

## PHILIPPINES CONFIRMS CANADIAN HOSTAGE BEHEADED

**MANILA:** Philippine authorities yesterday confirmed that Muslim extremist guerrillas had beheaded a second Canadian hostage, as they defended their inability to save him despite months of pursuit. The Abu Sayyaf, a small group of Islamic militants based on remote and mountainous southern islands that specializes in kidnappings-for-ransom, killed Robert Hall after its demands for 300 million pesos (\$6.5 million) by Monday were not met.

"We strongly condemn the brutal and senseless murder of Mr Robert Hall, a Canadian national, after being held captive by the Abu Sayyaf group in Sulu for the past nine months," presidential spokesman Herminio Coloma said in a statement. A military statement confirmed that a severed head, believed to be Hall's, was found near a cathedral on Jolo, the main island in the Sulu archipelago that is one of the Abu Sayyaf's strongholds.

In announcing on Monday night that he feared Hall had been killed, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau expressed outrage while maintaining that ransoms should not be paid. "The vicious and brutal actions of the hostage-takers have led to a needless death. Canada holds the terrorist group who took him hostage fully responsible for this

cold-blooded and senseless murder," Trudeau said. Hall, a retiree, was among four people abducted last September from aboard yachts at a tourist resort on Samal island, about 500 km to the west of Sulu.

Another Canadian kidnapped with him, John Ridsdel, was beheaded in April after a similar ransom demand of 300 million pesos was not paid. The fates of the two other people abducted at the Samal resort - Hall's Filipina girlfriend Marites Flor and Norwegian resort manager Kjartan Sekkingstad - were unknown yesterday, but the Abu Sayyaf had also previously demanded ransoms for them.

### Radical Offshoot

Muslim rebels have been waging a separatist insurgency in the south of the mainly Catholic Philippines since the 1970s, and the conflict has claimed more than 100,000 lives. The Abu Sayyaf is a loose network of a few hundred Islamic militants that broke away from the main rebel groups in the early 1990s, evolving into a radical offshoot focused heavily on kidnapping Filipinos and foreigners in largely successful bids to extort money. Its leaders have in recent years declared allegiance to the Islamic State group that holds territory in Iraq and Syria, but security analysts believe it is chiefly interested in ransom rather

than religious war. While having only a relatively small number of armed followers, it has proved extremely resilient against repeated military offensives. From 2002-2014, the US deployed special forces in the southern Philippines to train Filipino troops to combat the Abu Sayyaf, a move which led to the killing or arrest of many Abu Sayyaf leaders.

### Kidnapping Spree

But the Abu Sayyaf went on a sustained kidnapping spree after the Americans left. It has abducted 44 Filipinos and foreigners since the beginning of last year, according to Pacific Strategies and Assessments (PSA), a security intelligence group. Most have been released after ransoms were paid, although it is still believed to be holding at least eight people including a Dutch bird watcher abducted in 2012. After the beheading of Ridsdel, Philippine President Benigno Aquino vowed to "neutralize" the Abu Sayyaf and ordered a fresh offensive that PSA said involved more than 4,000 troops.

Major Filemon Tan, spokesman for military forces in the south, yesterday defended their performance and highlighted difficulties - such as support for the group from the impoverished Muslim residents on Jolo island. "They have relatives in the commu-



**MANILA:** Philippine National Police Spokesman Wilben Mayor (right) and PNP Crime Laboratory Chief Emmanuel Aranas listen to questions from the media after reading the statement on the alleged beheading of a Canadian hostage yesterday at Camp Crame in suburban Quezon City. — AP

unity. They are the ones that give them a warning when there are soldiers in the area," Tan told radio station DZMM. He also said the island's forested, hilly terrain, a

broad coastline that allows for swift movement by boat and the kidnappers' tactic of breaking up into smaller groups, were all hindering pursuit. — AFP



**PESHAWAR:** In this May 25, 2016 photo, Pakistani transgenders mourn the death of their colleague Alisha. — AP

## PAKISTAN TRANSGENDERS MOCKED BY MOST, ABHORRED BY MANY

### MANY LIVE IN FEAR OF BEING ATTACKED

**PESHAWAR:** Abandoned by family and mocked by their society, the life of a Pakistani transgender is lonely. It can even be deadly. Alisha was just 23 years old when she was shot five times last month, allegedly by a boyfriend who has since been arrested. She died of her wounds three days later. Her friends say she was neglected by doctors and medical professionals who taunted her, rather than treated her, and that three hours passed before Alisha went into surgery after arriving at the hospital.

As she lay bleeding, the hospital's health workers crowded around her, making jokes and ridiculing her, said her friend Paro, herself transgender. "I shouted: 'She is not dancing. She is dying. For God and the Prophet's (PBUH) sake leave her alone, let her breathe,'" Paro recalled, her voice rising as she remembered pushing the crowd away.

Farzana, another friend, said the hospital shuffled Alisha from ward to ward. First they sent her to the male ward, but the other patients and family members ordered her out. She was shunted then to the female ward, but she wasn't welcome there either, said Farzana, who heads an organization devoted to fighting for the rights of transgender people in Pakistan's conservative northwest.

As outcasts, Pakistan's transgender people are often forced into begging, dancing and even prostitution to earn money. They also live in fear of attacks, causing most to either change their names or use only one name to give them anonymity in their society. Paro and Farzana have both changed their names, as had Alisha, abandoning their male names with their gender.

The Pakistani Supreme Court has designated transgender people as a third gender, which under law should afford them protection but in practice,

Kamran Arif, vice president of the independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, said transgender people bear the brunt of some of the worst discrimination. They are sexually abused, assaulted and even murdered.

### Intolerance

He said Pakistan has become increasingly intolerant. He blamed the growing intolerance on a proliferation of madrassas or religious schools that propagate a strict Wahhabi sect of Islam, like that practiced in Saudi Arabia. Many of these religious schools get some funding from Saudi Arabia as well. "They have produced an army of young men with very intolerant views," said Arif.

Sedique Mir Mateen, the father of an American of Afghan origin who gunned down 50 people at a Florida gay nightclub Sunday, said his son was enraged after seeing two men kissing, suggesting that might have been why he chose to attack a gay club. Before carrying out the deadly attack, Omar Mateen also announced his allegiance to the Islamic State group, which follows the same strict Wahhabi belief that reviles the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) community as abhorrent to Islam, allowing them to justify their attacks.

So far this year in northwestern Pakistan alone, there have been five attacks against transgender people. According to members of the community, 45 have been killed in the last two years in the northwest province of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa, of which Peshawar is the capital. "I am very scared about being publicly visible," says Mani, another transgender, who rarely mixes with anyone but close friends who are either supporters or transgender themselves.

Mani tells of growing up as a girl in Pakistan's central Punjab province, never feeling in his heart like a girl. He would dress and act as a boy. He avoided family weddings so he wouldn't have to dress in fancy clothes, and strapped his chest, desperate to hide any evidence that he was a girl. One day he saw a program on television about a sex change operation. He was surprised. He never thought it possible and blurted out in front of his family: "I will change my sex too when I have enough money."

His mother scolded Mani, telling him that the body assigned by God was unchangeable. He left home. Everyone but his mother has stopped speaking to him "but still she doesn't support my transition," he told AP. Now 31, Mani is saving money and crowd funding on Facebook to raise \$5,000, the cost of a double mastectomy in Pakistan. He has begun the long and potentially dangerous journey to becoming a man - the medicines, endless rounds of blood tests, and regular visits to a psychiatrist.

### Fearful

Mani freely discusses the emotional road he has travelled since childhood. But he is reluctant to say anything that will identify him - fearful, he told the AP, of violent attacks by Islamic militants who revile transgender people as against their version of the tenets of Islam. He uses only the name Mani. "In Pakistan, very few people are aware that there are transgender men as well, not only transgender women, so people consider us like tomboy girls," said Mani. While that might afford some safety in a child's early years, Mani says a woman trying to live as a man in Pakistani society is vulnerable to violence because "the men of the society will not tolerate a woman who behaves and acts like a man". — AP

## AUSTRALIA REVIEWS VISA OF CLERIC OVER GAY COMMENTS

**SYDNEY:** Australia is urgently reviewing the visa of a British Islamic scholar who toured Orlando this year and had preached in 2013 that "death is the sentence" for homosexual acts. Farrokh Sekaleshfar, a senior Shiite scholar, is giving a series of lectures at an Islamic center in Sydney on the topic of spirituality. Sekaleshfar said in a lecture in Michigan in 2013 that in an Islamic society, the death penalty should be carried out for homosexuals who engaged in sodomy. "Out of compassion, let's get rid of him now, because he's contaminating society," Sekaleshfar said in a talk at that time, according to a recording available online.

There is no evidence of any link between his comments and the American Muslim man who killed 49 people in a gay nightclub in Orlando on Sunday, the deadliest mass shooting in the United States. Sekaleshfar told Reuters on Monday he condemned the Orlando shooting as a "barbaric act of terror that was in no way justified". Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull told reporters yesterday he has "zero tolerance for people to come to Australia who preach hatred" and his government was reviewing Sekaleshfar's visa "as we speak".

The Immigration Office did not directly respond to a query on how long that review would take or what it would involve, but referred Reuters to comments made by Immigration Minister Peter Dutton earlier in the day. Dutton said he was advised on

Monday of Sekaleshfar's presence in Australia and his previous comments, and he would look at all the facts before making a decision. "People who come to our country, regardless of what visa category they come on, they will abide by Australian law or their visa will be cancelled and they will be deported from our country," Dutton said. Sekaleshfar could not be reached for comment yesterday. He arrived at the Imam Husain Islamic Centre just after nightfall to give his scheduled lecture, and declined to speak to waiting media. Calls and emails to the centre were not returned. Sekaleshfar said on Monday that his comments in 2013 were made in the context of a lecture on Islamic law and homosexuality and should "not have been interpreted as a call for any Tom, Dick, or Harry to carry out a sentence wherever, whenever they like." "In the context it was right," he said of the Michigan speech. "It wasn't inciting, nor saying to everyone to kill homosexuals, that it's open to everyone to do that, that's not the case."

He also said that in the speech he was referring to homosexual acts in public. "Even in an Islamic country, what they do in the privacy of their house, no one can say anything about," he said. In his 2013 lecture, Sekaleshfar said: "There is nothing to be embarrassed about this. Death is the sentence. Islam doesn't accept people's faith to be compromised, to be threatened and it has to be taken seriously. With homosexuals it is the same." — Reuters



**NEW DELHI:** Members of Hindu nationalist party 'Hindu Sena' or Hindu Army, celebrates the birthday of US presidential candidate Donald Trump yesterday. — AP

## HINDU GROUP CELEBRATES TRUMP BIRTHDAY WITH CAKE

**NEW DELHI:** A small group of Donald Trump fans in India celebrated the presumptive Republican presidential nominee's 70th birthday yesterday with a cake and balloons in a New Delhi park. About 20 members of the right-wing Hindu Sena political group cut the three-tiered cake and held a piece up to a photo of Trump while singing "Happy Birthday to You". They invited journalists to the gathering under a tent decorated with balloons and

posters of Trump, including one showing him wearing a suit and holding a rifle.

Sena leader Vishnu Gupta said they were inspired by Trump's hard talk against Islamist militants, and called him the future "king of the United States". This is the second event the group has staged for Trump in New Delhi. Last month, a dozen members lit a ritual fire and chanted mantras asking Hindu gods to help Trump win the US presidential election. — AP

## BANGLADESH CLERICS ISSUE FATWA ON ISLAMIST KILLINGS

**DHAKA:** Bangladeshi clerics said Monday they have issued a fatwa against the killings of minorities and secular campaigners in the mainly Muslim country, where police have arrested over 10,000 people in a crackdown on militancy. Nearly 50 people have been killed over the last three years in a wave of gruesome attacks by Islamist militants targeting Hindus, Christians, Sufi Muslims, activists and foreigners. Many were hacked to death with machetes.

Farid Uddin Masuod, who heads the Council of Bangladesh Clerics, said over 100,000 clerics had signed the fatwa, or religious edict, which will be made public on June 18. "The fatwa unequivocally said these killings of non-Muslims, minorities and secular activists are forbidden in Islam," he told AFP. "We've said these killings are illegal and are crimes against humanity," Masuod added. Last week an elderly Hindu priest was found nearly decapitated in a rice field and a Hindu monastery worker was hacked to

death, while a Christian grocer was murdered near a church. Other victims have included liberal activists and secular bloggers along with two foreigners and two gay rights activists.

The Islamic State (IS) group and a South Asian branch of Al-Qaeda have claimed responsibilities for many of the murders. But the police and the government say they have no presence in the country. The fatwa announcement came as police said they had detained 3,115 people on the fourth day of a nationwide anti-militant drive aimed at stopping the killings, taking the total number to 11,307. Bangladeshi authorities had faced criticism for failing to tackle the violence, but Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina vowed at the weekend to catch "each and every killer". She has accused the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its Islamist party ally, Jamaat-e-Islami, of orchestrating the killings to destabilise the country. — AFP

## 'BUNGLING SAILORS' IN RECORD NZ METH BUST

**WELLINGTON:** Some bungling boating by a group of landlubber drug smugglers led to New Zealand's largest ever haul of methamphetamine, with their fumbling efforts arousing the suspicion of locals, police said yesterday. The 494 kg haul, with a street value of \$347 million, is the largest ever in New

Zealand, eclipsing in a single swoop the entire amount of ice seized in the South Pacific nation last year (334 kg).

Police said locals found an abandoned boat at remote 90 Mile Beach on Sunday and also reported a group of men had been acting suspiciously in the

area in recent weeks. They said the men, whose nationalities were not given, had been unsuccessfully trying to launch boats off the beach, then offering locals large amounts of cash to help them. When police went to recover the boat, a vehicle used by the group drove past and was stopped after a brief chase. Two men, aged 26 and 31, were arrested.

A short time later, a campervan driven by a third man, aged 19, was stopped and a search found multiple suitcases containing zip-lock bags full of drugs totalling 448 kg. Police also found a handheld GPS device in the first vehicle which had coordinates leading to some sand dunes, where officers on Monday dug up a further 46 kg of drugs.

"What is so great about this is that it's not only the result of hard work by the Northland police, but it's the result of information we got from the community," Superintendent Russell Le Prou said in a statement. "We received notification of several cases of suspicious behaviour in the past few weeks, and that has allowed us to get to this point." Police said they were working with customs to determine where the methamphetamine came from. Many of the bags showed signs of saltwater. The three men appeared in court yesterday charged with importing and possessing class A drugs for supply. — FP



**An undated handout photo received yesterday shows the 448 kg haul of ice seized. — AFP**