

WOMAN SCREAMS IN PAIN DURING CANING IN INDONESIA

BANDA ACEH: A young woman screamed in pain as she was caned yesterday in front of a jeering crowd in Indonesia's Aceh, the latest person to be punished for breaking the province's strict Islamic laws. Aceh is the only province in the world's most populous Muslim-majority country that imposes sharia law. People can face floggings for a range of offences-from gambling, to drinking alcohol, to gay sex. The woman was among 13 people-seven men and six women aged between 21 and 30 - who were caned Monday at a mosque in the provincial capital Banda Aceh, as a baying crowd cheered the spectacle.

Six couples were found guilty of breaking Islamic laws that ban intimacy, such as touching, hugging and kissing, between unmarried people. A man was caned for a less serious offence described as spending time with a member of the opposite sex in a hidden location in a fashion that could lead to adul-

tery. One 22-year-old woman due to be flogged was given a temporary reprieve as she was pregnant-but Aceh Deputy Mayor Zainal Arifin pledged: "The punishment will be handed down after she gives birth." The official added that he hoped the canings would serve as a deterrent: "We hope there are no more people in Banda Aceh who break the law in future."

More and more people are being caned in Aceh, with a particular increase in recent times in the number of women being flogged. Aceh, on Sumatra Island, began implementing sharia law after being granted special autonomy in 2001, an attempt by the central government in Jakarta to quell a long-running separatist insurgency. Islamic laws have been strengthened since the province struck a peace deal with the central government in 2005. More than 90 percent of Indonesians describe themselves as Muslim, but the vast majority practise a moderate form of the faith. — AFP



BANDA ACEH, Indonesia: A Muslim woman gets caned 23 strokes after being caught in close proximity with her boyfriend in Banda Aceh yesterday. — AFP

JAPANESE PM ABE SENDS OFFERING TO WAR SHRINE

PANEL STUDIES EMPEROR'S POSSIBLE ABDICATION

TOKYO: Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sent a ritual offering to a controversial war shrine yesterday, drawing fire from China which sees it as a painful reminder of Tokyo's warring past. The conservative premier—who has been criticized for what some see as a revisionist take on Japan's wartime record—sent a sacred "masakaki" tree bearing his name to Yasukuni Shrine at the start of a four-day festival. The shrine honors millions of Japanese war dead, but also senior military and political figures convicted of war crimes after World War II.

The site has for decades been a flashpoint for criticism by countries that suffered from Japan's colonialism and aggression in the first half of the 20th century, including China and the two Koreas. More controversial than the shrine is an accompanying museum that paints Japan as a liberator of Asia and a victim of the war. "The Yasukuni Shrine honors class A war criminals of WWII who were directly responsible for the war," said Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying, speaking in Beijing. "We oppose this ritual offering and we urge Japan to reflect on its aggressive history and take concrete actions to win back the trust of its Asian neighbors and the international community."

South Korea did not immediately issue an official response. Abe and other nationalists say Yasukuni is merely a place to remember fallen soldiers and compare it with Arlington National Cemetery in the United States. Abe visited in December 2013 to mark his first year in power, a pilgrimage that sparked fury in Beijing and Seoul and earned a diplomatic rebuke from close ally the United States, which said it was "disappointed" by the action. But he has since refrained from going, sending ritual offerings instead. Scores of conservative lawmakers, possibly including cabinet ministers, are expected to go to the shrine to mark the autumn festival today.

Possible abdication

In another development, experts on a government-commissioned panel were set to hold their first meeting yesterday to study how to accommodate Emperor Akihito's apparent abdication wish, in a country where he is not supposed to say anything political. Unlike many European countries where abdication of kings and queens are relatively common, Japan's modern imperial law doesn't allow abdication, and Japan's postwar constitution stipulates the emperor as a mere "symbol" with no political power or say. Allowing Akihito to abdicate



TOKYO: A wooden plaque (left) showing the name of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is seen with a "masakaki" tree that he sent as an offering to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo yesterday. Abe sent the ritual offering to a controversial war shrine at the start of a four-day festival but did not visit, possibly avoiding an angry reaction from China and South Korea. — AFP

would be a major change to the system, and raises a series of legal and logistical questions, ranging from laws subject to change to the emperor's post-abdication role, his title and residence.

The six panel members - five academics and a business organization executive - are to compile a report early next year after interviewing specialists on the constitution, monarchy and history. Akihito, 82, suggested his wish to abdicate in a rare video message to the public in August, citing his age and concern that he may not be able to fulfill his official duties. His message was subtle and the emperor did not use the word "abdication," because saying that openly could have violated his constitutional status.

Current law, set in 1947, largely inherits a 19th-century constitution that banned abdication as a potential risk to political stability. About 80 percent of the general public supports Akihito's abdication, saying he should be allowed to retire and enjoy life while he is still in good health. In addition to receiving foreign dignitaries, Akihito still travels across the country to attend ceremonies and has repeatedly visited

disaster-hit areas to console survivors. The government reportedly wants to allow Akihito's abdication as an exception and enact a special law to avoid dealing with divisive issues such as possible female succession and lack of successors. Akihito suggested in his public message a need to consider how to make the succession process smoother. He recalled the difficulties he faced when his father, Hirohito, died in 1989 while he was largely serving as a substitute. He said he doesn't wish to cling to his title if his responsibilities have to be severely reduced and he has to rely on a regent.

The abdication issue has also renewed concerns about aging and shortage of successors in the 2,000-year-old monarchy, reflecting the overall concern about Japan's declining and rapidly aging population. Akihito and his wife, Michiko, have two sons - Crown Prince Naruhito and his younger brother, Akishino - as first and second in line to the Chrysanthemum throne. The couple has four grandchildren but only one - Akishino's son - is eligible to become emperor under Japan's male-only succession system. — Agencies

DAUGHTER OF FORMER PHILIPPINE DICTATOR CALLS FOR FORGIVENESS

MANILA: The daughter of late Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos called for forgiveness yesterday as she led a rally at the Supreme Court urging it to approve a controversial hero's burial for her father. About 1,000 supporters gathered with Imee Marcos at the court, which may announce today whether it approves President Rodrigo Duterte's order to allow the burial at Manila's National Heroes' Cemetery 27 years after the strongman died. Imee, governor of the family's northern stronghold of Ilocos Norte, cited Pope Francis as she called for human rights victims and other critics of the dictatorship to abandon their campaign against the burial plan.

"To those who are criticizing and who are not allied with us, I hope you set aside your grievances. All of us have anger and bitterness in our hearts but we should set that aside because, as the pope said: 'When we forgive, you will be free and happy,'" Marcos told reporters outside the Supreme Court. However she maintained her family's longtime position that her father, accused of plundering billions of dollars and overseeing widespread human rights abuses during his 21-year rule, was a positive force for the country. "If in our view my father was great, others have many criticisms, but let us no longer debate," she said.

The dictator and his wife Imelda led their family into US exile in 1986 after a military-backed "People Power" revolution toppled him from power. Marcos died in Hawaii three years later. His embalmed body was brought back to the Philippines in 1993 and placed in a glass-topped casket at his northern Philippine home. Presidents since then refused family requests for him to be buried at the heroes' cemetery, even as the Marcos clan enjoyed a remarkable political comeback. Imelda Marcos is a congresswoman and her son, Ferdinand Marcos Jr, remains a powerful politician with presidential ambitions after narrowly losing the election for the vice presidency this year.

Duterte, who was elected in a landslide this year, has close ties to the Marcos family and has pushed for the burial. Opponents of the Marcos regime have insisted this would just let him whitewash his crimes, and filed the petition with the Supreme Court to ban it. One prominent opponent who was detained under the Marcos regime, Satur Ocampo yesterday dismissed Imee Marcos's appeal for forgiveness. "It's unfair that they are asking people to forgive and forget without them making a formal acknowledgement of the crimes of the Marcoses to the people," he said. — AFP

INDONESIA TRACKS DOZENS OF 'MILITANTS FROM SYRIA'

JAKARTA: Dozens of Indonesians who joined Islamic State in Syria have returned home with combat experience and pose a major threat to the world's biggest Muslim-majority nation, the police chief said yesterday. Authorities are closely monitoring about 40 returnees and are concerned they could be linking up with existing networks to equip a new generation of radicals with the skills and equipment required to launch a major attack.

"We are getting in touch with them but they can evade our detection. We believe they are organizing secretly and building interactions with other (radical) networks," police chief Tito Karnavian told Reuters in an interview. About 10 were in custody for questioning and the rest remained free, Karnavian said, adding there was no evidence of an imminent attack. The vast majority of Indonesia's 250 million people practise a moderate form of Islam. Small extremist groups that have periodically mounted attacks against the state and foreigners in the country have been largely disbanded or driven underground.

But the country has seen a recent resurgence in militancy, inspired in part by Islamic State. Authorities believe Islamic State has more than 1,200 followers in Indonesia and nearly 400 Indonesians have left to join the group in Syria. Indonesia suffered its first militant attack in years in

January, when four pro-Islamic State militants launched a gun and bomb attack in the heart of the capital Jakarta. Eight people were killed, including the attackers themselves. Authorities said the assault was poorly planned and executed.

Karnavian also said a worrying new trend was emerging of teens being radicalized online and lured into carrying out small-scale attacks. A 16-year-old in August tried but failed to detonate a homemade bomb in a church in the northern city of Medan. The teen also tried to stab the priest leading the service but was subdued by members of the congregation. Authorities said the teen was obsessed with Islamic State leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi and had researched his ideology online.

"This is a new trend. It's more difficult (to track them) than existing networks...because they are what are called lone wolves that are being radicalized online," Karnavian said, adding police were aware of at least 10 such cases. Under anti-terrorism laws, police can detain suspects for questioning for up to seven days. The government has called for preventive detention and the stripping of known militants of their citizenship if they fight for extremist groups overseas. Revisions to the anti-terrorism bill are pending parliamentary approval. — Reuters

AMNESTY: AUSTRALIA REFUGEE CAMP 'AMOUNTS TO TORTURE'

SYDNEY: Australia's detention of asylum-seekers on a remote Pacific island "amounts to torture" under international law, Amnesty International said yesterday in a report that alleged widespread abuse and an "epidemic of self-harm". Canberra sends asylum-seekers who try to reach the island continent by boat to the Pacific islands of Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus, where they are blocked from being resettled in Australia even if found to be refugees. The Nauru facility—which holds just over 400 men, women and children—has been under scrutiny after allegations of thousands of incidents of abuse and self-harm were leaked to the Guardian Australia in August.

Amnesty's senior director for research Anna Neistat said interviews she conducted with more than 100 people, including asylum-seekers, refugees, and current or former detention centre staff, between July and October "paint a picture of people driven to absolute despair". The rights group's report said there was an "epidemic of self-harm" among those held on Nauru, with nearly all the asylum-seekers interviewed reporting mental health issues that many said started after being transferred to the camp.

Contributing to their feelings of despair were inadequate medical care, exposure of children to abuse, and attacks and threats by some Nauruans outside the centre, it said. Asylum-seekers on Nauru have been free to roam around the tiny nation since last year, no longer forced to remain locked up, but the report alleged that some who ventured outside the camp were attacked

and raped. "Australia's offshore processing regime fits the definition of torture under international law," Amnesty said in a statement, pointing to the refugees' "severe mental anguish" and the use of offshore processing as a deterrent.

Amnesty also accused Australia of operating the camp "behind a fortress of secrecy". Only a handful of journalists and refugee advocates, including Neistat, have gained access to Nauru in recent years. Some of those interviewed by Amnesty said their time on Nauru was more difficult than the conflicts they had fled in Iraq and Syria. "I cannot go back. But here I am dying a thousand times," said an Iraqi man, identified only as Edris. "In Iraq, you get just one bullet or a bomb, and it's over, and here I am slowly dying from the pain."

Another, 19-year-old Ali Kharsa, who was held on Nauru for three years, said: "We fled Syria, but Nauru was the hardest thing I ever had." The Australian government was not immediately available for comment. But Canberra has strongly defended its tough policies towards "boatpeople" in the past, saying it has prevented deaths at sea and secured the nation's borders. Nauru's government in August dismissed the leaked incident reports that asylum-seekers faced violence, abuse and humiliating treatment as "fabricated". Just over 800 asylum-seeker men are held in the Manus camp, with Australia in August agreeing to close it following a Papua New Guinea Supreme Court ruling declaring that holding people there was unconstitutional and illegal. — AFP



HANOI PROVINCE: This picture shows villagers in a boat transporting boxes of instant noodles they received as relief aid past flooded homes in a village in Huong Khe district in the central province of Ha Tinh. — AFP

VIETNAM FLOODS KILL 25

HANOI: Severe flooding in central Vietnam has killed at least 25 people and destroyed thousands of homes, officials said yesterday, as the country braced for further destruction with a typhoon barreling closer. Images from flood-hit provinces showed houses almost completely submerged and people paddling down waterlogged streets following heavy rain that started last week. Four people are still missing after the deluge, which has destroyed or damaged more than 240,000 homes in several central provinces since Friday, the Natural Disaster Prevention office said on its website.

Nguyen Khac Vinh, a resident in the hardest-hit province of Quang Binh, said there was still no water for drinking and cooking at his house which was totally flooded. "The water came so quick... our rice, chicken and ducks, our belongings were all swept away," Vinh said, standing in knee-deep water in the streets of Kien Giang township. State-run media earlier reported that at least one local hydropower plant suddenly released water from its reservoir, which contributed to some of the destruction over the weekend.

The government said it was looking into

whether the Ho Ho hydropower plant in Ha Tinh province should have released the water without warning. Meanwhile, Typhoon Sarika which lashed the Philippines over the weekend is expected to hit Vietnam Wednesday, with northern provinces on high alert. Local forecasters said they expect Sarika to be the biggest storm of the season. Authorities said they may issue evacuation orders and a ban on ships going to sea, according to reports. Vietnam is hit every year by up to a dozen tropical storms or typhoons, which often cause widespread destruction along coastal regions. — AFP