

## BANGLADESH STOPPED EDITOR FROM FLYING

**DHAKA:** A prominent Bangladeshi magazine editor on bail for charges of plotting to kill the prime minister's son said yesterday he had been stopped from flying to London to visit his sick wife, despite having high court clearance to travel. Shafik Rehman, who is also a British citizen, said he was prevented from boarding a flight from Dhaka to London, where his wife is receiving treatment for leukaemia. The 81-year-old was released from jail last September, five months after he was arrested on charges of plotting to kill Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's son, sparking fears of a media crackdown.

Authorities returned his seized British passport last week after the high court granted him permis-

sion to visit his ailing wife. "The police asked to see the high court order which I have already submitted to a lower court. I showed them the order's photocopy but they said they were not advised about any clearance about my flight," Rehman said. "It's very unjust. I'm not accusing anybody, but feeling very disappointed. My wife is dying out there and she needs me beside her more than ever." Immigration authorities contacted by AFP said they needed to verify Rehman's papers.

"He will be able to catch the next flight once we are done with the procedure," a senior police official said on condition of anonymity. Rehman, a former speechwriter for the country's main oppo-

sition leader Khaleda Zia, was arrested last April on charges of plotting to murder Sajeed Wazed Joy, who lives in the United States. He denies the allegations. He was one of three pro-opposition editors arrested last year, triggering allegations by Human Rights Watch of an "organized assault on independent media".

Concerns over free speech were already high in the Muslim-majority nation after a spate of Islamist killings of secular bloggers and publishers. Rehman was a long-time editor of Jai Jai Din, a mass-circulation Bengali daily. He now edits a popular Bengali monthly magazine called Mouchake Dhil. —AFP

## INDIAN POLITICIAN SPENDS STATE CASH ON LAVISH TEMPLE GIFTS

**NEW DELHI:** The head of India's newest state is facing condemnation after spending \$750,000 in public money on gold temple offerings to thank the gods for realizing his long-held ambition. Chief Minister K Chandrasekhar Rao campaigned for decades for the creation of Telangana state in the south of India and had promised to donate gold to a local temple if he succeeded. On Wednesday he flew to a popular Hindu temple in a chartered plane and presented a lotus-shaped necklace weighing nearly 15 kilos and a five-kilo collar as priests chanted vedic hymns, according to media reports.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, an official in the Rao's office confirmed the donation and said it was "from the government of Telangana and its people". Social media users laid into Rao, who has been criticized in the past over his lavish use of public funds. "Rao is a great CM. Never hesitates to put his hand in the State treasury for meeting personal needs. The dictionary word is theft," said one Twitter user. "Instead of offering kg's of gold to temples and seeking miracles please do something on the ground" posted another.

Rao faced criticism last year when it emerged the state had funded a \$7.3 million official residence, fitted with bullet-proof offices and bathrooms and a movie hall. Telangana split off from neighboring Andhra Pradesh in 2014 after a long campaign for a separate state, with its champions arguing the region had been neglected by successive state governments. Rao now plans to raze the main government office complex in Hyderabad to construct a \$52 million structure according to the rules of Vastu—an ancient Hindu system of architecture. Media reports said he was planning to make a further offering to the gods over the weekend—this time a moustache of pure gold. —AFP



**KACHIN:** This file photo shows refugees in front of their temporary shelter near Lung Byeng village, Waimaw township in Kachin state. — AFP

## THREE SOLDIERS, CIVILIAN KILLED IN KASHMIR ATTACK

**SHOPIAN, India:** Three Indian soldiers and a woman were killed when militants ambushed a patrol in South Kashmir early yesterday, part of an upsurge of violence that has hit the restive northern region as it emerges from winter. An army and police party was returning from a village in the Shopian district of South Kashmir when it came under attack. Four soldiers were wounded in the one-hour firefight, according to police and witnesses.

"Around 2 in the night (2030 GMT), we woke up after hearing firing on the road," the son of the woman told Reuters Television. "Our mother was sleeping upstairs. The firing stopped after an hour and when we went upstairs, we found our mother dead." Television footage showed grieving relatives; a red van with shattered windows and shards of glass on the front seat; pools of blood on the ground and bullet marks on the walls of buildings.

A search was under way for the assailants in the latest in an upsurge of militant violence since Feb. 12 that has killed eight soldiers, eight gunmen and three civilians in the part of Kashmir that is controlled by India. India is trying to contain a separatist insurgency in its northernmost region that is more than a quarter-century old. Protests flared after security forces killed a popular militant leader called Burhan Wani last July. —Reuters

## MYANMAR'S WA MILITIA WARNS 'NO PEACE IN SIGHT'

**YANGON:** The head of Myanmar's most powerful ethnic rebel group has warned that fighting in the country's restive borderlands has reached a critical point, threatening to derail the government's wobbling push for peace. Bao Youxiang, chairman of the Wa, told dozens of armed ethnic leaders they must forge a "new path to peace" as the government's efforts to expand a ceasefire signed with some groups in 2015 have faltered, according to a leaked version of a speech seen by AFP.

Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi has been pushing to expand the deal, known as the NCA, since her party took power a year ago in a bid to end the decades-long conflicts rumbling across the country's borderlands. But clashes between the army and ethnic minority fighters along the China border have intensified, displacing an estimated 20,000 people and threaten-

ing the second round of peace talks slated for next month.

"The ethnic fighting happening today is heavier than ever," Bao told ethnic leaders gathered in Pangkham, the de facto capital of the UWSA's territories, on Wednesday, according to the transcript. "War in northern Kachin state and northern Shan state along the Myanmar-China border is getting worse day by day. The NCA being discussed between some ethnic organisations and Myanmar's government has brought no solution. "The many conflicts along Myanmar's road to peace... mean the dawn can't be seen."

The United Wa State Army, also known as the Wa, is the most powerful of the country's ethnic rebel factions with an estimated 25,000 heavily armed troops and strong ties to China. Its delegates stormed out of the first round of Suu Kyi's peace talks last

August over a spat about their accreditation. The group is also accused of producing and trafficking huge amounts of methamphetamine and heroin from their own mini-state on the Chinese border, and buying weapons with the proceeds.

Around 40 delegates from eight ethnic rebel armies gathered in Pangkham this week ahead of Suu Kyi's next round of peace talks, which were delayed until next month after one group threatened to boycott. Among the attendees of the USWA-led meeting were members of the Northern Alliance, a collection of four ethnic armed groups that has been locked in bitter conflict with the army since Nov. The UN's rights envoy Yanghee Lee warned last month that the humanitarian situation in Kachin state—a focal point of recent fighting—was "now worse than at any point in the past few years." — AFP