

International

India rejects UN criticism of 'Clean India Mission'

Government aims to eliminate open defecation by Oct 2019

MUMBAI: The Indian government has rejected criticism of its ambitious sanitation program by a United Nations official who said lower-caste communities had their rights violated by being left to clean toilets built in a nationwide drive. Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, or Clean India Mission, with much fanfare after he took office in 2014. The main aim is to eliminate open defecation by October 2019 by building individual and public toilets.

But activists say the campaign has failed to end the practice of manual scavenging, or clearing faeces by hand, and has even exacerbated the problem because the toilets are not connected to water supplies or the sewage system. The UN special rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation affirmed those observations. The emphasis on building toilets should not "contribute to violating fundamental rights of others, such as those engaged in manual scavenging, or ethnic minorities and people living in remote rural areas," Leo Heller said in a statement on Friday.



Indian lower-caste communities left to clean toilets

"Eliminating open defecation is not only about building latrines, but requires adequate methods for behavior change, and sufficient water supply is a pre-requisite for the sustainable and safe use of adequate, low-cost latrines." The Indian government dismissed Heller's "sweeping judgments" as "either factually incorrect, based on incomplete information, or grossly misrepresent (ing) the situation". The campaign fully conforms to human rights principles established by the UN, it said in a statement, adding that it "strongly rejected his mostly baseless assertions".

Despite laws to end the practice of manual scavenging, a euphemism for clearing faeces from dry toilets and open drains by hand, it is prevalent in many Indian states. The occupation has long been thrust upon the Dalit community, the lowest ranked in India's caste system. At least 90 percent of the country's estimated one million manual scav-

engers are women, who clean public and private dry latrines with barely any safety equipment.

While caste-based discrimination was banned in 1955, Dalit communities continue to face threats of violence if they try to give up manual scavenging. Dozens of manual scavengers have died in recent years from toxic fumes in septic tanks, activists say. The Indian government has shown "unprecedented commitment" in tackling the gaps in sanitation, but it also needs to adopt a humanitarian focus in addressing the issues, said Heller, who will submit a full report of his findings in September 2018.

Smog shortening lives

Meanwhile, in the emergency ward of a Delhi hospital, men and women gasp for breath as they wait to be treated for symptoms triggered by the choking blanket of smog that descended on the Indian capital this week. Doctors at the government-run Vallabhbhai Patel Chest Institute say patient numbers have more than tripled

since pollution levels spiked amid a change in weather conditions and the annual post-harvest burning of crop stubble in surrounding areas.

Shopkeeper Manoj Khatri said he initially dismissed his heaving cough but it grew gradually worse and he has now been diagnosed with chronic bronchitis. "For three days I haven't stopped coughing. I felt as though I would die," the 46-year-old said as he waited to undergo further tests. Levels of PM2.5 - the fine pollution particles linked to higher rates of chronic bronchitis, lung cancer and heart disease-regularly topped 500 this week, at one point going over 1,000.

Levels between 301 and 500 are classified as "hazardous", while anything over 500 is beyond the official index. The World Health Organization's guidelines say 25 is the maximum level of PM2.5 anyone can safely be exposed to over a 24-hour period. Emergency ward doctor Mansi Verma said the hospital had seen a huge spike in patients



NEW DELHI: Indian workers use brooms to sweep away dust in the morning fog in Greater Noida, near New Delhi. A thick gray haze has enveloped India's capital region as air pollution hit hazardous levels. —AP

suffering from respiratory problems. They are treated with steam inhalation or using nebuliser machines, which provide immediate relief by administering drugs directly to the airways. "Beginning this week, we are seeing between 250-300 patients, more than three times the usual," Verma said. "Most of them suffer from intense coughing and inflammation of the respiratory tract."

Slow killer

Despite the rise in emergency cases Arvind Kumar, a

respiratory diseases specialist at the private Sir Ganga Ram Hospital in Delhi, said many of the worst health effects would not be seen for years to come. "Pollution kills you slowly," he said. "Whatever toxins levels we are exposed to today, suppose it continued for 10 days, this would have shortened the life of each one of us by several days or several weeks. "But that effect will be noticed many, many years later, so it's not an immediate killer. And that's why its potential lethal value is not immediately appreciated, but nonetheless, it's a lethal killer." —Agencies

'Old' Trump takes dig at 'short and fat' Kim Jong-Un

HANOI: US President Donald Trump took his verbal jousting with Kim Jong-Un to a new level yesterday, taunting the North Korean leader over his height and weight before musing over the idea of them eventually becoming friends. While they have never met, Trump and Kim have form when it comes to name-calling, with the US president a more than willing match for the highly rhetorical flourishes deployed by his adversary in Pyongyang.

Trump has referred to Kim as a "madman" and "Rocket Man" while the 33-year-old responded by calling the 71-year-old former reality TV star a "mentally deranged dotard". Yesterday Trump got down to basics, with a sarcastic tweet prompted by recent descriptions of him in the North's state media as a "lunatic old man".

"Why would Kim Jong-Un insult me by calling me 'old,' when I would NEVER call him 'short and fat'?" the president tweeted from Hanoi—the latest leg of a lengthy Asia

tour that had, until then, appeared to have moderated his Twitter habit. "Oh well, I try so hard to be his friend - and maybe someday that will happen!" he wrote. Sarcastic or not, the dig about Kim's weight, which has increased significantly since he came to power following the death of his father Kim Jong-Il in 2011, is unlikely to go down well in Pyongyang.

The members of the ruling Kim dynasty—past and present—enjoy near god-like status in North Korea, which has demonstrated extreme sensitivity to any remark that might be seen as mocking or disrespectful of the leadership. Foreign tourists to Pyongyang are generally obliged to pay homage-laying flowers and bowing deeply before giant statues of Kim's father and his grandfather—founding leader Kim Il-Sung—at some point during their visit.

Questioned later about his Tweet, Trump insisted he had not been entirely joking about one day befriending the man he described just last week as a dictator with "twisted fantasies".

"That might be a strange thing to happen but it's certainly a possibility," he told reporters at a press conference in the Vietnamese capital. "If that did happen, it would be a good thing. I can tell you, for North Korea ... I don't know that it will, but



SEOUL: South Korean conservative activists hold placards showing a picture of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un during a pro-US rally near the US embassy in Seoul. — AFP

it would be very, very nice if it did," he added. Trump has played hawk and dove with the North during his sweep of five Asian countries—denouncing it as a "cruel dictatorship," while offering Kim Jong-Un a diplomatic way out of the crisis over

Pyongyang's growing nuclear arsenal. During his election campaign, Trump said he would be willing to sit down with Kim and negotiate over a "hamburger" - an offer the North Korea leader has so far chosen to ignore.—AFP

Israel signals free hand in Syria as US, Russia expand truce

JERUSALEM: Israel signaled yesterday that it would keep up military strikes across its frontier with Syria to prevent any encroachment by Iranian-allied forces, even as the United States and Russia try to build up a ceasefire in the area. US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin on Saturday affirmed joint efforts to stabilize Syria as its civil war wanes, including with the expansion of a July 7 truce in the southwestern triangle bordering Israel and Jordan.

A US State Department official said Russia had agreed "to work with the Syrian regime to remove Iranian-backed forces a defined distance" from the Golan Heights frontier with Israel, which captured the plateau in the 1967 Middle East war. Moscow did not immediately provide details on the deal. Israel has been lobbying both big powers to deny Iran, Lebanon's Hezbollah and other Shiite militias any permanent bases in Syria, and to keep them away from the Golan, as they gain ground while helping Damascus beat back Sunni-led rebels.

In televised remarks opening Israel's weekly cabinet meeting yesterday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu did not speak about the new US-Russian arrangement for Syria. His regional cooperation minister, Tzachi Hanegbi, sounded circumspect about the deal, telling reporters that it "does not meet Israel's unequivocal demand that there will not be developments that bring the forces of Hezbollah or Iran to the Israel-Syria border in the north".

"There's reflection here of the understanding that Israel has set red lines, and will stand firm on this," Hanegbi said. That was an allusion to Israeli military strikes in Syria, carried out against suspected Hezbollah or Iranian arms depots or in retaliation for attacks from the Syrian-held Golan. In the latest incident, the Israeli military said it shot down a spy drone on Saturday as it overflew the Golan. Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman blamed the drone on the Syrian government. Damascus did not immediately respond. Repeating Israel's warnings to Iran and Hezbollah, Lieberman said: "We will not allow the Shiite axis to establish Syria as its forefront base". —Reuters

Israel warns Gaza militants against revenge attack

JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday warned Palestinian militants against carrying out attacks in revenge for the blowing up of a tunnel stretching from the Gaza Strip into the Jewish state last month. The Islamic Jihad militant group meanwhile threatened to hit back at Israel over the destruction of the tunnel it says it dug. Israel's operation on October 30 resulted in the deaths of 12 Palestinian militants from Hamas and Islamic Jihad. "There are still those who toy with trying new attacks on Israel," Netanyahu said at the opening of his weekly cabinet meeting.

"We will react forcefully to whoever tries to attack us or attacks us from any arena. I mean anyone-rebel factions, organizations, anyone," he said in an apparent reference to Islamic Jihad. "In any case, we hold Hamas responsible for any attack against us originating from Gaza or organized there," he said of the Islamist group that runs the Gaza Strip. Netanyahu's remarks came on the heels of a Saturday night Arabic-language video issued by Major General Yoav Mordechai, head of a defense ministry unit responsible for activities in the Palestinian territories.

Referring to the Israeli operation on October 30, he said

that Israel "destroyed a terror tunnel in Israeli sovereign territory." "We are aware of the plot that the Palestinian Islamic Jihad terror group is planning against Israel," said Mordechai, whose defense ministry unit is known as COGAT. "They are playing with fire at the expense of Gazan residents, the Palestinian reconciliation efforts and the stability of the entire region. "Let it be clear: Any attack by Islamic Jihad will be met with a harsh and determined Israeli response. "This will not only apply to Islamic Jihad but also to Hamas."

Mordechai also addressed the Damascus-based Islamic Jihad leadership, mentioning Ramadan Shalah and Ziad Nakhleh by name. He called on them to "take control over the situation," as they are the ones "who will be held accountable" for any attack. Islamic Jihad rejected Mordechai's message, saying "the enemy's threat to target the leaders of the movement" was "a declaration of war". "We will respond to it," the militant movement said in a statement, stressing it had "the right to respond" to the blowing up of the tunnel.

Israel has said it is holding the bodies of five militants retrieved from the tunnel and implied it would try to use them as bargaining chips to retrieve the remains of two Israeli soldiers believed to be held by Hamas. Two Israeli civilians, said to be mentally unstable, are also believed to have entered Gaza and to be held by Hamas. Hamas and Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas's Fatah signed a landmark reconciliation deal on October 12 aiming to end their decade-long split. The deal is supposed to see the Palestinian Authority retake control of the Gaza Strip by December 1. —AFP



GAZA: A picture taken from the eastern outskirts of Gaza Strip shows an Israeli drilling machine stationed on the Israeli side of the border yesterday. —AFP

News in brief

Turkey denies 'plot'

ISTANBUL: Turkey yesterday dismissed as "ludicrous and groundless" a report that Turkish officials may have discussed kidnapping a US-based Muslim cleric in exchange for millions of dollars. On Friday, The Wall Street Journal reported that Special Counsel Robert Mueller was investigating an alleged plot involving former US National Security Adviser Michael Flynn and his son to forcibly remove Fethullah Gulen and hand him over to Ankara for as much as \$15 million. Turkey blames Gulen for last year's failed coup attempt. Turkey denies the claim. In a statement on Twitter, Turkey's embassy in Washington reiterated demands that the US extradite Gulen so he can stand trial. The embassy said Turkey has been working with US agencies to provide evidence of Gulen's culpability and rejected "allegations that Turkey would resort to means external to the rule of law."

476-carat gem found

FREETOWN: Sierra Leone said yesterday miners had unearthed a huge 476-carat diamond, eight months after an even more valuable find in the country's diamond-rich east. It appears to be the 29th largest diamond ever found, according to experts, but it is unclear what the hefty stone might be worth. The latest discovery came, as did its predecessor, in the province of Kono, said Sahr Wonday, director general of Sierra Leone's National Minerals Agency. For Wonday, the latest find "provides a remarkable indication of the potential of the mineral resources" in the area. He said the company that uncovered the stone, Meya Mining, has won government approval to export it and the diamond is to be sold at international auction. Last month, Sierra Leone announced it plans to auction off a massive 709-carat diamond at a December sale in New York, aiming to make a clean break with the "blood diamonds" of its past.

Cocaine lab busted

HONG KONG: Hong Kong police have raided a crack cocaine laboratory sited in an upmarket apartment and seized narcotics ingredients and drugs worth some \$7.6 million, a statement said Sunday. The ingredients were thought to have been imported from Peru and could have been used to produce 40 kilograms of cocaine. This, plus another 10 kilograms of suspected crack cocaine found in the apartment, would together have been worth about HK\$59 million (\$7.56 million), police said in a statement. It was believed to be the first time a luxury apartment had been used as a base for manufacturing drugs, police said. The four-bedroom flat in Hong Kong's New Territories measured 1,000 square feet—large by the city's cramped standards.

Iraq helicopter crashes

KOUT: An Iraqi army helicopter crashed yesterday south of Baghdad during a training exercise killing all three crew members due to a technical problem, military officials said. "A Mi-17 military helicopter crashed during a training exercise and its crew was killed," the army said in a statement. Three air force officers were killed in the crash in the province of Wasit, southeast of Baghdad, an air force official told AFP on condition of anonymity. Another air force officer said the helicopter came down at 0530 GMT "due to a technical problem". In January, a Russian-made Mi-35 attack helicopter went down south of the northern city of Mosul, killing all four crew members—two pilots and two technicians—also due to a technical failure. The accident came as Iraqi forces were battling the Islamic State group and an Iraqi officer at the time said the intensity of the war on IS meant that necessary maintenance work on such helicopters was not always satisfactory.