

International

India farmers get \$9bn loan relief ahead of elections

Set to be a major issue in the polls

JAIPUR: Three newly elected Indian state governments have waived up to \$8.6 billion in farm loans in a bid by Rahul Gandhi's main opposition Congress party to boost support ahead of 2019 elections. The sorry plight of farmers in India, where thousands commit suicide every year, is set to be a major issue in the polls when Prime Minister Narendra Modi will run for a second term.

Last week Congress wrested power from Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in three state elections, partly by promising the help voters working in agriculture. Late Wednesday the new government of one of these states, Rajasthan, announced a write-off on loans of small farmers up to 200,000 rupees (\$2,850), at an estimated cost of \$2.5 billion. The two other states, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, where Congress ended 15 years of BJP rule, announced similar plans this week to forgo loans worth nearly 440 billion rupees.

The move signals Congress's intent to latch on the growing disquiet in rural areas, where 68 percent of India's 1.25 billion people live, against Modi, 68. "It's done!," Gandhi, 48, whose standing was boosted by the state election successes, said on Twitter. "We asked for 10 days. We did it in 2." Modi swept to power in 2014 largely on promises of improv-

ing lives of poor, ending corruption, boosting the economy and more jobs. But tens of thousands of farmers have rallied in recent months — including 80,000 in New Delhi this month — over his government's failure to mitigate their problems.

Modi had pledged to double farm income by 2022 but most say nothing has changed. His opponents accuse him of being pro-rich and ignoring the plight of millions of poor farmers. Political parties often promise farm loan waivers or other agricultural sops to win support in rural India. Roughly 55 percent of the population is directly or indirectly dependent on agriculture, making the community the largest voting bloc. The agriculture sector accounts for around 15 percent of India's economic output. But nearly 300,000 farmers have killed themselves in the last two decades, as drought — or flooding — poor yields and low prices push them into a cycle of debt and despair.

Two BJP state governments in 2017 announced similar packages for farmers worth 770 billion rupees but Modi's government ruled out a similar nationwide amnesty plan in July. But recent media reports suggest that Modi's government may reconsider and announce a multi-trillion dollar relief package in the run up to the elections, which are due by



NEW DELHI: Indian supporters and members of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) take part in a protest holding placards featuring an image of opposition Congress party president Rahul Gandhi for his alleged derogatory remarks against Prime Minister Narendra Modi. —AFP

May. The previous Congress-led alliance in 2008 promised a nationwide farm loan waiver

of more than 700 billion rupees, helping it win a second term in office in 2009. —AFP

Pakistan: Outcry over detention camps 'sensationalized'

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan yesterday defended its close ally China against a growing outcry over Muslims who are being detained by Chinese authorities, saying the issue was being "sensationalized" by foreign media. Numerous extrajudicial detention centers have been set up in China's vast, troubled Xinjiang region, holding as many as one million ethnic Uighurs and other Muslim minorities, according to estimates cited by a UN panel.

Among them are believed to be dozens of women who married men from neighboring Gilgit-Baltistan region in Pakistan, where people regularly cross the border into China for trade. "Some section of foreign media are trying to sensationalize the matter by spreading false information," Mohammad Faisal, spokesman for Pakistan's ministry of foreign affairs, told reporters at a weekly press briefing in Islamabad yesterday.

"As per Chinese authorities, out of 44 women, six are already in Pakistan. Four have been convicted on various charges,

three are under investigations, eight are under-going voluntary training. Twenty-three women are free and living in Xinjiang of their own free will," he added. In recent years, Pakistan has heavily pushed its relationship with China, lauding the tens of billions of investment dollars that Beijing is pouring into the country as a "game changer".

Beijing has also upgraded the treacherous mountain road connecting Gilgit-Baltistan to Xinjiang. But China has had difficulty reconciling its desire for development with fears that Uighur separatists will import violence from Pakistan. Chinese authorities have long linked their crackdown on Xinjiang's Muslims to international counter-terrorism efforts, arguing that separatists are bent on joining foreign extremists like Al-Qaeda.

They describe the camps as "vocational education centers" for people who appear to be drawn towards Islamist extremism and separatism. But human rights activists say members of China's Muslim minorities are being held involuntarily for transgressions such as wearing long beards and face veils, and that the region has become a police state. Faisal said his ministry and Chinese authorities will continue to coordinate on this matter. "The Chinese authorities have also offered to arrange visits to Xinjiang of the families of the convicted women," said Faisal. —AFP

India police steer clear of forbidden island

PORT BLAIR: One month after an isolated tribe killed an American missionary seeking to convert them, Indian police have still not tried to retrieve the body of John Allen Chau from his remote island grave. But they are still trying to interview two American missionaries suspected of encouraging Chau to go to North Sentinel in the Andaman Islands, in breach of a strict cordon put around its isolated inhabitants.

Chau, 26, was cut down in a hail of arrows, according to fishermen who dropped him off nearby, as he marched towards the Sentinelese tribespeople with his "Jesus loves you" message. Investigators in the Indian Ocean chain of 500 islands will formally ask two American missionaries who had spoken with Chau before his death to give evidence, police said. "We have initiated the process of serving them a notice to be part of (the) investigation," local police chief Dependra Pathak said.

The notice, which would have to go between the Indian and US governments, would

only require the Americans to answer questions. The identities of the Americans, a man and a woman, have not been given. They are known to have left India. Chau was killed in mid-November but news of his death only emerged six days later. The incident cast a new spotlight on efforts to protect one of the world's last "uncontacted" tribes, whose language and customs remain a mystery to the rest of the world.

Outsiders are banned from travelling near the island to protect the tribe from outside diseases. Police have twice sent a vessel close to North Sentinel in a bid to see where Chau may have been killed. They acknowledge that it is unlikely that they would risk provoking the tribe by setting foot on the island. Anthropologists and activists for isolated tribal communities have called on Indian authorities not to try to retrieve the body.

"We are still awaiting the firm view of the Anthropological Survey of India and field experts," Pathak said. "What we have gathered is that going over there is not desirable for their health and psychological wellbeing." Seven people, including six local fishermen, were arrested for helping Chau travel to the remote island. All were granted bail this week. Two Indian fishermen were killed in 2006 after their boat drifted onto North Sentinel. One week after their deaths, their bodies were put on stakes facing out to sea on the beach. —AFP