

International

Big family but divided: North and South Koreans in China

North and South Korean officials to hold rare talks

SHENYANG: While North and South Korean officials hold rare talks this week, in a bustling Korea town in northeast China the rival communities have little to say to each other. Although their nations are separated by a heavily militarized border, North and South Korean restaurants operate side by side in Xita, the Korean neighborhood in the city of Shenyang. Billboards and signs in Korean script hang across the area, which boasts South Korean beer and fried chicken joints, cosmetics counters and clothing stores. But North Korean businesses now face a deadline to clear out as China enforces United Nations sanctions banning their presence following Pyongyang's nuclear and missile tests. After months of tensions that raised fears of nuclear warfare, North and South Korean officials will hold their first dialogue for more than two years today.

But in this corner of China, relations between Koreans are tense and show no signs of thawing. "We're one ethnicity, a big family, but they have a different way of thinking than us," said a North Korean waitress who works at the Pyongyang Rungrado restaurant. She has lived in Xita for three years but has never spoken to a South Korean. She declined to give her name. Across the street, the owner of a South Korean restaurant called Number 8 Storeroom said she has never had any contact with the owners of the two North Korean eateries near her establishment. "I don't want to talk to them," said Jin Meihua, 43, whose restaurant serves eel and steak barbecue to a mostly Chinese clientele.



North and S Korean restaurants operate side by side in Xita

Koreans. In recent years it became a destination for North Koreans privileged enough to travel overseas. North Korean eateries and small hotels popped up to feed and lodge them. South Korean boutiques became popular for shopping. But both sides of Shenyang's Korea town have become ensnared in international disputes. South Korean businesses took a major financial hit after China imposed punitive economic measures on Seoul over its decision to host the THAAD US anti-missile defense system, which Beijing sees as a threat to its own security. "The whole area is in a slump," said Lu Chao, director of the Border Studies Institute at the Liaoning Academy of Social Sciences in Shenyang. "Last year there was the THAAD issue with South Korea. Then North Korea created problems with its nuclear testing. Chinese have lost interest in spending their money in Xita." Many South Koreans packed up and went home as their businesses failed, locals say. "Things haven't been good since then," said 27-year-old Jin Zhenyou, an ethnic Korean waiter at a South Korean restaurant. The North's own dining establishments are likely to be hard hit by dwindling visitors and a blanket order from China's commerce ministry to shut down North Korean businesses today. Some estimates put their number at around 100 across China. In Xita, only one has apparently closed so far and waitresses at other establishments said they had no plans to close.

Socialists vs capitalists

China's ethnic Koreans could bridge the divide between the two sides, but even they say making friends with North Koreans can be difficult. "They don't like South Koreans.



SHENYANG: A man rides on an electric bike past a North Korean restaurant located at one of China's largest Korea towns in Shenyang in China's northeastern Liaoning province. —AFP

They won't eat in our restaurants. There's no overlap at all," Jin said. With the shifting geopolitical situation now hitting the North, South Koreans say they won't be sad to see them go. South Koreans and North Koreans "don't share any special relationship," said a man surnamed Gong at the local Korea Society in Shenyang. The citizens "don't hold any events for building friendly relations, they don't know each other and don't communicate with each other," Gong said.

In 2016 the South Korean embassy told citizens to avoid the North's restaurants for safety reasons, according to Chung Young-June, a scholar with the Institute for Sinology at Yonsei University. The government warning filtered into North Korean eateries, further straining relations between the neighboring restaurant owners. "The South Korean government doesn't allow them to eat our food," said the North Korean restaurant waitress. —AFP

Caught in the middle

Shenyang, a city of 8.3 million, is not far from China's border with the North and houses many of China's ethnic

Indian police probe reporter after data leak story, scandal

NEW DELHI: Indian police are investigating the reporter behind a story on alleged leaks from a government database containing the personal details of more than a billion people, sparking accusations of media censorship. Police said yesterday they were investigating a complaint of cheating, forgery and impersonation against the journalist, who reported last week that it was possible to buy information in the Aadhaar database for just 500 rupees (\$7.89). Aadhaar is a controversial government scheme that uses fingerprints and iris scans to provide users a unique identity number they can use to access government and other services.

It was intended to reduce official corrup-

tion, but critics say it violates citizens' right to privacy. The Unique Identification Authority of India, which administers the government identity card scheme, has denied any security breach but complained to police over the sting. A police report documenting the complaint names the reporter, Rachna Khaira, as well as her newspaper The Tribune and "unknown persons" behind the alleged data leak. The Editors' Guild of India said the criminal investigation amounted to an attack on press freedom.

"It is clearly meant to browbeat a journalist whose investigation on the matter was of great public interest," it said in a statement. Harish Khare, Tribune's editor-in-chief, said he stood by the report and regretted that the authorities had "misconceived an honest journalistic enterprise". Aadhaar was set up as a voluntary scheme, but has in recent years become compulsory for a growing number of services, including opening a bank account and paying taxes. Opponents say that its use for what are effectively essential services means their right to privacy is being violated. There have also been concerns about leaks, but the government has always maintained the system was secure. —AFP



NEW DELHI: An Indian bicycle rickshaw driver pedals down an alleyway on a foggy morning in New Delhi yesterday. —AFP

Malaysia's Mahathir, 92, eyes comeback in opposition he once crushed

KUALA LUMPUR: At the age of 92, Malaysia's one-time strongman Mahathir Mohamad is again seeking the leadership, but this time at the helm of the opposition that he crushed while in power. Mahathir was named the opposition's prime ministerial candidate Sunday after weeks of infighting, in an extraordinary turnaround as his heirs in government face a massive financial scandal. He will be the world's oldest leader if the coalition backing him wins a general election due by August, although analysts believe this is unlikely.

The authoritarian leader known for his acid tongue ruled the country for 22 years until 2003, making him Malaysia's longest-serving premier. He jailed opposition members without trial on security grounds in 1987 and was seen as an authoritarian figure who trampled over human rights. Even in retirement, he could not resist sniping at his successors. When allegations emerged that huge sums were looted from a sovereign wealth fund set up by current Prime Minister Najib Razak, he broke from the ruling party and established a new political outfit to try and oust a man who was once his protégé.

The US Justice Department alleges \$4.5 billion was stolen from the investment vehicle, IMDB, in a campaign of fraud and money-laundering. Najib denies any wrongdoing and has cracked down hard, purging critics from his government and curbing domestic investigations. The most remarkable aspect of Mahathir's return to frontline politics has been a rapprochement with his former nemesis and jailed opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, a dramatic shift after the pair's falling out dominated the political landscape for two decades. Anwar was heir apparent to Mahathir until the premier sacked him in 1998 over political differences, and was then jailed for six years on sodomy and corruption charges.

After being released Anwar led the opposition to its best-ever showing in 2013 elections, but was imprisoned again in 2015 under Najib's government. Anwar has condemned his convictions as politically motivated. After Mahathir cut ties with ruling party the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) he sought to mend his broken relationship with Anwar, with the pair meeting in



SHAH ALAM: Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad delivers a speech after he was elected as the opposition's prime ministerial candidate. —AFP

2016 for the first time in 18 years. His party, Bersatu, joined the main opposition coalition Pact of Hope, which includes Anwar's party and many other former sworn enemies, and on Sunday he was endorsed as the grouping's candidate at their convention.

'It is ridiculous'

If the opposition ousts the UMNO-led coalition which has ruled Malaysia since independence in 1957, Mahathir's position as premier is supposed to be temporary, with Anwar taking over once he is released from jail and has secured a royal pardon to overturn a ban on politics. The opposition hopes that Mahathir will boost its chances with Muslim Malays, who make up over 60 percent of the population, with the rest comprising mainly ethnic Chinese and Indians. Tian Chua, a lawmaker from Anwar's People's Justice Party, said Mahathir could deliver the knock-out blow to a government already reeling from the IMDB scandal. "Mahathir will invoke the glorious days of his 22-year reign and that will draw support from rural Malays, who are disgruntled with the rising cost of living," he told AFP.

But ruling party MPs quickly dismissed his candidacy and social media was flooded with angry comments criticizing the decision to put forward a man accused of ruling with an iron fist. "It is ridiculous. He is over 90 and he started all the problems we are facing," said Facebook user Radha Dulip Singh. Analysts said a victory for Pact of Hope looked unlikely. A survey by pollster the Merdeka Centre last month showed the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition potentially regaining its crucial two-thirds parliamentary majority, needed to amend the constitution. —AFP

Tap and donate: How a cashless society is creating jobs for the homeless

LONDON: A bitter January wind is biting in central London and passers-by shrink into their coats. But Liam, who is homeless, is still smiling as he tries to get people to stop and talk to him. Aside from his winning smile, he also offers intrigue - what is that strange box hanging from his neck? "I say to people: Hi, like to come and talk about this box?" The box makes people stop," said Liam, 34, who is currently sleeping in a night shelter. People can tap their credit or debit cards on his box to give a three pounds (about \$4) donation via contactless payment.

Two pounds goes towards Liam's wages; the other pound is donated to two homeless charities. In return, donors get a small art card depicting one of the week's news events. Tapping into the increasing use of contactless payments for everything from commuting to rounds of drinks, social enterprise TAP London is offering work for the homeless as charity fundraisers, all without any cash changing hands. Homelessness is on the rise in England, with at least 4,100 people sleeping rough on any given night in 2016, according to the homeless charity Crisis.

At the same time, use of contactless payments more than doubled last year, according to trade group The UK Card Association. All of TAP London's vendors are homeless and telling their personal stories often persuades people to donate. Since being kicked out of his family home at the age of 16, Liam has spent the last 18 years on and off the streets, struggling with cocaine and alcohol addiction. Following rehab, he's been clean for 13 months. "I'm trying to do something different rather than sit there and moan that the government won't do anything to help me," said Liam, who declined to give his full name.

The idea for the social enterprise came after TAP co-founder Polly Gilbert tried to donate food to a homeless man one evening. He rejected the hot dog she offered, explaining he had already been given five that evening. "Both of us had cared about homelessness but were frustrated at not knowing what to do," fellow co-founder Katie Whitlock, 28, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. Newspaper reports about street beggars making lucrative gains by pretending to be homeless and concerns about donated money supporting addictions have left people confused about whether to give money, said Whitlock. —Reuters

News in brief

Restaurant fire kills five

BANGALORE: Five workers were killed yesterday when a bar and restaurant in southern India caught fire, police said, less than two weeks after a blaze at another eatery killed 14. Police said an electrical short-circuit probably caused the fire at the Kailash Bar & Restaurant in the southern technology hub of Bangalore. All five victims were employees who were sleeping at the premises, Bangalore Deputy Commissioner of Police MN Anucheth told reporters. In late December 14 people were killed in a fire at a rooftop restaurant in Mumbai, many of them young women at a birthday party. The incidents have raised concerns over lax enforcement of safety rules in India, where fires are common. Such disasters are particularly frequent in Mumbai, where millions live in cramped and dilapidated properties because of high rents. Activists say builders and landlords often cut corners on safety to save costs and have accused civic authorities of negligence and apathy.

House fire kills four

MONTREAL: Four children were killed in a house fire in the eastern Canadian province of Nova Scotia, local media reported Sunday, quoting family members on the tragedy. The fire tore through a home in Pubnico Head, in the province's Yarmouth County, 260 kilometers southwest of Halifax. Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers said they responded to a call shortly after midnight. "We can confirm there are fatalities. The RCMP is at an early stage of this investigation," spokeswoman Jennifer Clarke told reporters around midday. Local media reported that two children who lived in the house were involved, as well as another two who were not part of the same family but were in the house at the time of the fire. The province has been dealing with frigid temperatures; it was minus 13 Celsius (8 Fahrenheit) at the time.

India reviews gay sex ban

NEW DELHI: India's Supreme Court yesterday announced a review of a hugely controversial ban on gay sex, saying no one should have to live in fear because of their sexuality. The court said it would take up a legal challenge by five high-profile Indians who said the colonial-era law created an atmosphere of intimidation. "A section of people... who exercise their choice should never live in a state of fear," said the court in its ruling, adding that "societal morality" was subject to change over time. The announcement is the latest chapter in a long-running legal tussle between social and religious conservatives and the gay community over the law passed by the British in the 1860s. Section 377 of the Indian penal code bans homosexual acts as "carnal intercourse against the order of nature" and allows for life imprisonment, though prosecutions for same-sex activity have been rare. Gay sex was effectively decriminalized in India in 2009 when the Delhi High Court ruled that banning it violated a person's fundamental rights.

11 dead after gun battle

MEXICO CITY: The aftermath of a gunfight on the outskirts of the Mexican seaside resort of Acapulco that pit residents of a small town against members of a local, self-appointed community police force has left 11 dead, state officials said on Sunday. The exchange of gunfire took place in the farming community of La Concepcion, just south of Acapulco, after elements of the community police detailed a young man for disorderly conduct during town festivities early Sunday morning. Eight local residents were killed in that exchange. After Army soldiers and state police later moved into the town, three members of the community police were shot dead after resisting them, Roberto Alvarez, a state security official, told reporters. Another 30 members of the local police, which had been authorized by state officials to operate in the small town, were arrested in the operation. Acapulco is the biggest city in the southern state of Guerrero, one of Mexico's most lawless and a center of opium poppy production.