



Trump, London mayor renews war of words

When fake news sparks violence: India grapples with online rumors

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KARBI ANGLONG, India: Photo shows villagers near the site of the lynching of two men in Panjuri Kachari village, in Karbi Anglong district some 180km from Guwahati, the capital city of India's northeastern state of Assam. — AFP

Death by 'fake news', social media

Social media-fuelled lynchings shock India

PANJURI KACHARI: The smartphone footage shows the two blood-soaked men pleading for their lives. Moments later they were dead, two more victims of lynchings sparked by rumors spread on Facebook and WhatsApp in India. The two men were young and well-educated. Gregarious, dreadlocked musician Nilotpal Das, 29, and his businessman friend Abhijeet Nath, 30, were both from Guwahati, capital of the northeastern state of Assam.

On the fateful day last month when they were beaten to death by a crazed village mob wielding bamboo sticks, machetes, and rocks, the friends were driving back from a day in the country, near a popular waterfall. "He liked to listen to the sounds of nature to find inspiration for his music," his grieving father Gopal Chandra Das, 68, told AFP at their home, the television table in the living room now a shrine to his son. Viral rumors about kidnapers, spread through Facebook and WhatsApp, have led to the lynching deaths of some 20 people in the last two months in India, according to a tally from local media reports.

Indian authorities have scrambled to respond but awareness campaigns, public alerts and internet blackouts have had limited success in deterring the spread of misinforma-

tion. Instead, officials blamed WhatsApp for the "irresponsible and explosive messages" being shared by its 200 million Indian users—the company's largest market. WhatsApp said it was "horrified" by the violence and promised action. The social media giant took out full-page advertisements in Indian newspapers offering "easy tips" to sort fact from fiction on its platform. "Together we can fight false information", the slick adverts declared.

Child kidnapers

On their June 8 excursion, the two men were unaware that "fake news" on child traffickers had been spreading on social media in the area. In the isolated, impoverished district of Karbi Anglong, Facebook and WhatsApp have become the new word of mouth, and messages on the platforms—however outlandish—are often taken as gospel.

Late in the day, the two men were sitting by a stream when a villager confronted them, causing an altercation. The young men left in their car in a hurry, but their antagonist warned the next village they were coming. "He made a phone call. He said that child kidnapers were on the way, that they needed to be stopped," said Gulshan Daolaguppu,

deputy division chief of Karbi Anglong. The mob surrounded the car on the country road. Convinced they had caught the child kidnapers, they launched a savage attack, posting videos of the killings online. The images shocked India.

An enquiry is under way to establish whether the suspect who instigated the attack, a 35-year-old taxi driver, genuinely believed he had caught the purported child kidnapers or whether he had ulterior motives. Some 50 people have been detained over the attack. "Had social media not been there, had this been 2014 — Facebook was not there, smartphones were not cheap—this would not have happened," said G.V. Siva Prasad, superintendent of police in Karbi Anglong district. "The speed at which it goes, nobody can address it, it is almost the speed of light." One month after the incident, the village of Panjuri Kachari is almost deserted. Only a few women, children and elderly people remain. The men are behind bars or on the run.

'It could have been me'

Lynchings based on misjudgment or malicious information are not a new phenomenon in India. But the spread of smartphones and internet access in the country's poorest

and most isolated areas has exacerbated the problem. Close to half a billion Indians are online, most accessing the internet via their smartphones. India was the fastest growing market for smartphones in 2017. Internet penetration in rural areas, though low at 20 percent, is growing. The tumbling cost of handsets—many priced at well below \$100 — coupled with cheap data plans is attracting many first-time users to the internet.

For researcher Abdul Kalam Azad, the lynchings in Panjuri Kachari must be seen in the particular context of Assam state, which is a patchwork of ethnic tribes and has been routinely hit by intercommunal strife. "Assam has been experiencing violence for a long time. In this situation of conflict, fake news become more dangerous, more violent and that's evident now," he said. The killing of Nilotpal Das and Abhijeet Nath has resonated broadly among urban, well-educated Indians and played on perceptions that rural districts are backward-looking and lawless. "Everyone could feel: 'it could have been my son, it could have been me,'" said Ittisha Sarah, 25, a friend of the victims. "That feeling is impacting people a lot. That it could have been anyone, so innocent, in that barbaric incident." — AFP

Syria raises flag in Daraa, but tough battles ahead

BEIRUT: The rapid fall of Daraa city, the cradle of Syria's uprising, is an important victory for President Bashar al-Assad's regime, but the country's devastating war is far from over, analysts say. Russian-backed government forces raised the flag in Daraa city on Thursday, but the regime still has two regions outside its control—and influential neighbors—to contend with.

To the west, it will have to retake the Quneitra province bordering the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, before moving on to a major battle in the north near the border with Turkey. "Bashar Al-Assad sent a signal with the fall of Daraa city that nowhere in Syria that has risen up against him will remain outside his reach," said Nick Heras, an analyst at the Center for a New American Strategy.

It was in poverty-stricken Daraa that anti-Assad protests erupted in 2011, sparking an uprising that spiraled into a complex civil war. Seven years into the conflict, Assad's forces have sealed a deal for a handover of the city and are determined to retake the whole of the wider province of the same name on the border with Jordan. More than 80 percent of Daraa province has returned to regime control, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor says, but



DARAA: A man rides a scooter in front of the Syrian national flag, raised in a street in Daraa-Al-Balad, an opposition-held part of the southern Syrian city of Daraa. — AFP

rebels are resisting in its western countryside.

"All of these images from Daraa of Assad's flag flying are meant to hasten the process of negotiating deals" for these rebel holdouts, Heras said. It is also intended to help the Assad regime retake the whole of southwest Syria, including Quneitra. "The hope in Damascus is that the fall of Daraa will move the Israelis to a deal now to let Assad reconsolidate his rule in southwest Syria," he said. But, says Sam Heller of the International Crisis Group think-tank, Quneitra will "represent a special military and political challenge". The ICG said in a recent report that Israel had supported fighters in southern Syria since 2013 or 2014, apparently to "secure a buffer zone on its border". This week, Israel said it had

carried out missile strikes on Syrian military posts in Quneitra, after intercepting what it said was an unarmed drone that had strayed into its territory.

Syria geographer Fabrice Balanche said Damascus securing Quneitra and the adjacent demilitarized zone would be "difficult because a deal is needed with the Israelis". "They are scared that the Syrian army will enter and then never leave," he said, adding the missiles strikes overnight to Thursday were likely a "warning". Israel is particularly worried about the presence of Iranians next door in Syria, where they have been backing Assad's regime. In recent months, a series of strikes in Syria that have killed Iranians have been attributed to Israel. — AFP

China floods wreak havoc

SHANGHAI: Heavy rain and thunderstorms are wreaking havoc across China, with floods along major rivers destroying bridges, blocking roads and railways and forcing thousands of residents to evacuate, state media reported yesterday. State television said 241 rivers in 24 provinces had flooded in the last few days, causing direct economic losses of 25.9 billion yuan (\$3.87 billion). Weather authorities are forecasting more downpours throughout the country today, with floods and landslides expected in the southwestern province of Sichuan.

Heavy rain and flooding hits much of China this time every year, often with hundreds killed, but the number of casualties this year has been relatively low, at least in the early summer, with one province reporting 15 dead and another three. The National Meteorological Center said rainfall could exceed 80 mm per hour in some regions. It also warned of floods in the northeast and called on authorities to halt outdoor activities and watch out for collapsing structures. The flood-prone Yangtze river, which runs from Yunnan in

the southwest to Jiangsu and Shanghai on the east coast, has seen a massive increase in water volumes, causing flooding in many of its tributaries and bringing water volumes in the giant Three Gorges reservoir close to record levels.

State news agency Xinhua reported on Friday that more than 10 highways in Sichuan province were inaccessible as a result of flooding, and a bridge across Sichuan's Min river, a Yangtze tributary, had collapsed. Floods in the province had caused damage to the tune of about 2.4 billion yuan by Thursday, according to the Ministry of Emergency Management, which had sent emergency relief teams to Sichuan and neighboring Gansu province.

The nearby city of Chongqing had evacuated more than 80,000 residents by Friday, Xinhua reported. Heavy rain has also caused the Yellow River, which runs through northern China, to burst its banks, blocking a section of a railway line in the northwest province of Shaanxi. Gansu, also in the northwest, reported 15 people killed, four missing and more than 1 million affected by a week of heavy rain and flash floods, the official China News Service said yesterday. The normally arid region of Inner Mongolia, which had suffered weeks of drought, also issued a flood warning on Friday. — Reuters