

International

For God and country: South Korea grants a Christian convert asylum

Iranian teenager converts to Christianity

SEOUL: When hundreds of Yemenis arrived in South Korea seeking asylum after fleeing their war-torn country, opponents decried their Muslim religion and none of their applications were approved. But an Iranian teenager who converted to Christianity has been granted refugee status. Religious belief is widespread in South Korea, where crosses dot the skylines of cities and towns and, according to government figures, more than a quarter of the population describe themselves as Christians.

But the country is also ethnically homogenous and unwelcoming towards immigrants, and the decision in the Iranian's favor - a marked contrast to the norm - came only after a campaign by his classmates in Seoul. The boy, who can only be identified by his adopted Christian name Antonio out of concerns for his safety, came to the South in 2010 as a seven-year-old with his businessman father. Two years later, he became a Roman Catholic, and his father followed suit in 2015.

But their conversions infuriated relatives in Iran, where apostasy by a Muslim can be punishable by death. The pair sought religious asylum in their new abode, but the South grants refugee status to only a tiny fraction of those who apply. The world's 11th-biggest economy accepted just 708 refugees from 2000 to 2017 - a mere 3.5 percent of total requests, one of the lowest rates in the world and far below the OECD average of 25 percent. Immigration authorities in Seoul rejected Antonio's asylum bid, arguing that he was too young to have religious faith, a decision upheld in May by the Supreme Court.

'Ray of hope'

With Antonio facing the prospect of deportation to an uncertain fate, his classmates stepped in, launching a petition on the presidential website, describing his faith as sincere and saying he was still going to church. A final chance to re-apply for asylum, they said, was "like a ray of hope from heaven". With a GDP per capita of \$30,000, they asked: "Could South Korea not embrace this one single soul?" The petition was eventually signed by more than 30,000 people.

Around 50 students accompanied Antonio when he returned to the immigration office and they staged a sit-in for hours as summer temperatures approached 40 degrees Celsius. Many wore surgical masks to conceal their identities with an anti-migrant outcry in full effect in South Korea after some 500 Yemenis arrived on the tourist island of Jeju earlier

this year, taking advantage of its visa-free status to seek asylum. Only around four percent of the South's population are foreigners, mostly from China and Southeast Asia, and discrimination against them is widespread.

Many opponents of the Yemenis' applications cited their Muslim religion and nearly 70,000 people-a record-signed another presidential website petition urging the tightening of what are already some of the world's toughest refugee laws. Social media commentators described the students as "brainwashed" and labeled them "crazy Muslim supporters". "People threw all kinds of slurs and insults at us and our parents online, and some of us were a bit scared," said Antonio's classmate Choi Hyun-joon, who staged a protest in front of the presidential Blue House.

'Not our problem?'

Critics complained to the school and city authorities, saying the establishment should remain neutral, said teacher Oh Heun-Rok. "The very essence of education is to protect the dignity of humankind, and humanitarianism is a part of that," he told AFP. Immigration authorities granted Antonio refugee status last month, two days after the Yemenis were turned down.

Both Antonio and his father declined to speak to AFP about the decision, not wanting to prejudice a forthcoming Supreme Court ruling on the father's own asylum application. Kim Yeon-ju, an activist at the Seoul-based Refugee Rights Centre, told AFP refugees generally get little support from South Korea's civic society, while a handful of Christians "may be a bit more willing to help." "So Christian refugees may have better access to the services provided by these faith-based activists," she said, but it remains "very limited".

The unusual, high-profile campaign by Antonio's friends may have played a role in the decision on his application, she added. During the drive, Antonio also met with Seoul's cardinal, Andrew Yeom Soo-jung, who vowed "all possible measures by the church" to help him, and wrote a prayer urging authorities to give his case "special attention and consideration". With Antonio's asylum approved, his classmates hope their efforts could encourage greater social tolerance toward refugees. There was "no political or religious repression" in South Korea, they said in a statement, but asked: "Does that mean that we should just shut ourselves up, saying, 'Refugees are not our problem... Don't soil our home?'" —AFP

Indian forces kill Kashmir militant

SRINAGAR: Government forces in Indian-administered Kashmir killed a top commander of the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Toiba militant group yesterday during a fierce firefight, police said, triggering clashes with protesters. LeT, the proscribed group India blames for the 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai, is one of the several groups fighting Indian soldiers for decades, seeking independence for Kashmir or a merger with Pakistan.

Pakistani national Naveed Jatt, the man killed yesterday, had dramatically escaped in February from a hospital in Srinagar where he was brought from jail for a check-up two years after his arrest. Two police officers accompanying Jatt—a renowned escape artist only five feet (1.52 metres) tall—were killed in a shootout inside the hospital before he was whisked away on a waiting motorbike. Police also say that Jatt was part of the group of assailants who killed prominent journalist Shujaat Bukhari in a daring attack inside Srinagar's high security press area in June.

Jatt and another militant were killed after they were trapped by soldiers, paramilitary forces and a police counterinsurgency unit surrounding the village of Chattergam in the central Kashmir valley. "It's a success, a



KASHMIR: Kashmiri Muslims look inside a damaged house after a gunfight between militants and Indian government forces in Chattergam village of central Kashmir's Budgam district yesterday. —AFP

relief. Naveed Jatt is one among the two militants killed," top police officer, Munir Ahmad Khan told AFP. "Jatt murdered two of our colleagues when he escaped (in February)," Khan said. Three soldiers were wounded in the gun battle, another police officer said, adding several protesters who hit the streets near the site of firefight were also injured in police action.

Violence in Kashmir has left tens of thousands of people dead. This year has been the bloodiest in nearly a decade with at least 530 killed so far, including 145

civilians and nearly 400 combatants. Kashmir has been divided between India and Pakistan since the partition of the sub-continent following independence from Britain in 1947. Both claim the former Himalayan kingdom in its entirety. India maintains some 500,000 soldiers in the part of the territory it controls, and regularly accuses Pakistan of arming and training rebels for attacks on Indian forces. Islamabad denies this, saying it only provides diplomatic support to a Kashmiri struggle for self-determination. —AFP

Pakistanis 'on one page' in seeking India friendship

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan said yesterday his government and the military want to mend ties with arch-foe India, in the latest bid to improve relations between the nuclear-armed neighbors. "I, the prime minister, my political party, the rest of our

political parties, our army, all our institutions are all on one page. We want to move forward," Khan said in a speech to open a new border crossing with India in Punjab province.

"If India takes one step forward then we will take two steps forward toward friendship," he said. Pakistan's chief of army staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, was among the dignitaries at the inauguration ceremony. The new crossing point, which will officially open next year, is about 120 km north of the Pakistani city of Lahore and will be used by Sikh pilgrims coming from India on a visa-

free basis to visit holy sites in Pakistan. The agreement is a rare instance of cooperation between the South Asian rivals which have fought three wars since independence from Britain in 1947. Appealing for a thaw in ties, Khan called for improvements in trade and other cross-border interaction and urged ending poverty through cooperation. Muslim Pakistan and mostly Hindu India have a range of disputes but their main bone of contention is the Muslim-majority Himalayan region of Kashmir, which they both claim in full but rule in part. —Reuters

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