

International

# Clashes erupt as India's most sacred temple accepts women

## Indian police charge protesters at flashpoint temple

**NILACKAL:** Clashes erupted in India yesterday as traditionalists tried to stop women visiting one of Hinduism's most sacred temples, with police waving batons charging stone-throwing protesters. Devotees opposed to allowing women into the Lord Ayyappa temple at Sabarimala in the southern state of Kerala earlier surrounded and intimidated journalists, including one from AFP.

Two other female journalists were reportedly injured. Even before the police charge, several people had blood streaming down their faces, suggesting further clashes had taken place. Last month India's Supreme Court overturned a ban on all females of menstruating age—judged between 10 and 50 — entering and praying at the hilltop temple. This enraged traditionalists, including supporters of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with thousands protesting in the days before the scheduled opening yesterday afternoon.

Kerala's state government said it would enforce the court ruling and deployed 500 extra police to ensure free access to the remote complex, which is reached by an uphill trek that takes several hours. At Nilackal, a base camp below the temple, police cleared protesters yesterday morning and arrested seven people who were stopping vehicles. "Anyone who wants to go to the temple will be able to do so without hindrance," said police chief Manoj Abraham. "Stern action will be taken against anyone who prevents devotees from going to Sabarimala," Kerala's Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said on Tuesday.



**Turned back**  
One 45-year old woman identified as Madhavi who wanted to enter the temple for the first time abandoned her attempt after activists prevented her climbing the hill, the Press Trust of India reported. Even though police gave the woman and her family protection and allowed them to move further, they gave up as agitated activists surrounded them, PTI reported.

Biju S Pillai, a local man in his 30s, was one of those opposed to the court ruling, telling AFP that he returned from working in Dubai to "protect the sanctity of the temple" with his mother and young son. "No one should be able to change the way this temple has functioned for centuries," he said. "If any change is made they will have to kill us and go over our bodies." "I am here to protest the Supreme Court decision," said engineer Anisha S., 23, one of a group chanting religious slogans. "We want to save our traditions. Ayyappa needs to be respected."

### Female journalists reportedly injured

### 'Impure'

Women are permitted to enter most Hindu temples but female devotees are still barred from entry by some. Two years ago, activists successfully campaigned to end a ban on women entering the Shani Shingnapur temple in Maharashtra state. Women were also permitted to enter Mumbai's Haji Ali Dargah mausoleum, a Muslim place of worship, after the Supreme Court scrapped a ban in 2016. The entry of women at Sabarimala was long taboo but was formalized by the Kerala High Court in 1991, a ruling overturned by India's Supreme Court last month. The restriction reflected an old but still prevalent belief among many that menstruating



**PATHANAMTHITTA:** Indian police beat a Hindu activist as he pleads for his own safety as protesters rallied against a Supreme Court verdict revoking a ban on women's entry to a Hindu temple, in Nilackal in southern Kerala state yesterday. —AFP

women are impure, and the fact that the deity Ayyappa was reputed to have been celibate.

The Sabarimala chief priest, Kandararu Maheshwararu Tantri, 25, warned this week that "anger could easily escalate into violence if a few egotistical women try to enter." "I say ego because no devotee who has faith in Sabarimala will try to

break the 2,100-year-old rule... Moreover, there are other Ayyappa temples women can visit," the Times of India quoted him as saying. He claimed to have the support of several "scientists" that concurred with the view that the "positive energy" in a temple can be polluted by the entry of menstruating women.—AFP

## China woos Bhutan, to India displeasure

**THIMPHU:** A peep into a Thimphu toy shop shows stacks of Pokemons, all made in China, a testimony to the quiet overtures Beijing is making in Bhutan at rival India's expense. China's annexation of Tibet in 1951 and an unresolved border dispute have long been irritants in ties with Bhutan, and India would prefer they remain estranged. India jumped to Bhutan's defense last year when Chinese troops started building a road on Doklam, a territory claimed by both China and Bhutan.

The eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation lasted 72 days before the Indian and Chinese armies pulled back. But now Beijing is seeking to mend relations and extend a hand of friendship to the tiny Himalayan kingdom, despite the two having no diplomatic relations. Chinese shipments have shot up in the past decade, with goods from machinery and cement to electricals and toys making Beijing the third largest source of foreign products to heavily import-dependent Bhutan.

And stuck between the competing regional powers, Bhutan has been gasping to assert its sovereignty and shrug off decades of heavy dependence on India. Many among Bhutan's 800,000 population feel India's embrace is becoming a stranglehold and getting in the way of Thimphu's ties with other countries. "Within Bhutan, there is a growing demand to diversify and loosen its dependence on India," University of British Columbia historian Tsering Shakya said.—AFP

## Shootout near Kashmir Muslim shrine kills four

**KASHMIR:** A firefight near a 14th century Muslim shrine killed at least four in the Kashmir capital yesterday and sparked protests in the city, police said. While deadly violence has increased in recent months across the restive Indian-administered part of Kashmir — a territory also claimed by Pakistan — such shootouts are rare in Srinagar. Police said three militants and a police officer were killed in the gunbattle near the Khanqah-e-Moula shrine, a tourist draw in Srinagar's Old City. The clash sparked a showdown between protesters and police, who fired tear gas at stone-throwing demonstrators shouting anti-India slogans. Shops and schools shut as news of the deaths spread, and internet services were suspended across the city.

Indian government forces cordoned off the Fateh Kadal locality, close to the shrine, after they received information about armed militants hiding in a house, a police statement said. Witnesses said the gunfire broke out

after soldiers knocked at the door of a house and took away a young man. "We don't know where he is and now we hear (police) say he was a militant," the young man's brother Asif Nabi told reporters outside his home, which was burned down in the clash. Police rejected this version of events saying that the man, though not known earlier to authorities, refused to leave the house when given the opportunity.

"Instead, he picked up a weapon and opened fire on troops there, and consequently was killed," inspector general of police Swayam Prakash Pani told AFP. As the firefight wound down, officers turned on journalists reporting at the site of the encounter, injuring at least one reporter and two cameramen. "They (police) just lunged at us and started beating us with sticks and then fired in the air. The empty cartridges hit my head," Asif Qureshi, a journalist with an Indian news station said. Earlier this month suspected rebels shot dead two activists from a pro-India political group near the scene of yesterday's shootout.

The capital has however largely been spared the violence which frequently breaks out between anti-India



**KASHMIR:** Kashmiri Muslims carry a body of a top militant commander Mehrajuddin Bangroo during a funeral in downtown Srinagar yesterday. —AFP

militants and government forces across Kashmir. India has some 500,000 troops deployed in Kashmir, where separatist groups demand independence or a merger with Pakistan. Both New Delhi and Islamabad claim the whole of Kashmir. Tens of thousands of people, mostly civilians, have died in

the fighting. This year, at least 184 militants, 75 security personnel and 60 civilians have been killed. India accuses Pakistan of arming and training militants to attack Indian forces. Pakistan says it only provides diplomatic support for Kashmir's right to self-determination.—AFP

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