

International

'Three Billboards' campaign targets gay conversion therapy in China

Unusual protest about raising and questioning unresolved issues

SHANGHAI: A Chinese artist and a gay policeman have launched an unusually bold public protest campaign in which bright-red trucks bearing slogans denouncing homosexual "conversion therapy" are being paraded through several major cities. Artist Wu Qiong said the rolling protest was inspired by the 2017 film "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri", in which Frances McDormand gave an Oscar-winning performance as a woman who uses billboards to call attention to her daughter's unsolved rape and murder.

"Three Billboards' was about raising and questioning unresolved issues. We wanted to also use this format to raise doubts (about conversion therapy)," Wu, 28, told AFP. Wu, who is based in the southern city of Shenzhen and says he is not gay, adds that the campaign will be staged in eight cities. It began last weekend in Shanghai. His policeman associate declines to reveal his name. China removed homosexuality and bisexuality from an official list of "mental illnesses" in 2001, but official terminology still includes vague references to "sexual orientation disorders".

Some parents are known to pressure gay children to "correct" their orientation, including through conversion therapy. The trucks bear slogans saying the therapy was being used on a "non-existent disease". Others say: "'Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders' still includes 'sexual orientation disorder'", and "It's been 19 years, why?"

The method is widely considered phony, and in 2017, a court in central China ordered a psychiatric

hospital to compensate a gay man who was forced to undergo conversion therapy. But many Chinese clinics still offer it. "Treatment" has reportedly included electroshocks, confinement, threats of violence, and pressuring patients to take unidentified medications.

Softening opposition

The first trucks toured around Shanghai last Saturday before the campaign moved to nearby Nanjing on Monday. An appearance in Beijing is planned later. Separate vehicles are hired in each location due to restrictions on inter-city trucking. Such campaigns are rare in China, where authorities quickly shut down most public protests to prevent them from snowballing. But Wu said the project has encountered no obstructions yet. Its Chinese social media hashtag remains unblocked by censors and had six million views as of Wednesday.

Many gay Chinese report softening social opposition to homosexuality, but authorities still routinely block gay-themed events. Activists complain of a hardening government line amid a broader campaign to purge social media and entertainment content deemed "unwholesome". "The space for public opinion on LGBT-related topics in China is getting smaller and smaller. We want to... become a channel to connect with the public," Wu said.

Wu said the project has raised about 20,000 yuan (\$3,000) in donations. He hopes to raise triple that to pay for drivers and fuel. "Our ultimate goal is for more people to talk about this," said Wu. The reception in Nanjing this week has been "quite inclusive",



NANJING: This photo taken on January 14, 2019 shows an activist (R) waving a rainbow flag near three trucks with slogans opposing "gay conversion therapy". —AFP

he added. "We stopped near a shopping mall and a security guard came out to ask what 'sexual orienta-

tion disorder' meant. After we explained it to him, he supported us." —AFP

More women barred from flashpoint Indian temple

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: Hindu devotees barred yesterday two more women from entering one of India's holiest temples, police said, two weeks after two others made history and sparked uproar by praying inside. The Sabarimala shrine in the southern state of Kerala has emerged as a burning issue after India's Supreme Court ruled in September that women of menstruating age — deemed as those between 10 and 50 — could enter.

The ruling sparked anger among traditionalists, including supporters of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ahead of elections later this year. On January 2, after protestors prevented other attempts, two women managed to sneak inside just before dawn, prompting days of unrest that left one man dead and led to several thousand arrests. The fresh attempt by two other women yesterday was unsuccessful, however.

"The women were given police protection but could not continue their journey owing to intense protests by other devotees," a Kerala police officer posted in the area told AFP. "Since their security was at stake, the police had no other option but to bring them back to Pampa (the base camp) from where they were sent (back to the nearest town)," he added. Local media reports said that they were part of a larger group which also included a 13-year-old girl and five men. —AFP

Indian opposition seeks scrapping of 1870 sedition law

NEW DELHI: India opposition politicians and media called for a colonial-era sedition law to be scrapped yesterday, accusing authorities of trying to suppress dissent after it was invoked against students marking the execution of a Kashmiri militant. Police used the 1870 law against 10 people, including a student organizer, for the 2016 rally at Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University where police say anti-India posters were raised.

The students denied the allegations and critics said Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government was trying to curb free speech and pander to his Hindu nationalist base ahead of his re-election bid in a few months. "There is no need for a sedition law in today's times, it is a colonial law," said Kapil Sibal, a senior leader of the main opposition Congress party. "Many who merely speak or tweet against the government have sedition charges imposed against them: it is being misused by the centre just to keep citizens in check."

Kanhaiya Kumar, the student leader, attended the rally questioning the execution of the Kashmiri separatist convicted of an attack on parliament in 2001, but his lawyers said he rejected the use of violence and made no incendiary comments. Instead, his supporters said he criticized a right-wing student fraternity and a Hindu-nationalist umbrella group to which Modi's ruling party belongs.

"The fact that the charges are being made three years after the alleged use of 'anti-national slogans' by JNU students in February 2016, and on the eve of the general elections, suggests that their motive is political," Manoj Joshi, a fellow at the New Delhi-



A Rohingya refugee receives an oral cholera vaccine from a Bangladeshi volunteer at the Thankhall refugee camp in Ukhlia district. —AFP

based think tank Observer Research Foundation, wrote in Mail Today. India is sensitive about Kashmir, its only Muslim majority state, where it is struggling to put down a decades-old revolt. India and Pakistan have fought three wars since independence from Britain in 1947, two of them over Kashmir, which they both claim in full but rule in part.

Hindu nationalists tied to Modi's party have long advocated a tough posture on Kashmir and say any policy of appeasement undermines India's security. The sedition law carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment. "Independent India should have the

confidence to scrap the anachronistic sedition law suited for the police state that existed before 1947, and let free speech flourish without fearing its own citizens so much." The Economic Times said. Police in the remote northeastern Indian state of Assam said last week they were also investigating an academic, a journalist and a peasant leader for possible sedition for publicly opposing a proposal to grant citizenship to non-Muslims from neighboring Muslim-majority countries. "This law now needs to go. A mature, liberal democracy cannot fight its own citizens," the Hindustan Times said. —Reuters

Rohingya exodus from India to Bangladesh hits 1,300: Official

COX'S BAZAR: At least 1,300 Rohingya Muslims have crossed into Bangladesh from India since the start of the year, an official said yesterday, as fears of deportation to Myanmar spark an exodus. New Delhi has faced sharp criticism for turning members of the persecuted minority over to Myanmar in recent weeks, despite the army there being accused of atrocities against the Rohingya. The United Nations and rights groups accused India of disregarding international law and returning the Rohingya to possible danger in Buddhist-majority Myanmar. India, which is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention, arrested 230 Rohingya in 2018 — the most in years as Hindu hardliners called for the displaced Muslims to be deported en masse.

The round-ups in India, and fear of deportation to Myanmar, have driven even more of the stateless Muslims into Bangladesh, where a million Rohingya live in giant refugee camps in the country's southeast. Nayana Bose, a spokeswoman for the Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG), which includes UN agencies and other foreign humanitarian organisations, said the pace of new arrivals had escalated since January 3. "Some 1,300 individuals from 300 families have arrived from India to Bangladesh until today," she told AFP. The new arrivals were being housed in a UN transit centre, she added.

UNHCR spokesman Firas Al-Khateeb said the UN refugee agency was "aware of the situation". Those crossing the border in recent weeks have been detained by police and sent to Cox's Bazar, a southern district home to the world's largest refugee camps. Some 40,000 Rohingya have been living in India. Police said those who arrived were living in India for years. Rohingya for decades have faced persecution and pogroms in Myanmar, which refuses to recognize them as citizens and falsely labels them "Bengali" illegal immigrants. —AFP

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