



Third attempt at Karabakh ceasefire quickly collapses

## Pakistan PM asks Facebook to ban Islamophobic content

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DAEJEON: South Korean Jehovah's Witnesses who are conscientious objectors to mandatory military service await an induction session at a correctional facility where they will begin training as administrators yesterday. — AFP

# S Korea offers alternative to conscription

## 'Clean conscience': South Korean Jehovah's Witnesses begin prison work terms

SEOUL: As a devout Jehovah's Witness Jang Kyung-jin was ready to be jailed rather than serve in South Korea's military. After a landmark court ruling he will be heading for prison - but as a civilian administrator, not a convict. The South remains technically at war with the North and maintains a compulsory conscription system to defend itself against Pyongyang's 1.2 million-strong army.

All able-bodied South Korean men are obliged to serve for 18 months before they turn 30, in a rite of passage that - while sometimes resented - can form lifelong bonds with fellow soldiers. Avoiding the duty in a conformist society faced with the world's last remaining Cold War conflict can bring with it employment consequences and lifelong social stigma, akin to the "white feather" campaign in First World War-era Britain.

## Russian strikes kill 78 Turkey backed rebels

BEIRUT: Air strikes by Damascus regime ally Russia killed 78 Turkey-backed rebels in northwestern Syria yesterday, a monitor said, in the bloodiest surge in violence since a truce almost eight months ago. More than 90 others were wounded when Russian warplanes targeted a training camp of the Faylaq al-Sham faction in the Jabal Duwaylit area in Idlib province, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. In early March, a truce brokered between Moscow and Ankara stemmed a deadly months-long Russia-backed regime military offensive on the country's last major rebel stronghold in Idlib.

That onslaught from December had displaced almost a million people from their homes in one of the worst humanitarian crises of the nine-year civil war. Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman described yesterday's strikes as the "deadliest since the ceasefire came into force". The National Liberation Front, an umbrella group of Ankara-backed rebels based in Idlib that includes Faylaq Al-Sham, told AFP that yesterday's Russian strikes hit one of its positions and caused casualties. It did not give an exact death toll.

NLF spokesman Sayf Raad denounced the "Russian aircraft and regime forces continuously violating the Turkish-Russian deal in targeting military positions, villages and towns". Of the almost one million people displaced in the last Idlib offensive, more than 200,000 have returned home to their towns and villages, most since the ceasefire went into force. The March truce has largely held, despite some intermittent bombardment in the area from both sides. Russian

air strikes have from time to time targeted military positions, including those of Turkey-backed groups, Abdel Rahman said.

### UN envoy visit

The US army on Thursday said it carried a drone strike against Al-Qaeda leaders in northwestern Syria, with the Observatory reporting 17 jihadists killed at a dinner gathering. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, led by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate, and allied rebels dominate the region of some three million people, around half living in camps after being displaced by fighting in other parts of the country. Last week, Turkey withdrew from one of its largest outposts in northwestern Syria

which had been encircled for the past year by Syrian regime forces. The outpost in Morek had been Turkey's largest in Hama province, most of which is now under Syrian government control.

After a string of military victories backed by Russia, the Syrian government has regained control of around 70 percent of the country, the Observatory says. Syria's war, which broke out after the brutal suppression of anti-government protests in 2011, has killed more than 380,000 people and displaced millions inside the country and abroad. Endless rounds of UN-backed peace talks have failed to stem the bloodshed and in recent years have been largely overtaken by a parallel negotiations track led by Russia and Turkey.—AFP



IDLIB: Syrians take part in the funeral of 10 fighters with the Turkey-backed Faylaq al-Sham rebel faction in this northwestern city yesterday following their death in a Russian air strike. — AFP

“ All who take the sword will perish by the sword ”

But over the decades tens of thousands of conscientious objectors, many of them Jehovah's Witnesses, have been willing to pay that price - and a prison sentence of 18 months or more - to adhere to their religious or moral beliefs. "As a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses, I believe it is my duty to interpret the Bible as it is written and follow the teachings of Jesus," Jang, a father of three said. A soft-spoken practitioner of traditional medicine, he cited Matthew 26:52, where Jesus tells his disciples not to use force to defend him as "All who take the sword will perish by the sword".

"It would have been the highest form of honourable act to defend the son of God but Jesus told his disciples not to... I have come to a conclusion that violence could never be justified under any circumstances." For years the idea of a civilian alternative to military service for conscientious objectors was highly controversial. But current President Moon Jae-in - who served in the special forces when he was a conscript in the 1970s - promised to create one during his 2017 election campaign.

The following year the South's Supreme Court ruled that moral and religious objections were valid reasons for refusing military service. The alternative service scheme went into effect yesterday, when Jang and 62 other conscientious objectors will report to a training centre in Daejeon, south of Seoul, for three years of duties as correctional facility administrators. They will be entitled to the same pay as regular conscripts and the justice ministry described the scheme as a "first step towards the balance of conscience and military duty".

### 36,000 years

Aside from Olympic medalists and Asian Games champions, along with the winners of some international classical musical competitions, the military obligation applies to all healthy men, and can mean career interruptions and delays. It currently looms over the seven members of the global K-pop sensation BTS, who are estimated to bring in billions of dollars to the world's 12th-largest economy. Steve Yoo, a hugely popular chart-topping singer in the 1990s, took US citizenship shortly before he was due to be called up, automatically forfeiting his Korean nationality and with it the obligation to serve. The move prompted widespread public fury and authorities swiftly banned him from entering the country, a measure that remains in place to this day.

Around the world, the Jehovah's Witnesses are perhaps best known for enthusiastic members preaching on street corners and knocking on doors in efforts to procure converts, and a refusal to receive blood transfusions. But in the South it is their refusal to serve in uniform or pledge allegiance to a national flag that most marks them out. No fewer than 19,353 church members have been punished for refusing to serve since 1950, spending a combined total of more than 36,000 years behind bars, according to the church.

Among the former inmates is Jang's fellow congregation member Lee Bit-nam, who was jailed in 2015 but, like all other conscientious objectors, has had his conviction record expunged as a result of the court ruling. A 30-year-old car mechanic, he said he was repeatedly ridiculed by guards and fellow prisoners for refusing to serve, but never doubted his decision.—AFP

## Black Alabaman campaigns for justice

MONTGOMERY: Anthony Ray Hinton, an innocent man, spent 30 years on death row in Alabama because, he says, he was "black and poor." His name finally cleared, he now campaigns for justice—which he says can only be achieved by beating Donald Trump at the ballot box. The 64-year-old African-American, his hair and beard graying, has mixed memories of the fateful day of April 3, 2015. After three decades behind bars—and under constant threat of execution—he regained his freedom on that day to start the second phase of his life.



MONTGOMERY, Alabama: Anthony Ray Hinton speaks during an interview with AFP at the office of Equal Justice Initiative on Oct 14, 2020. — AFP

"It was like I was walking on clouds" as he fell into the arms of welcoming relatives, he recalled. But his sense of joy was tempered. "It was good that I was finally free. It was bad that my mother was no longer here on this Earth to see her baby boy walk out of prison." That

day—which he had dreamed of so often before waking up, innocent, in a claustrophobic "five by seven" foot cell—finally ended his judicial nightmare.

Arrested in July 1985, Hinton was sentenced to death the following year, at the age of 29, for allegedly murdering two employees of fast-food restaurants, killed in separate armed hold-ups in Birmingham, the largest city in the southern state of Alabama. His court-appointed lawyer, Hinton later told talk-show host Oprah Winfrey, had rejected his protestations of innocence, telling him "All of y'all (Blacks) is always doing something, and then saying you didn't do it."

There was no fingerprint evidence against Hinton and the testimony of a ballistics expert hired by his attorney was torn apart when it emerged the man was half-blind. Nor did an alibi from Hinton's employer help. He was convicted largely because bullets recovered at the scene appeared to come from a gun owned by Hinton's mother, with whom he lived. "The state of Alabama, in one word, kidnapped me," he said firmly, speaking in his deep, sonorous voice. "Because we have a system that, if you are born Black and poor in America, the system can pretty much do with you as it pleases."

It was not until 1999, when lawyer Bryan Stevenson-founder of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) - took up Hinton's case that the truth began to emerge. Very, very slowly. Hinton was to spend another 16 years on death row, saved only by a new ballistics test, an intervention by the US Supreme Court and a second trial.

For years in prison he obsessed over the thought of gaining revenge for his wrongful conviction. "I would wake up and all I could think about was revenge," he said. But he came to realize that "that's not who I am." —AFP



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