

International

COVID fails to deter India's massive Ganges pilgrimage

Fines could be imposed for breaching health regulations

HARIDWAR: Hundreds of thousands of Hindu pilgrims descended on the banks of the Ganges River yesterday trusting in faith rather than masks to shield them against the coronavirus pandemic during the giant Kumbh Mela festival. Up to one million people were expected in the city of Haridwar for the first day of the pilgrimage, even though India has the world's second highest number of cases, more than 10 million, and has recorded more than 150,000 deaths. Most of the hordes, aged between three and over 80, who walked into the revered but freezing river in the morning mist did not have masks and social distancing was an organizational nightmare.

Senior police official Senthil Avoodai K Raj, who predicted between 500,000 and one million people would enter the city on the day, said that thousands of thousands of security forces in the crowds were trying to tell people to wear masks. He added that fines could be imposed for breaching COVID-19 regulations. "The pandemic is a bit of a worry, but we are taking all precautions," said organizer Siddharth Chakrapani. "I'm sure Maa Ganga will take care of their safety," he added, referring to the Hindu goddess of forgiveness and purification. According to Hindu mythology, gods and demons fought a war over a sacred pitcher containing the nectar of immor-

ality. Drops fell at four different locations, which now alternate as hosts for the immense gatherings. Kumbh Mela is recognized as a cultural heritage by UNESCO, and its last edition in Allahabad in 2019 — attracted around 55 million people over 48 days. This year Haridwar is the host, and several million people are expected to throng the holy city in the northern state of Uttarakhnad state over seven weeks.

'Not like Europe'

Taking a dip in the Ganges is considered a sacred rite by Hindus, who come from across India and beyond its borders to participate. "Its tradition. People eagerly wait for the Kumbh, waiting to take a bath. Yes, there is a pandemic but people will come because of tradition. People are coming from very far away," said 53-year-old Inderaj Singh. Uma Rani's job of putting coloured 'tilak' marks on the foreheads of pilgrims took a huge hit during the pandemic as visitor numbers to Haridwar collapsed. The 42-year-old hoped the Kumbh Mela would bring new business. "I only work for two hours in the evening and earn around two hundred rupees (\$2.50). The tourists make this town - without them there's nothing. I feed my children with whatever Ganga maa gives me," she said.

Holy men known as sadhus-boasting flamboy-



GANGASAGAR, India : Hindu pilgrims pray after taking a holy dip at the confluence of Ganges and the Bay of Bengal during the Gangasagar Mela on the occasion of Makar Sankranti. — AFP

ant dreadlocks and smoking cannabis—are a regular feature at the Kumbh Mela, camping by the river and offering blessings to those who come for the holy immersion. The river banks teemed with pilgrims and vendors while families laid out plastic

sheets to put their belongings on while they took turns to plunge in the river. Most were oblivious to the threat of coronavirus. "India is not like Europe... when it comes to immunity we are better," said 50-year-old Sanjay Sharma. —AFP

Sobbing relatives bury Indonesia plane crash victim

JAKARTA: Sobbing friends and relatives filed into a Jakarta cemetery yesterday to bury the remains of a flight attendant from the crashed Indonesian passenger jet, as divers restarted their hunt for its second black box. Okky Bisma, 29, was the first confirmed victim of Saturday's disaster after fingerprints from his retrieved hand were matched to those on a government identity database. There were 62 crew and passengers, including 10 children, on the Sriwijaya Air Boeing 737-500 when it plunged about 10,000 feet (3,000 meters) in less than a minute before slamming into the Java Sea just after take-off from Jakarta.

At least five other victims have since been identified, as forensic examiners sort through mangled human remains retrieved from the wreckage-littered seabed in the hope of matching DNA with relatives. At the cemetery, Bisma's wife Aldha Refa clutched a portrait of her husband and sprinkled flower petals on a mound of dirt where his coffin was buried. "Rest in peace up there darling and wait for me... in heaven," Refa, also a flight attendant, wrote in a tribute posted on social media this week.

"Thank you for being the perfect husband when you were on earth." Funeral traditions in Indonesia, the world's biggest Muslim-majority nation, call for a quick burial of the dead. But the identification process could take weeks or more, prolonging the agony for some distraught families. Bisma's family gave up hope of recovering more remains and decided instead to bury what divers had retrieved, said his father Supeno Hendy Kiswanto. "Today we're still mourning, but we surrender to Allah for what



JAKARTA: Aldha Refa, the wife of Okky Bisma, a flight attendant and one of the 62 people aboard Sriwijaya Air flight SJ182 grieves at his funeral in Jakarta yesterday. — AFP

has happened," Kiswanto told the ceremony. "Death is in the hands of God... Let's pray Allah grants him a place in heaven."

Nearly 270 divers were on hand yesterday as authorities restarted the underwater hunt, which was called off a day earlier due to bad weather and rough seas. "The main focus (today) will be the diving," Rasman MS, the search-and-rescue agency's operations director, said earlier yesterday. "We're not just looking for one thing—victims, the cockpit voice recorder and debris are all priorities." Investigators said they had extracted and cleaned a memory module from a retrieved flight data recorder and hope to be able to read critical details on the device soon, with the focus now on finding the plane's cockpit voice recorder. —AFP

News in brief

US envoy chides China

TAIPEI: Washington's envoy to the United Nations held a virtual talk with Taiwan's president yesterday after her visit to the island was scrapped in a diplomatic volte-face during the chaotic last days of the Trump administration. Ambassador Kelly Craft praised Taiwan's success in fighting the coronavirus while criticizing China for blocking the island from global bodies during a video discussion with President Tsai Ing-wen. "Unfortunately, Taiwan is unable to share those successes in UN venues, including the World Health Assembly, as a result of PRC obstruction," Craft tweeted, referring to the People's Republic of China. Taiwan has been praised for its pandemic response, with fewer than 850 cases and seven deaths. —AFP

Park to be jailed 20 years

SEOUL: South Korea's top court upheld a 20-year prison sentence for disgraced former president Park Geun-hye yesterday, in the final ruling over the corruption scandal that brought her down. The decision brings to an end an extended legal process that involved multiple trials and appeals, including a previous Supreme Court hearing. The country's first female president was impeached in 2017 after huge street protests against her rule. She was convicted the following year of bribery and abuse of power and jailed for 30 years. A series of appeals, a retrial and further appeals followed which reduced her sentence to 20 years. —AFP