



RANGPUR: In this Oct 4, 2015 file photo, Bangladeshi people gather outside a morgue as policemen guard during the autopsy on the body of killed Japanese citizen Kunio Hoshi at Mahiganj village in Rangpur district. — AP

RETAIL GIANTS RESTRICT TRAVEL TO BANGLADESH AFTER ATTACKS IS CLAIMS IT KILLED TWO FOREIGNERS, GOVT REJECTS

DHAKA: Business executives from global clothing giants H&M Inditex and Gap have cancelled trips to Dhaka this month after the killings of two foreigners, industry sources said, causing anxiety for Bangladesh's \$25 billion garment export sector.

Bangladeshi suppliers to the world's top brands said they didn't expect the disruptions to hurt their orders for the year-end Christmas season. But the attacks, claimed by the Islamic State, increase the pressure on an industry which faces competition from other low-wage countries and is trying to repair its safety image after several fatal accidents.

The United States and Canada have asked their diplomats to restrict their movements, and Britain warned of more attacks after an Italian aid worker and a Japanese man were shot dead a few days apart. Australia cancelled a cricket tour.

Poor light

Bangladesh's government, however, rejected the claim by the Islamic State and blamed the growing violence in the country on its domestic political opponents trying to show it in poor light. The attacks on foreigners, while rare, follow the killings of four Bangladeshi bloggers this year by machete-wielding assailants, and have spawned fear

among the foreign community.

"Our Western buyers panicked after the killing of the two foreigners within five days. Some buyers cancelled their visits during this peak time when they are supposed to place more orders," said Siddiqur Rahman, chief of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association.

Shahidullah Azim, a garment exporter who supplies to Sears, Loblaws and Perry Ellis among others said one of his buyers asked him to come to Dubai instead, along with the clothing samples. Other foreign business executives asked for video conferences with their Bangladeshi counterparts, saying they couldn't travel to Dhaka because of the warnings issued by their governments.

"We are monitoring the situation in Bangladesh closely and we are taking the appropriate security measures. We are also in close dialogue with other brands regarding the situation," H&M spokeswoman Anna Eriksson said. Marks & Spencer said the firm stopped travel to Bangladesh for seven days a few weeks ago. Travel has since resumed, a spokeswoman said, and added there was no impact on business orders.

Gap declined to comment on a change in its travel plans. Tesco said it had not stopped business travel to Bangladesh, but had asked

its employees to be vigilant and consider their movements carefully.

Japan's Fast Retailing, which owns the Uniqlo casual wear brand, said it suspended business travel for Japanese employees to Bangladesh this month, and warned employees against going out alone except when necessary. It said its local stores were operating as usual.

Masked men on bikes

Bangladesh has deployed paramilitary soldiers on nighttime patrols in the diplomatic quarter of Dhaka and issued a nationwide ban on people riding pillion after the two attacks were carried out by masked men riding bikes.

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan, who has dismissed claims that the Islamic State was operating in the Muslim majority country of 160 million, said on Wednesday that police were close to a breakthrough on the killings. "We have taken these attacks very seriously. We won't spare the killers," he said.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has blamed the rising tide of violence on the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its key ally, Jamaat-e-Islami, many of whose leaders are being prosecuted for war crimes during the 1971 war of independence. The opposition denies any involvement. — Reuters

INDIAN POLICE KILL TWO DESERTERS IN KASHMIR

SRINAGAR: Government forces in Indian-administered Kashmir yesterday killed two former police officers in a gun battle after the men deserted the force to join rebels in the restive territory. Inspector general of police Danish Rana said the two men had abandoned the force to join the Pakistan-based militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba, which is banned in India. "We were on hot pursuit against them. Today we eliminated them in a joint operation with the army," Rana told AFP.

Both were former rebels who had been recruited as Special Police Officers (SPOs), one in 1999 and the other in 2006. SPOs are mostly former rebels who have surrendered or served time in prison, and are mostly used in counter-insurgency work.

They are paid less than regular officers and there have been previous cases of them deserting the force—earlier this year an SPO guarding the residence of a local minister deserted his post to join the rebel group Hizbul Mujahideen.

Rana said the brief gun battle took place in the mountainous area of Doda, 175 kilometers southeast of the main city of Srinagar. Kashmir has been divided between India and Pakistan since the end of British colonial rule in 1947. Both claim the disputed territory in its entirety. For decades, several rebel groups have fought hundreds of thousands of Indian forces deployed in the region, for independence of the Himalayan territory or merger of its Indian-administered portion with Pakistan. The conflict has left tens of thousands, mostly civilians, dead. — AFP

TAMIL PRISONERS GO ON HUNGER STRIKE

COLOMBO: More than 200 Tamil prisoners staged hunger strikes and other protests in jails across Sri Lanka this week against being incarcerated for years without trial, officials said yesterday. Eight inmates were taken to the prison hospital of Colombo's main jail on Wednesday night, after refusing food for three days to push their demands for progress in their drawn-out cases, national prisons chief Rohana Pushpakumara said.

Some of the 200 are refusing food while others are defying demands to return to their cells and follow orders, Justice Ministry spokesman Harsha Abeykoon said. The prisoners were arrested during Sri Lanka's 37-year civil war for suspected involvement with Tamil rebels fighting for a separate homeland for the ethnic minority.

Although the war ended in 2009, some of those arrested under draconian anti-terrorism laws at the height of the conflict still languish in jail without any charges ever being brought against them. Justice Minister Wijeyadasa Rajapakse visited the main Welikada prison in Colombo yesterday and assured the detainees that the government would expedite their cases.

"The minister promised them that the attorney general's department will speed up the cases or release those against whom there is no evidence," ministry spokesman Abeykoon said. The new government of President Maithripala Sirisena, who came to power in January, has promised speedy action to help detainees, as part of reconciliation efforts. The detention of Tamils without trial has been a key criticism of successive Sri Lankan governments which are dominated by the majority Sinhalese community. Sri Lanka also faces allegations that tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed by government forces while battling the Tiger rebels. At least 100,000 people were killed in fighting between 1972 and May 2009. — AFP

MUTE INDIAN GIRL 'IDENTIFIES FAMILY'

KARACHI: A mute and deaf Indian girl who has been stuck in Pakistan for 13 years because she cannot remember where she came from may have finally identified her family, the charity looking after her said yesterday.

The new ray of hope for the woman known only as Geeta, believed to be in her early 20s, came after the Indian High Commission in Islamabad sent her a photograph of a family, whom she said she recognized.

The Edhi Foundation, Pakistan's largest

welfare organization who has been caring for Geeta since she was found 13 years ago, said it was trying to arrange a Skype video call with the family, reported to be based somewhere in India's Bihar province, to confirm their relationship. Geeta was 11 or 12 when she was found by police alone and disoriented with no identity papers on a train that had crossed the border from India into the eastern city of Lahore. She was believed to have strayed into Pakistani territory by mistake, but could not remember or explain exactly where she was from.

Unable to identify her or her family, Pakistani police handed her over to the Edhi Foundation. She now lives in one of the foundation's shelters in Karachi. Even the name "Geeta" was given to her by Edhi staff. "The Indian high commissioner has lately sent a family photo to us and Geeta has recognized the family," Anwer Kazmi, a senior official at the foundation, told AFP.

"We have showed the picture to Geeta and she says they are her family," Kazmi said. "We hope she will confirm the family identification during the Skype chat

through sign language," Kazmi said. It was not clear when the Skype chat would be held.

In August the Indian government pledged to bring Geeta home, prompted by fresh media coverage of a smash hit Bollywood film. "Bajrangi Bhaijaan", featuring Indian superstars Salman Khan and Kareena Kapoor, tells the mirror image of Geeta's story: a mute young Pakistani woman trapped in India. The Edhi foundation has made repeated attempts to trace Geeta's family, but with no success. — AFP