

## BANGLADESH UPHOLDS ISLAMIST TYCOON'S DEATH SENTENCE



**DHAKA:** File photo shows Bangladeshi Jamaat-e-Islami party leader, Mir Quasem Ali waving as he enters a van at the International Crimes Tribunal court in Dhaka. A wealthy tycoon who was a chief financier for Bangladesh's largest Islamist party could be executed in days after losing his final appeal yesterday, against a death sentence from a controversial war crimes tribunal. — AFP

**DHAKA:** A wealthy tycoon who was a chief financier for Bangladesh's largest Islamist party could be executed in days after losing his final appeal yesterday against a death sentence from a controversial war crimes tribunal. The Supreme Court rejected Mir Quasem Ali's last attempt to overturn the death penalty handed down two years ago by the domestic tribunal for murders committed during Bangladesh's 1971 independence conflict. "Now he has a chance to seek presidential clemency. Or else the verdict could be executed anytime whenever the state wants," Attorney General Mahubub Alam told reporters.

Five opposition leaders including four leading Islamists have already been executed for war crimes since 2013. They were all hanged just days after their appeals were rejected by the Supreme Court. Their families said they had refused to seek a presidential pardon as they did not want to legitimize the whole trials process. Ali, who became a shipping and real estate tycoon, was convicted in November 2014 of a series of crimes during Bangladesh's war of separation from Pakistan, including the abduction and murder of a young independence fighter.

Yesterday's decision is considered a major blow for the Jamaat-e-Islami party, which the 63-year-old Ali had helped revive by setting up charities, businesses and trusts linked to it after it was allowed to operate in the late 1970s. His son Mir Ahmed Bin Quasem, who was part of his legal defense team, was allegedly abducted by security forces earlier in August, which critics say was an attempt to sow fear and prevent protests against the imminent execution. Security was tight in Dhaka yesterday, even though the party has in recent months eschewed violent protests in reaction to war crimes verdicts and there was no immediate sign of unrest.

The war crimes tribunal set up by the government has divided the country, with supporters of Jamaat and the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) branding them a sham aimed at eliminating their leaders. The executions and convictions of Jamaat officials plunged Bangladesh into one of its worst crises in 2013 when tens of thousands of Islamist activists clashed with police in protests that left some 500 people dead. The Islamist party, which is banned from contesting elections, called a nation-

wide strike for Wednesday, calling the charges against Ali "false" and "baseless" and accusing the government of exacting "political vengeance".

### TV station shut

Before he was arrested in 2012 on 14 war crimes charges, Ali headed the Diganta Media Corporation, which owns a pro-Jamaat daily and a television station that was shut down in 2013 for stoking religious tensions. Defense lawyers have said the charges against him were baseless. "Mir Quasem Ali wasn't directly involved in war crimes. False witnesses were provided to frame charges against him. The future generation and law experts will scrutinize the verdict whether it was justified," Khandker Mahub Hossain said.

The court ruling comes a day after a visit to Dhaka by US Secretary of State John Kerry who said the best way to combat extremism was "to live up to the core values of democracy". Bangladesh has been hit by a series of deadly assaults by Islamist extremists in recent months, including an horrific attack on a Dhaka cafe in July in which 22 people, mostly foreigners, were killed. — AFP

## NEPAL BANS INDIAN POLICE COUPLE FOR FAKING MOUNT EVEREST CLIMB

**KATHMANDU:** Nepal has imposed a 10-year mountaineering ban on an Indian couple who faked photographs purporting to show them at the top of Mount Everest, an official said yesterday. Dinesh and Tarakeshwari Rathod, both police constables, said they reached the top of the world's highest mountain on May 23. But fellow climbers cast doubt on their claim, saying their photos at the summit were doctored. Nepal's tourism department initially certified their claim but later conducted an investigation.

"Our investigation shows that the couple faked their summit. We have imposed a 10-year ban against them from climbing any mountain in Nepal," tourism department chief Sudarshan Prasad Dhakal said of the decision made on Monday. Dhakal said an analysis of the photos submitted by the couple showed they had superimposed themselves and their banners onto photos taken by another Indian climber of his Everest summit. "Despite several attempts to get clarifications from them, they did not cooperate with us during the investigation. The two Sherpas that assisted them are also absconding," Dhakal said. "The ban should serve as a warning for mountaineers to follow ethics," he said.

Tourism ministry spokesman Ghanshyam Upadhyaya said the govern-

ment is considering revising the procedure for certifying claims of an ascent. The current system demands photos, reports from team leaders and government liaison officers stationed at the base camp-but has been open to attempts at fakery. "We will consult experts to see what technologies or processes we can use and make every party more responsible to prevent such false claims in the future," Upadhyaya said. Many of those who reach the top of the 8,848-metre (29,029-foot) mountain have gone on to make money or forge careers as motivational speakers and authors.

A total of 456 people, including more than 250 foreigners, summited Everest during the recently ended spring season, after two consecutive years of deadly disasters that led to almost all attempts being abandoned. Mountaineering is a major revenue-earner for the impoverished Himalayan nation. This year's string of successful summits is expected to boost the industry, which was left reeling after an earthquake last year killed almost 9,000 people nationwide. Hundreds fled Everest last year after an earthquake-triggered avalanche at base camp killed 18 people. Only one climber reached the top in 2014 after an avalanche killed 16 Nepali guides that year. — AFP



**NEW DELHI:** Indian Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj and US Secretary of State John Kerry arrive prior to a meeting in New Delhi yesterday. — AFP

## KERRY PRESSES FOR CLOSER INDIA TRADE, SECURITY TIES

### US, INDIA TRY TO COUNTER CHINA'S RISING INFLUENCE

**NEW DELHI:** US Secretary of State John Kerry pressed yesterday for more cooperation with India on security and trade as the world's two biggest democracies try to strengthen ties, in part to counter China's rising influence. Kerry also said he was hopeful of moving ahead on a deal to provide nuclear energy assistance to India, as the nations seek to meet an ambitious goal of boosting annual trade fivefold to around \$500 billion.

"I'm very, very confident that we will continue to strengthen what President Obama has called the defining partnership of the 21st century," Kerry said in New Delhi, adding that cooperation on trade and security has "room to be able to further grow". He was speaking before chairing a "strategic and commercial dialogue" with his counterpart Sushma Swaraj, launched by the nations' leaders in 2015. Kerry, who will meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday during the two-day visit, said he wanted progress on an agreement about construction of nuclear reactors.

"We also hope to see our civil nuclear cooperation take shape in the form of new reactors that will deliver reliable electricity to tens of millions of Indian households," Kerry said. The deal involving US

giant Westinghouse has been held up in the past by concerns over an Indian law that would make US companies liable for accidents at plants they helped build. Swaraj said she wanted to see closer military cooperation so that India could build more sophisticated hardware at home.

India, the world's biggest arms importer, wants access to US technology so it can develop better weapons—a key part of Modi's campaign to boost domestic manufacturing. India has historically relied heavily on Russia for arms imports, but has now turned to the US as it undergoes a lucrative and major modernization of its ageing military. "We want to take our expanding defense cooperation to the next stage of co-production and co-development," Swaraj said.

### Defense pact

The talks come one day after the two sides signed an agreement in Washington that allows access to each other's military bases for repairs and resupplies. US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and his Indian counterpart Manohar Parrikar sealed the pact in efforts to strengthen defense ties to counter concerns over China's growing military assertive-

ness. Carter said the agreement would make joint operations between their militaries logistically easier and more efficient.

Washington has increasingly turned its focus to Asia as it tries to counter China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, and is eager for India to play a greater role in its network of regional defense alliances. Regional superpower China is expanding its deep-water naval presence and staking a claim to disputed areas of the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Both Carter and Parrikar stressed that the new agreement did not allow for US bases to be set up on Indian soil nor for troops to be stationed there.

US Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker, who is taking part in the talks in Delhi, has said the idea of increasing two-way trade from \$100 billion to \$500 billion was ambitious. Modi, who enjoys close ties with US President Barack Obama, pledged to overhaul India's economy after winning landslide elections in 2014, to attract much-needed foreign investment and boost growth. Kerry arrived late Monday from Bangladesh where he said there was evidence to link the extremists behind a recent series of deadly attacks there to the Islamic State group. — AFP



**Indian climber, Satyarup Sidhantha holds on his right hand a photograph that shows him on Mount Everest, along with what he says is an altered version of the same used by an Indian couple to make it appear they were on the summit, as he displays them for the Associated Press in Kolkata, India. — AP**

## TALEBAN APPOINT NEW MILITARY CHIEF AS NEW LEADER SETTLES IN

**ISLAMABAD:** The Taliban have appointed a new military chief as the insurgents try to gain ground rather than talk peace under a new leadership, Taliban officials said in telephone interviews over the weekend. They said that the appointment of Mullah Ibrahim Sadar, once a close ally of Taliban founder Mullah Mohammed Omar, heralds a commitment to confrontation at a time when multiple governments are trying to coax the Taliban to the negotiating table. Sadar is a battle-hardened commander, who gained prominence among Taliban foot soldiers following the movement's overthrow in 2001. The two officials both spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly for the Taliban.

Sadar's appointment coincides with an uptick in Taliban attacks against Afghan security forces. The United States has sent additional troops to Afghanistan's southern Helmand province, where its capital, Lashkar Gah, is under pressure. The provincial council head Kareem Atal earlier said roughly 80 percent of Helmand is already under Taliban control. So far this month, Taliban fighters have attacked Afghan security forces in northern Kunduz province, briefly taking control of a district headquarters. The militants also overran a district in northern Bagram province and in eastern Paktia province.

Meanwhile, in eastern Nangarhar province, Taliban militants are fighting pitched battles with security forces. Afghanistan's Ministry of Defense says its security forces are waging operations in 15 provinces. Mohammad Akbari a member of Afghanistan's High Peace Council, which is tasked with talking peace with insurgent groups, said there

has been no progress in talks since Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour was killed in a US drone strike in May in Pakistan. Mansour was succeeded by Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, and the notorious Haqqani network gained a prominent role in the leadership structure.

"I can't see any green light toward peace by the Taliban for Afghanistan and instead we have seen an

increase in their fighting in the provinces," Akbari said. Since Mansour's death, Pakistan's Interior Ministry has launched a stepped-up campaign to verify the identity of roughly 1.5 million Afghans living in Pakistan, many possessing Pakistani identity cards, some legally obtained and others illegally acquired. Mansour was carrying a Pakistani passport and identity card under an alias. — AP



**HERAT:** Taliban fighters react to a speech by a senior leader of a breakaway faction of the Taliban, Mullah Abdul Manan Niazi, in the Shindand district of Herat province, Afghanistan. — AP

## AS DISASTER LOSSES MOUNT, SRI LANKA DEVELOPS TOOL, SYSTEM TO TRACK THEM

**ARANAYAKE:** Sri Lanka is planning to begin testing its first web-based disaster damage and loss reporting system by the end of the year, authorities say. The Disaster Management Center (DMC) is developing the program and training public officials on its use, said Srimal Samansiri, the DMC assistant director. The program will enlist at least one government official from each district - or a representative of a non-governmental organization in some cases - who is linked to disaster management and who will be tasked with uploading information.

The data then will be fed to a national data base maintained by the Treasury at the Finance Ministry. "For example, if it is the road sector, we would have the district engineer who would upload data on affected or closed roads, damages and closures," Samansiri said. The DMC official said that the request for such a program had come from the Treasury in mid-2015. "They were very keen to get precise up-to-date information so that they could plan relief efforts," he said. Right now, information about losses and damage from problems such as flooding, landslides and drought is collected in a less-coordinated way. Administrative officials in affected districts collect data and send it to their district offices, which then send it to the DMC or other government bodies

coordinating relief.

"There is no uniform system to report the damages or calculate losses, which is hampering disaster planning measures," Samansiri said. A clear example came during heavy floods in May. The Disaster Management Center said that 691 houses had been destroyed while 4,888 had been damaged between May 15 and May 22. However, Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake said the government expected housing damages to be higher. He said around 128,000 likely were damaged and at least a sixth of those would need complete rebuilding.

There have also been discrepancies in the number of fatalities and people missing reported by the DMC and the Sri Lanka Red Cross. The DMC data shows 89 deaths and 102 missing from May's disaster, while the Red Cross says the missing could be above 200, citing available population records. "The problem arises because untrained personnel are collecting data for various departments. There is no uniformity in the collection or in the reporting," said Jagath Mahendra, the DMC head for Kegalle District, one of those worst affected by the floods. He said a uniform reporting tool would minimize errors in data collection. The new reporting tool is being funded as part of a \$110 million World Bank Climate Resilience Program. — Reuters