

INDIAN MOURNERS SHAVE HEADS IN SHOW OF RESPECT FOR LEADER

CHENNAI: Thousands of ordinary Indians flocked yesterday to the seaside grave of Jayalalithaa Jayaram, a day after a burial ceremony restricted to politicians, film stars and relatives of the reclusive but hugely popular leader. Men wearing white dhotis lined up on plastic chairs beside hastily-erected police barricades around the grave to have their heads shaved, a Hindu mourning tradition usually reserved for the death of a close relative.

Many of the mourners were poor women who had travelled long distances in intense heat to pay final respects to the revered former chief minister of the southern state of Tamil Nadu, who died late on Monday aged 68. Among them was Vanita, 50, who ekes out a living rolling the cheap Indian cigarettes known as bidis. Vanita, who like many people in southern India uses only one name, said she had travelled to the state capital Chennai to see Jayalalithaa

many times, and once asked for her help getting treatment for a heart complaint.

"She made sure I got the operation I needed. She even gave me money for medicine. And the next time I met her she remembered me and asked how I was," said Vanita, pulling her sari to one side to reveal the scar from her surgery. "She once said, 'I am everything to my children and they are everything to me,'" she said of the woman who was known simply as "Amma" or mother to her adoring fans.

The former movie star, a populist champion of the poor, enjoyed god-like status in Tamil Nadu and was one of India's most powerful female leaders. She was buried on Tuesday alongside MG Ramachandran, her on-screen lover and predecessor as chief minister, at a ceremony attended by the stars of the film world and top political leaders including Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Media reports said her nephew was among the few relatives who attended, and there has been intense speculation about who stands to inherit the vast wealth she accrued during her time in power. An estimated one million people lined the streets to watch her glass coffin transported to the burial site amid tight security in a city that has seen outbreaks of violence after the deaths of past leaders.

Most shops and restaurants reopened yesterday as the city began returning to normal, although schools and colleges will remain closed for another two days. The atmosphere at her graveside was largely calm, the peace occasionally broken by anguished cries of "Amma" from the mourners. One elderly woman screamed and beat her head repeatedly with her hands, banging herself against the police barricades around the grave. "She took care of everything and we wanted for nothing," said 47-year-old Paramashiva after having his head shaved. —AFP



CHENNAI: Indian supporters of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa Jayaram pay tribute by having their heads shaved at the memorial where she was laid to rest. —AFP



DHAKA: Attorney General of Bangladesh, Mahbubey Alam, center, walks out of the Supreme Court after the hearing of a review petition relating to the death sentence of Harkatul Jihad leader, Mufti Abdul Hannan. —AP

BANGLADESH COURT CONFIRMS ISLAMIC GROUP LEADER DEATH

NEW DELHI: Bangladesh's Supreme Court yesterday upheld death sentences for the leader of a banned Islamic group and two of his associates found guilty in a 2004 grenade attack on a British envoy. Defense lawyers representing Mufti Abdul Hannan, head of the group Harkatul Jihad, said they would appeal for a Supreme Court review of yesterday's ruling, though such reviews are rare.

Hannan and the two others were found guilty in 2008 of orchestrating a grenade attack against Bangladesh-born British High Commissioner Anwar Choudhury while he was visiting a popular Islamic shrine in the northeastern city of Sylhet in 2004. Choudhury was unharmed, but the attack killed three police officers and wounded 70 others.

The trial court in 2008 sentenced two other associates of Hannan to life in prison in connection with the attack. Hannan took over leadership of Harkatul Jihad in the late 1990s. The group, formed in 1992 by Bangladeshis returning from fighting Soviet forces in Afghanistan, has been blamed for many other attacks in the Muslim-majority nation. Hannan was also sentenced to death for another attack in 2001 that killed 10 people during a new year celebration. He remains on trial in a 2004 grenade attack that killed 24 people which targeted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina when she was the opposition leader. Hasina escaped injury. The group was banned by the government in 2005. —AP

NIGERIA'S BOKO HARAM BATTLE STALLS AS POPULATION STARVES

KANO: Nigeria's military campaign against Boko Haram Islamists is increasingly bogged down as it confronts suicide attacks, looting and indiscriminate slaughter while the UN warns the affected region faces the "largest crisis in Africa". In northern Borno state, the epicentre of the insurgency that has spread to three neighboring countries—Chad, Cameroon and Niger—Nigeria's army has unleashed a barrage of air and land assaults.

The counter-insurgency has clawed back some territory, but Boko Haram has responded by stepping up guerrilla tactics, ambushing troops when it can and terrorizing civilians when it cannot. In late November major general Leo Irbor hailed his men's success in freeing "more than 5,200 people" over a month. But the high number freed merely highlighted Boko Haram's capacity to capture and hold vast, heavily populated areas.

Villagers under siege are typically forced to abandon their crops, devastating local food supplies. Those who are freed by the army are generally transported to camps where basic supplies are also desperately scarce. The United Nations estimates that 14 million people will need outside help in 2017, particularly in Borno State, after seven years of conflict that has killed at least 20,000 people and left 2.6 million homeless.

'Scorched-earth'

The scale of humanitarian suffering has become more apparent as troops recapture and discover the "scorched-earth" conditions of villages that have fallen into the hands of Boko Haram. But local people complain that there are not enough security forces deployed to effectively battle the menace of Boko Haram.

The same day as Irbor hailed the liberation of the civilians, five people were killed in insurgent raids on villages near Chibok, the district that gained notoriety for the Boko Haram kidnapping of more than 200 schoolgirls in 2014. The Boko Haram raiders looted and burned houses, set fire to crops that were ready for harvesting, and killed the locals—even though the army had been alerted to the assault.

"We've heard there are 700 soldiers to secure the zone bordering the Sambisa forest that is the Boko Haram stronghold," said Ayuba Alamson, a resident of Chibok. The forest covers an area of about 1,300 square

kilometers. "We need another battalion," said Alamson. Though Boko Haram has been weakened and casualty numbers followings its attacks are often low, the frequency of their strikes "enable it to keep up the pressure on security forces and force them to deploy", said Omar Mahmood, a researcher at the Institute for Security Studies, stretching them further.

'Famine-like'

Troop numbers are also being pulled away to fight on another front, Nigeria's south where militants have been sabotaging oil pipelines and other installations vital to the country's export earnings in a fierce dispute over local autonomy and the distribution of petrodollars. And with tensions mounting between Shiite and Sunni Muslim communities in the country's northwest, authorities are struggling to guarantee security for Nigeria's 180 million people.

The number of killings in the northeast, which increases after the end of the rainy season each year, is a particular cause for concern—especially on the border with Niger. Territory in Niger has become the stronghold of Abu Musab Al-Barnawi, who was declared a local leader by the Islamic State group after Boko Haram declared its allegiance to the jihadists. Anti-terrorist consultant Yan St-Pierre, director of the Modern Security Consulting Group, said that pressure on Islamic State jihadists in northern Libya has, perversely, pushed its activities further south, to countries bordering Nigeria.

As a result, their "effectiveness for supplying (Nigerian jihadists) with weapons and logistic materiel has greatly improved over several weeks," he told AFP. While IS and Boko Haram fighters battle the Nigerian army, hunger is spreading among both villagers and the swelling ranks of displaced people in the ravaged northeast. The UN has warned that 75,000 children in the region are at risk of death within "a few months".

What the World Food Program has called "famine-like" conditions have prompted experts to warn against seeking victory over the jihadists at all costs. "The Nigerian army, which has adopted a purely military strategy for seven years, needs to change its approach if it wants to win this war," said St-Pierre. —AFP

AFGHAN WOMAN GOES FROM REFUGEE TO MILITARY PILOT

AFGHAN WOMEN STEP TO INCREASE THEIR PRESENCE IN SOCIETY

KABUL: From a childhood as a refugee, Capt Safia Ferozi is now flying a transport plane for Afghanistan's air force as the country's second female pilot, a sign of the efforts to bring more women into the armed forces. Along the way, the 26-year-old Ferozi also married another pilot, who flies in the same unit supporting army ground forces. They are part of a small Afghan air force that is trying to take a greater role in fighting the Taliban insurgency. "When I wear military uniform, I really, really feel proud of myself as a woman," Ferozi said while preparing for a flight at the air force base in the capital, Kabul. She flies a C-208, a turboprop plane used as transport for the armed forces.

Nearly 16 years since the collapse of the militant Taleban regime after the US-led invasion in 2001, Afghan women are taking steps to increase their presence in society, including in parliament, government and the military. Still, they face resistance in a deeply conservative society where women are largely expected to stay in the home and where violence against women remains a widespread problem.

When she was a child, Ferozi's family fled from their home in Kabul in the 1990s, during the civil war among Afghanistan's warlords. They took refuge in Pakistan, returning only after the fall of the Taleban. In high school in post-Taleban Afghanistan, Ferozi saw a TV commercial urging women to join the military. So after graduation she enrolled in the military academy, studying to become a communication officer. Then it was announced at the academy that the air force was looking for women to become pilots.

Flying missions

Ferozi and 12 other women applied, and she was the only one who passed the tests to enter training. While she was training at an airfield in the western province of Herat, she first met Capt Mohammad Jawad Najafi, the pilot who would later become her husband. They married nearly two years ago, and he has since backed her ambitions. She graduated from training in 2015. She gave birth to their first child, daughter Nergis, now nearly 8 months old, and is back flying missions.

Ferozi is one of only two female pilots in the Afghan air force, but five other women are currently going through training. In 2013, Capt

Niloofer Rahmani became the country's first woman pilot in more than 30 years and the first to pilot fixed-wing aircraft - there were a few female helicopter pilots during Soviet-backed rule in the 1980s. She is now in the United States training on the far larger C-130 military transport craft. Ferozi says she hopes to inspire other women.

"As a woman you face many challenges, but you have to deal somehow with all those problems," she said. There are around 1,800 women serving in Afghanistan's 195,000-member military, according to Gen Mohammad Radmanish, deputy Defense Ministry spokesman. The military, which is heavily backed by the

US and NATO, is working to bring the number up to 10 percent of its ranks over the next seven years, he said.

Afghanistan's small air force - just over 100 aircraft - received little attention for years, but in 2015 NATO and the US began focusing on building it up with increased training and equipment. The force has attack helicopters and light attack planes that have been flying combat missions this year, though NATO militaries carry out the vast majority of strikes in the fight against insurgents. The other major role for the air force is in emergency humanitarian missions, helping those hit by flooding, avalanches, landslides or other disasters. —AP



KABUL: In this Monday, Nov 21, 2016, photo, Capt Safia Ferozi, 26, sits in a C-208, a turboprop plane used as transport for the armed forces, before a flight, at the Afghan military airbase. —AP

INDIA RECORDS HUGE SPIKE IN 'HONOR KILLINGS' IN 2015

NEW DELHI: India has registered nearly an 800 percent spike in the number of so-called honor killings reported last year, leading state officials and women's rights groups to urge investigations into how such crimes persist. Indian police registered 251 cases of honor killing in 2015, compared with just 28 a year earlier when India began counting them separately from murder, according to a statement this week by Junior Home Minister Hansraj G Ahir to India's Parliament.

The surge could partly reflect more willingness by people to report such crimes, which many still consider just punishment for women and men who defy communal customs by marrying outside of their religion, clan or caste. Often, the perpetrators are relatives seeking to punish young couples for bringing "shame" to the family. Women's rights activists say the government must pass legislation to recognize the crime as unique in order to target perpetrators for prosecution. "These figures show that the government has to take this as a priority," said Sudha Sundararaman, head of the All India Democratic Women's Association. Though police are now asked to count honor killing separately, the lack of a separate law defining such crimes means that some officers still record them in the larger murder category and do not investigate the cases further, she said.

Honor killings are still common enough among Hindus and Muslims to regularly make newspaper headlines in a country where most marriages are arranged by families. Most cases are reported in northern states such as Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, where caste councils wield enormous power in village life. The highest number of honor killings recorded last year was in Uttar Pradesh, where police counted 131 killings compared with just two cases in 2014, Ahir said, citing data from the National Crime Records Bureau.

Numbers doubted

State police officers were skeptical. Such a jump "is astronomical" and needs to be looked into, Deputy Inspector General D K Chaudhary said. Women's activists say that's missing the point, and that having 279 honor killings recorded over two years still vastly underestimates the actual numbers. One 2011 study suggested about 900 people are murdered in honor killings ever year in India. The study by the All India Democratic Women's Association was based on surveys conducted nationwide. "There is severe under-reporting of such honor crimes. Families are often ashamed to report such crimes," said Annie Raja of the National Federation of Indian Women.

Raja said the situation had worsened in the last few years, noting an increasing trend in village councils run by unelected elders promoting conservative, anti-women values in the name of preserving Indian culture and tradition.

Some observers also noted that social changes were creating friction in communities, as more women step away from traditional home-making roles to join the work force. That makes them more likely to want to delay marriage, while also increasing the chance of finding partners outside of their community.

"There has been a backlash of conservatism," Raja said. "Young people are facing violence and attacks from their families if they fall in love." Analysts say that even as politicians push for better health care and education for girls, they have been unwilling to act against village councils that influence large numbers of voters. "Indian society is unwilling to accept the choices made by young women when it comes to their marriage," said Ranjana Kumari of the Centre for Social Research, a New Delhi-based think tank. "People also have to learn to respect women." —AP

TORRENTIAL RAIN STRANDS TOURISTS ON INDIAN ISLAND

NEW DELHI: Torrential rain and rough seas have stranded around 1,000 tourists on one of India's tropical islands off its east coast, officials said yesterday. Officials from the local Andaman and Nicobar Islands administration said they have asked the Indian navy to help rescue tourists from Havelock, one of the smaller islands most popular with visitors. "Around 1,000 tourists who had gone to Havelock island have been stuck there since Monday because of heavy rains," TKS Ajayan, deputy director at the local disaster management department, told AFP by phone.

The archipelago is one of India's premier domestic tourist destinations thanks to its pristine beaches, marine life and lush-green forests. Ferry services between islands are currently suspended. "The boats (between Havelock and the main island) haven't operated yesterday or today because of bad weather, which is why we have sought the Navy's help. We know all of them are safe," said Ajayan. The navy has deployed four ships to the islands but said the sea was still too rough for them to risk moving the stranded travelers.

"We have reached there but the civilian lives can't be risked in these rough seas," said Captain DK Sharma, a naval spokesman. "We will begin moving them only after the conditions improve." The meteorological department forecast "heavy to very heavy" rainfall and "rough to very rough" seas around the islands in the next 24 hours. —AFP