

INDIAN MINISTER WANTS COMPULSORY SEX TESTS

NEW DELHI: India's children's minister has called for mandatory tests to determine the sex of an unborn child to try to counter high levels of female foeticide, sparking fierce criticism yesterday from women's activists. Prenatal sex tests are officially illegal in India, a policy designed to stop so many unborn girls being aborted by parents desperate for a boy. But in a speech late Monday, Women and Child Development Minister Maneka Gandhi said a more effective strategy would be to record the sex of a foetus at the outset of the pregnancy and then monitor its progress.

"How long are we going to keep making criminals out of people? How long are we going to put the onus on sonographers? My view is why not change the present policy. Every pregnant woman should be compulsorily told whether it is a boy or girl," Gandhi

said. "When a woman becomes pregnant it should be registered and that way you will be able to monitor right until the end whether she gave birth or not and what happened," she said in the western city of Jaipur.

Parents and doctors can be jailed for up to five years for asking for or conducting a pre-natal sex test. But the tests are still thought to be widespread, particularly in impoverished rural areas. A 2011 study in the British medical journal *The Lancet* found that up to 12 million girls had been aborted in the last three decades in India. India had 940 females for every 1,000 males, according to the last official census published in 2011, up from 933 in 2001 in a trend that some campaigners say vindicates the current policy of banning sex tests.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has previously spoken out against the killing of

unborn girls, warning that the gender imbalance will have serious consequences for the country's development, although he has not addressed the issue of sex tests. Gandhi, who is the sister-in-law of opposition leader Sonia Gandhi, said she was "just putting out this idea" which was being discussed with her ministerial counterparts. "We have not reached a conclusion, we are still discussing the pros and cons," she said. In a statement yesterday, her office said there was no "formal proposal" being considered by her ministry after some local media quoted her as saying one was being discussed in cabinet.

'Enormous pressure'

Women's rights groups said a change of policy would result in women from rural areas coming under even more pressure

from families to have an abortion. "This is not a very productive idea, in fact it could make things worse," Ranjana Kumari, director of the Delhi-based Centre for Social Research think-tank said. "This might work among educated women, but not for large numbers of women living in rural areas who are still under enormous pressure to live up to the social and cultural traditions to have a boy."

The All India Democratic Women's Association said Gandhi's proposal was "shocking" and appeared aimed at absolving the medical profession of responsibility for foeticide levels. "It will fuel a proliferation of illegal facilities for getting rid of unwanted female foetuses," the organization said in a statement. "What is required is a continued and stringent implementation of the present act, which has clearly acted as a deterrent wherever it has been used effectively."

Since coming to power, Modi has sought to position himself as a champion of women's rights, emphasizing education for girls and an end to female foeticide in a country where boys are seen as more desirable than girls.

A year ago, Modi urged a largely female audience in Haryana—the state with the lowest ratio of female to male births—to resist pressure from family and society to abort girls. And in July he launched a Twitter campaign #SelfieWithDaughter appealing to parents to post snapshots with their daughters to tackle the skewed sex ratio. Maneka Gandhi's was one of the more eye-catching appointments to Modi's cabinet given her family ties to the main opposition Congress party. She is the widow of Sanjay Gandhi, whose mother Indira was assassinated in 1984 while prime minister. — AFP



NAYPYITAW: Myanmar military lawmakers arrive to attend the final session of Myanmar's current parliament as it ends its five-year term in Naypyitaw, Myanmar. — AP

TRAVEL BAN FUELS TALK OF MYANMAR CONSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGE AND RIFT

MYANMAR CONSTITUTION BARS SUU KYI FROM PRESIDENCY

NAYPYITAW: The party of Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi has instructed its lawmakers not to leave the capital, rank-and-file members said, fuelling speculation of a legal bid to sidestep a clause in the constitution barring the democracy champion from the presidency. Eight new lawmakers from the National League for Democracy (NLD) said the party's top governing body, the 15-strong Central Executive Committee (CEC), had told them to stay in Naypyitaw, where the NLD-dominated parliament began its five-year term this week.

"We are not allowed to take any leave until the end of next week," said a new NLD member who did not want to be identified. "One of the NLD CEC members said there may be some important matters or emergency bills coming up next week." The directive has intensified speculation among lawmakers that the party could table legislation to suspend the provision that prevents Nobel Peace Prize laureate Suu Kyi from becoming president despite her thumping win in a historic election in November.

Senior NLD figures either declined to comment or said they were not aware of such a move, which would represent a major shift in their strategy and could pose a direct challenge to the still-powerful military. The NLD, which won about 80 percent of the contested seats in

the November poll, has so far taken a conciliatory approach to dealing with its former enemies in the armed forces, who ruled the former Burma with an iron fist for almost 50 years. Representatives of the outgoing, military-linked government said any attempt to circumvent the provision would be unlawful.

Constitutional bar

At issue is article 59 (f) of the constitution drafted in 2008 by the junta before it handed power to a semi-civilian government led by former generals in 2011. The article bars anyone with a foreign spouse or children from becoming president. The clause was widely seen as aimed specifically at Suu Kyi - whose two children are British citizens - and the NLD has called the document "ridiculous".

Suu Kyi has said she will rule "above the president," but has given few details about her plans, fuelling speculation about figurehead presidential candidates or legal devices to allow her to lead the new government when a lengthy transition is completed at the end of March. One such device would be to temporarily suspend article 59 (f), a move first floated by prominent lawmaker and former general Aung Ko. He is a close friend of Shwe Mann, the former speaker of parliament purged from the junta-linked

Union Solidarity and Development Party last year and now a key Suu Kyi ally.

Such a temporary suspension, the thinking goes, could allow Suu Kyi to become president without formally changing the constitution, which requires the votes of more than three-quarters of parliamentarians - so giving the military, which holds 25 percent of seats, a veto - and a national referendum. While Myanmar's post-independence 1947 constitution allowed for the suspension of articles, the 2008 charter, which has been criticized as vague and open to interpretation, makes no mention of it. "In our constitution, there's no provision saying whether or not 59 (f) can be suspended," Aung Ko told local media in December. "In such a case, the law can be suspended."

Legal grey area

Ko Ni, the NLD's legal expert, as well as Nyan Win, a senior NLD official and Suu Kyi's legal advisor, said they thought the parliament could suspend the article with a simple majority. "There is an informal way (to amend the constitution) in which we have to enact a special law to temporarily suspend the provision in 59 (f). This law can be enacted by 51 percent of votes at the Union Parliament," said Ko Ni. It was unclear whether the top NLD ranks are planning

to table such a proposal. Nyan Win, a CEC member, and Ko Ni said they did not know of such plans.

Win Htein, a former political prisoner and one of the party's most influential leaders, declined to comment, but told Reuters it would announce its presidential candidate next week. Ye Htut, Information Minister and spokesman for the outgoing President Thein Sein, said a constitutional article could only be suspended in a state of emergency, with executive powers transferred to the army chief.

Such a step would also set a bad precedent for the country's burgeoning democracy, he added in an interview with Reuters. "Now the NLD suspends one article, what happens after 2020, another party comes in and they suspend another 10 articles or 12 articles? So what will happen to our country?" said Ye Htut. The military-owned Myawady daily said in an editorial coinciding with the inauguration of parliament on Monday that it opposed any changes to the constitution. "The head of the state should be someone who the entire people can trust without any doubt," said the editorial. "Therefore, the family members of the head of the state should not be ones who are entitled to enjoy the rights and privileges of a subject of a foreign country." — Reuters

NORTH KOREA GETTING BETTER AT HIDING NUKE, ROCKET TESTS

TOKYO: Less than a month after its purported H-bomb test, attention is now focused on whether North Korea is readying a rocket launch. With underground railways, giant tarps and a movable launch pad structure in place, experts say, the North is getting a lot better at concealing its preparations. American and Japanese officials say they are seeing heightened activity at North Korea's main rocket facility, though they stress

it's still unclear if a launch really is in the works or how soon it might come. Intelligence officials in Seoul, stung by their failure to predict the North's Jan 6 nuclear test, are also cautiously warning another provocation could happen abruptly.

What North Korea might launch is a big question mark. There are indications - including the construction of a new and taller gantry, visi-

ble in commercial satellite imagery - that it could be a bigger and better version of the Unha 3 space launch vehicle that lifted off from the Sohae facility in 2012, on the west coast of North Korea. That would be in line with the North's own previous announcements. The Unha 3 successfully delivered North Korea's first satellite into Earth orbit.

Unha 9

A January 2013 report by the Rodong Sinmun, the ruling party newspaper, which has since been deleted from its online edition, quoted a scientist saying there would be a series of launches of observation and communication satellites culminating with Unha 9, which would carry a lunar orbiter. A North Korean space agency official told an AP television crew last year that more satellite launches are planned in the years ahead, but didn't elaborate. Models of the larger and much more formidable-looking Unha 9 rocket have since been displayed at various events in North Korea, including annual flower shows held in honor of national founder Kim Il Sung and his son, Kim Jong Il.

Although there are important differences, the United States and others have strongly criticized such rocket launches because similar technologies can be used in the development of ICBMs, which North Korea is banned from doing under UN restrictions. North Korea says that it has the right to maintain a peaceful space program and announces launches ahead of time to

maritime authorities, in keeping with international standards. Tightening its punitive squeeze on the North, the US Treasury on Jan 17 announced sanctions on 11 individuals and entities involved in Iran's ballistic missile program, including Iranian officials it said had direct links to North Korea and work being done by Pyongyang on "an 80-ton rocket booster."

It said two of the sanctioned Iranians "have been critical to the development of the 80-ton rocket booster, and both traveled to Pyongyang during contract negotiations." Iran has, coincidentally, suggested it might also conduct a rocket launch this month. Whether the booster would be a new first stage for the Unha rockets or something different is not known. Making firm predictions has become more difficult because of the increasingly sophisticated concealing measures the North has been developing over the past several years.

A huge tarp

Though the kind of intelligence available to agencies in the US and its allies is presumably far better than what they are willing to let on publicly, it is clear from unclassified commercial satellite monitoring that a lot has been going on at the North's main launching facility since the 2012 Unha 3 launch. Concealment upgrades include the construction of an underground railway right up to the launch pad that allows rocket stages to be transported stealthily to the site, possibly from Pyongyang. — AP



TOKYO: A soldier carries a package beside PAC-3 missile launcher as it is seen in position on the grounds of the defense ministry in Tokyo. Japan had ordered its military to be ready to destroy any missile fired by North Korea that threatens the country as concerns mount that Pyongyang is preparing a rocket launch. — AFP

News

in brief

British tourist trampled to death by Thailand elephant

BANGKOK: A British tourist has been trampled to death by an elephant on the Thai tourist island of Koh Samui, police said yesterday, the latest deadly attack by animals used to entertain holidaymakers. The man, identified by police as Gareth Crowe, 36, was riding on the animal's back with his daughter on Monday afternoon when it suddenly threw them off, police said. "We suspect that the hot weather made the elephant angry and that he was not accustomed to his mahout," Paiboon Omark, Samui district chief said. A mahout is the person who trains, controls and rides an elephant, usually after years of building up a close bond with the animal. Paiboon said Crowe had a prosthetic leg and was unable to run away from the marauding pachyderm. His daughter and the mahout, a Myanmar national, were both injured but escaped and are out of danger, he added. The elephant, named "Golf," was tranquilized and is now under control, he said. A spokesman at the British embassy in Bangkok said they were aware of the incident and were providing assistance to the victim's family. Thailand has an estimated 4,000 domesticated elephants, many working in the tourism trade, alongside some 2,500 wild elephants.

China's leader slogan gets a rap treatment

BEIJING: China's official news agency yesterday released a cartoon featuring an animated bald man with waistcoat tucked into his trousers disco-dancing and rapping President Xi Jinping's signature "Four Comprehensives" ideological slogan. The catchphrase, premised by Xi in 2014 and since plastered across newspapers, banners and TV programs, is typical of the Chinese Communist Party's predisposition towards numerical but nebulous buzzwords, such as Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents". The Chinese-language Xinhua video, which features tooting MIDI horns, a flying saucer and a giant fruit-filled wheelbarrow, begins with a countdown. The ruddy-nosed portly man, along with a giant-headed cartoon girl, repeatedly chant: "Say it with me, the four comprehensives, the four comprehensives." Interspersed are the lines "Moderate prosperity is the goal", "Reform is the driving force", "The rule of law is guaranteed" and "Building the Party is the key". The video, which lasts for more than three minutes, is packed with hallucinogenic imagery: a baby monkey swings from a crane, a silver Rubik's cube floats in front of an undulating bulls-eye, and the figure 666666666 drifts across the screen without explanation.

Saudi man executed, 57th execution in 2016

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia yesterday executed one of its citizens for the fatal shooting of another Saudi, bringing to 57 the number of convicts put to death this year. Mosaib Al-Shahrani had been tried and found guilty of killing Hamad Al-Shahrani with an automatic weapon after an argument, an interior ministry statement said. It did not give further details of the connection between them but said the accused was put to death in the southwestern city of Abha. Most executions in Saudi Arabia are done by beheading with a sword. The kingdom on January 2 executed 47 people in a single day for "terrorism". According to an AFP tally, Shahrani is among 10 other locals and foreigners put to death this year. In 2015 the kingdom executed 153 people, mostly for drug trafficking or murder, according to an AFP tally. Amnesty International says the number of executions in Saudi Arabia last year was the highest for two decades. However, the tally was far behind that for China and Iran. The kingdom practices a strict Islamic legal code under which murder, drug trafficking, armed robbery, rape and apostasy are all punishable by death.



KARACHI: Pakistani employees of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) shout slogans as police use a water cannon on them during a protest near Karachi International Airport in Karachi yesterday. — AFP

1 dead, several injured in clashes at Karachi airport

KARACHI: A Pakistan International Airlines employee was shot dead yesterday and several more were wounded after clashes broke out between law enforcement agencies and workers protesting the planned privatization of the national carrier, hospital officials said. Police and paramilitary rangers deployed tear gas and water cannon on the protesters after they blocked the main entrance to Karachi's Jinnah International Airport around midday. A spokesman at the Agha Khan hospital said one of the protesters, identified as Inayat Raza, had died of a gunshot wound. "The PIA employee was brought dead at our emergency department and our team attempted to revive him for 20 minutes," the spokesman said. Nadeem Jaffer, a colleague and friend of Raza, confirmed his death at the hospital. Seemi Jamali, head of the emergency department at the city's main Jinnah Post Graduate Medical Centre said the hospital had received four injured people, including two with non-fatal gunshot wounds. Both law enforcement agencies denied they had opened fire on protesters. Kameran Fazal, the police chief of the city's eastern district said: "The situation escalated when a couple of gunshots were fired. My officers told me that they might be fired from the crowd."