

NAURU ASYLUM BABY TO REMAIN IN AUSTRALIA

SYDNEY: Australia was yesterday set to allow an asylum-seeker's baby to remain in the country instead of being deported back to a remote Pacific detention camp, in what refugee advocates claimed as a victory after a public outcry.

Under Canberra's harsh immigration policy, asylum-seekers attempting to arrive in Australia by boat are sent to camps in Papua New Guinea and Nauru, where they are held indefinitely while their refugee applications are processed.

The one-year-old baby, named Asha and the child of Nepalese asylum-seekers, was held on Nauru with her parents before being brought to the Australian mainland for medical treatment last month.

Asha was due to be sent back to the camp after a court ruling in favour of the government's offshore immigration detention policy, but the hospital caring for her refused to release the infant until a "suitable home environment is identified".

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton said yesterday Asha and her parents would be sent to community detention from Brisbane's Lady Cilento Children's Hospital.

"We are proposing that baby Asha will come from Lady Cilento and will go into

community detention as have, as I say, 83 others who are living in the community who are in Australia for medical assistance," Dutton told reporters in Brisbane.

Community detention is when asylum-seekers waiting for their refugee applications to be processed live within the community and are usually allowed to move around freely. However they can still be moved or removed by the immigration department at any time.

Dutton said the government's decision was pre-planned and not a result of pressure from medical professionals and the public. The hospital confirmed the decision and said the move would take place "within the next 24 hours".

'Massive turnaround'

Refugee advocates welcomed Dutton's announcement, hailing it as a victory for their campaign against the deportations to Nauru of Asha and 266 other asylum-seekers also in Australia for medical care. "A week ago we had to file an urgent case in the highest court in the country to stop the government from secretly deporting this baby to Nauru," the Human Rights Law Centre's Daniel Webb said in a statement.

"Now the family is being released into the community. It's a massive turn-around."

Annastacia Palaszczuk, Labor Premier of Queensland, the state in which the hospital is located, said Dutton's decision was "too slow and lacked empathy" as she renewed her offer to house asylum-seekers facing removal in the community. Dutton said if the refugee claims of Asha and her parents were rejected, they would be sent back to their home country or to Nauru.

"If people are suggesting to you there has been a change in the policy or we are going to allow special treatment in baby Asha's case, then that is not the case," he added.

There have been numerous protests against the deportations under the #LetThemStay campaign, with Australian church leaders also vowing to defy the government's immigration rules, offering sanctuary to the asylum-seekers.

Canberra has long defended its policy under which asylum seekers are blocked from being resettled in Australia even if found to be refugees-saying it has prevented deaths at sea and secured its borders. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop confirmed Sunday the government was in negotia-



BRISBANE: Pro-refugee activists keep vigil outside the Mater Hospital in Brisbane yesterday. — AFP

tions with a range of Southeast Asian nations to resettle refugees in third countries, following a Fairfax Media report of a renewed push. Canberra has already struck

an agreement with Cambodia to accept refugees in exchange for millions of dollars in aid, but only a handful of people have taken up the offer. — AFP

MOST SUSPECTS DETAINED IN INDONESIA RAID RELEASED

OFFICIALS LAMENT LACK OF TOUGH LAW

JAKARTA: Indonesian police yesterday released most of the men detained while attending military-style training at a suspect jihadi camp, as officials lamented weaknesses in the current anti-terrorism legislation that is due to be significantly strengthened following last month's deadly attacks in Jakarta.

The elite anti-terrorism squad early Saturday detained 38 men at a suspected militant camp on the remote slopes of Mount Sumbing in Central Java province, said provincial police spokesman Col. Liliek Darmanto. Police seized air rifles, knives, and jihadi books and flags in the raid. However, they were released early Sunday after 24-hour questioning as police were unable to prove a string of terrorism-related allegations, he said.

"This is the weakness of our laws," said Saud Usman Nasution, head of the anti-terrorism agency. "We cannot arrest

before they have committed a crime even though we can detect a radical network."

His agency has been pushing the government to strengthen the anti-terrorism law. It gained momentum following the Jan. 14 suicide and gun attacks in Jakarta, which left eight people dead, including four of the attackers. In response to the attacks, Indonesia's government submitted a new anti-terrorism law to parliament this past week.

The draft bill, obtained by The Associated Press, says an individual suspected of plotting to carry out an act of terrorism could be detained for up to six months without charges. If approved, it would be the first time for such a tough measure to be enacted since the downfall of dictator Suharto in 1998.

Luhut Pandjaitan, a Cabinet minister in charge of security and political affairs, said he expected lawmakers to pass the revisions within the next two months.

The bill would also become an offense for Indonesians to join a militant group overseas such as the Islamic State group, or recruit others, with a maximum imprisonment of seven years. It would also authorize the anti-terrorism squad to execute raids and arrest suspects for interrogation based solely on intelligence reports.

In addition to the Central Java raid, five other suspected militants were captured late Friday in Malang, a hilly city in East Java province, said local police chief Lt. Col. Yudho Nugroho. He said police were tipped about their whereabouts after interrogating alleged militants who were arrested on suspicion of links to the Jakarta attack. National police chief Gen. Badrodin Haiti told lawmakers last week that police had arrested a total of 33 people in connection with the attack.

Among those arrested Friday was Nazarudin Mukhtar - also known as Abu Ghar. He is believed to have planned the Jakarta attack with Muhammad Ali and Afif Sunakin, who was fatally shot by police when the two were trying to detonate a bomb in front of a Starbucks cafe, said Lt. Col. Arif Makhfudiharto, head of the anti-terrorism squad unit in West Java province.

Mukhtar, who had recently completed a prison sentence for his role in a deadly 2004 attack on a police station in Maluku province, "returned to his old ways," Arif said. He alleged Mukhtar joined a new militant cell after visiting Abu Bakar Bashir and Aman Abdurrahman, the country's most radical clerics who are now serving sentences on the Nusa Kambangan prison island.

Arif said that Mukhtar had pledged allegiance to Islamic State leaders. — AP

News

in brief

Moderate 5.9 quake hits NW Pakistan

PESHAWAR, Pakistan: A moderate 5.9-magnitude earthquake shook northwestern Pakistan yesterday, with tremors felt in different cities, but officials said there were no immediate reports of damage or casualties. The epicentre was in the Hindu Kush mountain range inside Afghanistan at a depth of 157 kilometres (97 miles), senior Pakistani meteorological official Mushtaq Shah told AFP. The quake was felt in different northwestern cities and tribal regions including Upper Dir, Lower Dir, Swat and Bajaur. The US Geological Survey put the magnitude at 5.5. In October last year a 7.5-magnitude quake ripped across Pakistan and Afghanistan, killing almost 400 people and flattening buildings in rugged terrain that impeded relief efforts.

US drone crashes in Afghanistan; no injuries

KABUL: The US Air Force says that one of its drones crashed at a base in southern Afghanistan but there were no casualties and no hostile fire is suspected. In a statement, Capt. Bryan L. Bouchard says the MQ-9 Reaper went down at Kandahar Airfield late Saturday. He says the cause is under investigation "but hostile fire was not a factor." Kandahar Airfield, the largest base in Afghanistan, is being renovated by the US-NATO mission for mixed military and civilian use.

PHILIPPINE CANDIDATES GRILLED ON POVERTY, CRIME IN DEBATE

MANILA: The five Philippine presidential candidates were grilled in a nationally televised debate yesterday on how they would fight the long-persisting problems of poverty, corruption and crime that have blighted their Southeast Asian nation through several presidencies.

Commission on Elections Chairman Andres Bautista said the two-hour debate, the first to be organized by the commission in 24 years, aimed to shift the public's focus toward policy talk and programs to confront social ills.

Voters being swayed more by personalities, patronage politics and showbiz-like campaigns have long been a concern in the Philippines, which continues to grapple with widespread poverty, Marxist and Muslim insurgencies, corruption and other major problems three decades after toppling a dictatorship via a "people power" revolt.

The elections commission brought back the presidential debates, which were last held in 1992, to allow Filipino voters to scrutinize the main contenders and help them "vote correctly," Bautista said. After Sunday's debate, held at a university in southern Cagayan de Oro city, two more will be staged in March and April ahead of the May 9 election.

The candidates were asked questions on a

range of issues, including their anti-poverty and anti-crime strategies and how they would solve the decades-long Muslim insurrection in the south of the

predominantly Roman Catholic nation. President Benigno Aquino III, who won with a landslide margin on a promise to battle poverty and corruption in 2010, ends his six-year term in June.

Under Aquino, the economy has been growing steadily. His predecessor has been detained on an elections fraud charge and three senators were separately detained on corruption charges under Aquino's anti-graft fight.

But daunting challenges remain, led by the poverty that grips about a fourth of the Philippines.

100 million people, forcing about a tenth of the population to seek jobs and better opportunities abroad. The presidential contenders are Vice President Jejomar Binay; Mayor Rodrigo Duterte of southern Davao city, where he has carved an image for his tough anti-crime campaign; Sen. Grace Poe, the adopted daughter of a popular movie couple; former Interior Secretary Mar Roxas, who has been endorsed by Aquino; and Sen. Miriam Defensor-Santiago, a feisty former trial court judge. — AP

MYANMAR POLICE IN SHOWDOWN WITH ANTI-DRUG VIGILANTES

YANGON: Thousands of anti-drug vigilantes are locked in a showdown with police and soldiers in northern Myanmar after they were stopped from destroying poppy fields, witnesses said yesterday.

About 3,000 members of Pat Jasan, a hardline Christian anti-drug organisation whose members often don military-style uniforms and are known to flog drug users, are currently camped outside the town of Waingmaw in Kachin state. They have vowed to eradicate local poppy fields used to cultivate opium and heroin but have been halted by authorities who fear clashes may erupt with farmers.

"Local army and police told us that they are still blocking the way for security reasons. We have asked the state government to get access," Hpala Lum Hkawng, a senior member of Pat Jasan in Waingmaw, told AFP.

Myanmar's border regions have long been notorious drug manufacturing hotspots with both ethnic rebel forces and the military or its allied militias implicated in the lucrative trade.

The country is now the world's second

largest opium producer after Afghanistan. Mountainous and impoverished Kachin, a long restless rebel region which was plunged back into conflict in 2011, produces significant quantities of opium and methamphetamine.

As a result it has a huge addiction problem, something Pat Jasan-founded two years ago by the powerful Kachin Baptist Church-has vowed to end, by force if necessary.

While their hardline stance has won support, their rise has created fears of a new layer of community tension in a state already battered by ethnic conflict. Impoverished farmers in northern Myanmar have few viable alternatives to growing opium.

A local resident in Waingmaw told AFP that authorities were caught in the middle between Pat Jasan members and local farmers who had been preparing to fight back if their fields were attacked. "They asked Pat Jasan to forgive them for this year because they have invested much money in their planting poppies," the resident, who asked to remain anonymous, told

AFP. "They have nothing else to do but to fight back because it's their living," he added.

Local police and military could not be reached for comment. However a senior police official from the anti-drugs unit in Myanmar's capital Naypyidaw confirmed the vigilantes had been halted. "They are blocked for security reasons," the official, speaking on condition of anonymity said. "They might spark conflict with some local farmers there so they are blocked for a while," he added. Tuu Yaw, chairman of Pat Jasan group in Kachin's capital Myitkyina, said

authorities had vowed to eradicate the poppy fields themselves. But he cast doubt on those promises, adding that the estimated 4,000 hectares (10,000 acres) of poppy fields their group was targeting lay in regions controlled by the military or loyal militias. "People do not believe in them (the local authorities)," he said. "But people are not going to give up this time. Almost every family in Kachin state has been suffering from drug problems for the last three or four decades." — AFP

N KOREA CONFIRMS NEW MILITARY CHIEF AFTER REPORTED EXECUTION

SEOUL: North Korean state media yesterday confirmed the country has a new military chief following earlier reports in Seoul that the former holder of the post had been executed.

Ri Myong-Su, former People's Security Minister, was referred to as "chief of the Korean People's Army General Staff" when the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported on an army exercise guided by leader Kim Jong-Un. Ri Myong-Su was again mentioned in a separate KCNA report on Kim's inspection of an air force exercise.

His predecessor Ri Yong-Gil was reportedly executed early this month in what would be the latest in a series of purges and executions of top officials. Ri Yong-Gil was accused of forming a political faction and corruption, South Korea's Yonhap news agency said, citing a source familiar with North Korean affairs.

In May last year South Korea's spy agency said Kim had his defence chief Hyon Yong-Chol executed reportedly with an anti-aircraft gun. Hyon's fate was never confirmed by Pyongyang but he has never been seen or heard of since. Some analysts have suggested he was purged and imprisoned.

Reports-some confirmed, some not-of purges, executions and disappearances have been common since Kim took power

following the death of his father Kim Jong-Il in December 2011.

A large number of senior officials, especially military cadres, were removed or demoted as the young leader sought to solidify his control over the powerful military.

In the most high-profile case, Kim had his influential uncle Jang Song-Thaek executed in December 2013 for charges

including treason and corruption.

Professor Yang Moo-Jin of the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul said the new military chief was one of Kim's top three aides and was known to be well-versed in missile technology.

North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear test last month and launched a long-range rocket this month, sparking international outrage. — AFP



This undated photo released by North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) yesterday shows North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un (c) inspecting maneuvers for attack and defense between large combined units of the Korean People's Army (KPA) staged in three directions at the same time at an undisclosed location. — AFP

PARCELS BUILD-UP A POINTER TO CHINA'S BROADER SOUTH CHINA SEA AMBITIONS

HONG KONG/BEIJING: From listening posts to jet fighter deployments and now surface-to-air missiles, China's expanding facilities in the Paracel Islands are a signal of long-term plans to strengthen its military reach across the disputed South China Sea.

Diplomats and security experts in contact with Chinese military strategists say Beijing's moves to arm and expand its long-established holdings in the Paracels will likely be replicated on its man-made islands in the more contentious Spratly archipelago, some 500 kms (300 miles) further south.

Eventually, both disputed island groups are expected to be used for jet fighter operations and constant surveillance, including anti-submarine patrols, while also housing significant civilian populations in a bid to buttress China's sovereign claims.

Crucially, that would give Beijing the reach to try to enforce any effective air defence zone in the South China Sea, similar to the zone it created over the East China Sea in late 2013.

US officials confirmed on Thursday the "very recent" placement of surface-to-air missiles on Woody Island, the site of the largest Chinese presence on the Paracels, criticising the move as contrary to China's commitments not to militarise

its claims in the South China Sea.

Beijing says it is entitled to "limited defensive facilities" on its territory, and dismissed reports about the missile placement as media "hype".

Ian Storey, a South China Sea expert at Singapore's ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, said he believed similar weapons could be deployed to China's holdings in the Spratlys within a year or two.

"This would enable China to back up its warnings with real capabilities," he said. Bonnie Glaser, a military analyst at the Centre for Security and International Studies in Washington, said the Paracels build-up was a likely precursor to similar military deployments on China's recent reclamations in the Spratlys.

While Chinese officials might use on-going US operations in the South China Sea as justification, "there is a plan that has been in place for quite some time", Glaser said.

The HQ-9 missile batteries, guided by radar tracking systems, have a range of 200 km (125 miles) and are the most significant defensive weapon China has yet placed on the Paracels, regional military attaches say. The move could complicate surveillance patrols carried out routinely by U.S. and Japanese aircraft as well as flights by US B-52 long-range bombers, operations China objected to last

November. It could also challenge operations by Vietnam's expanding fleet of Russian-built SU-30 jet fighters.

STEADY EXPANSION

China's expansion of the Paracels, which it has occupied since forcing the navy of the then South Vietnam off the islands in 1974, pre-dates its moves to begin large-scale reclamations on seven reefs in the Spratlys three years ago. It landed fully-armed jet fighters on an expanded airstrip on Woody Island in November, and reinforced hangars have been completed, regional diplomats said.

Coast guard and fishing facilities have also been expanded, along with fuel storage tanks and housing for more than 1,000 civilians in what was declared "Sansha City" in 2012, Chinese analysts say.

Radar coverage and other electronic surveillance equipment has also been improved, and analysts expect the Paracels to play a key part in protecting China's nuclear armed submarine fleet on Hainan Island, 200 km to the north. Speaking privately, Vietnamese officials say it is now far more difficult for their fishing fleets and coast guard to get close to the Paracels as they try to assert their own sovereign claims. — Reuters