

AMNESTY SLAMS TORTURE OF VIETNAM'S PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE

PARIS: Thrown into jail for their political or religious views, Vietnam's prisoners of conscience are routinely tortured, beaten and kept from their families, Amnesty International said in a report published yesterday.

The rights group interviewed 18 prisoners of conscience who collectively spent over 77 years in prison for activism, questioning injustices in society or for their ethnicity and religious beliefs.

In the report, "Prisons within Prisons", those interviewed recount being beaten until they urinated blood, given electric shocks and confined in isolation without

access to family members or a lawyer.

One former prisoner of conscience told Amnesty he was beaten unconscious and left in a cell for four days without food. When he asked for food, officers prepared a bowl of rice for the dogs outside his cell, and then gave him what was left.

"On one occasion, pens were placed between his fingers and his hands were twisted around, causing excruciating pain. On another, the legs of a table were placed on his toes and police put all their body weight on the table resulting in unbearable pain and causing his toes

to bleed," read the report. "When his interrogators began electrocuting him and told him that his entire family, including his wife and child, would be arrested if he did not confess, he finally relented and agreed to plead guilty to the charges against him."

The report accuses Vietnamese officials of using prisoners known as "antennae" who work with authorities and take part in torture and continue interrogations inside prison cells, in exchange for favorable treatment.

Amnesty said in the most extreme case it heard, a Hoa Hoa Buddhist, Mai Thi Dung, had to share cramped

cells with a series of different women who would question her about her activism at night, after she had endured up to 10 hours of interrogation by authorities. She was locked in a tiny room "with no open windows or ventilation shafts resulting in such bad ventilation that it was difficult to breathe."

On one occasion prison authorities "presented her with a document for her to sign which guaranteed her conditions of detention in which she could move and breathe easily in exchange for a confession. She declined". — AFP



SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA: A South Korean man holds a sign during a rally to denounce deploying the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD, near US Embassy on Monday. — AP

N KOREA VOWS TO END DIPLOMAT COMMUNICATION CHANNEL WITH US HARSHER PUNISHMENT FOR AMERICANS

SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA: North Korea said Monday it will end a diplomatic communication channel with the United States and hinted at harsher punishment for Americans detained in the country in retaliation for US sanctions that target leader Kim Jong Un.

The US government last week imposed penalties on Kim and 10 other top officials for alleged human rights abuses. North Korea is already sanctioned because of its nuclear weapons program, but it was the first time that Kim has been personally sanctioned. The North called the sanctions tantamount to a war declaration.

On Monday, the North's state media said it told the United States it will terminate contact through a UN channel in New York that allowed diplomats to communicate. The New York channel refers to a method for North Korea's UN diplomats to communicate with US diplomats in New York. This is needed because the countries don't have diplomatic ties and their animosities have deepened because of the North's nuclear and missile programs.

New York Channel

In Washington, State Department spokesman John Kirby did not directly address the fate of the New York channel. In comments to reporters, he called on North Korea "to

refrain from actions and rhetoric that only further raise tensions in the region." He said he would not comment on the details of diplomatic exchanges.

The North also said it informed Washington that it will handle all issues between the two countries according to an unspecified wartime law, including Americans detained in North Korea, according to the state-run Korean Central News Agency.

South Korean media have suggested that North Korea might use the wartime law to hand out harsher punishments on Americans detained in the North. The North's actions could complicate US efforts to secure the release of at least two American citizens being held for alleged espionage, subversion and other anti-state activities. One is serving a 10-year prison term with hard labor while the other received 15 years.

Kirby urged North Korea to adhere to the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations and grant consular access to any detained US citizens without delay. He also reiterated a call for the Americans to be freed.

North Korea in the past released or deported American detainees only after high-profile Americans visited the country on their behalf. Outside analysts say Pyongyang often attempts to use foreign detainees to wrest concessions

from other countries.

The North's announcement came hours after it made more threats, this time over a US plan to deploy an advanced missile defense system in South Korea.

The North's threat, carried in state media, was typical of past bluster. It came three days after Seoul and Washington said they were close to determining a location in South Korea for the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD, system to better deal with North Korean threats.

The North said it will take an unspecified "physical counter-action" as soon as the THAAD location is announced. The statement also carried one of the North's favorite, oft-repeated threats: To turn Seoul into a "sea of fire." It has regularly warned it would do that since 1994. US and South Korea officials say THAAD only targets North Korea, but China and Russia suspect it could also help US radars detect their own missiles.

South Korea's President Park Geun-hye said Monday she agreed on the US missile deployment because North Korea has openly threatened to launch nuclear and missile attacks on South Korea. The two Koreas are divided along the world's most heavily fortified border. The United States stations about 28,500 soldiers in South Korea. — AP

JAPAN COURT UPHOLDS REACTOR SHUTDOWN IN NEW BLOW TO NUCLEAR INDUSTRY

TOKYO: A Japanese court yesterday upheld an order to keep two reactors operated by Kansai Electric Power closed, the utility said, helping keep efforts to get the country's struggling nuclear industry up and running in limbo.

The decision, which backs a petition from residents living near the Takahama atomic station west of Tokyo, means Kansai Electric must go to a higher court to try and win permission to get the reactors back online.

The move marks the latest judicial impediment to utilities' attempts to restore atomic power after the Fukushima disaster five years ago. Two out of Japan's 42 operable reactors are running, but a local governor who won election on Sunday has vowed to shut those units down.

While Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government is keen to restore a power source that provided about a third of electricity supply before the meltdowns at Fukushima, the public remains deeply skeptical over industry assurances on safety.

Residents have lodged injunctions against nearby nuclear plants across Japan and lower courts have been increasingly siding with them on safety concerns.

Contentious verdicts are usually overturned by higher courts, where judges tend to be more attuned to government policy, judicial experts say. But with courts and local politicians providing obstacles there may be

further impetus for the government to scale back nuclear targets. Japan will cut the emphasis on nuclear in its next energy plan, sources told Reuters in May.

The government has boosted renewable energy output and the population has responded to requests for more energy efficiency. The government is also strongly pushing for higher use of coal, which has soared to record levels.

Japanese utilities have benefited from a plunge in oil and gas prices that have kept costs down after higher imports of fossil fuels helped drive Japan into a record trade deficit in the years after Fukushima.

The Otsu District Court on March 9 ordered Kansai Electric, Japan's second-biggest utility, to shut down the Takahama reactors in the country's first injunction to halt an operating nuclear plant. "Today's decision ... is very regrettable and we cannot accept it," Kansai Electric said in a statement, adding that it would file an appeal with the Osaka High Court.

An appeal may take about a year and means continued extra purchases of oil, gas or coal to replace nuclear power generation. A Kansai Electric spokesman said the shutdown of the two Takahama reactors reduces recurring profit by 10 billion yen (\$97 million) per month because of higher fossil fuel use and other factors. — Reuters

IN RARE CONSENSUS, AUSTRALIAN MPS CALL FOR E-VOTING AS POLL COUNT DRAGS ON

SYDNEY: Australians have elected a divided parliament stacked with fractious independents and minor parties but the nation's weary political leaders are united on at least one front: the need for electronic voting.

Counting in Australia's July 2 election dragged into its 10th day yesterday, drawing unfavorable comparisons with Japan, Iceland and Spain, where recent elections were all decided in less than a day.

Britons took just seven hours to calculate their contentious Brexit vote to leave the European Union last month. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Opposition leader Bill Shorten have backed e-voting as a solution to Australia's snail-paced count, although experts warn of security issues and others bemoan the potential loss of typically Australian election day quirks like the "sausage sizzle".

Shorten said on Sunday, after already more than a week of hand-counting of ballot papers, that it shouldn't take "a grown-up democracy" so long to figure out who has won. Counting in Australia, where voting is compulsory, is usually resolved on the same evening that Australia's 15 million voters cast their

ballots. But a tight election this year and a close-run poll in 2010 demonstrate how polls can drag on for weeks before final results are declared, with electoral officials recounting by hand as they painstakingly pore over slender margins and wait for postal ballots to arrive.

By comparison, more than 45 million votes were cast in Japan on Sunday and more than 33 million were cast in the Brexit referendum. Both polls produced results within hours. E-voting could solve Australia's quandary by delivering an instant, computer-counted result, but experts warn the risks might outweigh the benefits.

Electronic voting is currently available to vision-impaired voters via an automated telephone system. It has also been trialed at state polls. In a 2015 trial in New South Wales, Australia's most populous state, internet security experts found the process vulnerable to hacking.

"Security issues around electronic voting are not solved. Software errors and security problems could potentially impact the election result," said Vanessa Teague, a lecturer in computer and information systems at University of Melbourne. — Reuters



KOMAKI, AICHI PREFECTURE, CENTRAL JAPAN: Japan Air Self-Defense Force C-130 transport plane takes off from Komaki Base for South Sudan on Monday. — AP

VIOLENCE SPURS JAPAN TO EVACUATE WORKERS FROM SOUTH SUDAN

TOKYO: Japan has urged dozens of Japanese nationals including aid workers in South Sudan's capital of Juba to leave the country and dispatched military aircraft to evacuate them amid renewed fighting in the African nation.

Japan sent transport aircraft to Djibouti on Africa's eastern coast, though it's unclear how they will travel the 3,000 kilometers (1,900 miles) between Juba and Djibouti. The three C-130s, which left their base in Komaki 260 kilometers (130 miles) southwest of Tokyo late Monday, are expected to pick up about 70 Japanese nationals from Juba.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said yesterday that the government was doing its utmost to protect

the Japanese. He said Japanese defense troops building roads and infrastructure will stay for the time being.

About 350 Japanese troops are there as part of the United Nations' peace-keeping operations. They are in their camp and safe, Defense Minister Gen Nakatani said.

The Japan International Cooperation Agency, a government-funded organization, said its more than 40 staffers were safe and standing by at home to be evacuated. JICA contractors were killed in a militant attack in Bangladesh this month.

The agency said the decision to pull out was not because of the Bangladesh attack, but because of the deteriorating safety situation in Juba. — AP

INDIA PM CALLS EMERGENCY MEETING AS KASHMIR DEATH TOLL RISES

AT LEAST 29 PEOPLE HAVE DIED IN CLASHES

SRINAGAR, India: India's prime minister called an emergency meeting yesterday over escalating anti-India protests in Kashmir, where at least 29 people have died in clashes and hospitals are struggling with hundreds of injured.

The protests erupted over the weekend after Indian troops killed the popular, young leader of the largest rebel group in the Indian-administered region beset by an insurgency since the 1990s.

Defying curfews and paramilitary troops and riot police on patrol, crowds of youths threw stones at law enforcement officers and rallied in the main city of Srinagar and dozens of other places around the region. Separatist politicians, most of them under house arrest, extended a call for a general strike through Wednesday.

A young man was killed yesterday after government forces opened gunfire on protesters who attacked a police station in northern Kupwara area and burned a police vehicle trapping some police, police said. At least two other civilians were reported injured. Since the weekend, 28 civilians, mostly teens and young men, and one policeman have been killed in the clashes.

Doctors and government officials said they were struggling with a medical emergency after hundreds of civilians were admitted to hospitals with bullet and pellet wounds. At least 100 troops have been injured. Amid reported scuffles between law enforcement and hospital staff, many injured protesters said they were beaten up by police and paramilitary soldiers while on the way to hospitals. Authorities appealed for calm and said they would investigate the complaints.

Prime Minister's stand

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, having just returned from a four-nation tour in Africa, called a high-level government meeting to discuss how to

calm the region and restore peace. Indian authorities had said Monday they sent at least 2,000 more law enforcement troops to the mountainous region, where hundreds of thousands already are deployed permanently.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon also expressed concern about the violence. A statement said Ban "calls on all parties to exercise maximum restraint to avoid further violence and hopes that all concerns would be addressed through peaceful means".

Indian officials lifted a suspension on an annual Hindu pilgrimage to a mountain cave that draws about half a million people each year, and asked that law enforcement ensure the security of the pilgrimage. Kashmir is about 70 percent Muslim.

Across the region, shops were shuttered, businesses closed and cellphone and mobile Internet services were suspended. Thousands thronged Tral town, despite restrictions, to participate in the memorial service for rebel leader Burhan Wani. — AP



ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN: Top leader of Hizbul Mujahideen Syed Salahuddin, center in cap, leads prayers for Burhan Wani yesterday, a rebel leader killed Friday night by Indian forces in a gun-battle in Indian controlled Kashmir, at a rally near the United Nations office. — AP