

OWNING LAND CAN BE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

OSMANABAD, India: Rajshree Gungoo, a chatty 27-year-old with a quick smile, speaks up at a gathering of about 40 women discussing the challenges facing single women in India's western Maharashtra state. "It's very difficult. I don't have a husband, I don't have a son, even my father doesn't want me," she says, her voice breaking. "I am alone and powerless to do anything." She breaks off, using the end of her saree to wipe her tears. Around her, others nod and mutter.

In drought-hit Marathwada, the state's poorest region, there is an unusually high number of single women. Some were widowed after their farmer husbands committed suicide because of debt; others were abandoned because they didn't produce a son, while some were left behind when their husbands left to search for work.

Alone and without financial support, the women and their children are usually thrown out of home by their in-laws, denied ownership of the land they worked on and any compensation from the government. They are also taunted and harassed by communities who believe a woman is nothing without a man. "In this country, single women are the most vulnerable category - they are

neglected by the government, by society, even their own family," said Vishwanth Todkar, secretary at Paryay, a charity that works with marginalized communities. "Every day, every hour is a struggle for them - to get a home, get land, even their identity cards, which are in the name of the father or the husband. They face humiliations constantly," he said.

Bias From Birth

In India, where a patriarchal system is deeply entrenched, only 13 per cent of farm land is owned by women. The figure is even lower when it comes to lower caste Dalit women who are single. About 12 percent of India's female population is classified as single, including women who are widowed, divorced, separated, and older unmarried women, according to the 2011 census. While widows receive a monthly pension of about 500 rupees (\$7.40) in most Indian states, divorced women and those who are unmarried or abandoned are ineligible for most welfare benefits.

In addition, most religious laws favor men when it comes to the inheritance of family property and agricultural land. In Osmanabad district, Paryay works with single women in about 30 villages. The

charity estimates that almost half the women in these villages are single, and that most are Dalits. Single women in India's villages bear the brunt of entrenched customs and superstitions, including a bias against girls from birth, limited education, early marriage and financial dependence on the husband or father. For older women who are unmarried or those who have been abandoned by their husbands, ownership of land or property can mean the difference between life and death, said Lata Bandgar, a program coordinator at Paryay. "It's like they don't exist without a man. We have to prove their existence in the eyes of the government to even get them identification and basic benefits," said Bandgar, who was thrown out of her home after her husband left her years before. "A piece of land to work on and a home to live in are their basic rights - it's tied to their identity, livelihood and status in the community. Without it they are nothing," she said.

Dangerous World

Maharashtra, one of India's most prosperous states, has seen some of the biggest battles for the rights of marginalized communities, including the Laxmi

Mukti campaign of the early 1990s to transfer half the family's land to women. Since then, however, efforts have lost momentum due to low levels of literacy and a lack of awareness. About 41 percent of households headed by women in India do not own land, and make a living through casual manual labor, according to the 2011 socio-economic and caste census. In Maharashtra, it is more than 45 percent. In Marathwada, many single women get duped into marriage or are trafficked as sex workers because they have no means of earning a livelihood, Bandgar said. "From the moment she wakes up till the time she goes to sleep - and even after - a single woman in a village is subject to so much harassment, so much stigma and abuse," she said. "They are treated worse than animals - even cattle live with greater security, greater comfort. It is a dangerous world for them. So if she can stake her claim to land or property, then she has some security. Without it, she has nothing," she said.

Social Protection

A new draft policy for women unveiled in May acknowledges the challenges single women face, including in finding safe and affordable housing. The policy aims

to strengthen the social infrastructure for single women, as well as create a "comprehensive social protection mechanism" and improve their overall condition. In Osmanabad, charities are helping single women to get government-issued identity cards that entitle them to subsidized food rations, to apply for bank loans, and to lay claim to property and land.

Last year, Paryay convinced the Osmanabad district council to set aside 2 million rupees for loans of up to 20,000 rupees a year for eligible single women to purchase poultry or goats. "With this money, the women can stay in the village and make a living that is not dependent on farming alone," district council chief A E Rayate told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "We would like them to be financially independent," he said. That is also the aim of the gathering of single women who filled in application forms for loans from Paryay's self-help group. "What are you crying for?" Nirja Bhatnagar, regional manager at ActionAid, which partners Paryay, asked Gungoo. "Don't think that just because you don't have a husband, a father or a son, that you are worthless. You have to believe in yourself and move forward with the support of women like you." —Reuters

TO BREXIT OR REGREXIT? A DIS-UNITED KINGDOM MULLS

LONDON: To leave, or not to leave: That is the question. Still, after Britain's historic vote to leave the European Union, there is no indication that a so-called Brexit will happen soon. It may be never will. Prime Minister David Cameron, who is resigning, has said he will not take the formal step to an EU divorce on the grounds that his successor should. Because the referendum is not legally-binding, some politicians are suggesting a parliament vote before formally triggering Brexit.

A petition on the UK government's website on holding a second referendum has gained more than 3 million signatories in just two days. European leaders, facing the biggest threat to European unity since World War Two, are divided over how swiftly divorce talks should start. Paris wants haste and German Chancellor Angela Merkel is urging patience. European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said he wanted to "start immediately".

And on Sunday, Scotland's leader said Scotland may veto Brexit altogether. Under devolution rules, the parliaments of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales are required to consent to any EU divorce, according to a report by the House of Lords. Most British politicians agree such a decisive 52-48 win for Leave in the referendum means a divorce must happen. Anything less would be a slap in the face of democracy.

"The will of the British people is an

instruction that must be delivered," a choking Cameron said in his resignation speech, which marked the most tumultuous end to a British premiership since Anthony Eden resigned in 1957 after the Suez crisis. Still, the upswell of chatter - #regrexit is trending big on twitter - over whether Britain might be able to reconsider speaks to the disbelief gripping this continent in the wake of a vote that has unleashed financial and political mayhem.

Sterling has plunged, and Britain's political parties are both crippled. Cameron is a lame duck leader, and the main opposition Labour party on Sunday attempted a coup against its leader, with nine top officials resigning. "The kaleidoscope has been shaken up not just in terms of our relationship with the EU but in terms of who runs our parties, who governs the country and what the country is made up of," said Anand Menon, Professor of European Politics and Foreign Affairs at King's College London. "It is very hard to see where the pieces are."

The law provisioning an EU member country's exit from the union is Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty that is effectively the EU's constitution. It has never been invoked before. Before the vote, Cameron had said Article 50 would be triggered straight away if Britain voted to leave. Over the weekend, several EU officials also said the UK needed to formally split right away - possibly at a Tuesday EU meeting. — Reuters

ABE CALLS FOR NEEDED FOREX STEPS POST-BREXIT

TOKYO: Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday instructed Finance Minister Taro Aso to watch currency markets "ever more closely" and take steps if necessary, in the wake of Britain's historic vote to leave the European Union. Abe made the comments at an emergency meeting with Aso and Bank of Japan Deputy Governor Hiroshi Nakaso as some analysts speculate the central bank may ease if it calls an unscheduled policy review before its planned July 28-29 gathering.

While Abe ordered the BOJ to ensure ample liquidity in markets, his government is ready to provide the economy fiscal support, with an eye on expanding planned stimulus steps to total more than 10 trillion yen (\$98.03 billion), sources told Reuters. "Risks and uncertainty remain in financial markets," Abe said. "We need to continue to work toward market stability."

The yen briefly soared above the key threshold of 100 to the dollar on Friday as investors hoarded the safe-haven currency after the Brexit vote, unnerving Japanese policymakers worried about the effect a strong yen could have on exports. Japanese authorities have threatened to intervene if they see yen rises as excessive, though market players doubt Tokyo will step in, given strong opposition from Washington. "I was instructed by the prime minister to take various, aggressive responses to ensure stability in financial and currency markets," Aso told reporters after the meeting.

Nakaso, speaking to reporters after the meeting, declined to comment on whether the BOJ would hold an emergency rate review to expand monetary stimulus. A former BOJ executive, Kazuo Momma, told Reuters yesterday that Japan has the right to intervene in markets to stem sharp yen rises, although he saw no need for the central bank to offer fresh stimulus if post-Brexit vote market turmoil is short-lived.

Some analysts say the BOJ could hold an emergency meeting to expand stimulus further if its tankan business survey on July 1 confirms worsening of the domestic economy and prices. "There's 30 percent chance of BOJ holding an extra policy meeting," said Naomi Murguruma, senior market economist at Mitsubishi UFJ Morgan Stanley Securities. But analysts say it will be difficult for Tokyo to intervene in currency markets to stem the yen's strength.

Japanese authorities argue that any action to stem excessive yen strength would be in line with G7/G20 agreements on currency stability. However, US Treasury Secretary Jack Lew warned against currency intervention earlier this month, describing market moves as orderly at a time when Tokyo raised concerns about excess volatility in exchange rates. "Unlike Switzerland, Japan as the G7 chair finds it hard to intervene as that would prompt other countries to label Tokyo a currency manipulator," Murguruma said. "Even if it intervened, it would not have a lasting impact on markets." — Reuters



TIANJIN, China: Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum Klaus Schwab (right) shakes hands with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang during the World Economic Forum yesterday. —AP

CHINA POTENTIAL WINNER IN BRITAIN-EU BREAKUP

LI SAYS BREXIT INCREASED GLOBAL UNCERTAINTY

BEIJING: China is a potential winner if Britain and the European Union rework trade deals and look for investors after a British exit.

Beijing faces a blow from weaker European demand for its exports and pressure to hold its yuan steady in turbulent currency markets. But economists and political analysts say if Britain and the EU split, both sides will look to cash-rich Chinese companies that are expanding abroad - with the possible bonus for Beijing of closer political ties.

"One of the benefits China can gain from 'Brexit' is a stronger and closer economic relationship with the UK and even with the EU," said Zhang Lihua, director of the Center for China Europe Relations at Tsinghua University in Beijing. "Both the UK and the EU need that kind of cooperation with China under the current circumstances." Chinese leaders urged Britain to stay in the 28-nation EU and have avoided mentioning possible benefits of a split.

Yesterday, Premier Li Keqiang, the country's top economic official, said Beijing wants to see a "united and stable" EU and a "stable and prosperous" Britain - a possible reference to concern the vote might inspire separatist sentiment in other EU members or parts of the United Kingdom. "We are seeing increasing uncertainties in the world economy," Li said in a speech at the World Economic Forum in the eastern city of Tianjin. "We need to jointly handle challenges, strengthen confidence and create a stable international environment."

Europe is China's biggest trading partner, and Chinese investors already see the region as more welcoming than the United States, where some acquisitions have been stymied by security concerns. Chinese companies own France's Club Med, the makers of Pirelli tires, Volvo cars and Weetabix cereal and football teams Inter Milan of Italy and Aston Villa of Britain. London is the second-biggest center outside mainland China for settling trans-

actions valued in Beijing's yuan.

Britain has technology China needs as the ruling Communist Party tries to evolve beyond low-skilled manufacturing, said Lu Zhengwei, chief economist for Industrial Bank in Shanghai. "China will benefit from industrial development experience in the UK," said Lu. "I do recommend seizing the opportunity to establish China-UK free trade to enhance bilateral cooperation between the two countries." Closer economic ties could lead to warming political relations, Zhang said. "The UK and the EU may become more friendly with China politically, but this is not what China tries to seek," he said.

Dealing separately with the two sides also might allow Beijing to reach agreements that might have been blocked previously by the need for Britain and Europe to agree, said Liu Yuanchun, executive dean of the National Academy of Development and Strategy of Renmin University. "The political gain for China is bigger than the economic gain," Liu said. Still, China also faces a risk that Britain's departure might leave other EU members free to take more forceful action on trade disputes including steel.

The EU and the United States accuse China of exporting steel at improperly low prices, hurting foreign competitors and threatening thousands of jobs. Washington imposed anti-dumping duties of up to 522 percent but British resistance blocked the EU from imposing higher tariffs. In the short run, European uncertainty might depress demand for Chinese goods, but trade matters less to China than it did a decade ago. China is the world's biggest trader but exports as a share of the economy declined last year to 22 percent from 2007's 33 percent.

A more serious problem is downward pressure on China's yuan in currency markets, according to economists. The British pound and the euro currency used by 17 EU countries have sunk relative to the dollar. As cur-

rencies of other developing countries also weaken, the Chinese central bank will be forced to decide whether to let the yuan, also called the renminbi, fall with them or stick closer to the dollar.

Last year, the People's Bank of China spent tens of billions of dollars to prop up the yuan after a change in the mechanism used to set its exchange rate allowed it to fall. That fueled expectations that Beijing was weakening the currency to boost exports and prompted investors to move capital out of China. If the dollar gains against the yuan, "this could set off a renewed bout of fears over renminbi depreciation and a pick-up in capital outflows," Julian Evans-Pritchard and Mark Williams of Capital Economics said in a report.

Yesterday, influential state-run Chinese tabloid the Global Times warned that Britain's troubles were far from over. "Leaving the EU will not be the end of Britain's difficulties, and will likely be the start of an incredibly painful process," it said in an editorial. China on Friday had called for Britain and the EU to reach agreement as soon as possible after the vote to leave the bloc, adding that China respected the choice of the British people. On China's outlook, Li told the WEF "So far this year, against the backdrop of slowing growth in the global economy, China's economic operations remain relatively stable, with growth within a reasonable range."

A pick-up in Chinese economic activity and company profits in March had fuelled global investors' hopes that the economy was improving, but readings in May were generally soggy, pointing to protracted weakness and the need for further policy support. While industrial output seems to be steady and property sales remain strong, growth in fixed-asset investment slowed to a 15-year low in January-May, while private investment was the weakest on record, dimming the outlook for the rest of 2016. — Agencies



TOKYO: Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (left) speaks during an emergency meeting between the government and Bank of Japan following last week's decision by British voters to leave the European Union at Abe's official residence yesterday. —AFP