



AFGHANISTAN: Afghan children watch Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers in Dand-e-Ghori district in Baghlan province yesterday.—AFP

# LAW PROTECTING WOMEN FROM ABUSE 'UN-ISLAMIC'

PAKISTAN RELIGIOUS GROUPS URGE GOVT TO RETRACT LAW

**LAHORE:** An all-parties conference convened by Pakistan's oldest Islamic political party and attended by powerful religious groups asked the government yesterday to retract an "un-Islamic" law that gives unprecedented protection to female victims of violence. The Women's Protection Act, passed by Pakistan's largest province of Punjab last month, gives legal protection to women from domestic, psychological and sexual violence. It also calls for the creation of a toll-free abuse reporting hot line, women's shelters and district-level panels to investigate reports of abuse and mandates the use of GPS bracelets to keep track of offenders.

Domestic abuse, economic discrimination and acid attacks made Pakistan the world's third most dangerous country in the world for women, a 2011 Thomson Reuters Foundation expert poll showed. But since the law's passage, many conservative clerics and religious leaders have denounced it as being in conflict with the Muslim holy book, the Koran, and the constitution. Yesterday, representatives of more than 35 religious parties and groups came together for a conference called by the Jamaat-e-Islami party and condemned the women's protection law as un-Islamic.

"The controversial law to protect women was promulgated to accomplish the West's agenda to destroy the family system in Pakistan," read the joint declaration issued at the end of the conference. "This act ... is redundant and would add to the miseries of women." The passage of the new law was welcomed by rights groups but spirits have since dampened as conservative voices have increasingly called for its retraction. On Monday, Fazlur Rehman, the chief of one of Pakistan's largest religious parties, the Jamiat-i-Ulema Islam, said Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had promised him at a meeting that he would address the reservations of religious parties.

"Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif heard our reservations against the Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Act 2016. He promised to amend the law so that it doesn't contravene the teachings of the holy Koran," Maulana Fazl told journalists at his residence. Earlier this month, the Council of Islamic Ideology, a powerful Pakistani religious body that advises the government on the compatibility of laws with Islam, declared the Women's Protection Act un-Islamic. A prominent lawyer has also filed a petition in the top sharia court asking it to strike down the law.—Reuters

## POPE APPROVES SAINTHOOD FOR MOTHER TERESA

**VATICAN CITY:** Pope Francis yesterday approved sainthood for Mother Teresa, the missionary nun who became a global icon of compassion for her care of the sick and destitute. The pontiff set September 4 as the date for her canonization, elevating the Nobel peace laureate to an official icon for the Catholic faith. The move comes 19 years after the death of the Albanian nun who dedicated much of her adult life to working with the poor in the slums of Kolkata, India.

Officials said the canonization ceremony would take place at the Vatican—an announcement which had been expected but nevertheless disappointed Indian Catholics who had hoped for a visit by Francis. Yesterday, hundreds attended a prayer meeting at Mother House in Kolkata, the global headquarters of the Missionaries of Charity where Mother Teresa is buried. Sushmita Roy, a housewife who was one of those attending, said Teresa had long been a saint in the eyes of Indian believers. "I came here today to pay homage to her," Roy said. "It would have been great if the canonisation of Mother Teresa would have been held in this city where she spent her life."

### 'Saint of the Gutters'

Teresa, who was 87 when she died in 1997, was revered by Catholics and many others around the world. Known as the "Angel of Mercy" or "Saint of the Gutters", she won the 1979 Nobel peace prize for her work with the poor. But she was also a controversial and divisive figure with critics branding her a religious imperialist whose fervent opposition to birth control and abortion ran contrary to the interests of the communities she claimed to serve. Despite posthumously published letters revealing that she suffered crises of faith throughout her life, Teresa has been fast-tracked to canonization in unusually quick time, underlining her status as a modern-day icon of Catholicism.

Teresa took the first step to sainthood in 2003 when she was beatified by Pope John Paul II following the recognition of a claim she had posthumously inspired the 1998

healing of a critically-ill Bengali tribal woman. Last year she was credited by Vatican experts with inspiring the 2008 recovery of a Brazilian man suffering from multiple brain tumours, thus meeting the Church's standard requirement for sainthood of having been involved in two certifiable miracles.

### Gentle eye that 'sees'

Teresa was born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu to Albanian parents in 1910 in Skopje, now the capital of Macedonia. She started her life as a nun as a teenager with a missionary order in Ireland and arrived in India in 1929. She founded her own Missionaries of Charity order in 1950 and was granted Indian citizenship a year later. Francis, who regards Teresa as the incarnation of the kind of Church he wants to lead, met the by-then internationally famous nun three years before her death, when he was still a bishop in Argentina.

He later joked that she had seemed so formidable he "would have been scared if she had been my mother superior". Others were much harsher in their judgment, with the likes of Australian-born feminist writer Germaine Greer and British polemicist Christopher Hitchens accusing her of contributing to the misery of the poor with what they saw as her dogmatic views. In her Nobel acceptance speech Teresa described terminations of pregnancies as "direct murder by the mother herself".

Critics also raised questions about the Missionaries of Charity's finances and the often insalubrious conditions in the order's hospices. The late Italian film director and writer Pier Paolo Pasolini was among those who fell under her spell, in his case when he met her during a trip to India in the early 1960s. "She has an almost virile jaw and a gentle eye that in its gaze 'sees', he wrote, describing Teresa as a combination of "goodness without sentimentality, someone with no expectations who is both calm and calming, powerfully practical." India granted her a state funeral after her death and her grave has since become a pilgrimage site.—AFP

## IN SECRET MEETINGS, TALEBAN REJECTS PAKISTAN PRESSURE ON PEACE PROCESS

**ISLAMABAD:** Pakistani officials threatened to expel Afghanistan's Taliban from bases in Pakistan if they did not join peace talks this month, but the militants rebuffed their traditional patron, two officials said, casting doubt on how much influence Islamabad retains over them. After the secret meetings with Pakistani officials about two weeks ago, the Taliban's Supreme Council met at an undisclosed location and voted to reject the talks scheduled for early March with the Afghan government, according to a council member.

Instead, the insurgents are now pouring back into Afghanistan for what they say will be a fierce spring offensive to be launched soon. Pakistan's influence over the insurgents is the lynchpin to the peace plan developed over last few months by Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States and China to bring an end to the 15-year-old war in Afghanistan.

A Pakistani official in Islamabad said the Taliban's recent success on the battlefield inside Afghanistan had changed the equation. "They no longer need their Pakistan bases in the same way, so if Pakistan threatens to expel them, it does not have the same effect," said the official, a retired military officer close to the talks. The insurgents have won new zones of influence - if not outright control - from Afghan security forces since the United States and its allies pulled most combat troops from Afghanistan at the end of 2014, Afghan and Western officials acknowledge.

"Pakistan's trump card - safe havens on its soil - is in danger of being snatched away," said Michael Kugelman of the Woodrow Wilson Institute, a Washington-

based think tank. "The Taliban have little incentive to step off the battlefield now, given recent gains and those likely to come in the next few months. In effect, why quit while you're ahead?" Nafees Zakaria, a spokesman for Pakistan's Foreign Office, said he had no knowledge of meetings with the Taliban but added, "We usually don't know who has met with whom" in the sensitive and high-level peace initiative.

In Kabul, however, members of the Afghan government were sceptical about Pakistan's assertions. "Pakistan's honesty and sincerity with regard to the Afghan peace process has always been a question," said an Afghan cabinet member, echoing the sentiment of several officials interviewed there. Pakistan's military has long been accused of fostering the Taliban as a way of pursuing regional rivalry with India. Pakistani officials, however, deny the charge and insist the government and military recognize that Afghanistan's war threatens their own security.

### 'Their dream'

A member of the Taliban's leadership council, or shura, whose members are mostly based in Pakistan and Afghanistan but also travel between Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, said rebel representatives met in Islamabad with Pakistani officials a little more than two weeks ago. "They have asked our representatives to bring more decision-making people to the next meeting ... to the meeting with US and Afghan officials. This is their dream, but they will not be able to see our senior commanders," the Taliban council member said.—Reuters



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