

COW ACTIVISTS DRINK PESTICIDE IN INDIA

RAJKOT: Eight Hindu cow rights activists drank pesticide as part of a protest in India calling for the animals to be given greater protection, with one protester dying of his injuries, police said. The "gau bhakt", or cow worshippers, consumed the poison at a rally outside a government office in western Gujarat state Thursday.

They were protesting at what they say is the ongoing slaughter of cows, considered sacred by India's large Hindu population, despite a widespread ban on killing the animals. "These men had come with bottles of poisonous substance and consumed a small portion in front of the collectors office", Manish Nakum, a police inspector investigating the case said.

"All were rushed to the government hospital where one of them, identified as Gabhru Bharwad, 40, died during treatment in the evening," he said. Nakum said he did not believe the men, who drank a mild pesticide used on cotton plants, intended to commit suicide. Cow slaughter and the consumption of beef are banned in Gujarat and several other states in officially secular India.

But the activists claim cows are still being killed illegally and want cows to be given the special status of "rashtra mata" ("mother of the nation"). Four of the protesters, aged in their twenties and thirties, were moved to a private hospital after their condition deteriorated, police said.

Dhaval Pandya, who participated in the protest in

Rajkot city but did not drink pesticide, told reporters that cow slaughter was rampant in India. "So to protect cows, which are holy to us like gods, we need to declare it as the mother of the nation," he said. Around 27 members of the same group also tried to block roads in Rajkot, but were detained, police said.

Around 80 percent of India's 1.2 billion population is Hindu, but it is also home to large numbers of Muslims, Christians and Buddhists. A spate of attacks on secular intellectuals and Muslims suspected of killing cows have heightened concerns of mounting intolerance under rightwing nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi's two-year-old government. — AFP

INDIAN MEN ARRESTED OVER DOCTORED IMAGE

NEW DELHI: Indian police said yesterday they had arrested two young Muslim men on charges of obscenity for posting a doctored image of a hardline Hindu leader dressed as a woman on social media. The image showed the head of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a controversial Hindu right-wing group with close links to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, dressed in a tight pair of women's trousers and black high heels.

The image of RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat was shared on Facebook and Whatsapp and was an apparent reference to the group's recent decision to ditch its trademark khaki shorts for long trousers. Police said they arrested Shakir Yunus and Wasim Sheikh, who are both in their early

twenties, after receiving complaints about the image. "We charged them with circulating obscene content and creating enmity between different groups," said D K Arya, deputy inspector general for the Khargone region in Madhya Pradesh state where the men live. The RSS styles itself as a cultural organisation devoted to protecting India's Hindu culture. But critics accuse it of being an anti-Muslim pseudo-fascist organisation with a history of fuelling religious tensions.

Some Twitter users criticized the arrests, which come as India's government faces pressure over its record on freedom of speech. "How is a morphed Bhagwat image obscene or offensive to Hindus?" Nimisha Jaiswal tweeted. — AFP



DUBAI: In this Sunday, March 24, 2013 file photo, former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf reacts while arriving at his office for a press briefing before leaving to Karachi. — AP

MUSHARRAF FLEES PAKISTAN AFTER TRAVEL BAN IS LIFTED

ARRIVES IN DUBAI FOR URGENT MEDICAL CARE

KARACHI: Pakistan's former military ruler Pervez Musharraf, who faces charges of treason and murder, arrived in Dubai yesterday after a three-year travel ban was lifted, allowing him to receive urgent medical care, his lawyers said.

Lawyers for the former president, who is facing multiple charges including treason and murder over the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, have said he needs urgent medical treatment not available in Pakistan. "I am going abroad for treatment but will return to face the cases against me," a party spokesman in Karachi quoted him as saying. "I am a commando. I love my motherland."

The spokesman added that Musharraf had reached his Dubai residence, where he will stay for some weeks before seeking an appointment with doctors in the United States. "Six to eight weeks are required for the treatment and then he would go back home," said Dr Amjad Malik, a spokesman for Musharraf's All Pakistan Muslim League party in Dubai.

Ill-fated mission

Musharraf was banned from leaving Pakistan in March 2013 after he returned to the country on an ill-fated mission to contest elections. The former ruler was barred from taking part in the polls and instead faces a barrage of legal cases. Last June, the Sindh High Court lifted Musharraf's travel ban, but the federal government, headed by his long-time rival Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, appealed the verdict.

The Supreme Court on Wednesday upheld the Sindh High Court decision and ordered the government to allow Musharraf to travel, which it did the following day. Musharraf's lawyers have provided guarantees he will return to Pakistan in six weeks and pledged he will appear in court for several ongoing cases against him,

Pakistan's interior minister, Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, said Thursday.

However, analyst Hasan Askari said yesterday the chance of Musharraf coming back was "minimal", adding that his return could cause problems for the government and embarrass the military. "In order to defuse the conflict, the government agreed to let him go," he said. In January, Musharraf was acquitted over the 2006 killing of a Baloch rebel leader Nawab Akbar Bugti. But four cases against him remain—one accusing him of treason for imposing emergency rule, as well as those alleging the unlawful dismissal of judges, the assassination of opposition leader Bhutto and a deadly raid on Islamabad's radical Red Mosque.

Bhutto's son Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, leader of her Pakistan People's Party, vowed to launch country-wide protests against the government for allowing Musharraf to travel. "After facilitating Musharraf's escape this government has lost the moral authority to govern," he tweeted yesterday.

Police decoy

A large convoy of police and paramilitary rangers left Musharraf's home in Karachi around 3.30 am yesterday as a decoy to waiting media crowding his street, while the general travelled to the airport separately. Musharraf ousted Sharif from power in 1999 in a bloodless coup and ruled Pakistan until democracy was restored in 2008.

He has been under house arrest in Karachi while the cases have ground through Pakistan's notoriously slow legal system, lurching from adjournment to adjournment with little clear progress apart from the granting of bail. Analysts had previously said they believe the government lacks the will to offend Pakistan's powerful military by pushing for Musharraf's prosecution. — AFP



AMRITSAR: Indian students perform a traditional Punjabi 'Bhangra' dance during celebrations of 'Jashan 2016' Inter Departmental Cultural festival at a university. — AFP

ARMY KILLS SUSPECTED REBELS IN KASHMIR

SRINAGAR: Indian soldiers killed two suspected rebels early yesterday in a gun battle in restive Kashmir near the de-facto border with Pakistan, an army spokesman said. Soldiers and police launched an overnight operation in Peethawada area, 70 kilometers northwest of the main city of Srinagar after receiving a tip-off that armed militants were hiding out in a local village. "Two terrorists were killed in the operation," army spokesman Colonel NN Joshi said. Kashmir is divided between India and Pakistan by a heavily militarized Line of Control or LoC since the two countries won independence from Britain in 1947.

Both claim the Himalayan territory in its entirety. Several rebel groups have for decades been fighting Indian forces deployed in the disputed region, for independence or a merger of the territory with Pakistan. The fighting has left tens of thousands dead, mostly civilians. Violence in the territory has sharply declined during the last decade, but armed encounters between rebels and government forces occur regularly. In February nine people including three Indian army Special Forces commandos were killed during a stand-off between militants and government forces that lasted three days. — AFP