

## JAPAN FLEET KILLS 333 WHALES IN ANTARCTIC HUNT

**TOKYO:** Japanese whalers returned to port yesterday after an Antarctic hunt that killed more than 300 of the mammals, the government said. The fleet had set sail for the Southern Ocean in December, with plans to slaughter 333 minke whales, despite a worldwide moratorium and opposition led by Australia and New Zealand. Japan's Fisheries Agency announced Thursday that the target number of "scientific research" kills had been achieved. The 2015/16 season came after a one-year hiatus prompted by a ruling by the United Nations' International Court of Justice (ICJ), which said the annual hunt was a commercial venture masquerading as science.

Under the International Whaling Commission, to which Japan is a signatory, there has been a moratorium on hunting

whales since 1986. But Japan persists in the practice using a loophole in the ban that allows for lethal research. Tokyo claims it is trying to prove the whale population is large enough to sustain a return to commercial hunting, and says it has to kill the mammals to carry out its research properly. However, it makes no secret of the fact that whale meat ends up on dinner tables and is served up in school lunches. In response to the ICJ ruling, Japan's 2014-15 mission carried out only "non-lethal research" such as taking skin samples and doing headcounts. However, the government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had been determined to resume the hunt.

### 'Unnecessary'

The haul announced Thursday is bigger

than it has been in recent years when the mission has been hampered by a confrontational campaign on the high seas by environmentalist group Sea Shepherd. The group, which attracts support from celebrities including actress Brigitte Bardot, has harangued Japanese vessels in the Southern Ocean, and has claimed success in drastically reducing the catch. In the 2013-14 season, just 251 minke whales were caught, while the figure was only 103 in the season before.

That compares with historic catches of around 850. The returning fleet arrived early Thursday at Shimonoseki port in western Japan, the fisheries agency said. Besides the kills, the agency also said it conducted non-lethal research such as observation, the taking of skin samples

from live whales and attaching tracking devices to whales. "Attaching GPS devices helps us study minke whales' migration routes by tracking them for several days," agency official Hiroyuki Morita told AFP. Environmental campaign group Greenpeace yesterday labeled the hunt "unnecessary" and said it violated the UN court ruling.

"It is completely unacceptable for the Japanese government to ignore the ICJ's findings and furthermore, completely unnecessary to go ahead with lethal research," said Greenpeace Japan executive director Junichi Sato. Japan has hunted whales for centuries, and their meat was a key source of protein in the immediate post-World War II years when the country was desperately poor. — AFP



**PARIS:** French youths and activists of various youth organizations march past the "Hotel Des Invalides" during a demonstration against proposed changes to labor laws yesterday. — AFP

## STUDENTS' PROTEST AGAINST FRENCH LABOR REFORMS TURNS VIOLENT

**PARIS:** Security forces responded with tear gas yesterday as French students protesting proposed labor reforms hurled bottles at riot police in Paris and the western city of Nantes. The reforms, which were significantly watered down under pressure from a wave of protests, were adopted earlier yesterday by the cabinet of an increasingly unpopular President Francois Hollande, who hopes to stand for re-election next year.

"Young and insurgent, the world is ours" read one banner as hundreds gathered at Place d'Italie in the south of the French capital, where riot police used tear gas after students threw bottles and emptied a rubbish bin over some officers. A protest in Nantes also turned violent as students hurled bottles at security forces who used tear gas and truncheons against the youths, making nine arrests, police said. Students have been at the forefront of protests over the reforms aimed at freeing up the job market and reining in France's 10 percent unemployment rate.

Among youths, joblessness is nearer to 25 percent—among the highest in Europe.

The youths, along with unions and the left flank of Hollande's Socialist Party, say the reforms are too pro-business and threaten hallowed workers' rights. One of yesterday's protesters in Paris was dressed as a capitalist, wearing a top hat and smoking a cigar with a sign reading "Business, power, finance—all together!" Some 58 percent of the French people oppose the measures, according to a recent poll. Prime Minister Manuel Valls has touted the reforms as "intelligent, audacious and necessary", in particular for reversing unemployment, which has not dropped below seven percent in 30 years. "Our country has become used to (joblessness) for too long," he said. The pressure prompted the government this month to water down the contested reforms, walking a tightrope between the insistent demands of employers and employees.

### 'Reformist' unions back measures

Bosses were unhappy with the withdrawal of a cap on the amount companies must pay for unfair dismissal, as well as the scrapping of a measure that would have allowed

small and medium-sized companies to unilaterally introduce flexible working hours. While employers' groups called on Valls to restore the reforms' original goal of creating jobs, the concessions were enough to persuade several so-called "reformist" unions to get behind the new version while still urging new language on conditions for laying off workers. The seven unions and youth groups which called yesterday's protests are demanding the withdrawal of the reforms. Last week students paralyzed dozens of schools and universities across France, and yesterday students were again barricading campus entrances in Paris. Tense protests were also under way in western Rennes and southern Marseille. Socialist Party dissidents, threatening stiff resistance when the reforms reach parliament, have presented a "counter-reform". The government's proposed reforms are scheduled to be taken up by parliament's social affairs committee on April 5, and by the full body in late April or early May. But before that, the protest movement plans an even bigger mobilization for March 31. — AFP

## BANGLADESH UPHOLDS ISLAMIST MILITANT'S DEATH SENTENCE

**DHAKA:** Bangladesh's top court has upheld the death sentence of an Islamist militant over fatal suicide blasts targeting secular activists 10 years ago, a prosecutor said yesterday. Asaduzzaman Chowdhury, who is also known as Panir, was sentenced to death in 2008 for his role in the December 2005 bombings that killed eight people and

injured 40 more. "The decision means he can now be executed within months unless he is pardoned by the president or the verdict is again reviewed by the Supreme Court," deputy attorney general Sashanka Shekhar Sarker told AFP. Both outcomes are seen as unlikely.

A Dhaka court sentenced Chowdhury and two others from the banned Jamayetul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) to hang in February 2008 for the attack on the offices of two groups that organise secular music and drama performances. The group was banned after a series of bombings across the country in 2005, but has recently regrouped and is blamed for a spate of attacks on foreigners and religious minorities in Bangladesh. Its founder Shaikh Abdur Rahman and five of his key associates were hanged in March 2007 and hundreds of JMB men were hunted down by an elite security force and prosecuted. Panir's lawyers have argued that his death sentence should be commuted because he was a minor when the blasts occurred. — AFP

## NINJA-SEEKING JAPANESE REGION INUNDATED WITH OVERSEAS APPLICATIONS

**TOKYO:** Hundreds of aspiring ninjas from abroad have overwhelmed tourism officials in Japan looking to hire six full-time secret assassins, massively outnumbering local applicants. Central Japan's Aichi prefecture is hiring a troupe of ninjas—the martial-arts masters and stealth assassins of feudal times immortalized in history books and period dramas—to promote tourism. In a job advert published earlier this month, the prefecture said candidates of any nationality were welcome. Week later, more than 200 applications were sent to the prefecture, with 85 percent coming from foreigners. "We received so many applications and inquiries," Satoshi Adachi of the prefecture's tourism promotion unit told AFP. "We didn't expect such a huge response (from overseas)."

Out of the 235 original applicants, tourism officials have whittled the competition down to 37 finalists. The foreign finalists, 13 in total, hail from countries as far afield as the United States, France and Thailand, Adachi said. Despite the high number of foreign applicants, there were far more Japanese finalists — 24 — as many from abroad were eliminated by the need to pay their own way to Japan for auditions next week. The newly hired ninjas will receive a one-year contract with monthly pay of 180,000 yen (\$1,600) plus bonus. Their duties will include performing backflips, using the trademark "shuriken"—ninja star-weapon and posing for photographs with tourists. — AFP