



A Pakistani fisherman collects a fish in a net after using a 'hot-wire' to stun the fish with an electric current in the River Kabul, at Hajji Zai village in Pakistan's northwestern Charsadda District. —AFP



A Pakistani fisherman casts a net into the River Kabul, at Hajji Zai village in Pakistan's northwestern Charsadda District. —AFP

ZAP FISHING WITH GENERATORS: PAKISTANI FISHERMEN

HAJI ZAI: Abbas Khan feeds a hot wire from a rickety generator into a river, a fishing technique he argues is more environmentally friendly than others used in northwest Pakistan—though he also admits it has killed several of his friends. Hundreds of fishermen risk their lives daily to hunt the rare fish known as "sher mahi", found in the Kabul River which flows from the Hindu Kush in Afghanistan into neighboring Pakistan, before merging with the Indus.

Some swim for hours on inner tubes, dragging nets behind them. Others use more brutal-and illegal-techniques: spraying pesticides directly into the river or, like Khan, using the electric current from generators to stun the river's inhabitants into submission. And, for those in a hurry, there is always the brutal but effective "Khatin bomb"-dynamite.

These imprecise techniques are a threat to the river's population, say dismayed conventional fishermen who have made their living selling sher mahi, considered the best for eating in Pakistan's northwest. "Fishing with dynamite and generators kills the entire population," says Ghani Ur Rehman. Like dozens of his fellow fishermen, the 58-year-old spends hours each day swimming the river on an inner tube, dragging his net behind him, catching only a few kilos at a time. He has done so for 25 years. "Now, the fish's population

has decreased and the main reason is an increase in fish hunting," he says, emptying his net on to the shore.

Along the banks of the Kabul River hundreds of visitors can be seen enjoying family days of boating and wading, topped off with a hearty meal of fresh sher mahi and other river fish at dozens of huts and restaurants. Sher mahi, with few bones and found in Pakistan only in the Kabul River, is similar to catfish, growing to a maximum of 30 centimeters. Some fishermen say its name come from the Persian word "sheer", or "milk", due to its rich oily taste. Rehman says he makes on average 600 to 1,000 rupees a day—but on days when the fish are plentiful his income can soar to 10,000 rupees.

Speaking with AFP along the river, Khan admitted using a generator in the water was "scary"—but said that, despite his lack of safety gear, he has learned the correct the technique. "Some of my friends had died because of electrofishing but now we have learnt it, now we know how to hunt in the best way," he explained, before demonstrating how to attach wires to a metal rod then place the rod in a net in the water. "It stuns the fish and brings it to surface. Then we collect the fish and put it a cooler," Khan said. "Some people use pesticides for fishing but that destroys the entire population of

fish. It also poisons the water and kills everything in the river, wherever it flows," he argued.

'Scary'

Rehman and Khan's anxiety is echoed by other fishermen in Haji Zai, in the suburbs of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincial capital Peshawar. Fishing by dynamite was banned by authorities in 1982, but there was not a serious decrease until after the launch of a military operation in the adjacent tribal areas in 2009 made the explosives slightly—but only slightly—more difficult to get ahold of. Fishing with generators and chemicals remains common, despite also being banned. Khair Gul-known as "Larram", or "Scorpion", an old childhood nickname that stuck—is mayor of Haji Zai village and himself an avid fisherman.

Authorities, he says, are not serious about stopping poaching. "We have taken action against such groups but the local officials used to set them free after taking (a bribe) of 400 to 500 rupees (\$5)," he said. "Use of dynamite, generator shocks and poisonous chemicals is not only a crime but also dangerous for health and causes disease. We ask the government to ban it completely," he adds. But the problems with a ban become obvious after speaking with officials.—AFP

TRUMP'S VICTORY CASTS PALL OF UNCERTAINTY OVER ASIA

MIDDLE POWERS WEIGH AMERICAN UNPREDICTABILITY

BEIJING: President-elect Donald Trump's vague and ambiguous foreign policy positions have cast a pall of uncertainty over whether American influence will decline in Asia, or if it will remain a force to be reckoned with, analysts say. The real estate tycoon-turned-politician frequently savaged China on the campaign trail, even calling it America's "enemy" and pledging to stand up to a country he says views the US as a pushover. But he has also indicated he is not interested in getting involved in far-off squabbles, saying America is sick of paying to defend allies like Japan and South Korea, even suggesting they should develop their own nuclear weapons.

"Trump could play the isolationist card and strike a deal with China to share regional influence," said Ashley Townshend of the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney. "But he might equally decide to

adopt a firm military stance on a country he thinks regards America as weak." Trump has offered no clear prescriptions for the geopolitical issues that plague the relationship between Washington and Beijing, from Beijing's territorial claims in the South China Sea to North Korea's nuclear program and the future of Taiwan. "At this juncture, governments around the world cannot depend on any particular set of US policies, since Trump's sometimes flip foreign policy statements were often contradictory," said Graham Webster, a US-China expert at Yale Law School.

Isolationist US?

In recent months, despite President Barack Obama's foreign policy "pivot" to Asia the US has seen some of its regional allies begin to drift into Beijing's sphere of influence—attracted by the economic appeal of

the neighborhood's biggest player. Newly elected Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte cosied up to China during a trip to the country last month, and has threatened to sever military relations with Washington. Malaysia, too, has seemingly begun to eye improving relations with the world's second-largest economy.

The prospect of an isolationist US under President Trump could quicken that trickle as the developing countries of Southeast Asia see Beijing—with its fiscal largesse and huge consumer base—as a better bet than a protectionist US. Meanwhile, Trump's assertions that he will require Japan and South Korea to pay more for US defense assistance has led those countries, too, to worry about how the new presidency may reshape long-established relationships, said Rory Medcalf, head of the national security college at the Australian National University.—AFP

GUNMEN IN PHILIPPINES SEIZE VIETNAM SAILORS

MANILA: Gunmen abducted six Vietnamese sailors and shot another yesterday when a bulk carrier was intercepted in Philippine waters off a southern island stronghold of the militant Abu Sayyaf group, the coastguard said. The cargo ship was bound for Davao City in another part of the province of Mindanao, but was intercepted when passing through a strait off Basilan island by 10 armed men who came aboard and took hostages. "One of the crew was shot and was evacuated to a local hospital," said Commander Jerome Cayabyab of the coastguard. He said the fate of the captives were uncertain after they were transferred to smaller, faster boats. It was the second kidnapping incident in the south in a week.

The Abu Sayyaf, a militant group that swears allegiance to Islamic State, said on Monday it kidnapped a German national. The military said a woman found dead in an abandoned yacht off an island near Basilan was believed to be his female companion. The latest attack on commercial shipping occurred just hours after the leaders of the Philippines and Malaysia agreed to step up maritime cooperation in their borders to stop the piracy. Abu Sayyaf rebels have since March been intercepting slow-moving tug boats towing coal barges in waters near the borders of Malaysia and the Philippines, taking captive more than a dozen Indonesian and Malaysian sailors.—Reuters