

TAIWAN BANS EATING DOGS AND CATS

TAIPEI: Taiwan has banned the eating of dogs and cats, lawmakers said yesterday, as pressure grows to improve animal welfare after a spate of cruelty cases that stirred public outrage. Parliament passed legislation to outlaw the consumption, purchase or possession of dog and cat meat, with offenders facing a fine of up to Tw\$250,000 (\$8,170). Authorities can also name and shame those who break the law.

"This shows that Taiwan is a society with advanced animal welfare," said lawmaker Wang Yu-min who proposed the new rules. The bill also hiked the penalty for killing or abusing animals to a maximum two-year jail term and a stiff fine of Tw\$2 million. Dog consumption-believed by some in Taiwan to help boost male potency-was common on the island decades ago but has become less popular amid growing calls to protect animal rights.

In 2001, Taiwan amended its animal protection law to ban the slaughter of pets-which included dogs and cats-for food, although there was no penalty on eating or buying the meat. Sales of pet meat were banned at the end of 2003. But a string of much-publicised animal abuse cases have continued to triggered deep public concern and demands for tougher protection laws. Last year, the military was forced to apologize after a video surfaced of three soldiers torturing and strangling a stray dog to

death with an iron chain, prompting several street protests. And in 2014, a male hippo famous for regularly performing at a private zoo in central Taiwan died after breaking a leg and sustaining other injuries during transportation, sparking a public outcry. Reactions to the new law were mixed, with some deeming it unfair to only single out cats and dogs for better protection. "This is the cute animal protection law? only cute animals are protected while the rest deserve to die?" read one message posted on Apple Daily's website. "Why doesn't the parliament amend laws to toughen punishment on drunk driving, fraud and homicide? what a lousy job it is doing," said another post.

Dog meat consumption is also common in countries such as China, Vietnam and South Korea. Last year, China's most notorious dog meat festival drew crowds despite international outrage, as more than 10,000 dogs were killed at the event in conditions activists described as brutal. South Koreans are believed to consume somewhere between 1.5 million - 2.5 million dogs every year, but the meat farming industry is in decline, with little demand among the younger generation. In Vietnam, cat meat-known locally as "little tiger"-is also a delicacy and although officially banned it is widely available in specialist restaurants. — AFP



TAIPEI: A Taiwanese man holds his dog during a gathering to demand establishment of a government department to protect dogs and cats from their owners who abused or dumped the animals. Taiwan has banned the sale and consumption of dog and cat meat and increased the penalty for animal cruelty. — AP



JAKARTA: A youth ferries a friend on a rented bicycle on the main square of Jakarta's old town. — AFP

ONE THIRD OF INDONESIAN WOMEN FACE PHYSICAL OR SEXUAL VIOLENCE

UN CALLS FOR URGENT ACTION

JAKARTA: One third of Indonesian women have faced physical or sexual violence, according to new government data, prompting calls by a United Nations agency for urgent action to protect women. The government's first national survey on violence against women showed 33 percent of women aged between 15 and 64 - around 26 million people - said they have faced abuse in their lives.

Cases of violence are most common among women who have received higher education and those who live in urban area, according to the survey released in late March. "The survey findings are sobering. It shows that violence against women occurs around us," Annette Robertson, head of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) in Indonesia told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. The issue of violence against women hit the headlines in Indonesia last year after a schoolgirl was gang-raped and murdered, sparking public uproar and leading to

the introduction of tougher punishments for sex offenders.

"Violence against women is a human rights violation and rooted in gender inequality. It deprives women and girls of the chance to enjoy a dignified life and present and future opportunities to live up to their full potential," Robertson said. The government's survey has been welcomed by women's rights campaigners as a way to tackle and address the root causes of violence against women in Indonesia, the world's fourth-most populous nation with 250 million people. Women's groups in the country have long said a lack of comprehensive data hampered education and prevention of violence, making it harder to reflect the prevalence of the crime.

The government is due to release further findings and analysis of the survey in June. Indonesia was ranked 88th out of 144 countries in the World Economic Forum's 2016 Gender Gap Index after scoring poorly on economic

participation, education and political empowerment. While Indonesia's economy has raced ahead over the past decade, critics say old-fashioned social attitudes persist and women are often subject to scrutiny about their behavior. The UNFPA, which has helped the government carry out the survey, urged action from authorities and communities, saying failure to act could cost the country, including through productivity losses.

Robertson cited a previous study in Vietnam which showed women survivors of violence earned 35 percent less than women who are not abused. "Silence and non-action are not an option. The stakes are high," she said. Globally, one in three women experience physical or sexual violence, according to the UN Women agency. Women who have been physically or sexually abused are more likely to have an abortion, experience depression, or get HIV, the group said. — Reuters

PHILIPPINE MILITANTS FLEE AFTER FOILED KIDNAP RAID

MANILA: Islamic militants who landed on a Philippine tourist island triggering deadly clashes with security forces had planned to stage a mass kidnapping, the military said yesterday as it pursued five fighters still on the loose. The army said the Abu Sayyaf group, notorious for a kidnap-for-ransom spree that has targeted foreigners, had planned to snatch up to a dozen tourists around Easter Sunday when resorts are packed. The group of 11 gunmen landed by boat on Bohol-one of the country's top tourism spots-sparking a gunbattle with security forces on Tuesday that left six insurgents dead and also killed three soldiers and a policeman.

Five Abu Sayyaf gunmen, along with an unknown number of local collaborators, remain at large after the clashes which took place in a rural district, said military chief of staff General Eduardo Ano. Ano said the gang, which arrived on three boats, had planned to acclimatize in the area and send scouts into resorts to scope out kidnapping targets. "They are expecting probably to kidnap four or five persons per boat, so at least 10 to 12 kidnap victims was their (overall) plan," he said. The Abu Sayyaf launched the strike from their remote stronghold on the lawless southern Philippines island of Jolo, which is about 500 kilometers away from Bohol.

The island is just half an hour's boat ride from Cebu, another major tourism draw. The incursion is the first on a major destination in recent years by the group, which pledges allegiance to the Islamic State. Ano said the Bohol plan was put into motion late last week as millions of local and foreign tourists prepared to hit the country's beaches ahead of the Easter holidays. Philippine intelligence agencies got wind of the plot last week, and alerted the military and foreign counterpart agencies, though authorities lost track of the

gunmen in the open seas. The US and Australian governments later warned their citizens about possible "terrorist" abductions in Bohol and Cebu.

Tourism fallout?

Ano said the five remaining fighters fled after an overnight siege near a remote village. "They are all running for their lives," he said. Helicopter gunships were used to bomb the militants, who fought back with high-end sniper rifles while holed up in a concrete house, according to officials. Ano said that among the dead was a key Abu Sayyaf leader known by his alias Abu Rahmi. The claim could not be independently confirmed. He said Abu Rahmi was behind a 2015 raid on the southern island resort of Samal in which four tourists-two Canadians, a Norwegian and a Filipina-were snatched. The two Canadian men were beheaded last year while the Norwegian man and the Filipina were freed unharmed. Ano said Abu Rahmi's group also attacked a German couple on a yacht at sea last year, murdering the woman on board and taking the man hostage. He was later killed.

Authorities in Cebu, an island of nearly five million people, warned their citizens about potential kidnapping raids following the Bohol attack. "It is unlikely that they have the operational capability to do further damage now. However, other elements may exist," Cebu city Mayor Tomas Osmena said on his Facebook page. As the government moved to contain the fallout on the lucrative tourism industry, the military said it would repel similar incursions. Authorities said some 100 residents had fled the fighting. Hoteliers and visitors said the incident had not affected tourist traffic on the island, though there was increased police security. — AFP



PYONGYANG: People dance to celebrate the fifth anniversary of respected Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un's assumption of the top posts of the Workers' Party of Korea and the state. — AFP

A GRIMACE AND A SHRUG, BUT NO FEAR OF US STRIKE IN PYONGYANG

PYONGYANG: Residents thronged the wide boulevards of North Korea's capital Pyongyang yesterday, some practicing for a parade to be held at the weekend, with no visible signs of the tensions engulfing the region over the isolated state's weapons programs. A US aircraft carrier group is headed to Korean waters amid concerns that Pyongyang may conduct a nuclear or long-range missile test and threats from US President Donald Trump of unilateral action "to solve the problem."

It was a sunny, spring morning in Pyongyang and many people were on the streets around the city's biggest sights, the Arch of Triumph and Kim Il Sung Square. Some of them spoke to Reuters journalists, who were escorted by North Korean officials. "I am a normal citizen, so I don't concentrate on politics too much," said a woman who gave her name as Ri Hyon Sim. "But one thing is very very clear, so long as we are with our supreme leader Marshall Kim Jong Un we are not afraid of anything."

North Korea has invited foreign media to cover celebrations this week of the 105th birth anniversary of founding president Kim Il Sung, the grandfather of current leader Kim Jong Un. However, journalists' movements are closely managed and conversations with the people are moni-

tored. As Ri spoke, women in flowing pink, red and yellow dresses walked by after dance rehearsals for a performance likely on Saturday when a parade is expected to celebrate Kim Il Sung's birthday.

North Korea also often marks important anniversaries with tests of its nuclear or missile capabilities. Hyon Un Mi, a tour guide at the Arch of Triumph, built to commemorate Korean resistance to Japanese occupation in the early 20th century, said she was following events on television and in newspapers. She called the United States an imperialist power that wanted to occupy her country. "Our people don't like these imperialists ... In recent days they want to occupy our country again and again," she said.

"The president of the US....," Hyon said, tailing off with a shrug and a grimace. North Korea remains technically at war with the United States and its ally South Korea after the 1950-1953 Korean conflict ended in a truce, not a peace treaty. Hyon however said she wanted reunification between North and South Korea. "Our people are suffering from the division," she said, adding that she was distressed while watching a women's football match between the two Koreas last week. "All the people feel very sad watching the football, our country divided into two," she said. The match ended in a 1-1 draw. — Reuters

MP CHARGED FOR UPENDING CHINESE, HONG KONG FLAGS

HONG KONG: A Hong Kong lawmaker was arrested yesterday for "desecrating" the Chinese and Hong Kong flags by turning them upside down in parliament, in charges he said were designed to suppress anti-Beijing sentiment. Cheng Chung-tai upended small China and Hong Kong flags that some pro-Beijing legislators had displayed on their desks in the legislative assembly last October. The incident happened in a feisty session where two pro-independence lawmakers were barred from taking up their seats in a row over the oath-taking ceremony.

Under Hong Kong law, it is an offence to desecrate national and regional flags by "publicly and wilfully burning, mutilating, scrawling on, defiling or trampling on them". "The clear and obvious goal is to eliminate dissent" before the city's newly elected pro-Beijing leader Carrie Lam takes office in July, Cheng told reporters after he was bailed. He said that Hong Kong was facing a "massive purge" against pro-democracy voices. The city was handed back to China by colonial ruler Britain in 1997 under a "one country, two systems" formula. But there are concerns China is interfering in the semi-autonomous city, eroding its freedoms and way of life.

Some activists have angered Beijing by calling for greater autonomy or even independence for Hong Kong, with some jailed or awaiting trial over anti-China clashes. A protester was jailed for more than four years Monday for rioting and arson during a 2016 protest known as the Fishball Revolution, where police fired warning shots and demonstrators hurled bricks torn up from pavements. Three other activists had been jailed for three years on riot charges for their role in the same protest. Other prominent activists were arrested late last month over 2014's Umbrella Movement, which saw tens of thousands occupy the city's streets for 79 days in an unsuccessful campaign for election reform. — AFP

MOUNTAINS, DAMS AT PYONGYANG BUS STOPS

PYONGYANG: The bus stops of Pyongyang have no advertisements. Instead of exhortations to buy an energy drink or sign up to a mobile service, travellers are offered soothing images before they cram into packed vehicles. From mountain, coastal and farming landscapes to views of dams and city squares, the depictions have no words or slogans, unlike the ubiquitous propaganda posters that take the place of commercial messages in North Korean urban centres.

Buses are by far the most common means of public transport in the capital of around three million people, where access to private cars is rare, and offer the most extensive network. Tickets cost 5 won each - less than 0.1 US cents at free-market rates, making journeys virtually free. AFP journalists working in Pyongyang are restricted in what and who they can photograph, film

and interview by North Korean rules. The city is one where everyone almost always appears to have a purpose, whether going to or from work, or taking part in some kind of group activity.

At bus stops, though, commuters are forced to disrupt that process as they wait for a vehicle. It is a moment that reveals their private interests - whether talking to friends and colleagues, pensively watching the world go by, or sometimes playing with a smartphone. Shop assistant Sin Hyi-Yong uses the time to plan her day, she said, crediting the country's founding father Kim Il-Sung - the 105th anniversary of whose birth will be marked this weekend - and his descendants and successors for building up the system. "When you go to and from work using the bus you can feel the warm love of the great leaders every time," she said. — AFP



PYONGYANG: Commuters wait at a bus stop in Pyongyang. Buses are by far the most common means of public transport in the capital of around three million people, where access to private cars is rare. — AFP