

22 DEAD IN BLAZE AT SENEGAL RELIGIOUS RETREAT

DAKAR: A fire ripped through makeshift shelters at a Muslim religious retreat in Senegal, killing at least 22 people and triggering a stampede, firefighters said yesterday. The blaze broke out on Wednesday afternoon as worshippers gathered in the town of Medina Gounass in the southeastern region of Tambacounda, a senior official with the firefighting service said. The cause was as yet unknown, the official said.

Images of billowing clouds of smoke, the charred corpses of animals and devastation at the

site circulated online, testifying to the fire's impact. While some victims were badly burnt, others were hurt in the panicked stampede triggered by the blaze, the firefighter added. Around 20 of the injured are in a serious state and are being treated at the regional hospital in Tambacounda city, around 80 kilometers away.

The fire ripped through straw shelters constructed for the multi-day event, according to Senegal's local press, allowing it spread rapidly through an open-air gathering packed with people. Senegalese

Muslims gather in their hundreds, even thousands, to worship at the site every year, and pilgrims were weighed down with food and luggage, the local press reported.

A similar incident at the same site in 2010 caused the deaths of six people and several injuries, Le Quotidien newspaper reported yesterday. Senegal's poor record on fire safety was also thrown into the spotlight in 2013 when a fire in a Koranic school killed nine children, triggering an outcry and calls for tighter regulation. —AFP

SOLD INTO SLAVERY: INDIA'S LOST GENERATION OF MISSING CHILDREN

NEW DELHI: It was a balmy August afternoon last year when 11-year-old Piyush Sharma disappeared while playing outside his home in the small east Indian town of Hatia. The skinny little boy, with big brown eyes and an infectious smile, had just returned from school and told his mother he wanted to play outside before lunch. When she called for him 15 minutes later he was gone. "It's been nine months since I saw him. He was still wearing his school uniform - a pink shirt and blue shorts. Someone must have taken him. He always played nearby," said Pinki Sharma, 35, Piyush's mother, by phone from Hatia in Jharkhand state.

"My husband has travelled to many places looking for him, but no one knows anything. But I will look for him until I die." Piyush is one of about 250,000 children registered as missing on the government's Track Child portal between January 2012 to March 2017 - that's five children vanishing every hour. But campaigners say these figures are just the tip of the iceberg, as many cases are not registered by parents or the police, and the children dismissed as runaways.

Most, however, are sold into slavery in a country where poverty prevails and child labor is normalized, despite being banned. The Track Child data also shows nearly 73,000 children - 30 percent - are still missing despite a raft of initiatives to better protect and find these children. A lack of training of police, child welfare and protection officials, poor coordination between agencies in different states, coupled with massive public apathy is hampering the battle to locate India's "lost generation", say campaigners.

Poverty-stricken, then enslaved

Missing children are so common in India that notices printed in classified sections of India's daily newspapers are buried alongside tender notices and job vacancies, with blurred black and white photos alongside a description and a contact number. Pintu, 10, last seen at a Delhi railway station wearing a red sweater and black trousers. Shiwani, 16, who vanished outside her home in southern Delhi, dressed in blue jeans. Pooja, 13, in white salwar kameez, last seen in a Delhi market.

Each notice ends in the same way: Sincere efforts have been made by local police to trace out this missing girl/boy, but no clue has come to light so far. Campaigners say some of these children are abused runaways. Others are abducted. Some come from poor families duped by traffickers with the promise of a good job. Some are girls in love - lured by boyfriends who sell them into prostitution.

Rishi Kant from Shakti Vahini, a Delhi-based anti-trafficking charity, says up to 70 percent of the missing children found are victims of trafficking and slavery. "Most are trafficked by organised gangs who know the system. They know how to lure, transport and sell them on to employers," said Kant, who is involved in rescuing trafficking victims. "As a result, they end up locked in brothels, wealthy homes and small workshops - making it hard to detect them or for them to escape."

India has one of largest populations of children in the world, with more than 40 percent of its 1.2 billion people below the age of 18, according to its 2011 Census. An economic boom of the last two decades has lifted millions out of poverty yet many children continue to be born into dire circumstances with India home to over 30 percent of the world's 385 million most impoverished children, according to a 2016 World Bank and UNICEF report. They make easy prey for traffickers, fed promises of a job and a better life but often ending up in forced labor. While some children manage to escape or are rescued in police raids after tip-offs from activists or local residents, others are not so fortunate, trapped for years. —Reuters



DHAKA: In this file photo, Mufti Abdul Hannan, center, leader of banned radical group Harkatul Jihad al Islami, stands at a court in Dhaka, Bangladesh. — AP

BANGLADESH BURIES ISLAMIST EXTREMISTS AFTER HANGING

DHAKA: Bangladeshi villagers buried the leader of a banned Islamist extremist outfit and two of his aides early yesterday, hours after they were hanged for a 2004 grenade attack on the British ambassador. The explosion at a 14th century Sufi shrine in the northeastern city of Sylhet killed three people and injured the British high commissioner. Mufti Abdul Hannan, the head of Harkatul Jihad Al Islami and his two HuJI associates were sentenced to death in 2008 over the carnage, with Bangladesh's highest court upholding the sentences last month.

HuJI was the first Islamist militant outfit to emerge in Bangladesh, and rose to prominence as Hannan escalated its deadly operations. All three sought clemency from the Bangladesh president in a last-ditch attempt to commute the execution orders to life sentences, but he rejected their pleas. Authorities hanged Hannan and one of his aides Sharif Shahedul Islam at a high security prison outside Dhaka at 10pm (1600 GMT) on Wednesday.

Another associate, Delwar Hossain, was executed at a jail in Sylhet. Their bodies were then taken back to their villages, where they were buried amid tight security, police said. "Hannan was buried in his village at around 5.45am after a funeral prayer attended by 15-20 of his relatives," local police chief Kamrul Faruq said. "We've stepped up security to prevent any violence," he said, adding the funeral passed off peacefully.

Hated figure

He said Hannan was a "hated figure" even in his village due to his roles in a series of deadly blasts and two attempts on the life of then opposition leader Sheikh Hasina, who also comes from the same district. Hannan, 60, was a madrasa teacher who studied in India and Pakistan and fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan before returning to join HuJI. Prosecutors said Hannan had headed HuJI since the late 1990s, masterminding deadly attacks on a church, secular gatherings, and

mosques used by Islam's minority sects. In August 2004, in one of the country's deadliest extremist attacks, he masterminded the blasts at a political rally of Sheikh Hasina, now prime minister, outside her party office in central Dhaka. Hasina narrowly survived what she said was an assassination attempt. At least 22 people were killed. By the time Hannan was arrested in late 2005, more than 100 people had been killed in attacks he orchestrated across the Muslim-majority nation.

Tensions in the moderate Muslim country have been running high in recent weeks following a resurgence of extremist attacks, at least three of which have been claimed by the Islamic State group. Al-Qaeda and the IS have claimed dozens of attacks in recent years, but Hasina's secular government insists local groups are to blame. Police have arrested scores of suspected extremists and killed more than 60 people since an attack on a Dhaka cafe last year in which 22 people were killed, many of them foreign hostages. —AFP