

## WITH TOO FEW PRIESTS, PORTUGUESE WOMEN STEP UP

**REGUENGOS DE MONSARAZ:** Facing a shortage of Roman Catholic priests, women churchgoers have stepped in to lead Sunday services in villages in southeastern Portugal, a sign the ageing communities are open to change. In the tiny church of Carrapatelo, a village overlooking the vineyards of the Reguengos de Monsaraz region, Claudia Rocha stands before a dozen mostly elderly female churchgoers wearing a black dress and sneakers. Her leather jacket and smartphone sit on the front-row bench as the 31-year-old leads what the church terms "Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest" with ease.

After prayers and church hymns, she makes comments on the day's biblical reading, a form of preaching. At the end, Rocha hands out communion wafers representing the body of Christ that were blessed by the priest beforehand, but wine is not part of the ceremony. "This church would be closed if I wasn't here. Who cares if I am a woman, a deacon or a priest?"

What matters is having someone from the community who maintains our connection with the priest, even when he isn't here," she said.

### No misgivings

A divorced social worker without children, she is one of 16 laypeople—eight men and eight women—chosen by Father Manuel Jose Marques to help ensure regular attendance at the seven parishes he presides over. "It might seem strange and new, but we haven't invented anything here. It's a tool that has long been set out in the Church's guidelines, for cases when it's absolutely necessary," says the 57-year-old priest.

The practice of Sunday services being led by laypeople in a priest's absence take place in a number of countries, including Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Switzerland and the US. It began in the 1980s, when services were prepared with a priest or ordained clergy member, resembling

mass but without the rite of consecrating bread for communion or the Eucharistic prayer. The Vatican and many clergy members have refused to encourage the practice, fearing a trivialisation of the tradition of Mass. Father Manuel had no such misgivings.

To him, the need to set up Sunday services without a priest became apparent as soon as he took on his seven parishes around 16 years ago. Before, there had been three priests for the seven parishes in Reguengos de Monsaraz, a town in the region of Alentejo between Evora and the Spanish border. He assembled a group of 16 volunteers aged between 24 and 65 from varied backgrounds. "These are people who have experience with faith and welcoming Christ, and who know how to talk about it," he says, noting he makes no distinction between men and women. Lay women step in, too, in other rural parts of Portugal, whose population of 10 million is overwhelmingly Catholic but only counts around 3,500 priests for 4,400 congregations. —AFP



North Korean soldiers take part in a demonstration at an undisclosed location in North Korea. —AP

## US ASSESSING MILITARY OPTIONS; NORTH KOREA NUKE TEST LOOMS

### WASHINGTON WARNS ITS PATIENCE IS OVER

**PYONGYANG:** North Korea denounced the United States yesterday for bringing "huge nuclear strategic assets" to the Korean peninsula as a US aircraft carrier group headed for the region amid concerns the North may conduct a sixth nuclear weapon test. Tension has risen since the US Navy fired 59 Tomahawk missiles at a Syrian airfield last week in response to a deadly gas attack, raising concerns about US President Donald Trump's plans for North Korea, which has conducted missile and nuclear tests in defiance of UN and unilateral sanctions.

The United States has warned that its policy of "strategic patience" is over. US Vice President Mike Pence travels to South Korea on Sunday on a long-planned 10-day trip to Asia. A spokesman for the North Korean Foreign Ministry's Institute for Disarmament and Peace issued a statement condemning the United States for the attack on Syria, while also calling for "peace by strength".

"The US introduces into the Korean peninsula,

the world's biggest hotspot, huge nuclear strategic assets, seriously threatening peace and security of the peninsula and pushing the situation there to the brink of a war," the North's KCNA news agency said yesterday, citing the statement. "This has created a dangerous situation in which a thermo-nuclear war may break out any moment on the peninsula and posed serious threat to the world peace and security, to say nothing of those in Northeast Asia," it said.

North Korea, still technically at war with the South after their 1950-53 conflict ended in a truce, not a treaty, has on occasion conducted missile or nuclear tests to coincide with big political events and often threatens the United States, South Korea and Japan. Today, it marks the "Day of the Sun", the 105th anniversary of the birth of state founder Kim Il Sung. The dollar fell yesterday against a basket of currencies, on track for a losing week as tension over North Korea underpinned the perceived safe-haven Japanese yen.

### 'Opportunity to talk'

China, North Korea's sole major ally and neighbor, which nevertheless opposes Pyongyang's weapons program, has called for talks leading to a peaceful resolution and the denuclearization of the peninsula. "Military force cannot resolve the issue," Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told reporters in Beijing on Thursday. "Amid tensions we will also find a kind of opportunity to return to talks." While Trump has put North Korea on notice that he will not tolerate any more provocation, US officials have said his administration is focusing its strategy on tougher economic sanctions. Trump said on Thursday Pyongyang was a problem that "will be taken care of" and that he believed Chinese President Xi Jinping would "work very hard" to help resolve the challenge. Trump has also said the United States is prepared to tackle the crisis without China, if necessary. He diverted the nuclear-powered USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier and its strike group towards the Korean peninsula last weekend in a show of force. —Reuters

## JAPANESE COURT UPHOLDS 'BLACK WIDOW' SENTENCE

**TOKYO:** A Japanese "black widow" convicted of murdering three boyfriends she had met online and dated for their money faces execution after Japan's Supreme Court yesterday dismissed her final appeal. Kanae Kijima, 42, who has married twice since she was detained in 2009, killed three men in the space of eight months through carbon monoxide poisoning, by burning charcoal briquettes after giving them sleeping tablets.

A spokesman for Japan's top court confirmed it had ruled against an appeal lodged by Kijima. Her legal team has claimed her innocence, saying the three men were likely to have committed suicide, according to public broadcaster NHK. The death penalty has overwhelming public support in Japan, despite repeated protests from European governments and human rights groups. Executions are by hanging, however it can take years before they are carried out.

The case has been closely followed in Japan and major media flashed news of the top court decision across television screens. Kijima writes a blog from the detention centre where she has been held, detailing her life inside, the food and talking about men she likes. In the latest post on Thursday, she wrote to her readers: "I hope to see you again somewhere someday." Kijima's first victim, 53-year-old Takao Terada was found dead in Tokyo in January 2009. Kenzo Ando, 80, died in his home in Chiba prefecture in May 2009, and three months later 41-year-old Yoshiyuki Oide was found poisoned in a rented car, also from briquette fumes.

Kijima was convicted without the witness testimony or confession often relied upon in Japanese prosecutions. Instead prosecutors rested their case on layers of circumstantial evidence, such as Kijima's purchases of sleeping pills and coal briquettes, in addition to the fact that she had met with each man shortly before he died. She was also found guilty of seven other lesser crimes, including fraud and theft. In another "black widow" case, Chisako Kakehi, 70, is awaiting trial in June for allegedly killing several men. —AFP