

PHILIPPINES SAYS ISLAMISTS BEHEADED FILIPINO CAPTIVE

MANILA: The Philippine army said Islamic State-linked Abu Sayyaf militants have beheaded one of four Filipino fishermen they took captive in December. Brigadier General Cirilito Sobejana, military commander on the southern island of Jolo island said the boat's captain had been executed in the jungle near the town of Patikul on Thursday but his remains have yet to be recovered.

Noel Besconde was abducted by the Abu Sayyaf group, along with three crewmen in December, while on board a fishing vessel in the Celebes Sea. Abu Sayyaf is a small but brutal militant group known for beheading, kidnapping, bombing and extortion in the south of the mainly Catholic country. Sobejana said it was likely the abductors beheaded Besconde because he was sick and had become a liability.

"The reason why he was beheaded is that he was delaying their movement," Sobejana told reporters. "They (Abu Sayyaf) are highly-mobile and we are pursuing them." Sobejana said the group had demanded 3 million pesos (\$60,648.94) ransom for Besconde but the government maintains its policy of refusing to pay ransom. The army has declared all-out war with Abu Sayyaf on the islands of Jolo and Basilan, but is hamstrung by its presence among large civilian communities.

Abu Sayyaf has its roots in separatism but its activities are mostly banditry and piracy and it has invested the profits of its business in modern weapons and fast boats. Sobejana said the Abu Sayyaf group is still holding Besconde's crew, along with more than a dozen foreign nationals in Jolo. The militant group last year beheaded Canadians John Riddell and Robert Hall. An elderly German, Jurgen Kantner, suffered the same fate in February when a \$600,000 ransom demand was not paid.

The army said on Wednesday that an Abu Sayyaf leader who was directly involved in the kidnap and execution of the Canadian and German nationals was among those killed by Philippine troops in a clash on a resort island last week.

Philippines, US to hold military drills

Meanwhile, the Philippine military said yesterday it would hold annual exercises with US troops next month, reaffirming its commitment to the alliance despite cooling relations under President Rodrigo Duterte. The 10-day exercises will be the first held under Duterte, who has suggested cancelling the drills and called for the withdrawal of American troops, putting into question Manila's 70-year-old alliance with Washington as he looks instead to court China. The outspoken Filipino leader, who has earned international censure for a war on drugs that has seen thousands killed, has since softened his stance on working with the US military. The annual military exercises, known as Balikatan (Shoulder-to-Shoulder), will now go ahead in May, focusing on counter-terrorism and disaster response as the Philippines battles Islamic militants in their lawless southern strongholds.

"It will be scenario-based like (preparing for) a big storm hitting the Philippines or the possibility of terrorism," Balikatan spokesman Major Celeste Frank Sayson told AFP. "We are safe to say there will be no more live-fire exercises. We (will) focus on humanitarian and civil assistance." In previous years Balikatan had evolved from counter-terrorism maneuvers against Islamic militants to simulations of protecting or retaking territory, as a dispute with Beijing over islands in the South China Sea escalated.

But Duterte, who took office last year, has sought



CAPAS TOWN: This file photo taken on April 14, 2016 shows US marines walking next to their transport and amphibious vehicles at a temporary camp for the "Balikatan" joint US-Philippine military exercise at Crow Valley. — AFP

improved relations with China and has set aside the maritime row in favor of economic concessions. Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana had said the exercises would refocus on fighting terrorism, which he described as the Philippines' top security problem. The Philippines is battling Islamic militants and pirates

in the conflict-torn south, where several groups have pledged allegiance to Islamic State fighters in Iraq and Syria. Security forces in the past week clashed with the Abu Sayyaf kidnap-for-ransom group on a popular resort island, the first attack on a key Philippine tourist destination in recent years. — Agencies

JAKARTA ELECTION EXPOSES NATIONS DEEP POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS DIVIDE

POLL SEEN ALSO AS REFERENDUM ON SECULARISM

JAKARTA: Jakarta voters head to the polls on Wednesday to elect a governor for Indonesia's teeming capital after a campaign that incited political and religious tensions in the world's most-populous Muslim country. Surveys have shown the race tightening to a statistical dead heat, with incumbent Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, an ethnic Chinese Christian, closing in on rival Anies Baswedan, a former education minister.

Purnama is standing trial on blasphemy charges stemming from the divisive campaign that also featured mass rallies led by Islamist hardliners and alleged plots to overthrow President Joko Widodo, who is popularly known as Jokowi. The Jakarta election is viewed as a larger choice ahead of a 2019 presidential poll between the secular policies Indonesia has practiced since its post-World War Two independence and a hardline political Islam that has strengthened in recent years.

"This is a test case for Indonesian pluralism, if it can withstand the pressure of the religious groups, the populists," said Wimar Witoelar, a political analyst and an adviser to former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid. "Indonesia is at a crossroads, and I mean Indonesia, not just Jakarta." A survey conducted April 12-14 by polling firm Indikator showed Anies with 48.2 percent support versus 47.4 percent for Purnama, with 4.4 percent undecided.

Worries about backlash

The business community is worried about a possible violent backlash from the losing side in the election, which could affect the investment climate and endanger Widodo's fit-and-start economic reforms. Southeast Asia's biggest economy grew 5.2 percent in 2016 and the government expects a repeat of that this year. Indonesian stocks are up 12.6 percent on the year, making the Jakarta market one of Asia's best performers.

Kartika Wirjoatmodjo, chief executive officer of the country's largest state bank, Bank Mandiri, said in an interview that whoever won "we (should) make sure it doesn't affect any of the long-term policies, especially on the openness and ... ease of doing business and attracting investment." Purnama, who replaced Widodo in 2014 as Jakarta governor after serving as his deputy, saw his popularity soar as he tackled decrepit infrastructure, chronic flooding and endemic corruption in the traffic-clogged city of over 10 million. His support plunged after an edited video circulated last September suggesting Purnama had mocked a



BANDA ACEH: A Hindu man (C) gets his cheeks pierced by a skewer during the annual Thaipusam festival at the Palani Andawer temple. — AFP

verse in the Quran used by his opponents to argue Muslims should not vote for a person holding different religious beliefs. Amid two rallies last year that drew hundreds of thousands of protesters, Purnama was charged with blasphemy, forcing him to make regular appearances in court during the campaign.

The hardline Islamists behind the rallies - led by the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), a group known for attacks on religious minorities and extorting money from nightclubs - were cultivated by Purnama's rivals. Baswedan was accused of betraying his moderate Islamic roots when he met and sang with FPI leader Habib Rizieq, who was twice imprisoned for inciting violence in 2003 and 2008. Purnama recovered to win the first round on Feb. 15 with 43 percent of the vote, compared to 40 percent for Baswedan and 17 percent for Agus Yudhoyono, son of former president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who drew support from conservative Muslims.

Chinese plots

The FPI was among groups circulating hoax news stories on social media during the cam-

paign of a pending invasion of Chinese workers and Chinese plots to decimate Indonesia's crops with contaminated chili. The FPI has vowed to stage further protests and a "revolution" if Purnama wins, according to flyers circulated by the group. A senior government official said a victory for Purnama could reignite religious tensions and China-baiting at a time when the government is chasing Chinese investment for much-needed infrastructure.

"I worry that if a sizeable portion of the electorate feels cheated there could be a very serious backlash," said the official, who asked for anonymity to speak freely about the political climate in Indonesia. However, political analyst Tobias Basuki also saw risks for the national government and its reform agenda if Baswedan won, given plans by his political patron Prabowo Subianto to challenge Widodo in the 2019 presidential poll. Baswedan was Widodo's campaign manager in the 2014 presidential election, when he beat Subianto. But Widodo sacked him as education minister last year. "Anies and Prabowo controlling Jakarta would impede Jokowi every step of the way," Basuki said. — Reuters

TERRORISM JOKES NO JOKING MATTER FOR SPAIN'S JUDGES

MADRID: When she posted jokes on Twitter about a 1973 assassination committed by Spain's Basque separatist group ETA, Cassandra Vera never for one moment thought they would land her a one-year jail sentence. But last month, one of Spain's top criminal courts found the 21-year-old guilty of "justifying terrorism" and humiliating its victims-the latest in a series of such convictions for social media pranks that has the country divided, and partisans of free speech worried.

"They ruined my life," Vera tweeted about the 13 posts about the 1973 murder of Luis Carrero Blanco, the prime minister and heir-apparent of dictator Francisco Franco who was killed in an ETA bomb attack that sent his car hurtling into the air. "ETA combined a policy against the use of official vehicles with a space program," read one of her posts. Another said: "Did Carrero Blanco also go back to the future with his car?"

Vera is unlikely to spend time behind bars, as offenders of non-violent crimes with a sentence of under two years do not serve time in jail. But she now has a criminal record that will prevent her from getting a scholarship for her studies. The National Court that sentenced her, which specializes in terrorism cases, ruled that her jokes did not form part of a "healthy humorous environment" and that her attitude was "disrespectful" and "humiliating." But Carrero Blanco's own granddaughter, Lucia, said in a letter sent to the El Pais daily that she was "scared of a society in which freedom of expression,

however regrettable it may be, can lead to jail sentences."

'Cult of hate'

Luis Conde, a historian of comic books, told AFP he remembered more lenient times, even under Franco's dictatorship when people would sing a song that featured the lyrics "Carrero flew," in reference to the attack. "And now, we can't say it anymore?" he asked. But Consuelo Ordóñez, head of the Covite association for victims of terrorism, said laughing at the expense of Carrero Blanco—a man associated with Franco's iron-fist rule that ended after he died in 1975 — was a big mistake. "If we had been serious about that fact that nothing justifies violence, we wouldn't be talking about more than 800 ETA deaths," she told AFP, referring to the 829 people killed during the group's four-decade campaign for Basque independence. "The cult of hate that always moved terrorists has not been defeated," she warned.

'Sensitive issue'

The number of court rulings involving alleged acts of "justifying terrorism" has risen from a dozen a year to 26 in 2015, 37 in 2016 and 12 for the first quarter of this year, according to judicial authorities. Most of them are linked to organizations that are now inactive, such as ETA, which declared a permanent ceasefire in 2011. In January, for instance, Spain's Supreme Court sentenced rocker Cesar Strawberry to a year in prison for tweets, including one that joked about the 1996-7 ETA kidnapping of a right-wing politician. — AFP

SENIOR TRUMP AIDE VISITS AFGHANISTAN

KABUL: US President Donald Trump's national security adviser met Afghan officials in Kabul yesterday, amid questions over the new administration's plans for the military mission in Afghanistan after American forces unleashed a huge bomb threat on militants. The visit by HR McMaster, the first high-level visit by a Trump official, came just days after the US military sparked controversy by dropping a GBU-43 Massive Ordnance Air Blast bomb, one of the largest conventional weapons ever used in combat, during an operation on Thursday against Islamic State militants in eastern Afghanistan.

While military officials said the strike was based solely on tactical needs, it led to speculation that Trump's defense advisers are planning to escalate the war against militants in Afghanistan. The strike was estimated to have killed nearly 100 militants and no civilians, according to Afghan officials, although this has not been independently verified.

McMaster met President Ashraf Ghani and other senior Afghan officials to discuss bilateral ties, security, counter-terrorism, reforms, and development, according to a statement from the palace. McMaster praised anti-corruption efforts and assured

Ghani that the United States would continue to support and cooperate with Afghanistan on a number of issues, according to the palace.

Ghani told McMaster that "terrorism is a serious issue for the security of the world and the region" and if serious steps are not taken it would affect "generations" of people, according to the statement. Illicit drugs and corruption also top the list of threats to Afghanistan's security, Ghani told the visiting officials. The Afghan government refers to both the Taliban and Islamic State as terrorists. Afghan forces have struggled to contain Taliban insurgents since most international troops were withdrawn in 2014, leaving them to fight largely alone.

At the peak in 2011, the United States had more than 100,000 troops stationed in Afghanistan. Nearly 9,000 US troops remain there to train and advise Afghan forces, provide close air support to soldiers on the ground and form a separate counter-terrorism unit that targets Islamic State, al Qaeda and other militant networks. The top US commander in Afghanistan has said he needs "several thousand" more troops to help the Afghans take on a resurgent Taliban and battle other insurgents, but no official plan has been announced. — Reuters



KABUL: Men from the Solidarity Party of Afghanistan wear masks of President Trump, President Ghani and Dr. Abdullah, carrying a hand made model of the "Mother of all bombs" during a demonstration, against the US government. — AP

GERMANY'S FORGOTTEN 'GUEST WORKERS' FROM AFRICA

DRESDEN: Long overshadowed by the more numerous and vocal Turkish "guest worker" community, Mozambicans who arrived in Germany decades ago still struggle to assert their rights in their adopted homeland. Faced with huge industrial production problems, pre-unification East Germany relied heavily on labor from communist "brother states" such as Cuba, Hungary, Vietnam and Angola. But the first from Africa were the Mozambicans, with around 15,000 eventually arriving in a deeply foreign, sometimes bitterly cold and often hostile new place.

After independence in 1975, their homeland plunged into civil war between Marxists who set up a one-party state after fighting Portuguese colonial forces and rebels backed by white Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa. Many Mozambicans sought to flee the deeply poor, troubled nation to seek gainful employment in East Germany's steel, construction, manufacturing and textiles industries.

"We were also escaping the civil war," which engulfed Mozambique for 15 years until 1990, said 50-year-old Emiliano Chaimite, who lives in the eastern city of Dresden. Like the Turks who spurred West Germany's "economic miracle" in

the 1960s and 1970s, Mozambicans often accepted jobs East Germans were unwilling to do. But it hasn't been easy and they have faced repeated bouts of xenophobia and brutality.

'Foreigners out!'

Chaimite has worked since his arrival in Germany in 1986 to fight racism, but laments an anti-immigrant mood that has taken hold of late. He cites in particular the Islamophobic movement Pegida, which has been holding weekly marches in Dresden's city centre since October 2014. "After all the work we did before the arrival of Pegida to sensitize people, we feel like we've been sent back to square one," said Chaimite, who started off in a foundry and now works as a nurse. "If you look at the situation on the streets, it reminds you of the 1990s," agreed Morgado Vasco Muxlhanga, 56. He was just 19 when he came to East Germany in 1980 to labour in a slaughterhouse. Both he and Chaimite worked hard to learn German early on and ended up marrying local women.

But when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the two Germanys became one less than a year later, most Mozambicans found themselves stripped of their jobs and

housing. The majority said they never received full wages for work performed under difficult conditions and many were summarily sent home to a nation that had long been a Cold War proxy battlefield. In the tumult, racism reared its head particularly in the disadvantaged states of the east.

"The young guys we used to play football with started saying 'Foreigners out! Go to Auschwitz!' and colleagues would cross to the other side of the street," Chaimite said, contrasting attitudes with the warm welcome he said he first received in the German Democratic Republic after experiencing colonial-era racism at home.

A wave of violence culminated on April 6, 1991 when Jorge Gomondai, 28, a neighbor and colleague of Muxlhanga's, was thrown on to the tracks of a streetcar in Dresden after being attacked by 14 skinheads. His death is considered the first racist murder of the post-reunification era and led to a legal fiasco for lack of a serious investigation. "It was horrible. We got together in small groups in Berlin asking 'Do we really want to stay here?'" recalled former metal worker Augusto Vinheque, who was himself attacked in the German capital in 2001.

'Do everything you can'

Recalling those dispiriting years, they recounted the jeers and racist monkey noises, the fear of walking home, the desire to safeguard their children. But they also remembered with pride their patient claiming of a stake in a country devoid of a multicultural tradition. The Mozambicans' lesser-known story even drew the attention of graphic novelist Birgit Weyhe, who last year published "Madgermanes", named after a somewhat pejorative term used back home for the emigrants.

Chaimite, who tried in vain to open up a dialogue with Pegida, blamed the view-long mainstream in politics that "Germany is not a country of immigration." The United Nations in February condemned the "structural racism" faced by blacks in Germany "at school, at work and in the public sphere."

However many in the Mozambican community say they have found it possible to make inroads, even if it's been a struggle. On the advice of a pastor, Chaimite began studying nursing and in 2003 founded an "African-European" club. And Muxlhanga eventually became a computer programmer and wrote a book, "My Life In Three Countries." "You have to do everything you can to improve the situation," he said. — AFP