

HUNT FOR TWO RED CROSS WORKERS AFTER DEADLY AFGHAN AMBUSH

KABUL: The Red Cross said yesterday it was desperately searching for two employees who went missing after their convoy came under insurgent fire in northern Afghanistan, leaving six other workers dead. The aid workers were ambushed in northern Jowzjan province on Wednesday while they were en route to a remote snowbound area to deliver much-needed relief supplies. Six employees were killed on the spot, many of them shot from close range, in one of the worst attacks on the international charity in the country for years.

"Unfortunately, there's no news yet on our two colleagues unaccounted for," Thomas Glass, a spokesman for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), said. "We are actively trying to locate them."

No militant group has so far claimed responsibility for the killings, but Jowzjan's police chief Rahmatullah Turkistani has blamed local Islamic State jihadists. The ambush underscores how aid workers in Afghanistan have increasingly become casualties of a surge in militant violence in recent years.

"This event demonstrates the urgent need for all parties to respect their obligations under International Humanitarian Law to (provide) aid workers with a safe environment to work in," the UN said, noting that those killed were travelling in a clearly marked ICRC vehicle.

The attack comes at a time when Afghanistan is in dire need of humanitarian assistance, with more than 100 people killed in recent avalanches and tens of thousands displaced by the wrenching conflict.

The ICRC, which has been working

in Afghanistan for three decades, said it was putting its nationwide operations on hold, but there were no plans for now to withdraw staff. The Taliban, the largest militant group in Afghanistan which promptly distanced itself from the attack, has assured ICRC of security in areas under their control. "The (Taliban) calls on the officials of ICRC to refrain from suspending their services as the Afghan nation is (in) need of humanitarian aid and health services more than ever before," the group said on their official website on Thursday.—AFP

INDIAN PM MODI VOWS TO CLEAN UP POLITICS

LUCKNOW: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has promised to clean up politics. The man running the ruling party's campaign in a crucial state election, who is facing 11 criminal cases, says it will take a while. "At a time of elections, one has to forget every other aspect and just focus on victory," said Keshav Prasad Maurya, as his three-vehicle convoy carrying police with automatic rifles sped through the countryside. Polls open today in Uttar Pradesh, with a population of some 220 million, and on the ground Modi's loftier aims for a new India seem far away.

Maurya, the state's president for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), says the charges against him are false and politically motivated; unless he is convicted, they do not prevent him from holding office. His bosses are not concerned. An official at the prime minister's office referred questions about Maurya and his criminal cases to the BJP, where an aide to party president and Modi confidant Amit Shah said there was no problem.

The charges are related to Maurya protesting on behalf of Hindu causes, said the aide, and anyone who does so "is not a criminal in the party's eyes." "Slowly," Maurya told Reuters, "the BJP will be moving towards a direction where it will only have politicians who are absolutely clean and have no cases of corruption against them." Modi stormed to power in 2014 vowing to sweep away corruption and vested interests from business and politics.

Late last year, he abruptly abolished 86 percent of cash in circulation, in a bid to crush the shadow economy, force Indians to declare their wealth and empower the poor. Ahead of the world's biggest scheduled election this year in Uttar Pradesh, though, the BJP is sticking to an old formula: elite with rap sheets and swelling bank accounts who pit religious communities and caste against each other. The party's manifesto for the state poll, for example, mixed development with a set of right wing Hindu causes likely to upset the sizeable Muslim population.

Win at all costs?

As Maurya criss-crossed Uttar Pradesh by helicopter and sport utility vehicle ahead of a month-long election, voters were doubtful of wholesale reform to the way Indian politics work. "That's not going to change - the corrupt and the criminal are able to get votes," said Rakesh Kumar Gupta, as he sold bread, cigarettes and snacks from the same cramped stand his father tended before him in Uttar Pradesh's capital, Lucknow.

Ashutosh Mishra, head of the political science department at the University of Lucknow, said he saw no sign that Modi or any other major Indian politician was serious about overhauling a system he described as "feudal." "Why should they? They are enjoying the perks of power, they are living the lives of modern gods," Mishra said. The biggest of five state polls held in India this spring points to a central dilemma for Modi.

If he loses the poll in Uttar Pradesh, he risks dissent in the ranks of his support base and a weaker position for his bid for re-election in 2019. But analysts say that if Modi wins through divisive politics driven by men with controversial backgrounds, it undermines his populist narrative of a rising India. Also at stake in Uttar Pradesh is the number of seats Modi controls in the upper parliamentary chamber, where the opposition has managed to delay some economic reforms. —Reuters



PUNJAB: In this file photo, Indians stand in a queue to cast their votes outside a polling station in Amritsar, in the northern Indian state of Punjab. —AP

FREEBIES, SYMBOLS, FUNDING: INDIA'S KEY ELECTION FEATURES

SYMBOLS USED TO HELP THE UNLETTERED VOTE

NEW DELHI: At 1.3 billion people, India is the world's largest and arguably the most chaotic democracy. Elections are a complicated logistical exercise that blends colorful pageantry with more serious political issues. A village fair atmosphere takes over rural India as people troop to the nearest voting stations. Five key states - Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Goa, Manipur and Uttarakhand - are currently in the middle of elections to choose local legislatures. The voting began Feb 4 and ends on March 8. Votes from all the state polls will be counted on March 11. A look at some of the key election features:

Election symbols

A bottle, an air conditioner, a television set, a lantern, an arrow, a bicycle, a loaf of bread - these are not shopping items but some of the many objects voters will see on the electronic voting machines as symbols for the dozens of political parties and independent candidates in the fray. Symbols have been allocated to political parties since India's first national election in 1951.

Since barely a fifth of the population could read or write in the early 1950s, the symbols were introduced on ballot papers to help the unlettered cast their votes. Nearly three-quarters of Indians

can now read but the icons remain evocative symbols of the major political groups. India's best-known political symbols are the lotus flower for the governing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the outstretched hand or palm for the main opposition Congress party.

The newest political party in the country, the Aam Aadmi Party, or the Common Man's Party, chose the broom as its election symbol, reflecting their claim that they mean to sweep clean the political system. The choice of symbols still available for selection with the country's independent Election Commission includes an electric pole, cricket bat, pliers and even food items including a coconut and a cauliflower. Also available: a toothbrush and nail clippers.

Freebies

Election season in India is the time when political parties offer freebies in return for the votes. On offer this year are promises of laptops, smartphones, spice grinders, fans and loan waivers. The governing BJP is even offering sugar and clarified butter at low prices in northern Punjab state. In the past, farm workers got cows and goats in a southern state. Freebies are a fact of life in Indian politics. Some 270 million people

- nearly 22 per cent of the country's population - live in poverty, making giveaways particularly attractive to voters.

The election-season freebies, however, raise questions about a fair playing field for smaller parties and independent candidates. In the absence of laws barring such campaign promises, the practice continues. In India's northern Uttar Pradesh, Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav, the state's top elected official, is promising free smartphones. In the previous 2014 election, he fulfilled his promise of free laptops for students after winning the vote. His main challenger, the BJP, also promised laptops, free internet and cooking gas to those who vote for them.

Election funding

Anonymous cash donations to political parties, running into billions of rupees (hundreds of millions of dollars) are seen at the heart of India's endemic corruption. Only a quarter of the annual income of the two main political parties, the BJP and the Congress party, comes from known sources and are declared in their tax returns. The rest is from anonymous donors, according to the Association of Democratic Reforms, a non-political group working for governmental and electoral reform. —AP