

THAIS IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE; V-DAY FEVER SWEEPS THE NATION

BANGKOK: Babies dressed as cupids, underwater weddings and a government vitamin giveaway to encourage procreation were all part of Thailand's imaginative and bizarre events yesterday to mark Valentine's Day. The Land of Smiles embraces February 14 like few other countries in Southeast Asia, with Bangkok awash with pop-up flower stalls and a roster of romantic gestures unfurling across the country.

The junta government led the love-in, doling out heart-shaped boxes of free iron and folic acid supplements in a bid to help healthy pregnancies and stimulate the kingdom's birthrate. "In 1970, a family had an average of six children but now it's 1.6," Wachira Pengjunt, director-general of the Department of Health

said. "In the past people ate better food, more vegetables and fruits but now lifestyles have changed... so we want to encourage more births."

In the southern tourist hotspot of Trang, couples were offered the opportunity to marry underwater in full wedding dress and diving gear in an annual publicity stunt aimed at boosting visitor numbers. And babies at one Bangkok maternity ward were dressed up with wings to resemble the god of love. Even Thailand's fractious political arena, a stage more accustomed to the delivery of brickbats than bouquets, could not escape Cupid's arrow.

In a widely trailed "Day of Love", the junta opened reconciliation talks with some political players in an effort to

bridge a decade of conflict that has seen two democratic governments upended by coups.

Thailand's normally stern Prime Minister Prayut Cha-O-Cha was also in an affectionate mood following a poll saying just over half the country wanted to give him flowers for Valentine's Day. "I have love for everyone—all 70 million Thais every day—not only on Valentine's Day. I have roses for you everyday. Thank you," he told reporters. Thai polling data is often criticized as politically slanted. Still the junta's unbridled passion for Valentine's Day was a contrast to more po-faced approaches in previous years—in 2015 the generals urged young people to have a special meal or visit temples instead of having sex. — AFP



BANGKOK: Newborn babies sleep at Rajavithi Hospital in Bangkok, Thailand. Just in time for Valentine's Day, the Thai government is distributing pills it calls 'very magical vitamins' to prospective mothers boost the country's falling birthrate. The pills are prenatal vitamins containing folic acid and iron and being handed out to women between the ages of 20-34. — AP



CHENNAI: Secretary of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam party VK Sasikala gestures to supporters at party headquarters in Chennai yesterday. A former video cassette seller with close ties to Tamil Nadu's late leader will become the next chief minister of the Indian state, capping a remarkable rise for the political novice. — AFP

INCOMING LEADER OF TAMIL NADU JAILED FOR FOUR YEARS

SASIKALA ORDERED TO SURRENDER TO PRISON AUTHORITIES

NEW DELHI: India's Supreme Court jailed the anointed next leader of Tamil Nadu for four years for corruption yesterday, heightening the turmoil in a state still reeling from the death of its long-time matriarch. VK Sasikala was ordered to surrender to prison authorities after judges quashed her acquittal in a \$10 million "disproportionate assets" case also involving her mentor, the late chief minister Jayalalitha Jayaram.

There was no immediate reaction from Sasikala who was not present at the apex court in New Delhi and has been holed up in a resort close to Tamil Nadu's capital Chennai since last week. But the verdict brought a juddering halt to the 59-year-old's meteoric rise as she was on the cusp of becoming the leader of one of India's most populous and prosperous states.

The court ordered she immediately hand herself in to begin serving her sentence, which automatically bars her from holding public office for a decade, as well as fining her 100 million rupees (\$1.5 million). The panel of judges also sentenced her nephew and niece to four years after the Karnataka High Court acquitted all of them in 2015 of any wrongdoing. "The magnitude of the nefarious gains as demonstrated by the revelations in the case are, to say the least, startling," Justice PC Ghosh and Justice A Roy wrote in their verdict.

The ruling also said there was "incriminating

evidence" against Jayalalitha, a former film star who died last December after three stints as chief minister. Sasikala had been anointed as Jayalalitha's successor by the state's dominant All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and was likely to be sworn in later this week. But she has been involved in a bitter battle with acting chief minister, O Panneerselvam, who has been trying to block her ascent.

Although there was no immediate response to yesterday's verdict from Sasikala herself, her party issued a statement saying Panneerselvam and 19 other senior AIADMK rebels had been sacked. Edappady Palaniswamy, a Sasikala loyalist, was appointed AIADMK leader in place of Sasikala but Panneerselvam is likely to stay on as chief minister while the infighting continues. "Let us bury the hatchets and stay united for the good of the party and continue the fine governance of Amma," Panneerselvam told reporters after the verdict, using Jayalalitha's nickname.

Firecrackers

While the 2014 conviction sparked mass protests, Sasikala does not command anything like the same level of loyalty as Jayalalitha and there no immediate signs of demonstrations. Few party workers were at the party headquarters and the only people outside her residence were political rivals who celebrated the verdict

by bursting firecrackers and distributing sweets. "This verdict shows that individuals in public life should not indulge in corruption," opposition leader M K Stalin told reporters.

Sasikala has taken refuge since last week in a luxury resort alongside several dozen AIADMK state legislators, keeping a close eye on them over fears that Panneerselvam's camp might poach them before her investiture. The corruption case dates back to late 1990s when Jayalalitha and Sasikala were accused of profiting from the chief minister's office and amassing wealth beyond their income. They were jointly accused of owning several bungalows, luxury cars, tea estates, eight tons of silver, nearly 30 kilograms of gold and thousands of saris which could be not accounted for.

The court put the overall value of the assets acquired illegally at 660 million rupees, equivalent to around \$10 million. Sasikala was running a video parlor and Jayalalitha was a budding politician when the two met, which marked the beginning of a decades-long friendship dogged by corruption allegations. Sasikala's meteoric rise mirrored that of Jayalalitha who came to power following the death of her own mentor and regular movie co-star MG Ramachandran in 1987. But unlike Jayalalitha, who inspired a devotion that verged on the religious, Sasikala is seen as lacking charisma and a solid power base. — AFP

HALF-BROTHER OF N KOREA LEADER KIM ASSASSINATED

SEOUL: The half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un has been assassinated in Malaysia, South Korean media reported yesterday, with one TV station saying he was attacked at the country's main airport with poisoned needles. Officials in Seoul could not be reached for comment on the reported death of Kim Jong-Nam. Malaysian police said an unidentified Korean had been taken sick at Kuala Lumpur International Airport and since died.

If confirmed, Kim Jong-Nam's case would be the highest-profile death under the Kim Jong-Un regime since the execution of the leader's uncle Jang Song-Thaek in December 2013. Kim Jong-Un has been trying to strengthen his grip on power in the face of growing international pressure over his country's nuclear and missile programs. He has reportedly staged a series of executions. The latest launch on Sunday of a new intermediate-range missile brought UN Security Council condemnation and vows of a strong response from US President Donald Trump. South Korea's national news agency Yonhap quoted a Seoul government source as saying Kim Jong-Nam was killed on Monday.

Another source cited by Yonhap said agents of the North's spy agency, the Reconnaissance General Bureau, carried out the assassination by taking advantage of a security loophole between Jong-Nam's bodyguards and Malaysian police at the airport. The 45-year-old was killed by two unidentified female agents using poisoned needles at the airport, according to South Korean broadcaster TV Chosun. That report, citing what it called multiple government sources, said the two women hailed a cab and fled immediately afterwards.

In Malaysia, the police chief in charge of Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Assistant Commissioner Abdul Aziz Ali said a Korean in his forties was found sick at the airport on Monday. Airport authorities rushed him to hospital and he died on the way, the police chief said. "We do not have

any other details of this Korean man. We do not know his identity," Abdul said. Kim Jong-Nam, the eldest son of Kim Jong-Il, was once seen as heir apparent but fell out of favor following an embarrassing botched attempt in 2001 to enter Japan on a forged passport and visit Disneyland. He has since lived in virtual exile, mainly in the Chinese territory of Macau. Jong-Nam's half-brother Jong-Un took over as North Korean leader when their father died in December 2011. Jong-Nam, known as an advocate of reform in the North, once told a Japanese newspaper that he opposed his country's dynastic power transfers. He was reportedly close to his uncle Jang Song-Thaek, once the North's unofficial number two and political mentor of the current leader.

Targeted in the past

Jong-Nam has been targeted in the past. In October 2012 South Korean prosecutors said a North Korean detained as a spy had admitted involvement in a plot to stage a hit-and-run car accident in China in 2010 targeting Kim Jong-Nam. In 2014 Jong-Nam was reported to be in Indonesia-sighted at an Italian restaurant run by a Japanese businessman in Jakarta and was said to be shuttling back and forth between Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and France. In 2012 a Moscow newspaper reported that Jong-Nam was having financial problems after being cut off by the Stalinist state for doubting its succession policy.

The Argumenty i Fakty weekly said he was kicked out of a luxury hotel in Macau over a \$15,000 debt. Last year South Korea warned of possible North Korean assassination attempts in its territory. It noted previous attempts to assassinate Hwang Jang-Yop, the North's chief ideologue and former tutor to Kim Jong-Il, who defected to the South in 1997 and died of natural causes in 2010. Jong-Nam was born from his father's extra-marital relationship with Sung Haerim, a South Korean-born actress who died in Moscow. — AFP



MACAU: In a file picture, Kim Jong-Nam, the eldest son of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il, waves after an interview with South Korean media representatives in Macau. Kim Jong-Nam, the half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un has been assassinated in Malaysia. — AFP

US AND THAILAND KICK OFF 'COBRA GOLD' WAR GAMES

BANGKOK: The US and Thailand launched annual joint 'Cobra Gold' military exercises yesterday as Asia grapples with uncertainty over the direction of American foreign policy under US President Donald Trump. The war games, typically involving days of grueling and sometimes gruesome drills in the Thai jungle, are the largest US-led military exercises in Asia. They have continued in spite of tensions over a 2014 coup in Thailand, prompting Washington to cut back on military aid and call for a return to democracy. But the US has also been wary of pushing its long-standing Southeast Asian ally into the embrace of superpower rival China.

This year Washington sent the head of the US Pacific Command Admiral Harry Harris to attend the opening of Cobra Gold yesterday—the highest ranking officer to visit Thailand since the coup. He urged the country to resume democratic rule, a hand-off the junta has repeatedly delayed. "We look forward to Thailand's reemergence as a flourishing democracy because we need Thailand to be a strong and stable partner," he said. This year's 10-day exercise kicks off under a cloud of uncertainty about the role of the US in the region.

It is unclear whether Trump will rollback on his predecessor's much-trailed 'Asia pivot', which banked on boosting security and trade ties as a counterweight to China's growing might. Trump's administration is also expected

to take a softer line on human rights, potentially offering some respite for the Thai junta and other authoritarian governments in the region. Some 3,600 US personnel will descend on Thailand's Chonburi and Nakhon Ratchasima provinces for the war games, along with soldiers from Singapore, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and Malaysia.

The drills, which have been hosted by the US

and Thailand since 1980, have previously involved an array of arduous activities, including a jungle survival challenge requiring US marines to drink snake blood. US embassy spokeswoman Melissa Sweeney said this year's drills will focus on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. China and India will join for those humanitarian exercises, with more than a dozen other countries sending representatives to observe. — AFP



SATTAPHI: A Thai marching band leads troops at the opening ceremony of the Cobra Gold Thai-US military exercise yesterday in Sattaphi, Thailand. — AP

AUSTRALIA MISSES TARGETS TO IMPROVE LIVES OF ABORIGINES

SYDNEY: Australia is failing to improve Aboriginal lives, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said yesterday, as a new report showed the government missing key targets, including cutting child mortality and raising life expectancy. The ninth "Closing the Gap" report found that government and community efforts were only able to meet one of seven targets to boost health, education and employment to the level of the non-indigenous population. "Even with successive Commonwealth and state governments investing more resources, and even with tens of thousands of dedicated Australians seeks to contribute and engage, we are still not making enough progress," Turnbull told parliament.

Aborigines—who make up about three percent of the total national population of 24 million—are among the most disadvantaged Australians. Apart from lifting high school completion rates, all other targets including child mortality, life expectancy, education and employment were not on track, the report said. The mortality rate for indigenous children under four years old was at 165 per 100,000 from 2011-2015, more than double that of the rest of the population. Aborigines also have significantly shorter life expectancy than their fellow citizens, with a gap of 10.6 years for males and 9.5 years for females, accord-

ing to figures from 2013. The community was also battling rising mortality rates from cancer, the report found. Turnbull said his government was investing another Aus\$50 million (US\$38 million) to improve the research and evaluation of policies being rolled out to try to close the gap. Efforts to implement policies featuring greater indigenous and local community involvement were also being made, he added. Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd—who made a historic apology to Aboriginal people for centuries of injustice in 2008—warned of a "second stolen generation" involving children being removed from their families under child protection laws.

The term "stolen generation" is used to describe children who were put in foster care with white families or institutions under an official policy that ended only in the early 1970s. "We cannot simply stand back and let the numbers of indigenous children being removed grow year by year, without other options being tested within the wider indigenous community," Rudd said Monday. He added that the annual report was "a political disaster for the government of the day, for governments of whichever political persuasion", The Australian newspaper reported. — AFP