



Jihadists in Niger kidnap 37 women



MORIGUAN: Indian villagers travel by boat through floodwaters in Balimukh Ashigarh village in Morigoan district, in India northeastern state of Assam yesterday. Floods have affected 350,000 people living across 13 districts in Assam as the annual monsoon rains continue to cross the Indian sub-continent. —AFP

INDIAN TRAFFICKERS FIND NEW WAYS TO SMUGGLE GIRLS

MUMBAI: Young girls from India's remote northeast are lured with promises of good jobs and trafficked to Southeast Asia and the Middle East on Nepalese passports, campaigners say, amid fears traffickers are finding new ways to escape checks. "Over a 100 girls from the northeast and northern part of West Bengal state were trafficked in the last two years, nearly 50 to 60 percent of them on passports issued by Nepal," said Hasina Kharbhih, founder of anti-trafficking charity Impulse NGO Network.

"Obtaining visas for Middle East countries is difficult on Indian passports, so recruitment agents are getting them from Nepal. They are doing the paperwork for both passports and visas in Kathmandu," Kharbhih told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from Shillong, capi-

tal of northeastern state of Meghalaya. Traffickers have been trying new ways, including transporting women on tourist visas to Gulf nations to get round Indian emigration checks. They are also trying routes through neighboring countries including Nepal where collusion of officials with traffickers is suspected.

Campaigners said traffickers are flying the girls from Kathmandu airport and in some cases crisscrossing through Indian airports with them before flying to a Gulf nation such as Kuwait or Oman. For destinations in Southeast Asia, such as Singapore and Malaysia, the girls are trafficked through Myanmar. India's underdeveloped northeast, a region marred by ethnic violence and armed conflicts, is bordered by China, Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Bhutan and is a hub for sex

traffickers to source girls for brothels in Mumbai and Delhi. But cases of trafficking for labor to other countries are being increasingly reported.

Alerts and checks

Recruitment agents peddle dreams to college graduates of well-paid jobs in hotels and spas in Gulf nations or the frozen fish packaging industry of Malaysia. They target illiterate girls for jobs as domestic helps. "The agencies are focusing on these areas because they find many girls are happy to go to Middle East countries as they find they can earn more there," Kharbhih said. But when they arrive they often find themselves trapped in bonded labour, having to pay off debts to traffickers. "Their passports are taken by the employers. They are not paid, as prom-

ised," she said. The police in Sikkim - considered prosperous among northeastern states - is currently investigating the case of a 25-year-old who flew to Kuwait to work as a housemaid in 2010 and went missing after that. Her family lodged a complaint with police last year. "She had flown on a passport issued by Nepal. This is our first such case," an official with the Sikkim anti-human trafficking unit said.

A similar case three years ago put campaigners on the Nepal passport trail when a woman trafficked to Lebanon committed suicide. "We found during the investigation that she was among a bunch of others who was taken there on Nepalese passports for housemaid jobs. That one case was our entry point into the issue," Kharbhih said. Cases have been trickling in since then - a recent one of a girl taken

through Chennai on her Indian passport to Malaysia to work in a beauty parlor. Her passport was seized by her employer and she couldn't renew her visa when it expired.

"It was a complex case as she was legally detained for overstaying in Malaysia. It was very difficult to get her back," Kharbhih said. Impulse NGO has police from India's northeastern states and campaigners logged on to its trafficking alert software. It is now training border forces on how to send alerts on the system in an effort to curb the numbers of trafficked girls and women. "These girls want a good job, and some mortgage assets and take loans with the hope of returning home with money. In some cases, they do send money back home, but these happy stories are short-lived," Kharbhih said. — Reuters

HEAVY RAIN LEAVES 56 DEAD IN SOUTH CHINA; 22 MISSING

BEIJING: At least 56 people have been killed and another 22 reported missing as heavy rains continue to pummel southern China, flooding towns, cutting off power and halting traffic, China's Ministry of Civil Affairs said yesterday. As much as 48.6 centimeters of rain has been dumped on several cities since Thursday, including the scenic resort city of Guilin in the Guangxi region, the ministry said.

More than 11 million people in 11 southern provinces were affected by floods, landslides and hailstorms, the ministry said. Rivers have broken their banks, inundating surrounding communities. The ministry said water levels in major rivers and lakes in the southern province of Hunan have surged to alarming levels, and that the collapse of levees forced large-scale evacuations. Dozens of flights at several airports serving major cities in the region including Chengdu, Changsha, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen were canceled or delayed, stranding thousands of travelers.

Chengdu's airport was shut down for more than an hour Monday because of rain, forcing 13 incoming flights to land elsewhere, according to state media reports. Trains also were halted, and roads were cut off to many towns and villages in the region. Television footage showed major flooding in cities, where the lower floors of homes and shops have been submerged. The national meteorological center forecast more rain to come this week in southern China. —AP

MODI'S TRIP HOLDS SPECIAL MEANING FOR INDIAN JEWS

RAMLA: At a curry house in central Israel, a poster welcoming Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi greets patrons even before they encounter the rich scent of spices wafting from the kitchen. Modi's three-day visit began yesterday-the first ever of an Indian premier to Israel-is a landmark moment for the Jewish state, a country seeking the friendship of powerful allies and customers for its advanced military equipment.

But for members of the small Jewish

Indian community in Israel, the trip is a cause of genuine excitement and a unique opportunity to increase their visibility. "There's not a single (Indian) household that's not talking about it. This is all people are talking about," said Elazar Ashtivker, owner of the Maharaja restaurant in the city of Ramla, south of Tel Aviv. "It's historic," he said. The fast-talking 33-year-old's parents, who were born in India, opened the restaurant in its first incarnation in the 1980s

because they felt "the community was in decline". Initially, the restaurant served the Indian community nearly exclusively.

But in the 1990s the trend of Israelis travelling to Asia after completing their military service became wildly popular, and many returned home with a taste for the Maharaja's spicy delicacies. The restaurant serves what Ashtivker calls "mainstream Indian food" but also sells peppers, vegetables and imported spices. The wording on the poster is in the colors of the Indian flag and invites members of the Indian community, in Hebrew and English, to a July 5 meeting with Modi in Tel Aviv. "There's a lot of excitement," Ashtivker said. "Everyone has signed up and everyone is going." "If you looked for Indians in Israel on the 5th you won't find any. They'll all be at the convention centre," he said with a laugh.

'Invisible Jews'

Estimates put the number of Jews of Indian origin in Israel at about 100,000, according to Eliaz Dandeker, a historian and author documenting the community. Even those of Indian origin born in Israel maintain a "deep connection" to their ancestral homeland, said Dandeker, including through music, cinema, food and cultural events. Events in Israel have featured appearances by Indian actors. Jews made their way to India over the course of the last 3,000 years, and by and large have not suffered religious and racist persecution in the country. They began coming to Israel en masse in the late 1940s and early 1950s for religious and other reasons.

Many of them settled in rural communities to become farmers, while others moved to peripheral towns throughout the country. In the first years following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, many Indian immi-

grants abandoned their names and traditions as part of the era's "melting pot" ideal. "There's more openness today" to Indian culture, the 34-year-old Dandeker said. "The younger generations want to know more."

'He's special'

In his spice shop near the Maharaja, Shaul Divekar, who emigrated from India as a child, scoops red lentils from a sack into a plastic bag, chatting from behind his counter with two customers. The conversation fluctuates between the goods that arrived from India and the prime minister who is about to. Divekar proudly notes he is in charge of one of the seven buses taking Indian Israelis from Ramla to Wednesday's meeting with Modi. "He's special," Divekar said of Hindu nationalist Modi, a Bollywood music video playing on a laptop behind the cash register.

"He likes Jews," proudly offers a tall bearded man in his 30s standing nearby the Indian DVD collection in Divekar's store, his Hebrew heavy with an Indian accent. Dandeker, the historian, notes that Jewish Indians in Israel have been called the "invisible Jews" since they are neither Ashkenazim from Europe nor Sephardim from Africa and the Middle East.

While members of the community have reached prominence in Israel in fields including medicine and the military, "a lot of them don't stress their origins". And with many of them having changed their last names to sound more Israeli, "it's hard to spot them," said Dandeker. Modi's visit and its potential to generate interest among Israelis in Indian culture could help raise the profile of the Indian community. "We expect it to help advance our community," said Ashtivker, the restaurateur. "We're a small community here and don't really stand out." —AFP



RAMLA: Elazar Ashtivker, owner of the Maharaja Indian restaurant in the small city of Ramla, south of Tel Aviv, cooks at his restaurant as the Jewish Indian community prepare for the visit of the Indian prime minister. — AFP