

IN PAKISTAN, CHINA PRESSES ADVANTAGE FOR CONTRACTS

ISLAMABAD: Last year, Pakistan held informal talks with General Electric, Siemens and Switzerland's ABB to build the country's first high-voltage transmission line. Chinese power giant State Grid committed to building the \$1.7 billion project in half the time of its European counterparts - and clinched the deal. This is a familiar tale in Pakistan and many other countries. As China makes its "Belt and Road" initiative - a massive project to connect Asia with Africa and Europe through land and maritime routes - a policy priority for the next decade, Chinese companies are taking the lion's share of infrastructure projects across the region.

Just last year, Chinese firms won project contracts in Belt and Road countries worth \$126 billion, state media reported. In Pakistan, whose geographical position makes it central to Beijing's "Silk Road" plans, contracts have been awarded for projects worth more than \$28 billion - all by Chinese companies working together with local firms. More than \$20 billion in new investment is likely in the next few years, Pakistan's Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal told Reuters this week.

Last month, Pakistan's government took out

full-page newspaper advertisements on the first China-Pakistan project completed under the plan, a 1,300 mw coal plant that it said was constructed in 22 months, a record time for such a facility. The plant is owned by China's state-owned Huaneng Shandong and the Shandong Ruyi Science & Technology Group.

China Inc's main advantage, officials in both countries said, is the ability of Chinese banks - with the blessing of the government - to fast-track loans for projects related to the Silk Road. That makes a huge difference to projects like Pakistan's power transmission line, which aims to end regular energy cuts that leave the country's 190 million population without electricity for several hours every day.

"(Chinese companies have) that advantage because of the support of the Chinese government," said Mohammad Younus Dagha, a senior government official who was in charge at the Water and Power Ministry until earlier this year. Dagha, who spoke to Reuters shortly before being transferred to the Commerce Ministry, said Beijing was fast-tracking loan approvals and pushing its banks and insurance firms to speed up due diligence

work. Chinese government officials declined comment on specific loan approvals.

Favor Lending

But two officials at two Chinese state-owned banks that direct government funding, China Development Bank (CDB) and Export-Import Bank of China (EXIM), told Reuters that they have been instructed by the government to favor lending to Chinese firms for Silk Road projects. The officials also said that the two banks prefer that companies working on infrastructure projects across the region import raw materials or purchase equipment from China. There is some criticism in Pakistan that the awarding of the contracts to Chinese companies - while speeding up projects - is also costing the country more money.

In the transmission line project deal, for example, General Electric estimated it could make one key part of the line - the converter stations - for about 25 percent less than what State Grid was charging, according to a Pakistani government official and two power sources familiar with GE's projections. By awarding the contract to State Grid,

Islamabad paid a higher price, they said.

An official at Nepra, Pakistan's independent energy regulator, said State Grid was also given a tax break not on offer to other investors. Pakistani government officials declined to comment on tax issues regarding the deal. China Electric Power Technologies Company Limited (CET), the State Grid subsidiary that will build the line, said the price it asked for was fair. "It's a very reasonable cost," said Fiaz Ahmad Chaudhry, managing director of Pakistan's National Transmission & Despatch Company (NTDC) referring to the overall State Grid contract.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said the process for Belt and Road projects in Pakistan was "open and transparent" and would bolster bilateral relations and regional prosperity. The edge of Chinese companies in Pakistan is likely to continue. Under the Silk Road plan, China and Pakistan are planning to build \$57 billion worth of power plants, port facilities, railway lines and roads in Pakistan. During a meeting in Beijing last month, Chinese President Xi Jinping said that the plan would be accelerated. —Reuters



Rescuers carry the body of a victim yesterday after Tuesday's massive landslide in Rangamati district, Bangladesh. — AP

RESCUERS BATTLING TO REACH VICTIMS OF B'DESH LANDSLIDES

CHITTAGONG: Rescue workers battled yesterday to reach victims of the worst landslides ever to hit Bangladesh, as the death toll rose to 146, with dozens more still missing. Villagers in some of the worst-hit areas used shovels to try to dig bodies out of the mud that engulfed their settlements as they slept. Authorities say hundreds of homes were buried by mud and rubble sent cascading down hillsides after monsoon rains dumped 343 mm of water on the southeast of the country in just 24 hours.

Disaster Management Department chief Reaz Ahmed said the landslides were the worst in the country's history and warned the death toll would rise as rescuers reached cut-off areas. Firefighters in the district of Rangamati said they had pulled 18 people out from under the mud on Tuesday, but did not have the manpower to reach all the affected areas. "People called us from several places saying people had been buried. But we did not have enough men to send," said Didarul Alam, fire services chief for Rangamati district. "We have been unable to reach some of the more remote places due to the rain. Even in those places we have reached, we have been unable to recover all the bodies."

The army said thousands of troops stationed in the affected districts as part of efforts to quell a long-running tribal insurgency had joined the rescue efforts. "Our soldiers based in all parts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts have participated in the rescue operations," armed forces spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Rashidul Hasan told AFP.

Four soldiers were killed in a landslide on Tuesday and another is missing.

Thousands evacuated

Those caught up in the disaster spoke of the horror that the rains had unleashed. Khodeza Begum emerged from her home just after dawn Tuesday to see the mountainside collapsing in front of her. "As I came out I saw a huge slab of earth rolling down from the hill. Instantly I got all my relatives out of their homes. We survived narrowly," she told a local news website. "My house was buried under mud within moments. I have never seen a disaster like this in my life," she said, adding that 11 people in her village were killed.

Rangamati district chief Manzurul Mannan told AFP 98 people had been killed there and 200 injured, some of them seriously. At least 37 people died in Chittagong, four in Cox's Bazar and seven more in the neighboring hill districts of Bandarban and Khagrachhari, officials said. The latest toll makes this year's disaster deadlier even than a 2007 landslide that killed 127 people in Chittagong. Authorities have opened 18 shelters in the worst-hit hill districts, where 4,500 people have been evacuated, a minister said. Among the victims were two fishermen who drowned off the coast of Cox's Bazar after their boat apparently capsized. Other trawlers and their sailors were still missing. As rain pounded Teknaf in Cox's Bazar for a third day, police confirmed that a father and daughter were killed after their home was buried by a landslide. — AFP

B'DESHI WOMAN ACTIVIST WITH 'ENEMIES' VOWS TO CARRY ON

MUMBAI: In her long career defending the rights of women, indigenous people and ethnic minorities, Sultana Kamal has faced numerous threats and intimidation. But none over a statue. Then on a TV show last month, she criticized the removal of a Lady Justice statue, wrapped in a traditional sari, from the Supreme Court premises - a move prompted by Islamist groups protesting it was a religious object. Kamal lashed back that mosques must also not be permitted then, sparking threats from a radical Islamist group.

"I have made enemies in many places," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by telephone from Bangladesh. "People have many reasons to come after me - because I talk about land grabbing, because I talk about the rights of indigenous people, of crimes against minorities. The majority groups, the fundamentalists don't like it."

Kamal, who until recently ran Dhaka-based human rights organization Ain o Salish Kendra, has been a vocal critic of the government's failure to protect the rights of minority groups and, increasingly, activists like herself. Rights activists in the South Asian country face judicial harassment, arbitrary arrest, fabricated charges, abduction, attacks, torture and extrajudicial killings, according to Front Line Defenders, an advocacy group headquartered in Dublin.

Violations against activists are committed by state and non-state actors, and in most cases go unpunished, it said. "The government does not put the rights of

people first," said Kamal, who campaigned for the country's liberation in the 1960s and 1970s, and now advocates for the protection of the fragile Sundarbans coastal mangrove forests. Activists warn the proposed construction of power plants near the Sundarbans would damage the environment and affect the livelihoods of millions.

Some protests against the projects have turned violent. Kamal is also fighting for the rights of tens of thousands of indigenous people displaced from their traditional lands in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region. Activists say the government has failed to honor an agreement signed 20 years ago to restore their lands. "The rights of indigenous people are not recognized. They are marginalized and disadvantaged because the law does not back them," she said. "People belonging to the majority religion, ethnic group and having the backing of political parties - that is Bangladeshi Muslim men, who are the majority - act with a certain impunity against everyone else."

Amnesty International last week called for a thorough investigation into the latest threats against Kamal and action from the government to ensure her safety. Two days after the government ordered the Lady Justice statue removed, they ordered it put back up, in a less prominent location. Kamal said the threats will not stop her work. "I am nearly 70, and I am not going to change my ways now ... I hope that others will also come forward to do this work, and I hope that the state will listen to us." —Reuters

CATTLE SLAUGHTER CRACKDOWN HITS INDIA LEATHER INDUSTRY

MUSLIM MINORITY FEARS FOR LIVELIHOODS IN SHOEMAKING CENTER

AGRA, India: In the backstreets of Agra's Muslim quarter, where shoes have been made for centuries, small-scale manufacturers are firing workers and families cutting back on spending as a government crackdown on cattle slaughter ripples through the community. The election of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) three years ago has emboldened right-wing Hindu groups to push harder for protection of the cow, an animal they consider sacred.

Authorities in India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, started closing down unlicensed abattoirs in March, immediately hitting production and sales in the Muslim-dominated meat industry. Last month Modi's government also banned trading cattle for slaughter, including not just cows, whose killing was already outlawed in most states, but also buffalo, an animal used for meat and leather. Now the squeeze is spreading to others in the Muslim minority and to lower-caste Hindus who cart cattle, labor in tanneries and make shoes, bags and belts - including for big name brands such as Zara and Clarks. Frequent attacks by rightwing Hindus against workers they accuse of harming cattle have further rattled the industry.

Social Tensions

Much of India's meat and leather trade takes place in the informal economy, meaning the impact of the closing of illegal abattoirs and ban on trading for slaughter is hard to measure. But cattle markets are reporting a big slowdown in trade and tanneries a shortage of hides. Abdul Faheem Qureshi, a representative of India's Muslim Qureshi community of butchers, said in Uttar Pradesh some markets trading 1,000 animals last year were now down to as few as 100.

The decline in production means fewer jobs for two of India's poorest communities, and risks inflaming social tensions at a time when Modi has vowed to boost employment and accelerate economic growth ahead of the next general election in 2019. Some large leather manufacturers support the Uttar Pradesh state govern-

ment's move, arguing that allowing only licensed abattoirs to operate will clean the industry's image. Bigger exporters also say they have enough leather as they source hides widely, including from abroad.

Still, millions work in the meat and leather industries, which are worth more than \$16 billion in annual sales. When Reuters visited the narrow shoemaking lanes of Agra a crowd of Muslims breaking their Ramadan fast gathered, shouting angrily that they were no longer safe to trade buffalo, buy cow leather for shoes or to do work that their community has done for centuries for fear of being attacked by Hindu vigilantes. "They want to weaken us. They want to snatch our bread," says 66-year-old Mohammad Muqem, whose workers stitch \$3 shoes in his cellar, referring to the closure of slaughterhouses and recent attacks on cattle traders. Muqem's monthly income has halved to \$300 since last year as leather has become scarce. His dozen casual workers, down from 40, now use mostly synthetic materials.

Impossible Target

Like meat, India's leather industry has expanded rapidly in the last decade, providing relatively well-paid factory work and cash for families stitching informally in their homes. Agra, in Uttar Pradesh, turns out a million pairs of shoes a day for domestic buyers and European labels such as Inditex-owned Zara and Clarks. An estimated 40 percent of the population of the northern Indian city, famed as the home of the Taj Mahal, depends on the industry.

Clarks said in a statement that it does not use leather from Indian-origin cows and that the small amount of buffalo leather it sources from India had not been impacted. Zara and did not respond to requests for comment. India is one of the world's top five producers of leather, with skins coming from cows that die of natural causes or from the legal slaughter of buffalo. Modi's government is targeting leather revenues of \$27 billion - more than double today's level - by 2020 as part of a job creation push. But in May, the

government decreed that animal markets could only trade cow and buffalo for agricultural purposes such as ploughing and dairy production - a move many in the industry say contradicts its plans to grow leather sales. India's environment minister said this week the government could amend the rule after a court temporarily stayed the order and there was widespread anger in regions where meat and leather are important to the local culture and economy.

But industry officials said the shock of the ban, coming on the heels of the crackdown on abattoirs and attacks against cattle workers, meant business would not easily recover. Companies say the government's leather target would be impossible to meet unless the restrictions are reversed. "There is a lot of panic in the industry after the latest order, which has come as the biggest blow," Puran Dawar, chairman of Agra-based exporter Dawar Footwear Industries, said as hundreds of workers moulded shoes on the factory floor, referring to the ban on cattle traded for slaughter. "There are grave concerns about the supply of leather, exports of shoes and overall employment." India's commerce ministry did not respond to requests for comment.

In Uttar Pradesh, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, a controversial Hindu priest, had made closing unlicensed slaughter houses a priority after Modi appointed him in March. About 30 percent of hides, mostly from buffaloes, that supply tanneries in the state are from unlicensed abattoirs. Sitting in his one-room shop in Agra's leather market, Mohammad Hashim, a burly leather dealer in his sixties, said business was down 40 percent in the last three months.

The recent scarcity of hides had hurt Hindus as much as Muslims, he said, pointing to the quiet streets outside and a Hindu man struggling to sell puffed rice snacks from his cart. Modi's election in 2014 and a resurgence in right-wing Hindu activism have increased concerns among Muslims that their livelihoods are under attack. As a minority making up 14 percent of India's 1.3 billion people, they are generally poorer and less literate than majority Hindus. — Reuters



KABUL: UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres (center) arrives to meet Afghan families who fled the conflict at a camp for internally displaced persons (IDP) yesterday. — AFP

UN: NO MILITARY SOLUTION IN AFGHANISTAN

TRUMP LETS PENTAGON SET TROOP LEVELS

KABUL: There is no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan that is forcing record numbers of people from their homes, United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres said yesterday, during an unannounced visit to the war-torn country. Guterres' first visit as secretary general comes as the Afghan government faces internal turmoil, insurgents make gains nationwide and the international military coalition mulls plans to send thousands more troops to help struggling Afghan forces.

These combined threats have worsened the crisis for refugees and internally displaced people, forcing international bodies like the United Nations to call for emergency funding. The crisis can only be solved by ending the war, said Guterres, standing in a makeshift camp on the outskirts of Kabul that accommodates Afghans displaced by fighting. "Peace is the solution for the problem," said Guterres, previously a United Nations' high commissioner for refugees. At least 126,000 Afghans have been forced to flee their homes, the United Nations says.

More than 218,000 Afghan refugees have also

returned this year from neighboring Iran and Pakistan, many citing pressure from authorities there. The International Organization for Migration estimates that at least 600,000 refugees could return this year, piling strain on aid groups struggling to help the newly displaced. Khumri, a 30-year-old Afghan woman who met Guterres, said she had lived in the squalid camp for the last two years with her family after their home was destroyed and her husband killed by government forces battling Taliban occupying their village in the northeastern province of Kapisa. "We need everything," she said, recounting the struggle for clean water, food, and hygiene materials that drives some to beg.

Guterres was set to meet Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, who is trying to soothe domestic political tension after recent violence in the capital, Kabul. Ghani also hosted international delegations last week in a bid to set the stage for peace negotiations with the Taliban, which have remained stalled amid widespread fighting. If the Taliban do not begin negotiations soon, Ghani will seek new UN sanctions against the group as a

sponsor of terrorism, he told the June 6 meeting.

Any sanctions would be up to the UN Security Council, Guterres said. Afghanistan has endured too many "foreign interventions", however, he added, urging an eventual deal to resolve the war. Thousands of international troops remain in Afghanistan to train and assist Afghan forces, besides mounting counterterrorism operations. US President Donald Trump has given Defense Secretary Jim Mattis the authority to set troop levels in Afghanistan, opening the door for future troop increases.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, an official told AFP that Mattis can now directly adjust troop numbers, though the official would not confirm whether a new "force management level" - currently at around 8,400 - had been finalized. "The White House has done the same that it did with Iraq and Syria, which is to grant the secretary of defense the authority to set troop levels," the official said, referring to recent adjustments Trump has approved for the fight against the Islamic State group in those two countries. — Agencies