

TWO SENTENCED TO DEATH FOR MUMBAI BOMB ATTACKS

MUMBAI: An Indian court yesterday sentenced two men to death over bomb blasts in Mumbai two decades ago that killed more than 250 people. Firoz Abdul Rashid Khan and Tahir Merchant were convicted of conspiracy in the 1993 blasts and sentenced to death. "So far as the two death sentences are concerned, I am satisfied," said special prosecutor Deepak Salve after the closed hearing.

A key figure in the attacks, Abu Salem, was sentenced to life imprisonment. India had to agree that Salem would not receive the death penalty when Salem was extradited from Portugal. Public prosecutor Ujwal Nikam announced life terms against Salem and Karimullah Khan, and a 10-year term against a fifth defendant. The sentences come after a special court in Mumbai convicted six men in June on a range of offences in the attacks. One accused, Mustafa Dossa, died of a heart attack shortly after the conviction.

The court acquitted a seventh man, Abdul Quayyum, for lack of evidence. The six were found guilty of involvement in coordinated bomb attacks on the Mumbai stock exchange, the headquarters of Air India and a shopping centre in March 1993 that killed 257 people and injured hundreds more. The attacks were believed to have been staged by Mumbai's Muslim-dominated underworld in retaliation for anti-Muslim violence that had killed more than 1,000 people a few months earlier.

Salem went on the run after the 1993 attacks and was only extradited from Portugal in 2005 after India agreed he would not face the death penalty. Salem is a former associate of Dawood Ibrahim, India's most wanted criminal, who allegedly masterminded the 1993 blasts. These are the final convictions in the long-running case that at its outset involved 189 defendants. One person has already been executed in the case.

Mumbai building fire kills 6

Meanwhile, six people died when a fire swept through a building in Mumbai, officials said yesterday, the latest housing tragedy to strike India's bustling financial capital. An exploding gas cylinder sparked the blaze at the unfinished building used by laborers and their families. Eighteen people were hurt in the blast, local government official Tanaji Kamble said, twelve of them critically.

Mumbai police said they were investigating the incident, which came a week after a building collapse in the city killed 33 people. Building disasters are common in Mumbai, especially during the monsoon season from late June to September, when heavy rains lash the city, weakening poorly-built structures. Millions are forced to live in cramped, dilapidated properties because of spiraling real estate prices and a lack of housing for the poor. Activists say housing societies, private owners and builders often cut corners to save on costs. —AFP



NEW DELHI: This file photo taken on May 21, 2007 shows accused Mumbai bombing mastermind Abu Salem (C-red shirt) being escorted by police at a railway station. — AFP



MUMBAI: This file photo taken on August 29, 2017 shows Indian people wading through a flooded street during heavy rain showers.—AFP

NO HELP AS MUMBAI FLOOD VICTIMS ARE ON THEIR OWN

'NO ONE FROM THE GOVERNMENT COMES TO CHECK'

MUMBAI: When Surekha Chiplunkar's home started to flood during recent heavy rains in Mumbai she knew exactly what to do—she had to; catastrophe comes every year and no one else was going to help. Her family's tiny ground floor apartment in central Mumbai is one of hundreds of thousands of homes in India's financial capital that regularly flood during the monsoon months of June to September. "We grab all of our possessions and move to one of our neighbors on a higher floor until the water subsides," explains the 60-year-old.

Last week, as floods wreaked unaccustomed havoc across parts of Texas, global news coverage was dominated by scenes of Americans being winched to safety. People in Houston, America's fourth biggest city, told reporters of their anguish at being forced from their homes by the unusually fierce Hurricane Harvey, as a sophisticated rescue and recovery operation revved into high gear.

President Donald Trump visited the affected area twice, while his vice president, Mike Pence, also went to assure Texans that the might of the US government was behind them, and would help them pick up the pieces in the wake of a storm that caused tens of billions of dollars' damage and killed around 60 people. At the same time, half a world away, monsoon rains were dumping millions of gallons of water on India.

Mumbai, a city of around 20 million inhabitants where at least ten people died, was brought to a virtual

standstill for two days. But there were no prime ministerial visits; no pledges of national unity; no promises to help the slum dwellers rebuild their washed-away homes. India largely shrugged and carried on, almost inured to a near-annual tragedy. "No one from the government comes to check to see if we have managed to survive the floods or not," said Chiplunkar. "People from top floors provide us with food during flooding as we cannot cook for ourselves." The help provided by members of the community during a disaster is often referred to, usually by local newspapers and leaders, as the "spirit of Mumbai".

'Financial loss'

Many of the homes that flood in Mumbai are shanties packed tightly into narrow dark alleyways lining the city's sprawling slums. The slums, where over 50 percent of Mumbai's population live, become covered in a sea of blue tarpaulin every monsoon as residents try to keep out whatever rain they can. But sturdily-built houses flood as well. Chiplunkar, her three sons, one daughter-in-law and two grandchildren, live in a basic flat built in an old chawl, or tenement, which used to house Mumbai's mill workers.

"We prepare for every monsoon by packing our belongings in plastic covers and keeping buckets ready," Aditya Jadhav, who lives in the one-room apartment opposite, tells AFP. The speed with which the rain fell—more than 315 millimeters in just a few hours—caught both families by surprise this year though. "We were

shocked. A lot of our valuables were damaged this time including a refrigerator and washing machine, causing us a lot of financial loss," says Chiplunkar.

British-era drains

Activists claim Mumbai's susceptibility to floods has worsened in recent years due to a rapid construction boom that is trying to keep up with the city's swelling population. They blame many in power as well as property developers for an insatiable desire to make money from luxury residential tower developments built on reclaimed land.

An estimated 40 percent of Mumbai's mangrove cover, which is extremely effective in helping to drain water, has been destroyed over the past decade to make way for glitzy high-rises. "Mumbai's estuaries have been tampered with and there is no space for water to flow out," Stalin D, a director of the environmental non-profit organisation Vanashakti, told AFP.

Mumbai's drainage system was built by the British in the 1860s when the population was a tenth of what it is now. Many drains are full of rubbish and desilting operations are often inadequate, activists say. While Chiplunkar and her neighbours are used to fleeing the floods at short notice, there's one aspect they can never get used to—cleaning up on their return. "All of us fall sick as the water is very dirty and sometimes we find dead rats in it. The children are particularly prone to getting diseases," she says. — AFP