

## PAKISTAN ARMY PUSHED POLITICAL ROLE FOR MILITANT GROUPS

**LAHORE:** A new Pakistani political party controlled by an Islamist with a \$10 million US bounty on his head is backing a candidate in a by-election today, in what a former senior army officer says is a key step in a military-proposed plan to mainstream militant groups.

The Milli Muslim League party loyal to Hafiz Saeed - who the United States and India accuse of masterminding the 2008 Mumbai attacks that killed 166 people - has little chance of seeing its favoured candidate win the seat vacated when Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was removed from office by the Supreme Court in July. But the foray into politics by Saeed's Islamist charity is following a blueprint that Sharif himself rejected when the military proposed it last year, retired Lieutenant General Amjad Shuaib told Reuters. Three close Sharif confidants with knowledge of the discussions confirmed that Sharif had opposed the "mainstreaming" plan, which senior military figures and some analysts see as a way of steering ultra-religious groups away from violent jihad.

"We have to separate those elements who are peaceful from the elements who are picking up weapons," Shuaib said. Pakistan's powerful military has long been accused of fostering militant groups as proxy fighters opposing neighboring arch-enemy India, a charge the army denies.

### "Patriotic people"

Saeed's religious charity launched the

Milli Muslim League party within two weeks after the court ousted Sharif over corruption allegations. Yaqoob Sheikh, the Lahore candidate for Milli Muslim League, is standing as an independent after the Electoral Commission said the party was not yet legally registered.

But Saeed's lieutenants, JUD workers and Milli Muslim League officials are running his campaign and portraits of Saeed adorn every poster promoting Sheikh. Another Islamist designated a terrorist by the United States, Fazlur Rehman Khalil, has told Reuters he too plans to soon form his own party to advocate strict Islamic law. "God willing, we will come into the mainstream - our country right now needs patriotic people," Khalil said, vowing to turn Pakistan into a state government by strict Islamic law.

Saeed's charity and Khalil's Ansar ul-Umma organization are both seen by the United States as fronts for militant groups the army has been accused of sponsoring. The military denies any policy of encouraging radical groups. Both Islamist groups deny their political ambitions were engineered by the military. The official army spokesman was not available for comment after queries were sent to the press wing.

Still, hundreds of MML supporters, waving posters of Saeed and demanding his release from house arrest, chanted "Long live Hafiz Saeed! Long live the

Pakistan army!" at political rallies during the past week. "Anyone who is India's friend is a traitor, a traitor," went another campaign slogan, a reference to Sharif's attempts to improve relations with long-time foe India that was a source of tension with the military.

### Deradicalization plan

Both Saeed and Khalil are proponents of a strict interpretation of Islam and have a history of supporting violence - each man was reportedly a signatory to al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden's 1998 fatwa declaring war on the United States.

They have since established religious groups that they say are unconnected to violence, though the United States maintains those groups are fronts for funneling money and fighters to militants targeting India. Analyst Khaled Ahmed, who has researched Saeed's Jamaat-ud-Dawa charity and its connections to the military, says the new political party is clearly an attempt by the generals to pursue an alternative to dismantling its militant proxies.

"One thing is the army wants these guys to survive," Ahmed said. "The other thing is that they want to also balance the politicians who are more and more inclined to normalize relations with India." The military's Inter-Services Intelligence agency first began pushing the political mainstreaming plan in April 2016, according to retired general Shuaib, a former director of the army's

military intelligence wing that is separate from the ISI. He said the proposal was shared with him in writing by the then-ISI chief, adding that he himself had spoken with Khalil as well as Saeed in an unofficial capacity about the plan.

"Fazlur Rehman Khalil was very positive. Hafiz Saeed was very positive," Shuaib said. "My conversation with them was just to confirm those things which I had been told by the ISI and other people."

Saeed has been under house arrest since January at his house in the eastern city of Lahore. The United States has offered a \$10 million reward for information leading to his conviction over the Mumbai attacks. Then-Prime Minister Sharif, however, was strongly against the military's mainstreaming plan, according to Shuaib and three members of Sharif's inner circle, including one who was in some of the tense meetings over the issue.

Sharif wanted to completely dismantle groups like JUD. Disagreement on what to do about anti-India proxy fighters was a major source of rancor with the military, according to one of the close Sharif confidants. In recent weeks several senior figures from the ruling PML-N party have publicly implied that elements of the military - which has run Pakistan for almost half its modern history and previously ousted Sharif in a 1999 coup - had a hand in the court ouster of Sharif, a charge both the army and the court reject. A rep-

resentative of the PML-N, which last month replaced him as prime minister with close ally Shahid Khaqī Abbasi, said the party was "not aware" of any mainstreaming plan being brought to the table.

### Religion and politics

Some analysts worry that mainstreaming such controversial groups would be a risky strategy for Pakistan. US President Donald Trump's administration has threatened sanctions against members of Pakistan's military and even raised the spectre of declaring Pakistan a state sponsor of terrorism.

"It will send a wrong message," said analyst Zahid Hussain, who nevertheless thought that Saeed's new party would have a "negligible" effect on Pakistani elections because religious parties have never won more than a few seats in parliament. Others are not so sure.

Sheikh, the MML candidate in today's by-election who says he was handpicked by Hafiz Saeed, vowed to establish strict Islamic rule and "break" liberalism and secularism. Analyst Ahmed warned that few existing religious parties have a charismatic leader like Saeed, and Pakistan may find itself unable to control a rising tide of Islamist sentiment. "If Hafiz Saeed comes into the mainstream, it's not that he is going to be politicized," he added. "It's that he is going to make politics more religious." — Reuters

## YEMENI CAPTORS DID ME NO PHYSICAL HARM: PRIEST

**VATICAN CITY:** A Catholic priest from India who was freed after being held 18 months in Yemen said yesterday that he was never physically harmed during his captivity, even if his captors feigned hitting him on videos seeking ransom. Officials said they had no knowledge of ransom having been paid.

The Rev. Tom Uzhunnalil was kidnapped from a home for senior citizens in Aden, southern Yemen, established by Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity in March 2016. Four nuns were killed during the attack. Uzhunnalil's voice broke as he publicly expressed his condolences. "I thank God almighty for this day. He saved me healthy enough. Clear mind. Emotions under control until now," the 59-year-old Uzhunnalil said. "God has been extremely kind to me. No gun was pointed at me."

He said that when the home for senior citizens was attacked, he identified himself as an Indian and he was brought to another room "while they killed the others."

Indian officials announced his release on Tuesday, and images show a bearded, gaunt Uzhunnalil descending from an airplane in Muscat, Oman. The priest said he had been transferred from Yemen by car to Oman, and then brought by air to the capital before continuing his journey to Rome. The priest said he didn't know his kidnappers' identities or affiliations and believed their motive was ransom, although the head of Uzhunnalil's Salesian order, Don A F Artime, said they had no knowledge of any ransom having been paid. "No one ever told us that they asked for money. No one asked us for even a euro," Artime said. "We don't know anything about this. This is the whole truth. And I believe that Father Tom knows even less." The mechanisms behind his release also were unclear, but the Vatican has thanked the Sultan of Oman in a statement and Uzhunnalil thanked leaders in his native India. —AP



Tom Uzhunnalil

## CRIME DRAWS UNWANTED ATTENTION TO THE REMOTE VIRGINIA MOUNTAIN

### DISAPPEARANCE OF YOUNG SISTERS SHAKES THE SUBURBS

**THAXTON:** The disappearance of two young Maryland sisters shook the suburbs of Washington, and remained an agonizing mystery for more than four decades. Now another region 250 miles away is linked to the crime. Authorities say convicted sex offender Lloyd Lee Welch Jr burned at least one of the sisters' bodies in a fire on his cousins' property on Taylors Mountain, in west-central Virginia.

Following Welch's guilty plea this week, the people of Taylors Mountain are hoping to put an end to any association between their home and the slayings of 10-year-old Katherine and 12-year-old Sheila Lyon. The sisters vanished in 1975 after walking to a shopping mall near their home in Kensington, Maryland. "All of us feel like he stained all of our reputations. We had nothing to do with it. It's something we'd rather have not had happen here. We wouldn't want to see it happen anywhere," said Danny Johnson, who runs an apple orchard and winery on the mountain.

Taylors Mountain is perched in the Blue Ridge Mountains, north of US Route 460, between Bedford and Roanoke. The mountain was settled by Cherokee Indians in the 1700s. Much later, it was known for its thriving tomato canneries, where many of the local residents worked, and its moonshine, including "some of the best brandy in this world," Johnson said. A 1924 article in The Washington Post describes a confrontation when officers went up the mountain to shut down a still during Prohibition. Several residents warned them not to go any farther.

When they continued up the mountain anyway, shots were fired at them from several directions. No one was hurt, but the officers "made a hasty retreat," according to the article. The mountain kept its reputation for decades thereafter as a rough-and-tumble place where people watched out for each other and were reluctant to deal with outsiders. "If something happened, they would get together then and decide how they wanted it to end up before they went to town," Johnson said.

Welch did not live on the mountain, but he had cousins, an aunt, uncle, and other relatives who did. And for 38 years, the mystery remained unresolved, despite what they and their neighbors saw back in 1975. Only when detectives from the cold case unit in Montgomery



**BEDFORD:** Lloyd Lee Welch Jr stands during a plea agreement hearing for the killings of Sheila and Katherine Lyon in 1975, in Bedford County Circuit Court in Bedford, VA. Welch, who pleaded guilty in the killing of the two young sisters from Maryland, was sentenced Tuesday to two 48-year prison terms, more than four decades after the girls vanished during a trip to a local shopping mall. — AP

County, Maryland showed up in 2013 did people on Taylors Mountain start talking. Welch - long imprisoned for sexually assaulting another girl, had become a "person of

interest" in the sisters' disappearance by then, based on a review of evidence in the case file.

Two of his cousins told police they remembered an unexpected visit to their home on Taylors Mountain that spring. The Lyon sisters disappeared on March 25, 1975. One cousin said Welch had a duffel bag containing bloody clothing, and told her he had been using it to carry ground beef. Another told them Welch had two army-style duffel bags with reddish-brown stains on them, and that he helped Welch put the bags into a fire.

Other people who lived on the mountain told investigators they remember a fire that burned for days that had "the stench of death," Bedford County Commonwealth's Attorney Wes Nance said during Welch's plea hearing Tuesday. Authorities began digging on the mountain in 2014, trying to recover the girls' remains. They did recover a tooth, according to documents filed in court, but authorities have never said if they were able to match it to the girls' dental records.

Welch's relatives sold their home on the mountain five years ago now. Locals bristle at the renewed attention the case has brought. Jennifer Thomson, a librarian at the Bedford Museum and Genealogical Library, said the mountain is made up of "good, hard-working country people," although some locals who live in Bedford derisively refer to it as "the redneck capital of the county." "People are kind there, they look out for his families and they'd look out for a stranger there, too. Very good people," Johnson said.

Homes on the mountain range from small, dilapidated ranch-style houses built more than 50 years ago to a handful of larger, newer, high-priced homes. And while a handful of families had lived there for generations, today there are newcomers in the mix. The last cannery closed in the late 1970s. The last publicized arrest for bootlegging was in the 1980s. Now people are hoping Welch's guilty plea will finally remove the spotlight. "People resent the fact that they brought the children here. I resent it, too. We're not a dumping ground for bodies, and it was just quite a blow to everybody that somebody would do that," said Ronnie Laughlin, a retired Bedford County deputy sheriff. "They live quiet and peaceful, and they didn't ask for this to happen." — AP

## News

in brief

### Suspected US drone strike targets militants in Pakistan

**PARACHINAR/PESHAWAR:** A suspected US drone strike killed three people in the tribal area of Pakistan near the Afghanistan border on Friday, a senior regional official said, in what Afghan Taliban sources say was an attack targeting a Haqqani network militant. If confirmed, it would be the first US drone strike inside Pakistan since President Donald Trump outlined a new Afghanistan strategy and pushed Islamabad to take greater action against Pakistan-based Haqqani militants who are allied to the Afghan Taliban. Baseer Khan Wazir, the political agent and the most senior administrator in the Kurram Agency region in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), said the drone strike took place close to the border with Afghanistan.

### Christian sentenced to death in Pakistan

**LAHORE:** A Christian man has been sentenced to death on blasphemy charges by a court in eastern Pakistan after a close friend accused him of sharing anti-Islamic material, the defendant's lawyer said on Friday. Blasphemy is a criminal offence in Muslim-majority Pakistan. Most cases are filed against members of minority communities. Nadeem James, 35, was arrested in July 2016, accused by a friend of sharing a blasphemous material on the Whatsapp messaging service. Lawyer Riaz Anjum said his client intended to appeal against the verdict, passed on Thursday by a sessions court in the town of Gujarat. There was widespread outrage across Pakistan last April when student Mashal Khan was beaten to death at his university in Mardan following a dorm debate about religion.

### Philippines retraining 1,200 police after abuses

**MANILA:** The Philippine capital's police chief ordered that the entire 1,200-member police force in one of Manila's biggest areas be relieved of duty and retrained on Friday in response to a series of controversies, including the killing of two teenagers. Metro Manila's top officer Oscar Albayalde said all police personnel in the Caloocan area of the capital would undergo retraining and reorientation before being reassigned to other police units, not necessarily in Manila. "We will start with the city's police precincts 2 and 7," Albayalde said. All personnel in Caloocan's headquarters and seven precincts would be temporarily replaced by the regional public safety battalion, a combat-trained unit. "This will be done in batches," he said.

## A HISTORY OF PERSECUTION: MYANMAR'S ROHINGYA

Nearly 400,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled renewed violence in Myanmar, crossing the border in Bangladesh in waves following a military crackdown the UN says amounts to ethnic cleansing.

It is the latest chapter in a long and tumultuous history of the Rohingya, the world's largest stateless population. Before the most recent surge of violence, there were over one million Rohingyas in Myanmar's restive Rakhine state.

But the questions of who they are, how many live in Myanmar and when they arrived is hotly disputed, highly emotive and behind much of the current unrest. Many of the Muslim minority trace their lineage in Myanmar back generations, but were effectively stripped of their citizenship by the former junta and are demonized among the Buddhist-majority population as illegal immigrants.

Here is a brief history of Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims. When did they first arrive in Myanmar?

By some accounts, they are descendants of Arab, Turkish or Mongol traders and soldiers who in the 15th Century migrated to Rakhine state, previously called the Kingdom of Arakan.

Other historians say they emigrated from Bangladesh in several waves, a widely held view among most Burmese. For centuries the small Muslim minority lived peacefully alongside Buddhists in the independent kingdom, some were even advisors to Buddhist royals, according to historians. Upheaval ensued from the late 18th century. In 1784 the kingdom was conquered by the Burmese and later by the British following the first Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-1826.

Under British rule, a large number arrived to work as farmers and later as military recruits. "In the 1830s there was a massive influx of Muslim peasants from neighbor-

ing Bengal, mostly to work in the agriculture sector," said Sophie Boisseau du Rocher, Southeast Asia expert at the French Institute for International Relations. By 1912, more than 30 percent of the population of Arakan state were Muslim, up from five percent in 1869, according to British census data cited by historian Jacques Leider. When did tensions start?

### British rule

Tensions between the Rohingya Muslims and the Buddhist majority date back to the beginning of British rule in 1824. As part of their divide-and-rule policy, British colonists favoured Muslims at the expense of other groups. They recruited them as soldiers during World War II, pitting them against Buddhists aligned with the Japanese as the war played out on Burmese soil.

"Both armies, British and Japanese, exploited the frictions and animosity in the local population to further their own military aims," said Moshe Yegar, author of a book about Muslim communities in Southeast Asia. Their status was fortified in 1947 when a new Constitution was drafted, enshrining them with full legal and voting rights-which would be later stripped and render them stateless. Rakhine has a poverty rate nearing 80 percent, double the national average, kindling resentments over ethnic claims to the area.

### What happened under the junta?

A 1962 military coup ushered in a new era of repression and brutality. The country's ethnic minorities like the Rohingya did not fare well. Most were effectively rendered stateless in 1982 when the junta issued a new law on citizenship, requiring minorities to prove they lived in Myanmar prior to the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1823 to obtain nationality.

After the junta was dissolved in 2011,



**JAKARTA:** Muslim protesters gather during a rally against the persecution of Rohingya Muslims, in Jakarta yesterday. Thousand Muslims staged the rally condemning violence in Myanmar against its Rohingya Muslim minority. — AP

the country saw a rise in Buddhist extremism which further sidelined the Rohingya and marked the beginning of the latest era of tensions.

The 20th century saw a series of military crackdowns against the group: in 1978 and 1991-2, which prompted hundreds of thousands to flee to Bangladesh.

Some were sent back by Dhaka, and the United Nations questioned the supposedly "voluntary" nature of the repatriations. What's behind the latest violence?

They have been subjected to restrictions on movement, employment and access to basic services since another outbreak of violence in 2012. Tensions mounted again in October 2016, when a small and previ-

ously unknown militant group-the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) — staged a series of deadly attacks on Burmese military forces.

The army responded with a massive security crackdown, sparking a new wave of refugee arrivals into Bangladesh. On August 25, ARSA again launched an early morning attack on army installations in Rakhine, triggering a brutal military campaign in response.

An estimated 391,000 Rohingyas have fled to Bangladesh in the last three weeks, according to the United Nations, which has said the military crackdown amounts to ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims.—AFP