

International

Pakistani killing sparks rage over extrajudicial murders

Bullet-riddled bodies dumped in barren neighborhoods

KARACHI: The killing of a young social media star in Pakistan's chaotic port city of Karachi has unleashed festering anger at a rash of alleged extrajudicial murders and the police accused of orchestrating them. Hundreds of people die each year at the hands of law enforcement officers under pressure to crack down on kidnapping, murder and gang crime in a city routinely ranked among the most dangerous in the world.

But the fatal shooting of 23-year-old Naqeebullah Mehsud, an aspiring model whose goofy dance videos and airbrushed brown locks had earned him a large Facebook following, brought thousands of people onto the streets to urge an end to impunity. "We demand that his killer be hanged publicly," said Mohammad Khan Mehsud of a national outcry over his son's death. "We saw people from all the four provinces (of Pakistan) - men and women, kids, youngsters and sisters-show solidarity with Naqeebullah".

Mehsud was shot dead along with three other people in what police say was an operation targeting Taliban insurgents on January 3rd. Friends and relatives insist the internet celebrity had no connection to militancy. They say he was the victim of a so-called "encounter killing" - an "encounter" being police shorthand for when a suspect resists arrest. Such deaths have surged in Karachi since 2013 when paramilitary forces and police launched a massive "clean up" operation targeting Taliban militants, organized crime networks and armed political muscle.

In its wake, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRC) said there were at least 598 extrajudicial killings in 2014 and an additional 343 the following year. A preliminary investigation headed by Sanaullah Abbasi, chief of

Karachi's Counter Terrorism Department, said the encounter involving Mehsud was probably staged. "We have interviewed some militants (purportedly linked with the case) in jail and inspected the scene of crime that seemed to be very doubtful," Abbasi said. "Prima facie, it was a fake encounter."

Much of the anger following the social media star's death has focused on Rao Anwar, senior superintendent of the Karachi police force. Anwar, who rose through the force's battle-hardened ranks in the 1990s, has been accused of spearheading hundreds of killings including that of Mehsud. Last week a Karachi lawyer filed a petition in the Sindh High Court, listing 250 allegedly fake encounters involving Anwar since 1992. The police officer has also been added to a travel ban after trying to flee the country. He has missed successive court summonses and is now believed to be on the run, according to a senior

police official familiar with the case.

City ranked among most dangerous in the world

One option

Yet as anger grows against him, experts warn that the campaign is not the work of a few bad cops, but rather the result of institutional shortcomings in the sprawling and violent megacity. Long before Anwar, bullet-riddled bodies were being dumped in barren neighborhoods as police with little faith in the courts took on dangerous armed political factions and often heavily-armed insurgents. "The investigation procedures are archaic," said Asad Iqbal Butt, director of HRC. "So they (police) are left with only one option... pick a guy, hang him, beat him and if he survives that is his fate and if he dies, just dump him in the bushes." The rise in encounter killings accompanying the clean-up offensive has



KARACHI: A Pakistani protester holds a photograph of 23-year-old man Naqeebullah Mehsud, during a protest in Karachi. The killing of a young social media star in Pakistan's chaotic port city of Karachi has uncorked festering anger over a rash of alleged extrajudicial murders and the powerful police accused of orchestrating them. —AFP

coincided with a drop in violent crime-with instances of kidnapping, murder and terrorism all dramatically down. "It is good that crimes and violence have come down in the city as police and (paramilitary) Rangers have been killing the terrorists and criminals. But common and innocent people must

be not the victims," said Umeed Ali, an auto rickshaw driver in Karachi. Rehmat Khan, a retired senior police officer, said that in developed countries, "encounter" killings were rare. "Here it takes place because we are incompetent professionally, we look for short cuts." —AFP

A ferry sinks in the Pacific

WELLINGTON: More than 80 people were aboard a ferry that sank in the remote Pacific, officials confirmed yesterday, as a senior Kiribati lawmaker called for an independent inquiry into the vessel's disappearance. A multinational rescue operation is scouring vast swathes of ocean for survivors, but only seven people have been found alive so far and hopes are fading of locating any more.

Initial estimates of how many people were on the MV Butirai when it went missing ranged from 35 to more than 100, but officials said the numbers were slowly becoming clearer. "Kiribati authorities have confirmed that about 80 passengers plus crew of likely about five were on the ferry," Rescue Coordination Centre NZ said in a statement. The centre said four aircraft from New Zealand, Australia and the United States had helped conduct sweeps in the area where the ferry went missing. It said the search was concentrating on finding a life raft that was launched from the sinking ferry.

"The life raft is designed for 25 people but more can be squeezed in uncomfortably," it added. Former Kiribati Prime Minister Ieremia Tabai, who represents the island of Nonouti from where the ferry departed on January 18, slammed the government's handling of the disaster. Tabai said his grief-stricken constituents on the island of 2,000 wanted to know why it took eight days to raise the alarm and how the unseaworthy vessel was allowed to sail in the first place. "This tragedy demands an independent commission of inquiry," he told Radio New Zealand.

"We need to know why it happened and (who is) responsible." The MV Butirai, 17.5-metre (57.4-foot) wooden catamaran, set off on a planned two-day voyage to Betio, the largest township of Kiribati's capital, South Tarawa. Local authorities said it ran aground and underwent repairs to its propeller shaft before it left Nonouti.



Boys jump off the deck of the ferry MV Butirai, a 17.5-metre wooden catamaran, at an unknown location. More than 80 people were aboard the MV Butirai that sank in the remote Pacific, officials confirmed yesterday. —AFP

Tabai said the vessel was not believed to be carrying mandatory safety equipment such as an emergency locator beacon. "The government is responsible because they did not look after the situation well, they should have ensured that particular vessel should not have sailed in the first place," he said.

He said the ferry was a free inter-island service that was carrying a large number of high-school students

returning to Tarawa before the start of a new term. Tabai said the ferry's loss was a tragedy for Kiribati, a nation of 33 atolls and reefs with a population of about 110,000, that lies some 3,460 kilometers (2,150 miles) northeast of Fiji. "It's a real sad day for those who lost their loved one. For my village two or three people that I personally know, that live next door in my village, were on that boat and perished." —AFP

Taliban active in 70 percent of Afghanistan

WASHINGTON: The Taliban are openly active in 70 percent of Afghanistan's districts, fully controlling 4 percent of the country and demonstrating an open physical presence in another 66 percent, according to a BBC study published on Tuesday. The BBC estimate, which it said was based on conversations with more than 1,200 individual local sources in all districts of the South Asian country, was significantly higher than the most recent assessment by the NATO-led coalition of the Taliban's presence.

The coalition said on Tuesday that the Taliban contested or controlled only 44 percent of Afghan districts as of October 2017. Afghanistan has been reeling over the past nine days from a renewed spate of violence that is adding scrutiny to the latest, more aggressive US-backed strategy to bolster Afghan forces battling the Taliban in a 16-year-old war.

A bomb hidden in an ambulance struck the city center and killed more than 100 people, just over a week after an attack on the Hotel Intercontinental, also in Kabul, which left more than 20 people dead,



FARAH: An Afghan National Army soldier fires an artillery shell during an ongoing anti-Taliban operation at Farah province. —AFP

including four US citizens. Although the BBC counted 399 districts in Afghanistan, the NATO-led force counted 407 districts. The reason behind the discrepancy was not immediately clear. The BBC study said the Afghan government controlled 122 districts, or about 30 percent of the country. Still, it noted that did not mean that they were free from Taliban attacks.

"Kabul and other major cities, for example, suffered major attacks - launched from adjacent areas, or by sleeper cells - during the research

period, as well as before and after," the report said. Asked about the BBC's study, the Pentagon did not comment directly, but pointed to the latest figures by the NATO-led coalition asserting that about 56 percent of Afghanistan's territory was under Afghan government control or influence. The study by Britain's public broadcaster quoted a spokesman for Afghan President Ashraf Ghani playing down the findings. The BBC study also said Islamic State had a presence in 30 districts, but noted it did not fully control any of them. —Reuters

Daring Himalayan rescue spotlights the 'Ice Warriors'

WARSAW: The daring Polish rescue of a stranded French mountaineer in the Himalayas this weekend was made possible by a long tradition of climbing that has seen Poles become first to reach the summit of most of the world's highest peaks in winter. France's Elisabeth Revol was facing death on a Pakistan peak nicknamed "killer mountain" when an elite group of Polish climbers scaled part of the 8,125 metre (26,660 foot) Nanga Parbat in darkness early Sunday to rescue her. Poor weather meant Polish duo Denis Úrubko and Adam Bielecki were unable to reach fellow countryman Tomek Mackiewicz, who had been climbing with Revol and who she left behind to save her life.

Pakistani climber Karim Shah, who was in contact with the expedition, said the rescue effort was unmatched in the climbing world, with the team ascending 1,200 meters in complete darkness along a treacherous route without a fixed rope. "It's the next generation of 'Ice Warriors'," said Piotr Pustelnik, president of the Polish Mountaineering Association (PZA), referring to the nickname that Poles acquired in the 1980s after coming up with the idea to tackle the Himalayas in winter.

They invented the sport, and they dominate it. Poles were the first to reach 10 out of 13 of the world's 8,000-metre-plus peaks during the harsher conditions of the colder months. One summit still remains to be conquered. "We had the misfortune of living behind the Iron Curtain, so we didn't have the opportunity to conquer the Himalayas in previous decades like our Western counterparts," Pustelnik told AFP. "When we were finally able to go there, all the summits had already been conquered. So our friend Andrzej Zawada had the idea of climbing them in winter, something no one had done before." —AFP

News in brief

Earthquake kills child

KABUL: A 6.1 magnitude earthquake struck northeast Afghanistan yesterday, shaking large parts of the region and killing a child and injuring several people in neighboring Pakistan, officials said. The quake, which rattled buildings in the Afghan capital and was also felt in parts of India, struck 270 km (167 miles) northeast of Kabul in the Hindu Kush mountains, at a depth of 180 km, the European Mediterranean Seismological Centre said. A baby girl was killed and 10 people were injured when roofs of mud-walled houses collapsed in the southwestern Pakistani province of Baluchistan, a district deputy chief, Shabbir Megnal, said. There were no immediate reports of any serious damage or casualties in Afghanistan. Large parts of the region are seismically active because a tectonic plate, known as the Indian plate, is pushing north into the Eurasian plate. —Reuters

'Nazi songbook' fraternity

VIENNA: Austria's chancellor said yesterday that one of the country's controversial nationalist fraternities would be disbanded after it emerged that it had printed song texts celebrating the Holocaust and other Nazi atrocities. The lyrics in the book produced in 1997 by the Germania zu Wiener Neustadt organization included "Step on the gas, old Germanics, we can make it to seven million", according to media reports. Six million Jews were killed in the Holocaust during World War II, many of them in gas chambers. Other songs in the book praised the Waffen SS and Nazi paratroopers behind war crimes committed in Greece. The scandal took on a political dimension because until recently the vice-chairman of the fraternity was Udo Landbauer, a candidate for the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) in local elections in Lower Austria state last Sunday. —AFP

Islamic academic detained

PARIS: Prominent Swiss academic Tariq Ramadan, a professor of Islamic studies at the University of Oxford, has been taken into custody by French police following accusations of rape, a judicial source said yesterday. The source said a preliminary investigation was opened after two complaints were filed against Ramadan, a well-known figure in the Middle East. He is the grandson of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt, Hassan Al-Banna. Ramadan took a leave of absence from Oxford last November after two women filed complaints in France alleging rape. He has denied the allegations and filed a complaint for slander against author Henda Ayari, one of his accusers. —Reuters

Indecent dance party

PHNOM PENH: Ten foreigners, charged in Cambodia with producing pornography related to indecent dancing at a party, have tested negative for drugs, police and their lawyer said yesterday. The 10 were arrested on Jan. 25 along with 77 other foreigners in a raid on the "Pub Crawl or Let's Get Wet" event in Siem Reap province, home to the ancient Angkor Wat ruins. A Cambodian police officer assigned to the case told Reuters, on condition of anonymity, that urine tests had not found any "addictive substance". Sourng Sophea, an attorney for the foreigners, who include five Britons, a Dutch citizen, two Canadians, a New Zealander and a Norwegian, said police had carried the drug tests at the prison where they are being held on Tuesday. —Reuters