

International

Bangladesh girl burned to death on teacher's order

Death of 19-year-old Rafi sparks protests

DHAKA: A schoolgirl was burned to death in Bangladesh on the orders of her head teacher after she reported him for sexually harassing her, police said yesterday. The death of 19-year-old Nusrat Jahan Rafi last week sparked protests across the South Asian nation, with the prime minister promising to prosecute all those involved. Rafi was lured to the rooftop of the Islamic seminary she attended where her attackers asked her to withdraw the sexual harassment complaint she had filed with police.

When she refused, she was doused in kerosene and set on fire. Police said Friday that one of the 18 people arrested in connection with her death had accused the school's principal of ordering the attack. The teacher "told them to put pressure on Rafi to withdraw the case or kill her if she refused", senior police superintendent Mohammad Iqbal, who is leading the investigation, told AFP.

Rafi had gone to police in late March to report the sexual harassment, and a leaked video shows the local police station chief registering her complaint but dismissing it as "not a big deal". Iqbal said at least five of those under arrest, including three of Rafi's classmates, had tied her up with a scarf

before setting her on fire. "The plan was to pass the incident off as a suicide. But it fell through after Rafi managed to come downstairs while on fire because the scarf burnt and freed her hands and feet," he said.

Rafi suffered burns to 80 percent of her body and died in hospital on April 10. But she recorded a video before her death, repeating her allegations against the principal. "The teacher touched me. I will fight this crime till my last breath," she said. She also identified some of her attackers. Rafi's brother Mahmudul Hasan Noman said people close to the principal had also put pressure on the family to withdraw the case against him. "They told us that it was a conspiracy against him and that it was fabricated," he told AFP.

The case has caused outrage in Bangladesh, with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina vowing that "none of the culprits will be spared legal action." A police official told AFP that they had also arrested the ruling party's local chapter head, over allegations he advised one of the prime suspects to flee. Scores of protesters from campaign group Student Community Against Rape and Sexual Violence rallied in central Dhaka Friday demanding a judicial probe into the role of

the police in the killing. "Police are not guilty of negligence but are rather involved in the murder of Nusrat. The (sexual harassment complaint) was filed on March 27, but police took no prompt action," the group's convener Shibly Hasan said, according to the online edition of the Daily Star newspaper. Rights groups say the number of rape and sexual assault cases has increased in Bangladesh because authorities have failed to prosecute attackers. "The horrifying murder of a brave woman who sought justice shows how badly the Bangladesh government has failed victims of sexual assault," Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said in a statement.

"Nusrat Jahan Rafi's death highlights the need for the Bangladesh government to take survivors of sexual assault seriously and ensure that they can safely seek a legal remedy and be protected from retaliation," she added. The local Manusher Jonno Foundation, a non-governmental group, says at least 39 children under the age of 18 have been raped in the country since April 2. Another eight have been subjected to attempted or sexual harassment, the groups says. — AFP



DHAKA: Bangladeshi women hold placards and photographs of schoolgirl Nusrat Jahan Rafi at a protest in Dhaka, following her murder by being set on fire after she had reported a sexual assault. — AFP

Indian election watchdog stops Modi web series

NEW DELHI: India's poll watchdog yesterday ordered producers to stop streaming a web series on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, weeks after it banned a Bollywood film and clamped down on a TV channel devoted to the right-wing premier. The Election Commission of India - an autonomous body tasked with overseeing the world's biggest democratic exercise - said the online web series was in violation of its rules. Under Indian election regulations, the publication of any content which is deemed as campaign material or propaganda is not allowed during the voting period.

Any political advertising must also be approved by the election authorities so that all spending is accounted for. India's mammoth six-week vote began on April 11 and will

run until May 19, with results due on May 23. When it ordered a halt to the streaming of the online series, the commission said any biopic material which has the "potential to disturb the level playing field" should not be displayed until after the polls have closed.

The series, titled "Modi: Journey of a Common Man" is produced by Eros Now and traces Modi's journey from childhood to becoming the prime minister of the world's largest democracy. Earlier this month, the commission banned the release of a flattering movie about Modi until after voting finishes. Days later it ordered a clampdown on NaMo TV, a channel showing 24-hour programs on Modi rallies, speeches, and even rap songs and dance routines devoted to the leader. The Election Commission said NaMo TV had to submit all of its content for approval. The Hindu nationalist Modi, 68, is seeking a tough re-election after storming to power in 2014. He often uses his humble upbringing as a tea-seller's son to strike a chord with millions of poor voters. The election commission - often accused of being ineffective - has been flooded with complaints since campaigning started in March. Last week, the Supreme Court told it to act tough on complaints of poll violations by political leaders. — AFP

India chief justice denies unwanted 'sexual advances'

MUMBAI: The chief justice of India's Supreme Court, Ranjan Gogoi yesterday denied allegations that he made unwanted sexual advances towards a junior court assistant who worked in an office at his home and that she was subsequently victimized. "This is unbelievable," Gogoi, India's most powerful judge, told a special hearing of the court he called yesterday so that the allegations could be addressed. "I should not stoop low even in denying it."

Gogoi said the events showed that India's judiciary was under "serious threat" and was being destabilized by a larger conspiracy, without elaborating. "There is some bigger force behind the woman," he said. The allegations, dating from October, were carried in full by a number of major

Indian online publications yesterday. The 35-year-old woman, whose identity has not been publicly disclosed, wrote a letter to all 22 of the Supreme Court judges along with an affidavit detailing her allegations on Friday.

Those included a series of allegations that the woman and her family were victimized by a series of related actions by the authorities, including the termination of her employment, and the suspension of her husband and his brother, who worked in the Delhi police force. She also says another brother of her husband's had his Supreme Court job terminated and she also faced a "false and frivolous" bribery complaint, leading to her arrest and subsequent bail.

"Me and my family's victimization is a consequence of my not agreeing to the sexual advances made by the Chief Justice of India, Justice Rangan Gogoi," she said in the letter to the judges. Justice Arun Mishra, who joined Gogoi on the bench for the special hearing, said the allegations were "wild and baseless". The court asked the media to show restraint in covering the case to avoid undermining the reputation and independence of the judiciary, though it decided not to issue a gag order. — Reuters

Indonesia 'smooth polls' a beacon in sea of strongmen

JAKARTA: Indonesia pulled off a complex yet peaceful election across its vast - and ethnically diverse - island territory this week, cementing its place as a democratic beacon in a sea of authoritarian governments, analysts say. But the world's biggest Muslim-majority nation still faces a spike in militant Islam and myriad other challenges. On Wednesday, the sprawling Southeast Asian archipelago saw as many as 190 million voters cast ballots to elect a new president, parliamentarians and local legislators, in a one-day contest with a record 245,000 candidates.

Preliminary results appeared to hand a second term to President Joko Widodo, but he held off declaring victory pending official results next month. However, his rival ex-general Prabowo Subianto - who has strong ties to the Suharto dictatorship that collapsed in 1998 - insisted he won, and vowed to challenge the results. He did the same, unsuccessfully, after losing to Widodo in 2014 and there is little to suggest Subianto will win this latest fight.

Despite the lingering uncertainty, Indonesia's democratic feat still stands in stark contrast to strongman governments in the Philippines and Cambodia, authoritarian Vietnam and Laos, Myanmar's stumbling post-junta steps and a chaotic election in Thailand, its first since a 2014 coup. "In a region that is not inclined towards democracy, where authoritarianism is on the rise, Indonesia's democracy really has weight - even if it is turning more conservative," said Christine Cabasset at the Bangkok-based Research Institute on Contemporary Southeast Asia.

'Slow erosion'
In a nod to voter participation, one reputable pollster recorded 82 percent turnout in this week's polls, the highest since 2004 legislative elections, local media reported. "People are voting and making a difference. Indonesians have embraced their own electoral power, especially younger voters," said Bridget Welsh, a Southeast Asia expert at John Cabot University in Rome. "This

bodes well for greater demands for better governance," she added. Still, Welsh was sharply critical of Widodo's rights records, and there are doubts about whether the 57-year-old will use his political capital to safeguard two decades of democratic progress that some fear is being undermined. "My prediction over the next five years is that we will continue to see a slow erosion of democratic quality," said Marcus Mietzner, an associate professor at the Australian National University. "(But) not a full push into authoritarianism," he added.

Widodo himself has been accused of creeping authoritarianism following arrests of opposition campaigners under a controversial electronic defamation law, while a decree during his tenure allowed Jakarta to ban mass organizations. Others have raised concerns about the renewed influence of the military, which is eyeing more civilian government positions in the country of 260 million - home to hundreds of ethnic groups and languages. Indonesia's reputation for religious tolerance has also been tested by increasingly vocal hardline Islamists, who were emboldened after their calls to prosecute Jakarta's Christian governor for blasphemy saw him jailed in 2017. — AFP

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