

International

Tourists stay away from Taj Mahal, other attractions as protests flare

Discriminatory Indian law triggers protests as 7 countries issue travel warnings

MUMBAI: India's tourism industry has been hit by a wave of violent anti-government protests against a new citizenship law that have rocked several cities this month, with at least seven countries issuing travel warnings.

At least 25 people have been killed in clashes between police and protesters, and demonstrations against the law continue. Officials estimate about 200,000 domestic and international tourists cancelled or postponed their trip to the Taj Mahal in the past two weeks, one of the world's most popular tourist attractions.

"There has been a 60 percent decline in visitor footfalls in December this year," said Dinesh Kumar, a police inspector overseeing a special tourist police station near the Taj Mahal who has access to visitor data. He said the decline was compared to December last year. "Indian and foreign tourists have been calling our control rooms to check security. We assure them protection, but many still decide to stay away," said Kumar.

The 17th century marble monument is in Uttar Pradesh, the northern state that has witnessed the highest number of deaths and intense bursts of violence in two weeks of unrest. A group of European tourists travelling in a group across India said they now planned to cut short their 20 day trip. "We are all retired folks, for us travel has to be slow and relaxing. The newspaper headlines have led to a sense of concern and we will leave sooner than we had planned," said Dave Millikin, a retired banker living on the outskirts of London, who

spoke to Reuters from the capital New Delhi. The Taj Mahal, situated in the town of Agra, attracts over 6.5 million tourists every year, generating nearly \$14 million annually from entrance fees. A foreign tourist pays 1,100 rupees (about \$15) to enter the grounds, although nationals from neighboring countries get a discount.

Managers in luxury hotels and guest houses around the Taj Mahal said last minute cancellations during the festive season have further dampened business sentiment at a time when the country's economic growth has slowed to 4.5 percent, its slowest pace in more than six years. In a bid to clamp down on violence and unrest, authorities have suspended mobile internet services in Agra.

"Blocking the internet has affected travel and tourism in Agra by about 50-60 percent," said Sandeep Arora, president of the Agra Tourism Development Foundation that groups over 250 tour operators, hotels and guides. The United States, Britain, Russia, Israel, Singapore, Canada and Taiwan have issued travel advisories asking their citizens to either refrain from visiting or to exercise caution when visiting regions embroiled in India's protests. Jayanta Malla Baruah, the head of the Assam Tourism Development Corp., said the state, home to the world's largest concentration of one-horned rhinoceroses, is visited on average by 500,000 tourists during December. "But this time, due to the ongoing protests and travel advisories by various countries, the number is down by 90 percent if not more." — Reuters



AGRA: Tourists visit The Taj Mahal under heavy smog conditions in Agra on Saturday. — AFP

N Korea's Kim holds top party meeting ahead of US deadline

SEOUL: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has convened a key meeting of top ruling party officials, state media said yesterday, ahead of a year-end deadline for Washington to shift its stance on stalled nuclear talks. The plenary session, which opened on Saturday, follows widespread speculation that Pyongyang is preparing to test an intercontinental ballistic missile—as a threatened "Christmas gift" for Washington.

Kim presided over the meeting which discussed a new "transparent, anti-imperialist independent stand", the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported.

The ruling Workers' Party of Korea will also "discuss important matters arising... in the building of the state and national defense", KCNA added. Talks on denuclearizing the Korean peninsula have been largely deadlocked since the second summit between Kim and US President Donald Trump collapsed in Hanoi at the start of this year.

The opening of the plenary comes a week after Kim held a meeting of top defense officials and discussed boosting military capabilities, and ahead of the leader's New Year speech on January 1, a key political set-piece in the isolated country. Pyongyang has carried out a series of static tests at its Sohae rocket facility this month, after a number of weapons launches in recent weeks—some of them described as ballistic missiles by Japan and others.

North Korea is under heavy US and United Nations sanctions over its nuclear program, but it has been frustrated at the lack of relief after it declared a moratorium on nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests.

Russia and China—North Korea's main ally—have proposed easing sanctions in a bid to de-escalate tensions.

'Imminent' threat

The ongoing meeting could have Pyongyang announce "major policy shift" from its previous approach with the US, said Hong Min, a senior researcher at the South's state-run Korea Institute for National Unification. Earlier this month, North Korean media published pictures of Kim riding a white horse on a sacred mountain, imagery that experts said was heavy with symbolism and may indicate a policy announcement. "We'll find out what the surprise is

and we'll deal with it very successfully," Trump said. "Everybody's got surprises for me, but let's see what happens. I handle them as they come along."

But Trump's former national security advisor John Bolton—a longtime hawk on North Korea—has sharply criticized the president's handling of the issue, and claimed that Pyongyang poses an "imminent" threat. The US president has invested a huge amount of political capital in his attempt to persuade Kim to end North Korea's isolation and give up its nuclear weapons. There has been little progress, however, after three face-to-face meetings and numerous letter exchanges. — AFP



PYONGYANG: This picture taken on December 28, 2019 and released by North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) yesterday shows the 5th Plenary Meeting of the 7th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea in Pyongyang. — AFP

Australia to compensate bushfire volunteers

SYDNEY: Volunteer firefighters in Australia will be offered government compensation after spending extended periods fighting bushfires raging across the country, authorities announced yesterday.

Rural Fire Service volunteers who have spent at least 10 days battling blazes in worst-hit New South Wales (NSW) state are immediately eligible for the scheme, which offers payments of up to Aus\$300 (\$209) per day for a maximum of Aus\$6,000 per person. "While I know RFS volunteers don't seek payment for their service, I don't want to see volunteers or their families unable to pay bills, or struggle financially as a result of the selfless contribution they are making," Prime Minister Scott Morrison said. "This is not about paying volunteers. It is about sustaining our volunteer efforts by protecting them from financial loss." Morrison said the compensation scheme would be rolled out across other Australian states and territories if local authorities requested that assistance.

"They run their own shows; they know what their challenges are," he said of the state governments.

The scheme—which applies only to self-employed volunteers and those working for small- and medium-sized businesses—is expected to cost about Aus\$50 million in NSW, which boasts the world's largest volunteer fire service at 70,000 people.

Volunteers who are also government employees were last week granted additional paid leave to help fight the blazes. Morrison has come under increasing pressure in recent weeks over his response to the bushfire crisis, which has killed 10 people, destroyed hundreds of homes and scorched more than three million hectares (7.4 million acres). The prime minister was forced to apologize for taking a family holiday to Hawaii as Australia battled the bushfires, a decision that sparked public outrage and prompted street protests.

Evacuation ordered

Temperatures are set to soar again across large parts of south-eastern Australia, with elevated fire danger expected in the lead-up to New Year's Day. People were ordered to evacuate Victoria state's East Gippsland region yesterday amid concerns three large blazes sparked over a month ago could burn out of control.

Victoria's Emergency Management commissioner Andrew Crisp said the more than 30,000 people in the popular tourist region should "leave now", as fires could force the closure of the last major road still open. "What we're saying now with the conditions that will be confronting us tomorrow... is if

you're holidaying in that part of the state, it's time you left," Crisp said, while urging local residents to do the same.

A major music festival was also cancelled ahead of the forecast extreme weather conditions, with 9,000 people asked to leave the Falls Festival campsite in Lorne due to the risk of bushfires, smoke haze and severe winds. Severe thunderstorms and damaging wind gusts are predicted for neighboring South Australia state, where multiple fires are raging and the bushfire danger will be extreme in several areas today.

Firefighters are also bracing for bushfire conditions to worsen during the week in NSW, where 95 blazes were burning yesterday, including 48 uncontained. — AFP



SYDNEY: A house and van are seen destroyed after bushfires ravaged the town of Bilpin, 70km west of Sydney yesterday. A heatwave is due to sweep across parts of New South Wales in the coming days, with deteriorating bushfire conditions expected to hit on New Year's Eve tomorrow. — AFP

7 bodies found on suspected North Korean boat in Japan

TOKYO: The badly decomposed remains of seven people have been found in a suspected North Korean fishing boat that washed up on a Japanese island, a coast guard official said yesterday. The remains were found on Saturday in a broken vessel on the shore of Sado Island, which lies around 900 kilometers (560 miles) from North Korea across the Sea of Japan. "Five of the bodies were identified as men but the remaining two could not be identified" as they were badly damaged, the official told AFP.

"There have been similar cases but this was the first discovery of bodies in such a wrecked boat on this island this year," the official added. Korean alphabet and numbers were painted on the wooden hull,

which was broken in half, he said, adding that there was nothing to show their nationality.

Local media said Japanese police and coast guard are investigating the case, suspecting the vessel departed from North Korea. So far this year, at least 156 suspected North Korean fishing vessels washed up on Japan's coast or were found drifting in Japanese waters, according to the Yomiuri Shimbun. Experts say some North Korean fishermen are travelling far out to sea in order to satisfy government mandates for bigger catches.

But their old and poorly equipped vessels are prone to mechanical and other problems, including running out of fuel, and there are few ways for them to call for rescue. Some of the boats wash up on Japanese shores with dead crews, called "ghost ships" by local media.

Last year, 10 North Koreans rescued from a tiny wooden boat drifting off northern Japan were deported. In October, around 60 members of a North Korean fishing boat were rescued in the Sea of Japan after it sank following a collision with a Japanese patrol vessel. — AFP

Two dead, 2,500 seek emergency shelter in Fiji

WELLINGTON: Tropical Cyclone Sarai was moving slowly away from Fiji yesterday, leaving two people dead and more than 2,500 needing emergency shelter. The cyclone damaged houses, crops and trees, cut power and forced the cancellation of several international flights, stranding holidaymakers visiting the island nation, which is a major tourist draw.

National Disaster Management Office director Vasiti Soko said an 18-year-old student drowned off the island of Kadavu. "The man is believed to have

been swept away by strong currents when he was swimming with his friends," she said.

The body of a man in his 40s was found yesterday off the coast of the main island Viti Levu a day after he was swept away by strong currents when crossing a river. Another person was in intensive care in hospital after being hit by a falling tree.

Soko said that at the height of the storm, there were 2,538 people packed into 70 evacuation centres although by Sunday evening 500 had been cleared to return home.

Electricity was restored to 80 percent of the capital Suva but power company Energy Fiji Limited said it could take a week to restore supplies to all areas of Viti Levu. Sarai, maintaining winds of up to 150 kilometers per hour (93 miles per hour), was tracking east and was expected to pass over Tonga on New Year's Eve. — AFP