

International

Human sacrifice bridge rumors spark lynchings in Bangladesh

8 killed over rumors of kids being kidnapped and sacrificed

DHAKA: Eight people have been killed in vigilante lynchings in Bangladesh sparked by rumors on social media of children being kidnapped and sacrificed as offerings for the construction of a mega-bridge, police said yesterday. The victims - which include two women - were targeted by angry mobs over the rumors, spread mostly on Facebook, that said human heads were required for the massive \$3 billion project, police chief Javed Patwary said. "We have analyzed every single case of these eight killings. Those who were killed by lynching mobs - no one was a child kidnapper," Patwary told reporters in Dhaka. More than 30 other people have been attacked in connection with the rumors.

Patwary said police stations across the country had been ordered to crack down on rumors, and at least 25 YouTube channels, 60 Facebook pages and 10 websites have been shut down. AFP has identified several posts still on Facebook that share the rumor, however. Mob lynchings are common in Bangladesh, but the latest incidents are particularly brutal. Local media said they started after reports circulated of a young man allegedly found carrying the severed head of a child in the northern district of Netrokona.

Among the latest victims was a single mother-of-two, Taslima Begum, who was beaten to death in front of a Dhaka school on Saturday by a mob which suspected her of being a child kidnapper, a police official said. A deaf man was also beaten to death outside the capital that day

while trying to visit his daughter. Police said eight people have been arrested over Begum's murder, and at least five others detained for their role in spreading the rumor on social media.

Loudspeaker pleas

Police are so concerned about the deadly fallout in rural towns that officers are trying to counter the web rumor using loudspeakers. "We are building awareness about the rumor and ask people not to get panicked," a police chief in northwestern Chapainawabganj district said. Some 6.1 million Ansar paramilitary security forces and village guards have also been asked to warn villagers, according to media reports quoting Ansar major general Kazi Sharif Kaikobad. Meanwhile beggars fearful of being lynched were wearing their identity cards to prove they were not strangers to a particular area, local media reported.

The lynchings could be "a sign of people's distrust in the existing law and order system", Dhaka University sociology professor Monirul Islam told AFP. But he did not rule out the possibility that some people were deliberately trying to trigger panic or unrest in the community. The bridge - which is set to be Bangladesh's biggest - is being built on the Padma, a major tributary of the Ganges. Rumors of human sacrifices being required for a bridge in Bangladesh have surfaced before, with several people attacked in 2010 over another structure, according to local media. — AFP



DHAKA: National police chief Javed Patwary speaks to the media over the recent lynching incidents triggered by rumors in social media of children being kidnapped and sacrificed as offerings for construction of a mega-bridge, in Dhaka. — AFP

Boys can wear skirts under Taiwan school gender-neutral plan

KUALA LUMPUR: Both male and female students will be allowed to wear skirts at a school in Taiwan after it announced plans to drop gender-specific uniforms yesterday, a move LGBT+ campaigners said was a boost for gender equality. The change, a rare move in Asia where traditional values often prevail, came after male students and teachers at Banqiao Senior High School near Taipei donned skirts in May during a week-long campaign seeking to break down gender stereotypes. The school's decision is seen as reinforcing the self-ruled island's reputation as a beacon of liberalism in Asia, which became the first place in the region to legalise same-sex marriage in May.

Under the current guidelines, male students are required to wear trousers and skirts for female students, but the new dress code - to take effect in the new academic year from August 30 - will remove any mention of specific gender. "It is to boost the students' autonomy in choosing their uniforms while respecting their rights," the Banqiao Senior High School said in a statement to the Thomson Reuters Foundation. The school, which is located in New Taipei City, just outside the capital, has over 2,000 students aged between 16 and 18.

Taiwanese education ministry officials were quoted in local media as welcoming the school's decision. "This is a progressive step that embraces diversity," said Du Sih-cheng, the policy advocacy director at the Taiwan Tongzhi Hotline Association, a non-profit that campaigns for LGBT+ rights. "It will especially gives transgender teenagers the freedom to choose what they want to wear in schools," he said by phone from Taipei, urging more



NEW TAIPEI CITY: Two men pass fishing boats tied up at the harbor as a precaution in New Taipei City. — AFP

schools to follow suit. A global campaign to push for gender-neutral school uniforms has gained traction in recent months.

Mexico City's mayor last month announced that students can decide whether to wear skirts or trousers to

school, stirring a controversy in the socially conservative predominantly Catholic country. In Wales, the government said this month that it would no longer have separate uniform codes for boys and girls under a new policy due to come into force from September 1. — Reuters

Car boom brings gridlock misery to 'green and happy' Bhutan

THIMPHU: Famed for valuing Gross National Happiness over economic growth, Bhutan is a poster child for sustainable development. But booming car sales may impact efforts to preserve its rare status as a carbon negative country - and an increase in traffic is testing the good humor of its citizens. Bhutan has seen a more than five-fold increase in cars, buses and trucks on its roads in the past two decades, according to transport authority director general Pemba Wangchuk with capital Thimphu hardest hit by the influx of vehicles.

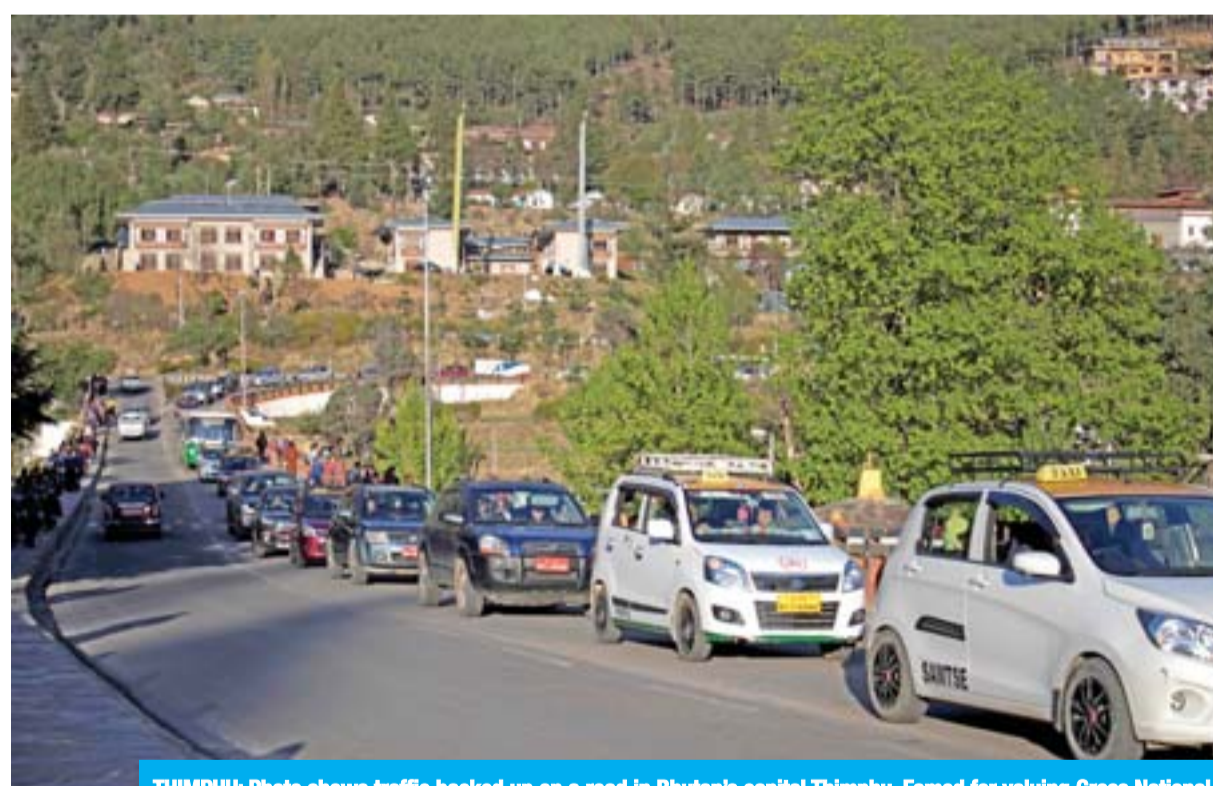
Phuntsho Wangdi, a media consultant, says the congestion and lack of parking now makes driving stressful in the tiny Himalayan kingdom where there are no traffic lights. "I wish there were fewer cars. It wasn't like this before," he adds of life in Thimphu, which is home to half the cars in the country. The nation's economy has grown 7.5 percent each year in the past decade, according to the World Bank. Officials estimate there is now one car for every seven people in Bhutan, which has a total population of 750,000. But the nation's narrow country lanes and outdated city roads can barely cope. A lack of infrastructure, along with poor driving etiquette - some simply leave their cars parked in the middle of the road - compounds the problem. "Every year the number of cars and the number of people are increasing, and the roads have remained the same, and it's a problem for us," Lhendup, a taxi driver, tells AFP.

Gridlock misery

Morning rush hour journeys that once took five minutes now take more than half an hour. This may seem a small figure compared to the hours of gridlock faced by commuters in Manila, Jakarta, and Bangkok, but it is a step-change for the Bhutanese who say the situation has rapidly deteriorated in the past year.

"It's chaotic. I eat my breakfast in the car now to save time," says Kuenzang Choden, who drops her four-year-old daughter at school every day before heading to work. The traffic jams are a sign of the wider economic changes the nation is facing. Bhutan is renowned for prioritizing Gross National Happiness over GDP, and has captured tourists' imagination as a tranquil, idyllic land, but there are signs of discontent.

According to the World Bank's 2018 report, the youth unemployment rate is high, as is rural to urban migration, which puts a strain on the resources of towns and cities.



THIMPHU: Photo shows traffic backed up on a road in Bhutan's capital Thimphu. Famed for valuing Gross National Happiness over economic growth, Bhutan was a poster child for sustainable development, but a boom in car sales may jeopardize its rare status as a carbon negative country. — AFP

And despite its reputation as a place where well-being is prioritized - it ranked 95th out of 156 countries in the 2019 UN World Happiness Report. The proliferation of the internet and smartphones are fuelling modern desires, while dealers are filling their showrooms with new brands and models from Japan and South Korea to lure buyers. And while taxes have increased and restrictions put on vehicle loans, car buyers are not discouraged.

Local financial institutions gave 3.2 billion ngultrum (\$46 million) in car loans in 2015, but by last year the amount had reached 6.7 billion ngultrum (\$96 million). The figures please local businessmen but worry environmentalists keen to ensure Bhutan remains one of the world's greenest countries. Environmental activist Yeshey Dorji explains: "As a nation that prides itself on being a carbon-negative country, the increase in the number of fossil fuel vehicles speaks poorly of our leadership position in environmental conservation."

Radical measures

Bhutan and Suriname, both with lush forests, are the only two countries to claim they are carbon negative, absorbing more carbon pollution than they give off. Methane from cows, the burning of crops and other farm

activities used to be Bhutan's main source of greenhouse gases. But that has changed in recent years to industry and cars. Bhutan's constitution dictates that at least 60 percent of the country must be forest and the figure is currently above 70 percent.

But Bhutan is now importing more in fossil fuels than it exports in hydropower to India - the country's biggest revenue earner. Public transport is poor, particularly in Thimphu, which is home to 100,000 people but barely 40 buses. The capital's mayor Kinlay Dorji plans to introduce bus-only lanes on city roads and wants to buy more buses. "It's time for radical measures," he says. "We have to make public transport more attractive and discourage owning cars," he adds, warning that unless action was taken Thimphu risked grinding to a standstill.

To ease congestion, the city is also constructing its first two multi-storey car parks that will each take about 600 cars. The National Environment Commission insists Bhutan is still carbon negative despite the traffic jams and vehicle boom, but wants to stop things worsening. Commission secretary Dasho Sonam P Wangdi explains: "We cannot stop people from buying cars, but we can introduce alternative, less polluting cars such as the hybrid and electric ones to reduce carbon footprint." — AFP

Sri Lanka orders return of smuggled British garbage

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka customs Tuesday ordered the return of container loads of hazardous mortuary and clinical waste illegally imported into the island from Britain under the cover of metal recycling. Customs officials said the racket dating back to 2017 was uncovered after the Colombo port complained last week that an importer had abandoned 111 containers which were emanating a huge stink.

A total of 241 containers had been imported since 2017 and 130 of them had been taken to a free-trade zone ostensibly for recycling and re-export, customs spokesman Sunil Jayaratne told AFP. "We are taking immediate action to order the re-export of the 111 containers abandoned at the port," Jayaratne said.

"The other 130 which had already been cleared from the port will be dealt under environmental and other laws." He said the 130 containers were stuffed with used mattresses and plastic and clinical waste imported in violation of international laws governing the shipping of hazardous material. A Sri Lankan businessman who imported the containers would be liable for criminal prosecution if he failed to re-export them to Britain, from where they originated, Jayaratne said.

An official at the finance ministry, which is responsible for the customs department, said it would take up the issue with British authorities for exporting hazardous cargo without first checking if Sri Lanka was willing to accept it. — AFP

Opposition outrage as India terror bill passes first hurdle

NEW DELHI: A controversial bill giving India's government sweeping powers to designate individuals as terrorists passed a major hurdle in parliament yesterday, as opponents warned the legislation was too broad and open to abuse. It comes in the wake of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's resounding victory in general elections in May, and amid accusations that his ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is trying to stifle dissent in the world's largest democracy.

The main opposition Congress party - which led a parliamentary walkout as the bill was debated - warned the proposed law was "draconian" and could turn India into a "police state". The bill has to be passed by the upper house before it becomes law, with the government needing to court votes from smaller parties and independents for it to pass. Home Minister Amit Shah defended the bill in the lower house yesterday, saying it was necessary to keep law enforcement agencies one step ahead of those deemed to be terrorists.

"The only purpose of this law is to root out terrorism. We will ensure that this law will not be misused," he said, before the bill was passed by acclaim. Opposition lawmakers remained unconvinced, however. "Is this government assuring us that the law will not be misused in future?" asked Congress member Karti Chidambaram. "Are you putting processes in place under which misuse will not happen?" Under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Bill, a person can be designated as a terrorist on broad grounds. — AFP



NEW DELHI: India Prime Minister Narendra Modi (center) reads a document during a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Parliamentary Committee meeting at the Parliament house in New Delhi. — AFP