



Bolsonaro eases rules for gun enthusiasts

## Bittersweet revival of Rohingya culture in exile in Bangladesh



LAHORE: In this file photo taken on Feb 1, 2019 Pakistani Islamists hold a poster displaying an image of Asia Bibi, a Christian Pakistani woman accused of blasphemy, with a noose and a knife, during a protest against the Supreme Court decision on Bibi's case. — AFP

# Woman in blasphemy row leaves Pakistan

## Asia Bibi 'safely reunited' with family, likely in Canada

ISLAMABAD: Asia Bibi, the Christian woman at the center of a decade-long blasphemy row, is "free" and has been reunited with her family, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said yesterday, months after her death sentence was overturned. Pompeo issued a statement after a government source in Pakistan told AFP earlier yesterday that Bibi had left the country "of her own free will" - the latest chapter in a saga that has sparked violent demonstrations and high-profile assassinations while spotlighting religious extremism.

"The United States welcomes the news that Asia Bibi has safely reunited with her family," Pompeo said in a statement. "Asia Bibi is now free, and we wish her and her family all the best following their reunification." It was not clear when Bibi may have left or where she may have gone, though British Prime Minister Theresa May appeared to confirm that Canada was her destination while speaking on the floor of the House of Commons yesterday. "Canada made this offer and we thought it was right and appropriate that we sup-

ported the offer that Canada had made," May said. Canada's foreign ministry said it had no comment on the matter. The Pakistani government source spoke to AFP on condition of anonymity and did not confirm Bibi's destination, and there was no official announcement from Islamabad. Blasphemy carries a maximum death penalty under Pakistan's penal code. It is an incendiary issue in the Muslim-majority country, and mere allegations of insulting Islam have sparked lynchings and vigilante violence in the past.

### Violent protests

"It is a great relief that this shameful ordeal has finally come to an end and Asia Bibi and her family are safe," said Omar Waraich, deputy South Asia director at Amnesty International. "She should never have been imprisoned in the first place, let alone endure the constant threats to her life. This case horrifyingly illustrates the dangers of Pakistan's blasphemy laws and the urgent need to repeal them." Bibi - a laborer from central Punjab province - was

first convicted of blasphemy in 2010 and was on death row until her acquittal last year. Her case swiftly became the most infamous in Pakistan, drawing worldwide attention to extremism in the country. She has technically been free to leave Pakistan since January when the Supreme Court dismissed a legal challenge to her acquittal in October. Since then, Bibi has been widely believed to have been held in protective custody by authorities as she awaited an asylum deal in a third country.

In November Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Ottawa was holding talks with Pakistan about bringing her to Canada, which he said is "a welcoming country". Bibi's lawyer Saif ul Mulook and multiple security sources in Pakistan also told AFP on condition of anonymity that Bibi had gone to Canada. Many blasphemy cases in Pakistan see Muslims accusing Muslims, but rights activists have warned that religious minorities - particularly Christians - are often caught in the crossfire, with such accusations used to settle personal scores.

Two politicians have been assassinated in connection with Bibi's case, and she spent much of her time in prison in solitary confinement because of fears she could be attacked by a guard or another prisoner. Islamist groups have regularly called for her to be executed, and activists have warned that she would not be safe in Pakistan. Following Bibi's acquittal in October the country was gripped for days by violent protests led by the hardline group Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP), which also called for mutiny in the armed forces and assassination of the country's top judges for acquitting her.

In the wake of the nationwide protests, TLP's leaders - who paralyzed the capital Islamabad for weeks in 2017 with an anti-blasphemy sit-in - were rounded up in a government crackdown months ago and remain in detention. Christians - who make up around two percent of the population - occupy one of the lowest rungs in class-obsessed Pakistani society, largely living in slums and working menial jobs as street sweepers, cleaners and cooks. —AFP

## Motive unclear in deadly shooting at Denver school

HIGHLANDS RANCH, Colorado: Colorado police yesterday were still trying to determine why two students walked into their school and allegedly opened fire with handguns, killing one person and wounding eight others, just a few miles from one of the nation's deadliest school massacres. Two surviving victims of the Tuesday attack at the Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) School in Highlands Ranch remained in serious condition, medical officials said. Another was stable and five had been discharged from the hospital. "We're still working toward the motive," Douglas County Sheriff Tony Spurlock said.

He declined to identify the person killed in the shooting, though he said the victim was an 18-year-old male three days away from graduation. He identified one of the two suspected shooters as Devon Erickson, also 18. The other suspect was a juvenile, Spurlock told a morning news conference, who was later identified as a female. The Denver ABC television affiliate reported on Tuesday the other suspect had wanted to transition to male from female. Spurlock declined to identify any of the victims.

Erickson was expected in Douglas County District Court in nearby Castle Rock at 1:30 p.m. MDT (1830 GMT). The second suspect will also appear in court on Wednesday, said District Attorney George Brauchler. The two suspects opened fire in two separate classrooms and were arrested within minutes at the public charter school about 40 km south of Denver, Spurlock said. A combination of factors, including revenge and anger, spurred the attack, the Denver TV ABC affiliate reported, citing law enforcement sources. One of the suspects had been bullied over gender identity, the station reported, citing police sources.

"A student's life was taken too soon by this act of violence," Colorado Governor Jared Polis told the news conference. "I share the heartbreak, the frustration, the



HIGHLANDS RANCH, Colorado: Students are reunited with their parents after being evacuated to the Recreation Center at Northridge during a shooting at STEM School Highlands Ranch on Tuesday. — AFP

sickness." Some of the worst mass shootings in the United States have occurred in Colorado. The attack occurred less than a month after the 20th anniversary of the Columbine High School massacre in nearby Littleton, about 8 km from the Highlands Ranch school. Also, a man opened fire at a movie theater in Aurora, another Denver suburb, in 2012, killing 12 people and wounding scores more.

What happened inside the STEM school remains unclear. Spurlock said there was a "struggle" as officers entered the building and some students said one victim was shot in the chest as he tried to tackle a shooter. A man who identified himself as Fernando Montoya said his 17-year-old son, a junior at STEM, was shot three times when a shooter walked into his classroom and opened fire. "He said a guy pulled a pistol out of a guitar case and started to shoot," Montoya told the Denver TV station.

The bloodshed shocked the affluent suburb of Highlands Ranch. Parents and students had considered the school a safe place for its 1,850 pupils ranging from kindergarten to 12th grade. The attack came a week after a gunman opened fire on the Charlotte campus of the University of North Carolina, killing two people and wounding four others. — Reuters

## Suicide blast at Pakistani shrine kills at least 10

LAHORE: A suicide blast at one of Pakistan's oldest and most popular Sufi shrines killed at least 10 people and wounded 24 in the eastern city of Lahore yesterday, police said, in an attack claimed by the Pakistani Taliban. The blast - which a faction of the militant group claimed by email - occurred near the entrance gate for female visitors to the 11th-century Data Darbar shrine, one of the largest Sufi shrines in South Asia, as the country marks the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

Wreckage of vehicles littered the pavement near the shrine as first responders rushed to the scene and armed security forces fanned out in the area. "As we crossed the road a blast took place in front of us," witness Ritat Shahid told AFP. She described seeing pieces of flesh fall in front of her, and added that the blast "sounded so big that we felt like our ears will burst".

The emergency room at the Mayo Hospital in Lahore was crowded with the wounded, and people searching for loved ones, an AFP reporter saw. Among them was Azra Bibi, whose son Muhammad Shahid cares for visitors' shoes - which must be removed before entering. He has been missing since the blast, she said. "They are not Muslims," she told AFP, referring to the attackers. "They even targeted worshippers."

The shrine has long been home to colorful Sufi festivals and a prime destination for the country's myriad Muslim sects, making it a soft target for militant attacks. It has been targeted previously, in a 2010 suicide attack which killed more than 40 people. Since then the area has been increasingly hemmed in by heavy security, with visitors forced to pass through several layers of screening before they can enter the complex.

Sufi worshippers, who follow a mystical strain of Islam, have frequently been the target of bloody attacks in Pakistan by Islamist militants - including the Islamic State group - who consider their beliefs, and rituals at the graves of



LAHORE: Pakistani security officials examine the site of a bomb blast outside a Sufi shrine yesterday. —AFP

Muslim saints, as heresy. Senior police official Muhammad Ashfaq told a press conference that the security personnel at the shrine were targeted. Three police officials, two security guards and five civilians including a child were among the dead, Punjab province chief minister Usman Buzdar said.

Pakistan's push against extremism was stepped up after the country's deadliest-ever attack, an assault on a school in Peshawar in 2014 that left more than 150 people dead - mostly children. Since then, security has dramatically improved, but militants retain the ability to carry out major attacks. Major urban centers such as Lahore, Pakistan's second largest city and the provincial capital of its wealthiest province, Punjab, are not immune.

An attack in the city in March last year left nine people dead, while a major blast targeting Christians celebrating Easter in a park in 2016 killed more than 70 people. Critics have long argued the military and government crackdown has not addressed the root causes of extremism in Pakistan, where hardline Muslim groups often target religious minorities. The Data Darbar complex contains the shrine of Saint Syed Ali bin Osman Al-Hajveri, popularly known as Data Ganj Bakhsh. Originally from Afghanistan, he was one of the most popular Sufi preachers on the subcontinent. Tens of thousands of pilgrims visit the shrine each spring to mark his death anniversary, while it is also crowded weekly with worshippers listening to qawwali, a traditional form of Islamic devotional music. —AFP