

Analysis

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Boy or girl? HK at centre of banned China gender test

Shady middle-men are openly advertising on Chinese social media to smuggle blood samples of pregnant women to Hong Kong (HK) to skirt the mainland's ban on gender testing, an AFP investigation has found. The business thrives on a well-organized underground network that serves the huge demand for illicit sex-selective abortion in mainland China - driven by limits on family size and an entrenched cultural preference for sons. Chinese authorities vowed to crack down on the trade in 2015.

But dozens of blood smuggling agents are openly advertising services on the Twitter-like platform Weibo and on websites, despite China's proven ability to scrub digital content. Gender testing - except on medical grounds - is outlawed in China, where sex-selective abortions have helped create a surplus of about 31.6 million men, with some 115 boys born for every 100 girls last year. A long-standing one-child policy was eased to permit two children in 2016 but gender testing continues, with many parents of daughters trying for a son the second time around.

Gender testing is legal in Hong Kong, with some clinics apparently turning a blind eye to the origins of the smuggled samples. Three agents contacted by an AFP reporter posing as a customer offered to arrange in-person appointments with medical testing labs or transport blood samples to Hong Kong for around US\$580, promising results starting from six weeks into pregnancy. Upon payment of a deposit, the agent sends a testing kit to the client through a delivery service. One advised using an app to hire a nurse who could come to the patient's home in mainland China to extract blood.

'Nothing will go wrong'

The client sends the blood sample to Shenzhen from where it is smuggled across the border to Hong Kong. The agents did not directly address questions about how the samples would be transported, but assured the reporter they would arrive safely at their destination. "They will be taken to the lab in a designated vehicle, the samples can be safely sent over for testing, nothing will go wrong," one representative said, adding that results would be sent out in one working day. Other agents use human smugglers. In February, a 12-year-old girl headed to Hong Kong was caught at the Shenzhen border carrying 142 vials of blood samples from pregnant women in her backpack.

The tests analyze small fragments of foetal DNA in a pregnant woman's blood and can detect the presence of a Y chromosome. They are also used to screen for chromosomal disorders such as Down's syndrome. They can often accurately predict the gender of a foetus weeks before doctors can see the sex organs in an ultrasound. Some mainlanders take the legal option of travelling directly to Hong Kong for gender testing. "I have three daughters already. To be honest I want a son," a 39-year-old man surnamed Wang told AFP outside a lab in Kowloon where his wife was getting her blood tested.

Wang, who circumvented the one-child policy as many well-connected or wealthy Chinese families do, said he was under intense parental pressure to produce a male heir and had made the journey from the southern province of Guizhou. "Chinese people still want to have a son to carry on the ancestral line, this is an antiquated way of thinking, but back home there are lots of people who think this way," he explained. He added he and his wife would terminate the pregnancy in China if it turned out to be a girl. "Right now she's only about 50 days along, so it can be solved by taking some medicine," he said.

'Ethically unacceptable'

The trade raises questions over the willingness of Hong Kong labs to ignore their own rules. According to industry guidelines, laboratory technicians should not test blood without a patient referral from a local doctor, and risk losing their licence if they do. It is illegal to mail or transport blood samples out of China without a permit, but Hong Kong only outlaws importing blood samples if a person has reason to suspect that it contains an infectious agent.

The city's Department of Health told AFP the number of cases it investigated every year has tripled since 2016 but none was prosecuted due to insufficient evidence. A lab that one agent claimed to be working with told AFP it does not perform tests on couriered samples and denied working with mainland middle-men.

Multiple Chinese government departments did not respond to requests for comment. Hong Kong lawmaker Kwok Ka-ki, who is also a doctor, called on the territory's government to work with mainland authorities to take down the networks. "Ethically this is completely unacceptable because this will only encourage more people to perform gender selection," he said. — AFP

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Photo shows an Air China Boeing 737 MAX 8 plane (back center) as a China Southern Airlines Boeing 787 (top) lands at Beijing Capital Airport in Beijing, China's three biggest airlines have filed claims seeking compensation from Boeing over the grounding and delayed delivery of 737 MAX 8 aircraft following two deadly crashes, Chinese state media reported yesterday. — AFP

Will FAA's plan for 737 MAX fly outside US?

Getting Boeing's top-selling 737 MAX back in the skies faces a critical test this week as the company and US regulators each seek to restore their reputations after two deadly crashes. The US Federal Aviation Administration convened a summit of global aviation regulators to walk through the steps taken to address concerns with the MAX following criticism the agency dragged its feet on the decision to ground the jets.

Most agencies around the world have said little or nothing about the situation since the 737 MAX was grounded following the March 10 Ethiopian Airlines crash, which together with a Lion Air crash in October, claimed 346 lives. So the gathering in Fort Worth, Texas is expected to provide clues as to whether the aviation safety authorities will be willing to set aside any skepticism about the FAA, which has not yet given the green light for the 737 MAX to fly again.

Regulators "are going to want a lot of explanation," said Richard Abouafala of the Teal Group. "We're going to learn a lot." The FAA would prefer to have other agencies quickly follow its lead-which previously would have been likely-but several aviation experts think that is improbable.

Europe and Canada could follow the US by weeks in allowing the MAX jets to return to the skies.

China is a wildcard. It was the first country to order the planes grounded in March, and has been sparring with the US for months over trade policy. China's three largest airlines filed claims seeking compensation from Boeing over the grounding and delayed delivery of the jets, state media reported yesterday.

Still the 'gold standard'?

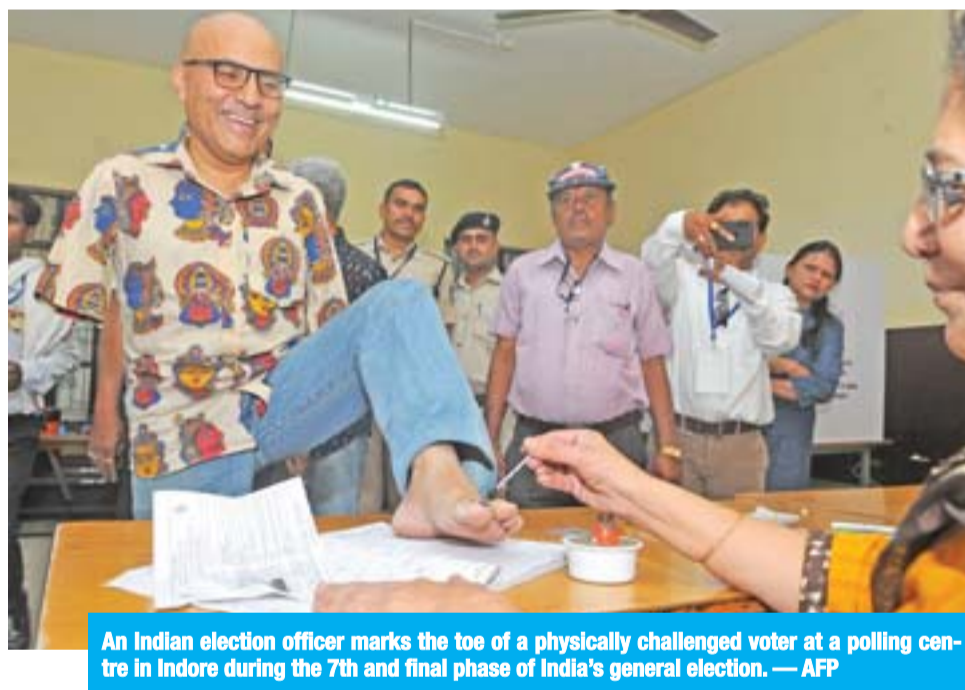
The FAA said 57 agencies from 33 countries will attend the summit, including China, France, Germany, Britain, India, Indonesia and Ethiopia, as well as the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) and the United Nations' International Civil Aviation Organization. The meeting comes after Boeing announced on May 16 that it completed a software update to address a problem with the flight handling program known as the Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System.

In both of the MAX crashes, the MCAS pointed the plane sharply downward based on a faulty sensor reading, hindering the pilot's effort to control the aircraft after

takeoff, according to preliminary crash investigations. Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg has said repeatedly that there was no design flaw in the 737 MAX, and has described changes to the MCAS system as an "update" rather than a fix. Still, the company's reputation has taken a hit amid reports it knew of the issue before the Ethiopia Airlines crash, and received complaints from US pilots.

Boeing said it is providing additional information to the FAA in anticipation of a certification test flight, a key step in winning regulatory approval. Long considered a "gold standard" internationally, the FAA's reputation has suffered, amid scrutiny of the oversight process and reports it allowed Boeing to effectively self-certify some features of the MAX. US lawmakers last week once again castigated acting FAA Administrator Daniel Elwell for lagging behind virtually all other regulators in grounding the planes, acting only after seeing data linking the two crashes.

"So the opposite of data is common sense," bellowed Representative Steve Cohen, a Tennessee Democrat, belatedly during a hearing. "Data is fine but it's something that's right before your eyes," he said, noting that non-US regulators reacted with appropriate urgency. — AFP



An Indian election officer marks the toe of a physically challenged voter at a polling centre in Indore during the 7th and final phase of India's general election. — AFP

India decides: Counting world's largest ballot

India's enormous election took six weeks to hold, but organizers have allotted just one day to count all the ballots cast by some of the 900 million eligible voters. The use of electronic voting machines means the count itself, set for today, should be simple enough. But with claims of fraud already surfacing in some quarters, it could equally be a laborious affair that could delay the announcement of the final result. More than 67 percent of the electorate turned out to use the machines during seven rounds of voting. Here is how their votes will be counted:

Guarded strongrooms

Armed police stand outside the strongrooms where the voting machines are kept to ensure no one touches them until the count starts. Representatives of competing political parties can join the guards in the 24-hour vigil or watch a CCTV feed from cameras monitoring the area. Representatives of the candidates can also inspect the machines when they are taken to the counting room where each is put on a table.

Sudeep Jain, a deputy election commissioner with the national poll body, said an official then presses a button to get a readout of the votes cast for each candidate. One round of counting including tabulation takes between 20 and 25 minutes, he said. The count is not final until all candidates, or their representatives, and electoral delegates are satisfied with the accuracy of the results. Jain said

the tally from machines around the country is expected to be ready in about eight hours.

Paper trails

India is using a system where the electronic machine results are checked against paper tickets given out with each vote. India's Supreme Court ordered officials to randomly match paper ballots against the machine results at 20,600 out of the total 1.3 million polling stations. Jain said candidates could also demand a check if there were doubts about a machine result. The checks could delay the announcement of the final result by several hours, he added. Every counting table must have a blue ballpoint pen and a paper knife to break open the seals on the electronic voting machines. Teams are also on hand to seal the machines with wax and a safety tag with a serial number as soon as the count is completed to ensure their integrity if a result is contested.

No memory loss

Postal ballot papers are counted first. India's rules allow security and other officials on election duty to cast their votes by post or electronically. The counting of electronic votes will begin 30 minutes after the postal ballot count is finished. Candidates have 45 days to contest a result. If a court orders a recount, a machine's memory can be reactivated by reconnecting the battery so it displays the result stored in its memory. When the final result sheet is ready, a returning officer in each constituency must pause for two minutes during which a candidate or his agent can ask for a recount. The officer can reject any request that is considered unreasonable or frivolous. When disputes are resolved, the result is announced and the candidate's agents sign the final document to be reported to the election commission. — AFP

India's election: Insulting affair

India's mammoth election, the biggest in the world, was a frequently bad-tempered affair and awash with insults. Ahead of the vote counting and results due today, AFP looks back at the worst of the mud-slinging during almost six weeks of campaigning.

Thief vs prince

Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and his main challenger, the Congress Party's Rahul Gandhi, led the way. Modi, 68, dismissed Gandhi - scion of the hugely influential Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty - as a privileged "shehzada" (prince) in contrast with his own humble origins. Gandhi, 48, called Modi a "liar" over an allegedly corrupt French defence deal, and coined the slogan "chowkidar chor hai" (the watchman is the thief). But Modi deftly turned the tables by changing his Twitter handle to "Chowkidar" (watchman) Narendra Modi, using it to bolster his image as the only candidate who can defend India.

Dig at dad

For many, Modi went below the belt when he attacked Gandhi's father-former premier Rajiv Gandhi, who was assassinated in 1991 - as "corrupt number 1". "Narendra Modi used hate and we used love and I think love is about to win (this election)," Gandhi responded. However, some of Modi's other opponents showed no such restraint. Mamata Banerjee, the formidable leader of the key eastern battleground state of West Bengal, called Modi and the president of the BJP, Amit Shah, "top goons". She then compared the duo to Duryodhan and Dushshasan, the main villain and his younger brother in the Hindu epic Mahabharata, before threatening Modi with a "slap... of democracy".

Shah, who compared illegal immigrants in parts of India to "termites", had vowed: "We will remove every single infiltrator from the country, except Buddha, Hindus and Sikhs." Derek O'Brian, an Anglo-Indian party colleague of Banerjee, went further. He called Shah "puke-worthy" and a "lowlife". And Mayawati, the charismatic head of a key regional party in India's Uttar Pradesh state, took a dig at Modi separating from his wife decades ago. "How can he (Modi) respect others' sisters and wives when he left his own innocent wife for political gains," she asked.

Khaki underwear

The Election Commission attempted to make matters more civilized. Azam Khan, a party leader in Uttar Pradesh, was banned from campaigning for three days after he claimed his rival-BJP candidate and former Bollywood actress Jaya Prada-wore khaki underwear. Khaki is the colour associated with the uniform of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), a hardline Hindu group from which the BJP originated.

Yogi Adityanath, the Hindu monk and firebrand BJP chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, was briefly banned when he compared the election to a battle between Ali, a figure in Islam, and the Hindu god Hanuman. Twitter reportedly also removed a tweet by Adityanath saying Congress was infected with a "green virus", the color associated with Muslims in South Asia. Maneka Gandhi, widow of Gandhi's uncle Sanjay, received a 48-hour ban for appearing to tell Muslims not to expect any favors if they didn't vote for her.

Enter Adolf

There was worse. Raj Thackeray, a fiery local politician in the western state of Maharashtra, likened Modi to Hitler. "What Adolf Hitler did to Germany in 1930s is going to be replicated in India if Modi and Shah return to power," he told a rally. Vaiko, the head of a regional party in Tamil Nadu in the south, added another World War II dictator to the mix: "Why is Modi talking in the language of Hitler and Mussolini?" Former Bihar chief minister Rabri Devi called Modi an "executioner" and one of the "insects of the gutter". And Satpal Singh Satti, head of the BJP in Himachal Pradesh state, called Gandhi a "motherfucker" at a public rally.

Karma killer

But perhaps the election's top prize in this category goes to Pragya Singh Thakur who-despite facing terrorism charges over a deadly 2008 bomb attack outside a mosque-is the BJP candidate in Bhopal. Thakur said the former anti-terrorist squad chief who arrested her deserved to die in the 2008 Mumbai attacks. "He falsely implicated me and treated me very badly. I told him that his entire dynasty will be wiped out and he died of karma," she said. Last week she went too far even for Modi. She said the killer of independence hero Mahatma Gandhi "was, is, and will remain a patriot". "People who call him a terrorist should search their soul. They will get the answers this election," she added. She later apologized. — AFP