



Modi praises party workers amid violence, killings

Myanmar soldiers jailed for Rohingya killings freed after less than a year



ATME, Syria: Displaced Syrian children are pictured in a field near a camp for displaced people in this village in northern Idlib province on May 23, 2019. —AFP

Syrians spend first homeless Ramadan

Many displaced live in the open after failing to find shelter in formal camps

ATME, Syria: Outside her makeshift tent, Syrian mother Mona Mutayr lays out a frugal meal of potatoes and cucumber as her family marks their first Ramadan since being displaced by war. The holy Islamic month is usually one of celebration, with Muslims fasting from dawn to dusk and gathering around a family meal after sunset. But regime bombardment forced Mutayr and her family to flee their home earlier this month and set up camp in an olive grove near the Turkish border.

"The days are long and hard," said 31-year-old Mutayr, wearing a long red and black dress and matching headscarf as she prepared the evening meal. "We're spending Ramadan here against our will," she said, as small bare-foot children waited for their food under a canvas tent strung up around a tree trunk.

The Damascus regime and its Russian ally have upped their deadly bombardment in recent weeks on Syria's northwestern region of Idlib held by the country's former

Al-Qaeda affiliate, causing more than 200,000 people to flee their homes, according to the United Nations. More than a third now live outside in the open after failing to find shelter in formal camps for the displaced.

'We have nothing'

Under her tent in the area of Atme, Mutayr sits cross-legged on the dry red earth, stooped over a potato she peeled with a small knife. "I made a little less potatoes for them today," she said, before laying out a plate of fries and two others of diced cucumber in what appeared to be thinned down yoghurt. It's a far cry from Ramadans past in their hometown of Humayrat in the north of Hama province, she said, when she and her family would break their fasts with a feast in the garden under a canopy of grapevines. "There was plenty of water and electricity. It was a good life," she said. "Look what's become of us now... Sometimes there's not enough food."

Charities sometimes donate Ramadan meals of rice and chicken to those at the makeshift camp, but Mutayr says her family has not received such aid in four days. "Our life has become heat and dust," she said. All around her, families have pitched shelters made of canvas strung between trees, their tops tied to branches and bottoms weighed down with clumps of earth. A lone goat rummages for food as a woman hangs clothes out to dry on a line.

Not far off, 42-year-old Hussein Al-Nahar, his pregnant wife and their six children are also spending their first Ramadan homeless. "How is someone supposed to feel when they're forced from their home during Ramadan?" said the agricultural worker. "It's so tragic. We have nothing."

No clothes for Eid

Nahar arrived in Atme a little more than two weeks ago after fleeing regime barrel bombs being pelted down

on his hometown of Kafr Nabuda, in the north of Hama province. Surrounded by her children, Nahar's wife, 30-year-old Rihab, strokes the hair of a small boy resting his head in her lap. Pregnant with a seventh child, she has no idea how the family will celebrate Eid al-Fitr, the holiday marking the end of Ramadan when many children receive new clothing. "The children want new clothes for Eid, but we don't have the money," she said, dressed in a long grey robe and beige headscarf. "We don't even have enough blankets."

As the sun sets, Rihab's family gathers around a small portion of chicken and rice donated by a charity, and a second plate of fried potatoes she has prepared. In previous Ramadans, "we wouldn't want for anything", she said. But today, "we sit around waiting for meals from charities, though sometimes we don't get any", she said. The day before there was nothing to cook, she said. "We had bread and tea." —AFP

German with 1,800 cows allowed to stay in India



RADHAKUND, India: German citizen Friederike Irina Bruening, 61, also known as Sudevi Mataji, touches a cow's nose at a cowshed in this village in the Mathura district of Uttar Pradesh yesterday. —AFP

MATHURA, India: It's a long way from Berlin to India, where Friederike Irina Bruening devotes her life to sick and abandoned cows. Now, after intervention from the Hindu nationalist government, she has been allowed to stay. "Currently we have around 1,800 cows," Bruening told AFP from outside the holy city of Mathura in northern India where she keeps the animals. "Between five and 15 are brought in every day."

Bruening, 61, had threatened last week to return a top civilian award for cow protection that she won - the Padma Shri award - after her request for a visa extension was denied. This prompted Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj to take to Twitter and announce she had "asked for a report", and yesterday Bruening said she had been issued with a new visa allowing her to remain in India.

Bruening came to India around 25 years ago and says she has since spent around \$200,000 (\$225,000) of her own money over the years on her cow shelter, which costs around \$45,000 per month to run. Many of the cows that arrive are blind or have been injured in road accidents, while others are sick from eating the vast amounts of plastic waste littering India. Around half of the new arrivals die.

Since coming to power in 2014 one of the signature policies of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, newly re-elected, has been the protection of cows, which for many Hindus are sacred. Laws against the slaughter and consumption of beef have been strengthened, and lynchings of Muslims and low-caste Dalits - who have traditionally been involved in the sector - have risen.

This has prompted many people to abandon old and infirm cows instead of selling them for slaughter, resulting in more of the animals on the loose, including in cities like Delhi where they are a common sight. But Bruening, who has become a Hindu and is known as Sudevi Dasi, said that allowing the slaughter of old or sick cows is not the answer. "Killing a cow is the worst thing you can do," she said. —AFP

Muslims seek voice in changing Uzbekistan

TASHKENT: Uzbek student Luiza Muminjonova wanted to work in the country's booming Islamic tourism sphere but last year she was expelled from a university in the capital Tashkent. The 19-year-old's only fault was being a pious Muslim and wearing the hijab, a staple of female Islamic dress. "How dare they discriminate (against) me and stop me from getting the education I want because of my religion?" she fumed in an interview with AFP. Instead of giving up, the student took a stand that has placed her at the centre of Uzbekistan's religious freedom debate.

Her family has sued the International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan, taking its legal battle all the way to the country's top court. Muminjonova's case points to the Uzbeks' increasing readiness to openly practice their faith as believers become emboldened by political change under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The formerly communist country's repression of the religion persisted long after it gained independence from Moscow in 1991.

The first president Islam Karimov frowned upon religious adherence and was criticized by rights groups for conflating piety with radicalism. Islamists mounted a challenge to Karimov's rule in the 1990s and were blamed for a spate of car bombings in 1999. More recently, hundreds of Uzbeks are believed to have joined militants fighting in Iraq and Syria including the Islamic State group.

Changing times

Karimov's death and the coming to power of Mirziyoyev in 2016 has seen the government offer an olive branch to believers. Last year mosques were allowed to call Uzbeks to prayer over loudspeakers for the first time in over a decade. During a visit to a shrine in the historic town of Termez last month, Mirziyoyev called the past approach of authorities to the religion "our

Sudan Islamists back army in push to preserve sharia

KHARTOUM: With talks suspended between protest leaders and Sudan's military over a transfer of power to civilian rule, Islamist movements are backing the army in the hope it will keep sharia law in place. Islamist parties stayed on the sidelines during the months of nationwide protests that led to the April ouster of long-time ruler Omar Al-Bashir. They have since not joined the protest alliance at loggerheads with the generals over the makeup of a new governing body, which would rule the country for a three-year transitional period.

But hundreds of Islamists have rallied in the capital in recent days, warning they would reject any deal that would exclude sharia - Islamic law - from the country's political roadmap. They have also backed the army's demands that the head of Sudan's new governing body

tragedy" and said Islam symbolised "light".

Over 90 percent of Uzbekistan's 33 million population is Muslim and social conservatism runs deep, especially in the provinces. Amid an Islamic revival, school uniforms have recently become a cultural battleground between conservatives and supporters of secularism. A universal school uniform insisting on below knee-length skirts for female students was rolled out last year. A television report that criticized teachers and students for wearing short skirts immediately followed. The September report set the tone for an explosive debate that played out on social media and saw the channel's director demoted. Conservative bloggers were reportedly detained the same month for calling for the right for girls to wear the hijab in schools.

Kicked out of school

Muminjonova said the university that expelled her and nine other students last September "set a condition" to around a hundred freshmen students. "(They said) either you take off a headscarf, or you will be expelled," Muminjonova recalled, smoothing her fingers over the rose-colored cotton head covering. After she refused to comply, Muminjonova was kicked out of the dormitory and was not allowed to attend classes. She said that being asked to take off the hijab was "like being forced to give up on my faith".

Ironically, the school focuses on religious learning. What happened next was remarkable for a country where nationals have for decades toed the government line. Muminjonova's family took legal action against the academy in order to reinstate the student and affirm her right to attend university wearing the head covering. Even more surprisingly, a local court agreed to hear the case, which saw over a dozen hijab-wearing girls and their mothers stand near the courtroom during hearings in a show of solidarity. After failing to secure a university climb down in both district and city courts, Muminjonova's family has taken the case to the Supreme Court.

'Many still in jail'

Seemingly in recognition of more breathing space for religion, the US State Department last year removed Uzbekistan's sanction-carrying designation as a "country of particular con-

cern" for religious freedom. But in April the US Commission on International Religious Freedom said that "severe violations of religious freedom persisted" and recommended the State Department put Uzbekistan back on the watchlist that includes North Korea and Saudi Arabia.

International rights groups have used a newfound dialogue with the new administration to push for more religious freedom, both for Muslims and other groups. Steve Swerdlow, Central Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch, cited anecdotal evidence "that perhaps hundreds of religious prisoners have been released" since Mirziyoyev came to power. Campaigners believe the extremism charges the people were jailed on were brought without due process and that torture was used during the investigations. "There are many, many more (religious prisoners) still in jail," Swerdlow told AFP.

Almost an entire academic year on from her expulsion, the family's lawyer Abdurahob Yakubov - whose own daughter was also expelled for the same reason - fears the judiciary is stalling the case. "The Supreme Court should have responded to our appeal within 30 days," said Yakubov, adding they lodged an appeal in late March. A defiant Muminjonova said she would turn to international courts if the justice system at home failed her. "We cannot keep silent anymore," she said. —AFP



TASHKENT: A picture taken on March 13, 2019 shows 19-year-old Uzbek student Luiza Muminjonova as she stands near a court building. —AFP

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ruled by the forces of the left," they chanted.

Nusrat Al-Sharia chief Mohamed Ali Jazuli justified the rejection by Islamists, saying the negotiations between the protesters and the generals were for an agreement that was "purely bilateral and excluding" the Islamists and other political forces. While the protest alliance could be a "partner in change", he said, it was not "the only leader of the revolution". "The revolution was not against ideology but against corruption and tyranny," he said.

Tayeb Mustafa, who heads a coalition of conservative parties, said Islamists were opposed to the transition plan because it "ignored the application of Islamic law". The protest alliance "stole the revolution in broad daylight", said Mustafa, whose 2020 coalition brings together Islamist groups, including the Popular Congress Party, a long-time ally of Bashir. —AFP



Abdelhay Yousef