

International

Pope Francis arrives in Japan to preach anti-nuke message

Francis to pay tribute to 'hidden Christians'

TOKYO: Pope Francis arrived in Japan yesterday, where he is expected to deliver a robust anti-nuclear message of peace in the only country to have suffered an atomic bomb attack. The 82-year-old Argentine is fulfilling a long-cherished ambition to preach in Japan, where years ago he hoped to be a missionary.

He arrived in Tokyo in heavy rain and high winds, the white cape of his papal outfit blowing up around his face as he stepped gingerly down the staircase from the Thai Airways plane that carried him from the first stop of his tour in Thailand. His four-day trip will begin with visits to Nagasaki and Hiroshima, cities forever associated with the nuclear bombs dropped on them at the end of World War II, killing at least 74,000 people and 140,000 people respectively.

In a video message to the Japanese people before he left the Vatican, Francis railed against the "immoral" use of nuclear weapons. "Together with you, I pray that the destructive power of nuclear weapons will never be unleashed again in human history," said the head of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics. Francis arrives from Thailand, where he preached a message of religious tolerance and peace.

He is expected to do the same in Japan, a country with only approximately 440,000 Catholics out of a population of 126 million. The majority of Japanese practice a mixture of Shinto and Buddhism, two closely intertwined faiths based on the worship of nature and spirits, but many in Japan also observe Christian festivals such as Christmas. Christians endured centuries of bloody repression in Japan after the religion was introduced to the country by a Spanish Jesuit priest in 1549.

In the 17th century, Japan was closed to the outside

world and Christians were persecuted, tortured, crucified and drowned as they were forced to recant their faith. When Japan reopened to the world in the mid-19th century and the missionaries returned, they were astonished to find an estimated 60,000 who had secretly kept the faith alive and followed a unique version of Catholicism blended with Japanese culture and religious rites. Francis is expected to pay tribute to these so-called "hidden Christians"-or "kakure kirishitan" in Japanese-during his trip today to Nagasaki, where they were discovered.

'Can't forget the bomb'

Francis will also visit Hiroshima and deliver remarks at the world-famous peace memorial that marks the day on August 6, 1945 when the atomic bomb was dropped. Father Yoshio Kajiyama, director of the Jesuit social centre in Tokyo, was born in Hiroshima shortly after the war and is eagerly awaiting the pope's anti-nuclear speech. "My grandfather died the day of the bomb in Hiroshima, I never knew him. Four days later my aunt died when she was 15 years old," said the 64-year-old. "If you grow up in Hiroshima, you can't forget the bomb."

In Tokyo on Monday, Francis will meet victims of the "triple disaster", the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown in 2011 that devastated large swathes of north-eastern Japan. His trip will also include meetings with the new Emperor Naruhito and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, as well as delivering a mass in a Tokyo baseball stadium. On the first leg of his latest Asian tour, Francis spent three nights in Buddhist-majority Thailand, another country where just a sliver



NAGASAKI: A general view shows the city skyline and port of Nagasaki at Mount Inasayama yesterday. — AFP

of the population is Catholic.

He met with Thai King Vajiralongkorn and also sat down with the Buddhist Supreme Patriarch-the head of Thailand's Buddhists-readily taking off his shoes during the visit to adhere to local customs. His cousin Sister Ana Rosa, who has worked as a missionary in Thailand

since 1966, was a near constant presence by his side during the visit, serving as his interpreter. In his final public address in Bangkok, the pontiff expressed gratitude to the small Catholic community for the warm welcome he received. "I am leaving you with a task: do not forget to pray for me!" — AFP

Religion in Japan: It comes naturally

TOKYO: As Pope Francis, the head of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics, prepares to visit Japan, AFP looks at the religions the Japanese have followed for centuries.

What's the main religion?

There is no state religion in Japan but the nation's principal religions are Shinto and Buddhism. The two are closely intertwined - so much so that the estimated numbers of believers in the country do not add up. Shinto groups claim 86 million believers and Buddhism sects 85 million followers, according to the latest tally by the government's cultural affairs agency. The combined figure, 171 million people, is far larger than the nation's entire population of 126 million, suggesting tens of millions of "double-ups".

What is Shinto?

Shinto is a naturalistic, polytheistic religion that originated in ancient times. All natural objects and phenomena are considered to have their own divinity, meaning that Gods or spirits are everywhere in nature. Followers believe these Gods can be benevolent or malevolent and need to be placated by offerings at shrines.

There are no holy scriptures and no founding leader although some view the emperor as the "top priest" of Shinto and religious rites have played a central role in ceremonies for new Emperor Naruhito's



TOKYO: Pope Francis attends a meeting with Bishops at the Apostolic Nunciature in Tokyo yesterday. Pope Francis arrived in Japan for a visit that will take him to Nagasaki and Hiroshima to warn of the dangers of nuclear weapons and pray for peace. — AFP

enthronement. People also buy charms at shrines to pray for good luck in everything ranging from exams or business to safe childbirth and road safety. Worshipping ancestors is another important element of Shinto. Shinto also plays a central part in the most traditional of Japanese sports - sumo wrestling.

How is Buddhism different?

Shinto is Japan's indigenous religion but Buddhism has spread widely since arriving in the sixth century via China and Korea. Unlike Shinto, Buddhism is rules-based with a clear doctrine and spiritual leader. Worshipers go to a temple, rather than a shrine (for Shinto), where there is a monk to assist in the prayers. Buddhism in Japan was brought in from abroad and spread from the aristocracy, whereas Shinto sprang out of people's daily life. The two religions are very closely linked and it is not uncommon for a Buddhist temple to have a shrine in its compound or vice-versa. Generally, Japanese people adopted

Buddhism in addition to their native belief rather than "converting" from Shinto.

What about Christianity?

Christianity was brought to Japan in the mid-16th century by Francis Xavier, a Catholic missionary of the Society of Jesus, and Christians have a bloody history of being repressed and persecuted in the country. There are an estimated 1.9 million Christians in Japan, of whom 440,000 are Catholics. In addition, there is a larger but undetermined number of practicing non-Japanese believers, according to the Catholic Bishops Conference. Schools set up by missionaries have played a great role in promoting education in Japan. Rather than practicing it in a religious sense, many Japanese people take part in Christian events for fun - Christmas parties and weddings in chapels are both popular. Muslims, Jews and Hindus are also present in Japan but in small numbers and there is no official government tally. — AFP

France takes aim at US inaction in Middle East

MANAMA: French Defense Minister Florence Parly took aim yesterday at "gradual US disengagement" in the Middle East and said its failure to respond to provocations blamed on Iran set off a dangerous chain of events. Since May, tensions in the Gulf have escalated alarmingly with attacks against tankers, a US unmanned drone being downed, and strikes on key Saudi oil facilities in September.

Iran was blamed but denied involvement, and the United States has avoided equivalent retaliation despite its Saudi ally being in the crosshairs. "We've seen a deliberate gradual US disengagement," Parly said at the annual Manama Dialogue on regional security, adding it had been "on the cards for a while" but had become clearer with recent events.

"When the mining of ships went unanswered, the drone got shot. When that in turn went unanswered, major oil facilities were bombed. Where does it

stop? Where are the stabilizers?" she asked. "The region is accustomed to the ebb and flow of US involvement. But this time it seemed more serious." Speaking from the same stage in Bahrain, Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel Al-Jubeir insisted there was no US withdrawal from the region and no doubt about its commitment. "We believe the US is very dependable ally, and has been for the past seven decades" he said.

"There is a desire in the US historically to try to retreat from the international scene, but that desire is not reflected in America's posture". Jubeir defended Riyadh's measured response to the September strikes, saying the kingdom was being "strategically very patient" in its investigation so there is "not a shadow of doubt" on where the drones and missiles came from. "We have said all along we don't want war, so to jump into war very quickly is not a rational position."

General Kenneth McKenzie, commander of US Central Command, which covers the Middle East, also deflected the criticism of America's role in the region, although he conceded it may not top the list of priorities. "We have a carrier in the theatre, we've reinforced Saudi Arabia... so I'm not sure I would agree with the narrative of abandonment or a narrative of walking away," he told reporters on the sidelines of the conference. — AFP



MANAMA: Adel Al-Jubeir (center), Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, attends the 15th Manama Dialogue, a regional security summit organized by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), in the Bahraini capital Manama yesterday. — AFP

South Korea, Japan seek summit after intel pact thaw

NAGOYA: Japan and South Korean foreign ministers agreed yesterday to arrange a summit between their leaders next month, seeking to build on a lowering of tensions after Seoul stuck to a key military pact. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and President Moon Jae-in could meet in China next month, their ministers agreed on the sidelines of a G20 meeting in Nagoya, Japan. The summit would take place on the occasion of the Japan-China-South Korea trilateral scheduled for next month, said a Japanese diplomat who declined to give his name.

Ties between the two countries, both key US allies in the region, have hit rock bottom in recent months over trade and Japan's historic war-time atrocities. This led to Seoul threatening to withdraw from a key military intelligence-sharing pact, alarming the United States who said that would benefit only North Korea and China in the region. But late Friday, with only six hours until the pact was due to expire, South Korea reversed course and agreed to extend it "conditionally", warning however it could be "terminated" at any moment. The accord, known as GSOMIA, enabled the two US allies to share military secrets, particularly over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile capacity. Washington welcomed Seoul's decision but urged the pair to "continue sincere discussions to ensure a lasting solution to historic issues". Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe gave a muted response to the decision on



SEOUL: South Korea's President Moon Jae-in (right) talks with Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong during their meeting at the presidential Blue House in Seoul yesterday. — AFP

Friday, stressing that co-ordination between Tokyo, Seoul and Washington was "very important" while his defense minister urged South Korea to extend the pact "in a firm manner".

The relationship between Japan and South Korea is overshadowed by the 35 years of brutal colonization by the Japanese - including the use of sex slaves and forced labor - that is still bitterly resented today. Ties began a downward spiral after a series of South Korean court rulings ordering Japanese firms to compensate wartime forced labor victims. This infuriated Tokyo, with Japan insisting the matter was settled in a 1965 treaty normalizing diplomatic relations between the two countries, which included significant reparations.

'Long-term drift'

The historic dispute morphed into a trade spat between the two market economies, as Japan removed South Korea from a so-called "white list" of countries that enjoyed streamlined export control procedures. South Korea hit back with similar trade restrictions and a decision to scrap

the intelligence-sharing pact, surprising analysts who thought defense ties would be immune from the diplomatic row.

While insisting the issues of trade and GSO-MIA were completely separate, Japan's trade ministry announced that working-level talks would resume between the pair to thrash out their trade differences. "Thus far Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has signaled no shift in his government's position on either the white list or the dispute over compensation for colonial-era forced labor that triggered this year's crisis in bilateral relations," noted Tobias Harris, an analyst at Teneo consultants. "Without assurances that Seoul will adhere to Japan's understanding of the treaty, it may be difficult to prevent the long-term drift in the relationship," added Harris. The G20 gathering focused on global trade issues - including the reform of the World Trade Organization - as well as the environment and African development. Motegi said ministers had agreed on the "urgent" need to reform the WTO amid a collapse in the multilateral trading system and the US-China trade war. — AFP

Indonesia ministries ban pregnant, LGBT job seekers

JAKARTA: Several Indonesian ministries are banning pregnant, disabled, or LGBT job hunters in favor of what one called "normal" applicants, the Ombudsman said Friday, slammed as "arbitrary and hateful restrictions" by a rights group. The report comes as the world's biggest Muslim majority country takes applications from millions of candidates who are applying for some 200,000 civil-service jobs nationwide.

Indonesia, a Southeast Asian archipelago of some 260 million, has seen a jump in discrimination against gay and transgender people in recent years - while sexism in the workplace is also prevalent. On Friday, Ombudsman Indonesia commissioner Ninik Rahayu said an investigation found that the

defense and trade ministries as well as the Attorney General's Office (AGO) were discriminating against candidates in their job advertisements.

"The Defense Ministry prohibits pregnant women from applying for a job, while the AGO and the trade ministry ban transgender people," Ninik told AFP. "(The AGO) even made a hurtful statement that said 'we only accept normal people'," she added. "Banning people from applying for a job simply because they are transgender is not acceptable and is a violation of human rights," she added.

The Ombudsman called on the ministries to revoke their hiring policies but only the trade ministry has so far complied, Ninik said, adding her office first noticed the discrimination this year. On Thursday, an AGO spokesman told reporters that the institution banned gay and transgender applicants in favor of "normal" candidates. On the AGO's website, it said job applicants must not be color blind, physically or "mentally" disabled including those who have "sexual orientation disorders (transgender) or LGBT". — AFP