

International

Outcry as Pakistan appoints new ambassador to United Nations

9-year-old among 144 minors detained in Indian Kashmir

ISLAMABAD: A decision by Pakistan to appoint a former diplomat as its ambassador to the United Nations has sparked criticism over his alleged involvement in a domestic violence dispute in 2002. Munir Akram "has been appointed as Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the United Nations in New York, in place of Dr Maleeha Lodhi," the country's ministry of foreign affairs said in a statement late Monday.

Akram served a previous stint in the post from 2002 to 2008. But in January 2003 the United States asked Pakistan to waive Akram's diplomatic immunity so that he could be prosecuted on assault charges. According to press reports, New York police were called to Akram's home on December 10, 2002 by a woman who alleged the envoy had beaten her. The woman told police dispatchers that the envoy had smashed her head into a wall, that her arm hurt and that he had hit her before, according to the newspaper accounts.

The case could have had potentially embarrassing diplomatic ramifications. At the time, Pakistan was a key US ally in the war on terror, and had just taken up a seat on the UN Security Council, which was then considering whether to authorize military action against Iraq. Akram, who enjoys full diplomatic immunity, was never charged. Even so his return to the post ignited a swift backlash yesterday, many from women angered over the decision.

"In the age of #MeToo, the appointment... sends absolutely the wrong message to Pakistani men AND women: being a domestic violence perpetrator will earn you not just protection from the government but also not harm your career," wrote feminist author Bina Shah in a statement posted on Twitter. Others decried Akram's age - he is in his 70s - and his hawkishness over Pakistan's arch-rival India, with Pakistani media suggesting that his appointment hints at a new, more aggressive policy by

Islamabad over the disputed region of Kashmir. Tensions between the nuclear-armed rivals are high after New Delhi in August moved to strip the portion of Kashmir which it runs of its autonomy. However many also praised him as a seasoned diplomat who would take up the role just as Pakistan is trying to rally the international community to challenge India over Kashmir. The widely-respected Lodhi, who had served in the post for four years, said on Twitter that she had planned to move on after last week's UN General Assembly, and wished Akram luck in the role.

144 minors detained

Meanwhile, a police list seen by AFP showed yesterday that Indian authorities in Kashmir have detained 144 minors, including a nine-year-old, since the government removed the region's special status in August. Sixty of the minors are under 15, according to the document submitted to a committee appointed by India's Supreme Court to look into allegations of illegal detentions. Reasons given by the police for detaining the minors include stone pelting, rioting and causing damage to public and private property, the committee said in its report. Most have since been released. The police however denied that any child was taken into "illegal detention" and said that the juveniles are "dealt strictly (with) as per the prescribed law". "It happens often that when minors/juveniles indulge in stone pelting, that they are momentarily held up on the spot and sent home.

Some of these incidents are exaggerated beyond proportion," the report quoted the police as saying. New Delhi stripped Indian-administered Kashmir of its autonomy on August 5, sending in tens of thousands of extra troops, cutting telecommunications and detaining thousands of people. Almost two months on, many of the region's top politicians remain in custody and mobile



KASHMIR: A security officer stands guard to block a road near closed shops while strict restrictions are imposed during a lockdown in Srinagar. — AFP

phones and the internet remain largely snapped in the Kashmir Valley, the main trouble hotspot.

UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet said last month she was "deeply concerned about the impact of recent actions by the government of India on the human

rights of Kashmiris". Kashmir has been split between India and Pakistan since 1947 and has been the spark of two wars. Last week Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan told the UN General Assembly that India could unleash a "bloodbath" in the Muslim-majority territory. — Agencies

India's monsoon leaves more than 1,600 dead

NEW DELHI: The heaviest monsoon rains to lash India in 25 years have killed more than 1,600 people since June, government data showed yesterday, as authorities battled floods in two northern states and muddy waters swirled inside a major city. The monsoon, which typically lasts between June and September, has already delivered 10% more rain than a 50-year average, and is expected to withdraw only after early October, more than a month later than usual.

The extended rains have wreaked havoc, with northern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar states the worst hit in the latest spell of intense downpours, killing 144 people since last Friday, two officials said. In Patna, Bihar's riverside capital city that is home to around two million people, residents said they were wading through waist-deep water to buy essential items like food and milk. Ranjeev Kumar, 65, a resident of Patna's Ashiyana neighborhood, told Reuters by telephone that the entire area was stranded by the water. "The government is not doing any rescue and the situation is very serious here," he said.

On Monday, relief workers rescued Bihar's Deputy Chief Minister Sushil Modi from his home in Patna. Video footage showed him dressed in shorts and a t-shirt as he was brought out on a raft along with his family members. Saket Kumar Singh, who lives in the city's Boring Road area, said he was stranded for four days, with about two feet of water inside his house. "There was no electricity, and despite having money I was helpless," Singh, 45, said.

In neighboring Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, heavy rains have brought down more than 800 homes and swathes of farmland are submerged. Data released by the federal home ministry shows that 1,673 people have died because of floods and heavy rains this year, as of Sept. 29. Officials said that many of these fatalities



PATNA, India: A view of a waterlogged ward of the Nalanda Medical College and Hospital is seen following heavy rains in the Indian state of Bihar on Monday. — AFP

were caused due to wall and building collapses, including in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra, the western state that has seen 371 flood-related deaths in 2019, the highest in the country. "The danger of old or weak structures collapsing increases during the heavy rainfall, like what happened this time," Chandrakant Sharma, a flood

expert with Uttar Pradesh's disaster relief department said. India's flood prevention and forecasting systems are lacking, other experts say, even as the total flood prone area in the country has increased in recent decades because of deforestation, degradation of water bodies, and climate change. — Reuters



MUMBAI: City civil authority workers pick up plastic waste and trash during a clean-up drive on Versova beach in Mumbai. — AFP

India shelve plan on nationwide ban on single-use of plastics

NEW DELHI: India has held off imposing a blanket ban on single-use plastics to combat pollution, officials said yesterday, a measure seen as too disruptive for industry at a time when it is coping with an economic slowdown and job losses. The plan was for Prime Minister Narendra Modi to outlaw six items on Wednesday, the 150th anniversary of the birth of independence leader Mahatma Gandhi, as part of a broader campaign to rid India of single-use plastics by 2022.

But two officials said there would be no immediate move to ban plastic bags, cups, plates, small bottles, straws and certain types of sachets and instead the government would try to curb their use. For now, government will ask states to enforce existing rules against storing, manufacturing and using some single-use plastic products such as polythene bags and styrofoam, Chandra Kishore Mishra, the top bureaucrat at the ministry of environment, told Reuters.

"There is no new ban order being issued," Mishra said. "Now, it's a question of telling people about the ill-effects of plastic, of collecting and sending for recycling so people don't litter." The government's proposed nationwide ban

had dismayed consumer firms, which use plastic in packaging for everything from sodas and biscuits to ketchup and shampoo.

The Confederation of Indian Industry, a lobby group, said the move had become an existential issue for several economic sectors because alternatives were not immediately available. It said small-sized plastic bottles used for pharmaceutical or health products should be exempted as there is no alternate available. Sachets made from so-called multi-layered packaging should also not be banned, as that could disrupt supplies of products like biscuits, salt and milk, the confederation said.

"There was a conscious decision within the government not to hit businesses hard for now and discourage use of plastic only on a voluntary basis," said an official working on policy. He declined to be identified in line with government rules. Plastic waste is at epidemic proportions in the world's oceans with an estimated 100 million tons dumped there to date, according to the United Nations. Scientists have found large amounts of micro plastic in the intestines of deep-dwelling ocean mammals like whales.

India, which uses about 14 million tons of plastic annually, lacks an organized system for management of plastic waste, leading to widespread littering. "The toxins, poisons and persistent pollutants present in some of these plastic products leach and enter human bodies where they cause several diseases, including cancer," said Chitra Mukherjee, head of advocacy and policy at Delhi-based Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group. — Reuters

Disputed isles at centre of dispute between Japan and South Korea

TOKYO: A South Korean fighter jet conducted a patrol flight over islands at the centre of a territorial dispute with Japan, South Korean President Moon Jae-in said yesterday, the latest escalation of a bitter feud over history, trade and territory. Below are key facts about the disputed islands, known as Dokdo in Korea and Takeshima in Japan. The islands row has heated up amid a fierce dispute over compensation for Koreans forced to work in Japanese firms' mines and factories during World War Two.

What and where

There are two main volcanic islands and numerous smaller islets about equidistant from Japan and South Korea in the Sea of Japan and have a total land area of just under 0.20 square kilometers. The cluster lies in fertile fishing grounds and may sit above enormous deposits of natural gas hydrate that could be worth billions of dollars, Seoul has said. The place is controlled by South Korea, with 25 guards and three lighthouse keepers currently stationed there.

Competing claims

The dispute is deeply emotional for Koreans, who say the islands have been recorded as being part of Korean territory since the year 512 and were the first pieces of their territory seized by Japan when it started its 1910-1945 colonial reign over the peninsula. South Korea has built lodgings, lighthouses and a monitoring facility on the islands despite repeated protests by Japan.

Japan insists the islands were never a part of Korea to begin with, so they were not returned when Tokyo relinquished its claims to the peninsula after its defeat in World War Two. Japan says it had established sovereignty over the islands by the mid-17th century when they were a stop-over point for its fishermen, and were incorporated into Shimane Prefecture in 1905, when South Korea became a Japanese protectorate. Tokyo says the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty confirmed Japanese sovereignty after World War Two. North Korea also claims sovereignty over the islands. — Reuters

Citing 'unhealthy air', Vietnam tells people to limit outdoor activities

HANOI: Vietnam warned its people yesterday to limit outdoor activities because the air quality in the Southeast Asian country has persistently been at "unhealthy" levels for days. The levels of hazardous small particles known as PM2.5 in the air at the country's two largest cities, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, have been rising persistently since early last month, exceeding "Vietnamese standards", the government said in a statement.

The government blamed the pollution on low rain and farmers burning rice crop remnants after the harvest to prepare for new plantings. Coal is also widely used for power generation in the country. Air Visual - an independent online air quality index monitor - says Hanoi's reading of PM2.5 has exceeded 300 micrograms per cubic meter at times, the worst in the world. Yesterday, it showed PM2.5 levels at 180 in Hanoi and 86 in Ho Chi Minh.

The World Health Organization recommends an air quality standard for PM2.5 of no more than 10 micrograms per cubic meter. Such pollution could become a political issue in Vietnam, where protests have been held in the past against the degradation of the environment. Communist-ruled Vietnam tolerates little dissent and protesters and activists are often prevented from gathering or charged with "causing public disorder". — Reuters

Russians drinking less, living longer, WHO says

MOSCOW: Russia remains a nation of heavy drinkers, but alcohol consumption has fallen 43 percent from 2003 to 2016, a key factor in the country's rapid rise in life expectancy, the World Health Organization said yesterday. Russians consume the equivalent of 11-12 liters worth of pure ethanol a year, among the world's highest consumption levels, but the reduction since 2003 has substantially reduced mortality, the WHO said in a report. Male life expectancy sank to a low of 57 years in the 1990s, but began to climb significantly in 2003 as drinking levels peaked, the report said.

It now stands at almost 68 years for men and 78 years for women. Mortality resulting from all causes dropped by 39 percent from 2003 to 2018 in men and by 36 percent for women, according to the study, which looked at trends over almost 30 years. The study said there was a clear correlation between national alcohol consumption and mortality rates and life expectancy, and that the reduction in drinking resulted from government policies adopted from 2000. "...our publication provides a clear causal link between the implementation of effective alcohol policies and a reversal of mortality trends," the study wrote.

President Vladimir Putin who has been in power since the turn of the century is battling a demographic slump. Last year the population contracted by 86,000 people, the first annual contraction recorded in a decade, the state statistics service said. Putin has long cultivated an image of sobriety in contrast to his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, whom many Russians associate with drunken and embarrassing gaffes. The study pointed to alcohol policy reforms aimed at reducing the share of smuggled or home-made alcohol on the market, increasing alcohol excise taxes and raising the minimum price for vodka and other spirits. — Reuters