

International

Rohingya 'bandit' couple shot dead in Bangladesh gunfight

Latest killings amid growing tensions between refugees and authorities

DHAKA: A Rohingya couple was shot dead during a gunfight in a border town camp hours after they were detained by Bangladesh police, officials said yesterday, the latest killings amid growing tensions between the refugees and authorities. Police in Teknaf town said the refugee couple - Dil Mohammad, 32, and his 26-year-old wife Jaheda Begum - were members of a Rohingya "bandit group". Authorities claim the gang killed a local ruling party official, Omar Faruk, in a refugee settlement in southeastern Bangladesh last month.

At least 13 Rohingya refugees have been killed in

alleged gunfights between criminals and officers since Faruk's murder on August 22, police inspector Ali Arshad said. "Eleven of them were involved in Faruk's murder," he said, but said that while part of the gang, the couple were not accused of carrying out the shooting. Police officer Mohammad Babul told AFP the pair were detained by investigators late Saturday and led officials to a suspected gang hideout in search of other alleged members.

He said the officers were ambushed by the group hours later. "We retaliated with gunfire. The couple sus-

tained severe bullet injuries during the shootout," Babul said, adding that they were later declared dead in a hospital. Rights groups have previously accused Bangladesh police of staging gunfights as a cover for the extrajudicial killings of Rohingya, mainly suspects in drug smuggling.

Early this week, UN human rights experts called for an impartial investigation into Rohingya being killed in gunfights after being named as suspects in Faruk's killing. Following the Faruk murder, local residents vandalized refugee shops and staged protests in one of the

camp. The settlements are home to nearly a million of the stateless minority who fled oppression in neighboring Myanmar. At least 33 Rohingya have been killed by Bangladeshi security forces in gunfights and another nine killed in internal gang clashes since July last year, according to the police. UN experts have also expressed "serious concerns" new restrictions and a virtual internet blackout in the camps. The ongoing clampdown came after the failure of a fresh attempt to repatriate some of the refugees, the second effort in less than a year. — AFP

Residents flee as strong earthquake rattles Albania

TIRANA: Albania was rattled by its strongest earthquake in decades Saturday, officials said, sending people fleeing into the streets in several cities, damaging buildings and triggering power cuts in the capital. The epicenter of the shallow 5.6-magnitude quake, was near Durres, less than 40 kilometers west of the capital Tirana, according to the US Geological Survey. Albania's defense ministry said it was the "strongest earthquake in the country in the last 20 to 30 years".

"There are no deaths," defense ministry spokeswoman Albana Qajaj said. Some 80 people sought medical help in both Tirana and Durres, 21 of whom were hospitalized due to injuries caused by falling objects or parts of walls as well as for panic attacks. Health Minister Ogerta Manasterili said. Qajaj told AFP that houses and buildings in Tirana had been damaged but were still standing and that the ministry was assessing damage in other towns and villages.

Prime Minister Edi Rama cancelled his scheduled trip to the United States following the quake, which cut electricity and telephone lines in Tirana and a number of other towns and villages. Many people remained outside their homes for several hours in the capital, fearful of aftershocks. "I fear to return because such a strong earthquake could be followed with others," Drita Lohja, a resident in her fifties said. Falling debris pulverized parked cars in parts of the city. AFP reporters and witnesses saw windows broken and deep fissures in the facades of buildings in Durres, as well as in the capital. Media reported that a large building



TIRANA: A man walks on the debris from a damaged building in Tirana after two earthquakes over 5.0 magnitude struck the coastline Adriatic coastline of Albania. — AFP

in Tirana was seriously damaged and that residents were being evacuated. A University of Tirana building was also damaged, witnesses said. According to local media reports, at least two people were lightly injured and a dozen houses collapsed in the village of Helmes, 10 kilo-

meters from Tirana. Two other earthquakes followed the strong one that occurred at around 4:00 pm (1400 GMT) and was felt in neighboring Montenegro and Italy, but also on the Greek island of Corfu according to some Twitter users. — AFP

High stakes for Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party

TUNIS: Snubbed by voters in the first round of Tunisia's presidential election, the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party must overcome an "identity crisis" to secure its political future in upcoming legislative polls, experts say. Last week saw the first round of the country's second free presidential elections since the 2011 ouster of autocrat Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who died in exile days after the poll.

It was the first time Ennahdha has contested the presidency, putting forward as its candidate interim speaker of parliament Abdelfattah Mourou, who is seen as a moderate and advocates more openness in the party. Mourou came third with 434,000 votes - 12.88 percent - a disappointing result for the largest party in parliament. That compared with 1.5 million votes won by Ennahdha in 2011 in the country's first free election, for a constituent assembly, that marked the party's political comeback.

Ennahdha was not alone in its recent setback. All the candidates who have been at the forefront of the political scene in recent years, such as Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, were also knocked back in the first round. The vote reshaped the political landscape, as two outsiders came out ahead, having campaigned against the system: constitutional law professor Kais Saied and imprisoned media mogul Nabil Karoui.

'Identity crisis'

After failing to reach the presidential run off, the stakes are high for Ennahdha in October 6 legislative polls. In an attempt to entice its base, on Friday the party pledged its support for Saied, who is considered socially conservative and siphoned off many of its votes, particularly among young Tunisians.

Ennahdha "could not support Nabil Karoui because it has already been accused by its base of having worked within the system to the detriment of its principles," said political scientist Slaheddine Jourchi. Ennahdha governed as part of a coalition with the Nidaa Tounes party, which Karoui helped found and which won 2014 elections on an anti-Islamist platform but later splintered. For political scientist Hamza Meddeb, the decline of Ennahdha can be explained by internal conflicts within

the movement over its direction. By participating in the coalition and "acquiescing to neoliberal economic policies" that did not lower unemployment or prices, Ennahdha "lost its ability to activate socioeconomic reform and anticorruption arguments to rebuild its legitimacy and support base", Meddeb said in a report for Carnegie Middle East Center published in early September. Since Ennahdha made the "landmark" decision in 2016 to "abandon preaching and focus on politics" the party has experienced "an identity crisis", he said.

By focusing on building support on a foundation beyond religion, Ennahdha must now regain legitimacy by positioning itself as "an effective governing force and propose viable policy solutions to Tunisia's social and economic challenges", he added.

Election challenge

As an indication of its internal shake up, Ennahdha - one of Tunisia's most structured parties, where disagreements rarely surface - in recent months has seen a series of resignations and public challenges to its candidate choices for the legislative and presidential elections. Lotfi Zitoun, advisor to the head of Ennahdha Rached Ghannouchi, announced his resignation in July, a decision triggered, according to local media reports, by a conflict over the strategic choices of the movement.

Zoubeir Shehoubi, former director of Ghannouchi's cabinet, also resigned, calling for the departure of the old guard and lamenting that "Ennahdha, now a normal party, integrated in the system and mechanisms of the state, has become incapable of finding social and economic solutions." In view of the fact that 15 to 20 percent of pro-Ennahdha youth did not vote for Mourou, Ghannouchi, himself a candidate in a heavily disputed Tunis constituency, has called for mass mobilization for the October legislative vote.

Ennahdha hopes to keep its 69 seats in the 217-seat parliament. The change in the electoral calendar to bring forward the presidential election after the death of president Beji Caid Essebsi posed an extra challenge. The presidential poll pushed the legislative elections, for which Ennahdha is better armed, into the background. And this vote, three weeks after the first round of the presidential election, could see voters reinforce the first-round anti-system choices. "Maybe Ennahdha will lose big... maybe the party will even lose its position at the heart of power," said Jourchi. — AFP



MAIDUGURI: Soldiers stand beside truck to close offices of humanitarian group, Action Against Hunger (ACF) in the restive Maiduguri, northeast Nigeria. The Nigerian army has shut down the offices of a humanitarian group in the restive northeast with no explanation as tensions simmer with aid organizations in the region. — AFP

Targeting militants, Nigeria to require ID cards in the northeast

ABUJA: Nigeria will require anyone moving through three northeastern states to carry identification cards in an effort to root out members of Boko Haram and Islamic State, the army said yesterday. The new requirement follows credible information that members of the two militant groups were hiding among civilians in the towns and villages of the states, an army statement said.

The army said it would "strictly check" the identification cards of those moving or passing through the states of Adamawa, Borno and Yobe. Those found without identification would "attract further scrutiny and comprehensive investigation to determine his or her activities with the insurgents or otherwise", it said.

Last week, the army forced non-profit Action Against Hunger to close its office in the region, accusing it of aiding groups such as Boko Haram and Islamic State by providing members with food and medicine. The decade-long insurgency led by Islamist militant group Boko Haram has killed some 30,000 people and forced more than 2 million to flee their homes. Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA) split from Boko Haram in 2016.

UN report on violence

In another development, Nigeria has rejected the findings of a UN report on violence in the country accusing it of simply blaming the government of President Muhammadu Buhari. "While we agree that the violence in Nigeria, or in any country, is a major concern and that there is a rippling effect, we are disappointed that the rapporteur was silent on intra-group violence," presidential spokesman Garba

Shehu said in a statement. Shehu said defended the government saying it was trying its best to end the violence. "There is absolutely no doubt that violence between farmers and herders, which has a long history in our country spiked in recent years but the effectiveness with which the federal and state authorities responded made a big difference," he said.

Calm has virtually returned to all parts affected by the peculiar violence, he added. Shehu called for the support of the UN rapporteur in reporting government efforts to end the conflicts, rejecting a report that he said "scratches the surface of the subject then ends up blaming the government under the able leadership of President Muhammadu Buhari".

In a preliminary report at the end of a 12-day visit to Nigeria, Special Rapporteur Agnes Callamard accused the government of not doing enough to end the violence between herders and farmers in central Nigeria as well as the kidnappings for ransom and banditry in the northwest which have claimed thousands of lives in recent months.

The report also called on Nigeria to stop extra-judicial killings by security forces in the country. Local and global rights groups, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have accused Nigerian security agents of abuses and summary executions of suspects. Hundreds of Boko Haram detainees have been killed over the decade-long jihadist uprising, while dozens of civilians have died in police custody. The security forces have repeatedly denied the allegations. — Agencies

News in brief

Pakistan bus accident kills 23

PESHAWAR: At least 23 people were killed and 18 others injured yesterday when a bus hit a rock and plunged into a ravine in northwestern Pakistan, officials said. Local administration official Aurangzeb Haider told AFP four women and six children were among the dead, while senior police official Zaibullah Khan said six of the injured were in critical condition. The accident happened in the Babusar Top area, bordering Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province with Gilgit-Baltistan. Pakistan has a poor traffic safety record, with frequent fatal accidents blamed on reckless driving, bad roads and shoddily maintained vehicles. — AFP

Tapah approaches Japan

TOKYO: Typhoon Tapah approached southwestern Japan yesterday, with heavy rain and strong winds grounding hundreds of regional flights. Tapah, with gusts up to 162 kilometers per hour, was expected to draw near Nagasaki prefecture overnight, according to the Japan Meteorological Agency. It was on course to travel through the channel between Japan and the Korean Peninsula before moving toward northern Japan today, when it is expected to weaken and be downgraded, the agency said. The storm prompted cancellations of more than 400 domestic flights, according to national broadcaster NHK. "Serious caution is warranted for violent winds, high waves and landslides," said Japan's Fire and Disaster Management Agency in a statement. So far the typhoon has caused 21 minor injuries, mostly in a southern island region of Okinawa that was hit by the storm earlier. — AFP

Al Shabaab loots weapons

MOGADISHU: Fighters belonging to Somali Islamist militant group Al Shabaab stormed an army base near the capital Mogadishu yesterday, looted it for weapons and then withdrew, a military source, residents and the group said. The assault began when a suicide bomber rammed his explosive-laden car into the base in El Salini, 60 kilometers southwest of Mogadishu, at around 5:30 am local time, al Shabaab said. A local elder, Ahmed Cali, told Reuters he had been woken by the sound of a huge blast followed by gunfire. He said that later Al Shabaab fighters were seen leaving the base, some in trucks loaded with ammunition. A major in the Somali military who didn't want to be named said the military has sustained some casualties, without giving details. He said the army had received reinforcements and was back in control of the base. Al Shabaab claimed responsibility for the assault and said they had killed 23 soldiers. — Reuters

Dutch and British commemorate Operation Market Garden

EDE: Operation Market Garden, the ultimately failed attempt to liberate the north of the Netherlands from Nazi Germany in September 1944, was commemorated by veterans and royalty in the Netherlands on Saturday. Under a clear blue sky, Britain's Prince Charles and Dutch Princess Beatrix watched over a thousand parachutists re-enact the landing of British, American and Polish paratroopers on Ginkel Heath on Sept 17, 1944.

The landing marked the start of Operation Market Garden, one of the largest allied operations of World War Two - famously depicted in the 1977 film "A Bridge Too Far", starring Sean Connery. Market Garden was meant to clear the path for allied troops into Germany, by liberating the north and east of the neighboring Netherlands, isolating German troops in the west of the country.

Tens of thousands of paratroopers were instructed to seize bridges up and down from the Dutch-German border, but after three days of heavy battles and initial success, they failed to take the city of Arnhem. Around 15,000 allied soldiers and thousands of German soldiers lost their lives in Operation Market Garden, which culminated in the loss of the Battle of Arnhem - prolonging World War Two in Europe until the final liberation came in May 1945. "The battle was tough, brutal and vicious," Dutch defense minister Ank Bijleveld said at the commemoration of the battles.

"We all know that Operation Market Garden did not bring the liberty that everyone was hoping for," the mayor of Ede, Rene Verhulst, said. "But these were days of great courage, that were decisive for the future of our continent." Among the thousands of spectators on Saturday were veterans who survived the harsh battles in 1944. Some of them even took part in the commemorative parachute jumps. "This was terrifyingly thrilling," 97-year-old veteran Sandy Cortman told Dutch TV after his jump. "I won't be doing this again tomorrow." — Reuters