

International

Indian families demand justice as they await bodies of soldiers

Indian army hands over bodies of soldiers killed in border skirmish

AHMEDABAD: In their last phone conversation, Neha Ojha, the wife of an Indian soldier, said she laughed off her husband's idea to name their daughter Snow White because he received the news of her birth while patrolling a snow-covered valley on the border with China.

She said she asked her husband, Kundan, to come up with an Indian name before he came home. Sixteen hours later, Ojha was informed that her husband was among 20 soldiers killed by Chinese troops in the disputed Galwan Valley. On Thursday, she said she was struggling to nurse her 18-day-old infant as she awaited her husband's remains. "We were all waiting for him (Kundan) to host the naming ceremony of our daughter. Now we're preparing to hold his final rites," 23-year-old Ojha said in a telephone conversation, speaking haltingly.

The Indian army yesterday began handing over the bodies of the soldiers killed in the fight - the worst clash in over half a century between the nuclear-armed neighbors. Both countries blame each other for the clash, but agreed not to take any steps to escalate matters further.

Indian soldiers who survived the clash said the Chinese used bamboo sticks studded with nails during the confrontation in sub-zero temperatures

in the high altitude terrain, while the Indians used stones and sticks. Under an agreement forged in the 1990s, the two armies carry but do not use arms near the border.

China said its troops were engaged in a "violent physical confrontation" with Indian soldiers, but has given no details on casualties. Families of the fallen Indian soldiers and other citizens demanded Prime Minister Narendra Modi find diplomatic and strategic ways to punish China.

Despite her husband's posting in one of world's most highly militarized areas, Ojha said she had assumed that the dispute with the Chinese would never take a serious turn. "My husband had compared brawls with Chinese soldiers to scuffles between boys in school, 'We push them, they push us, we throw a stick, they fling it back'," she recalled her husband recounting to her.

"I was wrong, we were all wrong to trust the Chinese...they must be punished."

Hardline nationalist groups with ties to Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party have stepped up calls for a boycott of Chinese goods and a cancellation of contracts with Chinese firms. "This kind of bludgeoning must stop. China has a strong army but Indians will unite against them if they continue such attacks," said Kishore Singh, the father of a de-



GURDASPUR: Relatives comfort Jaswinder Kaur (center) after her husband Indian soldier Satnam Singh, was killed in a clash with Chinese forces in the Galwan valley area, at Bhojraj village near Gurdaspur yesterday. — AFP

ceased soldier, hours before he received the body. "The Chinese are using their brute force amid a pandemic, the world must stand with India to punish them," said Singh, a retired teacher. — Reuters

Fitch cuts India's rating outlook to 'negative'

MUMBAI/BENGALURU: Fitch cut its outlook on India's sovereign rating to "negative" from "stable" yesterday and forecast a 5 percent contraction in growth for the current fiscal year, saying the coronavirus outbreak was extracting a heavy toll on the economy.

"The coronavirus pandemic has significantly weakened India's growth outlook for this year and exposed the challenges associated with a high public-debt burden," the ratings agency said in a statement.

However, Fitch maintained its India rating at 'BBB-', the lowest investment grade. The move comes after Moody's downgraded India earlier this month to a notch above junk, falling in line with other global agencies, while also cutting its outlook to 'negative'. But S&P shortly after affirmed its rating and maintained a 'stable' outlook.

Fitch said it expected India to rebound with growth of 9.5 percent in 2021/22, mainly due to a low base but highlighted that its forecasts are subjected to considerable risks due to continued rise in new COVID-19 cases as

nationwide lockdowns are eased gradually.

The agency said the medium-term fiscal outlook is of particular importance from the rating perspective, but is subject to great uncertainty and would depend on the level of GDP growth and government's policy intentions. Fiscal metrics have deteriorated significantly and Fitch said it expects government debt to jump to 84.5 percent of GDP this year from 71 percent last year and sharply higher than the median 52.6 percent for other similar rated countries in 2020. Fitch said India's medium-term GDP growth outlook might be negatively affected by renewed asset-quality challenges in banks and liquidity issues in non-banking financial companies and need for further financial support for banks is inevitable.

"It remains to be seen whether India can return to sustained growth rates of 6 percent to 7 percent as we previously estimated, depending on the lasting impact of the pandemic, particularly in the financial sector," they wrote. — Reuters

Living on the edge: Pakistani Hindus feel safer in India

NEW DELHI: Seven years ago, Dharamveer Solanki, a Hindu, left his home in Pakistan's Hyderabad city, never to return. When his train crossed the border into India, Solanki said he felt happier than ever before.

"It felt as though I had been reborn," he said, sitting inside a bustling refugee colony on the outskirts of New Delhi, where he and hundreds of other Hindus who fled Muslim-majority Pakistan have built a new home. Asylum-seekers like Solanki are the main beneficiaries of a law that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government introduced late last year, laying out a path to citizenship for people from six religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan who arrived in India before 2015.

The law excluded Muslims from the list, and that determination of rights to citizenship based on religion triggered protests across India that resulted in a fierce police crackdown and deadly violence. Critics say the law discriminates against Muslims and undermines India's secular constitution.

But for the Hindus of Pakistan, Modi's long-held commitment to providing them refuge has drawn more and more across the border even before the new

law was enacted. In the 15 months through March 2019 India's home ministry dealt with 16,121 applications from Pakistani nationals for long-term visas. In preceding years, the number of visas granted rose from hundreds to thousands.

The flow of migrants has stopped temporarily as borders have been sealed to control the spread of the coronavirus. But many remain desperate to cross, Solanki said. They often come on 25-day pilgrimage visas and stay on until they get citizenship.

Solanki is still waiting for India to grant him citizenship, as the process has now been delayed by the coronavirus outbreak in the country. He was unaware that there was a World Refugee Day, but when told by Reuters that it would fall on June 20, he was very clear what he would like to see.

"The citizenship law has been passed. Our people should now get land and benefits as citizens," Solanki told Reuters at his home in the Majnu Ka Tilla neighborhood on Delhi's northern fringe.

The settlement where he lives is a cluster of cement, brick and wood huts, with no electricity or water supply, off a busy road. Around 600 people live there. Many of the young men work as hawkers or, like Solanki, as laborers. Several said they lived in better conditions in Pakistan, but they felt safer in India.

A few miles away, across the heavily-polluted Yamuna river, a newer settlement has sprung up in the woods beneath a highway overpass called Signature Bridge. In July last year, when Reuters began observing this community, there were only a few rickety huts. But now hundreds of people live there. The huts are built with wood from the surrounding forest. —Reuters