

International

Indonesian man collapses during flogging for 'rape'

Backlash in Indonesia as transgender woman put in male jail cell

EAST ACEH: An Indonesian man collapsed as he was flogged nearly 150 times yesterday for raping a child in conservative Aceh province, where public whipping is a common punishment for violating Islamic law. The 19-year-old grimaced and cried out as a masked sharia officer lashed his back with a rattan stick in the town of Idi. He pleaded for the punishment to stop and was briefly treated by doctors before the flogging restarted.

The man was arrested earlier this year on charges he molested and raped the victim, whose age was not revealed. He was sentenced to 146 lashes, a particularly high number reserved for the most serious crimes. "The maximum sentence is meant to be a deterrent," Ivan Nanjar Alavi, an official from the East Aceh prosecutor's office, told reporters. Aceh, on the western tip of Sumatra, is the only region in Muslim-majority Indonesia to impose Islamic law under an autonomy deal with the central government that ended a long-running separatist insurgency.

Also yesterday, a 40-year-old and a 21-year-old man were whipped 100 times each for having sex with underage partners. Aceh's public whippings—widely criticized by rights groups—can attract hundreds of spectators, but crowds have dwindled in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. The province allows whipping for a range of charges—including gambling, adultery, drinking alcohol, and having gay or premarital sex. It has wide support among Aceh's mostly Muslim population.

Backlash in Indonesia

In another development, Indonesian rights groups have slammed police for placing a transgender woman in a jail cell with a man, saying it underscored widespread discrimination in the world's biggest Muslim majority nation. Social media influencer Millen Cyrus, 21, who has one million followers on Instagram, was detained with a male friend on drug-possession charges in the capital Jakarta at the weekend. Cyrus told local media this week that she hoped she would be moved from the male holding cell. Authorities have since placed her in a solitary cell. But they defended the initial decision by pointing to the suspect's government identity card which said Cyrus was male.

"The perpetrator's status was male as acknowledged in his identity card," said Jakarta police spokesman Yusri Yunus. "However, given the situation, (authorities) placed her in a special cell alone." The move sparked a backlash on social media and rights groups said it highlighted

Video games are 'under-regulated': EU anti-terror czar

BRUSSELS: Online video games can be used to propagate extremist ideologies and even prepare attacks, the EU's anti-terrorist coordinator told AFP in an interview in which he urged more regulation. The official, Gilles de Kerchove, made the argument ahead of the European Commission's presentation on December 9 of a proposed Digital Services Act that aims to rein in Big Tech excesses and internet hate speech. "I'm not saying that all the gaming sector is a problem. There are two billion people playing online, and that's all very well," said de Kerchove, a Belgian appointed to his post 13 years ago.

But, he warned, "you have extreme-right groups in Germany that have come up with games where the aim is to shoot Arabs, or (Hungarian-born US billionaire George) Soros, or Mrs (German Chancellor Angela) Merkel for her migration policy, etc." "That can be an alternative



IDI, Indonesia: A man is publicly flogged by a member of the Sharia police after he was found guilty of raping a child in Idi Rayeuk, East Aceh yesterday. — AFP

the challenges faced by gay and transgender Indonesians. Two years ago, police in the conservative province of Aceh made headlines when they publicly humiliated a dozen transgender women by forcibly cutting their hair as they made the group wear male clothing and speak in a masculine voice.

"We're demanding that police respect the rights of suspects during investigations with non-discriminatory and non-transphobic perspectives," said Arus Pelangi at Indonesia's Transgender Network. "Police discriminated against her gender identity ... by placing (Cyrus) in a men's detention cell." The Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (ICJR) said authorities need to do a better job of respecting transgender people. "Authorities should have been able to see the vulnerability of a suspect," said ICJR researcher Maidina Rahmawati. "If they were confused about where to place (Cyrus), they should have involved psychologists or social workers who are able to assess (her) needs." — Agencies

way to spread ideology, especially of the extreme right but not only them, a way to launder money... there are currencies created in games that can be exchanged for legal tender," he said. "It can be a form of communicating. It's encrypted. It can also be a way to test attack scenarios," he continued.

De Kerchove also raised concerns over "algorithmic amplification", where platforms such as Facebook and YouTube put "problematic" and "borderline" content up high, exploiting emotional reactions to boost user engagement. This is one aspect the EU executive wants to tackle in its Digital Services Act by demanding more transparency from digital titans. The European Parliament is also discussing a proposal which would require content deemed to have a terrorist character deleted online within one hour. The fight against terrorism has shot up the EU agenda since recent jihadist attacks in France and Austria. Another concern, a controversial one, is a push by law enforcement in EU countries to have encrypted communications, of the sort offered by WhatsApp, readable by authorities with a warrant. But that has run up against unease by defenders of free speech and civil liberties and privacy advocates, who fear abuse and a backdoor that can be used by hackers and criminals, as well as authoritarian administrations. On that, de Kerchove offered reassurance. "Nobody in Brussels wants to reduce encryption," he said. "On the contrary, we are in favor of more encryption." — AFP

COVID-19 forges path to new life for Israeli ultra-Orthodox Jews

JERUSALEM: For many, the pandemic has been a time of devastating isolation, but for some ultra-Orthodox Israeli Jews it has pushed them to integrate in the world outside their narrow communities. Lockdowns and restrictions on gatherings in Israel have shaken the rhythm of ultra-Orthodox, or haredi, life—especially the continuous cycle of communal Torah study in religious schools known as yeshivot. For some, that disruption has had a profound impact.

Yoav, a young man who asked that his last name be withheld, said the coronavirus pandemic triggered a spiritual crisis that led him to embrace a life outside his clannish, conservative surroundings. "The corona gave me the opportunity to leave this world," he told AFP. Removed from his daily routine of study in a yeshiva, Yoav found himself stuck at home with a father unbending on matters of religious observance. "The tensions were constant," he said. "For years I had known that this life was not made for me and then I understood that I had to leave." He had heard about Hillel, a non-profit which since 1991 has helped haredi youth seeking a different life.

He called them, moved out of his family home and has been living with 13 other young people aged 18 to 25 in the organization's large Jerusalem shelter. Residents are supported by mentors from the non-profit and by social workers, who give psychological and financial assistance and offer courses to help them integrate into non-haredi society. Young haredim "don't know anything about the modern world, they don't know anything about the other sex; you have to teach them everything," said Ety Eliyahu, the shelter's director. "We're here to help them find their place in the world," she said.

Cut off from more secular Israeli society, haredim adhere to a rigid interpretation of Judaism and an equally strict social code. Most males study scripture throughout the day. Women, who receive a broader education, are kept apart from men outside their family until marriage, which usually takes place at a relatively young age. Haredi women have higher workforce participation than their husbands, who typically remain dedicated to religious studies. Hillel is generally approached each year by around 350 youngsters, mostly between the ages of 19 and 25, but requests doubled in 2020 as the pandemic took hold, the organization's director, Yair Hess, told AFP.

With the closure of the yeshivot, he said, haredi youth have spent more time than usual with their families, creating a "pressure cooker" which exploded in many homes. Rabbi Shimon Bitton, who runs a religious secondary school in central Israel, shares this view. The seminary "was like a protective greenhouse for these young people", said the 38-year-old educator. But the Covid-19 pandemic has shaken up their daily lives, forcing some to look for work to help their families in financial difficulty. "They found themselves in a world they did not know and wanted to discover it," he said. — AFP