

International

Prophet row murder sparks fury on Indian social media

Lal had been targeted after a Facebook post expressing support for Nupur Sharma

NEW DELHI: The gruesome killing of a Hindu tailor has inflamed religious tensions in India and sparked a furious response on social media, including calls for reprisal attacks against the country's Muslim minority. Two Muslim men have been arrested over Tuesday's attack, committed in apparent retaliation for inflammatory comments about the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) made by a spokeswoman for India's governing party weeks earlier.

Footage of the murder and attempted beheading of Kanhaiya Lal, which went viral online, also showed his attackers brandishing large knives and threatening to kill Prime Minister Narendra Modi. India has a long history of communal violence and authorities have shut down internet connections and imposed a curfew in the city where the attack took place to prevent unrest.

But social media platforms have been consumed by angry reactions to the killing, with some users demanding violent retribution against both the accused murderers and other Muslims. Members of public Telegram groups dedicated to promoting and defending Hinduism called on each other to pick up weapons and attack Muslims, or discussed the virtues of storming a police station to attack the two accused men.

The far-right Hindu group Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) used social media to issue a nationwide protest call against Islamist terrorism and complain that Muslims had routinely upset the religious sentiments of India's majority religion. "You should be afraid of the day when Hindus too start giving reply to the insult," senior VHP figure Surendra Kumar Jain said in a video posted online,

and watched nearly 75,000 times across Twitter and Facebook.

Though many prominent voices said the killing was an indictment of Islam, many of the loudest voices condemning the attack came from Muslim religious groups. "There is no room for justification of violence in Islam," wrote the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, one of at least half a dozen prominent India-based Muslim groups to condemn the attack while also calling for calm. "Peace should not be disturbed. Nobody should try to take advantage of this ugly crime."

'Hindu lives matter' goes viral

A day after his murder, Lal's name had been mentioned more than 200,000 times on Twitter, along with a grab bag of hashtags condemning the attack. The hashtag "Hindu lives matter" was being posted more than 2,000 times an hour on Thursday.

Lal had been targeted after a Facebook post expressing support for Nupur Sharma, a BJP spokeswoman who last month made inflammatory remarks about the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) during a TV debate. Her comments led to violent protests in India and embroiled the country in a diplomatic row, with nearly 20 countries calling in their Indian ambassadors for an explanation.

The BJP went into damage control after Sharma's comments, suspending her from the party and issuing a statement to insist that it respected all religions. But since coming to power nationally in 2014, Modi's party has been accused by rights groups and foreign governments of championing discriminatory policies towards India's 200-million strong Muslim minority.

the city and forced to spend days in quarantine hotels.

In the mall, a 23-year-old postgraduate student who gave her name as Natalie said she felt distant from the Chinese leader. "We all know that (Xi) won't actually come into contact with everyday people. So I don't see why I have to pay attention," she said.

Some on social media pointedly shared decades-old pictures of visits by Queen Elizabeth II to Hong Kong, with visibly more relaxed security and close proximity to spectators. But others AFP spoke to throughout the day were more understanding.

"Of course I want to see the president if possible," said a 76-year-old woman surnamed Xu. "But we are just small ordinary people. Watching TV will be fine too." Details of Xi's visit have been kept under tight wraps, with media access tightly restricted.

Kelvin Lam, a financial professional in his 40s, said he could understand the reason for Covid-related restrictions. "But I think it would be better if they make things less secretive," he said. "More transparency is better."

Thunderstorms swept through the city all day

Indian soldiers guarded the twin routes of Pahalgam and Baltal leading to the shrine to the Hindu god Shiva. Over 400 sandbag bunkers manned by armed soldiers dot the Himalayan landscape surrounding the shrine and along the routes to two base camps.

Authorities restricted locals from visiting the two tourist resorts of Pahalgam and Sonmarg that serve as base camps during the pilgrimage. All traffic was being halted on the main highway to the start while convoys guarded by armed soldiers passed through, with all connecting roads blocked with coils of razor wire.

Dilip Sharma, from the northern Indian state of Rajasthan, said he was ecstatic to be able to undertake the pilgrimage again after three years. "You can't imagine how happy I am at being able to pay my obeisance to the lord again. I want to thank the government of India for very good arrangements," Sharma told an AFP photographer along the trek to the shrine.

The event used to be low-key, with a few thousand pilgrims attending, until an armed insurgency against the Indian rule of Kashmir erupted in 1989. Since then the religious practice-and accompanying

also barred from attending. Some speeches are being broadcast on state radio-with clerics calling for absolute loyalty to the Taliban's rule.

"Obedience is the most important principle of the system," Habibullah Haqqani, the head of the gathering, said in his opening remarks. "We must obey all our leaders in all affairs, sincerely and truly, and should obey in a good manner."

Deadly quake

The gathering comes a week after a powerful earthquake struck the east of the country, killing over 1,000 people and leaving tens of thousands homeless. Even before the quake, the Taliban were struggling to administer a country that had long been in the grip of economic malaise, utterly dependent on foreign aid that dried up with the overthrow of the Western-backed government in August 2021.

Officials from the United States were due to meet



BANGALORE, India: Activists of the right wing Hindu Janajagruti Samithi organisation shout slogans during a protest against the recent killing of Hindu tailor Kanhaiya Lal in Udaipur allegedly by two Muslim men for supporting a former spokeswoman of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) party. —AFP

Amnesty this month said authorities had waged a "vicious" crackdown on Muslims who took to the streets to protest Sharma's remarks, including by demolishing homes with bulldozers. Since the attack on Lal, party members have taken to social media to criticise Muslim nations that had complained about Sharma's comments for remaining silent on the killing.

Several also took aim at Indian journalist Mohammed Zubair, who had helped draw attention to the remarks by Sharma that eventually saw her suspended from the BJP. In one tweet, Kapil Mishra,

a BJP politician, accused Zubair and his supporters of being "responsible" for the tailor's death.

Zubair, who has drawn frequent attention to hate speech by Hindu fringe groups, was arrested on Monday. He remains in custody, with police citing a four-year-old tweet about a Hindu god they said had been the subject of complaints by Hindu groups.

Police opened an investigation into Sharma this month after a complaint by a member of the public about her remarks, but she has not been arrested and her current whereabouts are unknown. —AFP

Security, rain make for muted start to Xi's anniversary visit

HONG KONG: A brewing typhoon warning and a strict closed loop system made for a muted beginning to President Xi Jinping's visit to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Hong Kong's handover to China on Thursday.

Xi's trip is a show of strength and pomp for the Communist Party, showcasing its control after a political crackdown that quashed dissent in the once outspoken city. But at a mall next to the high-speed rail terminus where Xi arrived, a salesperson surnamed Luk said he felt the trip was "low-key" and said he knew little about it.

"I don't feel the city is in a festive mood for his visit," said Luk, 42. "I still think 25th anniversary is worth celebrating, it's a milestone in terms of time, though it's hard to say we are in a better spot today." The visit is taking place in a strict closed loop system, with Xi and anyone he comes into contact with cut off from the rest of



HONG KONG, China: Traffic police direct traffic near West Kowloon Station in Hong Kong on June 30, 2022, as Chinese President Xi Jinping arrives in Hong Kong to attend celebrations marking the 25th anniversary of the city's handover from Britain to China. —AFP

Thursday, with the city's weather service warning that it would launch a typhoon warning later that night. At a wet Victoria Park, previously the scene of annual July 1 rallies but this year the site of scattered displays about the handover, those who had braved the weather forecast were unimpressed by what was on offer. —AFP

Huge Hindu pilgrimage in Kashmir begins

PAHALGAM, India: Thousands of chanting devotees from across India began trekking up through Himalayan passes in Indian-administered Kashmir Thursday at the start of a huge pilgrimage, accompanied by a major security operation. Critics accuse the Hindu nationalist government of using the annual Amarnath procession to reinforce New Delhi's claims over the disputed Muslim-majority region.

Authorities expect around a million people to take part in a pilgrimage to the cave shrine at 3,900 meters (12,800 feet) containing a holy stalagmite over the coming 43 days. The procession, which sees pilgrims trek uphill for several days or be transported by donkey or helicopter did not take place for two years because of the pandemic.

On Thursday devotees chanted religious hymns as tens of thousands of



BALTAL, India: Hindu devotees gather in the early morning before starting their pilgrimage to the cave shrine of Amarnath from a base camp, near Baltal on June 30, 2022. —AFP

security mobilisation-have grown, as has its political significance.

The territory is divided between India and Pakistan and claimed by both. Rebels have often said that the pilgrimage is not a target but have warned in the past that if the religious event was used to establish Hindu domination of the territory they would act. In 2017 suspected rebels

attacked a bus, killing 11 pilgrims.

On Thursday some of the pilgrims chanted a slogan equating Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi to a deity, an AFP videographer said. As an additional security measure this year, authorities assigned all pilgrims a unique radio identification tag to closely monitor their movement. —AFP

Clerics meet to rubber-stamp Taliban rule

KABUL: Two gunmen were shot dead in the Afghan capital Thursday near the site of a gathering by thousands of religious scholars called to endorse the Taliban's hardline Islamist rule. Taliban officials said the two started firing from a rooftop near where the meeting was taking place, but were "quickly eliminated by Mujahideen with the help of Allah the Almighty".

Officials have provided scant details of the three-day men-only "jirga"-a traditional gathering of influential people that settles differences by consensus-and the media is

Taliban to meet US on releasing frozen funds after quake

DOHA: The United States and the Taliban plan talks Thursday in Qatar on unlocking some of Afghanistan's reserves following a devastating earthquake, officials said, with Washington seeking ways to ensure the money goes to help the population. The White House said it is working "urgently" on the effort, but a member of the Afghan central bank's board said it could take time to finalise.

The Taliban's foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, arrived in the Qatari capital Doha along with finance ministry and central bank officials for talks, Taliban foreign ministry spokesman Hafiz Zia Ahmed said.

The State Department said its envoy on Afghanistan, Tom West, would take part and said the United States was focused on a range of interests including human rights and opening schools for girls. "None of these engagements should be seen as 'legitimising' the Taliban or its so-called government but are a mere reflection of the reality that we need to have such discussions in order to advance US interests," said a spokesperson for the US State Department, which does not recognize Taliban rule over Afghanistan.

The Taliban took over in August 2021 after the United States gave up a 20-year military effort. Washington at the time froze \$7 billion in reserves and the international community halted billions in direct aid that Afghanistan and its population of roughly 40 million people had relied on.

The currency has collapsed and the country descended into a serious economic crisis, although some assistance has been restored. Last week's 5.9-magnitude earthquake in eastern Afghanistan, which killed more than 1,000 people and left tens of thousands homeless, adds urgency to the funding debate.

"Negotiations are underway and it is our expectation that a final proposal under discussion will be finalised," said Shah Mehrabi, member of the Supreme Council of the Central Bank of Afghanistan. However, details on "the mechanism to transfer the reserves to the Central Bank has not been finalised," he told AFP. "It is going to take a while. These things do not happen overnight."

'Get these funds moving'

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said over the weekend that efforts were underway "to get these funds moving" from the frozen reserves. "We are urgently working to address complicated questions about the use of these funds to ensure they benefit the people of Afghanistan and not the Taliban," she told reporters travelling with President Joe Biden to Europe. In question are \$3.5 billion in frozen reserves, half the total blocked by the US government.

"I have argued that these reserves should be released to the Central Bank," said Mehrabi, who also is an economics professor at Montgomery College in the suburbs of the US capital. He proposed a "limited, monitored release of reserves" of about \$150 million each month to pay for imports.—AFP