

International

South Korea vows probe of 2019 North Korean repatriations

Men were sent back because they would 'pose a threat' to society

SEOUL, South Korea: The South Korean government on Wednesday slammed the controversial 2019 repatriation of two North Koreans, after releasing photos that appeared to show one of them resisting the handover. Then-president Moon Jae-in's administration had expelled the men after investigators said the pair murdered 16 crewmates before taking their fishing boat to South Korean waters.

The government said at the time that the men — described by officials as “dangerous criminals” — had no intent to defect. At least two officials said the pair did not want to stay in South Korea. But images of their transfer at the truce village of Panmunjom, released on Tuesday by the new, conservative government, showed one man desperately resisting the handover.

If they were “forcibly sent” to North Korea, it would be “a crime against humanity that violates both international law and the constitution,” President Yoon Suk-yeol's spokeswoman Kang In-sun told reporters. The government will “fully determine the truth behind this case”, she said.

One image showed a man collapsed on the ground, with officials apparently dragging him to the Military Demarcation Line between the two Koreas.

In other photos, the two men appeared tied with ropes and blindfolded before their repatriation. Rights groups have said in the past that the transfer was a violation of international law because of the likelihood of the men being tortured or worse in North Korea.

South Korean media had reported at the time that

the two men were blindfolded on their journey and only became aware of their fate when their masks were removed to reveal North Korean soldiers ready to take them into custody. One of them immediately collapsed, the conservative Chosun Ilbo had reported.

'Disgusting and callous'

The hawkish Yoon has been sharply critical of his predecessor's dovish approach, accusing the liberal Moon of appeasing Pyongyang. The 2019 case was the first-ever transfer from the South to the North since the end of the Korean War. It was roundly condemned at the time as a breach of law by human rights groups, which also accused Moon of trying to curry favour with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

Under the South Korean constitution, all North Koreans are automatically considered citizens, and those who reach its territory and express a desire to defect are routinely able to stay. A Moon government official said in 2019 that the two men were sent back because they would “pose a threat” to society, and that as “dangerous criminals” they could not be considered refugees.

And Kim Yeon-chul, Moon's unification minister, told lawmakers at the time that the fishermen did not want to stay. He said they told South Korean authorities: “Even if we die, we'd like to die in our home country.” But Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said Wednesday that the men's “desperate resistance to being forced back” was clear

Buddhist clergy he was the reincarnation of Sinhalese warrior king Dutugemunu the Great, who is known for vanquishing a Tamil ruler.

Dutugemunu reigned for 24 years, but Rajapaksa fled less than three years into his rule — and a resignation would make him Sri Lanka's shortest-lived directly elected president. The 73-year-old leader flew to the neighbouring Maldives on Wednesday, four days after his presidency crumbled and tens of thousands of protesters overran his official residence.

That came after months of demonstrations demanding his resignation over an economic crisis, triggered by the coronavirus pandemic but exacerbated by mismanagement. The former soldier marketed his lack of political expertise as a virtue but Tamil legislator Dharmalingam Sithadthan said what Rajapaksa projected as his strength was actually his weakness.

“His lack of political knowledge showed in the way he worked,” Sithadthan told AFP. “He flip-flopped from one crisis to another. He thought by simply issuing orders things would materialise. “Every time I met with him, he would say he is focused on the economy and law-and-order, but he failed in both.”

'Prosperity and Splendour'

Rajapaksa came to power on a manifesto promising “Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour”, but according to the UN the country now desperately needs humanitarian aid. The coronavirus pandemic hammered tourism and overseas remittances — both mainstays of the

End of the line for Sri Lanka's 'Terminator'

COLOMBO: Known as “The Terminator” to family and foes alike for his ruthless crushing of Tamil rebels to end a decades-long civil war, Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's rule is drawing to a close with him a fugitive and his island's economy in ruins.

Rajapaksa, one of a clan of four brothers who have dominated the country's politics in recent years, was defence secretary under his brother Mahinda's Rajapaksa's presidency from 2005-15. He denied allegations that at least 40,000 minority Tamil civilians were killed by troops under his command during the closing months of the war, but the accusations bolstered his tough-guy image in the eyes of the majority Sinhalese.

He was also considered the architect of “white van” abductions under Mahinda, when dissidents and journalists were grabbed in unmarked vehicles and disappeared, allegedly the victims of extrajudicial killings.

He made no bones about winning the 2019 elections with the overwhelming support of his own majority Sinhala-Buddhist community. For Sri Lanka's influential

HK's 'Grandma Wong' jailed for democracy protests

HONG KONG: An elderly woman who became a fixture of Hong Kong's democracy protests was jailed on Wednesday for unlawful assembly, a day after courts imprisoned a terminally ill 75-year-old activist. Alexandra Wong, 66, popularly known as “Grandma Wong”, was a regular presence at the protests three years ago, usually waving a British Union Jack flag.

Prosecutors accused her of participating in two unlawful assemblies on August 11, 2019 and shouting “offensive words”, adding that her flag-waving and slogans encouraged an illegal gathering. Principal Magistrate Ada Yim jailed Wong for eight months citing the “scale and disruption to social order” of the democracy protests.

Unlawful assembly is one of the primary charges used by prosecutors against participants of the huge and sometimes violent democracy rallies that convulsed Hong Kong for months in 2019. More than 2,800 people have been prosecuted for protest related offences, while a security law imposed by Beijing in 2020 has effectively now criminalised dissent in Hong Kong.

Wong earlier this year pleaded not guilty but she switched her plea on Wednesday, the first day of her trial. From the dock, the bespectacled and grey-haired Wong struck a defiant note and criticised Hong Kong's government as an “authoritarian regime”.

She also reiterated an earlier claim that she had been interrogated and detained by security agents in the Chinese mainland for nearly 14 months and was forced to give written and filmed confessions. Wong disappeared half way through the 2019 protests.

She later re-emerged saying she was intercepted dur-

ing a trip back to Shenzhen, the mainland city next to Hong Kong. She alleged that she was kept in detention facilities in the mainland, taken on a “patriotic trip” and was kept in de facto house arrest until she was later allowed to return to Hong Kong.

In April, Wong was convicted of obstructing a police officer in a separate case and sentenced to six days in jail with an 18-month suspension. In July last year, she was

marked a public holiday for a Buddhist festival. “When we arrived there, injured people were scattered about and there was blood on the roadside,” a member of a rescue team told AFP. “According to the information we collected, eleven people were injured and two were killed,” he added, requesting anonymity.

The Southeast Asian country has been in turmoil since a coup last year, with self-declared “People's Defence Forces” (PDF) targeting the military and officials or organisations perceived to be working with the junta.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for Tuesday's attack, and a junta spokesman was



This undated handout photo provided by the South Korean Unification Ministry on July 13, 2022, shows (C, wearing black), one of two alleged North Korean mass murderers who were controversially deported by Seoul in 2019, appearing to physically resist as authorities try to hand him over to Pyongyang officials, via the truce village of Panmunjom. —AFP

in the newly released photos. He accused Moon — a former human rights lawyer — and his administration of having “a disgusting and callous disregard for human rights”.

The photos show that the deported men “understood they were fighting for their lives”, Robertson

added. Since Yoon took office in May, prosecutors have reopened the case. And last week, South Korea's intelligence agency also requested a formal investigation into allegations that its former chief under Moon, Suh Hoon, ordered the premature closure of an internal investigation into the matter. —AFP



Gotabaya Rajapaksa

economy — leaving it facing a foreign exchange crisis.

Lengthy power cuts are in place as the country does not have dollars to import oil for generators, the nation's 22 million people have been enduring acute shortages of food, fuel and medicines since late last year, and poverty is spreading.

When he took over in November 2019, Sri Lanka's foreign reserves were at \$7.5 billion, but dropped to just “one million dollars” recently, according to prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. Under Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka defaulted on its foreign debt for the first time in April. The country declared bankruptcy and inflation soared in June. —AFP



HONG KONG: Photo shows activist Alexandra Wong (C), also known as Grandma Wong, being taken away by police while protesting on the 24th anniversary of Hong Kong's handover from Britain, in Hong Kong. —AFP

sentenced to one month in prison after she was found guilty of assaulting a security guard at the High Court lobby in January 2019.

Her jailing came a day after a Hong Kong court gave veteran activist and terminal cancer patient Koo Sze-yiu nine months in prison. Koo was convicted of “attempted sedition” over a planned protest against Beijing's Winter Olympics that was foiled by a pre-emptive arrest. —AFP

not available for comment. Local media reported that the two people killed had died in hospital. Another rescue team said they had taken six people to hospital with non-serious wounds.

In May, a blast near a bus stop in a busy Yangon neighbourhood killed one man and wounded nine people. The junta later said the bomb had gone off accidentally and that the victim had been in contact with PDF groups it has declared “terrorists”.

More than 2,000 people have been killed and at least 14,000 arrested in the junta's crackdown on dissent since the coup, according to a local monitoring group. —AFP

Bomb in Myanmar's Yangon kills two, wounds nine

YANGON: A bomb blast near a shopping mall in Myanmar's commercial hub Yangon has killed two people and wounded eleven, rescue workers and local media said on Wednesday. No group has so far claimed responsibility for the explosion, which took place on Tuesday afternoon, as the country

Mexican schoolboy set on fire for being indigenous

MEXICO CITY: A Mexican schoolboy was set on fire and badly burned in a classroom - his “only crime” was speaking an Indigenous language in a country struggling to end racial discrimination.

Two classmates are accused of pouring alcohol on Juan Zamorano's seat at a high school in the central state of Queretaro in June. When the 14-year-old realized his trousers were wet and stood up, one of them set Zamorano on fire, according to his family.

He suffered second and third degree burns and was only this week discharged from hospital. Juan had already suffered weeks of bullying because of his Indigenous Otomi roots, according to his family's lawyers, who filed complaints against the alleged attackers and school authorities.

With an estimated population of 350,000, the Otomi are one of dozens of Indigenous groups in the Latin American country. The Otomi language is Juan's mother tongue “but he doesn't like to speak it much because it's a cause of ridicule, harassment and bullying,” Ernesto Franco, one of the family's lawyers, told AFP.

The family has alleged to the media that even Zamorano's teacher harassed him because of his origin. “She thinks that we're not her class, we're not her race,” Zamorano's father, who described the attack as “attempted murder,” told the newspaper El Universal.

'Recurring attacks'

Queretaro state prosecutors have announced an investigation into the attack and the alleged perpetrators face possible legal proceedings. President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said that if necessary, the country's attorney general's office might handle the case.

Juan's “only crime was speaking Otomi,” tweeted Lopez Obrador's spokesman Jesus Ramirez, who said that eradicating racism was everyone's responsibility. Mexico's National Institute of Indigenous Peoples urged the authorities to “sanction minors and adults involved in harassment and recurring attacks on minors.”

Urgent measures are needed in schools to prevent further cases of discrimination and racism, it said. Discrimination is common in Mexico, a country of 126 million where 23.2 million people identify as Indigenous and more than 7.3 million speak an Indigenous language, according to a 2020 census.

In a case in March, an Otomi woman accused staff at a restaurant in a trendy Mexico City neighborhood of preventing her from using the toilet, telling her it was only for customers.

Systemic racism

Around 40 percent of the Indigenous population complained of having faced discrimination in a survey published by the national statistics agency in 2018. Almost half felt that their rights were respected little or not at all.

The survey also revealed prejudices against the Indigenous population. Three out of 10 people questioned agreed with the statement: “The poverty of Indigenous people is due to their culture.”

Cases like Zamorano's are not isolated but part of systemic racism, said Alexandra Haas, the Mexico head of the international charity Oxfam. In 2019, an Oxfam study in Mexico found that speaking an Indigenous language, identifying with an Indigenous, Black or mixed ethnicity community, or having a darker skin tone, meant less chance of educational and labor advancement. —AFP