

International

Few Catholics in Mongolia, but Pope's visit eyes geopolitics

Mongolia has one of the world's youngest and smallest Catholic communities

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis heads to Mongolia this week, an unlikely choice given the isolated nation's small Catholic community, but a strategic one due to the young democracy's geographical position between two superpowers. In venturing to the sparsely populated, vast Buddhist-majority nation, the pope may eye Mongolia as a way to help build bridges with its neighbors China and Russia, given its strategic location and neutrality in the volatile region.

The trip, which involves a nine-hour flight from Rome on Thursday to the capital of Ulaanbaatar, will also be closely watched as a stamina test for the 86-year-old pope, who underwent hernia surgery in June and suffers pain when walking.

A former Soviet satellite state that has been a democracy since 1992, Mongolia has one of the world's youngest and smallest Catholic communities, estimated at approximately 1,400 people among its population of 3.3 million.

It has just 25 Catholic priests—only two of them Mongolian—and 33 nuns, according to the Vatican, although its ranks include the global Church's youngest cardinal. Pope Francis's trip to rapidly urbanizing Ulaanbaatar represents the Jesuit's desire to bring the Church's message to remote, largely ignored areas far from Rome while championing interfaith dialogue.

It will be "the opportunity to embrace a Church small in numbers but vibrant in faith and great in charity," the pope said Sunday. But the trip, lasting until September 4, also has undeniably geopolitical aims.

The Vatican's long-term thinking is "to retain a presence and openness in countries where that's not an inevitability", Paul Elie, a senior fellow at Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs in Washington, told AFP. "If going to Mongolia keeps the door open to that whole region, it's an effective visit with relatively few downsides," he said.

'Rediscovery of values'

Once part of the empire of Genghis Khan, landlocked Mongolia is sandwiched between Russia and China, dependent on the former for energy imports and on the latter for the export of its raw materials, primarily coal.

But Mongolia has sought to toe a neutral line with its expansionist neighbors, while reaching for balance among powers including the United States, Japan and South Korea. That makes Mongolia potentially helpful for Vatican relations with both Beijing, with whom the Holy See last year renewed a deal on the thorny issue of bishop appointments, and Moscow, with which Pope Francis has sought to broker an end to the war in Ukraine.

Mongolia also maintains relations with North Korea. "It has no disputes with its neighbors—in Asia that's pretty rare," said Mongolia expert Julian Dierkes, a professor at the University of British Columbia. "And it's really the only post-Socialist democracy in Asia, all the others have fallen by the wayside." That has spurred a "rediscovery of values" be-

tween democratic nations and Mongolia, he said, amid rising Russian aggression and concern over an unchecked China.

First papal visit

The first pope to visit Mongolia, the pontiff arrives Friday morning but will have a day of rest before formal meetings Saturday, including with Prime Minister Luvsan-namsrai Oyun-Erdene, members of civil society, diplomats, priests and missionaries.

On Sunday, he will address an interreligious meeting—one of five public addresses scheduled—and preside over a mass inside a newly built ice hockey arena. He is not scheduled to venture outside Ulaanbaatar, where a decade-long mining windfall has fueled a construction boom. Pope Francis may use his trip to address his concerns about the impacts of climate change, which along with mining and overgrazing is fueling desertification across swathes of Mongolia's territory.

Extreme weather, from severe floods to drought and sandstorms, has killed off herds on the vast grasslands, forcing nomads who make up one-third of the population to migrate to Ulaanbaatar. Shantytowns inhabited by displaced nomads now surround the capital.

In December, protests broke out over a coal industry corruption scandal, exacerbated by ongoing popular discontent over a weak economy and high inflation tied to COVID and the Ukraine war.



Pope Francis

Youngest cardinal

The pope's visit follows a flurry of diplomatic activity for Mongolia in recent months, including Luvsan-namsrai's visit to Washington this month and a visit by French President Emmanuel Macron in June. A Mongolian delegation of Buddhist monks and Catholic priests visited the Vatican last year to mark the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between

the Holy See and Mongolia. It was led by Italian Cardinal Giorgio Marengo, who at 49 is the Church's youngest cardinal, appointed by Pope Francis last year. As the apostolic prefect of Ulaanbaatar, the missionary who has worked for 20 years in Mongolia—helping establish the first church in a "ger", the nomads' traditional round tents—is the country's highest-ranking Catholic official. — AFP

Pakistan ex-PM Khan's detention extended over leaked documents

ATTOCK: A Pakistan court on Wednesday ordered that former prime minister Imran Khan be kept in jail over allegations he leaked classified documents, a day after a judge granted his release in a separate graft case.

Since being ousted from power last year, Khan—Pakistan's most popular politician—has been tangled in a slew of legal cases he says are designed to stop him from contesting upcoming elections. Following a brief hearing inside the jail on Wednesday, Khan's lawyer Salman Safdar told AFP his detention was extended for two weeks under the colonial-era Official Secrets Act. Khan's three-year prison term for graft was suspended on Tuesday, but authorities kept him in custody at Attock prison, around 60 kilometres (37 miles) west of Islamabad, over the leaked documents case.

The case relates to a cable that Khan had touted as proof that he was ousted as part of a US conspiracy backed by the establishment, according to a report by the government's Federal Investigation Agency. The United States and the Pakistan military have denied the claim. Safdar said the legislation was generally used to prosecute military cases, and the decision to try Khan in a closed courtroom was "condemnable and concerning".

"It is a brazen and blatant violation of the fundamental rights," he said. "He has not been given a right to free trial." The vice chairman of Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, a former foreign minister, has also been arrested over the case.

Khan's lawyers alleged he was arrested in the case two weeks ago, without his or their knowledge, allowing authorities to keep him behind bars after his graft sentence was lifted. "This constitutes a manipulation of justice," Muhammad Shoaib Shaheen, another of Khan's lawyers, said Tuesday.



ATTOCK: Barrister Salman Safdar (centre) signs on documents before representing former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan for his case hearing at the Attock prison in Attock. — AFP

More than 200 cases

Khan's three-year sentence was handed down early in August by a judge who found him guilty of failing to properly declare gifts he received while in office. The election commission subsequently banned him for five years from contesting elections.

The court on Tuesday said the sentence was short enough to be set aside, after Khan's team argued there were "serious jurisdictional defects" in the conviction made in "undue haste" without allowing them to present witnesses.

An appeal against the conviction is pending. As a for-

mer international cricket star, Khan has been embroiled in more than 200 cases that he argues are politically motivated. Khan was also briefly detained on graft charges in May, sparking days of civil unrest, but since then PTI has been targeted by a major crackdown that has vastly diminished his street power and seen most of his senior leadership jump ship or be locked away.

While Khan was imprisoned this month, Pakistan's parliament was dissolved at the request of his successor Shehbaz Sharif to pave the way for a caretaker government that will usher in elections. No date for the polls has been announced. — AFP

Floods drown hope in Pakistan's impoverished villages

OKARA: The coursing floods in eastern Pakistan first swallowed Nasreen Bibi's corn crop, then the cattle that fed on it, and finally her family home. They retreated to the roof to escape the rising water, before fleeing for their lives by boat.

"We didn't bring any of our belongings with us, everything we own is abandoned back there," said Bibi, who guesses her age in the 30s, from a relief camp inside a school in Mandi Ahmedabad, a village in eastern Punjab province.

"There is nothing left back home," she said, wiping away tears in a tent she shares with three young daughters. "Fear plays on my children's minds." Swaths of Pakistan's breadbasket were inundated this month, with at least 130,000 people evacuated, after the Sutlej river burst its banks and spilled over hundreds of villages and thousands of acres.

The head of Punjab's government, Mohsin Naqvi, said the flooding was caused by India releasing excess reservoir water into the Sutlej river, causing flooding downstream on the Pakistani side of the border.

With the water slowly receding, a ramshackle armada of 40 boats makes twice-daily food and aid deliveries to 80 water-bound villages where men perch on roofs guarding sodden possessions. The floodwaters are still some eight feet (2.4 meters) deep, and the boats skim past the tops of waterlogged corn stalks blanched by the sun.

A family's financial security depends on agriculture in this largely impoverished corner of Pakistan. Mud houses lie in ruins, with tumbled walls pooled in stagnant water, in Falak De Bheni, a village of 100 homes surrounded by drowned fields of sesame and rice.



OKARA: A woman carries footstools past the debris at a village wrecked by floods in the Okara district of Punjab. — AFP

"I don't want to plant a crop here next year, my heart can't bear it," Muhammad Tufail, 38, said as he stood at his ruined door surveying the damage. "I don't even know how much money I spent, how many troubles I went through, to plant these crops. But the

flood has left nothing in its wake."

More than 175 people were killed in Pakistan in rain-related incidents since the monsoon season began in late June, mainly due to electrocution and buildings collapsing, emergency services have reported. — AFP

UK foreign secretary raised human rights on China visit

BEIJING: British Foreign Secretary James Cleverly said he had raised human rights concerns at "every single one" of his meetings with top Chinese officials, as he made a state visit to Beijing on Wednesday. Cleverly, the first UK foreign minister to visit China in five years, held talks with Chinese Vice-President Han Zheng and top diplomat Wang Yi.

The foreign office previously said his talking points would include China's crackdown on freedoms in the former British colony of Hong Kong as well as Beijing's alleged rights abuses in the Xinjiang and Tibet regions.

"I've had a number of conversations with senior representatives of the Chinese government and I have raised human rights in every single one of those meetings," Cleverly said Wednesday. "This is an issue that is discussed extensively not just bilaterally, but at the United Nations," he said.

"I think the Chinese government understand the UK is consistent in our approach... and I will keep raising these issues with them." Meeting Cleverly at Beijing's Diaoyutai State Guesthouse, top diplomat Wang said China has "always attached importance to Britain's status as a great power and your unique role." "Dialogue and cooperation are the key words... of China's policy towards the UK," Wang said. But he also said that "we have also noticed that there are noises in the Sino-British relationship from time to time, and some people even question your trip to Beijing".

China last month accused the United Kingdom of giving protection to fugitives after Cleverly blasted the Hong Kong government for offering bounties for information leading to the capture of prominent democracy activists based overseas.

'Fundamental disagreements'

Cleverly has called for a pragmatic and united Western approach to China's rise, acknowledging the need to partner with Beijing on global issues. But a critical report by British MPs on Wednesday said London's line on China lacked clarity and needed a "coordinated, whole-of-government approach".

The 87-page report by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee also labelled China "a threat to the UK and its interests" and urged London to boost "deterrence diplomacy" to counter threats from Beijing.

Hawkish elements in the United Kingdom's ruling Conservative party have urged Cleverly to act tougher on China. Cleverly said Wednesday that "attempts to distill the UK's relationship with China down to a single word or a soundbite are fundamentally flawed".

China's size, influence and complexity mean Britain's relationship with Beijing will be "complicated and sophisticated", he said. "We are clear-eyed about the areas where we have fundamental disagreements with China, and I raise those issues when we meet," Cleverly added. "We will pursue a pragmatic working relationship, but that does of course mean raising the issues where we disagree." — AFP

Malaysia rejects new Chinese map over South China Sea claims

KUALA LUMPUR: Kuala Lumpur rejected Wednesday a new Chinese map that claims waters off Malaysia's coast in the South China Sea, in the latest war of words between the Asian allies over Beijing's assertiveness in the waterway.

China claims sovereignty over almost the entire South China Sea—through which trillions of dollars in trade pass annually—despite an international court ruling that Beijing's entitlement has no legal basis. Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Brunei also have overlapping claims in

parts of the sea, while the United States sends naval vessels through it to assert freedom of navigation in international waters. China released a "standard map" this week that included its unilateral claims in the sea, which overlap with Malaysia's exclusive economic zone off the coast of the Sabah and Sarawak states on Borneo island. "Malaysia does not recognize China's claims in the South China Sea, as outlined in the 'China Standard Map 2023 Edition' which covers Malaysia's maritime area," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

Describing the South China Sea issue as "complex and sensitive", Kuala Lumpur said the dispute must be "handled peacefully and rationally through dialogue" based on international law. Malaysia also said it supported the creation of a Code of Conduct for the sea, which Southeast Asian nations are currently negotiating. —AFP

'Monkey-men' deployed to scare away primates from G20 summit

NEW DELHI: Indian officials preparing for the G20 summit next week have hired teams of "monkey-men" and erected primate cutouts to deter marauding monkeys from munching on the floral displays laid out for global leaders.

New Delhi's city council has hired more than 30 "monkey wallahs", or "monkey-men", who mimic the hoots and screams of the aggressive langur monkey—the natural enemy of the smaller rhesus macaque primates who

wreak havoc in the capital's leafy government areas.

"We can't remove the monkeys from their natural habitat, so we have deployed a team of 30-40 men who are trained to scare away monkeys," Satish Upadhyay, the vice-chairman of the New Delhi Municipal Council, told AFP on Wednesday. "We will deploy one man each at the hotels where the delegates would be staying, as well as in places where monkey sightings have been reported."

Though revered in the majority Hindu nation, monkeys are a major menace, often trashing gardens, office and residential rooftops and even viciously attacking people for food. The Delhi metropolitan area, home to around 30 million people, has been on an intense beautification drive since India assumed the G20 presidency last year. —AFP