

International

No glory for bullies: South Korea's school violence epidemic

'There was only one thing I wished for, I wished someone could help me'

BUSAN: Pins hidden in her shoes, head forced down a toilet, kicked in the stomach: Korean hairdresser Pyo Ye-rim suffered a litany of abuse from school bullies, but now she's speaking out. The 26-year-old is part of a phenomenon sweeping South Korea known as "Hakpok #MeToo", where people who were bullied publicly name and shame the perpetrators of school violence — "hakpok" in Korean — decades after the alleged crimes.

Made famous globally by Netflix's gory revenge series "The Glory", the movement has ensnared everyone from K-pop stars to baseball players, and accusations — often anonymous — can be career-ending, with widespread public sympathy for victims. As a schoolgirl, Pyo says she suffered alone. Teachers told her "to be friendlier" to her bullies and the abuse went unchecked for years, eventually forcing her to give up her dreams of higher education and quit school for vocational training.

"There was only one thing I wished for. I wished someone could help me," she told AFP, adding that no one came to her aid and eventually she "escaped and struggled to survive on my own." In education-obsessed South Korea, where children can spend up to 16 hours a day studying at schools and in private academies, bullying is widespread, experts say, despite official efforts to stamp it out.

The problem, activists say, is that bullying often goes unpunished in real-time at schools, and the statute of limitations on such crimes makes it hard for victims to bring charges years later.

Pyo said she suffered from years of insomnia and depression as a result of her treatment at school, before deciding to stop hiding and go public with her accusations — resulting in one of her bullies being

fired from their job. But Pyo is lobbying for real legal change, demanding South Korea suspend the statute of limitations affecting school violence and change the defamation law to better protect victims. Hakpok #MeToo — Netflix's "The Glory" — which follows a woman's meticulously planned revenge scheme after suffering years of brutal abuse from high school bullies — helped amplify South Korea's national discussion about bullying. In an ironic sign of how pervasive the issue is, after the show became a hit, the director Ahn Gil-ho was himself accused of teenage bullying and forced to apologize. Even South Korea's presidential office was recently forced to withdraw a top police appointment after it emerged the candidate's son had bullied classmates, sparking public backlash.

School violence is endemic in South Korean schools, Noh Yoon-ho, a Seoul-based attorney who specializes in bullying cases told AFP, adding it is a "collective trauma" the country needs to process.

"Any South Korean who has gone to school has been a victim or witnessed other students being bullied and not helped — we all have memories of this," Noh said. The "Hakpok #MeToo" movement has helped many victims to shed the shame of their experience, and realize they were not bullied "because they were lacking something", she added. But the problem is that there is still no system in place at school level where victims can "approach without hesitation for an immediate and adequate response when incidents occur", Jihoon Kim, a criminology professor who has researched bullying in South Korea, told AFP.

Punish the bullies?

Pyo and other victims say South Korea should re-



SEOUL: Picture shows Noh Yoon-ho, a Seoul-based attorney who specializes in bullying cases, speaking during an interview with AFP at her office in Seoul. — AFP

move the statute of limitations on school violence so bullies can be held accountable even decades later. But there are huge practical issues with legally punishing adults for crimes committed as a juvenile, Noh said, which could give people lasting criminal records for teenage misdeeds.

Pyo is also calling for an overhaul of South Korea's criminal defamation laws, which currently allow bullies to sue their accusers for damages and win — even if their victims are telling the truth. Most accusations are anonymous but have resulted in bullies being fired or, in the case of one of South Korea's most successful baseball players, excluded from the national team.

Despite widespread public support for victims, some have questioned the fairness of such punishments. It would be far better to work with schools — where such crimes have typically been ignored — to ensure that bullying is addressed as it happens, experts say.

Unless this is done, the public naming and shaming will continue. "It's gotten this bad because no victims have done it before now," said Pyo, adding that unless the defamation law changes, bullies can still threaten victims with lawsuits. "This is why no one is able to talk," except anonymously, she said. "If this law disappears, countless victims will start speaking out." — AFP



Japanese PM Fumio Kishida

North Korea informs Japan of upcoming 'satellite launch'

TOKYO: North Korea has informed Japan that it is preparing to launch a satellite as early as this week, Tokyo announced Monday but warned it may actually be a sanctions-defying ballistic missile test.

North Korea informed Japan that it will launch a rocket between May 31 and June 11, identifying waters near the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea and to the east of Luzon Island in the Philippines as warning areas, a Japanese coast guard spokesman told AFP.

Such zones are usually designated for falling debris or rocket stages. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida told officials to gather intelligence "on North Korea's notification about the launch of a ballistic missile that it describes as a satellite", his office said in a tweet. "Even if it's described as a satellite, a launch using ballistic missile technology would be a violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions" and would threaten people's safety, Kishida told reporters.

In 2012 and 2016, Pyongyang tested ballistic missiles that it called satellite launches. Both flew over Japan's southern Okinawa region. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un this month inspected the country's first military spy satellite as it was prepared for launch, and gave the green light for its "future action plan". In 2021, Kim had identified the development of such satellites as a key defence project for the North Korean military. Because long-range rockets and space launchers share the same technology, analysts say developing the ability to put a satellite in orbit would provide Pyongyang with cover for testing banned intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).

Japan's defence ministry issued an order to shoot down any ballistic missile confirmed to be on course to fall into its territory. South Korea's foreign ministry condemned the launch plan, but officials did not confirm to AFP if Seoul had been directly notified too.

"North Korea's so-called 'satellite launch' is a serious violation of UN Security Council resolutions banning all launches using ballistic missile technology, and is a clearly illegal act that cannot be justified under any pretext," the ministry said. South Korea and Japan have been working to mend long-frayed ties, including with greater cooperation on North Korea's military threats.

Meanwhile, Kishida on Monday reiterated that Tokyo is open to talks with Pyongyang. North Korean state media on Monday published a statement from the country's vice-minister of foreign affairs, appearing to endorse a conciliatory approach to relations with Japan — an unusual stance from Pyongyang. If Japan avoids "being shackled by the past, and seeks a way out for improving the relations, there is no reason for the DPRK and Japan not to meet", said the statement from Pak Sang Gil, using the initials of North Korea's official name.

Pak said, however, that Japan needs to move on from sticking points such as the "abduction issue" for ties to improve. Japan suspects dozens of people who are still missing were abducted by North Korean agents in the 1970s and 1980s to train spies in the Japanese language and culture. — AFP

Seven charged with N Ireland police shooting in court

BELFAST: Seven men charged with the attempted murder of a senior off-duty police officer earlier this year appeared in a Northern Ireland court on Monday where they were remanded in custody. Detective Chief Inspector John Caldwell was shot several times as he left a sports complex in Omagh, some 70 miles (112 kilometres) west of Belfast, with his son in February. The high-profile officer had been coaching a youth football group at the time of the attack, which was later claimed by dissident republicans. The men appeared before Dungannon Magistrates' Court via videolink charged with attempted murder and included a father and two sons, according to Irish broadcaster RTE.

Three of the men face additional terror charges, while two others have been charged with membership of the IRA, a proscribed paramilitary group. District judge Steven Keown refused three bail requests, saying the individuals posed risk of further offending and potential interference with the police investigation. All seven are next due to appear in court in Omagh by videolink on June 27. Caldwell was released from hospital in April following the shooting, which recalled some of the worst violence in the period of sectarian unrest known as "The Troubles". Police, who remain

Australia PM condemns fear tactics in Indigenous vote

SYDNEY: Australia's prime minister took a swipe Monday at conservative "doomsayers" using fear tactics ahead of a referendum to give Indigenous people a voice on laws that affect them. Debate on the so-called Voice has turned increasingly acrimonious, with supporters decrying deliberate disinformation and opponents saying it risks opening a racial divide.

If passed, Indigenous Australians — whose ancestors have lived on the continent for at least 60,000 years — would have a constitutionally enshrined right to be consulted by the government on laws that impact their community. More than 200 years since British colonization and the ensuing persecution of Indigenous people, they remain greatly disadvantaged with higher incarceration and jobless rates, and a life expectancy about eight years shorter than that of other Australians.

In a keynote speech in Adelaide on Monday, Prime Minister Albanese said Australian voters face a "profound choice" when they go to the polls sometime later this year. A yes vote, he said, would allow Australians to proclaim to themselves, and to the world, "we are a mature nation coming to terms with our history, assured of our values, and shaping our own destiny."

It will be, he said, a "once in a lifetime opportunity" to change the country for the better. "We sometimes speak of ourselves as a young nation, but the truth is we are one of the world's oldest democracies. "Our continent is home to the world's oldest continuing culture, which we are at last coming to recognize as the great source of pride that it must be."

'Orwellian effect'

The "yes" vote is still ahead in a two-way fight, polls show, despite indications of an erosion in support since the conservative opposition decided to campaign for a "no". An Essential Research survey published mid-May gave put support for the Voice at 59-41 percent.

Australia's conservative opposition Liberal Party leader Peter Dutton has hardened his opposition and

the target of sporadic violence, were regularly targeted during the three-decade-long conflict over British rule, which claimed more than 3,000 lives and ended in 1998.

'Conspiracy'

In court a Police Service Northern Ireland (PSNI) chief detective outlined evidence including the discovery of residue from cartridges found on items, including a hat, allegedly associated with the accused. The officer also said police believe there was a "wide-ranging conspiracy" behind the attack and a "personal element", as Caldwell had been "intimately involved" in investigations into several of the defendants. He characterized a grudge against the prominent officer, who was aware of many threats to his life over the years, as a "golden thread" linking many of the accused. In March, the UK government raised the Northern Ireland terror threat level in response to Caldwell's shooting, citing a continuing threat of political violence. Tensions have run high in Northern Ireland since the UK's departure from the European Union, with the province's largest pro-UK party collapsing its power-sharing institutions over post-Brexit trading rules. The New IRA, a dissident republican splinter group, has been linked to two attacks in recent years, including the planting of a bomb under a police-woman's car in April 2021. The group also admitted responsibility for the death of Lyra McKee, a journalist killed in April 2019 while covering clashes in the city of Londonderry, which is known to nationalists who want a united Ireland as Derry. — AFP



Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese.

his rhetoric on the subject, last week declaring the Voice would "re-racialize our nation". "It will have an Orwellian effect where all Australians are equal, but some Australians are more equal than others," he said. On Monday, Dutton accused Voice supporters of using race to attack the "no" side. "The prime minister out there name-calling people and others suggesting that people are racist because they don't support the Voice — it's completely unacceptable," he said. By way of response, Albanese hit out Monday at "galling" opposition "scare campaigns" that, he said, underestimated Australians' ability to rise above division. Australians would not be lured by "ludicrous invitations to jump at our own shadows", the prime minister said.

"Australians have a healthy scepticism of doomsayers, a scepticism kept in good health by memories of all the predictions offered by the Chicken Littles of the past," he said. Australia's race discrimination commissioner, Chin Tan, urged politicians to avoid a "racial bun fight", in an interview published Monday in the Nine media group's newspapers.

The political battle over Indigenous recognition is already leaving a mark on the community. One of Australia's top television journalists, Stan Grant, quit his current affairs show with national broadcaster ABC this month citing "relentless" racial attacks he faced as an Indigenous person in the spotlight.

But the stakes are now higher, he said in a departure announcement. "There is a referendum on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament and I am not alone in feeling judged. This is an Australian judgement on us. Such is politics," Grant wrote. "But racism is a crime. Racism is violence. And I have had enough." The vote is expected to take place in the last three months of the year. — AFP

News in Brief

Japan PM's son dismissed

TOKYO: Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said Monday he will remove his son from the position of his secretary due to "inappropriate behavior" at the official residence. The decision comes after a magazine reported last week that Shotaro Kishida had invited relatives to the official residence for a party last year, with photos of some pretending to hold a press conference and one lying down on red-carpeted stairs. "His behavior last year at the public space was inappropriate for a political secretary, and we have decided to replace him," Kishida told reporters. Shotaro will resign on June 1, he added. Kishida had reprimanded his 32-year-old son, but criticism erupted from opposition parties, which called for his removal. — AFP

Migrant group stuck at border

WARSAW: A group of migrants, including women and children, are stuck at the border with Belarus, Poland's border guard said Monday as activists accused the officers of not letting migrants plead for asylum. The group has been forced to camp for four days in the forest near Bialowieza, at the border fence erected by the nationalist government in Warsaw to prevent irregular crossings. In a statement sent to AFP, the border guard said the group of "around 20-30 people" was "outside the jurisdiction" of Poland. "Therefore any administrative activities, including the possible acceptance of an application for international protection, if the intention of these people is to obtain protection in Poland, is not possible," it added. According to the activists, the group at the border include people from Syria, Iraq, and Congo, with 11 children. — AFP

Thirteen in court over 2019 storming of HK legislature

HONG KONG: A Hong Kong court on Monday began the trial of 13 people over the storming and ransacking of the city's legislature in 2019, which was an unprecedented challenge to the Beijing-backed government.

It was the most violent episode in the initial phase of huge democracy protests that shook Hong Kong that year, with millions marching and staging sit-ins for weeks. Hundreds of protesters broke into the legislature on the night of July 1, 2019 — the 22nd anniversary of Hong Kong's handover from Britain to China — smashing windows and spraying graffiti.

The 13 defendants who went on trial on Monday over the episode were charged with rioting, an offence punishable by up to 10 years in jail. Seven pleaded guilty to that charge when proceedings began at a Hong Kong district court on Monday. The six who pleaded not guilty for rioting are facing additional charges of unlawful entry to the legislature and "criminal damage", which carry a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison. Their trial is expected to run for 44 days.

"I have never regretted my fight for freedom, justice and democracy... my thoughts will remain free when I am in jail," Althea Suen, who pleaded guilty, wrote on Facebook as the trial began. Gregory Wong said he pleaded not guilty to the rioting charge because "I know how much I took part in and I am just telling the facts". He added that he hoped the defendants who pleaded guilty and have been remanded would not lose heart despite the recent tough years. "We are still in this together," Wong said. More than 10,000 people were arrested as authorities sought to snuff out the 2019 protests. — AFP