

International

China weighs ban on clothing that 'hurts feelings' of nation

'Vague' proposal could lead to 'arbitrary' punishment: Scholar

BEIJING: Clothing that "hurts the feelings" of the nation could soon be outlawed in China, according to recent draft revisions to legislation, with their vagueness sparking concern over the broad scope for interpretation and enforcement. The proposed law states that both speech and clothing deemed "harmful to the spirit of the Chinese people" or that "hurts the feelings" of the nation will result in fines or even jail time.

But it stops short of defining specifically which types of clothing stand to be banned by the new rules. "Determining who has the authority to decide and how to make judgements may require more time, and we need the establishment of mature judgement criteria before advancing such proposals," a 23-year-old Beijinger surnamed He told AFP. She worried that the offences the law targets are "not as clear as crimes like robbery, where right and wrong are definitive". Several legal scholars in China objected on similar grounds to the revisions, which were released earlier this month for public consultation. The consultation period ends on September 30.

The proposals would lead to "too vague a standard of punishment, which will easily lead to an arbitrary expansion

of the scope of administrative punishment", wrote Tsinghua University's Lao Dongyan on the social media platform Weibo. Police in China already routinely use the broad charge of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" to punish people with clothing or banners bearing messages deemed politically sensitive.

But the changes could grant authorities further power to clamp down on any clothing perceived as harmful to public morality. Earlier this month, social media videos showed a man in the southern city of Shenzhen being questioned by police for livestreaming himself wearing a skirt, triggering a discussion about individual freedom of expression. Many online commentators agreed with local law enforcement's decision to intervene, with one saying the man's behavior was "offensive to common morals".

'Historical reasons'

Like most people AFP spoke to on the streets of Beijing, He interpreted the revisions mainly as a reaction to incidents involving people wearing Japanese clothing in historically significant places or on memorial days. In 2021, the state-backed tabloid Global Times said a woman was "severely criticized and educated" after

she wore a kimono in public on December 13, the national remembrance day for victims of Japanese war crimes in 1937.

And last year, a woman said she was detained during a photoshoot while wearing a kimono in the eastern city of Suzhou by police. "Dressing is everyone's own choice and freedom, but there are also special (circumstances)," He said. "If someone makes an insulting move in front of a certain statue on a specific day and wears a special costume, such behavior is 100 percent on purpose and should be punished."

Gu, a 35-year-old man, told AFP that he was open to holding people legally accountable for offensive clothing on "special occasions". "There are indeed some historical reasons, and I think the emotions of the local people should be considered," said Gu. "But in most cases, for example, if someone just goes to a shopping street (wearing a kimono), I think there is no need to pursue any action."

'Psychological harm'

Others, such as 25-year-old male programmer Yang Shuo, were less lenient. "If a person wears a kimono to ... the Memorial Hall for the Victims of the Nanjing



A man looks at clothing at a store in the Causeway Bay district of Hong Kong on July 25, 2023 in this file photo. — AFP

Massacre by Japanese Invaders, I believe it would cause significant psychological harm to the Chinese people," said Yang. "I think they should be punished."

Jeremy Daum, senior research fellow at Yale's Paul Tsai China Center, told AFP he thought the revisions themselves

would be amended to focus the law more on such incidents. "It's fairly certain that the language will be heavily modified — probably made more specific to address heroes, martyrs, party history — following the large number of public comments," he said. — AFP

Clean water, toilets a luxury for quake survivors in Morocco

AMIZMIZ: In her earthquake-hit Moroccan town, Zina Mechghazzi has improvised a sink by placing a pink bucket and a bar of soap on the dusty ground amid the ruins. "I haven't taken a shower in seven days," said the woman from Amizmiz at the foot of the High Atlas range, about 60 kilometers (40 miles) southwest of Marrakech. "I've only washed my armpits and changed my clothes."

Over a week since a 6.8-magnitude quake devastated parts of central Morocco, many worry that the dire living conditions and poor hygiene spell new threats for the survivors. The disaster killed nearly 3,000 people and injured thousands more when it hit in Al-Haouz province, south of the tourist hub Marrakech, on September 8.

Many survivors have stayed close to their ravaged villages and now sleep in improvised shelters and simple tents provided by Morocco's civil protection service. Later, Mechghazzi was kneading dough to make bread, sitting on a stool next to a stove out in the open. When she was finished, she washed the flour off her hands with untreated water from a dirty five-liter jug, shrugging that "we have to adapt".

With only a few houses left standing and habitable in Amizmiz, functioning bathrooms and toilets have become a luxury, and they are often overcrowded. Mechghazzi pointed to an empty lot nearby where a stand of olive trees now

provide the only, limited privacy as a child was relieving himself behind a tent.

'Rain and cold'

During the day, temperatures in Amizmiz still top 30 degrees Celsius (86 degrees Fahrenheit), but nights bring biting cold and damp in the mountain area. "Winter is coming, the situation is difficult, especially with the children," said Rabi Mansour, holding a four-month-old baby, her fourth child. "Problems caused by rain and cold will be a challenge."

A pregnant woman, who only gave her first name, Hassna, and who is just days away from giving birth, said she was terrified. "I never thought I would give birth in these conditions," she said. "I don't have much water, it's hard to go to the bathroom, and I'd rather not even think about how I'm going to manage. It stresses me out so much."

A few tents away, first aid was being provided to people with injuries or sickness. "We have a foot infection, a tooth abscess, a stomach problem, and others are here for medication," said one responder, working under an awning serving as a clinic. For those villagers who were badly injured or disabled in the quake, the question of hygiene facilities and health services is especially important.

Said Yahia has been in a hospital in Marrakech since he lost both of his legs, after a rock crushed them while



ARDOUZ: Girls fill bottles with water in the village of Ardouz in the Amizmiz region on September 14, 2023. — AFP

he tried to save his son from their home. "I live in a remote place in the mountains," he told AFP from his hospital bed, dreading the thought of going back home. "I don't know what will become of me."

'Disease vector'

Morocco is expected to request more aid soon from the United Nations to help it recover and rebuild, UN aid chief Martin Griffiths told reporters in Geneva on Friday. An especially pressing need will be the provision of clean water, which was already in short supply in some areas before the quake.

Contaminated water is "a major vector of disease, with a whole range of water-related illnesses from diarrhea to cholera," Philippe Bonnet, the

director of emergencies for French charity Solidarites Internationales, told AFP by phone. Poor hygiene can also lead to skin problems, and the cold brings respiratory diseases like bronchitis, he said.

The charity has sent a team to Morocco with equipment to test the water, among other things. Some latrines have already been constructed by organizations in Tafeghaght, seven kilometers south of Amizmiz, and charities have said they may also send mobile latrines. Bonnet stressed the urgent need for emergency latrines. "If the water is unfit for consumption because the source has been contaminated, which is a risk with open-air latrines, the impact is very significant," he said. — AFP

Police allegedly threaten parents of French bullying victim

VERSAILLES: The parents of a French schoolboy who killed himself after complaining of being bullied at school said they were disgusted by the response of the authorities, which included a threatening letter warning they could face prison for slander. The 15-year-old boy, named as Nicolas, killed himself on September 5, one day after children went back to class in France after the summer break.

He had moved for the new term to an establishment in Paris, after complaining of being bullied during the previous school year at his former school in Poissy, in the Yvelines region southwest of the capital. Rather than expressing sympathy with the family's predicament, the Yvelines regional education authorities, based in Versailles, sent them a letter saying statements made by the parents had been "unacceptable" and urged them to adopt a "constructive" attitude.

UN says war crimes committed in Ethiopia despite peace deal

GENEVA: Serious violations are still being committed in Ethiopia despite a peace deal in the north, UN rights experts said Monday, warning the conflict was spreading across the country and putting regional stability at risk. "Atrocities, war crimes and crimes against humanity are still being committed in the country," the United Nations-backed investigators said in a statement.

Last November, a peace deal between Ethiopia's federal government and rebels in the Tigray

region ostensibly ended a brutal two-year conflict. "While the signing of the agreement may have mostly silenced the guns, it has not resolved the conflict in the north of the country, in particular in Tigray," said Mohamed Chande Othman, head of the UN-backed Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia.

"Nor has it brought about any comprehensive peace," he told reporters in Geneva, presenting the commission's latest report. "The situation in Ethiopia remains extremely grave." Beyond Tigray, the report warned that "hostilities in Ethiopia are now at a national scale, with significant violations increasing particularly in Amhara region, but also ongoing in Oromia and elsewhere". "The risk to the state as well as regional stability and the enjoyment of human rights in East Africa cannot be overstated."

Attal, 34, who this month had met the boy's family alongside first lady Brigitte Macron, is seen as one of the most ambitious ministers in President Emmanuel Macron's government. He has made tackling bullying a priority after a series of high-profile suicides in recent



VERSAILLES: A photograph shows the building of the rectorate of the Versailles Academy (Education Authority) on Sept 18, 2023. — AFP

years of children who had complained of being bullied at school. Versailles prosecutors are seeking to investigate whether Nicolas' suicide was directly linked to bullying, cautioning against drawing any conclusions for now. Attal is due on Monday to host a meeting of school regional authorities to discuss all the reports of bullying received over the last year. — AFP

'Truly horrific'

Radhika Coomaraswamy, a member of the commission, told reporters there were "indicators for the possibility of future atrocity crimes", with the tensions appearing to be "between two ethnic groups". "What is needed is a comprehensive peace agreement involving all Ethiopians." A mosaic of more than 80 ethno-linguistic communities, Ethiopia has long struggled with territorial conflicts inside its borders.

The Tigray conflict, which erupted in November 2020, pitted Ethiopia's government forces — backed by Eritrea's army and forces from the neighboring region of Amhara — against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). It was marked by mass atrocities by all sides, but there were hopes the violations would cease after the signing of last year's peace deal. — AFP

Handwritten letters only way to reach loved-ones in Darfur

EL DAEIN: With no cell service or phone calls, people in Sudan's war-ravaged western region of Darfur are resorting to a bygone means of communication: handwritten letters, carried by taxi drivers. Ahmed Issa, 25, sits on a plastic chair in a roadside cafe penning a message to relatives he left behind in Nyala, the capital of South Darfur state.

In the safety of El Daein, 150 kilometers (93 miles) southeast, he told AFP the letters are often the only way to get news in and out of his hometown, the second-biggest city in Sudan and the site of brutal battles between the regular army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). "Even at the start of the fighting, it was hard to get in touch with people in other neighborhoods inside Nyala," he said, nearly five months after the war began.

The situation has only grown worse since, with horrific violence reported across Darfur, a region the size of France that is home to around a quarter of Sudan's 48 million people. They remember all too painfully the years-long war and atrocities that began in 2003. Hundreds of thousands were killed and more than two million displaced after the government of Omar al-Bashir unleashed the Janjaweed militia in response to a rebel uprising.

Hunched forward in a black patterned shirt and a neat crew cut, Issa carefully folds his letter over and over. "You wait a week for the letter to arrive, and you don't know for sure if they'll get it," he told AFP. "And if they do, there's no guarantee they can send one back" through the treacherous roads in and out of Nyala.

Three months ago, the West Darfur state capital of El Geneina seemed to be the nucleus of the fighting, becoming a symbol of the return of ethnic violence in Darfur. Western countries and the UN linked the violence to the RSF and its allies. It triggered the International Criminal Court to open a new investigation into alleged war crimes. Now Nyala is the center of clashes between the army and the RSF. Over 10 days in August, more than 50,000 people fled Nyala's violence, according to the United Nations. Water and electricity networks quickly failed, compounding threats in a city where one in four people already needed humanitarian aid before the war, the UN said.

The messenger

People will do anything to make sure their loved ones are alright, according to human rights defender Ahmed Gouja, who left Nyala but is trying to inform the world of the gruesome violence unfolding through Twitter, which is being rebranded as X. He himself spent 16 days "with no info" about his family in Nyala, before finally reaching "one of my brothers who arrived at El Daein, searching for an internet signal". "We die every moment that passes while we are deprived" of news of loved ones, he wrote.

For weeks, Suleiman Mofaddal has seen families like Gouja's walk through his El Daein office, a small room with yellow walls, anxious for news of those who cannot or refuse to leave their homes in Nyala. On his desk sits a pile of small, neatly folded paper rectangles, each with a name scrawled in blue ink. Some have a phone number, just in case the recipient gets cell service for even a moment. All wait to be handed to drivers on Mofaddal's team, who will carry the letters on their way to Nyala. "Most often, the recipient immediately writes a response and hands it back to the driver before he leaves," Mofaddal told AFP. Then the driver heads back out, hoping the road ahead won't be closed — by either the bombs, militia checkpoints, or the downpours of Sudan's rainy season. — AFP