

2,000-KM MARCH FOR 'MISSING' NEARS END IN PAKISTAN

RAWALPINDI: After 2,000 grueling kilometers on the road, a band of families led by a 72-year-old are due to reach the end of their protest march over missing relatives in the Pakistani capital yesterday. They are the relatives of people who have disappeared in Pakistan's troubled southwestern province Baluchistan, allegedly at the hands of the country's security services. The marchers, led by a retired banker known as Mama (uncle) Qadir, hope to present a petition to UN officials in Islamabad and meet foreign diplomats to raise awareness of their cause.

"We want to tell (the world) that people

are being kidnapped every day in Baluchistan, districts are being bombarded and almost every day we are receiving mutilated bodies," Qadir said on the road close to Rawalpindi, Islamabad's twin city. "We have no more hope in the Pakistani government, which is why we want to talk to international organizations, so they can apply pressure."

Qadir's son Jalil Reki, a member of the Baloch Republican Party which is suspected of links to the armed insurgency, was found shot dead in 2011 after going missing. The marchers set out from the Baluchistan capi-

tal Quetta last October, walking first 700 kilometers to Karachi, on the shores of the Arabian Sea, before turning their steps northwards to Islamabad, nestling in the foothills of the Himalayas. Baluchistan, the size of Italy and rich in copper, gold and natural gas, is Pakistan's largest but least populous province. It is also the least developed, which has exacerbated a long-running ethnic Baluch separatist movement that wants more autonomy and a greater share of its mineral wealth.

The latest armed insurgency rose up in 2004 and separatist groups still regularly

attack Pakistani forces. Rights groups accuse the military and intelligence agencies of kidnapping and killing suspected Baluch rebels before leaving their bodies by the roadside. According to Human Rights Watch, more than 300 people have suffered this fate-known as "kill and dump"-in Baluchistan since January 2011. The security services deny the allegations and say they are battling a fierce rebellion in the province. The Supreme Court has also been investigating cases of missing people in Baluchistan, issuing warnings to the government to recover these people. — AFP

SINGAPORE COURT OVERTURNS SEX-FOR-FAVORS CONVICTION

'IT TAKES TWO HANDS TO CLAP'

SINGAPORE: Singapore's High Court has overturned the conviction of a law professor jailed for obtaining sexual favors and gifts from a female student in exchange for better grades, his lawyer said yesterday. Former National University of Singapore (NUS) law professor Tey Tsun Hang, 42, served a five-month sentence last year after he was found guilty by a district court of six charges of corruption over his relationship with his then-student Darinne Ko in 2010. The district court ruled that he had "exploited" the female student by obtaining sexual favors from her and also receiving gifts that included tailored shirts and a limited-edition pen.

But Tey's lawyer Peter Low said Friday that High Court Justice Woo Bih Li "allowed an appeal and overturned the conviction", five months after he completed his prison sentence. "The crux of it is that the court found that it takes two hands to clap even though he exploited her and that she was in love with him," Low said. "I am glad that Professor Tey has been vindicated by a court of law and acquitted of all six corruption charges," he said. The NUS, which announced last year that it had terminated Tey's employment after his conviction, said Friday he may "petition for reinstatement" at the university.

However, "he would remain liable for any acts contrary to the NUS Staff Code of Conduct," the school said in a statement sent to AFP. "In the event that he does seek to return to NUS, the university would first appoint its own Committee of Inquiry to determine whether Mr Tey is guilty of any misconduct and, if so, what sanctions are warranted," it said. In handing down the sentence last year, Chief District Judge Tan Siong Thye said Tey "abused his position and power" while in the relationship with Ko and chastised him for his "ulterior motives and corrupt intention".

The court had heard during the trial that Ko got pregnant during their affair and paid for her own abortion. It is the second high-profile corruption case to be overturned in Singapore in the past year. Ng Boon Gay, a former head of Singapore's narcotics police, was cleared of corruption in February 2013 after a court rejected charges that he demanded oral sex from a female contractor to help her win government deals. — AFP

BEIJING HITS BACK AT US ON RIGHTS REPORT

BEIJING: China yesterday issued a report on human rights in the US, denouncing it for foreign drone strikes, state-sponsored spying and "rampant" gun crime after Washington criticized its rights record. Beijing said the US "concealed and avoided mentioning its own human rights problems", such as a government-run intelligence program known as PRISM which it said "seriously infringes on human rights". The document came after the State Department issued its annual global human rights report Thursday. China regularly produces a statement on the US in response. It does not release rights reports aimed at other countries.

The report, released by China's State Council, or cabinet, singled out the US for criticism for drone strikes in countries such as Pakistan, which it said have caused "heavy civilian casualties". It also said the US suffers from "rampant gun violence", while its agricultural sector employs a "large amount of child laborers". Washington's report released on Thursday praised China for some successes in human rights, such as the abolition of some labor camps and a change to the one-child policy. — AFP



ST LOUIS: Wissam Akiki, who is married, serves his daughter, Perla, communion after being ordained to the priesthood during a ceremony at St Raymond's Maronite Cathedral on Thursday, Feb 27, 2014. — AP

MARRIED MAN BECOMES A MARONITE CATHOLIC PRIEST

ST LOUIS: When Wissam Akiki was ordained as a Maronite Catholic priest Thursday night in St Louis, he was welcomed by hundreds of supporters, including his wife and daughter. For the first time in nearly a century, the Maronite Catholic Church in the United States ordained a married priest in a ceremony at St Raymond's Maronite Cathedral near downtown St Louis. Akiki, 41, speaking at the end of the two-hour ceremony, called it a "historic day" and said he had been given two great blessings - marriage to his wife of 10 years, Manal, and "the dream to serve the Lord and church as a priest."

Eastern Catholic churches in the Middle East and Europe ordain married men. However, the Vatican banned the practice in America in the 1920s after Latin-rite bishops complained it was confusing for parishioners. But Pope John Paul II called for greater acceptance of Eastern Catholic traditions, and over the years, popes have made exceptions on a case-by-case basis for married men to become Eastern Catholic priests in America. Pope Francis gave permission for Akiki to be ordained. Maronites are among more than a dozen Eastern Catholic church groups in the US. Eastern Catholics accept the authority of

the pope but have many of their own rituals and liturgy.

"Almost half of our priests in Lebanon are married, so it's not an unusual event in the life of the Maronite church, though in the United States it is," Deacon Louis Peters, chancellor at St Raymond's, said. The ordination ceremony featured several bishops from within the Maronite rite. Many members of the St Raymond's congregation are of Lebanese descent, and many of the prayers, hymns and readings were in Arabic. Members of the church said they were ready to welcome the new priest. "He'll be a wonderful priest," Linda Hill, 54, said. "The fact that he's married will be exciting for the church. It's tradition in the old country. I guess we're finally catching up to the old country." Stephanie Baker, 57 and a lifelong member, agreed.

"I really think it sets a precedent," Baker said. "There are a lot of people who have it (the priesthood) in their hearts. This opens it up for other people." That remains to be seen. Peters said the pope's action does not lift the ban on married priests in the US. It is simply an exception. Experts, too, cautioned against reading too much into it. "This is certainly not an automatic indication that the mandate of celibacy within

Roman rite will be overturned," said Randy Rosenberg, a theological studies professor at Saint Louis University. Akiki emigrated from Lebanon in 2002, and almost immediately became a subdeacon at St Raymond's, ascending to deacon in 2009. It was about a year-and-a-half ago that he and the church petitioned the Vatican to allow him to enter the priesthood.

Akiki completed seminary studies at Holy Spirit University in Lebanon, Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Seminary in Washington, DC, and the Aquinas Institute of Theology in St Louis.

He and his wife have one daughter, 8-year-old Perla. She read a brief prayer at her father's ordination. Peters said that in the most recent Maronite Patriarchal Synod, the church reaffirmed its position in support of allowing married priests, a tradition that, worldwide, dates back centuries. In a statement, the Archdiocese of St Louis congratulated Akiki. "The Archdiocese of St Louis values its strong relationship with the Maronite community in St Louis," the statement read in part. Those attending the ordination applauded the new priest several times, which clearly left him moved. "It is a day of grace and of joy," he said. — AP