

# INDIA'S 'LIVING DEAD' FIGHT FOR RESURRECTION

**NEW DELHI:** For the last two years Ramjanam Mauriya has made countless journeys to Azamgarh magistrate's office in northern India, laden with stacks of documents to prove he is not a ghost. "It's frustrating. I am alive, yet they say I am dead," Mauriya told AFP. The 65-year-old is one of hundreds of people from the giant state of Uttar Pradesh who have been classified as deceased in official records as part of a plot by unscrupulous relatives to grab their land.

Mauriya alleges it was his brother who bribed officials to have him declared dead in order to gain a greater share of ancestral property. Others have been fallen victim to similar scams by cousins, nephews or even their own sons who bribe local officials to falsify or destroy paperwork. Nearly all the cases have been recorded in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, which also has a reputation for being one of the most corrupt and crime-ridden parts of the country.

Azamgarh district, around 300 km east of the state capital Lucknow, has been at the centre of a host of cases over the decades which have multiplied as the scramble for land has intensified. It's nearly 40 years since Lal Bihari discovered his three-acre plot in Azamgarh had passed into the hands of one of his cousins who had connived with a corrupt local bureaucrat to have him declared dead.

## 'You Doubt Your Existence'

After he finally managed to persuade the courts he was the victim of fraud, Bihari formed the "Mritak Singh" organisation (association of the dead) to help those who find themselves trapped in a similar nightmare. "I went crazy running from one office to another for months," said Bihari. "You even sometimes start doubting your own existence. Your enemy doesn't get his hands dirty by murdering you but you are as good as dead."

Bihari, who even stood against two prime ministers in general elections as part of his campaign, says his organisation is currently helping in around 200 cases nationwide. Authorities insist they have put an end to such scams and some people are making bogus allegations. Azamgarh district magistrate L Y Suhas said most records have now been computerised, making it impossible to fabricate personal details. "Some people just want to get publicity," he told AFP.

But the nature of the scams means it can take years before a case flares up, as in the case of Mauriya, who only discovered he had been declared dead when he tried to pass some land onto his son. Mauriya inherited a 1,500-sq m plot when his own father died in 1993 but he left the land in what he thought was his



**AZAMGARH, India:** In this photograph taken on June 22, 2015, Indian farmer Ram Janam Mauriya (right), who is struggling to prove to authorities that he is still alive after being declared dead by his younger brother, speaks with activist Lal Bihari Mritak. — AFP

brother's safe keeping when he moved to his in-laws' village a few years later. Then when he tried to transfer the plot to his son in 2013, officials told him he was

classified as dead and his brother was the sole owner. "It was a shock, even more so when I came to know about my brother's role," he said.

## 'Never Even Born'

Jagdish Prasad Gupta, 52, is having to battle to prove that he has ever existed. "The records say I was never born because my father died as a child," Gupta, who runs a sweet shop, told AFP. The revenue office ruled back in 1997 that he did not exist as it turned a plot of land he inherited in another Uttar Pradesh district over to a female relative whom he suspects bribed officials. While that decision was later overturned in 2002, he was again declared as "non-existent" the following year. Gupta says he is not that bothered about the land but wants to put the record straight so his own children don't run into bureaucratic problems. "My children and my existence is directly linked to my father's existence. I am not fighting for myself but for my future generations," Gupta told AFP.

Mohammad Arshad, a sociologist at Uttar Pradesh's Institute of Social Sciences, says a craving for land is the main factor behind the scams. The rapid urbanisation of India, coupled with the growth in population which now stands at around 1.25 billion, means some people are so desperate to get hold of land they will betray their own flesh and blood. "With land, you can attract business partners and make matrimonial alliances for yourself and your children," said Arshad. "Land makes the difference here." — AFP



**TOKYO:** Yasukazu Hamada (center right), the chairman of the lower house special committee on security legislation, yells out to continue his committee proceedings against a group of opposition lawmakers at the parliament yesterday. (Inset) Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe raises his hand to answer a question from an opposition lawmaker. — AP/AFP

# CHAOS IN JAPAN PARLIAMENT AS DEFENCE BILL SPARKS UPROAR

## ABE'S POPULARITY DECLINING

**TOKYO:** There were chaotic scenes inside Japan's normally orderly parliament yesterday as opposition lawmakers thronged a committee room in an unsuccessful bid to block Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's controversial security bills. Dozens of politicians held signs protesting against what they said was the "forced" passage of legislation that will bolster the role of Japan's military, in a way they say is anathema to the country's pacifist constitution. The floor of the committee room filled moments after chairman Yasukazu Hamada, a member of Abe's conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), called a vote.

Lawmakers chanted "nay, nay, nay" and held posters saying "No to Abe politics" and "No to a forced decision", as their

LDP colleagues pressed on with the vote, which they won comfortably. "This will drastically change our defence policies. It's also likely they are unconstitutional," said Katsuya Okada, head of main opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). "I strongly protest that these bills were forced through the committee," he said.

The bills, which are expected to go to a vote of the powerful - and LDP-dominated - lower chamber today, are something of a pet project for Abe, despite widespread public disquiet over what many Japanese say is an affront to 70 years of pacifism. Hundreds of people protested outside parliament yesterday, with numbers expected to swell throughout the evening. On Tuesday, around 20,000

people rallied against the changes.

Abe, a robust nationalist, has pushed for what he calls a normalisation of Japan's military posture. He has sought to loosen restrictions that have bound the so-called Self-Defense Forces to a narrowly defensive role for decades. But unable to muster the public support to amend the pacifist constitution imposed by the United States after World War II, Abe opted instead to re-interpret it for the purpose of his bills.

### Political Cost

Chief among the changes that the legislation will enable is the option for the military to go into battle to protect allies - so called "collective defence" -

even if there is no direct threat to Japan or its people, something successive governments have ruled out. If, as expected, the lower chamber passes the bills today, they will go to the upper house. Abe has been forced to extend the parliamentary session months beyond its normal finish in a bid to get the legislation through both chambers.

But there are growing signs that his determination to push the unpopular bills is exacting a political cost. Abe's support rate has fallen to 39 percent, lower than the 42 percent disapproval rating, according to the latest poll by the leading Asahi newspaper. The shift in military policy is supported by just 26 percent of those polled, while 56 percent expressed opposition. — AFP

# MULLAH OMAR HAILS PEACE TALKS

**KABUL:** Taliban leader Mullah Omar yesterday hailed as "legitimate" peace talks aimed at ending Afghanistan's 13-year war, in his first comments on the nascent dialogue, easing concerns that it lacked the leadership's backing. Afghan officials sat down with Taliban cadres last week in Murree, a tourist town in the hills north of Islamabad, Pakistan, for their first face-to-face talks aimed at ending the bloody insurgency.

They agreed to meet again in the coming weeks, drawing international praise, but many militant commanders openly questioned the legitimacy of the Taliban negotiators, exposing dangerous faultlines within the movement. But in his annual message before Eid-ul-Fitr, the festival marking the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, the reclusive leader backed negotiations - though he did not refer specifically to last week's meeting.

"If we look into our religious regulations, we can find that meetings and even peaceful interactions with the enemies is not prohibited," he said in a statement on the Taliban's website. "Concurrently with armed jihad, political endeavours and peaceful pathways for achieving these sacred goals is a

legitimate Islamic principle." Several informal meetings have been held in recent months between Taliban representatives and Afghan officials and activists - including in Qatar, China and Norway - but last week's meeting is seen as a significant step forward. Afghan officials have not said when and where the next round of negotiations will take place, but they are widely expected to be conducted after Eid.

### Fears of IS Emergence

Yesterday's statement marks the first clear indication of support for the process from Mullah Omar, about whom rumours of ill-health and even death regularly emerge. In the absence of a clear lead from the top, some fighters have fallen back on the Taliban's traditional position, that there can be no meaningful talks until all foreign forces leave Afghan soil. NATO ended its combat mission in Afghanistan at the end of December, but a smaller residual force remains in the country to train Afghan forces, due to leave altogether by the end of 2016.

But yesterday's statement is "different" from previous Taliban statements, said Kabul-based political analyst



Mullah Omar

Ahmad Saedi. "In addition to war, the Taliban leader talks about peace and negotiations," Saedi told AFP. "There is no doubt a gradual change is developing in the Taliban's attitude. It is now for the Afghan government to use this golden opportunity and engage them smartly." But despite the willingness to engage in peace talks there has been no letup in militant attacks on foreign and government targets, leaving Afghan forces stretched on multiple

fronts and inflicting a heavy blow on civilians. On Sunday 33 people were killed in a suicide attack at a military base in the eastern province of Khost and on Monday 25 civilians were wounded in a bombing inside a mosque in northern Baghlan province.

Talks are also dependent on another contributing factor - the emergence of a local branch of the Islamic State, the Middle Eastern jihadist outfit that last year declared a "caliphate" across large areas of Iraq and Syria that it controls. The Taliban warned IS last month against expanding in the region, but this has not stopped some fighters, inspired by the group's success, defecting to swear allegiance to IS chief Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi instead of the invisible Mullah Omar. US drone strikes over the past week have killed dozens of suspected IS-linked cadres in Afghanistan, including the group's Afghanistan-Pakistan regional chief Hafiz Saeed. The notoriously uncompromising IS has shown no desire to negotiate - and if the Taliban faultlines widen, there is a danger the talks process could drive more of its hardline fighters into the arms of the Middle Eastern jihadist group. — AFP

# CHINA DETAINS 20 FOREIGNERS FROM S AFRICA, BRITAIN, INDIA

**BEIJING:** A group of 20 travelers from Britain, South Africa and India were detained in northern China, a relative said yesterday. A South African aid group said some of them are accused of watching video deemed to be terrorist propaganda. The Foreign Ministry said 20 foreign nationals were suspected of committing crimes in Ordos in China's Inner Mongolia region. It said nine were criminally detained on Saturday, which means they can be held for up to 37 days by police while investigations continue, and 11 were ordered deported.

The British embassy in Beijing confirmed that nine Britons and two dual British-South African nationals had been detained, and said six of them had been deported. It said it was "seeking further clarification" from authorities about those still being held. The group was initially detained Friday at the airport in Ordos and was being held without charge, said Shameel Joosub, a relative of three of the detained people and CEO of South African telecommunications company Vodacom. "My family and I are deeply concerned for the safety and well-being of my brother, aunt and uncle," Joosub said in a statement emailed to AP.

Imtiaz Sooliman, a South African disaster response specialist, said in a statement on the Facebook page of his agency, Gift of the Givers, that the detainees were part of a group of 20 peo-

ple - 10 South Africans, nine Britons and one Indian - who were on a 47-day tour of ancient Chinese sites. Sooliman said nine members of the group were accused of watching terror propaganda in their hotel rooms and that they would continue to be detained. Sooliman said in a phone interview that a relative of some of the detained had contacted him to look into the case and that he was in close contact with South African authorities. He said the group had been heading from Ordos to the central Chinese city of Xi'an when they were detained at the airport.

The news of the detentions came as South African Vice President Cyril Ramaphosa was in Beijing on a trip to China that lasts until Friday. He met with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang on Tuesday. The African News Agency quoted International Relations Minister Maite Nkoana-Mashabane as saying in Pretoria that Ramaphosa would use the rest of his visit to press for the release of the remaining South Africans. Asked to confirm whether South Africans, Britons and an Indian citizen had been detained Friday at Ordos airport, a press officer at the Ordos police bureau said the case was under investigation and refused to give details. The Indian Embassy in Beijing did not immediately respond to a request for comment. — AP

# WOMAN KILLED IN INDIA-PAK BORDER SKIRMISH IN KASHMIR

## MAOISTS KILL 4 POLICE

**SRINAGAR/RAIPUR:** Indian and Pakistani troops exchanged fire in the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir yesterday, killing a woman and wounding at least four other people on the Indian-controlled side, officials said. Pakistan's army said it shot down an Indian drone. D Parekh, a senior officer with India's Border Security Force, said Pakistani soldiers first fired at a paramilitary soldier guarding a border post in the Pargwal area. As troops tried to evacuate the seriously injured soldier, they came under heavy fire and retaliated, he said.

Pakistani troops also fired mortar shells, and one woman was killed and three other civilians injured when one of the shells exploded near a border village, Parekh said, calling it "a blatant, unprovoked cease-fire violation by Pakistan". Pakistan, however, accused India of resorting to "unprovoked firing" in the incident, which took place near the city of Sialkot. The Pakistan Rangers, a border security paramilitary force, said in a statement that border guards "befittingly" responded to the Indian firing. Both sides said the skirmishes were continuing as of late yesterday afternoon.

Also yesterday, Pakistan's military said it shot down an Indian spy drone which intruded into the Pakistan-held portion of Kashmir. In a statement, the military said troops downed the drone in the Bhimber sector. It said such drones are used to take photographs. There was no immediate comment from Indian officials about the report. Indian and Pakistani troops often exchange fire along the border with Kashmir, with both sides routinely blaming the other for initiating the violence. Last week, India said two of its paramilitary soldiers were killed by Pakistani fire in separate incidents.

Yesterday's incidents came days after the prime ministers of the two countries met on the sidelines of a summit in the Russian city of Ufa in an effort to ease tensions. India and Pakistan

have fought two wars over their competing claims to Kashmir, which is divided between the two rivals. A 2003 ceasefire has largely held despite small but regular skirmishes. Separately, India's Maoist rebels have killed four policemen they abducted from a bus in the restive central state of Chhattisgarh, a senior officer said yesterday. The guerrillas stopped the bus transporting the security personnel as it was passing through a Maoist-dominated village late Monday. "We have been informed that the four abducted police personnel have been killed by the Maoists. The bodies were thrown on the roadside near a forested area," police superintendent K L Dhruv told AFP. "Police parties have been sent out to the jungles to hunt for the culprits."

The bodies were discovered close to the area where they were abducted, raising doubts about the search operations that police said had been launched immediately after the abductions. A police source told AFP three of the four abducted men had been shot dead by "sophisticated AK-47 guns" while one had his throat slit. "The use of these guns suggests a top Maoist commander may have been involved in the abduction," the source said. Maoists often use abduction to secure the release of jailed fellow fighters or to instil fear. In May, the rebels abducted at least 250 villagers in the state's Sukma district hours before Prime Minister Narendra Modi was to tour the region. The villagers were later released unharmed. The rebels, who claim to be fighting for the rights of poor tribal minorities and farmers, have waged a decades-long battle across central and eastern Indian states to overthrow government authorities. India's Maoist insurgency has claimed tens of thousands of lives, and was described by former prime minister Manmohan Singh as the country's most serious internal security threat. — Agencies



**JAMMU:** An Indian Border Security Force soldier injured in exchange of fire on the India Pakistan border is brought for treatment at the government medical college hospital yesterday. — AP