

SERIAL CHILD KILLER IN INDIA CONFESSES



NEW DELHI: Indian police officers escort Ravinder Kumar, who is accused of murdering and sexual assaulting a six-year-old girl, at a police station in New Delhi yesterday. Indian police said yesterday they are investigating whether a man arrested for the murder and sexual assault of a six-year-old girl may have been a serial child killer after he confessed to 14 more crimes. — AFP

NEW DELHI: Indian police said yesterday they are investigating whether a man arrested for the murder and sexual assault of a six-year-old girl may have been a serial child killer after he confessed to 14 more crimes.

Ravinder Kumar made the confession after he was arrested in New Delhi on Thursday, Deputy Commissioner of Delhi Police Vikramjeet Singh told AFP. Singh said police questioned the 24-year-old labourer after discovering he had been detained in a separate assault case last year and released on bail. "We specifically arrested Ravinder Kumar over the assault and murder of a six-year-old girl," he said.

"After we realised that he had previously been arrested in a similar case, we interrogated him... and he told us of at least 14 other cases." A police officer who spoke on condition of anonymity said Kumar had confessed to the "assault and murder of 14 or 15 children over the last few years".

"We are in the process of ascertaining all his claims and separate teams are looking at every claim," the officer told AFP. The case has drawn comparisons with the gruesome discovery in 2006 of the dismembered bodies of 19 people in sewage drains near a house in Noida, a satellite city of the

Indian capital. Many of the victims in that case—dubbed the "house of horrors"—were children abducted from the poor neighbourhood of Nithari nearby. Parents of the victims later said police had not taken them seriously when they initially reported their children missing because they were poor. Police arrested Kumar after finding his identity card at a construction site where they discovered the body of the six-year-old victim, who had gone missing last week.

Kumar, hooded and flanked by two police officers, told the NDTV news channel that he killed his victims after assaulting them while drunk. "I lose control over my mind after consuming excessive alcohol... and must have assaulted and killed around 14 or 15 children," he said. "I killed them to avoid getting detected." Police have sent teams to the areas where Kumar claimed to have committed the crimes, and have ordered a psychological profile. But they said their investigations would take time.

"We have the evidence to link him to his present arrest, but it could be a long investigation process for other claims as he has given a broad time frame of his acts and also doesn't know the exact area where he committed those acts," Singh said. — AFP

STUNG BY OPPOSITION, MODI SEEKS CONSENSUS ON REFORM

NEW DELHI: India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi began work with unions and employers yesterday to build support for the biggest shake-up of labour laws in decades, in an attempt to revive a reform agenda that has suffered setbacks ahead of a key parliamentary session. It is a change of tack for Modi, who is smarting from widespread opposition to business-friendly land purchase rules he has tried, and so far failed, to push through parliament following an executive decree.

"I am confident that we will be able to address the challenges ahead and proceed with reforms with everyone's consensus," Modi said at the start of a two-day labour conference yesterday. Modi has had to scale-

back his ambitions for the short session of parliament that starts today, with government officials privately saying the main focus will be on passing a law to enable a goods and services tax (GST). The GST law got the backing of a parliamentary panel yesterday. Passing it would in itself be a victory and go some way to reassuring investors who are growing jittery that economic modernisation is happening more slowly than they hoped under Modi.

"Unless there is clarity on reform proposals investors are not keen to pump in new money," said Deven Choksey, managing director at KR Choksey Securities. The proposed changes making it easier for government and businesses to buy farm land are now likely to be implemented by states, not by the central government. Draft changes to India's archaic labour codes include pro-business measures giving factories more leeway to lay off workers and will simplify thickets of rules, but also include measures to expand the social security net to the huge unorganised sector.

The overhaul will probably not reach parliament until later in the year, despite an earlier goal of tabling the amendments in the upcoming monsoon session.

Modi's government hopes the more consensual approach will pay dividends in the form of union support, and will help stave off a threatened national strike on Sept. 2. Over tea at the weekend, Modi reportedly told union leaders that they would be included in discussions along with companies in the build up to the labour law shake-up. "The government is talking in a positive manner," said Baj Nath Rai, president of the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, which is India's largest union and affiliated to Modi's party. Rai said the unions now felt the government was listening to their concerns, such as a demand for a higher minimum wage. "They are trying to understand us," he said. — Reuters



NEW DELHI: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi listens during the 46th Indian Labour Conference in New Delhi yesterday. — AFP

NEPAL QUAKE FORCES 'LIVING GODDESS' TO BREAK DECADES OF SECLUSION

PATAN: When a massive earthquake struck Nepal in April, Nepal's longest-serving "living goddess" was forced to do the unthinkable—walk the streets for the first time in her life, she told AFP in a rare interview.

Still following the cloistered lifestyle she entered at the age of two, Dhana Kumari Bajracharya also opened up about her unusually long 30-year reign, suggesting the pain of her unceremonious dethroning in the 1980s was still raw. Before the 7.8 magnitude April 25 quake, Bajracharya had only ever appeared in public while being carried in an ornate wooden palanquin. The Himalayan nation's living goddesses, known as Kumaris, live in seclusion and rarely speak in public, bound by customs that combine elements of Hinduism and Buddhism.

But as the tremor hit, shaking the ground, reducing buildings to rubble and killing thousands, Bajracharya left her quarters in the historic city of Patan, south of Kathmandu, for the first time in three decades. And for the first time on foot.

"I had never thought about leaving the house like that," she said, clearly still traumatised by the disaster that claimed more than 8,800 lives. "Perhaps the gods are angry because people don't respect traditions as much anymore," Bajracharya, 63, added. As the disaster ripped through Nepal, shaking Bajracharya's five-storey home, her family stayed indoors, waiting to see if the retired Kumari would break tradition and walk out with them. "We couldn't just leave the house like everyone else, we had to think of her. We didn't know what to do," said her niece, Chanira Bajracharya.

"But when nature forces you, you do the unthinkable," she added. Dhana Kumari Bajracharya was enthroned in 1954 when she was just two years old and reigned for three decades as the Kumari of Patan.

The Kumari, a pre-pubescent girl from the Newar community, is considered an embodiment of the Hindu goddess Taleju. Selection criteria is strict and includes a number of specific physical attributes from an unblemished body to a chest like a lion and thighs like a deer.

'Why so old?'

Unlike Kathmandu's "living goddess" who must move to an official residence, the Patan Kumari is allowed to live with her family, but can only emerge on feast days when she is paraded through the city to be worshipped.

"I loved going out during the festivals the most," said Bajracharya, remembering how

devotees lined up along Patan's narrow streets, eager to receive her blessings.

The Patan Kumari is traditionally dethroned once she begins to menstruate and, since Bajracharya never started her periods, she continued to serve well into her thirties.

But in 1984, Nepal's then crown prince Dipendra, who would go on to massacre his family 17 years later, stirred up a controversy which eventually ended her tenure.

"Why is she so old?" the 13-year-old prince reportedly asked when he saw Bajracharya during a festival, prompting priests to replace her with a young girl. Thirty years later, the memory of her abrupt dismissal still stings.

"They had no reason to replace me," she told AFP. "I was a little angry... I felt the goddess still resided in me."

Unchanged routines

Forced into retirement, Bajracharya decided to continue living the life she had always known, unable to abandon her duties or end her withdrawal from the outside world.

Every morning she wakes up, drapes an embroidered red skirt like the one she wore during her years as a Kumari, scrapes her hair into a topknot and lines her eyes with kohl curving upwards to her temples.

On special occasions, she uses red and yellow powder to draw a third eye in the middle of her forehead and takes to a wooden throne decorated with brass snake carvings.

Devotees are received, as when she was an official Kumari, on Saturdays and during festivals in a separate room in her red brick home reached by narrow stairs above two floors rented out to a shop and financial cooperative.

"The priests did what they had to do, but I cannot abandon my responsibilities," she said. When Bajracharya's niece Chanira was chosen as a Kumari in 2001, she guided her through the process.

Nepal has seen sweeping changes during Bajracharya's lifetime, transforming from a Hindu kingdom to a secular republic, the former Kumari's daily routine remains the same.

Her one concession to modernity is a fondness for television, especially current affairs shows and Indian mythological dramas.

Since the quake, however, she spends most of her time engrossed in prayer, according to Chanira. "It saddened her immensely... our astrologer had predicted last year that my aunt would leave the house, and we were wondering how that would ever happen," she said.

"But we never expected this." — AFP



KABUL: Afghanistan National Army wounded soldiers lie on the ground as they receive treatment, in district of Baraki Barak in Logar province, east of Kabul, Afghanistan, yesterday. A NATO airstrike hit two Afghan military checkpoints yesterday in a restive province east of the capital, Kabul, killing many Afghan troops in what an Afghan official describes as an accident due to bad coordination. — AP

AMERICAN 'FRIENDLY FIRE' KILLS 10 AFGHAN SOLDIERS

US CARRIED OUT 106 MILITARY AIR STRIKES IN JUNE

PUL-E ALAM: A US airstrike killed up to 10 Afghan soldiers yesterday at an army checkpoint in a Taliban-infested province south of Kabul, one of the deadliest episodes of "friendly fire" from foreign forces in recent years. The early morning raid in Baraki Barak district of Logar province comes as coalition forces increase air strikes on potential militant targets despite a draw-down of NATO forces after 13 years of war. The bombing marked the second such incident in the area since last December when a NATO air strike killed five civilians and wounded six others. "At 6:00 am (0130 GMT) today, two US helicopters attacked a checkpoint in Baraki Barak," district governor Mohammad Rahim Amin told AFP. "The checkpoint caught fire... and 10 Afghan army soldiers were killed," he added, revising down his earlier toll of 14.

Civilian and military deaths in coalition airstrikes have been one of the most emotive and high-profile issues of the war, often provoking fury from the government. An American military official said he was "aware of an incident involving US forces in Logar province this morning".

"This incident is under investigation," he added. Logar's deputy police chief, Mohammad Wara, also said 10 Afghan soldiers were killed and four others were wounded but provincial army commander, Abdul Razid Safi, said the attack resulted in eight fatalities. Amin said the targeted outpost was "not a suspicious area". "The Afghan flag was waving at the checkpoint in Baraki Barak when the Americans launched their attack," he said. But the Afghan defence ministry said "armed insurgents had opened fire on the coalition forces' helicopters", though it did not say if that had prompted the friendly fire.

Following the attack, an Afghan army convoy dispatched to the site was ambushed several times on its way by Taliban militants, but they managed to retrieve the dead bodies without any further casualties, Amin said. US-led NATO forces ended their combat mission in Afghanistan in December, leaving local forces to battle the Taliban alone, but a residual force remains for training and counter-terrorism operations.

Despite the drawdown, the US carried out 106 military air strikes in June, a sharp jump compared to the previous month when it carried out 41 strikes. But that figure is still significantly lower than previous years. Last year it carried out 2,363 air strikes compared to a total of 305 raids in the first six months of this year, according to military statistics.

Surging casualties

Yesterday's incident comes as Taliban insurgents step up attacks on government and foreign targets during their summer offensive despite official efforts to jumpstart peace talks.

Afghan officials sat down with Taliban cadres this month 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 praise from Islamabad, Beijing, Washington and the United Nations. While "friendly fire" incidents involving foreign coalition forces are a deeply contentious issue in Afghanistan, UN statistics show that the Taliban are responsible for most deaths.

Civilians often fall victim to such attacks, with

almost 1,000 Afghan civilians killed during the first four months of the year, according to the UN mission in Afghanistan.

President Ashraf Ghani's government has drawn criticism for failing to end growing insurgent attacks, which critics partly blame on the protracted delay in the appointment of a defence minister.

The crucial post has not been filled since Ghani came to power last September. Foreign forces are themselves known to sometimes fall victim to "friendly

fire" incidents. A NATO airstrike killed five US troops and an Afghan soldier in an accident during clashes with insurgents. The incident could have been avoided if American forces had communicated properly and understood their aircraft's capabilities, military investigators later said. Afghan soldiers are also sometimes blamed for such incidents. In January, Afghan soldiers accidentally fired mortars at a wedding party that killed 17 women and children in the southern province of Helmand. — AFP

DOZENS HURT IN NEPAL CHARTER PROTESTS

KATHMANDU: Clashes between police and hundreds of demonstrators left dozens injured in central and southern Nepal yesterday during protests about the draft of a long-awaited new constitution, an opposition leader said.

Lawmakers tabled the draft in parliament last month after bickering parties struck an historic deal to divide the country into eight provinces, paving the way for a new federal structure. The parties were spurred by April's devastating earthquake to reach agreement on the charter, which is intended to end years of political limbo in the impoverished country since a decade-long Maoist war ended.

But as the government yesterday began public discussions on the draft, opposition lawmakers and their supporters—some hurling stones—expressed anger about a lack of detail on where and how the new internal borders will be drawn.

"Clashes have occurred in several districts with hundreds of our supporters and more than 50 have been injured," Laxman Lal Karna, an opposition lawmaker protesting against the constitution, told AFP. "The police did not allow our party workers to enter

the discussion venues," said Karna, from the regional Madhesi Nepal Sadbhawana Party.

Opposition parties have repeatedly sought to draw up borders along lines that could favour historically marginalised groups including the Madhesi community living in Nepal's southern plains bordering India.

Protesters in Rautahat district, home to a sizeable Madhesi population, threw bricks and stones in brief clashes with security forces at one meeting, said local police official Bhim Dhakal. "Police has had to respond with 20 rounds of tear gas and batons... to control the crowd and ensure a safe environment for discussions," Dhakal said.

Maoist chief Pushpa Kamal Dahal, better as Prachanda, had to be escorted to safety in Siraha district after protesters hurled stones during a discussion, said district police chief Ram Kripal Saha. In the central district of Nuwakot a petrol bomb was thrown at Finance Minister Ram Sharan Mahat's convoy while he was en route to his constituency for public consultations, said his press adviser Gajendra Bista. No one was injured. — AFP



KATHMANDU: Protestors from Rastriya Prajatantra Party Nepal shout slogans after storming into the national stadium where Deputy Prime Minister Prakash Man Singh was collecting suggestions on a draft constitution in Kathmandu, Nepal, yesterday. Protesters demanding that Nepal be turned back into a Hindu nation scuffled with police yesterday and threw chairs at the country's deputy prime minister. — AP