

## International

# 2 lower caste children beaten to death for 'open defecation'

## Poor sanitation forces Indians to defecate outdoors

**LUCKNOW:** Two children from India's lowest caste were beaten to death by two men after they defecated outside, officials and relatives said yesterday, in the latest case of communal violence in the country. Rajesh Chandel, superintendent of police in Shivpuri, a district in the central state of Madhya Pradesh, told Reuters the children, identified as 12-year-old girl Roshni and her nephew Avinash, a 10-year-old boy, were attacked at around 0630 local time on Wednesday.

Two men, whom Chandel identified as Hakam Singh and Rameshwar Singh, have been ar-

rested, he said. "The accused are mentally stable and during the interrogation they have said they committed this crime," Chandel said, adding the investigation was continuing. It was not possible to reach the accused or their representatives for comment.

The two children belonged to what are known officially as "scheduled castes", but also called "Dalits", or "untouchables" for their position in India's ancient caste hierarchy. Discrimination on the basis of caste is illegal but still widespread in India, especially in rural areas where hundreds of millions of people live. Both

Chandel and Avinash's father, Manoj Balmiki, said the murders followed an earlier verbal altercation between the two families where "casteist slurs" were used by the accused.

"There is a lot of untouchability issues in our village," Balmiki, 32 said. "Our children cannot play with their children." Poor sanitation that forces Indians to defecate outdoors is one of the country's biggest health issues, and its eradication has been a top priority for the Bharatiya Janata Party government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Modi launched the Swachh Bharat, or Clean India, mission in 2014, and has

promised to make India "open defecation free" (ODF) by Oct. 2 this year.

This week Modi was given an award by the Gates Foundation at a ceremony in New York for his role in the scheme. Swachh Bharat has constructed more than a hundred million toilets for some of the poorest in Indian society, according to official data, but problems in some areas remain. Anugraha P, the district's top civil servant, told Reuters that Bhaukhedi village, where the two families live, had been declared as ODF in 2018, but that Balmiki's house did not have a toilet.— Reuters

## The economist and the eye doctor: The Afghan presidential hopefuls

**KABUL:** A former World Bank economist, an ophthalmologist, a spy chief and a one-time warlord are among the 15 candidates vying for the presidency when Afghanistan heads to the polls this weekend. Eighteen candidates are set to appear on the official ballot, although three have since dropped out and officials say there is not enough time to update the ballot papers. The run-up to the poll has been chaotic, with little in the way of campaigning and large swathes of the country unable to vote due to Taliban threats. Here is a rundown of the main candidates:

### The incumbent

President Ashraf Ghani has variously been described as visionary, short-tempered, academic and overly demanding. The former World Bank economist and finance minister has long nurtured dreams of rebuilding Afghanistan, and firmly believes he is one of the few people - perhaps the only one - capable of handling the responsibility. Despite a lack of credible polling, he is widely perceived as the overall favourite, though he has made little headway against either the Taliban or deep-rooted government corruption. And even though Ghani has made repeated overtures to the Taliban for peace, they continue to dismiss him as a US-controlled "puppet", while the Americans sidelined him from now-suspended talks with the militants. If re-elected, Ghani will be given a mandate in any future Afghan-led peace process with the Taliban - should they ever agree to such negotiations. If talking fails, Ghani has vowed in the past to fight the militants "for generations" if necessary.

### The doctor

Former ophthalmologist and resistance fighter Abdullah Abdullah is again on the cusp of becoming the president of Afghanistan after being defeated in two previous elections, both tarnished by widespread allegations of fraud. Abdullah, once an eye doctor in Kabul, was a member of Burhanuddin Rabbani's government during Afghanistan's 1992-1996 civil war, and made a name for himself abroad for his fluent English and refined manner. His formative political experience was as the right-hand man to Ahmad Shah Massoud - the celebrated Tajik commander who led resistance to the Soviet occupation in the 1980s and to the 1996-2001 Taliban regime, only to be assassinated by Al Qaeda two days before the 9/11 attacks. Both Abdullah and Ghani ran in 2014, and both claimed they had won.

To avert a full-blown conflict, then US secretary of state John Kerry brokered a power-sharing deal between the two that left Abdullah as



**KABUL:** Afghan presidential candidates Abdullah Abdullah (left) and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar take part in a presidential debate at Tolo News TV station yesterday. — AFP

the country's chief executive. Abdullah has been in an unending tug of war with Ghani ever since, with bitter infighting in their administration preventing major attempts at reforms and legislation, while the two avoid public appearances together due to deep-seated enmity. If finally elected, Abdullah has pledged to prioritize peace along with vague promises to improve the economy.

### The butcher of Kabul

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar has lived many lives in a career forged in the crucible of Afghanistan's decades of war. Widely regarded as one of the most notorious warlords in Afghanistan's bloody history, he has also been an anti-Soviet commander, prime minister, and now presidential contender. He was accused of killing thousands during the 1992-1996 civil war and earned the nickname "the butcher of Kabul" for his brutal shelling of the capital. After the 2001 US-led invasion, Washington designated him a terrorist, accusing him of colluding with Al-Qaeda and Taliban militants. Hekmatyar made a surprising re-entry into the political mainstream in 2017 following a peace deal between his dormant Hezb-i-Islami militant group and Ghani. If elected, Hekmatyar has vowed to oversee the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan once and for all.

### The lion's brother

Ahmad Wali Massoud is hoping to cash in on the fame of his renowned elder brother Ahmad Shah Massoud, the so-called "Lion of Panjshir" who worked so closely with Abdullah. Other than a stint as the Afghan ambassador to the United Kingdom, Massoud has little in the way of political experience and has largely spent the last two decades as his brother's keeper, running a foundation in his name. But he remains popular with the country's Tajik ethnic group, especially powerbrokers from his native Panjshir province that has enjoyed an outsized role in the government since 2001. Massoud, however, is believed to have little chance of winning and at best can hope for an appointment in any future government.—AFP

## Little hope for peace as Afghans prepare for weekend vote

**KABUL:** Afghans go to the polls tomorrow to vote in a presidential election that few expect will have much effect in bringing peace to the war-torn country. With the Taliban threatening violence against anyone who participates, and concern that the widespread fraud which blighted previous elections will resurface, analysts fear a low turnout will seriously undermine the result. "The security threats, coupled with a trust issue in the election's transparency, may translate into a very low turnout," Afghanistan analyst Ahmad Saedi told AFP ahead of the vote. "That would undermine the legitimacy of the election process and any future government that may come out of it."

### The stakes are high

Whatever the turnout, Afghans are choosing a leader who will almost certainly have to negotiate with the Taliban at some point - even though the hardline Islamist group is doing everything it can to undermine the process. Eighteen names were originally on the ballot, but the poll is considered a two-horse race between current President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, the country's chief executive. Both claimed victory in the 2014 election - a vote so tainted by fraud and violence that it led to a constitutional crisis and forced then-US President Barack Obama to push for a compromise that saw Abdullah awarded the subordinate role.

Five years of bitter rivalry later, the parallels are unsettling, yet nothing suggests President Donald Trump would be willing to play such a role in any fresh disputes. In fact, analysts suggest the new Washington administration has largely undermined the Afghan government by excluding Kabul from months of talks it held with the Taliban in a bid to extract US forces from America's longest-running war.

### Agreement seemed imminent

The Taliban have also refused to negotiate with Ghani - whom they consider a Washington puppet - and he was totally marginalized during negotiations. An agreement between the Taliban and Washington seemed imminent less than a month ago and observers thought the election could be suspended yet again to allow for the implementation of the withdrawal plan, even as Ghani insisted it must go ahead. Ultimately, Trump scuppered the deal at the last moment. That decision boosted what has been a fairly lacklustre election campaign, strengthening Ghani's argument the winner needs a strong mandate to negotiate with the Taliban to finally achieve a lasting peace.— AFP