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Torture video triggers calls for action on domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan Page 8

India's PM promotes yoga against COVID Page 8

NEW DELHI: A man sits with his umbrella on a road side during a rainy day in New Delhi yesterday. —AFP

Spat on and abused: Virus fuels racism

Northeast Indians face hate crimes, discrimination and racial slurs

NEW DELHI: One after another, people came, took one look at her face and then walked off. In the end, student Rachungailiu Gonmei gave up on finding anyone willing to share a rickshaw with her in New Delhi, and travelled alone. Like many Indians from Northeast India - a vast region that borders China, Gonmei has noticed a sharp increase in racial discrimination and abuse since the new coronavirus emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan late last year.

Targeted for their East Asian looks, northeasterners say they have been spat at, called "coronavirus" and told to go back to China. "I suddenly thought 'Oh, so this is how it's going to be'," said Gonmei, 23, who comes from the northeastern state of Manipur and studies at Delhi University. "But I also realized it's not surprising. It was disappointing and hurtful, but it wasn't something new," she said.

Northeast Indians have faced hate crimes, discrimination and racial slurs like "Chinky" and "chow mein" in other parts of the country for decades, but such abuse has become far more common during the pandemic. Bordered by China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan, the Northeast region is a cluster of eight states connected to the rest of the country by a narrow strip of land, and is home to numerous ethnic groups. Many people, especially the young, leave the remote area and head to the big cities of New Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru in search of better jobs and education.

But they face many challenges adapting to new languages and different cultures and endure frequent racial discrimination. Harassment from landlords and employers and attacks in the street are common, campaigners say. As Indian celebrities and politicians voice support for the global Black Lives Matter movement, northeast Indians say they should seek to tackle racism at home first. "When people are suffering here, you don't even raise your voice? It's only when it's an American issue that you speak out?" said Alana Golmei, a lawyer and activist who runs the Delhi-based Northeast Support Centre and Helpline. "It's a total double standard."

'Tip of the iceberg'

Golmei, who herself was called "coronavirus" in the street earlier this year, said calls to the helpline had more than doubled to about 200 a day since late January, around the time that India's first coronavirus infections were reported. But she said that was likely the "the tip of the iceberg" because most victims of racial harassment or abuse choose not to go to the police, who routinely refuse to register or follow up on such complaints.

"We face a lot of challenges in trying to help these victims of abuse and discrimination because the police are so insensitive. They mock us and laugh at our Hindi," she said, calling for strict enforcement of laws to punish racial abuse. Under Indian law, the use of derogatory racist terms is punishable by up to five years imprisonment, but punishment is rare. Women from Northeast India face a double discrimination, Golmei said. Neighbors and landlords often harass them for coming back late at night, assuming they are sex workers. Still, the situation has improved in recent years due to increased awareness.

> "Chinky and chow mein"

The murder of 20-year-old Nido Taniam, who was from the northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, at a New Delhi market in 2014 sparked protests and soul-searching in India, leading to anti-racism campaigns and police-training programs. It also spurred the creation of a panel to look into the concerns of northeast Indians, which made a series of recommendations on police reform, fast-track court procedures and greater representation of northeasterners in state roles. Six years on, however, Golmei - who was part of the panel - said the home ministry had implemented few of the recommendations. The ministry's Northeast division did not reply to requests for comment.

'Too traumatized'

In March, concerned about the upswing in racism, the ministry issued an advisory to all states to take action to tackle abuse against northeast Indians over the coronavirus. Over the last few years, the government has launched scores of initiatives to better connect the Northeast to the rest of the country by promoting tourism and infrastructure projects. But in the absence of a law specifically targeting racial discrimination, many northeast Indians try to prepare themselves for entrenched racism by learning the dominant Hindi language or contacting support groups before heading south. Thotmahai Raingam, a tech consultant and member of a Mumbai-based charity that helps northeast Indians in the city, said he had a list of dos and don'ts to help new arrivals cope.

"There are certain things we can control to make life safer for us," said Raingam from the Tangkhul Welfare Society Mumbai. He urges northeasterners to try to avoid getting into fights if they face abuse or do anything to "attract unnecessary attention that could invite trouble". They should try to get evidence of any harassment or assaults - either visual or audio recordings - otherwise police will likely refuse to take action. Raingam said that while awareness campaigns were important, they should not just say "racism is wrong", and instead emphasize the impact of racial abuse on victims.

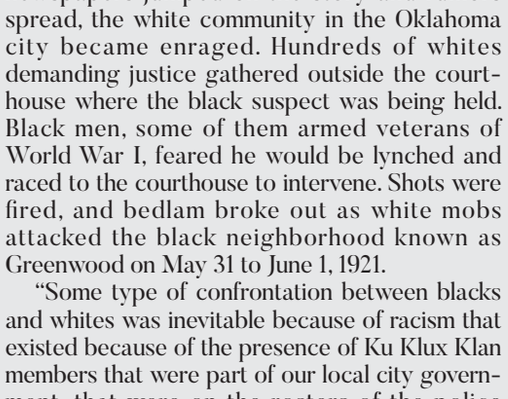
Contacted by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, a woman from the Northeast who was spat on in Mumbai in April said she still felt "too traumatized" to talk about the incident. Gonmei, the Delhi University student, urged universities to introduce more course books written by northeast authors to improve knowledge of their cultures. In the meantime, she said she hoped the Black Lives Matter movement would foster anti-racism demonstrations in India to fight discrimination faced by northeast Indians. "It would be so great if people in India also turned up for each other in that way," she said. "That kind of thing is definitely needed here as well." —Reuters

100 years ago, Tulsa endured a racial massacre

TULSA: Tulsa bears the scars of a racial massacre in 1921 that left up to 300 blacks dead, 1,200 buildings burned to the ground and none of the white rioters that committed the violence ever charged. It started when a young black shoeshiner was accused of assaulting a white woman working as an elevator operator. As newspapers jumped on the story and rumors spread, the white community in the Oklahoma city became enraged. Hundreds of whites demanding justice gathered outside the courthouse where the black suspect was being held. Black men, some of them armed veterans of World War I, feared he would be lynched and raced to the courthouse to intervene. Shots were fired, and bedlam broke out as white mobs attacked the black neighborhood known as Greenwood on May 31 to June 1, 1921.

"Some type of confrontation between blacks and whites was inevitable because of racism that existed because of the presence of Ku Klux Klan members that were part of our local city government, that were on the rosters of the police department and fire department," said Michelle Brown, program coordinator of the Greenwood Cultural Center. An exhibit there commemorates the massacre. A commission of inquiry formed in 2001 concluded that local authorities armed some white people and named them police deputies and that they added to the violence rather than curb it. A night of bloodshed ensued as gunfire rang out from both sides, black-owned stores were looted and torched, and homes of black families were shot up.

Many accounts say planes piloted by white men dropped incendiary bombs on Greenwood, which was known at the time as the Black Wall Street because it was one of the most prosperous African-American communities in America. For whites it was a source of envy and jealousy. For many years, the massacre was not widely known among average white Americans. —AFP



TULSA: The Oaklawn Cemetery is seen in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Tulsa Mayor GT Bynum recently announced that archaeologists will soon excavate a portion of the cemetery in an effort to locate remains of Black residents who were killed during the Black Wall Street Massacre of 1921. —AFP

UK: Muslims, Jews have higher COVID death rate

LONDON: The death rate from COVID-19 in England and Wales is higher among people who identify as Muslims, Jews, Hindus or Sikh than Christians or those with no stated religion, Britain's statistics office said on Friday. The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics also reflected previous studies which showed that black and other ethnic minority groups had a far higher risk of death from the disease than those with white ethnicity.

According to the ONS, which examined data from the start of March until May 15, the mortality rate among Muslims was higher than any other group, with those who were Jewish, Hindu or Sikh also showing higher death rates. "With ethnicity included, (this) demonstrates that a substantial part of the difference in mortality...between religious groups is explained by the different circumstances in which members of these groups are known to live; for example, living in areas with higher levels of socio-economic deprivation and differences in ethnic makeup," the ONS report said.

"However, after adjusting for the above, Jewish males are at twice the risk of Christian males, and Jewish women are also at higher risk," said Nick Stripe, Head of Life Events at the ONS, adding that more research was needed to explain this. The mortality rate among Muslim men was 98.9 deaths per 100,000 and 98.2 deaths per 100,000 for women. For those who said they had no religion in Britain's 2011 census, the figure was 80.7 deaths per 100,000 males and 47.9 deaths per 100,000 females.

The findings coincide with more statistics which show that black and Asian people in England and Wales were at higher risk from the novel coronavirus. Figures showed that the highest mortality rate was among black men at 255.7 per 100,000 compared to a rate of 87 deaths per 100,000 white males. The death rate was 119.8 per 100,000 for black women and 52 per 100,000 for white women. That echoes an official study earlier this month which found black and Asian people in England were up to 50% more likely to die after becoming infected with COVID-19. "Significant differences also remain for Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian men," Stripe said. —Reuters