

International

Milk and music: Indian villages support protesting farmers

Farmers fear farm reforms will place them at mercy of big corporations

MAKRAULI, India: Blasting catchy pro-farmer songs from a speaker, an electric-blue tractor rattled down an Indian village road collecting pails of milk—just some of the donations sustaining massive protest camps outside New Delhi. More than two months after the first farmers set up camps on the capital's borders, tens of thousands more have joined them, calling for the repeal of new agriculture laws. The farmers, who have slept outdoors through the winter cold, are being supported by an army of small villages in the northern states neighboring Delhi. "This campaign, this farmer movement, isn't theirs—those who are sitting there—alone," Sumit Arya, the 35-year-old head of Makrauli Khurd, a village about two hours' drive from the main protest sites, said. "The movement belongs to all of us, the rural villagers."

Makrauli, home to 4,000 people, is a hive of activity every morning with men and women bringing vegetables and wood to collection points. On Tuesdays, villagers carry small metal buckets full of milk freshly squeezed from their cows to the back of trailers, where men like Ajit Singh gently pour them into larger cans. "We can't give our time there but we can take care of their food and water needs and whatever they need in winter," the 58-year-old farmer said as he sat on a bed of hay in a trolley.

Around him, villagers raised their fists and chanted "zindabad" ("long live"), in reply to someone yelling "kisan ekta" ("farmers united") — a rallying cry often heard at the protests. The government says the agriculture sector needs to be modernized. But farmers fear the deregulation will place them at the mercy of big corporations. Farming has long been a political minefield in India, with nearly 70 percent of the 1.3-billion-strong population drawing their livelihood from agriculture. The protests—which turned deadly in late January when a tractor rally in Delhi turned into a rampage—have become one of the biggest challenges to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government since it came to power in 2014.

5 Bangladesh Islamists sentenced to death for writer's murder

DHAKA, Bangladesh: Five Islamist extremists were sentenced to death yesterday over the brutal murder of a Bangladeshi-American writer and rights activist six years ago. Avijit Roy, a prolific blogger and the author of 10 books including the best-selling "Biswisher Virus" ("Virus of Faith"), was hacked to death outside Bangladesh's largest book fair by machete-wielding extremists in February 2015. The murder, part of a reign of terror by extremists at the time, enraged the Muslim-majority nation's secular activists who staged days of protests. The judge at Dhaka's Special Anti-Terrorism Tribunal found six people guilty, sentencing five to death and one to life in prison, prosecutor Gohar Sarwar Zakir told AFP.

Two of them were tried in absentia, including sacked army officer Syed Ziaul Haque who was accused of



MAKRAULI, India: In this photograph villagers give milk and other supplies to be sent to the farmers protesting at the Tikri Delhi-Haryana state border, in Makrauli village in the northern Indian state of Haryana. — AFP

Passion and community

Since the start of the sit-in protests in late November, a support network has sprung up to care for the sprawling camps. Tractors pulling trolleys laden with wood, rice, flour, sugar and vegetables leave villages like Makrauli on daily or weekly rotations for the camps. They are joined by farmers and their families eager to spend the day or several nights at the sites. "We strike up friendships... Two or three tractors keep going from our village to keep their spirits up," Ajay Punia, 18, said on a trailer en route to Delhi from Makrauli with 11 others aged 14 to 65.

The villagers played songs of resistance, as green and yellow farmer union flags and the Indian tricolor fluttered from the tractor. Moments later, two trolleys carrying about 30 people—mostly women—from

another village passed by and the two groups pumped their fists into the air and chanted slogans. Beside the highway, people waved their support. By the time the villagers pulled up at a big protest camp at the Tikri border with Delhi, energy levels were high. The trolley stopped at a community kitchen run by Makrauli and several nearby villages, and the boys and men climbed out and sat in a straight line on a mat. They were served freshly made roti with pea-and-potato curry and a cup of fresh milk—brought from Makrauli earlier in the day by another tractor. "Without this brotherhood, nothing works. Even in our village, different castes are a part of it," Arya said. "People are getting increasingly pulled towards this (protest)... And whatever its length, we are not backing out." — AFP

leading the group that carried out the attack—known as Ansarullah Bangla Team, or Ansar al Islam. Roy was born in Bangladesh in 1972 and moved to the United States in 2006 from where he continued to criticize the government for the jailing of atheist bloggers. A defense lawyer said they would appeal the verdict in a higher court. It comes less than a week after eight Islamist extremists were sentenced to death for the murder of a publisher who brought out books by secular writers, including two by Roy.

The attacks were part of a wave of violence between 2013 and 2016 targeting secular activists, bloggers and atheist writers at a time of heightened political tensions. Several top Islamist political party leaders were hanged over the violence under the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The Bangladesh government has since set up two major anti-terrorism police units to crack down on Islamist extremists.

More than 100 suspects have been killed in anti-terror raids and hundreds detained. Around half a dozen Islamist militant outfits have been banned. Bangladesh cricket star Shakib Al-Hasan has become the latest target of radicals, and had to be given an armed bodyguard after he was threatened for attending a Hindu ceremony in India. — AFP



DHAKA: Police escort a convicted man after a Bangladesh anti-terrorism court sentenced five Islamist extremists to death over the brutal murder of Avijit Roy, a Bangladeshi-US writer and rights activist, in Dhaka yesterday. — AFP

India police seek more arrests in tweeted protest 'toolkit'

NEW DELHI: Indian police Monday said they were searching for two activists after detaining a climate campaigner for allegedly helping to create a guide for anti-government farmers protests shared by environmentalist Greta Thunberg. Disha Ravi, 22, was arrested on Saturday in Bangalore and brought to the capital New Delhi to face court, where she was remanded in police custody for five days. Delhi Police said they had issued arrest warrants for two others—Nikita Jacob and Shantanu, whose surname was not disclosed—for allegedly working with Ravi to draft the so-called "toolkit". "Shantanu was not found at his house. We are still searching for him... When the investigation team reached Nikita's residence, it was learnt that she has absconded," Delhi Police's Joint Commissioner of Police for Cyber Crime, Prem Nath, told reporters.

"As such for Nikita and Shantanu we have taken NBWs (Non-Bailable Warrants) from the honourable court." The toolkit was tweeted by Swedish activist Thunberg in early February. "The main aim of the toolkit was to create misinformation and disaffection against the lawfully enacted government", Nath said. Police also

claimed the trio had been in touch with a Canadian-based organization, Poetic Justice Foundation, that was allegedly pro-Khalistani, a movement representing Sikh separatists. Farmers have been camping on the outskirts of Delhi since late November and calling for the repeal of new agriculture laws, in one of the biggest challenges to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government since it came to power in 2014.

The protests turned deadly in late January when a planned tractor rally by farmers in Delhi became a rampage, leaving one person dead. Authorities have since issued criminal complaints against several journalists, activists and an opposition politician, accusing them of sedition and conspiracy over their reporting and tweets on the rally. The government demanded that Twitter block hundreds of accounts commenting on the protests. The social media giant later said it had suspended some accounts permanently while blocking others from being viewed within India. The foreign ministry was also angered by tweets on the farmers by international personalities including pop superstar Rihanna and Thunberg, calling them "sensationalist".

Ravi's arrest has been criticized by opposition politicians and activists. "The Indian state must be standing on very shaky foundations if Disha Ravi, a 22 year old student of Mount Carmel college and a climate activist, has become a threat to the nation," opposition leader and former finance minister, P. Chidambaram, tweeted. "Arrest of 21 yr old Disha Ravi is an unprecedented attack on Democracy." — AFP

News in brief

\$13,000 fine in Navalny's case

MOSCOW: A Russian prosecutor yesterday asked a Moscow court to fine opposition figure Alexei Navalny 950,000 rubles (\$13,000/10,600 euros) for allegedly defaming a 94-year-old veteran. The prosecution also asked for a three-and-a-half year suspended sentence Navalny received in 2014 to be converted into real jail time as the alleged defamation occurred during the suspended sentence. Another Moscow court earlier this month already converted the suspended sentence to jail time over Navalny allegedly violating the terms of the suspended sentence while recovering from a poisoning attack in Germany. — AFP

Kazakhstan Sputnik drive starts

NUR-SULTAN, Kazakhstan: Kazakhstan will be the first country in the world to locally produce Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine, after a pharmaceutical company received government authorization to make the job, the company said yesterday. The company, called the Karaganda Pharmaceutical Complex (KPC), "was granted certification" to produce the vaccine by Kazakhstan's health ministry on Monday. KPC said in a statement on the Telegram messenger service. A spokesman for the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), which financed the development of the two-dose jab, told AFP that Kazakhstan is the first country to begin local production of Sputnik V. He said Brazil, India and South Korea are expected to follow. — AFP

Peru names 6th FM in a year

LIMA: Peru on Monday appointed its sixth foreign minister in less than a year following a fresh resignation over a growing coronavirus vaccinations scandal. Veteran diplomat Allan Wagner, 79, was sworn in less than 24 hours after Elizabeth Astete became the second top official to step down over the scandal. Peru has been gripped in recent days by the news that government officials received the COVID-19 vaccination weeks or even months before the South American country launched its immunization program. Health minister Pilar Mazzetti stepped down last week following a newspaper report that former president Martin Vizcarra had received a shot of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine in October. — AFP

Guinea Ebola death toll rises

CONAKRY, Guinea: Five people have died of Ebola virus in Guinea, the health agency said on Monday, as the government and aid groups began to roll out their response to the outbreak. Guinea announced the outbreak on Saturday—the first in West Africa since a 2013-2016 epidemic that left more than 11,300 dead in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. According to an epidemiological report by the country's health agency dated February 15, five people have now succumbed to the virus, rising from a death toll of four reported earlier on Monday. Only one of the victims was confirmed positive for Ebola, with the remaining four listed as "probable cases". — AFP

N Zealand-Australia row erupts over 'terrorist' dual national

WELLINGTON, New Zealand: New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern angrily accused Australia yesterday of shirking its responsibility for a dual national arrested in Turkey with alleged links to the Islamic State militant group. Ardern said the woman had been a dual Australian-New Zealand citizen until authorities in Canberra cancelled her passport, leaving her situation in Wellington to deal with. In an unusually blunt message to her counterpart Scott Morrison, Ardern said Canberra was "wrong" to expect New Zealand to accept the woman, who she said had strong ties to Australia.

"Any fair-minded person would consider this person an Australian and that is my view too," Ardern said in a statement. "We believe Australia has abdicated its responsibilities." The 26-year-old woman was arrested with her two children near the Syrian border this week by Turkish authorities, and identified as a member of the Islamic State Group. Local media reported the woman had been taken to a Turkish court in the southeastern province of Hatay for interrogation. The Turkish defense ministry described the family as New Zealand nationals who had been trying to enter the country "illegally from Syria" and "were caught by our border guards".

But Ardern said the woman had not lived in New Zealand since she was six, and so it was "wrong that New Zealand should shoulder the responsibility" for her. "(The woman) has resided in Australia since that time, has her family in Australia and left for Syria from Australia on her Australian passport," she added. Morrison defended his government's decision as in "Australia's national security interests". "We do not want to see terrorists who fought with terrorism organizations enjoying privileges of citizenship, which I think they forfeit the second they engage as an enemy of our country," he said during a press conference in Canberra. — AFP



HONG KONG: Hong Kong veteran activists Martin Lee (center right) and Albert Ho (Right) are greeted by pro-democracy activist and supporter Raphael Wong (second left) on arrival outside the West Kowloon Magistrates Court in Hong Kong yesterday. — AFP

Veteran Hong Kong activists on trial over huge democracy rally

HONG KONG: Veteran Hong Kong activists flashed protest salutes and accused authorities of "political persecution" as they went on trial yesterday for organizing one of the biggest democracy protests to engulf the city in 2019. The nine defendants include some of the city's most prominent pro-democracy campaigners, many of whom are non-violence advocates who have spent decades campaigning in vain for universal suffrage. Among them are Martin Lee, an 82-year-old barrister who was once chosen by Beijing to help write Hong Kong's mini-constitution, and Margaret Ng, a 73-year-old barrister and former opposition lawmaker.

Media tycoon Jimmy Lai, currently in custody after his arrest under Beijing's new national security law, is also among those on trial. Others are leading members of the Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF), the coalition that organized a series of huge rallies throughout 2019. They each face up to five years in jail if convicted. As they entered court yesterday, some of the activists flashed a three-finger salute, a symbol now used across Asia to protest authoritarianism. Others stood behind a banner which declared: "Peaceful assembly is not a crime, shame on political persecution."

The group is being prosecuted for organizing an unauthorized assembly on August 18, 2019 — one of the biggest in Hong Kong that year as people took to the streets for seven straight months calling for democracy and greater police accountability. Organizers estimated 1.7 million people turned out—almost one in four Hong Kong residents—though that number was difficult to independently verify. Those involved described it as the second-largest protest of 2019, with demonstrators marching peacefully for hours under a sea of umbrellas and thundery skies.

At the start of yesterday's trial—which is expected to last 10 days—all except two defendants pleaded not guilty to the charges. Former CHRF convenor Au Nok-hin pleaded guilty to two charges of organizing and taking part in an unlawful assembly while former lawmaker Leung Yiu-chung pleaded guilty to taking part in the march but not guilty to organizing it. Protests in Hong Kong can only go ahead with the permission of authorities and rights groups have long criticized the use of unauthorized assembly prosecutions. This week's trial caused controversy before it began. British lawyer David Perry, hired by the Hong Kong government to be the lead prosecutor, stepped down last month following withering criticism from both the UK government and British legal bodies over his decision to take the job. — AFP