

International

Indonesia tackles call to prayer volume backlash

Piety or noise nuisance?

JAKARTA: Every night at 3:00 am, Rina is jolted awake by blaring speakers so loud she has developed an anxiety disorder: she can't sleep, she's too nauseous to eat - but she is also too scared to complain because doing so could see her jailed or attacked. The noisy neighbor is the local mosque in her Jakarta suburb, and the clamorous sound is the call to prayer.

Both are so sacred in Indonesia, the world's biggest Muslim majority nation, that criticizing them can lead to accusations of blasphemy, a crime punishable by as much as five years imprisonment. "None dares to complain about it here," says Rina, a 31-year-old Muslim woman who is using a pseudonym in case of reprisals.

"The loudspeakers are not only used for call to prayer but they also use it to wake people up 30-40 minutes before the morning prayer time," she tells AFP, adding that she is at breaking point after enduring the noise for six months. Online complaints about noisy loudspeakers are increasing, but the lack of anonymity and fear of a backlash means there are no reliable official statistics. Aware of the growing discord, the Indonesian Mosque Council (IMC) is deploying teams to tackle mosque sound systems around the nation - but it's a delicate subject.

The Southeast Asian archipelago was once hailed for its religious tolerance with people of many faiths living alongside each other, but there are concerns its moderate brand of Islam is coming under threat from hardliners. In 2018, a Buddhist woman was jailed after saying the call to prayer "hurt my ears", and earlier this year ac-

cess and influencer Zaskia Mecca, who has 19 million followers on Instagram, was condemned online after the hijab-wearing Muslim criticized mosque speaker volume during the holy month of Ramadan.

Symbol of greatness

Around the Islamic world, the broadcast of the call to prayer and sermons via external loudspeakers are regarded as a key pillar of Muslim identity, but the issue is deeply divisive. In June, authorities in Saudi Arabia ordered mosques to limit the volume of their external loudspeakers to one-third of their maximum capacity, citing concerns over noise pollution. There was an immediate backlash.

There are around 750,000 mosques across Indonesia - a medium sized venue could have at least a dozen external loudspeakers that blare the call to prayer five times a day. For Rina the nightly interruptions are impacting her health. "I started having insomnia, and I was diagnosed with anxiety disorders after always being woken up. Now I am trying to make myself as tired as possible, so I can sleep through the noise," she explains.

Indonesian Mosque Council chairman Jusuf Kalla estimates around half the nation's mosques have poor acoustics, which exacerbates the noise problem. "There is a tendency to set the volume high so that the call to prayer can be heard by as many worshippers as possible from far away because they consider it a symbol of greatness in Islam," explained the IMC's acoustics program coordinator Azis Muslim.

Ketsana, known in the Philippines as Tropical Storm Ondoy, that hit in 2009 and claimed hundreds of lives.

"This only proves the effect of climate change when it comes to the increasing magnitude of these natural hazards," Timbal said. "This continues to pose a challenge to our disaster management system - we always have to step up our preparations in view of the worst-case scenario for every natural hazard." Because a warmer atmosphere holds more water, climate change increases the risk and intensity of flooding from extreme rainfall.

Nineteen deaths have been confirmed so far, the majority in the northwestern province of Ilocos Sur where most of the victims were caught in flash floods. The disaster agency is also checking another 11 reported fatalities, mostly in the landlocked mountainous province of Benguet. A total of 14 people have been reported missing. Timbal said the "changing nature" of the hazards had made it difficult to achieve their target of zero casualties. "Each hazard is unique to the next one," he said. "It's a new normal caused by climate change." Timbal added that nearly 15,000 people fled their homes, but only about half stayed in evacuation centers. The rest sought shelter with friends or relatives due to fears of catching the coronavirus. — AFP



JAKARTA: Photo shows a mosque tower where speakers are placed in Jakarta. There are around 750,000 mosques across Indonesia — a medium sized venue could have at least a dozen external loudspeakers that blare the call to prayer five times a day. — AFP

The organization is battling to minimize community tension with a free door-to-door service to repair sound systems and offer training - some 7,000 technicians work on the project and have already fixed the audio at more than 70,000 mosques. Although the program is not manda-

tory, Jakarta's Al-Ihkwan mosque chairman Ahmad Taufik used it because he wanted to ensure social harmony. "The sound is softer now. That way it will not disturb people in the neighborhood, not to mention we have a hospital behind the mosque," he says. — AFP

Philippines storm death toll hits 19

MANILA: The death toll from a storm that triggered landslides and flash floods across the Philippines has risen to at least 19, authorities said yesterday, linking the extreme rainfall to climate change. Severe Tropical Storm Kompasu dumped more than a month's worth of rain in two days as it swept across the archipelago nation this week, national disaster agency spokesman Mark Timbal told AFP. Kompasu - named after the Japanese pronunciation of "compass" - intensified the southwest monsoon that had already saturated swathes of the disaster-prone country.

Provinces on the most populous island of Luzon were hardest hit by the storm, which caused more than a billion pesos (\$20 million) worth of damage to the agriculture sector and damaged hundreds of homes. Timbal said the rainfall was "even greater than the Ondoy experience", referring to the devastating Typhoon

Defectors sue North Korea's Kim in Tokyo

TOKYO: North Korean defectors in Tokyo symbolically summoned Kim Jong Un to court yesterday over a repatriation program they describe as "state kidnapping". The unusual case is a bid to hold Pyongyang responsible for a scheme that saw more than 90,000 people move to North Korea from Japan between 1959 and 1984. The program mainly targeted ethnic Koreans but also their Japanese spouses, lured by fantastical propaganda promising a "paradise on Earth".

Five participants in the repatriation scheme who later escaped from North Korea are demanding 100 million yen (\$880,000) each in damages as they make their case in the Tokyo District Court. They have accused Pyongyang of "deceiving plaintiffs by false advertising to relocate to North Korea", where "the enjoyment of human rights was generally impossible".

As there are no diplomatic relations between Japan and North Korea, Kim has been sum-

moned as the head of the North's government. "We don't expect North Korea to accept a decision nor pay the damages," Kenji Fukuda, the plaintiffs' lawyer, said at a briefing last month. "But we hope that the Japanese government would be able to negotiate with North Korea" if the court rules in the plaintiffs' favor, he added.

In all, 93,340 people took part in the repatriation program carried out by the Red Cross Societies in Japan and North Korea, and paid for by Pyongyang. The Japanese government also backed the scheme, with media touting it as a humanitarian campaign for Koreans struggling to build a life in Japan. During Tokyo's 1910-1945 colonial rule of the Korean peninsula, millions of Koreans moved to Japan, either voluntarily or against their will.

When Japan surrendered, hundreds of thousands remained, reluctant to return to their devastated homeland. They were stripped of their Japanese nationality and became stateless, and many believed propaganda films portraying an idyllic life in North Korea. Part of the defectors' complaint concerns separation from their families still trapped in the isolated country. "I don't know what happened to my family. Maybe the coronavirus has hit them, maybe some of them have died of hunger," Eiko Kawasaki, one of the five plaintiffs, said last month. — AFP