# Pakistan police: 5 suspected of abducting politician killed

QUETTA: Pakistani counter-terrorism police said Sunday they killed five people involved in the abduction for ransom and subsequent death of a nationalist political party leader.

The raid took place overnight in the southwestern city of Pishin, according to the Baluchistan province Counter Terrorism Department.

Malik Ubaidullah Kasi, leader of the secular Awami National Party, was abducted for ransom from his native Kuchlak area near the provincial capital, Quetta, in late June. His body was found Thursday near an Afghan refugee camp in Pishin district.

A statement issued by the CTD said investigators arrested a man after Kasi's body was found. The suspect subsequently led investigators to the hideout in Pishin.

Officers killed five men allegedly involved in Kasi's abduction late Saturday night in a gun battle. Machine guns, hand grenades and hand guns were recovered from the abductors' hideout, police said.

Kidnappings for ransom have been reported frequently in Baluchistan. Criminal gangs have abducted physicians businessmen and others in recent years for sometimes huge ransoms. Kasi, a prominent political leader, was the first political figure abducted for ransom in the province

Also on Sunday, counter-terrorism police in eastern Punjab province said they killed three militants in a gun battle during a raid on their hideout near the eastern city of Lahore.

The raid took place after police received information that the alleged militants belonged to the banned group Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, according to a brief statement issued by Punjab province's Counter Terrorism Department. The banned group is also known as the Pakistani Taliban.

The three men were hiding in a rented house in the city of Ferozwala, a Lahore suburb, police said.

Lahore is the capital of eastern Punjab province, which has seen several militant attacks in recent years, including one in June near the home of a militant leader that left three people including a police officer dead.

The CTD statement said the militants killed Sunday were planning attacks on security forces and Shiite mourning processions.

It said there was an exchange of gunfire during the raid in which three militants were killed and officers seized weapons from the hideout including an explosives-filled vest, two assault rifles, three hand grenades and two pistols. The militants were identified as Afghan nationals.

**AP**

# No relief soon even as Centre denies steep rise in UK airfares

NEW DELHI: There's no fare relief in sight for those planning to travel from India to the UK this month. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) on Sunday sought India-UK airfares from airlines for August following an outcry over steep airfares on this route as the UK reopens for Indian citizens.

The data submitted to the regulator shows minimum one-way economy class fares on Delhi-London nonstops during August ranging from Rs 1,03,191 to Rs 1,47,544 on different days this month across the four airlines that operate between the two countries — Air India, Vistara, British Airways and Virgin Atlantic.

Industry insiders say steep airfares will remain till the currently allowed weekly cap of 30 direct flights between the two countries is raised as there is no regulatory authority to ask airlines to lower fares. "International airfares are neither regulated nor monitored as they are dependent on demand and supply," said a senior official.

The aviation ministry late on Sunday night denied that India-London fares had zoomed up to Rs 4 lakh, as tweeted by senior IAS officer on Saturday. "The fares offered on the Delhi-London sector (Economy class) range from 1.03-1.21 lakhs for Indian carriers and 1.28-1.47 lakhs for UK carriers for travel during August 2021," the ministry tweeted.

Air India — which used to operate 13 weekly flights to UK before April 23 when restrictions were imposed on travellers from here — said it had allowed affected passengers to defer their India-UK bookings.

"These passengers have rebooked on available flights now, creating a steep surge in bookings on many India-UK flights. Seats on economy class have been sold on fares mostly ranging from Rs 25,000 to Rs 45,000. As most of the regular flights (from Delhi/Mumbai/Bengaluru) to UK are booked near capacity, only upper bucket economy and business class seats are available now," AI said in a series of tweets.

"Hence the fares dynamics are on higher side. Our average fares remain usual without any upward revision," AI said. AI will again have 13 weekly flights to London from August 16 to September 1, from Delhi, Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Amritsar and Kochi.

"Our average fares continue to remain as usual without any upward revision … Currently, seats for travel in August are available in economy in the range of Rs 1.15 lakhs," it added.

A Vistara spokesperson said: "Pricing is always a function of supply and demand. There are only 15 flights a week allowed currently on India-UK route for Indian carriers and when there is relaxation and more capacity allowed, (that) will automatically bring down prices."

The report compiled by the DGCA on Sunday also notes that "at present, only limited flights are available on this sector as scheduled international operations are suspended till August 31, 2021 (for now)."

A combination of four factors — 30 weekly flights between the two countries; pent up demand for travel for almost 3.5 months since UK restricted travellers from India; ongoing peak student season and requirement to travel non-stop between the two countries for a majority travellers under current air bubble rules — has led to fares spiralling.

A senior official of a mega foreign (non UK) carrier said: "Every airline's flights are full for August. Obviously the fares are high. Thousands of people, especially students, are affected because of continued suspension of scheduled international flights."

Travel industry says high fares are likely to be witnessed whenever a big destination for Indians/persons of Indian origin opens up.

The reason: stranded people already holding tickets will reschedule for flights immediately post-reopening. And only higher fare bracket tickets will be available for those making new bookings in the first few days.

Places where flights are limited for any reason, like 30 weekly in the case of UK, the issue will get magnified.

# Bangladesh to lift lockdown restrictions in phases

The Bangladesh government plans to relax the restrictions on public movement across the country in phases from August 11, State Minister for Public Administration Farhad Hossain has said.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is going to decide to what degree the restrictions will be lifted, and then a notification will be released, the state minister said while talking to the reporters at the secretariat on Sunday.

"A notification will be issued today [Sunday] or tomorrow [Monday] following the instructions of the prime minister. Our advice is to relax the lockdown gradually," he said.

"It has to be considered which ones will be allowed to open and how much. Although the infection has decreased, the number of deaths is still high," he added.

The decision to keep the economic activities going has been taken considering the needs of low-income people, the state minister said.

Later on Sunday, the Cabinet Division issued a circular allowing all offices, businesses, and factories to reopen from Wednesday, maintaining proper Covid-19 safety rules.

Mentioning that around 600 people have been vaccinated at each union under each district across the country during the first two days of the government's mass vaccination program, State Minister Hossain said people who have to come out to conduct their businesses – vegetable traders, rickshaw pullers – have been prioritized for vaccine in the program.

People will have to strictly maintain hygiene and social distancing rules, he added.

Bangladesh has been under a strict lockdown since July 23, which was supposed to end on August 5, but was later extended till August 10.

# Nepal launches mask up campaign, a day after coronavirus death toll crosses 10,000 mark

A day after the Covid-19 death toll crossed the 10,000 mark, the government on Saturday started a Nepal Mask Campaign with the slogan, "I will wear a mask and encourage others to wear one too."

"We would like to request all people throughout the country to own the programme and wear masks compulsorily and properly as this is the only way to lessen the risk of infection and avoid passing the virus to others," said Dr Radhika Thapaliya, director at the National Health Education Information and Communication Centre.

"Every citizen has some responsibility towards the country and during the pandemic by wearing the face mask properly, we can fulfill the responsibility."

Although it is a scientifically established fact that wearing face masks, either surgical or those made of cloth, reduces transmissions of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19, authorities seem to have just realised the need to launch a campaign.

"This kind of campaign could have been launched from day one and it would be less costly," Dr Sher Bahadur Pun, chief of Clinical Research Unit at the Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital, told the Post.

Studies suggest that some countries where the use of face masks by the general public is high have experienced significantly lower rates of Covid-19 spread and associated deaths.

The World Health Organisation has said that although the use of masks alone is not sufficient to provide adequate level of protection against Covid-19, masks should be used as part of a comprehensive strategy of measures to suppress transmission and save lives.

With authorities lifting most of the restrictions enforced to control the second wave of the pandemic, everyday life has become almost normal. Public transportation services have resumed, markets and offices have opened and crowds have increased with people behaving as if there was no pandemic and the risk of the infection is over.

The more transmissible Delta and Delta Plus variants of SARS-CoV-2 have been responsible for the ongoing surge in new cases.

More than 3,000 cases have been reported every day for the past week or so.

On Saturday, 2,231 people tested positive in 8,866 polymerase chain reaction tests and 987 in 4,707 antigen tests. Positivity rate is over 25 percent. Since the pandemic began last year, 712,740 infections have been reported. Of these 35,432 cases are still active.

Hospitalisations have gone up. Health facilities providing care to the patients infected with Covid-19 in cities like Kathmandu have been running in full capacity.

The death toll from Covid-19 has reached 10,038 with 19 more deaths reported on Saturday by the Ministry of Health and Population.

In view of the risks, the National Examination Board on Saturday postponed indefinitely the nationwide grade 12 examinations that were due to begin on August 15 and 374,000 students were taking.

"The fact is neither the risk of infection has lessened nor has the coronavirus infection gone anywhere," said Thapaliya, who is also an expert on risk communication.

"Rather, the risk has increased as new variants named Delta and Delta Plus—highly contagious compared to the virus first seen in Wuhan of China—have been circulating in the communities."

As part of the campaign, mass media will be used to create awareness and health workers, civil society members and teachers, among others, will be asked to promote the importance of wearing masks, according to Thapaliya.

On Saturday, Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba also chipped in in the effort.

In a video message entitled 'Let's wear masks, follow health protocols' with the hashtag #MaskUpNepal, a masked up Deuba said, "It seems that we are on the verge of being hit by the third wave of the pandemic. The efforts by the government alone would not be adequate to control the pandemic. It would require combined effort by the government and the people. So I have a request: please do not go out unnecessarily.

If you must go out, wear a mask properly, covering your nose and mouth. Maintain physical distance.

# Golden history of Kazakhstan's Saka warrior people revealed

Wisdom, as Bob Marley put it, is better than gold. From next month however, the precious metal is central to a major new historical exhibition in Cambridge using loaned artefacts telling the story of an ancient civilization little known beyond Kazakhstan.

Golden objects unearthed from ancient burial mounds built by the Saka warrior people of central Asia – a culture which flourished from around the eighth century BC to the third century BC – will go on display at the Fitzwilliam Museum.

The Gold of the Great Steppe exhibition will showcase what the museum described as "an archaeological sensation" on the global stage for the first time – hundreds of outstanding gold artefacts recently discovered in ancient burial mounds built by the Saka in east Kazakhstan.

Highlights will include a reconstruction of the burial of a teenage archer, showing how golden objects were laid alongside him. Many mounds where elites were buried with their horses and treasures were looted but archaeologists found the archer's burial display intact.

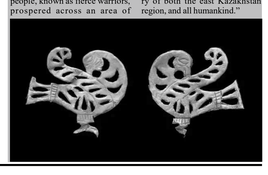
The boy was no older than 18 when he died and was buried in the same chamber with a younger female relative. Rockfall had shielded him from view for 2,500 years. Kazakh archaeologists discovered artefacts there in the last three years. It was only the second intact Saka burial to be discovered in Kazakhstan, according to the Fitzwilliam, which is the University of Cambridge's art and antiquities museum. The Saka people, known as fierce warriors, prospered across an area of steppe to their west and mountains to their east but were also skilled artisans who crafted intricate gold and other metalwork.

Luke Syson, the museum's director, described the loaned artefacts as "incredibly important". "We look forward to bringing the extraordinary culture of the Saka people to life for our audiences and are grateful to our partnership with east Kazakhstan, without which enlightening exhibitions such as these would simply not be possible."

The exhibition will be built around material from three different burial complexes in east Kazakhstan: Berel, Shilikty and Eleke Sazy.

Daniyal Akhmetov, governor of the east Kazakhstan region of the Republic of Kazakhstan, said that the exhibition would showcase his country's most outstanding archaeological discovery of recent years, the "golden man" found in one of the mounds of the Eleke Sazy cemetery, which dates back to the eighth century BC.

He said the "exceptional state of preservation" gave new opportunities for scientists to study the "religion, worldview and funeral rites of the early Saka people".

"It has been proven that the Saka created truly unique jewellery masterpieces, using technological processes that were advanced for their time, constructed grandiose and exceptionally complex religious, funerary and memorial monuments," he said.

"We are confident that the exhibition, and the research carried out around it, will open to the public new pages in the history of both the east Kazakhstan region, and all humankind."