

Three Hizbul militants killed in Tral encounter

ADIL AKHZER
SRINAGAR, FEBRUARY 19

THREE HIZBUL Mujahideen militants were killed in an encounter with security forces in South Kashmir's Tral on Wednesday.

Addressing a press meet in Srinagar, J&K DGP Dilbag Singh said the militants were identified as Tral residents Jahangir Wani and Raja Maqbool, and Sadat Thokar from Anantnag. He said Wani had replaced Hamaad Khan as the Hizbul commander in Tral after the latter was killed in January.

"After the killing of Hamaad Khan, Jahangir had taken control... Ammunition has also been recovered," he said, adding that Jahangir and Raja were involved in terrorist activities because of which there was fear in the area.

The DGP said 19 militants from Kashmir and four from Jammu region have been killed in 10 successful operations in Jammu and Kashmir this year. He said eight youngsters quit militant ranks recently and have reunited with their families. "The number of youths joining militant ranks is very low and it is a good trend."

Saying that Pakistan has continued ceasefire violations along LoC, Singh said a drone was pushed back by BSF in Jammu region. "Launch pads across border which used to remain empty during winters are active this time."

Will act against those spreading rumours on social media through VPN: J&K top cop

Srinagar: Two days after J&K Police invoked Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act to register a case against people using social media through proxy servers, the police on Wednesday said their priority is to take action against those spreading rumours and instigating people by accessing social media through Virtual Private Networks (VPN).

"My first priority [to take action] is against those spreading rumours, instigating (people), and who are facilitating militants," Inspector General of Police (Kashmir) Vijay Kumar said at a press meet where DGP Dilbag Singh was also present.

The IGP added, "On January 14, there was an order by the Home Department in which social media was banned. Despite that, many people are using social media through VPN. Among them, some miscreants are spreading rumours, instigating people; some are facilitating militants.... We have proof. We have lodged a general FIR, and whoever is found involved will be arrested." **ENS**

Expressed concern on detention of J&K leaders: US Congressman

SHUBHAJIT ROY
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 19

VISITING US Congressman Ami Bera, who is Chairman of House Foreign Affairs sub-committee on Asia-Pacific in the US Congress, on Wednesday said it is his desire and interest to see a resolution and return to normalcy in Jammu and Kashmir, and that he expressed his "concerns" on "continued detention of political leaders in Kashmir" during a meeting with Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla.

Bera and US Congressman George Holding, who is member of House Ways and Means Committee and co-chairs the India Caucus, are on a two-day visit and met Shringla.

"I express(ed) some of my concerns about continued detention of political leaders in Kashmir, and again expressed that the quicker India can return to normalcy in Kashmir, we feel it's in their interest," Bera said.

On his concerns, Amerish Babulal "Ami" Bera, a Democrat Congressman who traces his roots from Gujarat, said New Delhi has cited "security concerns" on the continued detention of Kashmiri leaders.

He said India is a "valuable partner" of the US, and that partnership is rooted in shared val-



(From left) US Congressmen Ami Bera and George Holding

ues of democracy, free market opportunities, and "protecting minority rights".

Holding, a Republican Congressman, said he firmly believes that "the way to success in Kashmir is increasing economic opportunities and economic development".

Asked whether they had sought permission to visit J&K, Bera said, "I would love to visit Kashmir...we did express that we would like to take a delegation (of members of US Congress) to Kashmir at some point."

Holding said he is "heartened to hear that they are going to roll out an economic development

plan" in Kashmir, and "provide economic incentives for their investment infrastructure investment there, which obviously raise prospects and prosperity".

Bera also said India's founding as a secular democracy, where "800 million Hindus can live with 200-plus million Muslims and other religious minorities, and somehow work", is its strength. "And we don't want to see India lose that secular democracy, (as) that's what sets it apart from other countries in the region," he said.

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VAISHNAV MENU ON TABLE

TN govt faces heat for Akshaya Patra tie-up for school breakfast

ARUN JANARDHANAN
CHENNAI, FEBRUARY 19

TAMIL NADU'S prestigious noon meal scheme, an internationally acclaimed social justice model, has landed in a controversy with the AIADMK government's decision to engage an NGO, Akshaya Patra Foundation, to serve breakfast to 32,000 students in schools run by the Greater Chennai Corporation.

Projected as a brainchild of Tamil Nadu Governor Banwarilal Purohit, the project has been allocated Rs 5 crore from the Governor's discretionary fund. The NGO has been allotted land by the Corporation at prime locations in Chennai to set up centralised kitchens.

Akshaya Patra Foundation is an initiative of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), Bengaluru, and its menu without garlic, onion and eggs, has drawn criticism from opposition parties and experts alike.

While the noon meal scheme in government schools is being run by the government for decades, this is the first initiative to provide school children with breakfast.

Greater Chennai Corporation's Commissioner G Prakash said the

current programme "taken up by the Governor is to ensure that children do not attend morning classes on empty stomach". It will not involve any government assistance, barring the Governor's fund and Corporation land, he said.

A kitchen facility in Greams Road "will feed healthy, nutritious and sumptuous breakfast to 12,000 children of 35 Corporation schools in the city," according to a statement from Akshaya Patra.

Rajya Sabha member and MDMK leader Vaiko pointed at ISKCON's menu for similar schemes that avoid onion, garlic and eggs and said in a statement, "In Tamil Nadu, eggs are provided as part of nutritious meal scheme to students. Now ISKCON will force them to eat vegetarian food. Developed countries even provide meat to students."

Alleging that the AIADMK government has handed over the prestigious scheme to a Hindutva group, he said that Tamil Nadu's Kaalai Unnavu Thittam (breakfast scheme) would now become a "Manu-dharma meal scheme".

In a statement, main opposition DMK criticised the move to engage an organisation known for "food fascism" when the state is equipped with infrastructure and resources to feed school children

across Tamil Nadu.

Justice K Chandru, retired judge of Madras High Court who has extensively studied the state's noon meal scheme and served several judgments in this regard, called the government's move to collaborate with a private agency for such a project "suicidal". He said, "The government is primarily washing its hands off a social justice scheme. Entering into such a deal with an NGO by giving them prime land is nothing but creating a scenario in which they can blackmail the government tomorrow."

In a state like Tamil Nadu, where 90 per cent people eat non-vegetarian food, there is no logic behind the move in engaging an organisation that is blamed for their "food propaganda" by rejecting garlic, onion and eggs, Justice Chandru said.

J Jayarajan, a senior food expert from the Institute of Development Alternatives, said engaging an NGO like Akshaya Patra ridicules Tamil Nadu's long legacy in pioneering and running a successful noon meal scheme. "We shouldn't forget that the Governor has given this money at a time when the Centre slashed hundreds of crores from the noon meal funding scheme," Jayarajan said.

Most don't consider mineral water bottles, straws single-use plastic: Study

ESHA ROY
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 19

MOST CONSUMERS do not consider mineral water bottles and straws single-use plastic, a study has found. The study, 'Single Use Plastics: The Last Straw', was released by environment body Toxics Link on Wednesday. The study was conducted through an online survey across urban centres, including both metropolitan cities and smaller towns.

The study has also found that only 57 per cent of those surveyed considered plastic carry bags single-use plastic, despite efforts by the central and state governments to create awareness.

"There is a huge gap between the government's desire to phase out plastic products and awareness among the people, although the Prime Minister's

announcement of the government's intention has had a huge impact...The good news is that we found during our survey that consumers do not want to use single-use plastics and are looking for alternatives — the alternatives are simply not available yet," says study author Priti Mahesh.

She says 16 single-use plastic items were taken into account during the study; out of them three were particularly ubiquitous and harmful — multilayered plastics (such as biscuit or wafer packet wrappings which have an aluminium layer), plastic pouches and fast-moving consumer goods (packaging of products available in e-commerce) and noodle packets.

"The harmful products include things like plastic tubes — such as toothpaste or creams, medicine wrappers with multi-layer plastic capsule holders and the packaging for online products. The consumer is aware that these need to be replaced and have told us that they do not

need harmful plastic products like straws, plastic cutlery or the excessive plastic packaging of online goods. So the study busts the myth that the plastic industry peddles that they manufacture these products because the consumer wants them," she adds.

"The results clearly point towards the ambiguity in the mind of individual consumers regarding what is single-use plastic," says the study.

Plastic Bags less than 50 microns have been banned in India since 2016 when the revised Plastic Waste Management Rules were notified.

"Still, even after three years of the Rules, 22% were completely unaware. Surprisingly, though the youth were the group which was shunning plastic bags, their awareness of the ban was very low. Only 40% of the respondents, aged under 20, were certain about the 50 micron restrictions in the Plastic Rules. In fact, the awareness grew with age — the 60 plus population was the most aware at 76%," the study states.

Court asks CBI why Asthana wasn't put through lie detector

ANAND MOHAN J
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 19

A DELHI court on Wednesday came down heavily on the CBI for not conducting psychological and lie detector tests on its former special director Rakesh Asthana in a bribery case in which he was recently given a clean chit.

Special CBI Judge Sanjeev Aggarwal also directed the initial investigating officer, Ajay Kumar Bassi, to appear before it on February 28 to explain the case diary.

The CBI had registered an FIR against Asthana on the basis of a complaint from Hyderabad-based businessman Satish Babu Sana, facing investigation in a 2017 case involving meat exporter Moin Qureshi. Sana's allegations of bribery against Asthana had triggered a war within the CBI, particularly between then director Alok Verma and his number two, Asthana.

Special Judge Aggarwal asked CBI investigating officer Satish Dagar, "Did you subject Rakesh Asthana to lie detector test and psychological test?" Dagar replied, "No."

The judge asked, "Why, Sir, if there is a 164 statement (Sana's statement under CrPC Section 164)?" Dagar said, "There is no direct interaction in the (Section) 164 statement."

The court said, "After going through the chargesheet, which I have done...you have been giving too much indulgence to the person..."

Special Judge Aggarwal also said that after going through the chargesheet co-accused Sunil Mittal appears like a fictional James Bond character "M": "You have pounced upon your own IO (investigating officer). You have plucked the low-lying fruit. It was easy."

The judge had read out contents of the chargesheet and asked the CBI, "What about calls made to RA [Rakesh Asthana] through WhatsApp? The complainant, Sana Satish Babu, has said this in his 164 statement. What is the reason to disbelieve his statement until he steps into the witness box?"

MP court acquits 8 Christians accused of forced conversion, abduction of 60 kids

MILIND GHATWAI
BHOPAL, FEBRUARY 19

EIGHT CHRISTIANS accused of the forced conversion and abduction of 60 children from Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh have been acquitted by a sessions court in Ratlam as none of the parents and children supported the prosecution story that they were being forcibly taken to a camp near Nagpur in May 2017.

The children, most of them under 14, had boarded a train from Meghnagar in Jhabua district along with eight elders. Their journey ended abruptly at Ratlam station when the police, tipped off by Hindutva outfits, rounded up the elders and booked them under the Freedom of Religion Act and IPC sections related to kidnapping and "criminal act done by several people".

The children included 28 girls who had to spend the night at a waiting room at the station while the boys were shifted to a shelter home in Ratlam. The girls were later shifted to a shelter home in Jaora. The police had claimed that the elders did not have any documents and could not explain why the children were being taken to the camp near Nagpur.

The police claimed it could be a case of human trafficking, forced child labour or even child theft. They refused to drop charges even after the father of a 14-year-old, on whose statement the FIR was registered, said

that he knew where his teenage son was being taken. The children shuttled between shelter homes over the next two days before being reunited with their parents.

The *Indian Express* had travelled to several villages in Jhabua district and spoken to the families of more than 20 children. The parents said they knew where the children were being taken to and had given their consent. Some of those arrested were relatives of the children. Those arrested were members of different Protestant churches.

Sharmila Damor, one of those arrested, was travelling with her two nieces on the train. She had told *The Indian Express* that during the train journey, some passengers started recording videos on their phones. The 24-year-old said someone spotted an 'Om' tattoo on her right hand. She said they thought she was being taken against her wish and were not convinced when she said she was among the caretakers.

Additional District and Sessions Judge Vivek Kumar Shrivastava acquitted the eight after none of the 20 witnesses, including parents, supported the prosecution story. Additional Public Prosecutor Vinod Jain said no witness supported the prosecution case and no accusation was proved. He said the court did not consider the police statements and that a decision on whether to challenge the judgment would only be taken after getting a certified copy.

MP Cabinet clears proposal to ensure time-bound clearances for investors

MILIND GHATWAI
BHOPAL, FEBRUARY 19

TO ATTRACT more investment and to convince potential investors, the Madhya Pradesh Cabinet on Wednesday cleared a proposal that will ensure time-bound clearance of applications seeking various permis-

sions. If a department concerned fails to give permission within that period, the application will be deemed to have been sanctioned.

Called Madhya Pradesh Time bound Clearance Act, 2020, the proposal covers 40 permissions and licences belonging to 10 departments. Of them, 25 licences and permis-

sions will have to be given in one day, 10 permissions and licences in seven days and five in 15 days.

The Cabinet chaired by Chief Minister Kamal Nath also cleared the Madhya Pradesh Film Tourism Policy, 2020, hoping to make the state more attractive for film producers and to seek private investment.

Coal scam: SC asks CBI to file fresh status report on probe against ex-CBI chief Sinha

New Delhi: The Supreme Court on Wednesday directed the CBI to file fresh status report within four weeks on the probe into charges of "abuse of official position" by former agency chief Ranjit Sinha and the progress made in over 50 coal scam cases.

A bench of Chief Justice S A Bobde and Deepak Gupta granted time to the agency after it sought time.

Sinha is accused of trying to impede the CBI's investigation into the cases, which emerged in 2012 after a report of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) was leaked to media.

The apex court dismissed the plea filed by lawyer M L Sharma, seeking a direction to the CBI to take coercive steps against Naveen Jindal, allegedly main beneficiary of coal scam cases.