

People offering pujas at Kalighat on "Polila Baishakh", Bengali New Year day, in Kolkata on Sunday



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Wonderwhy probe agencies make so many prosecution witnesses: SC

NEW DELHI, APRIL 15/—/The Supreme Court has wondered as to why investigating agencies "always believe in quantity" and make hundreds of prosecution witnesses to prove their charges before the court of law. The apex court, which was dealing with a case related to the 2008 Gujarat serial blasts, noticed that the prosecution has named more than 1,500 witnesses in the matter. "Why you (prosecution agencies) always believe in quantity? In every case, there are 100-200 prosecution witnesses. Yesterday, there was an accident case in which nine witnesses was there but around 200 prosecution witnesses were named. We really wonder why so many witnesses are made," a bench comprising Justices A K Sikri and Ashok Bhushan said. The general observations were made during the hearing on the bail plea of some of the alleged members of banned outfit Indian Mujaheddin (IM), who are facing trial in the 2008 serials blasts case. As many as 21 explosions had rocked the Ahmedabad city in Gujarat within span of one hour killing 56 people and injuring over 220. The bench was informed that in the blast case, which was probed by the Gujarat Police, around 930 prosecution witnesses were named, examined by the trial court while several others were yet to be examined. The apex court then asked Additional Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, who was representing the Gujarat Police, as to whether so many prosecution witnesses were "really required" to be examined in the case. "You have to tell us whether these



Saina wins 21-18 23-21

Saina Nehwal of India celebrates — REUTERS (Photo on page 4)

Togadia targets Modi after quitting VHP

AHMEDABAD, APRIL 15/—/A day after quitting the Vishwa Hindu Parishad in wake of his nominee losing an organisational poll, firebrand leader Pravin Togadia today launched a vicious attack against the Modi government at the Centre. Togadia, who has decided to undertake an indefinite fast from Tuesday, said his "disenchantment" with Prime Minister Narendra Modi began right after the 2002 post-Godhra riots. "I am not in the VHP anymore... I will continue to work for the welfare of Hindus. From Tuesday, I will go on an indefinite fast in Ahmedabad for fulfilling the longstanding demands of the Hindus," he had said yesterday after former Himachal Pradesh governor V S Kojke defeated his nominee Raghav Reddy in an election in Gurgaon for the post of VHP International president. Togadia, who returned here last night, met his supporters and top VHP functionaries in Gujarat today to finalise his plan. Claiming that scores of Hindus were killed in police firing during the post-Godhra riots, he said he could not understand how it could happen when the "Narendrabhai" (Narendra Modi) was the chief minister. "Cases were registered against thousands of Hindus and they were put in jail," he alleged. In 2014 elections, the VHP offered full support to Narendrabhai. But he called gau-rakshaks 'gundas' (goons). Eleven cow-protectors in Jharkhand were given life imprisonment (by a court) after his statement. This hadn't happened even under the Congress government," Togadia said. "This government has taken back cases against Pakistan supporters and stone-pelters in Kashmir. I was shocked as this government has helped Pakistan supporters," he went on to say. Togadia said his indefinite hunger strike would be aimed at the welfare of Hindus and to seek construction of Ram Jambhoomi Temple at Ayodhya, nation-wide ban on cow slaughter, enforcement of the common civil code and relocation of displaced Kashmiri Hindus, he said. All these years he and his associates have been fighting for these causes but to no avail, Togadia said, alleging that "for the last six months, enormous pressure was put on me instead to stop making all these demands." Many of Togadia supporters, shouting slogans in their mentor's favour at the state VHP headquarters in Paldi area here, said they would turn his fast into a show of strength. State VHP leaders, however, refrained from expressing their stand on Togadia's proposed fast. (PTI)



many witnesses are really required to be examined," the bench asked the ASG. Mehta said the police have themselves dropped 257 witnesses in the case but 175 "core witnesses" were required to be examined. He said a series of blasts had rocked Ahmedabad on July 26, 2008 while 15 more bombs were found and defused in Surat. Mehta said there were above 90 accused in the case out of which 84 were arrested and 10 were absconding. He said out of the 84 arrested accused, only two have got bail while the rest were in jail. Meanwhile, the counsel appearing for the accused said that so far, 931 prosecution witnesses have been examined and none of them has said anything against the accused who are on bail. The lawyer also said a trial court in Rajasthan has already acquitted these accused in a separate case where similar kind of allegations, including that they had allegedly wanted to terrorist camps for training, were levelled.

Pak prevents Sikh pilgrims from meeting Indian envoy

India lodges protest

NEW DELHI, APRIL 15/—/India today lodged a strong protest with Pakistan over blocking of access of visiting Sikh pilgrims to Indian diplomats in that country and even "compelling" the Indian envoy to return while on way to a prominent gurudwara there. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said a group of around 1800 Sikh pilgrims are on a visit to Pakistan from April 12 under a bilateral agreement on facilitating visits to religious shrines. In a statement, the MEA also said the Indian High Commissioner, who was to greet Indian pilgrims on the occasion of Baisakhi, was prevented to return when he was en route to Gurdwara Panja Sahib yesterday. The MEA called it an "intolerable diplomatic discourtesy" by Pakistan, holding that these incidents constitute a clear violation of the Vienna Convention on diplomatic relations. "India has lodged a strong protest with Pakistan over a block of access for visiting pilgrims to Indian diplomats and consular teams," it said in a statement. The fresh incidents came, over two weeks after India and Pakistan agreed to resolve matters related to

treatment of diplomats after envoys of the two countries made claims and counter-claims about harassment of each other's diplomats. The MEA said the Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan, who was to visit Gurdwara Panja Sahib at the invitation of the Chairman of the Evacuee Trust Property Board

(ETPB), was suddenly asked to return while en route the shrine yesterday, for unspecified 'security' reasons. It said the High Commissioner, who was to greet Indian pilgrims on the occasion of Baisakhi, was thus compelled to return without meeting Indian citizens. "India has lodged a strong protest with Pa-

kistan against this inexplicable diplomatic discourtesy, pointing out that these incidents constitute a clear violation of the Vienna Convention of 1961, the bilateral Protocol to visit Religious Shrines, 1974 and the Code of Conduct (for the treatment of diplomatic/consular personnel in India and Pakistan) of 1992, recently reaffirmed by both countries," the MEA said. On not allowing the pilgrims to meet Indian diplomats, it said a standard practice has been that the Indian High Commissioner's consular/protocol team is attached with visiting pilgrims to perform consular and protocol duties, like helping out in medical or family emergencies. "However, this year, the consular team has been denied access to Indian Sikh pilgrims. The team could not meet the pilgrims on their arrival at Wagah Railway Station on April 12. Similarly it was denied entry into Gurdwara Panja Sahib on April 14, for a scheduled meeting with pilgrims there. The High Commission was thus prevented from performing basic consular and protocol duties for Indian citizens," it said. (PTI)



Sikh pilgrims march during the Baisakhi festival, at the shrine of Gurdwara Panja Sahib in Hasan Abdal, some 50 kilometers from Islamabad

US, France, Britain launch new UN bid for Syria chemical weapons probe

UNITED NATIONS, APRIL 15/—/The United States, France and Britain today launched a new bid at the United Nations to investigate chemical weapons attacks in Syria, just hours after firing military strikes against Syrian targets. The three allies unveiled a joint draft resolution at the Security Council that also calls for unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid, enforcing a ceasefire and demands that Syria engage in UN-led peace talks, according to the text obtained by AFP. The move signalled the West's resolve to return to diplomacy

after a one-night military operation that hit sites Western officials said were linked to Syria's chemical weapons program. Among the contentious proposals, the draft resolution would establish an independent investigation of allegations of chemical attacks in Syria with the aim of identifying the perpetrators. Russia in November used its veto three times to bury a previous UN-led inquiry which found that Syrian forces had used sarin in the attack on Khan Sheikhoun in April last year. The measure would instruct the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons

(OPCW) to report within 30 days on whether Syria has fully disclosed its chemical weapons stockpile. The West has accused Syria of failing to live up to its commitment to scrap its chemical weapons program, under a deal reached between the United States and Russia. The Security Council held an emergency meeting earlier in the request of Russia, which failed in a bid to condemn the air strikes. Only China and Bolivia voted alongside Russia in favour of its draft resolution condemning the military action, while eight countries opposed it. (AFP)

Farooq Abdullah wants bill to award death penalty for raping minors

SRINAGAR, APRIL 15/—/Opposition National Conference (NC) president Farooq Abdullah today demanded a special session of Jammu and Kashmir Assembly to bring in a bill to award capital punishment to those who rape minors. He said a comment comes in the backdrop of a nationwide condemnation of the rape and murder of an eight-year-old girl in Jammu and Kashmir's Kathua. "Capital punishment must be brought in for such cases," Abdullah told reporters here. "She (Kathua rape victim) is just like my daughter. Thank God, today the nation has woken up and they have taken it very seriously. I hope justice will be done and we will see a high court judgment in any session wherein (if) any such incident takes place, the hanging must be brought in," he said. Abdullah was speaking to reporters after chairing a meeting of NC's provincial committee for Kashmir province at the party headquarters in Nawa-e-Sulha. The NC president said the PDP-BJP government should call a special session of the state legislature to pass the bill which would act as a deterrent against such crimes. Let the government call a special session of the Assembly just for this thing. When the special session of the Assembly is called and this bill is passed, it will be a great thing for the future such things will not take place," Abdullah said. (PTI)

Girl found murdered; may have been held captive, raped: Surat Police

SURAT (GUJ), APR 15/—/A girl, allegedly held captive, tortured and raped before being killed, the Surat Police said today. Weeks after the rape and murder of an eight-year-old girl in Kathua in Jammu region sent shock waves across the country, the body of an unidentified girl, believed to be between nine and 11 years, was found in Bhestan locality here and had 96 injury marks, they said. It was spotted lying in bushes near a cricket ground on the morning of April 6 by some passers-by, the police said. The autopsy report said there were 86 injury marks on her body, including the private parts, indicating that she was tortured and raped. Inspector K B Jhala of Pandesara police station said. She was strangled, the report said. While the police had earlier said that a body of a girl had been found, details of the case were made public today with Surat Police Commissioner Satish Sharma hold-

ing a press conference. An FIR has been lodged under sections 302 (murder), 323 (voluntarily causing hurt) and 376 (rape) of the IPC and under the Protection of Children From Sexual Offences Act (POCSO) against unidentified persons, he said. Ganesh Govekar, a doctor at the City Civil Hospital where the autopsy was conducted, said, "Going by the nature of injuries, they seem to have been caused over a period ranging from one week to a day prior to

the recovery of the body, suggesting that the girl, who is between nine to 11 years of age, might have been held captive, tortured and possibly raped." The police commissioner said the investigation has been handed over to the city police's Crime Branch and efforts are being made to identify the girl. "We have gone through the data of missing children in Gujarat and also in other states like Odisha and West Bengal, as she might be from another state," he said. "There was no sign of struggle at the spot where the body was found. The post-mortem report says she was killed six to 24 hours before the body was dumped. It is possible that she is from outside Surat," he said. "We need to identify the girl to solve the case. We are focusing on Odisha and West Bengal, as she is likely to be from either of the two states," he said, adding that so far the police have scanned data of 8,000 missing children. "We

have taken a DNA sample for identification. We will also obtain a report from the forensic science laboratory as soon as possible," he said. The police have announced a Rs 20,000 reward for anyone helping in identifying the girl or giving information about the culprits, Sharma said. (PTI)



A girl holds a placard during a protest against the rape and murder of a girl in Kathua, near Jammu, in Kochi —REUTERS

We need to identify the girl to solve the case. We are focusing on Odisha and West Bengal, as she is likely to be from either of the two states —Police

44 districts removed from affected list

Maoists area of influence shrinks: Union Home Secy

NEW DELHI, APRIL 15/—/Forty-four districts in the country are no longer under the influence of Maoists or have negligible presence and most of the Left Wing Extremism is now confined only to 30 worst-hit districts. Union Home Secretary Rajiv Gauba said the geographical spread of the LWE violence has shrunk significantly in the last four years due to a multi-pronged strategy involving security and development-related measures. "There is no influence or negligible presence of LWE in 44 districts and most of the Naxal violence is confined now only to 30 worst-affected districts," he told PTI in an interview here. Gauba said significant features of the anti-Naxal policy were zero tolerance towards violence coupled with a big push to developmental activities so that benefits of new roads, bridges, telephone towers reach the poor and the vulnerable in the affected areas. The Ministry of Home Affairs had categorised 106 districts in 10 states as LWE-affected areas. These districts are covered under the Security Re-

lated Expenditure (SRE) scheme for the purpose of reimbursement of security-related expenditure like transportation, communication, hiring of vehicles, stipend to surrendered Maoists, construction of infrastructure for forces etc. This categorisation provided the basis for focused deployment of resources — both security and development related. Over the last few years, a number of districts have been carved into smaller districts to enhance area the geographical area of the 106 SRE

districts being spread over 126 districts. The MHA has recently undertaken a comprehensive exercise in consultation with the states to review the affected districts in order to ensure that deployment of forces and resources is in sync with the changed ground reality. Accordingly, 44 districts have been excluded and 8 new districts have been added to the list of SRE districts as a pre-emptive step to check any attempts by Maoists to enhance area of influence. Therefore, the total number

of SRE districts now stands at 90, another official said. Similarly, the number of worst LWE-hit districts has also come down to 30 from 35. There has been a substantial improvement in the LWE scenario in last four years. Incidents of violence have seen a 20 per cent decline with a 34 per cent reduction in related deaths in 2017 as compared to 2013, the official said. Among the 90 districts, 32 districts have reported no violence in last few years while only 58 districts have reported violence in 2017. (PTI)