

Reprieve for Indians facing death in Qatar

Court of Appeals in Doha commutes sentences handed out to former Navy personnel convicted in espionage case; kin say verdict 'step in right direction', they will keep fighting to prove innocence; Modi earlier met Qatar's ruler Sheikh Tamim in Dubai raising hopes for leniency in the case; will continue to extend consular support, says MEA

Suhasini Haidar
NEW DELHI

In the first major breakthrough in the case against eight former Indian naval personnel sentenced to death in Qatar, the Court of Appeals in Doha has commuted their sentences, the Ministry of External Affairs confirmed on Thursday.

Vipul, India's Ambassador to Qatar, was in the court along with other officials and family members of the former naval officers as the verdict was announced, the Ministry said. All eight arrested last year were employees of the Dahra Global defence services company.

"We have noted the verdict today of the Court of Appeal of Qatar in the Dahra Global case, in which the sentences have been

reduced. The detailed judgment is awaited. We are in close touch with the legal team as well as the family members to decide on the next steps," the Ministry said in a statement.

Terms of verdict

Neither the Ministry nor those aware of the appeals verdict would comment on what the terms of the "reduced" verdict were. The fact that the court has struck down the death sentence is the first positive development for the families of the eight men who have been on death row since they were convicted on October 26. They filed appeals against that verdict on November 9.

However, while expressing relief at the waiver of the death penalty, sources close to the families of the men expressed disappointment



One to one: Prime Minister Narendra Modi met the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, during COP-28. PTI

ment that the original guilty verdict in the case – believed to involve charges of espionage – had been upheld, and said they would continue to fight to prove their innocence.

A source aware of the reactions from the families told *The Hindu* that while the verdict was a "step in the right direction", it was "harsh for eight innocent

ex-navy officers". The real hope for the wives and children of the men in custody is to prove their innocence, and be able to bring them back, the source said.

Hopes for leniency in the case rose this month after Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with Qatar's ruler Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani on December 1 on the sidelines

of the UN's climate summit in Dubai, their first conversation since the case began. While he did not address the issue directly on social media, Mr. Modi had said in a post that he had discussed the "well-being of the Indian community in Qatar" with the Emir.

However, subsequent reports that the men had been put on a list of those pardoned by the Qatari Emir, which is released each year on National Day, December 18, proved to be unfounded, especially as officials explained that a pardon can only be given after a convicted person exhausts the appeals process. Another option that could be pursued once all appeals have been exhausted, officials say, is for India to request that the men be allowed to travel back and serve out their

sentences in India, according to the bilateral "Transfer of Sentenced Persons" agreement signed with Qatar in 2015.

Charges not public

"We have stood by the [naval personnel] since the beginning of the matter and we will continue to extend all consular and legal assistance. We will also continue to take up the matter with the Qatari authorities," said the MEA in its statement, adding that no further comment was appropriate given the "confidential and sensitive nature of proceedings of this case". The Indian Embassy in Doha has also consistently applied for and received consular access to the men, including on December 3, two days after Mr. Modi's meeting with the Qatari Emir. The Opposi-

sition Congress expressed "immediate relief along with the entire nation" for the verdict in the Qatari appeals court. "While fuller details are awaited we express the hope that even the jail sentence that has replaced the death penalty will be set aside and the officers will be set free," wrote Congress leader Jairam Ramesh in a social media post.

Captain Navtej Singh Gill, Captain Birendra Kumar Verma, Captain Saunabh Vasisht, Commander Amit Nagpal, Commander Purnendu Tiwari, Commander Sugunakar Pakala, Commander Sanjeev Gupta, and Sailor Ragesh were arrested by Qatari authorities in Doha on August 30, 2022. The details of the exact charges against them have not been publicly released thus far.

Despair in distress

The farming crisis is forcing youths to take to illegal migration

In a world where the movement of labour is curtailed and restricted, it is no surprise that people affected by distress in their homeland seek opportunities in the developed world despite the enormous risks during their journeys. The recent episode of the forced return of 303 Indians who were detained at a French airport is suspected to be another such instance, or worse, trafficking. About 20 of them sought asylum in France, while the rest returned to Mumbai on Tuesday. However, it is well-known now that an alarming number of Indians, nearly 1,00,000 and five times the number in the previous year, attempted to enter the U.S. between October 2022 and September this year, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection data. More than half these attempts were through the heavily guarded Mexican border, with the rest being attempts to use the sparsely manned Canadian border. The rise of Indians risking the rather treacherous route to enter the U.S. through Mexico came to light when a six-year old girl from Punjab was found dead in the Arizona desert in June 2019. This was about nine months before the COVID-19 pandemic, which led the Trump Administration to invoke the rarely used Title 42 of the U.S. Code that deals with public health, empowering border agencies to turn away asylum seekers even without a hearing. After the COVID-19 years and since the Biden Administration came to power, such migration attempts began to steadily rise again. That Indians are willing to take risks and bear enormous difficulties only to become illegal immigrants in the U.S. suggests that they are doing so either in desperation or are being misled.

Initial reports from the current incident also bear the tell-tale signs of what has been reported in the past about such cases – the majority of the air passengers were men from Punjab, Haryana and Gujarat; about a dozen were unaccompanied minors. Immediate reasons for such migrations have been cited by some Sikhs as alleged religious persecution, while others cited the distress in farming. Regardless of the reasons, it is time the Indian government paid attention to the trafficking racket that appears to be widespread especially across parts of rural Punjab and Haryana, where gullible people fall prey to tall promises of a better future in the U.S. Their situation has been exacerbated by the crisis that they face in farming with plummeting incomes and overexploited and fragmented farmlands. A crackdown on exploitative middlemen in the labour market can only be the beginning.

Old and strong

India and Russia seem keen on renewing ties in a changed world

The importance of External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's visit to Russia this week can be gleaned from the special effort New Delhi and Moscow have made to make the meetings successful and productive. For India, at the end of a year of prolific diplomacy, a five-day visit would seem unusually long, particularly as the Kremlin leadership normally does not see high-level foreign visits at all in this period right before its holiday season. It is equally unusual for Russian President Vladimir Putin to meet lower-ranking foreign officials, as he did while meeting Mr. Jaishankar. The warmth was significant given that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has skipped the annual leadership summit, an unbroken tradition from 2000-21, for two years now, leading to speculation about the health of the India-Russia relationship after the Ukraine war. While India took care not to criticise Russia, worries over the flagging of defence supplies, continued issues over paying Russia for imports in third currencies, and the general decline in other bilateral engagements have persisted. It is clear that a large part of Mr. Jaishankar's mission was to smooth over the perception of differences. The resultant agreements, pertaining to furthering collaboration in future Kudankulam nuclear power projects, fostering connectivity, trade and resuming talks for the Eurasian Economic Union-India free trade agreement, and joint military production indicate that bilateral relations are on track. So is multilateral cooperation, especially as Russia plans to host the expanded BRICS summit next year, and India and Russia continue to coordinate positions at the UN and SCO. Mr. Jaishankar's announcement that imports of Russian hydrocarbons will continue to rise despite the West's Russian sanctions, indicated the strength of ties that continue "regardless of political fluctuations".

Mr. Jaishankar's affirmation that the annual leadership summit will be resumed in 2024, appeared to signify that both sides are working to eliminate any static in the relationship. His statement that the India-Russia relationship was the 'only constant in world politics' over the last six decades would not have gone unnoticed especially in Washington and Beijing, given some of the friction in India-U.S. relations over the Pannun investigation, as well as U.S. President Joseph Biden's decision not to accept Mr. Modi's invitation for Republic Day, while India-China relations have ended another year in impasse over the military standoff. It remains to be seen whether the bonhomie will yield concrete movement on the rupee-rouble payment mechanism, or on expediting the delayed delivery of S-400 air system units. However, the larger import of his visit, and his words that the "geopolitical and strategic convergence" between India and Russia in a multipolar world that is "rebalancing", will be watched most closely by votaries and critics of the relationship.

Houthi attacks: a threat to global shipping?

How have previous incidents of maritime threats, such as piracy, prepared nations to respond to the recent drone attacks in the Red Sea? What specific measures have the Yemen-based Houthi rebels employed to execute the drone attacks on merchant vessels? In what ways might rerouting vessels affect specific industries?

EXPLAINER

Dinakar Peri

The story so far:

On December 23, the crisis in the Red Sea reached Indian waters as a Liberian-flagged merchant vessel *Chem Pluto* heading to Mangalore port was hit by a projectile about 271 miles from Portbandar in Gujarat, just outside the Indian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This comes in the backdrop of a sharp rise in missile and drone attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea by Houthi rebels in Yemen in the last couple of weeks following Israel's offensive against Hamas in Gaza.

What is the latest on *m.s. Chem Pluto*?

The vessel with 21 Indians and one Vietnamese crew managed to sail on its power after the attack and reached Mumbai on Monday escorted by the Indian Coast Guard Ship (ICGS) *Vikram*. Upon arrival, a Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal team carried out a preliminary assessment of *Chem Pluto* and analysis of the area of attack and debris found on the ship points towards a drone attack, the Navy said. "However, further forensic and technical analysis will be required to establish the vector of attack, including type and amount of explosive used," it stated. A joint investigation by various agencies is also underway.

In another instance, on December 23, Gabon-flagged, Indian crewed vessel *m. v. Sai Baba* reported a drone attack in the Southern Red Sea and is now on its way to India. The twin attacks on *m. v. Sai Baba* and Norwegian-flagged *m. v. BLAAMAEN*, represent the 14th and 15th attacks on commercial shipping by Houthi militants since October 17, according to the U.S. Central Command.

How do these events impact India and the world?

Threats to shipping in the Gulf of Aden and the region are not new as seen with



Maritime support: ICGS Vikram escorting *m.s. Chem Pluto* to Mumbai on December 24

episodes of Somali pirates and the global anti-piracy efforts by several countries. However, the recent events represent a serious escalation that can potentially disrupt supply chains and impact economies. The Red Sea is a key shipping artery for global commerce and the Bab el-Mandeb is a critical choke point.

Following the October 7 terror attacks on Israel by Hamas and the subsequent offensive by Israel Defence Forces, the Houthi rebels have declared they would target all maritime commerce linked to Israel. What is especially worrying is their sophisticated arsenal of ballistic missiles and long range drones that are threatening maritime traffic far from the shores. The U.S. Navy has been shooting down missiles and drones in the region almost daily.

"About 12% of global trade passes through the Red Sea, which accounts for billions of dollars of goods and about 30% of the world's container shipping. Access to the Red Sea requires passage through the Bab el-Mandeb – a narrow strait about 20 miles wide with Djibouti to the west and Yemen to the east," Susan Stigant, Director of Africa Programs with the U.S. Institute of Peace wrote in a commentary.

Following the attacks, several global shipping majors have announced their decision to avoid the route and take a longer route through the Southern Indian

Ocean adding to both fuel and operating costs in addition to the time. For instance, shipping industry giant Maersk had begun re-routing vessels around Africa via the Cape of Good Hope.

Recent data indicates a notable shift in transit passage in the Suez and Red Sea as Israel-flagged and owned ships increasingly avoid transiting the Red Sea due to heightened security concerns, one official monitoring the situation said.

"The avoidance of the Red Sea route has substantial implications, potentially adding one to two weeks to voyages, disrupting shipping schedules, and subsequently elevating fuel and insurance costs," the official said adding this strategic shift has implications for the revenue generated by the Suez Canal, as well as the operational dynamics of ports in Djibouti and the Gulf of Aden.

What is being done to address this?

To counter the attacks and protect the free flow of commerce in the Red Sea, on December 18, U.S. Secretary of Defence Lloyd J. Austin announced the establishment of Operation Prosperity Guardian (OPG), an "important new multinational security initiative under the umbrella of the Combined Maritime Forces and the leadership of its Task Force 153, which focuses on security in the Red Sea." Since the announcement of OPG, several companies in the last few

days announced their decisions to review the re-routing.

From the Indian side, both the Navy and Coast Guard have increased their presence and surveillance in the region. Navy Chief Admiral R. Hari Kumar said, on December 26, that the Navy presently has four destroyers of Project 15B and ISA class deployed to counter piracy and drone attacks on merchant shipping. Further, P8I long range patrol aircraft, Dorniers, Sea Guardian Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, helicopters and Coast Guard ships are all deployed jointly to counter these threats, he stated.

Since October 2008, the Indian Navy has continuously deployed at least one ship on anti-piracy patrol in the Gulf of Aden and since 2017 under Mission Based Deployments has deployed one capital warship each at all the critical maritime choke points into the IOR.

Indian Navy's Information Fusion Centre for Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) located in Gurugram is actively monitoring the region and coordination in the back end to facilitate communication where required, like between the Navy and the company when *m. v. Ruen* was hijacked recently in the Gulf of Aden.

We coordinate operational responses and assistance to vessels in the Indian Ocean Region, Captain Rohit Bajpai, Director IFC-IOR said last week. "The international organisation had removed the high risk area that was there in the Gulf of Aden on January 1 this year and this is the first instance of actual piracy where a vessel has been hijacked."

However, several questions remain. For instance, Indians constitute close to 15% of commercial sailors while Indian owned vessels are very few and a lot of Indian crude and cargo is carried by foreign ships. So how would India and other countries react to a major attack resulting in loss of life or precious cargo? "Where do we draw the line?", another official questioned.

The fact remains that a shock to global economies in terms of delays and price rises due to the regional crisis is looming on the horizon.

THE GIST

▼ The recent drone attacks on merchant vessels in the Red Sea by Houthi rebels have raised concerns about maritime security, disrupting global trade routes and potentially impacting economies.

▼ These attacks have prompted some shipping companies to reroute vessels, avoid the Red Sea, and increase operational costs.

▼ India heightened its presence, deploying various resources to counter potential threats in the region and monitor maritime activity.

▼ However, uncertainties persist regarding potential future attacks, response strategies, and the broader implications for global trade and economies.

Is Pegasus spyware targeting journalists in India?

What are the latest allegations about Pegasus' use? What is Israeli company NSO's response regarding the matter? What mechanisms were used by the spyware?

Saptaparno Ghosh
P.J. George

The story so far:

The Washington Post and Amnesty International report claims that Pegasus spyware targeted journalists in India, including Siddharth Varadarajan of *The Wire* and Anand Mangnale of South Asia editor of the Organised Crime and Corruption Report Project (OCCRP). The intrusion was detected in October 2023 after Apple warned users, including MPs, of potential "state-sponsored attacks" on their iPhones.

What has Amnesty International alleged?

After Apple issued a security notification to certain iPhone users, including MPs, in October, researchers at Amnesty International's Security Lab analysed the allegedly infected devices, including those belonging to Mr. Varadarajan and Mr.

Mangnale. At the end of their examination, they reported finding traces of Pegasus's activity on their respective devices. Security Lab concluded that a message to facilitate a "zero-click exploit" had been sent to Mr. Mangnale's phone over his iPhone's iMessage app on August 23. Once received, the message was designed to covertly install Pegasus on the device. "The attempted targeting of Anand Mangnale's phone happened at a time when he was working on a story about an alleged stock manipulation by a large multinational conglomerate in India," an Amnesty report stated.

Mr. Varadarajan was allegedly targeted by Pegasus on October 16. According to Amnesty researchers' analysis, the attacker had used the same email address to target both Mr. Varadarajan and Mr. Mangnale: natalymarinova@proton.me.

What is a zero-click exploit?

A zero-click exploit refers to malicious software that allows spyware to be

installed on a device without the device owner's consent. More importantly, it doesn't require the device owner to perform any actions to initiate or complete the installation.

The specific exploit allegedly in use on the two devices is called BLASTPAST (previously identified as BLASTPASS). It plays out in two phases. In the first, the attack attempts to establish a link with the Apple HomeKit - which gives users a way to control multiple smart devices - on the target's device. In the second, some malicious content is sent via the iMessage app to the target. According to Amnesty, the purpose of the first phase - the "outreach" - could be to determine how the device can be exploited or to keep it in sight for further exploitation in the future. The second phase is the one that delivers the full spyware "payload".

"The two-stage attack process seen in this case is similar to the previous PWNYOURHOME Pegasus attack vector described by Citizen Lab and

independently observed by the Security Lab," Amnesty's report observed. Mr. Mangnale's phone was vulnerable to the exploit at the time of the alleged attack. Mr. Varadarajan's was not, however, because by then Apple had rolled out its 16.6.1 security update to tackle such intrusions. In both cases, however, evidence has reportedly not been found for Pegasus successfully "infecting" the devices.

How has Pegasus's maker responded?

The Washington Post quoted a statement from the Israeli company NSO, which makes and distributes Pegasus, as saying that it "[stresses] again that all of them are vetted law enforcement and intelligence agencies that licence our technologies for the sole purpose of fighting terror and major crime". "The company has no visibility to the targets, nor to the collected intelligence," NSO stated.

What has happened?

In the wake of the 'Pegasus Project' revelations, activists filed several petitions with the Supreme Court alleging a mass surveillance exercise by the government to muzzle free speech and democratic dissent. In response, the top court asked the Centre to file a detailed affidavit vis-a-vis its use of Pegasus. The Centre refused to comply, however, contending that such a public affidavit would compromise the country's national security.

THE GIST

▼ Amnesty International claims to have found evidence of Pegasus spyware targeting Indian journalists Siddharth Varadarajan and Anand Mangnale in their forensic analysis after Apple issued security notifications in October 2023.

▼ Anand Mangnale was targeted via a "zero-click exploit" in an iMessage related to his investigative work, while Siddharth Varadarajan was targeted using the same attacker-controlled email address.

▼ The spyware's method, known as BLASTPAST, exploited vulnerabilities in iMessage by sending malicious content, aiming to install Pegasus on the victims' devices without their interaction.

China mulls making 50% of clean-fuel ships in world by '25



Green oceans: The move is part of Beijing's push to become carbon neutral by 2060. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

Reuters
SINGAPORE

China has set itself the goal of producing more than half of the world's ships powered by cleaner fuels by 2025, in guidelines published by the Industry Ministry on Thursday.

It did not give any estimates of the number of ships involved.

Low carbon fuels

But the guidelines said China would build more vessels powered by lower-carbon fuels such as methanol and liquefied natural gas, part of Beijing's push to become carbon neutral by 2060.

"Implement innovation in ship engines, improve the efficiency of traditional fuel and LNG marine engines, and steadily increase the use of LNG in marine engines at scale," the document issued by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology said.

Key enterprises have made progress in reducing pollution and carbon emissions with the comprehensive energy consumption per 10,000 yuan dropping by 13.5% from 2020 levels, it added.

The environmental overhaul of the shipping industry would be completed by 2030, according to the document.