



A 14-year-old British Columbia girl has been arrested after prostituting herself and luring other girls into the trade through Craigslist

BRIEFLY



Chinese actress Li Bingbing arrives ahead of the Golden Horse Film Awards, the 'Oscars' of Chinese-language cinema, in Taipei —AFP

Indian-American couple charged for corruption

Washington: US investigators, who arrested an Indian-American couple on charges of bribing government officials, have seized an estimated \$400,000 hidden inside a closet in their home. Owner of a number of liquor stores in Langley Park and surrounding neighbourhoods, Amrik Melhi, 51, and his wife, Ravinder K Melhi, 49, were arrested by FBI on charges of bribing government officials in exchange of favours. Besides the Melhi couple, seven others including three police officials have been arrested on corruption charges. Melhi and others would pay police officers in exchange for them ensuring the safe transport and distribution of untaxed cigarettes and alcohol in Maryland and Virginia. —Agencies

Palin brands Barack and Michelle 'unpatriotic'

London: Sarah Palin has branded US President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle 'unpatriotic' and 'racist'. In leaked extracts of her new book, Palin delves into the minefield of racial politics, arguing that Obama is among those who regarded the conservative Tea Party movement as racially prejudiced and who thinks, "America is a fundamentally unjust and unequal country," reports the Telegraph. To back it up with evidence, she dredged up a quote from a 2008 campaign speech in which Michelle Obama said, "For the first time in my adult life, I am really proud of my country". —Agencies

Fake doc jailed for giving breast exams in bars

Salmon: A Boise woman police say posed as a physician and duped at least two other women into having their breasts examined by her at Boise-area nightclubs. Police say Kristina Ross, 37, introduced herself to victims as a plastic surgeon named Berlyn Aussieahshowna. The two women told Boise officers they believed Ross was a physician because of her apparent medical knowledge, and they agreed to undergo what they thought were breast exams, which happened at the bars. —ANI

Teacher dunks student in bath to satisfy water fetish

London: A music teacher in Britain has been accused of dunking a naked female student in his bath and taping the incident to satisfy his water "fetish". Michael Crombie, 73, a former schoolmaster, is said to have made eight films, including a "highlights tape" of the nude girl when she was aged between 10 and 12. Crombie has also been charged with molesting eight other girl pupils during private tuition sessions in Woodford Green, Essex. He denied accusations that he had groped other young pupils during piano and singing lessons in his home music studio, and said he had only placed his hands on pupils' chests and stomachs during "breathing exercises". —ANI

NATO backs Obama's plan of gradual Afghan pullout by 2014

Judy Dempsey LISBON

NATO leaders, backing president Obama's plan for a gradual phaseout of combat operations, on Saturday signed an agreement with Afghanistan to control the country's security until 2014 and then assist with its logistics, training and advising.

NATO, which has over 150,000 troops based in Afghanistan, including over 100,000 American soldiers, intends to begin the phaseout next year. But the agreement on Saturday ensures the slower military transition favoured by Obama, even as Afghan President Hamid Karzai has been pushing for greater control.

The pact followed more than three hours of talks among leaders from the 28 NATO countries, including Obama, and the 20 other coalition countries in Afghanistan. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the secretary general of NATO, said the agreement showed a commitment to the long-term security and development of Afghanistan.

Public opinion across Europe and in the US is increasingly opposed to the war in Afghanistan. But with a shift from combat operations to police and army training, diplomats here said they hoped they could buy some time with the

public instead of rushing out of Afghanistan. While Ivo Daalder, the American ambassador to NATO, said the 2014 goal and the end of NATO's combat role in Afghanistan beyond that date "are not one and the same," many NATO countries have insisted they will remove all their troops by 2014.

British foreign secretary William Hague reiterated said his country will end its combat role in Afghanistan by 2015. "Make no mistake about it, that is an absolute commitment and deadline for us," he said. German chancellor Angela Merkel said German troops would be withdrawn from Afghanistan by 2014 but added that her country would continue training Afghan police and armed forces.

NATO, which has been seeking much closer cooperation with Russia over Afghanistan, expects to sign agreements to expand the alliance's supply routes to Afghanistan through Russia as well as set up a new training program in Russia for counter-narcotics agents from Afghanistan and other Central Asian countries. NATO and Russia is also close to agreeing a program to provide training to Afghan helicopter crews.

It was still unclear if Russia would participate in Obama's plans to build a missile shield



Barack Obama (centre) greets Hamid Karzai —REUTERS

over Europe. NATO leaders agreed Friday night on the missile shield, but the exact details over cost and command and control of the shield have still to be worked out. "It offers a role for all of our allies," Obama told reporters Friday. "It responds to the threats of our times. It shows our determination to protect our citizens from the threat of ballistic missiles."

And while the US has invited Russia to participate, European diplomats, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that NATO and Russia would probably agree to develop two separate systems but eventually connect them. —NYT

Islamabad denies US bid to widen drone strike zones

Islamabad: Pakistan has rejected a US request to expand the areas where American missiles can target Taliban and Al Qaeda operatives, citing domestic opposition to the strikes, a senior Pakistani intelligence official said Saturday.

The refusal is a sign of the ongoing tensions between the US and its key ally over the program to find and kill Islamist extremists that have free rein in the lawless areas along the border. Pakistan privately tolerates the strikes along its northwestern border as a "necessary evil" but cannot sanction widening them into more populated areas, said the official with the Pakistani Inter Service Intelligence agency. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to speak to the press. He would not specify which new areas the American side hoped to target, but an article in the *Washington Post* identified one as around Quetta, the capital of the southwestern province of Baluchistan, where Afghan Taliban chief Mullah Mohammad Omar is believed to operate. —Agencies

Pak army is India-centric: Gen. Mullen

Washington: Border areas of Pakistan alongside neighbouring Afghanistan are the "epicentre of terrorism" in the world and the Pakistan army continues to be "India-centric", a top US military official has said.

"Resident in that border area, mostly in Pakistan, although not entirely, I call it the epicentre of terrorism in the world," said admiral Mike Mullen, chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"It isn't just Al Qaeda or the Pakistan Taliban, it's the Afghan Taliban, it's LeT, which has migrated from an India-focused organisation in the east to the west, and in fact has broader aspirations than that right now. So it has become very synergistic in that part of the world, and that's why we're so focused on it," Mullen said. Noting that Pakistan has taken some strong steps in combating terrorism in the region in recent years, Mullen said the Pak army continues to be "India-centric".

"You've had a military that has had to convert from a conventional force to a counterinsurgency force. Yet there's also the focus on your eastern border, certainly on India. That hasn't gone away. Certainly one of the things I've learned, that's not going away in the near future. I think that's also something, from a policy standpoint, that has to be addressed as a part of all of this," Mullen said.

Mullen said the presence of nuclear weapons in Pakistan only heightens the importance of denying Al Qaeda and related networks any lasting foothold in the region. —PTI

Swedish police sends out international warrant for Assange

Stockholm: Sweden's criminal police has issued an international arrest warrant for Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, wanted on suspicion of rape and sexual molestation, police said Saturday.

"Late last night we gathered all the information and sent it out in the different systems," namely the Swedish system, Schengen countries system SIS and Interpol, Tommy Kangasvieri of the Swedish National Criminal Police told AFP.

"The prosecutor had already decided to issue an international arrest warrant, we made sure that all the police forces in the world would see it," Kangasvieri explained. The Stockholm district court on Thursday ordered an arrest warrant for Assange, a 39-year-old Australian, for questioning on "probable cause of suspected rape, sexual molestation and unlawful coercion" in Sweden in August.

The court order allowed prosecutor Mar-



ianne Ny, who had requested Assange's detention, to prepare an international arrest warrant for the head of the whistleblowing website, who is believed to be in Britain.

Ny insisted Thursday that arresting Assange was the only way she could be sure of questioning him about the allegations, which he has denied.

Assange's Swedish lawyer Bjorn Hur-

ting on Friday filed an appeal against the arrest warrant court order, but the appeal did not suspend the Swedish order or delay the international warrant.

However, Swedish media reported the petition would likely be treated quickly by the appeals court, which could rule on the warrant's legitimacy in days.

On Thursday, Assange's counsel Mark Stephens said, "Over the last three months, neither Assange, nor his legal counsel has received a single word in writing from the Swedish authorities relating to the allegations; a clear contravention to Article 6 of the European Convention, which states that every accused must "be informed promptly, in a language which he understands and in detail, of the nature and cause of the accusation against him".

Assange has been accused of raping one woman in Sweden and sexually molesting another. —Agencies

Pakistani Christian woman sentenced to death seeks mercy

Islamabad: A Christian woman sentenced to death in Pakistan on charges of blaspheming Islam said on Saturday she had been wrongfully accused by neighbours due to a personal dispute, and appealed to the president to pardon her.

Asia Bibi, mother of four, is the first woman to be sentenced to death under Pakistan's controversial blasphemy law which rights groups say is often exploited by religious extremists as well as ordinary Pakistanis to settle personal scores.

The 36-year-old farm worker was taken into custody by police in June last year and was convicted by a lower court on November 8. She has been in prison since then, with her case drawing international media attention as well as appeals by human rights groups, and according to Pakistani media, Pope Benedict.

"I told police that I have not committed any blasphemy and this is a wrong accusation, but they did not listen to me," Bibi told reporters after meeting with Salman Taseer, governor of the central Punjab province. "I have small kids. I have wrongly been implicated in this false case," she said. Taseer said he would take up Bibi's case with President Asif Ali Zardari, who has the constitutional power to pardon her. "Inshallah (God willing) her appeal will be accepted," Taseer said, adding that he had studied Bibi's case and found that she had not committed any blasphemy.

"She is a helpless Christian woman. She can't legally defend herself because she does not have resources. Implicating such helpless minorities in such cases amounts to ridiculing the constitution of Pak-



Asia Bibi, 36, has four children

istan," Taseer added. On Friday, Zardari asked the ministry for minorities affairs to compile a report on Bibi's case within three days after Pakistani media suggested the accusations stemmed from a village dispute.

Bibi confirmed she had been involved in a dispute over livestock with her neighbours, but would not give any more details. Pakistani media said the quarrel began when some women who worked on the same farm refused to drink water from a bowl used by Bibi, saying they would not drink or eat anything a non-Muslim has touched. Bibi said her opponents physically abused her before taking her to court. "They slapped me...They tried to strangle me. Their women also pulled my hair," she said in a choked voice.

Pakistan is an overwhelmingly Muslim nation of more than 170 million people. Religious minorities account for roughly four percent of the population.

Christians have long complained about the blasphemy law saying it offers them no protection. The law makes it a crime to speak ill of Islam and its Prophet Muhammad, punishable by death. —Reuters

'Jihadists planning German parliament attack'

Berlin: Germany's decision to step up security measures this week was prompted by discovery of militant plans to break into the Reichstag parliament building and shoot hostages, a German magazine said on Saturday.

The weekly *Der Spiegel*, citing security officials, said a jihadist living abroad had informed them in recent telephone calls of a plan for armed militants to enter the 19th century building in central Berlin and open fire. It said police considered the information credible. Germany's Federal Crime

Office (BKA) had no immediate comment on the report.

The information, the magazine said, had prompted officials to announce on Wednesday they were raising security, especially at public places including airports and train stations. Interior minister Thomas de Maiziere said on Thursday authorities were on guard against threats of an armed attack of the kind that killed 166 in the Indian city of Mumbai in 2008.

The parliament building has strong symbolic importance in Germany. The image of a Sovi-

et soldier planting the red flag atop its ruin in 1945 marked the end of World War II for many.

The jihadist, *Der Spiegel* reported, said the group of attackers was to be made up of six people. Two had already arrived in Berlin and another four, including a German, a Turk and a North African, were under way. Germany maintains a contingent of forces in Afghanistan and has been the target of threats on jihadist websites. The timing of the reported parliament plot, for February or March, differed however from de Maiziere's warnings that at-

tacks were planned sometime before the end of November.

At a news conference convened at his ministry in Berlin on Wednesday, de Maiziere said intelligence services had received concrete indications attacks were planned in the next two weeks.

Der Spiegel said another plot could also have contributed to the alarm — one signaled two weeks ago by US authorities involving an Indian Shiite group that had dispatched two men who aim to arrive in Germany near the end of the month. —Reuters

AMERICAN AUDIENCES LOVE VAZ'S IMPERTINENT, HONEST EXPLORATION OF WHAT IT IS LIKE TO BE A WOMAN, ESPECIALLY AN INDIAN WOMAN

New York laughs out loud with 'Unladylike' Radhika Vaz



Radhika Vaz (right) and Brock Savage

Uttara Choudhury NEW YORK

One of the first rules in comedy is to approach the obvious. The obvious for Mumbai-born Radhika Vaz, a comedic actor and writer, is that she just doesn't have the "body or heart" to be a prissy little lady. So when you see Manhattan's new star in the making performing her one-woman show 'Unladylike: The Pitfalls of Propriety', expect an irreverent take on Indian expectations about virgin brides, fake orgasms and how women will say anything to get a man between the sheets.

Vaz talked a blue streak at the Producers Club in New York and had the audience in hysterics at her second run of sold-out comedy shows in November. During her show she burst into a livewire Lady Gaga imitation before letting rip on how women have created a planet on which men can get away with things women can't even dream about. "... I am a lady with body hair. I am a Hirsute Harriet, a Hairy Mary. If I were a man, this would be quite all right." Vaz tempered while stalking the stage on stylish black heels.

"So I have spent the better part of my life, and my savings, waxing and shaving and tweezing and threading and plucking

and pulling and epilating and depilating every square inch of myself. I have been forced to keep up with the latest technology in hair removal because someone, somewhere, decided that the authentic female body was too vile to be seen as it is," she exclaims.

Then she jokes: "People ask me, why do Indian women get married so young? Is it because your parents insist upon it? Is it because of the religious and social pressures of your culture? No, actually, we just want to stop shaving our legs."

Just when you think she is done, Vaz warms up to her subject; "I believe that the number one reason for a woman to walk away from a spontaneous sexual encounter is untended body hair. Of course, we would never tell that to a man, so we improvise. 'I'm not that kind of girl. I've come with my friends. I have typhoid.' More cow shit. It's so unfair isn't it?" The audience laughs in agreement.

These comedic rants have now become Vaz's trademark. Rather remarkable as Vaz slipped into New York's tough-as-nails, male-dominated comedy circuit from the buttoned-down corporate world. She worked as an ad-executive in Chennai and New York before discovering im-

provational theatre. Vaz, who has a Masters in advertising from Syracuse University, has traded the nine-to-five world for the vagaries of theatre life.

"One day, I took an improv class with a woman called Holly Mandel and finally found something I wanted to be good at. Improv helped me find my feet as a performer and a writer," said Vaz, who now teaches students in New York how to create great scenes and characters that engage the audience.

"I enjoy working with other writers which is why I did 'The Kat and Rad Show' — a medley of sketches written with my friend Kat," added Vaz. Vaz met her current show's director Brock Savage, a gifted writer and stand-up comic performer at Caroline's on Broadway, in improv school and he helped her battle through her initial nerves by encouraging her to tell her own stories. The result was 'Unladylike' which Savage says mixes theatrical genres by straddling storytelling, stand-up comedy and theatre. "Radhika is very opinionated and has all these unique takes on things. In 'Unladylike' there is a very particular character on stage who is Radhika, but a version of Radhika," says Savage.

"It is a very in-your-face, funny,

naughty exploration of what it is like to be a woman, an Indian woman. It discusses the issues and frustrations of what women have to put up with in the world, not in an angry, tirade sort of way but funny, ribald fashion. You don't have to be Indian to appreciate the show because the themes are universal, but since the pieces are personal and Radhika is an Indian woman, there are particulars to being an Indian woman that get discussed."

The show has Vaz poring over marriage ads in Indian newspapers including one that announces an "Innocent divorcee, age 25, seeks groom." Vaz promptly decodes, "An 'innocent divorcee' is a divorced woman who had managed to cling to her hymen the entire time that she was married."

Vaz plays a funny, poised, confident woman on 'Unladylike', and it's hard to imagine her as shy. But Vaz says she has a hard time opening up in front of people. "As a kid I was in awe of women who refused to be wallflowers, but stood out like the flaming tips of their cigarettes. I enjoy putting that on stage because off-stage I am not bold as brass. My husband calls me a paper tiger. That is why putting this other me on stage was such fun."

9/11 workers get \$625 mln

New York: After a wrenching seven-year battle, more than 10,000 workers who sued New York City over health damages they claimed after the 9/11 recovery efforts have approved a settlement, clearing the way for payouts totalling at least \$625 million, lawyers said Friday.

Their responses, delivered to a federal judge in Manhattan, ended months of wrangling over whether the city and its contractors were shortchanging the workers for the respiratory and other illnesses they developed after toiling in the smoldering ruins of the World Trade Center. The judge, Alvin K. Hellerstein of U.S. District Court, threw out a smaller settlement in March, arguing that the plaintiffs deserved more and lawyers were getting too big a cut.

In their lawsuits, the firefighters, police officers and other workers argued that the city had failed to provide adequate protective equipment and supervision as they retrieved victims' remains at ground zero and cleared smoky debris.

Under the terms of the settlement, individual payments will range from \$3,250 to \$1.8 million or more for the worst injuries, lawyers estimated. —NYT