

In south Indian temple town, plastics become taboo

By Anna Mathews
The Associated Press

PATHANAMTHITTA, India — Millions of Hindu men trudge the steep, three-hour climb to a hilltop temple to worship a celibate god every year. They bathe away their sins in the Pamba River. And these days, they leave less of a trace thanks to new rules aimed at getting rid of plastic trash.

Local officials have banned all plastic containers from the Sabarimala temple, set deep in the dense jungle of a tiger conservation park in Kerala state. Pilgrimages throughout the year attract some 100 million worshippers, though women of childbearing age are forbidden from entering.

For years the traffic took a heavy toll. Pastures were strewn with potato-chip packages and water bottles. Plastic bags blown into the air caught on branches and hung from the forest canopy. Rivers became choked with clothing discarded as people washed away their sins.

Last year, traces of plastic were found in the digestive tracts of dead samba deer and at least one elephant, prompting Kerala's forest department to petition a court last year for the ban on disposable plastic items.

Such bans have been imposed in various parts of India, including the capital of New



PROBLEMATIC POLYTHENE. Indian rag pickers look for reusable materials at a garbage dump littered with polythene bags in Lucknow, India. The northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, of which Lucknow is the capital, has banned the use of polythene carry bags throughout the state to limit the severe environmental degradation caused by their widespread use. (AP Photo/Rajesh Kumar Singh)

Delhi, with little effect as people flout new rules and authorities do little to crack down. The famed Himalayan pilgrimage to the Amarnath stalagmite housed in a cave atop a mountain has become well known for the trash left on the mountain trail.

But visitors and officials in Sabarimala say there is already a noticeable difference.

Pilgrims readily hand over their plastic bags and bottles, about 90 percent of which is recycled with the rest incinerated. District workers collected 1.2 tons of

plastic trash this year from busloads of visitors during the latest pilgrimage, which drew some 5 million people.

"There is a palpable change," says pilgrim Dinoj D., who has made the annual visit every year for the past 10 from his home in the neighboring state of Karnataka. "It was becoming the need of the hour for an anti-plastic drive here."

Still, there is room for improvement, and officials may start frisking pilgrims for plastic next year rather than relying on them to voluntarily give it up.

"We aim to extend the mission further,

to possibly also include fines, among other things," Pathanamthitta district magistrate S. Harikishore said. While acknowledging that people travelling for days need to carry and store things, he suggested they use cloth bags or reusable containers that are not thrown away.

The government has spent nearly \$18 million since November handing out cloth totes, setting up plastic trash receptacles, and printing leaflets for an awareness campaign, Harikishore said. Aiming to cut down on the 2 million or so plastic bottles usually left behind, officials have also set up a free water filtration depot for people to refill flasks.

Clean-up crews also collected one-third the amount of discarded clothing from rivers than what they picked up after last year's pilgrimage.

The Sabarimala shrine is dedicated to Lord Ayyappan, and is believed to mark the spot where the Hindu god meditated after killing a powerful demon. More temples sit atop other hills surrounding Sabarimala.

Seoul says North Korea has sent 1 million propaganda leaflets

By Hyung-Jin Kim
The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea has launched an estimated 1 million propaganda leaflets by balloon into South Korea amid increased tension between the rivals following the North's recent nuclear test, according to Seoul officials.

A Cold-War-style standoff has flared since North Korea's claim on January 6 that it tested a hydrogen bomb. South Korea resumed blasting anti-North propaganda broadcasts and K-pop songs from border loudspeakers. North Korea quickly responded by restarting its own border broadcasts and floating balloons over the border carrying anti-South leaflets, according to Seoul officials.

Seoul's Defense Ministry said the North's military has been sending the balloons on a near-daily basis. Spokesman Kim Min-seok said the leaflets have reached Seoul in addition to areas close to the border.

Such leafleting by the North is rare, as the

two Koreas officially stopped psychological warfare as part of tension-reduction measures in 2004. South Korean activists have still occasionally sent propaganda balloons toward North Korea, triggering angry responses from the North.

South Korean officials believe their broadcasts will sting in the rigidly controlled, authoritarian country by demoralizing frontline troops and residents. There are doubts in Seoul that the North Korean leaflets will have any impact on the public in more affluent South Korea.

Leaflets discovered at a South Korean border town contained cartoon images showing South Korean President Park Geun-hye wearing a bikini and falling headfirst into a slop bucket. The leaflets referred to her as "human filth." It is not the first time North Korea has lashed out at Park, the South's first female president, in a sexist or derogatory manner. It has previously referred to her as a prostitute.

Many foreign governments and analysts

remain highly skeptical about the H-bomb claim, but whatever the North detonated underground will likely push the country closer toward a fully functional nuclear arsenal, which it is still not thought to have. The North previously conducted atomic bomb tests in 2006, 2009, and 2013.

South Korea, the U.S., and other countries are pushing hard to get North Korea punished over the bomb test. Soon after the test, diplomats at a U.N. Security Council pledged to swiftly pursue new sanctions on the North. But it's unclear whether China, the North's last major ally and a veto-wielding permanent member of the Security Council, would cooperate on any tough sanctions that could force a change in the North.

The two Koreas share the world's most heavily fortified border since their war in the early 1950s ended with an armistice, not a peace treaty. About 28,500 American troops are deployed in South Korea as a deterrent against North Korea.

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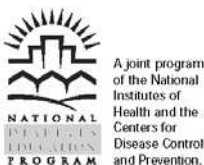
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