

Migrant boat sinks off Italy

130 killed; hundreds missing

Over 130 people drowned yesterday after a boat carrying up to 500 African asylum seekers caught fire and sank off Italian shores in one of the worst such disasters in the Mediterranean.

"There are 93 victims, including three children and two pregnant women," said Interior Minister Angelino Alfano, who flew to the remote island of Lampedusa near where the tragedy happened.

Rescue divers later said they had identified at least 40 more bodies in and around the sunken wreck at a depth of around 40 metres, just a few hundred metres from the shore.

There were fears that the final toll could rise further to 300 or more people since rescuers said that only 151 survivors had been plucked from the water more than 11 hours after the disaster.

"Seeing the bodies of the children was a tragedy. We have run out of coffins," said Pietro Bartolo, a doctor. "In many years of work here, I have never seen anything like this," he said.

Lampedusa is one of the main entry points into the European Union for asylum-seekers crossing from Africa or the eastern Mediterranean.

The UN estimates some 20,000 migrants have died at sea trying to reach Europe since the late 1990s, crossing on rickety fishing boats or dinghies.

Survivors said they were from Eritrea and Somalia and had left from the Libyan port of Misrata.

The migrants told rescuers they set fire to a blanket on the boat to attract the attention of coast guards after their vessel began taking on water and passing fishing boats ignored them.

The fire spread quickly, sowing panic on board which caused the boat to flip over and sink, as desperate passengers jumped into the water.

Visibly shaken survivors in thermal blankets -- many of them bare-chested -- were seen stepping on the dock as an emergency worker broke down in tears in images shown on Italian television.

The bodies were being taken to a hangar at the local airport because there was no more room in the local morgue on the remote island, which has a population of around 6,000 people.

Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta called the incident "an immense tragedy" and the government has declared a national day of mourning today.

Some 25,000 people have landed on Italian shores so far this year -- more than three times the number for the whole of 2012, although the figure for 2011 at the height of the Arab Spring revolts in North Africa was around 50,000.

In the last major disaster in June 2011, between 200 and 270 immigrants fleeing Libya are believed to have died off the coast of Tunisia.

Many of the arrivals have been on Lampedusa, which is closer to Tunisia than to Sicily. Most of them have been Eritreans, Somalis and Syrians.

Pope Francis, who visited Lampedusa in July to plead for more attention to the plight of refugees, called the disaster "shameful".



PHOTO: AFP

People take cover as gun shots were being heard at the US Capitol in Washington, DC, yesterday. Inset, police run to the scene where shots were reportedly fired. Police later said the shooting an isolated incident and denied any terror link to the incident which put the Capitol on security lockdown.

US shutdown continues as negotiations fail

AFP, Washington

The political crisis gripping Washington could trigger a "catastrophic" US debt default, the Treasury warned yesterday, as America limped into day three of a government shutdown.

Despite the looming danger to the US and world economies, there was no sign that either President Barack Obama or his Republican foes were ready to give ground.

"There's one way out of this reckless and damaging Republican shutdown. Congress has to pass a budget that funds our government with no partisan strings attached," Obama declared.

"Take a vote, stop this farce and end this shutdown right now," Obama said, in a fiery speech in the Washington DC suburbs.

At midnight on Monday the US federal government ran out of funding after Congress, divided between a Republican-led lower House and Democratic Senate, failed to pass a stop gap budget measure.

Hundreds of thousands of government workers have been sent home, federal agencies have halted all but the most critical operations, parks and monuments have

closed and scientific research is on hold.

Now, another threat looms, after Republicans warned that they would not approve an increase in the federal government's debt cap without receiving concessions in the budget debate.

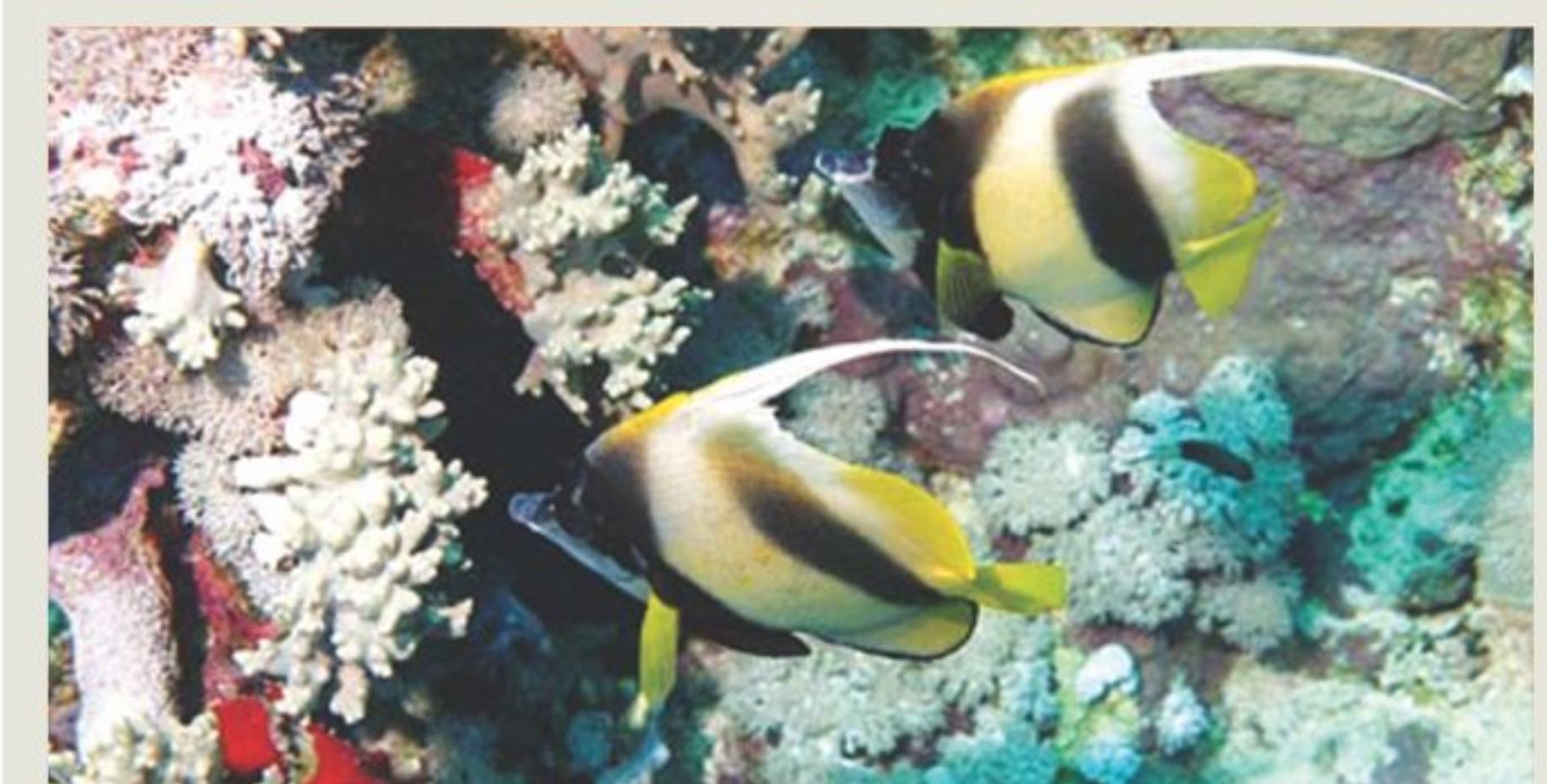
With the government likely to exhaust its cash reserves around October 17, the Treasury said being forced into non-payment of any of its obligations -- and in particular its debt -- would spark turmoil.

World financial markets would be rocked and the crisis could plunge the United States into deep recession, a Treasury report said.

Conservative Republicans want to dismantle or amend Obama's health care law as a condition for approving interim funding for the new fiscal year, which began Tuesday.

The president is refusing to tinker with the law, his signature health care reform widely known as "Obamacare" and there is no end to the crisis in sight.

Obama met with House Speaker John Boehner and Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell, the top Republicans in Congress on Wednesday, but there was no breakthrough.



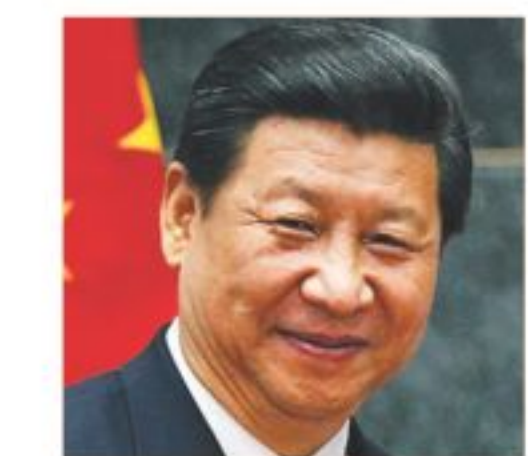
Ocean acidity at 300m years high

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

The oceans are more acidic now than they have been for at least 300m years, due to carbon dioxide emissions from burning fossil fuels, and a mass extinction of key species may already be almost inevitable as a result, leading marine scientists warned yesterday.

An international audit of the health of the oceans has found that overfishing and pollution are also contributing to the crisis, in a deadly combination of destructive forces that are imperilling marine life, on which billions of people depend for their nutrition and livelihood. In the starkest warning yet of the threat to ocean health, the International Programme on the State of the Ocean (IPSO) said: "This [acidification] is unprecedented in the Earth's known history. We are entering an unknown territory of marine ecosystem change, and exposing organisms to intolerable evolutionary pressure. The next mass extinction may have already begun."

It published its findings in the State of the Oceans report, collated every two years from global monitoring and other research studies.



Xi urges improved SE Asia ties

AFP, Jakarta

China's President Xi Jinping yesterday said his country's territorial disputes with Southeast Asia should be resolved in a "peaceful manner" as he tried to mend frayed ties with the region.

Making his first visit to Southeast Asia since taking power in March, Xi addressed the maritime disputes which critics say have been rekindled by Beijing's increasingly assertive claims to almost the entire South China Sea.

Xi told Indonesian lawmakers that China and the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) should settle territorial and maritime disputes "in a peaceful manner so as to safeguard regional stability and peace".

"Southeast Asia is one important hub of the maritime Silk Road. China is ready to increase maritime cooperation with ASEAN," he said.

China has overlapping territorial claims to parts of the sea with several other countries, and tensions have run particularly high with Vietnam and the Philippines.

Analysts said Xi's speech had a conciliatory tone aimed at repairing relations but offered little new of substance.

Li Mingjiang, China programme director at Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, said Xi's tone was one of openness.

"This shift is already taking place -- we haven't seen any aggressive patrolling in the South China Sea since Xi took the leadership," Li said.



US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, left, US Secretary of State John Kerry, 2nd left, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, centre, Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida 2nd right and Japanese Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera pose for photos at the prime minister's official residence in Tokyo yesterday. New US drones and a radar to defend against North Korean missiles will be deployed in Japan, senior politicians from both sides said yesterday as they met to rebalance their security alliance.

PHOTO: AFP

'Killer hornets' leave 42 dead in China

AFP, Beijing

Swarms of hornets have killed 42 people in northwestern China in recent months, state media said yesterday, as temperatures rise and development drives the stinging insects into cities.

The terrifying attacks started in July, the official Xinhua news agency said Thursday, with 1,640 people having been stung.

Of those, 206 are being treated in hospital, it quoted the National Health and Family Planning Commission as saying.

"With the development of air-conditioning, urban landscaping and residential environment, hornets have started to migrate and relocate to cities, which has increased the probability of their hurting people," Xinhua said in a report Wednesday.

It carried a photo of a doctor examining a hospitalised patient with several large and swollen sting wounds on the legs.

It also quoted Huang Rongyao -- a senior official concerned with pest control in the city of Ankang, which has borne the brunt of the attacks -- as attributing the phenomenon to warmer-than-usual temperatures in the region.

Hua Baozhen, a professor of entomology at Northwest Agriculture Forestry University, attributed the attacks mostly to a decrease in the number of the hornets' natural enemies, such as spiders and birds, due to ecological changes.

The Shaanxi Daily has said the attacks were centred on the cities of Ankang, Hanzhong and Shangluo.

Greek neo-Nazi leader detained

Faces charges for running criminal organisation

AFP, Athens

The leader of Greece's Golden Dawn party was taken to a high-security prison yesterday pending his trial on criminal charges for running criminal organisation, as part of a major government crackdown on the neo-Nazi group.

Nikos Michaloliakos is the first Greek party leader to be put behind bars in at least three decades. The 56-year-old faces at least 10 years in jail if convicted. No trial date has been set yet.

His detention is the most high-profile development yet in efforts by Greek authorities to dismantle Golden Dawn -- which has 18 members in the 300-seat parliament -- after last month's murder of an anti-fascist musician by a self-confessed neo-Nazi provoked national outrage.

Russia charges all 30 Greenpeace 'pirates'

AFP, Moscow

Russian investigators yesterday said they had charged all 30 crew members of Greenpeace's Arctic Sunrise ship with piracy over a protest against Arctic oil exploration, an offence that risks a lengthy prison term.

A court in the northern city of Murmansk last week detained the crew members for two months pending an investigation into their protest on an oil platform owned by energy giant Gazprom.

"All 30 participants in the criminal case have been charged over the attack on the Prirazlomnaya platform," the Investigative Committee said in a statement.

"They are all charged with... piracy committed by an organised group."

Piracy by an organised group carries a prison sentence of up to 15 years in Russia.

Investigators accused the activists of trying to seize property with threats of violence. The first 14 activists were charged on Wednesday and the rest were indicted yesterday.

Greenpeace denies the crew members -- who come from 18 different countries including Britain, Russia, New Zealand, Canada and France -- committed any crime.

"Our activists have been charged with a crime that did not happen," Greenpeace International executive director Kumi Naidoo said in a statement.

"A profound injustice is right now being perpetrated against our friends, our brothers and sisters, our sons and daughters who sit in Russian jails."

The September 18 protest saw several activists scale the oil platform in the Barents Sea to denounce Russia's plans to drill in the pristine Arctic.

MJ DEATH TRIAL

Jury finds promoter not liable for death

AFP, Los Angeles

A California jury on Wednesday dismissed a lawsuit brought by Michael Jackson's family seeking massive damages from tour promoter AEG Live over the pop legend's 2009 death.

At the climax of a five-month trial, the six man, six woman panel agreed that AEG Live hired doctor Conrad Murray, but found that he was not unfit or incompetent for the job he was hired to do, a key requirement for the Jackson lawsuit to have succeeded.

Jackson's 83-year-old mother Katherine alleged that AEG Live negligently hired and supervised Murray, seeking damages of more than a billion dollars for her and the icon's three children.

AEG Live lead lawyer Marvin Putnam welcomed the verdict, which came after the jury deliberated for three days.

"The jury's decision completely vindicates AEG Live, confirming what we have known from the start -- that, although Michael Jackson's death was a terrible tragedy, it was not a tragedy of AEG Live's making," he said in a statement.

Kevin Boyle, one of the Jackson family's lawyers, voiced disappointment at the verdict, and did not rule out an appeal.



ODDLY enough



10-year-old takes Zurich university maths class

AFP, Geneva

A 10-year-old boy who passed a Swiss final high school maths exam for fun is taking a special course in the subject at prestigious Zurich University, the institution said Wednesday.

Maximilian Janisch, whose father is a retired maths professor, is the youngest child to ever be allowed to follow such a course at the university, its president Michael Hengartner told AFP.

"He's a very intelligent child," Hengartner said, pointing out that the boy, whose parents are German, "understands a lot of concepts for his age".