

# 'They were killing each other'

## Desperate scenes as pressure grows to end 'maritime ping-pong' at sea

AGENCIES

A boat crammed with migrants was towed out to sea by the Thai navy and then held up by Malaysian vessels yesterday, the latest round of "maritime ping-pong" by Asian states determined not to let asylum seekers come ashore.

Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand have come under increasing pressure to rescue a wave of starving and helpless Rohingya and Bangladeshi migrants after triggering outrage by turning them back out to sea with scarce food and nowhere to go.

The International Organization for Migration has criticized Southeast Asian governments for playing "maritime ping-pong" with the migrants and endangering their lives.

Amid growing international criticism, Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak yesterday said he would seek help from Myanmar to address the unfolding "humanitarian catastrophe" involving the wave of boatpeople flooding to Southeast Asia, thousands of whom are ethnic Rohingya fleeing oppression in the mainly Buddhist country.

Najib said he told UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon the situation was "a humanitarian catastrophe."

Myanmar's cooperation is deemed vital to solving Southeast Asia's biggest influx of boatpeople since the end of the Vietnam War.

But its government -- which denies citizenship for Rohingyas -- has already

rejected a Thai call for a regional summit on the issue on May 29, saying it was not their problem.

The UN refugee agency has reported a surge in departures from Bay of Bengal ports in recent months.

Activists say 8,000 people may be adrift on overcrowded vessels, with starvation and disease claiming lives, after a Thai crackdown crimped busy human-trafficking routes and spurred smugglers to abandon men, women and children at sea.

In one of the grimmest episodes yet, survivors of a boat that sank off the east coast of Sumatra island -- among roughly 900 people rescued off Indonesia on Friday -- described a bloody struggle for survival between Bangladeshis and Rohingyas on board.

"They were killing each other, throwing people overboard," said Sunarya, police chief of the city of Langsa near where they were rescued.

The packed boat had put to sea two months ago but was deserted this week by captain and crew, survivors said.

It was then turned away, first by Indonesia and then Malaysia, as the Rohingyas won an onboard fight for the remaining food, said Bangladeshi survivor Muhammad Koyes.

"When we asked for food, they beat us. The Bangladeshis were very weak, so we could not fight back," he said.

Nearly 600 migrants were already sheltering in Sumatra's Aceh province after



managing to get ashore in recent days, while more than 1,100 had reached Malaysia.

The appalling scenes have triggered global calls, including by the UN chief and Washington, for Southeast Asia to open its ports to boatpeople.

The US State Department said John Kerry had phoned his Thai counterpart "to discuss the possibility of Thailand providing temporary shelter for them".

"We urge governments in the region to refrain from push-backs of new boat arrivals," State Department spokesman Jeff Rathke said, calling for immediate action "to save the lives of migrants."

The Bangladeshis are believed to be mainly economic migrants.

But Rohingyas have fled western Myanmar's Rakhine state in the thousands -- bound largely for Malaysia -- in recent years to escape sectarian violence and discrimination in Buddhist-majority Myanmar.

Each spring, boats stream out of the Bay of Bengal for Southeast Asia, trying to beat seasonal monsoon storms. Hundreds die every year, according to the UN refugee agency.

The flow has surged recently as traffickers dupe migrants by waiving payment for passage, according to Rohingya leaders in a refugee camp near Rakhine's capital, Sittwe.

Instead, they later demand ransoms from migrants' families once at sea, or ashore in Thailand or Malaysia. The trend has contributed to boats being kept at sea for weeks.

## WAR ON ISIS

# US commandos kill key leader in Syria

## Jihadists advance on Palmyra

AFP, Beirut

US special forces killed a senior Islamic State group leader in a raid in eastern Syria, the White House said yesterday, as jihadists closed in on Syria's ancient Palmyra and Ramadi in Iraq.

President Barack Obama ordered the raid on Al-Omar in east Syria on Friday night to capture senior ISIS leader Abu Sayyaf and his wife Umm Sayyaf, US officials said.

The bold operation, with elite commandos striking at IS's inner circle, was a rare use of "boots on the ground" by the United States, which has fought the jihadists almost entirely from the air.

Abu Sayyaf played a senior role in ISIS's lucrative oil and gas operations, and his wife -- suspected of being involved in "terrorist activities" -- was put under military detention in Iraq, Meehan said.

US Secretary of Defence Ash Carter said the operation was a "significant blow" to ISIS.

A young Yazidi woman who was apparently being held as a slave by the couple was also freed by US forces. US officials said the raid was "with the full consent" of Iraqi authorities.

In central Syria, the jihadists inched ever closer to the ancient majestic city of Palmyra, whose colonnaded streets and elaborate tombs have been under threat by an ISIS offensive since Wednesday.

The world heritage site lies at the gateway to Syria's vast desert, extending to ISIS-controlled territory in neighbouring Iraq. If Palmyra falls, ISIS would expand its control from Syria's east and north to the country's heartland.

Fearing a similar fate for Palmyra, known as the "pearl of the desert," UNESCO has called on the UN Security Council to act in order to save one of the Middle East's historic treasures.

Both Syria's opposition and regime have demanded that the renowned site not fall to the jihadists.

In neighbouring Iraq, ISIS fighters tightened their siege on the last government positions in Ramadi, west of Baghdad, a day after they seized the city's government headquarters.

## NEWS IN brief

### Burundi coup plotters appear in court

AFP, Bujumbura

Seventeen alleged coup plotters appeared before a prosecutor in Burundi yesterday, their lawyer said, the day after the failure of an attempt to overthrow the country's president. The group included General Cyrille Ndayirukiye and top police commissioners Zenon Ndbaneze and Hermenegilde Nimenya, who are accused of "attempting to overthrow the state", lawyer Anatole Miburo said. Coup leader Godefroid Niyombare, a general and ex-intelligence chief, was said to

### Shelling kills 8 children in Libya's Benghazi: UN

AFP, Tripoli

Shelling of residential areas of Libya's second city Benghazi killed at least eight children this week, the United Nations said, warning that such attacks may amount to war crimes. The UNSMIL mission to Libya, in a statement posted on its website, did not specify exactly when or where the children were killed nor indicate who may have been

### British aid helicopters turned back from Nepal

AFP, London

Three British Chinook helicopters sent to help with rescue efforts in Nepal following a devastating earthquake are to return without being used, the British government said yesterday. The Nepalese government has said the choppers are big enough to cause damage to already damaged structures in the country, which is reeling from two major earthquakes, leaving almost 8,500 people dead and leaving huge numbers with-

### Belmokhtar rejects ISIS allegiance pledge

AFP, Nouakchott

Algerian jihadist commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar distanced himself on Friday from a pledge of allegiance made by his jihadist group to the Islamic State organisation, Mauritanian media reported. Belmokhtar's north African Al-Murabitoun group was linked to al-Qaeda but a recording broadcast by Mauritanian news agency Al-Akhar on Thursday said it was aligning itself with the ISIS organisation and its

## Ukraine enacts laws to erase Soviet past

AFP, Kiev

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko on Friday enacted laws banning Soviet symbols and communist-era propaganda, his office said, after the measures drew strong Russian criticism when they were approved by parliament last month.

The measures come as Ukraine's pro-Western government seeks a complete break with its Soviet past and as its soldiers fight rebels in its east allegedly supported by Russia.

The laws "prohibit Soviet symbols, condemn the communist regime, open the Soviet special services archives" and officially recognise the role of a nationalist group that fought for Ukraine's independence in the mid-20th century.

Besides angering Russia, which has called the move "totalitarian," the measures rushed through parliament in April also exacerbated tensions with pro-Moscow rebels after lawmakers approved them.

The package of laws bans Soviet flags and means Soviet-era Lenin statues will have to be knocked down and town squares renamed across the country of 45 million people. The laws also ban Nazi propaganda in the ex-Soviet republic.

Penalties for violating the ban range from five to 10 years. The Ukrainian Insurgent Army recognised by the laws leaned towards German Nazis for a time before fighting them as well as the Soviet Union. They are often decried in Russia as "fascist" hardline nationalists.

## China rebukes US over island row



AFP, Beijing

China's foreign minister yesterday told top US diplomat John Kerry that Beijing was "unshakable" in its defence of sovereignty, as tensions between the powers mount over Chinese island-building in strategic but disputed waters.

The United States is weighing sending warships and surveillance aircraft within 12 nautical miles -- the normal territorial zone around natural land -- of artificial islands that Beijing is building in the South China Sea.

Such a move could lead to a standoff on the high seas in an area home to vital global shipping lanes and believed to be rich in oil and gas deposits.

Beijing regards almost the whole of the South China Sea as its own and after talks in the Chinese capital foreign minister Wang Yi said: "The determination of the Chinese side to safeguard our own sovereignty and territorial integrity is as firm as a rock and it is unshakable."

"It is the request of our people on our government as well as a legitimate right of ours," he added sternly at their joint press conference.

Kerry was less assertive in public, saying Washington was "concerned about the pace and scope of China's land reclamation" and urged it "to take actions that will join with everyone to reduce tensions".

The region needed "smart diplomacy", he said, rather than "outposts and military strips".

The world's top two economies have significant commercial ties and Chinese President Xi Jinping is due to pay a state visit to the United States in September.

But China's ambitions for a place on the world's political stage commensurate with its economic role have seen it cross the United States in multiple fields, and the two have long-running disputes over issues ranging from trade to cyberspying to human rights.

Beijing bases its territorial claims in the South China Sea on a segmented line dating back to Chinese maps of the 1940s.

## Girl suicide bomber, 12, kills 7 in Nigeria

AFP, Kano

A girl about 12 years old carried out a suicide attack at a bus station in north-eastern Nigeria yesterday, killing seven and injuring 31, witnesses said, shortly after officials revealed that Boko Haram Islamists had recaptured a strategic town in the region.

"A girl aged about 12 detonated an explosive under her clothes as she approached the station's perimeter fence," said Danbaba Nguru, a shopkeeper who witnessed the attack in the town of Damaturu.

The head of the local Sani Abacha hospital, doctor Gara Fika, said six bodies and 32 injured had arrived there with one person dying after being admitted.

The Damaturu bus station has been repeatedly targeted in a string of previous suicide attacks.

No claim of responsibility for the attack has been made but Islamist group Boko Haram has frequently used young girls to carry out suicide attacks.

The deputy governor in neighbouring Borno state, Mustapha Zannah, said Friday that he had seen a security report indicating that Boko Haram has recruited several suicide bombers to help counter a regional military operation against them.

And on Saturday Zannah announced the fall of Marte, located on a strategic trading route between Nigeria and neighbouring Cameroon and Chad, to the Islamists.

## Red Cross raises Nepal aid appeal to \$93m

AFP, Kathmandu

The Red Cross yesterday ramped up its appeal for aid to disaster-hit Nepal, requesting \$93 million in assistance after two earthquakes in less than three weeks killed nearly 8,500 and left thousands homeless.

Relief teams have been working for weeks to provide water, food, shelter and medical assistance after the first, 7.8-magnitude quake hit on April 25, flattening whole villages and leaving thousands without shelter with just weeks to go until the monsoon rains.

"We are still in full emergency mode -- the task at hand remains expanding our response while also adapting to meet emerging needs," said Elhadj As Sy, secretary general of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

"What we are doing, no matter how appreciated it is, it is not yet matching the scale and magnitude of the problem that we

face," Sy told reporters in Kathmandu.

The humanitarian agency revised its initial request for \$35 million after a second, 7.3-magnitude quake struck on Tuesday, triggering panic in Kathmandu and devastating remote villages in the country's mountainous northeastern region.

Tuesday's quake "exacerbated the situation that we found at the beginning... (with) areas which were not really affected becoming more affected," Sy told AFP in an interview.

"These kind of disasters, they leave also many invisible wounds. People are traumatised, people are scared, people are really shocked," he said.

Aid agencies have warned of a race against time to provide shelter and bring relief to victims before the approaching monsoon triggers landslides and blocks access to quake-hit villages located along the Himalayan nation's hills and mountains.

## Clashes kill dozens as ceasefire nears end

AFP, Sanaa

Fierce clashes between rebels and pro-government forces killed dozens across south Yemen yesterday, threatening to derail a humanitarian ceasefire drawn up to bring vital aid to the war-ravaged country.

The five-day truce initiated by a Saudi-led coalition that has bombarded the Iran-backed rebels for more than six weeks expires late Sunday, and Riyadh has already warned it was "ready to act" against any ceasefire violations.

In the latest violence, at least 12 civilians were killed and 51 wounded when the Shia Huthi rebels shelled several neighbourhoods in Yemen's third city Taiz.

The clashes came after overnight fighting killed 26 rebels and militiamen loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh as well as 14 pro-

government forces, military sources said.

The United Nations has expressed deep concern about the civilian death toll from the Saudi-led bombing as well as the humanitarian impact of an air and sea blockade imposed by the coalition.

It says more than 1,500 people have died in the conflict since late March.

The United Nations has called for the Saudi-led coalition to simplify import inspections after warning that supplies were still blocked.

The chaos in Yemen has been exploited by armed groups, including the country's branch of Al-Qaeda, which is viewed by the United States as the world's most dangerous.

A local official said 36 Yemen soldiers were kidnapped by suspected Al-Qaeda members overnight in the southern port of Mukalla.



A Nepalese mother and child participate in a "laughter yoga" session to help relieve trauma among survivors of two earthquakes which struck the country in less than three weeks, in Kathmandu, on Friday. Nearly 8,500 people have now been confirmed dead in the disaster. PHOTO: AFP



## Clintons earned at least \$30m since 2014

REUTERS, Washington

Hillary and Bill Clinton have earned at least \$30 million since January 2014, including more than \$25 million for delivering about 100 speeches, according to a government filing.

Hillary Clinton, the front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016, has earned more than \$5 million in royalties for her book, "Hard Choices," which was published in June, according to the form.

The Clintons' income puts them at the upper end of the top 0.1 percent of earners in the US population, according to government data.

Economic inequality has emerged as an early theme with candidates of both parties vying for the White House in November 2016.

The "one percent" has become a talking point in policy discussions about the divide between rich and poor, cited by politicians to support everything from increased Wall Street oversight to raising wages to overhauling the tax code.

Clinton announced her candidacy last month by saying "everyday Americans need a champion and I want to be that champion."