

MIGRANT CRISIS

Egypt seizes boats carrying 200 migrants
AFP, Cairo

The Egyptian navy has seized three fishing boats in the Mediterranean that were carrying 228 migrants trying to make their way to Europe, the military said yesterday. Seventeen crew members were arrested during the operation off the coast of second city Alexandria, the military said on its Facebook page. It did not disclose the identities of the migrants or of the crew.

Netanyahu says no to Syrian refugees
REUTERS, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday rejected a call by Israel's opposition leader to provide refuge to Syrian refugees, saying the country is too small to take them in. Though there have been no international calls on Israel to open its borders to Syrians, Isaac Herzog, head of the main opposition Zionist Union party, said Netanyahu had a moral duty to accept refugees.

Cyprus rescues 114 Syrians in fishing boat
AFP, Nicosia

Rescuers in Cyprus yesterday saved more than 100 refugees fleeing the war in Syria after their boat ran into trouble overnight off the Mediterranean island, authorities said. The 114 people, including 54 women and children, had been aboard a small fishing boat about 40 nautical miles from the southern Cypriot port of Lamaca at the time they struck trouble, said a source. The refugees had been headed for Greece, with some hoping to travel on to other parts of Europe, it added.



(From top, anti-clockwise) A migrant holds up a placard at a registration centre after arriving at the main railway station in Dortmund, Germany; a mother and her child cross the border line between Greece and Macedonia; migrants are welcomed by locals after their arrival at the main railway station in Frankfurt; and a woman wipes her eyes after her arrival in Dortmund, Germany yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

UK 'to take 15,000 Syrian refugees'

Merkel's green light to migrants splits Germany's ruling conservatives

AGENCIES

The British government is poised to accept 15,000 Syrian refugees and hopes next month to get backing for air strikes against Islamic State jihadists, the Sunday Times reported.

Prime Minister David Cameron has been under pressure internationally and domestically to address the refugee crisis. Cameron now intends to expand Britain's vulnerable persons relocation programme, take in around 15,000 refugees and launch military action against people traffickers, the report said.

He also hopes to persuade MPs in the opposition Labour Party to back air strikes in Syria in a vote early next month, it said. The paper previously reported that there was an option to directly accept refugees from UN camps on the Syrian border.

Britain has accepted 216 Syrian refugees under a special government scheme over the past year and around 5,000 Syrians have been granted asylum since the conflict there broke out in 2011 -- far fewer than countries like France, Germany and Sweden.

More than four million Syrians have fled the war. Meanwhile, Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision to allow thousands of migrants stranded in Hungary to enter Germany caused a rift in her conservative bloc on yesterday when her Bavarian allies accused her of giving "a totally wrong signal" to Europe.

The dispute broke out after Austria and Germany threw open their borders to thousands of exhausted migrants bussed to Hungary's border by a right-wing government overwhelmed by the sheer numbers and loath to take them in.

Germany expects a record influx of 800,000 migrants and refugees this year, by far the most in the European Union. More than 100,000 asylum seekers were registered in August alone.

A public opinion poll last week showed Merkel's popularity has dropped over her handling of the refugee crisis, but most Germans are not worried about the influx.

In France, a majority of people are against softening rules to access refugee status, a poll showed yesterday even as thousands poured to the streets to show their solidarity with migrants seeking asylum in Europe.

A poll conducted by Odoxa for Le Parisien-Aujourd'hui en France daily showed 55 percent of the 1,000 people surveyed were opposed to an easing of rules for migrants asking for refugee status, including Syrians fleeing civil war.

Discontent refugees clash with riot police on Greek island

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Police using riot batons have clashed with refugees on the Greek island of Lesbos, beating one unconscious and leaving several others injured.

A group of around 300 refugees protested yesterday morning against what they say is a failure by local authorities to process them quickly enough towards mainland Europe.

The demonstration largely involved Afghans, Syrians and Iraqis, who told reporters they had received no help from the Greek government and were running out of money.

One refugee was taken away in an ambulance after the clashes, which were the third such incident in as many days.

The Greek islands are at the centre of the growing refugee crisis, as one of the first land-

ing points for boats sailing over from Turkey. On Saturday, a newborn baby died as his parents arrived in a boat on the shores of the island of Agathonisi. The boy was taken to a hospital on the nearby island of Samos, where he was pronounced dead.

More than 13,000 people have been moved to the Greek mainland from the islands since last Monday, the country's coast-guard said, including a ferry of 2,500 on Saturday alone.

In Lesbos, the mayor of the island's main town demanded the government to more to address the situation.

"An island of 85,000 people has taken on the burden of a huge humanitarian crisis," Spyros Galinos said. "We are calling the people of Lesbos not to participate in the upcoming polls and we are clearly stating our intention not to set up ballot boxes, if there is no immediate action."



Migrants react during clashes with the police during a protest at the Lesbos Port yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Doubt grows over polls in Thailand

New constitution shot down, spelling prolonged military rule

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's junta-appointed reform council yesterday rejected a new constitution aimed at steering the country out of political turmoil, a move likely to extend the military's time in power and delay elections.

The rejection at a vote by the National Reform Council means the painstaking process of drafting a charter will now start again, potentially knocking back the timetable for elections which had been slated for mid-late 2016.

Of the 240 NRC members who voted, a majority of 135 were against the document, leaving 105 in favour.

The army seized power from an elected government in May last year.

Opponents of the charter said it was a blatant attempt to embed the military's political power for good and would prevent genuine democracy from taking root.

They pointed to "section 260" that allows the military to replace any elected government with an appointed 22-member "crisis" panel at any time in the five years after the charter is enacted if unrest or political deadlock, as they see it, requires it.

The panel would be stacked with military top brass and other unelected officials, effectively guaranteeing the military's grip on power.

'Take in a refugee family each'

Pope urges 'every parish, every religious community, every monastery, every sanctuary in Europe'

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Francis on Sunday called on every Catholic parish in Europe to take in a refugee family, saying the Vatican's two parishes would lead by example.

Calling for a "concrete gesture" ahead of a

Jubilee Year of Mercy starting in December, the pope urged "every parish, every religious community, every monastery, every sanctuary in Europe (to) take in a family."

"Faced with the tragedy of tens of thousands of asylum-seekers fleeing death (as) victims of war and hunger who are hoping to start a new life, the gospel calls on us and asks us to be the neighbour of the smallest and the most abandoned, to give them concrete hope," he said, giving the Angelus blessing in Saint Peter's Square in Rome.

It's not just about saying "have courage, be patient", Francis -- who has made poverty and

migration a key theme of his papacy -- told thousands of faithful gathered in the square. "Christian hope is more combative," he said, calling on "Europe's bishops, the true pastors to back my call in their dioceses."

The Vatican would lead the way, he said, announcing that its two parishes would take in two refugee families "in the coming days".

Drawing on a gospel story in which Jesus heals a deaf and mute man, the Argentinian-born pontiff said a miracle had also taken place in Europe, where "we have been healed of the deafness of selfishness and the silence of retreating into ourselves."

"The closed couple, the closed family, the closed group, the closed parish, the closed country, that comes from us, it has nothing to do with God," he stressed.



PHOTO: AFP

CAMPAIGN TO EXCLUDE MUSLIMS FROM POLLS

Hardline Myanmar monks claim victory

AFP, Mandalay

With a smile, Myanmar's most notorious Buddhist monk boasts of the sleepless nights he endures on his self-appointed quest against the country's Muslims -- one that the claims has helped strip voting rights from hundreds of thousands of the religious minority.

Wirathu, whose anti-Muslim campaign has stoked religious tensions in the Buddhist-majority nation, said he spends most nights at his tranquil Mandalay monastery glued to his computer screen, streaming images from some of the world's most violent Islamic terrorist organisations.

He then posts messages to his 91,000 Facebook followers, helping foment the idea that Buddhism is under threat.

"Many days I don't sleep at all," the monk, who goes by one name, told AFP, adding his work is so arduous that he lacks the time enjoyed by President Thein Sein and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi to "have family meals and put on make-up".

Recent years have seen bouts of deadly anti-Muslim violence and there are fears the spread of hate speech could trigger further troubles in the run-up to the nation's landmark November 8 election.

Wirathu claimed "victory" for pressuring government to push controversial laws through parliament -- which rights groups say discriminate against women and religious minorities -- and helping to snatch voting rights from hundreds of thousands of Muslim Rohingyas in strife-torn Rakhine state.

In March Myanmar revoked temporary identification documents -- a move affecting hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas, who have since been stripped of voting rights after parliament banned people without full citizenship from voting.

Observers say both Suu Kyi's opposition National League for Democracy and Myanmar's ruling party have bowed to the hardliners, declining to field Muslim candidates for polls seen as a crucial test of democratic progress.

A senior Muslim NLD member told AFP that "not a single Muslim" was among more than 1,000 party candidates for the upcoming elections -- the first it has fought for 25 years.

Suu Kyi "must be afraid" of the monks, the source said on condition of anonymity.



New air strikes rock Yemen capital

Coalition vows to press air war after rebel attack
AFP, Sanaa

Powerful explosions shook the Yemeni capital yesterday, witnesses said, after the Saudi-led coalition vowed to press its air war following a rebel missile strike that killed dozens of Gulf soldiers.

The United Arab Emirates had pledged to quickly avenge its heaviest ever military loss after 45 of its soldiers were killed in Friday's missile attack, along with 10 Saudis and five Bahrainis.

The latest coalition raids pounded positions of the rebels and renegade troops loyal to ousted president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was forced to resign in 2012 following a bloody uprising.

Coalition warplanes struck military bases on the Nahdain and Fajj Attan hills and the neighbouring presidential complex, south of Sanaa, as well as a headquarters for special forces.

Also targeted were Huthi positions in the northern neighbourhoods of Sufan and Al-Nahda, forcing scores of residents to flee, the witnesses said.

The UAE is part of the Arab coalition formed in March aimed at stopping the Iran-backed rebels from taking full control of Yemen and at restoring the rule of exiled President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi.



Smoke billows from buildings after reported air-strikes by the Saudi-led coalition on arms warehouses at al-Dailami air base, controlled by Yemeni Iran-backed Shia Huthi rebels and their allies, north of the capital Sanaa yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

RUSSIAN 'MILITARY BUILD-UP' IN SYRIA

US warns of 'escalation of conflict'

Putin admits supporting president Bashar al-Assad in civil war

AGENCIES

US Secretary of State John Kerry has expressed concern to Moscow over reports of Russian military build-up in Syria, the state department says.

US media reports said Russia has sent advisers and hardware to Syria, in what Washington fears is an expansion of its support for President Bashar al-Assad.

Any such development would "escalate the conflict", Kerry told his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov in a phone call, reports BBC.

"If such reports were accurate, these actions could further escalate the con-

flict, lead to greater loss of innocent life, increase refugee flows and risk confrontation with the anti-Islis coalition operating in Syria," the US State Department said, using an alternative acronym for Islamic State (ISIS).

Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin has given his biggest admission yet on the extent of Moscow's involvement in the Syrian civil war -- saying "serious" training and equipment are being provided to the Syrian army by Russia, reports Independent.

"[...] We are already giving Syria quite serious help with equipment and training soldiers, with our weapons," the state-owned RIA Novosti news

agency quoted Putin as saying at an economic forum in Vladivostok.

"We really want to create some kind of an international coalition to fight terrorism and extremism."

"To this end, we hold consultations with our American partners - I have personally spoken on the issue with US President Obama," the news agency reported him as saying.

He also did not rule out the possibility of direct military involvement in the region. The rumours have been fanned by videos released by Syrian state television appearing to show troops shouting in Russian and a Russian armoured vehicle.

New poll shows UK would vote to leave EU

AFP, London

A new opinion poll published yesterday showed more Britons want to leave the European Union than want to stay ahead of a referendum to be held by 2017. The poll is the first to put the EU exit camp in the lead.

Forty-three percent of respondents said they would vote to leave, 40 percent would vote to stay and 17 percent are still undecided, according to the poll by Survation research agency for the right-wing Mail on Sunday newspaper.

The survey, which was conducted online on September 3 and 4 and had 1,004 respondents, had a margin of error of two percentage points.

Yesterday's poll also showed that 22 percent of those who wanted Britain to stay said they could change their mind if the migrants crisis worsened. Twenty-nine percent of respondents also told the pollsters that Britain should not accept any more Syrian refugees.

British lawmakers in the House of Commons are expected today to debate and vote on a draft bill to allow the referendum, which will then pass to the House of Lords for final approval.

Prime Minister David Cameron has said he will campaign to stay in the European Union only as long as he can negotiate a series of EU reforms intended to restore more sovereignty powers to Britain.