

New boat tragedy kills 17 migrants

AFP, Ankara

Seventeen Syrian refugees drowned yesterday when their boat sank in Turkish waters on its way to Greece, local media reported, while the Italian coastguard said it had rescued some 500 migrants in the Mediterranean this weekend.

The bodies of the dead Syrians -- including five children -- were discovered by the Turkish coastguard inside the cabin of their wooden boat, which had set off from the holiday resort town of Bodrum for the Greek island of Leros, the Dogan news agency reported.

Another 20 migrants, who were on the boat's deck and had been wearing life jackets, survived and swam back to the Turkish coast, Dogan said. They were taken to a morgue in Bodrum to identify their drowned relatives.

Among the dead was a three-year-old boy named Yusuf, who was identified by his grief-stricken Syrian father, state news agency Anatolia said.

The tragedy came as the Italian coastguard launched seven operations in the Mediterranean over the weekend, plucking some 500 migrants from the water.

On Saturday the German navy frigate Werra and a boat run by medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF) rescued 140 people from a giant dinghy, according to an AFP photographer.

The migrants -- who had set sail from Libya three days earlier -- mainly came from the west African countries of Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal and Sierra Leone. They were rescued about 80 kilometres off the Libyan coast.



A man walks along the shore, as refugees and migrants arrive to the Greek island of Lesbos, after crossing the Aegean Sea from Turkey, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN brief

'ISIS fighters' attack Afghan police posts

AFP, Jalalabad

Self-proclaimed fighters from the Islamic State group have for the first time launched coordinated attacks on police checkpoints in an eastern Afghan province, officials said yesterday. The raids on eight to 10 police posts began early yesterday, Haji Ghalib, governor of Achin district in Nangarhar province, told AFP, giving no casualty figures. They came a day after a UN report warned that ISIS was making inroads in Afghanistan.

'30,000 foreign fighters went to Syria, Iraq'

AFP, New York

US intelligence fears nearly 30,000 foreign fighters have traveled to Iraq and Syria since 2011, many of them to join the Islamic State group, The New York Times reported Saturday. The number, which reportedly includes many westerners including perhaps 250 Americans, represents a doubling of last year's US assessment and will dismay US war planners.

Pope wraps up historic US tour

AFP, Philadelphia

Pope Francis wrapped up a six-day historic tour of the United States yesterday, having electrified Americans with a message of respecting immigrants, protecting the environment and sharing wealth. The 10th overseas tour of the pope began in Cuba, where he urged the country to continue down the path of reconciliation.

Nepal imposes vehicle curbs on fuel fears

AFP, Birgunj

Nepal yesterday imposed nationwide restrictions on vehicle use due to growing fears of a fuel shortage, as protesters seeking changes to a new constitution vowed to keep blocking a major border trade route. Drivers are allowed on the roads only on alternate days, depending on whether their licence plates end in odd or even numbers, to try to counter the effect of the blockade imposed on the India-Nepal border since Thursday night.

Clashes rock Jerusalem mosque compound

AFP, Jerusalem

Clashes erupted between Palestinians and Israeli security forces at Jerusalem's flashpoint Al-Aqsa mosque compound yesterday, with further trouble feared in the week ahead as Jews celebrate the Sukkot holiday. After brief clashes yesterday, the last day of the Muslim Eid al-Adha holiday, Palestinian protesters prepared "to defend" the mosque during the eight-day Jewish festival, stocking stones inside the shrine and planning to sleep in it.

Witnesses blame Saudi officials

AFP, Mina

Witnesses to a stampede that left 769 people dead at the hajj in Saudi Arabia blamed Saudi authorities and said they were afraid to continue the rituals.

The worst tragedy in 25 years at the

and the interior ministry said it deployed 100,000 police to secure the hajj, maintain safety and manage traffic and crowds.

One outspoken critic of redevelopment at the holy sites said despite the large numbers, police were not properly trained and lacked the language

Thursday's tragedy occurred outside the five-storey Jamarat Bridge, which was erected in the last decade at a cost of more than \$1 billion and intended to improve safety.

Almost one kilometre (less than a mile) long, the Jamarat Bridge allows 300,000 pilgrims an hour to carry out



Iranian protesters shout slogans during a demonstration against Saudi Arabia outside its embassy in Tehran on September 27, 2015, four days after some Iranian pilgrims were killed in a stampede at the hajj.

PHOTO: AFP

annual Muslim pilgrimage occurred during the symbolic stoning of the devil at Mina, just outside the holy city of Mecca.

Scores of people were also hurt, spurring King Salman to order "a revision" of hajj organisation while authorities started a probe into the disaster.

One minister blamed the pilgrims for the tragedy, but worshippers disagreed.

"There was crowding. The police had closed all entrances and exits to the pilgrims' camp, leaving only one," said Ahmed Abu Bakr, a 45-year-old Libyan who escaped the stampede with his mother.

"I saw dead bodies in front of me and injuries and suffocation. We removed the victims with the police."

He added that police at the scene appeared inexperienced.

"They don't even know the roads and the places around here," he said as others nodded in agreement.

Pilgrims in Mina stay in a complex of white fireproof tents big enough to hold more than two million people,

skills for communicating with foreign pilgrims, who make up the majority of those on the hajj.

"They don't have a clue how to engage with these people," said Irfan al-Alawi, co-founder of the Mecca-based Islamic Heritage Research Foundation.

"There's no crowd control," Alawi said.

Another witness, 39-year-old Egyptian Mohammed Hasan, voiced worries that a similar incident "could happen again".

"You just find soldiers gathered in one place doing nothing," he said.

He also alleged that he had been insulted because of his nationality, when security men asked him to "come identify this Egyptian corpse".

"Why are they humiliating us like this? We are coming as pilgrims asking for nothing," Hasan said angrily, urging the security forces to "organise the roads" to ensure the smooth movement of people.

Even before Thursday's stoning tragedy, other pilgrims had complained of a lack of organisation.

the ritual, in which they throw pebbles against walls.

Interior ministry spokesman General Mansur al-Turki said the stampede was caused when "a large number of pilgrims were in motion at the same time" at an intersection of two streets in Mina.

"The great heat and fatigue of the pilgrims contributed to the large number of victims," he said.

And one Saudi minister blamed the pilgrims for the tragedy, saying they had not followed hajj rules.

But in the view of an Egyptian worshipper who identified himself only by his first name Ahmed, "the fault is not on the pilgrims".

"Saudi Arabia is spending a lot on hajj but there is no organisation," he said, complaining that the flow of people into and out of the tent camp needed to be better managed.

"They could make one road for those going and another for those returning," Ahmed said.

"If one policeman would stand at the start of every road and organise the pilgrims, none of this would happen."

Hajj tragedy was beyond human control

Says top Saudi cleric

AFP, Mina

Saudi Arabia's top religious leader says a stampede which killed 769 pilgrims was beyond human control, official media reported on Saturday, the final day of this year's hajj.

The stampede was the worst disaster in a quarter-century to strike the annual event and drew fierce criticism of the Saudi authorities' handling of safety, particularly from regional rival Iran.

"You are not responsible for what happened", Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh told Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef in a meeting in Mina on Friday, the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA) reported.

"As for the things that humans cannot control, you are not blamed for them. Fate and destiny are inevitable," Sheikh told the prince, who is also minister of interior. Mohammed also chairs the Saudi hajj committee. King Salman, whose official title is "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" in Makkah and Medina, also ordered "a revision" of how the hajj is organised.

A STAMPEDE SURVIVOR'S TALE 'I was pinned down'

AFP, Makkah

Hamza Musa Kabir from Kano in northern Nigeria survived the massive stampede at the hajj by shedding his pilgrim's garment after he was pinned under a man in the crush, which killed 769 people.

Reflecting on the shocking events that unfolded on Thursday in Saudi Arabia, the 55-year-old tall, thin trader told his dramatic story to AFP's Kano correspondent Aminu Abubakar, who also performed the pilgrimage:

"We set off at sunrise from Muzdalifah and marched towards the Jamarat," the place in Mina where pilgrims ritually stone the devil, Kabir recounted.

"We were more than halfway through the procession when the road was blocked by the police, which led to buildup (of pilgrims).

"Then the police blocked all the roads, leaving us with only one route. The situation became worse when the police allowed people returning from the Jamarat to use the same route back to their tents" where the pilgrims stay.

"From where I stood, I could see a police officer on a raised platform at a nearby control post beckoning at pilgrims returning that they should move on.

"Because those returning were moving in the opposite (direction) of the surging crowd, there was a stampede.

"People became weak from suffocation and heat. People couldn't breathe (in the crush). Many collapsed, mostly women and the old and disabled on wheelchairs.

"I also was pinned down by this huge man I believe to be an Asian. I had to strip myself of my shroud which had become an obstacle to my escape.

In an act of desperation, Kabir grabbed the man's testicles "and squeezed them which made him jump off me.

"This enabled me to use my other hand to reach for the metal bar of the fence, and grab it. I then pulled myself up with the help of another young Arab man who was standing on the fence," reaching safety inside one of the camps where Kabir then passed out.

Still, he is not too frightened to return.

"I know I will not die until the appointed hour.... Hajj is very important to my faith, and no obstacles will discourage me from seizing another opportunity to come back."



Saudi emergency personnel stand near bodies of Hajj pilgrims at the site where at least 717 were killed and hundreds wounded in a stampede in Mina, near the holy city of Mecca, at the annual hajj in Saudi Arabia on September 24, 2015.

PHOTO: AFP

CATALONIA VOTE Nationalist parties on course to win, show exit polls

BBC ONLINE

Exit polls in the Spanish region of Catalonia suggest pro-independence parties have won yesterday's elections.

The main separatist alliance "Junts per Si" (Together for Yes) is set to win 63-66 of the 135 seats, according to the poll for local broadcaster TV3.

The far-left separatist CUP looks set to secure 11-13 seats, the poll said.

Before the vote, "Junts per Si" and the CUP said a majority would allow them to declare independence from Spain unilaterally within 18 months.

The central government in Madrid has pledged to block such moves in court.

The pro-independence parties have said they consider yesterday's vote a de facto referendum on independence from Spain.

They argue that the Spanish government has consistently refused to allow a legally recognised referendum to take place, ignoring an unofficial vote backing independence in November 2014.

Opinion polls suggest a majority of

Catalans favour a referendum on independence but are evenly divided over whether they want to secede.

Polling stations in the wealthy north-eastern province opened at 07:00 GMT and closed at 18:00 GMT.

More than five million people were eligible to vote.

The ruling Convergencia party of Catalan leader Artur Mas and the Esquerra Republicana party put up a single list of candidates under the "Together for Yes" banner.

The anti-independence vote in Catalonia is split between a number of groups, including Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's Popular Party.

The centre-right government in Madrid has described any breakaway plans as "a nonsense".

Rajoy argues that the democratic approach would be for all of the country to vote in a referendum on Catalonia's future because the loss of Catalonia would affect all of Spain.

'Super blood moon' today

For the first time in decades, skygazers are in for the double spectacle today of a swollen "supermoon" bathed in the blood-red light of a total eclipse.

The celestial show, visible from the Americas, Europe, Africa, west Asia and the east Pacific, will be the result of the Sun, Earth and a larger-than-life, extra-bright Moon lining up for just over an hour from 02:11 GMT.

"It will be quite exciting and especially dramatic," predicted astronomer Sam Lindsay of the Royal Astronomical Society in London.

"It'll be brighter than usual, bigger than usual."

The Moon will be at its closest orbital point to Earth, called perigee, while also in its brightest phase.

The resulting "supermoon" will look 30 percent brighter and 14 times larger than when at apogee, the farthest point -- which is about 49,800 kilometres (31,000 miles) from perigee.

Unusually, our planet will take position in a straight line between the Moon and the Sun, blotting out the direct sunlight that usually makes our satellite glow whitish-yellow.

But some light will still creep around Earth's edges and be filtered through its atmosphere, casting an eerie red light that creates the "blood moon".

For people younger than 33, this will be their first-ever chance to see a "super blood moon".

The last, only the fifth recorded since 1900, was in 1982, according to the NASA space agency, and the next will not be until 2033.

AFP, Paris



France carries out first air strikes on ISIS in Syria

Leaders seek political solution to Syria crisis

AFP, Paris

France carried out its first air strikes against the Islamic State group in Syria yesterday, as Russia said it was seeking a "coordinated framework" to fight the jihadists.

President Francois Hollande said six French warplanes were involved in the operation to strike an ISIS training camp near the eastern city of Deir Ezzor, and that more air strikes could follow in the coming weeks.

The action came on the eve of the UN General Assembly in New York where Syria is back in the spotlight after four years of a brutal war that has sent hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing to Europe.

President Vladimir Putin is set to unveil a plan to resolve the conflict today after boosting Russia's military presence in Syria and taking a leading role in pushing for a political solution.

Iraq said it had agreed with Russia, Iran and Syria to set up a unit in Baghdad to share intelligence on ISIS.

While Russia's deployment of troops and

warplanes to Syria appears to have signalled a shift on the ground, winds are also changing on the diplomatic front as leaders scramble to find a political solution.

World leaders who previously refused to embark on a political process unless Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was out of the picture, appear to be changing their stance.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a fierce critic of Assad, suggested for the first time Thursday that Assad could have a role to play in a political transition.

And in a sign the European position on Assad may also be softening, German Chancellor Angela Merkel suggested he could be part of discussions to end the bloodshed.

Washington refuses to accept a peace process that would leave Assad in power and so has backed and armed small "moderate" rebel groups. But that strategy appeared in tatters after the Pentagon admitted the latest US-trained fighters to cross into Syria had given a quarter of their equipment to al-Qaeda.