

Tear gas fired at Macedonia border

Germany lashes out at EU states for abandoning Greece

AFP, Idomeni

Macedonian police fired tear gas at hundreds of Iraqi and Syrian migrants who tried to break through the country's border fence with Greece yesterday, an AFP journalist at the scene said.

The group of around 300 migrants, including women and children, forced their way past a Greek police cordon onto a rail track and tore down a barbed wire fence into Macedonia.

"Open the borders!" they shouted, some throwing stones at the fence, prompting police to fire volleys of teargas which prevented them from crossing.

At least 30 people requested the first aid after the incident, including many children, aid group Doctors of the World said.

The angry protest took place several hours after Macedonia allowed just 300 Syrians and Iraqis to cross before resealing the frontier, keeping thousands of others out.

By yesterday morning, Greek police said more than 7,000 people were massed at the border, in a buildup triggered by Austria and Balkan states capping the numbers of

migrants entering their territory.

"Over 7,000 people are at Idomeni, nearly half of them women and children," Vicky Markolefa, a Doctors of the World representative, told AFP. She said the number was four times the capacity of camps set up by aid groups on the border to shelter people waiting to cross.

As the bottleneck showed little sign of easing, German Chancellor Angel Merkel lashed out at a raft of restrictions imposed by Austria and the Balkan states, saying they risked plunging debt-ridden Greece into refugee chaos.

"We can't just abandon this country," she said in an interview late on Sunday, pointing the finger at Austria, whose introduction of restrictions on February 19 triggered a domino effect.

"When one insists on his border, the other suffers. That's not my Europe."

The spate of border closures was sparked by Austria's announcement it would accept no more than 80 asylum claims per day and cap the numbers of those seeking to cross its territory, in a move Merkel said was responsible for the current buildup.



Stranded refugees and migrants try to bring down part of the border fence during a protest at the Greek-Macedonian border, near the Greek village of Idomeni, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Pakistan goes on alert

Hangs Islamist for killing blasphemy reform governor

AFP, Rawalpindi

Pakistan yesterday hanged the man who killed a provincial governor for seeking reform of the blasphemy law, angering Islamist supporters who had feted Mumtaz Qadri as a hero and threatened violence if he was executed.

Security was stepped up at flashpoints across the country including the garrison city of Rawalpindi where hundreds of supporters gathered at Qadri's family home, as officials braced for protests from hardliners.

Qadri, a police bodyguard to Salman Taseer, shot the liberal Punjab governor 28 times at an Islamabad market in 2011.

He said he was angry at the politician's calls to reform the blasphemy law.

Blasphemy is a hugely sensitive issue in the Islamic republic of some 200 million, and Qadri was hailed as a hero by many conservatives eager to drown out calls to soften the legislation.

Critics, including European governments, say the law -- which carries the death penalty -- is largely misused, with hundreds languishing in jails under false charges.

Analyst Hasan Askari said the next 24 hours would be "sensitive" for the government, adding that Islamabad had weighed the danger of mass violence against the need to "wash away the suspicion" of sympathy for militancy.

"Qadri was hanged in Adiala jail early Monday morning" in Rawalpindi, senior local police official Sajjid Gondal told AFP.

Mosques near Qadri's family home in Rawalpindi broadcast the news, with cries heard from inside the house.

Concern over truce violations

Says Nato as task force to meet to shore up fragile ceasefire

AGENCIES

Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg expressed concern over reports of violations of a three-day-old ceasefire in Syria yesterday and urged all parties to respect the truce.

"We have seen encouraging signs that the ceasefire is largely holding, but at the same time we have seen some reports about violations," Stoltenberg told a press conference in Kuwait City.

"Of course, that is of concern because it is important that all sides should respect the agreement," which is the best way to renew efforts for a political solution to the devastating five-year conflict, he said.

Stoltenberg said Nato was also concerned about Russia's military build-up in Syria, where it has carried out a five-month bombing campaign in support of

President Bashar al-Assad.

The Nato chief said Russian air strikes had "mainly targeted" non-jihadist rebels rather than the Islamic State group, which has been targeted by a US-led coalition.

SYRIA 'CESSATION OF HOSTILITIES'

Truce brings sharp fall in daily death toll: monitor

UN delivers aid in besieged area

Ceasefire holding 'by and large' despite 'incidents': UN chief

He said the Western alliance had no plans to send ground troops to Syria as part of the campaign against the jihadists.

An international task force was to meet late yesterday in a bid to shore up Syria's fragile ceasefire, as the United Nations scrambled to deliver aid to thousands of besieged civilians.

French Foreign Minister Jean-

Marc Ayrault said yesterday that the allegations "must all of course be verified," but that his government "would be vigilant about (the truce's) concrete application."

UN chief Ban Ki-moon said there been some incidents but the ceasefire was generally holding. "As of now I can tell you that by and large the cessation of hostilities is holding even though we have experienced some incidents," he told reporters in Geneva.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said yesterday the death toll in areas of Syria outside jihadist control has fallen sharply since a ceasefire went into effect at the weekend.

The United Nations yesterday delivered aid to thousands of besieged civilians in Syria.

The UN estimates more than 480,000 Syrians live in areas besieged by government forces, rebels or jihadists.

IRAN ELECTIONS

Hardliners lose seats on top clerical body

AFP, Tehran

Iranian hardliners suffered another election setback yesterday with two leading conservatives ejected from the top clerical body, handing another victory to moderate President Hassan Rouhani whose reformist allies made gains.

The public's rejection of ayatollahs Mohammad Yazdi and Mohammad Taghi Mesbah-Yazdi when picking the powerful Assembly of Experts came as final results were also awaited for parliamentary polls after voting on Friday.

The reformist camp which allied with Rouhani in the elections staged a comeback, especially in the capital where preliminary results Sunday showed them taking all 30 seats at the expense of conservatives.

Campaigning under its "List of

Hope", a slate of reformist candidates supporting the president and his government after its recent nuclear deal with world powers secured strong backing and will regain significant power in parliament.

Reformists stayed away from parliamentary elections four years ago, in protest at hardline president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's disputed re-election in 2009, which its defeated candidates said was rigged.

The unanimous sweep in Tehran propelled the reformists forward but results from other cities were split, with conservatives losing seats but retaining high numbers in provinces.

According to partial results from 274 out of parliament's 290 seats, the main conservative list will have 100 MPs, reformists and moderates from the List of Hope 94, and Independents 11.

TWIN BOMB ATTACKS

Shabab kills 30 in Somalia

AFP, Mogadishu

At least 30 people have been killed in twin bomb attacks claimed by Shebab Islamists at a busy restaurant in the Somali city of Baidoa, the regional governor said yesterday.

"The official number of the dead has reached 30 people -- all of them civilians -- and 61 others have been wounded, 15 of them seriously," Abdurashid Abdulahi, governor of Bay region, told AFP.

An initial car bomb struck a popular restaurant in a busy part of the regional capital on Sunday afternoon, with a suicide bomber nearby hitting people as they fled the area.

"The explosion occurred in a densely populated area," said Abdurhaman Ibrahim, a police officer in Baidoa.

Another policeman, Abdi Hared, said there were "twin blasts" from a car bomb and a suicide bomber.

The explosions shredded the roofs of nearby buildings, tore chunks out of vehicles and left bodies, plastic chairs and tables strewn across the road.

The al-Qaeda aligned Shebab jihadists claimed responsibility for the attacks, saying local officials were targeted.

"The mujahideen carried out two massive explosions in Baidoa targeting restaurants used by members of the apostate South West Administration," the Shebab said in a statement.



Otto Frederick Warmbier, a University of Virginia student who has been detained in North Korea since early January, bows during a news conference in Pyongyang, North Korea, in this photo released by Kyodo yesterday. Warmbier was detained for trying to steal a propaganda slogan from his Pyongyang hotel and has confessed to "severe crimes" against the state, the North's official media said.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Respect S China Sea dispute arbitration

Philippines tells China

REUTERS, Manila

The Philippines yesterday urged China to respect a forthcoming ruling by an arbitration court in The Hague on a territorial dispute in the South China Sea after Beijing accused Manila of "political provocation".

China claims almost the entire South China Sea, believed to have huge deposits of oil and gas. It refuses to recognise the case lodged by the Philippines with the tribunal and says all disputes should be resolved through bilateral talks.

"The Philippines, as well as the international community, is asking China to respect the forthcoming ruling of the arbitral tribunal and together advance an international rules-based regime," Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario said in a statement in Manila.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei repeated yesterday that China would not participate in the

case. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, on a visit to the United States last week, accused the Philippines of "political provocation" in seeking arbitration to resolve the dispute.

Wang held talks last week with his counterpart, US Secretary of State John Kerry, who said China was rapidly militarising the waterway after building artificial islands and deploying fighters and missiles.

Wang defended China's actions as self-defence but said it would remain open for two-way talks with countries claiming the South China Sea.

The Philippines and Japan, which has its own territorial dispute with China in the East China Sea, yesterday signed a military agreement allowing the transfer of aircraft and equipment to the Philippines.

Japan is ready to lease at least five TC-90 King Air planes to the Philippines as a training aircraft for surveillance and reconnaissance, a military official said.

PRESIDENT SELECTION

Myanmar MPs to speed up process

AFP, Naypyidaw

Myanmar MPs yesterday said parliament is expected to speed up the process of selecting a new president, who will serve as a proxy for newly-elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi, as political tensions mount.

Lawmakers and the powerful military were due to put forward their nominations for presidential candidates -- a role barred to Suu Kyi by the constitution -- by March 17, but a parliamentary schedule for today indicates the legislature is poised to make a last minute alteration.

"There will be date amendment in tomorrow's [today] parliament meeting. It is likely that it will announce the nomination a week earlier than planned," said a member of parliament for Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), speaking on condition of anonymity.

Other parliament sources told AFP the date was expected to be brought forward.

Observers have said the date for the presidential nomination had been set as late as possible to allow Suu Kyi time to negotiate with the army over the constitution, but talks do not appear to have led to any breakthroughs.

'This is Najib's party'

Mahathir quits Malaysia's ruling UMNO, protesting corruption

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Former Malaysian premier Mahathir Mohamad yesterday quit the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party, saying it is being seen as "supporting corruption" under Prime Minister Najib Razak's leadership.

Mahathir, Malaysia's longest-serving leader, remains an influential figure and has become the fiercest critic of Najib, who is facing pressure over a graft scandal surrounding state fund 1Malaysia Development Berhad.

"I won't call it UMNO anymore, this is Najib's party. I feel embarrassed that I am associated with a party that is seen as supporting corruption - it had caused me to feel ashamed," Mahathir told reporters.

Najib's office had no immediate comment. Communications Minister Salleh Said Keruak said in a blog that if Mahathir wants to continue to attack UMNO "then he should do so outside UMNO".

Ibrahim Suffian from Merdeka Center, an independent opinion polling firm, said Mahathir's exit will have limited short-term

impact on UMNO.

"But in the longer term, he may create problems by taking his stage to the larger Malaysian electorate," he said.

The 90-year-old Mahathir, premier from 1981 to 2003, said he would not set up a new party or join another party.

But he said he would set up a "core group" to work on removing the prime minister,



adding that with opposition parties, "we only agree on one thing, that is to get rid of Najib."

The prime minister has a comfortable majority in parliament. His greatest threat comes from within UMNO, if members decide he cannot lead the party to victory in elections that are due by 2018.

Internal strife has damaged UMNO, the leader of the country's ruling coalition since Malaysia's formation in 1957.

NEWSIN brief

Suicide bombing in Baghdad kills 14

REUTERS, Baghdad

At least 14 people were killed when a bomber detonated his explosive vest at a funeral for a Shia Muslim militia fighter in the eastern province of Diyala, security and medical sources said yesterday. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack in Muqaddiyah, 80 km north-east of the capital.

10 schoolchildren stabbed in China

AFP, Beijing

A knife-wielding assailant hacked at children in a Chinese schoolyard yesterday, wounding 10 before killing himself, police and reports said. Pupils were lining up to go home at the end of the morning session when the man struck, slashing at several children before fleeing, the state-run China News Service cited a witness as saying.

Nanny held for Moscow child 'beheading'

AFP, Moscow

Russian police yesterday arrested a nanny for beheading a young girl in her care, investigators said, with local media reporting she was arrested while carrying the child's severed head. The Investigative Committee said the body of a child aged three or four years with "signs of violent death" had been found in an apartment in northwest Moscow after a fire was extinguished there.

Car bomb blast kills four in Aden

AFP, Aden

A suicide car bombing killed four people yesterday when it hit a gathering of loyalist forces in Yemen's Aden, the southern city serving as a government base, a security official said. Five others were wounded in the attack in the residential Sheikh Othman district. The suicide bomber rammed his explosives-laden vehicle into an area where security forces and pro-government militiamen had assembled.

HK activists on trial over 'Occupy' protests

AFP, Hong Kong

Three pro-democracy activists went on trial in Hong Kong yesterday over charges relating to mass rallies in 2014, with the movement's student leader accusing the government of "unreasonable" prosecution. Joshua Wong 19, was the teenage face of the Occupy Movement, which brought parts of the semi-autonomous Chinese city to a standstill for more than two months.