

# 'Illegal migration to Europe over'

## Declares EU as it plans harsh deal with Turkey; UN, rights groups slam plan; migrants defiant

AGENCIES

The EU and Turkey yesterday said they have agreed the broad principles of a plan to ease the migration crisis in Europe which has been broadly slammed by UN and rights agencies as 'dehumanizing'.

Under the plan discussed in Brussels, all migrants arriving in Greece from Turkey would be returned.

For each Syrian sent back, a Syrian already in Turkey would be resettled in the EU. Turkey would also get extra funding and progress on EU integration.

However, the deal has not been finalised and talks will continue ahead of an EU meeting on 17-18 March.

Europe is facing its biggest refugee crisis since World War Two. Last year, more than a million people entered the EU illegally by boat, mainly going from Turkey to Greece. Most of them were Syrian, fleeing the country's four-year civil war. Another 2.7 million Syrian refugees are currently in Turkey.

European Council President Donald Tusk insisted the leaders at the summit had made a "breakthrough", and he was



A child sits in a cardboard box next to his mother at a makeshift camp near the Greek Macedonian borders, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

hopeful of concluding the deal in the next week.

He said the progress sent "a very clear message that the days of irregular migration to Europe are over".

However, German Chancellor Angela Merkel was more circumspect, saying: "It is a breakthrough if it becomes reality."

The hope is that the plan will eliminate incentives for migrants to come to Greece by boat, but it ran into swift opposition from the head of the UN refugee agency Filippo Grandi.

"I'm deeply concerned about any arrangement that would involve the blanket return of anyone from one country to another without spelling out the refugee protection safeguards under international law," he told the European Parliament.

Rights group Amnesty International said EU and Turkish leaders had "sunk to a new low" and ridiculed the notion that Turkey was a "safe country" to which migrants could return.

Iverna McGowan, the head of Amnesty's European Institutions Office, said "the idea of bartering refugees" was "dangerously dehumanising."

But despite heavy rain and the harsh deal that could close the Balkans route, migrants in Greece did not dampen their resolve.

"We will stay here even if we all die," said Kadriya Jasem, a 25-year-old from Aleppo in Syria among at least 13,000 people living in squalor in makeshift camp in Idomeni, a village on the Greek side of the border with Macedonia.

She held a four-month-old baby in her arms who she said needed a doctor. "Please open the border, if only for the children," she said.

But securing a deal next week may still be difficult given the deep divisions that the migration crisis has sown in the 28-member EU bloc.

Hungary's anti-migration PM Viktor Orban has already indicated he may veto any resettlement deal.

More problematic is Turkey's request for visa-free access for all its citizens to the EU's Schengen zone, which it hopes to achieve by June. This may draw a lot of opposition.

### WHAT'S IN THE PROPOSAL?

All new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands will be returned to Turkey, with the EU meeting the costs. The term "illegal migration" usually refers to people smuggling.

In exchange for every returned Syrian, one Syrian from Turkey will be resettled in the EU.

Plans to ease access to the EU for Turkish citizens will be speeded up, with a view to allowing visa-free travel by June 2016. Preparations will be made for a decision on the opening of new chapters in talks on EU membership for Turkey.

EU payment of €3bn (\$3.3bn) promised in October will be speeded up, and a decision will be made on additional funding to help Turkey with the crisis. Turkey reportedly asked for EU aid to be increased to €6bn.

# Netanyahu declines to meet Obama

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's cancellation of a proposed meeting with US President Barack Obama put more strain on their troubled ties yesterday just before a visit to Israel by Vice President Joe Biden.

The White House said on Monday it was "surprised" to learn first from Israeli media that Netanyahu had decided against coming to a conference of the pro-Israel lobby AIPAC in Washington on March 20, and the suggestion in some reports that among his reasons was Obama's unavailability to see him.

The Israeli premier's office defended the decision by saying Netanyahu did not want to interfere in US presidential primary elections currently taking place.

It was the latest episode in a fraught relationship between the right-wing Israeli leader and Democratic US president that has yet to recover from deep differences over last year's US-led international nuclear deal with Israel's foe Iran.

With violence surging for the past five months, US officials have said no peace breakthrough is expected during Biden's visit.

In Jerusalem yesterday, a 50-year-old Palestinian woman who tried to stab Israeli police officers was shot dead, a police spokeswoman said. Since October, Palestinian stabbings, shootings and car ramming have killed 28 Israelis and an American. Israeli forces have killed at least 174 Palestinians, 116 of whom Israel says were assailants. Most others were shot dead during violent protests.

In 2012, Netanyahu hosted then-Republican contender Mitt Romney in Israel in what many Democrats saw as a bid to undercut Obama's second-term run. Israel denied meddling.



# Bloomberg says will not run for White House

AFP, New York

US billionaire Michael Bloomberg announced Monday that he would not throw his hat into the volatile race for the White House, fearing that his candidacy could lead to the election of Republican usurpers Donald Trump or Ted Cruz.

The 74-year-old former New York mayor has long considered an independent run for the White House, expressing public dismay about a 2016 race dominated by the insult-flinging Trump, the current Republican frontrunner.

Bloomberg, whose \$41.7 billion fortune makes him the eighth richest person in the world according to Forbes, accused fellow New York tycoon Trump of waging "the most divisive and demagogic presidential campaign I can remember."

He savaged Trump's call for a ban on Muslims entering the United States, threatened deportation of millions of Mexicans and threatened trade wars against China and Japan as "all dangerously wrong."

Bloomberg stopped short of endorsing any candidate. A pragmatist rather than an ideologue, Bloomberg was a Democrat before turning Republican in 2001 and then switched his affiliation to independent in 2007. He is less known nationally than on the East Coast.

# China, S Korea step up sanctions on N Korea

AGENCIES

China has barred a North Korean freighter from one of its ports and South Korea announced a crackdown on individuals and companies linked to Pyongyang's weapons programme, stepping up sanctions against the isolated state.

North Korean general cargo ship Grand Karo arrived at Rizhao port in northeastern China a few days ago, but the port did not allow the ship to berth, said a person at the Rizhao Maritime Authority, declining to be identified because he was not authorised to speak to the media.

The ship is among 31 vessels blacklisted by China's Ministry of Transport after they were covered by harsher sanctions on North Korea that were approved by the UN Security Council last week.

South Korea also accused North Korea of hacking the smartphones of government officials, and unveiled new sanctions on Pyongyang over its recent nuclear test and long-range rocket launch.

The National Intelligence Service (NIS) --

the South's spy agency -- said the North had stolen phone numbers and texts from the phones of dozens of key officials between late February and early March.

North Korean hackers also sent phishing emails to employees of two provincial railway operators in an attempt to steal passwords that could have allowed a cyber-attack on rail traffic control systems, the agency said in a statement. Seoul has blamed North Korean hackers for a series of past cyber-attacks on military institutions, banks, government agencies, TV broadcasters and media websites as well as a nuclear power plant.

The NIS revelations came as Seoul unveiled a series of fresh unilateral sanctions against Pyongyang and asked citizens to boycott North Korean restaurants abroad. The new measures blacklisted scores of North Korean individuals and entities and banned any vessels previously docked in North Korean ports from South Korean waters.

They follow tough sanctions adopted by the UN Security Council last week and are likely to prompt an angry response from Pyongyang.

# Treason case Pak court summons Musharraf

PTI, Islamabad

A Pakistani court yesterday asked former military dictator Pervez Musharraf to appear before it on March 31 for the hearing of treason case against him after the ex-President did not turn up citing bad health.

The three-member special court ordered Musharraf to attend the hearing on March 31 in person and respond to the charges against him in the treason case launched in 2013 for imposing emergency in 2007 when he was president.

High treason is punishable with death if proved. Musharraf has pleaded non-guilty.

He is not allowed to leave the country under an order by the court.

# Tehran conducts new missile tests

AFP, Tehran

Iran conducted multiple ballistic missile tests yesterday in an exercise to demonstrate "deterrent power," a move that comes in defiance of US sanctions imposed over its missile programme in January.

The announcement by the official IRNA news agency said the tests showed the country's "all-out readiness to confront threats" against its territorial integrity.

State television a short time after showed still images of the armaments used in what it described as a military drill in which "ballistic missiles were fired from silos" in different parts of the country.

The United States imposed new sanctions over Iran's missile programme in January almost immediately after separate sanctions related to Iran's nuclear activities had been lifted under a landmark deal with world powers.

The latest tests, called "The Power of Velayat", a reference to the religious doctrine of the Islamic republic's leadership, were undertaken by the Revolutionary Guards and Aerospace Forces, IRNA reported.

The tests come less than two weeks after elections in Iran delivered gains to politicians aligned with Hassan Rouhani, the country's moderate president.

The Revolutionary Guards report to Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, not Rouhani, and their influence dwarfs that of the army and other armed forces.

# NEWS IN brief

## 21 militants killed in new Pak offensive

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday said it has killed 21 militants in airstrikes and ground operations that began overnight in a north-west border region where it is carrying out an offensive to clear Taliban strongholds. The strikes began Monday night and continued into the next day, a military official said. Pakistan began its operation to clear Taliban and Al-Qaeda strongholds in North Waziristan in 2014, and claims to have killed more than 3,750 militants since then with no civilian casualties.

## Homemade bomb kills two in West Bengal

AFP, Kolkata

Two people were killed yesterday when the crude bombs they were making exploded in India's West Bengal, a senior local police officer said. One person was also injured in the blasts which occurred in a village in Murshidabad district. The state is due to hold local elections next month. No arrests have been made so far.

## Rajiv Gandhi killer granted 1-day parole

TNN, New Delhi

The Madras high court yesterday granted one-day parole to Nalini Sriharan, convicted in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case. Nalini had applied for three-day parole to attend the 16th day obsequies of her father Sankaranarayanan, who died last month. The 16th day obsequies are scheduled to be held at Kottur on Wednesday, Nalini had submitted in her petition.



A crying woman falls on her knees as relatives of passengers onboard of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 which went missing in 2014, burn incense sticks and pray at Lama Temple in Beijing, China, yesterday. Investigators probing what happened to the flight said the cause of the plane's disappearance remained a mystery as the second anniversary passed with devastated next-of-kin still grasping for answers.



INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and his Greek counterpart Alexis Tsipras (L) present roses to women journalists because of the International Women's Day yesterday as they meet in the Aegean port city of Izmir, western Turkey, in this handout photo provided by the Prime Minister's Press Office. PHOTO: REUTERS

# Quake-hit Nepal turns to bamboo

REUTERS, London

Nepal is turning to bamboo, nicknamed "vegetable steel", as it rebuilds homes and schools after last year's devastating earthquakes which left hundreds of thousands homeless.

"Bamboo is a great material. The biggest enemy (in a quake) is weight so bamboo is perfect because it is light, flexible and very strong," said Nepalese architect Nripal Adhikary.

"It can be as strong as steel, but it's much more ecological because it doesn't need energy to produce. People call it 'vegetable steel'."

Twin earthquakes in April and May 2015 killed almost 9,000 people and destroyed nearly a million buildings in the Himalayan nation. Donors have pledged \$4.1 billion for reconstruction, but rebuilding has been delayed by a political crisis.

Kathmandu, said the government had recently approved the use of bamboo to rebuild schools and was expected to approve its use for reconstructing homes.

Bamboo is ideal for rebuilding in Nepal's mountainous terrain because it grows widely and is easier to transport than heavier materials, said Adhikary, Nepal's national coordinator for the International Network for Bamboo and Rattan (INBAR).

Building with bamboo is also about 50 percent cheaper than with other materials. Technological advances have improved its durability, he added, while new systems for joining bamboo lengths mean it can be used to build larger span structures than in the past.

INBAR is working with Nepal's government and other organisations on a \$800,000 pilot project using bamboo to build 150 homes and 10 schools which they hope other agencies will replicate.



# DEADLY US AIR STRIKE IN SOMALIA

## Al Shabab disputes numbers 'martyred'

AFP, Mogadishu

Somalia's Shabab insurgents yesterday said that "several" fighters had been killed in a US air strike on their training camp, but disputed Washington's claims that 150 were killed.

"The enemy fired several missiles during the evening and there are several martyred mujahedeen members", said senior Shabab commander Sheik Ibrahim Abu-Ahmed, but he added that the US military's toll was "completely false."

While the US military regularly conducts operations targeting the al-Qaeda-linked fighters in Somalia, Saturday's raid had a higher toll than all previous such US strikes combined.

Warplanes and unmanned drones were used in the strike, about 120 miles (195 kilometres) north of Mogadishu.

The Shebab, which responded to Saturday's strike by rounding up and arresting locals, according to witnesses, said it would not be cowed by the strikes.

# Malaysia foiled IS plot to 'kidnap prime minister'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Malaysia foiled a plot by the so-called Islamic State to kidnap government leaders including the country's Prime Minister, it has been revealed.

Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, the country's Deputy Prime Minister, said jihadists attempted to kidnap him and two other Malaysian officials - including the Prime Minister Najib Razak and the defence minister, Hishammuddin Hussein.

He added that Malaysia's anti-terrorism unit, who stopped the plot, also managed to prevent attempts to create chaos in Kedah, Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya.

"On Jan. 30, 2015, a total of 13 people with ties to Daesh [ISIS] had planned to kidnap the leaders, including the prime minister, home minister and defence minister," Mr Hamidi said.

that police had foiled four attacks planned by Isis in Malaysia. In one incident, in September 2014, there was a plan by the group to test improvised explosive devices in the northwest state of Kedah. "They also wanted to destroy the Free Mason Lodge in Bukit Jalil".

He added: "Although there is no proper Daesh (ISIS) establishment in the country, those who were here were being influenced and have been receiving orders from the network in Syria."

"We detected plans to attack several locations in Kedah, Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya, attempt to rob of firearms from army camps, making of explosions, robbing cash-in-transit vans as well as plot to kidnap the country's leaders for ransom."

Last week the Prime Minister of Malaysia vowed to fight extremism and terrorism in southeast Asia where officials said Isis have been working to co-opt local terror groups.

