

Migrant influx continues

Turkish officials in Greece to help implement deal

REUTERS, Lesbos
Turkish officials arrived on the Greek island of Lesbos yesterday to help implement a deal with the European Union to tackle a migrant crisis that has tested European cohesion to its limits.

The day after the formal start of an agreement intended to close off the main route through which a million refugees and migrants arrived in Europe last year, authorities said 1,662 people had arrived on Greek islands by 7 am yesterday, twice the official count of the day before.



Just after 4:30 am, one coastguard vessel rescued 54 refugees and migrants from the open sea and brought them to the port, some of the 698 arrivals counted in Lesbos.

They staggered down the ramp, women and children first, one elderly man bundled up in blankets.

"Where are we going?" asked one Syrian woman who was travelling with her husband and daughter.

The arrivals were directed to a coastguard bus that would drive them to the Moria "hot spot", a centre where new arrivals are being registered and their asylum applications processed.

"We are very tired. I want to go to my family in Sweden," said Ahmet Bayraktar, a 32-year-old unemployed accountant from Aleppo, Syria. "We'll try, God willing."

Like others, he was unaware of the accord, which means new arrivals will now be kept in confinement while their asylum bids are fast-tracked. If their applications fail, they will be sent back to Turkey.

"We don't know about this," Bayraktar said. "We're coming directly from Syria. Everybody wants to go to the border. We don't have the news, we don't have electricity, we don't have anything."

Two hours later, just as the sun rose above the Aegean Sea, the same coastguard vessel pulled another 44 people from the water, many of them escaping conflict in Congo and Sierra Leone. One woman cradled a baby just a few months old.



Chinese President Xi Jinping shakes hands with Nepal Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli inside the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Regime pressured on transition

Talks open second week; Russia says delay on ceasefire enforcement unacceptable

AFP, Geneva
Peace talks to end the war in Syria entered their second week yesterday, with Damascus under UN pressure to meet a looming target date for making a concrete proposal on political transition.

United Nations mediator Staffan de Mistura says that before negotiations are paused on Thursday he wants the Syrian regime to set down on paper its vision for a new government for leading the country out of five years of brutal conflict.

De Mistura has praised the main opposition High Negotiations Committee for submitting "substantive" ideas on political transition, but noted that through several meetings last week, the government side's focus was limited to procedural issues and broad principles.

Through the weekend, when no formal meetings were held in Geneva, the regime blasted de Mistura for taking sides, saying he had exceeded his mandate by pressuring the government and claiming the talks achieved nothing since resuming on March 14.

Meanwhile, Assad-ally Russia yesterday accused the United States of stalling on the enforcement of the truce and not committing to mechanisms for

responding to violations.

Washington supports the HNC and some opposition forces fighting on the ground in the conflict that has killed more than 270,000 people and displaced millions.

In a statement, Russian lieutenant general Sergei Rudskoy said that, given the US feet-dragging, Moscow was ready to unilaterally resort to force against ceasefire violators as of today.

The truce has broadly held since being declared last month and allowed life-saving aid to reach tens of thousands of Syrians stranded in besieged areas.

The ceasefire does not include the Islamic State group (IS) and al-Qaeda linked Al-Nusra Front, who continue to be targeted in Russian air strikes and government offensives.

At least 26 pro-government fighters were killed battling the Islamic State group near Palmyra yesterday as Damascus stepped up a bid to recapture the ancient city, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Negotiations were rattled last week by Russia's surprise decision to withdraw most of its troops from Syria, a move that diplomats and experts said could help the peace drive by weakening Assad's position and forcing him to negotiate.

SYRIA CONFLICT

Nepal inks transit treaty with China

PTI, Beijing

China agreed yesterday to a request of Nepal Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli to build a strategic railway link between the two countries through Tibet to reduce his land-locked country's total dependence on India. The day also saw the two sides cementing their ties by signing 10 agreements, including a landmark transit trade deal.

Oli, who arrived here on Sunday on his maiden seven-day visit to China, was given a red carpet welcome by Premier Li Keqiang at the Great Hall of the People. He also called on Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Oli's high-profile visit comes as Nepal seeks to open more supply routes from China amid fears of a repeat of recent nearly six-month-long crippling blockade when the Indian-origin Madhesis blocked Nepal's trade routes with India, throwing normal life out of gear.

During the talks, the two Prime Ministers made a comprehensive review of bilateral relations and expressed satisfaction over the steadily growing relations between the two countries.

During his talks with Li, Oli mooted the extension of China's strategic railway link with Tibet further to Nepal. Briefing the media after the Li-Oli talks, Hou Yanqi, deputy head of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, said: "Nepal Prime Minister wanted to explore two rail lines."

"The two sides exchanged substantive views on further strengthening and consolidating mutual trust and understanding as well as promoting mutually beneficial cooperation in various fields," according to a press release issued by the Nepalese Foreign Ministry.

Trade diversification, cross-border connectivity and infrastructure development, cooperation on energy, tourism, finance, education and culture were among the matters that figured prominently during the talks, it said.

NEWSIN brief

N Korea 'fires short-range missiles'

AFP, Seoul

North Korea yesterday fired five short-range missiles into the sea off its east coast - the latest in a series of launches ordered by leader Kim Jong-Un amid rising military tensions. They came just days after the North test-fired two medium-range missiles in what the UN Security Council described as an "unacceptable" violation of UN resolutions.

China columnist 'detained by police'

BBC ONLINE

A lawyer for prominent Chinese columnist Jia Jia, who went missing last week, has confirmed he has been detained by Beijing police. Yan Xin said police had told him that Jia was taken away at the airport last week, before boarding a flight to Hong Kong. Jia is said to be linked to a letter calling for the resignation of Chinese President Xi Jinping, published on a state-linked site earlier this month.

Ukrainian pilot faces Russian verdict

REUTERS, Donetsk

A Russian judge yesterday said Ukrainian pilot Nadezhda Savchenko was complicit in the killing of two Russian journalists, an assertion certain to inflame already dire relations between Moscow and Kiev. Savchenko, 34, was captured by pro-Moscow rebels in eastern Ukraine in June 2014 during the separatist conflict there and handed over to Russia.

Jihadist attack kills six soldiers in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

At least six soldiers were killed yesterday in an attack in western Iraq claimed by the Islamic State group that began with five suicide bombers ramming explosives-laden vehicles into a checkpoint, officials said. Several foreigners were among the bombers, including a Frenchman, according to a statement by IS which said its fighters carried out the attack.

Pakistan guard shoots boy in mask

BBC ONLINE

A security guard in the Pakistani city of Karachi has shot dead an 11-year-old boy wearing a monster mask, police say. The boy had sneaked up on the guard in an attempt to scare him, and the guard responded by opening fire. The boy was taken to hospital, but died of his injuries. The guard has been arrested.

US watching Iran 'like a hawk'

Biden says on nuke deal

AFP, Washington

US Vice President Joe Biden warned Sunday that the United States is watching Iran "like a hawk" to ensure compliance with the landmark nuclear deal.

Tehran and six world powers, including the United States, agreed to the deal in July when Iran promised to scale down its nuclear activities in return for the lifting of painful UN and Western sanctions, including on its lifeblood oil exports.

"The incentives are aligned for Iran to uphold its side of the deal. We're watching Tehran like a hawk," Biden said.

"Under this deal, Iran would never be allowed to pursue nuclear weapons, never, never, never," he told the annual policy conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) lobby group.

"If Iran violates the deal, the United States will act," Biden pledged. A key provision allows the sanctions to be restored or "snap-back" immediately if Iran is found in breach of the agreement.

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had accused Washington of failing to respect the terms of the deal, in a speech marking Persian New Year.

The United States has lifted sanctions "on paper" under the deal which came into effect in January, "but they are using roundabout paths to prevent the Islamic republic from achieving its targets," Khamenei said Sunday.



Israeli soldiers argue with Palestinian villagers at the entrance of the torched house of Palestinian Ibrahim Dawabsheh, the main witness in the July arson attack, in the West Bank village of Duma near Nablus yesterday. The UN expert on human rights in the occupied Palestinian territories voiced scathing criticism of Israel as he stepped down over what he said was a lack of access to areas he was meant to monitor.

Indian city bans gatherings

AFP, New Delhi

Authorities in western India have banned groups of people from gathering near water sources in a drought-ridden city following violent skirmishes between increasingly desperate residents, officials said yesterday.

Dnyaneshwar Chavan, the police chief of Latur, in Maharashtra state, said no more than five people were allowed at wells and public storage tanks at any one time over growing fears of water riots.

"There have been incidents of violence," Chavan told AFP. Latur, about 400 kilometres east of Mumbai, lies deep in the heart of India's arid central belt and its half-a-million residents are reeling from years of below-par monsoon rains.

Latur is part of Maharashtra's drought-hit Marathwada region. Several

media reports say thousands of people, mostly poor farmers, have left the area recently because of water scarcity.

Last year around 1,400 farmers committed suicide in the region over crop failure from a lack of water and an inability to meet loan payments.

And officials fear the worst this year as most of Marathwada's lakes and reservoirs lie empty months before the annual monsoon is expected to arrive.

"The reservoir has completely dried up. We are trying to get water from other sources to cater to the demand," local official Pandurang Pole told AFP.

He said water was only being supplied to households through main taps once a month, and that some of the 200 water tankers sent to make up the shortfall had been looted.



WATER RIOT FEARS

PARIS ATTACKS 'Accomplice' of suspect named

AFP, Brussels

Belgian prosecutors yesterday said they had discovered the real identity of an accomplice in the Paris attacks, as they met with French counterparts to discuss the probe into November's carnage.

The accomplice was named as Najim Laachraoui, 24 - previously known by the false name Soufiane Kayal which he used to travel to Hungary in September with Saleh Abdeslam, the key suspect who was finally arrested in a dramatic raid on Friday.

Laachraoui, who also travelled to Syria in February 2013, is still on the run.

French President Francois Hollande, who has said he wants Abdeslam extradited as quickly as possible, was due to hold his first formal meeting with relatives of the 130 Paris victims yesterday afternoon.

Investigators hope Abdeslam's arrest in Brussels on Friday, in which he was wounded in the leg, will give new leads on the attacks claimed by the Islamic State jihadist group.

RALLY VIOLENCE Trump defends 'spirited' campaign chief

AFP, Washington

Donald Trump defended Sunday his campaign manager, who appeared to grab a protester at a rally for the Republican presidential frontrunner that was again marred by demonstrations and sporadic violence.

It is just the latest controversial turn in the real-estate mogul's unconventional run for the White House, but it appears to have done little harm so far to his presidential ambitions and he is in pole position for the Republican nomination for November's election.

On Saturday afternoon anti-Trump protesters blocked a road near Phoenix and in the evening there was more unrest at a Trump rally in

Tucson. Among the incidents, cameras caught a member of the crowd repeatedly kicking and punching a protester and video also showed Trump's campaign manager Corey Lewandowski caught up in a melee.

Lewandowski appeared to grab one man by the scruff of the neck, with a member of Trump's security detail also involved in the fracas.

"No, he didn't touch him, that was someone else pulling him (the man) back," Trump, a reality television star who has never held elected office, told the ABC News program "This Week."

"I give him credit for having spirit. He wanted them to take down those horrible profanity-laced signs,"

