

Migrant crisis is 'global challenge'

Say G7 leaders

AFP, Ise-shima

The refugee crisis gripping Europe is a problem that the whole world must deal with, G7 leaders said yesterday, as it called for beefed-up efforts to tackle the root causes of mass migration.

Last year, some 1.3 million refugees, mostly from conflict-torn Syria and Iraq, asked for asylum in the European Union -- more than a third of them in Germany -- stretching resources and aggravating popular resentment in some countries.

The mass movement has provided fuel for Europe's far right parties and populist politicians, who has called for a clampdown on immigration.

So far this year, the International Organisation for Migration says an estimated 190,000 migrants and refugees have entered Europe by sea, arriving in Italy, Greece, Cyprus and Spain. More than 1,300 are known to have died en route.

"With the number of refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and vulnerable migrants at its highest level since the Second World War, the G7 recognises the ongoing large scale movements of migrants and refugees as a global challenge which requires a global response," it said in a communique at the end of a two-day summit in Japan.

"We place the highest priority on humanely and effectively managing this challenge, addressing both the humanitarian consequences and the root causes of massive displacement."

The G7 -- the United States, Japan, Germany, Britain, France, Italy and Canada -- said it would kick in more money to help the problem.

It gave no global figure, but German leader Angela Merkel told reporters the G7 had decided to dedicate its attention this year "especially to Iraq" -- one of the chief sources of migrants-- and would provide 3.6 billion euros (\$4 billion) to the country.



(From left, clockwise) A Syrian civil defence volunteer carries the body of a child following a reported attack yesterday by Syrian government forces in the Tariq al-Bab neighbourhood in the northern city of Aleppo; Iraqi civilians who fled their homes due to the clashes in Falluja, gather on the outskirts of Falluja; and armed men in uniform identified by Syrian Democratic forces as US special operations ride in the back of a pickup truck in the village of Fatisah in the northern Syrian province of Raqa on Wednesday.



PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

DOUBLE OFFENSIVE AGAINST IS IN SYRIA, IRAQ

Warplanes pummel 'IS capital'

US special forces seen aiding rebels; executions, starvation drive exodus in Falluja

AGENCIES

Warplanes from the US-led coalition have pounded the Islamic State group with at least 150 strikes to bolster a major offensive on the jihadists' Syrian stronghold of Raqa, a monitor said yesterday.

The US is backing twin assaults against IS -- one in Raqa province and another which aims to retake the Iraqi city of Fallujah across the border.

A Kurdish-Arab alliance is being supported by coalition air raids as well as US forces on the ground in its push for territory north of Raqa city -- IS's de facto Syrian capital.

Turkey on Friday said it was "unacceptable" that US troops had been seen near Raqa wearing insignia of Kurdish militia who belong to the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and who Ankara regards as a terror group.

The coalition has been providing air support to the SDF with 150 strikes on IS positions since the assault began Tuesday, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a British-based monitor. "There has been a serious intensification of air strikes," Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman said.

SDF forces have pushed forward from Ain Issa, less than 60 kilometres (40 miles) north of Raqa city,

into the surrounding farmland and small villages.

The fighting and bombardment has left 31 IS fighters dead so far, Abdel Rahman said. The number of SDF casualties was unclear.

Near the front line, an AFP photographer on Wednesday saw US soldiers supporting SDF forces, who say they have advanced seven kilometres from Ain Issa.

The twin offensives come as world powers try to salvage a shaky ceasefire between the regime

DEVELOPMENTS

150 US-led air strikes reported near Raqa

Turkey slams US for backing Kurdish militia

100,000 trapped as IS advances near Turkish border

and non-jihadist rebels agreed in February to boost efforts to end a conflict that has killed more than 280,000 people.

The estimated 300,000 people still living in Raqa city are becoming increasingly desperate to flee. According to anti-IS activist group Raqa is Being Slaughtered Silently (RBSS), residents were paying smugglers \$400 each to try to escape.

IS swept through rebel territory in Aleppo province Friday in a shock advance, cutting off tens of thousands of internally displaced Syrians living in informal camps near the closed Turkish border.

Pablo Marco, regional operations manager for Doctors Without Borders (MSF), said the group was "terribly concerned... about the estimated 100,000 people trapped between the Turkish border and active front lines."

In Iraq, pro-government forces have advanced towards bridges leading to IS-held Fallujah, said Staff Lieutenant General Abdulwahab al-Saadi, head of the Fallujah Liberation Operations Command.

IS fighters were using "car bomb and suicide (bombers) and sniper detachments" to resist the advance. About 50,000 civilians are estimated to be trapped inside the city, and only 800 had been able to escape, according to the UN's refugee agency.

Spokeswoman Melissa Fleming said the UN had received reports that people including women and children had been killed trying to flee. "There have been reports of a dramatic increase in the number of executions of men and older boys in Fallujah refusing to fight on behalf of extremist forces," Fleming said.

Fallujah, which lies only 50 kilometres west of Baghdad,

'Extremist govt'

Another minister quits Israel cabinet

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu suffered his second cabinet resignation in a week yesterday when a minister quit over the appointment of a hardline nationalist in the "extremist government".

Environment minister Avi Gabbay announced his resignation in a strongly worded statement that accused Netanyahu of putting the country on a path to ruin.

Gabbay said that he was "unable to swallow" Netanyahu's decision to take the defence portfolio from former general Moshe Yaalon and hand it to Avigdor Lieberman, who has pledged harsh measures against Palestinian "terrorists".

Yaalon resigned from the government a week ago in protest, warning of a rising tide of extremism in the party and the country as a whole.

"I could not accept the removal of Yaalon, a professional and thoughtful defence minister," Gabbay said.

"The country of course has the right to have a government of the right or left," he added. "But I do not think it is right... to form an extremist government."

"We must stop the process which I fear will lead to our ruin."

Gabbay, of the centre-right Kulanu party, is not a member of parliament and his resignation does not affect the ruling rightwing coalition's majority.

Co-opting Lieberman and his Yisrael Beiteinu party will add five lawmakers to Netanyahu's previously wafer-thin majority if the coalition deal is given parliamentary approval next week as expected.



Avi Gabbay



Striking French labour union employees stand near a barricade to block the entrance of the depot of the SFDM company near the oil refinery to protest the labour reforms law proposal, in Donges, France, yesterday. The French government's labour market proposals, which are designed to make it easier for companies to hire and fire, have sparked a series of nationwide protests and strikes over the past three months. The French government yesterday fought back, sweeping away blockades at fuel depots after President Francois Hollande vowed to "stand firm" over the reform.

Women being sold for £4,000 in Saudi Arabia

Claims India's welfare minister

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Indian women are being sold "like products" for just £4000 in Saudi Arabia and £2000 in Bahrain, according to India's welfare minister.

Palle Raghunatha Reddy claimed that women from the southern Andhra Pradesh region of India are being held in horrific conditions in Gulf state jails after fleeing their husbands and employers.

In a letter to India's foreign minister, Reddy appealed to the national government to protect women from overseas recruitment agents who sell them on as if they came from a "retail shop" after luring them from their homeland on the promise of triple pay.

Female migrants in Saudi are tricked into overstaying their visas and jailed on petty offences while their cases are heard before being sold to the highest bidder, the minister alleged.

Experts estimate that over twenty thousand Indian women have been detained in poor conditions having travelled from Andhra and neighbouring state Telangana.

There have been complaints of physical abuse, mistreatment, non-payment of salary and denial of fundamental human rights. Reddy confirmed that more than 25 women currently in Gulf jails have sought help from the Andhra Pradesh state government in the past few months.

Judgment day for historic South America repression

AFP, Buenos Aires

South American ex-military leaders faced judgment yesterday for their alleged role in the torture and assassination of leftist dissidents during a US-backed crackdown by the region's dictatorships during the 1970s and 1980s.

Argentine judges were considering their verdict in the trial of 18 former army officers accused of taking part in "Operation Condor."

In that scheme, the military regimes of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay helped each other track down and kill leftist dissidents.

On Friday, the court convened to deliver its verdict after a three-year trial -- the first to try the crimes committed under the Condor plan.

The operation began in the 1970s at the height of the Cold War. It is blamed for scores of executions and kidnapping -- 89 in Argentina alone.

Among those waiting at the court for the verdict were former abductees and victims' relatives who testified in the trial.

"Justice is coming late, if it is coming at all. But at least it will set a precedent. People should know what happened," said one of them, Lidia Cabrera de Franco, 67, a Paraguayan who was held by the Argentine military in 1977-1978.

Prosecutors based their case partly on declassified US intelligence documents showing how the South American regimes worked together to identify political exiles in neighboring countries and kill them or send them back to their home countries.

Hundreds of army officers and police have been tried in Argentina for atrocities carried out under the country's 1976 to 1983 dictatorship.

Among the accused is Argentina's last military dictator, Reynaldo Bignone. Now aged 88, he faces 20 years in prison, on top of the 15 he is already serving for the theft of babies born to political prisoners.

The court examined evidence relating to 105 victims from Uruguay, Chile, Paraguay, Bolivia and Argentina.

OPERATION CONDOR

Path to peace a 2-way street

Says Modi as he urges Pakistan to abandon terror

PTI, Washington

India-Pakistan ties can "truly scale great heights" if Pakistan removes the "self-imposed" obstacle of terrorism, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said as he asked Islamabad to play its part by putting a complete stop to any kind of support to terrorism -- "whether state or non-state".

"In my view, our ties can truly scale great heights once Pakistan removes the self-imposed obstacle of terrorism in the path of our relationship."

"We are ready to take the first step, but the path to peace is a two-way street," Modi told the Wall Street Journal, in comments posted on its website yesterday.

He said he has always maintained that instead of fighting with each other, India and Pakistan should together fight against poverty.

"Naturally we expect Pakistan to play its part," he said. "But, there can be no compromise on terrorism. It can only be stopped if all support to terrorism, whether state or

non-state, is completely stopped.

"Pakistan's failure to take effective action in punishing the perpetrators of terror attacks limits the forward progress in our ties," said the Prime Minister.

Modi said his government's proactive agenda for a peaceful and prosperous neighbourhood began from the very first day of his government.

"I have said that the future that I wish for India is the future that I dream for my neighbours. My visit to Lahore was a clear projection of this belief," he said.

Ruling out a change in India's decades-old policy of non-alignment, Modi said that despite the border dispute, there have been no clashes with China, pointing out the "new way" in today's "interdependent world" unlike the last century.

"There is no reason to change India's non-alignment policy that is a legacy and has been in place. But this is true that today, unlike before, India is not standing in a corner. It is the world's largest democracy and fastest growing economy."



The most 'racist' ad ever?

CNN ONLINE

A black man and a young Chinese woman are flirting, as he leans in for a kiss she thrusts a detergent capsule in his mouth and bundles him into a laundry machine.

She sits atop the machine as the man spins and screams inside until, to her apparent delight, out pops a handsome Chinese man dressed in a clean, white t-shirt.

This staggeringly offensive advert is attracting outrage on both the Chinese and wider web, with users blasting it for being racist.

"My god," wrote one user on Weibo, China's version of Twitter. "Don't Chinese marketing people get any education about race?"

While a large number of Africans live in China, particularly in southern Guangdong province, many have complained of facing discrimination and prejudice from locals due in part to a widespread stigma against dark skin.

That stigma also exists in other Asian countries, a Thai beauty company was forced to withdraw an ad and issue an apology after it released a commercial saying "just by being white, you will win."



NEWSIN brief

Iran sticking to nuke deal: UN watchdog

AFP, Vienna

Iran is still complying with the July 2015 landmark nuclear deal with major powers, a report from the UN atomic watchdog seen by AFP showed yesterday. The International Atomic Energy Agency's second quarterly assessment since the accord came into force on January 16 showed that Iran was meeting its main commitments.

Six rebels, one soldier die in Kashmir clashes

AFP, Srinagar

Six suspected rebels and a soldier have died in two separate gun battles in Indian Kashmir as violence flared in the restive region this week, police and the army said. Overall violence in the disputed region has sharply declined during the last decade, but this month has witnessed an uptick in armed encounters, leaving six members of the security forces, two civilians and 15 militants dead.

Men can lightly beat wives: Pak Islamic body

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani media and activists yesterday poured scorn on a suggestion from an Islamic religious body that men should be allowed to "lightly beat" their wives, made in their draft of a women's protection bill. The Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) released a draft of the bill on Thursday saying: "A husband should be allowed to lightly beat his wife if she defies his commands and refuses to dress up as per his desires; turns down demand of intercourse without any religious excuse or does not take bath after intercourse."