

Migrants try to fly to UK on light aircraft

Four Albanian migrants tried to fly from France to Britain in a light aircraft, in what is believed to be a first, prosecutors said yesterday.

The four, including two women and a child, were arrested along with the British pilot and two suspected British people smugglers as the plane prepared to take off from an airfield in Marck, near the northern port of Calais.

Calais is a springboard for migrants attempting to cross the Channel to Britain, normally by stowing away on trucks that board ferries.

Prosecutors said they had no record of a previous attempt to reach Britain in a private aircraft.

"It is the first time that the Boulogne prosecutor's office has been called in to investigate an attempt to smuggle migrants by air," the prosecutors' office in Boulogne, near Calais, said.

The plane was still on the ground and the pilot was at the controls although the migrants had not boarded when the arrests took place.

The pilot and the people smugglers remain in custody and could face charges of "helping undocumented foreigners as part of an organised group".

"We do not yet have a full profile of the pilot. Investigators are waiting for British authorities to send information," the prosecutor's office added.

A spokesman said the Albanian mother and her child had "disappeared" after they were sent to hospital for checks.

The other Albanian woman and a man are being held in a migrant holding centre.

Meanwhile, Italy is considering issuing temporary visas that would allow migrants to travel around the European Union, its deputy foreign minister said yesterday.



Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas (R) and Chinese President Xi Jinping (L) inspect Chinese honour guards during a welcome ceremony at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. Xi pledged to make unremitting efforts towards promoting peace in the Middle East following a meeting with Abbas, as China steps up its diplomatic engagement with the region.

PHOTO: AFP

India should not use trespass as policy tool

Says China, asks New Delhi to withdraw its troops

PTI, Beijing

India should not use "trespass" into the Doklam area in the Sikkim sector as a "policy tool" to achieve its "political targets", China said yesterday.

While asking New Delhi to immediately withdraw its troops to avoid any escalation of the situation, the Chinese foreign ministry also said it was in "close communication" with foreign missions in Beijing on the standoff with India, but refused to confirm whether it held a special briefing for them on the issue.

"Since the illegal trespass by Indian border personnel, many foreign diplomats in China felt shocked about this and [wanted] to confirm whether it was true," ministry spokesman Lu Kang said when asked about the reported briefing.

"The Chinese side maintains close commu-

nication with the foreign diplomatic missions on the issues they are interested," Kang said.

China reportedly held a "closed-door briefing" last week and conveyed their side of the story on the standoff near the Bhutan tri-junction.

The standoff between Indian and Chinese armies has continued for a month over the construction of a road by China near the tri-junction.

India has expressed concern over the road construction near the tri-junction, fearing it may allow Chinese troops to cut India's access to its northeastern States. It has conveyed to China that the road construction would represent a significant change of status quo with serious security implications for India.

Asked if China stated in the reported meeting that its patience was withering, Kang said Beijing stressed that the "facts are very clear in this incident."



SIKKIM STAND-OFF

US announces new sanctions on Iran

AFP, Washington

The United States announced new sanctions against Iran yesterday over its ballistic missile program and what it called Tehran's support for terrorist groups in the Middle East.

The sanctions announced by the State Department target 18 individuals or entities described as supporting Iran's ballistic missile program or the elite Republican Guard.

The announcement came a day after the United States certified that Iran was complying with the landmark nuclear deal signed two years ago with the United States and other world powers, but also warned it was preparing new sanctions.

"The United States remains deeply concerned about Iran's malign activities across the Middle East," State Department said.

Mahathir challenges PM to attend public meet

AFP, Putrajaya

Malaysia's former leader Mahathir Mohamad urged the prime minister yesterday to attend a town hall meeting focusing on a massive financial scandal, heaping fresh pressure on the scandal-hit premier.

The saga surrounding the 1MDB state investment fund has rocked Prime Minister Najib Razak's government, with claims the premier took part in the alleged looting of huge sums from the fund.

Mahathir, 92, has come out of retirement from politics, formed his own party and joined forces with his old foe Anwar Ibrahim in an opposition alliance that aims to unseat Najib at elections due by 2018.

He has excoriated Najib over 1MDB, saying that Malaysia is "controlled by thieves". Najib and 1MDB deny wrongdoing.

The former prime minister, who led Malaysia for over two decades and was

himself responsible for subduing opposition parties, said that he planned to hold a town hall meeting focusing on the 1MDB saga on August 13 near Kuala Lumpur, and urged Najib to attend.

"The session will explain to the masses about the 1MDB scandal," he told a press conference.

"This will be a good platform to tell the truth - Najib should attend and explain the allegations."

There was no immediate response from Najib's spokesman about Mahathir's challenge to attend the meeting.

Malaysia must hold a general election by mid-2018 but Najib has signalled he may call it earlier.

His party, the United Malays National Organisation, dominates the Barisan Nasional coalition, which has been in power since independence in 1957.

Najib's grip on power is said to be strong as he is backed by most of UMNO's powerful division chiefs.

MALAYSIA 1MDB SCANDAL



Mahathir



Najib Razak

Author of Article 50 wants to halt Brexit

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The author of Article 50 has called for Brexit to be halted, warning that the "disastrous consequences" of Britain's decision to leave the bloc are becoming "clearer every day".

Lord Kerr of Kinlochard is one of more than 60 prominent figures in Scotland who signed a joint letter saying that Brexit has seriously damaged the UK's international reputation.

The peer, who was Britain's permanent representative at the EU for five years from 1990, said when he wrote Article 50 - the clause in the EU's Lisbon Treaty that outlines the steps a country must take to leave the bloc voluntarily - he believed it would only ever be triggered by a dictatorial regime.

The letter, published in The Herald, also called for a "UK-wide debate about calling a halt to the process" and was signed by former Nato secretary general Lord Robertson, Scotland's former first minister Henry McLeish and Liberal Democrat ex-leader Lord Menzies Campbell.

"We see our society, economy and politics becoming ever more undermined due to the impact of Brexit. We recognise that a narrow majority voted to leave the European Union, but the disastrous consequences are now becoming ever clearer - every day," the letter says.

"Even before the UK has left the EU, we face falling living standards, rising inflation, slowing growth and lower productivity.

"We call for a national debate on Brexit. We ask our fellow citizens, and our politicians, to think again. It is time to call a halt to Brexit," the letter continues.



Smoke and flames rise from a fire in the village of Podstrana, near the Adriatic coastal town of Split yesterday. Montenegro asked for international help to fight wildfires in the Lustica peninsula on the country's Adriatic coast, while forest fires in neighbouring Croatia spread to suburbs of the coastal city of Split.

PHOTO: AFP

Trump threatens sanctions Warns Maduro over his bid to create a super-legislature

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump threatened on Monday to take "strong and swift economic actions" if Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro goes ahead with plans to create a super-legislature known as a Constituent Assembly in a July 30 vote.

"Yesterday, the Venezuelan people again made clear that they stand for democracy, freedom and rule of law. Yet their strong and courageous actions continue to be ignored by a bad leader who dreams of becoming a dictator," Trump said in a statement issued by the White House.

"The United States will not stand by as Venezuela crumbles. If the Maduro regime imposes its Constituent Assembly on July 30, the United States will take strong and swift economic actions," Trump said.

Maduro's foes are demanding a presidential election and want to stop the leftist leader's plan to create the

VENEZUELA CRISIS
98 percent opposition supporters rejected proposed assembly
Maduro insists opposition leaders are US pawns



Constituent Assembly, which would have the power to rewrite the constitution and annul the opposition-led legislature.

On Sunday, 98 percent of opposition supporters in an unofficial vote rejected the proposed assembly.

Maduro insists opposition leaders

are US pawns intent on sabotaging the economy and bringing him down through violence as part of an international right-wing conspiracy led by Washington and fanned by private domestic and foreign media.

Senior White House officials told Reuters last month the Trump administration was considering sanctions on Venezuela's vital energy sector, including state oil company PDVSA, a major escalation in US efforts to pressure the country's government amid a crack-down on the opposition.

The idea of striking at the core of Venezuela's economy, which relies on oil for some 95 percent of export revenues, has been discussed at high levels of the administration as part of a wide-ranging review of US options.

The White House officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, told Reuters the United States could hit PDVSA as part of a "sectoral" sanctions package that would take aim at the OPEC nation's entire energy industry for the first time.

Swiss glacier reveals couple lost in 1942

REUTERS, Geneva

The frozen bodies of a Swiss couple who went missing 75 years ago in the Alps have been found on a shrinking glacier, Swiss media said yesterday.

Marcelin and Francine Dumoulin, the parents of seven children, had gone to milk their cows in a meadow above Chandolin in the Valais canton on August 15, 1942.

"We spent our whole lives looking for them, without stopping. We thought that we could give them the funeral they deserved one day," their youngest daughter Marceline Udry-Dumoulin told the Lausanne daily Le Matin.

"I can say that after 75 years of waiting this news gives me a deep sense of calm," added the 79-year-old.

In an overnight statement, Valais cantonal police said that two bodies bearing identity papers had been discovered last week by a worker on Tsanfleuron glacier near a ski lift above Les Diablerets resort at an altitude of 2,615 metres (8,600 feet).

DNA testing would be carried out to confirm the identities of the couple.

"The bodies were lying near each other. It was a man and a woman wearing clothing dating from the period of World War Two," Bernhard Tschannen, director of Glacier 3000, told the paper.

NEWSIN brief

US ending laptop ban on ME airlines

REUTERS, Washington

The US Transportation Security Administration said on Monday it was lifting a ban on passengers on Saudi Arabian Airlines carrying large electronics like laptops onboard US-bound flights, the last carrier under the restrictions.

Egypt to end visas on arrival for Qataris

AFP, Cairo

Egypt said it would end visas on arrival for Qatari citizens as a dispute between four Arab states and the Gulf emirate continues over allegations that Doha supports terrorism. The measure, which goes into effect tomorrow, will not include spouses of Egyptians or university students who will be granted tourist visas on arrival.

Duterte seeks martial law extension in south

AFP, Manila

President Rodrigo Duterte plans to extend martial law in the southern Philippines to defeat Islamist militants who have seized a major city, his administration said yesterday, as critics warned the country could be edging towards a dictatorship.

7.7-magnitude quake hits off Russia

AFP, Washington

An earthquake with a magnitude of 7.7 struck Monday off the eastern coast of Russia, according to the US Geological Survey, causing officials to initially warn of a tsunami threat in parts of the Pacific. But the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center lifted that forecast a short time later.