

INTERNATIONAL

Italy rescues 1,600 migrants in Med At least 23 feared dead

REUTERS, Rome

Italy has rescued 47 boats carrying around 1,600 migrants in the central Mediterranean sea in the last two days and brought them ashore to the island of Lampedusa.

Italy's coastguard said in a statement late on Monday that it had taken to safety around 1,200 migrants but that at least 23 people were missing and one body was recovered at sea following three shipwrecks.

Another 12 boats with around 400 migrants were rescued yesterday, according to news agency ANSA.

The past months have seen a sharp increase in migrant boats trying to reach the Italian coast from Tunisia, which has become a more accessible departure point after crackdowns on human trafficking in Libya in recent months.

With the number of people crossing the Mediterranean in smugglers' boats on the rise, Rome's conservative government has urged Brussels to do more to reduce irregular arrivals.

On Monday, Italy offered Tunisia a prospect of money in exchange for economic and political reforms as European Union foreign ministers discussed in Luxembourg how to respond to growing instability in the African country.

Italian Interior Minister Matteo Piantedosi will visit Tunisia later this week, together with EU's top migrants official and French counterpart.



Rescuers and volunteers work at the site of a building of local museum heavily damaged by a Russian missile strike, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in the town of Kupiansk, Kharkiv region, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Isolating China against UK's interest: Cleverly

REUTERS, London

Foreign Secretary James Cleverly yesterday was expected to argue it would be "a betrayal" of Britain's national interest to isolate China and urge against declaring "a new Cold War".

In a speech in London setting out Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's foreign policy towards Beijing after a review, Cleverly was going to advocate constructive engagement on key global issues.

But he was also going to vow to strengthen national security protections in the face of China's military build up, and deepen cooperation with allies in the Indo-Pacific region to uphold international law.

"It would be clear and easy -- perhaps even satisfying -- for me to declare a new Cold War and say that our goal is to isolate China," Cleverly was expected to say at an annual speech given by Britain's foreign secretary.

"Clear, easy, satisfying -- and wrong. Because it would be a betrayal of our national interest and a wilful misunderstanding of the modern world."

The stance will likely anger hawkish elements in the ruling Conservative party, who have been pushing for several years for London to adopt a more bullish approach towards Beijing.

Former Tory party leader Iain Duncan-Smith, one of 10 UK organisations and individuals sanctioned by China in 2021 over their criticisms, last year called its rulers a "brutal, dictatorial, ghastly regime".

In a refresh of its strategic foreign and defence policy, the government in March detailed plans to bolster military and security spending to confront the "epoch-defining challenge" posed by China.



'Ukraine war not main cause of global food crisis'

Says Russia, remains downbeat on Black Sea grain deal; Zelensky slams strike on Kupiansk museum

REUTERS, Kyiv

The Kremlin said yesterday that a global shortfall in food supplies was not primarily attributable to a lack of Russian and Ukrainian grain on the market.

It also reaffirmed its position that the Black Sea grain deal is not working for Moscow, a day after the head of the United Nations handed Russia a letter with proposals to improve and expand it.

"Despite the fact that so much time has passed, (the deal) has not yet been implemented, it has not come together as a package, the conditions that concerned us have still not been realised," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

"Therefore, while the circumstances don't add up in favour of this deal, we continue to observe," he said.

Meanwhile, President Volodymyr Zelenskiy slammed Russian missile strike on a museum in the centre of the eastern Ukrainian city of Kupiansk that killed two women and wounded 10 other people.

The Black Sea grain deal was brokered by Turkey and the United Nations last July to allow Kyiv to resume grain exports from its Black Sea ports that had been severed after Russia invaded Ukraine five months earlier.

Russia has signalled that it will not allow the deal to be extended beyond May 18 unless obstacles to its own food and fertiliser exports are removed.

On Monday, a UN spokesperson said United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres had proposed to Russian President Vladimir Putin a "way forward aimed at the



improvement, extension and expansion" of the agreement.

The proposal was outlined in a letter that Guterres asked Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to deliver to Putin.

The grain deal was aimed at alleviating a global food crisis, as both Ukraine and Russia are major exporters of grain. Peskov, however, played down the extent to which shortfalls of grain from both countries had contributed to the crisis.

"We all know that the genesis of the global food crisis has other roots. And it is not a direct consequence of the loss of Ukrainian grain from the market," he said.

"Of course, the loss of Ukrainian grain and Russian grain from the market may be one of the factors, but not decisive."

The Russian missile strike killed two women and wounded 10, the state emergency service said.

Rescue workers dug through mounds of rubble to retrieve the bodies after the local history museum was hit by what President Volodymyr Zelenskiy's chief of staff and the regional governor said was a Russian S-300 missile.

Zelenskiy posted a video of a devastated building that had spewed out rubble and debris into the street. Its windows were smashed and a section of the wall and roof was destroyed.

"The terrorist country is doing everything to destroy us completely," he wrote in a Telegram post. "Our history, our culture, our people."

Russia did not immediately comment on the attack.

Probably on verge of new world war: Putin ally Dmitry Medvedev

RUSSIA, Moscow

An ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin said yesterday that the world was probably on the verge of a new world war and the risks of a nuclear confrontation were rising.

"The world is sick and quite probably is on the verge of a new world war," Dmitry Medvedev, deputy chairman of Putin's powerful security council, told a conference in Moscow.

He said such a new world war was not inevitable but the risks of a nuclear confrontation were growing and more serious than concerns about climate change.

Putin says the world faces the most dangerous decade since World War Two. He casts the war in Ukraine as an existential battle with an aggressive and arrogant West, and has said that Russia will use all available means to protect itself against any aggressor.

The United States and its allies have condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine as an imperial land grab. Ukraine has vowed to fight until all Russian troops withdraw from its territory, and says Russian rhetoric on nuclear war is intended to intimidate the West into curbing military aid.

UN urges Singapore to halt execution over drug offence

AFP, Singapore

The United Nations Human Rights Office pressed Singapore yesterday to "urgently reconsider" its scheduled execution of a man over one kilogram of cannabis.

Singaporean Tangaraju Suppiah, 46, is set to be hanged on today after he was convicted of conspiracy to traffic 1,017.9 grams (35.9 ounces) of cannabis, twice the amount that merits the death sentence in the city-state.

It would be Singapore's first execution in six months and the 12th since last year.

The Asian financial hub has some of the world's toughest anti-drug laws and insists the death penalty remains an effective deterrent against trafficking.

KENYA STARVATION CULT
Death toll climbs to 90

AFP, Malindi

Kenyan investigators unearthed another 16 bodies yesterday in a forest where a cult was believed to be practising mass starvation, bringing the number of victims so far to 90 including children.

There are fears more corpses could be found in Shakahola forest where cult leader Paul Mackenzie Nthene had allegedly been telling his followers that starvation was the only path to God.

Children are among the latest victims of the "Shakahola Forest Massacre", with search teams in white overalls still undertaking the macabre task inland from Malindi on Kenya's Indian Ocean coast.

The grim discovery has shocked the nation and President William Ruto has pledged a crackdown on "unacceptable" religious movements as horrifying details unfold by the day.

Visiting the site yesterday, Interior Minister Kithure Kindiki warned that worse could still come.

"We don't know how many more graves, how many more bodies, we are likely to discover," he told reporters, adding the crimes were serious enough to warrant terrorism charges against Nthene.

Efforts to make RMG factories safety compliant slog on

FROM PAGE 1

The RMG factories in the process of remediation are now either under the Department of Inspection of Factories and Establishments (DIFE)-led "National Initiative" (NI), or the private RMG Sustainability Council (RSC), which was formed in 2020 after the Accord ended following an apex court verdict.

In a paper released recently, the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) found that the progress of implanting safety measures in the factories under DIFE was only 54 percent on average.

The 54 percent progress does not necessarily mean the most serious safety issues have been addressed. In fact, the data shows that the progress of remediation remained the least in issues related to fire, said the paper.

"Emerging Concerns of Occupational Safety

and Health of the RMG Industry: Role of Public and Private Monitoring Agencies".

The DIFE is overseeing the progress of the implementation of safety measures in 659 factories, said the CPD. These factories were first inspected in 2015.

According to the DIFE's inspection report, 361 of the factories made less than 50 percent progress.

The CPD said the procrastination stems from a "lack of self-interest of the NI factories' owners as they were not adequately pressurised by the government, business associations, and their buyers who are mostly from non-European and non-North-American countries".

In addition, many factories are in rented buildings which makes it difficult to invest in certain safety measures. These businesses are often found

to be financially weak with limited access to credit.

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) in a press release yesterday said that after the DIFE took over, inspections halved in the last fiscal year and the quality of the inspections remained questionable due to corruption. "Bribing of compliance auditors to overlook non-compliance issues and ignoring important concerns worsen the situation."

When the Accord ended, over 1,700 factories were handed over to the RSC. Of the factories, about 1,000 were classified as running behind schedule for becoming fully safe.

The CPD pointed out that 500 factories under the RSC have become fully compliant. In January 2021 when Accord ended, 326 factories were compliant.

The issues in the initial findings had a correction progress rate of 91.32

percent in January 2023. "However, item-wise progress shows that the progress rate is lower for a few common fire-related items (such as fire detection and alarm system, installation of fire suppression system)," said the CPD.

The progress rate of fire detection and suppression installation is 53 and 63.5 percent respectively, found the CPD.

Easy steps like the removal of collapsible gates saw the highest implementation.

As per the RSC website, it has at least 1,884 factories to watch. It is yet to provide 211 factories with their corrective action plans.

On the addition of more factories to the RSC, Golam Moazzem, research director of the CPD and the author of the research, said, "This is a positive signal. More factories now want to be on board,

and be under scrutiny. The question is whether the RSC is increasing its capacity."

The CPD pointed out that because the RSC does not shut down non-compliant factories, the functionality of the RSC remains below par on many accounts.

The RSC on its website classified 1,061 factories as "behind schedule".

Chief Safety Officer George Faller of the RSC said, "There is good progress on most fire-related items, but automatic detection and alarms and fire suppression systems are more complex issues and therefore the RSC is not only monitoring the design and installation of these systems, but also carrying out commissioning and testing for them, which takes more time and effort than for other items for final approval."

The RSC is continuously

delisting some factories and onboarding new ones, so the overall percentage progress does not reflect progress on factories that have been under the programme for a long time."

The TIB said exploitative practices of some brands and buyers motivated by short-term profitability at the expense of business integrity, together with the continued failure of authorities to ensure accountability and workers' rights-sensitive governance, pose the most formidable challenges for sustainability in the industry.

In 2018 and 2019, the number of deaths in RMG factories were 10 and 2 respectively. In 2020 when Accord ended, that figure was one. In 2021, it rose to 13, says the CPD.

The DIFE inspector general did not respond to calls and texts from The Daily Star.

SAWANSUKHA

EID MUBARAK

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