

## BELGIUM STRUGGLES TO WIN BACK TOURISTS

**BRUSSELS:** Gone are the usual snap-happy crowds on Brussels' famed Grand Place, visits to the Atomium monument have plummeted and hotel rooms are empty. Two weeks after the Belgian capital was hit by terror attacks, the country's tourist industry is in despair.

As Belgium struggles to move on from the March 22 Islamic State suicide bombings that struck Brussels airport and a metro station, killing 32 people, the financial impact of the attacks is weighing on the economy. For some holidaymakers not scared away, the chance to explore the city's delights undisturbed during the normally busy Easter holiday period has been an unexpected boon.

"We like it. There's not too many people and we can take great pictures," said a smiling Lucien Liu from China as he marvelled at the near-deserted Grand Place square with its celebrated 15th-century Gothic city hall. Danish tourist Jeppe Strauss, in town for a few days with friends, said they had encountered no queues at the museums.

"It made our trip a lot more pleasant since we did not have to spend a lot of time waiting," he told AFP on a street lined with waffle and chocolate shops. But there is no such silver lining for those working in the tourism industry, which accounts a significant part of the economy, as much as nine percent in some parts of the country. Hotel and restaurant bookings are down by half since the attacks, according to Patrick Bontinck, head of the Brussels tourism office.

### 'Economic carnage'

"This has never happened before," said Said Rabet, owner of the Saint-Michel hotel which boasts views of the Grand Place and is usually fully booked. Now, just five of his 14 rooms are taken. "It's not enough to say things are going badly, it's worse than that. This is economic carnage in the hotel and restaurant sectors," he added. The effects are being felt across the country.

Hospitality businesses in the northern Flanders region, home to the tourist hotspot of Bruges, say revenues are down by a third since the attacks, according to a survey by the Unizo employers' group yesterday. Belgium's tourism sector was already struggling in the wake of the Paris terror attacks in November after it emerged they were largely planned in Brussels.

Following the Paris bloodshed, the Belgian capital went into lockdown for several days over fears of an imminent attack, with soldiers deployed on the streets and schools and the metro system closed. While Belgium remains on high alert-authorities are still hunting for a suspected third attacker whose bomb did not go off at Brussels airport-Prime Minister Charles Michel insisted Wednesday that the country was returning "to normal life".

Rudi Vervoort, head of the Brussels regional government, said steps have already been taken since the Paris attacks to reassure visitors. "We can of course guarantee the safety of all visitors, all tourists in hotels, in all the main tourist spots," he said at the same press conference as Michel.

A special phone line has been set up to respond to visitors' questions and there are webcams at key sites so tourists can go online and "see for themselves that everything is fine", he added. — AFP



**BRUSSELS:** Police stand outside the council chamber in Brussels the appearance of Salah Abdeslam, the sole surviving suspect in the November 13 Paris attacks. — AFP



**REYKJAVIK:** Iceland's new prime minister Sigurdur Ingi Johannsson (left) of the Progressive Party and Bjarni Benediktsson (right) finance minister of the Independence Party arrive to address members of the media after a meeting. — AFP

## ICELAND NAMES NEW PM, HOLDS AUTUMN ELECTION

### PANAMA PAPERS FORCES PREVIOUS LEADER'S RESIGNATION

**REYKJAVIK:** Iceland's right-wing government on Wednesday named a new prime minister and said it would hold early elections in the autumn, after the previous leader was forced to step down over his implication in the Panama Papers scandal.

The two coalition partners, the Progressive Party and the Independence Party, agreed after talks late Wednesday to hand the prime ministerial post to the agriculture minister Sigurdur Ingi Johannsson, 53, of the Progressives. He replaces Sigmundur David Gunnlaugsson, 41, who stepped down Tuesday amid massive public protests over a hidden offshore account revealed in the so-called Panama Papers leak of 11.5 million financial documents. "We expect to have elections this autumn," Johannsson told reporters, insisting that the coalition, in power since 2013, would continue to run the country's affairs despite thousands of protesters calling for the whole government's resignation. "We will continue our work together. We are of course hoping this will help bring stability in the political system," he said. President Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, who at 72 is due to retire in June after five terms and 20 years in office, is expected to approve Johannsson's appointment. Iceland's next legislative elections were originally scheduled for April 2017.

**First casualty of Panama Papers** Gunnlaugsson, who remains the

head of the Progressive Party for the time being, was the first major political casualty to emerge from the leak of millions of documents detailing offshore accounts held by world leaders and celebrities. Two other Iceland cabinet ministers have been singled out in the leak-Finance Minister Bjarni Benediktsson and Interior Minister Olof Nordal-and the coalition is keen to stall for time to avoid what would surely be a resounding protest vote if a snap election were held soon. The coalition parties "have lost all their legitimacy, but I am sceptical they will leave of their own initiative. Time is on their side and it's crucial for them to stay in power," lamented Gyda Margret Petursdottir, a 42-year-old teacher who protested against the government outside parliament on Wednesday.

The Panama Papers, revealed by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), showed that Gunnlaugsson and his wife owned an offshore company in the British Virgin Islands and had placed millions of dollars of her inheritance there.

The prime minister sold his 50-percent share of the company to his wife for a symbolic sum of \$1 at the end of 2009, but he had neglected to declare the stake as required when he was elected to parliament six months earlier. Gunnlaugsson has said he regretted not having done so, but insisted he and his wife had followed Icelandic

law and paid all their taxes in Iceland.

### Vote of no-confidence

It has not been proven the couple stood to gain financially from the offshore holding, and the ICIJ noted only that Gunnlaugsson had "violated Iceland's ethics rules". But the issue is particularly sensitive in Iceland, a country marked by the excesses of the 2000s when senior bankers used shell companies in tax havens to conceal their dealings in risky financial products which ultimately led to the 2008 collapse of the nation's three main banks.

The left-wing opposition presented a motion of no-confidence to parliament on Monday, and said late Wednesday it intended to push ahead with it despite the government's plans for an early election. "There is a consensus between the opposition parties that we will push the vote of no-confidence," said Birgitta Jonsdottir, the founder of the libertarian Pirate Party which campaigns for more transparency in politics. "We don't see the point in continuing with a government that has 26 percent trust," she said, acknowledging however that the motion had little chance of passing in parliament because of the government's majority. A Gallup poll conducted Monday and Tuesday credited the Pirate Party with a whopping 43 percent of voter support, far ahead of the Independence Party at 21.6 percent, the opposition Left Green Movement at 11.2 percent, and the Progressives at 7.9 percent. —AFP