

## TENSIONS RISE IN SWEDEN AFTER KILLING OF ASYLUM CENTRE WORKER

**STOCKHOLM:** Masked men chased migrants in Stockholm this weekend in a rare act of overt violence against refugees, but one that reflects smouldering tensions in Sweden as it grapples with the consequences of a record influx of migrants. The attack came just days after a teenaged asylum-seeker killed a young woman working at an asylum residence. Between 50 and 100 masked and hooded men chased and reportedly beat up "people of foreign appearance" on Friday evening at the Sergels Torg plaza in the heart of the city and handed out leaflets calling for "the street children of North Africa to get the punishment they deserve". Police swiftly chased off the assailants, but footage of the racist attack shocked many Swedes as they struggle with conflicting emotions regarding the flood of arrivals.

On the one hand there is a deep-rooted, longstanding sense of humanity and willingness to give refuge to those in need. While on the other, there is a grim realization that the country's infrastructure is overwhelmed after welcoming more migrants per capita than any other European Union country in 2015. "What is going on in Sweden?" asked daily Expressen on Sunday, listing a growing number of issues linked to migrants, including arson attacks on asylum residency centres and cultural as well as religious tensions.

On both the left and right wings, the Swedish media have squarely placed the blame on Prime Minister Stefan Lofven - a Social Democrat whose party has hit record lows in the polls - accusing him of downplaying the challenges facing the country.

"Those who dared discuss the link between the number of (migrant) arrivals and the capacity to welcome and integrate them were accused of painting a pessimistic picture and playing into the hands of the far-right," the centre-right daily Svenska Dagbladet wrote last autumn.

### 'Never thought this was possible'

But in an editorial on January 26, the newspaper called for migrants who commit crimes to be expelled - a proposal published the day after the fatal stabbing of Alexandra Mezher, a 22-year-old asylum centre social worker. Mezher, of Lebanese origin, was knifed by a 15-year-old boy as she tried to break up a fight in a centre for unaccompanied minors where she worked in Molndal, a suburb of Gothenburg in southwestern Sweden. "We would never have thought this was possible in Sweden. We hold the government and the prime minister responsible," the victim's uncle said.

Lofven responded quickly, visiting the scene hours after the killing, but his reaction stunned commentators. "There's no easy solution," the prime minister said, prompting Sweden's paper of reference Dagens Nyheter to conclude: "Lofven has nothing to say." A few days later the government announced it wanted to improve its efficiency at deporting asylum seekers whose applications are rejected, estimating that at least 60,000 of the 163,000 who applied in 2015 would be rejected and expelled. In 2014 and 2015, Sweden, where 20 percent of the population has foreign origin, took in 245,000 asylum seekers, more than any other EU country per capita.



**MOLNDAL, Sweden: A police officer is pictured outside a home for juvenile asylum seekers in Molndal in south western Sweden. — AFP**

### Dilapidated 'Swedish model'

The influx has dwindled to a trickle since Sweden reinstated border checks in November, but the large number of migrants has pushed the country's famed "Swedish model" - a cradle-to-grave welfare state already a little worse-for-wear - to the edge. Sweden faces acute housing shortages and skyrocketing real estate prices, salaries so low for teachers and nurses that

there are employee shortages, a lack of nursing homes, and, in a country that prides itself as an egalitarian society, the fastest growing inequality gap in the OECD.

Burdened further by the migration crisis, the degradation of the welfare state has left some Swedes with a sense of "paradise lost", fuelling the frustrations of society's weakest members. "The country has changed a lot. It used to be a quiet place but now all you hear

about is violence and attacks," Eva, a pensioner from the town of Borås where Alexandra Mezher lived said. Obsessed by the "image Sweden has of itself as a big moral power" on the international scene, "the left has (over the years) forgotten Sweden's domestic needs and has as a result left the door wide open for the Sweden Democrats", the far-right party represented in parliament, historian Lars Tragardh said. — AFP

## EU'S PRESIDENT UNVEILS PLANS TO AVOID 'BREXIT'

### A 4-YEAR BRAKE ON BENEFIT PAYMENTS FOR MIGRANT WORKERS

**BRUSSELS:** EU president Donald Tusk yesterday unveiled key proposals to keep Britain in the bloc, including a four-year brake on benefit payments for migrant workers and protection for countries that do not use the euro currency. Tusk sent the proposals for a "new settlement" to European capitals, firing the starting gun for two weeks of frantic negotiations with the other 27 European Union leaders to secure a deal at a summit on February 18-19. British Prime Minister David Cameron, who wants a deal so he can hold a referendum in June on his country's membership of the EU, said Tusk's proposal "shows real progress" but added that "more work" was needed.

"To be, or not to be together, that is the question... My proposal for a new settlement for #UKinEU," Tusk tweeted, adapting a famous quote from English playwright William Shakespeare's "Hamlet". The proposals will not take effect until Britain avoids a so-called "Brexit" and votes to stay in the EU in the referendum, the draft adds. European Commission spokesman Margaritis Schinas said the proposals took into account all issues that Cameron raised in a letter to Brussels last year, and also took into account the concerns of other EU states.

### 'Emergency brake'

The proposals include an "emergency brake" to stop EU migrants claiming benefits such as income top-ups for low-paid workers for up to four years after their arrival if a country can prove that its welfare system and public services are being overwhelmed. It says they would have to prove that an "exceptional situation exists on a scale that affects essential aspects of its social security system" to get the limit approved by the European Commission. It would then have to be voted for by a qualified majority of EU states.

But the question of how long Britain could apply this for is left blank in the draft circulated to EU leaders, where the issue will be one of the most contentious points. The plan has angered the so-called Visegrad Four - the central European states of Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia - which have thousands of citizens working in Britain. They say it breaches the EU's principles of free movement and is discriminatory.



**CHIPPENHAM: British Prime Minister David Cameron speaks to factory staff at the Siemens manufacturing plant yesterday in Chippenham, west England. — AFP**

Cameron will hold talks in Poland on Friday with Polish leaders aiming to win them over to the changes. He is also set to hold talks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Hamburg on February 12.

### Protection for 'euro-outs'

Despite concerns from France, Tusk's plan also includes a "mechanism" by which the nine countries that are not in the euro can raise concerns and be given "necessary reassurances" about decisions by the euro-zone. But he stressed that the mechanism "cannot constitute a veto nor delay urgent decisions" - adding that the conditions for triggering the mechanism had to be discussed before the summit.

The proposals further include a "red card" system that would allow a group of 55 percent of the EU's national parliaments to stop or change draft EU laws. The current "yellow card" system - using a term taken from football disciplinary infractions - only allows parli-

aments to demand an explanation of laws from Brussels. British eurosceptics were unconvinced, with UKIP head Nigel Farage dismissing it as "frankly ludicrous" and no change on the current situation Britain will be further exempted from the EU's stated goal of "ever closer union" because of its "special status" in the bloc's treaties - including its staying out of the euro and the passport-free Schengen area. Although Cameron has set a deadline of end-2017 to hold the referendum and insists he is in "no hurry" for a deal, sources have said he is keen to push a vote through by June. That would avoid any new flare-up in Europe's migration crisis this summer and before British eurosceptics, particularly in Cameron's own Conservative Party, become even more unruly. Opinion polls are largely split on whether Britons would vote to leave the EU. It will be the British public's first vote on the country's EU membership since 1975, two years after it joined what was then the European Economic Community. — AFP

## EU 'BREXIT' PROPOSALS

**BRUSSELS:** European Council head Donald Tusk yesterday unveiled a package of EU reforms demanded by British Prime Minister David Cameron in return for backing the country's continued membership of the bloc. Here are the main points of the Tusk reform package which will now have to be agreed with Cameron's 27 EU peers at a summit on February 18-19.

### Lots of paper

EU leaders will have to wade through a thicket of paperwork: a letter from Tusk, a draft decision of EU leaders that will be legally binding, a declaration on competitiveness, and three European Commission declarations.

### Euro 'ins' versus 'outs'

Britain is not part of the 19-nation euro single currency bloc and jealously guards the pound and the City of London, one of the world's largest financial centers, against any encroachment by Brussels. France however has led opposition to anything that would impinge on euro-zone decision-making. Tusk spells out a mutual accommodation - non-euro countries must help, not hinder, euro-zone integration in exchange for their rights as non-euro states being recognized. "The respect for these principles is backed up by a draft decision establishing a mechanism that while giving necessary reassurances on the concerns of non-euro area member states, cannot constitute a veto nor delay urgent decisions," he said in a letter outlining the proposals. In addition, the EU will aim to increase its economic competitiveness - another of Cameron's demands - by cutting red tape and reducing undue burdens on business.

### Sovereignty

As with the euro, Britain has chafed at oversight from Brussels and Cameron wants a clear opt-out from the bloc's on-wards march towards "ever closer union". "It is recognized that the United Kingdom, in the light of the specific situation it has under the (EU) treaties, is not

committed to further political integration," the text of the Tusk proposals says. To give that provision more teeth, national parliaments will be able to challenge and reject EU legislation if they can muster a 55 percent majority among the 28 member states under a "red card" system. The EU's current "yellow card" system - using a term taken from football - only allows parliaments to demand an explanation of EU laws. An EU official said this simple majority mechanism meant all member states would be put on an equal footing - for example Malta would have as much say as Germany's Bundestag. Economic powerhouse Germany is often criticized for supposedly bullying smaller member states who lose out under the EU's qualified majority system.

### Migration/welfare curbs

Cameron's demand to curb welfare benefits to EU citizens working in Britain for four years is the biggest sticking point, with critics seeing it as undercutting the bloc's core principle of freedom of movement. The draft concedes there is a "pull factor" whereby differing social security systems attract workers from less well off member states, distorting the single market where all are meant to be equal. Accordingly, there will be an "alert and safeguard mechanism that responds to situations of inflow of workers... of an exceptional magnitude over an extended period of time".

Crucially, a member state can apply such a mechanism for up to four years but the text notes that such limitations should be gradually reduced over that period. The provision will apply to all member states, who will have to ask for clearance in the European Council and the European Commission, the bloc's executive arm, before going to a qualified majority vote of EU states. However, in practice EU officials say they expect only Britain to qualify and to apply. On this issue, Tusk stressed in his letter the need "to fully respect the current treaties, in particular the principles of freedom of movement and non-discrimination" — AFP

## AMERICANS PACKING CLASSES ON HOW TO SURVIVE SHOOTING

**WESTERVILLE:** Study your surroundings. Find exits. Identify makeshift weapons. Americans are gleaning those tips and others as they pack classes on how to react to and survive a shooting. Such training is already common at schools, colleges and businesses, but sessions for the general public are the next step in confronting fears of mass violence that have been around for years and, for many, came to a head after the 1999 Columbine High School shootings. Police have offered the "awareness training" in Livonia, Michigan, and Douglasville, Georgia, while more than 600 people have attended classes taught by the Potter County Sheriff's Office in Amarillo, Texas, beginning about three years ago.

Public demand increased dramatically after the mass shooting in December that killed 14 in San Bernardino, California, said Lt. Scott Giles, a class instructor in Amarillo. "This is really just something that was born out of necessity," Giles said. "Active shooter events just continue to happen." Potter County is one of several sheriff's departments that provide training based on the CRASE curriculum: Civilian Response to Active Shooter Events. CRASE teaches an approach dubbed ADD: "Avoid" the situation by getting out, "Deny" by barricading inside a room, and as a last resort, "Defend" by fighting back.

A class offered by Westerville, a Columbus suburb, filled up so quickly that a second had to be scheduled for later this month. The city of about 38,000, with a per capita income well above the rest of Ohio, regularly

tops lists of the country's best suburbs. "We just feel the world has changed. There's evil out there," said retiree Tom Madine, 67, who attended the first Westerville class last month with his wife, Sue Madine, along with dozens of others. People today understand that such threats are real and could happen in their own communities, said Police Chief Joe Morbitzer. Officers teach a "Run, Hide, Fight" curriculum similar to ADD. "Part of the issue is that people don't know how to avoid becoming victims," Morbitzer said. "In today's society that's bad, that you've got to practice victim avoidance, but you have to." At the Jan. 28 Westerville class, officers Dan Pignatelli and John Jeffries emphasized "situational awareness."

They mixed practical tips - for instance, the best exit in an emergency is not always the way you came in, and if you're hiding, always turn the lights off - with case studies from the 1999 Columbine shooting, the 2007 Virginia Tech killings and others. As a last resort, a weapon could be as near as the closest chair, pair of scissors or blunt object, they said. "You've got to have a game plan," Jeffries, a 31-year police veteran, told the audience. His comment was part of a bigger point both instructors drove home throughout the two-hour class: that people must overcome inaction when something bad happens. Instructors in Ohio and elsewhere don't take a position on whether people legally allowed to carry a gun should intervene to stop an attacker. But they worry about what happens once police arrive. — AP

## GERMAN-RUSSIAN TIES FEEL COLD WAR-STYLE CHILL OVER RAPE CASE

**BERLIN:** Moscow's intervention in an alleged rape case involving a German-Russian girl has heightened suspicions in Berlin that it is trying to stir up trouble, with a view to weakening Chancellor Angela Merkel. The case of the 13-year-old, named only as Lisa F, became the focus of political intrigue after she told police that she had been kidnapped in east Berlin last month by migrants who raped her while she was held for 30 hours.

Senior German officials believe Russia is trying to erode public trust in Merkel using immigration, an issue which has badly damaged her opinion poll ratings and divided European Union governments over who should accommodate asylum seekers pouring in over the past year. By undermining Merkel, who has taken a tough line on the Ukraine crisis, Moscow hopes to destabilize Europe and create a vacuum into which it can project its own power, they say.

"There is a Russian attempt to strengthen disunity in the EU and to work with anti-European, right-wing populist parties," said one senior official, speaking on condition of anonymity. The Kremlin could not immediately be reached for comment. The teenager's case blew up into a diplomatic row last week when Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused the German authorities of "sweeping problems under the rug". Berlin warned Moscow not to exploit the case "for political propaganda". The Berlin public prosecutor's office has since said the girl spent the 30 hours with people she knew, and that a medical examination had shown she had not been raped.

But the waters were muddied long enough to allow Lavrov to intervene in the case of Lisa F, who German media say is a dual national who moved



**German Chancellor Angela Merkel**

with her family to the country in 2004. "The refugee crisis and the Lisa case have allowed (Moscow) to exploit more strongly groups like Russian Germans, and to play with Germans' angst and insecurities," said Stefan Meister of the German Council on Foreign Relations, a think tank. The case has provoked outrage among Berlin's Russian community and Russian media have reported extensively on it. Russians protested in Bavaria at the weekend, after about 700 people had demonstrated in front of Merkel's office, some holding banners reading "Our children are in danger" and "Today my child, tomorrow yours".

### The end of truth

The case has fomented popular anxiety. "The end of the truth," ran a headline in the latest edition of Der Spiegel magazine, above a picture of Merkel and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Spiegel quoted the chief of BfV Germany's domestic security agency, Hans-Georg Maassen, as saying Russia was using KGB-style "old measures" of misinformation and destabilization. At the same time, Putin is trying to charm Germans. Last month, he gave an interview to the mass-selling daily Bild, saying he wanted to work with Europe against terrorism. Meister said this was "to serve the wish among the (German) elite and parts of the population that Russia is showing a readiness to compromise." Russia is pursuing its policy of misinformation, as Germany sees it, at a crucial time for the EU. The refugee crisis is stretching it to new limits and EU leaders believe they have just weeks to get their act together.

At the centre of the turmoil is Merkel, still the EU's most powerful leader. If she falters, the risk is Europe falters. "The aim is to weaken the EU," the senior German official said. "Moscow is targeting the strongest, most stable country - Germany. Of course it is in the interest of this Russian government to weaken Merkel as the leader of this country." Another senior German official added: "The EU cannot allow third parties to split the union." Merkel, who enjoyed record high ratings early last year, has looked increasingly isolated as dissatisfaction has grown with her welcoming attitude towards people fleeing conflict and economic hardship in the Middle East and Africa. A poll last week showed 40 percent of Germans wanted her to resign over her refugee policy. — Reuters