

CZECH LEADER: EU MUSLIMS 'IMPOSSIBLE TO INTEGRATE'

PRAGUE: Czech President Milos Zeman, known for his fiery anti-migrant comments, said yesterday that it was almost impossible to integrate the Muslim community into European society. "The experience of Western European countries which have ghettos and excluded localities shows that the integration of the Muslim community is practically impossible," Zeman

said in a televised interview. "Let them have their culture in their countries and not take it to Europe, otherwise it will end up like Cologne," he added, referring to the mass New Year's Eve assaults on women in Germany and elsewhere. "Integration is possible with cultures that are similar, and the similarities may vary," pointing out that the Vietnamese and

Ukrainian communities had been able to integrate into Czech society. Zeman, a 71-year-old left winger and the first-ever directly elected president of the Czech Republic, has repeatedly spoken out against the surge of migrant and refugee arrivals in Europe. Earlier this month, Zeman claimed the influx was masterminded by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood which

uses money from several states to finance it in a bid to "gradually control Europe". Late last year, Zeman called the surge in refugee numbers "an organized invasion," urging young men from Iraq and Syria to "take up arms" against the Islamic State (IS) group instead of running away. More than one million migrants reached Europe

in 2015, most of them refugees fleeing war and violence in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, according to the United Nations refugee agency. But few asylum seekers have chosen to stay in the largely secular Czech Republic, an EU and NATO member of 10.5 million people, with the majority heading to wealthier Germany and other western EU states. —AFP

PRISONER RELEASE HELPS OBAMA BLUNT CRITICISM

WASHINGTON: The surprise release of five Americans held in Iran has helped a vulnerable President Barack Obama put his political foes on the back foot. On a day when the White House took the politically unpopular step of unfreezing up to \$100 billion dollars in Iranian assets, the administration pulled an ace from its sleeve.

After 14 months of stop-start secret talks between senior Iranian and US officials, Tehran announced the release of four Americans in exchange for seven Iranians being released in the United States. A fifth American, identified as Matthew Trevitick, was also released as a separate but "associated goodwill gesture." A senior US administration official said the timing of the two developments was coincidental. The swapped group included Americans Jason Rezaian, a Washington Post journalist, and Saeed Abedini, a Christian pastor from Idaho.

Republican air horns

Both men have become causes celebres for Republicans who oppose Obama's strategy of engagement with Iran. When a deal was reached last summer to significantly scale back Iran's nuclear program in return for sanctions relief, Obama was pilloried for leaving Rezaian and others languishing. Republican hopeful Ted Cruz - a Christian conservative has long demanded Abedini's release as one precondition for talking to Tehran. In a sign of how successful Republican criticism has been, ahead of "implementation day" much of the focus was on sanctions and Iran's return to the global economy.

Critics argued that the windfall would be used by Tehran to fund militants like Hezbollah or Yemen's Houthi rebels. Less noted was a report from international inspectors, also on Saturday, that precipitated sanctions relief. The IAEA reported that Iran, after decades of massive investment, had hobbled its own nuclear program. Republican attacks on Obama's policy of engagement had intensified this week as 10 American sailors were detained in the Gulf by Iran's hardline Revolutionary Guard Navy, but not before being paraded

in front of the cameras. The White House and its allies gamely pointed to the sailors' quick release as evidence that diplomacy is working.

It was an argument they reprised upon news that five more Americans would be released. "For all the bluster and bombast fashionable in some quarters, today's events underscore how important-and under-appreciated-diplomacy is," said David Axelrod, a long-time Obama advisor. Democratic presidential hopeful Martin O'Malley sent his own "memo" to Republican candidates. "Diplomacy beats carpet bombing," he said.

'Problematic aspects'

Republicans responded to the prisoner release with slightly more tempered criticism than had been seen in recent days. "We don't know the details of the deal that is bringing them home. It may well be that there are some very problematic aspects to this deal," said Cruz, referencing Abedini by name. Florida Senator Marco Rubio said he was happy for the families of the captives, but accused the Obama administration of "incentivizing" the detention of Americans by agreeing to a swap of seven Iranians imprisoned in the United States.

"It tells us all we need to know about the Iranian regime, that they take people hostage in order to gain concessions and the fact that they can get away with it with this administration," he said. "I think this created an incentive for more governments to do this around the world." Republican frontrunner Donald Trump, who has long portrayed himself as a master negotiator, questioned whether it was a good deal. With both Iranians and Americans heading to the polls this year, it may be too early for either side to declare victory.

According to Richard Nephew, a former US diplomat who negotiated with Iran, hardliners on both sides will be trying to "demonstrate that they remain 'tough' on their adversaries in the other capital and to appease their domestic hardliners." At the same time there are multiple points of possible friction between Tehran and Washington. —AFP



SOUTH CAROLINA: Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump speaks at the South Carolina Tea Party Convention, Saturday, Jan. 16, 2016, at the Springmaid Beach Resort in Myrtle Beach. — AP

TRUMP TREADS AMONG EVANGELICALS IN SEARCH FOR HOLY CHRISTIAN VOTES

REAL ESTATE MOGUL CAN'T RECITE SINGLE BIBLE VERSE

WASHINGTON: Manhattan billionaire Donald Trump, a pro-abortion Republican until recently, appears to have little in common with evangelical Christians. But he is increasingly gaining their support as he openly courts this key voting bloc. Just two weeks out from the Iowa caucuses, Trump will speak today at Liberty University, a private school in Lynchburg, Virginia and an evangelical bastion. The visit coincides with a holiday commemorating civil rights leader Martin Luther King. Speaking at the university has been a rite of passage for conservative presidential candidates from Ronald Reagan in the 1980s to Ted Cruz, Trump's main Republican rival, who launched his campaign there in March. Cruz, a Texas senator whose father is a Cuban-born evangelical preacher, already enjoys strong support from the evangelical community.

Trump and Cruz are locked in a tight race in Iowa, which on February 1 becomes the first state to vote for party nominees. News that Trump, known more for womanizing, an extravagant lifestyle and bombastic rhetoric than for piety, will speak on campus triggered threats of student protests. Evangelical voters typically support candidates that are conservative on social issues, an area of weakness for Trump.

According to polls, nearly two-thirds of evangelical Republicans say a candidate's position on abortion is the most important issue during their voting decision. But Trump, 69, who during his political life has been a Democrat and an independent, is only a recent convert to the "pro-life" anti-abortion position prevalent among evangelical Christians. In recent weeks Trump has

stressed his own faith as he stepped up efforts to reach out to this critical Republican voter group. "I am an evangelical. I'm a Christian. I'm a Presbyterian," he said last month. And when asked recently about his favorite book, Trump simply responded: "the Bible." But the real estate mogul can't name a single verse. Winning over the evangelical voting bloc could set Trump on a path to become the Republican Party's presidential nominee.

Ready to say anything

About 70 percent of Americans describe themselves as Christian, and among Christians one in four say they are evangelical Protestants, according to a Pew Research Center study on religion. "It's quite mandatory for a Republican to get the support of the evangelicals," said Baylor University professor Lydia Bean, author of "The Politics of Evangelical Identity."

Trump, she said, "has absolutely no arguments. That's what is interesting." The reality TV star "has zero claim to be a Christian leader, absolutely zero. Behind the scene, I think that a lot of leaders don't want to support him, they'd rather prefer Ted Cruz," she said. "That's why he has to attack. Donald Trump doesn't care, he can literally say anything to get what he wants."

Trump is ready to battle Cruz on his own turf, and is not shy about launching personal attacks. In late December, Trump proclaimed: "Not a lot of evangelicals come out of Cuba," a thinly veiled attack on Cruz and his father, Rafael Cruz. Trump has also questioned whether Cruz, who was born to an American mother in Canada, can even run

for president. This strategy to play offense is already paying dividends.

An early January NBC News/SurveyMonkey poll gave Trump 35 percent support among evangelicals, just behind Cruz but well ahead of retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson, a Seventh Day Adventist. Trump is taking advantage of the lack of unity among evangelicals, whose leaders have been unable to publicly choose a candidate among a crowded Republican field that also includes Florida Senator Marco Rubio and ex-pastor Mike Huckabee.

The evangelical voter base feels forgotten by national leaders in Washington and is attracted by anti-establishment candidates like Cruz and Trump. Trump has an especially high anti-establishment ranking as he has never served in any public office or in the military.

Cruz may have fought the Republican establishment but he remains a US senator-in other words, a much-criticized Washington politician. Trump's anti-Muslim diatribes find resonance among evangelicals, a group that according to the Pew Research Center has the least favorable opinion of Muslims in the United States.

"It's an advantage" for Trump, Bean said. "Unfortunately, for most of the evangelicals, attacking Muslims is the moral thing to do and it is a very good point for him. So yes, we can imagine that he will give some new comments on that." And if evangelical leaders don't necessarily want him to represent Republicans come the November general election, many "are afraid to attack Donald Trump because he's popular with the base," Bean added. — AFP



WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State John Kerry pauses while speaking to journalists about his negotiations with Iran upon his arrival from Vienna at Joint Base Andrews. —AP

NANNY NIGHTMARE: CHINESE PAIR IN COURT OVER BRUTAL MURDERS

PARIS: It started with a nannying job and ended with the parents chopped up in the bathtub: A Chinese couple go on trial in France Tuesday for a double murder worthy of a film plot. The baffling case first came to light in June 2012 when two women jogging in the Vincennes forest east of Paris stumbled upon a human leg "cut off at the ankle," according to a judicial source. Two days later, a dog dug up part of a human torso.

Efforts to find the rest of the bodies were in vain, and all investigators could determine was that the body parts belonged to an Asian woman and man. The discovery of the remains in the popular park came at the same time as Luka Rocco Magnotta, a Canadian convicted of killing and dismembering a Chinese student, was reported to have fled to Paris. In an unusual twist, a Chinese couple turned themselves in to police just over a week after the macabre discovery, and admitted killing another Chinese couple, Ying Wang and her husband Liangxi Xu. The woman, Hui Zhang, said she had been the couple's nanny.

She told police how one night several weeks earlier, she had found their two-year-old son Lucas dead, asphyxiated in his sleep. She and her partner Te Lu decided to offer the child's parents money to try to get them not to report the boy's death. They invited the parents to their home, but said their plans quickly went awry faced with the fury of the grieving couple. A fight broke out and the nanny said she grabbed a small axe and slashed at the couple, who eventually fell to the floor, dead. Hui Zhang and Te Lu argue their actions were self-defense, saying the parents had attacked them with a butcher's knife. Te Lu was seriously injured in the fight. Hui Zhang said she put the two bodies in the bathtub and cut them up with an electric saw, putting the washing machine on to hide any noise. Then she and her partner got rid of the body parts, hidden in dustbin bags, and carefully cleaned the apartment.

The couple's confession led police to find further human remains in a dustbin bag in the forest, but not the body of the child, Lucas. Hui Zhang said she threw his body, as well as the rest of the remains, into dustbins. The couple-both aged 34—arrived in France in 2004. Psychological experts say Te Lu had no criminal leanings and Hui Zhang was "extremely intelligent" and dominated her husband. — AFP

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