

EU LEADERS SEEK UNITY AFTER TUSK ROW

BRUSSELS: EU leaders sought yesterday to patch up deep divisions over the bloc's post-Brexit future, a day after an unseemly spat with Warsaw over President Donald Tusk's re-election underscored a lack of unity. The Brussels meeting—held without British Prime Minister Theresa May—aims to draft a declaration that leaders hope to unveil with great fanfare at a summit in Rome later this month to mark the EU's 60th birthday.

But unity is at a premium as the EU enters its seventh decade as big guns like France and Germany squabble with eastern countries over how the bloc should function when Britain pulls out. Paris and Berlin favor a "multi-speed Europe" in which some member states can deepen integration faster than others but Eastern nations, led by Poland, oppose it for fear of being locked out and left behind. European leaders have stressed the need to pull together as the European Union comes to terms with Britain's seismic decision to leave the bloc, as well as a more assertive

Russia and a less friendly United States.

According to a draft of the proposals seen by AFP, the EU 27 will "work together to promote the common good on the understanding that some of us can move closer, further and faster in some areas, keeping the door open to those who want to join later." The EU will be "an undivided and indivisible" union that "acts together whenever possible" the document said. The wording clearly prioritizes a "multi-speed" Europe and could spark further anger from countries like Poland who are loathe to see EU heavyweights go it alone.

The push to forge a more collective future for Europe was overshadowed by the clash with Poland over Tusk's re-election as head of the European Council, which groups the bloc's political leaders. Most of the 28 leaders—Britain still being a member—had hoped to push through Polish ex-premier Tusk's re-election on Thursday with a minimum of fuss so they could concentrate on a host of other chal-

lenges. Instead, they ran into outright opposition from the staunchly eurosceptic Polish government which cast the only no vote against 27 in favor. Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydlo accused her EU partners of setting a "dangerous precedent" by railroading their pick over the opinion of the candidate's home government.

Szydlo, whose right-wing eurosceptic Law and Justice party has nursed a long and bitter enmity with the centrist Tusk, blocked the summit's final statement in response. "It's not acceptable that one member says 'I don't want that', and then the other 27 are paralysed," said Luxembourg Prime Minister Xavier Bettel as he arrived for the talks yesterday. Britain's May, who left Brussels after the first day of the summit, said she wanted to "get on with" leaving the European Union—and her fellow EU leaders agreed. The EU summit was May's last before her self-imposed deadline to trigger the Article 50 withdrawal process by the end of March. — AFP

SHOOTING AT A SWISS CAFE LEAVES 2 ALBANIANS DEAD

GENEVA: Swiss police said yesterday that a shooting by two gunmen at a cafe in the city of Basel was a targeted killing with no "terrorist" motive. The assailants dressed in dark clothes burst into Basel's Cafe 56 at around 8:15 pm late Thursday and fired several rounds, according to police in the picturesque city on the Rhine river. The three victims were all Albanian nationals, including two dead aged 28 and 39, while a 24-year-old was seriously injured, police said in a statement. A bullet hole pierced one of the cafe's windows. Terrorism is "excluded" as an element of the crime, which appeared to be a "targeted" attack on the victims, the statement said.

Locals said Cafe 56 has a checkered past. It "was previously an establishment known for its links to the drug world", one resident told local newspaper Basler Zeitung. "But since the ownership changed several years ago it became an ordinary cafe." After the shooting, the gunmen believed to be in their thirties fled towards the train station, police said, adding that initial evidence suggests they are also from eastern Europe. Public broadcaster RTS has previously reported that Albanian criminal organizations in Switzerland have ties to heroin trafficking, but police stressed that the motive for Thursday's shooting was not immediately clear. — AFP



HELSINKI: Men sit together at a temporary refugee protest camp at the Central railway station in Helsinki, Finland yesterday. Asylum seekers protest against the Finnish government's deportation policy. — AFP

ROMAN CITIZENS HELP MIGRANTS, DEFY LAWS

MIGRANT NUMBERS EXPECTED TO SURGE WITH SEA ARRIVALS

ROME: Volunteers served macaroni in marinara sauce to dozens of migrants outside one of Rome's biggest train stations this week, offering help to travelers largely ignored by institutions on the frontline of Europe's migrant crisis. While other European cities including Milan have set up information centers and shelters for migrants, Rome has repeatedly cleared out impromptu camps citing security concerns. "We've had 13 evictions," Andrea Costa, director of the Baobab Experience group of volunteers, said before the migrants settled in for a cold night.

To keep from being cleared out yet again, volunteers cook meals at home and bring them to a bare plaza outside Tiburtina station where tents are set up at 9 pm and taken down in the early morning. There are now 50 migrants staying here, mostly from Africa, as they attempt to reach other European countries. That number is expected to soar this summer with sea arrivals to Italy up 60 percent already this year after setting a record last year. "With boat arrivals at this pace, in a little while we'll have hundreds of people to take care of," Costa said.

Baobab saw between 500 and 1,000 migrants per day last summer, and volunteers have helped almost 63,000 migrants over the past two years with no state funding - only donations. Robel Tesfit, a 27-year-old Eritrean-Ethiopian who everybody calls "Bob", arrived in Italy by sea in 2015, hoping to reach Britain where he wanted "to play for Manchester United". He never made it to Britain, and returned to Rome where he was granted asylum. Now he uses his knowledge of Italian, Arabic, Tigrinya and Amharic to help Baobab volunteers, who gave him food, shelter and advice on his journey.

Pointing to the men and women lining up for pasta, he said: "When I arrived, I was the same as them." While Italy has shelters to house 175,000 asylum seekers, it does not fund structures for migrants in transit, in part because the European Union wants to stop migrants from moving on, not help them to do so. EU law says they must seek asylum in the country where they first set foot. At the end of last year, Rome set aside about 60 beds in a nearby Red Cross centre for travelers and officials say they want to renovate a hotel near the station to provide beds for about 100 more. — Reuters

UN ACCUSES TURKEY OF 'SERIOUS' ABUSES

GENEVA: The UN yesterday accused Turkish security forces of committing serious abuses during operations against Kurdish militants in southeast Turkey after a regional ceasefire collapsed in July 2015. A report from the United Nations' rights office details evidence of "massive destruction, killings and numerous other serious human rights violations committed between July 2015 and December 2016 in southeast Turkey". "Government security operations" have targeted more than 30 towns and displaced 355,000 to half a million people, mostly Kurds, the report said. The outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has waged an insurgency against Turkey since 1984, though the violence was contained during the truce agreed in 2013.

But fighting resumed when the ceasefire fell apart in summer 2015. Satellite images of areas affected by the latest unrest "indicate an enormous scale of destruction of the housing stock by heavy weaponry", the report said, with some neighborhoods "razed to the ground". In Cizre, a mainly Kurdish town on the Syrian border, residents described the devastation of neighborhoods as "apocalyptic", the UN said. In early 2016, nearly 200 of the town's residents, including children, "were trapped for weeks in basements without water, food, medical attention and power before being killed by fire, induced by shelling," it said. — AFP