

GUNFIRE HEARD IN I COAST CITIES IN GRIP OF MUTINY

ABIDJAN: Gunshots rang out early yesterday in the Ivory Coast cities of Abidjan and Bouake amid a four-day-old mutiny by ex-rebel soldiers demanding government bonuses, AFP journalists and witnesses said. In the economic capital of Abidjan, gunfire was heard at two military camps in Akouedo in the east of the city, which together form the country's largest military barracks, a nearby resident said. Sustained gunfire also rang out in the second-largest city of Bouake, where one person died on Sunday from bullet wounds.

Access roads into Akouedo were closed, preventing residents from the east of Abidjan from entering the city, an AFP reporter said. Shots were also heard from the Gallieni camp in the centre of the city. Mutinous former rebels often fire in the air to express their anger over the non-payment of

bonuses by the government, an issue which sparked the mutiny in Bouake on Friday.

The African Development Bank advised its employees in Abidjan to stay at home as "the security situation" was "not clear for the moment." The armed forces chief of staff, General Sekou Toure, said in a statement Sunday that "a military operation is underway to re-establish order" and made a televised appeal to the disgruntled soldiers to return to barracks.

Deal on bonuses

Under a deal negotiated with the government in January after a mutiny by the ex-rebels, they were to be paid bonuses of 12 million CFA francs (18,000 euros) each, with an initial payment of five million francs that month. The remainder was to be paid

starting this month, according to rebel sources. But the government has struggled to pay the soldiers the promised money. In Bouake, the mutinous former rebels were in control late on Sunday and appeared determined to press on with their protest despite the threat of sanctions by military chiefs.

"We want the money, that's all! There's nothing to discuss," said one of them. Bouake was the epicenter of the January mutiny, which triggered months of unrest. The city served as rebel headquarters after a failed 2002 coup which split Ivory Coast in half and led to years of unrest. The world's top cocoa producer and former star French colony has since been slowly regaining its credentials as a West African powerhouse and a haven of peace and prosperity.

The current round of trouble began when on Thursday a soldier presented as a spokesman for

some 8,400 former rebels said in a televised ceremony that they wished to apologize to President Alassane Ouattara for the mutiny and were giving up their demand for huge payouts. But this seemed to be viewed with skepticism by many of the former fighters. "We don't know if the delegates who were sent to Abidjan (for the ceremony) betrayed us, if they are corrupt or if they were taken hostage over there," said one mutineer in Bouake, Sergeant Yacouba Soro.

"But we have not renounced, that's clear." Ivory Coast has an army of around 22,000, but falling cocoa prices have severely cramped the government's finances. Last year, the government unveiled an ambitious plan to modernize the military, part of which would involve the departure of several thousand men, particularly ex-rebels, who will not be replaced.—AFP

ITALY BUSTS MAFIA CLAN, CATHOLIC ASSOCIATION IN MIGRANT SCANDAL

68 ACCUSED OF EXTORTION, FRAUD, EMBEZZLEMENT

ROME: Italy has broken up a mafia ring accused of infiltrating one of the country's largest migrant reception centers and capitalizing on asylum seekers with the help of a Catholic association, police said yesterday. The Arena clan, a family belonging to the powerful 'Ndrangheta crime syndicate, allegedly made a fortune by supplying services for the centre at Isola di Capo Rizzuto and siphoning off money from the state destined for the migrants.

"Over 500 agents overnight arrested 68 people... accused of mafia association, extortion, carrying illegal weapons, fraud, embezzlement to the detriment of the state, (and) theft," police in Catanzaro, a city in Calabria, said in statement. Their investigation revealed "that the clan controlled, for profit, the management of the reception centre" at Isola di Capo Rizzuto which has held up to 1,500 migrants at a time for over a decade.

Police arrested Leonardo Sacco, the 35-year-old head of the Catholic Misericordia association which runs the centre, who has boasted of links to high-powered political figures. Local priest Edoardo Scordio was also detained in the sting.

Cash for spiritual guidance

"Some 32 million euros (\$35 million) went

straight into the clan's pocket," assistant prosecutor Vincenzo Luberto said, adding that Scordio had received 150,000 euros for offering "spiritual guidance" to the migrants. Police say the Arena clan, through Sacco, awarded contracts for services such as the centre's food supplies to associations it set up specifically for the purpose, as well as to other 'Ndrangheta families.

It also provided food services to the reception centre on Lampedusa, the Italian island which for several years was the frontline of the migrant humanitarian crisis, the biggest influx in Europe since World War II. The head of the country's anti-mafia commission, Rosy Bindi, said the sting was "an important result in the fight against the 'Ndrangheta and the infiltration of mafia in the management of migrants."

About 175,000 people are currently living in reception centres, where the state provides food, clothing, Italian lessons, psychological support, health care and a small amount of pocket money. Italy's finance ministry has estimated the 2017 budget for migrant reception at three billion euros, depending on how many people are rescued in the Mediterranean and brought to the country. More than 45,000 people have arrived so far this year, a 44 percent increase from the same period in 2016.

Ghost migrants

Raffaele Cantone, Italy's anti-graft chief, said the mafia infiltration at Isola di Capo Rizzuto "is unfortunately, I believe, just the tip of the iceberg, and certainly not a one-off case". The Calabrian centre had long been on the authorities' radar: In 2015 Italy's L'Espresso magazine published an investigative report alleging that managers at the camp were stealing funds earmarked for migrants and making money by starving them. "If the organization was supposed to provide 500 meals, it provided 300 and the rest went hungry," prosecutor Nicola Gratteri said.

The Crotona prefecture said in 2014 that it appeared the official number of people recorded at the centre was grossly inflated, with management pocketing funds from the state for "ghost" migrants. A health inspection in 2013 revealed that asylum seekers were being given miserly portions of out-of-date food, and that the centre was illegally hosting 70 unaccompanied minors who went barefoot and slept in a hangar with only two toilets.

The Arena clan hit the headlines in 2012 after police seized assets from them worth 350 million euros, including one of Europe's largest wind farms.—AFP

RUSSIAN STUDENTS FACE SPECIAL LECTURES OVER ANTI-PUTIN VIEWS

MOSCOW: Russian student Sergei Chaikovsky was expecting an ordinary history lesson when he entered the classroom at his high school in Siberia. But instead his teacher launched a stinging verbal attack against him for attending an anti-Kremlin protest in a special lecture on the dangers of "extremism" in the country. "Fascist," "lackey of the Anglo-Saxon nations" and "traitor"—the teacher did not mince his words in blasting the 18-year-old student for joining an anti-corruption rally in March organized by top opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

"In front of the whole class, he said that it was his job to make sure my classmates didn't turn out like me," said Chaikovsky, who secretly filmed the lesson at his school in the city of Tomsk and posted it online. "It was unethical. He wanted to humiliate and intimidate me." Chaikovsky told his headmistress about the lesson but she dismissed it on local television as "simply a teacher's hysterical reaction." This, however, is no isolated case as authorities in Russia appear to be getting jittery over youth discontent ahead of presidential elections next year.

Numerous schools and universities have held classes or lectures attacking Navalny after thousands of his supporters took part in the nationwide protests on March 26 in the biggest show of anger against President Vladimir Putin in years. Striking about the demonstrations were the large numbers of school pupils and students present who have grown up under Putin's nearly 18 years in power and were willing to risk detention to voice their anger. "I'm really happy that a generation has been born in the country who want to be citizens, who aren't afraid," Navalny said in court, a day after being detained at the Moscow protest.

Attitude to extremists?

Across the country students have reported being press-ganged into lectures warning them of the perils of supporting those opposed to Putin. In the Volga city of Samara, more than 3,000 students were last month forced to attend a lengthy conference titled "No to extremism!", where speakers warned the March protests could turn into an armed movement, a person who attended said. One of the speakers told students that "to fight extremism" they

must support the region's governor Nikolai Merkuskin from the Kremlin's ruling party, whom Navalny has accused of corruption.

At another event in the city, priests lectured students on the dangers of "revolutionary movements," citing the "collapse of the country" after the Russian Revolution in 1917, one of the students told the opposition movement Open Russia. In Russia's second city of Saint Petersburg, students at the Polytechnic University also had to attend a similar conference and fill in a questionnaire, a local journalist said. "Are you willing to help police? What is your attitude to extremists? Do you think that the media foment extremism?" said the questionnaire, obtained by AFP.

Debating more

But the attempts to reeducate the youths sometimes appear to backfire. In the city of Vladimir, 180 kilometers from Moscow, cell phone footage emerged showing university students challenging lecturers after they were forced to watch a film accusing Navalny of being a "fascist". "Why are you scaring us with war and revolution?" shouts one student before others raise examples of high-level corruption and demand to be shown opposition videos.

Andrei Rudoi, a history teacher in the town of Dzerzhinsk, around 450 km east of Moscow, has witnessed a rise in political engagement among his students and says authorities seem keen to tamp it down. "I've seen this in my teaching. Over the last year, more and more of my students have started talking about politics," Rudoi said. "They are debating more, they go to meetings and take part in political groups—and that makes the authorities afraid," the 26-year-old teacher said. "Whether at national or regional level, there must have been an order issued to calm school and university students down."

Morality lecture

Some schools and universities have simply tasked teachers with persuading their students not to go to protests. In the southern town of Volzhskiy, one school pupil recounted how they were supposed to have an IT lesson but the teacher said that, instead, they would discuss the importance of political stability in Russia.—AFP



DUNDALK, Ireland: European Commission (EC) member in charge of Brexit negotiations with Britain, Michel Barnier, center, is shown a border road in Co Monaghan between Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.—AFP

BREXIT SPARKS DEBATE ON UNITED IRELAND VOTE

DUBLIN: Britain's vote to leave the EU has sparked a debate after Irish nationalists called for a referendum on reunification less than two decades after Northern Ireland's historic peace deal. After last June's Brexit referendum outcome, Irish nationalists instantly began clamoring for a so-called border poll to allow people in Northern Ireland to vote on Irish reunification. When Britain leaves the European Union its only land border with the bloc will be between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, which people can currently cross freely.

The impact of such a change has prompted Brussels to make Ireland one of its top priorities for Brexit negotiations, less than 20 years since a hard-won peace accord ended decades of violence in Northern Ireland. EU leaders at a summit in Brussels last month said Northern Ireland would be automatically welcomed back into the bloc if it ever voted to become part of the Republic, although the prospect is currently far off despite rallying cries from Irish nationalists.

Ireland's Foreign Minister Charlie Flanagan told the BBC this week that the Brexit vote "may well" have made a referendum more likely but dismissed the prospect saying: "That time is not now." "I don't believe that a debate now on the merits or otherwise of a united Ireland is timely or appropriate. I don't believe that we should conflate the issue of the reunification of Ireland with the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union."

Brexit changed everything

Brexit has however brought back reunification as a talking point, in a society where bitter political, historical, cultural and socio-economic divisions between pro-British, mainly Protestant, unionists and pro-Irish, mainly Catholic, nationalists are still readily apparent. In the United Kingdom's June 2016 referendum on its EU membership—in which British, Irish and Commonwealth residents could vote—some 52 percent voted to leave the bloc.

But within Northern Ireland, on a 63 percent turnout—the lowest in the kingdom—some 56 percent voted for the UK to remain in the EU. The Irish nationalist party Sinn Fein, once the political arm of the Irish Republican Army paramilitary group, has called for a border poll in the next five years. "Brexit has changed everything," Sinn Fein European Parliament member Matt Carthy told a recent party gathering.

"The prospect of the north being dragged out of the European Union against the democratically expressed wishes of people there has horrified citizens across the political spectrum," he said. The possibility of a referendum is provided for in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which ended three decades of armed conflict in Northern Ireland.—AFP



ADANA: In this file photo a German Air Force cargo plane maneuvers on the runway after it landed at the Incirlik Air Base, in the outskirts of the city of Adana, southern Turkey.—AP

GERMANY SLAMS TURKEY'S REFUSAL TO LET MPs VISIT TO NATO BASE

BERLIN: Germany yesterday slammed Turkey's refusal to allow its lawmakers to visit a NATO base near Syria and warned it could move its troops elsewhere. Berlin described as "unacceptable" Ankara's latest ban on a visit to the Incirlik base in southern Turkey, used by international coalition fighting the Islamic State group. Germany has more than 200 troops stationed there, flying Tornado surveillance missions over Syria and refueling flights for partner nations battling IS jihadists.

Germany will now "look into alternative locations" for its military personnel, said Chancellor Angela Merkel's top spokesman Steffen Seibert. Jordan offered "the best conditions", a defense ministry spokesman added, saying it had also looked at Kuwait and Cyprus since Turkey first denied such visits to German MPs for several months last year. The defense ministry spokesman cautioned however that any move would involve shifting hundreds of containers of materiel and would take several months.

Turkey rejected the latest lawmakers' visit because of anger over Germany granting political asylum to some of its military officials since last year's failed coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, foreign ministry spokesman Martin Schaefer suggested. He said Ankara's reason may be "individual decisions of independent German authorities in connection with military members".

Hundreds have sought asylum

German media have reported that over 400 Turkish military personnel, diplomats, judges and other officials and their relatives had sought political asylum in Germany. They fear being caught up in

Turkey's crackdown against those Erdogan blames for the coup—supporters of Fethullah Gulen, a reclusive US-based Islamic preacher who has denied the charges against him.

The vast crackdown has heightened tensions between Turkey and Germany, which is home to a three-million-strong ethnic Turkish population, the legacy of a massive "guest worker" program in the 1960s and 1970s. Both countries have sparred over a range of issues, including civil rights in Turkey, press freedom and the military campaign against Turkey's Kurdish minority.

Relations were strained further during the referendum campaign in April to boost Erdogan's powers, and since the arrest of Turkish-German journalist Deniz Yucel on terror-related charges in February this year. Another row last year, centered on a sensitive historical question, had led Turkey to deny German lawmakers the right to visit Incirlik for several months. The German parliament had voted in June to recognize the Ottoman Empire's World War I-era massacre of Armenians as a genocide.

After the vote, a furious Erdogan accused German lawmakers of Turkish origin of having "tainted blood". Armenians say up to 1.5 million people were killed between 1915 and 1917 as the Ottoman Empire was falling apart. Turkey rejects the claims, arguing that 300,000 to 500,000 Armenians and as many Turks died in civil strife when Armenians rose up against their Ottoman rulers and sided with invading Russian troops. That row was only resolved after Merkel made clear the Armenia resolution was a political statement and not legally binding.—AFP

GOLDEN DAWN MP EJECTED FROM PARLIAMENT AFTER SHOVING MATCH

ATHENS: A leading member of the far-right Golden Dawn party was ejected from the Greek parliament yesterday after shoving a rival MP, prompting a showdown with other parties. "You are contaminating parliament. Get out," acting parliament chairman Makis Balaouras shouted at the neo-Nazi party's lawmakers after ejecting Ilias Kasidiaris. Kasidiaris became aggravated when conservative New Democracy parliament speaker MP Nikos Dendias passed in front of him as the neo-Nazi lawmaker addressed the chamber.

A parliament source said Kasidiaris shoved Dendias and then other Golden Dawn MPs emptied their water glasses on him. Parliament police were summoned to remove Kasidiaris, and Dendias later called the fracas a "huge insult" to Greece's constitutions and laws. "I hope that this incident will prove useful to society," Dendias told the chamber. Kasidiaris

had already been ejected from a parliamentary briefing in February after insulting the defense minister.

Golden Dawn lawmakers have repeatedly used offensive language in parliament towards representatives of other parties. They are also suspected of ordering rank-and-file members to attack migrants and political opponents. Kasidiaris and several other senior party officials, including the group's founder, Nikos Michaloliakos, are on trial in connection with the murder of a leftist rapper by a Golden Dawn member in 2013.

One of Golden Dawn's leading members, Kasidiaris in 2012 had punched a female Communist MP during an election debate. A court acquitted him in 2015 because he had not inflicted "serious injury", and because the victim did not register a complaint within the required time limit.—AFP

BOKO HARAM KILLS SIX FARMERS IN NE NIGERIA

KANO, Nigeria: Boko Haram jihadists have killed six farmers who were working on their land near the northeast Nigerian city of Maiduguri, civilian militia members and locals said yesterday. Gunmen on motorcycles attacked the group who were preparing their fields for the rainy season outside Amrawa village, 16 kilometers from the Borno state capital, on Saturday.

"The gunmen attacked the farmers with machetes as they were clearing their farms that have been taken over by weeds in preparation for the rains which start in a few days," said Ibrahim Liman, a civilian militia member. "They seized six farmers and slaughtered them while the rest fled." Liman's account was supported by Masida Bunu and Rahis Musa, who live in

the village. Some residents raised the alarm and the militia pursued the attackers to the nearby village of Sojori.

"The vigilantes fought the terrorists and killed four while the rest fled," said Liman. At least 20,000 people have been killed and more than 2.6 million made homeless in northeast Nigeria since the start of Boko Haram's Islamist insurgency in 2009. Nigeria's government and military maintain the jihadists are a spent force but sporadic attacks and suicide bombings pose a constant threat, particularly in remote areas. Saturday's attack again underlines the vulnerability of rural communities at a time when the authorities have been encouraging the displaced to return and rebuild their lives.—AFP



MOSCOW: This file photo shows riot police officers detaining a man during an unauthorized anti-corruption rally in central Moscow.—AFP