

International

Eritrea leader welcomes Ethiopia PM's olive branch, raising hopes

Hope in the Horn as Eritrea-Ethiopia thaw takes shape

ADDIS ABABA: Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki raised hopes of a breakthrough in one of Africa's most intractable conflicts yesterday by describing recent peace overtures from arch-enemy Ethiopia as "positive signals". Speaking at a Martyrs' Day event in the capital, Asmara, 72-year-old Isaias said he was sending a delegation to Addis Ababa to understand the position of new Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and "chart out a plan".

It was the first response from Eritrea, one of Africa's most closed and authoritarian states, to Abiy's shock pledge this month to honor all the terms of a peace deal that ended a 1998-2000 war between the Horn of Africa neighbors. Adding to the positive mood music, Abiy's chief of staff said the prime minister welcomed Isaias's statement and promised that the Eritrean delegation would be welcomed "warmly and with considerable goodwill".

The war drew comparisons to the First World War, with waves of soldiers forced to march through minefields towards Eritrean trenches where they were cut down by machinegun fire. As many as 80,000 are believed to have been killed in total. Disputes over the still-militarized border, in particular the town of Badme, have kept the two sides at loggerheads, with Asmara using the Ethiopian threat to justify its hefty military spending and long-term conscription.

However, Abiy, a 41-year-old former soldier who has outlined a series of radical reforms since taking over in March, stunned Ethiopians this month by saying he was prepared to honor international rulings that put Badme, which Ethiopia has refused to cede, in Eritrea. Isaias said the concession, which is likely to meet opposition from hardliners in Ethiopia's ruling EPRDF coalition, stemmed from the desire of both countries to reach long-term

"peace and harmony". "The positive signals issued in these past days can be seen as an expression of this popular choice. We can say that the positive messages which have been circulating of late are signs of the people's choice," he said, according to the official translation of his speech on state EriTV television. "Outside myopic considerations of public relations stunts and advantages, we will send a delegation to Addis Ababa to gauge current developments directly and in depth as well as to chart out a plan for continuous future action."

'Constructive'

There were no further details of the mission, including its date or remit, although Eritrea's ambassador to Japan, Estifanos Afeworki, described it on Twitter as "constructive engagement". Ethiopia's prime minister "thanked & congratulated President Isayas Afeworki for the positive response to Ethiopia's #peace and reconciliation overture," Fitsum Arega, Abiy's chief of staff, said on Twitter. "He also expressed his readiness to welcome warmly

Cost of conflict weighing on both countries

and with considerable goodwill the Eritrean delegation to Addis. #Eritrea #Ethiopia." Eritrea has no diplomatic relations with Ethiopia, although it has an embassy in Addis as part of its representation to the African Union, whose headquarters are in the Ethiopian capital.

In parliament this week, Abiy acknowledged that the tensions were inflicting a heavy economic cost on both countries and said Addis should no longer hide this price tag from the Ethiopian people, another stunning departure with the past. Although welcomed across East Africa, Abiy's concession met opposition from veterans of the war still living in Badme and ethnic Tigrayans living in Tigray province, which lies along the Eritrean border. Some



BADME: The graves of the Ethiopian soldiers who died during the battle against Eritrea are painted in the colors of the Ethiopian flag in Badme. —AFP

Tigrayans, who have long been the leading ethnic group in the EPRDF coalition that has run the nation of 100 million for more than two decades, are concerned their interests will be hurt if Badme is surrendered.

Residents told Reuters a protest had already taken place in the Irob district in Tigray over the decision by Abiy, a member of the Oromo ethnic group, Ethiopia's largest. After Abiy's Badme announcement, the Tigrayan

People's Liberation Front, a regional political party that had dominated the EPRDF until Abiy took office in April, came out swinging against any concessions to Asmara. "The Tigrayan People's Liberation Front will not take part in any process that harms the interests of the people of Tigray," it said in a statement, demanding that any withdrawal be linked to additional concessions from Eritrea. —Reuters

Immigration: A deeply divisive topic in Europe

PARIS: The arrival of massive numbers of migrants in Europe over the past few years has stirred fierce debate in many EU member states, and a number of governments have started to take a much tougher line as public opinion becomes increasingly hostile to the new arrivals. Meanwhile, the number of migrants arriving via the Mediterranean has tailed off. After peaking at more than one million in 2015, the number fell to 362,000 in 2016, 172,000 in 2017 and just 37,000 so far this year, according to EU and UN figures. Another point of friction is how the burden can be shared across the EU—especially when large swathes of the population are increasingly hostile to the idea of taking more migrants.

Germany

German Chancellor Angela Merkel allowed more than one million asylum seekers into the country in 2015, a decision that was welcomed at the time but has fuelled anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe's biggest economy. Merkel's CDU party suffered stinging losses in last year's general election, and she only just managed to hang on to power, while the far-right anti-immigrant, anti-Islam AfD party won seats in parliament for the first time. The CDU's Bavarian sister party, the CSU, has since threatened to shutter German borders if Merkel does not adopt a harder position on migration, an impasse that could topple her government. An opinion poll last week showed that nearly 90 percent of Germans favor a tougher stance on migration.

Italy

The main gateway into Europe for refugees arriving by sea, Italy is struggling under the burden placed on it by the so-called Dublin rules, which require migrants to apply for asylum in the first country they enter. An anti-migrant coalition between Italy's far-right and anti-establishment parties was sworn in to government earlier this month after March's election. One of its first decisions was to refuse to allow the Aquarius rescue ship carrying 630 migrants to dock in Italy. Italy has seen around 700,000 migrants arrive since 2013. Since January 1, the number of new arrivals has fallen by 78 percent to just over 15,600, according to data compiled by the interior ministry.

France

France, one of the countries where many migrants have said they would most like to settle, has also experienced tensions, particularly at its border with Italy which authorities have attempted to close. The majority of French people have said they are opposed to illegal immigration, with 56 percent saying they were against the Aquarius being allowed to dock in France. Nearly half of the 630 migrants on board, mostly of African origin, want to apply for asylum in France. Last year asylum applications in France rose to more than 100,000, a 17.5 percent increase.

Austria

Conservative Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, who claims to have helped shut down the so-called Balkan route for migrants in 2016, said Tuesday the debate in Germany could help accelerate efforts to find a Europe-wide solution. Austria received 200,665 applications for asylum between 2013 and 2017, equivalent to 2.3 percent of its population of 8.7 million. After peaking at 88,160 in 2015, the annual figure fell to 24,715 in 2017.

Belgium

Belgium awarded refugee or equivalent status to around 40,000 people between 2015 and 2017, according to official data. The government has toughened its stance, particularly under the state secretary for asylum and migration, Theo Francken, who recently said he was opposed to all illegal immigration in the EU and that only refugees who have been sent from UN-administered camps in war zones should be allowed in. —AFP

Death threats 'become routine' in toxic Brexit debate

LONDON: As a crucial Brexit battle comes to a head in the British parliament yesterday, MPs are weighing not just their own views but also their personal safety amid increasingly toxic public debate. Pro-EU lawmakers challenging the government's Brexit strategy have received repeated death threats, and at least one MP recently decided not to rebel on a bill for fear of reprisals. One member of Prime Minister Theresa May's Conservative Party is under such threat that they had to be accompanied by six armed undercover police officers at a public engagement, according to colleague Anna Soubry.

A leader of the pro-EU Conservative faction, Soubry has faced numerous death threats and on Monday had to call in police to investigate a new one. However, she said the intimidation only strengthened her resolve to vote against the government yesterday, when MP's vote on plans in the EU (Withdrawal) Bill to give parliament a greater say in the final Brexit

deal. "Death threats becoming routine & making many of us more resolute #StandingFirm #MeaningfulVote," Soubry tweeted on the eve of the vote.

During a debate on the same bill last week, Soubry revealed that she knew of at least one MP who declined to vote as they wanted "because of threats to their personal safety". Three people have been convicted over the abuse against Soubry, one of whom was jailed for eight weeks. All three referenced Jo Cox, an opposition Labor MP who was shot dead by a neo-Nazi sympathizer just days before the June 2016 referendum on Britain's EU membership. One of them, a 72-year-old retired engineer, admitted sending racist and threatening emails to a total of six MPs, which included accusations of "treachery" over Brexit.

'Can't do our job'

Online abuse is sadly a fact of life for MPs: Labour MP Jess Phillips, an outspoken feminist, recently reported how she received 600 rape threats in one night. Real-life threats are also too common. Last week, a 23-year-old neo-Nazi admitted in court to planning to assassinate Labour MP Rosie Cooper. But the 2016 EU referendum was particularly divisive and tensions continue to flare up around key

Hardline ally in new attack against Merkel

BERLIN: Chancellor Angela Merkel's hardline allies yesterday took aim at her backing for a new euro-zone budget. German media reported, opening up another front in their attack against her. Merkel's Bavarian sister party CSU had on Monday already given her an ultimatum to curb migrant arrivals or risk pitching Germany into a political crisis that could rattle Europe.

But the CSU now also take issue with an agreement announced Tuesday by Germany's and France's leaders to set up a common budget for the euro-zone which will fund investments in poorer member states. "We were always very skeptical about a euro-zone budget. Simply because it's a form of additional budget," Bavaria's state premier leader Markus Soeder told Sueddeutsche Zeitung. "Is it separate from the German legislature? Does it mean that the fundamental stability of the euro will be challenged? All that must be clarified," he said.

Austria's Kurz raises specter of new migration 'catastrophe'

VIENNA: Austria's Chancellor Sebastian Kurz yesterday raised the specter of a 'catastrophe' similar to the events of 2015 if Europe does not agree a common response on migration. Kurz's comments came as he and his ministers held a special joint session in the Austrian city of Linz with their Bavarian counterparts from the German CSU party, which is currently locked in a battle over migration policy within the government of Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin.

"We can't wait until we have a catastrophe like the one in 2015," Kurz said, referring to the migrant crisis

Ahead of a meeting with Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz in Linz yesterday, Soeder confirmed that his party will call a coalition panel to examine the issue. Germans are deeply opposed to any "transfer union" that sees their taxes flowing to euro-zone laggards. And Merkel herself had initially appeared lukewarm to the idea of a budget for the bloc. But she has since offered a key concession in backing French President Emmanuel Macron's call for such a fund. However, she said in a recent interview that the total sum should be at the low tens of billions range—far less than what Paris had hoped for.

'Don't mix finance and asylum'

The CSU's attack on the euro-zone reform proposal came in a week already marked by a deep rift between the Bavarian party and Merkel over her liberal refugee policy that allowed more than a million asylum seekers to enter Germany since 2015. Merkel's decision had proven divisive, and voters in September's elections handed her poorest score ever and gave seats for the first time to the far-right anti-Islam AfD.

Several high profile crimes by migrants—including a deadly 2016 Christmas market

of 2015-16, which saw more than 150,000 people seek asylum in Austria, a country of 8.7 million. A row over migration policy in Germany between Merkel and her CSU interior minister Horst Seehofer has shaken the stability of the government in Berlin. Kurz insisted he didn't want to take sides in an "internal German debate" but welcomed the fact that immigration was once again being discussed by EU leaders ahead of a summit later this month.

"If the discussion in Germany has an upside, it's that there's now a new dynamic on the European level, and that there's now a bigger chance that we finally see action in the EU," Kurz said. Without naming Merkel he also aimed a shot across her bows by making clear what he thought were the results of her decision to welcome refugees to Germany in 2015.

Those who opened the borders in 2015 "are responsible for the fact that we have border controls between



LONDON: Pro-EU supporters hold placards during an anti-Brexit demonstration outside the Houses of Parliament in London yesterday. —AFP

events, notably votes in parliament. Victims of abuse have laid some of the blame at Britain's rightwing newspapers, which have dubbed anyone challenging the Brexit process "Enemies of the People" or "Mutineers". Last

week, pro-EU Labor lawmaker Chuka Umunna highlighted a Daily Express headline warning MPs to "ignore the will of the people at your peril". "This is a threat, pure and simple," he said. —AFP



BERLIN: Chancellor Angela Merkel sits next to German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer as they attend a ceremony commemorating the victims of displacement on Germany's refugee day, at the German Historic Museum (DHM) yesterday. —AFP

attack by a failed Tunisian asylum seeker—have also fuelled public anger. Germany's Interior Minister Horst Seehofer of the CSU has been one of the fiercest critics of Merkel's refugee stance. The frustration

border police to turn back migrants. —AFP

Austria and Bavaria, between Austria and Hungary, between Austria and Italy, and that the situation could get even worse", he said. Kurz, who hails from the centre-right People's Party (OeVP) went into coalition with the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) after an election last year in which both parties made a clampdown on immigration a central theme.

'Common conviction'

Kurz was foreign minister under the previous government and often boasts of his actions to close the "Balkan route" for migrants in 2016. The head of Bavaria's state government, Markus Soeder, emphasized that Munich and Vienna "have a common conviction and position" on the issue. Kurz has said he intends to make migration a key theme when Austria takes up the EU's rotating presidency at the beginning of July and has been busy seeking allies for his stance. —AFP