

International

Italy defiant as migrant ship stranded in Mediterranean

German vessel in limbo with 230 migrants aboard

ROME: Italy defiantly declared yesterday that its ports were closed to foreign-flagged rescue ships as German charity vessel Lifeline lay off the coast of Malta in limbo with more than 230 migrants aboard. Malta—which is also refusing to take in the boat in a new diplomatic standoff with Italy—nevertheless said it had sent in humanitarian supplies. “The Lifeline, an illegal ship with 239 immigrants on board is in Maltese waters,” Italy’s far-right Interior Minister Matteo Salvini wrote on Facebook. “These boats can forget about reaching Italy, I want to stop the business of trafficking and mafia.”

Salvini’s tough talk came on the eve of an emergency mini-summit in Brussels to address the divisive issue of how the EU can tackle the renewed influx of migrants and refugees seeking a new life in Europe. Just three weeks in office, Italy’s new populist government is digging its heels in on campaign promises to stop the influx of migrants, threatening to seize rescue ships or barring them from its ports. The crisis has also caused ructions in Germany, with Chancellor Angela Merkel facing a rebellion from her coalition allies over her policies.

Meanwhile, more than 400 migrants were rescued in three operations off the coast of Spain yesterday, just days after Madrid took in the more than 600 rejected by Italy and Malta. And the Libyan navy said five people died and nearly 200 were rescued off its coast while trying to cross the Mediterranean.

Threat to seize boats

The Italian government has said both the Lifeline, run by German NGO Mission Lifeline, and another ship Seefuchs, run by another German charity Sea-Eye, — would be seized and directed to Italian ports for investigation “into their legal status”. Rome accuses the Lifeline of having acted in contravention of international law by taking on board migrants while the Libyan coastguard was intervening. Earlier this

month Salvini triggered an EU-wide row when he barred the French charity-run Aquarius rescue ship, carrying 630 migrants, from docking in Italy.

Malta also refused to take it in and the ship was later welcomed by Spain. Salvini said Friday that Malta should open its ports to the Lifeline, adding: “Clearly, the boat should immediately be impounded and its crew arrested.” But Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat said the Lifeline “broke rules” by ignoring Italy’s directions and should move towards its original destination “to prevent escalation”. “Despite having no responsibility #Malta just provided humanitarian supplies” while its armed forces carried out the medical evacuation of one passenger, he said.

As the two neighbors squabbled, a Danish cargo ship carrying 113 migrants was stationed near the Sicilian port of Pozzallo waiting for instructions from Italy. The Alexander Maersk changed course after picking up a distress call Friday, a spokesman for Maersk Line said, without specifying where the migrants were rescued.

Awaiting diplomatic solution Mission Lifeline denied Italy’s accusations regarding the rescue in Libyan waters, saying it was the best equipped vessel to help. “We are waiting for a diplomatic solution, discussions

are under way between different states to host the Lifeline and those rescued,” the organization’s representative in Germany, Axel Steier, said. Steier said 14 women and four children were among those on board. The issue of migration was thrust to the forefront of the EU agenda after Italy turned away the Aquarius. But the Aquarius defiantly vowed to continue its work and an AFP photographer on board said yesterday that it was currently responding to distress call in Tunisian waters.

EU tensions -

Italy hardline stance comes at a time of deep EU tensions on immigration. Today’s mini-summit is supposed to prepare for a



AT SEA: This handout picture taken off the coast of Libya and received from the German NGO ‘Mission Lifeline’ shows migrants boarding a container ship of Danish shipping company Maersk Line after they were rescued from a shipwrecked vessel at sea. —AFP

full summit next week, where 28 EU leaders will discuss plans to overhaul the bloc’s asylum system, which has been under severe pressure since the migration crisis exploded in 2015. German Chancellor Angela Merkel-facing a ferocious political backlash for letting in over one million asylum seekers into Europe’s biggest economy—played down expectations of a quick solution. “We know that no solution will be reached on Thursday and Friday at the level of the 28 member states... on the overall issue

of migration,” she said on a visit to Lebanon. Instead, she said, “bilateral, trilateral and multilateral” deals must be reached to tackle the issue. German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer warned Monday he would give Merkel a fortnight to find a European deal to curb new arrivals, failing which he vowed to order border police to turn back migrants. Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis also said Friday he was ready to start turning away migrants if Berlin and Vienna did so. —AFP

Identifying US troops returned from N Korea may be challenging

WASHINGTON: The US military will face a difficult task in identifying the remains of soldiers missing from the Korean War as the Pentagon prepares to receive them from North Korea in coming days, officials and experts said. US President Donald Trump, who met with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un at an historic summit in Singapore this month, said on Thursday that Pyongyang was in the process of returning the remains of US troops missing from the 1950-1953 conflict.

The Pentagon has said North Korean officials have indicated in the past they have the remains of as many as 200 US troops, and Trump himself has mentioned that figure. US officials expect the remains to be handed over to United Nations Command in South Korea at Osan Air Base near Seoul then transferred to Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii. Once in Hawaii, forensic experts will face the challenge of identifying the remains.

Among the techniques they could use are detective work with old photos, comparing DNA from remains to that of missing soldiers’ relatives and analysis of dental work. A US official familiar with the process said the remains could be co-mingled - meaning not separated by individual - and could include people who were not American. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said it could take months and even years to identify the remains.

Cases of co-mingled remains are the most difficult because they require identifying which skeletal fragments belong to the same person, said Luis Fondebrider, president of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, a non-governmental group that applies forensic science to investigate human rights violations. The degree that bones have broken down is also important, and deterioration, such as from being under soil, can affect whether DNA can be recovered, he said. —Reuters

Romania’s Iohannis announces bid for second term as president

BUCHAREST: Romanian President Klaus Iohannis announced yesterday he will run for a second term at next year’s election, amid rumors that the left-wing ruling coalition wants to impeach him for violating the constitution. “I’m firmly determined to run for a new term as President of Romania,” he said during a visit to the central city of Sibiu, his electoral stronghold. His decision comes at a time of political turmoil, with the ruling coalition reportedly considering the possibility of impeaching him for delaying the dismissal of a top anti-corruption prosecutor.

In a victory for the government, the Constitutional Court ordered the president to sack Laura Kovessi, but Iohannis’ appeal for more time to consider the judgment has angered the party. Iohannis, an ethnic German who hails from the centre-right, became president in 2014 for a five year term after campaigning on an anti-corruption platform. Like much of the opposition, he accuses the ruling Social Democratic Party of attempting to weaken the fight against corruption in Romania, putting pressure on the judicial system and of implementing bad fiscal policies.

The party’s controversial amendments to justice laws and the penal code have provoked street protests in the country. Tensions on the political scene flared this week after chief of PSD Liviu Dragnea, widely acknowledged as the most powerful politician in the country, was sentenced to three-and-a-half years in prison in a fake jobs scandal. The decision came from the Supreme Court and can be appealed. —AFP

Mexico turns page on scandal-stained President Nieto

MEXICO CITY: Six years after he seduced Mexico with his dashing good looks and promises of sweeping reform, President Enrique Pena Nieto leaves a legacy stained by corruption, violence and human rights violations. Charming his way to the presidency in 2012, his soap opera star wife by his side, Pena Nieto sold himself to voters as a fresh young reformer who would reinvent his party—the once-hegemonic Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) — and Mexico along with it.

The PRI had ruled Mexico as a one-party state from 1929 to 2000, until people grew so disgusted with its corruption, cronyism and abuses it had little choice but to allow free elections. Twelve turbulent years later, Pena Nieto, then 45 years old, pulled off what once seemed unthinkable: returning the PRI to power, by promising to restore the stability of the old days but usher in a new era of democracy, transparency and reform.

It all started well for the youthful president with the sleek black hair, who had previously been governor of Mexico state, the country’s most populous: in rapid succession he passed landmark reforms in energy, education, telecommunications, labor and more. The reforms, which touched virtually every aspect of Mexicans’ lives, were essentially a national make-over, designed to give the country a fresh new start and wash away the accumulated grime of seven decades of one-party rule.

George Clooney of politics

Pena Nieto made a splash on the international stage, too: during an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in the Philippines in 2015, infatuated fans coined the Twitter hashtag #APECChotties for him and then newly elected Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. The Economist magazine urged Pena Nieto to “keep it up.” The Washington Post called him “handsome” and “popular,” and CBS News declared him “the George Clooney of politics.”

But as Mexicans prepare to cast their ballots again on July 1, the outgoing president’s popularity is hovering around 20 percent. His chosen successor, former finance minister Jose Antonio Meade, appears to be on track for a drubbing, polling a distant third to fiery leftist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador—who has a double-digit lead—and conservative Ricardo Anaya. Where did it all go wrong?

Bad old days

It did not take long for signs to appear that the bad old days of the PRI were alive and well. Even as the ink was drying on Pena Nieto’s reforms, he and the party were getting mired in a succession of scandals. In 2014, investigative journalists revealed his wife had bought a multi-million-dollar mansion from a government contractor in a suspected sweetheart deal. Then came the string of corruption scandals involving PRI governors, no less than 11 of whom are now on trial, in jail, under investigation or on the run.

The headaches got worse when the drug lord Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman escaped from maximum-security prison in 2015.

Released protesters claim mistreatment by Nicaragua government

MANAGUA: Jailed Nicaraguan protesters said they had suffered beatings and mistreatment in detention following their release Friday after a plea by Catholic bishops, as the death toll in two months of anti-government protests rose to 212. Twenty-six young protesters were freed from jails in Managua and the flashpoint opposition bastion of Masaya in the first release of prisoners since the intervention of the bishops.

The clergy were tasked last month with mediating an increasingly bloody confrontation between the opposition and government. The bishops traveled to the besieged opposition city of Masaya on Thursday “to avoid another massacre” as police and paramilitaries loyal to President Daniel Ortega prepared an assault on opposition-held neighborhoods of the city. They said police commissioner Ramon Avellan committed to end attacks by police and pro-Ortega paramilitaries and release those arrested during the protests.

Bayron Hernandez, 16, said he had been beaten on the head with a rifle butt after he

was arrested by hooded pro-government paramilitaries. “They split my head open with an AK (rifle),” he said after he was handed over to a human rights group at Masaya’s San Miguel church. Evert Padilla, freed from Managua’s El Chipote prison, said he was held on the ground and kicked during an arrest at his home. The 23-year-old spoke after being handed over to Church authorities at Managua Cathedral.

Avellan “told us that he was going to make the call to suspend all harassment” in Masaya, Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes said. “Let’s see if it’s really true,” said Brenes, who led the influential bishops’ mission to the flashpoint city with the Vatican’s envoy to Nicaragua Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag. Masaya, once a stronghold of Ortega’s Sandinista revolution, has been a focal point of protests aimed at forcing him out of office. Last Monday, it declared itself to be in rebellion against his government. At least 23 people have been killed in the city since the unrest began.

Death toll rising

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights said Friday that the death toll during two months of anti-government unrest has risen to 212, faulting Ortega’s government for “serious” human rights violations. “Nicaragua has not fulfilled its international obligations to respect, protect and guarantee human rights in the context of the social protests that began on April 18,” the rights body said in a report after its visit to the Central American country.

“On the contrary, the IACHR found that



MEXICO CITY: In this file photo Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto speaks during a message on the most recent earthquake in Mexico City. —AFP

Though he was recaptured the following year and extradited to the United States, the episode remains a major embarrassment.

Missing students, murders

The darkest stain, however, may be the disappearance of 43 students in the southern state of Guerrero in 2014. The student activists went missing after a clash with local police, in circumstances that remain murky. Mexican authorities say corrupt police handed them over to drug cartel hitmen who killed them and burned their bodies. But a team of independent international forensic investigators who examined the supposed

bonfire site insists that version of events is impossible—leaving Mexicans to wonder what truth could possibly be worse than the alleged cover-up story.

More generally, the violence Mexico is suffering has badly battered Pena Nieto’s image. Awash in bloodshed driven by the war on drug cartels, Mexico registered a record 25,339 homicides last year. “He’s been a total failure” on security, said political analyst Sergio Aguayo of the Colegio de Mexico. “Mexicans can hardly agree on anything, but there’s rare consensus on one fact: Enrique Pena Nieto’s security policy was a failure.” —AFP



MASAYA: A man who had been arrested in recent protests, is embraced by relatives after being released from jail in Masaya, Nicaragua. —AFP

the state response has been characterized by the repression and criminalization of the demonstrators and the social movement they represent, which has resulted in serious violations of human rights,” the 97-page document said. The Washington-based group said more than 1,300 people had been wounded in the unrest. “Thanks to the IACHR for showing the truth of the genocide perpetrated against the people of Nicaragua by the government,” said the Auxiliary Bishop of Managua Silvio Baez.

Canada condemned Ortega’s crackdown on protesters, saying it is devastating the Latin American country and raising regional security concerns. “We condemn the killings of unarmed protesters by state security forces and paramilitary groups and the crackdowns in Managua and Masaya,” Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland said in a statement. Nicaragua’s Foreign Minister Denis Moncada rejected the report as “subjective, distorted, prejudiced and plainly biased.” —AFP