

International

European Parliament chooses new president, completing top EU jobs

Parliament elects an Italian social democrat as new president

STRASBOURG: The European Parliament yesterday elected an Italian social democrat as its new president, filling the final top EU job a day after Brussels named two women to key posts for the first time. Italy's David Sassoli, a 63-year-old former journalist, won the absolute majority of ballots he needed at the second round of voting, seeing off German Green Ska Keller, far-left Spaniard Siria Rego and Czech conservative Jan Zahradil.

The new MEPs elected in May's European polls took office on Tuesday during a brief inaugural session before voting by secret ballot to choose Sassoli as successor to Antonio Tajani, a conservative from Italy. The 751-seat parliament-based in Strasbourg, France-is more fragmented than ever after the May election saw solid gains by the liberals and Greens as well as the far right and eurosceptics.

The vote for president completes the roster of the EU's five most important jobs, with the others settled on Tuesday at the end of three days of negotiation among the EU's 28 national leaders in Brussels. Sassoli's election to a two-and-a-half year term as parliament president-effectively the speaker of the chamber-is a sought-after post by the major

European political families, though less coveted than that of president of the European Commission or European Central Bank.

The EU leaders on Tuesday nominated German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen as commission chief and IMF chief Christine Lagarde to head the European Central Bank, though their appointments still need confirmation. The national leaders also suggested that the chamber's presidency should be shared for the next five years by the Socialists and Tajani's centre-right EPP. Sassoli's election completes the first part of this, but it remains unclear whether he will make way in due course. Von der Leyen is expected to visit parliament in the afternoon to court MEPs, whose approval is needed to confirm her position as commission chief.

'Disappointing'

Germany's Manfred Weber, head of the EPP group, took note of the outcome of the Brussels summit by renouncing a run for parliament head, after having already thrown in the towel in the race for the Commission's presidency. "It is normal, that after two and a half years of an EPP president, now it is up to the

Socialists to present a candidate," Weber told a press briefing in Strasbourg. "We are ready to check with the Socialists for a candidate and to give our support," he said. But the Social Democratic group in the European Parliament, second only to the EPP in terms of seats, put forward Sassoli after criticising the agreements reached between the 28, which it described as "deeply disappointing". They had wanted the commission head spot to go to their leading candidate, the Dutchman Frans Timmermans.

Brexit and Catalonia

On Tuesday, the opening of the Parliament's session was marked by the return of Nigel Farage, a veteran of the EU chamber since 1999, whose Brexit Party MEPs turned their backs when asked to stand for the EU anthem-Beethoven's Ode to Joy-at the start of the session. As Brexit has still not taken place, there are again 73 British MEPs, who will be able to sit temporarily until the divorce goes through. The new deadline is October 31. It also saw the demonstration of some 10,000 Catalans who came to Strasbourg to support three secessionists elected at the end of May but prevented from sitting by Spanish authorities. — AFP



STRASBOURG: Italian MEP David-Maria Sassoli (S&D Group) delivers a speech after being elected new president of the European Parliament during the first plenary session of the newly elected European Assembly yesterday. — AFP

News in brief

Heavy rain prompts evacuation

TOKYO: Japanese authorities have issued evacuation orders for more than one million people as heavy rain hits southern parts of the country, a year after deadly floods that killed over 200 people. Small landslides were already being reported in parts of the affected area, public broadcaster NHK reported. It said a total of 1.12 million people in Kagoshima and Miyazaki prefectures had been ordered to evacuate to shelters, and that landslides had swept away several cars and buried a house in Kagoshima. No injuries have so far been reported, and there were no official details yet on how many people had heeded the warnings to leave their homes. The evacuation order is issued when a natural disaster is highly likely to occur and municipalities repeatedly urge residents to evacuate, although the instruction is frequently ignored. — AFP

US Navy SEAL 'not guilty'

LOS ANGELES: A decorated US Navy SEAL was found not guilty Tuesday of murdering a captive teenage militant in Iraq, the most serious of the charges brought against him during a two-week war crimes trial in San Diego. Edward Gallagher, 40, was likewise acquitted of two counts of attempted murder against Iraqi civilians, but was convicted of posing for a photograph beside the corpse of the captive Islamic State (IS) group fighter. The maximum sentence he could face is four months imprisonment, meaning he is set to walk free following Tuesday's verdict on account of the nine months he has already served in pre-trial confinement. The jury found Gallagher "not guilty of murder, not guilty of stabbing, not guilty of shooting, not guilty of all those things, they found him guilty of taking a photograph," Timothy Parlatore, one of Gallagher's attorney's, told journalists outside the courthouse. — AFP

Militant blows himself up

TUNIS: A wanted militant wearing an explosive belt blew himself up in the Tunisian capital after being surrounded by police, the government said yesterday, but there were no other casualties. The third such incident within a week comes months ahead of an election and at the peak of a tourist season in which Tunisia is hoping for a record number of visitors. Witnesses had told Reuters the man blew himself up in the Intilaka area of the capital, Tunis, after being surrounded by the police. Residents heard a loud explosion. An interior ministry spokesman said police opened fire on the man, whom authorities described as a wanted militant called Ayman Smiri, without giving further details. "Following a long chase, special forces surrounded the terrorist," the interior ministry said in statement. "When forces began shooting, he blew himself up with an explosive belt he was wearing." — Reuters

Italy population shrinks again

ROME: The number of babies born in Italy hit a new record low in 2018, the population shrank and the average age crept higher, national statistics office ISTAT said yesterday. Italy's demographic crisis, with a shrinking population and ageing workforce, is one reason for its chronically stagnant economy, economists say-and the situation is getting worse. Births dropped by some 18,000 to 440,000 last year, the lowest level since the unification of Italy in 1861, ISTAT said, while deaths totalled 633,000. The total population fell by 124,000 to 60.36 million, the fourth straight year of decline, meaning that since 2014 Italy has lost some 400,000 residents, the equivalent of its seventh largest city, Bologna. The anti-austerity government which took office a year ago has boosted welfare spending and vowed to cut taxes in a bid to improve families' stagnant incomes which it says contributes to their reluctance to have babies. — Reuters

Croatians outraged after British soldiers 'terrorise' seaside

ZAGREB: Urinating in the streets, unleashing a fire extinguisher in a cafe and getting into brawls - the UK is probing reports that British soldiers "terrorised" a Croatian seaside resort, media and officials said yesterday. After a military exercise in Croatia, around 100 British soldiers have spent the past ten days partying in Zadar, a city on Adriatic coast, where their rowdy behaviour has outraged locals, local media reported. "Violent, drunk, arrogant - British soldiers terrorise Zadar citizens for days," read a headline from the local daily Slobodna Dalmacija.

The soldiers, most of them reportedly drunk, peed in the streets, fled cafes without paying bills, fought with locals and vulgarly teased women, according to local



Croatia's Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic

media. Croatian police told AFP they had received several complaints over the unruly behaviour and briefly detained five of the British soldiers, who were fined. The British embassy in Zagreb said "investigations are being under-

taken". In a statement, a UK army spokesperson said "We apologise to anyone affected in Zadar".

"We do not tolerate poor behaviour and will deal with anyone who falls short of the Army's high standards appropriately," the statement added. A cafe manager in Zadar told a local newspaper that one of the soldiers "activated the fire extinguisher (while he) was half naked" inside his cafe. "We had to close the cafe and did not manage to clean it yet. No one of them apologised or offered to pay for the damage. They simply left," the man, whose identity was not revealed, told Slobodna Dalmacija newspaper.

The soldiers "behaved like hooligan fans.... I heard they fled several bars without paying, beat one guy, urinated wherever they could," he was quoted as saying. Young British tourists already have a reputation for bad behaviour in Croatia, with previous incidents of travellers vomiting in public or walking around scantily clad have led some resorts to introduce fines. Tourism is a key economic sector for Croatia, which welcomed nearly 19 million visitors last year to its stunning Adriatic coast, which boasts more than 1,000 islands and islets. — AFP



TEXAS: A US Border Patrol agent interviews immigrants after taking them into custody in Los Ebanos, Texas. — AFP

'Dangerous overcrowding' decried at Texas migrant detention centers

WASHINGTON: The inspector general for the US Department of Homeland Security warned on Tuesday about "dangerous overcrowding" in migrant detention facilities in Texas. The report by the agency watchdog came a day after a group of Democratic lawmakers toured detention centers for undocumented immigrants in the state bordering Mexico and denounced "horrifying" conditions there.

"We encourage the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to take immediate steps to alleviate dangerous overcrowding and prolonged detention of children and adults in the Rio Grande Valley," acting DHS Inspector General Jennifer Costello said in a memorandum to acting Homeland Security Secretary Kevin McAleenan.

The report included images taken at several Texas sites, showing dozens of migrants including young children packed shoulder to shoulder into cage-like holding areas or cells. The acting DHS inspector general said one senior manager at a detention facility described the situation as a "ticking time bomb" and raised security concerns for agency staff and detainees.

Costello said her office had toured five Border Patrol holding facilities in Texas's Rio Grande Valley in early June and observed "serious overcrowding and prolonged detention of unaccompanied alien children, families, and single adults." "Specifically, Border Patrol was holding about 8,000 detainees in custody at the time of our visit, with 3,400 held longer than the 72 hours generally permitted," she said. "Of those 3,400 detainees, Border Patrol held 1,500 for more than 10 days."

"Border Patrol's custody data indicates that 826 (31 percent) of the 2,669 children at these facilities had been held longer than the 72 hours generally permitted," she added. Children at three of the five Border Patrol facilities had no access to showers and few spare clothes while two facilities had not provided hot meals, only sandwiches. Most single adults had not had a shower in a month and were being given wet-wipes. Some detainees were suffering from constipation after a diet consisting only of bologna sandwiches. According to Border Patrol figures, 223,263 people were detained in the Rio Grande Valley sector between October 2018 and May 2019, up 124 per-

cent from the same period a year earlier. US Democratic presidential hopefuls denounced the conditions depicted by the report. "No human being deserves to be treated like this," Senator Kamala Harris wrote on Twitter. "This is abuse, it's dehumanization, and it's not who we are as a country."

'Nothing short of horrific'

"Sickening. Human beings are being herded like animals right now in our country," Senator Elizabeth Warren tweeted, while Senator Bernie Sanders wrote that those in charge of the detention centers "do not respect basic human rights." Mayor Pete Buttigieg tweeted that he was "outraged by these photos," and Senator Corey Booker wrote that "this report is nothing short of horrific." The report comes as the White House and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials pushed back against criticism from the Democratic lawmakers who toured migrant detention facilities on Monday.

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who visited two such centers in Texas, described the conditions as "horrifying" and said migrants were being subjected to "systemic cruelty." "There's abuse in these facilities," the outspoken Democratic congresswoman from New York told reporters. "They put them in a room with no running water and these women were being told by CBP officers to drink out of the toilet."

White House counselor Kellyanne Conway told Fox News that was an "outrageous claim." "Everybody who has control over that facility, or control for the Border Patrol, has said that's not true, they've not heard of this," Conway said. CBP deputy commissioner Robert Perez, appearing on CNN, said the detention centers were "never designed to deal with the volume of migrants coming our way" and the Border Patrol is doing its best to deal with "absolutely oversaturated conditions." In addition to criticism over detention conditions, the Border Patrol is also under fire following the revelation of a secret Facebook group for current and former agents that is filled with racist memes and posts mocking migrants. For example, a news story about a 16-year-old Guatemalan who died in Border Patrol custody elicited comments such as "Oh well" and "If he dies, he dies." — AFP

Black French MP leads fight against racist online trolls

PARIS: Laetitia Avia, a black French MP whose proposals to tackle online trolling go before parliament yesterday, suffers so many racist insults on Twitter that she once thought an abuse-free day was due to a technical problem. "It happened once or twice when I really didn't receive anything and I wondered if there was a bug," the former corporate lawyer told AFP in an interview. "It's incredibly rare that I don't get anything." Since swapping her successful private sector career to be part of President Emmanuel Macron's ruling party in 2017, Avia has regularly publicised the most abject abuse and death threats she receives online.

"It's to educate people," explained the 33-year-old who has family roots in Togo in West Africa and grew up in a low-income suburb of Paris. "They can't imagine what it's like." "I sometimes think that I should lend my Twitter account to people from time to time so they can see for themselves." But her real fightback, which could have consequences beyond France, began yesterday when French MPs start debating a draft law to tackle hate speech online which she has been preparing for the last year.

Inspired by German legislation that came into force in 2018, she hopes the new law will form the foundation of a wider European push to tackle racism, anti-Semitism, sexism and homophobia peddled by usually anonymous users of social media. Cleaning up the internet, she believes, is the responsibility of her generation, which was the first to grow up with the social media phenomenon. "There's a growing awareness in our society at large. No-one wants to accept the status quo," Avia said. "No-one wants to leave the big platforms to regulate themselves. Self-regulation has failed."

Her draft law proposes two main ways to tackle the scourge of what it terms as "obviously hateful content." The first plank will require social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or YouTube to create a button that will be "accessible, simple and clear" to report abusive messages. The button will be the same across all platforms and should be easy to find - unlike the mechanism to report abuse on German sites, which Avia believes is too difficult to locate. "I want to make the user experience easy," she said, while acknowledging the networks themselves will have to invest in teams of adjudicators to assess, block and remove reported content if necessary. "It's a financial investment, absolutely. That's what we are asking for," she said.

The second major part of the draft law will also increase the liabilities and potential penalties for social networks, who have long argued they are unable to police the billions of people who use their highly-profitable products. The draft law proposes creating a new crime - failing to remove abusive content - and the platforms will have just 24 hours to take down "obviously hateful" messages or videos, or face fines of up to 1.25 million euros (\$1.4 million).

But critics say the law places too much power in the platforms' hands by making them arbiters of online speech - which could lead to the closing down of free speech, as well as tackling abuses. Avia says the role of the French media regulator, the CSA, will be key because it will assess whether companies are being too lax or too restrictive. Offenders could face a potential fine of up to 4.0 percent of global sales. — AFP