

AFGHANS DEMAND EQUAL TREATMENT AS REFUGEES

MYTILENE: In cloistered meetings miles away from the combat zone, European governments have determined that Syrians fleeing their country's civil war should be given precedence over other exiles seeking refugee protection. But on the dock of Mytilene, the port capital of Greece's Lesbos Island, 22-year-old Sajjad wants to tell them they are wrong, and demands equal treatment.

"Of course I am a refugee. Your governments should go to Afghanistan if they think people can live there," he says. Sajjad, who does not want to give his surname, left home in mid-September. "We heard that Europe had opened its borders," he said. When he later learned that Afghans are not included in the EU scheme to share out 160,000 asylum seekers, he didn't know whether to laugh or get angry.

According to the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR), less than 64 percent of Afghans are granted asylum, compared to 75 percent for Syrians, Eritreans and Iraqis. The UN has called for an international effort to repatriate millions of Afghans who have fled the country, arguing that their return could help to stabilize it. Sajjad plans to head for Sweden. "But I'll see which country is prepared to take me in," he adds in broken English.

'We'll camp outside door'

"If they shut the door on us, we will camp outside the door," says Sajjad's nephew Bismillah. "We are numerous and this gives us strength," he adds. Bismillah is no stranger to exile. He may be young but he has already

experienced the life of a child refugee in Pakistan, where his family first fled after leaving Afghanistan.

After Syrians, Afghans are the chief nationality among the over 400,000 people who have landed on Greek shores from neighboring Turkey this year—a tenfold increase from 2014. Like other non-Syrians, they are fingerprinted and given a document ordering them to leave Greece in a month.

On Lesbos, this document earns them the right to buy a ticket off the island. They end up in Athens, frequently sleeping on the street until they can book passage to the border with Macedonia, hoping to pass themselves off as Syrian. Many including Bismillah lie about their age in an effort to win protection as unaccompanied minors. But the play

does not always work.

"Who are you trying to convince that you're 17 years old?" a Greek registration officer is heard shouting at a young Afghan in the migrant camp of Moria, where thousands of non-Syrian migrants are kept behind a double fence and barbed wire.

Screened out

During the summer, when larger numbers of Syrians and Afghans fought for space on Greek islands, there was frequent tension between the two groups. "Ideally you want to see a procedure to screen out those who are not refugees," UNHCR regional spokesman Ron Redmond told AFP. "And in a crisis like this, those screened out would ideally be assisted in going back to their home coun-

tries. You need to look at the specific situation of each family, each individual," he said. To become eligible for the EU relocation scheme, Greece must first satisfy its fellow member states that it can credibly sort out the refugees from the economic migrants. EU border agency Frontex has announced plans to send 600 officers to help staff registration centers on the islands of Lesbos, Samos, Leros, Kos and Chios.

The EU's aim is to have the centers ready by the end of November. But what is going to happen to thousands of non-Syrian migrants who will inevitably be sent back to Greece by other EU states is less clear. "We are not going to turn our country into a concentration camp for refugees," Yiannis Moutzalas, junior interior minister for migration, said last month. — AFP



NEW DELHI: In this Friday, Oct 9, 2015 photo, a Hindu temple priest Ram Mangal Das caresses a cow at his 'Gaushala' or shelter for cattle. "We should drink cow's milk, not its blood," Das said. "If someone attacks mother cow, or eats it, then this sort of reaction should happen," he said of the killing of a Muslim farmer who was rumored to have slaughtered cows, adding "It is justified." — AP

AS HINDU PARTY LEADS INDIA, BEEF GROWS MORE POLITICAL

'WE SHOULD DECIDE IF HINDUS WANT TO FIGHT MUSLIMS OR POVERTY'

NEW DELHI: The legislator was full of outrage when he arrived in the north Indian village days after the killing of a Muslim farmer who was rumored to have slaughtered cows. A Hindu mob had smashed through the heavy wooden door to the man's home, then beat him to death with his wife's sewing machine.

The legislator's anger, though, was not about the killing. Instead, Sangeet Som was furious that men had been arrested in the attack in the village, just 30 miles from New Delhi. Som, a member of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, called the arrests "atrocities on innocent villagers." As for the family of the dead man, he dismissed them as "those cow killers."

A few days later, a half-dozen BJP politicians slapped around a legislator on the floor of a state legislature, angry that he had served beef at a party. In south India, six members of a leftist student political party were suspended after their attempt to serve beef curry on campus to protest the farmer's killing set off a melee. On Friday, violence swept another northern village amid rumors that a cow had been slaughtered, with a crowd, who had chased down two Muslim men they suspected of cow-killing, clashing with police and burning several cars. Some villagers and police were injured, but no major injuries were reported.

Political tool

Cows have long been sacred to Hindus, worshipped as a mother figure and associated since ancient times with the god Krishna. But increasingly,

cows are also political. They have become a tool of political parties, an electioneering code word and a rallying cry for both Hindu nationalists and their opponents.

On Thursday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi broke his silence on the late September mob killing of Mohammad Akhlaq, saying communalism threatened the country's economic growth. "We should decide if Hindus want to fight Muslims or poverty. Muslims must decide if they want to fight Hindus or poverty," Modi said at a campaign rally in Bihar state, where elections start next week. "It is unity, communal harmony, brotherhood and peace that will take the nation forward."

But Modi also rose to power as Hindu nationalist, and since his election last year hard-line Hindus have been demanding that India ban the sale of beef — a key industry within India's poor, minority Muslim community. In many Indian states, the slaughtering of cows and selling of beef are already either restricted or banned.

Distrustful of Muslims

In the past, Modi has spoken out angrily against India's beef industry. "Brothers and sisters, I don't know whether this saddens you, but my heart screams out" at the rise of Indian beef exports, Modi said in a 2012 speech. "I am unable to understand why you are silent, why you are taking this lying down." Since becoming prime minister, though, he has danced delicately between an intense desire to be seen as a tolerant international statesman — the

sort of man who is greeted warmly by presidents and jokes around with Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg — and the need to satisfy a political base that is deeply distrustful of Muslims and other minorities.

That dance has, his critics say, emboldened extremist Hindus and given rise to everything from a series of church vandalisms to the recent mob killing. Criticism of cow slaughter, some say, is often simply code for anti-Muslim sentiments. India, a country of 1.3 billion, is about 81 percent Hindu and 13 percent Muslim. "I am afraid the hotheads will get busier. They are greatly encouraged and their strength is rather strong," said Inder Malhotra, a political analyst and former editor of the Times of India newspaper. "One of the reasons this prime minister keeps quiet about it, is that he doesn't want to lose these Hindus, because they are a very strong proportion of his supporters."

He criticized Modi for not speaking more strongly against the recent mob attack, and for his silence about comments like Som's. "Modi has not said a word against those in his party who have been making the most obnoxious statements," Malhotra said. Authorities are still investigating after the arrests of eight villagers for Akhlaq's death, but announced Friday that the meat found in his home turned out to be mutton — not beef. Meanwhile Som, the Hindu firebrand and avowed strict vegetarian, has denied media reports that he once owned part of a major Indian meat export company. The company exports goat and buffalo meat, but apparently not beef. — AP

COMMUNIST HEAD OLI ELECTED AS NEPAL PM

KATHMANDU: Nepal's parliament yesterday chose communist leader KP Sharma Oli as prime minister, tasked with unifying the quake-hit country after a new constitution triggered deadly protests, a border blockade and a nationwide fuel shortage.

Oli, of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist), defeated by 338 votes to 249 former premier Sushil Koirala, who stepped down from the top job as required by the constitution adopted on September 20.

"I announce that respected member KP Sharma Oli has been elected to the post of Nepal's prime minister," Speaker Subash Chandra Nembang told parliament to loud cheers and applause as lawmakers raced to congratulate him. Oli is tasked with quelling protests over the new constitution and ending the blockade which has led to national fuel rationing, as well as pushing ahead with reconstruction after the earthquake in April killed thousands. He is known as a moderate within his party despite its communist leanings, and has vowed to work with other parties to develop the impoverished country. "My request is that all the parties must work together and move forward in consensus," Oli told lawmakers in an address before the vote. "There are groups that are dissatisfied with the constitution, we have to address their demands," said Oli.

"Our country has been devastated by the earthquake. I will accelerate the reconstruction process," the 63-year-old also said. The current government is accused of stalling on rebuilding after the quake killed nearly 8,900 people and left more than half a million homeless. The constitution is aimed at bolstering the Himalayan country's transformation to a peaceful democracy after decades of political instability and a civil war.

Enormous challenges

The main political parties were spurred into agreeing on the charter, after years of bickering, following the earthquake. But the constitution, the first to be drawn up by elected representa-

tives, triggered a blockade by protesters at a vital border checkpoint, cutting off fuel supplies from India and sparking a nationwide shortage. Protesters from Nepal's southern plains are incensed about the charter, which will divide the country into several federal provinces.

More than 40 people have been killed in clashes between police and the protesters representing ethnic minorities, who say the new federal structure will leave them under-represented in parliament. The historically marginalized groups include the Madhesi and Tharu minorities, who mainly inhabit the southern plains, along the border with India. The constitution is the final stage in a peace process that began when Maoist fighters laid down their arms in 2006 after a decade-long insurgency aimed at abolishing the monarchy and creating a more equal society.

During his speech to parliament, Koirala, from the main Nepali Congress party, pledged to work with Oli if he lost the vote. But Ameet Dhakal, editor in chief of online news portal Sepopati, said Oli still faced an uphill battle in coming months. "There are enormous challenges for the new prime minister. The public will also have high expectations. He will have to resolve the crisis the country is facing," Dhakal told AFP.

Oli will also have to mend ties with giant influential neighbor India which is worried about instability on the border and has expressed concerns over the constitution. Oli has accused India of being behind the blockade that started on September 24 to protest against the charter. As trucks remain stuck at the frontier, Nepal has been forced to ration supplies nationwide as long lines form at petrol stations. India, which supplies all fuel to landlocked Nepal, has denied involvement in the blockade and instead urged all parties to enter talks to resolve the crisis. Nepal's economy—already weak before the disaster—was hit hard by the quake. It is forecast to grow around three percent this fiscal year, the lowest level in eight years. — AFP



KATHMANDU: Nepal's newly-elected Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli (center) greets supporters as he leaves the parliament. — AFP

MYANMAR'S OPPN SIGHTS DIRTY TRICKS IN CAMPAIGN

YANGON: A sparsely populated cluster of Indian Ocean islands has become the unlikely focus of allegations that Myanmar's government is spiking the chances of democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition party in next month's landmark general election. Both the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and the Nobel peace laureate's National League for Democracy (NLD) have fielded candidates on the Coco Islands, an archipelago off Myanmar's west coast and the country's smallest parliamentary constituency. But NLD parliamentary nominee Win Min has been prevented from going to the Coco Islands, where the main installation is a naval base, making it almost impossible for him to canvas for votes in the Nov 8 poll.

The allegations undermine the semi-civilian government's insistence that the election will be Myanmar's first free and fair poll for 25 years, a milestone in its transition from military dictatorship to democracy that will be closely watched by the international community. "I believe if they let me go there, I will win," said Win Min during an interview in Yangon, where he has recently been racking up a large mobile phone bill making calls to voters on the islands about 300 km away. The Coco Islands are a restricted area and transport links are sparse. A military plane flies every two weeks from Yangon, while a navy ship and a state-owned boat also make occasional trips. Win Min said he made plans three times to visit the islands since the campaign started on Sept. 8, once by boat and twice by plane. His scheduled boat trip was abruptly canceled while he was waiting to board. He was told there was

no space on two subsequent flights to the island.

Win Min told Reuters that he rented a boat and had planned to set sail on his own yesterday to the islands, a 36-hour journey from Yangon, but the government withdrew permission for the trip. Win Min's USDP rival, The Swe, who until August served as commander-in-chief of the navy, has been able to campaign freely on the island.

Easy win

Although there are no reliable opinion polls, the USDP — which includes many members of Myanmar's former junta — is expected to be beaten in many parts of the country by the NLD. However, the Coco Islands seat is considered to be a relatively easy win for the ruling party because of the development projects it has rolled out there and because many of the voters are military personnel or government officials. Western diplomats say the party has used a variety of tactics to trip up NLD candidates, but most overtly in seats where it wants to ensure a victory for its prominent leaders. Three senior USDP officials at party headquarters in the capital, Naypyitaw, declined to comment on why only their candidate was allowed access to the Coco Islands. The Swe could not be reached for comment. The election commission says it has no say over whether the NLD candidate can visit the islands, and the decision is up to the Yangon regional government. Officials in the government of the country's main city could not be reached for comment. — Reuters

TALEBAN SUICIDE BOMB TARGETS NATO CONVOY

KABUL: A Taliban suicide car bomber struck a NATO convoy in central Kabul yesterday, triggering a powerful explosion in an attack that comes two weeks after the resurgent militant group overran a key northern city. The rush-hour bombing, which sent a plume of smoke into the sky, wounded at least three civilians including a child, as the Taliban

ramp up attacks on government and foreign targets.

The intensity of the blast sent an armored vehicle crashing into a sidewalk, its front end badly mangled, and left the area littered with charred pieces of twisted metal. "The incident took place while a suicide car bomber detonated an explosive-packed car in the Joy Shir

area... of Kabul city," the interior ministry said. "The target of the attacker were the foreign forces convoy." Security forces cordoned off the area as ambulances with wailing sirens rushed to the scene, but officials said the human toll of the blast was limited. "The ministry of interior condemns in the strongest terms the suicide attack which resulted in the wounding of three civilians," the ministry said. The Kabul police said the wounded included a woman and a child.

A NATO spokesman in Kabul confirmed that their convoy came under attack but said the international coalition was still gathering further information. The emboldened insurgents have stepped up attacks around Afghanistan since they launched their annual summer offensive in late April. The Taliban captured the northern city of Kunduz on September 28, their most spectacular victory in 14 years.

The seizure of the provincial capital for three days was a stinging blow to Western-trained Afghan forces, who have largely been fighting on their own since the end of NATO's combat mission in December. The Taliban said that yesterday's bombing was carried out to avenge the recent "barbaric bombardment" in Kunduz by foreign and govern-

ment forces. "A Toyota sedan packed with explosives was used in the attack. Two military tanks were destroyed and 12 foreigners were killed," the group's spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said in a statement. The Taliban, toppled from power in a 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan, are known to exaggerate battlefield claims.

Resurgent Taliban

The government claims to have wrested back control of Kunduz city but sporadic firefights continue with pockets of insurgents as Afghan soldiers, backed by NATO special forces, conduct clearance operations. As fighting spreads in neighboring Badakhshan, Takhar and Baghlan provinces, concerns are mounting that the seizure of Kunduz was merely the opening gambit in a new, bolder strategy to tighten the insurgency's grip across northern Afghanistan. Most NATO combat troops pulled out of Afghanistan last year but a small contingent focused on training and counter-terrorism operations remains, including roughly 10,000 American soldiers. NATO forces are themselves under fire after a US air strike on October 3 pummeled a hospital in Kunduz run by Doctors Without Borders (MSF), killing at least 12 staff and 10 patients. — AFP



KABUL: Afghan and foreign soldiers inspect the site of a bomb attack that targeted several armored vehicles belonging to forces attached to the NATO Resolute Support Mission. — AP