

GREATER GLOBAL ACTION NEEDED TO TACKLE THREAT OF TERRORISM

STOCKHOLM: The threat of terrorism and mass migration will grow worse in rich and poor nations without greater global cooperation to tackle the causes of poverty and conflict, leaders of an international forum on peace building said yesterday. The Swedish co-chair of the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (IDPS) said conflict and violent extremism - such as the attacks in Paris and Brussels - coupled with rising migration had changed the global landscape.

Minister for International Development Cooperation Isabella L'vin called for all nations to speed and scale up efforts to tackle the causes of conflict and meet global goals agreed last year to end poverty

and inequality by 2030. Studies show the number of conflicts globally had been stable for the last decade but are now on the rise and 2014 was the most lethal year since the end of the Cold War, she said.

Conflict, poverty and climate change have forced 60 million people from their homes - the highest level since World War Two - with up to 1.5 billion people living in fragile states. L'vin called for a "coalition of the willing" to commit to supporting fragile and conflict-hit states, saying failure to tackle root causes of conflict and poverty would exacerbate world volatility and increase the risk of violence.

"This is maybe the opportunity to see the world is one and we need to work

longterm to help poor people in their countries and to create global security for all of us," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation at the fifth global IDPS meeting. "The refugees that are coming into Europe right now remind us that the war going on in Syria is not so far away ... and we do have the instruments to try to stop new conflicts erupting."

Risks of violence increasing

The IDPS meeting is the first international peace forum since the United Nations' 193 member states agreed last year to 17 global goals to end poverty and promote peace by 2030. United Nations Deputy Secretary General Jan Eliasson said

the world was at a "critical juncture", facing turmoil and risks from various forms of violence as well as "glaring inequality".

"We see civilians continue to pay the highest price in today's crises ... We have to confront these threats together," said Eliasson, a former Swedish foreign minister. But he said there was some good news with peace talks starting for Syria and Yemen and agreement on the U.N. global goals known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). "If we live up to these intentions we could turn a different direction," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. In this new global landscape, L'vin said there was a need for the IDPS to play a stronger, more relevant role. Launched in 2008, its mission

is to find ways through political dialogue to support countries move from conflict to peace and resilience. The IDPS includes more than 40 countries, nine multilateral organisations including the World Bank and the United Nations and a rising number of civil society groups.

L'vin led a renewed commitment by the IDPS to the so-called New Deal agreed in 2011 that outlined five peace and statebuilding goals - legitimate politics, security, justice, economic foundations, revenues and services - with locally driven and locally led processes. "I hope this gives a new injection into the thinking of how we provide development aid and also how we do peacekeeping and peacebuilding," L'vin said. — Reuters



VATICAN: Pope Francis caresses a child as he makes a tour of St. Peter's Square at the end of a Mass for the Holy Year of Mercy on Sunday. — AP

VATICAN EYES POSSIBLE POPE TRIP TO GREECE BUT NO DECISION

VATICAN CITY: Discussions are underway about a possible trip by Pope Francis to Greece as early as next week as the country begins deporting migrants back to Turkey.

Vatican spokesman the Rev. Federico Lombardi said yesterday that no decision had been made but in an email to The Associated Press he said "I don't deny that there are contacts about a possible trip."

A Greek ecclesiastic website, Dogma, reported yesterday that Francis was planning to visit refugees on the Greek island of Lesbos on April 15 along with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Archbishop of Athens Ieronymos. The Holy Synod of the Church of Greece, the decision-making body of the Greek church, said Francis had asked to come and the request had been accepted as it was a humanitarian visit of just a few hours.

A controversial European Union plan to stem the flow of refugees began Monday with more than 200 people deported from Lesbos and Chios back to Turkey. Human rights organizations have denounced the deportations as the undoing of Europe's obligations to protect refugees.

Francis, the son of Italian immigrants to Argentina, has been outspoken about the need for Europe and other countries to open their doors and hearts to people fleeing persecution and poverty.

In his first trip outside Rome, he visited the Italian island of Lampedusa, which has seen thousands of migrants arriving on smugglers' boats from Libya. And recently he celebrated a Mass at the US-Mexico border to pray for Central and South American migrants who died trying to reach the United States.

The Church of Greece said yesterday that Francis had proposed visiting Greece to raise awareness about the plight of refugees "searching for a better future in the European continent."

It said it had extended an invitation to Bartholomew, the spiritual leader of the world's Orthodox Christians, to visit at the same time. It said the visit of the leaders of the Catholic and Orthodox churches would send a "very strong signal" about the need to help refugees and protect Christians "who are cruelly suffering" in the Middle East. — AP



MARSEILLE: People demonstrate yesterday, one holding a placard reading "Youth in pain, elders in misery". — AP

POLICE ARREST FRENCH PROTESTERS ANGRY OVER LABOR LAW CHANGES

PARIS: Protesters threw stones in Paris and French police sprayed tear gas during new strikes and demonstrations against proposed changes to France's work week and layoff practices.

The scuffles yesterday led to a few arrests and sent demonstrators fleeing in panic in eastern Paris. The lower house of Parliament is taking up the labor reforms yesterday after a string of strikes and protests. Socialist President Francois

Hollande's government, desperately trying to lower unemployment, says the bill will encourage hiring, especially of young people. But unions and students say it erodes hard-fought worker protections.

Covering their faces with hoods and scarves, some of the few hundred students demonstrating carried a banner reading "General Burnout - (Labor Minister Myriam) El Khomri to the ground. We are going to burn down all of Paris." — AP

LEAKS ABOUT OFFSHORE ACCOUNTS LEAVE RUSSIANS UNIMPRESSED

PUTIN IN THE CLEAR ALTHOUGH HE 'HAS TOO MANY FRIENDS'

MOSCOW: In the list of presidents, prime ministers, sheikhs, billionaires and other magnates cited in a sweeping worldwide investigation into hidden assets in offshore accounts, there was an odd man out: A Russian cellist. Up until now, 64-year-old Sergei Roldugin was known only in the Russian music community - as a People's Artist of Russia and the artistic director of the House of Music in St. Petersburg. What makes him stand out from other Russian musicians, however, is his close ties to President Vladimir Putin.

Roldugin features in Putin's early autobiography as a close friend and the godfather of Putin's eldest daughter, Maria. He pursued a musical career, and despite the fact that he never became a tycoon like many of Putin's other friends, he did somehow acquire a stake in the Rossiya bank, one of the first Russian firms slapped with US sanctions following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea.

Suspicion of foul play

The US Treasury in 2014 described the bank as being "designated for providing material support to government officials" and co-owned by members of Putin's inner circle. But unlike other Putin friends who have built flourishing businesses in Russia, Roldugin, whose stake in Rossiya was reported at 3.3 percent, was not slapped with sanctions.

A myriad of documents that the Washington-based International Consortium of Investigative Journalists gained access to showed Roldugin - or someone posing as him - skillfully operating affiliated companies that controlled a significant share of a business empire that earned tens of millions of rubles per day from murky deals. The companies received millions from Putin's friends and Russian billionaires as well as preferential loans from a Russia-controlled Cyprus-based bank. The journalists who analyzed the leaked documents from the Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca, one of the world's biggest creators of shell companies, say the combined turnover of a company that Roldugin is reported to have owned through an intermediary between 2009 and 2012 was around \$2 billion.

When the Novaya Gazeta newspaper, which led the ICIJ investigation in Russia, approached Roldugin after a concert, the cellist had a friendly chat with the reporter but refused to talk about the offshore companies, saying the subject was "delicate."

Roldugin was unavailable for comment on Monday. A receptionist at the St. Petersburg House of Music said he was not in. The release of what has become known as the Panama Papers has sent officials in countries around the world scrambling.

Some have pledged to investigate claims of possible tax evasion, others like the prime minister of Iceland and the president of Ukraine face political storms over their alleged involvement in offshore companies. In Russia, however, the trove of documents showing a money trail leading close to the president has gone largely unnoticed.

Following hours of silence, state-owned Channel One in its 6 p.m. bulletin reported the story, leading with the denial by Putin's



MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin listens during a meeting in the Novo-Ogaryov residence on Monday. — AP

spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, and mentioning the dealings involving the Ukrainian president. The TV report said "many wonder" what could have triggered the investigation and alleged that the leak may have been a US-orchestrated attempt to remove Panama as a tax haven since it is competing for tax revenue.

The blame game

Peskov blamed Western media for focusing on Putin even though he was not directly linked to any offshore activity. He suggested the ICIJ had ties to the US government. The ICIJ is not funded by the government and is part of the nonprofit, non-partisan Center for Public Integrity.

"It's obvious that there are many journalists there whose main profession is unlikely to be journalism," he said, alleging that "former employees of the State Department, the CIA, other security services" may have been involved in the publication of the leaks.

Peskov said Roldugin was a friend of Putin's but added the president "has very many friends." In past years, as Putin's friends were building fortunes by getting lucrative state contracts with no or little competition, independent media in Russia have published countless investigations suggesting a conflict of interest at the least - or possibly major corruption. These reports, however, did not lead to any official investigations, Russian government reshuffling or public discontent. Arguably the only exception was last year's protest by truck drivers who rallied against a hefty new road tax imposed by a company co-owned by a son of one of Putin's friends. Russian experts said even if the offshore scandal was getting coverage on Russian television, Putin still came out of it unscathed.

"There aren't any accounts directly connecting Putin to the companies, but even if there were, it is unlikely that this would shock his sup-

porters in Russia," Alexander Baunov of the Carnegie Center in Moscow told The Associated Press. Putin's detractors, he said, are looking in the wrong places for problems that could potentially destabilize his government.

What could be disastrous for Putin? "Anything that brings Russia back to the 1990s," said Baunov, referring to the withholding of salaries and a slump in living standards. In a country where all officials are believed to be corrupt by default, a revelation of corruption in Putin's inner circle or even his own misdeeds are not viewed as much of a sin.

"In a healthy society, all those friends of the national leader would already be behind bars while the leader himself would be a pariah," Dmitry Gudkov, the only Russian lawmaker who voted against the Crimean annexation said in a blog Monday. "In our (society) the reaction is: 'So what? He does not drink newborn babies' blood, thanks for this.' We know things could be worse."

Unmoved

While Russian opposition activists were fuming on social media about the Panama Papers revelations, the reports left many more Russians unmoved. "Seriously, if someone had posted a photo of Putin watching 'Peppa Pig' it would have caused more of a stir," blogger Ilya Varlamov tweeted, referring to a popular cartoon series.

Unlike the reclusive banker Yuri Kovalchuk or Putin's childhood friend Arkady Rotenberg, the soft-spoken Roldugin has never hidden from the press, giving interviews about his love for music and Russian musical talent. "I don't like talking about Putin. It's private, I hope you understand," Roldugin said in a 2014 interview. But when asked where he thinks Putin's government is failing, he said: "I think there is not enough effort to fight corruption in Russia. I would like to see more decisive action." — AP

News

in brief

Germany records 300 attacks on asylum shelters so far this year

BERLIN: There were almost 300 attacks and other criminal offences against German asylum shelters in the first quarter of the year, police said yesterday, which suggests the 2016 total could exceed last year's level. The arrival of more than one million migrants into Germany last year has prompted a significant rise in attacks against asylum shelters. They reached 1,029 last year, compared with 199 in 2014 and 69 in 2013. But the flow of migrants into Germany has slowed to a trickle in recent weeks, following the effective closure of the Balkan route bringing people through southeastern Europe, and it was not clear what effect that could have on future attacks. Of the 292 offenses registered in the first quarter - more than three attacks a day on average - 33 were arson attacks, 59 were acts of violence, and one was an explosion, police said. The rest were damage to property and propaganda offences, police added.

Iceland PM threatens to dissolve parliament

REYKJAVIK: Iceland's prime minister yesterday threatened to dissolve parliament and call new elections if he were to lose the support of his junior coalition partner following an uproar over his offshore holdings revealed in the "Panama Papers". "I told the leader of the Independence Party that if the party's parliamentarians think they cannot support the government in completing joint tasks, I would dissolve parliament and call a general election," Prime Minister Sigmundur David Gunnlaugsson wrote on his Facebook page.



Bangui: French soldiers, part of Operation Sangaris, patrolling in the capital on May 20, 2015. — AFP

PARIS OPENS NEW SEX ABUSE PROBE INTO TROOPS IN C. AFRICA

PARIS: French prosecutors have opened a preliminary investigation into new allegations of sexual abuse against French troops based in Central African Republic, a judiciary source said yesterday. The prosecutors' office said the probe was opened after the UN passed on allegations of sexual abuse involving French troops that took place in the eastern town of Dekoa between 2013 and 2015. The UN did not give details on number of the alleged victims, their ages, or the number of soldiers involved, the source said.

The investigation was opened on Friday, a day after the UN said more 100 victims had come forward with horrifying new accounts of sexual abuse by UN peacekeepers and French troops based in the war-torn country. Most of the vic-

tims were underage girls. They included accusations that French soldiers in the Sangaris force had in 2014 forced young girls to commit sex acts with animals in return for money.

Apart from French troops, the accusations concern soldiers from Burundi and Gabon who were serving in the UN peacekeeping force in Central African Republic (MINUSCA), also between 2013 and 2015.

AIDS-Free World, a civil society group that tracks peacekeeper sex abuse cases, said three girls told a UN rights officer that they were tied up and undressed by a French commander inside a camp and forced to have sex with a dog. The girls were then allegedly given about \$9 (eight euros) in payment. — AFP