

## GHOST OF AUSTRIA'S LAST MONARCH STILL LOOMS LARGE

**VIENNA:** Even a century after his death, Austria's mutton-chop whiskered emperor Franz Joseph still looms large in the national consciousness—both as the custodian of imperial glory and the tragic figure responsible for its decline. For 68 years, the head of the powerful Habsburg dynasty reigned over a multi-ethnic realm with more than 50 million people, making him one of the world's longest-serving leaders.

To commemorate the centenary of his death in November, the City of Vienna is currently showcasing six exhibitions at landmark locations, including the world-famous Schoenbrunn Palace where Franz Joseph was born in 1830. The aim is to shed light on the personality cult surrounding the emperor, whose image used to feature on every school, train station and army barracks. "For Austrians, he's a depoliticized figure which doesn't elicit a longing for the monarchy but rather cultivates a nostalgia of the 'good old days', kept alive by skilful marketing," said one of the exhibitions' curators, historian Karl Vocelka who recently published a biography of Franz Joseph.

To this day, the stern-looking patriarch—who proudly referred to himself as "the

last monarch of the old school"—has left a lasting imprint on Vienna. The capital is strewn with the vestiges of his reign, from a solemn statue in the gardens of the Hofburg palace—now home to the presidential offices—to the initials "FJ" engraved on many public buildings constructed under his orders. He still towers over daily politics in the shape of a marble relief showing him as a Roman emperor above the main entrance of the parliament. Alongside his beautiful wife Elisabeth, affectionately known as "Sisi", the strapping emperor also appears on postcards, fridge magnets and countless other tourist trinkets.

## Reluctant media star

In the course of his lifetime, the emperor witnessed no less than 150 international rulers come and go. When he was crowned in 1848 aged barely 18, the era belonged to horse carriages and ballroom dances. By the time he died on November 21, 1916, "there were planes, the cinema, the telephone," wrote current affairs magazine Profil in a recent special edition. A pragmatic leader with a penchant for military uniforms, Franz Joseph crushed nationalist revolts, survived an assassina-

tion attempt, and unified Austria and Hungary in 1867. Franz Joseph also tore down Vienna's claustrophobic fortification walls, paving the way for the splendid Ringstrasse boulevard which transformed the city into a glittering chocolate box metropolis. At the start of the 20th century, Vienna rivaled Paris, London and Berlin as a hub of cultural refinement.

The emergence of photography and moving images turned Franz Joseph—a very private person—into a reluctant media star. "Franz Joseph is the first monarch whose voice and face are known beyond oil paintings," noted Vocelka, in reference to the huge trove of pictures available to the public today. But the conservative ruler was not comfortable with the new technologies, preferring to seek the peace and quiet of his summer retreat in Bad Ischl. Here too, his legend lives on. Every August, the spa town in Upper Austria re-enacts the imperial visits with a faux royal couple arriving by steam train amid much pomp and military fanfare.

## Charming to taciturn

The myth surrounding Franz Joseph was further fuelled by the tragedies overshadowing his personal life: the early

death of his daughter Sophie, the murder of Sisi, the suicide of his son Rudolf, and the execution of his brother. In light of so much grief, Franz Joseph grew from a charming young man to an increasingly isolated and taciturn leader over the years. The biggest blow, however, came at the end of his life. It is one of history's great ironies that Franz Joseph himself would sound the death knell for his beloved empire when he declared war on Serbia in July 1914 after the assassinations of the imperial heir presumptive Franz Ferdinand and his wife.

The move would not only trigger World War I but also lead to the collapse of both the monarchy and the empire. It prompted modern commentators to call him a "moderately talented" and even "powerless" leader who was defied by the extraordinary challenges of his time. "Towards the end of his life Franz Joseph became a relic of a time long past, increasingly isolated from the developments taking place in contemporary society," observed historian Martin Mutschlechner, another curator of the current exhibitions. "With his rigid traditionalism, (he) thus contributed to the decline of the monarchy against his own best intentions." — AFP

## FIGHT FOR SYRIA'S ALEPPO EXPOSES THE LIMITS OF RUSSIAN AIR POWER

## USE OF BASE STIRS POLITICAL ROW IN IRAN

**MOSCOW:** Russia's politically-sensitive and ultimately fruitless decision to launch bombing missions on Syria from Iranian soil has exposed the limits of its air power, leaving Moscow in need of a new strategy to advance its aims. People familiar with Russia's military said Moscow opted for the sorties from Iran - and Tehran agreed to allow them - because they were struggling to achieve their aim of crushing rebels in the city of Aleppo.

The gamble failed and rebels fighting their ally, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, remain ensconced in parts of Aleppo. Russia began air strikes on Syria in support of Assad on Sept 30 last year, launched from bases in government-held territory and from warships. Then this month, facing logistical problems in mounting an expensive campaign at a time of tight state finances, it intensified the bombing of Aleppo in what turned out to be a brief series of raids from Iran. The strikes on the Aleppo rebels seem to have achieved little beyond stirring a political row in Iran, whose constitution forbids the establishment of any kind of foreign military base.

The fact that Russia went to such lengths to achieve its aims in Aleppo and still failed could strengthen the hand of those in Moscow who believe the operation in Syria has reached a watershed, and that it is time to seek a negotiated solution. "I get the feeling we're like a horse at the circus, running around in a circle since Sept. 30 when we first deployed our aircraft there," said a person close to the Russian defense ministry who spoke on condition of anonymity. "Our forces are insufficient, our coordination with the Iranians is not at the required level. We need to change something. What, I don't know."

## Iranian sensitivities

Russia's defense ministry announced on Aug. 16 that it had for the first time used an air base in Iran from which to launch air attacks on Syria. On subsequent days, long-range Russian Tupolev 22M3 bombers, escorted by Sukhoi fighters, took off on sorties from the Nojeh air base, near the Iranian city of Hamadan. Letting Russia base aircraft there was politically



**AL KHALFATLI:** Syrian families, fleeing the Islamic State group and the ongoing fighting, carry their belongings as they arrive to take refuge in the Syrian village of Al-Khalifatli, held by the Free Syrian Army (FSA), near the Syrian-Turkish border, north of Aleppo. — AFP

sensitive for Iran: the last time a foreign power had used an Iranian air base was in World War Two. Some Iranian lawmakers called it a breach of the constitution while Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan said that, by publicly revealing the arrangement, Moscow had committed a "betrayal of trust".

By Aug 22, Iran's foreign ministry announced that Russia's use of the base had ended. In Moscow, the defense ministry said aircraft operating from the bases had completed their tasks.

A spokesman for Russia's defense ministry and spokeswoman for the foreign ministry did not respond to Reuters questions about its objectives in Aleppo and its use of the Iranian base. But Andrei Klimov, a pro-Kremlin member of the foreign affairs committee in the upper house of Russia's parliament, said the cost of the Syrian operation may have been a factor. "We are trying to conduct the operation in Syria within certain sums," he told Reuters. "The defense ministry has other expenditures. Therefore to optimize costs, more economical routes are sought. Any sensible country does the same thing."

## Aleppo escalation

Russia's desire to use the base was "linked to the increase in intensity of military activity in the Aleppo area," said Vasily Kashin, an analyst with the Center for Analysis and Technologies in Moscow, which advises Russia's defense sector. "It seemed that, in the opinion of the Syrian, Russian and Iranian commands, a watershed moment is coming." That chimed in with other evidence that Russia and its allies were ramping up their efforts to take control of Aleppo over the last two months. The leader of Lebanon's Hezbollah, which is allied to Iran, said on June 24 that the movement would send more fighters to the Aleppo area. The battle for the city was of strategic importance, he said.

Since then, residents and opposition activists have reported an increase in the intensity of raids on Aleppo, including the high-altitude operations which distinguish Russian bombing from that by low-flying Syrian aircraft. That was matched on the ground by an offensive from Syrian government forces which left rebel-held areas besieged. Aid organizations reported a jump in civilian casualties and warned of a

humanitarian disaster because of a shortage of supplies.

The Iranian base was a crucial logistical cog in this escalation in Aleppo because without it, Russia's Tupolev jets have to fly the greater distance to Syria from Russia, and back. That means carrying more fuel, which reduces the bomb payload they can carry, and also - because of the longer flight time - cuts into the number of sorties they can fly. Air bases inside government-controlled parts of Syria were not suitable for the Tupolev aircraft, and adapting them would be expensive, according to Kashin. The person close to the defense ministry said of the logistical challenges facing Russia's air operation: "We don't have all that many planes."

## Peace overtures

During the intensified bombing, the rebel forces in Aleppo even counter-attacked in the middle of this month, breaking the siege and restoring access to supply routes. According to defense experts, Russia does have the military capacity to intensify its bombing in Syria further, whether or not it has access to the Iranian base. But that would mean more expense for Russia, which is struggling to fill gaps in its budget, faces a parliamentary election next month, and has seen the Syrian operation drag on far past the Kremlin's original timetable. In May, President Vladimir Putin announced that "the main part" of Russian armed forces in Syria would start to withdraw, saying that their work had "on the whole, been fulfilled". But still the bombing went on.

The difficulty of making progress militarily will make a negotiated solution more attractive to the Kremlin. Russia agreed on Thursday to a 48-hour humanitarian ceasefire in Aleppo to allow aid deliveries to get through, UN officials said. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry met in Geneva on Friday to talk about a possible truce in Syria. Huge differences though remain between Moscow and its allies on one hand, and the United States and its allies on the other, not least over the future of Assad. Previous openings for peace talks have dissolved into renewed fighting. — Reuters

## GREECE LAUNCHES PRIVATE TV TENDER AMID CONTROVERSY

**ATHENS:** Greece yesterday launched a multi-million euro auction for four private TV licences, a process originally due two decades ago and now marked by political infighting. Eight groups are vying for the four 10-year nationwide

licences, with opening bids starting at three million euros (\$3.4 million). Their representatives will be locked up in an office building with no outside communication until the process is complete, a move prompting angry protests

from TV managers. Authorities say they want to clean up an industry known for workforce exploitation and rumored under-the-table deals between media moguls, bankers and influential politicians, while bringing an end to 25 years of chaotic licensing.

Government officials have noted that ever since private TV broadcasts began in Greece, channels have been allowed to operate on provisional licenses renewed 15 times since 1995. And a contract for Greece's digital TV provider was concluded two years ago with just one contestant, they note. But critics say the overhaul is merely a ploy by Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras to replace established TV barons who have opposed his leftist Syriza party in the past—with others more to his liking.

## Mattress in tow

Six of the eight groups participating in the auction have raised objections about the process. The first private channel to hit the air in 1989, Mega, has already been eliminated from the tender over outstanding debts. The first-ever tender is held under unprecedented security inside the state ministry of information in Athens. The six-floor building was emptied of staff last week and bunk beds moved in for what looks to be a two-day process. Rival TV representatives were shown arriving early Tuesday with luggage. One had a mattress in tow.

They are to be kept in complete isolation, and under closed-circuit TV surveillance, to prevent arranged bids. They are not to leave the building or communicate with the outside world until the process is concluded. One TV manager called the conditions "humiliating" while another said stations were being "held to ransom". Skai TV has sarcastically likened the procedure to reality TV show "Survivor". Others have called it "Big Brother with TV chiefs". Greece's top administrative court on Friday turned down a request by several of the channels to block the process. The government has said stations that continue broadcast nationwide without a license will be blocked three months after the auction is concluded. — AFP



**ATHENS:** A man walks past video screens displaying TV channels in Athens yesterday. Greece launched a multi-million euro auction for four private TV licences - a process originally due two decades ago and now marked by political infighting. Eight groups are vying for the four 10-year nationwide licenses, with opening bids starting at three million euros (\$3.4 million). — AFP

## News

In brief

## 130 men and boys still missing in Cameroon

**DAKAR:** One hundred thirty men and boys remain missing in Cameroon nearly two years after a government crackdown on suspected members of the Nigeria-based Boko Haram extremists, Amnesty International said yesterday, calling on the government to provide answers. Authorities on Dec 27, 2014 arrested more than 200 people in Magdeme and Double villages in Cameroon's Far North region, Amnesty said. The arrests were part of a push by the government to combat Boko Haram. They came within days of Cameroon's first airstrikes against the Islamic extremists to dislodge about 1,000 fighters who had seized a military base and attacked several villages along the border with Nigeria, according to reports at the time. More than 25 of the arrested men died in custody and 45 were transferred to a prison the next day, with three more dying due to dire conditions, Amnesty said. Nine civilians were killed, and 70 homes destroyed in the operations in the two villages by the military, it said.

## Venezuela to expel 3 Al Jazeera journalists

**CARACAS:** Venezuela is set to expel a crew of Al Jazeera journalists who were intending to cover an opposition march against President Nicolas Maduro, the country's union of journalists said. Venezuela in the throes of severe economic and political crises, the opposition has called for a march on Caracas tomorrow to press its constitutionally sanctioned demand for a referendum to remove Maduro. The authorities detained three employees of the Qatar-based channel when they arrived Monday at Maiquetia international airport outside Caracas, the National Union of Press Workers (SNTP) said on Twitter. "Teresa Bo, correspondent, Lagmi Chavez, producer, and a cameraman (from) @AlJazeera were detained in Maiquetia," the SNTP tweeted, saying their equipment was confiscated. The cameraman was named in local media reports as Mariano Rosendi. The journalists travelled from Argentina but are to be deported to Colombia, the SNTP added. Media rights groups frequently criticize Venezuela for violating the freedom of the press.

## More Bangladeshi workers jailed for 'terror financing'

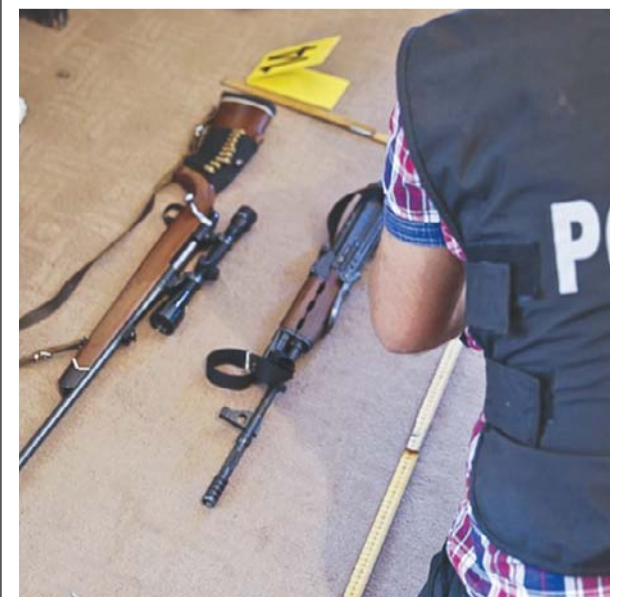
**SINGAPORE:** Two more Bangladeshi expatriate workers accused of planning to join the Islamic State group were jailed yesterday in Singapore for raising money to fund attacks in their homeland. Zzaman Daulat, 34, and Mamun Leatol Ali, 29, were jailed for two years and two and a half years, respectively, after admitting terrorist financing charges in a district court. Court documents said the men contributed between Sg\$200 (\$146) and Sg\$500 to help fund a terror campaign in Bangladesh, and plotted to overthrow the government there to set up a caliphate. They were the second set of Bangladeshi workers to be jailed under a Singaporean law against terrorist financing. In July four Bangladeshi workers were jailed for between two and five years for the same offence. The six were among a second group of Bangladeshis rounded up in Singapore after 27 were arrested in late 2015, also over alleged plots in their homeland. All from the first group have since been deported.

## Yemen Al-Qaeda suspect killed in US drone strike

**ADEN:** A presumed US drone strike in southern Yemen killed an Al-Qaeda suspect and wounded two more yesterday, a security official said. The strike hit a vehicle carrying the three jihadis in the eastern suburbs of Ataq, the capital of Shabwa province, the source said. The United States has carried out numerous drone strikes against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula operatives in Yemen. American officials said this month that the US military had killed three AQAP fighters in a strike, also in Shabwa. On Wednesday, drone strikes killed seven Al-Qaeda suspects in south and east Yemen. AQAP and the Islamic State group have exploited a power vacuum created by the conflict between the government and Iran-backed rebels to expand their presence in the Arabian Peninsula country. The US has vowed to continue its campaign against AQAP, which it considers to be the Al-Qaeda network's deadliest franchise. A Saudi-led Arab military coalition that backs the Yemeni government has also turned its sights on AQAP, targeting it with air strikes.

## Kosovo police arrest six in connection with blast

**PRISTINA:** Kosovo police arrested six people yesterday in connection with a grenade fired at the parliament building earlier this month that was claimed by a hardline nationalist group. The suspects are all members of the biggest opposition party, Vetevendosje, whose lawmakers have released teargas in parliament several times over the past year while its supporters clashed with police outside. They oppose an EU-brokered accord with Serbia giving more autonomy to Serb-held areas of Kosovo and a border deal with Montenegro, both of which are essential for building closer ties with the European Union. While making the arrests, police recovered three automatic rifles, two pistols and a rifle with a telescopic sight, police and prosecutors said in a joint statement. The attack on parliament happened on Aug. 4, when two motorcyclists fired a rocket-propelled grenade as they drove past. The building was damaged but no one was hurt.



**Police officers seize fire arms and bullets during a raid were Kosovo police detained six people over their involvement in an attack at the parliament building earlier this month. — AP**