

TOUGHER EUROPE BORDERS PUSHING MIGRANTS TO US

PENAS BLANCAS, Costa Rica: Europe's toughened borders are prompting migrants to switch focus to the United States, but their trek is being thwarted in Central America, where a bottleneck has formed, according to the International Organization for Migration. In Costa Rica, a makeshift camp has sprung up housing hundreds of Africans and Haitians. Elsewhere in the country smaller numbers of Afghans and Pakistanis are biding their time to head north. They are being stalled by Nicaragua, which strictly closed its border eight months ago to migrants without visas, mainly to stop the flow of thousands of US-bound Cubans through its territory. But that closed-door policy has also trapped what are called "extra-continental" migrants-those coming from outside Latin America. There are an estimated 2,000 such migrants in Costa Rica.

Their number has increased since March, since the EU did a deal with Turkey to send back migrants trying to

reach Europe through Greece and eastern European states built barriers across their borders. "We have documented cases of people telling us they chose this route to the United States or Canada because they felt that getting to Europe was too dangerous, that it was too difficult to enter Europe or the conditions in Europe weren't what they hoped for," said the IOM's representative in Costa Rica, Roeland de Wilde. "Most of them seem to be coming through from Brazil and other South American countries that are facing declining economic situations." The Pakistanis and Afghans, accounting for around 10 percent of the migrants, are well-organized and often lay up in basic hotels, de Wilde said. Most of the ones saying they are from Africa are making do with plastic sheets strung up as shelter by the roadside.

Haitians pretending to be Africans
Not all of the latter are "extra-continental," although many pretend to be.

"More than half" the migrants presenting themselves as Africans are from Haiti, an impoverished Caribbean country with a predominantly black population that speaks French, de Wilde said. "They say they are Congolese, but when questioned they don't know from which part of Congo they come from," he said. "Sometimes they say Kinshasa or Brazzaville, mixing up one Congo for the other. When asked which ethnicity they belong to, they have no idea."

The Democratic Republic of Congo, whose capital is Kinshasa, and the Republic of Congo, ruled from Brazzaville, are neighbors in central Africa. While both use French, the former is riven by deadly ethnic violence in its east, increasing the odds of emigrants from there receiving asylum. In northern Costa Rica close to the border with Nicaragua, near the town of Penas Blancas, African and Haitian migrants try to get by in rudimentary conditions while hoping they will be allowed to continue north to America.

"We can't stay here. No human being can live in these conditions," complained Alin Treme, a 31-year-old who said he was from Congo. "It rains every day, we're always in mud, the water pours into the tents and we sleep soaked," he said, speaking a mix of Portuguese, French and Spanish. Near him, a man cut garlic under the burning sun, preparing an improvised soup for his wife and one-year-old son.

Trash from the camp piled up not far away, raising a cloud of stink, flies and mosquitoes in the tropical air. "Our destiny isn't in Costa Rica or Nicaragua or Honduras. Why won't they let us pass?" asked Wilson Joseph, a migrant who said he was from French-speaking Senegal though he spoke Spanish with an accent from the Dominican Republic, Haiti's neighbor.

Brazil's downturn
When questioned by AFP, many in the camp claiming to come from the

Democratic Republic of Congo or Senegal were unable to give precise details about those countries. They often communicated in languages and accents suggesting they were Haitians trying to hide their nationality. Most said they had worked in Brazil for several years, but decided to leave when that country's economy dived into recession. "When I arrived in Brazil, it was great: there was a lot of work in 2011, 2012 and 2013. Things got difficult in 2014, the economy got worse, and in 2016 I could no longer support my wife and my kid," said Eddie Miche, a 27-year-old wearing the blue-and-red of Haiti's flag though he said he was from Congo.

Miche's lot was better than the others. He was staying in a shelter set up by the Costa Rican government in community centers and sports halls. But there was not enough room to accommodate all the migrants. In any case, all were determined to find a way to get through the closed borders, to America. — AFP



ALEXANDROUPOLIS: A Turkish military officer is transferred to a court hall. — AP

TURKS WHO FLED TO GREECE A DIPLOMATIC 'HOT POTATO'

ATHENS: The Turkish military helicopter that landed in the Greek border city of Alexandroupolis just as an attempted coup was being quashed in Turkey has turned into one of the toughest diplomatic challenges to date for Greece's relatively inexperienced government. On board were eight Turkish military personnel - all unarmed helicopter crew members, it later turned out - who issued a mayday signal and were granted permission for an emergency landing.

The eight immediately surrendered to Greek police. They insist they were not involved in the attempted coup, had been tasked with transporting wounded soldiers and civilians and had fled for their lives after coming under fire from Turkish police. Turkey disputes their claim, and has demanded their return to stand trial for alleged participation in the violent attempt to overthrow the government.

But the eight have applied for political asylum in Greece, saying they would be in danger if returned to Turkey amid President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's widespread purges of the military and civil service in response to the failed coup. Greece is now obligated to go through the asylum procedure, which can take weeks.

Asylum applications

Their arrival on board a Black Hawk helicopter on July 16 - and their asylum applications in particular - have created a diplomatic headache for Greece, which has a long history of delicate relations with its much larger and more powerful eastern neighbor. The two countries last came to the brink of war 20 years ago over a territorial dispute in the Aegean Sea that separates them, and while they have since enjoyed far warmer ties, tensions are never far away. Greece often complains of Turkish fighter jet violations of its airspace in the Aegean.

The Turkish helicopter case will also test

the country's relatively new coalition government, which came to power last year and consists of the left-wing Syriza party, which had never been in government before 2015, and the small nationalist Independent Greeks party, whose leader is the defense minister. "This was a hot potato that literally landed on Greek territory," said Thanos Dokos, director of the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy think tank. The government "is torn between the sensitivities of the Syriza party on human rights and asylum issues on the one hand, and on the other the cynicism of any governing party when it comes to issues affecting the country's foreign policy." Greek officials quickly returned the helicopter, and have suggested they would like to return the eight as well.

"What must be implemented is Greek and international law," Deputy Defense Minister Dimitris Vitsas said on private Mega television, adding "but I must say that the argument in favor of extradition from the Turkish side is quite strong." But complicating matters are frequent comments by Turkish officials, including Erdogan himself, about reinstating the death penalty. If such talk gathers pace, or if death penalty legislation is introduced in Turkey's parliament, Greece or any other European Union member would struggle to extradite someone to a country where they might be executed. "The key question will be the death penalty. That's a red line not just for Greece but for the whole European Union," said Dokos.

Widespread purges

The widespread purges in Turkey, which in a week have led to about 10,000 people being arrested and about 50,000 others being fired or suspended from their jobs, has fueled the argument that the eight would not face a fair trial at home. Turkey, however, has made no bones about how important it considers their return to be. — AP

LIBYA ISLAMISTS URGE FIGHT AGAINST FRENCH

TRIPOLI: Armed groups including Islamists have urged Libyans to mobilize against French and other foreign troops deployed in the country, denouncing their presence as a "blatant aggression". The call by militias in the second city of Benghazi came after French President Francois Hollande confirmed on Wednesday that his country has soldiers in Libya.

Hollande made the announcement after three French troops were killed in Libya during a mission to gather intelligence. His remarks sparked anti-French protests in several Libyan cities, while the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) said the presence of foreign troops was a "violation" of Libya's sovereignty. A military commander allied with a rival government based in eastern Libya has said that French troops along with US and British soldiers were in Libya to "monitor" Islamic State group jihadists.

The extremist group seized the Libyan coastal city of Sirte in June last year, raising fears that it is establishing a new stronghold on Europe's doorstep. The armed groups, known as the Revolutionary Shura Council of Benghazi, urged Libyans to rise up against the deployment of foreign troops in the chaos-wracked country. "We call on all the Libyan people to mobilize

and defend their (Muslim) religion... and expel" all foreign troops from Libya, a statement said. The French military presence in Libya is tantamount to a "crusader's invasion", it added.

Dozens of protesters rallied Friday outside the GNA's former headquarters in a Tripoli navy base and called on authorities to boycott French firms. The Pentagon said in May that it had a "small presence" in Libya tasked with trying to identify which groups might be able to assist the United States in its mission to combat IS. British media reported in May that British special forces had taken part in combat missions against IS in the country's northeast.

Rival militias in Libya have been vying for power since the overthrow of veteran dictator Moamer Kadhafi in 2011. Amid the chaos, the GNA, which is the result of a UN-backed power-sharing agreement in December, has been striving to assert its authority. Troops loyal to the unity government are battling to recapture Sirte from IS. Benghazi meanwhile has seen bloody battles for more than two years between armed groups, including jihadists, and forces loyal to the internationally recognized parliament, which has yet to endorse the GNA. — AFP

CLASHES ROCK MANBIJ AS IS IGNORES ULTIMATUM

FEARS GROWING FOR TRAPPED CIVILIANS

BEIRUT: Islamic State group militants clashed yesterday with US-backed fighters in the Syrian town of Manbij, pursuing their fierce defense of the jihadist stronghold and ignoring a deadline to leave. There are growing fears for the fate of civilians trapped in Manbij, formerly a key stop along IS's supply route from neighboring Turkey into its self-styled Islamic "caliphate" in Syria. The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) penetrated the town one month ago but have since been hindered by a bloody IS counter-offensive and concerns about the civilian population.

Yesterday, IS jihadists appeared to ignore a 48-hour ultimatum to leave issued by the Manbij Military Council, a key member of the SDF. "The 48-hour period is over, and there will be no more opportunities like this one for Daesh (IS)," a commander from the council told AFP on condition of anonymity. IS has "not responded" to the SDF's offer and had instead "attacked our positions" in the town, he said. The ultimatum came after at least 56 civilians, including children, were reportedly killed Tuesday in US-led coalition air strikes near Manbij.

The commander pledged that his forces would "intensify our attacks on their remaining positions" there while working to "secure safe passages" for civilians looking to flee. Thousands of civilians have already fled Manbij, which lies in Syria's northern Aleppo province. More than half of Syria's population has been displaced since the country's conflict erupted five years ago, and at least 280,000 people have been killed.

'Fight like we haven't seen'

An SDF field commander inside Manbij told AFP that clashes were rocking the flashpoint town yesterday, with "the main battles near the security quarter in the centre of the town." The civilian deaths in Tuesday's raids sparked an intense backlash from activists and rights groups, as well as a call from a prominent Syrian opposition body for the coalition to halt its air campaign until a thorough investigation is completed. The coalition has said it is investigating the reports of civilian fatalities in the town of Al-Tukhar, 14 kilometers from Manbij. Bombing raids have meanwhile continued unabated, with the Pentagon reporting nine strikes near Manbij on Friday.

Coalition spokesman Colonel Chris Garver



QAMISHLI, Syria : Syrian-Kurdish women carry the coffin of a female fighter in Syria's north-eastern city of Qamishli on July 21, 2016 during the funeral of sixteen fighters killed battling the Islamic State (IS) group in Manbij. - AFP

said on Friday that IS was mounting an exceptionally tough fightback. The battle has grown more intense as SDF units move deeper in the town, he said, "which is sort of different than what we saw in Ramadi and what we saw in Fallujah," two Iraqi cities from which jihadists were ousted this year. "It's a fight like we haven't seen before," said Garver. He estimated that the SDF had taken back roughly half the town, an area still housing at least 2,000 civilians.

IS use 'human shields, bait'

IS was using residents of Manbij "as human shields and as bait" in order to draw the fire of the SDF towards civilians, Garver added. Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, accused IS of "pushing children towards the frontlines" as it tried to defend its positions. Garver said that Tuesday's controversial air raid was called after the SDF "observed a large group of Daesh (IS) fighters in a convoy who appeared to be readying for a counterattack." "The strike was against both buildings and vehicles," but the coalition later received reports

that there may have been civilians mixed in among IS militants, he added. Earlier this year, the coalition said 41 civilians had been killed in its bombing raids in both Iraq and Syria since August 2014. But the Britain-based Observatory says that in Syria, 594 civilians across the country have been killed in coalition raids-more than 100 of them in Manbij alone. IS and its jihadist rival Al-Nusra Front are not included in global efforts to put an end to fighting in war-ravaged Syria.

Repeated attempts by Washington and steadfast regime ally Moscow to reinforce a nationwide ceasefire have largely failed, with violence continuing across the country. Dozens of civilians died in bombardment across the country yesterday, the Observatory said, with 10 killed in raids by unidentified warplanes in eastern Deir Ezzor province and eight dead in suspected Russian strikes in Syria's northwest. Another seven civilians from a single family, including four children, were killed in raids in central Hama province, and two civilians died in barrel bomb attacks in besieged parts of northern Aleppo city, the monitor added. — AFP

WEST BANK PALESTINIAN VILLAGERS IN LEGAL LIMBO

KHIRBET ZANUTA, Palestinian Territories: A tiny Palestinian village in the Hebron hills could soon cease to exist after a nine-year legal battle with Israeli authorities who say its 167 residents live on an archaeological site. Israel's supreme court is expected to make a final decision on the fate of Khirbet Zanuta soon. The village in the south of the occupied West Bank, around 20 kilometers from the Israeli city of Beersheba, includes makeshift homes made of stones, metal, clay and even tyres.

Caves in the area have also been used as homes in the past, and its residents farm the hundreds of hectares of surrounding land, raising sheep and goats. "I was born here before 1967," said village head Rashad Al-Tal, 65, referring to the

year when Israel's occupation of the West Bank began. "We lived in a cave and we walked seven kilometers to go to school in Dahriya," the closest city, he added as his daughter stirred milk behind him to make curd.

He said villagers began to build houses in the 1970s without having permits from the Israeli authorities and were fined for doing so. Such permits are extremely difficult to obtain for Palestinians living in most of the West Bank. "We showed them all the ownership papers for our land and asked for construction permits," said Tal.

Building in Area C

While Israeli authorities say structures in the village are illegal and are built on an archaeological

site, the villagers themselves suspect other motives. They allege that Israel wants to clear more space for settlers, since a settlement industrial zone called Meitarim is located less than a kilometer away. Villagers say explosives were used to develop the industrial zone and question why this would have been done if the nearby area was archaeologically important. Khirbet Zanuta is in what is known as Area C, the part of the West Bank under complete Israeli control.

Around 60 percent of the Palestinian territory falls under that classification, originally set up under the 1990s Oslo accords in an arrangement meant to be temporary. Israel's military decides on construction permits in Area C, and they are rarely granted to Palestinians. The military demolishes structures it deems illegal. That process, along with Israel's continuous settlement building in the West Bank, has been strongly criticised internationally as contributing to the erosion of the possibility of a two-state solution.

The court case involving Khirbet Zanuta is reaching its conclusion as debate over Israeli demolitions of Palestinian structures in the West Bank intensifies. In 2015, Israel demolished 548 structures in the West Bank, displacing 787 Palestinians, according to UN figures. But during the first four months of this year alone, 598 were demolished, displacing 858 people.

'They must leave'

The legal battle over Khirbet Zanuta has been waged since 2007. With the two sides unable to settle,

Israel's supreme court is expected to issue a ruling soon. Israeli authorities have said in court filings that "Khirbet Zanuta is an archaeological site and residents' presence in the area can have an impact on the site." "As a result, they must leave the area."

Israeli authorities declined further comment when contacted by AFP, saying their case was being presented in court. Rights activists who support the villagers and their legal battle say claims about the area's importance as an archaeological site are exaggerated. "We have consulted Israeli archaeological experts who say that the presence of the residents does not interfere with that of the historical remains," said Sharona Eliahu-Chai of the Association for Civil Rights in Israel.

Yoni Mizrahi of the Emek Shaveh NGO said that "every West Bank village contains remains", adding that those in Khirbet Zanuta are "neither very important nor very extensive". "This is a political issue," he said. "When they want to expel residents, they say that it is an archaeological site." Mizrahi said the village does indeed contain remains dating to the Iron Age and spanning the Roman, Byzantine and Islamic periods. But he also alleged that there have been no excavations there since it was declared an archaeological site in 1968, while arguing that in any case the remains "do not belong to Israel, but to Palestine". Others have pointed out that Jewish construction is allowed on much more important archaeological sites. — AFP



KHIRBET ZANUTA, Palestinian Territories : Shafiq Al-Tal (C) stands with his family outside his tent in the Palestinian village of Khirbet Zanuta, located in the hills south of the West Bank city of Hebron. — AFP