

## CALAIS MIGRANTS TURN TO FLIMSY BOATS TO CROSS CHANNEL

**LILLE, France:** Thwarted at every turn in their efforts to reach Britain, migrants in northern France have once again changed tack, turning to flimsy dinghies to carry them across the Channel. Migrants in Calais have sneaked into trucks or trains, and even tried to walk through the undersea tunnel in increasingly risky - and sometimes deadly - attempts to reach Britain.

However tighter security has stymied these efforts and authorities have reported about a dozen operations to rescue migrants drifting in inflatable dinghies in the Channel since the start of the year. In 2015, there were none. The most recent rescue took place on June 11, when three Iranian migrants were saved from their sinking vessel. Four days early, three other migrants were rescued in similar circumstances.

Pierre-Joachim Antona, spokesman for the local French maritime authority, said efforts to cross the Channel by boat were "no longer extraordinary or isolated". There have been rare cases in recent years of migrants drowning while trying to swim across the narrow sea, and an Afghan once built a raft with a bed sheet in a failed effort to drift to England. But the phenomenon is now a "real and lasting trend", said Antona. Hundreds of

thousands of economic migrants and refugees have crossed from Turkey to Greece in overloaded boats SINCE , hundreds of them perishing in the process.

While France's migrant crisis is tiny compared to that faced by Greece or Germany, the slum-like Calais camp of about 4,000 migrants desperate to reach Britain is a political hot potato on both sides of the Channel. Many of the migrants have relatives in Britain, or believe they will have a better chance of finding employment there.

### 'Nearly Impossible'

The migrants' main tactic has been sneaking onto the back of trucks, initially when drivers stopped to rest and later by blocking roads and forcing their way onto the vehicles. The crisis reached a peak in July and August last year when hundreds tried to storm the Eurotunnel site on several consecutive nights to try cross the Channel. Security was stepped up in response to the disturbances, however recent efforts to block traffic flared again last month. At least 26 people have been killed attempting to reach Britain since June 2015.

Antona said it had become "nearly impossible" for migrants to make it through the tunnel, forcing them to

adapt their tactics. He said that while coastguards had intercepted several boats, there was evidence that some were succeeding in crossing the treacherous stretch of water. "We are realistic, we know there have been other attempts, successful or not," said Antona, citing "clues on English and French beaches, like small boats or lifevests." "When the weather is good you can see England from the French coast and, quite naively, one could imagine the crossing will be quick and easy but it is an absolute illusion," he added. "It is one of the most dangerous seas in the world." High levels of traffic, strong currents and cold water mean chances of surviving a crossing are flimsy. "The risk of a boat not being seen by a large cargo ship and being run over are enormous," said Antona.

### Migrants Forced to Row

Both France and Britain have stepped up patrols and efforts on land to curb the trend. Patricio Martin, director of the border police in northern France, said a surveillance system had been set up along the coastline to "intercept smuggling networks even before the migrants take to the sea". A police source, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that



**CALAIS, France:** This file photo taken on Feb 6, 2016 in northern France shows a boat that was used by four migrants in their failed attempt to cross the English Channel between France and Great Britain. — AFP

smugglers were demanding "up to 10,000 euros (\$11,300)" for the crossing.

Antona said that the smuggler would provide a small boat, sometimes with lifejackets and a telephone to call for help if needed. "These are very fragile vessels, completely unsuited for this kind of crossing. Some don't even have engines and the migrants have to row," said Bernard Barron, head of sea rescue

charity SNSM in Calais. However there were also professional smugglers using larger, sturdier vessels that can carry up to 20 people, he said. In May, 18 Albanian migrants were rescued from a rigid-hulled inflatable boat when the boat started to take on water. Two British smugglers who were also on board were charged over the attempted crossing.—AFP



**Displaced Iraqis from the embattled city of Fallujah cook at a camp where they are taking shelter, some 18 km from Ramadi on Saturday. — AFP**

## IRAQI CAMPS OVERWHELMED AS RESIDENTS FLEE FALLUJAH

**BAGHDAD:** Iraqi government-run camps struggled yesterday to shelter people fleeing Fallujah, as the military battled Islamic State militants in the city's northern districts. Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi declared victory over the jihadists on Friday after troops reached the city center, following a four-week US-backed assault. But shooting, suicide bombs and mortar attacks continue. More than 82,000 civilians have evacuated Fallujah, an hour's drive west of Baghdad, since the campaign began and up to 25,000 more are likely on the move, the United Nations said.

Yet camps are already overflowing with escapees who trekked several kilometres past Islamic State snipers and minefields in sweltering heat to find there was not even shade. "People have run and walked for days. They left Fallujah with nothing," said Lise Grande, UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq. "They have nothing and they need everything."

The exodus, which is likely to be many times larger if an assault on the northern Islamic State stronghold of Mosul goes ahead as planned later this year, has taken the government and humanitarian groups off guard. With attention focused for months on Mosul, Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi said in May that the army would prioritize Fallujah, the first Iraqi city seized by the militants in early 2014.

He ordered measures on Saturday to help escapees and 10 new camps will soon go up, but the government does not even have a handle on the number of displaced people, many of whom are stranded out in the open or packed several families to a tent. One site hosting around 1,800 people has only one latrine, according to the Norwegian Refugee Council. "We implore the Iraqi government to take charge of this

humanitarian disaster unfolding on our watch," the aid group's country director Nasr Muflihi said.

### 'We Just Want Our Men'

Iraq's cash-strapped government has struggled to meet basic needs for more than 3.4 million people across Iraq displaced by conflict, appealing for international funding and relying on local religious networks for support. Yet unlike other battles, where many civilians sought refuge in nearby cities or the capital, people fleeing Fallujah have been barred from entering Baghdad, just 60 km away, and aid officials note a lack of community mobilization.

Many Iraqis consider Fallujah an irredeemable bulwark of Sunni Muslim militancy and regard anyone still there when the assault began as an Islamic State supporter. A bastion of the Sunni insurgency against US forces following the 2003 invasion, it was seen as a launchpad for bombings in Baghdad. The participation of Shiite militias in the battle alongside the army raised fears of sectarian killings, and the authorities have made arrests related to allegations that militiamen executed dozens of fleeing Sunni men.

Formal government forces are screening men to prevent Islamic State militants from disguising themselves as civilians to slip out of Fallujah. Thousands have been freed and scores referred to the courts, but many others remain unaccounted for, security sources told Reuters. At a camp in Amiriya Fallujah on Thursday, Fatima Khalifa said she had not heard from her husband and their 19-year-old son since they were taken from a nearby town two weeks earlier. "We don't know where they are or where they were taken," she said. "We don't want rice or cooking oil, we just want our men." — Reuters

## ALBANIA'S BROKEN MEN FEAR HORRORS WILL BE FORGOTTEN

### FORMER INMATES ALARMED AS SPAC PRISON CRUMBLES

**SPAC, Albania:** Buried in the mountains of northern Albania are crumbling buildings and an old copper mine where political prisoners were once forced to work to exhaustion and even death. The doors and window frames of the infamous Spac prison have rotted away and signs above the doorways have faded. But the nightmares never ended for former inmates who as young men were labeled enemies of Albania's communist dictatorship and punished there with years of hard labor.

As the prison falls into ruin, some of them fear that the thousands who suffered there will be forgotten, and they are campaigning to have the site turned into a museum and to have May 21 declared a national day of remembrance for those who suffered under communism. "This is a symbol of communist hell. It must not be lost and forgotten," said Bilal Kola, the head of the prisoners' institute which is leading the campaign.

One former inmate, 75-year-old Hysen Haxhijaj, hope help might come from the West to preserve this site of suffering where the regime broke its opponents - real and falsely accused - as the tiny country descended into isolation and paranoia over nearly five decades. "We're hoping Germany or the United States can help us turn this place into a museum. Forget about our government," said Haxhijaj, a stocky, silver-haired 75-year-old, who served 13 of 15 years of hard labor at Spac.

As a young man, Haxhijaj joined a tiny book club in his hometown of Durres in western Albania. His group of seven friends discussed novels and poetry, but some of the books had apparently been banned as being pro-Western or too pro-Soviet. Though communist, Albania had split with other Communist countries. The club was spied on, denounced for "anti-state agitation," and its members were jailed for a minimum of 10 years.

### Ruthless Regime

Albania was ruled for more than four decades after World War II by Stalinist dictator Enver Hoxha, with state repression steadily growing as Albania split from other Communist countries - similar to the course taken by North Korea. Religion was banned, so was leaving the country. Criticism of the regime, even in private conversation, could destroy a person's life with a hefty jail sentence. Cut off from the world, the country relied heavily on forced labor to build infrastructure and service its mines.

Abuses at Spac and other labor camps were first exposed in the mid-1980s by Amnesty International, which documented accounts of beatings, solitary confinement and desperate conditions described by a handful of former inmates who managed to escape the country. The truth turned out to be far worse. In late May, Haxhijaj and other former inmates traveled north along 13 km of dirt road to Spac to mark the anniversary of a prisoner uprising.

The revolt started on May 21, 1973 and last-



**In this May 21, 2016 photo, Hysen Haxhijaj talks to other former political prisoners as they gather at the notorious labor camp of Spac in northern Albania. —AP**

ed three days. The country's red-and-black national flag, without the communist red-star, was raised over the prison. Police cut off water and food and the inmates were easily crushed. Four alleged rebel leaders were executed and 1,700 years of jail times was added for 100 others. Forty-three years later, visitors at Spac prison were keen to tell their story, many overcome with anger or breaking down in tears as they gave their accounts:

### Inmates' Nightmares

Zenel Drangu from near the northern town of Shkodra was jailed for 16 years after fleeing for three days to neighboring Yugoslavia. He visited his former cell at Spac. "In this room 54 people slept in three-tier bunk beds. The mattresses and pillows were made out of hay."

• Pajtim Lamaj, 62 from southern Vlora, served 15 years. Nine of his cousins were imprisoned for a total of 143 years and two of them executed. Drangu kept him alive, giving him water, when a section of the copper mine collapsed and they were cut off for three days. "I can't believe I am alive today," he said.

• Bajram Dervishi from central Berat, served 28 years. He said inmates were forced to meet quotas of digging copper ore. "In an eight-hour shift every man had to fill seven wagons with copper pyrite." Failure to comply, he said, would lead to prison isolation, beatings or torture: Freshly boiled eggs placed under people's armpits or electric shocks to their genitals.

• Dush Martini, 65, from Shkodra, served 11 years in Spac and remembers the extreme conditions prisoners were subjected to. "Imagine working in over 40 degrees Celsius 2,500 meters deep into the mountain and then to

come out in minus 10 degrees Celsius."

Haxhijaj had a young daughter when he was imprisoned. He divorced his wife to try and spare his family reprisals that were commonly carried out against the relatives of political prisoners. Alone at Spac, he tried to take his life, climbing a barbed wire perimeter fence and hoping to be shot by guards. A fellow inmate stopped him. Between 1976 and 1990, he worked at three hard labor camps. After his release, he re-married his wife. "I left our daughter at two years old and found her at 17."

### Fading History

Some 43,000 Albanians were imprisoned, sent to internment camps or executed during the Communist rule which lasted from 1944 until 1990, according to Albania's Institute for the Integration of Former Political Prisoners. The Hoxha regime had 50 prisons and internment camps; 5,577 men and 450 women were executed; about 1,000 died in jail; 17,900 were imprisoned with 914,000 jail years and only about 2,700 of them are still alive now; more than 30,000 were sent to internment camps.

Twenty-five years after the regime collapsed in chaos, nearly half the country's 3 million population has no or little memory of life in one of the world's most isolated countries. The ambassadors of Germany and the United States have visited Spac, and in 2009, the Albanian government in 2009 listed it as a national monument. That's all it did. The New York-based World Monument Fund has described Spac Prison as being "in an extremely advanced state of deterioration," considering it as one of 50 most endangered monuments worldwide in 2016. —AP

## ANGRY ASSANGE STARTS FIFTH YEAR COOPED IN EMBASSY

**LONDON:** WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange started his fifth year camped out in the Ecuadoran embassy in London yesterday, an occasion his supporters were to mark with events celebrating whistleblowers. Supporters said they were planning to stage songs, speeches and readings in several cities worldwide. Assange was due to speak to his followers on a live video stream from inside the embassy.

The 44-year-old is wanted for questioning over a 2010 rape allegation in Sweden but has been inside Ecuador's UK mission for four full years in a bid to avoid extradition. The anti-secrecy campaigner, who denies the allegation, walked into the embassy of his own free will on June 18, 2012, with Britain on the brink of sending him to Stockholm, and has not left since. His lawyers say he is angry that Swedish prosecutors are still maintaining the European arrest warrant against him.

The Australian former computer hacker fears that from Sweden he could be extradited to the United States over WikiLeaks' release of 500,000 secret military files, and could face a long prison sentence there. WikiLeaks said events were planned for Athens, Belgrade, Berlin, Brussels, Buenos Aires, Madrid, Milan, Montevideo, Naples,

New York, Quito, Paris and Sarajevo. Listed participants in yesterday's anniversary events included Patti Smith, Brian Eno, PJ Harvey, Noam Chomsky, Yanis Varoufakis, Ai Weiwei, Vivienne Westwood, Michael Moore and Ken Loach.

### Loach, Jarre in Freedom Call

Croatian philosopher Srecko Horvat, an event organizer, said: "We live in a critical time. We are gathering all around the world on June 19 to speak out for Julian, because he has spoken out for all of us." Veteran leftist filmmaker Loach said: "He should be able to leave his place of safety without fear of deportation or being handed over to those who intend him harm." In a video message, French composer Jean Michel Jarre said: "We have to question the power in place, to improve it. This is why Julian Assange has to be freed right away."

A hero to supporters and a dangerous egocentric to detractors, Assange founded WikiLeaks in 2006 and has been portrayed in two movies in recent years. Assange has compared living inside the embassy - which has no garden but is in London's plush Knightsbridge district, near Harrods department store - to life on a space station. —AFP

## ROME SET TO ELECT FIRST FEMALE MAYOR



**Virginia Raggi**

**ROME:** Voters in the Italian capital headed to the polls yesterday with all signs indicating that they will elect Virginia Raggi as the first female mayor of the Eternal City. Raggi, a 37-year-old lawyer and local councillor, has leapt from anonymity to become one of the best-known faces in Italian politics in the space of only a few months on the campaign trail. The telegenic brunette, whose victory would be a blow for Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, is the rising star of the populist Five Star movement (M5S), the anti-establishment party founded by comedian Beppe Grillo.

More than nine million voters are eligible to take part in yesterday's second round election in 126 communes, including Rome, Milan, Naples, Turin and Bologna. "It's a very special day for us, we finally have the chance to have somebody new who can change things," Aldo, a 72-year-old pensioner, told AFP shortly after casting his ballot for the Five Star movement at a primary school in a district of Rome. "All the others have failed, we hope that they will succeed," he added.

Turnout at 1000 GMT was just under 15 percent, slightly lower than the first round figure of almost 16 percent. Polls close at 2100 GMT. All eyes are on

Five Star which has emerged as the best-supported opposition to the centre-left Democratic Party (PD)-led coalition of Renzi, and the stakes are extremely high for a movement that was only founded in 2009. With the ebullient Renzi's star waning slightly, success in Rome could provide a platform for a tilt at national power in general elections due in 2018. The PD also faces defeat in Italy's financial capital Milan and a tough challenge in Turin. "We are witnessing a historic moment," Raggi said after the June 5 first round of voting, when she emerged with 35 percent of the vote, well ahead of her nearest rival Roberto Giachetti with 24 percent. It was a particularly remarkable achievement for a party with a very limited organizational apparatus and also for a woman who only entered politics five years ago.

She told AFP recently that the move was triggered by the birth of her son Matteo and her determination that he should not grow up in a city beset by the intertwined problems of failing public services and endemic corruption. Opposition to Italy's ingrained cronyism and sleaze is the foundation of M5S's appeal to voters and the Roman electorate have had their fill of those in recent years.—AFP