

## UKRAINE REJECTS PUSH FOR REBEL POLLS

**KIEV:** Ukraine and Russia said yesterday they had not signed up to any agreements at peace talks in Paris where France and Germany pushed for elections in pro-Russian separatist regions by the end of June. The two EU powers have been mediating negotiations between Ukraine and Russia over the 23-month war in the industrial east of the former Soviet republic.

"No agreements were reached," Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin tweeted early yesterday, while his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov also said "no consensus" had been reached over the holding of elections in the war-torn zone. The fighting has killed nearly 9,200 people since April 2014 and raised alarm in eastern Europe about what they see as Russian President Vladimir Putin's aggressive foreign policy stance.

Berlin and Paris argue that one of the continent's worst crises since the Balkans wars of the 1990s could be settled if the rebel-run regions hold Western-monitored polls that may be recognized as valid by Kiev. But

Ukraine insists that it cannot accept such elections until a lasting and fully-verifiable ceasefire is established first. "Our position - security first," Klimkin wrote on Twitter.

Kiev has also expressed fears that Russia - already having annexed Crimea in 2014 - may try to unsettle the country further by exerting influence over the separatist Donetsk and Lugansk provinces within a reunified Ukraine. A separatist vote also threatens to unleash a popular backlash against President Petro Poroshenko whose approval rating is already a fraction of what it was when he took office shortly after parliament ousted Ukraine's Moscow-backed leadership in Feb 2014. The resulting stalemate appears to be undermining EU efforts to return calm to the outer edge of the 28-nations' eastern frontier and focus on new concerns such as the ongoing migrant crisis and the possibility of Britain leaving the union.

"We underlined the importance of adopting an electoral law to hold local elections by the end of the first half of 2016," French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc

Ayrault said at the close of the Paris meeting on Thursday with his three counterparts. He also called for the release and exchange of all prisoners and people held in "illegal detention" by the end of April. His German counterpart Frank-Walter Steinmeier did little to hide his frustration over the meeting. "I am not satisfied by the way in which Kiev and Moscow have been leading these negotiations," he told reporters.

Steinmeier had first floated the idea of the insurgents conducting their own elections in the coming months at a UN Security Council meeting on Monday. Both Moscow and a top separatist negotiator blamed the seeming failure to achieve progress on Kiev. Lavrov said Ukraine was the only side at the meeting to reject the idea of setting a firm deadline for elections in rebel-run parts of the east. "We were ready to support it but the Ukrainian side requested that it not be insisted upon. As a result, no consensus was reached," Lavrov said in comments posted on Russian foreign ministry website yesterday. — AFP



**FESSENHEIM, France:** This file photo taken on April 09, 2013 shows a reactor of the Fessenheim nuclear power plant. — AFP

## GERMANY DEMANDS FRANCE SHUT NUKE PLANT NEAR BORDER

**BERLIN:** Germany demanded yesterday that France close down its oldest nuclear plant, Fessenheim, near the German and Swiss borders - just one of several ageing atomic plants that are unsettling France's neighbors. "This power plant is very old, too old to still be in operation," said a spokesman for Environment and Nuclear Safety Minister Barbara Hendricks. "That's why the environment minister demands its closure at the earliest possible date," he said, reiterating Berlin's earlier demands.

The spokesman was reacting to media reports that claimed a 2014 incident at Fessenheim was more serious than earlier reported. Flooding had disabled electrical control systems and forced operators to launch an emergency reactor shut-down, reported public broadcaster WDR and Sueddeutsche Zeitung daily. France and Germany are close political partners at the core of the EU but have taken vastly different energy paths.

France, which gets more than 75 percent of electricity from nuclear plants, has been a leading international proponent of atomic energy. Germany - where the public mood swung against nuclear power after the 1986 Chernobyl disaster - decided after Japan's Fukushima meltdown five years ago to phase out nuclear power.

The German media reports said that Fessenheim operators in the incident decided to insert boron into the reactor cooling system, a procedure the report likened to "pulling the emergency brake". The joint news report said that operators temporarily lost full control over the plant's reactor 1 in the April 9, 2014 incident after water had incapacitated one of two parallel reactor security systems. The official reports by French nuclear safety agency ASN had not mentioned the use of boron, the media report said.

"I am not aware of any other case where a power reactor here in Western Europe suffered an incident in which it had to be shut down with the use of boron," nuclear safety expert Manfred Mertins was quoted saying. The German environment ministry spokesman, however, suggested the reports were exaggerated, stressing that Germany believed the French operators had at no stage lost the ability to shut down the reactor in a controlled way. Fessenheim houses two 900-megawatt reactors and has been running since 1977, making its France's oldest operating plant. Due to its age activists have long called for it to be permanently closed. — AFP

## EU CHIEF MEETS ERDOGAN AS MIGRANTS DOUBLE IN EUROPE

### PLANS TO RESTORE SCHENGEN FREE TRAVEL

**BRUSSELS:** A record 1.2 million asylum seekers reached Europe in 2015, more than double the previous year, new figures showed yesterday as EU head Donald Tusk met Turkey's Tayyip Erdogan on the crisis. With Tusk wrapping up a whirlwind diplomatic tour before a crucial EU-Turkey summit in Brussels on Monday, the EU unveiled a plan for saving the passport-free Schengen zone that has been jeopardized by the huge influx of migrants and refugees.

Tusk has said numbers crossing the Aegean Sea from Turkey to reach the Greek islands were "far too high" and was to push the Turkish president for more intensive help. The sea crossing has been the scene of hundreds of deaths, and a Turkish court on Friday jailed two Syrian people smugglers over the death of Aylan Kurdi, the three-year-old boy who drowned and washed up on a beach in September.

Diplomatic efforts have also done little to relieve the human misery along the Greek-Macedonia border where conditions worsened after a night of driving rain and plummeting temperatures. The humanitarian crisis is particularly acute at the Idomeni crossing where around 12,000 people are stranded after Austria and the Balkan states imposed a cap on entries, triggering a rapidly growing build-up in Greece. "It was very difficult, nobody slept, and this morning the children were crying," said Teshrina Sharif, a Syrian woman travelling alone with a three-year-old and a five-year-old.

#### Turkey Flows Must Fall 'Drastically'

Greece is the main entry point for migrants who have reached Europe by sea from Turkey over the past 14 months, prompting increasingly frantic diplomatic efforts to curb Europe's worst migration crisis since World War II. The sheer scale of the crisis that is dividing EU nations and fostering nationalist sentiment was underscored by Eurostat figures showing the number of asylum applications in 2015 doubled that of the previous year. Of the 1.25 million first-time asylum seek-



**ISTANBUL:** Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (right) shakes hands with European Council President Donald Tusk for the media before a meeting yesterday. — AP

ers arriving in the EU, Syrians fleeing the civil war were the largest group, numbering nearly 363,000, followed by 178,200 Afghans and 121,500 Iraqis.

Germany was the single largest recipient of asylum applications in 2015, at 441,800 or some 35 percent of the total, with Hungary taking 174,400 or 14 percent and Sweden 156,100 or 12 percent. Separate figures from the EU showed that an average of 1,943 people were still crossing to Greece every day in February, way above what Brussels is expecting from Ankara.

"We need to see the flows from Turkey drastically down soon," EU Migration Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos told a news conference as he unveiled the bloc's new "roadmap" for Schengen. The plan calls for the end of temporary border controls reintroduced by several member states and the restoration by the end of 2016 of full free travel across the 26-country Schengen zone. Brussels also called for the creation of an EU coastguard force by the summer, help for Greece to strengthen its external border, and to ensure the cooperation of Turkey in stemming the flow of migrants.

With the UN warning the border closures could leave Athens with 70,000 people stranded on its soil in the coming weeks, the EU has offered 700 million euros in emergency funding for Greece and other states. If Schengen collapses and border controls return it could cost the EU between five billion and €18 billion (\$5.5-\$20 billion) a year - equivalent to 0.05 percent to 0.13 percent of the bloc's economic output, Brussels said.

Tusk has bluntly warned economic migrants to stay away from Europe, in remarks on Thursday as he arrived in Ankara for talks with Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, who will attend the Monday Brussels summit. "Do not come to Europe," he said. "Do not believe the smugglers. Do not risk your lives and your money. It is all for nothing." The crisis now poses an "existential" threat to the EU that challenges its ideals of peace and solidarity that were formed in the ashes of World War II, former European Commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso told AFP. "I really believe it's the most serious crisis in many years the European Union is facing, probably even the most serious since the beginning of the process of European integration," Barroso said. — AFP