

CYPRUS THREATENS TO BLOCK EU-TURKEY MIGRANT DEAL

NICOSIA: Cyprus yesterday threatened to derail a proposed EU deal with Turkey to curb the flow of migrants to Europe, insisting on longstanding demands including that Ankara recognize its government. "Cyprus does not intend to consent to the opening of any new chapters if Turkey does not fulfill its obligations," Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades said after talks with EU president Donald Tusk.

EU and Turkish leaders agreed last week to a tentative proposal including the return of migrants landing in Greece and a "one-for-one" swap of Syrian refugees. Cyprus has expressed reservations, not least as its longtime adversary Turkey expects the accord to lead to the opening of new chapters in Ankara's long-standing EU membership bid and to ease visa requirements in Europe's passport-free Schengen area.

Anastasiades said Cyprus would not accept "the Turkish demands without (the) implementation of Turkey's long-pending obligations" in its EU membership bid. Tusk, who heads to Ankara for talks ahead of negotiations on the EU-Turkey proposal, admitted "we are not

there yet" in terms of a deal. "The Turkish proposal... still needs to be rebalanced so as to be accepted by all 28 member states and the EU institutions," he told reporters. The plan to expel migrants en masse from Greece has sparked international criticism, with the UN's top officials on refugees and human rights questioning whether it would be legal.

Officials have also expressed concern over the potential need for compromise with Ankara, as fears grow over freedom of expression and rights abuses under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. "One of the issues to be sorted out is the key question of legality," Tusk said. A Cypriot refusal of the migrant-swap deal would effectively block the largest diplomatic push yet to ease Europe's burden of accommodating hundreds of thousands of refugees, many of whom enter the EU through Turkey. The island of Cyprus has been divided since 1974 when Turkish troops invaded its northern sector in response to an Athens-engineered coup attempt.

Turkey does not recognize the government of Cyprus and Nicosia has blocked

six key chapters of Ankara's negotiations for EU membership since 2009, effectively halting the process. Cyprus insists Turkey must first meet its longstanding demands for recognition, and to open up trade ties, ports and airports. Complicating matters further is a UN-backed negotiation process between Greek and Turkish Cypriot administrations aimed at reuniting the island. European sources say EU officials admit that they took the wrong approach to Cyprus's concerns, which were overlooked in the enthusiasm among member states for a deal.

At one point last week in Brussels, Anastasiades was involved in a heated confrontation with five key European figures, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, in which he came under heavy pressure to back the accord, sources said. Germany registered a record influx of asylum seekers that reached 1.1 million in 2015. Tusk's Cyprus visit was arranged at the last minute—a sign of Brussels' realization that a new approach is needed. "I am not here to exert pressure on Cyprus," the EU president told reporters. "I am here to listen to your position." — AFP



NICOSIA: European Council President Donald Tusk (L) holds a press conference with Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades after a meeting yesterday. — AFP

QAEDA GUNMEN DRANK BEER IN BAR BEFORE UNLEASHING ATTACK

RAID DEMONSTRATES AL-QAEDA'S GROWING REACH

GRAND BASSAM: Gunmen from Al-Qaeda's North African branch drank beer at a beachside bar before launching a shooting rampage at an Ivory Coast resort town that left at least 18 people dead, the group's third major attack in West Africa in four months. Sunday's raid, details of which are beginning to emerge in witness and official accounts, was the furthest yet from Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) traditional desert base, a worrying indication of the militants' growing reach.

The attack raised questions about Ivory Coast's preparedness for such an attack, with some asking why such a sensitive target was left so vulnerable. Fifteen civilians and three members of the special forces were killed and 33 people were wounded in the attack in Grand Bassam, a weekend retreat popular with Ivorians and westerners about 40 km (25 miles) east of the commercial capital Abidjan.

Interior Minister Hamed Bakayoko said another 26 wounded were still receiving medical attention on Monday, as President Alassane Ouattara declared three days of mourning for the country, which has never before been hit by Al-Qaeda. Three militants also died in the attack on the resort town, a UNESCO heritage site of crumbling colonial-era buildings. Witness Christian Eddy said four men arrived in a Ford saloon car at the beachside bar where he works around noon on Sunday. While two remained outside, the two others entered and drank beers for around a half hour.

They then launched the attack. "They didn't speak French. They spoke Arabic. We communicated with them in English.... The guys who were still outside started shooting and the two seated at the table yelled 'Allahu Akbar' and flipped over the table," he said. He said the first victim was a boy who was made to kneel before he was shot. Bar staff tried to warn a deaf boy who was playing nearby. "People were yelling 'Come over here!' But he didn't know what was happening and just went down to the water. They

shot him in the water," Eddy said. The gunmen then moved up the beach, continuing their killing spree and entering several seaside hotels.

Surveillance footage from Hotel Etoile du Sud — one of the attackers' first targets where two people including a German woman and a Lebanese man were gunned down — showed the initial panic in the hotel bar as the first shots rang out. Staff crouched and then fled along with customers, among them parents carrying babies or leading young children by the hand. A man, apparently disguised as a waiter in a red waistcoat over a white dress shirt, entered with a rifle, fired at the empty bar and disappeared behind it, where the Lebanese man had been hiding. More gunshots were then heard.

The first police officers arrived on the scene around 15 minutes after the shooting began, witnesses said. It would be another half hour before special units from the security forces arrived from Abidjan. The victims included foreign citizens from Burkina Faso, Cameroon, France, Germany and Mali. Among the dead was Henrike Grohs, 51, head of the Abidjan branch of Germany's Goethe Institut cultural body. France's President Francois Hollande said four French nationals were killed in the attack. The French government had earlier said just one of its citizens had died.

Easy target

The attack is a heavy blow for Ivory Coast, which has recovered from more than a decade of political turmoil and a 2011 civil war to become one of the world's fastest growing economies. President Ouattara won a landslide election victory in October, promising to attract foreign investment to the largest economy in French-speaking West Africa which is also the world's top cocoa producer. "Ivory Coast will not let itself be intimidated by terrorists," Ouattara said in a televised address late on Monday. "Yes, Ivory Coast is on its feet. Yes, on its feet to combat the cowards and protect its people." AQIM has spread across the Sahara

from Algeria and now operates in much of western and northern Africa.

In January, gunmen killed dozens of people in a cafe frequented by foreigners in neighboring Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou, and also attacked a hotel. Militants attacked another hotel in the Malian capital Bamako late last year, killing 20. Since those attacks, Ivorian authorities have increased security around hotels and shopping malls in Abidjan, a city of around five million inhabitants. But there were few signs that was the case in Grand Bassam ahead of Sunday's attack. "Attacking Bassam was the easiest thing for them to do. Bassam is where all the expatriates and middle class from Abidjan gather on the weekends," said one longtime resident, who said he had seen no sign of recent security improvements.

"We don't understand why this wasn't considered a priority for protection. It would be easy," he said, asking not to be named. The recent attacks in the region are generally viewed as targeting France and its allies after Paris intervened militarily in Mali in 2013 to drive out Al-Qaeda-linked militants who had seized the desert north a year earlier. The attack in Grand Bassam, thousands of kilometers from Al-Qaeda's traditional operational zones, raises fears over where they might strike next. It poses serious security questions for former regional colonial power France, which has thousands of citizens and troops in the region.

While some 18,000 French citizens live in Ivory Coast, over 20,000 reside in Senegal. France has 3,500 troops in the region, from Senegal in the far west to Chad. A French military base in Abidjan, manned by around 800 soldiers, serves as a logistical hub for regional operations against Islamist militancy in the Sahel. French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault and Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve will travel to Ivory Coast on Tuesday to offer logistical support and intelligence, French diplomatic sources said. Counter-terrorism officials have also been sent to help the investigation. — Reuters

FRENCH PM URGES CARDINAL TO 'TAKE RESPONSIBILITY' IN ABUSE SCANDAL

PARIS: French Prime Minister Manuel Valls yesterday urged a cardinal, accused of covering up the sexual abuse of young boys by a priest, to "take responsibility" in a case which has deeply embarrassed the French Church. Cardinal Philippe Barbarin hit back, insisting at a press conference: "I have never covered up paedophilia." The latest abuse scandal to hit the Catholic Church erupted when priest Bernard Preynat was charged in January, after victims came forward with claims he had sexually abused Scouts between 1986 and 1991.

Prosecutors say he has admitted the charges. The victims have filed complaints against several senior officials in the Lyon diocese in eastern France, including Lyon archbishop Barbarin, accusing them of being aware of the abuse but failing to report the priest. Valls told BFM TV that without seeking to take the place of the Church or judges looking at the case, "The only message I have... is that (Barbarin) must take responsibility, speak and act." Barbarin has argued he was

not archbishop at the time when the first complaints emerged against Preynat—who was briefly suspended and then moved to another parish.

Accusations were made against Preynat only when a victim who was allegedly abused in the 1980s realized in 2015 that the priest was still in service. Other victims have since come forward. The case recalls the recent Oscar-winning film "Spotlight," which highlighted how the Church transferred deviant priests between parishes in Boston in the United States. While this practice is no longer commonplace, the French case raises the question of how deep Church authorities should dig into abuse cases lurking in their past.

'Yes, I believed him'

Barbarin has said he learned of Preynat's "behaviors" in 2007 or 2008, and met with him "to ask if, since 1991, anything had happened; he assured me there had been absolutely nothing. 'Some blame me for believing him... Yes, I

believed him," Barbarin said in an interview with Catholic newspaper La Croix. The diocese removed Preynat from service in May 2015. The Vatican has backed the cardinal, saying he had shown "a great deal of responsibility" in dealing with the matter.

But as the scandal took centre-stage at a meeting of France's 120 bishops in Lourdes, southwestern France, new accusations emerged against Barbarin. An alleged victim pressed new charges against the cardinal, saying he was sexually abused at the age of 16 by another Lyon priest who was still in service. The man, now 42, pressed charges against the priest in 2009, but the case could not go forward because of a statute of limitations.

He told Le Figaro newspaper that he met with Barbarin, who allegedly admitted that the priest involved had a problem—he had been sentenced to a month in prison in 2000 for exhibitionism—and apologized. But nothing was done to remove the priest from service. The scandal has been extremely embarrassing for the Church in France, which has worked to harden its stance against predator priests since Bishop Pierre Pican was convicted in 2001 for failing to report abuse. "The rules, best practices and prevention measures that we have put in place remain unequivocal," said Georges Pontier, archbishop of Marseille and head of the French Catholic Church.

'The culture has really changed'

The Church continues to be dogged by cases of priests abusing young children and past cover-ups, despite Pope Francis' promise of a crack-down. Barbarin's case, as well as a scandal in Australia that has seen Cardinal George Pell, the pope's powerful finance minister, accused of protecting paedophile priests, have been used as examples that a culture of silence persists.

But an editorial in Le Figaro argued that decades-old abuse cases do not necessarily reflect how the Church reacts today. "Most dioceses in the world now get rid of any accused priest, and demand that he report to the courts... The culture has really changed in the Church," the editorial read. Charles Scicluna, a former senior official in the Vatican's justice department, said: "Today it is no longer possible that a priest accused of paedophilia is simply moved to another parish." — AFP



LOURDES, HAUTES-PYRENEES: Roman Catholic Cardinal Philippe Barbarin, Archbishop of Lyon (L) answers journalists' questions next to Bishop of Pontoise for the Conference of Bishops of France Stanislas Lalanne (C) French Archbishop of Marseille and President of the Bishops' Conference of France Georges Pontier (R). — AFP

12 DIE IN FIRE AT RUSSIAN REHAB

MOSCOW: Twelve people died overnight as a fire swept through a rehab centre with barred windows in central Russia, investigators said yesterday. The bodies of 12 people, two of them women, were found in the residential building in the mainly Muslim Bashkortostan region, the regional Investigative Committee, which probes serious crimes, said in a statement. "They are believed all to be members of a social rehabilitation centre. Their identities are being established," investigators said.

Residents said the single-story building in the town of Sterlitamak, about 1,200 kilometers east of Moscow, housed a private drug rehabilitation centre, ProUfu.ru regional news website reported. An emergency situations official told Russian television that the windows "could not be opened from the inside or were bolted." The bodies had "no visible injuries", investigators said. "Based on the appearance of the bodies, they died from carbon monoxide poisoning," the

head of the emergency service in Bashkortostan, Marat Latypov, told Interfax news agency. The head of the Bashkortostan region, Rustem Khamitov, said the victims were undergoing work therapy to get rid of "harmful habits".

He called for an investigation into why the "12 people were living in a small room with barred windows and a metal door." The fire was reported at 3:00 am Moscow time (GMT) and took almost two hours to extinguish, the regional emergency situations ministry said. Russia frequently sees deadly fires at state-run facilities for the elderly or those with mental illness, which often have bars on windows and locked doors and are located in isolated areas. In 2013, 37 people were killed when a fire swept through a psychiatric hospital in northwestern Russia. Russia is gripped by drug addiction fuelled by easy access to narcotics with the head of the federal anti-narcotics service estimating last week that 7.3 million people were addicted to drugs. — AFP



BRUSSELS: A father carries his child after kids were evacuated from schools located within the security perimeter following a shooting in the southern Forest district of Brussels. — AFP

ONE SUSPECT KILLED IN BRUSSELS TERROR RAID

BRUSSELS: Police shot dead one suspect yesterday during a major Belgian-French anti-terror operation in Brussels linked to the Paris attacks, Belgian media reports said, citing the federal prosecutor's office.

The prosecutor's office could not be immediately reached to confirm the reports but a spokesman told AFP earlier that four police were wounded in the massive security operation in the south of the city. — AFP

ITALY SEXISM ROW OVER 'MAYOR NO JOB FOR A MAMMA' CLAIMS

ROME: Silvio Berlusconi sparked fury yesterday by claiming that being mayor of Rome was "no job for a mother" while backing a male candidate who advised a pregnant rival to stick to breastfeeding. The three-time former premier claimed the task of cleaning up the scandal-hit capital would be too much for far right candidate Giorgia Meloni, who is due to give birth soon after the election in May or June.

"A mother cannot dedicate herself to a terrible job which will require 14 hours a day in the office," Berlusconi said. The media tycoon, famed for his bunga bunga parties with young female escorts, was speaking in support of Guido Bertolaso, who said on Monday that Meloni would be unable to "sort out the rubbish, the traffic jams and the rats in Rome when she will have to be at home nursing."

Meloni replied tersely. "I don't want a row, I simply say politely and proudly that I hope to be a very good mother, as are all the women who, with a thousand problems

and often in much more difficult circumstances, manage to reconcile professional commitments with maternity." Behind the row lies a battle for ascendancy on the right of Italian politics with Berlusconi backing Bertolaso and Northern League leader Matteo Salvini endorsing Meloni in an election race the right feel they can win.

The last mayor, the centre-left's Ignazio Marino, was forced to resign last year after a minor expenses scandal intensified pressure on him over his perceived mismanagement of the cash-strapped capital. Salvini yesterday described Bertolaso's comments as "50 years out of date" while Italy Prime Minister Matteo Renzi insisted: "Of course a mother can be mayor." Female politicians lined up to denounce the outbursts as symptomatic of a lingering macho culture in Italian politics. "When will they ask a male candidate to withdraw because he is not telegenic? Or because he is due to be a father?," asked Constitutional Reform Minister Maria Elena Boschi on Twitter. — AFP