

BULGARIA'S NEW 'IRON CURTAIN' KEEPING PEOPLE OUT, NOT IN

SHTIT: In Soviet times, the now rusty watchtowers and barbed wire fences near the windswept Bulgarian village of Shtit stopped people escaping Communism over the border into Turkey. Now, 25 years later, a new "Iron Curtain" of sorts—a brand new fence topped by razor-wire—has been erected, aimed at stopping an exodus going the other way—migrants crossing from Turkey into Europe. "It was different back in the old days. Then it wasn't refugees who were coming in but Bulgarian prisoners and other people who wanted to run away," recalls Ivan Petkov, a pensioner from Shtit.

The fence is part of Bulgarian efforts to avoid becoming the new migrant trail into Europe after western Balkan countries slammed shut their borders to refugees, many from Syria, travelling north from Greece. EU member Bulgaria began building the fence along its frontier with Turkey in late 2013 after seeing large numbers of migrants cross the land border from Turkey. Now work is being speeded up. Around 30 kilometers were erected in 2014 and today the three-metre-high barrier stretches 95 kilometers through rolling countryside, patrolled on each side by Turkish and Bulgarian forces.

Along the length, a gravel road has been built to allow army four-by-four vehicles to patrol and reach any breaches as quickly as possible. "We are continuing at an accelerated rate of six kilometers per month," Stanislav Dechev, governor of the Haskovo border region said. The aim is to have 132.5 kilometers completed by July, covering half of the 260-kilometre frontier.

Cold War 'enemies'

During the Cold War from 1945 until 1989, when Bulgaria was under communist rule and allied to Moscow, the Turks—on the side of the West—were the "enemy". Many people, not just Bulgarians but also East Germans, Czechs and others, tried to escape into Turkey. Dozens were killed in the attempt, and others disappeared. "Any person or animal touching the barbed wire set off an alarm," remembers a border policeman who was also in the communist-era border army, without wishing to give his name. "Often the fence was set back hundreds of meters back from the border. Once escapees made it over the fence, they thought they'd made it to Greece or Turkey. "But they were wrong, and they were caught by the border guards." Locals were told to report "outsiders" to the authorities, and the situation is not dissimilar now, with border police stationed at major crossroads in the region checking all vehicles.

Harsh treatment

For now, Bulgaria has not yet seen large numbers of migrants try to enter the country since the western Balkan route—used by hundreds of thousands of people in 2015—was closed down, and following the new agreement between the EU and Turkey. Complaints from rights groups about the harsh treatment of some of the 30,000 people who made it into Bulgaria last year has also had a deterrent effect. Onwards travel to Hungary or Romania is also difficult. "On websites giving advice to refugees, crossing into Bulgaria is advised against," Vladimir Chukov, a Bulgarian Arab expert said.

But Sofia is not taking any chances, strengthening its borders and sending additional personnel to its frontiers with Turkey, Greece and Macedonia, as well as increasing surveillance on the Black Sea. It currently has close to 2,000 police on patrol with dogs on its Turkish border. In February parliament adopted legislation giving the military greater powers to act on the frontiers. High-profile exercises have taken place in recent weeks on the Greek and Macedonian borders involving helicopters and armored vehicles—in a clear show of force to any would-be migrant. "We're not going to shoot the refugees, just stop them and send them back," assured Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, at one exercise.—AFP



BRUSSELS: People gather to pay tribute to the victims of the Brussels attacks on the Place de la Bourse (Beursplein) in central Brussels yesterday two days after a triple bomb attack.—AFP

BELGIUM HUNTING THIRD SUSPECT CAUGHT ON FILM

FRENCH PM LEADS CALLS FOR A 'STRONG EUROPEAN RESPONSE'

BRUSSELS: Belgian police were yesterday hunting for a third man filmed with two Islamic State suicide bombers at Brussels airport as evidence piled up that the same jihadist network was involved in the deadly Paris attacks last November.

With pressure mounting on Europe to improve cooperation against terrorism, EU interior and justice ministers were to hold emergency talks on a joint response to Tuesday's bombings in Brussels, which killed at least 31 people and injured hundreds.

French Prime Minister Manuel Valls led calls for a "strong European response", but officials say many states, including France, withhold their most cherished data despite a mantra of willingness to share intelligence.

The chief surviving suspect linking the Paris and Brussels attacks, French national Salah Abdeslam, 26, arrested in the Belgian capital last week, was remanded in custody until April 7 with two other suspects. The public prosecutor said Abdeslam, who is in detention in a prison in Bruges in western Belgium, did not appear in person. His lawyer, Sven Mary, who requested the adjournment, said Abdeslam was no longer opposed to being extradited to France.

"Salah Abdeslam has asked me to inform you that he wishes to leave for France as quickly as possible," Mary told reporters at the courthouse, saying his client "wants to explain himself".

Mary said Abdeslam was not aware of the plan to attack Brussels. Turkey's president criticised Belgium for failing to track Brahim El Bakraoui, a convicted armed robber whom it expelled last year and who blew himself up at Brussels airport on Tuesday an hour before his brother Khalid, a fellow convict, killed about 20 people at Maelbeek metro station in the city centre.

DEPORTED

A Turkish government official said Brahim El Bakraoui was deported twice

from Turkey in July and August after re-entering the country. His initial deportation was based on police suspicion, conveyed to the Belgian and Dutch authorities, that he was a foreign militant fighter, another official said.

Since he had committed no offence in Turkey he was deported to the country of his choice, the Netherlands. Belgium's inner security cabinet was meeting yesterday to discuss the matter. Opposition lawmakers demanded an explanation in parliament. Belgium's interior and justice ministers offered to resign yesterday over

a failure to track militants.

Interior Minister Jan Jambon said Prime Minister Charles Michel had asked him to stay on. "In time of war, you cannot leave the field," Jambon told VTM television. Justice Minister Koen Geens would also stay on, a ministry spokesperson said.

Security sources told Belgian media the other suicide bomber at the airport was Najim Laachraoui, a veteran Belgian Islamist fighter in Syria suspected of making explosive belts for November's Paris attacks, in which 130 people were killed by Brussels-based militants.—Reuters

JOURNALISTS IN LINE OF FIRE OVER REPORTING OF TERROR ATTACKS

PARIS: Two controversies around the Brussels attacks have shown yet again the thin line the media must tread between breaking the news quickly and not compromising police enquiries. Just two days before jihadists struck the Belgium capital Tuesday, the police had criticized "the irresponsibility of a certain outlet" which had published information "far too early" about the missing Paris attacks suspect Salah Abdeslam, "causing us problems".

Hours before Abdeslam was arrested Friday after four months on the run, the French weekly news magazine L'Obs revealed that his fingerprints had been found in an apartment near Brussels. Police moving in to arrest Abdeslam found the outside broadcast van of a Flemish-language TV channel parked only metres from his hideout. Then on Wednesday two Belgian news websites had to retract reports claiming that an as yet unidentified third suspect involved in the Brussels airport bombings had been arrested. It prompted the BBC's veteran Europe correspondent Chris Morris to tweet, "This morning's report-

ing an object lesson in why all should be careful about quoting anonymous sources secondhand."

To their credit, Belgian media had respected the news blackout demanded by police in Brussels as they carried out a series of raids days linked to the Paris attacks in November, in which 130 people were killed. The French government watchdog had earlier praised the way its media had covered the Paris attacks after criticizing several outlets' coverage of the Charlie Hebdo and kosher supermarket shootings which took place in January 2015. Reporters then had managed to interview one of the Kouachi brothers who massacred some of the country's best known cartoonists as police besieged them, as well as Amedy Coulibaly as he held staff and customers hostage in the Hyper Cacher store in the east of the city.

French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve warned Wednesday that "the media need to be careful to avoid putting out information that is not accurate and could be exploited" for nefarious ends.—AFP