

FOUR SUICIDE BOMBERS KILL 15 IN NORTHEAST NIGERIA

YOLA, Nigeria: Four suicide bombers killed 15 people in a crowded market in the town of Madagali in Nigeria's north-eastern Adamawa state yesterday morning, a police spokesman said. The spokesman, speaking by telephone, did not identify any suspects. Suicide bombings are common in Nigeria's northeast, which is the centre of jihadist group Boko Haram's attempts to create an Islamic state.

The blasts killed two self-defense

fighters who wanted to search them. Their challenge likely saved many lives. In December, two women suicide bombers killed 57 people and wounded 177, including 120 children, at Madagali market. Last week, three girl suicide bombers were killed on the outskirts of the same town. Residents blamed Boko Haram Islamic extremists for the attacks. Madagali is about 150 kilometers (90 miles) southeast of Maiduguri, the largest city in the northeast and

birthplace of Boko Haram's insurgency. "They blew up themselves after they were intercepted by local vigilantes stationed at the checkpoint at the entry to town," resident David Abawu said by telephone. "Two vigilantes lost their lives in the process."

Nigeria's military and civilian self-defense fighters who work with them have intercepted many suicide bombers in recent months, preventing much higher death tolls. President

Muhammadu Buhari last month declared that Boko Haram had been crushed, but it is unlikely there will be a swift end to the suicide bombings and attacks on remote villages and army outposts.

Boko Haram's seven-year uprising has killed more than 20,000 people, driven 2.6 million from their homes and created a massive humanitarian crisis that the UN says has 5.1 million people in Nigeria facing starvation. —Agencies

LIBYA NOT ACCEPTING ITALY MIGRANT DEAL

VALLETTA: Libya's UN-backed government has not accepted proposals by Rome aimed at cutting migrant flows to Italy and the two sides are "far apart" on the issue, Malta's foreign minister said yesterday. George Vella, whose government holds the rotating chair of European Union ministerial councils, said he would brief his EU counterparts in Brussels on Monday on a long conversation he held on Thursday on behalf of the Union with the foreign minister of Libya's embattled, UN-backed premier, Fayez Seraj. Asked by reporters about unpublished proposals which Rome has put to Seraj in an effort to curb an expected surge in people taking to boats in Libya in the hope of being rescued and taken to Italy, Vella said the Libyans were considering the ideas. He declined to detail the Italian proposals beyond saying that their aim was to reduce the flow of migrants.

"They are far, far apart," Vella said. "Their positions are totally different ... It's not a question of money ... It's a wide-ranging discussion ... It's a question of what the Libyan government thinks would be acceptable to Libyans."

EU officials say the Union aims to agree a common position on Libya soon to back up Italy's initiatives. Rome has said these include helping secure Libya's southern desert frontier against people-smuggling and other trafficking.

Last week, after Italy's interior minister visited Tripoli, his ministry said he had agreed with Seraj that the two countries would cooperate against people-smugglers and that Rome would promote investment in the oil-rich country. Italy is reopening an embassy in its former colony and is keen to avert a new surge in migrant arrivals after taking in a record 180,000 people last year, mostly from Libya.

Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi took funding from Rome in return for holding back African migrants heading north. Since he was overthrown in 2011, numbers have soared and anarchy in Libya has left Europeans struggling for ways to reduce the flow.

Vella noted that the EU is aiming to increase funding to and cooperation with African and Middle Eastern governments to stem migration pressure. He said he saw cooperation with Egypt, also on the transit routes, as an important element in the strategy. He said he would consider the idea of EU-backed centres to process asylum claims in Egypt or other countries to help reduce numbers making journeys on which thousands died last year alone. "I would be willing to discuss practically anything," he said.

Echoing comments by Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat on Thursday, Vella, whose tiny island country lies on the sea route from Africa to Italy, said he was concerned about increasing Russian involvement in Libya following its role in Syria's war.

Describing recent contacts by a rebel Libyan commander with Moscow as "cavorting with the Russians", he said: "I'm not comfortable. We all know the Russians' dreams have always been to have bases in the Mediterranean." —Reuters

CYPRUS TALKS FALTER OVER FATE OF TURKISH TROOPS

DEAL HINGES ON ASSURANCE OF CYPRUS'S FUTURE SECURITY

GENEVA: Hopes for a peace deal in Cyprus stalled yesterday over a decades-old dispute, with the rival sides at loggerheads over the future of Turkish troops on the divided island. A week of UN-brokered talks in Geneva between Greek Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades and Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci sparked optimism that an agreement to reunify the island could be at hand.

But any settlement will require an agreement on Cyprus's future security, with key players Greece, Turkey and former colonial power Britain needing to sign on. The eastern Mediterranean island has been divided since 1974, when Turkish troops invaded in response to an Athens-inspired coup seeking union with Greece. And a key sticking point remains the presence of some 30,000 Turkish troops in the north of the island.

Ankara and Akinci have insisted that some Turkish military presence is essential for Turkish Cypriots to feel safe in a prospective united country. Anastasiades yesterday restated his position that a timeline must be agreed for those troops to eventually withdraw.

And Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias said there can be no solution to the four-decade division of Cyprus while Turkish "occupation" troops remain. "A just solution (to division) means, first of all, eliminating what caused it, namely the occupation and presence of occupation forces," Kotzias said, according to a ministry statement as he left Geneva.

But Turkish President Recep Tayyip



GENEVA: Greek Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades (center) gives a press conference following UN-sponsored Cyprus peace talks yesterday in Geneva. — AFP

Erdogan declared that a full withdrawal of Turkish troops from northern Cyprus was "out of the question".

He said in televised remarks that Athens and Greek Cypriots still have "different expectations" from their Turkish and Turkish Cypriot counterparts on resolving the Cyprus problem. UN envoy Espen Barth Eide cautioned that discussions on security had just begun and that the subject was "emotional" for all sides. He insisted that efforts to end one of the

world's longest running political crises would not be derailed over a temporary war of words.

Despite the roadblocks ahead, Anastasiades said the two sides were "on a path that creates hope" and that compromise was key. "A solution cannot create winners and leave losers (in its wake). If we want it to be viable and durable, all must understand, Greek and Turkish Cypriots alike, that a fine balance must be struck," he told reporters in Geneva. — AFP

GREEK ISLAND REFUGEE CAMP A PLACE WITHOUT 'HUMAN DIGNITY: US DOCTOR

LONDON: A camp on the Greek island of Lesbos housing more than 2,500 migrants denies people the most basic human dignity in bitterly cold winter weather, a doctor working at the camp said.

Diane Sampson, an American paediatrician, said she had treated desperate patients at the Moria camp suffering from frostbite, shivering with cold and drenched by snow and rain that had washed through the flimsy tents they are staying in. "This camp is definitely one of the least prepared ones that I have seen. It's not really prepared for the weather conditions," Sampson, who has worked in the camp for nearly three weeks, said by telephone from Lesbos.

Tents are leaking and standing in cold water and migrants have no way of drying

their clothes and bedding after days of heavy snow and rain, said Sampson.

"In a situation like that our main responsibility is to look at these human beings and treat them like human beings. This place lacks basic human dignity," Sampson told the Thomson Reuters Foundation on Thursday. A volunteer for Dutch charity Boat Refugee Foundation, Sampson said she had worked in camps after earthquakes in Pakistan and Haiti as well as along the Pakistan-Afghan border in the past 20 years.

The difference between how these camps had been run and the conditions she has encountered at the Moria camp were like "night and day", she said.

Sampson said usually in a humanitarian emergency an organization takes the lead

in delegating tasks like shelter, food and clothing to ensure efficient management of resources. "What is frustrating is that many of the conditions we're seeing here are preventable," said Sampson.

RAIN FORECAST

More rain is forecast over the weekend and next week. Some of Sampson's patients had told her they had queued for up to an hour in the cold and rain for food, with most people lacking winter boots and rain-proof clothes. A video posted on YouTube earlier this week showed tents collapsing under the weight of heavy snow days after Greek Migration Minister Yiannis Mouzalas was quoted as saying there were no refugees or migrants living in the cold. —Reuters