

GANGS' CAR BOMBS RATTLE MONTENEGRO'S CAPITAL

PODGORICA: Heavily-armed police are guarding the streets of Montenegro's capital after a spike in gangland violence rattled the Balkan country, which is on the brink of joining NATO. Drug mafia feuds began in the coastal towns of Bar and Kotor, hotbeds of organized crime, where anti-terrorist police swooped in to tackle the deadly rivalries last summer as tourists came and went on cruise ships.

But the troubles have come to the streets of the capital Podgorica in the past few weeks, with two people killed and two others seriously injured in three explosions. "Recent events in Podgorica and events that preceded them in other towns have understandably provoked the anxiety of citizens, who expect the authorities to do all they can in a merciless struggle against organized crime," said Interior Minister Mevludin Nuhodzic. He admitted that "in some way, order is threatened". Twelve people were killed last year as a result of gang feuds in the country of 620,000 people, whose tourism sector is growing under the threat of powerful organized crime.

In one incident in September, a sniper shot a prisoner dead in broad daylight in a yard in Montenegro's highest-security jail in Podgorica. The man had been jailed for extortion. The recent spike in attacks has resulted in dismissals and resignations at the top of the police force and an intensified presence on the streets. After nightfall for the past several days, heavily-armed officers have patrolled the



PODGORICA: Montenegrin police officers investigate a crime scene in the capital Podgorica. Heavily-armed police are guarding the streets of Montenegro's capital after a spike in gangland violence rattled the Balkan country, which is on the brink of joining NATO. — AFP

squares of the capital, closely monitored customers in bars and cafes and carried out tight security checks on cars.

So far they have seized several guns, drugs and one vehicle, but no arrests over the Podgorica blasts have been announced. Residents of the capital fear

becoming collateral damage of the warring gangs. "This has crossed all limits... the whole society is descending into the underworld. I am afraid of innocent people being killed," said Milos, 45, an economist who witnessed the latest blast in the centre of Podgorica on January 19. A young man with a crimi-

nal record was killed in the explosion and the passenger in his car had to have her leg amputated.

'Unbearable'

Another resident in the capital, 47-year-old lawyer Ana, described the situation as "unbearable" and wondered "what has prevented the authorities from strengthening their fight against crime?" Local people who spoke to AFP were reluctant to give their family names for security reasons. Nuhodzic insisted the government was "taking permanent action. Our goal is to create insecurity for criminals". But Nebojsa Medojevic, a leader of the main opposition Democratic Front alliance, said the security situation was "worrying" and that there was a "political character" to Montenegro's organized crime. "There are no boundaries between the state and crime," he told reporters on Friday.

NATO signed an accession agreement with Montenegro last year, paving the way for the country to become the 29th member of the Western military alliance. So far more than 20 of the 28 NATO allies have ratified the accession of the former Yugoslav republic, which is also a candidate for European Union membership. But mountainous Montenegro, which declared independence from Serbia in 2006, has struggled to contain the widespread scourge of organized crime and related violence. The EU regularly urges authorities to do more. — AFP



LILLE: Photographers take pictures of former French Education Minister and candidate in the left-wing primary for the 2017 French presidential election, Benoit Hamon (center). — AFP

FRANCE HARD-LEFT FACES OFF AGAINST CENTER-LEFT

PARIS: Hard-left Socialist rebel Benoit Hamon heads into France's left-wing presidential primary runoff as a surprising favorite to beat pro-business pragmatist Manuel Valls, in a vote that will realign France's unpredictable presidential campaign. Hamon is the favorite in today's vote after arriving in pole position in the first round with 36 percent of the votes. He proposes a "determined and optimistic leftist alternative." His most talked-about proposal is a 750 euros (\$800) "universal income" that would be gradually granted to all adults. He is now backed by another left-wing candidate, Arnaud Montebourg, eliminated from the race with 17.5 percent of the votes. Valls, who arrived second with 31.4 percent, criticized Hamon's "unrealistic" promises.

A former junior minister and briefly education minister, Hamon left the government in 2014. He then led a group of rebel Socialist lawmakers who opposed the government's economic policies. "Yesterday's failed solutions have no reason to become successes tomorrow," he said at a rally near Paris Thursday. Nasserah Mohammad, living in Trappes, the suburban city west of Paris where Hamon was elected, said he believes the hard-left candidate proposes "real innovation" in French politics. "That's where

we have to go, toward a renewal ... and not to be pleased with the old programs or with very small reforms," Mohammad said.

Ten French economists, including Thomas Piketty - author of the best-seller "Capital in the Twenty-First Century" - this week published an article to argue that the universal income can be "relevant and innovative". "Properly conceived and detailed, the universal living income can be a key element for reshaping our social model," they wrote. Valls has tried to make an asset from his experience as prime minister from 2014 to 2016 - despite his association with unpopular President Francois Hollande. Valls promotes "authority and security" values as the country is still under threat from potential terror attacks.

He says he represents a "credible left" seeking a balance between France's social model and reforms adapting the country to globalization. "I don't want to be the candidate of the taxes; I leave it to my adversary," Valls said in a rally near Paris Thursday. "I want to be the candidate of work value, of jobs, with a clear and serious roadmap offering a future to the French people." Vivien Chauffaille, a Parisian attending Valls' rally, said "he is the only one able to be a statesman and implement his proposals." — AP

TURMOIL AS CONSERVATIVES WOO FAR-RIGHT IN SWEDEN

BREAKING A LONGSTANDING TABOO

STOCKHOLM: Sweden's far-right party is rejoicing: long shunned by the political establishment, it has suddenly been invited in from the cold by a main opposition party eyeing a return to power and Swedish politics is all shook up. Breaking a longstanding taboo, Sweden's conservative Moderate Party last week opened the door for a cooperation with the anti-immigration Sweden Democrats, causing a deep rift within the stunned four-party centre-right opposition Alliance.

All of the political parties in parliament have long held a cordon sanitaire around the Sweden Democrats because of its roots in the neo-Nazi movement, but Moderates leader Anna Kinberg Batra argued the party could no longer be ignored. "It hasn't worked to pretend that such a large party in parliament doesn't exist," Kinberg Batra told public broadcaster SVT.

As Sweden took in the highest number of refugees per capita in Europe in 2015, the Sweden Democrats have seen their popularity soar. A recent poll credited them with 21 percent of voter sympathies, making them the country's second-biggest party after the Social Democrats. They first entered parliament in 2010 with 5.7 percent of votes, rising to nearly 13 percent in the 2014 election. Kinberg Batra made her remarks after calling on her Alliance partners to submit a joint budget to parliament and accept the far-right's votes-indirect support which would in effect topple the minority left-wing government comprising the Social Democrats and Greens.

Officials from the Moderates and the far-right are due to meet "in the near future", Swedish daily Dagens Industri reported on Friday. Kinberg Batra also said she was willing to talk to the Sweden Democrats on some issues, but did not specify which ones. The Centre and Liberal parties fiercely oppose the move, while the small Christian Democrats said they would accept the Sweden Democrats' indirect support but would not negotiate with them. The Moderates need the three parties' support if they are to have a chance at winning the next election in 2018.

'Threat to democracy'

Sweden Democrats party leader Jimmie Akesson was quick to react, saying he would demand "influence over what the government would look like" if his support helped the opposition regain power. Daniel Poohl, editor-in-chief of



STOCKHOLM: This file photo taken on September 14, 2014 shows Party leader Jimmie Akesson at the election night party of the far-right Sweden Democrats in Stockholm, Sweden. — AFP

anti-racism magazine Expo, raised a warning finger to the Moderates. The Sweden Democrats "constitute the greatest threat to democracy as we know it", he said, calling Kinberg Batra's invitation "a milestone" for the far-right. Akesson is a clean-cut 37-year-old with a talent for public speaking. Often described by media as having the looks of "a mother-in-law's dream", he is credited with giving the party a respectable facade.

But it is known for its nationalist views and strong stance against immigration, which it regards as a threat to Sweden's identity. Social Democratic Prime Minister Stefan Lofven made headlines in September 2016 when he described the Sweden Democrats as a "racist and Nazi party". Ironically, Kinberg Batra said much the same thing a month earlier. "They blame all of Sweden's problems on immigration. It is a racist party as it sets groups against each other and puts labels on other people," she said in a televised interview.

Collapsing Alliance?

The Alliance, which governed Sweden from 2006-2014, is keen to seize back power but its

hands have been tied since its 2014 election defeat. Prime Minister Lofven holds a weak minority which could easily be toppled if the opposition accepted the Sweden Democrats' indirect support on key issues in parliament. But the Alliance has until now refused to do so, not wanting to legitimize the Sweden Democrats, and because doing so would throw the country into political instability. Observers have now questioned whether the Alliance can survive such a deep ideological split.

A source in the Centre party told AFP they were "stunned" by Kinberg Batra's announcement. The Centre party "absolutely does not want to work in the Alliance on matters on which the Moderates and Sweden Democrats would launch negotiations". So why would Kinberg Batra risk such a rift? Editorialists have suggested her move was intended to quash critics within her own party who are angry that she has not taken advantage of a right-wing majority in parliament, which could snatch power from the left. "Our duty is not to ensure that Stefan Lofven gets through his left-wing politics," Camilla Brunsberg, a local group leader for the Moderates in southern Sweden said. — AFP

TRUMP PLAYS DOWN TALK OF LIFTING RUSSIAN SANCTIONS

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump on Friday played down talk that he might quickly lift sanctions on Russia, as he stepped onto the global stage alongside Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May. Britain is a strong supporter of maintaining international pressure on Moscow over its intervention in Ukraine, and Trump took a cautious line at their first joint news conference. Trump has also come under withering attack at home from hawkish critics in Congress, worried that his stated desire to become friends with President Vladimir Putin might weaken US resolve.

But the new US leader plans to have a telephone conversation with Putin yesterday, and his

aides say he is re-considering the sanctions regime. "We'll see what happens as far as the sanctions-very early to be talking about that," Trump said, welcoming May to the White House as the first foreign leader to visit since he was sworn in a week ago. May took a sterner line, insisting that Putin must live up to the Minsk Agreements that would put an end to Russian military interference in Ukraine.

"We believe the sanctions should continue until we see that Minsk Agreement fully implemented, and we've been continuing to argue that inside the European Union," she said. White House spokesman Sean Spicer had earlier announced on

Twitter that Trump plans to talk to Putin, France's President Francois Hollande and Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel over the weekend. France and Germany brokered the Minsk Agreement between Russia and Ukraine and have been pressuring both sides to live up to it.

Cold War

Appearing on Fox News, Trump's senior advisor Kellyanne Conway said the new commander-in-chief was indeed considering lifting sanctions on Russia. "All of that is under consideration," she said. "If another nation that has considerable resources wishes to join together with the United States of America to try to defeat and eradicate radical Islamic terrorism, then we're listening." In Moscow, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Putin would congratulate Trump on his inauguration. But he refused to comment on rumors that Trump might already be gearing up to roll back the measures that have helped drive ties to their lowest point since the end of the Cold War.

"This is the first contact by phone since President Trump assumed office so it is hardly likely there will be substantive contact on all issues. Let's be patient," Peskov said. On Thursday, in a speech to US Republican lawmakers, May had suggested Washington engage Putin but be wary of him. Trump has sparked concerns among Washington's European allies and foreign policy hawks at home by repeatedly declaring his desire to forge closer ties with Moscow. He won the presidency amid charges that Russia interfered in last year's election on his behalf, in part by hacking the emails of top officials in his rival Hillary Clinton's campaign. — AFP



MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin (center) holds a Security Council meeting in Moscow. — AFP

'RESISTANCE' MOVEMENT COALESCES - ON TWITTER

WASHINGTON: A social media "resistance" movement is taking shape against the Trump administration, inspired by the new president's efforts to control information. It began after the deletion of tweets and data from official US accounts and websites which proved embarrassing to the new president, including government reports on climate change, which have been challenged by President Donald Trump. Some took to Twitter with "alternative" handles-claiming to be federal employees exercising their free speech rights-and the resistance mushroomed into a movement.

The seeds of rebellion were first planted by the National Park Service, which came under fire from the new administration for its photos comparing crowd size at Trump's inauguration to the event eight years earlier with Barack Obama. After those tweets were deleted, tweets from one national park's account-which according to some reports came from a former employee-offered links to climate change studies, and when those were removed, a new @AltParkSer sprung up and amassed 1.2 million followers in a matter of days.

The account is described as "The Unofficial #Resistance team of US National Park Service." "We don't want any trouble. We just want to keep peer-reviewed 'factually accurate' climate science flowing out of US institutions," the group said in one of its first tweets. Over

the next few days, dozens of "rogue" or "alt" Twitter accounts emerged, including @RogueNOAA (for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), @RogueNASA (for the space agency) and @alt_fda for the Food and Drug Administration.

Another account called AltEPA (@ActualEPAfacts), with more than 150,000 followers, aims to offer data which might be suppressed by the Environmental Protection Agency. "He can take our official Twitter but he'll never take our FREEDOM," the account says. "UNOFFICIALLY resisting." The messages were gaining traction with hashtags such as #ResistTrump, #ClimateFacts and #Twistance, although it was not clear if the messages were coming from federal employees themselves.

Some of the Twitter handles, according to various tweets, have been turned over to people outside government to avoid potential reprisals. White House spokesman Sean Spicer denied the administration was trying to suppress free expression among federal employees. "There's nothing that's come from the White House, absolutely not," he said when asked if the White House had ordered a clampdown. But according to The Washington Post, Trump personally expressed anger to the head of the US park service over the inauguration day photos and ordered him to produce images to show a stronger turnout for his ceremony. — AFP