

JUNCKER SLAMS 'RIDICULOUS' EU PARLIAMENT



STRASBOURG: EU Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker gesturing as he speaks during a debate at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, eastern France. — AFP

STRASBOURG: European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker launched a blistering attack yesterday on a nearly empty European Parliament, sparking bitter exchanges with the head of the EU's only directly elected institution. Juncker, known for his sharp wit, was angry to find only a handful of MEPs present at the assembly in Strasbourg to hear a report on Malta's just-completed EU presidency.

But his remarks drew a sharp response from parliament head Antonio Tajani, who said his colleague was out of order and should mind his tongue. "The European Parliament is ridiculous, totally ridiculous," Juncker told the chamber,

which seats 751 deputies. "I salute those who made the effort to turn up but the fact that only about 30 deputies are here for this debate clearly shows that parliament is not serious!" he said.

Tajani interrupted from the podium: "You can criticize the parliament but it is not the Commission which controls parliament." "It is parliament which controls the Commission!" Juncker retorted: "There are only a few members in the plenary to control the Commission. You are ridiculous!" "Mr President, I ask you, please use different language. We are not ridiculous," Tajani said. Juncker begged to differ and signed off with a blunt admonition: "I will never again

attend a meeting of this kind." It is a courtesy for the head of the country holding the EU's rotating presidency, in this case Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat, to present parliament with a report on their work during the country's six-month leadership.

Juncker, a former long-serving Luxembourg premier, became head of the Commission in 2014 promising a more political approach. He also has a reputation for sometimes undiplomatic language which tends to amuse and infuriate in equal measure. Italy's Tajani became president of the parliament in January and served as EU transport commissioner from 2010 to 2014. —AFP

MIGRANT INFLUX TO EUROPE EXCEEDS 100,000 THIS YEAR

NEARLY 2,250 DIED ATTEMPTING THE SEA CROSSING

GENEVA: More than 100,000 migrants have made the perilous Mediterranean crossing to Europe this year, the UN said yesterday, amid mounting tensions among EU nations on how to tackle the crisis. Nearly 2,250 people have died in 2017 attempting the sea crossing from North Africa, the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM) added. Italy has taken in nearly 85 percent of the arrivals—most of them sub-Saharan Africans crossing from Libya—and has pleaded for help from other European Union nations, saying it is struggling to cope.

"The reception of rescued migrants cannot be seen as an issue only for Italy, but a matter for Europe as a whole," IOM chief William Lacy Swing said, appealing for the rest of the EU to show more solidarity. On Sunday, Italian Interior Minister Marco Minniti called on EU neighbors to open their ports to rescue ships picking up migrants in the Mediterranean, after issuing a drastic threat to close its own ports to the boats.

But France rejected that idea, with an aide to Minniti's counterpart Gerard Collomb telling AFP this would only encourage more migrants to set sail. EU interior ministers are due to meet in Estonia's capital Tallinn on Thursday to discuss the migrant crisis—the continent's worst since World War II—in a bid to defuse a long-running row over spreading asylum seekers across the bloc. The EU put in place a policy in 2015 to distribute around 160,000 asylum-seekers across different countries. But only about 20,000 have been relocated from Italy and Greece under the scheme, while Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic have flatly refused to take part.

Ministers meeting in Tallinn will also discuss proposals for a "code of conduct" for charities operating rescue boats in the Mediterranean, a plan announced by France, Germany and Italy on Monday. Separately, foreign ministers from European and African countries affected by the crisis will meet in Rome tomorrow with representatives of the EU and UN as part of a diplomatic push to stem the influx. In an interview with France's Figaro newspaper, European migration commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos called on Tuesday for EU countries to speed up deportations of failed asylum seekers to ease the pressure, but warned this needed cooperation from their home countries.



SALERNO: Migrants wait to disembark from the Spanish ship 'Rio Segura' in the harbor of Salerno, Italy. — AP

'Enormous pressure'

The UN figures released yesterday showed that between January 1 and July 3, more than 85,000 migrants landed in Italy, nearly 9,300 arrived in Greece, nearly 6,500 in Spain and over 270 in Cyprus. "We are under enormous pressure," Italy's Minniti said in an interview with Il Messaggero over the weekend, while the country's Red Cross warned that the situation in overcrowded reception centers was becoming critical. The UN's refugee agency also weighed in, warning that Italy cannot continue absorbing tens of thousands of migrants on its own. "This is not sustainable. We need to have other countries joining Italy and sharing that responsibility," said Vincent Cochetel, UNHCR special envoy for the central Mediterranean.

Austrian Defense Minister Hans Peter Doskozil warned Monday that Vienna is set to impose border checks and deploy soldiers on its frontier with Italy if the Mediterranean influx does not slow. While the numbers arriving in 2017 are staggering, they remain far below last year's figures. During the same period in 2016, 231,503 people made the crossing to Europe, with the 100,000-mark passed already in February that year. But at that time most of the migrants were crossing from Turkey to Greece, and an EU deal with Ankara in March last year effectively hit the brakes on that movement. —AFP

MACRON GOVERNMENT LAUNCHES REFORM PLAN

PARIS: French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe unveiled an ambitious program of tax cuts and reduced public spending on Tuesday designed to boost corporate investment and end the country's reliance on state borrowing. Philippe put spurring entrepreneurship at the heart of his first policy speech to the National Assembly after presidential and parliamentary elections in May and June. "Businesses must want to set up and develop on our territory rather than elsewhere," Philippe told lawmakers, announcing that corporate tax would be cut from 33 percent to 25 percent in the next five years.

Tackling France's chronic overspending was a priority, he said, warning that the public debt now totalled 2.1 trillion euros, nearly the equivalent of an entire year's economic output. "We are dancing on a volcano that is rumbling ever louder," Philippe told the newly elected National Assembly, saying that public spending would be cut and the public deficit would be brought below 3.0 of GDP this year. "France cannot remain the champion both of public spending and taxes," he said. Almost all of the measures confirmed election promises from 39-year-old centrist President Emmanuel Macron who was elected France's youngest ever president in May after promising to modernise the country.

Election pledges

Philippe has already outlined one of the government's biggest economic reforms: An overhaul of France's rigid labor law which will enable companies to negotiate working terms and conditions with their employees. The measure faces resistance from leftist opponents. The powerful CGT trade union has already called for street protests and strikes in September. The government will face little difficulty in passing legislation in the lower house of parliament where candidates from Macron's new Republic on the Move (REM) party won more than 300 out of 577 seats in last month's election.

The upper-house Senate, where rightwing Republicans hold a majority, will be trickier. Philippe said yesterday that the government would also honour other campaign pledges including introducing a new national service for young people and making dental and eye care free on the health system. Other measures including raising the price of cigarettes progressively to €10 from their current level of €7 to fight smoking-related diseases, the biggest cause of preventable deaths in France.

Macron reviews

Macron, France's youngest president at just 39, gave a state of the union address to both houses of parliament on Monday, a novelty which he intends to turn into an annual event to present his vision for the country. He said he was not aiming for mere reforms but a "transformation" of the political system and the economy. He faced mixed reviews for his inaugural address. The French press noted his determination to restore the prestige of the office of the all-powerful presidency and said he appeared keen to stay above the political fray.

"Macron is leaving the difficult work to Philippe," wrote commentator Paul-Henri du Limbert in the right-leaning Le Figaro newspaper. But Macron's style - he has used the former royal palace in Versailles twice since taking office and has given only one media interview - has also seen him criticized by some for being aloof, monarchical or even "pharaonic". Yesterday, he visited a military base in the northwest of the country, where he embarked for a four-hour trip on the nuclear submarine "The Terrible".

Macron also promised in his speech on Monday to slash by a third the number of MPs in the lower and upper houses, telling lawmakers he would call a referendum if they do not agree to the measure. The new head of state has broadly positive approval ratings with slightly more than half of respondents in recent polls expressing a positive view of him - around the same level as Hollande enjoyed at the start of his term. — AFP



PARIS: French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe makes his general policy speech before the National Assembly yesterday. — AFP



SINGAPORE: Interpol President, Meng Hongwei, delivers his opening address at the Interpol World congress yesterday in Singapore. — AP

INTERPOL PRESIDENT CALLS FOR UNITY IN FACING CYBERATTACKS

SINGAPORE: Countries and law enforcement agencies must work together to counter rising threats, especially those in cyberspace, the president of Interpol told a security congress yesterday. In a wide-ranging speech, Meng Hongwei cited the recent outbreak of ransomware WannaCry, which has scrambled data at hospitals, factories, banks, government agencies and other businesses in Asia and beyond. "Criminals will continue to exploit the exponential growth of the internet and social communication platforms," said Meng, a top Chinese police official.

"However, no single country or profession can rely solely upon its own capability to address the problem of transnational and organized crimes. We are all part of the world. We are all facing the same threats in (the) international arena," Meng said. Meng's election to lead Interpol set

off alarm bells among rights advocates over abuses and a lack of transparency within China's legal system. His speech yesterday was one of his first public appearances. Lyon, France-based Interpol has 190 member nations and has the power to issue "red notices," the closest instrument to an international arrest warrant in use today.

Interpol's president is a largely symbolic but still influential figure who heads its executive committee, which is responsible for providing guidance and direction and implementing decisions made by its general assembly. Interpol Secretary-General Jurgen Stock is the organization's chief full-time official and heads the executive committee. Meng took over in November from Mireille Ballestrazzi of France for a four-year term. He was nominated by Interpol member countries. — AP

BURUNDI BECOMING A 'VIOLENT DICTATORSHIP'

NAIROBI: Burundi's President Pierre Nkurunziza and his ruling party have moved the country toward violent dictatorship, rights groups said yesterday in a report that slams the international community for inaction. A "purge" of ethnic Tutsis from the army, a crackdown on opposition and media and a bid to change the constitution to allow unlimited presidential terms are signs of an "increasingly violent dictatorial regime," it said.

The tiny central African state was plunged into political crisis in April 2015 when Nkurunziza announced his intention to run for a third term which he went on to win. At least 500 people have been killed in ensuing violence, according to the UN—although rights groups put the figure at over 1,000 - and more than 400,000 have fled the country since the crisis began. In their report the International Federation for Human Rights (known by its French acronym, FIDH) and partner groups describe how the ruling party has tightened its stranglehold during a two-year conflict.

It said the ruling CNDD-FDD has become the sole state party, with monuments glorifying it erected, party flags placed at entrances to public schools and violent propaganda broadcast urging Burundians to be ready to fight and eliminate opponents. "In a matter of two years, almost all the heads and activists of the political opposition have been silenced and hunted down by the Burundian authorities," it said. The report details accounts of Tutsi soldiers who

have disappeared, been arrested or brutally tortured or found dead.

It warns that without international intervention Nkurunziza could succeed in reversing history and establishing a Hutu-controlled regime based on a mono-ethnic army under the control of the authorities. In Burundi, which has a long history of violence between Hutu and Tutsi communities, "this would represent a major risk for peace in the country, as in the region." The report singles out the ruling party youth wing, the Imbonerakure, which it describes as a militia characterized by "ideological radicalization" that has been recorded singing songs encouraging the rape of opposition women and is widely accused of human rights violations, including murder, rape and torture.

The FIDH urges "the international community to recognize the gravity of the situation in Burundi" and for the International Criminal Court (ICC) to quickly open an investigation. It also says the African Union and UN should ensure political dialogue, impose an arms embargo and apply sanctions against Burundi officials. "The international community's lack of determination and its incapacity to implement its own decisions" allow Nkurunziza to shore up his position ahead of a possible attempt to change the constitution to allow him to run again in 2020. Burundi has repeatedly denied a campaign of repression and has harshly criticised UN warnings of a genocide risk. — AFP

CANADA TO PAY EX-GUANTANAMO INMATE

TORONTO: The Canadian government is going to apologize and give millions to a former Guantanamo Bay prisoner who pleaded guilty to killing a US soldier in Afghanistan when he was 15, with Canada's Supreme Court later ruling that officials had interrogated him under "oppressive circumstances." An official familiar with the deal said yesterday that Omar Khadr will receive 10.5 million Canadian dollars (US\$8 million). The official was not authorized to discuss the deal publicly before the announcement and spoke on condition of anonymity. The government and Khadr's lawyers negotiated the deal last month.

The Canadian-born Khadr was 15 when he was captured by US troops following a firefight

at a suspected Al-Qaeda compound in Afghanistan that resulted in the death of an American special forces medic, US Army Sgt First Class Christopher Speer.

Khadr, who was suspected of throwing the grenade that killed Speer, was taken to Guantanamo and ultimately charged with war crimes by a military commission. He pleaded guilty in 2010 to charges that included murder and was sentenced to eight years plus the time he had already spent in custody. He returned to Canada two years later to serve the remainder of his sentence and was released in May 2015 pending an appeal of his guilty plea, which he said was made under duress. Omar Khadr spent 10 years in Guantanamo Bay. His case received

international attention after some dubbed him a child soldier.

The Supreme Court of Canada ruled in 2010 that Canadian intelligence officials obtained evidence from Khadr under "oppressive circumstances," such as sleep deprivation, during interrogations at Guantanamo Bay in 2003, and then shared that evidence with US officials. Khadr was the youngest and last Western detainee held at the US military prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. His lawyers filed a \$20 million wrongful imprisonment lawsuit against the Canadian government, arguing the government violated international law by not protecting its own citizen and conspired with the US in its abuse of Khadr. — AP