

FEW FOREIGNERS IN E GERMANY BUT XENOPHOBIA IS PREVALENT

FRANKFURT (ODER): A social worker in the drab eastern German city of Frankfurt an der Oder admits she feels isolated at work whenever talk turns to the country's record influx of refugees. "I have to say that my colleagues are not very friendly towards foreigners and I am almost alone in my opinion," Elisabeth, who gave just her first name, told AFP.

Foreigners are rarely seen in the former communist city about 100 kilometers east of Berlin, but as in much of eastern Germany, there is deep suspicion toward migrants. With its attacks on Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision to let in around a million asylum seekers since 2015, the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party has found fertile ground in the east.

At the last state elections in 2014, before Germany's migrant crisis erupted, the AfD won 11 seats in the state assembly of Brandenburg, where Frankfurt an der Oder is located. Police commissioner Wilko Moeller, who leads the city's local chapter

of the AfD, noted that the region offers "great potential" for his protest party. In an illustration of how favorable the climate is for the AfD, its deputy chairman Alexander Gauland is running for a national seat in Frankfurt an der Oder in the September 24 general elections.

'Far too many migrants'

With its tall concrete residential blocks in the centre of town, Frankfurt an der Oder, at the border with Poland, has struggled to shed its ex-communist yoke. Like other parts of the eastern region, the city has been losing population. Once home to 87,000 inhabitants, a quarter-century later only 58,000 people are left as many have moved west in search of better opportunities.

The unemployment rate stands at 10 percent, far above the 5.9 percent rate nationwide. And even if foreigners make up just over one percent of the city's population, some 1,400 people-half of them

asylum seekers who arrived in 2015 — many locals still feel that's too many. A retiree, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said: "I don't think refugees should have been allowed in like that. Even if we are a social country, we have our own problems. "I am not xenophobic, but that was far too many."

Her sentiment is mirrored across much of Germany's five states in the former communist east, where the number of jobless is higher than the western average and where few migrants are seen on the streets. Even in 2015 — when the mass migrant influx brought the total number of foreigners in Germany to 9.1 million-only 476,000 made their home in the east, according to official data.

'Structural racism'

Hajo Funke, a political scientist at Berlin's Free University, said eastern Germany suffers from a "structural" problem of racism. The former East Germany "was an authoritarian regime that was not

very open to diversity and which did not seek to integrate foreigners," he said. Following reunification in 1990, resentment also built up over the economic gap with western Germany as new prosperity failed to materialize quickly enough, he said.

Just two years later in 1992, race riots rocked the eastern coastal city of Rostock, with mobs flinging petrol bombs and stones at an apartment block housing migrants while thousands of bystanders applauded. More recently, the anti-Islam PEGIDA movement was born in the biggest city in the east, Dresden, and the proportion of assaults against shelters for asylum seekers has been far higher than in the west. The neo-Nazi party NPD also has some 264 elected municipal officials in the east, compared with 74 in the west. Funke noted that the Rostock riots became a template of violence for a generation that grew up during the turbulent reunification years, and became drawn to the extremist movement. — AFP



LILLE: French presidential election candidate for the far-right Front National (FN) party Marine Le Pen (C) acknowledges applause after she delivered a speech during a campaign rally at the Zenith venue. — AFP

NON MERCI: FRENCH VOTERS REJECT POLITICAL CORRUPTION ESTABLISHMENT SEEN AS INTENT ON ENRICHING ITSELF

PARIS: French voters just won't tolerate corruption in politics anymore - that appears to be the message from the swift downfall of the country's powerful security minister. It's a notable shift from the past, when influence peddling seemed endemic and politicians untouchable, even when they were accused of shocking scandals. The change is the result of an aggressive new financial prosecutor, an unprecedented anti-corruption drive by President Francois Hollande, and growing public frustration with a political establishment seen as intent on enriching itself even as ordinary people suffer.

Hollande on Thursday inaugurated the French anti-corruption agency, a public organization focusing on business activity - the latest move in government efforts to fight corruption. Five years ago, Hollande campaigned on the promise to make the French Republic "exemplary." He probably didn't think he would have so much clean up to do in his own camp. Former Interior Minister Bruno Le Roux on Tuesday became the fifth minister to quit the Socialist government over financial wrongdoing allegations. Prosecutors opened an investigation into a report that he hired his two daughters for some two dozen temporary parliamentary jobs, starting when they were 15 and 16 years old.

String of scandals

The case comes as France's electoral cam-

paign is being affected by a string of corruption scandals ahead of the country's two-round presidential election on April 23 and May 7. The conservative candidate Francois Fillon is the target an investigation into allegations that he gave his wife and two children government-funded jobs which they never did. Fillon suggested Thursday that Hollande would intervene in legal cases to try to discredit political rivals. Hollande vigorously denounced those allegations as false and insisted he has never intervened in any judicial procedure.

Fillon, once considered the presidential front-runner, has sunk in polls following the press' first revelations about the jobs in January. Since then, allegations have come out that Fillon was also given suits worth more than 48,000 euros (\$52,000) over the past five years - including two suits worth 13,000 euros (\$14,000) last month. Judges are also investigating whether Fillon and his wife committed fraud and forgery in a cover-up attempt.

His supporters insist the principle of presumption of innocence should protect their candidate. Far-right leader Marine Le Pen and some members of her anti-EU, anti-immigrant National Front party are also targeted in several ongoing investigations. Polls suggest that Le Pen and independent centrist Emmanuel Macron are the two top contenders in the election. The top two vote-getters on April 23 will

compete in a presidential runoff on May 7. For the first time in the country's history, the declarations of assets of all the presidential candidates were published this week on the High authority for the transparency of public life's website. Hollande's term was tarnished from the start with scandals - the biggest one concerning former budget minister Jerome Cahuzac.

Cahuzac acknowledged owning illegal foreign bank accounts for two decades in March 2013, after denying and publicly lying for months. He was sentenced last year to three years in prison. He has appealed the decision. Cahuzac's case prompted the creation of the new position of a national financial prosecutor three years ago to focus on complex cases of serious economic and financial crime.

Conflict of interest

The government also passed a law in 2013 to force ministers and parliamentarians to declare their assets and avoid any conflict of interest. The same year, another bill tightened France's legal arsenal to fight tax fraud and evasion. In addition to Le Roux and Cahuzac, three lower-profile ministers were forced to quit Hollande's government in the same circumstances, including junior minister for foreign trade Thomas Thevenoud who resigned in 2014 because he was named in an inquiry into tax fraud. He goes on trial next month. — AP

AFTER NEO-NAZI YOUTH, SWEDEN TEACHES VALUE OF TOLERANCE

KRISTINEHAMN: Kimmie Ahlen was once seduced by the violent underpinnings of National Socialist ideology, but today, alarmed by the spread of populism, he has a new mission-teaching tolerance to young Swedes. With a blond buzz cut, piercing blue eyes and beefy shoulders chiseled in the gym and boxing ring, Ahlen makes an imposing impression. The young boy who was once teased by his classmates is long gone, transformed by muscles and tattoos on his fingers and neck.

At an age when most students were enjoying their first flirtations and struggling through book reports, he joined a gang of neo-Nazi skinheads immersed in Nordic mythology and Holocaust denial, convinced of the superiority of the "white race". Many of them were criminals and drug addicts. But that was then. Now 27, Ahlen spends his time warning teenage students in Sweden about the dangerous allure of hatred, in a country of 10 million that has taken in almost 300,000 migrants since 2014.

"The world is different today. Donald Trump is president of the United States and the Sweden Democrats may soon take power in our country," he said in an interview with AFP, referring to the country's far-right party. A municipal youth councilor, he lives alone in a red-and-white cabin on the shores of Lake Vanern, Sweden's biggest lake. Three hours southwest of Stockholm by car, it is an ideal spot for meditation and reflection.

As a shy boy, Ahlen was bullied at school by his classmates and even by some teachers. In his free time, he collected objects he found on the ground. One day, when he was 12, he stumbled across a CD by Ultima Thule, a Swedish white-power rock group popular among neo-Nazis. It was a revelation. "I loved the music," he said. "What really appealed to me was the way they spoke about Sweden. It made me patriotic, a National Socialist, without

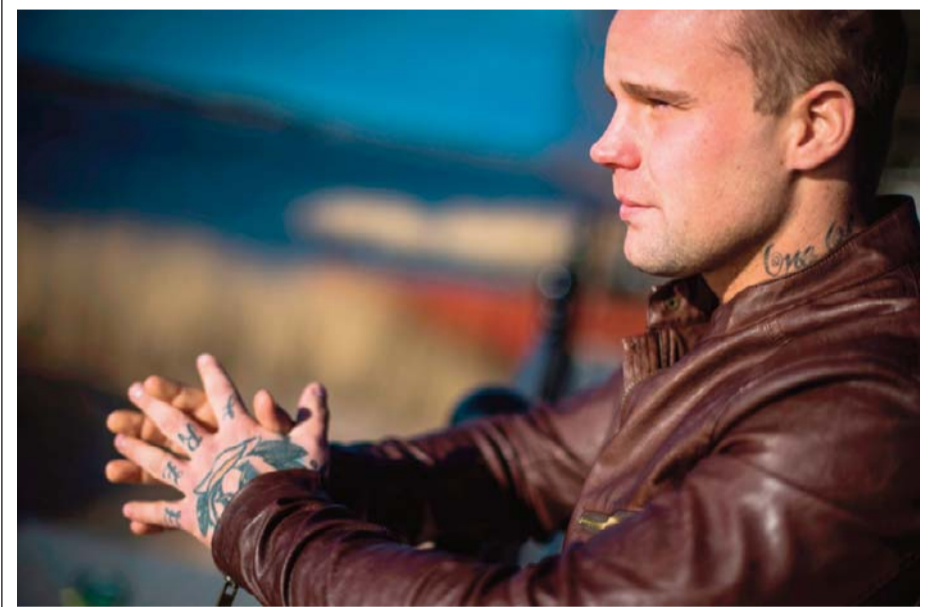
understanding the significance of nationalism at all." Soon afterward he joined the local gang of skinheads in Vallberg, in central Sweden. There was not a single foreigner among the town's 3,000 residents at the time, but unemployment, and hopelessness, were rampant.

'Gave me an identity'

His conversion began with his appearance: At 14, Ahlen donned the neo-Nazi uniform, suiting up in a bomber jacket and Doc Martens. "It gave me an identity, the feeling of being someone," he said. Between 2006 and 2008, he attended neo-Nazi demonstrations across Sweden. When he was not beating up left-wing activists, he was giving speeches: "I remember making up a story about immigrants who barbecued cats and ate them," he said.

He dropped out of high school, began experimenting with drugs, and repeatedly got arrested for crimes including theft and vandalism. And in the end, it was drugs that led almost surreptitiously his turnaround. "It was more fun to do drugs," he acknowledged. He gradually distanced himself from the skinhead crowd, but without abandoning his National Socialist convictions. Until one day, his boxing trainer forced him to spar with an Iranian-born partner.

"It was either that or not learn to box," Ahlen said. "It was around that time I stopped hating people because of their appearance." During a stint in jail for theft, he met a Swedish teacher who helped him to turn the page on racism for good; For the first time, Ahlen felt as though someone was really listening, and he started talking. But it was only during his last stay in jail, a time when his mother was gravely ill, that he decided to change. He got a job and quit hanging out with his friends to spend more time with his new colleagues and started writing poetry. — AFP



KRISTINEHAMN: Former neonazi and drug addict, 27 years-old Swedish Kimmie Ahlen, poses for a picture. — AFP

BULGARIAN LEFT SEEKS ELECTION COMEBACK

SOFIA: Bulgarian voters went to the polls Sunday after a tight election race pitting Socialists seen as closer to Russia against two-times centre-right premier Boyko Borisov, seeking another comeback. Opinion polls in the European Union's poorest country, where the average monthly salary is just 500 euros (\$540) and corruption is rife, also indicate a strong showing by nationalists.

The karate-kicking Borisov's enthusiastically pro-European Union GERB party and the Socialist Party (BSP), newly led by the energetic Kornelia Ninova, are both seen garnering around 30 percent. "I voted for a stable, predictable and united Bulgaria," Borisov said after casting his ballot, adding: "Bulgarians must decide today who is fit to lead this kind of politics so let them choose." Socialist chief Ninova denied that her party's perceived Russian sympathies would have any impact in power. "No foreign country, eastern or western, should be allowed to influence Bulgarian politics," she said.

In the ex-communist nation's third election in four years, many voters are turning away from the main parties towards groups on the fringes, or are not bothering to vote. "The big parties are totally disconnected from the reality of what is going on in Bulgaria and that is outright irresponsible," said IT worker

Alexander Naydenov, 35. "That is why I voted for one of the smaller parties with the hope that they can act as a balance to the big ones."

Borisov, 57, once a bodyguard for Bulgaria's last communist leader, has long been the dominant figure in national politics, serving as premier from 2009 to 2013 and again from 2014 to 2017. In between, the BSP was in power for barely a year. Both times Borisov quit early, first in 2013 after mass protests and then last November after his candidate for the presidency was beaten by an air force general backed by the BSP.

'Second-class member'

If Ninova can become premier this raises the prospect of NATO member Bulgaria, which has long walked a tightrope between East and West, drifting more towards Moscow. Ninova has said she is not content with Bulgaria being a "second-class member" of the EU and that she will veto an extension of EU sanctions on Russia. Russia, with which Bulgaria has long had close cultural and economic ties, has been accused of seeking to expand its influence in other Balkan countries in recent months. But Borisov has also said that he wants more "pragmatic" ties with Russia and Ninova, 48, insists that she remains committed to the EU. — AFP

GERMAN STATE VOTES IN TEST FOR MERKEL

BERLIN: German voters went to the polls Sunday in tiny Saarland state where a resurgent centre-left hopes to strike a first blow in their battle to topple Chancellor Angela Merkel this year. Although the state bordering France is home to just one million people, its vote half a year before national elections is seen as a test of the Social Democrats' rising fortunes under new leader Martin Schulz.

The SPD, having long played second fiddle to Merkel in a national right-left grand coalition, has been re-energized since the folksy and plain-spoken Schulz became its leader in January. The former president of the European Parliament has lifted party support by 10 percent with promises to help the socially disadvantaged and end Merkel's almost 12-year reign in September elections.

The "Schulz mania" has seen younger voters flock to the more than 150-year-old workers' party, which is now polling neck-and-neck with Merkel's conservative bloc-both nationally and in Saarland. The SPD is currently the CDU's unhappy junior partner in Saarland and in the national government-and in both cases hopes to grab power by teaming up with other leftist parties.

Even if the CDU comes out ahead in Saarland, the SPD could potentially seek a coalition with the far-left Linke and possibly the ecologist Greens parties — a so-called "red-red-green" alliance. The same trio is now running the city-state of Berlin, although policy hurdles remain at the national level, given that the Linke, for example, rejects German membership of NATO.

In Saarland, the latest poll for broadcaster ZDF gave the CDU a clear lead at 37 percent over the

SPD's 32 percent, with the SPD's potential ally the Linke scoring 12.5 percent. The incumbent is popular CDU premier Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, 54, often dubbed simply "AKK", who is considered pragmatic and unpretentious, dressing up as a cleaning lady at carnival festivities.

Change 'within reach'

While Merkel long seemed invincible at the ballot box, she has been weakened by a backlash against her decision to open German borders to refugees which has brought in a million asylum

seekers since 2015. This has boosted the anti-immigration Alternative for Germany party which, despite a recent dip in popularity, is still expected to enter the opposition benches of the 11th of Germany's 16 state assemblies on Sunday.

As the refugee crisis has abated, the campaign race is increasingly being fought along traditional ideological lines. While Merkel broadly argues that Germany, the EU's export engine, is prosperous and needs to stay competitive to keep it that way, Schulz points to the army of "working poor" and promises to narrow the wealth gap. — AFP



ROME: This handout picture released by the Italian Presidency (Quirinale) shows Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel arriving, on March 25, 2017 at the Quirinale presidential palace before a meeting with Italian President as part of a special summit of European leaders to mark the 60th anniversary of the bloc's founding treaties. — AFP