

International

Austria puts the squeeze on refugees with benefit cuts

Three regions reduced benefits for newcomers

VIENNA: Ahmed Ali, a 34-year-old teacher, fled the war in Syria two years ago and settled in a quiet Austrian town on the hilly border with the Czech Republic. He was hoping to raise a family there. But voter attitudes towards immigrants have hardened due to concerns about security and the economy after Austria took in more than 1 percent of its population in asylum seekers in 2015. This fuelled support for the far-right party Freedom Party and its candidate came close to winning last year's presidential election. Immigration is still the dominant political issue ahead of the Oct 15 parliamentary election.

In January, lawmakers in Lower Austria, where Ali lived, reduced benefits for new arrivals. They said the benefits system needed protecting from being overstretched by the influx of refugees. Ali and his pregnant wife moved again to Vienna in July, where their benefits would still be paid in full. "Most of us fled when the letter came telling us our social benefits would be cut. At first we didn't believe it but then we saw it on our bank balance," said Ali, who says his German is not yet good enough to find work.

Three of Austria's nine provinces—Lower Austria, Burgenland and Upper Austria—have reduced benefits for new arrivals. Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz, leader of the conservative People's Party which is leading in the polls, wants to make similar cuts apply to the whole country. Chancellor Christian Kern, whose Social Democratic Party polls show competing with the Freedom Party for second place, has resisted the idea but said he could support them in cases where new arrivals turn down job offers.

Legal challenge

So far, the cuts have primarily impacted migrants like Ali who sought asylum in Austria when it opened its border in 2015 although some Austrians returning home have also been caught. In Burgenland the rules apply to all peo-

ple seeking help who have spent fewer than five years of the six preceding their application for benefits in Austria.

A statement accompanying the Upper Austrian bill painted the cuts as a way to tackle the problem of "welfare magnetism" in the context of refugees. The Lower Austrian government declined to comment due to a legal challenge against the cuts. In a case brought by a charity, Austria's Constitutional Court is expected to rule next year on whether the cuts by Lower Austria, decided in late 2016 and implemented since early 2017, are illegal. The 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention says host countries must grant refugees "the same treatment with respect to public relief and assistance" as their own nationals. A 2011 EU directive sets a similar rule. The UN refugee agency (UNHCR), which has denounced "xenophobic debates" in Austrian politics ahead of the election, has described the cuts as breaches of international and European law but no international cases have been started. A Burgenland spokeswoman defended the benefits changes, saying they targeted Austrian nationals as well. "Therefore there is no violation of ... the EU directive and the refugee convention," she said. A spokesman for Kurz said legislation to expand the cuts would be passed and phrased in such a way "that no doubt for the highest courts will emerge".

Bare minimum

The three provinces have cut benefits for new arrivals, even after obtaining asylum, to around 570 euros (\$669) a month, less than half the poverty threshold of 1,200 euros, compared with around 850 euros for an Austrian who has never lived abroad. Benefits for a household have been capped at 1,500 euros. Rather than live off less than what is considered the bare minimum for most Austrians, many of those affected have moved, particularly to the capital. Ali moved to an apartment with his uncle and aunt in a

Constitutional Court looks into legality of cuts



SAINT-OMER: Afghan and Pakistani migrants gather for a cricket training session in Saint-Omer, northern France.— AFP

dilapidated building on the outskirts of the city costing 1,100 euros a month. "They don't care how many children you have. And maybe they'll cut again," Ali said in his living room with two sofas, a television set and a picture of Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani.

He found more affordable apartments but the landlord did not want refugees as tenants. One landlady was concerned social benefits for refugees might be cut in Vienna, too. "Instead of cutting the social safety net, integration and independence should be supported. We fear that language learning, training and the search for work will suffer if those affected don't know how to pay their rent any-

more," said the chief of the UNHCR's Austria office, Christoph Pinter. Although the Freedom Party and Kurz's conservatives have been the most vocal about cutting benefits for new arrivals, the three provinces that have put cuts in place are governed by various two-way combinations of all three main political parties. But most of those affected who spoke to Reuters fear an election victory for Kurz. "If Kurz wins, it will be a big problem," said 24-year-old Basel from Deraa in Syria. He moved from Lower Austria to Vienna in July, leaving behind friends and a job as a hairdresser. He says the cuts paralyze people like him with fear. "You stop thinking about the future." — Reuters

Cambodian opposition parliamentarians flee

PHNOM PENH: Nearly half of Cambodia's opposition parliamentarians have fled abroad in the past month to escape a government crackdown that has battered their party with legal cases ahead of crunch polls, an MP said yesterday. The exodus further imperils the prospects of a party that poses the only viable challenge at the ballot box to premier Hun Sen, who has clung on to power for 32 years. The strongman has smothered dissent in the lead-up to the 2018 national election and is accused of picking off his critics through a series of dubious court cases.

The crackdown was ramped up last month when opposition leader Kem Sokha was thrown into a remote jail on treason charges, a dramatic arrest that sent fear rippling through the embattled opposition movement. Since then, more than 20 opposition politicians have fled the country, MP Mao Monyvann said of his Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), which has 55 members of parliament. "Now there are only a few more than 10 (MPs) still in the country," he told AFP, with others having

fled before Kem Sokha's arrest.

Many have left for the US or European countries where they have family or dual citizenship. Mu Sochua, an outspoken deputy to Kem Sokha, was the latest to bolt on Tuesday, a day after Hun Sen said there would be no let-up in his crackdown. The bellicose premier has ratcheted up his rhetoric in daily speeches to the public, with threats to dissolve the CNRP if they continue to "protect" their leader. "I don't intend to continue to live under the continuous and open threat by the PM of arrest," Mu Sochua told AFP through Facebook, without sharing her whereabouts.

Human Rights Watch's Phil Robertson said the departure of MPs could spell the "death of Cambodian democracy" at the hands of Hun Sen. "Hun Sen wants to run in a 2018 election in which he will not face any meaningful opposition," said HRW's Deputy Asia Director, adding the poll would not be "free nor fair under these circumstances". In a message sent through his lawyers on Monday, Kem Sokha denied the treason charge as "total slander", a view



PHNOM PENH: Lawmaker from the National Rescue Party Mu Sochua smiles from her car window. Mu Sochua has fled the country.— AP

echoed by the US and other democratic countries which have called for his immediate release.

Hun Sen loomed over the impoverished democracy for more than three decades, using a mix of political wits and hard power to undermine his rivals and secure the loyalty of the bureaucracy, courts and security forces. But his popularity slipped in a 2013 election and he has since moved

to silence critics in politics, the media and NGOs. Around a dozen opposition politicians have faced prosecutions since that poll, with Kem Sokha's predecessor Sam Rainsy forced to flee abroad to avoid a string of convictions which he says are politically motivated. Last week the UN's human rights envoy to Cambodia warned the country was "moving inexorably towards a precipice".— AFP

Dark nights in power-starved North Korea

WONSAN: At the turbine hall at North Korea's Wonsan Number 5 hydropower station, a placard mounted on a wall proclaims: "Prosperous and Powerful Nation". But when it comes to electricity the North is anything but. The country has made rapid progress in its weapons program under leader Kim Jong-Un, detonating what it said was an H-bomb last month and launching intercontinental missiles that apparently bring much of the US mainland into range.

However, nearly 70 years after it was founded, the North suffers from perennial energy shortages, epitomized by satellite photos of the country at night, showing it as a largely dark quadrilateral between the bright lights of China and the South. Pyongyang is unusually dim for a capital city, the pale glow emerging from apartments often outshone by the moon. Solar panels are ubiquitous across the city's balconies and students gather under streetlights at night to read their books.

At the Wonsan power station, the turbine hall is dominated by a giant mosaic portraying the mythical birthplace of Kim Jong-Il, Kim's father and predecessor as North Korean leader, a hut on the sacred Mount Paektu. Several meters below, thousands of liters of water thunder through the generators every hour, spinning the turbines to produce electricity for a region on the east coast, chief engineer Choe Yong-Jun says, adding that while the complex's total capacity is 60,000 kW/h, actual production is a fraction of that.

"We have normalized our production rate at 25,000 kilowatts per hour," he told AFP—little more than 40 percent. Officials acknowledge the scarcity, with the state KCNA news agency quoting prime minister Pak Pong Ju referring to "the nation's acute shortage of electricity" while attending the groundbreaking earlier this year for



PYONGYANG: Photo shows an image of the sun broadcast on the illuminated screen of a giant television in a public square in Pyongyang. North Korea suffers from perennial energy shortages.— AFP

the new Tanchon hydropower station.

Citizens in the dark

It was not always thus. Under Japanese colonial rule northern Korea was developed as the industrial hub, with the southern part regarded as a agrarian backwater, and when the North designed its national emblem in the 1940s it gave pride of place to the Suphung hydroelectric dam on the Yalu river. "Back then, they had the best generation capacities in east Asia, probably better than in Japan, definitely better than anywhere else," said Andrei Lankov of Korea Risk Group.

But after the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, the North lost its access to heavily subsidized spare parts and technical expertise, and electricity generation nosedived. It has crept up more recently, but Lankov added:

"It seems that their power generation is roughly half of what it used to be in the early 1990s. It has gone down significantly."

According to the latest available figures from the International Energy Agency, hydroelectricity accounted for 73 percent of the North's power production in 2015, with coal in second place. Average consumption per capita was 0.46 megawatt hours, it says—less than a twentieth of that in the neighboring South. World Bank statistics say barely one in three North Koreans has access to electricity. Authorities ration power according to priority, with staff at important factories or prestige projects such as the Taedonggang brewery and the capital's Kaeson Youth Park funfair—whose bright lights contrast with the gloomy blocks nearby—telling AFP they never experience power cuts.—AFP

All 3 billion Yahoo accounts 'hacked' in 2013 data theft

CALIFORNIA: Yahoo yesterday said that all 3 billion of its accounts were hacked in a 2013 data theft, tripling its earlier estimate of the size of the largest breach in history, in a disclosure that attorneys said sharply increased the legal exposure of its new owner, Verizon Communications Inc. The news expands the likely number and claims of class action lawsuits by shareholders and Yahoo account holders, they said.

Yahoo, the early face of the internet for many in the world, already faced at least 41 consumer class-action lawsuits in US federal and state courts, according to company securities filing in May. John Yanchunis, a lawyer representing some of the affected Yahoo users, said a federal judge who allowed the case to go forward still had asked for more information to justify his clients' claims. "I think we have those facts now," he said. "It's really mind-numbing when you think about it."

Yahoo said last December that data from more than 1 billion accounts was compromised in 2013, the largest of a series of thefts that forced Yahoo to cut the price of its assets in a sale to Verizon. Yahoo on Tuesday said "recently obtained new intelligence" showed all user accounts had been affected. The company said the investigation indicated that the stolen information did not include passwords in clear text, payment card data, or bank account information.

But the information was protected with outdated, easy-to-crack encryption, according to academic experts. It also included security questions and backup email addresses, which could make it easier to break into other accounts held by the users. Many Yahoo users have multiple accounts, so far fewer than 3 billion were affected, but the theft ranks as the largest to date, and a costly one for the internet pioneer. Verizon in February lowered its original offer by \$350 million for Yahoo assets in the wake of two massive cyber attacks at the internet company.

Some lawyers asked whether Verizon would look for a new opportunity to address the price. "This is a bombshell," said Mark Molomphy, lead counsel in a shareholder derivative lawsuit against Yahoo's former leaders over disclosures about the hacks. Verizon did not respond to a request for comment about any possible lawsuit over the deal. Verizon, the likely main target of legal actions, also could be challenged as it launches a new brand, Oath, to link its Yahoo, AOL and Huffington Post internet properties.

In August in the separate lawsuit brought by Yahoo's users, US Judge Lucy Koh in San Jose, California, ruled Yahoo must face nationwide litigation brought on behalf of owners accounts who said their personal information was compromised in the three breaches. Yanchunis, the lawyer for the users, said his team planned to use the new information later this month to expanding its allegations. Also on Tuesday, Senator John Thune, chairman of the US Senate Commerce Committee, said he plans to hold a hearing later this month over massive data breaches at Equifax Inc and Yahoo. The US Securities and Exchange Commission already had been probing Yahoo over the hacks.

The closing of the Verizon deal, which was first announced in July, had been delayed as the companies assessed the fallout from two data breaches that Yahoo disclosed last year. The company paid \$4.48 billion for Yahoo's core business.—Reuters