

International

# NATO launches Black Sea force; message to Russia

## Russia's Crimea annexation puts focus on Black Sea

**BUCHAREST:** NATO yesterday launched a new multinational force in Romania to counter Russia along its eastern flank and to check a growing Russian presence in the Black Sea following the Kremlin's 2014 seizure of Crimea. Initially a small force relying on troops from 10 NATO countries including Italy, Canada as well as Romania, the land, air and sea deployments will complement about 900 US troops already in place. "Our purpose is peace, not war," Romanian President Klaus Iohannis told the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Bucharest.

"We are not a threat for Russia. But we need dialogue from a strong position of defense and discouragement." Russia accuses NATO of trying to encircle it and threatening stability in Eastern Europe, which NATO denies. Around the Black Sea, Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey are NATO members while Georgia and Ukraine aspire to join.

The NATO force aims to develop its allied presence in the Black Sea region, rich in oil and gas, without escalating tensions, as it seeks to counter Russia's own plans to create what military analysts say is a "buffer zone". The 2008 Russian operation to put troops in Georgia's South Ossetia's region, its support for separatists in eastern Ukraine since 2014 and its annexation of Crimea have raised the stakes, with all sides warning of a new, Cold-War style scenario.

Details of the new force size were unclear. Based inland at a base near the southern Romanian city of Craiova, the land component of the force involves a brigade-size multinational NATO force, typically some 3,000 to 4,000 troops, but the contribution of non-Romanian troops is modest. Aside from Romania, Poland is the biggest troop

contributor. Bulgaria, Italy and Portugal will train regularly with the force in Craiova, and Germany is also expected to contribute.

In addition to existing NATO Black Sea naval patrols, a maritime presence will include more allied visits to Romanian and Bulgarian ports, training and exercises. NATO air forces will also be limited at first but Britain is deploying fighter planes to Romania. Canada is already patrolling Romanian air space along with national pilots. Italy is patrolling Bulgarian air space. "It sends a signal of NATO's resolve," said NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, who will visit the troops later on Monday, stressing that NATO also had a 40,000-strong response force in case of a conflict.



### Zapad raised concerns about Russia capacities

**'West Berlin' Model**  
Some Eastern Europeans want NATO's new ballistic missile defense shield, which includes a site in Romania, to be part of NATO's eastern posture vis-a-vis Russia. "The Aegis Ashore system would add another level of deterrence," said Maciej Kowalski, an ana-

lyst at the Polish Casimir Pulaski Foundation, referring to the US-built system. NATO says the system is to intercept any Iranian rockets.

As in the Baltics and Poland, where the US-led alliance has some 4,000 troops, NATO says the relatively light multinational model recalls allied support for West Berlin in the 1950s, when British, French and US forces ensured the Soviet Union could not control all Berlin. Under NATO's founding treaty, an attack on one ally is an attack on all, meaning all 28 NATO nations would be required to respond in the case of any potential Russian aggression. While months in planning, the establishment of the force



**BUCHAREST:** NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (left) delivers a speech in front of NATO's Parliamentary Assembly at the Romanian Parliament in Bucharest yesterday. —AFP

comes as Russia winds down its biggest war games since 2013. The Zapad, or West, games were a show of its latest weaponry and its ability to quickly mass soldiers on NATO's borders.

The enhanced NATO presence in Romania and Bulgaria marks a diplomatic success for Bucharest, which gained greater persuasive power because it is set to reach a NATO goal of spending 2 percent of economic output on defense this year, a priority for US President Donald

Trump. Romania pushed for bigger NATO naval presence on the Black Sea for over a year, but found its neighbor Bulgaria wary of provoking Russia. Turkey only supports limited NATO reinforcements, concerned about breaking international rules limiting the scale of patrols in the Black Sea. Turkey has played down the extent of Russia's militarization of Crimea, which NATO says involves a laying of surface-to-air missiles and communications jamming equipment.—Reuters

## Clashes threaten Ethiopia's delicate ethnic balance

**ADAMA:** She was not one of them, but Saada Youssef had lived alongside the Somali people of eastern Ethiopia for years. Then came the day local officials told her to leave or die. "Even on the truck, people were throwing stones at us," Saada said, recalling her escape in a vehicle sent to rescue people of Oromo ethnicity living in the Somali region where tit-for-tat ethnic violence killed hundreds last month. Saada found refuge in a collection of abandoned buildings in Adama, a city far from her home in the eastern town of Wachale, one of several areas in Ethiopia's Oromia and Somali regions that have seen fighting between two of the country's largest ethnic groups.

The bloody clashes threaten to upset the delicate ethnic balance of Africa's second most populous country, where the all-powerful ruling party last year declared a state of emergency to end months of sometimes deadly anti-government protests spearheaded by the Oromos. The unrest raises questions about the future of Ethiopia's "ethnic federalism" system of governance, which is supposed to offer a degree of self-determination to the country's diverse peoples but which critics say is often overruled by the federal government.



**ADAMA, Ethiopia:** An Oromo girl looks on as she walks past a laundry line at a temporary camp for displaced people outside Adama, Ethiopia. — AFP

### A permanent rupture?

What triggered September's violence is unclear, but its results are not. A government spokesman said hundreds of people have been killed in recent weeks and a local official in the eastern city of Harar said that more than 67,800 Oromos alone have fled, not to mention the Somalis who have moved in the opposite direction. Survivors of the ethnic fighting blamed the government for not doing more to stop the bloodshed. They are worried it might lead to a permanent rift between the country's Somali and Oromo communities.

"This could be ethnic cleansing," said Mulu Wario, an Oromo who fled fighting in Moyale in the south along the border of the Somali and Oromia regions, after a land dispute turned ugly. "It has led to hostility, and the relationship between us will never be the same as before," he said. The logic of ethnic federalism sees different commu-

nities running their own affairs, so Somalis are in charge of the Somali region while Oromos run Oromia, but communities mix in all nine of Ethiopia's regions and squabbles over land and resources are common, though not always so violent.

This time, Somali and Oromo leaders alike allege atrocities committed by the other to justify their attacks. Somalis point to a clash in Awaday, a town in Oromia, where they claim Oromos killed 18 Somali traders who were selling khat, a leafy plant that is a mild stimulant when chewed and is hugely popular in Ethiopia. They also claim Oromos burned eight children to death in a district along the shared regional border and murdered patients in a hospital. The claims could not be independently verified, though a diplomat in the capital Addis Ababa said the Oromia region's police force took part in the clashes. Whatever the truth of the allegations, the retribution they have spurred is real.

### 'I have nothing left'

Fleeing Oromos say the Somalis who chased them away from their homes with knives and guns cited the attack in Awaday. Abdel Jabbar Ahmed, who escaped from Wachale, said he was told: "The Oromos killed 20 Somalis in Awaday, so we are going to take all the Oromos inside Somali region out." Other dispossessed Oromos said their Somali friends and neighbors sheltered them when violence broke out, but that the regional security force known as the Liyu police and repeatedly criticized by rights groups—was responsible for the worst of the excesses. Ayub Abdullah, an Oromo day laborer who lived for 15 years in the Somali regional capital Jigjiga, said he was confronted by a mob at work, who demanded to know his ethnicity. Then, four Liyu police attacked him and throttled him with a rope. Afterwards Ayub fled to a camp for displaced Oromos on the outskirts of Harar, a walled city near the border between the two regions. —AFP

## Trapped in Raqqa, civilians become IS human shields

**HAWI AL-HAWA:** As fighters from the Islamic State group retreat into a shrinking part of Syria's Raqqa, they are dragging along terrified civilians for cover against a ferocious US-backed onslaught. Locals who managed to flee describe being herded into apartments in buildings used by jihadists as makeshift military bases, and serving as human shields for fighters as they collect water. Civilians say the tactic-used elsewhere by the group to slow its opponents—is increasingly putting them in the cross hairs of US air power and allied fighters as they battle IS in densely populated districts near Raqqa's centre. Raqqa resident Umm Alaa and her family were twice forced to provide cover to IS jihadists, she said, hours after her escape from the city.

a plastic chair outside a mosque in Hawi Al-Hawa, a western suburb of Raqqa controlled by the US-backed force. IS moved her with her husband, their son Alaa and two-year-old grandson Hassan into a nearby building and refused their pleas to return home. Three days later, jihadists displaced them again, this time to a damaged building with other families in the battle-ravaged district of Al-Badu. "They were holding us as human shields.

They were keeping us there to protect themselves," said her husband Abu Alaa, a thick leather belt holding up the oversized trousers hanging off his bony frame. "Daesh told us, 'If you leave Raqqa, they are going to destroy the whole city over our heads,'" he said, using the Arabic acronym for IS. The whole family escaped on foot with other civilians on Friday, and like all the civilians who spoke to AFP, they declined to give their full names for fear of retribution against friends and relatives still stuck inside the city.

### Human shields at water wells

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces broke into Raqqa in June, and has since captured around 90 percent of the city, with the help of heavy US-led air strikes. Tens of thou-



**RAQQA:** A member of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by US Special Forces, monitors the area on the western frontline in Raqqa. —AFP

sands of civilians have fled, but with fighting and air strikes concentrated on a shrinking IS-held section of the city, the exodus has slowed to a trickle. As its options dwindle, jihadists are taking up positions inside residential buildings, said Mohannad, a fair-skinned woman with pale green eyes who also escaped Al-Badu with her four children. "They tried to move into the basement or the first floor of our buildings because it protect-

ed them from air strikes," she said. IS fighters sought out apartments left behind by fleeing families, so Mohannad began putting out clothes and blankets on the balconies of empty ones to trick jihadists into thinking they were occupied. She and her children were forced to move four times, and when they were moved into Al-Badu there was little to eat. They were not allowed to leave except to draw water from nearby boreholes. —AFP

## Despite abuses, expelled Ethiopians still eye Saudi

**ADDIS ABABA:** Ethiopian maid Zenit Ali has post-traumatic stress disorder after being mistreated by her Saudi Arabian employer and deported in a government crackdown, but she still hopes to return to the Middle East. The 27-year-old is among some 70,000 illegal Ethiopian migrants expelled from the Gulf kingdom since March, as it seeks to reduce its reliance on millions of migrant laborers.

"I'm not happy," she anxiously told the Thomson Reuters Foundation, while staying in a shelter for trafficked women run by a local charity Agar Ethiopia. "I have no job here in Ethiopia. I want to build my home but I can't because my family has used all the money. I need to go back." The number of Ethiopians being smuggled and trafficked to the Middle East has surged in recent years, as brokers lure the poor and unemployed with promises of a better life.

Most women work as maids, often for more than 20 hours a day, with few legal rights. Many do not have enough food or sleep, have their phones and passports confiscated and endure physical and sexual abuse, rights groups say. The controversial "kafala" sponsorship system, used across the Gulf, requires foreign workers to get their employer's consent to change jobs or leave the country. Saudi Arabia has publicly said it will deport or jail an additional 400,000 or so Ethiopians it believes live there illegally, following the August expiry of an amnesty allowing them to leave without punishment.

During a 2013 crackdown, many of 160,000 Ethiopians who were expelled were first detained, beaten and held in squalid conditions, Human Rights Watch said. Others were dumped in the desert near the Yemeni border, it said. Despite these risks, most migrants choose not to leave. "People may prefer to stay there even with the threat of imprisonment," Abebaw Minyaw, a psychology professor at Addis Ababa University, said in an interview in his office. "The original factors that pushed them there in the first place - poverty, above all - have not changed." An Ethiopian government spokesman did not respond to requests for comment.

### A dog and a slave

In interviews with more than 1,000 returnees in 2014, the professor found the majority had been abused - yet they still wanted to return to the Gulf. Most said they were not given any time off work or allowed to meet friends outside their employers' homes. More than a quarter had mental health problems, he found, attributing this to violations, like rape, beating, overwork and being called a dog and a slave. Experts say Ethiopians are likely to keep risking their lives as migrants because they lack opportunities at home. "They are imbued with a very strong sense of responsibility for the economic welfare of their families, which propels them to seek opportunities outside Ethiopia," said Bina Fernandez, a migration expert at the University of Melbourne.

Back-to-back droughts have left 8.5 million people in Africa's second most populous country in need of food aid. Most migrants use illegal channels because it is cheaper and faster, according to Kenya-based Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS) think tank. A record 117,000 Ethiopians arrived in Yemen last year, it said. Organized criminal networks traffic people between Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia and Yemen, which is the gateway to the Middle East, the United Nations migration agency says. —Reuters