

700 CATALAN MAYORS BACK HOLDING INDEPENDENCE VOTE



BARCELONA: Catalan regional vice-president and chief of Economy and Finance, Oriol Junqueras (CL), President of the Catalan Government Carles Puigdemont (center) and president of the Catalan parliament Carme Forcadell (CR) stand as Catalan pro-referendum mayors raise their staffs of command during a demonstration yesterday.—AFP

BARCELONA: More than 700 mayors from Catalonia met yesterday in Barcelona in a show of strength amid pressure from Spain's central government not to hold an independence referendum for the northeastern region.

Political tensions in Spain are increasing as the proposed voting date of Oct 1 nears. The Catalan government has been scrambling to push forward the vote, despite the central government's warnings that local municipalities are not allowed to use public buildings for it and mayors can be legally prosecuted for it.

Hundreds of mayors stood yesterday next to regional President Carles Puigdemont and Barcelona Mayor Ada Colau in Barcelona, the capital and main city in the region.

"We will not be intimidated. This is not about independence, it's about our rights," said Colau. Puigdemont thanked the mayors for not backing down and insisted that most Catalans are determined to press ahead despite the ban.

"Do not underestimate the Catalan people," he warned. Catalonia's regional

police force is under orders to arrest the mayors if they refuse to appear for questioning in an investigation into the vote, which Spain's constitutional court has suspended, State Prosecutor Jose Manuel Maza's office said. The order puts regional police in the uneasy position of carrying out commands from Madrid in their own towns and cities.

If mayors and their municipalities cannot help organize the balloting, the independence vote is unlikely to proceed.

On Friday, Spain's central authorities announced they have increased their control over Catalonia's regional spending to make sure that no funds are diverted to paying for the independence referendum.

The prosperous Catalonia region generates a fifth of the country's 1.1-trillion euro economy. It enjoys ample self-government, running its own police, and has considerable powers over health and education. Taxes, foreign affairs, defense and infrastructures are in the hands of Spain's central authorities.—AP

DESPERATE EUROPE-BOUND MIGRANTS TURN TO BLACK SEA

EMERGENCE OF A NEW 'ROMANIAN ROUTE' TO WESTERN EUROPE ?



Turkish boats of which some were used to transport migrants over the Black Sea and were seized by Romanian border police are pictured in Constanta, southeastern Romania.—AFP

NOCOSIA: While the arrival of exhausted migrants may be common on Mediterranean shores, it's a rare sight on the Black Sea coastline. But a string of recent arrivals from Turkey suggests it may be emerging as part of a new 'Romanian route' to western Europe.

Shortly before dawn on Wednesday, around 150 people, a third of them children, were rescued in the Black Sea—the fifth migrant boat to be intercepted by Romanian authorities since mid-August.

The arrival of some 570 Iraqis, Syrians, Afghans, Iranians and Pakistanis in less than a month remains modest compared to the influx recorded in the Mediterranean.

In 2014, the last year of relative activity, close to 300 migrants crossed the Black Sea to reach Romania. EU member Romania is not part of the bloc's passport-free Schengen zone and until now has largely avoided the kind of influx of refugees and migrants seen elsewhere on the continent over the past few years. The latest developments are being carefully watched in the country. "This seems to indicate that smugglers are trying to find a route through the Black Sea," Krzysztof Borowski, a spokesman for Frontex, the EU's border force agency, told AFP.

Smugglers are looking for more affluent migrants to pay the fare for the new route which avoids Greece, where arrivals risk deportation under an agreement between the EU and Ankara, explained Mircea Mocanu, head of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Romania.

The crossing between Turkey and Romania can cost between 1,000 and 3,000 euros, he added. However, he is doubtful there will be an influx of boats during the colder months: "It is ten times more difficult to cross the Black Sea than the Mediterranean Sea."

"It's the Black Sea, not because of its colour but because of the danger during storms," said Police Commissioner Gabriel Cerchez, who was part of Tuesday's rescue. "Until the boat enters the port, it could capsize at any time."

'Ready for anything'

Other tests await migrants who dare to make the crossing in a bid to reach western Europe, where reinforced controls and fences make it difficult to cross borders.

In Timisoara, close to the border with Hungary, hundreds of migrants are waiting for an opportunity to cross over. At the immigration centre, Tarek, a 19-year-old Syrian, told AFP he had been stopped while trying to reach the border in a car.

He has decided to stay in Romania to become a computer engineer, but he said many of his friends are "ready to do anything" to leave. "People come and ask: 'do you want to stay or go? Because I know a way to get to Germany that's 100 percent safe,'" he said, adding that middle-men get 100 euros for setting up a migrant with a smuggler. Not far from the centre, around 15 men were gathered on wasteland in a makeshift camp, in hope of finding a smuggler. Among them, Rafi, a 23-year-old Pakistani, and Zakir, a young Afghan, said they crossed from Hungary in to Romania by foot.

A direct crossing from Serbia to Hungary has become almost impossible because of the barbed wire fencing erected between the two countries, while the long Romanian-Hungarian border remains open.

According to Romania's border police, more than 1,200 people attempting to cross the western border have been arrested since the beginning of the year, compared to 900 in for all of 2016. The IOM estimates that 80 percent of attempts fail. For Tarek, is it a bitter conclusion: "A year and a half of my life has been wasted in the hope of joining the promised land." —AFP

AT LEAST 30 BURUNDIAN REFUGEES DIE IN CLASHES

KINSHASA: At least 30 Burundian refugees have been killed in clashes with Congolese security forces over plans to send some of them home, a Reuters witness and local activists said yesterday.

Police and soldiers opened fire as the refugees protested over the plan in the town of Kamanyola in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo on Friday, the activists told Reuters. Congo's government spokesman Lambert Mende denied that those killed were refugees, saying that the clashes broke out when assailants from an unidentified armed group attacked an office belonging to the national intelligence agency. Five soldiers and 20 of the attackers were killed in the fighting, Mende said.

More than 400,000 refugees have fled Burundi - including 40,000 to neighboring Congo - since violence erupted in April 2015 when President Pierre Nkurunziza said he would seek a third term in office, a move his opponents said was unconstitutional.

Wendo Joel, an activist from a Congolese pro-democracy and human rights group, said the refugees had seized a weapon and killed a soldier as they tried to free some of their arrested compatriots.

"The soldiers first fired in the air but there were many refugees," Joel told Reuters. "I have counted 32 bodies. There

are also about 100 wounded." Reuters TV footage showed more than 30 bodies covered by sheets on the roadside in Kamanyola, with many more wounded also lying in the street.

A UN spokeswoman confirmed that at least 18 Burundian asylum seekers had been killed but said the toll was likely to rise. Many others had taken shelter at the UN peacekeeping mission's nearby base, she added. According to a spokesman for the UN refugee agency, more than 2,000 Burundian refugees live in Kamanyola with host families. In a statement, Burundi's main opposition grouping, CNARED, accused Burundian army troops and members of the ruling CNDD-FDD's youth group Imbonerakure of carrying out the killings with the Congolese army.

Burundian officials could not be immediately reached for comment, but Burundi's foreign minister Alain Aime Nyamitwe wrote on Twitter: "My heart sinks as I learn of the shootings in Eastern DRC."

"Clarifications are needed on the shootings & circumstances around," he added.

The violence in Burundi has killed over 700 people and a UN commission said last week there were reasonable grounds to believe authorities had committed crimes against humanity. The government rejected the commission's findings as "propaganda." —Reuters

BUHARI TO PASS THROUGH LONDON AFTER UN TRIP

ABUJA: Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari will pass through London, where he spent five months on medical leave this year, on his way home from the United Nations General Assembly, his spokesman said today. Buhari will depart for New York on Sunday, his spokesman said in an emailed statement. It will be the first time he has left Nigeria since returning on Aug. 19 from Britain, where he received treatment for an unspecified ailment.

Spokesman Femi Adesina said Buhari would hold a lunch meeting with US President Donald Trump and other leaders, adding: "President Buhari will transit through London on his way back to the country." Buhari will be accompanied on the trip by cabinet ministers and the governors of three states.

Nigeria's Foreign Minister Geoffrey Onyeama told reporters at the United Nations in New York on Friday that Buhari was in "very good health" and "back to what he was before."

"We had a very long cabinet meeting two days ago and he was in excellent form in every way possible," Onyeama said. "He's really leading, he's very, very strong and he's back to his very punishing schedule so it's just fantastic." Adesina did not say whether Buhari would have medical treatment in London and declined a request to comment further. The refusal to disclose details of the president's illness has caused speculation about whether the 74-year-old is well enough to

run Africa's most populous country and biggest economy. Buhari was in London on medical leave for two months from January, and again from May 7 to Aug. 19.

After the first trip, the president reduced his working day to a few hours, diplomats and gov-

ernment sources said at the time. Since the second trip, however, Buhari's office has released a flurry of photos and statements from his engagements, including meetings with his vice president, heads of the armed forces and economic ministers. —AP



HOLLYWOOD: In this Wednesday file photo, a woman is transported from The Rehabilitation Center at Hollywood Hills as patients are evacuated after a loss of air conditioning due to Hurricane Irma in Hollywood, Fla.—AP



WASHINGTON: In this photo, US President Donald Trump poses during a meeting with (from left), Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-NY, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and other Congressional leaders in the Oval Office of the White House.—AP

SCHUMER AND PELOSI NOW DEAL-MAKERS WITH TRUMP

WASHINGTON: It's been a long eight months in the wilderness for Democrats, but if any two were going to find their way back to the action it was Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer and his House counterpart, Nancy Pelosi. Or "Chuck and Nancy," as President Donald Trump now calls them.

After the Republican-led Congress' failure to repeal President Barack Obama's health care law, when Trump cracked open the door of bipartisanship, the two Hill veterans barged through full-force. They were looking for ways to "build some trust and confidence" with Trump, Pelosi, D-Calif., said in an interview Friday. The willingness to engage with a president reviled by their party worried liberals like Rep.

Raul Grijalva, D-Ariz., who warned against "proceeding toward normalizing him." But it surprised no one who's watched Schumer and Pelosi's combined 67 years of wheeling and dealing in Congress.

"Let's put it this way, it doesn't matter," Pelosi said about whether she likes Trump following two meetings that yielded a budget deal and progress on immigration. She said she doesn't know if Trump likes her, adding, "Right now, I want him to like the Dreamers," the nickname for young immigrants the two Democrats and Trump aim to protect.

Schumer, D-N.Y., inadvertently shared his impression of the duo's Wednesday parley with Trump, which moved an immigration agreement forward, catching uninvited Republican leaders flat-footed. At an open Senate microphone Thursday, Schumer said: "He likes us. He likes me, anyway." He described warning Trump he'd be "boxed" if he only works with one party, adding, "He gets that."

Both leaders' comments were instructive. Pelosi, 77, who was the first female House speaker, is admired as a legislative tactician able to maximize minority Democrats' strength and as a prodigious fundraiser. Underscoring her penchant for finding allies, Sen. Mike Rounds, R-

S.D., said that when as governor in 2009, he called congressional leaders to discuss President Barack Obama's pending health care bill - and only Pelosi called back.

Recounting the White House dinner that produced progress on immigration, the only woman among 11 people around the Blue Room's rectangular table said she was responding to Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross when "the others" interrupted. "I said, 'Does anybody listen to women when they speak around here?'" Pelosi said Friday. But critics say that forcefulness also means Pelosi holds power too tightly, not consulting widely enough with junior lawmakers, and is part of an aging cluster of party leaders that's frustrating younger, ambitious members.

Schumer, 66, has been Senate Democratic leader since January and is viewed by colleagues as a people person. He's memorized senators' telephone numbers, perhaps because of his flip phone's limitations, and is known for emotional visits and calls with lawmakers who've experienced personal losses. Schumer has arranged dates for staffers and said this week that his life's big gap was lacking grandchildren, of which Pelosi has nine.

The progressive end of the Democratic spectrum has shown wariness of Schumer, and thousands of liberals protested outside his Brooklyn apartment after Trump's January inauguration. They demanded he aggressively oppose Trump's appointees and agenda and accused him of being too close to the financial industry, which is centered in New York.

With Schumer's saggy suits contrasting with Pelosi's tailored wardrobe, the two leaders have known each other since serving in the House in the late 1980s. Then-Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., invited Pelosi to join a group of lawmakers who dined weekly and already included Schumer. Pelosi says she and Schumer now meet or speak "as necessary," often daily. —AP

NOW-FAMOUS FLORIDA NUN USED GOOGLE TO FIGURE OUT CHAIN SAW

MIAMI: The Florida nun who became an internet sensation when video emerged of her - dressed in full habit - wielding a chain saw to clear downed trees after Hurricane Irma says she had to look up instructions on how to start the tool. "I actually had to Google it to find out how to start it because I'd forgotten how ...," Sister Margaret Ann said. "The students have told me everything is online, sister; just ask the question online." The nun, principal of Archbishop Coleman F. Carroll High School in Miami, said her mechanical education didn't stop with the Google search.

"Some people have sent me videos on how to use a chain saw because apparently I wasn't using it correctly or as safe as I should've been, so I'm learning, too," she told The Associated Press in a Skype interview. Many people posted warnings online that the nun's loose habit could get caught in the saw.

An off-duty Miami-Dade police officer posted the video of Sister Margaret Ann on social media Monday. The Miami-Dade Police Department praised her effort, saying: "Thank you Sister and all of our neighbors that are working together to get through this!" The video was picked up by media outlets, including the AP, and quickly became a global sensation.

Sister Margaret Ann laughed off the attention, saying her students are enjoying watching her on social media. Some have even asked for her autograph. "People are driving by and saying, 'Thank you, sister, thank you,'" she said. "So I think it has been really good for our community, and I understand that the video has really gone worldwide, so that's kinda funny." She also said she was glad the video gave the public a different view of nuns. "The students are telling me, they are saying, 'Sister, you're no wimp.' —AP