

International

Kosovo celebrates 10 years since splitting from Serbia

Sovereignty remains fiercely contested by Serbia

PRISTINA: Kosovo yesterday celebrated 10 years since it declared independence, a moment of pride for its ethnic Albanian majority, although sovereignty remains fiercely contested by Serbia. The capital Pristina is covered in the blue-and-yellow Kosovan flag for a weekend of festivities, with Kosovo-born British pop star Rita Ora due to headline a concert in the main square.

A decade after a war between Kosovo's ethnic Albanian rebels and Serbian troops left 13,000 people dead—most of them Albanians—the Kosovan parliament declared independence from Serbia on February 17, 2008. "It was the happiest moment for all of us as a people," said President Hashim Thaci in a statement on Friday, as children in Kosovo's Albanian schools began the day with lessons dedicated to the anniversary.

This was not the case in the completely separate schooling system of Kosovo's Serb minority, which remains loyal to Belgrade. Children from the two ethnic communities rarely mix. Although more than 110 countries have recognised Kosovo as a state in the past 10 years, Belgrade refuses to do so. Sovereignty is also rejected by Russia, whose Security Council veto prevents Kosovo from joining the United Nations, and five EU countries including Spain and Greece.



Kids from ethnic communities rarely mix

Serbian Defence Minister Aleksandar Vulin said on Thursday. The former foes have reached deals on issues such as freedom of movement since talks began in 2011, but the EU-brokered dialogue has stalled over the past two years.

Federica Mogherini, EU representative for foreign affairs, nevertheless said on the eve of the anniversary that she was "realistically optimistic" that a "legally binding agreement" could be reached by the end of 2019. Some officials in Belgrade have raised the prospect of redrawing Kosovo's borders along ethnic lines. In the far north, heavily dominated by Serbs, the Kosovo flag is shunned in favour of the red, blue and white stripes of Serbia. But Thaci insists that Kosovo is "indivisible" and many fear a partition deal would destabilise the fragile Balkans.

Father Sava Janjic, a prominent Serb Orthodox monk in Kosovo, warned that the "collapse" of a multi-ethnic Kosovo would be a dangerous precedent for the region. "The Balkans will again become a powder keg," he wrote on Twitter on Friday. The Kosovo war started in 1998 and came to an end the following year when Belgrade pulled out after NATO bombarded its forces, citing a need for a humanitarian intervention.

Trump applauds progress

From Washington, one of Pristina's staunchest allies, President Donald Trump, sent his congratulations to Kosovo for making "great strides in strengthening its sovereignty and multi-ethnic democracy". "While more work must be done, we applaud your progress." Kosovo's ties with the West have at times been strained in the past year, as it awaits



PRISTINA: Young Kosovar boys dressed as police officers salute in the street in Pristina they celebrate the 10th anniversary of Kosovo independence. —AFP

the first indictments from an EU-backed war crimes court trying former members of the Kosovo Liberation Army. A number of leading KLA figures, such as Thaci, remain dominant in Kosovo and ruling coalition MPs recently attempted to block the tribunal—a move that sparked strongly worded warnings from the US and other Western allies.

Kosovo's milestone is also marred by huge economic challenges. With the unemployment rate at around 30 per-

cent—and 50 percent among young people—tens of thousands have moved abroad in search of work over the past decade. Home to 1.8 million people, Kosovo is one of the poorest parts of Europe and hugely dependent on remittances from its diaspora to drive economic growth of around four percent. "The conditions for a decent living in Kosovo have not been fulfilled, so it is clear why people are leaving," said law student Berat Mumi, 17, in Pristina—AFP

Partition concerns

The "normalisation" of ties between Belgrade and Pristina is crucial to both sides' bids to join the European Union, but Serbian officials say recognition of independence is a red line. "Serbia will not recognise Kosovo and it will especially not recognise it in order to become an EU mem-

Kosovo Roma, the forgotten victims of war

PODGORICA: It was not their war, but the Kosovo conflict in the 1990s forced tens of thousands of Roma—the Balkans' eternal scapegoats—into exile. So for those living in a Roma camp in the capital of neighbouring Montenegro, the 10th anniversary of Kosovo's independence on Saturday is little cause for celebration. They fled Kosovo almost 20 years ago for fear of being accused by pro-independence ethnic Albanian rebels of collaborating with Serb forces in the 1998-1999 war that claimed 13,000 lives. Many Kosovo Roma who stayed were accused, most of them falsely, of such collaboration or other crimes. Serdjan Baftijari, now 25, says his family paid for "not taking sides" in the war.

He was a child when he left the central ethnic Serb enclave of Gracanica in the summer of 1999, as the tide of the conflict was turning. A NATO bombing campaign was forcing Serb troops out of the breakaway territory. The ethnic Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) was taking control. "We lived in a majority-Serb area. We were scared," Baftijari said. Now he is among about 2,000 people living in the camp in the suburb of Konik in Podgorica. Most of them recently moved into apartments but about 60 families remain in converted containers or huts. Children play in the rubbish and the communal water pipes where residents fill up their cans are leaking.

'Serious abuses' of Roma

Kosovo Roma were victims of "serious abuses" during the war, according to the Belgrade-based Humanitarian Law Centre (HLC), a prominent non-governmental organisation in the Balkans. They were sometimes forced by Serbs "to bury the bodies of Albanian civilians and KLA members, to dig trenches for the military, and to pillage and destroy ethnic Albanian property," it said in a 1999 report. Today there are about 35,000 Roma in Kosovo, said Gazmen Saljievic, a Roma activist in Kosovo.

Several thousand refugees have returned there, but the number is still far from the estimated 100,000 or more who lived in Kosovo before the war. Those who did not flee faced danger—HLC's Kosovo branch said that 240 Roma were either killed or went missing in the war. "The



PODGORICA: Roma children play outside their makeshift house in a camp in the suburb of Konik in Podgorica. It was not their war, but the 1990s Kosovo conflict forced tens of thousands of Roma—eternal scapegoats in the Balkans—into exile. —AFP

Roma were collateral damage in all the conflicts in former Yugoslavia," said Saljievic. "It is easy to attack us. We have nobody to back us, no state, no system to protect us."

With aid from the European Union, Montenegro has ramped up the construction of apartments in the camp. The goal is to eradicate provisional facilities in 2018. But that will not end the inhabitants' social isolation, said Elvis Berisha of the Walk With Us youth organisation, which campaigns for Roma education. "Of course it is better to live in an apartment than in a container," he said. But among the locals, he says, the camp has come to be known as a place for "garavi"—an insulting term for Roma.

'Never return to Kosovo'

Ferdi Bahtiri's family is one of about 50 at the camp waiting to be relocated. In the meantime, the 28-year-old has set up two containers to live in with his wife and their

five children. For money, he unloads trucks at a market in Podgorica, earning between five and 15 euros (\$6-18) a day. The camp's shared toilets are unusable. The Bahtiris use the ones at the home of their cousins, who were fortunate enough to be relocated to an apartment.

A native from the northern Kosovo town of Mitrovica, Bahtiri is convinced that this unhygienic environment caused the liver cirrhosis suffered by his youngest daughter, 18-month-old Aida. She needs treatment abroad but he cannot afford it. Like Baftijari, he had to briefly return to Kosovo to get a passport and avoid becoming stateless. Few of these refugees have managed to obtain Montenegrin nationality. Despite the harsh conditions of life in the camp, Bahtiri said he "will never return to Kosovo". "My children were born here. My parents were buried here," he said. "I do not know anyone there anymore."—AFP

'I fear for my life': Philippine lawyer behind Duterte investigation

MANILA: Philippine lawyer Jude Sabio felt it was his duty to bring President Rodrigo Duterte's deadly war on drugs to the attention of international war crimes prosecutors, but now that a probe into the killings is under way, he fears he too has become a target. Sabio, who describes himself as penniless and on the run, said he had received death threats from Duterte supporters on social media after filing a petition with the Hague-based International Criminal Court in April last year. "I'm in a state of constant paranoia because I fear for my life," Sabio, 51, told AFP in an interview. "It could be very possible that a bullet will hit me."

ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensouda launched a "preliminary examination" after receiving Sabio's petition, which alleges around 8,000 extrajudicial killings, and this could lead to a full investigation by the court. Sabio wants the president arrested. Duterte won a landslide victory in 2016 elections largely on a pledge to eradicate drugs. He is accused of stoking the killings with inflammatory statements and repeated promises to pardon any police officer charged with murder. Police say they have killed 4,021 drug suspects in self-defence, but rights groups claim police and shadowy vigilantes have actually killed more

than 12,000 people. Duterte maintains he is beyond the ICC's jurisdiction and has threatened to withdraw his country from the treaty that created it if the tribunal pursues a formal investigation. "The problem with me is when I see something wrong I fight," said Sabio, who had a low-key legal practice for two decades and unsuccessfully ran for public office twice. "Now to the question of how it feels to be standing against Goliath, to me the fact that he is president, I'm sorry to say this, doesn't matter to me."

'Traacherous'

The unassuming lawyer—the son of public school teachers of modest means lost the 2010 election for mayor of a southern town and was disqualified for being a "nuisance" senatorial candidate in 2016, officially ruled as lacking funds to run his campaign. But his life started to change course when in October 2016 he agreed to represent Edgar Matobato, a self-confessed assassin whose deposition forms part of the ICC case.

Matobato had spectacularly confessed at a Senate public hearing a month earlier that he was a member of the "Davao Death Squad" that killed at least a thousand people on Duterte's orders when the president was mayor of Davao city. The lawyer alleged in the suit that the drug war was the "Davao Death Squad" on a national scale, which Duterte rejects. "It is targeting a vulnerable civilian population, composed mostly of the poor living in depressed communities," Sabio said.

"The only way to stop the killings is to issue a warrant of arrest. Arrest president Duterte and bring him to The Hague," Sabio, a short, stocky man with an unruly moustache, has feared for his life ever since and he left his southern home city of Cagayan de Oro for his own safety a



MANILA: Lawyer Jude Sabio gestures as he shows the communication he submitted to the International Criminal Court against Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, during an interview in Manila. —AFP

year ago—the last time he saw his 75-year-old mother. His assassins could be "riding in tandem" he said, referring to gunmen on motorcycles, said by witnesses to be behind many of the unsolved street murders of known small-time drug dealers. Responding to questions about the threat against Sabio, Duterte's spokesman Harry Roque said Tuesday the president bore no "ill will" against the lawyer. "Let's make sure that if there's a threat, he should report it to the police," Roque told reporters. However, Sabio hit back Friday, saying "these people are treacherous". He said he does not know Duterte personally and denied working for the opposition, taking on the case purely on principle.—AFP

News in brief

Exporting drone parts

WASHINGTON: Federal authorities have charged three men with illegally exporting drone parts and other material from the United States to Lebanon's militant Hezbollah group, the US Justice Department said on Friday. It said in a statement that suspects Usama Darwich Hamade and Issam Darwich Hamade were in custody in South Africa while Samir Ahmed Berro remained at large. According to the indictment, the trio conspired and attempted to export goods including inertial measurement units suitable for use in drones, a jet engine, piston engines and recording binoculars to Hezbollah in Lebanon from 2009 to 2013, the statement said. Hezbollah is a heavily armed Shi'ite movement which is part of the Lebanese coalition government and backed by Iran.—Reuters

Indonesia inks deal

JAKARTA: Indonesia has inked a billion-dollar deal to buy 11 Sukhoi Su-35 jets from Russia, an official said yesterday. The contract, signed by both countries' representatives in Jakarta on Wednesday, is worth a total \$1.14 billion, Indonesia defence ministry spokesman Totok Sugiharto said. "Two units of Sukhoi jets will be delivered in August 2018," he said. Another six jets would be delivered 18 months after the contract comes into effect, and the final three a further five months later, he said. The deal comes after Indonesia said in August that it would seek to trade palm oil, coffee and tea for Russian fighter jets, saying it wanted to capitalise on international sanctions on Moscow.—AFP

Armenian 'genocide' motions

ANKARA: Turkey summoned the Dutch charge d'affaires to Ankara yesterday to express its unhappiness with a pair of proposed bills that would see the Netherlands recognize as genocide the 1915 killing of as many as 1.5 million Armenians. The four Dutch governing parties have expressed support for two proposals by the conservative Christian Union party which are due to be debated in parliament in coming weeks. One recognises the deaths as genocide and a second calls for a Dutch official to attend the country's formal genocide remembrance day on April 24. The bills risk further souring relations between Turkey and the Netherlands.—Reuters

Suicide blasts kill 19

KANO: Three suicide bombers killed 19 people at a fish market in northeast Nigeria, civilian militia leaders said yesterday, in an attack blamed on Boko Haram jihadists. Friday's deadly attacks came in the week that hundreds of Boko Haram suspects went on trial at civilian courts at a military base. One fighter involved in the 2014 abduction of more than 200 schoolgirls from the Borno state town of Chibok was jailed for 15 years. The suicide blasts happened at about 8:30 pm on Friday in Konduga, some 35 kilometres southeast of the Borno state capital, Maiduguri. Babakura Kolo and Musa Ari, from the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) assisting Nigeria's military against the Islamists, said the bombers were all men.—AFP

Fire kills 9 in China

BEIJING: Nine people have died in a fire at a waste processing facility in southern China that is suspected of being sparked by fireworks residue, state news agency Xinhua said yesterday. The fire broke out in the early hours of the morning in Qingyuan city in the southern province of Guangdong, Xinhua said, citing the local government. The fire has been extinguished and a survivor with serious burns was sent to hospital, the report said. Police have detained several suspects in connection with the fire. Xinhua said, without giving details. "Preliminary investigation showed that fireworks residue initially caused the fire. When three workers were trying to put out the flames, an explosion occurred, killing more people living nearby," it said.—Reuters