

International

Ukrainian rivals exchange 200 prisoners in controversial swap

Release of riot police has raised concerns

CHECKPOINT MAYORSKE, Ukraine: Ukraine and Russia-backed separatists in the country's war-torn east exchanged 200 prisoners yesterday, swapping detained fighters for civilians and servicemen held captive in some cases for years in two breakaway regions. Kiev handed over to separatists five riot policemen suspected of killing protesters during a pro-Western uprising in 2014 as part of the swap, sparking public outrage. "The mutual release of the detainees has ended," the Ukrainian presidential office said in a statement on Facebook, adding that it would provide more details later.

The presidency said Kiev received 76 captives, while separatist officials said the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics took in a total of 124. The head of the Lugansk stronghold, Leonid Pasechnik, congratulated his people on a new "victory" ahead of the New Year's festivities. The exchange came after Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky held their first face-to-face talks in Paris on Dec 9 and agreed measures to de-escalate Europe's only active war.

Prisoners filed off coaches at the Mayorske checkpoint in the eastern Donetsk region, many carrying plastic bags stuffed with their belongings, as gun-toting uniformed soldiers and ambulances were on standby. Among the group of detainees handed over by the sepa-

ratists were those who said they had been held for several years after getting caught up in the conflict while visiting relatives. Volodymyr Danylchenko, who said he had spent three years in captivity, said he was at a loss for words. "I myself don't understand what's happened," said the 36-year-old, adding that he was leaving his mother behind in the separatist region of Lugansk.

Bittersweet homecoming
Another detainee released by the separatists, who gave just her first name Victoria, said she had been held for three years. "I am so happy," the 24-year-old told AFP, adding that she had been convicted of "state treason" and sentenced to 12 years in prison after arriving in the Lugansk region to see her parents. Another woman being handed to Kiev sported a handwritten sign on her clothing: "My country is Ukraine!"

The swap, which was overseen by monitors from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, came three months after Ukraine carried out a long-awaited exchange with Russia of 35 prisoners each. The previous prisoner swap between Kiev and separatists took place in 2017. Ties between Ukraine and Russia were shredded after the bloody 2014 uprising ousted a Kremlin-backed regime. Moscow went on to annex Crimea and support insurgents in east-

ern Ukraine who launched a bid for independence in 2014. Since then more than 13,000 people have been killed in the conflict.

'No future'

The release of the riot police has raised concerns in Ukraine, with many fearing the country is being pushed to pay too high a price for the swap. Ahead of the exchange three riot policemen were released from custody while another two were freed from house arrest. The riot policemen are suspected to have been involved in the bloody crackdown on protesters in 2014. Some 100 demonstrators were shot dead during the uprising. "What Ukrainians have been fighting for is going down the drain," filmmaker Oleg Sentsov, who was released in the September prisoner exchange, said on Facebook. In an open letter to Zelensky, the victims' families warned that the release of the suspects could lead to a "wave of protests". Volodymyr Golodnyuk, whose 19-year son was killed in the uprising, accused authorities of "abusing the justice system". "This country has no future," he said. In an apparent move to allay concerns, Ukraine's prosecutor-general's office said the trial of the five former policemen would continue.

'Frozen' conflict

Since coming to power in May, comedian-



Pro-Russian rebels - who were made prisoners - board a bus during a prisoner exchange between Ukraine and pro-Russian rebels near the Mayorske checkpoint yesterday. — AFP

turned-president Zelensky, 41, has sought to kickstart a peace process to end the conflict. At the Paris summit, the leaders sought to revive accords signed in Minsk in 2015 that call for the withdrawal of heavy weapons, and the restoration of Kiev's control over its borders, among other conditions. But many doubt whether Putin genuinely wants to settle the conflict. He has said that if Kiev gets back con-

trol of the border in the east, residents of separatist-held territories could be targeted. Zelensky's peace plan has also been strongly criticized by war veterans and nationalists. Dmitri Trenin, head of the Carnegie Moscow Centre, praised the prisoner exchange but said it would not bring a settlement any closer. "The conflict is much more likely to become frozen than resolved," he said on Twitter. — AFP

EU charts path for 'challenging' post-Brexit deal

BRUSSELS: The EU will keep engaging with the UK through the WTO and the UN as both sides work out a deal on their future ties once Britain leaves the bloc, according to the top Brexit negotiator in Brussels. Agreeing and ratifying a post-Brexit relationship by the end of 2020 "will be immensely challenging, but we will give it our all, even if we won't be able to achieve everything," the official, Michel Barnier, wrote in a weekend online commentary for the Project Syndicate magazine website.

The two sides will have just 11 months to settle that agreement following Britain's formal departure from the EU on January 31.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson insists he will not seek an extension beyond 2020 to fine-tune a deal. He has also made it clear his country will drop EU labour, environmental, financial, health and safety standards, spurring Brussels' concerns about British trade "dumping" and making prospects of a quick and comprehensive deal appear remote.

'New Year's resolutions'

Barnier, who was unflinchingly courteous when he negotiated the terms of Britain's withdrawal in a way to protect the EU's single market and citizens, said he had three goals-framed as "New Year's resolutions"—for the upcoming talks on the future relationship. To work together on global issues, "the EU will continue to engage positively with the UK, both bilaterally and in global fora such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the G20," he said. In terms of security issues, while it is "simply not possible" for Britain to have the same access to data as EU members, "tackling terrorism, cyberattacks, and other attempts to undermine our democracies will require a joint effort".

Barnier said there should be "unconditional commitment from both sides" to building a security alliance. And for economic ties, "any free-trade agreement must provide for a level playing field on standards, state aid, and tax matters," Barnier emphasized.

That last point is seen as being a big stumbling block in the talks. Johnson told the British parliament last Friday that an "ambitious" trade agreement would be struck "with no alignment on EU rules, but instead with control of our own laws, and close and friendly relations". EU officials and lawmakers have voiced concern that Johnson might be seeking to build Britain as a deregulated "Singapore-on-Thames" that would try to sell goods into the EU made cheaper by cutting rules meant to protect workers, consumers and the environment. — AFP

Two killed in Texas shooting

HOUSTON: A shooting killed two people and wounded at least seven while they were filming a music video in the US state of Texas, authorities said Saturday. "We are now at 9 total gunshot wound victims: 2 were confirmed deceased at scene, 1 was critical, the others remain hospitalized," Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez tweeted.

The attack on a group of Hispanic men in their 20s occurred around 9:30 pm Friday (0330 GMT Saturday) at a parking lot in a residential Houston neighborhood, Gonzalez said at a media briefing that night. A video posted on Twitter Saturday morning by a Houston Chronicle reporter showed bloodstains on the ground in the parking lot and cars dotted with bullet holes.

"There were other vehicles that were staged there, and they were filming some type of music video when, all of a sudden, basically they were ambushed, we believe by individuals in cars and/or foot that fired shots into the parking lot," Gonzalez said in the media briefing. Police do not yet know the motive for the shooting, he added. According to government figures, around 40,000 people died from gunfire in 2017 in the US, a country that is plagued by frequent gun violence. — AFP

Five stabbed at NY rabbi's home in 'terrorist' attack

MONSEY, New York: An intruder stabbed and wounded five people at a rabbi's home in a New York suburb late Saturday, in an incident the state governor said was "an act of terrorism" after a spate of attacks on Jewish targets. Local media reported that a man with a machete entered the rabbi's property in Monsey, Rockland County, during celebrations for the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, knifing several people before fleeing. Victims were rushed to nearby hospitals, with no official details on their injuries. Police said a suspect was later arrested.

"This is an act of terrorism. I think these are domestic terrorists. They are trying to inflict fear," New York Governor Andrew Cuomo told reporters at the scene yesterday. "They're motivated by hate. They are doing mass attacks. These are terrorists in our country perpetrating terrorism on other Americans, and that's how we should treat it." Last year a white supremacist walked into a Pittsburgh synagogue and killed 11 people - the deadliest attack against the Jewish community in the United States.

I Coast ex-rebel vows to organize 'political resistance' from abroad

PARIS: Former rebel leader and would-be Ivory Coast presidential candidate Guillaume Soro said he would organize "political resistance" from abroad in an interview published yesterday, a day after president Alassane Ouattara warned him and other rivals against destabilizing the country.

"It is only a question of political resistance," Soro told French newspaper Le Journal du Dimanche following accusations he was preparing an imminent "civilian military insurrection" to seize power. "I am and remain a presidential candidate... I will organize the resistance just as de Gaulle did from London," he said, referring to the French wartime resistance leader. Ouattara on Saturday had warned against any attempt to destabilize the country, days after an arrest warrant was issued for Soro, a former ally turned political rival.

"No one will be allowed to destabilize Ivory Coast," Ouattara said during a joint news conference with Equatorial Guinea's President Teodoro Obiang Nguema, according to a statement sent to AFP.

"The law will be applied to everyone, candidate or not," Ouattara said. "Nobody is above the law, former presidents of the republic, presidents of institutions, the president of the republic and everyone else," he added.

Ouattara's comments could be seen as directed at not just Soro, but also former president Henri Konan Bedie, leader of the main opposition party, who has not yet said whether he is running for the presidency. Soro had been due to head back to Ivory Coast on Monday after a six-month absence. But after security forces stormed his party headquarters in Abidjan he diverted his flight.

Prosecutors then issued an arrest warrant for him. He told the Journal the arrest warrant against him was politically motivated, adding he planned to remain

Earlier this month six people, including two suspects, were killed in a Jersey City shooting at a kosher deli, which authorities said was fueled in part by anti-Semitism. A report in April from the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) stated that the number of anti-Semitic attacks in 2018 was close to the record of 2017, with 1,879 incidents.

"I was praying for my life," said witness Aron Kohn, 65, comparing the knife used by the attacker to "the size of a broom-

stick". Kohn threw chairs and tables in an attempt to head off the assault. "I saw him stabbing people," he added. "He injured a guy, he was bleeding in his hand, all over." Kohn said the attacker tried to enter the adjacent synagogue, but it was locked.

Extra patrols

Yossi Gestetner, of the Orthodox Jewish Public Affairs Council (OJPAC), told The New York Times that one of the victims



NEW YORK: Two police officers stand guard as the press gathers outside a rabbi's home where a machete attack that took place earlier during the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, in Monsey, New York, yesterday. — AFP

Guinea-Bissau votes in runoff presidential poll to end turmoil

BISSAU, Guinea-Bissau: Voters in Guinea-Bissau cast their ballots in a presidential runoff yesterday with the hope of ending months of political turmoil in the coup-prone West African state that is one of the world's poorest nations.

Some 700,000 registered voters have a choice between two former prime ministers-Domingos Simoes Pereira, from the traditional ruling PAIGC party, and opposition figure Umaro Sissoco Embalo.

Both are promising a better economic future in a young country wracked by poverty, instability, high unemployment and corruption. Incumbent Jose Mario Vaz crashed out of the race in the first round in November-becoming the first elected president in 25 years to reach the end of his mandate without being ousted or dying in office, in a country where the military has loomed large in politics.

Polling stations, often set up in the open air, opened at 0700 GMT.

"This is the most important day. We want everything to go well," said Dominique Zale, a security guard and father-of-six who spoke to AFP at a polling station near the port in the capital Bissau, where voters started lining up before dawn. "We must vote to change things. The next president will have the mission to make the country work," said 31-year-old Jair Fernandes Martins, at a nearby polling station. Nearly 70 percent of Guinea-Bissau's 1.8 million people lives on less than \$1.90 a day and the country ranks 178th out of 189 on the UN Human Development Index.

The small tropical country gained independence from Portugal in 1974, but has suffered a string of military coups,

attempted coups and political assassinations ever since. After the latest coup in 2012, the West African regional bloc ECOWAS deployed a nearly 700-member force to try to stabilize the fragile nation. A member of the European Union election observation team expressed cautious optimism that the military would not disrupt the political process this time.

"The soldiers are quiet. I hope that this will continue, but we will see after the results are announced," they said. Polls close at 1700 GMT and the results are not expected until next week.

Raucous campaign

The election campaign passed loudly and colorfully and with no violence. Pereira, 56, a civil engineer by training, won 40.1 percent of the vote in the first round on November 24. He belongs to the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), which is historically rooted in the fight to end Portugal's colonial rule. Embalo, a former general who wears a red-and-white Arab keffiyeh headress, is gambling that he can chip away at Pereira's lead by getting backing from candidates knocked out in the first round in November.

The 47-year-old came second with 27.65 percent. He represents Madem, an opposition party formed by PAIGC rebels. The latest crisis erupted in 2015 when Vaz sacked Pereira as prime minister, a move that incensed the PAIGC.

Thereafter, Vaz was unable to get parliamentary backing for his proposed prime ministers-and parliament did not sit for nearly two years until April 2018 when Aristides Gomes was appointed "consensus" prime minister. Vaz came fourth in the first round of voting, with just 12.4 percent. Guinea-Bissau has been lacerated by graft, ranking 172nd out of 180 countries in Transparency International's 2018 index for perceived levels of corruption. Latin American drug runners have exploited the instability and poverty to make the country a hub along the cocaine-smuggling route to Europe. — AFP



Guillaume Soro