



Hong Kong leader apologizes; protesters urge her to resign

Bangladesh prison breakfast menu gets makeover after 200 years



ZARZIS: A Tunisian fishing boat arrives at the port of Zarzis in the southern coast of Tunisia. Tunisian fishermen are finding themselves more and more involved in rescuing illegal boats leaving Libya for Italy, due to the difficulties of NGOs in the eastern Mediterranean and the disengagement of European military ships. — AFP

Tunisian fishermen turn life-savers

'We want to catch fish, not people'

ZARZIS: The Tunisian trawler radioed in for help as it passed the migrant boat in distress out at sea. But with the packed craft still adrift two days later, captain Chamseddine Bourassine took direct action. Fishermen from the North African country are spending more and more time pulling in stranded migrants after a sharp decline in humanitarian and European naval patrols along the stretch of water between war-ravaged Libya and Italy. Bourassine, his crew and three other fishing boats ferried the 69 migrants back to shore on May 11, five days after their boat pushed off from Zuwara on the western Libyan coast.

"The area where we fish is a crossing point" between Zuwara and the Italian island of Lampedusa, said Badreddine Mecherek, a Tunisian fisherman from Zarzis near the border with Libya. Fishermen from Zarzis have saved the lives of hundreds of migrants in recent years, and as the number of boats leaving western Libya for Europe spikes with the return of calmer summer seas, they will probably have to save even more. "First we warn the authorities, but in the end we end up saving them ourselves," Mecherek grumbled as he tinkered with his rusting sardine boat.

European countries in the northern Mediterranean are trying to stem the number of migrants landing on their shores, and the Tunisian navy with its limited resources only rescues boats inside the country's territorial waters. Since May 31, Tunisia itself has barred 75 migrants from coming ashore after they were saved in international waters by a Tunisian-Egyptian tug boat. Contacted multiple times by AFP, Tunisian authorities have refused to comment.

'Angel'

"Everyone has disengaged" from the issue, said Mecherek, adding it was hampering his work. Fishermen who run across migrants on their second day out at sea are at least able to have done a day's work, he added, "but if we find them on the first night, we have to go back." "It's very complicated to finish the job with people on board."



Hundreds of migrants saved in recent years

The complexity of the rescues grows when fishermen find migrants adrift closer to Italy. When Bourassine and his crew last year tugged a boat towards Lampedusa which was adrift without a motor, they were jailed in Sicily for four weeks for helping the migrants. It took months to recover their boat. Humanitarian boats and those of the European Union's "Operation Sophia" anti-piracy force had scooped up most stranded migrants in recent years, but rescue operations dropped in 2019.

"Now most often we are the first to arrive... if we aren't there, the migrants die," Mecherek said. On May 10, a Tunisian trawler just barely saved the lives of 16 migrants after they had spent eight hours in the water. Sixty others drowned before the ship arrived. Survivor Ahmed Sijur said the boat's appearance at dawn was like

that of "an angel". "I was loosing hope myself, but God sent us the fishermen to save us," the 30-year-old from Bangladesh said.

'Police of the sea'

Mecherek is more worried than proud. "We don't want to see all these corpses anymore. We want to catch fish, not people," he said, adding his crew was growing uneasy. "I have 20 seamen on board asking, 'Who will feed our families?'" he added. "But local fishermen will never let people die at sea." For Tunisian Red Crescent official Mongi Slim, the fishermen "are practically the police of the sea", adding that many migrants say large ships won't stop to help.

Under pressure to catch their quota during a short annual season, big tuna boats out of Zarzis often call the coast guard instead of stopping themselves to help. "We report the migrants, but we can't bring them back to shore... We only have a few weeks to fish," said one crew member. For Chamseddine, the summer months look difficult. "With fighting having resumed in Libya, traffickers are free to work again... There's a risk of many shipwrecks." — AFP

Piracy, collisions, missiles: Tankers in troubled waters

NEW YORK: Tankers like those apparently attacked in the Gulf of Oman operate through increasingly treacherous waters, facing mounting dangers from piracy and collision as well as geopolitical hazards. Around 60 million barrels of petroleum product move each day on the seas globally, according to the US Energy Information Administration. And around a third of this volume passes through the Straits of Hormuz, a critical shipping passage. This waterway is a principal route for crude exports from Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Iraq. It is also a key route for natural gas exports from Qatar.

Other highly strategic waterways include the Strait of Malacca between Singapore and Indonesia, the Suez Canal in Egypt and the Babel-Mandeb strait, which connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden. "Blocking a chokepoint, even temporarily, can lead to substantial increases in total energy costs and world energy prices," said EIA in a 2017 report. "Chokepoints also leave oil tankers vulnerable to theft from pirates, terrorist attacks, political unrest in the form of wars or hostilities and shipping accidents that can lead to disastrous oil spills."

Alexander Booth, head of market analysis at Kpler, said tankers are accustomed to traveling with pirates in their midst, especially in areas like the Strait of Malacca and the Gulf of Aden near Somalia. "Historically, the biggest military or terrorist threat is piracy," Booth said. "Off the coasts of Somalia for instance, whilst they are going through certain areas, they would often broadcast the fact they have guards on board." Booth said attacks such as those suspected on Thursday are "very rare."



FUJAIRAH: A woman sits along a beach as tanker ships are seen in the waters of the Gulf of Oman off the coast of the eastern UAE emirate of Fujairah. — AFP

Collisions

Thursday's incidents come about a month after attacks on four ships, including three oil tankers, anchored off the United Arab Emirates port of Fujairah. As with Thursday's incidents, the May attacks inflamed tensions between the United States and Iran. Anthony Cordesman, a national security analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said Iran could do damage.

Iran "does not have to launch a major war," Cordesman wrote in an commentary on CSIS's website. "It can conduct sporadic, low-level attacks that do not necessarily provoke a major US or Arab reaction but create sudden risk premiums in petroleum prices and the equivalent of a war of attrition."

Still another risk has been Iran's move to shut off automatic identification systems to help tankers

evade US sanctions on Iranian crude, said Matt Smith of ClipperData. AIS is used by vessel traffic services and permits ships to know if other vessels are nearby. "One new danger is the increased risk of collisions due to vessels switching off their AIS," Smith said.

In January 2018, the Iranian-owned Sanchi tanker carrying 136,000 ton of light crude oil caught fire after colliding with a bulk freighter in a deadly crash. Shipping companies are aware of this and can change course as a result, according to Booth, who said routes can be shifted not just to shorten distances but also due to refinery activity, product specifications and economic factors. "A cargo of products could turn around in the middle of the Atlantic half a dozen times before it actually ends up into its final destination," he said. — AFP

Severe heat kills dozens in Bihar

PATNA: Severe heat has left dozens dead over a 24-hour period in India's Bihar state, as the country enters a third week of searing temperatures, officials said yesterday. The deaths occurred in three districts of the poor northern state, where temperatures have hovered around 45 degrees Celsius (113 Fahrenheit) in recent days, senior health official Vijay Kumar told AFP. Forty-nine people died in three districts of the Magadh region that has been hit by drought, he said.

"It was a sudden development on Saturday afternoon. People affected by heatstroke were rushed to different hospitals," Kumar added. "Most of them died on Saturday night and some yesterday morning during treatment." Kumar said about 40 more people were being treated at a government-run hospital in Aurangabad. "Patients affected by heat stroke are still being brought, the death toll is likely to increase if the heatwave continues."

Most of the victims were aged above 50 and were rushed to hospitals in semi-conscious state with symptoms of high fever, diarrhoea and vomiting. Twenty-seven people died in Aurangabad district, 15 in Gaya and seven in Nawada district, officials said. State Chief Minister Nitish Kumar has announced a compensation of 400,000 rupees (\$5,700) for the family of each victim. Harsh Vardhan, India's health minister, said people should not leave their homes until temperatures fall. "Intense heat affects brain and leads to various health issues," he said.

Large parts of northern India have endured more than two weeks of sweltering heat. Temperatures have risen above 50 degrees Celsius (122 Fahrenheit) in the desert state of Rajasthan. A heatwave in 2015 left more than 3,500 dead in India and Pakistan. In 2017, researchers said South Asia, which is home to one fifth of the world's population, could see heat levels rise to unsurvivable levels by the end of the century if no action is taken on global warming. — AFP