

Analysis

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Hard Brexit threat looming over French fishing fleet

The waters for French fishermen are being stirred up by uncertainty of what will happen if Britain leaves the EU without a deal on Oct 31 and their boats barred from British waters. A no-deal Brexit would likely end access for French boats to British waters and, in France, fishing industry players fear this will not just increase tensions with rivals across the Channel but between themselves. Sophie Leroy, whose Armement Cherbourgeois company operates three fishing vessels off the northwest coast of France, says there have been almost daily checks of their boats by the British authorities.

Earlier this month, her boats were stopped for what she described as an interminable set of checks 21 miles off the English coast. Her boats were also surrounded by 15 British fishing vessels, she said. "And they were saying, 'We are going to do the same as what the French did to us last year.'" The "Scallop Wars" in 2018, when French and British fishing vessels clashed over access to scallops off France's Normandy coastline, was finally settled by the two sides in a deal last September.

While a Brexit deal would help put a framework in place, Britain anticipates the possibility of more clashes between rival fishing vessels if the country pulls out of the EU with no agreement in place. The government last week released a study of that scenario, codenamed "Operation Yellowhammer", after a copy of the document was leaked to the press. One issue it addressed was the possibility that EU vessels could illegally enter British waters, leading to "clashes between vessels", "violent disputes" or even the "blockading of ports".

'War of nerves'

So far this time around the two sides have not actually come to blows. But Leroy referred to what she called a "war of nerves" online. "I've had a photo of one of my boats published on Facebook with a target on it," she said. Nor are the British the only problem, she says. Like other fishing companies, her fear is that if a "no-deal" Brexit closes British waters to the French, then they will be left fighting among themselves over what is left.

The prospect of such infighting - of Breton fishing vessels clashing with their Norman neighbors - hung over this week's Assises de la pêche, a fishing industry meeting in the northern French port of Granville. Food and Agriculture Minister Didier Guillaume made several calls for solidarity during his visit there, both between EU countries affected by Brexit and among French fishermen. "With a no-deal Brexit, the stakes are high for us," said Philippe de Lambert des Granges, the fishing ministry official preparing the French industry for the impact of Brexit.

Fish caught in British waters account for 25 percent of the industry's volume and 20 percent of its value, he said - which helps explain the concerns of the fishermen here. Seventy percent of Leroy's current catch comes from British waters. "We are all going to be affected, so we are all going to be stretched," she said. "So, inevitably, there will be conflicts between fishermen, between inshore fishing, between gill-netters, between off-shore trawlers who are going to come in closer to the coast."

Other fleets threatened

The problem will be to quantify the impact of these losses, said Hubert Carre, head of the Maritime Fisheries Committee. Fishing operators will have to choose how to react, he said, with one option being simply suspending their fleet's activities in return for EU compensation. "It will be up to the head of each business," he added. But many in the industry are reluctant to beach their fleet and take their compensation, for fear of losing their clients.

France is not the only country facing a Brexit blow to their fishing. Eight EU member states will be affected one way or another, said Philippe de Lambert des Granges at the fishing ministry. For the Belgians, British waters represent 45 percent of their catch volume - and 50 percent of its value, he said. All eight EU nations that would be hit by a disorderly departure by Britain would have to work together, he said. France, he said, was determined "in the case of a no-deal Brexit, to maintain or re-establish access to British waters as soon as possible". —AFP

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In this file photo taken on Jan 18, 1983 Gabonese take part in the inauguration of the second section of the Ndjole-Bououéthe Trans-Gabon Railway (Transgabonais) in Gabon. (Inset) French President Francois Mitterrand and Gabonese President Omar Bongo are seen on board the train. —AFP

Gabon's sole train lifeline for people, economy

The sky turns from indigo to ebony as the tropical night falls, and the train patiently thrusts through the jungle towards its destination, still hundreds of kilometres away. The trek has the hallmarks of one of the world's Great Forgotten Train Journeys - a voyage through 648 km of lush equatorial forest. The train is the brainchild of Gabon's former president, Omar Bongo, who ruled for 42 years until his death in 2009.

In the 1970s, he dreamed of linking the central African state's resource-rich interior to the Atlantic coast - and he saw it through, despite being rebuffed by the World Bank, which refused to fund it on the grounds that it was not economically viable. Today, the "Bongo Train", as it is affectionately known, remains the country's sole railway line, linking 23 stations from the coastal capital Libreville to distant Franceville, the country's third most populous city. "The Transgabonais binds Gabonese society," declares Christian Antchouet Roux, the stationmaster at Franceville.

About 320,000 people take the train every year, a sign of its affordability for the average Gabonese. Ticket prices depend on

the time of year and class - the train has a VIP carriage, as well as first and second classes. Passengers travel only at nighttime but in air-conditioned comfort - a rarity in the world's poorest continent - and the blue and yellow compartments are modern. One of them is Miyha Koumba, a young student in Libreville who uses it to visit her family at the other end of the line. "I take the train at least four times a year. I can visit my parents regularly," she said, arriving in Libreville at 7:00 am bleary-eyed, having departed Franceville at 5:30 pm the day before. During the day, the train hauls manganese - a key export after oil - from the interior to the ocean side capital.

Critics and champions

Touting the train as a symbol of national unity and modernization, Bongo doggedly pressed on with the plan, saying: "If we need to have a pact with the Devil, we'll do that." Fortune smiled on Gabon's leader in 1973 when the OPEC cartel of oil producing nations raised prices dramatically, filling the country's coffers and enabling him to start construction with the additional help of Western aid, notably

from former colonial ruler France.

Bongo flagged off the project - the largest in Africa at the time - on Dec 30, 1973. It cost \$1.65 billion, and millions of trees were felled to cut the swathe through the jungle for the track, which is un electrified. In 1986, the last stretch was inaugurated in the presence of then French prime minister Jacques Chirac. Critics of the project have long pointed to its cost, to its use as a political tool for Bongo, whose partisan stronghold was centered in the region where Franceville is located, and to French involvement. "Since its creation, the Transgabonais has been closely linked to France and its interests," US law professor Douglas Yates, author of "The Rentier State in Africa: Oil Rent Dependency & Neocolonialism in the Republic of Gabon", told AFP. Its champions view it as a critical piece of infrastructure for Gabon's development. There is a road running parallel to the tracks. But it is riddled with potholes, making the journey much longer, far less comfortable, and dangerous too.

Derailments and elephants

In a country which has been grappling

with the effects of falling oil prices since 2014, the importance of manganese for the economy has ballooned. "Without manganese, this train could not exist," said Gabonese economist Mays Mouissi. According to an economic report by the Gabonese government, the ore accounts for a fourth of non-oil exports. Although still volatile, a recent surge in manganese prices over the last couple of years has boosted the country's oil-dependent economy.

French mining group Eramet, which extracts 80 percent of Gabon's manganese, recently said that it wants to boost production by 60 percent by 2023. But more than 33 years after the first train started rolling, the line is facing problems. There have been many derailments on a stretch built on unstable terrain and maintenance has been poor. Train services have been further compromised by technical problems, while elephants wandering over the tracks have caused delays. To keep the line going, a massive eight-year revamp was launched in 2015, costing an estimated \$330 million. More than half of the total will be financed by France together with, ironically, the World Bank. —AFP

The perennial problem of Italy's agro-mafia

Thousands of exploited workers who are paid a pittance to work in unacceptable conditions: Welcome to the dark side of Italy's world famous agriculture, and the shadowy role of the mafia. Every summer, thousands of migrant workers from Africa but also Bulgaria and Romania, come to pick tomatoes and watermelons under the unforgiving Italian sun. Around 400,000 farmworkers are exposed to the risk of exploitation, with at least 100,000 in a situation of "extreme vulnerability", according to the Flai-Cgil agricultural union.

The workers are mostly foreign, but they include Italians. "These people are reduced to slavery," thanks to the role of the "caporalato" (corporal) intermediary, said Jean-Rene Bilongo, head of migration policy and inequalities at Flai-Cgil. "He's the one who negotiates pay while taking his cut," he added. "For instance, of the five euros paid for a huge crate of tomatoes, he will only give three euros to the workers."

Agricultural workers have a collective agreement which says they should work 6 hours and 40 minutes per day for \$55 (\$55) a day. But in fact they work up to 14 hours a day and are paid by the weight of the fruit they pick. For tomatoes that means three or four euros per 350 kilo crate, which means workers earn \$20 to \$30 a day.

EU-bound migrants reroute via Albanian hills

After slipping across the Greek border into the arid mountains of southeastern Albania in the dead of night, Hidaja Salah and his fellow travellers are blinded by the headlights of a police car. The migrants were hoping to continue west towards the EU but their journey has been halted in this Balkan state - for now. "We will try again," Salah, a young and bespectacled man from Afghanistan in his 20s, tells AFP as the Albanian police vehicles pull up.

He and the others - eight Egyptian men - are part of a growing number of migrants travelling across a southern Balkan route from Greece into Albania and Montenegro in a bid to reach the European Union. Since May their journeys have become more difficult, with the EU dispatching its border agency, Frontex, to Albania to help patrol its porous 350 km border with Greece.

The poor and mountainous country has become a key transit stop for migrants ever since a northern route through the Balkans was shut down in early 2016. Since then, "the trend is visibly upward," said Aida Hajnaj, the deputy director general of Albanian police. "The Balkan routes are active again," she said. The new path winds through Albania and Montenegro, and sometimes Bosnia, in a bid to reach the EU through Croatia. In the past three months, 2,310 migrants were intercepted in Albania - more than double the 882 migrants caught in all of last year, according to official data. In 2017, the figure was 206.

'Inhumane'

"The corporals make them pay five euros to bring them to the fields, and then back again, they have to pay 3.50 euros for water and a sandwich, it's extortion," said Angelo Cleopazzo, vice-president of the association Diritti a Sud (Rights in the South), based in Nardo. Many of the workers live in shantytowns in the middle of the countryside that resemble ghettos, and are victims of physical and sexual violence. "It's inhumane," said the Flai-Cgil's Bilongo.

Their extreme vulnerability often prevents the workers from going to the authorities to report abuse. Nevertheless, in August 2018, hundreds of farm workers protested in Foggia, in Puglia on Italy's "heel", after 16 of them were killed in a traffic accident. Previous summers saw several other workers dying in the fields, worked to death at the height of summer. Police and judges try to enforce the law, including with a 2016 measure that targeted the "corporals".

Employers were required to do more for their workers, such as providing transport to and from the fields, reduce dependence on "corporals". But Bilongo said that the law is not being fully applied when it comes to such preventative measures and "there is lots of resistance".

'Agro-mafia'

Flai-Cgil and farmers' union Coldiretti blame supermarket chains. "They have a lot of responsibility because the impose very low prices," said Cleopazzo. He added the mafia is also involved and while the authorities turn a blind eye. This "agro-mafia" has a finger in everything from production to transport and distribution, according to the Coldiretti. Their slice of the agricultural pie rose 12.4 percent in 2018 to some \$24.5 bil-

'A life with dignity'

Salah linked up with his fellow travellers in Turkey and Greece, where they stayed in the overcrowded Moria camp on the island of Lesbos. It was "worse than the hell we lived in our countries," said an 18-year-old Egyptian who gave his name only as Ahmed. After trying to earn some cash on the island of Crete with farm jobs, they began their journey on foot.

But it was halted after 15 km on a grassy Albanian hillside near Poncare, where police took them to the local police station. There, they will probably launch an asylum bid - not to stay in Albania permanently but to buy some time before continuing onwards. Salah says they do not have a specific European city in mind yet, just hopes to find "a better life, more safety - and a life with dignity."

Night bustle

Frontex's joint operation with Albania is the first ever outside EU territory. "The terrain here is really difficult and you need a lot of resources" to cover it, said Dominik Matiske, a German Frontex officer helping with border patrols. He and other officers from EU countries peer through binoculars as they pad across hills overlooking the Kapshtica area, the main crossing region for migrants coming from Greece.

Inside a thermo-vision van nearby, their Czech colleague Pavel Dolezal monitors a screen that can detect bodies. "If we spot migrants, we send the information to our Albanian colleagues who call the patrol," he told AFP. According to Hajnaj, their help "has improved the management of illegal migration and strengthened border security."

But there is still plenty to keep them busy. Hyqmet Hoxha, a 55-year-old living in the village of Tresnik near the Greek border, says he has seen a "significant" increase in migrants just in



In this file photo taken on June 16, 2018 in Rome, a demonstrator raises a tomato into the air during a march organized by Italy's USB (Base Union of Trade Unions) against the murder of the USB syndicalist Soumalla Sacko and the refusal by Italy to accept migrants rescued at sea earlier in the week. —AFP

lion, it has estimated. Some local initiatives are trying to change practices. Geol is a collective of cooperatives in Calabria which since 2003 has helped farmworkers get more money for what they pick and resist organized crime. SfruttaZero (Zero exploitation) has since 2015 produced its own tomato sauce without chemicals and with regular contracts for around 20 workers, who are paid by the hour and given free transport, sandwiches and water. The company sells its jars of tomatoes for three to four euros instead of the usual 90 euro cents in supermarkets. They have no problem selling their entire stock, with consumers increasingly sensitive to ethical and environmental costs, said Cleopazzo. —AFP



A Czech member of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) monitors the Albania-Greece border on Sept 4, 2019 in Kapshtica near the city of Korca. —AFP

the past few weeks. The bustle begins as the sun goes down and migrants stop for the night. That morning police picked up around 20 women and children who had gathered around a fire for warmth. "Sometimes there are about 50 of them at night, sometimes none," Hoxha added.

After picking up Salah and the others, police also intercepted another group while they were driving to the police station. Esmā, a 16-year-old girl from Iraq who declined to give her surname, told AFP that her family would not be deterred by this temporary delay. "After Albania, we will go to Montenegro, then to Bosnia before joining Germany," she said. —AFP