

International

Fresh attack leaves 37 dead in western Niger

Tens of thousands of people have fled their homes

NIAMEY: Armed men killed 37 civilians in a flashpoint region of western Niger where hundreds have died in jihadist attacks this year, local sources said yesterday. The assailants "arrived on motorbikes" in the village of Darey-Daye in the Tillaberi region on Monday afternoon as people were working in the fields, a local official said. "The toll is very high—there were 37 dead, including four women and 13 children," the source said. A local journalist confirmed the toll and described the attack as "very bloody". "They found people in the fields and shot at anything that moved," he said.

The deaths bring the unofficial death toll from jihadist attacks in western Niger to more than 450 since the start of the year. It is also the fifth attack in this area of Tillaberi in as many months, claiming 151 lives.

Rated the world's poorest country by the UN's Human Development Index, Niger lies in the heart of the arid Sahel region of West Africa, which is battling a nine-year-old jihadist insurgency. The bloodshed began



Assailants 'arrived on motorbikes'

in northern Mali in 2012 and then spread to the centre of the country before hitting neighbouring Niger and Burkina Faso.

Tillaberi has borne the brunt of the crisis. Darey-Daye, located 40 kilometres (25 miles) east of the town of Banibangou, was already reeling from a bloody assault on March 15. Suspected jihadists killed 66 people in attacks on the village and on vehicles of shoppers returning from the weekly market in Banibangou.

'Waging war'

According to a toll issued last Wednesday by Human Rights Watch (HRW), more than 420 civilians have been killed in jihadist attacks in Tillaberi and the neighbouring region of Tahoua this year. Tens of thousands of people have fled their homes. "Armed Islamist groups appear to be waging war on the civilian population in western Niger," Corinne Dufka, HRW's Sahel director, said in the report. Among those killed were village chiefs, imams, people with disabilities and "numerous children", some executed after being ripped from their parents' arms, HRW said.

The groups have also destroyed schools and churches and imposed restrictions based on their harsh interpretation of Islam. The Banibangou department lies in the so-called "tri-border" area where the frontiers of Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali converge.

The area is notorious for attacks by highly mobile jihadists linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State

group. Three attacks by gunmen on motorbikes were carried out in the Banibangou area on July 25 and 29 and August 9, killing 48 people, according to the authorities.

Atrocities have also been committed in southeast Niger by Nigerian jihadists from Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). Meanwhile in northern Mali, authorities said hundreds of people had fled their homes a week after jihadist attacks on the villages of Karou, Ouatagouna and Daoutegest, near the border with Niger, left 42 dead.

"The terrorists gave orders to the population to leave their villages. Other civilians left out of fear," a senior administration official in the area told AFP late Monday, speaking on condition of anonymity. In January, the UN refugee agency UNHCR said the number of internally displaced people in the Sahel had exceeded two million. A further 850,000 people were refugees. — AFP



LUSAKA: President elect Hakainde Hichilema (C) waves at supporters after a press briefing at his residence in Lusaka. Zambian business tycoon and veteran opposition leader Hakainde Hichilema scored a landslide victory in bitterly-contested presidential elections. — AFP

Southern Africa hails Zambian democracy after opposition win

LILONGWE: Southern Africa's regional bloc praised Zambia yesterday for overseeing a peaceful transition of power after a veteran opposition politician won a landslide victory at the ballot box. Hakainde Hichilema was declared winner on Monday after roundly defeating Edgar Lungu, who had been in power for six years.

It is the third time that power has changed hands to the opposition in Zambia since 1991, on a continent where incumbent leaders often hold on to power for decades. "The pattern of peaceful transitions of power we have been seeing in our region in recent years. ... (with) Zambia being the latest member to embody that, are worthy of global acclaim and our applause," said Malawian President Lazarus Chakwera, launching a summit of southern African leaders.

"To all the leaders and people of Zambia, we say thank you," he said. Chakwera, himself a former opposition politician, came to power last year after the re-election of his predecessor Arthur Mutharika was scrapped for vote rigging and the ballot re-staged.

He told the 16-nation Southern African Development Community (SADC) that regional peace and security depended on democratic norms being sustained and on the protection of human rights. Lungu had claimed the election was not free or fair, while votes were being counted at the weekend. But on Tuesday, hours after the vote was declared, Lungu conceded defeat and promised to peacefully hand over power.

A few hours later he met Hichilema in the presence of former leaders — Zambia's Rupiah Banda, Tanzania's Jakaya Kikwete and Sierra Leone's Ernest Bai Koroma. In one of the post-meeting pictures posted on Twitter by Lungu, the two political foes were seen laughing and elbow-greeting.

Last Thursday's election marked Hichilema's sixth attempt at Zambia's top political job and his third bid against Lungu. In his first address to the nation, Hichilema, 57, assured his predecessor — whose administration arrested him several times — "don't worry, you'll be okay, you won't face retribution or get teargassed."

He pledged to "foster a better democracy... rule of law, restoring order, respecting human rights, liberties and freedoms." Despite occasional episodes of political violence, Zambia has earned a reputation for stability. Every transition of power has been peaceful since the former British colony adopted its multi-party system in 1990. — AFP

Poland gives defiant reply to EU on judicial reforms

WARSAW: Poland yesterday said it would fight an order from the EU's top court to suspend a "disciplinary chamber" for judges, part of a long-running row over judicial reform. Poland and the EU have been at loggerheads for years over the reforms and Brussels has promised to take strong action against what it sees as a flouting of democratic norms.

Poland argues it should be allowed to adopt the judicial reforms it wants and has accused Brussels of a high-handed approach that could split the European Union. The Polish government said it had told the EU in a letter that the disciplinary chamber would not handle new cases, but argued that officials had no authority to shut it down. "It was emphasised that the government had no measures which, without violating the principle of the independence of the judiciary, could suspend the operation of the court chamber and the effects of its decisions," it said in a statement.

The government also said it had applied to the European Court of Justice (ECJ) to annul its July 14 order on the disciplinary chamber after a ruling from Poland's Constitutional Court saying it went against the country's constitution.

"I can confirm that we've received the reply from the Polish authorities on time and we are currently analysing it," Christian Wigand, a European Commission spokesman, told reporters in Brussels. The European Commission has threatened to impose fines on Poland if it refuses to conform with the order from the ECJ and had said it wanted a reply by August 16.

The Polish law on reforming the judiciary, which came into force in February last year, prevents judges from referring questions of law to the European Court of Justice. It set up the disciplinary chamber to oversee judges, with the power to lift their immunity to expose them to criminal proceedings or cut their salaries.

In its statement yesterday, Poland said it would "continue reforms of the judiciary, including in the areas of judges' responsibility, aimed at improving the system's efficiency". The government argues the reforms are necessary to tackle corruption and end Communist-era legacies in the judiciary.

But the European Commission says they undermine rule of law and has sought to bring Poland, as well as Hungary, back into line with what it sees as European democratic norms. — AFP

News in brief

US criticizes Iran nuke work

WASHINGTON: The United States on Monday voiced alarm over Iranian production of uranium metal reported by the UN nuclear watchdog as it urged the clerical state to return to talks. The State Department said the United States has seen the latest report to members by the International Atomic Energy Agency and believed that Iran "has no credible need to produce uranium metal." Iran promised not to produce uranium metal, which can be used to build a nuclear bomb, as part of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) under which it was to scale back its nuclear program drastically in return for sanctions relief. — AFP

Europe's Vega rocket blasts off

KOUROU: A European Vega rocket lifted off Monday night from French Guiana carrying an Earth observation satellite and four miniature "cubesats". It was the second launch this year of the Vega, a crucial component of European ambitions to compete with rivals such as Elon Musk's SpaceX in the booming commercial aerospace market. The rocket blasted off from the Guiana Space Centre in Kourou at 10:47 pm (0147 GMT), successfully delivering the satellites in just under two hours. Its main cargo was a high-resolution satellite, the second of four for a new Earth observation constellation operated by Airbus. The first was put in orbit in April by a Vega rocket. The Pleiades Neo constellation will offer high-resolution imaging of Earth for military or civilian uses such as disaster response, according to Airbus. — AFP

Irish crime boss 'The Monk' arrested

MADRID: Spanish police said yesterday they had arrested the fugitive leader of an Irish organised crime group who is wanted in Ireland for murder. Officers arrested Gerry Hutch, also known as "The Monk", on Thursday at a restaurant in Fuengirola on Spain's southern Costa del Sol, where he was living, Spanish police said in a statement. The 58-year-old had been living in the centre of Fuengirola where he "relied on a logistics network which supplied him with everything he needed without having to leave his hiding place", the statement added. Described by Spanish police as one of Ireland's "most dangerous criminals", he is wanted for the murder in 2016 of a member of a rival organised crime group during a boxing weigh-in at the Regency Hotel in Dublin. — AFP

Russia hails 'positive signal' from Taleban

MOSCOW: Russia said yesterday that the Taleban's initial assurances since completing their military takeover of Afghanistan have been a "positive signal" and that it supports "inclusive" political dialogue in the country. "I consider it a positive signal that the Taleban in Kabul are declaring and in practice showing their readiness to respect the opinion of others," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said. "In particular, they said that they are ready to discuss a government in which not only they but other Afghan representatives will also participate."

Lavrov told a meeting in Kaliningrad that Moscow wanted the formation of Kabul's new government to be an inclusive process. "We support the beginning of an inclusive national dialogue with the participation of all of Afghanistan's political, ethnic and religious groups," he said in comments carried by the state-run Rossiya 24 television channel after the meeting.

Russia on Monday said it would decide on recognising the new Taleban government based on how responsibly the new authorities govern. Its ambassador to Afghanistan Dmitry Zhirnov was meeting the Taleban on Tuesday and has said that the militants have already established public order.

The Kremlin has in recent years reached out to the Taleban and hosted its representatives in Moscow several times, most recently last month. Moscow is closely watching for a potential spillover of the instability into neighbouring ex-Soviet Central Asian countries where Russia maintains military bases. — AFP



LESBOS ISLAND, Greece: Afghan migrants hold Afghan flag as they protest over Taleban takeover of Afghanistan, on the island of Lesbos. — AFP

In Lesbos, Afghans sing their protests at Taleban takeover

ATHENS: "No to the Taleban" was the slogan heard in Sappho square on the Greek island of Lesbos on Monday evening, where asylum seekers gathered for a peaceful protest against the militant Islamists' takeover of their homeland.

About 200 migrants and refugees from Afghanistan—with some from Iran too—waved Afghan flags, singing and chanting. The Taleban were in control of Afghanistan on Monday after President Ashraf Ghani fled the country. Thousands of people were trying to escape Kabul, with scenes of chaos as crowds gathered at the airport.

"We came to show to the world what is going on

my country," 35-year-old Amidi Rahmazolla, who has been living on Lesbos, told AFP. Her family is stuck in Kabul, her father is old and her brother is sick. She says that they want to come to Greece as well.

"The Taleban are dangerous people. They don't want young people to go to school. Women cannot go to university." The protesters expressed their concern about the fate of their relatives in Afghanistan, with some telling AFP they have been unable to contact them. They called on the international community to defend their people—especially the women.

These refugees and migrants say the past three days have been a nightmare. Some said their families had told them they do not have access to medical care and hospitals are closed. They have run out of money and cannot escape.

"I cannot sleep, my family is sick, they need money," said 29-year-old Abdul haq Salarzay, also stuck on the Aegean island for the past two years. He says he wants to borrow money from friends and bring them to Greece as well.

"They are in danger. Maybe I will go there to fetch

them," he says. "You cannot trust the Taleban." However, Greece's Migration and Asylum Minister Notis Mitarachi ruled out the idea that there would be new flows of migration from Afghanistan.

"It is clear that our country will not be a gateway for a new wave of refugees," Mitarachi told local TV earlier on Monday. He also said that two months ago Greece deemed Turkey a safe third country for asylum seekers, among others from Afghanistan.

"It is up to the European Union to strengthen the 2016 Joint Statement," he said, referring to the agreement that year with Turkey to help support migrants in the country and so ease pressure on the EU's member states.

"But also, to support Turkey, which as a neighbouring country will face more pressure than the rest of Europe," Mitarachi said. Asked to estimate how many people could arrive in Greece, Mitarachi said only "a very small number of arrivals" and added that the country doesn't want to experience the 2015 situation when nearly a million people crossed its borders before moving to northern Europe. — AFP