

International

Pope calls neglect of migrants 'shipwreck' on Lesbos visit

Mediterranean 'is becoming a grim cemetery without tombstones'

LESBOS ISLAND: Pope Francis yesterday returned to the island of Lesbos, the migration flashpoint he first visited in 2016, calling the neglect of migrants the "shipwreck of civilisation". The pope has long championed the cause of migrants and his visit comes a day after he delivered a stinging rebuke to Europe which he said was "torn by nationalist egoism".

"In Europe there are those who persist in treating the problem as a matter that does not concern them," the pope said as he spent some two hours at Lesbos' Mavrovouni camp where nearly 2,200 asylum seekers live. On the second day of his visit to Greece, he met dozens of child asylum seekers and relatives standing behind metal barriers and stopped to embrace a boy called Mustafa.

"I am trying to help you," Francis told one group through his interpreter. People later gathered in a tent to sing songs and psalms to the pontiff. Pope Francis warned that the Mediterranean "is becoming a grim cemetery without tombstones" and that "after all this time, we see that little in the world has changed with regard to the issue of migration".

He said the root causes "should be confronted-not the poor people who pay the consequences and are even used for political propaganda". The European Union has been locked in a dispute with Belarus over an influx of migrants travelling through the former Soviet state seeking to enter Poland, Lithuania and Latvia in recent months.

Britain and France have also traded barbs over the increasing number of migrants making the deadly Channel crossing to reach the UK in the wake of the November 24 mass drowning which claimed 27 lives. "His visit is a blessing," said Rosette Leo, a

Congolese asylum seeker at the site.

However, Menal Albilal, a Syrian mother with a two-month-old baby whose asylum claim was rejected after two years on the island, said refugees "want more than words, we need help." "The conditions here are not good for a baby," she told AFP. "The Greek government should think about us, we've been here for two years without work or education," said Francois Woumfo, from Cameroon.

'Terrible modern Odyssey'

The temporary Mavrovouni tent camp was hurriedly erected after the sprawling camp of Moria, Europe's largest such site at the time, burned down last year. Greek authorities blamed a group of young Afghans for the incident and security was substantially enhanced for the pontiff's Sunday visit.

The pope's trip to Lesbos was shorter than his last as he will hold a mass for some 2,500 people at the Megaron Athens Concert Hall later in the day. In Cyprus, where the pope visited before Greece this week, authorities said that 50 migrants will be relocated to Italy thanks to Francis. He took 12 Syrian refugees with him during his last visit to Lesbos in 2016.

EU 'torn by egoism'

At the start of his Athens visit on Saturday, Francis said that "today, and not only in Europe, we are witnessing a retreat from democracy," warning against populism's "easy answers". In 2016, Francis visited Moria with Bartholomew I, the spiritual leader of the world's Orthodox Christians, and Archbishop Ieronymos II, head of the Church of Greece.

The Mavrovouni camp currently holds 2,193

Refugees 'want more than words, we need help'



MYTILENE, Lesbos: This handout photograph taken yesterday and released by Vatican Media shows Pope Francis (R) meeting refugees at the Reception and Identification Centre in Mytilene on the island of Lesbos. —AFP

people and has a capacity of 8,000, a facility official said this week. Authorities insist asylum procedures and processing times are now faster. With EU funds, Greece is building a series of "closed" facilities on Greek islands with barbed wire fencing, surveillance cameras, X-ray scanners and magnetic gates that are closed at night.

Three such camps have opened on the islands of Samos, Leros and Kos, with Lesbos and Chios to follow next year. Once asylum seekers are recognised as refugees, they are no longer eligible to remain in the camps, a fate shared with migrants

whose requests for protection are rejected and who face deportation.

Many of these refugees are unable to find accommodation or work, raising another point of criticism of the Greek state from charities and aid agencies. The groups have also raised concerns about the new camps, arguing that people's movements should not be restricted as well as claiming Greek border officers have pushed back migrants.

Greece vehemently denies the claims, insisting its coastguard saves lives at sea. The pope will return to Rome today. —AFP

Maronites dream of return to occupied Cyprus villages

AGIA MARINA: Only a few times a year Ninos Josephides, a Greek Cypriot, is allowed to visit his home village in the Turkish-occupied part of divided Cyprus. But he can't visit his house. It was destroyed long ago. In the aftermath of a visit by Pope Francis last week, the Vatican-affiliated Maronite was allowed an extra visit to the town he had to flee 47 years ago.

"My house used to be here, opposite the church. It's demolished. There were a lot of houses here," Josephides told AFP on Saturday. Maronites first migrated to Cyprus centuries ago from Syria and Lebanon. Like other communities on the eastern Mediterranean island, they suffered from its turbulent history, the scars of which remain to this day.

Cyprus has been divided since 1974 when Turkish troops invaded and occupied the northern third of the island in response to a coup sponsored by the military junta then ruling Greece. The Republic of Cyprus, an EU member, controls the mostly Greek Orthodox south while the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is only recognised by Ankara.

TRNC authorities allow Maronites to visit Agia Marina an average of just five times a year, during religious holidays. An exception was made on Saturday as a gesture to Maronite Patriarch Bechara al-Rahi, who had come to Cyprus from Lebanon for the pope's two-day visit. Around 50 people registered for the trip organised by the Maronite church. As they reached Agia Marina their cars were stopped by Turkish security forces in civilian clothes who searched their vehicles and checked identification.

After the invasion, a military camp was set up in Agia Marina and some of the homes abandoned by the Maronites who fled south were occupied by Turkish troops. The small Agia Marina church is one of the few buildings unused by the Turkish soldiers. On Saturday men in uniforms bearing the Turkish word for police mingled with the faithful inside. A single bulb provided electricity as Rahi said he would keep lobbying in favour of the Cypriot Maronites. Before leaving Cyprus for Greece early Saturday Pope Francis called the island's division a "terrible laceration".

'Happy and sad'

Several rounds of UN-led talks to reunite Cyprus have resulted in failure, including the last failed attempt in 2017. Saturday's tour also took in the village of Asomatos, just north of Agia Marina, where visitation rules are more relaxed. Each Sunday, Maronite Cypriots are allowed back to attend mass but right after the service they must head back south again.

"I lived here from my birth till 1974. I got married here," said Maria Partella Stefani, 71. The invasion forced her to move south. "My house (in Asomatos) was built three months before the invasion... now it is occupied by the commander of the army," she said. Because of the coronavirus pandemic Stefani said she had not been able to visit her home village for a year.

"I'm very happy and sad today," she said, adding that her dream is to live permanently in Asomatos. Her sister Annetta, also in her 70s, harbours the same dream of returning. —AFP

French police on alert as Zemmour holds first rally

PARIS: French far-right presidential candidate Eric Zemmour is to hold his first official campaign rally at a stadium outside Paris yesterday, with police on high alert over the risk of clashes with protesters. Zemmour, a 63-year-old author and television pundit, announced Tuesday that he would run in next April's election, joining the field of challengers seeking to unseat centrist President Emmanuel Macron.

His first rally comes just a day after the right-wing Republicans party picked Valerie Pécresse, a former budget minister, as its nominee. "It's incredible the level of enthusiasm, while other candidates have been in half-empty rooms," Antoine Diers, a spokesman for the Friends of Eric Zemmour group, told AFP on Friday. "We're expecting a lot of people."

Around 19,000 people have signed up for the event, according to Zemmour's campaign, leading him to swap a concert hall for a larger capacity

'Eternal' chancellor: Germany's Merkel to hand over power

BERLIN: She was called "the leader of the free world" against authoritarian populists on the march in Europe and the United States, but Angela Merkel is wrapping up a historic 16 years in power with a mixed legacy at home and abroad.

In office so long she was dubbed Germany's "eternal chancellor", Merkel, 67, leaves with her popularity so resilient she would likely have won a record fifth term had she sought it. Instead, Merkel will pass the baton as the first German chancellor to step down entirely by choice, with a whole generation of voters never knowing another person at the top.

Her supporters say she provided steady leadership through countless global crises as a moderate and unifying figure. Yet critics argue a muddle-through style pegged to the broadest possible consensus lacked the bold vision to prepare Europe and its top economy for the coming decades.

What is certain is that she leaves behind a fractured political landscape, with her own CDU party divided as it struggles to emerge from her long shadow. Social Democrat Olaf Scholz, who served as her vice chancellor and finance minister, successfully sold himself as the Merkel continuity candidate in the run-up to September's general election and will now succeed her.

Travellers to UK to show pre-departure virus tests

LONDON: The UK government has announced that those travelling into the country will need to show a negative coronavirus test pre-departure as it reintroduces COVID-19 restrictions due to the Omicron vari-

ant. From 0400 GMT on Tuesday, anyone travelling to the UK will have to show evidence of a negative lateral flow or PCR test taken within the last 48 hours before boarding a flight, the health ministry said late Saturday.

This will apply to travellers aged over 12 from any country. Currently travellers have to take a PCR test within two days of arrival. The reintroduction of compulsory pre-departure testing prompted an angry response from the travel industry.

The Business Travel Association said that the measure would be a "hammer blow", while the Airport Operators Association said that "pre-departure tests

Momentum fades

The event will be closely scrutinised given how Zemmour has been falling in opinion polls following a dramatic entrance into French politics in September. Until now, he had been travelling the country doing promotional events for his latest book-"France has not said its final word"-which served as a thinly disguised pre-campaign tour.

As well as a series of recent missteps, including

With Scholz due to be officially elected by parliament as chancellor on Wednesday, Merkel will fall just days short of beating Helmut Kohl's record as Germany's longest-serving post-war leader.

Do the right thing

The unflappable Merkel has served for many in recent years as a multilateralist counterweight to the big, brash men of global politics, from Donald Trump to Vladimir Putin. A Pew Research Center poll in September showed large majorities in most democracies around the globe having "confidence in Merkel to do the right thing in world affairs".

A trained quantum chemist raised behind the Iron Curtain, Merkel was long in sync with her change-averse electorate as a guarantor of stability. Her major policy shifts reflected the wishes of large German majorities—among them phasing out nuclear power after the 2011 Fukushima disaster—and attracted a broad new coalition of women and urban voters to the once arch-conservative CDU. However, the last days of her tenure have been marred by a vicious fourth wave of coronavirus, the worst since the start of the pandemic.

'Austerity queen'

Before the pandemic, her boldest move—keeping open German borders to more than one million asylum seekers in 2015 — seemed set to determine her legacy. But while many Germans rallied to Merkel's "We can do it" cry, the move also emboldened an anti-migrant party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), ushering a far-right bloc into parliament for the first time since World War II.

are a devastating blow, as they deter people from travelling". Justice Secretary Dominic Raab told Sky News that he knew the new measure was a "burden for the travel industry" but stressed the UK needed to act.

"We've got to take the measures targeted forensically to stop the new variant seeding in this country to create a bigger problem." The government has vowed it "will take further decisive action if necessary to contain the virus and new variant". The UK earlier banned flights from South Africa and put 10 African countries on its red list, meaning only UK and Irish citizens or UK residents can travel from there to the UK. —AFP



VILLEPINTE, Seine-Saint-Denis: Supporters of French far-right media pundit and 2022 presidential candidate Eric Zemmour wave French national flags and placards during a campaign rally in Villepinte, near Paris, yesterday. —AFP

the middle-finger incident, Zemmour has seen several influential figures on the far-right distance themselves from him, including his main financial backer. Polls show that voters currently believe Marine Le Pen, the veteran leader of the far-right National Rally party, would make a more competent president than Zemmour, who is viewed as highly divisive and arrogant by a large majority.—AFP



BAYREUTH, Bavaria: File photo shows German Chancellor Angela Merkel and her husband Joachim Sauer arriving for the opening ceremony of the annual Bayreuth Festival featuring the music of German composer Richard Wagner at the festival theatre (Richard-Wagner-Festspielhaus) in Bayreuth. —AFP

The woman once known as the "climate chancellor" for pushing renewables also faces a mass movement of young activists arguing she has failed to deal with the climate emergency, with Germany not meeting its own emission-reduction commitments.

The incoming coalition has pledged to improve on that legacy and to take a more assertive stance with Russia and China after the commerce-based pragmatism of the Merkel years. Merkel became Europe's go-to leader during the eurozone crisis when Berlin championed swingeing spending cuts in return for international bailout loans for debt-mired countries.—AFP