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Tigray rebels 'raped, beat women' in Ethiopian war

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Poland sees surge at border

West accuses Belarus of orchestrating crisis

SOKOLKA: Poland said yesterday it had seen a surge in attempts to breach its border and had pushed back hundreds of migrants to Belarus, after it accused Minsk and Moscow of trying to orchestrate a crisis on Europe's borders. The migrants, mainly from the Middle East, have spent days in freezing temperatures on the border, blocked by rows of Polish border guards behind razor-wire. Western governments have accused Belarusian strongman Alexander Lukashenko of luring the migrants to his country and sending them to cross over into EU member Poland in retaliation for sanctions.

Poland has gone a step further, saying Lukashenko's main backer, Russian President Vladimir Putin, is masterminding the crisis. Between 2,000 and 4,000 migrants, reported to be mainly Kurds, have set up a camp near the border after they made a concerted effort to cross on Monday but were pushed back by Polish border guards. Polish officials said yesterday there had been a spike in attempted crossings in the previous 24 hours.

Poland's border guard said that large groups of migrants, ranging from 200 to several dozen persons, crossed the border illegally from Belarus in three places overnight in Podlaskie province, but were all pushed back. "All these attempts were thwarted, all these people were redirected back to Belarus," Podlaskie region border guard spokeswoman Major Katarzyna Zdanowicz told reporters. Polish police said more than 50 migrants were detained and handed over to border guards to be sent back to Belarus.



GRODNO: Photo shows migrants in a camp on the Belarusian-Polish border in the Grodno region. — AFP

15,000 Polish troops
"The situation is not calm," Defence Minister Mariusz Blaszczak told Polish radio. "Now we are dealing with smaller groups, although numerous, which are simultaneously attacking the Polish border in several places," he said. The defense ministry said Belarus was using intimidation to force migrants to breach the border, tweeting two short videos that it said showed a shot fired on the Belarusian side by a man in uniform. Blaszczak said on Twitter that 15,000 troops had been deployed along with police and border guards "to protect our homeland from the attack of the Lukashenko regime." Belarus has leveled its own accusations against Poland, saying Warsaw is violating international norms by blocking the migrants and beating them back with violence.

Its border service said that four Kurds had been severely beaten by Polish guards and that Polish military forces were firing over the heads of migrants attempting to cross. Journalists have been blocked from areas close to the border, but in the nearby town of Sokolka AFP reporters saw a patrol stopping vehicles to check the trunks for migrants, as well as several military trucks and police vans driving out of the town.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki on Tuesday said the migrants were being used as

"human shields to destabilise the situation in Poland and the EU" and pointed the finger at Russia. "This attack which Lukashenko is conducting has its mastermind in Moscow, the mastermind is President Putin," Morawiecki told the Polish parliament. The European Union, NATO and the United States have all said Lukashenko is provoking the crisis in response to Western sanctions imposed over his heavy crackdown on the opposition following a disputed election last year.

Merkel calls Putin

The EU is now considering new sanctions for human trafficking and EU chief Charles Michel was due to hold talks on the crisis with Mateusz Morawiecki in Warsaw later. German Chancellor

Angela Merkel telephoned Putin to ask him to get Belarus to stop the "inhumane" instrumentalisation of migrants, her spokesman said yesterday. Belarus and Moscow have hit back at the accusations, saying the West should deal with migrant flows caused by its military interventions in the Middle East. The Kremlin said yesterday it was "irresponsible" for Poland to blame Putin for the crisis, while Belarus's foreign minister said the EU was causing the crisis because it wanted a reason to impose new sanctions.

"The migrant crisis was provoked by the EU itself and its states that border Belarus," Vladimir

Makei said on a visit to Moscow to meet his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov. Lavrov, who has said the EU should provide financial aid to Belarus to deal with migrants, like it did for Turkey, reiterated Russian support for its ally. Accusing Western institutions of mounting an "anti-Belarusian campaign", Lavrov said Russia and Belarus had "closely coordinated our approaches" to countering it.

In a show of force, Russia's defense ministry said

two of its Tu-22M3 long-range bombers had flown over Belarus yesterday as part of longstanding efforts at military integration. Thousands of migrants have crossed or attempted to cross from Belarus into the eastern EU member states of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland in recent months. Lithuanian lawmakers voted Tuesday to impose a state of emergency along the Belarus border, effective from midnight. — AFP



Putin accused of masterminding migrant 'attack'

Journalist killed on way to hospital to give birth

DUBAI: A pregnant Yemeni journalist was killed and her reporter husband wounded in a bomb attack on their car as they travelled to hospital for her to give birth, the husband and a security source said. "An explosive device planted in the car of journalist Mahmud Al-Atmi blew up as he was taking his wife Rasha Abdallah to hospital to deliver her baby," the source from government forces said. The bombing took place in the southern city of Aden, the temporary seat of the Yemeni administration.

Abdallah, 27, also a journalist, and her husband had worked with a number of local and regional media outlets. They have a two-year-old child. There was no immediate claim for the bombing but Atmi said he suspected Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels of being behind the attack. "They were trying to find out my home address," he said. The Houthis

seized the capital Sanaa in 2014, leading the internationally-recognized government to relocate to Aden and prompting intervention of a Saudi-led military coalition which supports it.

Tens of thousands of people, mostly civilians, have been killed and millions displaced since the conflict erupted in 2014, in what the UN calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis. At least 12 civilians, including children, were killed late last month in a car bomb blast near the airport of Aden. The explosion came almost three weeks after six people were killed in a car-bomb attack that targeted Aden's governor, who survived.

Aden is home to a separatist movement that last year precariously integrated into the central government, and both have long been aligned against the Houthi rebels in the grinding civil war. Yemeni journalists have been among the casualties of the conflict. Last year Nabil Hasan Al-Quaety, a Yemeni journalist who contributed to AFP, was gunned down and killed, also in Aden. The 34-year-old videographer and photographer, who also worked for other major news organizations in the region, was shot in his car by unknown assailants shortly after leaving his home. — AFP

Iran's new law will endanger women

NICOSIA: Human Rights Watch warned yesterday that a new Iranian law aimed at raising the birth rate would put women's lives at risk by denying them access to reproductive health care. The bill, which is expected to become law later this month, provides various additional benefits to families with children and outlaws sterilization and free distribution of contraceptives in the public health care system unless a pregnancy threatens a woman's health.

"Iranian legislators are avoiding addressing Iranians' many serious problems, including government incompetence, corruption and repression, and

instead are attacking women's fundamental rights," said HRW's senior Iran researcher Tara Sepehri Far. "The population growth law blatantly undermines the rights, dignity and health of half of the country's population, denying them access to essential reproductive health care and information."

Over the past decade, Iran has shifted its population policy from providing family planning and access to contraception, to boosting the population growth by limiting women's access to sexual and reproductive health care. HRW said that several articles in the new legislation further limit already restricted access to safe abortion. Currently, abortion can be legally performed during the first four months of pregnancy if three doctors agree that a pregnancy threatens a woman's life or the foetus has severe physical or mental disabilities that would create extreme hardship for the mother. — AFP

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