

## International

# Syrian migrant found dead on Poland-Belarus border

## Russia has 'nothing to do' with Poland-Belarus border crisis

**WARSAW:** The body of a young Syrian man has been found in a forest close to the border between Poland and Belarus, Polish police said yesterday. The death brings to 11 the number of migrants found dead on both sides since the crisis began in the summer, according to aid groups. "The body of a young Syrian man was discovered yesterday in the forest near Wolka Terechowska," police for the Podlasie region said in a statement. "The cause of the death could not be determined at the scene," it said. Police also said that a group of around 100 migrants had attempted to cross the border during the night in the same area. "After seeing police and soldiers, the people on the Belarusian side fled into the forest," it said.

The Polish border guards also accused Belarusian forces of destroying some barbed wire fencing laid down by Polish forces overnight, releasing a video that purported to show Belarusian forces using lasers and strobe lighting while doing so. "During the night, Belarusian soldiers attempted to take down the temporary barrier. They took down fence posts and tore up the barbed wire with a service vehicle. Polish forces were blinded by lasers and strobe lighting," the border guard said. It also said that Belarusian forces had supplied the migrants with tear gas which was then used against Polish forces.

Thousands of migrants-most of them from the Middle East-have crossed or attempted to cross the EU and NATO border since the summer. The crisis escalated this week when larger groups of hundreds of migrants began arriving at the border and attempting to get through. Polish border guards estimate there are currently up to 4,000 migrants camped out along the border. Western countries

have accused the Belarusian regime, which is backed by Russia, of engineering the crisis in retaliation against EU sanctions, charges that Minsk has denied.

### Putin denies claims

Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday denied claims Moscow is helping to orchestrate a crisis that has left hundreds of migrants from the Middle East trapped on the Belarus-Poland border. Blaming Western policies in the Middle East for the crisis, Putin hit back at claims from Poland and others that Russia is working with Belarus to send migrants to the border of the European Union. "I want everyone to know.



### Putin blames West's policies in Mideast for border crisis

"We have nothing to do with it," he said in an interview with state television broadcast yesterday. Putin said European leaders need to talk to Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko to resolve the crisis and that "as I understand it" German Chancellor Angela Merkel was ready to do so. "We should not forget where these crises associated with migrants came from... Western countries



**BELARUSIAN-POLISH BORDER:** Photo shows children in a migrants camp on the Belarusian-Polish border in the Grodno region. —AFP

themselves, including European countries," he said.

The migrants, mainly Kurds, have been stuck for days in a no-man's land on the border in near-freezing temperatures, setting up a tent camp and burning wood to keep warm. Belarus says there are about 2,000 people in the camp, including pregnant women and children. Poland says there are between 3,000 to 4,000 migrants on the border, with more arriving every day.

### Tents, heaters brought to camp

There is growing concern for their plight as temperatures continue to fall, with Poland refusing to

allow them to cross and accusing Belarus of preventing them from leaving the area. Belarusian authorities said yesterday they were delivering aid including tents and heaters to the migrant camp - a move that could make it a semi-permanent presence on the borders of the EU.

State news agency Belta reported that government bodies were erecting tents at the camp and that a generator had been delivered. "The Belarusian side is doing everything to provide them with what they need. Water, firewood and humanitarian aid have been delivered," Igor Butkevich, the deputy head of the state border committee, told Belta. —AFP

## COVID pandemic speeds up in Latin America, Europe

**PARIS:** The COVID-19 pandemic continued to pick up speed across Europe this week and also began to accelerate in Latin America. Here is the global state of play based on an AFP database.

### Global rise

The number of new daily cases increased globally for a fourth week in a row, jumping eight percent compared to last week, with an average of 472,800 daily infections, according to an AFP tally. However, the confirmed cases only reflect a fraction of the actual number of infections, with varying accounting practices and levels of testing in different countries.

### Worsening in Europe, Latin America

Unlike previous weeks, the global increase was no longer largely down to Europe, which saw a 13 percent spike in the number of new daily cases. The number of new daily cases increased by 14 percent in the Latin America and Caribbean zone, and by 15 percent in Africa, but this is skewed by catch-up data from Botswana. Elsewhere the situation continues to improve in the Middle East, dropping 12 percent, in Asia (down seven percent) and Oceania (down six percent), while it is stable in the United States and Canada (up one percent).

### Worst in Europe

The 10 countries which suffered the biggest spikes over the week were in Europe, with the top five being Hungary (up 77 percent), Poland (66 percent), Germany (61 percent), Austria (57 percent) and France (52 percent).

### Big dips

The countries where cases fell the most were also in Europe, in the east where there had previously been large outbreaks-Romania (minus 35 percent), Latvia (-35 percent) and Estonia (-34 percent). The Philippines (-33 percent) and Mongolia (-30 percent) followed.

### US most infections

The US remained by far the country with the biggest number of new cases - 73,100 per day-a decrease of one percent. It was followed by Russia (39,800 cases, also down one percent) and the United Kingdom (34,300, a decrease of 12 percent). On a per capita basis the countries that recorded the most new cases this week were Slovenia with 1,080 per 100,000 inhabitants, followed by Croatia with 943, and Georgia 833.

### Russia most deaths

Russia recorded the biggest number of daily deaths with 1,205, followed by the US on 1,160. Third on the grim podium was Ukraine with 673. At a global level there was a two percent increase in the number of daily deaths, to 7,160.

### Vaccinations

Vietnam led the vaccination race this week, giving shots to 1.33 percent of its population every day, among countries with more than one million inhabitants. Iran came next with 0.96 percent, Taiwan (0.82 percent), and Bangladesh (0.81 percent). The leaders in the vaccination race are all in Latin America and Asia, which have over the past few months been catching up with the vaccination champions in Europe, North America and the Middle East. The United Arab Emirates remains the most vaccinated country in the world, with 89 percent of its population completely jabbed, and Portugal hot on its heels with 86 percent. —AFP

## Lukashenko: The unpredictable strongman on Europe borders

**MOSCOW:** The stranding of hundreds of migrants on Belarus's border with Poland is just the latest brazen gambit in strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko's nearly three-decade tenure as Europe's most unpredictable neighbor. Belarus's loyal state media has for days been sending out images of refugees huddling around makeshift fires in near-freezing temperatures next to rows of barbed wire and columns of Polish border guards refusing them entry.

The EU accuses Lukashenko of luring the migrants to his country to send them across the border. When the bloc with responded with plans for sanctions, he threatened to cut off Russian gas flowing through Belarus to Europe. The move on migration - an attempt to embarrass Europe on human rights and pile pressure on the bloc over the historically sensitive issue - is in a long tradition of unex-

pected surprises from Lukashenko.

"He's unpredictable in his tactics - he uses every opportunity available to him," said Alexei Makarkin, a political analyst at Moscow's Centre for Political Technologies. "But he is predictable in terms of strategy - to hold on to power at any cost. And he will fight to the end," Makarkin said. Lukashenko is the longest serving leader in any ex-Soviet country and has ruled Belarus with an uncompromising hand since coming to power in 1994.

### 'Clearly disturbed'

After just one year in charge, he was firmly on the radar of the West when he dispatched a military helicopter to shoot down a civilian air balloon over Belarus, killing two American citizens on board. Little has since changed. In May this year, the rogue 67-year-old who likes to be known as "balka" - a colloquial term for dad - alarmed



**KIEV:** A Ukrainian nationalist holding a placard with a portrait of Belarus' President Alexander Lukashenko and a symbolic picture of migrants participates in a protest action outside the Belarusian embassy in Kiev to support Poland in a migrant crisis. —AFP

Europe again by dispatching a fighter jet to ground a Ryanair flight with an opposition activist onboard. "I will not suddenly leave the presidency," mustachioed Lukashenko said last year in the wake of historic anti-government

protests. "I have nothing but Belarus, I cling to it and I hold it". According to leaked cables, US diplomats had come to that same conclusion in the wake of elections in 2006 that the opposition saw as rigged. —AFP

## Tigray's rebels kill scores of civilians

**NAIROBI:** Tigrayan rebels killed scores of civilians in the Amhara region on suspicion of being informants or offering aid to federal forces, the government-affiliated Ethiopian Human Rights Commission said in a report published yesterday. The investigation, which draws on 128 interviews, focuses on parts of Amhara which saw heavy fighting in July and August between fighters from the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and Ethiopian soldiers as the country's brutal conflict enters its second year.

At least 184 civilians died as a result of the bloodshed, the EHRC said, accusing TPLF fighters of "willfully (killing) scores of civilians in towns and rural areas they captured". Civilians were shot and killed for supporting the federal government or for sheltering wounded soldiers, the commission said.

## Eritrea condemns 'illicit and immoral' US sanctions

**WASHINGTON:** Eritrea slammed the United States yesterday for slapping new sanctions on the country over the deadly conflict in neighboring Ethiopia, calling the move "illicit and immoral". The US measures announced on Friday came in response to Eritrea's decision to send troops into Ethiopia's Tigray region to back Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in the war against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) rebel group. Eritrean and Ethiopian forces have been accused of carrying out mass rapes and massacres in Tigray and Washington has repeatedly urged Asmara to withdraw its troops.



**HUMERA:** A member of the Amhara Special Forces stands at the border crossing as people cross from Eritrea, in Humera, Ethiopia. —AFP

"TPLF forces shot and killed mentally ill residents of towns they controlled on suspicion of being informants for the government," it added.

Local youth meanwhile killed people who had fled war-torn Tigray, accusing them of spying for the TPLF, the commission said. "Additionally, both warring sides engaged in indiscriminate shelling that was not direct-

ed at a specific military objective causing civilian deaths, injuries and damage to civilian property."

EHRC Chief commissioner Daniel Bekele said that "violations and abuses committed by all parties in South Gondar and North Wollo Zones of the Amhara region underscores the need to put an urgent stop to the continued suffering caused to civilians." Prime

Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops into Tigray last November to topple the TPLF, a move he said came in response to rebel attacks on army camps. Though the 2019 Nobel Peace laureate vowed a swift victory, by late June the TPLF had retaken most of Tigray before expanding into Amhara and Afar.

As the humanitarian toll has spiked, bringing reports of massacres, sexual assaults and a starvation crisis, rights groups have sounded the alarm. Human Rights Watch said Wednesday that the Abiy government's "effective siege" of Tigray - where Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers are accused of mass rapes - was preventing survivors from getting health care and other critical services. The same day, Amnesty International said Tigrayan rebels had raped, robbed and beat up women during an attack on a town in Amhara. The TPLF criticised Amnesty's "disturbingly flawed methodology" but said it would conduct its own probe, adding: "If our investigation discovers that Tigrayan fighters have in fact committed such crimes, the government of Tigray will bring the perpetrators to justice." —AFP



**DABAT:** Children stand under a tree on the site of a future camp for Eritrean refugees, in a rural area near the village of Dabat, 70 kilometers northeast from the city of Gondar, Ethiopia. —AFP