

International

More than 100 migrants flown out of Belarus to reach EU via Poland

Authorities assisting migrants who wish to go home with their paperwork

MOSCOW: Authorities in Belarus said yesterday that a group of 118 migrants who had hoped to reach the European Union via Poland were flown out of the country. It was the latest sign of de-escalation in a crisis that saw several thousand migrants—mainly from the Middle East—stuck on the border between Poland and Belarus.

"Yesterday, 118 people left from Minsk national airport," Alexei Begun, the head of the migration department at Belarus's interior ministry, told state news agency Belta. He said another group of migrants was due to fly out of Belarus later.

He did not say where they were headed, but said the embassies of several countries—including Syria and Iraq—were organising repatriation flights for their citizens who "have found themselves in a difficult situation." Western leaders have accused Belarus's strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko of causing the crisis by luring migrants to his country to send across the border into the EU in retaliation for sanctions.

The migrants set up a camp on the frontier after Polish forces deployed to prevent crossings, and Belarusian authorities eventually moved them to a

logistics centre near the Bruzgi border checkpoint. A first group of 431 people was flown back to Iraq from Belarus on a repatriation flight last week.

Begun said authorities were "assisting" migrants who wish to go home with their paperwork. He said Minsk was working with the Geneva-based International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on getting migrants out of the border zone.

Representatives of the organisations were on a visit to the country, he said, meeting with state authorities to "work on joint steps to resolve the migrant crisis". Representatives of the European Commission were also visiting the logistics centre, Belta reported.

On Monday, Lukashenko said more repatriation flights were being prepared. "They want to go back to Iraq, Syria—you see, we organised a flight," he said, according to Belta. "We are preparing another flight for the end of the month, if we gather these people," he said.

Aid groups say at least 11 migrants have died since a surge in attempts to cross the border began this summer. — AFP



Another group of migrants was due to fly out of Belarus later



GRODNO, Belarus: Migrant children play with snow outside the transport and logistics centre near the Bruzgi border point on the Belarusian-Polish border in the Grodno region yesterday. — AFP

Iranian ex-official slams 'lies' in Sweden war crimes trial

STOCKHOLM: A former Iranian prison official accused of handing out death sentences during a 1988 purge of dissidents yesterday slammed as "lies" the charges brought against him in a landmark trial in Sweden. Hamid Noury, 60, has been on trial in Stockholm's district court since August on charges including murder, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

They stem from the period between July 30 to August 16, 1988, when he was allegedly assistant to the deputy prosecutor of Gohardasht prison in Karaj, near Tehran. Human rights groups say about 5,000 prisoners were killed across Iran, allegedly under the orders of supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini in reprisal for attacks carried out by the People's Mujahedin of Iran (MEK) at the end of the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88.

Noury took the stand yesterday for the first time, as several dozen members of MEK, an exiled opposition group, protested outside the courthouse in central Stockholm. "I have only four days to respond to all the lies that have been told to the Iranian people," he told the court, dressed in tan trousers and a white turtle-neck, his white beard neatly trimmed.

"Everything we've heard is repetitive elements, but when you look at the details you realise it doesn't hold up. I will put an end to 33 years of lies and accusations," he said in a statement to the court before questioning, without addressing specifics. This is the first time any Iranian official has gone on trial for the purge, and Noury will have four days to testify in the case.

The prosecution has alleged that Noury's participation included handing down death sentences, bringing prisoners to the execution chamber and helping prosecutors gather prisoners' names. A mock-up of the prison was installed in the courtroom.

Noury has previously insisted through his lawyers that he wasn't present for the killings. "He says he wasn't there, but we have 58 people who say he was," Kenneth Lewis, the lawyer for the civil plaintiffs, told AFP. The trial has already heard testimony from several witnesses, including from members or ex-members of the MEK.

"When I was in the death corridor... I had the chance to see him and I witnessed that whenever they read some people's names he followed them towards the death chamber," one of them, Reza Falahi, told AFP. "After for example 45 minutes or so he came back, and again and again the same story was repeated." Sweden's principle of universal jurisdiction means that its courts can try a person on serious charges such as murder or war crimes regardless of where the alleged offences took place.

Lured by a cruise
Noury was arrested at a Stockholm airport in November 2019 following the efforts of justice campaigner and former political prisoner Iraj Mesdaghi. After compiling an evidence dossier of "several thousand pages" on Noury, Mesdaghi set about luring him to Sweden — where he has family members — with the promise of a luxury cruise.

Prosecutor Kristina Lindhoff Carleson has accused Noury of "intentionally taking the life of a very large number of prisoners sympathetic to or belonging to the People's Mujahedin" as well as others considered opponents of the "theocratic Iranian state". — AFP

Death toll mounts as Yemen war rages

DUBAI: Yemen's seven-year-old war will have claimed 377,000 lives by the end of the year, through both direct and indirect impacts, a UN agency estimates in a report published yesterday. Nearly 60 percent of deaths will have been caused by indirect impacts such as lack of safe water, hunger and disease, it said, suggesting that fighting will have directly killed over 150,000 people.

Most of those killed by the war's indirect effects were "young children who are especially vulnerable to under- and malnutrition," said the UN Development Program report. "In 2021, a Yemeni child under the age of five dies every nine minutes

because of the conflict," it found. A Saudi-led coalition intervened in Yemen in early 2015 to shore up the government after Iran-backed Houthis fighters seized the capital Sanaa months before. Fighting since then has had "catastrophic effects on the nation's development", said the report.

The UNDP has warned in the past that the war in Yemen, already the poorest country in the region, had thrown its development back by over two decades. The Yemen war is often labeled the greatest humanitarian disaster in the world. Projecting the impact of continued fighting into the future, the UNDP warned that 1.3 million people in total will have died by 2030. "A growing proportion of those deaths will occur... due to second-order impacts that the crisis is waging on livelihoods, food prices and the deterioration of basic services such as health and education."

'Downward spiral'

If the war stopped now, the UNDP said, there

would be "hope for a brighter future in Yemen" which it said could achieve middle-income status by 2050. But it judged that, for now, "the situation continues to propel in a downward spiral". Escalating fighting, including tank battles and regular bombardment by both fighter jets and drones, have in some areas destroyed even the most basic infrastructure. In recent weeks fighting has escalated on several fronts, mostly near the strategic Marib city, the internationally-recognized government's last major stronghold in Yemen's oil-rich north.

Thousands of rebels and pro-government fighters have been killed in the battle for the city. The UN Refugee Agency, in separate comments yesterday, said it is "gravely concerned about the safety and security of civilians in Yemen's Marib governorate, including more than one million people who are estimated to be displaced". Some 40,000 people have been forced to flee in Marib since September, said UNHCR spokeswoman Shabia Mantoo in Geneva. — AFP

Zionists 'formalising' defence ties with Morocco on minister's visit

TEL AVIV: Zionist's Defence Minister Benny Gantz headed yesterday to Morocco on a visit that will "formalise" cooperation between the two countries, officials say, at a time when Rabat is embroiled in a standoff over Western Sahara.

The two-day trip comes less than a year after Morocco normalised ties with Zionist entity in a deal brokered by former US president Donald Trump's administration.

In return, Washington recognised the North African kingdom's sovereignty over the disputed territory of Western Sahara. Gantz, the first Jewish defence minister to make an official visit to Morocco, will sign "a memorandum of understanding that will outline defence cooperation between the two countries", his office said.

The trip aims to "set the foundation for all future security cooperation between the Zionist entity and Morocco", a source familiar with the visit told AFP. "Until now there has been some level of cooperation; this truly formalises it," the source said.

Morocco controls most of Western Sahara and considers the former Spanish colony as its sovereign territory. Tensions have flared between Morocco and Algeria, which backs Western Sahara's Polisario Front independence movement.

Algeria cut diplomatic ties with Morocco in August citing "hostile actions" — a charge denied by Rabat.

Earlier this month, Algiers accused Morocco of killing three Algerian civilians on a desert highway, raising fears

of an escalation. And Polisario head Brahim Ghali said last week the movement had decided to step up military operations.

Timing 'not coincidental'

Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, a Jewish expert on Morocco, said the timing of Gantz's visit and the signing of an MOU was not a coincidence. "It's possible that in the context of the Moroccan-Algerian tensions, the Moroccans were the ones who were keen on this," he said.

"It would seem to me that the Moroccans are the ones who are keen on showing everybody — their own public, their Algerian rivals, the West — that they are deepening their relationship with Israel," said the Tel Aviv University professor.

Morocco and Zionist previously set up ties in 1993 but Rabat broke them off at the start of the second Palestinian intifada, or uprising, in 2000. Rabat normalised ties with the Jewish state last December, shortly after similar announcements by the UAE and Bahrain. Last month, Zionist's Ratio Petroleum announced an agreement with Rabat on "exploration operations" off Dakhla in Western Sahara. Zionist's defence ministry oversees all security exports, with the Jewish state offering state-of-art products ranging from attack drones to the Iron Dome missile defence system.

'Benefits of recalibrating'

One Jewish product, the NSO's Pegasus spyware, has already made its



WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Morocco's Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita (L) stand side by side as they address the media at the State Department in Washington. — AFP

way to Morocco, according to Amnesty International and Paris-based organisation Forbidden Stories.

Rabat allegedly used it against French President Emmanuel Macron — a claim denied by Morocco which said it never bought the software and has filed lawsuits against French media and Amnesty International. A spokeswoman for Gantz would not comment on NSO. The Jewish-Palestinian conflict continues to mobilise civil society, Islamists and the far-left in Morocco, with a call for a November 29 demonstration against "creeping normalisation with Zionist entity" and in support of the Palestinians.

According to Maddy-Weitzman, while Rabat has not abandoned the Palestinian cause, "there are too many

other interests in play, too many other benefits to be gained by recalibrating".

"Most of the countries in the region just don't want to be held hostage any more on the issue, they want to pursue their interests as they define them, and at this point in time obviously the Jews has a lot to offer," he said. Before departing for Morocco, Gantz addressed a security conference at the Zionist's Reichman University, where he issued fresh warnings about arch foe Iran. It was not clear if the Islamic Republic would be discussed on Gantz's Morocco trip, but Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei last month vowed that the countries which normalised ties with Jewish state would have to "make up for this big mistake". — AFP

Merkel's husband calls unvaccinated Germans 'lazy'

BERLIN: Chancellor Angela Merkel's husband yesterday accused unvaccinated Germans of "laziness" as the country struggles to contain a dramatic surge in coronavirus infections.

Germany's COVID-19 resurgence has in part been blamed on its relatively low vaccination rate compared with other Western European nations like France, Italy or Spain, with just 68 percent of the population fully jabbed.

"It is astonishing that a third of the population

does not follow scientific findings," Merkel's husband, Joachim Sauer, said in an interview with Italian newspaper La Repubblica and picked up by German daily Die Welt.

"In part, this is due to a certain laziness and complacency of Germans," said Sauer, who rarely speaks in public.

"The other group are people who follow a personal conviction, a kind of ideological reaction to what they consider a vaccination dictatorship," Sauer said, a cohort he said also included doctors and scientists. Like his famous wife, Sauer is a quantum chemist and was in Italy on an academic visit.

The couple keep a low profile and Sauer rarely speaks to the media. One of the few occasions when they are photographed together is during their annual visit to the Bayreuth opera festival.

Sauer added that Germans' vaccine hesitancy

was all the more regrettable given the "miracle" of how quickly safe and effective jabs were developed during the pandemic.

Sauer's comments come a day after Merkel warned that Germany wasn't doing enough to curb the "highly dramatic" fourth wave of the pandemic.

The outgoing chancellor, who is acting in a caretaker capacity and will likely be replaced by Finance Minister Olaf Scholz next month, has repeatedly urged Germans to get vaccinated.

The sluggish vaccine uptake and rapidly filling intensive care beds have ignited a fierce debate about whether Germany should follow Austria's example and make coronavirus jabs compulsory.

Merkel's government has in the past always ruled out doing so, but several leading politicians, including Bavarian premier Markus Soeder, have in recent days called for mandatory vaccinations. — AFP