



Security, rain make for muted start to Xi's anniversary visit

'No progress made' on Iran nuclear talks



SAN ANTONIO, United States: People pray during a vigil for the 53 migrants who died in a trailer in San Antonio, Texas on June 29, 2022. — AFP

Texans mourn migrants who died in truck tragedy

'You put yourself in their place because you also lived through it'

SAN ANTONIO, United States: Texas residents gathered under a scorching sun Wednesday to mourn the 53 migrants who died this week after they were abandoned in a trailer in soaring temperatures, leaving tokens of flowers, candles and bottles of water.

The mourners, several of whom said they or their loved ones had also migrated to the United States illegally, gathered at the site in San Antonio where the truck was found on Monday to erect large wooden crosses and pay their respects. Immigration authorities have said 53 people died, many of dehydration and heatstroke after they were shut inside the trailer with no water during a day when ambient temperatures rose to 103 degrees Fahrenheit (39.4 degrees Celsius).

Eleven others are still being treated in local hospitals, authorities said. "All of this breaks my heart because I have family who have been through the same thing,"

said Veronica Vazquez, 37. "All my cousins, my uncles, came to the United States illegally, some over the river and others through the desert," she said.

Roberto Alvarez, who lives in the area, brought roses and candles. The 48-year-old himself came to the United States as an undocumented immigrant.

"You put yourself a little bit in their place... because you also lived through it," he said. According to Francisco Garduno, head of Mexico's National Migration Institute, the dead included 27 Mexicans, 14 Hondurans, seven Guatemalans, and two Salvadorans.

The nationalities of the other three were not yet revealed. Four men have been arrested and charged over the incident so far, according to a statement from the district attorney's office of western Texas. The office said a 45-year-old named Homero Zamorano had been arrested at the scene, where he was spotted "hiding in

the brush after attempting to abscond."

He was also spotted on surveillance footage driving the truck at an immigration checkpoint, the statement said, adding that he has been charged with one count of alien smuggling resulting in death, and faces life in prison or execution if convicted. Garduno said the suspected driver had initially pretended to be one of the survivors.

High on meth?

The local daily San Antonio Express-News reported the man was "very high on meth," citing a law enforcement officer. Federal law enforcement agents arrested two other men Tuesday at the address linked to the tractor-trailer's registration, court documents showed.

Juan Francisco D'Luna-Bilbao and Juan Claudio D'Luna-Mendez, both Mexican nationals who over-

stayed US tourist visas, were charged with illegal possession of multiple firearms, the documents alleged. They face up to ten years in prison.

The fourth man, Christian Martinez, was arrested in eastern Texas on Tuesday, the district attorney's statement said. He was charged with one count of conspiracy to transport illegal aliens resulting in death, and also faces life in prison or potentially the death penalty, it said. Officials from Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras, who met at Mexico's embassy in Washington, issued a joint statement in which they pledged to help the victims and their families. They said that they would form a rapid action group to target and dismantle human trafficking networks. San Antonio police were first alerted to the trailer on Monday, after a worker near an isolated road in San Antonio heard a cry for help and went to investigate. — AFP

4 protesters killed in Sudan rallies

KHARTOUM: At least four Sudanese demonstrators were killed Thursday as the security forces sought to quash mass rallies of protesters demanding an end to military rule, pro-democracy medics reported. AFP correspondents reported security forces firing tear gas and stun grenades to disperse tens of thousands of protesters, the latest crackdown on the anti-coup movement in the past eight months. At least two of the four were shot dead by "bullets to the chest", the medics said, reporting a total death toll of 105 from months of protest-related violence. "Even if we die, the military will not rule us," protesters chanted, urging the reversal of an October military coup by army chief Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, that prompted foreign governments to slash aid, deepening a chronic economic crisis.

"Down with Burhan's rule," others chanted, with protests and violence flaring in both the capital Khartoum and its suburbs, including the twin city of Omdurman. The medics had previously reported one demonstrator was shot dead on Wednesday during small-scale protests in the run-up to the main rallies. An AFP correspondent said internet and phone lines had been disrupted since the early hours of Thursday, a measure the Sudanese authorities often impose to prevent mass gatherings.

Security was tight in Khartoum despite the recent lifting of a state of emergency imposed after the coup. Troops and police blocked off roads leading to both army headquarters and the presidential palace, witnesses said. Shops around the capital were largely shuttered. Activists have been calling for "million-strong" rallies.

UN special representative Volker Perthes said Thursday that "violence needs to end", while the US embassy in Khartoum urged restraint and "the protection of civilians so that no more lives are lost". Sudan's foreign ministry has repeatedly criticized the UN envoy's comments, saying they were built on "assumptions" and "contradict his role as facilitator" in troubled talks on ending Sudan's political crisis.

The latest protests come on the anniversary of a previous coup in 1989, that toppled the country's last elected civilian government and ushered in three decades of iron-fisted rule by Islamist-backed general Omar Al-Bashir. They also come on the anniversary of 2019 protests demanding that the generals, who had ousted Bashir in a palace coup earlier that year, cede power to civilians.

Those protests led to the formation of the mixed civilian-military transitional government which was toppled in last year's coup. Sudan has been roiled by near-weekly protests as the country's economic woes have deepened since Burhan seized power last year. "June 30 is our way to bring down the coup and block the path of any fake alternatives," said the Forces for Freedom and Change, an alliance of civilian groups whose leaders were ousted in the coup.—AFP



PARIS, France: Xavier Nogueras (L), lawyer of defendant Mohammed Amri, and Johnathan De Tays, lawyer of defendant Ali El Haddad Asufi, speak to the press at the Palais de Justice courthouse in Paris after of the verdict in the trial of the November 13, 2015, Paris terror attacks. — AFP

French court jails for life sole surviving Paris 2015 attacker

PARIS: The sole surviving member of an Islamic State terror cell that killed 130 people in Paris in November 2015 was handed a whole-life sentence on Wednesday at the end of a trial that aimed to draw a line under the worst peace-time atrocity in modern French history.

Salah Abdeslam, a 32-year-old Frenchman of Moroccan origin, was captured alive by police four months after the bloodbath at the Bataclan concert hall and other locations. His sentence, the toughest possible, was read out by the head of a five-judge panel overseeing the trial of 20 men accused of involvement in the assault on the capital. Wearing a khaki-coloured polo shirt, he stood motionless and showed no emotion as he was declared guilty and sentenced by chief judge Louis Peries during an hour-long speech. "The sentences are quite heavy," one tearful survivor, Sophie, told AFP as she left the court in central Paris. "I feel a lot of relief. Ten months of hearings—it's helped us to rebuild."

The trial has been the biggest in modern French history, the culmination of a six-year international investigation whose findings run to more than a million pages.

The other 19 suspects, accused of either plotting or offering logistical support, were also found guilty, with their sentences ranging from two years to life in prison.

All of the attackers except for Abdeslam blew themselves up or were killed by police during or after the assault. Hundreds of victims and witnesses packed out the benches of the specially constructed courtroom as the sentences were read out.

"My first reaction is that we have the feeling of turning a page after the verdicts," Gerard Chemla, a lawyer representing victims at the trial, told reporters.

Change of heart?

Abdeslam had begun his appearances last September by defiantly declaring himself as an "Islamic State fighter" but finished tearfully apologising to victims and asking for leniency. In his final statement, he urged the judges not to give him a full-life term, seeking to emphasize that he had not killed anyone himself.

"I made mistakes, it's true. But I'm not a murderer, I'm not a killer," he said. His lawyers had also argued against the whole-life sentence, which prosecutors had demanded. It offers only a small chance of parole after 30 years and has been pronounced only four times previously since being created in 1994.

Abdeslam, a one-time pot-smoking lover of parties, discarded his suicide belt on the night of the attack and fled back to his hometown, Brussels, where many of the extremists lived. He told the court that he had had a change of heart and decided not to kill people. "I changed my mind out of humanity, not out of fear," he insisted. But after hearing that his suicide belt was defective, the judges concluded that this "cast serious doubt" on his apparent "renunciation". They ruled he was a "co-author" of the attacks which "constituted a single crime scene."

A team of 10 jihadists laid siege to the French capital, attacking the national sports stadium, bars, and the Bataclan in an assault immediately claimed from Syria by the IS group. The attacks shocked France, with the choice of targets and the manner of the violence seemingly designed to inflict maximum fear, just 10 months after a separate assault on the Charlie Hebdo magazine.

In one instance, the court heard a recording of gunmen taunting people trapped in the Bataclan as they fired on them with Kalashnikov machine guns from a balcony above.

The huge loss of life marked the start of a gruesome and violent period in Europe as IS ramped up attacks across the continent. France, under then president Francois Hollande, declared the country "at war" with the extremists and their self-proclaimed caliphate in Syria and Iraq.—AFP

Czechs take over EU presidency braced for 'bad weather'

PRAGUE, Czech Republic: The Czech Republic will take over the rotating six-month presidency of the European Union on Friday with all eyes on Ukraine, which has been battling Russian forces since February.

To kick off its presidency, the Czech government will meet European commissioners at a chateau for talks, followed by a concert. But the Czech turn at the helm-taking over from France-is unlikely to offer much leisure as the war rages on four months into the Russian invasion, analysts say. "This presidency is not geared for good weather, but for bad times," Pavel Havlicek of the Prague-based Association for International Affairs told AFP. The Central European country of 10.5 million people, an EU-member since 2004, has vowed to focus largely on aid to Ukraine and the war's repercussions.

It wants to help contain the refugee crisis, launch a post-war reconstruction effort, boost the EU's energy security, defence capacities and economic resilience, and improve the resilience of its democratic institutions.

"All the priorities are very well chosen and if we manage to put at least some of them on the table, start talks with partners and reach at least some decisions, I'd say we will not have wasted time," said Havlicek.

Pro sanctions

The Czechs have won respect abroad by doing their part to help Ukraine, he added. Since the invasion began on February 24, the Czech Republic has welcomed nearly 400,000 Ukrainian refugees and provided sizeable financial and military aid to Kyiv.

Within the EU it is also a vocal supporter of sanctions against Russia. Rightwing Prime Minister Petr Fiala, a former political analyst who co-wrote a 992-page book about the EU, recently said he would try to organise a summit with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

The event would also be attended by western Balkan countries whose EU bids, backed by the Czech Republic and others in the region, have recently stalled. But the summit, which would offer Ukraine a Marshall Plan-like US initiative to help western Europe rebuild after World War II—would only be held if the war were over by then. But political analyst Jiri Pehe said this precondition made the project unrealistic. "The conflict will hardly end before the end of the Czech presidency," he told AFP. "I think the Czechs will just try to organise a summit on Ukraine and... persuade other countries to keep helping the country."

The Czechs were ill-placed to lead a debate on economic recovery or energy security, said Pehe. The country faces high inflation, has yet to join the eurozone and relies on nuclear energy, dismissed by some EU members including Germany, he added.—AFP