

Rohingya Exodus Growing Amid Myanmar Brutalities



In this file photo taken on October 19, 2017 Rohingya refugees who were stranded walk near the no-man's land area between Bangladesh and Myanmar in the Palongkhali area next to Ukhiya.

TEKNAF, Bangladesh (AFP) -- Hundreds of desperate Rohingya Muslims are still pouring over the Myanmar border into Bangladesh every week, bringing harrowing accounts of torture and murder, six months after a military crackdown sparked the massive refugee crisis.

One of the recent arrivals, Nur Muhammad, said his village in Myanmar's Rakhine state was surrounded by Buddhist vigilantes for days before they were allowed to leave.

"The Moghs (Buddhists) torched our houses, kept us confined and starving," Muhammad said. "Villages are razed to the ground. We walked for days through mountains to reach here."

Thirty-year-old Enayetullah was among the 200 Rohingya who crossed the Naf river into Bangladesh Friday.

Most of his neighbors had left earlier, part of a 700,000-strong Rohingya exodus since Aug. 25, leaving behind desolate and burned-out villages.

"We stayed all these months hoping the situation will be fine. But in recent weeks, security forces have taken away our young men. If they abduct 10, only one returns," Enayetullah told AFP.

Enayetullah also accused Myanmar security forces of torching his shop, prompting him and his three brothers to flee their home in Mognapara village near the town of Buthidaung.

The military crackdown in the north of Rakhine has been termed "ethnic

cleansing" by the United Nations and the United States.

While Bangladesh and Myanmar talk of repatriating the refugees, the influx continues. Some days 200 people cross the border, on others a few dozen make the perilous journey. More than 2,500 have entered the overflowing camps in Bangladesh so far in February.

Hundreds of Rohingya villages have been torched in the crackdown, according to refugees and monitoring groups. Human Rights Watch said Friday that another 55 villages have been razed since November.

The Rohingya have been systematically stripped of their legal rights in mainly Buddhist Myanmar in recent decades and face rampant discrimination.

Myanmar denies seeking to eradicate the minority but refuses to give UN investigators access to an area where thousands of Rohingya are believed to have been killed.

In November Bangladesh and Myanmar signed an agreement to repatriate some 750,000 Rohingya over two years.

But Rohingya leaders bluntly refuse to return. The UN says anyone who goes back must be a volunteer, while Myanmar shows no sign of accepting the Rohingya as full citizens.

"If they send us back, we'll be tortured or killed. We would rather be killed here in Bangladesh. Here, at least I'll get a Muslim burial," Muhammad Elias said, whose group has staged protests against repatriation in recent weeks.

North Korea: U.S. Blockade Would Be Act of War



Kim Yong Chol, vice chairman of North Korea's ruling Workers' Party Central Committee, back right, watches the closing ceremony with South Korean President Moon Jae-in, left, Moon's wife Kim Jung-sook, and Ivanka Trump, Feb. 25, 2018.

SEOUL (Dispatches) -- North Korea on Sunday accused the United States of trying to undermine an improvement in inter-Korean relations as Pyeongchang Winter Games came to a close.

"The two Koreas have cooperated together and the Olympics was held successfully," the North's KCNA news agency said, citing North Korea's foreign ministry.

"But the U.S. brought the threat of war to the Korean peninsula with large-scale new sanctions on the DPRK ahead of the Olympics closing ceremony," the state news agency said, using the initials of the North's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

The Winter Olympics in South Korea have given a boost to engagement between the two Koreas after more than a year of sharply rising tension.

Kim Yo Jong, the younger sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, led a delegation that made a three-day visit to the opening of the Olympics and the North Korean leader later said he wanted to boost a "warm climate of reconciliation and dialogue."

Kim Yo Jong and the North's nominal head of state were the most senior North Korean officials to visit the South in more than a

decade.

The closing days of the Olympics were overshadowed by a U.S. announcement on Friday that it was imposing its largest package of sanctions aimed at getting North Korea to give up its nuclear and missile programs.

In announcing the sanctions, President Donald Trump warned of a "phase two" that could be "very, very unfortunate for the world" if the sanctions did not work.

North Korea criticized the new sanctions in a statement carried on its state media and said a blockade by the United States would be considered an act of war.

China also reacted angrily to the new U.S. measures, saying on Saturday the unilateral targeting of Chinese firms and people risked harming cooperation on North Korea.

Trump's daughter, Ivanka Trump, a senior White House adviser, met Moon on Friday as part of a weekend trip to lead the U.S. delegation to the closing ceremony of the Winter Olympics, but no official meeting between the American and North Korean delegations was planned.

South Korea's President Moon Jae-in won election last year promising to try to improve relations with the North.

Nigerian Parents Release Names of 105 Missing Girls



In this Dec. 7, 2015 file photo children displaced by Boko Haram during an attack on their villages receive lectures in a school in Maiduguri, Nigeria.

MAIDUGURI, Nigeria (AP) -- Parents in Nigeria have released a list of the 105 young women they say are still missing nearly a week after Boko Haram militants attacked a northern town, demanding that residents direct them toward the school for girls.

The fate of the girls is not yet known, though many fear they have been abducted as brides for the Boko Haram extremists, who in 2014 kidnapped 276 girls from a boarding school in Chibok and forced them to marry their captors. About 100 of the Chibok girls have never returned to their families nearly four years later. In the town of Dapchi in Nigeria's

Yobe state, the militants arrived Monday evening, sending many fleeing into the surrounding bush amid the hail of gunfire. While Nigeria's president has called the disappearances a "national disaster," local officials at first falsely indicated that some had been rescued while others would return in the coming days from hiding.

Yobe state Gov. Ibrahim Gaidam on Friday put the number of missing girls in Dapchi at 84, but family members quickly refuted that.

Bashir Manzo, who has been heading up the relatives' efforts, said they only took information when a girl's mother

or father appeared in person to report a missing child. His daughter Fatima is among those still unaccounted for.

"This list did not come from the school management or any government source but collated by us from the parents of the girls," he said. "As far as we are concerned, the governor is still being fed with fake information about these poor girls."

While it appears that many students at the school did go into hiding, Manzo said those children are now back with their families.

"All those that fled into the bush had been brought back to the school on Tuesday, and a roll call was taken after which they had all gone home to meet their parents," he said.

"The entire country stands as one with the girls' families, the government and the people of Yobe State. This is a national disaster. We are sorry that this could have happened and share your pain. We pray that our gallant armed forces will locate and safely return your missing family members," President Muhammadu Buhari said earlier in the week.

He said the government was sending more troops and surveillance aircraft to the area to help the search.

Rallies Turn Violent in Italy's Election Campaign



Police officers drag away a man during a demonstration in Milan, Italy, Feb. 24, 2018.

ROME (AP) -- Italians have demonstrated against racism, revivals of fascism, labor reforms, mandatory vaccines and other hotly-debated issues, at some points clashing with police, as antagonism flared between far-left and far-right activists in a violence-marred election campaign.

It was the last weekend for political rallies ahead of Italy's March 4 national election, and protesters held at least a dozen marches or rallies in several Italian cities.

In Milan, far-left demonstrators clashed with police trying to block them from reaching a far-right rally. Police in riot gear wielded batons against the front line of protesters to drive them back.

In Rome, a march drawing Premier Paolo Gentiloni and other ministers in his center-left government, deplored racism and revival of fascist ideology. Across town, another march protested government labor changes that made it easier to lay off workers.

Justice Minister Andrea Orlando warned that fascism "is a danger in Italy and Europe."

"And also dangerous is the underestimation of this phenomenon," he added.

Still elsewhere in the Italian capital, protesters denounced the government's decision to make several vaccines

mandatory for schoolchildren, another issue inflaming campaign debate.

Campaigning officially ends on March 2. Opinion polls indicate a hung Parliament could result, with three blocs, each short of an absolute majority: the center-left, the center-right and the populist 5-Star Movement.

Italy's election campaign took a violent turn on Feb. 3, when an Italian man in the central town of Macerata opened fire on African migrants, wounding six of them. The suspect, who once ran in a local election for the anti-migrant League party, has said he was avenging the death of an Italian woman allegedly murdered by African migrants.

In Milan on Saturday, League leader and premier candidate, Matteo Salvini, denied that his followers advocate violence. Instead he denounced what he called "this angry anti-fascism" and declared fascism a dead ideology.

The Italian constitution bans revival of fascism, the ideology of dictator Benito Mussolini before and during World War II.

League marchers held a banner with Salvini's slogan "Italians first."

Opinion polls indicate many Italians blame migrants for crime. The League, along with the 5-Star Movement, contends that foreigners, by working for less pay, rob Italians of work.

Prestigious U.S. Universities Join Gun Control Campaign

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- Dozens of U.S. colleges and universities, including at least three Ivy League schools, have said their application processes will not consider the disciplinary action taken against high school students who protested last week's massacre at a Florida school.

Many school districts officials have threatened to suspend high school students who take part in nationwide gun control walkouts and other demonstrations called by survivors of the mass shooting that killed 17 people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland. Such disciplinary action can sometimes hurt a student's chances of getting into a preferred college.

The student-led #NeverAgain movement launched after the Feb. 14 rampage has reshaped the long-

running gun control debate almost overnight and could influence the U.S. midterm elections.

"Yale will NOT be rescinding anyone's admission decision for participating in peaceful walkouts for this or other causes, regardless of any high school's disciplinary policy," Hannah Mendlowitz, a senior assistant director of admissions and recruitment at Yale University, wrote in a blog post. "I, for one, will be cheering these students on from New Haven," Mendlowitz said.

In addition to Yale, more than 40 universities, including Brown, Dartmouth and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), have issued statements supporting prospective scholars who may heed the calls of the Parkland survivors and risk school disciplinary action by joining protests.

Survivors of the Parkland shooting have demanded lawmakers restrict gun sales and are targeting politicians funded by the pro-gun National Rifle Association.

As the pressure on the NRA builds, several of its corporate partners have said they are cutting marketing ties with the gun rights organization.

Two airlines, Delta and United, became the latest, saying on Twitter that they were no longer offering NRA members discounted rates and would ask the NRA to remove their information from its website.

NRA officials have lashed out at gun control advocates, arguing that Democratic elites are politicizing the Parkland rampage to erode gun rights.



BEIJING (Reuters) -- China's ruling Communist Party has proposed removing a limit of two consecutive terms for the country's president and vice president, the country's official news agency said Sunday. The move, if approved, appears to lay the groundwork for party leader Xi Jinping to rule as president beyond 2023. The party's Central Committee proposed to remove from the constitution the expression that China's president and vice president "shall serve no more than two consecutive terms," the Xinhua News Agency said in a brief report. It provided no further details. The announcement came before the party's Central Committee was to begin a three-day meeting in Beijing Monday to discuss major personnel appointments and other issues. Xi's status as the most powerful Chinese leader in a generation was cemented at last year's party congress, where he was given a second five-year term as general secretary.

JUBA, South Sudan (AP) -- The United Nations mission in South Sudan says it has recalled a 46-member peacekeeping police unit after some members allegedly paid local women living in a protection camp for sex. A UN statement says the Ghanaian policemen have been recalled from Wau to the capital, Juba. The UN chief in South Sudan, David Shearer, calls it a "clear breach" of the code of conduct, which prohibits sexual relationships with vulnerable people. "We should not have such people in this country," South Sudan government spokesman Michael Makuei tells The Associated Press. The United Nations has 17,000 peacekeepers in civil war-torn South Sudan. The UN in recent years has struggled to deal with numerous cases of sexual abuse and exploitation by peacekeepers in some of the world's poorest nations.

PHNOM PENH (AFP) -- Voting for Cambodia's Senate began on Sunday in an election decried by critics as a "farce", with Prime Minister Hun Sen's ruling party set to dominate months after the country's only viable opposition party was dissolved. The vestiges of Cambodia's democratic project crumbled late last year when Hun Sen oversaw a crackdown on the press, civil society and the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party, which was disbanded in a court ruling not long after its leader Kem Sokha was arrested on treason charges. Though the Senate vote arouses little interest in Cambodia because the upper house is seen as a rubber-stamp body and candidates are elected by other officials rather than the public, the result is a clear prelude to the national poll set for July. "We expect to win overwhelmingly," CPP spokesman Sok Eysan told AFP, brushing off allegations that the election is undemocratic.

LONDON (AFP) -- Britain's opposition Labor Party warned Sunday that it could team up with Conservative rebels to force the country to become part of an EU customs union, a move that could threaten Theresa May's government. Labor's Brexit spokesman Keir Starmer warned May that "crunch time is coming" over her Brexit plans, which she will set out Friday, although she has always said Britain would not remain a member of the EU customs union. The prime minister only holds power thanks to the support of Northern Ireland's DUP, and there is a serious threat her government could be brought down if a handful of her Conservative MPs team up with opposition parties to demand that she pursues some kind of post-Brexit customs union. EU supporters back a form of union, which would align tariffs charged on goods imported from the rest of the world, saying it was essential in retaining tariff-free access to the continental market.

GENEVA (AFP) -- Angered by "unfair" pay cuts, UN staff in Geneva are planning a half-day strike next week, as dozens of ministers and other dignitaries attend high-level events at the organization's European headquarters. "We have tried other forms of protest before, to no avail... They have left us no choice," Ian Richards, who heads the U.N. staff unions association in Geneva, told AFP Sunday. He said it remained unclear how many of some 9,500 UN staff members in Geneva would participate in Tuesday's work stoppage, or what impact it would have, pointing out that "this is not like a bus company where the buses just stop." "But we certainly expect this to have an impact," Richards said. The half-day work stoppage will come during what is arguably one of the busiest weeks of the year at the UN in Geneva, with around 100 heads of state, government ministers and country representatives from around the world set to attend the main annual sessions of the UN's top human rights and disarmament bodies.

KISANGANI, DR Congo (AFP) -- At least two people were wounded as police fired live bullets and tear gas Sunday to break up a banned protest against DR Congo President Joseph Kabila in Kisangani, the country's third largest city, an AFP reporter said. Hundreds starting marching after mass at the city's cathedral but were dispersed by security forces. The AFP journalist said at least two people suffered bullet injuries.