

Germany Seeks Answers After 60 Injured in Car Ramming



People flee after a car ploughed into a carnival parade in Volkmarshen, Germany.

VOLKMARSEN, Germany (AFP) -- German authorities scrambled Tuesday to determine the motives of a man who ploughed his car into a carnival procession, injuring dozens and further unsettling a country rocked by a fatal mass shooting last week.

In an afternoon statement, police said the number injured had now reached “almost 60” and asked those hurt in the incident or with possible evidence to come forward.

Investigators said the 29-year-old German driver had not been drunk at the time of the incident on Monday, but could not yet rule out that he was under the influence of drugs, national news agency DPA reported.

The suspect has still not been questioned because of his own injuries, a

police spokesman told reporters near the scene of the incident in Hessian town Volkmarshen.

Among the injured in the ramming were 18 children aged from just three years.

It followed just days after a gunman with suspected racist motives killed nine people with migrant backgrounds in Hanau, also in western Hesse state, prompting fears of a repeat attack.

Officials cancelled all carnival parades across the state Monday, while a children’s procession was called off Tuesday in state capital Wiesbaden.

But authorities have stopped short of calling the incident an attack until they know more about the driver’s motives.

“I saw him drive off, he looked as if he was on drugs and said ‘soon I’ll be in the

papers,’” a neighbor of the suspect told German broadcaster RTL.

Nevertheless, prosecutors in Frankfurt have opened an investigation on suspicion of attempted homicide.

Prosecutors said they had also arrested a second person who filmed the car rampage, citing a privacy law against gawkers.

Eyewitnesses described how the man ploughed his silver Mercedes at high speed through a barrier and into crowds at the traditional “Rose Monday” parade in Volkmarshen, a small town in Hesse state.

“My wife called me and I ran out there straight away. I saw my daughter lying bleeding on the ground,” 33-year-old Sven Hirdler told mass-market daily Bild.

Hirdler’s four-year-old child Emilia escaped with relatively light injuries and a concussion.

On Tuesday morning, carnival floats and balloons were still in place around Volkmarshen, while emergency vehicles remained at the scene as the perpetrator’s car was hauled away.

Hessian police said that among the injured, 35 remained in hospital while 17 had already returned home.

The rampage fuelled concerns over the country’s increasingly emboldened far-right scene, after a pro-migrant politician was murdered in June and an anti-Semitic attack on a synagogue left two dead in the city of Halle last October.

Migrant Detention Camps in Greece Spark Clashes



A local resident clashes with riot police at a roadblock in Karava village near the area where the government plans to build a new migrant detention center, on the northeastern Aegean island of Lesbos, Greece on Feb. 25, 2020.

LESBOS, Greece (AP) — Riot police and residents clashed for several hours on the Greek islands of Lesbos and Chios Tuesday, as protesters tried to prevent authorities from bringing excavating machines from the mainland to build new migrant detention camps.

Police fired tear gas to disperse the crowds that gathered to try and stop police from disembarking from government-chartered ferries.

On Lesbos, protesters set fire to trash bins and used municipal garbage trucks to try and block off the port area.

Police on Chios also used tear

gas and flash grenades. At least three people, including the island’s mayor, were hospitalized for breathing difficulties caused by the extensive use of tear gas, local officials said.

The government says it will move ahead with plans to build the new facilities and has promised to replace existing camps where severe overcrowding has worsened in recent months.

Many island residents as well as local authorities vehemently argue that the migrants and asylum-seekers should be moved to the Greek mainland.

The standoff between police and

protesters continued Tuesday near the areas where the new camps will be built, as police cordoned off areas around roadblocks set up over the past few days by demonstrators on the two islands.

Stelios Petsas, the government spokesman, argued that authorities couldn’t impose any order on the situation without the new camps.

“We understand that there is a problem of trust that was created over the previous years,” he told state-run TV. “But the closed facilities will be built and we are calling on the public to support this.”

Petsas claimed that the government was also compelled to act because of heightened concerns over the widening coronavirus outbreak, arguing that proper health checks couldn’t be carried out at existing overcrowded camps.

Greece is the busiest entry point for illegal migration in the European Union with most arrivals occurring on eastern Greek islands from the nearby Turkish coast. Under a 2016 agreement backed and funded by the EU, the movement of migrants is restricted to those islands until their asylum claims are processed.

Nearly 60,000 migrants and refugees arrived on Greek islands last year, almost double the number recorded in 2018, according to the UN refugee agency.

‘Doomsday Vault’ Receives 60,000 Samples of Seeds

OSLO (AFP) -- An Arctic “doomsday vault” was set Tuesday to receive 60,000 samples of seeds from around the world as the biggest global crop reserve stocks up for a global catastrophe.

The seeds were to be deposited in the vault inside a mountain near Longyearbyen on Spitsbergen Island in Norway’s Svalbard archipelago, about 1,000 kilometers (600 miles) from the North Pole.

“As the pace of climate change and biodiversity loss increases, there is new urgency surrounding efforts to save food crops at risk of extinction,” said Stefan Schmitz, who manages the reserve as head of the Crop Trust.

“The large scope of today’s seed deposit reflects worldwide concern about the impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss on food production,” Schmitz added.

“But more importantly it demonstrates a growing global commitment — from the institutions and countries that have made deposits today and indeed the world — to the conservation and use of the crop diversity that is crucial for farmers in their efforts to adapt to changing growing conditions,” he said.

Common as well as wilder varieties of grains are being sent by institutions in countries as diverse as Brazil, the United States, Germany, Morocco, Mali and Mongolia.

The latest shipment brought to around 1.05 million the number of seed varieties placed in three underground alcoves which form the vault, known also as Noah’s Ark.

Aimed at safeguarding biodiversity in the face of climate change, wars and other natural and man-made disasters, the seed bank has the capacity to hold up to 4.5 million batches, or twice the number of crop varieties believed to exist in the world today.

It was launched in 2008 with financing from Norway.

Its usefulness was spotlighted during Syria’s civil war when researchers were able in 2015 to retrieve from the vault duplicates of grains lost in the destruction of Aleppo.

The countries and institutions that deposit seeds in the vault retain ownership over them and can retrieve them when necessary.

Paradoxically, the vault was itself hit by climate change. In 2016, water seeped into the vault’s tunnel entrance due to permafrost melting as Arctic temperatures climbed unusually high.

Norway has since financed work to insulate the vault from further effects of a warming and wetter climate, which scientists say is happening two times faster in the Arctic than elsewhere.

Mahathir Proposes Unity Government After Resignation



Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad arrives to visit jailed opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, who is recuperating from surgery, at Cheras Rehabilitation Hospital in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia January 10, 2018.

KUALA LUMPUR (Reuters) -- Malaysia’s Mahathir Mohamad is trying to form a national unity government under his personal authority, drawing together rival parties, political sources said on Tuesday, following his shock resignation as prime minister.

The world’s oldest government leader at 94, Mahathir stepped down on Monday, but Malaysia’s king immediately named him interim prime minister, which lets him retain the authority of a permanent leader.

The move effectively shattered a fragile coalition Mahathir had formed with old rival Anwar Ibrahim, 72, to win a 2018 election on an anti-graft platform. It also appeared to nullify Mahathir’s promise to eventually hand power to Anwar.

Mahathir proposed the idea of a grand coalition at meetings on Tuesday with leaders of major political parties, including Anwar and those he defeated in the election, four political sources with knowledge of the matter said.

“It appears that Mahathir is poised to form the government,” one source said. “There won’t be any political entity. We might be a government of no parties.”

“He is the person most likely to be the next prime minister,” said Democratic Action Party parliamentarian Ong Kian Ming.

Parties across the board rallied to say they would support Mahathir’s return as full-time prime minister, with Anwar’s the only major party not to offer a public endorsement.

No one has publicly staked a claim to be prime minister.

The realignment could give Mahathir greater authority than even during a previous spell as prime minister from 1981 until his retirement in 2003, during which he is credited with turning a farming backwater into an industrial nation.

“He has total freedom to decide as he pleases,” said Ibrahim Suffian, director of pollster Merdeka Center.

Two of the sources said Mahathir’s resignation meant a pre-election promise to hand power to Anwar was no longer valid.

The former medical doctor returned as prime minister after the 2018 election defeat of Najib Razak, ringing down the curtain on more than six decades of rule by the party he had once led.

“Just another day in the office,” Mahathir said on his official Twitter account, accompanied by photographs of him reading papers at the prime ministerial desk.

Malaysia’s constitution provides that any lawmaker who can command a majority in parliament can stake a claim to form a government, which must then be approved by the king.

Lawyers Tell Court: Assange Stripped Naked, Handcuffed



Supporters of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange protest outside his U.S. extradition hearing in London.

LONDON (AFP) -- Julian Assange was stripped naked twice and handcuffed 11 times coming and going from court, the WikiLeaks founder’s lawyer told his U.S. extradition hearing in London on Tuesday.

Assange faces charges under the U.S. Espionage Act for the 2010 release of a trove of files detailing the realities of U.S. military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.

“Yesterday, Mr Assange was handcuffed 11 times, stripped naked twice at Belmarsh and put in five separate holding cells,” his lawyer Edward Fitzgerald said on Tuesday.

He warned that Assange’s treatment could “impinge on these proceedings” and asked judge Vanessa Baraitser to give “an indication to prison authorities” that the regime should be relaxed.

Baraitser said it was a matter for prison officials, saying she did not have the authority to instruct them on how to treat detainees.

She added that she would expect Assange to be treated fairly and like anyone else.

The 48-year-old Australian is being held at the high-security Belmarsh prison in southeast London during the extradition process.

His full extradition hearing, which opened on Monday, is taking place at the court buildings next to the jail.

Assange wore a grey blazer and a sweater over a collared shirt in court.

He occasionally spoke to his lawyers through the gaps in the glass panels of the dock.

Assange spent much of the past decade holed up in Ecuador’s London embassy to avoid separate legal proceedings in Sweden, but Washington is now seeking his transfer to stand trial.

WikiLeaks initially worked with a string of high-profile newspapers to publish details from the leaked State Department and Pentagon files, which caused a sensation -- and outrage in Washington.

On Monday, a lawyer for the United States accused him of risking the lives of intelligence sources by publishing classified U.S. government documents.

Fitzgerald has argued that the U.S. charges are “politically motivated”.

Assange could be jailed for 175 years if convicted on all 17 Espionage Act charges and one count of computer hacking that he faces. The hearings will last all week then reconvene in May.

News in Brief

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- The U.S. and South Korean militaries said on Monday they are considering scaling back joint training because of mounting concerns about the coronavirus, in one of the first signs of the epidemic’s fallout on global U.S. military activities. The disclosure came during a visit to the Pentagon by South Korean Defense Minister Jeong Kyeong-doo, who acknowledged following talks with U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper that 13 South Korean troops had tested positive for the virus. The growing concern about the coronavirus’ impact on U.S. and South Korean military activities comes against the backdrop of strains in bilateral ties over U.S. calls for South Korea to offset more U.S. defense costs. Both sides appear to be at an impasse on the issue. Esper told reporters after the talks on Monday that “shouldering the cost of our common defense cannot fall disproportionately to the American taxpayer.” Jeong acknowledged that talks were at a “standstill.”

KAMPALA, Uganda (AP) — The UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization says a small group of desert locusts has entered Congo, marking the first time the voracious insects have been seen in the Central African country since 1944. The agency says the mature locusts, carried in part by the wind, arrived on the western shore of Lake Albert on Friday near the town of Bunia. The worst locust outbreak that parts of East Africa have seen in 70 years also recently reached South Sudan, a country where roughly half the population already faces hunger after years of civil war. Kenya, Somalia and Uganda also have been battling the locust swarms, which can reach the size of major cities. The insects can destroy crops and devastate pasture for animals, and experts have warned that the outbreak is affecting millions of already vulnerable people across the region.

LONDON (AFP) -- Nearly 90 percent of the 200 cities beset by the world’s highest levels of deadly micro-pollution are in China and India, with most of the rest in Pakistan and Indonesia, researchers reported Tuesday. Taking population into account, Bangladesh emerged as the country with the worst so-called PM2.5 pollution, followed by Pakistan, Mongolia, Afghanistan and India, according to the 2019 World Air Quality Report, jointly released by IQAir Group and Greenpeace. Particulate matter of 2.5 microns or less in diameter -- roughly 1/30 the width of a human hair -- is the most dangerous type of airborne pollution. Microscopic flecks are small enough to enter the bloodstream via the respiratory system, leading to asthma, lung cancer and heart disease. Among the world’s megacities of 10 million or more people, the most PM2.5-toxic in 2019 was the Indian capital New Delhi, followed by Lahore in Pakistan, Dhaka in Bangladesh, Kolkata in India, Linyi and Tianjin in China, and Jakarta, Indonesia.

WASHINGTON (AFP) -- Katherine Johnson, a ground-breaking black NASA mathematician whose life was portrayed in the movie “Hidden Figures,” died on Monday aged 101, the space agency said. Johnson’s calculations helped put the first man on the Moon in 1969, but she was little known until the Oscar-nominated 2016 movie that told the stories of three black women who worked at NASA. “She was an American hero and her pioneering legacy will never be forgotten,” NASA Administrator Jim Bridenstine said, honoring “her courage and the milestones we could not have reached without her.” Johnson and a colleague were the first to calculate the parameters of the suburban 1961 flight of astronaut Alan Shepard, the first American in space. Her math talents later helped determine the trajectory of the Apollo 11 flight that landed Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin on the Moon in July 1969.

WASHINGTON (AFP) -- Harvey Weinstein was convicted Monday of rape and sexual assault but acquitted of the most serious predatory charges, a verdict hailed as a historic victory by the #MeToo movement against sexual misconduct. The 67-year-old was remanded in New York’s notorious Rikers Island jail after the jury of seven men and five women found the once powerful Hollywood producer guilty of criminal sexual acts in the first degree and rape in the third degree. However, he left Rikers Monday evening and was admitted to Bellevue Hospital Center in Manhattan for chest pains, his spokesperson told AFP. Oscar-winner Weinstein, whose films include “Shakespeare In Love,” was found not guilty of first-degree rape and predatory sexual assault, charges that could have seen him jailed for life. But he faces up to 29 years in prison on the two felony convictions. The ashen-faced defendant, who attended the trial hunched over a walker, showed little emotion after the verdict was delivered to a packed New York courtroom. He was taken into custody pending sentencing, which was scheduled for March 11.

NEW DELHI (Reuters) -- President Donald Trump said on Tuesday that no country was trying to help him win the election, after a top intelligence official told lawmakers Russia was interfering in the 2020 presidential vote to help Trump win a second term. “I want no help from any country and I haven’t been given help from any country,” Trump told reporters at a news briefing as he concluded a two-day visit to India. After the congressional briefing, Trump ousted the acting intelligence chief, Joseph Maguire, and replaced him with a political loyalist.