



ISTANBUL (AFP) - Turkish police on Tuesday detained almost 70 businessmen, local officials and teachers in a new nationwide sweep against supporters of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's arch foe, reports said.

Sixty-eight people were detained on suspicion of links to the US-based Turkish preacher Fethullah Gulen who Erdogan accuses of running a "parallel state" aimed at usurping him, the state-run Anatolia news agency reported.

The coordinated raids on suspects, which came after seven months of investigations, took place in 22 regions across Turkey including Istanbul, Ankara, the resort of Antalya and Gaziantep close to the Syrian border.

A total of 120 arrest warrants were issued and several of the wanted suspects are believed to be abroad.

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BEIJING (Reuters) - China is confident it can resolve business disagreements with Myanmar through friendly talks, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said after meeting his counterpart Aung San Suu Kyi, amid pressure from China to resume a stalled \$3.6-billion dam project.

The talks with Wang in the Myanmar capital of Naypyitaw were Suu Kyi's first official meeting since her appointment as foreign minister.

China has been at pains to ensure its formerly close relationship with Myanmar's one-time military rulers continues under the new government, one of the reasons for Wang's visit.

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THOUSAND OAKS, Calif. (AP) - Investigators on Tuesday were trying to figure out what caused a homemade rocket attached to a skateboard to explode, killing a Southern California high school student and injuring his friend.

Bernard Moon, 18, of Thousand Oaks died after the blast Monday night. A 17-year-old had minor injuries and was hospitalized in stable condition Tuesday.

The two senior honor students were from Thousand Oaks High School. The blast took place in a courtyard at Madrona Elementary School in Thousand Oaks.

The teens were experimenting with a skateboard attached to a homemade rocket as an engine, authorities said. The rocket was about a foot long and three-quarters of an inch in diameter, Ventura County sheriff's Capt. Garo Kuredjian said.

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TEHRAN (Press TV) - Nearly 20 million people in Bangladesh still consume water poisoned with high levels of arsenic, about 20 years after the potentially deadly toxin was discovered in the supply, Human Rights Watch said Wednesday.

The HRW said in a report that an estimated 43,000 people die each year from arsenic-related illness in Bangladesh, mostly in poor rural areas.

The 111-page report, titled "Nepotism and Neglect: The Failing Response to Arsenic in the Drinking Water of Bangladesh's Rural Poor," finds a serious lack of monitoring and quality control in arsenic mitigation projects.

The report also documents how the health system in Bangladesh largely ignores the impact of exposure to arsenic on the public health.

Richard Pearshouse, a researcher with the HRW, has said that the government in Dhaka has failed to adequately respond to naturally occurring arsenic in drinking water across large rural areas.

Dutch Vote on Key EU-Kiev Pact as Europe Watches

THE HAGUE (AFP) - Dutch voters went to the polls Wednesday on whether to back a key EU pact with Ukraine in a referendum triggered by grassroots eurosceptic groups and seen as a yardstick on ties with Brussels.

A slow trickle of some of the 12.5 million eligible voters drifted into polling stations through the day in the non-binding vote being closely watched by Moscow and the West.

A 30-percent turnout is needed for the ballot to be valid, and by about halfway through the day interest appeared lackluster.

Dutch media said only around 7.0 percent of people had voted in the major cities, and turnout was even as low as 6.5 percent in the capital, Amsterdam.

A Dutch "No" to the two-year-old treaty with Kiev could pose a headache for the European Union (EU), and the outcome is also seen as an important litmus test for Britain's referendum on continued European Union membership in June.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who cast his ballot at a Hague primary school, urged citizens to vote in favor of the treaty.

"We have to help Ukraine build up a judicial state and its democracy. To support its minorities like Jews and its gay community. Therefore I call on the entire Netherlands: go vote and vote in favor," Rutte said. "Europe needs more stability at its edges."

Opinion polls on the eve of the vote over the EU's so-called Association Agreement with Ukraine gave the "No" vote a slight edge, but many voters were undecided, saying they remained puzzled about what it was all about.

It remains unclear what the results could mean for the Netherlands -- which currently holds the rotating EU presidency -- and the government has been non-committal, saying only it would study the results once polls close at 9:00 pm (1900 GMT).

The "No" camp has highlighted concerns about corruption in Ukraine, and continuing separatist unrest in the east, among reasons to refuse closer ties with Kiev.

According to one Ipsos poll, some 37 percent said they would vote against. Around 33 percent were in favour and the rest were undecided.

Tensions Run High Between Azerbaijan, Armenia Despite Truce

MOSCOW (AP) — More than two decades after a conflict killed about 30,000 people and displaced 1 million others, tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the region of Nagorno-Karabakh have exploded again, with both sides engaged in artillery duels, rocket barrages and tank attacks.

A cease-fire declared Tuesday after three days of intense battles raised hopes for restoring calm to the area in the South Caucasus mountains. But fears loom of a possible escalation in fighting, with Turkey strongly backing Azerbaijan and Russia obliged to protect Armenia by a mutual security pact.

Clashes that began over the weekend marked the worst violence since a separatist war ended in 1994 and left Nagorno-Karabakh — officially a part of Azerbaijan — under the control of local ethnic Armenian forces and the Armenian military. Armenian forces also occupy several areas outside the Karabakh region.

Peace talks under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, co-sponsored by Russia, the United States and France, have dragged on ever since without producing any visible results.

While Armenia appeared happy with the status quo, energy-rich Azerbaijan, which has lost control of about one-seventh of its territory in the conflict, has been desperate to change the situation.

Both countries blamed each other for the latest hostilities, but many observers believe that Azerbaijan's military unleashed an offensive aiming to seize some ground in order to make Armenia more likely to discuss a compromise in peace talks.

"Baku knows that one of its few tools of pressure on the Armenians is to violate the cease-fire and remind them that the status quo can be shaken," Thomas de Waal, an expert on the region with the Carnegie Endowment, wrote in a commentary. Azerbaijani leaders in Baku long have promised to win back the occu-

pied lands, and President Ilham Aliyev may have been forced to act while a reversal in the country's oil fortunes has tested public support for his government.

The operation in Karabakh was well-received in Azerbaijan. In the village of Gapanli, one of the areas hit hardest by the current fighting, residents enthusiastically welcomed the action against the Armenian forces, hoping Azerbaijan could win back the occupied territories.

"This is our land," said villager Elmar Abdullayev. "We will stand up for our rights till the end."

Both Azerbaijani and Armenian forces have used artillery, tanks and other heavy weapons on a scale unseen since 1994. Enemy losses were put in the hundreds, rival claims that couldn't be independently verified and which were promptly denied by the opposing side. Each party put its own losses in the dozens.

When oil prices were high, Azerbaijan used its petrodollars to upgrade its military, with most of its new weapons, including heavy artillery, rocket launchers and tanks, provided by Russia.

That angered many in Armenia, which has hosted a Russian military base and maintained close security and economic ties with Moscow. While arming Azerbaijan, Russia also has supplied new weapons to Armenia.

The parallel arms sales to the bitter rivals have reflected Russia's desire to expand its influence in the strategic South Caucasus region, which has been a key conduit for energy resources from the Caspian Sea to the West. If the Karabakh conflict escalates, it could disrupt oil and gas shipments from the region.

Amid the fighting, Karabakh's military command already has threatened to target Azerbaijan's energy pipelines with short-range ballistic missiles if the country's forces launch artillery barrage against the region's central city, Stepanakert, and other populated areas.

EU Launches Asylum Shake-Up to Better Share Migrant Burden



At present, under the so-called Dublin Rules, migrants seeking asylum must lodge their application in the country where they first arrived, and should be returned there if they move on to somewhere else.

BRUSSELS (AFP) - The European Union launched a drive Wednesday to overhaul the EU's asylum rules to more fairly share responsibility for an unprecedented influx of migrants despite resistance within the 28-nation bloc.

The European Commission, the EU executive, unveiled options to reform the rules two days after Greece began to expel migrants to Turkey under a controversial deal between Brussels and Ankara. The returns have since stalled. "We need to reform our European asylum system," the commission's First Vice President Frans Timmermans told a press conference in Brussels. "The present system is not working."

The existing so-called Dublin rules have been criticized as obsolete and unfair to countries like Greece, where most of the 1.25 million Syrian, Iraqi, Afghan and other migrants entered the

bloc last year. At present, under those rules, migrants seeking asylum must lodge their application in the country where they first arrived, and should be returned there if they move on to somewhere else.

But -- as 2015 showed -- the rules fell apart when countries like Italy and Greece, one of the poorest EU members, were overwhelmed by migrants who wanted asylum in Germany and other wealthy northern EU countries.

"This is neither fair, nor sustainable," Timmermans said, adding it was a "huge burden" to frontline countries.

Under one reform option, if a member state faces "disproportionate pressure" from migrant arrivals in the future, a "corrective fairness mechanism" can be introduced to redistribute migrants within the bloc.

A majority of countries support it, one

EU diplomat told AFP. However, EU states have already struggled to implement an emergency scheme agreed last September to relocate 160,000 asylum seekers out of Greece and Italy. Only 1,100 of these have been resettled so far.

The delays have been pinned on a range of factors, from governments trying to filter out jihadists from among the refugees following the terror attacks in Brussels and Paris, to a lack of housing and education -- but, say sceptics, political foot-dragging has also played a part.

Under a second, more drastic option, a "permanent distribution key" would be introduced based on the population and wealth of each member state.

"Responsibility would no longer be linked to the first point of entry," the commission said.

China Warns 'Powerful Forces' Behind Panama Papers

BEIJING (AFP) - Hostile Western forces are behind the "Panama Papers", a state-run Chinese newspaper alleged Tuesday, as media avoided reporting revelations about Communist leaders and it emerged that the law firm involved has eight offices in the country.

The scandal erupted on Sunday when media groups began revealing the results of a year-long investigation into a trove of 11.5 million documents from Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca, which specializes in creating offshore shell companies.

At least eight current or former members of China's Politburo Standing Committee, the ruling party's most powerful body, have been implicated, according to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), which co-ordinated the reports.

Mossack Fonseca has offices in eight Chinese cities including Hong Kong, its website showed Tuesday, more than any other country.

Under President Xi Jinping, Beijing has launched a much-publicized anti-corruption drive but has not instituted systemic reforms

such as public declarations of assets.

Among those named in the Panama Papers are close associates of Russian leader Vladimir Putin and President Xi's brother-in-law, who was previously identified in a New York Times investigation into the wealth accumulated by Xi's family.

Chinese media have largely avoided reporting on the leaks and social media have been scrubbed of references to them, with foreign news broadcasters such as the BBC blacked out when they report on the issue.

Ugandan Opposition Leader Arrested as Post-Election Tensions Linger

KAMPALA (Reuters) - Ugandan police arrested opposition leader Kizza Besigye on Tuesday amid clashes with his supporters, highlighting lingering tensions after a disputed presidential election.

Veteran President Yoweri Museveni was declared winner of the Feb. 18 election with 60 percent of the vote, although Besigye and other candidates rejected the results as fraudulent.

Besigye, who came second with 35 percent, said widespread rigging, intimidation by security personnel, ballot stuffing and other irregularities had made the vote invalid.

That criticism was echoed by independent monitors from the European Union and the Commonwealth who said Uganda's electoral body lacked independence and transparency and that the poll had been conducted in an intimidating atmosphere.

Police spokesman Patrick Onyango said Besigye had been arrested as he left his home after defying orders to use a designated route.

"He insisted on driving through the city centre with his supporters ... he would not listen to orders to use a different route," Onyango said.

Besigye was being held at a police

station in Mukono, about 24 km east of the capital Kampala. Onyango said he had been charged with participating in an unlawful assembly. He did not say whether Besigye might be released on bond.

Footage on local television showed a heavy contingent of police trucks, armoured vehicles and personnel intercepting Besigye as he was driving into the city centre with a procession of supporters.

Officials say they suspect Besigye wants to topple the government through street protests, and he has been kept under virtual house arrest since polling day.