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Issues

DJOKOVIC IN HIS
PRIME, THREATENS
RECORD BOOKS

By Martyn Herman

With Novak Djokovic's 10th grand slam title secured and the year-end number one ranking already in the bag, his stranglehold on men's tennis looks unshakeable and records beckon. The 28-year-old Serb's initial slow accumulation of major silverware after his breakthrough at the 2008 Australian Open has accelerated to such an extent that talk of him surpassing the likes of Bjorn Borg, Rafa Nadal and even Roger Federer is no longer fanciful. Djokovic's four-set defeat of 17-times major champion Federer in a spellbinding US Open final on Sunday was achieved despite a relentless Federer onslaught and with virtually the whole New York crowd roaring every winner from the Swiss maestro.

At times, Djokovic appeared the loneliest man in the world but he soaked up the pressure, sucked in the night air, and showed why beating him on the biggest of stages is almost mission impossible. Rarely in his career can the 34-year-old Federer have hit the ball with more ferocity, yet delivering

the knockout blow to a player whose ability to turn tendon-stretching defence into clinical attack proved tantalisingly out of reach.

ATP Tour chief Chris Kermode, blessed with a golden men's era that just keeps giving, described Djokovic's season as "awe inspiring" and few would argue. But for a stupendous display by Switzerland's Stanislav Wawrinka in this year's French Open final, the Serb would now be celebrating a calendar

year grand slam that has proved beyond the greatest players of the modern era. The way he bounced back from heartbreak in Paris, first at Wimbledon and then in New York, suggests he could complete the fabled 'slam' next year.

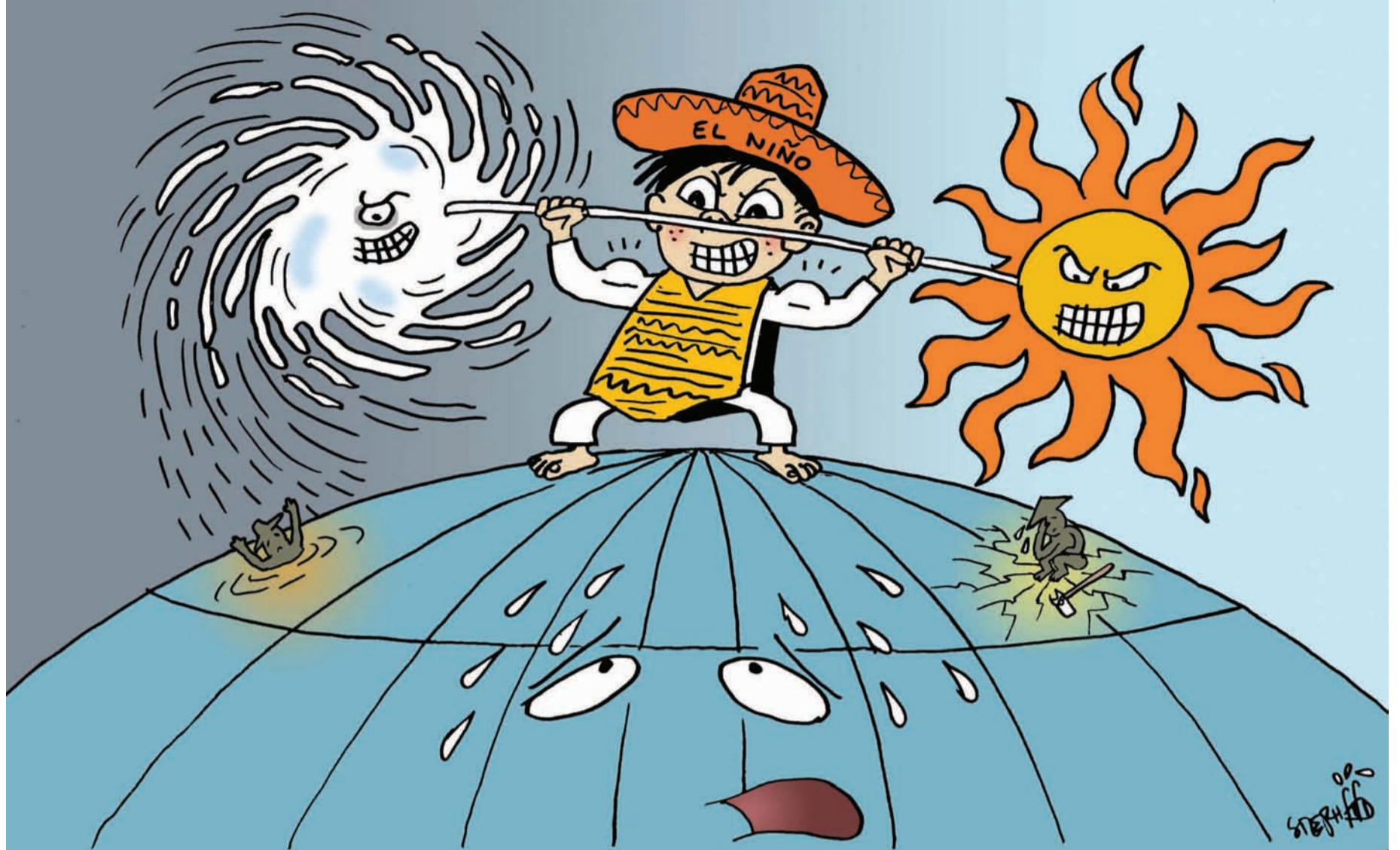
"He's in his prime, unquestionably at the pinnacle of the game, and fully deserving of this latest accolade, a true credit to our sport," Kermode said of Djokovic clinching the year-end top ranking for the fourth time on Monday.

Among Greats

Djokovic, ranked number one since July 2014, will move past John McEnroe's feat of 170 weeks at the top in November and then only Jimmy Connors (268), Ivan Lendl (270), Pete Sampras (286) and Federer (302) will have spent longer at the summit since the ATP rankings were introduced in 1973. "He's put himself among the greats. His steely resolve is what separates him," said McEnroe who analysed the final for ESPN as the Serb fought off 19 of 23 break points against Federer on a raucous Arthur Ashe court. "He doesn't get the cheers like Roger but maybe some day when he's 34 and has 16 or 17 Grand Slams, he will."

Djokovic's calmness on court, apart from the occasional racket-busting episode, speaks volumes for the contentment he enjoys off court with wife Jelena and son Stefan. "I'm enjoying this year more than I did any previous one because I'm a husband and a father and that makes it sweeter," he said. "I love this sport and all these results and achievements are incentive for me to keep on going." —Reuters

THIS YEAR'S EL NIÑO COULD BE THE BIGGEST...



WITH 2M REFUGEES, TURKEY SHOWING STRAIN

By Jonny Hogg

The strain of sheltering the world's largest refugee population is showing in Turkey, whose open door to those fleeing Syria and Iraq is shielding European nations from a migration crisis far worse than the one they are struggling with now. As some European governments turn to baton-wielding police and barricades to stem the flow of migrants, Ankara has vowed to continue accommodating more than 2 million people from its war-torn southern neighbours and welcome any more who come.

But refugees are becoming a political liability in the run-up to a close-fought election due in November, especially near border towns where Syrians can outnumber Turkish nationals. Barred from work by a government that fears a voter backlash, many of the newcomers are restless. When war first broke out in Syria in 2011, Turkey believed tens of thousands would cross its 900-km frontier. Since then, fighting has engulfed the country and Islamic State militants have exploited the chaos to impose brutal, medieval-style rule across large parts of both Syria and Iraq.

Turkey says it has spent \$6.5 billion on its humanitarian response, which includes some of the best equipped refugee camps ever built, including schooling, healthcare and social services. "It's one of the most humanitarian responses I've seen anywhere," Rae McGrath, from US aid agency Mercy Corps said. "There is an acceptance that, however inconvenient, Turkey must help its neighbour."

But its ability to help is reaching capacity, he said, and Sinan Ulgen, chairman of the Istanbul-based Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM) expressed a similar view. "Turkey's response has been very much more humane than Europe, and far more in line with what Europe claims to have as universal values," Ulgen said. "Many people are trying to understand the limits of how much Turkey is prepared to do. I think we are reaching those limits."

'No Life'

A bomb blast in the frontier town of Suruc in July blamed on Islamic State has increased concern that the open-door policy makes it easier for militants to enter Turkey, and the collapse of a ceasefire with Kurdish insurgents in July has deepened security fears. But the biggest challenge is long-term. Authorities are struggling to integrate a huge refugee population which does not speak Turkish and has little prospect of returning home soon. The sensitive issue of work permits for refugees has been shelved ahead of the snap parliamentary poll in which the ruling AK Party will try to recover the majority it lost in June.

That decision, criticised by aid workers, has driven refugees to take to perilous boats headed illicitly to Europe. In contrast with Greece which has let many migrants move on, Turkish coastguard and security forces patrol the routes to Europe, detaining boats and bringing passengers back to Turkey. Often, as in the case of drowned toddler Aylan Kurdi, this involves picking up the bodies of those who died en route.

Turkey gives refugees "Temporary Protection" status to access schooling, healthcare and social services. But costs are spiralling as economic indicators tick into the red. The lira this month hit record lows against the dollar whilst the economy grew just 2.9 pct last year, far below a 5 pct target. The gloomy outlook is only fuelling the illicit flow of refugees to Europe. "There is no life here. We need to live a normal life. I want to find a job," 32-year old Tariq said as he waited to cross illegally from the Turkish resort of Bodrum to the Greek island of Kos on his flight from Syria's devastated Aleppo.

Open the Gates?

Yesterday, security forces stopped hundreds of would-be migrants as they tried to reach Turkey's western land border with Greece. Unless European countries take more refugees or boost financial aid to Turkey, officials could begin to turn a blind eye to those trying to leave, aid-workers and diplomats

feared. "European countries need to step up to the plate to increase their support to Turkey," says Jean-Christophe Pegon, Turkey head of the European Commission Directorate-General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO). "Turkey could just open the gates, and for the moment they're not doing that."

A senior EU source told Reuters the bloc had been slow to engage with Turkey on tackling refugee flows, but that talks were underway to unlock funds to help refugees inside Turkey. Although it houses roughly half of all Syrian refugees, Turkey receives less money than poorer refugee-hosting countries like Lebanon and Jordan. The United Nations estimates that it has raised only 30 pct of the funds it says it needs for Turkey this year.

Some diplomats say direct offers of funding have been made but have foundered on Ankara's tight conditionality on how money is used and what role aid organisations are allowed to play. Ankara has also made little concrete progress convincing western partners of the urgent need for a "safe zone" in northern Syria, where some refugees could be resettled. Western officials privately say any such plan is probably years away. "I don't think it's even being discussed by the Turkish General Staff, it's just a political aspiration," one western diplomat with military knowledge said.

Despite the worsening prospects, a senior Turkish official insisted Ankara's policy would remain unchanged. "Turkey remains committed to helping people in need, whether or not the international community will continue to turn a blind eye to the problem," the official told Reuters. EDAM's Ulgen says Ankara would likely wait and see if the recent upsurge of debate in Europe over the migrant crisis would bolster resolve in the West for more decisive action on Syria. "But if on all fronts expectations remain unfulfilled, then as a last resort, Ankara could raise pressure by being less co-operative in regard of the outflow of refugees towards Europe," he added. —Reuters

RUSSIA GAMBLES IN SYRIA, UPS INVOLVEMENT

By Bassem Mroue And Zeina Karam

In ramping up its military involvement in Syria's civil war, Russia appears to be betting that the West, horrified by the Islamic State group's spread and an escalating migrants crisis, may be willing to quietly tolerate President Bashar Al-Assad for a while, perhaps as part of a transition. The logic is that prioritizing the fight with the jihadis means accepting Assad as the less bad option despite his own brutal acts, and might produce a more effective and coordinated fight in the air and on the ground.

It also would reorganize an awkward situation in Syria, whereby the Assad regime and the US-led coalition are actively fighting the same group but do not act like allies - as opposed to coordination the coalition maintains with the central Baghdad authorities in the parallel fight against Islamic State group in neighboring Iraq.

Russia has no such complications. A longtime backer of Syria's government, Moscow has recently increased its military activity in Syria, sending military advisers, technicians and security guards with the main goal of setting up an air base near the coastal town of Latakia, a stronghold of the Syrian president. There are reports that the Russians had flown in troops and modular housing units. And Israel's defense minister, Moshe Yaalon, says he expects Russians to be fighting alongside Assad's troops.

Even more than the concurrent assistance by Iran and proxy Shiite militias on behalf of Assad, Russian military intervention could potentially be a game changer in the Syrian conflict, tipping the scales in a spectacularly ruinous civil war that has killed a quarter of a million people and created a massive global humanitarian crisis. The degree and speed of the impact depends on scale. And there is also a chance that the Russian efforts could pro-

long the bloodshed, counteracting the various US efforts to train and arm palatable rebel groups.

Russia claims it is mainly motivated by fighting IS. But US President Barack Obama cast the buildup as an effort to prop up Assad. Samantha Power, the US ambassador to the United Nations, warned that "doubling down" on the Assad regime "is not a winning strategy." In an interview with CNN, she said that "Assad cannot be part of a solution ... because he gasses his people, uses barrel bombs against them and is responsible for one of the worst torture campaigns in modern memory." Even if "all you cared about is (Islamic State) this is not going to bring peace or succeed in defeating terrorism," she said.

Tactician

Despite such statements, evidence suggests Russian President Vladimir Putin believes the West can be swayed, if only informally. Moscow may also hope that a creatively constructive role in Syria might help improve ties with the West, ravaged in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis. "Putin has proven an excellent tactician on the Syrian crisis, and he currently likely senses a chance to increase Russia's prestige and influence with relatively little pushback from the international community," said Ayham Kamel, Middle East and North Africa director of the London-based Eurasia group. "Putin probably realizes that the US and Europe are no longer enthusiastic about regime change in Syria and are more focused on the threat of the Islamic State," he added.

Indeed, European leaders have recently begun voicing what many say the Obama administration will not say publicly. British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond told Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee that his government was willing to accept "compromises" with Russia and Iran that could see Assad play a role "for some months" in a transition process. A day earli-

er, Austria's foreign minister was even more direct, saying the West should involve Assad in the fight against IS. Sebastian Kurz's comments came during a state visit to Tehran, and reflected what some officials have been saying privately for months. "One should not forget the crimes that Assad has committed, but also not forget the pragmatic view of the fact that in this fight we are on the same side," Kurz said.

A true Russian buildup could complicate future American military action in Syria, including a safe zone along the Turkish border which has been discussed with Ankara. While neither the US nor its Saudi allies currently preoccupied with the war in Yemen are likely to openly confront the Russian deployment, both are likely to respond by stepping up their aid to anti-Assad rebels. It also carries risks for Russia, where memories of its 1980s struggles against Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan still sting: an increased Russian presence may itself become a target for Syrian opposition and jihadi elements.

Syrian opposition member Badr Jamous warned that rebels will regard any foreign fighters deployed on the side of the government as a legitimate target. Moscow may also be trying to ensure it has a say in a future political settlement, as ideas percolate around the region. There are reports that Egypt, an erstwhile ally of Russia and China, is considering a rapprochement with Assad.

The Russian moves follow the successful conclusion of the Iran nuclear deal, in which Moscow also played a key role. Both countries have a huge investment in the Syrian regime, which along with being a client state provides Russia with its only remaining Mediterranean and Middle Eastern base in the port of Tartus. A series of major defeats for the Syrian military may have hastened Russia's decision to intensify its activity in Syria. Extremists are estimat-

ed to be in control of half the ravaged country, while rebels backed by the US, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have made striking gains in the country's north and south, putting pressure on Assad's coastal heartland.

Transition

There is speculation about whether the Russians may convince Assad to accept a face-saving transition process that incorporates the Western-backed rebels into a power sharing deal. But several Lebanese politicians with close links to the Syrian government who frequent Damascus say the Syrian leadership is confident of the support of its Russian and Iranian friends and does not feel threatened enough to negotiate.

The extent of Moscow's involvement in Syria will likely remain sketchy until Putin speaks at the UN general assembly later this month. A Pentagon spokesman, Navy Capt Jeff Davis, said Monday the US is closely monitoring the buildup. "We have seen indications in recent days that Russia has moved people and things into the area around Latakia and the air base there that suggests that it intends to establish some sort of a forward air operating base," Davis said.

He said the US has concerns about ensuring that any Russian military air operations not come into conflict with US and coalition airstrikes that are being conducted in other parts of Syria against Islamic State targets and that "things that continue to support the Assad regime ... are unhelpful and risk adding greater instability to an already unstable situation." A recent analysis by The Soufan Group, a New York-based private risk assessment company, predicted worsening conflict amid the regional maneuvering. "Already a lethal cauldron of regional proxy warfare, Syria will further deteriorate if the US and Russia use both sides of the civil war as leverage against the other," it said. —AP

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