

## MEXICAN FM VISITS TOURISTS INJURED IN EGYPT AIR STRIKE

**CAIRO:** Mexico's foreign minister visited a Cairo hospital yesterday to meet survivors of an Egyptian air strike that mistakenly killed eight Mexican tourists, after President Enrique Pena Nieto expressed his country's "outrage".

The Mexican survivors have said their tour group came under aerial attack on Sunday in what the Egyptian interior ministry described as a botched operation against militants in the Western Desert. Four Egyptians were also killed. Foreign Minister Claudia Ruiz Massieu arrived in Cairo early yesterday seeking answers from the Egyptian government, which said it was still investigating the incident. She will meet President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi after she has visited the wounded tourists at Dar Al Fouad hospital, the Egyptian presidency said. The Egyptian government has said guides took the tourists into a restricted zone, an accusation vehemently denied by a union representing the guides.

In a letter addressed to Mexicans on Tuesday, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry expressed his "deepest condolences" for the incident. But he stopped short of an apology, saying there was a probe under way and that "the chain of events is still confusing and unclear". Sisi called Pena Nieto on Tuesday to express his "most sincere condolences" over the "tragic incident", the Mexican leader's office said in a statement.

"President Pena Nieto expressed his deep dismay and sadness over the death of our citizens, as well as the pain and outrage that these unprecedented events have caused within Mexican society," the statement said. His foreign minister, accompanied by relatives of four of the victims, will try "to obtain first-hand information that would clarify the circumstances of this deplorable event," a statement from her ministry said. In Mexico, details of the victims began to emerge from families and friends. They reportedly included 41-year-old musician Rafael Bejarano Rangel, whose mother was wounded in the strike, as well as former university professor Luis Barajas Fernandez and model agency head Queta Rojas. A former lawmaker, Maria Elena Cruz Munoz, was also feared dead. Egypt said the tourists entered a restricted area in the Western Desert and were "mistakenly" killed as security forces chased jihadists who had abducted and beheaded an Egyptian. The incident has proven embarrassing for security forces which

regularly claim to have killed dozens of militants in air strikes, tolls that are difficult to independently verify.

### Police escort

Hassan Al-Nahla, head of Egypt's tour guides union, said the tourist group had received all the required permits and set off with a police escort from Cairo to Bahariya oasis, roughly 350 kilometers away. About 80 kilometers from their hotel, they veered two kilometers into the desert for lunch, he said. The place they chose for their picnic was a regular tourist stop, Nahla added. "I don't blame anyone but I ask who is responsible for coordination and why was it absent? If the military is dealing with terrorists, why were the authorities who issue permits not notified? Why was the tourism ministry not notified so it could coordinate with the tourism companies?"

Nahla told AFP the area where they stopped had never been a restricted zone. "There was no notification on the ground, and no coordination," he said of the security operation. The Western Desert is popular with tour groups, but is also a militant hideout, with Western embassies warning against non-essential travel there.

Last month, Egypt's branch of the Islamic State group, which calls itself Sinai Province, beheaded a Croatian oil worker who was abducted near Cairo, at the edge of the Western Desert. IS in Egypt said on Sunday it had "resisted a military operation in the Western Desert" and published pictures of its fighters apparently engaging the military. The incident is likely to raise further fears for Egypt's vital tourism industry, which has struggled to recover from years of turmoil. Many Egyptians on social media have criticized the government for suggesting the tourists were at fault for straying into a restricted zone. The country has struggled to quell a jihadist insurgency focused mainly in the Sinai Peninsula in the east since the military overthrew Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in 2013.

The military last week launched a wide-scale campaign to uproot militants in the peninsula, claiming to have already killed more than 200 jihadists. Eleven soldiers have died in the operation, it said on Tuesday. Cairo says hundreds of police and soldiers have been killed, many in attacks claimed by Sinai Province, which pledged allegiance to IS last year. — AFP



**AMMAN:** Syrian refugees gather outside their embassy waiting to apply for passports or to renew their old ones. — AP

## SYRIAN REFUGEES SEEK NEW PASSPORTS AS AN EU TICKET

**AMMAN:** Hundreds of Syrian refugees line up outside their embassy in Jordan every day for a long shot at a better future - applying for new passports that allow them to enter Turkey legally and from there start on a dangerous trek to Europe.

The crowds in Amman have been turning up since Syria began issuing passports for large numbers of refugees without travel documents. Also, cuts in international aid have made the refugees' survival even tougher in Mideast host countries like Jordan.

In a measure of their despair, some of those waiting in line said they sold their wives' gold dowry or went deeper into debt to pay \$400 for a new passport, double what most make per month with off-the-books odd jobs. There is also a sense of urgency among the refugees, after several European countries re-imposed border checks in recent days to stem the flow of migrants.

Refugees preparing for the journey said they are willing to gamble. They believe there is no future for them in overcrowded Jordan, where they can't work legally or provide for their families. "The minute I get the passport, I will fly to Turkey," said house painter Ali Mohammed, 33, one of those in line this week at the Syrian Embassy. Mohammed, who fled Syria in 2012, said his final destination is Germany, where some of his relatives have found asylum.

### Conflict-scarred

The new possibility of a direct Jordan-Turkey route feeds into growing migration from the conflict-scarred Middle East to an increasingly overwhelmed Europe. EU member states have been arguing over a solution, with some rejecting Germany's proposed quota system for accepting migrants, saying it's too big a burden. Others believe quotas will only encourage more migration and that the world must send more help to keep refugees in host countries neighboring Syria.

The International Organization for Migration says more than 464,000 migrants and refugees crossed the Mediterranean Sea to Europe this year, and that 2,182 died on the way. The agency says among those making the crossing were 175,000 Syrians traveling via Turkey and Greece. Germany has taken in the most, by far, with some 450,000 migrants registered so far this year. About one-third arrived since the beginning of August - though this also includes many migrants

from Eastern Europe. Germany has said Syrians have the best chance of gaining asylum.

For now, most of the more than 4 million Syrians who fled their country since the conflict broke out in 2011 still live close to home - the main asylum countries are Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq. But life in these countries is becoming increasingly difficult. Faced with growing funding gaps, international agencies have cut back sharply on cash and food aid to refugees. More than one-third of 630,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan were dropped from a UN food voucher program in September.

### New policy

Meanwhile, the Syrian government decided in late April to begin issuing passports to refugees. The pro-government newspaper Al-Watan said at the time that the decision would facilitate the movement of hundreds of thousands of refugees without passports and bring significant foreign currency income for Syria.

The new policy also meant the door to Europe - from Turkey by sea to Greece and then overland through the Balkans - opened wider. Turkey does not require visitors' visas for Syrians, according to the country's Foreign Ministry website and an official at the Turkish embassy in Jordan.

With new passports in hand, Syrians can fly from Jordan to Turkey, rather than travel overland through their dangerous, strife-torn homeland first. Aymen Alloush, Syria's top diplomat in Jordan, said Tuesday that his embassy now issues or renews about 10,000 passports per month. He said he believes many of the refugees want to leave Jordan, where the situation for them "is not good at all," but denied Syria is encouraging the exodus.

The international community should invest more in host countries like Jordan if it hopes to stem the flow to Europe. "If the situation is better ... nobody would like to take this dangerous journey to Europe or another country," he said. Mohammad al-Halayka, a former head of the foreign affairs committee in the Jordanian parliament, said the departure of several thousands of refugees will not make a big difference for Jordan, considering the large number remaining.

"The refugee burden has exhausted Jordan," he said. Obtaining passports is only the beginning, said several refugees outside the Syrian Embassy on

Sunday. Some said they won't leave Jordan just yet, since they don't have enough money to pay smugglers in Turkey - according to refugees as much as \$2,500 per person.

In the Lebanese capital of Beirut, several dozen men waited in line at the Syrian embassy yesterday to obtain passports. Jumaa, a 25-year-old barber from eastern Syria, said that once he picks up his passport, he hopes to visit his parents in Turkey after a three-year separation. From there, he'll try to reach Germany, he said.

### Top destination

For most, Germany remains the top destination, partly because of recent ambiguous comments from German officials who said they expect up to 1 million refugees and migrants by the end of the year. Some refugees mistook the forecast for a promise. Mohammed, the house painter, said he is determined to leave, despite the latest border restrictions in Europe. On Sunday, Mohammed was told he could pick up his passport in five to six weeks. Mohammed sold his wife Myasser's last pieces of gold - two bracelets - to pay the fee for the document. With passport in hand, he will fly to Turkey. His wife, who suffers from spinal muscular atrophy, will return to Syria temporarily with their sons, 5-year-old Hussein and 4-year-old Omar, to live with her parents. Once he reaches Germany, Mohammed plans to seek permission to bring over his family.

Mohammed pins his hopes on the example of his brother-in-law Nidal, a 34-year-old attorney, who reached Germany via Turkey nine months ago. Nidal has settled in the town of Saarbruecken and in July was joined by his wife Doa, Mohammed's sister. The two men spoke over the phone on Sunday night. "Guten Abend," Nidal said, conversing in beginner's German when Mohammed handed the phone to a reporter. Switching to Arabic, Nidal said the family is settling in.

Mohammed said he wants the same for his wife and children. "If I work, I can take care of my children," he said. "I'll live a decent life." Looking up at an old wall-mounted TV at his tiny apartment in the Jordanian town of Zarqa, he pointed to the images of streams of refugees walking in Europe. "Those people went," he said. "Now I'm No. 2, behind them." — AP



**CAIRO:** Mexican Foreign Minister Claudia Ruiz Massieu gives a press conference after arriving to meet survivors of an Egyptian air strike that mistakenly killed eight Mexican tourists, at a hospital. — AFP

## ASSAD SAYS PRIORITY IS DEFEATING TERRORISM

**BEIRUT:** Syria's president Bashar Assad urged Syrian political and armed factions to unite in the fight against terrorist groups and said in comments aired Tuesday that there can be no political solution for the country's brutal civil war before terrorism is defeated.

Speaking in an interview with Russian media, he also blamed Europe for the refugee crisis currently hitting the continent, saying it is a direct result of the West's support of extremists in Syria over the past four years. The Russian president has said it is impossible to defeat the Islamic State group without cooperating with Damascus. In recent days Moscow has sent about a half-dozen battle tanks and other weaponry - along with military advisers, technicians, security guards and portable housing units - to Syria with the apparent goal of setting up an air base near the coastal town of Latakia, a stronghold of the Syrian President.

US officials have said Moscow is simply trying to prop up Assad. In the interview Assad did not directly address the Russian moves, only praising Moscow as an "independent state" and an "impartial" broker of dialogue between Syrian groups. He urged the formation of a united front against the Islamic State group, saying the priority of every single Syrian citizen is to be secure.

"We, the political parties, the government and the armed groups that fought against the government, we must all unite in the name of combating terrorism," Assad said. He said dialogue can continue, but added that nothing can be implemented unless terrorism is defeated first. Assad also said Europe is to blame for the refugee crisis, citing also what he described as a failure to enforce a controlled immigration system, forcing refugees to set out across perilous seas.

"We all mourn these innocent victims but is one life lost drowned at sea more valuable than those who have died in Syria? How can one be indignant about a drowned child and remain silent about the death of thousands of children, elderly people, women and men killed by terrorists in Syria? These European double standards are unacceptable," he said.

"Europe is to blame in its principles because it supports terrorism and continues to do so, it provides protection for terrorists, calling them moderates, divides them into groups, when they are in fact the terrorist groups in Syria," he said. Addressing Europeans, Assad added: "Stop, if you are worried about them (refugees), stop supporting terrorists." The Syrian government considers all armed groups fighting to topple Assad to be terrorists. — AP

## TWO KIDNAPPED TURKISH WORKERS FREED IN IRAQ

**BASRA:** Two of 18 Turkish workers kidnapped by gunmen in Baghdad this month have been freed in the southern province of Basra, Turkish and Iraqi officials said yesterday. The men were among 18 employees of major Turkish construction firm Nurof Insaat kidnapped on September 2 in the Sadr City area of north Baghdad, where they were working on a football stadium project.

The kidnapping was claimed by an unknown militant group that presented itself as Shiite, and top cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani has demanded that they be released. The Turkish ambassador to Iraq, Faruk Kaymakci, said that two workers had been released and were found near a Turkish company's premises in Basra. "They are in good health," he told AFP. "They said the other 16 were also in good health as of yesterday (Tuesday)."

The Basra police issued a statement saying that the two men were found late on Tuesday, while the Turkish foreign ministry spokesman also confirmed their release.

"Two of our 18 fellow citizen abducted in Baghdad have been released. The two released workers are Necdet Yilmaz and Ercan Ozpirlavci,"

spokesman Tanju Bilgic told the Dogan news agency. The militant group that claimed the kidnappings, which identified itself as Furaq Al-Mawt, or "Death Squads," issued a list of demands it said Ankara must fulfill for them to be freed. The group said Turkey must order rebel forces to stop besieging four Shiite villages in northern Syria, stop militants from travelling from Turkey to Iraq, and cut the flow of "stolen oil from Kurdistan through Turkish territory."

Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region is independently exporting oil via Turkey in a move the federal government considers illegal - a point of contention between Baghdad and Ankara. "If (President Recep Tayyip) Erdogan and his party do not respond, we will crush Turkish interests and their agents in Iraq by the most violent means," the group said in the video.

Sistani, the top Shiite cleric in Iraq, who is revered by millions, said the kidnapped Turks must be freed. "We demand the release of the kidnapped men and the end of such practices, which harm the image of Islam" in general and Shiites in particular, Sistani's office said in a statement. — AFP

## GARBAGE MOUNTAINS ENCIRCLE BEIRUT AS TRASH CRISIS GROWS

**BEIRUT:** On the outskirts of the Lebanese capital, mountains of putrid garbage are rising and tempers are flaring as a months-old rubbish collection crisis shows no signs of being resolved. Desperate Beirut has taken to dumping its rubbish in huge makeshift piles, with the largest in Karantina at the northern entrance of the city-neighboring the trendy nightlife areas of Mar Mikhael and Gemmayzeh.

For Ali Yaacoub, a driver working for a firm based near the "Karantina mountain", it has become a blight on his city. "The situation has become unbearable," he said. "We spend six hours here each day among the smells and the insects." Hopes had been raised that the crisis, which dates back to mid-July, would come to an end after the government approved a plan last week following the biggest anti-government protests in years.

The plan called for waste management to be turned over to municipalities in 18 months, the temporary expansion of two landfills and the reopening for seven days of the Naameh dump south of Beirut, which was closed in July. Trash collection resumed but on Monday the main private company involved, Sukleen, announced it was throwing in the towel as improvised dumps reached full capacity.

Frustration has grown day-by-day, and on Wednesday police clashed with demonstrators angered by political inaction over the crisis. Back at the Karantina dump, Yaacoub and three colleagues swat away hordes of flies as they have breakfast at a plastic table just metres (yards) from the eyesore.

### Health, environmental fears

"I've almost lost my sense of smell," a firm's supervisor said, adding that several employees had suffered bouts of "throwing up, diarrhea and stomach pains". Garbage mountains have



**BEIRUT:** Lebanese policemen push back supporters of Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri during clashes with anti-government protesters. — AP

expert Ziad Abu Chaker warned of the health risks, saying "organic matter is being fermented in the air, spreading bacteria which cause diarrhoea". Environmentalists fear the crisis could degenerate to the point where garbage as well as sewage will simply overflow into the sea from riverbeds as winter rains return. The health ministry has warned that garbage scattered by seasonal winds could also block Lebanon's drainage system. Adding to the environmental and health concerns, many Beirutis are resorting to burning garbage or spraying rubbish piles with strong insecticides. — AFP