‘DEAD SYRIAN’ FACEBOOK POST HIGHLIGHTS REFUGEE FEARS

A RASH OF ONLINE RUMORS OVER GERMAN REFUGEE INFLUX

BERLIN: A Facebook post about the death of a Syrian refugee in Germany sparked a storm of reaction this week, only for the author to admit making it up, highlighting a rash of online rumors fuelled by a record asylum seeker influx.

At first glance, it was all too credible: a 24-year-old Syrian had been queuing for days in the cold at Berlin’s notoriously chaotic refugee registration centre Lageso even though he was ill.

Homeless and penniless, he finally went into cardiac arrest on the way to hospital and died, according to the account posted on Wednesday by kind-hearted volunteer Dirk Voltz, who had taken the man in.

But Voltz in fact fabricated the tale, duping not just national media and authorities but also Moabit Hilft, the neighborhood aid group that he volunteers with.

“I acted out of a relationship based on trust,” said a dismayed Diana Henninges, from the aid group, who had confirmed the purported death to national media before Voltz finally admitted he had invented it.

In a gripping “live” text-message style exchange with a friend published online, Voltz said he rang for an ambulance as the man was suffering from a “39.4 degree fever, chills and could no longer speak”.

He told his friend to find an Arabic speak-er quickly to communicate with the refugee, “I acted out of a relationship based on trust,” said a dismayed Diana Henninges, from the aid group, who had confirmed the purported death to national media before Voltz finally admitted he had invented it.

Finally, Voltz confessed to police he had, in a drunken stupor, lied. “It is indicative of this overly excited, sometimes hysterical time, but also of the state of Lageso, that so many people have immediately believed such a death,” Berlin daily Der Tagesspiegel said in an editorial.

Offical cover-up

After all, Moabit Hilft were the good guys— one of the key volunteer groups credited with averting disaster so far at Lageso by handing out clothes, warm drinks and food to asylum seekers huddling in the cold. Berlin authorities on the other hand have come under fire repeatedly for failing to improve conditions at Lageso, where thousands of newcomers wait, often for days, in an unsheltered courtyard to get an appointment with an overwhelmed bureaucracy.

While this purported death was seized on as seeming to lay bare how Germany was failing the 1.1 million asylum seekers who arrived last year, other rumours, often surrounding "crimes" committed by for-eigners, are also doing the rounds on the Internet. — AFP

A wheelchair-bound elderly woman arrives along with other migrants and refugees to the village of Miratovac after crossing into Serbia via the Macedonian border yesterday. — AFP

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S AFRICAN RACIAL TENSIONS FOIL OPPN CHALLENGE TO ANC

JOHANNESBURG: A racist Facebook post by a member of South Africa’s main opposition party has caused a national furor and left it scrambling to shake off its image of an organisation that chiefly serves the interests of the minority white community.

The episode highlighted how racial tensions simmer in the country more than two decades after Nelson Mandela became its first black president, with wealth and income gaps that are still visibly visible along race lines fueling perceptions of white privilege.

It could set back the Democratic Alliance’s efforts to attract black votes and present an effective opposition to the African National Congress (ANC), whose hold on power has been virtually untested since the end of apartheid despite rising discontent over an ailing economy and job losses.

The furor erupted this month after estate agent Penny Sparrow, a Democratic Alliance (DA) member, referred to black people as “monkeys” in a New Year’s Day rant on Facebook against littering at a public beach. It triggered hundreds of posts on social media condemning the comments, in turn leading to nation-wide media coverage and to some rival politicians saying Sparrow had expressed views secretly shared by many DA supporters—who, along with its political leaders, are predominantly white.

In the following days, the ANC organised several anti-racism marches attended by hundreds of people. The DA was quick to denounce and expel Sparrow, but the episode dealt a blow to its drive to convince voters it is committed to an equal society, despite having elected its first black leader last year, Mmusi Maimane.

It risks costing the party the support of some black middle-class voters like Ndodana Nikuni, who had grown disenchanted with the ANC and was thinking of giving the opposition a chance at this year’s local government elections. “Now I’m not so sure,” said the 27-year-old financial market analyst from Johannesburg. “It seems like apartheid is still alive and well.”

Mcebisi Ndletyana, a professor of political science at the University of Johannesburg, said the Sparrow post has exacerbated a problem that has been compounded. "Mmusi Maimane’s presidency started off on a good footing ... but they’ve taken a step back. Racial identity is a strong problem that the DA faces both at national and local elections and that problem has been compounded,” Tensions in the country rose further when, days after Sparrow’s post, prominent Standard Bank economist Chris Hart suggested on Twitter that 25 years of ANC rule had perpetuated poverty and entrenched a tendency to blame whites for all of South Africa’s ills. — Reuters