

## EU'S TOP LAWYER BACKS 'WORK HEADSCARF' BAN

**BRUSSELS:** The most senior lawyer at the EU's top court said yesterday that companies may ban Muslim headscarves if they are enforcing a general prohibition on religious symbols in the workplace. The case concerns a woman, Samira Achbita, who was fired by Belgian security firm G4S Secure Solutions after she insisted on being allowed to go to work while wearing a headscarf for religious reasons. The opinion expressed by the advocate general to the

European Court of Justice is only an initial view and not a binding ruling, but usually the court follows the senior lawyer's advice when eventually giving its judgment.

"A ban on wearing headscarves in companies may be admissible," Juliane Kokott's ruling said. "If the ban is based on a general company rule which prohibits political, philosophical and religious symbols from being worn visibly in the workplace, such a ban may be justified if it

enables the employer to pursue the legitimate policy of ensuring religious and ideological neutrality." Achbita had been working for three years for G4S in Belgium when she insisted on being allowed to wear a headscarf and was dismissed as the firm prohibits the wearing of any visible religious, political and philosophical symbols.

She took legal action backed by a Belgian racial equality organization but the case was dismissed by two lower courts. Belgium's court

of cassation then referred the case to the EU's top court to seek clarification on discrimination laws. The wearing of headscarves or full-face veils has been an increasingly contentious debate in Europe between the forces of secularism and sections of the continent's Muslim minority. France brought in a ban on full-face veils in 2010, despite claims that the ban was discriminatory and violates freedom of expression and religion. — AFP



**REGGIO CALABRIA, Italy:** The body of a migrant is evacuated from Italian Navy ship 'Vega' which transports more than 600 migrants rescued at sea and the bodies of 45 people in the port of Reggio Calabria, southern Italy. — AFP

## MIGRANT DEATHS RISE

### 880 KILLED IN MEDITERRANEAN SHIPWRECKS OVER LAST WEEK

**GENEVA:** More than 2,500 people have died trying to make the perilous journey across the Mediterranean to Europe so far in 2016, the UN said yesterday, a sharp jump from the same period last year. At the same time some 204,000 migrants and refugees have crossed the Mediterranean to the continent since January, a figure that has also climbed acutely. In the past week alone, at least 880 people have died in a series of shipwrecks, the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) said, citing information from survivors who made it to Italy. "I emphasize that that figure is a conservative estimate," UNHCR spokesman William Spindler told reporters.

A number of small children reportedly drowned in the series of boat accidents over the past week, as thousands continue to attempt the sea crossing to Europe in rickety vessels from the Middle East and Africa. UNHCR described desperate situations at the weekend, with 47 people still missing after one incident where a raft carrying 125 people from Libya deflated. Spindler warned that "2016 is proving to be particularly deadly," saying that during the first five months of 2015, the death toll stood at 1,855, while the

number during the same period in 2014 was 57.

The number of arrivals is more than double the nearly 92,000 who landed on the continent's shores during the first five months of 2015, according to the International Organization for Migration, although more than one million made the trip by the end of last year. Three quarters of those who have arrived in Europe so far in 2016 landed in Greece before the end of March - most of them refugees fleeing conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan. But arrivals to Greece have fallen sharply since the EU entered a controversial deal on March 20 with key transit country Turkey to stem the flow of migrants.

#### Deadly route

Meanwhile, 46,714 people have arrived in Italy since the beginning of the year, around the same number as during the first five months of 2015, UNHCR said. Nearly all of those travelling on this route are from sub-Saharan Africa, especially Nigeria and Gambia, as well as Somalia and Eritrea. Counting all routes across the Mediterranean, Spindler said the odds of dying while trying to cross to Europe was now one in 81.

The route between Libya and Italy, which is far longer than the one between Turkey and Greece, has proven particularly deadly, with 2,119 of all deaths registered this year along that route. Spindler warned that the risk of dying on that route was now one in 23. The boats taking this route tend to be far more crowded, he explained, often carrying 600 or more passengers and sometimes being towed by larger fishing boats, which Spindler said was "very dangerous." "Smugglers are getting more ruthless," he warned.

He said there was suspicion that the recent increase in numbers attempting to cross the Mediterranean could be linked to "efforts by smugglers to maximize income before the start of the holy month of Ramadan", which begins next week. Also yesterday Italian prosecutors announced the arrest of 16 alleged traffickers who are accused of helping nearly 900 migrants make the journey from Libya to Italy. The suspects - 11 of whom were Moroccan - were on board a boat that arrived Saturday in Sicily after being rescued two days earlier off the coast of Libya. — AFP

## I COAST'S EX-FIRST LADY ON TRIAL FOR POLL BLOODBATH

**ABIDJAN:** Ivory Coast's feisty former first lady Simone Gbagbo went on trial yesterday for crimes against humanity in what many see as a litmus case for justice in the west African country. The hearings into the 66-year-old's role in post-election carnage in 2010 is expected to last a month with 32 witnesses testifying. Security was tight with the entrance to the court sealed off and Kalashnikov-wielding officers guarding the complex as she was led in and seated in a red chair opposite the bench.

Nicknamed the "Iron Lady," Gbagbo is accused of planning and organizing rights abuses against supporters of her husband's presidential rival in a bid to maintain Laurent Gbagbo in power at all costs. He was finally defeated at the polls however and is currently also facing trial at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. More than 3,000 people died in the nation in bloody post-poll violence which petered out only after the arrest of the Gbagbo couple in 2011 when troops stormed the bunker where they had taken refuge in the nation's main city, Abidjan.

Simone Gbagbo faces allegations of crimes against prisoners of war, crimes against the civilian population and crimes against humanity. This is her second trial in Ivory Coast where she is being held behind bars in Abidjan after a 20-year conviction for "attacking state security". Witnesses have accused her of personally distributing arms to death squads that operated in Abidjan during the five-month conflict but she has repeatedly denies this.

#### 'Moment for justice'

Human Rights Watch said the trial "could be a pivotal moment for justice" in the world's top cocoa producer, a beacon of stability in restive west Africa until a 1999 coup that was shortly followed by years of low-level civil war. The decade of strife and last wrenching months of violence between pro- and anti-Gbagbo supporters have left deep divisions and grievances that still need to be reconciled. The trial

opens just five days after the Supreme Court rejected her final appeal against the 20-year sentence she was handed last year.

"Simone Gbagbo's trial - the first in Ivory Coast for crimes against humanity - should be an opportunity for victims of pro-Gbagbo forces to learn the truth about her alleged role in abuses," Jim Wormington, west Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch said. "But unless the trial is credible and fair, the hopes of victims will be short-lived." One of her lawyers, Mathurin Dirabou, has described the charges against her as "fanciful". "These accusations have been created to please certain parts of the international community. It's a pity. Enough is enough," he added.

The ICC in The Hague had issued a warrant for Simone Gbagbo's arrest, but Ivorian authorities refused to hand her over saying she would face a fair trial at home. The decision was seen as a snub to the ICC, with President Alassane Ouattara saying he would "not send any more Ivorians" to The Hague as his country has an "operational justice system". But Ouattara has faced accusations his government only intends to prosecute crimes by pro-Gbagbo forces in the 2010-2011 conflict, charges he rejects. "For the trial to be meaningful to victims, it must be credible, fair, and followed by other trials that target high-level rights abusers from both sides of the 2010-2011 post-election crisis," Human Rights Watch said.

But on Monday, three rights groups representing nearly 250 victims of the violence, pulled out of the trial because of doubts over its "credibility". "Our lawyers have not had access to all stages of the procedures-how can they defend their case?" the head of one of the groups, the Ivorian League of Human Rights said. Pierre Kouame Adjoumani said the trial lacked "relevance", adding that Simone Gbagbo "is accused of crimes against humanity, something she could have only done through an organised group-so why is only she being judged?" — AFP



**ABIDJAN:** Ivory Coast's former First Lady Simone Gbagbo arrives for her trial at the Abidjan Justice Court yesterday. — AFP

## 4 KILLED IN RIOTS IN NIGERIA OVER 'ALLEGED BLASPHEMY'

**KANO:** At least four people were killed in central Nigeria in two days of violence over an alleged blasphemy by a Christian trader against Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), residents said yesterday. Abdullahi Sallau said a Muslim mob killed one person on Sunday and three on Monday in the town of Pandogari in Niger state "following blasphemous remarks by a Christian against the Prophet". One of those killed was Methodus Chimaije Emmanuel, the 24-year-old who posted comments on his Facebook page, said Sallau, who lives in the town.

#### His account was supported by another local

Emmanuel, whose parents were from Nigeria's mainly Christian south but who was born and raised in Pandogari, had gone into hiding following the post but was found. "The crowd took the law into their hands and mobbed him to death despite the revulsion expressed by his parents over the online comments," said Misbahu Malami, who lives locally.

Soldiers and police have made arrests and imposed an overnight curfew to restore calm after crowds went on the rampage, looting shops, burning a church and demanding the suspects' release. Sallau said soldiers opened fire and killed three while three others were injured. The military said one of the dead was a member of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps. Army spokesman Major NC Agwu confirmed

that Emmanuel was killed by a mob "on (the) allegation of posting a blasphemous statement about Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) on the social media".

Soldiers "quickly intervened and restored law and order while a dusk-to-dawn curfew was imposed in the town" but the mob on Monday took over a major road, prompting further deployments, he said. "Regrettably, one church, one house and a shop were burnt while 25 other shops were looted following the violence," added Agwu. Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) is the most revered figure in Islam and blasphemy against him is punishable with death under Islamic law. Previous allegations of blasphemy against the Prophet have seen deadly sectarian clashes before in Nigeria, which is almost evenly split between Muslims in the north and Christians in the south.

In 2002 riots broke out in the northern city of Kaduna between Muslim and Christian residents over a planned Miss World pageant to which many Muslims were opposed. The riots were fuelled by comments in a Nigerian newspaper article. Days of violence left more than 200 people dead. In 1987, hundreds were killed in the town of Kafanchan, also in Kaduna, following an alleged blasphemy by a Christian evangelist. In January this year, an Islamic court in the northern city of Kano sentenced a Muslim cleric to death for blasphemy after comments he made last year sparked violent protests. — AFP

## DROWNED MIGRANT BABY - A PHOTO WAKE-UP CALL FOR EU

**BERLIN:** A photo of a dead migrant baby pulled from the Mediterranean was published by a charity hoping to force European leaders to grant migrants safe passage, after hundreds were presumed to have died at sea last week. The baby in the photograph was not identified, but the German non-governmental organization Sea-Watch said the infant was found in the water last week after a wooden boat carrying

350 migrants capsized off the Libyan coast.

The photo shows the baby, its eyes closed with blue-tinged lips, in the arms of a rescuer. Many of the migrants had already drowned when the rescue boat arrived, the humanitarian group said, without giving a specific number. Sea-Watch said urgent action was required from European Union leaders to prevent more migrant deaths, as Europe faces its worst

migrant crisis since World War II. "If we do not want to see such pictures we have to stop producing them," Sea-Watch said in a statement released with the photo on Monday. "In the wake of these disastrous events it becomes obvious that the calls by EU politicians to avoid further death at sea, sum up to nothing more than lip service." The image was released after a deadly week in the Mediterranean, with 700 feared dead and several small children reportedly drowned in a series of boat accidents as thousands continue to attempt the deadly sea crossing to Europe in rickety vessels from the Middle East and Africa.

Many of those who have died at sea trying to reach European shores were children. The image of a drowned three-year-old Syrian boy Aylan Kurdi washed ashore on a Turkish beach last year stunned the world. "These accidents will not stop... a policy forcing people on the boats will always lead to such pictures. We think that solely the establishment of new systems ensuring legal and safe entries to EU can finally lead to an ending of this humanitarian tragedy," added the statement.

Sea-Watch justified the publication of the photograph saying that such images "have to be acknowledged by the European society as the tragedies are the consequence of EU foreign policy". Over one million migrants, many refugees escaping conflict in Syria and other states, arrived in Europe in 2015, with almost 200,000 arriving so far this year by land and sea routes. The influx has caused concern in some conservative EU societies, boosting right-wing parties and prompting the bloc to negotiate a controversial deal with key transit country Turkey to stem the flow of migrants. — AFP



**AT SEA:** A Sea-Watch crew member holds a drowned baby as dead bodies were recovered after a wooden boat transporting migrants had capsized off the Libyan coast. — AFP