

International

Short-sighted policies stall Balkans' integration into EU

Leaders voice disappointment at summit

MOUNT JAHORINA, Bosnia: Short-sighted anti-immigrant populism in some European Union member states has blocked the integration of Western Balkan countries into the EU, weakening the region's stability, Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan said yesterday. He was speaking at a 12-nation Balkans summit where leaders voiced deep disappointment with the EU's lack of follow-through on promises to open membership talks with North Macedonia and Albania, opposed by northern EU countries.

In June, EU governments unexpectedly put off a decision to start the talks with the two and cast doubt on the bloc's existing strategy to counter a growing Russian and Chinese presence in the Balkans. Erdogan and other speakers at the Balkans gathering held near the Bosnian capital Sarajevo criticized the EU over its reluctance to pursue further enlargement of the bloc. "Recently we have seen that some short-sighted populist circles have blocked EU enlargement policy. Negative trends toward division and discrimination have spread across the continent and endanger not only internal peace

within the EU but...hope and potential of the (Balkans) region."

The EU's appetite for further enlargement has been eroded by anti-immigration sentiment among voters and by increased criticism of the 28-nation bloc's already complex and lumbering decision-making processes. France and the Netherlands, with support from Denmark, also may seek further conditions such as more reform to tackle corruption and organized crime in Albania and Macedonia.

Turkey's own bid for EU membership, launched back in 2004, has been stalled for years, with EU officials citing Ankara's disregard for human rights and civil liberties under Erdogan. Some EU leaders want the talks to be scrapped. Erdogan has blamed alleged prejudice against Muslims for the impasse. Montenegro President Milo Djukanovic called on other Western Balkan leaders to come up with a clear, common approach regarding expectations for relations with the EU.

"We are concerned about enlargement policy being slowed down and being made vague," Djukanovic said, adding that other

countries of the region had also received discouraging signals regarding the EU accession process. He said the EU had failed to abolish visa requirements for Kosovo citizens or approve the opening of the last chapter in Montenegro's accession process, while postponing the approval of Bosnia's candidate status for later this year.

"I believe the issue of a real enlargement perspective will have to be opened very soon - whether we, the countries of the Western Balkans and the EU, are privileged partners or we are going back to the position of neighbors who (merely) share concern about the future of our common continent," he said. Western Balkans states that comprised the former Yugoslavia were wracked by ethnic war in the 1990s, and tensions linger.

Erdogan also paid respect to victims of the 1995 genocide in Srebrenica, laying flowers on trucks bearing the coffins of 33 among the 8,000 Muslim men and boys massacred by Bosnian Serb forces. The remains, which were exhumed from mass graves, will be reburied in a ceremony on July 11, the massacre anniversary. —Reuters



SARAJEVO: Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan attends the meeting of presidents of South-East Europe Co-operation Process (SEECP), on Mt Jahorina, near Sarajevo. — AFP

Calls for unity in Ethiopia's Tigray

MEKELE, Ethiopia: In his cramped studio, Ethiopian reggae singer Solomon Yikunoamlak plucks his guitar and reads over his latest ballad, a strident call for unity in his native Tigray during a time of national upheaval. It is unusual material for an artist who rose to fame singing love songs, but Solomon expects it will resonate with Tigrayan listeners who have witnessed their authority fade under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's leadership.

Since coming to power last year, the 42-year-old leader has loosened controls in long-authoritarian Ethiopia and shaken up decades-old power arrangements, angering some Tigrayans who feel sidelined as other ethnicities jostle for influence. "Nowadays everybody becomes activists, and everybody becomes politicians," Solomon told AFP, reflecting on the fevered political climate that has taken hold since Abiy assumed office. "This is because of the current problems."

In Mekele, the regional capital, Tigrayans complain they have been scapegoated by the prime minister, who is an ethnic Oromo, for Ethiopia's woes in recent years. Anti-Abiy sentiment in Tigray was spotlighted following the killings last month of five high-ranking government and military officials—violence Abiy says was part of a coup attempt in Amhara state, neighboring Tigray.

Two of the victims, including the army chief, were from Tigray, and their funerals in Mekele sparked an outpouring of grief, with some mourners denouncing Abiy as a traitor. "There is a huge frustration here in Tigray," said Nebiyu Sehil Mikael, a writer and lecturer at Mekele University. "There is a sharp opposition against the federal government."

We are under threat

Yet anger with Abiy was a feature of daily life in Mekele before the June unrest. Tigrayans grumble of a central government hostile to their interests. Though they make up just six percent of Ethiopia's population of 100 million people, Tigrayans were long seen as wielding outsized authority. After toppling the brutal communist Derg regime



MEKELE, Ethiopia: Ethiopian Tigrayan reggae singer Solomon Yikunoamlak, poses during an interview with AFP, in Mekele, the capital of Tigray Region, Ethiopia. — AFP

in 1991, the Tigray People's Liberation Front transformed from a rebel movement into the strongest political party of the ruling coalition that remains in charge today.

But the TPLF was undermined by several years of anti-government protests that swept Abiy to power. It remains part of the ruling coalition, though it has been weakened further under Abiy. Tigrayans have been stripped of top positions and in some cases jailed on charges of corruption and human rights violations. Some of those targeted under Abiy have become Tigrayan heroes.

Clothing vendor Zayid Meles said one of her top sellers these days was a T-shirt declaring "I am Getachew Assefa"—a reference to the powerful Tigrayan former spy chief who Abiy fired last year. Despite being the target of an arrest warrant, Getachew remains at large and is believed to be hiding somewhere in the region.

Zayid said the T-shirt—which includes a rendering of Getachew's face shielded by a scarf, hat and sunglasses—is a way of signaling to Abiy that Getachew will never face trial.

"All Tigrayans buy it," she said. "Getachew is a hero." Tigrayans fear for their future override other concerns about the TPLF's shortcomings in promoting democracy and

fighting poverty, said Mahari Yohans, a prominent Tigrayan political commentator. "The politics of Tigray is the politics of security," he said. "We are under threat."

Regional disunity

The situation has become so polarized that Tigrayans are increasingly entertaining the idea of secession, said Wondimu Asamnew, a Mekele native and longtime Ethiopian diplomat. "It's very sad," he said. "They have started even to question whether or not they belong to the country." Even if secession is a far-fetched prospect, it's clear the tensions are coloring everything from Tigrayans' Facebook posts to how they watch football.

Fans of Mekele's Ethiopian Premier League club, Mekele 70 Enderta F C, were dismayed earlier this year when supporters of a rival club tore down a poster of Tigrayan former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi during a match in Addis Ababa. The teams' supporters skirmished again at a follow-up match in Mekele, prompting the Ethiopian Football Federation to temporarily suspend the league. The TPFL has seized the opportunity to turn support for Mekele 70 Enderta F C into a regional cause. — AFP

Internet services restored in Sudan

KHARTOUM: Mobile internet services were restored across Sudan yesterday following a court order, weeks after the ruling generals imposed a blockade in the wake of a brutal crackdown on protesters. Demonstrators were violently dispersed on June 3 by men in military fatigues, who stormed a weeks-long protest camp outside army headquarters in Khartoum where Sudanese had camped to demand that the generals step down.

Armed men, shooting and beating protesters in a pre-dawn raid, killed dozens of demonstrators and wounded hundreds. Days later internet on mobile phones and fixed land connections was cut across Sudan, with users saying it was done to prevent further mobilization of protesters. Khartoum-based lawyer Abdelazim al-Hassan filed a case against the blockade, urging a court in the capital to order telecom company Zain to restore the internet services on his own mobile phone.

Days later internet on fixed land connections was restored, but the mobile 3G and 4G services remained cut. "I returned to court and said that numerous clients of Zain and other telecom companies were impacted due to the cut," Hasan told a news conference yesterday. "Today, the court issued an order to Zain and to MTN and Sudani to restore their mobile internet services," referring to three telecom companies.

Later yesterday the internet services on MTN and Sudani networks were restored, but not on Zain, users said. Several subscribers of MTN and Sudani contacted by AFP confirmed they were able to make voice and video calls through social media networks like the WhatsApp messaging platform. Protesters and rights group say the internet blockade was an attempt to quell protests against the generals, who had seized power after the army ousted longtime ruler Omar al-Bashir in April following nationwide protests against his rule. — AFP

Turkey issues warrants for over 200 soldiers over alleged coup links

ANKARA: Turkish police began nationwide raids yesterday aimed at detaining over 200 military personnel suspected of ties to the group blamed for a 2016 coup attempt, officials and state media reported, in an ongoing crackdown that has seen thousands jailed. The Istanbul public prosecutor said it issued arrest warrants for 176 active duty military personnel, including a colonel, five majors and 100 lieutenants from the different armed forces over alleged links to Muslim preacher Fethullah Gulen's movement.

Turkey says US-based Gulen ordered the failed overthrow of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan but he vehemently denies the charges. The Izmir public prosecutor in the Aegean region issued arrest warrants for 35 suspects including 20 soldiers on active duty and 10 civilians, state news agency Anadolu said. The agency said eight suspects had been detained already.

In the northwestern province of Kocaeli, the prosecutor sought the arrest of 17 suspects including nine current and former soldiers across seven cities, Anadolu reported. Authorities have detained tens of thousands of individuals since 2016, and the raids show no sign of slowing with almost daily reports of arrest warrants issued despite criticism from Western allies and rights defenders. Critics say the government is using the purge to crackdown on dissent but Turkish officials stress the raids are necessary to eradicate Gulen's influence in state bodies. — AFP

Afghan rivals conclude talks

DOHA: Dozens of influential Afghans concluded two days of talks with the Taliban on Monday in Doha, laying the foundations for renewed negotiations between the United States and the militants. The encounter ended with a joint statement pledging a "roadmap for peace" based on the opening of a monitored peace process, return of internally displaced people, and non-interference by regional powers in Afghanistan.

"Assuring women rights in political, social, economic, educational, cultural affairs as per (and) within the Islamic framework of Islamic values," also featured in the joint text. "It's not an agreement, it's a foundation to start the discussion," delegate Mary Akrami, executive director of the Afghan Women's Network, told AFP. "The good part was that both sides agreed."

The Taliban's Amir Khan Mutaqi, a former minister during the militant group's 1996-2001 rule of Afghanistan, read a Pashto version of the roughly 700-word statement. Habiba Sarabi, deputy chair of the Afghan High Peace Council established by former president Hamid Karzai to engage elements of the Taliban, read the Dari equivalent. Around 70 delegates attended the gathering at a luxury hotel in Doha and the large meeting room erupted into applause after the joint statement had been read out shortly before 2100 GMT.

"The differences is almost so narrow... we are quite frankly surprised how serious both sides are and they are so committed to putting an end to this conflict," said Qatar's counter-terrorism special envoy Mulla al-Qahtani. The so-called intra-Afghan meetings follow six days of direct US-Taliban talks that were put on hold for the two-day Afghan conference.

The flurry of talks will continue with the resumption of direct US-Taliban contact also in Doha on Tuesday as both sides eye a resolution to the bloody 18-

year conflict. Washington has said it wants to seal a political deal with the Taliban ahead of Afghan presidential polls due in September to allow foreign forces to begin to withdraw.

Most productive

US lead negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad has said that the latest round of US-Taliban talks "have been the most productive of the rounds we've had with the Talibs". "We want a stable Afghanistan," he told reporters on the sidelines of the dialogue on Monday. "Afghans meeting with the Taliban was a big success." The Taliban said they were "happy with progress".

The United States did not participate directly in the two-day Afghan summit, which was attended by political heavyweights, government officials and at least six women. The Taliban have steadfastly refused to negotiate with the government of President Ashraf Ghani, members of which only took part in a "personal capacity".

Ghani's administration, which the Taliban consider a puppet regime, has also been excluded from the direct US-Taliban talks. Sunday and Monday's gathering was the third such meeting following landmark summits in Moscow in February and May. An agreement with the Taliban is expected to have two main pillars—a US withdrawal from Afghanistan and a commitment by the militants not to offer sanctuary to jihadists. The Taliban's relationship with Al-Qaeda was the main reason for the US invasion nearly 18 years ago.

But the thorny issues of power-sharing with the Taliban, the role of regional powers including Pakistan and India, and the fate of Ghani's administration remain unresolved. The Taliban, believing they have the upper hand in the war, have kept up attacks even while talking to the United States and agreeing to the Afghan dialogue. A Taliban car bomb in eastern Afghanistan killed at least 12 people and wounded scores more on Sunday, officials said. Despite the violence, both the Taliban and the US have been positive about their engagement. — AFP



DOHA: Amir Khan Mutaqi, the Taliban's former culture and information minister, shakes hands with Ghairat Baheer, left, member of the Meshrano Jirga (upper house of the Afghan assembly), during the second day of the Intra Afghan Dialogue talks in the Qatari capital Doha. — AFP