

International

Russia and Ukraine swap prisoners in landmark 'first step' to ease tensions

'We have to take all the steps to finish this horrible war'

KIEV: Russia and Ukraine carried out a long-awaited swap of 70 prisoners yesterday, in a deal hailed by President Volodymyr Zelensky as a "first step" towards ending their conflict. Planes carrying 35 prisoners from each side landed simultaneously in Moscow and Kiev, where the passengers emerged under sunny skies. "We have taken the first step," Zelensky said on the tarmac after greeting and hugging former prisoners. "We have to take all the steps to finish this horrible war."

In emotional scenes at Kiev's Boryspil airport, family members embraced and handed flowers to the former prisoners, many weeping with joy. Among those swapped were 24 Ukrainian sailors, Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov and Russian-Ukrainian journalist Kyrylo Vyshynsky. "I am overflowing with happiness," Natalya Mokryak, the mother of one of the sailors, told AFP at the airport. "I have finally seen this come true." Russian state television showed the Russian prisoners emerging from the plane at Moscow's Vnukovo-2 airport used for government flights. Ukraine's SBU security service confirmed that Vladimir Tsemakh — a fighter with Moscow-backed separatists considered a key witness in the downing of flight MH17 — was handed over to Russia despite pleas from the Netherlands. Anticipation had been building for days for the exchange, which involved weeks of behind-the-scenes negotiations. Relations between Kiev and Moscow nose-dived in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and Moscow backed separatists in the eastern industrial regions of Donetsk and Lugansk. Fighting there has claimed more than 13,000 lives over the past five years.

'Sign of hope'

Zelensky's election in April has raised hopes that a stalled peace process could be revived. The comedian-turned-politician vowed during his campaign to have Ukrainian prisoners in Russia returned and has said ending the conflict with Russia is his top priority. Russian

President Vladimir Putin said this week that the exchange would be "a huge step towards normalizing relations" with Kiev. Yesterday's exchange was "a very important step", Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said. "It's necessary to maintain this drive to solve problems as much as possible," she said on Twitter. German Chancellor Angela Merkel called the swap a "sign of hope" and called for the implementation of a 2015 ceasefire deal that Paris and Berlin helped broker.

The release of Sentsov will be seen as a major victory for Kiev. The 43-year-old was Ukraine's most famous political prisoner and the subject of a star-studded international campaign calling for his release. He was arrested in 2014 and had been serving a 20-year sentence in an Arctic penal colony for planning "terrorist attacks" in Crimea. "I thank all the people who have fought for us," Sentsov said at the airport in Kiev, where he was greeted by his teenage daughter who wept and smiled.

MH17 witness handed over

The sailors, including two members of Ukraine's SBU security services, were detained last year when Russia seized three Ukrainian vessels off Crimea. Moscow had wanted to put them on trial for violating Russia's maritime borders. Among those handed over to Russia was Vyshynsky, a 52-year-old journalist at Russia's RIA Novosti state news agency. The Russian-Ukrainian dual national was facing charges of "high treason" but was released on bail ahead of the swap. The release of Tsemakh, who was reportedly in charge of air defense in the area where the MH17 came down, was denounced by the Netherlands. The Dutch government contacted Ukraine "several times and at the very highest level" in an effort to prevent Tsemakh's handover. Foreign Minister Stef Blok said after his release. The Malaysia Airlines passenger plane travelling from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur



KIEV: A former prisoner is helped by a medical worker after he disembarked from a plane on September 7, 2019 at Boryspil International airport in Kiev after a long-awaited exchange of prisoners between Moscow and Kiev, a day after Russian President said for the first time the "large-scale" prisoner exchange with Ukraine was being finalised. — AFP

was shot down by a Russian-made BUK missile in 2014 over eastern Ukraine, with the loss of all 298 people on board. Most of those killed were Dutch and a Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team (JIT) is investigating the tragedy. An informed source told AFP that Dutch investigators

were able to question Tsemakh in Kiev this week before the swap. Efforts have intensified to resolve the conflict since Zelensky's election, with French President Emmanuel Macron calling for a summit of the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany this month. — AFP

Forgotten plight of Russia's jailed grassroots activists

REUTOV: When anti-corruption activist Yevgeny Kurakin went to make an official complaint about authorities destroying a park in his sleepy town near Moscow, he was arrested in the prosecutor's office. Three months later, he is still behind bars. Kurakin regularly denounces the corruption of officials in Reutov — a city of some 100,000 in the Moscow region where he lives. He had planned to run in Sunday's local elections.

Russian authorities have cracked down on mass protests calling for the elections to be free and fair, while the arrests of high-profile activists like Alexei Navalny have made international headlines. But Kurakin has gained little attention, despite languishing in jail on fraud charges his family say are fabricated. Investigators say the 42-year-old ran an embezzlement scheme in his apartment block through which he stole three million rubles that were supposed to go on building works and communal services.

Kurakin's neighbors have stood by him, with 132 of them signing a letter saying the accusations are false. Kurakin has exposed the controversial links between the city's former mayor Alexander Khodyrev and a local real estate developer, TsentrStroy. According to him, the alliance turned Khodyrev into a millionaire — allowing him to buy several villas, some exceeding 20 million euros. "He's a very uncomfortable person for the authorities," his wife Zhanna Bass said. "He exposes the crimes that they commit." Kurakin's case, lawyers say, is not unique. They say local authorities throughout the Moscow region have used such tactics to silence their critics. Khodyrev's personal office refused to comment, saying only that he is now mayor of another town. The current administration of Reutov also declined to comment to AFP.

'Local mafia'

Kurakin's arrest in June coincided with that of investigative journalist Ivan Goltunov, which led to an unprecedented mobilization of civil society which resulted in his quick release. But there is little public pressure to release Kurakin or others. "Yevgeny is not the only activist persecuted by the authorities in the Moscow region," said Kurakin's lawyer Dmitry Trunin. He said he could name "dozens" of names. But he said the cases often have "no resonance and these people are left alone to face the local mafia." The exact number of Russians jailed on trumped-up charges are difficult to estimate. A study published in April by US law firm specializing in human rights Perseus Strategies, Russia has at least 236 political prisoners — a figure that has risen in recent years.

'Absolute lawlessness'

Kurakin already spent 16 months in pre-detention under the same charges in 2015 before being released on bail. At the time, his case was returned to the prosecutor's office due to a lack of evidence. His wife said the second arrest came after he announced his candidacy in the local elections with the Yabloko opposition party.

"The aim is to find someone guilty of fraud so that authorities can say they are not corrupt because those accusing them of corruption are crooks," said another lawyer Dmitry Sotnikov. Kurakin's lawyers have challenged the conditions of his arrest but the case has dragged on. Valery Borshtchov, the co-chairman of Moscow's Helsinki Group and a former Soviet dissident, said the investigation was taking place in an atmosphere of "absolute lawlessness."

At one hearing, masked armed men with batons working for the court prevented Kurakin's friends from entering the courtroom, throwing them to the ground. Three women, including his wife, were hospitalized. In such a system, many people facing similar charges have little chance of being acquitted. According to Russia's Investigative Committee, the acquittal rate of Russian courts in 2018 was a mere 0.51 percent. Complaints to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) are often the only hope for justice, said Tatyana Sukhareva, a lawyer working with former detainees. — AFP

Spain struggles to house thousands of young migrants

BARCELONA: Spain is struggling to accommodate thousands of young migrants who over the years have arrived alone on rickety boats or hidden in trucks, some of whom have ended up on the streets or even become involved in crime. There are currently around 14,000 unaccompanied young migrants in Spain, according to the government, up from just around 4,000 in 2016.

In regions like Catalonia in Spain's northeast, which has a large Moroccan community that attracts the youngsters after they arrive in the south, reception centers are overwhelmed. In Barcelona, dozens sleep rough on benches, in parks or in makeshift camps hidden in the hills that surround this Mediterranean seaside city. "They're damaged, many sniff glue. And they're very vulnerable on the street, criminal gangs take advantage and get hold of them," Peio Sanchez, a priest in charge of the Santa Anna church where young migrants sleep regularly, tells AFP.

In front of the church in a small, hidden square near the popular Ramblas avenue in Barcelona, two teenagers share a cigarette as they play on their mobile phones. One of them sleeps in a juvenile centre. The other, Sofiane, lives on the street. His child's thin and short body contrasts sharply with his hard appearance, his cheek scarred.



BARCELONA: 21-year-old Moroccan migrant Najib poses during an interview. — AFP

Orphaned when he was 10, he emigrated from Morocco to Spain hidden underneath a truck. He was sent to various centers far from Barcelona, but always ended up coming back to the city. "My friends are here, my life is here," he says. Adria Padrosa, a social worker at the church, says they persuaded him to go to a centre several weeks ago, but he returned the following day. "He's a complicated profile, very used to living on the streets," he says.

'Kick you out and bye bye'

The majority of the migrants the church tends to are no

longer underage. They were when they came to Spain, but when they turned 18 they were no longer given protection or support. Spain automatically gives minors a residency permit but not a work one. They can get a work permit after five years in Spain or if they get an annual full-time contract, which is hard to come by in a country with 32 percent unemployment among under 25s.

"You turn 18 and that's it. They give you your suitcase, they kick you out and bye bye," says Najib Benyaala, a 21-year-old Moroccan with curly hair he's dyed blonde. "From one day to the next, you find yourself on the streets." Athletic and smiley, Najib does boxing in a gym in Barcelona for vulnerable people, a haven of peace after years on the street, in squats or shelters. "The street is tough, it's bad," he says. "If they gave us work permits, we wouldn't all be on the street." In Catalonia, just one percent of unaccompanied minors have a work permit when they turn 18, says Georgina Oliva, in charge of childhood matters in the regional government. "Without this, it's very difficult."

Catalonia tends to 4,200 unaccompanied young migrants, a large chunk of the total in Spain. Despite a decrease in 2019, arrivals in the region rose tenfold between 2015 and 2018, from 350 to 3,700. That caused punctual scenes of chaos, with some youngsters sleeping on the ground in police stations for lack of room in reception centers. Authorities have since opened 3,000 new places for unaccompanied minors. "We've been warning about this for years but until the bubble burst, nothing was done," says Axel Roura of the NGO Casal dels Infants which looks for housing for homeless youngsters. — Reuters



ANTANANARIVO: This handout photo released by the Vatican Media shows Pope Francis as he attend at the meeting with the Bishops of Madagascar at the Andohalo Cathedral. — AFP

Strife-hit Madagascar welcomes Pope Francis

ANTANANARIVO: True to his reputation as "pope of the poor", Pope Francis began a visit Saturday to Madagascar, one of the world's most impoverished nations with a unique and threatened environment. Arriving from Mozambique, where he pleaded for understanding and the renunciation of violence in a country riven by 16 years of civil war and now jihadist attacks, the Argentine pontiff warned of the dangers of deforestation and the impact of environmental degradation.

Francis told his hosts that they should "create jobs and money making activities which respect the environment and help people escape poverty." Madagascar is home to 25 million people, the vast majority of whom live in poverty with income of less than two dollars a day. The pope said there "were many causes driving excessive deforestation which benefits just a few people... and compromises the future of the country."

The authorities must ensure social justice, he added, echoing concerns about the global environment highlighted by massive fires across the Amazon forest. After the welcoming ceremonies, the pope's first engagement Saturday is a mass and prayer vigil with at least 12,000 young scouts. Tafika Fanomenza, 39, who is helping to coordinate the scores of volunteers involved in the preparations, as well as in the pontiff's security, hoped Francis' visit would help bring about change in Madagascar.

Crowds of 800,000

Sunday will mark the high point of Francis' visit with a huge mass in the capital expected to be attended by some 800,000 pilgrims. Many had already started setting up tents on the outskirts of the city on Friday, armed with posters of the Argentine pontiff. Prosper Ralison, a 70-year-old farm worker, arrived with some 5,000 fellow pilgrims from the central eastern town of Ambatondrazaka, 200 kilometers away.

"We are tired, but it's worth making all these sacrifices to see the pope with our own eyes and receive his blessing," he told AFP, impatient to set out on the final two-hour hike on Sunday to attend the mass. "We spent 65,000 ariary (\$18/16 euros) and brought three kilos of rice to make the trip to Antananarivo," said another pilgrim and farm worker, Jean-Claude Rabemanantika, 40.

"There are five of us at home and we don't have enough money so we had to choose just one family member to make the trip." "We've provided toilet, showers, a sick bay and somewhere to cook for our 5,000 guests," beamed Marino Andriamasy, 35, who is in charge of the makeshift site where the pilgrims are staying. — AFP

African Union lifts its suspension of Sudan

ADDIS ABABA: The African Union (AU) has lifted its suspension of Sudan three months after freezing its membership following Khartoum's bloody crackdown on pro-democracy protesters. The AU's Peace and Security Council said Friday that the decision followed the announcement of Sudan's first cabinet since the ousting of veteran leader Omar Al-Bashir.

Handing down its suspension in June, the AU's conflict-resolution body had said transferring power to a civilian-led authority was "the only way to allow the Sudan to exit the current crisis". Sudan's new premier Abdalla Hamdok on Thursday unveiled a new 18-member cabinet, a major step in the transition toward civilian rule after decades of authoritarianism. The move was hailed by AU Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki as "the beginning of a new era" for Sudan. The cabinet formation followed the signing of a power-sharing deal last month between the movement that led the months-long protests against Bashir, and the generals who seized power after ousting him.

A joint civilian-military ruling body was sworn in and tasked with overseeing the transition. Part of the deal was that legislative body be formed within 90 days. The AU's Peace and Security Council said in a tweet Friday it had decided "to lift the suspension of the participation of #Sudan in the activities of the #AU, now that #Sudan established a civilian-led Government". Demonstrations over a worsening economic crisis in Sudan escalated into a months-long nationwide protest movement against Bashir's three-decade rule, which ended in April.

Bashir was later arrested and is on trial on charges of illegal acquisition and use of foreign funds. In early June, security forces broke up a protest-sit in outside military headquarters in Khartoum. Doctors linked to the protest movement said at least 127 people died in the violence. Sudan's membership from the AU was suspended on June 6 pending a transition to civilian rule. A number of African nations have been suspended from the 55-member AU in recent years, a move that bars them from all summits and meetings. — AFP