

International

Morocco intervenes after record migrant influx to Spanish enclaves

Brussels urges Morocco to block Ceuta migrant crossings

FNIDEQ, Morocco: Moroccan security forces intervened yesterday after a record 6,000 migrants crossed largely unimpeded into a Spanish North African enclave amid diplomatic tensions between Rabat and Madrid. Reinforcements deployed at Morocco's Fnideq border crossing with the enclave of Ceuta and fired tear gas to disperse a large crowd of would-be migrants who had gathered in the hope of seizing a rare opportunity to slip across, an AFP correspondent reported.

The surge in numbers came after some migrants were able to cross into the tiny Spanish territory of some 84,000 people virtually unimpeded by Moroccan border guards. The Moroccan government has been angered by Spain's decision provide medical treatment for the leader of the Western Sahara independence movement who has been seriously ill with COVID-19.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez called off a planned trip to Paris to oversee his government's response while the EU commissioner for home affairs, Ylva Johansson, urged Morocco to take action to stop the "worrying" increase in the number of migrants crossing illegally. Spain sent back around a quarter of the 6,000 or so migrants, mostly Moroccans, who entered the Ceuta enclave in the past 36 hours and was preparing further repatriations, Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska told public television. Monday's arrival figures were the highest ever for a single day, authorities in Ceuta said.

Early yesterday, another 300 migrants, said to be

from sub-Saharan Africa, attempted to cross into Spain's other North African enclave of Melilla by scaling a high barrier. Authorities in Melilla said "85 men and one woman succeeded in entering".

'I'll try again'

Amal, 18, said he had hurried to the Ceuta border with his brother and two friends in the hope of slipping into Spanish territory. "Many of our friends managed to get across. We came later when we heard about it," he said. "We tried to climb over the mountain but the police blocked us".

The migrants reached Ceuta by swimming or by walking at low tide from Moroccan beaches a few kilometers to the south. Some used inflatable swimming rings and rubber dinghies. In the early hours of yesterday, hundreds more men and women of all ages flocked to the border to try their luck. They walked down a path to the beach in their dozens, before running towards Ceuta along the coastline, as a handful of Moroccan policemen watched on without intervening. "I saw on Facebook that it was possible to cross the border, so I took a taxi here with my friend as I can't feed my family anymore," 26-year-old Ouarda, from the neighboring town of Tetouan, said.

"I'm not scared-I'll either die or I'll cross," the unemployed, divorced mother-of-two said. One man drowned trying to swim across, Spanish officials said on Monday. Videos posted on social media showed dozens of migrants-some wearing



A Spanish Civil Guard holds a migrant who arrived swimming at the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, yesterday. — AFP

just beachwear but others clad in normal outdoor clothes-setting off from rocky beachheads. "They stopped me from getting through, but I'm going to try again," said one 26-year-old job-seeker.

Meanwhile, Brussels yesterday urged Morocco to stop the irregular entry of migrants into Spain's Ceuta

enclave in the north African country after 6,000 crossed into it. The migrants began flowing into Ceuta on Monday, many of them swimming and crossing by foot at low tide along the coastline from Moroccan territory. A smaller number, 86 migrants, made it into Melilla, Spain's other enclave in Morocco. — AFP

News in brief

Italy intercepts 400kg cocaine

ROME: Italian border police said yesterday they seized more than 400 kilograms of cocaine from South America in a joint operation with Kosovar and Albanian authorities. The drugs, with an estimated market value of more than 100 million euros (\$122 million), were first detected at the port of Gioia Tauro, in the southern Italian region of Calabria. They were hidden in a container coming from Santos, Brazil "officially containing chicken," the Guardia di Finanza border police said in a statement. — AFP

Malaysian police kill militants

KUALA LUMPUR: Five suspected members of Philippine militant group Abu Sayyaf have been shot dead in a firefight with police on the Malaysian part of Borneo island, authorities said yesterday. Police were attacked by men armed with guns and machetes Monday when they raided a settlement near the town of Beaufort in Sabah state, and returned fire. "Five male suspects were successfully defeated," said Sabah police commissioner Hazani Ghazali in a statement. They were believed to be from the Abu Sayyaf group, police said, self-proclaimed Islamic militants whose stronghold is in the Muslim-majority southern Philippines, not far from Sabah. — AFP

9 bodies found in truck in Mexico

MEXICO CITY: The bodies of nine people, apparently dead of bullet wounds, were found in a truck in the western Mexican state of Michoacan, local prosecutors said Monday. "Eight men and one woman were found, who have not yet been identified," a statement from Michoacan prosecutors said. "The bodies had gunshot wounds." The vehicle in which they were found was parked in a central area of the city of Zitacuaro and was reported to authorities by neighbors. Officials opened an investigation while the bodies were transported to the medical examiner. — AFP

Canada taps woman general

MONTREAL: Coordination of Canada's coronavirus vaccination campaign is set to be taken over by another army general, the public health agency said Monday, after a probe into allegations of sexual misconduct sidelined her predecessor. Brigadier General Krista Brodie, a logistic expert who served in the Balkans and Afghanistan, is to replace General Dany Fortin, who was dismissed due to a military investigation into what media reports said involved allegations of sexual misconduct dating back some 30 years, a charge which he has strongly denied. — AFP

UN meeting on Myanmar postponed

UNITED NATIONS: A UN General Assembly meeting set for yesterday to discuss a non-binding resolution on halting arms transfers to Myanmar was postponed indefinitely because there was not enough support to pass the text, diplomatic sources said Monday. The authors "did not have the support they expected" in order to pass the motion with a large majority of the Assembly's 193 member countries, one diplomat said on condition of anonymity. — AFP

Over 50 missing after boat from Libya sinks

TUNIS: More than 50 people were missing yesterday when their boat sank after leaving Libya heading to Europe, Tunisia's defense ministry said, with 33 others rescued. Defense ministry spokesman Mohamed Zikri said the survivors of the shipwreck were picked up after clinging to an oil platform off the southern coast of Tunisia.

"There are 33 survivors, all apparently from Bangladesh," Flavio Di Giacomo, a spokesman for the International Organization for Migration, told AFP. "At least 50 are missing."

The boat, crammed with over 90 passengers, left the Libyan port of Zuwara on Sunday. It was not immediately clear what caused the boat to sink, but vessels leaving the North African coast for Europe are often heavily overloaded makeshift crafts, departing at night even in rough weather to avoid detection from the coastguard. Tunisian rescuers were bringing the survivors to the port of Zarzis, some 100 kilometers (70 miles) northwest of Zuwara. "We don't know the nationality of the more than 50 who are missing," Di Giacomo added. At least 1,200 migrants died in the Mediterranean last year, most of them crossing the central part of the



This representational image shows a boat tragedy in Mediterranean Sea

sea, according to the United Nations.

Libya is a key gateway for Europe-bound migrants. According to the IOM, more than 500 people have died trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea from the shores of North Africa to Italy and Malta since the start of 2021. On Monday, the Tunisian navy said it had rescued more than 100 migrants, mainly from Bangladesh and Sudan, whose boat was "on the verge of sinking". Several boats were also stopped by Libyan coastguards and brought back to shore overnight Sunday.

"Two days ago about 680 migrants were intercepted at sea and returned to Libya by the Libyan," Di Giacomo said. "Almost 9,000 have been intercepted at sea and returned to Libya in 2021 so far," he added. Safa Msehli, IOM spokeswoman for the Geneva-based UN agency, said that support for search and rescue teams "should be contingent on no one? being arbitrarily detained or subjected to human rights violations", warning that "without such guarantees, such support should be reconsidered". — AFP

Choose electric chair or firing squad: US state gives option

WASHINGTON: The US state of South Carolina has introduced a law requiring death row prisoners to choose between firing squad and electric chair after a lack of lethal injection drugs halted executions for a decade. "This weekend, I signed legislation into law that will allow the state to carry out a death sentence. The families and loved ones of victims are owed closure and justice by law. Now, we can provide it," Governor Henry McMaster said on Twitter.

The pro-death penalty Republican wants to resume executions after a 10-year hiatus caused by a shortage of drugs used in lethal injections. Before the pause, death row inmates would choose between the chair and injection, with the injection being administered if no choice was made.

The new law, signed Friday, makes the electric chair the default option if lethal injection is unavailable, and creates the alternative option of a firing squad. Local prisoner advocacy

group the Incarcerated Outreach Network called the move "appalling, shocking, abhorrent" while the South Carolina branch of the American Civil Liberties Union it was "about finding a new way to restart executions without a racist, arbitrary, and error-prone system."

"South Carolina's criminal justice system makes mistakes," executive director Frank Knaack, said in a statement. "Yet, capital punishment is irreversible... Black people make up more than half of South Carolina's death row despite being only 27 percent of the state's population."

The electric chair has not been used in South Carolina since 2008 and the last execution by lethal injection was in 2011, according to the state's Department of Corrections. South Carolina is the fourth US state to allow death by firing squad, along with Mississippi, Oklahoma and Utah, according to the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC). Only



An electric chair nicknamed "Old Sparky," which stands at the Texas Prison Museum in Huntsville, Texas. The chair was used to execute 361 prisoners. — AFP

three convicts have died before a firing squad, all in Utah, since the US Supreme Court reinstated capital punishment in 1976, according to the center.

An acute shortage of the deadly drugs used in lethal injections has lasted several years, as several major laboratories refuse to stock US prisons to avoid the bad PR of being

associated with the death penalty. Lethal injections are generally carried out with three substances administered in succession: the first induces a coma, the second paralyzes, and the third stops the heart. But in several executions in recent years, the first drug failed to render prisoners fully unconscious, causing them intense suffering prior to death. — AFP

Egypt prioritizing vaccination of tourism workers

DUBAI: Egypt is prioritizing the vaccination of tourism workers to support the sector's recovery and is on track to announce full inoculation of two resort areas this month, its tourism minister said Monday.

While Egypt's tourism industry is still reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic, the sector has picked up in recent months, with more visitors heading to resorts along the Red Sea and Mediterranean coasts.

"We will prioritize workers in the tourism industry, which is an essential sector for Egypt's econo-

my," Tourism and Antiquities Minister Khaled Al-Enani said. "In May, I will announce, along with the minister of health, the complete vaccination of Egyptian workers in hotels, resorts, businesses and restaurants in South Sinai and the Red Sea," he said on the sidelines of a travel industry conference in Dubai. About 65 percent of tourists in Egypt head to those coastal destinations, he said.

Enani said other tourist spots will follow, such as Luxor, Aswan and the capital Cairo, home of the Giza pyramids and major museums. Egypt, which has a population of approximately 100 million, has administered some one million doses, according to authorities.

About two million people work in the tourism industry or organizations linked to it. Along with its pyramids and Pharaonic temples, Egypt is also known for its seaside resorts. After experiencing "significant and continuous loss" since the coronavirus outbreak, the sector has picked up, said Enani.

'Upward curve'

He said Egypt welcomed 500,000 tourists in April, more than double the number in January and up from just 200,000 tourists a month in the second half of last year. "The important thing is there is an upward curve," Enani said.

"We hope the numbers will increase again in the near future with the opening of some countries and the easing of restrictions, including in Arab countries, Europe and Russia," he said. "The return of tourism in Egypt does not only depend on us, but remains linked to other countries." Cairo has announced several major new archaeological discoveries in recent months, hoping to revive a sector which was battered by a 2011 uprising, political unrest and jihadist attacks. While the industry recorded a rebound of nearly \$13 billion in revenues for 2018-2019, tourism was hit hard again by the COVID-19 pandemic. Official figures show a drop of more than 20 percent in revenues for mid-2019 to mid-2020. — AFP