

Focus

'Incognito'

Fears mount criminals 'in'

PARIS, Oct 17, (AFP): Fears are growing that "shabiha" militiamen accused of committing some of the most barbaric atrocities against Syrian civilians for President Bashar al-Assad's regime are arriving incognito in Europe and getting asylum.

The prospect has sent shivers down the spines of Syrians who fled the war-torn country, as indications pile up that thugs who tortured on behalf of Assad have slipped into the flow of refugees arriving in Europe.

"Today, there are war criminals who find refuge in France and in Europe," Ziad al-Isa — a Franco-Syrian doctor who is part of the UOSSM disaster relief grouping — recently told French lawmakers.

Predominantly Alawites — the confession of the Assad clan —, "shabiha" are the hugely feared tools of a regime that is responsible for nearly 80 percent of the 250,000 deaths in the conflict that kicked off in 2011, rights groups say.



Al-Isa

Spotted

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a Syrian employee of an international NGO told AFP they had spotted several of these former pro-regime militiamen while on assignment on the Greek island of Kos at the end of September.

Members of the same family from the northwestern city of Tartus, they were among a group of migrants who had just arrived from Turkey. "We too are war victims," one of them said, under the hostile glares of his countrymen.

Half of the close to 600,000 migrants who have come to Europe this year via the Mediterranean are Syrians, according to the United Nations, and many come directly from the country — not just refugee camps in neighbouring states — including regions controlled by the regime.

And while the exact extent of the phenomenon is difficult to determine, witness statements come to the fore on a regular basis.

A Facebook page titled "Criminals, not refugees!" in Arabic focuses entirely on unmasking those suspected of having committed atrocities against civilians.

Posing

Managed by Syrians, it lists dozens of pro-regime militiamen or Iraqi Shiite volunteers who fought in Syria and have been spotted in Europe.

There are photos of people posing with their weapons on the frontline in Syria, in front of portraits of Assad or trampling bodies.

Then pictures allegedly of the same people show them going about their new life in Europe — smiling as they splash about in a pool, sitting at cafes or posing with their backpacks under Berlin's Brandenburg Gate.

However none of these photos could be verified by AFP.

"We took this initiative after receiving testimonies from Syrian refugees who were gobsacked to have seen and recognised, in the heart of Europe, the faces of some of their torturers," Qutaiba Yacine, one of the page's managers, tells AFP.

"We act and collect testimonies to unmask them," says Yacine, who estimates that "around 500" currently live in northern Europe, Germany, Austria and France.

Ziad Majed, a political analyst who specialises in Syria, said there were reports that "young people from the Alawite community are increasingly trying to escape, particularly to avoid forced conscription, as the losses on the government side are very high."

"They could be young people who want to escape military service and a never-ending war," he says.

"But there could also be ex-shabiha who were potentially involved in war crimes. It's a very sensitive issue."

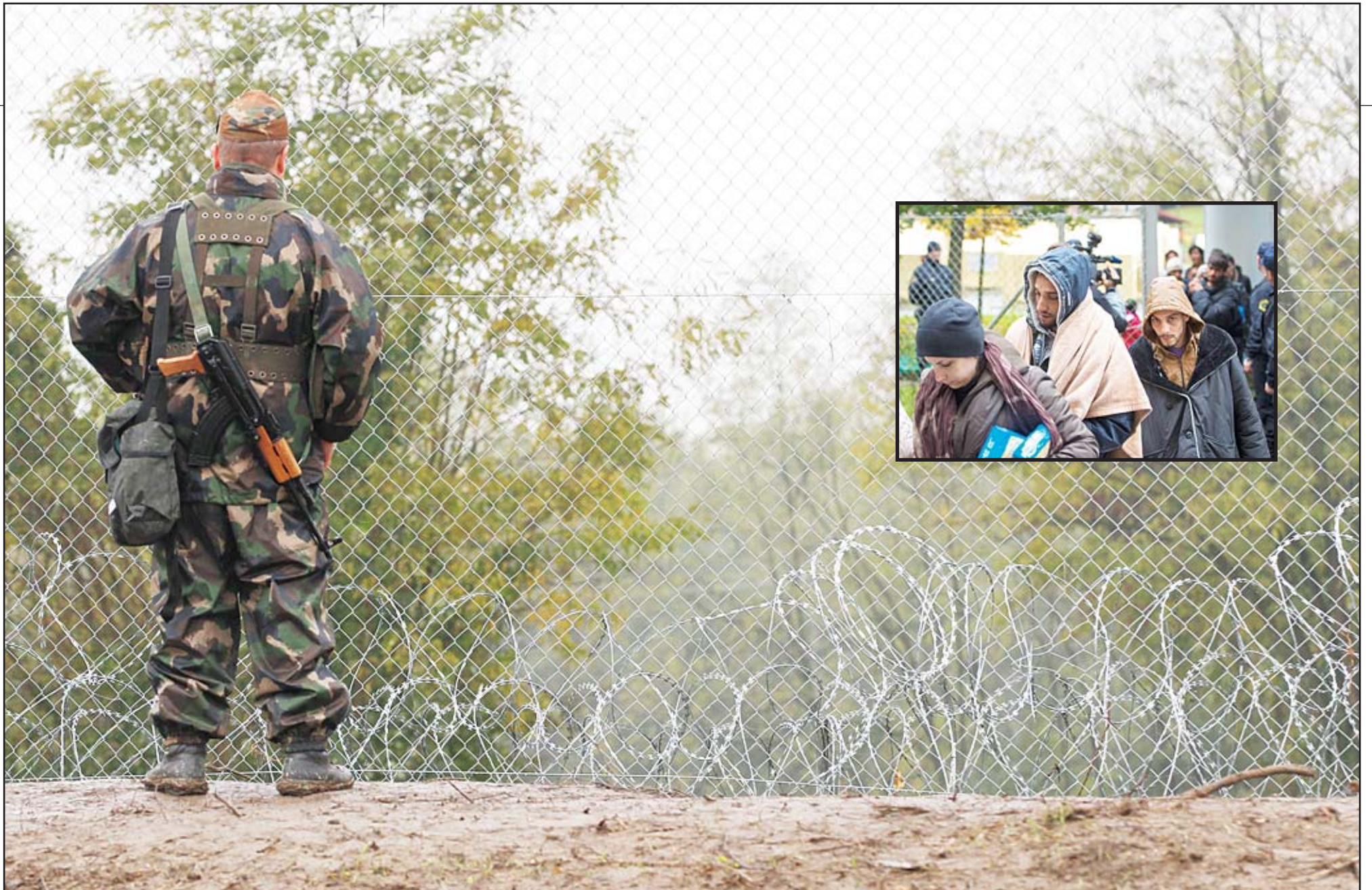
A magistrate at the French national court of asylum, who asked not to be named, said that the issue had to be raised.

"Have some of the Syrian refugees taken part in horrors committed by the regime?"

The magistrate said that national agencies in charge of refugees look out for these types of people in the interviews they conduct with recent arrivals, but unmasking them is very difficult.

"There are so many false identities, false testimonies... and no one is going to brag about these kinds of crimes."

The French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless People says that anyone found responsible of violating the Geneva Conventions is automatically precluded from getting asylum.



A Hungarian soldier stands by a fence that was set up at the border with Croatia near the village of Zakany, Hungary on Oct 17. Hungary shut down its border with Croatia to the free flow of migrants on Saturday, a move experts say could leave thousands of people on their way to western Europe stranded in the small Balkan nation. (Inset): Migrants wait to be transferred with a bus to Austria, in Gruskovje, on the Croatian-Slovenian border, Saturday. (AP)

Migrants

EU rift over crisis grows

Migrant flow turns to Slovenia

'Foreigners overrunning Germany'

PEGIDA radicalised by refugee influx

PETISOVCI, Slovenia, Oct 17, (AFP): Croatia on Saturday diverted the flow of thousands of migrants toward Slovenia after Hungary sealed its border to block the path of the streams of refugees desperate to reach northern Europe.

Slovenia received the first buses from Croatia transporting the migrants as a much-hyped EU deal with Turkey to defuse the crisis — which has seen some 600,000 mostly Syrian migrants enter the EU this year — began to look shaky.

The continent's worst refugee crisis since 1945 has opened up rifts among the 28 EU member states and put unprecedented strain on the right to freedom of movement that is at the core of the bloc's values.

In the latest tragedy, 12 migrants drowned on Saturday when their boat sank off the Turkish coast as they were seeking to reach Greece, Turkey's Anatolia news agency reported.

The Turkish coastguard recovered the bodies from the wooden boat, which had sailed from northwest Turkey's seaside town of Ayvalik for the Greek island of Lesbos.

Hungarian police and soldiers sealed its border with Croatia barbed wire shortly before 1:00am (2300 GMT Friday), after the last 1,500 or so migrants to arrive by train on the Croatian side trudged silently through mud over the informal Zakany crossing, and AFP correspondent said.

The two official border posts of Beremend and Letenje remain open for those with valid papers.

Croatia — which has repeatedly slammed Budapest's migrants' policy as "unacceptable" — reacted by diverting the flow of migrants from Hungary toward Slovenia.

An AFP correspondent at the Petisovci border checkpoint in Slovenia said he had seen six buses cross into Slovenia. Three continued on to a registration centre, according to police, while the remaining passengers got off at Petisovci to be registered there.

Said, a 40-year-old lawyer from Syria travelling with his wife and two young

children, said they had spent two arduous weeks travelling to the Slovenian border from Turkey and Greece.

The worse thing during their journey was spending four hours in "a very small inflatable boat with sixty people in it on the water, from Turkey to Greece," he told AFP.

In preparation for the migrants' arrival, a large white tent was erected at the crossing, where Slovenian authorities carry out identity checks, before taking the migrants to one of several refugee camps.

A majority of the 300 migrants at Petisovci were young men, the correspondent said, adding that there was no armed police presence and the atmosphere appeared calm and joyful.

The migrants were picked up at the Opatovac refugee centre near Croatia's border with Serbia around 0000 GMT

of the Occident" — started life as a xenophobic Facebook group around co-founder Lutz Bachmann, 42.

From a few hundred people who showed up for their first evening "Monday stroll" on October 20 last year, it grew to a peak of 25,000 in January, shortly after the Paris jihadist attacks against satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo.

"We are the people," they have chanted, co-opting the slogan of demonstrators before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and suggesting a righteous revolt against an out-of-touch political elite and the "lying press".

A mix of hardcore neo-Nazis and a far greater number of self-proclaimed "concerned citizens", the movement triggered broad distaste

in Germany and sparked larger anti-fascist counterprotests nationwide. It seemed to have crashed and burned at the start of the year after Bachmann's racist online slurs and "selfies" sporting a Hitler moustache surfaced, sparking outrage and a leadership split.

PEGIDA, and its smaller clone groups in Germany and abroad, disappeared from the streets and the newspaper headlines — until a spike in migrant arrivals in September brought them back from the dead.

"The turning point was when Angela Merkel opened the borders to let in people from Hungary," said Nele Wissmann of the French Institute for International Relations. "This was the trigger point."

lion refugees but nobody cares," Erdogan said.

The Turkish leader also challenged the EU to take Ankara's bid for EU membership more seriously.

"They keep saying 'We can't do without Turkey.' It's very clear but they are not being clear. Then why don't you let Turkey in the EU?" he asked.

Meanwhile, twelve migrants drowned Saturday when their boat sank off the Turkish coast as they were seeking to reach Greece, while around 25 others were rescued, the Anatolia news agency reported.

The Turkish coastguard recovered the bodies from the wooden boat, which had sailed from northwest Turkey's seaside town of Ayvalik headed for the Greek island of Lesbos, the Turkish news agency said.



Supporters of the German right-wing movement PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident) hold up a poster showing German Chancellor Angela Merkel in a uniform with an Eurologo-aramband as they attend a PEGIDA rally on June 1, 2015 in Dresden, eastern Germany. They gather in the dark, wave German flags and vent their fury at foreigners they fear are overrunning their homeland — next week Germany's anti-Islamic PEGIDA movement turns one year old. (AFP)

Europe

Rally causes Eurostar delays: About 250 protesters staged a demonstration in support of migrants at the London Eurostar terminus on Friday, delaying some departures to mainland Europe.

The activists poured red liquid on the floor of St Pancras station in memory of migrants who have died trying to use the Channel Tunnel to enter Britain, and carried banners reading "Your borders kill" and "Protect people, no borders".

"We demand that the UK and the US and the EU open their borders to all migrants and refugees," said one protester, who declined to be named. "We demand that Theresa May shuts down all detention centres and end all deportation," the protester added, referring to the British interior minister.

Some 50 policemen stood guard at the rally, which lasted about an hour and ended peacefully. (AFP)

Poland to send equipment: Poland will send around 70 border officials to Hungary to help it secure its border with Serbia, Poland's Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz said after a European Union summit on Thursday.

Landlocked Hungary has struggled to deal with the largest wave of migrants in Europe since World War Two and has already built a fence along its border with Serbia despite criticism from international partners.

In the nine months to September, Hungary reported 204,000 people crossing its borders who did not have the appropriate passports and visas. That was a 13-fold increase on the same period in 2014.

Because of the fence, the flow of migrants from Serbia has already dropped steeply.

"We are sending five highly specialised

vehicles with night vision devices (to Hungary), with equipment, which will allow for guarding the entire border (with Serbia)," Kopacz was quoted as saying by Polish state agency PAP early on Friday. (RTRS)

Police break up 'ring': Spanish police said Friday they have smashed a network which smuggled Moroccans into Spain, arresting seven Moroccans and freeing a man they were holding hostage.



May



Kopacz

The smugglers charged 5,000-10,000 euros (\$5,700-11,400) per person to get them into Spain, usually in the northern region of Navarra on the border with France, and help them get their authorisation to live legally in the country, a statement said. (AFP)

Dutch trio arrested: Three Dutch nationals arrested at the Bulgaria-Turkey border on suspicion of participating in a terrorist organisation will be extradited, a

Bulgarian court announced Friday.

The two men, 18 and 22, and a woman, 17, were arrested on Oct 8 and are wanted on European Arrest Warrants issued by their home country for "participation in a terrorist organisation," Bulgarian prosecutors said.

The suspects, who were on their way to Syria, have agreed to be extradited and must leave Bulgaria for the Netherlands in the next 10 days, the court in southern Bulgaria said. (AFP)

Germany's Merkel defends 'transit zones'

BERLIN, Oct 17, (RTRS): Chancellor Angela Merkel on Friday defended a proposal to set up "transit zones" at German borders to filter out migrants who clearly have no chance of gaining asylum, declaring she would not rest until she had persuaded her junior coalition partner.

Germany is struggling to cope with a record influx of more than 800,000 migrants. Senior conservatives have raised the pressure on Merkel to focus on measures to

reduce the number of new arrivals.

Speaking at an event in Hamburg organised by the youth wing of her Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Merkel said her approach was based on Christian values and that the respect for human dignity had to be the "central benchmark".

"But this doesn't mean that we'll shelter everyone," Merkel said, adding that those migrants who come to Germany for a better life and were not in real danger would

be sent back.

Merkel said the government would soon pass more measures to handle the refugee influx, including temporary establishment of so-called transit zones at land borders.

The conservative leader said European Union rules provide for such a move actually only at the bloc's external border, but in exceptional cases Brussels allowed such measures also at internal borders for a limited time.

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