

Europe

Russia accident kills 9

UN calls for renewed 'disarmament' push

GENEVA, Feb 27. (Agencies): The UN secretary-general launched Monday what he termed "a new initiative" to revitalise global disarmament, warning that surging arms sales and rising nuclear tensions required a renewed effort towards containing deadly weapons.

Antonio Guterres, the United Nations chief, offered few details on the project but said its objective was to give "greater impetus and direction to the global disarmament agenda."

He told the UN's Conference on Disarmament in Geneva that he wants to shake up the approaches that have led to stalemate and a reversal of progress in recent years.

The UN's stated goal of a nuclear-free world remains a remote prospect, with an estimated "150,000 nuclear weapons in the world", Guterres said.



Guterres

He added that any initial momentum towards curbing the size and budgets of the world's militaries has "been abandoned", while "military power is glorified".

"At the same time, global arms trade is thriving in a way not seen since the Cold War", Guterres further said.

The UN Conference on Disarmament has failed for two decades to agree on a conclusive deal, as nations have traded blame for each others' failures to implement existing deals.

Merkel slams food charity: German Chancellor Angela Merkel has criticised a food bank for refusing to accept any more migrants, calling the decision "not good".

Essener Tafel, a charity that serves free meals to the poor, had come under fire after it said it would now require new customers to produce German identity papers as a huge migrant influx was displacing locals in need.

In an interview late Monday with RTL television, Merkel said: "One should not make such categorisations. That is not good."

At the same time, the German leader acknowledged that the incident demonstrates the pressure that the volunteers are coming under.

More than 1.2 million asylum seekers have come to Europe's biggest economy since 2015 -- more than half from war-torn Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan -- in a mass wave that sparked a xenophobic backlash.

Facebook case dropped: German prosecutors said Monday they were dropping a probe into whether Facebook bosses including Mark Zuckerberg were condoning hate speech online.

Executives at the social media giant found themselves the target of a complaint filed in 2016 that alleged they were not taking sufficient action to clamp down on racist content.

Concern has risen in Germany over the vitriolic comments made by some Facebook and Twitter users, which gained intensity as public misgivings grew in some quarters over the arrival of more than a million asylum seekers since 2015.

Lawyer Chan-jo Jun, who initiated the claim, had compiled 442 Facebook posts containing incitement of hatred and violence, as well as support for terrorist groups.

Greek economy minister quits: Greece's Economy and Development Minister Dimitri Papadimitriou has quit his post in response to public anger over his wife's use of a housing allowance, a move that will likely expedite a mini reshuffle of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras's cabinet.

Papadimitriou's wife, Rania Antonopoulou, stepped down from her role as junior labour minister on Monday after media reported that she had claimed a 1,000 euro a month rent allowance.

The reports, some of which described the pair as the "richest couple in government", incensed Greeks who have suffered years of austerity brought on by a debt crisis that many blame on political corruption and a spendthrift state.

Murdered journo probed graft: Murdered Slovak journalist Jan Kuciak was about to publish an investigation into high-level political corruption, the country's leading newspaper said Tuesday as the killing stoked concerns about graft and press freedom in the small EU state.

Prime Minister Robert Fico has offered a one million euro (\$1.2 million) reward for information leading to the killers' capture after police commander Tibor Gaspar said the motive was "most likely related to the investigative work of the journalist".

Police found Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kusnirova shot dead on Sunday at his home in Velka Maca, a town to the east of the capital Bratislava.

Hungary summons Ukraine envoy: Hungary said Tuesday it had summoned Kiev's envoy to warn against rising "extremism" after an ethnic-Hungarian cultural building in western Ukraine was attacked for the second time in a month.

The headquarters of an ethnic-Hungarian cultural association (KMKSZ) was set on fire overnight in Uzhhorod, capital of the Transcarpathia region, according to Hungarian news agency MTL.

Unidentified attackers threw a petrol bomb into the building which burnt out most of the ground floor, said MTL. No injuries were reported.

The building also suffered minor damage in an attack earlier this month.

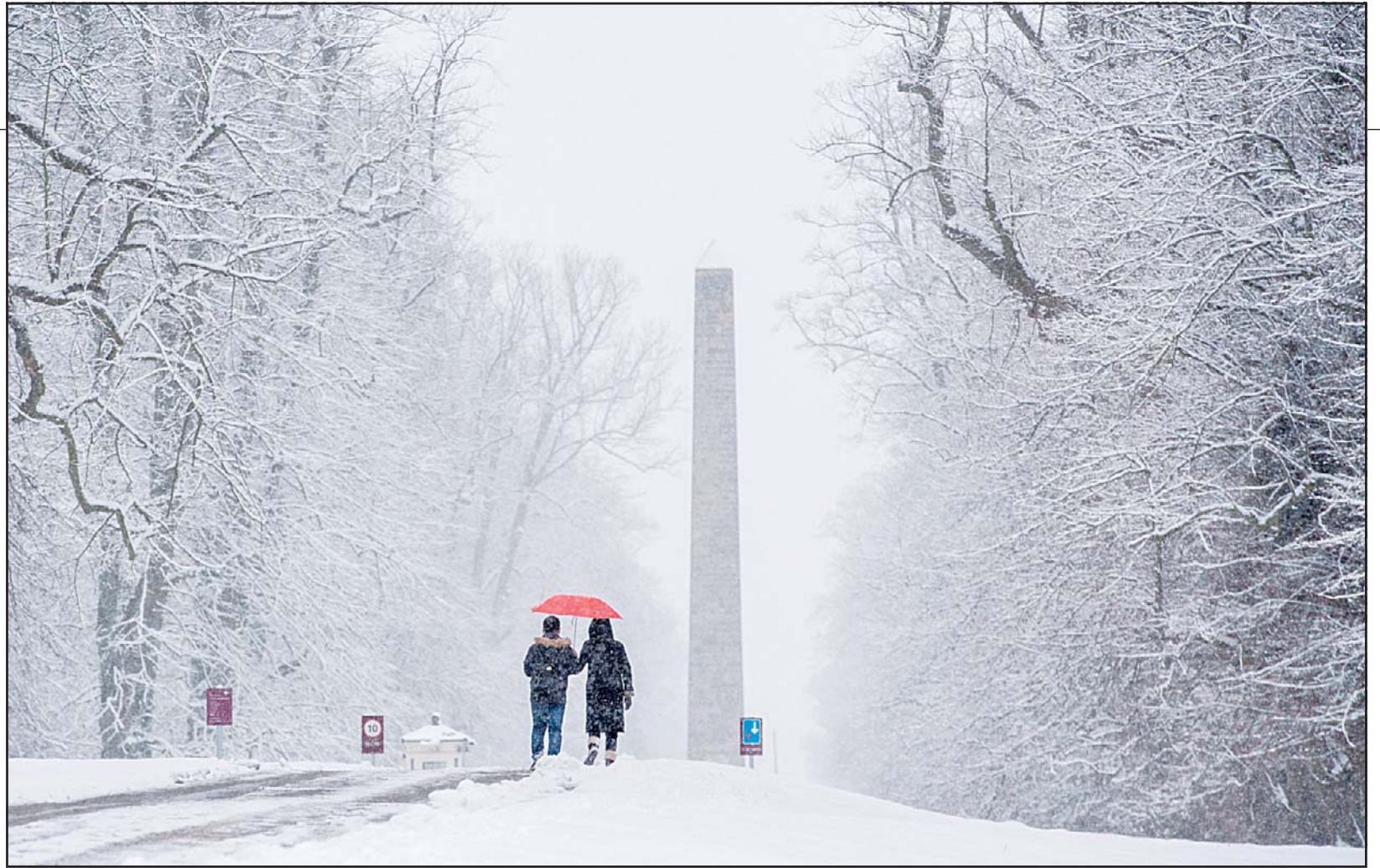
9 killed in Russia accident: Nine people were killed when a minibus collided with a truck in Russia's Bashkiria region, Interfax news agency reported on Tuesday, citing a police official.

"We have information about nine dead," the official said, according to the agency. (RTRS)

Putin family used Estonian bank: A Danish newspaper said Tuesday a whistleblower warned the management of Denmark's biggest bank in 2013 that family members of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russia's spy agency were using its Estonian bank branch for money laundering.

Denmark's Berlingske daily says the leaked internal report indicated that the Danske Bank leadership knew "of far more serious conditions than previously stated."

The paper adds that Danske Bank in 2013 shut down 20 Russian customer accounts following a whistleblower report alleging that its Estonian branch possibly had been involved in illegal activity. The clients' identities were kept secret at the time.



Tourists visit Haworth Castle in Haworth as snow blankets northern England on Feb 27. A blast of Siberian weather dubbed 'The Beast from the East' sent temperatures plunging across much of Europe early Tuesday as commuters braced themselves for another day of travel chaos. (AFP)

'Beast from the East' sends Arctic blast across Europe

A blast of Siberian weather sent temperatures plunging across much of Europe on Tuesday, causing headaches for travellers and leading to several deaths from exposure as snow carpeted palm-lined Mediterranean beaches.

The icy weather is in stark contrast to conditions in the Arctic itself, which is experiencing an "off-the-charts" heatwave this week, according to the European Geosciences Institute.

Meteorologists have documented temperatures above freezing in some parts of the Arctic, causing astonishment among many scientists.

But to the south swathes of Europe were shivering under temperatures well below freezing, claiming at least 10 lives across the continent in a snap

dubbed "the Beast from the East" by British tabloids.

At least five deaths were reported in Poland alone on Monday as the mercury dropped to minus 16°C (minus 4°F) overnight in Warsaw.

That brought the number of Polish deaths from freezing to 53 since Nov 1, and temperatures are expected to remain below minus 12°C across the country Tuesday, with the cold accentuated by a biting wind.

In Britain, authorities warned of five to 10 cms (2-4 inches) of snow on Tuesday and the likelihood of travel delays on roads, rail networks and at airports, while electricity and even mobile phone service may be cut in some areas.

On Monday, British Airways cancelled more than

60 short-haul flights either departing or arriving from London Heathrow airport.

Some of the iciest conditions were reported in Italy, where many schools and daycare centres were closed, to the consternation of parents already preparing for closures next week linked to this weekend's general election.

Public anger was also growing over the disruptions to rail services across the country, as travellers learned that many track switches did not have defrosting equipment, meaning they had to be dug out by hand.

In Naples, the airport was closed early Tuesday and bus services in the city halted because of ice. (AFP)

Brexit

Ex-official slams trade plans

'No open-ended Brexit transition'

BRUSSELS, Feb 27. (Agencies): European Union negotiator Michel Barnier warned Britain Tuesday that it could not have an open-ended post-Brexit transition and that a deal on the phase remained out of reach.

Barnier added ahead of a key speech by Prime Minister Theresa May on future trade relations that Britain's plans for partial access to the single market were "cherry picking".

"There are quite a lot of points of disagreement. I regret, but maintain the evaluation I made a few weeks ago: in the light of these disagreements, we have not achieved the transition yet," Barnier told a press conference after briefing EU ministers.

Britain hopes to agree by an EU summit at the end of next month on a transition period during which it will still follow EU laws in exchange for access to the single market.

The EU says it should last until the end of 2020, when its current multi-year budget runs out. But Britain says it should be "about two years", while a recent government paper said the date should reflect the time needed for both sides to strike a deal on future trade ties.

Barnier, who will unveil the EU's draft of its Brexit divorce agreement on Wednesday, said that Britain "it seems would like to keep an open-ended transition, which of course is not possible."

Meanwhile, a senior minister on Tuesday defended Britain's plans to cut EU ties to pursue an independent trade policy post-Brexit, after his former top official compared the approach to swapping a three-course meal for a packet of crisps.

International Trade Secretary Liam Fox said leaving the European Union's single market and customs union was crucial if Britain was to take advantage of its newfound independence.

"Our approach should not be premised on simply identifying how much

of our current relationship we want to keep, but what we need to prosper in a rapidly changing global environment," he said in a speech in London.

He called for a "fully independent trade policy" that would allow Britain to strike deals in new markets, saying: "We cannot let the practices and the patterns of the past constrain the opportunities of the future."

The opposition Labour party on Monday joined business lobby groups in calling for a new customs union with the EU after Brexit, raising the pressure on Prime Minister Theresa May to change course.

And just hours before Fox's speech, Martin Donnelly, the senior civil servant at the minister's Department for International Trade until last year, added his voice to the criticism of the government's strategy.

Meanwhile, British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson drew ridicule Tuesday for suggesting that problems with the Irish border after Brexit could be managed in a similar way to travel across London boroughs.

The leading eurosceptic highlighted technological innovations used in the capital to calculate a traffic charge to explain why the government's plans to leave the EU's customs union and single market need not lead to border checks in Ireland.

"There's no border between Camden and Westminster," he told BBC radio, referring to two local authority areas in London.

"But when I was mayor of London we anaesthetically and invisibly took hundreds of millions of pounds (dollars, euros) from the accounts of people travelling between those two boroughs without any need for border checks whatever."

Questioned about his analogy between travelling across one city and the cross-border trade between two coun-

tries, Ireland and Northern Ireland, he insisted it was "a very relevant comparison".

"There's all sorts of scope for pre-booked, electronic checks, all sorts of things that you can do to obviate the need for a hard border to allow us to come out of the customs union, take back control of our trade policy and do trade deals," he said.

Also:

EDINBURGH: Scotland's first minister said on Tuesday that the devolved Scottish parliament would not consent to legislation necessary to keep Britain's Brexit plans on track, presenting another thorny issue for the government to surmount.

Prime Minister Theresa May's government on Monday indicated that it would go no further in offering concessions to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, who are concerned that they will lose powers in a constitutional realignment after Britain leaves the European Union.

The United Kingdom's devolved nations do not have a veto on Brexit legislation, but ignoring their wishes risks worsening already strained relations, stoking nationalism in Scotland, and further complicating the already-difficult withdrawal process.

"I will not sign up to something that effectively undermines the whole foundation on which devolution is built," Nicola Sturgeon, whose party supports independence for Scotland, told BBC radio. As things stand, her government could not recommend consent for the bill, she said.

Cabinet minister David Lidington said on Monday that most currently devolved powers would now automatically stay in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, the devolved nations' capitals, after Britain leaves the European Union.



Britain's Catherine (right), Duchess of Cambridge is met by Lesley Regan, President of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists as she visits St Thomas' Hospital in London on Feb 27. (AFP)



Watkins

Rowley

Britain

4 far-right plots foiled: British police foiled four extreme right-wing terror plots in 2017, according to the country's chief counter-terrorism officer, warning of a "significant" threat.

"The right-wing terrorist threat is more significant and more challenging than perhaps the public debate gives it credit for," Mark Rowley said in a speech late on Monday.

"Right-wing terrorism wasn't previously organised here," said Rowley, who is stepping down this year.

He added: "A deeply concerning characteristic is how both far-right and also Islamist terrorism are growing, allowing each side to reaffirm their grievances and justify their actions."

Britain was hit by five terror attacks last year, four Islamist-inspired and one extreme right-wing.

In 2016, a neo-Nazi sympathiser assassinated British MP Jo Cox in her constituency in northern England.

Investigations against the extreme far-right in Britain have focused in recent months on National Action, a group defined by Rowley as a "homegrown, white supremacist, neo-Nazi terror organisation".

The group was banned under terrorism laws in 2016.

Rowley also said that the children of convicted terrorists should be taken away from them.

"The family courts and social services now routinely wrestle with child protection and safeguarding cases arising out of terrorism and extremism," he said.

"However, we still see cases where parents convicted of terrorist-related offences, including radicalisers, retain care of their own children." (AFP)

Call for screening system: The head of Save the Children called for a global screening system for the aid sector to keep sexual predators out of humanitarian operations and said Interpol should be involved.

Chief executive Kevin Watkins likened the sexual exploitation crisis which has engulfed the aid world to the 2008 financial

crisis and urged charities not to bury their heads in the sand.

The aid sector has been rocked by reports that some Oxfam staff paid for sex

with prostitutes in Haiti after the country's 2010 earthquake. Save the Children has also come under attack amid reports senior bosses sexually harassed staff.



A woman places a candle in front of a portrait of Slovak investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his girlfriend Martina Kusnirova in the center of Bratislava on Feb 27. The body of Jan Kuciak, a 27-year-old reporter for the actuality.sk news portal owned by Axel Springer and Ringier, was discovered alongside that of Martina Kusnirova at their home in Velka Maca, 65 kms (40 miles) east of the Slovak capital Bratislava on Feb 26. (AFP)

"If we pretend that we are not facing a crisis of trust in our sector, we are delusional," he told the Bond International Development Conference in London - the largest meeting of aid groups since the scandal broke.

"This is our 2008 financial crisis moment. The financial crisis happened because of institutions that got too big, too confident, too exuberant, and had too much belief in their own power, who refused to look at their own organisational cultures ..." (RTRS)

Modern slavery cases surge: Better support for victims of modern slavery and growing public awareness of the crime have helped Scotland boost the number of cases reported to police, the government said on Monday.

Scottish police saw a surge in suspected human trafficking cases last year, with authorities receiving 213 referrals, up 42 percent from 2016, according to government figures.

Cases involving labour exploitation saw the sharpest jump and made up over half of those reported to police in 2017. Nearly 30 percent of cases involved children, the data showed.

Authorities said the rise in cases was due to better understanding of human trafficking, after Scotland introduced a national strategy last year aimed at stamping out the crime. (RTRS)