

Migrants

Automatic: Macron

'14 countries agree to a new influx mechanism'

PARIS, July 23, (Agencies): Fourteen member countries of the European Union have agreed to a new "solidarity mechanism" proposed by Germany and France to allocate migrants across the bloc, French President Emmanuel Macron said on Monday.

Foreign affairs and Interior ministers of the EU had earlier gathered in Paris to discuss immigration and security issues following a first gathering in Finland last week.

"The conclusion of this morning's meeting is that, in principle, 14 member states, at this stage, have expressed their agreement with the Franco-German document," Macron told journalists.

Macron did not spell out specifics but said the new initiative would be "quick" and "automatic".

A source close to the French presidency told Reuters that in addition to France and Germany, Finland, Luxembourg, Portugal, Lithuania, Croatia and Ireland had also signalled a clear intention to move forward with a new system.

Italy's Interior minister Matteo Salvini, whose country is at the forefront of the migrant influx in Europe, did not take part in the meeting, however.

In a letter to his French counterpart Christophe Castaner, Salvini warned of the effect of decisions "solely taken in Paris and Berlin."

Italy took in almost all of the migrants rescued by humanitarian groups at sea until a populist coalition government took office in 2018 and immediately sought to close the nation's ports to the charity ships.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, at least 426 people have died during attempts to reach Europe in the Mediterranean sea so far this year.

Macron also said France had asked the Libyan government to ensure migrants would no longer be placed in custody in the country and that appropriate measures would be taken to ensure their safety.

Stop

In other news, Macron called on Libyan authorities Monday to stop holding transiting refugees in detention camps and said buildings of the United Nations' refugee agency were attacked earlier in the day.

Macron did not elaborate on the attacks he said were carried out on buildings of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. He said France should provide security for vulnerable refugees fleeing their homelands and end the "confinement" in Libya.

Macron met with UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi and the director general of the International Organization for Migration on Monday, when European ministers in Paris tried to find agreement on dealing with Europe-bound migrants who use Libya as a stepping stone.

Under a deal with the European Union, Libyan vessels apprehend refugees and migrants setting out across the Mediterranean Sea and drag them back unwillingly to the North African country, where battles between two opposing leaders are in progress around Tripoli.

The day began with talks among European interior and foreign ministers, and Macron announced that eight countries have so far signed on to a French-German initiative to cooperate in a burden-sharing mechanism. Southern European countries like Italy and Greece have complained for years that they shoulder a disproportionate responsibility for arriving migrants.

"Europe isn't a la carte when it comes to solidarity," he said, with countries saying they don't want a Europe that shares burdens but are in favor of unity "when it's about receiving structural funds."

Absent from the closed-door meeting of European Union interior and foreign ministers was Italy's populist Interior Minister Matteo Salvini. He tweeted a day earlier his strong disagreement with letting France and Germany determine the bloc's refugee policy while nations like Italy are on the front line.

"We intend to make ourselves respected," Salvini declared in another tweet.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas voiced hope earlier in the day that a solution was on the horizon.

"The haggling about emergency rescue in the Mediterranean must finally end," Maas said at a briefing for reporters. "It is really necessary that we manage to put together a coalition of those who are prepared to help, and I think we came a step closer to that today."

He said talks would continue among interior ministers about how an ad hoc mechanism might look that would make it possible for Italy and Malta to open their harbors.

Smugglers

Thousands of migrants set off each year in smuggler's boats from Libya, a war-torn North African nation where migrants are kept in prison-like camps that international authorities have called appalling. The International Organization for Migration says up to June 19, there were 2,252 arrivals in Italy and 1,151 in Malta on the central Mediterranean route while at least 343 other people died trying - all far below the numbers who arrived in previous years.

France has stressed the need for European countries to share the arriving migrants, who are often traveling on traffickers' flimsy boats and rescued by humanitarian groups.

The meeting, called by French President Emmanuel Macron, preceded talks later Monday between Macron and the UN chiefs for refugees and migration.

On Sunday, the SOS Mediterranean, a French charity, partnering with Doctors Without Borders, announced it has returned to the sea with a new boat to save migrants, seven months after the flag was pulled from its original ship, Aquarius. The Norwegian-flagged Ocean Viking is heading to the Mediterranean with a 31-member crew, the group said.

Salvini wasted no time in warning SOS Mediterranean that Italy was not about to bend on its policy of keeping rescue ships at bay, tweeting Monday, "if someone is thinking about helping smugglers or breaking laws, be careful because we won't be standing still."

The Aquarius, SOS Mediterranean's original rescue ship, ended its operations last fall after Panama revoked its flag and Italian prosecutors ordered the vessel seized, accusing Doctors Without Borders of illegally disposing of tons of contaminated and medical waste. The organization says the Aquarius assisted 30,000 migrants since 2016.

Monday's meeting follows a gathering of EU interior ministers on the issue of rescuing migrants last week in Helsinki, Finland, which holds the rotating EU presidency. Salvini hailed the progress in Helsinki, saying other ministers shared Italy's position of re-vamping Mediterranean search and rescue rules with the aim of preventing immigration abuses.



Macron



An airplane operates over a fire at the village of Chaveira, near Macao, in central Portugal on July 22. More than 1,000 fire-fighters are battling a major wildfire amid scorching temperatures in Portugal, where forest blazes wreak destruction every summer. About 90% of the fire area in the Castelo Branco district, 200 km (about 125 miles) northeast of the capital Lisbon, has been brought under control during cooler overnight temperatures, according to a local Civil Protection Agency commander. (AP)

Britain

EU tells incoming UK PM it won't change Brexit terms

Johnson named next British PM

LONDON, July 23, (RTRS): Boris Johnson, the ebullient Brexiteer who has promised to lead Britain out of the European Union with or without a deal by Halloween, will replace Theresa May as prime minister after winning the leadership of the Conservative Party on Tuesday.

His victory catapults the United Kingdom towards a Brexit showdown with the EU and towards a constitutional crisis at home, as British lawmakers have vowed to bring down any government that tries to leave the bloc without a divorce deal.

Johnson, the face of the 2016 Brexit referendum, won the votes of 92,153 members of the Conservative Party, almost twice the 46,656 won by his rival, Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt.

May will leave office on Wednesday after going to Buckingham Palace to see Queen Elizabeth, who will formally appoint Johnson before he enters Downing Street.

"We are going to get Brexit done on Oct 31, and we are going to take advantage of all the opportunities it will bring in a new spirit of 'can do,'" Johnson, 55, said after the result was announced.

"Like some slumbering giant, we are going to rise and ping off the guy-ropes of self-doubt and negativity."

Johnson said the mantra of his leadership campaign had been to "deliver Brexit, unite the country and defeat (opposition Labour leader) Jeremy Corbyn - and that is what we are going to do".

Within half an hour of his victory, US President Donald Trump had tweeted his congratulations, adding: "He will be great!"

The comprehensive victory for one of Britain's most flamboyant politicians places an avowed Brexit supporter in charge of the government for the first time since the United Kingdom voted

to leave the EU in the shock 2016 referendum.

But Johnson - known for his ambition, mop of blonde hair, flowery oratory and cursory command of policy detail - takes office at one of the most tumultuous junctures in post-World War Two British history.

The 2016 Brexit referendum showed a United Kingdom divided about much more than the European Union, and has fuelled soul-searching about everything from regional secession and immigration to capitalism, the legacy of empire, and modern Britishness.

Toppled

Brexit, which has already toppled two Conservative prime ministers, will dominate.

Johnson has pledged to negotiate a new Brexit divorce deal with the EU to secure a smooth transition out of the EU before Oct 31. But if the bloc refuses, as it insists it will, he has promised to leave anyway - "do or die" - on Halloween.

It is a step that many investors and economists say would send shock waves through world markets and tip the world's fifth largest economy into recession or even chaos.

A Brexit without a divorce deal would also weaken London's position as the pre-eminent international financial centre while jolting the northern European economy.

Johnson's Conservatives have no majority in parliament and need the support of 10 lawmakers from Northern Ireland's Brexit-backing Democratic Unionist Party to govern.

Even then, the majority is wafer-thin - and some lawmakers have threatened to bring down the government, a step that would probably deepen Britain's political crisis and lead to an election.



Boris Johnson gestures as he speaks after being announced as the new leader of the Conservative Party in London on July 23. Brexit champion Johnson won the contest to lead Britain's governing Conservative Party on Tuesday, and will become the country's next prime minister. (AP)



Sanchez



Zelenskiy

Europe

Podemos declines support: Spain's far-left Unidas Podemos party said on Tuesday it would not back acting Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez in a confirmation vote later in the day, making Sanchez all but certain to lose the first round but leaving his fate beyond that in limbo.

Sanchez, who won the most seats in an election in April but fell short of an absolute majority, has faced three months of difficult coalition talks with Podemos, seen as natural allies of his centre-left Socialists.

While he was likely to fail to win Tuesday's first round vote, he could still be confirmed in a second round two days later, provided Podemos and the Socialists overcome their differences to strike a deal by that time.

"We haven't decided yet what we will vote but we obviously won't vote in favour (of Sanchez)," Podemos chief negotiator Pablo Echenique told Cadena Ser radio, when asked how his party would vote on Tuesday. He said the party had not yet decided whether to abstain or vote no.

Under Spain's system for choosing a prime minister, Sanchez would need an absolute majority of 176 yes votes in the 350-seat parliament to be confirmed on Tuesday. Different rules would apply in Thursday's second round, requiring more yes votes than no votes while excluding abstentions.

Echenique said that his party wanted to keep negotiating with the Socialists to try and eventually strike a deal on a coalition government.

Considering how difficult talks have been over the past three months, and tense exchanges between Sanchez and Iglesias in a parliament debate late on Monday, it remains to be seen how stable and united such a coalition government would be. (RTRS)

Portugal wildfire under control: Fire-fighters in Portugal have brought a huge wildfire under control after the blaze raged for four days and injured 39 people.

Civil Protection Agency commander Luis Belo Costa said around 1,000 fire-fighters were keeping watch over smoldering hotspots amid gusting winds and tempera-

tures close to 40 degrees Celsius.

Belo Costa says 17 water-dropping aircraft were deemed no longer needed to fight the fire, centered in the district of Castelo Branco, 200 kilometers (about 125 miles) northeast of Lisbon.

He says hilly terrain and dense woodland had slowed the emergency response, but

cooler nighttime and morning temperatures helped firefighters make progress controlling the blaze. Eleven bulldozers were used to create firebreaks. (AP)

PM's party nears majority: The party of Ukraine's president was on track Monday to win an absolute majority in parliament,



In this photo provided by Russian Emergency Situations Ministry for the Khabarovsk Region Press Service, officials inspect a tent camp after fire near Solnechny village, Khabarovsk Region, Russia on June 27. Russian authorities say three children have died in a fire at the tent camp in a ski area in the Khabarovsk region about 6,000 kilometers (3,700 miles) east of Moscow, that housed some 189 people at the time of the fire, news reports said. (AP)

a first in the country's modern history that would hand President Volodymyr Zelenskiy a clear mandate for change.

Zelenskiy, a popular comedian and political novice who was elected in April, pushed for a snap election that was held Sunday. He argued that the allies of former President Petro Poroshenko who dominated parliament were hampering his reform agenda.

With more than 70% of ballots counted Monday, his party, Servant of the People, had 42.7% of the vote. In addition, results showed his allies winning in at least 125 of the 199 single-mandate constituencies, in which voters cast ballots for individuals, not parties.

The landslide win would give Zelenskiy the go-ahead to fight corruption, to try to bring peace to Ukraine's eastern regions under control of Russia-backed separatists, and to fix the country's stagnant economy without needing to forge a coalition with other political players. (AP)

'Walesa must apologize': A Polish appeals court upheld a lower court's verdict in a slander case and ruled Monday that pro-democracy fighter and former president Lech Walesa must apologize to the leader of the country's right-wing ruling party.

Law and Justice party leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski, Poland's most powerful politician, sued Walesa for blaming him on social media for the 2010 plane crash in Smolensk, Russia that killed President Lech Kaczynski, Kaczynski's twin brother, and 95 others. (AP)