

Capsized-Boat Captain, Crew Member Arrested

BY TRISHA THOMAS
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Associated Press

CATANIA, Sicily — European leaders struggled for an adequate response in the face of unremitting migrant flows and continued instability in Libya following the feared drowning of as many as 900 people in the latest Mediterranean tragedy. In Sicily early Tuesday, prosecutors said they had arrested the boat's captain and a crew member.

Assistant Prosecutor Rocco Liguori said two men were charged with favoring illegal immigration and that the Tunisian captain was also charged with reckless multiple homicide in relation to the sinking.

The captain and crew member, a Syrian, were arrested aboard the rescue boat that brought 27 survivors from the shipwreck to Sicily.

Even as the search continued for victims of the weekend disaster, coast guard ships rushed to respond to new distress calls on the high seas — two off Libya and a third boat that ran aground near Greece.

Decrying what he called an "escalation in these death voyages," Italian Premier Matteo Renzi urged Europe to put the focus on preventing more boats from leaving Libya, the source of 90 percent of migrant traffic to Italy.

"We are facing an organized criminal activity that is making lots of money, but above all ruining many lives," Renzi said at a joint news conference with Malta's prime minister, Joseph Muscat. He compared their activity to that of slave traders of centuries past, "unscrupulous men who traded human lives."

The European Union foreign affairs chief, Federica Mogherini, said this weekend's appalling human toll — which, if verified, would be the deadliest migrant tragedy ever — had "finally" fully awakened the European Union to the evils of human trafficking.

The EU has been under increasing criticism for lagging



XINHUA/ZUMA PRESS/TNS

A vessel carrying approximately 200 irregular migrants sank off the coasts of Rhodes island in southeastern Aegean Sea on Monday,, local authorities said. At least three people died in the accident. European Union officials gathered for an emergency meeting Monday, after hundreds of people are believed to have died in what could be the Mediterranean's deadliest migrant disaster.

in its response to the crisis, with two shipwrecks believed to have taken the lives of as many as 1,300 migrants in the past week. Some 400 people are believed to have drowned in another capsizing on April 13.

Stopping the traffickers will be a key item on the agenda when EU leaders meet in an emergency summit Thursday in Brussels, along with a proposal to double spending on sea patrols off Europe's southern border. The 10-point plan includes a proposal to take "civil-military" action modeled on Europe's anti-piracy operation off the coast of Somalia, to capture and destroy boats used by traffickers.

Meanwhile, new details emerged about the weekend disaster, with Italian prosecutors saying hundreds of migrants were locked below deck unable to escape when the rickety boat capsized off the coast of Libya.

Speaking at a news conference in Catania, Sicily, prosecutor Giovanni Salvi said "a few hundred were forced into the hold and they were locked in and prevented from coming out." He said hundreds more were locked on a second level of the boat, which also had hundreds of migrants squeezed into its upper deck.

Salvi said the migrants rushed to one side of the boat as they saw a Portuguese-flagged container vessel approach, with the promise of rescue contributing to the disaster.

"Merchant ships don't have adequate training for rescues in the seas," Salvi warned. "The fact is, sea rescues are difficult and require professionalism."

As with most such high seas sinkings, a precise death toll will likely never be known. Only 24 bodies have been recovered so far and only 27 survivors were res-

cued. One survivor, identified as a 32-year-old Bangladeshi, has put the number of people on board at as many as 950, though Salvi said the survivor had no means to verify numbers. He said the coast guard estimated more than 700 people were on board, based on its observations at the scene.

Muscat, the Maltese prime minister, called the latest tragedy "a game-changer," and said that "if Europe doesn't work together, history will judge it very badly."

Renzi said that recent events had proven that providing rescue wasn't always possible, given the conditions of the smugglers' boats and the delicacy of such operations, and that the focus needs to be on preventing the boats from leaving Libya. "Continuing to think that allowing them to depart and then chasing after them means putting at risk human lives," he said.

Saudi Airstrikes Hit Yemeni Capital

SANAA, Yemen (AP) — Saudi-led airstrikes hit weapons caches held by Iran-backed Shiite rebels, touching off massive explosions Monday in Yemen's capital that killed at least 19 people and buried scores of others under the rubble of flat-topped homes.

After the coalition airstrikes, mushroom clouds rose over the mountainous outskirts of Sanaa, where the arms depots are located. The Fag Atan area has been targeted several times since March 26, the start of the air campaign against the rebels known as Houthis.

"It was like the doors of hell opened all of a sudden," said Mohammed Sarhan, whose home is less than 2 kilometers (1 mile) from the site. "I felt the house lift up and fall."

The blasts — among the most powerful in Sanaa since the airstrikes began — deposited a layer of soot on the top floors of buildings in the Yemeni capital and left streets littered with glass. Anti-aircraft fire rattled in response.

Talks Begin On Capitol Hill Budget Pact

WASHINGTON (AP) — Lawmakers quarreled Monday over Medicare, taxes and almost \$40 billion in unrequested money for overseas war-fighting as House and Senate negotiators kicked off work on a Republican budget blueprint for next year and beyond.

"A budget is more than just a set of numbers. It is a reflection of our priorities, of our vision for the future," said Rep. Tom Price of Georgia, top negotiator for House Republicans, as he touted the version he largely drafted.

It would cut more than \$5 trillion from spending projected to otherwise total almost \$50 trillion, his path toward a balanced budget by 2024.

Separate House- and Senate-passed budget plans have plenty in common. Both chambers want to use the fast-track budget process to send a measure repealing the health care law to President Barack Obama. And both call for padding war spending — it's exempt from budget limits — on new weapons and training of American forces.

At issue is a nonbinding measure for the 2016 fiscal year starting Oct. 1. Both House and Senate Republicans have endorsed major cuts to programs such as Medicare, Medicaid, highway projects and domestic agency budgets as a way to bring the federal ledger into balance within a decade — all without raising taxes.

"Passing a balanced budget is about restoring the trust of the American people, because the federal government's chronic overspending and exploding debt threatens each and every American," said Senate Budget Committee Chairman Mike Enzi, R-Wyo.

Liberal Vermont Independent Bernie Sanders agreed that the companion Republican plans are the GOP's vision for the future — though he views it as an assault on the poor and working class because of cuts to student loans, Medicaid and food stamps, as well as a repeal of the Affordable Care Act that would take medical care away from about 15 million people.

"The rich get much richer, and the Republicans think they need more help," Sanders said.

US To Send Ukraine \$18 Million In Aid

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States will supply Ukraine with nearly \$18 million in aid to provide shelter, food vouchers, potable water and health and sanitation in regions affected by fighting between government forces and pro-Russia fighters.

The White House says Vice President Joe Biden informed Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko about the new assistance in a telephone call Monday.

The two men are welcoming efforts by the Organization for Security and Cooperation Europe to seek a permanent ceasefire in areas still experiencing fighting. Both are calling on Russia to abide by earlier agreements and stop moving troops along the Russia-Ukraine border.

The call came as U.S. and Ukraine troops kicked off joint training exercises intended to help bolster Ukraine's defenses against incursions from the Russian-backed separatists in the east.

Obama Honors Buckeyes At White House

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama honored the national champion Ohio State football team Monday, taking just a little bit of credit for the new playoff system that the Buckeyes mastered.

Ohio State won the first College Football Playoff in January, beating Oregon in the title game.

Obama jokingly talked about throwing his political weight behind the idea of a four-team playoff to replace the old system in which voters and computers selected two teams to play for the championship.

"I cannot claim full credit. But I will point out that I pushed for a playoff system in 2008," Obama said. "This is a promise kept. You're welcome, America."

Ohio State coach Urban Meyer thanked the president, noting that the Buckeyes probably wouldn't have been eligible to play for the title under the previous system.

"He made the point several times, but it's true that he jumped right in the middle of a conversation about a college football playoff that we obviously benefited," Meyer told reporters.

More than 200 guests and dignitaries packed the White House East Room for the ceremony, including former Ohio State players Archie Griffin and Cris Carter.

Ohio State made an improbable run to the championship after losing two starting quarterbacks to injury, winning its final three games with third-string quarterback Cardale Jones.

All three quarterbacks return for the upcoming season, which has everyone in Ohio — and much of college football — wondering who will be the Buckeyes' starting quarterback.

Meyer said he got no advice from Obama.

"That was my fault. I should have asked," Meyer said.

Yemen

US Warship Could Block Iran Access

BY LOLITA C. BALDOR
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In a stepped-up response to Iranian backing of Shiite rebels in Yemen, the Navy aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt is steaming toward the waters off Yemen to beef up security and join other American ships that are prepared to intercept any Iranian vessels carrying weapons to the Houthi rebels.

The deployment comes after a U.N. Security Council resolution approved last week imposed an arms embargo on leaders of the Iranian-backed Shiite Houthi rebels. The resolution passed in a 14-0 vote with Russia abstaining.

Navy officials said Monday that the Roosevelt was moving through the Arabian Sea. A massive ship that carries F/A-18 fighter jets, the Roosevelt is seen more of a deterrent and show of force in the region.

The U.S. Navy has been beefing up its presence in the Gulf of Aden and the southern Arabian Sea in response to reports that a convoy of about eight Iranian ships is heading toward Yemen and possibly carrying arms for the Houthis. Navy officials said there are about nine U.S. warships in the region, including cruisers and destroyers carrying teams that can board and search other vessels.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the ship movement on the record.

Saudi Arabia and several of its allies, mainly Gulf Arab countries, have been trying to drive back the rebels, who seized the capital of Sanaa in September and have overrun many other northern provinces with the help of security forces loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The U.S. supports the Saudi campaign.

Western governments and Sunni Arab countries say the Houthis get their arms from Iran. Tehran and the rebels deny that, although the Islamic Republic has provided political and humanitarian support to the Shiite group.

The U.S. has been providing logistical and intelligence support to the Saudi coalition launching airstrikes against the Houthis. That air campaign is now in its fourth week, and the U.S. has also begun refueling coalition aircraft involved in the conflict.

White House spokesman

Josh Earnest would not comment specifically on any Navy movements in Yemeni waters, but said the U.S. has concerns about Iran's "continued support for the Houthis."

"We have seen evidence that the Iranians are supplying weapons and other armed support to the Houthis in Yemen. That support will only contribute to greater violence in that country. These are exactly the kind of destabilizing activities that we have in mind when we raise concerns about Iran's destabilizing activities in the Middle East."

He said, "The Iranians are acutely aware of our concerns for their continued support of the Houthis by sending them large shipments of weapons."

The expanded U.S. Navy activity in the region comes at a sensitive time, as the U.S. and six world powers have reached a framework deal with Iran to control its nuclear program.

Since the preliminary deal with reached on April 2, Iran and the U.S. have been disputing the details of the deal. And on Monday, a lawyer for Tehran-based *Washington Post* reporter Jason Rezaian said Tehran had charged Rezaian with espionage and three other crimes. The Obama administration dismisses the charges as "absurd."

The U.S. Navy generally conducts consensual boardings of ships when needed, including to combat piracy around Africa and the region. So far, however, U.S. naval personnel have not boarded any Iranian vessels since the Yemen conflict began.

Officials said it's too soon to speculate on what the Navy ships may do as the Iranian convoy approaches, including whether Iran would consent to a boarding request, and what actions the Navy would take if its request was refused.

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