

The Malta Summit

Today the EU Heads of state and government will meet in Malta. Their background text will be the pessimistic and alarmist letter from Mr Tusk that we talked about on Wednesday.

The meeting will mainly be concerned with strengthening the EU's external borders, with special emphasis on the problems of Libya. There are in the EU's view too many migrants coming across the sea from Libya. The EU wishes to work with the Libyan authorities – to the extent that there are authorities in charge there – to reduce the flows. The EU may also wish to beef up its naval force, though so far this has been used to offer safe transit to the EU for those who have taken to the seas in dangerous and overloaded boats and got into trouble. The EU will wish to take stronger action against people smugglers, though that too will require co-operation with governments on the African continent.

All this illustrates the cruel dilemma of Mr Tusk's letter. He does not wish the EU to give concessions to people he calls populists or to political parties that challenge the elite view of the EU. Yet he feels the need to hold a summit largely devoted to the populist issue of trying to reduce the flow of migrants and to strengthen the EU's external borders. He is ambiguous about the elite themselves, saying they genuflect too far towards populists, yet saying they are losing faith in the democracy which is driving the populist movements. I guess Mrs Merkel felt the need to change her permissive immigration policy owing to the pressure of public opinion. Does Mr Tusk think this was the wrong thing to do?

Important though Mr Tusk is within the EU, he is but the servant of the Council which is made up of the Heads of state and government. If they say they wish to shift policy in the so called populist direction, he has to allow them an agenda to do so. It will be fascinating to see what emerges from their consideration yet again of migration and borders.

I do hope they take up the UK's request to lift the uncertainty they have created for British citizens living in other EU countries. If they just agree they are all welcome to stay, the UK can confirm the same for all EU citizens legally settled in the UK. It is the right and decent thing to do, so why won't they do it? I am sure Mrs May will ask them again. I thought civilised values were part of their idea of the EU, but they are not showing them on this matter.

The later afternoon session will be for the EU 27 only. They plan to discuss how to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, which they think the UK could not help them with. It will be fascinating to see what celebration they want to hold, and what they think are their main achievements to trumpet.

UN report details 'devastating cruelty' against Rohingya population in Myanmar's Rakhine province

3 February 2017 – In a report issued today, the United Nations human rights arm said that the widespread human rights violations against the Rohingya population by Myanmar's security forces in the country's northern Rakhine state indicate the very likely commission of crimes against humanity.

The flash report – issued today by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) based on its interviews with people who fled Myanmar after attacks on a border post in early October, the ensuing counter military operations and a lockdown in north Maungdaw – documents mass gang-rape, killings, including of babies and young children, brutal beatings, disappearances and other serious human rights violations by the country's security forces.

"The devastating cruelty to which these Rohingya children have been subjected is unbearable – what kind of hatred could make a man stab a baby crying out for his mother's milk. And for the mother to witness this murder while she is being gang-raped by the very security forces who should be protecting her," said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, noting the report suggests the recent level of violence to be unprecedented and added:

The gravity and scale of these allegations begs the robust reaction of the international community High Commissioner Zeid

"What kind of 'clearance operation' is this? What national security goals could possibly be served by this?"

OHCHR noted that more than half of the women its human rights team interviewed reported having suffered rape or other forms of sexual violence. Many other interviewees reported witnessing killings, including of family members and having family who were missing.

Houses deliberately set on fire, people pushed inside burning houses – report

The report also cites consistent testimony indicating that hundreds of Rohingya houses, schools, markets, shops, madrasas and mosques were burned by the army, police and sometimes civilian mobs. Witnesses also described the destruction of food and food sources, including paddy fields, and the confiscation of livestock.

It also noted that several people were killed in indiscriminate and random

shooting – many while fleeing for safety.

Army or Rakhine villagers locked an entire family, including elderly and disabled people, inside a house and set it on fire, killing them all

“Numerous testimonies collected from people from different village tracts...confirmed that the army deliberately set fire to houses with families inside, and in other cases pushed Rohingyas into already burning houses,” the report states.

“Testimonies were collected of several cases where the army or Rakhine villagers locked an entire family, including elderly and disabled people, inside a house and set it on fire, killing them all.”

Many witnesses and victims also described being taunted while they were being beaten, raped or rounded up, such as being told “you are Bangladeshi and you should go back” or “What can your Allah do for you? See what we can do?”

Violence follows a long-standing pattern of violations and abuses – OHCHR

According to the UN human rights wing, the violence since 9 October follows a long-standing pattern of violations and abuses; systematic and systemic discrimination; and policies of exclusion and marginalization against the Rohingya that have been in place for decades in northern Rakhine state, the report notes.

OHCHR also noted that after the repeated failure of the Government of Myanmar to grant it unrestricted access to the worst-affected areas of northern Rakhine state, High Commissioner Zeid deployed a team of human rights officers to the Bangladeshi border with Myanmar, where an estimated 66,000 Rohingya have fled since 9 October 2016.

It further noted that according to reports, operations by security forces in the area have continued into January 2017, although their intensity and frequency may have reduced.

Perpetrators and those who ordered them must be held accountable – UN rights chief

Calling on the international community for robust reaction given the gravity and scale of the allegations, High Commissioner Zeid stressed:

“The Government of Myanmar must immediately halt these grave human rights violations against its own people, instead of continuing to deny they have occurred, and accepts the responsibility to ensure that victims have access to justice, reparations and safety.”

“The killing of people as they prayed, fished to feed their families or slept in their homes, the brutal beating of children as young as two and an elderly woman aged 80 – the perpetrators of these violations, and those who ordered them, must be held accountable.”

Violations of children's rights 'totally unacceptable' – UNICEF

Also today, expressing serious concern at the level of violations of children's rights as documented in the report, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) called for thorough investigations into the allegations and prosecution of the violators.

"Such violations of children's rights are totally unacceptable," the UN agency said, underscoring: "Every child has the right to protection, irrespective of their gender, ethnicity, religion or nationality, in every circumstance [...] child victims need and deserve support."

[International collaboration on wheat rust can curb threat to global supplies – UN agency](#)

3 February 2017 – As new data shows that wheat in Africa, Asia and Europe is increasingly threatened by fresh groups of wheat rust, the United Nations agricultural agency is highlighting the need for early detection and rapid action to keep the fungus under control.

Two studies produced by scientists in collaboration with the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) show the emergence of two new groups or races of both yellow rust and stem rust last year in various regions of the world.

"These new, aggressive rust races have emerged at the same time that we're working with international partners to help countries combat the existing ones, so we have to be swift and thorough in the way we approach this," said FAO Plant Pathologist Fazil Dusunceli.

Wheat rusts spread rapidly over long distances by wind. If not detected and treated on time, they can turn a healthy looking crop, only weeks away from harvest, into a tangle of yellow leaves, black stems and shriveled grains.

"It's more important than ever that specialists from international institutions and wheat producing countries work together to stop these diseases in their tracks," Mr. Dusunceli said.

That would involve work such as continuous surveillance, sharing data and building emergency response plans to protect their farmers and those in neighbouring countries.

Wheat is a source of food and livelihoods for over 1 billion people in developing countries, according to FAO.

Some of the most vulnerable regions are also the highest producers of wheat. Northern and Eastern Africa, the Near East, and West, Central and South Asia alone account for some 37 per cent of global wheat production.

The most recently identified race of stem rust pathogen – called TTTTF – hit the Italian island of Sicily in 2016, causing the largest stem rust outbreak in Europe in decades.

In addition, farmers in the mainland Italy, Morocco and some Scandinavian countries are battling a yet-to-be-named race of yellow rust, while Ethiopia and Uzbekistan fights outbreaks of yellow rust AF2012.

“Preliminary assessments are worrisome, but it is still unclear what the full impact of these new races will be on different wheat varieties in the affected regions,” said Mr. Dusunceli. “That's what research institutions across these regions will need to further investigate in the coming months.”

The FAO-supported reports have been highlighted in the journal *Nature* following their publication by *Aarhus University* and the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT).

[Death toll rises to 6 in China homes collapse](#)

Two survivors were rescued and six found dead after a residential building collapsed in Wenzhou, east China's Zhejiang Province, local authorities said Friday.

Part of a five-storey residential building in Dahui village of Wencheng County collapsed at about 8 a.m. Thursday, burying nine people from two families.

A 63-year-old woman was pulled out from the debris at about 10:40 p.m. Thursday and another female survivor was rescued at about 7 a.m. Friday. Both have been rushed to hospital for medical treatment.

There was one still buried under the rubble.

With the help of eight cranes and excavators, more than 400 paramilitary officers, fire fighters, township officials and medical workers have been carrying out rescue operation.

"The scene is quite chaotic, as if the place was leveled by an earthquake," a rescuer told Xinhua. "We have to work very carefully because the wreckages of the ruined building are joined to homes still standing."

One of the adjacent homes, he said, was already damaged with a big hole in its outer wall.

A total of 58 people living nearby were evacuated to safe places.

Local authorities have launched an investigation into the cause of the building collapse.

[Bad traffic slows return journeys](#)



Traffic slows to a crawl on the Liuzhou-Nanning Expressway in the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region on Thursday as the highway is overwhelmed with travelers returning home. [Photo/Xinhua]

Traffic slowed to a crawl on major highways on Thursday as tens of millions of people returned home after the Spring Festival holiday.

According to China Central Television, about 94.2 million people were expected to travel on Thursday.

Traffic was slow on several major highways, including Beijing-Hong Kong-Macao Expressway and Shanghai-Chongqing Expressway, according to the Ministry of Transport, with traffic jams in some sections extending for dozens of kilometers.

In Henan and Hunan provinces, some highways were partly closed due to snow or smog.

According to the ministry, the rush of traffic into major urban areas, including the Yangtze River Delta, Pearl River Delta and Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, was expected to last past 10 pm.

About 1.5 million vehicles were expected on highways in Central China's Hubei province on Thursday as many parts of the province experienced light rain.

Chen Ying, who was heading to Hubei's capital Wuhan from the province's Enshi Tujia and Miao autonomous prefecture, encountered a traffic jam after passing Yichang city.

"I don't know whether it was because of the weather or there was an accident ahead, but the traffic was terrible," the 53-year-old said.

She said the traffic was so slow that some people even got out of their cars and did some exercise, and many service zones were so packed that it was hard to find somewhere to park.

The 340 kilometers from Yichang to Wuhan, which usually takes about four hours, took Chen nine hours. "At its worst, we moved only about 5 km in 80 minutes," she said.

China Railway Corp was expected to log 11.5 million trips on Thursday, 11.3 percent more the last day of Spring Festival in 2016. The company had to add 819 temporary trains to meet the high demand.

About 8.48 million people left Beijing during Spring Festival – 39 percent of the city's population – according to the Beijing Municipal Commission of Transport. Now, their return is putting stress on the capital's transportation system.

Almost 1,700 flights were expected in Beijing on Thursday. According to the commission, 224 trains a day arrived at Beijing South Railway Station during the Spring Festival holiday.

The commission said it has taken various measures to help travelers get back home using the capital's public transport system. From Feb 1 to 4, 1,000 taxis will be dispatched to Beijing South Railway Station and the operation of the subway's Line 4 will also be extended.