

Paradise resorts torched as militants target islands

Luxury lodges attacked by suspected Islamists who have been waging war in northern Mozambique

By Peta Thornycroft in Johannesburg

AT 3am last Saturday, Tessa and Craig McDonald's dog started barking. Mrs McDonald looked outside bleary-eyed and saw that the luxury resort they manage on Sita, the most southerly island in Mozambique's picturesque Quirimbas archipelago, was on fire. She and her husband ran to get the guests, when they then saw another fire raging far off in the distance. The South African couple realised this was no accident and that they were probably under attack from suspected Islamists wreaking havoc in northern Mozambique. They ran to a boat and called a mercenary group hired by the Mozambican government to provide air cover against the insurgents and begged for help. A helicopter arrived and hovered overhead, as the boat was loaded with guests, hotel workers and children. The helicopter then escorted the boat to the port city of Pemba on the mainland. In



the past week, two pristine Indian Ocean island resorts off the coast of Mozambique were turned into a war zone by militants linked to Islamic State. The situation is still developing, but it is believed Islamists were responsible for the fires on Sita Island. The raids are the latest chapter in a bush war which has been raging across Mozambique's northern Cabo Delgado province since October 2017. The conflict is one of the least understood in the world. Mysterious insurgents, who claim allegiance to IS in the Middle East, have tried to dominate the northern province. Fighting between the insurgents and security forces has displaced more than 250,000 people and cost the lives of at least 1,500 men,

women and children. People fleeing south speak of mass beheadings, executions by security forces, rape and torture.

Henry Pitman, a British businessman who won a 50-year lease for Vamizi Island some 15 years ago, told *The Daily Telegraph* that the recent attacks had been "devastating".

He has spent vast amounts of money turning Vamizi into a luxury tourism conservation centre.

In 2006, Nelson Mandela stood by the Mozambican president as he opened Mr Pitman's resort. A-list celebrities including Tom Hanks, Daniel Craig and Emma Watson have visited the resort. He said he will return and rebuild his luxury lodge burned down last Friday after invaders raided food stocks.

Kevin Record, a South African investor, owns some 14 lodges on Ibo Island, an old trading post used by Arab and Chinese traders for centuries.

But now the war means the tourists no longer come. "I don't know how we will survive. I invested everything I had here," Mr Record said.

"Every single island has been closed by the war since the British issued a travel advisory 18 months ago."



Vamizi Island, off the coast of Mozambique, was turned into a luxury resort by Henry Pitman, a British businessman, but it was targeted by raiders who stole food and torched buildings; inset left, a fire rages on one of the islands in the Quirimbas archipelago

Right poised for big gains in Italian elections

By Andrea Vogt in Bologna

ITALIANS headed to the polls yesterday in local elections that could result in big gains for the far Right.

Voting continues today in the first key test of public support for the fragile national coalition since the coronavirus outbreak.

The 46 million voters are electing local officials, as well as giving their verdict on a proposed move to cut the number of MPs. Voters have



Matteo Salvini's League hopes to capture Tuscany, a bastion of the Left wing

largely approved of how Giuseppe Conte, the prime minister, has handled the pandemic.

But recent opinion polls suggest this will not help his coalition allies in the vote for the heads of seven regions and mayors in almost 1,000 towns.

The Right-wing opposition, led by Matteo Salvini's League, is expected to win at least four of the regions, and could capture the traditional Left-wing stronghold of Tus-

cany. A drubbing for the ruling parties would galvanise the League and its allies, but most analysts say it would be unlikely to trigger a government collapse in the midst of the coronavirus crisis and as the country prepares a crucial 2021 budget.

The constitutional referendum on whether to reduce the number of members of parliament from 945 to 600 is likely to be approved, according to early polls.

It would clear the administrative path for Italy's president to dissolve parliament or hold new elections in the future, if necessary.

Its passage would be considered a win for its backer, the Five Star Movement, which is expected to perform dismally in regional contests.

The big question is how many regions will the League and its Right-wing coalition gain from the centre-left.

"Another stronghold of the Left is under attack from the League – for Salvini, Tuscany is the race to win," said La Stampa's Niccolò Carratelli.

"Nobody has a strong incentive to make the government fall right now," Erik Jones, of Johns Hopkins University in Bologna, said. "But the regional contests could have important implications within the political parties."

N Korea turns on the charm via YouTube

By Nicola Smith

NORTH KOREA is producing slick YouTube videos as it tries to expand its propaganda repertoire beyond austere military parades.

Echo of Truth, a YouTube channel fronted by a young, sophisticated woman called Un A, who speaks fluent English, takes viewers to a youth concert, a pizza restaurant, a funfair and the supermarket, in an attempt to break away from the traditional narrative of North Korea as nuclear-armed and authoritarian.

The messaging is clear – in Pyongyang, the capital, life is normal and relatable to Western audiences, with residents shown having a good time.

The series is strong on gastronomic content, with Un A shown at her favourite res-

taurants as well as a well-stocked Taesong department store.

In one video, the camera zooms in on laughing faces and foreign tourists enjoying stomach-dropping rides at the Kaeson Youth Park, while in an August broadcast, Un A excitedly heads off to a concert in the park.

"I didn't realise how many songs we had about young people," she exclaims.

But the channel, which has 35,000 subscribers, is also a political loudspeaker for the regime, which often rebuts Western media reports.

In February, a video from Kim Il-sung Square told how not a single person had contracted Covid-19 because the government had taken "very decisive and very reasonable measures".

Novichok chemist says sorry to victim Navalny

By Our Foreign Staff

A SCIENTIST involved in the secret Soviet programme to create the Novichok nerve agent has apologised to Alexei Navalny, the Russian opposition politician who is recovering from poisoning in Berlin.

Vil Mirzayanov, a chemist who was the first to reveal Novichok's development, said on Russia's TV Rain channel on Saturday, he wanted to apologise to Mr Navalny after Germany said

it found "unequivocal evidence" that he was poisoned with Novichok.

On Saturday, Mr Navalny described his severe symptoms after falling ill on a plane on Aug 20, saying he still struggles to pour a glass of water or use a phone.

"I offer my profound apologies to Navalny for the fact that I took part in this criminal business, developing this substance that he was poisoned with," said Mr Mirzayanov, who now lives in America.

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