

International

Britain homelessness becomes a 'national crisis'; Christmas helps

Thousands of people forced to sleep in cars, trains, buses

LONDON: Volunteers at a drop-in centre in north London hand out food, healthcare and advice to homeless people as they do every Christmas-except that this year, the numbers needing help have reached crisis point. At a school emptied of children for the holidays, visitors are offered a hot meal and a chat, dental and medical check-ups, and even a sewing repair service for damaged sleeping bags.

The pop-up centre is among 13 set up across Britain by homelessness charity Crisis to provide some festive cheer to an estimated 4,500 people who might otherwise be on the streets. Among those stopping by for a cup of tea before Christmas was Paula, a 48-year-old former care worker who spent three months living in her car after being evicted following problems with her landlord. "My car was my safest bet because I could lock the doors, but it wasn't warm-luckily it was summer," she said.

It was also deeply uncomfortable and exacerbated an existing back problem, to the point that she collapsed and had to be taken to hospital. She has since found a new place to live, but Crisis warned that cases like hers are increasingly common, estimating that thousands of people across Britain are forced to sleep in cars, trains, buses and tents. These "hidden" homeless are in addition to the more than 9,000 people living on the streets in England at any one time, up 134 percent since 2011, according to a scathing report by lawmakers published this week. The MPs said the growth was "appalling".

adding: "The extent of homelessness across England is a national crisis."

Housing shortages

Opposition Labor lawmaker Jeremy Corbyn highlighted the plight of rough sleepers in his Christmas message yesterday, as well as that of an estimated 78,000 households who are living in temporary, often sub-standard accommodation. He has previously described it as a "national disgrace". Crisis chief executive Jon Sparkes said there were numerous reasons why people lost their homes, including the breakdown of relationships, but the biggest recent factor has been the ending of a private sector tenancy. "What's becoming really clear to us is that the impact of not building social houses, the impact of spiraling cost of housing, the impact of welfare reform and cuts to benefits is creating and driving a really worrying growth in rough sleeping and broader homelessness," he said.

The MPs said the government's attitude in the face of a growing problem had been "unacceptable complacent". They too warned about the impact of a lack of affordable, decent homes, calling for a "renewed focus" on housing policy. Challenged on the subject earlier this month, Prime Minister Theresa May said the government was investing £500 million (563 million euros, \$668 million) in tackling homelessness. Speaking in the House of Commons, she also noted measures announced in last month's annual



'National disgrace'
thousands living on the streets



LONDON: Photo shows a homeless person sleeping rough by the entrance to a money exchange shop in central London. —AFP

budget to increase the supply of affordable housing. "We are going to be a government who put a clear focus on housing, on building the homes that people need, on ensuring that people are given help to get into those homes, and on acting to prevent homelessness before it happens," she said. At the drop-in centre, volunteer

Mhari Colvin, who has worked with Crisis for 13 years, reflected on "just how easy it is for people to become homeless". "They are just you and me, they're the same people, they've just had one or two runs of bad luck and it can be just one thing and their whole world falls apart," she said.—AFP

News in brief

Gunmen kill 3 at cafe

CAIRO: Masked gunmen opened fire on a cafe south of the Egyptian capital, killing three people, security officials said yesterday. The attack, which took place overnight in the village of Al-Ayat about 50 kilometers from Cairo, left at least five others wounded, they said. While the motivation was unclear officials suspect it was a criminal incident rather than terrorism. State-run newspaper Akhbar Al-Youm, citing witnesses, said two attackers arrived on a motorcycle and opened fire on people in the cafe before fleeing. Security officials arrived at the scene and also interviewed injured people in hospital to try to identify and arrest the attackers, the newspaper reported.

American IS fighter

WASHINGTON: A federal judge has ruled that the Pentagon must allow an American Islamic State fighter captured in Iraq access to a lawyer, following a lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union. Judge Tanya S Chutkan of the Federal District Court in Washington ruled Saturday the ACLU must be provided "temporary, immediate and unmonitored access" to establish whether the detainee wants it to act on his behalf. The Trump administration had argued the ACLU had no standing to file suit as it had not conferred with the man and could not "prove that it is pursuing his best interests," according to the 12-page ruling. But in a cutting criticism, Judge Chutkan slammed the government's position as "disingenuous at best" - given that the Defense Department was the only reason the ACLU had not met with the detainee, designated an "enemy combatant." The ruling also noted that the man requested counsel during questioning by FBI agents-describing the Defense Department's disregard of the request "until it decides what to do with the detainee and when to allow him access to counsel" as "remarkable and troubling."

Vanished submarine

BUENOS AIRES: A sonar search for the Argentine submarine that disappeared on November 15 with 44 crew members on board has made a new contact in the South Atlantic, according to the navy. It will be investigated by the remotely-operated Russian Panther Plus submarine, while the US oceanographic research vessel Atlantis continues exploring the search area, the navy announced Saturday. Argentina has received help from 13 countries in its search for the San Juan submarine. It has abandoned hope of finding survivors and is concentrating only on finding the vessel, which in its last message reported that seawater had entered the ventilation system, causing a battery on the diesel-electric vessel to short-circuit and start a fire. An unusual noise heard in the ocean near the last known position of the San Juan, three hours after its final contact, was "consistent with an explosion," the navy said in late November. Other reported contacts detected weeks ago amounted to nothing-with some arising from a fishing boat which sank years previously.

12th Palestinian dies

GAZA: A Palestinian teenager died yesterday, nine days after being wounded by Israeli fire during a Gaza protest against US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, the health ministry said. Mohammad Sami Al-Dahidh, 19, from Gaza City was shot on December 15 during a demonstration on the Israeli border, ministry spokesman Ashraf Al-Qudra said. His death brings to 12 the number of Palestinians killed since US President Donald Trump announced on December 6 that he would recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital and move the US embassy there from Tel Aviv. Ten protesters have died after clashes with Israeli troops, two of them on Friday. Two others were killed in an Israeli air strike on Gaza earlier in the month. Among the Gazans killed in the December 15 clashes was Ibrahim Abu Thurayeh, who had lost his legs in an Israeli attack a decade ago.

Russians endorse Navalny candidacy; a challenge to Putin

MOSCOW: Thousands of Russians yesterday endorsed the candidacy of Alexei Navalny, seen as the only Russian opposition leader who stands a fighting chance of challenging strongman Vladimir Putin in a March vote. Thousands of people who back the charismatic 41-year-old lawyer were meeting in 20 Russian cities to nominate him as a candidate in the presence of electoral officials to boost his chances of making the presidential vote.

In Moscow alone, more than 700 people supported Navalny's candidacy as they gathered in a huge tent set up in a picturesque park on the snow-covered banks of the Moscow River. "I am hugely happy, I am proud to tell you that I stand here as a candidate of the entire Russia," the plucky Western-educated lawyer told supporters at the Moscow event which at times felt like a US campaign conference. "We are ready to win and we will win these elections," Navalny said before finishing his speech in a cloud of confetti. Two members of the Central Election Commission attended the Moscow event, Navalny's campaign said.

Earlier yesterday supporters in other Russian cities also endorsed his candidacy, including more than 800 people in the southern city of Rostov-on-Don, more than 900 in the Urals city of Yekaterinburg and over 700 in Novosibirsk in Siberia, his campaign said. Electoral officials have deemed Navalny ineligible to run due to a criminal conviction, saying "only a miracle" would help him get registered. Navalny, who has tapped into the anger of a younger generation who grew up under Putin and yearn for change, hopes that popular support for his Kremlin bid would pressure authorities into putting his name on the ballot.

'Thwart dishonest elections'

An independent candidate needs at least 500 votes to get registered with election authorities, according to legislation. Navalny has said he would get at least 500 Russians in each of the 20 cities to support his candidacy to make it harder for the authorities to reject his bid. Putin, 65, announced this month that he will seek a fourth presidential term, which would extend his rule until 2024 and make him the longest-serving Russian leader since dictator Joseph Stalin.

Opposed by token opposition candidates, he is widely expected to sail to victory. Yesterday, Navalny reiterated his

Florida orange industry hit by hurricane, disease

NEW YORK: Hit by Hurricane Irma and a citrus ailment known as "Yellow Dragon Disease," Florida orange growers are bracing for potentially the worst harvest in more than a half century. Forecasters are projecting a yield of 46 million boxes of oranges for the 2017-2018 Florida orange season, a drop of 33 percent from last year and the lowest output since at least 1944-1945, according to the US Agriculture Department.

Some areas have lost as much as 90 percent of their fruit due to winds from Irma, or root damage due to flooding. "It may take months for growers to gauge the true scale of the impact of Hurricane Irma and years to fully recover," said Shelley Rossetter, a spokeswoman for the Florida Citrus Department. Florida oranges aren't the only casualty of 2017, an unusually busy year for natural disasters in North America.

The massive "Thomas" wildfire, considered the second biggest fire ever in California, has damaged lemon and avocado crops in the region north of Los Angeles. Hundreds of acres of producing land have burned, said Ken Melban, vice president of industry affairs at the California Avocado Commission. "It's a very unusual fire, some areas have been burned several times," Melban said. "It has a tremendous impact on growers impacted by the fire." But Melban said it was difficult to determine the full



MOSCOW: Supporters of Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny hold ballots as a symbol to nominate him as opposition candidate for the upcoming presidential election yesterday. —AFP

threat to call for a boycott of the polls if he did not get registered. "Thwart the elections if they are dishonest," he said. With the result of the March vote a foregone conclusion, turnout could be low, harming Putin's hopes for a clear mandate, observers say. "If Navalny is not allowed to run I am not going to vote," pensioner Marina Kurbatskaya said in Moscow. "I don't see anyone else who I want to become president."

Navalny has built a robust protest movement in the face of persistent harassment and jumped through multiple hoops as he campaigned across the country in an effort to shift attitudes amid widespread political ennui. He says he is the only Russian politician who has run a genuine Western-style political campaign, stumping for votes in far-flung regions. Many critics scoff at Navalny's Kremlin bid but the anti-corruption blogger says he would beat Putin in a free election if he had access to state-controlled television, the main source of news for a majority of Russians.

impact on avocado prices because of higher imports and the supply from California growers not touched by the fire.

Four times

But in Florida, where the orange industry employs 45,000 and an economic impact in the state of \$8.6 billion, the outlook is grim, especially since the industry already faced myriad challenges even before Irma hit in September. Citrus greening disease—otherwise known as Yellow Dragon Disease—is a bacterial malady spread by insects that has begun to ravage crops, killing some orange trees and rendering other fruit small and sour.

Orange production in Florida, which peaked at 244 million cartons in 1998, fell last year to 67 million. There is no cure, so growers are focusing on ways to limit the spread of the disease, and on technologies and growing practices that could build resistant to the disease. "Things were starting to turn around," Rossetter said. "Before Hurricane Irma, Florida Citrus growers were expecting 75 million boxes, the first crop size increase in years."

But she warned that in the wake of the storm, "Without support from state and federal government, some growers may go out of business." The state orange industry also has come under pressure due to declining demand for orange juice as Americans turn to less sweet drinks and other alternatives. About 90 percent of Florida's oranges are used for juice. US consumption of fresh orange juice has fallen 18 percent in just four years, according to Nielsen data. At the same time, rising imports offer unwelcome competition. Brazil, a big producer of oranges for orange juice, could see an increase in output of 55 percent this year amid favorable weather conditions, according to USDA.—AFP

'Need new president'

Navalny shot to prominence as an organizer of huge anti-Putin rallies that shook Russia in 2011 and 2012 following claims of vote-rigging in parliamentary polls. The rallies gradually died down but he has been able to breathe new life into the protest movement this year, bringing out tens of thousands of mostly young protesters onto the streets. "Navalny is the only real opposition candidate," Sergei Dmitriyev, 60 said in the second city of Saint Petersburg where more than a thousand supporters gathered to support Navalny's bid. "We need a new president," added Alexander Semyonov, 18. Despite a litany of problems such as corruption, poor health-care and increasing poverty, opinion polls suggest Putin enjoys approval ratings of 80 percent. Asked why Navalny had been barred from running, Putin - who has refused to mention him by name in public-said the opposition was hoping for a "coup" but would not succeed.—AFP

Myanmar, accused of crackdown, invited to US-Thai exercise

WASHINGTON: The Myanmar military, which has been accused of ethnic cleansing against the country's Muslim Rohingya minority, has been invited back as an observer in a major multinational military exercise next year led by the United States and Thailand. Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Logan, a Pentagon spokesman, told Reuters that Thailand had invited Myanmar to take part in the annual Cobra Gold exercise, which involves thousands of US and Thai military personnel and participants from other Asian countries.

Myanmar had been invited to observe the humanitarian assistance and disaster relief portion of the exercise, Logan said. A senior officer at the Directorate of Joint Intelligence of the Royal Thai Armed Forces told Reuters it was unclear whether Myanmar had accepted the invitation but Thailand was eager for them to join. Asked why Thailand decided to invite Myanmar despite concerns over the crackdown against the Rohingya and whether this issue was part of their deliberations, the official said:

"That never came up in the discussions. We separated that issue (the Rohingya). We focus on training, on education, on military cooperation. That is our wish, to have Myanmar involved." "That is politics. We are soldiers. This is a military exercise," added the official, who declined to be named because he was not authorized to speak to the media.—Reuters