

STRESS UNDER SHELLING PRODUCES BABY BOOM IN UKRAINE

AVDIIVKA, Ukraine: Olena Gorbatova gave birth to her third child in war-torn eastern Ukraine to the sounds of gunfire and exploding shells in the Kiev-held flashpoint town of Avdiivka. The 40-year-old Gorbatova calmed herself by thinking the attacks were just a celebration of the baby girl she named Myroslava—which in Russian and Ukrainian means “glory to peace”. The wartime birth was not unusual.

The town in which dozens were killed in early February has seen a mini baby boom that doctors attribute to the fact that people want to couple in times of stress and a change in women’s hormonal behavior. “In recent years, we have managed to deliver babies from older families who are now in their 40s,” gynecologist Svitlana Khomchenko told AFP in the dilapidated and partially abandoned town of less than 20,000 people. “They had been trying without success for many years. And now families who were considered sterile have children,” said Khomchenko. “It turns out that stress is a factor.”

Making love, not war?

Gorbatova’s 38-year-old husband Sergiy had to make it past a series of road blocks to reach the maternity ward where his wife was resting. A part of it has been turned into a military hospital. Women about to give birth lie side by side with the wounded from the 34-month revolt in the pro-Russian region that has killed more than 10,000 people and left nearly 25,000 others injured.

Sergiy laughed off local jokes that the rising birth rate is down to the large number of Ukrainian soldiers defending the town. He admitted that many people tried to convince him not to bring more children into the Ukraine’s unsafe world. “But we still decided to do it,” he said. The fog of war means that no real scientific study can explain why couples have more sex and women appear to be more fertile when disaster strikes. Gynecologist Khomchenko simply cites the statistics she has.

The year the war broke out in 2014 there were 45

births in Avdiivka compared with 110 babies born in 2016 more than double the figure despite people fleeing the region for more peaceful parts of the ex-Soviet state. Khomchenko recalls scenes of horror as women were hidden in basements to shield them from exploding shells that blasted out windows and mortar rounds that landed in the hospital’s garden. The city’s heating system is periodically not working and the doctor says she has had to take many deliveries by candlelight. A power generator has been recently installed and the windows replaced.

Glory to peace

The maternity ward stayed open even during the frightening days in early February when constant clashes between rebels and government troops claimed 35 lives in Ukraine’s east. “We worked while people were dying,” said Khomchenko. “But we were forced to move some of the women in labour to neighboring towns because there was no heat or water.” — AFP



PARIS: This file photo shows Winner of the right-wing primaries ahead of France’s 2017 presidential elections, Francois Fillon, right, defeated candidate Alain Juppe, center, and president of the primary’s organizing committee Thierry Solere, left, posing for a photo at the primary’s high authority headquarters in Paris. — AFP

JUPPE WAITS IN WINGS IF FILLON QUILTS FRENCH RACE

BORDEAUX: Veteran French conservative Alain Juppe is ready to step in as presidential candidate if the beleaguered Francois Fillon pulls out, his entourage said yesterday as the list of deserters from Fillon’s camp grew. Fillon’s spokesman Thierry Solere quit the campaign yesterday in the latest sign that support is crumbling over an expenses scandal. Pressure has been building on 62-year-old former prime minister Fillon since he revealed this week that he will be charged over allegations he paid his wife Penelope hundreds of thousands of euros for fake parliamentary jobs.

The 71-year-old Juppe, also a former prime minister, was beaten by Fillon in the conservative primary in November despite being the clear pre-contest favorite. He has kept out of the campaign since then as far-right candidate Marine Le Pen has taken the lead in opinion polls and centrist Emmanuel Macron has also benefited from Fillon’s woes.

Juppe ready

With supporters deserting Fillon by the day and the first round of voting fast approaching on April 23, Juppe is now prepared to take over, a member of his entourage said. Juppe “will not refuse if all the conditions are met-Francois Fillon has to take the decision to pull out himself and the rightwing and centre camps have to be united behind him”, the unnamed source said. Since his defeat in the primary,

Juppe has kept a low profile in the southwest city of Bordeaux where he is mayor. Police raided the Fillons’ Paris residence on Thursday, adding to the pressure on him to step aside.

Solere, a key member of his team, said on Twitter yesterday he was quitting. Already gone from Fillon’s campaign are two deputy directors, the treasurer and his foreign affairs point man Bruno Le Maire. Le Pen, campaigning on an anti-immigration and anti-EU platform, has a clear lead in polling ahead of the first round in an election influenced by the same populist themes that swept Donald Trump to power in the United States and led British voters to opt to leave the European Union. Surveys currently show however that Le Pen will be beaten in the decisive runoff on May 7 by either the fast-rising Macron or the conservative candidate.

The danger for the right is that Fillon has slipped to third place in polling and risks being eliminated in the first round. Fillon hit out at the justice system this week, claiming he was the victim of a “political assassination” over the fake jobs allegations that were first made by the Canard Enchaîné newspaper. Investigators are probing what work Fillon’s wife Penelope actually performed for her pay. A source close to Juppe told Le Parisien newspaper yesterday that the veteran politician “felt ill” when he heard Fillon questioning the impartiality of judges. —AFP

BREXIT TRIGGER STILL FIXED FOR END-MARCH

BRATISLAVA: Britain will still formally trigger its departure from the European Union by the end of March, the minister responsible for managing “Brexit” said yesterday. David Davis’s comments, during a visit to Bratislava, came just two days after a vote by the House of Lords called that date into question. When asked by journalists about the date Davis said “Yes”, the conservative government would be able to trigger Article 50 of the EU’s Lisbon treaty by the end of this month. A two-year period of negotiations will follow.

The House of Lords, Britain’s unelected upper chamber of parliament, voted Wednesday to amend and thereby delay the bill that would allow Prime Minister Theresa May to begin Brexit negotiations. The Lords, where May’s Conservative Party does not hold a majority, have demanded guarantees for EU nationals living in Britain, a matter that the premier had wanted to tackle later. The defeat means the bill must return to the lower House of Commons for deliberation, delaying final approval just weeks before the self-imposed deadline for starting Brexit negotiations.

At a joint press conference, Davis told Slovakia’s Prime Minister Robert Fico that the government wanted to preserve the rights of EU citizens now living in Britain. “For existing citizens in the UK, we want something that is very close to or identical to that of the rights of British citizens in terms of rights of residence, access to welfare,” Davis said. “But that is something that will have to be agreed between us, in the whole 28,” he added, referring to all EU member states.

Hundreds of thousands of EU citizens living and working in Britain, a majority from eastern states such as Slovakia and Poland, are demanding that their rights be protected. It is estimated that at least 1.2 million British citizens currently live and work in other EU member states. They, too, are lobbying to preserve their rights post-Brexit. —AFP



BRATISLAVA: Britain’s Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, David Davis, left, and Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico, right, attend a press conference after their meeting in Bratislava yesterday. —AFP