

## International

# Millions celebrate Christmas under shadow of pandemic

## Pope Francis calls for vaccines for everyone

VATICAN CITY: Hundreds of millions across the world celebrated pared-down Christmas festivities on Friday due to coronavirus restrictions, as Pope Francis called for vaccines for everyone, describing them as “glimmers of hope in this period of darkness and uncertainty”.

The pandemic has claimed more than 1.7 million lives and is still running rampant in much of the world, but the recent launching of mass vaccine campaigns has boosted hopes that 2021 could bring a respite. Like so many across the globe, the pope was forced to break with normal Christmas tradition, holding his annual “Urbi et Orbi” speech by video from the apostolic palace, to prevent a crowd from gathering in St Peter’s Square.

“I call on everyone, on leaders of states, on businesses, on international organisations, to promote cooperation and not competition, to find a solution for everyone: vaccines for all, especially the most vulnerable and most in need in all regions of the planet,” he said. In her own annual Christmas speech, Britain’s Queen Elizabeth II also spoke of hope during “difficult and unpredictable times”.

“Of course, for many, this time of year will be tinged with sadness: some mourning the loss of those dear to them, and others missing friends and family members distanced for safety, when all they’d really want for Christmas is a simple hug or a squeeze of the hand,” she said. “If you are among them, you are not alone,” she added, saying she was proud of those in the UK and around the world who have “risen magnificently to the challenges of the year”.

Britain has been through a particularly difficult time after the discovery of a new strain of coronavirus believed to spread much faster. It had already been one of the hardest countries in Europe, which passed a total of 25 million confirmed cases on Friday. Last week it became the first global region where more than 500,000 people have died of the virus.

### ‘A way out of this tragedy’

World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in a video message that “vaccines are offering the world a way out of this tragedy” but one that will “take time”. Tedros hailed the “heart-wrenching sacrifices” millions were making by staying away from loved ones on Christmas Day.

“We must not squander their sacrifices,” he said, calling for people to keep up infection control measures. In Asia, churches across South Korea stood largely empty, with worshippers congregating online as the country reported a new daily caseload record.

“It really is heartbreaking to see,” said Park Jae-woo, a member of the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul which



THE VATICAN CITY: This handout photo taken on Friday and released by the Vatican press office, the Vatican Media, shows Pope Francis (center) delivering his streamed Urbi et Orbi blessing from the Vatican Blessing hall. — AFP

would usually expect up to 10,000 worshippers, but on Friday was only able to welcome 15 staff and choir members. And in Catholic-majority Philippines, services were rocked when a 6.3-magnitude earthquake struck the country, capping off a troubled yuletide already muted by bans on parties and carol singing. “Sad, very sad. Seeing everyone in masks, even the priest and altar servers, reminded me that the world as I know it is not the same,” said Manila resident Kyen Quimpo Mallonga after watching Christmas Eve mass on television instead of attending her local church.

Despite warm weather, the usual picnicking crowds also avoided the sands of Sydney’s Bondi Beach, while the waves were empty of surfing Santas and patrolling police officers enforced social distancing rules.

### Thin crowds in Bethlehem

Bethlehem, where Christians believe Jesus was born, prepared for a Christmas unlike any in its recent history. Christmas Eve mass at the Church of the Nativity is traditionally the highlight of a holiday season that sees hundreds of thousands of visitors flock to the Palestinian city in the occupied West Bank. The service was held online this year, with only clergy and select individuals allowed inside the basilica.

“Everyone feels darkened, tired, exhausted, oppressed for too long under the heavy burden of this pandemic

that besieges our lives,” said the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Pierbattista Pizzaballa.

In war-ravaged northeast Syria, hundreds of residents of a predominantly Christian neighbourhood in the town of Qamishli ditched face masks and donned Santa hats, throwing caution to the wind to celebrate a Christmas tree lighting ceremony. “We were concerned celebrations would be cancelled this year due to the novel coronavirus, but as you can see everyone is here celebrating and we are happy,” said Maria Danhou, a 36-year-old mother of two.

### Holiday isolation

Germany has been forced to cancel its famous Christmas markets, while in Kuwait, churches were closed until January 10 despite being home to a large Christian community. For many, the isolation that has defined the past year will continue beyond Christmas Day—such as in Belgium, where residents are largely limited to welcoming a single visitor. Britons, meanwhile, were cut off from swathes of the world due to the emergence of the new COVID-19 strain. Some UK border restrictions have been temporarily relaxed for the holidays, but thousands from other European countries are still stranded in England. “Home for Christmas? Forget it,” said Laurent Beghin, a French truck driver who delivered his cargo but was still stuck days later. — AFP

## Israel attacks sites in Gaza

JERUSALEM: Israel has targeted a number of sites in Gaza after Palestinian militants fired rockets into the south of the country, the army said yesterday. The Israeli Defense Force said that three Hamas targets—including a rocket manufacturing site, underground infrastructure, and a military post—had been struck. “Hamas will bear the consequences for all terror emanating from Gaza,” the IDF said in a tweet.

Sirens had sounded earlier in the southern port city of Ashkelon and the area surrounding the Gaza Strip, according to the army statement. “Two rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip towards Israeli territory,” a statement from the army said on Friday, adding that they were intercepted by the Iron Dome Aerial Defense System. There were no reports of damage as a result of the interceptions.

Israeli emergency medical services said a few people were treated for going into shock. The latest fire from the Hamas-ruled Palestinian enclave came over a month after one rocket was fired from the coastal strip



GAZA CITY: A Palestinian man checks damage caused by an Israeli air strike on Gaza City yesterday. — AFP

into Israel. Hamas, considered a terrorist group by Israel, seized control of Gaza from the rival Palestinian movement Fatah in 2007 in a near civil war.

Since then Hamas has fought three devastating wars with Israel in the coastal territory where about two million Palestinians live. Israel has since maintained a crippling blockade on the Gaza Strip to prevent Hamas from arming. —AFP

Prefecture, and in Bakouma, in the southern Mbomou Prefecture, it said, without providing further details. Stephane Dujarric, spokesman for the UN Secretary-General, strongly condemned the latest incident, and called on the CAR authorities to investigate the “heinous” assaults. He also warned that “attacks against United Nations peacekeepers may constitute a war crime.”

Ahead of the presidential and legislative elections to be held today, 63-year-old incumbent President Faustin Archange Touadera has accused his predecessor Francois Bozize of plotting a coup.

Bozize—who is under UN sanctions and barred from running—denies the charges. On Tuesday a militia briefly seized the country’s fourth biggest town, before it was retaken by security forces backed by UN peacekeepers. Meanwhile the Constitutional Court yesterday rejected final appeals by the opposition to postpone today’s vote. At least six candidates had filed appeals arguing that insecurity in the country, and the recent withdrawal of one of the candidates, justified delaying the polls.

### Broken ceasefire

Rebel groups launched an offensive a week ago threatening to march on the capital Bangui, in what the government described as an attempted coup, but their progress was halted with international help. However, a three-day ceasefire brokered ahead of the elections fell apart Friday with the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC) announcing that it would resume its push for the capital.

The CPC—whose components are drawn from militia groups that, together, control two-thirds of the country—was created on December 19 by armed groups who accused Touadera of trying to fix the vote. Clashes resumed on Friday in Bakouma, about 800 kilometers (500 miles) northeast of Bangui, according to Vladimir Monteiro, spokesman for the UN’s MINUSCA peacekeeping force. MINUSCA said Thursday that a 300-strong contingent of Rwandan reinforcements had arrived in the country. Russia, which recently signed a military cooperation agreement with Touadera’s government, has also sent at least 300 military instructors to bolster the CAR’s forces ahead of the polls. —AFP

## UN peacekeepers killed in C Africa ahead of elections

BANGUI: Three UN peacekeepers have been killed by unidentified combatants in the Central African Republic, the United Nations said, as the country prepares for a general election and fighting continues between rebels and government forces. The news came after a rebel coalition called off a ceasefire and said it would resume its march on the capital, as well as the arrival of troops from Russia and Rwanda to shore up the government of the resource-rich country.

“Three peacekeepers from Burundi were killed and two others were wounded” following attacks on UN troops and Central African national defense and security forces, the UN said in a statement Friday.

The assaults took place in Dekoa, central Kemo



In this file photo, new recruits for the Central African Armed Forces (FACA) march in formation during an award presentation in Berengo. Russian military consultants have set up training for the Central African Armed Forces and the Internal Security Forces after delivering weapons to the country. — AFP



This file picture taken on June 28, 2001, shows George Blake, a former MI6 officer who worked as a double agent for the Soviet Union, walking in Moscow. George Blake died aged 98, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) has reported. — AFP

## British Cold War double agent Blake dies in Moscow

MOSCOW: George Blake, a famous “mole” in British intelligence who spied for the Soviet KGB during the 1950s before fleeing across the Iron Curtain, has died aged 98, Russian news agencies reported yesterday.

“The legendary intelligence officer George Blake has passed away today,” the spokesman for Russia’s SVR foreign intelligence service Sergei Ivanov told the TASS state news agency. “He sincerely loved our country and admired our people’s achievements during World War II,” Ivanov added. Russian President Vladimir Putin, himself an ex-KGB agent, yesterday expressed his “deep condolences” to Blake’s family and friends.

In a message published on the Kremlin website, the Russian leader noted Blake’s “invaluable contribution to ensuring strategic parity and maintaining peace on the planet”. A former member of the Dutch resistance during World War II then an agent of the British foreign intelligence service MI6, Blake offered his services to the Soviets in the 1950s after witnessing US bombings against the civilian population during the Korean War.

He provided the names of hundreds of MI6 agents to the KGB and revealed the existence of a secret tunnel in East Berlin that was used to spy on the Soviets. In 1961, Blake was discovered as a double agent and was sentenced to a record 42 years of imprisonment in England.

Five years later, he broke out of prison using a rope ladder with the help of three cell mates. After the escape, Blake was smuggled across the Iron Curtain into East Germany and travelled to the Soviet Union where he lived until his death. Blake received a hero’s welcome in Moscow and was awarded the rank of colonel by the Russian intelligence service.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the country to which he dedicated his life, he said he never regretted his actions. Blake was among the last living British double agents that the USSR recruited during the Cold War.

The bearded spy, however, trod a very different path to becoming a Soviet agent than that taken by the establishment insiders of the infamous Cambridge spy ring: Kim Philby, Donald Maclean and Anthony Burgess, all recruited while at the British city’s prestigious university. —AFP

### News in brief

#### Tunisia extends emergency

TUNIS: The Tunisian presidency on Friday announced a six-month extension of the country’s state of emergency, in place since a 2015 attack on a presidential guard bus claimed by the Islamic State group. President Kais Saied “decided on the six-month extension of the nationwide state of emergency, from December 26, 2020, to June 23, 2021,” a statement said. The measure, extended continuously since late 2015, grants exceptional powers to the country’s security forces. It allows measures to “ensure the control of the press” and for strikes and meetings that “create disorder” to be banned. Tunisia has seen political and social instability in recent weeks, along with protests in several regions. — AFP

#### Algeria seeks tougher jail for activist

ALGIERS: Algerian prosecutors have requested a tougher two-year jail sentence for prominent anti-government activist Amira Bouraoui during her trial on appeal, a prisoners’ rights group said Friday. Bouraoui, a 44-year-old gynaecologist, is a prominent in the “Hirak” protest movement that secured the resignation of former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika in April last year. She came to prominence in 2014 when she opposed Bouteflika running for a fourth term. She was sentenced to a one-year jail term in June over a string of charges, including insulting the president and Islam. — AFP

#### 26 dies in Lake Albert boast capsized

KAMPALA: At least 26 people died when their boat sank on Lake Albert, which marks the border between Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ugandan officials told AFP on Friday. The boat was carrying passengers between two Ugandan locations in the lake’s northeast on Wednesday when it “hit a strong wind” and “went under water”, local official Ashraf Oromo said. “The boat had over 50 people on board, 26 bodies have been recovered, 21 people were rescued,” Oromo said. “A search is ongoing and no more survivors are expected.” A regional police marine officer, Samuel Onyango, confirmed the accident. — AFP

#### Jordan journalist held over vaccine report

AMMAN: Jordan has arrested a journalist over an article alleging the coronavirus vaccine had arrived in the kingdom and that officials had received the jab, a judicial source said yesterday. “The state security court prosecutor ordered the arrest Thursday of journalist Jamal Haddad, editor of news website Al-Wakaai, for writing that government officials had been vaccinated against the coronavirus,” the source said. Haddad had been accused of “endangering public security and causing sedition and public disorder”, the source told AFP, declining to be identified. He was to be detained for 15 days while awaiting trial. — AFP

#### Malian oppn chief Cisse dies of COVID

BAMAKO: Malian opposition leader Soumaila Cisse died of coronavirus on Friday aged 71, his family and party said, after being held hostage for six months by jihadists earlier this year. Cisse “died in France, where he had been taken for Covid-19 care,” a member of his family said. “I can confirm this terrible news. He’s dead,” a leader of Cisse’s URD party told AFP, saying the politician’s wife had let him know. Interim Prime Minister Moctar Ouane expressed his condolences, tweeting that “all of Mali as well as the African continent mourns one of its brave sons”. Mali has reported 6,347 coronavirus cases as of Wednesday, with 229 deaths, as the country tackles a second wave of infections. — AFP

## Russia probes Navalny ally

MOSCOW: Russian authorities on Friday launched a criminal probe into an ally of Kremlin foe Alexei Navalny after she tried to doorstep the apartment of a man Navalny said took part in his poisoning.

Investigators accused Lyubov Sobol of trespassing “with the use of violence or a threat to use it” after she rang the doorbell of the alleged agent from Federal Security Service (FSB), the country’s main security agency. The charges carry a maximum penalty of two years in jail.

Sobol was initially taken in for questioning as a witness in the probe, but later on Friday Navalny ally Ivan Zhdanov said she became a suspect in the case. “Lyubov Sobol is now officially a suspect in the criminal case, her status has changed,” Zhdanov wrote on Twitter, adding that she was being taken into police custody for 48 hours.

Sobol’s lawyer Vladimir Voronin confirmed this information to AFP without providing further details. Russia’s Investigative Committee—which probes major crimes—said in a statement on Friday that Sobol and several others repeatedly tried to enter the “apartment of an elderly woman” in eastern Moscow, adding that they were wearing uniforms of the country’s consumer watchdog. —AFP