

International

German crematorium struggles in pandemic

Stacks of coffins stored in hallways

MEISSEN, Germany: Some coffins are marked “infection risk”, others have “corona” scrawled in chalk, many have the box for “no memorial service” ticked, though the hall for such ceremonies has been turned into a temporary mortuary anyway. As Germany’s Meissen crematorium struggles to cope with an explosion in deaths from the coronavirus pandemic in the region, coffins are stacked up to three high or even stored in hallways awaiting cremation.

Largely spared in the first wave of the outbreak, the eastern state of Saxony has topped Germany’s worst-hit zone for weeks in the second wave. In the three decades he has worked at the crematorium in Meissen, Joerg Schaldach has not seen such high numbers of deaths sustained over such a long period of time. “It started in mid-November, the numbers kept rising,” Schaldach, who runs the site, told AFP.

“The problem is that the cold storage capacity is now full. We are in a state of catastrophe,” he said, explaining that there was no choice but to use the memorial hall to hold bodies. Benches and chairs usually used by mourners at memorial services have been stacked up at the back. In their place are rows of wooden coffins, many with the telltale transparent film used to double-seal the bodies of COVID patients.

“We’re now getting 400 in a week for cremation”, twice that of typical fatalities during the winter, said Schaldach. As he spoke, his colleagues were shifting more coffins into the memorial hall in a bid to make space in the actual mortuary, which opens out to a loading bay where others were arriving.

‘No longer afraid’

In the parking area, undertaker Matthias Moebius has already been waiting for an hour for space to unload the casket in his vehicle. “They’re packed right up to the door,” he said, pointing to where they would normally unload the coffins. “Usually it takes 10-15 minutes, we drive in, unload, go to the office with the paperwork, and we’re off,” he said. “These days, it’s closer to 90 minutes.”

Behind him is a queue of casket vehicles - three other undertakers are waiting. Moebius, who has been in the job for 20 years, said this winter had brought more work “by far” than he has ever had to handle. To cope, Meissen crematorium is running 24 hours, seven days a week, with two furnaces in operation to cremate 60 bodies every day.

Staff are working overtime and giving up their weekends. Retirees have returned to help and even family members are chipping in. Ingo Thoering, 76, who had worked at the crematorium since 1999 before his retirement, has come back to lend a hand even though his age places him in the risk group. He accompanies coroners as they carry out the final viewing of corpses to ascertain their identities and determine if any qualify as suspicious cases. Shrugging off the infection threat, Thoering said: “Fear is of no use at work. At my age, I’m no longer afraid.”

‘Come move the coffins’

Germany shuttered restaurants and cultural or leisure facilities from November, and later also closed schools and most shops in December to halt the second wave. But yesterday, the country saw a new high in daily



MEISSEN, Germany: Employees move coffins with the lettering ‘corona’ through the mourning hall before cremation at a crematorium on Wednesday. —AFP

deaths, at 1,244. Overall, the death toll stands at 43,881, according to the Robert Koch Institute. Other crematoriums in coronavirus hotspots have also warned they are at their limit. The city of Dresden on Wednesday said that a hall used to store flood protection equipment would serve as a temporary mortuary. Nuremberg has brought in cold storage containers as the crematorium ran out of space. Across the border on Monday, the Czech Republic said it was prohibiting cremations on its territory of bodies “imported” from neighboring countries.

Schaldach believes that German authorities could have done more earlier to prevent the second wave of infections, including imposing

mandatory testing at elderly care homes or tougher mask requirements. “They were caught napping in the summer,” he said. He believes corona deniers who travelled from all over Germany to the city of Leipzig in Saxony for a huge demonstration in November could have also helped spread the disease.

“What I would like to say to the corona sceptics is: Come and join us, help us move the coffins. “We have stacked up a whole lot of coffins—that means we have moved 750 tons of deceased (people). “Some have the idea that all this is a movie scene that was shot in the summer,” he said. “The corona deniers... can come and touch all these (coffins) for themselves.” —AFP

UK abuse victims get code word to ask pharmacist’s help

LONDON: British pharmacies yesterday launched a campaign encouraging domestic abuse victims to give staff a code word to access help. The pandemic and lockdowns have led to a global surge in domestic violence and child abuse as victims have found it even harder to flee attackers if they are living together.

According to UN data released in late September, lockdowns have led to increases in complaints or calls to report domestic abuse of 25 percent in Argentina, 30 percent in Cyprus and France and 33 percent in Singapore. The new scheme involves the 2,300 branches of Boots, the UK’s largest pharmacy chain, as well as 255 independent pharmacies, the government said.—AFP

WHO deplores 95% of vaccines limited to 10 countries

COPENHAGEN: The World Health Organization’s European branch yesterday said 95 percent of vaccine doses so far administered worldwide were limited to 10 countries and called for a more equitable distribution. In terms of total doses the top countries are the US, China, the UK, Israel, United Arab Emirates, Italy, Russia, Germany, Spain and Canada.

“Collectively, we simply cannot afford to leave any country, any community behind,” WHO’s regional director for Europe, Hans Kluge, said at an online press conference. Kluge said the WHO was working to get the vaccine to every country but, “it needs every country capable of contributing, donating and supporting equitable access and deployment of the vaccines, to do so.”

According to website Our World in Data, over 32 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines have been administered so far. In the WHO’s European Region, which comprises of 53 countries and includes Russia and several countries in Central Asia, 31 countries have launched vaccination programs.

But despite the start of vaccination campaigns the speed of transmission observed in some countries due to new more contagious variants, especially the so-called English and South African ones, was worrying, according to Kluge. “This is a concerning situation,” he said.

In the European region, 25 countries, including Russia, have recorded cases of the strain first discovered in the UK, and dubbed “VOC 202012/01”. “So far, we understand there is no significant change to the disease this variant produces, meaning the COVID-19 is not more, nor less, severe,” Kluge said. “At the same time, we are concerned for two reasons: This variant has a higher transmission rate. Secondly is the question of what does this mean for vaccines,” Kluge added.

However, Kluge also stressed that there were still reasons to be optimistic. “2021 will be another year of the coronavirus, but this will be a more predictable year, the situation will be easier to control.” —AFP