

## International

# Historic snowfall chills Madrid slum to the bones

## Police blame electricity shortage on illegal cannabis plantations

**MADRID:** “We’re not animals but dogs live better than us,” sighs Lidia Arribas, who lives without electricity in a vast slum near Madrid where temperatures hit historic lows this week. Days after its heaviest snowfall in 50 years, Madrid woke on Tuesday to its lowest temperatures in decades, with the mercury plummeting to minus 10 degrees Celsius. And the brutal cold has hit particularly hard in Canada Real Galiana, one of Europe’s largest slums, where for months more than half of its nearly 8,000 residents have had no electricity for heating or light.

Police blame the shortage on the illegal cannabis plantations whose lamps, extractors and fans use so much power that they cause widespread electrical outages in the surrounding area. The crisis posed by the power cuts and the cold snap has been denounced by UN human rights experts, NGOs and Oscar-winning Spanish actress Penelope Cruz.

“I’m really angry with the authorities... everyone passes the buck... nobody does anything,” says Arribas, a 37-year-old mother-of-three, torch in hand as she walks back to her home where mildew covers the walls. Curled up in a blanket, her seven-year-old daughter Ainara says she always sleeps with her “head under the covers” to protect herself from the cold and the damp.

With no electricity, she and her brother and sister cannot get any of the online homework set by their school, and neither the fridge nor the washing machine are working. An unofficial settlement built along a 16-km stretch of land flanking the southeastern section of Madrid’s M50 ring road, Canada Real is home to a community largely of Moroccan or gypsy origin who live in extreme poverty. Built along a former cattle trail, this sprawling shantytown has existed for decades, with this most recent power cut affecting some 4,000 residents.

### Infants with hypothermia

Without heating, the brutal freeze has left many struggling to cope. On Sunday night, a three-year-old girl was taken to hospital “showing signs of hypothermia”, says Conrado Gimenez, head of the Fundacion Madrina NGO which provides residents with food, blankets and gas bottles. A similar case occurred last month and was flagged by UN human rights experts who warned the power cuts were “endangering the health of some 1,800 children” in Canada Real.

“Children in Canada Real Galiana are truly suffering, and their health is at risk,” they said. “Now that winter is closing in - and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic - electricity must be restored.” Lidia Arribas’ next-door-neighbor Yolanda Martin says she is “more afraid of the cold than of COVID”. “I get up in the morning and my blankets have frozen, it’s pitch dark and I can’t have a shower,” says this 47-year-old whose lips are blue with cold.

Out of work since May, her only source of heat and light is a chiminea which sits in the middle of her home. “It will be minus 11C tonight, as cold as hell, but we’re surviving with the little firewood we have left,” she told AFP. “We’re breaking tables and stuff



**LA CANADA REAL, Spain:** Yolanda Martin, 47, stands in the living room of her house in sector 6 of this shantytown on the outskirts of Madrid on Jan 12, 2021 following a heavy snowstorm. — AFP

that isn’t worth much to throw on the fire.”

### Cannabis farms bleeding power

Two policemen patrolling the area, which is notorious for supplying the capital with drugs, say the power cuts are caused by cannabis farms set up in homes in the area. This week, Spanish energy giant Naturgy, which supplies free electricity to Canada Real, began cutting power to several suspect homes in order to get the network back up and running. Local residents and Pedro del Cura, mayor of Rivas-

Vaciamadrid where part of the shantytown is located, are calling for more capacity be given to the network.

They also fear that power could be cut to homes with no links to the drugs trade. Despite the cold, Arribas is still hopeful they will be reconnected to the grid so she can warm the house for her children, whose only consolation these days is the neighborhood’s running snowball fights. “We mustn’t lose hope,” she says, her eyes downcast. “Somebody has to listen to us because we can’t carry on like this. It’s really very hard,” she sighs. “It’s very sad.” — AFP

## Fines for lawmakers who refuse to walk through detectors

**WASHINGTON:** US lawmakers who refuse to go through metal detectors installed at the House of Representatives after last week’s Capitol riot will be fined, Speaker Nancy Pelosi said late Wednesday. The fine for the first offense will be \$5,000, and \$10,000 for the second, Pelosi said in a statement. Fines will be docked directly from members’ salaries. “It is tragic that this step is necessary, but the Chamber of the People’s House must and will be safe,” Pelosi said as she announced the measure.

Tighter safety rules came into effect after a mob of supporters of President Donald Trump violently broke into the building on January 6 in an attempt to stop the certification of Joe Biden as the next US president. Five people died in the day of violence. Metal detectors were installed at the entrances to the US House for the first time Tuesday in response to the riot.

Magnetometers have been used for years at all

visitor and staff entrances to the Capitol and many other federal buildings. But lawmakers have been allowed to go around those security screenings provided they were wearing their congressional pin. Since the metal detectors were installed several Republican lawmakers have pushed past police even after setting off the metal detectors.

On Wednesday, first term Republican lawmaker Lauren Boebert, who had threatened to bring her firearm, was in a standoff with police when she refused to hand over her bag after the metal detector started beeping.

“Sadly,” Pelosi wrote, just days after the new safety protocols were in place, “many House Republicans have disrespected” the Capitol police “by verbally abusing them and refusing to adhere to basic precautions keeping members of our Congressional community, including the Capitol Police, safe.” — AFP

## Europhile selected to be Estonia’s first woman PM

**TALLINN:** Estonia’s pro-business opposition leader Kaja Kallas was nominated yesterday to become the Baltic eurozone member’s first woman prime minister, pending the support of parliament. Kallas, leader of the Reform Party, is a staunch europhile and the daughter of former Estonian prime minister Siim Kallas. The 43-year-old would replace Juri Ratas, who resigned on Wednesday after his Centre Party came under investigation for corruption.

His resignation brings down the governing center-right coalition, which includes the far-right EKRE party. “Both the Estonian people and I are expecting that Estonia would quickly have an active and competent government, which focuses on handling the pandemic and the economic crisis,” President Kersti Kaljulaid said in a statement.

Kallas’s party came first in parliamentary elections in 2019 but did not win an outright majority and then failed to build a ruling coalition. Kallas previously served in the European Parliament and was regularly included on lists of the most influential MEPs. She is a passionate proponent of innovation who argues that regulations must not hinder the digital technological revolution.

Focused on the rights of small and medium-sized businesses, Kallas believes that borders in the digital world prevent innovative companies from emerging. She now has 14 days to win majority support in parliament. Her Reform Party and the Centre Party have announced that they are starting unofficial coalition talks. The two parties have alternated in government over the nearly three decades since Estonia broke free from the crumbling Soviet Union. Both strongly support Estonia’s EU and NATO membership, which they see as a buffer against Soviet-era master Russia. They have favored austerity to keep spending in check, giving the country one of the eurozone’s lowest debt-to-GDP ratios. — AFP



**TALLINN:** Kaja Kallas, leader of the Reform Party, smiles as she leaves the presidential office Kadriorg yesterday. — AFP