



MOSCOW: A picture shows Viktor Karachun, one of the coordinators of the campaign at his house in the village of Vostochnaya Perlovka outside Moscow.—AFP photos

AS MOSCOW EXPANDS, PROPERTY BOOM SPARKS LOCAL IRE

'SOON PEOPLE WON'T HAVE ANYWHERE TO GO FOR A WALK OR FRESH AIR TO BREATHE'

MYTISHCHI, Russia: Property developers are racing to build up prime land in Moscow's leafy outskirts with plans that involve razing entire villages and felling acres of forest. Now determined locals are fighting back to stop the developers in their tracks and preserve the environment, local heritage and their homes. And with some success, such as in the village of Vostochnaya Perlovka, a settlement ranging from simple wooden cottages to roomy brick family homes with some 4,000 residents, northeast of the capital. Local authorities announced a plan to demolish all of its 600 houses to allow a property developer to build high-rise blocks there, increasing the population to 25,000 people.

Horrified at the prospect of losing their beloved homes, the residents immediately teamed up to campaign against the demolition. "If the project goes through, the population density of this area will be more than 13,000 people per square kilometer—more than twice that of Hong Kong," which has close to 6,800 people per square kilometer, said lawyer Andrei Yumashev, who represents the residents. He urged the property company, at the very least, to discuss the details of its plans for Vostochnaya Perlovka with locals. "I couldn't live in a concrete building," said Viktor Karachun, one of the coordinators of the campaign, who works as a company's commercial director.

"Here, I have a large wooden house and an apple orchard. I have no problem parking and my children can spend the whole day outside." He published an online petition in July 2016 against the planned development by local com-

pany Zemelnye Resursy which has gained 2,000 signatures. But neither the petition nor dozens of letters and protests made any difference, forcing residents to go to courts. In December, the Supreme Court responded by reducing the scale of the project—banning the developers from building 20-storey blocks and massive shopping centers and reducing the number of residents to 10,000 — something the locals view as a considerable victory.

Disappearing forests

With an already bulging population of at least 12 million, Moscow is a magnet for the upwardly mobile from all over Russia and the former Soviet Union. But commuting to central Moscow for work while living in the surrounding region is a more affordable option for most. Just six kilometers (4 miles) from Vostochnaya Perlovka, residents of another small settlement called Stroitel, or Builder, are fighting the felling of 255 acres (103 hectares) of forest, known as Chelyuskiy Wood, for house building. Residents accuse the local authorities of illegally selling the forest to a Moscow property developer called Novaya Zemlya, which wants to build a new district with 20,000 inhabitants.

In December, after MPs supported the residents' complaints, local prosecutors launched a probe and determined that the construction plan was against the law. But the developers have not given up their plans and are continuing to destroy the forest, say residents, who have seen trees felled in recent months. "We moved here (from Moscow) so our children could breathe fresh air. In this forest, every tree is dear

to us," said one resident, Maria Tyabut. The destruction of natural areas for construction is becoming increasingly common in Russia, said Mikhail Kreindlin of Greenpeace-Russia, since "property developers benefit from loopholes in the law".

"Housing construction is a sector that gives good returns, not just for the investors, but also for the local authorities," Kreindlin said. "Even if you rule out corruption—which is frequent—these projects fill up the coffers of the local authorities with taxes." But the problem is that "soon people won't have anywhere to go for a walk or fresh air to breathe," he warned.

Moscow expands

However officials and property developers argue that such construction projects are essential. "There is practically no free land left in Moscow," said Vladimir Voronin, who heads a large Russian property developer, FSK Lider. "Moscow region attracts people from other regions who want to earn money and make careers in the capital," said Voronin, adding that the economic crisis prompted by falling oil prices and Western sanctions over Ukraine had not stopped them coming. Last year, 8.8 million square meters of housing was built in the Moscow region, including 5.5 million square meters of high-rise blocks, according to the Moscow region's construction ministry, the highest rate in the country. In 2011 the municipal government massively expanded the area that is part of the capital by extending the limits of "Greater Moscow" by 1,500 square kilometers to the city's southwest.—AFP



KATHMANDU, Madhyamanchal: In this photograph vehicles and motorbike riders travel on a dusty road in Kathmandu.—AFP photos

THE BUS MAFIA CONTROLLING NEPAL'S SMOG-CHOKED CAPITAL

KATHMANDU: Nepal's government is trying to tackle rising pollution levels in the smog-choked Kathmandu Valley, but standing in the way is a powerful bus mafia that controls the capital's roads. The rulers of Kathmandu's streets are a web of transport syndicates made up of private bus owners who have repeatedly blocked official attempts to modernize the highly inefficient bus network. Critics say these associations have managed to win control over the roads and ensure laws stay favorable to them by making payments masked as political donations to key political figures. "There is no regulatory mechanism that is strong enough to control them," said Kanak Dixit, chairman of Sajha Yatayat, a cooperative bus company trying to break the hold of the transport mafia. "This sector has so much cash liquidity that they are able to influence the politicians and therefore they get their way."

A \$30 million six-year program mostly funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) aimed at cleaning up the system, by introducing larger buses in busy areas and redrawing overlapping routes, is gathering dust. Meanwhile more than 10,000 buses and minibuses in varying states of disrepair ply the streets of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur—three cities that bleed into each other, making up the largest urban area in the country. "We prepared a very excellent report with the help of donors, but when it came to the implementation phase we failed to materialize it," Bimal Prasad Subedi, deputy director of the Kathmandu Sustainable Urban Transport Project (KSUTP), told AFP.

"They (the bus syndicates) protested against our plans... They are private entities and don't want to lose their profit." Corruption in Nepal has flourished during the political instability that followed the end of the decade-long civil

war in 2006 and seen the country cycle through nine governments since then. The impoverished Himalayan nation is currently ranked 131 out of 168 countries in watchdog Transparency International's global corruption perception index.

Genie out of the bottle

Experts say the ADB plan would significantly reduce congestion and emissions in gridlocked Kathmandu where levels of PM 2.5 — micro-



KATHMANDU, Madhyamanchal: In this photograph scooter riders wear masks as they ride along a dusty road in Kathmandu.

scopic particles harmful to human health regularly surpass 150. That is far above the maximum threshold of 25 recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) for a 24-hour exposure. But Dharman Rijal of the National Federation of Nepal Transport Entrepreneurs—an umbrella group for the bus operators—said the modernization plans amounted to "bullying small investors". "I stopped going to these fruitless meetings," he said. "We have urged the government and KSUTP to enter open competition with us, but replacing our buses with their new buses is injustice."

Bus routes are allocated by the Department of Transport Management, but only on the recommendation of an association, and competition between operators over fiercely guarded routes has on occasion turned violent. Under pressure to be seen to be acting on pollution, which regularly makes the headlines of local newspapers, the government introduced a ban on public vehicles older than 20 years in February. So far the government says only four minibuses and one bus of an estimated 2,500 that fail to meet the new age requirements have been taken off the road.

Most bus owners have refused to retire their old vehicles without compensation, accusing the government of bringing in the ban at the behest of the new vehicle lobby. The deeply entrenched political patronage system that has been allowed to thrive will make it difficult for the government to now bring the bus mafia to heel, observers warn. "If you allow private sector to go unregulated on something that is supposed to be a public service then they will run amok for sure," Dixit said. "There is no way to put that genie back in the bottle."—AFP

INDIAN GREEN WATCHDOG: FESTIVAL MASSIVELY DAMAGED RIVER BANK

NEW DELHI: An expert panel appointed by India's top environmental watchdog has said that damage caused by a cultural festival held on the banks of the Yamuna River a year ago would need at least a decade to be fixed. The panel set up by the National Green Tribunal after the Art of Living Foundation's World Culture Festival said Wednesday that restoring the river banks would cost around 420 million rupees (\$6.5 million). It said construction of roads, ramps and a massive stage for the three-day spectacle damaged vast tracts of the river's flood plains.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and top Delhi government officials attended the festival hosted by Hindu spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar despite criticism from environmental activists about damage to the river banks. The festival to mark the 35th anniversary of the Art of Living Foundation drew some 3.5 million visitors who came to see thousands of singers, dancers and other performers. People filed complaints to the tribunal almost immediately after con-

struction began, but much of the damage was already done and the tribunal allowed the organizers to go ahead with the event. It did issue an immediate fine of 50 million rupees (\$740,000).

Afterward, the watchdog set up the panel comprising environmental engineers and biodiversity experts to assess the impact that the festival had. In their report, the experts said that an area comprising around 170 hectares (420 acres) had been "completely" destroyed and not simply damaged. "The ground is now totally leveled, compacted and hardened and is totally devoid of water bodies or depressions and almost completely devoid of any vegetation," the panel said.

The Yamuna is one of the main tributaries of the Ganges River. Art of Living Foundation has dismissed the findings of the panel as biased. The foundation was a "responsible and environment-sensitive NGO" that has consistently worked to preserve and revive the environment, Kedar Desai, a spokesman said.—AP



NEW DELHI: In this file photo, workers dismantle stadia temporarily erected for a massive three-day cultural festival organized by the Art of Living Foundation on the banks of the river Yamuna in New Delhi, India.—AP

HEALTH WORKERS END MONTH-LONG STRIKE IN MALI

BAMAKOL: Health workers in Mali called off a month-long strike yesterday that paralyzed hospitals after reaching an agreement with the government. The stoppage was called by the country's two main health unions, demanding raises for staff and jobs for contract workers, though a skeleton emergency service was maintained. "The demand for strike action is lifted because we are satisfied," said Youssef Maiga, a senior official with one the

unions, adding that eight of nine demands had been met.

Government spokesman and commerce minister Abdel Karim Konate confirmed to AFP the strike was over. "The strikers and the government have reached agreement," he said. The strike was the longest ever to hit hospitals in Mali's history and badly affected the majority of patients who could not afford private care, pushing them to seek help from traditional healers.—AFP

INSIDER Q&A: PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEM CEO SWEATS OUT ACA DEBATE

CHICAGO: Cook County Health & Hospitals System, which handles more than 1 million patient visits in the Chicago area every year, has seen a significant financial boost from the Affordable Care Act. The federal law - whose future is up in the air - expanded the Medicaid program for the poor, giving most of the system's patients coverage for the first time in its 180-year history. As one of the nation's largest public health systems, it runs more than a dozen community health centers and two hospitals, including one on which the TV drama "ER" was loosely based.

About 70 percent of the system's patients were uninsured before the Affordable Care Act expanded coverage in 2014. Now, nearly the same percentage has coverage, and the system relies less on local tax dollars for support. The law's future is unclear as Republicans in Congress consider another push to replace it after failing last month.

Hospital system CEO Dr Jay Shannon, who has followed the debate closely, spoke recently with The Associated Press. Questions and answers have been edited for clarity and length.

Q: What are the biggest ways the ACA has affected your hospitals and clinics?

A: Most important is the impact for the patient. (They) now have access to care coordination, they have access to community mental health and substance use services if they need it, and ... we can give them preventive services including things like vaccinations.

Q: How has the influx of patients covered by Medicaid affected your bottom line?

A: The health system has been able to break even for the first time in our history. We always operated at a gigantic loss. It has been an increase in revenue to the system of somewhere between \$200 million and \$300 million a year for the past three years.

Q: Emergency departments are usually a main source of care for the uninsured. Have your emergency department visits changed since the law?

A: Actually, our volumes, our registrations, have not gone down.

Q: Has the nature of those visits changed?

A: We're seeing a decrease in what some health care researchers refer to as ambulatory sensitive conditions. That is, those things that ought to ... have been cared for if your primary care home was open and you could reach them. A sore throat, I've got a fever, I've got symptoms of a bladder infection, those kinds of things.

Q: You run a safety net hospital that treats people with little or no income, and you have clinics around the city. What is your top public health concern?

A: Repeal of the Affordable Care Act, absolutely, because that has been such a leg up for so many adults who previously weren't able to get insurance. For us, the growth in the proportion of people who have insurance post-ACA is almost exclusively because of growth in Medicaid expansion in Illinois and in Cook County, so that is the biggest concern that we have.

Q: Insurers have been pushing patients for years to seek care at less expensive locations outside hospitals. How is your business evolving to address that?

A: We actually embrace that. We have passed a strategic plan that marks an intentional pivot to moving ... to community-based ambulatory services. That's comprehensive services ideally, including primary care, specialty care, behavioral health, dental services. We want to make it ambulatory care if at all possible and reserve the expensive, higher-risk, (hospital) setting only for those people who absolutely need it.—AP



CHICAGO: This undated photo provided by Cook County Health & Hospitals System shows Dr Jay Shannon.—AP