

NIGHT OF HORROR AS BLAZE TRAPS LONDON TOWER DWELLERS

LONDON: People watched in horror as neighbors found themselves trapped or in desperation leapt to their doom as flames raced through the stricken Grenfell Tower. The last time Hanan Wahabi saw her brother was when he and his family waved to her from their home in an upper floor after she had safely left the blazing building. Wahabi, 39, who lives on the ninth floor of the 24-storey Grenfell Tower, said she was awoken by smoke at around 1:00 am yesterday. "I could see there was ash coming through the window in the living room, which was partially open," she told AFP, sitting outside a local community center.

"I looked out and I could see the fire travelling up the block. It was literally by my window," she said. "I slammed the window shut and got out." After she escaped along with her husband and son, 16, and daughter, eight, she called her brother, who lives on the 21st floor, to see if he was all right. "The fire hadn't reached the top of the block at that point," Wahabi said.

"He said he had been told to stay inside, stay in one room together and put towels under the door. I told him to leave. He said he was going to come. Then I called him and he said there was too much smoke. The last time I saw him they were waving out the window, his

wife and children. The last time I spoke to his wife, he was on the phone to the fire brigade. I've not heard from them since, the phone is not going through, the landline isn't going through. That was about 2:00 am."

'Saw people jumping out'

Two eyewitnesses told the Press Association news agency they saw children dropped by their parents into the arms of people on the ground. One said a baby was dropped from the ninth or 10th floor, another that she saw a five-year-old boy dropped from a fifth or sixth floor window. Khadejah Miller, who was evacuated from her home nearby, recounted a night of horror. "I literally just heard screaming, I saw people jumping out of their windows, the building was literally on fire, the ambulances, the police. It was horrendous," she said.

Amanda Fernandez, 31, was evacuated from a different part of the housing estate. "When you live around here, you know people. And to stand helpless watching the fire and counting the floors, and thinking, 'Who lives on that floor? Who lives on that one?' Most of the people I know lived higher than the 10th floor." Others reported seeing mobile phone lights and white cloths, and hearing screams for



LONDON: Police man a security cordon as a huge fire engulfs the Grenfell Tower early yesterday. —AFP

help from the windows, as the flame rose through the building at astonishing speed.

'I'm a goner'

Another survivor at the community center, wearing shorts, a T-shirts and trainers and with a blanket draped around his shoulders, said he saved his own life with

just moments to spare. "My neighbor's smoke alarm went off and I thought he might have done some cooking," he said, giving only his first name of Eddie, 55. "I was in bed and I heard people shout fire, fire, I opened my door and loads of smoke came in. Then two seconds later my neighbor (on fifth floor) called and said,

'Get the f*** out the building!'

"I went into the bathroom and I got the towel and wet it and wrapped it around my head. I ran out into the hallway, close the door behind me and ran for where I thought the fire exit was. I didn't find it. It was a matter of life and death - I thought, 'If I'm in this for another five seconds, I'm a goner.' Then on the ground there was a fireman, he touched my leg and pulled me into where the fire stairwell was. You couldn't see anything. I just ran down the stairs. There wasn't that many people on the stairs. Loads of people haven't got out of the building."

'Saw them dying'

Some evacuated residents found refuge in nearby St Clement's Church and sat dazed on the pews as volunteers handed out food and drink. Clarita Ghavimi, 66, said she escaped with a tea towel over her mouth and was helped down by two men. "I was shaking and crying," she said, still clutching the tea towel in her sooty hands. Adi Estu, 32, who was in her pyjamas and a coat, said: "I saw people flashing their lights for help, families flashing their mobile phones like a torch. But the smoke covered them and then the fire destroyed everything." "We saw them dying. How can you forget that?" — AFP

MACRON SAYS 'DOOR ALWAYS OPEN' FOR UK TO STAY IN EU

TOWER BLAZE BRINGS FRESH DELAY TO MAY'S POWER DEAL

PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron said Tuesday the door was "always open" for Britain to remain in the EU despite Prime Minister Theresa May saying Brexit talks would begin next week. The meeting in Paris followed the leaders' remarkably different political fortunes in the past week, which saw Macron's party headed for a massive parliamentary majority, while May lost her slim advantage in the House of Commons. "Of course the door is always open as long as the negotiations on Brexit have not finished," Macron said in a press conference.

But he stressed that the British people had taken the sovereign decision to leave the 28-member bloc in their referendum a year ago, adding that the beginning of talks would be a milestone. "Once it (the Brexit process) has started we need to be collectively clear that it's more difficult to reverse course," he said at the Elysee palace. May stressed that she would stick to her timetable of starting Brexit discussions next week in Brussels, saying the talks were "on course", despite her domestic difficulties.

Her Conservative party lost its majority in a bungled snap election last week which some observers suggested might lead May to abandon her plans for a so-called "hard Brexit". But she countered: "There's a unity of purpose among people in the UK. It's a unity of purpose having voted to leave the EU that their government gets on with that and makes a success of it."

Crackdown on online extremism

After their talks, May and Macron watched a football friendly between England and France where a minute's silence was held before kick-off to remember the victims of recent terror attacks in Manchester and London. The order of the national anthems was reversed, leading thousands of French fans to put aside centuries of rivalry, war and their own history of regicide in a moment of cross-Channel solidarity. "God Save The Queen" they thundered before the match began.

The poignant moment served to underline May and Macron's main message, namely that France and Britain will continue to work together despite Brexit. However there was no comfort for May on the pitch, with France running out 3-2 winners. The French and British leaders also announced a joint action plan to crack down on extremism and terror propaganda online, accusing Internet companies and social media networks of doing too little.

The measures aim "to ensure the Internet cannot be used as a safe space for criminals and terrorists and it cannot be used to host the radicalizing material that leads to so much harm," May said. Priorities include looking into encrypted communication platforms used by extremists to evade security forces and new laws to impose penalties on internet companies which fail to remove offensive content. Facebook, Twitter and other social networks had long argued that they



PARIS: Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May is greeted by France's President Emmanuel Macron ahead of a meeting at The Elysee Palace in Paris on Tuesday. —AFP

were unable to monitor content posted online by their users, but have grown increasingly sensitive to criticism. Germany lawmakers recently introduced legislation requiring Internet companies to remove content flagged as hate speech within 24 hours.

Yesterday, May faced further delays in forming her new government yesterday after her would-be allies said their agreement would be put back following a deadly tower block blaze in London. The Conservative leader is now desperately seeking the backing of the 10 MPs from Northern Ireland's ultra-conservative Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

EU leaders have voiced growing impatience to start Brexit negotiations, which have already been delayed by the parliamentary election - and on which the clock is ticking. An initial round of talks between May and DUP leader Arlene Foster ended with no agreement on Tuesday, although both sides said they were hopeful of a deal. "The talks are continuing but I think the events in London today probably will have some impact on that. I think it's unlikely there will be any announcement today," a DUP spokesman told AFP.

'Softer Brexit'

May has dismissed calls to resign following the dismal election result after calling a vote three years early in the hope of bolstering her slim majority, only to actually lose seats. A lackluster campaign saw her high approval rating slip away, and support for her "hard Brexit" strategy - pulling out of the European single market and customs union - now hangs in the balance.

Former prime minister David Cameron, who called last year's EU referendum and resigned after losing it, told a conference in Poland that "there will be pressure for a softer Brexit". Parliament now "deserves a say", he said, adding that there was "perhaps an opportunity to consult more widely with the other parties on how best we can achieve it".

Guy Verhofstadt, the European Parliament's chief Brexit negotiator, warned Tuesday that "the current uncertainty cannot continue" and yesterday issued five "pressing questions" on Twitter. Among these was whether Britain's position would "be the same as in the letter of March 29" when May triggered the two-year Brexit countdown.

'Very unsettling'

The DUP is believed to be more favorable to a "soft Brexit" that would keep Northern Ireland's border with the Republic of Ireland free-flowing. Under the proposed deal, the DUP would likely support May's Conservatives on big issues such as the budget, Brexit and defense legislation on a vote-by-vote basis. They would not form a coalition. However, the prospect of a deal has prompted warnings that it could upset Northern Ireland's fragile peace. London's neutrality is key to the delicate balance of power in Northern Ireland, which was once plagued by violence over Britain's control of the province. "The danger is that however much any government tries they will not be seen to be impartial if they are locked into a parliamentary deal," 1990s Conservative prime minister John Major told BBC radio. — Agencies

TEARS, CHEERS AS BOROUGH MARKET REOPENS

LONDON: With emotions running high and stalls bursting with produce, London's 1,000-year-old Borough Market re-opened yesterday for the first time since a deadly attack by Islamist extremists killed eight people. Traders gathered for a minute's silence in honor of the victims of the June 3 attack, before fruit-and-veg stallholder Paul Wheeler rang the market bell, crying as he tugged the rope harder and harder. "I was only supposed to ring it once, but once I started I couldn't stop. I just wanted to get the market back open," he told Reuters moments later, still visibly emotional. "It's been really hard. Business-wise, we suffered, but emotionally, all of us here have been struggling with it. I'm just glad we're back open," he said.

Donald Hyslop, chairman of the market's board of trustees, was cheered loudly as he declared trade had resumed. London Mayor Sadiq Khan was in the crowd as he spoke. "Strong and together, London is open. Borough Market is

open," Hyslop said. A warren of alleyways and streets nestled under a railway bridge and by the side of the medieval Southwark Cathedral, Borough Market is a foodie's paradise, with stalls selling a variety of specialties from around Britain and the world.

It is also a vibrant spot for socializing, with the surrounding streets full of pubs, bars, cafes and restaurants that were packed with people enjoying a balmy Saturday night out when the three attackers struck. They drove a van into pedestrians on nearby London Bridge, killing three. They then ran into the maze of bustling streets, killing five people and injuring dozens by stabbing them and slashing their throats. The rampage ended when the three attackers were shot dead at the scene by police. The market had remained shut since then, with forensic investigators at work and police standing guard.

'Light after Darkness'

For the tight-knit community of



LONDON: Mayor of London Sadiq Khan (center) attends the re-opening of Borough Market yesterday in central London following the June 3 terror attack. —AFP

market traders, re-opening their stalls was a first step towards normality after a traumatic time.

"I'm so happy that we're all here to keep going and carry on and to show that no matter what they do we're still here. There's always light after darkness," said

Maria Moruzzi, who runs a cafe on the edge of the market. She moved to the area as a child, in 1964, and her parents ran a local cafe. She and her sisters used to play in the market as children. For her, it felt as if the attack took place "in my front room". — Reuters

NIGERIA SEEING A SURGE IN SEPARATIST SENTIMENT

LAGOS: Nigeria's government is calling for national unity after southerners were given an ultimatum to leave the country's north, triggering renewed calls for independence elsewhere. The Arewa Youth Consultative Forum last week said Igbo living in the mainly Muslim north should go back to the largely Christian south by Oct 1. At least two other groups in the south and southwest have since revived their push for independence, underlining barely concealed ethnic divisions in Africa's most populous nation.

In the Igbo-dominated southeast, there have been mounting calls for a separate state of Biafra, 50 years after a previous declaration of independence sparked a civil war. Nigeria's Vice-President Yemi Osinbajo has moved to nip the issue in the bud, warning the government "cannot control violence once it begins". At a meeting with northern leaders in Abuja on Tuesday evening, he said the "noises of hate, of division" had been "much louder... than perhaps had been the case in the past".

But he said a common front and dialogue was needed to overcome nearly a year of crippling economic recession that has pushed up inflation and worsened unemployment. "Every form of violence, every form of hate speech, any stone that is thrown in the market place will hit targets that are not intended," Osinbajo said in a speech. He added: "This is not the time to retreat behind ethnic lines. Moments like this are not for isolating ourselves... it is a time for us to come together, to work together."

History repeating

Nigeria's more than 180 million people could be forgiven for feeling a sense of deja vu. A similar situation involving Igbo in the north was a major factor in triggering the civil war that left more than one million dead between 1967 and 1970. Tensions are also nothing new in a country with more than 250 ethnic groups, which is roughly split along religious lines between north and south. But there is clear concern because the AYCF represents the dominant ethnic group in the north, the Hausa-speaking Fulani, and was made in the northern city of Kaduna.

Kaduna has been a powder keg of ethnic, sectarian and religious tensions over the years, where rivalries and grievances have regularly boiled over into deadly violence. Tit-for-tat attacks between

nomadic cattle drivers and farmers have also killed thousands in Kaduna state and the wider central region for decades. What is effectively a resource conflict has frequently been portrayed as a religious or ethnic dispute, because the herders are Muslim and farmers Christian.

The UN's resident coordinator in Nigeria, Edward Kallon, has stepped in to the row and publicly called for peaceful co-existence. But it has not stopped the Niger Delta Self-Determination Movement to call for "political autonomy and 100 percent ownership and control of our resources" in the oil-rich south. In the Yoruba-dominated southwest, the Oodua Nationalist Coalition said it was time to break free from the "Fulani oligarchy" to create "the third-biggest nation in Africa".

'Bluff and bluster'

The separatist calls and the need for what one newspaper said was to "clamp down on those beating the drum of war" have dominated headlines in Nigeria over the last week. To some extent, the situation mirrors 2014, when the then-president Goodluck Jonathan ruled out discussion about Nigeria's continued union at a national conference. The issue had come to the fore as it was 100 years since British colonialists created Nigeria by amalgamating its linguistically, religiously and socially distinct northern and southern protectorates.

Political commentator Chris Ngwodo told AFP the current situation was cyclical and much of it was "grandstanding, bluff and bluster". "My sense of the situation is that it is the consequence of a state that doesn't really guarantee social and economic opportunity for the majority of its people," he said. That has led to a rise of "demagogues and populists" like the Igbo independence leader Nnamdi Kanu, who is testing the government in power with political brinkmanship, he added. Grievances are frequently expressed in ethnic and religious terms and threats are a way of negotiating, particularly at a time when there is a "leadership vacuum", he said.

Osinbajo is deputizing for President Muhammadu Buhari, who has spent much of this year in London receiving treatment for an undisclosed illness. "There's no great hunger for secession in the north, there really isn't. National solidarity does exist. It might be dysfunctional but it's there," Ngwodo added. — AFP

FAMILY BATTLES EX-KGB FOR TRUTH ON DISGRACED RELATIVE

SAINT PETERSBURG: For decades the family of Russian village elder Vasily Ostryakov were told nothing about the man other than he was a traitor convicted of collaborating with the Nazis. Now, following an unlikely legal victory against the feared Federal Security Service, (FSB) Ostryakov's descendants are a step closer to learning the truth about their ancestor. "The figure of my great-grandfather has always remained in the shadows for our family, nobody knew much about him," said 33-year-old Dmitry Ostryakov.

Dmitry began his quest for the truth by asking his father, who had scarcely any information. Then, in 2015, the family went on a mission that many Russians consider to be a lost cause: to access his file from the FSB, inheritor of the archives of the KGB that prosecuted him. Vasily Ostryakov was the appointed elder of a small village in southern Russia that was occupied by the Nazis in World War II.

Condemned by the Soviets to six years in a labor camp for collaboration, he died in the gulag in far east Russia soon after. In 1998, his case was reviewed, like those of many other victims of Joseph Stalin's massive purges who were convicted between 1930 and 1950. But for reasons that remain unclear, the verdict against Vasily was not overturned and he has never been rehabilitated.

'What could he have done?'

The family want to know the precise reasons for their ancestor's conviction, but

their requests to see his file have been refused. "Those were difficult times," Dmitry, a doctor, told AFP of his relative living under Nazi occupation in southwestern Belgorod region. "The other villagers elected him as their elder. What could he have done? In any case, I want to learn the truth." Dmitry promised himself he would prize the information out of the security services, taking over a task his father had begun. "I want to really learn everything there is about my relative. Sooner or later I want to succeed."

After a protracted legal dispute, the Ostryakov family unexpectedly won a small battle in May, when the FSB tried to sue them to recover its legal expenses. A court in Saint Petersburg rejected the FSB's appeal and sided with the family.

Rare victory

Winning a case against the KGB's successor agency is practically a miracle in Russia, even if the sum in question of 26,000 rubles (\$450) is relatively small. "With this lawsuit against Mr. Ostryakov, the FSB wanted to discourage other people who would like to learn about their relatives," said Darya Sukhikh, a lawyer with Team 29, a human rights collective that fights for freedom of information and is helping the Ostryakovs. "This decision pleased us but it doesn't change anything - we still cannot receive the file on my great-grandfather," said Dmitry.

Two higher courts have confirmed the legitimacy of the decision by the FSB to refuse access to the file. — AFP