

Fearing worst, French 'preppers' gear up for the Day After



People visit the Survival Expo in Paris. — AFP photos



When the end comes, ex-army signaller Daniel will calmly fire up the generator, flip on the water purifier, gather eggs from his chickens and watch in serene self-sufficiency as society tears itself apart. "I'm preparing myself for risks, floods, earthquakes, avalanches or social breakdown," says the sixty-something father, hunter and self-styled survivor from the French Alps.

Daniel, who has been prepping for the worst since leaving the military 20 years ago, is one of a growing cohort of nature buffs joining "survivalist" movements seeking reduced reliance on authorities should disaster strike. "Throughout society we are dependent on infrastructure and supply chains that are fragile and can be destabilized by things we can predict," says Clement Champault, organizer of France's first survivalist expo, which runs this weekend in Paris.

"We're not talking about a zombie apocalypse—aliens aren't going to land—we're talking about real risks: natural disasters, sabotage, attacks and even financial and economic crises," he said. Inside the expo, men in khakis and cargo pants peruse rows of steel-framed gazebos displaying animal traps, food rations, solar panels and—for the

off-gridder who has everything—hazmat suits and radiation detectors.

In one corner a man throws axes at a wooden target from increasingly improbable distances while another man dressed vaguely like an Eskimo lets punters pet his huskies. The survivalist movement grew in 1960s America from the fear of nuclear war or Soviet invasion, according to Bertrand Vidal, sociology professor at Paul Valery University, Montpellier.

"Today these people don't necessarily identify with an existential threat, it can be a mixture of fears that punctuate their daily lives," he says. Initiates believe their concerns are borne out by the high number of extreme weather events in recent years. In France, where a string of terror attacks since 2015 has left hundreds dead, there is a growing lack of faith among some in the state's ability to keep people safe.

Obligated to protect ourselves

"If I told you 10 years ago there'd be all these people killed on the streets of Paris, you'd have said I'm crazy," says Laurent Berrafato, publisher of the "Survival" trade magazine. "But unfortunately that's the reality. Now people are asking themselves: 'If we're all alone what can we do about it?'"



Aside from survival wares, the expo has stalls with names like "Ground Force" and "YShoot" flogging a variety of unpleasant-looking self-defense implements.

Tasers, bulletproof vests, axes, throwing stars and knives—lots of knives—are all openly on sale. The branding is unashamedly macho, but movement members insist their version of survivalism is a far cry from the US stereotype of a trigger-happy recluse stashed in his gun-filled bunker. Unlike similar US shows, there's not a firearm on display in Paris. "These images of Americans armed to the teeth are problematic. But if there's a rupture and people no longer respect the law, average citizens are obliged to protect themselves," says



Daniel, who admits to owning a pistol and a shotgun, both legally registered.

Far-right taint

The survivalist movement has another image problem: its origins are intertwined with the American far-right from which it sprang, and sociologist Vidal says there are still members who identify with the xenophobic worldview of its founders. "There's still this image of the mad man who wants to kill everyone," he says. "It's not gone away, but the targets have shifted. They no longer fear the USSR but rather mass immigration."

But many survivalists—most prefer the term "preppers"—simply want an easier, greener existence. "We're looking for

greater freedom. We're preparing for normal life, not some catastrophe or the end of the world," says Marie Guillaumin, 30, from near Lyon. The last 12 months saw a barrage of storms batter the Caribbean and US eastern seaboard, leaving thousands of homes without water or power.

Preppers insist the risks from natural disaster can be reduced with a little common sense, training and scout-like readiness. And a knife or two wouldn't hurt, either. "The weapons are part of the equipment," says Daniel. "You need physical and psychological training and equipment—but equipment means nothing without knowhow." — AFP



Afghan teenage beekeeper creates entrepreneurial buzz

Three years ago a schoolgirl in rural Afghanistan took out a small loan and bought two beehives. In her first year she harvested 16 kg of honey, enough to repay the loan and leave her with a small profit. In 2016 Frozan, who is now in her final year at school, earned 120,000 afghanis from the 120 kg that her burgeoning collection of 20 beehives produced - a sizeable sum given that the country's GDP per

person is around \$600 a year.

"It is unique for a girl in a rural area like mine to have a private business and make a considerable income, but I trusted myself, took the chance, worked hard and made a success of it," the 19-year-old said by phone from the city of Mazar-i-Sharif. Frozan, who goes by one name, is the first schoolgirl in northern Balkh province's Marmul district to keep bees.

A beekeeping novice three years ago, Frozan was taught by the charity that provided the loan how to look after the bees, how to extract honey, and how to improve its quality and volume. "It is not time-consuming. I do my daily chores at home, I go to school and I can look after the beehives," she said. Her story is unusual in other ways too. Women and girls in Afghanistan are discriminated against on a regular basis, says UN Women, and that includes facing severe restrictions on working and studying outside their home.

Citing government figures, Human Rights Watch said last year that 85 percent of the 3.5 million Afghan children not in school are girls. And while two-thirds of adolescent boys are literate, the figure for girls is little more than half that. That is not the situation for Frozan. The beekeeping profits pay for her and two younger sisters to attend school, and also help her father meet the costs of running a home. "I am very happy to be self-reliant. I am also glad to have an income and be able to help my father and my sisters," she said.

Progress

The World Bank's latest figures show 39 percent of Afghanistan's population lives below the poverty line. And, it said last year, unemployment had worsened - particularly in rural areas. Although the position of women has



Frozan holds a fresh honey comb produced at her farm.

improved significantly since the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, said UN Women, traditional practices and insecurity continue to hold them back. That is one reason why Hand in Hand International - the UK-based charity that loaned Frozan the money to start her business - focuses on women.

"They are a vulnerable group and did not have much in the way of employment opportunities in the past," said Rafi Azimi, who works for the charity's regional office in Mazar-i-Sharif. Empowering women economically, he said, provided them with more status in society. The charity's goal is to tackle poverty by encouraging local entrepreneurship. Part of that involves helping entrepreneurs connect to bigger markets. Like any beneficiary, Frozan first went through months of training including on micro-finance, bookkeeping and business development. "She was taught the basics of a business - know the market, how to conduct market surveys and how to link the product to the right market," Azimi said. Frozan is one of more than 38,000 Afghans who have been helped since the charity opened its office in the country in 2007. — Reuters



Frozan checks a beehive in the Marmul district, Balkh province. — Reuters photos