

International

Faced with floods and suicides, US readies for a warmer world

Worsening extreme weather creating hardships

ELLICOTT CITY: Julia Sanger, whose tiny ice cream shop flooded twice in two years in Maryland's historic Ellicott City, joked darkly that the disasters left many local business owners in need of therapy. Shops on the former mill town's picturesque Main Street are barely back on their feet more than a year after the second flood. Some are boarded up, and others open just a few hours a day. Several heavily damaged buildings are due to be torn down.

"Some of my friends down here, I know they sought professional therapy. I know there's probably some who should have and didn't," said Sanger, whose shop got 6 feet of muddy floodwater in 2016 and 8 ft in 2018. "I drink a lot," she added. "I'm not going to lie. I'm definitely drinking more than I did before." She has also moved her shop to higher ground. Worsening extreme weather linked to climate change is creating hardships for many, from immediate deaths and injuries to increases in asthma and heat stroke. But the psychological trauma that often accompanies such losses is barely on the map.

Depression, anxiety, suicide and post-traumatic stress disorder tend to increase after floods, storms, wildfires and heatwaves, according to the American Psychological Association (APA), which represents psychologists in the United States. "The problem with that link is it's not like so obvious. It's not like I stick a needle in you, you feel pain right away," said Anthony Ng, former head of the APA's caucus on climate change and mental health. "Some of this is so insidious and gradual that people won't realize it until it's too late. That's why it's hard for a lot of people to appreciate it."

Panic

The debate over how to safeguard residents of picturesque Ellicott City, a tourist draw an hour's drive north of Washington, DC, illustrates the challenges many towns are facing as the world becomes warmer and wetter. The town was devastated in 2016 by a so-called 1,000-year flood - meaning a magnitude with a one-in-1,000 chance of occurring in any year. The Patapsco River, which runs through the town, rose more than 13 ft in less than two hours. Less than two years later, a 1,000-year storm struck again, overwhelming the tributaries that converge under the old mill town's buildings and feed into the Patapsco.

Warmer temperatures are increasing heavy downpours, and rainfall has been growing in intensity in the Northeast, according to the government's 2018 National Climate Assessment, risking power outages and the viability of roads and bridges.

As Ellicott City has become more built up, floodwater flows across paved roads and rooftops, instead of percolating down through the soil as it used to - a phenomenon known as urban runoff, which is worsening globally as cities grow. In the wake of the 2018 floods, the county launched the Ellicott City Safe and Sound plan, which involves demolishing some old buildings, making tunnels to carry water under roads and clearing waterways more regularly.

Officials are also testing a flood warning system, with emergency sirens telling people to move to higher ground. It has caused some alarm among residents, said Amy Miller, a social worker at the Grassroots Crisis Intervention Center. "You almost have a panic response," said Miller, whose non-profit organization, based in Columbia, some 8 miles (13 km) south, has provided food, shelter and support to flood survivors. "We're basically exposing ourselves to the perceived threat of a traumatic event."

Suicides

Grassroots provides 24-hour counseling to people in Ellicott City and the surrounding rolling hills of Howard County who might be feeling suicidal. Miller has trained farmers to watch out for each other and spot signs of danger, particularly suicide risks. Farmers are a high risk group. They tend to live solitary lives, have access to lethal means and face financial stress when hit by poor weather and low prices - factors they cannot control, according to anti-suicide campaigners.

"When your livelihood is impacted, that causes hopelessness," Miller said. "The hard part for farmers is they work almost 24-7, and it's really hard for them to seek treatment." Stanford University predicted last year that a hotter planet could lead to a surge in suicides by 2050. Its data analysis found suicides had risen 0.7% in the United States and 2.1% in Mexico with a 1.7°C increase in monthly average temperatures.

The researchers also found - by analyzing the language used in more than a half billion Twitter posts - depressive



NEW YORK: A man steers his Jet ski in the East River in front of the Williamsburg bridge in New York City. Northern hemisphere summers will deliver dangerously longer heatwaves, droughts and bouts of rain even if humanity manages to cap global warming at two degrees Celsius, scientists said. — AFP

language increased during hot weather, suggesting worse mental health. Keith Ohlinger, one of the Howard County farmers trained to keep an eye out, said he was driven to the work by the suicide of a young friend who grew up on a nearby farm, planned a career in agriculture and took her own life last year at age 21.

He struggled this spring with heavy rains washing away seeds and soil and leaving hay too wet to be dried and stored for winter feeding. "Things are changing," he said. "The earth is changing. Patterns are changing. Things are melting." Ohlinger uses his position on the Maryland Agricultural Commission, which advises the government on farming, and at monthly farmers club meetings to bring up mental health, often taboo in the conservative agricultural community.

He said climate change was just one more stress for farmers already worried about commodity prices, credit, bank loans, the price of equipment and old family-run

farms being squeezed out by more and more giant residential homes known as McMansions. "I can't fix pricing. I can't fix what the Chinese president or Donald Trump does, but I can surely try and keep someone from killing themselves," Ohlinger said. Not everyone in the region is willing to make the link between mental health problems and climate change.

Global warming as a manmade phenomenon is a politically divisive topic in the United States, where President Donald Trump announced plans to withdraw from the Paris agreement, a global pact to fight climate change. "You talk about global warming, but we deal with this stuff all the time," said another Howard County farmer, Howie Feago. "Most farmers believe it's more of an ebb and flow. We know that the weather is going to be up and down. If you're going to worry about global warming, you probably ought to get some other kind of job because it will drive you nuts." — Reuters

Lightning strike caused power cut in Britain

LONDON: A blackout in Britain which cut power to one million customers and caused transport chaos on Aug. 9 was due to a lightning strike, the grid operator said in a report to regulator Ofgem, which said yesterday it would investigate the matter further. Ofgem commissioned the report into the causes of the outages from National Grid and said it would open its own investigation to establish whether any of the grid and network operators or generators breached their licence conditions. "Having now received National Grid's interim report, we believe there are still areas where we need to use our statutory powers to investigate these outages," said Jonathan Brearley, Ofgem's executive director of systems and networks.

"This will ensure the industry learns the relevant lessons and to clearly establish whether any firm breached their obligations to deliver secure power supplies to consumers." Ofgem's powers under the Electricity Act, which it will use to conduct the investigation, allow it to impose penalties up to a maximum of 10% of the regulated companies UK turnover. National Grid reported annual revenue, or turnover, of 14.9 billion pounds (\$18 billion) for the year to March 31, 2019.

An hour-long outage on the evening of Aug. 9 cut off one million electricity customers, including homes, businesses, one hospital and Newcastle Airport and caused disruption on the rail network. National Grid said the power cuts were the result of an unusual issue that led to the almost simultaneous loss of output from two generators - Orsted's Hornsea off-shore windfarm and RWE's Little Barford gas-fired plant.

Lightning strikes

There were many lightning strikes that hit the electricity grid that day, but only one had a significant impact - on a transmission line at 1652 local time, which returned to normal operation after around 20 seconds, the grid's report said. Around 500 megawatts of generation capacity was also disconnected - all of which is normal for such events. However, immediately after the lightning strike and within seconds of each other, Hornsea and Little Barford reduced supply to the grid, disconnecting 1,378 MW of generation.

"As generation would not be expected to trip off or de-load in response to a lightning strike, this appears to represent an extremely rare and unexpected event," National Grid said. "This unexpected loss of generation meant that the frequency fell very quickly and went outside the normal range of 50.5Hz - 49.5Hz," it added. Back-up power and other tools were used but the size of the generation loss meant the frequency fell to 48.8Hz which is a level at which secondary backup systems were required to disconnect some demand to ensure the safety of the network.

This, along with additional generation, returned the system to normal by 1706 and network operators started to return supply to customers by 1737, the report said. National Grid said it will deliver its final report to Ofgem by Sept. 6, in which it will examine the exact failure mechanisms at Little Barford and Hornsea, as well as demand side impacts and communication processes. Separately, an emergency committee will also investigate the incident, the government said last week. — Reuters

Tensions build on migrant ship off Italy as 10 jump overboard

MADRID: Tensions rose on a rescue ship stranded off southern Italy yesterday, as 10 of the migrants aboard jumped into the sea and tried to swim ashore, according to the Spanish charity that operates the vessel. The ship Open Arms, at sea for 19 days with almost 100 migrants onboard, has been waiting just off the port of Lampedusa, asking permission to bring the mostly African migrants ashore, despite an Italian ban on private rescue ships docking. Italy says it has borne too much responsibility for handling African migration to Europe. Its interior minister says the charity-run ships have become "taxis" for people smugglers.

"Nine people have thrown themselves into the water trying desperately to reach the coast of Lampedusa. Our lifeguards and Italian coastguards are trying to rescue them. The situation is out of control," the Open Arms tweeted. It had earlier tweeted that one other migrant had jumped in the water and posted a video of the migrant swimming toward the shore, his way blocked by an Italian Coast Guard boat.

"Day 19: a night of panic and a man in the water," the charity tweeted. "The night began with an urgent medical evacuation, and this morning a man has jumped into the



LAMPEDUSA: The Spanish migrant rescue NGO ship Open Arms is seen off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa. — AFP

water trying to reach the land before his eyes ... The situation is desperate." The man overboard, a Syrian, was rescued by Italian authorities, who are caring for him, an Open Arms spokesman said. Dozens of migrants have been taken ashore since the ship entered Italian waters because they were said to be minors or ill. The remaining migrants still sleep jammed together on deck and share two toilets. Open Arms says some are suicidal.

Interior Minister Matteo Salvini suggested yesterday that the charity was exaggerating the problems on board. Of eight migrants taken ashore on Monday night for urgent medical attention, he said, only two had health problems. "I will never go back (on the ban)," he told

Radio 24. The standoff has fuelled Salvini's campaign against migrant boats from Africa, and comes as he is trying to drag Italy into snap elections. The ruling coalition, in danger of collapse later on, has split over the issue.

Salvini's political rival, Transport Minister Danilo Toninelli, who controls the Coast Guard but not port access, has offered to take the migrants on a Coast Guard vessel to Spain, which has offered them safe harbor. But Toninelli has set a condition - that Madrid de-register the Open Arms ship by removing its Spanish flag. Without a flag, it would be difficult for the ship to continue running rescue missions; its insurance would be invalid and it could be intercepted at any time by a navy or coast guard force.

Separate talks are also under way between Italy and Spain to find a diplomatic solution, said a source in Rome familiar with the matter. She did not elaborate. "They want to take the flag away from us. The price is very high," Open Arms' director and founder, Oscar Camps, said in remarks published by El Mundo newspaper yesterday. Camps has ruled out the option of taking the migrants to Spain on the Open Arms ship, saying conditions on board were too miserable for them to endure such a journey. If a solution is not found, Open Arms has not ruled out the option of defying Italy's ban and attempting to dock. Asked if the ship would try and enter the port without permission, the Open Arms head of mission in Lampedusa, Riccardo Gatti, said on Monday, "Yes, it is an option". Spain's left-wing government offered on Monday to allow the ship to dock at a Spanish port, and it and five other European Union nations have offered to take the migrants. The details of the offers from France, Germany, Romania, Portugal, Spain and Luxembourg have yet to be finalized. — Reuters



SAN SALVADOR: Salvadorean rape victim Evelyn Hernandez (center) celebrates with her lawyers after being cleared of murder after giving birth to a stillborn baby at home in 2016. El Salvador has an extremely strict abortion ban. — AFP

Salvador clears rape victim of killing baby

SAN SALVADOR: An appeals court in El Salvador on Monday acquitted a 21-year-old rape victim accused of killing her stillborn baby, in a case closely watched by rights groups. The court in San Salvador overturned a 30-year sentence imposed on Evelyn Hernandez, who was convicted under the Central American country's strict anti-abortion laws in 2017. Hernandez's lawyer, Bertha Maria Deleon, triumphantly announced the verdict on Twitter: "Acquitted! Yes we could."

Her legal team had won a re-trial after appealing the 2017 verdict on the grounds that it had failed to take into account key forensic evidence that indicated that the baby had choked in the womb. Hernandez gave birth in April 2016 in the bathroom of her home in the central Cuscatlan region. She was 18 years old and eight months pregnant. She said her son was stillborn but a court in the city of

Cojutepeque convicted her of murder after prosecutors said she was culpable of not having sought prenatal care. Hernandez said she had not known she was pregnant and gave birth in the toilet after feeling abdominal pains.

Hernandez became pregnant as a result of a rape which she did not report out of fear because her family had been threatened. A report by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in January urged El Salvador to revise the cases of women sent to prison for having abortions. El Salvador should "carefully review the convictions" of each of the women, the report concluded. In March, three women serving 30-year sentences for aggravated homicide after losing their babies by miscarriage were released from prison.

But around 20 women remain locked up in similar cases, serving long sentences. Many women who suffered miscarriages or complications in pregnancy ended up being found guilty of voluntary abortions, the Inter-American rights commission said. El Salvador's law against abortions provided for prison sentences of between two and eight years, but courts often found the women guilty of the more serious crime of aggravated homicide, which carries punishment of up to 50 years behind bars. — AFP

California tightens restrictions on police use of lethal force

CALIFORNIA: California police officers will be allowed to use lethal force only when "necessary" in response to a threat, instead of the existing standard of "reasonable", under a new law signed by Gov. Gavin Newsom on Monday. Under the stricter standards, officers must believe they have no other choice to "defend against an imminent threat of death or serious bodily injury to the officer or another person," an abstract of the law published online says.

The new law, which officials say is one of the most restrictive in the United States, is partly a response to police shootings of unarmed black men. Those include the death of Stephon Clark, 22, who was killed by Sacramento police in March 2018, touching off protests across the state. Clark, who was black, was standing in his grandmother's yard, holding a cell phone, when he was shot and killed last year.

The two officers were exonerated in March, touching off more protests. At the signing, Newsom said he hoped California's new law would become a model for the nation. "As California goes, so goes the rest of the United States of America," Newsom said, according to news media. "And we are doing something today that stretches the boundaries of possibility and sends a message to people all across the country - that more can be done."

Clark's family attended the signing ceremony at the invitation of the governor. The law goes into effect in January. But not all of them were entirely pleased. "The bill is watered down, everybody knows that," Stevante Clark, brother of Stephon Clark, told the Los Angeles Times. Neither the governor's office nor Clark's family members could be immediately reached by Reuters early on Tuesday. — Reuters