

International

Drowning in waste, Russians fume over lack of recycling

Waste management has emerged as a subject of heated debate

MOSCOW: Roman Yudakov points in the distance to a stinking mountain of trash looming over the Russian capital and sighs: "Take a look at our pyramid!" The rubbish towers above the Timokhovo dump outside Moscow, one of the biggest in Europe. Authorities plan to build an incinerator to burn some of the trash, but Yudakov and other activists are fighting for it to be recycled instead. "The priority of the authorities is to burn, rather than sort (waste for recycling). Nobody is ready to do that," says the 36-year-old electrician as he flicks his cigarette butt in the direction of the 157-metre (515-feet) high dump east of Moscow.

Open since the late 1970s, Timokhovo receives dozens of lorries every day from the capital some 80 km away. Since 2013, residents have complained of foul sulphurous smells and worry that effluents are polluting ground water. The authorities acknowledged the smell comes from the dump, but say it is now safe because of a filtration system. Activists however dispute this claim. Just seven percent of rubbish is recycled in Russia, according to official data. This falls far below France's 43 percent or Germany's 68 percent achieved in 2017, according to Eurostat.

The majority of household waste in Russia ends up in locations like Timokhovo, whose trash pile can be seen from many kilometres

away. In recent years, waste management has emerged as a subject of heated debate as residents of towns surrounding Moscow have protested against dumps filled to over capacity or catching on fire. Authorities came up with the idea of unloading some of the local landfills and taking the waste from Moscow, which produces 15 percent of Russia's garbage, to the Arkhangelsk region in the north. The new landfill project launched in the region 1,000 km from the capital caused unprecedented demonstrations and led to clashes between local protesters and construction workers and security guards.

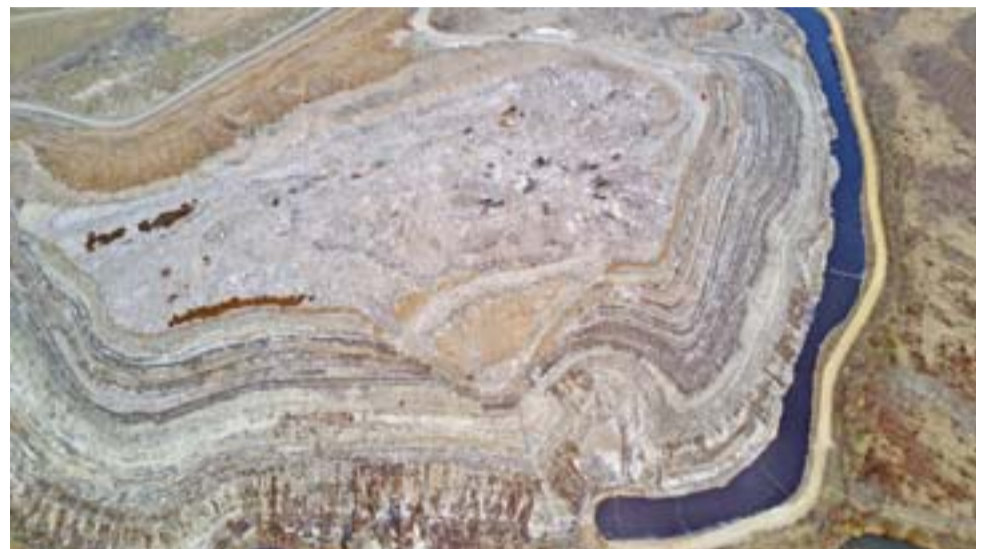
'Need change in mentality'

With the issue emerging as a major cause of public discontent, President Vladimir Putin in December announced that the recycling rate will increase to 60 percent by 2024 with the help of 200 new waste sorting centres. But campaigners for recycling have reacted with skepticism, saying all centralized attempts at recycling have failed in the past, and only private initiatives can be effective. "They pretend to talk about recycling. I've seen an ad on the subway and opinion polls on the subject, but for the moment the government is not rushing to support us," says Alyona Rudyuk, who runs a small recycling centre in Moscow.

The centre opened in November and is part of a network launched by an environmental association Sobirator. Every day, dozens of Muscovites come here to drop off their sorted packaging. Sobirator also has a truck that collects rubbish in various Moscow neighbourhoods, advertising pickup points via social media or even coming straight to a person's home for a fee. Natalia Umnova chose that option after collecting and sorting recyclables on the balcony of her flat for several months. "We checked the (recycling) centres nearby, but they were either closed or only accepted one type of waste," she says. To take recycling to a wider scale, there are a lot of challenges to overcome, mostly stemming from a lack of enthusiasm at the government level, says Sobirator founder Leonid Sinitsyn. "We can show people how to do (recycling) but we can't solve the problem, so we need a change in mentality and in the law," he says.

'Garbage reform'

So far government efforts appear to have had the opposite effect. A so-called "garbage reform" kicked into action in January was supposed to make waste management more transparent, but in effect hiked waste disposal fees for already struggling Russians, fuelling more public ire. "It's the price of (consumer) packaging that should increase, not the fees,"



MOSCOW: An aerial view taken on April 23, 2019 shows Moscow region's Timokhovo solid waste landfill. — AFP

says former MP Maxim Shingarkin, who was one of the reform's authors. "And as long as people are angry, they will not be motivated to recycle." Moscow regional government said in a comment to AFP that increased fees go toward new sorting bins and rising trans-

port costs following the closure of overflowed waste landfills. In addition, three recycling centres opened last year and nine more are under construction, and more than 700,000 school children have attended special classes on the benefits of recycling, it said. — AFP

China urges students to weigh 'risk' of studying in US

BEIJING: China yesterday warned students and academics on the "risk" of studying in the United States, citing an uptick in visa denials and delays amid a trade war and other tensions with Washington. The warning comes as negotiations to resolve the trade spat have stalled and Washington pushed back against what it says is Beijing's aggressive militarization of the disputed South China Sea. In recent months US officials and lawmakers have voiced concerns that Chinese students and academics could be used for espionage purposes by the Communist government.

The Chinese education ministry in a statement said students applying to US universities should brace themselves for visa troubles and "strengthen risk assessment... and make relevant preparations". Chinese students and academics have recently experienced visa restrictions, delays in obtaining them, and visas with shorter duration, according to the ministry. From January to March, over 1,350 Chinese students had applied for US student visas but 182 were "unable to make the trip as planned" due to visa issues, accounting for 13.5 percent of all applicants, Xu Yongji, deputy head of a department overlooking foreign academic exchanges at the ministry, told state broadcaster CCTV.

Xu said this was a marked increase from just over three percent of applicants who experienced visa issues in 2018, citing data from the China Scholarship Council. Visa denials have "damaged the dignity" of Chinese students and cast a "cold spell" over research collaborations and academic exchanges he said. China is the biggest source of international students on US campuses, with 360,000 of them attending last year - a third of the foreign student body - with many paying full tuition.

Chinese students contributed \$14 billion to the US economy in 2017, the official Xinhua news agency estimated last month, citing US official data. China's foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said the US had been setting "unnecessary obstacles" to people-to-people exchanges between the two countries. "This has been widely opposed by the education circles in China and the United States, as well as by (Chinese) students studying abroad," he said.

'Stealing innovation'

US complaints about technology and intellectual property theft by China have been a major bone of contention in the trade war between the two countries. FBI director Christopher Wray said in April that Beijing had used Chinese graduate students and researchers, among others, in its economic espionage efforts in the United States. "China has pioneered a societal approach to stealing innovation in any way it can from a wide array of businesses, universities and organizations," Wray said.

"They're doing it through Chinese intelligence services, through state-owned enterprises, through ostensibly private companies, through graduate students and researchers, through a variety of actors all working on behalf of China." Last month, Republicans in the US Congress introduced legislation aimed at barring Chinese military scientists from obtaining visas to study or work in the United States.

The bills in the House and Senate would compel the White House to identify a list of research and scientific institutions that the president determines are affiliated with or funded by the People's Liberation Army. The PLA Visa Security Act would prevent people currently or formerly employed or sponsored by such entities from entering the United States on student or research visas. The New York Times reported in April that the United States has started to bar some Chinese academics from the country if they are suspected of having links to intelligence agencies, with 30 scholars having their visas cancelled or put under review in the past year.

China's state-run Global Times has published accounts from several Chinese academics saying their 10-year visas to the US were cancelled, with officials citing concerns about links to Chinese intelligence. US scholar Michael Pillsbury, who advises US President Donald Trump on China, said his visa to enter China for a forum earlier this year was blocked in apparent retaliation. — AFP

5 bodies spotted in search for missing climbers in India

PITHORAGARH, India: A helicopter searching for eight climbers missing on India's second-highest peak spotted five bodies yesterday, officials said. Nothing has been heard from the four Britons, two Americans, an Australian and an Indian on the 7,826-m Nanda Devi in the Himalayas since May 26. But yesterday two Indian Air Force helicopters scoured the area for a third day and took aerial pictures.

"During that search some photos were taken and in those photos four to five bodies can be seen. The resolution is quite bad that is why their faces or exact features are not clear," said local official V K Jogdande. "But what we can roughly say is that these are body parts of five persons which can be seen. We have ordered a technical evaluation... so that the bodies can be retrieved as quickly as possible," he said. The search operation involving the helicopters and dozens of mountain rescuers has been hampered by poor weather and the remoteness of the area. Authorities were able to reduce the search area to roughly 50 sq km yesterday following information from four British climbers rescued a day earlier from Nanda Devi base camp. They had been in contact with the larger group until May 26 when heavy snowfall and avalanches struck.

The missing climbers, led by Briton Martin Moran - who has two previous successful ascents of the mountain - had initially set out on May 13 for the eastern peak of Nanda Devi. But in a post on May 22 on the Facebook page of the mountaineering company he runs, Moran



PITHORAGARH, India: In this handout photo released yesterday, rescuee mountaineers (from left) Zachary Qual, Ian Wade, Kate Armstrone and Mark Thomas speak with Indo-Tibetan Border Police personnel upon arriving at the ITBP camp after being rescued following an avalanche while climbing Nanda Devi. — AFP

Mountain, said they were set to attempt "an unclimbed peak". They were expected to report back to base camp on May 26 but a porter stationed there reported to authorities that the group remained missing on May 31, prompting the search operation.

'No sign'

A statement by the Moran family on Sunday had said they have been informed by the Indian Mountaineering Federation that the air search has "revealed the scale of the avalanche, but no sign of the climbers, their equipment nor their tents". The Sydney Morning Herald named the Australian member as British-born Ruth McCance. It quoted her husband Trent Goldsack as saying that her last communication to him had been a text message around a

week ago saying: "OK at base camp". Another of the British climbers was reported to be Richard Payne, a lecturer at the University of York. "We remain extremely concerned for his safety and our thoughts are with his family, friends and colleagues at this difficult time," a spokesman for the British university said. Hundreds of climbers from across the world visit India to scale mountains across the Himalayan chain, and the peaks of Nanda Devi are considered the toughest to scale. The first successful ascent of the Nanda Devi summit was in 1936. India has 10 peaks above 7,000 m, including Kangchenjunga - the world's third highest - sandwiched between India and Nepal. Four Indians were among 11 climbers that died climbing Mount Everest in the latest season that ended last week amid allegations of overcrowding on the world's highest peak. — AFP

Future of Merkel govt in hands of crisis-hit SPD

BERLIN: Germany's Social Democrats could end up deciding if the country faces snap elections, the leader of Angela Merkel's party said yesterday, after her junior coalition partner sank into chaos over the resignation of its leader. In a surprise announcement that rattled Berlin, Social Democratic Party (SPD) leader Andrea Nahles said Sunday she was quitting her party's top jobs following an European election drubbing late last month. Merkel and other heavyweights in her Christian Democratic Union (CDU) have sought to calm nerves, saying they stood by the coalition.

But CDU chief Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer conceded yesterday that whether Germany goes to the polls before the end of the electoral term in 2021 would depend on the SPD's next move. "We are ready to keep this coalition going. How the SPD behaves is its decision," she told journalists following crisis talks within her centre-right party. "There are good reasons to not end a government lightly, from the view of the situation in Germany but also the situation in Europe," she said. Given the international challenges, it would be "anything but productive if Germany were to go into a government crisis or a lengthy election campaign". The question of snap elections did not come up during yesterday's huddle in Berlin, she said, but added that "you can be certain that the CDU is prepared for whatever comes or does not come".

The leadership crisis at the SPD could not have come at a worse time for the CDU, which was itself struggling to halt a haemorrhage of voters as the younger generation shuns it in droves for the Greens. The SPD meanwhile has been

Johnson launches campaign to become next British PM

LONDON: Boris Johnson, the frontrunner to replace Theresa May as Britain's prime minister, launched his digital campaign to become the Conservative Party leader yesterday, coinciding with the visit of "friend" Donald Trump. The launch video follows Johnson on the campaign trail, promising voters that he will take Britain out of the European Union on October 31 "deal or no deal" if he becomes prime minister by being elected Tory leader.

The former foreign secretary is popular among the grassroots Tory members, but they will only get a vote once the party's MPs have whittled down the ever-growing candidates list to a final two. He is less popular among



BERLIN: Politicians of Germany's social democratic SPD party (from left) Thorsten Schaefer-Guempel, SPD leader in Hesse and one of the federal SPD's vice leaders, State Premier of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania Manuela Schwesig and State Premier of Rhineland-Palatinate Malu Dreyer give a joint press conference yesterday. — AFP

scrambling to find a new leader to replace Nahles, 48. But voices are growing louder within both the SPD and the CDU for the parties to part ways. Harald Christ of the SPD's business leaders forum said "Nahles stands for the existence of the GroKo - whose stability is now in question."

"In my view what comes next is the end of the GroKo - everything else leads nowhere," he told Bild daily, using the German short form for grand coalition. The deputy leader of the CDU-CSU parliamentary group, Carsten Linnemann, also warned in an interview with RedaktionsNetzwerk Deutschland newspaper group that "if we are unable to progress with the SPD, then we should draw a line under this and ask ourselves if continuing with the GroKo still makes sense." — AFP

his own MPs, due to his key role in campaigning for Brexit and for his gaffe-prone style, and failed to make the last two when he last ran for the job in 2016. US President Trump, who kicked off a state visit to Britain on Monday, gave Johnson his backing on Saturday.

"I actually have studied it very hard," Trump told the Sun newspaper, earlier calling Johnson a "friend". "I know the different players. But I think Boris would do a very good job. I think he would be excellent. I like him. I have always liked him." The comments drew criticism in Britain for interfering in the country's political process. Elsewhere in his campaign video, Johnson expressed support for increased education and police funding and said he would "unite" a country fractured by Brexit. "We have got to have the courage to tell the people of this country we can do it, if we want to," he told one voter on the doorstep. Johnson has long held ambitions to become prime minister, but pulled out of the race in 2016 after key ally and fellow Brexit campaigner Michael Gove withdrew his support, saying "Boris cannot provide the leadership or build the team for the task ahead." — AFP

Assange hearing in Sweden to decide extradition request

UPPSALA, Sweden: A Swedish court heard arguments yesterday before deciding if prosecutors can proceed to request Julian Assange's extradition from Britain, after a 2010 rape probe was re-opened in May. Both sides presented their arguments to the Uppsala district court which adjourned to deliberate. Swedish deputy director of public prosecutions Eva-Marie Persson said the WikiLeaks founder had not cooperated with the Swedish investigation previously, fleeing from an extradition order, and therefore needed to be detained and questioned in Sweden.

She asked the court to order Assange's detention in his absence, a standard part of Swedish legal procedure if a suspect is outside the country or cannot be located, and which would be the first step to having him extradited. "The purpose of this detention is to be able to complete the investigation and bring Julian Assange to justice," Persson said. Assange's Swedish lawyer, Per E Samuelson, meanwhile argued that a detention order was "meaningless" as Assange is currently imprisoned in Britain and should not be considered a flight risk. He said it was not proportionate to ask for someone's detention merely to conduct a questioning session.

The Australian whistleblower, who holed himself up in Ecuador's embassy in London for seven years to avoid a British extradition order to Sweden, was arrested by British police on April 11 after Quito gave him up. He was subsequently sentenced to 50 weeks in prison for breaching bail conditions when he took refuge in the embassy. Following his arrest Swedish authorities reopened their 2010 rape investigation, which had been closed in 2017 with the argument that it was not possible to proceed with the probe as Assange could not be reached.

If the Uppsala court grants the prosecutor's request, Eva-Marie Persson has made clear she intends to issue a European Arrest Warrant "concerning surrender to Sweden". Such a request would, however, have to compete with an extradition request from the United States, where Assange is facing a total of 18 charges, most of which relate to obtaining and disseminating classified information over the publishing of military documents and diplomatic cables through the website WikiLeaks. Assange could be sentenced to 175 years in prison if convicted on all 18 counts. — AFP