

International

30 years after the fall of Berlin Wall, East Germans feel inferior

Easterners still feel like second-class citizens

BERLIN: A majority of Germans in the former communist East feel like second-class citizens almost three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall even though they are catching up economically with western regions, a government report showed yesterday. As Germany gears up for a year of celebrations to mark the demise of the Wall, the Cold War's most potent symbol, in November 1989 and German reunification a year later, the report's findings help explain a surge in support for the far-right among eastern voters.

On the face of it, the East has come far. "Numerous indicators show that we have made a lot of progress in the convergence of living conditions between East and West since 1990," said Christian Hirte, the government's commissioner for the east. By 2018, East Germany's economic strength had risen to 75% of the west German level from 43% in 1990. Employment is at a high in the east and wages there are 84% of those in the west. However, people's attitudes tell a different story.

The annual report on 'the state of German unity' also cited a recent survey carried out for the government showing that 57% of east Germans felt like second-class citizens. Only 38% of those asked in the East see reunification as a success, including only 20% of people younger than 40 years. "This dissatisfaction is expressed in the election results in the east and west in recent years which show significant differences," said the report, saying one of the causes of the dissatisfaction

is painful and deep upheaval in the east. Hirte, acknowledging that the convergence process was not yet complete, cited depopulation - 2 million people, especially young people and women, have left the region in the last three decades and few big global firms have moved in. Voters in the east are deserting the traditional parties - Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives and her coalition partners, the Social Democrats (SPD) - and embracing the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and radical Left Party.

Far-right riots

The AfD came second in elections in the eastern state of Saxony and Brandenburg earlier this month, winning roughly 27% and 23% of the vote respectively. Polls in the state of Thuringia, which goes to the polls next month, show the AfD on 25%, just behind the Left, which includes former Communists. Nationally, the AfD, which has capitalized on voter resentment over Merkel's open-door migrant policy, is polling at around 14%.

Outbreaks of violence, such as last year's far-right riots in the eastern city of Chemnitz - the worst such clashes Germany had seen in decades - have reinforced the picture of a disenchanted and radicalized east. Hirte acknowledged that xenophobic attitudes had to be overcome, while industry groups have warned that they could damage the prospects for investment in the region. — Reuters



MAGDEBURG: A disused east German 'Plattenbau' concrete panel building with broken windows is seen in Magdeburg. — AFP

Flowers and anger in the shadow of Franco's tomb

SAN LORENZO DE EL ESCORIAL: Like every day since Francisco Franco's 44 years ago, flowers were placed on his tomb on Tuesday, just behind the altar. And as usual, several dozen people came for daily mass at the basilica where the Spanish dictator is interred. It was after the service that the faithful learned of the Spanish Supreme Court's decision to allow the government to remove Franco's remains from the imposing building carved into a mountain in the Valley of the Fallen, 50 kilometers outside Madrid.

"This decision is shameful," 56-year-old Mariano Zafra said, adding that he came to the Catholic basilica specifically "to say farewell to Franco in case they take him away." Around an hour before the court's decision was announced, the basilica's sexton, Benedictine monk Julio Iglesias, expressed his wish that "they let the dead rest in peace". "This basilica is a consecrated church and they can't come in here and smash everything up like a bull in a China shop," said the monk who has been taking care of the site since 1981.

The court had rejected an appeal against the exhumation by Franco's descendants. But the sexton pointed out that the court still had to rule on three other appeals against transferring the dictator's remains to a more discreet site, including one lodged by his Benedictine community. Franco, who ruled with an iron fist following the end of Spain's 1936-39 civil war, had himself planned the monument and had it built, using the labor of republican political prisoners.

A huge 150-metre-high (500-foot) cross that can be seen from miles away towers over the site, which also holds the remains of more than 33,000 dead from both sides of the civil war. It is presented as a place of reconciliation for Spain, but many on the left compare Franco's huge memorial to a monument glorifying Adolf Hitler. Visitors are at pains to find the tombs of the dead fighters,



MADRID: People shout outside the Supreme Court in Madrid, as the court gave the green light for the government to remove the remains of Francisco Franco from a grandiose state mausoleum, rejecting an appeal against it by the late dictator's descendants. — AFP

carrying only the inscription "fallen for God and for Spain 1936-1939". A guide explains they are inaccessible behind the walls of eight chapels.

'No place of reconciliation'

The monument attracted nearly 379,000 visitors last year - a third more than in 2017. Inside the complex of the Valley of the Fallen is a monastic hostel where visitors Javier Gebrie and Aurea Buenosvinos, who call themselves Spanish "conservatives" but "not Catholics", stayed during a visit to the site. Gebrie, a 48-year-old computer engineer, was opposed to the exhumation, considering it an "electoral" manoeuvre by the socialists as Spain prepares

to go the polls on November 10. However, others like Mercedes Abril, 86, dislike the site even though her father's remains are buried there.

A station master in the village of Aragon and a socialist supporter, her father was shot in 1936 and thrown into a common grave. His remains were not transferred to the monument until decades later. "Removing Franco from there makes sense, he shouldn't be there, he wasn't killed during the civil war," said Abril, whom AFP contacted by phone in Valladolid. She added Franco was "a war criminal" and expressed her desire to also exhume her father's remains. "What matters to me is that we remove my father from that site, which is not at all a place of reconciliation." — AFP

Honey heals wounds of war in Colombia village

CHENGUE: Covered from head to toe in a protective suit, Yina Ortiz peers through a veil to check in on her beehive. It is one of hundreds that form a lifeline for her remote village, helping to heal the wounds of one of the Colombian conflict's most brutal atrocities. Rightwing paramilitaries stormed the village in the dead of night and used machetes to hack 27 people to death, accusing them of collaborating with leftist guerrillas. The attack 18 years ago was one of the conflict's worst atrocities.

Ortiz, a young girl then, survived the attack on her village of Chengue in the northern Montes de Maria region. But she lost several members of her family as well as close friends. Now 33, her memories are still clear, particularly of "the dead lying in the streets the next day." "It wasn't just the streams of blood, it was awful to see so many dead bodies, one of top of the other, there on the ground, and their loved ones picking them up," Ortiz told AFP. More than a hundred families fled in the wake of the atrocity, leaving behind a ghost village. But nearly two decades later, life has

slowly returned to the dusty village, in part because of the lure of bees. A program initiated by Ortiz and a group of industrious local women helped bring apiculture to Chengue and it hasn't looked back. "Thanks to beekeeping, people have united, returned, they enjoy taking care of the bees," she said, working the handle on a device called a bee smoker to fumigate and calm the swarming bees.

For the past year, the 159 families of Chengue alternate between agricultural work and caring for the 500 hives donated by the government and the United Nations, as part of a collective program for survivors of armed conflict. "We used to be all over the place, some people were in Ovejas, others in Sincelejo, but we need to heal wounds and now, thanks to the beekeeping, people have come back, they like to be with the bees, to study the life of the bees."

'The last widow'

For Ortiz, apiculture is a way of "trying to heal the wounds" left over from the war, but it also represents a hope of survival for farmers whose mixed crops of tobacco, yam and cassava are gradually drying up because of global warming. Julia Merino, a 49-year old school teacher who manages the project, expects the first harvest at the end of the year to yield 13 tons of honey.

For Merino it will be a sweet victory, a balm to salve the memories of the 2001 attack. Her uncles and cousins were multi-



CHENGUE: Beekeepers arrange a honeycomb at the community of Chengue, municipality of Ovejas, some 1,000 kms north of Bogota, Colombia. — AFP

lated and killed by the right wing paramilitaries. Two years later, her husband was abducted and murdered by the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) as local families were once again caught in the middle of Colombia's interminable conflict.

Merino is known here as "the last widow of Chengue" because she was the only one who returned to the village where she lost her husband. In front of his white-

washed grave, in the abandoned cemetery of nearby Ovejas commune, she recalled the healing process that has taken her to this point. Workshops allowed her to "turn these sources of pain" into "spaces of goodness, to heal wounds and recover the social fabric that had fragmented," she said. Merino says she shared her experience with other women, mounting the honey venture to spark "economic change" in the village. — AFP

The Indian children who need to take a train to get water

MUKUNDWADI: As their classmates set off to play after school each day, nine-year-old Sakshi Garud and her neighbor Siddharth Dhage, 10, are among a small group of children who take a 14 km return train journey from their village in India to fetch water. Their families are some of the poorest in the hamlet of Mukundwadi, in the western state of Maharashtra, a village that has suffered back-to-back droughts.

India's monsoons have brought abundant rain and even floods in many parts of the country, but rainfall in the region around Mukundwadi has been 14% below average this year and aquifers and borewells are dry. "I don't like to spend time bringing water, but I don't have a choice," Dhage said. "This is my daily routine," said Garud. Their cramped shanty homes are just 200 meters from the train station. "After coming from school, I don't get time to play. I need to get water first."

They are not alone. Millions of Indians do not have secure water supplies, according to the UK-based charity, WaterAid. It says 12% of Indians, or about 163 million people, do not have access to clean water near their homes - the biggest proportion of any country. Recognizing the issue, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has promised to spend more than 3.5 trillion rupees (\$49 billion) to bring piped water to every Indian household by 2024.

More than 100 families in Garud and Dhage's neighborhood do not have access to piped water and many depend on private water suppliers, who charge up to 3,000 rupees (\$42) for a 5,000-litre tanker during summer months. But private water supply is something Garud and Dhage's parents say they can not afford. "Nowadays, I don't get enough money to buy groceries. I can't buy water from private suppliers," said Dhage's father, Rahul, a construction worker. "I am not getting work every day."

Pipe dream

The children take the train daily to fetch water from the nearby city of Aurangabad. The train is often overcrowded, so a group of small children jostling to get on board with pitchers to fill with water is not always welcome. "Some people help me, sometimes they complain to railway officials for putting pitchers near the door. If we don't put them near the door, we can not take them out quickly when the train stops," Dhage said.

Garud's grandmother Sitabai Kamble and an elderly neighbor help occasionally by pushing them on board in the face of irritable passengers. "Sometimes they kick the pitchers away, they grumble," Kamble said. When the train pulls into Aurangabad thirty minutes later, they scramble to fill the pitchers at nearby water pipes. Garud can't reach the tap, so she relies on her taller sister, Aaysha, 14, and grandmother. Others, like Anjali Gaikwad, 14, and her sisters, also board the train every few days to collect water and wash clothes.

Their neighbor Prakash Nagre often tags along with soap and shampoo. "There's no water to bathe at home," he says. When the train returns them to Mukundwadi, they have just under a minute to disembark. At times, Dhage's mother, Jyoti, is waiting at the station to help. "I'm careful, but sometimes pitchers fall off the door in the melee and our work is wasted," she said, holding her infant in one arm and a pitcher in the other. "I can't leave my daughter at home alone so I have to take her along." — Reuters

Indonesian students rally again to protest major changes to laws

JAKARTA: An estimated 200 students clashed with riot police in Indonesia's capital as demonstrators hurled rocks and Molotov cocktails at authorities who shot tear gas into the crowds on the third day of protests. The demonstrations erupted in response to a proposed criminal-code overhaul that includes everything from

criminalizing pre-marital sex and restricting sales of contraceptives, to making it illegal to insult the president and toughening the Muslim majority country's blasphemy laws.

There has also been a public backlash against a separate bill that critics fear would dilute the investigative powers of Indonesia's corruption-fighting agency - known as the KPK - including its ability to wire-tap graft suspects. "This bill will obviously weaken the KPK and cause corruption to run rampant - and that's going to hurt people," Angga Prasetyo, a 22-year-old engineering student in protest-hit Makassar on Sulawesi island said yesterday.

The rallies are among the biggest anti-government demonstrations since 1998 when mass street protests

brought down the three-decade Suharto dictatorship.

Students have issued a list of demands including scrapping some of the criminal-code changes, withdrawing troops from Indonesia's unrest-hit Papua region, and halting forest fires in Sumatra and Borneo that have unleashed toxic haze across Southeast Asia.

Hundreds rallied in the capital Jakarta - as did scores in the second-biggest city Surabaya, and in Borneo on Tuesday - but the crowds were smaller than the thousands who took to the streets nationwide the previous day. On Tuesday, police fired tear gas and water cannon to disperse protesters in chaotic scenes that saw about 300 people - including dozens of officers - sent to hospital for treatment with hundreds arrested, according to police officials. Most had minor injuries, authorities

said. A vote on the criminal code bill was originally scheduled for Tuesday. But President Joko Widodo last week called for a delay in passing controversial changes that could affect millions of Indonesians, including gay and heterosexual couples who might face jail for having sex outside wedlock, or having an affair.

Updating Indonesia's criminal code, which dates back to the Dutch colonial era, has been debated for decades and appeared set to pass in 2018 before momentum fizzled out. A renewed push this year, backed by conservative Islamic groups, was met with a wave of criticism over what many saw as a draconian law that invaded the bedrooms of a nation with some 260 million people - the fourth most populous on Earth. — AFP