

International

Women suffer as lockdown worsens 'domestic hell' across Latin America

Confinement traps women victims with their attackers

BUENOS AIRES: Weeks of confinement imposed by the coronavirus pandemic is taking a chilling toll on women and girls across Latin America, where the number of calls to helplines have soared, made by victims of domestic violence who cannot flee. Appeals to help women experiencing violence in the home have redoubled in recent weeks, from the United Nations to Pope Francis-Latin America's first pontiff.

"The confinement is plunging thousands of women into hell, trapped with an attacker who they are more afraid of than the coronavirus," said Victoria Aguirre from the Argentine NGO MuMaLa, which campaigns against violence related to macho culture. In Argentina, 18 women have been killed by their partner or ex-partners during the first 20 days of a mandatory quarantine instituted by the government from March 20. Appeals to helplines in Argentina are up nearly 40 percent.

The country is still reeling from the shocking murder of Cristina Iglesias and her seven-year-old daughter Ada, killed by her mother's partner in the early days of the lockdown. Their two bodies were found buried in the backyard of their home in a town in Buenos Aires province. Elsewhere, police-alerted by neighbors-arrived in the nick of time to save a woman whose husband attacked her with a hammer.



The number of calls to helplines have soared

where they should be protected, in their own homes," said UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, who issued a call for a domestic violence "ceasefire" as lockdowns extended into April.

"You live in fear of turning your back on him. It is only later, when the bruises appear, that you realize that he could have killed you," Luciana, a 25-year-old victim of domestic violence, told AFP. She was badly beaten by her ex-husband. "Every day, a woman is abused, raped or beaten at home by her partner or her ex," said Ada Rico, from the NGO La Casa del Encuentro. "In normal times, we would help her to file a complaint. These days, the urgency is to get her out of the house as quickly as possible."

The situation is similarly grim in Mexico, Brazil, Chile and elsewhere, where measures taken by the authorities often fall far short of properly protecting victims. In Mexico, "emergency calls have increased" since the start of the lockdown on March 24, said Nadine Gasman, head of the National Women's Institute in Mexico City. Maria Salguero, who researches violence against women and created a "femicide map" around the country, estimated that around 200 women have been murdered since quarantine measures began.

Rape and murder

The sordid murder of Ana Paola, a 13-year-old who was raped and beaten to death by a burglar in the northeastern state of Sonora in early April, provoked widespread disgust and anger in Mexico. Emergency calls to the National Refugee Network, an NGO which caters to women victims of violence, have increased by 60 percent since the beginning of the confinement period. The number of women

we are talking about new cases multiplying day by day, five or 10-fold." The burly middle-aged man with curly ginger hair from Georgia came to Russia to study medicine and specialized in critical care. The virus is a "major test for the health system, for Moscow's medicine," he says, vowing: "We will overcome it."

Red and green zones

Tens of thousands of beds have been made available in Moscow and the recent opening of large new virus hospitals "will allow us to better overcome this difficult situation," Churadze said. Yet virus treatment at this facility is not accessible to most Muscovites. It takes cash-paying patients or those with private health insurance and a course of treatment costs tens of thousands of dollars, Churadze says.

The private hospital group that owns it, Medinvest, also runs a much bigger coronavirus hospital for public health patients. The entire hospital, including administrative floors, has been divided into "green" or clean and infectious "red" areas, including lifts. To enter the "red zone", medics put on full personal protection, including goggles, hooded white suits, one or more masks, shoe coverings, and two pairs of gloves, helped by special staff. "It's an absolutely new reality" for medics, Churadze said.

Doctors are kitted out with protective gear but getting hold of this equipment is a challenge,

biggest contributor to the WHO but Trump is freezing funding, alleging that the organization mismanaged and covered up the spread of the virus.

Tedros said the presence of embedded US government secondees working at the WHO headquarters in Geneva meant there was nothing being concealed from Washington. The WHO said there were 15 staff from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the US health protection agency, detailed specifically to work with the organization on its COVID-19 response.

"Having CDC staff means there is nothing hidden from the US, from day one. Because these are Americans working with us. It just comes naturally and they tell what they are doing," said Tedros. "WHO is open. We don't hide anything. Not only for CDC, them sending messages, or others-we want all countries to get the same message immediately because that helps countries to prepare well and to prepare quickly."

Taiwan row

The US State Department has said the WHO was too late in sounding the alarm over COVID-19 and is overly deferential to China. It questioned why it did not pursue a lead from Taiwan flagged up on December 31 about reports of

due to the coronavirus pandemic and will later head into election season.

Alexander Lukashenko, the authoritarian leader of Belarus, in 2008 threw out the US ambassador after the George W Bush administration imposed sanctions on the president, his allies and a state oil company following elections seen as unfair and a crackdown on protesters. In a sign of warming ties, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in February met Lukashenko in Minsk in the first visit there by a top US diplomat since 1994.

While saying the United States was not trying to drive a wedge between Belarus and Moscow, Pompeo said the United States wanted to help the country often described as Europe's last dictatorship to be a "sovereign." Pompeo also offered to export US oil to the



SANTIAGO: A woman demonstrates against 'femicide' and killings related to domestic violence, in front of the La Moneda presidential palace in Santiago. —AFP

taken into care by the organization is up 5 percent.

With more than 1,000 femicides in 2019, two recent brutal murders-one of a seven-year-old girl-again highlighted a lack of action by authorities. Mexican feminist activists have demanded more effective policies from President Andres Manuel Lopez to combat the wave of violence. It's a similar case in Peru, where 2019 femicides were the highest in a decade. In Sao Paulo, the epicenter of Brazil's virus outbreak, reports of domestic violence have risen by 30 percent since the state government imposed a stay-at-home order.

A group of 700 volunteers have formed a "vigilante network" to provide victims with medical, legal and psychological assistance through a WhatsApp messaging service. In Chile, which has opted for selective confinement in the most affected areas plus a nighttime curfew, complaints of domestic violence are up 500 percent in Providencia, an upper class neighborhood in the capital Santiago. The crisis has resulted in "increased alcohol consumption, mental health effects, increased anxiety, depression and violence within families," said senior health official Paula Daza.—AFP

Luxury Moscow clinic becomes coronavirus 'battleground'

MOSCOW: A small elderly woman lies curled up in bedsheets with an oxygen tube in her nose, coughing as doctors cocooned in white suits care for her. In a nearby bed, an elderly man is on a ventilator. In another a woman in her 50s lies on her belly to improve her oxygen saturation. This is the intensive care ward at a branch of Moscow's K+31 private hospital. Until a week ago, it was a luxurious private clinic where you could get a nose job.

Yet as the capital shoulders the weight of Russia's virus onslaught, with more than 26,000 cases, the facility has switched entirely to treating coronavirus patients. "There's not a single empty bed," says chief doctor Boris Churadze. In the state-run hospital next door, where 500 patients are being treated, the situation is the same, he says. He calls the virus fight a "battlefield," where medics combat an invisible enemy with homicidal intentions.

The situation is set to deteriorate in the next two or three weeks, he warns, predicting "mid-May will be the absolute top of the peak." "I think

WHO insists it hid nothing, sounded alarm from start

GENEVA: The World Health Organization insisted Monday that it sounded the alarm on the novel coronavirus right from the very start and had hidden nothing from Washington about the deadly pandemic. WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said there were no secrets at the UN agency after being blasted by the United States for allegedly downplaying the initial COVID-19 outbreak in China. "We have been warning from day one that this is a devil that everyone should fight," Tedros told a virtual briefing in Geneva.

The virus, which emerged late last year in the Chinese city of Wuhan, has so far infected more than 2.4 million people globally and killed more than 165,000, according to an AFP tally. The United States has by far the highest death toll of any country, at more than 40,000 fatalities, and President Donald Trump has faced criticism over his handling of the pandemic. Washington is the

US names Belarus envoy after decade-long freeze

WASHINGTON: The United States on Monday named its first ambassador to Belarus in more than a decade as it seeks to nudge the close Russian ally toward the Western orbit. President Donald Trump tapped career diplomat Julie Fisher, a top State Department official for Europe who has served in Moscow, to be the US ambassador to Minsk. Fisher requires confirmation by the Senate. While her nomination did not generate immediate opposition, it is uncertain when the Senate would act as lawmakers are staying out of Washington



MOSCOW: An ambulance is seen on the territory of a nearly-finished hospital for coronavirus patients outside the village of Golokhvastovo, some 60 kilometers southwest from the center of Moscow. —AFP

Churadze says. "It's a global problem." "A black market for personal protective equipment has even appeared and a lot of people are making money from this." "It's ordinary work" - In the intensive care unit, doctor Sergei Sevalkin is helping treat a patient in her late 60s. "We've held out a week and now it's a bit easier," he says. "We have one patient in a serious condition who was transferred from another hospital." Working for hours in a protective suit is one of the hardest parts of treating virus patients, he says. "After a shift you feel like ripping it off." —AFP



GENEVA: World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus attends a daily press briefing on COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, at the WHO headquarters in Geneva. —AFP

atypical pneumonia in Wuhan Debate has raged over the significance of Taiwan's email, which informed the WHO of the reports from Wuhan, and of at least seven patients being isolated-something that would not be necessary for a non-infectious disease. —AFP

landlocked country, which was embroiled in a price war with Russia. Shortly after Pompeo's visit, Lukashenko traveled to Russia and said President Vladimir Putin pushed him to merge Belarus outright in return for cheap energy.

The United States and Belarus agreed in principle to exchange ambassadors after trips to Minsk last year by David Hale, the top US career diplomat, and John Bolton, then Trump's national security advisor. Bolton, a hardliner on Russia, had been keen to nurture US relationships with neighboring nations including Belarus and Ukraine. Despite his administration's push, Trump has voiced admiration for Putin and has been especially critical of Ukraine—with his pressure on Kiev leading to his impeachment.—AFP

Families mourn as police seek motive for gun rampage

MONTREAL: Investigators on Monday scoured crime scenes from the worst mass shooting in Canadian history to try to understand why a dental worker with no criminal past killed at least 18 people. The gunman, identified by police as 51-year-old Gabriel Wortman, began his rampage late Saturday in the seaside village of Portapique, Nova Scotia, dying 14 hours later in a hail of police gunfire outside Halifax, 100 kilometers away. "Just how could this happen, we may never know why," Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told a news conference.

"But we do know this: no one man's action can build a wall between us and a better day, no matter how evil, how thoughtless, or how destructive." The death toll, initially put at 16, rose to 18 on Monday, Trudeau said, with police warning that more bodies could be found in the rubble of five burned out homes and buildings. "We expect there to be more victims," said RCMP Chief Superintendent Chris Leather. Among the victims so far identified were a veteran constable with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, a nurse, an elementary school teacher, prison guards and a retired firefighter.

"This happened in small towns-in Portapique, Truro, Milford and Enfield-places where people have deep roots, places where people know their neighbors and look out for one another," Trudeau said. A "virtual vigil" has been planned for Friday at 7:00 pm. Nova Scotia Premier Stephen McNeil told public broadcaster CBC that the investigation and the grieving process would be "complicated" by the coronavirus pandemic-and the vast geographic area of the crime spree.

'Unprecedented violence'

Forensic investigators fanned out to 16 "chaotic" crime scenes across the province that is home to Canada's Atlantic navy fleet. Some of the victims were not known to the shooter, while others were specifically targeted, said Leather. "It's too early to tell what the motivation was," he said. "It appears to be, at least in part, very random in nature."

German Chancellor Angela Merkel led international expressions of sympathy, telling Trudeau in a note: "This senseless and cruel act has shaken us all deeply." After the first gunshots rang out in Portapique, where Wortman owned two properties, police found casualties inside and outside a home and also responded to a series of blazes. Neighbors told The Globe and Mail newspaper that Wortman set fire to homes and shot residents as they ran out.

An acquaintance said Wortman drove to his house in a mock squad car, wearing a police uniform, and banged on the door clutching a rifle and a pistol. "He wasn't killing enemies, he was killing his friends," said the man, who hid with his wife and called the police. "He was trying to beat down our door. It was beyond terrifying." Police said Wortman, still posing as a policeman, later stopped a vehicle near Debert and shot the occupants. "A monster murdered my mother today," Darcy Dobson wrote in a Facebook post about victim Heather O'Brien, a nurse in Truro. —AFP