

## International

# Coronavirus casts spotlight on S Africa's housing blight

## A legacy of apartheid regime

**JOHANNESBURG:** Over three years, Isaac Mbatha grew accustomed to the suffocating summer heat and icy winter drafts that pierced the canvas walls of his tent in Wilgespruit, a township on a hilly outskirts of Johannesburg. He also came to terms with the lack of space, running water and electricity in the makeshift home he shared with his wife and three children. But he never got used to the rain. "When it's raining you can't even sleep," said the 38-year-old, recalling the deafening sound of water splattering against the flimsy sheets and the constant fear of flooding. "Life is very difficult if you don't have a roof over your head." Coronavirus brought unexpected respite to those wet sleepless nights.

Thanks to the pandemic, 70 Wilgespruit families have been relocated to wooden cottages nearby - free of charge. "No more rain inside your home, no more cold in the morning," Mbatha exclaimed. "Our life will be better now." Wilgespruit is one of South Africa's 2,700 so-called informal settlements. A section of it known as Plot 323 came into being in 2017, when hundreds of squatters were evicted from a nearby property where they had been living in shacks for over a decade. Thrown onto the streets, they were allowed to settle on the government-owned Wilgespruit hill - its name in Afrikaans means "stream of the weeping willow" - living in

donated khaki tents. Most scrap a meagre living from informal recycling of plastics.

### 'Not safe'

Such bubbles of extreme poverty are a legacy of the apartheid regime, whereby black South Africans were stripped of land ownership and moved to subpar neighborhoods away from inner-city areas. More than a million families continue to live in these informal settlements more than 25 years after the end of white-majority rule. The townships, usually only remembered by politicians when its election season, were dragged back to the government's attention by the coronavirus outbreak. Amid fears that overcrowding and squalor would hinder efforts to stem the disease, authorities rushed to boost access to sanitation and relocate the poorest. "For corona, the government gave us sanitizer (and) toilets," said another resident thirty-four-year-old Rebecca Jane.

"But we don't have water and there are several families living in one tent," she added. It's "not safe." "Plot 323" was the first on a government-compiled list of dozens of settlements in South Africa to be urgently "de-densified". At the inauguration ceremony last week, Human Settlements Minister Lindiwe Sisulu said the residents' "dignity" had been "restored". She rebutted dryly against anyone who asked why the

curb the virus have coincided with the hardest months of the dry season. Unable to travel far in an inhospitable landscape, herders have been forced to spend what little money they have on animal feed. "Pastoralists are part of the population that has been the most impacted by the COVID-19 crisis here in Senegal," says local MP Yoro Sow. "They are extremely vulnerable."

The Fulani herders' main source of income - selling livestock - has also been cut off, because the local government has banned large markets over contamination fears. Even when the restrictions lift, it is not clear that all the herders will have the money to leave for better grazing. In the hamlet of Mbetiou Peulh, which is inhabited for only part of the year, Adama Ba says he must travel nearly 100 kilometers (60 miles) south soon, to a refuge containing pasture. A shortage of cash means his car has to stay behind. Ba's phone rings as he's walking across the scrub. A stroke of luck: A local official arrives in a blue pick-up, and agrees to transport one of his cows to the nearest town to be sold.

Weekly markets known as "loumas," which can draw traders from as far as the seaside capital Dakar, were the region's economic heart until they closed in March. To help herders, local authorities are distributing animal feed and are allowing them to sell livestock in small numbers, but it is not enough. Mamadou Cisse, 51, the livestock ministry's veterinary inspector in the region, said that the dry season is always grueling for herders. — AFP



**JOHANNESBURG:** Customers queue while waiting for the opening of a shop at the Bara taxi rank in Soweto, Johannesburg. — AFP

resettlement had taken so long. "We didn't know about their terrible conditions," Sisulu said. "The most important thing is (that) when we were aware of it, in less than a month we were able to solve it ... and we will continue to do it because we are a caring government."

As expected, Wilgespruit's re-location rapidly became a political football. "These people had been

put by what I would call an uncaring government into these tents and forgotten about," blasted Geoffrey Makhubo, mayor of Johannesburg and member of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party. Makhubo, who took office in December, was making reference to his predecessor Herman Mashaba - a former member of the main opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) party. — AFP

## In Senegal's north, the Fulani herders boxed in by virus

**IN THE DESERT:** Scores of white cattle plod into the village for their only drink of water of the day. Herders, wearing brightly-coloured robes, walk in tow. Soon, they will wander miles back across the semi-desert of northern Senegal in search of sparse yellow stubs poking through the sand. "There is no water, there is no pasture," says Adama Ba, a herder whose 100-head of cattle is his lifeblood, in his native Pulaar. "I'm scared now. There is nothing here". The 56-year-old is one of thousands of semi-nomadic Fulani pastoralists who have been stuck in Senegal's Louga region, in the Sahel, since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. The sparsely populated area is a sandy flatland, dotted with spindly gum arabic trees. The odd donkey shelters underneath them to escape soaring noon temperatures.

Pastoralists move with their cattle from north to south across Louga, and further afield, as pasture dries up, before returning north again with the summer rains. But recent times have been hard. Less rainfall, attributed to climate change, has meant less grazing. Worse, months of government restrictions on movement designed to

## Surge in Germans seeking alcoholism help

**BERLIN:** When the coronavirus lockdown started in Germany, all Marco wanted to do was get drunk. The musician from Berlin, 38, was downing roughly a bottle of gin every night. "I was like, why not, come on! It's quarantine, let's party!" But as the days went on, he started to see things differently.

"Because of quarantine you're forced to look at yourself and realize, wait a second, this is not OK. This is actually a problem, this is addiction." Marco - speaking on condition of anonymity - reached out to a local Alcoholics Anonymous group and made the decision to get sober after 20 years of drinking heavily almost every night. And he is far from alone in Germany, which has seen a surge in numbers of people seeking help for alcohol addiction since lockdown measures were introduced in early March. According to a spokesman for Alcoholics Anonymous, enquiries to the group's national helpline have roughly doubled - from about 10 calls per day to about 20.

### National culture

Germany has one of the highest rates of alco-

hol consumption in Europe, with drinking occupying a prominent place in national culture through events such as the Oktoberfest beer festival. According to a recent study by the German Center for Addiction Issues (DHS), three million Germans between the ages of 18 and 64 had an alcohol problem in 2018. Sales of alcohol rose sharply during the initial phase of the lockdown as many people turned to drinking at home as a substitute for banned social events. Wine sales at the end of March were 34 percent higher than during the same week in February, and sales of spirits went up 31 percent, according to a study published in the Spiegel magazine.

But the pandemic has also prompted many people to confront problematic alcohol use, whether through increased self-reflection or because family members finally became aware of how much they were drinking, according to the Alcoholics Anonymous spokesman. "Some people use or abuse the way to work and the workplace as a drinking opportunity, and in many cases this is now no longer available," he said. "People have to start drinking at home, and then their spouse or family can see how much they really drink. They get to the point where they realize that there is no way to hide it." Alcoholics Anonymous holds about 2,000 regular meetings across Germany. A spokesman for one of the groups in Berlin said it is now getting roughly one enquiry a day, compared to one or two a month before the pandemic started. — AFP