

International

Health workers, slum-dwellers face housing bias as lockdowns ease

Slums from Brazil to the Philippines emerge as virus hotspots

BANGKOK: The easing of coronavirus lockdowns in cities around the world could lead to a rise in evictions of slum dwellers, housing experts warned on Wednesday, with healthcare workers and migrants also facing difficulties finding homes.

More than 6 million people have been reported infected with the coronavirus globally, according to a Reuters tally, with slums from Brazil to the Philippines emerging as hotspots.

As eviction moratoriums and rent holidays end, those who have lost jobs will be vulnerable to evictions, with authorities also likely to use the pandemic as an excuse to clear slums, said Theresa Williamson, a Brazil-based city planner.

"Certain government officials would like nothing more than the opportunity to permanently evict these neighborhoods," said Williamson, executive director of Catalytic Communities, a non-profit supporting Rio de Janeiro's favelas.

"Government officials will use the high death count to push evictions, arguing that it was these communities' unhygienic conditions that produced the deaths, rather than recognizing their own neglect of sanitation and health," she said.

About a third of the world's urban population lives in informal settlements, according to the United Nations, with poorly ventilated homes,

little or no running water, few toilets and inadequate sewage systems.

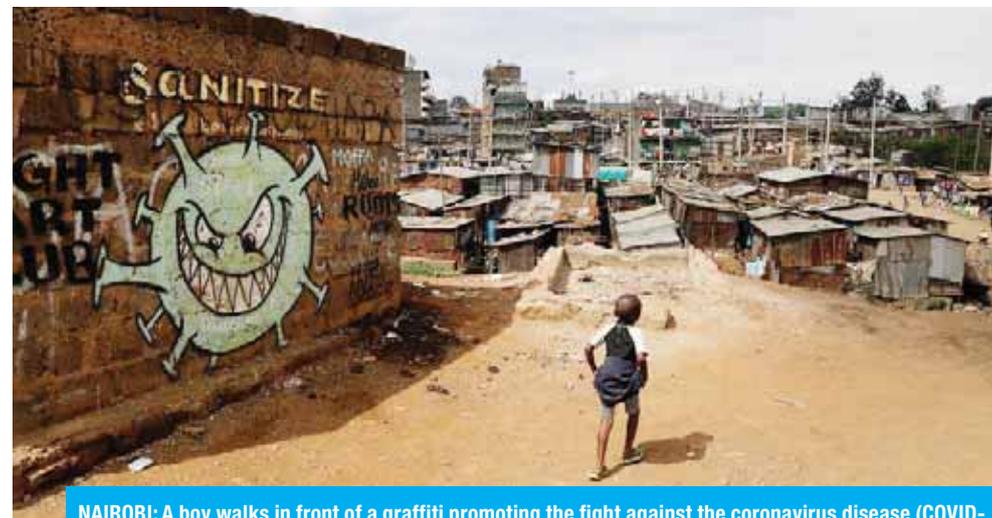
Most residents lack property records and face the constant threat of eviction, made worse now with job losses and plans for redevelopment, said Shivani Chaudhry, executive director of Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN) in Delhi. In India, there was no moratorium on evictions during a months-long lockdown, and several were reported then, she said.

"If evictions could be carried out during the lockdown when people were asked to stay at home, there is a genuine fear that these will continue or even rise after restrictions ease," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. More than 11 million people in India risk being uprooted from their homes as authorities build highways and cordon off forests, HLRN forecast before the pandemic.

"We could see evictions on account of the inability of people to pay rent, as well as for infrastructure projects being promoted under the guise of economic recovery," Chaudhry said.

Housing 'gate keepers'

The stigma around those infected or exposed to the coronavirus has also led to doctors, healthcare providers, sanitation and low-skilled workers being denied housing,



NAIROBI: A boy walks in front of a graffiti promoting the fight against the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in the Mathare slums of Nairobi, Kenya. — Reuters

said Chaudhry. The Indian government last month launched an affordable rental housing scheme for migrant workers and the urban poor, and proposed stringent punishment for those harassing or attacking healthcare personnel.

But landlords can still refuse to rent to them,

said Nirat Bhatnagar, founder of Belongg, a social venture that aims to register homeowners willing to rent without discriminating. In addition, landlords may insist on health certificates or for new tenants to use India's coronavirus contact-tracing app, which might exacerbate discrimination, he said. — Reuters

Protest disrupts HK debate over national anthem bill

HONG KONG: Police and firefighters entered Hong Kong's legislature yesterday after two pro-democracy lawmakers threw foul-smelling liquid to protest against China's "murderous" crackdown by Chinese troops in and around Tiananmen Square 31 years ago.

Lawmakers Eddie Chu and Ray Chan rushed to the front of the chamber during a debate over a controversial bill that would criminalize disrespect of China's national anthem, splashing the reeking fluid as guards grappled with them. Police and firefighters later arrived on the scene. "A murderous state stinks forever. What we did today is to remind the world that we should never forgive the Chinese Communist Party for killing its own people 31 years ago," Chu said later, before he and Chan were removed from the chamber.

A final vote on the bill was expected later with people in Hong Kong set to commemorate the bloody 1989 crackdown by lighting candles across the city. For the first time, police have banned an annual vigil to mark the event that is usually held in downtown Victoria Park, citing the coronavirus outbreak. The disruption in the legislature came after pro-establishment lawmakers vetoed most amendments to the anthem bill proposed by democrats.

If passed, the bill could punish those who insult the anthem with up to three years jail and/or fines of up to HK\$50,000 (\$6,450). It states that "all individuals and organizations" should respect and dignify the national anthem and play it and sing it on "appropriate occasions". Tensions in the Chinese-ruled city have ramped up after Beijing gave the green light last week to move ahead with national security laws to tackle secession, subversion and foreign interference. —Reuters

HSBC, StanChart back China law for Hong Kong

HONG KONG/LONDON: HSBC and Standard Chartered banks gave their backing to China's imposition of a national security law on Hong Kong on Wednesday in a break from their usual policy of political neutrality.

HSBC's Asia-Pacific Chief Executive Peter Wong signed a petition backing the law, the bank said. HSBC "respects and supports all laws that stabilize Hong Kong's social order," it said in a post on social media in China. StanChart later said it believed the law can "help maintain the long term economic and social stability of Hong Kong".

Both banks are based in Britain but have a significant Asia focus. Now Europe's largest bank, HSBC has its origins in Hong Kong, a British colony until 1997. It has previously avoided weighing in on the political situation there in recent months, while facing increased calls in Chinese state media to make its position clear.

A Hong Kong-based spokeswoman for the bank declined to comment beyond the contents of the post. Wong, a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, told the official Xinhua news agency in an interview published on Wednesday he hoped the law could bring stability to Hong Kong.

HSBC moved its headquarters to London in 1993, but Hong Kong is still its biggest market. It has invested billions of dollars in China to grow its market share in the world's second-largest economy, and it has become harder for the

bank to follow an apolitical line as it faces criticism from both the pro- and anti-Beijing camps. "The US no longer considers Hong Kong autonomous from China and there are risks that HSBC becomes a political football after Peter Wong's declaration of support for the new national security law," Will Howlett, analyst at HSBC shareholder Quilter Cheviot, said.

Western human rights groups were critical.

"Does HSBC feel compelled to weigh in on other laws in other countries? We have watched over the past week China clearly assert pressure on businesses and other actors to show their support for the law to create the illusion of support," said Sophie Richardson, China director for US-based Human Rights Watch.

HSBC was caught up in Hong Kong's months-long anti-government protests, with its branches vandalized and bronze lion statues outside its headquarters defaced during a protest march on Jan 1. Some protesters accused HSBC of being complicit in action by the authorities against activists trying to raise money to support protesters, accusations the bank denied.

Some of HSBC's corporate peers have faced retribution from Beijing for perceived support for the anti-government protesters. Cathay Pacific Airways last year was forced to suspend staff involved in the protests, and chief executive Rupert Hogg and his top deputy resigned in August.

Hong Kong returned to Chinese rule in 1997 with the guarantee of freedoms, such as an independent legal system and right to protest, not enjoyed on the mainland.

The city was rocked by unrest last year by pro-democracy protesters fearing an erosion of those freedoms by Communist Party rulers in Beijing. China denies this and accuses the West of stirring up trouble. — Reuters