

## International

# Virus, dire economy, unrest upend US presidential race

## Crises prompt reflection over racial inequality in America

WASHINGTON: Three concurrent crises scarring the United States—a deadly health pandemic, economic despair and widespread social unrest—have reframed this year's presidential contest and prompted national reflection over racial inequality in America.

Is the country on the cusp of a transformation, or will systemic inequalities exacerbated by the coronavirus crisis persist, allowing alienation and marginalization to fester?

In weeks, the unprecedented strain has become the focal point of the ferocious White House campaign between President Donald Trump and Democrat Joe Biden, two politicians approaching the disasters with very different strategies.

It has been several generations since the country has experienced such a sharp and rapid confluence of major emergencies, a national low point that philosopher Cornell West has branded "America's moment of reckoning."

Nearly 110,000 Americans have died of COVID-19, and tens of millions are jobless due to pandemic-prompted lockdowns. At the same time, unrest has gripped dozens of US cities where protesters demand justice over the killing by Minneapolis police of unarmed black man George Floyd.

Repeated episodes of police brutality caught on camera, even as most demonstrations have been peaceful, have further laid bare the nation's deep social wounds.

"It's a pretty bad moment," said Daniel Gillion, a political science professor at the University of Pennsylvania and author of "The Loud Minority."

The crises, he told AFP, have been "horrific" for African Americans, who traditionally have poorer health care outcomes, have just a fraction of the

household wealth of whites, and are more likely to face police brutality. "I can't think of a (modern-day) period where blacks have experienced such strife, such pain, such hardship," Gillion said. Among COVID-19 victims, a disproportionate number are people of color. While Trump on Friday touted a surprise drop in the overall jobless rate from 14.7 percent in April to 13.3 percent in May, black unemployment actually rose, to 16.8 percent. The injustice that erupted into ugly view when a white police officer pressed his knee onto Floyd's neck for almost nine minutes is the latest manifestation of a systemic racism that has persisted for generations.

"There's been a knee on the neck of black America since slavery was abolished," 30-year-old Minneapolis protester Kayla Peterson said from behind a pandemic face mask. "We've never really been free."

### Law and order

Trump could have delivered an Oval Office address to the nation this week to soothe tensions. Instead he has exploited discord and launched a "law and order" crusade. Trump has walled off the White House from protesters and launched fiery accusations that do little to calm the storm.

"The problem," he tweeted Thursday about recent controversial tactics deployed in Washington, "is the arsonists, looters, criminals, and anarchists, wanting to destroy it (and our Country)!"

severity of the current crunch has sparked calls for government bailouts—with private papers in Cameroon even holding a "dead press" day to denounce a lack of action.

Authorities in some countries have heeded the pleas for help. Kenya's national regulator on Friday unveiled what it called a "historic" fund worth just under \$1 million to help some 150 broadcasters weather the storm.

"This challenge of COVID-19 has squeezed life from television and radio stations," said David Omwoyo, the head of the Media Council of Kenya.

Officials from Nigeria's journalist union said it had appealed to President Muhammadu Buhari to provide emergency aid to distressed media. But there are fears that state aid would only increase political interference in sectors around Africa that are already often dominated by powerful vested interests. "The government has been harassing the media. Several journalists are facing trials for frivolous offences," University of Lagos lecturer Olubunmi Ajibade said of the situation in Nigeria. "Collecting bailout funds from government at this time will compromise their independence and freedom."

### 'Disseminate propaganda'

Just as the spread of the virus has caused revenues to dwindle, it has also posed unprecedented logistical challenges to media outlets. While the official figures—more than 170,000 infections and 4,700 deaths across the continent—have risen slower than elsewhere on the planet, governments have still imposed tough restrictions. Lockdowns have hampered reporting, social distancing has forced journalists to work remotely with poor internet or electricity supplies, and protective

If their children have nothing to eat "the mother desponds, and I have three girls who've given birth during the quarantine," added Portales, of the Miluska Life and Dignity network. In a large house in the historic center of Lima, a group of prostitutes prepare huge pots of cooked food for their colleagues and families.

People in their profession have faced a worrying and uncertain period since Peru enforced a lockdown on March 16. Wearing red face masks, and some in high heels, the women arrive carrying their children in their arms.

"Miluska Life and Dignity is my organization, our organization and everyone's organization," Leida Portal told AFP. The 53-year-old is president of the network fighting the criminalization of and violence against prostitutes, and their right to access health care.

"We have extreme cases of women who were

foothold in the war-torn country or delivering advanced weaponry to Lebanese armed group Hezbollah.

Iranian and Iraqi armed groups backing the regime of Bashar Al-Assad have deployed across swathes of Deir Ezzor, a large desert province bordering on Iraq.

The Observatory said the latest strikes came after Afghan forces brought in reinforcements from near the Iraqi border to a large Iranian base near the town of Al-Mayadin on the Euphrates river. Two waves of similar strikes in May killed 12 pro-Iranian fighters, according to the Observatory.

Syria's complex, almost decade-long war has killed over 380,000 people, devastated the country's infrastructure and forced millions of people to flee their homes.

Meanwhile, a Turkish soldier was killed in Syria's Idlib region after an attack on an armored ambulance, the defence ministry said. Two other soldiers were injured, it said in a statement, adding the army retaliated by hitting specified targets. The ministry did not give further information.

A Russian-backed Damascus offensive on the last rebel bastion in the country has killed hundreds of civil-

Trump's provocative walk from the White House to a nearby church for a photo opportunity minutes after the area was forcibly cleared of protesters contained clear signals to conservative and evangelical voters in his base: security and faith remain paramount.

While Trump has trafficked in division, his November election rival has blasted him as "dangerously unfit" to lead. Biden, 77, was largely absent for two months, hunkered down in his Delaware home as the pandemic played out and Trump used his bully pulpit to push to re-open the country.

But the veteran Democrat is eyeing an opening by embracing a message of conciliation and reform—something that could unite the moderate and liberal factions of the Democratic Party and draw independents appalled by Trump's strongman style. "It is long past time we made the promise of this nation real for all of our people," Biden tweeted Friday.

### 'Teflon man'?

Experts say that despite the recent chaos, Trump does have a path to victory. "If the president is able to talk about race in a meaningful way, and if he's able to ride the recovery in health and in the economic crisis, he's going to look like the Teflon man," Gillion said. "Nothing will stick to him." Trump however has seen his poll numbers erode, particularly among two groups vital to his



This combination of file photos shows US President Donald Trump (left) and Democratic presidential hopeful and former Vice President Joe Biden.—AFP

re-election: elderly voters and evangelical Christians. And his failure to tackle the pandemic early and his threat to unleash the military on protesters is repelling female voters.

White women "are upset with Trump's handling of the pandemic" and his lack of leadership, said Nadia Brown, associate professor of political science and African-American studies at Purdue University. "Women are also watching the protests and they are having empathy" with demonstrators. The persistent inequalities, snapshots of a shattered economy and how leaders respond "will definitely be on the mind of voters in five months," Brown added. It doesn't mean Biden romps to victory, either. "A cat has nine lives," Brown said, "but Trump has 12." —AFP

## Virus crisis piles pressure on Africa media

LAGOS: Collapsing revenues, rising layoffs: the coronavirus crisis is battering media outlets across Africa that were already struggling for cash and often facing pressure from hostile authorities.

The news of cutbacks was sudden and painful for journalists at two of Nigeria's most popular independent newspapers when bosses from The Punch and Vanguard made their announcements last month. "It was a rude shock for me because I didn't do anything wrong to warrant such treatment," one Punch veteran told AFP, asking not to be named as he was still owed a "token" payoff.

The redundancies were just the latest to hit Nigeria's press—one of the most vibrant on the continent—as the economic fallout from the pandemic has sent sales and advertising income plunging. "What is happening in Nigeria is not peculiar to us. The whole world is feeling the impact," said Qasim Akinreti, the chairman of the Lagos Union of Journalists. "For us in the Nigerian media, the story is the same—we have lost hundreds of jobs in the past four months."

### Calls for state aid

In Kenya some media houses slashed wages by up to half, in Uganda a leading weekly halted printing, and in Namibia hours have been reduced and redundancy schemes fast-tracked. The speed and

## Sex workers in Peru sharing food to survive

LIMA: Prevented by the lockdown over the coronavirus pandemic from earning a living, Peru's sex workers have had to organize soup kitchens supplied by food handouts to feed themselves and their children.

"We have 70 meals we're going to make on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, because most of the girls work on the streets and there's no work," 61-year-old Lidia Portales, who helps run a foundation that represents sex workers in Lima, told AFP.

## East Syria air raids kill 12 pro-Iran fighters

BEIRUT: At least 12 pro-Iranian fighters died in strikes by unidentified aircraft on eastern Syria late Saturday evening, a war monitor said. "Eight air strikes before midnight on Saturday night targeted a base of pro-Iranian forces in rural eastern Deir Ezzor (province), killing 12 Iraqi and Afghan fighters and destroying equipment and ammunition," the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The Observatory did not identify the aircraft responsible, but its head Rami Abdul Rahman told AFP that Israel was likely responsible. The Jewish state has carried out hundreds of strikes targeting regime and Iranian-backed forces, notably in Deir Ezzor.

The Israeli military rarely claims responsibility for such attacks but has vowed to prevent Iran gaining a



LAGOS: The coronavirus crisis is battering media outlets across Africa that were already struggling for cash and often facing pressure from hostile authorities.

equipment has added new costs.

On the streets there have been reports of security forces harassing journalists trying to do their work.

In Ghana—one of West Africa's most open democracies—soldiers enforcing virus restrictions "assaulted" two reporters in April, the Committee to Protect Journalists said.

A raft of countries including South Africa have introduced legislation criminalizing the spreading of disinformation about the pandemic. Authorities insist the measures are needed to tackle a flood of dangerous falsehoods surrounding the virus.

But media professionals say journalists are already trying to do the job of combatting "fake news"—and such laws could be used to muzzle them. —AFP

working in brothels that are now closed. What can they do? How can they support their families?" said Portal.

"There are colleagues that have their little rooms and live there with their children. They sell themselves to get food for their children and themselves.

"Then there are other colleagues in other places who come to work the streets who will also come here for their food." Peru, a country of 33 million, has recorded the second-most coronavirus cases in Latin America with more than 187,000 and over 5,000 deaths, the third most in the region.

As well as running the soup kitchens, the group has been distributing food in various districts of the capital thanks to donations and from the sale of masks and syrups they made themselves. The group, founded in 2004, helps around 1,000 sex workers. —AFP



A Syrian boy looks at Russian and US military vehicles in the northeastern Syrian town of Al-Malikiyah (Derik) at the border with Turkey.—AFP

ians since December and displaced close to a million people. A ceasefire between rebel-backer Turkey and regime-ally Russia was agreed for Idlib and came into force on March 6.—AFP

## Generation Z: creative and committed

PARIS: With their art, technology know-how, creative social networking skills or political commitment, post-millennials, known as Generation Z, have found their own ways to help others through the coronavirus lockdown.

From Colombia to Senegal, Malaysia to North Macedonia, AFP talked to a group of 15- to 24-year-olds, who put their energy and skills to use within their communities, contributing perhaps to shaping the post-virus world. Only history will tell if they'll become the "Coronavirus Generation", forever marked at a formative time in their lives by the pandemic, which brought more than half the planet to a standstill.

### Solidarity beyond the smartphone

"If I don't volunteer and those like me don't volunteer, then who will?", asks Malak Sabah, 24. In her high visibility vest, she has been the linchpin of an initiative to sanitize the streets of Lebanon's overcrowded Wavel Palestinian refugee camp, where she grew up. Worried that some were not taking the risk seriously enough after the first COVID-19 case in the camp, an awareness campaign was launched, Sabah said.

"It's a hidden virus, you can't deal with it with physical strength, it requires awareness, knowledge and protection," she said. Having always known a world connected by the likes of Google, Facebook and Amazon, this generation understands the power of social networks in getting a message across, Walid Badi, a French professional handball player, said.

Not only that, but these young people also realize they're best placed "to help the most vulnerable", the 24-year-old, who lives in Ivry-sur-Seine near Paris, said. The health crisis demonstrated that "we're not just good for staying at home, hooked to our smartphones, but are deeply rooted in reality," he added. While competitions were off the cards during confinement, he used the time to step up action through his Solidaritess association in aid of the homeless, distributing clothes to the "forgotten" in the capital's suburbs.

### Drones and 3-D printing

Jose Otero, a 22-year-old Venezuelan living in Colombia, has come up with what he describes as a low-cost drone to beat the travel restrictions by carrying medicine and test results around the northern city of Barranquilla. "They used to tell us that we had to separate ourselves from technological devices or telephones because that separated us," he said.

"On the contrary, right now it is what unites us." In Senegal, engineering student Ibrahim Cisse, 23, and his friends at Dakar's ESP Polytechnic Higher School built a special bicycle equipped with a rear-end loud speaker for sharing preventative information and a hand sanitizer dispenser. He said that they were learning how to be useful through initiatives that take into account the environment, people's needs and reducing costs.

"We're in a poor country and you shouldn't think of extravagant projects," he said. At 15, Romeo Estezet, a Paris high school student, has made his bedroom into a 3-D printing workshop and is turning out 80 protective visors a day. "My dream is to show other young people the usefulness and, above all, the ease of this technology, which puts the production of objects within everyone's reach" especially in a crisis, he said. —AFP