

## International

# Fears for UK homeless as virus hotel scheme draws to a close

## Charities fear they could soon be back on the streets

**LONDON:** Thousands of homeless people in Britain were given hotel rooms to protect them from coronavirus but as the outbreak slows, charities fear they could soon be back on the streets.

Lisa was among 15,000 people in England given emergency accommodation as part of an unprecedented government scheme in March to get "Everyone In" as COVID-19 spread. She has a chronic health condition and had been living on the streets, relying on temporary shelters run by the charity Glass Door, which helped her onto the hotel scheme.

"I was elated," the 30-something told AFP by telephone. "To be able to sleep in a bed, it was like sleeping on cloud nine!" But her room in a London hotel is only confirmed until the end of June—and as the government eases a nationwide lockdown, she is getting increasingly anxious.

The scheme "does give me some glimmer of hope that things can go forward. When you are on the street it feels never-ending", she said.

"I have faith that the charities are not going to put us back on the street. But if it's a case of going back into the kind of temporary accommodation I was in, I know the cycle will be repeated." Campaigners are demanding the government urgently clarify what happens to people like Lisa when the hotel contracts run out.

"Returning people back onto the streets should not be an option, but time is running out to find alternative solutions," said Glass Door chief operating officer Lucy Abraham. There are also calls for wider action amid warnings that homelessness will increase as the economic impact of the outbreak bites.

"The government's actions and support so far are welcome, but there is still a long way to go," said a joint letter to ministers from leading homelessness charities. "With the risk of a second wave

of infection and looming economic crisis, more needs to be done. Getting this right is critical for the health and economic security of tens of thousands of people and families."

### Seize this opportunity

Charities had warned that people living on the streets or in crowded hostels were particularly vulnerable to coronavirus, which has killed around 40,000 people in Britain so far.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government responded with an extraordinary effort, housing 14,610 people sleeping rough or at risk of doing so in England — 4,450 in London alone. Many were given rooms in shuttered hotels, providing a safe and comfortable environment that some people had not experienced for years.

"We've heard some incredible stories of people really seizing this opportunity and showing they can hold down a tenancy," said Balbir Chatrik, of the youth homelessness charity Centrepoint. "But many more require the sort of intensive support that can only be provided in tandem with stable accommodation."

### Moral mission

There is a major shortage of public housing in Britain and local authorities, which have responsibility for homelessness, have suffered years of cuts in central government funding.

Research by charities suggests rough sleeping has risen by 141 percent in the last decade. In December's election, Johnson's government pledged to end rough sleeping within five years, backed up by a £650 million package. Last month, Housing Secretary Robert Jenrick said he would accelerate delivery of 6,000 new "housing units" with support staff on hand, with 3,300 made



LONDON: Charities has warned that people living on the streets were particularly vulnerable to coronavirus. —AFP

available in the coming year.

"This government wants to end rough sleeping for good, and we now have a real opportunity to deliver on this moral mission," he said. On Friday, Jenrick also extended a three-month ban on evictions proceedings until August, to help people struggling to pay the rent.

### Still dangerous

David Renard, housing spokesman for the Local Government Association (LGA), welcomed the extra funds for councils. But he asked for "clarity from government on what additional practical support will be available to councils to

help them move people out of hotels".

Campaigners say people are already falling through the gaps. Some who became homeless since March, such as newly released prisoners, have not been able to access the hotel scheme, one case worker told AFP.

There are also concerns that rules restricting government help on the basis of immigration status, which were suspended, are also being reimposed in some areas. "There are people being turned away from that support despite the fact that the pandemic continues," said Jasmine Basran, from housing charity Crisis. "And that is putting people in a very dangerous situation." —AFP

## Nigerian girl, lover held for faking own kidnap

**LAGOS:** A 17-year-old girl in southwestern Nigeria who allegedly faked her own kidnap to demand a ransom from her mother has been arrested, police said yesterday. Seun Adekunle is accused of conspiring with her boyfriend to stage her abduction in Abeokuta, the capital of Ogun state and asking for 500,000 naira (1,388 dollars).

"The two lovers were arrested on Thursday following a report by the girl's mother that she had not been seen since June 1," state police spokesman Abimbola Oyejemi told AFP. He said the girl's mother got a call from someone two days later claiming to have kidnapped her and demanding 500,000 naira for her release.

"The caller also warned her against reporting the abduction to the police if she still needed her daughter," Oyejemi said. He said police detectives were able to trace the girl and her lover to their hideout.

"They were caught hibernating, yet passing themselves off as victims of abduction. They were promptly arrested," Oyejemi said the suspects would be taken to court after investigation.

Kidnapping for ransom is common in southern Nigeria where oil workers, prominent Nigerians, including relations of sports stars, have been abducted in recent years. The victims are usually released unhurt after ransom payments. —AFP

## India, China seek to resolve border face-off

**NEW DELHI:** India and China have agreed to "peacefully resolve" a latest border flare-up that has heightened tensions between the nuclear-armed neighbors, New Delhi said yesterday after a high-level meeting between army commanders.

Tensions have flared in recent weeks between the two regional powers over their 3,500-kilometre (2,200-mile) frontier, which has never been properly demarcated. Thousands of troops from both countries are involved in the face-off concentrated in India's Ladakh region, just opposite Tibet.

"Both sides agreed to peacefully resolve the situation in the border areas in accordance with various bilateral agreements," the foreign ministry said in a statement. The ministry added that the commanders agreed an "early resolution" was "essential" for bilateral relations between the world's two most-populous nations.

"Accordingly, the two sides will continue the military and diplomatic engagements to resolve the situation and to ensure peace and tranquility in the border areas," the statement said. There have been numerous face-offs and brawls between Chinese and Indian soldiers at the frontier, but they have become more frequent in recent years.

## Crematorium in Delhi struggles with virus dead

**NEW DELHI:** Traditional funeral pyres have been drafted in to burn the bodies of coronavirus victims in the Indian capital as crematorium furnaces struggle to keep up with the mounting death toll.

Smoke from the open-air blazes stings the eyes of waiting mourners and workers at Nigambodh Ghat, New Delhi's biggest and oldest crematorium. The rising number of bodies arriving from hospitals has forced the facility, situated next to the city's historic Red Fort, to extend its opening hours. Funerals start at 8.00am and go on late into the night.

India is one of the hardest-hit countries from the coronavirus with about 240,000 cases and more than 6,700 dead. According to official figures, about 650 have died in Delhi, but media and cemetery officials say there have been hundreds more victims in the city.

The committee that runs Nigambodh Ghat says the crematorium has handled more than 500 coronavirus funerals in two months. Three other crematoria and at least two cemeteries also handle

Delhi's virus dead.

Authorities have ordered victims be incinerated in modern furnaces as a precaution against infection as anxiety grows over the spread of the disease.

But only three of six furnaces at Nigambodh Ghat are working, so for the past week, wood pyres, the traditional structures used in Hindu funeral rituals for thousands of years, have been allowed to help clear the backlog. Furnace or tradition -

Suman Kumar Gupta of the crematorium management committee said families arriving for a funeral had to queue to pass through a "sanitation tunnel" at the entrance and then wait hours for the ceremony, prompting anxiety about the risk of infection.

"They want it to be faster, but we have only the three furnaces working," said the official. Pressure is being felt all around. Some ambulances are bringing four or five bodies at a time from hospitals where mortuaries are reportedly overloaded with virus victims.

An ambulance driver told AFP there had been times when he was forced to leave his vehicle with bodies inside parked overnight at Nigambodh Ghat, after the facility failed to cremate them and they could not be returned to the hospital. It takes about two hours to incinerate a body in a furnace and even

the second week of May, and left them near the plantation boundary.

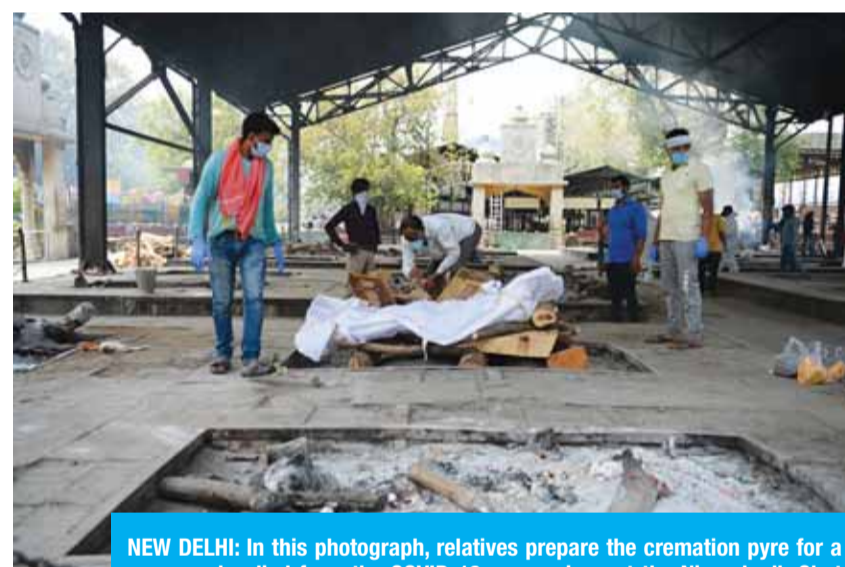
Officials said it was unclear when exactly the 15-year-old elephant consumed the rigged fruit but it was found injured on May 25, two days before it died.

Forest officials said the explosion caused severe damage to its mouth, leaving the creature unable to eat or drink for days. Villagers across India often use explosive or firecracker-filled fruits—which act like pressure-activated landmines—as bait to target wild animals that threaten crops and homes. A similar incident was reported last month in a nearby Kerala district, when a female pachyderm was found with serious mouth injuries. If convicted, the men could face up to seven years in jail for killing an elephant, a protected animal under Indian wildlife laws.

### Lord Ganesh

The latest incident caused widespread outrage on social media, including from several sports and Bollywood celebrities, who condemned the "inhuman act" and called for harsh action against the perpetrators.

But it stirred another controversy after several Hindu right-wing figures on social media turned the death into a hate campaign against Muslims, falsely claiming that the community were behind the incident.



NEW DELHI: In this photograph, relatives prepare the cremation pyre for a person who died from the COVID-19 coronavirus, at the Nigambodh Ghat cremation ground in New Delhi. —AFP

longer on the pyres, which are fed by a constant stream of cartloads of wood pushed by dozens of crematorium workers. In front of the furnaces, the mourners stand behind a screen, their masked faces revealing only eyes brimming with tears.

Narendra Vashisht, 68, waited two hours before he could peer through the glass at his brother's body being prepared for its final moments.

"It has not been easy," he said. "We had to keep asking them to hurry it up."

Before the virus crisis, tradition-loving Indian families were wary of modern furnaces. Now they are scared of the illness and want a quick and efficient end.

"We used to get only four or five bodies a day for the furnace. We had to convince people to use it. Now things are different," Gupta said. —AFP



CHENNAI: A woman takes a picture with her mobile phone of a painted poster of an elephant and its calf in the belly lit up with candles by school staff to pay homage after the recent killing of a pregnant wild elephant in the southern Indian state of Kerala, in Chennai. —AFP

Many right-wing Hindu figures alleged online the creature was specifically targeted because the animal is an embodiment of Lord Ganesh, the elephant-headed Hindu deity. Members of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party, including environment minister Prakash Javadekar and parliamentarian Maneka Gandhi, also claimed the event happened in Malappuram, a Muslim-majority district.

The incident took place in Palakkad district, some 80 kilometers

(50 miles) away. India is home to nearly 30,000 elephants, equivalent to 60 percent of the world's wild Asian pachyderms.

But urban expansion has put the animals in conflict with humans. About 2,360 people were killed in elephant attacks between 2014 and 2019, according to Indian government data. In the same period about 510 elephants died, including 333 from electrocution and roughly 100 from poaching and poisoning, the figures stated. —AFP