

International

French black, Arab men face 'discriminatory' police checks

Angry protests over racism sweep across the country

PARIS: French police conduct discriminatory identity checks on black and Arab men, Human Rights Watch charged yesterday, as angry protests over alleged racism in the security forces sweep across the country. France has seen numerous demonstrations in recent weeks protesting the actions of police, many coalescing around the 2016 death of young black man Adama Traore in police custody, which activists say echoes George Floyd's killing in the US. Human Rights Watch said in a report that the French police have "overly broad" powers "to conduct discriminatory and abusive checks on black and Arab boys and men", leaving too much room for arbitrary and biased decisions.

"There is ample evidence that identity checks in France drive a deep and sharp wedge between communities and the police, while doing virtually nothing to deter or detect crime," HRW's France director Benedicte Jeannerod said. The report comes as France is reeling from allegations of institutionalized racism in the ranks of its police, an accusation vehemently rejected by police forces who say the problems are down to individual security force members. French President Emmanuel Macron acknowledged in a national address Sunday that France had to fight against the fact that "the name, the address, the color of the skin" can

affect a person's chances in their lives.

But Macron defended France's under-fire police force, saying they "deserve public support and the recognition of the nation for their work". On Tuesday his government backtracked on a ban on the use of chokeholds by the police after a backlash by police unions, who demonstrated across France and threw down their handcuffs in protest. HRW's report - based on interviews with 90 men and boys belonging to minority groups in Paris, Grenoble, Strasbourg and Lille - says the stop-and-search checks "often involved invasive and humiliating body pat-downs."

The 44-page document includes 12-year-old Koffi's account, who says his class was subjected to an identity check in front of their school in Bobigny, a disadvantaged neighborhood in northeastern Paris, as they were leaving on a field trip to the famous Louvre museum. He said three police officers searched their bags. "They put their hands in my pockets. They spread my legs and touched my genitals," Koffi said. Children as young as 10 are targeted, the HRW report said. There are no official statistics on the racial profiles of those stopped by the police, as a 1978 French law prohibits the collection of data on a person's race, ethnicity, or political or religious opinions. — AFP



PARIS: Handcuffs and badges are displayed on the ground during a protest in reaction to the French Interior minister's announcements, amid the latest wave of protests against racism and police violence. —AFP

WHO halts HCQ trials on patients

GENEVA: The World Health Organization decided Wednesday to halt trials of hydroxychloroquine as a potential treatment for hospitalized COVID-19 patients, finding it did not reduce the mortality rate. A decades-old malaria and rheumatoid arthritis drug, hydroxychloroquine has been at the center of political and scientific controversy. It has been touted as a possible treatment for the new coronavirus by high profile figures, including US President Donald Trump.

The drug has been included in several randomized clinical trials - considered the gold standard for clinical investigation - but the WHO said the evidence had led the UN health agency to call time on its own trials. Doctor Ana Maria Heno Restrepo, from the WHO's health emergencies program, told a virtual press conference in Geneva that it was being withdrawn from its multi-country Solidarity Trial of a range of potential treatments.

"The internal evidence from the Solidarity/Discovery Trial, the external evidence from the Recovery Trial and the combined evidence from these large randomized trials, brought together, suggest that hydroxychloroquine - when compared with the standard of care in the treatment of hospitalized COVID-19 patients - does not result in the reduction of the

mortality of those patients," she said. "Based on this analysis and on the review of the published evidence, the Executive Group of the Solidarity/Recovery Trial has met on two occasions and today we met with all the principal investigators. "After deliberation, they have concluded that the hydroxychloroquine arm will be stopped from the Solidarity Trial."

British trial results

Heno Restrepo said it was not a WHO policy recommendation and the decision to stop testing it on COVID-19 hospital patients did not apply to the use or the evaluation of the drug as a potential preventative measure against the virus. Earlier this month, the Recovery Trial - a major trial run by the University of Oxford - found hydroxychloroquine had "no benefit" for patients hospitalized with COVID-19.

The British trial, the biggest so far to come forward with findings, said it would stop recruiting patients to be given hydroxychloroquine "with immediate effect". "Our conclusion is that this treatment does not reduce the risk of dying from COVID among hospital patients," said Martin Landray, an Oxford professor of medicine and epidemiology who co-leads the study. The randomized clinical trial has recruited a total of 11,000 patients from 175 hospitals in the UK to test a range of potential treatments. The WHO announcement came after the United States on Monday withdrew emergency use authorizations for hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine - both favored by Trump to treat the new coronavirus. — AFP

Facial recognition: IT and police in delicate dance

PARIS: Tech giants love to portray themselves as forces for good and as the United States was gripped by anti-racism protests a number of them publicly disavowed selling controversial facial recognition technology to police forces. Facial recognition has numerous applications that could simplify our lives as we've seen with Apple using it to unlock smartphones or in stores to replace cash registers.

But the technology has a dark side, with facial recognition integrated into China's massive public surveillance system and its social credit experiment where even minor infractions of public norms can result in sanctions. As the protests spread across the United States about police violence and racism, pressure mounted on tech firms about the technology. Microsoft and Amazon announced they would suspend sales of facial recognition software to police forces while IBM said it would exit the business. Privacy and rights groups worry about the implications of the use of facial recognition technology by law enforcement.

'Extremely intrusive' technology

"It is an extremely intrusive form of surveillance and can seriously undermine our freedoms and eventually our society as a whole," says Pri-

vacy International. "The biggest danger is that this technology will be used for general, suspicionless surveillance systems," says for its part the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). It notes that US state governments hold extensive photo databases as part of their motor vehicle departments, which if combined with public surveillance or other cameras, could result in "a comprehensive system of identification and tracking". In January 2020, a New York Times investigation pulled back the curtain on the activities of Californian startup Clearview AI, whose facial recognition tool "could end your ability to walk down the street anonymously".

Social network photos scraped

That is because Clearview AI doesn't use photos held by governments, but billions of photos scraped from social media sites. While social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube (Google) and LinkedIn (Microsoft) protested against the unsanctioned use of their users' photos, Clearview hasn't acceded to their demands to delete them. The firm, which received funding from PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel, says it has already signed up 600 law enforcement agencies worldwide. According to advocacy group AlgorithmWatch, at least 10 European police forces already use facial recognition technology and haven't needed to turn to the tech giants. "I have never seen a contract between Microsoft, Amazon or IBM and a police force in the investigations I have done on the subject," said journalist Nicolas Kayser-Bril, who did the research behind the AlgorithmWatch report. — AFP