

International

Homeless but not forgotten
in Britain's COVID jab drive

126,000 people in UK fell prey to the virus over a year

WINCHESTER, UK: Mac is only 25, normally too young to be eligible for the British government's COVID inoculation campaign at this stage. But he's still terrified of catching the virus. "I don't want to die from COVID!" he says. Mac is homeless, and therefore qualifies for priority vaccination to ensure the most vulnerable are also protected. They include other younger people with acute medical conditions or learning difficulties. Homeless since the age of 18, Mac has been offered a first jab in April at a shelter in the southern city of Winchester, the ancient capital of England known for its cathedral and an elite private school.

For all its history and gentility, Winchester is no stranger to the problem of homelessness, which has grown across Britain following years of budget cuts following the 2008 global financial crisis. "If I wasn't sleeping in the night shelter I wouldn't have been offered it at all," Mac said, his long blond curls peeking out from under a hoodie. "There are many people I know living in tents, in the countryside. Around here is very rural, you would never find them."

Mac and others at the shelter were found thanks to the community outreach work of local doctor Alex Fitzgerald-Barron. "The homeless are high health-risk patients because they are in a multitude of diagnostic categories," he said, listing mental health problems and frequent pneumonia, along with oral and skin infections. "They are at high risk of hepatitis C because of injecting drugs," Fitzgerald-Barron added. "They are much more likely to end up in hospital if they catch COVID—and to die from it."

Leave no one behind

Britain last week marked the anniversary of its first coronavirus lockdown, paying tribute to the more than 126,000 people who have died—one of the world's worst tolls. A year ago, the government ordered everyone to stay at home. For those without a home, it directed local councils to throw open emergency shelters and paid for rooms in hostels. But complaints were rife that social distancing was impossible in cramped shelters, hastening the spread of COVID-19.

And the homelessness charity Shelter has warned



LONDON: The vaccination campaign is currently targeting people aged over 50 in the general population — AFP

that the "economic fallout of 2020 may turbo-charge this crisis" as the latest lockdown is wound down. The easing of restrictions is possible thanks to the vaccination campaign, which is currently targeting people aged over 50 in the general population.

More than 30 million people have now received at least a first dose, and the government intends to cover every adult with at least one shot by the end of July. "It's so important that nobody gets left behind in this national effort," Health Secretary Matt Hancock said, when he announced in mid-March that the campaign would start prioritizing the homeless. "We know there are heightened risks for those who sleep rough." But Fitzgerald-Barron had already begun to target the homeless, using his medical judgment to classify them as "extremely vulnerable", one of the first groups inoculated alongside the very old.

Second doses deadline

While other medics work out of mobile clinics, the Winchester doctor uses a small fridge that he plugs into his car, loaded with the day's doses. When Fitzgerald-

Barron arrives at a shelter, he plugs the fridge into the mains electricity. He started offering jabs in February, making face-to-face contact with 114 homeless people, 74 of whom agreed to be vaccinated. He considers that number "a good result", made possible only by a "personal relationship of trust". "I had to be in front of them to explain what it is," Fitzgerald-Barron says. More than other groups, according to people involved, the homeless are often scarred by past encounters with officialdom and more prey to anti-vaxx hoaxes.

"I think this is all a big conspiracy to control the population," said one woman, Leighan, 35, who refused the invitation from Fitzgerald-Barron. For those like Mac who did take up the doctor's offer, the worry is what happens after the lockdown is lifted and the pandemic is considered over. "The government hasn't yet set out their (homelessness) strategy as the pandemic eases," said Jasmine Basran, policy and public affairs manager at the charity Crisis. Despite the government's pledges last year of financial support, when the first lockdown finished in June, "some people were turned away from support" by local councils, she said. —AFP

At Moldova-Romania
frontier, pandemic
lays bare inequality

CHISINAU, Moldova: At the hospital in the small Moldovan town of Leova, exhausted doctors see no end to the pandemic: cases are rising, and vaccinations have only just begun. The first Moldovan was vaccinated at the start of March—more than two months after European Union member countries began inoculating their populations—and only thanks to donations from neighboring Romania, with which it has historically close relations. The two countries might share the same language, but offer a glimpse at the difference a border can make.

So far, non-EU member Moldova has received barely enough doses for three percent of its population, while Romania, an EU member since 2007, has already administered almost three million.

"If Romania was not part of the EU, it would certainly have had a much harder time getting vaccines," says Sorin Ionita, a political analyst with the think tank Expert Forum.

Romania's liberal Prime Minister Florin Citu has said that the European Commission's handling of procurement helped avoid "chaos" in which "the highest bidder" would have received the most vaccines. It is part of the reason why Bucharest has refrained from criticizing the bloc's vaccine rollout, unlike other Eastern members like Hungary and Poland, Ionita says.

This conciliatory position "is part of a broader policy of Bucharest, which, supported by a Europhile population, does not seek a fight with Brussels", he adds.

'Our only chance'

Moldova, a part of Romania until the Soviet Union annexed it in 1940, remains one of the poorest countries in Europe and has so far relied on vaccine donations—about 72,000 so far—from Bucharest.

It received another 38,000 doses under the global Covax mechanism to help low- and middle-income countries fight the pandemic. In total, these donated vaccines would be enough to give about 110,000 people at least one dose, out of a population of 3.5 million.

The outlook remains bleak as "vaccination represents the only chance" to contain the pandemic, says Andrei Malasevski, the hospital director in Leova, a city of about 8,000 nestled on the banks of the meandering Prut river that forms the border with Romania. "We didn't have the so-called 'waves'. The pandemic only grew and it continues to do so," he says. So far more than 4,800 people have died in the small nation.

At the Emergency Institute in Moldova's capital Chisinau, one of the biggest hospitals in the country, the number of ICU beds was expanded from 24 to 62



CHISINAU: Two men wearing protection suits transport a COVID-19 patient's dead body to the hospital's morgue from the COVID-19 ICU unit at the "Emergency Institute" in Moldova's capital Chisinau. — AFP

to cope with the influx of COVID-19 patients.

The unit has nevertheless been 90 percent occupied for months and doctors and nurses are stretched to the limit, says Adrian Belii, head of the ICU unit and one of the country's most prominent physicians. The health system was already strained before the pandemic, in part because vast numbers of doctors and nurses have left to work in the EU.

Many sought employment in Romania when salaries for healthcare workers there doubled in 2018.

"It is too early to consider vaccination of risk categories, let alone the general population," Belii says. If Moldova was a member of the EU, "as a large segment of the population dreams of, things would have been different," he adds.

Help from Russia?

While the number of cases continues to climb, Moldova's pro-European president Maia Sandu said she would try to "obtain rapid access to the Sputnik V vaccine" from Russia—an announcement that sparked fierce discussions among Moldovans. Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union more than 30 years ago, Moldova has been torn between Russia and the EU, and geopolitics is now shaping the pandemic response too. Disinformation campaigns are rampant, and local media have reported that healthcare workers in the pro-Russian region of Gagauzia refused the AstraZeneca vaccine, saying they would rather wait for Moscow's Sputnik V.

"We are very politicized. And when some hospitals say that they won't use a vaccine from Europe because they want the Russian one, we have a problem", Malasevski says. Once vaccines are available for a larger part of the population, sociologist Victor Mocanu believes that mistrust will yield to the economic need of families dependent on remittances from the diaspora. "The approximately one million Moldovans who work abroad will want to be vaccinated as soon as possible as they won't be able to travel without a certificate," he predicts. —AFP

NY state passes bill legalizing
recreational marijuana

NEW YORK: New York state lawmakers passed a bill Tuesday legalizing recreational marijuana, with Governor Andrew Cuomo saying he would sign it into law. New York will join 14 other US states and the District of Columbia in permitting cannabis use after the bill was backed by both state chambers, where Cuomo's Democratic Party holds strong majorities.

"For too long the prohibition of cannabis disproportionately targeted communities of color with harsh prison sentences," Cuomo said in a statement. "This landmark legislation provides justice for long-marginalized communities, embraces a new industry

that will grow the economy, and establishes substantial safety guards for the public." Cuomo's office has said the change could net an additional \$350 million in annual tax revenues and create tens of thousands of jobs.

The law will allow adults 21 and over to purchase cannabis and grow plants for personal consumption at home, with a plan to divert some funds to drug treatment and education. New York would automatically clear records of people with past convictions of marijuana-related offenses that would no longer be criminalized. —AFP

News in brief

Harris thanks Guatemalan president

WASHINGTON: US Vice President Kamala Harris thanked the Guatemalan president Tuesday for monitoring the border with Honduras, during a telephone call to discuss the recent surge of Central American migrants into the United States, the White House said. Harris, appointed last week by President Joe Biden to work with Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras to address the root causes of the influx of migrants, highlighted Alejandro Giammattei's efforts to "secure Guatemala's southern border," the White House said in a statement. — AFP

Yemen receives first vaccines: UN

ADEN: War-torn Yemen received the first shipment of COVID-19 vaccines yesterday, the UN children's agency said, a week after the country's coronavirus committee warned of a public health "emergency". The AstraZeneca doses arrived in the southern port city of Aden, Yemen's de facto capital, where the internationally recognized government is based after being routed from Sanaa in the north by Houthis rebels. "Yemen received 360,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses shipped via the Covax facility," UNICEF said in a statement, referring to the World Health Organization-backed scheme to provide jabs to countries in need. — AFP

EU-mediated Georgia crisis talks fail

TNILISI: The second round of European Union-mediated talks between Georgia's ruling party and the opposition failed yesterday to resolve a political impasse sparked by elections last year, an EU mediator said. The EU-aspirant nation in Europe's extreme southeast has been gripped by a political crisis following October's parliamentary elections which the opposition has denounced as rigged, staging mass protests to demand snap polls. The stalemate worsened last month after police arrested the opposition leader in a violent raid on the headquarters of his United National Movement (UNM), the Caucasus country's main opposition force, leading the prime minister to resign. — AFP

Bolivia to speed up vaccinations on border

LA PAZ, Bolivia: Bolivia said Tuesday it will speed up its vaccination campaign in areas that border with Brazil, where a new variant of the coronavirus has emerged. "We have instructed the Ministry of Health to proceed with the vaccination of all border populations in the country, starting with these, which are the most exposed populations [and] that are adjacent to Brazil," said President Luis Arce. "We are not exempt from the fact that there may be a strain, a virus that is being generated and reproduced without control, so we have to take precautions," said the president. — AFP

Candidate murdered in Mexico

MEXICO CITY: Gunmen killed a local election candidate in a central Mexican state plagued by cartel-related violence, his party said Tuesday, the latest in a wave of murders linked to the June polls. Alejandro Galicia, who was running for municipal councilor in Guanajuato state, was shot dead Monday when returning from a tour of the area, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) said. A local PRD leader was also seriously wounded in the attack, it said, calling for a full investigation. — AFP

Colombian ex-rebel sentenced

BOGOTA: A Colombian court has sentenced a former FARC fighter to nearly 29 years in jail for the kidnapping and murder of a three-man Ecuadorian press team in 2018, the prosecutor's office said Tuesday. Jesus Vargas, who goes by the alias Reinel, was given a sentence of 28 years and eight months, it said—the first person convicted in the case. Reporter Javier Ortega, 32, photographer Paul Rivas, 45, and their driver Efraim Segarra 60, were abducted in March 2018 while covering a story on violence along the Ecuador-Colombia border. They worked for Ecuador's influential El Comercio newspaper. — AFP



NEW YORK: Protestors celebrate outside US District Court Southern District of New York on Tuesday after Juan Antonio "Tony" Hernandez, brother of the president of Honduras Juan Orlando Hernandez was sentenced to life for drug trafficking offenses. — AFP

Honduran president's
brother gets life in US
jail for drug-pushing

NEW YORK: Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez's brother was sentenced to life in prison by a New York judge Tuesday for large-scale drug trafficking after a trial that implicated the leader of the Central American country. Tony Hernandez, 42, was found guilty in October 2019 on four counts—including conspiring to import cocaine into the United States, possessing machine guns and making false statements. Judge P. Kevin Castel said a life sentence for the former Honduran congressman who trafficked more than 185 tons of cocaine into the United States, some branded with his initials "TH," was "richly deserved."

President Hernandez, however, described the ordeal as a scandal, calling the sentencing "outrageous" and stating that it was "incredible that the false testimonies of confessed murderers are heard and valued in this way," referring to some of the convicted killers who served as witnesses. Prosecutors had demanded life in prison, stressing that Tony Hernandez had "shown no remorse" and was "a central figure in one of the largest and most violent cocaine trafficking conspiracies in the world." His defense team had called for the mandatory minimum sentence of 40 years. Hernandez, who served as a member of the Honduran Congress from 2014 to 2018, was arrested at a Miami airport in November 2018. His family in Honduras also insisted on his "innocence" Tuesday evening, and said that he would appeal, in a statement released by the Honduran presidency.

Co-conspirator

During the trial, US prosecutors said President Hernandez had been a "co-conspirator" in his brother's crimes, although he has not been formally charged by the US judicial system. Government attorneys said the president took millions of dollars in bribes from drug lords including jailed Mexican kingpin Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman. President Hernandez has repeatedly denied all allegations of drug trafficking.

A lawyer who came to power in January 2014 and is in his second term, Hernandez has styled himself as a champion in the fight against drugs. During his brother's trial the US government successfully argued that Tony Hernandez was a large-scale drug trafficker who worked from 2004 to 2016 with others in Colombia, Honduras and Mexico to import cocaine into the US by plane, boat and submarine. Hernandez made millions of dollars from the trafficking and used the proceeds to influence three presidential elections, according to US attorneys. The prosecution also said Hernandez was involved in at least two murders of rival drug traffickers in 2011 and 2013. Defense lawyers unsuccessfully questioned the credibility of witnesses, many of them former drug traffickers, some of whom had been convicted of murder. — AFP



NEW YORK: In this file photo a recreational marijuana smoker indulges in smoking weed in the Bushwick section of the Brooklyn borough of New York City. — AFP