

International

Coffin stored in break room as LA funeral home overwhelmed

Shortage of coffins in Los Angeles due to lack of wood

LOS ANGELES: A corpse in the break room. Embalmed bodies in the garage. Boyd Funeral Home, a small family business in Los Angeles, is so overflowing with COVID-19 victims it has begun turning away customers for the first time in its history. "The weekend before I turned down 16 families that I couldn't do services for," said owner Candy Boyd.

"It's sad. But that's pretty much how it is now." In the past two weeks, as coronavirus has slammed Los Angeles, some 80 percent of the deceased passing through her doors died from COVID. One-in-10 residents of the nation's second largest city has been infected since the pandemic began, with nearly 300 people dying daily last week as the virus surges.

At Boyd's reception desk, the phones keep ringing, mostly going unanswered as her overwhelmed staff have abandoned setting appointments and now tell customers to just show up and get in line. She is even receiving calls from desperate families in other countries more than an hour's drive away.

Many hospital morgues are also full, with local coroners using refrigerated trucks to accommodate the victim load and some cemeteries warning of two week waiting lists. "Things are getting more and more out of control," said Boyd. During AFP's visit this week, a casket topped with a small wreath of flowers occupied the employee break room beyond the front desk. It had been there for a week. "This room is our lunch area, however, we are having to

use this room for space for caskets," said the owner. "We've done the services but the cemetery is so backed up... we have to hold them here until they have time to do the burial."

Bodies in the garage

Like much of surrounding South Los Angeles, the Westmont neighborhood is mainly inhabited by Black and Latino working class communities living in densely populated homes. These demographics have been hit particularly hard by COVID, with mortality rates two or three times higher than nearby affluent communities. Boyd's funeral home cold storage room has been consistently full.

Two weeks ago, Boyd brought in craftsmen to erect two large wooden structures in the company's garage to store embalmed bodies. "He hasn't even gotten a chance to really finish because we needed (to store) these," she said, pointing to corpses wrapped in body bags lying on the rough shelves.

"I would never imagined having to build that in my wildest dreams." Some funeral homes have reported a shortage of coffins due to lack of wood, though Boyd's supplier has kept up with orders so long as they are placed early enough.

'Nightmares'

Worried about her five staff catching the virus at the start of the pandemic, Boyd initially refused to accept COVID victims. "I was having nightmares. I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep," she recalled.



LOS ANGELES: Candy Boyd, owner of the Boyd Funeral home, speaks during an interview next to an empty casket and cabinets built for expanded storage capacity of embalmed bodies awaiting burial due to the surge of COVID-19 deaths in Los Angeles. — AFP

Boyd has since created safety protocols and now feels comfortable dealing with the influx, although she insists it is "not about the money." "It's about helping families and helping them get through this crisis," she said. "It takes a toll on me every day, I'm dealing with this," Boyd added. "And I have to keep a stoic face because I have to be there for the family."

Sometimes, customers are people she has long known personally. Other times, Boyd encounters

families who still refuse to wear masks or respect physical distance, even as they make arrangements to bury their loved ones. "The numbers don't lie. It's true. It's real," said Boyd of the disease.

Cases in California have more than doubled since early December to 2.8 million.

"If you don't take it serious," she warned an AFP journalist, "you could be one of the people that are in my back row back there, you know!" —AFP

An indiscriminate airport attack means many families are in mourning: ICRC

By Dominik Stillhart

SANAA, Yemen: My visit to Yemen was one filled with heartbreak, following the deaths of three of our colleagues. It's heartbreaking that the people of Yemen have suffered so much violence in the last five years, that ongoing fighting causes daily losses and despair at a time when people are dealing with a global pandemic on top of the consequences of protracted conflict.

The attack at Aden airport on December 30 was indiscriminate and a stark reminder of what civilians caught up in conflict and violence in Yemen endure. Latest official figures say that 28 people died and 113 were wounded, among them travelers, airport employees, families seeing people off or welcoming them home, who saw their world change in an instant.

Three of our colleagues were also killed in the attack—Saidi Kayiranga, Hamid Al-Qadami and Ahmed Wazir—three dedicated International Committee of the Red Cross staff helping people in need. As difficult as the visits were, I am glad that I got to meet with grieving family members, to extend my support and share heartfelt condolences on behalf of the entire ICRC. Our injured colleagues are also in our thoughts, as well as all those who witnessed and survived the attack and are dealing with the psychological and physical after-effects.

This is not the first such attack in Yemen where civilians have borne the brunt and the losses. We have said it many times before and we will keep repeating it: all those involved in the violence in Yemen must spare and safeguard civilians and ensure that humanitarian workers can perform their duties.

ICRC response to US designation in Yemen

We are increasingly alarmed about the situation across Yemen and committed to doing all we can to help alleviate suffering and deliver assistance. On top of the ongoing and deadly violence in different parts of the country, COVID-19 has affected many communities, seasonal infectious diseases claim thousands of lives each year; and high inflation has seen the price of food, medicine, and other basic goods soar.

With that in mind, the ICRC is concerned by the potential negative impact of the U.S. designation of Ansarullah as a foreign terrorist organization on the humanitarian situation in Yemen, as well as on the provision of impartial humanitarian assistance to those in need. In particular, the ICRC is concerned about the possible "chilling effect" the designation may have on humanitarian action, leading to it being impeded or delayed. Increased operational risks and possible de-risking from the banking and private sectors in response to the designation ultimately may constrain the humanitarian response in Yemen. States that decide to impose such measures must consider the humanitarian consequences and take steps, such as humanitarian carve-outs, to mitigate any negative impact on affected populations and on impartial humanitarian action.

We are two weeks into 2021. For Yemen, this new year started as the old one ended - with violence, fear and loss. People there need support more than ever and the ICRC, as an independent, impartial, and neutral humanitarian actor, will do all we can to assist.

Note: This is a statement from Dominik Stillhart, director of ICRC operations, after a visit to Yemen following the deaths late last month of three ICRC staff in an explosion at Aden's airport

Brazil's Amazonas state transfers COVID patients

MANAUS, Brazil: Facing the imminent collapse of its health system, Amazonas state in northern Brazil started transferring coronavirus patients to other regions Friday as hospitals run out of beds and oxygen. Nine patients out of 235 identified for transfer were flown in the early morning hours to the state of Piaui on an air force plane, state authorities reported, with further flights planned to other states later Friday.

Amazonas state, with Manaus as its capital, has been hard hit by a resurgence of the virus.

It has a death rate of 143 per 100,000 inhabitants, one of the highest in Brazil, with a national average of 98.5 deaths per 100,000. During the first wave of the Covid-19 epidemic last April, the Amazon rainforest city saw haunting scenes of mass graves and corpses piled into refrigerator trucks.

With hospitalizations in Manaus reaching even higher levels this time round, the city has again had to deploy refrigerator trucks. It is also the origin of a new virus variant recently detected in Japan, and which scientists warn is likely more contagious than the original, though it is not clear if this is the reason for the resurgence.

Images of people bringing oxygen tanks to hospitals and of patients complaining about a lack of

Outgoing Trump fetes Morocco king, rallies behind claim

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump, in a last-minute push to solidify Morocco's normalization with Israel, bestowed a rare award Friday on its king as his administration rallied international support in a regional dispute.

Trump, who sees Arab recognition of Israel as a key overseas achievement of his presidency, last month broke decades of precedent by recognizing Morocco's full sovereignty over contested Western Sahara, with Morocco in turn saying it would normalize relations with the Jewish state. The White House said it presented King Mohammed VI with the Legion of Merit, degree of Chief Commander, five days before Trump's departure in a private ceremony in Washington in which Morocco's ambassador accepted.

Pompeo hits Iran, China and Cuba in last-minute push

WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Friday imposed sanctions on three of his primary targets—China, Iran and Cuba—in a last-minute push aimed in part at boxing in President-elect Joe Biden. Five days before he turns in his keys at the State Department, Pompeo vowed to punish China over its clampdown in Hong Kong—a stance backed by Biden—but moved further away from Biden's goal of easing tensions with Iran and Cuba.

Pompeo condemned as "appalling" the massive operation on January 6 in Hong Kong in which China rounded up 55 people including an American lawyer, John Clancey. "We condemn PRC actions that erode Hong Kong's freedoms and democratic processes and will continue to use all tools at our disposal to hold those responsible to account," Pompeo said, referring to the People's Republic of China.



A COVID-19 patient, one of 12 to be transferred in a military airplane, is assisted by medical staff at the Ponta Pelada airport in Manaus, Amazonas State, Brazil, Friday amid the novel coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

medical assistance have angered Brazilians and augmented criticism of President Jair Bolsonaro's handling of the pandemic. The country has recorded more than 207,000 deaths from Covid-19, second only to the United States.

'We have done our part'

Bolsonaro, who has downplayed the virus and railed against lockdowns, face masks and other "hysteria," on Friday told supporters in Brasilia it was "terrible the problem there" in Amazonas. "Now we

have done our part with resources, means," he said. A ten-day curfew of 7:00 pm to 6:00 am enters into force in the state Friday in a bid to stop the rapid viral spread. A court on Saturday forced Amazonas state government to shut non-essential businesses for 15 days. In the early morning of Friday, an air force plane brought nine oxygen cylinders for Amazonas hospitals, adding to more than 400 delivered in the last five days. Oxygen is needed to treat people who suffer breathing problems as the coronavirus attacks their lungs. —AFP

dor accepted.

The military award was created to honor allied leaders in World War II and had gone into obscurity until it was revived by Trump, who last month also presented it to the prime ministers of Australia, India and Japan. "His vision and personal courage—including his decision to resume ties with the State of Israel—have positively reshaped the landscape of the Middle East and North Africa and ushered in a new era of security and prosperity for both our countries and the world," a White House statement said. The State Department's top official on the Middle East, David Schenker, on Friday joined Morocco in a virtual conference on Western Sahara that highlighted Trump's position. Forty nations participated with 27 at the ministerial level, a joint statement said.

"Participants committed to continue their advocacy for a solution, using Morocco's autonomy plan as the sole framework for resolving the Western Sahara dispute," it said. The countries taking part included Arab allies of Morocco and smaller developing nations but also France, Morocco's foreign ministry said.

President Donald Trump's outgoing administration slapped sanctions on six people over the detentions including Tam Yiu-Chung, Hong Kong's sole delegate to China's top lawmaking body, the National People's Congress Standing Committee. It earlier took action against Hong Kong's top leader, Chief Executive Carrie Lam, who acknowledged that as a result she was no longer able to use a credit card or hold a bank account.

China last year pushed through a draconian security law in Hong Kong after widespread and sometimes violent protests that sought to preserve freedoms guaranteed to the financial hub before Britain handed back the territory in 1997.

Pressure on Cuba, Iran

Antony Blinken, who will appear for a Senate confirmation hearing Tuesday to be Pompeo's successor, has vowed that the next administration "will stand with the people of Hong Kong and against Beijing's crackdown on democracy." But the Biden administration is expected to shift course on Cuba and Iran, on which headline stances have become points of pride in Trump's Republican Party, which saw a boost in support in the crucial state of Florida from Cuban-Americans.

On Friday, the Treasury Department said it was



Moroccan King Mohammed VI

President-elect Joe Biden has not committed to maintaining Trump's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony where tensions have simmered since the 1970s as the Algerian-backed Polisario Front fights for independence. Morocco controls most of Western Sahara but its sovereignty is not recognized by the United Nations. —AFP



WASHINGTON, DC: In this file photo US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo listens as US President Donald Trump speaks during the daily briefing on the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, in the Brady Briefing Room at the White House on April 8, 2020, in Washington, DC. —AFP

imposing sanctions on Cuba's interior minister, Lazaro Alberto Alvarez Casas, days after Pompeo said he was putting the island back on the US list of state sponsors of terrorism. Pompeo pointed to the arrest in 2019 of Cuban dissident Jose Daniel Ferrer, who was held in a prison run by the interior ministry "where he reported being beaten, tortured and held in isolation." —AFP