

International

Calls grow for a national monument honoring America's COVID-19 dead

Largest pandemic death toll more than 540,000

NEW YORK: Will the United States soon have a national monument commemorating the victims of COVID-19? Calls for a permanent memorial are increasing in the country with the largest pandemic death toll of more than 540,000. Since Joe Biden succeeded Donald Trump as president in January, and with America now in its second year of the pandemic, ceremonies honoring the dead—mostly virtual—have multiplied. Minute silences, flags at half mast, and places of contemplation: ephemeral moments of solemn respect have sprung up nearly everywhere. From 20,000 flags planted in the Mall in Washington last September when the US passed 200,000 dead, to 30,000 ribbons recently hung by a Florida resident resembling every death in the state, to murals paying tribute to caregivers, the pandemic has had markers in the landscape for months.

Now that the vaccination campaign is in full swing, and with the United States seeing light at the end of the tunnel despite a daily death toll of well over 1,000, appeals for lasting memorials are intensifying. “We are advocating for a permanent monument on the National Mall and funding for local, state, and tribal governments to be able to bring memorials and places all across the country,” said Kristin Urquiza, co-founder of the Marked by COVID association.

Urquiza helped launch the group shortly after her father died from coronavirus at the end of June. “It cannot be overstated how tragic and monumental this moment in our existence is,” she said. “We’re slated to lose more people than we lost in the Civil War,” when an estimated 620,000 Americans died, added Urquiza, an environmental official from San Francisco.

For Urquiza—who spoke about the death of her father, a Trump supporter, at the Democratic convention in August—erecting a monument and declaring a national holiday would be “an important step in the healing process.” It would also help ensure “that we impart upon future generations the unvarnished truth of what happened and why,” she said. Some municipalities have already green-lit monuments, with Jersey City in the New York suburbs the first. In December it designated a park under development as the site of 500 trees, symbolizing each COVID death in the city.

But the toll there has since risen past 700, highlighting the challenge facing supporters of these memorials. Many



WASHINGTON, DC: In this file photo taken on February 22, 2021 US President Joe Biden, First Lady Jill Biden, US Vice President Kamala Harris and her husband, Doug Emhoff, hold a moment of silence during a candlelight ceremony in honor of those who lost their lives to Coronavirus on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, DC. — AFP

relatives consider it essential to include the names of all the victims, even if the number makes that almost impossible. Supporters of a national place of remembrance all cite the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, which is inscribed with the names of more than 58,000 soldiers killed or missing in the war.

The long granite wall erected on the Mall in 1982 is one of the most visited monuments in the United States. It is the most successful contemporary memorial in America along with the 9/11 Memorial in New York City, according to Emily Godbey, a monument design expert at Iowa State University. “It’s an experience. It’s not something that you just look at,” she said. But “how do you honor the victims, when the numbers are so vast and we don’t know the end point yet?” she asks.

Virtual funerals

Godbey thinks an anonymous monument is more realistic, such as the “World Memorial to the Pandemic” proposed by Uruguayan architectural firm GomezPlatero. It resembles a large disc saucer and would be installed off the coast of Montevideo. But in the United States, where

the epidemic has been marred by political tensions, many relatives of victims expect real recognition, and even reparations, from the authorities. “We have to find a way to recognize each life lost to really make the tragedy understood,” said Urquiza.

Godbey says the debate over a national monument could last years. While waiting for physical monuments to be erected, the moment is virtual. Websites with photos and tributes to the victims are legion. A tribute site launched by journalism schools in New York last year calling on relatives to send photos and testimonies of their departed loved ones is the most exhaustive databases amassed so far, according to one of the site’s editors, Anjali Tsui. Despite the help of many volunteers the site only has some 2,000 names out of the more than 30,000 people who have died in New York City, highlighting the magnitude of the task. “What is so devastating about the COVID losses is that we’re having to experience them virtually,” said Godbey. After attending funerals online and watching a family member via a screen die in their hospital bed, over time a memorial is “going to have to be physical,” she added. — AFP

Southern European nations show united front on migration

ATHENS: Southern European countries showed a united front at a meeting in Athens, urging solidarity from other EU states in sharing the migration burden. Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Malta and Spain took part in the talks ahead of a March 25-26 EU summit focusing on EU-Turkey relations. Four of those southern EU countries that bear the brunt of refugee arrivals—Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain—have already told the European Commission that a proposed New Pact on Migration and Asylum does not share the burden of migrants arriving in Europe widely enough.

“We repeat our strong plea in favor of a needed true balance between solidarity and responsibility as in its current format the Pact does not provide sufficient reassurances to the front-line Member States”, the common statement said on Saturday. The Commission wants to overhaul the rules so that the asylum-seekers are shared out across the 27 member countries and not left the responsibility of Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain.

Aware that some countries, mainly eastern EU states, resist that, the new pact proposes they contribute funds instead to help the others taking in asylum-seekers. On Saturday the ministers of the five front-line countries stressed the “need for an automa-

tic and mandatory relocation mechanism to be put in place” and “a centrally managed European return mechanism, coordinated by the Commission and supported by relevant EU agencies such as FRONTEX”.

The MED5 group asked for an increase in “cooperation with origin and transit countries” but also to “ensure that the 2016 EU-Turkey Joint Statement is fully implemented by both the EU and Turkey towards all Member states”.

Cyprus and Greece are strongly critical of Turkey. Ever since a migration crisis in 2015 that saw over a million asylum-seekers enter Europe, the EU’s refugee and migration rules have been exposed as deficient.

Under a 2016 EU-Turkey pact, Ankara had agreed to take back migrants not entitled to international protection in return for billions of euros in aid. But Ankara has long accused the EU of not fulfilling its end of the bargain while it continues to host more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees.

The ministers who met at a hotel in Vouliagmeni, a seaside suburb of Athens, were joined by the vice-president of the European Commission, Margaritis Schinas and the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis. “We can no longer be punished because of our geographic position. We can no longer be punished for saving lives at sea,” Malta’s Home Affairs Minister Byron Camilleri said. Greek Migration Minister and host Notis Mitarachi warned that “the pact shouldn’t allow in future the emergence of new camps like Moria”, referring to a notorious Greek island refugee camp destroyed by fire. He added that “there is a lack of balance between the obligations of the countries of first reception and the uncertain mechanism of solidarity of the rest of the EU”. —AFP

Greece to mark revolution bicentennial with 1821 allies

ATHENS: Greece will next week celebrate the 200th anniversary of the uprising that created its modern state, a romantic revolution that experts say captivated both elites and the masses around the world. A national parade alongside Athens’ central Syntagma Square on March 25 — the date traditionally associated with the revolution—will feature mounted troops in traditional costumes from the 1821 conflict and the 1912-13 Balkan Wars. Nations who helped the Greeks in their near-decade-long struggle against the Ottoman Empire will also be represented. Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and Prince Charles of Britain and his wife Camilla will be in attendance, the Greek prime minister’s office said.

A new coronavirus lockdown forced French President Emmanuel Macron to pull out, but French Rafale and American F-16 jets will overfly the Greek capital, while the USS Eisenhower aircraft carrier will dock in Crete, a defense ministry source said. France has also loaned Greece an 18th-century tapestry of Raphael’s Renaissance masterpiece The School of Athens, the French embassy said.

Debt to Greece

With passion for Classical Greece mounting among European elites through the 17th and 18th centuries, “providing aid to modern Greeks came to be seen as a ‘duty’ of Europeans, as the only possible way of repaying Greece for its contribution to the birth of occidental civilization,” said Konstantina Zanou, a Mediterranean Studies specialist at Columbia University. Poet Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote in his 1821 verse drama ‘Hellas’ that “our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their root in Greece. But for Greece... we might still have been savages and idolaters”.

In decline and distracted by war in Persia and an Albanian governor’s rebellion in northwestern Greece, in 1822 the Ottoman Empire sent an army that was decimated by the rebels, who took control of the entire Peloponnese peninsula through use of guerrilla tactics.

The Friendly Society, a secret group of Greek expatriate merchants and intellectuals, had earlier helped organize the uprising with clandestine meetings and funds. The Greeks were a disparate mix of regional chiefs, ex-bands, warrior priests and veterans with prior experience in Ottoman-funded militias and British, French and Russian armies, including many of Albanian origin. By 1823, competing aims among the rebels’ civilian and military leaders resulted in open civil war, and an 1824 invasion by the Ottoman vassal state of Egypt nearly extinguished the revolution. —AFP



Greek Presidential guards march past outdoor exhibition, featuring portraits of Greek revolution heroes titled ‘History has Face’ by Benjamin Mary, a Belgian diplomat on the occasion of the 200 years anniversary of the Greek Revolution against ottoman Turks. — AFP



MIAMI BEACH: In this file photo taken on March 17, 2021 people watch a drag show at a club on Ocean Drive in Miami Beach. Throngs of revelers flocking to Miami Beach, Florida for spring break have become so uncontrollable that authorities imposed a curfew Saturday. — AFP

Miami Beach declares state of emergency

MIAMI BEACH: Throngs of revelers flocking to Miami Beach in Florida for spring break have become so uncontrollable that authorities declared a state of emergency Saturday and imposed a curfew meant to quash the party. The move marks the second year in a row that fun has been curtailed at the popular spring break destination—last March because the pandemic was just ramping up and this year due to unruly and destructive crowds. Authorities announced Saturday that visitors must be off the street and that restaurants would close their doors at 8:00 pm in South Beach, the epicenter of the city’s nightlife, following an increase of violence and vandalism over recent days. “It kind of sucks,” said John Perez, a student from Texas having beers with a group of friends on the sand, despite police efforts to prevent alcohol consumption on the beach.

In addition to the curfew, the three bridges that connect the Miami Beach island to mainland Miami will now be closed to traffic from 10 pm to 6 am. Only residents, workers and hotel guests will have access. “It’s been so much fun out here, you know, like we got the warm weather, you got the beach,” 22-year-old Perez said.

An aerial photo released by police Saturday night showed the city’s main strip, Ocean Drive, empty just two hours after the curfew went into effect. Miami Beach is no stranger to uncontrollable spring break crowds, but this year, with approximately 13 percent of US residents vaccinated, the atmosphere is particularly festive and the illusion that the pandemic is now under control is pervasive. “Just go get your vaccine y’all so that you could come out here and have a good time like us because we vaccinated, baby,” Jalen Rob, another student from Texas, said. Another man, with his face painted like the Joker, stood on top of a car yelling “Covid’s over, baby!” while waving an American flag, in a video posted to Twitter by filmmaker Billy Corben.

Acting City Manager Raul Aguila said the city’s curfew moves were “all about the public safety.” He described huge crowds that had gathered on Ocean Drive as looking “like a rock concert. You couldn’t see pavement and you couldn’t see grass.” Miami Beach Mayor Dan Gelber said Saturday while announcing the curfew that “the volume is clearly more than it’s been in previous years.” “I think it is in part due to the fact that there are very few places open elsewhere in the country, or they’re too cold or they’re not open and they’re too cold,” he said. —AFP

News in brief

Launch postponed for Soyuz rocket

MOSCOW: The launch of a Russian Soyuz rocket with 38 foreign satellites on board has been postponed until Monday, the Russian space agency Roscosmos said. The launch of satellites from more than half a dozen Asian, Arab and European countries, as well as Canada and Brazil, was originally scheduled for 0607 GMT on Saturday. It was initially postponed until yesterday, but Roscosmos later said it would take place today. Space agency chief Dmitry Rogozin said the launch was delayed after a surge in voltage was detected. “Having heard reports from the work managers, the State Commission decided to conduct the launch on the morning of March 22, 2021,” Roscosmos said in a later statement. —AFP

Police clash with protesters

KASSEL: German police clashed with protesters at a mass demonstration against coronavirus restrictions in the city of Kassel on Saturday, using water cannon, batons and pepper spray to disperse crowds. The protest attracted between 15,000 and 20,000 demonstrators, a Kassel police spokesman told AFP, making it one of the largest such rallies so far this year. “This is not what a peaceful protest looks like,” North Hesse police tweeted, adding that there had been “repeated attacks” by protesters against emergency service workers. An AFP reporter saw scuffles erupt when a group of corona skeptics tried to break through a police cordon to join up with other protesters, resulting in shoving and the use of pepper spray. — AFP

False alarm sends Mexicans into street

MEXICO CITY: Quake alarms roused thousands of residents of Mexico City early Saturday, sending some running into the street in their pajamas, but then nothing happened. Nerves were on edge because a 5.7-magnitude quake had struck south-central parts of the country hours earlier, though there were no reports there of injuries or damage. Alarms sounded in some of the capital’s central neighborhoods, including Escandon and Del Valle, sending dozens out of their homes, AFP journalists reported. Similar scenes were witnessed in the Iztacalco neighborhood farther south, as well as in Popotla in the city’s east, while in neighborhoods including Roma and Doctores no alarm was sounded. — AFP

Climate change row in Canada

TORONTO: Delegates of Canada’s Conservative Party rejected a resolution calling on the party to recognize the reality of climate change, snubbing a plea from the faction’s leader to take the environment more seriously. In a virtual policy conference that opened Thursday, 54 percent of delegates voted against a proposal recognizing that “climate change is real” and that the party is “willing to act” on it, according to results posted online. —AFP

‘Put me in jail’: Vaccine-skeptics still a barrier

MARTINSBURG, US: Patients stream steadily into the COVID vaccine center that Todd Engle can almost touch from his West Virginia backyard. But like scores of other Republican voters, force would likely be required to get a dose into his arm. Many of the party’s millions of supporters are among the nation’s most vaccine-skeptical people, which experts see as a dangerous barrier to finally taming the virus that has killed more than 540,000 in the United States. “If they try to make me get it, they’re just going to (have to) put me in jail,” the 58-year-old Engle told AFP from the porch of his home in Martinsburg, referring to health authorities. “I just don’t trust them.” West Virginia is heavily Republican—over 68 percent of its voters chose Donald Trump in November’s election—and it has long been one of the nation’s poorest states.

Yet not all West Virginia Republicans are vaccine skeptics. The state of under two million people has been lauded for quickly getting COVID vaccines to its people while bigger, wealthier and Democrat-led states have sometimes struggled to do the same. Part of that effort is the vaccine site behind Engle’s home, which operates in a recreation center gymnasium with the kind of efficiency that bustling, pre-pandemic airports could only dream of. Nurse Angela Gray, 51, said the site has administered as many as 1,500 shots in a day. “I try not to look at politics; that doesn’t matter,” Gray noted as nurses in masks, face shields and gloves delivered shots behind her. “But I’ve seen a lot of my fellow Republicans who are getting vaccinated.” She added that Republican elected officials in the area have spoken up for the safety and effectiveness of the shots and gotten inoculated themselves, a key part of efforts to convince the skeptical. But in towns across the United States, skeptics are numerous. According to a poll last week, 41 percent of Republicans nationally said they would not get the vaccine, compared to just 11 percent of Democrats. —AFP