



France accuses US, Australia of 'lying' in escalating crisis

Prisoners, newcomers and spoilers: Russia candidates



BEIJING: Volunteers search for Chen Shaohua, who suffers from Alzheimer's, at a mall in Beijing where Chen was last seen. —AFP

China's health time bomb

10 million diagnosed with degenerative - and incurable - brain disorder

BEIJING: The first time Chen Shaohua went missing and was picked up by police, the 68-year-old's family put it down to confusion. When he disappeared a second time, they realized he was deeply unwell - but it was already too late. "We missed the early signs," daughter Chen Yuanyuan explained, adding: "For several years our mother complained he was lying... but we couldn't judge because we haven't lived with them for years."

Doctors diagnosed Chen with Alzheimer's Disease, the most common form of dementia, where people suffer impaired cognitive function including memory loss, eventually needing full-time care. Approximately 10 million people have been diagnosed with the degenerative - and incurable - brain disorder in China, which accounts for approximately a quarter of the world's cases.

As the country's population is rapidly aging, this figure is expected to soar to 40 million by 2050, according to a study by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. The report warned this surge in cases would cost the economy \$1 trillion each year in medical expenses and lost productivity as caregivers drop out of the workforce. The World Health Organization says that while dementia is not "an inevitable consequence of biological aging", the strongest risk factor for getting it is age.

And while this is a growing problem worldwide - experts say China is poorly prepared for the challenge. The United States has 6.2 million Alzheimer's patients and 73,000 beds in specialist treatment centers, while China has double the cases but fewer than 200 beds. "No healthcare problem looms larger in China than Alzheimer's Disease," said Wei Shouchao, a neurologist from Guangdong medical university. "It is the fastest-growing major illness on the mainland, and we are not at all equipped to deal with it."

'We never suspected'

When Chen started misplacing his keys or wallet,

his family thought it was just forgetfulness. The first time he went missing, it took 40 hours to find him. Police picked him up after someone reported an attempted break-in. "(It) looked like the place where we used to live. Dad was confused. He forgot we are now in Beijing... luckily no one assaulted him," his daughter told AFP. Uncertain of what to do next, they bought him a watch that could help them track him via an app, but when he went missing again after taking it off, they realised he needed medical help.

"We never suspected Alzheimer's because we didn't have a family history and he is so young," said Chen Yuanyuan. As millions migrate to cities, old parents in

cated care facilities or increasing the capacity of public hospitals to treat dementia patients. "Rural doctors aren't trained for early diagnosis," said Wei. "Even Beijing has only one care home with staff trained to handle Alzheimer's patients."

Missing parents

Chen is a former army musician who plays several classical Chinese instruments including the bamboo flute. He is physically fit and has a clear memory of things that happened decades ago. On the surface, the only indicator that something is amiss is when he talks of past events as if they are happening now. "Chairman Mao attended one of our performances," he told AFP, referring to a concert in the central city of Wuhan in the 1960s.

Dementia patients often need round-the-clock care, and the physical and mental toll on caregivers can be significant, particularly if there is little professional help. Chen's son Chen Yunpeng has a busy job at a logistics company but as there are no community facilities he must instead bring his father to the warehouse where he juggles full-time work with keeping his father safe. And when he disappeared, the family had to rely on a volunteer group that helps find elderly people reported missing.

Over a dozen people - including retired civil servants, teachers and housewives - rushed to the site where Chen was last seen and helped police pore over hours of CCTV footage from public cameras to find clues about where he went. The team says it has helped find about 300 missing Alzheimer's patients since 2016. "We get calls almost every day about missing parents from families across the country," said Su Xiao, head of Beijing Zhiyuan Emergency Rescue Services Center. "The real danger is of the elderly being trapped in abandoned construction sites or falling into open pits or being out during bad weather." —AFP



Living with Alzheimer's Disease

rural China are "left behind and left vulnerable", said He Yao, from the National Clinical Research Center for Geriatrics Diseases. Lack of awareness among families means patients go without access to proper medical care for years, he said. "This is a missed opportunity because early interventions can slow the progression of the disease," he said.

Last year, Beijing announced the Healthy China 2030 action plan that aims to roll out community-level screening programs for the early detection of Alzheimer's or dementia and raise public awareness of the disease. However, critics say the proposals do not include details about training doctors, building dedi-

of Christians to their city," said Affas. "This is a great day of joy, and I hope the joy will grow even more when not only all the churches and mosques in Mosul are rebuilt, but also the whole city, with its houses and historical sites," he told AFP.

'Back to life'

The bell weighing 285 kilograms was cast in Lebanon with donations from Fraternity in Iraq, a French NGO that helps religious minorities, and transported from Beirut to Mosul by plane and truck. The church of Mar Tuma, which dates back to the 19th century, was used by the jihadists as a prison or a court.

Restoration work is ongoing and its marble floor has been dismantled and to be completely redone. Nidaa Abdel Ahad, one of the faithful attending the inauguration, said she had returned to her home town from Arbil so that she could see the church being "brought back to life". "My joy is indescribable," said the teacher in her forties. "It's as if the heart of Christianity is beating again." Faraj-Benoit Camurat, founder and head of Fraternity in Iraq, said that "all the representations of the cross, all the Christian representations, were destroyed," including marble altars.

"We hope this bell will be the symbol of a kind of rebirth in Mosul," he told AFP by telephone. Iraq's

Algerians rue 'missed opportunities' of the Bouteflika era

TUNIS: Algerians looked back on two decades of "missed opportunities" as flags flew at half mast yesterday during the funeral of former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika. His death at age 84 was announced late Friday, more than two years after the former strongman quit office. The long-time leader had risen to power in 1999 on a wave of popular support as his amnesty offer to Islamist militants helped bring an end to a devastating decade-long civil war.

But 20 years later, mass protests broke out in response to his announcement that he intended to stand for a fifth term, and the army stepped in to force his resignation. Bouteflika, a fighter in the war for independence from France, had suffered a mini-stroke in 2013 that affected his speech, and he was forced to use a wheelchair. Dubbed "Boutef" by Algerians, he had won respect as a foreign minister in the 1970s to his mentor, Algeria's second president Houari Boumediene. Algerian journalist Adlene Meddi said it was nostalgia for the heady Boumediene days of the late 60s and 70s that had given Bouteflika his initial honeymoon period as president. "For some, he was a reassuring presence, reviving memories of the 'glorious' years under Boumediene, when Algeria was the leader of the developing world-all in sharp contrast with the smouldering ruins of Algeria of the late 1990s," Meddi wrote on online news outlet Middle East Eye.

Weakened institutions

Hasni Abidi, head of the CERMAM studies centre in Geneva, said Bouteflika had also benefited from high oil prices of the era which had inflated government coffers. "His popularity was guaranteed by a high (price of a) barrel and a 'civil concord' law negotiated by the army" that put an end to the war with the Islamists, he said. "Unfortunately, Bouteflika missed his rendezvous with history-he was the president of missed opportunities. "He became a man of power and intrigue and not a statesman." University of Algiers politics lecturer Louisa Dris Ait Hamadouche said the nation had suffered a "litany of missed opportunities" as Bouteflika "failed to achieve his own ambitions or those of the Algerian state". He wanted "to surpass Boumediene, enshrine the presidency, bring all military institutions under its command, boost Algeria's influence on the regional stage, be the one to turn the page on the black decade (of civil war)," which killed around 200,000 people, Dris Ait Hamadouche said. "But the outcome has been that in 2021, the institutions of the state have never been so weakened, so divided or so discredited." Dris Ait Hamadouche said that for many younger Algerians, the only memory they would keep of their former president would be the "distressing image of an old man in a wheelchair".

More than half the country's population is younger than 30. She said she regretted that death had spared him having to answer for "the mistakes committed during the exercise of his duties". Bouteflika faced criticism from rights groups and opponents who accused him of being authoritarian. —AFP

Church in former IS Iraqi stronghold gets new bell

MOSUL: A bell was inaugurated at a church in Mosul on Saturday to the cheers of Iraqi Christians, seven years after the Islamic State group overran the northern city. Dozens of faithful stood by as Father Pios Affas rang the newly installed bell for the first time at the Syriac Christian church of Mar Tuma, an AFP correspondent reported.

It drew applause and ululations from the crowd, who took photos on mobile phones, before prayers were held. "After seven years of silence, the bell of Mar Tuma rang for the first time on the right bank of Mosul," Affas told them. IS swept into Mosul and proclaimed it their "capital" in 2014, in an onslaught that forced hundreds of thousands of Christians in the northern Nineveh province to flee, some to Iraq's nearby Kurdistan region.

The Iraqi army drove out the jihadists three years later after months of grueling street fighting. The return of the Mosul church bell "heralds days of hope, and opens the way, God willing, for the return



MOSUL: People gather to inaugurate the new bell at Syriac Christian church of Mar Tuma in Iraq's second city of Mosul. —AFP

Christian community, which numbered more than 1.5 million in 2003 before the US-led invasion, has shrunk to about 400,000, with many of them fleeing the recurrent violence that has ravaged the country. Camurat said around 50 Christian families had resettled in Mosul, while others travel there to work for the day. "The Christians could have left forever and abandoned Mosul," but instead they being very active in the city, he said. —AFP