

International

Witchhunt murders surge in troubled DR Congo province

Eight women burned to death or lynched

News in brief

29 killed in prison violence

QUITO: Nearly 30 prisoners were killed in a battle between inmates equipped with firearms and grenades at a prison in Ecuador's largest city Tuesday, officials said. It was the latest in a series of deadly prison clashes between rival drug gangs that have killed over 100 inmates this year. Ecuador's attorney general's office said on Twitter it was investigating the deaths of 29 convicts at the Litoral Penitentiary in the city of Guayaquil, including six who were beheaded. Officials gave conflicting statements on how many inmates were wounded, with the attorney general's office saying 42 while the national prison bureau earlier put that number at 48. President Guillermo Lasso retweeted an announcement from the prison bureau saying order "has been restored at the Litoral Penitentiary after the Tuesday incidents." Ecuador's prison system has become a battleground between prisoners linked to Mexican drug gangs—mainly the Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation cartels. —AFP

Russia reports record deaths

MOSCOW: Russia yesterday recorded its highest coronavirus death toll for a second day running, as infections are on the rise driven by the Delta variant and slow vaccination rates. A government tally reported 857 fatalities over the past 24 hours and 22,430 new cases. The new figure brings the country's total deaths from COVID-19 to 206,388 — the highest in Europe. Authorities have been accused of downplaying the severity of the outbreak. Under a broader definition for deaths linked to the coronavirus, statistics agency Rosstat reported in late August that Russia had seen more than 350,000 fatalities. The world's fifth worst-hit country with more than seven million infections, Russia has seen cases climb since last month as vaccinations stall. Moscow, the epicenter of the outbreak, has experienced a spike over the past week with authorities warning of rising hospital admissions. — AFP

At least 100 killed in Marib

DUBAI: At least 100 Yemeni rebels and pro-government troops have been killed in the past 48 hours as fighting intensifies for the key city of Marib, military and medical sources said yesterday. A string of air strikes from the Saudi-led coalition targeted the Iran-backed Houthi rebels, who have stepped up their assault on Marib, the government's last northern stronghold. Sixty-eight Houthis and 32 loyalists were killed in the latest clashes, military sources said. The tolls were confirmed by medical sources. The rebels rarely announce casualties among their own ranks, but their Al-Masirah channel reported around 60 coalition air strikes in Marib governorate in the past two days. Hundreds of fighters have been killed this month after the Houthis renewed their campaign for the capital city of the oil-rich province. — AFP

Texas executes man

WASHINGTON: A man condemned to death for the 1991 murder of two brothers in their home was executed by the state of Texas on Tuesday, after the US Supreme Court rejected an appeal that could have seen his case thrown out on grounds of racial bias in jury selection. Rick Rhoades, 57, received a lethal injection at the Huntsville penitentiary, according to Texas authorities, becoming the sixth person to be executed in the United States this year. A recidivist burglar, Rhoades was out of prison on conditional release when, on September 13, 1991, he entered the home of Charles Allen, who lived with his brother Bradley in the Houston suburbs. He then killed them in their sleep before robbing them, authorities said. He was not apprehended until a month later, when he was arrested during a school burglary and confessed to the double murder, claiming to have acted during a fight with Charles Allen outside his home. — AFP

UK officer 'murdered' woman

LONDON: A serving British police officer kidnapped a woman as she walked home, handcuffing her in a false arrest for breaking coronavirus restrictions, before raping and murdering her, a court was told yesterday. The disappearance of Sarah Everard during a national lockdown in March was one of Britain's most high-profile missing person investigations and sparked protests and a debate about women's safety on the streets. Wayne Couzens, 48, who served with the elite diplomatic protection unit of London's Metropolitan Police, admitted her kidnapping, rape and murder in July. Everard, who had been visiting a friend in Clapham, south London, was strangled then set on fire, with her remains found in woodland. At a two-day sentencing hearing, prosecutor Tom Little said Couzens targeted the 33-year-old marketing executive on March 3, and accused her of breaking coronavirus rules. — AFP

BUKAVU: Murders of women accused of witchcraft are surging in a troubled eastern province of the Democratic Republic of Congo, say officials and campaigners. Since early September, eight women have been burned to death or lynched in three districts of South Kivu province, local officials say. "We recorded 324 accusations of witchcraft for the June to September period," says Nelly Adidja of a provincial NGO called the Association of Women in the Media.

In the district of Kalehe alone, 114 cases have been recorded, including five women who were burned alive and four who were hauled away to unknown destinations by so-called self-defense militias. South Kivu lies in an arc of three provinces that for years have been in the grip of armed groups, many of them the legacy of regional wars that were fought a quarter of a century ago. Bosco Mchukiwa, director and professor of sociology at the Higher Institute of Rural Development in the provincial capital Bukavu, says the surge in witch-hunt attacks stems from a vacuum in governance.

"There is a resurgence of the phenomenon because the state has been failing in its core missions—the police and justice system are not doing their job," he said. The attacks, he added, are being whipped by "bajakazi"—bogus preachers or self-described psychics, mostly women, who live locally and claim to be able to detect witches. "It's false—they don't have any powers, but they play on the

gullibility of the people they manipulate in order to attract more followers, pump up their reputation and gain more clout in the village."

Little action

Muhindo Cikwanine, a lawyer and expert in parliamentary law, said the solution was to "outlaw these charlatans' prayer rooms". "In 2014, provincial lawmakers approved an edict forbidding use of mob justice in

and jailed for six months, he said. "They were released after promising to change profession, but some of them are secretly carrying on as before," Miderho said. Prosecutors say that it is virtually impossible to track down individuals who carry out the killings, he added. "Whenever there's a case of mob justice, village chiefs say it was done 'by the public', and don't provide any names."

Children join hunt

Shasha Rubenga, a young teacher and rights activist, said he saw a witchhunt on August 16 in Cifunzi, a village of around 2,000 people on the edge of DRC's Kahuzi-Biega National Park. "It was about five in morning—a Monday. Young men were going around the village with a list that had the names of 19 women over the age of 65 who had been designated as witches by a prophetess," he said.

Most of the women were able to flee from their homes, which were then destroyed. Others were saved by troops who fired shots into the air to disperse the mob. "But then I saw these youths grab hold of a neighbor whose name was Nyabadeux," an elderly woman who had seven children. "She was beaten up, doused in petrol and then set alight with a match," he said. The awful scene took place in the heart of the village, and children younger than 10 years old took part, Rubenga said. "I saw a five-year-old child who had a big stick and was using it to turn over Nyabadeux's charred body." — AFP



Congo Bajakazi 'detect' witches

South Kivu," he said. However, the law was never applied, "and it hasn't been followed up with a proper awareness campaign among the public," he said.

Thadee Miderho, administrative chief for Kabare territory, said that six killings had been recorded since the start of the year, "mainly women aged over 60," who had been designated as witches by "bajakazi". Two years ago, 11 accusers were arrested

Taleban's fighters hit the fairground

QARGHAH: "This is Afghanistan!" a Taleban fighter shouts on a pirate ship ride at a fairground in western Kabul, as his armed comrades cackle and whoop onboard the rickety attraction. With AK-47 and M4 assault rifles strapped to their chests, the soldiers cling to colorful steel benches as they are flung back and forth, their scarves and headresses flapping in the wind. It was decided a rocket launcher one of them was earlier cradling was better left on solid ground. The group—ranging in age from 18 to 52 — is relaxing at a small amusement park next to Qarghah Reservoir on the outskirts of the Afghan capital, where families and children normally ride the Ferris Wheel and carousel.

The scene is an incongruous one: the Taleban fighters were in a playful mood in the capital they seized less than six weeks ago. Since then, Afghans have feared a return to the group's brutally oppressive rule of the 1990s, when they banned music, photography, television—and even children's games such as kite-flying. The Taleban promised a more moderate rule this time, but have already curtailed Afghans' freedoms, including excluding girls from school and sports.



QARGHAH: A Taleban fighter carrying a rocket propelled grenade (RPG) launcher stands on a dock for leisure boats at Qargha Lake on the outskirts of Kabul. — AFP

Fighters from around the country flocked to Kabul after the Islamist hardliners swept to power in mid-August and many had never been to a funfair. Once the three-minute ride is over the battle-hardened fighters clap, grin and giggle amongst themselves—and the RPG launcher is reunited with its owner. On the shores of the picturesque reservoir, other Taleban members hop into swan-shaped pedalos as the sun begins to set behind the hills in the distance.

Still brandishing their weapons, they set off in pairs across the water in the pink, blue, green, yellow and blue boats, laughing as the vessels bump together. Dressed in camouflaged military uniforms and traditional Afghan clothes, they pose with their assault rifles as friends take pictures on the pebbly shore. Nearby, a few of the more senior Taleban members take the opportunity to pray, setting down their shawls between two boats on a jetty. — AFP

In COVID's shadow, HIV on march in Eastern Europe

BUCHAREST: In a Bucharest back street, drug addicts rush towards an ambulance handing out free syringes. While the eyes of the world focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, the fight against HIV has slowed down in Eastern Europe. Three times a week, Alina Schiau and colleagues from the Romanian anti-AIDS Association (ARAS) go out to the rougher parts of the city to hand out syringes and bandages to injecting drug users, and condoms to sex workers.

But their funds are running low and stocks dwindling. Come November, their ambulance might have to stay in the garage. "What's cheaper? To buy a syringe and thus focus on prevention? Or to treat a patient for years?" says social worker Ada Luca, indignant at government inaction. Bulgaria and Romania are both former Eastern bloc countries, and in 2019, 76 percent of AIDS cases diagnosed in Europe were in the East, according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and

Control (ECDC).

"It is obvious that the number of contaminations has increased since the start of the pandemic", Schiau told AFP. As coronavirus took hold, hospitals closed to non-COVID patients, says Davron Mukhamadiev, Regional Health and Care Coordinator for Red Cross Europe (IFRC). Quarantine requirements, travel restrictions and reduced access to rapid testing and diagnostic services all undermined efforts to roll back HIV/AIDS, he said.

'We are abandoned'

UNAIDS data shows 140,000 new infections in Eastern Europe and Central Asia in 2020, compared with 170,000 in 2019, which experts attribute to a dramatic slowdown in screening, not a drop in cases. In 2020, for example, Romania managed to screen only 234,420 people for HIV/AIDS — down nearly a third from 334,410 the previous year. It is a similar story in neighboring Bulgaria.

Regional health centers were "overwhelmed and hardly ever did any HIV testing during COVID," said Alexander Milanov, program director at the country's National Patients' Organization. The pandemic has disrupted supply chains and the transport of medicines, exacerbating historic shortages in countries such as Romania despite huge scientific strides that have dra-



BUCHAREST: Drug users hold syringes and other medical supplies they received from an ambulance of the Romanian anti-AIDS Association (ARAS) in Bucharest. —AFP

matically improved outcomes for HIV patients in rich nations.

Alexandru Tantu, a 28-year-old, HIV-positive IT specialist, has seen firsthand how other European countries treat patients better, and how in Romania, it is a daily struggle to get the required drugs. "We came to realize that we are abandoned," he said. "Hence all the anger and the fear that tomorrow we might not have our treatment." Still, with his stable job, he

regards himself as relatively "privileged". In his advocacy work, he says, he receives calls from patients who are considering suicide.

The HIV/AIDS crisis in Romania dates back to the communist years. Around 11,000 children born in the 1980s under the communist regime of Nicolae Ceausescu were infected as a result of contaminated or unsterilized syringes or transfusions with untested blood. — AFP

From mines to virus: Cambodia dogs train to sniff out COVID

KAMPONG CHHNANG: Cambodian anti-landmine authorities are training dogs to sniff out COVID-19, hoping the sharp-nosed canines normally used to detect underground explosives can keep the virus on a tight leash. Cambodia has won praise for a swift vaccine drive, with the health ministry saying over 98 percent of the adult population has received at least one dose.

Now they are embarking on a new strategy to spot COVID cases. Joining the fight will be 12 Belgian Malinois dogs the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC) has trained to nose out unsuspect-

ing patients who might be carrying the virus. In the longer term, the centre hopes to use the dogs at major events, including sports matches, director general Heng Ratana said. "Dogs are more efficient than other tools," he said.

The University of Health Sciences provided samples of volatile organic compounds—organic chemicals that emit odors—from COVID-19 patients to the demining agency's facility in Kampong Chhnang province. The dogs, bred in Cambodia, have so far proven to be very good boys. "After two and a half months, our dogs are in an early stage of success (so) they could sniff out the scent of COVID-19," dog trainer Khom Sokly said.

Four are now able to detect COVID-19 placed in a one-meter tube in less than a minute, he said, while the other eight are training to root out the scents in an open space "at any location". "In the future, I hope the dogs could take part in prevent-

ing or reducing COVID-19 because they are fast," Khom Sokly said. CMAC staff said the budding virus-hunters have a few months left in their training regime. Nearly three decades of civil war and US bombing starting in the 1960s left Cambodia one of the most heavily bombed and mined countries in the world.

The kingdom has vowed to clear all mines and unexploded ordnance by 2025, with several organizations working with veteran deminers, sniffer dogs and even rats to reach the goal. Other countries deploying dogs in the fight against COVID include Ecuador and Italy, where there is a program in a Rome hospital for training canines to detect the virus in human sweat. Cambodia largely avoided a mass outbreak during the pandemic last year, but cases surged from the 20,000 mark in May to a total of 110,000 cases in late September and more than 2,200 deaths. — AFP