

International

Relief and alarm as El Salvador rounds up alleged 'gangsters'

87 civilians killed in 72 hours of violence

SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador: An unprecedented round up of alleged gangsters in El Salvador has netted thousands of suspects and brought relief to citizens living in constant fear. But the clampdown has drawn complaints of rights abuses, and experts say mass arrests are but a stop-gap as long as so many Salvadorans have no feasible exit from a life of penury.

With a poverty rate of 30.7 percent and sky-high unemployment that pushes ever more people to emigrate, a career as a gangster is one of few options available to those who remain. The most prominent gangs, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18, count some 70,000 members in the country of 6.5 million people. Almost half are thought to be behind bars.



I have had to bury my brother

They eke out a living by extorting protection money from anyone who wishes to avoid harm and from drug dealing that brings them into regular conflict with one another. In a particularly bloody weekend in March, 87 ordinary civilians died at the hands of gangs in 72 hours of violence around the country. That bloodbath prompted President Nayib Bukele to announce a state of emergency that has allowed the police and military to round up more than 18,000 alleged gang members in just a month.

'Trade is flowing'

In the short term, removing criminals from the streets has allowed residents and entrepreneurs to breathe a sigh of relief. At least temporarily. "On some of my routes, the criminals are no longer collecting protection money," bus company operator Juan Pablo Alvarez told AFP. The gangs have extracted a heavy toll from him over the years, he said. "I have had to bury my brother, more than 10 col-



SAN SALVADOR: People arrested for alleged gang links are escorted by the National Civil Police during the state of emergency declared by the Salvadoran government at the San Salvador penal center. — AFP

leagues and 25 employees, mainly drivers," he added. In the city center of San Salvador, where even vegetable sellers fall victim to racketeers, vendor Felipe told AFP he, too, was enjoying a reprieve from being shaken down.

"We are not paying anything, the guys (gangsters) have not been seen, they have practically disappeared and the trade is flowing," said Felipe, who preferred to withhold his last name for fear of reprisal. Clients "have stopped being afraid of coming to the (city) center."

Eduardo Cader, president of the Salvadoran Industry Association, said delivery trucks were, for the first time in a long time, able to enter certain areas where they previously had to pay bribes. According to a recent CID Gallup poll, an overwhelming majority of Salvadorans support Bukele's anti-gang operation. And on Sunday, lawmakers extended the state of emergency for another month. But not everyone is on board.

'Criminal populism'

Emergency powers have done away with the need for arrest warrants, and sentences for gang membership have

been raised five-fold to up to 45 years. Rights observers say innocent people are getting caught in the dragnet and journalists have raised censorship fears over jail terms of up to 15 years for "sharing" gang-related messages in the media.

Rather than ordinary courts, suspected gangsters are brought before judges whose identities are hidden, ostensibly to protect them. But sitting judge Juan Antonio Duran told AFP these were measures of "criminal populism." He pointed out that trial by an anonymous judge, without witnesses or even the defendant present-as has happened-"is prohibited by the constitution." On Monday, Amnesty International said Bukele's state of emergency "has created a perfect storm of human rights violations."

And US Secretary of State Antony Blinken reminded Bukele last week that "we can tackle violence and crime while also protecting civil rights and fundamental freedoms." Veronica Aguirre, 26, claimed her husband was arrested groundlessly, telling AFP that under the state of emergency, "we cannot provide proof" of innocence. — AFP

Music against bombs

With the car filled up, it heads off to a former post office now serving as an aid centre distributing meat. There, they exchange bread for chicken legs. At the wheel is Alexei, 23, a wiry youngster with blue eyes and a single lock of hair on his shaved skull. Starting the delivery operation was his idea. For two years, he delivered bread to Kharkiv in the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine before getting work as a mechanic.

When the war broke out, he went back to delivering bread, then when his company shut down he started doing deliveries himself. "But I couldn't do it alone, so I asked Nazar to help me," Alexei said. Outside the former post office, more than 100 people wait in a queue. With the chicken on board, they set off to do their first delivery, the red Opel driving through the streets with techno playing at full blast.

"We cannot drive without music. If there is shelling, we simply put up the volume. We are tired of the bombing. (The music) helps us relax, we're not afraid," Nazar said. Russian rockets pound Kharkiv-home to nearly 1.5 million people before the war-almost every day, its northern and eastern districts particularly affected. The strikes, which come at random times at any hour of the day or night, can sometimes prove deadly. One day during a bombing, all the shelters were closed, said Nazar. "We couldn't hide so we lay on the ground and protected civilians to save them." — AFP



KHARKIV, Ukraine: Alexii (L), Nazar Tishchenko (C) and Oleg Vadimovich (R) stand as they deliver humanitarian aid to a family in a district of Kharkiv, eastern Ukraine. — AFP

Wearing his cap the wrong way round, a T-shirt, black shorts and bright red trainers, Nazar resembles French football star Karim Benzema with his goatee, shaved skull and imposing frame.

A football fan, he likes a fight, but he is no fan of the police. He has the numbers 13 and 12 tattooed on his shins, numbers representing the letters forming the acronym ACAB: "All cops are bas.....". Born in Tyrynauz, Russia, he has lived his "whole life in the football fan movement, with nationalist guys who are imbued with love for our country", Ukraine.

Kharkiv youth brave the bombs to deliver food

KHARKIV, Ukraine: With their red Opel Astra blaring techno music and the boot full to the brim with supplies, three Ukrainian volunteers deliver aid to Kharkiv neighbourhoods targeted by Russian rockets. While the previous two days had been fairly quiet in Ukraine's second city, on Tuesday, the roar of Ukrainian cannon and Russian artillery rang out again.

The frontline is less than five kilometres (three miles) from Kharkiv's northern and eastern districts. The Russian border itself is only a few dozen kilometres away. None of that discourages the volunteers Nazar, Alexei and Oleg.

Outside a kindergarten now serving as a food storage centre, they load their car boot with plastic bags containing bread and canned food. "Our main goal is to feed children and the elderly, they need it most," said Nazar Tishchenko, 34. "Unfortunately, at the moment, people have no money or work. Many of them can't even get to a supermarket," he added.

EU to lift Schengen visa requirements...

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achieve visa free travel for all Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Together with our upcoming joint communication on the Gulf, this proposal will reinforce the overall partnership and strengthen the cooperation between the EU and the Gulf Cooperation Council," he said.

On his part, European Commission Vice-President for Promoting our European Way of Life, Margaritis Schinas, said: "Today we are proposing short-stay visa-free travel to the EU for Qatari and Kuwaiti citizens with biometric passports - facilitat-

ing people-to-people contacts and strengthening business, social and cultural ties."

This is the result of the success of the governments of Qatar and Kuwait in achieving far-reaching reforms and reflects the increasing intensity and depth of EU relations with both countries. It is an important achievement for citizens in both regions, and I hope that the European Parliament and the Council will adopt our proposal swiftly," he said.

EU Commissioner for Interior Affairs, Ylva Johansson, said: "The proposal for visa exemption for Qatar and Kuwait nationals facilitates business travels, tourism and family visits to the EU. It is also a step towards stronger regional coherence in the Gulf region when it comes to visa regimes. The EU will continue to engage with the remaining visa-required Gulf countries that are interested in visa-free travel to the EU." — KUNA

Levels of fasting...

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a change in you when fasting." In other words, you should be a better person when fasting than when you are not (Al-Bayhaqi and Ibn Abi Shayba)

(C) Fasting of the crème de la crème entails keeping one's heart from lowly aspirations and motives as well as thoughts that would keep him far from Allah (the Almighty and Majestic). Anyone in this category is always pre-occupied with things that please Allah (SWT). Once Umar's wife prepared for him sumptuous food, the ingredients of which she bought from her own savings, Umar (the second caliph in Islam) refused to eat until the poor and weak were invited to share the meal with him.

After enjoying the food with the poor, he thanked Allah (the Majestic and Sublime) for that blessing. By this, Umar (ra) demonstrated that he was so much pre-occupied with pleasing Allah (the Almighty) than satisfying his appetite. (Refer to Umariyyat, pages 47 and 48) Fasting is given preference over other acts of worship for two major reasons:

(1) It is a secret and an intrinsic act of worship that none can see except Almighty Allah and the fasting person. (2) By fasting, a Muslim actually conquers the devil, which capitalizes on food, drinks and other appetites to lure human beings into committing sins.

In Ramadan, we are trained to strike a balance

Kuwait lifts all corona-related...

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educational establishments and places of work, according to the cabinet decisions which become officially effective on Sunday. The Cabinet also abolished the need to undergo quarantine for people who had come in contact with infected cases regardless of whether they are vaccinated or not. Such people need

only to wear masks for 14 days from the day of the contact. People who have come in contact with infected cases need to carry out a PCR test only if they show some symptoms within 14 days, Mazrem said.

Infected people are required to undergo house quarantine for five days only and then wear face masks for another five days, as per the new cabinet decisions. The Cabinet also decided to allow unvaccinated people to fully attend all types of games. The Cabinet urged people who go to mosques for prayers to observe health conditions like bringing their own mats but are no longer required to wear the face mask.

Climate change, overuse kill off...

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2014, says Youssef Jabbar, environmental department head of Muthana province. The causes have been "climate change and rising temperatures," he explained. "Muthana is a desert province, it suffers from drought and lack of rainfall."

A government statement issued last week also

pointed to "more than 1,000 wells illegally dug" for agriculture in the area. Additionally, nearby cement and salt factories have "drained significant amounts of water from the groundwater that feeds the lake", Jabbar said. It would take nothing short of a miracle to bring Sawa Lake back to life.

Use of aquifers would have to be curbed and, following three years of drought, the area would now need several seasons of abundant rainfall, in a country hit by desertification and regarded as one of the five most vulnerable to climate change. The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, a global treaty, recognized Sawa as "unique... because it is a closed water body in an area of sabkha (salt flat) with no inlet or outlet. — AFP

UAE to roll out...

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and facial recognition to commerce and autonomous cars. His appointment came a year after the UAE also named ministers for happiness, hoping to create a "happier society", and tolerance, mainly aimed at promoting coexistence in the Gulf country where foreigners make up the majority of the population.

The UAE's stated goal is to become one of the leading AI nations by 2031, creating new economic and business opportunities and generating up to 335 billion dirhams (\$91 billion) in extra growth. According to consultancy firm PwC Middle East, nearly 14 percent (\$96 billion) of the UAE's gross domestic product will come from AI by 2030. "The UAE was the only country that appointed someone to actually oversee this

mandate seriously," Olama said.

The wealthy Gulf country has invested heavily in technology over the past decade as it diversifies its economy and reduces its reliance on oil. Its bets include driverless cars, with autonomous taxis already tested on the streets of the capital Abu Dhabi, while Dubai, another of the country's seven emirates, aims to have a quarter of its transport driverless by 2030.

Abu Dhabi's Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence, touted as the world's first graduate-level AI university, opened to students last year, and the country has launched a number of start-up hubs and training schemes. However, the UAE has also drawn concern over its high levels of surveillance, and in 2019 it denied reports that a popular mobile app was being used for government spying. Olama said a big part of his job was instilling public confidence and avoiding costly errors when AI systems are put in place. — AFP

Disgraced surgeon on trial in Sweden

STOCKHOLM, Sweden: An Italian doctor who made headlines for pioneering windpipe surgery went on trial in Sweden on Wednesday, charged with assault for performing the experimental procedure.

Paolo Macchiarini won plaudits in 2011 after claiming to have performed the world's first synthetic trachea transplants while a surgeon at Stockholm's Karolinska Institute.

The procedure was hailed as a breakthrough in regenerative medicine. But allegations soon emerged that the risky procedure had been carried out on at least one individual who had not been critically ill at the time of the operation.

Dressed in a blue suit, the 63-year-old listened to translated audio as prosecutors listed the charges of "aggravated assault" against three patients. The Karolinska Institute has confirmed that the three individuals have since died, but did not directly link the deaths to the operations.

"Paolo Macchiarini has carried out the surgery with complete disregard for science and tried experience," prosecutor Karin Lundstrom-Kron told the court. Macchiarini has maintained they constituted treatments and not experiments, and denied being criminally responsible. "His only motivation has been to treat the patients," his lawyer Bjorn Hurtig told the court.

In 2013, the Karolinska hospital suspended all transplants and refused to extend Macchiarini's contract as a surgeon. A year later, several surgeons at the hospital filed a complaint alleging that Macchiarini had downplayed the risks of the procedure.

Macchiarini carried out three surgeries at Karolinska University Hospital — where he also worked as a surgeon — in 2011 and 2012, using an artificial windpipe made of plastic and coating it with the patient's own stem cells.

Together with his colleagues, he performed a total of eight such transplants between 2011 and 2014, the five others taking place in Russia.

An external review in 2015 found Macchiarini guilty of research misconduct, but despite sacking him, the Karolinska Institute repeatedly defended him until 2018, when it found him and several other researchers guilty.

The university's principal stepped down over the scandal, as well as a number of other people. Medical journal The Lancet in 2018 retracted two papers authored by Macchiarini. The trial, held in the Solna district court near the Karolinska Institute, is scheduled to take place over 13 days. — AFP