

International

UK assisted dying bill hopes to end 'inhumane' suicides

Bill's restrictions are 'a political decision based on realities': MP

LONDON: Molly Meacher's voice quivers with emotion as she tells how her aunt took her own life after her liver cancer tumor grew to the size of a football. "One night, she took a whole lot of pills and whisky, and her husband found her dead in the morning," said Meacher, a member of British parliament's upper House of Lords.

"It seemed to me terribly sad that somebody would end their life alone in the middle of the night without even their dear husband knowing that this was what they were doing," she told AFP.

Meacher, 81, has drafted a law to legalize assisted dying in England for the terminally ill with less than six months to live, an act currently punishable by up to 14 years in prison. "It just was clear to me that this was just inhumane. You wouldn't treat a dog or a cat like that. But we treat our own people like that," said the former social worker.

The UK parliament examined the question of assisted dying in 2015 and decided against legalizing it, but since then other countries have decided to approve what many see as an act of mercy. "Things are moving in the right direction, there are a number of British Isles jurisdictions that are looking at changing the law," said Sarah Wootton, head of the Dignity in Dying campaign group.

'Discriminatory'

Last September, the influential British Medical Association ended its opposition to "physician-assisted dying", taking the "historic step" of adopting a neutral position. According to a poll by YouGov, 73 percent of Britons questioned in August said that doctors should be able to help terminally ill patients die. By contrast, only 35 percent of MPs approved.

Campaigner Alex Pandolfo says the law "needs

changing immediately (because) of the discriminatory practice that takes place in this country".

"It actually exists already for the privileged," says Pandolfo, in his 60s and terminally ill with Alzheimer's. If you have £10,000 (about 12,000 euros, 13,500 dollars) for flights, hotels and food, you can go to a country such as Switzerland to die, he said.

Pandolfo has already booked his assisted death at a Swiss clinic and in recent years has accompanied around 100 Britons to die in Switzerland. But he would rather die in England, to be near loved ones and allow them to have a more natural grieving process. "I'm in no hurry," he jokes, saying he was given "a death sentence" in 2015. "I am already dying of a condition that I've got no control over," he said. "All I'm asking for is somebody to assist me with that death when it will be unbearable, to accelerate things. It's a rational act."

Sitting on his sofa in Lancaster, northwest England, the white-haired Pandolfo says his illness has already had a "massive impact" on his quality of life. It affects his memory, movement, ability to speak and drive, and watch a football match.

As a result, he would never qualify for assisted dying under the terms of the draft law before parliament, which he says is "extremely restricted". "By the time I've got six months to live, I won't have capacity to say that I want assisted dying," he said.

'Unacceptable pressure'

Meacher said her bill's restrictions are "a political decision based on realities" in a "fairly conservative country", particularly where religious leaders and the faithful are involved. "It's pretty hard to get a bill through parliament with these rather narrow limits," she said. The Archbishop of Canterbury,



LONDON: In this file photo taken on October 22, 2021 'Dignity in Dying' supporters gather to call for a change in the law to support assisted dying outside the Houses of Parliament in central London. —AFP

Justin Welby, told parliament that euthanasia could expose the most vulnerable to unacceptable pressure to die from some "loved ones".

Welby, the most senior cleric in the worldwide Anglican communion, also told the BBC that "sadly people make mistakes in their diagnosis". Meacher's bill "has done a great job at raising the issue," said Wootton. While it will not necessarily become law a similar bill before the Scottish Parliament has much more chance of success "within a year-and-a-half", she said.

"It will be very difficult for medical regulators to

have something lawful in one part of the country and not lawful in other parts of the country.

"I think that's an unsustainable situation in the long term." Similar draft laws are being looked at in the self-governing Crown dependencies of Jersey and the Isle of Man. Even strictly Roman Catholic neighbor Ireland is studying the possibility of euthanasia, giving people like Pandolfo a measure of hope. Once he had his place booked in Switzerland, Pandolfo said: "I stopped worrying about dying and suffering and started focusing and concentrating on enjoying what life can." —AFP

US radio sets out to break Russian 'propaganda wall'

KIEV: With Russian troops massed on Ukraine's border, US-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty is trying to break through a "wall of Russian propaganda", its director for Europe told AFP. Based in Prague, RFE/RL was founded in 1950 as an anti-communist outlet to beam programs into the Soviet bloc, helping topple those totalitarian regimes nearly four decades later.

These days, it still broadcasts in 27 languages—including Russian, Belarusian and Ukrainian—to 23 countries, many where media freedoms face severe restrictions. It has more than 200 journalists in Ukraine and plays a major role in covering the looming conflict on the Ukrainian border, according to Kiryl Sukhotski, regional director for Europe and TV production.

"Our role is to provide objective and impartial information from both sides of the conflict to our audiences. We're a surrogate broadcaster and we don't take sides," Sukhotski said in an interview. "We are penetrating the wall of Russian propaganda."

The West has repeatedly accused Russia of spreading disinformation to justify its cause, while Russia says the Western view of the crisis is distorted. Most recently, the Russian foreign ministry slammed as "nonsense" and "provocative" reports from Britain about Moscow planning to install a pro-Russian leader in Kyiv.

RFE/RL, which has a target audience of 37 million people, stepped up activities in the region following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the occupation of eastern Ukraine by pro-Moscow rebel forces. It launched the Current Time TV channel in Russian, as well as programmes targeting audiences in the Donbass and Crimea regions.

'My boyfriend is there'

The radio station's journalists-staff and freelancers alike-face constant threats from Russian and rebel authorities. Some have already ended up in prison, such as Vladyslav Yesypenko, who is facing 15 years in jail on espionage charges. Their coverage methods vary, from on-the-ground reporting to journalism based on open sources.

Last week, an RFE/RL journalist gave an account of how Russian troops are gathering on the Ukrainian border by following scores of TikTok accounts. "Soldiers were sharing TikTok videos of how they go towards the border, and then there were hundreds of comments saying, 'Oh, my son is going there', or 'My son is on that train', or 'My boyfriend is there,'" said Sukhotski.

"And we started talking to their families posting those comments and suddenly this whole picture of dozens of thousands of troops moving to Belarus, towards the Ukrainian border, we were able to do it just by looking at TikTok accounts," he added.

Funded by the US Congress, RFE/RL is also setting out to battle what it says is Russian disinformation. "We are creating a new unit in Kyiv that will do same-day rapid reactions to fake news, disinfo, propaganda—just saying OK, this is true, this is not true," Sukhotski said. "Russia very quickly understood that it is not necessary to lie to make successful propaganda." —AFP

Is 'fortress Russia' ready for new Ukraine sanctions?

MOSCOW: US President Joe Biden and Western leaders have described "unprecedented" economic penalties and sanctions "with massive consequences" in the event Russia invades Ukraine. Here is a breakdown of what those measures could be and what impact they might have:

Putin, oil and gas

Washington has teased the possibility of targeting sanctions directly against Russian President Vladimir Putin, a largely symbolic move mimicking those brought against authoritarian strongmen like ex-Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi and Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad.

When Biden raised the possibility of targeting Putin this week, he did not specify what shape the sanctions could take, but generally these measures include freezing personal assets abroad and barring foreign bank transactions. The Kremlin said in response the move would be pointless since Russian officials are barred from holding wealth abroad and that it would damage diplomacy on the Ukraine crisis. A potentially more damaging step discussed in Western capitals would be to ban Russian banks' transactions in dollars—the key

currency on international markets—or excluding Moscow from SWIFT, a key mechanism of international banking exchanges.

Iran has suffered from having been excluded from the tool and, in the case of Russia, its crucial oil and gas sector would be expected to be badly hit. Another potential sanctions target is the controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline connecting Russia with Germany. With construction complete, it is set to double natural gas supplies to Europe. Also on the table is the possibility of banning exports of crucial technologies to Russia.

Fortress Russia

Russia has weathered waves of Western sanctions in the wake of its annexation of the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine in 2014, which hit the ruble and saw foreign investment dwindle. In response, Moscow built up what is referred to as "fortress Russia", measures designed to ensure new sanctions won't see the economy or Russia's financial system collapse.

As of January 1, the National Wealth Fund, the country's sovereign wealth fund, had assets worth \$182 billion, or nearly 12 percent of gross domestic product, according to the



VASTERVIK, Sweden: In this file photo taken on September 21, 2021 the minesweeper HMS Uly'n (left) scans the waterway for mines as machine gunners on vessel HMS Trosso (A264) look for threats during a demining exercise, a part of the naval exercise Northern Coasts 21, outside Vastervik, south-eastern Sweden. —AFP

finance ministry.

The country also has a small external debt compared to other global powers and a large reserve of foreign currencies accumulated by the central bank. Moscow has also pursued a "de-dollarization" policy for several years, calling on its partners, such as China and India, to conduct payments in other currencies.

Last year, Russia said it will be dropping the dollar from its National Wealth Fund. To minimize the risk of being cut off from Western-controlled financial institutions, Russia launched its own payment system Mir, which is

widely used in Russia and across the former Soviet Union.

Boomerang effect

Europe remains dependent on Russian oil and gas, especially now with gas prices soaring across the continent and Moscow allegedly restricting its supply. Cutting Moscow off from international payment systems would complicate Europe's payments for its gas imports, more than a third of which come from Russia.

There are also fears Russia could use its energy dominance as leverage and turn off the tap. —AFP

'Anxiety, concern:' Ukrainians in Poland on Russia threat

WARSAW: Hrystyna Zanyk, one of an estimated 1.5 million Ukrainians living in neighboring Poland, said the fear that Russia will invade her homeland has left the community rattled. "There's anxiety, concern," said Zanyk, who has been living in neighboring Poland for nine years. "We fear for our loved ones who stayed behind in Ukraine," she told AFP.

The news from back home is far from reassuring: Russia has deployed over 100,000 troops and heavy armor along Ukraine's borders, according to the West, which fears that the Kremlin will stage an incursion. "Us over here, we're safe, far from the whole thing. But everyone is grappling with how to respond to the situation," said Zanyk, editor-in-chief of "Our World", a Ukrainian weekly in Poland.

There is a longstanding minority population of 50,000 people in Poland and around 300,000 Ukrainians have Polish residence permits but the actual number living there is estimated to be much higher.

'Never going back'

"We send home money so that they can make rent, pay the electricity bill, buy medication and food," said Lessia Savchyn, a cashier in Warsaw. "I'm never going back to Ukraine... It's unlivable over there," the 26-year-old added. But Dmytro Dovzhenko, a veteran of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, said he was ready to return if Russia attacks.

Dovzhenko heads up a mutual aid foundation for Ukrainian veterans who have settled in EU member states. He himself served in battle from 2014 to 2019 but now lives with his family in Wroclaw, a city in



BELGOROD, Russia: Ilya Ignatyev, 24, medical student, walks with his dog past a WWI monument in the village of Maslova Pristan outside Belgorod, a few kilometers from Ukrainian border. —AFP

the southwest of Poland.

"Seventy percent of us are ready to return to Ukraine the moment we're needed," he told AFP. "If there's a big war, we'll re-enlist and we'll do what's required." Dovzhenko admits however that he "no longer feels anything" in response to the news coming from the Russia-Ukraine border.

"This war, it's been going on for eight years. Nothing has changed," he said. "Things are actually a little better now because we're getting help from other countries," he added in reference to international efforts to defuse the security situation. The West's involvement "is a good thing, even if it's a little late," said Mirosław Kupiec from the Association of Ukrainians in Poland. He recalls that the conflict has already claimed the lives of 13,000 people "not to mention the wounded, the expelled." —AFP

France to 'adapt' Mali mission as ties with junta fray

PARIS: France and its European partners "cannot stay with things the way they are" in Mali after the military junta expelled a contingent of Danish troops, Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said on Friday. "Given this situation, the breaking of the political framework and the military framework (in Mali), we cannot stay with things the way they are," Le Drian told RTL radio.

He complained of growing "obstacles" placed in the way of European and international forces deployed to fight a jihadist insurgency in the West African country that has spread through the Sahel.

But Le Drian added that relations between Bamako and European nations had turned sour would not say whether Paris was considering withdrawing its Barkhane mission altogether. "It's not just a French decision, it's a collective one, and we've opened talks with our African and European partners to see how we can adapt our deployment to the new situation," he said, flanked by visiting Dutch Foreign Minister Wopke Hoekstra. Hoekstra agreed that "we are looking for a joint approach".

Mali's Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop was unyielding in comments made in response to Radio France Internationale and France 24. "Mali will not exclude anything from these issues if it does not take our interests into account," he said.

Diop said that asking for the departure of French troops from Mali "is not on the table for the moment", adding that if ever that presence "is deemed contrary to the interests of Mali, we will not hesitate to assume our responsibilities." —AFP