



'Like it or not',
Britannia still
rules part of Cyprus

US abortion rights advocates, opponents brace for court decision



WASHINGTON: Thousands of gun control advocates join the "March for Our Lives" as they protest against gun violence during a rally on the National Mall in Washington. — AFP

Protesters want action on gun violence

Activists place over 45,000 white vases holding flowers in Washington

WASHINGTON: Thousands of people took to the streets in the United States on Saturday to push for action on the devastating gun violence plaguing the country, where Republican politicians have repeatedly blocked efforts to enact stricter firearms laws.

Protesters of all ages streamed onto the National Mall in Washington, where activists placed more than 45,000 white vases holding flowers — one for each person killed by a firearm in the United States in 2020.

"Protect People Not Guns," said one sign held by a protester near the Washington Monument. "Fear Has No Place In Schools," read another.

Two horrific shootings last month — one at a Texas elementary school that killed 19 children and two teachers, and another at a New York supermarket that left 10 Black people dead — helped spur the rallies, organized by March For Our Lives.

The student-led organization, founded by survivors of a shooting at a high school in Parkland, Florida, held a rally that drew hundreds of thousands of people to the nation's capital in March 2018. Four years later, the demonstration was marked by frustration at the lack of progress.

"Enough is enough" rang out repeatedly from the podium, with speakers including Parkland survivor X Gonzalez and Martin Luther King Jr's granddaughter Yolanda King.

"We are here to demand justice," said Garnell Whitfield, whose 86-year-old mother was killed in the racially motivated supermarket shooting in Buffalo, New York on May 14. "We are here to stand with those who are bold enough to demand sensible gun legislation."

Widespread outrage, little change

The problem of gun violence in the United States — which has killed more than 19,300 people so far this year, according to the Gun Violence Archive — goes far beyond high-profile mass killings, with more than half of those deaths due to suicide.

Outside of Washington, hundreds of other demonstrations were planned around the country Saturday, including in Parkland, where protesters carried signs with messages such as "Am I Next?"

Thousands also turned out in New York City. In Brooklyn, white crosses were erected for the children killed in Uvalde and portraits of those killed in Buffalo fastened to shopping carts.

Ease of access to firearms, and mental health problems that can lead to them being used in attacks, have both been in the spotlight in the wake of the May 24 shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas.

The massacre was carried out by a gunman who bought two assault rifles shortly after turning 18.

Gun control advocates are calling for tighter restrictions or an outright ban on such rifles. But opponents have sought to cast mass shootings as primarily a mental health issue, not a weapons problem. Gerald Mendes, a physical education teacher in Texas who joined the rally in New York said he supports the US constitutional right to bear arms, but that "as far as AR-15s and weapons of war, we regular citizens don't need those."

The majority of Americans support tighter gun laws, but opposition from many Republican lawmakers has long been a hurdle to major changes.

"The will of the American people is being subverted by a minority," said Cynthia Martins, a 63-year-old resident of the US capital, referring to the Republican Party. "There's a reason that we're still in this situation," she said.

'Fear that we live with everyday'

Some lawmakers are trying to pass gun regulations. The Democrat-controlled House of Representatives passed a broad package of proposals this week that included raising the purchasing age for most semi-automatic rifles from 18 to 21 — but the party does not have the requisite 60 votes to advance it in the Senate.

A cross-party group of senators has also been working on a narrow collection of controls that

could develop into the first serious attempt at gun regulation reform in decades.

But it does not include an assault weapons ban or universal background checks, meaning it will fall short of the expectations of President Joe Biden.

Faith Barrett, a teacher who traveled to the rally with her daughter, also a teacher, voiced the frustration shared by many on the Mall.

"We're still back in the same place," the 47-year-old said, voicing only "tentative" hope change would come. Both she and her daughter have plans in place in case of a shooting at their school.

"Most teachers look at every single classroom they go into and think, where am I going to put my kids if something happens," Barrett said.

The spectre of gun violence also hung over the rally, where police and security forces had a heavy presence. A moment of silence for the Uvalde victims was shaken by a brief panic when a disturbance near the stage sent people sprinting away in terror.

While the crowd quickly calmed and the man creating the disturbance was detained, with Park Police telling local media no weapons were found, some were left in shock and tears.

Fred Guttenberg, the father of a Parkland victim, took to the podium to ease the crowd. "Unfortunately somebody decided to show up and put the fear that we live with everyday to life." — AFP

Russia strikes depot in west Ukraine

KRAMATORSK, Ukraine: Russian forces said Sunday they had struck a site in western Ukraine storing large amounts of weapons supplied by the United States and European countries, as the battle intensified for the key eastern city of Severodonetsk.

The strike on the town of Chortkiv, a rare attack by Russia in the relatively calm west of Ukraine, left

22 people injured, the regional governor said. Meanwhile the situation in Severodonetsk was "extremely difficult", after the Russian army destroyed a second bridge into the city and was heavily bombarding the last one, regional governor Sergiy Gaiday said.

Away from the battlefield, the head of the European Commission on Saturday promised it would provide a clear signal by the end of next week on Ukraine's bid to become a candidate to join the European Union.

"Ukraine has achieved a lot in the past ten years and much still needs to be done. Our opinion will reflect this carefully," Ursula von der Leyen said after a surprise trip to the capital Kyiv. Despite reservations among some member states, EU lead-

ers are expected to approve the bid at a summit later this month, although with strict conditions attached.

"The challenge will be to come out of the (EU) council with a united position, which reflects the enormity of these historic decisions," von der Leyen said as she travelled back to Poland. Ukraine's geopolitical vulnerability has been laid bare by Russia's February 24 invasion, which has killed thousands, sent millions fleeing and reduced swathes of the country to rubble.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said Saturday that it was a "decisive time". "Russia wants to ruin European unity, wants to leave Europe divided and wants to leave it weak. The entirety of Europe is a target for Russia." — AFP

UK urged to aid Moroccan facing death penalty

LONDON: The UK's government Sunday came under pressure to win the release of a Moroccan man who has been sentenced to death alongside two Britons by a pro-Russian court in Ukraine. The court in Donetsk, one of two self-proclaimed statelets in eastern Ukraine, last week ordered the death penalty for the trio after they were captured by Russian troops.

Brahim Saadoun along with UK nationals Aiden Aslin and Shaun Pinner were said to have surrendered in April after fighting with Ukrainian forces in the besieged port city of Mariupol. British cabinet minister Brandon Lewis told Sky News the government was "fully engaged" with Ukrainian authorities in trying to help Aslin and Pinner after their "sham trial".

The Britons were legal combatants serving with Ukraine's armed forces and fully entitled to protection for prisoners of war under the Geneva convention, Lewis said. The UK should also intervene on Saadoun's behalf, his friend Zina Kotenko told Sky from her new home in northern England, after fleeing Russia's invasion.

Kotenko said she had first met the 21-year-old Saadoun in a Kyiv nightclub, described him as a "kind", "open-minded" and "cheerful" person. Kotenko said he had been accepted into the Ukrainian army after several attempts, being found previously by recruiters to be underweight. — AFP

Macron seeks majority in parliament vote

PARIS: France voted in the first round of parliamentary elections on Sunday with President Emmanuel Macron hoping to win a majority backing his reform plans while a resurgent and newly unified left seeks to thwart his ambitions. Elections for the 577 seats in the lower house National Assembly are a two-round process, with the shape of the new parliament becoming clear only after the second round on June 19.

The ballots provide a crucial coda to April's presidential election, when Macron won a second term and pledged a transformative new era after a first mandate dominated by protests, the coronavirus pandemic and

Russia's war against Ukraine.

After a dismal performance in April, the French left has united in a coalition for what its leader Jean-Luc Melenchon dubs "the third round" of the presidential elections. Opinion polls show the president's centrist alliance, Ensemble (Together), and Melenchon's NUPES coalition of hard left, Socialists, Communists and Greens neck-and-neck in the popular vote-although the actual breakdown of parliamentary seats will depend on turnout in the second round.

The abstention rate is predicted to be well over 50 percent in the first round, in what would be a new record for elections already marked by feeble participation in recent years. At midday (1000 GMT) turnout was 18.43 percent, according to an interior ministry estimate, down 0.8 points from the last election in 2017.

"I voted tactically in the presidential election, and that didn't change a thing," unemployed 59-year-old Alain Mendez told AFP at an outdoor cafe in Toulouse, southwestern France. — AFP



LE TOUQUET, France: France's President Emmanuel Macron waves, flanked by Touquet's mayor Daniel Fasquelle as he leaves after voting in French parliamentary elections at a polling station in Le Touquet, northern France on June 12, 2022. — AFP