

Quick Read

Nine homeless drug users shot dead in Kabul



KABUL: Gunmen shot dead nine homeless drug users in the Afghan capital, officials said, shining a light on chronic drug abuse in the world's biggest producer of opium but a rare incident of apparently coordinated violence against addicts.

The motive for the Saturday night attack by the unidentified gunmen in Kabul was not known and police said they were investigating. The men had been sleeping in an open area and a forensic examination had shown they were drug users. "The shooting took place at the side of the Qrough mountain," a spokesman for Kabul police, Ferdaus Faramarz, told Reuters.

There are an estimated 2.5 million drug users in Afghanistan, the Ministry of Public Health says, with most thought to be addicted to heroin made from opium poppies grown in Afghanistan.

Some 20,000 drug users are homeless, with half that number in Kabul, at times straining relations with residents of some communities. "It's a social crisis," said Dr Shokoor Haidari, deputy of the ministry's counter drugs department.

The ministry can only treat 40,000 people a year but far more seek help, said Haidari. Lack of social services, unemployment and easy access to drugs have fueled drug abuse in Afghanistan, Haidari said.

Harsh winter weather killed at least 50 homeless drug users in the past two months, the Ministry of Public Health said. Afghanistan has been the world's biggest producer of opium for years despite some US\$8.9 billion spent since 2002 by the US government to stop production and trafficking in narcotics.

With compelling economic incentives and politically protected networks - from cultivators to producers and distributors - deeply entrenched, officials say there is little they can do to stop it.

The Interior Ministry this month announced the arrest of five top police officials, including the head of Kabul's counter-narcotics force, for suspected involvement in drug trafficking. —Reuters

UK issues rare 'danger to life' warning over Storm Dennis

LONDON: Storm Dennis swept across Britain with the army drafted in to help deal with heavy flooding and high winds, officials warning it could be "life-threatening" in South Wales.

The government weather agency issued a rare red warning for the area, saying there was a risk of "significant impacts from flooding" that included a "danger to life from fast-flowing water, extensive flooding to property and road closures".

Almost 200 flood warnings were in place early on Sunday, extending from Scotland's River Tweed to Cornwall in southwest England.

Winds of over 150 kilometres per hour were recorded in Aberdaron, south Wales. The Ministry of Defence had earlier deployed troops in West Yorkshire, northern England, which suffered badly from flooding caused by last weekend's Storm Ciara.

"Our armed forces are always ready to support local authorities and communities whenever they need it," said defence minister Ben Wallace.

British Airways and easyJet confirmed they had grounded flights, while two bodies were pulled from rough seas off the south England coast on Saturday as the storm barrelled in.

One of the men is assumed to have been the subject of a search triggered when an LPG tanker reported that one of its crew was unaccounted for. He was last seen several hours earlier. —AFP

Russian artist at centre of French tape scandal held

PARIS: Controversial Russian artist Pyotr Pavlensky, who claims to have leaked a sex video of a prominent Paris politician, was arrested by French police over an unrelated act of violence, the Paris prosecutor's office said.

The political refugee was taken in for questioning over an alleged instance of "armed violence" that took place on Dec 31. The prosecutor stressed that the case had no link to the sex video case involving French President Emmanuel Macron's chosen candidate to become Paris mayor, Benjamin Griveaux. Too hot to handle in his home country Russia, the gaunt looking Pavlensky, 35, fled to France where he has caused uproar by putting the sex video online which forced Griveaux to withdraw from the mayoral race.

Griveaux, a 42-year-old MP, has brought a legal case against Pavlensky over the release of the video and an enquiry has been opened, the prosecutor said later Saturday. Pavlensky, an activist and performance artist, told AFP on Friday that he had put the video online in order to expose Griveaux's

Australian bushfires extinguished, but climate rows still

SYDNEY: Australia's "black summer" of devastating bushfires is finally coming to a close, but bitter arguments over how to tackle climate-fuelled disasters are raging on.

When firefighters announced this week that all blazes in the hard-hit state of New South Wales were under control for the first time since September, the relief was palpable. In other regions, a few fires are still being contained, but most Australians can finally abandon the grim rituals of the last half-year - morning checks of smog monitors and "Fires Near Me" apps, deciding whether the kids can play outside, whether to flee or defend their homes. But the after-effects will endure, and national soul searching has already begun.

"We know events like these can challenge the way we think about the world, undermine our perceptions of safety, and rupture social bonds," said disaster response expert Erin Smith. Dozens of families have lost loved ones, thousands of homes and farms have been gutted, swathes of the east coast are scarred charcoal-black and millions have had their sense of security shaken.

"It will likely take years and a great deal of

imagination for us to figure out where we go from here," said Smith.

The question of what is next for Australia is already being asked, most of all of political leaders, and it is being met mostly with finger-pointing and recrimination.

While scientists agree climate change created favourable conditions for the blazes, politicians of all stripes are acutely aware how sensitive the issue is in Australian politics. In an arid nation whose economic strength is intimately tied to the mining and export of fossil fuels, at least four prime ministers have been ousted in part over their climate policies.

In recent weeks, Prime Minister Scott Morrison has seen his ruling conservative coalition threatened by members in rural constituencies demanding funding for more coal-fired power plants. At the same time, the centrist wing of his party has criticised his climate targets as inadequate. Meanwhile rebel members of opposition Labor met secretly to steer the centre-left party's leadership toward a more overtly pro-coal stance. The party's deputy leader awkwardly refused to rule out more coal subsidies, months after vowing they should end. "They



don't want to stick their heads above the parapet, at least when it comes to suggesting substantive policy," said Matt McDonald, an expert in climate politics from the University of Queensland. One reason, he explained, is that while the hot and dry Australian continent is

uniquely susceptible to the impact of climate change, it is also a world-beating source of coal. Coal accounts for around 75 per cent of Australia's electricity generation and exports of the fossil fuel are worth A\$60 billion a year, the country's largest export after iron ore. —AFP



SINGAPORE: The cruise ship Diamond Princess which anchored at Daikoku Pier Cruise Terminal is pictured in Yokohama, south of Tokyo.

Saudi women smoke in public to 'complete' their freedom

RIYADH: Rima settles in a chair at an upscale Riyadh cafe, looks around carefully, and seeing no one she recognises, drags on her electronic cigarette and exhales a cloud of smoke.

"I feel that smoking in public is a part of exercising my newly won freedoms. I am happy that now that I can choose," the 27-year-old Saudi who works for a private company in the capital told AFP.

Like Western feminists of the early 20th century, in an era of social change in Saudi Arabia some women are embracing cigarettes, shisha pipes or vaping as a symbol of emancipation.

The sight of women smoking in public has become much more common in recent months, an unthinkable prospect before the introduction of sweeping reforms in the ultra-conservative kingdom. The kingdom's ambitious de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, has



rolled out an array of economic and social innovations to project a moderate, business-friendly image. Women are now allowed to drive,

attend public sporting events and concerts, and obtain passports without the approval of a male guardian. Rima, who started smoking two

years ago, dismisses concerns about the harmful effects of tobacco, but is worried her family will find out.

She says she is prepared for a showdown. "I won't tell them that this is about my personality liberty, because they won't understand that women are free to smoke like men," said Rima, dressed in a traditional black abaya with gold embroidery matching the hijab that covered her hair. Najla, 26, who like Rima asked to use a pseudonym, said that despite the rapid social changes, double standards still existed, and that it was still considered a "scandal and disgrace" if women smoked.

The only woman lighting up amid several tables of male smokers, she said she intended to "challenge society" and ignore the occasional dirty looks.

"My rights will be fully respected when my family accepts me as a smoker," she said, recalling that a friend was sent to an addiction clinic

when her parents found out about her smoking.

Najla started smoking while still a school student, and like her, up to 65 per cent of female Saudi schoolers light up secretly, according to a 2015 study by the medical faculty at King Abdulaziz University cited by Arab News.

Despite the limitations, in a country where until just a few years ago religious police would chase and hit women for infractions like wearing nail polish or allowing a strand of hair to escape from their hijab, the changes have been head-spinning. "Most of our women clients order shisha. It's something that was totally unimaginable just three months ago," a Lebanese waiter told AFP at an upscale cafe in north Riyadh. Heba, a 36-year-old longtime smoker who sat at a table nearby, described growing up in a closed country where "everything was forbidden to women". —AFP

France announces first COVID-19 death outside Asia

PARIS: An 80-year-old Chinese tourist in France has died from COVID-19, said French Health Minister Agnes Buzyn.

This is the first novel coronavirus death outside of Asia. So far the only reported fatalities outside of the Chinese mainland has been in the Philippines, Japan and Hong Kong.

Buzyn said she was informed on Friday that the man, who was treated at the Bichat hospital in northern Paris since Jan 25, had died of a lung infection due to the coronavirus.

His condition "had deteriorated rapidly" after several critical days, she added.

France has recorded 11 cases of the virus, out of a global total of 63,851.

Six people with the virus remain in hospital in France, Buzyn said, adding that none was seriously ill.

One of them was the dead Chinese tourist's 50-year-old daughter and the rest were British nationals who were infected by a compatriot at a French ski re-

sort. The illness has killed more than 1,500 people and infected at least 66,000 in China while spreading to more than two dozen other countries, sparking an unprecedented containment effort.

The scale of the epidemic ballooned this week after officials in the Chinese province of Hubei - the epicentre of the outbreak - changed their criteria for counting cases, adding thousands of new patients to the tally.

Around 56 million people in Hubei and its capital Wuhan are now living under quarantine, virtually sealed off from the rest of the country in an effort to contain the virus. Away from China, almost 600 cases have been confirmed - roughly 35 of which have been reported in the European Union. The most concentrated number of cases outside China is on a cruise ship quarantined off the Japanese coast, which is holding at least 285 people with the virus among its 3,700 crew and passengers.

The US embassy has said it will fly roughly 400 Americans on board the

ship back their home country and Buzyn said France was "always ready to repatriate its nationals", though she made no firm commitment.

There are believed to be four French nationals on the Diamond Princess, where all those on board are mostly confined to their cabins and required to wear masks and keep away from others during brief outings on deck.

"We are following the international situation very closely," Buzyn said.

"We need to prepare our health system to deal with a possible pandemic and therefore the circulation of the virus on national territory." —Agencies

Chinese businesses in faraway Namibia feel virus fear
Namibia should by rights feel little concern about the coronavirus outbreak given that the sparsely-populated desert country is 12,000km from China and without a single confirmed case.

But like many countries on the continent, the southern African nation hosts a big Chinese retail business community

with close links to home.

And as the fear of infection spreads, businesses are taking things into their own hands. A notice in Chinese and English taped to an aluminium shutter on a Chinese-owned shop in Windhoek's Chinatown spells it out: Any merchant returning to Namibia from China "must be quarantined for 14 days and keep the shop closed for that period", state the typed instructions signed by the Chinatown management.

Many shop owners who travelled to China for the year-end break have opted to stay put instead of returning to Windhoek's Chinatown, a vast complex of nearly 200 retail, wholesale, food and electronics outlets in the northern industrial district of the capital. In one block of 90 shops, 20 stores have not re-opened.

The Chinese community, their embassy and Chinese Chamber of Commerce are trying their "very best to prevent people from returning from China to Namibia ... during this period," said Brian Lee, a businessman.

For those who travel nonetheless "we have already set up a quarantine place outside of Windhoek" where they will be kept until cleared of the virus, but nobody has been taken there yet.

"I think everybody is panicking, not just Namibians, also the Chinese community here is panicking as well," said Lee. Chinatown is usually teeming with shoppers, but not on this Friday afternoon. Shop owner Miang Li points to people's fear of contracting the virus from the Chinese as a reason for the dropping footfall, although he says mid-month blues - due to low funds between pay cheques - may also be to blame.

"People who come here shout, 'coronavirus, coronavirus'," he told AFP at his clothes store. Li said inventories are dwindling because owners would rather not travel to China for their usual restock runs, instead clearing last year's stock at marked down prices.

"Many of us here only go back in February or March for stock, now it is dangerous to go and come back," he said. "If

you go now, you don't know if this country will let you come back."

Chinatown caters to retail shoppers but also sells bulk to online and bricks-and-mortar boutiques in other parts of Namibia. "Clients from Walvis Bay, Swakopmund and Oshakati are not coming for now because we only have old stock," said the 52-year-old who has worked in Namibia for nine years.

To make matters worse, some local staff are reluctant to continue working for the Chinese.

"Her uncle and aunt told her the Chinese bosses will give her the virus that is killing all the Chinese and that a NS800 (US\$54) salary is not worth losing her life or infecting the rest of them in the house," and so she quit, said Ndinoshiso. Namibia has had only one suspected case of coronavirus which turned out to be a false alarm.

Health Minister Kalumbi Shangula said the government had medics screening visitors at all entry points into the country. —AFP