NEW YORK: For a president obsessed with deporting "bad hombres" from the United States, the Latin American street gang known as MS-13 is the perfect target. Known for its horrific murders, in which victims are set upon with machetes and baseball bats, it has a reach that now extends from its base in Central America into 40 US states as well as Mexico, Canada and Spain. "MS-13 is a very well-known criminal brand," says Samuel Logan, author of a book on the gang. "It's a brand that creates fear and they use fear as a weapon." And Donald Trump, whose administration has declared MS-13 a national security threat, has vested on that fearsome brand to justify stepped up deportations of undocumented immigrants, a border wall and pressure on so-called "sanctuary cities" to stop protecting vulnerable migrants. MS-13 has "literally taken over towns and cities of the United States," Trump said last week, arguing that the border wall is needed to keep gang members out. "MS-13 is going to be gone from our streets very soon, believe me," he said on another recent occasion.

The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency this month announced the arrests of nearly 1,100 gang members or associates. But two-thirds of those arrested were US citizens, not immigrants, and only 104 members were MS-13. Last week, Los Angeles police arrested 21 members of MS-13 - a dozen of whom were gang leaders - and charged 44 people in the city's biggest ever operation against the group.

Hector Silva, a Salvadoran with Insight Crime, a research group that focuses on organized crime in Latin America, says the gang is the perfect foil for Trump's policies. MS-13, he says, "kills two birds with one stone for Trump: "In the minds of Americans, gangs are Latin American, hence they are both bad and foreign," Silva says. But experts and law enforcement officials warn that the strategy could make combating MS-13, or Mara Salvatrucha as the gang is also known, more difficult.

Police say undocumented Hispanics are the victims in nearly all MS-13 crimes, and Trump's anti-immigration policies are not helping police investigators. "If individuals believe that they cannot freely cooperate with law enforcement because of their immigration status, the mission of the police department and the safety of all residents are compromised," Silva said. Silva says undocumented immigrants are more afraid of being deported than of meeting the gang. "They can live with the gang, as cruel as it is, but not with deportation," he said.

A vicious circle
MS-13 emerged in the 1980s in the streets of Los Angeles among Salvadoran immigrants who had fought in their country's brutal civil war. The gang caught on, and its ranks spread to other Central American immigrants. In the 1990s and 2000s, many gang members were deported to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, where they gained immense power, turning Central America's northern triangle into the world's deadliest region. As it expanded, MS-13 has harnessed a brand that has become expert at smuggling drugs into the US, but also at exploiting the vulnerability of the thousands of Central American immigrants who cross the border alone. "We're concerned that MS-13 is recruiting younger people," said Silva. "In one instance, a 10-year-old." The average age of the gang members arrested in Suffolk County, which encompasses the eastern end of Long Island, is 18, he said. MS-13 is not a big drug trafficking cartel, like the powerful Colombian and Mexican crime groups. Instead, it finances itself with street sales of drugs, extortion, human trafficking and sometimes prostitution. It was declared a "transnational criminal organization" in 2012 by the United States. "I don't think that MS-13 is a security threat to the United States but rather a threat to the security of Hispanic communities," said Silva. "Where they truly are a national security threat is in El Salvador," he said. —AFP

CARACAS: A young man set ablaze by policemen in Caracas. Looting, destruction and 57 people dead. Both the Venezuelan government and the opposition admit that violent protests that have gripped the country for nearly two months are out of control - and analysts warn they could be a double-edged sword that might trigger even more unrest. "We condemn violence wherever it comes from," Attorney General Luisa Ortega said on Wednesday.

Nominally an ally of socialist President Nicolas Maduro, Ortega is now the highest-profile official to criticize the author-