

International

Trapped migrant workers suffer from Lebanon's dollar crisis and lockdown

Migrant workers long marginalized in Lebanon

BEIRUT: Temitope can't find work in Lebanon since the Nigerian domestic worker escaped her employer's house last month. With Lebanon in deep financial crisis and dollars in short supply, people have less money to spend on help. And with Beirut airport shut under a coronavirus lockdown, Temitope can't go back home even if she tries. "I'm very afraid. There's not a day that I don't cry... without any money even to eat now," said Temitope, who climbed down a building after her employer beat her until she bled.

She now lives with friends, relying on any cash they can give her. Like many African and Asian women in Lebanon, Temitope, a mother of two, was recruited for work and came so she could send money home to her family. But dollar shortages piling pressure on hundreds of thousands of migrant workers in Lebanon have left some stranded in the streets and many begging to go home. Rights groups warn this puts workers at risk of abuse and trauma. Embassy and NGO shelters are saturated.

Since Lebanon plunged into crisis late last year, the local currency has lost more than half its value. Prices have soared as more Lebanese slide into poverty. The coronavirus pandemic has also hampered government efforts to repatriate workers via their embassies, and even those flights require payment in dollars. "There's more need than ever before for shelters...for those who lost jobs and have no place else to go," said Zeina Mezher of the

International Labour Organization. Activist groups say they field regular calls from unpaid domestic workers who have been kicked out or escaped their employer's households.

'Slavery'

Migrant workers form the backbone of sectors like waste collection and housekeeping in Lebanon, where many barely have any rights, face widespread racism and sometimes commit suicide. Most women work as maids under a sponsorship system called "kafala" that even the former labor minister likened to slavery. It prevents them from leaving without the employer's consent, with salaries as low as \$150 a month. Last month, police interrogated a man who tried to sell a Nigerian housekeeper for \$1,000 on Facebook. "The crises, whether it's coronavirus or the economy, expose the flaws in the kafala system," Mezher said. The prime minister's wife sparked controversy last week when she called on Lebanese - facing rising unemployment - to take up jobs usually filled by foreigners like housekeeper or doorman.

Bangladeshi trash collectors went on strike for weeks after the firm managing waste in Beirut, RAMCO, switched to paying them in Lebanese pounds, undermining the value of their wages. When workers stopped garbage trucks from going out in protest last week, riot police arrived, firing smoke bombs and beating some of them. Mohamad Ilahi, one of the workers, has not sent money to his

said the platform freed thousands of users—especially high-risk groups—from having to turn up at public services, as they were now able to sign documents digitally. Previously at civil services "physical attendance (by the public) was the norm and remote activity the exception," Pierrakakis told AFP.

'Archaic'

In 2019, Greece was among the EU's laggards in digital performance, ranking 25th in the Digital Economy and Society Index published by the European Commission. That same year, about 20 percent of the active population had no access to the Internet, nearly double the EU average of 10 percent according to Eurostat figures. Nikos Smyrmaios, an associate professor of digital media at the university of Toulouse, said the 2010-2018 Greek debt crisis had already forced the country to overhaul its "archaic" civil service, but the process was often "haphazard." "Let's hope the trend doesn't come to a halt once we are out of this emergency," said Spinellis.

Not everything has gone according to plan. On May 11, the government faced criticism after large crowds gathered outside the main Athens offices of just-reopened state electricity company PPC to settle bills. Officials later insisted that customers had received ample warning that most transactions could be handled online or by telephone. Many users have lamented a lack of network bandwidth, while noting that their own homes could not be turned into office work areas at the flick of a switch when the lockdown was imposed

the European Rohingya Council rights group. She was threatened with rape on Facebook after asking the government to allow boats carrying Rohingya refugees to land. The government turned back one boat with 200 refugees on board last month.

The Rohingya are a minority from largely Buddhist Myanmar, which brands them illegal immigrants although many say they can trace their ancestry there for generations. More than one million now live in camps in Bangladesh. Some 700,000 Rohingya fled from their homes in 2017 alone in the face of crackdown by Myanmar's army. Malaysia was long seen as a haven of relative freedom and prosperity by Rohingya and it is now home to more than 100,000 of them despite the fact that it brands them illegal immigrants rather than refugees.

Raids

But the coronavirus changed the atmosphere towards Malaysia's estimated millions of undocumented migrants and most of all towards the Rohingya. Sentiment hardened as the government imposed economically paralyzing movement restrictions to stop the spread of a virus that has now infected more than 7,000 people in the country of 31 million and killed 115 of them. As the mood turned against migrants, the government carried out raids this month in which at least 2,000 foreigners were arrested, some led away in handcuffs by agents in protective gear.

ing month of Ramadan, the nearby Martha Lutheran church stepped in to help, hosting Muslim prayers in Arabic and German. "It is a great sign and it brings joy in Ramadan and joy amid this crisis," said Mohamed Taha Sabry, the mosque's imam, who led his congregation in prayer watched over by a stained-glass window depicting the Virgin Mary. "This pandemic has made us a community. Crises bring people get together."

Places of worship reopened in Germany on May 4 after being shut for weeks under a coronavirus lockdown, but worshippers must maintain a minimum distance from one another of 1.5 meters. The church, a red-brick neo-renaissance building in Berlin's Kreuzberg district could hardly offer a sharper contrast to the cultural centre in Neukoelln where the Muslim congregation is



BEIRUT: Ethiopian domestic workers wait outside their country's consulate to register for repatriation, in Hazmieh suburb of the Lebanese capital Beirut. —AFP

wife and two daughters in Bangladesh for months. "My family cries a lot," he said. "They can't pay school fees, can't buy enough food."

He said the firm had finally agreed to a pay raise in local currency. RAMCO manager Walid BouSaad said the company had no choice because the Lebanese state, its main customer, stopped paying in

dollars late last year, on top of millions the government owes in arrears. "It is the worker's right to ask for payment in dollars," he said. "But some things are out of our hands." For Ilahi, the future in Lebanon remains uncertain. "I want to work. But without a solution, there's no use for me here," he said. "I will want to leave then. All of us will." —Reuters

COVID edges Greece closer to e-governance

ATHENS: The coronavirus crisis has forced Greece to take rapid steps to computerize its lumbering civil service and belatedly introduce e-governance in one of the EU's worst digital laggards, experts say. After recording its first coronavirus death on March 12, Athens took unprecedented measures totally at odds with its previous love affair with paperwork and red tape.

Diomidis Spinellis, head of the department of management science and technology at the Athens university of Economics, says that the COVID-19 crisis "accelerated" Greece's digital turn—though critics say the country has a long way to go. Between March 23 and May 4, when a nationwide lockdown was imposed, Greeks were required to inform authorities when leaving their homes. A special SMS service was introduced for those unable to print a special form created by the government.

Eventually, some 110 million messages were sent free of charge during this period, in an initiative praised by the OECD. The government also rolled out gov.gr, an online platform combining all public services and simplifying online access. Greece's minister of digital governance Kyriakos Pierrakakis

Rohingya targeted in Malaysia; coronavirus stokes xenophobia

KUALA LUMPUR: Eleyas, a Rohingya Muslim, fled to Malaysia six years ago, seeking a safe haven from persecution in Myanmar. Now he has been fired from his job by a boss who told him it was because of his origins and he is scared to leave his home in fear of arrest or harassment. "I want to find a new job, but it's not safe. We're all just staying at home," Eleyas, 38, told Reuters, not giving his full name for fear of retribution.

For decades, Muslim-majority Malaysia welcomed Rohingya and largely turned a blind eye to their technically illegal employment in low-paying jobs. But, as in some other parts of the world, the novel coronavirus outbreak has turned sentiment against foreigners, who have been accused of spreading disease, burdening the state and taking jobs as the economy plummets.

While the Rohingya have been the most obvious targets, other migrants are also worried in a country that relies heavily on foreign labour at factories, construction sites and plantations. "There is harassment on the streets and online. I've never seen anything like this in Malaysia before," said one Malaysian activist, Tengku Emma Zuriana Tengku Azmi, from

Muslims pray in Berlin church to comply with social distancing rules

BERLIN: A Berlin church is hosting Muslims who are unable to fit into their mosque for Friday prayers because of social distancing guidelines. The Dar Assalam mosque in the Neukolln district normally welcomes hundreds of Muslims to its Friday services. But it can currently only accommodate 50 people at a time under Germany's coronavirus restrictions. During the holy fast-



ATHENS: A woman looks at the website of Taxisnet in Athens yesterday. The coronavirus crisis has forced Greece to take rapid steps to computerize its lumbering civil service and belatedly introduce e-governance in one of the EU's worst digital laggards, experts say. —AFP

in March. "We are celebrating the disappearance of the fax in 2020," jeers Dimitris Tsingos, a tech entrepreneur and founder of the Hellenic startup association.

"There are efforts by the government but it's hardly revolutionary... there is still a lot of work to be done," he said. Diamanto Zafiraki, a 38-year-old economy ministry employee, has her personal laptop to work with, but has to share with her eight-year-old twins when it's time for homework. "I don't have a dedicated work area at home. I work from my kitchen, using equipment that is not made for this purpose," she said. —AFP



UKHTIA: Rohingya refugees gather at a market as first cases of COVID-19 coronavirus have emerged in the area, in Kutupalong refugee camp in Ukhtia. —AFP

The government has not given full details of the detainees' nationalities, but at least 800 of them were from Myanmar and the vast majority of people from Myanmar in Malaysia are Rohingya. Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's office did not respond to requests for comment on the arrests and the backlash towards refugees and foreign workers. The government has not said how many Rohingya have been found to have the virus. Eleyas said that as the mood soured, he and eight other Rohingya workers were fired from their jobs at a supermarket. He did not identify the store, for fear he could be targeted. —Reuters

accustomed to gathering. "It was a strange feeling because of the musical instruments, the pictures," said worshipper Samer Hamdoun. "But when you look, when you forget the small details, this is the House of God in the end..."

The Islamic Council, an umbrella group of 400 mosques, said in April that many face bankruptcy because the closures stretched into the holy fasting month of Ramadan, usually a vital period for donations. The church's pastor, Monika Matthias, said she had felt moved by the Muslim call to prayer. "I took part in the prayer," she said. "I gave a speech in German. And during prayer, I could only say yes, yes, yes, because we have the same concerns and we want to learn from you. And it is beautiful to feel that way about each other." —Reuters

News in brief

Egypt 'coronavirus tax'

CAIRO: Egypt's cabinet has preliminarily approved a bill that taxes one percent of citizens' salaries to cushion the impact of coronavirus on strained government finances, sparking online criticism. The draft law - due to come into effect from July, pending parliamentary approval - imposes the deductions across the public and private sectors on employees with monthly net incomes above 2,000 Egyptian pounds (around \$125). "All governments across the world give out money to their people except for Egypt" to help cushion the effects of coronavirus, said one Twitter user. Instead, the Egyptian government "reaches into the pockets of Egyptians to take 1 percent." The bill also stipulates a 0.5 percent effective tax on state pensions to help "confront some of the economic repercussions resulting from the spread of coronavirus," the cabinet said in a statement this week. On Facebook, some citizens alleged that depriving pensioners of part of their income was "unconstitutional". —AFP

No kissing the bride

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka lifted a ban Friday on wedding receptions as part of an easing of coronavirus restrictions, but grooms may not kiss the bride - at least in public. The country's well-heeled usually hold wedding celebrations with thousands of guests, and the festivities can last for days with much eating, drinking, dancing and singing. But under the new guidelines there should be no more than 100 guests, all of whom must stay a meter apart and wear masks - including the happy couple. "Guests should not be allowed to kiss, hug or shake hands," said the latest health ministry rules seen by AFP. "Greeting each other should be done without any touching." Sri Lanka imposed a nationwide curfew on March 20 that ruled out gatherings of any sort, but the restrictions have been eased in many districts that are not considered high-risk. Religious gatherings remain banned while only the bereaved family are allowed at funerals. —AFP

8 inmates killed in Mexico

PUEBLO GRANDE: A violent clash at a prison in Mexico's central state of Jalisco on Friday left eight inmates dead and another eight prisoners hospitalized with injuries, state security officials said. During the incident at a jail in the Pueblo Grande complex, three people were killed by firearms and four others died from beatings, Jalisco's prosecutor Gerardo Octavio Solis said in a press conference. Authorities later confirmed another death, after nine people were initially hospitalized. They said the fight broke out as inmates participated in a sports activity. Officials said jail staff never lost control of the facility or were threatened, and that they recovered two firearms and a homemade explosive device. Five people were detained for having a possible role in the confrontation. As part of the investigation, authorities said they will probe whether any public officials were involved. —Reuters

Egypt arrests 11 suspects

CAIRO: Egyptian security forces arrested 11 people on suspicion of fabricating media content for the Qatar-based Al Jazeera network, the interior ministry said Friday. The suspects were allegedly found to be collaborating with members of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood group to create content that included a documentary on Egypt's troubled North Sinai region in exchange for large sums of money, the ministry said in a statement. It said the suspects aimed "to undermine national security and stability by producing fabricated media reports... on the country's internal situation to spread rumors". The investigations were handed over to the Supreme State Security Prosecution, the ministry added. Security forces have been battling a long-running Islamist insurgency in North Sinai, spearheaded by a local affiliate of the Islamic State group. The region is largely closed off to the media, except for rare visits supervised by the military. —AFP