

International

'Catastrophic': Balkan healthcare overwhelmed by COVID-19 surge

Skyrocketing virus caseload pushes hospitals to the cusp of collapse

BELGRADE: Not enough beds and not enough doctors: a skyrocketing coronavirus caseload is pushing hospitals in the Balkans to the cusp of collapse, in chaotic scenes reminding some medics of the region's 1990s wars. After nearly a year of keeping outbreaks more or less under control, the nightmare scenario that the Balkans feared from the start of the pandemic is now starting to unfold. In hard-hit Bosnia, one doctor described the distress of having to juggle the care of multiple patients whose lives were hanging by a thread.

"The situation reminds me of the war, and I'm afraid it could get even worse during the winter," the doctor, who requested anonymity said. "We can do the work of three (people), but not of five". The Western Balkans, one of Europe's poorest corners, has for weeks been battling an explosive coronavirus spike, its death toll doubling in the last month alone to reach nearly 10,000. The crisis is exposing gaps in healthcare systems that have long suffered from low funding and a brain drain crisis, with an exodus of promising young doctors and nurses leaving to seek better wages and training abroad.

Even before the pandemic began, the Balkans had some of the lowest density rates of doctors in Europe, according to World Health Organization data. Hospitals are now facing further shortages as staff fall victim to the respiratory disease. In Serbia, some 2,000 medical workers have been forced to self-isolate just as medical wards are seeing a huge inundation of patients filling beds in the capital Belgrade.

"I never had such an experience in my professional career", Rade Panic, the president of a Serbian doctors' union, told regional TV channel N1 on Friday in a trembling voice. "I didn't have room for patients that we medically consider young, I didn't have anywhere to transport them", added the anaesthesiologist, who works in the "red zone" of a hospital treating the most serious Covid-19 cases.

Bed shortage

Bosnia, North Macedonia and Montenegro are all in Europe's top ten when it comes to highest per capita death rates on the continent. Yet governments in the region have been reluctant to return to the drastic lock-



SARAJEVO: People wait for a medical examination outside a COVID hospital on Nov 5, 2020. — AFP

downs imposed at the start of the pandemic, instead opting for lighter restrictions such as early closure of restaurants. While Serbia is racing to build two brand new hospitals, Kosovo is considering adapting old hotels into makeshift wards, including the Grand Hotel in downtown Pristina.

Overflowing clinics in Pristina mean that some patients, such as 33-year-old Veprim Morina, are being turned away. The doctor "told me to take my medication at home since the hospitals are full," the fitness instructor said. Morina managed to hire a nurse to provide treatment at home — an option those who can afford it are opting for when possible. Getting a hospital bed now requires having "connections", he said. "You have to be very lucky to find a place."

In neighboring North Macedonia, the government is marshalling private clinics and their staff to treat COVID-19 patients after public hospitals hit full capacity. "We have been providing new beds, but it is harder and harder", health minister Venko Filipce said last week. Outside clinics in the capital Skopje, relatives of patients bring food and sometimes even medicine to their loved ones. "Catastrophic. Unorganized. No one

answers the phone for hours," said one man seeking information on his sick relative. "They (medical staff) are fighting, giving their best, but they simply cannot do everything".

Slow to act

Croatian doctors have also warned of staff and equipment shortages. More than 2,100 patients are currently hospitalized and 3,000 would push the healthcare system to "collapse," they say. Experts say politicians have struggled to strike a balance between controlling the virus and protecting fragile economies. "We are too poor that all (lockdown measures) be repeated twice", said Croatian economist Ljubo Juric.

In Bosnia, shops, restaurants and gyms all remain open while Serbia recently cut hours for businesses but has stopped short of an all-out closure. While progress on vaccines is giving doctors hope, they fear the chaos that could unfold in the meantime. "I don't understand why the authorities don't put in place more restrictive measures," said Jasmina Smajic, a doctor in the Bosnian city of Tuzla. "Something must be done about this if we want to prevent catastrophic consequences".—AFP

'Silent majority' of Poles favor strict abortion law

WARSAW: While mass protests against a court verdict backing a near-total ban on abortion have taken on an increasingly political flavor in Poland, the devout Catholic country is far from turning pro-choice. Surveys show that Poles have grown comfortable with existing abortion legislation - among Europe's most restrictive - adopted in 1993 as part of a church-state compromise after the collapse of communism.

Abortion is only permitted in cases of rape or incest, when the life of the mother is at risk or if there is a severe foetal anomaly. That last provision was struck down by the constitutional court last month, triggering a wave of protests nationwide. "We're seeing a surprising mobilization of the younger generation in particular in these protests. And in that group, support for a more liberal law is growing — but that's not the majority," said Adam Szostkiewicz, a commentator on political and religious issues.

"The majority had been silent for years, holding the belief that if the Church says so and politicians don't question it, then evidently that's just how it must be," he told AFP. Only 22 percent of Poles are in favour of abortion on demand, according to a survey published late last month by the independent Kantar pollsters. Sixty-two percent think it should be legal in certain cases, while 11 percent are in favour of a total ban. According to sociologist Katarzyna Zielinska, the attachment of Poles to Catholicism as well as conservative family and gender roles is rooted in the communist past. —AFP

French police risk charges over black man's beating

PARIS: Four French police yesterday risked being charged over the beating and racial abuse of a black music producer that shocked France and intensified controversy over new security legislation. Tens of thousands protested across France Saturday against the security bill—which would restrict the right of the press to publish the faces of on-duty police—with the rally in Paris ending in bitter clashes.



PARIS: Demonstrators clash with French riot police during a protest against the 'global security' draft law on Saturday. — AFP

Belarus protesters take to the streets with new tactic

MINSK: Opposition protesters in Belarus took to the streets of capital Minsk yesterday in the latest of three months of demonstrations against the re-election of strongman president Alexander Lukashenko. Since an August election, Belarus has been gripped by massive protests that erupted after Lukashenko, 66, secured a sixth term as president of the ex-Soviet republic. The opposition believes the election was rigged and political novice Svetlana Tikhanovskaya - who ran against Lukashenko in the place of her jailed husband - was the true winner of the polls.

In recent weeks, authorities imposed an intense crackdown in which hundreds were detained and protesters were prevented from gathering in central Minsk. That prompted Lukashenko's opponents to change tactic, calling on supporters to create small gatherings in every district of the capital. According to local media, some twenty rallies were recorded yesterday across the city.

"Large columns of people have assembled in all districts of Minsk, without exception. The Lukashenko police are desperately rushing from district to district," said opposition Telegram channel Nexta Live that has helped coordinate the ongoing demonstrations. As in previous weeks, several metro stations in the city center were shut and mobile connection was limited.

Riot police were deployed in large numbers, with the Tut.by news website reporting the use of stun grenades and tear gas. Human rights group Viasna said that at least 20 people have been taken into police



MINSK: Opposition supporters hold former white-red-white flags of Belarus as they gather to protest against police violence and the Belarus presidential election results yesterday. — AFP

custody so far. "Everyone takes to the streets in their district and sees dozens, hundreds and thousands of supporters," Tikhanovskaya, 38, said in a video address posted on her Telegram channel on Saturday.

She added that Belarusians are a "proud, brave and peaceful people that have learned the price of freedom and will never agree to live without it". Tikhanovskaya fled to EU member Lithuania shortly after the August vote and has received support from several Western leaders, who refuse to recognise the election results. The European Union has slapped sanctions on Lukashenko and a number of his allies over election rigging and a violent crackdown on demonstrators.

Belarus police detained thousands of protesters in the first days of the demonstrations, with many reporting torture and abuse in custody. Lukashenko, who has the firm backing of Moscow, has refused to step down and instead has suggested reforms to the constitution to placate the opposition. — AFP

"We are shocked by the injuries suffered by our colleague Ameer al-Halbi and condemn the unprovoked violence," said Phil Chetwynd, AFP's global news director, demanding that the police investigate the incident. Police said 62 officers were injured at the demonstrations and 81 people arrested, with Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin saying the violence in the protests was "unacceptable". Authorities did not have a tally for the number of marchers injured, saying only that two people outside the capital had complained of police violence.

'Shame us'

Four police have been detained over the beating of Zecler, with three of them specifically probed for using racial violence as well as for making false statements. Following questioning by the police's National Police Inspectorate General (IGPN) they have now been handed over to the judicial authorities to decide on the next steps, which could see them being charged. They could face a fast-track trial or a more standard procedure which would see a case being opened and the men appear before an investigating magistrate. Paris prosecutor Remy Heitz is due to give an update on the measures to be taken against them from 5:00 pm.

Commentators say that the images of the beating—first published by the Loopsider news site—may never have been made public if the contentious Article 24 of the security legislation was made law. The bill would criminalize publishing images of on-duty police with the intent of harming their "physical or psychological integrity". It was passed by the National Assembly although it is awaiting Senate approval. The controversy over the law and police violence is developing into another crisis for the government as President Emmanuel Macron confronts the pandemic, its economic fallout and a host of problems on the international stage.—AFP

Sydney records its hottest Nov night amid heatwave

SYDNEY: Sydney recorded its hottest November night as Australia's largest city suffered through a weekend heatwave that saw daytime temperatures peak above 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit). The overnight temperature did not drop below 25.3 degrees Celsius Saturday into Sunday in central Sydney, according to the meteorology bureau, making it the hottest November night since records began.

The temperature had already hit a scorching 30 degrees Celsius by 4:30 am Sunday, before reaching above 40 degrees for the second consecutive day. "New South Wales is in the midst of a severe heatwave with very warm conditions already being experienced yesterday, and today being a repeat of some of those conditions," said the Bureau of Meteorology's Agata Imielska.

Daytime records for November fell elsewhere in Australia's southeast, with the outback towns of Griffith and Mildura reaching 43.2 and 45.7 degrees Celsius respectively on Saturday. The heatwave saw bans on lighting fires imposed across large swathes of New South Wales (NSW) state, which was badly hit by catastrophic bushfires during the last southern hemisphere summer. A number of blazes broke out Sunday, including one on Sydney's western outskirts that the NSW Fire and Rescue Service said damaged a property.

More than 60 bushfires were still burning across the state, but most had been brought under control by firefighters as a southerly wind change led to a rapid drop in temperatures. It was the first burst of significant bushfire activity since the devastating 2019-2020 fires, which burned an area roughly the size of the United Kingdom and left 33 people dead as tens of thousands fled their homes. The fire season also killed or displaced nearly three billion animals and cost the economy an estimated US\$7 billion. The latest heatwave comes just two weeks after government scientists warned the fossil-fuel reliant country should brace for worse to come, predicting climate change will continue to exacerbate bushfires, droughts and cyclones in Australia. —AFP

Sao Paulo, Rio elect mayors in runoffs

SAO PAULO: Brazil's biggest cities, Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, began electing their next mayors yesterday as the country held municipal runoffs, the last polls before far-right President Jair Bolsonaro is up for reelection in 2022. In Sao Paulo, Brazil's economic capital, centrist incumbent Bruno Covas faces leftist challenger Guilherme Boulos, a leader of the Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST). Boulos, 38, who is running for the upstart Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL), trails in the polls by about 10 points.

But he has momentum: he came from behind in the first round on November 15 to beat both Bolsonaro's candidate and a leftist rival from the more-established Workers' Party (PT). Young and charismatic, he is being called the new face of the Brazilian left, which is still reeling from the 2016 impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff and the jailing of ex-president and PT founder Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva on corruption charges. The runoff took a twist two days before the vote when Boulos announced he had tested positive for the new coronavirus, forcing the cancellation of the candidates' final debate.

Covas, a cancer survivor, meanwhile has a powerful backer in Sao Paulo governor Joao Doria, his predecessor and mentor, a top contender to challenge Bolsonaro for the presidency. In June, Covas was also diagnosed with coronavirus. The virus has indelibly marked the municipal elections in the giant country of 212 million people. The polls were postponed by six weeks because of the pandemic, with the period between the first and second rounds reduced from four weeks to two.

The authorities are urging voters to bring their own pens, respect social distancing guidelines and disinfect their hands multiple times. Bolsonaro, who has downplayed the virus as a "little flu," faces criticism for his handling of the pandemic, which has killed more than 172,000 people in Brazil — the second-highest death toll worldwide, after the United States. In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's second city, opinion polls indicate incumbent Mayor Marcelo Crivella, an Evangelical pastor and Bolsonaro ally, is set to lose in a landslide to ex-mayor Eduardo Paes of the traditional right-wing Democrats party (DEM).

Other races to watch include the northeastern city of Recife - scene of a family feud on the left between cousins Joao Campos of the center-left Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB) and Marilia Araes of the PT - and the southern city of Porto Alegre. There, another rising left-wing star, Manuela D'Avila of the Communist Party of Brazil, faces centrist candidate Sebastiao Melo, in a city rocked by violent protests following the first-round vote after two white security guards killed a black customer at a supermarket. In all, 57 cities across Brazil are holding mayoral runoffs. Results are expected from around 0100 GMT today.—AFP