

## International

## US evictions surge amid virus despite federal ban

## Families still being threatened with removal from their homes

WASHINGTON: When single mother Khalyah Jackson-Rivers lost her job in May, she fell behind on her rent despite a payment plan, eventually owing thousands of dollars to her building's management company in South Carolina. "Then I got an eviction notice (in July) and a second eviction notice, and (it) said I had 30 days to move," the 25-year-old said by phone, worrying that she and her five-year-old daughter would have nowhere to go.

Despite a federal ban on evictions amid the coronavirus pandemic, US families are still being threatened with removal from their homes - and the rate of such legal filings may be speeding up, housing experts warn. After a previous ban ended in July, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in September issued a sweeping nationwide order temporarily halting millions of US renters from being evicted, in a bid to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Yet thousands of eviction filings went forward in the weeks leading up to and following the start of the moratorium, brought by some of the largest landlords in the country, according to tracking by the nonprofit Private Equity Stakeholder Project. "We saw a substantial increase in cases in the last month, including since the CDC moratorium was announced," the group's executive director, Jim Baker, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

The group warned of a surge in evictions in a September report, saying that "filings by private equity firms and other large landlords appear to be accelerating".

Others like Princeton University's Eviction Lab have noted similar trends. The Eviction Lab reported 1,975 evictions in the 17 cities it tracks during one week in mid-September, and more than 50,000 since the pandemic began. Such data is notoriously difficult to gather, so to get a sense of the national picture, Baker and his colleagues have been focusing on metro areas in five states - Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee and Texas.

They recorded more than 5,200 cases in these areas

brought by private equity firms and other large corporate landlords during the four weeks since the CDC moratorium was announced.

"We're just scratching the surface, but I do think the findings are representative of broader trends," Baker said. A spokeswoman for property leasing firm Invitation Homes, one of the companies highlighted by the study, said in emailed comments that "eviction is never a course we want to pursue". "We have been doing what the CDC order directs since early in the pandemic - working with our residents facing COVID-related financial hardships and offering a variety of payment options so they can stay in their homes," she said.

In September, after speaking with an attorney, Jackson-Rivers found out about the moratorium's declaration form, and signed and handed it over. She is now protected from eviction through the end of the year, but is currently moving out of her apartment anyway and into a family member's house.

A spokesman for AMCS, the management company at Jackson-Rivers's building, did not respond to a request for comment.

“We’d be moving into a shelter”

## Procedural hurdle

The CDC ban covers nearly all renters, said Sarah Saadian, vice president for public policy at the National Low Income Housing Coalition, but it does have exemptions and requirements. "One of the challenges with the moratorium is that to be protected, renters have to sign a declaration form and give it to their landlord," she said.

Currently, property owners do not have to give formal notice to tenants about the moratorium and steps they have to take if they need its protection, Saadian said, though her office is urging federal agencies involved in housing to change that. "Corporate landlords are moving forward as quickly as possible before renters hear about the moratorium," she said. "That's clearly violating the intention of the order, which is to protect individual and public health."

Many of those evicted will move in with friends and families, Saadian said, making it harder to follow social distancing guidelines. The National Multifamily Housing Council,

which represents the apartment industry's largest firms, called on congressional leaders to focus more on rental assistance, which the CDC moratorium does not provide. "It is far better to focus on ensuring renters can pay the rent than to try and come up with policies like eviction moratoriums that do not address the root cause and put housing providers at financial risk," vice president Paula Cino said in emailed comments. Landlords and industry groups have sued over the moratorium, claiming it is unconstitutional.



Despite a federal ban, thousands of eviction filings went forward in the weeks leading up to and following the start of the moratorium, brought by some of the largest landlords in the country. —Reuters

Some renters have reported instances of landlords not accepting moratorium declarations.

Scott and Martine Thomas had been renting in Riverdale, Georgia, for two years when the pandemic hit this spring, forcing Martine to take a 20% pay cut as well as reduced hours. The family has relied on that salary, as Scott cares for their two teenage sons with special needs.

While the couple was able to keep up on their rent in April and May, they started to fall behind in June, able to make only partial payments until mid-July - when their landlord asked them to move out by October. "We called family and friends and got the rent together, the full rent," Scott said in a phone interview.

But after some back-and-forth, the landlord continued to demand that the Thomases move out. Both Scott and Martine had heard about the CDC moratorium, however, and after consulting with an attorney, gave the landlord the signed declaration. Yet days later, an eviction notice was posted on their door, Scott said. The couple is now awaiting a court date on the eviction.

"Fortunately I'm able to take advantage of the CDC moratorium because otherwise we'd be moving into a shelter," Scott said. He noted that with no co-ed shelter in the county, "it would be just me with the kids, and my wife would be in another shelter by herself." —Reuters

## Laredo's millionaires, nuns and muralists battle border wall

LAREDO: Former US Border Patrol agent Daniel Perales spent hours over the years crouched at the mouth of the Zacata Creek, a tributary of the Rio Grande, listening for the snap of carrizo cane as border crossers from Mexico arrived on the northern banks. These days, he listens for the whistle of the Morelet's seedeater, a bird rare in these parts, and frets about the proposed construction of a border wall here. "It would fragment the habitat of the birds, especially those that live along the river," said Perales, who spent nearly 30 years with the federal agency and oversaw 400 agents at the Laredo North Station before retiring in 2007.

Perales said he voted for President Donald Trump in 2016 and plans to do so again. But that hasn't stopped him from joining the ranks of residents in Laredo opposed to building a barrier here as part of Trump's promised wall spanning the US-Mexico border.

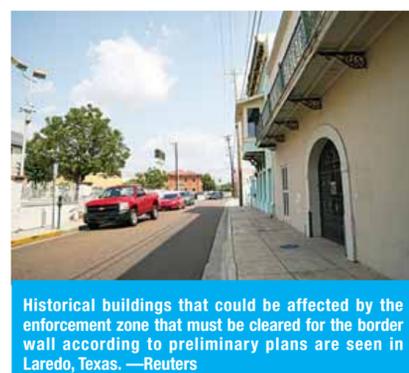
"It's not necessary. You don't need a wall here," said Perales, adding that cameras and patrol roads were sufficient. Less than a month before the US presidential election, resistance to the wall, a centerpiece of Trump's 2016 campaign, is flaring across parts of the approximately 2,000-mile border. Near construction sites in Arizona and California in recent

weeks, members of Native American tribes have clashed with law enforcement and others over plans for building on lands the tribes consider sacred. Two weeks ago in front of a Laredo courthouse, military veterans against the border project mobilized to thwart a caravan of Trump supporters who had sought to drive over a 30-foot "Defund the Wall" street mural. Amid an election upended by Trump's positive coronavirus diagnosis, the future of the wall hangs in the balance. Trump's Democratic challenger, former vice president Joe Biden, has said he would not build "another foot of wall" if elected.

Meanwhile, opposition to plans for a stretch of wall in the counties of Zapata and Webb, which includes Laredo, has united some strange bedfellows: the street artists, multimillionaire Republicans, Catholic nuns, military and border patrol veterans, conservationists and a local Native American tribe. In Webb County, CBP has issued contracts worth \$1.05 billion to three construction companies to build approximately 69 miles of a 30-foot steel bollard wall, as well as construct roads and adding cameras and other surveillance technology. Construction is slated to begin as early as January depending on the availability of land.

In an August press release, CBP officials said the Laredo wall is necessary to "impede and deny illegal border crossings and the drug and human smuggling activities of transnational criminal organizations." In the Laredo sector, traffic has not abated during the coronavirus pandemic as it has in other sectors, government data show. In statements to Reuters, CBP spokesman Matthew Dyman said the agency is committed to protecting cultural and natural

resources, such as wildlife corridors and culturally sensitive Native American artifacts or sites. The agency is now surveying land for possible purchase. Dyman said it is "always CBP's preference" to obtain land voluntarily through negotiated offers but if that is not possible, a condemnation action - known as eminent domain - may be required. The majority of Americans oppose a substantial expansion of the border wall, according to a January 2019 Pew research poll, although the opinions tended to fall along party lines, with 82 percent of Republicans in favor and 93 percent of Democrats opposed. —Reuters



Historical buildings that could be affected by the enforcement zone that must be cleared for the border wall according to preliminary plans are seen in Laredo, Texas. —Reuters

## New York seeks shutdowns in 9 neighborhoods

NEW YORK: New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said Sunday he planned to reimpose restrictions on nine neighborhoods as COVID-19 cases rise in parts of the city, which had largely controlled the virus after a catastrophic outbreak. The proposal, which must be approved by state Governor Andrew Cuomo, marks a major setback for America's largest city since it was hit hard in March by the coronavirus. The city has lost almost 24,000 people to the virus. "Today, unfortunately, is not a day for celebration," de Blasio said, announcing he would ask to close nonessential businesses and all schools in nine neighborhoods of Brooklyn and Queens.

If approved by the governor, who has not yet weighed in, the new restrictions would be the first step back toward lockdown in the city. New York City became the global epicenter of the pandemic in spring, but more recently officials had touted the lowest rates of test positivity and infection among major US cities.

## 'Rewind' of city's reopening

De Blasio has faced criticism previously for his handling of the virus response among the city's Jewish residents. He triggered fury in April when he threatened "the Jewish community" with summons and arrest after a large crowd of Hasidic Jews gathered for a rabbi's funeral in Brooklyn's Williamsburg neighborhood.

The nine neighborhoods now targeted by the mayor have seen the rate at which people are testing positive for the virus remain above three percent for the past seven days, despite authorities intervening to encourage mask-wearing and other safety practices. De Blasio said he intended to "rewind" the city's reopening in the worst-affected areas, according to the New York Times.

The city is also monitoring 11 additional ZIP codes that de Blasio described as of "real concern."

His proposal comes just days after hundreds of thousands of the city's children began returning to in-person school for the first time since March, and restaurants were allowed to resume limited indoor service. New



NEW YORK: People cross the street near Times Square in New York City, which now faces potential re-imposition of virus restrictions in some neighborhoods.

York City is considered America's cultural capital, and its world-class restaurants have been hard-hit by the virus.

However, authorities allowed eateries to resume indoor service at 25 percent capacity as economic pressure grew for loosening restrictions. Following increases in cases in 20 of the city's 146 neighborhoods, New York City's leaders are following a model of localized measures, also taken in other nations like South Korea and Singapore. —AFP

## Egypt arrests reporter after protest coverage

CAIRO: Egyptian police have arrested a journalist who had been covering a crackdown in the aftermath of small-scale protests near the southern city of Luxor, her employer and lawyer said. Basma Mostafa was brought before prosecutors on Sunday after she had gone missing the day before while reporting on unrest

in the village of Al-Awamyia. She had been arrested while reporting on the alleged killing of a man by police during the demonstrations, according to her employer, the Al-Manassa news website. "The prosecution ordered that she remains in jail for 15 days pending an investigation over charges of joining a terrorist group and spreading false news," her lawyer Hala Doma wrote on Facebook late Sunday.

Dozens of Egyptians took to the streets in several villages across the Egypt in September, according to videos shared widely on social media, especially by sympathizers of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood movement. The demonstrations coincided with mounting anger, particularly in rural and low-income areas,

over sweeping government campaigns against illegal construction, which have forced people to pay fines to legalize home ownership.

They came after exiled businessman Mohamed Ali, who has emerged as a vocal critic of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi since last year, called for protests against the government. On Friday, London-based rights group Amnesty International said Egypt had arrested hundreds of people, and that security forces had killed at least two during the demonstrations. Sisi on Sunday warned against attempts to stoke instability in the country, and said the government was carrying out the campaign against illegal construction as part of reforms. —AFP

## News in brief

## Turkey pulls back drilling ship

ISTANBUL: A Turkish drilling ship returned to port yesterday from contested waters near Cyprus, according to a naval tracking website, as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan prepared to receive the head of NATO. The Turkish navy had said last month that the Yavuz would stay in eastern Mediterranean waters southwest of Cyprus until Oct 12. The apparent de-escalation came as Erdogan prepared to hold talks in Ankara later yesterday with NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg about its dispute with Greece and Cyprus about maritime borders and energy rights. —AFP

## Russia virus cases approach May high

MOSCOW: Russia yesterday recorded a rise in coronavirus cases close to the maximum level in May but it has stopped short of reimposing strict lockdown measures. With the fourth-highest number of cases in the global pandemic, Russia introduced harsh measures during the first outbreak of the virus including the closure of borders from March while Muscovites had to apply for electronic passes to travel round the city. Yesterday, the government confirmed 10,888 new cases, approaching the May 11 highest recorded level of 11,656. Of these, 3,537 were in the capital, the worst-hit city by far, where Mayor Sergei Sobyanin said Sunday there are "many seriously ill". —AFP

## Guatemala sends back migrants

GUATEMALA CITY: Guatemala has sent back almost 3,500 Honduran migrants from a caravan that was heading to the United States over concerns they might spread COVID-19, President Alejandro Giammattei said on Sunday. In a televised message, Giammattei said Guatemalan security forces were able to "contain" the caravan, that according to the president was a factor in the transmission of the virus. According to the Guatemalan Migration Institute (IGM), the caravan entered eastern Guatemala on Thursday, pushing over a military cordon on the Corinto border before splitting into groups to reach Mexico, which has closed its borders. —AFP

## Mali frees over 100 militants

BAMAKO: Insurgency-hit Mali has freed over 100 alleged or convicted jihadists to secure the release of a top politician and a French charity worker, sources close to the talks said yesterday. This is a rare mass release of prisoners in the fragile West African country, which is struggling with an eight-year-old Islamist insurgency that has claimed thousands of lives. Soumaila Cisse, a former opposition leader and three-time presidential candidate, was abducted on March 25 while campaigning in his home region of Niafunké ahead of legislative elections. —AFP

## Turkey backs Libya unity govt

ISTANBUL: President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Sunday expressed "full solidarity" with Libya's UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) during a meeting in Istanbul, his office said. Erdogan met with the head of the Tripoli-based government, Faysel Al-Sarraj, who last month announced plans to step down within six weeks as part of efforts to broker a peace agreement. "President Erdogan stated that Turkey would continue to stand by Libya in full solidarity and strengthen relations with the Government of National Accord, the only legitimate representative of Libya," the presidency said. —AFP