

International

Deserted, boarded up, fenced off: Washington barely recognizable

Troops on Washington streets to begin carrying arms

WASHINGTON: Walking through central Washington, it is difficult to distinguish between those buildings boarded up due to pandemic closures, and those boarded up due to riots. The capital of the United States is known for its grand vistas, historical monuments and crowds of tourists, but the city has radically changed in the last year. "This is my first time (in downtown Washington) in a year. There's usually people walking all over the place. This is very, very quiet. I almost think it's like a ghost of itself," said Jaime, a mother from Maryland who did not wish to give her full name.

Hordes of schoolchildren who normally travel from all over the country to visit museums and see the White House now stay at home, as do most foreign tourists. The hectic jostle of politicians, lobbyists and lawyers on the street has also fallen quiet, while the large metro stations that bring workers in from suburbs are quiet and little-used. The city of more than 700,000 inhabitants is subdued, one week before the presidential inauguration of Joe Biden on the steps of the Capitol. "The city is basically desolate," said Nadine Seiler, 55, who has been demonstrating every day since the end of October near the White House in favor of anti-racist causes. "Usually it's very stressful, but here it's like everybody's away on vacation," she added.

'It's all over'

As in many Western cities, many workers have been signing in from home—especially staff at big institutions headquartered in Washington such as the World Bank and the IMF, as well as the countless government agencies. The city's famous museums, most of them free, have been closed since March. And Mayor Muriel Bowser has again tightened restrictions so that restaurants can no longer serve any indoor customers. Eateries instead must try to survive by erecting tents and marquees along sidewalks, and tempting customers to sit down next to heaters of varying efficiency battling the winter cold.

"I went to the Christmas market... that's gone, all that's gone. You go into bars, (previously) packed bars—it's gone," laments Timothy Bartholomew, a resident of Arlington, just over the Potomac river.

According to the specialist site Eater, nearly 70 restaurants have permanently closed in Washington since the start of the pandemic, and many others are boarded up without any certainty they will ever reopen. The economic fallout is even more starkly evident in the



WASHINGTON: Members of the US National Guard arrive at the US Capitol in Washington, DC. — AFP

lengthening lines at soup kitchens, and the spread of tents sheltering homeless people under bridges and along main roads. Violent protests and unrest has also shaken Washington repeatedly in the last year.

After the death of George Floyd at the hands of the police in Minneapolis in May, Washington became one of the hotspots of nationwide anti-racist demonstrations. City authorities painted huge yellow letters reading "Black Lives Matter" across a wide street outside the White House, and the location became a popular site for rallies. But over the months, clashes between anti-racist activists and pro-Trump protesters have brought an edge of tension to the city.

Troops on the prowl

National Guard troops deployed on the streets of Washington began carry weapons late Tuesday in a major change of posture ahead of Joe Biden's inauguration as US president, according to an AFP photographer. The Guard soldiers were originally mobilized to provide mostly logistical support to Washington police, and on Monday General Daniel Hokanson, Pentagon National Guard Bureau chief, said they had not been

authorized yet to carry weapons. Authorizing Guard members to deploy in a law enforcement role, armed and empowered to make arrests, would be a "last resort" if the security situation got out of hand, Hokanson said.

It was not clear what changed late Tuesday, and the city's National Guard had no comment. Security experts have said chatter among extremists and supporters of President Donald Trump on social media about holding armed marches and threatening violence in the US capital and other cities had surged in recent days. The Pentagon is mobilizing up to 15,000 National Guard for the January 20 inauguration, as Trump and supporters still refuse to accept Biden's election victory two months ago.

Five people died on January 6 when Trump supporters attacked and shut down the US Congress in an attempt to halt the certification of Biden's election win. At the time Guard troops were nearby, but were unarmed and called in too late to back up the Capitol Police to protect the legislature. The New York Times reported that weapons had been authorized Tuesday for the troops guarding the Capitol complex. — AFP



UTOYA, Norway: A computer-generated handout view shows the future memorial to the 77 victims of Norwegian far-right extremist Anders Behring Breivik at Utøya, near the island of Utøya. — AFP

Memorial of Utøya massacre angers Norwegian neighbors

HOLE, Norway: He rescued terrified youths fleeing the bullets of a fanatical killer. Ironically, a decade later Terje Lien is fighting to stop a memorial to the victims. Lien and a handful of neighbors are battling to change its location, fearing the construction honoring the 77 people killed in Anders Behring Breivik's 2011 attack will make them hostages to a constant reminder of the trauma. "We have been given a cemetery-like memorial: 77 three-meter-high (10-foot) bronze columns that will stand 75 meters (yards) from our house," Terje Lien tells AFP.

"The first thing we'll see when we look out of the kitchen window will be these columns," he adds. Consisting of 77 columns, the memorial is set to stand on the bank facing the island of Utøya, where 69 people perished on July 22, 2011. The other eight victims died earlier in Oslo. Most of those killed were teenagers attending a camp organized by the youth league of the country's Labor Party. Disguised as a police officer,

right-wing extremist Breivik tracked and gunned down the youths, shortly after killing eight people in a bombing outside a government building in Oslo. Called Utøya or "Utøya Dock" where the ferry departs for the island 600 meters away—the site of the memorial in the village of Hole is next door to the home of the Lien family, which has lived here for four generations.

'Re-traumatization'

The 75-year-old retiree still has a vivid memory of the grey summer Friday afternoon, which was coincidentally his birthday. At first he mistook the bangs for "firecrackers", and as he saw people diving into the water to escape he thought he was witnessing a "swimming contest". Then his grandson came running, shouting: "They are shooting on Utøya." The two quickly took off in their family boat; 28 youths were rescued from the cold waters and they also brought a policeman out to the island. "When we came out there were bodies floating all over the bay, there were bodies on land and many wounded and bleeding," Lien recalls. For their bravery, he and other residents who helped were awarded medals and met Norway's King Harald—but he feels the government is not taking their feelings into account. "We are trying to move on," he says. "But every time we look in that direction, we will be haunted by these memories," he adds, pointing towards Utøya where construction machines are rumbling. — AFP

Kremlin critic Navalny vows to return to Russia on Sunday

MOSCOW: Opposition leader Alexei Navalny said yesterday he plans to return to Russia on Sunday from Germany, where he has been recovering from a poisoning attack, despite facing a threat of jail. The 44-year-old Kremlin critic wrote on Instagram that he had booked a flight that will arrive in Moscow on January 17. "There was never any question of 'returning or not' for me. Simply because I didn't leave. I ended up in Germany... for one reason: they tried to kill me," the anti-graft campaigner wrote on Instagram.

Navalny has been in Germany since late August after he fell violently ill on a flight from Siberia to Moscow and was hospitalized in the city of Omsk. He was then flown out to Berlin in an induced coma. Western experts concluded that Navalny was poisoned using the Soviet-designed nerve agent Novichok, the same chemical said to be used in the

attempted murder of former spy Sergei Skripal in the English town of Salisbury in 2018. Navalny insists the attack was carried out by Russia's main security agency, the Federal Security Service (FSB), on the orders of President Vladimir Putin.

"I survived. And now Putin, who gave the order for my murder, is... telling his servants to do everything so that I do not return," Navalny added. The Kremlin denies any involvement in the poisoning, but the European Union has imposed entry bans and bank account freezes on several officials, including the head of the FSB. Russia in turn introduced tit-for-tat sanctions on EU officials, further increasing tensions between Moscow and its Western neighbors. Speaking at his annual marathon press conference last month, Putin said that if Russia's special services had wanted to poison Navalny "they would have taken it to the end". — AFP

News in brief

S Africans held for not wearing masks

JOHANNESBURG: South African police have arrested more than 7,000 people caught without face masks in public since the end of December, the government said yesterday. Officials made face coverings mandatory in May last year at the same time as they gradually eased movement restrictions imposed in March to stem coronavirus infections. A partial lockdown was reinstated last month as the virus resurged, fuelled by a more transmissible variant. Officials at the time vowed to be more stringent in enforcing the regulations, which include an alcohol sales ban. Police Minister Bheki Cele yesterday said more than 20,000 people had been arrested or fined since December 29 for breaching the new rules, including 7,455 people detained for not wearing face masks. — AFP

C Africa forces target rebels

BANGUI: Rebel forces in the Central African Republic yesterday launched two attacks that were pushed back on the outskirts of the capital Bangui, Interior Minister Henri Wanzet Linguissara told AFP. Officials with the UN peacekeeping force confirmed the two attacks. Yesterday's simultaneous dawn assaults on army units were the first close to the capital since President Faustin Archange Touadera was re-elected in a December ballot. Fighting was still underway, said UN MINUSCA mission spokesman Abdoulaziz Fall, who only spoke of one attack. — AFP

Widodo gets first COVID job

JAKARTA: Indonesian President Joko Widodo received the country's first COVID-19 jab yesterday, as the sprawling archipelago of nearly 270 million kicked off a mass vaccination drive to clamp down on soaring case rates. The 59-year-old leader, better known as Jokowi, was inoculated on live television at the state palace in Jakarta along with his health minister and several senior officials, as well as business and religious leaders. "I don't feel it at all," he said with a laugh after receiving a dose of the Chinese-developed CoronaVac, the first of two required. — AFP

S Korea sect leader gets clean chit

SEOUL: The elderly leader of a secretive religious sect at the center of South Korea's early coronavirus outbreak was not guilty of hindering the government's virus prevention efforts, a district court ruled yesterday. But Lee Man-hee was convicted of embezzling billions of won from his organization and given a suspended prison sentence. The Shincheonji Church of Jesus, which is often condemned as a cult, was at the center of huge controversy early last year when it accounted for more than half of South Korea's coronavirus cases. At the time, the country was enduring one of the worst early outbreaks of the disease outside China, but later largely brought it under control with widespread testing and tracing. — AFP

Japan to expand virus emergency

TOKYO: Japan is set to expand a coronavirus state of emergency yesterday to seven more regions including the major cities of Osaka and Kyoto, as infections surge nationwide. While the country's outbreak remains comparatively small, with around 4,100 deaths overall, there has been a sharp spike in cases this winter and medics say hospitals are under heavy strain in the worst-affected areas. The month-long emergency measure—which unlike strict lockdowns elsewhere in the world carries no enforcement mechanism—was implemented in the greater Tokyo area last week. It asks restaurants and bars to close by 8 pm, with residents requested to avoid unnecessary outings and telework strongly encouraged. — AFP

CDU to pick new Leader in vote for Merkel succession

BERLIN: Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservative CDU party will elect a new leader on Saturday, in a key vote kicking off the race for Germany's top job as a deadly pandemic roils Europe's biggest economy. With just nine months to go before a general election, no candidate stands out in the battle for the chairman post of the party that has dominated German politics for 70 years. Three men are vying for the job, but have struggled to create momentum with their campaigns overshadowed by the relentless pandemic.

Yet Saturday's vote could lead to a dramatic departure from the middle-ground consensus politics that Merkel has come to be known for internationally, with the veteran politician planning to leave the stage after September's general election. In the running is Merkel ally Armin Laschet, the premier of Germany's most populous state North Rhine-Westphalia. But he is lagging in surveys against the chancellor's arch-conservative rival Friedrich Merz, who has indicated he wants a clean break from the Merkel era. The third candidate, foreign affairs expert Norbert Roettgen, is polling neck-and-neck with Laschet. The stakes are high for the vote, described by some as the second most important for Germany this year after the September 26 election. That is because the winner would be in pole position to lead Merkel's conservatives to the polls and potentially claim her job as she retires after 16 years in power. But the pandemic has also reshuffled the cards and opened up the possibility that someone else could end up snatching the conservatives' coveted "chancellor candidate" nomination to lead them into the elections.

With the clock ticking down to the vote, the conservative alliance's heavyweights including Merkel's chief of staff Helge Braun have come out to plump for Laschet, dubbed the "continuity candidate". Markus Soeder, the leader of the CDU's Bavarian sister party the CSU, has also voiced backing for Laschet. Although he was an early favorite, various gaffes in his handling of the pandemic have pushed him way down public approval ratings. Merz, a veteran hardliner, has promised to shift the party to the right. But some fear that old divisions could surface under Merz. — AFP



BERLIN: This file photo shows the three candidates for the leadership of Germany's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party (from left) Friedrich Merz, Armin Laschet and Norbert Roettgen posing at the end of a discussion at the party's headquarters in Berlin. — AFP



MOSCOW: In this file photo Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny addresses supporters during an unauthorized anti-Putin rally in Moscow. — AFP