

International

Death threats, law suits: COVID experts targeted

A rise in abuse related to the pandemic

PARIS: Marc Van Ranst, a virologist famous in Belgium for providing expertise about the COVID-19 pandemic, was at home for his first afternoon off in months in May, unaware that his life was under threat and that he would soon be forced to go into hiding. Jurgen Conings, a soldier aligned with right-wing extremist movements who had stated his intent to harm Van Ranst was sitting in a car nearby armed with four rocket launchers.

It wasn't until the following day Van Ranst learned he was in danger. "They called me at noon and half an hour later they came with heavily armored cars," Van Ranst said. "They took my son from school and my wife from the hospital and me... to a safe house. We were in several safe houses over the course of about a month." Van Ranst has given hundreds of interviews on COVID-19 since the pandemic began and says he has a file of over 150 threats related to his pandemic expertise.

"Some are minor—they compare you to Hitler or Mengele," he said. "And then some are death threats." He is one of dozens of scientists harassed over the pandemic, according to a survey by scientific journal *Nature*. Of 321 experts who responded to the journal, 81 percent reported some experience of "trolling or personal attacks after speaking about COVID-19 in the media". Fifteen percent reported receiving death threats and over half had their credibility attacked.

'They find different ways'

In its article on the survey, *Nature* said it reached out to scientists in the US, the UK, Brazil, Canada, Taiwan, New Zealand and Germany who had given interviews about the pandemic. The prestigious journal acknowledges that harassment of scientists speaking on hot-button issues such as gun violence, vaccines and

climate change is not new. But they say even experts who were already prominent noted a rise in abuse related to the pandemic.

The survey's respondents described threats by email, online comments, phone calls and more. French virologist Karine Lacombe rose to prominence during the pandemic for her expertise lent during regular television and radio appearances and in articles. She told AFP that attacks on her—largely driven by French right-wing media supportive of controversial doctor Didier Raoult—began in earnest once she spoke out publicly against Raoult's advice to use hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID.

She describes being insulted in the street, getting anonymous letters threatening rape, and having her inbox flooded with disparaging personal messages. "It was totally new to me and extremely violent," she told AFP. She left Twitter and even spent several days with friends, imagining people might be waiting for her in front of her home. "I had a kind of breakdown," she said.

Both Lacombe and Van Ranst report being targeted by right-wing extremists in their countries, which are often aligned against pandemic measures and vaccines. Van Ranst describes being repeatedly summoned to Belgian court by anti-vaxers. "They find different ways of harassing us," Van Ranst said. He says he makes a point of defending himself at the mandatory court appearances and that he has never lost—but fighting the suits has taken over 400 hours of his time. "They're not keeping me from my job but I have literally no free time," he said. "This is the third one and they said they would keep doing it."

'They want to silence us'

Nature describes a "chilling effect", with experts who experienced the most harassment also reporting the biggest influence



LOS ANGELES: A syringe is filled with a first dose of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine at a mobile vaccination clinic in Los Angeles. —AFP

on their willingness to speak to the media. While Lacombe says she has heard similar feedback from colleagues, that it is not the case for her. For with support from psychologists and groups fighting bullying and disinformation online, she says she was able to return to Twitter after a month and a half. "It has reinforced my convictions," she said. "They want to silence us, we who have the knowledge and expertise. I'm trying not to give in." Van Ranst feels the same. "I'm not more careful," he said, "I'm equally outspoken against anti-vaccination messages or fake news or whatever." "Otherwise they win." — AFP

Biracial women taken from African mothers by Belgium go to court

BRUSSELS: Five biracial women taken from their mothers in Congo 70 years ago demanded reparations from the Belgian state yesterday, which is accused of "crimes against humanity" for acts committed during the colonial era. Lea, Monique, Simone, Noille and Marie-Josée, who are now more than 70 years old, sued Belgium demanding reparations from central Africa's former colonial power. The trial is the first in Belgium to shed light on the fate of biracial children born in the former Belgian colonies (DR Congo, Rwanda, Burundi), whose number is generally estimated at around 15,000, though there has never been an official count.

The women, who are now grandmothers, were forcibly removed from their maternal families at the age of two, three or four years old and placed in religious institutions "sometimes hundreds of kilometers away", said Michele Hirsch, their lawyer. They are each asking for an initial

sum of 50,000 euros and the nomination of an expert to determine moral damages. Most of the children born of a union between a black woman and a white man were not recognized by their father and were not allowed to mix with either whites or Africans.

As a result, many were placed under state guardianship and placed in orphanages in return for subsidies to these institutions, which were usually run by the Catholic Church. "At school, we were called 'milk coffee'. We were not accepted," recalled one of the complainants, Simone Ngalula, in an interview with AFP in September 2020. "We were called 'children of sin'. A white man could not marry a black woman. The child born of this union was considered a child of prostitution," said Lea Tavares Mujinga, who was born to a Portuguese father and abducted at the age of two in the 1940s.

In the eyes of the complainants, the apology made in 2019 on behalf of the Belgian state must be followed by reparations. Then prime minister Charles Michel acknowledged "targeted segregation", and deplored a "loss of identity" with the separation of siblings, including when the children were repatriated to Belgium after Congo's independence in 1960. "We were destroyed. Apologies are easy, but when you do something you have to take responsibility for it," said Monique Bitu Bingi at a press conference with the other four plaintiffs before the trial. — AFP

Report shows racial disparity in doctor recruitment in UK

LONDON: White doctors are six times more likely than black applicants to be successful when applying for posts in London, the British Medical Journal (BMJ) said on Wednesday. Data obtained under the Freedom of Information Act showed white doctors were also four times more likely to be get a job than Asian candidates or those from a mixed ethnic background.

The figures emerged after a senior NHS human resources professional asked all 18 NHS acute hospital trusts in London for a breakdown by ethnicity for 2020-21 of applicants for medical jobs, shortlisted candidates, and those offered posts. The BMJ report is based on responses from 12 of the 18 trusts in the state-run NHS that shared full unredacted data with the BMJ.

The report found wide disparities, with Barts Health NHS Trust 15 times more likely to ap-

point white applicants than black applicants. "The NHS is not making a significant shift in D&I (diversity and inclusion)," said Sheila Cunliffe, the HR director who made the data request. A spokesperson for the NHS in London responded: "The NHS in London is built on the skill and dedication of its diverse workforce and is committed to ensuring fair and equal opportunities for all."

"After listening to the experiences of NHS staff, work is underway to improve recruitment and selection processes as well as the accessibility and visibility of new roles." Government statistics about ethnic diversity in public sector jobs, published in 2019, indicated that the NHS had the most ethnically diverse workforce in the country. Some 44.4 percent of medical staff in the NHS were from an ethnic minority, and 18.4 percent for non-medical staff.

But within the workforce, it found that while nearly one in three NHS doctors were Asian, those from a black, mixed or other background was far lower. The findings comes as the state-run National Health Service (NHS) is seeking to address inequalities in ethnic minority recruitment, as well as discrimination. An NHS Workforce Race Equality Standard report, published last year, found that white applicants were 1.61 times more likely to be appointed from short-listing than those from a black or minority ethnic background. — AFP