

International

After Floyd killing in US, no sweeping police reform but small, local steps

Blacks denounce police violence, whites retain lofty image of police officers

MINNEAPOLIS: George Floyd's death at the hands of a white police officer last year was a gut punch that sparked sometimes violent nationwide protests over brutality against people of color in America and a national reckoning over race relations. Nine months later, the US has not undertaken any radical overhaul of its police forces, but is instead taking incremental and localized steps to better tackle excess force and racism in the ranks of its law enforcement agencies.

Floyd's death by asphyxiation as a white police officer knelt on his neck for almost nine minutes last May in Minneapolis sent shock waves around the country. But what remains of this extraordinary mobilization, as the trial opens of Derek Chauvin, the former police officer accused of Floyd's murder?

A substantive debate

The main shift has been one of perception: while the black minority in America had for years denounced police violence, the majority of Americans, in particular white people, had retained a lofty image of police officers. "It's culturally accepted in America that police will commit violence. And the assumption is that they're committing violence, because they're faced with violence," said Kate Levine, a professor at the Cardozo School of Law at Yeshiva University in New York.

"I think some of that assumption is being upset by video, and protests and narratives about people who are killed by the police who are no way vio-

lent," she said. With Floyd's death, "people who historically have not had to think about it, have to think about it. They're uncomfortable with that," said Tracie Keese, a black ex-police officer who co-founded the Center For Policing Equity.

Hot takes

Since June last year, there have been nationwide calls for radical reforms, including the idea of "defunding the police." That means redirecting some funds from police departments to social services tasks like dealing with people who have mental health issues. In order to calm things down, Keese said certain measures had been quickly adopted: some cities banned police choke holds, and others made police disciplinary records accessible to the public or beefed-up police training.

The US House of Representatives adopted a bill tackling the sweeping immunity that police officers enjoy from prosecution. More broadly, the United States embarked on a re-examination of its own history, resulting in numerous statues of historical figures with links to slavery being taken down.

Stalled efforts

But in the middle of last year's electoral campaign, the debate inevitably took on a political hue. As crime rates soared in big cities due to the coronavirus pandemic, then-president Donald Trump sought to portray himself as guarantor of law and order and accused Democrats of weakness.

Set against that backdrop, radical reforms were



WASHINGTON: In this file photo taken people raise their fists as they protest at the makeshift memorial in honor of George Floyd, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. — AFP

shelved. In Minneapolis, where Floyd was killed, "there was a brief moment of them attempting something and they've done nothing," said Levine. In New York, billion-dollar cuts to the police budget that were decided upon in June have been significantly reduced and spread over time.

As for federal reform, that was buried by the Senate. And on the ground, the situation has not changed: around 1,000 people were killed by the

police in 2020. 28 percent of them African-Americans, who make up only 12 percent of the population. Grand juries and other local decision makers dropped prosecutions of officers blamed for the deaths of unarmed African-Americans such as Breonna Taylor, who was shot dead in her Kentucky apartment, or Daniel Prude, who suffocated in police custody while suffering from a mental health episode in New York state. — AFP

News in brief

Eritrean troops kill hundreds in Ethiopia

ADDIS ABABA: Eritrean forces shot dead hundreds of children and civilians in a November massacre in neighboring Ethiopia's war-hit Tigray region, Human Rights Watch (HRW) said Friday. It was the second major report on Eritrean abuses in the town of Axum, a UNESCO World Heritage site, in the past week. An Amnesty International investigation into the same events detailed how Eritrean troops "went on a rampage and systematically killed hundreds of civilians in cold blood." The findings from the rights watchdogs come as global concern mounts over atrocities by Eritrean troops in Tigray. — AFP

Italy extends regional lockdowns

ROME: Italy's health minister announced Friday that another region would be subject to lockdown measures due to worsening pandemic numbers fuelled by the spread of more contagious coronavirus variants. The new clampdown came after the ISS health institute said the R number—which measures the rate at which the virus is spreading—had risen above one, to 1.06, for the first time in seven weeks. As of Monday, the southern region of Campania, which includes Naples, will be classified as a "red" zone, joining the regions of Basilicata and Molise in the highest-risk level, announced Health Minister Roberto Speranza. — AFP

Russia population shrinks by 130K

MOSCOW: Russia's population shrank by over 113,000 in January, official data showed Friday, more than double its rate of decline over the same month last year, as the country is battered by the pandemic. The Rosstat statistics agency released figures showing that in January Russia saw 219,769 deaths and 106,603 births, meaning its population shrunk by 113,116. The decline was 2.5 times as much as the decrease of 45,255 people in January 2020. The new figures came as Rosstat on Friday also reported that Russia saw 28,680 virus-related deaths in January this year. — AFP

Saudi center to leave Vienna

VIENNA: A Saudi-funded center for interfaith dialogue announced Friday that was relocating its headquarters from the Austrian capital Vienna, following years of political controversy over its presence. The King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) was founded in 2012 and critics have long said it offered the government in Riyadh a way to gloss over Saudi Arabia's human rights record. In 2019 Austrian MPs voted to demand the centre be shut down, prompted by a case in which an 18-year-old was sentenced to death in Saudi Arabia for alleged crimes committed when he was a child. — AFP

Fighting in Yemen's Marib kills 90

DUBAI: Fierce fighting between Yemeni pro-government forces and Iran-backed Houthi rebels has killed at least 90 combatants on both sides in the past 24 hours, government military sources said yesterday. The Shiite rebels launched an offensive last month to seize Marib, the last stronghold in northern Yemen of pro-government forces who are backed by a Saudi-led military coalition. The clashes in the oil-rich province left 32 dead among government forces and loyalist tribes, while 58 Houthi rebels were killed in coalition air strikes, the sources told AFP. — AFP

Amid virus, a 'shadow' pandemic for domestic abuse sufferers

PATERSON, United States: In New Jersey, at a timber farm turned shelter for women who have suffered domestic violence, Gloria's struggles, like those of many abuse victims, have worsened with the coronavirus pandemic. From Argentina to Singapore, virus-induced confinement has caused an increase in violence cases and their severity and made it more difficult to report abuses and help victims, activists say. Gloria, a 56-year-old New Yorker who is too afraid to give her surname, arrived at the Strengthen Our Sisters shelter six months ago, several months into the pandemic.

Before joining the center, which houses about 80 women and children in seven houses, Gloria first had to quarantine for two weeks, completely alone. Sitting in her pink- and red-painted bedroom, which is decorated with teddy bears, hearts, a Christmas tree, and a picture of Jesus, Gloria describes her ex-partner as "a mon-

ster" who beat her and forced her to work for him in exchange for drugs. "He had me isolated with him, without my family. He spoke very badly to me, he abused me very badly, and yet I still loved him," says Gloria, tears streaming from her piercing blue eyes.

Gloria, who has grown children from another relationship and several grandchildren, said her abuser would remove the phone, rip her clothes, force her to eat food she didn't want and call her a prostitute. "He said that I owed him my life and my body," said Gloria, the daughter of Puerto Rican parents, in Spanish. She is a former cocaine paste addict, who for a time lived on the streets of Coney Island, in Brooklyn. "The pandemic has exacerbated the ability of abusers to utilize power and control tactics over their intimate partners," said Connie Neal, executive director of the New York Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

Stay-at-home orders have caused



PATERSON, United States: Gloria gestures as she describes the abuse she suffered while speaking during an interview at the shelter "Strengthen Our Sisters" in Paterson, New Jersey. — AFP

household abuse to last longer and in many cases become more serious, said Cassie Mecklenburg executive director of Sheltering Wings, an organization that provides emergency housing to domestic violence survivors. The group is based in Danville, Indiana, a state where deaths caused by domestic violence surged 102 percent between the start of the pandemic in March and December. "People are

having a harder time seeking services, but when they do finally have the opportunity to reach out, they're more serious," she told AFP. A rise in unemployment and increased consumption of alcohol and drugs have also aggravated the situation, Mecklenburg notes. In April, the United Nations warned that violence against women during COVID-19 was a "shadow pandemic." — AFP

In Florida yard, a ribbon flutters for every COVID death

FLORIDA: When Cathy Tobias began tying a ribbon to a rope for each COVID-19 death in Florida, she had no idea her entire patio would end up being draped in color. The eye-catching tribute to those who have died in the Sunshine State during the pandemic crisscrosses her patio, weaves across stairs and onto a balcony at her home on Anna Maria Island, a small community on Florida's Gulf coast. There are now more than 30,000 ribbons, in all colors of the rainbow—from pale pink to crimson to neon green. Sitting on a porch with a neighbor who has helped her create the memorial, Tobias said she began to tie the ribbons because she wanted to visualize the death toll.

"Watching the numbers change as fast as we can tie really hits us very deeply and strongly—how many people have died and are dying," the 67-year-old retired occupational therapist said. "It's very sad." Tobias' home is at the end of the main road on Anna Maria Island, a tourist-friendly town on a narrow strip of land with visitors driving around in rented golf carts and plenty of stores stocked with beach gear. She says her tribute of course conjures up mixed emotions. "It is in some ways celebratory because we're celebrating life-of course, lives lost," said Tobias, who now works as a photographer.

Kyrgyz activists face Women's Day Violence from 'patriots'

BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan: For activists preparing to mark International Women's Day in Kyrgyzstan, recalling the ambush that broke up last year's march is still traumatic. That day, a group of masked men charged the marchers, hitting them with sticks and trampling banners dedicated to equality. What followed shocked the activists even more. As the men strolled away, police who had stood by began detaining the victims—a move they later claimed was for the marchers' own safety. Gender equality in Central Asia's most politically turbulent country has



FLORIDA: Cathy Tobias, 67, poses in her courtyard which has turned into a memorial for Covid-19 victims, in Anna Maria Island, Florida. — AFP

"Each one of these people have family, loved ones, friends that are all deeply impacted and I didn't want them to get lost in this pandemic." She said she knows "what it feels like, unfortunately, to lose a loved one," because her first child died at less than a month old.

'Labor of love'

Tying ribbons might not seem too complicated, but as the pandemic swept the world and Florida along with it, Tobias and her neighbor Lucy Kancy, devised an organizational system to keep track of all the dead. For every 10 deaths, they tie a white ribbon. After that, for every 500, 1,000 and 10,000 deaths, they acknowledge the grim milestone using

taken a back seat to what conservatives call "traditional values."

Kidnapping for marriage and domestic violence are systemic and mostly go unpunished thanks to indifferent law enforcement and stigma surrounding whistleblowers. For Nadira Masyumova, one of the rally organizers, the police's behavior last year was further proof of state complicity in attacks on activists by self-styled patriot groups. The 25-year-old noted that the attempt "to frighten activists" was carried out by men sporting Kyrgyzstan's traditional square white hat.

"Many girls we spoke to are now frightened of the Ak-Kalpak," Masyumova said, referring to the garment embedded in Kyrgyz culture and whose national day falls on March 5, three days before International Women's Day. "Yes it is a symbol of purity and wisdom, but many women now perceive it as a symbol of aggression and terror". As they readied to march this

year under slogans promoting equal pay, healthcare and education free of sexism, Masyumova said marchers were prepared for any violence.

Successive regimes in Kyrgyzstan have ignored chronic domestic violence and the custom of coerced marriages that survived the Soviet period and forces thousands of women into wedlock every year. Activists complain authorities are empowering conservative groups that single out feminists, LGBT groups and anti-corruption protesters in smear campaigns. They are also questioning a clause in a draft constitution-expected to be passed via referendum this year—that could be used to quash dissent. The article in question allows for restrictions on events "contradicting traditional values" to protect "forthcoming generations". One party backing the proposal is the new Nur Party, which has attracted controversy for positioning itself as defending Islamic norms against the secular spirit of the constitution. — AFP