

International

Petrol bombs, police patrols as N Ireland 'celebrates' 100th year

Deep divisions overshadow the province's centenary landmark

BELFAST, UK: Two weeks before Northern Ireland's 100th anniversary, black smoke from a burning roadblock billowed into the Belfast sky, signaling the deep divisions overshadowing the province's centenary landmark.

As hooded youths hurled masonry, weary riot police poured out of rusty armored Land Rovers to form ranks. All sides know their roles in this well-versed piece of street theatre, which provides the backdrop to the 100 years of the divided British province. Scenes of unrest returned last month to the streets of Northern Ireland, the former battleground of "The Troubles" where tempers are fraying over Brexit and other tectonic political shifts.

At least 88 officers have been injured in clashes emanating from pro-UK loyalist enclaves, angry with a post-Brexit "protocol" they feel is casting them adrift from mainland Britain. "All generations are angry and frustrated at what's going on," said David McNarry, of the Loyalist Communities Council (LCC).

"This damn protocol is a European invention (to) take away my Britishness," he told AFP in central Belfast, a heavy trace of emotion in his voice.

Communities facing off

Violence has been focused at "interfaces"—where loyalist and pro-Ireland nationalist areas butt up

against one another. Towering "peace walls" separate the communities, crisscrossing the Belfast landscape, a reminder of the divisions that remain even after "The Troubles" ended in 1998.

The latest violence saw loyalist youths face off with police who were preventing their advance towards a gate in the barrier. In the early evening on April 19, teens covered their faces and scrambled for bricks and stones to throw. A mother pushing a pram scooted her child out of the way as a small gang charged a police Land Rover, climbing on the bonnet, prying off a wing mirror and pulling at locked door handles. Police on the frontline remained inside their vehicles—their windscreens and sirens covered in metal grid-work that parried the worst of the debris.

Early in the evening, a switch pressed by an unseen hand slammed shut the gates in the "peace walls", completely sealing the neighborhoods off from each other. A convoy of police vehicles pulled in from a side street, parking in practiced formation to block the road to the gates. The ranks of riot police wielding batons and shields quelled the worst of the violence, for one night at least.

The unrest paled in comparison to clashes earlier in the month, when water cannon and dog units waged a running battle with gangs throwing petrol bombs and fireworks.



In this file photo taken on November 29, 1999 Sinn Féin's President Gerry Adams (left) and chief negotiator Martin McGuinness take a brief walk outside Stormont Parliament Buildings in Belfast. — AFP

Loyalist and nationalist youths faced off in a night of violence that shocked the UK and left the area by the peace gates charred and pockmarked. A teddy bear has since been hung on the gates with a hopeful handwritten dedication: "Peace for our chil-

dren's future." Against this backdrop, it is hard to imagine a "happy birthday" for Northern Ireland. Unionists and nationalists fervently disagree about the legitimacy of the region, both contest its future, and both feel under siege. — AFP

News in brief

Madrid poll puts PM on defensive

MADRID: Madrid votes tomorrow in a closely watched regional election which surveys suggest will deliver a serious drubbing to Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's Socialist Party. In a country still divided over its 1936-39 civil war and the dictatorship of Francisco Franco that followed, echoes of the past have entered campaign rhetoric with parties labeling each other "reds" and "fascists". The polarization has drowned out debate over the Madrid regional government's handling of the pandemic and the policies of the conservative Popular Party (PP), which has governed Spain's richest region since 1995. —AFP

21 prisoners escape Iraqi jail

BAGHDAD: Iraqi police were questioned yesterday after 21 prisoners escaped jail, the latest breakout to highlight failings in the country's security system. Ten of the escaped prisoners, all convicted on drug and terrorism charges, had been recaptured by Sunday afternoon after a manhunt was launched at dawn. The interior minister immediately "ordered the confinement to the barracks of all officers and police" at Hlial district prison in Mouthanna province 300 kilometers (180 miles) south of the capital Baghdad, while an investigation into the escape was carried out. —AFP

Pope embarks on prayer 'marathon'

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis on Saturday launched a month-long prayer marathon to hasten the end of the coronavirus pandemic with a prayer at St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican before some 150 believers. The Argentinian pontiff gave the inaugural rosary prayer to kick off a series which will be streamed live each day this month at 1600 GMT from different Catholic shrines across the world. They range from Fatima in Portugal and Lourdes in France to shrines in Poland, Nigeria, Cuba and South Korea as well as the Basilica of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington. —AFP

Hope, uncertainty in DR Congo

KINSHASA: The Democratic Republic of Congo's move to impose a "state of siege" on two violence-wracked eastern provinces brought praise on Saturday from local leaders but also sparked concern in a country where the army faces allegations of rights abuses. President Felix Tshisekedi had said Thursday he was preparing "radical measures" for the mineral-rich east, where an estimated 122 armed groups operate as a legacy of a spate of 1990s conflicts. —AFP

Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan truce holds

BISHKEK: Kyrgyzstan said a ceasefire with Tajikistan was holding yesterday, as it accused citizens from its Central Asian neighbor of crimes during the pair's worst clashes at their contested border in decades. The Kyrgyz interior ministry said that casualties on its side had risen to over 160 with 34 deaths, 31 of whom were civilians. The ministry also said it had opened 11 criminal cases targeting citizens of Tajikistan in connection with the violence, including investigations into murder and illegal border crossings. Clashes between communities over land and water along the long-contested border are regular occurrences, with border guards often getting involved. — AFP

US Republicans grapple with way out of limbo

WASHINGTON: Shut out of the White House and desperate to reclaim power in Congress next year, Republicans are locked in an internal battle over their party's direction, and whether to embrace or jettison the divisive politics of Donald Trump. One hundred days after Trump's turbulent term gave way to Democratic rule in Washington, Republican lawmakers spent part of the last week in closed-door soul searching at their annual retreat in Florida, struggling to tamp down their conference's extremist personalities and highlight conservative policies they believe will resonate with voters.

The party of Abraham Lincoln and Ronald Reagan is scrambling to forge a path out of political limbo in the run up to the 2022 midterm elections and ultimately the next presidential race in 2024. Even if there is GOP appetite for ditching the rhetoric of nativist grievance and moving on from Trump,

many Republicans still see him as their party's de facto leader—although an NBC News poll this week showed Trump's support among Republican voters is slipping. Trump himself told Fox News last week he is "beyond seriously" considering another White House bid to challenge President Joe Biden, or another Democrat, in 2024.

Such statements are likely to freeze the primary field until Trump announces his political plans, denying the party opportunities to vet and debate the candidates who would otherwise step forward to challenge Democrats for the White House. Republican strategists and lawmakers themselves acknowledge the party is grappling with how much distance they need to take from Trump and who can lead them back to power. "Any party that loses a presidential election goes into the wilderness for a while," Matt Mackowiak, a Republican consultant in Texas, told AFP in a Friday interview.

"When you're in the wilderness you don't have one unified leader," he explained. "But the difference with us is we do have one leader, and it's Trump." The ex-president however is weighed down with baggage. His approval ratings have slid, he faces

As US vaccine demand falls, states look to new solutions

PASADENA, US: It's official: America's COVID-19 immunization campaign is stalling. While vaccination programs are lagging badly in many countries—if they've begun at all—mass vaccine sites across the US are closing due to dwindling demand, leaving the authorities exploring new ways to reach people who haven't yet gotten a shot.

The national vaccination rate peaked around April 11, according to official data, and although 55 percent of US adults now have had one or more doses, there's still a long way to go to achieve population immunity. The people most eager to get their shots have, for the most part, already rolled up their sleeves and done so. The challenge is reaching the rest.

In Texas, as in much of the coun-

try, vaccinations are in freefall. A huge federal site in Arlington, between Dallas and Fort Worth, shut its doors in mid-April because of insufficient numbers. Two other federal sites, the NRG Stadium in Houston and Fair Park in Dallas, have ended their appointments system and now take walk-ups.

The NRG Stadium, seeking to ease the process, is now remaining open until nine o'clock in the evening rather than five, and vaccinating people in their cars.

'Too far'

Even so, that site is only running at half capacity. "We have the capacity to see about 6,000 people and at one point we saw up to 7,000 people. And now, it's dropped to 2,500 on average. So that is a huge drop," said Martha Marquez, a spokeswoman for Harris County Public Health. Authorities are considering more targeted approaches to reach people who are geographically isolated or find it hard to reach vaccine sites.

Five mobile vaccination centers are now crisscrossing those areas of the county with the highest number of



CLEVELAND: In this file photo taken on July 18, 2016, a woman walks past the elephant logo of the Republican Party on the first day of the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio. — AFP

mounting legal woes, and his former personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani is under federal investigation.

"But Trump's agenda was successful," Mackowiak said. "There's an emerging consensus that Trumpism without Trump may give us the best opportunity to win in 2024."

Eager to appear as the party of

inclusion, especially following the guilty verdict in the trial of the white ex-police officer charged with murdering George Floyd, Republicans appointed Senator Tim Scott, the chamber's only Black Republican, to deliver the rebuttal to Biden's Wednesday address to Congress. —AFP



PASADENA, Texas: A healthcare worker vaccinates a woman with the COVID-19 vaccine, as the Pasadena Public Library hosts a mobile vaccine clinic set up by the Harris County Public Health. — AFP

positive cases. "Next week, we'll be increasing to 10 clinics," Ashlee Dawson, the official in charge of one of the sites, told AFP, as she oversaw the training of new recruits.

Her own team had set up for the day at the public library in Pasadena, a mainly Hispanic suburb of Houston. Members of the public were only trickling in, and by midday just 27 people had received injections. One

of them, 55-year-old Jose Herrera, said, "I didn't do it before because it was too far away." He said he was also concerned about side effects.

Dozens of supermarkets and pharmacies around the city are now advertising vaccinations. But Herrera and his wife, Maria, were finally persuaded by their daughter, who works at the Pasadena library, to get their done. —AFP

Iran's treatment of Zaghari-Ratcliffe is 'torture': UK

LONDON: Iran's treatment of detained dual national Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe amounts to "torture", Britain said yesterday, after she was convicted anew and banned from leaving the Islamic republic.

"Nazanin is held unlawfully in my view as a matter of international law, I think she's being treated in the most abusive, tortuous way," Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab told BBC television. "I think it amounts to torture the way she's being treated, and there is a very clear, unequivocal obligation on the Iranians to release her," he said. The British-Iranian woman has been held in Iran since 2016. In late April, she was sentenced to a year's imprisonment

and banned from leaving the country for a further 12 months. Her husband Richard Ratcliffe argues she is being held hostage as part of a diplomatic stratagem.

"I think it's very difficult to argue against that characterization," Raab said. "It is clear that she is subjected to a cat and mouse game that the Iranians, or certainly part of the Iranian system, engage with and they try and use her for leverage on the UK." Richard Ratcliffe has linked his wife's plight to a British debt dating back more than 40 years for army tanks paid for by the shah of Iran.

When the shah was ousted in the 1979 revolution, Britain refused to deliver the tanks to the new Islamic republic.

'Bleak'

London admits it owes Iran several hundred million pounds, but is reportedly constrained by US sanctions in its ability to pay the debt back. "That is not actually the thing that's holding us up at the moment, it's the wider context," Raab said of the

debt, pointing to nuclear talks currently ongoing with Iran and its upcoming presidential elections.

Zaghari-Ratcliffe, 42, had appeared in court last month to face new charges of "propaganda against the system", a week after she finished a five-year sentence for plotting to overthrow the regime, accusations she strenuously denies. Richard Ratcliffe said the family hoped she could at least serve any new sentence under house arrest, with her parents in Tehran. But the situation was "bleak", he told AFP at the time. Zaghari-Ratcliffe was initially detained while on holiday in Iran in 2016, when she was working as a project manager for the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the news agency and data firm's philanthropic wing.

She has been under house arrest in recent months and had her ankle tag removed, giving her more freedom of movement and allowing her to visit other relatives in Tehran. In March, legal campaign group Redress handed a report to the UK government which it said "confirms the severity of the ill-treatment that Nazanin has suffered". — AFP