

# Access denied

Covid-19 pandemic complicates journalists' work

AFP, New York

While institutions, governments, elected officials, companies and sports federations are all having to adapt to new constraints under the coronavirus pandemic, experts say they are often using the health crisis as an excuse to restrict journalists' access.

Fewer physical press conferences, questions that must be submitted in advance or sometimes no questions at all, queries that go unanswered -- information does not circulate well in the age of Covid-19.

"We're seeing all sorts of situations where people are using Covid to hide information," said David Cuillier, professor of journalism at the University of Arizona.

Cover-up attempts often involve information about the pandemic itself, which may shed unfavorable light on the management of the virus by government or local officials.

This week, Kansas Governor Laura Kelly turned down a request from the Kansas Reflector news site for contact information for businesses in the state connected to outbreaks of Covid-19.

So as not to reveal the number of cases in a retirement home or university, for example, some authorities hide behind arguments about personal data even if that data is anonymous and the laws don't apply, Cuillier said.

Government agencies, city councils or local organizations are making decisions "behind closed doors," adds the former president of the Society of Professional Journalists.

In addition to restricted access, journalists have been subjected to censorship in several

countries, a measure presented as a means of combating disinformation linked to the pandemic.

Some countries, such as China and Egypt, have canceled visas or ordered the deportation of foreign reporters after publishing articles on the response to the pandemic.

These difficulties come at a time when the media landscape is already under pressure from fallen incomes, which have been worsened by the pandemic, especially among local papers.

Chronically understaffed newsrooms don't always have sufficient time to cultivate sources and dig into public records to the extent that the job requires.

"Therefore more and more information provided to the public is really being spoon-fed without verification and that's not good," said Cuillier.

"The efforts by politicians and others to control the message have only increased over the past two years," said Courtney Radsch of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). That trend has been reinforced by Covid-19, she said.

Access to information is further complicated by the growing public distrust of the press in an era when President Donald Trump rails against mainstream media he dislikes.

During the demonstrations that followed the death of George Floyd, journalists were attacked by the police but also by people against coverage of the protests, Radsch said.

"We're headed for dark times unless something changes," said Cuillier. "This could lead to the end of democracy as we know it within 20, 30 years."



# India digs deep to boost defences

NEW DELHI'S INFRASTRUCTURE BLITZ ALONG LAC

AFP, ATAL ROHTANG TUNNEL

A tunnel nearing completion in the Indian Himalayas will slash by hours the time it takes troops to reach the Chinese border, part of an infrastructure blitz by New Delhi that is gathering pace since a bloody border clash.

The nuclear-armed Asian giants blame each other for a brutal high-altitude battle in June that left 20 Indian soldiers dead and an unspecified number of Chinese casualties.

Both have sent massive troop reinforcements, but India has also stepped up its activities behind the frontlines -- belatedly so, analysts say.

Its stepped-up infrastructure programme includes roads and bridges as well as high-altitude helpads and airstrips for civilian and military aircraft.

The showpiece is a \$400-million tunnel in Himachal Pradesh state, providing an all-weather route for military convoys to avoid a 50-kilometre (30-mile) trudge through mountain passes that are snow-bound in winter and subject to frequent landslides.

From late this month, what used to be a four-hour, winding, high-altitude crossing will be cut to a 10-minute dash through the mountains in the state-of-the-art tunnel.

"There have been times on the pass route when vehicles have broken down, causing traffic jams of even six to eight hour," said Lieutenant-General Harpal Singh, head of India's Border Roads Organisation (BRO).

"This tunnel and the other infrastructure plans change a lot for the troops," he told AFP.

Labourers are working overtime to get the tunnel ready before Prime Minister Narendra Modi is due to open it later this month.

Constructed at an altitude of more than 3,000 metres (10,000 feet) and stretching nine kilometres (six miles), the Atal Rohtang tunnel is also a feat of engineering.

Still, India's efforts only belatedly mirror



This photograph taken on September 1, 2020, shows the north portal of the Atal Rohtang Tunnel in Teling village in Lahaul and Spiti district of Himachal Pradesh state.

PHOTO: AFP

those of China, experts say.

"Earlier administrations wasted two decades," said Harsh Pant, from the Observer Research Foundation think-tank in New Delhi.

"China, and its infrastructure, is much stronger today."

The BRO says it has built more strategic roads -- most in the high-tension zone next to China -- the last four years than in the previous decade and aims to complete 15 more key routes by the end of 2021.

Labourers are upgrading a recently-completed 250-kilometre stretch parallel to the Chinese frontier that cuts journey times from Ladakh's capital Leh from one week to less than a day.

Significantly, by next month all bridges along

the route will be able to support the weight of a 70-tonne T-90 tank on a trailer, or a truck carrying a surface-to-air missile, according to press reports.

There are several strategic high-altitude tunnels as well as 125 bridges at different stages of planning in the states of Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Sikkim bordering Tibet and Xinjiang.

Besides the strategic value, the improvements will also be life-changing for people who can be cut off from the rest of India for months in winter. This will boost the local economy and attract more people to the sparsely populated area, and so make it less prone to cross-border incursions by the Chinese, the government hopes.

## MAJOR UN REPORT ON CLIMATE CHANGE

# Severe water crisis looming

AFP, London

Record temperatures are accelerating the rise of sea levels, melting glaciers and snow coverage and threatening the water supplies for billions, according to a major UN report yesterday charting the "increasing and irreversible" impacts of climate change.

The multi-agency United in Science report said the world had seen its warmest five years on record in the last five years, adding that extreme weather events bore "a clear fingerprint" of climate change.

It comes after UN chief Antonio Guterres told AFP that nations must use the coronavirus crisis as a springboard to implement "transformational" green policies to make energy, transport, industry and everyday life more sustainable.

If they fail, he warned humanity was "doomed".

The report, coordinated by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), said humanity was not on track to meet the targets for emission reductions that would avert devastating global warming.

It highlighted "the increasing and irreversible impacts of climate change, which affects glaciers, oceans, nature, economies and human living conditions and is often felt through water-related hazards like drought or flooding".

Warmer temperatures have seen reductions in the world's glaciers and ice sheets, threatening fresh water supplies.

The United Nations' science advisory panel for climate change, the IPCC, has forecast that oceans will rise by up to a metre by the end of the century, and even more after that.



Hundreds of millions of people live in vulnerable coastal areas.

The new report said that between 2016 and 2019 glacier mass loss was greater than all past five-year periods since 1950, adding that sea-level rise was accelerating.

It said 1.2 billion people are currently at risk of flooding and predicted this will rise to 1.6 billion by 2050.

Meanwhile, water scarcity is set to increase, with up to 3.2 billion people predicted to live in areas with insufficient water by 2050, compared to 1.9 billion in the 2010s.

The loss of glaciers will severely impact access to freshwater, with annual runoff expected to peak at a global level by the end of the century and then decline.

But the report said Central Europe and

the Caucasus region were at their peak now.

In the Tibetan Plateau -- where runoff from snow cover, glaciers and permafrost provides almost half of the regional river flow -- the peak is forecast between 2030 and 2050, threatening water access for 1.7 billion people.

That would affect the mighty Mekong river, for one, which originates in the plateau and threads south through six countries.

Earth's average surface temperature has gone up by one degree Celsius since the 19th century, enough to increase the intensity of droughts, heat waves and tropical cyclones.

The UN report said the last five year period would be the hottest on record and that trend was set to continue.

## Dozens killed in fighting amid Afghan peace talks

AFP, Jalalabad

Fierce fighting between Afghan forces and the Taliban killed dozens in a restive eastern province, officials said, as negotiators from both sides pushed ahead with peace talks in Qatar.

Overnight clashes erupted in three districts of Nangarhar province when Taliban fighters attacked several checkpoints of Afghan forces and pro-government militiamen, Attaullah Khogyani, spokesman for the Nangarhar governor told AFP.

He said at least 11 Afghan security personnel were killed in fighting in Hesarak, while eight pro-government militiamen were killed in Khogyani.

Khogyani said about 30 Taliban fighters died in the clashes -- including some foreigners.

The hardline insurgent group has not commented on the fighting.

The latest violence comes as the Afghan government and Taliban are engaged in talks in Doha aimed at ending the long-running conflict.

Afghanistan's acting Defence Minister Asadullah Khalid blamed the Taliban for the fighting.



Water is dropped by a helicopter as The Bobcat Fire burns in the Angeles National Forest, northeast of Los Angeles, California, US on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP



## Trump will not attend UN General Assembly in person

US President Donald Trump will not attend next week's UN General Assembly's 75th session in person, his chief of staff told journalists aboard Air Force One Thursday, according to a pool report. The decision marks an about-face for Trump, who last month said he wanted to deliver his speech in the General Assembly hall in New York, even if other world leaders are staying away due to the coronavirus pandemic. The main part of this year's UNGA, when world leaders take turns to give speeches, runs through the week starting September 21 and ends on September 29.

## Report: China lab leak infects thousands with bacterial disease

Thousands of people in northwest China have tested positive for a bacterial disease after a leak from a state-owned biopharmaceutical plant making animal vaccines last year. Health officials in Lanzhou city said 3,245 people had contracted brucellosis, a disease often caused by close contact with infected animals or animal products that can bring about fevers, joint pain and headaches. Another 1,401 people tested as an early positive for the disease, and health authorities said there was no evidence of person-to-person transmission so far.

## Turmoil in Poland over animal rights law

Poland's parliament yesterday passed an animal rights law that had angered fur farmers and kosher meat producers and divided the country's right-wing governing alliance. The junior partners in the three-party ruling coalition had refused to vote in favour, provoking the ire of Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the powerful leader of the Law and Justice (PiS) ruling party that put forward the legislation. Kaczynski, who is known for his love of cats, has threatened to exclude his coalition partners from the government during a planned cabinet shuffle or even call snap elections. The measure, which still requires the approval of the senate, bans the breeding of animals for fur and stops exports of halal and kosher meat. Poland is the world's third biggest fur producer after China and Denmark, according to activists, and a major exporter of kosher meat to Israel and Jewish communities in Europe.

## Pets can catch Covid-19 virus from owners

Cat and dog owners suffering from Covid-19 can pass their illness onto their feline and canine companions, according to a small study released yesterday. The new coronavirus is a "zoonotic" infection -- meaning it has jumped into humans from animals -- and while there is little sign that pets play a major role in spreading the virus, there is growing evidence that cats, dogs and even tigers may catch it. The World Health Organization has said it was unclear whether infected animals pose a risk to humans.

## US hopes to name Qatar as major non-Nato ally

The United States hopes to move ahead with plans to name Qatar as a major, non-Nato ally, a status that provides foreign nations with benefits in defence trade and security cooperation with Washington, a senior US official said on Thursday. Currently, 17 countries have MNNA status, including Gulf Arab states Kuwait and Bahrain, which hosts the US Navy's Fifth Fleet. Qatar, host of the largest US military facility in the Middle East, has been locked in a dispute with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt since 2017.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS, NDTV

