

Firefighting plane crashes in Australia

3 American crew killed
AFP, Sydney

Three American crew helping to battle Australia's devastating bushfires were killed yesterday when their water-bombing plane crashed in mountainous terrain during a sortie to tackle another outbreak of the deadly blazes.

Officials said the Hercules C-130 plane erupted in a large fireball on impact in a national park the Snowy Mountains shortly before 1:30 pm (0230 GMT).

The cause of the crash was not immediately known, but an official had said earlier in the day that high winds were making flying the water tankers "very difficult".

The incident brought the death toll in Australia's bushfires to at least 32 since the crisis began in September. The crash happened as at least seven fires flared to emergency status following a brief lull brought by rain and cooler temperatures.



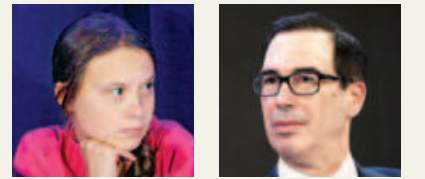
Dr Mohammad Abdulkarim Al-Issa (5th R), Secretary General of the Muslim World League visits Auschwitz with American Jewish Committee (AJC) CEO David Harris (5th L), yesterday. Israel yesterday hosted dozens of world leaders to mark 75 years since the liberation of Auschwitz, the World War II death camp where the Nazis killed more than 1.1 million people, most of them Jews.

PHOTO: AFP

MPS back Putin's reforms

Russian lawmakers yesterday unanimously approved a sweeping constitutional reform bill put forward by President Vladimir Putin in its first reading. All 432 lawmakers present in the lower house State Duma voted in favour of the bill, just three days after the amendments were presented to parliament. Second reading of the bill is expected on February 11. The bill will then face a third reading, but with parliament dominated by Kremlin-loyal lawmakers it is unlikely to face much pushback. Putin made the call for reforms last Wednesday and it was quickly followed by the resignation of the government and the appointment of a new premier and cabinet. The breakneck speed of the changes has fuelled speculation about Putin's plans, with some saying he is laying the groundwork to hold on to power after his current term expires in 2024.

'Go study' and then teach



US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin yesterday advised climate activist Greta Thunberg, who has been bitterly critical of US policy at the World Economic Forum, to study economics before giving out lessons. Asked about the Swedish 17-year-old's demand for an immediate halt to investment in fossil fuels, he told reporters: "After she goes and studies economics in college, she can come back and explain that to us." In a speech on Tuesday, US President Donald Trump castigated the "prophets of doom" and those that predicted a climate "apocalypse", while Thunberg sat in the audience. Thunberg repeated her climate warnings, hammering home in her speech that it was time to "panic" because "the house is burning", as she did the previous year in Davos.

Gabbard sues Hillary



US presidential hopeful Tulsi Gabbard, who is in near last place among Democrats in primary polling, filed a defamation suit Wednesday against Hillary Clinton after the former secretary of state called her a "Russian asset." Gabbard alleges that Clinton made the comments in retaliation for her support of Bernie Sanders, the former secretary of state's rival in 2016 for the Democratic presidential nomination. Gabbard, a 38-year-old Army veteran and Hawaii lawmaker who has criticized US involvement in Syria and received favorable coverage in Russian state media, said Clinton's accusation, which was widely repeated on social media, was "devastating" to her reputation. She said she had asked Clinton to retract the statement, to no avail.

Paid protest for Huawei CFO!



Protestors outside a Canadian courtroom pressing for the release of a senior Chinese telecommunications executive fighting extradition to the US were paid actors, they told local media. It was not clear, however, who footed the bill. A dozen men and women on Monday, at the start of the hearing considering whether or not to hand over Huawei chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou to US authorities to face fraud charges, held up red and white hand-written signs that read "Free Meng" and "Trump stop bullying us." They declined to speak to an AFP journalist at the scene. But later a handful were tracked down and spoke to Canadian media, saying they were paid Can\$100 (\$76) to Can\$150 for two hours work that they had understood to be as extras in a movie shoot. The offer, they said, came through Facebook or acquaintances. Her extradition hearing is scheduled to last until Friday, then adjourn until a second phase scheduled for June. China's embassy in Ottawa did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the protests. SOURCE: AFP

Show 'courage'

Democrats urge Republicans as they make case for his removal

AFP, Washington

Democrats on Wednesday accused Donald Trump at his historic Senate impeachment trial of seeking to cheat to ensure re-election in November, and called for "courage" by the president's fellow Republicans while considering the case against him.

Adam Schiff, head of the House of Representatives' prosecution team, took to the Senate floor to deliver hours of methodical arguments to a hushed chamber hearing only the third-ever impeachment trial of a US president.

The Democratic lawmaker described how Trump solicited foreign interference in domestic elections, "abusing the powers of his office to seek help from abroad to improve his re-election prospects at home."

"And when he was caught, he used the powers of that office to obstruct the investigation into his own misconduct," said Schiff, who headed the probe that led to Trump's December 18 impeachment by the Democratic-controlled House.

TRUMP IMPEACHMENT TRIAL



Trump stands accused of withholding military aid from Ukraine to pressure his Ukrainian counterpart to announce an investigation into Democrat and potential election rival Joe Biden.

"President Trump withheld hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid to a strategic partner at war with Russia to secure foreign help with his re-election," Schiff said at the nationally televised proceedings. "If this conduct is not impeachable, then nothing is."

Interspersing his remarks with video of House inquiry testimony, and clips of Trump himself, Schiff

appealed to the Senate's 100 members to put aside partisanship in deciding Trump's fate.

He encouraged them to use an open mind when evaluating the testimony of people like ambassadors Gordon Sondland and Marie Yovanovitch, and former National Security Council official Fiona Hill.

"They risked everything, their careers. And yes I know what you're asked to decide may risk yours too," Schiff told the senators.

"But if they could show the courage, so can we," he said in concluding a nearly-nine-hour session.

Republicans, who hold a 53-47 edge, have shown little inclination, however, to break ranks with the president.

Sixty-seven senators, a two-thirds majority, are needed to remove Trump from office. Republicans defeated repeated efforts by Democrats to introduce White House witnesses and documents at the start of the trial. Trump called the proceedings a "hoax" and said he expected the Senate to clear him "fairly quickly."

Weinstein a 'seasoned' sexual predator, rapist

Prosecutors tell court; defence team denies

AFP, New York

Harvey Weinstein was a "seasoned" sexual predator and rapist who abused his power as a movie-producing titan to prey on vulnerable aspiring actresses, prosecutors said Wednesday as his trial heard from its first witness.

Weinstein, wearing a dark suit, shook his head as New York Assistant District Attorney Meghan Hast painted a picture of a 300-pound (140 kilogram) bully who violently raped, humiliated and manipulated several women, leaving them traumatized for years.

His defence team hit back by saying the fallen film producer engaged in consensual relationships with his accusers, including a "loving one" in which the woman called Weinstein "her casual boyfriend."

That woman, who says Weinstein raped her in a New York hotel room in 2013, was identified for the first time in court as actress Jessica Mann, having until now remained anonymous.

"It will be clear throughout this trial that the defendant knew he was preying on the naive and the defenseless," Hast told the court.

"They didn't know they were being lured in on false pretenses. They thought they had got their big break. He was the old lady in the gingerbread house luring the kids."

More than 80 women have accused Weinstein of sexual misconduct but many of the alleged crimes fall outside the timeframe for bringing charges.

Weinstein, 67, faces life in prison if convicted of predatory sexual assault charges related to Haley and Mann in the New York proceedings seen as key to the #MeToo movement. The trial is expected to run until March 6.

OUTBREAK OF NEW VIRUS

WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR

As China locks down the city at the epicentre of a new viral outbreak, countries around the world are scrambling to prevent the spread of the deadly disease. Here's what we know so far about the illness that has killed 17 people and infected at least 570, most in Wuhan:

IT'S ENTIRELY NEW: The pathogen appears to be a never-before-seen strain of coronavirus -- a family of viruses that can cause diseases ranging from the common cold to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which killed 349 people in mainland China and another 299 in Hong Kong between 2002 and 2003. The new virus has been named "2019-nCoV". Most patients experience flu-like symptoms, including fever, a cough, shortness of breath, a sore throat or runny nose.

WHERE DID IT COME FROM?: It may have originated in bats, according to genetic analysis, but researchers say there could have been an "intermediate host" in the transmission to humans that one study suggested could have been snakes. Gao Fu, director of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, said on Wednesday the virus likely came from "wild animals at a seafood market" in Wuhan. The market offered a range of exotic wildlife for sale, including live foxes, crocodiles, wolf pups, giant salamanders, snakes, rats, peacocks, porcupines and camel meat. SARS was linked to Chinese consumption of civet meat.

HUMAN TO HUMAN TRANSMISSION: China has confirmed the virus is passing from person to person without any contact with the now-closed market. While most patients are in Wuhan, cases have been detected across China and a few abroad. Nathalie MacDermott of King's College London said it seems likely the virus is spreading through droplets in the air from sneezing or coughing. Scientists at Imperial College London published an estimate on Wednesday that 4,000 people had been infected in Wuhan -- around 10 times the official figure.

IT IS Milder THAN SARS: The symptoms appear to be less aggressive than those of the virus that spread in 2002 and 2003. However, Antoine Flahault, director of the Institute of Global Health at the University of Geneva, told AFP the fact that the virus seems milder in the majority of people is "paradoxically more worrying" as it allows many to travel further before their symptoms are detected. The 17 patients who died were between 48 and 89 years old.

INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY?: The World Health Organization on Wednesday postponed its decision on whether to declare a global public health emergency, extending talks by a day. It has only used the rare label a handful of times, including during the H1N1 -- or swine flu -- pandemic of 2009 and the Ebola epidemic that devastated parts of West Africa from 2014 to 2016. Cases have so far been confirmed in Thailand, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Macau and the United States. The Chinese government said Tuesday it was classifying the outbreak in the same category as SARS, meaning compulsory isolation for those diagnosed and the potential to implement quarantine measures on travel.

GLOBAL PRECAUTIONS: Authorities halted flights and trains out of Wuhan from yesterday and told people in the city they should not leave without a special reason. In Thailand, officials have introduced mandatory thermal scans of passengers arriving at airports in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phuket and Krabi from high-risk areas in China. In Hong Kong, authorities have said they are on high alert, carrying out scans at the city's airport and at other international land and sea crossing points. Taiwan has issued travel advisories. South Korea urged its citizens yesterday not to travel to Wuhan. The US has also ordered the screening of passengers arriving on direct or connecting flights from Wuhan. In Europe, Britain and Italy introduced enhanced monitoring of flights from Wuhan, while Romania and Russia are also strengthening checks. SOURCE: AFP



Central American migrants -mostly Hondurans heading in a caravan to the US- cross the Suchiate River from Tecun Uman, Guatemala, to Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas State, Mexico, yesterday. Mexican migration authorities released Wednesday an official count of the number of people detained along the country's southern border two days before, estimating that more than 2,000 people were "rescued" after they crossed the border with Guatemala. PHOTO: AFP

Brexit bill passes final hurdle

Queen's assent makes deal law a day after House approval

AFP, London

Queen Elizabeth II gave her formal assent yesterday for Britain to end its decades-long involvement in the European Union and seek a more independent but uncertain future at the end of the month.

With the head of state's ceremonial approval of the withdrawal legislation, Britain can finally leave its closest neighbours and trading partners after years of bickering and three delays.

Two top EU officials in Brussels are expected to sign the formal separation treaty today and Prime Minister Boris Johnson -- the pro-Brexit figurehead of Britain's seismic 2016 referendum -- will put his name on it in the coming days.

"At times it felt like we would never cross the Brexit finish line, but we've done it," Johnson said after both houses of the British parliament ratified the withdrawal bill on Wednesday.

"Now we can put the rancour and division of the past three years behind us and focus on delivering a bright,

exciting future."

The January 31 split caps a remarkable political comeback for Johnson at one of the most difficult points in Britain's post-war history.

He quit former prime minister Theresa May's government in 2018 in protest at what he viewed as her pro-



European separation terms.

Johnson returned as May's successor in July last year and has since managed to negotiate his own deal with Brussels and regain the government's control of parliament in a risky early election last month.

The rest was a formality. Lawmakers

barely debated the withdrawal agreement before passing it -- even though critics called it worse for Britain than the one reached by May.

The formal talks are not expected to begin until March but the war of words is already intense.

Johnson insists that he will not extend the end-of-year negotiation deadline, while Brussels says a comprehensive deal will take much more time.

The UK government is also demanding the post-Brexit right to set its own rules on politically sensitive issues such as environmental standards and workers' rights.

EU officials say that could give Britain an unfair advantage and are threatening to retaliate with tariffs and quotas that could do particular damage to the UK auto and pharmaceutical industries.

But some analysts believe this is the price Johnson is prepared to pay for delivering on voters' wishes to "get Brexit done".

ALLEGED SAUDI HACK OF BEZOS'S PHONE

UN experts demand immediate probe

REUTERS, San Francisco/Washington

UN experts have demanded an immediate investigation by the UN and other authorities into allegations that Saudi Arabia's crown prince was involved in a plot to hack the phone of Amazon boss and Washington Post owner Jeff Bezos.

The UN special rapporteurs, Agnes Callamard and David Kaye, said on Wednesday they had information pointing to the "possible involvement" of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in the alleged 2018 cyberattack, which preceded alleged threats by the National Enquirer to publish intimate photographs of the billionaire tech tycoon.

Callamard, the special rapporteur for extra-judicial killings, and Kaye, special rapporteur for free expression, said in a statement that they believed the hack was carried out "in an effort to influence, if not silence, The Washington Post's reporting on Saudi Arabia" and called for an "immediate investigation by US and other relevant authorities."

The rapporteurs based their call for an investigation on a 17-page forensic report drawn up by Washington-based FTI Consulting, which a source familiar with the matter said had been commissioned by Bezos. The report alleges with "medium to high confidence" that the billionaire's iPhone X was hijacked by a malicious video file sent from a WhatsApp account used by the crown prince on May 1, 2018.