

HEAVY RAINFALL IN AUSTRALIA

‘All busfires’ now contained: report

AFP, Sydney

All the blazes in Australia’s hard-hit state of New South Wales have been brought under control, firefighters said yesterday, signalling the end of a “black summer” that claimed 33 lives nationwide.

But heavy rains that helped extinguish the blazes that have raged along the east coast since September are causing flash floods in parts of the state, posing new problems for some residents.

“Not all fires are out, there’s still some fire activity in the far south of the state but all fires are contained so we can really focus on helping people rebuild,” the state’s fire service deputy commissioner Rob Rogers said on Twitter.

“It is very good news,” a Rural Fire Service spokesman told AFP.

Bushfires scorched more than 10 million hectares in the country’s east and south, killing at least 33 people and an estimated one billion animals, while destroying more than 2,500 homes. The fires were exacerbated by prolonged drought and worsened by climate change in the country’s hottest and driest year on record.

Days of recent rainfall have extinguished the largest fires and brought those that remain under control. Attention has now turned to tackling flash flooding expected in the coming days following the heaviest rains in 30 years.

On Thursday dams near Sydney overflowed after days of torrential rain. The Nepean dam was just a third full less than a week ago, but on Thursday video footage showing water cascading over the dam wall. Hundreds of people have been rescued from floodwaters in recent days.



Iraqi women raise placards as they take part in an anti-government demonstration in the capital Baghdad’s Tahrir Square, yesterday. The placard reads in Arabic: “Beware of Iraqi women’s anger”. More than 540 Iraqis have been killed in protest-related violence across Iraq since the rallies erupted, according to a recent toll by the Iraqi Human Rights Commission.

PHOTO: AFP

China appoints hardliner to Hong Kong office

China yesterday appointed a senior official known for a hardline crackdown on Christians to head its main policy-making body for Hong Kong, following months of pro-democracy protests in the semi-autonomous city. The reshuffle comes after months of political unrest – the starkest challenge to Beijing since the former British colony was returned to Chinese rule in 1997. Senior Beijing official Xia Baolong, currently secretary-general at the national committee of China’s top political advisory body, was promoted to director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office of the State Council. His predecessor Zhang Xiaoming was demoted to deputy in charge of daily operations. Xia, 67, was Communist Party secretary of eastern Zhejiang province for five years from 2012. Xia also served as Xi’s deputy between 2003 and 2007 while the now-president was Zhejiang party secretary.

Senate moves ahead to curb Trump’s war powers

The US Senate advanced legislation on Wednesday intended to limit President Donald Trump’s ability to wage war against Iran, paving the way for a final vote as eight Republicans joined Democrats in supporting the war powers resolution. The resolution would require Trump to remove U.S. troops engaged in hostilities against Iran unless Congress declares war or passes a specific authorization for the use of military force. The vote was 51-45 on a motion to proceed to a final vote, expected on Wednesday or on Thursday. Republican opponents, including Trump, said passage would send the wrong message to Tehran. The US Constitution gives Congress, not the president, the power to declare war. Despite bipartisan backing, the resolution is unlikely to garner enough support from members of Trump’s party to overcome a veto if it does reach his desk.

Big Ben tower more badly damaged than thought



Britain’s Big Ben tower at the Houses of Parliament was more badly damaged by German bombs during World War Two than originally thought, experts said yesterday, as the bill for its restoration rose by nearly 20 million pounds (\$25 million). The 177-year-old tower has been swathed in scaffolding for the past three years as craftsmen refurbish its stonework and famous 12-tonne clock. Although the tower survived Nazi bombing, its roof and dials were damaged in a May 1941 air raid which destroyed the main House of Commons chamber. The latest refurbishment of the structure, during which its 13-tonne Big Ben bell has been largely silenced, is expected to be finished next year.

SOURCE: AFP

UK PM tightens grip on govt

Finance minister Javid resigns after row; Labour calls reshuffle “chaos”

REUTERS, London

British finance minister Sajid Javid resigned yesterday, a surprise move that underlined Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s desire to tighten his grip on government in a long-planned reshuffle by jettisoning a minister who refused to toe the line.

Johnson, who wanted to minimise any disruption from the cabinet reshuffle, quickly appointed Javid’s deputy Rishi Sunak, an ultra-loyal supporter of the prime minister who has often been put in front of the cameras to sell government policy.

The prime minister’s team had carefully choreographed the reshuffle, presenting it as an opportunity to foster new talent, particularly among women, while also rewarding loyal supporters to deliver his vision for Britain beyond Brexit.

But the finance minister’s resignation – which some commentators said might have been sought by Johnson’s team – due to a dispute over Javid’s advisers added to the picture that the prime minister will not tolerate dissent in his government.

“He has turned down the job of Chancellor of the Exchequer (finance minister),” a source close to Javid said.

The source said Johnson had told Javid he would have to sack his advisers and replace them with advisers from the prime minister’s Downing Street office. “The Chancellor said no self-respecting minister would accept those terms.”



Rishi Sunak



Sajid Javid

Sunak, who once worked for investment bank Goldman Sachs and is married to the daughter of an Indian billionaire, is seen by many Conservatives as a safe pair of hands who will easily get on board with Johnson’s agenda for a post-Brexit Britain.

Sterling rose on the expectation of investors that Sunak’s appointment

would pave the way for a more expansionary budget next month.

His sacking of Northern Ireland minister Julian Smith, who only a month ago had helped broker the restoration of a government in the British province, prompted criticism from politicians north and south of the border with Ireland.

Smith, who had been in charge of parliamentary discipline for Johnson’s predecessor, Theresa May, was the first minister to lose his job in the reshuffle. He was joined by business minister Andrea Leadsom and environment minister Theresa Villiers.

Ultra-loyal Alok Sharma, a former minister for international development, was appointed as the new minister for business and also the head of the COP26 climate change summit in Scotland in November, due to be attended by world leaders.

Opposition politicians said the reshuffle was a mess. “This is a historical record. A government in chaos within weeks of an election,” said John McDonnell, finance spokesman for the main opposition Labour Party.

TRUMP’S STONE INTERFERENCE

Republicans unmoved as Democrats demand probe

REUTERS, Washington

Republicans in Congress on Wednesday brushed aside calls to investigate possible political interference at the US Justice Department after the agency asked for a lighter prison term for President Donald Trump’s longtime adviser Roger Stone.

The Justice Department’s decision to back off its sentencing recommendation of seven to nine years for the Republican operative sent shock waves through Washington and prompted all four prosecutors to quit the case and one to quit the agency.

“There should be an investigation,” said House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the top Democrat in Congress. Other Democrats accused Trump of purging the US government of perceived enemies following his acquittal on impeachment charges last week.

They said they would question Attorney General William Barr about the matter when he testifies before Congress on March 31.

“You have taken steps that raise grave questions about your leadership of the Department of Justice,” Democratic members of the House Judiciary Committee wrote to Barr in a letter.

Republican lawmakers, who nearly all voted to acquit Trump of impeachment charges, offered muted criticism of the president but shrugged off suggestions they should investigate whether his political concerns were influencing law enforcement.

After the Justice Department decision, Trump on Wednesday praised Barr, his appointee to the law enforcement job, for “taking charge of a case that was totally out of control and perhaps should not have even been brought.”

US foreign policy ‘amoral’

Says ex-ambassador

AFP, Washington

The former US ambassador who was a key figure in President Donald Trump’s impeachment trial criticized US foreign policy on Wednesday as “amoral” and based on threats.

Marie Yovanovitch, who Trump abruptly recalled last May from her post as US ambassador to Ukraine, spoke at Washington’s Georgetown University where she received a prize from the school’s Institute for the Study of Diplomacy.

“Right now, the State Department is in trouble,” she said. “Senior leaders lack policy vision, moral clarity and leadership skills.”

“To be blunt, an amoral, ‘keep-em-guessin’ foreign policy that substitutes threats, fear and confusion for trust cannot work over



112-year-old Japanese man Chitetsu Watanabe poses next to calligraphy reading in Japanese ‘World Number One’ after he was awarded as the world’s oldest living male in Joetsu, Niigata prefecture, on Wednesday. Chitetsu Watanabe believes smiling is the key to longevity.

PHOTO: AFP

Plant a trillion trees

US Republicans offer fossil fuel-friendly climate fix

REUTERS, Washington

Republican lawmakers on Wednesday proposed legislation setting a goal for the United States to plant a trillion trees by 2050 to fight global warming, a plan intended to address climate change by sucking carbon out of the air instead of by cutting emissions.

The proposed legislation reflects an acknowledgement by some in the Republican Party of rising voter demand for action on climate change, even as it seeks to preserve the economic benefits of a historic drilling boom that has made the United States the world’s biggest oil and gas producer.

Republican President Donald Trump, who has repeatedly cast doubt on the science of climate change, had expressed support for the idea of a massive tree-planting campaign during a speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, last month.

The bill was one of several elements of a broader proposal on climate change

introduced by a half dozen House lawmakers on Wednesday.

Additional bills will be released over the coming weeks, focusing on expanding a tax credit to bolster carbon capture technology from power plants and directly from the air, creating a research hub to advance those technologies, and boosting “clean” energy, including natural gas and nuclear.

The bills focus on technology “innovation” and avoid setting a price for carbon pollution and setting or enforcing emission reduction mandates.

Democrats, including all the top presidential hopefuls in this year’s election, have made

proposals for a rapid shift away from fossil fuels to help the United States and other countries avoid the worst impacts of climate change.

Environmentalists argue that focusing on planting trees or investing in carbon sequestration technology while ignoring emission cuts from fossil fuel use is counterproductive.



Libya rivals ignore UN ceasefire call

AGENCIES

Rival forces clashed in the Libyan capital yesterday, witnesses and pro-Government of National Accord (GNA) forces said, a day after a UN Security Council resolution called for a “lasting ceasefire”.

Flights were again suspended at Mitiga, Tripoli’s sole functioning airport, following rocket fire, as fighting broke out between forces loyal to the UN-recognised GNA and fighters of strongman Khalifa Haftar in the capital’s south.

Witnesses heard explosions in the largely agricultural area of Machrou al-Hadhba about 30 kilometres (18 miles) south of the Tripoli city centre.

Rockets also struck residential neighbourhoods, killing one woman and wounding four other civilians, according to a spokesman for the health ministry, Amin al-Hachimi. Meanwhile, Haftar’s forces yesterday said they won’t allow United Nations to use the only functioning airport in the capital Tripoli.

The UN earlier warned flight restrictions by commander Khalifa Haftar’s forces known as the Libya National Army (LNA) were hampering humanitarian and mediation efforts in the oil-producing country embroiled in a conflict between loose alliances from western and eastern Libya since 2014.

The UN Security Council adopted on Wednesday a resolution calling for a “lasting ceasefire” in the conflict-hit country, a first since Haftar launched his offensive to seize Tripoli in April.

More than 1,000 people have died in the clashes between Haftar and the GNA, while another 140,000 have been displaced, according to the UN.



the long haul,” Yovanovitch said.

Trump last year disparaged Yovanovitch in a telephone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky which was the center of his impeachment for abuse of power.

The House of Representatives impeached him for pressuring Ukraine to announce investigations, including into his political opponent Joe Biden.

In October Yovanovitch testified to Congress that she was recalled due to “unfounded and false claims by people with clearly questionable motives.”

The 33-year diplomatic veteran said she was subjected to a smear campaign orchestrated in part by Trump’s personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani.



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