

Russia battles wildfires amid record warm weather

Wildfires raging in Siberia in record summer temperatures have decreased considerably over the past week, Russia's forest service said yesterday, as it battles blazes by cloud seeding and explosives. Both the number and intensity of fires in Siberia and parts of Alaska have increased since mid-June, resulting in the highest carbon emissions for the month -- 59 million tonnes of CO₂ -- since records began in 2003, it said. Russia's Aerial Forest Protection Service said it was trying to suppress 136 fires over 43,000 hectares (430 square kilometres) as of yesterday. However most of the fires have been deemed too remote and expensive to handle, with over 333,000 hectares currently ablaze in areas where all firefighting efforts have stopped, it said.

US court orders Iran to pay \$879m over 1996 Saudi attack

A US judge has ordered Iran to pay another \$879.1 million over a 1996 bombing in Saudi Arabia that killed 19 US airmen, ruling again that Tehran bore responsibility. President Donald Trump's administration hailed the judgment, the latest over the attack against Iran, which denies involvement and refuses to pay. Saudi Hezbollah, a militant group from the conservative Sunni kingdom's Shia minority, allegedly carried out the attack by driving an explosives-laden truck into the eight-story Khobar Towers complex where Western and Saudi forces were staying. The same judge in 2018 had ordered Iran to pay \$104.7 million in a similar case over the Khobar Towers bombing. A separate court decision in 2013 ordered Iran to pay \$591 million to the family of one of the US airmen who died. Iran, which has no diplomatic relations with the United States, has hit back that Washington should pay for past wrongdoing including support for Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq war.

Singapore ruling party's support slips in pandemic poll



Singapore's ruling party retained power yesterday but its support fell sharply, while the opposition made gains, in a general election held under the shadow of a coronavirus outbreak. The People's Action Party (PAP), which has ruled Singapore for six decades, was always assured of victory, and won 83 of 93 parliamentary seats up for grabs, and 61.2 percent of the popular vote. But that was pointedly down on the nearly 70 percent of the vote it won at the country's last election in 2015, while the opposition Workers' Party picked up 10 seats -- its best ever showing at an election. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, visibly disappointed, conceded the "percentage of the popular vote is not as high as I had hoped".

SOURCE: REUTERS, AFP

US president commutes long-time ally's prison sentence

REUTERS, Washington

President Donald Trump commuted the sentence of his longtime friend and adviser Roger Stone on Friday, sparing him from prison after he was convicted of lying under oath to lawmakers investigating Russian interference in the 2016 US election.

Trump's decision to commute Stone's sentence days before he was due to report to prison marked the Republican president's most assertive intervention to protect an associate in a criminal case and his latest use of executive clemency to benefit an ally. Democrats condemned Trump's action as an assault on the rule of law.

"Roger Stone has already suffered greatly," the White House said in a statement. "He was treated



very unfairly, as were many others in this case. Roger Stone is now a free man!"

Stone, 67, was scheduled to report by Tuesday to a federal prison in Jesup, Georgia, to begin serving a sentence of three years and four months.

Trump, seeking re-election on Nov 3, opted to give Stone a commutation, which does not erase a criminal conviction, rather than a full pardon.

Stone was among several Trump associates charged with crimes in former Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation that documented Russian interference to boost Trump's 2016 candidacy.



People take part in the festival of water lanterns at the amusement park 'Dreamland' in Minsk, on Friday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

25TH ANNIVERSARY OF SREBRENICA MASSACRE

Int'l courts 'more needed than ever'

AFP, The Hague

Twenty-five years after the Srebrenica massacre international courts like those which tried the perpetrators of the slaughter face an uncertain future but are needed more than ever, experts say.

The now-defunct war crimes tribunal that convicted Bosnian Serb leaders like Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic over the murder of 8,000 Muslim men and boys was hailed at the time as a new era of post-Cold War accountability.

Yet the numerous courts set up in its wake now face a litany of problems like low conviction rates, attacks by US President Donald Trump and antagonistic governments, and accusations of racism.

They also need to start giving justice to victims of a new generation of crimes such as the war in Syria, the repression of the Rohingya people in Myanmar and the persecution of the Uighurs in China, experts said.

The Srebrenica commemoration was a reminder that the need for such tribunals to tackle mass atrocities "has never been greater," said Nancy Combs, law professor at the William and Mary Law School in Virginia.

The Hague in the Netherlands -- dubbed the "city of peace and justice" -- plays host to many of these tribunals, the biggest of which is the International Criminal Court, set up in 2002 to try the world's worst crimes.

It is also home to a tribunal for Kosovo which recently handed down war crimes charges against President Hashim Thaci, and a tribunal for the



assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri in 2005.

But the ICC is now under attack by the Trump administration for probing alleged war crimes in Afghanistan, while the wheels of justice have turned slowly and expensively at both the Kosovo and Lebanon courts.

"Undoubtedly, these tribunals are experiencing considerable difficulties at present," said Combs.

"At this moment in history, the future of war crimes tribunals is uncertain."

The ICC was also "suffering from a crisis of confidence because its successes have been so meagre in the last decade," Combs told AFP.

The court had to drop a crimes against humanity case against Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta, while the acquittals of former Ivorian president Laurent

Gbagbo and Congolese politician Jean-Pierre Bemba came as severe blows.

Despite recent political changes in Sudan, the court's most wanted fugitive and former Khartoum strongman Omar al-Bashir remains out of reach.

Claims that the ICC was only prosecuting suspects from the African continent had also led to accusations of racism.

Things had seemed more hopeful when tribunals for the genocide in Rwanda and the wars in the former Yugoslavia were set up in the 1990s -- the first of their kind since the Nuremberg and Tokyo tribunals after World War II.

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) was the most successful. By the time it shut in 2017 it had tried 161 people including Karadzic and Mladic, both of whom remain in detention in The Hague.

The future of international justice now lay in a "combination of various law models", mixing big international tribunals with local courts, said Carsten Stahn, law professor at Leiden University.

Syrian atrocities for example are being prosecuted using a mixture of a UN-backed investigative archive and domestic trials based on the concept of universal jurisdiction, for instance in Germany, Stahn said.

"We see a multiplication of avenues for justice. Not only purely domestic or purely international courts, but also hybrid or regional ones," he added.

"This is the future."

US conducted cyberattack on Russia in 2018

Confirms Trump

CNN ONLINE

President Donald Trump, for the first time, confirmed the US conducted a covert cyberattack in 2018 against Russia's Internet Research Agency. The Internet Research Agency is a troll farm blamed by the US for helping to facilitate interference both in the 2016 presidential election and the 2018 midterms.

Trump gave the confirmation during an interview conducted by Marc Thiessen, a Washington Post columnist and former speechwriter for President George W Bush and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Thiessen writes in the Post that during his interview he asked Trump whether he had launched a cyberattack. Thiessen said Trump replied, "Correct."

Trump said during the interview that in 2016, then-president Barack Obama knew but did nothing.

Trump claimed that unlike his predecessor, he acted on intelligence the US had about Russia's election interference by launching the cyberattack.

"Look, we stopped it," Trump told Thiessen.

Obama in December 2016 did announce sanctions against Russia and expelled some Russian diplomats in retaliation for Russia's interference in the US presidential election.

The Washington Post in October 2018 previously reported there was a cyberattack. The operation against the company, which is bankrolled by an oligarch close to Russian President Vladimir Putin, was carried out in order to prevent any interference in the midterms, the paper was told.

This is, however, the first official confirmation from Trump. Thiessen reports senior US officials also confirmed that the strike occurred and was effective, taking the Internet Research Agency offline.



People gather near the bridge that is damaged due to the flood at Raghu Ganga River in Myagdi, Nepal, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Floods, landslides kill 23 in Nepal

Dozens missing; thousands displaced

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Heavy rains triggered flash floods and landslides that killed at least 23 people and displaced thousands in western Nepal, officials said yesterday.

Nine people were killed and more than 30 were missing in Myagdi district, 200 km (125 miles) northwest of the capital Kathmandu, where several houses were destroyed on Friday, district administrator Gyan Nath Dhakal said.

"The toll is expected to increase as rescuers had just reached the remote site to look for victims," Dhakal said, adding that 50 people had been plucked to safety using helicopters.

In neighbouring Kaski district, seven people were killed, said a second government official in the tourist town of Pokhara. Another seven were killed in Jajarkot district in the far west.

"We are searching for eight people who are still missing," said Kishore Shrestha, a senior police official.

In the southern plains bordering India, the Koshi river, which causes deadly floods in the eastern Indian state of Bihar almost every year, was flowing above the danger level, police said.

Landslides and flash floods are common occurrence in mountainous Nepal during the June-September monsoon every year.

flood situations in Nepal's neighbours India, Bangladesh are worsening due to heavy rains. The major rivers that these countries share are running over the danger level.

High blood sugar elevates Covid mortality risk: study

AFP, Paris

Patients with abnormally high blood sugar levels are more than twice as likely to die from COVID-19, researchers in China said yesterday.

It is the first time scientists have been able to confirm that patients with hyperglycemia, but not diagnosed with diabetes, are at higher risk of death from COVID-19, they wrote in the journal Diabetologia.

The researchers examined death rates for 605 COVID-19 patients at two hospitals in Wuhan, China.

Having high blood pressure is "independently associated" with increased risk of death and complications from COVID-19, they wrote.

The study builds on previous research on diabetic patients.

One-in-10 COVID-19 patients with diabetes died in French hospitals, a far higher proportion than for patients without the condition, a May study in the

same journal found.

Exactly why high blood sugar increases COVID-19 death rates remains clear.

The authors of Friday's study suggested that blood clotting, the weakening of blood vessel linings, and cytokine storm syndrome -- an overreaction of the immune system -- could all play a role.

The authors of the report urged hospitals to test all COVID-19 patients for glucose levels, as opposed to only those known to have diabetes.

The study, which looked at hospital patients admitted in January and February, had some limitations, experts not involved in the research said.

"This is a nice report but it is fully in line with expectations," Naveed Sattar, a professor of metabolic medicine at the University of Glasgow who was not one of the study's authors, said.

More research involving randomised controlled trials is needed, Bernard Khoo, a professor of endocrinology at University College London, commented.

Indonesia 'dog doctor' rescues canines from pandemic peril

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian doctor Susana Somali and her staff cut tightly-bound plastic ropes off dozens of whimpering dogs rescued from the butcher's block after being sold or abandoned during the coronavirus pandemic.

Somali's sprawling Jakarta complex, home to about 1,400 canines, has become a refuge for at-risk animals as cash-strapped owners sell them into the Southeast Asian nation's controversial dog meat trade.

Mostly acting on tip-offs, Somali and her team hit the streets looking for stray dogs and butcher shops where more and more doomed animals are spending their last days howling in cramped cages.

Somali -- who juggles a day job testing COVID-19 samples at a local hospital -- started the shelter in an upscale Jakarta neighbourhood more than a decade ago.



Back then, she rescued one or two dogs from a butcher each week. But that number has soared to as many as 20 in recent months as strays are snatched off the streets for their meat.

The 55-year-old mother of two negotiates with often unfriendly butchers, sometimes paying them cash or supplying other meat to secure the animals' release.

"The real battle isn't rescuing them from butchers, although that is always scary. The challenge is taking care of these dogs during the pandemic,"

Somali said.

Somali and about 30 staff at Pejaten Animal Shelter are struggling to care for a huge number of animals as donations plunge in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak. Myriad breeds, including huskies, pit bulls, and German shepherds, roam the 5,000 square metre shelter, which Somali started in 2009.

Somali and her team rescued dozens of puppies bound for a local Korean eatery this month, but they don't always make it in time.

Animal welfare groups estimate as many as one million dogs are killed annually across Indonesia, with more than 100 restaurants in Jakarta alone serving their meat, according to government figures.

Dog is often a culinary speciality among Indonesia's non-Muslim minority groups. The animals are considered unclean in Islam and rarely kept as pets in Muslim-majority countries.