

Floods kill scores in India's Assam

9 rare rhinos die; China blows up dam to ease flood risk

AGENCIES

Intense rain and floods in the Indian state of Assam have killed at least 84 people and displaced more than 2.75 million since May, authorities said yesterday, as they tried to collect the bodies of nine rare rhinos drowned in the past 10 days.

Rescue teams were facing a double challenge of rising flood waters amid the novel coronavirus as villagers driven from their homes huddle in shelters.

"It's hard to enforce social distancing when people are being ordered to move away from the rising waters," said Sanghamitra Sanyal, a member of the northeastern state's flood management force. "We're urging people to at least cover their mouth and nose with a piece of clean cloth."

Officials warned that the water level in the Brahmaputra river was expected to rise by 11 cm (4.3 inches), two weeks after it burst its banks swamping more than 2,500 villages.

Floods have also inundated Assam's the Kaziranga National Park, home to the world's largest concentration of one-horned rhinoceroses, with an estimated 2,500 out of a total population of some 3,000 of the animals.

"Nine rhinos have drowned and over 100 other animals have been killed," Atul Bora, Assam's agriculture minister who is Kaziranga's member of the state parliament, told Reuters.

In China, authorities blew up part of a dam in eastern Anhui province to relieve flood pressure, local media reported, as heavy rains continue to swell rivers across parts of the country.

Rising waters across central and eastern China have left over 140 people dead or missing, and floods have affected almost 24 million since the start of July, according to the ministry of emergency management.



This aerial photo taken on Sunday shows water released from the Xiaolangdi Reservoir Dam in Luoyang in China's central Henan province, in preparation of the upcoming annual flood season at the Yellow River basin.

PHOTO: AFP

Iran executes spy who helped to track Soleimani

Iran yesterday executed a former translator convicted of spying for the US and Israel, including helping to locate a top Iranian general killed later by the Americans, the judiciary said. The killing of Major General Qasem Soleimani in a US drone strike near Baghdad airport in January brought decades-old arch enemies Iran and the United States to the brink of conflict. The judiciary's Mizan Online website said Mahmoud Mousavi Majd's death "sentence was carried out on Monday morning over the charge of espionage so that the case of his betrayal to his country will be closed forever". Soleimani headed the Quds Force, the foreign operations arm of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Sudan to try ousted Bashir over 1989 coup

Sudan's former autocratic president Omar al-Bashir, ousted amid a popular pro-democracy uprising last year, faces trial from today over the military coup that brought him to power more than three decades ago. Bashir, 76, who is already behind bars for corruption, could face the death penalty if convicted over his 1989 coup against the democratically elected government of prime minister Sadek al-Mahdi. The Khartoum trial starting at 0800 GMT against him and 16 co-accused comes as Sudan's post-revolution transitional government has launched a series of reforms in hopes of fully rejoining the international community. Sudan has also pledged to hand over Bashir to the International Criminal Court to face trial on war crimes and genocide charges related to the Darfur conflict, which left 300,000 people dead.

Saudi king hospitalised with gall bladder inflammation



Saudi Arabia's 84-year-old ruler King Salman was admitted to hospital in Riyadh yesterday for gall bladder inflammation, the royal court said, prompting the postponement of the Iraqi prime minister's high-profile visit. It is rare for Saudi Arabia to report on the health of the ageing monarch, who has ruled the top oil exporter and the Arab world's biggest economy since 2015. King Salman is the second reigning monarch in the Gulf to be hospitalised after Kuwait's 91-year-old emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad Al-Sabah was admitted to hospital last week, at a time when the region is gripped by the twin crises of the coronavirus pandemic and a plunge in crude prices.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

EU in 'mission impossible'

Summit drags on as Europe's big players see Covid recovery deal coming

REUTERS, Brussels

European Union (EU) heavyweight Germany yesterday said that national leaders split over a massive coronavirus stimulus plan had sketched a framework agreement that could bring a successful end to a fraught summit dragging into its fourth day.

Slow to coordinate their initial response to the outbreak and already weakened by Britain's departure, the EU's 27 nations could redeem themselves with an economic aid plan that would show Europeans they can step up to a crisis and are united.

But old grievances between fiscally-frugal northern nations less affected by the pandemic and more indebted southern European nations like Italy and Greece, whose economies are in freefall, have made progress painfully slow.

Ahead of the 1400 GMT restart, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said leaders now had a new basis for a deal on a 750 billion euro (\$858 billion) recovery fund and the bloc's next 2021-



2027 common budget, worth around 1.1 trillion euros.

"We worked out a framework for a possible agreement last night after long negotiations," she told reporters, arriving for the fourth day of talks in Brussels in what could be the bloc's longest ever summit.

"This is progress and gives hope that an agreement can be reached today."

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen was also upbeat about the chances of a deal.

With talks going past midnight for two consecutive nights, French President Emmanuel Macron lost patience in the early hours of yesterday

and banged his fist on the table in frustration at "sterile blockages" by the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark and Austria, two diplomats said.

But by daylight, he shared Merkel's optimism, telling reporters as he arrived back: "I'm starting today with a lot of determination to make progress."

Summit chair Charles Michel urged leaders on Sunday to achieve "mission impossible", reminding them that more than 600,000 people had now died from COVID-19 around the world.

"It looks a bit more hopeful than at the times where I thought last night that it was over," Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte told reporters in the early hours.

Within the 750 billion euro recovery fund, 390 billion euros could be considered as non-repayable grants, diplomats said, a compromise between the 350 billion level of the five "frugals" - who also include Finland - and the 400 billion euros demanded by France and Germany.

West Bengal announces 2-day weekly lockdown

NDTV ONLINE

West Bengal will go into complete lockdown two days of the week to fight the spurt in coronavirus cases. State Home Secretary Alapan Bandyopadhyay, making the announcement, said there were pockets of community transmission across the state.

This week, the state will be under lockdown on Thursday and Saturday. The next week, it will be on Wednesday. Future dates for August will be announced in the coming days. The containment zone-based restrictions will continue to be in place.

"Bengal is making an effort to break the chain of transmission. The strategy now is to intensify the effort to break the chain. A lockdown for 2 to 3 days a week will act as a brake. It will have a good effect," home secretary Alapan Bandyopadhyay said.

"There is a perception of community transmission in some pockets," the home secretary said.

Congress MP Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury reacted strongly to what he called was an ad hoc decision by Bengal. "The state had four and a half months to prepare for this situation but all we saw was half boiled and half baked decisions which has left the people in the state in the dark about what to do and where to go if they get infected," he said.

Citing the turnaround in New Delhi, Chowdhury said the state should look to the capital where the recovery rate is over 80 per cent while in Bengal it is going down." His remarks did not go down well with Dr Shantanu Sen, Trinamool MP and former President of the state's medical association.

"This whole situation is the result of the centres callous handling of the migrant issue among other things. And all that they are doing is, writing letters to the state sometimes from the health secretary sometimes from the home," Dr Shantanu Sen said.



Kanye West holds chaotic opening of 2020 polls bid

AFP, Washington

US rapper Kanye West broke down in tears on Sunday at the chaotic launch of his unlikely campaign to oust Donald Trump as president in November elections.

Wearing a bullet-proof jacket marked "security," West gave a rambling speech in which he claimed he had wanted his wife, Kim Kardashian, to get an abortion and that renowned American abolitionist Harriet Tubman "never actually freed the slaves."

West told the event in Charleston, South Carolina, how he had wanted his wife to get an abortion when she was pregnant with North, their oldest daughter. He then revealed his father also had wanted to abort him.

"My dad wanted to abort me. My mom saved my life. There would've been no Kanye West because my dad was too busy," West said, bursting into tears.

He later shouted, "I almost killed my daughter! I almost killed my daughter!"

At another point during his speech, he said, "Harriet Tubman never actually freed the slaves, she just had the slaves go work for other white people."

West's speech, clips of which went viral on social media, provoked confusion, anger and concern for the musician's mental health.

Less than four months ahead of November's election, West, 43, raised eyebrows on July 4 when he announced on Twitter he would challenge Trump.

'Breakthrough' treatment slashes virus death risk

AFP, Paris

An aerosol-based treatment could drastically reduce the number of new coronavirus patients dying from the disease or requiring intensive care, according to preliminary results released yesterday by a British biotech firm.

In a randomised trial of 100 patients admitted to hospital with Covid-19, those who received an inhaled formula of the protein interferon beta were at 79 percent lower risk of developing severe disease compared to those who received a placebo.

They were also more than twice as likely to make a full recovery compared with the control group.

The firm behind the treatment, known as SNG001, said the preliminary results suggested "a major breakthrough" in the pandemic.

"We are all delighted with the trial results announced today, which showed that SNG001 greatly reduced the number of hospitalised COVID-19 patients who progressed from requiring oxygen to requiring ventilation," said Richard Marsden, CEO of Synaigen.

The results published yesterday have not yet been peer-reviewed and the sample size is relatively small.

But if confirmed the treatment could revolutionise the way Covid-19 is dealt with in hospitals.

Interferon beta is a naturally occurring protein, commonly used to treat multiple sclerosis. It forms part of the body's natural fight against infection, and the novel coronavirus suppresses its production in an attempt to evade an immune response.

Delivering the protein directly into the lungs of patients is designed to trigger a robust immune response to the virus, even in patients whose immune system is already weakened by infection.

"The results confirm our belief that interferon beta... has huge potential as an inhaled drug to be able to restore the lung's immune response," said Tom Wilkinson, professor of respiratory medicine at the University of Southampton.

There are currently a number of treatments available for patients hospitalised with COVID-19.

Last month a Britain-based team of researchers announced they had successfully reduced the risk of death among seriously ill patients by administering the commonly available steroid dexamethasone. Several countries have also authorised the use of remdesivir for treatment.



Catalan pro-independence demonstrators take part in an anti-monarchy march in Monasterio de Poblet yesterday coinciding with a visit of the Spanish royals to the Royal Abbey of Santa Maria de Poblet.

PHOTO: AFP

UK going down 'wrong path'

Warns China as Britain to scrap Hong Kong extradition treaty

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday warned that Britain was heading down "a wrong path" as Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab was expected to announce the suspension of an extradition treaty with Hong Kong, raising tensions between the countries.

Wang Wenbin, spokesman for China's foreign ministry, told a regular press briefing that Beijing would "firmly counter" any interference in its internal affairs, also slamming suggestions it was mistreating minorities in Xinjiang as "slander."

"We urge the UK not to go further down this wrong path, in order to avoid further damage to China-UK relations," Wang said.

"Recent erroneous remarks and measures concerning Hong Kong have seriously violated international law and basic norms governing international relations... China strongly condemns this and firmly opposes it."



A new security law imposed by China on Hong Kong last month has drawn widespread criticism in Britain and elsewhere, and Raab later yesterday was to announce a package of measures similar to those already introduced by the United States, Canada and Australia.

They are expected to include the suspension of an extradition treaty. Tensions between Hong Kong's former and current rulers have soared over a number of topics recently.

Britain recently bowed to sustained pressure from Washington and ordered the phased removal of

Chinese telecoms giant Huawei from its 5G network despite warnings of retaliation from Beijing.

Wang also hit back at comments by Raab that accused Beijing of human rights abuses against ethnic and religious minorities in the northwest region of Xinjiang.

Raab told the BBC on Sunday that it was "clear that there are gross, egregious human rights abuses going on... it is deeply, deeply troubling."

Wang called the comments "nothing but rumours and slander." "The Xinjiang issue is not about human rights, religions or ethnic groups at all, but about combating violence, terrorism and separatism," he said.

Rights groups and experts estimate that more than one million ethnic Uighurs and other mostly Muslim minorities have been rounded up into a network of internment camps, which China says are facilities for job-training and to steer people away from extremism.

Astrophysicists unveil biggest-ever 3D map of the Universe

AFP, Geneva

Astrophysicists yesterday published the largest-ever 3D map of the Universe, the result of an analysis of more than four million galaxies and ultra-bright, energy-packed quasars.

The efforts of hundreds of scientists from around 30 institutions worldwide have yielded a "complete story of the expansion of the universe", said Will Percival of the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada.

In the project launched more than two decades ago, the researchers made "the most accurate expansion history measurements over the widest-ever range of cosmic time", he said in a statement.

The map relies on the latest observations of the Sloan Digital Sky Survey (SDSS), titled the "extended Baryon Oscillation Spectroscopic Survey" (eBOSS), with data collected from an optical telescope in New Mexico over six years.

The infant Universe following the Big Bang is relatively well known through extensive theoretical models and observation of cosmic microwave

background -- the electromagnetic radiation of the nascent cosmos.

Studies of galaxies and distance measurements also contributed to a better understanding of the Universe's expansion over billions of years.

But Kyle Dawson of the University of Utah, who unveiled the map, said the researchers tackled a "troublesome gap in the middle 11 billion years."

Through "five years of continuous observations, we have worked to fill in that gap, and we are using that information to provide some of the most substantial advances in cosmology in the last decade," he said.

Astrophysicist Jean-Paul Kneib of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (EPFL) in Lausanne, who initiated eBOSS in 2012, said the goal was to produce "the most complete 3D map of the Universe throughout the lifetime of the Universe."

For the first time, the researchers drew on "celestial objects that indicate the distribution of matter in the distant Universe, galaxies that actively form stars and quasars".