



The San Francisco Bay Bridge and city skyline are obscured in orange smoke and haze as they are seen from Treasure Island in San Francisco, California, on Wednesday. At least six people were confirmed dead by late Wednesday, with officials warning that more deaths would likely be reported in the coming days as many areas were currently impossible to reach. Five towns were "substantially destroyed" as widespread evacuations took place across the northwestern state of Oregon, governor Kate Brown said. Neighboring California and Washington states have also been scrambling to contain the rapidly spreading wildfires since the weekend due to unprecedented heatwaves followed by intense, dry winds.

PHOTO: AFP

EU snubs Suu Kyi

Parliament suspends her from rights prize events over Rohingya atrocities

AFP, Brussels

The European Parliament yesterday removed Myanmar's civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi from the "Sakharov Prize community" because of her "acceptance" of state crimes against the Rohingya community.

The EU assembly awarded the former democracy campaigner its top human rights prize in 1990, a year before she received the Nobel Peace Prize, but she will no longer take part in events for laureates.

A source close to the parliament said the prize had been awarded for Suu Kyi's work before 1990 so could not be withdrawn, but that this exclusion was the strongest sanction available to MEPs.

A statement from the speaker and the group leaders in parliament said the decision was "a response to her failure to act and her acceptance of the ongoing crimes against the Rohingya community in Myanmar".

Majority-Buddhist Myanmar's Muslim Rohingya minority has long been discriminated against and around 740,000 people fled to Bangladesh in August 2017 to escape a military offensive.

Suu Kyi, a former political prisoner who fought to end military rule and is now the country's most powerful civilian official as "state counsellor", was once honoured around the world as a champion of freedom.

But she has been accused of turning a blind eye to, or even condoning, abuses against the Rohingya.

Myanmar's election campaign began this week, with Suu Kyi's party hoping to build on its 2015 victory and secure its role as a counterweight to the still powerful military establishment.

But the refugees have been disenfranchised and most of the 600,000 Rohingya still in Myanmar have been stripped of citizenship and rights, despite pressure from Suu Kyi's former international admirers.

Suu Kyi's loss of her Sakharov Prize privileges is largely symbolic. She is already a pariah in world capitals, especially after she travelled to the International Court of Justice in The Hague to rebut allegations against her country of rape, arson and mass killings.

NEWS IN BRIEF

US cancels visas of more than 1,000 Chinese nationals

China accused Washington of "political persecution and racial discrimination" yesterday, after the US confirmed it had revoked the visas of more than 1,000 Chinese students under an order by President Donald Trump that accused some of espionage. Trump declared in May that some Chinese nationals officially in the United States for study have stolen intellectual property and helped modernise China's military, as tensions between the two countries soar on multiple fronts. The State Department declined to give details on whose visas have been revoked, citing privacy laws. Nearly 370,000 students from China were enrolled at US universities in 2018-19 -- the most of any country -- offering a lucrative source of income to institutions that are now facing growing pressure from the coronavirus pandemic.

UN chief calls for \$35b more for WHO Covid-19 programme

United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres called for \$35 billion more, including \$15 billion in the next three months, for the World Health Organization's (WHO) "ACT Accelerator" programme to back vaccines, treatments and diagnostics against COVID-19. Some \$3 billion has been contributed so far, Guterres told an online event yesterday, calling it "seed funding" that was less than 10% of what the WHO wants for the programme, formally called Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator. Financial support has, so far, lagged goals, as nations or governments including the European Union, Britain, Japan and the United States reach bilateral deals for vaccines, prompting Guterres and WHO General Director Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus to plead to nations to contribute.

Iran holds naval exercise near sensitive Strait of Hormuz

The Iranian navy began a three-day exercise in the Sea of Oman near the strategic Strait of Hormuz yesterday, deploying an array of warships, drones and missiles. One of the exercise's objectives is to devise "tactical offensive and defensive strategies for safeguarding the country's territorial waters and shipping lanes," the military said on its website. The navy will test fire surface-to-surface and shore-to-sea cruise missiles and torpedoes, and rocket-launching systems fitted on warships, submarines, aircraft and drones, it added. Dubbed "Zolfaghar 99", the exercise will be held over two million square kilometres (772,000 square miles) of sea stretching from the northern part of the Indian Ocean to the eastern end of the Strait of Hormuz, the sensitive shipping lane from the Gulf through which a fifth of world oil output passes.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

US, China lock horns at Asean

Pompeo urges states to shun Chinese firms; Beijing says US biggest threat to peace and stability in South China Sea

AGENCIES

Washington's top diplomat yesterday urged Southeast Asia to cut ties with Chinese companies helping build islands in the South China Sea after China accused the US of becoming "the biggest driver of militarization" in the contested sea, as tensions between Washington and Beijing look set to swamp a regional Asian summit.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's comments came at a regional Asian summit overshadowed by the US-China rivalry over a range of issues, from trade to the coronavirus.

Tensions are also simmering over the South China Sea, with the US last month sanctioning 24 Chinese state-owned companies it said had helped Beijing's military buildup in the resource-rich waterway.

Pompeo said it was time for

Southeast Asian governments to reconsider their own relationship with firms working in the sea.

"Don't just speak up, but act," he told the 10 foreign ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) during an online summit.

"Reconsider business dealings with the very state-owned companies that bully Asean coastal states in the South China Sea.

"Don't let the Chinese Communist party walk over us and our people."

This year's Asean summit comes days after Beijing launched ballistic missiles in the South China Sea as part of live-fire exercises.

Vietnam, which is chairing the summit, expressed "serious concern" about recent militarisation of the sea.

"This has eroded trust and confidence, increased tension and undermined peace, security and rule

of law in the region," said Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh.

But the Philippines already said last week it would not follow the US lead because it needed Chinese investment.

And Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi laid blame on the United States for tensions, claiming Washington was "becoming the biggest driver" of the waterway's militarisation. Wang said that China's greatest interest in the waters was "peace and stability", while accusing the US of "creating tension and seeking profit from it".

China claims the majority of the South China Sea, invoking its so-called nine-dash line to justify what it says are historic rights to the key trade waterway. Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan all contest parts of China's declared territory in the sea.

Trump admitted playing down Covid-19 danger

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump admits he tried to minimize the seriousness of the threat from Covid-19 at the outset of the pandemic in audio recordings released Wednesday from interviews with veteran US journalist Bob Woodward.

"I wanted to always play it down," Trump said in an interview with Woodward on March 19, according to a CNN preview of the book "Rage," due to be published September 15.

"I still like playing it down, because I don't want to create a panic," he said in the conversation with Woodward, which was recorded.

In another recorded interview, on February 7, he told Woodward the virus "goes through the air" -- despite repeatedly mocking people who wear masks in the weeks and months after.

Coming eight weeks before the November 3 presidential election, the revelations add new pressure on Trump.

Speaking to reporters at the White House, Trump denounced the book as "another political hit job" and said if he'd downplayed Covid-19 it was to prevent a "frenzy."

"I don't want people to be frightened," he said.

"I'm not going to drive this country or the world into a frenzy," he said.

In the interviews with Woodward, Trump made clear he'd understood at the outset that the virus was "deadly stuff" -- far more dangerous than the ordinary flu. In public, however, Trump repeatedly told Americans during the initial weeks at the start of 2020 that the virus wasn't dangerous and would "disappear" by itself.

"He knew how deadly it was," Democratic presidential challenger Joe Biden said while campaigning in Michigan. "He lied to the American people. He knowingly and willingly lied about the threat it posed to the country for months."



A couple sits covered with a blanket as refugees and migrants camp on a road following a fire at the Moria camp on the island of Lesbos, Greece, yesterday. Thousands of migrants were stranded without shelter on Lesbos yesterday after fires razed their camp to the ground, and the government said it would take days to find housing for all of them.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Lebanese firefighters try to put out a fire that broke out at Beirut's port area, yesterday. A large fire erupted at Beirut port yesterday, engulfing parts of the port and surrounding residential area. There were no immediate reports of injuries but the blaze strained nerves already on edge in a nation grappling with a deep economic crisis that has posed the biggest threat to Lebanon's stability since its 1975-1990 civil war.

PHOTO: REUTERS

India commissions French Rafale jets

Seals military deal with Japan

AGENCIES

India's defence minister yesterday hailed the formal commissioning of the country's first new French Rafale jets as a "strong message" to its adversaries, amid an escalating border row with China.

The first five of a \$9.4-billion order for 36 Rafale aircraft formally entered service following a ceremony in Ambala in northern India.

"The induction of Rafale is a strong message for the world and especially for those who challenge India's sovereignty," Defence Minister Rajnath Singh tweeted, without mentioning China directly. "Our country will not take any step to disturb peace anywhere. We expect the same from our neighbours," Singh added.

Meanwhile, India has signed a mutual logistics support arrangement (MLSA) with Japan, with an eye firmly on China's expansionist behaviour in the Indo-Pacific and beyond, reports TNN. The agreement provides for creation of an enabling framework for closer cooperation, interoperability and use of each other's military facilities by the armed forces of the two countries, the official said.

Space for democratic dissent shrinking in India: academics

REUTERS, New Delhi

About 2,000 academics from top institutions in India and abroad have signed petitions demanding federal authorities stop targeting people critical of the government as part of a widening investigation into caste clashes two years ago.

The National Investigation Agency has arrested more than a dozen people, including scholars and human rights campaigners, saying they had ties to Maoist guerrillas and had instigated violence in western Maharashtra state in 2018.

More university professors have since been summoned for questioning, some of whom had never visited Bhima Koregaon, the village where violence broke out between upper caste Hindus and those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, the Dalits, according to the petitioners.

"We are writing to express our deep concern at the actions of the National Investigation Agency (NIA) in its

investigation of the Bhima-Koregaon violence," the signatories said, adding the probe was more focused on hunting down left-wing intellectuals and activists than the actual perpetrators of the violence.

The NIA did not respond to a Reuters request for comment.

The signature campaign by the academics comes amid growing concerns that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has been seeking to stifle opposition and that India's traditions of secularism and free speech are under threat.

The signatories noted that several of the academics detained had been charged under the Unlawful Activities and Prevention Act, which makes it difficult for them to get bail.

It quoted Gautam Navlakha, a civil liberties activist who was detained in 2018 as saying "the process itself becomes punishment" since the accused were deemed "guilty unless proven innocent".