

50 feared dead in DR Congo mine collapse

AFP, Bukavu

About 50 people are feared dead after a gold mine collapsed in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo following torrential rain, local authorities said yesterday.

The accident in the makeshift mine occurred on Friday in the town of Kamituga, in South Kivu province.

Provincial governor Theo Ngwabidje Kasi deplored “the tragic deaths of 50 people, most of them young”.

A local resident who was at the scene, Jean Nondo, told AFP that “according to witnesses, there are more than 50 dead. There is only one survivor.”

He said a river close to the mine had flooded after torrential rain.

“Water went into the three tunnels. When people tried to get out, there was no way as the water was flowing strongly, with high pressure,” he said.

The mayor decreed a two-day mourning period and called on local residents to help extract the bodies from the ground.



Woman and children react as refugees and migrants from the destroyed camp of Moria flee clash with riot police, on the island of Lesbos, Greece, yesterday. Greek riot police fired tear gas at protesting asylum seekers on Lesbos island yesterday as tensions simmered following the catastrophic fire that ripped through Europe's largest migrant camp this week.

PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWS IN BRIEF

Delhi summons top Indian Facebook official over content

Delhi summoned Facebook's India chief yesterday to answer allegations that the social media giant failed to remove dangerous content in its biggest market globally. Facebook has been embroiled in a huge row in India after the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported in August that the site failed to take down anti-Muslim comments by a politician from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in order to protect its business interests. The Delhi Assembly panel on peace and harmony said Saturday it would investigate evidence -- described by the committee as “incriminating material on record” -- submitted by four prominent journalists and digital rights activists. The committee has asked Ajit Mohan, the managing director of Facebook India, to appear before it on September 15 to determine the “veracity of allegations” made by the group.

Liberia declares rape a national emergency

Liberian President George Weah has declared rape a national emergency and has ordered new measures to tackle the problem after a recent spike of cases in the poor West African state. The moves comes after thousands of Liberians protested rising incidents of rape in the capital Monrovia last month, in a bid to draw attention to the country's alarming rate of sexual assault. Late on Friday, Weah said he would install a special prosecutor for rape in Liberia, as well as set up a national sex offender registry, a statement from his office said. A UN report in 2016 recorded 803 rape cases the previous year in the country of 4.5 million, and found that only two percent of sexual violence cases led to a conviction, for example. Margaret Taylor, the director of Liberia's Women Empowerment Network, told AFP last month that her NGO had recorded 600 cases of rape between June and August, for example.

India sees record jump in coronavirus cases



Oxygen supply has grown scarce in some parts of India hard hit by coronavirus, hospital and local government officials said, as India reported a record daily jump in cases for a second consecutive day, logging 97,570 new infections yesterday. With total cases of more than 4.65 million, India is the world's second worst affected country, trailing only the United States, which has more than 6.4 million cases. Total COVID-19 deaths stood at 77,472, putting India in third place in a ranking of countries' fatalities. But the growth in infections in India is faster than anywhere else in the world, as cases surge through urban and rural areas.

SOURCE: AFP

Wildfires continue to ravage US West Coast

At least 26 killed; many missing

AGENCIES

US officials yesterday warned of potential “mass” fatalities as more than 20,000 firefighters from across the country battled sprawling deadly wildfires up and down the West Coast.

A prediction of cooler weather offered some hope of respite in coming days, but the true scale of the destruction from dozens of massive blazes in California, Oregon and Washington states remained hard to gauge.

There were 16 deaths confirmed this week, with wide stretches of land still cut off by flames. CNN reported death of at least 26 people in the devastating fire season across the West Coast. Dozens more are missing, it added.

“We anticipate that number (of deaths) may potentially go up as we get back into areas that have been ravaged by flame and obviously, smoke begins to clear,” warned California governor Gavin Newsom.

Ten people have been confirmed dead from that blaze in Butte County, which was driven at unprecedented pace toward the city of Oroville earlier in the week by strong, dry winds and soaring temperatures.

In neighboring Oregon, where one million acres (400,000 hectares) have burned and three people are reported dead with dozens still unaccounted for, governor Kate Brown also expressed hope a corner had been turned. More than 40,000 Oregonians have fled their homes so far, with around half a million under evacuation warnings, Brown told a press conference -- clarifying previous higher figures given by state officials.

‘Momentous’ breakthrough!

Afghan peace talks open with calls for ceasefire, women's rights

REUTERS, Doha

Peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government opened in Qatar yesterday, marking what US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo heralded as a “truly momentous” breakthrough in nearly two decades of relentless conflict.

Ahead of face-to-face negotiations in coming days, the warring sides were urged by various countries and groups to reach an immediate ceasefire and forge an agreement that upholds women's rights.

The government of US President Donald Trump, who is eager to claim an end to America's longest conflict as he seeks re-election, expressed its intention to use aid as leverage for a deal.

The opening ceremony came one day after the 19th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on the United States that triggered its military involvement in Afghanistan.

Pompeo urged the warring sides to seize the opportunity to strike a comprehensive peace deal, while acknowledging many challenges lay ahead.

“The choice of your political system is yours to make,” he told the opening ceremony in the Qatari capital Doha. “We believe firmly that protecting the rights of all Afghans is the best way for you to break the cycle of violence.”

The head of Afghanistan's peace council, Abdullah Abdullah, said that even if the two sides could not agree on all points, they should compromise.

Taliban leader Mullah Baradar Akhund said that Afghanistan should “have an Islamic system in which all tribes and ethnicities of the country find themselves without any discrimination and live their lives in love and brotherhood.”

Pompeo warned that the size and scope of future US financial assistance

to the country, which relies heavily on international funding, would depend on their “choices and conduct”.

US Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad told reporters that preventing terrorism was the chief condition but that protecting minority and women's rights would also influence any future decisions on Congress-allocated funding. “There is no blank check.”

Officials, diplomats and analysts say that although getting both sides to the negotiating table was a major achievement, this does not mean the path to peace will be easy, especially with violence increasing around the country.

Negotiations to broker a comprehensive peace deal were a component of a troop withdrawal pact signed between the United States and the Taliban in February. After months of delay, a dispute over the Taliban's demand for the release of 5,000 prisoners was resolved this week.



The Bobcat Fire burns through the Angeles National Forest, north of Monrovia, California, on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

EU plotting to tear apart UK with food ‘blockade’

Says Johnson; Germany says UK to suffer if no deal

AFP, London

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has accused the European Union of threatening to tear the UK apart by imposing a food “blockade” between Britain and Northern Ireland, throwing new fuel on the fire of simmering Brexit talks.

Writing in Saturday's Daily Telegraph newspaper, Johnson said the EU's stance justified his government's introduction of new legislation to rewrite its Brexit withdrawal treaty -- a bill that is causing deep alarm among his own MPs.

Talks between London and Brussels on a future trading relationship are deadlocked as both sides struggle to prise apart nearly 50 years of economic integration, after British voters opted for a divorce.

“My assessment is that an unregulated situation (no deal) would have very significant consequences for the British economy,” German Finance Minister Olaf Scholz warned yesterday after a meeting of EU finance ministers in Berlin.

But absent a deal by the end of this year, when the full force of Brexit kicks in, Johnson said the EU was bent on

an “extreme interpretation” of rules for Northern Ireland under the divorce treaty both sides signed in January.

“We are being told that the EU will not only impose tariffs on goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, but that they might actually stop the transport of food products from GB to NI,” he wrote.

“I have to say that we never seriously believed that the EU would be willing to use a treaty, negotiated in good faith, to blockade one part of the UK, to cut it off, or that they would actually threaten to destroy the economic and territorial integrity of the UK.”

Johnson said the EU's stance would “seriously endanger peace and stability in Northern Ireland”, and stressed he remained committed to finding agreement with the EU by the end of the year, but the new UK Internal Market Bill was a “legal safety net”.

The EU, however, has threatened Britain with legal action unless it withdraws its unilateral changes by the end of September, and leaders in the European Parliament on Friday threatened to veto any trade pact if London violates its promises.



Attenborough warns against species extinction

AFP, London

Renowned TV naturalist David Attenborough, in a new documentary, gives his starkest warning yet for humanity to safeguard species from mass extinction for the sake of our own survival.

His one-hour film “Extinction: The Facts”, airing today on the BBC in Britain, does not hold back in portraying the devastating consequences of mankind's encroachment on natural habitats -- and draws a clear link to pandemics such as the coronavirus crisis.

It comes after international experts warned in a report this week that global animal, bird and fish populations have plummeted more than two-thirds in less than 50 years due to humanity's rampant over-consumption.

There is hope, however, as Attenborough retraces an iconic film he made in the 1970s showing a fast-dwindling band of mountain gorillas on the border between Rwanda and the present-day Democratic Republic of Congo.

Their population has recovered from just 250 then to more than 1,000, thanks to a determined conservation campaign in Rwanda.

“I may not be here to see it, but if we make the right decisions at this critical moment, we can safeguard our planet's ecosystems, its extraordinary biodiversity and all its inhabitants,” he concludes in the documentary.

UN adopts Covid-19 response resolution

US, Israel vote against

AFP, United Nations

The United States was supported only by Israel Friday in a vote against a UN resolution for a “comprehensive and coordinated response” to the Covid-19 pandemic, a text that included recognition of the WHO's leadership role.

The measure, which has been negotiated since May, was adopted by an overwhelming majority of 169 countries out of 193, with Ukraine and Hungary abstaining.

The text, called an omnibus resolution because it covers multiple aspects of the pandemic, “acknowledges the key leadership role of WHO and the fundamental role of the United Nations system in catalyzing and coordinating the comprehensive global response to the Covid-19 pandemic.”

The United States withdrew from the WHO this spring, accusing the body of mismanaging the coronavirus pandemic and delaying launch of a global alert.

The text additionally calls for “the urgent removal of unjustified obstacles,” meaning sanctions, in order to create better access to products used in combatting the virus.

It requests nations to maintain food and agricultural supply chains and encourages synching economic recovery strategies to promote sustainable development and combat climate change.

Isolated Palestinians in search of new allies

AFP, Jerusalem

The Palestinian cause has long cemented ties between Middle East nations with divergent interests, but amid shifting regional alliances they are increasingly isolated and in need of new friends, analysts say.

In the latest blow, Bahrain broke ranks and agreed on Friday to open diplomatic ties with Israel, in a deal announced in Washington by President Donald Trump.

Palestinian anger was swift. The deal was “a stab in the back of the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian people” like the UAE-Israel deal announced last month, a top official from the Palestinian Authority told AFP.

At a summit of the 22-member Arab League this week, foreign ministers failed to back a Palestinian push to condemn last month's US-brokered normalisation deal between Israel and the United Arab Emirates.

“May you never be sold out by your ‘friends,’” read one bitter tweet by senior Palestinian official Hanan Ashrawi after the UAE-Israel deal was announced in August.

The UAE has defended its move in part as a way of halting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's proposed annexation of settlements in parts of the occupied West Bank.

The Israel-UAE deal “suspended” those

annexation plans -- but Netanyahu has insisted they are not off the table in the long run.

Despite this, the Palestinians' traditional Arab allies have either welcomed or silently endorsed the normalisation agreement with the US and Israel voicing hope more Arab states would follow suit.

The Palestinian cause had already become less central as the region has been rocked by the Arab



Spring upheavals, the Syria war and the bloody reign of the Islamic State jihadist group.

At the same time, hostility has deepened between US ally Saudi Arabia and Iran, its Shia Muslim rival which supports proxy forces from Syria to Lebanon.

“There have been all kinds of problems in the

Arab world -- disputes, revolutions, civil wars, tensions between different Arab countries,” said Palestinian analyst Ghassan Khatib.

“Palestinians are now paying the price for the determination in Arab unity.”

Ramallah maintains the validity of the so-called “Arab consensus” and rejects the notion that it is isolated.

That consensus has long held that Arab states will only normalise ties if Israel meets a number of conditions. One demand is for Israel to withdraw from the territories it occupied in the Six-Day War of 1967. Another is to agree to a Palestinian state with east Jerusalem as its capital, and a third to find a just solution for the millions of Palestinian refugees and their descendants.

One Western diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity, shared the view that at the moment “the Palestinians don't really have a way out, they are stuck”. “They are also stuck because of those who want to support their cause, whether it is Turkey or Iran.”

But analyst Khatib argued the Palestinians should keep their distance from Turkey, Iran and also Qatar, which is deeply at odds with other major Gulf powers.

“It's not wise for the Palestinians to be caught within the regional tensions and competition between regional superpowers,” he said.