

How much plastic are you eating?

REUTERS

What's for dinner? Lego sushi, credit card burgers, or a well-done piece of PVC pipe?

These examples may sound extreme, but can easily represent over time the cumulative amount of microscopic pieces of plastic we consume every day.

People could be ingesting the equivalent of a credit card of plastic a week, a 2019 study by WWF International concluded, mainly in plastic-infused drinking water but also via food like shellfish, which tends to be eaten whole so the plastic in their digestive systems is also consumed.

Reuters used the findings of the study to illustrate what this amount of plastic actually looks like over various periods of time.

In a month, we ingest the weight of a 4x2 Lego brick in plastic, and in a year, the amount of plastic in a fireman's helmet. This may not sound like much, but it can add up.

At this rate of consumption, in a decade, we could be eating 2.5 kg (5.5 lb) in plastic, the equivalent of over two sizable pieces of plastic pipe.

And over a lifetime, we consume about 20 kg (44 lb) of microplastic.

Plastic production has surged in the last 50 years with the widespread use



of inexpensive disposable products. As plastic is not biodegradable, but only breaks down into smaller pieces, it ultimately ends up everywhere, cluttering beaches and choking marine wildlife, as well as in the food chain.

Standing on the shoreline of a wildlife-protected saltmarsh in southern England, Malcolm Hudson, a professor of environmental science at the University of Southampton, shows Reuters small, bead-like plastic pellets that permeate the marsh.

Hudson says that most research has been done on these microplastics, but there are increasing amounts of even smaller particles called nanoplastics in the environment that are far more difficult to detect, which we are likely ingesting as well.

"It could pass into our blood or lymphatic system and end up in our organs," said Hudson.



Communist Party of India (CPI) activists and supporters scuffle with police during a demonstration supporting a nationwide general strike called by farmers to protest against the recent agricultural reforms in Chennai, India yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

UN declares Dec 27 as day of 'epidemic preparedness'

REUTERS, New York

A year into a global battle against the coronavirus, the United Nations General Assembly on Monday declared Dec 27 will be the "International Day of Epidemic Preparedness" in a bid to ensure lessons are learned for any future health crises.

The Covid-19 virus emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan late last year and spread globally, so far infecting more than 66 million people and killing some 1.5 million. The World Health Organization (WHO) called it a pandemic in March, a declaration that the United States and others said came too late.

The 193-member General Assembly adopted a resolution by consensus on Monday that recognizes the need "to raise the level of preparedness in order to have the earliest and most adequate response to any epidemic that may arise."

"Given that the General Assembly has previously declared international days devoted to chess, yoga and toilets it only seems fair that epidemics should have their day too," said International Crisis Group UN director Richard Gowan. He described the symbolic move as an attempt by the General Assembly to appear relevant as "a lot of smaller and poorer states worry that they won't have any part in real decisions about the coronavirus vaccine or recovery."

The UN resolution stresses the importance of international cooperation and multilateralism. "The pandemic caught us off guard, but it also has served as a wake-up call for improving our preparedness," Vietnam's UN Ambassador Dang Dinh Quy said as he introduced the resolution. "We believe that observing an International Day on Epidemic Preparedness will be a prominent way to achieve this goal."



Biden 'picks' first Black Pentagon chief

AFP, Washington

President-elect Joe Biden has chosen Lloyd Austin, who led US troops into Baghdad in 2003 and rose to head the US Central Command, as the first African-American secretary of defense, US media reported Monday.

A veteran of conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the retired four-star army general, 67, beat out the favorite for the job, former under-secretary of defense Michele Flournoy, amid pressure on Biden to nominate more minorities for positions in his cabinet.

CNN, Politico and The New York Times cited unnamed sources familiar with the decision, after Biden said earlier Monday that he had made his choice and would announce it on Friday.

Austin would require Senate confirmation to take up the post. He would also require a special waiver from the Senate due to federal law that requires military officers to wait seven years after retirement before serving as the Pentagon chief. The rule is rooted in the view that only a civilian should serve as defense secretary.

The waiver has happened twice -- most recently for General Jim Mattis in 2017, President Donald Trump's first defense secretary. But members of the Senate agreed begrudgingly, and several said at the time that they wouldn't want to do it again.

If confirmed, Austin would take responsibility for the 1.2 million active service members, of whom about 16 percent are Black.

PROTEST AGAINST CONTROVERSIAL AGRICULTURE LAWS IN INDIA

Farmers stage nationwide strike

AFP, New Delhi

Railway tracks and highways were blocked across India as farmers launched a national day of action yesterday against reforms deregulating the agriculture sector, upping the stakes after 10 days blockading the capital.

Tens of thousands of farmers have set up barricades on roads into New Delhi since November 26, vowing not to move until the laws are repealed in one of the biggest challenges to the Hindu nationalist government since it was re-elected in a landslide in 2019.

"We are worried, extremely worried. Our children will starve, what could be a bigger worry than this?" farmer Ved Singh told AFP ahead of the strike, echoing fears of his peers that large corporations would lower prices and destroy their livelihoods.

"There would be nothing to eat... How will we earn money? This is the biggest worry for us."

Authorities put on extra police in Delhi and boosted security in the rest of the country in a bid to head off any trouble.

The farmers were supported in their call for action yesterday by railway workers, truck drivers, teachers and other unions.

In many eastern and western states, protesters blocked railway tracks, roads and halted trains.

"We want to support the farmers' cause," a senior leader from the Communist Party of India told AFP in eastern West Bengal state.

The blockade and strike have taken on a political dimension with the national ruling Bharatiya Janata Party accusing opposition parties of opportunism by rejecting measures they had called for when in power.

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's Common Man Party said he had been placed "under house arrest" since Monday by Delhi Police, which is controlled by the national

government, after he visited the farmers' blockade site. Police denied the claim.

Footage posted on Twitter showed an opposition Congress leader in western Gujarat state riding a scooter being chased by a police vehicle as he sought to join the strike.

Five rounds of talks have failed to narrow differences between farmers and ministers.

The laws will allow farmers to sell their produce on the open market -- including to supermarket chains -- instead of through state-run organisations that guarantee a minimum price. Farmers say the industry will be taken over by major firms that will force prices down.

The farmers are strongest in the north, but even the government in the southern Karnataka state suspended online school lessons for the day to show support.

Fresh talks on the reforms will be held today.

Saving the Amazon's orphan monkeys

AFP, Amazonas

Far from the rifle cracks that occasionally rip through the rainforest as local tribesmen hunt mature primates for their meat and soft pelts, a sanctuary in a corner of the Colombian Amazon is offering new life to the orphaned monkeys left behind.

The refuge run by a local leader, Jhon Jairo Vasquez, is giving them a second chance -- while gradually changing attitudes in the area -- in the indigenous settlement of Mocagua on the banks of the Amazon.

Vasquez has proved to be a father figure for one of the orphans, a three-month-old female woolly monkey, or Lagothrix, he's named Maruja.

The pair have become inseparable on his hikes through the rainforest, carrying the little primate in a sack on his back.

"I have become the father, and she's become the daughter," said Vasquez, 38.

"An indigenous family ate the mother."

Long prized by indigenous hunters for their meat and furry pelts, the woolly monkey is now classified by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature as Vulnerable, appearing on the IUCN's Red List of



Woolly monkeys surround Jhon Jairo Vasquez in the indigenous community of Mocagua, near Leticia, Colombia on November 18, 2020. Inset, Maruja, a orphan monkey, climbs to his head.

PHOTO: AFP

Threatened Species.

Given their thick brown coat and grey appendages, young woolly monkeys like Maruja are often hunted for the pet trade, with their mothers sometimes killed in the process.

Fourteen years ago, Vasquez helped found the Maikuchiga animal refuge located in the middle of the 700-strong Tikuna indigenous community in Mocagua.

Since 2006, he has been trying

to convince locals of the damage caused by "over-hunting," as well as a flourishing illegal wildlife market.

Reluctant at first, the Tikunas have developed a taste for eco-tourism. "Rehabilitated" hunters have become guides who now "protect their wildlife," says Vasquez.

But traumatized orphans continue to arrive in Maikuchiga from other parts of the Amazon. Since its creation, the refuge has rehabilitated about 800 monkeys, according to Vasquez.

The community is located at a spot in the Amazon called the Triple Frontier, where Peru, Colombia and Brazil meet.

There is a long history of monkeys being hunted here for meat or for ritual purposes.

They are still shot from trees, mother and baby entwined as they fall, says Vasquez.

"The mother does not let go of her baby. And the little one falls attached to its mother."

The adult's flesh is roasted on a wood fire, as the meat is prized. The small survivors are sold as pets.

The lucky ones are rescued by Corpoamazonia, the Colombian government agency in charge of environmental protection, based in nearby Leticia.

US sanctions 14 Chinese officials over Hong Kong

AGENCIES

The United States imposed financial sanctions and a travel ban on 14 Chinese officials over their alleged role in Beijing's disqualification last month of elected opposition legislators in Hong Kong, prompting China to say it will retaliate.

Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying told a news briefing on Tuesday that Beijing would take "firm counter-measures against the malicious actions by the US to safeguard our sovereignty, security and developmental rights."

The US move announced on Monday, which was first reported by Reuters, targeted the vice chairpersons of the National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC), the top decision-making body of the Chinese legislature.

The Trump administration earlier slapped sanctions on Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam, the Asian financial hub's current

and former police chiefs and other top officials in August for what it said was their role in curtailing freedoms in a crackdown on the territory's pro-democracy movement.

Earlier, the House of Representatives voted to welcome Hong Kong residents to live temporarily in the United States, vowing to be a beacon for rights as China clamps down in the territory.

The House moved by consensus to issue so-called Temporary Protected Status for five years to Hong Kong residents, meaning that people from the financial hub will have the right to work in the United States and will not be subject to deportation.

Meanwhile, eight Hong Kong democracy activists including three former lawmakers were arrested yesterday for their part in a July protest, the latest in a broad crackdown by authorities under a sweeping new security law. They could face a maximum of five years in prison.

Beijing vows 'firm counter-measures against the malicious actions'

US House votes to open doors to Hong Kong residents

Eight Hong Kong activists arrested over security law protest

'We are a long way apart still'

Says UK PM on Brexit talks after agreeing to meet EU chief

AFP, London

Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday said that Britain and the European Union remain far apart, as he prepares to head to Brussels to try to salvage a post-Brexit trade deal.

"I am always hopeful, but I have to be honest with you, the situation at the moment is tricky," he said, touring a hospital in London for Britain's historic rollout of a coronavirus vaccine.

"Our friends have to understand the UK has left the EU to exercise democratic control. We are a long way apart still," he said, ahead of face-to-face talks with EU commission chief Ursula von der Leyen.

"It is looking very difficult at the moment. We will do our level best. I would say to everybody there's great options ahead for our country."

After the negotiating teams' latest session in Brussels -- and with just over three weeks until Britain leaves the EU's single market -- Johnson held a phone call with von der Leyen late Monday and secured an invitation to head over

in person. "We agreed that the conditions for finalising an agreement are not there due to the remaining significant differences on three critical issues: level playing field, governance and fisheries," the pair said in a joint statement.



"We asked our chief negotiators and their teams to prepare an overview of the remaining differences to be discussed in a physical meeting in Brussels in the coming days."

It was not immediately clear whether Johnson's visit would be a separate event, or whether he might be slotted in before an EU summit tomorrow, with the other 27 EU leaders meeting in person.

The announcement of Johnson's trip came after a pessimistic day of talks, during which EU negotiator Michel Barnier told sceptical members of the European Parliament that Wednesday was the effective deadline for a solution ahead of the summit.

Barnier and UK counterpart David Frost were due to hold another session yesterday in Brussels.

In one olive branch, the UK government said it was ready to revoke clauses in Brexit legislation that have provoked legal action by the EU and undermined trust in London.

However, it kept the clauses intact as a "fall-back option" when the Internal Market Bill returned to debate in the House of Commons on Monday.

MPs voted to keep them in the text, rejecting a bid by the upper House of Lords to excise them.

Britain left the EU on January 31 and entered a transition period to allow negotiations to establish a trade relationship with zero tariffs and zero quotas.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS