

Harvey causes havoc in Texas

2 killed as the megastorm leaves a trail of destruction along US Gulf Coast

AFP, Rockport
Tropical Storm Harvey lashed central Texas with torrential rains yesterday, unleashing "catastrophic" floods after the megastorm -- the most powerful to hit the United States since 2005 -- left a deadly trail of devastation along the Gulf Coast.

The storm has caused at least two deaths since making landfall late Friday as a Category Four hurricane, pummeling the town of Rockport outside Corpus Christi with sustained winds of 130 miles (215 kilometers) per hour, the National Hurricane Center (NHC) said.

One person was killed when their house caught fire in the Rockport area, local officials said. And in Houston, a woman drowned when she left her car which had stalled in high water, local media reported citing police.

Harvey slowly weakened as it advanced, ripping off roofs, flipping mobile homes, and leaving hundreds of thousands of people in the dark on the Gulf Coast, home to some of the country's most important oil refineries.

The National Weather Service issued more than a dozen tornado warnings overnight for southeast Texas, including several in the Houston area.

Forecasts show Harvey hovering over the shore for the next days, dumping dangerous amounts of rain.

In Houston, a city of 2.3 million, the city streets turned into fast moving rivers with officials warning residents to stay home.

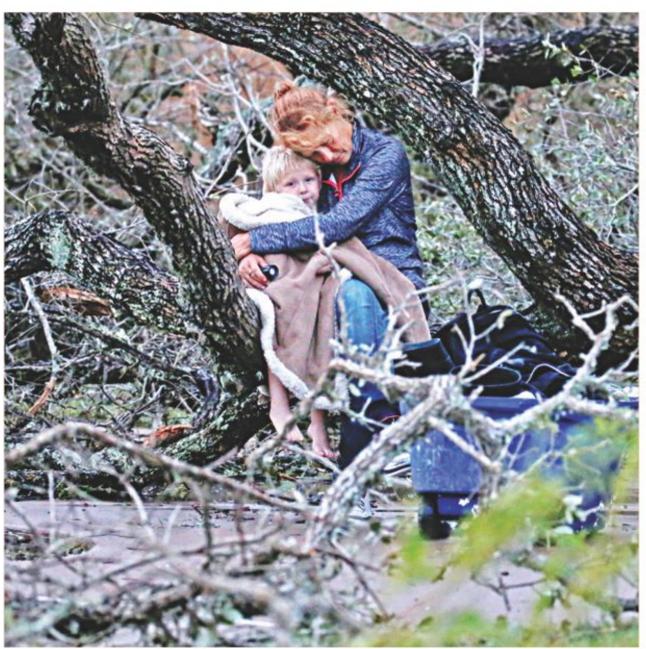
"Catastrophic and life-threatening flash flood ongoing!" the NWS said on Twitter.

President Donald Trump, aware of the damage to George W Bush presidency's for his tardy response to Hurricane Katrina, said he was closely monitoring relief efforts from Camp David in Maryland. He will visit Texas next week.

Harvey is the most powerful hurricane to hit the mainland since Wilma struck Florida 12 years ago.

2005 was a huge year for hurricanes -- before Wilma, Hurricane Katrina pummeled New Orleans, leaving more than 1,800 dead.

TORRENTIAL RAIN TRIGGERS 'CATASTROPHIC FLOODING'; THOUSANDS TRAPPED IN HOMES



(From top left, clockwise) A mother and her son reacts after they lost their home to Hurricane Harvey in Rockport, Texas; A woman stands on her front door as she surveys her property in Rockport; damaged boats in a Rockport multi-level storage facility are seen in this photo; a big rig lies on its side near Edna, Texas, south of Houston; and a man in wheelchair struggles to cross road in Texas.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS



Trump asked AG about dropping Arpaio case

Says W Post report

AFP, Washington

Donald Trump asked Attorney General Jeff Sessions about dropping a criminal case against controversial ex-sheriff Joe Arpaio, a close ally of the Republican president who has since received a pardon, The Washington Post reported Saturday.

Trump was advised that closing the criminal contempt case against Arpaio, who was convicted for ignoring a court order to stop detaining illegal migrants, would be inappropriate, said the Post, citing three unnamed sources with knowledge of the conversation.

The president decided to let the case go ahead, but said he would pardon Arpaio if necessary -- one source said Trump was "gung-ho" about the idea, the Post said.

Trump has received pushback on the pardon by members of his own party -- most recently from the highest ranking Republican in Congress, Speaker of the House Paul Ryan. Both GOP senators from Arizona also opposed the move.

Trump's reported chat with Sessions over Arpaio stands as evidence of the inability -- or unwillingness -- of the 71-year-old billionaire US leader to maintain the traditional distance between the White House and the Justice Department on specific cases.

TERROR ATTACKS IN EUROPE

IS claims Brussels stabbing

Second man arrested after Buckingham Palace sword attack

AFP, Brussels

Islamic State jihadists on Saturday claimed the knife attack against patrolling soldiers a day before in Brussels, an assault that came just hours before a sword-wielding assailant wounded police outside London's Buckingham Palace.

The knifeman in Brussels, who hurt a soldier on Friday in what authorities said was an "attempted terrorist murder", was shot dead, while police in London overpowered a man who injured three unarmed officers outside the royal residence with a four-foot (1.2-metre) blade.

The 26-year-old man in the London violence has been arrested under the Terrorism Act, which allows for 14 days of pre-charge detention, and is being held at a police station in the British capital.

British police arrested a second man yesterday.

The two attacks came as much of Europe is on high alert following a string of deadly assaults over the past two years -- most of which have been claimed by jihadists.

Last week, Spain was hit by twin vehicle attacks

which left 15 dead, and two people were killed in a stabbing spree in Finland.

Belgian prosecutors said the attacker yelled "Allahu akbar" (God is greatest) during the assault before being shot by a soldier in the centre of city, which has been on high alert since last year's carnage at the airport and on the metro.

"The perpetrator of the stabbing operation in Brussels is one of the soldiers of the Islamic State," the jihadist organisation's propaganda outlet Amaq said. One of the soldiers was slightly hurt in the attack which Brussels Mayor Philippe Close said had been carried out by a "lone individual".

The assailant was a Belgian national of Somali origin who was born in 1987, authorities confirmed. He arrived in the country in 2004 and was granted Belgian nationality in 2015.

In Britain, 35 people have been killed in three jihadist attacks in London and Manchester since March.

The two attacks came as much of Europe is on high alert following a string of deadly assaults over the past two years.

Lebanon halts anti-IS battle at Syria border

AFP, Beirut

Lebanon's army yesterday announced a pause in its offensive against Islamic State group militants along the border with Syria in exchange for information on troops taken hostage in 2014.

The armed forces launched their campaign against IS militants entrenched in the mountainous Jurud Ras Baalbek and Jurud al-Qaa areas on Lebanon's eastern border on August 19.

"The army command announces a ceasefire beginning at 7:00 am (0400 GMT) to make way for the last phase of negotiations linked to the fate of the kidnapped soldiers," it said in a statement yesterday.

Nine troops are believed to still be held by IS after militants overran the Lebanese border town of Arsal in August 2014 and kidnapped 30 soldiers and police.

The army has said the missing troops were its "top concern" in its offensive against an estimated 600 IS fighters using the hilly border region as a base.

IS has claimed several attacks in Lebanon in recent years, including twin bombings in a densely populated Beirut suburb that killed 44 people.

An army source told AFP yesterday that its command had agreed to IS's request for a ceasefire in order to get more information on the missing soldiers.

The head of Lebanon's General Security agency "Abbas Ibrahim has been authorised to negotiate with them for information on the kidnapped soldiers," the source said.

"In the meantime, the battle has stopped. If we find any ulterior motives or if we are dissatisfied with the solution, the army will continue its fight," the source added.

UK warns EU not to 'drag its feet' on Brexit

AFP, London

The European Union should not "drag its feet" in negotiating Brexit, a British government source said yesterday ahead of a fresh round of UK-EU divorce talks in Brussels this week.

"Both sides must be flexible and willing to compromise when it comes to solving areas where we disagree," the source said.

"As the EU itself has said, the clock is ticking so neither side should drag its feet."

The Brexit ministry in a statement also called for the European Commission to be "more flexible", as British negotiators push for talks on future trade ties alongside the divorce.

"Conversations about our exit and the future deep and special partnership we want with the EU are inextricably linked," the ministry said.

But the EU says there must first be "sufficient progress" on three issues -- the status of EU nationals in Britain, the bill for the divorce and the future of Northern Ireland's border with the Irish republic.

An EU official told a press briefing on Friday that there was a "very big gap" between "where we are and where we need to be" and there was "lack of substance" in the negotiations so far.

The official said it was "unlikely" there would be "major steps" in the coming days of talks.

The ministry said the negotiations between Brexit minister David Davis and Michel Barnier, the EU's chief negotiator, would begin on Monday and wrap up on Thursday.

The precise date for the start had been in doubt, as Monday is a public holiday in Britain.



CRISIS IN VENEZUELA

A member of the Militia of the National Bolivarian Armed Forces teaches a woman how to use a rifle during a military exercise in Caracas, Venezuela, on Saturday. Inset, A group of civilians learn how to use a rifle. Venezuela held nationwide armed forces exercises on Saturday, calling on civilians to join reserve units to defend against a possible attack after US President Donald Trump warned that a "military option" was on the table for the crisis-hit country.

PHOTO: REUTERS



No regrets over bold move

Says Merkel supporting her 2015 refugee policy, backs Libyan coastguard but warns against rights abuses

AGENCIES

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said she has no regrets about her 2015 decision to open the country's borders to hundreds of thousands of refugees and added she will not be deterred from campaigning by angry hecklers.

In an interview with the Welt am Sonntag newspaper yesterday, Merkel denied she had made any mistakes with her open-door policy even though the arrival of a million refugees over the last two years from Syria and Iraq opened deep rifts in her conservative party and depressed its support.

Four weeks before the Sept 24 election, an Emnid opinion poll yesterday showed Merkel's conservatives would win 38 percent, or 15 points ahead of the centre-left

Social Democrats (SPD). That is up from 32 percent in February but well below the 41.5 percent her party won in the last election in 2013, reported Reuters.

"I'd make all the important decisions of 2015 the same way again," Merkel said. "It was an extraordinary situation and I made my decision based on what I thought was right from a political and humanitarian standpoint."

"Those kinds of extraordinary situations happen every once in a while in a country's history," she added. "The head of government has to act and I did."

She also said the Libyan coastguard should be supported in its efforts to stem the flow of migrants to Europe, but warned that rights abuses would not be tolerated, reported AFP.



Macron popularity drops to 40%: poll

AFP, Paris

French President Emmanuel Macron's popularity rating slumped a further 14 points in August to hit 40 percent, following a sharp 10-point drop the previous month, according to a poll released yesterday.

Prime Minister Edouard Philippe also saw his popularity fall nine points over the same period, with 47 percent now satisfied with his performance, the Ifop poll carried out for the Journal du Dimanche newspaper showed.

Macron has seen his popularity plunge 22 points since the first Ifop poll published three months ago, when he enjoyed a rating of 62 percent just after his May 7 election win.

At this point in 2012, his socialist predecessor Francois Hollande had a much higher popularity rating of 54 percent while Nicolas Sarkozy boasted an even higher 67 percent in 2007.

Macron, 39, who shot to power promising to overcome France's entrenched right-left divide, has since come under fire for his labour reform programme and budget and public spending cuts.

From militancy to politics

Disarmed, Colombia's Farc rebels to form political party

AFP, Bogota

Colombia's leftist Farc rebels seek political rebirth yesterday as they move to transform into a party to seek elected office after disarming to end a half-century war.

About 1,000 delegates from the freshly demobilized Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia will launch a founding congress to choose their political representatives.

They will choose a name for the party and candidates to run in next year's general elections.

"We are going to define the character of the political party that we aspire to build," former guerrilla commander Carlos Antonio Lozada told AFP.

He said they will also shape "its structure and name the leaders, at least at national level."

Another former commander of the force, Ivan Marquez, said he expected the movement to call itself the Alternative Revolutionary Force of Colombia.

However, the overall FARC leader Rodrigo Londono canvassed opinion on Twitter and many respondents said they favored the name "New Colombia."

Conflict analyst Frederic Masse of Bogota's Externado University said the debate reflected a "dilemma" in the movement. "Some want to keep the word 'revolutionary' while others want to change that to show that this is a new start," Masse said.

Regardless of how many votes they may win, the peace deal signed with the government last year guarantees the new party five seats in each of the two legislative chambers for two terms.

Londono has ruled out the new party fielding a presidential candidate.

The communist Farc formed in 1964 from a peasant uprising for rural land rights.

After 53 years of attacks and kidnappings, the Farc in its new form faces a struggle for acceptance. Recent polls indicate that more than 80 percent of Colombians are opposed to it.