

MOST POWERFUL & DEADLY QUAKE OF PAST 100 YEARS

A powerful 8.2-magnitude earthquake off the southern coast of Mexico killed at least 32 people late on Thursday authorities said, with the president saying it was the biggest in a century to hit the country. These are the world's most powerful earthquakes in the past 100 years and some of the most deadly.

MOST POWERFUL

Chile, 1960 (9.5-magnitude): The most powerful ever recorded, the quake hit Chile's coast in May, lasting about 10 minutes. Around 5,700 people are killed in Chile; the resulting tsunami leaves 130 dead in Japan and 61 in Hawaii.

Alaska, 1964 (9.2-magnitude): The largest earthquake recorded in the United States, it strikes the Prince William Sound area in March and unleashes a large tsunami but causes only around 123 deaths.

Japan, 2011 (9.1-magnitude): This quake triggers a devastating tsunami off northeastern Japan, leaving some 18,500 people dead and crippling the Fukushima nuclear power plant in the world's worst atomic disaster in 25 years.

Indonesia, 2004 (9.1-magnitude): The earthquake strikes off the coast of Sumatra in December and unleashes a tsunami that kills 220,000 in countries around the Indian Ocean, including 168,000 in Indonesia.

Russia, 1952 (9.0-magnitude): More than 2,300 people are killed when this quake hits Siberia's Kamchatka peninsula, causing a tsunami felt as far as Chile and Peru.

MOST DEADLY

China, 1976 (7.4-magnitude): this quake strikes near the industrial city of Tangshan in northeastern Hebei province. The official death toll is given as 242,000 but is believed to be significantly higher.

China, 1920 (8.3-magnitude): This quake, measured at 8.3, hits the Haiyuan county of the northern province of Ningxia and causes aftershocks for several years. Up to 235,000 reported killed.

Haiti, 2010 (8.3-magnitude): A 7.0-quake hits in January, destroying thousands of buildings and leaving at least 200,000 people dead.

SOURCE: AFP



(Clockwise from left) A collapsed building in Juchitan in Oaxaca is pictured after an 8.1 magnitude earthquake hit Mexico late on Thursday; people gather on a street in downtown Mexico City during the earthquake.



PHOTO: MAIL ONLINE, AFP

Irma batters Bahamas, Cuba

Death toll hits 19; all Florida residents told to be prepared for evacuation

REUTERS, Havana

Hurricane Irma menaced Cuba and the Bahamas yesterday as it drove toward Florida after lashing the Caribbean with devastatingly high winds, killing 19 people and leaving catastrophic destruction in its wake.

As Irma, one of the most powerful Atlantic storms in a century, bore down on Florida, Governor Rick Scott issued a stark warning to residents to get out if they were in evacuation zones.

"We are running out of time. If you are in an evacuation zone, you need to go now. This is a catastrophic storm like our state has never seen," Scott told reporters, adding the storm's effects would be felt from coast to coast.

He warned that all of the state's 20 million inhabitants should be prepared to evacuate as Irma bears down for a direct hit on the southern US state.

Irma was about 435 km east of Caibarien on Cuba's central-north coast, and 655 km southeast of Miami, the National Hurricane Center (NHC) said in an advisory at 11 am EDT (1500 GMT) yesterday. Hurricane conditions were spreading westward over parts of Cuba and the central Bahamas.

Irma pummeled the Turks and Caicos Islands after saturating the northern edges of the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

The "extremely dangerous" storm was downgraded from a Category 5, the top of the scale of hurricane intensity, to a Category 4 early yesterday.



day but it was still carrying winds as strong as 150 miles per hour (240 km per hour), the NHC said.

Irma was forecast to bring dangerous storm surges of up to 20 feet (6 meters) to the southeastern and central Bahamas, and up to 10 feet (3 meters) on parts of Cuba's northern coast. The storm was predicted to slam southern Florida tomorrow.

Cuba, where the Communist government has traditionally made rigorous preparations when the island is threatened by storms, was at a near standstill as Irma began to drive up the northern coast from east to west offshore.

Schools and most businesses were closed, hundreds of thousands of people were evacuated, and train, bus and domestic air services around the island were canceled. Airports were closing to international flights as conditions warranted.

The storm comes two weeks after Hurricane Harvey struck Texas, claiming around 60 lives and causing property damage estimated at as much as \$180 billion in Texas and Louisiana.

As it roared in from the east, Irma ravaged a series of small islands in the northeast Caribbean, including Barbuda, the French-Dutch island of St Martin and the British and US Virgin Islands, flattening homes and hospitals and ripping down trees.

Even as they came to grips with the massive destruction, residents of the islands hit hardest by Irma faced the threat of another major storm, Hurricane Jose.

Jose, expected to reach the northeastern Caribbean on Saturday, was an extremely dangerous Category 4 storm, with winds of up to 150

Trump offers to mediate talks on Qatar crisis

Saudi-led bloc stays tough despite US offer

AFP, Riyadh

A Saudi-led bloc of Arab states hostile to Qatar yesterday took aim at Kuwaiti mediation and maintained a tough line even after US President Donald Trump offered to help resolve the crisis.

Saudi Arabia as well as the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain cut ties with Qatar in June, accusing it of bankrolling Islamist extremist groups and being too close to Iran.

They also shut down air, maritime and land links and imposed economic sanctions on Qatar. The gas-rich emirate denies the claims and accuses the four countries of an attack on its sovereignty.

In Washington on Thursday, Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, a key figure involved in trying to mediate an end to the dispute, met with Trump and gave an upbeat assessment of his efforts so far.

At a joint news conference in Washington with the emir, Trump offered his own medi-

ation in the three-month crisis, the worst to have gripped the Gulf region in decades.

"I would be willing to be the mediator," Trump told reporters.

"I would be willing to do so, and I think you'd have a deal worked out very quickly," he said. "I think it's something that's going to get solved fairly easily."

But in a statement early yesterday, the Saudi-led bloc showed no signs of backing down as it questioned the Kuwaiti emir's statement that Qatar would be willing to accept their 13 demands.

"Dialogue on the implementation of the demands should not be preceded by any conditions," they said in the joint statement carried by the state-run Saudi Press Agency.

The demands include shutting Doha-based broadcaster Al-Jazeera, closing a Turkish military base in the emirate and downgrading Qatari diplomatic ties with Iran.



NEWS IN brief

Pakistan opens fifth nuclear power plant

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi yesterday inaugurated the country's fifth nuclear power plant, developed in collaboration with China amid hopes that his government could end chronic power shortages this year. The 340-megawatt Chashma-IV reactor is the fourth built as part of a collaboration between the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission and China National Nuclear Corporation.

143m affected in hack of US credit agency

AFP, Washington

US credit reporting agency Equifax yesterday said its computer systems were hit by hackers, potentially affecting 143 million US customers as well as some data for British and Canadian residents. Equifax said the hackers obtained names, social security numbers, birth dates, addresses and, in some instances, driver's license numbers from the database, potentially opening up the victims to identity theft.

Trump sees 'chance' for peace in ME

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump yesterday said that he believes there is a "chance" for a Middle East peace settlement, long one of the most elusive goals of US diplomacy. "I think we have a chance of doing it," he told reporters during a White House news conference with Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.



A photo taken on September 7, 2017 and released yesterday shows damage in Orient Bay on the French Caribbean island of Saint-Martin, after the passage of Hurricane Irma. Inset, Empty racks of a Walmart store in North Miami Beach.

PHOTO: AFP, MAIL ONLINE

AIR STRIKE IN SYRIA'S DEIR EZZOR

Russia claims killing IS 'minister of war'

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday claimed to have killed several top commanders of the Islamic State group in an air strike in Syria, including the US-trained "minister of war" who has a \$3 million bounty on his head.

"As a result of a precision air strike of the Russian air forces in the vicinity of Deir Ezzor city, a command post, communication centre and some 40 ISIS fighters have been killed," the Russian defence ministry said in a statement posted on Facebook.

"According to confirmed data, among the killed fighters are four influential field commanders including Deir Ezzor emir Abu Mohammed al-Shimali," the ministry said.

Gulmurod Khalimov, who is known as the IS group's minister of war and the highest-ranking defector from ex-Soviet Tajikistan, suffered a "fatal injury," it added.

Reports of Khalimov's death have surfaced before, and the Tajik interior ministry said it could not immediately confirm the claim. "We are working with our Russian colleagues to obtain reliable information," a spokesman told AFP.

But a spokesman for the Tajik security services, speaking to AFP, suggested that "this time around" he might have been killed. "We're checking the information," he said.

In 2016, the United States offered a \$3 million bounty for information leading to Khalimov's location or arrest.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

China tightens restrictions

AFP, Beijing

China has tightened regulations on religious freedom, intensifying punishments for unsanctioned activities and increasing its supervision of certain groups in a bid to "block extremism" and tackle what it sees as internal threats.

The updated rules, released by China's cabinet the State Council on Thursday, come as the country ratchets up already stringent controls on Muslim and Christian populations and include a ban on religious organisations accepting foreign donations.

China says it is facing a growing threat from domestic cults and radical Islam but critics have accused Beijing of a broader pattern of harassment, detention and abuse.

The latest measures focus on "maintaining legality, curbing illegality, blocking extremism, resisting infiltration and attacking crime", according to a copy of the regulations posted on the State Council's official website.

"Any organisation or individual may not use religion to carry out illegal activities such as endangering national security, undermining social order...and other activities that harm national interests," it said.

Among other changes, the regulations, which will be implemented February 1, extend previous rules to include online communications.

Xi urges France to help defuse Korea tensions

Mexico expels N Korean envoy; Philippines suspends trade

AFP, Beijing

Chinese President Xi Jinping called on France to help ease the situation in North Korea during a phone call with French President Emmanuel Macron, state media said Friday, days after Pyongyang's largest ever nuclear test.

The conversation came one day after statements from China supporting stronger sanctions against Pyongyang and "necessary measures" at the UN Security Council, where China and France both hold vetoes.

"China hopes that France, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, will play a constructive role in easing the situation and restarting dialogue" on North Korea, Xi said, according to state broadcaster CCTV.

North Korea triggered global alarm Sunday with its most powerful nuclear blast to date, claiming to have successfully tested a hydrogen bomb.

The blast triggered global condemnation and calls by the United States, South Korea, Japan and others for stronger UN Security Council sanctions against the North.

Macron told Xi that France is willing to strengthen cooperation with China to promote the proper settlement of the nuclear issue.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, who held talks with Xi in eastern China during the BRICS summit earlier this week, has repeatedly insisted that further economic pressure on Pyongyang will not work.

Meanwhile, Mexico on Thursday expelled the ambassador of North Korea in protest over Pyongyang's latest nuclear test which it said posed "a grave risk for peace."

And Philippines yesterday suspended trade relations with North Korea to comply with a UN Security Council resolution over its repeated missile tests, Manila's foreign minister said.



Spain blocks Catalan independence vote

REUTERS, Madrid

Spain's central authorities moved on Thursday to crush plans by the northeastern region of Catalonia to hold an independence referendum and took steps to prosecute regional lawmakers backing the ballot.

A long-running campaign for independence by a group of Catalan politicians, who hold a majority in the regional parliament, came to a head on Wednesday when they approved a law to allow a vote on secession from Spain scheduled for Oct 1.

The country's Constitutional Court, Spain's highest legal authority on such matters, suspended the referendum law late on Thursday to allow judges time to consider whether the vote breaches the country's constitution.

Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy said earlier on Thursday he had appealed to the court to declare the referendum illegal. The constitution states Spain is indivisible. "This referendum will not go ahead," he said.

In a separate move on Thursday, Spain's state prosecutor's office said it would present criminal charges against leading members of the Catalan parliament for allowing Wednesday's parliamentary vote to go ahead.

Catalan lawmakers have said they are prepared to go to jail over the issue.

The state prosecutor-general, Jose Manuel Maza, told reporters he had also asked the security forces to investigate any preparations by the Catalan government to hold the referendum. This could involve printing leaflets or preparing polling stations.