

Ebola spreads to Congo city: WHO

AFP, Geneva

The Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo has spread to a city, the World Health Organization said yesterday, fuelling concern the deadly virus may prove tougher to contain.

The fresh outbreak, publicly declared on May 8 with 23 deaths so far, had previously been confined to a very remote, rural area in Equateur Province in the northwest of the country.

But the UN's health agency confirmed that an Ebola case has been recorded in the city of Mbandaka, which lies roughly 150 kilometres from the Bikoro area where the outbreak originated.

"This is a concerning development," WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in a statement.

Last week, a top WHO official warned that if the virus reached Mbandaka, the DRC could be confronted with yet another Ebola crisis.

The city's population has been variously estimated at between 700,000 and 1.2 million.

Russia, China tighten Iran ties

'United' EU to launch moves to block US sanctions today

AGENCIES

Russia and China yesterday moved to extend their economic influence in Iran, while EU said they will begin moves to block the effect of US sanctions on Iran in the bloc from today.

In one of the most concrete moves yet against renewed US efforts to choke off Iran economically, a Russian-led trade bloc signed an interim trade deal with Iran and signalled plans to negotiate a free trade zone.

Meanwhile, Iran's oil minister said that Chinese state-owned oil company CNPC was ready to replace Total on a major gas field project in Iran if the French energy giant pulls out.

The fate of Total's participation in the gas project demonstrates the difficulty the European Union faces in resisting Washington's move as European firms stand to lose much more from busting US sanctions.

Earlier this month US President Donald Trump's controversially pulled Washington out of an international deal with Iran that placed limits on its nuclear programme in return for easing economic sanctions.

China, Russia and EU members Britain, France and Germany were also signatories of the 2015 pact, opposed Washington's abandonment of the deal which Iran had respected.

But companies around the world now face a difficult choice as Washington has previously slapped huge fines on firms which bust US sanctions.

This week the EU launched work on a plan to keep the nuclear deal alive and French President Emmanuel Macron yesterday said



US EXIT FROM NUCLEAR DEAL

Russia-led trade bloc seeks free trade area with Iran

China oil giant agrees to replace Total if it quits amid US pressure

that one reason is "so that our businesses can remain" in Iran.

But EU yesterday vowed to stick to the Iran deal as the bloc's leaders have mandated their Brussels-based executive to defend the interests of European companies dealing with Tehran from US sanctions if needed.

"As the European Commission we have the duty to protect European companies. We now need to act and this is why we are launching the process of to activate the 'blocking statute' from 1996. We will do that tomorrow morning at 1030," European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said.

"We also decided to allow the European Investment Bank to facilitate European companies' investment in Iran. The Commission itself will maintain its cooperation with Iran," Juncker told a news conference after a meeting of EU

leaders.

Meanwhile Russia, one of the strongest defenders of the Iran nuclear deal, tightened its trade ties with Tehran.

In the Kazakh capital Astana, the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union trade bloc signed an interim trade deal with Iran that lowers tariffs on hundreds of goods.

The bloc that also comprises Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, also plans to begin three years of talks with Iran that aim to create a free trade zone.

Beijing also signalled that it intends to continue trading with Iran.

"Under the prerequisite of not violating its international obligations, the Chinese side will continue to carry out normal and transparent practical cooperation with Iran," said foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang.

'With friends like Trump, who needs enemies'

AFP, Sofia

The European Union's top official yesterday launched a stinging attack on President Donald Trump, slamming his "capricious assertiveness" and saying the US leader acted more like an enemy than a friend.

EU president Donald Tusk urged leaders meeting in Bulgaria to form a "united European front" against Trump's withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal and his move to impose trade tariffs on Europe.

Tusk even compared the US administration to Europe's traditional foes Moscow and Beijing as he launched his broadside before a dinner of the 28 leaders in Sofia where they discussed the issue.

"Looking at the latest decisions of President Trump, someone could even think with friends like that, who needs enemies," Tusk told reporters.

"But frankly speaking, Europe should be grateful to President Trump, because thanks to him we have got rid of all illusions. He has made us realise that if you need a helping hand you will find one at the end of your arm."

The transatlantic rift has hijacked the agenda of a summit yesterday at which the EU leaders met their Balkan counterparts in a bid to foster closer ties and keep Russia out of their backyard.

Tusk called for more unity in the divided EU -- which is set to lose Britain as a member next year -- to face the growing challenges. Merkel however said earlier that Europe had no choice but to stick with the ties that have bound it to Washington since World War II.

"Despite all the difficulties we have these days, the transatlantic relations are and will remain of outstanding importance," Merkel told the German parliament.



ODDLY Enough

Migrants are animals!

US President Donald Trump described some migrants as "animals" Wednesday, in a charged discussion about the border wall and law enforcement. "You wouldn't believe how bad these people are, these aren't people, these are animals and we're taking them out of the country," said Trump talking to California Republicans visiting the White House. His most recent comment -- loaded with echoes of Nazi language about Jews -- was swiftly condemned by Democrats.

Waterboarding for kids!

Ten children found living in squalid conditions in a California home were waterboarded, shot at with crossbows and had scalding water poured over them by their mother and her partner, authorities said. The abuse was detailed in a motion filed by prosecutors to increase the bail of the children's mother, 30-year-old Ina Rogers, who was ordered taken into custody and whose bail was set at \$495,000. "On a continuous basis the children were getting punched, strangled, bitten, shot with weapons such as crossbows and bb guns, hit with weapons such as sticks and bats, subjected to 'waterboarding' and having scalding water poured on them," according to the motion filed by prosecutors. Rogers and her husband Jonathan Allen, 29, were arrested on March 31 at their home in north of San Francisco.

SOURCE: AFP

'Still no collusion'

Tweets Trump marking one year of Mueller probe; Giuliani says Mueller concedes he can't indict president

AFP, Washington

Donald Trump yesterday marked the one-year anniversary of special counsel Robert Mueller's probe into ties between the president's campaign team and Russia with a trademark tweet, reiterating "there is still No Collusion."

"Congratulations America, we are now into the second year of the greatest Witch Hunt in American History...and there is still No Collusion and No Obstruction," Trump tweeted.

The Republican president has repeatedly insisted he's the target of a "witch hunt" and denied any collusion between Team Trump and Moscow to win the presidency against former Democratic rival Hillary Clinton.

In a follow-up tweet, Trump also revived claims that former president Barack Obama's administration spied on his campaign, after the FBI in 2016 launched its investigation into ties between the Republican camp and Russia.

Since his appointment on May 17, 2017, Mueller -- a veteran prosecutor and former FBI director -- has kept his silence on the investigation. But his team has notched 22 indictments, including those of former Trump national security advisor Michael Flynn and former campaign chairman Paul Manafort.

Mueller was given the reins of the probe shortly after Trump sacked James Comey as FBI director. The special counsel has requested an interview with Trump -- a proposal the White House has thus far not accepted, as his lawyers debate the risks.

Meanwhile, Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani said Mueller's team has told the White House that whatever evidence it comes up with in the Russian meddling probe, it cannot indict President Donald Trump.

Giuliani told CNN and Fox News on Wednesday that Mueller's team had accepted a longstanding, though never tested Justice Department legal interpretation that a sitting president is immune from indictment.

"All they get to do is write a report," Giuliani told CNN. "They can't indict. At least they acknowledged that to us after some battling, they acknowledged that to us."

Mueller's spokesman Peter Carr refused to comment on Giuliani's remarks.



UK ROYAL WEDDING

Markle confirms father will not attend

AFP, Windsor

Meghan Markle finally confirmed yesterday that her father would not attend her wedding to Prince Harry, putting an end to days of speculation that had overshadowed the build-up to the glittering ceremony.

Harry, Queen Elizabeth's grandson, and US actress Markle, a star of the TV drama "Suits", will tie the knot tomorrow at the 15th-century St George's Chapel in Windsor Castle, home to the British royal family for nearly 1,000 years.

Markle's father, Thomas, had been due to walk his daughter down the aisle in front of a congregation of senior royals, celebrities, friends of the couple and a TV audience of hundreds of millions.

"Sadly, my father will not be attending our wedding. I have always cared for my father and hope he can be given the space he needs to focus on his health," Meghan Markle, 36, said in a statement. He suffered heart surgery on Wednesday.

Markle's mother Doria Ragland is now expected to walk her daughter down the aisle.

Ozone treaty cheaters

Scientists point at East Asia as the source of new production

AFP, Paris

The decline in the atmosphere of an ozone-depleting chemical banned by the Montreal Protocol has recently slowed by half, suggesting a serious violation of the 196-nation treaty, researchers revealed Wednesday.

Measurements at remote sites -- including the government-run Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii -- of the chemical, known as CFC-11, point to East Asia as the source or renewed production.

"We show that the rate of decline of atmospheric CFC-11 was constant from 2002 to 2012, and then slowed by about 50 percent after 2012," an international team of scientists concluded in a study.

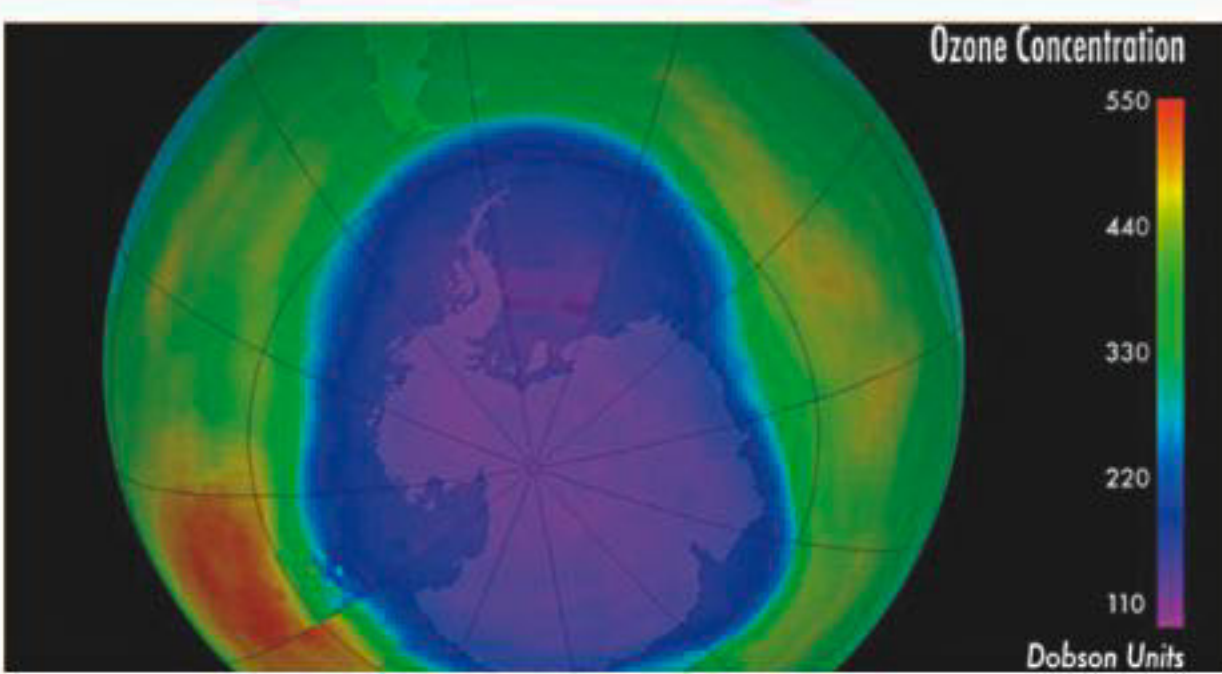
"This evidence strongly suggests increased CFC-11 emissions from eastern Asia after 2012."

The ozone layer in the stratosphere, 10-to-40 kilometres (6-25 miles) above Earth's surface, protects life on the planet from deadly ultraviolet radiation.

The 1987 Montreal Protocol banned industrial aerosols such as chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) that were chemically dissolving ozone, especially above Antarctica.

At its most depleted, around the turn of the 21st century, the ozone layer had declined by about five percent. Today, the "hole in the ozone" over the South Pole is showing clear signs of recovery.

"The ozone layer remains on track to recovery by mid-century," the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) said in a statement, reacting to the findings.



AIR POLLUTION

EU takes UK, Germany, to court

AFP, Brussels

The European Commission yesterday said it is taking Germany, Britain, France and three other countries to the bloc's highest court for failing to comply with EU air quality standards.

The decision by the commission, the 28-nation European Union's executive arm, hits Britain before it is due to leave the bloc in 2019 following the shock Brexit referendum two years ago.

The commission had given the six countries -- which also includes Italy, Hungary and Romania -- a last chance in January to take long-sought steps to improve air quality or be hauled before the European Court of Justice.

However, EU Environment Commissioner Karmenu Vella told a press conference in Brussels that the countries, part of what activists have dubbed a "toxic bloc", had failed to act quickly enough.

"The commission had to conclude that... the additional measures proposed are not sufficient to comply with air quality standards as soon as possible," Vella said.

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