

Arctic chill sweeps over US Midwest

AFP, Chicago

Tens of millions of people in the United States are bracing for a potentially life-threatening deep arctic chill forecast to hit swaths of the country.

Companies have told their workers to stay home, schools are closed and hundreds of flights have been canceled.

The US Postal Service -- known for its commitment to bringing the mail whatever the weather -- has even reportedly suspended deliveries in Iowa due to the severe cold.

Temperatures in almost a dozen states stretching more than 1,930 kilometers from the Dakotas to Ohio were forecast to be the coldest in a generation, if not on record.

The cause is a swirl of arctic air that broke away from the polar vortex that usually encircles the North Pole.

The National Weather Service forecast temperatures between -10 to -40 degrees Fahrenheit (-23 to -40 Celsius) by Wednesday across the Midwest, with wind chills making it seem as cold as -65 degrees Fahrenheit in one area of Minnesota.

Chicago, America's third largest city, was expected to be colder than parts of Antarctica.

Authorities in Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin put emergency measures in place to handle the frigid weather.

Americans were asked to stay home if possible, when temperatures are expected to be at their coldest.

Scores of schools, businesses and government agencies announced closures in multiple states.

President Donald Trump used the occasion to again voice skepticism about climate change, tweeting: "What the hell is going on with Global Warming? (sic) Please come back fast, we need you!"

But the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which operates NWS, tweeted, "Winter storms don't prove that global warming isn't happening," with a link to a 2015 explanatory article.



A pedestrian stops to take a photo by Chicago River, as bitter cold phenomenon called the polar vortex has descended on much of the central and eastern United States, in Chicago, Illinois, US.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Blame 'oath-breaker' US for woes

Says Rouhani

AFP, Tehran

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani slammed his critics yesterday, defending the political achievements of a landmark 2015 nuclear deal and calling the US an "oath-breaker".

"One should not condemn the government or the great Islamic system instead of America -- this is the greatest damage that can be done," he said on state TV.

Hardliners have repeatedly hammered the 2015 nuclear deal with six world powers since the early stages of negotiations, calling it a fool's errand and a deception.

They contend that Iran has gained nothing from the agreement despite complying with its restrictions on the Islamic republic's nuclear programme, intensifying their criticism after Washington withdrew from the treaty last year.

Speaking during an annual ceremony of allegiance to the late founder of the Islamic republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Rouhani said: "America has not been an oath-breaker only to us, but also to Europe, China, NAFTA and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)."

President Donald Trump withdrew Washington from the deal -- technically called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) -- last May, reimposing punishing sanctions on the Islamic Republic.

Washington also withdrew from the TPP trade agreement in 2016, the Paris Agreement on climate change control the next year and forced Canada and Mexico to renegotiate and sign a new deal in 2018 replacing the North American Free Trade Agreement.

The other parties to the Iran nuclear deal -- Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia along with the European Union -- have insisted it remains in force and is working.

Rouhani took another jab at opponents who have criticised Iranian diplomats' lack of foresight over not predicting the US withdrawal.

Spy chiefs at odds with Trump

AFP, Washington

US intelligence chiefs contradicted some of President Donald Trump's most fundamental foreign policy claims Tuesday, underscoring a persistent division in his view of the world and theirs.

In a hearing on global threats at the Senate Intelligence Committee, the country's top spies took issue with Trump's assertion that the Islamic State group has been defeated, and that North Korea can be convinced to forego its nuclear weapons.

They also challenged Trump's claim that Tehran is actively seeking nuclear weapons, the justification Trump gave for withdrawing last year from a multilateral treaty on Iran.

And they underscored again that Russia meddled deeply on Trump's behalf in the 2016 presidential election -- which he has repeatedly denied -- and can be expected to do the same in 2020.

But Trump hit back yesterday and attacked the US intelligence services as "naive" and "wrong" on the threat he says is posed by Iran.

"Perhaps Intelligence should go back to school!" Trump said in a blistering tweet.

The hearing took place weeks after

INTEL HEARING AT US SENATE



Dan Coats



Christopher Wray

North Korea is unlikely to give up nuclear weapons

IS can rise again from the vacuum left by US withdrawal from Syria

China and Russia have increased cooperation

Iran complying with nuclear deal

Trump cited a victory over Islamic State to justify his sudden announcement of an immediate pullout from Syria -- a move that alarmed the US defense establishment and allies in the Middle East.

And it came just weeks before Trump plans a second summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to negotiate a hoped-for denuclearization of the hermit state.

Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats told the committee that the US intelligence community believes it is unlikely that

Pyeongyang will agree to completely denuclearize.

"We continue to assess that North Korea is unlikely to give up all of its nuclear weapons and production capabilities, even as it seeks to negotiate partial denuclearization steps to obtain key US and international concessions," Coats said in the annual "Worldwide Threat Assessment" report.

"North Korea's leaders see having a nuclear weapons capability as "critical to regime survival."

NEW IMMIGRATION POLICY

US sends first Central American to Mexico

REUTERS, Tijuana/Mexico City

The United States sent the first Central American asylum seeker back to Mexico through a crossing at the border city of Tijuana on Tuesday, Mexican authorities said, as part of the Trump administration's hardened immigration policy.

The return of a Honduran man was carried out under a US policy dubbed the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) by which the United States will return non-Mexican migrants who cross the US southern border back to Mexico while their asylum requests are processed in US immigration courts.

Asylum seekers have traditionally been granted the right to stay in the United States while their cases were decided by an immigration judge, but a backlog of more than 800,000 cases means the process can take years.

US authorities are expected to send as many as 20 people per day through the Mexican border city of Tijuana and gradually start sending people back through the other legal ports of entry, Mexico's foreign ministry has said.

Mexico has said it will accept the return of certain people who have a date to appear in a U.S. court, but will reject those who have health problems, are unaccompanied minors or would be in danger in Mexican territory.

3 Iraqis held for attack plot in Germany

AFP, Berlin

German police commandos yesterday arrested three Iraqis suspected of planning an Islamist attack using explosives, a gun and a vehicle.

Two of the men had "decided in late 2018 to carry out an Islamist attack in Germany," prosecutors said in a statement.

"According to the investigation so far, the accused had not yet chosen a target for their attack."

"Whether the accused belonged to a terrorist group must now be clarified."

They were detained in early-morning raids in Dithmarschen, Schleswig-Holstein state, near the Danish border.



Rescue workers search along a beach for survivors after two boats capsized off the coast in Godoria, Djibouti, on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

"Trump gave order to kill me"

Claims Maduro as Guaido hit with travel ban, bank freeze

AGENCIES

Venezuela's socialist leader Nicolas Maduro accused US President Donald Trump of ordering his assassination while his main global backer Russia called yesterday for mediation in a standoff deepening geopolitical splits.

The fight to control Venezuela, which has the world's largest oil reserves, has intensified with new US sanctions and legal moves that may bring the arrest of opposition leader and self-declared interim



president Juan Guaido.

In an interview with Moscow's RIA news agency, Maduro, 56, facing the biggest challenge to his rule since replacing Hugo Chavez six years ago, said Trump had ordered neighboring Colombia to murder him.

"Donald Trump has without doubt given an order to kill me and has told the government of Colombia and the Colombian

mafia to kill me," Maduro said, reprising a constant accusation of his and Chavez's over the years.

Meanwhile, Venezuela's Supreme Court has imposed a travel ban on Guaido and frozen his bank accounts in apparent retaliation for oil sanctions imposed by the United States that are expected to severely hit an already collapsing economy.

Guaido is recognized as president

by the United States and most Western Hemisphere nations. The 35-year-old opposition lawmaker, who is president of the National Assembly, says Maduro fraudulently won a second term last year and is offering an amnesty to military officials.

Maduro, who accuses Guaido of staging a US-directed coup against him, still has the support of the top military brass, and is unlikely to back down unless that changes.

In the RIA interview, Maduro reiterated he was ready for talks with the opposition, but rejected calls for a snap election as blackmail.

Maduro also said Russian President Vladimir Putin had promised him more economic and military support during phone talks last week.

Meanwhile, a group of Latin American countries and Canada opposes armed intervention in Venezuela, Peru's foreign minister said Tuesday.

31 killed after migrant boats sink off Djibouti

Scores of fortune-seekers feared missing or dead

AFP, Addis Ababa

The death toll from the sinking of two migrant boats off the coast of Djibouti has risen to 31, the UN migration agency said yesterday, with scores still feared missing.

Two vessels carrying migrants departed from Godaria on the Horn of Africa nation's northeast coast on Tuesday morning, but sank in heavy seas 30 minutes into the journey, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

The IOM's chief of mission in Djibouti Lalini Veerassamy told AFP the death toll had hit 31 yesterday.

"This tragic event demonstrates the risks that vulnerable migrants face as they innocently search for better lives," she said in a statement issued by IOM.

Sixteen people were recovered alive following the sinking, with one survivor telling Djiboutian authorities there were 130 people on his boat.

The number of passengers on the second vessel remains unclear, as do the nationalities of those onboard.

Located across the Bab el-Mandeb strait from Yemen and next to volatile Somalia and Ethiopia, Djibouti has in recent years become a transit point for migrants heading to find work on the Arabian Peninsula.

The region of Obock, from where the boat set off for Yemen, is unusual in that it sees people passing in both directions -- boatloads of Yemeni refugees fleeing war cross vessels carrying African migrants seeking better opportunities.

In 2017, 100,000 migrants arrived in Yemen, with many aiming to head north to find work in Saudi Arabia and its neighbours.

This migration continues despite Yemen facing one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.

UN officials say 80 percent of the population -- 24 million people -- are in need of aid and nearly 10 million are just one step away from famine.

Venezuela to get more arms, support from Russia

Report says Maduro ready for early parliamentary polls, talks

LatAm countries, Canada oppose armed intervention