

NEWS IN brief

Khamenei meets Yemen rebels

AFP, Tehran

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has held talks with a senior Yemeni rebel official just days after the long-running intervention against the rebels by its regional foes Saudi Arabia and the UAE suffered a major setback. Khamenei hosted Houthi rebel spokesman Mohammed Abdul Salam at his Tehran residence late Tuesday after southern separatists backed by the United Arab Emirates seized Yemen's second city Aden on Saturday.

US public opinion of China sours: Pew

AFP, Washington

The US public's opinion of China has plummeted amid a surge in strategic and trade tensions in recent years, the Pew Research Center reported Tuesday. The survey group said 60 percent of Americans have an unfavorable view of China, the most in the 14 years since the survey began and up from 47 percent a year ago. More Americans saw China as a military threat than an economic menace, despite the showdown over trade launched by President Donald Trump after he took office in 2017.

'No-deal Brexit would betray UK'

AFP, London

A no-deal Brexit would betray Britain's decision to leave the European Union, former finance minister Philip Hammond said Wednesday, as he slammed Prime Minister Boris Johnson's "wrecking" approach to negotiations. Hammond, who quit as chancellor just hours before Johnson took over from Theresa May on July 24, said there was no popular or parliamentary mandate for a no-deal Brexit, saying most people wanted an orderly exit from the EU.



Protesters hold placards as they rest on the floor of Hong Kong's international airport, yesterday. Inset, A Hong Kong policeman (C) falls backwards during a scuffle with pro-democracy protesters at Hong Kong's International Airport on Tuesday. Flights were departing Hong Kong airport largely on schedule yesterday, a day after pro-democracy protesters caused chaos with a disruptive sit-in that paralysed the busy transport hub.

PHOTO: AFP

Fresh flood alert in southern India

Monsoon death toll hits 244

AFP, New Delhi

India yesterday issued a fresh flood alert for parts of the southern state of Kerala, as the nationwide death toll from the annual monsoon deluge rose to at least 244.

Authorities warned Kerala locals of heavy rainfall over the next 24-48 hours in some of the worst affected regions of the state popular with tourists.

Heavy rain in parts of four Indian states -- Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Gujarat -- has forced more than 1.2 million people to leave their homes, mostly for government-run relief camps.

Kerala was hit by its worst floods in almost a century last year, when 450 people died, and the state is still recovering from the damage to public infrastructure including highways, railways and roads.

The state's death toll this monsoon season increased to 95 overnight, with at least 59 people missing, Kerala police told AFP yesterday.

At least 58 people have also lost their lives in neighbouring Karnataka state, where authorities have rescued around 677,000 people from flooded regions.

The situation is now improving in Karnataka, however, as waters start to recede, a government official told AFP.

In the western states of Gujarat and Maharashtra the death toll reached 91, with hundreds of thousands rescued from inundated regions.

Half of world's forest wildlife lost in 40 yrs

WWF calls on leaders to declare planetary emergency

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The amount of wildlife in the world's forests has plummeted by more than half (53 percent) in just over 40 years, conservationists have found.

Humanity is killing the Earth's greatest natural ally in the fight against climate breakdown, our forests, according to the report by the WWF.

The charity is calling on world leaders to declare a planetary emergency and develop a "new deal for nature and people" to halt climate breakdown, restore nature and fix food systems.

The first ever global assessment of forest biodiversity shows that habitat loss and degradation, chiefly caused by people, account for 60 percent of the threats to forests and forest species.

The report, 'Below the Canopy', written jointly by WWF and ZSL, found the drops in wild animal and bird populations were greatest in tropical forests such as the Amazon rainforest, where there is the most wildlife to lose.

Monitored populations of forest-living birds, mammals, amphibians and reptiles declined, on average, by 53 percent between 1970 and 2014, the most recent year with available data.

Protecting and restoring forests must be at the heart of the global plan, the charity says.

WWF says that forests, which are home to more than half of the world's land-based species, are vital to the health of the planet, absorbing damaging greenhouse gases.

The report outlines how in the vast tropical forests of South America and Africa, the carbon locked in would decline if large birds and primates in particular were lost.

"When animals are lost from forests this has severe implications for forest health, the livelihoods of more than a billion humans who depend on forests, and our opportunity to mitigate against climate disaster," WWF says.

Deforestation and forest degradation account for about 10 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions.

SCRAPPING OF KASHMIR'S AUTONOMY

Outposts divided

Governor says curfew to be eased

AFP, New Delhi

India's move to carve up Kashmir and curtail its autonomous powers has caused division and anger in parts of the far-flung Himalayan region even as followers of Prime Minister Narendra Modi rejoice.

Since Modi's shock decree last week, protests and celebrations in many towns have widened religious fault lines between communities in the strategic region.

International focus has remained on the Kashmir valley, where tens of thousands of troops have enforced a lockdown and cut off phone lines and internet connections to head off opposition to the government move. But tensions have spread to other parts of the state, which will be cut in two under the new administrative arrangements.

In remote Ladakh, the region's Buddhist minority welcomed Modi's decision to split the territory from the Muslim-majority valley.

"Ladakh has finally gained freedom," exclaimed Phunchock Stobdan, a former Indian diplomat and now head of a conference centre in Leh, the region's largest town.

Despite Ladakh's sparse population and thin air, its border with China's regions of Tibet to the east and Xinjiang to the north make it strategically important to New Delhi.

At the other end of Ladakh, many in the Shia Muslim majority town of Kargil are in shock.

"This was an undemocratic move. It should be rolled back," Asgar Ali Karbalai, a former regional lawmaker, told AFP by telephone.

As a so-called union territory, Ladakh will not have its own legislature under the new system. "It just takes away our voice," said Karbalai. "The debate around this issue may become communal now as, I feel, most Muslims in Ladakh oppose and the Buddhists support the move."

But even in Kargil, many are looking for a boost to the rudimentary economy promised by Modi, who said tourism and even the film industry would bolster Ladakh and Kashmir if there was peace.

While Srinagar, Kashmir's biggest city with a population of around 1.2 million, remains under curfew, the city of Jammu further south, with a population of over 500,000, is slowly returning to normal.

Jammu is more than 60 percent Hindu and Sikh, and its citizens have long complained about Muslim-majority Kashmir's dominance in politics and business. Many local communities' leaders were seen dancing in the streets of Jammu city waving Indian flags after Modi's announcement.

Yesterday, the J&K state governor said that restrictions on freedom of movement in the Kashmir will be eased after India's Independence Day celebrations, although phone lines and the internet will remain cut off.

"We don't want to give that instrument to the enemy until things settle down," Satya Pal Malik told Times of India told the paper in an interview.

"In a week or 10 days, everything will be alright and we will gradually open lines of communication," he said.



Fossil fuels? Plastic?

Trump says more is better

AFP, Monaco

President Donald Trump has seen the future and it is oil. And plastic.

Where most environmental scientists and most US allies fear that overuse of fossil fuels is driving the planet into crisis, the US president sees only opportunity.

In a speech on Tuesday to hundreds of workers building a new Shell petrochemical factory near Pittsburgh, Trump did not bother paying even lip service to environmental concerns. He just wanted to make clear that America is winning.

"We're the number one energy producer and I'm so proud of that," he said. Trump said that his priority on entering office had been to halt "the war on energy."

The Shell Pennsylvania Petrochemicals Complex will make manufacturing-grade plastic out of liquid natural gas extracted through fracking from the Marcellus Shale deposit. The facility, a huge web of pipes and half-constructed buildings, is a symbol of Trump's aggressive pro-fossil fuel agenda -- and a powerful statement to his working-class voters that he meant business when he promised to restore the US manufacturing base.

Pennsylvania is a particularly important target: the state will be one of the vital pieces in the 2020 presidential election puzzle and Trump is struggling.

Plastic, once celebrated as a near-miraculous byproduct of hydrocarbons, is increasingly seen as a scourge, clogging up rivers, circulating forever in the seas, invading the food chain, and showing up everywhere from the deepest ocean to the seemingly pristine Arctic.

All that, Trump says, is someone else's fault. "It's not our plastic. It's plastics that's floating over in the ocean," Trump told reporters on the way to the Shell plant.

Trump's focus on old-school heavy manufacturing and fossil fuel energy production goes far beyond just visiting the occasional new factory. He has sought to rewrite strict environmental protection rules that he referred to on Tuesday as "horror stories."

Trump gleefully told the crowd that his Environmental Protection Agency chief, Andrew Wheeler, "knows how to break it up." Breaking it up means the Trump administration's dismantling of regulations put in place by his predecessor Barack Obama, including the Clean Power Plan, which sought reduced greenhouse gas emissions from power plants.

One of his first acts as president was on an even bigger scale: pulling the United States out of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, which aims to unite the planet in a joint push to reduce carbon emissions.

Trump told workers that the restrictions imposed in the agreement would have "taken away our wealth."

"They didn't want you to drill. They didn't want you to frack. They didn't want you to do steel," he said. "It wasn't for us. It was good for others."

29 STATES AND CITIES SUE TRUMP

A coalition of 22 US states and seven cities on Tuesday sued Trump's administration to block it from easing restrictions on coal-burning power plants. Tuesday's challenge argues that it violates the EPA's duty under the Obama-era Clean Air Act to address carbon pollution from power plants, and artificially narrows the EPA's authority. The lawsuit, filed in the United States Court of Appeals in Washington, could end up at the Supreme Court.



Syrian children, who fled battles in the Idlib province and the northern countryside of Hama, participate in games organised by a local association for displaced children at the camp of Al-Sikkah near the town of Kafr Yahmul north of Idlib, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Greta Thunberg sets sail for NYC

AFP, Plymouth

Teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg yesterday set sail for New York, heading for a UN summit on a zero-emissions yacht skippered by a member of Monaco's ruling family.

The 16-year-old Swede, whose school strikes have inspired children across the world to protest against global warming, refuses to fly because of the carbon emissions caused by planes.

But she has been offered a lift on the Malizia II racing yacht, along with her father Svante and a filmmaker to document the journey, that will allow her to attend the UN talks in September with a clear conscience.

The 60-foot (18-metre) boat is skippered by Pierre Casiraghi, vice president of the Monaco Yacht Club and a member of the principality's ruling family, and German round-the-world sailor Boris Herrmann.

The journey takes about two weeks -- the yacht can travel at speeds of around 35 knots (70 kilometres an hour) but will be



heading into the wind for much of the time so will be slower, and the captain wants a smooth ride.

"The objective is to arrive safe and sound in New York," Herrmann told AFP as he made final preparations in the English port of Plymouth.

Thunberg has become a figurehead for climate action with her stark warnings of catastrophe if the world does not act now to cut carbon emissions and curb global

warming.

Speaking to AFP before she set sail, the activist said: "Of course there are many people who don't understand and accept the science."

"I will just have to do what I have always done -- ignore them and just tell the science as it is," she added in reference to her North American trip.

"We create an international opinion and movement so that people stand together and put pressure on the people in power."

The yacht is made for racing, with foils, or wings, that lift it out of the water for a faster and smoother ride.

Thunberg has never sailed before this week, and got seasick on their first journey out of Plymouth on Monday, but said she was looking forward to the adventure.

The teenager, who has spent hours on trains across Europe to spread her message, was relaxed about the basic conditions.

"You can't really ask for that much if you get to sail across the Atlantic for free," she said, adding: "I am grateful for what I have."

Halt Afghan civilian casualties: UN

The United Nations yesterday said it was gravely concerned about reports indicating 11 civilians had been killed in an Afghan security force operation in an eastern province near the border with Pakistan. The government's main security agency, the National Directorate of Security (NDS), said the operation in Paktia province had targeted a Taliban hideout and among the 11 dead militants were two commanders. However, a politician in the area said the government forces attacked a student gathering over the Eid al-Azha Muslim holiday. Security forces surrounded the house, brought out the victims from the guesthouse and shot them one by one, he said by telephone from the province. "Accountability essential. Harm to civilians must stop," the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan said in a post on Twitter.

Clashes kill 59 fighters in northwest Syria

Clashes between regime loyalists and insurgents in rebel-held northwest Syria killed 59 combatants on Tuesday, a war monitor said. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a jihadist group led by Syria's former al-Qaeda affiliate, has since January controlled most of Idlib province as well as parts of neighbouring Hama, Aleppo and Latakia provinces. Several other armed rebel groups also operate in the region. Fighting in southern Idlib and rural Latakia on Tuesday claimed the lives of 29 pro-government forces as well as 30 jihadists and allied rebels, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Brazil tribal women protest president's 'genocidal policies'



Thousands of tribal women decorated with feathers and body paint marched on Brazil's capital Tuesday denouncing the "genocidal policies" of President Jair Bolsonaro, who faces growing criticism over destruction of the Amazon. Far-right Bolsonaro wants to develop the rainforest -- seen as vital to combatting climate change -- by allowing more mining and farming in the region. Carrying bows, arrows and spears, the indigenous women advanced on Congress in Brasilia carrying a large banner that said "Resist to exist" as they demanded greater protection of their land.

SOURCE: AFP