

Johnson, EU chief in Brexit blame game

AFP, Biarritz

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday said that the European Union needed to drop its insistence on the so-called Irish backstop to avoid a “no deal” Brexit. “I don’t want a ‘no deal’ Brexit. I say to our friends in the EU, if they don’t want a ‘no deal’ Brexit then we have got to get rid of the backstop from the treaty,” Johnson told reporters on the way to the G7 summit in Biarritz, southwest France. He also responded to EU Council President Donald Tusk, who earlier urged Johnson not to go down in history as “Mr No Deal”. “If Donald Tusk does not want to go down as Mr ‘No Deal’ Brexit then that point should be borne in mind too,” Johnson said. During a press conference in Biarritz, Tusk had warned: “One thing I will not cooperate on is a ‘no deal’, and I still hope that Prime Minister Johnson will not like to go down in history as Mr No Deal.” “We are willing to listen to ideas that are operational, realistic and acceptable to all member states, including Ireland. If and when the UK government is ready to put them on the table,” he added. At stake is the “backstop”, a provision guaranteeing that border checks will not return between Ireland, an EU member, and Britain’s Northern Ireland. Johnson has called it “anti-democratic” because it would require London to keep its regulations aligned with those of the EU during a transitional period when the country is no longer a member of the bloc. The EU argues the backstop is necessary to avoid the re-emergence of a border which could lead to a return of sectarian fighting on the island.



A protester holds a placard reading ‘heads of state, act now, Amazon is burning’, during a march in Hendaye, south-west France, yesterday, to protest against the annual G7 Summit attended by the leaders of the world’s seven richest democracies, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States.

PHOTO: AFP



Arun Jaitley passes away

REUTERS, New Delhi

Arun Jaitley, the former Indian finance minister and one of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s closest associates, died in hospital yesterday, nearly two weeks after he was admitted following breathing difficulties, officials said. Jaitley, 66, a senior leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), stepped down as finance minister in January due to ill health, just months before elections that returned Modi’s Hindu nationalists to power. “With the demise of Arun Jaitley Ji, I have lost a valued friend, whom I have had the honour of knowing for decades,” Modi said on Twitter. “His insight on issues and nuanced understanding of matters had very few parallels.” Jaitley was admitted to All India Institute Medical Sciences in New Delhi on Aug 9. A diabetic, his health had worsened after he underwent a kidney transplant in May last year. He also had to skip the presentation of the interim budget in February when he was in hospital in the United States for cancer treatment. The lawyer-turned-politician also had triple heart bypass surgery when he was 52. Jaitley’s urbane and articulate manner helped him win friends across party lines and industry. The BJP lost another veteran party leader and former minister of external affairs when Sushma Swaraj died after a cardiac arrest earlier this month. During his tenure as finance minister, Jaitley led the enactment of a bankruptcy code and a national goods and services tax law that had languished for almost 20 years. The implementation of the GST resulted in job losses for thousands of workers in small businesses, adding to his mixed record on economic management. The Indian economy has been under a cloud for months, with latest government estimates showing it had slowed to a five-year low of 5.8% in January-March as a result of sluggish domestic and global demand and little growth in private investment.

Clashes return to HK streets

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong riot police yesterday fired tear gas and baton-charged protesters who retaliated with a barrage of stones, bottles and bamboo poles, as a standoff in a working-class district descended into violence. The city has been gripped by three months of street protests that started against a proposed extradition bill to China but have spun out into a wider pro-democracy movement. An uneasy peace was prevailing this week but that was broken yesterday as thousands of demonstrators -- many wearing hard hats and gas masks -- marched through the industrial Kwun Tong area, where they were blocked by dozens of officers with shields and batons outside a police station. Frontline protesters pulled together a barricade of traffic barriers and bamboo construction poles, spray-painting walls with insults directed at the police. As the afternoon wore on some fired stones from slingshots, prompting a charge from police wielding batons and pepper spray. Tear gas swept across the road as protesters retreated, leaving a trail of broken bottles and at least one small fire in their wake. Several of the black-clad protesters were detained as officers swept through, with police justifying their charge



on “a large group of violent protesters” who had set fires and hurled bricks. The city had appeared to have pulled back from a sharp nosedive into violence, with the last serious clashes taking place a week and a half ago just after protests paralysed the financial hub’s airport. Tension flickered throughout yesterday’s march, where dozens of the most radical demonstrators known as “braves” had gathered, battle-hardened by a three-month street campaign. Hundreds of thousands marched peacefully last Sunday, as a key protest group sought to regain the moral high ground in a city shocked at the level of violence. But Saturday’s face-off underscored the dangerous deadlock into which the city has sunk -- with the government unmoving in the face of protester demands, and demonstrators stubbornly refusing to leave the streets. China has used a blend of intimidation, propaganda and economic muscle to constrict the protests in a strategy dubbed “white terror” by the movement. Protests started against a bill that would have allowed extradition to China, but have bled into wider calls for democracy and police accountability in the semi-autonomous city. Protesters say Hong Kong’s unique freedoms are in jeopardy as Beijing tightens its political chokehold on the city.

North Korea launches 2 short-range missiles

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea fired what appeared to be two short-range ballistic missiles into the sea off its east coast yesterday, the South Korean military said, the latest in a series of launches in recent weeks amid stalled denuclearisation talks. Yesterday’s launch was the seventh by North Korea since US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un met at the inter-Korean border in June. The launches have complicated attempts to restart talks between US and North Korean negotiators over the future of Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes. The two leaders agreed in June to restart working-level negotiations but the United States has so far been unsuccessful in its attempts to get the talks going again. The process has been stalled since an unsuccessful second summit between Trump and Kim in Hanoi in February. Trump said earlier this month Kim told him he was ready to resume talks on North Korea’s nuclear and missile programmes and would stop missile testing as soon as US-South Korea military exercises ended. However, while the joint military drills are over, North Korea’s continued launches caused “strong concern”, South Korea’s National Security Council (NSC) said yesterday. Trump said after the latest launches the United States has a good relationship with North Korea. “Kim Jong Un has been ... pretty straight with me,” Trump told reporters at the White House. North Korea’s top diplomat called US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo a “diehard toxin” on Friday, saying: “We are ready for both dialogue and standoff.” Those remarks came after US envoy on North Korea Stephen Biegun was in Seoul this week to discuss ways to get negotiations back on track.

WHO SAID WHAT



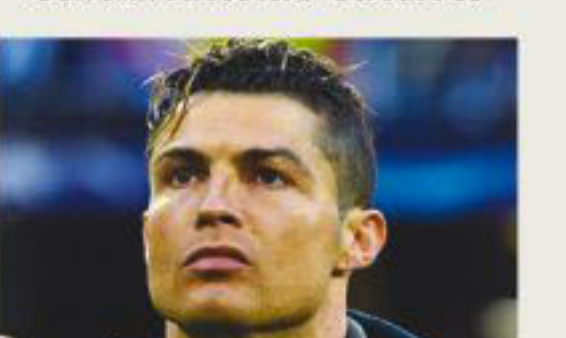
“Our house is burning. Literally. The Amazon rainforest - the lungs which produces 20% of our planet’s oxygen - is on fire.”

French President Emmanuel Macron



“I told him if the United States can help with the Amazon Rainforest fires, we stand ready to assist!”

US President Donald Trump



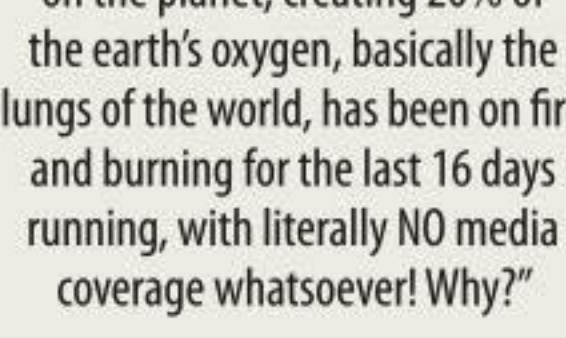
“In the midst of the global climate crisis, we cannot afford more damage to a major source of oxygen and biodiversity. The Amazon must be protected.”

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres



“The Amazon Rainforest produces more than 20% of the world’s oxygen and its been burning for the past 3 weeks. It’s our responsibility to help to save our planet. #prayforamazonia”

London Mayor Sadiq Khan



“The whole world is watching a situation that is out of control in terms of deforestation and fires in Brazil’s Amazon. It’s a situation I regard to be a crime against the homeland, a crime against humanity.”

Former Brazilian environment minister Marina Silva blames

“Terrifying to think that the Amazon is the largest rain forest on the planet, creating 20% of the earth’s oxygen, basically the lungs of the world, has been on fire and burning for the last 16 days running, with literally NO media coverage whatsoever! Why?”

Hollywood superstar and environmentalist Leonardo DiCaprio

AMAZON WILDFIRES: ‘OUR HOUSE IS BURNING’

According to the Brazilian space agency there have been 74,155 forest fires in the country since January – an 84 per cent increase on the same period in 2018. More than half were in the Amazon. But why is the Amazon, the world’s largest rainforest and home to about three million species of plants and animals, and some one million indigenous people, is on fire – and is it as bad as images suggest?

SOURCE: AGENCIES, WEBSITES

WHAT IS CAUSING THE FIRES?

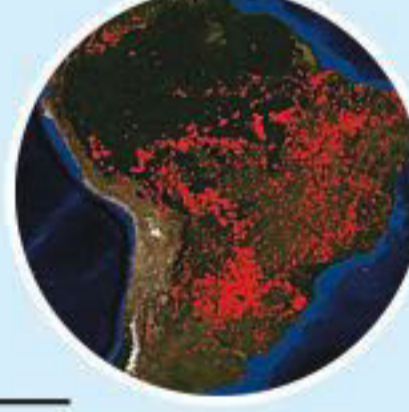
It is common for the Amazon to witness fires during the dry season – which runs from July to October. Last year, Brazil recorded more than 40,000 fires. Brazil’s space research center (INPE) says 99% percent of the fires result from human actions. “The dry season creates the favorable conditions for the use and spread of fire, but starting a fire is the work of humans, either deliberately or by accident,” INPE researcher Alberto Setzer told Reuters. On Wednesday, the smoke from the fires was so bad that it caused an hour-long black-out in Sao Paulo, located almost 1,700 miles away. The clouds can also be seen from space. IS BRAZIL’S PRESIDENT TO BLAME? Activists say that the anti-environment rhetoric of Brazil’s President, Jair Bolsonaro, has given farmers and ranchers free rein to cut down trees without impunity. Since taking office in October 2018, Bolsonaro has emphasized economic development over environmental concerns—a policy pattern that has led to an uptick in

agriculture, mining and deforestation across the Amazon. During his campaign, he vowed that if elected he would not set aside a single “centimetre” more land for Indigenous reserves. Within hours of taking office, he implemented a number of law changes that would benefit Brazil’s pro-development “rural caucus.” HOW MUCH FOREST IS BEING DESTROYED? According to Washington Post, infernos have razed 18,627 square kilometers (7,192 square miles) of Brazil’s Amazon region this year to date. Comparatively, Amazonian fires caused roughly half this damage—cutting through 3,168 square miles—over the same period in 2017. The INPE reported that the Amazon lost 870 square miles of forest in July alone. SOCIAL MEDIA STORM AND FAKE PHOTOS This week has seen an outpouring of social media posts decrying the forest fires – many of them using the hashtag #PrayforAmazonas. But some of the most viral posts have been shown to be unwittingly misleading – either because they include photos that are



AMAZON: WORLD’S LUNG

- Amazon, world’s largest rainforest, spreads across 9 countries. Brazil accounts for 60 percent of it.
- Home to about 3 million species of plants and animals, and some 1 million indigenous people.
- Amazon absorbs a quarter of the 2.4 billion metric tons of carbon absorbed by all global forests annually and supplies 20 percent of global oxygen.
- Brazilian farmers reportedly announced a coordinated “day of fire” on 10 August to show support to Brazil president’s pro-business stance.
- Infernos have razed 18,627 square kilometers of Brazil’s Amazon region this year to date.
- Experts fear the worst to come as Amazonian dry season to last till November.



Areas lost to deforestation (in Sq KM)

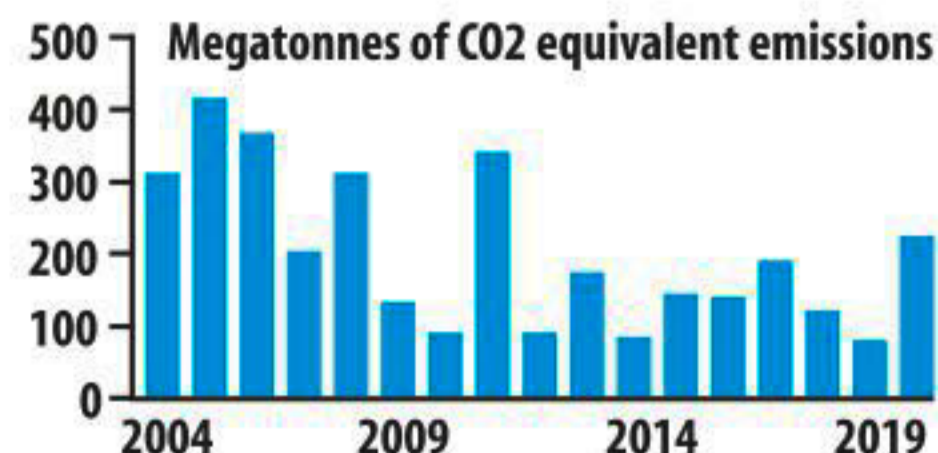
- 1977 – 21,130
- 2002 – 21,651
- 2003 – 25,396
- 2004 – 27,772
- 2013 – 5891
- 2014 – 5012
- 2015 – 6207
- 2016 – 7893
- 2017 – 6947
- 2018 – 7900
- 2019 – 18,627

AMAZON FOREST FIRES BY YEAR



years old, or images taken were in other parts of the world. Among international leaders, French President Emmanuel Macron led the chorus terming the situation as an “international crisis”. But the image used by Macron is at least 16 years old – taken by a National Geographic photojournalist, Loren McIntyre, who died in 2003. Other celebrities – including Madonna, Cristiano Ronaldo, Leonardo DiCaprio, Novak Djokovic and Lewis Hamilton – have also shared images that do not depict the current crisis. WILDFIRES ARE RAGING ACROSS THE GLOBE In Brazil the worst-affected regions are in the north and Amazonas, the country’s largest state, has declared a state of emergency. But it is not the only country in the Amazon basin – which spans 7.4 million square kilometers – which has seen a high number of fires so far this year. Bolivia has seen a 114 per cent increase in blazes in the first eight months of this year. Venezuela has also seen more than 26,000 fires – a 19 per cent rise since last year. Although other countries have seen a much smaller number of blazes, Peru, Guyana, Suriname and French Guyana have recorded more than a 100 per cent increase this year. And the Amazon is not the only region which has been battling enormous wildfires this summer – Russia declared a state of emergency in June as wildfires raged across Siberia, with unprecedented outbreaks in the Arctic releasing more than 120 million tonnes of CO2 in just two months. Spain, Portugal, Greece, France, US all have seen wildfires. NOT THE WORST YEAR OF AMAZONIA While the number of fires in Brazil is at its highest level for almost a decade, the data suggests that Brazil - and the wider Amazon region - may have experienced more intense burning in the past. An analysis of Nasa satellite data last week indicated that the total fire activity in 2019 across the Amazon, not just Brazil, is close to the average when compared with a longer 15 year period. Looking specifically at Brazil, figures from Copernicus Atmosphere Monitoring Service (Cams), a part of

the European Union’s Earth observation programme, going back to 2003 show that the total CO2 equivalent emissions, used to measure of the amount and intensity of fire activity, are at their highest since 2010. But according to the data, emissions in Brazil were higher in the mid-2000s, as the chart below indicates.



WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT?

The situation can get much worse. The dry season in Amazon lasts till November and the peak fire season is yet to come. According to National Geographic, Amazon deforestation occurs in a cyclical pattern: Forest loss, spurred by economic activities including harvesting timber, planting soy and building cattle pastures, leads to a decline in rainfall, which in turn engenders more deforestation. Eventually, experts say, this cycle could transform the lush rainforest into a dry, savannah-like ecosystem. IMPACT ON CLIMATE FIGHT The World Wildlife Fund estimates that more than a quarter of the Amazon will be without trees by 2030 if the current rate of deforestation continues. Experts say fire and subsequent deforestation could make it nearly impossible to limit global warming to levels called for by the Paris Agreement. Although the Amazon currently accounts for roughly a quarter of the 2.4 billion metric tons of carbon absorbed by all global forests, changing weather patterns, deforestation, tree mortality and other factors are hampering its ability to serve as an essential carbon sink. And when these trees are cut or burned, the carbon they have been holding is released giving the climate a double blow.