

At least 10 dead in Rio hospital fire

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

At least 10 people have died in a fire in a hospital in Rio de Janeiro, the fire service in the Brazilian city said, with preliminary reports suggesting a short circuit in a generator could have sparked the blaze.

The fire broke out at dusk Thursday at the Badim hospital in the north of Rio, sending medical staff and relatives into a desperate flurry to try to evacuate scores of patients.

"At least 10 people died," the Rio de Janeiro fire department said in a statement, without specifying whether the victims were patients or workers.

"About 90 patients had to be transferred to other medical units."

The blaze was brought under control by 8:00pm (2300 GMT), and firefighters searched until the early hours of Friday to recover bodies from the scene.

During the evacuation effort, dozens of gurneys and stretchers were taken into surrounding streets as ambulances struggled to get through crowds of curious onlookers to rush the most vulnerable patients to other hospitals.

"I was able to take my mother out of her room and when we got to the fire escape, there were a lot of people running around," lawyer Carlos Omorelo, whose 93-year-old mother is being treated for pneumonia, told the UOL news website.

"It was terrible because the smoke spread very quickly."

Dense black fumes poured out of one side of the hospital, a private facility in the Tijuca neighborhood, as doctors, nurses and volunteers ran inside to rescue patients.

While hospital authorities pointed to a generator fault in the oldest part of the complex as the probable cause of the fire, Rio mayor Marcelo Crivella said he could not rule out sabotage.

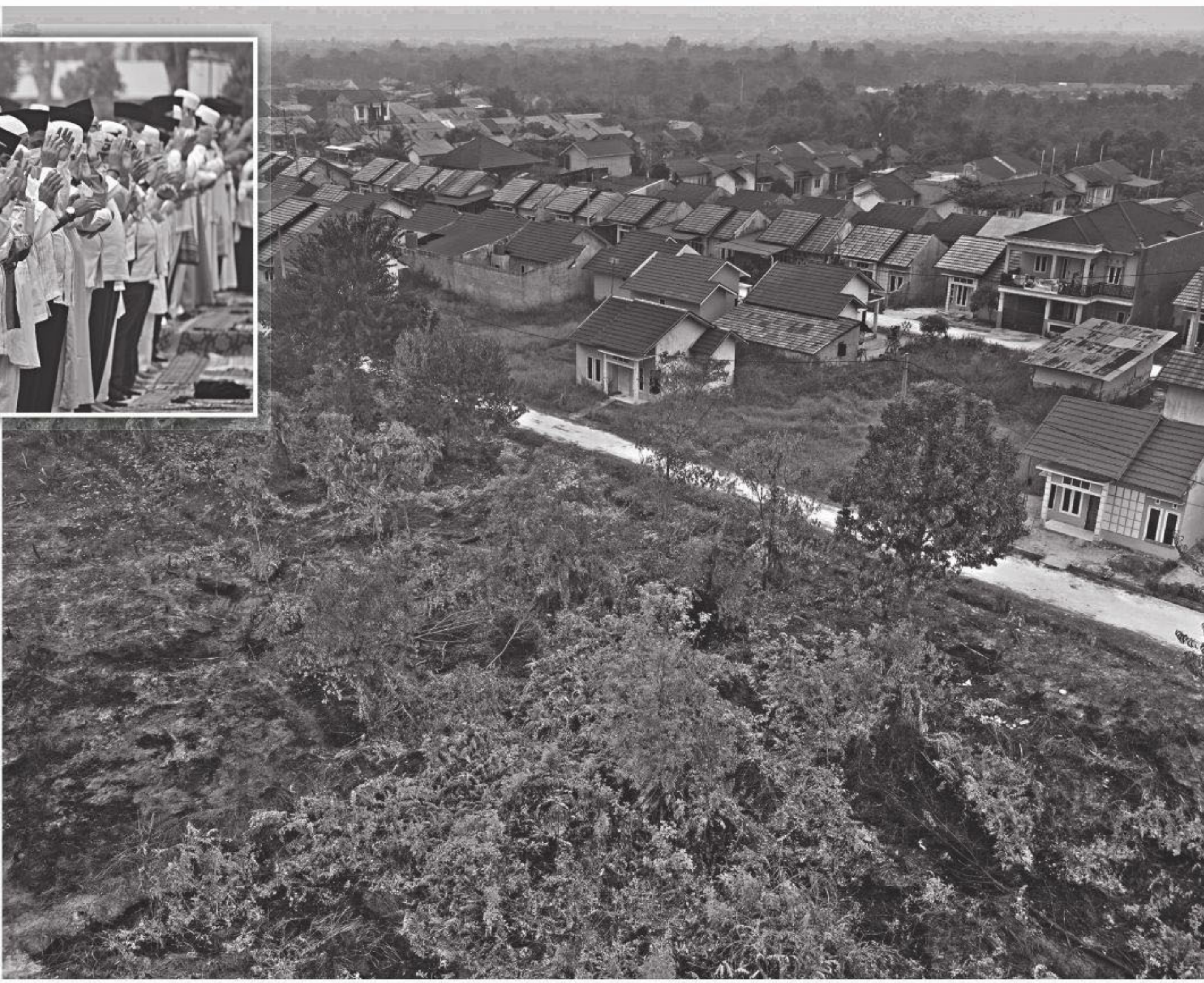
"Experts will have to find out whether anyone was responsible. I hope I am wrong, but we have to check there was no sabotage, we have to investigate," he told reporters.



PRAYERS FOR RAIN

This aerial picture shows smouldering peatland after a fire swept through the area and stopped moving further due to a road in Kampar, Riau province, Indonesia. *Inset*, Indonesian Muslims, most seen wearing pollution masks, gather for special prayers asking for rain in Pekanbaru, Riau province. Hundreds held a mass prayer for rain in Pekanbaru, a provincial capital on Sumatra, yesterday, desperately hoping that downpours will extinguish forest fires and wash away toxic haze covering wide swathes of the country that has forced mass school closures.

PHOTO: AFP



Biden maintains grip

REUTERS, Washington

Those expecting Joe Biden's presidential candidacy to flame out any day now will have to keep waiting.

The former US vice president survived another Democratic debate on Thursday largely unbloodied and unbowed, leaving those on the margins of the race for the party's 2020 nomination wondering if their time to gain ground on the front-runner is running out.

If anything, the third Democratic debate in Houston was notable for how few of the nine other candidates took hard swings at Biden, a marked contrast from earlier debates when his record was more directly challenged.

The evening likely left the race fairly much as it was before the debate, with Biden holding a sizeable, but not overwhelming lead over US Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren.

None of the other 17 Democratic presidential candidates seeking the chance to battle Republican President Donald Trump in the November 2020 election have more than 4% support, according to the latest Reuters/Ipsos poll released on Wednesday.

Biden seemed more vulnerable than ever coming into the debate, facing persistent questions about his age, verbal slip-ups and performance on the campaign trail.

But on Thursday, his resilience and forceful defense of his record as a US senator and No. 2 to former president Barack Obama left wide open the question of who else in the field might rise to shake up the race.

"Most had a decent night, but the front-runners are still the front-runners," said Leah Daughtry, a Democratic strategist in South Carolina, a critical early voting state in next year's nominating contests.

It was the first time Warren was on a debate stage with Biden and the matchup between the old-school Democratic centrist and the spirited progressive senator from Massachusetts was widely anticipated.

Yet it produced no fireworks, as Warren stuck to her pattern of not criticizing other Democrats.

More fortunate for the 76-year-old Biden: Aside from a few slips of the tongue, he provided little ammunition for those who argue he is too old or too out of step to be the party's nominee.

Rather, most of the candidates stressed party unity and worried aloud about not appearing divided in front of the American people, a shift from earlier debates where intraparty conflict was the story.

Biden was helped as well by several candidates paying homage to Obama's record, which reinforced Biden's long-standing argument that he is best positioned to build on the former president's achievements and reverse Trump's policies.



CRACKDOWN ON UIGHURS

US Senate okays bill to press China

AFP, Washington

The US Senate has approved a bill to press China on its treatment of Uighurs, requiring the US government to closely monitor the mass incarceration of the community and consider punishment of those responsible.

The Senate unanimously approved the so-called Uighur Human Rights Policy Act late Wednesday. It still needs passage by the House of Representatives, which is highly likely as the bill enjoys wide bipartisan support.

The act would require US intelligence to produce a report within six months on the crackdown in Xinjiang, the western region where as many as one million Uighurs and other mostly Muslim minorities are being held in re-education camps.

It would also establish a State Department special coordinator on Xinjiang and ask the FBI to assess reports of harassment by China of US citizens and residents of Uighur heritage.

The bill also asks Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to consider sanctions on Chinese officials behind the policy, notably Chen Quanguo, the Communist Party chief for Xinjiang.

The Uighur Human Rights Project, a Washington-based pressure group, hailed the bill as a key step in building international pressure.



A man is removed after heckling Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson's speech at the Convention of the North, in the Magna Centre in Rotherham, northern England, yesterday. Johnson will meet EU chief Jean-Claude Juncker in Luxembourg on Monday, officials said, as the British prime minister bids to broker a Brexit compromise ahead of the October 31 deadline.

PHOTO: AFP

'Treasonous crimes'

Trump slams Democrats after they intensify 'impeachment' probe

AGENCIES

US President Donald Trump has lashed out at Democrats moves towards his impeachment in a series of angry tweets claiming he has "done more than any president".

"You don't impeach presidents for doing a good (great!) job," he insisted, before accusing his rivals of "treasonous crimes".

His attack came as Democrats stepped up their impeachment investigation of Trump even as the party's leaders remained dubious about the political value of the move 14 months before the next presidential election.

The House Judiciary Committee approved new procedures allowing members to demand more documents and testimony from the White House, declaring for the first time that its probe of the president is focused on "impeachment."

Committee Chairman Jerry Nadler said the measures will serve to enhance an "aggressive series of hearings"

aimed at determining whether to recommend articles of impeachment against the president.

"The resolution before us represents the necessary next step in our investigation of corruption, obstruction and abuse of power," Nadler said before it was approved by the Democrat-controlled committee.



The probe is focused along four lines: allegations that Trump illegally interfered with the Russia election meddling investigation, that he took part in hush payments to alleged former mistresses, that he has used his office to enrich himself and that he offered pardons to government and campaign officials to protect him.

While a significant step closer, there are still doubts about whether Democrats will eventually vote to impeach the president, the political equivalent of formally indicting him for a crime.

Democratic Party leaders, especially House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, have opposed the move as politically risky, as opinion polls show the public generally is against going through the drama of charging the president.

It is virtually certain that the Republican-controlled Senate, which would effectively try the president on the allegations, would acquit, absent new evidence.

Nadler's committee is planning to interview Trump's former campaign manager Corey Lewandowski next week, and is seeking to question former White House Counsel Don McGahn.

The White House maintains that Trump's executive privilege gives him the power to prevent McGahn from testifying.

UN: 2m in Somalia at risk of starvation

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

The United Nations is warning some two million people in Somalia are at risk of starvation, amid the country's worst drought since 2011, and is calling for more support from the international community.

Speaking at the end of a two-day visit to the country, UN Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock said decades of conflict and a lack of investment had undermined Somalia's ability to cope with repeated humanitarian crises, even as droughts became more frequent and intense and the rainy season triggers recurring floods.

The UN's most recent food security analysis showed the April to June harvest was the worse since 2011 thanks to poor and erratic rains, which were followed by flooding, it said in a statement.

"Up to six million people are now projected to be food insecure over the coming months," Lowcock said. A third of them will be severely food insecure without sustained aid." Climate change-related events would also continue to have "deleterious effects" on the country's humanitarian situation, he added.

Some 2.6 million people have already been forced from their homes as a result of natural disasters, as well as conflict, the UN statement said.

The latest crisis comes with many people, who have for centuries lived their lives as nomadic farmers, still struggling to recover from the ravages of prolonged drought in 2017 that brought the country to the edge of famine.

Lowcock led a group including senior officials from the World Bank to Baidoa in southwest Somalia, where some 360,000 people have fled drought, terrorist attacks and armed conflict in the past three years, finding refuge in 435 sites around the city.

Iranians 'want to meet'

Claims Trump

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump said he believes that Iran's leadership wants to talk, adding to expectations that he is trying to arrange a summit with his Iranian counterpart at the upcoming UN assembly.

"I can tell you that Iran wants to meet," he told reporters at the White House.

Trump has repeatedly indicated he is ready to meet with President Hassan Rouhani, who is expected to attend the UN General Assembly in New York this month. However, the Iranians have so far not given a positive response.

On Wednesday, Rouhani blasted the Trump administration, which has poured pressure on Iran, saying "the Americans must understand that bellicosity and warmongering don't work in their favor. Both... must be abandoned."

Arch-foes Tehran and Washington have been at loggerheads since May last year when Trump withdrew from a 2015 nuclear deal



and began reimposing punitive measures.

Iran responded by scaling back its commitments to the accord, which gave it the promise of sanctions relief in return for curbs on its nuclear program.

However, some analysts see hope for more compromise following this week's exit of Trump's hardline national security adviser John Bolton, who in the past has called for the use of military force and regime change.

Bolton's departure came just days after Iran announced it had fired up centrifuges to boost its enriched uranium stockpiles in another step back from the deal.

Yet even with Bolton gone, top Trump officials have shown no signs of backing down from the strategy of sanctions against Iran.

Mugabe to be buried at Zimbabwe nat'l shrine

Robert Mugabe will be buried at a Zimbabwean national shrine in Harare tomorrow, his nephew said yesterday, contradicting comments a day earlier which had suggested the family was resisting the government's burial plans. Mugabe, who ruled Zimbabwe for 37 years until he was ousted by his own army in November 2017, died in a Singapore hospital a week ago aged 95. Mugabe's body arrived in Zimbabwe from Singapore on Wednesday and started three days of lying in state on Thursday. Some relatives, expressing bitterness at the way former comrades including Mnangagwa had ousted Mugabe, had pushed for him to be buried in his home village rather than at the shrine to heroes of the liberation war against white minority rule.

Google agrees nearly \$1.07b tax settlement with France

US internet giant Google has agreed a settlement totalling 965 million euros (\$1.07 billion) to end a tax dispute in France under an agreement announced in court on Thursday. The company will pay a 500-million-euro fine for tax evasion, as well as a further 465 million euros to settle claims with French tax authorities. In a statement, Google confirmed the settlement and hailed the fact it had put an end to fiscal differences that it had had with France for numerous years. The settlement follows similar out-of-court agreements reached by Google in Italy and Britain in recent years, though the French agreement is much larger than the previous ones. Google said it now wanted to see a coordinated reform for a clear international taxation framework.

Ukraine: Russia sanctions must remain in place



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky yesterday warned the West against lifting sanctions on Russia as France pushes for rapprochement with Moscow. But speaking on the sidelines of an annual forum in the capital Kiev, the 41-year-old leader told AFP that he had a "feeling" that Russian President Vladimir Putin was ready to improve ties with Ukraine. "Sanctions should remain" until peace was restored in eastern Ukraine, Zelensky added. In 2014, Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula and supported a separatist insurgency in Ukraine's industrial east. The conflict between Russia-backed fighters and Ukrainian troops has killed more than 13,000 people. SOURCE: AFP