

NEWSIN brief

Brazil: Amazon fires fall to record low

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

The number of fires in the Amazon rainforest in northern Brazil fell to a record low in October, even as blazes ripped across the Pantanal tropical wetlands, official data show. There were 7,855 fires in the Amazon last month, the lowest for any October since 1998 when the government agency started keeping records. It came after Brazil in late August slapped a 60-day ban on fires in the rainforest. The drop also coincided with the start of the Amazon rainy season, which typically lasts until June.

New Caledonia referendum in 2020

AFP, Noumea

France's Pacific island territory of New Caledonia yesterday said it will hold a new independence referendum on September 6, following a first vote a year ago which saw separatists score much higher than expected. New Caledonia in particular is seen as key for Paris as it grapples with China's rising ambitions in the Pacific.

N Korea: Talks chance with US 'narrowing'

AFP, Seoul

The possibility of talks between nuclear-armed North Korea and Washington is "narrowing", Pyongyang said yesterday. Last month the North walked away from working-level nuclear talks with the US in Sweden, saying it was disappointed at the lack of "new and creative" solutions offered by Washington. On Friday the State Department in an annual report reaffirmed the North's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism, reiterating that it was "implicated in assassinations on foreign soil".



Delhi policemen shout slogans during a protest after clashes erupted between police and lawyers last week outside their headquarters in New Delhi, yesterday. Several hundred Delhi cops staged a rare and angry protest yesterday following violent clashes with lawyers that saw at least 30 people injured.

PHOTO: AFP

'Thatcherism on steroids'

Corbyn slams Johnson's Brexit plans as polls campaign heats up

REUTERS, Harlow

British opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn yesterday accused Prime Minister Boris Johnson of seeking to hijack Brexit to unleash a Thatcherite bonfire of regulation that would usher in what he cast as a much harsher brand of American-style capitalism.

Britain is heading towards a deeply unpredictable Christmas election on Dec. 12 that could decide the fate of both its planned departure from the European Union and the future of the world's fifth-largest economy.

Corbyn, a 70-year old socialist campaigner, is proposing an overthrow of what he casts as a venal elite led by Johnson which he says wants to use Brexit as a Trojan horse to turn the United Kingdom into a deregulated paradise for global capital.

He invoked the memory of late Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and said Johnson wanted to strike a trade deal with US President Donald Trump that would sell off parts of the National Health Service (NHS).

"What Boris Johnson's Conservatives want is to hijack Brexit to unleash Thatcherism on steroids," Corbyn told supporters in Harlow, a suburb northeast of London which voted strongly in favour of leaving the EU in the 2016 referendum. The nationwide margin was 52%-48% in favour of Leave.



"A vote for Johnson's Conservatives is a vote to betray our NHS in a sell-out to Trump," he said, to chants of "not for sale, not for sale" from the audience. "Iron Lady" Thatcher radically transformed the British economy along free-market lines but was hated by some voters for crushing the trade unions and privatising swathes of industry.

Johnson has repeatedly said the NHS would not be on the table in trade talks with US.

After rejecting calls from many senior Labour figures to take a definitive position against leaving the EU, Corbyn is focused on underscoring Johnson's failure to deliver on his promise of Brexit on Oct. 31 and the need to get on and tackle domestic issues such as a shortage of affordable housing.

Corbyn, whose party is trailing the Conservatives in opinion polls, hopes to turn the debate from whether Brexit should happen to what kind of country Britain will be, regardless of how it resolves its relationship with the EU.

Corbyn says if elected he would negotiate a new deal with the EU that would keep Britain more closely aligned economically with the bloc and do more to protect workers. He would then put it to the people in another referendum.

A YouGov poll published on Tuesday found 65% of voters were unclear about Labour's Brexit position.

Seas to rise dramatically even if greenhouse gases are curbed

AFP, Washington

Just as an oil tanker steaming ahead at full speed cannot stop immediately, so the dramatic rise in sea levels will continue even if the world manages to slash greenhouse gas emissions to zero by 2030, experts warned in a study published Monday.

Emissions between 2015, when the Paris climate change accord was thrashed out, and 2030 would be enough to raise levels by eight centimeters (3.1 inches) by 2100, according to research by experts based in Germany.

They would rise by 20 centimeters (7.9 inches) by 2300 in comparison with the reference period of 1986-2005, according to the study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS).

In total, sea level can be expected to rise by at least a meter by 2300 in the extremely unlikely event that greenhouse gas emissions fall to zero in the next 11 years.

And that may be a conservative estimate:

UN-backed scientists are already predicting an increase in water levels of between 26 cm and 77 cm by the end of this century alone.

A full quarter of that one-meter rise by 2030 will be due to emissions from China, the United States, the European Union, Russia and India in the preceding 40 years, the authors of the latest report concluded.

By comparison, oceans rose by around 20 cm in the 20th century.

The goal of the study, co-author Alexander Nauels of the Climate Analytics institute in Berlin told AFP, was to show that current emissions will have a clear effect on rising sea levels that will be felt over the next 200 years.

In a report published last year, experts from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) said reducing the rise in sea level by 10 centimeters would save 10 million people in coastal areas from being exposed to flooding, storm surges and other risks.



Troubles, what troubles?

Trump basks in populist love despite impeachment probe, rape allegations

AFP, Lexington

Taking the stage in a packed Kentucky arena to the strains of America's unofficial patriotic anthem, "God Bless the USA," Donald Trump didn't look like a man in trouble.

Harried by impeachment proceedings, yes. Beset by foreign policy worries, yes. Accused of everything from sexual assault to incompetent White House management, yes.

But Trump resembled a man younger than his 73 years and considerably happier than a president likely to become only the third in history tarnished by impeachment.

The ear splitting cheers from the crowd of around 20,000 in Lexington's Rupp Arena explained why.

Dressed in red "make America great again" baseball caps and carrying "Trump 2020" placards, this hardest of the hardcore Trump base was delirious even before the president took the stage.

They'd warmed up to 1980s golden oldies, but Michael Jackson and company could not compare to the excitement triggered by Trump's entry.

Within a few minutes, he'd boasted that US special forces sent Islamic State's late leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi "to hell," that the Democratic party is "crazy," and joked that he might ignore constitutional term limits to stay in power for the rest of his life.



First impeachment transcripts go public
Writer sues Trump for defamation after alleged rape

Classic Trump.

By many measures, Trump's presidency is wobbling. His national approval ratings are in the low 40 percent range and Democrats are lining up to throw him out of office in 2020.

Allegations that he used US aid to Ukraine to try and pressure the government into opening an embarrassing investigation of Democratic opponents will likely see Trump impeached in coming months. Even if Republicans protect him in the Senate and he stays in the White House, as seems assured, Trump is seemingly in perilous territory.

On Monday, witness transcripts in the impeachment probe were made public for the first

time, with the former US ambassador to Kiev Marie Yovanovitch telling investigators she felt threatened by the president in his call to Ukraine's leader.

Meanwhile, a prominent US magazine columnist who says Donald Trump raped her more than two decades ago sued the president for defamation on Monday after he ridiculed her as "not my type."

E. Jean Carroll, 75, filed the lawsuit in a New York court, claiming Trump's denials of the alleged sexual assault had damaged her reputation and career.

Carroll alleged earlier this year that Trump raped her in a dressing room at the Bergdorf Goodman department store in Manhattan in the mid-1990s following a chance encounter.

But to Trump's rightwing base, these troubling information have little impact.

Trump tapped into popular anger against the establishment in 2016 and three years into his first term he believes the same formula will work again.

Seen through that lens, impeachment isn't damaging -- it's an elixir, a boost that "has created an angry majority that will vote the do nothing Democrats the hell out of office," he said.

He may have a point: a New York Times/Siena poll published Monday found that while Trump has flimsy support across the nation, his base remains solid in key swing states where elections are actually won.

VIOLENT PROTESTS OVER GRAFT AND UNEMPLOYMENT

Iraq cuts internet again

AFP, Baghdad

A mounting death toll in Baghdad and across southern Iraq coupled with reimposed internet restrictions sparked concerns yesterday that anti-government protests would once again trigger chaos.

A first wave of protests that erupted on October 1 met with brutal violence, with at least 157 people killed over six days, most of them protesters in Baghdad, according to an official investigation.

Many were shot dead from rooftops by "unidentified snipers," the probe found.

After a two-week lull, protests resumed but appeared to be less deadly, and the government eased the internet blackout to restrictions on social



media sites only.

But late Sunday and early Monday, the bloodshed resumed with four protesters killed near the Iranian consulate in the Shia pilgrimage city of Karbala.

On Monday evening, security forces fired live ammunition at crowds in Baghdad for the first time since rallies resumed, leaving two people dead, medical sources said.

Two protesters were also shot dead in the southern city of Nasiriyah.

And yesterday morning, two protesters were killed when security forces attempted to break up crowds blocking the road to the southern port of Umm Qasr, the main entry point for imports of food and medicine.

The deaths brought the overall toll since October 1 to more than 270 killed, according to an AFP count. Officials have stopped providing running casualty figures.

Anger over chronic unemployment and widespread official corruption initially fuelled the protesters. But demonstrators have increasingly called for radical reform of the political system, and turned to strikes and sit-ins to press their demands.

BID TO OUST PM IN PAKISTAN

Islamists vow to continue protest

AFP, Islamabad

A Pakistani Islamist leader who led thousands of supporters into the capital and demanded Imran Khan's resignation vowed to continue his protest Monday, after the prime minister ignored his 48-hour deadline.

Maulana Fazlur Rehman, a firebrand cleric who heads one of the country's largest Islamist parties, has accused Khan of taking power last year with the help of the military. Khan and the military have denied the accusations, which have swirled since the July 2018 election.

But Rehman, a long-time rival of Khan, launched days of protest culminating in his arrival in Islamabad late Thursday at the head of tens of thousands of supporters, all calling for Khan to resign. On Friday, he announced he was giving the government 48 hours to step down.

The leaders of Pakistan's two largest opposition parties both also addressed the protesters, echoing many of Rehman's claims. But the deadline came and went, with the government remaining intact.

Though Rehman's supporters remained enthusiastic, the other opposition parties did not mobilise their supporters in large numbers, and their leaders left Islamabad even as Rehman remained.

NEW DELHI AIR POLLUTION

SC orders halt to stubble burning

AFP, New Delhi

India's top court has ordered a complete halt to stubble burning around Delhi, a major contributor to lethal smog that yesterday kept the metropolis of 20 million people choking in air rated "very poor".

The Supreme Court said the capital's residents were "losing precious years" of their lives, adding "people are dying, this just cannot happen in a civilised country".

In a ruling following petitions filed by activists, the court's judges ordered an immediate halt to the practice of farmers burning crop stubble in the states surrounding the capital.

They warned that the entire administrative and police hierarchy -- all the way down to local officers -- would be held responsible if the practice continued.

Burning stubble is already illegal, but many hard-core farmers say they have no choice.

On Sunday pollution shot up, with levels of particulates measuring less than 2.5 microns -- so tiny they can enter the bloodstream -- approaching 1,000 micrograms per cubic metre of air, the worst in three years.

The World Health Organisation's recommended safe daily maximum is just 25.

Flights were diverted and hospitals reported a surge in patients with respiratory complaints.

Concentrations of the tiny particles -- which can be lethal with long-term exposure -- fell Tuesday, with the government monitoring agency SAFAR rating the air "very poor", down from "severe" a day earlier.

According to the AirVisual website, Delhi remained the most polluted city in the world yesterday ahead of Kolkata in eastern India and Lahore in Pakistan. Beijing was in sixth place.

Turkey says it captured sister of dead IS leader Baghdadi

Turkish forces in northern Syria have detained a sister of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State group who was killed in a US raid, a senior Turkish official said yesterday. "Turkey has captured Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's sister" in a raid near the town of Azaz in northwestern Syria, the official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told AFP. He named the woman as Rasmiya Awad, and said she was born in 1954. The woman was accompanied by her husband, her daughter-in-law and five children. US President Donald Trump announced on October 27 the death of Baghdadi in a US special forces raid in Syria's northwestern province of Idlib, carried out in coordination with Kurdish militants.

Four-day working week pays off for Microsoft

In a country notorious for overwork, Microsoft Japan trialled a radical idea: working less. And it found that four-day weeks and other reforms both boosted sales and cut costs. The Japanese unit of the US IT giant closed its offices every Friday in August, giving all 2,300 full-time workers special leave. It also restricted meetings to a maximum of 30 minutes, and encouraged online chats as an alternative to face-to-face communications. The results were positive, with sales per employee rising almost 40 percent in August from a year earlier, electricity consumption down by a quarter and paper usage being cut in half. The firm said the trial showed "employees want to have a variety of ways of working" and that adopting the model more broadly could boost efficiency.

Snowden warns of Web giants' 'irresistible power'



Technology has given internet giants "irresistible power" when they work in concert with governments, whistleblower Ed Snowden told the Web Summit that opened in Lisbon on Monday. "When we see government and corporations working in concert... they become the left and right hands of the same body. What we see is the concentration of power," he told the European celebration of startups and new technologies gathering high-tech entrepreneurs and investors. "If you create an irresistible power... how do you police the expression of that power when it is used against the public rather than for it?" he asked, speaking by video link from Russia where he has lived since 2013.

SOURCE: AFP