

Oil, gas groups 'destroying' climate talks

Accuse NGOs

Oil and gas groups were yesterday accused of seeking to influence climate talks in Madrid by paying millions in sponsorship and sending dozens of lobbyists to delay what scientists say is a necessary and rapid cut in fossil fuel use.

A day after tens of thousands marched in the Spanish capital demanding climate action, seven environmental groups raised concerns to AFP over the role of fossil fuel representatives at the COP25 summit.

Spanish energy giants Endesa and Iberdrola stepped in to sponsor the conference, which brings together more than 20,000 negotiators, scientists, NGOs and journalists from around the world.

AFP has been told that each company paid 2 million euros to be COP25 "Platinum" sponsors, affording them prominent branding and trade stalls at the event.

Endesa is one of Spain's largest greenhouse gas emitters, producing just over 60 million tonnes of CO2 equivalent last year alone. Iberdrola produced 24.6 million tonnes in 2018.

"Bankrolling the global climate negotiations is a classic trick from the polluter's playbook," said Jean Su, energy director with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Environmental groups including Oil Change International, Corporate Europe Observatory, the Observatorio de Multinacionales en America Latina, and Power Shift Africa all told AFP they considered oil and gas presence at COP25 as unacceptable.

"Our hard work and determination is easily overpowered by the vast resources of the biggest polluting corporations," said Sarah Dobson, from the UK Youth Climate Coalition.

"These companies are destroying our planet and our right to fair climate negotiations free from their influence."

RISING GLOBAL DISCONTENT OVER CLIMATE INACTION

Scientists warn of social 'tipping point'

Say the effects of a warming world will worsen inequality and poverty worldwide

REUTERS, Lisbon

With young climate activists taking to the streets of Madrid, the UN climate chief and a leading scientist warned of a growing risk of social unrest as the effects of a warming world worsen inequality and poverty worldwide.

Speaking on the sidelines of a UN climate summit in the Spanish capital, they said governments were so far failing to meet growing public demands for urgent action to halt rising global temperatures and curb the damage as extreme weather intensifies and melting ice pushes up sea-levels.

"It's clear - and this is very painful to recognise - that the political leadership in the world is lagging behind the sentiments among youth (as well as) the state of science and even what business leadership thinks," said Johan Rockström, director of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research.

Rockström, as part of an international team of scientists, highlighted how the world may be nearing a "social tipping point" on climate change that could bring about rapid and exponential changes in behaviour, lifestyles and technologies.

An analysis published on Friday, entitled "10 New Insights in Climate Science 2019", noted that public opinion polls indicate an increasing number



of citizens in a range of countries are seriously concerned about climate change.

Meanwhile, recent large-scale civil protests are getting close to a size where social scientists predict governments could be forced into action, according to the analysis put together by several climate research organisations.

Rockström noted that, according to social scientists, when roughly 3.5% of a nation's population joins "civil and non-violent uprisings" it can be enough to force change, even in a dictatorship. In Germany, numbers at the climate demonstrations on Sept. 20 were

estimated at nearly 2% of the population, and in New Zealand at 3.5%, he said.

UN climate chief Patricia Espinosa acknowledged on Friday that the world is "not where we need to be", with global average temperatures currently on track for a rise of 3 degrees or more above pre-industrial times.

The new analysis warned that failure to address and adapt to climate change would have disastrous consequences for hundreds of millions of people, mainly the very poorest, who are most vulnerable to climate-related disasters like floods and drought.

Espinosa, a former diplomat for

Mexico, warned that climate change, as a "threat multiplier" would deepen problems of social inequality and poverty around the world.

"It is really an issue that is very closely related to the wellbeing of societies, and in that regard you can understand that it is very likely to create social unrest," she said in response to a question from the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Globally, there is widespread dissatisfaction with institutions and systems, she noted. Protests - sometimes violent - have erupted from France to Chile in the past year, often provoked by a perceived political insensitivity to ordinary people's struggles for a decent life.

That struggle is also hampered by environmental degradation, analysts said. Addressing climate change is "one way" to work on those problems, Espinosa said.

He questioned whether, at some point, it would start to become morally unacceptable to cause people's deaths with car exhaust, as happened with cigarette smoking.

In New Delhi, at some times of the year, young people are inhaling toxic pollution equivalent to smoking 10 cigarettes a day, killing over 7,000 people a year in the city, he noted.



Gulf crisis has moved from stalemate: Qatar FM

Qatar's foreign minister has spoken of "some progress" in talks with Saudi Arabia on ending a bitter two-year-old rift between Doha and the kingdom and its allies. A Saudi-led bloc including the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt cut all diplomatic and transport ties with Qatar in June 2017. They broke with Doha over allegations it backs radical Islamists and seeks closer ties with Saudi arch rival Iran. Qatar vehemently denies the charges. "In recent weeks we have moved from a stalemate to some progress," Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani said in Rome at the Mediterranean Dialogue Forum. "We hope these talks will lead to a progress where we can see an end to the crisis."

US resumes talks with Taliban in Doha

Washington resumed talks with the Taliban in Qatar yesterday, a US source said, three months after President Donald Trump abruptly halted diplomatic efforts that could end America's longest war. In September, the United States and the Taliban had appeared on the verge of signing a deal that would have seen Washington begin withdrawing thousands of troops in return for security guarantees. It was also expected to pave the way towards direct talks between the Taliban and the government in Kabul and, ultimately, a possible peace agreement after more than 18 years of war. But that same month, Trump abruptly called the year-long effort "dead" and withdrew an invitation to the insurgents to join secret talks at his US retreat at Camp David after the killing of an American soldier. During a surprise visit to a US military base in Afghanistan last week, Trump said the Taliban "wants to make a deal."

Travel misery in France as nationwide strike continues

The most serious nationwide strike to hit France in years caused new misery for weekend travellers yesterday, with defiant unions dismissing proposals by the government and warning walkouts would last well into next week. The challenge thrown to President Emmanuel Macron over his plans for radical pension reform has seen hundreds of thousands take to the streets and key transport services brought to a standstill. The strikes, which began on Thursday, have recalled the winter of 1995, when three weeks of huge stoppages forced a social policy U-turn by the then-government. Unions have vowed a second series of mass demonstrations nationwide on Tuesday and there is expected to be little easing of the transport freezes over the coming days.

A firefighter conducts back burning measures to secure residential areas from encroaching bushfires at the Mangrove area in Central Coast, some 90-110 kilometres north of Sydney, yesterday. More than 100 out of control bushfires forced residents in eastern Australia to flee their homes yesterday, as other parts of the country braced for a heatwave due next week.

PHOTO: AFP

SOURCE: AFP

Indian rape victim dies after being set ablaze by rapists

REUTERS, Unnao

A 23-year-old rape victim set on fire by a gang of men, which included her alleged rapists, has died in a New Delhi hospital, prompting protests from opposition leaders who blamed the ruling party for failing to check incidents of violence against women.

The woman was on her way to board a train in Unnao district of northern Uttar Pradesh state to attend a court hearing over her rape when she was doused with kerosene and set on fire on Thursday, according to police.

She was airlifted to New Delhi for treatment later that day.

The attack, the second major case of violence against women in the past two weeks, has sparked public outrage in India.

The woman died on Friday after suffering a cardiac arrest, Dr Shalabh Kumar, the head of burns and plastic department at New Delhi's Safdarjung Hospital told Reuters.

The woman had filed a complaint with Unnao police in March alleging she had

been raped at gun-point on December 12, 2018, police documents showed. The woman named two local men, one of them was arrested by police, the other absconded.

Having been subsequently jailed, the alleged rapist was released last week after securing bail, police officer SK Bhagat said in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh state.

On Thursday, the rape victim was seized by five men, including the two people she had named in her complaint, and beaten, stabbed and set on fire, local media reported citing her statement to police.

Still ablaze, she walked nearly a kilometre, seeking help before finally calling the police herself, according to Aaj Taj TV news channel.

All five of the accused have been arrested and are in 14-day judicial custody, Vikrant Vir, superintendent of police, Unnao, told Reuters. A fast-track court would hear the case and the guilty would not be spared, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath said.



US House endorses two-state solution

AFP, Washington

The US House of Representatives on Friday threw its weight behind a two-state solution for Israelis and Palestinians, in a warning to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as he mulls annexing the West Bank.

Passed largely along party lines, the House resolution also marked a shot across the bow to President Donald Trump, who has stood squarely behind Netanyahu.

In its first-ever resolution on a West Bank annexation, the House said that a two-state solution "can both ensure the state of Israel's survival as a Jewish and democratic state and fulfill the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people for a state of their own."

US should "discourage steps by either side that would put a peaceful end to the conflict further out of reach," the resolution said. Such steps include "unilateral annexation of territory or efforts to achieve Palestinian statehood status outside the framework of negotiations with Israel," it said.

Representative Eliot Engel, the Democrat who heads the House Foreign Affairs Committee, recalled his longtime support of Israel and how he backed Trump's shift of the US embassy to the disputed holy city of Jerusalem.

"But he said, in a choice turn of phrase, US security was being 'trumped by decisions about our own political interests.'"

"Those of us that are strong supporters of Israel understand that Israel is best served by a two-state solution, that a two-state solution is good not only for Palestinians but also good for Jews," Engel said on the House floor.

Johnson, Corbyn wage Brexit battle

REUTERS, Maidstone

Prime Minister Boris Johnson and opposition Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn clashed over Brexit on Friday in the last televised debate before next week's election that will determine the path for Britain's departure from the European Union.

Six days before Britain votes in its second national election in less than three years, the debate was seen as the last chance for Corbyn to squeeze Johnson's lead in the polls, which mostly point to victory for the prime minister.

A snap poll by YouGov found 52% of viewers thought Johnson had won the debate.

The two leaders set a combative tone over how to leave the EU and in their very different offers for domestic policy - "socialism carried out in a democratic way" from Corbyn, or "one-nation Conservatism" that will not "rack up debts" from Johnson.

More than three years after Britain voted

to leave the EU, the Dec. 12 election will determine when, how and even whether Brexit happens.

Johnson ridiculed Corbyn's support for a new referendum in which Corbyn has said he would remain neutral, while the Labour leader said the prime minister's pledge to "get Brexit done" actually meant years of trade talks.

"We have ample time to get on and build a new free trade partnership, not just with the EU but with countries around the world," Johnson said in the BBC television debate.

But Corbyn countered that it would take the government seven years to negotiate a trade deal with the United States and said business could not live with the uncertainty that Britain might still leave the EU without a deal next year.

Polls show Johnson's governing party is well ahead of Labour. A Panelbase survey on Friday showed the Conservatives extending their lead slightly over the opposition party to nine points, up from eight a week ago.



BAGHDAD PROTEST CAMP 'SLAUGHTER'

Anger simmers after 23 killed

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's anti-regime protesters gathered in the capital and south yesterday, grieving but defiant after 23 were killed in an attack demonstrators described as "slaughter."

The protest movement faced another worrying turn yesterday after an armed drone targeted the home of Iraqi cleric Moqtada Sadr, an attack his office said could lead to "civil war."

The dramatic developments have threatened to derail the anti-government rallies rocking Iraq since October, the largest and deadliest grassroots movement in decades.

Late Friday, at least 23 people were killed and dozens wounded when unidentified gunmen attacked a large building where protesters had camped out for weeks, medics said.

"Government forces were one kilometre away and didn't interfere," said a young volunteer medic who had treated wounded people overnight.

The violence pushed the protest toll past 440 dead and nearly 20,000 wounded, according to an AFP tally compiled from medics, police and a national rights commission.

Under stormy skies yesterday, young men in central Baghdad prayed over an Iraqi flag to mourn those who died the previous night.

They sobbed heavily, their shoulders shaking. Small clusters of protesters stood near the charred parking complex that was attacked, as larger crowds flocked to nearby Tahrir Square.

"They fired intensely, mercilessly on the protesters," one witness told AFP. "They wouldn't let us evacuate the wounded. It was slaughter."

After the attack, panicked demonstrators sent out calls through social media for people to join the rallies in Tahrir, hoping to gain strength in numbers.

"I came after the incident and there were tons of people in Tahrir and by Al-Sinek," one demonstrator told AFP.



A Yemeni artist sitting atop the rubble of a collapsed building, plays the oud during a street performance in Yemen's third city of Taiz, Friday. The Yemeni conflict between Saudi-backed government forces and Iran-backed Huthi rebels has raged since 2015, sparking what the United Nations terms the world's worst humanitarian crisis