

NEWS IN
briefNovember 2019 2nd
hottest on record: US

AFP, Washington

Last month was the second hottest November in the 140-year global climate record, a US government agency said Monday, adding that polar sea ice also shrank to near-record lows. The average global land and ocean surface temperature for November 2019 was 1.66 degrees Fahrenheit (0.92 degree Celsius) above the 20th-century average and the second-highest November temperature on record, just shy of November 2015, according to the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Bomb kills 10 members
of Afghan family

AFP, Khost

Ten members of the same family were killed yesterday when their car detonated a roadside bomb as they were travelling to a funeral in eastern Afghanistan, officials said. The victims had been driving in Khost province in a large station wagon-type vehicle when the blast occurred, according to local and national officials. Provincial police spokesman Adil Haidar confirmed the toll and incident details.

Sudan rivals agree
to form unity govt

AFP, Juba

South Sudan President Salva Kiir and opposition leader Riek Machar yesterday agreed to form a unity government by a February deadline, as they face international censure over faltering peace talks. The rivals signed a truce in September 2018 but have failed to respect a cornerstone of that agreement -- that they form a power-sharing government and lay their differences to rest.



A protester holds a placard against India's new citizenship law during a rally in Bangalore, yesterday. Fresh protests against India's new citizenship law erupted yesterday as alleged police brutality fuelled fury against the legislation which critics say is anti-Muslim. PHOTO: AFP

NORTH KOREA CRISIS

China, Russia press
UN to ease sanctions

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday urged the UN Security Council to unanimously back its joint proposal with Russia to ease sanctions on North Korea, warning that dialogue to resolve nuclear tensions must not be rejected.

The nuclear-armed North has issued increasingly strident declarations in recent weeks, even promising an ominous "Christmas gift" if Washington does not come up with some concessions.

For his part, US President Donald Trump said Monday that he would be "disappointed" if North Korea had "something in the works," warning that if it did, "we'll take care of it."

"We're watching it very closely," Trump said at the White House.

Negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang have been largely stalled since the collapse of a February summit in Hanoi between Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

The North is under heavy US and United Nations sanctions over its nuclear program, but it has been frustrated at the lack of relief after it declared a moratorium on nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests.

While Beijing is Pyongyang's most important diplomatic ally and key economic lifeline, it has backed sanctions against its neighbour in the wake of its nuclear activities.

China and Russia, which had cautiously backed pressure against North Korea after its past nuclear tests, had indicated last week they would reject further sanctions.

GLOBAL REFUGEE SUMMIT

Rich nations must do more

Says UN chief; Pak PM says millions of Muslim refugees could flee India

AGENCIES

UN chief Antonio Guterres called on countries to take joint responsibility for caring for a surging number of displaced people as he opened a global refugee summit in Geneva.

"It is a moment to build a more equitable response to refugee crises through a sharing of responsibility," Guterres said in his opening speech to the Global Refugee Forum.

With a full 80 percent of the world's refugees living in poor and developing countries, which often feel left to shoulder the heavy economic and societal costs alone, burden-sharing is high on the agenda at the meeting.

"The world owes all countries and communities that welcome large numbers of refugees a debt of gratitude," Guterres said, stressing that "gratitude is not enough."

"At this time of turbulence, the international community must do far more to shoulder this responsibility

together."

At the end of 2018, nearly 71 million people were living in forced displacement due to war, violence and persecution, including nearly 26 million people who had fled across borders as refugees.

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran



Khan yesterday said that millions of Muslims could flee India due to the curfew in the disputed territory of Kashmir and India's new citizenship law, creating "a refugee crisis that would dwarf other crises."

Khan, addressing the Global Forum on Refugees in Geneva, said: "We are

worried there not only could be a refugee crisis, we are worried it could lead to a conflict between two nuclear-armed countries."

"Our country will not be able to accommodate more refugees," he added, urging the world to "step in now".

The need for the world's wealthier nations to do their share will likely be hammered home by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Turkey is the world's largest refugee host with more than three million refugees on its soil, mainly from Syria.

The forum, which will last through Wednesday, begins exactly a year after the UN General Assembly adopted a framework aimed at creating a more predictable and equitable approach to providing assistance to refugees and host communities.

During the forum, hundreds of pledges are expected from countries.

UK PM to outlaw Brexit
extension beyond 2020

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was seeking yesterday to outlaw extending the Brexit transition period beyond the end of 2020, as he prepared to put the EU divorce deal before MPs.

Johnson won a big majority in last week's general election on a promise to "get Brexit done" by taking Britain out of the European Union by the end of January.

A transition period will then follow, during which London and Brussels hope to negotiate a trade agreement before the end of December next year.

European leaders have said the 2020 deadline would be too tight to complete a comprehensive deal, reviving fears of a "no-deal" outcome that could cause fresh uncertainty and chaos.

That was enough to pull the pound sterling lower in late trading in New York.

Johnson held his first cabinet meeting since the election yesterday, welcoming back his ministers after what he called a

"seismic" result.

Parliament was scheduled to return yesterday and Johnson plans to put the EU Withdrawal Agreement Bill before MPs on Friday, after Queen Elizabeth II sets out the government's legislative programme on Thursday.

But the government is planning to block the transition period from going beyond the end of 2020.

"Last week the public voted for a government that would get Brexit done and move this country forward -- and that's exactly what we intend to do, starting this week," a Downing Street source said.

"Our manifesto made clear that we will not extend the implementation period and the new Withdrawal Agreement Bill will legally prohibit government agreeing to any extension."

Sam Lowe, from the Centre for European Reform think-tank, said there would a lot of "performance theatre" from the government in the next six months to fulfil Johnson's Brexit pledge.

UNSC to meet on Kashmir
at China's request

The United Nations Security Council was scheduled to meet at China's request to discuss the situation in the disputed Indian territory of Jammu and Kashmir, diplomats said. The council will meet behind closed doors for the first time since a similar gathering in August, which was also called by Pakistan ally China, after India removed the decades-old autonomy the area enjoyed under the Indian constitution. In a letter to the Security Council on Dec. 12, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi expressed concern about a possible further escalation of tensions. The Himalayan region has long been a flashpoint in ties between nuclear-armed neighbors India and Pakistan, with both claiming Kashmir in full but ruling it in part.

Malaysia to host major
summit of Muslim leaders

Malaysia will this week host a summit of Muslim leaders billed as a forum to look at the Islamic world's problems, but it will be closely watched for Middle East power plays and their stance on China's Uighur minority. Leaders from Iran, Turkey, and Qatar will be among hundreds of delegates attending the three-day event set to discuss myriad challenges faced by Muslims. With no high-level Saudi delegation coming, there has been speculation the forum could be used to counter the kingdom's influence. Analysts said the Kuala Lumpur summit could "serve as an alternative to the Jeddah-headquartered Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which is under Saudi Arabia's de facto leadership."

China's second aircraft
carrier enters service

China's second aircraft carrier entered service yesterday, adding major firepower to its military ambitions as it faces tensions with self-ruled Taiwan as well as the US and regional neighbors around the disputed South China Sea. The commissioning of the ship, which has been named the Shandong, puts China in a small club of nations with multiple aircraft carriers and the country is reportedly building a third. China's first domestically built carrier was delivered and commissioned to the People's Liberation Army navy in Sanya, on the southern island of Hainan, at a ceremony attended by President Xi Jinping, state media said. China has one other carrier -- the Liaoning, a repurposed Soviet carrier bought from Ukraine.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

India's Hindu nationalist trajectory under Modi

India's new citizenship law has stoked fears that Prime Minister Narendra Modi wants to remould the world's largest democracy as a Hindu nation, undermining the secular and pluralist roots of the world's biggest democracy. As protests rage, AFP looks at this and other steps since Modi swept to a second term in May that have struck fear among India's 200 million Muslims, other minorities and some in the international community.

KASHMIR'S AUTONOMY: Until October 31, Jammu and Kashmir was the only Muslim-majority state in India, and its special status and partial autonomy in the Indian constitution has long rankled with Hindu nationalists. On August 5, parliament moved to strip Kashmir -- where an armed rebellion against Indian rule has raged for decades -- of this status and split it into two territories directly ruled from New Delhi. Modi said this was to foster economic development and tackle corruption but many Kashmiris believe the real reason was to dilute the region's identity by allowing Hindus to migrate there.

CITIZENSHIP LIST: A citizens' register in Assam state finalised this year left off 1.9 million people, many of them Muslims, who now face possible statelessness, detention camps and even deportation. Modi's right-hand man Amit Shah said this month he intends to replicate the "National Register of Citizens" nationwide with the aim of removing all "infiltrators" from India by 2024. Muslims, who in Modi's first term saw many Islamic-sounding cities renamed and the role of Muslims in India's past expunged from some history textbooks, worry that



Shah has them in mind.

AYODHYA TANTRUMS: India's top court ruled in November that a Hindu temple could be built in Ayodhya on the site where a mosque was demolished by Hindu zealots in 1992, in a major victory for Modi's supporters. Since the 1980s the construction of such a temple -- which Shah said on Monday would be "sky-touching" and erected in four months -- has been a campaign pledge of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). For critics the ruling served to legitimise the mosque's destruction -- and to give free rein to further possible acts of vandalism and violence.

CITIZENSHIP OF NON-MUSLIM IMMIGRANTS: The latest move is a law making it easier for millions of illegal immigrants from three neighbouring countries to get citizenship -- but only Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists or Christians. Modi said the law, passed by parliament last week, does not cover Muslims because they do not face persecution in the three Islamic-majority countries concerned, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Passed last week, the legislation has sparked major demonstrations which raged across the country yesterday for another day. The epicentre of the demonstrations has been

in northeast India where locals have a different concern: that it will grant Bangladeshi immigrants citizenship, many of whom are Hindus. "Indian democracy is closely connected with its secular character," Ashok Swain, a professor at Sweden's Uppsala University, told AFP. "What Modi has been doing is a majoritarian capture of power, which lacks any concession for minority rights."

REACTIONS HOME AND ABROAD: Indian opposition has been vocal against the citizenship law as well as all the religion-based decisions. A number of states governed by opposition have vowed not to implement the law, alleging that it was an attempt to strip the country of its secular credentials. The UN human rights office said last week it was concerned the law "would appear to undermine the commitment to equality before the law enshrined in India's constitution". The US State Department urged "India to protect the rights of its religious minorities in keeping with India's constitution and democratic values." But more may be in the pipeline.

UNIFORM CIVIL CODE NEXT?: On the BJP's wishlist is a uniform civil code, doing away with personal laws for all religious minorities in areas such as marriage, family and death. "What we are seeing playing out here is an aggressive pursuit of a Hindu-nationalist agenda -- one that has troubling implications for the secularism and religious pluralism that has defined Indian democracy for decades," said Michael Kugelmann from the Wilson Center think-tank. "What ultimately emerges from this is unclear, but it does seem that the bedrock principles of democracy in India are increasingly imperilled."

SOURCE: AFP

Trump popularity edges
up during impeachment

AFP, Washington

Strong economic figures have helped US President Donald Trump to his highest approval ratings ever, despite impeachment, a new poll found Monday.

Although the Quinnipiac University survey said Trump has a high of 43 percent for his job approval, that's still far below nearly all previous presidents in modern times at the same point in their administration.

According to the poll, carried out December 11-15, 52 percent of Americans still disapprove of Trump's job performance. Trump has been mired in those unusually low ratings for nearly his entire presidency.

But the latest figures show a progression indicating support growing for Trump despite the impeachment process threatening his presidency. The House of Representatives could vote to impeach for abuse of office and obstruction of Congress as early as this Wednesday.

A Quinnipiac poll earlier in December had 41 percent approval and 55 percent disapproval, while an October poll, done before impeachment hearings began, put those figures at 38 and 58 percent.

Nearly three quarters, 73 percent, saw the economy as good or excellent, the poll found.

The poll found little changed figures on impeachment, with 45 backing Trump's impeachment and removal from office and 51 percent opposing. Support for impeachment and removal back in October was at 45-48 percent.

Not surprisingly, the poll looks radically different when the answers are divided by party. Ninety five percent of Republicans oppose removing Trump from office, while 86 percent of Democrats are in favour.



GENDER EQUALITY AT WORKPLACE

It's 257 years away

AFP, Geneva

Women may have to wait more than two centuries for equality at work, according to a report on Tuesday showing gender inequality growing in workplaces worldwide despite increasing demands for equal treatment.

While women appear to be gradually closing the gender gap in areas such as politics, health and education, workplace inequality is not expected to be erased until the year 2276, according to a report published by the World Economic Forum (WEF).

The Geneva-based organisation's annual report tracks disparities between the sexes in 153 countries across four areas: education, health, economic opportunity and political empowerment.

The overall gender gap across these categories has shrunk, yesterday's report showed, with WEF now forecasting it will take 99.5 years for

women to achieve parity on average, down from the 108 years forecast in last year's report.

But while some sectors have shown improvements, others lag far behind. WEF said the gender gap was more than 96 percent closed in the area of



education and could be eliminated altogether within just 12 years. The gap was equally small in the health and survival category.

Politics meanwhile is the domain where the least progress has been made to date, but it showed the biggest improvement in the past year.

Women in 2019 held 25.2 percent of parliamentary lower-house seats and 22.1 percent of ministerial positions, compared to 24.1 percent and 19 percent in 2018.

But when it comes to the workplace, the picture is less rosy. The report, which looked at a variety of factors including opportunity and pay, said it would take 257 years before there was equality in the workplace.

On average, only 55 percent of adult women are in the labour market today, compared to 78 percent for men, while women globally on average still make 40 percent less than men for similar work in similar positions.

Progress across the categories varies greatly in different countries and regions.

The report pointed out that while Western European countries could close their overall gender gap in 54 years, countries in the Middle East and North Africa will take nearly 140 years to do so.