

FLASHBACK 2019 RECORDS

The hottest month, the longest flight, the wildest auction prices... here is a look back at 10 new records in 2019:



RECORD TEMPERATURES: Temperatures in July 2019 were the hottest ever recorded globally at an average of 16.75 degrees Celsius for the planet, the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced. A heatwave in Europe the same month reset several record highs: 42.6 degrees for Paris; 41.5 degrees for Germany; and 38.7 degrees in Britain. In December, it was Australia's turn to set a record for its hottest day ever, with an average national maximum temperature of 41.9 degrees Celsius (107.4 Fahrenheit) on December 19, while a scorching heatwave intensified bushfires.

FACEBOOK FINE: Facebook was in July slapped with the largest ever fine -- \$5 billion -- imposed on any company for violating consumers' privacy. Announcing the penalty, the Federal Trade Commission said it was also one of the largest ever issued by the US government for any violation.

MONSTER SALE: Chinese consumers spent a record \$38.3 billion on Alibaba platforms in the annual 24-hour "Singles' Day" buying spree in November. It was a jump of 26 percent from the previous record high a year earlier, the e-commerce giant said.

MILLION-DOLLAR PARKING: A parking space in Hong Kong's The Center skyscraper sold in October for a whopping HK\$7.6 million (more than \$970,000, 882,000 euros), about the price of a one-bedroom apartment in London's plush Chelsea.

LONGEST FLIGHT: Qantas completed the longest non-stop passenger flight in October, taking 19 hours and 16 minutes to test a direct route from New York to Sydney. Just 49 people travelled on the Boeing 787-9 to minimise the weight on board and give the plane sufficient fuel range to travel more than 16,000 kilometres (9,500 miles).

SUMMIT SPEEDSTER: Nepali mountaineer Nirmal Purj summited all of the world's 14 highest peaks in just six months and six days over April to October, smashing the previous record for the feat of almost eight years.



ART AUCTION HIGHS: Amid furious Brexit wrangling, Banksy's "Devolved Parliament" painting depicting lawmakers as chimps was sold at auction in October for 11.1 million euros, a record for the British artist. A new auction record for a work by a living artist was set in May when Jeff Koons' stainless steel "Rabbit" fetched \$91.1 million.

SOURCE: AFP

2019: world jolted by climate emergency

AFP, Paris

Schoolchildren skipping class to strike, protests bringing city centres to a standstill: armed with dire warnings from scientists, people around the world dragged the climate emergency into the mainstream in 2019.

Spurred on by Swedish wunderkind Greta Thunberg -- virtually unknown outside of her homeland a year ago but now a global star nominated for a Nobel prize -- millions of young people took part in weekly demonstrations demanding climate action.

And, like harbingers of the apocalypse, the Extinction Rebellion movement embarked on a campaign of peaceful civil disobedience that spread worldwide, armed with little more than superglue and the nihilistic motto: "When hope dies, action begins."

Although scientists have warned for decades about the risk to humanity and Earth posed by unfettered burning of fossil fuels, in 2019 -- set to be the second hottest year in history -- their message seems to have finally hit home.

The 2015 Paris agreement saw nations commit to limiting global warming to two degrees Celsius (2.7 Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels as a way of curbing the worst impacts of global warming. A safer cap of 1.5C was included as a goal for nations to work towards.

With Earth having already warmed by 1C, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate



Change (IPCC) dropped a bombshell late last year.

Its landmark report in October 2018 laid the groundwork for the string of climate shockwaves that rumbled throughout 2019: The world is way off course for 1.5C, and the difference between 1.5C and 2C could be catastrophic.

It was a message heard around the world.

For Corinne Le Quere, president of France's High Commission for Climate Change and member of Britain's Committee on Climate Change, 2019 was "something new".

"I've worked on climate change for 30 years and for 29 of those, as scientists,

we've worked unnoticed," she told AFP.

The IPCC report concluded that global CO2 emissions must drop 45 percent by 2030 -- and reach "net zero" by 2050 -- to cap temperature rise at 1.5C.

"It's given us a clear timeline: we have 12 years to act," said Caroline Merner, 24, a Canadian member of the Youth4Climate movement.

The UN last month said carbon emissions must decline 7.6 percent annually by 2030 to stand any chance of hitting 1.5C.

Scientists meanwhile said emissions this year will instead rise 0.6 percent.

Despite growing mobilisation and awareness, COP25 -- the climate summit in Madrid this month -- barely squeezed

out compromises from countries over a global warming battle plan that fell well short of what science says is needed to tackle the climate crisis.

But while society and particularly younger generations appear to have woken up to the threat of climate catastrophe, industry shows little signs of sharing their urgency.

Greenhouse gas emissions are once again set to rise in 2019 after hitting a record in 2018, as extreme weather events -- made more likely as the planet warms -- struck seemingly everywhere this year.

Cyclone Idai in Mozambique, typhoon Hagibis in Japan, a deadly, record-breaking heatwave across much of Europe, wildfires in California and eastern Australia, floods in Venice... the list goes on.

The threat posed by climate change became so stark in 2019 that Indonesia, one of the fastest-growing economies on Earth, decided to move its capital to somewhere that wasn't sinking.

Faced with an unbreachable body of evidence and mounting pressure from the streets, governments in 2019 started, slowly, to mobilise.

A total of 66 nations now have plans to be carbon-neutral by 2050. The cities of London and Paris declared official ecological and climate emergencies.

Yet there are fears meagre progress could be undermined as developing economies appear no closer to ditching fossil fuels and the United States -- the largest historic emitter -- looks poised to complete its Paris pullout.



IRAQI CRISIS President refuses to designate PM nominee

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraqi President Barham Salih yesterday refused to designate the nominee of an Iran-backed parliamentary bloc for prime minister, saying he would rather resign than appoint someone to the position who would be rejected by protesters.

The Bina bloc, led by Iran-backed militia leader Hadi Al-Amiri, had nominated Basra Governor Asaad al-Edani to be the next prime minister.

But Salih said in a statement that appointing Edani would not placate protesters demanding an independent prime minister with no party affiliation or help calm the unrest that has rocked the country.

He said that because the constitution does not give him the right to reject nominees for the premiership, he was ready to quit.

"Out of my desire to stop blood and maintain peace, and with due respect to Asaad al-Edani, I refuse to nominate him," Salih said. "Therefore I put my willingness to resign the post of president to members of parliament so that they decide as representatives of the people what they see fit."

Mass protests have gripped Iraq since Oct. 1 and the protesters, most of them young, are demanding an overhaul of a political system they see as profoundly corrupt and keeping most Iraqis in poverty. More than 450 people have been killed.

Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi resigned last month as the protests continued, but he has remained in office in a caretaker capacity.

Sources in Salih's office said the president left Baghdad on Thursday for his hometown of Sulaimaniya in the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq and that he would deliver a televised speech later.



Kids wearing special protective glasses observe the annular solar eclipse in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia, yesterday. Inset, The moon moves in front of the sun in a rare "ring of fire" solar eclipse as seen from Balut Island, Saragani province in the southern island of Mindanao, Philippines.

PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP



Japan's birth rate hits another record low in 2019

CNN ONLINE

Japan's demographic crisis is getting worse, as the fast-graying nation experienced its biggest natural population decline and a record-low birth rate this year, government statistics show.

The estimated number of babies born in the country in 2019 fell to 864,000 -- the lowest since records began in 1899 -- according to a report published Tuesday by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare.

The number of newborns is estimated to have shrunk by 54,000 from 2018, and the figure remains under the 1 million mark for the fourth year running.

Deaths in 2019 also hit a postwar record high of 1.376 million, with a natural population decline of 512,000 -- the highest ever.

Japan is a "super-aged" nation, meaning more than 20% of its population is older than 65. The country's total population stood at 124 million in 2018 -- but by 2065 it is expected to have dropped to about 88 million.

The country's demographic decline

means a shrinking cohort of workers is left supporting an increasingly elderly population in need of healthcare and pensions.

Japan isn't alone in facing falling fertility rates. Germany is also a "super-aged" nation. And by 2030, the US, UK, Singapore and France are expected to have earned that status.

The total fertility rate measures the average number of children a woman will have in her lifetime. In South Korea in 2018, this dropped to 0.98 -- or less than one baby per woman, and a drop from the previous year's rate of 1.05. This record low puts South Korea near the bottom of lowest fertility rates in the world -- even lower than Japan, which had a rate of 1.42 in 2018.

To put that into perspective, the 2018 fertility rate was 1.72 in the United States. In some African countries, which see the highest fertility numbers in the world, the rate can go up 5 or 6.

To maintain a stable population, countries need a fertility rate of 2 -- anything above that indicates population growth.

Erdogan paves the way for troop deployment in Libya

Trump warns Russia, Syria, Iran against killing civilians in Syria

AGENCIES

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday opened the way for direct Turkish military intervention in Libya, announcing a parliamentary vote in early January on sending troops to support the UN-backed Tripoli government against strongman Khalifa Haftar.

Sending Turkish troops will complicate the situation in an already fragile country torn by internal dissent since the ouster and killing of dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

"We will present the motion to send troops (to Libya) as soon as parliament resumes" on January 7, Erdogan said in a speech in Ankara.

"God willing, we will pass it in parliament on January 8-9 and thus respond to an invitation" from the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), he said.

Erdogan's comments come after the Turkish parliament on Saturday ratified a security and military cooperation deal with the GNA of Faye al-Sarraj.

That agreement, which came into force on

Thursday, allows Ankara to send military and security personnel to Libya for training purposes, according to Turkish officials.

But a separate motion is needed to send boots on the ground. The Turkish parliament in October passed another motion to deploy troops in Iraq and Syria for another year.

"We have given and will give all forms of support to the Tripoli government which is fighting against a putschist general backed by Arab countries and Europeans," Erdogan said.

Turkey and Qatar back the GNA, while Haftar has received support from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Russia -- all of whom have tense relations with Turkey.

Meanwhile, US President Donald Trump yesterday warned Russia, Syria and Iran against killing civilians in Syria's Idlib province and said Turkey was working hard to stop the "carnage."

"Russia, Syria, and Iran are killing, or on their way to killing, thousands of innocent (sic) civilians in Idlib Province. Don't do it! Turkey is working hard to stop this carnage," Trump said in a tweet.



This photo shows damage to infrastructures caused by Typhoon Phanfone outside Kalibo International Airport in Kalibo, the capital of Aklan province. At least 16 people were killed in the typhoon that hit the Philippines on Christmas Day.

Netanyahu faces party leadership challenge

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's embattled premier Benjamin Netanyahu faced a challenge yesterday for the leadership of his Likud party from a longtime rival, former interior minister Gideon Saar.

Likud's roughly 116,000 eligible voters have until 11 pm (2100 GMT) to choose between Netanyahu and Saar, with the result expected by early Friday morning.

A defeat for Netanyahu, 70, would be a shock, but even a relatively close result could weaken his influence over the conservative party he has dominated for 20 years.

After a decade in power, Netanyahu is Israel's longest serving premier but he has been weakened by a series of corruption indictments.

After months of political stalemate, he faces a third general election within 12 months early next year -- but only if he first defeats his challenger. Saar, 53, a former interior and education minister, is seen as slightly to the right of Netanyahu and has called for an even more hawkish policy towards the Palestinians.

On Wednesday evening Netanyahu was rushed off stage at a campaign event in Ashkelon in southern Israel near Gaza after alarms sounded indicating incoming fire from the Palestinian enclave.

Italy's education minister quits over lack of funds

Italian Education Minister Lorenzo Fioramonti of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement yesterday said he had resigned because his ministry is underfunded. Fioramonti wrote on Facebook that he informed Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte of his decision on Tuesday, saying he had taken up the portfolio to "reverse... the trend that has for decades put Italian schools, higher education and research in conditions of great suffering." He said the government had failed "to ensure a financial waterline... especially in such a crucial area as universities and research." Italy spends 4.5 percent of its budget on education sector.

China, Russia, Iran to hold joint naval drills

China, Russia and Iran will hold joint naval drills starting today in the Gulf of Oman, Beijing said, at a time of heightened tensions since the US withdrew from a landmark nuclear deal with Tehran. Set to take place from December 27 to 30, the military exercises aim to "deepen exchange and cooperation between the navies of the three countries," Chinese defence ministry spokesman Wu Qian told reporters yesterday. Wu said the Chinese navy would deploy its Xining guided missile destroyer -- nicknamed the "carrier killer" for its array of anti-ship and land attack cruise missiles -- in the drills. But he did not give details on how many personnel or ships would take part overall.

Gaza protests against Israel suspended for 3 months



Weekly Hamas-backed demonstrations along the Gaza-Israel border will be suspended for three months, protest organisers in the Palestinian enclave said yesterday. Today's protests would be the last until March 30, 2020, Talal abu Zarifa, a member of the organising committee for the 'March of Return', told AFP. The weekly protests began in March 2018, calling for an end to Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip and for Palestinians to be allowed to return to their ancestral homes inside the Jewish state. When they resume, the demonstrations will be monthly, rather than weekly, Zarifa said. He did not give a specific reason for the decision, but the number of attendees has dwindled in recent months. At least 348 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza by Israeli fire since the marches began, the majority during the demonstrations, according to an AFP toll.

SOURCE: AFP