

CLIMATE COMMITMENTS

Dozens of nations miss deadline

AFP, Paris

More than half the world's nations failed to submit upgraded commitments by year's end to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, straggling behind the schedule of accelerated climate ambitions set out in the Paris Agreement.

Almost every country on the planet signed up to the 2015 Paris deal, which calls for capping global warming at "well below" two degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial levels, and 1.5C if possible.

The first raft of so-called "nationally determined contributions" (NDCs) would -- if fulfilled -- still see Earth become 3C hotter, but nations pledged to intensify their emissions cuts, with revised plans due every five years.

As the December 31, 2020, deadline approached, several large emitters said they would achieve net-zero output this century, but many nations allowed the year end to pass without publishing details of their renewed short-term targets.

Most NDC pledges run to 2030, with a few -- including that of the United States -- ending in 2025. As of January 1, only around 70 out of nearly 200 nations had filed updated commitments, according to the United Nations, with some countries blaming delays on the Covid-19 pandemic.

The UN has estimated that emissions need to be cut by 7.6 percent a year in the ten years to 2030 if there is to be a hope of limiting heating to 1.5C. Earth's surface has already warmed nearly 1.2C on average, intensifying extreme weather and making it more deadly.



Iranian Armed Forces Chief of Staff Major General Mohammad Bagheri and other top commanders inspect drones as they are prepared for large-scale drone combat exercise of Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in Semnan, Iran. Photo was taken on Monday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWS IN BRIEF

Trump's sanctions on rights lawyers, ICC blocked

A US judge on Monday blocked the Trump administration from sanctioning human rights lawyers for supporting the work of the world's war crimes tribunal, the International Criminal Court. US District Judge Katherine Polk Failla in Manhattan issued a preliminary injunction against the White House from imposing criminal or civil penalties against four law professors under an executive order from President Donald Trump last June. Trump had authorized economic and travel sanctions against employees of the Hague-based ICC and anyone supporting its work, including a probe into whether US forces committed war crimes in Afghanistan between 2003 and 2014. The ICC has called Trump's order an attack on international criminal justice and the rule of law. The European Union has also expressed opposition.

'Commoner' Mamata queues up for state health card

The health scheme of the West Bengal government -- one of the flashpoints of the coming state elections -- had a VIP participant yesterday. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, who had ditched the Central government's health scheme in favour of the state scheme, visited the local booth of the Duare Duare Sarkar (Government at your doorstep) near her residence and collected her health card. Yesterday morning, around 11.30 AM, Banerjee was seen queueing up with locals to personally collect her card for the cashless scheme that offers free treatment at private and government hospitals, and a health insurance of ₹5 lakh per family. Asked if she felt safe after collecting her card, Banerjee told NDTV that she doesn't use government funds for any personal needs. "I don't even take Re 1 as salary. But this card is for everyone, ... I am proud to say I am a commoner, and I am happy about that. I will preserve it," she said.

Israeli forces 'killed 27 Palestinians in 2020'

Israeli security forces committed "heinous killings" throughout 2020, shooting dead at least 27 Palestinians across occupied Palestinian territories and in Israel, according to Israeli rights group B'Tselem. "Over the course of 2020, Israeli security forces killed 27 Palestinians, seven of them minors: one in the Gaza Strip, 23 in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and three inside Israel," B'Tselem said on Monday. In at least 11 of the 16 killings investigated by B'Tselem in the occupied West Bank, the Palestinians "posed no threat to the lives of the forces" or any other person at the time they were shot. Over the course of 2020, amid the raging coronavirus pandemic, Israeli authorities also destroyed at least 729 Palestinian buildings, including homes and non-residential structures. In 2020, the group said, more Palestinians lost their homes in the West Bank and East Jerusalem than in every year since 2016.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

'Nuclear extortion'

US slams Iran's enrichment move, slaps sanctions; China urges calm; South Korea to dispatch diplomats to Tehran over seized tanker

AGENCIES

Iran yesterday said it had stepped up its uranium enrichment, amid heightened tensions with arch-foe the United States and after Iran seized a South Korean tanker in strategic Gulf waters.

The Islamic republic said it was now refining uranium to 20 percent purity -- far above the level permitted under its 2015 agreement with world powers, but significantly below the 90 percent required for an atomic bomb -- in a step Washington condemned as "nuclear extortion".

The United States yesterday imposed fresh Iran-related sanctions targeting the steel sector, according to the Treasury Department's website, continuing to increase pressure on Tehran in the final weeks of Donald Trump's presidency. Washington blacklisted more than a dozen entities and one person, according to the website.

China yesterday urged calm and restraint. Chinese foreign ministry



South Korean-flagged tanker vessel MT Hankuk Chemi. PHOTO: REUTERS

spokeswoman Hua Chunying said the Iran nuclear issue was at a critical juncture and was "extremely complex and sensitive".

It was the most striking suspension yet of Tehran's commitments under its landmark deal with six nations, which has been fraying ever since Trump withdrew from it in 2018 and reimposed crippling sanctions.

Washington has meanwhile

reversed an order to bring home its USS Nimitz aircraft carrier from the Gulf, citing "threats" against Trump, after recently also flying B-52 bombers over the region.

On Monday, the Guards launched a dramatic action on the high seas, near the strategic Straits of Hormuz, a chokepoint through which a fifth of world oil output passes.

Its speedboats seized the South Korean-flagged Hankuk Chemi carrying oil chemical products and arrested its multinational crew of 20, charging the ship had polluted sea waters. Seoul will send a government delegation to Iran "at the earliest possible date" to negotiate the release of the vessel and its crew, the foreign ministry said yesterday.

Iran's move came after Tehran had urged Seoul to release billions of dollars of Iranian assets frozen in South Korea as part of the US sanctions.

QASSEM SOLEIMANI KILLING

Iran issues Interpol red notice for Trump's arrest

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

US President Donald Trump has had a "red notice" request for his arrest issued through Interpol by Iran.

Iranian judiciary spokesman Gholamhossein Esmaili announced during a press conference on Tuesday that Iran has requested the international police organisation to arrest Trump and 47 other American officials identified as playing a role in the assassination of top general Qassem Soleimani last year.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran is very seriously following up on pursuing and punishing those who ordered and executed this crime," Esmaili told reporters.

Soleimani, Iran's top general who led the foreign operations arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, was assassinated on January 3, 2020, in a US drone strike in Baghdad ordered by Trump. The assassination was deemed to be against international law by Agnes Callamard, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions.

It was the second Iranian request for an international arrest warrant for Trump and dozens of US officials in the Pentagon and US Central Command, among other organisations.

In June, Tehran prosecutor Ali Alqasimehr issued an arrest warrant for Trump and dozens of US officials saying they face "murder and terrorism charges". But France-based Interpol rejected Iran's request, saying its constitution forbids it from undertaking "any intervention or activities of a political, military, religious or racial character".



Voters cast their ballots in the US Senate run-off election, at a polling station in Marietta, Georgia, yesterday. Control of the U.S. Senate -- and with it the ability to block or advance Democratic President-elect Joe Biden's agenda -- is on the line in a pair of runoff elections in Georgia yesterday after a dizzying campaign that shattered spending and early turnout records.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Britain locks down over virus surge

Sinopharm claims its vaccine effective against new strain; Japan mulls Tokyo emergency

AGENCIES

Schools and colleges across Britain closed yesterday ahead of a national lockdown as the country battled to control surging coronavirus cases that are threatening to overwhelm its healthcare system.

The tough new measures were announced Monday even as Britain began rolling out the Oxford-AstraZeneca shots, a possible game-changer in fighting Covid-19 worldwide, and as vaccine programmes in the United States and Europe stumbled.

Scotland began its lockdown yesterday, while Prime Minister Boris Johnson said all of England, the UK's largest nation, would close down from today -- possibly into mid-February.

The latest virus moves are aimed at containing a severe wave of infections with a new coronavirus strain believed to spread faster.

"With most of the country already under extreme measures, it's clear that we need to do more, together, to bring this new variant under control while our vaccines are rolled out," Johnson said in a televised address.

Similar to a first March-June lockdown last



year, the new moves include the closure of schools and a ban on leaving home for all but exercise and essential shopping.

As Britain ramped up its inoculation programme Monday with the shots developed by the University of Oxford and AstraZeneca, pressure was growing on European authorities to speed up their vaccine approvals process. The European Medicines Agency is yet to approve the Moderna vaccine, and it has said a decision on the AstraZeneca jab is unlikely in January.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and state leaders were expected yesterday to extend

a shutdown in Europe's top economy as coronavirus deaths mounted despite tough restrictions in the run-up to the holidays.

The ease of storage and use of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine compared with the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna alternatives could mean greater access for less wealthy nations in the fight against the coronavirus, which has infected more than 85 million people with more than 1.8 million known deaths.

The efforts to accelerate vaccinations come as concerns grow about the potentially more transmissible variant spreading out of control.

The Chinese firm Sinopharm said Monday its vaccine -- with a claimed effectiveness of 79 percent -- remains effective against the new variant.

Meanwhile, Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said Monday he was considering declaring a state of emergency in the greater Tokyo area over a "very severe" third wave of coronavirus infections.

Speaking at a regular New Year press conference, Suga also said he hoped vaccinations would begin in Japan in late February, adding that he would be among the first to receive one.

West Bengal sports minister 'quits politics'

NDTV ONLINE

Trinamool Congress MLA and sports minister Laxmi Ratan Shukla has resigned from his post in the government and the party to pursue a career in cricket, a decision that comes just months ahead of the assembly election in West Bengal and weeks after a senior minister, Suvendu Adhikari, quit the party and joined the BJP along with a dozen other MLAs.

With a raft of local leaders joining the BJP, the party is priming itself to replace Trinamool Congress in West Bengal in this year's election.

At the launch of the Trinamool's election campaign last month, Banerjee had said leaders who have left the party at a critical time did so after profiting from the party's success but failing to remain loyal. "We will stand with people and fight with them. That is our promise," she said.

Assange 'free to return home' once legal challenges over

Says Australia PM; Mexico offers him asylum

REUTERS, Sydney

Julian Assange is "free to return home" to Australia once legal challenges against him are dealt with, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said yesterday, after a UK court denied a request to extradite the WikiLeaks founder to the United States.

A British judge on Monday blocked the extradition request by the United States, where Assange was set to face criminal charges including breaking a spying law, saying his mental health problems meant he would be at risk of suicide.

U.S. justice department said it would continue to seek Assange's extradition with prosecutors set to appeal the ruling to London's High Court.

"Well, the justice system is making its way and we're not a party to that. And like any Australian, they're offered consular support and should, you know, the appeal fail, obviously he would be able to return to Australia like any other Australian," Morrison told local radio station 2GB.

"So, yes, it's just a straightforward process of the legal system in the UK working its way through."

Assange, 49, is accused by the United States of 18 offences during the administration of former President Barack Obama relating to the release by WikiLeaks of confidential U.S. military records and diplomatic cables which they say put lives at risk.

Assange's supporters, however, see him as an anti-establishment hero who has been victimised because he exposed U.S. wrongdoing in Afghanistan and Iraq and say his prosecution is a politically motivated assault on journalism and free speech.

WikiLeaks came to prominence when it published a U.S. military video in 2010 showing a 2007 attack by Apache helicopters in Baghdad that killed a dozen people, including two Reuters news staff. It then released thousands of secret classified files and diplomatic cables.

Mexico on Monday offered political asylum to Assange, a move that could anger the United States.



People carry placards demanding justice, following the killings of coal miners from Pakistan's minority Shia Hazara community in an attack in Mach area of Bolan district, during a protest in Karachi, yesterday. Members of the Shia Hazara minority who have blockaded a highway in Quetta with the bodies of slain coal miners yesterday said they will not withdraw until Prime Minister Imran Khan meets them and the killers are brought to justice. Islamic State militants slit the throats of 11 miners in a residential compound near a mine site in Balochistan province on Sunday, filming the entire incident and later posting it online.

PHOTO: REUTERS