

NEWS IN BRIEF

UN rights body picks Fiji in first ever presidential vote

The UN Human Rights Council elected Fiji's ambassador as its 2021 president in an unprecedented secret ballot after a diplomatic stand-off blocked the usual consensus decision. Fiji's ambassador in Geneva, Nazhat Shameem Khan, who served as the council's vice president in 2020 and is considered a rights champion, won with 29 out of 47 votes. She ran against two other candidates from the UN's Asia-Pacific regional group of countries: Bahrain's ambassador Yusuf Abdulkarim Buheeri and his counterpart from Uzbekistan, Ulugbek Lapasov, who received 14 and four votes respectively. The council's presidency rotates each year between the regions and the candidate is typically agreed upon by consensus within each regional group. This year, though, the Asia-Pacific group due to take the helm failed to agree on a candidate -- or even on holding a vote within their group.

US troop levels cut to 2,500 each in Afghanistan and Iraq



The US military has cut troop levels in Afghanistan and Iraq to 2,500 each, their lowest levels in the nearly two decades since the wars began, the Pentagon announced yesterday. Outgoing President Donald Trump, seeking to fulfill a campaign promise to end the two wars launched after the 9/11 attacks, had ordered force levels slashed in both countries to that level by January 15. Acting Secretary of Defense Chris Miller said progress towards peace in both countries permits the cuts without a decrease in security for Americans and their counterparts.

46 Pygmies killed in militia attack in eastern DR Congo

Forty-six Pygmies have been massacred in eastern DR Congo's Ituri province by the notorious Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) militia, local sources said yesterday. "ADF rebels overran the village of Abembi" on Thursday, said Gili Gotabo, a local NGO leader. "Forty-six people died and two were wounded, all of them from the Pygmy community," he said. The province's interior minister, Adjo Gigi, confirmed the toll and also blamed the ADF, which has been accused of hundreds of killings in the past year. The attack took place in a local chiefdom called Walese Vonkutu, on Ituri's border with North Kivu province, the sources said. Originating in the 1990s as a Ugandan Muslim rebel group, the ADF is the most notorious of more than 100 militias that plague eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. It has been accused of slaughtering hundreds of civilians in North Kivu and southern Ituri in reprisal for an army offensive launched in late 2019.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

'Laws meant to finish farmers'

Rahul Gandhi leads Congress protest

Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra yesterday protested outside Delhi Lieutenant Governor Anil Bajjal's official residence, in solidarity with those farmers who have been protesting against the central government's recently introduced agricultural laws.

The protest by Congress, which has backed the farmers all this while, is part of its "Speak Up For Kisan Adhikar" campaign. The Congress was observing "Farmer Rights Day" yesterday and all state units had been asked to congregate around all Raj Bhavans in the states.

"BJP government will have to withdraw the farm laws. The Congress will not relent till these laws are repealed. These laws are not to help farmers, but to finish them," Rahul said leading the protest outside Raj Niwas.

"The Narendra Modi government earlier tried to take away the land of farmers, when it brought the land acquisition Act and the Congress party stopped them at that time. Now the BJP and their two-three friends are once again attacking the farmers and have brought these three farm laws," he alleged.

Thousands of farmers from Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan have been camped in and around Delhi in decrepit conditions for the past many weeks. They have been protesting against three recently-passed farm laws perceived to be harmful to them.

The ninth round of discussion between farmers and the government -- held days after the Supreme Court stayed their enactment "until further orders" -- ended yesterday with no progress.

US capital locks down

FBI, citing credible threats, tells police of all 50 states to stay alert ahead of Biden's inauguration

AGENCIES



PHOTO: REUTERS

National Guard members being deployed on US Capitol grounds in Washington, on Thursday.

buildings around the country in the days to come, that could bring armed individuals within close proximity to government buildings and officials," he said.

In steps not seen since after the September 11, 2001 national alerts, an internal FBI bulletin warned that an armed group planned to "storm" government offices in all 50 states to protest Biden, ABC News reported. "The FBI received information about an identified armed group intending to travel to Washington, DC on 16 January," the bulletin added.

The New York Times reported that the FBI has told police departments around the country to stay alert for extremist activity and pass on intelligence.

Meanwhile, the Defense Department Thursday said far-right and white supremacist extremists are actively recruiting in the US military and have gained more support over the past year.

The Pentagon said it will launch an investigation into the extent of extremism in US military ranks. But the Defense Department has not yet released any data on the size of the problem.

The military has been aware of the problem for some time. But it was underscored by the involvement of serving and retired force members, as well as police officers, among the pro-Trump protesters who violently forced their way into the Capitol building.

In another development, US prosecutors now believe supporters of Trump planned to "capture and assassinate elected officials" in their siege of the Capitol building last week, according to a new court filing.

Far-right extremists recruiting in military: Pentagon

Prosecutors say Capitol rioters sought to 'capture and assassinate' lawmakers

The filing, submitted by Justice Department lawyers late Thursday, sought the detention of Jacob Chansley of Arizona, the QAnon conspiracy theorist pictured in the riot dressed as a horned shaman at the desk of Vice President Mike Pence.

"Strong evidence, including Chansley's own words and actions at the Capitol, supports that the intent of the Capitol rioters was to capture and assassinate elected officials in the United States government," prosecutors said of the January 6 siege.

Covid cases in Europe top 30m

AFP, Paris

More than 30 million coronavirus cases have been officially recorded in Europe, according to an AFP tally based on official health statistics at 0800 GMT yesterday.

The 52 nations, which include Russia, constitute the world's worst affected zone in terms of the number of infections, with a total of 30,003,905. Europe is followed by the United States and Canada, which had recorded 23,994,507 cases, Latin America and the Caribbean 16,989,628, Asia 14,485,588, the Middle East 4,323,966, Africa 3,170,837 and Oceania 31,443.

The worst affected countries in Europe were Russia with 3,520,531 cases and 64,495 deaths, Britain with 3,260,258 infections and 86,015 deaths, France (2,851,670 and 69,313) Turkey (2,364,801 and 23,495), Italy (2,336,279 and 80,848) and Spain (2,211,967 and 53,079).

'Catastrophic' warming awaits us

Warns UN chief; forests may flip from CO2 'sink' to 'source' by 2050

AGENCIES

The world is on course for a "catastrophic" temperature rise this century, the United Nations said Thursday as it confirmed that 2020 rivalled 2016 as the hottest year on record.

The relentless pace of climate change is destroying lives, said Secretary-General Antonio Guterres as the UN's World Meteorological Organization said 2011-2020 had been the warmest decade recorded.

The UN weather agency said the warmest three years on record were 2016, 2019 and 2020, and the differences between them in average global temperatures were

It said the average global temperature in 2020 was about 14.9 degrees Celsius -- a figure 1.2 C above the pre-industrial (1850-1900) level.

The 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change calls for capping global warming at well below 2C above the pre-industrial level, while countries will pursue efforts to limit the increase to 1.5 C.

The WMO believes there is at least a one in five chance of the average global temperature temporarily exceeding the 1.5 C mark by 2024.

"The confirmation by the WMO that 2020 was one of the warmest years on record is yet another stark reminder of the relentless pace of climate change, which is destroying lives and livelihoods across our planet," said UN chief Guterres.

"We are headed for a catastrophic temperature rise of 3-5 C this century. Making peace with nature is the defining task of the 21st century. It must be the top priority."

Forests and other land ecosystems today absorb 30 percent of humanity's CO2 pollution, but rapid global warming could transform these natural 'sinks' into carbon 'sources' within a few decades, opening another daunting front in the fight against climate change, alarmed researchers have said.

Climate sceptics often describe CO2 as "plant food", suggesting that increased greenhouse gas emissions will be offset by a massive upsurge in plant

growth. But the new study shows that beyond a certain temperature threshold -- which varies according to region and species -- the capacity of plants to absorb CO2 declines.

Under current greenhouse gas emission trends, plants across half the globe's terrestrial ecosystem could start to release carbon into the atmosphere faster than they sequester it by the end of the century, researchers reported this week in Science Advances.

Ecosystems that store the most CO2 -- especially tropical and boreal forests -- could lose more than 45 percent of their capacity as carbon sponges by mid-century, a team led by Kathryn Duffy from Northern Arizona University found.

"Anticipated higher temperatures associated with elevated CO2 could degrade land carbon uptake," said the study. Failure to take this into account leads to a "gross overestimation" of the role Earth's vegetation might play in reducing global warming, the researchers warned.



PHOTO: REUTERS

NORTH KOREA SHOWS OFF NEW SUBMARINE-LAUNCHED MISSILE

This picture taken on Thursday and released from North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) yesterday shows what appears to be submarine-launched ballistic missiles during a military parade celebrating the 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) in Pyongyang. Political analysts say the unveiling of the missiles was a calculated show of strength days before Joe Biden's inauguration as US president. A working SLBM on a nuclear-powered submarine would be a strategic game changer, enabling Pyongyang to launch a surprise attack from close to the United States or carry out a strike even if its land-based forces had been destroyed.

CHILD BENEFITS SCANDAL

Dutch government quits

AFP, The Hague

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte's government resigned yesterday over a child benefits scandal, threatening political instability as the country battles the coronavirus pandemic.

Thousands of parents were wrongly accused by Dutch authorities of fraudulently claiming child allowance, with many of them forced to pay back large amounts of money and ending up in financial ruin.

The fact that some parents were targeted for investigation by tax officials because they had dual nationality also underscored long-standing criticisms of systemic racism in the Netherlands.

Rutte -- one of Europe's longest-serving leaders, having been in power since 2010 -- said the cabinet would stay on in a caretaker role to oversee the response to Covid-19 until elections in mid-March.

"The buck stops here," Rutte told a press conference after a crisis meeting of his four-party coalition cabinet in The Hague.

"We are of one mind: if the whole system has failed, only joint responsibility can be borne. And that leads to the conclusion that I have just now offered the king the resignation of the entire cabinet."

He added: "The rule of law must protect its citizens from an all-powerful government, and here that's gone terribly wrong."

Rutte defended the decision to resign when the Netherlands is fighting the coronavirus pandemic, with the country facing a surge in cases of a new variant first found in Britain.

Polls say his Freedom and Democracy Party would likely come first in the next elections, putting Rutte in line for a fourth term since 2010.

A hard-hitting parliamentary investigation in December said civil servants cut off benefits to thousands of families wrongly accused of fraud between 2013 and 2019.

Many were required to pay back benefits totalling tens of thousands of euros (dollars). Reports said several couples had split up as a result of the strain.



PHOTO: AFP

A bull charges participants during an annual bull-taming festival 'Jallikattu' in Palamedu village on the outskirts of Madurai, yesterday.

ALLEGED IRAN-QAEDA TIES

Friends with benefits or ideological foes?

AFP, Paris

Iran has for years faced accusations of cooperation with al-Qaeda despite stark ideological differences, but while mutual interests may have sometimes converged any relationship has been marked by distrust, analysts say.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's claim -- made just a week before President Donald Trump leaves office -- that Iran was the "new Afghanistan" for Qaeda militants surprised observers, who said there was no evidence of the country being used as a base.

He also stated publicly for the first time that al-Qaeda's number two, known as Abu Muhammad al-Masri, was assassinated in Tehran in August.

On paper, Iran and al-Qaeda are ideological foes -- the former the Persian regional heavyweight guided by Shia Islam, the latter inspired by a militant vision of Sunni Islam and dominated by Arabs.

Tehran has long dismissed claims of links to al-Qaeda, and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif accused Pompeo of "ending his disastrous

career with more warmongering lies." Zarif noted that all the militants who carried out al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks on the United States came from Pompeo's "favourite ME destinations," a pointed reference to Iran's regional rival Saudi Arabia.

Daniel L. Byman, a professor at Georgetown University, described the relationship between Iran and al-Qaeda as "troubled and mutually suspicious."

"In general, there is cooperation, and Iran does provide some sanctuary," he said, adding that "Iran has put limits on al-Qaeda even as it has provided a haven."

After 9/11 many al-Qaeda cadres from Afghanistan did seek refuge in Iran but it was never an easy relationship, he said, leading up to a wave of arrests in 2002 and 2003.

The New York Times reported that Pompeo succeeded in "bewildering counterterrorism officials" with his comments, with some saying his assertions "appeared to represent his own analytic conclusions" rather than those of US intelligence.

Pompeo's comments came amid speculation that the Trump

administration, in its final days, might go as far as ordering a strike against Iran -- even as incoming president Joe Biden mulls rejoining the 2015 deal on its nuclear programme.

The killing of Abdullah in Tehran, reportedly carried out by Israel's Mossad agents at the behest of the United States has also thrown new light on the alleged presence of Qaeda members in Iran.

Assaf Moghadam, associate professor at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya (IDC) in Israel, described the relationship as "tactical cooperation." Especially with the US administration changing, he said, Iran will not want to give up an "al-Qaeda card" that has proved "way too valuable" for Iranian leaders in the past.

Iran has worked with al-Qaeda and sheltered them on many occasions. But beyond these episodes of cooperation, the relationship has remained one of hostility and distrust.

Depending on the political climate, Iran "would be happy to sell out Al-Qaeda, but only for the right price," Byman said.

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