

News

Explosion risk for oil tanker ablaze off China

BEIJING: An Iranian oil tanker ablaze off China's east coast was at risk of exploding or sinking yesterday, as fears grew for 32 missing sailors amid warnings of a potential environmental disaster. The huge fire was still raging yesterday morning around the stricken vessel, which had been carrying 136,000 tonnes of light crude oil, some 36 hours after it collided with a cargo ship. But China's English-language state broadcaster CGTN later posted a video on Twitter showing the fire seemingly under control as a second vessel sprayed it with water.

Earlier the transport ministry said rescuers trying to locate the crew of 30 Iranians and two Bangladeshis were being beaten back by toxic clouds. The Panamanian-flagged 274-m tanker Sanchi is "in danger of exploding or sinking", the ministry said. Rescuers had recovered one unidentified body as of yesterday afternoon, said foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang. "Conditions... are not that favorable for search and rescue work," he said, adding that "we are also investigating how to prevent any secondary disaster."

The body was found three or four miles from the tanker and "cannot be easily identified" even though the victim had a fire safety vest, Alireza Irvash, from Iran's

consulate in Shanghai, told Iranian state broadcaster IRIB. The accident happened on Saturday evening 160 nautical miles east of the city. The tanker, operated by Iran's Glory Shipping, was heading to South Korea when it collided with a Hong Kong-flagged cargo ship, the CF Crystal, carrying 64,000 tonnes of grain.

Ten government vessels and "many fishing ships" were helping with the ongoing rescue and cleanup effort, the transport ministry said, adding that a South Korean coastguard ship was also on the scene. A US Navy aircraft took part in the search on Sunday, scouring a wide area before returning to Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, Japan.

Environmental fears

As Chinese authorities raced to contain the ship's leaking oil, experts expressed fears the accident could create an environmental disaster. Greenpeace said in a statement it was "concerned about the potential environmental damage that could be caused by the 1 million barrels of crude oil on board". If all of the Sanchi's cargo spills, it would be the biggest oil slick from a ship for decades. By comparison, in the sixth-worst spill since the 1960s, the Odyssey dumped 132,000 tonnes some 700 nautical miles off Canada's Nova Scotia in 1988, according to figures from the International Tanker Owners Pollution Federation website.

"It's very possible this will kill off marine life across a wide area," Wei Xianghua, an environmental expert at Beijing's Tsinghua University, told AFP of the latest threat. Even under a best-case scenario, it would take a



This frame grab yesterday shows smoke and flames coming from a burning oil tanker at sea off the coast of eastern China. — AFP

"long time" for the area to get back to normal, Wei added. "At present, the only thing to be done is make the best effort to not allow the oil to spread to other places."

China had two vessels working to contain the spill early yesterday morning, the transport ministry said. Iran's Petroleum Ministry said the tanker belongs to the National Iranian Tanker Company (NITC) and was

delivering its cargo to South Korea's Hanwha Total. The ship and its cargo were insured, a statement said. It was the second accident in less than two years involving a tanker owned by the NITC. In August 2016 an Iranian supertanker and a container ship collided in the Singapore Strait, causing damage to both vessels but no injuries or pollution. — AFP

US ends protected status for 200,000 Salvadoran residents

WASHINGTON: The US government announced yesterday the end of a special protected status for about 200,000 Salvadoran immigrants, a move that threatens with deportation tens of thousands of well-established families with children born in the United States. Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen announced the end of the "temporary protected status" (TPS) granted to Salvadorans already in the United States in 2001, when two major earthquakes rocked the Central American country.

They were given 18 months to leave or be deported, which officials said is enough time for a legislative solution to be crafted by Congress to allow them to stay. "Only

Congress can legislate a permanent solution addressing the lack of an enduring lawful immigration status of those currently protected by TPS who have lived and worked in the United States for many years," said the DHS. The move came in the wake of the termination of similar TPS protections for 59,000 longtime resident Haitians and 5,300 Nicaraguans late last year, after having been allowed to set deep roots inside the United States for decades.

Crackdown on illegal immigration

DHS said Nielsen made the decision after a review determined "that the original conditions caused by the 2001 earthquakes no longer exist" and so extending the 17-year-old TPS cannot be justified. But the decision also comes as part of a broader crackdown on illegal immigration by President Donald Trump. Many if not most of those in the TPS programs had originally entered the country illegally or overstayed visas, but TPS had effectively allowed them to settle down without the constant fear of deportation. Previous governments rolled over TPS status with lit-

tle debate, but Trump has pursued a tougher "law and order" approach to the issue.

Important to economy

Without a change in the law, the move will force some 195,000 Salvadorans to leave the country by Sept 9, 2019. It impacts large communities of deeply-rooted people in California, Texas and around the US capital, more than 135,000 households, according to the Center for Migration Studies. Nearly all have jobs, over a quarter own homes with a mortgage, 10 percent are self-employed and about 10 percent have married US citizens.

The decision will also impact nearly 193,000 children of Salvadorans born inside the United States - and who therefore have citizenship rights unlike their parents. "They are employed, support families, own homes and pay taxes. They are human beings pursuing the American Dream," said John Boardman, Executive Secretary-Treasurer of the Washington DC area local of the UNITE HERE union, which counts many Salvadoran hotel and restaurant work-

ers as its members.

"If that is not enough, then understand that they are an integral part of our economy and the failure to recognize that comes with dire consequences for industries like hospitality," Boardman said. Democrats in Congress condemned the decision, many noting that the high level of insecurity in El Salvador, where criminal gangs run rampant, puts the lives of returnees in danger.

"Today's decision is a poignant reminder that we have an anti-immigrant president who turns his back on hard-working families and insists on governing by fear and intimidation," said Nevada Senator Catherine Cortez Masto. "Revoking TPS for Salvadorans will not only tear families apart, deportation could expose thousands of them to potentially dangerous and life-threatening situations," she said. Immigrant advocates and many lawmakers held out hopes for a deal with the White House that would allow the Salvadorans to stay, and a senior official, speaking to journalists Monday, suggested that the administration would be amenable to action by Congress. — AFP

Syrian regime pounds rebels...

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Rebels led by the Jaish al-Islam group had in recent days surrounded the army's only military base in the area but the state news agency SANA said yesterday the siege had been broken. "Units from the Syrian Arab Army have brought an end to the encirclement of the Armored Vehicles Base in Harasta," it said, adding that operations were ongoing to fully secure the base. According to the Observatory, the fighting in Harasta since the base was surrounded in late December left 72 regime fighters and 87 rebels dead.

Syrian and Russian aircraft also pounded targets in the northwestern region of Idlib, pressing a week-old operation targeting the last province in the country to escape government control. Raids Sunday left "at least 21 dead, including eight children and 11 members of the same family" west of the town of Sinjar in the southeast of the province, the Observatory said. "Regime and Russian strikes are continuing today on several parts of Idlib" province, Abdel Rahman said.

Russian-backed regime forces launched an operation on the edge of Idlib province in the last days of 2017 and have retaken villages every day since. After the collapse of the Islamic State group in both Syria and Iraq late last year, President Bashar Al-Assad's regime is bent on restoring its grip over the country. Idlib province, which borders Turkey, is almost entirely controlled by anti-gov-

ernment forces that are dominated by a jihadist outfit known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) consisting mostly of fighters from a former Al-Qaeda affiliate.

Among the other groups present in the province are thousands of militants from Central Asian states and members of the Muslim Uighur ethnic minority of China's Xinjiang province. An explosion on Sunday in the city of Idlib at a base for the group Ajnad al-Qawqaz, made up of men from the Caucasus who fight alongside HTS, left at least 43 dead, including 28 civilians, the Observatory said. The toll went up from 23 after rescuers found more bodies in the wreckage and the most critically injured died of their wounds. It was not immediately clear whether the blast was caused by air strikes or was the result of the kind of internal clashes that sometimes break out between jihadist and rebel factions.

After shrinking to barely a sixth of the country at the height of the nearly seven-year-old conflict, the areas under government control now cover more than 50 percent of Syrian territory. More than 340,000 people have been killed and millions have been driven from their homes since Syria's conflict erupted with anti-government protests in 2011.

Meanwhile, pilotless drones carrying explosives attacked Russian bases in Syria over the weekend without causing any casualties or damage, Russia's defense ministry said yesterday. "Ten drones carrying explosives attacked the Russian air base at Hmeimim and three others targeted the Russian naval base in Tartous", both in western Syria, the ministry said in a statement run by Russian press agencies. The "terrorist" attacks took place on Friday night causing "neither casualties nor material damage", the statement said. — AFP

Conjoined Gaza twins separated...

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Allam Abu Hamda, head of the neonatal unit at Gaza's Shifa Hospital, told AFP in October the girls were born joined at the stomach and pelvis and that the complicated condition could not be dealt with in the

enclave. Israel has maintained a blockade of the enclave for a decade, citing security fears over Gaza's Islamist rulers Hamas. Conjoined twins who share key organs have a low chance of survival.

Farah and Haneen, whose condition Abu Hamda said was stable, have one shared leg but separate hearts and lungs. Conjoined twins born in Gaza in Nov 2016 later died. In 2010, conjoined twins from Gaza were transferred to Saudi Arabia for surgery to separate them, but doctors in Riyadh said their condition was too delicate to operate and they died. — AFP

Bacteria makes blue jeans green...

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off slightly with wear-and-tear to yield the sought-after worn-in look.

Some four billion denim garments are produced every year, the vast majority indigo-tinted, said the study authors, and warned of "a serious sustainability problem". The first danger: Producing indigo dye requires the use of toxic chemicals such as formaldehyde and hydrogen cyanide. Furthermore, synthesized indigo is insoluble in water, meaning chemicals are needed to make it suitable for dyeing. One such chemical is sodium dithionite, which decomposes into sulfate and sulfite which can corrode equipment and pipes in dye mills and wastewater treatment plants.

"Many dye mills avoid the additional cost of wastewater treatment by dumping the spent dye materials into rivers, where they have negative ecological impacts," said the research team. The new method mimics the workings of the Japanese plant *Persicaria tinctoria*. Instead of a plant, "we engineered a common lab strain of *Escherichia coli*, a bacteria found in our gut, to be a chemical factory for the production of indigo dye," study co-author John Dueber of the University of California's bioengineering department told AFP.

Like the plant, the bacteria produces a compound called indoxyl, which is insoluble and cannot be used as a dye. By adding a sugar molecule, the indoxyl is turned into indican - a precursor of indigo. Indican can be stored and transformed into indigo directly on the cloth when dyeing, by adding an enzyme to the mix. The lab is working to make the process commercially feasible, Dueber said. For now, producing five grammes of indigo to color one pair of jeans would require "several litres of bacteria," he said, and would be more expensive. — AFP

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