

## Health &amp; Science

# Canary Islands fire goes out of control, now dubbed an 'environmental tragedy'

**MONTANA ALTA:** A fire raged out of control on the Spanish holiday island of Gran Canaria yesterday, forcing evacuations as flames rose so high even water-dropping planes could not operate in what was dubbed an "environmental tragedy". The blaze, the third in 10 days in the mountainous centre of the island, has forced the evacuation of several villages, which according to the census have a combined population of 9,000, a spokeswoman for the emergency services said.

The exact number of evacuees was unclear on the island that lies at the heart of the Canary archipelago off the coast of northwest Africa. No fatalities have been reported and tourism on Gran Canaria, which boasts breathtaking views and is popular with foreigners, had not been affected. "This is an environmental tragedy," Canary Islands President Angel Victor Torres told reporters.

## Next 48 hours 'critical'

Altogether, 1,000 firefighters and other crew and 14 water-dropping helicopters and planes were working on controlling the blaze, which has destroyed 6,000 hectares, according to emergency services. More helicopters were planned to arrive on Tuesday. This deployment of ground and air forces "is the biggest ever carried out in the Canaries and one of the biggest implemented in Spain in the past few years," said Agriculture Minister Luis Planas.

So fierce is the fire in what is part of a UNESCO biosphere reserve that in some areas, it "is beyond our extinction capacities," Federico Grillo, head of emergency services in Gran Canaria, said late Sunday. On the northwest-

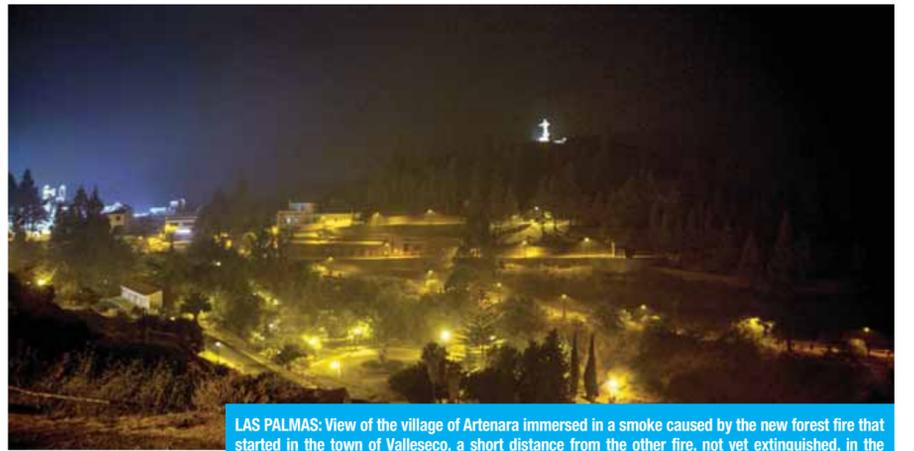
ern flank of the blaze, flames have risen as high as 50 metres (160 feet), preventing ground crew from approaching or water-dropping aircraft from over-flying, the emergency services spokeswoman said. She added around 100 people had been "confined" to the cultural centre of Artenara, unable to leave this village in the disaster zone as all possible evacuation roads were too dangerous to take. Planas said the next 48 hours would be "critical".

## 'Firestorms'

The fire broke out on Saturday afternoon, just days after another wildfire in the same region forced the evacuation of hundreds. Lourdes Hernandez, an expert on wildfires at WWF, told AFP the blaze had entered the Tamadaba natural park, an untouched pine forest that represents "the main green lungs of the island". The fire is also threatening the Inagua nature reserve, another area of major biodiversity. Two other fires hit the island's centre last week without causing injury.

Hernandez said scientists blamed the rapid propagation of the blazes to climate change, even if fires are often initially triggered by humans, intentionally or not. "The virulence of the fire, the speed at which flames spread, the intensity of the fronts, mean that more extreme weather conditions are generated inside the fire and embers leap sometimes hundreds of metres away," she said. "That's what is known as firestorms. And they're blazes that cannot be approached and cannot be extinguished" by fire-fighting forces.

The centre of the island, the second-most populous of



**LAS PALMAS:** View of the village of Artenara immersed in a smoke caused by the new forest fire that started in the town of Valleseco, a short distance from the other fire, not yet extinguished, in the Grand Canary Island of Spain. — AFP

the Canary Islands, attracts hikers. But a large majority of tourists who visit Gran Canaria stay in beach resorts. In a statement, the Canary Islands government said the tourism industry on Gran Canaria remained unaffected "given that the fire is confined to upland areas", with no resorts impact-

ed and no flight delays. Torres said all firefighters were working "to contain the blaze in zones where it is heading to populated areas". Planas added that the "maximum priority" was to "preserve human lives". With its arid hot summers, Spain is frequently plagued by huge forest fires. — AFP

## Ban on sending wild elephants to zoos a step closer

**GENEVA:** The regulator of global wildlife trade will likely ban sending African elephants captured from the wild to zoos after countries supported the move, in what conservationists hailed as a "historic win". A large majority of countries voted in Geneva to prohibit the transfer of elephants caught in the wild to so-called captive facilities — a practice animal protection groups have long described as "cruel".

The vote was the first rendered during a 12-day meeting of the parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, which kicked off on Saturday with thousands of conservationists and policymakers from more than 180 countries in attendance. With 46 in favor, 18 against and 19 abstaining, the vote cast in one of two committees secured the two-thirds majority needed to pass, but will still need to be approved by the full conference before the meeting concludes on August 28.

"This decision will save countless elephants from being ripped away from their families in the wild and forced to spend their lifetimes imprisoned in substandard conditions at zoos," Iris Ho, a senior wildlife specialist with Humane Society International (HSI), said in a statement. Specifically, the countries voted to limit trade in live wild African elephants only to conservation in their natural habitats, effectively ending the practice of capturing elephants and sending them to zoos and entertainment venues around the world.

While elephants in western, central and eastern Africa have long been listed among the species in need of most protection under CITES, and thus banned from all trade, some trade has been permitted



**BRUGELLETTE:** A young elephant from Asia stands near his mother in its enclosure at the Pairi Daiza Zoo. — AFP

in southern Africa, where elephant populations are healthier. Zimbabwe has for instance captured and exported more than 100 baby elephants to Chinese zoos since 2012, according to HSI. "The preliminary decision is a remarkable recognition that elephants don't belong in the entertainment industry," Cassandra Koenen, who heads the wildlife division at World Animal Protection, said in a statement. "It's a huge step in the right direction." — AFP

## Bolsonaro takes on Norway for whaling

**OSLO:** Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro yesterday responded to Norway's decision to halt its forest protection subsidies, taking to Twitter to criticize the Scandinavian country for its whaling practice and post spectacular — albeit misleading — images. "Look at the killing of whales sponsored by Norway," Bolsonaro wrote on Twitter.

The post includes a video and photographs of a spectacular whale hunt, where mammals in the shallow waters of a bay are slaughtered by people wading on shore, armed with hooked knives. The whales' blood turns the waters red. However, the images, reportedly taken on May 29 in Norway, illustrate a "grind", a type of pilot whale hunt practiced exclusively in the Faroe Islands — a Danish territory in the North Atlantic.

Norway is one of the few countries in the world that authorizes commercial whaling, but the whales are hunted individually, at sea from a ship, and with grenade-mounted harpoons. "We can confirm that the video/the photos are not from Norway," the Norwegian fisheries ministry told AFP in an email. "Our whale hunt takes place from ships at sea," he said, arguing that the Norwegian practice was "sustainable".

Bolsonaro was ridiculed on social media for the mix-up. "Haha what a stupid president Brazil has! This is NOT from Norway! We don't kill whales like that. Do your homework to get respected! Fake news' as Trump would have said," wrote one Twitter user. "False information is a crime Mr President," wrote another. Bolsonaro has been taking digs at Norway since the country announced last week that it, like Germany, was blocking 30 million euros (\$33 million) of subsidies to Brazil, accusing it of turning its back on the fight against deforestation.

Norway has been the single largest donor to the Amazon Fund for forest protection, giving almost 830 million euros since its creation 11 years ago. Oslo said Brazil, under Bolsonaro's leadership, "no longer wishes to stop deforestation" and said it unilaterally "broke the agreement" it had on the Amazon Fund. Bolsonaro reacted immediately and angrily. "Norway, isn't that the country that kills whales up there, at the North Pole? And that produces oil too? That is not at all a role model to us. Let them keep their money and let them help Angela Merkel reforest Germany," he said. — AFP

## Foreigners arrested over ivory bracelets at Kenyan airport

**NAIROBI:** A Spanish woman has become the second foreigner in a week to be arrested at Kenya's international airport for wearing an ivory bangle, the wildlife service said yesterday. Spaniard Maria Pich-Aguilera, 50, was arrested on Sunday evening and faces a fine of one million shillings (\$9,800) or 12 months in prison for illegal possession of ivory. The Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) said in a statement she was "arrested at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport with an ivory bangle," while travelling from Nairobi to Tanzania's financial capital Dar es Salaam.

Last week a Frenchwoman was arrested at the airport on her way from France to Mayotte for possession of an ivory bracelet. She pleaded guilty and paid the one million shilling fine. "We noticed this new trend where ivory is smuggled through worked or processed bangles and we have increased surveillance," said an investigator speaking on condition of anonymity. A KWS official, also asking not to be named, said that trafficking included "ornamentals made out of ivory".

"It may be legal in other countries but here it is not. That is why you always hear a call to stop ivory trade all over the world because any small or big demand anywhere pushes poachers to meet the demands." Global trade in elephant ivory has largely been outlawed since 1989 after the animal's numbers plunged from millions in the mid-20th century. The African Elephant Database estimates that by 2015, fewer than 415,000 of the giant mammals remained on the continent.

Thousands of conservationists and policymakers from more than 180 countries are currently meeting in Geneva to tighten rules on trade in elephant ivory and products from other endangered animal and plants. The plight of African elephants is expected to dominate the discussions. Some countries are calling for the strongest possible level of protections for all African elephants, while countries in southern Africa, where populations have traditionally been better protected and healthier, are requesting the resumption of ivory stockpile sales. — AFP

## Singapore to bolster defenses against rising sea levels

**SINGAPORE:** Singapore needs at least \$72 billion to build defenses against rising sea levels, its leader said Sunday as the low-lying city-state gears up against the impact of climate change. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong described climate change as "one of the gravest challenges facing humankind" and said the Southeast Asian country is already feeling the impact through a hotter weather and heavier rainstorms.

He devoted a large portion of a major policy speech late Sunday — which included initiatives on the economy and social issues — on how the city-state will tackle global warming. "Because we are a low-lying island, Singapore is especially vulnerable to one grave threat, and that is rising sea levels," he warned. City planners previously required buildings to be constructed at least three meters above the mean sea level, leaving a one-meter buffer against flooding after high tide.

But if sea levels rise by one meter due to global warming, the buffer could be breached when heavy rains coincide with high tide, prompting the government to require new developments to be built four meters above sea level.



**SINGAPORE:** Visitors walk along the bridge leading to the Merlion park. — AFP

## Victim-blamers have empathy, but it's for the perpetrators

**WASHINGTON:** You may have seen it among your own friends: a high-profile #MeToo case triggers responses that assign some or all the blame on a victim of sexual harassment, with men more likely than women to side with an accused male. New research published Sunday in the *Psychology of Women Quarterly* suggests it is men's empathy for other men, rather than their lack of empathy for women, that may be more important in explaining this effect.

"Men are accused of not being empathic enough — I would say they are as empathic as women, they just might have a different focus," Renata Bongiorno, who led the research, at the University of Exeter told AFP. More encouragingly, the work also found "victim-blaming" among men fell when they were asked to see a situation from a woman's perspective — a possible path towards mobilizing both genders against sexual harassment and assault.

The paper described two studies involving around 230 Australian university students who were asked to read about a clear-cut incident of sexual harassment created for the research using examples drawn from real life. The incident related to a female student who was harassed by a male student on the same campus. Over a period of several months, he made repeated unwanted advances that included slapping her buttocks, placing his arms around her waist, and emailing her pornographic images with suggestions they engage in the same acts.

On several occasions after drinking he would bang on her door demanding to be let in to "cuddle," then insult her when she refused to unlock her door. When the female student finally brought the incident to the college's attention, the male student admitted to most of the allegations but insisted he had been joking around, did not mean to upset her, and believed she "enjoyed the attention."

## 'Dark' side of empathy

In the first study, overall levels of victim-blaming were low and men and women showed equal levels of empathy for the female victim. But men showed greater empathy for the male perpetrator, which helped to explain why they were more likely than women to blame the victim. Bongiorno said this conformed to social identity theory in which members of a so-called "ingroup" are more likely to empathize with other members of the same group and engage in excusing behaviors.

In the second study, participants were asked to focus on how the incidents would affect the life of either the male or female student moving forward. Both men and women who focused on the male perpetrator's point of view showed greater empathy for him and blamed the female victim more. When they were asked to focus on the female victim's point of view, victim-blaming was lower by comparison for both genders.

Bongiorno argued that media depictions that focused too heavily on the potential impact on accused male harassers' careers and lives had damaging consequences that made it harder for victims to speak up. But she said: "I was encouraged by the second study, where we showed that when men have their attention turned toward the victim, their empathy for the male perpetrator was reduced along with their victim blaming. I think that's a positive message and way forward for the future." — AFP