

## International

# Fire crews make headway as Algerians pray for 71 dead

## Nationwide prayers held for the dead as anger mounts

**ALGIERS:** Firefighters made headway Friday against wildfires that have raged across northern Algeria for days but, as nationwide prayers were held for the dead, anger grew that the country was so ill-prepared. Fire crews backed by army engineers and civilian volunteers were still battling 51 wildfires across 16 provinces, emergency services said, but only three in the worst-hit province of Tizi Ouzou.

Blazes were still burning in some areas, including Bejaia, another province of the mainly Berber Kabylie region that extends along the Mediterranean coast east of the capital Algiers, and El Taref, a sparsely populated province that borders Tunisia. At least 71 people have died since Monday, according to the latest official toll. Authorities have said many of the fires were of "criminal origin".

In Tizi Ouzou province, where entire villages have been destroyed and terraced orchards reduced to charred timber and ash there was incredulity that a seasonal phenomenon had become such a deadly disaster. "In Larbaa Nath Irathen, the epicentre of the fires in Kabylie, the experts have only managed to identify 19 of the 25 charred bodies they recovered,"

the vice president of the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights, Said Salhi, said. "Families are left still searching for their loved ones — that just piles pain on pain."

### 'Lost everything'

Larbaa Nath Irathen serves as the market center for some two dozen villages deep in the Kabylie mountains that were renowned for their scenery. All have been destroyed or blighted by the fires. "It's horrific — there's no other word for it," a villager in his 60s, who gave his name only as Djamel, told AFP by telephone. "The first rule of government is be prepared. Except here, where every time we do nothing until after the catastrophe, when the damage has already been done."

Another villager, Mohand, had driven to Algiers to find shelter for his family before heading back to help. "I've never seen anything like it in my entire life," he said. "There are families who have lost everything, absolutely everything. I can still smell the odor of charred flesh. It's unbearable. It just won't go away."

Many rural districts of Tizi Ouzou have been left without power, gas or telephone

lines. A family of five was killed when a petrol station in the village of Ain el-Hammam blew up, prompting other stations across the region to switch off their pumps and leaving motorists struggling to find fuel. The North African country was observing a second day of national mourning for those killed in the fires, with prayers held at mosques after the weekly Friday services.

### 'No firebreaks, no hydrants'

Seasonal wildfires are nothing new in Algeria. But this time high winds fuelled the rapid spread of flames in tinder-dry conditions created by a heatwave across North Africa and the wider Mediterranean. Meteorologists expect the regional heatwave to continue until the end of the week, after temperatures in Algeria reached 50 degrees Celsius (122 Fahrenheit).

France and other countries have offered support, including firefighting aircraft. The death toll from this year's fires in Algeria — far higher than all other Mediterranean countries combined — has sparked growing criticism of successive governments' failure to invest in fire prevention and control.



**TIZI-OUZOU, Algeria:** An Algerian woman dressed in a traditional outfit stands amidst the charred debris of her home that burned down during wildfires in the Ait Daoud area of northern Algeria, Friday. —AFP

Bab Ezzouar University research director Abdelkrim Chelghoum said the country had failed to learn from a series of deadly disasters that hit the country in the early 2000s. A law detailing measures that needed to be put in place was adopted

in December 2004 but its provisions were never implemented, he said. "The emergency services are struggling on the ground because there are no forestry roads, no firebreaks, no hydrants," Chelghoum said. —AFP

## Nigeria separatists suspend protest call

**LAGOS:** Separatists in Nigeria yesterday announced a suspension of a weekly protest over the arrest of their leader, a spokesman for the group said in a statement. The outlawed Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which wants a separate state for the ethnic Igbo people in the southeast of the country, had recently called on businesses in the oil-rich region to close every Monday.

The "sit-at-home" order from 6:00am to 6:00pm was to protest the arrest of their leader Nnamdi Kanu who is facing trial on terrorism and treasonable felony charges among others. Markets and shops heeded the group's call on Monday this week and streets were mostly deserted, residents said.

But IPOB spokesman Emma Powerful said they were suspending the protest until Kanu's court appearance scheduled for October 21. "The suspension of the sit-at-home... was as a result of a direct order from the supreme leader of this great movement (Mazi) Nnamdi Kanu through his lawyers," Powerful said in a statement.

"Our sit-at-home will in the meantime be observed on the date of our leader's court appearances." He said "the leadership will not hesitate to lift the suspension" if there were "any reason or directive from the IPOB highest command." Kanu, 53, is being held by the Department of State Services after his lawyers say he was arrested in Kenya in June and brought back to Nigeria to face trial. — AFP

## Bill Cosby sex assault case to move forward in California

**SAN FRANCISCO:** A nearly seven-year-old civil lawsuit alleging Bill Cosby sexually assaulted a teen girl will move forward, a judge ruled Friday. The lawsuit, filed in December 2014, says the disgraced comedian—who was freed from prison in Pennsylvania in June—sexually assaulted Judy Huth in 1974 when she was 15 years old. Huth alleges Cosby assaulted her at the Playboy Mansion and that she suffered "psychological damage and mental anguish" as a result.

The case had been on hold as Cosby, 84, was facing aggravated indecent assault charges in Pennsylvania. After being convicted for drugging and sexually assaulting a woman 17 years ago, Cosby was freed from his prison sentence after the state's supreme court ruled he had been denied a fair trial. Now, a Los Angeles judge says the civil case against Cosby should proceed.

The court lifted the stay on Friday, except regarding whether Cosby must give a deposition, according to Huth's legal team. The stay on the deposition will remain in effect until September 30, as lawyers wait to see if the US Supreme Court will review the Pennsylvania decision vacating Cosby's criminal conviction, attorney John West told AFP. Huth's legal team said a trial date of April 18 had been set.

"We look forward to continuing battling for our very brave client," attorney Gloria Allred told reporters. Cosby's legal team did not respond to an AFP request for comment. The case is understood to be the last pending legislation against Cosby. Dozens of women have said they suffered sexual assault at the hands of the celebrity, but only Constand's allegations were tried criminally, due to expiring statutes of limitations. Cosby's release from prison—he had served more than two years of his three-to-ten year sentence—infuriated many advocates of the #MeToo movement. —AFP

## Toddler among dead in UK's worst shooting for decade

**LONDON:** Police said on Friday they were investigating the background of a troubled loner who obtained a firearms license and shot dead five people including his mother and a three-year-old girl, in Britain's first mass shooting in 11 years. No motive has emerged for Thursday evening's bloodshed at the hands of 22-year-old gunman Jake Davison, who killed himself after the six-minute spree in Plymouth, southwest England, not far from western Europe's biggest naval base.

But ruling out terrorism, including with far-right groups, Devon and Cornwall Police confirmed that Davison's first victim was his 51-year-old mother, Maxine, at her house in a quiet residential area.

Davison then shot and killed toddler Sophie Martyn and her father, Lee, 43, on the street outside, before taking the lives of another man and woman nearby, the police said. Another two locals received "significant" but not life-threatening gunshot wounds, they said, adding that as of 2020, Davison held a valid firearms license. But as questions mounted over Davison's past, Prime Minister Boris Johnson thanked the emergency services, and expressed concern at the misogyny apparent in the gunman's social media accounts. He told reporters he was "appalled" at the sexism and said: "I think this is something that will undoubtedly be part of the investigation."

### Gun permit probe

Home Secretary Priti Patel stressed the government was addressing online extremism in forthcoming legislation that seeks to hold social media companies to greater account. She said it would also look into how Davison obtained a gun permit, as independent police investigators opened a probe into the approval of a license in his case by the



**PLYMOUTH:** Britain's Home Secretary Priti Patel (center) arrives with Chief Constable for Devon and Cornwall Police, Shaun Sawyer (left) and Labour MP for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, Luke Pollard (second right), to lay a floral tribute to the victims of the August 12 shootings in Plymouth, in North Down Crescent Park in the Keyham area, southwest England, yesterday. —AFP

regional force. Britain's police watchdog said it would investigate why Davison was handed back his shotgun and accompanying permit in July.

They had been taken away from him by police in December 2020 "following an allegation of assault in September 2020," the Independent Office for Police Conduct said in a statement. Churches and schools in Plymouth opened their doors for locals to mourn and receive counseling if needed. "We weep with those who weep," said Plymouth's Anglican bishop, the Right Reverend Nick McKinnel.

City leaders planned Friday evening to illuminate Smeaton's Tower, a local landmark, as "a beacon of light on a very dark, dark day for Plymouth". A single gun was recovered from the scene after Davison shot himself, but the police were unable to confirm witness accounts that it was a pump-action shotgun. Britain has some of the Western world's toughest gun controls and police are not routinely armed. Gun crime rates are among the lowest in the world.

According to the latest government figures, in the year to March 2020, 30 people were killed by shooting in England and Wales—the equivalent of

four percent of homicides in the 12-month period.

### 'YouTube rants'

Private ownership of handguns was outlawed in nearly all cases after a school massacre in the Scottish town of Dunblane in 1996, which claimed the lives of 16 young pupils and their teacher in Britain's worst mass shooting to date. But ownership of sporting rifles and shotguns is allowed, subject to strict licensing rules. Licenses last five years, and are meant to be granted only after thorough police background checks, including for mental illness. Britain's last mass shooting was in June 2010, when taxi driver Derrick Bird killed 12 people in Cumbria, northwest England. Davison's social media channels on Facebook, YouTube and Reddit indicated an interest in guns, right-wing libertarian politics and "shoot-em-up" video games. The content suggested a self-pitying loner, alienated from his family and hostile to women, identifying with the "incel" (involuntary celibate) subculture. Prior to being taken down, his YouTube content mostly showed him lifting weights in his home gym. —AFP

## US authorizes COVID boosters for those with weakened immune systems

**WASHINGTON:** The United States authorized an extra dose of COVID-19 vaccine for people with weakened immune systems overnight Thursday to Friday, as the country struggles to thwart the Delta variant. Emergency use authorization for a third injection of Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines was granted by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulator.

"The country has entered yet another wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the FDA is especially cognizant that immunocompromised people are particularly at risk for severe disease," said acting FDA Commissioner Janet Woodcock in a statement. The FDA said the additional dose was for solid organ transplant recipients or those with equivalent weakened immune systems.

Some media reports suggest that one million Americans may have had unauthorized third doses in an attempt to increase protection against the coronavirus. "Individuals who are fully vaccinated are adequately protected and do not need an additional dose of COVID-19 vaccine at this time," Woodcock said.

A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advisory committee voted in favor of the decision on Friday, with the agency subsequently publishing its recommendations for the administration of a third dose for use by healthcare professionals. However, the committee said people who received the Johnson & Johnson single-dose vaccine, a minority of the US population, were not included in the decision due to lack of available data.

### Booster moratorium call

Earlier this month, the United States rejected an



**HARTFORD, US:** In this file photo, pharmacist Madeline Acquilano inoculates a teacher with the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 Vaccine at Hartford Hospital in Hartford, Connecticut. —AFP

appeal from the World Health Organization for a moratorium on booster shots to help ease the drastic inequity in dose distribution between rich and poor nations. More than 619,000 people have died in the United States from COVID-19, with case numbers increasing sharply in recent months due to the spread of the Delta variant. The country's rapid vaccination program hit resistance in politically conservative regions in the South and Midwest, among those with lower incomes and racial minorities.

But officials this week hailed recent progress, with a half million people getting newly vaccinated every day, and improved take-up among teenagers and in virus hotspots such as Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi. After the FDA ruling, Moderna CEO Stephane Bancel said it was "promising" that studies demonstrated a third dose could help immunocompromised people. COVID-19 vaccines are free and widely available in the United States, though only half of the total population is fully vaccinated. "Right now at this moment, other than the immune compromised, we're not going to be giving boosters to people," top US Covid-19 advisor Anthony Fauci told NBC on Thursday. —AFP

## Senegal architects enraged after historic Dakar market is razed

**DAKAR:** Senegalese architects expressed their anger on Friday after bulldozers razed the famed Sandaga market, a sprawling hub of informal trade in the heart of Senegal's capital Dakar. An iconic establishment lying between the old French colonial quarter and more working-class neighborhoods, Sandaga has been one of Dakar's main trading centers for almost a century.

Frequented daily by residents of the capital, the market also drew people from the provinces and from the West African region. Many tourists came to hunt down artisanal carvings and other artefacts. The great hall, built in the Sudanese-Sahel tradition in 1933, housed hundreds of stalls selling merchandise of all kinds, from food to craft goods. It was shut down for public safety reasons after the edifice was weakened by several fires. The authorities had it pulled down in order to build a modernized replica. The architects voiced their anger just hours after that process was completed on Friday. "This is deeply regrettable," said Jean Augustin Carvalho, president of the National Order of Architects.

Sandaga is "a heritage and an identity of the city of Dakar. It was necessary by all means to see how to preserve it," he said adding "this building could still be standing with some renovation". Papa Dame Thiaw, another member of the architect's society, said that "technical solutions exist for the conservation of this heritage building." Fellow member Annie Jouga called the demolition "a scandal". "It is a bluff to say that we are going to rebuild identically. We cannot reconstruct a 1933 building identically with modern techniques," she added. Shopkeepers voiced opposition over the relocation last month, telling the government that they would lose customers at the new site far from Sandaga, a curiosity for tourists which drew large crowds. — AFP