



Tokyo's popular governor, Japan PM trade barbs

Happier marriages linked to healthier hearts

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CALIFORNIA: Flames overtake a structure as nearby homes burn in the Napa wine region in California as multiple wind-driven fires continue to whip through the region. — AFP

California wildfires rage on; thousands evacuate

Wildfires kill 10; fire crews battle the blaze

NAPA: More than a dozen fast-moving wildfires tearing through California's wine country have killed at least 10 people, destroying hundreds of homes, authorities said Monday. Fanned by winds of over 50 miles an hour, the blazes have forced more than 20,000 people to evacuate in the country's heaviest populated state since they began Sunday night.

California's fire service said about 73,000 acres have been ravaged by the major infernos. "The Sheriff's Office confirms seven fire-related deaths from the Sonoma Co. fires. Our condolences to their friends and families," tweeted the sheriff of Sonoma County in the state's north. The previous toll had stood at three. At least 1,500 buildings were destroyed as the state declared an emergency in three counties ravaged by intense fires, mostly in its famous wine-producing regions.

Fourteen major fires are burning in total. Napa, Sonoma and Yuba counties are covered by Governor Jerry Brown's order. The counties are north of San Francisco Bay. An AFP correspondent in the Santa Rosa area witnessed multiple explosions from gas lines or gas tanks, in addition to charred out homes and a winery. Fire trucks were out in force in that area, he said. About 410 firefighters are working on blazes in Mendocino, a sheriff's spokesman in that county told the CBS news

network, adding that multiple fatalities were expected.

'Significant damage'

Another fire in Anaheim has surged to char 800 hectares and at least 200 fire fighters scrambled to try to contain it. Dozens of shelters were opened in schools and churches. Even livestock had shelter areas set up on some fair grounds. "We're going to have to start over completely," Dreema Goldberg, who fled her home—now a heap of ashes—at eight months pregnant, told NBC. Jesus Torres told CBS he barely had time to grab a few things and run from his home. "We could see the sky was getting red; we did not know it was fire until the last second because there was just smoke everywhere," he said. The Hilton Hotel in Santa Rosa said on Facebook that its staff and guests were evacuated safely.



About 73,000 acres ravaged by infernos

"The wildfires in Santa Rosa, California and the surrounding areas have forced the evacuation and temporary closure of Hilton Sonoma Wine Country," it said on Facebook. "All guests and associates of the Hotel have been safely evacuated and are not able to return until further notice. It is anticipated that the Hotel has sustained significant damage." Pacific Gas & Electric said more than 196,000 customers had initially lost electricity although half had had their power restored. "As of 3.00 pm, we have about 99,000 customers out of power throughout our service area, with the majority of them in Sonoma and Napa counties," it said.

'Everything gone'

Coffey Park, a sprawling Santa Rosa neighborhood with dozens of homes, was also charred in the strong

winds and low humidity fire experts said were more like fires in southern California. Cheri Sharp told Oregon-based TV news channel KOB1 her home of 26 years in Santa Rosa was among those destroyed. "All our pictures are gone. Everything, everything is gone. We've got a fire pit. It's pretty awful," she said.

"But we're all healthy and safe, and we have to try and be grateful for that. But it's pretty awful." Marian Williams of Kenwood, in Sonoma County, told NBC Bay Area she joined a convoy of neighbors driving through the flames before dawn as one of the fires reached the area's vineyards. "It was an inferno like you've never seen before," Williams told the station. Governor Brown in April declared the official end of the state's drought that lasted more than five years.

But the state is still dealing with the Santa Ana winds, a meteorological phenomenon which brings dry winds down from the high mountains east of the coastal areas—a recipe for perfect wildfire conditions. Forest fires are common in the western United States during dry, hot summer months. Last month, a massive fire described as the biggest in the history of Los Angeles forced hundreds to evacuate their homes. Early Monday, the fires could be smelled in San Francisco, about 60 kilometers from the closest. — AFP

Rohingya feel like prisoners in giant Bangladesh camp

KUTUPALONG: Hasina Begum's earliest memory is of watching the jungle cut down to expand the camp in Bangladesh that is the only home the 31-year-old Rohingya refugee has ever known. Begum is one of about 300,000 Rohingya who escaped turmoil in Myanmar before the latest eruption of violence brought another half a million refugees to Bangladesh, pushing already overcrowded camps to breaking point. She was just five when her family fled persecution of the Muslim minority in Myanmar and has become trapped in the poverty of the refugee camps.

"My children sometimes ask me what their future will be. I don't know what to tell them," said the widowed mother of four in her dark, damp hut in Kutupalong camp near the Myanmar border. "There is no happiness here," she said. "If we had a decent house and enough to eat it would be wonderful. But we live in a camp, there is not enough to eat, so really there is no happiness here." The influx of about 520,000 Rohingya in the past six weeks has made the situation even worse, overturning the environment and human eco-system in Kutupalong, where elephants once roamed.

The elephants are gone, trees and any other plant life have been razed to make way for the tidal wave of

humanity that has taken over the hills around what was once a tiny village on the Bangladesh border with Myanmar. Hafez Ahmed, who sells bamboo on the roadside, arrived at Kutupalong 27 years ago. "When I came here, it was an area of green hills, uninhabited, covered with jungle. There were elephants here," he said. The nearest elephants are now dozens of kilometers away. Behind him the tented city spreads further each day from one hill to another.

'Not a life'

The Rohingya, whether they fled unrest in Rakhine state in 1978, 1991-92 or this year, do not feel wanted anywhere. Myanmar considers them migrants from Bangladesh and refuses to give them nationality—even though many lived in Rakhine for generations. Bangladesh wants Myanmar to take back the Rohingya. It does not let the refugees work or move outside the camps. They are forced to live off UN and charity aid, waiting for a return to Rakhine that will probably never materialize.

Some manage to get work as black market laborers. A small bribe to local police allows occasional trips outside the camp, said Mohammed Idriss, who has been at Kutupalong since 1992. "It is the life of a prisoner," he said as he started to cry. "I have been here so long, this is not a life." Bangladesh authorities want to extend the existing camps around Kutupalong into a refugee city for the 800,000 Rohingya that the United Nations has warned will be dangerously overcrowded. The camp already has its own archaeology which sets out the different waves of refugees.

The oldest residents have huts with mud walls but suc-



UKHIA, Bangladesh: Newly arrived Rohingya refugees rest by the side of the road on their way to the Thangkhal refugee camp at Balukhali in the Bangladeshi district of Ukhiya yesterday. — AFP

cessive newcomers were forced to find shelter further away from the key roads, their homes even more basic. Those who arrived since August 25 have had to live in tents pitched on monsoon-soaked mud. Few will admit any hope that they will be allowed to return to Rakhine,

even if Myanmar has said it will take back refugees whose identities are "verified". "Bangladesh will send back a few, Myanmar will agree to take them, but in six months, it will all start again," predicted Kafait Ulah, who has spent all but eight of his 34 years in Kutupalong. — AFP