

International

World's 15 hottest places are in India, Pakistan as pre-monsoon heat builds

Parched India awaits monsoon rains as reservoirs begin to run dry

NEW DELHI: India warned of severe heat in northern and central areas yesterday, following similar extreme weather on Sunday. Of the 15 hottest places in the world in the past 24 hours, eight were in India with the others in neighboring Pakistan, according to weather monitoring website El Dorado. Churu, a city in the west of the northern state of Rajasthan, recorded the country's highest temperature of 48.9 Celsius yesterday, according to the Meteorological Department.

Churu has issued a heat wave advisory and government hospitals have prepared emergency wards with extra air conditioners, coolers and medicines, said Ramratan Sonkariya, additional district magistrate for Churu. Water is also being poured on the roads of Churu, known as the gateway to the Thar desert, to keep the temperature down and prevent them from melting, Sonkariya added. A farmer from Sikar district in Rajasthan died on Sunday due to heatstroke, state government officials said.

Media reported on Friday that 17 had died over the past three weeks due to a heatwave in the southern state of Telangana. A state official said it would confirm the number of deaths only after the causes had been ascertained. The temperature in New Delhi touched 44.6C on Sunday. One food delivery app, Zomato, asked its customers to greet delivery staff with a glass of cold water.

Heat wave warnings were issued yesterday for some places in western Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh state. The monsoon, which

brings down the heat, is likely to begin on the southern coast on June 6, the weather office said last month. The three-month, pre-monsoon season, which ended on May 31, was the second driest in the last 65 years, India's only private forecaster, Skymet, said, with a national average of 99 mm of rain against the normal average of 131.5 mm for the season.

Meanwhile, millions of Indians are desperately awaiting overdue monsoon rains as they struggle to secure drinking water amid the heat wave that is rapidly drying up reservoirs and sending temperatures soaring across the country. India typically witnesses water scarcity during summer months, but the situation this year is particularly grim in western and southern states which received less than normal rainfall in the 2018 monsoon season.

"I wake early to get water from a well outside the village, as within three hours the water runs dry," says Ramchandra Pawar, a farmer from Latur district some 500 km southeast of Mumbai in the drought-hit western state of Maharashtra. The drought has ravaged crops, killed livestock, emptied reservoirs and hit city dwellers and supplies to some industries. Hardest hit are the western states of Maharashtra and Gujarat, along with Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana down south and Madhya Pradesh in central India.

Depleting reservoirs have even forced some municipalities in places like Chennai, Mumbai and Hyderabad to cut supplies to

ensure water lasts until the arrival of the monsoons, which are running a few days late. In total, key reservoirs in western India were at 11 percent of their overall storage capacity on Thursday, compared to 15 percent a year ago and ten-year average of 19 percent. State governments have deployed tankers to ease water scarcity, but people complain there are not enough.

"Tankers supply water only once in a week. The rest of the week, we have to carry water from a borewell where hundreds of people queue from early morning," said Zeenat Shaikh from Latur, a city with population of around 500,000. Maharashtra is using 6,209 lorries to supply water to 15,426 villages and hamlets - four times the fleet it sent out in 2018, said a senior state government official. "Tanker requirements are going up every week as reservoirs are depleting," the official said.

As government supplies are not enough, people are buying water from private tanker suppliers, and the price is rising with demand. In the southern city of Chennai, where many well-known IT companies are based, the price of a water tanker has nearly doubled in two months to 4,000 rupees, media reported. Gautham Prithvirajan, 27, who lives in Chennai, said nobody in his street had been able to get clean drinking water despite drilling 350 feet into the ground, a situation he says he hasn't witnessed in years. The shortage had been exacerbated by private vendors digging deep into the water table, he said.



AJMER, India: A general view of a lake running dry on a hot summer day on Sunday. — AFP

"We are planning a protest later this week. Calls to rectify the situation have gone unanswered," he said.

Indians now hope the annual June-September monsoon rain will also bring down

temperatures that have shot up above 45 degrees Celsius in many parts of the country. But there are fears it could deliver lower rainfall than normal, according to a private forecaster Skymet. — Reuters

Protests over Muslim politicians grip Lanka city

COLOMBO: Demonstrations by several thousand people gripped Sri Lanka's pilgrim city of Kandy yesterday as Buddhist monks demanded the sacking of three top Muslim politicians over the Easter suicide bombings. Even as shops and offices were closed in the city 115 km east of Colombo, two of the Muslim leaders stepped down from their posts as provincial governors, President Maithripala Sirisena's office said.

The governors of the Eastern and Western provinces, both Sirisena appointees, tendered their resignations which were accepted, the president's office said in a brief statement. It gave no further details. Inside Kandy's famed Temple of the Tooth, where Buddhists believe a tooth of the Buddha is enshrined, prominent monk Athuraliye Ratana ended what he had called a "death fast" since the weekend after the two resignations.

The monk was taken away in an ambulance for medical treatment. Also present earlier in the day was Galagodaatte

Gnanasara, a firebrand monk released from jail on a presidential pardon late last month who has long been accused of instigating hate crimes against Muslims. Ratana, who is also a member of parliament, was demanding the sacking of the two provincial governors and Commerce Minister Rishad Bathiudeen. Political sources said all Muslim ministers were expected to step down from the government of the Buddhist-majority island en masse if Bathiudeen was forced out. "All Muslim ministers may step down in solidarity if Rishad is forced out," a Muslim minister told AFP, asking not to be named.

Cardinal criticized

Buddhist monks accuse the three Muslim leaders of supporting the extremists responsible for the April 21 attacks on three churches and three hotels that killed 258 people including 45 foreigners. The head of the Catholic Church in Colombo, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, also travelled to Kandy yesterday to express solidarity with Ratana. "We support the monk's campaign because so far justice has not been served," Ranjith told reporters in Kandy.

Government spokesman and Finance Minister Mangala Samaraweera criticised Ranjith for supporting "communalism". "Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith fanning the flames of hatred and communalism by vis-



KANDY, Sri Lanka: People demonstrate outside the Buddhist shrine Temple of the Tooth in this central town yesterday. — AFP

iting fasting robed MP Rathana. Vatican TAKE NOTE!" Samaraweera said on Twitter. The government has said nearly 100 people linked to local jihadist group, the National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ), have been arrested since the attacks.

In the wake of the bombings, anti-Muslim riots spread in towns north of the capital killing one Muslim man and leaving

hundreds of homes, shops and mosques vandalized. "There is tension in the area because of the demonstrations, but police are maintaining a high alert," a police official in Colombo told AFP. Sri Lanka is under a state of emergency since the Easter attacks. Police and troops have been empowered to arrest and detain suspects for long periods. — AFP

News in brief

Indian military plane missing

GUWAHATI, India: An Indian military aircraft with 13 people on board went missing yesterday in the northeast of the country, the defense ministry said. The Russian-built Antonov An-32 took off from Jorhat in Assam state at 12:25 pm (0655 GMT) headed for Mechuka in Arunachal Pradesh, bordering China. "The aircraft last contacted ground agencies at 1300 hrs, thereafter there has been no contact," the defense ministry said in a statement. "A total of eight crew and five passengers were onboard the aircraft," it said. Spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel P Khongsai said every effort was being made to locate the missing plane. Defense Minister Rajnath Singh, who assumed charge of the ministry last week, said he was in touch with senior air force officials. "I pray for the safety of all passengers on board," he said on Twitter. Crashes by India's sizeable fleet of ageing Russian military aircraft are relatively common. — Agencies

Tiananmen 'immunized' China

BEIJING: A Chinese state-run daily defended the government's handling of the Tiananmen protests yesterday, saying it "immunized" China against turmoil in a rare editorial about the crackdown on the eve of its 30th anniversary. The Global Times' English-language edition hailed the Chinese government's handling of what it called the "incident" in an editorial titled: "June 4 immunized China against turmoil". "As a vaccination for the Chinese society, the Tiananmen incident will greatly increase China's immunity against any major political turmoil in the future," wrote the nationalist tabloid. The party's "control of the incident" in 1989 had been a "watershed" that marked the difference between China's rapid economic progress and the fate of other communist countries such as the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia that disintegrated, the Global Times said. The editorial also rebuked dissidents, Western politicians and media, saying their criticism of the event would have "no real impact" on Chinese society. — AFP

Four killed in Kabul bus blast

KABUL: At least four people were killed yesterday when a bomb tore through a bus in Kabul, an official said, marking the second day straight that attackers have targeted a bus. The vehicle was taking workers home from a government watchdog agency ahead of the Eid holidays marking the end of Ramadan when the bomb exploded. Farid Ahmad, a spokesman for the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission (IARCS), told AFP the bomb had been concealed on a bicycle along the side of the road. "Unfortunately, we have lost four colleagues, nine have been wounded", Ahmad said. Interior ministry spokesman Nasrat Rahimi put the toll at five dead and 10 wounded - all of them civilians. He said the explosion had been caused by a sticky bomb, a common threat in Kabul where criminals and insurgents slip explosives under vehicles. — AFP

Whistleblower seeks Swedish asylum

ALMATY, Kazakhstan: A woman who testified in court to the existence of camps for Muslim minorities in China's troubled Xinjiang region has left Kazakhstan after being refused asylum there, her lawyer said yesterday. Sayragul Saulybay, a Chinese citizen of Kazakh descent, and her family travelled to Sweden which had granted her an alien's passport for the journey, her lawyer said. Saulybay made world headlines last year when she testified in a Kazakh court that she had been forced by Chinese authorities to work at a re-education camp where 2,500 Kazakhs were interned. Saulybay was arrested by authorities in Kazakhstan after she used forged documents to cross from China into the Central Asian country where her husband and children were living and had received citizenship. Although the Kazakh court freed her amid a public outcry in August, migration authorities subsequently refused her asylum status in a move that appeared motivated by the need not to offend Beijing. — AFP

With #KuToo, Japan women kick back at high-heels

TOKYO: A group of Japanese women yesterday submitted a petition to the government to protest what they say is a de-facto requirement for female staff to wear high heels at work.

The #KuToo campaign, a play on words from the Japanese word "kutsu" - meaning shoes - and "kut-suu" - meaning "pain" - was launched by actress and freelance writer Yumi Ishikawa and quickly won support from nearly 19,000 people online. Campaigners say wearing high heels is seen as near-obligatory when job hunting or working at many Japanese companies. "Today we submitted a petition calling for the introduction of laws banning employers from forcing women to wear heels as sexual discrimination or harassment," Ishikawa told reporters after meeting labor ministry officials. A ministry official who met her "was a woman and sympathetic to our petition... and told us that this is the first time voices of this kind reached the ministry", Ishikawa said. "It's the first step forward" towards achieving their goals, added Ishikawa.

Ministry officials were not immediately available for comment on the petition. A tweet by Ishikawa earlier this year that complained about the requirement to wear heels for a hotel job went viral, prompting her to launch the campaign. "As I realized that so many people face the same problem, I decided to launch the campaign," hot on the heels of the global anti-sexual harassment #MeToo campaign, she said. Some campaigners online have said high heels are akin to modern foot-binding while others urged other dress codes, such as the near-total donning of business suits for men, to be loosened in the Japanese workplace. In 2015, the director of the prestigious Cannes Film Festival apologized after a controversy blew up over women being denied access to the red carpet for not wearing high heels. But Cannes kept the dress code, despite a protest by Hollywood superstar Julia Roberts, who went barefoot the next year. — AFP



Yumi Ishikawa

Chinese warships cause surprise in Sydney Harbour

SYDNEY: Australians enjoying a sunny winter morning were shocked by the sight of three Chinese warships steaming into Sydney Harbour yesterday, forcing the prime minister to reassure jittery residents. Amid heightened concern about Beijing's growing clout and military muscle-flexing, the appearance of a Chinese flagged task group and around 700 sailors came as a surprise. It also came as Prime Minister Scott Morrison was away on a visit to the Solomon Islands, a key player in the South Pacific that China is hoping to woo away from its recognition of Taiwan.

"It may have been a surprise to others, but it certainly wasn't a surprise to the government," Morrison told reporters in the Solomons capital Honiara when asked about the Chinese naval visit. "We have known about that for some time," Morrison described the port call as a "reciprocal visit, because Australian naval vessels have visited China". "They were returning after a counter drug trafficking operation in the Middle East."

The vessels appeared to be the Kunlun Shan, an amphibious landing ship; the Luoma Lake, a replenishment ship; and the Xuchang, a modern frigate that is believed to be fitted with surface-to-air and anti-submarine missile systems. They are scheduled to stay until Friday. The timing of their visit has been questioned, coinciding with Morrison's Solomons trip and on the eve of the 30th anniversary of the violent suppression of the Tiananmen demonstrations.

New Delhi to offer free public transport for 850,000 women

NEW DELHI: Almost a million women will enjoy free public transport as part of an attempt to make the Indian capital safer, New Delhi's government said yesterday. The city has been notorious for women's safety since the 2012 gang rape and murder of a female student on a Delhi bus that sparked major protests. The measure will be rolled out in the next two-to-three months for around 850,000 women. Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal said it would cost about \$115 million a year, but would improve security and cut traffic pollution. The regional government is also look-



SYDNEY: Three Chinese warships are seen docked at Garden Island naval base yesterday. — AFP

On June 4, 1989 the regime gunned down hundreds of its own citizens and jailed thousands more, after protesters demanded political change and an end to state corruption. The arrival of the ships also comes just days after it was revealed that a Chinese warship had recently confronted an Australian vessel in the South China Sea, and Australian helicopter pilots had been targeted with lasers. "I think any reading into timing could be subject to a bit of over-analysis," said Morrison.

Since coming to power, President Xi Jinping has invested heavily in the People's Liberation Army and navy in a bid to project Chinese influence across the Pacific and beyond. "Chinese naval visits to Australia have more typically been a lone frigate, not a task group with an amphibious assault ship and 700 personnel," tweeted Rory Medcalf, head of the National Security College at Australian National University. "Sydney is hardly a convenient stopover on their way home from the Gulf of Aden. What's the story here? This looks like a serious show of presence in the South Pacific." — AFP

ing to install 150,000 CCTV cameras across the capital this year, Kejriwal added. Delhi, home to nearly 20 million people, is also one of the world's most polluted cities, according to UN studies. "Women will be allowed to travel free of cost so that they have safe travel experience," Kejriwal told a press conference. Delhi has a rickety public transport system, and the doubling of some metro fares in recent months has forced many people onto the streets. Some commentators accused Kejriwal, head of the small Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), of making the gesture to win votes in state elections expected in January.

Kejriwal's party won a landslide victory in 2015 state elections when it offered free drinking water, subsidised electricity and healthcare and better education for the poor. It also promised to improve women's security after the 2012 Delhi gang rape. But the AAP failed to make a breakthrough in a national election in April-May when conservative Prime Minister Narendra Modi won a second landslide, including in Delhi. — AFP