



Scores ill, schools closed in Malaysia due to toxic fumes

Student debt a 'life sentence' for millions of Americans

Page 8

Page 9



HANOVER: People cool off in a swimming pool in Hannover, western Germany yesterday as temperatures topped 33 degrees Celsius. — AFP

As Europe bakes, governments step in

Unusual warm weather raises the risks of 'blow-ups'

PARIS: As Europe started to sizzle yesterday at the start of a heatwave that could break records, drivers on Germany's famously-speedy motorways were ordered to slow down and fans at the women's World Cup were showered in health warnings. Meteorologists blamed a blast of torrid air from the Sahara for the unusually early summer heatwave, which could send thermometers up to 40 degrees Celsius in some places on Thursday and Friday.

Experts say such heatwaves early in the summer are likely to be more frequent as the planet heats up. In Germany, where forecasters have warned a June record of 38.5 degrees could be smashed, speed restrictions were placed on some stretches of the usually free-wheeling "autobahns" as the unusually warm weather raises the risks of "blow-ups"—the hot tarmac breaking up and shredding tyres.

A forest fire was raging north of Cottbus, the second-largest city in Brandenburg state. Police said it could take days to put out the blaze in an area that was just recovering from a fire in 2018. The fire was deemed especially dangerous due to the risk of unexploded ammunition left in the area, which is home to a military training facility.

'Hell is coming'
In Spain, TV weather presenter Silvia Laplana riffed on the doom-filled catchphrase "Winter is coming" from the blockbuster Game of Thrones franchise to describe what lay in store for the country. "El infierno (hell) is coming," she tweeted alongside a weather map which showed most of the country colored scarlet later in the week.



Bad weather causes catastrophic harvest

"Of course it's hot in summer but when you have a heatwave that is so extensive and intense, during which records are forecast to be beaten, it's NOT normal," she tweeted. Temperatures are expected to be particularly sweltering in the northeast, with a stifling 45 degrees expected Friday in the

northeastern city of Girona, and 44 degrees in Zaragoza at the weekend. Five northern provinces were placed on an orange high alert for a heatwave on Wednesday, with another five to be added by the weekend.

'Overdoing' the warnings?
Authorities were also taking no chances in France, which is still scarred by the August 2003 heatwave blamed for the deaths of 15,000 people, many of them elderly who were left to fend for themselves. In a highly unusual move, Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer on Monday postponed national school exams to next week. Health Minister Agnes Buzyn denied the government was being excessively vigilant. "For all those who know (the risks), obviously it's too much, but if I can avoid unnecessary deaths, I will continue to communicate about prevention," Buzyn told LCI television, referring to the warnings on radio, TV and public transport.

Players and spectators at the women's football World Cup taking place in cities around France were also being inundated with messages about keeping hydrated. In a rare gesture by FIFA on Monday evening, fans were allowed to bring their own bottles



LIEBEROSE: Wood burns during a forest fire in Lieberose, eastern Germany yesterday as temperatures topped 36 degrees Celsius. — AFP

of water into the Paris stadium where Sweden took on Canada. Phil Neville, the England coach, was sanguine about the impact of the weather on the tournament, however. "There's no excuse, the players are ready for it."

Meanwhile, French beekeepers and farming groups said they were bracing for a "cat-

astrophic" honey harvest this year after frost damage in winter, an unusually rainy spring, and, now, unusually high temperatures. "In the hives, there is nothing to eat, beekeepers are having to feed them with syrup because they risk dying from hunger," added the union, which represents many small farms in honey-producing regions. — Agencies

Critics hit out at millions spent on Prince Harry and Meghan's home

LONDON: Prince Harry and his wife Meghan's new home in Windsor cost £2.4 million (\$3.05 million, 2.7 million euros) of taxpayers' money to renovate, royal accounts showed yesterday, prompting criticism from anti-monarchy campaigners. Queen Elizabeth II's grandson and his wife moved into Frogmore Cottage on the Windsor Castle estate before the birth of their son Archie on May 6.

The residence, west of London, had been split into five separate homes but was turned back into one property in a six-month refurbishment ahead of their move-in. "The property had not been the subject of work for some years and had already been earmarked for renovation," said Michael Stevens, who runs the monarchy's accounts.

"The building was returned to a single residence and outdated infrastructure was replaced to guarantee the long-term future of the property. "All fixtures and fittings were paid for by their royal highnesses," added Stevens, whose title is Keeper of the Privy Purse. The cost was revealed as the British monarchy published its accounts for the last financial year. The monarchy is paid for using a slice of the profits from the land it owns, the rest of which go to the government.

The monarchy's official expenditure in the financial

year 2018-2019 was £67 million, including souping up the 1801-built Frogmore Cottage - an increase of almost £20 million on the previous financial year. The renovation and rise in overall spending provoked condemnation from campaigners who want to abolish the monarchy. "This year's increases are outrageous at a time of widespread spending cuts," Graham Smith, from the Republic campaign group, told The Sun newspaper. "If even one school or hospital is facing cuts, we cannot justify spending a penny on the royals."

Buckingham Palace refit

Under a deal dating back to 1760, profits from the Crown Estate - the monarch's hereditary land and property portfolio - are surrendered to the Treasury, which in return funds the monarchy's running costs through the sovereign grant. The grant is not income for the royals but pays for the monarch's household staff, property maintenance, official travel, housekeeping and hospitality. The grant amounts to 15 percent of the Crown Estate profits.

For 10 years starting last year, there is an additional 10 percent to cover the reservicing of Buckingham Palace, Queen Elizabeth's official residence in London. The sovereign grant for 2018-2019 was £82.2 million - up from £76.1 million the previous year. The £82.2 million comprised of a £49.3 million core grant plus a further £32.9 million for the Buckingham Palace reserving, replacing old wiring, water pipes and boilers, some of which has not been done since the 1950s.

"The 10-year reservicing program presents a unique opportunity for innovation and investment in one of the world's most prestigious and iconic historic buildings, thereby preserving it for future generations," said Stevens. — AFP

Iran drone downing highlights limitations of unmanned aircraft

WASHINGTON: US drones have been a key tool in conflicts against insurgent organizations such as the Taliban and the Islamic State group, but Iran's downing of one of the aircraft highlights their limitations against more sophisticated adversaries. While drones offer the significant attraction of not putting American lives at risk and can stay aloft for more than a day, allowing for extended surveillance missions, they can be vulnerable to air defenses, are often expensive, and their loss can lead to sensitive hardware falling into the wrong hands.

American drones "are generally not stealthy, they are generally not aerodynamically impressive," said Michael O'Hanlon, a senior fellow and director of research in foreign policy at the Brookings Institution. "I believe sophisticated air defenses will continue to have good chances to shoot down an aircraft like an RQ-4 whenever it is in position to do meaningful surveillance of their territories or other assets," he said, referring to the type of drone brought down by Iran near the strategic Strait of Hormuz last week.

But "it takes quite a bit to target an American military asset, and most countries won't do it just because Iran seems to have 'gotten away with it' here," O'Hanlon said, noting that punishing US sanctions on the country mean it is not emerging unscathed. "These drones were not, generally speaking, designed with

contested airspace in mind," said Arthur Holland Michel, co-director of the Center for the Study of the Drone at Bard College.

"If you looked at the operational history of the RQ-4 Global Hawk, you'll see that it generally avoids denied-airspace environments," he said. Michel said that Predator drones had been shot down in the Balkans and Iraq, while a stealthy RQ-170 was lost over Iran in 2011, with Tehran claiming to have used it to build a copy of its own. "There are some possibilities for operating in contested airspace, but generally no, this is a system that if someone wants to shoot it down, they probably can," he said.

'Tremendously important'

But American drones have proved "tremendously important" in "counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency style operations," said Michel. US forces have used drones to gather intelligence, monitor enemy forces and watch battles and raids unfold in real-time in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan. "They really showed their value in being able to track individual, moving targets persistently over extended periods of time," he said. The loss of the US drone - coupled with attacks on tanker ships the US has blamed on Iran - has seen already-high tensions between the two countries spike further, raising fears of an unintended slide toward conflict that both sides have said they want to avoid.

US President Donald Trump ordered strikes on Iranian targets last week but said he called them off "10 minutes" before they were to have been launched, and Washington has now imposed sanctions on Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and a string of military leaders. In the event of a war, US drones might paradoxically be safer, O'Hanlon said. — AFP