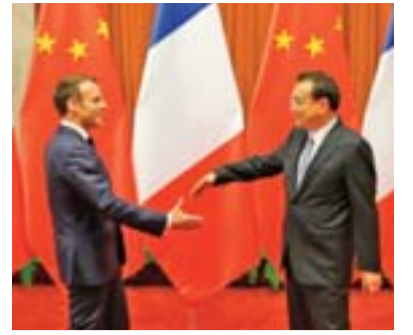


International

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2019



Xi, Macron unite on climate as US withdraws from Paris pact

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Dengue cases soar to record high in Pakistan



NEW DELHI: A motorist (C) wearing a face mask for protection against air pollution rides past an idol of Hindu god Hanuman. — AFP

Top court orders halt to stubble burning

Delhi residents are 'losing precious years' of their lives

NEW DELHI: India's top court has ordered a complete halt to stubble burning around Delhi, a major contributor to lethal smog that on Tuesday kept the metropolis of 20 million people choking in air rated "very poor". The Supreme Court said the capital's residents were "losing precious years" of their lives, adding "people are dying, this just cannot happen in a civilized country".

In a ruling following petitions filed by activists, the court's judges ordered an immediate halt to the practice of farmers burning crop stubble in the states surrounding the capital. They warned that the entire administrative and police hierarchy — all the way down to local officers — would be held responsible if the practice continued. Burning stubble is already illegal, but many hard-up farmers say they

have no choice.

Each winter, smog hits northern India as cooler air traps the stubble smoke, car fumes, factory emissions and construction dust close to the ground, creating a noxious cocktail that burns eyes and makes breathing difficult. On Sunday pollution shot up, with levels of particulates measuring less than 2.5 microns — so tiny they can enter the bloodstream — approaching 1,000 micrograms per cubic metre of air, the worst in three years.

The World Health Organisation's recommended safe daily maximum is just 25. Flights were diverted and hospitals reported a surge in patients with respiratory complaints. Concentrations of the tiny particles — which can be lethal with long-term exposure — fell Tuesday, with the government monitoring agency SAFAR rat-

ing the air "very poor", down from "severe" a day earlier. According to the AirVisual website, Delhi remained the most polluted city in the world on Tuesday ahead of Kolkata in eastern India and Lahore in Pakistan. Beijing was in sixth place.

Construction halt

Construction was banned temporarily in Delhi late last week, while schools have been closed until Wednesday — with city authorities handing out free anti-pollution masks to children. Authorities also parked a van with an air purifier near the Taj Mahal in a bid to clean the atmosphere that in recent years has damaged the iconic marble mausoleum, some 250 kilometers south of Delhi. "We read in newspapers about pollution in India and bought masks once we landed in Delhi. The air is really

bad here and we are worried about our children," Neelofar, a tourist from Iran at the Taj Mahal, told AFP.

On Monday Delhi authorities moved to reduce traffic by rolling out a scheme allowing cars with odd and even registration numbers on the roads on alternate days. Delhi's chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, who has called the city a "gas chamber", hailed the first day of the scheme as a success, with 1.5 million cars off the roads and traffic reduced. Two thousand volunteers and more than 465 police and transport officials were deployed at intersections, handing out fines of 4,000 rupees (nearly \$60) to 259 transgressors.

They included Vijay Goel, of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling party, who flouted the law in his saffron sports utility vehicle to protest what called a

"stunt" ahead of upcoming city elections. Exempt from the restrictions were Delhi's seven million motorbikes and scooters, public transport vehicles, and cars carrying only women, stoking criticism that the measures were token.

Siddharth Singh, a climate policy expert, called the traffic restrictions "ineffective". "If air pollution was solely due to the vehicular traffic, then this would be a solution. Right now it cannot be a solution because motorized private transport has a very small share in the whole pie," Singh said. Stubble burning is believed to account for nearly half the pollution. Fourteen Indian cities including the capital are among the world's top 15 most polluted cities, according to the WHO. One study last year said that a million Indians died prematurely every year as a result. — AFP

India sets online monitors ahead of temple verdict

NEW DELHI: India has deployed thousands of additional security forces and roped in about 16,000 "digital volunteers" to sanitize social media of inflammatory posts ahead of a crucial Supreme Court verdict on a disputed religious site. Hindus and Muslims have for decades been bitterly divided over the 16th-century Babri mosque in Ayodhya, a city in the northern Uttar Pradesh state that Hindus believe is the birthplace of their god Ram.

Tensions boiled over in 1992 when Hindu zealots destroyed the mosque, sparking religious violence that killed 2,000 people. India's top court is expected to hand down its ruling on competing claims to the site's ownership before Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi retires on November 17. "Thousands of (additional) security personnel from different agencies have been deployed in and around Ayodhya. Additional vehicles, CCTV cameras, body cameras and drones too have been brought in," Ayodhya police senior superintendent Ashish Tiwari said yesterday.

"The police are also making other efforts to ensure that things remain calm. We have enlisted around 16,000 digital volunteers from 1,600 villages in the region to help monitor and flag sensitive content on the social media." The monitors will report what they deem is inappropriate content to police, who could then try to track down the posters and demand that



AYODHYA: Rapid Action Force (RPF) and Uttar Pradesh Police personnel patrol a street. — AFP

they delete their posts or messages.

Ayodhya — considered one of the holiest Hindu sites — is visited by religious pilgrims from all over India throughout the year. Around one million pilgrims are expected to be there early next week for a bathing ritual in the Saryu river that flows in the region. "We just have to stay alert and sensitive to the security of the visiting pilgrims," Ayodhya district magistrate Anuj Kumar Jha told AFP. "We are also keeping a very close watch on the social media to ensure there are no rumors or incitement."

Authorities clamped down on movement and assembly of people in the region last

month when the court was concluding its hearing into the dispute. The district also banned firecrackers and drones, only allowing them to be used if permission is granted. The Supreme Court has to decide on the appeals against a key 2010 verdict by the High Court which ruled that both groups should split the site, with Hindus granted the lion's share. Many Hindus believe the medieval mosque that stood there for 460 years was only built after the destruction of an earlier temple. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist party has campaigned on constructing a new temple on the site of the razed mosque for decades. — AFP

South Koreans fake their funerals for life lessons

SEOUL: A South Korean service is offering free funerals — but only to the living. More than 25,000 people have participated in mass "living funeral" services at Hyowon Healing Center since it opened in 2012, hoping to improve their lives by simulating their deaths. "Once you become conscious of death, and experience it, you undertake a new approach to life," said 75-year-old Cho Jae-hee, who participated in a recent living funeral as part of a "dying well" program offered by her senior welfare center.

Dozens took part in the event, from teenagers to retirees, donning shrouds, taking funeral portraits, penning their last testaments, and lying in a closed coffin for around 10 minutes. University student Choi Jin-kyu said his time in the coffin helped him realize that too often, he viewed others as competitors. "When I was in the coffin, I wondered what use that is," said the 28-year-old, adding that he plans to start his own business after graduation rather than attempting to enter a highly-competitive job market.

South Korea ranks 33 out of 40 countries surveyed in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's Better Life Index. Many younger South Koreans have high hopes for education and employment, which have been dashed by a cooling economy

and rising joblessness. "It is important to learn and prepare for death even at a young age," said Professor Yu Eun-sil, a doctor at Asan Medical Center's pathology department, who has written a book about death.

In 2016, South Korea's suicide rate was 20.2 per 100,000 residents, almost double the global average of 10.53, according to the World Health Organization. Funeral company Hyowon began offering the living funerals to help people appreciate their lives, and seek forgiveness and reconciliation with family and friends, said Jeong Yong-mun, who heads the healing center. Jeong said he is heartened when people reconcile at a relative's funeral, but is saddened they wait that long.

"We don't have forever," he said. "That's why I think this experience is so important — we can apologize and reconcile sooner and live the rest of our lives happily." Occasionally he has dissuaded those contemplating suicide. "I picked out those people who have asked themselves whether ... they can actually commit suicide, and I reversed their decision," Jeong said. The message of personal value resounded with Choi. "I want to let people know that they matter, and that someone else would be so sad if they were gone," he said, wiping away tears. "Happiness is in the present." — Reuters