

## International

# UN basks in climate spotlight, amid global conflict clouds

## Guterres mobilizing the movers and shakers against climate change

**UNITED NATIONS:** Today, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will position himself on the frontline against climate change as he presides over a UN emergency summit, a role some say he turned to after difficulties in resolving global conflict. Speaking about rising temperatures, the 70-year-old recently told journalists, smiling discreetly: "I don't pretend I rule the world. My main objective is to make as much noise as I can."

In May, he traveled to the South Pacific where rising sea level threatens entire island nations and more recently to the hurricane-ravaged Bahamas, witnessing a devastation the likes of which he said he had never seen. Mobilizing the globe's movers and shakers against climate change is paramount in the eyes of Guterres, who served as Portugal's prime minister from 1995 to 2002 and often mentions not wanting to leave his grandchildren a destroyed planet.

However the focus on climate change marks an evolution for Guterres, who arrived in the role in early 2017 under the belief that his predecessor, South Korea's Ban Ki-moon, had already achieved great things with the 2015 Paris climate accord. "Guterres wanted to focus instead on crisis management," said Richard Gowan of the International Crisis Group, noting in the same breath that Guterres' "crisis management failed first in Cyprus, then this year in Libya."

### Severe humiliation

In Libya, Guterres' humiliation was severe. He traveled to the country to personally advance prospects for a political solution, only to have one of the negotiating parties launch a deadly offensive to seize the capital of Tripoli in the wake of his departure. The secretary-general's human

rights efforts around the world have resulted in meager gains, with many NGOs believing he could do much more. While the UN helped broker the end to a decades-old dispute between Greece and Macedonia, which resulted in the latter country's name change to the Republic of North Macedonia, little has come of efforts to halt conflict in Syria and Yemen or ethnic cleansing in Myanmar.

### Behind-the-scenes diplomacy

Following the climate summit, Guterres will steer the UN General Assembly, herding 91 heads of state, six vice presidents, 45 heads of government and more than 40 ministers through "diplomatic fashion week" or "diplomacy speed dating" as the New York gathering is often called at headquarters.

Potential conflict in the Middle East between the United States and Iran will dominate discussion at the General Assembly, where Guterres will adeptly work his skill at behind-the-scenes diplomacy to reduce tensions, in sharp contrast with his flashier center-stage efforts on climate change. On a daily basis, Guterres, who sets his watch ahead by three-quarters of an hour - deeply disturbing to some dignitaries who have visited him - says he strives to manage jetlag and admits that he doesn't sleep on airplanes.

The practicing Catholic said that one of the difficulties of his job is doing "everything I can for the billions of people that live in very difficult circumstances in the world." It's these sorts of interpersonal skills that have earned him praise from the majority of ambassadors working at the UN. Even amid a push by US President Donald Trump to slash UN funding, Guterres has persevered, only just beginning to make sense of an organization he might like to head for a second term. — AFP



**BRUSSELS:** People take part in a demonstration for the climate called 'Act Now or Never' to raise awareness for climate change, organized by 'Rise for Climate Belgium' yesterday in Brussels. — AFP

## Sri Lanka orders fresh probe into bombings

**COLOMBO:** A fresh inquiry into the Easter suicide bombings that hit Sri Lanka killing at least 258 people was ordered by president Maithripala Sirisena yesterday, after concerns from the Catholic Church that current probes are not independent. The government has blamed a local jihadi group, the National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ) for the April 21 attacks on three churches and three luxury hotels, while the Islamic State group also claimed responsibility.

Sirisena said the commission has wide judicial powers to gather evidence on those responsible for the bombings, and to probe security and intelligence lapses. The five-member panel is headed by a Court of Appeal judge and includes three other judges and a retired civil servant. It is to report back with recommendations within three months.

The inquiry was launched amid fears voiced by the country's Catholic Church that a parliamentary probe and police investigation into the attacks are not sufficiently independent. While the newly-launched inquiry is being carried out by a cross-section of MPs, many opposition members are boycotting it. They say the commission is being used by political parties to deflect any responsibility for failing to stop the attacks. Sirisena, who is also the minister in charge of law and order, has said that all those responsible for the attacks were either killed or under arrest.

A parliamentary public inquiry has heard evidence from intelligence and senior police officials that Sirisena neglected national security issues and failed to convene regular national security council meetings. The president has also been accused of failing to act on precise Indian intelligence that jihadists were about to hit Christian churches



**COLOMBO:** This photograph shows the view of Sri Lanka's rapidly changing skyline in Colombo. — AFP

and other targets in Sri Lanka. Sirisena has denied the accusations, and sacked his top defense official and the intelligence chief after blaming them for the lapses.

The Police chief, Pujith Jayasundara, was also suspended, and he - along with the secretary to the ministry of defense - are both facing criminal prosecution over their failure to prevent the bombings. Sri Lankan authorities

failed to arrest the known jihadist who led the attacks - Zahran Hashim - before they occurred, the country's top intelligence official has said. Ten days before the bombings, Jayasundara warned that Hashim's NTJ group could target prominent churches. But this was not followed up. The government has admitted there were intelligence failures before the attacks. — AFP

## Bangladesh couple challenge wedding tradition

**DHAKA:** A 19-year-old bride has challenged Bangladesh Muslim wedding tradition by taking a groom to her home to marry him, with the ceremony going viral on social media and sparking debate about women's rights in the conservative nation. In what local media are describing as a first, Khadiza Akter Khushi led hundreds of guests to the wedding ceremony at her groom Tariqul Islam's residence in the western rural district of Meherpur on Saturday, before taking him to her home.

It overturned a longstanding tradition where a groom kicks off the festivities by first going to the house of the bride. "Yes, it is uncommon. But I did it so that other women can follow me," Khushi said yesterday. Islam, 27, said the couple faced no resistance or criticism from families and friends. "We did it as part of our efforts to end gender discrimination and to establish equal rights for women," he told AFP. "I am sure our marriage will send a message that a woman can do whatever a man can." Footage of their wedding went viral online, generating heated debate on social media.

The marriage also made national headlines in the Muslim majority country of 168 million people, where conservative values remain strong. "Definitely it's a big news in our culture," Sadaq Hasan wrote on the Bengali daily Prothom Alo's website, while others wrote "courageous women" and "I want to marry like this". — AFP



**MELS:** People take part in a ceremony to mark the 'death' of the Pizol glacier (Pizolgletscher) yesterday above Mels, eastern Switzerland. — AFP

## Climate activists hold event to mark vanishing glacier

**MELS:** Hundreds of climate activists paid their respects to a Swiss glacier yesterday that is due to disappear over the next decade, the victim of a warming environment. The Pizol glacier, now at less than a tenth of a square km, in the Glarus Alps in eastern Switzerland has been retreating as temperatures climb. Located about 2,600 meters above sea level, the glacier is due to vanish completely by 2030.

"I have climbed up here countless times," said Matthias Huss glaciologist at ETH Zurich university, addressing the people who joined the march. "It is like the dying of a good friend." At roughly 0.06 square km (0.02 square miles), the glacier is just a fraction of its area in 1987 when scientists

recorded it at 0.32 square km. Just four years ago, its area was put at 0.1 square km, according to the Global Glacier Change Bulletin.

The gathering in Switzerland, which has about 1,500 glaciers, mirrors an action in August when activists and others in Iceland commemorated a melted glacier there. In Switzerland, climate change activism has been rising, including action this year in which dozens of people were arrested after blocking entrances to Swiss banks some people blame for their role in financing energy projects that are reliant on fossil fuels.

Moreover, the country famous for its direct democracy may soon vote on going climate neutral, after organizers of a petition drive called "the Glacier Initiative" collected 120,000 signatures needed to put the measure on the ballot. "We can't save the Pizol glacier anymore," said Huss. But if people acted now, many of the negative effects of climate change could be contained. "Let's do everything we can, so that we can show our children and grandchildren a glacier here in Switzerland a hundred years from now." — Reuters

## India seizes one ton of ketamine on boat

**NEW DELHI:** India's coast guard has arrested six Myanmar men and seized \$42 million worth of ketamine after spotting a suspicious vessel in the Indian Ocean near the Nicobar Islands. The 1,160 kilogram (about 2,500 pounds) drug haul came after coast guard aircraft spotted the boat, which had its lights off, on Wednesday in India's Exclusive Economic Zone, the defense ministry said in a statement. The boat's crew did not respond to radio calls and the coast guard eventually boarded it, with officials finding "57 gunny bundles of suspicious substance" on Friday.

"Preliminary analysis... revealed that the suspicious substance was ketamine and there were 1,160 packets of 1kg each onboard the vessel," the ministry added. The

six Myanmar men and cargo were taken to Port Blair, the capital of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, where they were questioned by investigators. They claimed they left Myanmar on September 14 and were due to rendezvous with another boat "operating near the Thailand-Malaysia maritime border line" on Saturday, the statement said.

The Nicobar Islands are located near Southeast Asia, off Myanmar's coast. Parts of Myanmar, Laos and Thailand are in the lawless "Golden Triangle" zone, the world's second-largest drug-producing region after Latin America. Large amounts drugs such as heroin and methamphetamine are churned out in remote jungle labs each year and smuggled across Asia and beyond. — AFP



**CAR NICOBAR:** Indian Coast Guard personnel (up) pose for photographs as they keep watch on a Myanmar ship's crew after seizing 1160 kg of Ketamine drug from their boat near Car Nicobar islands, part of the Indian union territory of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. — AFP