



35 killed at wedding party in Afghanistan

Trump, Modi vow relentless fight on extremists, terrorism

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CALIFORNIA: Crosses mark old graves at the Daggett Pioneer Cemetery in the Mojave desert in Amboy, California. California's Fourth Climate Change Assessment found that temperatures of the inland deserts of Southern California, including the Mojave desert, are expected to continue climbing. According to the report, average daily highs could increase as much as 14 degrees this century if greenhouse gas emissions keep rising. —AFP

'Moment of truth' at climate summit

World leaders convene for a UN summit on 'climate emergency'

UNITED NATIONS: Some 60 world leaders convene yesterday for a UN summit on "climate emergency" aimed at reinvigorating the faltering Paris agreement, at a time when mankind is releasing more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere than at any time in history. From heat waves to slow-crawling hurricanes to rapidly acidifying oceans, the impacts of global warming are being felt more than ever before, yet the gap between carbon reduction targets demanded by scientists to avert catastrophe and actions thus far taken is only widening.

It is within this context that a new, youth-led movement has emerged and re-energized climate activism, symbolized by Swedish teen Greta Thunberg who will take the podium in the morning following a speech by Secretary General Antonio Guterres. Thunberg along with millions of others around the world rallied on Friday calling for climate justice and for the voices of the younger generations who will be most affected by increasing extreme weather events to be heard. Fewer than half the 136 heads of government or state in New York this week to attend the UN General Assembly will be present yesterday.

US, Brazil, Australia absent

Among the list of those absent will be US President Donald Trump, who pulled his

country out of the Paris Accord upon taking power and has made slashing environmental regulations a key part of his platform. Likewise President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, under whose leadership the Amazon rainforest is continuing to burn at record rates, and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison whose government has pursued an aggressively pro-coal agenda.

China, the world's biggest carbon emitter by far, but also a leader in the renewables sector, will be present and represented by foreign minister Wang Yi, with Guterres hinting last week that the East Asian giant will be committing to new measures. Laurence Tubiana, CEO of the European Climate Foundation and one of the architects of the Paris agreement, told AFP the summit represented a "moment of truth" but was also taking place at a time of great political headwinds.

"There's a tension between the countries that want to go ahead to translate their goals into real policies" and those that do not, she said. "We can hope for the best, that this group of progressive countries and actors and local authorities prepare for the second wave, to demonstrate that this is where modernity is, where progress is, and even where economic growth could be."

Increased urgency

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi,

fresh from a triumphant diaspora event in Houston where he was joined by Trump, will speak in the morning session, along with the leaders of New Zealand, the Marshall Islands, and Germany's Angela Merkel. Like China, India is coal-addicted, but has also set itself highly ambitious renewable energy targets, particularly in solar. Guterres has asked countries to bring "concrete, realistic plans" to enhance commitments made in 2015 in Paris toward the goal of limiting long-term warming to less than 2 degrees Celsius—and ideally 1.5 degrees Celsius—over pre-industrial levels.

These are deemed important to avoid hitting a number of so-called "tipping points," like the melting of polar permafrost, that could trigger irreversible warming and fundamentally alter weather events and ecosystems. Seventy-five countries are expected to bring enhanced commitments. But officials have also been careful to manage expectations and say the summit is also a run-up event to the 2020 UN climate summit that the UK will host in Glasgow. Still, there is some sense of increased urgency.

The goal of "carbon neutrality"—where most emissions are eliminated and those that remain are offset by planting new trees (and potentially carbon capture technology in the future) was considered so radical in 2015 that it was left out of the text of the



NEW YORK: (From left to right) Colombia President Ivan Duque, French President Emmanuel Macron, Bolivian President Evo Morales and US actor Harrison Ford listen to Amazonian Indians during the Amazonia Forest meeting at the United Nations headquarters yesterday. —AFP

Paris agreement. Now, though, it has become a rallying cry for countries like the United Kingdom and France as well as major corporations, who are leading the charge in countries like the US where the political leadership have sought to distance themselves or even undermine the cause.

Ahead of the summit, 87 firms under the "We Mean Business" coalition pledged to slash their emissions. The UN published a

report on the eve of the summit that said the five-year period ending 2019 was set to be the hottest ever, the latest grim reminder that climate change is already a reality. "Our global carbon credit is maxed out," said Dave Reay, a professor and chair in Carbon Management at the University of Edinburgh, commenting on the report. "If emissions don't start falling there will be hell to pay." —AFP

Japan roboticists predict rise of the machines

SEIKA: Set in 2019, cult 80s movie "Blade Runner" envisaged a neon-stained landscape of bionic "replicants" genetically engineered to look just like humans. So far that has failed to materialise, but at a secretive research institute in western Japan, wild-haired roboticist Hiroshi Ishiguro is fine-tuning technology that could blur the line between man and machine.

Highly intelligent, self-aware and helpful around the house - the robots of the future could look and act just like humans and even become their friends, Ishiguro and his team predict. "I don't know when a 'Blade Runner' future will happen, but I believe it will," the Osaka University professor said. "Every year we're developing new technology - like deep learning, which has improved the performance of pattern recognition," he added.

"Now we're focusing on intention and desire, and if we implement them into robots whether they become more human-like." Robots are already widely used in Japan - from cooking noodles to helping patients with physiotherapy. Marketed as the world's first "cyborg-type" robot, HAL (hybrid assistive limb) — developed by Tsukuba University and Japanese

company Cyberdyne — is helping people in wheelchairs walk again using sensors connected to the unit's control system.

Scientists believe service robots will one day help us with household chores, from taking out the garbage to making the perfect slice of toast. Stockbrokers in Japan and around the world are already deploying AI bots to forecast stock market trends and science fiction's rapid advance towards science fact owes much to the likes of Ishiguro. He previously created an android copy of himself - using complex moving parts, electronics, silicone skin and his own hair - that he sends on business trips in his place.

'Wake up, time to die'

But Ishiguro believes recent breakthroughs in robotics and artificial intelligence will accelerate the synthesis of man and machine. "As a scientist, I hope to develop self-conscious robots like you see in 'Blade Runner' to help me understand what it is to be human," he said. "That's my motivation." The point at which that line between humans and machines converges has long been a source of anxiety for some, as depicted in popular culture. In "Blade Runner", Harrison Ford plays a police officer who tracks down and kills replicants that have escaped and are living among the population in Los Angeles.

The "Terminator" series starring Arnold Schwarzenegger centers on a self-aware computer network which initiates a nuclear holocaust and, through autonomous military machines, wages war against human survivors. "I can't understand why

Hollywood wants to destroy robots," shrugged Ishiguro, who in 2007 was named one of the top 100 living geniuses by global consultants firm Syneetics. "Look at Japanese cartoons and animations - robots are always friendly. We have a totally different cultural background," noted the professor.

It's not just Hollywood that has concerns over AI. Tesla's Elon Musk has called for a global ban on killer robots, warning technological advances could revolutionize warfare and create new "weapons of terror" that target innocent people. But Ishiguro insists there is no inherent danger in machines becoming self-aware or surpassing human intelligence. "We don't need to fear AI or robots, the risk is controllable," he said. "My basic idea is that there is no difference between humans and robots."

'Uncanny valley'

The ultimate goal, according to Ishiguro's colleague Takashi Minato, is "to bring robots into society as human companions - it's possible for robots to become our friends." But will they look like us, as Ishiguro believes, and how comfortable will we feel surrounded by autonomous humanoids? Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori suggested in 1970 that the more robots resemble people, the creepier we find them - a phenomenon he called the "uncanny valley".

Ishiguro's first attempt at creating an android clone was based on his daughter and its "jerky movements" reduced her to tears. He has since perfected the template, including a creation he claimed was the world's first news-reading android and a robot priest at a Kyoto temple unveiled earlier this year. —AFP

Man killed by mob over cow

BHUBANESWAR: A mob in India killed a man after accusing him of butchering a cow, police said yesterday, in the latest case of violence involving the animals considered sacred to the country's Hindu-majority population. ML Meena, a senior police official in eastern Jharkhand state, told Reuters a crowd of 10-15 people attacked three men on Sunday, accusing them of butchering a cow in a forest about 50 km from the state capital Ranchi. The villagers beat them "severely", Meena said. One of trio died and the others sustained injuries. One of the men is still undergoing treatment in hospital, while the remaining victim suffered minor injuries.

Police have detained eight people in connection with the lynching in the rural Khunti district, he added. "Police are investigating the matter. We are addressing this murder case," Meena said. Cows are sacred in Hinduism, and there have been frequent attacks on those accused of killing them for meat or leather, predominantly people from the minority Muslim population or those on the lower rungs of India's ancient caste system. The three men attacked by the mob on Sunday were not Muslim, Meena said. — Reuters