

International

Troops deployed across fire-hit Australia after horror weekend

Authorities warn another heatwave looms

EDEN, Australia: Reserve troops were deployed to fire-ravaged regions across three Australian states yesterday after a torrid weekend that turned swathes of land into smoldering, blackened hellscapes. The bushfires have now destroyed an area the size of Ireland, according to official figures, and authorities warned the months-long crisis is not over as another heatwave looms.

Firefighters joined by fresh teams from the US and Canada were taking advantage of rainy and cooler conditions to tackle out-of-control blazes ahead of soaring temperatures forecast later this week.

Military teams, in the biggest-ever call up of reserves, fanned out across eastern Australia to help emergency services assess the damage, restore power and deliver supplies of food, water and fuel to cut-off communities. For the first time in Australian history the government also deployed its medical assistance team—normally sent to other nations to lend support in the aftermath of their disasters—to help evacuees.

"There is no room for complacency, especially as we have over 130 fires burning across (New South Wales) state still," New South Wales Premier Gladys Berejiklian said early yesterday. Almost five million hectares (50,000 square kilometres) have been razed across the state since late September. New South Wales Rural Fire Service commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons added. That took the total amount of land burnt close to eight million hectares—the size of the island of Ireland or South Carolina.

Twenty-four people have lost their lives so far, with over 1,500 homes damaged. Two people are missing in New South Wales, the vast nation's most populous state.

'Creeping disaster'

The chair of the newly established Victoria state's

bushfire appeal fund, Pat McNamara, said this year's summer bushfire season was a "creeping disaster".

"We're still not even into what we would regard as the peak of the fire season," McNamara told national broadcaster ABC. "So we've probably got at least another four to five weeks of this sort of weather and we've got to deal with it."

In the usually picturesque southeastern town of Eden, Holly Spence said she spent more than 12 hours defending her family's farm on Saturday, less than a week after saving it on New Year's Eve.

"If we weren't here the spot fires would have taken all our sheds and the house and everything," the 28-year-old told AFP. "We don't want to go through this for a third time."

Fiona Kennelly, 50, who evacuated with 24 members of her extended family to a motel outside Eden, said she was relieved the easing conditions allowed them to get some respite from the crisis.

"It's good to see daylight at the right time again," she told AFP, adding that the skies had been turning pitch-black in the afternoons. Authorities were also grappling with the health impacts of heavy smoke engulfing cities and towns in or near fire-hit regions, including the country's second-largest city Melbourne and the national capital Canberra.

In Canberra, some government departments were shut as the city's air quality was once-again ranked the poorest in the world, according to independent online air-quality index monitor Air Visual. There has been growing anger in Australia about Prime Minister Scott Morrison conservative government's slow response to the deadly climate-fuelled bushfire crisis, with rallies calling for action planned across major cities on Friday. — AFP



COOMA, Australia: A long exposure picture shows a car commuting on a road as the sky turns red from smoke of the Snowy Valley bushfire on the outskirts of Cooma. — AFP

Ghosh took bullet train to Osaka en route to Lebanon

TOKYO: Former Nissan and Renault boss Carlos Ghosn began his astonishing escape from Japan with a bullet train ride from Tokyo to Osaka, possibly accompanied by several people, Japanese news agency Kyodo reported yesterday. Japanese authorities also said yesterday they may still press for Ghosn's extradition from Lebanon to face multiple charges of financial wrongdoing, even though the country does not normally extradite its nationals.

Security cameras captured Ghosn leaving his home on Dec. 29 at about 2:30 pm (0530 GMT) and arriving some hours later at Tokyo's Shinagawa Station, where he took the train to Shin Osaka Station, Kyodo said, citing a person familiar with the matter. The international fugitive then went by car to a hotel near Osaka's Kansai International Airport, where he boarded a private jet at 11:10 p.m., according to the media report.

Ghosn was forbidden from leaving Japan while awaiting trial on charges of financial misconduct, which he has denied, but he fled at the end of last year to escape what he called a "rigged" justice system.

Prosecutors are now working with police to piece



TOKYO: Japan's Justice Minister Masako Mori speaks during a press conference on former auto tycoon Carlos Ghosn after he fled Japan to avoid a trial, in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

together Ghosn's route and find out who helped him, Kyodo said. In the government's first briefing since Ghosn skipped bail, Justice Minister Masako Mori said yesterday that as a general principle, Tokyo could request the extradition of a suspect from a country with which it has no formal extradition agreement.

Such a request would need to be carefully examined based on the possibility of "guaranteeing reciprocity and the domestic law of the partner country", Mori told reporters in Tokyo.

Arrest warrant

Mori did not say what would guarantee reciprocity - the idea that benefits or penalties extended by one country to citizens of another should be reciprocated. She also did not say if there were any Lebanese nationals in Japan wanted in Lebanon. Mori offered little insight into the events of Ghosn's escape to his ancestral home, repeatedly saying she could not comment on specifics because of an ongoing investigation.

Japanese officials broke days of silence about the Ghosn case on Sunday, saying they would tighten immigration measures and investigate his escape thoroughly. The authorities have also issued an international notice for his arrest. Government offices and most businesses in Japan have been shut for the New Year holidays, which formally ended yesterday. Lebanon has said it received an Interpol arrest warrant for Ghosn and that he entered the country legally. A senior Lebanese security official, meanwhile, has said Lebanon does not extradite its citizens.

Mori also defended Japan's justice system against Ghosn's charges that it was "rigged" and discriminatory. In Japan, suspects who deny charges against them are often detained for long periods and subject to lengthy questioning without a lawyer present, a system critics call "hostage justice". "Various comments about Japan's justice system and this unjust departure are two different things," Mori told reporters, saying criticism of the justice system could not be used to justify Ghosn's escape.

"Departure in an unjust way without proper procedure is tantamount to smuggling, an illegal departure amounting to a crime." — Reuters

Children's death toll at India hospital rises amid outcry

KOTA, Rajasthan: Some 109 children have so far died at a government hospital in northern India since the beginning of December, said a hospital official on Sunday, even as local authorities scrambled to bring in additional staff and equipment amid a rising outcry over poor healthcare facilities in the country.

"The death toll since Dec. 1 stands at 109," Suresh Dulara, the medical superintendent of JK Lon Hospital in Kota, in the northwestern state of Rajasthan, told Reuters on Sunday. The deaths, which have begun to grab national headlines in the last week, have sparked a social media firestorm about the deplorable state of many government healthcare facilities. It has also unleashed a political blame game between the state's ruling Congress party, and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party at the centre, after Rajasthan's chief minister defended the situation saying there had been more infant deaths at that hospital, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP was in power in the state.

Roughly three quarters of the deaths have occurred in the hospital's neonatal intensive care unit, which treats up to one-month-old babies, said an official directly aware of the matter.

A team appointed by the central health ministry is probing the deaths and will come out with a report soon, said the source who asked not to be named due to the sensitivity of the issue. A lack of infrastructure and staff, along with unhygienic conditions may have played a role in some of the deaths, said the source, adding the hospital - the only center with a neonatal intensive care unit in a 200-kilometre radius - is often a hospital that receives critically ill children from elsewhere, contributing to higher mortality rates.

Much of north India has also been hit by a severe cold wave since late in December, and officials at the hospital have now rushed to provide blankets, bed-sheets and heaters, said patients at the hospital.

On Saturday, the National Human Rights Commission sent a notice to the state government stating the situation raises some serious concerns. "The state is duty bound to provide basic necessary medical care to its citizens," the commission said. Separately, local media reported on Sunday that 219 infants had died in December at two government hospitals in the western state of Gujarat - a BJP-ruled state, which is the home state of Modi. — Reuters

Hard-fought Delhi election set for Feb 8

NEW DELHI: New Delhi will hold elections next month, officials said yesterday, in a key popularity test for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party as it reels from nationwide protests over a new citizenship law. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party swept to a second term last year in national elections but the Indian capital has been governed since 2013 by the left-wing grass-roots Common Man Party (AAP).

Under pressure from a weak economy, the BJP has also fared badly in a string of recent regional elections, most recently in Maharashtra, home to Mumbai, and in Jharkhand in the east. New legislation loosening citizenship rules for persecuted minorities, but not if they are Muslim, has sparked almost a month of protests and violence that has killed more than 25 people.

Islamic groups and critics at home and abroad charge that this forms part of Modi's aim to remold India as a Hindu nation and render its 200 million Muslims second-class citizens, something he denies.

More than 14 million voters in the sprawling, polluted city state of New Delhi will be eligible to cast ballots in the February 8 polls, with results expected three days later, the election commission said. The AAP, led by Arvind Kejriwal, a former tax inspector who has modeled himself as a crusader for the underprivileged, won 67 out of 70 seats on offer in Delhi's last election in 2015. — AFP



MUMBAI: Protesters and students shout slogans as they protest against the violent clashes at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) campus in New Delhi a day before, in Mumbai yesterday. Protests were held across India yesterday after masked assailants wielding batons and iron rods went on a rampage at a top Delhi university, leaving more than two dozen injured. — AFP



DHAKA: Dhaka University students take part in a rally to demand punishment for the people involved in the rape case of a female student of Dhaka University, in Dhaka yesterday. — AFP

Student's rape triggers protests in Dhaka

DHAKA: The sexual assault of a student at a top university in Bangladesh triggered angry protests in Bangladesh yesterday, with demonstrators urging the death penalty for convicted rapists.

The South Asian nation has seen a doubling of reported rape cases in the last year, according to activists, triggering spasms of public anger directed at the glacial response of police and the justice system. "Rape is an unforgivable offence. In Bangladesh, the punishment for rape is very slow," said demonstrator Shahela, who like the 21-year-old victim of Sunday's attack is a student at the prestigious Dhaka University in the capital. "We want quick executions for the perpetrators so that others are deterred from committing such crimes."

Demonstrators linked arms and marched along key roads in Dhaka, halting traffic to demand the perpetrator's arrest within 24 hours. "We are working to arrest him," senior police official Sazzadur Rahman told AFP. Police said around 1,500 students joined the protests, which remained peaceful. An AFP correspondent at the scene estimated that twice as many people joined the rally.

The victim in Sunday's attack was travelling to a friend's home when she was gagged, taken to a remote area in Dhaka's outskirts and sexually assaulted. Local rights group Ain O Salish Kendra said that there were 1,413 reported rape cases in Bangladesh last year, double the number recorded in 2018. Dozens of victims were killed while 10 committed suicide after they were attacked.

Nationwide protests gripped Bangladesh in April after a 19-year-old student who accused her seminary's head teacher of sexual harassment was doused in kerosene and set on fire. Sixteen people were later sentenced to death over the attack, including the teacher. — AFP

Family of dead Franco-Irish teen sue Malaysian resort

KUALA LUMPUR: The family of a Franco-Irish teenager whose body was found in the Malaysian jungle are suing the resort from where she disappeared for allegedly failing to provide adequate security.

The unclothed body of 15-year-old Nora Quoirin was discovered in August after a massive hunt through dense rainforest, not far from the resort where the London-based family had been on holiday.

Her parents say they believe there was a "criminal element" in the case as the teen had learning difficulties and would not have wandered off alone, but Malaysian police insist there was no sign of foul play. The family's lawyers have filed a civil suit against the Dusun Resort, not far from the capital Kuala Lumpur, seeking at least 182,000 ringgit (\$45,000) in damages, according to court documents seen by AFP yesterday.

The couple, Meabh and Sebastian Quoirin, claim the entrance gate to their jungle cottage was left open at all times, no guards were stationed outside and there was no CCTV installed at the premises. They also say the latch of a window was broken and it could be easily opened by anyone from outside. — AFP