

International

Trump and Harris head for California as US wildfires ignite political row

'This isn't about forest management or raking'

PORTLAND: President Donald Trump was due to visit California for a briefing on record wildfires that have killed 35 people, as West Coast officials and political opponents accused him of being in denial about climate change.

The history-making blazes have now burned through nearly five million acres (two million hectares) across the US West, torching an area roughly the size of the state of New Jersey, with fears the death toll may rise.

Kamala Harris, the Democratic vice-presidential candidate who tweeted that Trump "denied evidence" the flames were "intensified by the climate crisis," is also set to tour the damage, as the infernos ignite a political conflagration.

"This is climate change, and this is an administration that's put its head in the sand," Eric Garcetti, the Democratic mayor of Los Angeles, told CNN's "State of the Union" Sunday.

Of at least 35 people killed by the blazes since the beginning of summer, 27 died this week alone. Dozens were still missing on Sunday. Trump has made little comment about the blazes in recent weeks, but at a Nevada campaign event on Saturday he acknowledged the scope of the disaster.

"They never had anything like this," said Trump, who systematically downplays global warming. "Please remember the words, very simple, forest management." He plans to meet today with the heads of California's emergency services, while California senator Harris will tour the damage a day later. Garcetti hit back at the president's earlier remarks, saying that "anybody that lives in California is insulted by that." "Talk to a firefighter if you think that climate change isn't real... This isn't about forest management or raking."

With battle lines drawn ahead of November's election, Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden is also due to address the wildfires and their cause. He recently called the threat of climate change "undeniable" and "existential."

Much of the West Coast remained coated in dense smog through Sunday, with Portland by a distance the world's most air-polluted city according to IQAir. "It's apocalyptic," Washington state Governor Jay Inslee told ABC's "This Week."

"It's maddening right now we have this cosmic challenge to our communities, the entire West Coast of the United States on fire, to have a president to deny that these are not just wildfires, these are climate fires," he said.

Most of the fatalities have occurred in California and Oregon, with emergency services in the two states recording 34 deaths. More than 30,000 firefighters are battling the blazes, with officials warning that improved weather could end Monday as windier conditions return to the dry region.

Residents of Arcadia, on the outskirts of Los Angeles, were ordered to evacuate Sunday as the nearby Bobcat Fire spread south through forested terrain toward the metropolis. Two new deaths were confirmed from the North Complex Fire, which swept at unprecedented speeds this week into areas already ravaged less than two years ago by the Camp Fire — California's deadliest ever blaze.

"There are still active fires, power lines are down, trees are down, there are roads that are impassable," said Sheriff Kory Honea, warning evacuees it could take "weeks and weeks" to return to their homes.

Paul Clement described to AFP how he fled his home in Berry Creek. "When I came around the bend, everything was on fire — an entire hillside. So I ended up driving through and you couldn't see fifty feet (15 meters)."

"It was worse than the Camp Fire, which I didn't think was possible." California has seen 3.3 million acres burn — an annual record, with more than three months of the fire season still to come — and over 4,100 structures destroyed.

Near the Beachie Creek Fire, east of Oregon state capital Salem, police had set up multiple road-



HENDERSON: US President Donald Trump speaks during a campaign event at Xtreme Manufacturing on September 13, 2020 in Henderson, Nevada. Trump's visit comes after Nevada Republicans blamed Democratic Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak for blocking other events he had planned in the state. —AFP

blocks on Sunday. Long lines of cars stretched in front of them, waiting in the thick fog to pass through.

Many were farmers trying to go home and feed their livestock. "We went back to Mill City this morning, but police advised us not to as it is dangerous," resident Elaina Early told AFP. "The house is ok, but we leave now because the conditions are

really not good."

"My son is six and he is in shock, it's hard for him," the 36-year-old added. "He keeps telling me, 'We live in a hotel now?'"

Preparations have been hampered by online claims that "extremists" are intentionally setting fires in Oregon, rumors debunked by the FBI. Facebook said it was removing the posts. —AFP

Japan next premier's hometown highlights challenges ahead

YUZAWA: It's noon on a warm day in the Japanese town where Yoshihide Suga, Japan's next prime minister, grew up, but more than half the stores in a downtown shopping arcade are shuttered and sidewalks stretch empty except for the rare elderly passerby.

A building proclaiming "I Love Yuzawa" stands abandoned. A giant department store nearby hulks over the street, mostly unusable because it doesn't meet earthquake safety standards but too expensive to tear down.

The remote part of Yuzawa where Suga grew up, 480 km (300 miles) northeast of Tokyo, captures key challenges his administration will face: half the residents in the area are over 60. Depopulation and ageing have meant a dramatic fall in tax revenue, pushing the town's government, reliant on support from Tokyo, to consider merging with other towns in Akita prefecture.

"Japan is the world's fastest-aging nation, Akita the fastest-aging prefecture and Yuzawa one of the worst in Akita," said town employee Toru Abe, noting that close to 40% of all Yuzawa residents are over 65, compared to 28% for the nation.

"If we didn't have fiscal support from the central government, we couldn't make ends meet," said Abe. Of the town's annual budget of 27 billion yen (\$250 million), he said, only about a fifth comes from taxes.

Suga is on track to be chosen leader of Japan's ruling party yesterday and elected prime minister on Wednesday, succeeding long-serving Shinzo Abe, who is resigning for health reasons.

Yuzawa, which sees two-metre (6 1/2-foot) snowfalls that locals say make them tough, has marked Suga, 71, as a self-made politician among hereditary lawmakers from wealthy families. It has also influenced his best-known policies.

These include promoting inbound tourism, reforming the country's vast agricultural cooperative network and introducing a "hometown tax" — a system allowing people to pay local taxes to an area other than where they live and, in return, getting deductions and local delicacies like beef or rice.

"He talked about it long before then, saying he grew up in Akita and benefited from tax revenues, then moved down here and feels strange not paying anything. He wondered if there was a system to make it possible," said Hiromi Okazaki, a retired bureaucrat who worked for Suga in the Internal Affairs Ministry when Suga ran it and introduced the scheme in the 2000s.

Most residents in Yuzawa blame the economic decline on the devastating population slide, largely due to a low birth rate and lack of jobs in the town reliant primarily on rice farming. In 1955, Yuzawa had 80,000 residents, some working at a now played-out silver mine. The population has since shrivelled by half. Only 442 high school students graduated last year. With 16.4 deaths for every 1,000 residents in 2019, Akita has Japan's highest death rate. That compares with 11.2 deaths nationwide. Its birth rate, 4.9 per 1,000, is Japan's lowest. Town officials project 400 million yen (\$3.8 million) in revenue from Suga's "hometown tax" in the fiscal year through March. It's not enough to turn its fortunes around, they say, but

in Yuzawa, every bit helps.

By a row of cigarette vending machines in the city centre hangs a sign: "Tobacco taxes are important for our area. Let's buy cigarettes!" In 2019, the tax brought in 209 million yen, it says.

In 2015, Akita crafted a plan to stem the demographic decline with steps such as expanding medical subsidies for schoolchildren, providing extra daycare support and helping workers repay student loans. But local residents say it's hard to revive an aging economy. "If only we had places people wanted to come, like shops," said Momoko Takahashi, 33, a Yuzawa native, preparing to open a cafe in October. "Even a big supermarket would help."

Suga's family home still stands in a remote part of Yuzawa, empty since his aging mother moved to a nursing home three years ago.

The Akinomiya hamlet was known for its rice fields, and adult male farmers left their families each winter to work in Tokyo to make ends meet — a practice Suga's father, Wasaburo, helped eliminate by venturing into more lucrative strawberry farming and forming a co-op.

"He would have seen his father's thinking, his father's initiatives and that would have grown up in him naturally," said Masashi Yuri, 71, who lived just a few houses away from Suga.

Suga helped out in the strawberry fields and was quiet and stubborn as a classmate, practicing baseball for hours at night to get the third-baseman spot he wanted, Yuri said.

"He doesn't show anything on his face, he doesn't show his emotions, but in the shadows, he makes extreme efforts," Yuri said. Of the 200 strawberry farmers who made the area famous for tart summer berries, only some 60 remain. More than half are elderly. — Reuters

Bodies recovered at DR Congo mine accident site

BUKAVU: Emergency workers late Sunday recovered the first bodies of miners who perished in a disaster at a makeshift goldmine in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, witnesses told AFP.

A total of 18 bodies have been recovered to nearby mining town Kamituga, according to a local resident at the scene, Jean Nondo.

The governor of the South Kivu province has said that 50 miners had died, caught underground when heavy rains flooded their mine on Friday.

"When people wanted to get out, there was no way to because the water was pouring in at a great pressure," Nondo said. Kamituga mayor Alexandre Bundy said he did not know how many miners were working at the time of the flooding, but that 19 families were searching for missing loved ones.

For a second day running, hundreds of people gathered at the site as emergency workers brought the first bodies out and into nearby tents, video footage viewed by AFP showed.

While the emergency workers were working with shovels and their bare hands on Saturday, by Sunday a hydraulic shovel had been brought to the site to help them with their work.

The mine was on a concession held by Kamituga mining, a subsidiary of Canadian gold mining com-

pany Banro, Raoul Kitungano, of the Congolese campaign group Justice Pour Tous (Justice for All), told AFP. Banro announced in September 2019 it was suspending its operations there.

The mine was thus left to the artisanal miners, who earn their living by selling the minerals they manage to dig up themselves to local traders, who sell it on to large foreign companies. Accidents in DR Congo's makeshift mines are common and often deadly.

In June 2019, at least 39 men died when a copper mine in Kolwezi, in the southeastern Katanga region, partially collapsed. Because many such mines are in remote areas however, the accidents are under-reported. DR Congo has huge reserves of gold, cobalt, copper and coltan. It is the world's largest producer of cobalt, crucial for making the batteries used in mobile phones and electric vehicles.

DR Congo's mineral-rich but volatile east faces regular attacks from a plethora of militias and rebel groups which operate freely in the region. —AFP

Three Lebanese soldiers killed

BEYROUTH: The Lebanese army said three of its troops were killed and another wounded while attempting to arrest a suspected "terrorist" at his north Lebanon home. "While raiding the house of a wanted terrorist in the Mount Beiddawi-Minyeh area, a military intelligence patrol was hit by gunfire and hand



KAMITUGA: Hundreds of people gather in Kamituga, South Kivu, at the entrance of one of the mines where dozens of Congolese artisanal miners are feared to be killed after heavy rain filled the mine tunnels. —AFP

grenades," the army said in a statement late Sunday.

"Three soldiers were killed and another was seriously wounded," it added, saying that the army was chasing the perpetrators. It did not say whether it had arrested the suspect or give any details on his identity. Local media reports said that the army had been chasing a militant cell known as the Khalid al-Tallawi group, believed to be behind the August 21 murder of two police officers and the son of the mayor of Kaftoun village in north Lebanon. Police had already arrested a suspect the day after the murders took place in the Beiddawi camp for Palestinian refugees near the northern port city of Tripoli. —AFP

US, Iran battle over sanctions at world court

THE HAGUE: The United States and Iran will face off at the UN's top court yesterday in the latest round of a battle over sanctions on Tehran reimposed by President Donald Trump. Tehran dragged Washington to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague in 2018 after Trump pulled the US out of a landmark international nuclear deal with Iran.

They will argue over the coming week about whether the court, set up after World War II to deal with disputes between UN member states, actually has jurisdiction in the case. Iran says the sanctions brought back by the Trump administration breach the 1955 "Treaty of Amity" between the two countries, signed long before the 1979 Iranian revolution severed ties.

Tehran won an early victory in October 2018 when the ICJ ordered sanctions on humanitarian goods to be eased as an emergency measure while the overall lawsuit is dealt with. The US responded by formally ending the treaty, agreed when Iran was ruled by the Western-oriented shah, and accusing Iran of using the ICJ for "propaganda" purposes.

The United States will first address the court on Monday at 1300 GMT about whether judges have jurisdiction in the case, while Iran will speak tomorrow. A decision on that issue could take several months, while a final judgment will take years.

'Unclean Hands'

Relations between Washington and Tehran have been tense since the Iranian revolution, and have spiralled since Trump unilaterally pulled out of the nuclear deal in May 2018. The deal, involving the five permanent members of the UN Security Council — Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States, plus Germany — had limited Iran's nuclear programme.

Washington then reimposed sanctions on Iran and companies with ties to it, notably hitting Iran's vital oil sector and central bank, while major global firms halted their activities in Iran. Tehran took the case to the ICJ and, in response to Iran's request for so-called "provisional measures" while the case is resolved, the judges two years ago found that some of the sanctions breached the 1955 treaty.

The court ordered Washington to lift measures on medicines, medical equipment, food, agricultural goods, and airplane parts and services. The ICJ is also dealing with a separate case over Tehran's bid to unfreeze \$2 billion in assets frozen in the United States.

In February 2019 the court said the case could go ahead, rejecting US arguments that Iran's "unclean hands" — Tehran's alleged backing for terror groups — should disqualify its lawsuit. —AFP