

International

Heavy snowfall, bitter cold bring chaos to Germany and Britain

Drivers stranded for hours in traffic jams; vaccination centers shut

BERLIN: Freezing drivers were stranded for hours in traffic jams in Germany and COVID-19 vaccination centers were shut in Britain yesterday as Europe was pummeled by the heaviest snow in years.

Traffic on a motorway near the German city of Bielefeld was brought to a standstill by heavy snowfall overnight Monday into yesterday, with some drivers trapped for at least 16 hours, according to media reports. The bottleneck, caused by lorries stuck in the snow and stretching over 37 kilometers (23 miles), had still not been cleared by yesterday morning, local police said. Video footage showed shivering drivers huddled in their vehicles, complaining of going for hours without food as temperatures plunged to minus 12 degrees Celsius (10 degrees Fahrenheit).

Severe jams were also reported in Hesse, where some drivers were stuck in their cars for 15 hours, according to police. Transport Minister Andreas Scheuer asked residents to avoid setting out on journeys until today at the earliest.

Northern and eastern Germany were particularly badly hit on Sunday and Monday night, with blizzard-like conditions and some of the coldest temperatures seen in years. Police in Saxony-Anhalt said a man had probably frozen to death after he was found buried in snow next to his tractor. In Bielefeld, a man was found dead on a snow-covered road on Monday, though emergency services said initial findings suggested he had suffered a medical emergency. In the southern city of Nuremberg, many residents had their heating cut off because of a fire in a power station.

Rail disruptions

Train services across the country have seen severe delays and cancellations because of the winter weather.

Kalashnikov maker targets hipsters with 'gadget gun'

MOSCOW: The Kalashnikov group, which produces the AK-47 assault rifle, is planning to target hipsters and young people with a gadget-packed shotgun, its director said yesterday. Kalashnikov's director Dmitry Tarasov said the group had developed a semi-automatic 12-gauge shotgun dubbed the MP-155 Ultima that has a built-in computer and can teach its users how to shoot. "It's the first gadget weapon. The task is to attract that part of the audience who was born with gadgets and cannot imagine themselves without them," Tarasov said in an interview with the RBK business daily. "Classic



BERLIN: People crowd the Wilmersdorf-Schoeneberg park as they take advantage of the fresh snow to use their sledge and play on the frozen pond near the town hall in Berlin's Schoeneberg district. — AFP

er, with snow and ice clogging the rails. Snow is expected to decrease in the coming days, according to forecasters, but temperatures as cold as -18 C mean travel conditions will remain hazardous. With the wind-chill factor, temperatures could feel as low as -30 C at night, forecasters have said.

Heavy snow has also fallen in other countries across central and northern Europe, including Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark. Parts of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland were placed on amber alert yesterday, with major disruptions expected to road and

hunting today is becoming more rare, even outlandish. Therefore, I would like to involve... hipsters, Generation Z," he said, referring to those born from the mid-1990s onwards.

"I really want people to own weapons responsibly and at the same time get a kick out of it." The estimated price of its new high-tech shotgun, which was first presented at a military expo outside Moscow last summer, is 100,000 rubles (\$1,348). It can be adapted with gadgets including a compass and a video camera, Tarasov said. The Kalashnikov group is Russia's largest weapons producer and is part of the state-owned defence conglomerate Rostec. The group says it manufactures some 95 percent of "all Russian small arms". Mass shootings in Russia are relatively rare. In the last high-profile case, a teenage gunman in October 2018 killed 20 at his college in Moscow-annexed Crimea. Last month a young army recruit was sentenced to over 24 years in prison for shooting dead eight servicemen, in a trial that spotlighted hazing in the army. — AFP

rail travel, according to the Met Office weather service. Heavy snow yesterday morning drew many families to London's parks for sledding, while parts of northern and eastern England were expecting up to 15 centimeters.

Some coronavirus vaccination centers in England were forced to close—including major hubs in Ipswich and Colchester—hampering Britain's rollout. Schools, currently open only to vulnerable children or those of essential workers, were also closed in southeastern England and Lincolnshire. — AFP



MUMBAI: In this file photo Indian Bollywood actor Rajiv Kapoor attends a prayer meeting for Bollywood film producer and director Ravi Chopra in Mumbai. — AFP

Bollywood actor Rajiv Kapoor dead

MUMBAI: Bollywood actor and late Raj Kapoor's son Rajiv Kapoor passed away yesterday. He was 58. According to reports, he suffered a massive heart attack, following which he was rushed to Inlax Hospital in Chembur. Before the doctors could start treating him, he breathed his last, the reports added.

Rajiv Kapoor's brother Randhir Kapoor also confirmed the news while speaking to a leading daily, stating, "I have lost my youngest brother, Rajiv. He is no more. The doctors tried their best but could not save him," he said adding, "I am at the hospital, waiting for his body." Rajiv's sister-in-law Neetu Kapoor took to Instagram to confirm the news. Sharing a photo of the actor, Neetu wrote, "RIP"

Rajiv Kapoor was a part of Bollywood's Kapoor clan. He was the brother of Randhir Kapoor, Rima Kapoor, Ritu Nanda, and late Rishi Kapoor.

Rajiv Kapoor made his acting debut in 1983 with Ek Jaan Hain Hum. He was seen as the leading actor in father Raj Kapoor's last directorial venture Ram Teri Ganga Maili (1985). His most notable being Aasmaan (1984), Lover Boy (1985), Zabardast (1985) and Hum To Chale Pardes (1988). —AFP

the three warmest years on record. "Despite the general cooling influence of La Nina events, land temperatures are expected to be above-normal for most parts of the globe in February-April 2021," the WMO said. "La Nina and El Nino effects on average global temperatures are typically strongest in the second year of the event, but it remains to be seen to what extent the current La Nina will influence global temperatures in 2021," the United Nations agency added.

Warmer temperatures expected

In a global seasonal climate update, the WMO said that other than in a few small areas, above-normal land temperatures are "expected to dominate everywhere" for February-April. "The highest probabilities of above-normal temperatures occur in western, central and eastern Asia and over the southern half of North America," the WMO said. "Above-normal temperatures are also likely over much of the northern high latitudes (except over northwestern North America), southern, central and eastern parts of South America, and equatorial and northern regions of Africa.

"Below-normal temperatures are more likely for northern South America." Meanwhile the precipitation outlook for February to April is consistent with typical La Nina effects on regional climates, said the WMO. "These include increased chances of unusually wet conditions over much of southeast Asia, Australia and northern South America and islands in Melanesia, Southern Africa may also see above-normal rainfall," the WMO said.

"Below-normal precipitation is likely over much of western and central Asia... as well as parts of the Greater Horn of Africa, parts of Central Africa, subtropical latitudes of North America, islands in Polynesia and some parts of southeastern South America." The last La Nina, which was brief and relatively weak, began developing in November 2017 and ended in April 2018. —AFP



MOSCOW: In this file photo Kalashnikov's MP-155 Ultima shotgun is pictured in the Kalashnikov expo center prior to the International Military-Technical Forum Army-2020 in the military Patriot Park outside Moscow. — AFP

Caribbean islands in dire straits as new COVID rules hit

PARIS: It's February and the palm-fringed beaches of French islands in the Caribbean should be dotted with mainland tourists on mid-term holidays. But the annual influx has slowed to a trickle in Guadeloupe and Martinique following a government decision to ban non-essential travel outside of the EU over the COVID-19 pandemic. The move, part of a series of restrictions announced to stave off a third nationwide lockdown, caused dismay in the islands that have been part of France since the 17th century and rely heavily on tourism from the mainland.

The government insists the islands must be protected from the new, more infectious coronavirus strains that are sweeping France. So far they have been relatively shielded from the pandemic, with Guadeloupe recording 159 deaths, Martinique 45 and the rate of new infections described by the health ministry as stable. "We have to do everything to protect them from this new risk," Minister for Overseas Territories Sebastien Lecornu tweeted on January 28. But travel restrictions are a blow to the economy of islands that had hoped to profit from the closure of French ski resorts—a popular destination in February—to sell more winter sun holidays.

French travellers to Guadeloupe, an archipelago of nine inhabited islands that are home to 390,000 people, and Martinique, an island of 370,000 inhabitants, must now show a "compelling" motive for their trip. This could be visiting a dying relative or a child of which the traveller has shared custody. They also have to present a negative PCR test taken less than 72 hours before departure, self-isolate for a week on arrival, and, since last week, present a negative PCR test before returning to the mainland. —AFP

La Nina climate cycle has peaked

GENEVA: The 2020-2021 La Nina phenomenon has passed its peak, the UN weather agency said yesterday, but its impact on temperatures, rain and storm patterns is set to continue. La Nina refers to the large-scale cooling of surface temperatures in the central and eastern equatorial Pacific Ocean, occurring every two to seven years. The effect has widespread impacts on weather around the world—typically the opposite impacts to the El Nino warming phase in the Southern Oscillation cycle.

Besides the cooling effect, La Nina is usually associated with wetter conditions in some parts of the world, and drier conditions in others. La Nina conditions have been in place since August-September 2020, according to atmospheric and oceanic indicators. "La Nina appears to have peaked in October-November as a moderate strength event," said the World Meteorological Organization (WMO).

The WMO said there was a 65 percent likelihood that La Nina will persist during February-April. The odds shift rapidly thereafter, with a 70 percent chance that the tropical Pacific will return to neutral conditions in the cycle by April-June. "El Nino and La Nina are major drivers of the Earth's climate system," said WMO Secretary-General Petteri Taalas. "But all naturally-occurring climate events now take place in the context of human-induced climate change, which is increasing global temperatures, exacerbating extreme weather, impacting seasonal rainfall patterns and complicating disaster prevention and management."

The temporary global cooling effects of La Nina were not enough to prevent 2020 from being one of

News in brief

Hacker tries to dump chem into water

WASHINGTON: An unknown hacker broke into a Florida city's water supply and briefly pushed levels of a potentially dangerous additive up 100-fold, local law enforcement said Monday. The hack was noticed quickly and reversed immediately, so no one in the Tampa suburb of Oldsmar was ever in danger, Pinellas County Sheriff Bob Gualtieri said. But it underscored the broader threat of cyberattacks to US infrastructure, he added. —AFP

Colombia to offer protected status

BOGOTA: Colombia will temporarily normalize the status of almost one million undocumented Venezuelan migrants, President Ivan Duque said on Monday during a visit by the UN Refugee Agency. Some 56 percent—around 950,000 — of the 1.7 million Venezuelans to have arrived in Colombia fleeing economic and political crises in their homeland, are undocumented and will benefit from the measure. —AFP

Family of Suu Kyi aide 'distracted'

Sydney: The relatives of an Australian economic advisor to Myanmar's deposed civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi say they are "distracted" over his detention in the wake of a military coup. Macquarie University professor Sean Turnell was the first foreign national confirmed arrested by the new military junta, which took power last week after detaining Suu Kyi and other senior members of her National League for Democracy (NLD). In a statement released by Australia's foreign affairs department late Monday, the family said they were "distracted" that Turnell had been detained. — AFP

Republican wins final election

NEW YORK: The final unresolved race of the US election was brought to a conclusion Monday, three months after polling day and over a month since most lawmakers were sworn into Congress. New York's elections board certified Republican Claudia Tenney as the winner of the state's 22nd congressional district over Democrat Anthony Brindisi. She becomes the final member of the 435-seat lower chamber after months of wrangling over the vote count. A judge on Friday ordered the New York State Board of Elections to certify a count that put Tenney just 109 votes ahead of Brindisi out of 300,000 ballots cast. —AFP

Israel, Greece sign travel deal

JERUSALEM: Israel and Greece agreed a tourism deal Monday that will allow coronavirus-vaccinated citizens of the two countries to travel between them without limitations, once flights resume. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said the agreement "will allow us... to be able to offer Israeli tourists the opportunity to spend their holidays in Greece without any restrictions" at a joint press conference with his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu. This would go into effect once "a significant percentage of the population is vaccinated" and travel restrictions are lifted, Mitsotakis said. —AFP

Family sues trading app Robinhood over suicide

SAN FRANCISCO: The family of a college student who killed himself after thinking he'd lost a fortune using Robinhood sued the free trading app Monday. A message left behind by Alex Kearns asked how it was that a 20-year-old with no income could get access to nearly \$1 million of financial leverage using Robinhood, according to the suit filed in Silicon Valley, where the app is based. "Robinhood's website entices young, inexperienced users," the suit contends.

"By marketing its online trading platform like a video game, it implied that trading stock and options was a fun way to make money, perhaps even to get rich." The suit accuses Robinhood of causing the Illinois man's death along with unfair business practices, and asks for unspecified damages. In response to an AFP query, Robinhood said it was "devastated" by Kearns' death last June and has since improved trading features along with guidance and education features for users.

"We remain committed to making Robinhood a place to learn and invest responsibly," a spokesperson said. Kearns was in his final year of high school when he opened a Robinhood account, according to the suit. He used the app to start trading options in his freshman year of college, and a series of trades resulted in him finding his account was \$730,000 in the red, the suit detailed. "Tragically, Robinhood's communications were completely misleading, because, in reality, Alex did not owe any money," the lawsuit contended. "He held options in his account that more than covered his obligation." —AFP