

International

Evacuations ordered as Sydney's biggest dam overflows after rain

Authorities ask 4,000 people to leave their homes in coming days

SYDNEY: Sydney braced for its worst flooding in decades yesterday after record rainfall caused its largest dam to overflow and as deluges prompted mandatory mass evacuation orders along Australia's east coast. Emergency services ordered people living in low-lying areas on the city's north-western fringes to flee to safety, as authorities warned of a potentially "life-threatening" situation in New South Wales state. It came after the Warragamba Dam, which provides much of the drinking water for Sydney, spilled over Saturday afternoon-causing officials to warn the downstream Hawkesbury River was expected to peak at levels not seen since 1961.

"It is one of the biggest floods we are likely to see for a very long time," Bureau of Meteorology flood operations manager Justin Robinson said. Floodwaters had already risen in several areas, prompting mass evacuations, and officials said another 4,000 people could be told to leave their homes in the coming days. Authorities urged residents to heed the "dozens" of official warnings in place across affected areas, with State Emergency Service assistant commissioner Dean Storey saying those in evacuation zones "must leave immediately".

People had already begun flocking to evacuation centers in towns north of Sydney on Saturday as torrential rains pummeled a vast coastal region already soaked by an unusually wet summer. State

Premier Gladys Berejiklian said the region was experiencing a "one in 100 year event" and a national disaster had been declared. In Taree, where television images showed one house floating down a bloated river, about 150 people slept in a local auditorium overnight that has previously been used as a refuge for people fleeing bushfires. Club Taree chief executive Paul Allen described the floods as a "catastrophe", telling public broadcaster ABC that some locals had "lost everything".

The Bureau of Meteorology said the wild weather was forecast to re-intensify north of Sydney today before easing later in the week. Conditions were "going to be treacherous yet again," senior climatologist Agata Imielska said. Rainfall records were forecast to continue tumbling in the coming days, she added. Emergency services reported receiving more than 7,000 calls for help and carrying out about 650 flood rescues since Thursday, with reinforcements being called in from other states.

The rain and floods were also expected to delay the already halting roll-out of coronavirus vaccines in Sydney and surrounding areas. Australia is due to begin the first major public phase of vaccine distribution on Monday although the program has slipped behind the government's announced timetable due to supply and delivery issues. —AFP



SYDNEY: Residents walk amid heavy rain in Penrith suburb yesterday, as Sydney braced for its worst flooding in decades after record rainfall caused its largest dam to overflow and as deluges prompted mandatory mass evacuation orders along Australia's east coast. —AFP

Thousands rally at anti-Netanyahu protest ahead of vote

JERUSALEM: Thousands of Israelis rallied outside Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Jerusalem residence Saturday to protest his policies and premiership, days before a general election that could see the long-standing leader removed from power. Netanyahu, 71, in power for a record 12 consecutive years, is hoping to remain in office following Israel's fourth election in less than two years on March 23.

His detractors accuse him of corruption and say his management of the coronavirus pandemic, including protracted lockdowns, battered the economy and contributed to job losses. Waving flags including the Israeli blue-and-white, protesters led by a young man with a bullhorn chanted "Bibi go home", using the prime minister's nickname.

They also held up signs carrying a broad range of messages, from the need for a leader-

ship "revolution" to mistrust in the police. "We came to protest against a dictator," Anat Gourelle, a 60-year-old lawyer from Tel Aviv, said of Netanyahu.

"It is outrageous what is going on in Israel. It is unthinkable that somebody is using his power to steal from his own people," she said. "We will keep on protesting until he gets out of Balfour," she said, using the name of the Jerusalem street where the premier's official residence is located.

Netanyahu was the first Israeli premier to be indicted in office for corruption when he was formally charged last year in three cases over claims he accepted improper gifts and sought to trade regulatory favor with media moguls in exchange for positive coverage. The combative premier denies wrongdoing and claims he is the victim of a witch-hunt, but he would be forced to resign if convicted with all appeals exhausted.

'Go vote'

First launched in June last year, the vocal and colourful demonstrations against Netanyahu have gained momentum over the past 38 weeks, with Saturday night's rally—the 39th—the largest in recent months. "I have come here every Saturday since the

beginning," said Simon, a Tel Aviv resident who drove to Jerusalem for the demonstration. "People will not change their side from right to left, but this event is to convince them to go to vote, not to remain silent," he said. "It is a very emotional event for us." Others, like Hagit, were at the weekly rally for the first time. —AFP



JERUSALEM: A protester holds a sign reading "BB GO HOME" depicting Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu as the character 'E.T.' —AFP

beginning," said Simon, a Tel Aviv resident who drove to Jerusalem for the demonstration. "People will not change their side from right to left, but this event is to convince them to go to vote, not to remain silent," he said. "It is a very emotional event for us." Others, like Hagit, were at the weekly rally for the first time. —AFP



BRAZZAVILLE, Commune de Brazzaville: Republic of Congo incumbent president Denis Sassou-Nguesso, candidate for the presidential election waves at his supporters, at the end of his last campaign rally in Brazzaville. —AFP

only opposition party to have a parliamentary group in the current national assembly. Flanked by its giant neighbor the Democratic Republic of Congo and Gabon, the former French colony has oil reserves and most of its budget comes from petroleum revenue. —AFP

Subramanian, a former chief government economic advisor, resigned from Ashoka in solidarity. That the university "can no longer provide a space for academic expression and freedom is ominously disturbing," media reports cited his letter of resignation as saying. Students have held several days of demonstrations at the Ashoka campus outside New Delhi, calling for a boycott of classes. The university faculty also issued a statement saying Mehta's departure "raises urgent questions about the university's commitment to academic freedom as well as its internal processes."

More than 150 academics worldwide including from Columbia, Yale and Oxford said in an open letter that they were "deeply distressed" that Mehta had resigned "under political pressure". They said that the values of "free inquiry, candor, and a rigorous distinction between the demands of intellectual honesty and the pressure of politicians, funders, or ideological animus... come under assault whenever a scholar is punished for the content of public speech." —AFP

North's diplomats 48 hours to leave the country.

Yesterday the North Korean flag and a plaque were taken down from the country's embassy—a large house in an upmarket area of Kuala Lumpur—and the gates were chained up. Before departing, North Korean charge d'affaires, Kim Yu Song, accused Malaysia of siding with Washington in a "conspiracy" against Pyongyang, and committing a "large hostile act". Malaysia had aligned its policies with those of the US, "which seeks to deprive our state of its sovereignty, peaceful existence and development," Kim, the North's most senior diplomat in Malaysia, told a large media

Internet blackout as Congo votes, with Nguesso set to win

BRAZZAVILLE, Congo: The Republic of Congo voted yesterday in a presidential election boycotted by the main opposition and attacked by critics as tilted towards veteran leader Denis Sassou Nguesso. Access to the Internet and social media was cut hours before polls opened at 7:00 am. AFP correspondents said. The 77-year-old Sassou Nguesso is widely expected to win against six contenders, led by economist Guy-Brice Parfait Kolelas, who revealed Saturday that he is gravely ill with COVID-19.

Sassou Nguesso, a former paratrooper, first rose to power in 1979 and has since accumulated 36 years in office, making him one of the world's longest-serving leaders. He is hoping for a first-round victory to secure a fourth term running the central African oil exporter. Meanwhile challenger Kolelas posted a video message from his sickbed, declaring he was "battling against death" after tak-

Furor after govt critic quits top Indian university

NEW DELHI: The resignation of one of India's most prominent intellectuals and a fierce government critic from a top university has sparked student protests and worries about freedom of speech in the world's biggest democracy. Pratap Bhanu Mehta, a respected scholar on political theory and constitutional law, had long been dismayed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, firing off stinging editorials and speeches denouncing the "death of liberalism". The Oxford and Princeton alumnus had already stepped down as vice-chancellor of Ashoka University in 2019, reportedly

because the trustees were worried by his outspoken views, but remained a political science professor.

But last week he threw in the towel, saying that the board of the university—founded in 2014 as a bastion of the liberal arts and India's answer to the Ivy League—saw him as a "political liability". "My public writing in support of a politics that tries to honor constitutional values of freedom and equal respect for all citizens, is perceived to carry risks for the university," he said in his resignation letter. Ashoka's founders met Mehta recently and said they could no longer protect him in the "current political environment", the Indian Express daily reported. According to the university's student newspaper, Mehta's resignation was endorsed by the board because it would speed up efforts to acquire land needed for an expansion.

'Political pressure'

The university has yet to comment on the controversy but matters escalated Thursday when Arvind

move Friday, labeling Malaysia's extradition of a North Korean man last week an "unpardonable crime" carried out under "blind obedience" to American pressure.

The Southeast Asian country had been one of Pyongyang's few allies but ties were already strained following the 2017 assassination of leader Kim Jong Un's half-brother at Kuala Lumpur airport.

A court ruling earlier this month that Mun Chol Myong could be extradited to the US to face money laundering charges for allegedly exporting prohibited items to the North in violation of sanctions proved the final blow. After Pyongyang cut ties, Malaysia gave the

News in brief

Arauz, Lasso to contest poll

QUITO: Left-wing economist Andres Arauz and conservative former banker Guillermo Lasso will contest the second round of Ecuador's presidential election on April 11, the National Electoral Council (CNE) confirmed Saturday after resolving all disputes from the first round. "Once 100 percent of the votes have been counted and the legal appeals filed by the political organizations have been resolved, the plenary of the electoral body has decided to proclaim the final results for the presidential run-off," CNE secretary Santiago Vallejo said. Arauz, 36, won the first round in February with 32.72 percent of the vote but not enough to win outright, followed by Lasso with 19.74 percent, according to the CNE count. —AFP

Peru govt, unions to end strike

LIMA: The Peruvian government and transport unions, striking since Monday over fuel price increases, have reached an agreement to end the protests, authorities announced Saturday. "After a long day of dialogue, leaders of the transport unions reached an agreement with the government and signed an act benefitting the sector and are committed to lifting their strike," the Ministry of Transport said on Twitter. As part of the agreement, state-owned Petroperu will reduce the price of diesel and fuel will be subsidized by a special fund protecting against price volatility. The resolution also sought to place more responsibility on "highly polluting" Canadian companies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and support innovation in green technologies. —AFP

Protesters march in Spain

MADRID: Hundreds of demonstrators on Saturday rallied in cities across Spain, including Madrid and Barcelona, calling for the release of a controversial rapper, jailed in mid-February for tweets criticizing the royal family and the security forces. Shouting slogans such as "Freedom for Pablo Hase!" and "We are the anti-fascists", several hundreds of people took to the streets in the Spanish capital in an unregistered demonstration, according to an AFP reporter. The march passed off peacefully before the crowds dispersed at the request of the police. In Barcelona, the main focal point of protests last month, around 100 people marched, waving banners demanding "complete amnesty for Pablo Hase!". —AFP

Ex-Malta PM faces graft charges

VALLETTA, Malta: A top aide to former Maltese prime minister Joseph Muscat accused of graft by journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, whose brutal murder rocked the nation, was charged Saturday with money laundering and fraud. Anti-corruption campaigners hailed the prosecution of Keith Schembri as a vindication of the work of Caruana Galizia, whose death in a car bomb in 2017 sparked grief and anger across the Mediterranean island. Schembri, who was Muscat's chief of staff from 2013 to 2019, appeared in court Saturday charged with money laundering, corruption, fraud and forgery. He pleaded not guilty and was denied bail. —AFP

N Korean diplomats set to leave Malaysia after ties cut

KUALA LUMPUR: North Korea's diplomats in Malaysia shuttered their embassy and fled home yesterday, after Pyongyang severed diplomatic ties over the extradition of a citizen to the US. Pyongyang announced the shock

pack. Kim and what appeared to be a group of diplomats and their family members then departed on a bus.

They arrived later at Kuala Lumpur airport, loaded stacks of luggage onto trolleys and went to check in at the counters used by regular passengers. An airport security official, speaking anonymously, told AFP that about 30 North Koreans were expected to fly to Shanghai yesterday. Pyongyang's decision to cut ties came after a visit last week by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin to South Korea, part of an Asian tour to rally support against the nuclear-armed North and China. —AFP