



Optimism amid salvage efforts as megaship still stuck in Suez

## Defense chiefs condemn bloodiest day since Myanmar's military coup

Page 7

Page 6



LONDON: A picture shows London landmark The London Eye before being submerged into darkness for the Earth Hour environmental campaign. —AFP

# Cities turn off lights to mark Earth Hour

## Event highlights link between destruction of nature and outbreaks of diseases like COVID

**BUENOS AIRES:** From Singapore to Buenos Aires, cities around the world turned off their lights Saturday to mark Earth Hour, with this year's event highlighting the link between the destruction of nature and increasing outbreaks of diseases like COVID-19.

After starting in Asia, the call to action on climate change made its way around a planet reeling from the coronavirus pandemic. As the day came to an end, it was the turn of the Americas, where the lights dimmed at the Obelisk in Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro's Museum of Tomorrow and the BBVA tower in Mexico City.

In London, the Houses of Parliament, London Eye Ferris wheel, Shard skyscraper and neon signs of Piccadilly Circus were among the landmarks flicking the switches. "It's fantastic news that parliament once again is taking part in Earth Hour, joining landmarks across the country and the world to raise awareness of climate change," said Lindsay Hoyle,

Speaker of the House of Commons.

In Paris, the three stages of the Eiffel Tower progressively went dark but there were few people to watch with the whole country under a 7 pm COVID-19 curfew. The giant metal tower has been shut to the public since October 30, due to the pandemic. In Rome, the lights went out at the 2,000-year-old Colosseum, while police enforcing Italy's coronavirus restrictions checked the papers of a small crowd of onlookers.

### Harmful human activity

Asia-Pacific kicked off the event after night fell there, with the skylines of metropolises from Singapore to Hong Kong going dark, as well as landmarks including the Sydney Opera House. As the event crisscrossed time zones and continents, the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin and Moscow's Kremlin also joined the annual initiative. This year, organizers said they wanted to highlight the link between the

destruction of the natural world and the increasing incidence of diseases—such as COVID-19 — making the leap from animals to humans.

Experts believe human activity, such as widespread deforestation, destruction of animals' habitats and climate change, is spurring this increase, and warn more pandemics could occur if nothing is done. "Whether it is a decline in pollinators, fewer fish in the ocean and rivers, disappearing forests or the wider loss of biodiversity, the evidence is mounting that nature is in free fall," said Marco Lambertini, director general of the WWF, which organizes Earth Hour. "And this is because of the way we live our lives and run our economies. "Protecting nature is our moral responsibility but losing it also increases our vulnerability to pandemics, accelerates climate change, and threatens our food security," he said. In Singapore, people at the waterfront watched as skyscrapers went dark and in a nearby park, Gardens by the Bay, a group

of futuristic-looking tree sculptures had their lights turned off.

### 'Impact on the environment'

Earth Hour is about "more than just saving energy, it's more like remembering our impact on the environment," Ian Tan, 18, told AFP at the park. But he was not convinced the event, which has been running since 2007, made much of a difference. "One hour is not enough for us to remember that climate change is actually a problem—I don't really see (Earth Hour) as very significant," he said. In Hong Kong, people at viewing points above the city watched as lights were dimmed on hordes of closely packed skyscrapers, while in the South Korean capital Seoul, the historic Namdaemun gate went dark. In Thailand, Bangkok's ultra-popular CentralWorld mall counted down to 8:30 pm before its exterior glass displays went dark for an hour—though inside, the shopping center appeared to operate as usual. —AFP

## European jihadists' children 'at risk of radicalization'

**BRUSSELS:** The children of European jihadists left trapped in a Syrian camp after their fathers' defeat on the battlefield now face radicalization in their turn, a Belgian expert warns. Heidi De Pauw, director of the association Child Focus, has visited orphans and widows in the Al-Hol camp in northern Syria and says it is time to bring the youngsters home.

Belgium has been one of the main sources of foreign fighters who travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight under the banner of the Islamic State jihadist group. The group's so-called caliphate centered around Raqqa has now been overrun by western-backed forces and many militants have been slain—leaving behind their wives and children. Belgium's Prime Minister Alexander de Croo has recognized the need to bring the youngest children home to prevent a new generation of extremists growing up in camps.

His decision came as Brussels marks the fifth anniversary of the triple suicide bombing that was the deadliest peacetime attack in Belgium's history, and some here are worried. But De Pauw told AFP that the western-backed Kurdish forces that over-ran Raqqa are

losing control of the Al-Hol camp and the children held there should be protected. Very young girls are wearing full-face niqab veils and stone-throwing youths chase off "infidel" visitors.

"You'd think you were in Raqqa," De Pauw said, warning that the Islamic State group is once again in charge, particularly among the estimated 10,000 "foreigners" in Al-Hol. De Croo has said much the same—"In these camps are the terrorists of tomorrow"—and Belgian MP Georges Dallemagne says an "embryonic new Islamic State" is growing there.

Earlier this month, Belgium decided it must do what it can to bring home the youngest-children under 12 born to Belgian parents—on a case-by-case basis. According to agencies working in the camps, most of the 62,000 people languishing in Al-Hol are Iraqi and Syrian jihadists and their families. But for the past two years, there have been thousands of French, British, German, Dutch and Belgian nationals—mainly women and children—driven out of former IS stronghold Baghuz. Their section of the camp is run under the group's interpretation of Islamic law, enforced by sharia courts.



In this file photo, Dorothee Maquere, wife of French jihadist Jean-Michel Clain, sits with four of her five children at a screening area in the eastern Syrian province of Deir Ezzor, after fleeing the Islamic State (IS) group's embattled hold-out of Baghuz. — AFP

"All the women we saw wear the black niqab, even little girls of three or four," De Pauw said. "Many women have organized Islamic schools."

De Pauw's group Child Focus took part in a mission in June 2019 to bring six adolescents back to Belgium—orphans or those thought to have been kidnapped by a parent.

But researchers estimate that there may be 40 Belgian children in the camps. Back in 2019, just two months after Baghuz fell, the women were keen

to talk to European visitors about their plight. But by last December, the mood had changed. "We immediately felt the tension," De Pauw said. "At one point the children turned on us and called us kufar, infidels, and started to throw stones," she said. "It's sad to see a nine-to-ten year radicalized to this point." No contact was possible on the later visit with the adult women, and De Pauw fears that adolescent girls are being married off young to produce a new generation of babies. —AFP

## Al-Shabaab calls for attacks on US, French interests in Djibouti

**NAIROBI:** The leader of jihadist group Al-Shabaab has called for attacks on "American and French interests" in Djibouti, less than two weeks before the country's presidential election. In a video released late Saturday, Abou Obaida Ahmad Omar lashed out at Djibouti's President Ismail Omar Guelleh, who has been in power since 1999 and is set to win a fifth term in elections on April 9. The Islamist leader accused Guelleh of turning the Horn

of Africa country "into a military base from where every war against the Muslims in East Africa is planned and executed". "Make American and French interests in Djibouti the highest priority of your targets," he told followers in the video.

Djibouti's strategic location as a gateway to both Africa and the Arabian Peninsula has made it a sought-after destination for foreign military bases. The former French colony hosts France's largest contingent in Africa—some 1,500 troops—as well as the United States' only permanent base, with around 4,000 troops. Japan and Italy also have a presence in Djibouti, while China has had a port and military base in the country since 2017. Djibouti is furthermore host to a contingent of African Union troops fighting the Al-Qaeda linked Al-Shabaab in

Somalia, where the Islamists have waged a long and violent insurgency seeking to unseat the internationally-backed government.

In 2014 Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for a suicide attack on a restaurant in Djibouti, killing a Turkish man and injuring around 20 other people, including seven French nationals, six Dutch citizens, four Germans and three Spaniards. The jihadist group said it had targeted the restaurant because it was popular with "French crusaders and their NATO allies". French nationals were targeted because of what the group alleged was their government's "complicity in the massacres and persecution of our Muslim brothers in the Central African Republic and for their active role in training and equipping the apostate Djiboutian troops". —AFP

## European countries tighten curbs, France 'critical'

**PARIS:** France, Belgium and Poland tightened curbs as coronavirus cases surged in Europe while the Philippines prepared for a giant lockdown and Chile confined over 80 percent of its population. France has admitted that the situation is "critical" and added three more departments to the 16 already under tight restrictions.

Around 20 million people in France, including those in the greater Paris region, are classed as living in high-infection zones. They are not allowed to travel further than 10 kilometers (six miles) from their home unless they have an essential reason. Checks at train stations, airports and toll-paying motorways began Saturday to enforce the travel restrictions. "About 10 police teams have been deployed against two in normal times" in Paris's busy Montparnasse station, a police officer told AFP, adding that these numbers would be increased during busy hours.

Only shops selling food, and book and music stores are open and classrooms in high schools are only running at half the capacity. Daily cases in France have nearly doubled since the start of the month and there have been more than 200,000 new cases every week.

Belgium meanwhile closed all businesses involving non-medical physical contact such as hairdressers for four weeks from Saturday. Shops offering "non-essential" services can only receive clients with appointments. Poland closed creches, playgrounds, furniture and DIY stores, as well as beauty salons and barber shops.

Social distancing in churches in the predominantly Catholic nation has also been tightened with one person allowed in every 20 square meters (200 square feet) instead of 15 square meters earlier. The Philippines announced Saturday that more than 24 million people in and around Manila will go into lockdown next week. "The virus is the enemy, not the government," presidential spokesman Harry Roque said. "While we're at home we expect the infection rates to slow." —AFP