



Is the body on Mount Etna Italian reporter 'killed' by mob?

Syrian migrant found dead on Poland-Belarus border

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NEW DELHI: Commuters make their way along a busy road under heavy smoggy conditions in New Delhi. — AFP

Unbreathable! India board warns

A looming health emergency in New Delhi; Schools shut

NEW DELHI: India's pollution control body warned of a looming health emergency in New Delhi as deteriorating air quality in the capital turned the sky a murky grey. The city is ranked one of the world's most polluted, with a hazardous melange of factory emissions, car exhaust fumes and smoke from agricultural fires settling in the skies over its 20 million people each winter.

Yesterday, levels of harmful PM 2.5 particles topped 300 on the air quality index. That number is more than 10 times the safe daily limit set by the World Health Organization. A reading over 300 for 48 hours would initiate emergency measures in the

capital, including the closure of primary schools and severe traffic restrictions. The Central Pollution Control Board on Friday told New Delhi residents to "limit outdoor activities and minimize their exposure" and advised government authorities to prepare "for implementation of measures under 'emergency' category".

It added the poor air quality would likely run until November 18 due to "low winds with calm conditions during the night". Yesterday, the Supreme Court suggested imposing a pollution lockdown on Delhi to help with the air quality crisis. "How will we live otherwise?" Chief Justice NV

Ramana said. The burning of agricultural waste in Delhi's neighboring states - largely behind the megacity's pollution levels every winter - has continued despite a Supreme Court ban. The number of farm fires this season has been the highest in the past four years, according to government data.

At the COP26 global climate summit this month, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made it clear that carbon emissions-cutting pledges from India and other developing nations would require finance from rich, historic emitters. A 2020 report by Swiss organization IQAir found that 22 of the world's 30 most polluted cities were in India, with

Delhi ranked the most polluted capital globally. The same year, the Lancet said 1.67 million deaths were attributable to air pollution in India in 2019, including almost 17,500 in the capital.

Meanwhile, New Delhi's chief minister yesterday ordered schools to close for a week as India's capital reeled under dangerously high levels of air pollution. "Starting Monday, schools are being shut so that children don't have to breathe polluted air," Arvind Kejriwal told reporters, as government data showed pollution levels in the megacity were 437 on a scale of 500 on the Air Quality Index. — AFP

Broken dreams: Burkina Faso's orphans schooled in Castro's Cuba

OUAGADOUGOU: Thirty-five years ago, Burkina Faso's radical leader Thomas Sankara sent 600 youngsters, most of them orphans, to train in Cuba—a scheme, he declared, that would steer the country to a new dawn. Within a year, Sankara's dream of immersing marginalized children in Burkina's revolution was wrecked after he was cut down by assassins.

Today, scores of those who were enrolled in his scheme have died before their time, some by suicide, and many have mental health problems. Others live in limbo, eking out a life despite gaining qualifications in Cuba that their home country does not recognize. Sankara came to power in 1983 at the age of 33, an idealistic army captain who wanted to eradicate poverty in his country and challenge the "imperialist" world order.

The Marxist-Leninist turned instinctively to Cuba and Fidel Castro. "Sankara had the idea of sending a contingent of students to be trained in Cuba—politically, ideologically and professionally," Stanislas Damiba, who was 12 at the time he made the journey, told AFP. The group consisted of 600 children and adolescents aged 12 to 16, including 135 girls, "all from disadvantaged families and most of them orphans," said Damiba. On their return to Burkina, said Sankara, they would be a spearhead—a generation hardened in doctrine and trained in badly needed skills.

Damiba, 46, is president of the Association of Former Students Trained in Cuba—individuals who are often called the "Sankara Orphans." Today he has become a senior civil engineering technician in the private sector but proudly wears a Sankara T-shirt to honour a man he still considers "a spiritual father". Joined by two comrades who were with him in Cuba, Florence Hien and Inoussa Dankambary, 51, Damiba made a



OUAGADOUGOU: Stanislas Damiba, association of former students trained in Cuba's president, looks at a photo of him and a friend when he was a young student in Cuba. — AFP

point of meeting AFP journalists at the Thomas Sankara Memorial erected in Ouagadougou. The statue marks the place where the young leader was shot dead during a putsch which, on October 15, 1987, brought to power Blaise Compaore, once his brother in arms and a close friend. Compaore ruled for 27 years before being kicked out on the back of mounting street protests in 2014.

Damiba recalled the heady days when everything seemed possible. After passing selection tests, "we headed off to Cuba in September 1986," Damiba recalled. Six Burkina teachers came with them to teach French, history, geography and sex education, while other specialized subjects were taught by Cubans. The group was taken to the Isle of Youth, located in the southwest of Cuba and where students of 40 nationalities mingled. Their first requirement was to learn Spanish in six months.

'Work hard'

Sankara visited Cuba in September 1987. "Sankara came to shake our hands, one by one, and said to us, 'Work hard and come back to build the nation,'" said Damiba. But a month later, the "Father of the Revolution" was murdered. "It came out of the blue. For three days we were too stunned to eat or to

drink," said Damiba. "Everything changed—our six supervisors were recalled to the country and replaced by others," he said.

The "rectification" of Sankara's leftist policies had already started. Burkina's new government decided to "have us only do short studies" lasting a maximum of three years after the baccalaureate (high school) diploma, said Damiba. Then a monthly scholarship of about \$100 (86 euros) a month was cut off, dealing a further blow to their chances. Only 33 of the 600 were able to gain a university education. "Compaore wanted to destroy everything connected with Sankara," said Hien.

Before they had left home they had been promised coveted jobs in the civil service on their return. But only 240 out of the 600 "orphans" were given civil-service jobs on their return. And the qualifications they gained in Cuba are not recognized by the Burkina state, despite a long-running legal battle mounted by Damiba's association, which is also demanding compensation. "They are underemployed, they hold junior positions compared with people who trained in other countries," he said. "What sickens us is that we didn't ask to go to Cuba—we don't understand why when we came back, we were given the brush-off." — AFP

Mind over matter? Long COVID-19 study sparks controversy

WASHINGTON: A large-scale French study suggesting symptoms of so-called long COVID may be more due to psychological factors than to infection with the virus has sparked debate among patients and scientists. The report that appeared earlier this week in the Journal of the American Medical Association focused on nearly 27,000 participants across France who took antibody tests to screen for COVID infection.

After the subjects had received the antibody test results, researchers asked them whether they believed they had been infected with COVID and to report on symptoms like fatigue, breathlessness or impaired attention. The vast majority of respondents—over 25,000 people—tested negative for COVID antibodies and believed they had never been sick.

Of the some 1,000 who tested positive, about 450 believed they had contracted the virus. Finally, about 460 people who received negative antibody tests said they nonetheless believed they had had COVID. Researchers found that people who believed they had had COVID, whether or not they had had a positive test, were more likely to report long-term symptoms. A positive antibody test, meanwhile, was only consistently associated with one long-term symptom: loss of smell.

They concluded that persistent physical symptoms "may be associated more with the belief in having been infected with SARS-CoV-2 than with having laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 infection". The study coordinated by Cedric Lemogne, head of psychiatry at the Hotel-Dieu hospital in Paris, suggested the findings were important in order to allow research into other causes of the symptoms. "A medical evaluation of these patients may be needed to prevent symptoms due to another disease being erroneously attributed to 'long COVID'," it said.

Scepticism

But for patients suffering from these symptoms, the analysis feels like an attempt to discredit them. After the study was written up in French daily Le Monde, patient support group ApresJ20 alleged it could lead to stigmatization of people with long COVID. And some researchers have questioned the study's methods. Several reactions from experts published via the Science Media Centre point out that serology tests for antibodies cannot always reliably measure previous COVID infection—with one researcher saying it could be particularly unreliable for people feelings sick months after infection. — AFP