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Business



KEY WEST, US: Tourists wait at the Southernmost Point Buoy in Key West, Florida. — AFP photos



KEY WEST: Tourists sit on a bench near the Carnival Dream cruise ship at Port B in Key West, Florida.

Cruise ships at center of dispute in Florida's idyllic Key West

Restriction on cruises deals a blow to businesses in island-city

KEY WEST: The island-city of Key West off the southern tip of Florida invites visitors to stroll slowly, enjoy turquoise waters and take in the sunset. But according to some residents, that idyllic peace is endangered-by lumbering, tourist-filled cruise ships.

The huge vessels bring thousands of visitors every day to the small city of 26,000 inhabitants, whose quaint, often pastel-colored Victorian homes line leafy, walkable streets. Following a drawn-out local battle, the cruise tourist numbers are now down, but many residents say more still needs to be done. While many businesses depend on the tourist throngs, residents such as Arlo Haskell find the ships to be a nuisance and believe they cause environmental harm. As a result, he founded the Safer Cleaner Ships non-profit. "These cruise ships are an extraction industry that is profiting off of the beauty in Key West while harming that beauty and degrading the experience for everyone else," Haskell said.

In 2020, his association put forth three local referendums: one to limit the size of cruise ships, another to allow no more than 1,500 people a day to disembark and a third to be able to prohibit boats that do the most dam-

age to the environment. The three proposals, each approved by between 60 to 80 percent of voters, were ratified by the city council. It was a victory for Haskell—or so he thought.

Then in June 2021, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed a law suspending the measures, arguing that voters could not meddle in matters of maritime trade. Local businesses, including ones also owned by the owner of Pier B—a huge beneficiary of the cruise ships as one of the city's main docking locations—had donated almost \$1 million to a political campaign committee supporting the governor, according to the Miami Herald.

Public docks closed

Relying on a bit of unexpected economic data, Safer Cleaner Ships returned to battle following DeSantis' move. The info showed that cruise ship suspensions during the pandemic did not sink local finances. To the contrary, in 2021, the city collected 25 percent more sales taxes than in 2019, before COVID.

Hotels and restaurants seem to have taken advantage of the fact that Florida promoted its open businesses in

the middle of the pandemic while other states imposed rules and closings. The city administration last month decided that since Key West cannot limit the number of cruise ships, it would close its two public docks.

Now cruises can only park at private Pier B, which welcomes only one cruise ship per day. The era of two to three ships arriving daily is over. The move has been a blow to some businesses. Although cruise tourists spend only a few hours in the city and usually eat before disembarking—generating little income for restaurants and hotels—they do buy souvenirs and snacks.

The visitors support the likes of tchotchke shops, ice cream parlors and tourist destinations, such as the Ernest Hemingway Home and Museum where the US writer lived between 1931 and 1939, according to Mayor Teri Johnston.

Finding balance

One morning this week, the streets of Key West were nearly deserted. Vanessa Wilder manned her downtown bike rental stand, waiting for the first passengers to disembark from a newly arrived cruise. "The main shops and

the bars down here, we thrive off of these cruise ships," she said. "If we didn't have them, a lot of businesses around here would have to shut." Despite his victories, Haskell maintains that things should move one step further, with cruise ships at the private dock not allowed to exceed a size specified by residents.

The boats, according to Haskell "do tremendous damage to our ecosystem" by clouding the water, which endangers the survival of corals. But Scott Atwell, spokesman for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Key West, said the evidence wasn't so clear. "We do not have specific studies on whether the cruise ship turbidity is any different than natural turbidity and whether turbidity from the ships' channel reaches our coral reefs in a detrimental way," he said. In the meantime, Key West's city council has decided to monitor water quality and also support coral restoration under an initiative that charges a fee to Pier B for disembarking passengers.

"We don't want to get rid of the cruise ships but bring them into a moderate level so that we have good economic conditions and we also have good quality of life for our residents," Johnston, the mayor, said. — AFP

Climate activists disrupt traffic in London, Paris

PARIS: Several hundred activists from the Extinction Rebellion activist group on Saturday blocked major roads in central Paris and London, disrupting traffic to protest "inaction" on climate change from world leaders. Around 300 meters (980 feet) of a main thoroughfare in central Paris was taken over by activists over the Easter weekend, with some of them moving in hay bales and cement-filled containers to block traffic.

Extinction Rebellion tweeted "thousands" of protesters were "occupying" London's Marble Arch roundabout during a sit-in close to Hyde Park, demanding an end to the fossil fuel economy. Demonstrators also glued themselves to a limousine in central London. The Metropolitan Police said in a tweet that the protest caused "significant traffic disruption" and that the protesters "locked onto a stationary vehicle in the middle of the road... believed to be their own".

Activists from the group had glued themselves to a tanker earlier on Saturday, blocking the vehicle on a road near Hyde Park. Three activists including 2012 Olympic canoe slalom champion Etienne Stott climbed onto the tanker belonging to British energy giant Shell, unfurling a banner saying, "End fossil filth", Extinction Rebellion said. I am aware that my actions will cause anger to many people and I am prepared to be held accountable," Stott said. "But our government should also be held to account for its decisions which are

destroying our planet's ability to support human civilization."

Six people were arrested, the Metropolitan Police said. In Paris, activists hung out a large red banner that read: "This world is dying. Let's build the next one." The protest is scheduled to continue until Monday. "Rebelling is our duty," had been daubed in graffiti on a wall nearby. "This is the only way of ensuring that everyone talks a bit about climate change," Antoine, a young activist who declined to give his surname, told AFP. A line of French riot police stood opposite the protesters, but officers did not intervene.

Anger over official policies

Extinction Rebellion has carried out a series of protests in Britain in the past week, including shutting down four of London's busiest bridges on Friday. A scientist from the group, Emma Smart, was freed on Saturday after starting a hunger strike following her arrest earlier in the week during a protest targeting the British energy ministry, Extinction Rebellion said.

After several oil depots were targeted by the campaign group Just Stop Oil in recent days, many companies including ExxonMobil successfully took out injunctions to stop such actions, the government in London said. The British government last week presented a new energy security strategy after the war in Ukraine and soaring inflation, with a greater focus on nuclear power and renewable energy, but also oil from the North Sea.

The strategy has angered many activists who believe the government is not doing enough to move away from fossil fuels. Many French environmentalists have been left despondent after the first round of presidential elections last weekend in which Greens candidate Yannick Jadot and hard-left ecologist Jean-Luc Melenchon were eliminated.—AFP



China Eastern resumes Boeing 737-800 flights

BEIJING: China Eastern Airlines resumed flying Boeing 737-800 aircraft on Sunday, flight tracking data showed, just weeks after it grounded 223 planes over a crash that killed 132 people. Flight MU5843, operating the 800 variant of the 737, departed the southwestern city of Kunming at 9:58 am local time (0158 GMT) and landed in Chengdu at 11:03 am, according to Flightradar.com.

The three-year-old jet later returned to Kunming from Chengdu, with further flights scheduled for Tuesday. Flight MU5735 — a 737-800 — was en route from Kunming to Guangzhou on March 21 when it nosedived into a mountainside, disintegrating on impact. The jet dropped 20,000 feet (6,096 meters) in just over a minute. The velocity of the impact left twisted metal and passengers' belongings scattered across a vast swathe of forest. The cause of the disaster, China's deadliest plane crash in more than 30 years, is not yet known.

The accident caused China Eastern to ground all of its 737-800s for safety checks as aviation authorities vowed an extensive two-week inspection of China's vast passenger fleet. Authorities have retrieved both black boxes from the downed jet, which are currently being analyzed at an American lab with the help of investigators from the United States government. A preliminary investigation report would be completed within 30 days of the crash, the government previously said.

China Eastern's resumption of 737-800 flights on Sunday came as Boeing awaits approval to resume operation of the 737's MAX variant in China, the last major market yet to give the green light. The 737 MAX was temporarily grounded worldwide following two crashes in Indonesia and Ethiopia that killed a combined 346 people in 2018 and 2019. — AFP

US to host ASEAN leaders in mid-May

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden will meet in mid-May with the leaders of Southeast Asian nations, with a likely focus on the rising power of China, the host country announced Saturday.

The summit, originally scheduled for March, "will demonstrate the United States' enduring commitment to ASEAN," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said in a statement, referring to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. "It is a top priority for the Biden-Harris Administration to serve as a strong, reliable partner in Southeast Asia," the statement said.

The summit, originally set for March 28 and 29 before being delayed without a new date, will now take place on May 12 and 13. The meeting was postponed amid reports that the leaders of some ASEAN members had scheduling conflicts, and as the Ukraine crisis continued to deepen.

The United States has long said that strengthening ties to Asia was a foreign policy priority. On March 29, Biden met at the White House with a key ASEAN member, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore, and said he wanted to ensure that the region remains "free and open"—a reference to what the US sees as attempts by rising power China to dominate international trade routes.

Biden had participated in a virtual summit with ASEAN leaders in October. In that summit, Psaki noted in her statement, Biden announced initiatives to expand US engagement with ASEAN on COVID-19, climate change, economic growth and more. A tense competition with China has become one of the greatest foreign policy challenges for the United States, though other issues—the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine—have demanded more urgent attention.

ASEAN members include Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Several of them have experienced growing friction with Beijing.—AFP



BANGKOK: In this file photo taken on November 04, 2019, the national flags of the various countries attending the 35th Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit are displayed in Bangkok. — AFP



PARIS: Activists of the climate change action group Extinction Rebellion block the Paris Grand Boulevard during a demonstration in Paris, on Saturday. — AFP