

## International

# Western Europe wilts under second heatwave in weeks

## Wildfire ripped through 800 hectares of pine trees just south of Bordeaux

**BORDEAUX, France:** France and Britain were set to suffer soaring temperatures on Wednesday, with a heatwave in Western Europe fuelling wildfires across vast stretches of forestland. Since Sunday, large parts of the Iberian Peninsula have seen temperatures surpassing 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit) in Spain and Portugal, where firefighters have battled wildfires.

In southern France since Tuesday afternoon, a wildfire ripped through 800 hectares of pine trees just south of Bordeaux, pushing 150 residents to evacuate their homes, according to the local fire department.

ed to become more intense.

The previous such phenomenon to blight France, Portugal and Spain occurred in mid-June. "We do expect it to worsen," World Meteorological Organization spokeswoman Clare Nullis told a briefing in Geneva on Tuesday. "Accompanying this heat is drought. We've got very, very dry soils," she said.

She added that despite being early in the summer, "it's been a very bad season for the glaciers". Last week an avalanche triggered by the collapse of the largest glacier in the Italian Alps—due to unusually warm temperatures—killed 11 people.

### 'Oppressive' temperatures

The high temperatures are expected to spread to other parts of western and central Europe in the coming days. Britain issued an "amber" alert—the second-highest of three levels—which indicates that the extreme heat will have a "high impact" on daily life and people. Temperatures are forecast to hit 35C in the southeast of the country in the coming days.

Britain's highest recorded temperature was on July 25, 2019 — reaching 38.7C at Cambridge Botanic Garden, in eastern England—and a UK climate official said that the chances of a new UK record were increasing due to "strongly embedded warming".

In Spain, temperatures are forecast to keep rising until Thursday, with highs of up to 44C expected in Guadalquivir valley in Seville in the south. Spain's health ministry warned the "intense heat" could affect people's "vital functions" and provoke problems like heatstroke. It advised people to drink water frequently, wear light clothes and "remain as long as possible" in the shade or in air-conditioned places.

But for those who make a living working outdoors, it was a struggle. "It's hard because the temperature is a bit oppressive," said Miguel Angel Nunez, a 54-year-old bricklayer at a construction site in central Madrid.

In its eastern region of Extremadura, some 300 firefighters backed by 17 planes and helicopters battled a wildfire Tuesday which ravaged 2,500 hectares (6,180 acres), local officials said. The blaze

Norwegian geophysical services group TGS. The company owns British firm Spectrum Geo, which a decade ago chartered the Rhosus ship, which was carrying the ammonium nitrate that was subsequently unloaded at Beirut port and exploded on August 4, 2020.

The blast—described as one of the largest non-nuclear explosion in recent history—killed more than 200 people, wounded thousands and ravaged entire neighbourhoods. Accountability Now said Spectrum had "entered into a series of highly profitable but suspicious contracts with the ministry of energy of Lebanon" to transport seismic survey equipment from Lebanon allegedly to Jordan aboard the Rhosus.

only be addressed through "multilateral" financial aid and debt relief, she said. "Reducing debt is an urgent necessity - especially in emerging and developing economies with liabilities denominated in foreign exchange (FX) that are more vulnerable to tightening global financial conditions."

Georgieva stressed the top priorities were bringing down inflation, including through government spending cuts that would aid central bank efforts. She called on the G20 to boost "coordinated international action," including wealthier countries providing essential aid to poorer ones. Most of the world's economies are "completely shut out" from global markets due to financial pressures, and lack the safety net of a large domestic market, Georgieva warned. "They are calling on the international community to come up with bold measures to support their people. This is a call we need to heed." — AFP

Zionist entity opposes.

Biden's visit to Saudi Arabia on Friday will be the major focus of the tour. Air Force One will make a first direct flight from the Zionist entity to Saudi Arabia amid efforts to build ties between the Zionist entity and the conservative Gulf kingdom, which does not recognize the Zionist entity's existence. Moments after Biden landed, the Zionist military showed him its new Iron Beam system, an anti-drone laser it claims is crucial to countering Iran's fleet of unmanned aerial vehicles.

Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi warned earlier Wednesday that if Biden's goal on the trip was to bolster the Zionist entity's security, he was destined to fail. If US visits "to the countries of the region are to strengthen the position of the Zionist regime... their efforts will not create security for the Zionists in any way," Raisi said.

Biden, 79, will also meet Palestinian leaders angered by what they describe as Washington's failure to curb Zionist aggression. The persistent frustrations of Zionist-Palestinian diplomacy are nothing new for Biden, who first visited the region in 1973 after being elected to the Senate. Palestinians claim Zionist-annexed east Jerusalem as their capital and, ahead of the visit, accused Biden of failing to make good on his pledge to restore the United States as an honest broker in the conflict.

"We only hear empty words and no results," said Jibril Rajoub, a leader of the secular Fatah movement of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas. Biden will meet Abbas in the occupied West Bank city of Bethlehem on Friday, but there is no expectation of bold announcements toward a fresh peace process. — AFP



**SEVILLE, Spain:** People cool off with a fountain's water during a heatwave in Seville on July 12, 2022. Firefighters battled wildfires in Spain and Portugal as Western Europe faced its second heatwave in less than a month. — AFP

began Monday due to a lightning strike and "will probably last several days", the head of the regional government of Extremadura, Guillermo Fernandez Vara, told reporters. Between January 1 and July 3, more than 70,300 hectares of forest went up in smoke in Spain, the government said—almost double the average of the last ten years.

### 'A maximum of caution'

Firefighters in neighbouring Portugal were combating a similar inferno, which torched some 2,000 hectares of land in the central municipality of Ourem since last week. The blaze was brought under control Monday but flared up again by Tuesday.

With temperatures set to climb past 40C,

Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa urged "a maximum of caution". "We have experienced situations like this in the past and we will certainly experience them in the future," he said.

The whole country is under a "situation of alert" for wildfires until at least Friday, raising the readiness levels of firefighters, police and emergency medical services. The current inferno is stirring memories of devastating wildfires in 2017, which claimed the lives of over 100 people in Portugal.

Officials in the town of Sintra near Lisbon closed a series of tourist attractions such as palaces and monuments in a verdant mountain range popular with visitors as a precaution. — AFP



### Heat affects people's health very quickly

And near the Dune of Pilat—Europe's tallest sand dune—another fire consumed about 180 hectares of old pine trees, authorities said. About 6,000 campers near the dune were evacuated overnight as a precautionary measure, fire department official Lieutenant Colonel David Annotel told local news channel BFMTV.

Firefighters worked through the night on the sandy terrain to "cut the head off the fire", an official told AFP, adding that the blaze had been contained. Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne has called on government ministers to be ready to deal with the consequences of the heatwave, which is forecast to last for up to 10 days.

"The heat affects people's health very quickly, especially that of the most vulnerable," her office said in a statement. Heatwaves have become more frequent due to climate change, scientists say. As global temperatures rise over time, they are expect-

## Lawsuit filed in US over Beirut blast for \$250m

**BEIRUT, Lebanon:** Victims of Lebanon's deadly 2020 port blast have filed a quarter-billion-dollar lawsuit against a US firm for its suspected links to the tragedy, a Swiss foundation assisting the plaintiffs said Wednesday.

Accountability Now said in a statement that the claim was filed this week in Texas against US-

nine plaintiffs are all US citizens and include Sarah Copland, the mother of two-year-old Isaac Copland, who was one of the explosion's youngest victims.

The lead counsel in the "strict liability" case is US firm Ford O'Brien Landy LLP, and Accountability Now's lawyer Zena Wakim said TGS's response should be known "in the coming months". "This lawsuit is a first. It's a way of circumventing the obstruction that has the investigation had faced in Lebanon," Wakim told AFP.

"The evidence that will be generated by this lawsuit can also benefit the Lebanese investigation," she said. "The spirit of the claim is to benefit all the victims." — AFP

## Global economic outlook 'darkened...'

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Ukraine and Russia are major grain producers, and Russia also is a key source of energy for Europe, and has throttled back natural gas supply to the region. Inflation also has complicated policymaking: major central banks are raising interest rates to contain prices, but that increases borrowing costs for emerging markets and developing nations, which face high debt burdens.

But Georgieva said fighting the price surge is critical, despite the recession risk. "Acting now will hurt less than acting later." Offsetting the effects of the war and the pandemic are top priorities, which can

## Abu Akleh kin invited to US...

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reiterated our demands and our request to meet the president on his arrival" in Jerusalem, she told AFP. She said the family voiced its "disappointment" with Washington's July 4 statement on Abu Akleh's killing that appeared to clear Zionist forces of intentional wrongdoing. Blinken gave no indication as to whether the family would meet a top US official while Biden's delegation was in Jerusalem, Lina Abu Akleh said.

Biden - whose first regional tour since taking office will also take him to Saudi Arabia - pledged strong backing for the Zionist entity, which has forged ties with several Arab states in recent years and hopes to do so with Riyadh as well. "We'll continue to advance (the Zionist entity's) integration into the region," Biden said after Air Force One touched down at Ben Gurion airport near Tel Aviv to a red-carpet welcome.

The Zionist entity's caretaker prime minister Yair Lapid said that "we will discuss building a new security and economy architecture with the nations of the Middle East", following US-brokered accords in 2020 with the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco. "And we will discuss the need to renew a strong global coalition that will stop the Iranian nuclear program," he added, amid ongoing efforts by world powers to salvage Iran's frayed 2015 nuclear deal, which the



**COLOMBO:** An army personnel fires tear gas to disperse demonstrators outside the office of the prime minister on July 13, 2022. — AFP

## Sri Lanka PM office stormed...

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believed to have wanted to go abroad before stepping down to avoid the possibility of being detained. The 73-year-old, his wife and two bodyguards took a military aircraft to the neighboring Maldives, immigration sources told AFP.

Hours later, with no formal announcement he was stepping down, thousands of demonstrators mobbed the office of Wickremesinghe - whom Rajapaksa named as acting president during his absence - demanding both officeholders should go. "Go home Ranil, Go home Gota," they shouted. Tear gas and water cannon fired by police and the declaration of both a nationwide state of emergency and a curfew failed to disperse them and the crowd poured into the building.

Wickremesinghe, also 73, would automatically become acting president if Rajapaksa steps down, but has himself announced his willingness to resign if consensus is reached on forming a unity government. "We can't tear up our constitution," he said in his statement. "We can't allow fascists to take over. We must end this fascist threat to democracy," he said, adding that the official buildings occupied by protesters must be returned to state control.

The protesters' actions were a repeat of the capture of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's home and office on Saturday, when Wickremesinghe's private

home was also set ablaze. The prime minister's office confirmed that Rajapaksa had left the country, but said it had no schedule for any presidential resignation announcement. The succession process could take between three days - the minimum time needed for parliament to elect an MP to serve out Rajapaksa's term, which ends in November 2024 - and a maximum of 30 days allowed under the statute.

Rajapaksa is accused of mismanaging the economy to a point where the country ran out of foreign exchange to finance even the most essential imports, leading to severe hardships for its 22 million people. Earlier Wednesday, smiling Sri Lankans again thronged the corridors of the president's official residence after his departure, with young couples walking around hand in hand in a mood of quiet celebration.

"People are very happy, because these people robbed our country," said retired civil servant Kingsley Samarakoon, 74. "They've stolen too much money, billions and billions." But he held little hope for an immediate improvement in Sri Lanka's plight. "How are people going to run the country without money?" he asked. "It's a problem."

Sri Lanka defaulted on its \$51 billion foreign debt in April and is in talks with the IMF for a possible bailout. The island has nearly exhausted its already scarce supplies of petrol. The government has ordered the closure of non-essential offices and schools to reduce commuting and save fuel. The departure of Rajapaksa, 73 and once known as "The Terminator", had been stymied for more than 24 hours in a humiliating standoff with immigration personnel in Colombo. — AFP