

International

And now the weather: Cloudy with scattered showers of plastic

High stakes talks to end plastic pollution to resume in Paris

PARIS: Diplomats from 175 countries gathering in Paris for plastics treaty talks on Monday may want to pack an umbrella, but not just because there's a chance of rain. France's capital will also be showered during the five-day talks by billions of microplastic particles falling from the sky, according to the first-ever plastics pollution weather forecast.

The predicted downpour will range between 40 and 48 kg of free-floating plastic bits blanketing greater Paris every 24 hours, the scientists involved told AFP. If the weather delivers heavy rain, the "plastic fall" is likely to increase up to tenfold. "This should sharpen the focus of negotiators," said Marcus Gover, head of plastics research at the Minderoo Foundation based in Perth, Australia. "Plastic particles break down into the environment and this toxic cocktail ends up in our bodies, where it does unimaginable damage to our health."

Concern over the impact of plastics on the environment and human wellbeing has surged in recent years along with a crescendo of research documenting its omnipresence and persistence. In nature, multicolored microplastics — by definition less than five millimeters in diameter — have been found in ice near the North Pole and inside fish navigating the oceans' deepest, darkest recesses. Plastic debris is estimated to kill more than a million seabirds and 100,000 marine mammals each year, according to the United Nations Environment Program, and filter-feeding blue whales consume up to 10 million pieces of microplastic every day.

'Heads in the sand'

The equivalent of a garbage truck's worth of plastic refuse is dumped into the ocean every minute. In hu-

mans, microscopic bits of plastic have been detected in blood, breast milk and placentas. Animal tests have linked chemicals in microplastics to increased risks of cancer, reproductive problems and DNA mutations but data on human impact is still lacking.

"In our bodies, the plastics we need to be most worried about are probably those between 10 nanometers and one micrometer," said pediatrician Christos Symeonides, a researcher at Murdoch Children's Research Hospital and the Minderoo Foundation. "They're the ones most likely to get through our biological membranes into tissues, including the blood-brain barrier," he told AFP. "We're just now pulling our heads out of the sand when it comes to the health hazards of microplastics."

The forecast for Paris next week only covers significantly larger particles, mostly synthetic fibers at least 50 microns in length. For reference, a human hair is about 80 microns (or 80,000 nanometers) across. The method developed by Minderoo Foundation researchers does not measure plastic falling through the atmosphere in real time. Rather, it is based on research done in Paris starting in 2015 that collected samples from multiple locations year round and sifted through them in the laboratory.

'Virgin' plastic

This pioneering work by French scientists found that most plastic particles falling across Paris' 2,500-sq-km catchment area were nylon and polyester, probably from clothing. Other bits were cast off by tyres, which shed them especially when vehicles brake. Over an entire year up to 10 tons of microplastic fibers settle over the Paris area, they estimated.



BANDA ACEH, Indonesia: University students clean up plastics and other debris washed ashore at a port on May 21, 2023. — AFP

The density of "plastic fall" can increase by an order of magnitude during heavy rain. Measurements taken by other teams have replicated these findings in half a dozen cities around the world. Microplastics that hit the ground can still be ingested or inhaled when stirred up, for example, on a windy day. Last year, 175 nations agreed to forge a legally binding treaty to curb plastic pollution, aiming to complete negotiations by 2024.

No major breakthroughs are expected at the technical talks starting on Monday, but major policy de-

ated will include a global ban on single-use plastic items, a "polluter pays" scheme and a tax on new or "virgin" plastic production. These policies — even if fully implemented — may not be enough to cut consumption, according to experts and green groups calling for an outright cap on plastic production.

On current trends, annual production of fossil-fuel-based plastics will nearly triple by 2060 to 1.2 billion tons, while waste will exceed one billion tons, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). — AFP

South Korea hails successful launch of homegrown rocket

SEOUL: South Korea said Thursday it had successfully launched its homegrown Nuri rocket and placed working satellites into orbit, hailing a key step forward for the country's burgeoning space program. It was the third launch of the Nuri, which successfully put test satellites into orbit last year after a failed 2021 attempt saw the rocket's third-stage engine burn out too early.

The three-stage rocket, more than 47 m long and weighing 200 tons, soared into the sky at 6:24 pm (0924 GMT) from the Naro Space Center in South Korea's southern coastal region, leaving a huge trail of white smoke. "We report to the public that the third launch of Nuri, which was independently developed to secure domestic space transportation capacity, has been successfully completed," said Lee Jong-ho, minister of science and technology.

The main satellite made communication with South Korea's King Sejong Station in Antarctica, he said, adding that the launch confirmed "our potential for launch services for various satellite operations and space exploration". South Korea will carry out three more launches of Nuri by 2027, Lee added. South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol hailed Nuri's launch, saying it will give the country a competitive edge in the global space race.

"The success of Nuri's third launch is a splendid achievement that declares South Korea has joined the G7 space powers," he said in a statement. The launch came a day after initial plans were called off over a computer communication error which was resolved by Thursday. In previous tests, the rocket carried payloads mainly designed for verifying the performance of the launch vehicle.

This time, the rocket was topped with eight working satellites, including a "commercial-grade satellite", according to the science ministry. More than 200,000 viewers were watching the livestream of the launch on YouTube, with one commenting: "Fly high Nuri! Let's go to space!"

South Korea has laid out ambitious plans for outer space, including landing spacecraft on the Moon by 2032 and Mars by 2045. In Asia, China, Japan and India all have advanced space programs, and the South's nuclear-armed neighbor North Korea was the most recent entrant to the club of countries with their own satellite launch capability. Ballistic missiles and space rockets use similar technology and Pyongyang claimed to have put a 300-kilogram satellite into orbit in 2012 in what Washington condemned as a disguised missile test. — AFP



SYDNEY: This screen grab from a video shows people watching a fire on May 25, 2023. — AFP

Dramatic Sydney blaze consumes 7-storey building

SYDNEY: More than 130 firefighters battled towering flames and thick smoke Thursday as a huge blaze consumed an unoccupied seven-storey building in central Sydney. The flames appeared to be dying down as firefighters poured in water from multiple hoses two hours after the fire took hold in the vacant building near the Central Station railway hub.

"We're on top of the fire but it's still burning," NSW Fire and Rescue superintendent Adam Dewberry told AFP, explaining that a "significant structural collapse" made it too dangerous for firefighters to enter. More than 130 firefighters and 30 fire trucks were at the scene, he said, dousing the blaze from the ground, ladder trucks and crane-like aerial ladder trucks.

"It looks like we have stopped the fire spreading to adjoining occupied buildings, which is good news," Dewberry said. "But the main fire building is destroyed," he said. The fire had also spread into another "abandoned and derelict" three-storey building, he said. Shortly after the blaze erupted, flames almost

as high as the building itself could be seen shooting into the sky. The entire top floor wall leaned over and crashed in pieces into the street below, fire service video showed, as the building glowed orange with flames. The carcass of a burning van was parked in front. One firefighter suffered a minor burn on his right arm but did not need hospital treatment, the fire service said. Firefighting would extend throughout the night, it said.

'Heat on your face'

There were no other reports of injuries from the blaze, which broke out in the afternoon in a building described by Australian media as a heritage-listed, unoccupied former hat factory. "The public is urged to avoid the area as firefighting operations continue," the fire service said earlier, as the sound of emergency vehicle sirens echoed through the city streets.

One commuter, Corrin Ellis, told the national broadcaster ABC he was going to catch a tram when he noticed the fire. "All you could feel when standing here was heat on your face from the flames," Ellis told the ABC. "And when they started to move us back, a car just in front of the building caught fire," he added. "The front of the building collapsed and flames just spewed from the top of the building." New South Wales Premier Chris Minns urged people to "stay safe". "The public are advised to avoid the area as firefighting operations continue," he said on social media. — AFP

Myanmar team visits Rohingya camps for repatriation scheme

TEKNAF, Bangladesh: A Myanmar government team visited Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh on Thursday as part of a mooted pilot repatriation scheme. Most of the refugees have been stuck in ramshackle camps in southeastern Bangladesh since fleeing a 2017 crackdown by the Myanmar military that is now subject to a United Nations genocide investigation. Several previous repatriation attempts have failed but Bangladesh and Myanmar are looking to return around 1,100 people to the violence-wracked state of Rakhine in the coming weeks. Twenty Rohingya visited two resettlement camps this month in Rakhine, where the Myanmar junta plans to house them in what experts say is land that for generations belonged to the Rohingyas before being confiscated.

The team of 14 Myanmar officials, all in civilian clothes, arrived by boat in the Bangladeshi border town of Teknaf on Thursday morning, went to the camps and talked to around 200 people. But Mohammad Selim, one of the Rohingyas who met the Myanmar

delegation, told AFP by phone that their demands were being ignored. "We said that we have to return to our own ancestral house... We told them they should give us citizenship. But they said they will give us NVC (national verification card), which is not citizenship," Selim said. "They repeatedly said so. There is no way we can trust them." "We have no permanent representative in this repatriation process," Khin Maung, a prominent Rohingya leader, told AFP before the meeting. "This repatriation process is just an eyewash. If they didn't ensure our dignity, there is no point returning to IDPs (internally displaced people)," he said. — AFP



TEKNAF, Bangladesh: A Myanmar delegation arrives in Teknaf on May 25, 2023 to meet Bangladeshi officials. — AFP

flights to be canceled over the weekend out of Mexico City. Shelters have been opened near Popocatepetl in case the situation escalates, while troops have been deployed and are helping to sweep up ash in the streets.

Roughly 25 million people live within a 100-km radius of Popocatepetl, the second-tallest volcano in Mexico, rising nearly 5,500 m above sea level. On Sunday, authorities increased their warning level to one step below red alert, which, if reached, would mean evacuation for thousands like Atenco living near the volcano, whose name means "smoking mountain" in the indigenous Nahuatl language. — AFP



XALITZINTLA, Mexico: Ash and smoke billow from the Popocatepetl volcano on May 25, 2023. — AFP

Shaking roofs, frayed nerves as 'Popo' rumbles

SAN NICOLAS DE LOS RANCHOS, Mexico: Miguel Angel Atenco tries to ignore the vibrations, falling ash and fiery night-time shows from the volcano towering over his Mexican town, and carry on selling tacos as usual. Like others living in the shadow of Popocatepetl, located just 70 kilometers (about 45 miles) southeast of Mexico City, he is used to its periodic tantrums.

"We keep on working, just waiting to see what the volcano does," Atenco told AFP in his restaurant, in the ash-covered community of San Nicolas de los Ranchos, in the foothills of rumbling "El Popo". "We have to clean up. We have to work, and everything's dirty," he added, after sweeping the ash from the sidewalk in front of his business again.

Since Friday, "Don Goyo" as the volcano is also known locally, has rattled nerves with several explosions and repeated emissions of ash, gasses and molten rock. The increased activity caused dozens of

Three killed in Japan gun and knife attack

TOKYO: A woman and two male police officers were killed in a shooting and stabbing attack at a farm in central Japan on Thursday, media reported. A suspect, believed to be a farmer in his 30s, was holed up inside a building after the incident, which also left a fourth person injured, the reports said. Residents were urged by authorities to stay indoors in the semi-rural area around the city of Nakano in Nagano region, where the attack took place.

It was a rare instance of violent crime in Japan, which has a low murder rate and some of the world's toughest gun laws. Public broadcaster NHK and other major outlets said the woman was stabbed and the two police officers were shot in the afternoon attack. Police did not immediately confirm details when contacted by AFP. A witness told NHK he had been working at a farm nearby when "a woman came running from the road saying 'help me', and she fell down".

"Behind her came a man wearing camouflage and carrying a large knife, who stabbed her in the back," the 72-year-old witness said. He said he called emergency services while neighbors tried to resuscitate the woman. NHK, citing police, said the attacker then fired what appeared to be a shotgun at the police officers who arrived at the scene.

The officers were inside a patrol car and the attacker placed the weapon against a window of the vehicle and fired twice, NHK reported. Another man was injured in the attack but could not be rescued because he was too close to the building where the suspect has taken shelter, Kyodo News said.

Japan was left reeling in July last year when former prime minister Shinzo Abe was shot dead in broad daylight with an apparently homemade gun. Abe's accused assassin, Tetsuya Yamagami, reportedly targeted the politician over his links to the Unification Church. And last month, a man was arrested for allegedly hurling a pipe bomb-like explosive towards current Prime Minister Fumio Kishida as he campaigned in the western city of Wakayama.

Kishida was unharmed and a man arrested on the scene will undergo a three-month psychiatric examination, a regional court said this week. The suspect has reportedly remained tight-lipped about his motive for that failed attack. — AFP



GOHEUNG, South Korea: This handout photo taken on May 25, 2023 shows South Korea's homegrown space rocket Nuri launching from the Naro Space Centre. — AFP