

Heat, Winds Escalate Fire Danger; Australians Flee Homes

Agencies

Eden: Thousands of people fled their homes and helicopters dropped supplies to towns at risk of nearby wildfires as hot, windy conditions Friday threatened already fire-ravaged southeastern Australian communities.

The danger is centered on New South Wales and Victoria, Australia's most populous states, where temperatures and wind speeds are escalating after a few days of relatively benign conditions.

In neighboring Victoria, evacuation orders were issued in alpine areas, and Pre-

warnings and do as you are asked. If you are told to leave a community, and you can leave, then you should leave."

The unprecedented fire crisis in southeast Australia has claimed at least 26 lives, destroyed more than 2,000 homes and scorched an area twice the size of the U.S. state of Maryland since September.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the Australian military was on standby to help firefighters and emergency agencies.

The military has already been involved in the unfolding crisis by clearing roads closed by fallen trees, burying dead



mier Daniel Andrews pleaded with residents to heed alerts and avoid complacency even though no fresh destruction was being reported.

"Despite this unprecedented fire activity, we have nobody who is unaccounted for, we have no further people who have died, and we have no further communities who have been cut off," Andrews told reporters. "Now, all of those things can change and that is perhaps the most powerful reminder that we have to remain vigilant. Please, listen to the

cattle and sheep and providing fodder to surviving livestock.

The conservation group WWF-Australia estimates that 1.25 billion wild animals had died during the current fire crisis in addition to livestock losses, which the government expects will exceed 100,000 animals.

WWF fears the disasters could lead to local extinctions and threaten the survival of some species, such as the glossy black-cockatoo and a knee-high kangaroo known as the long-footed potoroo.

Woman Presenter Wins Equal Pay Case Against BBC

Agencies

LONDON: A British female news presenter who was paid one sixth of the fee earned by a male presenter on a similar show won her discrimination case against the BBC on Friday.

An employment tribunal ruled



the corporation failed to prove the disparity in pay between Samira Ahmed and Jeremy Vine was "because of a material factor which did not involve subjecting the claimant to sex discrimination".

Both journalists present

shows where the viewers are given a chance to air their opinions. The BBC is regularly scrutinised over the amounts it pays top stars and has also faced several major stories about female staff being paid less than their male equivalents.

Ahmed, who argued she was owed almost 700,000 (\$914, 000, 825,000 euros) in back pay, welcomed the ruling.

"No woman wants to have to take action against their own employer. I love working for the BBC," she said in a statement released through the National Union of Journalists (NUJ).

The BBC responded that Ahmed was "an excellent journalist and presenter, and we regret that this case ever had to go to tribunal".

But it defended its actions. "We have always believed that the pay of Samira and Jeremy Vine was not determined by their gender," it said. "Presenters — female as well as male — had always been paid more on 'Points of View' than 'Newswatch'."

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But one senior Ethiopian official said the remarks referred to preventing further



'Disastrous Mistake': Iran Admits It Shot Down Ukrainian Plane

Agencies

Tehran: Iran has announced that its military "unintentionally" shot down a Ukrainian jetliner, killing all 176 on board.

The statement on Saturday morning blames "human error" for the incident, adding that the military mistook Flight 752 for a "hostile target".

Press TV also quoted Iran's General Staff of the Armed Forces as saying that the plane had flown close to a "sensitive military site".

The military said it was at its "highest level of readiness" amid the heightened tensions with the United States.

"In such a condition, because of human error and in an unintentional way, the flight was hit," the military said. It apologised and said it would upgrade its systems to prevent future tragedies.

In a statement posted on social media, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani wrote that the country "deeply regrets this disastrous mistake".

"My thoughts and prayers go to all the mourning families. I offer my sincerest con-

dolences," he said, adding that "investigations continue to identify and prosecute this great tragedy and unforgivable mistake".

Iran had denied for several days that a missile downed the aircraft. But then the US and Canada, citing intelligence, said they believe Iran shot down the aircraft.

On Friday, Ali Abedzadeh, head of Iran's civil aviation authority, said it was impossible due to close coordination between Iran's air defence and the civil aviation department.

"What is obvious for us, and what we can say with certainty, is that no missile hit the plane," Abedzadeh told reporters in Tehran.

The jetliner, a Boeing 737 operated by Ukraine International Airlines, went down on the outskirts of Tehran during takeoff just hours after Iran launched a barrage of missiles at US forces in Iraq.

Al Jazeera's Assed Baig, reporting from Tehran, said questions were now being raised as to why Iranian authorities kept the country's air space open during a military operation.

"There's a lot of explaining to do by Iranian authorities. People want to know why and how it happened."

In a social media post, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said that "human error at time of crisis caused by US adventurism led to the disaster".

"Our profound regrets, apologies and condolences to our people, to the families of all victims and to other affected nations."

The plane, en route to the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv, was carrying 167 passengers and nine crew members from several countries, including 82 Iranians, 57 Canadians and 11 Ukrainians, when it was shot down.

"This is the right step for the Iranian government to admit responsibility and it gives people a step toward closure with this admission," said Payman Parseyan, a prominent Iranian-Canadian in western Canada who lost a number of friends in the crash.

"I think the investigation would have disclosed it whether they admitted it or not. This will give them an opportunity to save face," he told AP news agency.

Washington Turns Down Iraqi Call To Remove Troops

Agencies

BAGHDAD/WASHINGTON: Washington on Friday spurned an Iraqi request to prepare to pull out its troops, amid heightened US-Iranian tensions after the US killing of an Iranian commander in Baghdad, and said it was exploring a possible expansion of NATO's presence there.

Seeking to tighten pressure on its foe, the United States meanwhile imposed more sanctions on Iran, responding to an attack on US troops in Iraq launched by Tehran in retaliation for the death of General

Qassem Soleimani.

Iraq could bear the brunt of any further violence between its neighbor Iran and the United States, its leaders caught in a bind as Washington and Tehran are also the Iraqi government's main allies and vie for influence there.

President Donald Trump said Iran had probably planned to attack the US embassy in Baghdad and was aiming to strike four US embassies when Soleimani was killed in a US drone strike.

"We will tell you probably it was going to be the embassy in Baghdad," Trump said in a clip of an interview

with Fox News. "I can reveal that I believe it would have been four embassies."

Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi made his request for preparations for a US troop withdrawal in a phone call with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Thursday in line with a vote in Iraq's parliament last week, his office said.

Abdul Mahdi asked Pompeo to "send delegates to put in place the tools to carry out the parliament's decision," his office said in a statement, adding that the forces used in the killing had entered Iraq or used its airspace without permission.

Oman's Sultan Qaboos passes away

Agencies

Oman: Sultan Qaboos, the longest-reigning leader of the modern Arab world, has died at the age of 79, the royal court said on Saturday.

"With great sorrow and deep sadness [...] the royal court mourns His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, who passed away on Friday," the court said in a statement.

His cousin Haitham bin Tariq, Oman's culture minister, was named as Qaboos' successor, the government said on Saturday.

"Haitham bin Tariq was sworn in as the new sultan of the country [...] after a meeting of the family which decided to appoint the one who was chosen by the sultan," the Oman government said in a tweet.

Discussions over the late ruler's successor were held as he had left no apparent heir. He was unmarried and had no children or brothers.

Qaboos, who ruled Oman since 1970 when he deposed his father in a palace coup, had been ill for some time and had been believed to be suffering from colon cancer.

Prime Minister Imran Khan, in a tweet, offered his condolences on the death of Qaboos and termed the ruler as a "visionary" who "transformed Oman into a vibrant, modern state".

"Oman has lost a beloved leader and Pakistan a close, trusted friend. May his soul rest in eternal peace," the premier said.

I extend our deepest condolences to people of Oman on the passing of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said. He was a visionary & transformed Oman into a vibrant, modern state. Oman has lost a beloved leader & Pakistan a close, trusted friend. May his soul rest in eternal peace

PML-N President and Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Shehbaz Sharif also extended his condolences to the people of Oman and said that Qaboos' services for the development and progress of his country will be remembered.



Haitham Bin Tariq Sworn In As Oman's New Sultan



The Omani constitution stipulates that a successor must be named by the royal family within three days of the throne falling vacant. The sultan must be a member of the royal family as well as "Muslim, mature, rational and the legitimate son of Omani Muslim parents".

The late Sultan Qaboos, one of the Middle East's longest-serving rulers who maintained the country's neutrality in the region, had been ill for some time and was believed to have been suffering from colon cancer.

The 79-year-old ruled Oman since overthrowing his father in a bloodless coup in 1970.

He had no children and had not publicly appointed a successor to rule the nation's 4.5 million people.

Oman observers had said the sultan's three cousins - including Haitham bin Tariq - stood the best chance.

Mahjoub Zweiri, a professor at Qatar University's Gulf Studies Centre, said to maintain Oman's status as a "mature state" will be an important task.

"Taking into consideration new challenges including unemployment ... the leadership has to take into consideration all those matters," Zweiri told Al Jazeera.

"In regional matters ... the role of Oman played so far is significant. It confirmed the importance of Oman regionally and internationally," he said. "I think this is likely to continue."

NEWSMAKERS

Puzzlement in Ethiopia as Trump claims hand in Nobel prize

ADDIS ABABA: Video of US President Donald Trump saying he had a hand in the latest Nobel Peace Prize has gone viral in Ethiopia after Trump asserted that he had made a deal to save the country.

The comments during a rally in the US on Thursday don't mention the East African country by name, but Trump says: I made a deal, I saved a country, and I just heard the head of that country is now getting the Nobel Peace Prize for saving the country. ... Did I have something to do with it? Yeah. But that's the way it is.

Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed accepted the prize in December for making peace with longtime rival Eritrea and other reforms. Abiy's office did not comment

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But one senior Ethiopian official said the remarks referred to preventing further

tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt over a massive dam that Ethiopia is completing on the Nile river. Egypt says the dam threatens its water supply. Ethiopia says its needed for development.

Ministers from the countries, plus Sudan, are expected to meet in Washington on Monday to report on the failure of their latest round of talks.

He was talking about Egypt and Ethiopia, the official with Ethiopia's foreign ministry said.

The official asserted that Egypt's president lobbied Trump over the disputed dam project, leading to the US taking a role in the discussions.

President Trump really believes he avoided a war as such but that was not the case, the official said.

Trump is 'Dangerous and Incapacitated': Psychiatrists

A group of mental health professionals has said US President Donald Trump is "dangerous and incapacitated" and an urgent action must be taken by Congress after he ordered the assassination of Iranian Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani.

The US military carried out an airstrike on the order of Trump at Baghdad's international airport early on Friday, assassinating General Soleimani and the second-in-command of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, as well as eight other companions.

The World Mental Health Coalition made the statement a month after they warned Congress that the stress of impeachment by the House of Representatives could cause

Trump's mental state to deteriorate to a dangerous level, The Independent reported.

"We have been seriously warning about this for some time. The US Congress must act immediately and forcefully without further delay," said Yale Medical School Professor Dr Bandy Lee, George Washington University Professor Dr John Zinner, and former CIA profiler Dr Jerrold Post in a statement obtained by The Independent.

Following Iran's retaliation for the US assassination of the top Iranian general, Trump made a scripted statement from the White House on Wednesday where he struggled to pronounce words and sniffed repeatedly.

The psychiatrists said Trump is "psychologically and mentally both dangerous and



incapacitated" and has a presentation that is "consistent with a person who, when his falsely inflated self-image is questioned, or when his emotional need for adulation is thwarted, lashes out in an attempt to restore his sense of potency and command over others."

They added that current tensions with Iran make this a "critical time," at which Americans "cannot wait any longer to deal with the dangerous situation caused by a mentally compromised person acting in erratic, reckless, impulsive, and destructive ways."

They said Congress must "act immediately to take any war-making powers out of his hands," and added that it is "imperative that the Congress be equipped with accurate information" from those in the medical community who are qualified in "assessment and management of psychological dangers."

"We urge Congress to consult with us for a profile, if not evaluation, and to take seriously the mental health aspects that are at play in this mentally impaired president," they said.