

**Quick Read**

**French travellers face train disruption as pension strikes go on**

**PARIS:** Strikes disrupting services in France brought frustration for travellers thronging Paris stations at the start of the festive season, as rail workers protested over pension reform. Two weeks of nationwide industrial action against President Emmanuel Macron's planned overhaul of the pension system have disrupted railways and roads, shut some schools and brought more than half a million people onto the streets. After inconclusive talks with the government, hardline unions called for stoppages to continue over the holiday period, while rail sections of more moderate unions also rejected calls for a Christmas truce. French SNCF workers and the Paris transport network strike in Paris.

Commuters walk on a platform at the Saint-Lazare railway station during a strike by all unions of French SNCF workers and the Paris transport network (RATP) as trade unions press on with a transport strike over the festive holidays in Paris. National rail operator SNCF continued to run reduced services on Saturday, including half the usual number of its high-speed TGV trains, as passengers headed out of the French capital. At Saint-Lazare station, one of the busiest in Paris, travellers scrutinised departure boards for service updates. Sylvain de Pierrepont and Cathy Walters, en route to Normandy with their two children to visit family, stood waiting after their train was delayed. "It's a bit stressful because we don't know if the train will be running or not," de Pierrepont said. As well as competing for limited seats on nationwide rail services, travellers also endured transport chaos in and around Paris with metro and suburban train services crippled by strikes. Half of the capital's 16 metro lines were shut on Saturday. French SNCF workers and the Paris transport network strike in Paris. Travelers rush to catch a train at the Saint-Lazare railway station during a strike by all unions of French SNCF workers and the Paris transport network (RATP) as trade unions press on with a transport strike over the festive holidays in Paris. At Saint-Lazare station, Aurelie Lecerf said she expected her journey to Caen in Normandy from the Paris suburbs to take six hours, twice the usual journey time. Unions oppose Macron's plans to streamline France's state pension system, including by scrapping special regimes for sectors such as railways, and to push people to work until 64, beyond the legal retirement age of 62. The moderate CFDT union has called for members to observe a pause in strikes during the holiday season, but its rail section voted to pursue stoppages. The rail section of the UNSA union also called for a holiday truce, a move opposed by members in some regions. Negotiations over the pension reform are due to resume in January, after which the government wants to bring its proposal before parliament and have legislation passed by next summer. —Reuters

**175 children abused by priests from Mexican Catholic group**

**MEXICO CITY:** At least 175 children were sexually assaulted by priests belonging to an ultra-conservative Mexican branch of the Roman Catholic Church, according to an internal report published. The founder of the Legionaries of Christ, Marciel Maciel, abused as many as 60 children, with a total of 33 priests or deacons acknowledged to have committed sexual assaults against minors since 1941, the document says. The findings of the report - written by a commission created in June by the director general of the group, Eduardo Robles-Gil - spans from the group's founding in 1941 until December 16, 2019. "The vast majority of the victims were adolescent boys between 11 and 16 years old," the statement said, published on [ceroabusos.org](http://ceroabusos.org), which is supported by the Legionaries of Christ. The report notes that 18 of the 33 individuals who committed abuses are still part of the organization, but says they have been removed from tasks connected to the public and minors. Fourteen of the 33 had themselves been victims of the Legionaries, which the report said highlights the existence of "chains of abuse" where "a victim of a Legionnaire, over time, becomes in turn an aggressor". "There are probably more cases of abuse than those in the report and the statistics will have to be updated regularly," it added. Ceroabusos also notes that a process of "reparation and reconciliation" with 45 victims is taking place, while acknowledging that it has yet to extend it to the others. Maciel, who died in 2008, was ordered to retire to a life of prayer and penitence by Pope Benedict XVI in 2006 after facing years of allegations that he had sexually abused boys and young men. He never faced his accusers. —AFP

**Thousands protest in Iraq as deadline for new PM looms**

**DIWANIYAH, IRAQ:** Thousands of protesters blocked roads and public buildings in southern Iraq, as the latest deadline for choosing a new prime minister loomed. Anti-government rallies have rocked Baghdad and the Shiite-majority south since Oct 1, with demonstrators calling for a complete overhaul of a regime they deem corrupt and inefficient. "The revolution continues!" shouted one demonstrator at a protest encampment in central Diwaniyah. Protesters blocked off public buildings one by one in the southern Iraqi city, and put up banners reading "The country is under construction - please excuse the disruption". Overnight, protesters in Diwaniyah and Basra, another southern city, had declared a "general strike". —AFP

**Cuba gets first prime minister in over 40 years**

**HAVANA:** Cuba's first prime minister in more than four decades - long-serving tourism minister Manuel Marrero - took office as the country resurrected a post last held by Fidel Castro. The appointment of Marrero, 56, as head of government is part of a process of decentralization and generational change from the revolutionary old guard that is aimed at extending and protecting Communist Party rule. "This proposal was duly approved by the political bureau of the Communist Party of Cuba," President Miguel Diaz-Canel said, presenting it to the country's National Assembly, which unanimously signed off.

Immediately after his presentation, Marrero received a handshake from former president Raul Castro, the leader of the Communist Party.

Marrero "is not coming to the job to transform, but rather to implement and manage. The president is the one who leads," said Cuba specialist Arturo Lopez-Levy of Holy Names University in California. Marrero served as tourism minister from 2004, late in revolutionary hero Fidel Castro's administration, continuing in the post under Fidel's brother Raul and the current president, Diaz-Canel.



**Death toll in Europe from storm rises to 8**



**MADRID:** The death toll from a storm that battered Spain, Portugal and France rose to eight on Saturday (Dec 21) as the region braced for more violent winds.

A 32-year-old South Korean woman died Saturday, a day after being struck on the head by falling debris from a building in central Madrid, the Madrid region's interior minister said.

The building had passed an inspection in 2015 "but weather like this, with heavy rain and wind, causes these fatal cases," Enrique Lopez told reporters.

A man died Saturday after his car was swept away by a swollen river near the town of Huescar in the southern province of Granada, the regional government of Andalusia said in a statement.

Emergency services in Andalusia said a 68-year-old Dutch man who went missing while windsurfing in rough weather in Huelva province Friday had drowned.

Those three deaths bring to eight to the number of fatalities from the storm that has

battered Spain, Portugal and southern France overnight Thursday to Friday.

Storm Elsa flooded rivers, brought down power lines and disrupted rail and air travel across the region.

Six of the deaths have been in Spain and two in Portugal, where the extreme weather interrupted train services Saturday between the capital Lisbon and the second city Porto due to flooding on the rail tracks.

As a weakened Storm Elsa moved over Britain, the authorities in France, Portugal and Spain all warned of a fresh threat.

Storm Fabien has already brought winds of 170 kilometres (105 miles) per hour in Galicia in northwestern Spain, forcing the cancellation of 14 flights according to Spanish airport operator Aena.

Another 13 flights were diverted from airports in Galicia to other parts of Spain or Portugal, it added.

Some 8,000 households in Galicia were without power due to damage caused to power lines by the wind, local officials said.

Spain's national weather office has put the entire coast of Galicia and the neighbouring region of Asturias on red alert on Saturday - the highest in its four-scale alert scale - due to strong winds and high waves.

Eight Madrid city parks remained shut Saturday because of the strong winds.

Parks and cemeteries were also closed in Bordeaux in southwestern France on Saturday while the Arlette Gruss circus, which had set up in a big tent in the city's main square, cancelled three performances.

France's weather office placed 14 regions in the southwest of the country on orange alert earlier Saturday, as the storm battered its Atlantic coast.

The winds were as high as 148 kph at Socoa, on the southwest Atlantic coast near the border with Spain. Even up on the north-west coast of Brittany, winds reached up to 120kmh.

France's SNCF rail network cancelled services between Bordeaux, Toulouse and Hendaye services in the southwest because of the likelihood of winds blowing trees down on to the line.

Officials on the French Mediterranean island of Corsica have closed all the island's airports Sunday because of the approaching storm. Ferry services to the mainline have also been suspended.

And officials on the island closed the roads into Ajaccio to try to prevent anyone getting caught in flood waters. —Reuters



SYDNEY: A helicopter drops fire retardant to protect a property in Balmoral, 150km southwest of Sydney.

**Australia PM apologises for going on holiday amid country's bushfire battle**

**SYDNEY:** Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison issued a rare public apology and cut short a Hawaiian vacation in response to mounting public anger after two volunteer firefighters were killed battling bushfires sweeping the country's east coast. Australia has been fighting wildfires across three states for weeks, with blazes destroying more than 700 homes and nearly 3 million acres (1.2 million hectares) of bushland.

The death of the two firefighters overnight when their fire truck was struck by a falling tree as it travelled through the front line of a fire brought the fires death toll since the start of October to eight. Six more firefighters were seriously injured on Thursday. "The worst imaginable set of circumstances unfolded," New South Wales (NSW) Rural Fire Service (RFS) Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons told reporters in Sydney. "This hurts everybody to the core."

Shortly after the pair's deaths were announced, Morrison issued a statement saying he would return as soon as possible from a family holiday in Hawaii, a trip that has

drawn sharp criticism in recent days as the wildfires crisis deepened. Firefighters at a bushfires in Bilpin, New South Wales, Australia

"I deeply regret any offence caused to any of the many Australians affected by the terrible bushfires by my taking leave with family at this time," Morrison said in the statement. Morrison later told 2GB radio that the trip had been planned as a surprise to his young daughters to replace leave originally scheduled for January that he had cancelled because of official trips to Japan and India.

His return comes as firefighters prepare for "catastrophic" fire danger - the most severe level - in NSW on Saturday as searing heat and high winds are forecast, leading officials to urge people to evacuate their homes early if they live close to bushland. There are more than 200 fires burning across Australia - 70 of which are classified as uncontrolled, mostly in NSW.

"It is a fairly strong likelihood that we will lose homes tomorrow, it would be a miracle if we don't," RFS Deputy Commissioner Rob

Rogers told reporters in Sydney.

Morrison's conservative Liberal-National coalition government has been under sustained pressure to defend its climate change policies as it has downplayed links to the unprecedented early arrival and severity of this year's bushfire season. Hundreds of protesters gathered outside Morrison's Sydney residence on Thursday. One protester, wearing a Hawaiian shirt, carried a sign reading, "ScoMo, where the bloody hell are you?" referencing the leader's nickname and a well-known international advertisement for Tourism Australia.

Australia is one of the world's largest carbon emitters per capita because of its reliance on coal-fired power plants. It has pledged to cut carbon emissions by 26per cent from 2005 levels by 2030, but critics accuse Morrison of paying lip service to that commitment.

In June, the government approved the construction of a new coal mine in Queensland state by India's Adani Enterprises that is expected to produce 8 million to 10 million tonnes of thermal coal a year. As Morrison was apologising

on radio on Friday morning, opposition Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese was serving breakfast to firefighters near the front line of a fire in rural Bilpin.

The fires have resulted in days of heavy pollution in Sydney, pushing air quality to unprecedented hazardous levels and resulting in viral images of heavy smoke haze over the usually sparkling harbour and landmarks like the Opera House.

The fires are being spurred this week, by record temperatures across the country which led NSW, the most populous state with 7 million people, to declare a seven-day state of emergency. Thursday's declaration gave firefighters broad powers to control government resources, force evacuations, close roads and shut down utilities.

Days out from Christmas, a time when many Australians head to the coast for the holidays, NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian urged people to reconsider travel plans.

"What is most important for us is that everyone is safe and if that means changing your plans for Christmas, we ask you to do that," Berejiklian told reporters in Syd-

**Defective soda machine kills 2 McDonald's workers in Peru**

**LIMA:** A defective soda vending machine was responsible for the deaths of two McDonald's cleaners in Peru, the general manager for the Lima franchise told a local news station night. Carlos Campos, 19, and Alexandra Porrata, 18, died late on Dec 15 as they cleaned the fast food restaurant in Lima's Pueblo Libre district. Police had said on Monday the two were electrocuted. Since the deaths, the chain has closed its 29 stores throughout the country, while the police and the prosecution investigate. "Twenty-four hours before (the accident) it was already known that the machine had problems (...)," Jose Carlos Andrade, the general director of Arcos Dorados, the owner of the McDonald's franchise in Peru, told television channel N. "This has hit us all very hard and we are working hard to review all our processes, all our protocols, to ensure such a thing does not happen again," he told the local station. The company confirmed the soda machine would not be used in future. The deaths prompted Peruvian President Martin Vizcarra to announce a bill to strengthen job security, as demonstrators rallied peacefully Saturday against labor abuses for the second time in a week. —AFP

**It was wrong to say reporter had 'homosexual face'**

**BRASILIA:** Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro said that it was wrong for him to tell a journalist a day earlier that he had "the face of a homosexual." "I was wrong. I shouldn't have said it," the country's far-right leader told reporters at the presidential residence in Brasilia, according to the news website G1. The original comment by the notoriously outspoken president came in response to a reporter's question about an investigation into his eldest son, Senator Flavio Bolsonaro, for alleged money laundering when he was a regional deputy. Pressed by the reporter, a visibly flustered Bolsonaro replied, "You have the face of a homosexual, but that doesn't mean I'm going to accuse you of being a homosexual." His comments, while welcomed by some Bolsonaro supporters, sparked a sharp reaction from media groups. The Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (ABRAJI) accused Bolsonaro. —AFP