

**Quick Read**

**Bushfires, cyclone, torrential rain hit Australia's coasts**



**MELBOURNE:** Severe bushfires burned through parts of Western Australia, with other areas of the state dealing with the aftermath of a powerful cyclone, while the country's east coast was facing potential life-threatening flash flooding.

After months of destructive wildfires that have razed millions of hectares of land, Australia has been hit in recent weeks by wild weather that has alternately brought heavy downpours, hail storms, gusty winds and hot and dry air.

About a dozen fires were burning in Western Australia (WA) on Sunday, with severe fire danger expected in several districts, according to fire services and the state's Bureau of Meteorology. Daytime temperatures in some of the districts were forecast at up to 42 degrees Celsius.

The state's upper parts were battling on Sunday the aftermath of a tropical cyclone Damien that made a landfall on Saturday afternoon, bringing gusty winds of up to 200kph.

Fallen branches and trees sway as tropical cyclone Damien hits Dampier, Western Australia. Fallen branches and trees sway as tropical cyclone Damien hits Dampier, Western Australia, February 8, 2020, in this still image from video obtained via social media. Video taken Feb 8, 2020.

No immediate damages were reported and the cyclone was expected to weaken as it moved inland, but winds were seen to blow at more than 100kph.

"Although Tropical #CycloneDamien has weakened significantly from the thrashing it gave Karratha and Dampier yesterday, areas around Tom Price and Paraburdoo are receiving significant rainfall and squally conditions," the state's Bureau of Meteorology said on its Twitter account.

On the opposite coast of Australia, Sydney and the state of New South Wales were in danger of potential life-threatening flash flooding as rain kept bucketing down for a third day in a row in downpours not seen since 1998.

Rainfall in some parts of the state approached half the annual average, but the falls were welcomed after the state saw its driest year on record in 2019, at 55 per cent below average.

The state's Bureau of Meteorology said there was potential for heavy "rainfall and life-threatening flash-flooding," and coast erosion, although little danger of river flooding as water levels have been low due to a persistent drought. In Queensland, meteorologists also warned of flash and riverine flooding on Sunday, following heavy falls overnight. An emergency flood alert was issued for residents of Dalby due to a creek overflowing, about 200km west of Brisbane. — Reuters

**Motorcycle taxi ban brings Lagos to a halt**

**LAGOS:** Even before a sudden controversial ban on motorcycle taxis and tricycles in Nigeria's commercial capital, Lagos, crippling traffic jams were a daily ordeal for its more than 20 million inhabitants. Now just a week on, getting around the city has become even more difficult.

There are endless queues at bus stops and crowds of tired and exasperated pedestrians, assaulted by acrid exhaust fumes and the cacophony of drivers stuck in traffic jams honking their car horns.

"Monday, when the ban started, I spent seven hours on the road. Tuesday I spent almost nine hours in traffic jams," says Ayobayo Babade, a real estate agent.

He tries to remain upbeat. "Now I bring my laptop and I work in the taxi," he smiles.

"Nigerians are the most resilient people in the world!" declares 30-year-old Olaniyi Odina. "Put a policy in place, Nigerians will adapt, no matter how stupid it is, we are very patient!"

Recently elected governor of Lagos, Babajide Sanwo-Olu, banned motorbike-taxis known as "okadas" and three-wheeled "kekes" saying they caused road accidents and were out of place in a modern city. Okadas in particular are infamous in Lagos for their anarchic approach to traffic laws but are often vital on its poorly connected, pot-hole ridden roads.

But they do come at a cost - between 2016 and 2019, there were more than 10,000 traffic accidents and 600 deaths recorded, just at the General Hospital in Lagos.

To mitigate the effects of the ban, the government announced there would be 65 additional buses - in a rapidly growing megacity of more than 20 million people.

Critics say buses are in any case unsuitable for Lagos' narrow, damaged roads, where okadas and kekes are crucial for both transport and jobs.

Commuters who would normally leave their cars at home to avoid sitting in traffic, now have little choice but to drive, clogging up the roads even more.

Thousands of workers who do not drive and were reliant on okadas and kekes, have been forced to trek or take the despised buses, now charging higher fares.

"Before I used to pay 50 to 100 naira (28 cents US) for a journey, now you can go for 200 or even 300," Goodluck, 34,

**Novel coronavirus case numbers 'stabilising' in China: WHO**

GENEVA: The number of cases of the deadly novel coronavirus being reported on a daily basis in China is "stabilising", the World Health Organization said.

The UN health agency said this was "good news" but cautioned that it was too early to make any predictions about whether the virus might have peaked.

"There has been a stabilisation in the number of cases reported from Hubei," Michael Ryan, head of WHO's Health Emergencies Programme, said at a briefing in Geneva.

The central Chinese province of Hubei has been at the epicentre of the virus outbreak and has been placed under lockdown by the authorities in an effort to contain the virus.

"We're in a four-day stable period where the number of reported cases hasn't advanced. That's good news and may reflect the impact of the control measures that have been put in place," Ryan said.

But he added that it was "very early to make any predictions". WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the trend was "not really accelerating" but also called for "caution".

The coronavirus has infected more than 34,500 people and killed more than 700.

Tedros warned against misinformation about the virus, saying it made the work of healthcare staff harder.

"We're not just battling the virus, we're also battling the trolls and conspiracy theo-

ries that push misinformation and undermine the outbreak response," he said.

Asked about a planned WHO-led international mission to China, he also said a list of names had been submitted to Chinese authorities and the team leader would be travelling there on Monday or Tuesday.

"The rest of the experts will also follow after that," he said.

Asked if the mission would include members of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), he said: "I hope so".

**Five Britons in French ski resort catch coronavirus after contact with man who had been in Singapore**

Five British nationals including a child have been diagnosed with the coronavirus in France, after staying in the same ski chalet and coming into contact with a person who had been in Singapore, French health officials said.

The new cases emerged after authorities began to retrace the recent travels of one British citizen confirmed by Britain to have contracted the virus in recent days, senior health official Jerome Salomon told a news conference.

Agnes Buzyn, France's health minister, added that the group of people newly infected with the virus were not in a serious condition.

They had formed "a cluster, a grouping around one original case", she said, after staying in the same chalet, in the Conta-

mines-Montjoie resort in Savoie in eastern France. Contamines is in the French Alps, close to the Swiss city of Geneva.

Four overseas cases of novel coronavirus linked to Singapore: Here's what we know

"That original case was brought to our attention last night, it is a British national who had returned from Singapore where he had stayed between Jan 20 and 23, and he arrived in France on Jan 24 for four days," Buzyn said. Two of the apartments in the ski chalet were being examined, health officials said, adding that no other people had been affected by the outbreak in the resort.

The infected Britons had been hospitalised overnight in the region, in the cities of Lyon, Grenoble and Saint-Etienne, the ministry added. The total number of people infected with the virus in France has now reached 11.

The six others include one man in a serious condition, while the others have shown signs of improvement in recent days, according to medical officials.

Authorities are now seeking to contact people who came into close contact with the initially infected Briton.

The French government has been in touch with Singapore and Britain, and Singaporean authorities were looking into a business meeting that took place in a hotel and was attended by 94 foreigners, they said.

On Saturday, Singapore confirmed seven new cases of the novel coronavirus, taking its

tally to 40.

At least four overseas cases have been linked to an international business conference at Singapore's Grand Hyatt hotel last month.

**UAE confirms 2 new coronavirus cases, bringing total to 7**

Two new cases of coronavirus infection have been detected in the United Arab Emirates, bringing the total number of people diagnosed with the disease to seven, the country's health ministry said on Twitter.

The patients are of Chinese and Filipino nationalities, said the ministry.

The United Arab Emirates, a major international transit hub, had suspended flights to and from China, except for Beijing, from Feb 3, following the outbreak of the new coronavirus in China.

The new coronavirus that emerged in a market in the Chinese city of Wuhan at the end of last year has killed 722 people and infected more than 34,546 people in China.

Outside China, there have been more than 320 infections reported in nearly 30 other places. There have also been two deaths, one in the Philippines and the other in Hong Kong. Both of those victims were Chinese nationals. On Saturday, it was reported the virus had claimed its first two foreign victims - a US citizen who was diagnosed with the novel coronavirus and a Japanese man suspected to have the infection. Both died in Wuhan. —AFP



GENEVA: People wear face masks on the roadside following an outbreak of the novel coronavirus in Wuhan, Hubei province, China

**Trump's State of the Union tells us what his re-election bid will be about**

**SYDNEY:** This year's State of the Union address came as part of a tumultuous trifecta, given it was wedged between the Democratic Iowa caucuses vote count fiasco and the Senate impeachment verdict.

Overall, Donald Trump decided not to diverge from the presidential tradition of using the last State of the Union address in the first presidential term to list what he views as his administration's major achievements over the past three years.

However, what was markedly different and uncharacteristic for Trump was the change in tone compared to the speeches he gave early in his presidency, particularly the macabre mood of his "American carnage" inaugural address.

The optimism, upbeat tenor, and references to the bright future made it sound almost like Ronald Reagan's "Morning in America" advertisement.

Unlike his campaign speeches, the State of the Union was a highly scripted affair and left little space for adlibbing.

This meant the joint session of the US

Congress was spared the rants about "witch hunts" and "hoaxes", and more importantly, any reference to the impeachment trial, which concluded with his acquittal less than 24 hours after he left the Capitol.

If anything, the delivery veered into reality TV territory with the military family reunion, and a surprise Presidential Medal of Freedom awarded to the controversial conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh.

Yet, given the pace of the presidential campaign and president's ability to generate more news than any of us can consume, we are likely to forget all about the State of the Union address in a couple of weeks - bar some of the meme-able scenes and gifs.

However, the speech should best be interpreted as a campaign relaunch and a highly choreographed presentation of the themes that will dominate Trump's re-election bid, now he has emerged from the impeachment process with approval ratings on an upward trajectory. U.S. President Trump delivers a statement about his acquittal at the White House in Washington

U.S. President Donald Trump hugs his daughter Senior White House Advisor Ivanka Trump after delivering a statement about his acquittal in the East Room of the White House in Washington, U.S., February 6, 2020. In essence, Trump is vesting his political hopes into continuous economic growth as this is the central piece of his argument for re-election. This is also why he will keep on insisting his political rivals are socialists or dilettantes who will ruin the economy.

Immigration is another one of his pet issues that will be repeatedly mentioned as a "promise kept". From the border wall under construction, other enhanced (and cruel) border security measures to the stricter citizenship and residency requirements, nativist policies abound.

On the social policy front, Trump is going to continue courting some of conservative, religious voters who began to waver in their support. Similar to the State of the Union address, we will certainly hear more about his (latest) stance on reproductive freedom and

rights, executive action on religious freedom protections, school choice policies, and similar issues that have been the signature Republican platform since the 1970s.

While foreign policy doesn't get as much coverage in presidential campaigns, Trump is undoubtedly going to continue to portray himself as a decisive commander-in-chief and a deal-maker.

At the same time, "nurturing" rivalries, such as that with Iran, which took up a considerable portion of the speech, is going to serve as a rallying call for his supporters and another point of differentiation from the Democrats. Those unwilling to scrutinise president Trump's State of the Union claims could be forgiven for thinking the US is experiencing its best days.

However, the facts are irrefutable - the country has never been as economically, politically and socially polarised in its recent history. All the while, on the international stage, friends and foes alike are learning to live in a new world of uncertainty that is in no small part fuelled by the incumbent US

**Africa holds 'silence the guns' summit as new conflicts grow**



**ADDIS ABABA:** African heads of state gather at the headquarters of the African Union for a summit meeting due to focus on how the body can play a more prominent role in resolving conflicts proliferating across the continent.

The two-day summit has taken as its theme "Silencing the Guns", yet AU officials are well aware of their failure to achieve the goal adopted in 2013 of ending "all wars in Africa by 2020".

In remarks to African foreign ministers ahead of the summit, AU Commission Chairman Moussa Faki Mahamat painted a bleak picture of the continent's security situation, citing extremist threats stretching from the Sahel to Somalia.

The "missed deadline" to silence the guns, he said, "reveals the complexity of the security situation in Africa."

The focus on conflicts this year marks a departure from multiple years of summits dedicated to reforming the AU - including its funding structure - and the implementation of a continent-wide free

trade area.

Though some progress has been made recently in Central African Republic and Sudan, long-running conflicts in places like Libya and South Sudan have been joined by new crises from Cameroon to Mozambique.

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, who will take over from Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as AU chair, appears attached to these challenges.

In a speech to South Africa-based diplomats in late January, he warned that conflict "continues to hamper" development. The AU "must be more proactive" in responding to conflicts instead of leaving the job to outside powers, Naledi Pandor, South Africa's international relations minister, told AFP. "The fact that anyone can step in means a gap has been allowed by us, and so I think we have to act faster, be more responsive when matters are affecting our continent," she said.

For his part, Faki encouraged a focus on "root causes" of conflicts and urged African leaders to pursue "innovative solutions that put the military solution into perspective by combining it with measures from other areas, notably development." The AU will have to overcome internal disputes and insufficient financing for peacekeeping missions if it wants to become a major player in conflict resolution.

One priority for Ramaphosa is to have the AU play a bigger role in Libya-related peace processes, which have been led primarily by the UN.

A spokeswoman for Faki complained last month that the AU "has consistently been ignored" on Libya.

But the AU's attempts to assert itself have been undermined by its own divisions. These date back to 2011, when African members of the UN Security Council endorsed military intervention, even as the AU's Peace and Security Council opposed it. —AFP