

Thousands Flee Wildfire in Southern France



The blazes on Tuesday had devoured around 4,000 hectares (15 square miles) of land along the Mediterranean coast, in the mountainous interior and on the island of Corsica.

With strong winds and dry brush creating a dangerous mix, the government asked its European Union partners to send two extra fire-fighting planes - a request immediately fulfilled by Italy, according to the EU.

La Croix-Valmer's deputy mayor Rene Carandante described a desolate landscape of blackened headlands fringed by charred umbrella pines, where green forest had once framed the azure waters of the Mediterranean.

"It's a disaster area. There's nothing left," he said.

Francois Fouchier, of the local coastal conservation group, told AFP that local wildlife, such as the Hermann's tortoises, would be victims of the fires. "We are going to find burnt shells."

A local official accused the authorities of failing to regularly remove dry undergrowth, making the forest a fire hazard.

The French island of Corsica, situated midway between France and Italy, was also assessing the damage.

A resident, whose house had at one point been in danger, spoke of "apocalyptic" scenes.

MARSEILLE, France (AFP) -- At least 10,000 people were evacuated after a new wildfire broke out in southern France, which was already battling massive blazes that have consumed swathes of forest, authorities said Wednesday.

The new fire came a day after France asked for Europe's help to tackle the flames already raging in the tinder dry south, including near the popular resort of Saint-Tropez.

"The evacuations, at least 10,000, followed the progression of the fire. It's an area that doubles or triples its population in summer," said a fire service official of the blaze near Bormes-les-Mi-

mosas on the Mediterranean coast.

The number of people on France's Cote d'Azur bulges in July and August as holidaymakers head to the beach, though the area is experiencing an exceptionally hot, dry summer that has made it especially vulnerable to fires.

On Tuesday over 4,000 firefighters and troops backed by 19 water bombers had already been mobilized to extinguish the flames, which have left swathes of charred earth in their wake.

At least 12 firefighters have been injured and 15 police officers affected by smoke inhalation since the fires broke out on Monday, according to the authorities.

EU Mulls Sanctions on Poland Over Court Reform

WARSAW, Poland (AP) -- The European Commission said Wednesday it is keeping the door open to triggering sanctions against Poland for limiting judicial independence, despite the Polish president's surprise decision to veto parts of a controversial legal overhaul.

"In this past week in Poland some things have changed and some things have not," Frans Timmermans, the vice-president of the European Commission, said at a news conference in Brussels. The Commission is the executive arm of the European Union.

Timmermans said the Commission was giving Poland one month to resolve all the problems in its judicial overhaul — though it was not clear what would happen if Poland does not do so.

In a comment to the PAP news agency, Polish government spokesman Rafal Bochenek said Poland would not accept the "blackmail." Konrad Szymanski, deputy foreign minister, said the Commission's doubts were unfounded and that Poland has the right to decide on how to organize its justice system.

The conservative ruling Law and Justice party took steps soon after winning power in 2015 that have gradually reduced the ability of the Constitutional Tribunal to act as a check on the party's power. This month it took its shakeup further when lawmakers passed three bills putting the rest of the court system under ruling party control.

Law and Justice, under the lead-



Protesters raise candles during a protest on July 18, 2017 in front of the presidential palace in Warsaw.

ership of Jaroslaw Kaczynski, says the courts are inefficient and corrupt and need deep change. While most Poles agree, many people saw a power grab and turned out by the tens of thousands to stage nightly candlelight protests.

President Andrzej Duda, long loyal to the party, surprisingly announced Monday that he would veto two of the bills, including one that would have allowed the justice minister to immediately dismiss any of the Supreme Court judges. But he signed a third bill giving the justice minister power to name all the heads of lower courts in the country.

Timmermans said he welcomed Duda's rejection of the two bills. But he said that other parts of the judi-

cial overhaul, including the earlier takeover of the constitutional court, "increase significantly the systemic threat to the rule of law."

"Our recommendations to the Polish authorities are clear," he said. "It is time to restore the independence of the Constitutional Tribunal and to either withdraw the laws reforming the judiciary or bring them in line with the Polish Constitution and with European standards on judicial independence."

He also said any legal acts that lead to the dismissal or forced retirement of Supreme Court judges would lead the Commission to "immediately" act to issue a formal warning to Poland which could result in Poland losing its voting rights.

North Korea Warns Washington: Nuke Response to U.S. Regime Change Threat

SEOUL (Dispatches) -- North Korea threatened to launch a nuclear strike "at the heart of the U.S." if it sees signs that Washington is trying to remove Kim Jong Un as the country's leader, according to South Korea's Yonhap news agency.

"Should the U.S. dare to show even the slightest sign of attempt to remove our supreme leadership, we will strike a merciless blow at the heart of the U.S. with our powerful nuclear hammer, honed and hardened over time," the state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reports, citing a spokesperson of the North's foreign ministry.

Pyeongyang's warning follows comments by CIA director Mike Pompeo last week that hinted that the U.S. might be interested in seeing some form of regime change.

"It would be a great thing to denuclearize the peninsula, to get those weapons off of that, but the thing that is most dangerous about it is the character who holds the control

over them today," Pompeo told the Aspen Security Forum on Thursday, reports CNN. He went on to say that the most important thing the U.S. administration can do is, "separate capacity and someone who might well have intent and break those two apart." Though Pompeo later denied that he was talking about removing Kim Jong Un.

Pompeo's words went "over the line," KCNA said, and show that toppling Kim is "the ultimate aim of the Trump administration."

U.S. authorities have expressed increasing concern over North Korea's advancing nuclear and missile program, particularly following Pyongyang's successful test-launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile earlier this month. A report by the Defense Intelligence Agency suggests that North Korea could have an ICBM capable of carrying a nuclear weapon as early as next year, two years earlier than previously thought, according to the Washington Post.

Top Vatican Official in Court on Sex Charges



Cardinal George Pell arrives under heavy police protection for his first court hearing over historical sexual abuse allegations.

MELBOURNE, Australia (Dispatches) -- Vatican treasurer Cardinal George Pell made a brief court appearance in his native Australia on Wednesday to face what police described as "historical sexual offences", making him the most senior Roman Catholic official to face such accusations.

Pell, 76, a top adviser to Pope Francis, did not speak as he was escorted to and from Melbourne Magistrates' Court by police through a large crowd of media, protesters and supporters. He was not required to enter a plea.

Australian police said last month Pell had been summoned to appear on charges of "historical sexual offences" from multiple complainants. "For the avoidance of doubt ... Cardinal Pell will plead not guilty to all charges, and will maintain the presumed innocence that he has," Pell's lawyer, Robert Richter, told the court.

Magistrate Duncan Reynolds said he was denying media requests to see the charge sheets against Pell, who also did not speak during the five-minute hearing.

Reynolds set a committal hearing date of Oct. 6 and told Pell's lawyers they would receive a summary of the charges by Sept. 8.

A magistrate decides at a committal hearing whether prosecutors

have enough evidence for a case to be committed to trial. Pell is not required to enter a formal plea until a magistrate determines whether there is cause for a full trial.

Protesters and supporters carrying religious icons shouted as Pell entered and then left the courthouse in central Melbourne, Australia's second-largest city.

He has been granted a leave of absence by the Pope, who has made clear the cardinal would not be forced to resign his post as head of the Vatican's powerful economic ministry.

But the scandal has rocked the church. He is the most senior Catholic cleric to be charged with criminal offences linked to its long-running sexual abuse scandal.

The allegations against Pell coincide with the final stages of Australia's Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sex Abuse, ordered in 2012 after a decade of pressure to investigate widespread allegations of institutional pedophilia.

The commission has spoken to thousands of survivors and heard claims of child abuse involving churches, orphanages, sporting clubs, youth groups and schools.

Pell appeared before the commission three times, once in person and twice via video-link from Rome.

New Trump Aide: I'm Going to Fire Everybody



President Trump's communications director Anthony Scaramucci speaks with reporters in the White House driveway, July 24, 2017.

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) -- Anthony Scaramucci, President Trump's new communications director, vowed on Tuesday to purge the White House staff of disloyal aides in an effort to crack down on leaks, as another member of the press staff resigned from a West Wing reeling from an unfolding shake-up.

"I'm going to fire everybody — that's how," Scaramucci told reporters in the White House driveway, when asked how he planned to identify who had been disclosing information to reporters without authorization and ensure that the leaks stopped. He said he had authority directly from Trump to do so.

"You're either going to stop leaking, or you're going to get fired," he said.

"If I've got to get the thing down to me and Sarah Huckabee, then the leaking will stop," he added, referring to Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the newly named press secretary who stepped in after Sean Spicer resigned last week in protest of Scaramucci's hiring.

Michael C. Short, an assistant press secretary who had been close to Spicer, re-

signed just hours after Scaramucci had been quoted in a news report on Tuesday saying he would be fired. The White House confirmed the move in a terse news release, saying that Sanders had accepted Short's resignation and that officials were "grateful for Michael's service and wish him well in his future endeavors."

His departure marked another setback for Reince Priebus, the White House chief of staff and former chairman of the Republican National Committee, who populated the West Wing with a group of former R.N.C. aides loyal to him. Those affiliated with the establishment forces of the party are often viewed with suspicion by others in Trump's inner circle.

Both Priebus and Spicer had argued forcefully against bringing on Scaramucci, whose hiring seemed to signal a pivot by the White House toward surrounding Trump with people more likely to stick by the campaign code of "let Trump be Trump."

Trump has long been suspicious, by contrast, of the party committee hires, whose personal loyalty he has repeatedly questioned.

News in Brief

LONDON (Dispatches) -- A Royal Air Force Typhoon based in Romania has been launched as a response to Russian nuclear bomber operating near NATO airspace over the Black Sea.

Operating from the Romanian Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base near Constanta on the Black Sea coast, the RAF Typhoon responded to Russian Federation Air Force TU-22 Backfire strategic bombers heading south near NATO air space. The Russian military jets were flying over the western Black Sea and were monitored by the Typhoon. The Tupolevs - the first supersonic bomber to enter production in the Soviet Union - were tracked as they departed south but the jets did not come within visual range of each other. The NATO Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC) at Torrejon Spain, ordered a RAF Typhoon jet to scramble and shadow the Russian jets flying in international airspace in the vicinity of NATO airspace.

MANILA (AP) -- Human rights groups asked the Philippine president Wednesday to retract a threat to order airstrikes against tribal schools he accused of teaching students to become communist rebels, warning such an attack would constitute a war crime.

U.S.-based Human Rights Watch said international humanitarian law "prohibits attacks on schools and other civilian structures unless they are being used for military purposes," adding that deliberate attacks on civilians, including students and teachers, "is also a war crime." Left-wing Rep. Emmi de Jesus of the Gabriela Women's Party asked Duterte to retract the threat, saying government troops may use it as a pretext to attack indigenous, or Lumad, schools and communities in the country's south which have come under threat from pro-military militias in recent years.

BEIJING/MOSCOW (Dispatches) -- China's military is more nimble and technologically proficient following reforms to make it more compact and responsive, rather than just relying on strength of numbers, state media cited President Xi Jinping as saying.

China's armed forces, the world's largest, are in the midst of an ambitious modernization program, from restructuring to troop cuts and investment in technology and equipment upgrades, such as acquiring stealth fighters and aircraft carriers. Speaking to the ruling Communist Party's elite Politburo, Xi called for all-out efforts to drive military reform, the official Xinhua news agency said. "After the reforms, our military's scale is smaller, but it is more capable, its structure is more optimized, its formation more scientific," the report paraphrased Xi, who is head of the military, as saying.

BAUCHI, Nigeria (Dispatches) -- Suspected Boko Haram terrorists have kidnapped 10 members of a university research team prospecting for oil in northeast Nigeria, the state oil company, which contracted the work, said on Wednesday.

The Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC) has been surveying for more than a year for what it says could be vast oil reserves in the Lake Chad Basin, a region wracked for eight years by a Takfiri militancy, which has killed at least 20,000 people and forced some 2.7 million to flee their homes. NNPC spokesman Ndu Ughamadu said contractors working as consultants were kidnapped near Jibi village in Borno state on Tuesday afternoon. The village is in Magumeri local government area, about 50 km from the state capital, Maiduguri.

PARIS (MEE) -- The two main rivals in conflict-ridden Libya made a joint commitment to calling a ceasefire and holding elections that French President Emmanuel Macron said would take place in spring 2018.

Macron said Libya's UN-backed prime minister, Fayez al-Sarraj, and Khalifa Haftar, the military commander based in the remote east of the vast country, had shown "historic courage" in talks outside Paris. Sarraj and Haftar "struck an agreement to hold elections next spring", Macron said after hosting the meeting. A 10-point statement backed by the two leaders said: "We commit to a ceasefire and to refrain from any use of armed force for any purpose that does not strictly constitute counter-terrorism."

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka (AP) -- Sri Lanka's government deployed army troops on Wednesday to restore fuel distribution crippled during a strike launched by trade unions who want to stop leases of oil tanks to India and China.

Long lines have formed at gasoline stations across Sri Lanka since Monday evening due to the strike by workers at the state-run petroleum company. Military spokesman Brig. Roshan Senewiratne said troops entered the country's main distribution facility and refinery at Kolonnava and Muthurajavela outside Colombo early Wednesday and they are now working in distribution facilities alongside the workers not on strike to resume the distribution of fuel.