

California Wildlife Toll Rises to 63 as 630 Missing



Debris and residences leveled by the wildfire line a neighborhood in Paradise, Calif., Nov. 15, 2018.

PARADISE, Calif. (Reuters) -- Rescue workers searched on Friday for 630 people reported missing in a northern California town reduced to ashes by the deadliest wildfire in state history.

At least 63 people were killed in and around Paradise by the Camp Fire that erupted a week ago in the Sierra foothills 175 miles (280 km) north of San Francisco. The fire is among the most lethal U.S. wildfires since 2000. Authorities attribute the death toll in part to the speed with which flames raced through the town of

27,000, driven by wind and fueled by desiccated scrub and trees.

Nearly 12,000 homes and buildings burned hours after the blaze erupted, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire) said. The fire left a ghostly expanse of empty lots covered in ash and strewn with debris.

Thousands of additional structures are still threatened as firefighters, many from distant states, labored to contain and suppress the flames.

The revised roster of 630 missing people is up from 297 listed on

Thursday by the Butte County Sheriff's Office.

Sheriff Kory Honea on Thursday said the remains of seven victims have been located since Wednesday's tally of 56. Nearly 300 people reported missing have been found alive, he said.

The sheriff has asked relatives of the missing to submit DNA samples to hasten identification of the dead. But he said some of those unaccounted for may never be identified.

There were other smaller blazes in southern California including the Woolsey Fire that is linked to three fatalities and destroyed at least 500 structures near the Malibu coast west of Los Angeles.

Scientists say two seasons of devastating wildfires in California are linked to drought they say is symptomatic of climate change.

Two electric utilities say they sustained equipment problems close to the origins of the blazes around the time they were reported.

The White House said on Thursday that President Donald Trump plans to visit the fire zones on Saturday to meet displaced residents. Critics say Trump politicized the fires by casting blame on forest mismanagement.

Cal Fire said 40 percent of the Camp Fire's perimeter is contained, up from 35 percent, even as the blaze footprint grew 2,000 acres to 141,000 acres (57,000 hectares). The Woolsey fire is 57 percent contained.

Bangladesh Halts Repatriation of Rohingya Refugees



Young Rohingya refugees raise slogans in protest against a repatriation program at the Unchiprang refugee camp near Teknaf on Nov. 15, 2018.

COX'S BAZAR, Bangladesh (AP) -- Normal life returned to a Rohingya Muslim refugee camp in Bangladesh on Friday a day after government officials postponed plans to begin repatriating residents to Myanmar when no one volunteered to go.

The head of Bangladesh's refugee commission said plans to begin the repatriation of 700,000 Rohingya Muslims to Myanmar on Thursday were scrapped after officials were unable to find anyone who wanted to return.

The refugees "are not willing to go

back now," Refugee Commissioner Abul Kalam told The Associated Press. He said officials "can't force them to go" but will continue to try to "motivate them so it happens."

Some people on the government's repatriation list disappeared into the sprawling refugee camps to avoid being sent home, while others joined a large demonstration against the plan.

More than 700,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled to Bangladesh from western Myanmar's Rakhine state to escape killings and destruction of their villages by the military

and Buddhist vigilantes that have drawn widespread condemnation of Myanmar.

The United Nations, whose human rights officials had urged Bangladesh to halt the repatriation process even as its refugee agency workers helped to facilitate it, welcomed Thursday's development.

Firas Al-Khateeb, a spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Cox's Bazar, said it was unclear when the process might begin again. "We want their repatriation, but it has to be voluntary, safe and smooth," he said.

Bangladesh Foreign Minister A.H. Mahmood Ali told reporters in Dhaka late Thursday that "there is no question of forcible repatriation. We gave them shelter, so why should we send them back forcibly?"

At the Unchiprang refugee camp, a Bangladeshi refugee official implored the Rohingya on Thursday to return to their country over a loudspeaker.

"We have arranged everything for you, we have six buses here, we have trucks, we have food. We want to offer everything to you. If you agree to go, we'll take you to the border, to the transit camp," he said.

"We won't go!" hundreds of voices, including children's, chanted in reply.

Some refugees on the repatriation lists — which authorities say were drawn up with assistance from the UNHCR — said they don't want to go back.

China PM Hails Expansion of Ties With Russia

SINGAPORE (Dispatches) -- Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang and Russian President Vladimir Putin have applauded an expansion of mutual ties after meeting on the sidelines the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Singapore.

"Thanks to the efforts of our governments, trade and economic ties are developing at a noticeable and impressive rate, creating a good basis for our special strategic partnership," said Putin on Thursday.

The Russian president urged regular top-level communication between the countries to be further maintained to advance cooperation in fields of energy, aviation, space, science and technology as well as digital economy.

The Chinese premier, on his part, conveyed President Xi Jinping's

greetings to Putin, highlighting the positive outcomes of the two presidents' meetings earlier this year.

Li noted that the China-Russia strategic partnership has been functioning positively at high administration levels and called for added investment opportunities and a reduction of trade restrictions.

Putin and Jinping are expected to meet at the G20 summit in Argentina in late November as the two countries expand ties in the face of heightening aggressive behavior on the part of the United States.

The U.S. has increased troop presence in Eastern Europe and the Asia-Pacific in a bid to "contain" what it describes as a growing threat from the two countries.

Subsequently, heavy American naval buildup in the South China Sea has occasionally led to potentially dangerous standoffs with Chinese

forces. Observers believe the U.S. seeks to further exert control over the area's oil and gas-rich waterways.

Speaking at the ASEAN summit on Thursday, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence Pentagon indirectly denounced Chinese presence in the Indo-Pacific, saying that "empire and aggression have no place" in the region.

The US along with NATO has also increased military garrisons and drills around Russia in the past four years, deploying missile systems along the Russian border.

Moreover, Pentagon officials recently announced the withdrawal of thousands of troops from their Africa-based "counter-terrorism operations" in order to relocate more resources to "countering Russia and China".

Russia and China have, however, denied the American maneuvers as destabilizing provocations.

Khmer Rouge Leaders Convicted of Genocide



Nuon Chea, left, and former regime president Khieu Samphan sit inside the courtroom on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, November 16, 2018.

PHNOM PENH (AP) -- The last surviving leaders of the communist Khmer Rouge regime that brutally ruled Cambodia in the 1970s were convicted of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes Friday by an international tribunal.

Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan were sentenced to life in prison, the same punishment they are already serving after earlier convictions at a previous trial for crimes against humanity connected with forced transfers and mass disappearances. Cambodia has no death penalty.

Both men have suggested they were targets of political persecution. Nuon Chea was considered the main ideologist of the Khmer Rouge and the right-hand man of the group's late leader, Pol Pot, while Khieu Samphan served as the head of state, presenting a moderate veneer as the public face for the highly secretive group.

The verdict read aloud in the courtroom by Judge Nil Nonn established that the Khmer Rouge committed genocide against the Vietnamese and Cham minorities. Scholars had debated whether suppression of the Chams, a Muslim ethnic minority whose members had put up a small but futile resistance against the Khmer Rouge, amounted to genocide.

Members of the Cham community were among the large crowd of spectators who attended Friday's session.

The court found Khieu Samphan not guilty of genocide against the Cham, for insufficient evidence, though he was convicted of genocide against the Vietnamese under the principle of joint criminal enterprise, which holds individuals responsible for actions attributed to a group to which they belong.

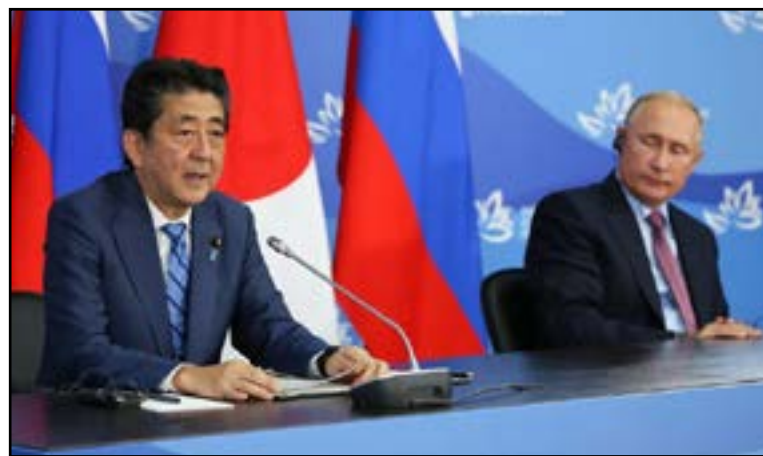
The Khmer Rouge sought to achieve an agrarian utopia by emptying the cities to establish vast rural communes. Instead their radical policies led to what has been termed "auto-genocide" through starvation, overwork and execution.

The crimes against humanity convictions covered activities at work camps and cooperatives established by the Khmer Rouge. These offenses comprised murder, extermination, deportation, enslavement, imprisonment, torture, persecution on political, religious and racial grounds, attacks on human dignity, enforced disappearances, forced transfers, forced marriages and rape.

The breaches of the Geneva Convention governing war crimes included willful killing, torture or inhumane treatment.

Nuon Chea, 92, was brought by ambulance and Khieu Samphan by van to the courthouse from the nearby prison where they are held. The prison and the courthouse were custom built for the use of the tribunal, which is officially called the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, or ECCC.

Abe Tells Putin Japan Not to Let U.S. Troops on Islands



Russian President Vladimir Putin, right, listens as Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe addresses the plenary session of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum.

TOKYO (Reuters) -- Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, eager to resolve a row that has haunted ties with Moscow since World War Two, has told Russian President Vladimir Putin the United States would not put troops on disputed islands if they are handed over to Japan, a newspaper reported on Friday.

Seeking to cement his diplomatic legacy and improve ties with Russia, Abe has pledged to settle the dispute over four isles in the Western Pacific that were occupied by Soviet troops toward the end of the war.

They are known as the Northern Territories in Japan and the Southern Kuriles in Russia.

Any agreement involving transfer of sovereignty to Japan would have to address whether the U.S.-Japan security treaty, the core of Japan's diplomacy, would apply, including whether Washington would have the right to put military bases on the islands.

The isles have strategic value for Russia, ensuring naval access to the western Pacific.

The two leaders agreed in talks in Singapore on Wednesday to speed up talks based on a 1956 joint declaration in which the Soviet Union agreed it would hand over two smaller islands after a peace treaty formally ending the war had been concluded.

The Asahi newspaper said Abe told Putin the United States would not put military bases on the two smaller islands thereafter, the Asahi newspaper said, adding Abe's top security adviser had previously said bases were possible.

Japan has long insisted its sovereignty over all four islands must be confirmed before a peace treaty is signed.

In recent years, however, there have been signs Tokyo was rethinking its stance, perhaps with a "two-plus-alpha" formula that would focus on the handover of the two smaller isles and some sort of visa-free access to the larger islands, plus joint economic projects.

A breakthrough has been elusive. But Abe, who is expected to meet Putin again at a Group of 20 (G-20) summit in Buenos Aires from Nov 30 and in Russia early next year, has said he's determined to settle the dispute before leaving office in 2021.

Putin may be less keen. Russian news agency Tass quoted him as saying after meeting Abe in Singapore that talks based on the 1956 statement "certainly demands separate, additional and in depth analysis, given that not everything is clear in that Declaration".



LONDON (Reuters) -- British Prime Minister Theresa May's Brexit secretary and other ministers quit one by one on Thursday, striking at the heart of a draft divorce deal with the European Union she is struggling to save. Just over 12 hours after May announced that her team of top ministers had agreed to the terms of the draft agreement, Brexit minister Dominic Raab and work and pensions minister Esther McVey quit, saying they could not support it. Their departure, and the resignations of two junior ministers, shakes May's divided government. Raab is the second Brexit secretary to quit over May's plans to leave the European Union, the biggest shift in British policy in more than 40 years. By leaving now, some suggested that Raab could be positioning himself as a possible successor to May. Less than five months until Britain leaves the EU on March 29, the resignations put May's Brexit strategy in doubt. EU leaders are ready to meet on Nov. 25 to sign off on the divorce deal, or Withdrawal Agreement, but the drama is in London with some lawmakers openly questioning whether the government will survive.

PARIS (AP) -- French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire warned that the trade dispute between the United States and China could escalate into a fresh Cold War. Le Maire made the alarm-sounding comments at a Friday conference in Paris on the World Trade Organization's future. He said there's a "real risk" that a Cold War between China and the United States could arise out of the trade tensions between the two and that every country in the world would lose out. To counter the threat, he said the WTO needs reforming by solving its "consensus paralysis" on decision-making and by enforcing international trade rules. President Donald Trump has imposed import taxes on Chinese goods, and the Chinese have responded with tariffs of their own.

PARIS (AFP) -- Tariq Ramadan, a leading Islamic scholar held in France since February on charges he raped two women, Thursday won conditional release as the allegations continued to be investigated, his lawyer told AFP. In court, Ramadan said he had no intention of becoming a fugitive from justice, and said his multiple sclerosis meant he had difficulty walking after 10 months locked up. "I will remain in France and defend my honor and my innocence," the well-known TV commentator told the judges in what was his fourth bid to secure his freedom. "I would like you to make your decision from your conscience, not because my name is Tariq Ramadan and I'm demonized in this country," he said. He portrayed his accusers as liars bending media attention in the case to their benefit, asking: "Who has instrumentalized the 'Me Too' movement?" Ramadan, a married father of four whose grandfather founded Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, was a professor at Oxford University until he was forced to take leave when the rape allegations surfaced at the height of the "Me Too" movement late last year.

MOSCOW (AFP) -- Russia warned France on Thursday that it must put aside "parochial national interests" and recognize its peace efforts in the Central African Republic as negotiations continued on a contentious UN Security Council resolution. France has presented a draft resolution that takes aim at recent Russian efforts to broker peace deals in CAR by specifying that an African-led initiative is "the only framework" for a solution. "We are pro-actively helping the CAR, knowingly with the support of the people and we would like our efforts to be duly reflected in the French draft," Russian Deputy Ambassador Dmitry Polyanski told the council. "In the CAR, there will be work for all to genuinely help the country get back on our feet," he said, adding that it was time to "set aside historical complexes, egotism and parochial national interests." Working with Sudan, Russia in August convened talks in Khartoum of Central African militias who signed a preliminary agreement, drawing criticism from France of unhelpful meddling in its former colony.

CHEMNITZ, Germany (AP) -- German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Friday headed to Chemnitz to talk with residents of the eastern city three months after it was the scene of violent far-right protests. Merkel's plans included a meeting with the local basketball team and then discussions with readers of the Chemnitz Freie Presse newspaper. The demonstrations broke out in August after the killing of a German man that authorities blamed on two recent migrants. The violence was largely directed at foreigners, but a kosher restaurant was also attacked by masked men throwing stones and yelling anti-Semitic jeers. Seven people have been arrested on suspicion of forming a far-right terrorist organization in connection with violence that followed, and plotting attacks. Critics say the chancellor should have visited the city earlier and that now it's too late.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- American prosecutors have obtained a sealed indictment against Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, whose website published thousands of classified U.S. government documents, a U.S. federal court document showed on Thursday. The document, which prosecutors say was filed by mistake, asks a judge to seal documents in a criminal case unrelated to Assange, and carries markings indicating it was originally filed in U.S. District Court in Alexandria, Virginia in August. A source familiar with the matter said the document was initially sealed but unsealed this week for reasons that are unclear at the moment. On social network Twitter, Wikileaks said it was an "apparent cut-and-paste error." U.S. officials had no comment on the disclosure in the document about a sealed indictment of Assange, the charges facing whom are unclear.