

German Officials Under Fire Over Response to Deluge



Damage and debris from flooding is near the Ahr River, including in the spa complex, Sunday, July 18, 2021, in Bad Neuenahr, Germany.

BERLIN (AP) — German officials are defending their preparations for flooding in the face of the raging torrents that caught many people by surprise and left over 190 people dead in Western Europe, but concede that they will need to learn lessons from the disaster.

Efforts to find any more victims and clean up the mess across a swath of western Germany, eastern Belgium and the Netherlands continued Monday as floodwaters receded. So far, 117 people have been confirmed dead in the worst-affected German region, Rhineland-Palatinate; 46 in the neighboring state of North Rhine-Westphalia; and at least one in Bavaria, parts of which saw heavy

rain and flooding over the weekend. At least 31 people died in Belgium.

The downpours that led to usually small rivers swelling at vast speed in the middle of last week were forecast, but warnings of potentially catastrophic damage didn't appear to have found their way to many people on the ground — often in the middle of the night.

Federal and state authorities faced criticism from opposition politicians for allegedly failing to warn citizens of the impending disaster, which came ahead of a national election in September. But Interior Minister Herkener dismissed claims that federal officials had made mistakes, and said warnings were passed to local au-

thorities “who make decisions on disaster protection.”

The head of Germany's civil protection agency said that the country's weather service had “forecast relatively well” and that the country was well-prepared for flooding on its major rivers.

But, Armin Schuster told ZDF television late Sunday, “half an hour before, it is often not possible to say what place will be hit with what quantity” of water. He said that 150 warning notices had been sent out via apps and media.

He said “we will have to investigate” where sirens sounded and where they didn't.

Officials in Germany's Rhineland-Palatinate state said they were well-prepared for flooding, and municipalities were alerted and acted.

But the state's interior minister, Roger Lewentz, said after visiting the hard-hit village of Schuld with Chancellor Angela Merkel on Sunday that “we of course had the problem that the technical infrastructure — electricity and so on — was destroyed in one go.”

There were already broader questions about Germany's emergency warning system after a nationwide test last September, the first in 30 years, largely failed. Sirens didn't sound in many places, or had been removed after the end of the Cold War, and push alerts from the national warning app arrived late or not at all.

Russia Warns West With Test of Hypersonic Missile



Tsirkon (Zircon) hypersonic cruise missile is fired from guided missile frigate Admiral Gorshkov in the White Sea in this still image taken from video released July 19, 2019.

MOSCOW (Dispatches) — Russia said on Monday it had successfully tested a Tsirkon (Zircon) hypersonic cruise missile, a weapon President Vladimir Putin has touted as part of a new generation of missile systems without equal in the world.

The defense ministry said in a statement that the missile had been fired from the Admiral Gorshkov, a warship located in the White Sea, and travelled at around seven times the speed of sound before hitting

a ground target on the coastline of the Barents Sea more than 350 km (217 miles) away.

“The tactical and technical characteristics of the Tsirkon missile were confirmed during tests. The flight speed reached nearly 7 Mach,” the ministry said.

Some Western experts have questioned how advanced Russia's new generation of weapons is, while recognizing that the combination of speed, maneuverability and altitude of hypersonic missiles makes them

difficult to track and intercept.

Russia plans to fit the Tsirkon missile system to its submarines and surface ships.

Putin announced an array of new hypersonic weapons in 2018, saying they could hit almost any point in the world and evade a U.S.-built missile shield.

The following year, he threatened to deploy hypersonic missiles on ships and submarines that could lurk outside U.S. territorial waters if the United States moved to deploy intermediate-range nuclear weapons in Europe.

Washington has not deployed such missiles in Europe, but Moscow is worried it might.

The testing of the missile began five years ago, with nearly a dozen launches completed by 2018.

In his address to the Russian parliament back then, Putin described the missile as one of the main strategic systems capable of reaching “almost any point in the world” and of evading the U.S.-made missile shields.

Russia has unveiled several advanced weapons that can circumvent existing defense systems, including the Sarmat intercontinental missiles and Burevestnik cruise missiles.

South Korea Replaces Sailors Aboard Virus-Hit Destroyer

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea on Sunday sent military aircraft to replace the entire 301-member crew of a navy destroyer on an anti-piracy mission off East Africa after nearly 70 of them tested positive for the coronavirus, officials said.

Two multi-role aerial tankers are bringing the new crew and will then take home 301 sailors aboard the 4,400-ton-class destroyer Munsu the Great, Joint Chiefs of Staff and Health Ministry officials said.

They said 68 sailors have so far tested positive and the results of tests for 200 crew are still pending.

Fifteen sailors have been hospitalized in an African country that authorities did not name, while the rest are on the destroyer. None of the crew has been vaccinated for COVID-19 as they left South Korea in early February, before the start of the vaccination campaign, a Joint Chiefs of Staff official said requesting anonymity citing department rules.

The cause of infections hasn't been officially announced. But military authorities suspect the virus might have spread when the destroyer docked at a harbor in the region to load goods in late June.

The replacement crew of 150 navy personnel will arrive aboard the aerial tankers and move to the destroyer, which is anchored at sea, to sail it back to South Korea on a journey that takes about a month, the Joint Chiefs of Staff official

said.

Health Ministry official Sohn Youngrae told reporters that the 301 crew of the destroyer will be sent to hospitals or quarantine facilities upon their return to South Korea early this week. He said the crew were all relatively in good condition.

South Korea has taken part in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since 2009. Military officials said the Munsu the Great was to be replaced with another destroyer next month following a six-month rotational deployment. The second destroyer is on its way to the area.

The outbreak on the destroyer comes as South Korea is grappling with a spike in infections at home that has forced authorities to place the populous capital region under the toughest distancing rules.

Starting Monday, authorities will enforce a four-person cap on private gatherings in areas outside the Seoul metropolitan region for two weeks, Sohn said. In the Seoul area, the same restrictions have been in place during the daytime since last Monday but gatherings of three or more people are banned after 6 p.m.

South Korea on Sunday confirmed another 1,454 new cases, taking the country's total to 177,951 infections and 2,057 deaths since the pandemic began. It was the 12th consecutive day for South Korea to report more than 1,000 new cases.

Surging COVID Infections Mar UK's 'Freedom Day'



Travelers at King's Cross Station in London, most wearing masks, on Monday.

LONDON (Reuters) — Prime Minister Boris Johnson's “freedom day” ending over a year of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in England was marred on Monday by surging infections, warnings of supermarket shortages and his own forced self-isolation.

Johnson's bet that he can get one of Europe's largest economies firing again because so many people are now vaccinated marks a new chapter in the global response to the coronavirus.

If the vaccines prove effective in reducing severe illness and deaths while infections reach record levels, Johnson's decision could offer a path out of the worst public health crisis in decades. If not, more lockdowns could loom.

But Johnson's big day was marred by “pingdemic chaos” as a National Health Service app ordered hundreds of thousands of people to self-isolate — prompting warnings supermarket shelves could soon be emptied.

“If we don't do it now we've got to ask ourselves, when will we ever do it?” Johnson said just hours after he was forced to abandon a plan to dodge the 10-day quarantine requirement for himself and finance minister Rishi Sunak.

“This is the right moment but we've got to do it cautiously. We've got to remember that this virus is sadly still out there.”

Britain has the seventh highest death toll in the world, 128,708, and is fore-

cast to soon have more new infections each day than it did at the height of a second wave of the virus earlier this year. On Sunday there were 48,161 new cases.

But, outstripping European peers, 87% of Britain's adult population has had one vaccination dose, and more than 68% have had the two doses which provide fuller protection. Daily deaths, currently at around 40 per day, are just a fraction of a peak of above 1,800 seen in January.

The FTSE 100 share index fell to a two-month low on Monday on concerns that economic recovery could be in danger. UK-listed shares of cruise operator Carnival Plc, and airlines easyJet and British Airways-owner IAG fell between 4% and 6.7%. The pound fell to a three-month low.

Johnson sets COVID-19 restrictions for England, with devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland making their own policy.

As businesses across England faced a shortage of workers due to the NHS app pinging people and telling them to isolate, supermarkets warned they faced strain.

British society appears split on the restrictions: some want tough rules to continue as they fear the virus will keep killing people and overwhelm hospitals, but others have chafed at the most onerous restrictions in peacetime history.

'Tiny Homes' Pop Up Amid Homeless Crisis in U.S.



A row of Pallet shelters at the Chandler Street Tiny Home Village on February 1, 2021 in the North Hollywood neighborhood of Los Angeles, California.

LOS ANGELES — In a parking lot in Los Angeles, a village of miniature prefab houses has sprung up, one of several sites in America's second-largest city where so-called “tiny homes” are being put up to help the homeless get back on their feet.

The City of Angels has a large homeless population, second only to New York. Tens of thousands live rough — their tents, and their distress, are plain for any resident or visitor to see.

In the Tarzana neighborhood, 76 tiny homes paid for by the city have been erected. Each is 64 square feet (six square meters), and is equipped with two beds and shelving as well as air conditioning and heating.

Each one costs \$6,500 and can be set up in just 90 minutes. Toilets and showers are shared, and state-of-the-art washing machines face large, bright orange tables under umbrellas. The set-up feels a bit like a campground.

Zuri-Kinshasa Maria Terry, 46, has just moved into the Tarzana development.

The former stripper says she ended up on the streets a year ago, after two weeks in intensive care because she had contracted Covid-19, and waited two months for the tiny home village to open. “It was the scariest thing in the freak-

ing world to be out there,” Terry told AFP, adding she was “still grasping” the fact that she had found a steady place to live.

In addition to allowing a certain privacy, she said the main advantage of the tiny homes is “safety,” as compared to either living on the street or in a traditional shelter.

The Tarzana site is guarded 24 hours a day, and while residents do not get to keep the keys to their tiny homes, they can lock it from the inside, explains Rowan Vansleve, chief finance and administration officer of Hope of the Valley, a non-governmental organization that manages the development.

The first village of tiny homes in Los Angeles opened in early 2021 and several more followed.

Similar initiatives have sprung up in recent years elsewhere in California, including San Jose, and in Seattle.

For those who advocate for the homeless, the projects are a mixed bag.

Mayer Dahan, a founder of the Dream Builders Project, says the tiny homes can be “a very positive transition” for some, but he said he worried about “the concept that solutions could be found by trying to resolve the symptoms, as opposed to the underlying issue.”

News in Brief

MUMBAI (Reuters) — India's capital New Delhi and the main financial centre of Mumbai were drenched with heavy rain on Monday, a day after at least 35 people were killed across the country in landslides and house collapses triggered by downpours.

The Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) has predicted heavy to very heavy rain in north India, including New Delhi, over the next two days. In Mumbai, the IMD has issued a heavy rain and thunderstorm alert for the city and surrounding districts. At least 30 people were killed on Sunday in three Mumbai suburbs when several houses collapsed in landslides after rain. At least three people were also killed when a house collapsed in the northern state of Uttarakhand after a downpour, Reuters partner agency ANI reported. In a separate incident on Sunday evening, a three-storey building collapsed in the city of Gurugram, bordering Delhi. Two people were killed and rescue operations were still underway.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) — President Joe Biden's administration said on Monday that it had transferred its first detainee from the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, a Moroccan man who had been imprisoned since 2002, lowering the population at the facility to 39. While former President Donald Trump kept the prison open during his four years in the White House, Biden has vowed to close it. Abdul Latif Nasir, 56, was repatriated to Morocco. He had been cleared for release in 2016. Morocco's general prosecutor said in a statement that Nasser would be investigated for suspected involvement in terrorist acts, and a police source said he had been taken into custody in Casablanca.

BRUSSELS/LONDON (Reuters) — Britain will threaten this week to deviate from the Brexit deal unless the European Union shows more flexibility over Northern Ireland, one UK and three EU sources told Reuters, a move that could thrust the five-year Brexit divorce into turmoil. Deviating from the deal's so-called Northern Ireland Protocol is a risky step: its aim was to prevent Brexit from disrupting the delicate peace brought to Northern Ireland by the U.S.-brokered 1998 peace deal that ended three decades of sectarian conflict. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who signed the 2020 Brexit deal, has been dismayed by the protocol which has imposed paperwork and checks that London says could prevent British food staples such as sausages going to Northern Ireland. David Frost, the British minister who leads Brexit negotiations, is preparing to announce a significant potential change on the protocol that could have far-reaching consequences for the relationship with the EU, one of the sources said.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) — Claude Joseph, who has nominally led Haiti as acting prime minister since the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, said in a Washington Post interview that he has agreed to step down, handing over power to a challenger backed by the international community. The announcement, made in an exclusive interview with the U.S. newspaper, ends a power struggle between Joseph and Ariel Henry, the 71-year old neurosurgeon who was appointed prime minister by Moïse two days before the killing.

SEOUL/TOKYO (Reuters) — South Korean President Moon Jae-in will not visit Tokyo for the upcoming Olympics, his office said on Monday, scrapping plans for what would have been his first summit with Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga. The announcement came after Seoul lodged a protest over a news report on Friday that a senior diplomat at Japan's embassy in Seoul had said Moon was “masturbating” when describing his efforts to improve relations between the two countries. “President Moon has decided not to visit Japan,” Moon's press secretary Park Soo-hyun told a briefing, adding both sides had explored ways to tackle rows over history and boost cooperation but failed to reach agreement. “The discussions were held amicably and made considerable progress, but it still fell short of being considered as a summit result, and we took other circumstances into account,” Park said, without elaborating. Suga declined to comment on Moon's decision, but described the Japanese diplomat's remarks as “inappropriate.”

SYDNEY (Reuters) — Australian authorities said Victoria state would extend a COVID-19 lockdown beyond Tuesday to slow the spread of the highly infectious Delta variant, despite a slight drop in new infections in the state and nationwide. Victoria state Premier Daniel Andrews said lockdown rules would not be lifted as cases were still being detected in the community, promising more details would be provided on Tuesday, when the lockdown had been due to end. “It would be perhaps a few days of sunshine and then there is a very high chance that we'd be back in lockdown again. That's what I'm trying to avoid,” Andrews told a news conference in Melbourne, the state capital. Victoria, the country's second most populous state, on Monday reported 13 locally acquired cases, down from 16 a day earlier. All new local cases are linked. Nearly half of Australia's 25 million people are living under lockdowns imposed to quell an outbreak fuelled by the highly transmissible Delta variant, which has become the worst this year.