

News in brief

Residents flee wildfire raging through Southern California canyon



Two firefighters were injured and residents of a rustic Southern California canyon were driven from their homes after a blaze broke out overnight at a house and tore across more than 7,000 acres of dry brush and wooded hillsides. Some 500 firefighters aided by water-dropping aircraft were battling the flames, which sent smoke drifting across Orange and Los Angeles counties and out over the Pacific Ocean. Some 25,000 people were evacuated across Orange County.

There was an explosion at South Africa's second-largest crude oil refinery in Durban yesterday morning, a local metropolitan police official said, adding it was not yet clear whether there had been injuries or deaths.

Huge explosion rocks refinery south of Durban



According to Engen's website, the Durban plant has a crude refining capacity of 120,000 barrels per day. It was not immediately clear if there was any impact on the refinery's production.

Surgeon jailed in France's massive paedophile case



A retired French surgeon has been sentenced to 15 years in jail at the end of his closed-doors trial for the rape and sexual abuse of four children in the first part of France's biggest ever paedophilia case. Joel Le Scouarnec, 70, remained impassive as the verdict was read out on Thursday at the court in Saintes, western France, keeping his arms crossed without a glance at his victims, who embraced each other, overcome with emotion.

Australia's Great Barrier Reef status lowered to critical and deteriorating



The World Heritage-listed site off Australia's northeastern coast has lost more than half its coral in the past three decades. The Great Barrier Reef, the world's most extensive and spectacular coral reef ecosystem, is in a critical state and deteriorating as climate change warms up the waters in which it lies, an international conservation group said.

China to start ambitious rail line to link city clusters in five years

China will start construction of 10,000 kilometres (6,213.7 miles) of intercity and urban railway over the next five years in Yangtze River Delta, Greater Bay and Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei areas, the state planner said. The Greater Bay area is a region that includes Hong Kong, Macau and nine cities in China's southern Guangdong province.

NASA to buy Moon dust for \$1

US space agency announces contracts awarded to four companies to collect soil from the moon for \$1 to \$15,000

The companies plan to carry out the collection during already scheduled unmanned missions to the Moon in 2022 and 2023

AFP | Washington

The US space agency NASA awarded contracts to four companies to collect lunar samples for \$1 to \$15,000, rock-bottom prices that are intended to set a precedent for future exploitation of space resources by the private sector.

"I think it's kind of amazing that we can buy lunar regolith from four companies for a total of \$25,001," said Phil McAlister, director of NASA's Commercial Spaceflight Division.

The contracts are with Lunar Outpost of Golden, Colorado for \$1; ispace Japan of Tokyo for \$5,000; ispace Europe of Luxembourg for \$5,000; and Masten Space Systems of Mojave, California for \$15,000.

The companies plan to carry out the collection during already scheduled unmanned missions to the Moon in 2022 and 2023.



Scientist-astronaut Harrison H. Schmitt collecting samples from the moon during the Apollo 17 mission using a lunar rake in December 1972 (file photo)

The firms are to collect a small amount of lunar soil known as regolith from the Moon and to provide imagery to NASA of the collection and the collected material.

Ownership of the lunar soil will then be transferred to NASA and it will become the "sole property of NASA for the agency's use under the Artemis program."

Under the Artemis program, NASA plans to land a man and a woman on the Moon by 2024 and lay the groundwork for sustainable exploration and an eventual mission to Mars.

"The precedent is a very im-

portant part of what we're doing today," said Mike Gold, NASA's acting associate administrator for international and interagency relations.

"We think it's very important to establish the precedent that the private sector entities can extract, can take these resources but NASA can purchase and utilize them to fuel not only NASA's activities, but a whole new dynamic era of public and private development and exploration on the Moon," Gold said.

"We must learn to generate our own water, air and even fuel," he said. "Living off the land will

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As per the payment plan, Lunar Outpost of Golden received 10 cents on getting the contract and will get another 10 cents after the mission launch. The full payment will only come in after it delivers the samples to NASA

enable ambitious exploration activities that will result in awe inspiring science and unprecedented discoveries."

Any lessons learned on the Moon would be crucial to an eventual mission to Mars.

"Human mission to Mars will be even more demanding and challenging than our lunar operations, which is why it's so critical to learn from our experiences on the Moon and apply those lessons to Mars," Gold said.

Puerto Rico's Arecibo Observatory 'not closing' after collapse

AFP | Washington

Puerto Rico's Arecibo Observatory could still have a future after its vast telescope dramatically collapsed this week, US officials said.

The structure was destroyed on Tuesday when its 900-ton receiver platform, which was suspended 450 feet (140 meters) in the air, fell loose and plunged onto the



A screenshot from a video shows the collapse at the Arecibo Observatory

radio dish below.

Ralph Gaume, director of the US National Science Foundation's division of astronomical sciences, said "the NSF is not closing the Arecibo Observatory."

"The NSF is deeply saddened by the situation," he told reporters, adding that the agency "has a very well-defined process for funding and constructing large-scale infrastructure including

telescopes... it's very early for us to comment on the replacement."

Engineers had recently warned of the telescope's decrepit condition, and the NSF announced only last month that it would be dismantled. Two of the cables that held the platform over the radio dish -- which measures 1,000 feet (300 meters) in diameter -- had snapped this year, and the structure finally gave way on Tuesday.

COVID-19 Countries worst affected

Country	Total cases	Total deaths
1 USA	14,664,081	284,402
2 India	9,606,810	139,700
3 Brazil	6,496,050	175,432
4 Russia	2,402,949	42,176
5 France	2,268,552	54,140
6 Spain	1,699,145	46,252
7 UK	1,690,432	60,617
8 Italy	1,688,939	58,852
9 Argentina	1,447,732	39,305
10 Colombia	1,343,322	37,305
11 Mexico	1,144,643	108,173
12 Germany	1,143,116	18,492
13 Poland	1,041,846	19,359
14 Iran	1,016,835	49,695

Global tally

66,008,929

Deaths

1,519,895

Recovered:

45,680,722

New cases

+483,665

New deaths

+8,749

Figures as of closing

Middle East

Country	Total cases	New cases	Total deaths	New Deaths	Total recovered	Active cases
Egypt	117,156		6,713		103,082	7,361
Saudi Arabia	358,336	+234	5,940	+10	348,238	4,158
UAE	174,062	+1,311	586	+1	157,828	15,648
Kuwait	143,917	+343	886	+2	139,148	3,883
Oman	124,329		1,435		115,866	7,028
Qatar	139,643	+166	239		136,872	2,532

Erdogan says he hopes France gets rid of Macron

AFP | Istanbul

Turkey's president has renewed his vitriolic attacks on French President Emmanuel Macron, saying he hopes France will get rid of him soon.

Speaking after Friday prayers in Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdogan called Macron "trouble" for France, which he said was experiencing a dangerous time under his leadership.

"My wish is for France to get rid of the Macron trouble as soon as possible," Erdogan said. Otherwise, Erdogan claimed, France would not be able to overcome the Yellow Vest protest movement against social injustice in the country.

Erdogan also said France has lost its credibility as an intermediary of the Minsk group, which was created in the 1990s to encourage peaceful resolution for the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Tiger's severed head seized during Thai zoo raid

AFP | Bangkok

Authorities in Thailand found a severed tiger's head when they raided a fake zoo near the country's border with Laos that has suspected links to an illegal wildlife trafficking racket.

Officials seized five live tigers at the Mukda Tiger Park and Farm -- which have been sent to a wildlife sanctuary -- while other tiger parts were also discovered.

The site in the north-eastern province of Mukdahan had claimed six cubs were born at the facility five years ago, but DNA tests have since confirmed the five seized tigers and the decapitated animal were not related to any others at the park.

This has raised suspicions that the zoo was being used as a holding facility for wildlife being smuggled into Laos and Vietnam.

"They have had a zoo licence to open as a business since 2012, but they claimed their facility was not ready to open," an official from the Thai Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation told AFP.

"We got tipped off from various international agencies about the



The severed head of the tiger seized during the raid

25 tigers were only left in the zoo whose population jumped from 28 in 2013 to 50 in five years

ent during the raid on Monday and was wanted for questioning, the official said.

The zoo had 28 tigers in 2013, and five years later the population had jumped to 50, according to conservation group Wildlife Friends Foundation Thailand. But by 2020 the number of tigers was down to 25.

"Think of this as animal laundering; once you change the identities of the animals they can no longer be traced," Edwin Wiek, the group's founder, said.

strange activities conducted by this zoo." The zoo's owner was not pres-