

Tie for warmest June globally, Siberia sizzles: EU

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AFP | Paris

Temperatures soared 10 degrees Celsius above average in June across much of permafrost-laden Siberia, with last month in a dead heat for the warmest June on record globally, the European Union's climate monitoring network said yesterday.

An Arctic hourly temperature record for the month -- 37 degrees Celsius -- was set on June 21 near Verkhoyansk in northeastern Russia, where a weather station logged a blistering 38C on the same day, the Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S) reported.

The hourly record -- averaged across 60 minutes -- was one to two degrees above previously registered Arctic highs in 1969 and 1973.

Freakishly warm weather across large swathes of Siberia since January, combined with low soil moisture, have contrib-



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uted to a resurgence of wildfires that devastated the region last summer, C3S reported.

Both the number and intensity of fires in Siberia and parts of Alaska have increased since mid-June, resulting in the highest carbon emissions for the month -- 59 million tonnes of CO2 -- since records began in 2003.

"Last year was already by far an unusual, and record, summer for fires in the Arctic Circle," said Mark Parrington, senior scientist at the EU's Copernicus Atmosphere Monitoring Service (CAMS), warning of "intense activity" in the coming weeks.

Copernicus has said that "zombie" blazes that smouldered through the winter may have reignited.

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Permafrost 'carbon bomb'

"What is worrisome is that the Arctic is warming faster than the rest of the world," he said in a statement.

Across the Arctic region, average temperatures have risen by more than two degrees Celsius since the mid-19th century, twice the global average.

Despite lower-than-average

temperatures in its western reaches, the whole of Siberia -- larger than the United States and Mexico combined -- was more than 5C above normal for June, according to C3S satellite data.

The softening of once solid permafrost -- stretching across Siberia, Alaska and northern Canada -- has upended indigenous communities and threatens industrial infrastructure, especially in Russia.

A massive diesel spill into rivers near the city of Norilsk, Russia resulted when a tank at a power plant built on melting permafrost collapsed in late May.

"Widespread permafrost thaw is projected for this century," the UN's climate science panel, the IPCC, said in a landmark report last year on the world's cryosphere, or frozen zones.

"The majority of Arctic infrastructure is located in regions where permafrost thaw is projected to intensify by mid-century."

Soils in the permafrost region across Russia, Alaska and Canada hold twice as much carbon -- mostly in the form of methane and CO2 -- as the atmosphere, more than 1.4 trillion tonnes.

One tonne of carbon is equivalent to 3.65 tonnes of carbon dioxide.

What are Hong Kong police's new powers?

AFP | Hong Kong

Hong Kong's government has expanded police surveillance and enforcement powers using Beijing's sweeping new national security law.

The changes were spelled out in 116-pages of guidelines released late Monday that form part of a new law targeting subversion, secession, terrorism and foreign collusion.

Below are some of the key powers granted authorities when conducting national security investigations.

Warrantless searches

Police can now raid premises without a court-granted warrant in "exceptional circumstances", the government said.

The guidelines specifically stated this would apply if it "would not be practicable to obtain" a warrant. The rules also apply to searches of vehicles or electronic devices.



Covert surveillance

The city's chief executive -- a pro-Beijing appointee -- will have final approval on all applications for interception of communications and covert surveillance operations to do with national security cases.

Less intrusive surveillance can be approved by senior police officers.

"The authorising authority," the government said in its statement, "has to ensure that the covert operation concerned satisfies the proportionality and necessity tests before granting the authorisation."



Asset seizures and travel restrictions

Once someone is suspected of endangering national security, police can apply to a magistrate for a warrant ordering them to surrender their passport.

The city's security chief can also freeze any assets deemed to be related to an offence against national security, and the justice chief can apply to the courts to order the property's confiscation.

Foreign political organisations

The city's police chief can -- with the security minister's approval -- compel political groups or agents from abroad, including Taiwan, to hand over certain information.

That includes their activities, personal details, and details on their finances and sources of income.

Any agent or group that fails to hand over the information is liable on conviction to a fine of HK\$100,000 and six months in prison -- or two years in prison if they give information which proves false.

Internet censorship

Police now have the power to remove online content -- a move that embeds unprecedented control over the internet in a city outside of China's "Great Firewall".

If police decide an internet user's online post is likely to constitute or cause "an offence endangering national security", they can order the user to delete the post, order the platform on which it was posted to remove it, or order the platform's web host to pull the message.

This applies whether the message was posted in Hong Kong or elsewhere.

If users or providers do not follow the police order, officers can apply to a magistrate for a warrant to seize relevant electronic devices and take action to remove the message.

They can also apply for a warrant ordering people and businesses to hand over a message's identification record or help decrypt messages.

Individuals who do not obey the order are liable to be fined up to HK\$100,000 (\$12,900) or jailed for up to a year. Jail terms for service providers are capped at six months.

Mumbai opens new hospitals as India virus deaths top 20,000



A makeshift field hospital to treat coronavirus patients has opened at Mumbai's Mahalaxmi Racecourse

● Mumbai accounts for about a quarter of India's 20,100 deaths

● India's caseload is predicted to pass one million this month

AFP | Mumbai

India's financial capital Mumbai opened four new coronavirus field hospitals yesterday -- including one at a horseracing track -- as the nationwide death toll jumped past 20,000.

Hospitals in densely populated cities such as Mumbai and Delhi are struggling to cope with the epidemic, and the country now has around 720,000 infections -- the world's third-highest.

The Mumbai region, which accounts for about a quarter of India's 20,100 deaths, has suffered a new surge in infections, forcing authorities to build makeshift hospitals and quarantine facilities.

Schools, hotels, a planetarium and a stadium used to host US NBA games last year have all been repurposed, and on Tuesday four new field hospitals -- including 700 beds inside the Mahalaxmi horseracing venue -- were opened.

The new facilities will together provide an extra 3,500 beds in the city of 20 million, where hospitals have been overwhelmed with hundreds of patients each day.

Health workers have complained about severe staff shortages, with some senior doctors and nurses avoiding frontlines because of their vulnerability to the virus due to age or conditions such as diabetes. "Required medical help will be available at these four new treatment centres," said a spokesman for the government of Maharashtra state, of which Mumbai is the capital.

As the death toll climbs, critics say the country is not testing enough -- leaving many infections undiagnosed.

India's caseload is predicted to pass one million this month and not peak for several weeks.