

News in brief

**Australia heatwave stokes risk of catastrophic bushfires**



Firefighters warned millions of Australians of “catastrophic” bushfire dangers yesterday as they battled multiple blazes stoked by a heatwave blanketing the country. Temperatures are forecast to soar past 40C in parts of southeast Australia, fuelling some of the most dangerous bushfire conditions since the “Black Summer” blazes of 2019-2020. Country Fire Authority chief officer Jason Heffernan said the fire danger rating in some parts of Victoria state would reach “catastrophic”.

**Japan nuclear official loses phone with confidential data in China**



An employee of Japan's nuclear regulator lost a smartphone, possibly in China, containing a confidential list of contacts, an official and local media reports said. The case became public this week as China continues to raise pressure on Tokyo after Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi suggested in November that Japan may react militarily if Taiwan were to come under an attack. Beijing claims the self-ruled island as part of its own territory and has not ruled out seizing it by force. The news also came as Tokyo Electric Power (TEPCO), which operated the crippled Fukushima atomic plant, moves to restart the world's biggest nuclear plant later this month.

**South Korean leader turns to penguins in bid to meet Kim Jong Un**



South Korean President Lee Jae Myung has portrayed himself and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un as a pair of affectionate penguins in a social media post urging the despot to meet him. Writing on social media platform X, Lee said he hoped for the day that “the abnormal state of turmoil and hostility on the Korean peninsula will be overcome”. “Go meet, Po Jae Myung and Po Jong Un,” a reference to “Pororo the Little Penguin”, a popular Korean children's animation featuring penguin characters. One of South Korea's most successful animated series, the programme's creators outsourced some work in its initial production phase to North Korean studios in the early 2000s.

CURIOSER & CURIOSER

Yes to red meat, no to sugar: Trump’s new health guidelines



A nutrition facts and ingredients label is displayed on the side of boxes of cookies displayed for sale at a grocery store in Hawthorne, California

AFP | Washington

The Trump administration on Wednesday urged Americans to avoid highly processed foods along with added sugars while touting consumption of red meat and full-fat dairy, foods many nutritionists had previously discouraged. The new federal nutritional guidelines emphasize protein more than previous recommendations, releasing a flipped-pyramid graphic that places meat, dairy and healthy fats on the same tier as vegetables and fruits, with fiber-rich whole grains like oats at the bottom tip. Reaction from nutritionists and public health advocates was mixed: the advice to cut sugar and processed foods was a positive, but the emphasis on animal protein and full-fat dairy was “contradictory.” “I found the whole thing to be muddled, contradictory, ideological and very retro,” said Marion Nestle, a professor emerita of nutrition at New York University.

Health chief Robert F. Kennedy Jr vowed the new guidelines would “revolutionize” US eating habits and “make America healthy again” -- the catchphrase of the MAHA movement that’s perhaps best known for vaccine resistance. Kennedy has long railed against the typical American diet and the food industry, saying the country is in a “health emergency” that has resulted in chronic disease including among children. The new recommendations -- the federal government must release them every five years -- strongly discourage sugars, saying children should avoid added sweeteners until age 10, and that sugar-sweetened beverages are anathema to good health. Americans are encouraged to cut back on refined carbohydrates like white bread or flour tortillas, and prioritize whole foods like vegetables and fruits over packaged or prepared meals, which often include significant added sugar and salt.

Iran protesters defy crackdown nationwide

Security forces use tear gas as nationwide economic protests enter second week

- Protests enter twelfth consecutive day
- Security forces use tear gas, fire

AFP | Tehran

Security forces used tear gas to disperse protesters in Iran as people angered by the economic situation in the Islamic republic kept up their challenge to the authorities and the exiled opposition yesterday urged them to step up their actions. Twelve days of protests have shaken the clerical authorities under Ayatollah Ali Khamenei already battling economic crisis after years of sanctions and recovering from the June war against Israel. The movement, which originated with a shutdown on the Tehran bazaar on December 28 after the rial plunged to record lows, has spread nationwide and is now being marked by larger scale demonstrations. Authorities have blamed unrest on “rioters” and the judiciary chief has vowed there would be “no leniency” in bringing them to justice. On Wednesday, an Iranian police officer was stabbed to death west of Tehran “during efforts to



Iranian security forces using tear gas to disperse protesters at the Tehran bazaar

control unrest”, the Iranian Fars news agency said. Reza Pahlavi, the son of the shah ousted by the 1979 Islamic revolution and a key exiled opposition figure, said the turnout on Wednesday had been “unprecedented” in this wave of demonstrations and called for major new protests yesterday evening. He said in a message on social media he had received reports the “regime is deeply frightened and is attempting, once again, to

cut off the internet” to thwart the protests. Iraq-based Iranian Kurdish opposition parties, including the Komala party which is outlawed by Tehran, called for a general strike yesterday in Kurdish-populated areas in western Iran which have seen intense protest activity.

Soleimani statues attacked

The HRANA monitor published a video of protesters in Kuhchehar in the southern Fars province cheering overnight as they pulled down a statue of the former foreign operations commander of the Revolutionary Guards Qassem Soleimani, who was killed in a US strike in January 2020 and is hailed as a national hero by the Islamic republic. Persian-language TV channels based outside Iran also posted images of a statue of Soleimani in the central city of Kashan being set on fire. It was not immediately possible to verify the images. HRANA said according to its count protests had taken place in 348 locations over the last 11 days in all of Iran's 31 provinces. It also published a video of people massing late at night in the Tehran satellite city of Karaj and lighting fires in the streets and also images of security forces using tear gas to disperse a protest in the Caspian Sea town of Tonekabon.

Russia slams Western peacekeeping plan for Ukraine

AFP | Moscow

Russia yesterday slammed a plan for European peacekeepers to be deployed to Ukraine as “dangerous”, branding Kyiv and its allies an “axis of war” and dousing hopes it could be a step towards ending the almost four-year-long war. US President Donald Trump has been pushing the warring sides to strike a deal to halt the conflict, running shuttle diplomacy between Ukraine’s Volodymyr Zelensky and Russia’s Vladimir Putin to try to get an agreement across the line. An initial 28-point plan that largely adhered to Moscow’s demands was criticised by Kyiv and Europe. Now Russia has condemned attempts to beef up protections for Ukraine should an elusive deal be reached. Ukraine’s allies said they had agreed key security guarantees for Kyiv at a summit in Paris earlier this week, including a peacekeeping force. But in its first comments since the summit, Moscow said the statements were far from anything the Kremlin could accept to end its assault. “The new militarist declarations of the so-called Coalition of the Willing and the Kyiv regime



A man walks past residential buildings on a snow-covered street in Kyiv

together form a genuine ‘axis of war’,” Russia’s foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said in a statement. The plans drafted by Kyiv’s allies were “dangerous” and “destructive”, she added. The remarks came as Russian strikes plunged hundreds of thousands in Ukraine into darkness and killed three in a frontline city -- attacks that Zelensky said showed Russia was still set on war.

Moscow rejects NATO presence

European leaders and US envoys announced earlier this week that post-war guarantees for Ukraine would include a US-led monitoring mechanism and a European multinational force to be deployed once the fighting stops. But Moscow has repeatedly warned that it would not accept any NATO members sending peacekeeping troops to Ukraine. “All such units and facilities

will be considered legitimate military targets for the Russian Armed Forces,” Zakharova said yesterday, repeating a threat previously uttered by Putin. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz yesterday said a ceasefire in Ukraine was still “quite far” away given Russia’s position. “The order must be: First a ceasefire, then security guarantees for Ukraine for a long-term agreement with Russia,” Merz told reporters.