

News in brief

◆ **A Syrian-Israeli ministerial meeting** is set to take place Thursday in Baku to discuss security matters in southern Syria, a diplomat told AFP. The meeting between Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani and Israeli Minister of Strategic Affairs Ron Dermer follows a similar meeting between the two ministers in Paris last week. It will take place after an unprecedented visit by Shaibani to Moscow on Thursday, added the diplomat, who requested anonymity due to the sensitivity of the matter. Israel and Syria have technically been at war since 1948. The meeting in Baku will focus on “the security situation, particularly in southern Syria”. The Paris meeting focused mainly on “recent security developments and attempts to contain the escalation in southern Syria”, according to Syrian state television.



Syrian, Israeli ministers to hold meeting in Baku today: diplomat

◆ **Belgium asks ICC to look at war crimes claims against two Israelis**

◆ **Belgium said** yesterday it would ask the International Criminal Court (ICC) to look into accusations of war crimes levelled against two Israelis who travelled to a Belgian music festival this month. The pair were briefly held for questioning by prosecutors upon attending the electronic dance music festival near Antwerp, following a complaint filed by pro-Palestinian groups who identified them as Israeli soldiers and accused them of violations in Gaza. Authorities initially said they took action after concluding that Belgian courts had extraterritorial jurisdiction over war crimes cases. But after analysing the complaints the federal prosecutor's office said on Wednesday that the justice ministry would refer the cases to the ICC, which is already investigating possible violations of humanitarian law in the Palestinian Territories.

◆ **A Chinese submersible** has discovered thousands of worms and molluscs nearly 10 kilometres (six miles) below sea level in the Mariana Trench, the deepest colony of creatures ever observed, a study revealed yesterday. The discovery in Earth's deepest underwater valley suggests that there could be much more life thriving in the hostile conditions at the bottom of our planet's largely unexplored oceans than previously thought, the China-led team of scientists said. Almost all life on Earth is supported by light from the Sun. However in the total darkness at the bottom of the world, these creatures live off of chemicals such as methane seeping through cracks in the seafloor, a process called chemosynthesis. Last year, the Chinese submersible “Fendouzhe” -- or “Striver” -- dove 23 times into the depths of the Mariana Trench in the western Pacific Ocean with researchers on board, according to the study in the journal Nature.

Chinese sub discovers deepest-ever creatures 10 km undersea



SPOTLIGHT

Australia to ban under-16s from YouTube



AFP | Sydney, Australia

Australia will use landmark social media laws to ban children under 16 from video-streaming site YouTube, a top minister said Wednesday stressing the need to shield them from “predatory algorithms”.

Communications Minister Anika Wells said four-in-ten Australian children had reported viewing harmful content on YouTube, one of the most visited websites in the world.

“We want kids to know who they are before platforms assume who they are,” Wells said in a statement.

“There’s a place for social media, but there’s not a place for predatory algorithms targeting children.”

Australia announced last

year it was drafting laws that will ban children from social media sites such as Facebook, TikTok and Instagram until they turn 16.

The government had previously indicated YouTube would be exempt, given its widespread use in classrooms.

“Young people under the age of 16 will not be able to have accounts on YouTube,” Prime Minister Anthony Albanese told reporters on Wednesday.

“They will also not be able to have accounts on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and X among other platforms.

“We want Australian parents and families to know that we have got their back.”

Albanese said the age limit may not be implemented perfectly -- much like existing restrictions on alcohol -- but it was still the right thing to do.



The tsunami-hit Severo-Kurilsk on Paramushir island of Russia's northern Kuril islands.

Huge quake off Russia sparks Pacific tsunamis

Almost two million people in Japan were told to head to higher ground

- “STAY STRONG AND STAY SAFE!” US President Donald Trump said on social media
- A tsunami had already hit and flooded the port town of Severo-Kurilsk
- Strongest in the Kamchatka region since 1952

AFP | Chiba, Japan

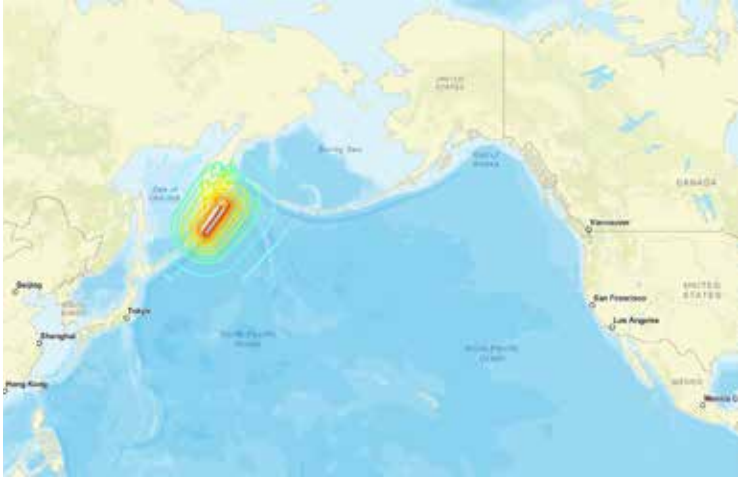
One of the strongest earthquakes ever recorded struck Russia's sparsely populated Far East on Wednesday, causing tsunamis up to four metres (12 feet) high across the Pacific and sparking evacuations from Hawaii to Japan.

The magnitude 8.8 quake struck off Petropavlovsk on Russia's Kamchatka peninsula, and was the largest since 2011 when one of magnitude 9.1 off Japan caused a tsunami that killed more than 15,000 people.

Almost two million people in Japan were told to head to higher ground and tsunami warnings were issued across the region, before being rescinded or downgraded -- though scientists warned of the danger of powerful aftershocks.

A tsunami had already hit and flooded the port town of Severo-Kurilsk, crashing through the port area and submerging the local fishing plant, officials said. Russian state television footage showed it sweep buildings and debris into the sea. Authorities said the population of around 2,000 people had been evacuated.

The waves reached as far as the town's World War II monu-



This image courtesy of the US Geological Survey (USGS) shows the epicenter of an 8.7 earthquake that hit off of Russia's far east

ment about 400 metres from the shoreline, said Mayor Alexander Ovsyannikov.

Several people were injured in Russia by the quake, state media reported, but none seriously.

“The walls were shaking,” a Kamchatka resident told state media Zvezda.

“It's good that we packed a suitcase, there was one with water and clothes near the door. We quickly grabbed it and ran out... It was very scary,” she said.

Later Wednesday, the authorities in the Kamchatka peninsula announced the tsunami warning had been lifted.

Millions advised to flee

Officials from countries with a Pacific coastline in North and South America -- including the United States, Mexico, Ecuador and Colombia -- issued warnings to avoid threatened beaches and low-lying areas.

In Japan, nearly two million people were advised to evacuate, and many left by car or on foot to higher ground.

One woman was killed as she drove her car off a cliff as she tried to escape, local media reported.

A 1.3-metre high tsunami reached a port in the northern prefecture of Iwate, Japan's weather agency said.

By Wednesday evening, the agency had downgraded its tsunami alerts -- issued for much of the archipelago -- to advisories.

In Hawaii, governor Josh Green said flights in and out of the island of Maui had been cancelled as a precaution.

The Pacific Tsunami Warning Center later downgraded the alert for Hawaii to an advisory and local authorities cancelled a coastal evacuation order.

Earlier, tsunami sirens blared near Hawaii's popular Waikiki surf beach where an AFP photographer saw gridlocked traffic as Hawaiians escaped to higher ground. “STAY STRONG AND STAY SAFE!” US President Donald Trump said on social media.

Pacific alerts

Wednesday's quake was the strongest in the Kamchatka region since 1952, the regional seismic monitoring service said, warning of aftershocks of up to 7.5 magnitude.

The epicentre is in roughly the same location as a 9.0-magnitude quake that year that caused a Pacific-wide tsunami, according to the USGS.

The organisation said Wednesday's was one of the 10 strongest earthquakes ever recorded.

The quake was followed by at least six aftershocks that further rattled the Russian Far East, including one of 6.9 magnitude.

The US Tsunami Warning Centers said waves exceeding three metres above the tide level were possible along some coasts of Ecuador, northwestern Hawaiian islands and Russia.

Between one- and three-metre waves were possible along some coasts of Chile, Costa Rica, French Polynesia, Hawaii, Japan and other islands in the Pacific, it added.

Waves of up to one metre were possible elsewhere, including Australia, Colombia, Mexico, New Zealand, Tonga and Taiwan.

Fukushima evacuated

At Inage Beach in Chiba prefecture in Japan, officials have set up a security perimeter. One rescue worker told AFP the seaside area was off limits until further notice.

The stricken Fukushima nuclear plant in northeast Japan -- destroyed by a huge quake and tsunami in 2011 -- was evacuated, its operator said.

In Taitung in Taiwan, hotel resort worker Wilson Wang, 31, told AFP: “We've advised guests to stay safe and not go out, and to avoid going to the coast.”

Pacific nation Palau, about 800 kilometres (500 miles) east of the Philippines, ordered the evacuation of “all areas along the coastline”.

Waves of up to four metres are expected overnight in the Marquesas Islands, French Polynesia, authorities said in a press statement.