

World News Roundup

New Zealand

Death toll hits six

Volcano keeps search parties off NZ's island

WHAKATANE, New Zealand, Dec 10, (RTRS): Fearing the volcano could erupt again, search parties were unable to set foot on New Zealand's White Island for eight people still missing on Tuesday, as police raised the death toll to six from the eruption a day earlier.

Police doubted whether any more survivors would be found. They said latest victim died in hospital, having been among more than 30 people injured in the eruption on the uninhabited island, a popular sightseeing excursion for tourists.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said reconnaissance flights showed no signs of life on the ash covered island, as eyewitnesses detailed the horrific burns suffered by those caught up in Monday's eruption.

"The scale of this tragedy is devastating," Ardern said in parliament. "To those who have lost or are missing family and friends, we share in your grief and sorrow and we are devastated."



Ardern

Police said 47 people were on White Island at the time of the eruption.

Twenty-four came from Australia, nine from the United States, five from New Zealand, four from Germany, two each from China and the Britain and one from Malaysia.

"I would strongly suggest that there is no one that has survived on the island," police Deputy Commissioner John Tims said of the eight people still missing.

Most of the injured had suffered greater than 71% body surface burns, said Peter Watson, the government's chief medical officer, warning that some might not survive.

Burns units across the South Pacific nation of 4.5 million are full to capacity, he added.

Relatives of missing tour guide Tipene Maangi held onto hopes that the 23-year-old man had survived, unsure whether he was among those in hospital.

Prayer

"We are all standing strong, standing together, holding the fort together, and like I said in prayer with faith... we are just staying strong for one another until we actually know for sure," said his aunt Ronnie.

Police said an investigation into the deaths on White Island had been launched but clarified it was not a criminal investigation.

New Zealand's geological hazards agency GeoNet raised the alert level for the volcano in November because of an increase in volcanic activity. The volcano's last fatal eruption was in 1914, when it killed 12 sulphur miners.

Yet, daily tours bring more than 10,000 visitors to the privately owned island every year, marketed as "the world's most accessible active marine volcano".

"I have to say that I'm very surprised to hear there were visitors there today, because scientists seem to have been well aware that White Island was entering a phase of heightened activity," said Drexel University volcanologist Loek Vanderkluysen.

"I've been to White Island before, but I don't think I would have been comfortable being there today."

A crater rim camera owned and operated by GeoNet showed one group of people walking away from the rim inside the crater just a minute before the explosion.

"It's now clear that there were two groups on the island - those who were able to be evacuated and those who were close to the eruption," Ardern said at a morning news conference in Whakatane, a town on the mainland's east coast, about 50 km (30 miles) from White Island.

Later, in parliament, she paid tribute to the pilots of four helicopters that landed on White Island in the aftermath of the eruption.

"In their immediate efforts to get people off the island, those pilots made an incredibly brave decision under extremely dangerous circumstances," Ardern said.

Since then, rescuers have been unable to access the island, which is covered in grey ash. GNS Science, New Zealand's geoscience agency, warned there was a 50/50 chance of another eruption in the coming 24 hours, as the volcano vent continued to emit "steam and mud jetting".

Tragic

The Buttle family have owned the island for over 80 years, and a spokesman said they were devastated by the tragic event.

"We wish to thank everyone involved in the rescue effort, including the first responders, medical personnel and the locals who helped evacuate people from the island," Peter Buttle said. "Their efforts have been both courageous and extraordinary."

Royal Caribbean confirmed several passengers on its 16-deck cruise liner, Ovation of the Seas, were on a day trip to the island but did not provide further information.

Janet Urey, 61, a nurse from Richmond, Virginia, said her son Matthew, 36, and his wife, Janet, 32, were cruise passengers injured in the eruption while on their honeymoon.

"The phone rang at midnight. Then I heard a voice-mail come on. It was my son. He said, 'Mom ... this is not a joke. A volcano erupted while we were on the island. We're at the hospital with severe burns.'" Urey said she was frustrated by the lack of information from the cruise ship he was on and from authorities.

"I have not heard a word from the cruise people," she said.

A New Zealand man, Geoff Hopkins, whose tour group was just leaving the island at the time of the eruption, said he helped pull critically injured survivors into a boat.

Hopkins, 50, who was given the tour as a birthday gift, said many of the survivors had run into the sea to escape the eruption.

"People were in shorts and T-shirts so there was a lot of exposed skin that was massively burnt," he told the NZ Herald newspaper.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said three Australians were feared to be among the confirmed fatalities, with 13 among the injured.

A website managed by the New Zealand Red Cross listed 17 Australians as missing though some could be among those in hospital.

Malaysia's high commissioner in New Zealand said one Malaysian was among the dead, while Britain's high commissioner to New Zealand confirmed two British women were among the injured.

Russell Clark, an intensive care paramedic with a helicopter team, said the early scenes were overwhelming.

"Everything was just blanketed in ash," he told Reuters. "It was quite an overwhelming feeling."

"Whakaari", as it is known in the Maori language, is New Zealand's most-active cone volcano, built up by continuous volcanic activity over the past 150,000 years, according to GeoNet.



In this Dec 9, photo provided by Michael Schade, tourists on a boat look at the eruption of the volcano on White Island, New Zealand. Officials say on Tuesday, 47 people from New Zealand, United States, Australia, Germany, Britain, China and Malaysia were on the New Zealand

volcanic island when it suddenly erupted. Of those, dozens were killed, injured or are missing. Details are scarce because conditions on the island are too dangerous for officials to return and disaster victim identification experts have only begun their work. (AP)

Britain

Chances of Labour win dismissed

PM dodges health woes

LONDON, Dec 10, (AP): British Prime Minister Boris Johnson sought Tuesday to get his campaign back to the issue of Brexit after coming under fire for his lack of empathy for looking away from an image of child sleeping on a hospital room floor while seeking treatment.

The story of 4-year-old Jack has overshadowed campaigning for Thursday's general election as Johnson and his Conservatives hunted for crucial votes.

The opposition Labour Party has painted Jack's plight - no available hospital bed for a sick child - as a symptom of Britain's ailing health system, which has suffered under years of Conservative government austerity measures.

The parties sought to return to key messages on the campaign trail, with Johnson's Conservative Party concentrating on the risks of having a divided Parliament and endangering his plan to have Britain leave the European Union on Jan 31. Labour kept up its relentless focus on problems with the beloved National Health Service.

All 650 seats in the House of Commons seats are up for grabs in this election, which is also expected to break Britain's political impasse over Brexit and determine its future relationship with the EU.

Johnson's clumsy reaction to Jack's plight merely gave it more attention Monday. A video of the prime minister briefly declining to look at a cellphone photo of Jack and then placing the phone in his pocket has been viewed more than a million times.

In the clip of the interview, ITV reporter Joe Pike said to Johnson: "You refuse to look at the photo. You've taken my phone and put it in your pocket, prime minister."

Johnson then removed the phone from his pocket and looked at the screen.

Apologize

"It's a terrible, terrible photo. And I apologize obviously to the families and all those who have terrible experiences in the NHS," he said.

Meanwhile, a senior member of Britain's opposition Labour Party has dismissed the chances of the party winning power in Thursday's general election, speaking in a private conversation leaked to the Guido Fawkes news website. The Labour Party are trailing Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative Party in opinion polls ahead of the election which will decide the fate of Brexit and the ideology that underpins the world's fifth-largest economy.

Labour's health spokesman Jon Ashworth said in the recordings that the situation in seats outside cities was "abysmal", blaming the party's Brexit policy and voters' perception of leader Jeremy Corbyn.

"I just can't see it happening," Ashworth said, when asked how to prepare for Corbyn becoming prime minister. The recording appears to have been made before last week's visit by US President Donald Trump. "Outside of the city seats, if you're in small-town Midlands and

the North, it's abysmal out there.

They don't like Johnson, but they can't stand Corbyn and they think Labour's blocked Brexit. Guido Fawkes is a website critical of Corbyn which says its aim is to campaign against political sleaze, corruption and hypocrisy. Ashworth did not contest the contents of the recording but responded by saying the conversation was "banter" with an old friend who worked as an activist for the Conservative Party.

"We're going to win this general election," he said in a BBC interview.

"I was having a bit of banter with a Tory (Conservative) friend of mine - at least I thought he was a friend."

Manifesto

Britain's Labour Party cautioned smaller parties not to stop it implementing its radical manifesto, including nationalisation, if it forms a minority government after Thursday's election, telling opponents they would get "shredded" if they do. Britain votes on Thursday in an election which will decide the fate of Brexit and the world's fifth-largest economy with a stark choice between Prime Minister Boris Johnson's pro-market Conservatives and the socialist-led opposition Labour Party.

Johnson is forecast to win a majority at the election, but he could yet fall short of the 320 to 326 seats he needs. If Johnson fails, Labour could get a shot at forming a government propped up by smaller parties. "If we are a minority government we'll implement our programme," John McDonnell, the party's second most powerful man behind leader Jeremy Corbyn, told Reuters. "I just warn the other political parties, we'll implement a programme that has overwhelming popular support."

If they want to press for a second election, we're happy to have that. "Labour wants to hold a second referendum on Brexit next year after negotiating a new exit deal. McDonnell predicted Labour will form the next government even though they are behind in every opinion poll.

He said polling companies were making the same mistakes they did at a 2017 election, when Labour outperformed expectations and deprived the Conservatives of a majority.

"People need to wake up to the subterranean move that is happening now where people don't trust this prime minister, see the Conservative manifesto is one without any hope whatsoever and are looking for real change, and that's what we're providing," he said.

Labour is proposing a radical shift in Britain's economy. It wants more public spending paid for by higher taxes on companies and the wealthy, hundreds of billions of pounds of infrastructure investment funded through borrowing, and a large-scale programme of nationalisation.

"It does sound radical," McDonnell said. "It sounds more radical in the UK than in other countries because we've been held back by this neo-liberal thinking for so long, particularly the 10 years of austerity which narrowed people's horizons.

about solidarity."

The unions urged rail workers, doctors, teachers and other public workers to turn the screws on Macron before his government unveils the details of its proposal on Wednesday.

In Bordeaux and Marseille, thousands of protesters waved union flags and held up banners reading: "We have to get rid of Macron". Demonstrations are also taking place in Rennes, Lyon, Nantes and Paris. In the capital, riot police fanned out along the Champs Elysees boulevard in central Paris and barricaded streets leading to the offices of Macron and his prime minister. The days ahead will test whether Macron can deliver the social and economic change he says is necessary for France to compete with powers like China and the United States. (RTRS)



In this May 1, 2010 file photo, Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov waves as United Russia party and government-linked trade unions take to the streets to mark May Day in Moscow. The former mayor of Moscow and one of the founders of Russia's ruling United Russia party, Yuri Luzhkov, has died at the age of 83. Russia's Ren TV channel reported on Dec 10, that Luzhkov died in Munich, where he was undergoing heart surgery. (AP)

Europe

Finland picks youngest PM: Finland's parliament chose **Sanna Marin** as the country's new prime minister Tuesday, making the 34-year-old the world's youngest sitting head of government.

Marin is heading a five-party, center-left coalition. The four other parties in the coalition are headed by women - three of whom are in their early 30s.

The Nordic country's Parliament, the 200-seat Eduskunta approved Marin in a 99-70 vote. The government has a comfortable majority of 117 seats.

President Sauli Niinisto will formally hand Marin her mandate later Tuesday, after which she will officially become prime minister.

The appointment of Marin and her new government on Tuesday allows Marin to represent Finland at the European Union summit in Brussels later this week. Finland currently holds the bloc's rotating presidency until the end of the year.

Having emerged as Finland's largest party in the April election, the Social Democrats were able to appoint one of their own to the post of prime minister in the Nordic nation of 5.5 million people.

The coalition of the Social Democrats, the Center Party and three junior partners has said they are committed to the government program agreed upon after the April election and will continue in Marin's new Cabinet.

Marin who was the No. 2 in the Social Democratic Party, takes over from incumbent Antti Rinne, who stepped down a week ago after a key coalition partner, the Center Party, withdrew its support, citing lack of trust.

Rinne has said he plans to continue as party leader until a party congress next summer. (AP)

Spain's king meets party leaders: Spain's King Felipe VI has begun meeting party political leaders in the hope he can choose one that will be able to form a government following last month's inconclusive elections.

The king began the talks Tuesday with smaller parties and will meet the main party leaders Wednesday, finishing with incumbent Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez.

Sánchez's Socialist party is best-positioned, having won the most seats - 120 - in the election. They have a deal with the left-wing United We Can party, which won 35, but are still way off securing a majority in the 350-seat chamber. The Socialists are now trying to secure the abstention of the 13-seat secessionist Catalan Republican Left party. This has fueled charges from right-wing rivals that Sánchez is doing deals with those who want to break up Spain and has raised fears of an unstable government and possibly fresh elections. (AP)

6th day of French strikes: Public sector workers marched peacefully through cities across France on Tuesday, heeding a call by trade unions to stage one of the biggest protests in decades in a revolt against President Emmanuel Macron's pension reform.

Commuters grappled with widespread transport chaos on a sixth day of strikes that unions said forced dozens of schools to close in Paris, airlines to cancel 20% of flights and refineries to halt distribution.

The unions show no sign of backing down in a battle that could define the presidency of former investment banker Macron, who is determined to simplify a system of more than 40 pension plans that provide some of the world's most generous benefits.



Marin



Macron

Asia

Moon to visit China: South Korean President Moon Jae-in will visit China next week for a trilateral summit with Japan amid rising tension over stalled denuclearisation talks between North Korea and the United States, Moon's office said on Tuesday.

Moon is scheduled to arrive in China on Dec 23, one day before the planned trilateral meeting in the southwestern city of Chengdu with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, his spokeswoman Ko Min-jung told a briefing.

The leaders would review the recent situation on the peninsula and discuss ways to boost three-way cooperation to achieve denuclearisation and permanent peace, Ko said.

Moon is also expected to hold separate talks with Abe and also Chinese President Xi Jinping during that trip. The meeting comes amid a war of words that has rekindled in recent days between North Korea and the United States ahead of a year-end deadline set by Pyongyang for Washington to soften its stance in negotiations.

North Korea has also conducted a series of weapons tests, including what it called a "very significant" test at its missile launch site on Sunday.

Moon would seek to consult Xi on the recent developments as South Korea sees China as instrumental in reviving the nuclear talks due to its status as a longtime ally of North Korea, officials in Seoul said.

"We're watching very carefully various related circumstances that are happening between North Korea and the United States, and we're very cautious to forejudge anything and predict the future," an official at Moon's office told reporters. (RTRS)

Japan ex-defence minister shot: A former Japanese defence minister has been shot in the leg near his home in northern Japan, Sankei newspaper reported on Tuesday citing police sources.

Tokuichiro Tamazawa, who is 81 years old, served as defence minister in the government of Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama. His injuries are not life-threatening, Sankei said.

A man thought to be aged in his eighties has been apprehended, national broadcaster NHK said.

A police spokesman said he could not immediately comment. (RTRS)

Duterte to end martial law: President Rodrigo Duterte has decided to end more than two years of martial law in the southern Philippines after government forces weakened Islamic militant groups there with the capture and killing of their leaders, his spokesman said Tuesday.

Duterte placed the Mindanao region under martial law after hundreds of local militants aligned with the Islamic State group and backed by foreign fighters occupied buildings, a commercial district and communities in Marawi city starting May 23, 2017, in the worst security crisis Duterte has faced. (AP)

Subcontinent

US panel eyes sanctions: A federal panel on religion has urged the United States to weigh sanctions against India's Home Minister Amit Shah if the south Asian nation adopts legislation to exclude Muslims from a path to citizenship for religious minorities from its neighbours.

Shah is a close associate of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose Hindu nationalist-led government is seen by critics as pushing an agenda that undermines the secular foundations of India's democracy.

On Tuesday, parliament's lower house approved the measure covering citizenship for non-Muslim minorities, specifically Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jains, Parsis and Sikhs, who fled Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan in 2015.

The bill has prompted criticism at home and abroad, as it marks the first time India is weighing religion in granting citizenship, although it must first pass the upper house of parliament, where Modi's party lacks a majority.

The measure goes against India's constitution, which guarantees legal equality to people of all faiths, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom said.

"If the CAB passes in both houses of parliament, the United States government should consider sanctions against the Home Minister and other principal leadership," the panel said in a statement, referring to the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB).

The panel is a bipartisan body that makes foreign policy recommendations to the US leadership.

India's foreign ministry called the panel's statement inaccurate, saying the bill sought to help persecuted religious minorities already in the country. (RTRS)

US misled public - report: The US government across three White House administrations misled the public about failures in the Afghanistan war, often suggesting success where it didn't exist, according to thousands of pages of documents obtained by The Washington Post.

The documents reveal deep frustrations about America's conduct of the Afghanistan war, including the ever-changing US strategy, the struggles to develop an effective Afghan fighting force and persistent failures to defeat the Taliban and combat corruption throughout the government.

"We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan - we didn't know what we were doing," Douglas Lute, a three-star Army general who served as the White House's Afghan war czar during the Bush and Obama administrations, told government interviewers in 2015.

The interviews were conducted as part of a "Lessons Learned" project by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction over the past several years. SIGAR has produced seven reports so far from the more than 400 interviews, and several more are in the works. The Post sought and received raw interview data through the Freedom of Information Act and lawsuits. (AP)