UN condemns HK violence

The United Nations’ top human rights official has condemned violence in Hong Kong’s pro-democracy protests and called on the authorities and protesters to solve their dispute peacefully. A spokesman for UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said she was concerned by the recent “escalation of violence”.

Origins of black squirrels

It may sound a bit nuts but black squirrels are the result of the grey squirrel interbreeding, a study suggests. The two squirrels are the same species, with the only difference being their fur colour. Now research published in the journal BMC Evolutionary Biology has shed new light on why some grey squirrels are black.

Brexit legal challenge fast-tracked

Boris Johnson’s Brexit plans could be blown off course early next month after a judge agreed to fast-track a hearing on whether the Prime Minister can legally suspend Parliament to force through a no-deal exit. Anti-Brexit campaigners – including more than 70 MPs and peers – filed a petition at the Court of Session in Edinburgh to attempt to stop Johnson from being able to prorogue Parliament.

‘No guarantee’ on jobs after Brexit

There are “no guarantees” that people will not lose their jobs following a no-deal Brexit, Amber Rudd has admitted. The Work and Pensions Secretary said there are “no guarantees about jobs, in or out, under any economic circumstances”, and said a no-deal Brexit would be “far worse than a deal Brexit”.

Police inflatable stops disaster

A maritime police officer has described the battle as he stopped a 200-tonne ferry from slamming into an Auckland wharf, with a 12-metre inflatable boat. The Great Barrier Island car ferry was thrown off its mooring in Wynyard Quarter last night during what onlookers have described as a tornado.
Trump to promote plastics

Trying to hold support in the manufacturing towns that helped him win the White House in 2016, President Donald Trump is showcasing growing efforts to capitalise on western Pennsylvania’s natural gas deposits by turning gas into plastics. Trump will be in Monaca, about 40 minutes north of Pittsburgh, to tour Shell’s soon-to-be completed Pennsylvania Petrochemicals Complex.

Shootout kills US officer

A man whose pickup truck was being impounded grabbed a rifle and opened fire, killing a California Highway Patrol officer and wounding two others before he was shot to death in gunfire, authorities said. “We don’t know his motive for this crime,” Riverside Police Chief Sergio Diaz said. The shooter opened fire after a CHP officer pulled over a white GMC pickup truck and decided to impound it.

Fire burns through Greek forest

More than 180 firefighters backed by water-dropping aircraft were battling a wildfire on an island north of Athens that left the Greek capital blanketed in smoke. The blaze on the island of Evia was burning through a nature reserve in a thick pine forest where access by land was difficult.

Mayor candidates in debate

The Auckland mayoral race heated up last night with the third-ranked candidate pulling out and offering John Tamihere an easier path to the Town Hall. In what’s now essentially a two-horse race, Tamihere presented himself as an agent for change, and Mayor Phil Goff as a status quo bureaucrat beholden to Wellington.
It may sound a bit nuts but black squirrels are the result of the grey squirrel interbreeding, a study suggests.

The two squirrels are the same species, with the only difference being their fur colour.

Now research published in the journal BMC Evolutionary Biology has shed new light on why some grey squirrels are black.

In 2014, Dr Helen McRobie, of Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), found that the black fur is caused by the grey squirrel having a pigment gene with a missing piece of DNA.

The new study has revealed that the faulty gene is identical to one found in the closely-related fox squirrel – a species native to North America.

Dr McRobie, senior lecturer in biomedical science, said:

“Squirrels take part in ‘mating chases’, where a female squirrel is pursued by lots of male squirrels and eventually one male mates with the female.

“People have spotted ‘mixed species’ mating chases, with a mix of grey and fox squirrels pursuing a female.

“The most likely explanation for the black version of the gene being found in the grey squirrel is that a male black fox squirrel mated with a female grey squirrel.

“The fact black grey squirrels have become so common right across North America is possibly because black fur offers a thermal advantage, helping them inhabit regions with extremely cold winters.

“This may have contributed to the expansion of the grey squirrel’s range during the past 11,000 years, following the end of the most recent Ice Age, helping them spread further north into Canada.”
Brexit legal challenge fast-tracked

Boris Johnson’s Brexit plans could be blown off course early next month after a judge agreed to fast-track a hearing on whether the Prime Minister can legally suspend Parliament to force through a no-deal exit.

Anti-Brexit campaigners – including more than 70 MPs and peers – filed a petition at the Court of Session in Edinburgh to attempt to stop Johnson from being able to prorogue Parliament.

Judge Lord Raymond Doherty agreed to expedite the timetable for the legal challenge to take place, setting the date for the substantive hearing as Friday September 6 – in what is shaping up to be a tumultuous week in Westminster.

The following day, the Government will provide a progress report on power-sharing in Northern Ireland, which will be debated within five days.

A Government source said Downing Street anticipated that Monday September 9 – when MPs are likely to discuss the report in the Commons – could be the first major legislative showdown over a no-deal Brexit.

Some insiders speculate that the European Union is watching and waiting to see the outcome of any bids to prevent a no-deal Brexit in the Commons before it considers making amendments to the beleaguered Withdrawal Agreement.

Downing Street reiterated that Johnson remains “very clear in his determination to want to get a deal” and said he will hold talks with EU leaders over the phone in the coming days.

It comes after Donald Trump’s national security adviser said the UK would be “first in line” for a trade deal with the US, possibly on a gradual “sector-by-sector” basis, after Brexit.

‘No guarantee’ on jobs after Brexit

There are “no guarantees” that people will not lose their jobs following a no-deal Brexit, Amber Rudd has admitted.

The Work and Pensions Secretary said there are “no guarantees about jobs, in or out, under any economic circumstances”, and said a no-deal Brexit would be “far worse than a deal Brexit”.

Rudd said the Government is focused on getting a deal, but that they have to be prepared should a no-deal situation arise on October 31.

Rudd said: “A no-deal Brexit is definitely going to be a challenge for the economy, which is why the Government is putting together so much preparation should it come to that, and we are very clearly focused as a Government that we want to get a deal.”

Asked about previous comments she made in which she said a no-deal Brexit would cause “generational damage to the economy”, she said: “I can tell that a no-deal Brexit would be far worse than a deal Brexit, which is why the Government is so focused on trying to get that.

“But we are also putting in place a lot of preparation to make sure that, should it come to that, we will have done all we can to mitigate against any difficulties.”

Asked if she could guarantee that no-one would lose their jobs as a result of a no-deal Brexit, Rudd said: “Listen, there are no guarantees about jobs, in or out, under any economic circumstances.

“What Government has to do is to make it as straightforward and as conducive to good employment arena as possible, and that is what, the statistics show today, we have been able to do.”

Frank analysis
AUSTRALIA

Worry over China bid for health group

A Chinese company's intention to buy an Australian medical centre giant with links to the defence force is on the Morrison government’s radar.

Jangho Group is hoping to one day buy pathology and radiology business Healius, which provides medical imaging services to the Australian Defence Force.

The Chinese-based company already has a 15.9 per cent stake in Healius and tried to buy the remainder of the operation for $2 billion in January.

The takeover bid was unsuccessful, but Jangho Group told the Hong Kong stock exchange it “intends to acquire Healius in the future”.

Asked about the issue, Prime Minister Scott Morrison stressed the decision would be considered by the Foreign Investment Review Board to ensure it’s in Australia’s “national interest”.

“The treasurer and our foreign investment laws only allow foreign investments where we don’t think it’s contrary to the national interest,” he said.

“So you can expect those conditions, those analyses to be done on any such investments to ensure that Australia’s national interest is always first and foremost in any decisions that are taken.”

Defence Minister Linda Reynolds said that the government is “aware of the issue”, stressing the government would protect the health records of defence personnel.

“The security of their health records is paramount,” she said.

NEW ZEALAND

Police inflatable stops a boating disaster

A maritime police officer has described the battle as he stopped a 200-tonne ferry from slamming into an Auckland wharf, with a 12-metre inflatable boat.

The Great Barrier Island car ferry was thrown off its mooring in Wynyard Quarter last night during what onlookers have described as a tornado.

A police coastal master, John Burridge, says he was helping people injured by flying furniture at a restaurant, when he looked up to see the looming ferry.

It was about 50m from Captain Cook wharf when he and colleague Kevin Stone attached a tow-line from their rigid inflatable boat (RIB) and pulled it slowly into the middle of the harbour.

“It was a very surreal moment, I was standing on the wharf initially when I saw it, and moving quite quickly with the wind down the harbour,” he said.

“And when our RIB turned up and we got on board, there was only two of us on our 12m RIB. It’s got twin 225 outboard [motors] on the back.

“I must admit, when we got alongside it, it's rather large and it's rather heavy and it was blowing a lot. We were just like, oh well I hope we can do this and we managed to stop it so that was great.

“We were really worried that if it had hit the wharf, a) it would have damaged the wharf, damaged the ferry, but it also could have spilled diesel and oils, could have ruptured tanks and put more fuel into the harbour, so we were trying to stop any environmental hazard.”

He and his colleagues held the boat for 35 minutes until Coastguard volunteers and tugs from the Ports of Auckland arrived to help guide it back to the ferry terminal.

Burridge, Stone and fellow officer Charlie Fowler then helped stricken vessels, which included two utes, yachts and a catamaran, and removed debris.
Shootout kills patrol officer, gunman

A man whose pickup truck was being impounded grabbed a rifle and opened fire, killing a California Highway Patrol officer and wounding two others before he was shot to death in gunfire, authorities said.

“We don't know his motive for this crime,” Riverside Police Chief Sergio Diaz said.

The shooter opened fire after a CHP officer pulled over a white GMC pickup truck and decided to impound it.

“He called for a tow truck and was filling out the necessary paperwork when the driver pulled a rifle from the truck and opened fire, said Scott Parker, assistant chief at the CHP’s Inland Division.

The officer called for help and three other CHP officers arrived, who immediately faced gunfire and two were hit, Parker said.

A Riverside police officer and three Riverside County sheriff’s deputies also arrived and traded shots with the man before killing him at the scene, Diaz said.

Parker said the first CHP officer who was wounded was taken by helicopter to a hospital, where he was pronounced dead. Another officer was hospitalised in critical condition and the third had minor injuries.

Authorities didn’t immediately release the names of the slain CHP officer or the gunman.

However, family members identified the officer as 33-year-old Andre Moye, Jr., who was married and had been with the CHP about four years, KABC-TV reported.

Police earlier had said at least one civilian had been slightly injured by flying glass.

Parker said two civilians received superficial injuries and “they’re going to be OK”.

Trump due to promote turning gas to plastics

Trying to hold support in the manufacturing towns that helped him win the White House in 2016, President Donald Trump is showcasing growing efforts to capitalise on western Pennsylvania’s natural gas deposits by turning gas into plastics.

Trump will be in Monaca, about 40 minutes north of Pittsburgh, to tour Shell’s soon-to-be completed Pennsylvania Petrochemicals Complex.

The facility, which critics claim will become the largest air polluter in western Pennsylvania, is being built in an area hungry for investment.

The focus is part of a continued push by the Trump administration to increase the economy’s dependence on fossil fuels in defiance of increasingly urgent warnings about climate change.

And it’s an embrace of plastic at a time when the world is sounding alarms over its ubiquity and impact.

Trump’s appeals to blue-collar workers helped him win Beaver County, where the plant is located, by more than 18 percentage points in 2016, only to have voters turn to Democrats in 2018’s midterm elections.

In one of a series of defeats that led to Republicans’ loss of the House, voters sent Democrat Conor Lamb to Congress after the prosperity promised by Trump’s tax cuts failed to materialise.

Today, Beaver County is still struggling to recover from the shuttering of steel plants in the 1980s that surged the unemployment rate to nearly 30 per cent.

The region’s natural gas deposits had been seen, for a time, as its new road to prosperity, with drilling in the Marcellus Shale reservoir transforming Pennsylvania into the nation’s No. 2 natural gas state.

But drops in the price of oil and gas caused the initial jobs boom from fracking to fizzle, leading companies like Shell to turn instead to plastics and so-called cracker plants.
Italy's political parties
pitch for allies

Italy's political leaders are scrambling to line up allies ahead of a no-confidence vote against Premier Giuseppe Conte's 14-month-old populist coalition that could trigger the government's collapse.

The Senate meets tonight to schedule the no-confidence vote. Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, who heads the anti-migrant, Euro-skeptic League, wants to topple the government in a bid for early elections he hopes will elevate him to premier.

Conte must resign if the no-confidence vote goes against him.

The 5-Star Movement, who are senior coalition partners, is weighing whether to ally with opposition Democrats for an alternative transition government.

Democrat Matteo Renzi, a former premier, says such a deal would let Italy make crucial budget cuts in line with European Union rules before year's end.

Wildfire burns through Greek nature reserve

More than 180 firefighters backed by water-dropping aircraft were battling a wildfire on an island north of Athens that left the Greek capital blanketed in smoke.

The blaze on the island of Evia was burning through a nature reserve in a thick pine forest where access by land was difficult.

The fire department sent reinforcements to the area, bringing the total number of firefighters to 189. Six water-dropping planes and five helicopters were deployed. The inhabitants of three villages were put on alert for potential evacuation if the fire approached.

Dozens more firefighters were tackling a forest fire on the northern island of Thassos, where 46 firefighters, two planes and a helicopter were deployed. A third wildfire was burning through brush and dried weeds near Thebes, north-west of Athens.

Greece's civil protection authority warned those in areas affected by the smoke, particularly the elderly and very young and those suffering from breathing or heart conditions, to remain indoors and set air-conditioning units to recycle internal air.

Forest fires are common in Greece during the hot, dry summer months. Authorities have repeatedly warned the public not to carry out any outdoor activities that could cause fires, such as welding work, burning dried weeds or lighting campfires and barbecues. Parks and forest areas have been closed to the public at times of high fire risk.

Last year, more than 100 people died when a fast-moving forest fire broke out in a seaside area north-east of Athens and raged through a nearby settlement of mainly holiday homes.
Mayor candidates go head-to-head in debate

The Auckland mayoral race heated up last night with the third-ranked candidate pulling out and offering John Tamihere an easier path to the Town Hall.

In what's now essentially a two-horse race, Tamihere presented himself as an agent for change, and Mayor Phil Goff as a status quo bureaucrat beholden to Wellington.

For his part, Goff painted himself as the candidate for integrity, reliability and honesty, while attacking Tamihere for being what he called a “failed cabinet minister”.

It didn’t take long for the Newmarket Business Association debate to hot up, when three-time mayoral hopeful John Palino pulled the plug on his campaign.

“I’m withdrawing from the mayoral contest, because I want to give John Tamihere the best possible chance of providing Auckland with the strongest leadership it badly needs,” he said.

That left the two front-runners to go head-to-head on some of the big issues affecting Aucklanders – and to throw a few punches at their opponents.

Tamihere compared the mayor to the much-maligned former UK Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain.

“A great guy that came back from Berlin after seeing Hitler with ‘Peace in our times’, he [Goff] comes back from Wellington – ‘Hey, what a deal I’ve got for you Aucklanders – 11-and-a-half cents a litre, on top of gas!’ And like that, the Germans invaded Poland yesterday,” Tamihere said.

Goff countered by playing up his political experience.

“We [could] not raise the rates, we could not do the regional fuel tax,” he said.

“But I’m telling you where the money is going to come from. I’ve had enough experience in government – 15 years as a minister – to know how to get that money. I’ve had enough experience to know how you can get it, and I’ll tell you what your approach will fail, just as you failed as a cabinet minister.”

Tax rebates fail to boost retailers

Post-election tax rebates and a second cut to the cash rate failed to boost business confidence in July, a closely-watched survey of business shows.

The National Australia Bank’s index of business conditions, a monthly survey of about 400 companies, was broadly unchanged from June and remained significantly below average.

Business confidence rose by two points to +4 index points, while business conditions fell by two points to +2.

“Broadly the picture from the business survey is unchanged from last month – the key message being that the business sector has lost significant momentum since early 2018 and that forward looking indicators do not point to an improvement in the near term,” the NAB report said.

Weakness in the retail sector, already at recessionary levels, declined further in the month, with retail sales volumes at its lowest rate since the 1990s recession.

“A worrying result, given we expected some boost to the industry following the post-election tax cuts,” NAB said.

The weakness in the retail sector appears to be broad-based, and most pronounced in the car sector, followed by food and household goods.

Construction and wholesale industries also experienced sharp declines in the month, while mining, transport and utilities and finance did better.

Business conditions fell in all states except Western Australia, which saw a spike.

Overall it appears that the lift in business confidence following the federal election in May has faded.

“It appears that both the cut to interest rates and boosts to tax rebates is yet to feed into the business sector and that the weakness in Q2 has persisted into Q3,” the report said.

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