

USA**Crews battle to tame wildfire**

Crews scrambled to protect homes from a huge wildfire that prompted evacuations north of Los Angeles, and officials warned the blaze could flare up again as a blistering heatwave descended on California. The fire exploded in size within hours after it broke out in dense forest on Wednesday, sending up a towering plume visible for hundreds of miles around. Flames raced across ridges and steep slopes, including in some areas that had not burned since 1968.

UK**Rush to beat France quarantine**

British tourists in France are being charged hundreds of pounds to return home before quarantine restrictions are imposed. Airfares were more than six times higher than normal for flights from Paris to London on Friday, with the cheapest British Airways tickets being sold for £452. The lowest priced Eurostar tickets available on Friday morning were £210. Travellers willing to pay these inflated fares could still miss out due to many services already being fully booked.

AUSTRALIA**Youngest Aussie dies of Covid**

Victoria has passed the peak of its second coronavirus wave but authorities remain concerned more aged care residents will die. A man in his 20s became Australia's youngest Covid-19 fatality as the state recorded 14 more deaths and 372 new infections. Premier Daniel Andrews said it still wasn't known whether the man in his 20s died from the virus or with it. The premier added the man was not living at a disability facility.

USA**Trump, Biden bicker over virus**

President Donald Trump has criticized Joe Biden for calling on governors to mandate that all Americans wear masks for the next three months, accusing the Democratic presidential candidate of politicizing the issue. Trump said Biden has been wrong about the coronavirus pandemic at every turn, "ignoring the scientific evidence and putting left-wing politics before facts and evidence."

UK**New fines for mask refusers**

Fines for repeatedly refusing to wear a mask could soar to £3200 and organisers of illegal raves could face a £10,000 penalty, Boris Johnson has announced ahead of further easing of England's lockdown. At present, people who refuse to wear a face covering where it is required face a £100 fine, which can be reduced to £50 if paid within 14 days. Under the new measures, that penalty will double for subsequent offences, up to a maximum of £3200.

AUSTRALIA**Ruby Princess mistakes laid bare**

When Covid-infected passengers were allowed to disembark the now-infamous Ruby Princess cruise ship in Sydney the errors were inexcusable and inexplicable and the results deadly. A special commission of inquiry into the ship's arrival in Sydney on March 19 has determined authorities made a litany of mistakes when contagious travellers alighted at Circular Quay, spreading the virus across Australia and overseas.

REST OF THE WORLD



Anger at UAE-Israel deal

Iran and Turkey have lashed out at their regional rival the United Arab Emirates over its decision to normalise diplomatic relations with Israel in a US-brokered deal, accusing it of betraying the Palestinian cause. Iran's Foreign Ministry called the deal a "dagger that was unjustly struck by the UAE in the backs of the Palestinian people and all Muslims." Turkey said the peoples of the region "will never forget and will never forgive this hypocritical behaviour" by the UAE.

EUROPE



'Nobody could hear us scream'

One of the two young women found clinging to lobster pots after 15 hours at sea in Ireland has said nobody could hear their screams for help. Cousins Sara Feeney, 23, and Ellen Glynn, 17, were reported missing on Wednesday evening. They were found on Thursday clinging to lobster pots, 27km from where they had initially set off paddleboarding on Furbo beach, by local fisherman Patrick Oliver and his son Morgan.

NEW ZEALAND



Auckland lockdown extended

Auckland will remain in alert level three for a full two weeks, with the government announcing that the country will remain at current Covid-19 alert levels for 12 more days. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Director General of Health Ashley Bloomfield announced the decision, saying Cabinet had unanimously decided today that the country would remain at the current alert levels. She said the settings would be reviewed on 21 August.

REST OF THE WORLD



Blast victims plead for inquiry

Lebanon's judicial investigation of the Beirut port explosion has started with political wrangling over the naming of a lead investigator, military threats to jail leakers and doubts over whether a panel appointed along sectarian lines could be fully impartial. So for many Lebanese, their greatest hope for credible answers about the blast may lie with outsiders. Families of the dead and survivors have asked the UN Security Council for an international investigation.

EUROPE



Belarus frees protesters

Belarusian authorities have released about 1000 people detained amid demonstrations contesting the results of the presidential election, in an attempt to assuage public anger against a brutal crackdown on peaceful protests and avoid Western sanctions. Crowds of demonstrators have swarmed the streets daily to contest the official results of Sunday's vote that showed authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko extending his 26-year rule.

NEW ZEALAND



Concern over crowded test clinic

A woman tested at an Auckland pop-up clinic had to queue in a tent with other symptomatic people – with little social distancing and hardly anyone wearing a mask. Auckland hit a record number of tests on Wednesday – 7800, with people queuing for hours. Yesterday was also set to be big once numbers were tallied. The woman had her test at the Otara Pop-up clinic. After waiting in her car for three hours, she was surprised to be ushered into an open-ended tent.



A firefighter watches as a helicopter drops water on the Lake Hughes fire in Angeles National Forest, north of Santa Clarita, California. – AP

USA

Crews battle to tame California wildfire

Crews scrambled to protect homes from a huge wildfire that prompted evacuations north of Los Angeles, and officials warned the blaze could flare up again as a blistering heatwave descended on California.

The fire exploded in size within hours after it broke out in dense forest on Wednesday afternoon (US time), sending up a towering plume visible for hundreds of miles around.

Flames raced across ridges and steep slopes, including in some areas that had not burned since 1968, fire officials said. By Thursday morning, the blaze had consumed nearly 16.5 square miles (42 square km) of timber and brush. There was no containment.

Light winds and scattered thundershowers early in the day helped firefighters tame the flames somewhat. But as the cloud cover cleared and temperatures spiked, officials prepared for a repeat of the ferocious fire activity seen a day earlier.

"This will be a major fire for several days," said Chief Robert Garcia with the US Forest Service.

About 100 rural homes were evacuated in the Lake Hughes area of the Angeles National Forest, some 60 miles (97km) north of downtown Los Angeles.

Preliminary damage assessments found that at least three structures burned, but authorities warned the toll would likely be higher.

Kenny Reynolds lost his home.

The fire came down the hill and across the street, "engulfing on both sides," he said.

Reynolds and others retreated "and then it just kind of rolled in," he said. "It was taking everything as it kind of went down."

Evacuation centres were designated for residents and animals, but because of Covid-19 concerns, people were told to stay in their cars in the parking lots.

The cause of the blaze, dubbed the Lake Fire, is under investigation. It's one of several wildfires burning in the region. ■



Democratic presidential candidate former Vice President Joe Biden. – AP

USA

Trump, Biden bicker over virus response

President Donald Trump has criticised Joe Biden for calling on governors to mandate that all Americans wear masks for the next three months, accusing the Democratic presidential candidate of politicizing the issue.

Trump said Biden has been wrong about the coronavirus pandemic at every turn, "ignoring the scientific evidence and putting left-wing politics before facts and evidence." Trump went on to say that Biden was advocating for the president to use executive power to institute a nationwide mask mandate and that Biden was in favor of "locking all Americans in their basements for months on end."

"To Joe, I would say stop playing politics with the virus," Trump said at the White House press briefing.

Biden did not call for an executive order, but did at an earlier campaign event call for the institution of "a mask mandate nationwide, starting immediately." Biden clarified, however, that it should be left up to the governors to make mask-wearing mandatory. He said nothing about keeping Americans indoors, but has argued that economic reopenings in states have been rushed and without proper guidance.

Trump first wore a mask in public about a month ago, during a visit to a military hospital, and has since expressed support for them at times.

Biden, at his earlier event, said all Americans should wear masks, citing health experts' predictions that it could save 40,000 lives from the coronavirus over the next three months. The Democratic presidential candidate also responded to those who push back against such mandates.

"This is America. Be a patriot. Protect your fellow citizens."

The back-and-forth marked a new line of attack from Trump, who is trailing Biden significantly in most nationwide and swing-state surveys. Biden has made what he says is Trump's mishandling of the pandemic — which has now caused the deaths of 167,000 Americans — a centerpiece of his attacks on the president. ■



Passengers at Nice airport line up to check in to a flight to the UK. – AP

UK

Brits rush to beat France quarantine

British tourists in France are being charged hundreds of pounds to return home before quarantine restrictions are imposed.

Air fares were more than six times higher than normal for flights from Paris to London on Friday, with the cheapest British Airways tickets being sold for £452.

The lowest priced Eurostar tickets available on Friday morning were £210.

Travellers willing to pay these inflated fares could still miss out due to many services already being fully booked.

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps insisted the government had taken “a practical approach” to the new restrictions.

It was announced on Thursday night that people arriving in the UK from France after 4am on Saturday would be required to spend 14 days in self-isolation due to rising numbers of coronavirus cases there.

The quarantine conditions will also apply to travellers returning from the Netherlands, Monaco, Malta, Turks & Caicos and Aruba.

Shapps said an estimated 160,000 holidaymakers were expected to try to return to the UK from France on Friday.

The move, which applies throughout the UK, came after Prime Minister Boris Johnson promised to be “absolutely ruthless” in decisions about imposing quarantine restrictions on countries.

The Joint Biosecurity Centre and Public Health England detected a significant change in Covid-19 risk in all six destinations. Department for Transport officials said that data from France showed that over the past week there had been a 66 per cent increase in newly reported cases and a 52 per cent increase in weekly incidence rate per 100,000 population, indicating a sharp rise in Covid-19.

The latest 14-day cumulative figures from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control showed 32.1 Covid-19 cases per 100,000 people in France, compared with 18.5 in the UK. ■



– PA

UK

New powers to tackle mask refusers

Fines for repeatedly refusing to wear a mask could soar to £3200 and organisers of illegal raves could face a £10,000 penalty, Boris Johnson has announced ahead of further easing of England's lockdown.

At present, people who refuse to wear a face covering where it is required face a £100 fine, which can be reduced to £50 if paid within 14 days.

Under the new measures, that penalty will double for subsequent offences, up to a maximum of £3200.

In England face coverings are mandatory in settings including public transport, shops and museums, with some exemptions for children or on medical grounds.

A clampdown on illegal gatherings of more than 30 people could see those responsible hit with spot fines of up to £10,000, a No.10 source indicated.

Police chiefs have promised increased patrols to prevent unlicensed events following a spate of parties during the heatwave.

The tougher enforcement measures came as the Prime Minister confirmed plans to open up more of the economy from Saturday, potentially adding to the risk of spreading coronavirus.

The moves were postponed from August 1 due to concerns about a slight increase in the number of people in England testing positive but that appeared to have levelled off.

From August 15: indoor theatre, music and performance venues will be able to reopen with socially distanced audiences; the piloting of spectators at sporting events will resume, with a limited number of fans expected to be allowed to watch the World Snooker Championship at Sheffield's Crucible Theatre over the weekend; casinos, bowling alleys, skating rinks and soft play centres will be allowed to reopen; “close contact” beauty services such as facials, eyebrow threading and eyelash treatments will resume; wedding receptions for up to 30 guests will be permitted and pilots will take place at conference venues ahead of the expected resumption of business events. ■



A healthcare worker is seen outside an aged care facility in Melbourne. – AAP

AUSTRALIA

Man in 20s is youngest Aussie to die of Covid

Victoria has passed the peak of its second coronavirus wave but authorities remain concerned more aged care residents will die.

A man in his 20s became Australia's youngest Covid-19 fatality as the state recorded 14 more deaths and 372 new infections.

Premier Daniel Andrews said it still wasn't known whether the man in his 20s died from the virus or with it.

"I can't speak to the circumstances of that individual and it may well be the coroner will look at that matter and determine the circumstances," he said.

The premier added the man was not living at a disability facility, where there are now 87 active cases among residents and staff.

The remaining 13 victims were aged in their 80s and 90s, with 12 residents of aged care facilities.

To date, 289 Victorians have died from the virus, while the national toll stands at 375.

About 70 per cent of Australia's coronavirus deaths are among aged care residents.

Victoria's Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton was confident the state had passed its second-wave peak, with the effect of Melbourne's stage four lockdown to show in coming days.

"The seven-day trend indicates the peak was probably four or five days ago and we will continue to see lower numbers overall from here on in," he said.

He warned the tough restrictions would not be lifted until case numbers were much lower.

"We could not conceive of opening up with 200 cases a day. We couldn't do it with 100 cases a day. We have to head for the lowest possible number," Professor Sutton said.

He and the premier remained concerned about the number of aged care residents infected.

"They are most at risk of dying. We also have to drive those numbers down," Professor Sutton said.

There were 2034 active cases across 119 facilities, out of a total of 7877 active cases in the state. ■



The *Ruby Princess* is linked to more than 20 coronavirus-related deaths in Australia. – AAP

AUSTRALIA

Ruby Princess mistakes laid bare in report

When Covid-infected passengers were allowed to disembark the now-infamous *Ruby Princess* cruise ship in Sydney the errors were inexcusable and inexplicable and the results deadly.

A special commission of inquiry into the ship's arrival in Sydney on March 19 has determined authorities made a litany of mistakes when contagious travellers alighted at Circular Quay, spreading the virus across Australia and overseas.

Drawing on three weeks of hearings, the Special Commission of Inquiry commissioned by the NSW government has released its findings.

In the scathing 330-page report, eminent barrister Bret Walker SC – who led the inquiry – reserved his harshest criticism for NSW Health while absolving Australian Border Force officials of blame.

The report noted that on March 10 the Communicable Diseases Network of Australia amended its guidelines such that everyone on board the ship with newly defined suspect cases should be tested.

But when a risk assessment was conducted on March 18, those making decisions did not have the updated definition of a "suspect case".

"This was a serious and material error," the commission found.

Notifying the *Ruby Princess* of the change would have identified such suspect cases, as 101 people fell under the definition by 18 March and later 120 when the ship docked.

Those people should then have been isolated in cabins, the inquiry found.

The *Ruby Princess* outbreak infected 663 Australians on board and led to 28 deaths, including 20 domestically and eight in the United States.

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian said she would read the report over the weekend and respond early next week. ■



President Donald Trump, applauded by key advisers, smiles in the Oval Office after announcing the UAE-Israel deal. – AP

REST OF THE WORLD

Iran, Turkey angry at UAE-Israel deal

Iran and Turkey have lashed out at their regional rival the United Arab Emirates over its decision to normalise diplomatic relations with Israel in a US-brokered deal, accusing it of betraying the Palestinian cause.

Iran's Foreign Ministry called the deal a "dagger that was unjustly struck by the UAE in the backs of the Palestinian people and all Muslims." Turkey said the peoples of the region "will never forget and will never forgive this hypocritical behaviour" by the UAE.

The UAE, which has never fought Israel and has quietly been improving ties for years, said the agreement put a hold on Israel's plans to unilaterally annex parts of the occupied West Bank, which the Palestinians view as the heartland of their future state.

But the Turkish Foreign Ministry said the UAE had no authority to negotiate with Israel on behalf of the Palestinians or "to make concessions on matters vital to Palestine."

The agreement would make the UAE the first Gulf Arab state – and the third Arab country, after Egypt and Jordan – to have full diplomatic ties with Israel. The Palestinians said the deal amounted to "treason" and called on Arab and Muslim countries to oppose it.

The historic deal delivered a key foreign policy victory for US President Donald Trump as he seeks re-election and reflected a changing Middle East in which shared concerns about archenemy Iran have largely overtaken traditional Arab support for the Palestinians. Trump predicted that other countries in the region would follow the UAE's lead.

Israel, the UAE and other Gulf countries that view Iran as a regional menace have been cultivating closer ties in recent years. Turkey has had diplomatic relations with Israel for decades, but under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has positioned itself as a champion of the Palestinians. Turkey and the UAE support rival camps in the conflict in Libya. ■



The site of the explosion in Beirut. – AP

REST OF THE WORLD

Blast victims plead for outside inquiry

Lebanon's judicial investigation of the Beirut port explosion has started with political wrangling over the naming of a lead investigator, military threats to jail leakers and doubts over whether a panel appointed along sectarian lines could be fully impartial.

So for many Lebanese, their greatest hope for credible answers about the blast that wrecked much of their capital may lie with outsiders. Families of the dead and survivors have asked the UN Security Council for an international investigation. Others pin their hopes on the French forensic police who have joined the probe and FBI investigators are expected to take part.

"We are not lawyers or politicians, we are families and people, our appeal today is to the people of the international community," said Paul Najjar, a survivor of the explosion. "Is it acceptable today that people would find their homes shattered, their families killed, their hopes and their dreams killed as well, with no justice, in all impunity?"

French teams have pressed ahead at their work, sending divers into the underwater crater, taking explosives samples and preparing recommendations for both French and Lebanese magistrates. Among the French judicial police on the case are men and women who responded after the 2004 tsunami in Japan, the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, and the November 2015 and Bastille Day 2016 terror attacks in France.

It still was not known what sparked the fire that ignited nearly 3000 tons of ammonium nitrate that were stored for years in Beirut's port next to densely populated residential areas. Documents have emerged that show the country's top leadership and security officials were aware of the stockpile.

Many Lebanese want the probe taken out of the hands of their own government, having learned from past experience that the long-entrenched political factions, notorious for corruption, won't allow any results damaging to their leadership to come to light. The explosion killed more than 175 people, injured at least 6000 and left tens of thousands homeless. ■



– 123RF

EUROPE

‘Nobody could hear us scream’

One of the two young women found clinging to lobster pots after 15 hours at sea in Ireland has said nobody could hear their screams for help.

Cousins Sara Feeney, 23, and Ellen Glynn, 17, were reported missing on Wednesday evening.

They were found on Thursday clinging to lobster pots, 27km from where they had initially set off paddleboarding on Furbo beach, by local fisherman Patrick Oliver and his son Morgan.

Ellen said the pair got caught by surprise by the weather and were swept from the route they wanted to take.

“The wind got really strong and the waves got really strong all very quickly so we kind of just knew we weren’t going to get back in,” she said.

“Straight away, we just tied the two paddle boards together so we could keep together.

“We tried to paddle in but the waves just got really strong.”

“We kind of figured that we wouldn’t be able to get back to the shore so we started screaming in the hope that someone would hear us and come for help.

“The wind was just so strong that nobody could hear us screaming.”

She said they were aware of the danger they were in but decided to stay calm. “We just said we should stay positive and everything will be fine.

“There were heavy winds and thunder and lightning.

“We were absolutely frozen and really scared.

“We tied the paddle boards onto the life buoys connected to a lobster pot so we could stay where we were in the water.

“We were so tired we took turns going to sleep on the paddleboards in the water.”

She paid tribute to the rescue and search teams and the fishermen who found them.

“I honestly don’t know how to thank them.

“We are so, so grateful.

“I have no idea what would have happened to us if they had not have found us.” ■



Relatives hug after being released from a centre where protesters were detained after a mass rally following presidential election in Minsk. – AP

EUROPE

Belarus frees detainees amid protester pressure

Belarusian authorities have released about 1000 people detained amid demonstrations contesting the results of the presidential election, in an attempt to assuage public anger against a brutal crackdown on peaceful protests and avoid Western sanctions.

Crowds of demonstrators have swarmed the streets daily to contest the official results of Sunday’s vote that showed authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko extending his 26-year rule with 80 per cent of the vote.

Nearly 7000 people have been detained and hundreds injured since Sunday as police have ferociously dispersed the demonstrations with stun grenades, tear gas, rubber bullets and severe beatings.

Many of those who were released talked about brutal beatings and other abuse at the hands of police, and some showed bruises. Some wept as they embraced their relatives.

The releases come as European Union foreign ministers are due to meet to discuss possible sanctions against Belarus. As thousands of protesters again rallied across Belarus on Friday, Lukashenko’s main challenger, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who has been given refuge in neighboring Lithuania, posted a video statement contesting the results of the vote and demanding that the government launch a dialogue with protesters.

Thousands of workers have joined the protests, denouncing the police crackdown and demanding a new election, raising the prospect of a nationwide strike.

“Our entire shop voted against Lukashenko and then we suddenly learned that he won by a landslide,” 42-year-old assembly worker Dmitry Glukhovskiy said outside the Minsk Automobile Plant. “They not only have cheated us but also beaten us up, and no one is going to accept that.”

Another factory worker, 45-year-old electrician Viktor Konovalov, said his friend had been detained during the clampdown.

“People will not forgive that,” he said. “We don’t need their excuses, we need a new election and a new government.” ■



Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announces the decision. – RNZ

NEW ZEALAND

Auckland's level three lockdown extended

Auckland will remain in alert level three for a full two weeks, with the government announcing that the country will remain at current Covid-19 alert levels for 12 more days.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Director General of Health Ashley Bloomfield have announced the decision, saying Cabinet had unanimously decided today that the country will remain at the current alert levels.

"Auckland will remain at level 3 and New Zealand will remain at level 2 ... until 11.59pm 26 August."

But she said the settings would be reviewed on 21 August.

"There is nothing to suggest we need to move to a level 4 lockdown at this stage.

Ardern said construction would continue and hospitality services would continue under the existing level 3 operating protocols.

"Cabinet also does not want Auckland to be in level 3 any longer than is needed to ensure the outbreak is contained.

"The best economic response is a strong health response."

Ardern said if over the next seven days that the perimeter of the cluster was found, there would be time in the rest of alert level 3 to consider the situation.

"We have had a number of theories (about the source) that we have tried to chase down and we will continue to pursue."

Ardern said closing the cluster did not mean the source had to be found – that had been demonstrated overseas.

"It is heartening to see at this stage that linkage between all the cases. If you make a wrong move with Covid you can see the long term impact of that, and Australia has demonstrated that so we are looking to the experiences of others to inform our decision making.

"The likes of Hong Kong or the likes of Australia where they have taken a little more time, and existed with a more open environment while they've determined the perimeter of an outbreak. Our view is it's better to assess that with restrictions in place so we can get back to freedom faster." ■



Inside the tent where symptomatic people were waiting for a Covid-19 test. – RNZ

NEW ZEALAND

Concern over crowded testing clinic

A woman tested at an Auckland pop-up clinic had to queue in a tent with other symptomatic people – with little social distancing and hardly anyone wearing a mask.

Auckland hit a record number of tests on Wednesday – 7800, with people queuing for hours. Yesterday was also set to be big once numbers were tallied.

The woman had her test at the Otago Pop-up clinic.

After waiting in her car for three hours, she was surprised to be ushered into an open-ended tent.

At one stage there were 12 other people in it. She heard all of them describe their symptoms to the nurse.

"Like coughs, runny noses, headaches, fevers – a couple of people had been to Rotorua at the weekend," she said.

"So as the nurse was working through the people, I was getting more and more concerned that I was in this tent."

The woman was also conscious that she had symptoms too.

It was not possible to stay two metres from the person in front or behind her – but everyone was doing their best to try, she said.

The woman was wearing her own mask as was one other man, and staff offered one woman a mask but no one else was wearing them. She was surprised because of the change in policy to tell Aucklanders they should wear masks.

A spokesperson for the Waitematā, Auckland, and Counties Manukau DHBs said there had been no significant safety issues at the CTCs.

"However our Otago CTC has had issues with people not maintaining physical distancing despite multiple requests from staff.

"Everyone accessing testing at the Otago CTC is offered a mask and asked to wear it, but not all do.

"We have infection prevention and control expert support on site at every CTC but we need the public's help – please do your part to keep everyone safe by following the instructions of our expert staff." ■