

International

Under the dome: Fears Pacific nuclear 'coffin' is leaking

Runit 'monstrosity' symbol of mess left by US nuke test program

MAJURO, Marshall Islands: As nuclear explosions go, the US "Cactus" bomb test in May 1958 was relatively small - but it has left a lasting legacy for the Marshall Islands in a dome-shaped radioactive dump. The dome - described by a UN chief Antonio Guterres as "a kind of coffin" - was built two decades after the blast in the Pacific Ocean region. The US military filled the bomb crater on Runit island with radioactive waste, capped it with concrete, and told displaced residents of the Pacific's remote Enewetak atoll they could safely return home.

But Runit's 45-cm thick concrete dome has now developed cracks. And because the 115-m wide crater was never lined, there are fears radioactive contaminants are leaching through the island's porous coral rock into the ocean. The concerns have intensified amid climate change. Rising seas, encroaching on the low-lying nation, are threatening to undermine the dome's structural integrity.

Jack Ading, who represents the area in the Marshalls' parliament, calls the dome a "monstrosity". "It is stuffed with radioactive contaminants that include plutonium-239, one of the most toxic substances known to man," he told AFP. "The coffin is leaking its poison into the surrounding environment. And to make matters even worse, we're told not to worry

about this leakage because the radioactivity outside of the dome is at least as bad as the radioactivity inside of it."

'Staggering' challenges

The dome has become a symbol of the mess left by the US nuclear test program in the Marshall Islands when 67 bombs were detonated between 1947-58 at Enewetak and Bikini atolls. Numerous islanders were forcibly evacuated from ancestral lands and resettled, including Enewetak's residents. Thousands more islanders were exposed to radioactive fallout and suffered health problems. The people of Enewetak were allowed home in 1980, and about 800 islanders now live in the southern part of the atoll, 20 km from Runit.

After the US military withdrew, the Marshall Islands government officially accepted a "full and final" settlement to cover the impact of the nuclear tests. But there have long been complaints that the compensation paid by Washington was inadequate, and the United Nations has described "a legacy of distrust" towards the United States. UN Secretary General Guterres raised the issue earlier this month after meeting Marshall Islands President Hilda Heine in Fiji, when they discussed the nuclear legacy and the prospect of radioactive leakage from Runit dome.

"The Pacific was victimized in the past as we all know... the consequences of these have been quite dramatic, in relation to health, in relation to the poisoning of waters in some areas," he said. Marshalls Foreign Minister John Silk said he appreciated Guterres bringing the Runit dome to world attention with this comments. "We are pleased that the Secretary General made these statements, since so often it seems that these ongoing legacy issues that continue to impact our people are forgotten by the international community," he said.

Uncertain future

Rhea Moss-Christian, who chairs the Marshall Islands National Nuclear Commission, said the country "needs the support of the international community to address the staggering health and environmental challenges across the Pacific". The consequences of the dome failing are unclear. A 2013 inspection commissioned by the US government suggested radioactive fallout in the Enewetak lagoon sediment was already so high a catastrophic failure would not necessarily result in locals receiving increased dosages of radiation.

Silk, noting that the US government had committed to ongoing monitoring of the dome,



ENEWETAK, Marshall Islands: Picture taken by the US Defense Nuclear Agency in 1980 shows the huge dome built over top of a crater left by one of the 43 nuclear tests over Runit Island. — AFP

said an independent assessment of the structure's status "would be helpful". But Ading said the situation was "a constant source of anxiety

for the people of Enewetak". "We pray that the Runit dome does not eventually become our coffin," he said. — AFP

News in brief

600 test HIV positive in Pak city

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan said yesterday over 600 people, most of them children, had tested HIV positive in a city in southern Sindh province. Concern grew after hundreds of people were allegedly infected by a doctor using a contaminated syringe in Rato Dero city and surrounding villages of Larkana district. Some 681 people, of which 537 were children from two to 12 years of age, had been tested positive for HIV until yesterday in Rato Dero," special health advisor Zafar Mirza told a press conference in Islamabad. He said 21,375 people had been screened in Rato Dero, adding "the increase in the number of patients being tested positive for HIV is a matter of grave concern for the government". With about 20,000 new HIV infections reported in 2017 alone, Pakistan currently has the second fastest growing HIV rates across Asia, according to the UN. — AFP

2 Afghans jailed for killing girl

KABUL: An Afghan court yesterday sentenced two teenage boys to 30 years in prison for the abduction and killing of a young girl whose brutal murder provoked a national outcry. Six-year-old Mahsa Ahmadi was snatched off a Kabul street in March and was killed after her parents were unable to pay a ransom of \$300,000. Police eventually arrested two boys and released a video clip showing them confessing. They said they had picked up Mahsa, driven her away on a motorcycle, taken her to a house and then strangled her after the ransom wasn't paid. In a televised court hearing, a judge sentenced the two youths to 30 years each in prison. Their ages were not released, but the judge said they were under 18. For Mahsa's father, the sentence was too lenient. "I want the severest punishment for them, they should be hanged," he said. But the judge said since they were minors they could not be executed. — AFP

Aide to BJP minister shot dead

MUMBAI: An aide to an Indian ruling party candidate, who recently defeated Congress party chief Rahul Gandhi for a seat in parliament, was shot dead overnight, police said yesterday. Surendra Singh was an aide to Smriti Irani, a former television actress and minister in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's cabinet. In one of the biggest upsets of the election that handed Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) a second term, Irani beat Gandhi in the Amethi constituency, which had been held by his family almost continuously for the last four decades, in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh. Singh worked closely with Irani and distributed sweets and paraded with celebrating supporters on Friday, a day after the election results, his relatives told Reuters partner ANI. He had gone to sleep on the veranda outside his home when unidentified gunmen shot him, Amethi Superintendent of Police Rajesh Kumar told Reuters yesterday. Seven people have been arrested, Kumar said, adding it was too early to draw conclusions about a motive. — Reuters

Sri Lanka detains nearly 100

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's military has detained nearly 100 suspects during four days of search operations against remnants of an Islamist group blamed for the Easter attacks that killed 258, officials said yesterday. Some 3,000 military personnel were deployed in and around the capital as well as other key towns for cord-on-and-search activities that began on Thursday, a military official said. In the first three days, security forces took 87 suspects into custody and they were handed over to police for further investigations, he added. "The number of people detained could be around 100 by now," a security official said adding that almost all were taken in for possessing drugs and in some cases illegal weapons. Similar raids were carried out in North Western Province, north of Colombo, where anti-Muslim riots this month left one man dead and left hundreds of Muslim-owned shops, homes and mosques destroyed. — AFP

Sumo wrestlers meet their match in Trump

TOKYO: The big men of Japanese sumo met their match yesterday in the form of an even bigger star: Donald Trump. Trump was the first US president to attend a tournament in sumo's hallowed Ryogoku Kokugikan arena and when he entered, the crowd of more than 10,000 cheered and whistled. The president, on a feel-good visit to Japan that peaks Monday when he becomes the first foreign leader to meet with newly enthroned Emperor Naruhito, responded the way he always does in a crowd.

He waved, he pumped his fist, he beamed. Even more than most normal politicians, Trump loves being centre of attention and here on the other side of the world he proved his star power. Four low seats awaited Trump, First Lady Melania Trump, and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his wife Akie. The furniture was a break in tradition - everyone else watching sumo ringside sits on simple mats. But Abe had pulled out all the stops to make sure Trump was happy.

For several minutes, the crowd seemed to forget the sumo ring, instead turning to



TOKYO: US President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump are accompanied by Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his wife Akie Abe as they watch a sumo demonstration during the Summer Grand Sumo Tournament yesterday. — AFP

Trump, who wore a light pink tie, and his ex-model wife, who wore a deep pink dress. Thousands of mobile phones flashed and filmed. "This is a very rare opportunity. He's got an aura," said spectator Masamitsu Kurokawa, 56, who works in the service industry. "He is in a different class."

Longing for limelight

That said, sumo crowds are passionate about their uniquely Japanese sport and as soon as the action in the ring recommenced,

even Trump appeared briefly forgotten. Giant sumo grapplers pushed and buffeted each other. The crowd veered from nervous anticipation to delirious cheers. Trump was maybe a little baffled by the proceedings, getting meager help from his many years of watching and promoting the more far more garish US pastime of professional wrestling.

His initially buoyant demeanor dimmed and other than a few words with Abe and occasional chats with his wife, he sat stolidly, staring straight ahead. But if the

wrestlers were having their moment, no one was going to keep Trump, real estate showman and populist political rule-breaker, from the limelight for long. Japanese wrestler Asanoyama lost his final bout, but was still far ahead enough of his competition overall to keep the title of champ. The crowd sang the Japanese national anthem.

Up into the ring came Asanoyama to collect his first trophy and the crowd cheered. Now Abe arrived to present an even bigger second trophy, the Prime Minister's Cup, which was so large that a child could have curled up inside. The crowd cheered even more loudly. But then came the American trophy.

This is officially known as the President's Cup, but is already popularly known as the "Trump Cup". Unlike the previous two, the US trophy was carried into the ring under a white sheet. An official in traditional Japanese garb then pulled this off, revealing a glistening, also gigantic cup - and prompting a chorus of whistling and "oohs".

Entering the ring, Trump read a brief presentation to Asanoyama. He got a big cheer when he mentioned that the award was being given in the new imperial era of Reiwa. Then going back to his instincts for hamming it up in front of photographers, Trump mock grimaced as he lifted the huge cup - clearly something he would not have tried to do without the help of one of the sumo officials at his side. — AFP

PNG premier quits amid gas deal tensions

PORT MORESBY, Papua New Guinea: Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Peter O'Neill resigned yesterday following a string of high-profile political defections that threatened his leadership. O'Neill - who had been in power since 2011 - handed over the reins to veteran politician Julius Chan, who has twice been prime minister. "I will be stepping down as prime minister in the coming days, when I visit the governor-general... (to) pave way for a new government," O'Neill told reporters in the capital, Port Moresby.

"We have agreed for a change of direction, that leadership of the government will be now handed over to Sir Julius Chan, who is a veteran leader and one of the founding fathers of our nation." Chan, 79, who was prime minister from 1980-82 and 1994-97, said his government would not be a lame-duck administration. "We are not just going to be a caretaker government, we will work. The transformation of PNG. I don't intend to be a lame duck. We will move this country forward," he told reporters.

O'Neill, 54, had avoided a vote of no confidence earlier this month after the defections of his defense, health and forest ministers. His People's National Congress Party had a small majority in parliament and he faced repeated closed-door requests from party allies to step down. O'Neill was under pressure following the signing of a multi-billion-dollar deal for a liquefied natural gas (LNG) project with France's Total and US firm ExxonMobil earlier this year.

The LNG project would almost double PNG's gas exports. But James Marape, who had led the government



PORT MORESBY: Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Peter O'Neill (right) and member of parliament Julius Chan attend a function yesterday. — AFP

in parliament and was also the finance minister, resigned citing the failure of the government to ensure national firms and locals benefit from the contract. Local communities had complained bitterly about not benefiting from similar deals in the past. Marape said in a separate press conference yesterday the opposition could rally 63 out of 111 members of parliament on their side.

PNG's parliament is due to sit tomorrow, with O'Neill's resignation - and whether it is formalized by a visit to the governor-general - possibly changing the dynamics ahead of a possible vote of no confidence. "By offering to resign, it basically resets that question," said Shane McLeod, a PNG specialist at the Australian thinktank the Lowy Institute. "The question is: what will parliament be voting on Tuesday? Will it be moving a vote of no confidence in the current prime minister? Will it be voting on a vacant role of prime minister? Will it be something else? It's just a bit uncertain." McLeod said it was possible O'Neill's announcement could have been a way to win back MPs who had deserted his government for the opposition. — AFDP

created after her disappearance on May 8. "It did come down to life and death and I had to choose. And... I chose life. I wasn't going to take the easy way out, even if that meant more suffering and pain for myself," she said. Eller, who also works as a physical therapist, has been in the hospital since her rescue. She suffered a broken leg, a torn meniscus in her knee, sunburns and scrapes. The New York Times reported. A grassroots fund-raising campaign collected more than \$70,000, which paid for a helicopter to be hired for the search.

Video of her rescue shows Eller being hoisted into a helicopter as a volunteer shouts "And there she goes!" as she was lifted out of a steep ravine lined with waterfalls. "I have the most gratitude and respect, and appreciation - I can't even put it into words - for the people that have helped me, for the people that have paid for me, for the people that were at base camp," said Eller from the hospital. Eller's boyfriend was the last to see her before she disappeared. Police found her car at a parking lot near a hiking trail. She had gotten lost after leaving the trail to rest, the New York Times said. — AFP

Thai unmatched powerbroker Prem dies aged 98

BANGKOK: Former prime minister and close advisor to Thailand's revered royals Prem Tinsulanonda died early Sunday aged 98, a senior parliamentarian said, ending a decades-long career of unrivalled influence over Thai politics. Prem "passed away this morning around 9 o'clock", interim house speaker Chai Chidchob told MPs on the third day of Thailand's new parliament. "I would like to ask everyone to stand for a moment in memorial."

Hailed as a stabilizing force by allies but loathed by critics as a conservative underminer of democracy in the kingdom, Prem was a top aide to the late beloved King Bhumibol Adulyadej and helped cement the unshakable bond between the monarchy and the military. As Privy Council president his influence endured through a tense succession period after Bhumibol died in 2016 and Prem was briefly appointed regent before Bhumibol's son Maha Vajiralongkorn ascended the throne.

Prem presided over the king's surprise wedding to Queen Suthida days before his coronation earlier this month. With assistants helping him stand, he took part in a key sacred water ritual on coronation day alongside 2014 coup leader and junta chief Prayut-Chan-O. The participation highlighted his legacy of cementing the army's self-designated role as protector of the royals. The general helped establish the all-powerful "monarchized military" seen in Thailand today, according to Paul Chambers, lecturer at Naresuan University in Thailand. "Prem proved time and again that his savvy acumen could prevent or facilitate army coups that helped the palace," Chambers told AFP.

Born in southern Songkhla province in 1920, 12 years before Thailand's absolute monarchy was abolished, Prem experienced most of modern Thai history. He graduated from the country's top military academy in 1941, showcasing his talent on the frontline by fighting the French in Cambodia and later the British in Burma. He was a key figure in the kingdom's battle against communists in its northern provinces and was rewarded with the top job of army chief in 1978. But the ambitious commander only held the position for two years before seizing power in what was widely viewed as a silent coup. His 1980-1988 rule as premier brought a rare period of political and economic stability to Thailand thanks to his patronage of military officers but most importantly through the trust he forged with Bhumibol. — AFP



Prem Tinsulanonda

US hiker found after 2 weeks lost in Hawaii forest

LOS ANGELES: An American yoga instructor who spent two weeks lost in the wilds of Hawaii, surviving on plants and water, has been found alive after an ordeal she described as "the toughest days of my life". Amanda Eller, 35, was rescued Friday beside a creek bed at the bottom of a ravine in a national forest on Maui after a helicopter spotted her. She had been out on a hike when she vanished. "The last 17 days of my life have been the toughest days of my life and it's been a really significant spiritual journey," Eller said from her hospital bed in a tearful video posted Saturday on the "Find Amanda" Facebook page