

Health & Science

Giant telescope project in Hawaii delayed by protests

LOS ANGELES: Anger is brewing on the Big Island of Hawaii over plans to build a giant telescope on a dormant volcano that is highly sacred to the region's native population. For months, hundreds of protesters have delayed the start of construction on Mauna Kea volcano of the so-called Thirty Meter Telescope, or TMT, which astronomers say will have a dozen times the resolution of the Hubble Space Telescope.

The demonstrators, who have converged on the site peacefully, argue that the \$1.4 billion project would sit on a volcano that is sacred to Native Hawaiians and would harm the environment. Celebrities like Dwayne Johnson, Jason Momoa and Bruno Mars have lent their support to the protesters. "What I realized today, and obviously I've been following this for years now, is that it's bigger than a telescope," Johnson, who lived in Hawaii as a child, reportedly said when he visited the site earlier this summer. "It's humanity. It's culture," he said.

Work on the project — set to be completed by 2027 — was supposed to start in 2015 but has been hampered by repeated protests. "Construction has been delayed for years because of this situation," Christophe Dumas, a French astronomer and head of operations at TMT, told AFP. "The cost has also risen significantly... and the process to obtain a construction permit lasted 10 years."

Protest leaders say the consortium of sci-

entists behind the project can build their scope on a less controversial site, including on a mountain in Spain's Canary Islands, where they say it would be a win-win situation for everyone. Dumas argues, however, that Mauna Kea "remains the ideal site" in the Northern Hemisphere because of its altitude — 13,796 feet (4,205 meters) above sea level — as well as its remoteness and clear skies which make it one of the best places on the planet for astronomical observatories. The new telescope, according to scientists, would enable astronomers to see "forming galaxies at the very edge of the observable universe, near the beginning of time." Already, Mauna Kea, which means White Mountain, is home to 13 telescopes housed in 12 facilities at or around the summit, which have been the source of a host of new discoveries and scientific studies. Some question whether one more telescope — albeit a giant one — would make such a big difference. The answer is a resounding "yes" from opponents.

'Enough is enough'

"I talked to the leaders of the opposition and they made it real clear that not only is it too big, but it's just one too many," said Greg Chun, executive director of Mauna Kea stewardship at the University of Hawaii. "They tell me we have shared this mountain long enough. Enough is enough." He said Native Hawaiians have repeatedly expressed concerns about the development

of the mountain but their complaints have, for the most part, fallen on deaf ears.

Scientists began flocking to Mauna Kea after a tsunami in 1960 devastated communities along the base of the volcano and local authorities, in a bid to revive the economy, began a drive to attract astronomers. "From the very beginning, the development of astronomy has raised concerns about the development of the mountain," Chun said. "So it's not something new." But many observers say the Mauna Kea debate goes beyond just a telescope and reflects deep-seated resentment by some Native Hawaiians over past abuses and the legacy of colonialism in the Hawaiian islands.

Jonathan Osorio, an expert on Hawaiian culture and a longtime opponent of the planned telescope, insists that he and fellow protesters are not opposed to science but they object to telescopes being built on sacred land. Dumas for his part argues that the telescope is being used as a tool to pressure authorities to seek more autonomy for the native population. "The telescope would not sit atop the mountain and will be visible from only a small section (14 percent) of the island," he said. He said his team has gone to great lengths to respect local custom and tradition but the project now needs to urgently get off the ground. "We can't wait much longer and the next few weeks are going to be critical," he said. — AFP

French MPs approve IVF for single women

PARIS: France moved Friday towards allowing lesbians and single women to conceive children with medical help, setting the stage for a clash with conservatives who say it would create generations of "fatherless" kids. To loud applause, France's lower house of parliament approved a controversial draft bioethics law in a move that has already sparked outrage from defenders of the traditional family unit, and even opponents in President Emmanuel Macron's own centrist party.

For now, only heterosexual couples have the right to use medically-assisted reproduction methods such as in vitro fertilization, commonly known as IVF. Given the green light by the National Assembly, the bill must also get the go-ahead from the upper house, or Senate, before it can become law. The National Assembly passed the draft law by 55 votes to 17. It represents Macron's biggest social reform since coming to power in 2017. But Macron has acknowledged the political risk he is taking,

and is mindful of the backlash six years ago against gay marriage, legalized under his Socialist predecessor Francois Hollande.

A coalition of grassroots religious groups, Catholic figures and right-wing political opponents organized mass demonstrations against Hollande. About 20 conservative groups have called for a rally in Paris on October 6 against the proposed legal changes they say will "deprive children of their fathers". Under the bill — for which lawmakers have suggested a total of 2,500 amendments — the child of a lesbian couple would have the names of the "mother and mother" on its birth certificate instead of the "mother and father".

"The state is going to lie to a child by saying that you are born from two mothers," far-right National Rally leader Marine Le Pen told RTL radio on Tuesday. "The state should not lie on a birth certificate... you can say that you are born from an unknown father." The conservative Le Figaro newspaper said in an editorial yesterday that the reform "threatens the foundation of our humanity", while the prestigious French Academy of Medicine has raised worries about a potential psychological impact on children. Under the proposed law, the country's health care system would cover the cost of the procedure for all women under 43. — AFP

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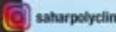
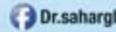
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