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Iran most likely downed Ukraine airliner with missiles, U.S. officials believe



FILE PHOTO: Red Crescent workers check the debris from the Ukraine International Airlines plane, that crashed after take-off from Iran's Imam Khomeini airport, on the outskirts of Tehran, Iran January 8, 2020. Nazanin Tabatabaee/WANA (West Asia News Agency) via REUTERS

WASHINGTON/KIEV (Reuters) - A Ukraine airliner that crashed in Iran, killing all 176 people aboard, was most likely brought down accidentally by Iranian air defenses, U.S. officials said on Thursday, and President Donald Trump said he did not believe the crash was due to a mechanical issue.

Citing an extensive review of satellite data, one U.S. official said the government had concluded with a high degree of certainty that anti-aircraft missiles brought down the plane, on the same day that Iran launched ballistic missiles at U.S. forces in Iraq.

The official said the Ukraine International Airlines plane had been tracked by Iranian radar.

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U.S. believes Iran brought down Ukraine airliner with anti-aircraft missiles: officials

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The data showed the Boeing 737-800 (BA.N) was airborne for two minutes after departing Tehran when the heat signatures of two surface-to-air missiles were detected, one of the officials said.

That was quickly followed by an explosion in the vicinity of the plane, this official said. Heat signature data then showed the plane on fire as it went down.

The flight was on its way to Kiev carrying mostly Iranians and Iranian-Canadians.

The crash happened early on Wednesday morning, hours after Iran launched missile attacks on U.S.-led forces in Iraq, leading some to speculate that the plane may have been hit. tmsnrt.rs/36Fn26m

Iran's head of civil aviation denied the reports as "illogical rumors."

"Scientifically, it is impossible that a missile hit the Ukrainian plane, and such rumors are illogical," the semi-official ISNA News Agency quoted Ali Abedzadeh as saying.

Two U.S. officials said Washington believed the downing of the plane was accidental.

FILE PHOTO: Red Crescent workers check the debris from the Ukraine International Airlines plane, that crashed after take-off from Iran's Imam Khomeini airport, on the outskirts of Tehran, Iran January 8, 2020. Nazanin Tabatabaee/WANA (West Asia News Agency) via REUTERS

Speaking to reporters at the White House, Trump said he had a terrible feeling about the downed airliner but offered no details. He said he did not believe it was a mechanical issue.

"It's a tragic thing. But somebody could have made a mistake - on the other side," Trump said.

Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was due to provide an update on the crash on Thursday afternoon.

Ukraine had outlined four potential scenarios to explain the crash, including a missile strike and terrorism. Kiev said its investigators wanted to search the crash site for possible debris of a Russian-made missile used by Iran's military.

An initial report issued by Iran's civil aviation organization on Thursday cited witnesses on the ground and in a passing aircraft flying at a high altitude as saying the plane was on fire while in the air.

It said the three-year-old airliner, which had its last scheduled maintenance on Monday, encountered a technical problem shortly after take-off and started to head toward a nearby airport before it crashed. The report said there was no radio

communication from the pilot and that the aircraft disappeared from radar at 8,000 feet (2,440 m).

INITIAL REPORT

Investigations into airliner crashes require regulators, experts and companies across several international jurisdictions to work together. It can take months to fully determine the cause and issuing an initial report within 24 hours is rare.

Canadian Foreign Minister Francois-Philippe Champagne called his Iranian counterpart to stress that Canadian officials needed "to be quickly granted access to Iran to provide consular services, help with identification of the deceased and take part in the investigation of the crash."

"Canada and Canadians have many questions which will need to be answered," a Canadian statement said.

Britain wants a transparent investigation, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's spokesman said on Thursday following a call between the British leader and Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

"The prime minister said that there needed to be a full credible and transparent investigation into what happened," the spokesman said.

Tensions between Washington and Tehran have risen with the United States' killing of a top Iranian general on Friday.

The Ukrainian airliner took off at 6:12 a.m. local time and was given permission to climb to 26,000 feet, Iran's report said. It crashed six minutes later near the town of Sabashahr.



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Texas becomes first state to refuse refugees under Trump order

NEW YORK (Reuters) - Governor Greg Abbott of Texas on Friday became the first governor in the country to refuse to accept refugees after President Donald Trump signed an executive order empowering local jurisdictions to consent to the federal program.

FILE PHOTO: Texas Governor Greg Abbott speaks at the annual National Rifle Association (NRA) convention in Dallas, Texas, U.S., May 4, 2018. REUTERS/Lucas Jackson

“At this time, the state and non-profit organizations have a responsibility to dedicate available resources to those who are already here, including refugees, migrants and the homeless,” Abbott, a Republican, said in his letter to the U.S. State Department. “As a result, Texas cannot consent,” to refugee resettlement this fiscal year, he said.

The decision is a major blow to the U.S. refugee program since Texas is the largest recipient of refugees in the country. The State Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

So far, 41 governors – 18 of them Republican – and at least seven dozen local officials have consented to resettlement, according to a tally by the resettlement agency Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. Florida and Georgia, other major recipients of refugees, have so far remained silent on their stance. The governor’s office in Florida said it was still reviewing the issue and Georgia declined to comment.

Cutting immigration has been a centerpiece of Trump’s presidency and 2020 re-election campaign. One of his first acts after assuming office in January 2017 was to issue an order capping the maximum number of refugees that year at 50,000. Since then, the cap has been slashed every year.

Trump set a ceiling of 18,000 refugee admissions



FILE PHOTO: Texas Governor Greg Abbott speaks at the annual National Rifle Association (NRA) convention in Dallas, Texas, U.S., May 4, 2018. REUTERS/Lucas Jackson

for this year, the lowest level since the modern refugee program began in 1980. By contrast, former Democratic President Barack Obama proposed resettling 110,000 refugees in fiscal 2017.

The administration has said the consent requirement, signed in September, aimed to ensure receiving communities have the resources to integrate refugees.

But refugee resettlement groups have argued that giving local governors and mayors a veto over whom they accept is unconstitutional and would disrupt the way they work. Three of the nine national resettlement agencies sued the Trump administration in federal court in an effort to block the order from being implemented.

Arguments in the case were held this week, and U.S. District Judge Peter Messitte in Greenbelt, Maryland, appointed by former Democratic President Bill Clinton, could rule on the case soon.



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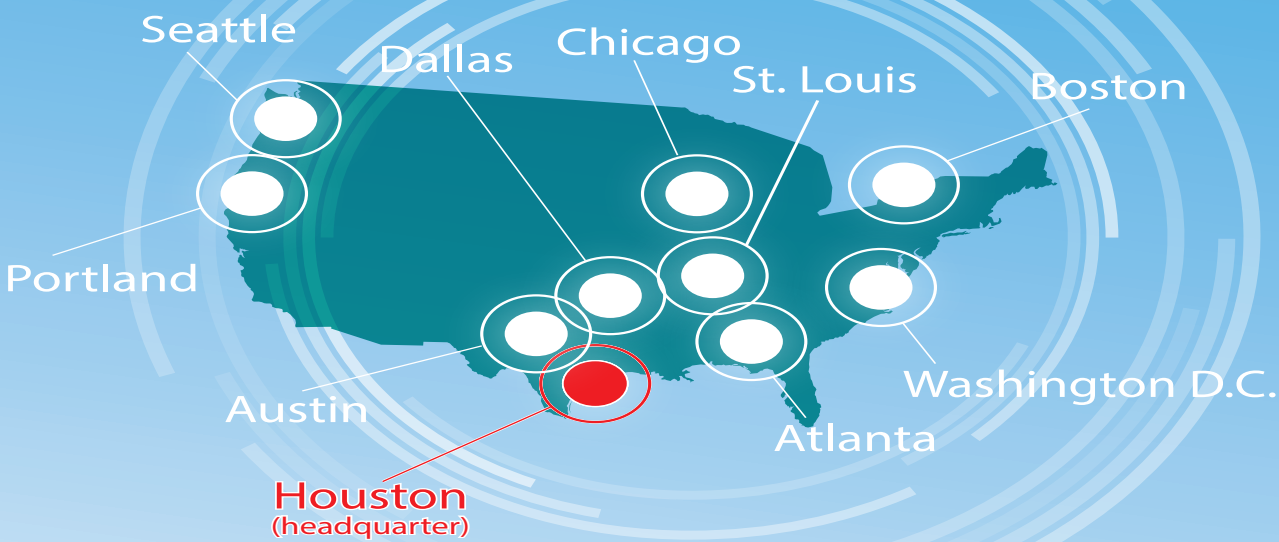
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Editor's Choice



Kuomintang party's presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu speaks at an election rally in Kaohsiung,



Kuomintang party's presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu speaks at an election rally in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, January 10, 2020. REUTERS/Ann Wang



Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen and the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) vice presidential candidate William Lai attend the final campaign rally ahead of the elections in Taipei



Supporters of Kuomintang party's presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu attend his election rally in Kaohsiung



Kuomintang party's presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu attends his election rally in Kaohsiung



Supporters of Kuomintang party's presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu attend his election rally in Kaohsiung



Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen and vice president candidate William Lai attend a campaign event in Taipei



Hong Kong academic and activist Joseph Cheng chats with others on a street corner in Taipei

The Environment Will Suffer For Years To Come
More Than One Billion Animals Have Died From The Australian Wildfires



A koala named Paul from Lake Innes Nature Reserve recovers from his burns in the ICU at The Port Macquarie Koala Hospital, Nov. 29, 2019, Port Macquarie, Australia. Photo: Nathan Edwards/Getty Images

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

More than 1 billion animals are believed to have been killed in wildfires that have ravaged Australia since September, University of Sydney professor Chris Dickman told the Huffington Post in an update from his previous estimate of 480 million last week.

Why it matters: The fires have threatened Australia's wildlife, known for its rare animals and distinctive ecosystems. The environment was already imperiled by deforestation to support the country's growing agribusiness.

•The scale of the damage remains unclear because of a lack of access to the burned areas and because it is difficult to document animal deaths, but scientists say "it is clear that the devastation is immense," per the New York Times.

•Dickman explained that his earlier esti-

mate was conservative and exclusive to the state of New South Wales — which he now estimates has more than 800 million dead animals alone.

What he's saying: "The original figure — the 480 million — was based on mammals, birds and reptiles for which we do have densities, and that figure now is a little bit out of date," Dickman told HuffPost.

•"Over a billion would be a very conservative figure," he said of the deaths continent-wide, adding that the toll has exceeded 1 billion "without any doubt at all."

Zoom in: Experts say thousands of kangaroos and koalas have been killed on Kangaroo Island, off the coast of South Australia, of which one-third has been destroyed, per the Times. They fear the

worst for the island's subspecies of cockatoos, which only had a population of 300–370 before the fires.



A kangaroo in a smoky field on the outskirts of Cooma, New South Wales on January 4, 2020.

•In a remote area of South Australia, aboriginal officials say they've approved a cull of up to 10,000 camels, as a drought has driven the thirsty animals to "threatening the APY [local government] communities and infrastructure," CNN reports.

Be smart: The estimated death toll is calculated by multiplying the number of estimated animals in a given area by the number of acres burned, according to Dickman.

The blazes, which have been burning across Australia for months, have razed homes and wiped out entire towns. Across Australia, nearly 18 million acres of land have been burned -- much of it bushland, forests and national parks, home to the country's beloved and unique wildlife.

Nearly half a billion animals have been impacted by the fires in NSW alone, with millions potentially dead, according to ecologists at the University of Sydney. That figure includes birds, reptiles, and mammals, except bats. It also excludes insects and frogs -- meaning the true number is likely much higher.



A koala recovering from burns at The Port Macquarie Koala Hospital on November 29, 2019.

The total number of animals affected nationwide could be as high as a billion, according to Christopher Dickman, the University of Sydney ecologist who led the report.

Fires are nothing new in Australia, but they have been growing more intense and becoming more destructive in recent years, a problem that has been exacerbated by climate change. And animals have been on the front lines -- Australia has the highest rate of species loss of any area in the world, and researchers fear that rate could increase as the fire disaster continues.

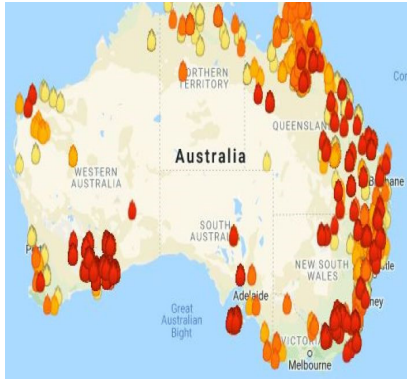
"The scale of these fires is unprecedented," said Dieter Hochuli, an environmental sciences professor at the University of Sydney. "There are substantial concerns about the capacity of these (ecosystems) to rebound from the fires."

Flames, food, and predators

The team at the University of Sydney came to their conclusion by using estimates of NSW mammal population density in 2007 in order to estimate how many animals have been affected by the 4.9 million hectares (12.1 million acres) that have been set alight in the state this fire season.

It's a pretty good estimate, Hochuli said -- but until the fires stop, they have no way of surveying exactly how many animals have died. And since the density figures excluded some species of bats and frogs, "the true loss of animal life is likely to be much higher than 480 million," said a statement from the university.

Australia's bushfire crisis has spread nationwide



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The Hottest Decade On Record



Illustration: Aida Amer/Axios

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

2019 wasn't just the second-hottest year on record — the 2010s will go down as the hottest decade in human memory, per a new report.

Driving the news: The Copernicus Climate Change Service found “an unrelenting upward trend in temperatures as emissions of greenhouse gases trap heat in the atmosphere and change the climate,” the N.Y. Times notes.

The big picture: “The amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is now the highest level in human history and probably has not been seen on this planet for 3 million years,” WashPost notes.

•2019 “also brought troubling signs that natural systems [like permafrost and the Amazon] that serve to store huge quantities of carbon dioxide and methane ... may be faltering as temperatures increase.”

By the numbers, per Copernicus:

•“The five warmest years on record have all occurred in the last 5 years.”

•“Globally, the calendar year 2019 was 0.59°C warmer than the 1981–2010 average.”



•“2016 is the warmest calendar year on record, with a global temperature 0.63°C above that for 1981–2010.

•“The third warmest calendar year, 2017, had a temperature 0.54°C above average.”

What's next: November 2020 is shaping up to be a historic month on climate, Axios' Amy Harder reported.

•The UN's annual conference will offer the most high-profile moment for the Paris deal since it was signed in 2015.

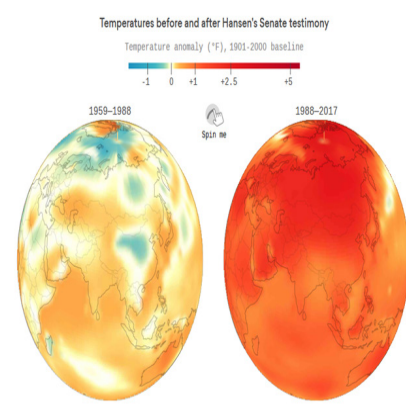
•Trump is also likely to formally withdraw from Paris climate accords the day

after the election.

Related

Special report: A 30-year alarm on the reality of climate change

Three decades have passed since then-NASA scientist James Hansen testified before the Senate Energy committee and alerted the country to the arrival of global warming.



Data: NASA; Goddard Institute for Space Studies; Graphics: Harry Stevens/Axios

Why it matters: The predictions of the world's leading climate scientists have come true, with dire consequence for the planet.

•In the 30-year period prior to Hansen's testimony, the Earth's surface was, on average, less than 0.2°F warmer than the 20th-century average. In the 30 years since, the planet's surface has, on average, undergone a six-fold temperature increase.

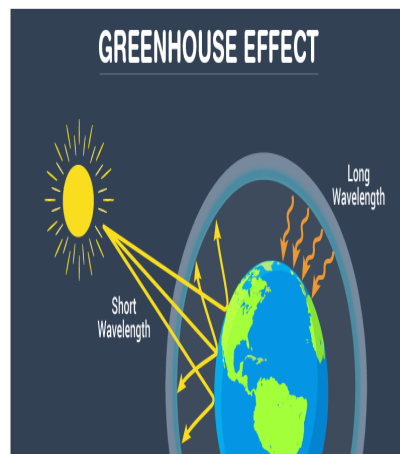
•Hansen's temperature projections weren't exactly on target, since he projected a slightly higher amount of warming than what has occurred, but about two-dozen climate scientists told Axios that overall, his main conclusions were right.

In his June 23, 1988 testimony, Hansen made three key points:

- 1.The Earth has gotten warmer.
- 2.So warm, in fact, that the temperature trend was almost certainly due to the greenhouse effect, which is enhanced by emissions of gases like carbon dioxide and methane from burning fossil fuels.
- 3.As a result, summer heat waves and other extreme weather events will become more common.

“The greenhouse effect has been detect-

ed, and it is changing our climate now,” Hansen said. When he spoke, 1988 was on track to become the hottest year of all-time. Since then, that record has been broken six more times — in 1990, 1998, 2010, 2014, 2015 and 2016.



•In an interview with the Guardian this week, Hansen gave a bleak assessment of the last thirty years. “All we've done is agree there's a problem,” he said. “We haven't acknowledged what is required to solve it.”

Be smart: Uncertainty is often cited as a reason for not addressing climate change, but the longer we go without addressing it, the harder it will be to cut emissions and avert major impacts.

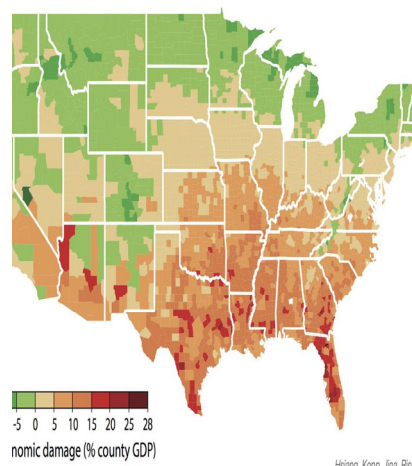
•As Andrea Dutton, a climate scientist at the University of Florida, told Axios:

“The true debate lies in the solutions and in mobilizing the social and political will to act upon our knowledge. Deciding not to act is a choice itself, and one that we cannot correct later. The time to act is always now. Because the longer we wait, the worse the outcomes will be.”

Where climate change will hit the U.S. hardest

Left unmitigated, rising temperatures from climate change will increase inequality and mortality rates in the U.S. by the end of the 21st century, a team of economists and climate scientists warn in a study published today. It's the first to project the impacts of climate change on individual counties in the U.S. Many of those predicted to be hit hardest are in fast-growing Arizona, Texas, and Flori-

da.



Climate change will hit the South and Midwest the hardest

Local differences: If steps are not taken to lessen the rate of warming from climate change, counties in the South and lower Midwest — which on average tend to already be poorer and warmer — may lose as much as 20% of their income and may experience higher mortality rates. However, areas of the Pacific Northwest, the Great Lakes region and New England — which on average tend to be wealthier and cooler — could benefit economically from the change and see lower mortality rates. (Courtesy axios.com)

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