

TOPOF THE WORLD



Jussie Smollett stars in the TV show *Empire*

USA
TV star Jussie Smollett attacked in ‘hate crime’ in Chicago

JUSSIE SMOLLETT, one of the stars of the television show *Empire*, was attacked by two assailants in Chicago early Tuesday morning, an incident being investigated as “a possible hate crime,” according to police. Smollett, who is black and publicly came out as gay in 2015, was walking on a down-town street when two people approached him and yelled racial and homophobic slurs, according to police. The attackers then began hitting Smollett in the face and poured an “unknown chemical substance” on him. One of the perpetrators also wrapped a rope around Smollett’s neck before the duo fled.

PAKISTAN
90 held over Asia Bibi protests

Lahore: Over 90 members of headline religious parties have been arrested from different parts of Pakistan’s Punjab province for holding demonstrations against the Supreme Court’s decision to reject a review plea against the acquittal of Christian woman Asia Bibi in a blasphemy case. Punjab Police spokesperson Nabila Ghazanfar said that most arrests have been made from Lahore, Gujranwala and Rawalpindi. “Police have arrested more than 90 activists of different religious parties... on Tuesday and Wednesday for creating law and order situation,” Ghazanfar said.

SOUTH KOREA
President’s ally jailed over opinion rigging

Seoul: A political ally of South Korean President Moon Jae-in on Wednesday received a two-year prison term for his involvement in an on-line opinion rigging scandal. The conviction of South Gyeongsang Gov Kim Kyoung-soo is a blow to Moon, a liberal who is struggling to revive stalled negotiations on North Korea’s nuclear programme and address diverse economic woes at home. The Seoul Central District Court said that Kim was immediately arrested after his conviction.

CHINA
Wife of jailed activist banned from visiting him

Beijing: China says it has banned the wife of a Taiwanese human rights activist jailed in China from visiting him for three months due to alleged improper behaviour. A statement Wednesday from the spokesman of the Cabinet’s Taiwan Affairs Office, Ma Xiaoguang, says Lee Ching-yu had made false statements and “interfered with prison operations” during a visit last month. Lee’s husband, Lee Ming-che, is serving a five-year prison sentence.

VENEZUELA CRISIS

Maduro ready to negotiate with Oppn, calls for early parliamentary elections

Top court bars Opposition leader from leaving Venezuela

AGENCIES
MOSCOW, CARACAS, JANUARY 30

VENEZUELA’S PRESIDENT Nicolas Maduro said he was prepared to hold negotiations with the US-backed Opposition and added he would support early parliamentary elections, *RIA Novosti* reported on Wednesday. “I am ready to sit down at the negotiating table with the Opposition so that we could talk for the good of Venezuela,” Maduro told the Russian state news agency in Caracas. Last week the oil-rich but economically devastated Latin American country was plunged into uncertainty when the US-backed Opposition leader Juan Guaido proclaimed himself “acting president”. The United States, a dozen Latin American countries and Canada have recognised Guaido as interim president.



After the Maduro government opened a criminal probe against Opposition leader Juan Guaido (right), the Supreme Court froze all economic assets of the latter. *Reuters*



In the interview with *RIA Novosti*, Maduro also said he would support early parliamentary elections. At the same time, he dismissed the possibility of holding a new presidential poll any time soon. “Presidential elections in Venezuela have taken place, and if imperialists want new elections let them wait until 2025,” he said in an apparent reference to the US. The embattled leader claimed that US President Donald Trump

had ordered the government of Colombia to assassinate him. “If something happens to me one day then Donald Trump and Colombian President Ivan Duque will be responsible for everything that is happening to me,” he said. Meanwhile, Venezuela’s Supreme Court barred Guaido from leaving the country, a move certain to heighten tensions as the US warned of “serious consequences” if he is harmed. The government-stacked

EXPLAINED
US sanctions will weaken Maduro; they may also worsen crisis

VENEZUELA HAS the world’s largest proven oil reserves, and around 90 per cent of the government’s revenue comes from oil exports, according to the *New York Times*. With US sanctions on the Venezuela’s state-run oil company stopping the Maduro regime from being paid for oil sales in the US, the already cash-strapped country could face an even bigger economic crisis which could further worsen living conditions for normal Venezuelans. The US intends to redirect the money from Venezuelan oil sales to Opposition leader Juan Guaido, who Washington has recognised as the president of Venezuela. However, in Caracas, Maduro still has control over state institutions such as the security forces and courts. It remains unclear how, or if, Guaido will be able to spend the oil money to ease the economic crisis, which had originally helped to trigger a political face-off in the country. The broader crisis in Venezuela is unlikely to be resolved by a worsening of the economic situation.

court announced the order just hours after chief prosecutor Tarek William Saab announced that he was opening a criminal investiga-

tion into Guaido’s anti-government activities. The court also froze all of Guaido’s financial assets, as requested by Saab.

Pak-backed groups will continue attacks in India, Afghanistan, says US intel chief

LALIT K JHA
WASHINGTON, JANUARY 30

MILITANT GROUPS supported by Pakistan, which uses some terror outfits as “policy tools”, will continue to plan and conduct attacks in India and Afghanistan, according to the US’ top intelligence official. Remarks by Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats came as he and heads of other top American intelligence agencies appeared on Tuesday before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on their worldwide threat assessment. Coats said Pakistan’s “narrow approach to counterterrorism cooperation — using some groups as policy tools and confronting only the militant groups that directly threaten Pakistan — almost certainly will frustrate US counterterrorism efforts against the Taliban.” “Militant groups supported by Pakistan will continue to take advantage of their safe haven in Pakistan to plan and conduct attacks in India and Afghanistan, including against US interests,” Coats told the members of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Coats was accompanied by CIA Director Gina Haspel, FBI Director Christopher Wray and Defence Intelligence Agency Director Robert Ashley. The comment on South Asia is part of the US intelligence community’s assessment of threats in 2019 and was presented to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence by Coats. **PTI**

Trump calls intel officials passive and naive over Iran threats

Washington: US President Donald Trump on Wednesday called top US intelligence chiefs “extremely passive and naive” on Iran and dismissed their assessments of the threat posed by North Korea a day after they contradicted his views during congressional testimony. Leaders of the US intelligence community told a Senate committee on Tuesday that the nuclear threat from North Korea remained and that Iran was not taking steps toward making a nuclear bomb, drawing conclusions that contrasted starkly with Trump’s assessments of those countries. “The intelligence people seem to be extremely passive and naive when it comes to the dangers of Iran. They are wrong!” Trump said in a Twitter post. Trump cited Iranian rocket launches and said that Tehran was “coming very close to the edge”. “Perhaps Intelligence should go back to school!” Trump said. Trump last year pulled out of an international nuclear deal with Iran put in place under his Democratic predecessor Barack Obama, saying Tehran was “not living up to the spirit” of the agreement, and re-imposed sanctions. The US intelligence officials told the Senate Intelligence Committee that Iran was not developing nuclear weapons in violation of agreement. **REUTERS**



POLLUTION: BANGKOK SHUTS SCHOOLS

Students wear masks as they wait to be picked up from a public school in Bangkok on Wednesday. Choking air pollution has prompted schools to close in the Thai capital for the rest of the week and people celebrating next week’s Lunar New Year holiday were urged to curb the use of incense and fireworks. *Reuters*

Kamala Harris CNN town hall sets TV viewership record

LALIT K JHA
WASHINGTON, JANUARY 30

INDIAN-ORIGIN PRESIDENTIAL hopeful Kamala Harris’s town hall on CNN with an average of 1.957 million viewers got the network its highest ratings ever for such an event with an individual election candidate, according to the network. Harris, 54, who was elected to the Senate in 2016, announced her run for presidency last week. She has been voted on top of the list of Democratic



Kamala Harris announced her decision last week to run for the presidency in 2020

leaders aspiring to defeat President Donald Trump in the November 2020 election.

MEANWHILE
ALGORITHM To ‘De-Bias’ DATA FOR AI

Scientists at MIT have developed an algorithm that they say can automatically identify and minimise any hidden biases in the data used by artificial intelligence systems. In tests, the algorithm decreased “categorical bias” by over 60 per cent compared to state-of-the-art facial detection models — while simultaneously maintaining the overall precision of these systems, they said.



British PM Theresa May in Parliament on Tuesday. *Reuters*

British MPs instruct May to change Brexit deal, but EU says no

Lawmakers junk bid to give Parliament more control to avoid no-deal divorce

KYLIE MACLELLAN, WILLIAM JAMES & ELIZABETH PIPER
LONDON, JANUARY 30

BRITISH LAWMAKERS on Tuesday instructed Prime Minister Theresa May to reopen a Brexit treaty with the European Union to replace a controversial Irish border arrangement — and promptly received a flat rejection from Brussels. Two weeks after overwhelmingly rejecting May’s Brexit deal, Parliament backed a proposal intended to send her back to Brussels with a stronger mandate to seek changes that were more likely to win their support. At the same time, they rejected a proposal to give Parliament a path to prevent a potentially chaotic ‘no-deal’ exit by making May ask Brussels for a delay if she cannot get a deal through Parliament. With two months left until Britain is due by law to leave the EU, investors and allies have urged the government to clinch a deal to allow an orderly exit from the club it joined in 1973. “Tonight, a majority of honourable members have said they would support a deal with changes to the backstop,” May said, only two weeks after her divorce deal was crushed in the biggest parliamentary defeat in modern British history. “It is now clear that there is a route that can secure a substantial and sustainable majority in the house for leaving the EU with a deal,” May said, adding she would seek “legally binding changes”.

The proposal, put forward by influential Conservative lawmaker Graham Brady and passed by 317 votes to 301, called for the backstop to be replaced with unspecified “alternative arrangements”, and said Parliament would support May’s Brexit deal if such a change was made. However, Brussels has repeatedly said it does not want to reopen a treaty signed off by the other 27 EU leaders. Speaking immediately after the vote in Parliament, a spokesman for European Council President Donald Tusk said the backstop was part of the withdrawal deal and not up for negotiation, a stance echoed by the Irish government. “This is a deal which was negotiated with the UK, by the UK, signed off by the UK and the Prime Minister — and now it looks as though this evening, essentially, there is a row-back and a renegeing on the commitments that were made,” said Irish European Affairs minister Helen McEntee. French President Emmanuel Macron’s office said there could be no renegotiation and demanded a “credible” British proposal. If the British Parliament cannot find a majority for a way forward, the UK will leave the largest global trading bloc without any deal, a scenario that businesses fear will bring chaos to the world’s fifth biggest economy. Neither May nor her ministers spelled out what compromises she would seek from the EU, but suggestions include a time limit to the backstop or allowing a unilateral exit clause. **REUTERS**

Grenade thrown into Philippine mosque kills 2

ASSOCIATED PRESS
ZAMBOANGA, JANUARY 30

A GRENADE was thrown into a mosque in the southern Philippines where Muslim teachers were sleeping early Wednesday morning, killing two of them and injuring four, authorities said. It was the second explosion at a religious site in the south this week, though authorities didn’t see it as retaliation for the bombings of a Roman Catholic cathedral in nearby Jolo during Sunday Mass that killed 21 people.

Regional police Chief Superintendent Emmanuel Luis D. Licup said investigators are trying to determine the motive and identity of the suspect in the grenade attack at the mosque in Zamboanga city. The victims were from Basilan and nearby provinces at the mosque to teach Islam to children. Military Col Leonel M Nicolas emphasised the grenade blast was not a retaliatory act and was still under investigation. Licup said a personal grudge was among the possible motives.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Age of weather extremes: US Midwest freezes as Australia burns

SOMINI SENGUPTA
NEW YORK, JANUARY 30

IN CHICAGO, officials warned about the risk of almost instant frostbite on what could be the city’s coldest day ever. Warming centres opened around the Midwest. And schools and universities closed throughout the region as rare polar winds streamed down from the Arctic. At the same time, on the other side of the planet, wildfires raged in Australia’s record-breaking heat. Soaring air-conditioner use overloaded electrical grids and caused widespread power failures. Authorities slowed and cancelled trams to save power. Labour leaders called for laws that would require businesses to close when temperatures reached hazardous levels: nearly 47 degrees Celsius, as was the

case last week in Adelaide, the capital of South Australia. This is weather in the age of extremes. It comes on top of multiple extremes, all kinds, in all kinds of places. “When something happens — whether it’s a cold snap, a wildfire, a hurricane, any of those things — we need to think beyond what we have seen in the past and assume there’s a high probability that it will be worse than anything we’ve ever seen,” said Crystal A Kolden, an associate professor at the University of Idaho, who specialises in wildfires and who is working in Tasmania during one of the state’s worst fire seasons. Consider these recent examples: Heat records were toppled from Norway to Algeria last year. In Australia, a drought has gone on so long that a child in kindergarten will hardly have seen rain in her



A pedestrian stops to take a photo by Chicago River. *Reuters*

lifetime. And California saw its most ruinous wildfires ever in 2018, triggering a bankruptcy filing this week by the state’s largest utility, Pacific Gas and Electric. Is it climate change? Heat and drought extremes are consistent with scientific con-

sensus: More greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere bring a greater likelihood of abnormally high temperatures. Also, broadly speaking, scientists say, a hotter planet makes extreme weather more frequent and more intense. The real-life numbers bear

out the climate models. Concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere are higher than they have been in 800,000 years, and average global temperatures have risen. The last four years have been the hottest on record, according to the World Meteorological Organisation, and the 20 warmest years on record have all come in the past 22 years. Ocean temperatures have broken records several straight years. As for the extremely low temperatures this week in parts of the US, they stand in sharp contrast to the trend toward warmer winters. They may also be a result of warming, strangely enough. Emerging research suggests that a warming Arctic is causing changes in the jet stream and pushing polar air down to latitudes that are unaccustomed to them and often unprepared. Hence this week’s atypical chill

over large swaths of the Northeast and Midwest. Friederike Otto, an Oxford University climate scientist who studies how specific weather events are exacerbated by global warming, said that while not all of these extreme events can be attributed to climate change, the profound changes in the Earth’s atmosphere raise “the likelihood of a large number of extreme events”. “This means it becomes crucial to understand well where your community is vulnerable, and this can be something that was not on the agenda without climate change,” she said. Take Chicago, for instance. It woke up to the hazards of heat two decades ago, when a five-day heat wave in the summer of 1995 killed hundreds of people, particularly those who lived alone. The city developed a heat action plan. It planted thou-

sands of trees, set up neighbourhood cooling centres and created a text messaging system so residents could request that city officials check on vulnerable people. Now comes a cold spell that a generation of Chicago residents has never experienced, with Wednesday night temperatures projected to dip to minus 24 degrees Fahrenheit (the city’s record low is 27 degrees below zero, recorded in January 1985). The city said it would send out five buses to cruise the streets as mobile warming centres for homeless people. It has issued instructions on how to warm pipes so they don’t freeze. Extreme heat, though, is the bigger problem overall. Heat records have been broken twice as often as cold records in the United States since the 2000s. **NYT**

