



ASHTON KUTCHER SHARES PHONE NUMBER ON SOCIAL MEDIA TO HAVE 'REAL CONNECTION', BUT DELETES IT SOON AFTER

ARIANA GRANDE'S LATEST JAPANESE TATTOO CONTAINS A MAJOR TYPO: '7 RINGS' GETS SPELLED AS BARBEQUE GRILL

British MPs want divorce deal tweaked, EU says no

Lawmakers Say OK With May's Brexit Pact If Irish Border Provision Revised

Naomi Cantor

London: British Prime Minister Theresa May held talks with leader of the opposition Jeremy Corbyn, European leaders, and Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar on Wednesday afternoon after MPs agreed to accept her Brexit deal if the Irish backstop can be changed.

Corbyn finally agreed to meet the PM to take forward cross-party talks after MPs voted in favour of rejecting a no-deal Brexit on Tuesday. He had refused to participate in them for the past two weeks.

It is not clear when May will head to Brussels to attempt to renegotiate the deal and it is far from clear if the 27 EU member states will agree to reopen the legally binding text. EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier said on Wednesday, "We stand by the agreement we have negotiated with the UK. The EU institutions remain united." Irish deputy PM Simon Coveney said alternatives to the backstop were "wishful thinking".

Leaders across the European Union offered a united chorus of "No" on Wednesday to Britain's belated bid to negotiate changes. "We are, quite simply, running out of road," said Coveney.



PM Theresa May has promised to give MPs a chance to vote on February 14 on what happens should she fail to win a new agreement

"The withdrawal agreement will not be renegotiated," said Jean-Claude Juncker, chief of the European Commission. Juncker told European parliamentarians in Brussels "the withdrawal agreement remains the best and only deal possible".

MPs had voted in favour of the "Brady amendment" by 317 to 301 on Tuesday. Tabled by Tory grandee Graham Brady, it requires the Northern Ireland backstop in the withdrawal agreement to be replaced with "alternative arrangements" in order to avoid a hard border in Ireland.

When asked what the "alternative arrangements" were, May on Wednesday said:

"There are a number of proposals on how it can be done, such as a unilateral exit mechanism or time limit to the backstop or mutual recognition on trusted traders' schemes."

Tuesday's votes did nothing to inspire UK industry. Carolyn Fairbairn, director-general of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), which represents 190,000 businesses in Britain, said: "The Brady amendment feels like a throw of the dice. It won't be worth the paper it is written on if it cannot be negotiated with the EU. Delay will do nothing to lift the threat of an economic cliff edge that is draining money from the UK." If there is no change to the deal,

May will return to the House on February 13 to detail the next steps, which will be debated on February 14.

MPs had voted on seven amendments in the House of Commons to demonstrate which direction the parliament wants to take after MPs overwhelmingly rejected May's Brexit deal on January 15. MPs rejected five of the seven amendments that were voted on. These included Corbyn's amendment for a softer Brexit, which was defeated by 327 to 296, and the Cooper amendment, tabled by Labour MP Yvette Cooper, which called for a nine-month extension to Brexit, causing the pound to fall sharply against the dollar.

A majority of MPs backed an amendment to reject a no-deal Brexit, but this is not binding on the government. The exit date of March 29 is statute law, so would need legislation to be changed.

The 12 PLO MPs voted in line with their party whips on the amendments. Hardline Brexiters Tory MP Priti Patel said: "We must get that clear, legally binding change to the text of the withdrawal agreement. We must leave on March 29 so that we can position ourselves as an outward-looking, global, free-trading country."

China signals it will continue to block India from NSG

Saibal Dasgupta | TNN

Beijing: China signalled on Wednesday that it would continue to block India's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group despite the special rapport struck between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping during the past three meetings starting with the Wuhan talks in April last year.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said there should be no double standards in the application of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. China feels that countries like India, which have not signed the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), should not be admitted to the NSG.

India is not a signatory to the NPT but believes that it has the right to enter the NSG on the basis of its clean non-proliferation record.

"We believe we should conduct wide consultations and look for practical measures by opposing double standards in enforcing the treaty," Geng said without directly mentioning India. The statement comes at the start of a meeting in Beijing of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council to discuss issues related to nuclear disarmament.

"We believe we should enhance its authority and effectiveness, universality and do a better job in preventing nuclear proliferation," Geng said. "We believe that the international community should stick to multilateralism and promote the three pillars, namely non-proliferation, disarmament and peaceful uses of nuclear energy," he said.

Some observers believe that China would try to keep India out of the NSG as long as its close ally, Pakistan, is regarded as unsuitable for NSG membership.

The NSG is a group of nuclear supplier countries that seeks to contribute to non-proliferation of nuclear weapons through the implementation of guidelines for nuclear and nuclear-related exports.

1.9 million watch Harris town hall, a record for channel

Washington: Indian-origin presidential hopeful Kamala Harris' town hall on CNN 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 leaders aspiring to defeat President Donald Trump in the November 2020 election.

Harris, the second African-American woman elected to the US senate, has drawn comparisons to former President Barack Obama since early in her political career.

CNN announced on Tuesday that the broadcast was the most-watched cable news single candidate election town hall, according to Nielsen data. The live event on Monday averaged 1.957 million viewers, a figure far greater than CNN's previous four town halls, which attracted an average audience of 1.119 million each, it said.

Reversal in H-1B lottery order, priority to US degree holders

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The final H-1B cap registration rule, which will reverse the order of the H-1B lottery process, was issued on Wednesday by the US department of homeland security (DHS). As per the rule, the regular lottery will be conducted first, giving those with a US master's (or higher degree) a better chance of winning the H-1B lottery. This will make it more challenging for Indian aspirants without an advanced US degree to get a H-1B visa.

DHS, however, has postponed the implementation of an online registration system.

There are 65,000 H-1B visas available each year, with an additional 20,000 allocated to those with an advanced degree from US colleges (referred to as Masters cap). Currently, the 'Masters' cap lottery is conducted first; cases not selected in this lottery are then placed in the 'Regular' cap lottery for another round of random selection.

Fragomen, a global firm, specialising in immigration laws, in its alert explains, "For the upcoming fiscal 2020 H-1B filing season, which commences on April 1, United States Immigration and Citizenship

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Services (USCIS), will first run the regular H-1B cap lottery to select enough petitions to meet the 65,000 H-1B quota. It will then run a lottery to select enough qualifying petitions to meet the cap exemption of 20,000 for holders of US advanced degrees. The agency estimates that the change will yield a higher proportion of advanced-degree workers, one of the key goals of the Trump Administration's Buy American, Hire American executive order. "The overall annual cap of 85,000 remains unchanged."

Cyrus D Mehta, founding partner of a New York based law firm, told TOI, "The skewing of H-1B visas towards those with master's degrees from US institutions under the new selection methodology is in some senses counter to the H-1B law, which was to permit those with foreign degrees, and equivalent work experience, to qualify for H-1B classification. Hence, a foreign physician with a master's deg-

ree in medicine from a foreign university who intends to provide critical medical services in a shortage area in the US may have less chances of nabbing an H-1B visa under the new proposal."

H-1B visas are popularly used by the Indian tech sector. Mehta adds, "Even a highly skilled IT worker with a bachelor's degree in computer science from a reputed Indian institution such as the Indian Institute of Technology, will have less chance of getting an H-1B in the new proposal. Both the physician and the IT worker with foreign degrees have the potential of making contributions to the US in the same way, or even greater, as one who has recently graduated with an MBA from a US university."

On the flip side, David Nachman, managing attorney at NPZ Law Group points out, "More individuals will end up pursuing higher levels of education in the US."

Full report on www.toi.in

They should go back to school: Trump calls intel chiefs 'naive'

Eileen Sullivan

Washington: US President Donald Trump on Wednesday pushed back against his intelligence chiefs' national security assessments, saying "the Intelligence people seem to be extremely passive and naive when it comes to the dangers of Iran," and he defended his own, more positive appraisals of threats to the US posed by North Korea and the Islamic State. "Perhaps Intelligence should go back to school," Trump said.

In a series of Twitter posts the day after senior American intelligence officials briefed Congress and directly contradicted some of Trump's rosier estimations, the president reasserted his own conclusions and trumpeted his accomplishments on critical national security matters. He said the Islamic State's control in parts of Iraq and Syria "will soon be destroyed," and that there was a "decent chance of Denuclearization" in North Korea.

On Tuesday, top intelligence officials described a different Iran, one that is not currently trying to make a nuclear bomb and appears to be complying with a 2015 agreement, even after Trump last

'Trump privately met Putin during G20'

US President Trump reportedly sat down for a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in November accompanied only by his wife Melania. In a revelation likely to trigger fresh concerns about the Trump's relationship with Moscow, the Financial Times reported that Trump met the Russian leader during the G20 summit in Buenos Aires without any of his translators or aides present. The meeting allegedly occurred at the end of an evening event at the Colon Theatre. As other world leaders and guests left the building, Trump and Melania sat down at a table with Putin and one of his translators. According to a Russian government official quoted by the newspaper, the leaders spoke for around 15 minutes on a range of foreign policy issues, including the Syrian conflict and an incident in the Azov Sea earlier in November in which Ukrainian sailors were fired on and detained by Russia. THE INDEPENDENT

year promised to withdraw from it. On Syria, intelligence officials said the Islamic State would go on "to stoke violence" with thousands of fighters there and in Iraq, and with 12 networks around the world. Regarding North Korea, they said Pyongyang was not likely to permanently shed itself of nuclear weapons—contradicting a prediction Trump has made based on what he has called the "best" relationship the two nations have ever had.

"It's deeply dangerous that the White House isn't listening," Representative Adam B Schiff, Democrat of California and chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, said in a Twitter post Wednesday morning. The threat assessment—an annual report to Congress that ranks threats to American national security from around the world—provides the public with an unclassified and up-to-date summary of the most pressing national security threats to the US.

It was not the first time the president has split with senior intelligence officials on national security assessments. Before he took office in 2017, he was publicly skeptical of intelligence conclusions that Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential election, and he mocked intelligence agencies for their role in the lead-up to the Iraq war. NYT

'FB paid teens \$20 to access their data'

New York: Facebook paid users, including teens, to track their smartphone activity as part of an effort to glean more data that could help the firm's competition efforts, according to a new report.

On Tuesday, TechCrunch reported that Facebook was paying \$20 a month to users aged 13 to 35 to install an app called Facebook Research. The app used Apple's business tools to ask for an iPhone user's permission to install VPN software onto their devices which would then track what it did, with "nearly limitless access". That included seeing kids' private messages, watching them as they used the internet and tracking browsing habits.

Apple said on Wednesday that it had banned Facebook from distributing the app. Facebook said the programme was being wrongly represented and that it had secured users' permission. AGENCIES

Aide jailed for faking 'likes' to help S Korea prez

Seoul: A top confidant of South Korea's President Moon Jae-in was jailed for two years on Wednesday under a computer crime law for posting fake "likes" on online posts favourable to Moon during his election campaign.

The sentence for Kim Kyung-soo deals another blow to Moon, who faces plunging ratings, economic woes and accusations of corruption against some aides and political allies.

The prosecution said Kim, with the help of a blogger, used automatic clicking software to boost "likes" on various postings and thereby interfere in the 2017 presidential polls. Kim, touted by some as a future presidential candidate, denied the charge, YTN reported. Moon's spokesman said the sentence was "never expected". REUTERS

AMERICA IN A DEEP FREEZE



A blast of Arctic air from the polar vortex is bringing dangerous, bone-chilling cold to a wide swath of the US

Chicago To Be Colder Than Parts Of Antarctica
Temperature may dip below all-time record of -32.7 °C while Priestley Glacier in Antarctica will have a Wednesday high temperature of -14.4 °C

FROSTBITE IN 5 MINS In Minnesota, that any exposed skin could get frostbite in as little as 5 minutes

FLIGHTS CANCELLED Over 2,700 flights across United States cancelled
DON'T TALK TOO MUCH Weather officials in Iowa have warned people to 'avoid taking deep breaths, and to minimise talking' if they go outside

212M people will see temp drop below freezing

5 people reported dead due to the extreme weather

CHICAGO POLICE SAY PEOPLE ARE BEING ROBBED AT GUNPOINT OF THEIR COATS

FIRE AND ICE Chicago's Metra rail authority is using fire to heat up tracks to ensure trains can run smoothly

Maduro says Trump out to kill him, Russia seeks talks

Caracas/Moscow: Venezuela's socialist leader Nicolas Maduro accused US President Donald Trump of ordering his assassination while his main global backer Russia called on Wednesday for mediation in a standoff deepening geopolitical splits.

The fight to control Venezuela, which has the world's largest oil reserves, has intensified with new US sanctions and legal moves that may bring the arrest of opposition leader and self-declared interim president Juan Guaido.

In an interview with Moscow's RIA news agency, Maduro, 56, facing the biggest challenge to his rule since replacing Hugo Chavez six ye-

ars ago, said Trump had ordered neighbouring Colombia to murder him. "Donald Trump has without doubt given an order to kill me and has told the government of Colombia and the Colombian mafia to kill me," he said, replying a constant accusation of his and Chavez's over the years.

Bogota and Washington have routinely denied that, while does say Maduro uses such accusations as a smokescreen when in trouble. However, speculation of military action against him was fuelled this week when Trump adviser John Bolton carried a notepad with the words "5,000

troops to Colombia".

In an early morning tweet, Trump warned US citizens against travelling to Venezuela, given the unrest. Russia, which like China has

loaned and invested billions of dollars in OPEC member Venezuela, called on Guaido to drop his demand for a snap election and instead accept mediation.

Meanwhile, Venezuela's Supreme Court has imposed a travel ban on Guaido and frozen his bank accounts in apparent retaliation for oil sanctions imposed by the United States that are expected to severely hit an already collapsing economy. REUTERS

A 14-year-old tried to warn Apple it had a problem

Nicole Perloff

San Francisco: On January 19, Grant Thompson, a 14-year-old in Arizona, made a discovery: Using FaceTime, Apple's video chatting software, he could eavesdrop on his friend's phone before his friend had even answered the call. His mother, Michele Thompson, sent a video of the hack to Apple the next day, warning the company of a "major security flaw". On Friday, Apple's product security team encouraged Thompson, a lawyer, to set up a developer account to send a formal



Grant Thompson, a 14-year-old in Arizona, discovered that he could eavesdrop on his friend's phone using FaceTime on January 19

bug report. But it wasn't until Monday, more than a week after

Thompson first notified Apple of the problem, that Apple disabled Group FaceTime and said it was working on a fix.

The bug, and Apple's slow response to patching it, have renewed concerns about the firm's commitment to security. Hours before Apple's statement addressing the bug on Monday, Tim Cook, the firm's CEO tweeted that "we all must insist on action and reform for vital privacy protections".

Security expert say Apple's security team should have known better. Rarely is there a software flaw that grants such

high-level remote access and is so easy to manipulate. ZBut the company has not addressed how the flaw passed through quality assurance, why it was so slow to respond to Thompson's warnings, or whether it intends to reward her for alerting the firm to the bug in the first place.

There is actually a healthy market for bugs and the code to weaponise them, which allow governments, defence contractors and cybercriminals to invisibly spy on people's devices without their knowledge. The FaceTime flaw, and other

Apple bugs, can fetch millions of dollars, from dozens of brokers. Brokers sell those bugs for higher sums to governments and intelligence and law enforcement agencies around the world. Some sell the tools on the dark web to the highest bidder.

In part to compete in that market, and reward those who do right by the company by notifying it of potentially lucrative bugs, Apple announced its own bounty programme in 2016—the last of the Silicon Valley companies to do so. NYT NEWS SERVICE

AROUND THE WORLD

Dutch allow church asylum family to stay

A Dutch church said on Wednesday it will finally halt a marathon three-month-long religious service aimed at stopping the expulsion of an Armenian family after a parliamentary deal allowing them to stay. The Tamrazyan family has been sheltering at the Bethel church in The Hague since October, fighting their deportation by taking advantage of a Dutch law that authorities cannot enter while a service is underway. On Tuesday the ruling four-party coalition reached a hard-fought deal over so-called "children pardons" for young deportees. The church on Wednesday "is stopping the continuous services held since October 26", said Theo Hettema, a member of the church's management



ROYAL TREATMENT: Duchess of Cambridge Kate Middleton greets young girls during a visit to Scottish town Dundee on Wednesday

see-through clothes, flesh-coloured tights, etc", according to state news agency Xinhua

Little blue penguins stolen from New Zealand nest
Three little blue penguins have been stolen from their burrow in New Zealand. One of the penguins died in the process and was left behind, but two were taken away, conservation officials said. Two men were seen using a crowbar to prise rocks off the burrow of the smallest breed of penguin. They then hooked the birds out by their neck, the BBC reported. The theft was carried out on January 24. The depart-

ment of conservation said it was not clear where the birds were taken to and the suspects have not yet been identified.

'Lord Voldemort' insurance agent jailed in Singapore
A disgruntled insurance agent who took on the identity of "Lord Voldemort", Harry Potter's nemesis, and threatened to harm clients unless they paid him bitcoins has been jailed in Singapore. Myanmar national Ye Lin Myint targeted several clients after they missed appointments or cancelled insurance policies, according to court documents.