

TOP OF THE WORLD



Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had ordered the crackdown

SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi anti-graft sweep ends, govt 'recovers' \$106 billion'

Riyadh: Saudi Arabia's unprecedented anti-corruption sweep that saw top princes, businessmen, military officers and officials detained at the Ritz-Carlton hotel has concluded after netting the government around \$106.6 billion, the Royal Court said Wednesday. The Royal Court said the work of an anti-corruption committee formed to oversee the sweep headed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had concluded its work after summoning or questioning 381 people. The recovered assets from settlements with 87 people include cash, real estate, businesses and securities, according to the Royal Court announcement.

USA

Hindu temple vandalised in hate crime

Washington: In a hate crime, a Hindu temple has been vandalised in the US state of Kentucky by miscreants who sprayed black paint on the deity and wrote repugnant messages on the walls. The incident happened between Sunday night and Tuesday morning at the Swaminarayan Temple in the Louisville city, authorities said. There are no suspects but an investigation is ongoing, police said. Temple officials said no video of the incident is available.

BRITAIN

No holiday for MPs as Brexit clock ticks down

London: The British government said Thursday it was scrapping MPs' February holiday in the rush to get ready for Brexit on March 29, but hinted it may need extra time amid chaos and confusion over strategy. In a rare move, MPs were warned to ditch their holiday plans in order to cram through vital legislation over the next two months as Britain careers towards the EU exit door after 46 years of membership. British MPs have not had their holidays pulled since they were recalled from their 2013 summer break to debate the escalating conflict in Syria.

TAIWAN

Dissidents stuck in airport let in after 125 days

Taipei: Two Chinese activists who spent more than four months trapped in limbo at a Taiwanese airport have been temporarily allowed to stay on the island, officials said Thursday. Liu Xinglian, 64, and Yan Kefen, 44, spent 125 days marooned in the transit area of Taoyuan airport after they arrived from Bangkok in September last year. The pair ran from China because of their political activism and were granted refugee status by the UN in Thailand.

EU Parliament recognises Guaido as Venezuelan interim president

Oppn had clandestine meetings with military, Guaido says; Caracas arrests 5 foreign journalists

AGENCIES

BRUSSELS, JANUARY 31

THE EUROPEAN Parliament recognised Venezuela's self-declared interim president Juan Guaido as the de-facto head of state on Thursday, a symbolic step that lawmakers said was designed to keep pressure on President Nicolas Maduro.

EU lawmakers voted in a non-binding resolution to recognise Guaido as interim leader and called on all EU governments to follow suit.

"From Europe, we can help change the Venezuelan regime and make it known that tyrants will never enlighten any democratic possibility," Spanish centre-right EU lawmaker Esteban Gonzalez Pons said in a statement.

In an opinion piece published on Wednesday in the *New York Times*, Guaido said Venezuela's Opposition has had clandestine meetings with members of the country's military and security forces.

"The transition will require support from key military contingents. We have had clandestine meetings with members of the armed forces and the security forces," Guaido wrote. "The



Venezuelan Opposition leader and self-proclaimed interim president Juan Guaido takes part in a protest against President Nicolas Maduro in Caracas on Wednesday. Reuters

military's withdrawal of support from Mr Maduro is crucial to enabling a change in government."

Meanwhile, EU diplomatic chief Federica Mogherini on Thursday called for the immediate release of journalists arrested in Venezuela as part of a crackdown on foreign media.

"Our request is for them to be immediately released," Mogherini told reporters in Bucharest, where EU foreign ministers will discuss the Venezuela crisis.

Five foreign journalists, including two from France and

one from Spain, have been held in Venezuela this week, and two more, from Chile, have been deported.

Ahead of the Bucharest meeting, Britain's Foreign Minister Jeremy Hunt said he would press his EU colleagues for new sanctions against what he called Venezuelan "kleptocrats" as a way to step up pressure on Maduro.

Guaido himself has called for more EU sanctions targeting the Maduro regime. No quick decision is expected as the legal basis for any sanctions would take some time to prepare.

Maduro turns to special police force to crush dissent

ANA VANESSA HERRERO & NICHOLAS CASEY
CARACAS, JANUARY 31

IN THE face of the unfolding crisis in Venezuela, President Nicolas Maduro has hit back hard at his opponents, sending out security forces to crush dissent in deadly operations that have alarmed even some of the President's traditional supporters.

But while Venezuela's armed forces have publicly declared their allegiance to Maduro, they have not taken the muscular role they have in the past. When months of chaotic demonstrations arose against Maduro two years ago, it was largely the National Guard that squelched dissent with batons and bullets, with protesters prosecuted in military courts.

But this time, in a potential sign of the strained loyalties inside the military, much of the crackdown has been entrusted

to a relatively new national police unit Maduro created to conduct raids on gang groups in Venezuela's slums.

Now, the unit appears to have his political opponents in its sights. Known as the Special Actions Force, or FAES, it is being sent to work as Maduro's enforcer in the poor neighbourhoods that once supported him but have turned against him, according to rights groups, former government officials and lawmakers.

At least 40 people have been killed in the latest round of protests against Maduro, largely in nightly raids in poor neighbourhoods involving the special police unit, human rights groups say.

The involvement of the special police unit is especially worrisome, human rights advocates say, because the unit was created to put down armed gangs or rescue hostages, not to control crowds of protesters in a peaceful manner. **NYT**



ARCTIC FREEZE KILLS 12 IN US

Snow crews remove snow in Bismarck, North Dakota, on Wednesday. The blast of Arctic air that brought record-breaking cold, causing at least 12 deaths and cancelling or delaying thousands of flights in the US Midwest, spread eastward on Thursday, bringing frigid misery to the Northeast. A forecast for warmer weather by the weekend offered little comfort to those enduring icy conditions, brutal winds and temperatures as low as minus 34 degrees Celsius. **AP**

Six Indians arrested as 'pay to stay' visa racket busted in US

REENIVAS JANYALA
HYDERABAD, JANUARY 31

THE US Department of Homeland Security has arrested at least six Indians for committing visa and immigration fraud allowing Indian students to stay and work illegally in the US.

The six now face deportation. The arrests were the result of a two-year long undercover operation in which agents of

Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) set up a fake university to investigate and identify those indulging in immigration fraud. HSI has charged them with facilitating the entry of Indians, who intend to live and work in the US without work permits, on student visas.

An indictment filed in the court of Eastern District of Michigan alleges that the six Indians — Bharath Kakireddy, 29, of Lake Mary, Florida; Suresh

Indians arrested for aiding foreigners to remain in the US illegally by enrolling them in a fake university — which, unbeknownst to them, was set up by US investigators as part of an undercover operation

Reddy Kandala, 31, of Culpeper, Virginia; Phanideep Karnati, 35, of Louisville, Kentucky; Prem Kumar Rampeesa, 26, of Charlotte, North Carolina; Santosh Reddy Sama, 28, of

Fremont, California, and Avinash Thakkallapally, 28, of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania — assisted at least 600 students to "illegally remain, re-enter and work in the US and actively recruited them to enrol



A US government report says Afghan security forces are shrinking and the Taliban are largely holding their own despite a surge in American bombing. **AP**

Kabul control slips in Afghanistan amid US talks with Taliban

ROD NORDLAND
KABUL, JANUARY 31

THE AFGHAN government's control of its country declined late last year, in terms of both territory and population, according to a US government report released Thursday.

The report, by the agency of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) said that as of October 31, the Afghan government controlled territory on which 63.5 per cent of its population lived, a decrease of 1.7 per cent from the previous quarter, while gains by the Taliban insurgency gave it control over territory that is home to 10.8 per cent of the population.

The agency's statistics are based on data provided by the US military under a mandate to report to Congress quarterly.

In addition, the Afghan government lost control of seven more districts during the last quarter, meaning that only 53.8 per cent of districts were "controlled or influenced" by the government, while 12.3 per cent of the districts were under insurgent control or influence and 33.9 per cent of districts were contested.

John Sopko, the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, whose agency issued the report, said, "It's like moving the goal posts, something we've seen a lot of over the last few years."

In response to the report, the US military said that such metrics, which have been compiled quarterly for many years, were no longer important and might be based on faulty analysis.

The report comes as US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad has been leading talks with Taliban, and last week reached a preliminary agreement with them on a framework that would call for US troop withdrawals in exchange for as-

EXPLAINED

Afghan military may not be able to cope if US pulls out troops

KABUL ESTIMATES that 45,000 Afghan security personnel have died since 2014. This has resulted in a steep decline in the number of Afghan troops, as many have deserted and few civilians are willing to enlist. With a new report saying Kabul has lost control of even more parts of the country to the Taliban, a proposed withdrawal of US troops would make it very difficult for the Afghan forces to fend off the militants. US-Taliban peace talks have made progress in recent days, with the Taliban tentatively agreeing to stop terror groups from attacking the US from Afghanistan. But the militants have repeatedly refused to talk to the Afghan government, raising fears of a return to Taliban dominance in the country.

surances that terrorists would not be allowed to use Afghanistan as a base of operations.

The latest SIGAR report also expressed concern at the declining size of the Afghan security forces, which it said had 3,635 fewer personnel compared with the previous quarter. With a total of 308,693 personnel, the security forces are at 87.7 per cent of their authorised strength, the report said, the lowest since 2015. **NYT**

were promised money for enrolling students.

The fake university had no staff, no teachers, no curriculum, and no educational activities were conducted there, and no students attended it.

According to the indictment, the recruiters and students who enrolled and paid tuition fees to the university were fully aware that they will never go to the university to study or attend classes. **—WITH PTI INPUTS**

NUMBER OF NEWBORNS IN CHINA DROPPED BY TWO MILLION LAST YEAR

Low birth rate: China urged to legitimise unmarried women's babies

KJM VARMA
BEIJING, JANUARY 31

A SINGLE Chinese woman has asked lawmakers to legalise children of unmarried women to tide over the problem of low fertility rate, which has been haunting China, the world's most populous nation, after the number of newborns dropped by two million last year despite the government permitting two children since 2016.

China's two-child policy implemented in 2016 has failed to make an impact on the country's low birth rate as the number of new-borns dropped by two million last year in the world's most populous nation, recent figures from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) revealed.

After China implemented the comprehensive two-child policy that allows all couples to have two children — abandoning its decades-long one-child policy — in 2016, the country's health authority predicted that the fertility rate in 2017 and 2018 would be 1.97 and 2.09

Zhang Ahlan (pseudonym), 27, from Beijing has proposed that children of unmarried women be legitimised which was strongly opposed by some experts, state-run *Global Times* reported on Thursday.

Zhang said that she sent letters to 64 deputies of the National People's Congress (NPC) saying they cannot freeze their eggs or apply for sperm from the sperm bank or use artificially assisted reproductive technology to get pregnant. The letters sent by Zhang



Modern China's birth rate fell to its lowest last year. Reuters

early this month to NPC Deputies were mostly from China's Jilin Province as Jilin is

the only province in the country that officially allows unmarried women above legal age to

get pregnant.

However, it is allowed under certain conditions, including having a Jilin household registration and remaining single for life.

She is yet to receive a response, the report said.

The NPC, which is China's Parliament, is due to hold its annual session from March 5.

Currently, single Chinese women's right to give birth to children falls under a grey area of the law, the report said.

In China, single women are deridingly called "leftover women". According to unofficial figures, China has about 200 million single adults.

Zhang's proposal has been strongly opposed by many who say it is irresponsible to legitimise single women's children, the paper reported.

"It might lead to children living in single families," Liu Changqiu, a health law expert and research fellow at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, was quoted as saying by the paper.

The steady increase in old age population raised concerns over mounting costs of health care for the elderly and the shortage of labour in the world's second-largest economy, which is also facing a slowdown.

A total of 15.23 million babies were born last year in China, a drop by about two million from that of 2017, the data by the NBS said.

It marks the second consecutive year of a decrease in birth rate since the country relaxed its family planning policy and fully implemented the universal second-child policy since 2016.

The birth rate also dropped from 1,243 to 1,094 per 100,000 population from 2017 to 2018, the paper said, quoting the NBS data.

The number of women between the ages of 20 and 39 is expected to drop by more than 39 million over the next decade, He Yafu, a demographer and author of a book on the impact of China's population policy, was quoted as saying in a report early this month.

Chai Zhenwu, president of the China Population Association, said that the number of people born will continue to fall over the next few years.

Recent reports also said China plans to completely abandon the birth control policy to encourage people to have more children, to correct the demographic imbalance. **PTI**