

I FELT IT (RACISM) QUITE STRONGLY. I'VE BEEN DISCRIMINATED AGAINST BECAUSE OF THE COLOUR OF MY SKIN  
YALITZA APARICIO, Mexican actress, who starred in the award-winning film Roma

photooftheday



Visitors admire Rembrandt's Night Watch, part of an exhibition to mark the 350th anniversary of the Dutch master's death, in Amsterdam on Wednesday.

shortstories

PAKISTAN VOWS 'MASSIVE' SOCIAL MEDIA CRACKDOWN TO CURB HATE SPEECH

ISLAMABAD: Pakistani authorities on Wednesday vowed to carry out a "massive" crackdown targeting hate speech and extremism on social media, as a minister boasted arrests have already been made. Information minister Fawad Chaudhry announced the government was setting up a new enforcement arm to regulate social media. "We made some arrests last week and we are launching a massive crackdown against social media users spreading hate speech and violence," he said. "Our problem is that digital media is overtaking formal media, so it is important for us to regulate this," Chaudhry said, adding, "Informal media is a greater problem than formal media."

78 detainees pull off daring prison break in Haiti

PORT-AU-PRINCE: Haiti, which is reeling under anti-government protests, saw a major prison break. All 78 detainees at a prison in Aquin escaped around midday on Tuesday. The circumstances of the prison break are unclear.

Maldives' Yameen charged with money laundering

COLOMBO: Ex-Maldives president Abdulla Yameen has been charged with money laundering. The case stems from a deal to lease islands and the discovery of \$1 million in his bank account.

Philippines arrests journalist on libel charge

MANILA: Philippine journalist Maria Ressa, who has clashed with President Rodrigo Duterte, was arrested on Wednesday in what rights advocates called an act of "persecution".

in the news

'EL CHAPO' GUZMAN

Drug lord with a long history of jailbreaks will be moved to Colorado's foolproof Supermax prison

- 1 Joaquin Guzman, convicted on Tuesday of drug-trafficking, may be sent to the Supermax jail, a facility so secure and so remote that it's often called the 'Alcatraz of the Rockies'
- 2 The drug lord known as 'El Chapo' has an unparalleled record of prison breaks, having escaped two high-security prisons in Mexico before his ultimate capture and extradition to the US
- 3 Supermax's hardened buildings house America's most violent offenders, with many of its 400 inmates held alone for 23 hours a day in tiny cells with furnishings made of reinforced concrete.



UK negotiator hints Brexit delay possible

LONDON: British lawmakers will face a stark choice between Prime Minister Theresa May's Brexit deal or a long extension to the March 29 deadline for leaving the bloc, the UK's chief Brexit negotiator was overheard saying in a Brussels bar.

Unless May can get a Brexit deal approved by Parliament, she will have to decide whether to delay Brexit or thrust the world's fifth largest economy into chaos by leaving without a deal. May has repeatedly said the UK will leave on schedule, with or without a deal, as she tries to get the EU to reopen the divorce agreement she reached in November.

But her chief Brexit negotiator, Olly Robbins, was overheard by an ITV correspondent saying MPs would have to choose

whether to accept a reworked Brexit deal or a potentially significant delay. "Got to make them believe that the week beginning end of March... Extension is possible but if they don't vote for the deal then the extension is a long one," ITV quoted Robbins as saying on Monday during a private conversation. Robbins said he felt the fear of a long extension to Article 50 - the process of leaving the EU - might focus lawmakers' minds, ITV said. The spectacle of one of May's most senior officials undermining her negotiating position in a hotel bar in Brussels indicates the scale of the UK's Brexit crisis that has shocked both investors and allies.

It's unclear why Robbins would make such comments in a hotel bar.

20 killed in attack on Iran Revolutionary Guard bus

ELITE FORCES HIT Al-Qaeda-linked Sunni extremist group Jaish al-Adl blamed

Agencies

TEHRAN: A suicide bombing targeting a bus carrying personnel of Iran's elite paramilitary Revolutionary Guard force killed at least 20 people and wounded 20 in the country's southeast, state media reported on Wednesday.

Iranian state media blamed the al-Qaeda-linked Sunni extremist group Jaish al-Adl. Other semi-official news agencies also reported Jaish al-Adl, or "Army of Justice," had claimed the attack.

The attack came on the day of a US-led conference in Warsaw that included discussions on what US describes as Iran's malign influence across the wider Middle-east. It also comes two days after Iran marked the 40th anniversary of its 1979 Islamic Revolution.

The state-run IRNA news agency, citing what it described as an "informed source," reported the attack on the Guard in Iran's Sistan and Baluchistan province. The province, which borders Pakistan and lies on a major opium trafficking route, has seen occasional clashes between Iranian forces and Baluch separatists, as well as



Members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard march during a parade.

drug traffickers. The Guard is a major economic and military power in Iran, answerable only to the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

While Iran has been enmeshed in the wars engulfing Syria and neighbouring Iraq, it largely has avoided the bloodshed plaguing the region. In 2009, more than 40

people, including six Guard commanders, were killed in a suicide attack by Sunni extremists in Sistan and Baluchistan province. Jundallah, a Sunni extremist group still active in the region on Iran's border with Pakistan, claimed responsibility for that attack. Jaish al-Adl kidnapped 11 Iranian border guards in October. Five later were returned to

Iran and six remained held. A coordinated June 7, 2017 Islamic State assault on Parliament and the shrine of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution. At least 18 people were killed and more than 50 wounded. An attack on a military parade in September in Iran's oil-rich southwest killed over 20 and wounded over 60.

UN COURT: IRAN CAN PROCEED TO RECOVER ASSETS FROZEN BY US

THE HAGUE: The International Court of Justice ruled on Wednesday that Iran can proceed with a bid to recover billions of dollars in frozen assets the US says must go to victims of attacks blamed on Tehran.

Judges of the UN's top court rejected US claims that the case should be thrown out because Iran had "unclean hands" due to alleged links to terrorism, and that the tribunal in The Hague did not have jurisdiction in the lawsuit. The court will hold further hearings to decide whether Iran can get back \$2 billion frozen by the US Supreme Court in 2016.

Abdulqawi Ahmed Yusuf, the chief judge at the ICJ, said the court "unanimously rejects the preliminary objections to admissibility raised by the United States of America".

The court also "finds that it has jurisdiction" to rule on the case, which was filed by Iran in 2016, Yusuf said after reading of the judgment. Iran said the freezing of the funds breached the 1955 Treaty of Amity with the US, signed before Iran's Islamic Revolution.

Nato chief to meet Russian foreign minister to save arms control treaty

Agence France-Presse

BRUSSELS/WARSAW: Nato secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg announced on Wednesday that he will hold talks with Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov this week, as part of efforts to save a key arms control treaty that is on the point of collapse.

The pair will meet at the Munich Security Conference, which starts on Friday, as Nato tries to persuade Moscow to abandon a new missile system the alliance says breaches the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.

The US began the process of exiting the treaty earlier this month in response to Moscow's deployment of the 9M729 missile, prompting Russia to announce its own withdrawal.

"I expect to meet minister Lavrov in Munich, and I think it is important to have dialogue with Russia especially when we face so many difficult issues as we face today," Stoltenberg said as he arrived for a meeting of Nato defence ministers.

The US withdrawal will only take effect in August, giving a six-month window to save the treaty,



File photo of Russian military personnel equipping an Iskander tactical missile system at an international forum in Kubinka near Moscow.

but few expect this to happen and Stoltenberg said Nato was already planning for a "future without the INF Treaty and with more missiles".

The future of the INF treaty - and what steps Nato will take to bolster its defence against new Russian medium-range missiles - are top of the agenda for the

defence ministers' two-day meeting.

The collapse of the 1987 treaty, which banned missiles with a range of 500km to 5,500km, has sparked fears of a new arms race in Europe. But Stoltenberg said Nato had no intention of deploying new nuclear weapons systems in Europe.

Xi to meet US trade officials

BEIJING: Chinese President Xi Jinping plans to meet top US officials in Beijing as the world's two biggest economies rush to patch up their trade differences before a looming deadline.

Xi will meet on Friday with officials including US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, who are in the capital for crunch talks towards a trade deal, the South China Morning Post reported on Wednesday. "Xi is scheduled to meet both Lighthizer and Mnuchin on Friday," it said, quoting a source briefed on

the arrangements.

Mnuchin said talks with China went well on Wednesday. "So far, so good," he said, without divulging who he met. Mnuchin said earlier he hoped for "productive" trade meetings as the two countries seek to end a festering dispute that has seen both sides level tariffs at one another. US tariffs on \$200 billion worth of imports from China are scheduled to rise to 25% from 10% if the two sides cannot reach a deal by a March 1 deadline, increasing pain and costs in sectors from consumer electronics

to agriculture.

Mnuchin, asked by reporters as he left his Beijing hotel what his hopes were for the visit, said "productive meetings". He did not elaborate.

On Wednesday, White House press secretary Sarah Sanders told Fox News that President Donald Trump is weighing different possibilities on how to treat the March 1 deadline, adding that the final agreement depends on Trump and Xi meeting in person. Trump has already signalled flexibility on the deadline.

'Climate change could wipe out Bengal tigers'

MELBOURNE: Sundarbans, the iconic Bengal tiger's last coastal stronghold and the world's biggest mangrove forest, could be destroyed by climate change and rising sea levels over the next 50 years, scientists say.

Spanning more than 10,000 square kilometres, the Sundarbans region of Bangladesh and India is the biggest mangrove forest on Earth, and also the most critical area for the endangered Bengal tiger, researchers said. "Fewer than 4,000 Bengal tigers are alive today," said Bill Laurance, a professor at the James Cook University in Australia. "That's a really low number for the world's biggest cat, which used to be far more abundant but today is mainly confined to small areas of India and Bangladesh."

"What is most terrifying is that our analyses suggest tiger habitats in the Sundarbans will vanish entirely by 2070," said Sharif Mukul, an assistant professor at Independent University Bangladesh. The researchers used computer simulations to assess the future suitability of the low-lying Sundarbans region for tigers and their prey species, using mainstream estimates of climatic trends from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Their analyses included factors such as extreme weather events and sea-level rise.

"Beyond climate change, the Sundarbans are under growing pressure from industrial developments, new roads, and greater

BILATERAL BOOST

India-US defence sales at all-time high: Pentagon

Yashwant Raj

WASHINGTON: India-US strategic ties are advancing at a "historic pace", a top US military commander has said, highlighting the increased interoperability and information sharing between the two forces and an "all-time high" in New Delhi's arms purchases from America.

The signing of COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement) and LEMOA (Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement) was cited by Admiral Philip Dawson, head of Indo-Pacific Command, to illustrate interoperability and information sharing. At a Congressional hearing on Monday, he also pointed to India's purchases of P-8s marine surveillance aircraft, C-130Js transport carriers, Chinook choppers and M777 howitzer.

The strategic partnership between the two countries, he said in his opening statement, "continues to advance at an historic pace as we continue to increase our interoperability and information-sharing capabilities". Defence sales to India are at an "all-time high", he added. India's defence purchases from

TOP US COMMANDER SAYS THE TWO NATIONS CAN PREVENT ADVERSARIES FROM ESTABLISHING MILITARY PRESENCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN THAT THREATENS SECURITY OF TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT

the US have gone up from zero a decade ago to \$18 billion and it has been cited often by officials of both countries as proof of the rapidly growing strategic ties.

In 2018, the US renamed its Pacific Command as Indo-Pacific Command as a nod to ties with India.

The two countries participated in five major exercises, executed more than 50 other military exchanges that year.

COMCASA was signed at the first 2+2 ministerial that took place in New Delhi last September. LEMOA was signed before.

The two so-called "enabling agreements" or "foundational agreements" will enable the two militaries to share encrypted communication and draw logistics help from each other.

Snap polls likely in Spain after govt loses budget vote

MADRID: Spain's Parliament rejected a draft 2019 budget on Wednesday after Catalan separatists turned their back on the government, pushing the country close to an early national election amid an increasingly fragmented political landscape.

Sources in the government and the Socialist party of Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez told Reuters on Tuesday that he would call a snap election if the draft was rejected, with April 14 or April 28 the most likely dates. An official in Sanchez's office said that he would make his decision known after he chairs a weekly cabinet meeting on Friday.

The euro zone's fourth-largest economy, Spain emerged in 2013 from a deep economic slump but has been plagued since by growing political volatility, driven by deep divisions over Catalonia's independence drive and emergence of several new parties.

Smiling but not saying a word, Sanchez left Parliament straight after losing the budget vote, while opposition parties urged him to call elections immediately. "Mr Sanchez, that's enough, it's over... call elections now!" said the head of the centre-right Ciudadanos Albert Rivera.

SYRIA ENDGAME



Civilians flee the Islamic State-held holdout of Baghouz.

Hundreds flee from war zone in Baghouz

NEARBAGHOZ: The ferocious battle for the Islamic State's last bastion in eastern Syria entered its fifth day on Wednesday, as exhausted families left the ever-shrinking scrap of land where holdout jihadists have been boxed in by Kurdish-led forces.

Hundreds fled day and night from Baghouz, near the enclave where diehard IS fighters are making their last stand, as plumes of grey smoke billowed into the sky over the flat, desolate town. The group declared a cross-border "caliphate" in Syria and Iraq in 2014, but various military campaigns have chipped its territory down to less than four square kilometres on the Iraqi border.

After a pause of more than a week to allow out civilians, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) declared a final push to retake the

ists on Saturday, aided by the warplanes and artillery of a US-led coalition.

SDF spokesman Mustafa Bali said on Tuesday that 600 civilians had fled the combat zone overnight and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, said another 350 made it out that day.

Half a dozen among the new arrivals were adult men. The rest were women, panting after their long trudge out of Baghouz, and young children with dirty hair. About half were Ukrainian or Russian women and their children, while most of the others were Syrian. A 34-year-old woman from Crimea tore pieces of bread to give her three children. She identified herself as Umm Khaled and said she came to Syria five years ago after

NASA to try one last time to contact rover Opportunity on Mars

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, FLORIDA: NASA is trying one last time to contact its record-setting Mars rover Opportunity, before calling it quits.

The rover has been silent for eight months, victim of one of the most intense dust storms in decades. Thick dust darkened the sky last summer and, for months, blocked sunlight from the spacecraft's solar panels.

NASA said on Tuesday it will issue a final series of recovery commands, on top of more than 1,000 already sent. If there's no response by Wednesday — which NASA suspects will be the case — Opportunity will be declared

dead, 15 years after arriving at the red planet. Team members are already looking back at Opportunity's achievements, including confirmation water once flowed on Mars. Opportunity was, by far, the longest-lasting lander on Mars. Besides endurance, the six-wheeled rover set a roaming record of 45km.

Its identical twin, Spirit, was pronounced dead in 2011, a year after it got stuck in sand and communication ceased.

Both outlived and outperformed expectations, on opposite sides of Mars. The golf cart-size rovers were designed to operate as geologists for just three months, after bouncing onto our planetary neighbour inside cushioning air bags in January 2004. They rocketed

from Cape Canaveral a month apart in 2003. It's no easier saying goodbye now to Opportunity, than it was to Spirit, project manager John Callas told AP.

"It's just like a loved one who's gone missing, and you keep holding out hope that they will show up and that they're healthy," he said. "But each passing day that diminishes, and at some point you have to say 'enough' and move on with your life."

Deputy project scientist Abigail Fraeman was a 16-year-old high school student when Opportunity landed on Mars; she was inside the control centre as part of an outreach programme. Inspired, Fraeman went on to become a planetary scientist.



Illustration shared by NASA shows the rover Opportunity on the surface of Mars.