

QUICK HITS

Sony Stock Jumps after Buyback Announcement

Tokyo: Sony Corp announced its first-ever major share buyback on Friday, worth 100 billion yen (\$910 million), helping its stock recover from a hammering days earlier when investors freaked over lacklustre earnings.

Thomas Cook might Sell Airline Unit to Raise Cash

London: Thomas Cook said it was willing to sell its profitable airline business to raise cash to fund its fight back from losses racked up in 2018 and to cope with a tough year ahead.

Americans Support Gun Control: Survey

New York: Most Americans want tougher gun laws but have little confidence their lawmakers will take action, according to a Reuters/Ipsos poll released on Friday ahead of the one-year anniversary of the country's deadliest high school shooting.

Contradicting Trump, Merkel says IS not Defeated

Berlin: Islamic State is far from defeated, and instead is morphing into an asymmetrical warfare force after the militant group lost almost all of the territory it once controlled in Syria.

Bezos Allegations Could Upend American Media's Deal with Feds

Threat may be criminal conduct; non-prosecution pact required no crimes for 3 years

Edvard Pettersson Los Angeles: Jeff Bezos's allegations that he was blackmailed by American Media Inc. could upend the non-prosecution agreement the publisher of the National Enquirer struck last year with federal prosecutors in New York over its illegal aid to the Trump campaign.



AMI CEO David Pecker

Under the September 20 agreement, the tabloid publisher was supposed to refrain from all illegal activity for a three-year period. The agreement says that if New York-based AMI commits any crime, it can be prosecuted for the ones it was granted immunity against, including perjury and obstruction of justice.

The disclosure on Thursday by Amazon.com's chief executive officer that AMI threatened to publish revealing photos of him unless he halted an investigation into whether an earlier expose of his relationship with former TV anchor Lauren Sanchez was politically motivated is "textbook extortion" and could lead to criminal prosecution,

according to some legal experts.

New York law explicitly makes it a crime to threaten to expose a secret or publicise material that will expose someone to "contempt or ridicule", said Zachary Elsea, a litigator with Kinsella Weitzman Iser Kump & Aldisert in Santa Monica, California. The emails from AMI that Bezos posted explicitly threaten to embarrass him, according to Elsea.

"This could be construed as criminal conduct," Elsea said.

A spokesman for AMI didn't respond to a request for comment. Nicholas Biase, a spokesman for Manhattan US attorney Geoffrey Berman, had no comment.

The magazine investigated Bezos because his wealth and position make him a newsworthy subject, and its reporting isn't influenced by politics, according to copies of emails allegedly from AMI lawyer Jon Fine that Bezos included in his post on Thursday.

Under the deal with federal prosecutors, AMI admitted it worked with the Trump campaign to kill stories 'about the presidential candidate's relationships with women' and agreed to cooperate with investigators

"about the presidential candidate's relationships with women" and agreed to cooperate with investigators. As early as August 2015, David Pecker, the company's CEO, agreed to identify any damaging information about Trump that came his way and suppress it by buying the stories and not publishing them—a practice known as "catch and kill".

AMI may defend against any extortion accusations by claiming that the emails are between lawyers who are simply trying to resolve a dispute, with AMI offering a compromise solution, according to Robert Schwartz, an attorney with Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan in Los Angeles.

"The Enquirer has a lot of lawyers and wouldn't do this kind of thing without first talking it through with them," Schwartz said. The tabloid could run into trouble, however, if it turns out that it illegally obtained the private pictures of Bezos, according to Schwartz.

"There are plenty of prosecutors in New York who don't feel beholden to the president and who will want to explore any shady behaviour by the National Enquirer," Schwartz said. Bloomberg

Bezos' Security Chief is a Guardian to the Stars

Gavin de Becker, Jeff Bezos's longtime security chief, may run his own consulting firm, write books, operate a private luxury terminal at Los Angeles International Airport and develop threat-assessment tools.

But he is really selling only one thing: peace of mind.

For more than four decades, de Becker, 64, has counseled the US government, law enforcement departments, thousands of celebrity

executive of AMI, was trying to use the photos to blackmail him and deter him—and the news outlet he owns, The Washington Post—from investigating allegations that The Enquirer's coverage of his affair was politically motivated.

Bezos said he had asked de Becker "to proceed with whatever budget he needed". Those are words that could inspire any employee. But de Becker has made the security of others his life's work.

His own childhood was full of the violence and fear that he is now paid to shield others from. De Becker has written that his mother, a heroin addict, regularly beat him and his sister, and shot his stepfather. She committed suicide when he was 16.

He has investigated stalkers for stars like Olivia Newton-John and Cher. He headed security for public figures visiting President Ronald Reagan and his family at the White House. He worked with the family of Ronald L Goldman when it sued OJ Simpson over Goldman's 1994 killing at the home of Simpson's former wife.

For most people seeking de Becker's advice, they can buy peace of mind for a few dollars with a paperback copy of his best-seller, The Gift of Fear. NYT



Gavin de Becker

clients and countless readers on how to ward off threats and stay safe in a scary world.

His most recent case was for Bezos, Amazon's chief executive, who asked him to find out how American Media Inc., which publishes The National Enquirer, had obtained private intimate pictures of Bezos and his girlfriend, Lauren Sanchez.

In a blog post on Medium on Thursday, Bezos said David J Pecker, chief

Facebook Rejigs Kids Team in Quest for Youth

San Francisco: Facebook on Thursday announced it had restructured its team devoted to products or features designed to increase the social network's appeal to younger generations. Nascent projects such as a "LOL" platform for funny memes were taken off the board at the "youth team", which shifted focus to more promising products such as a Messenger Kids app launched more than a year ago, according to the leading social network.

"The Youth team has restructured in order to match top business priorities, including increasing our investment in Messenger Kids," Facebook said in response to an AFP inquiry.

Facebook in December 2017 introduced a version of its Messenger application designed to let young children connect with others under parental supervision. No in-app purchases are allowed.

The social media giant said at the time that it created the app, available in the US, Canada, Mexico, Peru and Thailand, because many children were going online without safeguards. AFP

London Pushes to Take Saudis Off EU Blacklist

Francesco Guarascio

Brussels: Britain is leading a group of European Union states who are trying to block an EU plan to include Saudi Arabia and 22 other jurisdictions on a blacklist of countries that pose money-laundering and terrorism financing threats, sources said.

The EU's executive commission adopted last month a draft list that adds Saudi Arabia, Panama and small Pacific and Caribbean islands to the existing list of 16 states, which currently includes Iran, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen and North Korea.

The list needs the endorsement of a majority of the 28 EU nations but Britain and other heavyweights of the bloc, including Germany, France, Italy and Spain, are raising concerns, three EU officials told Reuters.

Two of the sources said EU states' reluctance to endorse the list was mostly driven by concerns over the inclusion of Saudi Arabia and Panama on the list.

Listed countries face higher scrutiny in their financial dealings with the EU, with bloc's banks forced to carry out additional checks on payments involving entities from those jurisdictions.



Britain is the country that is pushing more openly not to include Riyadh in the list, one official said, while Spain is insisting it excludes Panama.

Oil-rich Saudi Arabia is a top importer of EU products and weapons while Panama is a major financial centre in Latin America with many EU firms involved in the multi-billion-dollar expansion of its trans-oceanic canal.

Countries are blacklisted if they "have strategic deficiencies in their anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism regimes that pose significant threats to the financial system of the Union", the existing EU list says. Reuters

Thai Princess Ubolratana to Run for PM Against Junta Chief Chan-O-Cha

Bangkok: A Thai princess will run for prime minister in upcoming elections, in a stunning twist that pits the high-profile royal against the chief of the ruling junta who had hoped to maintain his grip on politics. Princess Ubolratana, the older sister of Thai King Maha Vajiralongkorn, emerged as a candidate for the Thai Raksa Chart party steered by the divisive Shinawatra political clan.

"The board agrees that the name of Princess Ubolratana, an educated and skilled person, is the most suitable choice," Thai Raksa Chart party leader Preechapol Pongpanich told reporters.

The party falls under the tutelage of Thaksin Shinawatra, a billionaire self-exiled former premier, who stands at the heart of Thailand's bitter decade-long political schism—loathed by the army and Bangkok elite, yet adored by the rural poor.

The announcement means a royal-fronted party tied to the Shinawatra will directly take on the military party, whose own candidate was also announced on Friday as junta leader Prayut Chan-O-Cha. Prayut has headed the junta for

nearly five years, scripting a new constitution in a bid to recast the entire political system to ensure the army has a foothold on power after elections on March 24.

But the shock entrance of 67-year-old Ubolratana is likely to throw the military's plans into disarray.

In a day of high political drama, Prayut declared his candidacy for premier moments after the princess. "I agree to accept the invitation by Phalang Pracharat to nominate me to be appointed as premier," he said in an unusually conciliatory statement released to media.

Ubolratana, a colourful, public-facing royal in contrast to her more restrained brot-

her King Maha Vajiralongkorn, relinquished her royal titles after marrying an American decades ago. But the couple divorced and she moved back to Thailand where she is still considered part of the royal family.

Known to the public for lead roles in Thai films, on-stage singing performances, vibrant fashion sense and a prolific Instagram following, Ubolratana is the first-born child of the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

She was seen at the World Cup in Russia smiling with Thaksin and his sister Yingluck—also a former prime minister—and has over the last years given a number of coded nods on social media in favour of the Shinawatra. AFP



Ghosn to Reimburse Versailles Palace for 2016 Wedding Costs

Ania Nussbaum

Paris: Carlos Ghosn plans to pay back the Chateau de Versailles for costs related to his Marie Antoinette-themed wedding party after Renault disclosed that its former chairman may have improperly used a sponsorship deal to host the event.

Ghosn will reimburse the palace, which will in turn compensate the French carmaker, a spokeswoman for his family, Devon Spurgeon, said by phone on Friday.

The response came a day after

Renault said it would tell French authorities that the jailed executive had received a "personal benefit" worth €50,000 (\$57,000) related to an agreement with the chateau. The finding was part of an internal probe and marked the first time Renault has disclosed possible improprieties by Ghosn, who remains in a Tokyo jail after allegations of financial crimes were brought against him by Japanese prosecutors.

The sum is said to be the estimated cost of renting the historic premises under a contract signed by Ghosn that

entitled the carmaker to hold corporate events at Versailles. He and his wife Carole threw an extravagant party there in 2016 that was captured in a photo spread showing actors in period costumes, along with eye-popping arrays of cakes.

Ghosn's quick decision to pay back the chateau contrasts with his stance in Japan, where he has rejected prosecutor claims of financial wrongdoing related to his time at the helm of Renault partner Nissan Motor. In his first Tokyo court appearance last month, he said he was "wrongly

accused and unfairly detained based on meritless and unsubstantiated accusations". He painted a picture of a loyal company man who wouldn't dream of harming the firm.

Lavish Lifestyle

The Versailles party has been widely held up as evidence of the executive's lavish lifestyle when he headed the three global car companies. Before his decision to pay back the Versailles palace was made public, his lawyer in France, Jean-Yves Le Borgne, had said in an

emailed statement Ghosn paid for all his wedding expenses.

"The event space at Versailles was made available to him without charge and Mr Ghosn was unaware that the use of the space would be charged against Renault's allotted usage," he wrote in the email.

Renault started an internal probe in November, shortly after Ghosn was arrested. Following the Versailles revelations, French finance minister Bruno Le Maire said the investigation is "starting to get results". Bloomberg

TIPS, TRIVIA & TRENDS YOUR DAILY DIET OF FUN AND FACTS

Priyanka Chopra's Wax Statue Unveiled at New York Madame Tussauds



NEW YORK Actor Priyanka Chopra is the latest Indian A-lister to get a wax figure at Madame Tussauds museum in New York. The actor shared the news on social media and said her wax figure will also be unveiled in other cities across the world, including London, Sydney and Asia. "It's finally here! You can now see my wax figure at Madame Tussauds in NYC!! (& at other locations very soon!!" she wrote on Facebook. Priyanka's wax statue is dressed in a red Jason Wu outfit that she wore at the 2016 Emmy Awards. It also wears a replica of the diamond ring her husband Nick Jonas gave her. PTI

UK School Cancels Play about Darwin after Parents Complain



A primary school in the UK has cancelled a play about Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution following complaints from a group of Christian parents. Several families threatened to withdraw their children from the play, which is aimed at 7- to 11-year-olds, as they felt one of the scenes "mocked" a bishop involved in a historic debate on evolution. Hartford Manor Primary School, a non-religious community school in a village in Cheshire, decided to cancel the musical Darwin Rocks and replace it with a less divisive show following the objections. But the decision to cancel the play has provoked anger among another group of parents who argue that it is "unacceptable" that their children have been denied a valuable learning opportunity. As well as complaints around the portrayal of the English bishop Samuel Wilberforce, a number of Christian parents also had concerns about a song in the show about "bumping and grinding". Simon Kidwell, headteacher of Hartford Manor Primary School, said: "We thought it would be a problem to rewrite it. So we decided to change it. However, in hindsight I think that was a hasty decision. We could have put more effort into looking at whether we could have adapted it to make sure it was inclusive of everybody. I have apologised to the parents and we will consider putting it on in future years if we can make sure those bits are edited so it is inclusive for everybody." The Independent

Woody Allen Sues Amazon for \$68 Million for Breach of Contract

Filmmaker Woody Allen has filed a \$68-million suit against Amazon for breach of contract, accusing the streaming giant of cancelling a film deal because of a "baseless" decades-old allegation that he sexually abused his daughter. Allen says Amazon sought to terminate the deal in June, and has since refused to pay him \$9 million in financing for his latest film, A Rainy Day in New York, his lawyers at Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan allege. That film was one of several to be produced with the Oscar-winning director under a series of agreements reached after Allen made the Crisis in Six Scenes programme for Amazon, which was then a new content provider. He is seeking \$9 million along with minimum guarantees owed to him for three other films, totaling "in excess of \$68,000,000", according to a complaint filed on Thursday in federal court in New York. Allen says Amazon told him the deal had become "impracticable" because of "supervening events, including renewed allegations against Mr Allen, his own controversial comments" and the refusal of actors to work with him. AFP



Richard Branson says He'll Fly to Space by July

British billionaire Richard Branson plans to travel to space within the next four or five months aboard his Virgin Galactic spaceship, he told AFP. "My wish is to go up on the 50th anniversary of the moon landing, that's what we're working on," the head of the Virgin group said on Thursday on the sidelines of an event to honor Virgin Galactic at the Air and Space Museum in Washington. The American Apollo 11 mission landed on the moon on July 20, 1969. Branson has previously announced dates for this first trip into space, though they've always come and gone without the voyage happening. But this time the businessman claims preparations are in their final stages. "By July we should have done enough testing," he said. But he doesn't want to make any promises he can't keep: "I need to wait for our team to say they're 100% happy. I don't want to push them," he said, but thinks they'll be ready for clients by the end of the year. AFP

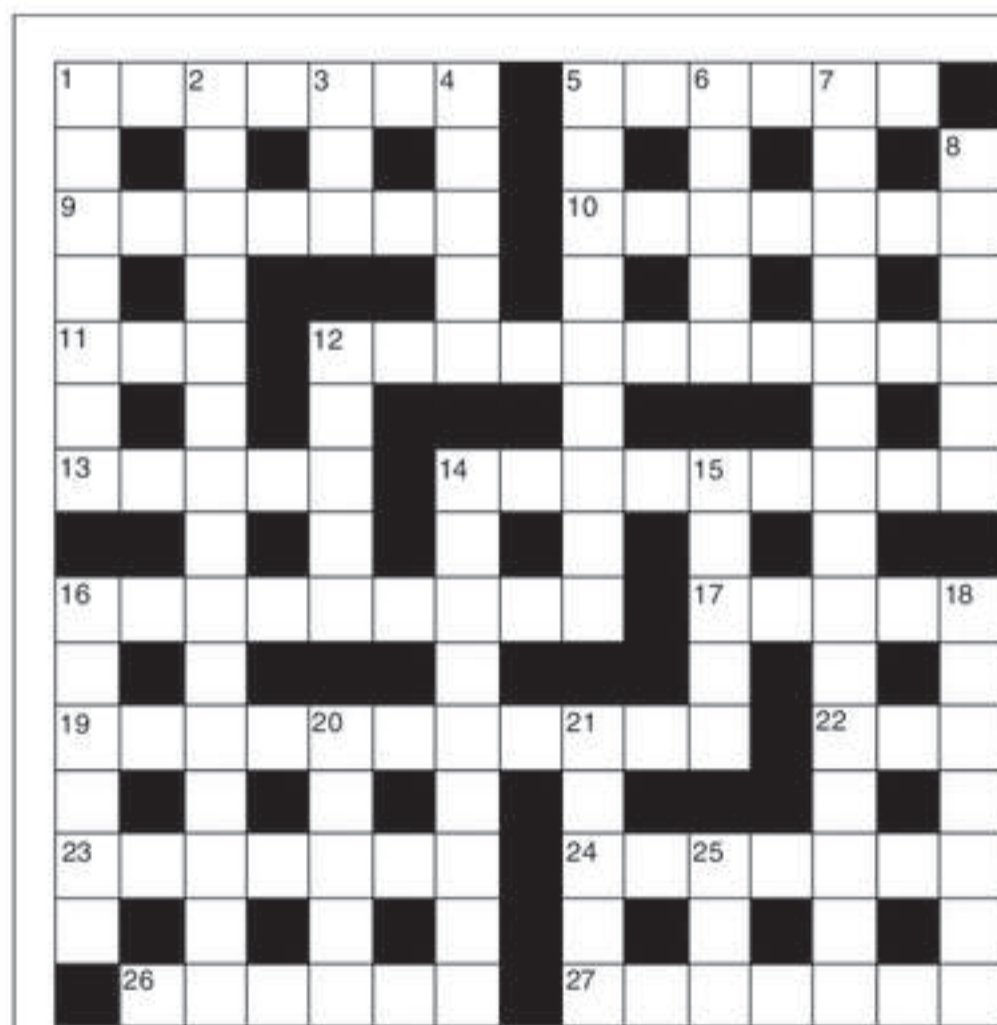
Oreo the Raccoon, Model for GOTG Rocket, Dies



His on-screen avatar may have survived Thanos' finger snap, but in real life, Oreo the Raccoon, the animal which served as the model for beloved Guardians of the Galaxy character Rocket, tragically passed away at the age of 10. Oreo helped animators capture motions and behaviours for Rocket Raccoon, who is voiced by Bradley Cooper in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The news of Oreo's death was announced by a Facebook fan page for Guardians of the Galaxy franchise. "Rest in Peace to Oreo the Raccoon, the real-life model for Rocket Raccoon. Oreo was also the GcG director James Gunn when the movie debuted in Hollywood. Thank you for your awesomeness, Oreo!" the group wrote. PTI

Crossword

7326



ACROSS
1 Letter describes a mine in US state (7)
5 Turner captures love and hate (6)
9 Represent river swimmer about right (7)
10 Harry told his granny about duke's child (7)
11 Be indebted to Welshman briefly (3)
12 Small pixie against short dwarf, showing restraint (4-7)
13 Avoid start of train collision (5)
14 Chap with German overcoming priest's restriction (4,5)
16 Jazz pianist defends mushy stuff,

bland sort of music (9)
17 Commander-in-chief beginning to hate easy job (5)
19 Factory rep betrays poor water diver at first (4,7)
23 The Mafia's second book (3)
23 Actor, one impressed by Dickens character (7)
24 He tests pupils using old register copper brought in (7)
26 Consume for fun, as they say (6)
27 English guys rent houses in which they're happiest (7)

DOWN
1 Seize debtor's notes in abundance (7)
2 Impartunate Pole in trouble? That's impossible (9,6)
3 Rubbish piled up, becoming small mountain (3)
4 Faithful Liberal set nothing up (5)
5 He's after majority, disrupting morale etc. (9)
6 A lecturer entertains 500 extra (3-2)
7 Superstate, sort of hyper-immortal one (4,5,6)
8 Decorative band made of rare metal (6)
12 Unnamed Russian leader's revolutionary exercise (3-2)
14 Stamp on M15 file about probing main cult (3,6)
15 Clear fluid beginning to go off contains carbon (5)
16 Know-how is dominant? There's erudition in it (6)
18 Panama perhaps protects a little place for animals (7)
20 Disparaging note dropped into bank (5)
21 Stirred feeling of dread about fine (5)
25 Take advantage of Aussie now and then (3)

SOLUTION TO No. 7325
ACROSS: 1 Daisy cutter. 9 Bear cub. 10 Tinofin. 11 Bee. 12 No can do. 13 Rightly. 14 Set. 15 Essen. 17 Timer. 18 Pizza. 20 Meats. 22 Ebb. 24 Tunes up. 25 Sea salt. 26 Hen. 27 Othello. 28 Unusual. 29 Piece of cake.
DOWN: 1 Dual citizenship. 2 Incess. 3 Yobbo. 4 Utterance. 5 Tonight. 6 Room temperature. 7 U-bends. 8 Player. 16 Semaphore. 18 Petrol. 19 Absolve. 21 Spatula. 23 Bottle. 25 Snuff.

Dilbert

by S Adams

