

TOP OF THE WORLD



Empire actor Jussie Smollett

USA
Jussie Smollett
hoax charges
dropped

Chicago prosecutors dropped charges accusing Empire actor Jussie Smollett of staging a phony hate crime, a move that drew the fury of the city's police superintendent and mayor, who called the decision a "whitewash of justice". Smollett, who is black and gay, told reporters that he had been truthful when he said two masked men threw a noose around his neck and poured chemicals on him while yelling racist and homophobic slurs and expressing support for US President Donald Trump in January. But Mayor Rahm Emanuel lambasted the surprise reversal by prosecutors, emphasising that a grand jury concluded the attack was a hoax and hammering Smollett as inexcusable for claiming to be a victim.

CHINA
Ex-Interpol
chief sacked
from CPC

Beijing: China on Wednesday sacked former Interpol chief Meng Hongwei from all his official positions and expelled him from the ruling Communist Party, accusing him of corruption, serious disciplinary violations and encouraging his wife who is settled abroad to campaign against his detention. Meng, 65, vanished in late September after leaving his home in the French city of Lyon for China. He had sent his wife Grace Meng a message on social media, telling her to "wait for my call", along with a knife emoji suggesting he was in some kind of danger. Chinese authorities later confirmed he was under their detention.

USA
Admissions
scam: Yale
expels student

New York: The prestigious Yale University has expelled a student whose parents paid more than a million dollars in bribes to get her in, the first such move since a huge admissions scandal erupted earlier this month. Some 50 people have been indicted so far in a scam to help children of the American elite gain entry into top US colleges.

BRUNEI
New criminal
laws dubbed
cruel, inhuman

Kuala Lumpur: Amnesty International on Wednesday slammed plans by Brunei to implement what the rights group called "vicious" criminal laws such as stoning to death for gay sex and amputation for theft. Amnesty said in a statement that the new penalties, which also apply to children, are provided for in new sections under Brunei's Sharia Penal Code and will come into effect April 3. The legal changes were announced in a discreet notice on the attorney general's website, it said.



NAWAZ SHARIF OUT ON BAIL

Former Pakistan prime minister Nawaz Sharif leaves the Kot Lakpat jail in Lahore on Wednesday. Sharif was released a day after the Supreme Court granted him six weeks' bail to receive medical treatment within the country. The 69-year-old had been in prison since December last year, serving a seven-year sentence in the Al-Azizia Steel Mills corruption case. PTI

Pakistan tries to cool
row over Imran Khan
remarks about talks
with Afghan Taliban

REUTERS
ISLAMABAD, MARCH 27

PAKISTAN MOVED on Wednesday to cool a row with Afghanistan over reported comments by Prime Minister Imran Khan that were taken to suggest that Kabul should set up an interim government to help smooth peace talks with the Taliban.

The comments, made to Pakistani journalists on Monday, prompted a furious reaction in Afghanistan and led to the government recalling its ambassador in protest at what it described as "irresponsible" remarks.

It was the third time in just over a month that Kabul has demanded an explanation from Islamabad over comments related to peace talks aimed at ending 17 years of war in Afghanistan.

The Pakistani foreign ministry issued a statement saying that Khan's comments, reported in various forms by Pakistani media outlets and picked up in Afghanistan, had been taken out of context and misinterpreted.

"In his comments, the PM

Pak man says Hindu
girl embraced Islam,
married him; FIR says
she is minor, abducted

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
ISLAMABAD, MARCH 27

A PAKISTANI man has claimed that a Hindu woman, who authorities said was a minor and abducted by four armed men, has converted to Islam and married him in Sindh province, amidst uproar over a similar case involving two teenage girls from the minority community.

His claim came a day after the provincial Minorities Affairs Minister Hari Ram Kishori Lal directed authorities to register an FIR of the abduction and provide protection to the girl's family.

The FIR was registered on Tuesday after the girl's father complained that his 14-year-old daughter was abducted from their house by four armed men, three of whom were unidentified, on March 17 from her residence in Badin district.

However, the man came forward with the claim that she is now his wife after converting to Islam, Dawn reported.

He sent documents to journalists, claiming that he has mar-

ried the girl after she converted to Islam at the hands of Pir Jan Agha Khan Sarhandi on March 17 at his seminary in Samaro town, the report said.

The man, who hails from Umerkot district, also rejected her father's claim that she was a minor, saying that the girl was 19 years old, it said.

The incident came amidst nationwide outrage over abduction, forced conversion and marriage of two underage Hindi girls in Chotki district in Sindh.

Raveena, 13, and Reena, 15, were allegedly kidnapped by a group of "influential" men from their home on the eve of Holi.

Soon after the kidnapping, a video went viral in which a cleric was purportedly shown solemnising the Nikah (marriage) of the two girls, triggering a nationwide outrage.

The Islamabad High Court on Tuesday ordered official protection for the two girls due to concern about their safety as authorities widened a probe to ascertain if the teenage sisters were abducted, forcibly converted and married.

AI pioneers win Turing Award, 'the tech Nobel'

ASSOCIATED PRESS
SAN FRANCISCO, MARCH 27

COMPUTERS HAVE become so smart during the past 20 years that people don't think twice about chatting with digital assistants like Alexa and Siri or seeing their friends automatically tagged in Facebook pictures.

But making those quantum leaps from science fiction to reality required hard work from computer scientists like Yoshua Bengio, Geoffrey Hinton and Yann LeCun. The trio tapped into their own brainpower to make it possible for machines to learn



Yoshua Bengio, Geoffrey Hinton and Yann LeCun were awarded for their work on neural networks, the electronic engines that power tasks such as facial and speech recognition

like humans, a breakthrough now commonly known as "artificial intelligence," or AI.

They were rewarded Wednesday with the Turing Award, an honour that has become known as technology in-

dustrial version of the Nobel Prize. It comes with a \$1 million prize funded by Google.

The award marks the latest recognition of the instrumental role that AI will play in redefining the relationship between humans

and technology in the future.

Bengio, Hinton and LeCun have mostly worked separately on technology known as neural networks. These are the electronic engines that power tasks such as facial and speech recognition, areas where computers have made enormous strides over the past decade. Such neural networks also are a critical component of robotic systems that are automating a wide range of other human activity, including driving.

Hinton works at Google as a vice president while LeCun is chief AI scientist at Facebook. Bengio remains immersed in academia as a University of Montreal professor.

BRITAIN

TIPU SULTAN'S WEAPONS FETCH £107,000 AT AUCTION

A collection of rare artefacts from Tipu Sultan's armoury, including one of his personal swords, discovered by a couple in their attic in the English county of Berkshire has been auctioned for around 107,000 pounds. The highlight lot, a silver-mounted 20-bore flintlock gun and bayonet from the personal armoury of the last ruler of Mysore, proved hugely popular as it attracted 14 bids before being sold for 60,000 pounds.

British PM May says
she will quit if her
Brexit deal is passed

Parliament seeks to shape UK's EU exit with 'indicative votes'

GUY FAULCONBRIDGE
& ELIZABETH PIPER AND
KYLIE MACLELLAN
LONDON, MARCH 27

BRITISH PRIME Minister Theresa May said Wednesday she would quit if her twice-defeated EU divorce deal passes at the third attempt, making a last-ditch bid to persuade rebels in her Conservative party to back her, one of her lawmakers said.

May "will go if the deal gets through", said the lawmaker, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

May was addressing a meeting of the 1922 Committee — in effect her parliamentary caucus.

Another Conservative lawmaker said that, while May had not given a date, the impression was that she would go "reasonably soon".

A third Conservative member of Parliament said May had told the meeting that she would hand over to a successor to negotiate the next phase of Brexit — future relations with the EU, notably a wide-ranging trade agreement.

May's announcement is the latest dramatic turn in the UK's three-year Brexit crisis, but it is still remains uncertain how, when or even if it will leave the EU.

Many of the Conservative rebels who want a cleaner break from the EU than May's deal would deliver had made it clear that they would only consider supporting her agreement if she gave a firm commitment and

EXPLAINED
May's move could
end MPs' hopes
for softer Brexit

WITH PARLIAMENT trying to take control of the Brexit process after Theresa May's Brexit deal was rejected twice, pro-Europe MPs had hoped to soften, or even cancel, the UK's exit from the EU. This week, MPs are set to choose between multiple Brexit scenarios in 'indicative votes', including scenarios in which the UK maintains very close relations with the EU. However, indicative votes are not binding on the government, which is likely to reintroduce May's deal in Parliament on Friday. This time, it has a much better chance of going through. May has told rebel Conservative MPs, who had earlier voted against her deal, that she will step down if they help to pass her deal in Parliament. This would mean the Brexiters could potentially have one of their own to negotiate further relations with the EU after Brexit.



May has not set a date for her resignation, an MP said

date for her resignation.

May had already promised to step down before the next election, due in 2022. By agreeing to go sooner, she increases the chances of her EU deal passing before the new April 12 deadline.

The government is now expected to bring the deal back to Parliament for a third vote Friday.

May's deal means Britain will leave the EU single market and customs union as well as EU political bodies. But it requires some EU rules to apply unless ways can be found in the future to ensure no border is rebuilt between British-ruled Northern Ireland and EU member Ireland.

Many Conservative rebels have objected to this so-called Irish backstop, saying it risks bringing Britain to the EU for years. But given the choice between the backstop and no Brexit at all, more should come round.

Some of the party's most influential dissenters had already indicated they would back her deal, agreed after two years of talks with the EU, saying it was the least worst option. REUTERS

Thai opposition
parties form
alliance, say have
right to form govt

ASSOCIATED PRESS
BANGKOK, MARCH 27

THAILAND'S OPPOSITION "democratic front" of seven parties on Wednesday said it had won a majority in the Lower House of Parliament after a messy election, and had the right to try to form a government after five years of military rule.

But the opposition alliance would still be unable to elect a PM, as parliamentary rules, written by the military junta, require backing from a majority of Upper and Lower Houses combined.

Parliament's Upper House is entirely appointed by the junta. With unofficial results of Sunday's vote still delayed, the ruling junta showed no sign giving up on its goal to keep coup leader Prayuth Chan-ocha as PM.

Sudarat Keyuraphan, the main prime ministerial candidate of the Pheu Thai party ousted by the 2014 Army coup, said the seven parties in the opposition alliance would take at least 255 seats in the 500-member House of Representatives.

"We declare that the democratic front which opposes military rule commands the majority in the House," Sudarat said.



Trump with Fabiana Rosales, wife of Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido, at the White House Wednesday. Reuters

Trump: Russia must pull
troops out of Venezuela

STEVE HOLLAND &
ROBERTA RAMPTON
WASHINGTON, MARCH 27

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump on Wednesday called on Russia to pull its troops from Venezuela and warned that "all options" were open to make that happen.

"Russia has to get out," Trump told reporters in the Oval Office, where he met with Fabiana Rosales, the wife of Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido.

Two Russian air force planes landed outside Caracas on Saturday carrying nearly 100 Russian troops. The US government believes the troops include special forces and cybersecurity personnel.

Asked how he would make Russian forces leave, Trump said: "We'll see. All options are open."

Trump and Vice President Mike Pence met with Rosales to express support for her husband, who invoked the constitution to assume the interim presidency in January, saying President Nicolas Maduro's re-election was not legitimate.

"The United States views Russia's arrival of military planes this weekend as an unwelcome provocation," Pence told reporters.

"We call on Russia today to cease all support of the Maduro regime and stand with Juan Guaido and stand with nations across this hemisphere and across the world until freedom is restored," Pence said. REUTERS

RESEARCHERS SAY THERE IS A RATIONAL EXPLANATION FOR THE 'DOG SUICIDE BRIDGE'

Mystery of a Scottish bridge from which dogs keep jumping off

CEYLAN YEGINSU
DUMBERTON, MARCH 27

"I WAS sure she was dead," Lottie Mackinnon said quietly.

Mackinnon was sitting huddled in the corner of a cafe with her two children, sipping hot chocolate as she described the day three years ago when she was walking with her Border collie, Bonnie, over the Overtoun Bridge in Dumbarton, Scotland.

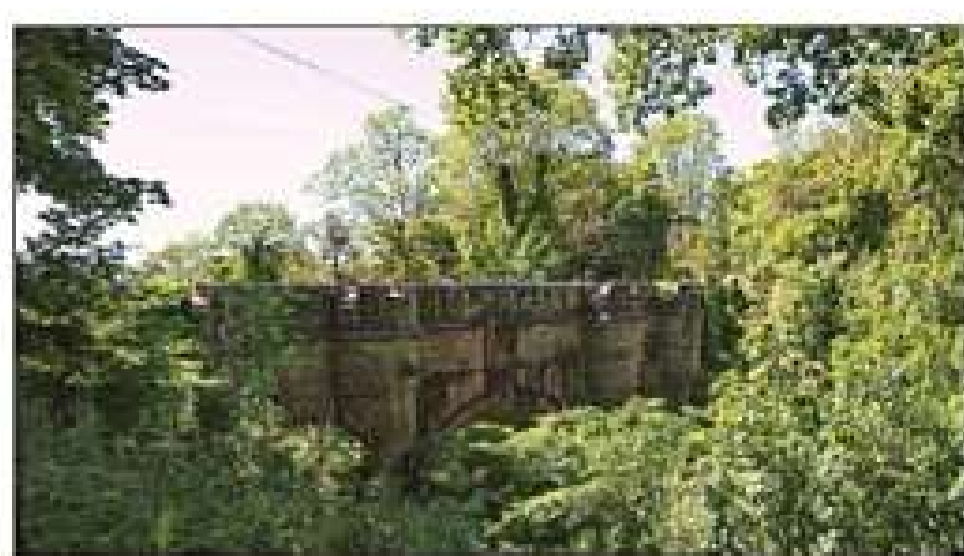
"Something overcame Bonnie as soon as we approached the bridge," Mackinnon said. "At first she froze, but then she became possessed by a strange energy and ran and jumped off the parapet." A bewitched dog lured to

leap off a bridge by a malevolent force? It sounds like a preposterous scene straight from an old *Twilight Zone* episode.

But Mackinnon's dog is one of hundreds that Scots insist have suddenly been compelled to throw themselves off the gothic stone structure since the 1950s. Many have ended up dead on the jagged rocks in the deep valley bed below.

Residents of Dumbarton, which is northwest of Glasgow, began calling Overtoun, a century-old bridge that stretches across a 50-foot gorge, the "dog suicide bridge."

Mackinnon, who grew up in the neighbouring village of Milton, winced at the memory of



Overtoun Bridge in Dumbarton, Scotland, from which hundreds of dogs are said to have jumped. NYT

scurrying down the gorge through the trees and the bushes in a desperate hunt for Bonnie. But

when she approached the dog's body, Bonnie started to whimper and eventually tried to stand up.

"It was a miracle that she survived," she said.

In a land rife with superstitions, myths and monsters — Scotland is the land of the Loch Ness legend, after all — the bridge has been at the centre of an enduring mystery. Why do so many dogs jump?

Local researchers estimate more than 300 have sailed off the bridge; tabloid reports say it's 600. At least 50 dogs are said to have died. Some say there are rational explanations involving the terrain and the scents of mammals in the gorge that may drive the dogs into a frenzy.

Other explanations take on a more paranormal tone. The bridge's location,

hushed, lush and sometimes still, fits the description of what the pagan Celts called a "thin place," a mesmerising spot where heaven and earth overlap.

"People in Dumbarton are very superstitious," said Alastair Dutton, a local taxi driver. "We grew up playing in the Overtoun grounds and we believe in ghosts here because we've all seen or felt spirits up here."

The leaps inspired an episode of the American TV series *The Unexplained Files*. An entire book is dedicated to exploring the phenomenon. Despite all this attention, the mystery lives on, unsolved.

From a distance, it seems as if the ornate Victorian bridge,

built in 1895, is a mere extension of the driveway of an adjoining 19th-century manor built in Dumbarton by a wealthy industrialist, James White.

Bob Hill, the current tenant of the manor and a pastor from Texas, had an earthbound explanation: The smell of small animals scurrying around in the gorge below the bridge drives the dogs into a frenzy, then they break free of leashes — if they're on any — and jump.

"The dogs catch the scent of mink, pine martens or some other mammal and then they will jump up on the wall of the bridge," Hill said. "And because it's tapered, they will just topple over." NYT