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TOPOF THE WORLD



Chung Sye-kyun

SOUTH KOREA

Seoul appoints ‘Mr Smile’ as Prime Minister

Seoul: South Korean President Moon Jae-in appointed an anodyne former parliamentary Speaker known as “Mr Smile” as Prime Minister Tuesday, after a previous Cabinet appointment triggered a corruption scandal and mass protests. Chung Sye-kyun — a six-term lawmaker and former commerce minister — earned the soubriquet for his mild demeanour, and local reports say he has six times been voted the “most gentlemanly lawmaker” by reporters covering the National Assembly. “He has always pursued politics that listen, by valuing dialogue and compromise with his gentle personality,” Moon said.

CHINA

14 people killed in coal mine blast

Beijing: At least 14 miners were killed on Tuesday in a coal and gas outburst at a mine in southwest China with two workers still trapped underground, authorities said. The accident happened at around 1.30 am (local time) at the Guanglong Coal Mine in Anlong County, Guizhou province, when 23 workers were working underground, authorities said. The accident happened at around 1.30 am (local time) at the Guanglong Coal Mine in Anlong County, Guizhou province, when 23 workers were working underground, authorities said. Seven workers have been rescued safely, while 14 were confirmed dead and two others still remain trapped, the report said.

PAKISTAN

Lawyer who fought for unlawfully held is abducted

Islamabad: A Pakistani lawyer known for pursuing cases of those unlawfully detained by the country’s security agencies was abducted overnight from his home in the garrison city of Rawalpindi, his son said Tuesday. According to the son, several armed men knocked on the gate of the family’s home on Monday night. When the family opened the door, the men barged in and took his father, Inamur Rehman, shoved him into a car and then sped away. Rehman, a lawyer and a retired military officer, was never a threat to anyone, said the son.

US Defence Secy wants to cut troops in Afghanistan ‘with or without’ peace deal

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
WASHINGTON, DECEMBER 17

DEFENCE SECRETARY Mark Esper said Monday he wants to reduce the number of US troops in Afghanistan “with or without” a peace agreement in order to give higher priority to strategic competition with China.

The Trump administration is expected to announce plans to withdraw around 4,000 troops from Afghanistan, according to US media, after peace talks resumed a week ago between the US and the Taliban.

Esper told reporters Monday that Austin Miller, the head of the NATO mission and US Forces



Afghanistan, “is confident that he can go down to a lower number” of troops.

Miller “believes he can conduct all the important counter-terrorism missions and train, advise and assist” the Afghan army, Esper said on a plane as he flew back from Belgium, where he had attended the 75th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge.

“...The best solution for Afghanistan is a political agreement. But I think we can go down with or without that political agreement.”

— MARK ESPER
U.S. DEFENCE SECRETARY

sary of the Battle of the Bulge.

“I would like to go to a lower number because I want to either bring those troops home” to re-train for new missions or to “be re-deployed to the Indo-Pacific to face off our greatest challenge in terms of the great power competition that’s vis-a-vis China,” he said.

“At the end of the day, the

best solution for Afghanistan is a political agreement” between the government and the Taliban, Esper added.

“But I think we can go down with or without that political agreement,” Esper said he had not yet ordered any downsizing, noting that the decision was ultimately the responsibility of President Donald Trump.

About 13,000 US troops are currently in Afghanistan, though the number fluctuates according to rotations.

Trump said last month that he planned to cut the overall troop presence to 8,600, with further reductions possible. He had also insisted on the need for a ceasefire.

IMPEACHMENT SET TO MOVE FROM HOUSE TO SENATE

Senate majority leader rejects Democrats’ demands to call top Trump aides during trial

MICHAEL D SHEAR
WASHINGTON, DECEMBER 17

SENATOR MITCH McConnell, the Republican leader, on Tuesday rejected demands by Democrats to call four White House officials as witnesses during US President Donald Trump’s impeachment trial in the Senate.

On the eve of a House vote Wednesday that is all but certain to result in Trump’s impeachment on two charges, McConnell said he would not agree to call the witnesses — all of whom have first-hand knowledge of Trump’s dealings with Ukraine — including Mick Mulvaney, the White House chief of staff, and John Bolton, the former national security adviser. The White House blocked them from appearing during the House impeachment inquiry.

Democratic Senator Chuck Schumer, the minority leader, had insisted in a letter to McConnell

GIULIANI: TRUMP ‘RELIED ON’ HIS CLAIMS ABOUT U.S. AMBASSADOR TO UKRAINE

Washington: Rudy Giuliani, US President Donald Trump’s personal lawyer, says he provided the President with information that the US ambassador to Ukraine was impeding investigations that could benefit Trump politically. Within weeks, she was recalled from her post.

In an interview, with *The New York Times*, Giuliani portrayed himself as directly involved in the effort to oust Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch, and he indicated that Trump

knew of that effort.

Giuliani said he passed along information to Trump “a couple of times” about how Yovanovitch had frustrated efforts that could help Trump, including efforts to have Ukraine investigate political rival Joe Biden. Trump, in turn, passed the information on to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Giuliani said. Within weeks, Yovanovitch was told Trump had lost trust in her and she was recalled as ambassador.

that they must be heard from.

But in remarks on the Senate floor Tuesday morning, McConnell said there was no reason for the Senate to immediately agree to take testimony from officials who

might bolster Democrats’ case against the President.

McConnell called Schumer’s demand for witnesses “a strange request at this juncture,” leaving open the possibility that the

Senate could decide to call witnesses after a trial is underway. But McConnell made it clear that making that decision before the trial started was premature.

“If House Democrats’ case is this deficient, this thin, the answer is not for the judge and jury to cure it here in the Senate,” he added. “The answer is that the House should not impeach on this basis in the first place.”

Schumer responded moments later, saying that holding a trial without witnesses “would be an aberration” and vowing to demand votes by senators on whether to call witnesses and subpoena documents during the trial.

McConnell’s comments came as the most politically vulnerable House Democrats in moderate districts continued to announce their support for the impeachment charges, signalling that the House vote expected Wednesday is likely to be almost entirely along party lines. **NYT**

Boris to outlaw Brexit extension beyond 2020

UK PM holds 1st Cabinet meeting after election, says ‘you ain’t seen nothing yet’

AGENCIES

LONDON, DECEMBER 17

BRITISH PRIME Minister Boris Johnson was seeking Tuesday to outlaw extending the Brexit transition period beyond the end of 2020, as he prepared to put the EU divorce deal before MPs. Johnson won a big majority in last week’s general election on a promise to “get Brexit done” by taking Britain out of the European Union by the end of January.

A transition period will then

3 INDIAN-ORIGIN MINISTERS REMAIN IN CABINET



Three Indian-origin ministers — Home Secretary Priti Patel; Alok Sharma, the secretary of state for international development; and Chief Secretary to the Treasury Rishi Sunak — have retained their posts in PM Boris Johnson’s Cabinet.

follow, during which London and Brussels hope to negotiate a

MEANWHILE

INSTAGRAM EXPANDS FACT-CHECKING GLOBALLY

Instagram on Monday announced it had gone global in its fight against misinformation, expanding its third-party fact-checking network around the world. The Facebook-owned social platform launched a fact-checking programme in the US early this year. “Today’s expansion is an important step in our ongoing efforts to fight misinformation on Instagram,” it said in an online post.

Pope Francis scraps ‘pontifical secret’ in clergy abuse cases

‘Epochal decision’ takes away any excuse for Church to not comply with legal requests, says Vatican’s top investigator

NICOLE WINFIELD
VATICAN CITY, DECEMBER 17

POPE FRANCIS abolished the “pontifical secret” used in clergy sexual abuse cases Tuesday, responding to mounting criticism that the high degree of confidentiality has been used to protect pedophiles, silence victims and prevent police from investigating crimes.

“The carnival of obscurity is over,” declared Juan Carlos Cruz, a prominent Chilean survivor of clergy abuse and advocate for victims.

In a new law, Francis decreed that information in abuse cases must be protected by church leaders to ensure its “security, integrity and confidentiality.” But he said “pontifical secret,” the highest form of confidentiality in the church, no longer applies to abuse-related accusations, trials and decisions under the Catholic Church’s canon law.

The Vatican’s leading sex crimes investigator, Archbishop Charles Scicluna, said the reform was an “epochal decision” that will facilitate coordination with civil law enforcement and open up lines of communication with victims.

While documentation from the church’s in-house legal proceedings will still not become public, Scicluna said, the reform now removes any excuse to not cooperate with legitimate legal requests from prosecutors, police or other authorities.

Francis also raised from 14 to



Pope Francis also raised from 14 to 18 the cutoff age below which the Vatican considers pornographic images to be child pornography. *Reuters*

EXPLAINED How Church laws worked in sex abuse cases

POPE JOHN Paul II issued a decree in 2001 stating that cases of alleged sexual abuse of minors by the clergy must be handled by the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and that the doctrine of “pontifical secret” must apply to these cases. The Church justified this as a means to protect the privacy of the victims and the accused. However, this has been criticised as having been used as a means to hush up scandals. Moreover, under the Church’s in-house canon law, the highest punishment for a priest was being defrocked. This is why there has been repeated demands in recent years to abolish “pontifical secret” in grave cases.

18 the cutoff age below which the Vatican considers pornographic images to be child pornography — a response to the Vatican’s increasing awareness of the prolific spread of on-line child porn that has frequently implicated even high-ranking churchmen.

The new laws were issued Tuesday, Francis’ 83rd birthday, as he struggles to respond to the global explosion of the abuse scandal, his own missteps and demands for greater transparency and accountability from victims, law enforcement and ordinary Catholics alike. **AP**

UN medal given to Indian peacekeepers in South Sudan

YOSHITA SINGH
UNITED NATIONS, DECEMBER 17

ABOUT 850 Indian peacekeepers serving in South Sudan have been awarded the prestigious UN medal for their service and contribution to building peace in the strife-torn nation and supporting the local communities.

India is among the largest troop contributing countries to UN peacekeeping operations. Currently, 2,342 Indian troops and 25 police personnel are deployed with the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).

The UNMISS said the Indian peacekeepers have been “recognised for their strong contribution to building peace in conflict-affected South Sudan as well as for going above and beyond their duties to support local communities.”

The 850 Indian troops serving with the UNMISS received the United Nations Medal for their dedication and sacrifice, “serving so far away from home to protect civilians and build durable peace in South Sudan,” according to a statement by the UNMISS. The Indian troops were particularly praised for their efforts to support peace talks. **PTI**

Jinping, who is also the General Secretary of the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) and head of the country’s military.

The aircraft carrier is China first domestically-built ship.

China currently has one aircraft carrier *Liaoning*, a re-fit of the Soviet era ship which was commissioned in 2012. It is largely used for training, especially to test the fighter jet J-15, which has been specifically developed to operate from the decks of the aircraft carriers. **PTI**

China’s 2nd aircraft carrier joins service; focus on SCS

KJM VARMA
BEIJING, DECEMBER 17

CHINA ON Tuesday launched its second aircraft carrier from a key base in the South China Sea (SCS), boosting its military ambition in the region where Beijing’s claims of sovereignty is challenged by the US and other nations.

The ship named after Shandong Province in east China was launched from Sanya, located in the South China Sea coast by President Xi



Elderly Japanese people exercise during a health promotion event. Japan’s population is fast shrinking and ageing. *Reuters*

dren because it would be more cheerful,” she said. “So I made the children.”

Japan’s population is shrinking and ageing, and nowhere is the trend felt more intensively than in its rural regions, where a low birthrate is exacerbated by dwindling employment opportunities and an inconvenient lifestyle.

“There are no chances for young people here,” said Ayano, who remembers when the village had a medical clinic, a pachinko gambling parlor and a diner. Now, Nagoro does not have even one shop. “They can’t make a living.”

It just so happened that she did it with dolls rather than humans.

Ayano, 70, had arrayed more than 40 handmade dolls in a life-like tableau on the grounds of the shuttered school. Recreating a school sports day known as “undokai,” a staple of the Japanese calendar, she had posed child-size dolls in a footrace, perched on a swing set and tossing balls.

“We never see children here anymore,” said Ayano, who was born in Nagoro, and has staged an annual doll festival for the last seven years.

“I wish there were more chil-

ADULTS IN THE VILLAGE COMPENSATE FOR THE LACK OF CHILDREN WITH THE COMPANY OF HUNDREDS OF GIANT HANDMADE DOLLS

There are no children in this Japanese village, just lots of life-size dolls

MOTOKO RICH & NADIA SHIRA COHEN
NAGORO, DECEMBER 17

THE LAST children were born in the remote mountain village of Nagoro 18 years ago.

Now, a little more than two dozen adults live in this outpost straddling a river on the Japanese island of Shikoku. The elementary school closed its doors in 2012, shortly after the last two students completed sixth grade.

But on a recent bright autumn Sunday, Tsukimi Ayano brought the school back to life.

dolls on a travel blog.

“I think it is a beautiful way to make the village alive again,” Raynaud said.

Another visitor scrawled a more pointed message on a chalkboard in one of the school’s classrooms: “Where are the living?”

Nagoro is one of several hamlets consolidated into a municipal area where more than 40% of the residents are 65 or older.

Even with child care subsidies, discounted medical bills and housing support, the area has little luck attracting new residents or luring back adults who were born in the region. **NYT**