

TOP OF THE WORLD



BUSHFIRE REMINDER: Artist James Dive stands in front of the "Burnt Christmas tree" that he built from charred logs and bushfire remnants, in Sydney. *Reuters*

CLIMATE CHANGE

Australia has its hottest day ever, more to come

Sydney: Australia this week experienced its hottest day on record and the heatwave is expected to worsen, exacerbating an already unprecedented bushfire season, authorities said on Wednesday. The average nationwide temperatures of 40.9 degrees Celsius on Tuesday beat the previous record of 40.3 degrees Celsius in January 2013, the Bureau of Meteorology said. "This heat will only intensify further today," meteorologist Diana Eadie said. The heatwave is another alarm bell about global warming in Australia, where the early and intense start to summer bushfires heaped pressure on the government to do more to tackle climate change.

AFGHANISTAN

US special envoy in Kabul amid push for deal

Kabul: The US special envoy leading negotiations with the Taliban met with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in Kabul on Wednesday, an official said, amid a renewed push to reach an accord with the insurgents. US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad and Ghani discussed several topics including the need for a ceasefire, Ghani's spokesman Sediq Seddiqi said. "The President also expressed his concerns about the continued violence by the Taliban," Seddiqi said.

PANAMA

12 inmates dead in shootout in jail

Panama City: Twelve inmates were killed and about a dozen more were wounded in a gunfight Tuesday inside a prison in the capital, Panamanian authorities said. The shooting occurred in a cell block that holds inmates who belong to a single local gang. Five pistols and three rifles were found after the shooting. The weapons appeared to have been smuggled in to the La Joyita prison in Panama City. Police said such smuggling has been a longstanding problem and "there are many ways that weapons can get in".

HONG KONG

Five dead in bus accident

Hong Kong: Five people were killed and dozens injured in Hong Kong on Wednesday when a double-decker bus smashed into a tree, police said. Live footage showed firefighters trying to reach victims on the vehicle's top deck, which had been turned into a tangled mess of twisted metal and shattered glass, leaving some passenger seats dangling to the side. Victims were seen being removed in body bags and placed next to a sign reading "Temporary Mortuary" at the roadside.

In a historic move, US House set to vote to impeach Trump

Voting expected to be along party lines in Democrat-controlled House; GOP seeks to stall process

DAVID MORGAN & PATRICIA ZENGERLE
WASHINGTON, DECEMBER 18

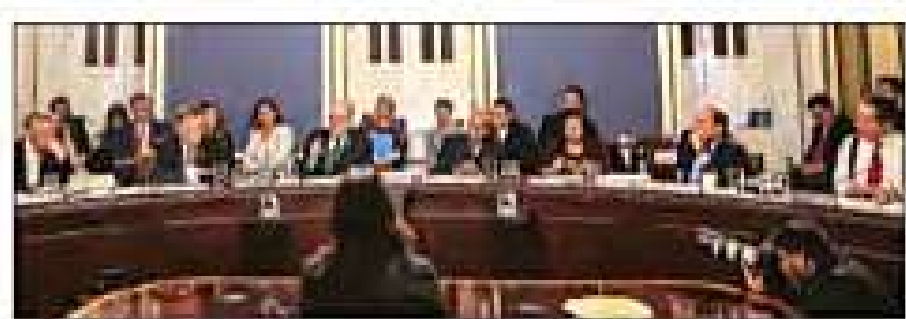
THE HOUSE of Representatives began debate on Wednesday ahead of a historic vote on two articles of impeachment against President Donald Trump, charging him with abusing his office and obstructing Congress that would make him the third US president to be impeached.

The vote in the Democratic-controlled House is expected to fall almost entirely along party lines, underscoring the deep divide in Congress over Trump's conduct — and the larger political schism within the nation itself.

Trump would become only the third American president to be impeached, an extraordinary check on presidential power spelled out in the US Constitution for executives who commit "high crimes and misdemeanors." No president has ever been removed from office under its terms.

The vote would result in a trial next month in the US Senate in which House members would act as prosecutors. That chamber is controlled by Trump's fellow Republicans, who have shown little interest in removing him from office.

House Democrats accuse Trump of abusing his power by asking Ukraine to investigate Joe Biden, a former US vice president

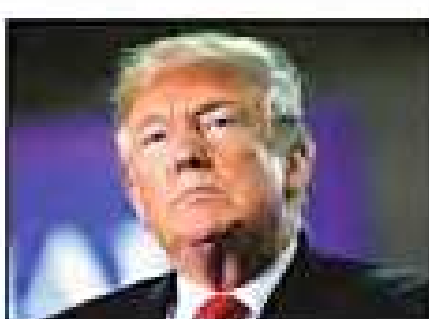


The House Rules panel finalises the rules for the vote. *NYT*

TRUMP CRIES FOUL BUT DEMS HAVE NUMBERS

TRUMP LETTER

Trump set the tone Tuesday for the impeachment debate, with an aggrieved six-page letter to Pelosi, accusing her of "declaring open war on American Democracy" with "an illegal, partisan attempted coup" that he called a "perversion of justice and abuse of power." He complained he was being railroaded: "More due process was afforded to those accused in the Salem Witch Trials."



HISTORY IN MAKING

If the House, as expected, approves impeachment, Trump will find himself in the company of Presidents Andrew Johnson and Bill Clinton, who were the other presidents impeached. President Richard Nixon resigned after the House Judiciary Committee approved articles of impeachment but before the full House could vote. *NYT*

and leading Democratic contender in the 2020 election. Trump is also accused of ob-

structing the congressional investigation into the matter. Republicans signalled as soon

as the day began that they intend to do everything possible to stall the proceedings. Representative Andy Biggs, a Republican member of the Judiciary Committee, called for the House to adjourn immediately after the morning prayer and pledge of allegiance, leading to a vote on the House floor.

Trump has called the impeachment process "a total sham," and on Tuesday sent House Speaker Nancy Pelosi a lengthy letter in which he accused her of engaging in a "perversion of justice." The President has denounced the probe as an "attempted coup" and has argued Democrats are trying to undo the results of the 2016 election in which he defeated Democrat Hillary Clinton.

"Can you believe that I will be impeached today by the Radical Left, Do Nothing Democrats, AND I DID NOTHING WRONG! A terrible thing," Trump tweeted early on Wednesday morning. "Say a prayer!"

On the eve of the vote, Pelosi sent a letter to all 232 Democratic members of the House, urging them to abide by the Constitution's standards. "Very sadly, the facts have made clear that the President abused his power for his own personal, political benefit and that he obstructed Congress as he demanded that he is above accountability, above the Constitution and above the American people," she wrote. *REUTERS*

EXPLAINED

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The price of impeachment

WHILE THE House is likely to make Trump only the third president in US history to be impeached, he is not expected to be removed from office after a trial in the GOP-controlled Senate. So, debate has raged on about what effect this process will have on the 2020 election.

Many Republicans, and some Democrats, believe it could rally Trump's base and increase their support for him as he goes through an ordeal that he has repeatedly characterised as a witch hunt. This has resulted in some moderate Democratic lawmakers, elected from states that voted for Trump in 2016, hesitating to support impeachment.

However, the majority of Democrats are in support of impeachment and hope that the details unravelled during the process would convince voters to shun Trump in the next election.

Xi In Macau To Mark Handover As HK Seethes



Chinese President Xi Jinping and his wife Peng Liyuan greet officials, along with the outgoing Macau Chief Executive Fernando Chui and the incoming chief Ho Iat-seng, at Macau International Airport Wednesday. *Reuters*

■ China's President Xi Jinping arrived in Macau to celebrate the 20th anniversary of its handover to China, and is expected to announce economic perks as a reward for its loyalty while protests rock nearby Hong Kong.

■ Security was tight in the gambling hub, especially for people arriving from Hong Kong. Among the policies Xi is expected to announce are steps to diversifying the former Portuguese colony's economic base beyond its casinos.

■ While protesters in Hong Kong, across the mouth of the Pearl River, are infuriated by what they see as Beijing encroaching on their freedoms, Macau has seen little dissent.

■ Protests are very rare in the territory with more than half of Macau's population immigrating from China in recent decades.

Japan journalist wins high-profile #MeToo case

KIYOSHI TAKENAKA & LINDA SIEG
TOKYO, DECEMBER 18

JAPANESE JOURNALIST Shiori Ito on Wednesday won her civil lawsuit seeking damages from a prominent reporter who she said had raped her, a verdict welcomed by women's rights advocates in a country where sexual assault victims often stay silent.

A Tokyo court ordered television journalist Noriyuki Yamaguchi to pay ¥3.3 million yen (\$30,375) in damages to Ito, a free-



"Now, I have to deal with how I live with my scars," journalist Shiori Ito said after the verdict. *Reuters*

lance journalist who has become a well-known face of Japan's

#MeToo movement, which has struggled to gain momentum.

Ito fought back tears as she spoke through a megaphone to reporters and supporters outside the court after the verdict.

"I'm so happy," she said, her voice breaking at times with emotion. "It's not over. Now, I have to deal with how I live with my scars."

Ito, 30, had sought 11 million yen in damages for her suffering. Prosecutors had declined to indict Yamaguchi following her complaint to police that he had raped her while she was unconscious in 2015.

Ito made waves in 2017 when she took the rare step of going public with allegations that Yamaguchi, a senior television journalist known for his reporting on PM Shinzo Abe, had raped her after she met him for drinks to discuss an offer to help her find a job.

The court also ruled against a counter-suit by Yamaguchi, who has repeatedly denied the allegations, in which he sought 130 million yen in damages from Ito.

Yamaguchi told reporters that he would appeal the verdict, saying he had done nothing illegal. *REUTERS*

TREASON CASE

Pak government to back Musharraf in appeal against death sentence

A-G questions 'urgency' in pronouncing judgment while Musharraf is in ICU

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
ISLAMABAD, DECEMBER 18

WITH THE Pakistan Army publicly backing former president Pervez Musharraf after he was sentenced to death for treason, Prime Minister Imran Khan discussed the issue with his top party aides on Wednesday even as his government decided to support the retired General's appeal against the "unfair" verdict.

The former military ruler, Musharraf, was sentenced to death in absentia on Tuesday for high treason following a six-year legal case. He has been living in Dubai since 2016 after Pakistan's Supreme Court lifted a travel ban allowing him to leave the country to seek medical treatment.

A three-member special court here convicted 76-year-old Musharraf of violating the Constitution by unlawfully declaring emergency rule while he was in power, in a case that had been pending since 2013.

Khan, who returned from Geneva, convened an emergency meeting of the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's core committee to discuss the sentencing of Musharraf, Geo News reported.

Following Musharraf's sentencing, the Pakistan Army said that its former chief Gen (ret'd) Musharraf can "never be a traitor" and the verdict against him has been received with a "lot of pain and anguish" by Pakistan Armed Forces personnel.

"An ex-Army Chief, Chairman Joint Chief of Staff Committee and president of Pakistan, who has served the country for over 40 years, fought wars for the defence of the country can surely never be a traitor," Pakistan Army



Musharraf was sentenced to death in absentia on Tuesday for high treason

spokesperson Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor said in a statement.

Alarmed by the military's public statement, Khan quickly deployed two of his trusted aides to say that the government would defend the self-exiled, ailing ex-president during the hearing of an appeal to be filed on his behalf.

"I will defend the law in the case but not any individual," said Attorney-General Anwar Mansoor Khan in a late-night press conference along with Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Information, Firdous Ashiq Awan.

He said Musharraf was not given the right of a fair trial and the judgment was announced in absentia without recording statement of the accused.

The Attorney-General said the verdict raised questions about the "urgency in pronouncing the judgment when Mr Musharraf was in critical condition in ICU" in Dubai.

"There is no question that a person who has committed treason must be punished, but in this case, the right of fair trial, guaranteed under the Constitution, was not ensured. A trial should not just be fair but also seen to be fair," he was quoted as saying by *Dawn* newspaper.

Indian-origin academic to chair Boris review on party's 'Islamophobia'

ADITI KHANNA
LONDON, DECEMBER 18

BRITAIN'S RULING Conservative Party, led by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, has appointed an Indian-origin academic to conduct an independent review into dealing with allegations of anti-Muslim prejudice as well as other issues of discrimination within the Tory party ranks.

Swaran Singh, professor of Social and Community Psychiatry at the University of Warwick, will lead the inquiry aimed at improving the Conservative Party's handling of complaints of all forms of discrimination and prejudice, including Islamophobia.

The issue had played out heavily in the run up to the general election earlier this month, with many British Muslims accusing the Conservatives of anti-Muslim bias and calling for an independent inquiry.

"I am privileged to have been appointed to chair the independent review into improv-

ing handling of complaints of prejudice and discrimination in the Conservative Party," said Singh, who has been a Commissioner of the UK's Equality and Human Rights Commission until recently.

This independent review will look at how the party can improve its processes — to make sure that any instances are isolated, and that there are robust processes in place to stamp them out as and when they occur, a party statement said on Tuesday.

Chairman of the Conservative Party, James Cleverly, said: "The Conservative Party has always worked to act swiftly when allegations have been put to us, and there are a wide range of sanctions to challenge and change behaviour."

"The Conservative Party will never stand by when it comes to prejudice and discrimination of any kind and it is right to hold an independent review, so we can stamp out unacceptable abuse that is not fit for public life."

The timetable of the review will be determined by Singh as the independent chair. *PTI*

SOCIAL NETWORK SAYS KNOWING A USER'S GENERAL LOCATION HELPS IT TO DETECT SUSPICIOUS LOGIN BEHAVIOUR

Facebook reveals it can locate users who opt out of tracking

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
SAN FRANCISCO, DECEMBER 18

FACEBOOK CAN determine where users are even if they opt out of having their whereabouts tracked, the company revealed in a letter sent to US senators.

In the missive, which was widely shared on social media Tuesday, Facebook explained ways it can still figure out where people are after they have selected not to share precise location data with the company.

The social network, which was responding to a request for information by two senators, contended that knowing a user's whereabouts has benefits ranging from showing ads for nearby shops to fighting hackers and battling misinformation.

"There is no opting out. No control over your personal information," Republican Senator Josh Hawley said in a tweet.

"That's Big Tech. And that's why Congress needs to take action."

Facebook said that clues for



Facebook was responding to a request for information from two senators. *Reuters*

figuring out a user's location include being tagged in a photo at a specific place or a check-in at a location such as at a restaurant during a dinner with friends.

People may share an address for purchases at a shopping section at Facebook, or simply include it in their profile information.

Along with location information shared in posts by users, devices connecting to the internet are given IP addresses and a user's whereabouts can then be noted.

Those addresses include locations, albeit a bit imprecise when it comes to mobile devices linking through telecom services that might only note a town or city.

Facebook said knowing a user's general location helps it and other internet firms protect accounts by detecting when suspicious login behaviour occurs, such as by someone in South America when a user lives in Europe.

IP addresses also help companies such as Facebook battle misinformation by showing the

general origin of potentially nefarious activity, such as a stream of politically oriented posts which might be aimed at a particular country.

Facebook said recently that it was ready for a data privacy law that is to go into effect in its home state of California at the start of next year.

The California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) will give internet users the right to see what data big tech companies collect and with whom it is shared.