

Cuba to have a PM for the first time since 1976

Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel on Saturday named Tourism Minister Manuel Marrero Cruz as the country's first Prime Minister since 1976, under a new Constitution. Manuel Marrero Cruz, 56, whose nomination was ratified by the National Assembly, is a former functionary of the militaryrun Gaviota tourism corporation. REUTERS

Twitter blocks 88,000 Saudi-linked accounts

Facebook and Twitter on Friday said they had blocked multiple government-backed manipulation operations around the world as part of a crackdown on statesponsored propaganda efforts. Twitter said it had blocked some 88,000 accounts linked to Saudi state-backed "information operations", in violation of its manipulation rules. AFF

Pak. academic sentenced to death over blasphemy charges

Junaid Hafeez was arrested in 2013 for allegedly posting derogatory remarks

A Pakistani court on Saturday sentenced a university professor to death for blasphemy under a law that critics say is often used to target minorities activists.

Junaid Hafeez, 33, was arrested in March 2013 for allegedly posting derogatory remarks against Prophet Mohammed on social media.

Blasphemy is a hugely sensitive issue in Pakistan, where laws against it carry a potential death sentence. Even unproven allegations have led to mob lynchings and vigilante murders.

Lawyer to appeal verdict Hafeez's sentence was announced in central city of Multan, where he was a university professor at the time of his arrest, and his counsel Asad Jamal slammed the decision as "most unfortu-





Tight security: Junaid Hafeez; right, police officers outside Multan jail after the decision. • AP

"We will appeal against this verdict," said Mr. Jamal. There was tight security in and outside Multan prison where the trial was held.

After the verdict, prosecution lawyers distributed sweets among their colleagues, who chanted "Allahu-akbar"(God is great) and "Death to blasphemers."

Rights group Amnesty International said the verdict was "a gross miscarriage of justice". "Junaid Hafeez's

death sentence is a gross miscarriage of justice and the verdict... is extremely disappointing and surprising," Amnesty's Rabia Mehmood said.

"The government must immediately release him and drop all charges against him," she added.

Hafeez's lawyer was killed in 2014 after receiving death threats during a hearing. About 40 people convicted of blasphemy are on death

row in Pakistan, according to a 2018 estimate by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

The acquittal last October of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman who had spent more than eight years on death row for blasphemy, provoked violent protests across Pakistan, leaving large swathes of the country paralvsed.

Ms. Bibi now lives in Canada with her family.

U.S. sanctions companies building Russia's gas pipeline to Germany

Congress fears it will give Kremlin leverage over Europe

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE WASHINGTON

President Donald Trump on Friday signed off on U.S. sanctions against companies building a Russian natural gas pipeline to Germany that Congress fears will give the Kremlin dangerous leverage over European allies.

The sanctions, which are opposed by the European Union (EU), were included in a sprawling defence spending Bill Mr. Trump signed at a ceremony on Joint Base Andrews. They target companies building the nearly \$11 billion Nord Stream 2 pipeline under the Baltic Sea with the aim of doubling deliveries of Russian natural gas to Germany.

U.S. lawmakers have warned that the pipeline would enrich a hostile Russian government and vastly increase President Vladimir Putin's influence in Europe. Both houses of Congress overwhelmingly approved the sanctions, with the Se-



Sea tensions: The *Audacia* ship belonging to an Allseas offshore service company, which is responsible for laying parts of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline in the Baltic Sea. • AFP

nate voting on Tuesday to send the measure to Mr. Trump's desk. Mr. Trump, who has been accused by Democratic opponents of being soft on Mr. Putin, had little choice but to give his approval.

Annual Pentagon Bill

The sanctions were inserted into a much wider \$738 billion annual Pentagon funding Bill and, given the level of congressional support, a veto would likely have been

overturned. The U.S. measures have angered Moscow and the EU, which says it should be able to decide its own energy policies.

Germany's Foreign Minister Heiko Maas discussed the issue during a phone call Friday with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus said. Mr. Pompeo expressed "strong opposition" to the project, Mr. Ortagus said in a

ICC to probe 'war crimes' in Palestinian territories since 2014

'There is reasonable basis to proceed with an investigation'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

The International Criminal Court (ICC)'s chief prosecutor said on Friday that she wanted to open a full investigation into alleged war crimes in the Palestinian territories, sparking a furious reaction from Israel and condemnation from the U.S.

The Palestinians welcomed the move by the ICC as a "long overdue step" following a nearly five-year preliminary probe by the prosecutor into the situation since the 2014 war in Gaza.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the decision made the Hague-based court a "political tool" against the Jewish state.

"I am satisfied that there is a reasonable basis to proceed with an investigation into the situation in Palestine," ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensouda said in a statement. "In brief, I am satisfied that war crimes have been or are being committed in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip," she added, without specifying the perpetrators of the alleged crimes.

She said that before opening a full probe, she would ask the ICC to rule on the territory over which it has jurisdiction because of the "unique and highly contested legal and factual issues attaching to this situation." "Specifically, I have sought confirmation that the 'territory' over which the Court



A home in Gaza City that was damaged following an Israeli attack on December 8. • AFP

may exercise its jurisdiction. and which I may subject to investigation, comprises the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza." The prosecutor added however that she did not require any authorisation from judges to open a probe as there had been a referral from the Palestinians, who joined the court in 2015.

"We firmly oppose this and any other action that seeks to target Israel unfairly," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said of Washington's top ally in the region. "We do not believe the Palestinians qualify as a sovereign state, and they therefore are not qualified to obtain full membership, or participate as a state in international organisations, entities, or conferences, including the ICC."

The issue is highly sensitive, with former White House National Security Adviser John Bolton threatening last year to arrest ICC judges if they moved against Israel or the United States. Both countries have refused to sign up to the court, which was set up in 2002 to be the only global tribunal trying the world's worst crimes, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Ms. Bensouda launched a

preliminary probe in January 2015 into allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Israel and the Palestinian territories, in the wake of the 2014 Gaza war. A full ICC investigation could possibly lead to charges against individuals. States cannot be charged by

"Palestine welcomes this step as a long overdue step to move the process forward towards an investigation, after nearly five long and difficult years of preliminary examination," the Palestinian statement said. Mr. Netanyahu however lashed out at what he called a "dark day for truth and justice". "The ICC prosecutor's decision has turned the International Criminal Court into a political tool to delegitimise the State of Israel," he said. The ICC's preliminary investigation has looked at the 2014 war which left 2,251 dead on the Palestinian side, the majority civilians, and 74 on the Israeli side, most of them soldiers. It has also looked at violence near the Israel-Ga-

za border in 2018.

Hong Kong suspect fired at officers: police

He could be linked to the group arrested earlier this month that was plotting to attack policemen

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Hong Kong police on Saturday said an armed suspect fired a live round at officers as they tried to arrest him in an operation linked to the months of pro-democracy protests engulfing the city.

Police said a 19-year-old man pulled a semi-automatic pistol from his waistband as officers approached him in Tai Po district on Friday evening. The shot did not hit anyone and the man was subdued.

AR-15 rifle found

A subsequent search of a nearby flat uncovered an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle and more than 250 rounds of ammunition. Police said they believed

the man and the newly discovered weapons were linked to a group arrested earlier this month who were also allegedly found in possession of a pistol and were plotting to attack officers.

"The firearms we discovered matched the intelligence we had collected which indicated that some people hoped to use firearms in some public assemblies to wound some others, including police officers on duty," Senior Superintendent Lee Kwai-wah told reporters on Saturday. However, Mr. Lee said the



In black and white: Protesters marching through a mall in the Tsim Sha Tsui district of Hong Kong on Saturday. • AFP

suspect was also facing ongoing firearms charges from an arrest last year before the protests.

Riot police had to be

called in to back up the officers as local residents began heckling police, with at least two tear gas rounds fired to disperse them, the South

reported. Semi-autonomous Hong

Kong has been shaken for six months by increasingly violent pro-democracy protests. Millions have marched peacefully in multiple rallies, with Beijing and local leader Carrie Lam digging their heels in. But a newly radicalised youth armed with petrol bombs, bricks and sometimes bows and arrows has added a dangerous layer to the movement, leading to increasingly violent battles with riot police.

In recent weeks, police have made arrests indicating some protesters may be plotting more drastic action.

50,000 guns surrendered in New Zealand scheme

Govt. had initiated a buyback programme after the Christchurch terror attack

ASSOCIATED PRESS

New Zealand authorities said on December 21 that their country will be a safer place after owners handed in more than 50,000 guns during a buyback programme following a ban on assault weapons. But critics say the process was flawed and many owners have illegally stashed their firearms.

The government banned the most lethal types of semi-automatic weapons less than a month after a lone gunman in March killed 51 worshippers at two Christchurch mosques. The police then launched a six-month



Arms handed over: New Zealand police officers with a firearm ahead of a gun buyback scheme in Upper Hutt in July. •AFP

programme to buy the newly banned weapons from owners. The buyback ended midnight on December 20, with gun collection events staying open late as police reported in a surge in last-minute re-

Banksy unveils nativity artwork in Bethlehem

turns. Provisional figures indicate 33,000 people handed in 51,000 guns, and another 5,000 guns as part of a parallel amnesty in which owners could hand over any type of firearm but compensated

'A difficult process' Police Deputy Commission-

er Mike Clement thanked gun owners for doing the right thing. He acknowledged in a statement it had been "a difficult process for some people".

But Nicole McKee, a spokeswoman for the advocacy group Council of Licensed Firearms Owners, said owners had kept about twothirds of the banned weapons because they had lost faith in the government and hadn't been offered adeq-

Banksy's only West Bank im-

print. In 2007, he painted a

number of artworks in Beth-

lehem, including a young

girl frisking an Israeli soldier

In 2005, he sprayed nine

stencilled images at different

locations along the eight-

metre-high (27-foot) separa-

They included a ladder on

the wall, a little girl carried

away by balloons and a win-

dow opening onto a peaceful

The identity of the world's

best known graffiti artist re-

mains a mystery and he was

not present during the re-

vealing of his latest work.

"Banksy is trying to be a

voice for those that cannot

speak," said Mr. Salsaa. He

"is creating a new model of

mountain landscape.

tion barrier.

pinned up against a wall.

North Korea hits out at U.S. for criticising rights record

North Korea lashed back at the United States for taking issue with its human rights record on Saturday, saying Washington's "malicious words" would only aggravate tensions on the Korean Peninsula, state news agency KCNA reported.

The KCNA statement, attributed to a Foreign Ministry spokesperson, warned that if the United States dared to take issue with the North's system of government by citing human rights problems, it would "pay dearly". The UN General Assembly on Wednesday condemned North Korea's "long-standing and ongoing" violations of human rights in an annual resolution sponsored by dozens of countries including the U.S., that Pyongyang's UN envoy rejected.

The North Korean Foreign Ministry statement is its first since U.S. special envoy for North Korea, Stephen Biegun, publicly urged Pyongyang on Monday to return to talks. There has been no direct response from North Korea to Mr. Biegun's entreaty.

U.S. Defense Secretary

Mark Esper said on Friday that he remains hopeful the U.S. can restart diplomacy with North Korea, as the clock ticks down to North Korea's declared year-end deadline for new U.S. concessions in talks over its nuclear arsenal. North Korea has repeatedly called for the United States to drop its "hostile policy" before more talks. But tension has been rising in recent weeks as Pyongyang has conducted a series of weapons tests and waged a war of words with President Donald Trump.

SUDOKU

			4			9	2	
7		4			3			6
	2				<u>ვ</u> 6 თ	4		3
		7	1	8	9			
	3			4			9	
			6	3	2	7		
3		5	6 8 3				1	
4			3			6		9
	1	2			5			

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

DIFFICULTY RATING:

5	9	2	1	3	4	6	7	8
				7				
7	8	4	6	9	2	1	3	5
				5				
4	2	7	8	1	3	9	5	6
8	5	3	9	4	6	7	2	1
3	1	9	4	8	5	2	6	7
6	7	5	3	2	1	8	4	9
2	4	8	7	6	9	5	1	3

It is part of the 'Walled-Off Hotel' and is aimed at creating awareness on the Palestinians' suffering AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

A manger scene juxtaposed

against concrete blocks seemingly pierced by a mortar shell: with Christmas looming, the latest Bethlehem offering by secretive artist Banksy appeared on Saturday in West Bank. Dubbed the "Scar of Beth-

lehem", the artwork's baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph are backlit through damaged concrete, chiselled pockmarks exploding out from a gaping hole in four directions to approximate the Christmas Star. The work is installed at Banksy's Walled-Off Hotel, where all rooms overlook a concrete section of the barrier built by Israel to cut off the occupied West Bank from Israeli territory.

Love and peace

"Love" and "peace" are respectively graffiti tagged in English and French on the artistic installation's concrete blocks, while three large wrapped presents are



and made by Banksy, at the Walled-Off Hotel in Bethlehem. • AFP

at the forefront of the scene. "It is a nativity," said the hotel's manager Wissam Salsaa after the piece was installed. "Banksy has his own contribution to Christmas." "It is a great way to bring up the story of Bethlehem, the Christmas story, in a different way to make people think more" of how Palestinians live in Bethlehem.

Mr. Salsaa calls the Israeli wall a "scar" that should induce "shame in anyone who supported" its construction. Israel began building the

separation barrier in 2002 during the Palestinian uprising, or intifada. Built mostly inside the West Bank, Israel says it is necessary to prevent attacks, but Palestinians label it an "apartheid wall",

separating them from Jerusalem. Traditional Bethlehem Christmas festivities will take place next week at the church built on the spot where Christians believe Jesus was born.

The manger scene and hotel – an establishment opened two years ago – are far from

Banksy rose to prominence after his subversive Other West Bank works

in public spaces in the U.K. in the early 2000s, and he has long worked on themes of violence and conflict.

resistance through art."

artworks started to appear