

TOPOF THE WORLD



FRANCE

Macron to give up presidential pension in reform gesture

Paris: French President Emmanuel Macron, whose plans to reform the pension system have run into fierce public opposition, will forego a special presidential pension payout when he eventually steps down, his office said on Sunday. Under a law dating back to 1955, France's presidents are entitled to draw a pension of about 6,000 euros (\$6,650) per month before tax as soon as they leave office. Macron will waive these pension rights and change the presidential scheme to bring it into line with the wider overhaul of France's retirement system, his office said, confirming an earlier report by French daily *Le Parisien*.

USA

Chicago police: 13 wounded in shooting at memorial party

Chicago: A shooting early Sunday at a house party held in honour of someone who was killed in April left 13 people wounded, four of the critically, Chicago police said. The shooting stemmed from a dispute at the memorial party, Chief of Patrol Fred Waller said at an early morning news conference. He said shots were first fired just after 12.30 am. The victims range in age from 16 to 48 and suffered "different and various gunshot wounds to their bodies". Two people were being questioned, Waller said. One of them was arrested with a weapon, he said.

SYRIA

25,000 fled Idlib for Turkey over two days

Ankara: At least 25,000 civilians have fled Syria's northwestern region of Idlib and headed towards Turkey over the past two days, Turkish state media said on Sunday, as Syrian and Russian forces intensified their bombardment of the region. Turkey currently hosts some 3.7 million Syrian refugees, the largest refugee population in the world, and fears another wave from the Idlib region, where up to 3 million Syrians live in the last significant insurgent-held swathe of territory. Ankara has repeatedly asked its allies to support it in hosting refugees.

STARLINER RETURNS AFTER ABORTED SPACE MISSION



Boeing CST-100 Starliner spacecraft after its landing in White Sands, New Mexico, Sunday. Reuters

■ Boeing's Starliner spacecraft landed in the New Mexico desert on Sunday, the company said, after faulty software forced officials to cut short an unmanned mission aimed at taking it to the International Space Station.

■ The landing at dawn in the White Sands desert capped a turbulent 48 hours for Boeing's botched milestone test of a crew capsule that is designed to help NASA regain its human spaceflight capabilities.

■ The Starliner was successfully launched from Florida Friday, but an automated timer error prevented it from attaining the right orbit to meet and dock with the space station.

Ghani wins majority as Afghanistan releases September's election results

Results may change after complaints reviewed: poll panel

HAMID SHALIZI & ABDUL QADIR SEDIQI
KABUL, DECEMBER 22

AFGHANISTAN'S INCUMBENT President Ashraf Ghani won a slim majority of votes in a Sept 28 election, delayed preliminary results showed on Sunday, after a poll that plunged the country into political crisis and was marred by allegations of fraud.

The Independent Election Commission (IEC) said the total turnout in the presidential election was over 1.8 million with Ghani securing 50.64%, enough to win the first round of voting, beating his main challenger



The incumbent received 50.64% of the vote

Abdullah Abdullah, who currently shares power with Ghani in a unity government.

However, the head of IEC, Hawa Alam Nuristani, said the outcome could change after final results and was still subject to a review by the election com-

plaints' commission.

If a review showed Ghani's vote falling below 50% and no other candidate with a majority, a second round of voting would be held, she said.

According to the tally released by the IEC on Sunday, the total turnout was 1,824,401 with Ghani winning 923,868 votes while Abdullah finished second with 39.5% and 720,099 votes.

In a statement, Abdullah's office said he did not accept the preliminary results and the commission had failed to tackle election fraud. "The result that stands is based on fraud and without considering our legitimate demands, will never be accepted." **REUTERS**

EXPLAINED More political uncertainty likely

FIVE YEARS ago, during the last election, Ghani and Abdullah were involved in a dispute that caused months of political uncertainty. Similarly, the results of this year's election, already delayed by around 2 months, is set to cause more political wrangling. Abdullah has rejected the results and the election panel has left the door open for a change of results after a review of complaints.

Six killed, 13 injured in Las Vegas apartment fire

ASSOCIATED PRESS
LAS VEGAS, DECEMBER 22

A FIRE in a three-story apartment building in downtown Las Vegas where residents were apparently using their stoves for heat killed six people and forced some residents to jump from upper-floor windows to escape the heavy smoke before dawn Saturday, authorities said.

Investigators reported that the fire started around a first-floor unit's stove and that residents had told them that there was no heat in the building, which sits a few blocks from downtown Las Vegas' touristy Fremont Street District.

Residents reported awakening to pounding on doors around 4 am.

By the time Matthew Sykes got his clothes on to flee, one end of his second-floor hallway was choked with thick black smoke, as was a stairwell, making it impassable for he and his wife.

"The whole place was like one big black cloud of smoke - couldn't get down the stairs," Sykes told *The Associated Press*.

Firefighters arriving at the scene began treating the injured and using ladders to rescue numerous people already jumping or hanging from windows, fire department spokesman Tim Szymanski said.

175 children abused by Mexican branch of Catholic Church: report

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
MEXICO CITY, DECEMBER 22

AT LEAST 175 children were sexually assaulted by priests belonging to an ultra-conservative Mexican branch of the Roman Catholic Church, according to an internal report published Saturday.

The founder of the Legionaries of Christ, Marcial Maciel, abused as many as 60 children, with a total of 33 priests or deacons acknowledged to have committed sexual assaults against minors



The founder of Legionaries of Christ, Marcial Maciel, with Pope John Paul II in this 2004 photo. Maciel abused as many as 60 children, the internal report said. Reuters

since 1941, the document says.

The findings of the report - written by a commission created in June by the director general of the group, Eduardo Robles-Gil - spans from the group's founding in 1941 until December 16, 2019.

"The vast majority of the victims were adolescent boys between 11 and 16 years old," the statement said. The report notes that 18 of the 33 individuals who committed abuses are still part of the organisation, but says they have been removed from tasks connected to the public or minors.

Clashes as police try to clear Hong Kong protesters after Uighur support rally



Hong Kong protesters rally in support of Uighurs. Reuters

months of unrest.

A mixed crowd of young and elderly people, dressed in black and wearing masks to shield

their identities, held up signs reading "Free Uyghur, Free Hong Kong" and "Fake 'autonomy' in China results in genocide".

Racist remarks: Indian-origin head of major S African channel sacked

FAKIR HASSEN
JOHANNESBURG, DEC 22

AN INDIAN-ORIGIN head of a news channel in South Africa has been sacked by the broadcaster following an uproar over his alleged racist remarks to a resigning employee.

Kanthan Pillay, head of South Africa's largest independent TV news channel eNCA, had called Samkelo Maseko a rat heading for a sinking ship after the latter opted to work for the South

Kanthan Pillay, head of eNCA, was also accused by a former employee of interference that led to biased coverage favouring some politicians

African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC).

The national public broadcaster SABC is currently facing financial strain.

Based on interviews with officials in Europe and the United States, it is also now clear that the assassination attempts against Gebrev served as a kind of Rosetta Stone that helped Western intelligence agencies to discover Unit 29155 - and to decipher the kind of threat it presented.

Security and intelligence officials are still working to understand how and why the unit is assigned certain targets. Even now, investigators have not determined the precise motive in the Gebrev case.

By the summer following Gebrev's second poisoning,

Bulgarian authorities had dropped the case. They apparently had no idea that Unit 29155 even existed.

Neither did intelligence and security officials in the rest of Europe. However, members of Unit 29155 were very busy, according to partial travel records reviewed by the *Times*. From 2016 to 2018, operatives made at least two dozen trips from Moscow to different European countries.

Their operation in Bulgaria most likely would never have been detected. Then there was another poisoning.

In March 2018, a former Russian spy named Sergei

AUSTRALIA PM APOLOGISES FOR VACATION AMID FIRES

Australian PM Scott Morrison apologised for taking a family vacation in Hawaii as deadly bushfires raged across several states, claiming the lives of two firefighters. "If you had your time over again and you had the benefit of hindsight, we would have made different decisions," Morrison said. "I am sure Australians are fair-minded and understand that when you make a promise to your kids you try and keep it."

FATF grills Pakistan on madrasas linked to banned outfits



The Pakistan government has been told to respond to the questions by January 8. Reuters

The FATF's joint group has sent 150 questions to Pakistan, seeking some clarifications, updates and, most importantly, actions taken against the madrasas belonging to the proscribed outfits

a top official source as saying.

Pakistan has been told to respond to the questions by January 8 next year, the official said.

According to officials, Mumbai terror attack mastermind Hafiz Saeed-led Jamat-ud-Dawah's network includes 300 seminaries and schools.

In March 2019, Punjab police

said the government seized control of 160 madrasas, 32 schools, two colleges, four hospitals, 178 ambulances and 153 dispensaries associated with the JuD and its so-called charity wing Falah-i-Insaniat Foundation (FIF) in the province.

At least 56 madrasas and facilities being run by the JuD and FIF in southern Sindh province were also taken over by the authorities in the same month.

The JuD is believed to be the front organisation for the Lashkar-e-Taiba, which is responsible for carrying out the 2008 Mumbai attacks. The US declared the LeT as a foreign terrorist organisation in June 2014.

The next FATF meeting is scheduled to be held in Beijing from January 21 to 24, where Pakistan will be given an opportunity to defend the points in the report.



Cuban PM Manuel Marrero Cruz embraces President Miguel Diaz-Canel. AP

Cuba gets its first PM in over 40 years

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
HAVANA, DECEMBER 22

CUBA'S FIRST Prime Minister in more than four decades - long-serving tourism minister Manuel Marrero - has taken office as the country resurrected a post last held by Fidel Castro.

The appointment of Marrero, 56, as head of government is part of a process of decentralisation and generational change from the revolutionary old guard that is aimed at extending and protecting Communist Party rule.

"This proposal was duly approved by the political bureau of the Communist Party of Cuba," President Miguel Diaz-Canel said on Saturday, presenting it to the country's National Assembly, which unanimously signed off.

Marrero "is not coming to the job to transform, but rather to implement and manage. The President is the one who leads," said Cuba specialist Arturo Lopez-Levy of Holy Names University in California.

with the second poisoning. Investigators from the Britain-based open-source news outlet Bellingcat have identified the man using the Fedotov alias as Denis Sergeev, a high-ranking GRU officer and a veteran of Russia's wars in the North Caucasus. British authorities confirmed the accuracy of the report.

The revelation that he was connected to the poisonings in both England and Bulgaria was critical in helping Western officials conclude that these were not one-off Russian attacks but rather part of a coordinated campaign run by Unit 29155. **NYT**

FOR YEARS, A SECRET TEAM, UNIT 29155, OPERATED WITHOUT WESTERN SECURITY OFFICIALS HAVING ANY IDEA OF THEIR ACTIVITIES

A poisoning in Bulgaria helped expose Russian assassins in Europe

MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ
SOFIA, DECEMBER 22

THE RUSSIAN assassin used an alias, Sergei Fedotov, and slipped into Bulgaria unnoticed, checking into a hotel in Sofia near the office of a local arms manufacturer who had been selling ammunition to Ukraine.

He led a team of three men.

Within days, one man sneaked into a locked parking garage, smeared poison on the handle of the arms manufacturer's car, then left, undetected, except for blurry images cap-

tured by surveillance video.

Shortly after, the arms manufacturer, Emilian Gebrev, was meeting with business partners at a rooftop restaurant when he began to hallucinate and vomit.

The poisoning left Gebrev, now 65, hospitalised for a month. His son was poisoned, and so was another top executive at his company. When Gebrev was discharged, the assassins poisoned him and his son again, at their summer home on the Black Sea. They all survived, though Gebrev's business has yet to recover fully.

Western security and intelligence officials said the Bulgaria

poisonings were a critical clue that helped expose a campaign by the Kremlin and its sprawling web of intelligence operatives to eliminate Russia's enemies abroad and destabilise the West.

Entering his third decade in power, President Vladimir Putin of Russia is pushing hard to reestablish Russia as a world power. Russia cannot compete economically or militarily with the US and China, so Putin is waging an asymmetric shadow war.

In October, *The New York Times* revealed that a specialised group of Russian intelligence operatives - Unit 29155 - had for



In March 2018, former Russian spy Sergei Skripal was poisoned by a nerve agent in Britain

years been assigned to carry out killings and political disruption campaigns in Europe.