

TOPOF THE WORLD



Civilians flee a Syrian military offensive in Idlib province. AP

SYRIAN CONFLICT

Over 235,000 flee flare-up in Syria, says UN

**Beirut:** More than 235,000 people have fled the Idlib region over the past two weeks, the UN said Friday, amid heightened regime and Russian attacks on Syria's last major opposition bastion. The mass displacement between 12 and 25 December has left the Idlib's Maaret al-Numan region "almost empty", according to the UN humanitarian agency OCHA. The main highway connecting southern Idlib to the province's north has been bustling with pick-up trucks ferrying civilians out of the region. Since mid-December, regime forces have pressed with an assault on jihadists in Idlib, despite a ceasefire deal and calls for a de-escalation.

IRAN

Quake strikes near nuclear power plant

**Tehran:** An earthquake struck Iran on Friday less than 50 kilometres from the country's only nuclear power plant, monitors said. There were no immediate reports of any casualties or damage. The US Geological Survey said the 5.1 magnitude quake struck 44 kilometres from the southwestern city of Borazjan and at a depth of 38 kilometres. Its reported epicentre is 45 kilometres east of the Bushehr nuclear power plant, on the southwest Gulf coast. The Iranian Seismological Center said in a preliminary report on its website that the strength of the quake was 4.9 magnitude and that its depth was 10 km.

PERU

McDonald's fined \$250,000 after worker deaths

**Lima:** Peruvian authorities on Thursday fined the local owner of a McDonald's franchise \$250,000 for serious safety violations after two employees were electrocuted to death. Two workers, an 18-year-old man and a woman, died on December 15 while cleaning the kitchen of a McDonald's in Pueblo Libre, in the Lima province. Police said the woman suffered an electric shock while handling one of the soda machines. Her coworker tried to help her but was also electrocuted in the process.



At the site of the plane crash near Almaty International Airport in Kazakhstan on Friday. AP

12 die after airliner crashes in Kazakhstan

Bek Air plane, carrying nearly 100 people on board, crashes soon after takeoff

PAVEL MIKHEYEV  
ALMATY, DECEMBER 27

A PASSENGER plane carrying nearly 100 people crashed soon after take-off near the city of Almaty in Kazakhstan on Friday, slamming into a house in an accident that killed 12 people and injured dozens.

The Fokker 100 aircraft, operated by Bek Air, got into trouble shortly after departing from Almaty, the Central Asian coun-

try's commercial centre, on a pre-dawn flight to the capital Nur-Sultan.

It lost altitude during take-off and broke through a concrete fence before hitting the two-storey building, Kazakhstan's Civil Aviation Committee said. It was not immediately clear what caused the crash.

"The plane tilted to the left, then to the right, then it started shaking while still trying to gain altitude," businessman Aslan Nazaraliyev, who survived the

crash, told Reuters.

Investigators found scratch marks on the runway.

"Before crashing, the aircraft touched the runway with its tail twice, the gear was retracted," Deputy Prime Minister Roman Sklyar told reporters.

"A commission... will establish whether this was pilot error or technical issues. The runway was in an ideal condition."

A Reuters reporter saw the battered remains of the front of the plane and other separate parts of

the fuselage scattered around what was left of the house.

A survivor told news website Tengrinews she heard a "terrifying sound" before the plane started losing altitude. "The plane was flying at a tilt. Everything was like in a movie: screaming, shouting, people crying," she said.

Almaty authorities initially put the death toll at 15 or more but later revised the figure down to 12. They said 49 people were in hospitals, some of them in serious condition. **REUTERS**



USA

TONY WINNING COMPOSER JERRY HERMAN DIES

Tony Award-winning composer Jerry Herman, who wrote the cheerful, good-natured music and lyrics for such classic shows as *Mame*, *Hello, Dolly!* and *La Cage aux Folles*, died Thursday in Miami of pulmonary complications. He was 88. The creator of 10 Broadway shows and contributor to several more, Herman won two Tony Awards for best musical.

Netanyahu rebuffs a challenge from within, despite graft charges

Wins party primary by big margin ahead of March election

ISABEL KERSHNER  
JERUSALEM, DECEMBER 27

PRIME MINISTER Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel easily brushed off a challenge for the leadership of the conservative Likud party early Friday, a crucial victory for Israel's longest-serving leader but one that may only harden the country's yearlong political standoff.

For Netanyahu, the wide margin in a party primary on Thursday reaffirmed his political prowess and staying power despite his indictment last month on corruption charges, and it gives a jolt of fresh energy to his campaign for Israel's next general election in March.

But it also assures that one of Israel's most polarising issues will be on the ballot in that election: Netanyahu himself.

Israel has already had two inconclusive elections this year, each ending in deadlock with voters nearly evenly divided on whether the corruption cases against Netanyahu should disqualify him from serving a fourth consecutive term.

And though support for Netanyahu has been slipping



After winning 72.5% of the vote in the primary, Netanyahu wrote on Twitter: 'A giant victory!'. Reuters

since his indictment, recent polls suggest that a third election may not resolve anything. Once again, neither Netanyahu nor his main opponent, Benny Gantz of the centrist Blue and White party, may have the votes to form a majority government.

In the party primary Thursday, the most serious internal leadership challenge Netanyahu had faced in years, he handily beat a rival party veteran, Gideon Saar, by a vote of 72.5% to 27.5%, according to an unofficial final count.

"A giant victory!" Netanyahu declared on Twitter just after midnight, barely more than an

hour after the polls closed. "With the help of God and with your help, I will lead Likud to a great victory in the upcoming elections and we will continue to lead the country to unprecedented achievements," he added.

Saar congratulated Netanyahu and conceded defeat in a televised statement an hour later. He said he and his colleagues would stand behind Netanyahu in the party's campaign for the general election.

But the fact that there even was a battle exposed cracks in Likud's long-united front as it prepares for an eventual post-Netanyahu era. **NYT**

Russia deploys hypersonic nuclear missile

ANDREW OSBORN  
MOSCOW, DECEMBER 27

RUSSIA DEPLOYED its first regiment of hypersonic nuclear-capable missiles on Friday, the Defence Ministry said, a move which President Vladimir Putin has boasted puts his country in a class of its own.

Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu has informed Putin of the deployment, his ministry said in a statement, which did not say where the missiles were located.

The new system, called Avangard, comprises a hypersonic glide vehicle which is designed to sit atop an intercontinental ballistic missile, one of several new types of weapons touted by Putin as being ahead of their time.



An intercontinental ballistic missile lifts off from a truck-mounted launcher. AP

Putin has said Russia's new generation of nuclear weapons can hit almost any point in the world and evade a US-built missile shield, though some experts

EXPLAINED

**E.** As Russia, China take lead in hypersonic weapons, US ponders counter measures

WITH RUSSIA making its hypersonic intercontinental weapon operational, and China also having tested its own such missile, the US has been forced to consider how to respond. A missile mounted with Russia's hypersonic glider can manoeuvre sharply while in flight. It also follows a flatter, lower trajectory than conventional ballistic missiles. This means it will be more difficult to detect. According to reports, the US has considered putting sensors and missile interceptors in space to more quickly respond to such missiles. The US Defence Secretary has also said in August that in "a couple of years", the US will have its own hypersonic weapon.

Another Brexit delay could be necessary, EU chief warns

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
BRUSSELS, DECEMBER 27

THE EUROPEAN Union and Britain will struggle to seal an agreement on trade and other aspects of their future ties after Brexit next year and should consider extending the negotiations beyond 2020, a top EU official said in an interview published Friday.

The UK is scheduled to leave the EU on January 31. If it does, it will be the first time a country leaves the world's biggest trading bloc. Negotiations between the remaining members and the British government on future trade, fisheries, education and transport relations can only begin after that date and must con-



URSULA VON DER LEYEN  
European Commission President

clude by the end of 2020.

"I am very concerned about how little time we have," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen told the French business newspaper *Les Echos*.

"It seems to me that, on both sides, we should seriously con-

sider whether the negotiations are feasible in such a short time." "I think it would be reasonable to take stock in the middle of the year and if necessary, agree on an extension to the transition period," von der Leyen said.

As the leader of the executive commission, von der Leyen heads the EU institution responsible for Brexit talks and negotiating trade deals on behalf of member countries.

Such trade pacts routinely take years to complete, and businesses fear that the UK could face a new "no-deal" Brexit scenario at the start of 2021 if questions about whether tariff-free trade with the country's biggest trading partner remain unanswered.

Philippines bans US senators, considers visa restrictions for Americans

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
MANILA, DECEMBER 27

THE PHILIPPINES banned two US senators and threatened to introduce visa restrictions for Americans entering the country, the President's spokesperson said Friday, if Washington pushes ahead with sanctions against Filipino officials involved in jailing a leading opposition leader.

Senators Richard Durbin and Patrick Leahy were banned from entering the country after introducing a provision in the 2020 US budget that would prevent officials involved in the incarceration of Senator Leila de Lima from entering the US, presidential spokesman Salvador Panelo said.

De Lima, one of the highest-profile critics of Duterte's controversial war on drugs, has been imprisoned since February 2017 over a drug charge — but has claimed innocence, and accused him of persecuting political opponents.

"If they will enforce this provision in the US budget, then we will be compelled to require all Americans entering into this country to secure a visa before they can be allowed entry," Panelo said on Friday.

American tourists — who can enter visa-free for up to 30 days — account for more than a tenth of arrivals, according to the Philippines tourism department.

The senators' provision allows the US to deny entry to Philippine officials if the state department finds "credible information" on those involved in the "wrongful imprisonment" of De Lima.

finally arrested in such a death — a first in Nepal, according to law enforcement officials. The case has set off a national debate about women's rights, tradition, law and punishment.

Nepali authorities have jailed the brother-in-law of a young woman who died in a shed this month in the remote Achham district, in the far west. Many Nepalis have been disturbed by her death, and one newspaper called the taboo — called *chhaupadi* — a "national shame."

Human rights activists have been pressing authorities to enforce a law that went into effect last



A woman in *chhaupadi* hut. Reuters file

year that punishes family members who exile menstruating women from their own homes. Still, villagers continue to do it and

many residents in Achham are upset that someone was sent to jail.

"The police are just adding pain over pain," said Krishna

Budha, chief of the village where the young woman died. "She had gone to the hut on her own, taking part of our culture."

But Nepal's highest authorities intervened, leading police officers to make the arrest.

In the past few weeks, villagers have been ordered to destroy dozens of *chhaupadi* huts and Nepal's home ministry has threatened to cut off government aid to families that do not comply with a law that bans the *chhaupadi* ritual.

In Nepali language, *chhaupadi* means someone who bears an impurity. An oppressive tradition has evolved around this

taboo, including the construction of a separate hut for menstruating women to retreat to at night and then sleep in. Each year, at least one woman, usually more, and often young, dies in such a tiny space from smoke inhalation, a snake bite or exposure to the cold.

On Dec. 2, it happened again. Shortly after sunrise, according to police officials, relatives of Parbati Budha, 21, sensed something was wrong. Budha, who lived in a mountain village about a two-day drive from the capital, Kathmandu, was usually an early riser. She was known in the village as a determined worker

who was quite bright.

But on this morning, she did not emerge from her *chhaupadi* hut. When her sister-in-law and brother-in-law went to check on her, they found her on the shed's floor, face down. She had built a fire inside the hut to keep warm during the freezing night and died from inhaling too much smoke.

Budha had married about a year ago and moved in with her husband's family. Her husband worked in a sari showroom in India, and police say it was her husband's brother, Chhatra Raut, 25, who pressured Budha to move out to the shed. **NYT**

IN A FIRST FOR NEPAL, A MAN WAS HELD FOR FORCING HIS SISTER-IN-LAW TO STAY IN A COLD HUT DURING HER PERIOD

An old menstruation taboo killed her; this time, a man went to jail

BHADRA SHARMA & JEFFREY GETTLEMAN  
KATHMANDU, DECEMBER 27

EVERY WINTER, in Nepal's snow-covered hills, young women keep dying because of a deadly superstition.

The tradition here says that any woman who has her period must be banished outside, to a cowshed or makeshift bunker, no matter how cold or dangerous. This has been a ritual, believed to protect the purity of the village, for as long as anyone can remember. But this winter, someone was