

TOPOF THE WORLD



Syed Muazzem Ali

ASIA

Bangladesh ex-foreign secy Syed Muazzem Ali dies at 75

Dhaka: Syed Muazzem Ali, Bangladesh's former foreign secretary and a "good friend" of India, died due to old-age complications here on Monday. He was 75. Ali, who served as Bangladesh's immediate-past High Commissioner to India, died at the Combined Military Hospital in the capital, Bangladeshi newspapers said. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar expressed grief over Ali's demise, saying he was a "good friend" of India. "Deeply shocked to learn of the passing away of former High Commissioner Syed Muazzem Ali. He was a good friend and a strong partner for so many of us. Our thoughts are with Tuhfa and family," Jaishankar said in a tweet.

TURKEY

124 held over suspected links to IS group

Ankara: Police in Turkey detained at least 124 people suspected of links to the Islamic State group, the state-run news agency reported Monday, in an apparent sweep against the militant group ahead of New Year celebrations. At least 33 foreign nationals were detained in the capital Ankara in a joint operation by anti-terrorism police and the national intelligence agency, according to the Anadolu Agency. In Istanbul, police raided 31 houses, detaining 24 suspects, including four foreign nationals.

BRITAIN

I wouldn't have wasted my time on Trump: Greta

London: Teenage climate change activist Greta Thunberg said on Monday that talking to US President Donald Trump at a United Nations summit on global warming would have been a waste of time since he would not have paid any attention. In an interview with BBC radio's *Today* programme, for which she was the guest editor on Monday, Thunberg also said she regarded personal attacks on her as funny and that she hoped to go back to having a normal life.



Churchgoers take cover while a congregant armed with a handgun (top left), engages a man who opened fire (near top centre, just right of windows) during a service at West Freeway Church of Christ in White Settlement, Texas on Sunday. AP

GUN VIOLENCE AT TEXAS CHURCH

Parishioners kill man who shot 2 in church

ASSOCIATED PRESS

WHITE SETTLEMENT, DEC 30

A MAN pulled out a shotgun at a Texas church service and fired on worshippers Sunday, killing two people before he was shot to death by congregants who fired back, police said.

Authorities at a Sunday evening news conference praised the two congregants who opened

fire as part of a volunteer security team at West Freeway Church of Christ in White Settlement. It was unclear if the two people who were killed were the two who shot at the gunman.

"This team responded quickly and within six seconds, the shooting was over. Two of the parishioners who were volunteers of the security force drew their weapons and took out the killer immediately, saving untold number of

lives," said Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who also hailed the state's gun laws. Britt Farmer, senior minister of the church, said, "We lost two great men today, but it could have been a lot worse."

Authorities said there were more than 240 parishioners in the West Freeway Church at the time of the shooting.

White Settlement Police Department Chief J.P. Bevering said the gunman had sat down

in a pew before getting up, taking out a shotgun and firing at a parishioner, who was killed. He said the church's security team then "eliminated the threat."

Officials have not released the names of the victims or the gunman. FBI Special Agent in Charge Matthew DeSarno said they're working to identify the gunman's motive, adding that he is "relatively transient" but had roots in the area.

Sudan sentences 27 intel agents to death over teacher's killing

REUTERS

KHARTOUM, DECEMBER 30

A SUDANESE court sentenced 27 members of the national intelligence service to death by hanging on Monday over the killing of a teacher in detention in February during protests that led to the overthrow of former president Omar al-Bashir.

It was the first time courts have handed down convictions over crackdowns on demonstrations in the months before and after Bashir was toppled in April.

The death of teacher Ahmed al-Khair in the eastern town of Khashm al-Qirba became a rallying point during 16 weeks of protests against Bashir's rule.



He Jiankui

agency, reported. He had said he was trying to prevent HIV infections in newborns, but the state media Monday said he deceived the subjects and the medical authorities alike.

He, 35, sent the scientific world into an uproar last year

DAY AFTER REPORTS OF A TRUCE

Taliban say no plans for Afghan ceasefire

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

KABUL, DECEMBER 30

THE TALIBAN on Monday denied agreeing to any ceasefire in Afghanistan after rumours swirled of a potential deal that would see a reduction in fighting after more than 18 years of war.

The statement from the insurgents comes as local and international forces brace for another bloody winter amid renewed US-Taliban talks, after President Donald Trump called off the negotiations earlier this year over insurgent attacks.

"In the past few days, some media have been releasing untrue reports about a ceasefire... The fact is that, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has no ceasefire plans," the Taliban said, after multiple media reports, including a story in the *Wall Street Journal*, suggested the group was on the verge of announcing some type of temporary truce.

The US and the Afghan government in Kabul have long called for a ceasefire with the Taliban, including during the year of negotiations between Washington and the militants that were abruptly called off by



According to an Associated Press report, the release from jail of around 5,000 Taliban prisoners has been written into the agreement under discussion with the US. AP

Trump in September.

However, the insurgents have repeatedly stated that any potential truce will only be ironed out after American troops withdraw from the country.

The US-Taliban talks, held mainly in Doha, were aimed at allowing Washington to begin withdrawing troops in return for various security guarantees.

They were on the brink of a deal when Trump abandoned the effort in September, citing Taliban violence. Negotiations have since restarted in Doha, but were earlier this month put on a "pause".

Trump is looking to slash the troop presence in Afghanistan, potentially even before a deal between Washington and the Taliban is cemented.

Deadly bouts of fighting continue however, with tens of thousands of Afghan security forces killed since they inherited combat operations from NATO at the end of 2014.

Earlier Monday, in northern Afghanistan's Jowzjan province, the Taliban killed at least 13 Afghan security forces during a raid on a pro-government militia position.

Cyprus: Woman who accused 12 men of rape convicted of 'public mischief'

LIZZY IOANNIDOU & ILIANA MAGRA

PARALIMNI, DECEMBER 30

A BRITISH woman was convicted by a Cyprus court on Monday for lying to the authorities when she accused a dozen Israeli men of raping her and later retracted her statement, the latest twist in a case that divided public opinion in Cyprus and Israel.

The British woman, who was 19 when she made the accusation and has not been publicly identified, had accused the men, who ranged in age from 15 to 18, of raping her in a hotel room in the resort town of Ayia Napa in July. The men were arrested that month but were later released after the police said the woman had retracted the accusations.

Marios Christou, the chief in-



Activists protest after a British woman was found guilty of faking a rape claim, in Paralimni, Cyprus. Reuters

vestigating officer in the case, testified during the legal proceedings that she had "admitted that she reported the incident" because the men "were recording her having sex" and "she felt insulted." He also pointed to inconsistencies between her statement and video footage from the night on which

she said she was raped.

On Monday, the Famagusta District Court in Cyprus convicted her of public mischief. She is due to be sentenced on Jan 7 and could face up to a year in prison. She can appeal the verdict, and her lawyers have asked for a suspended sentence. **NYT**

Lanka ex-minister held for news conference gets bail

ASSOCIATED PRESS

COLOMBO, DECEMBER 30

A SRI Lankan court granted bail Monday to a former Cabinet minister who was arrested for participating in a news conference about abductions of critics under the government of the current President's brother.

Police arrested Rajitha Senaratne, now an opposition lawmaker, last week at a private hospital where he was receiving treatment.

Opposition lawmakers have criticised his detention, saying it is politically motivated and is

part of a government witch hunt of political opponents that has taken place since President Gotabaya Rajapaksa assumed duties last month.

Police arrested Senaratne on Friday, and he continued to remain at the hospital under the detention of prison guards.

On Monday, a magistrate court granted him bail on two sureties of 500,000 Sri Lankan rupees (\$2,766) each, said his lawyer Gunaratna Wanninayaka.

Senaratne was the second opposition lawmaker to be arrested and detained since Rajapaksa's election victory in November.

Gene-edited babies: China scientist gets jail term

SUI-LEE WEE

BEIJING, DECEMBER 30

A COURT in China on Monday sentenced He Jiankui, the researcher who shocked the global scientific community when he claimed that he had created the world's first genetically edited babies, to three years in prison for carrying out "illegal medical practices."

In a surprise announcement from a trial that was closed to the public, the court in the southern city of Shenzhen found He guilty of forging approval documents from ethics review boards to recruit couples in which the man had HIV and the woman did not, Xinhua, China's official news

DISPUTE OVER LONG WORK HOURS CAPTIVATES COUNTRY

A 7-Eleven in Japan might close for a day; yes, that's a big deal

BEN DOOLEY & HISAKO UENO

HIGASHI-OSAKA, DECEMBER 30

MITOSHI MATSUMOTO, the most famous 7-Eleven convenience store owner in Japan, wants to do something unthinkable in his 24-hour, 7-day-a-week industry: Take a day off.

That's why, he says, 7-Eleven is trying to put him out of business.

Matsumoto announced in November his plans to close up shop so he and his two full-time employees could take off New Year's Day, Japan's most important holiday, after years of working 14-hour days with few breaks. But on Dec 20, 7-Eleven's parent company told him that

his store had received more customer complaints than any other in Japan. He had 10 days to address the issues, it said, or the location would be closed.

"They don't want to let me take New Year's off. That's all there is to it," said Matsumoto, 57, who has made a name for himself in Japan by publicly defying the company's demands that franchisees stay open 24 hours. "If they allow me to do this, others will start rising up here and there."

His decision in February to shorten store hours inspired other franchisees to demand that 7-Eleven allow them to do the same. But the company has been slow to change, he said, so he decided to take New Year's off in protest.

The standoff has super-



Outside the convenience store owned by Mitoshi Matsumoto in Higashi-Osaka, Japan. NYT

charged a national debate over the business practices of the country's 24-hour convenience store industry. Japan's declining

population has made workers harder to find. Tales of punishing work schedules have struck a chord in a country that holds a

sometimes lethal corporate devotion to working long hours.

Last year, the labor ministry approved 246 claims related to hospitalization or death from overwork, according to government statistics, which show the retail industry as one of the biggest sources of complaints. Another 568 workers took their own lives over job-related exhaustion.

But even as convenience store owners are suffering under increasingly long hours, the country's three biggest convenience store chains — 7-Eleven, Lawson and FamilyMart — have been reluctant to change the 24-hour schedule that Japanese shoppers have come to expect.

In a letter to Matsumoto, 7-Eleven said it received 78 com-

plaints about his store this year. In a statement, it said that the threat to sever the contract was based on the complaints and on the "destruction of the relationship of trust" caused by his criticisms on social media of 7-Eleven's management.

Matsumoto and his supporters say 7-Eleven is trying to make an example of the man who has become the face of the resistance against a company that they say exploits their labour.

"Owners can't organise, because the second you try, they home in on you and apply pressure," said Reiji Kamakura, the leader of the Convenience Store Union, a small group that has struggled to gain members and change industry practices in the

face of corporate opposition.

Though it got its start in Texas in the 1920s, 7-Eleven has been controlled by a Japanese company since 1991. Today, it operates nearly 40% of Japan's more than 55,000 convenience stores.

That makes 7-Eleven an integral part of Japanese life. The government considers convenience stores part of the country's infrastructure, like highways and sewers. They are expected to help promote regional tourism and to help with local policing by offering a safe place for people to flee to. Its stores can be called on to help distribute aid and supplies during a natural disaster.

The vast majority of Japanese 7-Elevens are owned by individuals like Matsumoto. **NYT**

Bushfires reach Melbourne as heatwave fans Australia blazes

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

MELBOURNE, DECEMBER 30

FIRE THREATENED three Melbourne suburbs Monday, with residents warned it was too late to flee and they must "act immediately to survive", as a heatwave fuelled Australia's deadly bushfire crisis.

Authorities declared a bushfire emergency as an out-of-control blaze bore down on homes in Australia's second-biggest city.

In Bundoora — just 16 kilometres north of the city centre and home to two major Australian university campuses — fire was "threatening homes and lives", Victoria Emergency said.

"You are in danger and need to act immediately to survive," the agency said in a message to residents. "The safest option is to take shelter indoors immediately. It is too late to leave." Local media showed images of water bombers flying over the neighbourhoods and families dousing their homes with water hoses in the hope of halting the fire's spread.

It is the latest emergency in Australia's devastating summer fire season, which has been turbocharged by a prolonged drought and climate change.

Ten people have been killed, more than 1,000 homes destroyed and more than three million hectares — an area bigger than Belgium — have been scorched.

Conditions worsened on Friday with high winds and temperatures soaring across the country — reaching 47 degrees Celsius in Western Australia and topping 40 degrees in every region.