

TOP OF THE WORLD



Biden is the current frontrunner for the Democratic nomination

USA

Biden says would consider a Republican running mate

FORMER US vice president Joe Biden, a leading contender for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination, said on Monday he would consider choosing a Republican running mate if he is the party's nominee next year. However, even as he raised the possibility of a Republican running mate while speaking to a crowd at a campaign event in Exeter, New Hampshire, Biden said, "But I can't think of one right now." Biden has premised much of his presidential bid on appealing to moderate Democrats, independents and Republicans who have been alienated by President Donald Trump.

USA

Trump: Will sign first-step China trade deal in Jan

West Palm Beach: US President Donald Trump said he would sign the first phase of a trade deal with China at the White House next month. Trump said Tuesday in a tweet that he would then travel to Beijing at a later date to open talks on other sticking points in the US-China trade relationship that remain to be worked out. "I will be signing our very large and comprehensive Phase One Trade Deal with China on January 15. The ceremony will take place at the White House," Trump tweeted from his Florida home.

ASIA

Taiwan passes law to combat China influence

Taipei: Taiwan's Parliament passed an anti-infiltration law on Tuesday to combat perceived threats from China as the island gears up for a presidential vote on Jan 11 amid heightened tension with Beijing. The legislation is part of a years-long effort to combat what many in Taiwan see as Chinese efforts to influence politics and the democratic process, through illicit funding of politicians and the media and other methods.

OUTRAGE IN IRAQ OVER U.S. AIRSTRIKES

Chanting 'death to America', protesters storm Baghdad US embassy compound

Trump blames Iran, calls on Iraq to protect embassy as protesters break security cameras, light fires, cover walls with graffiti

FALIH HASSAN & BEN HUBBARD
BAGHDAD, DECEMBER 31

PROTESTERS BROKE into the heavily guarded compound of the United States embassy in Baghdad on Tuesday and lit fires inside to express their anger over US airstrikes that killed 24 members of an Iranian-backed militia over the weekend.

The men did not enter the main embassy buildings and later withdrew from the compound, joining thousands of protesters and militia fighters outside who chanted "Death to America", threw rocks, covered the walls with graffiti and demanded that the United States withdraw its forces from Iraq.

The situation remained combustible, with protesters vowing to camp outside the compound indefinitely. Their ability to storm the most heavily guarded zone in Baghdad suggested that they had received at least tacit permission from Iraqi security officials sympathetic to their demands.

The US airstrikes on Sunday have resulted in the most serious political crisis in years for the United States in Iraq, stoking anti-Americanism and handing an advantage to Iran in its competition for influence in the country.

The airstrikes targeted an Iranian-backed Iraqi militia, Kataib Hezbollah, which the United States accused of carrying out a missile attack on an Iraqi military base that killed an American contractor and wounded American and Iraqi service members. A spokesman for the militia denied involvement in the attack.

But the size of the US response — five strikes in Iraq and Syria that killed two dozen fighters and wounded dozens of others — prompted condemnation from across the political spectrum and accusations that the United States had violated Iraqi sovereignty.

US President Donald Trump quickly blamed Iran for both the



Protesters in front of the US embassy compound in Baghdad on Tuesday. Protesters and militia fighters (left) attacked a reception room of the embassy during a protest to condemn US airstrikes in Iraq. AP, Reuters

death of the American contractor and the storming of the embassy compound, which he described as "an attack", adding that the Iraqi government shared responsibility for the compound's safety.

Iran killed an American contractor, wounding many. We strongly responded, and always will," he wrote on Twitter. "Now Iran is orchestrating an attack on the US Embassy in Iraq. They will be held fully responsible. In addition,

we expect Iraq to use its forces to protect the Embassy, and so notified."

The Iraqi interior minister, Yassin al-Yasiri, said in an interview near the embassy that US attacks on an Iraqi militia had in-

ited trouble. "These are the dangerous ramifications of this strike," he said. "What happened today is the danger that we were afraid of, and that the Americans should have been afraid of." NYT

However, recent airstrikes in the country by the US has turned the protesters' ire to Washington. The US action came in response to a rocket attack in Iraq, reportedly by an Iranian-backed militia, that killed an American contractor. Iraqi protesters denounced what they called the disproportionate US response which killed 24 members of the militia. The Iran-backed militias technically come under the Iraqi security forces. Many Iraqis are also wary of a proxy conflict between the US and Iran playing out in their country.

EXPLAINED

Latest strikes refocus Iraqis' ire from Tehran to Washington

IRAQ HAS seen months of largescale protests against what demonstrators consider Iran's pervasive influence in their country. This had even led to the burning down of an Iranian consulate in the city of Najaf in November.

However, recent airstrikes in the country by the US has turned the protesters' ire to Washington. The US action came in response to a rocket attack in Iraq, reportedly by an Iranian-backed militia, that killed an American contractor. Iraqi protesters denounced what they called the disproportionate US response which killed 24 members of the militia. The Iran-backed militias technically come under the Iraqi security forces. Many Iraqis are also wary of a proxy conflict between the US and Iran playing out in their country.

Thousands trapped on Australia's beaches by dangerous bushfires

SONALI PAUL & SWATI PANDEY
MELBOURNE, SYDNEY, DEC 31

THOUSANDS SWARMED to beaches on Australia's east coast on Tuesday to escape fierce wildfires bearing down on several seaside towns, as the government readied naval vessels and military helicopters to aid firefighting and evacuations.

Government officials called for Australian military support and assistance from US and Canadian fire crews as authorities confirmed two people had died overnight, taking to 11 the total deaths in wildfires since the beginning of October.

The huge bushfires have destroyed more than 4 million hectares, with new blazes sparked into life almost daily by extremely hot and windy conditions in bush-

land left tinder dry after a three-year drought.

Fuelled by searing temperatures and high winds, more than 200 fires are burning across the southeastern states of New South Wales and Victoria, threatening several towns and snapping their power, mobile and internet links.

"This is absolutely one of the worst fire seasons we've seen," Shane Fitzsimmons, commissioner of the NSW Rural Fire Service, told a briefing in Sydney.

"It's going to be a very long, difficult dangerous night still ahead. It's going to be another difficult day again tomorrow."

Authorities said the main fire-front was moving up the coast and warned those in its path to seek shelter close to the beach.

About 4,000 people in the town of Mallacoota in Victoria headed to the waterfront after the main road was cut off. REUTERS



SYDNEY RINGS IN THE NEW YEAR

Fireworks during New Year's Eve celebrations in Sydney, Australia. Reuters



The former Nissan boss is facing trial on financial misconduct charges

Ghosn flees to Lebanon, slams Japan's 'rigged' justice system

ISSAM ABDALLAH & TIM KELLY
BEIRUT, TOKYO, DECEMBER 31

OUSTED NISSAN boss Carlos Ghosn was in his childhood home of Lebanon on Tuesday after fleeing what he said was a "rigged" justice system in Japan, raising questions about how one of the world's most-recognised executives slipped away while on bail.

Ghosn's abrupt departure marks the latest dramatic twist in a year-old saga that has shaken the global auto industry, jeopardised the alliance of Nissan Motor Co Ltd and top shareholder Renault SA and cast a harsh light on Japan's judicial system.

"I am now in Lebanon and will no longer be held hostage by a rigged Japanese justice system where guilt is presumed, discrimination is rampant, and basic human rights are denied," Ghosn, 65, said in a brief statement on Tuesday.

Tokyo officials have previously said the system is not inhumane and that Ghosn, who is facing trial on financial misconduct charges he denies, has been treated like any other suspect.

It was unclear how Ghosn, who holds French, Brazilian and Lebanese citizenship, was able to leave Japan, given that he was under strict surveillance by authorities while out on bail and had surrendered his passports. REUTERS

Pakistani media mogul rejects rape accusations

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
ISLAMABAD, DECEMBER 31

THE CHIEF executive of one of Pakistan's most influential newspapers has denied accusations he raped an acclaimed filmmaker, in a case that has spotlighted sexual abuse targeting men and added momentum to the country's fledgling #MeToo movement.

Director Jamshed Mahmood Raza took to social media over the weekend to allege that Dawn newspaper's Hameed Haroon raped him 13 years ago.

In October, Raza first described the assault publicly on Twitter but referred to the alleged perpetrator as a "powerful person in our media world".

Haroon — who hails from one of Pakistan's wealthiest and most influential families — issued a fierce denial in Dawn, the country's most popular English daily, late Monday, calling the accusations "simply untrue and intentionally fabricated".

"I categorically deny the allegation of rape levelled against me," said Haroon in a statement.

Raza later slammed Haroon's comments, saying the statement was "nothing but a slap to all us survivors".

THE BAR'S OWNER SAYS HIS INTENTION IS NOT TO PRAISE PYONGYANG, WHICH IS PUNISHABLE UNDER A SOUTH KOREAN LAW

In heart of Seoul, a North Korea-themed bar that walks the line on legality

NEHA BANKA
SEOUL, DECEMBER 31

IT IS not unusual to find North Korean food in Seoul. Several restaurants across the country serve various North Korean-style dishes. But Pyongyang Bar, a new restaurant and bar in the South Korean capital, has taken the experience of North Korean dining one step further.

Located in the trendy neighbourhood of Hongdae in Seoul, which is filled with bars and restaurants on almost every street, Pyongyang Bar, stands out not just because of its name. The bright lights of the bar's pink and mint green exterior highlight the large-scale North Korean propaganda

images and graphics in Hangul, the Korean script. At the very top of the bar are two images, one of US President Donald Trump and the other of Kim Kyung-jin, a Korean impersonator of Kim Jong Un, in a nod to the meetings of the two leaders during summits in 2018 and 2019. For many South Koreans and foreigners, this is the closest they can get to experiencing a little bit of North Korea.

The bar has a range of products from North Korea on display, smuggled out of North Korea into China and available for purchase in border towns. North Korean music plays inside and waitresses are dressed in colourful traditional dresses called *hanbok*. Word spread on social media, says Kim Seong-geon, 27, the bar manager.

"People began sharing photos because of the unique interiors,"

Jang Woo-kyung, 43, has been in the restaurant business for a decade. Prior to opening Pyongyang Bar, he was running a Japanese pub in the same location for seven years. He had to close the pub down after diplomatic tensions with Japan resulted in anti-Japan sentiment and campaigns in South Korea. "After that campaign, my sales decreased by 50 percent. I had no choice other than changing the bar. I was looking for a new concept that nobody had tried before. I had a meeting with an interior designer and he suggested a North Korea-themed pub and I thought it would be fun and might bring back sales," Jang told *The Indian Express*.



Pyongyang Bar in Seoul. Neha Banka

Planning the interiors and other aspects of the bar's theme

involved months of research to get the look that Jang wanted. "I did a

lot of research through books, the Internet, documentary films, YouTube and meetings (with) North Korean defectors," Jang said. The defectors, who now run their own restaurants in South Korea, helped him set the menu according to the preferences of South Koreans, he added.

South Korea's National Security Act is a law that penalises praise of North Korea or support of Kim Jong Un's regime. A few weeks before and after the bar opened, local news reports and social media in South Korea were abuzz, debating whether the bar violated this national law.

Jang said that was never the intention. "Before posting Kim's portraits (inside the bar), we checked with the lawyer who told us that

it was not going to be a problem, because that was not praising North Korea," Jang said the initial news coverage of his establishment alluded that he was attempting to praise North Korea, giving rise to the controversy that followed. "I just posted Kim's portrait for fun. I just want my customers to feel like they are really in Pyongyang. My keyword (during planning) was 'realistic,'" he said.

This controversial law was used by South Korea, particularly when the country was under the military dictatorship of President Park Chung-hee between 1963 and 1979, to prevent North Korean propaganda and to prosecute individuals suspected of being spies, acts that were punishable by death. According to reports, South

Korean police had investigated the issue and decided that the bar had not been violating the law. But the decision was not final.

The North Korean products on display are not for sale because Jang is not permitted to sell them in South Korea. The products are a fascinating collection of everyday items and food products — cigarettes, tea, chocolates, dried fish, various North Korean liquors, beer, postcards and North Korean-style *hanbok*. The bottles of liquor and beer are empty because bringing them into South Korea is not allowed, Jang said, explaining that he sourced these products from Dandong, a Sino-North Korean border town in China.

FULL REPORT ON
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