

TOPOF THE WORLD



French union members and workers on strike stand near a fire in Paris. Reuters

FRANCE
Unions return to streets in pension protest

Paris: French trade unions disrupted rail services, shut schools and brought demonstrators onto the streets in cities across France on Thursday in a make-or-break push to force President Emmanuel Macron to abandon his planned pension reform. The country's hard-left unions rallied supporters hoping to regain momentum at a time participation in a 36-day long public sector strike wanes and opinion polls show public backing for the industrial action dropping.

EUROPE
Norway to take in 600 migrants moved to Rwanda

Copenhagen: Norway says it will take 600 asylum seekers recently evacuated to Rwanda from Libyan detention centers as the Scandinavian country wants to stop the sometimes deadly smuggling of migrants across the Mediterranean Sea. "For me it is important to send a signal that we will not back smuggling routes and cynical backers, but instead bring in people with protection needs in organized form," Justice and Immigration Minister Joaran Kallmyr said in a statement emailed Thursday to The Associated Press.

PAKISTAN
Woman thought to be dead 'comes back to life' at funeral bath

Karachi: In a bizarre incident, a 50-year-old woman pronounced dead by a hospital in Pakistan "came back to life" at her funeral bath, according to a media report on Thursday. Rasheeda Bibi was admitted to the Abbasi Shaheed Hospital in Karachi where the doctors pronounced her dead and also issued a death certificate, the *Express Tribune* reported. The woman "miraculously came back to life while being given her funeral bath on Wednesday", it said. "Her body had been shifted to the morgue and we had started giving her a funeral bath when a woman present in the room noticed her limbs moving," a relative said.

Ukrainian plane was accidentally shot down by Iran, say US officials

Keiv wants to search crash site for Russian missile debris; Tehran says plane was on fire before crash

REUTERS

WASHINGTON, KIEV, JAN 9

A UKRAINE airliner that crashed in Iran, killing all 176 people on board, was most likely brought down accidentally by Iranian air defences, US officials said on Thursday, as President Donald Trump said he had a terrible feeling about the disaster.

One US official said satellites had detected the launch of two missiles shortly before the plane crashed, followed by evidence of an explosion. Two officials said Washington believed the downing of the plane was accidental.

Speaking to reporters, Trump said the crash could have been a mistake, adding he had a terrible



At a vigil at the University of Toronto for the victims of the crash. 63 Canadians were among the 176 dead. Reuters

feeling about the downed airliner but offering no evidence. "Somebody could have made

a mistake," Trump told reporters at a the White House. Meanwhile, Iranian investi-

UKRAINE'S THEORIES

ATOP Ukrainian security official has said the country was not ruling out the possibility that the plane was brought down by a missile. He said Ukraine was investigating to see whether a Russian missile could have hit the airliner.

OTHER THEORIES put forward by Ukraine are a mid-air collision, engine explosion and terrorism.

gators said the plane was on fire before it fell to the ground. The Iranian report cited wit-

nesses on the ground and in a passing aircraft flying at a high altitude as saying the plane was on fire while in the air.

It said the Ukrainian International Airlines Boeing 737-800 encountered a technical problem shortly after take-off and started to head toward a nearby airport before it crashed.

Ukraine said its investigators wanted to search the site of Wednesday's crash southwest of Tehran for possible debris of a Russian-made missile used by Iran's military.

The flight to Kiev and carrying mostly Iranians and Iranian-Canadians, crashed shortly after taking off from Tehran's Imam Khomeini airport, killing all 176 people on board.

Iran sends mixed signals after US backs off

Iranian military commanders vow harsher revenge on US

AMIR VAHDAT & JOSEPH KRAUSS

TEHRAN, JANUARY 9

IRAN SENT mixed signals Thursday as tensions with the US appeared to ease, with President Hassan Rouhani warning of a "very dangerous response" if the US makes "another mistake" and a senior commander vowing "harsher revenge" for the killing of a top Iranian general.

Both sides appeared to step back on Wednesday after Iran launched a series of ballistic missiles at two military bases housing American troops in Iraq without causing any casualties. Iran said the attack was retaliation for the US strike that killed General Qassem Soleimani, the architect of its regional security strategy, in Iraq earlier this week.

Rouhani said the missile attack was a legitimate act of self-defence under the UN Charter, but he warned that "if the US makes another mistake, it will receive a very dangerous response."

In addition to launching the missile attack, Iran also abandoned its remaining commitments under the 2015 nuclear deal, which President Donald Trump had walked away from in May 2018. But Rouhani said Thursday that Iran would continue to cooperate with UN inspectors.

Senior Iranian military commanders struck a more defiant



What appears to be damage at Al Asad air base in Iraq is seen in a satellite picture taken Wednesday. Reuters

EXPLAINED

US assets in West Asia could still be under threat

IRAN'S OFFICIAL retaliation for the US's killing of Soleimani caused little damage and claimed no lives. According to experts quoted by the *New York Times*, this is likely to have been a deliberate move by Tehran in order to de-escalate the tense situation. However, Iran has a large network of allied armed groups in West Asia, as well as a fleet of sophisticated armed drones and teams of highly skilled computer hackers, all of which have been used in the past in attacks for which the Iranian regime does not take direct responsibility. The attacks last year on Saudi oil facilities, claimed by the Iran-backed Houthi rebels, is an example of such an attack. Analysts say that Iran could target American assets in the region in similar ways after the US attacked Tehran's officials and allied groups in Iraq.

tone. Abdollah Araghi, a member of Iran's joint chiefs of staff, said the Revolutionary Guard "will impose a harsher revenge on the enemy in the near future," according to the semi-official Tasnim news agency.

Tasnim also quoted General

Ali Fadavi, the acting commander of the Guard, as saying the missile attack was "just one of the manifestations of our abilities."

"We sent dozens of missiles into the heart of the US bases in Iraq and they couldn't do a damned thing," he said. **AP**

Lebanon bans Ghosn from travelling abroad

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

BEIRUT, JANUARY 9

LEBANON BANNED former auto tycoon Carlos Ghosn from travelling on Thursday after questioning him over an Interpol "red notice" of charges of financial misconduct in Japan, judicial sources said.

The 65-year-old businessman — for years venerated in Japan for turning around once-ailing Nissan — fled while awaiting trial on charges including allegedly under-reporting his compensation to the tune of \$85 million.

His shock arrival in his native Lebanon last month was the lat-

est twist in a story worthy of a Hollywood plot and prompted outrage from the Japanese government as well as from Nissan.

"The state prosecution issued a travel ban for Ghosn, and asked for his file from the Japanese authorities," a judicial source said.

A second judicial source said: "He has been banned from travelling until his judicial file arrives from Japan." Lebanon's judiciary received a "red notice" from Interpol urging Ghosn's arrest.

A "red notice" is a request to police across the world to provisionally arrest a person pending extradition, surrender or similar legal action. It is not an arrest warrant.

Pak Council of Islamic Ideology: Forced conversion 'un-Islamic'

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

ISLAMABAD, JANUARY 9

AMIDST INCREASING reports of forcible conversion of minorities in Pakistan, including that of Hindus and Sikhs, a constitutional body tasked with giving legal advice on Islamic issues to lawmakers said such incidents were "un-Islamic and unconstitutional".

The Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) during its two-day session took up the matter of forced conversions and decided to include minority leaders in the consultation process, *The News* reported Thursday, citing sources.

"They (CII) were of the view that Islam does not allow forced conversions. It was also proposed to the Ministry of Religious Affairs to prepare a performa for those who want to change their religion or accept Islam," the paper said.

Addressing a press conference here after the two-day meeting, CII Chairman Dr Qibla Ayaz said the forced conversion of religion is violation of the Islamic teachings and also breach of the Constitution.

India has condemned the abduction, forced conversion, and marriage of minorities in Pakistan.

In July last, Prime Minister Imran Khan had termed the

climb in the Republican-controlled Senate, but on Wednesday, two Republicans signalled they were inclined to support it, holding open the possibility of a razor-thin vote. Either way, it is certain to ignite a fierce debate over Trump's strategy on Iran and Congress' role in curtailing a President's ability to wage war. "Members of Congress have serious, urgent concerns about the administration's decision to engage in hostilities against Iran and about its lack of strategy moving forward," Pelosi said in a statement. "Our concerns were not addressed by the president's insufficient War Powers Act notification and by the administration's briefing today." **NYT**

practice of forced conversions as "un-Islamic" and said there was no precedent in Islamic history for forcefully converting others, according to media reports.

"How can we take it into our own hands to forcefully convert someone to Islam — either by marrying (non-Muslim) women (...) or on gunpoint or to (by threatening) to kill someone because of their religion?" he asked. "All these things are un-Islamic. If God hadn't given his messengers the power to impose their beliefs on someone, who are we (to do so)?" he asked, explaining that the messengers' duty was only to spread the word of God.

been reported, but seven people have become critically ill. On Wednesday, the local health commission said eight people had been discharged.

The revelations set off a panic in a country where the memory of the SARS outbreak remains fresh. SARS, or severe acute respiratory syndrome, is a dangerous respiratory disease and also a coronavirus, which spread from southern China in 2003 and infected more than 3,000 people, killing 774.

The new illness appeared just weeks before the Spring Festival,

UK MPs back EU exit deal, turning page on Brexit crisis

REUTERS

LONDON, JANUARY 9

LAWMAKERS APPROVED legislation on Thursday which will allow Britain to leave the European Union on Jan 31 with an exit deal, ending more than three years of tumult over the terms of the unprecedented divorce.

They voted 330 to 231 in favour of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill, which implements an exit deal agreed with the EU last year.

That allows Prime Minister Boris Johnson to turn the page on one of Britain's deepest political crises in decades, putting an end to the fears of an immediate disorderly exit which had cast a shadow over the economy and fuelled divisions over the 2016 referendum decision to leave the EU.

"It is time to get Brexit done. This bill does so," Brexit minister Stephen Barclay told lawmakers, summing up hours of debate in Parliament.

The legislation now heads to parliament's upper chamber and is expected to become law in the

They voted 330 to 231 in favour of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill, which implements an exit deal agreed with the European Union in 2019

coming weeks, leaving enough time to allow Britain to leave at the end of the month with a deal to minimise economic disruption.

After Johnson called a snap election late last year and then won a large majority by promising to deliver Brexit at the end of January, the uncertainty over when and how Britain will leave the EU has largely abated.

The focus has instead turned to upcoming talks on long-term arrangements with the EU that will kick in when a transition period — during which Britain remains subject to EU rules — ends on December 31.

Johnson is adamant that the free-trade deal he wants can be negotiated in time, but his EU counterparts are less convinced.



Prince Harry and Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, at Bondi Beach in Sydney, Australia in 2018. AP

Harry and Meghan's plan to step back jolts UK royal family

DANICA KIRKA

JANUARY 9

BRITAIN'S ROYAL family scrambled Thursday to contain the fall-out from the surprise announcement by Prince Harry and Meghan that they plan "to step back" from royal duties and pursue a new path that will allow them to be financially independent.

The couple's announcement that they planned to forge a "progressive" new path for royals in the modern world and clearly upset senior royals — who apparently weren't told of the decision in advance. Hours after Harry and Meghan's announcement, Buckingham Palace issued a second statement, saying many issues still had to be worked out before the couple's plan could be realised.

A statement issued Wednesday evening by Buckingham Palace, described as "a personal message from the Duke and Duchess of Sussex," said Harry and Meghan intend to become financially independent and to "balance" their time between the UK and North America.

"After many months of reflection and internal discussions, we have chosen to make a transition this year in starting to carve out a progressive new role within this institution," the

UNPRECEDENTED

■ There is no precedent in the British royal family for Harry and Meghan's situation.

■ Other royals have left the family before, in various ways. Diana, the Princess of Wales, lost her royal title in 1996 after divorcing Prince Charles. King Edward VIII gave up his right to the throne in 1936 by announcing he wanted to marry a divorced American.

■ But no senior royals in the past have voluntarily said they want to remain members of the royal family while also being outside it at the same time.

■ Their plan to live partly in North America make them the only senior royals since King Edward to live for a substantial period of time outside the United Kingdom.

statement said. "We intend to step back as 'senior' members of the royal family and work to become financially independent, while continuing to fully support her majesty the queen." **AP**

THOUGH NOT TIED TO ANY DEATHS, OFFICIALS CLOSELY MONITORING VIRUS THAT COMES FROM SAME REGION AS SARS

China identifies new virus behind mysterious pneumonia-like illness

SUI-LEE WEE & DONALD G MCNEIL JR

JANUARY 9

RESEARCHERS IN China have identified a new virus that is behind a mysterious pneumonia-like illness that has sickened 59 people in Wuhan and caused a panic in the central Chinese region.

There's no evidence that the virus, a coronavirus, is readily spread by humans, and it has not been tied to any deaths. But health officials in China and internationally are watching it

carefully, as it comes from the same region where the deadly SARS epidemic broke out in the early 2000s.

Experts said the pathogen that caused these unexplained pneumonia cases had been "initially identified" as a new coronavirus, China's state broadcaster, China Central Television, said Thursday. They detected this virus among 15 of the people.

The new coronavirus "is different from previous human coronaviruses that were previously discovered, and more scientific research is needed for

further understanding," CCTV said in its report.

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that infect animals and people. Some cause only the symptoms known as the common cold — although many other viruses also do that.

The Wuhan government confirmed on Dec. 31 that health authorities were treating dozens of cases of pneumonia of unknown cause. Symptoms of the new illness include high fever, difficulty breathing and lung lesions, the Wuhan health commission has said. No deaths have



Health officials last week at Hong Kong International Airport awaited travellers to scan, in response to a mysterious infectious disease outbreak in central China. AP