

TOPOF THE WORLD



Gotabaya Rajapaksa

SRI LANKA  
Probe into graft panels set up by previous govt

Colombo: President Gotabaya Rajapaksa on Friday ordered a presidential probe on the previous government's anti-corruption panels which investigated the members of the Rajapaksa family including himself. Two retired senior judges and a former police chief have been appointed to the panel which has been mandated to come out with a report within six months from January 9, according to a gazette issued by the government. The probe panels investigated the members of the Rajapaksa family on the alleged misconduct during 2005 and 2015.

THAILAND  
Toddler among 3 killed by man in mall robbery

Bangkok: Thai police were hunting Friday for a masked assailant who went on a shooting spree at a shopping mall, killing three people, including a 2-year-old boy, and wounding four others as he robbed a jewelry store. Security footage from the Thursday night spree at a Robinson mall in Lopburi province, north of Bangkok, shows a man wearing a ski mask, camouflage pants and a backpack across his chest shooting a customer at the shop and a sales clerk. "The robber was merciless. We are looking for him in every place," Regional police commander Lt Gen Ampol Buaruppon said.

ISRAEL  
Man convicted of spying for Syria released

Jerusalem: Israel has announced the release of two prisoners — one of whom was convicted of spying for Syria — as part of a swap deal brokered by Russia. Sidqi al-Maqt, from the Druze community in the annexed Golan Heights, was jailed in 2015 to 11 years for spying, treason, contact with a foreign agent and transfer of information to the Syrian government. He had already spent several years behind bars in Israel for spying. "Security prisoner Sidqi Al-Maqt will be released tomorrow (Friday) January 10..." Israel's prison authority said late Thursday.

TENSIONS OVER UKRAINE AIRLINER CRASH

After US, Canada points to Iranian missile, Tehran says share intel

AGENCIES

OTTAWA, JANUARY 10

PRIME MINISTER Justin Trudeau said Thursday multiple intelligence sources indicate that Iran shot down a Ukrainian airliner after it took off from Tehran, killing all 176 on board, including 63 Canadians.

Trudeau's comments came as video emerged that appeared to show the moment the airliner was hit. That and other footage posted on social media increasingly pointed to a catastrophic mistake by Tehran's air defense batteries in bringing down Ukraine International Airlines Flight PS752 early Wednesday.

The video, which *The New York Times* said it verified, shows a fast-moving object rising at an angle into the sky before a bright flash is seen, which dims and then continues moving forward. Several seconds later an explosion is heard. Citing information from allies as well as Canada's own intelligence, Trudeau said the plane appeared to have been hit by an Iranian surface-to-air (SAM) missile.

"We know this may have been unintentional. Canadians have questions, and they deserve answers," Trudeau told reporters. He was backed by other leaders, including British Prime Minister Boris Johnson who said mounting evidence supported a missile strike, which "may well have been unintentional."

The Iranian government



At a vigil for the victims of the jet crash, in Toronto. Reuters

said the missile strike scenario made "no sense," however, arguing that several internal and international flights had been sharing approximately the same airspace. "What is obvious for us, and what we can say with certainty, is that no missile hit the plane," Ali Abedzadeh, head of Iran's national aviation department, told a press meet.

"If they are really sure, they should come and show their findings to the world" in accordance with international stan-

dards, he added.

Meanwhile, the US also rejected a request by Iraq's caretaker prime minister to send a delegation to prepare to pull out its 5,200 troops in the country.

"At this time, any delegation sent to Iraq would be dedicated to discussing how to best recommit to our strategic partnership — not to discuss troop withdrawal, but our right, appropriate force posture in the Middle East," State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus said.

US HANDS OVER DATA TO UKRAINE

■ US officials have handed Kiev 'important data' following a plane crash in Iran, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Vadym Prystaiko said on Friday

received important data which will be processed by our experts."

■ Earlier, President Volodymyr Zelensky had pleaded with the US and other Western countries to release the evidence showing that the jet had been shot down

US House votes to restrain Trump's Iran war powers amid charged debate

Iraqi cleric slams 'violations of sovereignty'

CATIE EDMONDSON & CHARLIE SAVAGE

WASHINGTON, JANUARY 10

ASHARPLY divided House voted on Thursday to force President Trump to come to Congress for authorization before taking further military action against Iran, in a sharp response to his ratcheting up of hostilities with Tehran without the explicit approval of the legislative branch.

The vote was 224 to 194, almost entirely along party lines, to curtail Trump's war-making power. It came as Democrats insisted that the president must in-



'AMERICAN JUSTICE'

President Donald Trump used his first campaign rally of 2020 to argue he served up 'American justice' by ordering a drone strike to take out Iranian General Qassem Soleimani. "We didn't have time to call up Nancy, who isn't operating with a full deck," he said of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. AP

volve Congress in any escalation against Iran, and Republicans — following Trump's lead — accused Democrats of coddling the enemy in questioning the commander in chief at a dangerous moment.

Iraq cleric condemns Washington, Tehran

Meanwhile, Iraq's top Shi'ite Muslim cleric on Friday condemned the US-Iranian military confrontation taking place on Iraqi soil, saying it risked plunging the war-ravaged country and the wider Middle East into deeper conflict.

Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani said attacks by both sides inside Iraq this month showed blatant disregard for Iraqi sovereignty and its people stood to suffer the most from Washington and Tehran's conflict. NYT

Washington imposes more Iran sanctions

ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON, JANUARY 10

THE TRUMP administration on Friday announced a new wave of sanctions on Iran after this week's missile strikes by the Islamic Republic on US bases in Iraq.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said the sanctions will target eight senior Iranian officials involved in "destabilising" activities in the Middle East as well as Tuesday's missile strike.

Mnuchin said President Donald Trump will issue an executive order imposing sanctions on anyone involved in the Iranian textile, construction, manufacturing or mining sectors. They will also impose separate sanctions against the steel and iron sectors.

Meghan returns to Canada as royals seek to solve rift

MICHAEL HOLDEN

LONDON, JANUARY 10

MEGHAN, THE wife of Prince Harry, has gone back to Canada to be with their son after the couple provoked a rift with Britain's royal family by unexpectedly announcing they would be stepping back from their roles to spend more time in North America.

Queen Elizabeth and other senior British royals were trying to calm the crisis by thrashing out a plan for Harry and Meghan after the couple blindsided the family by going public with their announcement without consultation. The couple spent six weeks in Canada at the end of last year before returning to Britain and their first official engagement of 2020 was to visit Canada House to say thank you for what they said had been an "unbelievable" welcome.

Their baby son, Archie, remained in Canada as Harry and Meghan returned to announce that they would step back from royal duties and build a more "progressive" role for themselves. Meghan has now returned to Canada to be with her son, a spokeswoman said.

The couple - formally the Duke and Duchess of Sussex - said they had been reflecting for months before making the decision, which would see them divide



The royals were trying to calm the crisis by thrashing out a plan for the couple

their time between Britain and North America to allow them and Archie the space they needed. They also said they intended to become financially independent.

The couple, who spoke of their struggles dealing with the intense media attention in a TV interview last October, revealed their decision to step back from royal duties on Instagram, leaving senior royals hurt and disappointed.

Discussions over the future had only been at a preliminary stage and neither the queen nor Prince Charles — Harry's father and heir to the throne — were consulted on the release of their statement or its contents, a royal source said. As the crisis engulfed the Windsors, aides who work for the queen, Charles, and Harry's elder brother William were trying to find a solution. REUTERS



Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen in Taipei on Friday. Reuters

World is watching our democracy: Taiwan prez on election eve

YIMOU LEE

TAIPEI, JANUARY 10

THE WORLD is watching what choice Taiwan makes as the only Chinese-speaking democracy, President Tsai Ing-wen said on Friday, the eve of elections in which Tsai said a vote for her would be a vote for freedom.

Taiwan holds presidential and parliamentary polls on Saturday in the shadow of a ramped up effort by China to get the democratic island to accept Beijing's rule.

"To choose Tsai Ing-wen and Enoch Wu is to choose to stand together with democracy and freedom," Tsai told reporters. Wu is an up-and-coming member of Tsai's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

"More importantly, it shows our determination to defend our country and sovereignty," added Tsai. She said Taiwan is the "only democratic country in all Chinese-speaking societies in the world". "The whole world is watching how we make our choice." REUTERS

EXPLAINED  
E. The stakes: Nature of ties with China

THE CHINA issue has dominated the election, especially after Chinese President Xi Jinping had threatened to attack Taiwan last year. Tsai has been critical of China's alleged attempts to erode Taiwan's freedom. Her main poll rival, Han Kuo-yu, favours closer ties with China, though he has said he will defend the island's democracy, Beijing, which had in 2005 passed a law authorising force if Taiwan secedes, will likely consider a victory by Han to be the best outcome.

NO CONSIDERABLE HABITAT REMAINS FOR MANY SPECIES, THAT LEADS TO LOCAL EXTINCTION EVENTS'

Australian animals face extinction threat as bushfire toll mounts

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

GLENMORE PARK, JANUARY 10

WHEN VOLUNTEER Sarah Price found a baby kangaroo frightened but miraculously alive in the pouch of its dying mother surrounded by the embers of Australia's bushfires, it seemed fitting to name him Chance.

The furry pup had survived flames that have ripped through much of southeastern Australia, but the mother's organs later collapsed from acute stress — making her one among the more than

one billion animals estimated to have died in the crisis so far.

Chance is slowly recovering, getting regular food and water and hiding out in a bag in a darkened room — a rare success story amid a disaster that has shocked even volunteers accustomed to Australia's frequent bushfires and prolonged droughts.

"We are not seeing the amount of animals coming into care or needing rescuing that we would normally anticipate," Price, who works with wildlife rescue group WIRES, told AFP. Haunting images of koalas

with singed fur, possums with burnt paws or countless charred kangaroo carcasses have flashed around the world and have come to symbolise a nation and an environment buckling under the weight of a crisis fuelled by climate change. The populations of less visible creatures, such as frogs, insects, invertebrates and reptiles, are also expected to have been devastated.

Experts warn that even those animals that survive face a perilous fight to stay alive.

"A lot of the animals die after the fire because they have a lack



A koala rescued from a burning forest on Kangaroo Island. NYT

of food and lack of shelter," Mathew Crowther of the University of Sydney told AFP.

Australia's extinction rate for mammals is already the highest in the world, but there are growing fears this year's bushfires could cause localised extinctions.

"The (kangaroo) mobs will generally try and regroup. When they come back, obviously the... grass isn't green anymore, the foliage isn't there, bushes have gone, the trees are burnt," Price said.

One third of Kangaroo Island, a wildlife haven off the coast of South Australia state, has been

razed and there are fears some species unique to the area might have been wiped out.

"There's almost no considerable habitat remaining for many species. That leads to local extinction events," John Woinarski of the Threatened Species Recovery Hub told national broadcaster ABC, describing the fires as a "holocaust of destruction" for wildlife.

At least half of Australia's only infection-free koala population on Kangaroo Island, a key "insurance population" for the species' future, is feared dead

with more badly hurt.

The Kangaroo Island dunart, already one of 10 priority threatened mammal species targeted in the national government's Threatened Species Strategy, could face extinction.

University of Sydney professor Chris Dickman said his estimate of more than one billion animals killed was "highly conservative".

"We're probably looking at what climate change may look like for other parts of the world in the first stages in Australia at the moment."