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US DEMOCRAT ILMAN OMAR

My destiny, your destiny, and the destiny of millions struggling to survive around the world are linked. We need a global migrant compact to make sure all those impacted by climate change are able to find a home.

TOPOF THE WORLD



Oleksiy Goncharuk

UKRAINE

PM offers to resign after leaked recording

Kiev: Ukraine's prime minister offered his resignation on Friday after audio was leaked of him reportedly criticising President Volodymyr Zelensky's understanding of the economy. Goncharuk, 35, is reportedly heard saying that explanations need to be simple because Zelensky has a "primitive understanding" of the economy. He also called himself an economic "ignoramus". "This is not true," he said. He said the audio "artificially created an impression that my team and I do not respect the president".

CHINA

Second death due to mystery virus: Official

Beijing: A second person has died in China from a mystery virus that has stricken dozens and appeared in two other Asian countries, officials said. Local authorities said a 69-year-old man died on Wednesday in Wuhan, the central Chinese city believed to be the epicentre of an outbreak of a coronavirus from the same family as the deadly SARS pathogen. The outbreak has caused alarm because of the link with SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), which killed 349 people in mainland China and another 299 in Hong Kong in 2002-2003.

USA

Indian-origin woman found dead in car trunk

New York: A 34-year-old Indian-origin woman who was reported missing two weeks ago has been found dead in the trunk of her car in Illinois, according to reports. Sureel Dabawala was reported missing by her family on January 1 after she failed to return to her home in Schaumburg on December 30, as per a police statement. On Monday, the Chicago Police Department contacted Schaumburg Police to report that a deceased person had been recovered from the inside of the vehicle owned by missing endangered, Dabawala from Schaumburg, the statement said.

'WE DELIVERED A SLAP TO U.S. IMAGE AS A SUPERPOWER'

Khamenei calls Trump clown, says enemy happy about airliner crash

Iran's supreme leader called for national unity, dismissed protesters as 'stooges of United States'

FARNAZ FASSIHI & BEN HUBBARD  
JANUARY 17

IRAN'S SUPREME leader struck a defiant tone in a rare public sermon on Friday, calling the United States an "arrogant power" and telling tens of thousands of chanting worshipers that God's backing had allowed his country to "slap the face" of the United States.

In his first such address in eight years, the leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, sought to rally supporters and undermine critics after weeks of turbulence in the Middle East that brought Iran and the United States to the brink of war and prompted street protests in Iran over the accidental downing of a civilian jetliner by Iranian forces.

Khamenei offered only scant condolences to families who lost relatives in the crash, and instead sought to project strength. He dismissed protesters as "stooges of the United States," lauded Major General Qassim Suleimani, Iran's foreign operations chief who was killed in an American drone strike and praised a retaliatory Iranian missile attack on United States forces in Iraq.

"These two weeks were extraordinary and eventful. Bitter and sweet events. Lessons we learned. The Iranian people went through a lot," he said. "We delivered a slap to US's image as a superpower."



Iranians chant during Friday Prayer under portraits of Qassim Suleimani and Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. NYT

He added that President Trump was a "clown" who only pretended to support the Iranian people but would "push a poisonous dagger" into their backs.

The event, choreographed to present an image of power and unity, skirted the accidental downing of a Ukrainian passenger plane on January 8 by Iranian forces that killed all 176 people on board. A banner featuring an airplane hung between huge pictures of General Suleimani.

Nearly 45 minutes into his

sermon, Khamenei said his "heart burned" for the victims of the crash, but he quickly accused Iran's enemies of seeking to capitalise on the tragedy to overshadow the killing of General Suleimani and the missile strikes on two bases that housed American troops in Iraq.

"As much as we were sad about the crash, our enemy was happy about it," he said. "They thought they found an excuse to undermine the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and our armed forces and question the Islamic Republic." NYT

11 Americans injured in Iran strike, military says, contradicting Trump

ELEVEN AMERICAN troops were treated for concussions after Iranian missiles struck two Iraqi bases where the servicemembers were stationed, the military said on Thursday, contradicting statements by President Trump that no Americans had been injured.

"While no United States servicemembers were killed

in the January 8 Iranian attack on Al Asad air base, several were treated for concussion symptoms from the blast and are still being assessed," Captain Bill Urban, a spokesman for United States Central Command, said in a statement. He said the injured troops were taken to military sites in Germany and Kuwait.

In Myanmar, Xi vows new era of bilateral ties

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
NAYPYIDAW, JANUARY 17

CHINESE PRESIDENT Xi Jinping vowed to usher in a "new era" of ties with Myanmar after a red-carpet welcome Friday on a state visit aimed at buttressing the embattled government of Aung San Suu Kyi and driving through multi-billion-dollar infrastructure deals.

Myanmar fighter jets escorted Xi's plane as it touched down in Naypyidaw where children presented him with flowers, according to China's official Xinhua news agency, as he was whisked off to a greeting party.

In addition to being its largest investor, China has become an indispensable ally for Myanmar as it reels from Western isolation over the Rohingya crisis. But widespread mistrust of Beijing's ambitions and its influence over armed insurgencies in areas bordering the two countries threaten to undermine the bond. Xi told Myanmar leaders he was "convinced that the concerted

efforts of our two sides will make this visit a success and take the bilateral ties to a new level and into a new era," Xinhua reported.

During the trip he is expected to sign a series of mammoth infrastructure deals as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative — a global trade plan that promises to change the face of Myanmar. The centrepiece of the so-called China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) is a USD 1.3-billion deep-sea port at Kyaukphyu in central Rakhine state, giving Beijing a gateway to the Indian Ocean.

A high-speed rail link is also on the cards to connect the port and nearby planned industrial zone with the countries' shared border. Bilateral trade was worth USD 16.8 billion last year and Beijing holds the biggest share — around USD 4 billion or 40 per cent — of Myanmar's foreign debt. Billions of cubic metres of gas and millions of barrels of oil from offshore rigs are pumped each year across the country into China.



Myanmar's leader Aung San Suu Kyi with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Presidential Palace in Naypyitaw. AP

Amid reports of surveillance of US ambassador, Ukraine probes Trump allies

ANTON TROJANOVSKI & RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA  
MOSCOW, JANUARY 17

UKRAINE HAS opened a criminal investigation into allies of President Trump, following reports that they had the United States ambassador under surveillance while she was stationed in Kyiv, the Ukrainian government said on Thursday.

On Tuesday, Democrats in the House of Representatives published text messages to and from Lev Parnas — an associate of Rudolph W Giuliani, the president's personal lawyer — pointing to surveillance of the ambassador, Marie L. Yovanovitch.

The Internal Affairs Ministry of Ukraine said in a statement released Thursday that "the published messages contain facts of possible violations of Ukrainian law and of the Vienna Convention on diplomatic relations, which protect the rights of diplomats on the territory of another state."

Ukraine "cannot ignore such illegal activities" on its territory, the statement said, adding that the national police had started criminal proceedings after analysing the new material.

EXPLAINED

E. Walking a fine line

UKRAINE'S MOVE comes as a departure from its previous stance of refraining from any action that could hint at partisanship in its dealings with the US. It ordered a probe after the US House released evidence hinting at surveillance of Yovanovitch. It also considers the US as its main ally in its conflict with Russia. Caught in the centre of the Trump impeachment process, Ukraine will likely keep bipartisanship in mind amid the probe.

"Our goal is to investigate whether there were any violations of Ukrainian and international laws," the ministry said. "Or maybe it was just bravado and fake conversation between two US citizens." NYT

Pak court hands 55-yr sentences to 86 Islamists

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
ISLAMABAD, JANUARY 17

A PAKISTANI court has sentenced 86 members of a radical Islamist party to 55-year prison terms each for taking part in violent rallies in 2018 over the acquittal of a Christian woman in a blasphemy case, a party official said Friday.

The verdicts, unusually harsh for Pakistan, were announced late Thursday night by the court in Rawalpindi, a garrison city near Islamabad. The trial had lasted for over a year. Pir Ejaz Ashrafi, a senior leader of the radical Tehreek-e-Labbaik party, said the sen-

TEHREEK-I-LABBAIK PAKISTAN (TLP), a radical Islamist outfit, is considered a powerful group in the country. The far-right outfit is led by cleric Khadim Hussain Rizvi. The group has taken the issue of blasphemy as one of its main planks, and had at one point vowed to wipe out the Netherlands



with nuclear weapons over cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed.

tences would be appealed.

Among those sentenced was Ameer Hussain Rizvi, the brother of firebrand cleric Khadim Hussain Rizvi who heads the party. "Justice has not been

done," Ashrafi said.

"We will challenge the verdicts." The 86 were charged with damaging public property, beating people up and disrupting normal life by staging sit-ins

German foreign ministry backtracks after sense of humour failure on Twitter

REUTERS  
BERLIN, JANUARY 17

SOCIAL MEDIA can be a minefield for the strait-laced world of diplomacy, as the German Foreign Office just found out, when it was forced to delete a tweet and apologise for its contribution to a mildly off-colour Twitter meme.

The meme was the hashtag #SeduceSomeonein4Words. Submissions on Thursday ranged from "You hungry? I'm cooking" to "Donald Trump Is Impeached".



"Being funny is apparently not always our strong suit. We know... visa decisions can deeply affect peoples' lives. Our colleagues take these decisions very seriously" - FOREIGN MINISTRY

Then @GermanyDiplo, the foreign ministry's English-language channel, came up with "Your visa got approved".

That got hundreds of retweets and thousands of likes. But it also got a fair amount of criticism.

Germany attracts migrants from the world over, with its free universities, strong economy, high wages and almost full employment. In 2015's migrant crisis, hundreds of thousands from the Middle East and Africa overwhelmed Europe's border controls and flooded into Germany.

against the acquittal of Aasia Bibi earlier that year.

Bibi was convicted of blasphemy in 2009 and sentenced to death on charges of insulting Islam. Her case stemmed from a quarrel with fellow farm workers who refused to drink from the same water container used by a Christian. She consistently denied the charges against her.

The country's Supreme Court overturned her conviction in 2018 but after hard-line Islamists staged nationwide rallies against the ruling, authorities continued to hold her in protective custody before she was allowed to leave for Canada last year to reunite with her family there.

UK adds entire Hezbollah movement to terror blacklist

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
LONDON, JANUARY 17

BRITAIN'S FINANCE ministry on Friday said it had added Lebanon's entire Hezbollah movement to its list of terrorist groups subject to asset freezing.

The ministry previously only targeted the Shiite organisation's military wing but has now listed the whole group after the government designated it a terrorist organisation last March.

The change requires any individual or institution in Britain with accounts or financial services connected to Hezbollah to suspend them or face prosecution. The group had "publicly denied a distinction between its military and political wings," the Treasury said in a notice posted on its website.

"The group in its entirety is assessed to be concerned in terrorism and was proscribed as a terrorist organisation in the UK in March 2019," it added.

"This listing includes the Military Wing, the Jihad Council and all units reporting to it, including the External Security Organisation."

Brian Hook, the US special representative for Iran, said the United States was "very pleased" with the decision.

NOT READY TO ENDORSE RELOCATION, WAITING FOR CHANCE TO VISIT ISLAND: UN AGENCY

Bangladesh says once-submerged island ready for 100,000 Rohingya

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
DHAKA, JANUARY 17

ABANGLADESHI island regularly submerged by monsoon rains is ready to house 100,000 Rohingya refugees, but no date has been announced to relocate people from the crowded and squalid camps where they've lived for years, officials said Thursday.

Flood protection embankments, houses, hospitals and mosques have been built on Bhasan Char, or floating island, in the Bay of Bengal, officials said.

"Bhasan Char is ready for habitation. Everything has been

put in place," Bangladesh refugee, relief and repatriation commissioner Mahbub Alam Talukder told The Associated Press.

The island is built to accommodate 100,000 people, just a fraction of the million Rohingya Muslims who have fled waves of violent persecution in their native Myanmar. About 700,000 people came after August 2017, when the military in Buddhist-majority Myanmar began a harsh crackdown against Rohingya in response to an attack by insurgents.

Global rights groups and the UN called the campaign ethnic cleansing involving rapes,

killings and torching of thousands of homes.

Foreign media have not been permitted to visit the island.

Saleh Noman, a Bangladeshi freelance journalist who recently visited, described a community emerging there. "I saw a market with about 10 grocery shops and roadside fish stalls. Some were selling fish and vegetables," he said.

"All is set there with a solar power system and water supply lines." Bangladesh is a low-lying delta nation. The island, 21 miles (34 kilometres) from the mainland, surfaced only 20 years ago and was never inhabited.

The Bangladesh navy has



International aid agencies and the United Nations have vehemently opposed the relocation plan. Reuters/File

been implementing a multimillion-dollar plan to bolster the swampy island, which is submerged for months during annual monsoon season.

International aid agencies and the United Nations have vehemently opposed the relocation plan since it was first proposed in 2015, expressing fear that a big storm could overwhelm the island and endanger thousands of lives.

Mostafa Mohammad Sazzad Hossain, a spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Bangladesh, said Thursday the agency isn't ready to endorse the relocation and is waiting for a

chance to visit the island after a November trip was canceled.

"The UN has emphasised the importance of undertaking independent and thorough technical and protection assessments that consider safety, sustainability, and protection issues prior to any relocation taking into place. The assessment process should include onsite visits to Bhasan Char," Hossain said.

The current refugee camps near the beach town of Cox's Bazar are overcrowded and unhygienic. Disease and organized crime are rampant. Education is limited and refugees aren't allowed to work.

Still, most Rohingya are unwilling to return to Myanmar due to safety concerns. Government officials didn't have an estimate of how many refugees would be willing to be relocated to the island. On Thursday, two Bangladeshi contractors involved with development of the island described construction there. They spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the media.

"We have built quality infrastructure. Bangladeshi villages have never seen such good work. This is like a modern township project," one contractor said.