



ELSEWHERE

World's shortest man dies in Nepal at 27

KATHMANDU
The world's shortest man who could walk, as verified by Guinness World Records, died on Friday at a hospital in Nepal. Khagendra Thapa Magar, who measured 67.08 cm, died of pneumonia at a hospital in Pokhara, where he lived with his parents. He first won the title in 2010 after his 18th birthday. He lost it briefly only to regain it in 2015. **AFP**

China sees second death due to SARS-linked virus

BEIJING
A second person has died in China from a SARS-linked virus that has affected dozens and appeared in two other Asian countries, with a new case reported in Thailand on Friday. Authorities said a 69-year-old man died on Wednesday in Wuhan, the city believed to be the epicentre of an outbreak of a coronavirus from the same family as SARS pathogen. **AFP**

Crash was a bitter tragedy: Khamenei

But the incident should not be allowed to overshadow Soleimani's martyrdom, says Iranian leader

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
TEHRAN

Iran's Supreme Leader said on Friday that demonstrations at home over its accidental downing of a Ukrainian airliner were unrepresentative of the Iranian people and accused the country's enemies of exploiting it for propaganda purposes.

Leading the main weekly Muslim prayers in Tehran for the first time since 2012, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said the January 8 downing was a "bitter" tragedy but should not be allowed to overshadow the "sacrifice" of one of Iran's most storied commanders, assassinated in a U.S. drone strike in Baghdad.

'Enemies were happy'

His sermon came after a traumatic month for Iran in which the country had appeared on the brink of war with the United States before mistakenly shooting down the Ukrainian jet with the loss of all 176 people on



Honouring a soldier: Iran's leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei leading Friday prayers in Tehran. **• AFP**

board. "The plane crash was a bitter accident, it burned through our heart," Ayatollah Khamenei said in an address punctuated by cries of "Death to America" from the congregation. "But some tried to... portray it in a way to forget the great martyrdom and sacrifice" of Major General Qasem Soleimani, the assassinated head of the foreign operations arm of Iran's elite Revolutionary

Guards. Khamenei said Iran's enemies had seized on the plane tragedy in a bid to undermine the Islamic republic.

"Our enemies were as happy about the plane crash as we were sad... happy that they found something to question the Guards, the armed forces, the system," he said. The air disaster triggered scattered protests in Tehran and other cities, but

they appeared smaller than a nationwide wave of demonstrations prompted by a fuel price hike in November. At least 300 people died in a crackdown by security forces after those demonstrations, according to Amnesty International.

On Friday, anti-riot police staged a massive deployment in Tehran, an AFP correspondent said. Ayatollah Khamenei said the protes-

ters were unrepresentative of the Iranian people as a whole, who had turned out in their hundreds of thousands for Soleimani's funeral. Praising the slain general, Ayatollah Khamenei said his actions beyond Iran's borders were in the service of the "security" of the nation.

11 U.S. soldiers injured

Meanwhile, U.S. Central Command said on Thursday that at least 11 American troops were injured in an Iranian attack on an Iraqi base where American soldiers were deployed, although the US military had previously maintained there were no casualties.

At the time of the attack, most of the 1,500 U.S. soldiers at the base had been tucked away in bunkers, after advance warning from superiors.

The strike caused significant material damage but no casualties, according to previous reports from the U.S. military.

Pak. Islamists get 55 years in jail for protests

They took part in violent rallies in 2018

ASSOCIATED PRESS
ISLAMABAD

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 on Friday. The verdicts, unusually harsh for Pakistan, were announced late on Thursday night by the court in Rawalpindi. The trial had lasted for over a year.

Pir Ejaz Ashrafi, a senior leader of the radical Tehreek-e-Labbaik party, said the sentences would be appealed. Among those sentenced was Ameer Hussain Rizvi, the brother of fire-brand cleric Khadim Hussain Rizvi who heads the party. "Justice has not been done," Ashrafi told. "We will challenge the verdicts."

Asia Bibi case

The 86 were charged with damaging public property, beating people up and disrupting normal life by staging sit-ins against the acquittal of Asia Bibi earlier that year. Ms. 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



Supporters of Pakistani Islamist group Tehreek-e-Labbaik in Lahore. **• AP**

family there. Pakistan's blasphemy laws are often used to settle scores or intimidate followers of minority religions, including Shia Muslims. A charge of insulting Islam can bring the death penalty, and the mere accusation of blasphemy is sometimes enough to whip up vengeful mobs, even if courts acquit defendants.

Last year, authorities arrested Mr. Rizvi for leading incendiary rallies. He was later freed on bail on medical grounds pending trial.

Last month, in Multan, a court convicted Junaid Hafeeze, a Muslim professor, of blasphemy, sentencing him to death for allegedly spreading anti-Islamic ideas. He was held for six years awaiting trial and spent most of that time in solitary confinement.

A prominent Pakistani lawyer, A.K. Dogar, criticised Thursday's verdicts, saying they were mostly symbolic and that none of those convicted would spend more than 25 years in prison at the most, which is equivalent to a life sentence under Pakistani law.

Phone scandal rocks Sri Lanka's Opposition party

Leaked conversations featuring UNP leader reveal details on court cases against several high-profile figures

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

A Sri Lankan politician's alleged practice of recording phone conversations has led to a scandal, after some of the conversations were leaked on social media, putting several judges, police officers and politicians under the spotlight and delivering a huge blow to the main Opposition party.

Earlier this week, police arrested actor-politician Ranjan Ramanayake, a legislator with the United Nation-

al Party (UNP), that suspended him following the phone call leaks.

The recordings reveal what appear to be the politician's conversations, with senior judges, police and celebrities, pertaining to ongoing court cases.

On Thursday, the Judicial Services Commission suspended a magistrate court judge in connection with the leaked audio. The Attorney General has also directed the Colombo Crime Division to record statements from cur-

rent and former judges reportedly heard speaking to the politician. A senior police investigator has been suspended pending an inquiry initiated against him.

High-profile cases

Most of the leaked conversations in Sinhala language have raised serious questions about possible political interference from the former UNP government in high-profile cases involving members of President Mahinda Rajapaksa's administration

that the UNP-led coalition unseated in 2015, promising good governance and rule of law. In the November 2019 presidential election, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa won a huge mandate, prompting the UNP to step down from the government.

Ministers and MPs of the new government, helmed by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, have slammed the opposition UNP for "politicising" the judiciary and police services while in pow-

er. It remains unclear who leaked the conversations on social media after police obtained hard drives and CDs, reportedly with one lakh call recordings, including some with indecent language.

Mr. Ramanayake, a former State Minister, was also heard criticising his party's leadership, according to media reports. Police have denied any involvement in the leak.

Mr. Ramanayake has in the past made news for his sensational phone calls. He once called a fellow MP dur-

ing a press conference and put her on speaker phone, reportedly without her knowledge.

Meanwhile, the UNP is caught in an internal power struggle, a month after its candidate Sajith Premadasa - now Leader of Opposition - lost the presidential election. While Mr. Premadasa and his supporters are keen on obtaining party leadership from Ranil Wickremesinghe, the factions are yet to reconcile and resolve the tussle within.

Christopher Tolkien, son of *The Lord of the Rings* author, dead

He edited and published many of his father's works

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
LONDON

Christopher Tolkien, the son of J.R.R. Tolkien who was responsible for publishing many of his father's works, has died aged 95, the Tolkien Society said.

The academic, a former lecturer in Old and Middle English as well as Old Icelandic at the University of Oxford, is credited with drawing the 1954 map of Middle-earth for his father's novel *The Lord of the Rings*.

After his father's death in 1973, he became the literary executor of the Tolkien Estate. He spent years compiling and editing his father's material before publishing many of his works, including



Christopher Tolkien

The Silmarillion in 1977 and *The Fall of Gondolin* in 2018. "We have lost a titan and he will be sorely missed," Tolkien Society chairman Shaun Gunner said in a statement on Thursday. "Christopher's commitment to his father's works has seen dozens of publications

released, and his own work as an academic in Oxford demonstrates his ability and skill as a scholar," Mr. Gunner added.

Christopher was critical of the "commercialisation" of his father's work in a 2012 interview with French newspaper *Le Monde*. "Tolkien has become a monster, devoured by his own popularity and absorbed by the absurdity of our time," he was reported as saying.

"The chasm between the beauty and seriousness of the work and what it has become has overwhelmed me. The commercialisation has reduced the aesthetic and philosophical impact of the creation to nothing.

China's birth rate hits lowest level since 1949

Number of births fell for the third year

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BEIJING

China's birth rate dropped last year to its lowest level since the Communist country was founded in 1949, adding to concerns that an aging society and shrinking workforce will pile pressure on a slowing economy.

To avoid a demographic crisis, the government relaxed its one-child policy in 2016 to allow people to have two children, but the change has not resulted in an increase in pregnancies. In 2019, the birth rate stood at 10.48 per 1,000 people, down slightly from the year before, according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) released on Friday. The number of

births has now fallen for three consecutive years, still, there were 14.65 million babies born in 2019.

He Yafu, an independent demographer based in southern Guangdong province, said the number of births was the lowest since 1961, the last year of a famine that left tens of millions dead. U.S.-based academic Yi Fuxian, senior scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, said that even though China has abolished its one-child policy, there has been a shift in the mindset of the population. He believes that China's population is over-estimated, and according to his work, the real population "began to decline in 2018".

Ukraine President rejects PM's resignation over tape leak

Honcharuk is heard criticising Zelenskiy in the recording

REUTERS
KIEV

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy on Friday allowed Prime Minister Oleksiy Honcharuk to keep his job after the leak of an embarrassing audio recording prompted Mr. Honcharuk to submit his resignation.

Speculation over Mr. Honcharuk's position has grown this week after a recording of a man discussing President Volodymyr Zelenskiy's purported lack of knowledge of economics was circulated on messaging channels, apparently at a meeting of the Prime Minister, Finance Minister and the National Bank of Ukraine in December.



Ukrainian Prime Minister Oleksiy Honcharuk. **• REUTERS**

had been said at government meetings.

Mr. Zelenskiy asked law enforcement agencies to determine who was involved in making the recording and how to prevent such incidents in future.

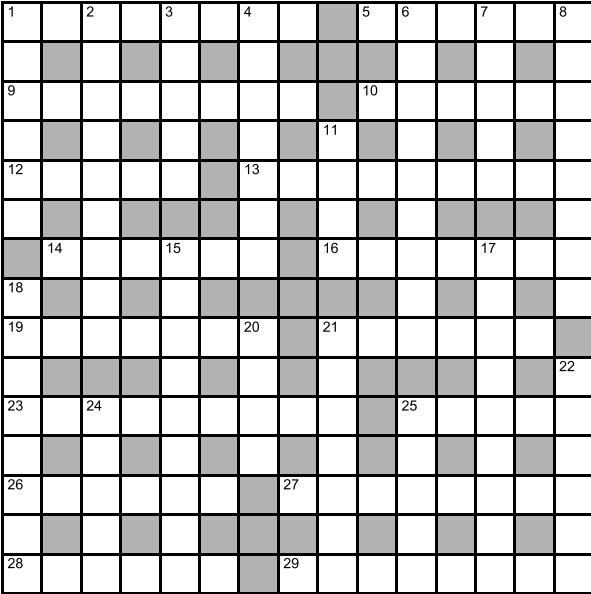
Mr. Honcharuk announced his resignation in a message on Facebook, where he also praised Mr. Zelenskiy as "a model of openness and decency".

Mr. Honcharuk appeared in Parliament later on Friday and reaffirmed his respect for the President.

Mr. Zelenskiy said he would give Mr. Honcharuk another chance and that it was not the time to shake the country politically.

THE HINDU CROSSWORD 12835

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ACROSS

- 1 Give wrong advice to lady missing second mentor (8)
- 5 Afraid of religious chapter moving back (6)
- 9 Understood dealer is worried (8)
- 10 Grand diamonds replaced - mess up package (6)

DOWN

- 1 Man boxes royal black stone (6)
- 2 Stop splitting cocktail having a fizz (9)

(set by Lightning)

- 12 Compare love note (5)
- 13 Abbreviated tenders at first held out to be rewritten (9)
- 14 Not doing well, enter average stronghold (6)
- 16 Dish with gold at a stable level (7)
- 19 Rule curtailed military unit (7)
- 21 Humble manner of saint (6)
- 23 Conflict where unionist usurps one secret agreement (9)
- 25 Primarily obese, survive on fruit (5)
- 26 Free a French isle captured by one that protects (6)
- 27 Clear and well-organised timetable (8)
- 28 European left regular cricket side (6)
- 29 Great one, he transformed a nation's mark of history (8)
- 3 Peacekeepers return leader to league (5)
- 4 Cadres seriously helping to make furniture (7)
- 6 Tennis arena with three feet of open space (9)
- 7 Communication device missing one new element (5)
- 8 Segment of accord read fully is scary (8)
- 11 Upset with detailing of two door car (4)
- 15 One rodent nearly breaking cable of luxury car (9)
- 17 Company that set up a rule? (4,5)
- 18 Rule out (caught) in the beginning (8)
- 20 Nothing around a dead skin (4)
- 21 Order partner to accept non-disclosure agreement (7)
- 22 Ruling royal engineers followed last month (6)
- 24 Slip by line at vaulted recess (5)
- 25 Daggers one bishop evidently left inside at first (5)

SUDOKU



Solution to puzzle 12834



Solution to yesterday's Sudoku



FAITH

Muruga gives positivity

Ulaganatha Pillai wrote a set of verses, which give in simple Tamil, a list of don'ts. He says that we should not speak ill of anyone, we should never forget the love of our mothers. We should not make friends with those who are scheming. We should never harm others. At the end of each verse, Ulaganatha Pillai says that we should worship Murugan. Ulaganatha Pillai's verses are usually taught to school children to keep them on the right path. The same sentiments are expressed in sacred literature also, except that in this case it is done at a higher level, and the verses are more philosophical in nature.

In one of the verses in Deivamani Malai, Vallalar gives a list of all the positive things that result when Murugan is worshipped, said M.A. Manickavelu in a discourse. He says that if Murugan is worshipped, then it will rain copiously. Crops will be bountiful. A person who seeks the feet of Murugan, will be blessed with intelligence and fame. He will know the correct path he has to take in life. He will have wealth, and a good paying profession. He will not lack anything. He will be blessed with a peaceful nature.

In his Vadivudai Manikka Malai, Vallalar says that if a man worships the Goddess of the Thiruvottiriyur temple, he will have a happy family life. He will have a contented life with his wife and his children. In Abirami Andadi, Abirami Bhattar elaborates on all the boons that the gracious glances of Goddess Abirami will confer on Her devotees. They will be blessed with wealth and with education. They will never be dejected. They will acquire a graceful divine beauty. They will be blessed with relatives who have no evil thoughts in their mind. In short, worship of Abirami will give a person everything that is desirable in life.