



DROUGHT IN AUSTRALIA  
SNIPERS TO CULL 10,000 CAMELS

Snipers took to helicopters in Australia to begin a mass cull of up to 10,000 camels as drought drives big herds of the feral animals to search for water closer to remote towns, endangering indigenous communities. Officials in South Australia state said “extremely large” herds have been encroaching on rural communities — threatening scarce food and drinking water, damaging infrastructure, and creating a dangerous hazard for drivers.

REGIONAL TENSIONS RISE AS IRAN STRIKES U.S. BASES IN IRAQ

Ukrainian airliner crashes in Iran, killing all 176 on board

82 Iranians, 63 Canadians among dead; Tehran rules out suggestion of plane being struck by missile

MOHAMMAD NASIRI, NASSER KARIMI & JON GAMBRELL  
SHAHEDSHAHR (IRAN), JAN 8

A UKRAINIAN airliner carrying 176 people crashed on the outskirts of Tehran during a takeoff attempt Wednesday hours after Iran launched its missile attack on US forces, scattering flaming debris and passengers' belongings across farmland and killing everyone on board.

The Iranian military disputed any suggestion the plane had been blown out of the sky by a missile, and Iranian aviation authorities said they suspected a mechanical problem brought down the three-and-a-half-year-old Boeing 737. Ukrainian officials initially agreed but later backed away and declined to offer a cause while the investigation is going on.



Reuters

Airlines jet was en route to the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv with 167 passengers and nine crew members from several countries, authorities said. Ukraine Foreign Minister Vadym Prystaiko said they included 82 Iranians, 63 Canadians and 11 Ukrainians.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy cut short a visit to Oman to return to Kyiv and said a team of Ukrainian experts would fly to Tehran to help investigate the crash.

The plane had been delayed from taking off from Tehran's Imam Khomeini International Airport by almost an hour. It never



■ An amateur video, run by Iranian news agencies and purportedly featuring the crashed plane, showed a flash in the sky descending rapidly with comments that the aircraft was “on fire”, followed by a larger flash as it appears to hit the ground. The plane was a Boeing 737-800NG en route to Kiev.

made it above 8,000 feet, crashing just minutes after takeoff, according to data from the flight-tracking website FlightRadar24.

Qassem Biniaz, a spokesman for Iran's Road and Transportation Ministry, said it appeared a fire erupted in one of its engines and the pilot lost con-

trol of the plane, according to the state-run IRNA news agency.

The pilot apparently couldn't communicate with air-traffic controllers in Tehran in the last moments of the flight, according to Hassan Razaefar, the head of the air crash investigation committee. He did not elaborate. **AP**

Pressed for details on Soleimani strike, White House gives little

JULIANE BARNES, CATIE EDMONDSON, THOMAS GIBBONS-NEFF & RUKMINI CALLIMACHI  
WASHINGTON, JANUARY 8

UNDER INCREASING pressure to defend the killing of a top Iranian general in Iraq, Trump administration officials offered new justifications but little detail Tuesday, citing threats to the US embassy in Baghdad and intelligence suggesting other imminent attacks that helped prompt the strike.

Democrats stepped up their criticism of intelligence that the administration provided immediately after the drone strike last week that killed General Qassem Soleimani, the leader of Iran's Revolutionary Guard. The administration's formal notification to Congress, which remains classified, provided no information on future threats or the imminent attack, officials who have read it said.

Several said it was improperly classified, and Democratic Senator Richard Blumenthal called it “vague and unacceptably unspecific.” Lawmakers pressed for more answers Tuesday at a briefing by CIA Director Gina Haspel and other intelligence officials.

Iranian forces or their proxies were days from attacking US personnel when President Donald Trump decided to strike Soleimani, Defence Secretary Mark Esper told reporters at the Pentagon, adding that Soleimani had travelled to Baghdad to coordinate attacks following up on a two-day siege of the US embassy there last week by pro-Iranian demonstrators. He declined to elaborate but called the intelligence “exquisite.”

Trump was more forceful but no more specific. Soleimani “was planning a very big attack and a very bad attack for us and other people,” Trump said in the Oval Office. “And we stopped him.”

Their defence of the killing came as Tehran fired a dozen ballistic missiles targeting US forces in Iraq. **NYT**



**SOLEIMANI LAID TO REST:** Mourners carry the coffin of Iranian Major-General and head of the elite Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani, who was killed in an airstrike at Baghdad airport, during the funeral at his hometown in Kerman, Iran, on Wednesday. *Reuters*

Afghanistan sweats between US & Iran

MUJIB MASHAL  
JANUARY 8

IN THE days after a US drone strike killed Iran's top intelligence and military operative, President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan scrambled to keep his country out of a cycle of escalation between the two powers.

Now that Iranian missiles have come into play, some of the particular vulnerabilities of Afghanistan, which lies along Iran's northeastern border and still hosts about 13,000 US military personnel on a network of bases, are on display.

“The government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan assures the people and its neighbours that, according to the security agreement with the United States, the territory of Afghanistan in no circumstances will be used against another country,” Ghani said. His aides say he reiterated that message in calls with President Hassan Rouhani of Iran and

**Afghanistan hosts 13,000 US military personnel. It also shares a border as well as extensive political, cultural and economic ties with Iran.**

with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defence Secretary Mark Esper.

The Afghan leader's concerns arise from the fact that President Donald Trump in recent days warned that Iranian retaliation for the killing of General Qassem Soleimani would be met by heavy force. Two US military officials said American assets in Afghanistan have repeatedly come up in discussions over potential responses to Iran.

Along with a border, Afghanistan shares complicated and extensive political, cultural and economic ties with Iran. **NYT**

Major airlines avoid Iran, Iraq

DAVID SHEPARDSON & ALLISON LAMPERT  
WASHINGTON, JANUARY 8

MAJOR AIRLINES cancelled Iran and Iraq flights on Wednesday and re-routed others away from both countries' airspace, following an Iranian missile strike on United States-led forces in Iraq.

Germany's Lufthansa, Dubai-based Emirates and low-cost flydubai were among airlines that cancelled flights, as the US Federal Aviation Administration barred American carriers from the area. But several other carri-

Several flights cancelled or re-routed

ers continued operations over the affected airspace.

Iran fired more than a dozen ballistic missiles from its territory targeting at least two Iraqi military bases hosting US-led coalition personnel early on Wednesday, the US military said.

Within hours, the FAA barred US carriers from airspace over Iran, the Gulf of Oman and the waters between Iran and Saudi Arabia, citing “heightened mili-

tary activities and increased political tensions in the Middle East, which present an inadvertent risk to US civil aviation operations”.

The flight ban came shortly before a Ukraine International Airlines Boeing 737 crashed shortly after take-off from Tehran, killing all 176 people aboard in a crash blamed by Ukrainian authorities on an engine failure.

Airlines have taken more steps to avoid flying over conflict zones since 2014, when Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 was downed by a missile launched from Ukraine, killing 298 people. **REUTERS**

EXPLAINED  
US-Iran tensions will lead to longer flights, fewer seats

HEIGHTENED TENSIONS between the US and Iran has resulted in international flights becoming up to an hour longer as many airlines have decided to avoid using Iranian and Iraqi airspace. The US Federal Aviation Administration has ordered American carriers to stay clear of the region, and several airlines from other countries have voluntarily decided to do the same. Some airlines, especially from the Gulf region, and those that cannot avoid flying above the region, have cancelled many of their services. As for airlines that have taken longer routes to bypass the area, their planes will have to carry more fuel. This results in the aircraft getting heavier, which, in turn, could lead to the airline reducing the number of passengers it carries, and the amount of luggage travellers are allowed to take.

In a first, submarines of China, Pakistan rehearse in Arabian Sea

K J M VARMA  
BEIJING, JANUARY 8

THE NAVIES of China and Pakistan, holding nine-day exercises in the Arabian Sea to enhance their all-weather strategic partnership, have for the first time deployed submarines, providing a rare major exposure to the Chinese Navy in the region.

The Arabian Sea region is strategically important for India as major ports including Kandla, Okha, Mumbai, Nhava Sheva (Navi Mumbai), Mormugao, New Mangalore and Kochi are located there.

The joint maritime exercises began on Monday in the North Arabian Sea, regarded as strategically significant for China which is now developing Pakistan's deep water Gwadar port there.

Gwadar is being connected through the over \$60 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to China's Xinjiang province, providing a key land route to China to access the warm waters of Arabian Sea. India has

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objected to China over the CPEC as it is being laid through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK).

Gwadar is also located close to Iran's Chabahar Port being jointly developed by Iran, India and Afghanistan to ensure a trade corridor for Indian exports to Afghanistan.

The Arabian Sea provides entry to the Indian Ocean, where China has built a logistics base at Djibouti in the Horn of Africa.

The joint exercises are expected to be the first of many to come, as China and Pakistan have now developed a series of joint exercises covering the Navy, Army and Air Force, the PLA Daily, the official newspaper of the Chinese military, reported. The report said this joint exercise is not related to ongoing regional affairs and is not aimed at any third party.

The exercise is also the first between China and Pakistan that will feature anti-submarine and submarine rescue training, indicating a high-level of strategic mutual trust, state-run Global Times quoted experts as saying.

The exercise started on Monday in the port city of Karachi, Pakistan, and will be held in the North Arabian Sea until January 14, the PLA Daily reported on Tuesday. This is the sixth joint naval exercise between China and Pakistan, the report said, but it is the first time the exercise was named “Sea Guardians”.

“Sea Guardians” is expected to become a series of naval exercises with Pakistan, similar to the “Warrior” series of joint land exercises and the “Shaheen” series of joint air exercises, the report said. **PTI**

Pak Senate passes Bills to extend Bajwa tenure

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
ISLAMABAD, JANUARY 8

PAKISTAN'S UPPER House of Parliament on Wednesday passed three crucial Bills to give extension to Army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa for another three years.

The Bills to extend the retirement age from 60 to 64 years for the chiefs of Army, Navy and Air Force, and the chairman of the joint chief of staff committee sailed through the Senate despite protests from minor parties, Geo News said.



Pakistan's Army chief is set to get a three-year extension

As soon as the Bills were passed, Senate chairman Sadiq Sanjrani adjourned the session.

The Bills were already approved by the Standing

Committee on Defence.

On Tuesday, the three Bills — The Pakistan Army (Amendment) Bill 2020, the Pakistan Air Force (Amendment) Bill 2020 and the Pakistan Navy (Amendment) Bill 2020 — were passed easily by the National Assembly, or the Lower House of Parliament, as the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People Party (PPP) supported them.

All eyes are now on President Arif Alvi, whose signatures on the Bills will formalise them into law.

Bajwa, a close confidant of Pakistan Prime Minister Imran

Khan, was to retire on November 29 last year at the end of his three-year original term, but the PM gave the 59-year-old Army chief another extension of the same length, citing the regional security situation, through a notification on August 19. However, the Supreme Court on November 28 suspended the government order, observing that there is no law to give extension to the Army chief's tenure. But the apex court granted a six-month extension to Bajwa after being assured by the government that Parliament would pass legislation to allow for the Army chief's tenure to be extended.



The Republican lawmaker is the Senate majority leader

US Senate leader: Will proceed on impeachment trial even with no witnesses deal

NICHOLAS FANDOS  
WASHINGTON, JANUARY 8

SENATOR MITCH McConnell, the Senate majority leader, said Tuesday that he planned to move forward with US President Donald Trump's impeachment trial without committing to calling witnesses or hearing new evidence, foreshadowing a partisan vote to kick off a divisive proceeding.

His decision deepened a standoff over the shape of a Senate trial that has gripped the Capitol in the weeks since the House voted to impeach Trump. But hours later, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi indicated it may not persist much longer, saying that she would “soon” transmit the two articles of impeachment, though not before McConnell made public the rules for the process.

McConnell shared his intentions with senators over lunch in the Capitol, declaring that he had the votes he needed to steamroll over Democratic objections and proceed with the trial that puts off final decisions on whether to consider evidence.

That would mean the Senate would tackle those questions only after representatives of the House and the president make opening arguments and senators question both sides.

“We have the votes,” McConnell told reporters afterward. He said he modelled his plan on the procedures used during the impeachment trial of President Bill Clinton in 1999. **NYT**

THERE ARE JUST 700 SEKE SPEAKERS LEFT, AND 100 LIVE IN NEW YORK — HALF OF THEM IN ONE BUILDING

Near-extinct language finds a home in one Brooklyn building

KIMIKODE FREYTA-SAMURA  
NEW YORK, JANUARY 8

THE APARTMENT building, in Brooklyn's Flatbush neighbourhood, is a hive of nationalities. A Pakistani woman entered the elevator on a recent afternoon with a big bag of groceries, flicking a dupatta over her shoulder as a Nepalese nurse and the janitor, a man from Jamaica there to mop up a spill, followed her in.

It was hardly an unusual scene in New York, one of the world's most diverse cities. But this nondescript, seven-story brick building is also the improb-

able home to some of the last speakers of a rare, unwritten language from Nepal that linguists worry could disappear within a generation, if not sooner.

The language, Seke, is spoken in just five villages cloistered by craggy cliffs and caves in a part of Nepal called Mustang, a region close to the border with Tibet.

There are just 700 or so Seke speakers left in the world, according to a recent study by the Endangered Language Alliance, a New York-based organisation dedicated to preserving rare languages in the city.

Of those, a little over 100 are in New York, and nearly half of them live in the building in Flatbush.



A birthday celebration at a Brooklyn building that is home to about 50 speakers of Seke. *NYT*

“I live on the fifth floor. My uncle lives on the second. My cousins live on the sixth, and a family friend lives on the first,” said

Rasmina Gurung, 21, who came to New York eight years ago from Chuksang, one of the five villages in Nepal where Seke is spoken and

that is known for its apples.

The remaining Seke speakers live in another building in Flatbush or are scattered across Queens.

Seke is one of 637 languages and dialects that the Endangered Language Alliance has identified as being spoken across the five boroughs of New York and in New Jersey, which also has a diverse, global population.

Seke means “golden language”. Legend has it that it was passed down from people living in the snowy peaks of the Himalayas who settled in Mustang, a former kingdom whose terrain was formed, so the story goes, from the heart and innards of a demon defeated

in battle by a Buddhist monk.

The apartment building in Flatbush where a number of Seke speakers now live is a microcosm of life back home and a bastion of the language.

Many of them were former apple growers who left after it became increasingly difficult to earn a living. In New York, they mostly work as manicurists, construction workers and cooks.

Inside their apartments, it looks as if their former homes had been transported undisturbed from thousands of miles away.

Nyaka Gurung, Gurung's uncle, has built low, wooden rectangular seats along the walls, covered with rugs, a common setup in

Nepalese living rooms. Scrolls of Tibetan deities hang on one wall.

On a recent visit, offerings were laid out under a framed photo of the Dalai Lama that hung above a large plasma television. A thermos used to serve hot butter tea, the national drink of Nepal, stood on a table nearby, and the smoky fragrance of chumin, a Tibetan incense, blended with the smell of Indian spices from the kitchen.

In New York, young Nepalese, like Gurung's cousins, speak very little Seke. She says she is the most fluent speaker among the diaspora's younger members and has been helping the Endangered Language Alliance compile a Seke-English dictionary. **NYT**