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TOP OF THE WORLD



THE VATICAN

Pope dismisses bid to ordain married men as priests in Amazon

Vatican City: Pope Francis, in one of the most significant decisions of his papacy, on Wednesday dismissed a proposal to allow some married men to be ordained in the Amazon region to ease an acute scarcity of priests. The recommendation, put forward by Latin American bishops last year, had alarmed conservatives in the deeply polarised 1.3 billion-member Roman Catholic Church, who feared it could lead to a change in the centuries-old commitment to celibacy among priests. Francis delivered his response in an Apostolic Exhortation, three months after the proposal passed by 128 votes to 41 at a contentious Vatican assembly, or synod, of Roman Catholic bishops.

SOLOMON ISLANDS

4 survive 32 days adrift in Pacific

Wellington: Four people who survived a month adrift in the Pacific were recovering in the Solomon Islands Wednesday after an ordeal that claimed the lives of eight of their companions, including a baby, reports said. The group, from Papua New Guinea's Bougainville province, said they survived by eating coconuts found floating in the sea and collected rainwater in a bowl during their 32 days adrift. The group set off from Bougainville on Dec 22, to celebrate Christmas in the Carteret Islands, about 100 km away. But survivor Dominic Stally said their boat capsized and a number of the group drowned.

JAPAN

Mother, son held for 3,250 hotel cancellations

Tokyo: Japanese police have arrested a mother-and-son duo for allegedly making more than 3,200 no-show hotel cancellations, costing the hotels \$1 million while collecting reward points worth \$22,000, reports said Wednesday. Police in Kyoto confirmed on Wednesday they had taken into custody a 51-year-old mother and her 31-year-old son in connection with making fake reservations in November at three hotels, causing damage worth about 95,000 yen (\$864).

Trump gives conditional go-ahead for peace deal with Afghan Taliban

Deal only if group proves commitment to reducing violence over test period of 7 days later this month

MUJIB MASHAL & LARA JAKES
KABUL, FEBRUARY 12

MORE THAN 18 years after the US invaded Afghanistan, President Donald Trump has conditionally approved a peace deal with the Taliban that would withdraw the last American troops from the country, potentially beginning the end of America's longest war, according to Afghan and US officials.

But the deal will only be signed if the Taliban prove their commitment to a durable reduction of violence over a test period of about seven days later this month. If the Taliban do end hostilities and a deal is signed, the US would then begin a gradual withdrawal of American troops, and direct negotiations would start between the Taliban and Afghan leaders over the future of their country.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo informed Afghanistan's top leaders in separate phone calls Tuesday that Trump had given tentative approval to this approach, according to an Afghan



American military personnel at Camp Shorabak in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. The US has had a military presence in the country for over 18 years. NYT

official briefed on one of the calls.

A senior US official also confirmed that Trump had given his preliminary approval for a deal Monday, dependent on a cessation of violence, the same day he visited Dover Air Force Base to receive the remains of the latest US fatalities in the war, which

has killed tens of thousands of Afghans and more than 3,500 American and coalition troops since the US drove the Taliban from power in 2001.

A senior diplomat in Washington described the deal as "95% agreed to in principle", but that the possibility of a final

agreement will become clearer in a matter of a couple weeks.

A senior Taliban official informed of the negotiations said there were now "positive movements," but declined to discuss details because the group's internal deliberations were continuing. NYT

CIA spied on India, Pak, others through secretly-owned Swiss firm: WaPo

PRESS TRUST INDIA
WASHINGTON, FEBRUARY 12

THE CIA read the encrypted messages of several countries, including India, for decades through its secretly-owned Switzerland-based company trusted by governments all over the world to keep the communications of their spies, soldiers and diplomats secret, according to a leading American daily.

According to a report by *The Washington Post* and German public broadcaster ZDF published on Tuesday, the company, Crypto AG, entered into a deal with America's Central Intelligence Agency in 1951 and came under its ownership in the 1970s.

The joint reporting project, which uncovered the secret operation from CIA classified documents, described how the US and its allies exploited other nations for years, taking their money and stealing their secrets.

The company specialised in communications and information security and was founded in the 1940s as an independent firm.

The CIA and the National Security Agency spied on allies and adversaries alike through

For over half a century, govts all over the world trusted the Swiss encryption firm to keep the communications of their spies, soldiers and diplomats secret, the Washington Post said

Crypto AG, which specialises in making cryptography equipment, the report said. For more than half a century, governments all over the world trusted the Swiss firm to keep the communications of their spies, soldiers and diplomats secret, the *Post* said.

The company had clients such as Iran, military juntas in Latin America, India, Pakistan and even the Vatican, it said.

However, none of its customers ever knew that the Swiss firm was secretly owned by the CIA in a highly classified partnership with West German intelligence. These spy agencies rigged the company's devices so they could easily break the codes that countries used to send encrypted messages, according to the report.

Trump admin seeks shorter sentence for Stone; prosecutors quit

SARAH N LYNCH
WASHINGTON, FEBRUARY 12

UNDER PRESSURE from President Donald Trump, the US Justice Department on Tuesday abruptly moved to seek a shorter prison sentence for veteran Republican operative and long-time Trump ad-



Roger Stone

viser and friend Roger Stone, and all four prosecutors quit the case after the highly unusual reversal.

Senior department officials — hours after Trump complained on Twitter that Stone was being treated unfairly — overrode the sentencing recommendation of seven to nine years made on Monday by the

federal prosecutors who secured Stone's conviction. Stone was found guilty in November on seven counts of lying to Congress, obstruction and witness tampering.

In a new court filing, a Justice Department official who had not previously worked on the case called that recommendation "excessive and unwar-

ranted" and said the State Department would not make a formal sentencing recommendation.

Stone's trial arose from former Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation that detailed extensive Russian interference in the 2016 election to benefit Trump's candidacy. REUTERS

PLEDGE TO CLOSE HEALTH, WELLBEING GAP BETWEEN INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND OTHERS FAILING: GOVT

Australia admits 'national shame' of failing to help Aboriginals

AGENCIES
SYDNEY, FEBRUARY 12

A PLEDGE to close the health and wellbeing gap between Aboriginal and other Australians is failing, the government admitted Wednesday, describing the situation as a source of "national shame".

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said just two of seven key targets to improve the lives of Australia's indigenous people were on track — unchanged from last year.

More Aboriginal children

were enrolled in early education and graduating from high school than ever before, he said, but attendance rates were still lagging behind other groups.

Other targets to halve the gap in child mortality, literacy, life expectancy, and unemployment rates were not being met.

Morrison called the failure to give indigenous children equal opportunities to other Australian kids "a national truth and a national shame".

The admission comes 250 years since Captain James Cook's first voyage to the vast continent, a journey that led to British



Prime Minister Scott Morrison with Minister for Indigenous Australians, Ken Wyatt, who is indigenous, after the PM gave a speech on indigenous disadvantage in Parliament. AP

colonisation and upended indigenous communities.

The life expectancy for Aboriginal Australians is about eight years lower than the national average.

Indigenous children are twice as likely to die before their fifth birthday and 25 times more likely to be incarcerated than the rest of the population, according to official statistics.

The report marks 12 years since former prime minister Kevin Rudd made a historic apology to Aboriginal people for centuries of injustice and launched the "Closing the Gap" initiative.

Morrison on Tuesday said the Australian government's policy is failing and will be replaced.

"We perpetuated an ingrained way of thinking passed down over two centuries and more, and it was the belief that we knew better than our Indigenous peoples. We don't," Morrison told Australia's Parliament. "We also thought we understood their problems better than they did. We don't. They live them. We must see the gap we wish to close, not from our viewpoints, but from the viewpoint of Indigenous Australians," he added.

USA

JUSSIE SMOLLETT INDICTED AGAIN

Actor Jussie Smollett was indicted Tuesday for a second time on charges of lying to police about a racist and anti-gay attack he allegedly staged on himself in downtown Chicago, renewing a divisive criminal case that drew worldwide attention last year. The indictment came from a special prosecutor who was appointed after Cook County prosecutors dropped the same charges last March.



CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK



The Diamond Princess anchored near Tokyo. AP

Two Indians test positive for virus on cruise ship off Japan

SHUBHAJIT ROY
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 12

TWO INDIAN nationals have tested positive for the coronavirus (COVID-19) on a cruise ship off the Japanese coast, Indian government sources said on Wednesday.

The *Diamond Princess* cruise ship, currently docked off the coast of Yokohama, Japan, has 3,711 people on board, including 132 crew members and six passengers who are Indian nationals.

Sources said the ship reached Yokohama on February 3, 2020, after visiting Hong Kong and Okinawa. On the same day, the government of Japan conducted an on-board quarantine.

Japan quarantined the ship as one passenger who had disembarked at Hong Kong on Jan 25 was found to be infected with the virus on Feb 1. Taking into account the maximum incubation period of 14 days for the coronavirus, Japan has quarantined the cruise ship at Yokohama for 14 days. The quarantine period started from Feb 5 and will end on Feb 19.

During this period, passengers have been kept under monitoring and requested to remain restricted to their rooms. They have been provided with protective masks, medicines and necessary supplies including water and food, as well as regular phone and Internet services. Quarantine officers have been deputed by Japan on the ship, including doctors to attend to the needs of passengers.

"As of February 12, 2020, 174 people have tested positive for N-Coronavirus, including two Indian nationals. People who have tested positive have been taken to hospitals for treatment," an Indian government source said.

"The embassy of India in Tokyo is monitoring the evolving situation and is in touch with concerned authorities in the government of Japan. Embassy officials have also reached out to the Indian nationals on board and sought their cooperation after explaining to them the health and safety regulations of Japanese authorities. The embassy is also tak-

FALL IN NEW VIRUS CASES RAISES HOPE IN CHINA

Beijing: The number of new cases in China dropped for a second straight day in a virus outbreak that has infected about 45,000 people and killed more than 1,100, health officials said Wednesday. The number of new cases has trended down in the past week, raising hopes that the epidemic may be peaking. The National Health Commission said 2,015 new cases had been tallied on Tuesday, the second straight daily decline and down from nearly 3,900 a week ago. Commission spokesman Mi Feng said the situation is still grim but "we have seen some positive changes." The total number of cases in mainland China reached 44,653 and the death toll hit 1,113. Two people have died elsewhere, one in Hong Kong and one in the Philippines. AP

ing up concerns raised by the Indian nationals on board the cruise ship with the concerned authorities in the Japanese Foreign Ministry as well as the cruise company," the source said.

"We understand that once the quarantine is over, everyone leaving the ship will be screened for temperature and other symptoms related to the N-Coronavirus infection. Thereafter, people will be free to go to a place of their choice. The managing company of the cruise liner has also announced that the passengers will be refunded full cruise fare including air travel, hotel, ground transportation, etc. Crew members of the ship, will be remunerated as per their existing contracts post the quarantine period," the source added.

No evidence that virus can be passed on to child in womb: Study

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 12

THERE IS currently no evidence that the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) causes severe adverse outcomes in newborn babies or that it can pass to the child while in the womb, according to a small observational study of women from Wuhan, China. These women were in the third trimester of pregnancy and had pneumonia caused by COVID-19.

In the study, published in *The Lancet*, there were two cases of fetal distress, but all nine pregnancies resulted in livebirths.

The study also found that symptoms from COVID-19 infection in pregnant women were similar to those reported in non-pregnant adults, and no women in the study developed severe pneumonia or died.

The authors of the study caution that their findings are based on a limited number of cases, over a short period of time, and only included women who were late in their pregnancy and gave birth by caesarean section.

The effects of mothers being infected with the virus during the first or second trimester of pregnancy and the subse-

The study comes after the news of a newborn testing positive for COVID-19 infection within 36 hrs of birth

quent outcomes for their offspring remain unclear, as well as whether the virus can be passed from mother to child during vaginal birth.

The new study comes after the news of a newborn (born to a mother infected with COVID-19) testing positive for COVID-19 infection within 36 hours of birth, which prompted questions about whether the virus could be contracted in the womb.

Talking about this case, lead author of the study Professor Yuanzhen Zhang, Zhongnan Hospital of Wuhan University, China, says: "It is important to note that many important clinical details of this case are missing, and for this reason, we cannot conclude from this one case whether intrauterine infection is possible. Nonetheless, we should continue to pay special attention to newborns born to mothers with COVID-19 pneumonia to help prevent infections in this group."