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US AIR FORCE TWEAKS DRESS CODE FOR SIKHS

The US Air Force has updated its dress code to accommodate the religious sentiments of communities, including Sikhs, making it easier for them to join the service. Finalised on February 7, the new Air Force policy establishes clear grooming and uniform standards for enlisted and officer airmen who are granted accommodations based on their sincerely held religious beliefs

TOP OF THE WORLD



Leo Varadkar

IRELAND

Leo Varadkar resigns amid crushing defeat

London: Ireland's Indian-origin Prime Minister Leo Varadkar resigned from his post on Friday after a crushing defeat in a parliamentary vote, which failed to garner him enough supporters for a re-election. Varadkar, whose father was born in Mumbai, visited Irish President Michael D Higgins in Dublin to tender his resignation as Taoiseach - as the Prime Minister is known in Ireland. The 41-year-old will stay on as caretaker PM until a new administration is in place following a General Election earlier this month which failed to throw up a clear majority for any party.

SWITZERLAND

Burkina violence displacing 4,000 daily: UN

Geneva: More than 4,000 people are being forced to flee their homes each day in Burkina Faso, as attacks on civilians by jihadist militants increase in number and frequency, the UN's refugee agency said on Friday. "People fleeing the violence report attacks on their villages by militant groups, killing, raping, pillaging," the UNHCR said in a statement. "In Burkina Faso... more than 4,000 people to flee their homes and search for safety (on a daily average)," it said.

GERMANY

Police presence to be hiked after far-right killings

Berlin: German authorities will step up the police presence throughout the country and keep a closer watch on mosques and other sites after the racially motivated shootings that killed nine people, the country's top security official said Friday. A 43-year-old German man fatally shot the victims of immigrant backgrounds in the Frankfurt suburb of Hanau on Wednesday night before killing his mother and himself. Officials confirmed they had received a letter from the suspect last November in which he sought help in stopping the surveillance he believed he was under.

S KOREA REPORTS 2ND DEATH AS ITS CASES DOUBLE

Coronavirus on G20 agenda, WHO head warns window to act narrowing

AGENCIES
BEIJING, FEBRUARY 21

THE DEATH toll in China's novel coronavirus has gone up to 2,236 with 118 more deaths reported, mostly from the hard-hit Hubei province, while the overall confirmed infection cases have climbed to 75,465, Chinese health officials said on Friday.

As international authorities tried to stop the outbreak in China from becoming a global pandemic, finance leaders from the Group of 20 major economies meeting in Saudi Arabia over the weekend were set to discuss risks to the global economy.

Asian shares dipped on Friday as fears over the disease sent funds fleeing to the sheltered shores of US assets, lifting the dollar to three-year highs.

The head of the WHO warned on Friday that the window of opportunity to stem the spread of the virus was shrinking. "Our window of opportunity is narrowing, and that's why we called (on) the international community to act quickly, including the financing," Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a news conference in Geneva, adding: "That's not what we see."

A team of WHO experts would travel to Wuhan on Saturday, the global health body announced. South Korea also reported a



Passengers checked after leaving the Diamond Princess in Japan on Friday. Reuters

second death from the coronavirus on Friday. The patient, who died on Friday, was a 54-year-old woman who had been admitted to a hospital in Cheongdo.

Iran's health ministry Friday reported two more deaths among 13 new cases of coronavirus in the Islamic republic, bringing the total number of deaths to four and infections to 18. "Thirteen new cases have been confirmed," ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said on Twitter. "Unfortunately two of them have lost their lives."

China finds spike in cases in prisons, officials fired

REUTERS
BEIJING, FEBRUARY 21

THE NEW coronavirus has infected 234 people in two prisons outside the province at the centre of the epidemic and top officials deemed responsible for the outbreaks have been fired, authorities said on Friday.

The infections found in the two jails, in the northern province of Shandong and the eastern province of Zhejiang, made up most of the 258 newly confirmed cases on Thursday outside the central province of Hubei, where the most cases have occurred.

Authorities sacked the chief of the provincial justice department in Shandong after the extent of the outbreak in Rencheng prison in Jining city was detected. In all, 207 people at the jail tested positive.

The jail discovered its first case in a prison officer on February 13. Seven prison officials were also fired, authorities told a media briefing.

DOCTOR WHO 'POSTPONED WEDDING TO TREAT PATIENTS' DIES IN WUHAN

■ A 29-year-old Chinese doctor, who postponed his wedding to look after coronavirus patients, has died treating them - the ninth fatality among the healthcare providers

hospitalised on January 25 and died on Thursday night, as per the health bureau

■ 'Peng Yinhua, a frontline doctor at Jiangxia First Hospital in virus epicentre #Wuhan, died of #COVID19 on Thursday night...' state-run Global Times tweeted on Friday.

■ Dr Peng Yinhua, a respiratory acute care medical professional, was

Days before election, Netanyahu plans homes in contested East Jerusalem areas

ISABEL KERSHNER
FEBRUARY 21

PRIME MINISTER Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel announced plans on Thursday to build thousands of new housing units in contested East Jerusalem, which critics say could doom any prospect of a deal with the Palestinians.

It is likely to be years before any of the 6,200 units would be built, but the announcement, 11 days before a national election, was widely seen as an effort by Netanyahu to solidify support among his right-wing base.

The homes are slated for two areas in East Jerusalem, which was captured by Israel from Jordan in the 1967 war and has been long demanded by Palestinians as the capital of a future independent state. Israel unilaterally annexed the area as part of its capital, a move not recognised by most countries but endorsed by President Trump's Middle East plan.

"We are joining up all the parts of unified Jerusalem," Netanyahu announced in a video shot against the backdrop of Har Homa, one of the two neighborhoods where new homes will be built. Netanyahu said he had now "removed all the limitations."

Veteran Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat condemned the move.



Benjamin Netanyahu. AP



NYT

"Ongoing Israeli settlement announcements represent the implementation of the Trump plan, which requires urgent international action to deter both Israel and the U.S. from their continued violations of international law and order," he said in a statement.

The plans announced by Netanyahu call for 4,000 new homes in Givat Hamatos, another neighbourhood in the region. NYT



At a polling station during parliamentary elections, in Tehran on Friday. Reuters

Iran holds critical election, hardliners set to dominate

PARISA HAFEZI & BABAK DEGHANPISHEH
DUBAI, FEBRUARY 21

IRANIANS VOTED on Friday in a parliamentary election likely to help hardline loyalists of the supreme leader tighten their grip on power as the country faces mounting US pressure over its nuclear programme and growing discontent at home.

State television said voting would run for 10 hours, but could be extended depending on turnout, which is seen as a critical test of the popularity of the clerical establishment after most moderates and leading conservative candidates were barred from running.



Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei casts his vote on Friday. AP

Seven hours after polls opened, an Interior Ministry of-

ficial said about 11 million of 58 million eligible voters had cast their ballots for candidates in the 290-member parliament, the semi-official ISNA news agency reported.

With thousands of potential candidates disqualified in favour of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's allies, the vote is not expected to ease Iran's nuclear standoff with the United States or spawn a softer foreign policy.

Parliament's power is limited, but gains by security hawks could weaken pragmatists and conservatives who support the ruling theocracy but also more economically beneficial engagement with the West, from which Tehran has been estranged since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. REUTERS

Russia meddling to re-elect Trump, US House warned; Kremlin denies

ANASTASIA TETEREVA & SUSAN HEAVEY
MOSCOW/WASHINGTON, FEBRUARY 21

The Kremlin on Friday denied Russia was interfering in the 2020 US presidential campaign to boost President Donald Trump's re-election chances following reports that American intelligence officials warned Congress about the election threat last week.

US intelligence officials told members of the House of Representatives Intelligence Committee in a classified briefing last week that Russia was again interfering in American politics ahead of November's election, a person familiar with the discussion told Reuters.

Trump has since ousted the acting intelligence chief, replacing him this week with a political loyalist in an abrupt move as Democrats and former US officials raised the alarm over national security concerns.

On Twitter, the Republican president accused Democrats in Congress of launching a misinformation campaign "saying that Russia prefers me to any of the Do Nothing Democrat candidates." Trump called it a "hoax" in his Friday tweet.

US officials have long warned that Russia and other countries would seek to inter-



Trump has since ousted the acting intelligence chief in an abrupt move. Reuters

fer in the November 3 presidential election, following Russia's meddling in the 2016 campaign that ended with Trump's surprise victory over Democratic rival Hillary Clinton.

US intelligence agencies concluded that the Kremlin used disinformation operations, cyber attacks and other methods in its 2016 operation in an effort to boost Trump, an allegation that Russia denies. Trump, sensitive to doubts over the legitimacy of his win, has also questioned that finding and repeatedly criticised American intelligence agencies.

On Friday, the Kremlin said the latest allegations were false.

"These are more paranoid announcements which, to our regret, will multiply as we get closer to the (US) election," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters. "They have nothing to do with the truth." REUTERS

'PATTERN OF JUDICIAL HARASSMENT' Court disbands Thai Oppn party, draws criticism

HANNAH BEECH
BANGKOK, FEBRUARY 21

THAILAND'S MOST dynamic political force in years was ordered disbanded on Friday by the country's Constitutional Court, in a ruling that rights groups say is part of a pattern of judicial harassment aimed at smothering democracy.

The Future Forward Party was found to have violated a law governing political parties by accepting a loan from its young tycoon leader, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, to fund an electoral campaign.

The party maintains that the 191 million baht loan, equivalent to about \$6 million, was legitimate, and that the campaign financing rules are so ambiguous that it would have been impossible to know whether the loan contravened them. Other political parties have taken out loans without any legal ramifications.

For a country where the same politicians and army generals have dominated politics for decades, the Future Forward Party offered something fresh.

In elections last year, the first since an army coup in 2014, all of Future Forward's candidates were first-time entrants. The

EXPLAINED Political future may be tenuous

THE RULING by the Constitutional Court has likely cut off the Future Forward Party's political future. Despite being relatively new, the party had quickly become popular. Now, the court's ruling implies that the FFP's senior leadership will not be allowed to step into the political arena for a set period of time, usually 10 years. Even if the party's founders simply create another one, that entity will be shorn of the FFP's top ranks.

party didn't even exist a year before the elections.

Despite its neophyte status, the opposition force surged to a third-place finish in the elections, capturing 81 of the 500 seats in the House of Representatives. (It now has 76.) NYT

70TH EDITION OF THE BERLINALE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL — DAY 1

Hitting turgid notes, 'My Salinger Year' falls short of being love letter to author



SHUBHRA GUPTA
FEBRUARY 21

worldwide women's rights movement, the right to same sex marriage and the right to abortion.

His comments were more in the nature of contravening previous ill-advised remarks on these issues, but the fact of having them said out loud, with force and clarity, set the tone for the presser. As well as for the Berlinale, which prides itself on being one of the world's most political film festivals, where issues such as rising right-wing nationalism, the refugee crisis and violence against minorities have found a voice in the choice of films.

There is something to be said about watching contemporary cutting-edge cinema just a few minutes' walk away from a som-



Margaret Qualley and Sigourney Weaver in Berlin. AP

bre memorial dedicated to those who perished in the Holocaust. The main venue at the Potsdamer Platz is surrounded by signs of a city that was recon-

structed post 1945, and those signs, which include remnants of the Berlin Wall are assiduously maintained. The movies help with the healing.

■ ■ ■ If you, like me, have been a life-long fan of J D Salinger, you will have read everything by and on the famously elusive author. I brought my battered, well-thumbed copy of 'Franny And Zooey' along for the plane ride from Delhi to Berlin as a refresher for the opening film, 'My Salinger Year'. Not that I had forgotten any of it, and though I love 'Raise High The Roofbeam, Carpenters' as much, and 'Catcher In The Rye' just a little less, I've always come back to the crackling prose and the intriguing doings of the two youngest Carpenter siblings.

The film, I'm heartbroken to report, is, for the most part, turgid and inert. It's based on Joanna

Rakoff's memoirs of her year at one of New York's most famous publishing houses, where the author, a wide-eyed ingenue, walks in to find dark-paneled walls, antediluvian typewriters and respectful mentions of someone called 'Jerry'. Rakoff's part is played by the lovely Margaret Qualley, (Once Upon A Time In Hollywood), and her boss, a formidable grande dame who hates computers and anything modern, is played by Sigourney Weaver.

Rakoff's book is full of the sights and sounds of a 1995 New York. Manhattan, actually, where the publishing house is situated, not far from the venerable 'The New Yorker', and which is home to all kinds of itinerants from across the

US, especially those, like Rakoff, who want to write themselves.

The finding-your-voice-and-yourself genre is well-established, and the film, directed by Philippe Falardeu, lays out all its conventions on the table: the hopeful young woman, in her Peter Pan collars and messy just-woken-up hair, who begins tentatively but gains confidence as she goes along, the older woman who wants everything her own way and will brook no interference, the heavy-handed boyfriend who only cares for himself and writes very purple prose to boot. But there's no sparkle here.

Which, I have to say, is very disappointing. Qualley, criminally, comes off flat. Weaver is

better, just a shade, just by the fact that she's done this for so long. How can a movie about wonderful writing, and writers, be written with so little flair?

Rakoff's character discovers the joys of reading Salinger and is visited by imaginary Salinger fans (her primary job is to read the mountains of fanmail he gets); one could have been Catcher's remarkable young Holden Caulfield, who so hated 'phonies'. One of the most alive parts of the movie has Qualley dance about a room full of light, chatting about a letter Franny writes.

That tone, joyous, curious, suffusing the whole film, would have been an apt love letter to Salinger.