



TWITTERATI

BERNIE SANDERS, US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

"Why does this president repeatedly think that scientific facts are hoaxes? This is the most dangerous president in the modern history of our country. He is putting our people's lives at risk. He must be defeated"

TOP OF THE WORLD



John Ratcliffe

USA  
Trump picks controversial ally as intel chief

Washington: US President Donald Trump announced Republican lawmaker John Ratcliffe as his intelligence chief Friday, sparking fresh controversy over a crucial position that has lacked a permanent office holder for months. The 53-year-old Trump loyalist was nominated as director of national intelligence after Dan Coats stepped down in July last year, but withdrew from consideration after strong criticism of his credentials. Trump has been determined to place someone politically close to him as chief of the intelligence community, which he views as hostile and full of leakers.

UK  
Man jailed for dumping body of Indian-origin date

London: A man who pleaded guilty to supplying drugs and preventing the lawful burial of his Indian-origin gay lover during a date last year has been sentenced to six years' imprisonment at a UK court for dumping the body rather than alerting the police. Hiran Chauhan's body was discovered by some schoolchildren after it was buried in a park by Neil Cuckson. "To save your own skin, and to thwart a police investigation, you embarked on an elaborate plan to dispose of his body," the judge told him.

PAKISTAN  
At least 20 killed as train, bus collide

Karachi: A horrific collision between a speeding train and a passenger bus at an unmanned crossing killed at least 20 people, including children, and left scores injured in Pakistan's southern Sindh province, officials said. The accident took place on Friday at the Kandhra railway crossing, near the Rohri railway station in the province, when the '45 Up Pakistan Express' train coming from Rawalpindi towards Karachi collided with the passenger bus. Sukkur Commissioner Shafiq Ahmed Mahesar confirmed that at least 20 people, including children, died in the incident.

UK  
Civil servant at centre of Priti Patel row quits

London: The top civil servant in the UK Home Office at the centre of a row over a strained relationship with Home Secretary Priti Patel resigned on Saturday and said he plans to sue the government over his "constructive and unfair" exit. Philip Rutnam, Permanent Secretary in the department led by Patel, said there had been a "vicious and orchestrated campaign" against him. "The Home Secretary (Patel) categorically denied any involvement in this campaign to the Cabinet Office. I regret I do not believe her," he said in a statement.

HISTORIC PACT INKED IN DOHA

In Afghanistan, US-Taliban peace deal greeted with mistrust, hope

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
KABUL, FEBRUARY 29

AFGHANS EXPRESSED unease and cautious hope about a historic deal signed Saturday that aims to have all foreign forces leave Afghanistan within 14 months in exchange for Taliban guarantees, with many people doubting the insurgents' intentions.

War-scarred Afghans have long sought an end to the onslaught of bombings and airstrikes over the past 18 years, but as the accord was signed many said they feared what comes next. "I believe the Americans have been stranded here and with this deal they are looking for a way to flee the country," Kabul shopkeeper Najeeb Haleemi said.

"I am pessimistic about the deal and worried about what will happen after," the 50-year-old added, echoing concerns expressed by others in the country.

Fellow shopkeeper Husain Ahmad said that while Afghans were "hungry for peace", the agreement represented a victory for the insurgents.

Immediately after the deal was signed, Taliban political spokesman Suhail Shaheen told AFP that Afghan women "should not worry about their rights". "We accept their rights and acknowledge their right to education and to work," Shaheen said.

"We also request them as Muslim women to observe the Islamic hijab, only that." But activist Zahra Hussaini said she had no faith in such claims. "I don't trust the Taliban, and remember how they suppressed women when they were ruling," the 28-year-old said in Kabul.

"Today is a dark day, and as I was watching the deal being signed, I had this bad feeling that it would result in their return to power rather than in peace," she said.

Some were celebrating the end of the war and expressing hope that it would unite the country. "We are very optimistic about this deal, and are impatiently waiting for the foreign invaders to leave..." said Arefullah Saad, a resident of eastern Khost.



Afghan President Ashraf Ghani (centre) with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper in Kabul on Saturday. AP

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EXPLAINED  
Crucial first step, but many risks remain

THE treaty, which could pave the way for peace in Afghanistan, will be claimed as a political victory for President Donald Trump. However, many risks remain, including the fact that a key stakeholder — the Afghan government — has been excluded from the process so far. Now, with talks between the government and Taliban set to begin, issues from women's rights to internal stability will have to be hammered out. The chances of a gridlock are significant, and there appears to be little clarity on how the US will respond if the Taliban does not comply with the conditions of the peace treaty. If handled improperly, the consequences could be dire for the US and for Afghanistan.

Complicated talks between Afghans, reduced violence — the road ahead

MUJIB MASHAL & RUSSELL GOLDMAN  
DOHA, FEBRUARY 29

THE AGREEMENT between the United States and the Taliban unlocks a difficult but crucial next step: negotiations between the Taliban and other Afghans, including the government, over future power-sharing. Those talks are expected to start soon, within 10 days or so.

But the Taliban refuse to recognise Afghanistan's democratic government. The goal of their insurgency has been returning to power and establishing rule based on their view of Islam. Divisions inside Afghanistan

A WARNING  
The US "will not hesitate to nullify" its deal with the Taliban if the insurgents renege on their security guarantees and commitment to hold talks with the Afghan government, US Defense Secretary Mark Esper said Saturday. Esper warned that "should the Taliban fail to honour their commitments they will forfeit their chance to sit with fellow Afghans and deliberate the future of their country" PTI

will complicate the negotiations. The democratic side has been bitterly divided by a disputed election, with the main challenger declaring he would form his own government after President Ashraf Ghani won a second term in office.

The Taliban also commit to keeping Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups from using Afghan territory to stage attacks against the United States and its allies. The US and the Taliban are to establish a joint monitoring body in Qatar to assess progress.

The US also committed to working to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners, held by the Afghan government, and 1,000 from the Afghan side by March 10. NYT

Global bodies, leaders welcome peace efforts

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
FEBRUARY 29

UN SECRETARY General Antonio Guterres on Saturday welcomed efforts to achieve a lasting political settlement in Afghanistan, stressing the importance of sustaining the nationwide reduction in violence, for the benefit of all Afghans.

"The Secretary-General stresses the importance of sustaining the nationwide reduction in violence, for the benefit of all Afghans. He encourages continued efforts by all parties to create an enabling environment for the intra-Afghan negotiations and a

comprehensive peace process," the statement said.

The European Union said Saturday the proceedings are "important first steps towards a comprehensive peace process" in Afghanistan. The EU's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said in a statement that "the current opportunity to move towards peace should not be missed".

Pakistan on Saturday said it would continue to support every effort being made to bring peace in Afghanistan. "Pakistan will continue to support a peaceful, stable, united, democratic and prosperous Afghanistan, at peace with itself and with its neighbours," a statement read.

Turkey says destroyed 'chemical warfare facility' near Syria's Aleppo

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
ISTANBUL, FEBRUARY 29

A TURKISH official said Saturday that Turkey destroyed a chemical warfare facility after dozens of its soldiers were killed by Syrian regime fire in the last-rebel enclave of Idlib province.

The Turkish army destroyed overnight "a chemical warfare facility, located some 13 kilometres south of Aleppo, along with a large number of other regime targets," the senior official told reporters.

However, the Syrian

Observatory for Human Rights, which relies on sources inside the war-torn country, said that Turkey instead hit a military airport in eastern Aleppo, where the monitoring group says there are no chemical weapons.

Thirty-three Turkish soldiers were killed in an air strike by Russian-backed Syrian regime forces in the Idlib region on Thursday, the biggest Turkish military loss on the battlefield in recent years.

The latest incident has raised further tensions between Ankara and Moscow.

Erdogan asks Putin to 'step aside' in Syria

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan said on Saturday that he had asked President Vladimir Putin for Russia to step aside in Syria and leave Turkey to deal with Syrian government forces alone. Speaking in Istanbul, Erdogan said he had told Putin in a phone call to stand aside and let Turkey "to do what is necessary" with the Syrian government alone. He said Turkey does not intend to leave Syria right now.



GREEK POLICE CLASH WITH MIGRANTS: A migrant stands during clashes with Greek police, at Turkey's Pazarkule border crossing with Greece's Kastanies. The police fired tear gas while some migrants lobbed rocks. Reuters

GLOBAL DEATH TOLL OVER 2,800

First virus death in US confirmed, South Korea faces spike in infections

AGENCIES  
SEOUL/SEATTLE, FEBRUARY 29

A PERSON has died in Washington state of the coronavirus, COVID-19, state health officials said Saturday, marking the first such reported death in the United States.

State officials issued a terse news release announcing the death, gave no details and scheduled a news conference. State and King County health officials said "new people (have been) identified with the infection, one of whom died." They did not say how many new cases there are.

Amy Reynolds of the Washington state health department said in a brief telephone interview: "We are dealing with an emergency evolving situation."

South Korea urged citizens on Saturday to stay indoors as it warned of a "critical moment" in its battle on the coronavirus after recording the biggest daily jump in infections, as 813 new cases took the tally to 3,150.

South Korea is grappling with the largest outbreak of the virus outside China, as a new death took the toll to 17, amid a record daily increase in infections since the country confirmed its first patient on January 20.

"We have asked you to refrain from taking part in public events, including a religious gathering or protest, this weekend," Vice health minister Kim Kang-lip told a briefing.

Sixty-five cases of the virus have been reported in the US, but until this week, all of the cases could be explained by overseas travel or contact with



In South Korea, Saturday. AP

someone who had been ill. Three new cases on Friday, and a case earlier in the week, in California, were the first in the US where the cause was mysterious and unknown — a sign, experts warned, that the virus, which has killed more than 2,800 people worldwide, might now be spreading in the US.

Trump accuses media of exaggerating threat

President Trump and members of his administration mobilised on Friday to confront the threat of the coronavirus — not just the outbreak, but the news media and the Democrats they accused of exaggerating its danger.

Trump said news outlets like CNN were "doing everything they can to instill fear in people," while some Democrats were "trying to gain political favour by saying a lot of untruths."

"Now the Democrats are politicising the coronavirus," Trump said. "We did one of the great jobs. You say, 'How's President Trump doing?' They go, 'Oh, not good, not good.' They have no clue..."

MALAYSIA

Crisis as Mahathir rejects new PM, says he has the numbers

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
KUALA LUMPUR, FEBRUARY 29

MALAYSIA'S POLITICAL crisis deepened Saturday after 94-year-old Mahathir Mohamad rejected a decision by the king to pick his rival as the next prime minister, insisting he had enough backing to return to the role.

Ex-interior minister Muhyiddin Yassin was earlier named for the job by the monarch, who appoints the country's premiers after deciding who has backing from MPs, signalling a defeat for Mahathir and the return of a scandal-plagued party to power. It capped a week of turmoil that began when Mahathir's "Pact of Hope" alliance collapsed and he resigned as prime minister following a bid by rivals to form a new government and push out leader-in-waiting Anwar Ibrahim.

Their alliance stormed to a historic victory in 2018 that broke the six-decade stranglehold on power of a corruption-riddled coalition, but it was riven by infighting over who should succeed the world's oldest leader.

The victory of Muhyiddin and his coalition, which is dominated by the country's ethnic Malay Muslim majority, was a shock as Mahathir had appeared to be in the lead, and it sparked widespread public anger. Addressing supporters outside his Kuala Lumpur house, Muhyiddin said: "I urge all Malaysians to take the decision that has been made by the palace today well."

The palace earlier said the king believed Muhyiddin had enough support and he would be sworn in Sunday.

But after meeting his political allies, Mahathir said he had received the backing of 114 MPs to be prime minister — the required number is 112 — and released a statement listing their names. Mahathir said he would send a letter to the king explaining this, and added the number of MPs that Muhyiddin claimed to have supporting him was "not accurate".



Muhyiddin Yassin. AP

'DISTINGUISHING POLANSKI IS SPITTING IN THE FACE OF ALL VICTIMS'

Actors walk out after Polanski wins award at France's Oscars

ALEX MARSHALL  
LONDON, FEBRUARY 29

ROMAN POLANSKI, the film director who fled the United States in 1978 while awaiting sentencing for unlawful sexual intercourse with a minor, was a big winner Friday night at the César Awards, France's equivalent of the Academy Awards, leading several actors to walk out of the ceremony in outrage.

He was named best director for "J'accuse" (The English title: "An Officer and a Spy") about

Alfred Dreyfus, the Jewish military officer wrongly convicted of treason in what remains France's most notorious miscarriage of justice.

"Very few" people applauded Polanski's best director award, said *Le Monde*, the French newspaper.

Adèle Haenel, one of France's most prominent young actresses who said she had suffered from sexual abuse in the country's film industry, was one of those who left the room at the César ceremony, waving an arm in disgust and appearing to say, "Shame."

Several others followed Haenel when she walked out, in-



Protests Near the venue of the Cesar awards ceremony. AP

cluding Céline Sciamma, the director of "Portrait of a Lady on Fire," which starred Haenel. The 31-year-old actress also shouted, "Well done, pedophilia" as she left the hall, according to videos shared on social media.

Haenel previously complained this month in an interview with *The New York Times* about his nominations. "Distinguishing Polanski is spitting in the face of all victims," she said. "It means raping women isn't that bad."

Polanski's film won two other awards, having led the nomina-

tions with 12, the most of any movie. But he was not there to collect any of the prizes. He announced on Thursday that he would not attend the ceremony because he feared a "public lynching" from protesters.

"We know how this evening will unfold already," Polanski said in a statement. "What place can there be in such deplorable conditions for a film about the defense of truth, the fight for justice, blind hate and anti-Semitism?"

On Friday, the French police fired tear gas outside the Paris

concert hall hosting the César Film Awards in a clash with people protesting the director.

Florence Foresti, the actress and comedian who hosted the event, started the event by welcoming "predators" in the audience. "There are 12 moments when we're going to have an issue," she said in a reference to Polanski's 12 nominations.

Foresti, who was not onstage when he was named best director, did not return for the end of the ceremony.

She wrote on Instagram she was "disgusted." NYT