

IN BRIEF

**\$15m stolen in Chilean airport**

**Santiago:** Heavily armed thieves stole around \$15 million from an armored security truck at Chile's Santiago airport Monday, one of the biggest heists in the country's history. The gang arrived in the airport's cargo area aboard two vehicles, police colonel Oscar Figueroa told reporters. "Once inside, they threatened the guards before making off with the money," he said. In 2017, a gang stole a cash shipment worth \$19 million from the same airport.

**SA court clean chit to President**

**Johannesburg:** A South African court has cleared President Cyril Ramaphosa of allegations that he misled parliament about the funding of his campaign to become leader of the ruling African National Congress party. Ramaphosa had been accused by the country's public watchdog of misleading lawmakers about a \$34,000 contribution from the CEO of a local company, Africa Global Operations, formerly known as Bosasa. The company has been implicated in a state probe into allegations of corruption in government and state-owned enterprises during former president Jacob Zuma's tenure from 2009 to 2018. The Pretoria High Court Tuesday dismissed the watchdog's report which is a boost for Ramaphosa, who became president on promises to rid South Africa of corruption.

**Burkina Faso attacks kill 43**

**Ouagadougou:** At least 43 people have been killed in attacks in northern Burkina Faso, the government said on Monday, in what local sources described as apparent vigilante reprisals for jihadist violence that has claimed hundreds of lives. Burkina Faso, one of the world's poorest countries, has battled a jihadist insurgency since 2015, but the conflict has also provoked attacks on Fulani herders whom other communities accuse of supporting militants. "On Sunday, attacks were carried out on the villages of Dingulla and Barga... in Yatenga province. The provisional toll is 43 victims," the government said in a statement. It said six people were hospitalized with injuries. The statement did not blame any group for the attack or mention the Fulani community, but a local source reached by telephone blamed "self-defence groups who are acting in reprisal against jihadist attacks".

**INDONESIA RIGOUR: DUTCH KING SORRY**

**Jakarta, March 10:** Dutch King Willem-Alexander apologised to Indonesia on Tuesday for "excessive violence" during the former colony's independence struggle in the 1940s. The king made the remarks during a state visit to the country with Queen Maxima after a ceremony with Indonesian President Joko Widodo in the capital Jakarta. Indonesia declared its independence on August 17, 1945 following a brief wartime occupation by the Japanese and several hundred years as a Dutch colony. "The past cannot be erased, and will have to be acknowledged by each generation in turn," the king said in a joint statement. In the years after the independence proclamation "a painful separation followed that cost many lives... I would like to express my regret and apologise for excessive violence on the part of the Dutch in those years," he added. "I do so in the full realisation that the pain and sorrow of the families affected continue to be felt today." In 2013, the Dutch government publicly apologised to Indonesia for mass killings by its army in the 1940s war of independence, in the first general apology for all executions. But the apology Tuesday was a first by a Dutch monarch, according to two sources, including a senior Indonesian government official. The Dutch embassy in Jakarta declined to comment. Previously, the Dutch government announced compensation to the widows of those who died in mass killings. But not all have received funds, according to the Committee for Dutch Honour Debts.

**Royal gesture**



Britain's Queen Elizabeth II meets High Commissioner of Sri Lanka Saroja Sirisena (c) and her husband Sudath Talpahewa (R) during an audience at Buckingham Palace in London on Tuesday. —AFP

**US begins military pullout from 2 Afghanistan bases**

**US is keen to end its longest ever conflict and quit country in 14 months**

**Kabul, March 10:** American forces have started pulling out of two bases in Afghanistan, a US official said Tuesday, the day peace talks between Kabul and the Taliban were due to start despite widespread violence and a political crisis. The United States is keen to end its longest-ever conflict, and under the terms of a deal signed in Doha last month has said all foreign forces will quit Afghanistan within 14 months — provided the Taliban stick to their security commitments. Under the accord, the US is initially supposed to cut its troop presence from about 12,000 currently to 8,600 by mid-July, and close five of its roughly 20 bases across the country. Troops have started leaving one base in Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province in the

south, and another base in Herat in the west, a US official told on the condition of anonymity. Even with the drawdown, US forces retain "all the military means and authorities to accomplish our objectives", Colonel Sonny Leggett, spokesman for US Forces-Afghanistan, said Monday, referring to American counterterrorism operations and support for Afghan forces. Helmand, which along with neighbouring Kandahar province is considered a Taliban stronghold, is where US and British forces fought some of the bloodiest campaigns of the 18-year war. Omar Zwak, spokesman for Helmand's governor, said that "20 to 30" foreigners had left Lashkar Gah since the weekend. The initial drawdown comes as the Taliban, which see

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**MIKE POMPEO, Secretary of State**

themselves as having achieved "victory" over America, test the Pentagon's resolve to protect local partners by conducting dozens of low-level attacks against Afghan forces. The US has only responded to a few of these attacks. Under the terms of the withdrawal deal, the Taliban are supposed to tackle jihadists such as the Islamic State group and Al-Qaeda, as well as hold talks with the Afghan

government that were due to start Tuesday. But Kabul is in disarray and appears unable to present a unified front to negotiate with the Taliban. On Monday, President Ashraf Ghani was inaugurated for a second term following an election that was marred by fraud allegations while his rival, former chief executive Abdullah Abdullah, also declared himself winner and swore himself in as premier in a parallel ceremony. Washington has denounced Abdullah's self-inauguration, urging unity in Kabul ahead of negotiations with the Taliban. "Prioritising an inclusive government and unified Afghanistan is paramount for the future of the country and particularly for the cause of peace," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Monday.

Peace talks were supposed to start Tuesday but have been thrown into limbo by a dispute over the release of Taliban prisoners — something the insurgents have demanded as a prerequisite ahead of negotiations, but which Ghani has so far refused to do. Ghani was expected later Tuesday to announce a decree on the issue and reveal details of the negotiating team. A member of the Taliban's leadership council — the Quetta Shura — told that the insurgents had delivered a list of the 5,000 captives they wanted freed to the Afghan government. But he accused Kabul of acting in bad faith, alleging that "the government (planned) to release only those prisoners who are elderly, very ill, or those whose sentences have expired". —AFP

**Turkey FM: EU deal this month**

**Ankara, March 10:** Turkey hopes to reach a new agreement with Europe to deal with refugees in time for the next EU leaders' summit, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Tuesday. "If we reach an agreement by March 26 when there will be an EU leaders' summit, this issue will come on to the agenda of this meeting," Cavusoglu said. "We are ready for constructive work."

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— MEVLUT CAVUSOGLU, Foreign Minister

Erdoğan skipped the post-talks press conference in Brussels on Monday. "Clearly we do have our disagreements, but we have spoken plainly and we have spoken openly to each other," Von der Leyen, the head of the European Commission, said. Turkey hosts some four million refugees — most of them from Syria — and faces a fresh influx as the Syrian regime, backed by Russia and Iran, seeks to retake the last rebel stronghold of Idlib on the Turkish border. Europe has said it will consider taking 1,500 child refugees, but has focused on reinforcing Greece's borders. Although Turkey and Russia agreed a ceasefire for Idlib last week, previous peace deals have proved temporary and Ankara has called for greater assistance from its NATO allies. —AFP

**Court rejects Bibi's plea to delay trial**

**Jerusalem, March 10:** A Jerusalem district court on Tuesday rejected Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's request to delay the start of his corruption trial, ruling it would begin as planned next week. Netanyahu's lawyers had appealed for a delay, saying they needed more time to review evidence. State prosecutors responded that they oppose any delays and the court accepted their position. In overruling the request the presiding judge wrote that the first session on March 17 was a reading only and the defendant's response was not needed, therefore there was no justification for a delay. Netanyahu has been charged with fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes in connection to a series of scandals that include accepting expensive gifts from wealthy friends and offering to exchange favors with powerful media moguls. The long-ruling Israeli leader denies any wrongdoing and says he is the victim of a media-orchestrated witchhunt. His legal troubles stood at the center of last week's third inconclusive Israeli election in less than a year.

**Missing ex-FBI agent: Blame Iran**

**Washington, March 10:** A federal judge has held Iran responsible for the kidnapping of former FBI agent Robert Levinson, entering a default judgement against the regime on the 13th anniversary of his disappearance. The decision from US District Judge Timothy Kelly on Monday was a milestone moment in the family's lawsuit against Tehran, which featured wrenching testimony in Washington's federal court from each of Levinson's seven children. "It is really important to the family that people realize what their father, their husband, has been through and what they've been through," said David McGee, a lawyer for the family. "It is a terrible ordeal." In his 25-page ruling, Kelly found that Iran "in no uncertain terms" was responsible for Levinson's "hostage taking and torture" and entered a default judgement after the country declined to respond to the lawsuit. The family sought more than \$1.5 billion in damages. Most of that amount was in punitive damages. "He has been unable to see his children grow up, enjoy professional success, marry, and become parents themselves — as they have many times over," Kelly wrote in his judgment. "But they have not forgotten him, not by a long shot."



Robert Levinson

**● HIS DAUGHTERS** tied photographs of him to their bouquets on their wedding day, the judge said, and one named a son after him. Levinson disappeared on March 9, 2007, when he was scheduled to meet a source on the Iranian island of Kish.

Levinson was working independently on a private investigation. But a 2013 Associated Press investigation revealed that Levinson had in fact been sent on a mission by CIA analysts who had no authority to run such an operation. The family received proof-of-life photos and a video in late 2010 and early 2011, but his whereabouts and fate are not known. In November, the Iranian government unexpectedly responded to a United Nations query by saying that Levinson was the subject of an "open case" in Iranian Revolutionary Court. Though the development gave the family a burst of hope, Iran clarified that the "open case" was an investigation into his disappearance. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement on Monday that the US would continue working to free Levinson and other hostages held by Iran. —AP

**Biden hopes on continuing impetus in Michigan primary**

**Detroit, March 10:** Surging US presidential candidate Joe Biden has urged Michigan voters to help him bolster his lead over Bernie Sanders as the rivals made their final pitches hours before the battleground state holds its Democratic primary. The veteran politicians — Biden a moderate former vice president and Sanders a leftist senator calling for nothing less than a political revolution — are locked in a political duel to decide who faces President Donald Trump in the November election. Michigan is the top prize with the largest number of

**● MICHIGAN IS** the top prize with the largest number of delegates at stake among six states, and the candidates campaigned heavily here. **● BOTH LAWMAKERS** are touted as possible vice presidential picks for Biden. Michigan "could be the turning point" of the campaign, said Booker. delegates at stake among six states, and the candidates campaigned heavily here. While Sanders is desperate to right his listing ship with a strong showing,

Biden is riding high, having won 10 of 14 states that voted last Tuesday, and was hoping to continue the momentum. "Michigan, I'm counting on you in a big way!" Biden told a cheering crowd at a majority black high school in Detroit. Biden, 77, is flush with the endorsements of several high-profile former rivals in the Democratic race, including two prominent African-American senators: New Jersey's Cory Booker, who threw his support behind Biden early Monday, and Kamala Harris of California. Both lawmakers are touted

**MELANIA TRUMP CANCELS FUNDRAISER**

**Washington, March 10:** Melania Trump has cancelled a California fundraiser set for later this month. Stephanie Grisham, the first lady's spokeswoman, cited an unspecified "scheduling conflict" as the reason on Monday. The cancellation comes as organizations and groups around the country are scrapping large gatherings amid an outbreak of the new coronavirus. President Donald Trump's reelection campaign had been asking supporters to make a donation for a chance to meet the first lady in California. —AP

**COMPASSION | PLEA He's already had a 'historic' fall and has serious health issues**

**Weinstein lawyers seek mercy**

**New York, March 10:** With Harvey Weinstein facing sentencing this week, his lawyers have argued that the disgraced movie mogul deserves mercy in his New York City rape case because he's already suffered a "historic" fall from grace and is dealing with serious health issues. Weinstein's defense team on Monday asked a judge in court papers to consider a sentence of only five years, far short of the potential 29-year maximum term allowed by law. The papers argue Weinstein should get credit for supporting various charitable causes during his rise to one of Hollywood's most powerful producers. On the health front, the 67-year-old Weinstein is dealing with heart problems, ramifications of unsuccessful back surgery



A file photo of Harvey Weinstein leaving the courthouse during jury deliberations in his rape trial. —AP

stemming from a car crash last summer and a condition that requires shots in his eyes so he does not go blind, his lawyers have said. The filing came in

advance of Weinstein's sentencing on Wednesday for his conviction last month on one count of criminal sex act for forcibly performing oral

sex on a woman in 2006 and one count of third-degree rape for a 2013 attack on another woman. His lawyers had contended at trial that any sexual

**● WEINSTEIN'S DEFENSE** team on Monday asked a judge in court papers to consider a sentence of only five years, far short of the potential 29-year maximum term allowed by law. **● THE PAPERS** argue Weinstein should get credit for supporting various charitable causes during his rise to one of Hollywood's most powerful producers. contact was consensual. On the criminal sex act count, Weinstein faces a minimum of five years in prison and a maximum of 25 years in prison, while the third-degree rape count carries a maximum penalty of four years in prison. The judge could have the sentences run concurrently. —AP