



MEANWHILE
COUGHING POPE CANCELS PLANNED RETREAT

Pope Francis said he was cancelling a planned six-day spiritual retreat south of Rome after coming down with a "cold". The 83-year-old pontiff coughed a couple of times during his weekly Sunday appearance from a Vatican window in front of supporters. The cancellation of the retreat came as Italy battles Europe's worst outbreak of the new coronavirus.

TOP OF THE WORLD



Muhyiddin Yassin

MALAYSIA

Mahathir seeks House vote as new PM sworn in

Kuala Lumpur: Mahathir Mohamad called Sunday for an urgent sitting of Malaysia's Parliament to contest the appointment of a former ally as PM under a Malay-majority coalition following the collapse of Mahathir's multiracial reformist alliance. Muhyiddin Yassin was sworn in as the new leader at the palace Sunday. After a week of political turmoil, the king said Saturday that he believed Muhyiddin had the majority support of lawmakers and named him the new leader. But Mahathir's camp has contested that assertion, saying he has the backing of 114 lawmakers to return as premier for a third time, surpassing the 112 votes needed for a majority.

NEPAL

Oli to undergo his second kidney transplant

Kathmandu: Nepal Prime Minister K P Oli is set to undergo a kidney transplant for the second time in 12 years. Party spokesperson Narayan Shrestha announced that Oli would be admitted to the Tribhuvan University Teaching Hospital on Monday and undergo the operation on Wednesday. Oli, 69, had undergone a kidney transplant in New Delhi's Apollo Hospital 12 years ago. He has also been undergoing regular dialysis, at least once a week, for the past three months. He had further spent nearly two weeks in hospital in November.

EUROPE

Migrants head to Greece as Turkey opens floodgates

Kastanies: Greece placed its borders on maximum security footing on Sunday after hundreds of migrants used porous crossing points to enter the country from Turkey, with thousands behind them seeking entry after Ankara relaxed curbs on their movement. At least 500 people had arrived by sea on three Greek islands close to the Turkish coast within a few hours on Sunday morning, police said. Turkey said on Thursday it would no longer restrain hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers in its territory from reaching Europe despite a deal to do so reached with the EU in 2016.

U.S.-TALIBAN DEAL

Afghan peace agreement hits first snag over release of prisoners

Ghani says won't free thousands of Taliban prisoners; partial truce to continue with 'full ceasefire' goal

AGENCIES
KABUL, MARCH 1

AFGHANISTAN'S PRESIDENT said Sunday that he will not free thousands of Taliban prisoners ahead of all-Afghan power-sharing talks set for next week, publicly disagreeing with a timetable for a speedy prisoner release laid out just a day earlier in a US-Taliban peace agreement. President Ashraf Ghani's comments pointed to the first hitch in implementing the fragile deal, which is aimed at ending America's longest war after more than 18 years and getting rival Afghan factions to agree on their country's future.

Still, the US has said a planned US troop withdrawal over the next 14 months is linked to the Taliban's counter-terrorism performance, not to progress in intra-Afghan talks. The US-Taliban deal signed Saturday envisions the release of up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners by



Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani said the release of Taliban prisoners was not a promise the United States could make. AP

the Afghan government ahead of talks between Afghan factions meant to begin March 10 in the Norwegian capital of Oslo. The Taliban would release up to 1,000 prisoners.

Ghani told a news conference in the Afghan capital of Kabul on Sunday that this wasn't a promise the United States could make.

He said the release of prisoners was a decision for his government to take and that he wasn't ready to release prisoners before the start of negotiations.

"The request has been made by the United States for the release of prisoners and it can be part of the negotiations but it cannot be a precondition,"

EXPLAINED
Hitch a sign of the bumpy road ahead in govt-Taliban talks

WITH THE signing of the US-Taliban peace deal, NATO forces are set to leave Afghanistan over the next 14 months. But the next stage of the Afghan peace process is the talks between the Ghani-led government and the militant group. These talks are likely to involve difficult negotiations over a number of issues, especially as the Taliban have refused to recognise the government, which it terms a puppet of the West. The release of its prisoners is a key demand of the Taliban, but the Afghan government is likely to use this as leverage to secure their own interests — most importantly a lasting ceasefire.

Ghani said.

Aso-called "reduction in violence" period, which saw attacks plummet across Afghanistan and ran for the week preceding the signing of the accord, would continue, the Afghan President said.

"The reduction in violence will continue with a goal to reach

a full ceasefire," Ghani told a press conference.

"General (Scott) Miller has told Taliban to do so. It is expected (to continue)," he added, referring to the US commander in charge of foreign forces in Afghanistan.

A Taliban source did not immediately comment.

Sri Lanka's Parliament set to be dissolved, paving way for snap elections

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
COLOMBO, MARCH 1

SRI LANKAN President Gotabaya Rajapaksa is likely to dissolve the Parliament later on Sunday, paving the way for snap elections in the country months ahead of the schedule, a top minister said.

Gotabaya in December named his elder brother and former strongman Mahinda Rajapaksa as Prime Minister of the caretaker Cabinet until the general election in August 2020. He can now legally dissolve Parliament and call an election.

The President could issue the dismissal order on the Parliament Sunday night, the earliest he could force a fresh parliamentary poll. The current Parliament was appointed on September 1, 2015.

"Yes we will definitely look to dissolve, we were prevented from going for early polls due to the 19A mistake of the previous government," Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena told reporters.

The 19A amendment was a key reform pledge of the previous government headed by then president Maithripala Sirisena and PM Ranil Wickremesinghe.

It aims to curtail excessive powers of the presidency, leaving more power for the Parliament.

Gunawardena said Gotabaya, despite his clear win in the elections, was clamped by the 19A to call for a fresh election to have his own government.

"Previous presidents were able to dissolve the Parliament after a year," he said.

Political sources said the dissolution order could be issued Sunday midnight, making the way for the fresh polls by April end.

DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES

In South Carolina, Biden scores first win, adding new life to his candidacy

JONATHAN MARTIN & ALEXANDER BURNS
COLUMBIA, MARCH 1

JOE BIDEN scored a decisive victory in the South Carolina primary Saturday, reviving his listing campaign and establishing himself as the leading contender to slow Senator Bernie Sanders as the turbulent Democratic race turns to a slew of coast-to-coast contests Tuesday.

Propelled by an outpouring of support from South Carolina's African American voters, Biden easily overcame a late effort by Sanders to stage an upset. The victory in a state long seen as his firewall will vault Biden into Super Tuesday as the clear alternative to Sanders for establishment-aligned Democrats.

With almost 100% of the vote counted, Biden, the former vice president, had won just under 50% of the vote, well ahead of Sanders, who had 20%. Tom Steyer, the California billionaire, was a distant third, followed by Pete Buttigieg and Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts. The victory en-



Joe Biden with supporters at his South Carolina primary night rally in Columbia. Reuters

SOUTH CAROLINA RESULTS				
Candidate	Biden	Sanders	Buttigieg	Warren
Votes	255,662	105,070	43,484	37,285
Pct.	48.4%	19.9%	8.2%	7.1%

Source: NYT

abled Biden to significantly narrow Sanders' pledged delegate lead, but he did not appear poised

to overtake him. Biden, in an exuberant victory speech Saturday night, said vot-

ers faced a momentous choice in the coming days. Democrats, Biden argued, wanted results rather than revolution, improvements to the Affordable Care Act rather than a disruptive transformation of the health care system, and a candidate who would "take on the NRA and gun manufacturers and not protect them".

As much as the results here offered new life to Biden, the one-time front-runner, they dealt a perhaps fatal blow to two moderates, Buttigieg, the former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, and Senator Amy Klobuchar. Both had been hoping to overtake Biden as the candidate of the party's centre, but again proved unable to win nonwhite voters.

Perhaps even more consequentially, Biden's triumph here also increased pressure on Michael Bloomberg to best Biden in the 15 states and territories voting Tuesday — or consider exiting the race.

Steyer fell far short of the breakthrough his campaign believed was possible in South Carolina, and after the polls closed, he dropped out of the race. NYT

Trump: May not be excited by a crowd again after India

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
WASHINGTON, MARCH 1

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump has said he would "never be excited about a crowd again" after his visit to India where he addressed a rally of over 1,00,000 people.

During his maiden visit to India on February 24-25, President Trump and First Lady Melania were given a rousing welcome in the presence of more than one lakh people at the Motera stadium in Gujarat's Ahmedabad city.

Addressing a rally in South



Carolina on Saturday, the US President recalled the mega 'Namaste, Trump' event at the Motera stadium and said, "In India, I hate to say this to you,

"In India, I hate to say this to you, they actually have a 129,000-seat stadium. Did you see it? The place was packed, and they did better than most."

— DONALD TRUMP
U.S. PRESIDENT

they actually have 129,000-seat stadium. Did you see it? The place was packed, and they did better than most."

Trump also praised Prime

Minister Narendra Modi, saying he is a "great guy" and is "loved by people of India".

"We had an amazing thing. And I went in, and here's the problem. This is a big crowd and normally, I like talking about my crowd because I get the crowds like nobody. But, I just got back from 140 or 50 or 60,000 people and now I am coming here. What does this place hold, 15? It's hard to be enthused. You understand that?"

"I may never be excited again about a crowd after going to India," Trump added.



People photograph cherry blossoms in Nanjing, Jiangsu province, China. Reuters

Gatherings banned, travel restricted as coronavirus cases grow worldwide

STEVE HOLLAND & JULIA HARTE
WASHINGTON, MARCH 1

LEADERS IN Europe, the Middle East and the Americas rolled out bans on big gatherings and stricter travel restrictions as cases of the new coronavirus spread around the world.

The United States on Saturday reported its first death from the disease, a man in his 50s in Washington state, where officials said two of the state's three cases have links to a nursing home with dozens of residents showing disease symptoms.

Although most Americans face a low risk from the virus, more US deaths could be imminent following the nation's first, CNN quoted Vice President Mike Pence as saying.

Travellers from Italy and South Korea would face additional screening. Trump and top officials told a White House news briefing, warning Americans against travelling to coronavirus-affected regions in both countries.

Ecuador on Saturday reported its first case, in a woman who had traveled from Madrid, while Mexico reported four

CHINA TOLL 2,870

China reported 573 new confirmed coronavirus cases, up from 427 the previous day. The number of deaths stood at 35, taking the toll in mainland China to 2,870.

cases, all in people who had visited Italy.

As governments worldwide stepped up efforts to halt the spread of the virus, France announced a temporary ban on public gatherings with more than 5,000 people in confined spaces. It reported 16 new cases for a total of 73, and canceled a half-marathon of 40,000 runners scheduled for Sunday.

Switzerland said it is banning events expected to draw more than 1,000 people.

Tehran has ordered schools shut until Tuesday and extended the closure of universities and a ban on concerts and sports events for a week. An Iranian lawmaker has died from the disease along with more than 40 other Iranians, and several officials have tested positive for the virus. REUTERS

Turkey shoots down two Syrian warplanes in escalating offensive

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
ANKARA, MARCH 1

TURKEY SHOT down two Syrian warplanes on Sunday in an escalating offensive against the Damascus regime as Ankara pressured Europe over the conflict by opening its border for migrants to cross into the continent.

Following weeks of violence in the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib, Turkey confirmed a full military operation against Russian-backed Syrian forces after dozens of Turkish soldiers were killed last week in an airstrike blamed on Damascus.

Tensions have intensified between Russia and Turkey — who back opposing forces in the Syria's civil war — but Ankara has insisted it does not want to clash directly with Moscow.

"One anti-aircraft system that shot down one of our armed drones and two other anti-aircraft systems have been destroyed, and two SU-24 regime planes that were attacking our aircraft have been downed," Turkey's defence

The confrontation between the Russia-backed Syrian forces and NATO-member Turkey, which supports Syrian rebels, has prompted worries over a wider conflict

ministry said in a statement.

Syrian state media said Turkish forces "targeted" two of its planes over Idlib. A rebel group and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, both said the planes had been downed.

The situation in rebel-held Idlib was already volatile as the regime supported by Russian air power pressed an assault on the region in a bid to retake the last opposition enclave in a nine-year civil war.

The confrontation between the Russia-backed Syrian forces and NATO-member Turkey, which supports Syrian rebels, has prompted worries over a wider conflict and a migrant crisis in Europe similar to 2015.

UK's PM ANNOUNCES THAT HE AND HIS PARTNER, CARRIE SYMONDS, WERE EXPECTING A CHILD

For Boris Johnson, Britain's baby boom starts at 10 Downing Street

MARK LANDLER
LONDON, MARCH 1

OF ALL the glad tidings that Prime Minister Boris Johnson promised would flow from Brexit, one of the most far-fetched was a baby boom. But at least in his own case, Johnson has actually delivered on that pledge.

The 55-year-old prime minister and his partner, Carrie Symonds, 31, said on Saturday that they had become engaged and were expecting a child in early summer. A spokeswoman for the couple told the BBC they were

"very pleased" to share the news. Johnson will be the first prime minister since Tony Blair to have a child while living in No. 10 Downing St. Blair and his wife, Cherie, had a son, Leo, while there in 2000.

Johnson and Symonds were the first unmarried couple ever to move into the prime minister's residence. The child will be the first for Symonds, a former communications chief for Johnson's Conservative Party.

For the twice-married Johnson, whose private life is as untidy as his appearance, news that he is again becoming a father



Johnson and Symonds were the first unmarried couple ever to move into the prime minister's residence. Reuters

inspired a fit of good-natured humor on social media. With four children from his second marriage and possibly at least one from an extramarital relationship, the exact number of Johnson's progeny remains somewhat mysterious.

"Congratulations Boris Johnson on your 5th or 6th kid," said one wit on Twitter. "Congratulations to Boris Johnson on his 4th, 8th or 17th child," another chimed in.

During a radio interview in 2019, Johnson declined to say how many children he had. He also deflected a question about whether he and Symonds, with whom he

has been romantically linked since last year, planned to start a family.

But he waxed enthusiastically in another interview about the beneficial effects that leaving the European Union would have on Britain's birthrate. He predicted that Brexit would bring a surge in births similar to what he claimed happened when London hosted the Olympics in 2012, when he was the city's mayor.

"Cupid's darts will fly once we get Brexit done," he said in an interview with the Sunday Times of London last year. "Romance will bloom across the whole nation. There was one af-

ter the Olympics, as I correctly prophesied in a speech in 2012."

A report by the Office of National Statistics appears to cast doubt on the claim. Births in England and Wales fell 4.3% in 2013, the year after the Games.

The couple's news comes two weeks after a court approved a financial settlement formally ending Johnson's marriage to his second wife, Marina Wheeler. Sajid Javid, who was pushed out of his job as chancellor of the Exchequer by Johnson this month, was among the first to congratulate the couple. "Wonderful news," Javid wrote on Twitter. NYT