

NEWS IN brief

Malaysia's former first lady goes on trial

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's former first lady Rosmah Mansor, who allegedly bankrolled a luxurious lifestyle with kickbacks and stolen public money, went on trial yesterday for corruption for the first time since her husband lost power. Najib Razak suffered a shock election defeat in 2018 in large part due to claims he and his officials plundered billions of dollars from sovereign wealth fund 1MDB. Rosmah's first trial centres on allegations she received bribes linked to a government project.

Thousands flee flooding in NZ

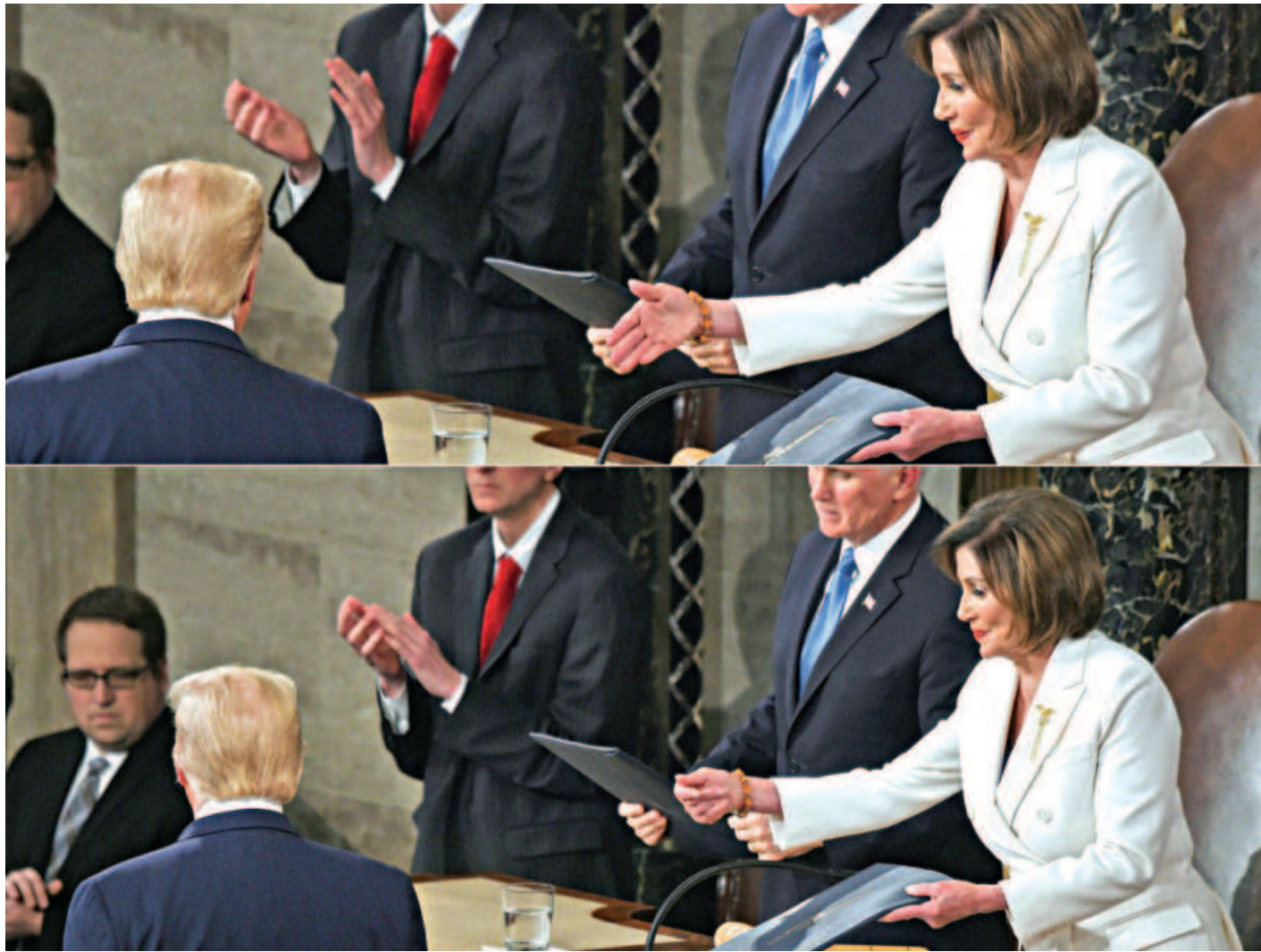
AFP, Wellington

Severe flooding forced thousands of residents in New Zealand's South Island to flee their homes yesterday and left hundreds of tourists stranded at the remote Milford Sound beauty spot. The Southland region declared a state of emergency after being deluged with more than 1,000 mm of rainfall in 60 hours, triggering landslides on major roads and causing rivers to burst their banks. Residents in the low-lying area were advised to grab medication, clothing and identification documents, then head to higher ground.

India to get S-400 missile by end-2021

REUTERS, Moscow

Russia will begin delivering S-400 surface-to-air missile systems to India by the end of 2021, agency RIA Novosti yesterday quoted a Russian official as saying. India signed a \$5 billion deal for S-400 missiles in 2018, drawing warnings from the United States that such an acquisition would trigger sanctions as part of a wider programme against Russia.



This combination of pictures shows the moment when US president Donald Trump ignored US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's hand extended for a handshake ahead of the State of the Union address at the US Capitol in Washington, DC, Tuesday. Trump was set to win acquittal from impeachment in the Senate on Wednesday, hours after his partisan State of the Union speech triggered unprecedented protests from Democrats in a seething display of US political divisions.

PHOTO: AFP

January, 2020 warmest January on record

Last month was the warmest January on record globally, while in Europe temperatures were a balmy three degrees Celsius above the average January from 1981 to 2010, the European Union's climate monitoring system reported Tuesday. Across a band of countries stretching from Norway to Russia, temperatures were an unprecedented 6C above the same 30-year benchmark, Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S) reported in a statement. The five last years have been the hottest on record, as was the ten-year period 2010-2019. 2019 -- the second warmest year -- was only 0.04C below 2016, when temperatures were boosted by a powerful El Nino, a periodic natural weather phenomenon over the Pacific Ocean. The global record last month was 0.03C above the preceding warmest January, also in 2016.

Avalanches kill 33 people in eastern Turkey

At least 33 people were killed in eastern Turkey yesterday by a second avalanche which buried a team of rescuers searching for people hit by the first the day before. The bodies of 33 rescue workers and civilians were discovered in Van province, where they had been helping dig out a minibus buried by snow late Tuesday, the government's disaster agency AFAD said. Five people aboard the vehicle were killed, taking the overall toll to 38. Eight people had been rescued alive from the first avalanche. Television images showed dozens of people scrambling up the mountains, digging through snow in blizzards to find those trapped under the snow. The number of those injured was 53 in total after the second avalanche hit after 0900 GMT between Bahcesaray and Catak districts, AFAD said.

Measles vaccine group targets 45m children



Vaccine group Gavi said on Tuesday it would help to inoculate up to 45 million children in countries in Asia and Africa over the next six months. Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, will work with governments and groups including the World Health Organization and UNICEF to target children under five years old, the age group most vulnerable to the disease. Cases have surged dramatically in recent years, with nearly 360,000 cases recorded globally in 2018 and almost 430,000 cases reported for 2019, according to provisional data. The vaccination campaigns will take place in Bangladesh, Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nepal, Somalia and South Sudan.

SOURCE: AFP

'Not looking to kill hundreds of thousands'

Trump renews vow to withdraw troops from Afghanistan

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump has renewed his vow to negotiate a troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, saying he had no desire to kill "hundreds of thousands" in unending fighting.

In one of his few foreign-policy points in a highly partisan State of the Union address to Congress, Trump offered his blessing for ongoing negotiations with Taliban militants.

"I am not looking to kill hundreds of thousands of people in Afghanistan, many of them totally innocent," Trump told the joint session of Congress.

"It is also not our function to serve other nations as a law enforcement agency. These are war-fighters, the best in the world, and they either want to fight to win or not fight at all," he said.

"We are working to finally end America's longest war and bring our troops back home."

Trump has long questioned the wisdom of keeping troops overseas and has described the war

in Afghanistan launched after the September 11, 2001 attacks as a drain on blood and treasure.

The Taliban has more recently proposed a limited reduction in violence, an easing of position after previously refusing any halt to attacks it sees as leverage.

Trump earlier spoke forcefully against Venezuela's leftist leader Nicolas Maduro, inviting his rival Juan Guaido to watch the speech from the gallery.

But his speech otherwise focused little on foreign policy, with no mention of North Korea, a year after Trump used the State of the Union to announce his second summit with the nuclear-armed state's leader, Kim Jong Un.

Trump only briefly mentioned his pro-Israel plan for the Middle East, which he unveiled last week next to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after more than a year of delay.

On Iran, Trump highlighted his pressure campaign against the clerical regime and boasted of the controversial strike he ordered last month that killed Iran's best-known general, Qassem Soleimani.



Iran will back armed groups

Khamenei assures Palestinians

REUTERS, Dubai

Iran will support Palestinian armed groups as much as it can, Iran's Supreme Leader said yesterday, urging Palestinians to confront a U.S. plan for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

"We believe that Palestinian armed organizations will stand and continue resistance and the Islamic Republic sees supporting Palestinian groups as its duty," Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said in a speech carried on his website.

"So it will support them however it can and as much as it can and this support is the desire of the Islamic system and the Iranian nation."

US President Donald Trump announced a U.S. plan last month which would set up a Palestinian state with strict conditions but allow Israel to take over long-contested Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank.

Palestinian leaders have rejected it as biased toward Israel. Trump's plan is to the detriment of America and Palestinians should confront the deal by forcing Israelis and Americans out through jihad, Khamenei said, according to his official website.

Tensions have spiked between Iran and the United States after top Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani was killed in a U.S. drone strike in Baghdad on Jan. 3, prompting the Islamic Republic to retaliate with a missile attack against a U.S. base in Iraq days later.



Rescue workers known as the White Helmets carry away the body of a victim found amidst the rubble of a building, hit during an air strike by pro-regime forces on the rebel-held town of Ariha in the northern countryside of Syria's Idlib province, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Back off from Turkish posts

Erdogan gives Syria ultimatum as regime forces press offensive against rebels in Idlib

AFP, Istanbul

Turkey yesterday gave Syria an ultimatum to pull its forces back from its military posts in the country's last rebel enclave following unprecedented clashes between their forces this week.

The escalation between Turkish and Syrian troops -- which saw more than 20 people killed in exchanges on Monday -- is testing the uneasy relations between Turkey and Russia, the key foreign brokers of the conflict.

"If the regime does not pull back, Turkey will be obliged to take matters into its own hands," Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told a meeting of his ruling party MPs in Ankara, giving Syria until the end of the month to comply.

But Syrian regime forces were continuing their offensive in northwestern Idlib province yesterday -- one which has killed 300 civilians since December and displaced some 520,000 people in one of the biggest upheavals of the nine-year war.



Syrian troops have seized more than 20 towns and villages from rebels and jihadists over the past 24 hours, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and state news agency SANA.

Erdogan said two of Turkey's 12 observation posts in Idlib, set up under a 2018 agreement with Russia, were now "behind the regime's lines".

The post at Morek was surrounded by Assad's forces in December, while another at Surman now lies within the regime's area of control.

Eight Turkish troops and civilians were killed on Monday by regime fire in Idlib and Turkey killed at least 13 Syrian government troops in response, according to monitors, in the bloodiest clashes since Ankara sent troops to Syria in 2016.

Erdogan called on Moscow, the key backer of President Bashar al-Assad's regime, to "better understand our sensitivities in Syria".



AYODHYA HOLY SITE

Modi finalises trust for Ram temple work

AFP, New Delhi

The construction of a grand Hindu temple at holy site bitterly contested with Muslims moved a step closer yesterday when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said a trust had been finalised to oversee the project.

The razing of a mosque at Ayodhya by a huge crowd of Hindu zealots almost 30 years ago unleashed some of the country's worst sectarian violence since independence, with more than 2,000 people killed.

After a decades-long legal battle, India's highest court ruled in November that the land in northern India should be managed by a trust to oversee the construction of a temple.

Modi announced in parliament, to applause and chants of "Hail Lord Ram" from party supporters, that the trust has now been set up.

"Let us all support the construction of a grand Ram Temple in Ayodhya," Modi said, referring to the deity it will be named after.

The temple construction had been a campaign pledge of Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) even before the mosque's demolition in 1992.

In 2002, when Modi was chief minister of Gujarat state, 59 Hindu activists died in a blaze on a train from Ayodhya, leading to riots that saw upwards of 1,000 people perish, mostly Muslims.

For critics, the temple construction forms part of Modi's alleged master plan to remould the country as a Hindu nation, something he denies.

NPR, NRC, CAA like 'black magic'

Says Mamata Banerjee

NDTV ONLINE

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Tuesday called BJP a "party of Dussasanas" while a BJP MP dubbed the TMC government as "shikhandis", as they invoked the epic Mahabharata in the political fight over the amended citizenship law.

Alleging that the BJP was trying to forcibly implement the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the National Population Register (NPR), Banerjee said these steps are like "black magic" and she would stop this "anyhow".

"The NPR, NRC and CAA are like black magic", she said, and urged the people of the country to unite to save the nation.

"We (TMC) are not a party of Dussasanas like the BJP. They are the off-springs of Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq and people must unite to save the country from them," Banerjee said while speaking at a public rally at Ranaghat in Nadia district.

Notorious Dussasana was the brother of Kaurava prince Duryodhana in the Mahabharata while Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq was the Sultan of Delhi from 1325-1351 and known for his eccentric decisions.

Banerjee also wondered whether the PM Modi government would throw her out of the country because she does not have her mother's birth certificate.

Melting permafrost to worsen crisis

Warn scientists, say it may release record amount of stored CO2

AFP, Paris

Permafrost in Canada, Alaska and Siberia is abruptly crumbling in ways that could release large stores of greenhouse gases more quickly than anticipated, researchers have warned.

Scientists have long fretted that climate change -- which has heated Arctic and subarctic regions at double the global rate -- will release planet-warming CO2 and methane that has remained safely locked inside Earth's frozen landscapes for millennia.

It was assumed this process would be gradual, leaving humanity time to draw down carbon emissions enough to prevent permafrost thaw from tipping into a self-perpetuating vicious circle of ice melt and global warming.

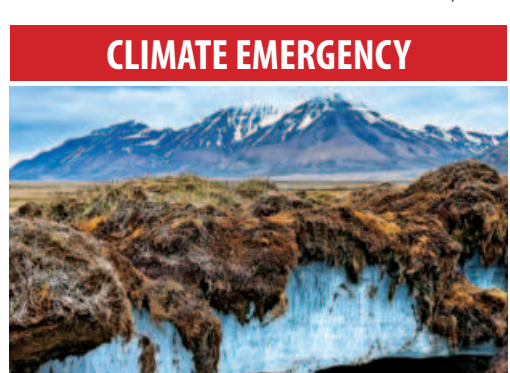
But a study published on Monday in Nature Geoscience says projections of how much carbon would be released by this kind of slow-and-steady thawing overlook a less well-known process whereby certain types of icy terrain disintegrate suddenly -- sometimes within days.

Permafrost contains rocks, soil, sand and pockets of pure ground ice. Its rich carbon content is the remains of life that once flourished in the Arctic, including plants, animals and

microbes.

This matter -- which never fully decomposed -- has been frozen for thousands of years.

It stretches across an area nearly as big as Canada and the United States combined, and



CLIMATE EMERGENCY

holds about 1,500 billion tonnes or carbon -- twice as much as in the atmosphere and three times the amount humanity has emitted since the start of industrialisation.

Some of this once rock-solid ground has begun to soften, upending indigenous communities and threatening industrial infrastructure across the sub-Arctic region,

especially in Russia.

In a special report published in September, the UN's scientific advisory body for climate change, the IPCC, looked at two scenarios.

If humanity manages -- against all odds -- to cap global warming at under 2C, the cornerstone goal of the 2015 Paris climate treaty, "permafrost area shows a decrease of 24 percent by 2100", it concluded.

At the other extreme, if fossil fuel emissions continue to grow over the next 50 years -- arguably an equally unlikely prospect -- up to 70 percent of permafrost could disappear, the IPCC said.

"We estimate that abrupt permafrost thawing -- in lowland lakes and wetlands, together with that in upland hills -- could release 60 to 100 billion tonnes of carbon by 2300," lead author Merritt Turetsky, head of the Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research in Boulder, noted in a comment also published by Nature.

One tonne of carbon is equivalent to 3.67 tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO2), which means this would be equivalent to about eight years of global emissions at current rates.

"This is in addition to the 200 billion tonnes of carbon expected to be released in other regions that will thaw gradually," she said.