

NEWSIN
brief

8 killed, 40 hurt in
Kazakhstan clashes

AFP, Nur-Sultan

Eight people have been killed, dozens hurt and property burned during clashes in southern Kazakhstan, prompting concern Saturday from authorities who portray the country as a beacon of stability. Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev held an emergency government session yesterday to tackle the violence Friday in an ethnically-mixed pocket of the Jambyl region, near the border with Kyrgyzstan. A commission of inquiry was also set up.

Cyclone Damien
batters Australia

AFP, Sydney

Tropical cyclone Damien lashed northwestern Australia's resource-rich Pilbara region yesterday, downing trees and forcing locals to heed a code red emergency warning and hunker down indoors. The category three storm brought winds of 195 kilometres per hour (121 miles per hour), sending debris into the air, knocking over trees and -- in a few instances -- ripping roofs off sheds and other outbuildings. There were no immediate reports of serious damage to homes or businesses.

Cracker explosion
at Indian rally kills 2

NDTV ONLINE

Two people were killed and over 14 injured in a firecracker explosion during a religious procession in Punjab on Saturday, police said. The incident occurred during a "Nagar Kirtan" religious procession near Pahu village in Tarn Taran district. Police said sparks arising from crackers being burst during the event landed on a tractor trolley that was carrying a huge pile of fireworks, causing the explosion. Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh asked the authorities to conduct a "thorough inquiry" to ensure justice for the victims.



The young sister of Badr Nafila, 19, who died after reportedly being shot by Israeli forces in the neck in the midst of confrontations near the northern West Bank city of Tulkarem , reacts during his funeral yesterday. The fatality brings to five the number killed in the occupied West Bank and Jerusalem since US President Donald Trump angered the Palestinians with his plan released last week.

PHOTO:
AFP

A campaign of revenge?

Trump defends action as impeachment witnesses lose their jobs

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump on Friday fired two of the highest profile witnesses in his impeachment probe, sparking accusations that he is on a campaign of revenge.

Trump recalled his ambassador to the European Union, Gordon Sondland, just hours after Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman, a decorated soldier who worked at the National Security Council, was ordered out of the White House.

The firings came two days after the Republican-majority Senate acquitted Trump of charges that he abused his office and one day after he gave a victory speech branding his opponents as "evil."

Sondland, a political appointee who got his post after donating \$1 million to Trump's inauguration, said in a brief statement, "I was advised today that the president intends to recall me effective immediately."

The ouster of Vindman, a respected officer who was wounded in Iraq, was even more abrupt, when he was ordered out of his NSC offices at the White House.

He was "escorted out of the White House where he has dutifully served his country and his president," his lawyer David Pressman said in a statement.

"Vindman was asked to leave for telling the truth," Pressman said. Vindman's twin brother Yevgeny,



Gordon Sondland



Alexander Vindman

also a lieutenant colonel who worked as an attorney in the NSC, was fired simultaneously, US media reported.

Trump has described the impeachment process as a hoax, denying there was anything wrong in his push for Ukraine to open a politically embarrassing investigation into Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden's family.

Trump yesterday defended his decision to fire Vindman saying

Vindman was present during a now famous July 25 phone call during which Trump asked Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to open an investigation into his political rival Joe Biden.

Subpoenaed by Congress to testify at the House impeachment hearings, the Ukrainian-born Vindman, who received a Purple Heart for wounds suffered in Iraq, said Trump's actions were

"improper."

That testimony helped build the case leading to Trump becoming only the third president ever impeached by Congress.

Trump attacked Vindman in a tweet yesterday.

"Fake News @CNN & MSDNC keep talking about 'Lt. Col.' Vindman as though I should think only how wonderful he was," Trump wrote, apparently referring to news outlet MSNBC.

"Actually, I don't know him, never spoke to him, or met him (I don't believe!) but, he was very insubordinate, reported contents of my 'perfect' calls incorrectly."

"In other words, 'OUT.'"

Sondland told lawmakers he followed the president's orders in seeking a "quid pro quo" deal for Ukraine to investigate Biden in exchange for getting Zelensky a coveted White House visit.

Sondland said Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani led the effort at Trump's direction to pressure Zelensky for the investigation and that top officials in the White House and State Department knew about it.

That testimony helped build the case leading to Trump becoming only the third president ever impeached by Congress, before his acquittal this week.

Iran should increase military
might to prevent war: Khamenei

REUTERS, Dubai

Iran should increase its military might to prevent a war, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei told a gathering of air force commanders yesterday, dismissing the US sanctions on the country as "criminal act".

"We should be strong to prevent any war against the county. Being weak will encourage our enemies to attack Iran," Khamenei, Iran's top authority, said according to state news agency IRNA.

The Islamic Republic has vowed to increase its military strength despite mounting pressure from Western countries to curtail its military capabilities, including its ballistic missile programme.

Tensions between Tehran and Washington have spiked since 2018 when US President Donald Trump abandoned a 2015 pact between Iran and world powers under which Tehran accepted curbs to its nuclear



programme in return for lifting sanctions.

"Since the revolution their aim was to stop us from having a strong military and a strong air force ... but look at us now. We even build planes. We have transformed their pressure to opportunity," Khamenei said, according to state TV.

Iran is marking the 41st anniversary of the Islamic revolution, which toppled the US-backed Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1979.

Washington has reimposed crippling sanctions aimed at halting all Iranian oil exports, saying it seeks to force Iran to negotiate to reach a wider deal.

Khamenei, who dismissed the U.S. sanctions as a "criminal act", has banned Iranian officials from holding talks unless the United States returns to the deal and lifts all sanctions. He said Iran should distance its economy from dependency on oil exports.

Iran and the United States stormed to the edge of a war in early January when Tehran's most prominent general, Qassem Soleimani, was killed in a US drone strike on his convoy in Baghdad.

Tehran responded by launching missile attacks on US targets in Iraq.

Iranian television said 80 "American terrorists" had been killed and US helicopters and military equipment damaged, without providing any evidence, Washington denied that there were any fatalities.



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi (R) shakes hands with Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa prior to a meeting in New Delhi, yesterday. Rajapaksa is on his four-day state visit to India from February 7.

PHOTO: AFP

Hopefuls fan out across New Hampshire

AFP, Manchester

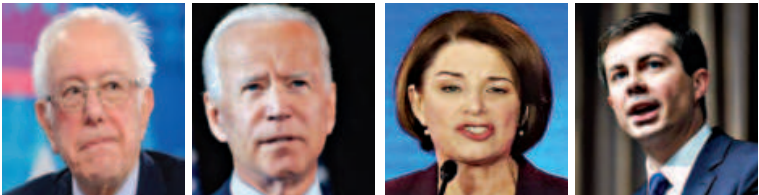
Democratic hopefuls fanned out across snowy New Hampshire yesterday campaigning for the state's primary, stop two on the road to picking a challenger to President Donald Trump in November.

The burst of glad-handing ahead of Tuesday's vote in the small, predominantly white northeast state came with leftist Senator Bernie Sanders and 38-year-old moderate Pete Buttigieg having emerged in a dead heat atop the field in last week's messy Iowa caucus.

And in line with their position as frontrunners, both came under sustained attack from their rivals at a feisty debate on Friday night.

Sanders, 78, was challenged over his age and record on guns, while Buttigieg -- the former mayor of a midwest town of 100,000 -- was depicted as too young and inexperienced to be the party's choice to take on Trump and deny him a second term.

2020 DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL RACE



Sanders

Biden

Klobuchar

Buttigieg

When it was all over, none of the seven men and women who took to the stage was seen as having scored a knockout punch or made any serious mistake.

Sanders, a veteran senator calling for "political revolution," found himself in the firing line from former vice president and fellow septuagenarian Joe Biden, who branded his policies too radical to unite Americans.

The 77-year-old Biden, fighting to keep his White House hopes alive after finishing an unnerving fourth in Iowa, insisted that liberal policies like Sanders's flagship universal health care

plan would be too divisive, expensive and difficult to get through Congress.

Biden performed more aggressively than in previous showings, seizing a chance to argue that today's global tensions required an experienced statesman to guide the nation out of a dark period.

Despite the Iowa setback, he also made plain he still views himself as best-placed to mount a centrist challenge to the Republican Trump, who this week survived an impeachment trial that did little to dent his electoral support.

But Biden all but conceded defeat in New Hampshire.

"I took a hit in Iowa, and I'll probably take one here," Biden said. He noted that in 2016, Sanders, who represents neighboring Vermont, won the New Hampshire primary by 20 points.

Also onstage in New Hampshire were Senator Elizabeth Warren, entrepreneur Andrew Yang and billionaire activist Tom Steyer.

Klobuchar, a pragmatist from Minnesota, put in a forceful performance as she voiced her opposition to Sanders and Warren, arguing their liberal plans would only divide voters.

"Truthfully, Donald Trump's worst nightmare is a candidate that will bring people in from the middle," she said.

After New Hampshire, the candidates turn to Nevada on February 22, South Carolina on February 29 and then Super Tuesday on March 3, when 14 states vote.

Fear can be more harmful
than coronavirus

Singapore PM says after run on shops, panic

REUTERS, Singapore

Fear can do more harm than the spreading coronavirus, Singapore's prime minister said on Saturday, a day after the city-state raised its alert level, prompting residents to clear out supermarket shelves of rice, noodles and toilet paper.

Singapore raised its response to "orange" - the same as during the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak and the 2009 H1N1 influenza, which indicates the virus is severe and passes easily between persons.

"There is no need to panic. We are not locking down the city or confining everybody to stay at home," Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said.

"We have ample supplies, so there is no need to stock up with instant noodles, tinned food, or toilet paper, as some people did yesterday."

The city-state has 33 coronavirus infections, with some cases not linked

to travel to China, where more than 700 people died from the virus.

If cases kept growing and the fatality rate stayed low, the government may encourage those with mild symptoms to rest at home instead of going to hospital, which would allow healthcare workers to focus on the most vulnerable patients, Lee said.

While the epidemic began in Wuhan in China, it has been spreading rapidly in other countries and sparking wider precautionary measures.

French health officials said on Saturday that five British nationals including a child had been diagnosed with the coronavirus in France, after staying in the same ski chalet with a person who had been in Singapore.

Britain has included the city-state in a list of countries from which returning travellers who developed symptoms should self-isolate, while Kuwait has asked its citizens not to travel to Singapore.

