

Priyanka Gandhi moves out of govt bungalow before deadline

Senior Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra yesterday vacated her official bungalow at Delhi's posh Lodhi Estate area before the deadline specified in a July 1 eviction order. The central government, in the notice, had asked her to vacate the sprawling premises by August 1 or face monetary penalty. Priyanka, the daughter of Congress president Sonia Gandhi and a general secretary in the party, will stay in a Gurgaon penthouse for a few days before moving into her new house in central Delhi, news agency PTI quoted sources as saying. Earlier this month, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs had asked her to move out of the bungalow allotted to her in 1997 as she no longer had Special Protection Group security.

UMNO quits as Malaysia's ruling coalition stumbles

The biggest party in Malaysia's ruling coalition yesterday said it will withdraw from a political alliance with the prime minister but will continue to support the government, potentially undermining the stability of his administration. The move by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party comes two days after former premier Najib Razak, a party leader, was sentenced to 12 years in jail for corruption in a case linked to the multi-billion dollar scandal at state fund 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB). UMNO makes up the largest bloc of lawmakers in Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's coalition and its support is crucial for the survival of the government, which has a two-seat majority in parliament.

Ashley Judd wins appeal in Weinstein harassment case



A US court of appeals on Wednesday ruled that actress Ashley Judd has the right to pursue her sexual harassment lawsuit against disgraced Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, overturning a lower court's decision. The three-judge panel on the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals found that Weinstein, who is in prison, held power over the actress and her career when he invited her to his room in a luxury Los Angeles hotel in the mid-1990s. Judd was one of the first women to come forward with sexual harassment claims against Weinstein, and sued him in April 2018 over the incident at his Beverly Hills hotel where she met with him to discuss potential film roles. She alleges that after she rebuffed his advances, Weinstein defamed her and damaged her career by discouraging "Lord of the Rings" director Peter Jackson from giving her a role, claiming she was a "nightmare" to work with.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



Federal law enforcement officers fire tear gas at demonstrators during a night of protest against racial injustice, police brutality and the deployment of federal troops to US cities in Portland, Oregon, on Wednesday. President Donald Trump's administration, without specifying time-frame, on Wednesday agreed to a deal to defuse weeks of clashes in Portland with the withdrawal of federal forces whose presence enraged protesters.

PHOTO: AFP

Pandemic-hit hajj 'safest ever'

AFP, Makkah

This year's downsized hajj may prove to be the safest ever despite the ever-present threat posed by the novel coronavirus.

In past years pilgrims have faced a host of viral illnesses, with some falling sick, but a raft of measures are in place for the relatively modest number allowed to attend this year.

The hajj is usually attended by upwards of two million Muslims, who converge on the Saudi city Makkah for one of the world's biggest annual gatherings.

That poses enormous health and logistical challenges.

In the past, pilgrims returning home have developed respiratory diseases after mingling with large crowds and staying in cramped pilgrim camps where social distancing was unheard of.

Just 10,000 Muslims, all resident in the kingdom, are being allowed to perform the hajj -- 0.4 percent of last year's 2.5 million attendees from across the globe.

But despite the pandemic, many pilgrims said they felt safer joining a limited number of fellow faithful for the hajj as the risk of both infection and logistical upsets was limited.

A stampede in 2015 that killed up to 2,300 worshippers was one of a series of deadly incidents that had sparked criticism of how the pilgrimage was managed.

But the scene on Wednesday was a vast contrast to that: mask-clad pilgrims performed the "tawaf", a ritual walk around the Kaaba, in small groups, following carefully spaced routes marked on the white marble floor.

Attendees were given elaborate amenity kits that included sterilised pebbles for the ritual Stoning of the Devil, disinfectant, masks and a prayer rug, according to the hajj ministry.

80m kids poisoned by lead

UN says 'previously unknown' health crisis more acute in South Asia

AFP, Paris

Up to 800 million children around the world are being poisoned by lead from water and air pollution, the United Nations warned yesterday in a special report on the "massive and previously unknown" health crisis.

One out of every three children is estimated to have levels of lead -- a potent neurotoxin -- in their blood that require immediate action to prevent long-lasting damage, the UN's children's fund said.

"With few early symptoms, lead silently wreaks havoc on children's health and development, with possibly fatal consequences," said Henrietta Fore, UNICEF executive director.

"Knowing how widespread lead pollution is -- and understanding the destruction it causes to individual lives and communities -- must inspire urgent action to protect children once and for all."

Childhood lead exposure has been linked to a range of behavioural



problems, as well as kidney damage and cardiovascular conditions later in life.

The problem, which occurs overwhelmingly in South Asia, is estimated to cost low- and middle-income countries almost \$1 trillion over the children's lifetimes.

Lead pollution comes from a variety of sources, including open-air furnaces, paint and petrol. Lead piping in many countries also produces dangerous levels of the chemical in drinking water supplies.

The UN report said a leading source of the toxin was un-recycled or poorly disposed-of car batteries. In countries where child lead poisoning is most prevalent, the number of vehicles on the road has doubled since 2000.

The analysis of childhood lead exposure was compiled by the Institute of Health Metrics Evaluation and was partly funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

It found that while blood lead levels among children in richer countries had declined over the years, in poorer nations the problem had increased drastically.

"The good news is that lead can be recycled safely without exposing workers, their children, and surrounding neighbourhoods," said Richard Fuller, president of Pure Earth, a charity that co-lead the study.

"People can be educated about the dangers of lead and empowered to protect themselves and their children."

He said the economic and social returns on investing in reducing lead pollution could be "enormous".

"Improved health, increased productivity, higher IQs, less violence, and brighter futures for millions of children across the planet," said Fuller.

Arrests, disqualifications fuel purge fears in HK

AFP, Hong Kong

Leading Hong Kong democracy campaigners were disqualified yesterday from upcoming elections after four student activists were arrested for social media posts, sparking warnings of a new "terror" under authoritarian China.

The moves were the latest blows against the semi-autonomous city's democracy movement, which has been under sustained attack from China's Communist Party rulers.

China imposed a national security law last month on Hong Kong outlawing subversion, which it warned was a "sword" hanging over the head of democracy protesters.

In some of the most significant developments since the law was imposed, 12 democracy activists were disqualified yesterday from legislative elections due to be held in September.

"Beijing shows a total disregard for the will of the Hongkongers, tramples upon the city's... autonomy," Joshua Wong, one of Hong Kong's highest-profile activists who was among those disqualified, wrote in a tweet. Wong described the move as "the biggest-ever crackdown" on the city's pro-democracy movement.

In a statement Hong Kong's government listed political views that required disqualification -- including criticising Beijing's new security law, campaigning to win a legislation-blocking majority and refusing to recognise China's sovereignty.

Chris Patten, Britain's last colonial governor in Hong Kong, accused Beijing of carrying out "an outrageous political purge". "It is obviously now illegal to believe in democracy... This is the sort of behaviour that you would expect in a police state," he added.

Tech giants 'too powerful'

Says US antitrust panel chair as lawmakers accuse Facebook, Google, Amazon, Apple CEOs of crushing rivals to boost profits

AGENCIES

Amazon, Apple, Google and Facebook are too powerful and will likely emerge from the coronavirus pandemic even stronger, the head of a US congressional antitrust committee said Wednesday.

"Simply put, they have too much power," House Judiciary Antitrust subcommittee chair David Cicilline said while opening an unprecedented hearing featuring the CEOs of the four giants.

"Whether it's through self-preferencing, predatory pricing, or requiring users to buy additional products, the dominant platforms have wielded their power in destructive, harmful ways in order to expand," the Democrat from Rhode Island said.

Google and Facebook took particularly sharp jabs for alleged abuse of their market power from Democrats and Republicans on Wednesday in a much-anticipated congressional hearing that put four of America's most prominent tech CEOs



in the hot seat.

The chairman of the US House of Representatives antitrust panel holding the hearing said afterwards that the four CEOs had acknowledged concerning behavior.

"What we heard from witnesses at the hearing confirmed the evidence that we have collected over the last year," Cicilline, a Democrat, told Reuters.

Facebook Inc's Mark Zuckerberg, Amazon.com Inc's Jeff Bezos, Google owner Alphabet Inc's Sundar Pichai and Apple Inc's Tim Cook - whose companies have a combined market value of about \$5 trillion - parried a range of accusations that they crippled

smaller rivals in their quest for market share.

The videoconference hearing was the first time the four CEOs have appeared together before lawmakers.

Though it was Bezos' first congressional testimony, he appeared the least fazed. Cook drew fewer barbed questions than Bezos and handled them efficiently. Zuckerberg suffered the most damage, stumbling at times when confronted with internal emails.

Pichai, CEO of both Alphabet and Google, took the most heat from conservatives on the panel and looked the worse for it, as he repeatedly told lawmakers he would be happy to look into various situations and get back to them.

A detailed report with antitrust allegations against the four tech platforms and recommendations on how to tame their market power could be released by late summer or early fall by the committee, senior committee aides said.



Rescue workers search near vehicles in a parking lot and lower sections of apartment buildings flooded due to heavy rain in Daejeon, South Korea yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Nasa's life-seeking rover launches for Mars

AFP, Cape Canaveral

Nasa's latest Mars rover Perseverance launched yesterday on an astrobiology mission to look for signs of ancient microbial life -- and to fly a helicopter-drone on another world for the first time.

A United Launch Alliance Atlas V rocket took off on schedule at 7:50 am (1150 GMT) from Cape Canaveral, Florida, despite a 4.2-magnitude earthquake that rattled Nasa's Jet Propulsion laboratory in California that manages the mission minutes earlier.

The first stage separation took place a few minutes later and Perseverance prepared for a second burn to put it on a trajectory toward Mars.

If all goes to plan, Perseverance will reach the Red Planet on February 18, 2021, becoming the fifth rover to complete the voyage since 1997.

All so far have been American. China launched its first Mars rover last week, which should arrive by May 2021.

By next year, Mars could therefore have three active rovers, including Nasa's Curiosity, which has traversed 23 kilometers (14 miles) of the Red Planet since it landed in 2012.

Perseverance is an improved version of Curiosity.

It is faster, with a tougher set of six wheels, has more computing power, and can



autonomously navigate 200 meters per day.

About the size of a small SUV, it weighs a metric ton, has 19 cameras, and two microphones -- which scientists hope will be the first to record sound on Mars.

It has a two-meter-long robotic arm, and is powered by a small nuclear battery.

Once on the surface, Nasa will deploy the Ingenuity Mars Helicopter -- a 1.8 kilogram (four pound) aircraft that will attempt to fly in an atmosphere that is only one percent the density of Earth's.

The idea is to lay down a proof of concept that could one day revolutionize planetary exploration, since rovers can only cover a few dozen kilometers in their whole lifespans



and are vulnerable to sand dunes and other obstacles higher than 40 centimeters (15 inches).

Perseverance's primary mission is to scour the planet for evidence of ancient life forms.

Scientists believe that more than three billion years ago the planet was much warmer than today and was covered in rivers and lakes, conditions which could have led to simple microbial life.

The reasons for it becoming the cold, barren world we know today aren't fully known.

Another first: Perseverance's drill will collect around 30 intact rock cores and place them in test tubes, to be collected by a future joint US-European mission.

US fuelling new Cold War as election nears: China

REUTERS, London

China yesterday accused the United States of stoking a new Cold War because certain politicians were searching for a scapegoat to bolster support ahead of the US presidential election in November.

US President Donald Trump identifies China as the West's main rival, and has accused President Xi Jinping of taking advantage over trade and not telling the truth over the novel coronavirus outbreak, which Trump calls the "China plague".

Asked if he saw a new Cold War, China's ambassador to London, Liu Xiaomeng, said the United States had started a trade war with China and that there would be no winner from such an approach.

"It is not China that has become assertive. It's the other side of the Pacific Ocean who want to start new Cold War on China, so we have to make response to that," Liu told reporters. "We have no interest in any Cold War, we have no interest in any war."

"We have all seen what is happening in the United States, they tried to scapegoat China, they want to blame China for their problems," he said. "We all know this is an

election year."

The envoy did not mention Trump or Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden by name, but he said some US politicians were doing and saying anything to get elected.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said earlier this month that the United States wanted to build a global coalition to counter China as he accused Beijing of exploiting the coronavirus pandemic to further its own interests.

After British Prime Minister Boris Johnson slapped a ban on Huawei's participation in 5G networks, Liu bluntly warned that the United Kingdom it had no future if it tried to decouple from the Communist state.

"It is hard to image a 'Global Britain' that bypasses or excludes China, decoupling from China means decoupling from opportunities, decoupling from growth and decoupling from the future," Liu said.

He said London had poisoned relations by meddling in its former colony of Hong Kong and cautioned that the United Kingdom would "pay the price" if it wanted to treat China as a hostile state.