



Japan emperor to abdicate on April 30, 2019

Japan's Emperor Akihito will step down on April 30, 2019, the prime minister announced yesterday, the first retirement in more than two centuries in the world's oldest imperial family. Shinzo Abe said he was "deeply moved" at the "smooth decision" taken at a special meeting of the Imperial Council to decide on the date for the popular 83-year-old to step down for health reasons. Akihito's eldest son, 57-year-old Crown Prince Naruhito, is expected to ascend the Chrysanthemum Throne the next day.

Myanmar, China hail ties

Suu Kyi meets Xi amid global backlash over Rohingya crisis

Chinese President Xi Jinping and Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday touted their nations' close ties as Myanmar's civilian leader, under fire over the Rohingya refugee crisis, visited Beijing. Suu Kyi was in friendly territory in China and neither she nor Xi publicly mentioned the plight of Myanmar's Muslim minority group as they met in the Chinese capital. "The (Communist) Party and the Chinese government will, as in the past, continue their policy of friendship towards Myanmar," Xi told Suu Kyi during their meeting, according to the Xinhua news agency. Suu Kyi, who took office in 2015 after five decades of military dictatorship, gave a speech later during a meeting of world parties hosted by the Chinese Communist Party. "China and Myanmar are committed to creating closer ties," she said, adding that the founding goals of the CCP -- "happiness for the Chinese people and rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" -- and those of her National League for Democracy party

are "not that dissimilar". The Nobel Peace Prize winner was adored by the global human rights community but has since been ostracised for failing to speak up in defence of the Rohingya in her Buddhist-majority country. The UN and US say the Rohingya are victims of an ethnic cleansing campaign by Myanmar's military that has sent 620,000 of them fleeing into Bangladesh since late August. Rohingya refugees have recounted widespread cases of rape, murder and arson at the hands of Myanmar's military and Buddhist mobs. Myanmar's army insists its crackdown has been proportionate and targeted only at Rohingya rebels. "Although Myanmar is not yet among the rich and powerful nations of the world, we are ambitious," Suu



Kyi said at the CCP gathering. "Our ambition is to become a responsible member of the international community, willing and able to contribute to its peace and friendship throughout the world." Myanmar has received unflinching support from China, which has invested billions on ports, gas and oil in Rakhine -- including a \$2.45 billion pipeline that opened in April. Xi met with Myanmar's powerful army chief Min Aung Hlaing in Beijing last week. Last month, strong Chinese opposition forced the UN Security Council to drop plans to adopt a resolution demanding an end to the violence. Beijing has presented its own proposal to resolve the crisis with a ceasefire, refugee repatriation and poverty alleviation. Bangladesh and Myanmar have reached a deal to begin returning refugees in two months. Arriving in Bangladesh from Myanmar Thursday, Pope Francis urged the world to take "decisive measures" to resolve the crisis, though he avoided using the term "Rohingya" when he was in Myanmar.

GLOBAL DISASTERS AND CRISES

UN calls for record \$22.5b in aid

The United Nations yesterday appealed for a record \$22.5 billion (18.9 billion euros) to provide aid in 2018 to soaring numbers of people slammed by conflicts and disasters around the world. The global appeal by UN agencies and other humanitarian organisations aims to raise funds to help the some 91 million most vulnerable of the nearly 136 million people expected to need aid across 26 countries next year. The number of people in need of international assistance worldwide has thus risen more than five percent from last year's estimate. "More people than ever before will need our assistance," UN humanitarian chief Mark Lowcock said in a statement launching the appeal. Drought, floods and other weather-related catastrophes are expected to continue racking up humanitarian needs. But Lowcock stressed that "conflict, in particular protracted crises, will continue to be the main driver of need in 2018." A full \$7.66 billion is needed to address the staggering needs created by Syria's brutal conflict alone -- more than a third of the requested amount of funds next year. War-torn Yemen comes next on the list, with yesterday's appeal urging donors to cough up \$2.5 billion to provide desperately needed assistance to the most vulnerable people in the country.

NEWS IN brief

Prince Harry, Meghan on first royal visit

Prince Harry and his American actress fiancée Meghan Markle were welcomed by hundreds of people yesterday on their first royal visit as a couple since announcing their engagement this week. Harry and Meghan, who broke the news of their forthcoming marriage on Monday, went on a walk-about in the central English city of Nottingham, spending more than 20 minutes meeting enthusiastic well-wishers.



Maldives quietly inks trade deal with China

Setting off fresh concerns over China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean, the Maldives government has signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Beijing without taking the country's opposition, or even the people, into confidence. According to the Maldives opposition, the archipelago already owes almost 70% of its debt to China.

Tax for saving water!

China has extended a pilot taxation scheme to encourage water conservation to another nine provinces and regions, including the arid capital Beijing, Ningxia and Inner Mongolia in the desertified northwest, Xinhua news agency reported late on Thursday. The pilot scheme, already tested in Hebei province, will impose punitive tax rates on businesses that exceed their water use quotas, and will use favourable rates to encourage the use of recycled water from sewage treatment plants.

Myth busted

It's lust at first sight, not love

How did you know she was the one? Prince Harry, fifth in line to the British throne, was asked in his engagement interview with his fiancée Meghan Markle. "The very first time we met," he replied. Well that may have been the case but unfortunately the prince was probably experiencing lust rather than anything else the first time he met his bride-to-be, because a study has proven once and for all that "love at first sight" doesn't exist. Psychologists at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands scientifically investigated the phenomenon to try and work out whether the common romcom trope is real. Two further studies were conducted which involved speed dating, where participants either spent 90 or 20 minutes getting to know each other. Again, they were asked their feelings for their potential partners. Taking the results of all the tests into consideration, 32 participants (most of whom were men) described 49 experiences of love at first sight. However this was strongly linked to finding the other person incredibly physically attractive. Interestingly, the participants who were in a relationship at the time of the study and believed they'd fallen in love with their partners at first sight reported higher levels of passion in their relationship than those who didn't say they fell in love at first sight.



Pakistani volunteers carry an injured student from an Agriculture Training Institute after an attack by Taliban militants in Peshawar, yesterday. Inset, A Pakistani policeman looks a blood-stained floor inside the institute.

FIRST ZIMBABWE CABINET AFTER MUGABE OUSTER

'Coup' leaders get posts

Zimbabwe President Emmerson Mnangagwa yesterday appointed senior military officials to top posts in his first cabinet in what was widely seen as a reward for the army's role in the removal of his predecessor, Robert Mugabe. Mnangagwa was sworn in as president a week ago after 93-year-old Mugabe quit in the wake of a de facto military coup. Mnangagwa, a former state security chief known as 'The Crocodile', made Major-General Sibusiso Moyo foreign minister and gave Air Marshal Perrance Shiri the land portfolio. He brought back Patrick Chinamasa as finance minister once more despite his

chequered record in that post previously. Most Zimbabweans remember Moyo as the khaki-clad general who went on state television in the early hours of Nov. 15 to announce the military takeover that ended Mugabe's 37-year rule. Shiri is feared - and loathed - by many Zimbabweans as the former commander of the North Korean-trained '5 Brigade' that played a central role in the so-called Gukurahundi massacres in Matabeleland in 1983 in which an estimated 20,000 people were killed. "For most observers, this looks like a reward for the military - or more specifically like the military asserting its authority," London-based political analyst Alex Magaisa wrote on Twitter. Mnangagwa dropped allies of

Mugabe's wife, Grace, but brought back many Mugabe loyalists from the ruling ZANU-PF party, disappointing those who had been expecting a break with the past. Mnangagwa's opponents from Grace Mugabe's ousted G40 faction derided the line-up as old wine in a khaki bottle. Chinamasa, a lawyer by training, had been finance minister since 2013 until he was shifted to the new ministry of cyber security in a reshuffle this year. With elections due next year, Mnangagwa needs to deliver a quick economic bounce and has made clear he wants to curb wasteful expenditure, pointing out that his cabinet has 22 ministers compared to Mugabe's 33.

Saudi intercepts 'Iran' missile

A ballistic missile fired by Yemen's armed Houthi group at Saudi Arabia was shot down on Thursday near the south-western city of Khamis Mushait, the Saudi-owned al-Arabiya channel reported. It was the second ballistic missile fired from Yemen this month, after an earlier rocket was brought down near King Khaled Airport on the northern outskirts of the capital Riyadh. A Saudi-led coalition fighting the Houthis in Yemen has closed air, land and sea access in a move it says is meant to stop a flow of Iranian arms to the Houthis, who control much of northern Yemen. The blockade has cut food imports to seven million people on the brink of famine. "Air defence intercepted a ballistic missile, fired by the Houthis towards Khamis Mushait," Arabiya said on its Twitter account, without giving details. No causalities were reported.

The Houthis and allied militias loyal to former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh said on their official news agency they had launched a mid-range ballistic missile that "hit its military target with high precision". Meanwhile, remnants of four ballistic missiles fired into Saudi Arabia by Houthi rebels this year appear to have been designed and manufactured by Riyadh's regional rival Iran, a confidential report by United Nations sanctions monitors said, bolstering a push by the United States to punish the Tehran government. Earlier this month, US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley accused Iran of supplying Houthi rebels with a missile that was fired into Saudi Arabia in July and called for the United Nations to hold Tehran accountable for violating two UN Security Council resolutions.



'Think before you tweet'

Former US president Barack Obama yesterday said that social media powers like Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter are leading to "snap judgements to complex issues" and warned leaders to think before tweeting. Obama was repeatedly asked about his successor, President Donald Trump, at a New Delhi symposium but stuck to a general warning to all high-profile figures to take care. "I think it's important to be mindful of both the power of these tools but also its limits," Obama said when asked about the dangers of Twitter, a platform on which Trump has caused repeat controversies. "What I would say is Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, all these various platforms are extraordinarily powerful tools, and those tools can be used for good and they can be used for ill," the two-term leader told the conference, which was organised by the Hindustan Times newspaper. Highlighting how he has 100 million Twitter followers -- "more than other people who use it more often" -- Obama said: "I think it's important to be mindful of both the power of these tools but also its limits." "Your mother and father knew better. Listen to them. Don't do things like that. Think before you speak, think before you tweet." Obama was more direct in criticising Trump's threat to leave the 2015 Paris climate accord on slashing global carbon emissions. "It is an agreement that - even though we have a little bit of a pause in American leadership -- is giving our children a fighting chance," he said.



Tillerson out, Pompeo in?

Reports say White House staff exits likely soon

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's expected exit from the Trump administration is one of many staff changes likely as President Donald Trump nears the end of his first year in office, with sources saying top economic adviser Gary Cohn and son-in-law Jared Kushner could be among those who depart. Amid reports of a plan to replace the former oil man with CIA director Mike Pompeo -- who is seen as more amenable to the president's headline views -- Trump on Thursday passed up an opportunity to publicly back his embattled top diplomat. Asked if he wants Tillerson to remain in his post, Trump said only that "Rex is here" at the White House, a break from the usual expression of confidence in such circumstances. The New York Times earlier on Thursday quoted unnamed senior administration officials as saying Trump had soured on Tillerson

and was ready for a change, probably around the end of the year. Cohn, whose relationship with Trump became tense earlier this year, has considered leaving once the Republican effort to overhaul the US tax system is completed in Congress, according to the sources. Kushner, who has seen his influence in the White House shrink, may receive a "face-saving" exit as he deals with legal challenges related to a special counsel's investigation of Trump's 2016 presidential campaign's potential ties to Russia, one of the sources said. More junior-level advisers could also use the completion of Trump's first year and tax legislation as a pivot point to move on, leading to another period of uncertainty that has at times overshadowed Trump's tenure, which began on Jan 20. Though a lot of speculation about departures has focused on high-profile names, the possibility of mid-level staffers leaving could have a big impact on the rhythms of the White House.

Top economic adviser Gary Cohn and Jared Kushner could be among those who depart

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