

NYC's worst fire for decades kills 12

Four children among the dead

REUTERS, New York

Investigators in New York City searched early yesterday for the cause of a blaze that ripped through an apartment building in the Bronx and killed 12 people including four children, in the city's deadliest fire in at least a quarter of a century.

The fire broke out a little before 7 pm on the first floor of a brick building and quickly spread upstairs, city Fire Commissioner Daniel Nigro told a news conference with Mayor Bill de Blasio. The cause was under investigation.

"We're here at the scene of an unspeakable tragedy. In the middle of the holiday season is a time when families are together. Tonight, here in the Bronx, there are families that have been torn apart," de Blasio said.

Children ages one, two and seven and an unidentified boy died in the fire along with and four men and four women, local media reported.

Four people were in hospital in critical condition "fighting for their lives," the mayor said. Authorities said firefighters rescued 12 people from the building.

"People died on various floors of the apartment, ranging in age from 1 to over 50," Nigro told reporters. "In a department that is surely no stranger to tragedy, we're shocked by the lives lost."

Two of the dead were found in a bathtub, according to cable news station NY1.

New York is going through a bitter cold snap with temperatures in the low-teens Fahrenheit and high winds, which according to one media account, stoked flames inside the building as residents flung open doors and windows.

Wherever fire hoses sprayed, the ground was covered with sheets of ice, according to an NY1 reporter.



Fire Department of New York personnel work on the scene of an apartment fire in Bronx, New York, US on Thursday night. Inset, people react near the scene of the apartment fire in Bronx. Over 170 firefighters respond to the four-alarm blaze, fire officials said.

PHOTO: REUTERS

China caught red handed

Says Trump as South Korea confirms seizure of Hong Kong ship that transferred oil products to Pyongyang amid UN sanctions

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday rejected accusations that it had helped Pyongyang skirt sanctions after US President Donald Trump claimed on Twitter that Beijing was turning a blind eye to oil transfers to North Korea.

Trump's tweet was the latest salvo in his battle to persuade China to tighten the economic screws on Pyongyang over its missile and nuclear programme, in a campaign that has seen him heap both praise and criticism on Beijing.

"Caught RED HANDED - very disappointed that China is allowing oil to go into North Korea," Trump wrote Thursday. "There will never be a friendly solution to the North Korea problem if this continues to happen!"

The United Nations -- at the urging of the US -- has imposed a series of sanctions against North Korea aimed at getting it to halt its weapons development.

China has supported the moves, but critics claim it is not rigidly enforcing the sanctions, fearful that too much pressure will cause the unpredictable

regime to collapse.

South Korean newspaper Chosun Ilbo, citing government sources in Seoul, reported earlier this week that US satellites had spotted a Hong Kong-registered ship selling oil to North Korean vessels at sea dozens of times since October.

The recent series of reports on this

N KOREA TENSIONS

Beijing denies US claims of allowing oil transfer

UN bars four North Korean ships from international ports

oil to a North Korean vessel and found it to be inaccurate.

"There is no record of the (Chinese) vessel visiting a Chinese port" since August, she said.

"I think making pointless hype through the media is not conducive to enhancing mutual trust and cooperation."

A defiant Pyongyang has said there is no possibility of its weapons programmes being rolled back, and that it has been developed to defend against what it terms aggression by the US and its allies.

Washington insists a resolution of the crisis on the Korean peninsula depends on the North's denuclearisation.

The UN Security Council on Thursday meanwhile denied international port access to four North Korean ships suspected of carrying or having transported goods banned by international sanctions targeting Pyongyang, diplomats told AFP.

The ban of the four vessels brings the UN's total number of blocked ships to eight.

situation do not conform with the facts", Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said, adding that Beijing did not allow its "citizens or companies to engage in any activities that violate" UN resolutions.

Hua said China had looked into the report of a Chinese ship transferring

Ex-Catalan leader's bid to rule from abroad 'absurd'

Says Spanish PM after separatists win vote

AFP, Madrid

Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy yesterday denounced as "absurd" the idea that ousted Catalan president Carles Puigdemont could govern from Belgium where he is in self-imposed exile to avoid arrest.

"It is absurd to pretend to be the president of a region when you live abroad, and even more absurd to pretend that you are carrying out this function from abroad," Rajoy said in his end-of-year press conference in Madrid.

His remarks came a week after Catalan separatist parties claimed victory in a divisive snap election.

Madrid had called the poll after Catalan lawmakers declared independence on October 27, triggering Spain's worst political crisis since democracy was reinstated following the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975.

Following the declaration, Rajoy had sacked Catalonia's government, dissolved its parliament and stripped the region of its treasured autonomy.



Puigdemont fled to Brussels to avoid arrest over charges linked to rebellion, sedition and misuse of public funds.

Other independence leaders, including Puigdemont's former deputy Oriol Junqueras, are behind Spanish bars pending trial.

Rajoy reiterated yesterday that a vote to choose a new Catalan president would take place within 10 days after the new regional parliament reconvenes on January 17.

Puigdemont's advisors are currently looking into whether he can run in next month's ballot from abroad.

Although the unionist Ciudadanos had the biggest share of the vote in the October ballot, three separatist groupings headed by Puigdemont retained their parliamentary majority.

The pro-independence parties have said they no longer plan to push for independence unilaterally and favour a negotiated settlement instead.

Rajoy, however, has repeatedly ruled out holding talks with Puigdemont.

Saudi frees two princes accused of corruption

REUTERS, Dubai

Two sons of Saudi Arabia's late King Abdullah have been released from detention at Riyadh's Ritz-Carlton hotel, days after nearly two dozen other detainees in the kingdom's two-month-old anti-corruption campaign were also freed.

Saudi Arabia's attorney general approved the release of Prince Meshaal bin Abdullah and Prince Faisal bin Abdullah after they reached financial settlements with the government, a senior Saudi official with knowledge of the matter told Reuters.

The source did not elaborate on the settlements.

The attorney general had not yet reached a decision on whether to release a third brother, Prince Turki bin Abdullah, the source said.

A related member of the royal family, Princess Nouf bint Abdullah bint Mohammed bin Saud, tweeted photos of the two princes and exclamations of thanks on Thursday.

Saudi security forces rounded up some 200 princes, ministers and business leaders and converted the Ritz-Carlton into a luxurious prison for them in early November in what Riyadh said was a crackdown on corruption.

The move was also widely seen by analysts as helping Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman consolidate his grip on power, after he ousted his cousin as heir to the throne in the summer.

The most powerful of King Abdullah's sons, former National Guard chief Prince Miteb bin Abdullah, was released last month after agreeing to pay the government \$1 billion.

Prince Miteb had been the last member of Abdullah's Shammar branch of the family to retain a key position in the Saudi power structure, after Prince Meshaal and Prince Turki were relieved of their posts as governors in 2015.

Saudi newspaper Okaz reported on Tuesday that 23 individuals had been released after reaching deals with the government and that more were expected to follow in the days ahead.

NEWS IN brief

German court keeps Auschwitz Nazi in jail

AFP, Berlin

A former Nazi SS guard known as the Bookkeeper of Auschwitz, 96, lost his final challenge against being jailed when Germany's highest court yesterday rejected his appeal. In one of the last cases against a surviving Nazi, Oskar Groening was found guilty of being an accessory to the murders of 300,000 people.

Bosnia charges 25 over war crimes

AFP, Sarajevo

Bosnian authorities have charged 25 Muslim wartime officials in two separate cases for war crimes against Serb civilians and prisoners of war in the country's bloody 1990s conflict, prosecutors said yesterday. The crimes included murder, torture, inhumane behaviour and unlawful imprisonment.

Fierce fighting kills dozens in Syria

AFP, Al-tamana

Intense fighting killed dozens of people on the edge of the last Syrian province entirely outside government control as aid workers completed a series of medical evacuations from another rebel-held area yesterday. Government and allied forces backed by Russian warplanes took on mostly jihadist fighters in an area straddling the border between Idlib and Hama provinces, sparking clashes that left 66 people dead.



PHOTO: REUTERS

A Palestinian demonstrator hurls stones towards Israeli troops during clashes at a protest against US President Donald Trump's decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, near the West Bank city of Nablus, yesterday.

Myanmar frees two journalists of TRT

REUTERS, Yangon

Myanmar yesterday freed two journalists for Turkey's state broadcaster, their local interpreter and a driver after they completed a two-month jail sentence for violating an air-craft law by filming with a drone, a prison official said.

Cameraman Lau Hon Meng from Singapore, reporter Mok Choy Lin from Malaysia, Aung Naing Soe - a local journalist who was interpreting for the pair - and driver Hla Tin were released from a prison at Yamethin, near the capital Naypyitaw.

Police detained the two journalists on assignment for the TRT World television station and the two Myanmar men on Oct. 27, when they attempted to fly a drone near Myanmar's parliament building.

A court last month sentenced them to two months in prison under the colonial-era Anti-Aircraft Act. All four were until this week also facing an additional charge for importing the drone, and the two foreigners were also facing immigration charges.

"We released Aung Naing Soe and the crew at 7:20 am today because immigration and police have dropped the charges," said Aung Myo Chun, chief of Yamethin prison.

"They have served their two-month prison sentence under the Anti-Aircraft Act."

S Africa parliament failed to hold Zuma accountable

Rules top court over corruption scandal

AFP, Johannesburg

South Africa's top court yesterday ruled parliament failed to hold President Jacob Zuma accountable for using public money for private home upgrades, a move that could lead to impeachment proceedings.

The opposition had gone to the Constitutional Court arguing that the Speaker of parliament failed to enforce the appropriate processes to hold Zuma accountable.

He had failed to abide by recommendations made by the anti-corruption watchdog in 2014 over refurbishments at his personal home in the eastern KwaZulu-Natal province that used \$15 million (12 million euros) of taxpayers' money.

The scandal came to a dramatic climax when the Constitutional Court last year found the president guilty of violating his oath of office by refusing to pay back the money.



"We conclude that (National) Assembly did not hold the president to account," said Constitutional Court judge Chris Jaffa.

"The failure by the National Assembly to make rules regulating removal of the president... constitutes a violation" of the constitution, the court said.

It ordered that the National Assembly "must comply" with the constitution to make rules that could be used for the removal of the president "without delay".

Defeated in court and facing mounting public criticism, Zuma later relented and paid \$500,000, a sum set by the treasury following last year's ruling.

In power since 2009, Zuma stepped down last week as president of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) after a 10 year term marked by numerous damning court judgements against him.

BRUTAL COLD ACROSS US

Trump makes light of climate change science

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump on Thursday made light of climate change science as an Arctic chill settled on much of the central and northeastern United States and Canada, forcing people indoors, stranding motorists with dead car batteries and complicating firefighting duties.



In the United States, the National Weather Service said that "dangerously cold temperatures and wind chills" were pummeling much of the central and eastern part of the country.

"In the East, it could be the COLDEST New Year's Eve on record," Trump tweeted from his Mar a Lago resort in Florida, where he is on holiday vacation.

"Perhaps we could use a little bit of that good old Global Warming that our Country, but not other countries, was going to pay

TRILLIONS OF DOLLARS to protect against. Bundle up!"

In New York, Governor Andrew Cuomo earlier warned residents to prepare for "dangerously cold weather," with below-normal temperatures expected to be between minus 12.7 C and minus 6.6 C through today.

Trump's missive quickly drew Twitter eye-rolls from many users exasperated that the Republican US president could use cold weather to mock the science behind climate change.

"Weather is not the same as climate," tweeted Representative Pramila Jayapal of Washington state. "The president should be able to understand that. It isn't hard."

Jon Foley, executive director of the California Academy of Sciences, wrote: "Believe it or not, global climate change is very real even if it's cold outside Trump Tower right now."

Thatcher spurned flight with panda

AFP, London

Margaret Thatcher refused a request to fly a panda in the back of her Concorde when she visited Washington for her first summit with Ronald Reagan, according to papers released yesterday.

The then prime minister was drawn into the scheme in January 1981, the same month that Reagan was inaugurated, when the Smithsonian Institution in Washington appealed to London Zoo for the loan of its male panda.

The president of the London Zoological Society, Solly Zuckerman, seized on the opportunity to create a publicity stunt with the help of the prime minister.

"Lord Zuckerman sees this as a signal demonstration of the special relationship and would be very happy to time the announcement of the loan or the delivery of the panda in any way that the prime minister thought would be most likely to benefit Anglo-American relations," cabinet secretary Robert Armstrong wrote.

The "Iron Lady" was not convinced, however, that she should be involved in promoting London Zoo's efforts to bring a new mate to a female panda.