

# Putin seeks to be 'emperor for life'

Says Kremlin critic Navalny

AFP, Moscow

The Kremlin's top critic Alexei Navalny has slammed Russia's March presidential election, in which he is barred from running, as a sham meant to "re-appoint" Vladimir Putin on his way to becoming "emperor for life".

With two months to go before Russians vote in polls that are all but guaranteed to hand Putin a historic fourth term, the 41-year-old opposition leader and anti-corruption campaigner spoke to AFP Tuesday in his campaign headquarters.

"This is not an election and my role will consist of explaining to people that this procedure, which they call an election, in fact is only held to re-appoint Putin," he said.

"We will prove this and convince people that it's impossible to recognise either these polls or this regime."

Navalny last year mounted a national campaign, meeting thousands of people in cities across Russia, but in December the Central Election Commission said he could not take part due to a controversial embezzlement conviction which the opposition leader says is fabricated.

He is now ready to channel the force of his campaign team into persuading Russians to boycott the polls, calling this first major protest of this year on January 28.

"Putin wants to be emperor for life. His entourage, people who became billionaires and the world's richest individuals, they want the same thing," he said, vouching to continue his "political fight."



Palestinians hold signs during a protest against US aid cut, outside United Nations' offices in Gaza City yesterday.

# Ex-CIA agent held in 'China spying case'

AFP, Washington

US authorities said Tuesday they had arrested a former CIA agent, Hong Kong resident Jerry Chun Shing Lee, after discovering he had an unauthorised notebook that had the identities of undercover US spies.

Lee, a naturalised US citizen also known as Zhen Cheng Li, was arrested late Monday after he arrived at JFK International Airport in New York.

The Department of Justice said Lee, 53, grew up in the United States and served in the US Army before joining the Central Intelligence Agency as a case officer in 1994.

He served in unnamed overseas locations and left the agency in 2007, later apparently taking a job in Hong Kong.

In a complaint filed in a New York federal court, the Justice Department said that in 2012, FBI agents with court-ordered warrants secretly searched Lee's luggage while he was travelling in the United States and found he was carrying top secret materials he was not authorized to have.

"Agents found two small books containing handwritten notes that contained classified information, including but not limited to, true names and phone numbers of assets and covert CIA employees, operational notes from asset meetings, operational meeting locations and locations of covert facilities," the Justice Department said.

The case takes place amid concern in the US intelligence community that the Chinese government has been able to cripple their operations in that country.

Lee was charged with unlawful retention of national defense information, a charge that can bring up to 10 years in prison.

Officials did not say why it took so long to bring charges against Lee, or whether he had leaked any materials to foreign countries.

# Catalan parliament meets

Lawmakers elect separatist speaker as sacked leader eyes comeback and govern the deeply divided region in Spain

AFP, Barcelona

Catalan lawmakers yesterday elected a separatist as parliamentary speaker, the first stage of a plan by pro-independence deputies to get regional leader Carles Puigdemont, in self-exile in Belgium, back into power.

As MPs met for the first time since a failed bid to break from Spain, protesters waving separatist flags gathered outside the assembly in Barcelona where pro-independence parties are in the majority after winning regional elections on December 21.

With 70 out of 135 deputies, they largely favour Puigdemont, sacked by Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy along with his cabinet on October 27 after the regional parliament declared unilateral independence, as candidate for president.

Despite being in Belgium, Puigdemont wants to make a comeback and govern the deeply divided region.

For separatist lawmakers, the first step towards this was to secure control of parliament by getting one of their supporters elected as speaker.

They did precisely that yesterday, with 65 lawmakers voting for Roger Torrent, a member of the leftwing separatist

ERC party, against 56 who cast their ballot for an anti-independence candidate.

Separatists will also attempt to get a majority of their supporters elected as deputy parliamentary speakers.

These make sure assembly rules are respected and will decide whether Puigdemont and others are allowed to be lawmakers while remaining out of the country.

Including the former Catalan president, five separatists are abroad and risk arrest on charges of rebellion, sedition and misuse of public funds for their role in the failed independence bid if they come back to Spain.

A further three pro-independence lawmakers are in jail pending a probe into the same charges.

Large yellow ribbons that have come to represent support for those in jail were placed on parliamentary seats yesterday.

Separatist lawmakers clapped when their names were read out in the opening session.

"Those who should be here are precisely those who aren't," said Ernest Maragall, one of these MPs.

Rajoy's government has warned Madrid will maintain direct control over Catalonia if Puigdemont attempts to govern from Belgium, which could lead to yet another crisis.



People hold placards reading "Free political prisoners" outside Catalan's parliament during its inaugural session in Barcelona yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

# US withholds \$65m from UN agency for Palestinians

AFP, Washington

The United States held back \$65 million that had been destined for the United Nations relief agency for Palestinians on Tuesday, two weeks after President Donald Trump threatened future payments.

State Department officials insisted the decision was not taken to pressure Palestinian leaders, but because the US wants other countries to help pay for and reform UNRWA.

But the call came after a behind-the-scenes tussle between hawks who want to cut all aid to Palestinians and officials concerned about the humanitarian and diplomatic fallout.

The State Department said \$60 million of what had been a planned \$125 million package would go through to keep the agency running, but the rest will be withheld for now.

"This is not aimed at punishing anyone," spokeswoman Heather Nauert told reporters.

"The United States government, and the Trump administration, believe that there should be more so-called burden-sharing to go around," she said.

"We would like other countries, in fact other countries that criticize the United States for what they believe to be our position vis-a-vis the Palestinians... to step forward."

The head of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA), Pierre Krahenbuhl, expressed alarm and immediately called on other UN members to contribute.

He said the \$60 million would keep schools and hospitals open for now, but noted that it was dramatically lower than the \$350 million Washington paid over the course of 2017.

"Funding UNRWA or any humanitarian agency is the discretion of any sovereign member state of the United Nations," he said, in a statement.

The Arab League chief yesterday charged that a US decision to freeze crucial funding for the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees was aimed at wiping out the whole issue.

"This decision affects the education and health of Palestinians and aims to eradicate the question of refugees," Ahmed Aboul Gheit said at a conference in Cairo on the disputed city of Jerusalem.

**Aid freeze aims to wipe out refugee issue: Arab League**

**Schools, health could be hit by cut: UNRWA**

# Trump is fit for duty

Says White House doctor after carrying out cognitive test

AFP, Washington

Donald Trump is expected to remain physically fit for the duration of his presidency and has "no cognitive issues whatsoever," according to full results from his first medical examination released Tuesday.

Trump's critics have openly questioned his mental health, and an explosive book on his presidency published earlier this month described aides as having doubts about his fitness for office.

"All data indicates the president is healthy and will remain so for the duration of his presidency," doctor Ronny Jackson told a White House briefing following last week's physical, which determined the 71-year-old to be in "excellent" health.

"He has incredible genes and that's the way God made him," Jackson said Trump, who has recently faced a swirl of speculation about his mental fitness, had himself requested a cognitive test in which he performed "exceedingly well."

"I think he saw doing the physical as an opportunity to put some of that to rest," Jackson said. "And I think he wasn't the least bit concerned that he had anything to hide."

The screening was carried out using a test called the Montreal Cognitive Assessment, on which Trump scored 30/30, Jackson said.

# NEWS IN brief

**India top court hears challenge to ID scheme**

AFP, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court yesterday began hearing a challenge to the legality of a government identity scheme that holds biometric data on more than a billion people. The "Aadhaar" system uses finger prints and iris scans to provide users a unique identity number they can use to access government services.

**Arson attacks ahead of Pope's Chile visit: police**

AFP, Temuco

Unknown attackers used incendiary devices to set fire to Catholic churches and three helicopters belonging to forestry companies, ahead of Pope Francis's visit to the indigenous Mapuche homeland of Araucania in Chile, police said yesterday.

**Saudi declares bailout plan for Yemen govt**

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia announced yesterday it would transfer \$2 billion to Yemen's central bank, following desperate calls for a financial rescue from the beleaguered government it has supported militarily for nearly three years.

**HK activist Wong jailed over 2014 protest**

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong activist Joshua Wong was yesterday jailed for the second time for his role in 2014 mass pro-democracy protests as concern grows that prison terms for young campaigners are shutting down debate in the semi-autonomous city as Beijing increases control.



# TRUMP-RUSSIA PROBE

# Bannon refuses to answer US Congress panel

AFP, Washington

Former Donald Trump advisor Steve Bannon Tuesday refused to answer questions from a congressional committee probing the president's campaign links to Russia, saying he was under orders from the White House not to.

Bannon was quizzed voluntarily behind closed doors by the House of Representatives Intelligence Committee, the first time he has testified in the probe investigating whether Trump's campaign colluded with Russia in its bid to influence the 2016 US elections.

It was unlikely to be Bannon's last such testimony: the New York Times and the Washington Post reported late Tuesday that Bannon has been subpoenaed by Robert Mueller, the Justice Department special counsel investigating the same issue.

That made Bannon the first person from Trump's inner circle to receive a grand jury subpoena from Mueller in the probe, which is also looking at whether Trump has tried to obstruct the investigation.

When appearing before the Intelligence Committee, Bannon refused to answer a number of questions, citing "executive privilege" allowing the president to keep information from the public.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spins cotton on a wheel as his wife Sara looks on during their visit to Gandhi Ashram in Ahmedabad, India yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# Thermometer breaks in coldest village

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The temperature in the world's coldest village reached near-record lows, so much so that their digital thermometer broke as a result.

Oymyakon is a village in the Russian region of Yakutia. It's named after the Oymyakon River, which literally translates to mean: "unfrozen patch of water; place where fish spend the winter."

The digital thermometer in the village was installed last year to appeal to tourists. However, as temperatures dwindled to -62C, the thermometer broke down because it was too cold.

The coldest temperature ever recorded in a permanently inhabited area was -68C in Oymyakon in 1933.

The freezing conditions of Antarctica reached a new low in 2013 when Nasa announced a record temperature of -94.7C based on analysed satellite data.

Around 500 people live in the village of Oymyakon and they haven't been letting the frost stop them from going about their lives as normal.

Anastasia Gruzdeva, a 24-year-old woman from Yakutsk in Russia, posted a selection of photos on Instagram showing her and her friends with frozen eyelashes.

# UK appoints 'minister for loneliness'

AFP, London

Britain appointed a "minister for loneliness" yesterday to tackle what Prime Minister Theresa May described as "the sad reality of modern life" affecting millions of people.

Tracey Crouch, a junior minister for sport and civil society, will take on the role as part of a broader strategy to combat loneliness in Britain. "For far too many people, loneliness is the sad reality of modern life," May said.

"I want to confront this challenge for our society and for all of us to take action to address the loneliness endured by the elderly, by carers, by those who have lost loved ones," the prime minister added.

# Second US winter storm forces flight cancellations

REUTERS, New York

A second winter storm in as many weeks is causing hundreds of flight cancellations across the United States, airlines reported on Tuesday, potentially dealing a further blow to carriers' first quarter outlooks.

As the storm sweeps across southeast Texas and up the East Coast dumping snow, sleet and freezing rain, airlines have already canceled flights in anticipation of difficult conditions.

American Airlines, the world's largest airline by passenger traffic, had canceled some 270 flights between Tuesday and yesterday as a result of the storm, it said.

Rival Delta Air Lines, the No 2 US carrier by passenger traffic, said it had canceled about 275 Tuesday flights and expected additional cancellations in New York and

Boston as the storm tracked north.

The third-largest US carrier, United Airlines, said it had canceled more than 700 flights on Tuesday. United was offering to waive fees for changes to flights to and from Boston, New York, Philadelphia and other affected airports for scheduled flights.

The storm itself is relatively minor compared to other winter weather events, and several hundred flights represent only a tiny percentage of airlines' overall operations. But such storms are still a nuisance to carriers and can cost them millions of dollars in lost revenue.

By Tuesday night there was a long line of precipitation that brought 2 inches of snow to some areas of Mississippi, 6 inches in Kentucky and 4 inches in Vermont, reported CNN Online.

