

Comey grilled again in US Congress

Former FBI director James Comey testified before US lawmakers for the first time in over a year Friday, with much of the discussions centering on Hillary Clinton's email use. The closed-door grilling came amid mounting intrigue over Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election and possible contacts between Donald Trump's presidential campaign and Moscow. Comey had pleaded for a public hearing after he was subpoenaed by the outgoing Congress in November, but House Republicans including some of Trump's allies insisted on a private session before the judiciary and oversight committees. Comey was questioned as part of a Republican-led House inquiry into possible Russian interference, and Clinton, who lost to Trump in 2016, featured prominently. Clinton had set up a private email server before becoming secretary of state in 2009. Republicans seized on the revelation years later, saying she broke department protocol by using a private email account while a government official in order to hide sensitive correspondence. In May 2017 Trump abruptly sacked Comey, who was the senior official leading a criminal investigation into possible collusion with Moscow. Three months earlier the president met privately with Comey and urged him to end the investigation into former national security advisor Michael Flynn, a move that many Democrats interpreted as obstruction of justice.

BITS OF HISTORY (DECEMBER 08)

- 1978:** Golda Meir, Israel's first woman prime minister (1969-74), died.
- 1980:** John Lennon was shot dead in New York by Mark David Chapman.
- 1987:** US and Soviet Union signed a treaty to eliminate all their intermediate-range and shorter-range nuclear missiles.



(From left, clockwise) A woman is sprayed with teargas by a riot police officer during a "yellow vests" protest against higher fuel prices, in Brussels, Belgium, yesterday; Police detain a demonstrator during a protest in Paris, France; and protesters in Paris vandalise a shop's windows. Pictures were taken yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

Protests rock France again

Cops clash with 'Yellow Vest' protesters; more than 700 arrested

Armoured vehicles rolled through central Paris yesterday as riot police clashed with "yellow vest" demonstrators, who set fire to barricades and hurled rocks in the latest demonstrations against President Emmanuel Macron. Shouts of "Macron, resign" mingled with tear gas on the Champs-Elysees avenue, which was the scene of the worst rioting in Paris in decades last week. Thick plumes of black smoke from fires could be seen rising high into the sky over the city. The demonstrators began blockading roads over rising fuel taxes on November 17 but their list of demands have since grown, with many calling for the resignation of Macron, whom they accuse of favouring the rich. In the Grands Boulevards shopping district, masked protesters threw rocks at riot police and set fire to a barricade hastily assembled from stolen dustbins and Christmas trees. Coordinated "yellow vest" protests

were taking place across the country yesterday, including on numerous motorways, causing havoc on the national road network. Deputy interior minister Laurent Nunez said an estimated 31,000 people were taking part in protests nationwide, including 8,000 in Paris -- similar numbers to last week.



Around 700 people had been detained, most of them in Paris. Police carried out checks on people arriving at the capital's train stations, confiscating items that could be used as projectiles as well as surgical masks and goggles used to protect against the effects of tear gas. Some of those arrested were carrying hammers, sling-

shots and rocks. Parts of the city centre were on effective lockdown, with shops, museums, the Eiffel Tower and many metro stations closed. Top-flight football matches and concerts were cancelled. Last weekend's violence, which saw some 200 cars torched and the Arc de Triomphe vandalised, shook France and plunged Macron's government into its deepest crisis so far. Macron this week gave in to some of the protesters' demands for measures to help the poor and struggling middle classes, including scrapping a planned increase in fuel taxes and freezing electricity and gas prices in 2019. But the "yellow vests", some of whom who have become increasingly radicalised, are holding out for more. Protests at dozens of schools over university reforms, and a call by farmers for demonstrations next week, have added to a sense of general revolt. The hardline CGT union, hoping to capitalise on the movement, has called for rail and metro strikes next Friday to demand immediate wage and pension increases.

'He was dumb as a rock'

Trump lashes out after ex-state secretary criticises him

Former US secretary of state Rex Tillerson said Donald Trump was "undisciplined" and repeatedly wanted to break the law -- leading the US president to respond Friday that his onetime cabinet member was "dumb as a rock." Tillerson, who was fired in March, made no attempt to deny his poor relationship with Trump during a rare interview Thursday night as part of a charity dinner in his native Texas. "I think part of it was obviously we are starkly different in our styles. We did not have a common value system," Tillerson told veteran journalist Bob Schieffer of CBS News, which broadcast an excerpt of the interview. "I'd have to say to him, 'Well, Mr President, I understand what you want to do, but you can't do it that way -- it violates the law, it violates a treaty.'" "He got really frustrated," he said. "I think he grew tired of me being the guy every day that told him you can't do that and let's talk about what we can do." Trump voiced anger hours later in a harsh tweet, saying that Tillerson "didn't have the mental capacity needed" to be the top US diplomat.

"He was dumb as a rock and I couldn't get rid of him fast enough. He was lazy as hell. Now it is a whole new ballgame, great spirit at State!" Trump wrote from Air Force One as he returned from a conference in Kansas City about crime. Trump praised Tillerson's successor, the brusque former congressman and CIA chief Mike Pompeo, for "doing a great job." He becomes the latest cabinet member on which Trump has turned his knives. He repeatedly denounced attorney general Jeff Session, who was ousted last month, as "very weak" for not blocking a probe into whether the Trump presidential campaign colluded with Russia. Tillerson, a former chief executive of oil giant ExxonMobil, had no government experience. After getting into Trump administration Tillerson immediately struggled to fit in. "It was challenging for me coming from the disciplined, highly process-oriented ExxonMobil Corp to go to work for a man who is pretty undisciplined, doesn't like to read, doesn't read briefing reports, doesn't like to get into the details of a lot of things," Tillerson said at the event in Houston.



Huawei CFO faces US fraud charges linked to Iran

Chinese telecom giant Huawei's chief financial officer faces US fraud charges related to sanctions-breaking business dealings with Iran, a Canadian court heard Friday, a week after she was detained on an American extradition request. Meng Wanzhou, 46, was arrested in Canada's Pacific coast city of Vancouver on December 1 while changing planes during a trip from Hong Kong to Mexico -- ratcheting up tensions between the United States and China just as the countries' leaders agreed to a truce in their trade war. A day-long hearing was adjourned until Monday, when the judge is expected to render a decision on bail. Until then, she will remain in custody. Canadian government lawyer John Gibb-Carsley asked for bail to be denied, saying Meng has been accused of "conspiracy to defraud multiple financial institutions" and if convicted faces more than 30

years in prison. She is specifically accused of lying to a US bank, identified by her lawyer as "Hong Kong Bank," about the use of a covert subsidiary to sell to Iran in breach of sanctions. Meng had personally denied to bankers any direct connections between Huawei and the subsidiary, SkyCom, when in fact "SkyCom is Huawei," Gibb-Carsley said, putting the bank in jeopardy of violating sanctions. SkyCom's alleged sanctions breaches occurred from 2009 to 2014, while Meng's alleged fraudulent misrepresentations were in 2013. Meng had been a member of SkyCom's board a decade ago, but the company was later sold, said her lawyer David Martin. US authorities, however, claim Huawei continued to control the company. China says Meng -- the daughter of Huawei founder Ren Zhengfei, a former engineer in China's People's Liberation Army -- has violated no laws in Canada or the United States and has demanded her release.



Emergency personnel treat victims after a stampede at a nightclub in Cornalio, Italy, left six dead early yesterday.

Mexican model Miss World

A Mexican model and volunteer was crowned Miss World at a glitzy event on the tropical Chinese island of Hainan yesterday. Miss Mexico Vanessa Ponce de Leon, 26, has a degree in international business, volunteers for "Migrantes en el Camino" and is on the board of directors of a rehab centre for girls, according to the Miss World website. She was crowned as the 68th Miss World by last year's winner, Manushi Chhillar of India, in the coastal city of Sanya. The colourful ceremony included US group Sister Sledge performing their 1979 disco anthem "We Are Family."



First runner up was Thailand's Nicolene Pichapa Limsukan, a 20-year-old studying business administration. Miss Belarus Maria Vasilevich, Miss Jamaica Kadajah Robinson and Miss Uganda Quini Abenakyo were also among the final five. It is the eighth time the Miss World final has been held in Sanya, which first hosted the pageant in 2003. At the finals three years ago controversy erupted as officials in Hong Kong stopped Miss Canada, Anastasia Lin, from boarding a plane bound for Sanya, telling her she would not receive a visa.

Nasa's InSight lander 'hears' wind on Mars

Humans can now hear the haunting, low rumble of wind on Mars for the first time, after Nasa's InSight lander captured vibrations from the breeze on the Red Planet, the US space agency said Friday. The strong gusts of wind, blowing between 10 to 15 mph (five to seven meters a second), were captured as they moved over the solar panels on InSight, an unmanned lander that touched down on Earth's dusty, desolate neighbor November 26. Two sensors picked up the vibrations: an air pressure sensor inside the lander and a seismometer on the lander's deck, awaiting to be deployed to the surface by InSight's robotic arm. "This is the very first fifteen minutes of data that have come from the short period seismometer," said Thomas Pike, lead investigator at Imperial College London, during a conference call with reporters. "It's a little like a flag waving in the wind," he added. "It really sounds otherworldly, and that is exactly what it is." InSight is designed to study the interior of Mars like never before, using seismology instruments to detect quakes and a self-hammering mole to measure heat escape from the planet's crust.

German farmers sue govt over missed climate targets

Dismayed by the German government's failure to meet climate protection targets, dairy farmer Heiner Luetke Schwienhorst has filed a lawsuit against Berlin to force it into action. "Some describe this as a fight between David and Goliath. To me, that's besides the point," said Schwienhorst, who suffered his poorest harvest in three decades after a record drought. "The attitude of political representatives, the way they trivialise climate targets by giving up what they have set, is something that we need to bring to political accountability. That is important," he told AFP. Together with two other farmers and Greenpeace, Schwienhorst has launched a challenge against the German government for having "given up" trying to achieve cuts in greenhouse gas emissions set out under its own climate target, as well as under European law. A dairy farmer near Hamburg and a livestock farmer on the North Sea island of Pellworm have joined the first such lawsuit to seek "climate protection, not monetary compensation". Berlin had pledged to take action to slash greenhouse gas emissions in Germany by 40 percent by 2020 compared to 1990 levels. But in its latest annual climate protection report published in June, the government admitted that it was now expecting to achieve 32 percent in reductions compared to 1990. The shortfall of 8 percentage points is equivalent to about 100 million tonnes of carbon dioxide. "It was clear in the climate protection report that the government is not planning to take further measures in order to reach the target. Instead, it has simply given up," said Anike Peters of Greenpeace. "We're saying we're not going to accept this. Because it's not about a lack of technical possibilities to reach the target, rather it's about a lack of political will." With the help of lawyer Roda Verheyen, the plaintiffs lodged their case at the administrative court in Berlin at the end of October. The court now needs to decide if there is any merit to the case.

CHARLOTTESVILLE RAMPAGE Neo-Nazi found guilty of murder

An American neo-Nazi was found guilty of murder on Friday for killing a woman when ramming his car into counter-protesters at a 2017 white supremacist rally that made Charlottesville a byword for racial violence under President Donald Trump. In addition to first-degree murder, which carries a possible life sentence, James Alex Fields Jr, 21, was found guilty of five counts of aggravated malicious wounding, three of malicious wounding, and one hit-and-run count. A jury of seven women and five men reached their verdict near the end of the first day of deliberations of a trial that lasted a little under two weeks. The August 12, 2017 violence, which claimed the life of 32-year-old paralegal Heather Heyer and injured dozens more, turned the bucolic university city in Virginia into a symbol of the growing audacity of the far right under Trump. The president drew broad criticism in the aftermath when he spoke of "blame on both sides," appearing to establish a moral equivalence between the white supremacists who came to protest the removal of a Confederate statue, and those who opposed them.