

NEWS IN brief

Pakistan denounces blacklisting by US

REUTERS, Islamabad
Pakistan yesterday denounced the United States for placing it on a list of countries violating religious freedoms, calling the designation politically motivated. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Tuesday added mainly Muslim Pakistan to the US list of "countries of particular concern", which has violated religious freedoms.

Gunman kills four in Brazil cathedral

AFP, Sao Paulo

A gunman opened fire Tuesday in a cathedral in the southeastern Brazilian city of Campinas near Sao Paulo, killing four worshippers before committing suicide as police shot at him, officials said. Paramedics said the man fired a revolver and a .38-caliber pistol inside the cathedral at 1:00 pm as a sparsely attended mass was taking place. The motive of the shooting was not immediately known.

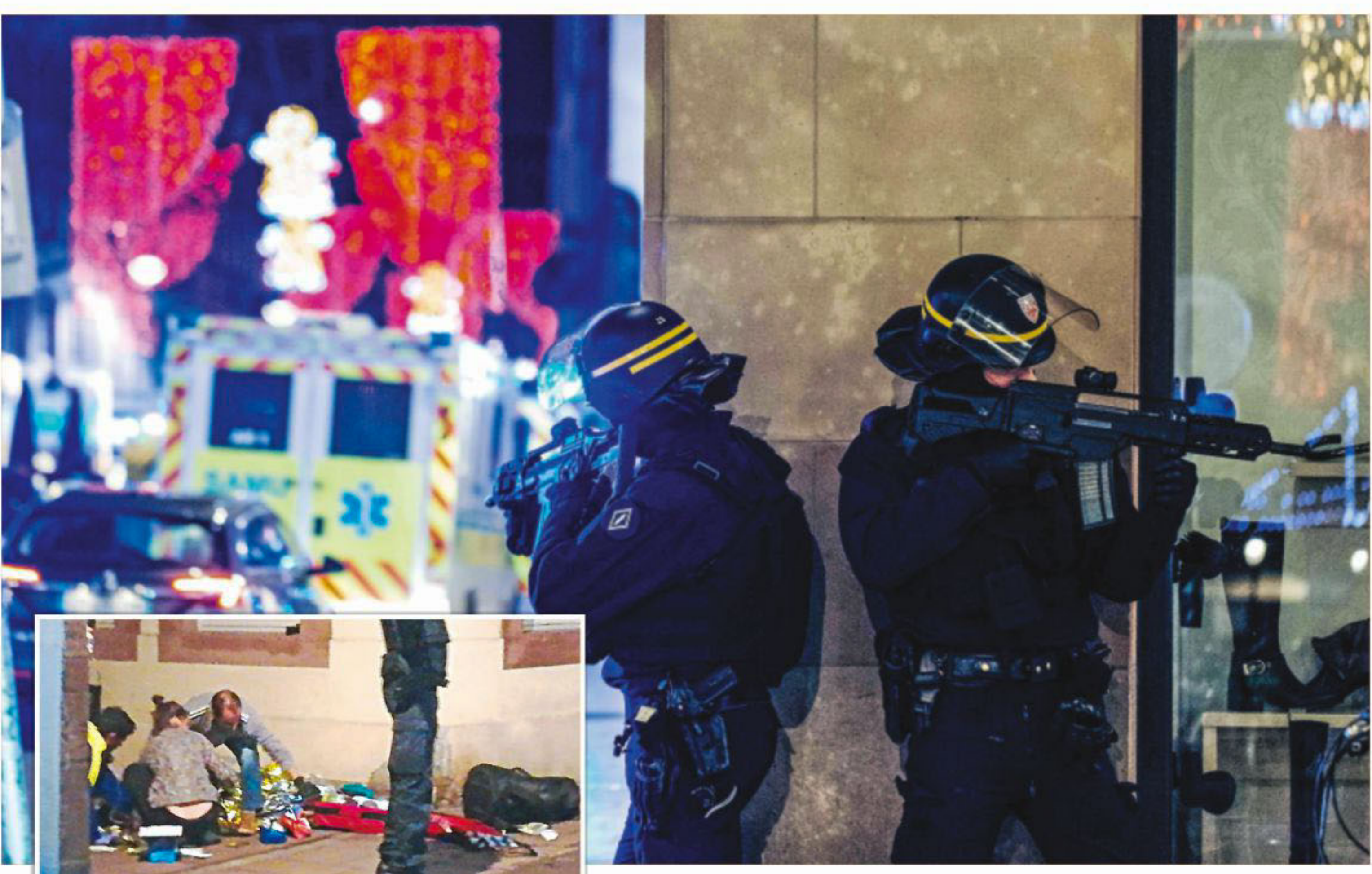
Malaysia ex-PM faces fresh graft charges

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian ex-leader Najib Razak and the former head of 1MDB were yesterday charged with altering an audit of the state fund at the centre of a scandal that helped topple the last government. Najib has now been hit with a total of 39 charges since losing power, most related to his alleged role in looting 1MDB.

BITS OF HISTORY (DECEMBER 12)

1963: Kenya became an independent state within the Commonwealth with Jomo Kenyatta as prime minister; it became a republic on this day in 1964 with Kenyatta as president.
1996: President Saddam Hussein's eldest son, Uday, was shot and wounded in an assassination attempt in Baghdad.
2007: The UN war crimes tribunal sentenced former Bosnian Serb general Dragomir Milosevic to 33 years imprisonment for ordering the deadly shelling of Sarajevo during the Bosnian war.



French police officers stand guard after a shooting breakout in a Christmas market in Strasbourg, eastern France early yesterday. Inset, rescuers treating an injured person in the streets after the shooting incident. PHOTO: AFP

FRANCE MARKET SHOOTING

Cops hunt gunman after two killed

REUTERS, Strasbourg

Police yesterday searched through eastern France for a man suspected of killing at least two people in a gun attack on a Christmas market in Strasbourg and who was known to have been religiously radicalised while in jail. Witnesses told investigators the assailant cried out "Allahu Akbar" (God is Greater) as he launched his attack on the market, the Paris prosecutor said. The prosecutor, Remy Heitz, also suggested the suspect may have chosen his target for its religious symbolism. "Considering the target, his way of operating, his profile and the testimonies of those who heard him yell 'Allahu Akbar', the anti-terrorist police has been called into action, Heitz told a news conference. Police identified the suspect as Strasbourg-born Chérif Chekatt, 29, who is on an intelligence services watch list as a potential security risk. An investigation had been opened into alleged murder with terrorist intent and suspected ties to terrorist networks with intent to commit crimes, Heitz said. Two people were killed and a third person was brain-dead and being kept alive on life support with no chance of recovery, he said. Six other victims were fighting for their lives. France raised its security threat to the highest alert level, strengthening controls on its border with Germany as elite commandos backed by helicopters hunted for the suspect. French and German agents checked vehicles and public transport crossing the Rhine river, along which the Franco-German frontier runs, backing up traffic in both directions. Hundreds of French troops and police were taking part in the manhunt.

Key issues unresolved

Guterres warns 195-nation UN forum as efforts to elaborate 'rule book' for Paris pact run aground

AFP, Katowice

"Key political issues" deadlocking UN climate talks "remain unresolved", UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned yesterday after an unscheduled stop at the troubled negotiations in Poland. The fight against climate change is a "matter of life and death today," he told ministers and delegates at the 195-nation UN forum tasked with beating back the threat of global warming, barely 48 hours before the meet in the coal town of Katowice was set to adjourn.

The two-week talks are tasked with breathing life into the 2015 Paris Agreement, which vows to cap global warming at "well under" two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) and funnel hundreds of billions of dollars to poor countries already feeling the sting of deadly storms, heatwaves and droughts made worse by climate change.

But efforts to elaborate a "rule book" for the Paris pact and to boost the carbon-cutting pledges of all nations have run aground, even as a barrage of scientific reports have warned that only immediate and radical measures can avert catastrophic climate impacts. "The eyes of the world are upon us," said Guterres, who had not planned to return to the talks after addressing the opening plenary 10 days ago. "To waste this opportunity would be a crime against humanity."

But several countries at the talks, led by the United States and Saudi Arabia, have blocked efforts to endorse the report, which many developing countries see as essential. "The IPCC report on 1.5C is the basis for all future action, on what we need to do," Vanuatu Foreign Minister Ralph Regenvanu told AFP. Endorsing the report's findings at the conclusion of the UN forum "is a red line issue for us." Meanwhile, ministers from nations imperilled by rising seas and temperatures on Tuesday called for drastic action at UN climate talks deadlocked over a refusal by big polluters to embrace landmark environmental data. "We all need to act now and fast, but I must stress it requires a strong political will by us leaders," said Taneti Maamau, president of Kiribati in the Pacific. Cook Islands Prime Minister Henry Puna accused some nations of "not willing to accept the stark realities outlined in this report."

COP24 SUMMIT
US, Saudi blocked efforts to endorse IPCC report on 1.5C
Small islands plead for action at talks

compromise our last best chance to stop runaway climate change," he said. "It would not only be immoral, it would be suicidal." A major report called for by the UN climate body concluded in October that Earth's rise in temperature must be capped even lower -- at 1.5C -- to avoid the danger of runaway warming.

China, Canada tension mounts over detention

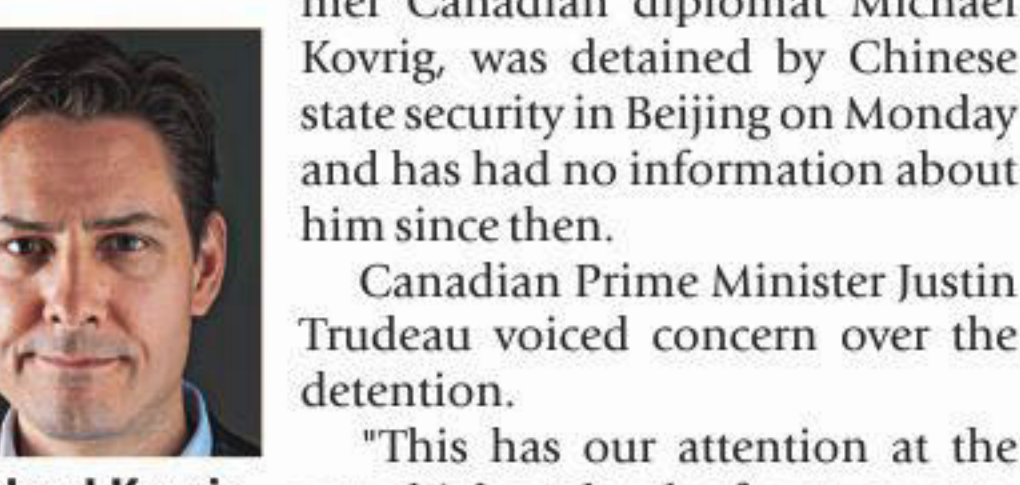
Beijing detains ex-Canadian envoy; Huawei CFO gets bail

AFP, Vancouver

A Canadian court has granted bail to a top Chinese telecom company executive wanted in the United States, as diplomatic tensions turned to the detention of a former Canadian diplomat in Beijing. Meng Wanzhou, the chief financial officer of Huawei, was released on Can\$10 million (US\$7.5 million) bail on Tuesday in a case that has rattled relations between China, the United States and Canada.

Meng, who faces a US extradition bid on charges related to alleged violations of Iran sanctions, was also ordered to surrender her passport and will be subjected to electronic monitoring. "The risk of (Meng's) non-attendance in court can be reduced to an acceptable level by imposing the bail conditions proposed by her counsel," a judge in Vancouver said, prompting the courtroom packed with her supporters to erupt in cheers.

Meng, who later left in a black SUV, will be allowed to stay at a luxury home owned by her husband, Liu Xiaozong, in Vancouver. Her December 1 arrest in Vancouver has shaken China's relations with Canada and the United States, and raised concerns that it could derail a US-China trade war truce. While Meng secured her release, the International Crisis Group (ICG) think tank said its North East Asia senior adviser, former Canadian diplomat Michael Kovrig, was detained by Chinese state security in Beijing on Monday and has had no information about him since then. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau voiced concern over the detention. "This has our attention at the very highest level of our government," said Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland. China had warned Canada of "grave consequences" over Meng's arrest as it demanded her release, although Canada said no link between the two cases had been established. But a former Canadian ambassador to Beijing, Guy Saint-Jacques, said Kovrig's detention was likely linked to Meng's case.



Michael Kovrig

House demands sacked Lanka PM be reinstated

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's legislature yesterday voted overwhelmingly to demand the reinstatement of prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, as a bitter power struggle headed for a government shut down within weeks. Members of Wickremesinghe's party and their allies voted 117-0 asking President Maithripala Sirisena to restore the status quo prior to October 26 when he dismissed his former ally.

"This resolution expressing confidence in me is a vote to defeat the coup of October 26," Wickremesinghe told parliament referring to his controversial sacking by Sirisena six weeks ago. Sri Lanka has been trapped in a bitter power feud since the president replaced Wickremesinghe with Mahinda Rajapakse, a controversial former strongman leader who has failed to secure parliamentary support. Parliament has twice voted against Rajapakse but he has refused to step down.

Instead, Rajapakse and his allies are boycotting parliament since they do not have a majority in the 225-member assembly. It was not immediately clear if yesterday's resolution would be accepted by Sirisena who has vowed he will not give the job back to Wickremesinghe. Courts have prevented Rajapakse and his disputed cabinet exercising the powers they claim until they can prove their legitimacy. A hearing by the Court of Appeal was yesterday put off till January 16. Former finance minister Ravi Karunanayake said the entire public sector will come to a complete stand still from January 1 in the absence of a budget for the New Year. "Unless this parliament approves a budget for 2019, the government will not be able to spend even one cent from January 1," Karunanayake told parliament. Officials have expressed similar fears and urged Sirisena to resolve the crisis at the earliest. Sri Lanka's credit ratings have already been cut.



Ranil Wickremesinghe



Supporters gather outside the Foreign Correspondents Club (FCC) in Hong Kong yesterday, to give the "thumbs-up" gesture in support of jailed Myanmar journalists Wa Lone (bottom L on magazine cover) and Kyaw Soe Oo (bottom R of magazine cover). PHOTO: AFP

ASSAM NRC

SC extends deadline for filing claims

AFP, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court yesterday extended by two weeks a deadline for millions of people left off a citizens register in Assam state to provide the necessary documents to be included. A new draft Register of Citizens (NRC) in the north-eastern state announced in July left off four million people, leaving them potentially stateless and facing an uncertain future. With many of these lacking the necessary papers, only around 1.5 million people have filed claims for inclusion in the last two weeks, according to the state government. But it appealed to the Supreme Court seeking more time, saying it could not process all the claims before the previous deadline of December 15. The new deadline is December 31. The current register includes only those who were able to prove they were in the state before 1971, when millions fled Bangladesh's war of independence into the state, and their descendants. The policy was introduced by the state government, which is controlled by the same BJP party in power nationally. Critics say it is the latest move by the right-wing party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to bolster India's Hindu majority at the expense of minorities. India will hold a national election next year. Assam, a state of 33 million people known for its lush tea estates, has for decades been racked by violence between indigenous tribes and settlers.

Man sues after pinky stuck in armrest

AFP, Los Angeles

A California man has filed a lawsuit against two US airlines after his pinky got stuck in his first-class seat armrest, forcing firefighters and a mechanic to intervene to free the finger. Stephen Keys, an actor who has starred in "Soul Plane" and "Big Time Rush," claims in his suit -- filed in Los Angeles Superior Court against American Airlines Inc. and SkyWest Airlines Inc. -- that he suffered severe emotional distress and weeks of pain after the September 9 incident on board a flight from Reno, Nevada to Los Angeles. The mishap took place after he raised his armrest to reach for his seatbelt and his pinky got stuck in a small hole under the armrest. "The spring mechanism embedded inside of this hole in the armrest applied intense pressure to plaintiff's finger, immediately inflicting injury, swelling and pain," the suit alleges. It adds that Keys repeatedly tried to free his pinky as fellow passengers looked on, "causing his dire situation to become a humiliating public spectacle." Keys claims he suffered for nearly an hour as flight personnel and firefighters tried to dislodge the finger. An airline mechanic finally disassembled the armrest and freed the pinky.

Trump awarded \$293,000

Judge dismisses Stormy Daniels' defamation suit over tweet, orders her to pay the legal fees

REUTERS, Los Angeles

Adult film actress Stormy Daniels must pay more than \$290,000 to reimburse President Donald Trump for legal fees he spent defending himself in a defamation lawsuit she brought against him over a tweet, a judge ruled on Tuesday. Daniels, whose real name is Stephanie Clifford, lost her defamation lawsuit in October, with a federal judge in Los Angeles saying the president's tweet was protected by the freedom of speech clause of the US Constitution. Following that ruling, Trump's attorneys at a hearing last week requested nearly \$800,000 in legal fees and sanctions, but US District Judge James Otero in his latest ruling awarded a fraction of the sum. Otero's ruling awarded Trump most of the legal costs his attorneys had sought, but only \$1,000 in sanctions. "The court's order, along with the court's prior order dismissing Stormy Daniels' defamation case against the president, together constitute a total victory for the president, and a total defeat for Stormy Daniels in this case," Charles Harder, an attorney for Trump, said in a statement. Daniels' attorney, Michael Avenatti, in a statement suggested the attorneys' fees in the defamation case were of small importance in Daniels' broader litigation battle with Trump. Daniels, who has written a "tell-all" book about Trump called "Full Disclosure," has separate from the defamation lawsuit gone to court to challenge the validity of a \$130,000 hush money agreement over a tryst she claimed she and Trump had more than a decade ago.



Stormy Daniels and Donald Trump

STATE ELECTIONS

India voters hoof out cow minister

AFP, New Delhi

India's only dedicated "cow minister" has been dumped in state elections, ending a controversial tenure that saw hundreds of the sacred animals starve to death and poisoned on his watch. Otaram Dewasi, the first head of Rajasthan's cow ministry, was turfed out Tuesday when the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was thumped in the desert state and two other key regional polls. Dewasi, who carried a traditional stick and wore the red turban and white sarong of a desert herdsman, was defeated by 10,000 votes by an independent candidate. Hindus consider cows sacred and the BJP, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has campaigned for their protection at a state and national level and introduced harsh penalties for mistreating them. But the cause has spawned cow vigilantism in parts of India in recent years, with people accused of carrying beef or slaughtering the animals murdered by mobs. Rajasthan, a western state bordering Pakistan, has witnessed some of the most high-profile cow lynchings in recent times. The state created India's first ministry exclusively for cow protection in 2015 when the BJP won the state and appointed Dewasi, a policeman turned politician, to be in charge.