

NEWSIN brief

Warren launches US presidential bid
AFP, Washington

Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren entered the 2020 race for the White House on Monday. The 69-year-old progressive announced she was launching an exploratory committee for president, becoming the first major candidate in what is set to be an extraordinarily crowded Democratic primary, united by a singular focus on unseating the Republican Trump.

Coronation of Thai king set for May
AFP, Bangkok

An elaborate three-day coronation ceremony for Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn will take place between May 4 and 6, more than two and half years after the death of his revered father Bhumibol Adulyadej. This year is poised to be pivotal for Thailand. The country is also set to hold elections, with the junta teasing the date of February 24.

Taliban kills 23 Afghan troops
ALJAZEERA ONLINE

At least 23 security personnel have been killed and dozens of others wounded in a series of attacks by the Taliban on security checkpoints in Afghanistan's northern Sar-e-Pul province, officials said yesterday. Fierce gun battles raged for several hours late on Monday in the centre of Sayad district and outside the provincial capital, Sar-e-Pul, provincial council chief Mohammad Noor Rahmani said.

BITS OF HISTORY (JANUARY 1)

- 1959** - Fidel Castro seized power in Cuba after dictator Fulgencio Batista fled to the Dominican Republic.
- 1995** - The World Trade Organisation came into effect, succeeding GATT.
- 2002** - Some 300 million people in 12 member countries began using the EU's single currency, the Euro.



WELCOME 2019
(From Top, clockwise) A view of the Christ the Redeemer in Rio De Janeiro during the new year fireworks; pro-independence supporters take part in a New Year's Day march in Hong Kong; a protester wearing a "Yellow vest" demonstrates on the Champs-Elysees in Paris; people offer prayers on the first day of the new year at the Meiji Shrine in Tokyo; and revellers gather at Times Square, New York. People across the world welcomed 2019 in their own ways yesterday, putting to bed a tumultuous 2018.



Car rams into Tokyo street injuring 9
REUTERS, Tokyo

At least eight people were injured, one seriously, when a vehicle ploughed into crowds celebrating New Year's Day in Tokyo early yesterday.

A police spokesman said the driver had been detained and national broadcaster NHK said the man had been arrested on suspicion of attempted murder.

He was identified as Kazuhiro Kusakabe, 21, from Osaka. NHK said the suspect had initially described the incident as an "act of terror" but later said the attack was in retaliation for capital punishment.

The incident happened shortly after midnight local time on Monday in the popular tourist area of Harajuku, near Meiji Shrine, in central Tokyo. The street was closed to vehicles at the time to accommodate the large number of pedestrians making their way to the shrine for New Year's prayers.

The suspect fled from the scene and assaulted a passerby before he was captured 20 minutes later, NHK said. About 20 litres of kerosene were found in the vehicle.

Kim warns of 'new path' if sanctions not lifted

AFP, Seoul

Nuclear-armed North Korea wants good relations with the US but could consider a change of approach if Washington maintains its sanctions, leader Kim Jong Un warned in his New Year speech yesterday after 12 months of diplomatic rapprochement.

At a summit with US President Donald Trump in Singapore in June the two signed a vaguely worded pledge on denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula.

But progress has since stalled with Pyongyang and Washington arguing over what that means.

"If the US fails to carry out its promise to the world... and remains unchanged in its sanctions and pressure upon the DPRK," Kim said Tuesday, "we might be compelled to explore a new path for defending the sovereignty of our country and supreme interests of our state".

He was willing to meet Trump again at any time, he added, "to produce results welcomed by the international community".

The North is demanding sanctions relief - it is subject to multiple measures over its banned nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes -- and has condemned US insistence on its nuclear disarmament as "gangster-like".

Washington is pushing to maintain the measures against the North until its "final, fully verified denuclearisation".

In marked contrast with January 1, 2018, when he ordered mass production of nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles, Kim said the North had "declared that we would no longer produce, test, use or spread our nuclear arsenal", calling for the US to take "corresponding measures".



GAS EXPLOSION AT RUSSIA HIGH-RISE

Baby survives beating the odds

AFP, Moscow

Russian rescuers yesterday pulled a baby boy alive from the ruins of an apartment block that collapsed in a gas explosion more than a day earlier, amid freezing temperatures.

"The rescuers heard crying. The baby was saved by being in a cradle and warmly wrapped up," Chelyabinsk regional governor Boris Dubrovsky wrote on his Telegram channel.

The baby boy aged 10 months was taken to hospital and is now being checked for fractures, a medic at the hospital where she is being treated told TASS news agency.

"The little boy is conscious. The prognosis is positive."

Part of the 10-storey apartment building collapsed following a gas explosion on Monday morning in the industrial city of Magnitogorsk, nearly 1,700 kilometres east of Moscow in the Ural mountains.

The baby was found after rescuers were forced to temporarily halt the search for dozens of missing people in the rubble for fear the rest of the block could come down.

The child survived temperatures that fell overnight to around minus 27 degrees celsius (minus 16 degrees Fahrenheit), TASS reported.

So far the incident has claimed at least seven lives and only six survivors have been found, including a 13-year-old boy. 37 people are unaccounted for.

The Soviet-era apartment block was home to around 1,100 people. The blast completely destroyed 35 flats while 10 more were damaged. Residents left homeless were evacuated to a nearby school.

The regional governor Boris Dubrovsky announced a day of mourning on January 2, with flags lowered and entertainment events cancelled, as the disaster toll set a sombre mood in Russia where New Year's Eve celebrations are the biggest annual festivities.



Rescue workers search for victims near a collapsed house following landslides at Cisolak district in Sukabumi, West Java province, Indonesia, yesterday. Rescuers said the landslides triggered by heavy rain left at least 15 people dead and at least 25 missing.

'TOTALITARIAN MODEL INFORMATION CONTROL' IN VIETNAM

Draconian cybersecurity bill comes into effect

AFP, Hanoi

A law requiring internet companies in Vietnam to remove content communist authorities deem to be against the state came into effect yesterday, in a move critics called "a totalitarian model of information control".

The new cybersecurity law has received sharp criticism from the US, the EU and internet freedom advocates who say it mimics China's repressive censorship of the internet.

The law requires internet companies to remove content the government regards as "toxic".

Tech giants such as Facebook and Google will also have to hand over user data if asked by the government, and open representative offices in Vietnam.

The communist country's powerful Ministry of Public Security (MPS) published a draft decree on how the law may be implemented in November, giving companies which offer internet service in Vietnam up to 12 months to comply.

MPS has also said the bill was aimed at

staving off cyber-attacks -- and weeding out "hostile and reactionary forces" using the internet to stir up violence and dissent, according to a transcript of a question-and-answer session with lawmakers in October.

The law also bans internet users in Vietnam from spreading information deemed to be anti-state, anti-government or use the internet to distort history and "post false information that could cause confusion and damage to socio-economic activities".

Critics say online freedom is shrinking under a hardline administration that has been in charge since 2016. Dozens of activists have been jailed at a pace not seen in years.

The law comes into force a week after Vietnam's Association of Journalists announced a new code of conduct on the use of social media by its members, forbidding reporters to post news, picture and comments that "run counter to" the state.

Daniel Bastard of Reporters Without Borders decried the new requirements for journalists and the cybersecurity law, calling it "a totalitarian model of information control".



'Hold fast' Mattis bids farewell to Pentagon

AFP, Washington

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis bade farewell to the Pentagon on Monday, telling the US military to "hold fast" after he quit over a series of fundamental differences with President Donald Trump.

Mattis resigned December 20, after Trump stunned the US establishment by ordering a full troop withdrawal from Syria.

"Our department is proven to be at its best when the times are most difficult," Mattis said in a brief memo to the Pentagon, an apparent reference to the turmoil in Washington.

"So keep the faith in our country and hold fast, alongside our allies, aligned against our foes."

Mattis, a scholar who frequently backs his views with historical anecdotes, also quoted a telegram President Abraham Lincoln sent to General Ulysses Grant in February 1865, near the end of the American Civil War.

"Let nothing which is transpiring, change, hinder, or delay your military movements, or plans," the former Marine Corps general quoted Lincoln as saying.

He added that he was confident military members are "undistracted from our sworn mission to support and defend the Constitution while protecting our way of life."

Mattis was followed in his resignation by Brett McGurk, the US special representative to the coalition fighting the Islamic State movement, which Trump declared to be defeated.

US and Israel formally quit Unesco

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

The United States and Israel have officially quit the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Day, the culmination of a process triggered more than a year ago.

The Trump administration filed its notice to withdraw in October 2017 and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu followed suit, accusing the UN agency of anti-Israel bias.

The Paris-based organisation has previously criticised Israel's occupation of East Jerusalem and granted full membership to Palestine in 2011. The US has demanded "fundamental reform" in the agency.

NUKE INSTALLATIONS, PRISONERS

India, Pakistan exchange list

XINHUA ONLINE, New Delhi

New Delhi and Islamabad yesterday exchanged a list of their nuclear installations and prisoners, officials said.

The exchange was carried out through diplomatic channels simultaneously at New Delhi and Islamabad, India's Foreign Ministry officials said.

"The list of nuclear installations and facilities was exchanged under the Agreement on the Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations between India and Pakistan," a statement issued by India's Foreign Ministry said.

Yesterday's exchange was the 28th consecutive exchange between the two countries since 1992.

The two countries also exchanged the lists of civilian prisoners and fishermen in their respective custody.

"India handed over lists of 249 Pakistan civilian prisoners and 98 fishermen in India's custody to Pakistan. Pakistan has shared lists of 54 civilian prisoners and 483 fishermen in its custody, who are Indians or believed-to-be-Indians," the foreign ministry said.

India has also asked Pakistan to expedite response in the case of 80 Pakistani prisoners who have completed their sentences and await repatriation for want of nationality confirmation by Pakistan.

'GO NEW HORIZONS!'

Nasa rings in New Year with historic flyby of faraway world

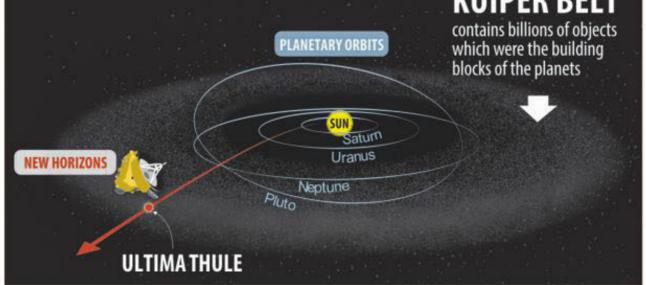
AFP, Tampa

Nasa rang in the New Year yesterday with a historic flyby of the farthest, and quite possibly the oldest, cosmic body ever explored by humankind -- a tiny, distant world called Ultima Thule -- in the hopes of learning more about how planets took shape.

"Go New Horizons!" said lead scientist Alan Stern as a crowd including kids dressed in space costumes blew party horns and cheered at the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory in Maryland to mark the moment at 12:33 am (0533 GMT) when the New Horizons spacecraft aimed its cameras at the space rock 6.4 billion kilometres away in a dark and frigid region of space known as the Kuiper Belt.

Offering scientists the first up-close look at an ancient building block of planets, the flyby took place about a billion miles beyond Pluto, which was until now the most faraway world ever visited up close by a spacecraft.

Hurting through space at a speed of 32,000 miles per hour, the spacecraft aimed to make its closest approach within 2,200 miles of the surface of Ultima Thule. Stern said Ultima Thule is unique because it is a relic from the early days of the solar system and could provide answers about the origins of other planets.



The spaceship was to collect 900 images over the course of a few seconds as it shaved by. Even clearer images should arrive over the next three days.

New Horizons was launched in 2006 and completed its main mission of flying by Pluto in 2015, returning the most detailed images ever taken of the dwarf planet.

KUIPER BELT contains billions of objects which were the building blocks of the planets