

NEWS IN brief

Malaysia's king steps down from throne

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's King Muhammad V resigned yesterday, the first time a monarch has stepped down from the throne before completing their five-year tenure. No reason was given and palace officials did not respond to requests for comment. Malaysia has nine royal households, who typically take turns to sit on the throne. The selection of the next king can be decided by a vote in the Council of Rulers, made up of all nine royal households.

Pentagon chief of staff Kevin Sweeney resigns

CNN ONLINE

Kevin Sweeney has resigned as Pentagon chief of staff after serving the defense secretary for two years. Sweeney retired as a rear admiral in 2014. Sweeney served under former Defense Secretary James Mattis, who announced his resignation December 20 on the heels of President Donald Trump's plans to withdraw troops from Syria.

UAE emir visits cash-strapped Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

The red carpet was rolled out for Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan in Islamabad yesterday, just weeks after his country offered \$3 billion to support Pakistan's battered economy. In a rare gesture, Prime Minister Imran Khan met Al Nahyan at the Pakistan Air Force base and a formation of air force jets marked his arrival with a flyby.

BITS OF HISTORY (JANUARY 06)

1919: Theodore Roosevelt, 26th US president (1901-1909), died.

1929: Mother Theresa arrives in Calcutta.

1993: Rudolf Nureyev, Russian ballet dancer, died at 54. One of the greatest dancers of the century, he was granted political asylum in Paris in 1961.



Maduro will be usurper president

Says new Congress chief of Venezuela

REUTERS, Caracas

The newly elected chief of Venezuela's opposition-run Congress on Saturday said President Nicolas Maduro will be "usurping the presidency" when he swears in for a second term on January 10 after winning a much criticised and broadly boycotted 2018 election.

Legislator Juan Guaido of the hard-line opposition party Popular Will, who was elected to head the legislature on Saturday, said he would confront the "dictatorship" and seek fair elections, without offering details.

His statements add to criticism by governments around the world that have accused Maduro of undermining democracy and mismanaging the economy. But the largely powerless congress has few concrete means of stopping the inauguration or easing Maduro's grip on power.

"Maduro from January 10 will be usurping the presidency of the Republic," said Guaido, a 35-year-old industrial engineer, in his first speech. "This National Assembly, as the only legitimate power elected by Venezuelans, assumes the representation of the people."

Venezuela's annual inflation now tops 1 million percent and basic food and medicine are out of the reach of most citizens, spurring an exodus of some 3 million people since 2015, according to the United Nations.



Kite-flying enthusiasts fly kites on the first day of the eight-day long International Kite Festival in Ahmedabad, India, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

2nd vote shouldn't happen

PM says if Brexit deal is rejected, UK will be in uncharted territory

REUTERS, London

Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday said that Britain would be in uncharted territory if her Brexit deal is rejected by parliament later this month, despite little sign that she has won over sceptical lawmakers.

May also repeated her objections to holding a fresh public vote on the deal.

She said a second referendum would be divisive and disrespectful to those who voted to leave in the initial vote, and also highlighted the lack of time available to hold a new referendum.

"Practically, actually you couldn't get a referendum in time before the 29th of March - you'd be talking about extending Article 50," she said, referring to the two-year exit notice Britain sent to the EU in March 2017.

Britain is due to leave the EU on March 29 but May's inability so far to get her deal for a managed exit through parliament has alarmed business leaders and investors who fear the country is heading for a damaging no-deal Brexit.

May said the vote in parliament would be around Jan 15, as expected, contrary to reports she could delay it. May has already delayed the vote once, in December, when it became clear she would lose unless extra reassurances from the EU

were agreed.

Describing what would happen if she was defeated, May told the BBC: "We're going to be in uncharted territory. I don't think anybody can say exactly what will happen in terms of the reaction we'll see in parliament."

Amid the uncertainty over Britain's next steps - which range from leaving without a deal to not leaving at all - a poll showed more Britons want to remain a member of the EU than leave, and voters want to make the final decision themselves.

The survey by polling firm YouGov showed that if a referendum were held immediately, 46 percent would vote to remain, 39 percent would vote to leave, and the rest either did not know, would not vote, or refused to answer the question.

When the undecided and those who refused to answer were removed from the sample, the split was 54-46 in favour of remaining.

With the parliamentary debate on her deal due to begin on Jan. 9, May said there was still work to do to get reassurances over the Irish backstop from the EU. She also promised parliament would have a greater say in the rest of the Brexit process and warned that rejecting her deal could prevent Britain's exit.

May says parliament vote will be around January 15

Survey shows Britons for staying in EU, want second referendum



LANDSLIDE IN AFGHANISTAN GOLDMINE

30 killed; 7 hurt

AFP, Kunduz

At least 30 people were killed when a gold mine collapsed in northeastern Afghanistan yesterday, officials said, in the latest tragedy to strike the war-torn country.

Another seven were injured in the incident in Kohistan district of Badakhshan province, district governor Mohammad Rustam Raghili told AFP.

Villagers had dug a 60-metre (200-feet) deep shaft in a river bed to search for gold. They were inside when the walls fell in.

"The people were using an excavator to dig a big hole in the river when it collapsed, trapping dozens of workers," Raghili said.

"At least 30 people have been killed and seven wounded."

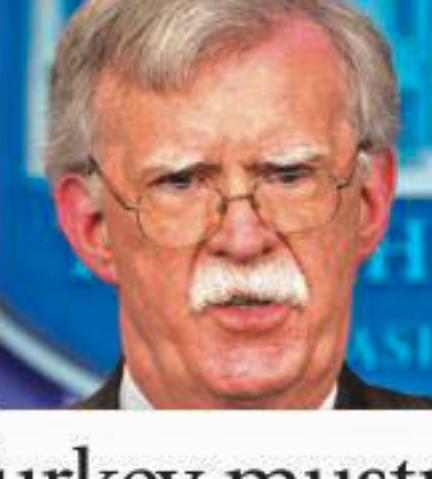
It was not clear why the shaft collapsed, but the provincial governor's spokesman Nik Mohammad Nazari told AFP the miners were not professionals.

Defense ministry helicopters have been dispatched to deliver cash to the families of the victims and airlift the wounded to hospitals, said Hashmat Bahaduri, spokesman for the National Disaster Management Authority.

Bahaduri confirmed the casualty toll, but warned the figures could change.

Badakhshan is a remote, mountainous province in northeast Afghanistan bordering Tajikistan, China and Pakistan. The impoverished region is prone to landslides, particularly in the colder months when heavy snow blankets the province.

Illegal mining is common in resource-rich Afghanistan, with the Taliban relying on the sector for much of its revenue.



Turkey mustn't attack Kurds in Syria: Bolton

REUTERS, Jerusalem

White House national security adviser John Bolton added a new condition yesterday to the US withdrawal from Syria, saying Turkey must agree to protect the United States' Kurdish allies.

President Donald Trump's abrupt decision to announce a US pull-out from Syria left open many questions, chiefly whether Kurds fighters operating in northern Syria would now be targeted by their long-time enemy Turkey.

Bolton, on a four-day trip to Israel and Turkey, said he would stress in talks with Turkish officials, including President Tayyip Erdogan, that the Kurds must be safeguarded.

"We don't think the Turks ought to undertake military action that's not fully coordinated with and agreed to by the United States at a minimum so they don't endanger our troops, but also so that they meet the president's requirement that the Syrian opposition forces that have fought with us are not endangered," Bolton told reporters ahead of talks with Israeli officials.

Bolton, who will travel to Turkey today, said the United States will talk to Turkey to find out what its objectives and capabilities were.

But Bolton said Trump's position is Turkey may not kill the Kurds and that the US withdrawal would not take place without an agreement on that.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that he would discuss Iranian ambitions in neighbouring Syria when he meets Bolton in Jerusalem later yesterday.



Activist and university students demonstrate yesterday to demand the first election in Thailand since the military seized power in 2014 coup to be held on February 24 this year in Bangkok, Thailand. PHOTO: REUTERS

Thai activists protest as polls faces delay

REUTERS, Bangkok

Dozens of Thai activists yesterday protested against a possible delay of a national election set for next month, the first such gathering since the military government lifted a ban on political activity imposed after a 2014 coup.

The junta has promised and postponed the election several times since it came to power, with the latest date set for Feb 24.

However, the vote faces yet another postponement after Deputy Prime Minister Wissanu Kraengsai suggested on Friday that post-election events might clash with rituals related to King Maha Vajiralongkorn's coronation from May 4-6.

That prompted the first protest since the junta lifted a ban on political activities and a gathering of more than five people in December.

"We want the government to hold an election as soon as possible, so that democracy can move forward in our country," said Anon Nampa, a human rights lawyer and anti-junta activist who organized the protest at the Victory Monument area in central Bangkok.

Protestors carried signs which read "We Want Election" and "Election only on Feb 24, 2019", chanting "No delay!" in unison.

Thailand's Election Commission has not officially announced the postponement but said it has acknowledged the government's suggestion that the vote be pushed back.

'We have no choice' Trump insists Democrats have to fund his border wall to end government shutdown

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump stood firm yesterday on his demand for billions of dollars to fund a border wall with Mexico, which has forced a shutdown of the US government now entering its third week.

"We have to build the wall," Trump told reporters as he left the White House for the Camp David presidential retreat, while conceding that the barrier could be "steel instead of concrete."

"It's about safety, it's about security for our country," he said. "We have no choice."

An impasse with lawmakers over funding for the border wall has partially shut down the federal government since December 22.

Talks aimed at ending the shutdown were to continue Sunday, after discussions a day earlier between Vice President Mike Pence and representatives of Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi, the top two Democrats in

Congress, made little headway.

Democrats, who now control the House of Representatives, seem in no mood to make concessions to the president on a border wall Pelosi has described as an "immorality."

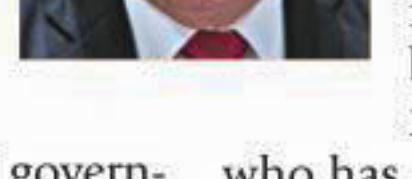
"This shutdown could end tomorrow and it could also go on for a long time," Trump said. "It really depends on the Democrats."

Both Democrats and Republicans have attempted to pin the blame for the shutdown on the other side.

Building a wall along the 2,000-mile (3,200-kilometer) US-Mexico border was a central plank in the 2016 election campaign of Trump,

who has sought to equate immigrants with crime, drugs and gangs.

The president has described the situation at the border as a "national emergency" and has said he is looking into ways to get a wall built without congressional approval.

China passes law to 'Sinicize' Islam
Beijing arranges tour for journalists, non-Western countries to allay fears about 'vocational education training centres'

AGENCIES

China has passed a new law that seeks to "Sinicize" Islam within the next five years, the latest move by Beijing to rewrite how the religion is practised, reported Al Jazeera.

China's main English newspaper, Global Times, reported on Saturday that after a meeting with representatives from eight Islamic associations, government officials "agreed to guide Islam to be compatible with socialism and implement measures to Sinicize the religion."

The newspaper did not provide further details or the names of the associations that agreed to the decree.

China has embarked on an aggressive "Sinification" campaign in recent years with faith groups that were largely tolerated in the past seeing their freedoms shrink under Chinese President Xi Jinping, China's most powerful leader since Mao Zedong.

The report came as Beijing is facing an outcry from activists, scholars, foreign governments and UN rights experts over what they call mass detentions and strict surveillance of the mostly Muslim Uighur minority and other Muslim groups in Xinjiang province.

In August, a UN human rights panel said it had received credible reports that a million or more Uighurs and other minorities in the far western region are being held in what resembles a "massive internment camp."

Last week, the government organised a visit to three such facilities, which it calls vocational education training centres, for a small group of foreign reporters, including Reuters.

In recent days, a similar visit was arranged for diplomats from 12 non-Western countries, including Russia, Indonesia, India, Thailand, Kazakhstan, according to Xinjiang

officials and foreign diplomats.

Senior officials, including Shohrat Zakir, Xinjiang's governor and the region's most senior Uighur, dismissed what they called "slanderous lies" about the facilities.

Speaking in Xinjiang's capital, Urumqi, Shohrat Zakir said the centres had been "extremely effective" in reducing extremism by teaching residents about the law and helping them learn Mandarin.

"As time goes by, the people in the education training mechanism will be fewer and fewer," he said.

Shohrat Zakir said he could not say exactly how many people were in the facilities.

"One million people, this number is rather frightening. One million people in the education mechanism - that's not realistic. That's purely a rumour," he said, stressing they were temporary educational facilities.