

NEWS IN  
brief

## Ayodhya case hearing adjourned till Jan 29

PTI, New Delhi

A new five-judge Constitution bench of the Indian Supreme Court will hear the Ayodhya title dispute case on another day as one of the judges, U U Lalit, recused himself from the case. Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi yesterday announced that a reconstituted bench will on January 29 pass orders on the date and schedule of hearing.

## Pak PM sacks heads of gas utilities over crisis

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan on Wednesday sacked the chiefs of Sui Natural Gas Pipeline Limited (SNGPL) and Sui Southern Gas Company Limited (SSGC) over a severe winter energy crisis that has seen repeated supply outages. Khan took the decision after an inquiry committee found that the two companies were responsible for the crisis.

## US conducts series of strikes in Somalia

AFP, Washington

US forces have conducted a series of air strikes in Somalia in recent days, including one announced Wednesday that officials said killed six jihadis. The strikes come as part of an ongoing mission in which US forces are working with African Union and Somali national security forces to fight the Shabaab movement.

BITS OF HISTORY  
(JANUARY 10)

1917: William Frederick Cody, the American army scout, Indian fighter and showman known as Buffalo Bill, died aged 70.

1946: The first meeting of the United Nations General Assembly began in London.

2003: North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, accusing the United States of trying to topple its political system.



Members of Amnesty International Turkey hold a demonstration to mark the 100th day of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi's killing in front of Saudi Arabia's Consulate in Istanbul, Turkey yesterday. Inset, demonstrators hang a street sign reading "Jamal Khashoggi street" in the street of the Saudi Arabian consulate.

PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP



## Meet halfway in nuke talks

*Xi tells Kim over possible Trump summit, urges concessions on both sides; South willing to co-operate to ease sanctions*

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Chinese President Xi Jinping offered North Korean leader Kim Jong Un firm backing in deadlocked nuclear talks with the United States, insisting the two sides should meet "halfway", state media said yesterday.

Kim visited Beijing by train this week for two days of discussions that reassured China's role in the process, and were seen as a strategy session ahead of a second summit between the North Korean leader and US President Donald Trump.

At their first meeting in Singapore in June, Kim and Trump signed a vaguely worded document with Kim pledging to work towards the "denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula".

But progress has since stalled with Pyongyang and Washington -- which stations 28,500 troops in South Korea -- disagreeing over what that means.

North Korea wants relief from the multiple sets of sanctions imposed on it over its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes, while the US wants the measures to remain in place until Pyongyang gives up its arms -- something it has made no public promise to do.

China also wants the sanctions relaxed and Xi said he

"hopes that the DPRK and the United States will meet each other halfway" according to China's state news agency Xinhua, using the initials of the North's official name.

Xi "spoke highly of the positive measures taken by the DPRK side", it added.

North Korea has carried out six nuclear blasts and launched missiles capable of reaching the whole of the United States, but has performed no such tests for more than a year, and blew up the entrances to a nuclear testing ground it said it no longer needed, reported AFP.

Kim noted the "difficulties and concern" in talks with the US, according to Pyongyang's official KCNA news agency, which said the Chinese leader had issued a ringing endorsement of the North's position.

Meanwhile, China and South Korea called for concessions from the United States as well as North Korea, reported Reuters.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in said yesterday that he would cooperate with the international community to at least partially ease sanctions to allow for some inter-Korean business and tourism ventures, while later noting that Pyongyang needed to take "bold steps" towards denuclearisation to win concessions from Washington.

## US-N KOREA STANDOFF



## Lanka struggles to repay record foreign debt: PM

*Accused war criminal gets top army post*

AFP, Colombo

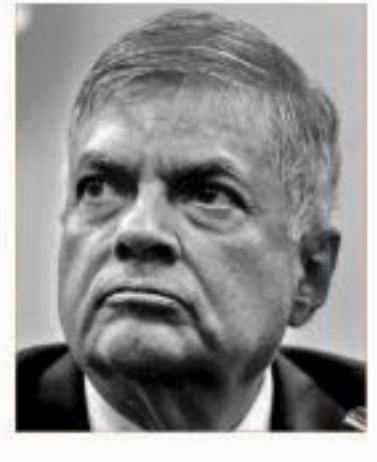
Sri Lanka's prime minister said yesterday the country was struggling to pay back its ballooning foreign debt, blaming a recent political crisis for dealing a "death blow" to the economy.

Ranil Wickremesinghe said his government was scrambling to raise \$1.9 billion to help service a first debt payment of \$2.6 billion, that is due on Monday.

Sri Lanka faces \$5.9 billion in foreign debt repayments in 2019, a record for the cash-strapped island.

The country lost \$1 billion in foreign reserves during a power struggle between Wickremesinghe and President Maithripala Sirisena in late 2018.

Sirisena sacked Wickremesinghe in October and later dissolved parliament to quell any opposition, but Sri Lanka's courts deemed the move unconstitutional.



Wickremesinghe was reinstated 51 days later but not without a cost, the prime minister said.

"We are yet to quantify the losses, but it was a death blow to an economy that was struggling to recover," Wickremesinghe told parliament.

Sri Lanka hopes to raise \$1 billion from the international debt market, another \$500 million from China and Japan and a further \$400 million from the Reserve Bank of India.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's president has appointed a general accused by the United Nations of war crimes to the country's second-highest army ranking, evoking outcry from rights groups.

Major General Shavendra Silva, who commanded an army division accused of gross abuses against civilians during Sri Lanka's civil war, formally assumed duties as Chief of Staff of the army yesterday.

## Delhi cows, elderly to moo-ve in together

AFP, New Delhi

Delhi plans to create a special home for both elderly people and some of the Indian megacity's thousands of cows, in a new animal welfare blitz also aimed at reducing numbers of monkeys and stray dogs.

The local development minister Gopal Rai said as he unveiled the programme on Wednesday that "cows and senior citizens will co-exist, taking care of each other" in the planned pilot facility in southwest Delhi.

"When a cow dries up, people leave her and she ends up in a gaushala (cow shelter). Similarly, humans too are abandoned and sent to old age homes, even by rich families," local media quoted Rai as saying.

Other steps include "birth control" measures for the Indian capital's ubiquitous, mischievous and occasionally dangerous monkeys, the sterilisation of stray dogs and electronic chips for cows and pets.

In addition, people unable to look after their cows -- a common sight on Delhi's roads, impeding traffic and eating rubbish -- will be able to house the animals in special hostels for a small fee.

HUAWEI CFO ARREST  
China accuses Canada of 'double standards'

REUTERS, Beijing

China's ambassador to Ottawa has accused Canada of "double standards" and disregarding his country's judicial sovereignty, in a diplomatic row sparked by the arrest of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou at the request of the United States.

Beijing denounced Canada's arrest of Meng Wanzhou, the chief financial officer of Huawei Technologies Co on December 1 on a US extradition warrant, and threatened reprisals unless the case against Meng was dropped.

Days after the arrest, China detained two Canadian citizens - businessman Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig, a former diplomat and an adviser with the International Crisis Group - whom it is investigating for endangering its national security.

In an article in the Ottawa-based Hill Times newspaper on Wednesday,

Ambassador Lu Shaye said Canada's demands for the release of the two men reflected "double standards" born of "Western egotism and white supremacy".

Lu wrote, "It seems that, to those people, the laws of Canada or other Western countries are laws and must be observed, while China's laws are not, and shouldn't be respected."

A lack of concern in Canada for Meng suggested that humanitarian treatment was only deemed necessary for Canadian citizens, not Chinese people, he added.

China has not drawn a direct link between its detention of the two Canadians and Meng's arrest, but Beijing-based Western diplomats have called the cases a tit-for-tat reprisal.

While Meng has had full access to lawyers, has been granted bail and is able to see family, Kovrig is being denied legal representation, is not allowed to see family, and is limited to one consular visit a month.

AUSTRALIA CONSULATE SCARES  
Arrest made over 38 suspicious parcels

REUTERS, Sydney

Australian police yesterday charged a 49-year-old man for sending as many as 38 packages containing a hazardous material to diplomatic embassies and consulates across the country.

More than a dozen foreign offices received suspicious packages on Wednesday, including the US and British missions in Melbourne.

The man, named as Savas Avan, was charged with sending dangerous articles through a postal service, an offence that carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in jail, the Australian Federal Police (AFP) said in a statement.

Police said the packages contained asbestos, once a popular building material that can cause cancer and scarring of the lungs.

Police, who have recovered 29 of the parcels, said they would intercept the rest. They gave no additional details of how the asbestos was packaged or what the motive might have been.

Australian media on Wednesday said the parcels appeared to contain plastic bags of concrete and asbestos, with "asbestos" written on at least one of the bags.

Avan, who was originally said by police to be 48 years old, will next appear in court in March.

There was no ongoing threat to the general public, the AFP said.

## LOCAL ELECTION DEFEAT

## Taiwan premier, cabinet to quit

REUTERS, Taipei

Taiwan Premier William Lai said yesterday he was resigning along with the self-ruled island's entire cabinet, nearly two months after the defeat of his ruling pro-independence party in local elections.

The election losses present a major challenge to President Tsai Ing-wen who has come under mounting domestic criticism over her reform agenda while facing renewed threats from China, which considers the island its own.

Lai's departure was widely expected. It is standard practice in Taiwan for leaders to go when their party loses a major election. The DPP suffered a significant defeat in November to the China-friendly opposition Kuomintang.

It is also customary for the cabinet to step down when the premier resigns.

"The time is up. I will call a special cabinet meeting tomorrow and resign along with the entire cabinet," Lai told reporters in parliament, adding that Tsai had approved his resignation.

Tsai, who is also from the DPP, was expected to announce a new premier, Lai said, and ministerial appointments would follow.

Taiwan's elected president appoints the premier, who forms the cabinet and runs the government on a day-to-day basis.

Analysts said Tsai, who faces a presidential election in about a year, must shore up public support for her policy on relations with Beijing and boost the island's export-reliant economy in a challenging year amid the China-US trade dispute.

had described his ousting as eroding "the independence of the institution" and its officers' morale. Some critics said the government's actions were part of a wider pattern of government authoritarianism.

A government statement announcing Verma's removal said he had been assigned as director general of fire services. The statement named M. Nageshwar Rao as his replacement.

The decision came following the second meeting of the PM-led selection panel, which also included Congress leader Mallikarjun Kharge and Justice AK Sikri, who was nominated by Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi to represent him.

There were eight counts of charges against Alok Verma in the CVC report presented before the committee. The decision for the removal was taken by a majority with Kharge opposing the move, they said.

The CBI is investigating several high profile cases, including a \$2 billion fraud at Punjab National Bank involving fugitive diamond billionaire Nirav Modi, loan defaults by liquor baron Vijay Mallya and police firing on anti-Vedanta protesters in south India.

Govt to define insult to monarchy  
Says Malaysia PM

AGENCIES

Malaysia must properly define what statements are considered insulting to the royal institution, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday.

At the moment, our enforcement officers do not understand what is considered insult, so we need to spell out what sort of actions or words can be construed as insults.

"I have said before that Malaysia now practises freedom of speech. With this freedom of speech, if you say something is factual, you cannot be prosecuted."

"On the other hand, if we shut the mouths of everyone until people cannot even speak up against acts of crime, then there will be injustice in the country," said Dr Mahathir at a press conference in Putrajaya.

The PM was commenting on the arrests of three individuals for insulting Sultan Muhammad V, reported The Star Online.

Sultan Muhammad V stepped



aside at the weekend after just two years on the throne. No official reason was given, but it came after he reportedly married a Russian ex-queen while on medical leave.

National police chief said two men aged 46 and 27, and a 26-year-old woman, were arrested under tough sedition laws Tuesday for allegedly posting insulting remarks about the abdication on Facebook and Twitter.

The trio face up to three years in jail if found guilty.

Latheefa Koya, executive director of rights group Lawyers for Liberty, criticised the arrests, telling AFP: "The police should not give in to mob rule amid the push by some people for the authorities to act."

A statement from the group, which pushes for legal reforms, added that the sedition act was a "draconian piece of legislation" and it was shocking Malaysia's new administration was using it.