

NEWSIN
briefTrump cancels Davos
trip over wall row

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump on Thursday canceled his upcoming trip to the annual international conference at Davos, blaming the ongoing row in Washington over building wall on the border with Mexico. "I am respectfully cancelling my very important trip to Davos, Switzerland for the World Economic Forum," he said in a tweet.

Cohen to testify to
Congress in Feb 7

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump's former lawyer Michael Cohen will testify in Congress next month, lawmakers said Thursday, posing a potential new threat to the president as the Russia collusion investigation increasingly menaces the White House. The newly Democrat-controlled House Oversight Committee said Thursday that Cohen will testify in a public session on February 7.

Nissan's ex-chief hit
with more charges

AFP, Tokyo

Tokyo prosecutors yesterday filed two new charges of financial misconduct against former Nissan chief Carlos Ghosn, meaning the auto tycoon is unlikely to be leaving his jail cell soon. Lawyers for the former jet-setting executive immediately said they would file a bail application, but have acknowledged that he will probably be detained until a trial.

BITS OF HISTORY
(JANUARY 11)

1935: The American aviator Amelia Earhart made the first transpacific solo airplane flight by a woman.

2008: The New Zealander Sir Edmund Hillary, who along with Nepal's Tenzing Norgay Sherpa became the first to conquer the world's highest peak, Mount Everest, died aged 88.

2009: An Indonesian ferry carrying 250 passengers from Pare-Pare on the west coast of Sulawesi to the city of Samarinda capsized and sank in a storm after being hit by a large wave.



PHOTO: REUTERS

A wounded Palestinian demonstrator is evacuated during a protest at the Israel-Gaza border fence, in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday.

Pompeo blames Obama

Vows to expel 'every last Iranian boot' from Syria

REUTERS, Cairo

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Thursday accused Barack Obama of sowing chaos by abandoning the Middle East to Islamist militants and Iranian influence in a blistering critique of the former president's policies even as Pompeo's boss, President Donald Trump, moves to pull American troops out of Syria.

In a speech at the American University in Cairo, Pompeo dispensed with a US diplomatic tradition of avoiding public airing abroad of domestic disputes by blasting Obama at the site of a landmark 2009 speech by Trump's predecessor aimed at improving relations with the Islamic world.

Pompeo presented America as "a force for good in the Middle East" and suggested Obama saw the United States as "a force for what ails the Middle East."

Some former US officials and analysts accused the top American diplomat of misreading history and camouflaging Trump's own desire to reduce US commitments in the region.

Pompeo accused Obama of underestimating "the tenacity and viciousness of radical Islamism," of failing to adequately support the 2009 "Green Movement" mass protests against a disputed election in Iran, and faulted him for not

bombing Syria in retaliation for chemical weapons use by government forces in its civil war.

"What did we learn from all of this? We learned that when America retreats, chaos often follows. When we neglect our friends, resentment builds. And when we partner with our enemies, they advance," Pompeo said.

Pompeo is touring the region to try to explain US strategy after Trump's surprise announcement last month of an abrupt withdrawal of all 2,000 US troops from Syria, which rattled allies, shocked top US officials and prompted US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis's resignation.

Pompeo sought to reassure allies that Washington remains committed to the "complete dismantling" of the threat posed by the Islamic State militant group and to ending Iranian influence in Syria despite Trump's decision to withdraw

troops there.

US plans to jointly host a global summit focused on the Middle East, particularly Iran, next month in Poland, the US State Department said yesterday.

Iran's foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, mocked

Pompeo's speech, writing on Twitter: "Whenever/wherever

US interferes, chaos, repression and resentment follow."

CHAOS IN MIDDLE EAST

US top diplomat says
Obama's policies made
ground for extremists

US to host Iran-focused
world summit
next month

Syria withdrawal
has started

Says US-led coalition

AFP, Hasakeh

The US-led coalition in Syria has begun withdrawing its troops, a spokesman said yesterday, less than a month after US President Donald Trump made his shock announcement.

The force which has battled the Islamic State group since 2014 started scaling down but it remained unclear how long the drawdown process would last.

"CJTF-OIR has begun the process of our deliberate withdrawal from Syria," spokesman Colonel Sean Ryan told AFP in a statement, referring to the US-led anti-jihadist force.

"Out of concern for operational security, we will not discuss specific timelines, locations or troops movements," he said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that the coalition had started scaling down its presence at Rmeilan airfield in the Hasakeh province in northeastern Syria.

"On Thursday, some American forces withdrew from the Rmeilan military base," Rami Abdel Rahman, the head of the Britain-based monitoring organisation, said.

"This is the first such pullout of American forces since the US president's announcement" of a military withdrawal from Syria last month, he said.

The US-led coalition has several other bases across northeastern Syria, as well as in neighbouring Iraq, where Trump has said his forces would remain.

A US defence official in Washington had earlier confirmed to AFP that equipment was being removed from Syria.

Ex-CBI chief
Verma resigns
from service

AGENCIES

Alok Kumar Verma yesterday resigned from service, a day after he was removed as the CBI Director by the Indian Prime Minister-led high-powered committee.

Verma refused to join as Director General of the Fire Services, Civil Defence and Home Guards, as per the orders issued by the government on Thursday.

He alleged that the committee had not provided him an opportunity to explain the details as recorded by the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) before arriving at the decision.

Alok Verma was suspended in October along with his deputy after they accused each other of bribery and interfering in investigations.

The spat embarrassed the CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation), which fulfils a similar role to the US Federal Bureau of Investigation, and also led to accusations that the Modi government had damaged the independence of the agency.

India's highest court ordered the government on Tuesday to reinstate Verma, but barred him from taking major policy decisions until the conclusion of the probe.

In his earlier petition to the court, Verma 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.

Poland arrests Chinese
employee of Huawei

Beijing says 'greatly concerned' by reports

REUTERS, Warsaw

Poland has arrested a Chinese employee of Huawei and a Polish national involved in cyber business on allegations of spying. Polish media reported yesterday, deepening the controversy over Western criticism of the Chinese telecoms equipment maker.

US intelligence agencies allege Huawei Technologies Cos Ltd is linked to China's government and that its equipment could contain "backdoors" for use by government spies.

No evidence has been produced publicly and the firm has repeatedly denied the claims. But the criticism has led several Western countries and companies to look into whether they should allow Huawei's equipment to be used in their telecoms networks, straining relations with Beijing.

Polish public TV channel TVP said security services had searched the local offices of Huawei, as well as the offices of telecoms

firm Orange Polska, where it said the Polish national works.

China's foreign ministry said it was "greatly concerned" by the reports, and urged Poland to handle the case "justly."

"We are aware of the situation, and we are looking into it. We have no comment for the time being," Huawei said in a statement.

"Huawei complies with all applicable laws and regulations in the countries where it operates, and we require every employee to abide by the laws and regulations in the countries where they are based," it added.

Orange Polska said in a statement the security agency had on Tuesday gathered materials related to an employee, whom it did not identify. The company added it did not know if the investigation was linked to the employee's professional work.

TVP said the security services also searched the offices of Poland's telecoms regulator, the Office of Electronic Communications, but



A man bikes past a graffiti with the word 'vote' in Bangkok, Thailand, yesterday. Thailand is scheduled to hold its first national election next month since the military seized power in 2014 coup.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Canada wants 1m
new immigrants

CNN ONLINE

Remember when you said you wanted to move to Canada? Now is a good time to start packing your bags.

The Canadian Parliament has announced plans to add more than one million new permanent residents in the next three years. That's nearly one percent of the country's population each year.

Canada welcomed more than 286,000 permanent residents in 2017 and projects that number could reach 350,000 this year. And 360,000 in 2020. And 370,000 in 2021.

"Thanks in great part to the newcomers we have welcomed throughout our history, Canada has developed into the strong and vibrant country we all enjoy," said Ahmed Hussen, Canada's minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship (IRCC).

Hussen, himself an immigrant from Somalia, said the influx will help offset Canada's aging population and declining birth rate while growing its labor force.

Canada's friendly stance towards new residents comes as many other Western nations, including the United States, are adopting more restrictive immigration policies.

World pressure mounts
on 'illegitimate' Maduro

AGENCIES

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro started a second term on Thursday, defying critics in the United States and Latin America who called him an illegitimate usurper of a nation where economic chaos has wrought a humanitarian crisis.

The country's pro-government Supreme Court, which has largely supplanted the opposition-run Congress, swore him in following a welcome with a symphony orchestra and cheering supporters waving miniature yellow, blue and red Venezuelan flags.

The ceremony contrasted with the harsh realities that face the former bus driver turned socialist leader, including hyperinflation, severe food and medicine shortages and an exodus of millions of citizens.

Before he had even completed his inaugural speech, the United States decried a "usurpation of power," and

announced it was cutting diplomatic ties - highlighting the growing isolation that Maduro will face.

US refused to recognize Maduro and urged rank-and-file government employees to empower the opposition, reported AFP.

"We will continue to increase pressure on the corrupt regime, support the democratic National Assembly, and call for democracy and freedom in Venezuela," national security advisor John Bolton tweeted.

"A new world has risen up that refuses to be controlled by the imperial and hegemonic orders of a single nation or its satellite countries," Maduro said following his swearing-in.

"That's the rallying cry of our revolution to the peoples and governments of the world."

The European Union, and many Latin American countries condemned the vote last year, and issued withering criticism of Maduro on Thursday.

Far right mulls
prospects of
German 'Dexit'

AFP, Riesa

Far right party AfD meets to decide whether to champion Germany's exit from the EU in their campaign for the upcoming European parliamentary elections, at a time when Brexit is already roiling the bloc.

Members of the anti-immigration party were holding a four-day congress from yesterday to firm up a manifesto for the May 23 elections, when populists and nationalist groups are expected to make gains across Europe.

If the party's rank-and-file decides to adopt the "Dexit" plan, the AfD would open another front in its battle against mainstream political classes. It has already openly questioned the country's atonement culture over World War II.

It is not clear how the seats will be allotted and what role the main opposition Congress party will have in the state, but SP's chief Akhilesh Yadav hinted that it will not have a significant role to play.

"We can give Congress two seats they have always held," Yadav told news channel NDTV, referring to constituencies from where Congress President Rahul Gandhi and his mother Sonia Gandhi have contested in the past.

GENERAL ELECTION IN INDIA 2019
Rivals unite in UP in
a bid to beat Modi

REUTERS, New Delhi

Two political rivals in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh will form a alliance in a bid to defeat Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in national election scheduled for May, leaders of the parties said.

The Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), both of whom command large support bases among Uttar Pradesh state's working class and are led by former chief ministers, will contest the election as a team, they said.

Uttar Pradesh is India's most populous state and accounts for about a sixth of all members of the parliament. Barring a couple of exceptions in the 1990s, the party winning the most number of seats there has historically helped form the federal government.

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CITIZENSHIP TO NON-MUSLIMS

India slaps cases
against critics

REUTERS, Guwahati

Indian police yesterday said they are investigating an academic, a journalist and a peasant leader for possible sedition for publicly opposing a proposal to grant citizenship to non-Muslims from neighbouring Muslim-majority countries.

Critics have called the proposal blatantly anti-Muslim and an attempt by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to boost its Hindu voter base ahead of a general election due by May.

The cases have been filed amid a wave of protests in the BJP-governed northeastern state of Assam. A small regional party in India quit the ruling coalition on Monday in protest against the plan.

The Modi government is facing growing criticism for stifling criticism, including in the media. A television journalist in the region was jailed last month for criticising the government on social media.

"We have registered a case against a few people based on certain statements that they made at a public rally in Guwahati," Deepak Kumar, a police official from Guwahati in Assam, told Reuters.

The three have not been charged.

Hiren Gohain, an 80-year-old academic, peasant leader Akhil Gogoi and journalist Manjot Mahanta have been accused of criminal conspiracy and attempting to wage a war against the government, Kumar said.

The bill, which seeks to give citizenship to Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Christians and Parsis from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, has been passed by the lower house of the parliament.