

# NEWSIN brief

## US top court blocks Louisiana abortion law

AFP, Washington

The US Supreme Court on Thursday blocked a Louisiana law that critics say would limit access to abortion in the southern state. The decision was made by a narrow majority -- 5 votes to 4 -- with Chief Justice John Roberts joining the court's progressive justices to block the legislation, which would have taken effect Friday. It was considered a test for the high court, swung to the right under President Donald Trump.

## Brazil dam disaster toll rises to 157

AFP, Sao Paulo

The toll from a dam collapse at a mine in southeast Brazil's Minas Gerais state has risen to 157 deaths after nearly two weeks of searches, with 182 missing, authorities said Thursday. Those listed as missing are presumed dead, but not yet located under the layers of muddy mining waste released when the tailings dam broke apart in the town of Brumadinho on January 25.

## Ten trapped by avalanche in J&K

AFP, Srinagar

Rescuers yesterday battled to reach the site of an avalanche that buried 10 people in Indian-administered Kashmir following two days of heavy snowfall across the region, police said. The avalanche hit a fire emergency facility late Thursday in the Banihal area of the Kashmir valley. Six police, two prisoners and two other personnel had taken refuge there during a storm. The avalanche in Banihal came after two days of heavy snowfall that cut electricity supplies to many areas and blocked roads.

## BITS OF HISTORY (FEBRUARY 08)

**2003:** India expelled Pakistan's acting high commissioner and four other mission staff, accusing them of funding separatists in Indian Kashmir.



## Europe can't be trusted

Says Khamenei

AFP, Tehran

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei yesterday said that Europe "cannot be trusted", a week after the EU launched a trade mechanism to bypass US sanctions on Tehran.

"These days there's talk of the Europeans and their proposals. My advice is that they shouldn't be trusted, just like the Americans," he said at a meeting with air force officials, his website reported.

"I'm not saying we shouldn't have relations with them. This is about trust," he added.

Britain, France and Germany last week launched a special payment mechanism called INSTEX to help save the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers.

It would allow Tehran to keep trading with EU companies in spite of US sanctions renewed after Washington quit the accord last year.

Tehran has cautiously welcomed INSTEX as a "first step", but US officials said the new entity would not have any impact on efforts to exert economic pressure on Iran.

Khamenei also accused Europe of hypocrisy over human rights, criticising France's treatment of protesters in Paris.

"They (anti-riot police) attack protesters in Paris streets and blind them, then they have the audacity to make human rights requests to us," he said.



Local residents along with security personnel search for missing people after a snow avalanche hit a police post at Qazigund Jawahar Tunnel in Kulgam district, Kashmir, yesterday. Three policemen were rescued yesterday while five other bodies were recovered from an avalanche that buried 10 people following two days of heavy snowfall, police said.

PHOTO: AFP

## TRUMP'S TAX RECORD, REAL ESTATE BUSINESS AND RUSSIA TIES

# Democrats open investigations

## US president lashes out, terms probes as 'presidential harassment'

AFP, Washington

Newly empowered House Democrats kicked off a barrage of investigations into President Donald Trump's taxes, real estate business and Russia ties Thursday, raising the pressure on the White House after two years of insulation by a Republican majority.

Trump lashed out about "presidential harassment" as one House committee opened a hearing into forcing the release of his long-hidden tax returns, and another began questioning his controversial policy to separate immigrant children from their parents at the US-Mexico border.

"The Dems and their committees are going 'nuts,'" Trump tweeted.

"The Republicans never did this to President Obama, there would be no time left to run government," he said.

Both sides were girding for tough legal clashes pitting congressional powers against those of the presidency.

House Judiciary Chairman Jerrold Nadler threatened Trump's acting attorney general, Matthew Whitaker, with a subpoena if he did not turn over records of his communications with the White House in reference to Special Counsel

Robert Mueller's ongoing investigation into Russian election meddling.

And Adam Schiff, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, laid out a plan to begin probing Trump's business ties to Russia, citing fears of money laundering and of "foreign financial or other leverage over President Trump."

Schiff's committee is planning to hear testimony



from the president's former personal lawyer, Michael Cohen, who has already divulged to investigators inside information about the operations of the president's real estate business, the Trump Organization and Trump's 2016 election campaign.

House Democrats have a long list of Trump-focused issues to probe after being stifled for two years by majority Republicans.

Winning control of the House in November allows them to open an investigative assault on the White House in the same way that -- contrary to Trump's claim -- Republicans laid siege to former president Barack Obama.

A shortlist of topics include conflicts of interest and mismanagement by cabinet members; Trump's benefits from family business while in the White House; and security lapses by Trump and his White House staff.

"We will not surrender our constitutional responsibility of oversight," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Thursday.

Altogether, the probes elevate the chance that Trump could face impeachment if serious wrongdoing is found.

Thursday's House Ways and Means hearing into Trump's taxes would break what he declared in 2017 as a red line -- that investigations should not touch his business and finances.

Unlike previous presidents, Trump has refused to release his tax records. His lawyers claim they have been under review by the Internal Revenue Service since 2002. A 2016 New York Times analysis based on limited information concluded that Trump may have paid minimal or even no taxes each year since 1995.

## KNIFE AND ARSON ATTACKS

# 15 killed as China celebrates New Year

AFP, Beijing

Fifteen people were killed in China on the night of the Lunar New Year in two family tragedies, after one man started a fire and another went on a knife rampage.

As people celebrated to welcome in the Year of the Pig Monday night, a man surnamed Lu set fire to the home of his brother in the northern province of Shaanxi, killing seven, according to police in the town of Baoji.

The brother, his wife, their fathers and their three children died in the blaze, police said on the Twitter-like Weibo platform.

A few hours after the incident police arrested the suspect, who had just tried to kill himself.

During the same night, a man surnamed Guo, who suspected his wife of adultery, stabbed eight people to death and injured seven in a village in the northwest province of Gansu, according to police in the commune of Baiyin.

The man, aged 49, has been arrested. The identities of the victims have not been released.

Knife attacks are common in China, where carrying of firearms is strictly regulated. Violent crime has been on the rise as the economy has boomed in recent decades and the gap between rich and poor has widened rapidly.



Palestinian demonstrators evacuate a wounded comrade during a demonstration near the fence along the border with Israel, east of Gaza City, yesterday. A Palestinian teenager was killed by Israeli fire during clashes along the Gaza border, the health ministry in Hamas-run enclave said.

PHOTO: AFP

# Bezos accuses Enquirer of 'blackmail' over intimate photos

AFP, Washington

Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos on Thursday accused the publisher of the National Enquirer of blackmail after it threatened to publish intimate photographs sent by the billionaire to his mistress if he did not cease his investigation into how the newspaper got the pictures.

It comes after the tabloid, having accessed private text messages, last month reported Bezos had an extramarital affair with former news anchor and entertainment reporter Lauren Sanchez -- a leak that led to his divorce.

In a post on blogging platform Medium Thursday, Bezos said Enquirer publisher American Media Inc (AMI), led by David Pecker, approached him with a threat to publish the photos if he did not halt an investigation into the motives behind the leak.

In the post, Bezos, who also owns The Washington Post, pointed to AMI and David Pecker's previous cooperation with President Donald Trump -- including payments made to suppress negative stories, currently under

investigation by federal prosecutors.

Bezos, his newspaper and Amazon are all regular targets of Trump's signature Twitter tirades. Bezos also raised the publisher's links to Saudi Arabia -- whose Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is accused of directing the murder of Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi.

"My ownership of the Washington Post is a complexifier for me. It's unavoidable that certain powerful people who experience Washington Post news coverage will wrongly conclude I am their enemy," Bezos wrote in the blog post.

"President Trump is one of those people, obvious by his many tweets. Also, The Post's essential and unrelenting coverage of the murder of its columnist Jamal Khashoggi is undoubtedly unpopular in certain circles."

He added: "Rather than capitulate to extortion and blackmail, I've decided to publish exactly what they sent me, despite the personal cost and embarrassment they threaten," Bezos wrote in the post, which was entitled "No thank you, Mr. Pecker" and included copies of emails from AMI.



# EU, LatAm ministers call for free elections in Venezuela

## US rejects talks with Maduro, revokes visas of MPS

AFP, Montevideo

Ministers from more than a dozen European and Latin American countries on Thursday called for "free, transparent and credible presidential elections" in Venezuela as a solution to the roiling political crisis there.

The International Contact Group (GCI) said it was committed to finding a "peaceful, democratic" way out of the power struggle between President Nicolas Maduro and opposition leader Juan Guaido "without the use of force."

Meanwhile, The United States said Thursday it was revoking visas of Venezuelan lawmakers aligned with Maduro as it criticized European and Latin American countries for seeking dialogue with the embattled leader.

Elliot Abrams, the new US envoy on the Venezuelan crisis, said that countries should only deal with Guaido.

The political standoff comes with Venezuela mired in economic crisis, marked

by hyperinflation and shortages of food and medicine.

The GCI said it would make contact with Venezuelan authorities and regional and international partners to "establish the necessary guarantees for a credible electoral process, as soon as possible," and to allow in humanitarian aid sent by the United States to Colombia's border with Venezuela.

The GCI, which was meeting in Uruguay's capital Montevideo, said it would send a technical mission to Venezuela.

Guaido's key demand is for Maduro to step down and hand power over to a transitional government ahead of new elections.

Maduro, for his part, has said he is prepared to sanction early legislative elections, but that would only serve to present him with a chance to take control of the one of Venezuela's five government branches dominated by the opposition.

## THAI PRINCESS'S ENTRY INTO POLITICS

# WHAT IT MEANS?

Thai Princess Ubolratana will stand as a candidate for prime minister in March elections, the first time a royal has run for top civilian office. Her game-changing entrance to Thailand's turbulent political scene throws fresh intrigue over the coming poll, the first since a 2014 coup. So what does her candidacy mean for the future of Thai politics, and will it bring unity?

## HOW IS THE JUNTA AFFECTED?

Shortly after the Thai Raksa Chart party announced Ubolratana's candidacy for premier, junta leader Prayut Chan-O-cha said he would also stand for the post -- for a political grouping aligned with the military. But the princess's involvement is a serious roadblock to his ambitions, putting him in direct rivalry with a member of the institution he seized power vowing to defend. Thai Raksa Chart, with a wide electoral pull across the country, is part of the political machine headed by former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a coup in 2006. Prayut's chances of returning as premier are getting "smaller and smaller," according to Puangthong Pawakapan, professor of political science at Chulalongkorn University.

## WILL IT HEAL DEEP POLITICAL DIVIDES?

Analysts are divided over whether the move will help bridge Thailand's bitter schisms. They are broadly between the Shinawatra-aligned rural poor and the Bangkok-based elite, and have resulted in rounds of deadly street protests and two coups since 2006. Coming out on the side of the Shinawatras will further complicate Thailand's troubled politics, said Pavin Chachavalponpun, associate professor at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University. "Thai politics has been drawn along the monarchy fault line and the latest move has further deepened that line." But the change was also seen as deft political footwork by Thaksin, who was spotted watching a World Cup football match last year with the princess in Russia. "In the past he (Thaksin) has been criticised as an anti-royalist force, and this is how he has changed," said Kanokrat Lerthchoosakul, a political science lecturer at Chulalongkorn University.



## HOW THE PRINCESS WILL DO IN POLITICS?

Her political experience is limited, but the Shinawatras have a deep pool of political know-how. Thaksin and his sister Yingluck were both ousted in military coups, in 2006 and 2014 respectively. Still, their parties have won every election since 2001. Ubolratana is well-known among the Thai public having appeared in movies, stage performances and maintaining an active vibrant social media presence. "I feel great. And I think she's a suitable choice," Thai homemaker Nirinsiri Chanboriboon, 41, told AFP after the announcement. But she is still untested politically and Thai social media was full of scepticism over the move -- with many unsure what to make of it. But by entering the political arena the princess may push the royals closer to public scrutiny. "It may not be promising for the royal institution itself," Kanokrat said, adding that in the near future they may have to confront direct political pressure from the public.

## WHAT ABOUT LESE MAJESTE NOW?

Thailand's monarchy is protected by one of the world's toughest royal defamation laws, making detailed discussion about the family's role almost impossible inside the kingdom. Ubolratana's entry into politics raises questions about how the media can cover her campaign, and even how analysts or the public can discuss her publicly. Technically, the princess would not be covered. She also relinquished her royal titles after marrying an American decades ago, before divorcing and returning to Thailand. She is however considered a member of the royal family and performs royal duties, and 112 has been routinely interpreted to cover any aspect of the monarchy. Under "112" anyone convicted of defaming, insulting or threatening the king, queen, heir or regent faces between three and 15 years in prison on each count.

SOURCE: AFP

## Labour's Brexit offer rebuffed by UK govt

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Theresa May's government on Thursday repeated its opposition to negotiating a future UK-EU customs union, after the opposition Labour Party named that as its price for backing her Brexit plan.

The rebuff came after an official in Brussels said EU President Donald Tusk had told May that the plan from main opposition Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn "might be a promising way out of the impasse".

Corbyn wrote to May ahead of her meetings with EU leaders in Brussels on Thursday, setting out his terms for supporting her withdrawal deal following its rejection by MPs last month.

He noted the EU has rebuffed her efforts to modify the controversial Irish "backstop" arrangement in



the deal, but outlined changes to an accompanying political declaration on future ties that he said would secure his backing.

These include a commitment to a "permanent and comprehensive" UK-EU customs union, in which Britain has a "say" on future European Union trade deals.

May has repeatedly said that a customs union would stop Britain signing its own trade deals, and her Downing Street office repeated this on Thursday.

"It's welcome that the leader of the opposition is engaging in this and it's important that we continue to hold discussions to find a way forward to deliver Brexit," an official said.