

Nobel literature prizes
to be given this year

REUTERS, Stockholm

The Swedish Academy will be allowed to give the 2018 and 2019 Nobel literature prizes together after a scandal prevented last year's award, the head of the troubled literary body told a newspaper on Tuesday. The Nobel Foundation last year stopped the academy from awarding the prize after a string of sexual misconduct allegations against the husband of one of its board members effectively paralysed the institution.

China raises defence
spending by 7.5pc

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday announced a 7.5 percent increase in military spending in 2019, lower than last year as the country faces an economic slowdown, but still likely to make Asian neighbours nervous. Boasting the world's largest army, China's military spending is second only to the US, which budgeted \$716 billion for defence in 2019.

Guaido returns
to Venezuela

AFP, Caracas

Venezuela's opposition leader Juan Guaido received a hero's welcome from thousands of flag-waving supporters chanting "Yes, you can!" as he returned to Caracas on Monday, defying the threat of arrest from embattled President Nicolas Maduro's government. Guaido announced a new protest march for Saturday to ramp up the pressure on Maduro.

Malaysia joins ICC

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia has become a member of the International Criminal Court, a minister said yesterday, in a boost for the beleaguered institution. The ICC is the world's only permanent war crimes court and aims to prosecute the worst abuses when national courts are unable or unwilling.

ALLEGED OBSTRUCTION OF JUSTICE AND ABUSE OF OFFICE BY TRUMP

Democrats launch sweeping probe

House Judiciary Committee seeks info on 81 people, organisations including Trump's inner circle

AGENCIES

US Democratic lawmakers have launched their most ambitious investigation yet into alleged obstruction of justice and abuse of office by Donald Trump, targeting dozens of individuals in the president's inner circle.

With controversies swirling around Trump, the powerful House Judiciary Committee's chairman sent strongly worded letters to family members of the president -- including sons Don Jr and Eric -- as well as political confidantes and related entities.

The letters demanded documents that could shed light on possible wrongdoing by the administration and Trump himself.

Son-in-law Jared Kushner and the Trump Organization's longtime chief financial officer, Allen Weisselberg, were among the 81 people and organizations -- such as the National Rifle Association -- receiving letters from the panel's Democratic chairman Jerry Nadler.

They also include White House ex-aides Steve Bannon and Hope Hicks, current Trump personal lawyer Jay Sekulow, former attorney general Jeff Sessions, and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

The request is the most serious overt ramp-up of investigations into Trump since Democrats took control of the House of Representatives in early January, and seeks to uncover whether Trump or his administration participated in obstruction of justice or public corruption -- potentially impeachable offenses.

Trump himself swatted away the probe as a "political hoax," but said he would cooperate. He later hardened his

reaction, tweeting that any effort by the Democrats to probe new avenues of possible wrongdoing "will never work."

White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders lambasted the probe as "disgraceful and abusive." The strong statement further claimed that "the Democrats are not after the truth, they are after the president."

Conspicuously absent from the list of Nadler's targets -- who have two weeks to respond -- is the president's eldest

White House blasts Democrats' 'disgraceful and abusive' probe

US Senate set to reject Trump's emergency declaration

US attorney general will not recuse himself from Mueller probe



daughter Ivanka Trump, a senior White House advisor married to Kushner.

The chairmen of three other House panels also joined the fray, demanding the White House produce details of communications between Trump and Russian leader Vladimir Putin, after reports that such information was destroyed or hidden in the aftermath of their 2017 Helsinki summit.

The US intelligence community has concluded that Russia

meddled in the 2016 presidential election, and that Putin ordered the influence campaign as a way to help elect Trump. The US president has repeatedly casted doubt on the findings.

Nadler's broad investigation focuses on Trump's business dealings and obstruction of justice allegations, along with possible Russian collusion. It also will address accusations of campaign finance law violations and potential violations of the US Constitution's ban on foreign emoluments. It also includes hush money payment to two women who say they had affairs with Trump.

Meanwhile, US Attorney General William Barr will not recuse himself from overseeing Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 election, a Justice Department spokeswoman said on Monday.

And compiling more pressure on Trump, the Republican-led US Senate is set to reject the national emergency Donald Trump declared to build his Mexico border wall, likely forcing the US president's first veto, Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said Monday.

The House of Representatives, which is controlled by Democrats, passed the so-called resolution of disapproval and sent it to the Senate, which is expected to vote in the coming weeks.

Senate Republicans have a 53-47 advantage. But four of them have now announced they will vote with Democrats to block Trump, who is seeking to bypass Congress to unlock funds for construction of a wall on the US-Mexico border that he insists will reduce illegal immigration and drug trafficking.



KHASHOGGI MURDER

US senators vow to push for stronger response

REUTERS, Washington

Republican and Democratic US senators said on Monday they were frustrated with the Trump administration's failure to provide more information about the murder of Saudi Arabian journalist Jamal Khashoggi and vowed to push for a stronger response.

State and Treasury Department officials briefed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee behind closed doors on Monday evening. Lawmakers said they had learned nothing new.

"It was a complete waste of time. I knew more than they did," Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, a close ally of President Donald Trump on many issues, told reporters.

Graham said it was time for more action, but did not elaborate.

Republican Senator Mitt Romney said: "It was not very helpful. And it was frustrating for a number of us to have made so little progress."

Bob Menendez, the committee's ranking Democrat, said new sanctions should be levied, possibly via legislation he co-sponsored with Graham.

The Trump administration missed a February deadline to report to Congress on who was responsible for Khashoggi's death. In Saudi Arabia, 11 suspects have been indicted in the murder, and officials have rejected accusations that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman ordered the killing.

The report was required after lawmakers last year triggered a provision of the 2016 Global Magnitsky human rights act requiring that a Trump administration investigation.



Members of the Vila Isabel samba school perform during the second night of Rio's Carnival parade at the Sambadrome in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Inset, A reveller from Uniao da Ilha samba school performs yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP



Second HIV remission patient ignites cure hope

AFP, Paris

For just the second time ever a HIV patient is in sustained remission from the virus in what was hailed by experts yesterday as proof that the AIDS-causing condition could one day be curable.

Ten years almost to the day since the first confirmed case of an HIV-infected person being rid of the deadly disease, a man known only as the "London patient" has shown no sign of the virus for nearly 19 months, doctors reported in the journal Nature.

Both patients underwent bone marrow transplants to treat blood cancers, receiving stem cells from donors with a genetic mutation present in less than one percent of Europeans that prevents HIV from taking hold.

"It is a landmark. After 10 years of not being able to replicate (the first case), people were wondering if this was a fluke," said lead author Ravindra Gupta, a professor at the University of Cambridge.

"I think it is important to reaffirm that this is real and it

can be done," Gupta told AFP.

Millions of people infected with HIV around the globe keep the disease in check with so-called antiretroviral therapy (ARV), but the treatment does not rid patients of the virus.

Close to 37 million people are living with HIV worldwide, but only 59 percent are receiving ARV. Nearly one million people die every year from HIV-related causes.

A new drug-resistant form of HIV is also a growing concern.

The first sustained remission survivor, announced in 2009 as "the Berlin patient" and later named as American Timothy Brown, was given two transplants and underwent total body irradiation to treat leukaemia -- a process that nearly killed him.

Gupta said that while a second successful transplant did not constitute a generalised cure, his team's work showed that even milder forms of treatment can achieve full HIV remission.

The International AIDS Society yesterday said in a statement that results from the second patient "reaffirm our belief that there exists a proof of concept that HIV is curable".



Bezos, Gates and Buffett still top world's rich list: Forbes

AFP, New York

Jeff Bezos remains the world's richest person, ahead of Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, according to the latest Forbes list of the ultra wealthy.

But while things are largely stable up top in that ranking, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg dropped three spots and former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg rose by two.

According to the list announced by Forbes yesterday, the riches of Bezos, 55, have swelled by \$19 billion in one year and he is now worth \$131 billion.

Bezos, who holds 16 percent of Amazon and whose wealth now makes him a target of the left wing of the US Democratic Party, has widened the money gap between himself and Gates, the philanthropist and co-founder of Microsoft.

Gates, 63, has seen his wealth grow to \$96.5 billion, up from 90 billion last year, said Forbes.

Third place is held by Buffett, 88.

Buffett's fortune slipped by \$1.5 billion to \$82.5 billion, the magazine estimated.

It is more or less after this trio that things start to get shaken up on the Forbes list.

The CEO of French luxury good company LVMH, Bernard Arnault, held on to fourth place. But Zuckerberg lost \$9 billion in net worth and slipped from fifth to eighth.

Ahead of Zuckerberg now are Mexican tycoon Carlos Slim, Zara and Inditex founder Amancio Ortega of Spain, and Oracle co-founder Larry Ellison.

Bloomberg rose from 11th to ninth place as his fortune increased to \$55.5 billion, from \$50 billion, said Forbes. Americans still dominate the list with 14 of the top 20 billionaires from the US. Non-Americans among the top 20 include India's Mukesh Ambani, chairman of Reliance Industries, in 13th place, and China's Ma Huateng, head of the Chinese internet giant Tencent, who rounds out the top 20.

CRACKDOWN ON UN TERROR LIST GROUPS AFTER KASHMIR ATTACK

Pakistan detains dozens

JeM chief's brother among held; India skeptical

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan has detained dozens of alleged militants after a suicide attack in Indian-held Kashmir last month which sent tensions between the nuclear-armed foes soaring, its interior minister said yesterday.

Among those detained in Islamabad's latest crackdown on banned groups was Abdul Rauf -- who a security source told AFP is a younger brother of Masood Azhar -- the leader of Pakistan-based militant group Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) that claimed responsibility for the February 14 attack.

Rauf had been named in a dossier of evidence in that attack given to Pakistan by India, the interior ministry said.

"We have launched a crackdown against proscribed organisations and have taken 44 individuals into custody, including Mufti Abdul Rauf and Hammad Azhar," state minister for the interior Shehryar Afridi told reporters in Islamabad.

He did not give any further names, clarify what groups those detained allegedly belonged to, or say if they would face charges.

The February 14 attack killed 40 Indian paramilitaries and spurred tit-for-tat air raids between India and Pakistan across the highly militarised Line of Control, the de facto border in the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir.

Both sides claimed they had shot each other's warplanes down, igniting fears of an all-out conflict as world powers pleaded for restraint.

Pakistan captured one Indian pilot, releasing him on Friday in a bid to pull both countries back from the brink, though tensions remain high.

Indian officials were sceptical of the detentions yesterday. "We have seen Pakistan make arrests before, and then the people are released," an Indian government source told AFP.

India, along with the US, has pressured Pakistan to take action against militancy.

JeM leader Masood Azhar remains in Pakistan, foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi told CNN last week, adding that he was "very unwell" and could not leave his house.



Hillary rules out another presidential run in 2020

AFP, Washington

Hillary Clinton has for the first time ruled out running for president in 2020.

"I'm not running, but I'm going to keep on working and speaking and standing up for what I believe," Clinton said Monday in an interview with News 12, a local TV channel in New York.

Clinton was the frontrunner in 2016 but ended up losing to Donald Trump.

"I want to be sure that people understand I'm going to keep speaking out," Clinton said.

"I'm not going anywhere. What's at stake in our country, the kinds of things that are happening right now, are deeply troubling to me."

Clinton has held meetings with some of the Democrats who are now vying for the party nomination or considering a run. CNN has reported that they include former vice president Joe Biden, who has not yet said if he is running.

"I've told every one of them, don't take anything for granted, even though we have a long list of real problems and broken promises from this administration that need to be highlighted," Clinton said.

Asked if she would run again for some kind of public office, she seemed to avoid ruling that out.

"I don't think so, but I love living in New York and I'm so grateful that I had the chance to be a senator for eight years and to work with people across our state," said the former secretary of state and senator for New York state.



Kashmiri villagers look on as a fire razes a house following a deadly gun battle between militants and Indian government forces in Tral area of Pulwama district, south of Srinagar, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP