

# UK judge blocks Assange extradition to US

Cites concerns for his mental health

AFP, London

A British judge yesterday ruled that WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange should not be extradited to the United States to face espionage charges for publishing secret documents online, finding he was at risk of suicide.

District Judge Vanessa Baraitser said extradition of the Australian publisher would be "oppressive by reason of mental harm and I order his discharge".

She said if detained in the United States, Assange "faces the bleak prospect of severely restrictive detention conditions designed to remove physical contact and reduce social interaction and contact with the outside world to a bare minimum".

"He faces these prospects as someone with a diagnosis of clinical depression and persistent thoughts of suicide," she said in her ruling.

"I am satisfied that the risk that Mr Assange will commit suicide is a substantial one."

Assange was remanded in custody until a bail application, which was set to take place later yesterday.

The 49-year-old wiped his forehead as the decision was announced while his fiancée Stella Morris burst into tears. She was embraced by WikiLeaks editor-in-chief Kristinn Hrafnsson.

Outside the Old Bailey court in central London, Assange supporters who had gathered since the early morning cheered and shouted "Free Assange!"

However, US and British prosecutors can appeal Baraitser's ruling.

Assange and his legal team have long argued that the protracted case, which has become a cause celebre for media freedom, was politically motivated.

Fugitive US whistleblower Edward Snowden said yesterday he hoped the British refusal to extradite Assange would mark "the end" of attempts to see the WikiLeaks founder face espionage charges in the United States.

Assange has been in custody in Britain since April 2019, when he was removed from the Ecuadorian embassy in London, where he had taken refuge seven years previously to avoid extradition to Sweden over a sexual assault case that was subsequently dropped.



Members of Israel's security forces block Palestinians trying to reach their lands confiscated by Israeli authorities, during a protest in the village of Halhul, north of Hebron in the occupied West Bank, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

# Military must stay out of US election

Ex-Pentagon chiefs tell Trump

AFP, Washington

All 10 living former US defense secretaries, including two Donald Trump appointees, warned Sunday against involving the military in the presidential transition.

In an essay published in The Washington Post, Ashton Carter, Leon Panetta, William Perry, Dick Cheney, William Cohen, Robert Gates, Chuck Hagel, Donald Rumsfeld, James Mattis and Mark Esper urged the Pentagon to commit to a peaceful transition of power.

"Efforts to involve the US armed forces in resolving election disputes would take us into dangerous, unlawful and unconstitutional territory," they said, adding that officials who sought to do so could face serious professional and criminal consequences.

Referring to the election process and peaceful transfers of power as "hallmarks of our democracy," the secretaries noted that other than Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860 that ultimately led to the pro-slavery South seceding and the US Civil War, the country has had an unbroken record of peaceful transitions. "This year should be no exception," they wrote. The secretaries, who come from both US political parties with Esper and Mattis both appointed by Trump, pointed out that all legal challenges to the presidential election results had been dismissed by the courts, and the votes certified by state governors.

# Biden, Trump head to Georgia

President's request to 'find' votes for him sparks political uproar

AFP, Atlanta

Donald Trump and Joe Biden headed to Georgia yesterday to rally their party faithful ahead of twin runoff elections that will decide who controls the US Senate, one day after the release of a bombshell recording of the outgoing president that rocked Washington.

If Democratic challengers defeat the Republican incumbents in both races Tuesday, the split in the upper chamber of Congress will be 50-50, meaning incoming Vice President Kamala Harris will have the deciding vote.

The dueling rallies by the outgoing president and his successor were set to be the final exclamation mark on a two-month blitz in the southern state awash in campaign donor cash.

But instead, Sunday's release of Trump's stunning conversation with Georgia's Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, a fellow Republican,

## SENATE RUNOFF RALLIES



only succeeded in diverting attention from the Senate races, a must-win for his party.

Trump still refuses to concede that he lost to Biden in November, despite multiple recounts and court rulings undermining his case.

The Republican billionaire has also continued to make repeated accusations of voter fraud and election rigging without providing evidence.

In the audio recording, Trump urges Raffensperger to "find 11,780 votes" -- one more than Biden's margin of victory -- and makes vague threats that Raffensperger and his general counsel could face "a big risk" if they failed to honor his request.

Raffensperger is heard responding: "Well, Mr. President, the challenge that you have is, the data you have is wrong."

Vice President-elect Harris slammed the call as a "bald-faced, bold abuse of power by the president of the United States" during a Sunday rally for the Democratic Senate candidates in Savannah, Georgia.

But Trump still has support within his party.

Republican Senator Kelly Loeffler, who has been an ardent Trump supporter, did not answer a question about the recording during a campaign event.

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### S Korea population falls for first time

South Korea's population fell for the first time in 2020, with more people dying than were born, the government said yesterday, warning that towns in poor regions faced a "crisis of extinction". The world's 12th-largest economy has one of its longest life expectancies and one of its lowest birthrates, a combination that presents a looming demographic disaster. As of December 31, South Korea had 51,829,023 people, down 20,838 from a year earlier, according to data released by the interior ministry. Annual births have been falling for years and it added that they had been exceeded by deaths for the first time, 275,815 to 307,764.

### Pelosi re-elected as US House Speaker



Nancy Pelosi, the only woman to serve as US Speaker of the House, was narrowly re-elected to the position Sunday in a deeply divided new Congress that convened in the final weeks of Donald Trump's presidency. Pelosi, 80, faced a scare when five fellow Democrats defected and voted "present" or for someone else during the floor vote. But the woman who is third in line to the presidency secured her fourth -- and perhaps final -- non-consecutive term as House speaker by earning 216 votes versus 209 for Republican leader Kevin McCarthy. In a symbolic gesture beginning the 117th Congress, McCarthy formally handed the speaker's gavel over to Pelosi, who raised it in triumph as Democrats cheered and applauded.

### At least 15 killed in Syria road attack: monitor

Gunmen killed at least 15 people in Syria, mostly government soldiers travelling on a bus in the second such road ambush in recent days, a war monitor said yesterday. The ambush late Sunday resulted in the deaths of eight soldiers, four allied fighters and three civilians, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said, updating an earlier toll. There was no immediate claim of responsibility, but the monitor said the Islamic State group was to blame. Another 15 people were wounded, with cars and fuel tankers also attacked, in the Wadi al-Azib area of Hama province.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



Two men carry cats in a cage through floodwaters in Kuala Kaung, near Lanchang in Malaysia's Pahang state yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

# 20pc uranium enrichment process started: Iran

EU warns the move would hamper nuke deal

AFP, Tehran

Iran has started the process to enrich uranium to 20 percent purity at its underground Fordow facility, state media reported yesterday, going well beyond the threshold set by the 2015 nuclear deal.

It is the latest and most important suspension of nuclear commitments by Iran under the landmark deal, starting in 2019, and in response to President Donald Trump's dramatic withdrawal from the accord in May 2018, with the US imposing crippling economic sanctions on Tehran.

"The process for producing 20 percent enriched uranium has started at Shahid Alimohammadi enrichment complex (Fordow)," government spokesman Ali Rabiee said, quoted on the website of the state broadcaster. According to the official, President Hassan Rouhani ordered the enrichment "in recent days", and "the gas injection process started as of hours ago."

The European Union yesterday said that Iran's enrichment programme would be a "considerable departure" from the deal.

EU spokesman Peter Stano said Brussels would wait until a briefing from the director of the UN's IAEA nuclear watchdog before deciding what action to take. On December 31 Iran informed the IAEA that it would begin producing uranium enriched to up to 20 percent purity, the level it had before the nuclear deal was reached.

Meanwhile, Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps seized a South Korean-flagged tanker in Gulf waters, Iranian media said yesterday, at a time of tension between Tehran and Seoul over Iranian funds frozen at South Korean banks due to US sanctions.

# MODERNA VACCINE US may cut some doses to speed rollout

REUTERS, New York

The US government is considering giving some people half the dose of Moderna's Covid-19 vaccine in order to speed vaccinations, a federal official said on Sunday.

Moncef Slaoui, head of Operation Warp Speed, the federal vaccine program, said on CBS' "Face the Nation" that officials were in talks with Moderna and the Food and Drug Administration about the idea. Moderna's vaccine requires two injections.

"We know that for the Moderna vaccine, giving half of the dose to people between the ages of 18 and 55, two doses, half the dose, which means exactly achieving the objective of immunizing double the number of people with the doses we have," Slaoui said.

# Brazil wildfires surge again

A total of 222,798 incidents recorded last year

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

The number of wildfires in Brazil increased 12.7 percent last year to a decade-high, according to official figures likely to add to pressure on President Jair Bolsonaro's government over the destruction of the Amazon rainforest.

There were a total of 222,798 wildfires across Brazil in 2020, the highest number since 2010, according to the Brazilian space agency, INPE.

That included more than 103,000 fires in the Brazilian Amazon, an annual increase of nearly 16 percent, said INPE, which uses satellite images to track fires and deforestation.

It also included more than 22,000 fires in Brazil's share of the Pantanal, the world's largest wetlands, which were devastated last year by an annual increase of more than 120 percent.

The Amazon and Pantanal are two of Earth's most valuable ecosystems.

The Amazon, the world's biggest rainforest, is considered vital to curbing climate change because of the carbon

dioxide it absorbs from the atmosphere. About 60 percent of the rainforest is in Brazil.

The Pantanal, further south, is a paradise of biodiversity that stretches from Brazil into Bolivia and Paraguay.

Nearly a quarter of the Brazilian Pantanal was devastated by fires last year, amid the region's worst drought in nearly half a century.

Images of charred landscapes strewn with animal carcasses shocked the world, drawing criticism of Bolsonaro's government for failing to stop the destruction. Bolsonaro also faces attacks over the sharp rise in Amazon deforestation on his watch.

Activists say his push to open protected Amazon lands to agribusiness and mining and his government's funding cuts for environmental protection programs are fueling the destruction. Deforestation wiped out an area larger than Jamaica in the Brazilian Amazon in the year to August, a 12-year high, according to the space agency's PRODES monitoring program.



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