

MORE NEWS

Pro-Putin party heads for Russian election win

President Vladimir Putin's party was set to retain a majority in parliament as Russia yesterday concluded a three-day election in which most Kremlin critics were barred from running. The vote comes in the wake of an unprecedented crackdown on the opposition this year, with Russian authorities jailing Putin's best-known domestic foe Alexei Navalny and banning his organisations as "extremist". In the lead-up to this weekend's vote, all of his top allies were arrested or had fled the country, with anyone associated with his groups kept from running in the parliamentary and local polls scheduled to close at 8:00 pm.

SpaceX all-civilian orbital crew completes historic mission

Four SpaceX tourists returned to Earth safely on Saturday after spending three days in space, successfully concluding the first orbital mission in history with no professional astronauts on board. The SpaceX Dragon capsule, whose heat shield allowed it to withstand descent, was slowed down by four large parachutes before splashing into the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Florida at 7:06 pm (23:06 GMT), according to a video feed by the company. "That was a heck of a ride for us, and we're just getting started," billionaire captain Jared Isaacman, who financed the trip with a goal of making space a bit more accessible, said shortly after landing.



Iceland eruption the longest in half a century

It became six months yesterday that the volcanic eruption currently mesmerising spectators near Reykjavik first began, making it the longest Iceland has witnessed in more than 50 years. The first lava began spewing out of a fissure close to Mount Fagradalsfjall on the evening of March 19 on the Reykjanes peninsula to the southwest of Reykjavik. And the ensuing spectacle -- ranging from just a slow trickle of lava at times to more dramatic geyser-like spurts of rocks and stones at others -- has become a major tourist attraction, drawing 300,000 visitors so far, according to the Iceland Tourist Board.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



A Taliban fighter watches as Afghan women hold placards during a demonstration demanding better rights for women in front of the former ministry of women affairs in Kabul yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Stay home
Taliban to female Kabul city workers; blast targets truck in Jalalabad

AGENCIES

The interim mayor of Afghanistan's capital said many female city employees have been ordered to stay home by the country's new Taliban rulers.

Hamdullah Namony told reporters yesterday that only women who could not be replaced by men have been permitted to report to work. He said this includes skilled workers in the design and engineering departments as well as female attendants of public toilets for women, reports AP. Namony's comments were another sign that the Taliban are enforcing their harsh interpretation of Islam, including restrictions on women in public life, despite their initial promises of tolerance and inclusion.

In their previous rule in the 1990s, the Taliban had barred girls and women from schools and jobs. The mayor said a final decision about female employees in Kabul municipal departments is still pending, and that they would draw their salaries in the meantime.

He said that before the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan last month, just under one-third of close to 3,000 city employees were women who worked in all departments.

Meanwhile, a pickup truck carrying Taliban fighters was the target of a bomb in the Afghan city of Jalalabad yesterday, local media reported, a day after at least two people were killed in a series of blasts in the area.

Witnesses said several wounded Taliban fighters were taken to hospital after the explosion, which one journalist said happened near an interchange for transport to and from the capital, Kabul, reports AFP.

North Korea expanding Yongbyon nuke facility

Recent satellite images show

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Recent satellite images show North Korea is expanding a uranium enrichment plant at its main Yongbyon nuclear complex, a sign that it is intent on boosting the production of bomb materials, experts say.

A report from the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey said photos taken by satellite imagery company Maxar showed construction in an area adjoining the uranium enrichment plant at Yongbyon.

"The expansion of the enrichment plant probably indicates that North Korea plans to increase its production of weapons-grade uranium at the Yongbyon site by as much as 25 percent," Jeffrey Lewis and two other experts at the institute said in their report.

North Korea recently announced its first ballistic missile tests in six months with nuclear negotiations with the United States stalled since 2019.

The Middlebury report said a satellite image taken on September 1 showed North Korea cleared trees and prepared the ground for construction, and that a construction excavator was also visible. The report said a second image taken two weeks later showed a wall had been built to enclose the area, and panels removed from the side of the enrichment building to provide access to the newly enclosed area.

Australia had 'deep concerns'

Says PM Morrison over French subs, rejects accusations of lying over defence deal with US, UK

AGENCIES

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said yesterday the French government would have known Canberra had "deep and grave concerns" about French submarines before the deal was torn up last week.

France is furious at Australia's decision to withdraw from a multibillion-dollar deal to build French submarines in favour of American nuclear-powered vessels, recalling its ambassadors from Canberra and Washington and accusing its allies of "lying" about their plans.

Morrison said he understood the French government's "disappointment" but said he had raised issues with the deal "some months ago", as had other Australian government ministers.

- » Macron, Biden to talk in 'coming days' about subs spat
- » Australia was 'upfront' with France over deal: defence minister

"I think they would have had every reason to know that we had deep and grave concerns that the capability being delivered by the Attack Class submarine was not going to meet our strategic interests and we made very clear that we would be making a decision based on our strategic national interest," he told a press conference in Sydney.

Morrison said it would have been "negligent" to proceed with the deal against intelligence and defence advice and that doing so would be counter to Australia's strategic interests.

Speaking to Sky News Australia earlier yesterday, Defence Minister Peter Dutton said his government had been "upfront, open and honest" with France that it had concerns about the deal, which was over-budget and years behind schedule.

A French government spokesman said yesterday that US President Joe Biden and President Emmanuel Macron will talk on the phone in the coming days amid high tension over the tripartite submarines contract signed among Australia, US and UK, reports AFP.

"There will be an exchange on the phone in the coming days," spokesman Gabriel Attal told the BFM news channel, adding that the request for the conversation had come from Biden.



An anti-government protester waves a flag during a demonstration to mark the 15-year anniversary of the 2006 military takeover in Bangkok, Thailand yesterday as they urge the resignation of the current administration over its handling of the coronavirus crisis.

PHOTO: AFP

IS claims Syria gas pipeline attack

AFP, Beirut

The Islamic State group on Saturday claimed an attack on a major natural gas pipeline southeast of the Syrian capital that led to power outages in the city and surrounding areas.

IS fighters "were able to plant and detonate explosives on the gas pipeline feeding the Tishreen and Deir Ali plants," the group said in a statement.

The Deir Ali station southeast of Damascus generates half of Syria's power needs, Electricity Minister Ghassan al-Zamel said Saturday in comments carried by the official SANA news agency.

He said an attack on the gas pipeline on Friday evening with explosive devices caused the station to go out of service temporarily.

The outage affected several other stations, causing blackouts in Damascus, its outskirts and other areas, Zamel said, before power was restored some thirty minutes later.

He said maintenance works had started Saturday but warned of severe rationing until the pipeline is repaired and power plants resume normal operations.

The Deir Ali and Tishreen plants remain out of service.

The IS group's so-called caliphate in Syria was declared defeated in the riverside hamlet of Baghouz in 2019 following a gruelling US-backed offensive.

World leaders return to UN with focus on Covid, climate

REUTERS, United Nations

World leaders are returning to the United Nations in New York this week with a focus on boosting efforts to fight both climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic, which last year forced them to send video statements for the annual gathering.

As the coronavirus still rages amid an inequitable vaccine rollout, about a third of the 193 UN states are planning to again send videos, but presidents, prime ministers and foreign ministers for the remainder are due to travel to the US.

The United States tried to dissuade leaders from coming to New York in a bid to stop the UN General Assembly from becoming a "super-spreader event," although President Joe Biden will address the assembly in person, his first UN visit since taking office. A so-called UN honor

system means that anyone entering the assembly hall effectively declares they are vaccinated, but they do not have to show proof.

This system will be broken when the first country speaks - Brazil. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro is a vaccine skeptic, who last week declared that he does not need the shot because he is already immune after being infected with Covid-19.

Demonstrating US Covid-19 concerns about the UN gathering, Biden will be in New York only for about 24 hours, meeting with Guterres today and making his first UN address tomorrow, directly after Bolsonaro.

His UN envoy, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, said Biden would "speak to our top priorities: ending the pandemic; combating climate change ... and defending human rights, democracy, and the international rules-based order."



Quote of the day



"I no longer want to talk about climate change. I want to talk about the climate crisis, it's already here. And in order to address it, we need horizontal policies which essentially permeate every aspect of our economic and our social life."

GREEK PRIME MINISTER KYRIAKOS MITSOTAKIS

World's tallest nation getting shorter

CNN ONLINE

The Netherlands has long been the world's tallest nation -- but its people are getting shorter, according to Dutch researchers.

Although height has increased over the last 100 years, the study showed Dutch men born in 2001 were 1 centimeter (.39 inches) shorter than their 1980 counterparts. For women, the difference was more pronounced with a difference of 1.4 centimeters (.55 inches).

The 1980 generation may have been the tallest ever, benefiting from a huge increase in height.

Dutch men born in 1980 stood at an average height of 183.9 centimeters (6 feet), and were 8.3 centimeters (3.27 inches) taller than those born in 1930. Women born in 1980 were also significantly taller at 170.7 centimeters (5.6 feet), compared to 165.4 centimeters (5.4 feet) for those born in 1930.

The study by Statistics Netherlands, municipal health service the GGD and the National Institute for Public Health, the RIVM, analyzed 719,000 Dutch-born individuals between the ages of 19 and 60 who self-reported their height, and used the average height at age 19 as a benchmark.

The reason for the height decrease is partly related to increased levels of immigration from shorter population groups, according to researchers. However, growth also tapered off for individuals whose parents were both born in the Netherlands, and for those whose four grandparents were all Dutch-born.

Dutch men with no family history of migration did not show any increase in height, while Dutch women without any migration in their family got shorter.

However, the Dutch have stood head and shoulders above the rest of the world for their height increases over the past 70 years, with the streets of the Netherlands showing a very different picture in 2020 compared to the early 1950s, according to researchers.

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