

TERROR CHARGES  
UAE orders  
trial of 84  
people

AFP, Dubai

The United Arab Emirates is to put 84 people on trial for terror-related offences, state media said yesterday, a decade after a similar mass trial of government critics.

The Gulf state's attorney general ordered the trial of "mostly members of the terrorist organisation of (the) Muslim Brotherhood", news agency WAM said.

In 2013, the UAE tried 94 activists, lawyers, students, teachers and other government critics, accusing them of membership of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. Rights groups denounced the proceedings at the time.

The trials resulted in jail time for 69 people, many of whom remain in prison. The defendants are accused of "establishing another clandestine organisation for the purpose of committing... terrorism on UAE soil," the WAM said.



Yutaka Obayashi, who lives in his car with his wife Akiko after the earthquake, cries after greeting firefighters in gratitude, in Wajima, Ishikawa Prefecture, Japan yesterday. Rescuers and residents sifted through rubble as their focus turned to recovering bodies and cleaning up rather than finding survivors, five days after the earthquake struck central Japan and killed at least 126 people. PHOTO: REUTERS

Taiwan slams  
Chinese  
balloons as  
safety threat

REUTERS, Taipei

Taiwan's defence ministry yesterday accused China of threatening aviation safety and waging psychological warfare on the island's people with a recent spate of balloons spotted near or over the island, days before key Taiwanese elections.

The potential for China to use balloons for spying became a global issue in February when the United States shot down what it said was a Chinese surveillance balloon. China said the balloon was a civilian craft that accidentally drifted astray.

Taiwan is on high alert for Chinese military and political activity ahead of the January 13 presidential and parliamentary elections. It says China is exerting military and economic pressure in an attempt to interfere in the elections.

China views the island as its own territory, a claim Taiwan's government rejects.

Since last month Taiwan's defence ministry has reported several instances of Chinese balloons flying over the sensitive Taiwan Strait. It said this week some balloons had flown over Taiwan island near major air bases.

IS's Afghanistan branch  
behind blasts in Iran

US intel confirms; N Korea's Kim sends sympathy messages to Iran, Japan

REUTERS, Washington

Communications intercepts collected by the United States confirmed that Islamic State's (IS) Afghanistan-based branch carried out twin bombings in Iran that killed nearly 100 people, two sources familiar with the intelligence told Reuters on Friday.

"The intelligence is clear-cut and indisputable," one source said.

That source and a second, both of whom requested anonymity to discuss the sensitive issue, said the intelligence comprised communications intercepts, without providing further details. The collection of the intercepts has not been previously reported.

Wednesday's bombings, the deadliest of their kind in Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, added to regional tensions over the Israel's offensive in Gaza and attacks by Yemen's Tehran-aligned Houthi group on commercial shipping in the Red Sea.

IS on Thursday claimed responsibility for the bombings, saying two operatives wearing explosive suicide belts staged the attack during a memorial service for Qassem Soleimani, a senior military commander assassinated in Iraq in a 2020 US drone strike.

The Sunni Muslim group, however, did not specify that its Afghanistan-based affiliate, known as ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS K), was responsible for the bombings in the southeastern Iranian city of Kerman.

"The US has pretty clear intel" that ISIS-K conducted the attack, the first source said. The Central Intelligence Agency declined to comment.

ISIS harbours a virulent hatred for Shias - Iran's dominant sect and targets of its affiliate's attacks in Afghanistan - who it views as apostates.

IS claimed responsibility for a 2022 attack on a Shia shrine in Iran that killed 15 people and 2017 bombings that hit the parliament and the tomb of the Islamic Republic's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Iran on Friday said security forces had arrested 11 people suspected of involvement in Wednesday's attack and had seized explosive devices and vests.



While Taliban crackdowns have weakened ISIS-K and prompted some members to leave Afghanistan for neighboring countries, the affiliate has continued focusing on plotting foreign operations, US officials say.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un sent messages of sympathy to the leaders of Iran and Japan yesterday, state media said, after the countries were hit with deadly bombings and earthquake respectively this week.

Meanwhile, Iranian state media said yesterday at least 91 people were killed in the twin blasts, raising an earlier toll after two victims had succumbed to wounds.

"The death toll from the terrorist incident reached 91 after two people, including a child, hospitalised in intensive care, succumbed to their injuries," official news agency IRNA quoted a local health official as saying.

The Iranian intelligence ministry said on Friday that "one of the suicide bombers" was "of Tajik nationality", while the identity of the second attacker has not yet been established.

US SC to hear  
Trump appeal  
of ballot ban

AFP, Washington

The US Supreme Court agreed on Friday to hear Donald Trump's appeal of a ruling by Colorado's highest court that would keep him off the presidential primary ballot in the western state.

The Supreme Court, which includes three justices appointed by the former president, said it would hear oral arguments in the high-stakes election case on February 8.

The Colorado Supreme Court barred Trump last month from appearing on the Republican presidential primary ballot in the state because of his role in the January 6, 2021 assault.

Lawyers for Trump, the frontrunner for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination, urged the court earlier this week to hear case and "summarily reverse the Colorado Supreme Court's ruling."

They said the Colorado ruling, "if allowed to stand, will mark the first time in the history of the United States that the judiciary has prevented voters from casting ballots for the leading major party presidential candidate."

"The question of eligibility to serve as President of the United States is properly reserved for Congress, not the state courts, to consider and decide," they added.

2024 CAMPAIGN LAUNCH

Biden compares  
'sick' Trump to  
Nazis

AFP, Blue Bell

US President Joe Biden launched his harshest attack yet on Donald Trump as he kickstarted his 2024 reelection campaign Friday, accusing the Republican of echoing Nazi Germany and posing a threat to democracy.

The 81-year-old Democrat branded his likely challenger in November a "loser" and "sick" in a speech on the eve of the third anniversary of the deadly January 6 Capitol attack by pro-Trump supporters.

"He's willing to sacrifice our democracy, put himself in power," Biden told supporters.

Not only had the twice-impeached former president instigated the Capitol attack, but the tycoon and his followers were still embracing "political violence" ahead of the 2024 vote, said Biden.

"He calls those who oppose him vermin. He talks about the blood of Americans being poisoned, echoing the same exact language used in Nazi Germany," he added.

Biden chose a symbolic location for the speech near Valley Forge in Pennsylvania, the historic site where George Washington rallied American forces fighting their British colonial rulers nearly 250 years ago.

He portrayed himself as a defender of America's institutions, warning that if Trump won a second term in the White House then democracy itself was at risk.

Biden's full frontal attack on Trump came after criticism from some Democrats that the campaign has gotten off to a slow start.

BRAZILIAN AMAZON  
Deforestation  
halved in 2023

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon fell by half last year, according to figures released Friday, as President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's government bolstered environmental policing to crack down on surging destruction. However, the news was far less bright from the crucial Cerrado savanna below the rainforest, where clear-cutting hit a new annual record last year, rising by 43 percent from 2022, according to the national space research agency's DETER surveillance program. Satellite monitoring detected 5,152 square kilometers (nearly 2,000 square miles) of forest cover destroyed in the Brazilian Amazon last year, down 50 percent from 2022.

Microsoft, OpenAI  
hit with new  
lawsuit by authors

REUTERS



OpenAI and its financial backer Microsoft were sued on Friday in Manhattan federal court by a pair of nonfiction authors who say the companies misused their work to train the artificial intelligence models behind the ChatGPT and other AI-based services.

Writers Nicholas Basbanes and Nicholas Gage told the court in a proposed class action that the companies infringed their copyrights by including several of their books as part of the data used to train OpenAI's GPT large language model. The lawsuit follows several others filed by writers ranging from Sarah Silverman to "Game of Thrones" author George R.R. Martin against companies over alleged use of their work to train AI programs.

Same again?  
1996 calendars reused  
for 2024

AFP, Washington

It is a radical form of recycling. Calendars from 1996 are being reused for 2024 as both are leap years that begin on a Monday.

The quirk has sparked a flurry of interest on the internet, with 1990s nostalgia fans chasing down vintage calendars nearly 30 years old.

As last year came to an end, people began posting about how the 1996 calendar works neatly in 2024, with one TikTok clip garnering over 1.5 million views.

Another viral post, this time on X (formerly Twitter), playfully reminds people to start reusing their carefully saved calendars featuring then-child star Jonathan Taylor Thomas - who is now aged 42.

The US presidential election date on a 1996 calendar is correctly marked for 2024 as November 5, and there is also the Olympics in both years - though the dates don't match up.

Second-hand sites like Ebay are selling hundreds of 1996 calendars with themes ranging from Star Wars to Barbie and Pamela Anderson.

Prices range from \$50 to \$200, with a Pocahontas calendar on sale for \$149.99.

The calendars tap into a wave of 1990s throwback nostalgia embracing fashion trends, hairstyles and love of the "Friends" sitcom.



This photograph taken yesterday, shows a street flooded by the River Ouse after it burst its banks, in central York, Britain following Storm Henk which brought strong winds and heavy rain across much of the country. PHOTO: AFP

VISIT TO JAMAICA

New aircraft  
glitch for  
Canadian PM

REUTERS

Canada said on Friday an aircraft was sent this week to Jamaica to address a maintenance issue with the plane that took PM Justin Trudeau on a visit to Caribbean, enabling him to fly back home.

It is the second instance of such an aircraft glitch; Trudeau's departure from India in September 2023 was delayed by a couple of days after a summit.

"We can confirm two Royal Canadian Air Force CC-144 Challengers were in Jamaica supporting transport for the prime minister," a spokesperson for Canada's defence department said.

An inspection uncovered the maintenance issue on Tuesday, before Trudeau's departure date, the spokesperson added. A maintenance team and aircraft were sent to the island to restore the craft to service the next day.