

Yunus calls for return of billions 'stolen' during Hasina's rule

DHAKA: (News Desk) Bangladesh's interim leader Muhammad Yunus on Wednesday demanded the return of stolen assets, decrying the scale of corruption under the ousted government of Sheikh Hasina, toppled in August last year.

Hasina, 77, fled in August to India, where she has defied extradition requests from Bangladesh to face charges including mass murder.

"The theft of billions of dollars in public funds has left Bangladesh with a significant financial deficit," Dr Yunus said in a statement.

"The funds stolen from Bangladesh belong to its people. We will continue to work with our international partners to ensure that justice is done," Yunus said he expected "assets to be returned", adding that the stolen funds have "not only robbed the people of Bangladesh, but also disrupted the country's progress toward economic stability".

Bangladesh's anti-corruption commission (ACC) is investigating Hasina and her wider family, including her niece, British lawmaker and anti-corruption minister Tulip Siddiq. She resigned from her position on Tuesday. Bangladesh's Supreme Court acquitted former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia in a 2008 corruption case on Wednesday, clearing the way for the ailing leader to fight parliamentary elections in the troubled South Asian country. The verdict is the latest judicial victory for Khaleda and her family, one of two main groups that have dominated the country's politics.

Unicef, Muslim World League ink \$1.5m skill building deal

ISLAMABAD: (News Desk) The Makkah-based Muslim World League will provide financial support to the 'Green Skills Training Programme for Non-Formal Education Students' in Pakistan to equip adolescents, especially girls, with essential green skills and digital skills.

The programme to be implemented by Unicef will enhance their employability and empower them to contribute to a sustainable future.

Unicef and the Muslim World League have signed a \$1.5 million agreement to enhance education and skill-building programmes in Pakistan and Chad, and to improve maternal, newborn and childcare services in Afghanistan.

The agreement was signed by Unicef Representative in Pakistan, Abdullah A. Fadil, on behalf of Unicef Executive Director Catherine Russell, and MWL General Manager of Strategic Partnerships Dr Shaima Alluqmani, on the sidelines of the global conference on Muslim World League initiative hosted by Pakistan.

The climate crisis and digital divide are critical challenges faced by children in Pakistan every day. Providing vulnerable children and youth, especially girls, with the education and skills they need will empower them to reach their full potential and help the country prosper.

Biden removes Cuba from list of 'terrorist states'

WASHINGTON: (News Desk) The Biden administration removed Cuba from its terrorism blacklist on Tuesday, while Cuba said it would release upward of 500 prisoners from its jails, dual announcements poised to reshape US-Cuba relations just days before Donald Trump takes office.

President Joe Biden's announcements effectively roll back many of the sanctions put in place by President-elect Trump during his previous term ending in 2021. If they endure, they would represent the most significant advance in US-Cuba relations since the Obama-era detente.

Trump, a harsh Cuba critic who designated the island a state sponsor of terrorism — has not yet commented on the measures but has promised a hard line on the communist-run country.

He also nominated US Senator Marco Rubio, the son of immigrants from Cuba and an outspoken critic of the island's government, as secretary of state. Biden's announced plans — subject to the review of Congress, and the incoming Trump administration — would lift Trump's 2021 designation of Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism, easing sanctions on an island already suffering a deep economic crisis. They would also revoke a 2017 Trump order that restricted financial transactions with some military and government-linked Cuban entities, according to a senior administration official.

Biden also seeks to prevent individuals from filing lawsuits against both Cuban entities and foreign companies under the Helms-Burton Act over property seized following Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution, the official said.

Just one hour after the US announcement, Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel said his government planned to "gradually" release 553 prisoners following talks with Pope Francis.



KHAN YUNIS: Palestinians react joyously to news of a ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas, which was announced by officials in Doha and the United States, on Wednesday.

Suzuki Motor president says India to be global production hub for EVs

Delhi (News Desk) India will be the global production hub for Suzuki Motor's electric cars and it plans to export the vehicles back to Japan as well as other markets, such as Europe, despite a slowdown in sales of EVs, the carmaker's chief said on Thursday. India is the biggest market by sales and revenue for Suzuki Motor,

present there through its majority stake in market leader Maruti Suzuki.

On Friday, Maruti will launch its first EV in India — the e Vitara mid-sized SUV — which will be exported globally and also supplied to Suzuki's partner Toyota Motor Corp.

"For Suzuki, the scale merit in India is our strength, and we will fully leverage

this advantage to supply high-quality and appealing products across various markets such as Europe, Japan, Middle East, Africa, Central and South America," Suzuki Motor President Toshihiro Suzuki told reporters in New Delhi.

"Globally, the EV market is sluggish but I think in India there is a potential

that EV sales are going to grow," he said.

EV sales growth in India slowed to 20 per cent last year from about 115pc in 2023, but it still outpaced overall car market growth of 4pc and the government has an ambitious target of boosting their market share to 30pc by 2030 from about 2.5pc of 4.3 million cars sold last year.

India achieves 'historic' space docking mission

Delhi (News Desk) India docked two satellites in space Thursday, a key milestone for the country's dreams of a space station and manned Moon mission, the space agency said.

The satellites, weighing 220 kilograms each, blasted off in December on a single rocket from India's Sriharikota launch site. Later they separated.

The two satellites were manoeuvred back together on Thursday in a "precision

process resulting in a 'successful spacecraft capture', the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) said, calling it a "historic moment".

India became the fourth country to achieve the feat — dubbed as SpaDeX, or Space Docking Experiment — after Russia, the United States and China.

The aim of the mission was to "develop and demonstrate the technology needed for rendezvous, dock-

ing, and undocking of two small spacecraft", ISRO said.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated Indian scientists for the successful docking. "It is a significant stepping stone for India's ambitious space missions in the years to come," he said on social media. Two earlier docking attempts by ISRO were postponed due to technical issues.

ISRO said the technology is "essential" for India's Moon

mission, and comes after Modi announced plans last year to send a manned mission to the Moon by 2040.

The world's most populous nation has flexed its space-faring ambitions in the last decade with its space programme growing considerably, matching the achievements of established powers at a much cheaper price tag. It became just the fourth nation to land an unmanned craft on the Moon in August 2023.



President of Suzuki Motor Toshihiro Suzuki attends the Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit, at the Mahatma Mandir in Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India

Biden warns of Trump 'oligarchy' in dark farewell speech

Washington (News Desk) President Joe Biden capped a half-century political career on Wednesday with a final Oval Office speech as he hopes to seal a legacy overshadowed by Democrats' failure to stop Donald Trump from returning to the White House. Biden opened his speech with a familiar message — asking Americans to

join together — but quickly warned about a dangerous concentration of wealth in the United States. "Our system of separation of powers, checks and balances may not be perfect, but it has maintained our democracy for nearly 250 years, longer than any other nation in history that's ever tried such a bold experiment," Biden said. But

he warned of a "tech industrial complex" that is bringing an "avalanche of misinformation and disinformation, enabling the abuse of power." The free press, he added, "is crumbling." Biden hands over power to Trump at noon (10pm Pakistan time) on Monday. Trump has enlisted billionaire Elon Musk, who helped his election efforts,

as a special adviser charged with cutting costs from the federal government. The foreboding speech comes as Biden's Democratic Party has little leverage in national politics and Trump has nominated a slate of cabinet members who have pledged to upend traditional American alliances and governing norms.

Double moonshot launch sends US, Japanese landers into space

ORLANDO: (News Desk) Two moon landers, one from Japan's space and another from US space firm Firefly, began their journeys into space on Wednesday with SpaceX's unusual double moonshot launch, underscoring the global rush to examine the lunar surface.

Japanese moon exploration company ispace launched its Hakuto-R Mission 2, making its second attempt to land on the moon after an initial mission in April 2023 failed in its final moments because of an altitude miscalculation. Texas-based Firefly Aerospace launched its first moon lander, Blue Ghost, making it the third company to launch a moon lander under NASA's public-private Commercial Lunar Payload Services (CLPS) programme. About 300 ispace staff, families and partners clapped and cheered as SpaceX's Falcon 9 rocket carrying the landers blasted off from Florida at 3:11pm Japan time (11:11am PKT). The rocket released Blue Ghost on schedule about an hour after liftoff, and ispace's lander Resilience about 30 minutes after that.

Pakistan, West Indies seek to improve from Test Championship lows

Multan (News Desk) Pakistan and West Indies vowed a strong finish when they meet in the first Test in Multan on Friday despite dragging up the rear of the World Test Championship.

Pakistan are currently eighth in the 2023-25 cycle of the WTC, with their rivals in last place far behind finalists Australia and South Africa.

Skipper Shan Masood said the two-test series was significant for Pakistan, who finished sixth and seventh in the first two WTC cycles.

"This cycle is finishing so this series is significant for us as we want to become a better team by being unbeaten in home conditions," he told reporters on Thursday.

Pakistan ended a winless stretch of 11 home Tests by beating England 2-1 in October and Masood wants his team to keep winning at home despite a 2-0 defeat in South Africa this month.

"We won against England so it will be important we keep that momentum against the West Indies," Masood said.

West Indies finished eighth in both previous WTCs and skipper Kraigg Brathwaite wants to end on a positive note this time. "I think this series is very important with two Tests left in this cycle... so we want to start the year strong and that is our focus," Brathwaite said.

Hamas denies Israeli accusations of backtracking on fragile ceasefire deal

Gaza (News Desk) Israel accused Hamas of backtracking on parts of a fragile ceasefire and hostage release deal in the Gaza war, and carried out fresh air strikes ahead of an expected vote by the cabinet, AFP reports.

But the office of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that Hamas had "reneged on parts of the agreement reached with the mediators and Israel in an effort to extort last-minute concessions".

It also said that the Israeli cabinet, which has yet to approve the agreement, "will not convene until the mediators notify Israel that Hamas has accepted all elements of the agreement."

Hamas political bureau member Sami Abu Zuhri said there was "no basis" to Israel's accusations. The health ministry in Gaza has said that 81 people were killed in the Palestinian territory in the previous 24 hours, during which a ceasefire deal was announced, taking the overall death toll to 46,788, AFP reports.

Djokovic, Sabalenka progress as Zheng, Ruud make early exits

MELBOURNE: (News Desk) Novak Djokovic and Carlos Alcaraz swept into the third round of the Australian Open in the wake of women's top seed Aryna Sabalenka on Wednesday as the rain returned and Olympic champion Zheng Qinwen bowed out.

While Zheng, who was stunned 7-6(3), 6-3 by Laura Siegemund, was the first top-10 women's seed to exit, sixth seed Casper Ruud became the fourth to fall on the men's side after going down 6-2, 3-6, 6-1, 6-4 to Czech teenager Jakub Mensik.

"We can see that tennis is moving on," said 19-year-old Mensik, whose triumph followed Brazilian teenager Joao Fonseca's stunning victory over ninth seed Andrey Rublev.

"We can see different or new names on the tournaments. For the fans, for the tennis, for everything, it's really great. That's it. New blood is coming."

Djokovic, however, continued to defy the rise of the younger generation and took another step towards a 25th Grand Slam title with a 6-1, 6-7(4), 6-3, 6-2 victory over 21-year-old qualifier Jaime Faria on Rod Laver Arena.

"Overall it was another big test. Another three-hour match, back-to-back against the youngsters," said the 37-year-old, who claimed another record merely by taking to the court for his 430th Grand Slam match.

"Again, I'm happy with the way I ended up the match. Good fashion, good mindset."

Djokovic will next face Czech Republic Tomas Machac, who beat American Reilly Opelka 3-6, 7-6(1), 6-7(5), 7-6(4), 6-4. Second seed Alexander Zverev made light work of contemporary Pedro Martinez 6-1, 6-4, 6-1 in the final match on the main showcourt, while Alcaraz, still only 21, served up another quick-fire win to advance past Yoshihito Nishioka 6-0, 6-1, 6-4. Sabalenka next opponent is high-flying world no 42 Clara Tauson who thumped Tatjana Maria of Germany 6-2, 6-2.

Paid in blood: Gaza ceasefire announced

DOHA: (News Desk) There were celebrations among Palestinians on Wednesday after US and Qatari leaders announced that Israel and Hamas had agreed to a ceasefire in Gaza — starting on Sunday — and a hostage and prisoner exchange, after 15 months of war.

"The two belligerents in the Gaza Strip have reached a deal on the prisoner ... swap, and (the mediators) announce a ceasefire in the hopes of reaching a permanent ceasefire between the two

sides," Qatar's Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani said on Wednesday night. Speaking at the White House just days before he leaves office, a visibly relieved President Joe Biden said the negotiations to halt the Gaza conflict had been some of the "toughest" of his career.

"I'm deeply satisfied this day has come, finally come," he said in a televised statement. Israeli President Isaac Herzog, who holds a largely ceremonial role, said the deal was the "right move", while the office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu cautioned that some issues in the framework remained "unresolved", though it hoped the "details will be finalised tonight".

The first phase of the deal would see Hamas release 33 captives, Al-Thani said, "including civilian women and female recruits, as well as children (and) elderly people... in return for a number of prisoners who are being held in Is-

raeli prisons". Pressure to put an end to the fighting had ratcheted up in recent days, as mediators Qatar, Egypt and the United States intensified efforts to cement an agreement. On Wednesday, Qatar's PM said the three countries would monitor the implementation of the ceasefire via a body based in Cairo. Hamas said its delegation had handed mediators its approval for the ceasefire agreement and return of prisoners. Hamas' acting Gaza chief Khalil al-

Hayya said in a televised address on Wednesday that Israel failed to achieve its goals in Gaza, shortly after a ceasefire deal was announced. He also vowed the Palestinian group will neither forgive or forget. Another Palestinian official, who asked not to be named, earlier told Reuters that Hamas had given verbal approval to the ceasefire and prisoner return proposal and was awaiting more information to give final written approval. The agreement follows months of on-

and-off negotiations, conducted by Egyptian and Qatari mediators, with the backing of the United States, and comes just days ahead of the Jan 20 inauguration of US President-elect Donald Trump, who rushed to claim credit for the deal on Thursday. "We have a deal for the hostages in the Middle East. They will be released shortly. Thank you!" Trump said on his Truth Social network, before any official announcement from outgoing President Joe Biden's White House.