

## Canada's deputy PM quits in tariff rift with Trudeau

OTTAWA: (news desk) Canada's Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland quit on Monday in a surprise move after disagreeing with Justin Trudeau over US President-elect Donald Trump's tariff threats.

Freeland also stepped down as finance minister, and her resignation marked the first open dissent against Prime Minister Trudeau from within his cabinet and may threaten his hold on power.

Liberal Party leader Trudeau lags 20 points in polls behind his main rival, Conservative Pierre Poilievre, who has tried three times since September to topple the government and force a snap election.

"Our country today faces a grave challenge," Freeland said in her resignation letter, pointing to Trump's planned 25 per cent tariffs on Canadian imports.

"For the past number of weeks, you and I have found ourselves at odds about the best path forward for Canada." Canada's PM Justin Trudeau (L) and then-foreign minister Chrystia Freeland (R) speak at a press conference to announce the new trade pact with Canada, the US, and Mexico in Ottawa. First elected to parliament in 2013, the former journalist joined on Trudeau's cabinet two years later when the Liberals swept to power, holding key posts including trade and foreign minister, and leading free trade negotiations with the EU and the United States. Most recently, she had been tasked with helping lead Canada's response to moves by the incoming Trump administration.

## Dissanayake in India for first overseas trip

NEW DELHI: (news desk) Sri Lanka President Anura Kumara Dissanayake vowed to bolster ties with India on Monday on his first overseas visit as head of state, with a red carpet welcome by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Leaders of the island nation typically make their first visit to regional powerhouse India, which competes with China for influence in the Indian Ocean. Leftist Dissanayake, who came to power in September on a pledge to fight corruption, said the ties between the nations held a "significant place" in their foreign policy, adding that Modi had "assured us of full support".

Modi said he was "happy" that India was Dissanayake's first foreign visit, saying after their meeting it would "add new energy and speed" to ties. New Delhi has been concerned about Beijing's growing hold in Sri Lanka, and gave Dissanayake a warm welcome with a military honour guard parade at the presidential palace. New Delhi is a key trading partner for Colombo — Indian exports totalled \$4.1 billion to Sri Lanka, versus \$1.4 billion in reverse — and is pushing infrastructure projects. But China is Sri Lanka's largest bilateral lender. Dissanayake is expected to travel to Beijing for talks with Chinese leaders in early 2025. Sri Lanka suffered its worst financial crisis in 2022 when it ran out of foreign exchange to pay for essential imports such as food, fuel and medicines, and defaulted on its \$46 billion foreign debt.

## Scholz loses trust vote, triggering early elections

BERLIN: (news desk) Germany's centre-left Chancellor Olaf Scholz lost a confidence vote on Monday after weeks of turmoil, setting Europe's biggest economy on the path to early elections on Feb 23.

The Bundestag vote, which Scholz had expected to lose, allows President Frank-Walter Steinmeier to dissolve the legislature and formally order an election.

The crucial vote followed a fiery debate in which political rivals traded angry recriminations in a foretaste of the election campaign to come.

Embattled Scholz, 66, lags badly in the polls behind conservative opposition leader Friedrich Merz of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of ex-chancellor Angela Merkel. After over three years at the helm, Scholz was plunged into crisis when his unruly three-party coalition collapsed on Nov 6, the day Donald Trump won re-election to the White House.

The political turbulence has hit Germany as it struggles to revive a stuttering economy hammered by high energy prices and tough competition from China.

Berlin also faces major geopolitical challenges as it confronts Russia over the Ukraine war and as Trump's looming return heightens uncertainty over future Nato and trade ties. Those threats were at the centre of a heated debate between Scholz, Merz and other party leaders ahead of the vote in the lower house, in which 207 MPs backed Scholz against 394 who did not, with 116 abstentions. After Scholz outlined his plans for massive spending on security, business and social welfare, Merz demanded to know why he had not taken those steps in the past, asking: "Were you on another planet?"

Scholz argued that his government had boosted spending on the armed forces which previous CDU-led governments had left "in a deplorable state".



France's Ambassador to Germany Francois Delattre, the CEO of German railway operator Deutsche Bahn (DB) Richard Lutz, German Minister for Transport Volker Wissing, Berlin's mayor Kai Wegner and Director at SNCF European Markets.

## Paris-Berlin direct daytime high-speed rail link launched

PARIS: (Newsdesk) French and German rail operators launched the first direct high-speed rail link between Paris and Berlin on Monday, in response to growing European demand for train travel.

The inaugural service, a German ICE train, left the French capital's Gare de l'Est station at 9:55am and was due at Berlin Hauptbahnhof at 6:03pm.

The service shaves only minutes off the fastest one-

change connection between both capitals. The trains run at up to 320 kilometres per hour while in France, but that speed drops to a maximum 250km/h in Germany — only just meeting the definition of high-speed rail travel.

A one-way ticket for the 1,100-kilometre journey costs upwards of 99 euros (\$104), rising sharply on busy days.

Budget airlines, such as easyJet, charge around half

that for a 1h45 nonstop flight between both capitals. But French rail operator SNCF has reported an occupancy rate of over 80 per cent for the new trains.

"Bookings are going very well," said SNCF boss Jean-Pierre Farandou. "People like to travel in comfort rather than negotiating the sometimes difficult access" to airports, he said.

Lea Bader, who travelled on Monday's train, said she did not hesitate to take the train

because she would have had to buy an extra ticket for her cello on a plane. She said the train was also more comfortable, and she welcomed the absence of a need to change trains which she said had been "horrible, because each time there was a problem or a delay".

A third of Germany's high-speed train services suffered delays in 2023, and line closures because of repairs or maintenance work are commonplace.

## Hundreds feared dead as cyclone hits Mayotte

SAINT REUNION: (news desk) Rescuers raced against time on Monday to reach survivors and supply urgent aid after a devastating cyclone ripped through the French Indian Ocean territory of Mayotte, destroying homes across the islands, with hundreds feared dead.

Images from Mayotte, which like other French overseas territories is an

integral part of France and ruled from Paris, showed scenes of devastation, with homes reduced to piles of rubble. The crisis, which erupted at the weekend the day after President Emmanuel Macron appointed Francois Bayrou as the sixth prime minister of his mandate, poses a major challenge for a government still only operating in a caretaker capacity. The cyclone left

health services in tatters, with the main hospital extremely damaged and health centres knocked out of operation, Health Minister Genevieve Darrieussecq told broadcaster France 2. "The hospital has suffered major water damage and destruction, notably in the surgical, intensive care, maternity and emergency units," she said, adding that "medical centres were also

non-operational". Macron was due to chair a crisis meeting in Paris at 1700 GMT, the Elysee said. Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau, whose super ministry is responsible for Mayotte, arrived on the island to oversee rescue efforts. "In reality for the toll we are going to need days, days," he told officials after arriving, warning against giving any figures at this stage.



A view shows damage in storm-hit Mayotte, France, in this handout image obtained by Reuters on Dec 16, 2024. — UIISC7/Securite Civile via

## Incoming leader of Anglican Church embroiled in abuse scandal

LONDON: (news desk) A senior UK bishop, who will soon take over temporarily as leader of the world's Anglicans after a sex abuse scandal, faced calls to quit on Monday over his own handling of another case.

Archbishop of York Stephen Cottrell, the Anglican Church's second most senior cleric, will take

charge for a few months in the New Year following the resignation of Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby last month.

Welby stepped down after an independent probe found he "could and should" have formally reported decades of abuse by a Church-linked lawyer to authorities in 2013. The report found the

Church of England — the mother church of Anglicanism — covered up the "traumatic physical, sexual, psychological and spiritual attacks", which occurred in Britain, Zimbabwe and South Africa over several decades.

Now the Bishop of Newcastle, Helen-Ann Hartley, has called for Cottrell to stand down over claims he

too mishandled a sexual abuse case during his time as the Bishop of Chelmsford. Priest David Tudor remained in his post under Cottrell, despite the bishop's knowledge that the Church had banned him from being alone with children and paid compensation to a sexual abuse claimant, the BBC reported.

## Istanbul tainted alcohol death toll jumps to 37

ISTANBUL: (news desk) The death toll from people drinking tainted alcohol in Istanbul jumped to 37, the governor's office said on Monday.

"Thirty-seven people died and 17 others are still receiving treatment" over a period of six weeks, the governor's office said. It said a total of 77 people had been poisoned since November 1, 23 of whom had been treated and discharged.

On December 4, Turkish media said 17 people had died from drinking tainted alcohol in Istanbul, while 22 others were being treated in hospital. Alcohol tainted with methanol is thought to be the cause, methanol being a toxic substance that can be added to liquor to increase its potency but which can cause blindness, liver damage and death. Poisonings from adulterated alcohol are quite common in Turkey, where private production has exploded as authorities have cranked up taxes on alcoholic drinks. The most commonly faked product is raki, Turkey's aniseed-flavoured national beverage whose price has shot up to around 1,300 lira (\$37.20) a litre in supermarkets. The minimum wage in Turkey is 17,000 lira (\$489) a month. The authorities also fined 32 businesses for supplying fake alcohol, hitting them with a collective fine of 2.6 million Turkish lira (\$76,200). The governor's office said police had arrested 14 people in connection with supplying the tainted alcohol and seized 14,701 bottles of suspect liquor.

## Three killed in US school shooting

MADISON: (news desk) A teenager killed two people at a Wisconsin school on Monday before police found the suspect dead at the scene of the latest shooting to devastate a US campus.

Six other people were wounded, according to police, who said children were among the dead and wounded in the shooting, which took place in Madison, the capital of Wisconsin state.

Earlier, police had said five people were killed in the shooting, but later clarified that information was incorrect.

The campus of Abundant Life Christian School after a school shooting. The shooting took place at Abundant Life Christian School, a private institution that teaches some 400 students from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Police said in a written statement that three people were killed in the incident, including the suspected shooter, who was identified only as a juvenile student at the school. The shooter was found dead inside the school when police arrived.

## Syria's ammunition dump turns into a smoking ruin after Israeli strikes

TARTUS: (news desk) A Syrian bunker complex outside the port of Tartus was ablaze and rocked by explosions on Monday just hours after what a war monitor and locals said was an intense wave of Israeli air strikes. Even after the strikes ended, blasts continued to erupt in a valley outside the village of Bmalkah, a Christian community in the hills behind the city, which is home to Russia's naval base in Syria.

Coming just over a week after Bashar al-Assad's regime was ousted in a lightning rebel offensive, the raids targeted strategic sites and air defences along Syria's western coast.

Israeli planes launched "the heaviest strikes in Syria's coastal region since the start of strikes in 2012" overnight, according to the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The hillsides around Bmalkah and the base, a cluster of concrete buildings and arched concrete bunker entrances cut into the hillside to protect stockpiled munitions, were littered with shrapnel. Missile launch tubes, mortar shells and damaged munitions were scattered on the ground and plumes of smoke rose from the terraced sides of the valley as parts of the arsenal continued to detonate.

## Palestinians mourn dead after Israeli strike on Khan Yunis

CAIRO: (news desk) Relatives of Palestinians killed by Israel in Khan Yunis gathered around their white-shrouded bodies on Monday before carrying them to their graves.

Palestinian health officials said on Sunday at least 20 people, including children, were killed in a strike at a school sheltering displaced families in the city in the southern Gaza Strip.

Women wept as the bodies of the family members were carried away on medical stretchers by men who laid them on the ground to perform funeral prayers.

"People were safe, staying in their homes (shelters) after they prayed the dinner prayer. They were sitting, sleeping, and staying put in their places," said Manal Tafesh, whose brother and his children were among those killed. "Our children are gone, our children are gone. Our youth are gone. Our children are gone, and our lineage ended. When will this darkness end?" she said outside the orgue.

Israeli bombardment continued on Monday. Palestinian health officials said strikes across the enclave had killed at least 10 people.

Medics said four people were killed in an airstrike in Beit Lahiyah town in the northern edge of the Gaza Strip, where the army has operated since October, while three were killed in Israeli tank shelling that hit near the cemetery of Nuseirat camp in central areas and three others in Rafah in the south.

## Czech billionaire acquires Britain's centuries-old Royal Mail

LONDON: (news desk) Britain's centuries-old Royal Mail is set to pass into foreign ownership after the UK government on Monday approved the takeover of its parent company by Czech billionaire Daniel Kretinsky's EP Group.

The takeover of International Distribution Services (IDS) is worth 3.6 billion (\$4.5 billion). The deal "protects workers and key services whilst seeing Royal Mail continue to be headquartered in Britain, securing jobs and tax receipts in

the UK", the government said in a statement. The government will hold a "golden share" in the former state monopoly Royal Mail which ensures it has veto power over the postal operator's headquarters being moved abroad and over changes to its tax residency.

Both parties have been waiting for the government green light since IDS in May accepted the takeover offer from the EP Group, which already held a near 28-per cent stake. "For too many

years progress on securing a stable future at Royal Mail has stalled," Business Secretary Jonathan Reynolds said.

"We are working towards ensuring a financially stable Royal Mail with protected links between communities other providers can't reach," he added.

Kretinsky made a series of guarantees to gain government approval, notably maintaining the Universal Service Obligation to deliver mail six days a week to all 32 million UK addresses for the

price of a stamp. "EP Group is a long term and committed investor with a mission to make Royal Mail a successful modern postal operator with high quality service and products for its customers," Kretinsky said in a statement.

Royal Mail, which was privatised in 2013, has suffered in recent years from falling parcel volumes, delays in delivering mail and strikes over pay. "Historic moment" Monday's announcement comes after Britain's communi-

cations regulator Ofcom last week fined the postal operator 10.5 million for delays in delivering mail. Ofcom has previously proposed that Royal Mail cut delivery to five days a week, or even just three days, potentially saving the company hundreds of millions of pounds. The EP Group also announced Monday it had reached an agreement in principle with the main unions representing postal workers, CWU and CMA Unite. "Whilst many will fear Royal Mail falling into the hands of

a foreign equity investor, the truth is every postal worker knows the status quo is what will kill off postal services in the UK," CWU general secretary Dave Ward said in a statement on the union's X account. IDS employs about 153,000 staff, with the vast majority representing Royal Mail. It has also seen its core letters business ravaged as consumers increasingly communicate online, which has conversely helped its international parcels business, GLS.