

EU universal charger rules come into force

BRUSSELS: (news desk) EU rules requiring all new smartphones, tablets and cameras to use the same charger came into force on Saturday, in a change Brussels said will cut costs and waste. Manufacturers are now obliged to fit devices sold in the 27-nation bloc with a USB-C, the port chosen by the European Union as the common standard for charging electronic tools. "Starting today, all new mobile phones, tablets, digital cameras, headphones, speakers, keyboards and many other electronics sold in the EU will have to be equipped with a USB Type-C charging port," the EU Parliament wrote on social media X. The EU has said the single charger rule will simplify the life of Europeans and slash costs for consumers. By allowing consumers to purchase a new device without a new charger, it will also reduce the mountain of obsolete chargers, the bloc has argued. The law was first approved in 2022 following a tussle with US tech giant Apple. It allowed companies until Dec 28 this year to adapt. Makers of laptops will have extra time, from early 2026, to also follow suit. Most devices already use these cables, but Apple was more than a little reluctant. The firm said in 2021 that such regulation "stifles innovation", but by September last year it had begun shipping phones with the new port. Makers of electronic consumer items in Europe had agreed on a single charging norm from dozens on the market a decade ago under a voluntary agreement with the European Commission. But Apple, the world's biggest seller of smartphones, refused to abide by it and ditch its Lightning ports.

South Korean prosecutors say Yoon authorised 'shooting' during martial law bid

SEOUL: (news desk) South Korea's suspended president Yoon Suk Yeol authorised the military to fire their weapons if needed to enter parliament during his failed bid to impose martial law, according to a prosecutors' report on Saturday.

The 10-page summary from former defence minister Kim Yong-hyun's prosecution indictment report, which was provided to the media, also says Yoon vowed on December 3 to declare martial law three times if necessary.

Yoon, who was stripped of his duties by the National Assembly this month, is under investigation for his short-lived attempt to scrap civilian rule, which plunged the country into political turmoil and led to his impeachment.

Yoon's lawyer Yoon Kab-keun dismissed the prosecutors' report, telling it was "a one-sided account that neither corresponds to objective circumstances nor common sense". As lawmakers rushed to parliament on Dec 3 to vote down Yoon's martial law declaration, heavily armed troops stormed the building, scaling fences, smashing windows and landing by helicopter.

March against air pollution in North Macedonia's capital

SKOPJE: (news desk) Around a thousand people protested on Saturday in Skopje against air pollution in North Macedonia's capital, which often ranks among the most polluted cities in Europe.

It was the second such demonstration in less than a month in Skopje, with the previous march involving a slightly smaller crowd of several hundred people.

The participants of Saturday's march through downtown Skopje, dubbed "Come out for clean air", sought from the authorities to undertake immediate measures over the issue.

"Our air is poison, our government is deaf" and "Future cannot be seen from smog" read some of the banners carried by the protesters. The march was organised by several environmental groups and citizens' initiatives.

The urgent measures sought by the protesters include increasing inspection for industrial facilities, ecological heating of state facilities, promoting the use of public transport and bicycles as well as better waste management. It was the second such demonstration in less than a month in Skopje, with the previous march involving a slightly smaller crowd of several hundred people.

Almost 4,000 people in North Macedonia die each year due to exposure to PM2.5 particles, the smallest particulate matter that can be inhaled and the most dangerous to human health, according to the Institute for Public Health.

Air pollution is the cause of 20 per cent of premature deaths in 19 Balkan cities, according to a UN study from 2019. People living in the region lose in average up to 1.3 years of their life due to air pollution, the study showed.



THE Eagle S (right), an oil tanker which operates under the flag of Cook Islands, is anchored beside Uisko, a Finnish border guard ship (back centre), and tugboat Ukko (front left), on Saturday.

Finland 'seizes' ship blamed for Baltic cable cuts

HELSINKI: (news desk) Finnish police on Saturday moved a ship held over suspicions it sabotaged an undersea power cable between Finland and Estonia to help with their investigations.

Since Thursday, Finnish authorities have been investigating the Eagle S tanker, which Helsinki suspects of having Russian connections, as part of a probe into the "aggravated sabotage" of the Estlink

2 submarine cable in the Baltic Sea.

That cable's disconnection on Christmas Day was the latest in a spate of incidents Western officials believe are acts of sabotage linked to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Cook Islands-flagged ship was then escorted towards the Finnish coast near Porkkala in the south of the Nordic nation. Finnish police reported the tanker was moved under escort

on Saturday to an inner anchorage in Porvoo, a town some 40 kilometres (25 miles) east of Helsinki. "The reason for the transfer is that the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) has seized Eagle S," the police said in a statement. Investigations on board were to resume once the vessel had anchored again at its new location. "The new location offers a better option for carrying out investigative measures," the

statement added. Tensions have mounted around the Baltic Sea since Russia's invasion of Ukraine began in Feb 2022. The Estlink's disconnection comes just over a month after two telecommunications cables were severed in Swedish territorial waters in the Baltic. Nato's secretary general, Mark Rutte, said on Friday the US-led defence alliance would bolster its military presence in the Baltic Sea in response.

Russia to halt gas supplies to Moldova

MOSCOW: (news desk) Russia's Gazprom announced on Saturday that it will halt gas supplies to Moldova from January 1 over a debt dispute during a state of emergency over energy security in the tiny country.

The move comes as several Eastern European countries brace for an end to Russian gas supplies, as Kyiv will block the flow of Russian gas via its territory in several days.

Moldova earlier this month introduced a 60-day state of emergency before the expected cut.

"Gazprom will introduce a restriction on natural gas supplies to the Republic of Moldova to zero cubic meters per day from 0500 GMT on January 1, 2025," the company said in a statement, accusing Chisinau of failing to settle debts.

It said it made the move "in connection with the refusal by the Moldovan

side to regulate debts". Gazprom accused Chisinau of not fulfilling its side of contracts and said it "reserved the right" for further action, including terminating a gas supply contract with Moldova. Russia supplies Moldova with gas piped to the separatist region of Transnistria.

The country gets most of its electricity from a power station based in Transnistria that uses Russian gas. "Gazprom will intro-

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PROTESTERS wearing gas masks take part in a demonstration against air pollution in Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia, on Saturday.

Trump asks US Supreme Court to delay TikTok ban

WASHINGTON: (news desk) US president-elect Donald Trump filed a brief on Friday urging the Supreme Court to pause a law that would ban TikTok the day before his Jan 20 inauguration if it is not sold by its Chinese owner ByteDance. "In light of the novelty and difficulty of this case, the court should consider staying the statutory deadline to grant more breathing space to address

these issues," Trump's legal team wrote, to give him "the opportunity to pursue a political resolution." Trump was fiercely opposed to TikTok during his 2017-21 first term, and tried in vain to ban the video app on national security grounds. The Republican voiced concerns — echoed by political rivals — that the Chinese government might tap into US TikTok users' data or manipulate

what they see on the platform. US officials had also voiced alarm over the popularity of the video-sharing app with young people, alleging that its parent company is subservient to Beijing and that the app is used to spread propaganda, claims denied by the company and the Chinese government. Trump called for a US company to buy TikTok, with the government sharing in the sale

price, and his successor Joe Biden went one stage further — signing a law to ban the app for the same reasons. Recently, Trump told Bloomberg he had changed his mind about the app: "Now (that) I'm thinking about it, I'm for TikTok, because you need competition." "If you don't have TikTok, you have Facebook and Instagram — and that's, you know, that's Zuckerberg."

Case of journalist detained in Iran 'complicated': Rome

ROME: (news desk) Efforts to release Italian journalist Cecilia Sala from prison in Iran are "complicated", Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani said on Saturday. Sala was detained on Dec 19 by police in Tehran and is being held in the city's notorious Evin prison, according to her employer. "We are trying to resolve a complicated issue and to ensure in the meantime that Cecilia Sala is detained in the best possible conditions," Tajani said. Asked when she might be released, he said "I hope shortly, but it does not depend on us". "She is obviously detained, which is not ideal, but she is fed and in a single cell," he said.

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's office said she was "following the complex affair" closely, and Rome was pursuing "all possible avenues of dialogue" to bring Sala home "as soon as possible".

Chora Media, an Italian podcast publisher for which Sala worked, said she had travelled from Rome to Iran on Dec 12 on a journalist visa, and was due to return on Dec 20. But she went quiet on Dec 19 and then did not board her flight. Shortly afterwards she called her mother to say she had been arrested, it said.

"She was taken to Evin prison, where dissidents are held, and the reason for her arrest has not yet been formalised," Chora said in a statement.

Sala also worked for Italian newspaper Il Foglio, which said she had been in Iran "to report on a country she knows and loves".

Gaza child amputees get new limbs, but can't shake trauma

ABU DHABI: (news desk) Layan Al Nasr, 14, thought she would never walk again after both of her legs were amputated following an Israeli bombing in Gaza one year ago.

Now, she stands proudly on artificial limbs fitted in the United Arab Emirates. But fear for her family, still living under the attacks, gnaws away. "When I was told about prosthetics when I arrived, I didn't even know they existed," she jokes, taking a few steps supported by crutches. She is able to smile as she describes her operations, rehabilitation and her newfound hope. But emotion eventually catches up with her. "What scares me today is losing my brothers, my sisters and my father," she confides, bursting into tears. Nasr is one of more than 2,000 wounded or seriously ill Palestinians flown with their closest relatives to the oil-rich UAE during the Israel-Hamas conflict. Plucked from shattered Gaza, much of it in ruins, they are lucky to escape a conflict that has left more than 45,000 people dead in the Palestinian territory.

Lebanon sends 70 military persons back to Syria

BEIRUT: (news desk) Lebanon expelled around 70 Syrian officers and soldiers on Saturday, returning them to Syria after they crossed into the country illegally via informal routes, a Lebanese security official and a war monitor said. Many senior Syrian officials and people close to the former ruling family of Bashar al-Assad fled the country to neighbouring Lebanon after Assad's regime was toppled on Dec 8. Moreover, a Lebanese security source said on Saturday that Rifaat al-Assad, Bashar al-Assad's uncle, left the country via Beirut airport around a week ago. Rifaat al-Assad arrived in Lebanon overland and "departed from Beirut airport normally, as there is nothing from Interpol on him" the security source said. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), a London-based organisation with sources in Syria, and the Lebanese security official said Syrian military personnel of various ranks had been sent back via Lebanon's northern Arida crossing. SOHR and the security official said the returnees were detained by Syria's new ruling authorities after crossing the border. The new administration has been undertaking a major security crackdown in recent days on what they say are "remnants" of the Assad regime. Several of the cities and towns concerned, including in Homs and Tartous provinces, are near the porous border with Lebanon.

Turkiye's pro-Kurd party meets jailed PKK leader

ISTANBUL: (news desk) A delegation from Turkey's main pro-Kurdish DEM party on Saturday visited jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, who is serving life on a prison island off Istanbul, party officials said. The visit would be the party's first in almost 10 years. DEM's predecessor, the HDP party, last met Ocalan in April 2015. "The delegation left in the morning," a party source said, without elaborating how they would travel to the island for security reasons.

Turkiye's top diplomat said Syrian Kurdish fighters essential for the United States in the fight against the militant Islamic State group cannot be sheltered in Syria, in a phone call with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan told Blinken that "the PKK/YPG terrorist organisation cannot be allowed to take shelter in Syria," the ministry spokesman said, referring to the People's Protection Units (YPG) Ankara views as a terror group.

Fidan told Blinken that Ankara backed the efforts of Syria's new rulers to "ensure the territorial integrity and security" of the country. He also said during the phone call that "it is important to act in cooperation with the new Syrian administration in order to ensure stability in Syria and to complete the transition period in an orderly manner," according to the ministry spokesperson. The government's approval of DEM's request to visit Ocalan, who founded the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) nearly half a century ago and has languished in solitary confinement since 1999, came on Friday. The DEM party delegation is made up of two lawmakers — Sirri Sureyya Onder and Pervin Buldan.

Putin apologises to Azerbaijan over 'tragic' plane crash

MOSCOW: (news desk) President Vladimir Putin on Saturday apologised to Azerbaijan's leader for what the Kremlin called a "tragic incident" over Russia in which an Azerbaijan Airlines plane crashed after Russian air defences were fired against Ukrainian drones. The extremely rare publicised apology from Putin was the closest Moscow had come to accepting some blame for Wednesday's disaster, although the Kremlin statement did not say Russia had shot down the plane, only

noting that a criminal case had been opened. Flight J2-8243, en route from Baku to the Chechen capital Grozny, crash-landed on Wednesday near Aktau in Kazakhstan after diverting from southern Russia, where Ukrainian drones were reported to be attacking several cities. At least 38 people were killed.

Four sources with knowledge of the preliminary findings of Azerbaijan's investigation told Reuters on Thursday that Russian air defences had mistakenly shot the airliner

down. Passengers said they heard a loud bang outside the plane.

Putin called President Ilham Aliyev and "apologised for the tragic incident that occurred in Russian airspace and once again expressed his deep and sincere condolences to the families of the victims and wished a speedy recovery to the injured," the Kremlin said.

"At that time, Grozny, Mozdok and Vladikavkaz were being attacked by Ukrainian unmanned aerial vehicles, and Russian air defence systems re-

pelled these attacks." The Kremlin said "civilian and military specialists" were being questioned.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky also said he had called Aliyev to offer condolences, and in his statement on the X platform demanded that Russia provide "clear explanations". Azerbaijan for its part said Aliyev had noted to Putin that the plane had been "subjected to external physical and technical interference in Russian airspace, resulting in a complete loss of control and redirection to

the Kazakh city of Aktau". Until Saturday, Russia's last working day before a long New Year holiday, the Kremlin had said it was improper to comment on the incident before official investigations were concluded. Meanwhile, the European Union's top diplomat on Saturday called for a "swift, independent" probe into the Azerbaijan Airlines crash, after the US suggested the incident may have been caused by a Russian anti-aircraft missile. "I call for a swift, independent international investiga-

tion," Kaja Kallas, the EU's foreign affairs chief, wrote on social media platform X. She said the incident was a "stark reminder" of the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, which was shot down by a surface-to-air missile fired by Russia-backed rebels over eastern Ukraine in 2014. "Our thoughts are with the families and friends of the victims. I wish for a speedy recovery to the injured," Kallas said. Russia has previously said that Grozny was being attacked by Ukrainian drones that day.