

Jailed PKK leader 'ready' to support peace in Turkiye

ISTANBUL: (news desk) Abdullah Ocalan, the jailed leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), is "ready to make a call" to back a new initiative by the Turkish government to end decades of conflict, Turkiye's pro-Kurd party said on Sunday.

Two lawmakers from the DEM party made a rare visit to Ocalan on Saturday on his prison island, the first by the party in almost a decade, amid signs of easing tensions between the Turkish government and the PKK. On Friday, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government approved DEM's request to visit the founder of the PKK, which is designated a terror group by Turkiye and its Western allies. Ocalan has been serving a life sentence on the island of Imrali south of Istanbul since 1999.

The government's approval of the visit comes two months after the head of Turkiye's nationalist MHP party, Devlet Bahceli, extended Ocalan a shock olive branch, inviting him to parliament to renounce terror and disband his group, a move backed by Erdogan.

"I have the competence and determination to make a positive contribution to the new paradigm started by Mr Bahceli and Mr Erdogan," Ocalan said, according to a DEM statement. Ocalan said the visiting delegation would share his approach with both the state and political circles. "In light of this, I am ready to take the necessary positive steps and make the call." DEM party co-chair Tuncer Bakirhan lauded Ocalan's appeal as "historic opportunity to build a common future," in a message on social media platform X.

Suicide blast kills Iranian police commander

TEHRAN:(news desk) Iranian security forces arrested a person allegedly linked to a suicide blast that killed a police commander, state media reported on Sunday, after the rare attack in Hormozgan province.

The attack took place on Saturday in the southern coastal city of Bandar-e Lengeh, Iranian media reported.

On Sunday the separatist jihadist group, Ansar al-Furqan, claimed credit for the attack, according to SITE Intelligence Group which quoted the Ansar al-Furqan Telegram channel.

The official IRNA news agency reported that "one person was arrested following the deadly terrorist attack." It did not give further details including the suspect's identity. IRNA said the suicide blast also killed the attacker, whose identity "has not yet been accurately identified and investigations are ongoing," the agency quoted Ehsan Kamarani, the deputy provincial governor, as saying.

He added that "the evidence shows that he was affiliated with takfiri groups", terminology used by Iran to describe Sunni groups.

UK to tax private schools to raise \$1.9 billion

LONDON: (news desk) The UK will end a tax exemption for private schools on Wednesday, the centre-left Labour government has announced, in a move set to raise over £1.5 billion (\$1.9 billion) for public education.

After years of worsening educational inequalities, from Jan 1, private schools will have to pay 20 per cent value added tax on tuition fees, which will be used to fund thousands of new teachers and improve standards in state schools. "It's time things are done differently", finance minister Rachel Reeves said in a statement on Sunday.

The funding will "go towards our state schools where 94pc of this country's children are educated", she said.

The policy was promised by Labour in its election campaign and officially laid out in its inaugural budget in October. It hopes the move will bring in 1.5 billion for the 2025/2026 school year and rise to 1.7 billion a year by 2029/2030, which will be used to fund 6,500 new teachers in the public sector. Tuition fees in private schools already average 18,000 a year, according to the Independent Schools Council, which represents private schools. That figure is set to rise, with the government estimating that tuition fees will increase by around 10pc, with schools taking on part of the additional cost. "High and rising standards cannot just be for families who can afford them," said education secretary Bridget Phillipson.

Opponents of the reform say state school enrolment will explode if the private sector is lost, increasing the cost to the government. But studies contradict this. Despite warnings from private schools over the impact of the policy, Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer is ploughing ahead and will charge 20pc VAT on independent school fees from the start of 2025.



An Afghan craftsman Sakhi uses a hatchet as he makes Rubab, a string instrument of dried mulberry wood from deserts, at a workshop in Hera

Unesco-listed musical instrument Rubab stifled in Afghanistan

HERAT: (news desk) Wood shavings littered the floor of Sakhi's cramped workshop in the Afghan city of Herat as another rubab, the national musical instrument of his homeland, took shape under his deft hands. Sakhi has crafted two rubabs a month for decades, and he refuses to set down his tools even as a Taliban crackdown strangles music in Afghanistan.

"I know only this work and I need to make money somehow," said Sakhi, surrounded by rubabs in different stages of completion. But far more important to him than money is the "cultural value", said the craftsman in his fifties, whose name has been changed for his safety along with those of others interviewed. "The value of this work for me is... the heri-

tage it holds. The heritage must not be lost," he said. The UN agency Unesco agrees, recognising in December the art of crafting and playing the rubab as intangible cultural heritage in Afghanistan, Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Made of dried mulberry wood and often inlaid with mother-of-pearl, the lute-like rubab is one of the oldest instruments in the

region, its twanging sound stretching back thousands of years. But that heritage is threatened in Afghanistan under the Taliban authorities' near-total ban on music, considered corrupting in their strict interpretation of Islamic law. Since coming to power in 2021, Taliban authorities have banned music in public, from performances to playing tracks in restaurants.

China-Malaysia bond deepens over Malacca heritage

Wang Lin, (news desk) a tourist from Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, marveled at the artefacts in the Cheng Ho Cultural Museum in Malacca, Malaysia, where the stories of China's legendary navigator and diplomat Zheng He were vividly brought to life. "The history of Zheng's voyages that I learned in school has come alive before my eyes," Wang says. Zheng He, known as Cheng Ho in Malay, was a celebrated envoy of the

Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), who visited Malacca at least five times during his seven maritime expeditions. His voyages have not only strengthened ties between China and Malaysia but also laid the foundation for centuries of cultural and economic exchanges. Today, Malacca's rich historical legacy and vibrant cultural landscapes continue to attract Chinese tourists, as the 50th anniversary of China-Malay-

sia diplomatic relations in 2024 has bolstered tourism and strengthened people-to-people ties. Since the implementation of the China-Malaysia mutual visa exemption in December 2023, travel between the two nations has become more convenient. Roslan Abdul Rahman, secretary-general of Malaysia's Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, says the country has welcomed 2.69 million Chinese tourists in the first nine

months of this year, marking a 144 percent year-on-year increase. Malacca stands out as a favorite destination for Chinese tourists due to its historical ties with China. Among its attractions, Jonker Street, also known as Jonker Walk, nestled in the heart of Malacca, holds particular significance. Once the site of Zheng's storehouses and early Chinese settlements, the area now is a bustling Unesco World Heritage Site.



Malacca's rich historical legacy and vibrant cultural landscapes are a big draw for Chinese tourists

Georgia's new pro-Russia president inaugurated amid protests

TBILISI:(newsdesk) Georgia inaugurated on Sunday an ex-footballer turned far-right politician — Mikheil Kavelashvili — as Tbilisi's next figurehead president, after a controversial election process denounced as "illegitimate" by the current pro-EU leader.

Picked by the governing Georgian Dream party as a loyalist, the former forward

for English Premier League champions Manchester City is known for his expletive-laden parliament speeches and tirades against government critics and LGBTQ people. He was voted into the role by an electoral college controlled by Georgian Dream, after the party abolished the use of popular votes to elect the president under

controversial constitutional changes passed in 2017. Kavelashvili was the only candidate and his inauguration came amid a major political crisis — thousands of anti-government protesters have staged daily rallies in Tbilisi for a month, outraged at Georgian Dream for shelving EU accession talks. In a speech after taking the presidential oath, Kave-

lashvili, known for his far-right views and derogatory comments against LGBTQ people, praised Georgian "traditions, values, national identity, the sanctity of the family, and faith". Minutes before he took the oath in parliament, outgoing pro-Western leader Salome Zurbishvili said she remains the "country's only legitimate president."

Taliban leader bans windows overlooking women's areas

KABUL: (news desk) The Taliban's supreme leader has issued an order banning the construction of windows in residential buildings that overlook areas used by Afghan women and saying that existing ones should be blocked.

According to a statement released late on Saturday by the Taliban government spokesman, new buildings should not have windows through which it is possible to see "the courtyard, kitchen, neighbour's well and other places usually used by women".

"Seeing women working in kitchens, in courtyards or collecting water from wells can lead to obscene acts," according to the decree posted by government spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid on social media platform X. Municipal authorities and other relevant departments would have to monitor construction sites to ensure it is not possible to see into neighbours' homes. In the event that such windows exist, owners would be encouraged to build a wall or obstruct the view "to avoid nuisances caused to neighbours", the decree states. Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, women have been progressively erased from public spaces, prompting the United Nations to denounce the "gender apartheid" the administration has established. Taliban authorities have banned post-primary education for girls and women, restricted employment and blocked access to parks and other public places.

Atalanta snatch late draw at Lazio to hold Serie A lead

ROME: (news desk) Atalanta kept hold of top spot in Serie A on Saturday after escaping Lazio with a 1-1 draw which kept Inter Milan at bay but ended their club-record league winning streak at 11 matches.

Marco Brescianini tapped home into an open goal with two minutes remaining to snatch a point from the Stadio Olimpico in Rome, where a passionate crowd thought a big win was coming their way.

Instead Atalanta will end a historic year a point ahead of Inter, who have a game in hand, after the champions briefly drew level on points with a 3-0 win earlier at Cagliari.

Europa League holders Atalanta will lead the league even if Napoli beat Venezia and draw level on 41 points with Gian Piero Gasperini's side who have a significantly better goal difference than the 2023 champions.

Should two teams finish level at the top of Serie A come the end of the season they will face off in a single match to decide the destination of the Scudetto, which Atalanta have never won.

Bouzkova outlasts Australian wildcard in Brisbane opener

BRISBANE: (news desk) The Czech Republic's Marie Bouzkova outlasted Australian wildcard Talia Gibson 7-6 (7/5), 3-6, 6-3 in a three hour marathon in the opening round of the Brisbane International on Sunday.

World number 44 Bouzkova was expected to have a comfortable opener against the 20-year-old Australian, but was pushed all the way by the big-hitting Gibson.

She will now play seeded Latvian Jelena Ostapenko in the second round of the season-opening tournament. "She has so much power so I was behind in a lot of the rallies," Bouzkova said. "I'm just happy that I could get a lot of balls back and fight with everything I have." In other matches, McCartney Kessler of the United States pulled off an upset when she downed Poland's world number 38 Magda Linette in straight sets 6-4, 6-4. The 25-year-old American will now play 15th seed Yulia Putintseva of Kazakhstan in the second round.

Mexico's Renata Zarazua set up a second round clash against world number one Aryna Sabalenka with a 6-0, 6-3 win over Bulgaria's Viktoriya Tomova.

Australian Maya Joint beat fellow countrywoman Maddison Inglis 6-3, 6-4, Armenian Elina Avanesyan downed Slovakia's Rebecca Sramkova 1-6, 6-2, 6-2 and Russia's Anna Blinkova was too good for Czech player Sara Bejlek 6-1, 7-6 (7/5).

Zverev helps champions Germany knock Brazil out of United Cup

SYDNEY: (news desk) Germany took a solid first step on Sunday in defence of their United Cup title with world number two Alexander Zverev and Laura Siegemund powering them past Brazil, who were knocked out of the mixed-team tournament.

Zverev assured the win by dominating Thiago Monteiro 6-4, 6-4 after Siegemund began with a 6-3, 1-6, 6-4 victory over Beatriz Haddad Maia, who is ranked 63 places above her at 17.

The result in Perth eliminated the South Americans from group play after a previous loss to China. Germany face the Chinese on Monday with the winner advancing to the quarter-finals.

In Sydney, women's world number four Jasmine Paolini crushed Belinda Bencic 6-1, 6-1 in just 57 minutes to ensure Italy beat Switzerland.

Men's world number six Casper Ruud, meanwhile, survived a tough examination from Tomas Machac, but his efforts were in vain as Norway crashed to the Czech Republic.

Zverev broke Monteiro in the opening game of each set, preventing him from threatening in the 80-minute contest.

The one-two singles punch left Germany in an unfamiliar position at the tournament it won last year.

"This is the first time we've ever been up 2-0," Zverev said. "Last year, I played deciding (mixed doubles) matches every time.

"It's nice to have this (tie) in the bag. I'm very happy to be playing for Germany again."

Trump sides with Musk in right-wing row over worker visas

WASHINGTON:(news desk) Donald Trump weighed in Saturday in a bitter debate dividing his traditional supporters and tech barons like Elon Musk, saying that he backs a special visa programme that helps highly skilled workers enter the country.

"I've always liked the (H1-B) visas, I have always been in favor of the visas, that's why we have them" at Trump-owned facilities, the president-elect told the New York Post in his first public comments on the

matter since it flared up this week. An angry back-and-forth, largely between Silicon Valley's Musk and traditional anti-immigration Trump backers, has erupted in fiery fashion, with Musk even vowing to "go to war" over the issue. Trump's insistent calls for sharp curbs on immigration were central to his election victory in November over President Joe Biden. Trump has vowed to deport all undocumented immigrants and limit legal immigration.

But tech entrepreneurs like Tesla's Musk — as well as Vivek Ramaswamy, who is set to join Musk in co-chairing a government cost-cutting panel — say the United States produces too few highly skilled graduates, and they fervently champion the H1-B programme. Musk, who migrated from South Africa on an H1-B, posted on his X platform that luring elite engineering talent from abroad was "essential for America to keep winning." Adding acrimony to the debate was a post

from Ramaswamy, the son of immigrants from India, who deplored an "American culture" that he said venerates mediocrity, adding that the United States risks having "our asses handed to us by China." That angered several prominent conservatives who were backing Trump long before Musk noisily joined their cause this year, going on to pump more than \$250 million into the Republican's campaign. "Looking forward to the inevitable divorce between President

Trump and Big Tech," said Laura Loomer, a far-right MAGA figure known for her conspiracy theories, who often flew with Trump on his campaign plane. "We have to protect president Trump from the technocrats." She and others said Trump should be promoting American workers and further limiting immigration. "MAGA civil war" Musk, who had already infuriated some Republicans after leading an online campaign that helped tank a bipartisan budget deal

last week, fired back at his critics. Posting on X, he warned of a "MAGA civil war" over the visas, which he said were critical "for those who want America to win." Musk swore at one critic, adding: "I will go to war on this issue." That, in turn, drew a volley from Trump strategist Steve Bannon, who wrote on the Gettr platform that the H1-B programme brings in migrants who are essentially "indentured servants" working for less than American citizens would.