

Sri Lankan monkey causes nationwide blackout

Colombo(News Desk) An intruding monkey at a Sri Lankan electrical grid sub-station caused a general island-wide blackout on Sunday, government officials said.

The power outage, which began around 11:30am (0600 GMT), had yet to be fully restored after three hours. "A monkey has come in contact with our grid transformer causing an imbalance in the system," Energy Minister Kumara Jayakody told reporters.

The intrusion took place in a south Colombo suburb, he said.

While power was restored in some areas, it was not immediately clear how much longer the outage would last.

"Engineers are attending to it to try and restore the service as soon as possible," the minister said.

Sri Lankans had to endure months electricity blackouts in the summer of 2022 when the country plunged into an economic crisis.

Fuel stations ran out of petrol and diesel, forcing thermal power stations to ration electricity to 13 hours each day. Sri Lanka had defaulted on its \$46 billion external debt in April 2022 after running out of foreign exchange to finance the import of food, fuel, medicines and other essentials. The unprecedented economic meltdown forced then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa to step down. His successor, Ranil Wickremesinghe, secured a \$2.9bn bailout loan from the International Monetary Fund.

Trump says he has spoken to Putin about ending war in Ukraine: report

Washington(News Desk) US President Donald Trump said that he has talked to Russian President Vladimir Putin on the phone to discuss an end to the war in Ukraine, the New York Post reported late on Saturday. In an interview aboard Air Force One on Friday, Trump said that he had "better not say," when asked how many times the two leaders have spoken.

"He (Putin) wants to see people stop dying," Trump told the New York Post.

Neither the Kremlin nor the White House immediately responded to Reuters' request for comment outside business hours.

In late January, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said that Putin is ready to hold a phone call with Trump and Moscow is waiting for word from Washington that it is ready to.

On Friday, Trump said he would probably meet Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy next week to discuss the end of the war.

The war, which began with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, will mark its third anniversary on February 24. Thousands of people, the vast majority of them Ukrainian, have been killed during the conflict.

Trump told the New York Post that he has "always had a good relationship with Putin" and that he has a concrete plan to end the war. But he did not disclose further details.

US judge blocks Musk's cost-cutting team from Treasury data

WASHINGTON: (News Desk) A US judge issued an emergency order early Saturday blocking Elon Musk's government reform team from accessing personal and financial data for millions of Americans stored at the Treasury Department, court documents showed.

US District Judge Paul A. Engelmayer's order restricts giving access to Treasury Department payment systems and other data to "all political appointees, special government employees, and government employees detailed from an agency outside the Treasury Department."

The temporary restrictive order, which remains in effect until a Feb 14 hearing, also says any such person who has accessed data from the Treasury Department's records since President Donald Trump's Jan 20 inauguration must "immediately destroy any and all copies of material downloaded."

Musk, the world's richest person, is leading Trump's federal cost-cutting efforts under the so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). The case was brought against the Republican president, the Department of the Treasury and Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent by attorneys general from 19 states on Friday.

They alleged the administration violated the law by expanding access to sensitive Treasury Department data to staff from Musk's DOGE. The Tesla, SpaceX and X chief is neither a federal employee nor a government official, although US media reported this month that he had been registered as a "special government employee."

DOGE does not enjoy full status as a government department, which would require approval by Congress. But Musk, a top Trump donor and ally, and his team have rampaged through federal agencies in the first weeks of the new administration, pausing foreign aid programmes, slashing budgets and attempting to lay off scores of government workers.

Musk ran into controversy last week with reports he and his team were accessing sensitive data stored at the Treasury Department. Judge Engelmayer's order early Saturday said the states that sued would "face irreparable harm in the absence of injunctive relief."

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social media platform X, Tesla and a slew of other companies — buying the platform. Musk, however, said he did not wish to acquire the company.

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Musk bought social media giant Twitter, which he renamed X, for \$44 billion in 2022, insisting he was doing so in order to safeguard "free speech". Since his takeover, rights



US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin shake hands as they meet in Helsinki, Finland.

Indian forces kill 31 Maoists, two commandos dead

Delhi(News Desk) Indian security forces killed at least 31 Maoist rebels on Sunday in one of the deadliest clashes since the government ramped up efforts to crush the long-running insurgency.

Two Indian commandos were also killed in the battle, and two other security force members were wounded, police said.

More than 10,000 people have been killed in the decades-long insurgency waged by the rebels, who

say they are fighting for the rights of marginalised people in India's resource-rich central regions. "So far 31 dead bodies of the Maoists have been recovered," senior police officer Sundarraj P. told AFP.

"Two security personnel are dead and two other security personnel are injured," he added. Reinforcements have been sent to the area, he said, warning that the toll could rise as the police carry out search operations.

"Additional forces have been rushed to the encounter site," he said. Police said they had seized assault rifles and grenade launchers from the bodies of the dead rebels.

The gunfight broke in the forested areas of Bijapur district in the state of Chhattisgarh, considered the heartland of the insurgency. The rebels, also known as Naxalites after the district where their armed campaign began in 1967, were inspired by the Chi-

nese revolutionary leader Mao Zedong. "This is a big success in the direction of achieving a Naxal-free India," said Amit Shah, India's interior minister, who last year said the government expected to crush the rebellion by 2026.

Shah repeated his vow to "completely eradicate Naxalism". A crackdown by security forces killed around 287 rebels last year, an overwhelming majority in Chhattisgarh, according to government data.

netine and its conscientious, historical and legal association with that land," it said. Discussions of the fate of Palestinians in Gaza have been upended by Tuesday's shock proposal from President Donald Trump that the US would "take over the Gaza Strip" from Israel and create a "Riviera of the Middle East" after resettling Palestinians elsewhere.



A coffin of Prince Karim Al-Hussaini Aga Khan IV, the spiritual leader of Ismaili Muslims, is carried into the hearse from the Ismaili Centre during his funeral in Lisbon, Portugal

China inflation picks up after Lunar New Year spending boost

Hongkong(News Desk) Inflation picked up in China last month, official figures showed Sunday, as the Lunar New Year holiday boosted January spending. China has struggled to raise consumption and stave off deflation for months as sluggish spending, a property slump and ballooning local government debt all weigh on growth. The consumer price

index (CPI), a key measure of inflation, rose 0.5 per cent last month, up from a 0.1pc rise in November, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. The reading from January, which coincided with the start of the long Lunar New Year holiday this year, is the highest since August's reading of 0.6pc.

Last month's reading exceeded the 0.4pc rise predicted by Bloomberg analysts. The NBS reported a rise in prices for goods associated with the holiday, where millions of people travel to their hometowns and celebrate with feasts and drinking. Fresh vegetable prices rose by 2.4pc year-on-year and the price of pork rose by 13.8pc.

The boost in prices last month is "mainly due to higher food prices and tourism-related services prices on an earlier-than-usual Lunar New Year holiday," Goldman Sachs analyst Xinquan Chen wrote in a note on Sunday. "But the boost is likely to become a drag in February as seasonal demand fades," Chen said.

China suffered its sharpest fall in prices for 14 years in January 2024, at the end of a four-month period of deflation.

On Saturday, a US judge issued an emergency order blocking Musk's government reform team from accessing personal and financial data for millions of Americans stored at the Treasury Department, court documents showed.

In the comments at the forum in Germany, Musk also took aim at Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, which are meant to support historically oppressed and disenfranchised communities.

"DEI is simply racism rebranded," he said. "I'm against racism and sexism no matter who it's directed against."

US officials have been racing to enact Trump's war on DEI across the federal bureaucracy — dismantling training initiatives, scrapping grants and sidelining hundreds of workers. In Germany, Musk has voiced firm support for the far-right anti-immigration AfD party — a political taboo in a country whose Nazi past remains a sensitive subject.

Saturday's swap followed remarks by President Donald Trump suggesting the United States should take control of the Gaza Strip and clear out its inhabitants, sparking global outrage.

Or Levy, Ohad Ben Ami and Eli Sharabi, who were all seized by Hamas during the Oct 7, 2023 attack that sparked the war, "crossed the border into Israeli territory" on Saturday, the Israeli military said.

With their return, 73 out of 251 prisoners taken during the attack now remain in Gaza, including 34 the Israeli military says are dead.

Jubilant crowds in Israel's commercial hub Tel Aviv cheered as they watched live footage of the three prisoners, flanked by masked gunmen, brought on stage in Deir el-Balah before being handed over to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Or Levy, Eli Sharabi and Ohad Ben Ami are released by Hamas fighters in Deir el-Balah.

Aga Khan, late leader of Ismailis, to be buried in Egypt today

GILGIT: (News Desk) Prince Karim Aga Khan Al-Hussaini, the 49th imam of Ismaili Muslims, will be buried in the Egyptian city of Aswan on Sunday.

His funeral at the Ismaili Centre in Lisbon was attended by more than 300 guests, including Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa and former Spanish king Juan Carlos I, leaders of the Ismaili community and other dignitaries on Saturday.

In Gilgit-Baltistan and other parts of Pakistan, thousands of followers of the late spiritual leader gathered at their community centres and Jamaat Khanas to view the funeral ceremony broadcast from Lisbon.

In Gilgit, Hunza and Nagar, shops and businesses remained closed to mourn the death of Prince Karim, who died on Tuesday in Lisbon after nearly seven decades as the spiritual leader of the Ismaili Muslims.

Finance minister, global dignitaries attend funeral in Lisbon According to a statement by the Ismaili Imam, the funeral was a closed event attended only by invited guests. The Ismaili community was represented by the 22 National Council presidents from around the world, including Pakistan.

Unexploded ordnance imperils thousands of lives in Gaza

PARIS: (News Desk) Unexploded bombs and shells buried in the ruins of Gaza could kill or injure thousands of people in the conflict-stricken Palestinian territory in the future, an aid organisation has warned. The volume of ordnance dropped on Gaza during 15 months of conflict between Israel and Hamas was "mind-boggling," said Simon Elmont, a demining expert with Handicap International — Humanity & Inclusion. "The amount of ordnance that has been fired is an enormous quantity," Elmont said, adding that between nine and 13 per cent of munitions fail to explode on initial impact. "It is going to be tens of thousands of unexploded ordnance, that's for sure," he added.

He said that the contamination level in Gaza was massive, and much of the ordnance "lies mainly within the rubble and underneath the surface of Gaza". Hamas and Israel have agreed a ceasefire, which came into effect on Jan 19 and ushered in a fragile calm. Fatah Elmont warned of the risk of multiple deaths and injuries as hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians return home to recover their belongings and try to rebuild. "The potential is for hundreds, if not thousands, of incidents where people potentially are injured. And unfortunately, some of those injuries will be fatal," Elmont said. "We know that people will start to try to find their personal effects. They will be entering damaged and destroyed buildings. They will start moving the rubble around," Elmont added. "Our great concern now is that as they're doing that, they will come across ordnance."

Israel putting Gaza ceasefire at risk of collapse, says Hamas

ISTANBUL: (News Desk) Israel's "lack of commitment" is putting the Gaza ceasefire in danger of collapse, a senior Hamas official said on Saturday with talks yet to start on its second phase.

In an interview, Hamas political bureau member and former Gaza health minister Basem Naim warned the deal was in danger, but said the Palestinian group did not want to return to conflict. Question: You say Hamas remains committed to negotiations to extend the ceasefire, but is there still the possibility of a return to conflict? Basem Naim: What we see from delay and lack of commitment in implementing the first phase and the attempt to create a political, international, diplomatic, and media environment to pressure the Palestinian negotiators upon entering the second phase, certainly exposes this agreement to danger and thus it might stop and collapse. The return to war is certainly not our wish or decision. But if one party decides to return to war, certainly our Palestinian people who endured for 15 months and have resistance in their heart will be ready to respond appropriately. Iran's supreme leader Khamenei meets Hamas leaders in Tehran. Question: The negotiations for the ceasefire's second phase were supposed to start this week in Doha.

Hamas, Israel complete fifth prisoner swap

DEIR BALAH: (News Desk) Israel and Hamas completed their fifth prisoner swap under a fragile Gaza ceasefire deal on Saturday.

Out of the 183 inmates released by Israel in return for three Israelis, the Palestinian Prisoners' Club advocacy group said seven required hospitalisation, decrying "brutality" and mistreatment in jail.

An AFP correspondent later reported that more than 100 Palestinian prisoners had arrived in Gaza. The fifth exchange since the truce took effect last month comes as negotiations are set to begin on the next phase of the ceasefire, which is intended to pave the way for a permanent end to the war.

But senior Hamas official Basem Naim on Saturday said Israel's "procrastination and lack of commitment in implementing the first phase...exposes this agreement to danger and thus it may stop or collapse". He also described, in an interview with AFP, the condition of the prisoners as "acceptable under the difficult circumstances that the Gaza Strip was living".

A freed Palestinian detainee is greeted after being released from an Israeli jail as part of a hostages-prisoners swap and a ceasefire deal in Gaza between Hamas and Israel, in Ramallah, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank on February 8. — Reuters

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