

China's Xi meets business leaders including Alibaba's Jack Ma

Hongkong(News Desk) Chinese President Xi Jinping held a meeting Monday with top private business leaders including Alibaba co-founder Jack Ma, state media footage showed. Since coming to power more than a decade ago, Xi has consistently sought to bolster the role of state enterprises in the world's second-largest economy and warned against the "disorderly" expansion of the private sector. But reports last week said he was preparing to meet leading business luminaries, as he battles a slowing economy beset by a real-estate crisis, persistently low consumption and high youth unemployment. State broadcaster CCTV reported on Monday that the meeting had taken place at Beijing's Great Hall of the People, with a video showing Ma standing and applauding as Xi entered a lavish room. CCTV did not immediately give details of the content of the meeting. Ma's inclusion hints at the billionaire magnate's potential public rehabilitation after years out of the spotlight following a tangle with regulators.

'Next few days' to show Putin's seriousness about peace: Rubio

WASHINGTON: (News Desk) US Secretary of State Marco Rubio on Sunday said the next few days would determine if Russian President Vladimir Putin was serious about peace in Ukraine. Speaking to CBS, the Secretary of State said he had also discussed what he called the difficult operating conditions of the US embassy in Moscow when he spoke to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov during a phone call. Lavrov and Rubio discussed the Ukraine situation, the situation around Palestine and in the Middle East in general as well as the removal of "unilateral barriers" set by the previous US administration, Moscow said. In a call initiated by the US, both sides agreed to maintain contacts to resolve problems in bilateral relations, "in the interests of removing the unilateral barriers to mutually beneficial trade, economic and investment cooperation inherited from the previous administration," the Russia's foreign ministry said in a statement. Calls Lavrov to discuss 'removal of barriers' set by Biden administration. It was not immediately clear what barriers were discussed. The US under then-President Joe Biden and Kyiv's allies around the world imposed a series of sanctions on Moscow over its invasion of Ukraine three years ago, aimed at weakening the Russian economy and limiting the Kremlin's war efforts. The US State Department said Rubio reaffirmed in the call Trump's commitment to finding an end to the conflict in Ukraine. "In addition, they discussed the opportunity to potentially work together on a number of other bilateral issues," it stated, without providing further detail.

Hezbollah demands Lebanon govt lift ban on Iran planes

BEIRUT: (News desk) Hezbollah on Sunday urged the Lebanese government to reverse a decision blocking Iranian flights from landing in Beirut, following US warnings. The allegedly Iran-backed group said in a statement that it "demands that the government reverse its decision to ban Iranian planes from landing at Beirut airport and take serious measures to prevent the Israeli enemy from imposing its dictates". A Lebanese source said that Lebanon had denied permission for Iranian flights to land twice this week, after the United States warned Israel might strike the airport. The first incident occurred on Thursday, when Lebanese authorities sent word to Iran that a Beirut-bound flight should not take off. Sources say Tehran planes blocked after US warnings and threat of Israeli attack on Beirut airport "Through the Americans, Israel informed the Lebanese state that it would target the airport if the Iranian plane landed in Lebanon," the source said. "The American side told the Lebanese side that Israel was serious about its threat," the source added. Lebanon's public works and transport ministry then refused clearance for the flight, after consulting the prime minister and president, the source added. The message was passed on before the flight took off, said the source. Another flight was also barred from taking off from Iran on Friday, prompting protests in Lebanon from Hezbollah supporters, who blocked the road to the airport. "The security of Beirut airport takes precedence over any other consideration," Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam said. "And the safety of travellers as well as the safety of Lebanese citizens are elements on which we will not compromise." The decision to block the flights came after the Israeli military warned that Iran's Quds Force and Hezbollah were using civilian flights to and from the airport to smuggle money to be used to re-arm the Lebanese group.

Trump's aid freeze could cause millions of deaths: UN

ADDIS ABABA: (News Desk) President Donald Trump's decision to suspend US overseas funding could result in millions more deaths from AIDS, the head of the UN's programme for the illness warned on Sunday. The United States is the world's largest provider of official development assistance, with most funds directed through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Trump ordered the bulk of US foreign assistance to be frozen for three

months on returning to office in January, leaving global humanitarians scrambling to deal with the fallout. "It's dramatic in many countries," UN-AIDS executive director Winnie Byanyima said. "I need to sound the alarm so that it's very clear that this is a big part could see additional deaths increasing by tenfold" to 6.3 million in five years, Byanyima said, citing UNAIDS estimates. "Or we could see new infections increase up to (of AIDS relief funding). If it goes away, people



US President Donald Trump speaks to reporters after landing at the Palm Beach International Airport in West Palm Beach, Florida on February 16, 2025 after attending the Daytona 500 car race earlier in the day.

Trump says could meet Putin 'very soon' as Saudi talks loom

Washington(News Desk) US President Donald Trump said on Sunday he could meet "very soon" with Vladimir Putin, adding he believes his Russian counterpart genuinely wants to stop fighting in Ukraine. "No time set, but it could be very soon," Trump told reporters, hours after Secretary of State Marco Rubio sought to play down expectations of upcoming

high-level talks in Riyadh on ending the war. With Rubio set to lead a high-level American delegation at the discussions with Russian officials in Saudi Arabia's capital in the coming days, a flurry of diplomacy was taking place as the brutal Ukraine war nears its third anniversary. Trump, addressing reporters after a flight on Air Force One, said his team

has been speaking "long and hard" with Russian officials, including his Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff whom the president said met with Putin for about three hours recently. "I think he wants to stop fighting," Trump said of Putin. Asked whether he believes Putin wants to seize the entirety of Ukraine, Trump said: "That was my question to him. 'If he's go-

ing to go on... that would have caused me a big problem," Trump added. "I think he wants to end it, and they want to end it fast. Both of them," he said, adding "Zelensky wants to end it too." Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky meanwhile said on Sunday he believes Russia is preparing to "wage war" against a weakened Nato should Trump dilute US support for the alliance.

Afghan Taliban delegation visits Japan in rare trip outside region

Kabul(News Desk) A Taliban government delegation was visiting Japan for the first time on Monday, in a rare diplomatic visit outside of the region. The Afghan delegation left Kabul on Saturday, in a visit that local media said would last one week and included officials from the higher education, foreign affairs, and economy ministries.

"We seek dignified interaction with the world for a strong, united, advanced, prosperous, developed Afghanistan and to be an active member of the international community," Latif Nazari, a deputy minister at the ministry of economy who is part of the delegation, tweeted on Saturday. The Taliban government makes regular visits to neighbouring

and regional countries, including in Central Asia, Russia and China. However, it has only officially visited Europe for diplomacy summits in Norway in 2022 and 2023. Japan's embassy in Kabul temporarily relocated to Qatar after the fall of the previous foreign-backed government and the takeover by the Taliban in 2021. But it has since reopened and resumed diplomatic and humanitarian activities in the country. The Afghan delegation plans to "exchange views with Japanese government officials during their stay", Japan's public broadcaster NHK reported, citing unnamed Afghan diplomatic sources. Japan's foreign ministry could not immediately comment on the visit when contacted by AFP.



US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attend a press conference at the Prime Minister's office in Jerusalem, February 16, 2025

Court in India's Goa jails man for life in rape, killing of Irish woman

Delhi(News Desk) An Indian court jailed a 31-year-old man for life on Monday following the rape and murder of a young Irish woman in the tourist resort state of Goa, nearly eight years after the crime. The victim, whose name cannot be disclosed under Indian law, was 28 when she visited Goa in March

2017 and befriended Vikat Bhagat, the man convicted of the crime. "Today the court has given the final verdict, life imprisonment to the accused," investigating officer Filomeno Costa told the ANI news agency, in which Reuters has a minority stake. Her lawyer, Vikas Varma, said the body was dis-

covered in a forested area of Goa's Palolem beach, bearing multiple injuries, including some on her face. "Nothing can compensate the loss of a child, but the sentence has diluted the grief of the family," Varma said in a statement to Reuters. "It was a long battle of nearly eight years but justice has been done."

Forensic reports confirmed the woman was raped and her face smashed in with a beer bottle to frustrate efforts to identify her, the lawyer said. Bhagat's lawyers asked the court to take a lenient view in handing down the sentence, media reported. Reuters could not immediately contact them.

US, Israel present united front on Gaza, Iran

JERUSALEM: (News Desk) Top US diplomat Marco Rubio and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu presented a united front on Sunday against their common enemies, threatening to "open the gates of hell" on Hamas and "finish the job" against Iran. The pledges came during a joint address to reporters in Jerusalem, where Rubio began his first Middle East trip as secretary of state in President Donald Trump's new administration. "Hamas cannot continue as a military or a government force... they must be eliminated," Rubio said of the Palestinian group that fought Israel for more than 15 months in Gaza until a fragile ceasefire took effect on Jan 19. Standing beside Rubio, Netanyahu said the two allies had "a common strategy", and that "the gates of hell will be opened" if all prisoners still held in Gaza are not freed. The comments came a day after Hamas freed three Israeli prisoners in exchange for 369 Palestinian prisoners — the sixth such swap under the ceasefire deal, which the United States helped mediate along with Qatar and Egypt.

Europeans call meeting after being excluded from Ukraine talks

PARIS:(News Desk) France's President Emmanuel Macron will host leaders from key European countries on Monday to discuss the continent's security, his office said, amid growing concerns over US efforts to end the Ukraine war. US President Donald Trump blindsided Ukraine and its European backers last week by starting discussions on Russia's invasion in a call with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin. The new US administration has also warned its Nato allies that Europe will no longer be its top security priority and it may shift focus too as it switches focus to China. Macron's office said European leaders would meet in Paris on Monday afternoon to discuss "the situation in Ukraine" and "security in Europe". "The heads of government of Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, Poland, Spain, the Netherlands and Denmark" will be attending the "informal meeting", it said. Antonio Costa, who heads the European Council representing the European Union's 27 nations, EU chief Ursula von der Leyen, and Nato secretary general Marc Rutte would also be present. The Kremlin has pushed for negotiations — set to kick off in Saudi Arabia in coming days — to discuss not just the Ukraine war as it nears a third anniversary but also broader European security.

Champions Trophy will rekindle Pakistan's love of cricket, say former captains

LAHORE(News Desk) Cricket fans in Pakistan are buzzing ahead of the Champions Trophy and hosting the elite one-day international tournament will rekindle the country's love affair with the sport, three former captains said. The event, which features the sport's top eight sides in the ODI format, begins on Wednesday with the hosts up against New Zealand in Karachi. It will be the first major global tournament hosted by Pakistan in nearly 30 years and former batting great Inzamamul Haq told Reuters there was no escaping the excitement in the lead-up to the event. "Right now everyone is talking about the Champions Trophy, in schools, houses, markets, offices, everywhere," he added. Pakistan spent nearly a decade in the wilderness after gunmen attacked the Sri Lankan cricket team's bus in Lahore in 2009, wounding six players. Top teams shunned Pakistan after the 2009 attack and it took the Pakistan Cricket Board years to convince foreign counterparts that it was safe to visit. "The events of 2009 feel like a bad dream," Inzamam said. "We were punished for 10 years. Our cricket went backwards."

Pakistan opens Champions Trophy with low-key ceremony

LAHORE: (News Desk) With participating teams absent, some members of Pakistan's victorious 2017 squad provided the star power as the opening ceremony of this year's ICC Champions Trophy was held at the Deewan-e-Aam of the historical Lahore Fort on Sunday. Hosts Pakistan go into the Feb 19-March 9 tournament as defending champions after the International Cricket Council had decided to do away with the tournament before finding a space for it back in the calendar. "I hope the team can defend the title on home soil," Sarfraz Ahmed, the captain of Pakistan's 2017 side said during a panel discussion alongside former South Africa batter J.P. Duminy and ex-New Zealand pacer Tim Southee. "Those were unforgettable moments for us after lifting the trophy," added Sarfraz with other members of that history-making side including Azhar Ali, Mohammad Hafeez, Wahab Riaz, Haris Sohail, Imad Wasim, Mohammad Amir, Hasan Ali, Junaid Khan and Shadab Khan among the audience. Afghanistan batter Rahmanullah Gurbaz plays a shot as New Zealand pacer Lockie Ferguson looks on during their ICC Champions Trophy warm-up match at the National Bank Stadium on Sunday. New Zealand won the match by two wickets.—Tahir Jamal/White Star During the discussion, hosted by former West Indies fast bowler Ian Bishop, Duminy predicted that Afghanistan "could be a dark horse" for the semi-finals. Afghanistan are in Group 'B' alongside South Africa, Australia and England. Pakistan and New Zealand, who clash in the tournament opener on Wednesday, are in Group 'A' alongside India and Bangladesh. Afghanistan, New Zealand and South Africa are already in Karachi for their opening matches next week; the latter two having featured in a tri-series against the hosts which concluded on Friday. Having seen his former team-mates coast to the tri-series title, Southee was looking forward for more. "We're in for some very entertaining cricket in the next few days," he said. The tournament marks the first ICC tournament on Pakistan soil since it co-hosted the 1996 ODI World Cup and ICC h chief executive Geoff Allardice hopes it will be memorable.