



Chinese President Xi Jinping applauds during the opening session of the National People's Congress (NPC) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing



King Frederik X of Denmark speaks as he and Queen Mary (not in picture) of Denmark host a reception at the Finlandia Hall in Helsinki, Finland



Chief of Defence Staff General Anil Chauhan with Commander of Australian Defence College Rear Admiral James Lybrand during his visit to the Australian Defence College



Jayanta Bhattacharya testifies during a US Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions hearing on his nomination to be Director of the National Institutes of Health, in Washington

allovertheworld



Seth Bodnar, President of the University of Montana being felicitated on the sidelines of the Indian Film Festival in Missoula, Montana, on Wednesday

Shehbaz Sharif thanks Trump for 'acknowledging' Pak's role in counter terrorism

ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Wednesday thanked US President Donald Trump for "acknowledging and appreciating" Pakistan's role in counter-terrorism efforts after the country arrested a wanted terrorist. Trump thanked the Pakistani government for "helping arrest" Mohammad Shareefullah, also known as "Jafar", who supported and conducted activities on behalf of ISIS-K in support of multiple lethal attacks, including the Abbey Gate attack in 2021. The attack on the Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) on August 26, 2021, took place when American and other Coalition military forces were conducting an evacuation operation at the airport as part of a larger operation to conclude US combat operations in Afghanistan. The attacks came just days after the Taliban took over Kabul. Sharif in a post on X said the terrorist, an Afghan national, had been apprehended in an operation along the border with Afghanistan.

Four killed in explosion in market in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD: At least four people were killed and five others injured on Wednesday in an explosion in a market in Pakistan's restive Balochistan province, officials said. An improvised explosive device (IED) was attached to a motorbike which was parked in the Naal Bazaar of Khuzdar, according to police. Naal police Station House Officer (SHO) Bahawal Khan Pindrani in a media interaction confirmed the casualties, saying that the condition of one of the injured was serious. Khuzdar Senior Superintendent of Police Javed Zehri said that some vehicles were also destroyed in the blast. Balochistan Chief Minister Mir Sarfraz Bugti strongly condemned the blast in a statement, adding that orders were issued to provide the injured with the best medical care available.

Alaska State Troopers report multiple backcountry skiers trapped in avalanche

ANCHORAGE: Multiple skiers were reported trapped in the Alaska backcountry after being swept up in an avalanche, Alaska State Troopers said Wednesday. The number of skiers and their conditions were not immediately available. The slide happened late Tuesday afternoon near the skiing community of Girdwood, located about 64 kilometres south of Anchorage, Austin McDaniel, a spokesperson for the Alaska State Troopers, said in a text to The Associated Press. "Troopers received a report of an avalanche that caught multiple individuals who were helisking yesterday afternoon near the west fork of 20 Mile River," McDaniel said. "The company that they were skiing with attempted to recover the skiers but were unable to due to the depth of the snow." The size of the avalanche and the depth of the snow was not immediately known.

US charges Chinese hackers, government officials in broad cyberespionage campaign

WASHINGTON: Ten Chinese hackers have been charged alongside two Chinese law enforcement officers in a global hacking campaign that targeted dissidents, news organisations and US agencies, the Justice Department announced Wednesday. The hacking by workers of I-Soon was done in some cases at the direction of China's Ministry of Public Security, which received the stolen information and selected targets for the intrusions as part of what US officials say was a massive intelligence-gathering operation. Among the targets of the hacking was the US Treasury Department, which disclosed a breach by Chinese actors late last year.

Chinese student found guilty in British court of drugging and raping 10 women

LONDON: A Chinese PhD student has been found guilty by a court in London of drugging and raping 10 women in England and China. Zhenhao Zou, 28, was convicted of the attacks between 2019 and 2023 following a monthlong trial at Inner London Crown Court. Jurors found Zou, a mechanical engineering student who was doing his PhD at University College London, raped three of the women in London, and seven in China. Police have only been able to identify two of the victims.

2022 Ukrainian law bans Zelensky from talks with Putin, says Kremlin

AP, MOSCOW: A Ukrainian decree from 2022 that ruled out negotiations with Russian President Vladimir Putin raises the question of who could sit at the table in potential peace talks aimed at ending their three-year war, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday.

UKRAINE CONFLICT

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky "is still legally prohibited from negotiating with the Russian side," Peskov noted during his daily conference call with reporters. He said it was "positive" that Zelensky expressed readiness Tuesday to negotiate peace with Russia as soon as possible. "But the details have not changed yet," Peskov added, apparently referring to the Ukrainian decree.

Neither Ukrainian nor Western officials have recently mentioned the September 2022 presidential decree, signed seven months after Russia's cross-border invasion, in the context of US President Donald Trump's efforts to stop the fighting.

The Trump administration on Monday suspended its crucial

military aid to Ukraine as the United States sought to pressure Zelensky into negotiating an end to the war. It wasn't immediately clear whether the support would resume after Zelensky's apparent effort to placate Trump.

Ukrainian forces are toiling to slow advances by the bigger Russian army along the 1,000-kilometre front line, especially in the eastern Donetsk region. The Russian onslaught, which has been costly for its troops, hasn't yet brought a strategically significant breakthrough for the Kremlin. The war of attrition has killed tens of thousands of soldiers and more than 12,000 Ukrainian civilians.

Zelensky, French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer could travel together to Washington, the French government spokesperson said Wednesday.

"It is envisaged that President Macron could eventually travel again to Washington with President Zelensky and his British counterpart," spokesperson Sophie Primas told reporters. She did not elaborate.

Macron's office later said no trip to Washington is being planned at

US pauses intelligence sharing with Ukraine

AFP, WASHINGTON: The United States has "paused" intelligence sharing with Ukraine after a dramatic breakdown in relations between Kyiv and the White House, CIA director John Ratcliffe said Wednesday.

President Donald Trump and Ukraine's leader Volodymyr Zelensky had a public falling-out in the Oval Office last week, followed by Ukraine's top ally suspending crucial US military aid.

Ratcliffe confirmed that intelligence sharing had also been frozen as Ukraine seeks to beat back the Russian invasion.

"President Trump had a real question about whether President Zelensky was committed to the peace process," Ratcliffe told Fox Business.

Ratcliffe said the pause "on the military front and the intel-

ligence front" was temporary, and he expected that the United States will again "work shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine" in the future.

For Ukraine's armed forces, US intelligence is as important as military supplies in bloody fighting against the Russian offensive, and many ordinary Ukrainians have been shocked by Trump cutting off assistance.

National Security Advisor Mike Waltz told reporters at the White House that "we have taken a step back and are pausing and reviewing all aspects of this relationship."

Trump said Tuesday that Zelensky told him Kyiv was ready for talks with Moscow and the finalization of a US minerals access deal, as Ukraine works to move on after the Oval Office spat.

Macron was due to give a televised address to the nation later Wednesday about what he called the "great uncertainty" in global affairs.

The three leaders travelled separately to Washington last week for meetings with Trump.

Starmer didn't comment on the possibility of a joint trip when he appeared in the British Parliament on Wednesday. His spokesman, Dave Pares, would not confirm such a trip.

There was no immediate comment from Zelensky's office.

In the early months of the war, Zelensky repeatedly called for a personal meeting with Putin but was rebuffed. After the Kremlin's decision in September 2022 to illegally annex four regions of Ukraine — Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia — Zelensky enacted a decree declaring that holding negotiations with Putin had become impossible.

The decree enacted a decision by Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council to bolster Ukrainian defences and seek more weapons from the country's Western allies.

The Kremlin said at the time it would wait for Ukraine to sit down for talks on ending the conflict, noting that such a step may not happen until a new Ukrainian president takes office.

Pope resting after sleeping through night: Vatican

AP, VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis was resting Wednesday, the start of the solemn Lenten period leading up to Holy Week observances, after sleeping through the night with a ventilation mask as he undergoes hospital treatment for double pneumonia.

In its latest update, the Vatican said that the pope rested well overnight, waking up shortly after 8 am. Pope Francis remained in stable condition, with a guarded prognosis, meaning he was not out of danger.

He resumed supplemental oxygen delivered by a nasal tube in the morning, alternating from a ventilation mask at night as doctors seek to ease his breathing for a deeper rest.

The 88-year-old pope, who has chronic lung disease and had part of one lung removed as a young man, had two respiratory crises on Monday in a setback to his recovery. On Tuesday, he was breathing with just the help of supplemental oxygen after respiratory crises a day earlier, but resumed using a ventilation mask at night, the Vatican said.

Francis' treatment continues as the Vatican prepares for Lent, the solemn period beginning with Ash Wednesday and leading up to Easter on April 20. A cardinal has been designated to take Francis' place at Vatican celebrations, with a traditional service and procession in Rome.

On Ash Wednesday, observant Catholics receive a sign of the cross in ashes on their foreheads, a gesture that underscores human mortality.

It is an obligatory day of fasting and abstinence for Catholics that signals the start of Christianity's most penitent season.



Italian cardinal Angelo De Donatis (C) arrives with a procession at the Church of Saint Sabina in Rome during the celebration of Ash Wednesday mass on Wednesday. Pope Francis's condition was stable, a Vatican source said, with celebrations for the Lent religious season starting without him

China hikes defence budget to \$249 b

Pushes on with hectic military modernisation

PTI, BEIJING: China on Wednesday announced a 7.2 per cent increase of its national defence budget totalling to USD 249 billion this year amid its hectic efforts to modernise armed forces, including fast paced development of warships and new generation fighter jets.

The planned defence expenditure for the country is 1.784665 trillion yuan (about USD 249 billion) this year, according to a draft budget report submitted to China's Parliament by Premier Li Qiang, state-run Xinhua news agency reported.

Last year, China increased its defence budget by 7.2 per cent to about USD 232 billion (1.67 trillion yuan). China has the world's second-largest military budget after the US whose latest defence spending amounted to over USD 890 billion as proposed by President Donald Trump.

The Chinese defence spending is amounted to three times that of India's Rs 681, 210 crore (USD 78.8 billion).

China's defence budget figures are viewed by critics with scepticism in the light of massive military modernisation, including building aircraft carriers, rapid construction of advanced naval ships and modern stealth aircraft being carried out at a feverish pitch by the Chinese military.

Announcing the annual budget which includes the defence spending at the opening of the annual session of China's parliament, the National People's Congress (NPC) Chinese Premier Li Qiang said last year, China made major new progress in national defence and military development.

Li emphasised on the Chinese President

"We will step up military training and combat readiness, speed up the development of new combat capabilities, and establish a framework of modern military theories with Chinese characteristics, so as to firmly safeguard China's sovereignty, security, and development interests"

— Li Qiang, National People's Congress (NPC) Chinese Premier

Xi Jinping's core leadership of the ruling Communist Party as well as the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the military follow the party leadership.

Xi is also the Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) which is the overall high command of the military.

"We will stay committed to the Party's absolute leadership over the people's armed forces, thoroughly implement the system of ultimate responsibility resting with the chairman of the Central Military Commission, continue improving the political conduct of the military," he said.

The Chinese military functioned under the leadership of the Communist Party unlike the armed forces of other countries which functioned under the government.

"We will step up military training and combat readiness, speed up the development of new combat capabilities, and establish a framework of modern military theories with Chinese characteristics, so as to firmly safeguard China's sovereignty, security, and development interests," Li said in his work report submitted to the NPC.

Covered entire gamut of ties: EAM on talks with UK's Lammy

PTI, LONDON: External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Wednesday said the dialogue with his UK counterpart, David Lammy, covered the entire gamut of bilateral ties, including the relaunched Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations, strategic coordination and political cooperation.

During "wide-ranging and productive" talks over two days at Chevening House in Kent, where Jaishankar was hosted by Lammy, the leaders also exchanged views on regional and global issues, including the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

"Held wide-ranging and productive talks with Foreign Secretary David Lammy over past two days at the Chevening House," External Affairs Minister Jaishankar posted on X.

"We discussed the entire gamut of bilateral ties, especially our focus on strategic coordination, political cooperation, trade deal negotiation, education, technology, mobility and people-to-people exchanges. Agreed to formulate the next steps to further strengthen and structure them," he said.

Philippine defence chief warns allies will fight if China restricts flights over SCS

AP, MANILA: The Philippines and its security allies would take measures to counter any attempt by China to impose an air defence zone or restrict freedom of flights over the South China Sea, Defence Secretary Gilberto Teodoro said Wednesday, following confrontations between Chinese aircraft and those of his country, Australia and the United States.

Teodoro told The Associated Press in an interview that China's increasing aggression in the disputed waters was now considered the greatest threat to the national security of the Philippines and should also be regarded as a global threat because it could choke a key trade route crucial for global supply chains.

"The greatest external threat actually is Chinese aggression, Chinese expansionism and the attempt by China to change the international law through the use of force or acquiescence...or its attempt to reshape the world order to one that it controls," Teodoro said.

There was no immediate reaction by Chinese officials. Confrontations over the strategic waterway, which Beijing claims almost in its entirety, have spiked between Chinese and Philippine coast guard and navy forces in the last two years. The long-seething territorial standoffs over the hotly-disputed shoals also involve Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan.

Recent brushes involving Chinese military aircraft firing warning flares or flying dangerously close to drive away US, Australian and Philippine patrol aircraft have set off fresh alarms.

Teodoro said defence officials have discussed the possibility of China imposing a so-called Air Defence Identification Zone or any exclusion zone to restrict foreign aircraft movement in what Beijing regards as its airspace over the SCS.

"That is a very serious transgression of international law, which will demand our response," said Teodoro, a US-educated lawyer and a licensed commercial pilot in the Philippines.