



LOS ANGELES (Reuters) -- San Francisco declared a local emergency over the coronavirus on Tuesday, despite having no cases, as U.S. officials urged Americans to prepare for the spread of infections within their communities. California's fourth-largest city said it made the move to boost its coronavirus preparedness and raise public awareness of risks the virus may spread to the city. "Although there are still zero confirmed cases in San Francisco residents, the global picture is changing rapidly, and we need to step-up preparedness," Mayor London Breed said in a statement. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) told the United States on Tuesday to prepare for community spread after infections surfaced in several more countries. The 14 confirmed U.S. cases of coronavirus have been mostly travel related, with only two cases of person-to-person spread. There are also 39 cases among Americans evacuated from the Diamond Princess cruise ship in Tokyo and from Wuhan, China.

MOSCOW (AP) -- A former senior aide to Russian President Vladimir Putin has warned that Ukraine will never be able to regain control over the separatist-controlled east. Vladislav Surkov, who lost his job as Putin's adviser on Ukraine earlier this month, said in remarks published Wednesday that he stepped down because of a shift in the Kremlin course on the Ukrainian conflict. He didn't spell out specific reasons for his departure, saying only that it was due to a "change in context" on Ukraine. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy has made settling the conflict in eastern Ukraine his top priority. December's summit of Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany failed to achieve a breakthrough, but the four leaders made a deal on a prisoner exchange and agreed on further moves toward settling the conflict in the east.

LJUBLJANA (Reuters) -- Slovenian President Borut Pahor on Wednesday named a former prime minister Janez Jansa, the head of the largest party in parliament, as a candidate for a new prime minister and asked parliament to confirm him. The parliament is expected to confirm Jansa, head of the center-right Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), next week. He will replace center-left Prime Minister Marjan Sarec who resigned last month. The nomination comes a day after the SDS agreed a majority coalition with the center-left Party of Modern Centre, the conservative New Slovenia and the pensioners' party Desus. Jansa told a news conference that his government will focus on improving the inefficient national health system, cutting red tape and decentralizing the country.

GENEVA (Reuters) -- China expects UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet to visit the country this year, including its restive Xinjiang region, its Geneva ambassador said on Wednesday. UN experts and activists say at least 1 million ethnic Uighurs and other Muslims are held in detention centers in Xinjiang. China describes them as training centers helping to stamp out terrorism and extremism and give people new skills. "We are looking forward to the visit of the High Commissioner, Mrs. Bachelet, to China including to Xinjiang this year, and we are working closely with her office on detailed arrangements for her visit," Chen Xu told the UN Human Rights Council, where Germany and others raised concerns this week.

ALMATY (Reuters) -- Gulnara Karimova, the imprisoned daughter of late Uzbek President Islam Karimov, has asked his successor to release her in exchange for facilitating the confiscation of her remaining assets, worth \$686 million. Karimova, 47, was jailed in March 2019 for violating the terms of her house arrest after receiving a five-year sentence in 2015 on charges of embezzlement and extortion. In an open letter to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev published on Wednesday, she said she had not been told how long she was supposed to remain behind bars, but asked him to allow her release, citing ill health and an urgent need for surgery. In exchange, Karimova said she would stop legally contesting the Tashkent government's efforts to confiscate from her \$686 million in assets already frozen by authorities in Switzerland. Karimova, a powerful businesswoman before she fell out with her own father around 2014, said the Uzbek government has already confiscated \$1.2 billion worth of her assets.

NAIROBI (Reuters) -- The Burundi government said it had killed at least 22 "wrongdoers" in the hills overlooking the main city Bujumbura since last week, in what it described as violence linked to a presidential election scheduled for May. The authorities said two members of the police force were killed and six attackers were captured. The clashes erupted after local residents called the police to alert them to the presence of about a dozen gunmen hiding in coffee plantations in Nyabiraba district, a local administrator told Reuters on condition of anonymity. Police said fighting also spread to the neighboring Isare district. "Wrongdoers took advantage of this electoral period thinking people are distracted," police spokesman Pierre Nkurikye said on the state broadcaster RTNB. "The population should remain calm because security officers are ensuring its security." Burundi, which has a similar ethnic composition to neighboring Rwanda, has suffered from decades of ethnic and political violence, including a 1993-2005 civil war in which 300,000 people died, mostly civilians.

Zelenskiy Hints at Reshuffle as His Popularity Dips



Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskiy speaks during a joint news conference after a Normandy-format summit in Paris, France December 10, 2019.

KIEV (Reuters) -- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy signaled a potential reshuffle of his government on Wednesday that local media said could include axing Prime Minister Oleksiy Honcharuk in favor of businessman and veteran politician Serhiy Tihipko. Confidence in Zelenskiy's government has slid since the actor and comedian scored a surprise landslide election victory last year promising to root out corruption and end the war with Russian-backed rebels in the eastern Donbass region. But progress on either front has been patchy, and while the 42-year-old Zelenskiy remains Ukraine's most electable politician, his public trust score has fallen from a high watermark of 79% in September to 51% in February, according to a survey by the Kiev-based Razumkov Centre think-tank.

Honcharuk's position had already come into the spotlight in January after the leak of an embarrassing audio recording that suggested he had criticized the president in a closed meeting with the finance minister and central bank. Any reshuffle would come just as Ukraine is trying to secure the release of billions of dollars in loans from the International Monetary Fund, a move contingent on Kiev's progress in passing reforms and tackling graft. "I am conducting interviews with many people now," Zelenskiy said in a response

to a question from reporters on whether he had met Tihipko about giving him a government post. "And I also met with Mr. Tihipko. It's true." Tihipko has not commented on media reports that he had been offered the prime minister's job. The president's office referred back to Zelenskiy's comments when asked whether Tihipko had been interviewed for the post of premier. A source familiar with the situation said work in the prime minister's office was carrying on as normal, adding that over the last three months there had been constant efforts to remove Honcharuk. Tihipko, 60, has been deputy prime minister twice, first under President Leonid Kuchma in a short-lived 1997 government, and then again in 2010 under President Viktor Yanukovich, who eventually fled to Russia after the 2014 Maidan street protests. He has also been central bank governor and co-founded PrivatBank, the former Soviet republic's largest lender. Zelenskiy has prioritized ending the war in Donbass but while he has implemented some confidence-building measures with Russia, including prisoner swaps, the conflict simmers on. In October, 48.2% of Ukrainians rated those in power as better than their predecessors, but that figure declined to 29.5% in February, according to the same Razumkov survey.

Modi Calls for Calm After Sectarian Violence Kills 22



People supporting the new citizenship law beat a Muslim man during a clash with those opposing the law in New Delhi, India, February 24, 2020.

NEW DELHI (AFP) -- Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for calm Wednesday after Delhi's worst sectarian violence in decades left at least 22 people dead and calls for a military curfew. This week's battles between Hindus and Muslims have seen mobs armed with swords, guns and acid raze parts of a northeastern district of the Indian capital. The clashes, which also left almost 200 injured, were triggered by protests against a citizenship law seen by many critics as anti-Muslim and part of Modi's Hindu nationalist agenda. They exploded into brutal violence on Monday and Tuesday, with resi-

dents forced to flee their homes after seeing dwellings destroyed, a mosque attacked and a tire market and two schools set ablaze. "I appeal to my sisters and brothers of Delhi to maintain peace and brotherhood at all times. It is important... calm and normalcy is restored at the earliest," Modi tweeted on Wednesday. Delhi's chief minister, Arvind Kejriwal, a political opponent, called for the army to be deployed and for a curfew to be imposed. "Police, despite all its efforts, (are) unable to control situation and instill confidence," Kejriwal tweeted. Sunil Kumar, the director of the hospital where many of the wounded were

taken, told AFP on Wednesday that almost 60 had gunshot injuries and that 16 new patients were admitted on Wednesday. On Wednesday morning residents cleaned out the blackened interior of a trashed mosque, including a charred Qur'an, burned out during the violence in the Ashok Nagar area. A video circulated on social media and verified by AFP showed men ripping off the muezzin's loudspeaker on top of the mosque's minaret and installing a Hindu religious flag. Locals accused the police of doing nothing to help -- or worse. "We tried to make many calls to the police... that people are entering our neighborhoods chanting 'Jai Shree Ram'," said Naeem Malik, referring to a popular Hindu chant. "But police did not help us at all. We tried to save the women at the protest site but instead policemen started beating us up," he said, showing wounds on his leg and hands. Elsewhere a firetruck tried to put out blazes from the previous night, the air thick with smoke from still-smoldering cars, motorbikes, shops and homes. "They say we are not Indians, but we are Indians by blood," Farhat, 22, a student in Islamic studies, said in her father's shop as police looked on. "There is no police in the streets at night, just during the day."

Democratic Rivals Intensify Attacks on Sanders



Democratic 2020 U.S. presidential candidates discuss an issue during the tenth Democratic 2020 presidential debate at the Gaillard Center in Charleston, South Carolina, U.S., February 25, 2020.

CHARLESTON, S.C. (Reuters) -- Democratic presidential candidates attacked embattled Sen. Bernie Sanders on Tuesday, assailing his ambitious economic agenda and warning his nomination would be a "catastrophe" that would cost Democrats the White House and control of Congress. In a debate that featured candidates repeatedly shouting over one another and ignoring their time limits, Sanders' opponents united in attacking the self-avowed democratic socialist as a risky choice

to face Republican President Donald Trump in November. "Bernie will lose to Donald Trump, and Donald Trump and the House and the Senate and some of the statehouses will all go red," billionaire former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg said, adding that would be "a catastrophe." Pete Buttigieg, the moderate former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, criticized Sanders for the shifting estimates on the costs of his proposals such as government-run healthcare and warned that the front-runner would bring about chaos.

"I can tell you exactly how it all adds up. It adds up to four more years of Donald Trump," Buttigieg said. "If you think the last four years has been chaotic, divisive, toxic, exhausting, imagine spending the better part of 2020 with Bernie Sanders versus Donald Trump." Sanders, a senator from Vermont, has taken command of the Democratic race after his resounding win last week in Nevada, and the debate was the last chance for his opponents to try to stop his momentum before Saturday's South Carolina primary and next week's 14 vital Super Tuesday contests. Under incoming fire, Sanders largely held his ground. He defended healthcare as a human right and said his economic and social justice agenda, including his Medicare for All plan that would replace private health insurance with a government-run program, is supported by the American people. "If you want to beat Trump, what you're going to need is an unprecedented grassroots movement of black and white and Latino, Native American and Asian people who are standing up and fighting for justice. That's what our movement is about," Sanders said.

Mahathir Vows to Form Nonpartisan Gov't If Elected

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) -- Mahathir Mohamad said Wednesday that he will form a new nonpartisan government if he is elected to return as Malaysia's prime minister, as the king completed two days of consultations with lawmakers to resolve a political vacuum caused by the abrupt collapse of Mahathir's ruling coalition. Breaking his silence two days after his shocking resignation, Mahathir confirmed that his Bersatu party ditched the alliance Monday in a bid to form a new government with the United Malays National Organization, or UMNO, the party of disgraced ex-leader Najib Razak, who is on trial for corruption, and an Islamic party. The move had thwarted a pre-election agreement by Mahathir to hand over power to his named successor, Anwar Ibrahim. Mahathir said he had quit to show he wasn't power crazy and because he cannot work with the corrupt-tainted UMNO, which he had ousted in 2018 elections. He made no mention of Anwar in his televised speech, but reiterated that the lower house of Parliament should be the one to pick the prime minister. "If I really still have support, I will return. If not, I will

accept whoever's chosen," said Mahathir, the world's oldest leader at 94. Anwar's camp, as well as UMNO and the Islamic party, have rejected Mahathir's proposed nonpartisan government. "I am not aiming to be popular," Mahathir said. "I just want to do what is best for the country. ... I believe, rightly or wrongly, politics and political parties must be set aside for now. If allowed, I will form an administration that does not side with any party. Only national interest will be prioritized." The departure of 37 lawmakers, including 11 from Anwar's party, deprives the governing Alliance of Hope of majority rule and sparked a crisis less than two years after its election victory ousted a corrupt-tainted coalition that had ruled for 61 years. The king dissolved the Cabinet but reappointed Mahathir as interim leader. Mahathir spoke as the king finished consulting all 222 lawmakers to determine who they support as prime minister or if they want fresh elections. The king's role is largely ceremonial in Malaysia, but he appoints the person with majority support in Parliament as prime minister.

China Has Three Times More Billionaires Than U.S.



People stand near a window overlooking the financial district in Shanghai, China October 23, 2019.

BEIJING (Reuters) -- China minted three times as many new billionaires than the United States in the past year, with fortunes made in drugs and online entertainment after a mini-boom from the coronavirus outbreak, a ranking of the world's wealthiest people shows. The Greater China region, including Hong Kong and Taiwan, created 182 new billionaires in the year to Jan. 31, taking its total to 799, according to the 2020 Hurun Global Rich List released on Wednesday. That compares with 59 new U.S. billionaires. While the outbreak of a new coronavirus in China has hammered the world's second-biggest economy, it has also driven up stock valuations of Chinese companies in online education, online games and vaccinations, the report said. With much of China stuck at home due to quarantines and travel restrictions, demand for online services has surged, lining the pockets of billionaire founders such as Robin Li of Baidu, owner of popular online video platform iQiyi. Healthcare entrepreneurs specializing in vaccinations did well, including An Kang of Hualan Biological Engineering and Jiang Rensheng of Zhifei Biological Products. "China today has more billionaires than the U.S. and India combined," said Rupert Hoogewerf, founder and chairman of the Hurun Report, which counted 629 U.S. billionaires and 137 in India.

New Chinese entrants include Cheng Xianfeng of drug maker Yifan Xinfu Pharmaceutical and Shen Ya of online discount retailer Vipshop. In the past year to end-January, tech stocks in China .CSIINT surged 77% and Chinese pharma companies .CSI300HC gained 37%, beating a 16% rise in world stocks. "A boom in tech valuations and strong stockmarkets across the U.S., India and China propelled the billionaires to record heights," said the British accountant, who began publishing the list in 1999. U.S. tycoons still led the list, with Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos retaining the top spot for a third year with a \$140 billion fortune. Jack Ma of Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba Group topped China's billionaires with \$45 billion and came in No. 21 overall, but he was overtaken by Elon Musk from Tesla due to soaring shares in the U.S. electric carmaker. Technology was followed by property, manufacturing, capital and retail as a major source of wealth in the past year. Despite the U.S.-China trade war, Ren Zhengfei, founder of Shenzhen-based telecoms giant Huawei Technologies, blacklisted by the U.S. government, saw his personal wealth grow 7% to \$3 billion, roughly on par with that of U.S. President Donald Trump. Beijing is the world's billionaire capital for the fifth year, with 110 billionaires, against 98 in New York. Shanghai overtook Hong Kong to claim third spot.