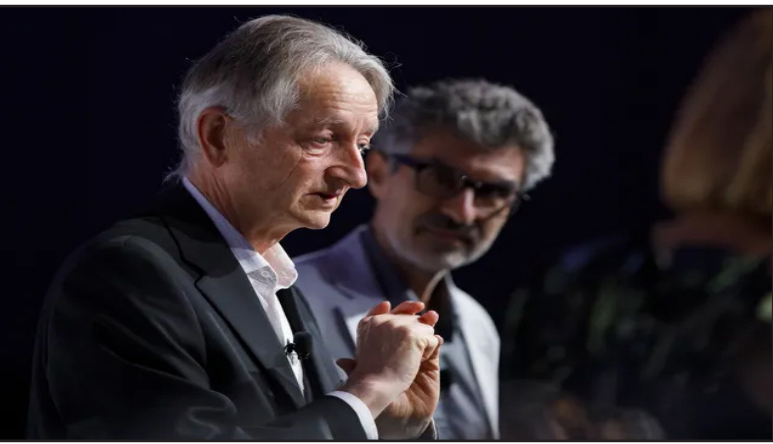




AI 'Godfather' Quits Google, Warns of Dangers



Geoffrey Hinton (foreground) has left Google to speak out on the dangers of AI.

WASHINGTON (AFP) -- A computer scientist often dubbed "the godfather of artificial intelligence" has quit his job at Google to speak out about the dangers of the technology, U.S. media reported.

Geoffrey Hinton, who created a foundation technology for AI systems, told The New York Times that advancements made in the field posed "profound risks to society and humanity".

"Look at how it was five years ago and how it is now," he was quoted as saying in the piece, which was published on Monday. "Take the difference and propagate it forwards.

That's scary." Hinton said that competition between tech giants was pushing companies to release new AI technologies at dangerous speeds, risking jobs and spreading misinformation. "It is hard to see how you can prevent the bad actors from using it for bad things," he told the Times.

In 2022, Google and OpenAI -- the start-up behind the popular AI chatbot ChatGPT -- started building systems using much larger amounts of data than before.

Hinton told the Times he believed that these systems were eclipsing human intelligence in some ways because of the amount of data they

were analyzing. "Maybe what is going on in these systems is actually a lot better than what is going on in the brain," he told the paper.

While AI has been used to support human workers, the rapid expansion of chatbots like ChatGPT could put jobs at risk.

AI "takes away the drudge work" but "might take away more than that", he told the Times.

The scientist also warned about the potential spread of misinformation created by AI, telling the Times that the average person will "not be able to know what is true anymore."

Hinton notified Google of his resignation last month, the Times reported.

In March, tech billionaire Elon Musk and a range of experts called for a pause in the development of AI systems to allow time to make sure they are safe.

An open letter, signed by more than 1,000 people including Musk and Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak, was prompted by the release of GPT-4, a much more powerful version of the technology used by ChatGPT.

Hinton did not sign that letter at the time, but told The New York Times that scientists should not "scale this up more until they have understood whether they can control it."

Pastors in 'Meet Jesus' Deaths Appear Before Court



Ezekiel Odero (left), Paul Mackenzie Nihenge (right)

MALINDI (AFP) -- Two pastors appeared before Kenyan courts on Tuesday suspected of being behind the deaths of at least 109 people found buried in what has been dubbed the "Shakahola forest massacre".

The deeply religious Christian-majority country has been stunned by the discovery of mass graves last month in a forest near the Indian Ocean coastal town of Malindi. Self-proclaimed pastor Paul Nihenge Mackenzie, who set up the Good News International Church in 2003 and is accused of inciting cult followers to starve to death "to meet Jesus", appeared in the dock in Malindi.

The small courtroom was packed with relatives of victims as Mackenzie was brought in by about half a dozen police officers along with eight other defendants.

Wearing a pink and black jacket and brown trousers, Mackenzie conferred with his lawyer George Kariuki, who told AFP: "We have not been told what application the prosecution wants to make. We are just waiting to see."

A total of 109 people have so far been confirmed dead, most of them children. The first autopsies from Shakahola were carried out Monday on nine children and one woman.

They confirmed starvation as the cause of death, though some victims were asphyxiated, the authorities said.

Ezekiel Odero, a wealthy and high-profile televangelist, was expected in court in the East African nation's second-largest city of

Mombasa following his arrest in Malindi on Thursday.

Odero is suspected of murder, aiding suicide, abduction, radicalization, crimes against humanity, child cruelty, fraud and money laundering.

The prosecution is seeking to detain him for a further 30 days, citing credible information linking the corpses exhumed at Shakahola to the deaths of several "innocent and vulnerable followers" from Odero's New Life Prayer Center and Church.

Mackenzie stands accused of murder, kidnapping, cruelty towards children among other crimes in court documents seen by AFP.

The former taxi driver turned himself in on April 14 after police acting on a tip-off first entered Shakahola forest, where some 30 mass graves have been found.

Prosecutors have linked Odero and Mackenzie, saying in court documents that they share a "history of business investments" including a television station used to pass "radicalized messages" to followers.

Questions have been raised about how Mackenzie, a self-styled pastor with a history of extremism, has managed to evade law enforcement despite his prominent profile and previous legal cases.

The horrific saga has seen President William Ruto intervene on Kenya's homegrown religious movements, and thrown a spotlight on failed efforts to regulate unscrupulous churches and cults that have dabbled in criminality.

WASHINGTON (AFP) -- Seven bodies were found in the U.S. state of Oklahoma during a police search for two missing teenagers, U.S. media reported. The victims were not identified and authorities did not say whether they included the missing 14-year-old and 16-year-old girls, who were said to have been seen with a convicted sex offender, The New York Times reported. But authorities had called off their search for the teens after the bodies were found in the city of Henryetta, Okmulgee County Sheriff Eddy Rice told the newspaper. The Tulsa World reported Rice as saying officials believed two of the seven bodies found were those of the missing girls. The bodies were found on a property where registered sex offender and convicted rapist Jesse L. McFadden resided, according to the newspaper. The state highway patrol had issued a missing persons notice earlier Monday saying the two girls were last seen at 1:22 am (0622 GMT) in Henryetta and were both possibly traveling in a white Chevrolet Avalanche with McFadden, 39.

BRUSSELS (AFP) -- The eurozone annual inflation rate rose to seven percent in April, the EU's statistics agency said Tuesday, the first increase after five consecutive months of declines. Consumer prices edged up from 6.9 percent in March, which could further encourage the European Central Bank to raise interest rates on Thursday. Analysts for FactSet and Bloomberg had predicted the rate would remain stable.

LONDON (Reuters) -- The leader of Britain's main opposition Labour Party Keir Starmer said on Tuesday he is likely to scrap his pledge to provide free university tuition, blaming economic circumstances for the probable u-turn. Labour pledged to ditch university fees as part of its campaign in the run up to the last two national elections in 2017 and 2019, and Starmer stuck with the policy after becoming leader of the party in 2020. Abolishing the fees is estimated to come at a cost to the government of billions of pounds a year. "We are likely to move on from that commitment because we do find ourselves in a different financial situation," Starmer told BBC Radio. Starmer is looking to prove his electoral credentials at local polls on Thursday, ahead of a national election expected next year. Scrapping the pledge to abandon tuition fees, which currently stand at a maximum 9,250 pounds (\$11,569.90) a year for British students studying in England, could damage his standing with those on the left of the party.

South Korea Cites Nuclear-Based Upgrade in Alliance With U.S.



Activists protest near the Presidential Office in Seoul on April 21, 2023 ahead of South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol's planned visit to Washington.

SEOUL (Reuters) -- South Korea has upgraded its U.S. alliance, President Yoon Suk Yeol said on Tuesday, as he briefed his cabinet on a trip to the United States which pledged more South Korean insight into nuclear planning in the event of war with North Korea.

Yoon held a summit with U.S. President Joe Biden in Washington last week as anxiety grows in South Korea over North Korea's rapidly evolving nuclear and missile capabilities and growing doubts that the U.S. would risk its security to help its Asian ally.

Calls have been growing in South Korea, even among some senior

members of Yoon's party, for it to develop its own nuclear weapons. The U.S. opposes that, assuring South Korea of protection under the U.S. "nuclear umbrella".

"The alliance has a nuclear-based upgrade and has expanded to include supply chain, industrial and science and technology alliances," Yoon told his cabinet.

Yoon and Biden agreed in a "Washington Declaration" to launch a Nuclear Consultative Group to give South Korea more insight into, and a voice in, U.S. contingency planning to deter and respond to any nuclear incident in the region.

They also agreed on new partnerships on supply chains and science

and technology, including cyber security, electric vehicles and batteries, quantum technology, foreign assistance and economic investment.

Yoon said the nuclear planning mechanism would be more effective than NATO's Nuclear Planning Group by facilitating more frequent high-level bilateral discussions.

More U.S. "strategic assets" would be regularly deployed to South Korea to maintain an "overwhelming retaliatory posture", he said.

"We will build strong security, peace based on overwhelming strength, not the fake peace that relies on the good faith of the other party," Yoon said.

Some South Koreans, especially younger voters, have welcomed the summit's achievements, including Yoon's speech to the U.S. Congress and surprise singing at a White House state dinner.

But the opposition Democratic Party criticized a lack of progress on new U.S. rules on electric vehicle subsidies, which South Korea fears could hurt its automakers.

A Democratic Party spokesperson said Yoon "only sang a song at the world's most expensive karaoke" in return for billions of dollars of South Korean corporate investment.

Yoon's approval ratings slightly rose to 34.5%, a poll released on Monday by Realmeter showed, marking their first rebound in four weeks.

Australia to Ban Recreational Vaping



A saleswoman holds an e-cigarette as she demonstrates vaping at the Vape Shop that sells e-cigarette products in Beijing, January 30, 2019.

SYDNEY (Reuters) -- Australia said on Tuesday it will ban recreational vaping and tighten other aspects of e-cigarette laws in the biggest crackdown on the tobacco industry in more than a decade to try to stop an alarming rise in teenage vaping.

The government aims to ban all disposable vapes, which often comes in fruity flavors, ban the import of non-prescription vapes and limit nicotine levels, aiming for the sale of vapes to be confined to helping smokers quit.

"Just like they did with smoking, Big Tobacco has taken another addictive product, wrapped it in shiny packaging and added flavors to create a new generation of nicotine addicts," Health Minister Mark Butler said in a speech at the National Press Club.

Vaping, widely seen as a safer alternative to smoking cigarettes and useful for helping smokers quit, involves heating a liquid that contains nicotine in what is called an e-cigarette and turning it into a vapor that users inhale.

But studies have shown the potential of long-term harm from the addictive e-cigarettes.

Under the new rules, vapes will be sold only in pharmacies and require "pharmaceutical-type" packaging. Disposable vapes popular with young people will also be banned.

Though a prescription is needed to buy nicotine vapes in Australia, lax border enforcement and a thriving illegal market mean they are readily available in convenience stores and other outlets.

Major vape manufacturer Philip Morris welcomed the crackdown on such shops. "Nicotine vaping products sold in corner stores have always been illegal," a spokesperson for the company said.

"We have been urging enforcement against these illegal products for several years and hope this will now happen."

Butler said vaping had become a recreational product in Australia, mostly sold to teenagers and young people, who are three times as likely to take up smoking.

"This is a product targeted at our kids, sold alongside lollies and chocolate bars," Butler said. "Vaping has now become the number one behavioral issue in high schools. And it's becoming widespread in primary schools as well."

Doctors backed the vaping crackdown but urged the government to do more to limit the number of young people taking it up.

"Nicotine vaping products are being sold featuring colorful flavors and we have even seen products featuring the same type of imagery as children's breakfast cereal including cartoon characters," said Nicole Higgins, president of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners.

'Dark Web' Bust Nets 288 Suspects in U.S., Europe

BRUSSELS (AFP) -- A multi-continental crackdown has halted a major "dark web" marketplace, with international police arresting 288 suspects and recovering more than 50 million euros (\$54.8 million) in cash and virtual currency, Europol said Tuesday.

The joint operation called SpecTor by U.S., British, Brazilian and European law enforcement also netted almost a tonne of drugs and 117 firearms, Europe's policing agency said.

"In an operation coordinated by Europol and involving nine countries, law enforcement have seized the illegal dark web marketplace 'Monopoly Market' and arrested 288 suspects involved in buying or selling drugs on the dark web," the Hague-based Europol said in a statement. "A number of these suspects were considered high-value targets," Europol said.

The sting followed in the wake of a successful 2021 operation by German police in which it seized the Monopoly Market's criminal infrastructure.

"Europol has been compiling intelligence packages based on troves of evidence provided by the German authorities," Europol said.

"These target packages, created by cross-matching and analyzing the collected data and evidence served as the basis for hundreds of national investigations," it said.

"As a result, 288 vendors and buyers who engaged in

tens-of-thousands of sales of licit goods were arrested across Europe, Britain, the United States and Brazil," Europol said.

The largest number of arrests were in the United States with 153, Britain 55, Germany 52 and the Netherlands, 10.

Police got back 50.8 million euros (\$53.4 million) in cash and virtual currency and seized 850 kilograms of drugs, the majority composing of amphetamines, Europol said.

Police also seized 43 kg of cocaine, 43 kg of the drug MDMA and more than 10 kg of LSD and ecstasy pills.

Operation SpecTor comes in the wake of last month's takedown of the world's largest online marketplaces selling stolen identities and passwords.

Led by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Dutch police the operation called "Cookie Monster" saw 119 suspects arrested and involved 17 countries across the world.

"Cookie Monster" targeted the Genesis marketplace, where cybercriminals could buy stolen identities and passwords of more than two million people.

A cookie is a piece of computer data that makes it easier to reopen web pages. Cookie Monster is a blue, furry character from the U.S. children's television series "Sesame Street".

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- The White House estimated that Russia's military has suffered 100,000 casualties in the last five months in fighting in the Bakmut region and other areas of Ukraine. White House national security spokesperson John Kirby told reporters the figure, based on U.S. intelligence estimates, included more than 20,000 dead, half of them from the Wagner mercenary group, which includes convicts released from prison to join the fighting. "Russia's attempt at a winter offensive in the Donbas largely through Bakmut has failed," Kirby said. "Last December, Russia initiated a broad offensive across multiple lines of advance, including toward Vuhledar, Avdiivka, Bakmut, and Kremenna. Most of these efforts stalled and failed. Russia has been unable to seize any strategically significant territory."

SYDNEY (Reuters) -- Australian police searched the home of a British former test pilot for documents related to China's J-16 strike fighter, Australia's intelligence partners, and China's biggest aviation company, a court judgment shows. The search in November was part of an investigation into Western military pilots training China's military at a time of growing tension between China and the United States and its allies. Britain and Australia have announced crackdowns on former military pilots working to train Chinese fliers, and Britain vowed to change its national security law to stop them working for intermediaries including a South African flying school, which was alleged to be helping China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) recruit pilots. Keith Hartley, chief operating officer of the Test Flying Academy of South Africa (TFASA), has not been charged. He challenged the validity of the search warrant in Australia's Federal Court, questioning its wording and seeking the return of seized material.

ASUNCION (Reuters) -- Supporters of a right-wing candidate who came third in Paraguay's presidential election clashed with police outside the electoral court, amid complaints of fraud in a vote that the ruling Colorado Party won comfortably. Police put up fences around the court's headquarters and fired rubber bullets at young protesters who were throwing stones, authorities said, after hundreds of supporters of Paraguayo Cubas gathered. Elsewhere, demonstrators blocked roads with burning tires and destroying billboards with the photo of President-elect Santiago Pena, a 44-year-old economist who won 43% of the vote on Sunday compared with 27% for runner-up Efraim Alegre. Cubas, who surprised observers by winning nearly 23% of the vote, called in a post on Instagram for a recount and asked his supporters to protest.