



MOSCOW (Reuters) -- A Russian cargo ship called *Ursa Major* sank in the Mediterranean Sea overnight after an explosion ripped through its engine room and two of its crew are still missing, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Tuesday. The vessel, built in 2009, was controlled by Oboronlogistika, a company that is part of the Russian Defense Ministry's military construction operations, which had previously said it was en route to the Russian far eastern port of Vladivostok with two giant port cranes lashed to its deck. The Foreign Ministry's crisis centre said in a statement that 14 of the ship's 16 crew members had been rescued and brought to Spain, but that two were still missing. It did not say what had caused the engine room explosion. Russia's embassy in Spain was cited by the state RIA news agency as saying it was looking into the circumstances of the sinking and was in touch with the authorities in Spain.

MANILA (Reuters) -- The Philippines' defense minister on Tuesday justified the country's deployment of a U.S. medium-range missile system and plans to acquire its own, despite opposition from China, a longstanding rival in the South China Sea. "Any deployment and procurement of assets related to the Philippines' security and defense fall within its own sovereign prerogative and are not subject to any foreign veto," minister Gilberto Teodoro said in a statement. There is a plan to acquire a missile system with mid-range capability, Philippine army chief Roy Galido said on Monday, adding "there are negotiations because we see its feasibility and adaptability." Reuters reported in September the United States had no immediate plan to withdraw the Typhon missile system from the Philippines and was testing the feasibility of its use in a regional conflict, which China said risked causing a geopolitical confrontation. China on Monday reiterated it firmly opposes its deployment. It urged the Philippines to "quickly pull out the Typhon missile system as publicly pledged, and stop going further down the wrong path," foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning told a regular press conference on Monday.

MOSCOW (AFP) -- A Russian court on Tuesday sentenced a U.S. man to 15 years in a penal colony for "espionage", Russian news agencies reported. Moscow City Court sentenced the man, named as Gene Spector, to "15 years to be served in a strict-regime penal colony", taking into account a sentence the defendant had already received for bribery, RIA Novosti state news agency reported. It published a photograph of Spector in the defendant's cage, wearing glasses and a dark jacket. The trial, except for the sentencing, took place behind closed doors due to the secret nature of the case, news agencies reported. Spector was born in 1972 in Leningrad and his Russian name is Yevgeny Mironovich, the agency reported. Now a U.S. citizen, he lives in the city of Saint Petersburg in northwest Russia and is married with children.

BERLIN (AFP) -- Germany's president said Tuesday that a deadly car-ramming attack on a Christmas market had cast a "dark shadow" over this year's celebrations but urged the nation not to be driven apart by extremists. In his traditional Christmas address, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier sought to issue a message of healing four days after the brutal attack in the eastern city of Magdeburg killed five people and left over 200 wounded. A Saudi doctor, Taleb al-Abdulmohsen, the attack was arrested Friday at the scene of the attack in which a rented SUV ploughed at high speed through the crowd of revellers, bringing death and chaos to the festive event. "A dark shadow hangs over this Christmas," said the head of state, pointing to the "pain, horror and bewilderment over what happened in Magdeburg just a few days before Christmas." He made a call for national unity as a debate about security and immigration is flaring again: "Hatred and violence must not have the final word. Let's not allow ourselves to be driven apart. Let's stand together."

PORT-AU-PRINCE (Reuters) -- At least 207 people were killed by members of the *Wharf Jeremie* gang in Haiti's portside neighborhood of Cite Soleil earlier this month, the United Nations said in a report on Monday, revising up a death toll it initially estimated at 187. In a new report on the massacre, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights said at least 134 men and 73 women, most of them elderly residents accused of witchcraft, were killed in less than a week of mass executions, abductions, and raids by some 300 members of the *Wharf Jeremie* gang. Gang leader Monel "Mikano" Felix ordered the attacks after his child got sick, accusing local residents of causing the illness through Voodoo. Many of the victims were abducted from Voodoo temples and religious ceremonies, the UN said. Mikano's gang has controlled a small but strategic area between key ports, surrounding warehouses and national highways out of the capital for some 15 years, according to the UN. Over 5,300 people have been killed in Haiti since January and more than 12,000 since the start of 2022, according to the U.N., while over 700,000 have been internally displaced.

Honda, Nissan Plan Merger; Ghosn: 'Desperate Move'



Nissan CEO Makoto Uchida, left, Takao Kato, CEO of Mitsubishi Motors, center, and Honda CEO Toshihiro Mibe, right, leave after a joint news conference in Tokyo, Dec. 23, 2024.

TOKYO (AP) -- Japanese automakers Honda and Nissan have announced plans to work toward a merger that would form the world's third-largest automaker by sales, as the industry undergoes dramatic changes in its transition away from fossil fuels.

The two companies said they had signed a memorandum of understanding and that smaller Nissan alliance member Mitsubishi Motors Corp. also had agreed to join the talks on integrating their businesses.

Automakers in Japan have lagged behind their big rivals in electric vehicles and are trying to cut costs and make up for lost time as newcomers like China's BYD and EV market leader Tesla devour market share.

Honda's president, Toshihiro Mibe, said Honda and Nissan will attempt to unify their operations under a joint holding company. Honda will lead the new management, retaining the principles and brands of each company. They aim to have a formal merger agreement by June and to complete the deal and list the holding company on the Tokyo Stock Exchange by August 2026, he said.

No dollar value was given and the formal talks are just starting, Mibe said.

A merger could result in a behemoth worth more than \$50 billion based on the market capitalization of all three automakers. Together, Honda, Nissan and Mitsubishi would gain scale to compete with Toyota Motor Corp. and with Germany's Volkswagen AG. Toyota has technology partnerships with Japan's Mazda Motor Corp. and Subaru Corp.

News of a possible merger surfaced earlier this month, with unconfirmed reports saying

Taiwan iPhone maker Foxconn was seeking to tie up with Nissan by buying shares from the Japan's company's other alliance partner, Renault SA of France.

Nissan's CEO Makoto Uchida said Foxconn had not directly approached his company. He also acknowledged that Nissan's situation was "severe."

Even after a merger Toyota, which rolled out 11.5 million vehicles in 2023, would remain the leading Japanese automaker. If they join, the three smaller companies would make about 8 million vehicles. In 2023, Honda made 4 million and Nissan produced 3.4 million. Mitsubishi Motors made just over 1 million.

Nissan has struggled following a scandal that began with the arrest of its former chairman Carlos Ghosn in late 2018 on charges of fraud and misuse of company assets, allegations that he denies. He eventually was released on bail and fled to Lebanon.

Speaking Monday to reporters in Tokyo via a video link, Ghosn derided the planned merger as a "desperate move."

The company said in November that it was slashing 9,000 jobs, or about 6% of its global work force, and reducing its global production capacity by 20% after reporting a quarterly loss of 9.3 billion yen (\$61 million).

It recently reshuffled its management and Uchida, its chief executive, took a 50% pay cut while acknowledging responsibility for the financial woes, saying Nissan needed to become more efficient and respond better to market tastes, rising costs and other global changes.

Le Pen: Days of New Government Already Numbered



File photo of French PM François Bayrou taken on the set of political TV show "L'Evenement" (The Event) in Paris, Dec. 19, 2024.

PARIS (AFP) -- Far-right leader Marine Le Pen said Tuesday that the days of France's new government are already numbered, predicting an early presidential election in a few months.

Le Pen, 56, spoke a day after President Emmanuel Macron named a new government under Francois Bayrou, his fourth prime minister of the year, to drag the second-largest EU economy out of political crisis.

"This moment of temporary political fluctuation... will come to an end as soon as the people, through their sovereign will and collective intelligence, decide to do so," she said in a Christmas Eve video posted on X.

"They will then choose a new path to follow, that of revival and recovery," Le Pen added, a Christmas tree behind her.

That moment will come "as soon as the institutions allow it. That means, as we are all aware, soon -- very soon, in a few months at most," she said.

France has been mired in political deadlock since Macron gambled on snap elections this summer in the hopes of bolstering his authority. The move backfired, with voters electing a parliament

fractured between three rival blocs. Le Pen now has unprecedented power over French politics.

By joining forces with the hard left, Le Pen's far-right National Rally party toppled Bayrou's predecessor Michel Barnier earlier this month. Many predict the centrist will also struggle to survive.

Le Pen is seen by many as having her best ever chance to win the French presidency in 2027 after three unsuccessful attempts.

However, her trial on charges of creating fake jobs at the EU parliament, which she denies, could hobble her ambitions.

If convicted, she could receive a jail sentence and a ban from public office.

The verdict is due on March 31. Some analysts believe that she wants to force Macron to resign quickly and hold snap presidential elections, allowing her to take the Elisee, and with it presidential immunity, before the verdict.

In an interview with *Le Parisien* last week, Le Pen said she was "preparing for an early presidential election."

"Emmanuel Macron is finished, or almost," she said. "I'm not trying to be cruel, it is an institutional reality."

Panama Rejects Trump Threat to Take Control of Canal



Two cargo ships pass each other during their entry and exit to the Panama Canal at the Pacific Ocean near Panama City.

PANAMA CITY (Dispatches) -- The status of the Panama Canal is non-negotiable, President Jose Raul Mulino said in a statement signed alongside former leaders of the country, after Donald Trump's recent threats to reclaim the man-made waterway.

The U.S. president-elect on Saturday had slammed what he called unfair fees for U.S. ships passing through the Panama Canal and threatened to demand control of the waterway be returned to Washington.

Mulino dismissed Trump's comments, saying "every square meter of the Panama Canal and its adjacent areas belongs to Panama and will continue belonging to Panama".

He reiterated in a statement -- also signed by former presidents Ernesto Perez Balladares, Martin Torrijos and Mireya Moscoso -- that "the sovereignty of our country and our canal are not negotiable."

The canal "is part of our history of struggle and an irreversible conquest," read the statement, which the four politicians had signed after a meeting at the seat of the Panamanian government.

"Panamanians may think differently in many aspects, but when it comes to our canal and our sovereignty, we all unite under the same flag."

Former leader Laurentino Cortizo, who did not attend the meeting, also

showed support for the statement on social media, as did ex-president Ricardo Martinelli.

The 80-kilometer (50-mile) Panama Canal carries five percent of the world's maritime trade. Its main users are the United States, China, Japan, South Korea and Chile.

It was completed by the United States in 1914, and then returned to the Central American country under a 1977 deal signed by Democratic president Jimmy Carter.

Panama took full control in 1999. In the past week, Trump has also taunted Canadian officials by suggesting the U.S. could absorb its northern neighbor and make it the 51st state. And on Sunday, he resurfaced his first-term desire to obtain Greenland, a Danish territory he has long eyed.

He called ownership of Greenland an "absolute necessity" for "purposes of National Security and Freedom throughout the World."

Speaking in Arizona this weekend, Trump also reiterated plans to designate drug cartels as foreign terrorist organizations, a distinction that could preface the use of military force on Mexican soil. Trump has threatened to drop bombs on fentanyl labs and send special forces to take out cartel leaders, an incursion that could violate Mexico's sovereignty and disrupt relations with the United States' largest trading partner.

American Airlines Scrambles to Resume Flights After Glitch



American Airlines flight 718 lands at LaGuardia airport in New York, December 29, 2020.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- American Airlines said on Tuesday its flights had resumed after a technical glitch forced the carrier to issue an hour-long ground stop, disrupting travel for thousands on Christmas Eve, one of the busiest periods of the year.

The airline said a vendor technology issue briefly affected its ability to get planes in the air.

While customers across social media were still pressing for details on their delayed flights, the relatively brief

stoppage means American will likely avoid a full-scale meltdown that ripples for days during the holiday season.

"Not a good start to Christmas Eve travel as current flight is grounded and Captain cannot provided ETA on resolution from system outage and/or paperwork error at national level. Will make connections or refunds more complicated too," a user said, tagging American Airlines on X.

Shares of the carrier were down 2% in early trade.

It is the latest technical snag after carriers were hit by a global tech outage tied to Microsoft's Azure cloud platform and a software issue at cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike earlier this year.

The outage had cost Delta Air Lines at least \$500 million.

Two years ago, Southwest Airlines experienced a meltdown with its systems during the holidays that led to 16,900 flight cancellations and stranded 2 million passengers. It was eventually fined \$140 million in the largest-ever civil penalty for a travel disruption.

Airlines have upgraded their cybersecurity and operational software systems but given there was an exodus of talented workers during the pandemic, the glitches over the last few years are not altogether unexpected, said Ken Quinn, partner at law firm Clyde & Co.

American Airlines operates thousands of flights per day to more than 350 destinations in more than 60 countries.

American Airlines, along with its wholly owned regional carriers in the U.S., has canceled over 23,000 flights or about 1.3% of their scheduled flights this year, according to FlightAware data.

South Korea Opposition Postpones President's Impeachment

SEOUL (AFP) -- South Korea's opposition said Tuesday it would hold back a decision to impeach acting president Han Duck-soo until later in the week.

The opposition Democratic Party earlier said it would introduce an impeachment motion against Han on Tuesday to protest against the interim leader's refusal to sign into law special bills to investigate his impeached predecessor.

"We have decided to exercise patience, taking into account the sentiments of the people, and wait until the 26th (Thursday) to determine whether our demands are met," floor leader Park Chan-dae said.

The party originally set Christmas Eve as the deadline for Han to promulgate two special bills investigating suspended President Yoon Suk Yeol's short-lived imposition of martial law, as well as graft allegations surrounding his wife, Kim Keon Hee.

The conservative leader was stripped of his duties by parliament on December 14 following his brief

declaration of martial law 11 days earlier, which plunged the country into its worst political crisis in decades.

Yoon is now waiting for a decision by the Constitutional Court, which requires six votes in favor from its nine-member bench in order for the impeachment motion to be passed. Currently three seats are empty, and can be appointed.

But Han, who stepped in to replace Yoon, rejected the opposition's demand at a cabinet meeting on Tuesday, insisting on bipartisan agreements for the two bills.

Han's stance "left us no other option but to interpret it as his intention to continue the insurrection by delaying proceedings", Park told a press briefing earlier.

Yoon is currently under investigation by a joint team comprising police, the defense ministry, and anti-corruption investigators.

On Tuesday, Yoon Jong-kun, the Democratic Party spokesperson told reporters that the impeachment motion against Han had been "unani-

mously adopted" as the party's official stance.

The reasons for impeachment include not only rejecting the two bills but also "actively participating in and supporting the insurrection" and "attempting to exercise another form of power while the President's authority had not yet formally ended after the insurrection".

The opposition says it needs only a simple majority in the 300-member parliament to impeach Han, as this is the threshold for a cabinet member.

The ruling People Power Party, however, argues that a two-thirds majority is required since Han is currently serving as acting president.

Kweon Seong-dong, leader of the ruling People Power Party, said The Democratic Party's "coercive politics have reached their peak" adding that they are "constantly interfering with the legitimate exercise of the acting president's authority."

"This behavior is no different from that of gangsters who threaten retaliation if money is not deposited," said Kweon.