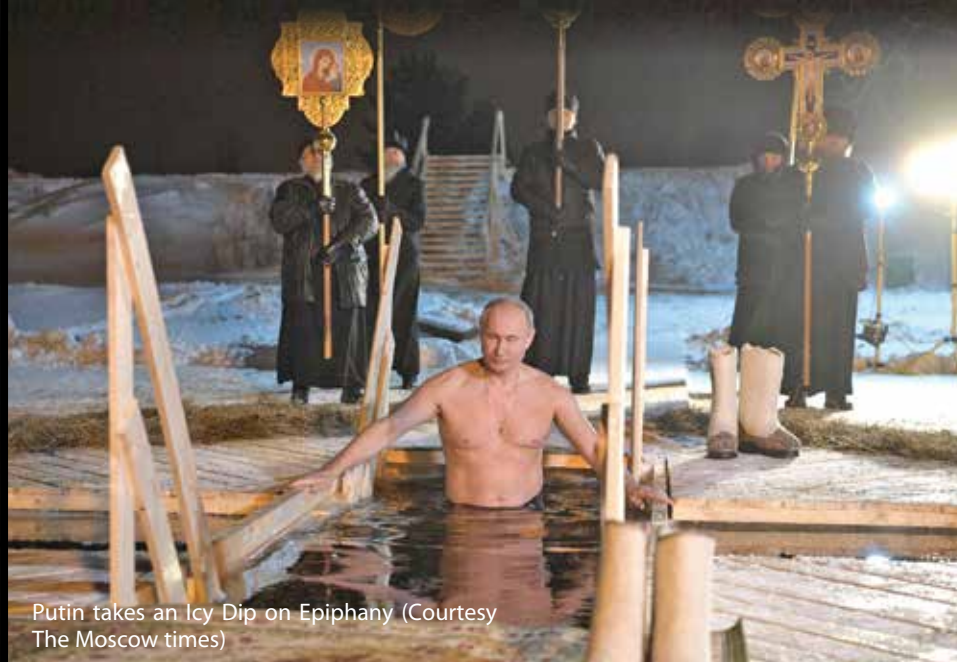


Putin takes icy plunge



Putin takes an Icy Dip on Epiphany (Courtesy The Moscow times)

Moscow Russian President Vladimir Putin along with millions of Orthodox believers braved freezing temperatures to take a barechested plunge into icy water in a traditional ritual marking the baptism of Jesus.

Surrounded by Orthodox priests and glittering religious icons, and with the temperature hovering around minus 5 degrees Celsius (23 Fahrenheit), Putin lowered himself into waters of Lake Seliger some 350 kilometres (220 miles) northwest of Moscow.

Many other Russians followed suit, submerging themselves in lakes and rivers in a widely-observed ritual

normally taking place on January 18 and 19 that last year saw two million people take the plunge.

The president marched over the ice covering the lake wrapped in a cream sheepskin coat and wearing traditional knee-high felt boots as priests chanted and waved an incense lamp, in footage shown on state television.

Asked by a journalist: "Is it cold?" Putin braved it out: "No, it's great."

Then wearing just swimming trunks, he lowered himself into a hole cut in the ice, puffing slightly and crossing himself, a crucifix hanging around his neck. He then held his nose and immersed himself fully.

It was the first time the 65-year-old, who regularly poses barechested on wilderness expeditions, publicly took part in the ritual.

However, his spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Putin "has been plunging into an ice hole for a number of years now," quoted by TASS state news agency.

Putin's latest macho exploit comes as he bids for a fourth Kremlin term in March polls.

Amid a chill in relations with Washington, it was an opportunity for the strongman to show off his fitness as US counterpart Donald Trump faces questions over his waistline. (AFP)

Ex-Catalan leader says can govern region from Belgium

Barcelona Catalonia's former leader Carles Puigdemont, who was sacked by Madrid over his attempt to break from Spain, said Friday he can govern the region from Belgium as he eyes a comeback after scoring big in elections.

"There are only two options: in prison I would not be able to address people, write, meet people," Puigdemont, who is in

self-imposed exile in Belgium and risks arrest on charges of rebellion, sedition and misuse of public funds if he returns to Spain, told Catalunya Radio.

"The only way is to continue doing it freely and safely."

"Nowadays big business and academic research projects are essentially managed using new technology," he added.

"These aren't the kind of normal conditions we would

have liked, but it's sadly much harder to do it (govern Catalonia) from the Spanish state, where we would be in prison."

Puigdemont, who was sacked along with his cabinet on October 27 after the regional parliament declared independence, is the only candidate of Catalonia's separatist block to lead the region.

#PollToday



International Energy Agency says the United States is set to overtake Saudi as the world's number two oil producer after Russia. Do you think this would reignite the supply glut war pushing the oil prices down?

Yes No Cant Say



Today, thanks to the efforts of all the nations involved, the Daesh military organisation in the Levant is almost completely defeated. I'm confident that in the coming weeks we will achieve a military victory on the ground."

Emmanuel Macron
French President

Rest in sight

India to offer yoga classes in Davos summit



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's delegation to the World Economic Forum at Davos will offer yoga classes on the icy slopes.

Somali troops rescue 32 children

Somali authorities said troops stormed a school run by al Shabaab and rescued 32 children who had been taken as recruits.

Iraqi teen denies attempted bombing of London train

An Iraqi teenager on Friday pleaded not guilty to allegations he was behind the attempted bombing of a London underground train last year which left 30 people injured.

Russian student injures six in an axe attack

A Russian teenager attacked a group of younger students with an axe, injuring six people, before setting his school on fire, investigators said.

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Turkey shells Syria's Afrin region as military op begins



Protesters waving giant flags of the YPG and other parties and militias, during a demonstration against Turkish threats

Sugedigi Turkish artillery fired into Syria's Afrin region yesterday in what Ankara said was the start of a military campaign against the Kurdish-controlled area.

The cross-border bombardment took place after days of threats from Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan to crush the Syrian

Kurdish YPG militia in Afrin sees as growing Kurdish strength across a wide stretch of north Syria.

"The operation has actually de facto started with cross-border shelling," Turkish Defence Minister Nurettin Canikli said, adding that no troops had crossed into Afrin.

1.3 million children displaced by Iraq's war with IS: UNICEF

Geneva

About half the 2.6 million people displaced in Iraq after a three-year war with Islamic State militants are children and persisting violence hampers efforts to ease their suffering, the United Nations said on Friday. "We believe that as a result of the conflict, a lack of investment over the years,

and the poverty ... that there are 4 million children now in need across Iraq," said Peter Hawkins, UNICEF chief representative in the country.

He told a Geneva news briefing by telephone from Baghdad that 1.3 million of the 2.6 million displaced by the often devastating fighting with Islamic State were children.

Melted nuclear fuel seen inside Fukushima reactor



A photo taken by a robotic probe shows a part of what is believed to be the handle of the fuel rods container and melted fuel

Tokyo

The operator of Japan's crippled Fukushima nuclear plant says a long telescopic probe has successfully captured images of some melted fuel inside one of its three damaged reactors, providing crucial information for its cleanup.

Tokyo Electric Power Co.

said Friday the fishing rod-like device carrying a camera went deep into the plant's Unit 2 primary containment vessel. The images showed that at least part of the fuel breached the core, falling to the vessel's floor.

Melted fuel has previously only been documented inside Unit 3.