

News in brief

Children hit by train in Germany, one killed, authorities say



A child was killed and another was seriously injured after they were hit by a train along a railway line in the western German town of Recklinghausen, local authorities said. Bild newspaper said the victims were dragged by a freight train for several hundred meters (yards). "It's horrible. Children and trains and at such a young age, it's just horrible what happened here and one can only hope the parents will have the strength to overcome this great misfortune," Herbert Reul, the interior minister in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, told journalists at the scene.

US House of Representatives Republicans

Republicans oust Ilhan Omar from high-profile US House committee



ousted Democrat Ilhan Omar from a high-profile committee over remarks widely condemned as antisemitic, two years after Democrats removed two Republicans from committee assignments. The deeply divided House voted 218-211 along party lines to remove Omar from the Foreign Affairs Committee with Republicans citing the 2019 remarks for which she later apologized. One Republican voted "present."

CIA chief warns against underestimating Xi's ambitions toward Taiwan

Central Intelligence Agency

Director William Burns said on Thursday that Chinese President Xi Jinping's ambitions toward Taiwan should not be underestimated, despite him likely being sobered by the performance of Russia's military in Ukraine. Burns said that the United States knew "as a matter of intelligence" that Xi had ordered his military to be ready to conduct an invasion of self-governed Taiwan by 2027.

CURIOSER & CURIOSER

Marmot death overshadows Canada Groundhog Day



Groundhog Club handler AJ Dereume holds Punxsutawney Phil, the weather prognosticating groundhog in Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania's Punxsutawney Phil predicts six more weeks of winter

Reuters | Ottawa

A Canadian woodchuck cast a different type of shadow over "Groundhog Day" Thursday -- just hours before he was due to predict spring's arrival, Fred la Marmotte was found dead.

The groundhog showed "no vital signs" when the organizer of the annual February 2 tradition in Val-d'Espoir, Quebec tried to wake him from hibernation, local media reported.

If Fred had seen his shadow, then he would have quickly scurried back inside his burrow, a portent of six more weeks of winter.

No shadow would have meant Fred staying above ground, auguring an early spring.

But after some 40 minutes of festivities, including singing and dancing, organizer Roberto Blondin told waiting spectators that Fred had passed away.

He added that he thought the groundhog had died in late fall or early December, aged

According to folklore, if the rodent sees his shadow on Groundhog Day, then frigid and blustery weather will persist for six weeks. If it is cloudy and no shadow appears, the onset of spring is near

nine, CBC reported.

Undeterred, a child wearing a groundhog hat was called up to the stage, handed a stuffed toy groundhog and asked for his prediction. He forecast a lengthy winter.

Further south in Pennsylvania, another famous furry weather forecaster, Punxsutawney Phil, also predicted six more weeks of the cold season.

A number of towns in the United States and Canada celebrate "Groundhog Day," but Punxsutawney Phil, named for his hometown, is the most celebrated of the rodent forecasters.

That is in large part due to the 1993 cult classic movie of the same name, featuring Bill Murray in which he wakes up and experiences the same day again and again.

Phil and his predecessors, also called Phil, have been forecasting since 1887.

EU prepares more Russia sanctions; Kremlin readies offensive

AP | Kyiv

The European Union will unveil its 10th package of sanctions against Russia on Feb. 24 to mark the anniversary of Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a senior official from the bloc said in Kyiv yesterday, as Ukrainian forces gird for an expected Russian offensive in the coming weeks.

The sanctions will target technology used by Russia's war machine, among other things, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen told a news conference.

The sanctions will take aim in particular at components used in the manufacturing of drones, she said, naming Iran as a key supplier of Russia.

Closing loopholes that the Kremlin uses to circumvent sanctions will also be a priority, according to Von der Leyen, who was on her fourth visit to the Ukrainian capital since the war began.

The exact measures in the next EU sanctions package must be agreed upon by the bloc's 27 member countries -- a process that can take weeks.

Top EU officials met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a show of support for the country as it battles to counter the Kremlin's forces and strives to join the EU as well as NATO.

The last such summit was held in Kyiv in October 2021 -- a few months before the war started. The highly symbolic visit is also the first EU political



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, center, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, center right, and European Council President Charles Michel, center left, arrive for the EU-Ukraine summit in Kyiv



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mission of its kind to a country at war.

The high-level meeting came as a 60-year-old man was killed and six others were wounded yesterday after Russian missiles hit central Toretsk, a town in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region, the local prosecutor's

office said in a statement on Facebook.

Ukrainian authorities reported yesterday that at least six civilians were killed and 20 others were wounded over the previous 24 hours.

Among the dead were two brothers, ages 49 and 42, killed when Russian shelling destroyed an apartment building in the northeastern Kharkiv region, Ukraine's presidential office said. Their 70-year-old father was hospitalized with unspecified injuries.

Also, six people were wounded and 18 apartment buildings, two hospitals and a school were damaged in a Russian attack in the eastern city of Kramatorsk on Thursday, Gov. Pavlo Kyrylenko told Ukrainian TV. Three people died when a Russian missile hit an apartment building in that city on Wednesday.

Brazil's Lula accuses Bolsonaro of preparing Jan 8 'coup'

AFP | Brasilia

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva on Thursday alleged that his predecessor Jair Bolsonaro actively participated in planning for his supporters to storm government buildings on January 8.

"Today I am well aware and will say it loud and clear: that citizen [former president Bolsonaro] prepared the coup," Lula said in an interview with broadcaster RedeTV!

Refusing to accept Bolsonaro's election loss, thousands of his backers broke into the presidential palace, Congress and Supreme Court buildings



Protesters, supporters of Brazil's former President Jair Bolsonaro, storm the National Congress building in Brasilia

in Brasilia a week after Lula's inauguration.

The president was not in the capital at the time.

"I am certain that Bolsonaro actively participated in that and is still trying to participate," Lula added when questioned about his predecessor's role in the assault.

Lula's allegations against Bolsonaro -- who has been in the

US state of Florida since late December -- came the same day that a Brazilian senator accused the former president of attending a meeting on how to prevent the handover of power.

The plan, according to Senator Marcos do Val, was to force Superior Electoral Court president Alexandre de Moraes to say something incriminating while secretly recording him.

17 people killed in bus-truck crash in Northwest Pakistan

AP | Peshawar

A head-on collision between a passenger bus and a speeding truck trailer near a tunnel in northwest Pakistan overnight killed at least 17 passengers, including women and children, a rescue official said

early yesterday.

The crash happened in Kohat district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, according to the local emergency official and state-run media.

"We have transported all the dead and injured to a hospital in

Kohat," rescue official Rehmat Ullah said.

TV footage showed images of the destroyed bus.

Azam Khan, the caretaker chief minister in the province, has expressed his deep sorrow and grief over the tragic accident.

Blinken follow

The US secretary of state

China says balloon is for research, accidentally strayed

AP | Washington

Secretary of State Antony Blinken has postponed a planned high-stakes weekend diplomatic trip to China as the Biden administration weighs a broader response to the discovery of a high-altitude Chinese balloon flying over sensitive sites in the western United States, a US official said yesterday.

The abrupt decision came despite China's claim that the balloon was a weather research satellite that had blown off course. The US has described it as a surveillance satellite.

The decision came just hours before Blinken had been due to depart Washington for Beijing and marked a new blow to already strained US-Chinese relations. The official said Blinken and President Joe Biden determined

Pope in South Sudan as peace leaders



Pope Francis talks to South Sudan's President Riek Machar at the airport in Juba
AP | Juba

Pope Francis, on a novel ecumenical peace mission to the world's youngest country, warned South Sudan's political leaders yesterday that history will judge them harshly if they continue to drag their feet implementing a 2018 peace accord.

Accompanying him to the overwhelmingly Christian country were the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and the moderator of the Church of Scotland, the Rt. Rev. Iain Greenshields. They hope to cast a spotlight on what Francis has called a "forgotten crisis."

South Sudan gained independence from the majority Muslim Sudan in 2011, but has been beset by civil war and conflict.

Thousands of people ululated and sang in 96-degree Fahrenheit (35.5-degree Celsius) heat as President Salva Kiir greeted the reli-