

News in brief

◆ **Nepal has hiked the cost** of an Everest climbing permit by a third, arguing it will help tackle pollution and boost safety on the world's highest mountain, the tourism chief said yesterday. Fees for the peak spring climbing season will rise from \$11,000 to \$15,000 for a permit to scale the 8,849-metre (29,032-foot) peak, Narayan Prasad Regmi, director general of the tourism department, told AFP. "The cost had remained constant for a decade and it was high time to revise that," he said. Costs of climbing at less popular -- and more demanding -- times of year such as during winter or the monsoon rains have also risen at similar rates, including from \$5,500 to \$7,500 during the autumn season. Nepal is home to eight of the world's 14 peaks over 8,000 metres and welcomes thousands of climbers each year. Foreign climbers already spend tens of thousands of dollars in their attempt to climb Everest, with more than 400 purchasing permits last year, bringing in around \$4 million to government coffers.



Nepal hikes Everest climbing fee by a third

Ex-NATO chief Stoltenberg named Norway finance minister

he took possession of his new office at the finance ministry. When his close friend Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store offered him the job last week, "the only correct answer was yes", he added. Speaking of the risk of a trade war, he stressed the importance of "doing everything we can to protect ourselves against the creation of trade barriers against Norway". Stoltenberg was Norwegian prime minister between 2000 and 2001 and again from 2005 to 2013 before serving as NATO secretary general between 2014 and 2024, when he developed good ties with Donald Trump during the US president's first term.

◆ **Former NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg** yesterday was named Norway's new finance minister, taking on the key role with a possible transatlantic trade war looming on the horizon as the Labour government lags in the polls. "I didn't plan to be here," the 65-year-old Stoltenberg told reporters as

Former US president Biden signs with talent agency CAA



◆ **Joe Biden** has signed with the powerhouse talent agency CAA, joining its star-studded ranks of Hollywood actors and sports legends as the former US president explores what comes after the White House. Creative Artists Agency said in an Instagram post on Monday that they had represented Biden from 2017 to 2020 after his eight-year term as vice president. "President Biden is one of America's most respected and influential voices in national and global affairs," said Richard Lovett, co-chairman of CAA, praising the former leader's "commitment to public service." "We are profoundly honored to partner with him again."

SPOTLIGHT

US greenlights pig kidney transplant trials

AFP | Washington, United States

Two US biotech companies say the Food and Drug Administration has cleared them to conduct clinical trials of their gene-edited pig kidneys for human transplants.



United Therapeutics along with another company, eGenesis, have been working since 2021 on experiments implanting pig kidneys into humans: initially brain-dead patients and more recently living recipients.

Advocates hope the approach will help address the severe organ shortage. More than 100,000 people in the United States are awaiting transplants, including over 90,000 in need of kidneys.

United Therapeutics's approval, announced Monday, allows the company to advance its technology toward a licensed product if the trial succeeds.

The study authorization was hailed as a "significant step forward in our relentless mission to expand the availability of transplantable organs," by Leigh Peterson, the company's executive vice president.

The trial will initially enroll six patients with end-stage renal disease before expanding to as many as 50, United Therapeutics said in a statement. The first transplant is expected in mid-2025.

Meanwhile, rival eGenesis said it had received FDA approval in December for a separate three-patient kidney

study.

"The study will evaluate patients with kidney failure who are listed for a transplant but who face a low probability of receiving a deceased donor offer within a five-year timeframe," the company said.

Xenotransplantation -- transplanting organs from one species to another -- has been a tantalizing yet elusive goal for science.

Early experiments in primates faltered, but advances in gene editing and immune system management have brought the field closer to reality.

Pigs have emerged as ideal donors: they grow quickly, produce large litters, and are already part of the human food supply.

United Therapeutics said trial patients would be monitored for life, assessing survival rates, kidney function, and the risk of zoonotic infections -- diseases that jump from animals to humans.

Currently, there is only one living human recipient of a pig organ: Towana Looney, a 53-year-old from Alabama who received a United Therapeutics kidney on November 25, 2024.

West Bank's Jenin camp going in 'catastrophic direction': UNRWA

AFP | Geneva, Switzerland

The Jenin refugee camp in the occupied West Bank is heading in a "catastrophic direction", the UN agency for Palestinian refugees said yesterday, adding that residents had "endured the impossible".

The Israeli military launched a major offensive in the West Bank on January 21 aimed at rooting out Palestinian armed groups from the Jenin area, which has long been a hotbed of militancy.

On Sunday, the army said that it had killed at least 50 militants since it launched the operation, while the Palestinian health ministry in Ramallah said Israeli forces have killed 70 people in the territory since the start of the year.

The operation has also seen troops levelling buildings in a refugee camp adjacent to Jenin.

"The camp is going into a catastrophic direction," UNRWA spokeswoman Juliette Touma told reporters in Geneva.

"Large parts of the camp were completely destroyed in a series of detonations by the Israeli forces. It is estimated that 100 houses were destroyed or heavily damaged," she said, speaking from Amman.

"The residents of this particular camp have endured the impossible."

She added: "This detonation that happened on Sunday was when children were supposed to go back to school."

"When it comes to UNRWA, 13 schools in the camp and the surrounding areas continue to be closed. That affected 5,000 kids in that area."

Touma said UNRWA's services inside Jenin camp have been interrupted for several months and stopped completely in early December.

UNRWA said it received no prior warning of the detonations, as contact between staff and Israeli authorities is no longer permitted.

After Israel accused UNRWA of providing cover for Hamas militants, legislation severing ties with the agency came into force on Thursday -- a move likely to hamper the agency's vital services after 15 months of war in Gaza.

The agency is banned from operating on Israeli soil, and contact between it and Israeli officials is also forbidden.

Trump said Sunday that talks with Israel and other Middle Eastern countries were "progressing" -- but warned that he had "no assurances" that the truce in Gaza would hold.

"I have no assurances that it will hold, I mean I've seen people brutalised, nobody's ever seen anything like it, no I have no guarantees that the peace is going to hold," he said.

Witkoff, who met Netanyahu on Monday over terms for the second phase of the truce, said however that he was "certainly hopeful".

Asked about how he viewed a

Hamas says negotiations started for second phase

Gaza City

Palestinian group Hamas said yesterday that talks for the second phase of the Gaza ceasefire had begun, as Israel said it would send ne-

gotiators to mediator Qatar later this week.

"Contacts and negotiations for the second phase have begun, and we are currently focused on shelter, relief and reconstruction for our people

in Gaza," Hamas spokesman Abdel Latif al-Qanou said in a statement, without specifying who was involved in the current negotiations, a little more than two weeks since the first phase went into effect.



A Palestinian child, transported with a relative from the Gaza Strip, arrives in Egypt through the Rafah border crossing, as Palestinian patients are transported out of the Palestinian strip as the key gateway reopened as part of a ceasefire deal.

5 freed Palestinian prisoners have arrived in Turkey: FM

Istanbul, Turkey

Fifteen Palestinian prisoners freed by Israel under the terms of the Gaza ceasefire have arrived in Turkey, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said yesterday. "A few days ago, 15

Palestinians came to Turkey via Cairo after they were released," he told a joint press conference with his Egyptian counterpart Badr Abdelatty. The former detainees were issued visas by the Turkish embassy in Cairo,

he said. The first phase of the Gaza ceasefire saw the release of 33 Israeli hostages held by Hamas in return for the freeing of around 1,900 prisoners, mostly Palestinians, being held in Israeli jails.

'We will not leave,' say Gazans as Trump and Netanyahu meet

Rafah, Palestinian Territories

Like most Palestinians, Hatem Azzam, a resident of the southern Gaza city of Rafah, was incensed by US President Donald Trump's remarks suggesting Gazans should relocate to Egypt or Jordan.

"Trump thinks Gaza is a pile of garbage -- absolutely not," the 34-year-old said, attacking Trump's choice of words when he told reporters last week of his plan to "clean out the whole thing". Calling him "delusional", Azzam said that Trump "wants to force Egypt and Jordan to take in migrants, as if they were his personal farm".

Both Egypt and Jordan have flatly rejected Trump's idea, as have Gazans and other neighbouring countries.

Azzam's outrage comes as Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu are set to meet in Washington later Tuesday and discuss plans for the Palestinian territory ravaged by more than 15 months



A Palestinian man bakes bread in front of a destroyed building in Jabalia in the northern Gaza Strip

of war.

"Trump and Netanyahu must understand the reality of the Palestinian people and the people of Gaza. This is a people deeply rooted in their land -- we will not leave," Azzam told AFP. Ihab Ahmed, another Rafah resident, deplored that Trump and Netanyahu "still don't understand the Palestinian people" and their attachment to the land.

"We will remain on this land no matter what. Even if we

have to live in tents and on the streets, we will stay rooted in this land," the 30-year-old said.

Ahmed told AFP that Palestinians had learned lessons from the 1948 war that followed the British mandate, when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were chased from their homes at the creation of Israel, and never allowed to return.

"The world must understand this message: we will not leave, as happened in 1948."

possible annexation of the West Bank, Trump told reporters: "It's a small country in terms of land."

"It's a pretty small piece of land. And it's amazing that they've been able to do what they've been able to do," he said.



Israel's retaliatory response has killed at least 47,518 people in Gaza, the majority civilians, according to the Hamas-run territory's health ministry. The UN considers these figures as reliable.