

News in brief

New Zealand gives former PM Ardern title of dame



New Zealand honoured former prime minister Jacinda Ardern with the title of dame yesterday, citing her leadership after the 2019 Christchurch mosque massacre and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Ardern, 42, shocked New Zealand in January when she announced she was stepping down as prime minister and retiring from politics, saying she no longer had "enough in the tank". Her successor, Prime Minister Chris Hipkins, said Ardern had been named a dame in the King's Birthday and Coronation Honours List. King Charles III, who was ceremonially crowned on May 6, is also head of state in New Zealand.

Republican former vice president Mike Pence launched Monday his hotly-anticipated challenge to one-time boss Donald Trump for the party's 2024 White House nomination, setting up the unusual scenario of two running mates becoming rivals.

Pence, a 63-year-old evangelical Christian, filed his nomination papers with the Federal Election Commission ahead of an official declaration to be made by video Wednesday in the early voting state of Iowa -- joining an already crowded primary field. He spent his 2017-21 tenure as vice president honing his reputation as a loyal deputy who brought the religious right into the tent and who was willing to defend the president against any accusation.

Ex-VP Pence jumps into 2024 White House race



Russian radio stations hacked, played fake Putin message



Several Russian radio stations were hacked and played a fake President Vladimir Putin speech announcing an invasion from Kyiv's troops and emergency measures in three regions bordering Ukraine, the Kremlin said yesterday. The hacking comes amid several reported incursion attempts and intense shelling in south-western Belgorod, and as Kyiv says it is preparing a long-expected counteroffensive. The fake message, still circulating on social media, said "Ukrainian troops armed to the teeth by Nato and with Washington's consent and support have invaded the Kursk, Belgorod and Bryansk" territories. The voice, very similar to Putin's, also announced martial law, general mobilisation and the evacuation of civilians in those three regions.

CURIOSER & CURIOSER

Spell it out: Paris' Champs-Elysees hosts mass 'dictation'



This photograph shows the prestigious Champs-Elysees Avenue, transformed into a giant classroom hosting participants, as they attempt to beat the record of the "World's Biggest Dictation" in Paris

AFP | Paris

Not to be outdone by US-style spelling bee extravaganzas, Paris's most famous street the Champs-Elysees was transformed into an open-air mass "dictation" spellathon Sunday, pitting thousands of France's brainiest bookworms against one another.

Revealing a very French love affair with words, over 50,000 applied to participate in the event, a world first, in which hopefuls attempt to faithfully

and without error transcribe a text read to them.

Over 5,000 applicants aged 10-90 were chosen to participate in three sessions led by novelist Rachid Santaki.

With 1,779 desks laid out on Paris' most famous boulevard in each session, organisers had sought to break the world record for a dictation spelling competition.

In the first round, an excerpt of La Mule du Pape by renowned French writer Alphonse Daudet was read by journalist Augustin Trapanard, of Libraries Without Borders.

Silence fell when the first session started, but for 10-year-old Samson, the dictation was "too fast". He gave up.

In his final year of primary school, top student Antoine attended with his father and, despite being a star pupil, he had struggled to fill his page.

"It was impossible! The dictation was for adults," he said.

His father Adrien Blind, 42, was equally relieved when the session wrapped, saying he "was in a state of stress and worry".



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Russia says repelled 'Ukraine offensive in

Russian army claims to have repelled Ukraine attack and said that enemy force

Ukrainian forces launch large-scale offensive in five sectors of the front in the south of Donetsk region

AFP | Washington

Russia said yesterday it had repelled "a large-scale offensive" by Ukrainian forces in the Moscow occupied Donetsk region as Kyiv was silent about plans to claw back lost territory.

Ukrainian officials meanwhile were expected to hold talks with Pope Francis' peace envoy, Italian Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, who headed to Kiev yesterday for two days of negotiations.

Ukraine says it has been preparing a major offensive after months of stalemate to recapture territory lost since Russian President Vladimir Putin sent troops in February last year.

But officials have been tight-lipped about the details, saying



A photograph shows a damaged building after a missile strike in the town of Kramatorsk, Donetsk region (file photo)

there would be no formal announcement about the start of the operation.

On Sunday, Ukrainian Defence Minister Oleksiy Reznikov posted a cryptic tweet, citing lyrics from Depeche Mode's song, "Enjoy the Silence."

"Words are very unnecessary," he tweeted. "They can only do harm."

Military experts expect Ukrainian forces to test Russian defences for weaknesses before starting a full-blown offensive.

Early yesterday, Russia's defence ministry said that on Sunday "the enemy launched a large-scale offensive in five sectors of the front" in the south of the Donetsk region.

"A total of six mechanised and

YOU KNOW WHAT

Large parts of Donetsk have been held by pro-Moscow separatists since 2014. It is one of four eastern Ukrainian territories that Russia formally annexed in September last year, along with Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson

two tank battalions of the enemy were involved," it said in a Telegram post, adding that Ukrainian troops had hit "the most vulnerable, in their opinion, sector of the front".

"The enemy did not achieve their tasks, they had no success." The ministry posted what it

Trains resume service 51 hours after deadly India crash

AFP | Balasore

Passenger and freight trains were running again yesterday at the site of India's deadliest train disaster in decades, which officials said was caused by failures linked to signal systems.

Trains rumbled past the debris of smashed carriages from Friday night's crash near Balasore in the eastern state of Odisha, where nearly 300 people were killed and hundreds injured.

Officials had initially reported the death toll stood at 288, but the Odisha state government has since revised the toll down to 275 after some bodies were mistakenly counted twice.

Of the 1,175 injured, 382 were still being treated in hospital, authorities said on Sunday.

However, many fear the death



Railway workers help to restore services at the accident site of a three-train collision near Balasore

toll could still rise with medical centres overwhelmed by the number of casualties, many in serious condition.

Green netting was erected on either side of the tracks, shielding the crumpled carriages, which had been pushed down

the embankment, from the view of travelling passengers.

Railway minister Ashwini Vaishnaw was seen folding his hands in prayer as he saw the first train cross the site of the disaster late Sunday.

The railways ministry said the

YOU KNOW WHAT

Green netting was erected on either side of the tracks, shielding the crumpled carriages, which had been pushed down the embankment, from the view of travelling passengers

first train, a goods train loaded with coal, started 51 hours after the crash.

It was not immediately clear if all the tracks had been fully repaired, with trains yesterday using only lines on one side.

Bizarre! 3-year-old boy chews snake to death in India

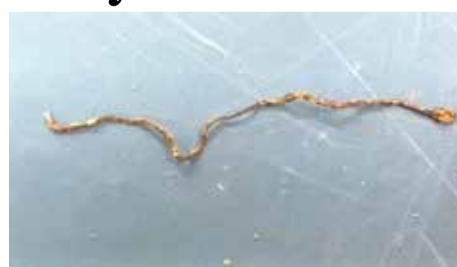
Times Now | Farrukhabad

In a bizarre incident, a three-year-old boy chewed a snakelet to its death in Farrukhabad district of Uttar Pradesh state in India.

Akshay, the child was playing outside his home when a snake appeared in front of him.

He started playing with the snake by putting it in his mouth.

Few moments later, he started screaming, following which his grandmother rushed and was shocked to find the dead snakelet



The remains of the chewed up snake clamped in his mouth.

"I pulled it out and cleaned his mouth and alerted the child's parents," the boy's grandmother Sunita said.

His horrified parents took the child to a hospital. They also put the dead snakelet in a polybag to explain the entire incident to the doctors. After keeping the boy under observation for 24 hours, the doctors declared him out of danger, Times of India reported.

Speaking to Times of India, Dr Mohammad Salim Ansari, who observed the child, said necessary medicines had been administered to the boy and that he was doing fine and had been discharged. "It appears the snakelet was of a non-venomous species," he added.