

Trump orders downsizing of key intelligence office

Washington, United States

President Donald Trump said yesterday that he has directed his contentious pick for director of national intelligence to cut the size of his agency when he takes office on an acting basis this month.

In a post on Truth Social, Trump said that he had told Bill Pulte, who will start as director of national intelligence on June 19, "to execute the immediate and needed downsizing of the office, reverting staff to their home agencies."

The appointment of Pulte, a Trump loyalist with no background in intelligence, has drawn ire from legislators. The ODNI agency was established to coordinate the activities of the sprawling US intelligence community.

France to keep working on fighter jet through 2040: minister



Paris, France

France will keep working on a next-generation fighter jet through 2040, the defence minister said on Wednesday, after Germany pulled the plug on the joint FCAS programme this week.

"Eight years of commitment, 2.5 billion in investment," Defence Minister Catherine Vautrin told parliament, referring to the joint German-French jet project.

"It means that almost all of this investment will enable us to continue working on a fighter jet through 2040," she added.

"This is obviously a major technical asset for our country's sovereignty."

Bill Gates arrives for questioning in US Congress over Epstein ties

● The panel asked Gates to appear after documents released by the Justice Department raised new questions about his contacts with Epstein.

● The Epstein files include a 2013 draft email in which the financier appeared to suggest he had helped Gates manage the fallout from extramarital affairs.

AFP | Washington, United States

Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates arrived on Capitol Hill Wednesday morning for questioning from US lawmakers over his relationship with late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, whose



Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates arrives for a closed-door interview with the House Oversight Committee on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC

network of wealthy and powerful associates has fueled years of scrutiny and conspiracy theories.

Gates, one of the world's richest men and a leading philanthropist, was appearing before the House Oversight Committee for a transcribed interview about the disgraced financier, who died in a New York jail cell in 2019 while awaiting trial on sex trafficking charges involving underage girls.

"I hope my testimony is helpful to the work -- important work -- of the committee to find justice for the victims," Gates

told reporters as he walked into a hearing room, while avoiding further questions.

The panel asked Gates to appear after documents released by the Justice Department raised new questions about his contacts with Epstein.

Several other high-profile figures have also appeared before the committee, including Bill and Hillary Clinton, and Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick.

A spokesperson for Gates told AFP in a statement that the billionaire welcomed the chance to appear before the committee and emphasized he had "never witnessed or participated in Epstein's illegal conduct."

The Epstein files include a 2013 draft email in which the financier appeared to suggest he had helped Gates manage the fallout from extramarital affairs, including by seeking antibiotics after a sexually transmitted infection.

Julian Barnes wins top Spanish literature prize

AFP | Madrid, Spain

Veteran British author Julian Barnes was yesterday named the winner of Spain's top literature prize for decades of

work that "offers a lucid, warm and compassionate vision of humanity".

The jury of the Princess of Asturias Award for Literature "highlighted his status as an extraordinary storyteller and essayist, gifted with humour and irony", read the official announcement.

Barnes, 80, "uses memory as a shaper of identity without letting go of imagination, with love as an essential principle", the jury added.

Born in the English city of Leicester in 1946, Barnes has penned 15 novels and 10 works of non-fiction in a career that has earned top literary prizes in the UK and France.

Previous winners of the Princess of Asturias Award include Japan's Haruki Murakami, US writers Siri Hustvedt and Paul

Auster as well as Peruvian Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa.

"The measure of a prize always lies in the quality of those who have previously received it, and I am more than honoured to join the list of such distinguished names," Barnes said in a statement.

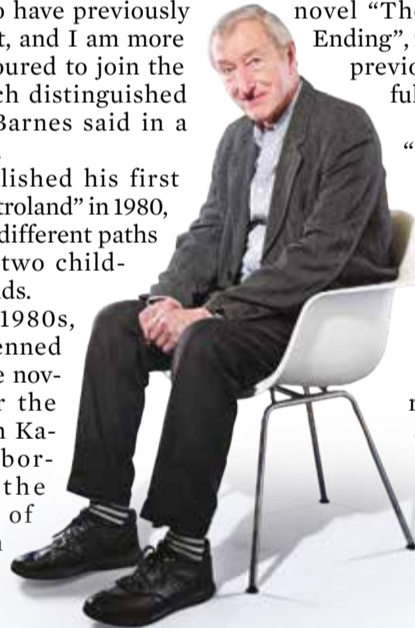
He published his first novel "Metroland" in 1980, about the different paths taken by two childhood friends.

In the 1980s, Barnes penned four crime novels under the name Dan Kavanagh, borrowing the surname of his then wife and

literary agent Pat Kavanagh, who died in 2008.

He was awarded the Man Booker Prize in 2011 for his novel "The Sense of an Ending", following three previous unsuccessful nominations.

His last novel "Departure(s)" was published in January, days after his 80th birthday, an anniversary he thought he would never reach following a diagnosis for a rare form of blood cancer six years earlier.



Founded in 1981, the Princess of Asturias Awards are the most prestigious in the Spanish-speaking world and come with prize money of 50,000 euros (\$57,750).

World's largest whale graveyard discovered by Chinese sub

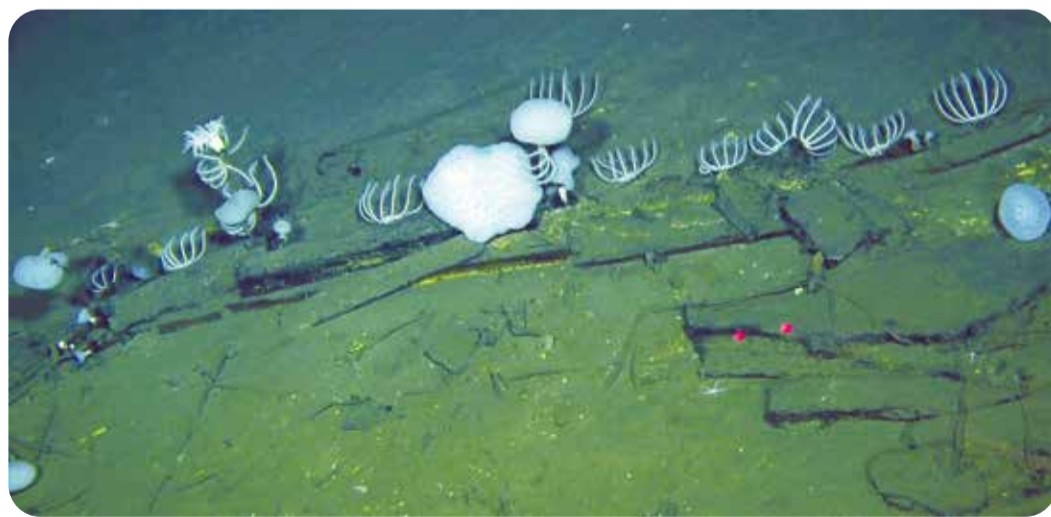
AFP | Paris, France

The world's largest whale graveyard has been discovered at the bottom of the Indian Ocean by Chinese scientists, who found that the vast expanse of both new and ancient carcasses supports huge communities of deep-sea life.

It is also the deepest and oldest known whale graveyard on Earth, according to research published in the journal Nature on Wednesday, with some fossils dating back 5.3 million years.

From inside a small submersible, the Chinese researchers saw many strange animals -- many believed to be new to science -- living off the whale carcasses.

A new, though extinct, species of whale was also identified among the nearly 500 skeletons found up to 7,000 metres deep along a 1,200 kilometre corridor



Whale bones at the world's biggest known whale graveyard discovered by the Chinese submersible Fendouzhe.

of bones in the Indian Ocean west of Australia.

Lead study author Xiaotong Peng of the Chinese Academy of Sciences told AFP that the researchers were "astonished" when the scale of their discov-

ery became clear.

It was known that when whales die and drop to the seafloor, their sunken bodies -- called "whale falls" -- provide a source of food to deep-sea creatures.

"But discovering a necropolis of this scale was completely unexpected: the size of distribution, the depth and the age range were far beyond anything we had imagined," Xiaotong Peng said.

The whales were believed to have died in such numbers in this particular area because it is a popular foraging habitat -- and has a V-shaped trench that funnels carcasses to the seafloor.

'Truly incredible experience'

For the discovery, the Fendouzhe submersible carried out 32 dives in 2023 -- though what it found was only revealed in Nature on Wednesday.

The sub took up to three people on the dives, collecting the fossil samples using robotic arms.

Study co-author Peng Zhou said witnessing the whale graveyard "was a truly incredible experience".

"The vibrant ecosystems we saw offered a completely different perspective on this otherwise dark and cold ocean floor." Among the animals they discovered living off the carcasses were jellyfish, brittle stars,

bone-boring worms and molluscs called bivalves.

Most of the 485 fossils the scientists catalogued were from different species of beaked whales.

Extrapolating from the number of bones they found, the scientists estimated there could be more than 10 million carcasses across the area, which is called the Diamantina Zone.

The soft tissue and lipids inside that many carcasses "translates to roughly 6.7 million tonnes of sequestered carbon," Xiaotong Peng said.

This provides an immense source of sustenance for animals, similar to how hydrothermal vents create their own ecosystems on the ocean floor.

Some of the animals seen by the scientists also live in hydrothermal vents and cold seeps, suggesting whale carcasses could help connect these deep-sea communities.

At Guantanamo, Pentagon chief warns Cuba not to acquire weapons that threaten US

Miami, United States

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth visited the US military base at Guantanamo Bay Wednesday, warning the communist-led island of Cuba against acquiring weapons that could threaten the United States.

Washington has ramped up pressure against the Cuba with sanctions and a crippling oil blockade, and President Donald Trump has repeatedly signaled that the Cuban government could be the next after Venezuela to fall to US pressure.

"It would be unwise for the government of Cuba to try to procure or get access to the types of weapons that could reach this base or the American homeland," Hegseth said in remarks to US troops at the base.

"They would be inviting the kind of confrontation not only do they not want, but they could not stand," said Hegseth, dressed in a green t-shirt and black shorts for physical fitness training with US forces.

US sentences ex-Taliban commander to 42 years

New York, United States

A former Afghan Taliban commander charged by the United States with abducting a journalist and supporting fighters who killed American troops in 2008 was sentenced Tuesday to 42 years in prison.

Haji Najibullah, 50, was accused by US prosecutors of kidnapping an American journalist, identified as New York Times journalist David Rohde, and two Afghan civilians. He was also charged with the deaths of three US soldiers and an Afghan interpreter in an attack by forces under his command in June 2008.