

News in brief

◆ **Bangladesh will hold national polls** on February 12, the electoral commission announced Thursday, the country's first vote since a student-led uprising toppled former prime minister Sheikh Hasina last year. A referendum on a landmark democratic reform charter will also be held on the same day, Chief Election Commissioner AMM Nasir Uddin said in a television broadcast to the nation. The Muslim-majority country of 170 million people has been in political turmoil since Hasina was overthrown in August 2024, ending her 15-year autocratic rule. Her former ruling party Awami League has been banned from running. The country's interim leader, Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus who returned from exile in August 2024 at the behest of protesters to lead a caretaker government, will step down after the polls.



Bangladesh sets first post-uprising polls for February 12

◆ **More than 600 British Empire artefacts stolen from museum: police**

◆ **More than 600 items** from a collection documenting the links between Britain and countries in the former British Empire were stolen from a UK museum in September, police said yesterday. Avon and Somerset police have launched an appeal for information about four men captured on CCTV images on September 25 outside a building in the southwestern city of Bristol which housed items from the collection. "More than 600 artefacts of various descriptions were taken by the offenders," police said in a statement about the theft from the British Empire and Commonwealth Collection. "The theft of many items which carry a significant cultural value is a significant loss for the city," said the officer in the case, Dan Burgan. "These items, many of which were donations, form part of a collection that provides insight into a multi-layered part of British history."

◆ **Austrian lawmakers**

yesterday voted by a large majority in favour of a law banning headscarves in schools for girls under 14, a move rights groups and experts say is discriminatory and could deepen societal division. Austria's conservative-led government -- under pressure with anti-immigration sentiment is running high -- proposed the ban earlier this year, arguing it is aimed at protecting girls "from oppression". In 2019 the country introduced a ban on headscarves in primary schools, but the constitutional court struck it down. This time the government insists that its law is constitutional, though experts have suggested it could be seen as discriminating against one religion -- Islam -- and putting children in an uncomfortable position. The law prevents girls younger than 14 from wearing headscarves that "cover the head in accordance with Islamic traditions" in all schools.

Austrian parliament approves headscarf ban in schools



SPOTLIGHT

French supermarket's veggie wolf Christmas ad goes viral

AFP | Paris, France

A French supermarket has made a strong entry into the competitive field of Christmas advertising with a viral animated clip about a vegetarian wolf that has wracked up tens of millions of views internationally.

The Intermarche production has been praised for its tear-jerking take on friendship and stereotypes, but also for its use of human actors and an animation studio -- instead of artificial intelligence.

Set to the song "Unloved" by French crooner Claude Francois, it recounts the journey of a wolf from feared forest predator to a beloved vegetarian chef who forages mushrooms and berries for an all-creature Christmas dinner.

"I'm genuinely in love with this ad a french one? for a SUPERMARKET?? like woaah," wrote X user @pawcord who posted the full video which has been viewed there more than 26 million times.

Thierry Cotillard, the chairman of Intermarche, celebrated that "our 'unloved' wolf is now loved by the entire world" in a post on the LinkedIn social network.

He said it was made over the last year by around 100 people, led by Montpellier-based animation company Illogic Studios, whose short animated film "Garden Party" was nominated for an Oscar in 2018.

Cotillard and the studio confirmed that the Intermarche



ad had been produced without artificial intelligence, which is blamed for flooding the internet with quick and cheap "slop" cartoons.

The technology is threatening jobs across the advertising and animation industries.

Many Western retail brands spend a considerable part of their annual marketing budget on Christmas advertisements, seeking to boost sales and their image at a time of peak consumer spending.

But while a brand such as Coca-Cola was long seen as expert in the domain, the exercise can be fraught with danger.

Coca-Cola's recent efforts have been panned as cheap low-quality animations, while the Dutch branch of McDonald's withdrew an AI-generated advert from YouTube earlier this month after it was dubbed "creepy" and "depressing" by critics.

Israel says Hamas 'will be disarmed' after group proposes weapons freeze

Hamas rejects the demand for total disarmament

● **Netanyahu recently indicated the second phase to begin soon**

● **Netanyahu is expected to meet Trump on December 29**

AFP | Jerusalem, Undefined

Israel said yesterday Hamas "will be disarmed" as part of the US-sponsored peace plan for Gaza, after a top leader from the Palestinian Islamist movement suggested a weapons freeze.

The ceasefire, in effect since October 10, halted the war that began after Hamas's deadly attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. But it remains fragile as Israel and Hamas accuse each other almost daily of violations.

Top Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal told Qatari news channel Al Jazeera that the group is open to a weapons "freeze", but rejects the demand for total disarmament put forward in Trump's plan for the Palestinian territory.



A woman fixes her tent as children stand inside at a makeshift camp sheltering displaced Palestinians after heavy rains in the Zeitoun neighbourhood of Gaza City

An Israeli government official told AFP, however, that "there will be no future for Hamas under the 20-point plan. The terror group will be disarmed and Gaza will be demilitarised".

The agreement is composed of three phases. Israeli Prime Min-

ister Benjamin Netanyahu recently indicated that he expected the second phase to begin soon.

Under that phase Israeli troops would further withdraw from their positions in Gaza and be replaced by an international stabilisation force (ISF), while Hamas would lay down its weapons.

The Palestinian group has indicated it would not agree to giving up its arsenal.

"The idea of total disarmament is unacceptable to the resistance (Hamas)," Meshaal said in the interview aired on Wednesday. "What is being proposed is a

freeze, or storage (of weapons)... to provide guarantees against any military escalation from Gaza with the Israeli occupation," he added.

"This is the idea we're discussing with the mediators, and I believe that with pragmatic American thinking... such a vision could be agreed upon with the US administration," he said.

Netanyahu is expected to meet US President Donald Trump in the United States on December 29 to discuss the next steps in the truce.



Hamas was founded in 1987 during the First Intifada as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza.

China's top diplomat to visit Middle East this week

AFP | Beijing, China

China's top diplomat Wang Yi will begin a tour of the Middle East on Friday for bilateral talks in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, Beijing said yesterday.

Wang will visit from 12 to 16 December for talks with foreign ministers "to exchange views on bilateral relations, the situation in the Middle East and major issues of common concern", China's foreign ministry said in a statement.

"China expects that through this visit, it can consolidate political mutual trust with the three countries," foreign ministry spokesman Guo Jiakun said.

China is also focusing on the Middle East as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, a vast global infrastructure project developed over the last decade.

US seized 'very large' tanker near Venezuela, Trump says



Screen grabs from a video posted by US Attorney General Pam Bondi on her X account shows what Bondi says is the execution of "a seizure warrant for a crude oil tanker used to transport sanctioned oil from Venezuela and Iran" off the coast of Venezuela

AFP | Washington, United States

The United States has seized a large oil tanker off the coast of Venezuela, President Donald Trump said yesterday, which Caracas deemed a 'blatant theft' amid escalating tensions between the countries.

The move comes during a huge US naval build-up in the

Caribbean, which Venezuela's leftist leader Nicolas Maduro says is aimed at regime change, and strikes on alleged drug boats.

A video published by US Attorney General Pam Bondi showed troops rappelling from a helicopter onto the tanker's deck, then entering the ship's bridge with rifles raised. "We've just seized a tanker on the coast of Venezuela,

a large tanker, very large -- the largest one ever seized, actually," Trump told reporters at the start of a roundtable with business leaders at the White House.

"And other things are happening, so you'll be seeing that later."

Bondi said the tanker was part of an "illicit oil shipping network" used to carry sanctioned oil from Venezuela and Iran.