

News in brief

UK Labour party loses parliamentary seat to left-wing Greens



◆ Britain's ruling Labour party yesterday lost a crunch local poll in one of its traditional northern English heartlands to the left-wing Greens, adding to the woes of unpopular Prime Minister Keir Starmer. Labour also finished behind the hard-right Reform UK party

in the by-election for the parliamentary seat of Gorton and Denton in Manchester, as the country's traditional two-party system fractures. The third-place finish in a seat that Labour has dominated for decades is likely to increase chatter about how much longer the 63-year-old Starmer can stay in office.

◆ Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi said yesterday she

Japan PM opposes changing male-only imperial succession



opposes changing the imperial family's male-only succession rules, as pressure mounts on lawmakers to address the issue of the monarchy's survival. Only the male offspring of the male side of the family can currently ascend the ancient Chrysanthemum Throne. Since Emperor Naruhito, 66, only has one daughter, hopes for continuing the imperial family lie with Prince Hisahito, the teenage son of Crown Prince Akishino. Prime Minister Takaichi told parliament yesterday that a panel of experts in 2021 found it "appropriate to limit eligibility to those who are male-line male descendants belonging to the imperial lineage" and she respected their conclusion.

Duterte killed thousands, ICC prosecutors say



◆ Rodrigo Duterte killed thousands during his anti-drug campaign, an International Criminal Court prosecutor alleged yesterday, as the crimes against humanity hearing against the former Philippines president wrapped up.

"He's proud of his killings. He wants to be remembered for them," said Julian Nicholls, summing up for the prosecution. "Decades of murdering his own people, murdering

the children of the Philippines, and he claims that he did it all for his country. He doesn't deny it.

CURIOSER & CURIOSER

Australian supermarket giant reins in AI assistant claiming to be human



People shop at a Woolworths supermarket in Melbourne
AFP | Sydney

Australian supermarket giant Woolworths has been forced to rein in an AI-powered customer service assistant after users reported it had been rambling about its mother.

The AI assistant, who goes by Olive, offers round the clock help with everything from tracking orders to finding products.

But users online reported that Olive has in recent weeks gone slightly off-message while on the phone.

"It asked me for my date of birth and when I gave it, it started rambling about how its mother was born in the same year," one user wrote on online discussion site Reddit.

Another user reported Olive had attempted "fake banter", talked about its relatives and made "fake typing sounds" while looking something up.

"The ick cringe factor whilst wasting completely unnecessary time was enough to make me hate Olive and wish her harm," they wrote.

And one user on X said their mum had contacted Olive and received the same kind of re-

sponse.

Olive "kept claiming to be a real person and started talking about its memories of its mother and her angry voice", they said.

A Woolworths spokesperson told AFP that the responses about birthdays had been written by a human employee.

"Olive has been around since 2018. Over this time, customer feedback for Olive has been very positive, with many noting its personality," they said.

"A number of responses about birthdays were written for Olive by a team member several years ago as a more personal way for Olive to connect with customers.

"As a result of customer feedback, we recently removed this particular scripting."

Woolworths is one of Australia's largest supermarket chains and is far from the only company to have employed AI-powered customer service assistants.

The company said in January it had teamed up with Google to make Olive capable of doing more tasks for customers, including meal planning.

US allows non-emergency staff departure from Israel

Progress in Geneva talks tempered by US "excessive demands," warns Iran

● Aircraft carrier heads toward Israel

● Iran talks show mixed progress

● Military buildup expands rapidly

AFP | Washington

The United States authorised the departure of non-emergency embassy staff from Israel yesterday, as it threatened strikes on Iran and pressed its biggest military buildup in the Middle East in decades.

The move came a day after a round of Oman-mediated talks between Iran and the US seen as a last-ditch bid to avert war, though initial optimism was tempered by Tehran warning Washington must drop "excessive demands" to reach a deal.

The talks follow repeated threats from President Donald Trump to strike Iran while the US military builds up its forces in the region.

As the world's largest aircraft carrier, the USS Gerald R. Ford, was due to arrive off the coast of key US ally Israel, the US embassy in the country announced it was allowing non-emergency government personnel and family members to leave "due to safety risks".

"Persons may wish to consider



An Iranian couple walk past an anti-US mural on a building in Tehran

leaving Israel while commercial flights are available," the embassy said on its website.

The New York Times reported that US Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee sent an email to embassy staff yesterday morning saying that those wishing to leave "should do so TODAY".

"Focus on getting a seat to an-yplice from which you can then continue travel to DC, but the first priority will be getting expeditiously out of country," he was quoted as writing.

Growing concerns over conflict spurred China yesterday to

join other countries in warning its citizens to leave Iran "as soon as possible".

Trump on February 19 gave Iran 15 days to reach a deal. While Iran has insisted the discussions focus solely on nuclear issues, the United States wants Tehran's missile programme and its support for militant groups curtailed.

The Wall Street Journal reported on Thursday that Trump's negotiating team would demand that Iran dismantle its three main nuclear sites and hand over all its remaining enriched uranium to

the United States.

Without specifying what demands he was referring to, Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said yesterday that "success in this path requires seriousness and realism from the other side and avoidance of any miscalculation and excessive demands".

Following the talks in Geneva on Thursday, Araghchi told state TV that the negotiations "made very good progress and entered into the elements of an agreement very seriously, both in the nuclear field and in the sanctions field".

Scientists discover giant bird-like dinosaur in Niger desert

AFP | London

Deep in the desert of Niger, scientists have unearthed an unknown species of dinosaur, a giant fivervy of its kind in more than a century.

Around 95 million years ago, the Spinosaurus -- a massive beast with a blade-shaped head crest and interlocking teeth -- roamed the African continent.

Scientists believe it rivalled the fearsome Tyrannosaurus rex in size, measuring around 40 feet long with a 20-inch sword-like crest on its head.

Researchers dug up fossils that belonged to the Spinosaurus mirabilis -- or "hell heron", in the words of Paul Sereno, the University of Chicago palaeontologist and lead author of the research published in the journal Science.

"Look at the length of the skull, the length of the neck, and the length of the hind limb -- you're in heron territory."

Spinosaurus mirabilis lived when forests and rivers covered the now-barren Sahara. Previ-



US paleontologist Paul Sereno poses next to the skull cast

ously, most spinosaurid fossils had been found near coastlines in North Africa.

Some scientists thought these fish-eating creatures may have been fully aquatic, gliding through deep waters to snare prey.

But this time, the fossils were discovered further inland, hundreds of miles from what would have been the nearest ocean.

"I think it was an animal that could have waded easily into the water," Sereno said.

"But I do not think it was a diver, I do not think it was a good swimmer."

'Earth-shattering site'

The search began in 2019 in the Sahara Desert, where French geologist Hugues Faure had said he found a tooth belonging to the

giant predator Carcharodontosaurus in the 1950s.

"We've got a couple of things that Faure could never dream of. We have GPS coordinates, we have drones and better vehicles," said Sereno.

The barren sands yielded nothing and the team, disheartened, headed back to their camp.

But a Tuareg man in a black trench coat approached Sereno's team on a motorcycle, claiming to know where "big bones" lay.

After a long journey through the desert, Sereno worried they "had made a mistake".

"We jokingly said, are we still in Niger? I mean, we drove for a day and a half until we had no more gas to spare because we wouldn't get back."

But eventually they reached a remote site where the "biggest bones... I have ever seen in my life" emerged from the ground.

Far out in the desert, the researchers gaped at the six-foot-long femur, the jaw, teeth, and base of the crest.