

## US Senate opens impeachment trial of President Trump

Agencies

Washington: The US Senate opened the impeachment trial of President Donald Trump with quiet ceremony Thursday — senators standing at their desks to swear an oath of “impartial justice” as jurors, House prosecutors formally reciting the charges and Chief Justice John Roberts presiding.



The trial, only the third such undertaking in American history, is unfolding at the start of the election year, a time of deep political division in the nation. Four of the senators sitting in judgment on Trump are running for the Democratic Party's nomination to challenge him in the fall.

“Hear ye, hear ye, hear ye!” intoned the Senate's sergeant at arms, calling the proceedings to order just past noon.

Senators filled the chamber, an unusual sight in itself, sitting silently under strict rules that prohibit talking or

cellphones, for a trial that will test not only Trump's presidency but also the nation's three branches of power and its system of checks and balances.

The Constitution mandates the chief justice serve as the presiding officer, and Roberts made the short trip across the street from the Supreme Court to the Capitol. He has long insisted judges are not politicians and is expected to serve as a referee for the proceedings. Senators rose quickly when he appeared in his plain black robe.

“Will all senators now stand, and remain standing, and raise their right hand,” Roberts said.

“Do you solemnly swear that in all things appertaining to the trial of the impeachment of Donald John Trump, president of the United States, now pending, you will do impartial justice according to the Constitution and laws, so help you God?”

The senators responded they would, and then they lined up to sign an oath book.

Trump faces two charges after the House voted to impeach him last month. One, that he abused his presidential power by pressuring Ukraine to investigate Democratic rival Joe Biden, using military aid to the country as leverage. Trump is also charged with obstructing Congress' ensuing probe.

## Pak court hands down 55-year sentences to 86 Islamists



Agencies

Islamabad: A Pakistani court has sentenced 86 members of a radical Islamist party to 55-year prison terms each for taking part in violent rallies in 2018 over the acquittal of a Christian woman in a blasphemy case, a party official said Friday.

The verdicts, unusually harsh for Pakistan, were announced late on Thursday night by the court in Rawalpindi, a garrison city near Islamabad. The trial had lasted for over a year. PirEjaz Ashrafi, a senior leader of the radical Tehreek-e-Labbak party, said the sentences would be appealed.

Among those sentenced was Ameer Hussain Rizvi, the brother of firebrand cleric Khadim Hussain Rizvi who heads the party.

“Justice has not been

done,” Ashrafi told The Associated Press. “We will challenge the verdicts.”

The 86 were charged with damaging public property, beating people up and disrupting normal life by staging sit-ins against the acquittal of Aasia Bibi earlier that year.

Bibi was convicted of blasphemy in 2009 and sentenced to death on charges of insulting Islam. Her case stemmed from a quarrel with fellow farm workers who refused to drink from the same water container used by a Christian. She consistently denied the charges against her.

The country's Supreme Court overturned her conviction in 2018 but after headline Islamists staged nationwide rallies against the ruling, authorities continued to hold her in protective custody before she was allowed to leave for Canada last year to reunite with her family there.



## Riyadh Pays \$500 Million To Cover Cost Of Us Troops' Presence In Saudi: Report

Agencies

Washington: Saudi Arabia has reportedly paid \$500 million to begin to cover the cost of US military operating in the Arab country, a US official says.

The payment was made in December 2019, according to the report. “Consistent with the President's guidance to increase partner burden-sharing, the Department of Defense has engaged Saudi Arabia on sharing the cost of these deployments, which support regional security and dissuade hostility and aggression. The Saudi government has agreed to help underwrite the cost of these activities and has made the first contribution,” said Rebecca Rebarich, Pentagon spokeswoman.

Last week, President Donald Trump claimed that the Saudis had “already deposited \$1 billion in the bank.”

“We're sending more [troops] to Saudi Arabia, and Saudi Arabia is paying us for it,” Trump said. “I said, ‘Listen, you're a very rich country. You want more troops? I'm going to send them to you, but

you have to pay us.’ They're paying us. They've already deposited \$1 billion in the bank.”

Critics, including independent representative Justin Amash, slammed the move, accusing Trump of using American troops as “paid mercenaries.” “He sells troops,” Amash tweeted.

Speaking to MSNBC, Democrat representative Barbara Lee claimed Trump deposited the Saudi money in a personal bank account and said the president is “selling our soldiers as mercenaries to foreign governments.”

Later, Pentagon spokeswoman Rebarich said discussions were ongoing to formalize the contributions.

“Discussions are ongoing” is quite different from Trump's unequivocal claim that Saudi Arabia had “already deposited \$1 billion in the bank.”

The Saudi funds are to cover the overall costs of deploying troops, as well as fighter jets and Patriot missile defense batteries to protect Saudi oil installations, CNN reported.

The deployments began after what the Saudis and Americans

claimed were Iran's attacks on Aramco oil facilities in September 2019. Iran has denied any involvement in the attacks, for which Yemen's Ansarallah movement claimed responsibility.

The UN chief says the world body's investigators cannot verify the US and Saudi claims of Iran's involvement in attacks on Aramco facilities in September.

The military buildup has come despite Trump repeatedly claiming that he wants to reduce the US military commitment in the Middle East.

France to deploy its only aircraft carrier to Mideast

Meanwhile, French President Emmanuel Macron said on Thursday his country will deploy the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier and its battle group to support French military operations in Middle East.

“The aircraft carrier will support Chammal operations (in the Middle East) from January to April 2020 before deploying to the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea”, Macron said at a New Year speech to the French military, according to Reuters.

## Iran ready for negotiations with Saudi Arabia, Persian Gulf states: FM Zarif

Agencies

Tehran: Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif says the Islamic Republic is ready to hold talks with Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf countries to promote regional security.

“We are ready for negotiations with Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf littoral states and we are ready to give proposals regarding security in this region, particularly the Strait of Hormuz,” Zarif said in an address to a meeting held in the Indian city of Mumbai on Friday in coordination with All India Association of Industries (AIAI).

He added that Iran has also presented proposals on ways to



establish peace in the Strait of Hormuz. Established in 1956 in Mumbai, the AIAI has over 1,500 members and through its affiliates it represents over 50,000 industries.

In an address to the 74th session of the United Nations General Assembly on September 25, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani

said as a steward of maritime security in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, Iran invites all countries that are affected by developments in the strategic region to join the country's new regional peace initiative, dubbed Hormuz Peace Endeavor (HOPE).

He said the “coalition of hope” aims to promote peace, stability, progress and prosperity of littoral states and help achieve mutual understanding and establish peaceful and friendly relations among them.

The Iranian foreign minister said in October 2019 that he is ready to visit Saudi Arabia to help reduce tensions between Riyadh and Tehran if suitable conditions existed.

## ‘Bilateral relations will decide Khan's visit to India for SCO’: Pak sources

Agencies

Islamabad: A day after India said it will invite all SCO members for the upcoming 19th Shanghai Cooperation Organisations summit, Pakistan on Friday said that the country is waiting for an official invitation and indicated that the Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to the neighboring country will depend on bilateral relations between the two countries at that time.

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government sources said that Islamabad is committed to the SCO mechanism.

“Let the invite come at first, whenever the invite comes, we will consider that in lieu of the situation in Jammu and Kashmir and our bilateral relations with India, at that time. We reiterate once again, we are committed to the SCO mechanism,” said government sources on PM Imran Khan's participation at the SCO's Head of Government's summit in India.

India for the first time will host the next meeting of the SCO members states' heads of government later this year.

In June 2019, Prime Minister Modi and Khan attended the SCO summit in Bishkek.

During the summit, Modi made a veiled attack on Pakistan while addressing the plenary session, stating that the countries



which support and finance terrorism must be held accountable.

Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Raveesh Kumar, while addressing a weekly briefing on Thursday, said that all heads of the government of member states including Prime Minister Imran Khan will be invited as per the standard procedure.

The SCO is an intergovernmental organization founded in Shanghai. The SCO currently comprises eight Member States — China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, four Observer States interested in acceding to full membership — Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia — and six “Dialogue Partners” — Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Turkey.

## To Defuse Palm Row, Davos Diplomacy Likely Between India, Malaysia

Agencies

New Delhi: Trade ministers from India and Malaysia are likely to meet on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos next week amid a palm oil spat between the two countries, a Malaysian government spokesman told Reuters.

Hindu-majority India has repeatedly objected to Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad speaking out against its recent policies which critics say discriminate against Muslims.

Malaysia, a Muslim-majority nation, is the second-biggest producer and exporter of palm oil and India's restrictions on the refined variety of the commodity imposed last week have been seen as a retaliation for Mahathir's criticism of New Delhi's actions.

India's trade minister Piyush Goyal denied on Thursday that the government was trying to hit out at Malaysia in particular.

The row between the countries, nevertheless, pushed benchmark Malaysian palm

futures to its biggest weekly decline in more than 11 years on Friday.

No agenda has been set for the proposed meeting between Goyal and his Malaysian counterpart Darell Leiking on Friday, the spokesman for Malaysia's Ministry of International Trade and Industry said, adding that the request for a meeting had come from India.

An Indian government source said a meeting was indeed likely with Leiking. A spokeswoman for India's trade ministry did not respond to a request for comment.

Reuters reported on Thursday that Malaysia did not want to escalate the palm spat with India by talking of any retaliation for now, after Mahathir's media adviser called for tighter regulations on Indian expatriates and products. Malaysia instead wants to rely on diplomacy.

A separate Indian government source said it was important for New Delhi also to talk things out with Malaysia.

“We too have a lot to lose in Malaysia, there are 2 million Indian-origin people there,” the source said.

### NEWSMAKERS

## Why is moustache of US envoy to South Korea causing an uproar?

It has been more than three weeks since US President Donald Trump made a hopeful statement that North Korean Leader might send him a Christmas present that is not a nuclear launch. US ambassador to South Korea Harry Harris has expressed that he was surprised and but pleased that the ‘Christmas present’ was not given in light of stalled nuclear disarmament talks.



North Korea had warned that its Christmas gift to the US would depend on what action Washington took in the talks, leading to concerns that it might conduct a major weapons test. While North Korea refrained from conducting any nuclear tests, the US didn't meet a year-end deadline set by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to make economic concessions.

“You can say that I personally was surprised. But I'm glad also ... there was no Christmas gift, Ambassador Harry Harris

told reporters in Seoul. Washington was ready for any eventuality, and we were all glad that there was no ICBM test or nuclear test.” Harris also added that South Korean President Moon Jae-in and President Trump are keeping the door open to negotiations and hoping that Kim Jong Un will walk through that door.

Harris said Trump believes Kim will live up to the pledge he made during the Singapore summit in 2018, where he said he will work towards denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula and will work with the US to improve relations and build lasting peace.

Harris might be hopeful on the US and Jong Un resolving de-

nuclearisation and the sanctions issue, but, his moustache has come under the scanner.

Harris, born to an American father and Japanese mother, the former navy admiral has been called out as his facial hair is said to be insulting his hosts. The moustache sported by Harris reminds many South Koreans of the days the nation was under Japan's imperial rule. The moustache has become the object of resentment and ridicule among South Koreans.

Japan's colonisation of the Korean peninsula was one of its darkest times in its history. South Koreans hold a long-running animosity towards Japan. South Koreans recall that Japanese governors-general who ruled them from 1910 to 1945 wore moustaches. “My moustache, for some reason, has become a point of some fascination here,” said Harris and added that he has been ridiculed also for his Japanese-American ethnicity.

## Gandhi beyond Bharat Ratna: SC

New Delhi: The Supreme Court Friday refused to entertain a PIL seeking conferment of ‘Bharat Ratna’ on Mahatma Gandhi saying that people hold the father of the nation in “high esteem”, beyond any formal recognition.

A bench, comprising Chief Justice S A Bobde and justices B R Gavai and Surya Kant, however asked petitioner Anil Dutta Sharma to give representation to the central government in this regard.

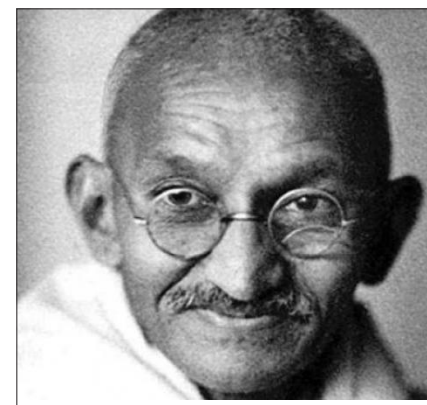
“Mahatma Gandhi is the father of nation and people hold him in high esteem, beyond any formal recognition,” the bench said.

The issue of directing the government to award Bharat Ratna to the father of the nation was not a “justiciable issue”, it said.

The bench however said that it agreed with the sentiments of the petitioner for granting official decoration to Mahatma Gandhi.

Disposing of the petition, the top court said, “We will allow you to give a representation to the Centre in this regard.”

Sharma, in his PIL, had sought a direction to the government to give “official decoration” to Mahatma Gandhi to honour him for the contribution to the nation.



“Mahatma Gandhi is the father of nation and people hold him in high esteem, beyond any formal recognition

## Deaf Man In New York Sues Porn Websites. Here's Why

New York: A deaf man in New York has filed a class action lawsuit against three pornographic websites on grounds he cannot enjoy their content fully without closed captions.

In a filing Thursday in Brooklyn federal court, Yaroslav Suris sued Pornhub, Redtube and YouPorn and their Canadian parent company MindGeek, arguing they violated an anti-discrimination law called the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Suris, who already sued Fox News over similar violations, named several racy-sounding videos that he said he wanted to watch in October and this month.

“Without closed captioning, deaf and hard of hearing people cannot enjoy video content on the defendants' websites while the general public can,” Suris wrote in his 23-page complaint.

Suris said he wants the porn sites to provide closed captioning and is also seeking undisclosed damages and interests.