



Niger stages historic elections despite jihadist bloody attacks

Catholics and evangelicals unite against Argentina's abortion bill

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NEW DELHI: A man sits in front of a mural representing a frontline warrior of the COVID-19, painted on a wall along the roadside yesterday. — AFP

World rocked by COVID, Trump, BLM

Brexit, Hong Kong clampdown, Beirut blast cast a long pall over 2020

PARIS: The COVID-19 pandemic cast a long pall over 2020 but it also saw President Donald Trump beaten by Joe Biden in a tumultuous US election and the Black Lives Matter movement shake the world. Here are some of the key events of the year:

Rampaging virus

On January 11, less than two weeks after it alerts a cluster of pneumonia cases "of unknown cause", Beijing announces its first death from an illness which will become known as COVID-19. By March a pandemic has been declared and a month later half of humanity is in lockdown as governments scramble to halt its spread. Massive state aid programs are rolled out to save jobs as the International Monetary Fund predicts recession, with the global economy shrinking by 4.4 percent. In November, drug companies announce positive results for several vaccines as a second wave of cases lashes the planet. Within a month, the first shots are being given but by Christmas some 1.7 million people are dead, with the US the worst hit.

Iranian roulette

The world holds its breath after top Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani is killed in a US drone strike in Iraq on January 3, days after pro-Iranian protesters storm the US embassy in Baghdad. Iran retaliates by launching a volley of missiles at bases in Iraq housing US troops. The same day, it shoots down a Ukrainian passenger plane "in error" shortly after take off from Tehran, killing all 176 people on board. Tensions mount again at the end of November when top Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh is assassinated, with Tehran blaming Israel.

Brexit endgame

Britain becomes the first country to leave the European Union on January 31 following its 2016 Brexit referendum. But crucial talks on future ties and trade with the bloc drag on for months, breaking deadline after deadline as negotiators try to avert a hard Brexit before a last-gasp deal on

Christmas Eve. While British Prime Minister Boris Johnson claims victory, Scotland's anti-Brexit leader Nicola Sturgeon says its future is "an independent, European nation".

US-Taleban accord

The US and the Taleban sign a deal in Doha on February 29, with all foreign forces to quit Afghanistan by May 2021 after nearly two decades of war. Talks between the Afghan government and insurgents start in September, but fighting rages on as the Taleban launch attack after attack and a string of civil society figures are assassinated. The Pentagon is due to pull 2,000 of 4,500 US soldiers out of the country by January 15, 2021.

George Floyd killed

The killing of George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American, by white police officers on May 25 in Minneapolis sparks protests across the US and inspires anti-racism rallies across the world. The Black Lives Matter movement leads to a major debate about race and the toppling of statues of figures linked to slavery or colonization.

Hong Kong clampdown

In June, a year after a massive wave of demonstrations, China imposes a sweeping new security law on Hong Kong that opponents say undermines the semi-autonomous city's liberties, promised under its handover from Britain in 1997. Pro-democracy lawmakers are ousted, harassed and arrested. In December, three prominent Hong Kong activists are jailed including Joshua Wong.

Thais rise up

Students spark pro-democracy protests in July that roll on for the rest of the year calling for a new constitution, reform of the untouchable monarchy, and for Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha to resign.

Beirut blast

A massive explosion on August 4 destroys

where our money is" to buy the vaccine and "this country has accepted", Rouhani said during a meeting of Iran's coronavirus task force, without identifying the country in question.

In theory, medicines are exempt from the sanctions, but in reality, international banks tend to turn down transactions involving Iran to avoid being exposed to potential litigation. The US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control had initially indicated that "it didn't have a problem" with such a transfer of funds, he said. But "it said later that the money had to first pass through a US bank before being transferred" for the vaccine purchase, Rouhani said.

In April, the Iranian president said the country had won a legal "victory" over \$1.6 billion of its assets that had long been frozen on a US request in Luxembourg. "Who can trust people like you?

much of Beirut's port and devastates swathes of the capital, killing more than 200 and injuring at least 6,500. The blast from a vast stockpile of ammonium nitrate fertilizer devastates an already teetering Lebanese economy and the credibility of its governing elite.

Fires and hurricanes

Enormous bushfires rage across Australia in what becomes known as its "Black Summer" while in September San Francisco and other regions of the American West Coast wake to orange skies as the state's largest ever inferno breaks out. In November, two hurricanes devastate Central America, leaving more than 200 dead.

The Navalny affair

Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny is flown to Berlin in a medically induced coma after becoming violently ill after he boarded an internal flight to Moscow. Tests reveal he was poisoned with the Soviet-era nerve agent Novichok. Navalny accuses Russian President Vladimir Putin of trying to kill him and later releases a recording where he appears to trick the alleged agent responsible into telling him the poison was put in his underpants.

Crisis in Belarus

Belarus strongman President Alexander Lukashenko's disputed victory in August 9 elections sparks four months of anti-government protests, centred on his main rival, political novice Svetlana Tikhonovskaya. Opposition leaders are jailed or driven into exile.

Israel's new friends

The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain normalize ties with Israel on September 15 as Palestinians condemn the move as a "stab in the back". The next month Donald Trump announces that Sudan is joining them, while in November unconfirmed reports of a secret trip to Saudi Arabia by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu sparks speculation that the kingdom is set to follow. In another twist, Morocco "resumed relations" with Israel on December 10 in return for the US recognizing its claim to Western Sahara.

China-US tensions

2020 sees US-China relations nosedive, with Trump calling COVID-19 the "China virus" and saying Beijing is responsible for "a mass worldwide killing". They also clash over the repression of Turkic speaking Uighur minority in the Chinese region of Xinjiang, as well as the national security law imposed on Hong Kong.

Biden beats Trump

Deeply-divided Americans vote in record numbers in the November presidential election between outgoing Republican Donald Trump and Democrat Joe Biden. After four days of nail biting, Biden takes the White House by seven million votes. Trump cries fraud without evidence and has yet to concede defeat.

Nagorno-Karabakh

Heavy fighting for the Armenian-populated region of Nagorno-Karabakh, which broke away from Azerbaijan after a war in the 1990s, goes on for 45 days. Several thousand die before a Kremlin-brokered peace deal on November 9, with Armenians losing swathes of territory to Azerbaijan forces.

Ethiopia: Tigray conflict

Ethiopian Prime Minister and Nobel Peace Prize winner Abiy Ahmed orders a military response to attacks on federal army camps in the dissident northern Tigray region. The Tigray People's Liberation Front - which has dominated Ethiopian politics for nearly three decades - denies responsibility and says the reported attacks are a pretext for an "invasion". Federal forces take the Tigrayan capital on November 28. — AFP

Iran says US wants vaccine payments to go via its banks

TEHRAN: President Hassan Rouhani said Saturday that Washington was demanding Iranian transactions for novel coronavirus vaccines pass through US banks, and expressed fear the money could be seized. US President Donald Trump has imposed wave after wave of sanctions on the Islamic republic since 2018, when he unilaterally withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal. Iran has assets frozen in several countries, including in the US. "We want to transfer money from a country

You have stolen our money everywhere you found it," Rouhani said Saturday, addressing the US administration. The Islamic republic has been battling the Middle East's deadliest outbreak of the novel coronavirus since February, with almost 1,195,000 cases and over 54,500 deaths, according to official figures.

Health Minister Saeed Namaki said early this month that Iran had "pre-purchased" about 16.8 million vaccine doses "via COVAX", without specifying which vaccine. COVAX is an international initiative that aims to ensure equitable access to coronavirus vaccines for all countries. The vaccine purchase "could be more costly and be delayed, but it will certainly happen", Rouhani said Saturday. Iran has also called for volunteers for the start of clinical trials for its own vaccine, which it began to develop in the spring, the health ministry said. — AFP



TEHRAN: Iranian President Hassan Rouhani chairs the weekly coronavirus taskforce meeting on Saturday. — AFP