

News in brief

◆ **The Taliban** administration will move ahead with plans to turn former foreign military bases into special economic zones for businesses, the acting deputy prime minister for economic affairs said in a statement on Sunday. The acting commerce minister had told Reuters in December that his ministry was working on the plan for former American bases and would submit it to both the economic committee led by acting deputy PM Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and to the cabinet for approval. "Following a thorough discussion, it was decided that the Ministry of Industry and Commerce should progressively take control of the remaining military bases of the foreign forces with the intention of converting them into special economic zones," Mullah Baradar said in the statement. He added a pilot plan would begin to convert bases in the capital Kabul and in northern Balkh province.



Taliban plans to turn former foreign bases into special economic zones

◆ **The United States** held joint air exercises bilaterally with South Korea and Japan involving strategic bombers on Sunday, a day after North Korea fired a Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) in a "sudden launching drill". South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said the exercise, in which South Korea's F-35A, F-15K and U.S. F-16 fighters escorted American B-1B bombers, demonstrated the allies' "overwhelming" defence capabilities and readiness posture. "(The exercise) strengthened the combined operation capability and affirmed the United States' ironclad commitment to the defence of the Korean Peninsula and the implementation of extended deterrence," the South's military said in a statement. Japan flew F-15s over the Sea of Japan with the U.S. Armed Forces' B-1 bombers and F-16s in tactical exercises, Japan's Defense Ministry said in a statement, calling the security environment "increasingly severe" after the latest North Korea missile landed within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

US stages joint air exercises with Asian allies after North Korea's ICBM launch



Saudi Arabia's foreign minister said consensus was building in the Arab world that isolating Syria was not working and that dialogue with Damascus was needed "at some point" to at least address humanitarian issues, including a return of refugees. "You will see not just among the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) but in the Arab world there is a consensus growing that the status quo is not workable," Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud said. The minister said without a path towards "maximalist goals" for a political solution, another approach was "being formulated" to address the issue of Syrian refugees in neighbouring states and suffering of civilians, especially after the devastating earthquake that hit Syria and Turkey.

Arab states need new Syria approach, Saudi minister says

CURIOSER & CURIOSER

Japan bids farewell to four pandas returning to China



Xiang Xiang was initially set to head to China in 2021

AFP | Tokyo

Thousands of Japanese fans yesterday bade farewell to four beloved pandas which will be returned to China this week, with some visitors shedding tears.

Visitors flocked to Tokyo's Ueno Zoo to catch a last glimpse of Xiang Xiang, who has been a massive draw for the park since her birth in 2017, and to a park in western Wakayama region for the other three pandas.

In Tokyo, the final viewing of Xiang Xiang, the zoo's first baby panda since 1988, was limited to 2,600 visitors who won a lucky lottery ticket, but some fans who did not win still came.

"I wanted to breathe the same air," as Xiang Xiang, Mari

Asai told the Asahi Shimbun daily.

"Even if I cannot see her, my heart is filled with joy knowing she's there," the 48-year-old said.

Another visitor told local media, crying, that she wanted to be closer to the five-year-old panda.

"Everything about her is adorable, whether sleeping or awake," she said.

Ueno Zoo receives calls and emails every day from panda fans asking it to keep Xiang Xiang, the Tokyo Shimbun daily reported, citing a zoo official.

The panda was initially set to head to China in 2021 but its departure was postponed multiple times due to travel restrictions linked to the pandemic.

Syrian baby born in earthquake adopted by aunt and uncle

● **Footage circulating widely on social media after the quake showed a rescuer scrambling down a hill of rubble carrying a tiny dust-covered baby**

Reuters | Jandaris

An infant child born in northern Syria during this month's devastating earthquake was reunited on Saturday with her aunt and uncle, after her parents and siblings died in the disaster.

Footage circulating widely on social media after the quake showed a rescuer scrambling down a hill of rubble carrying a tiny dust-covered baby.

The newborn was later identified as the child of Abdallah and Afraa Mleihan, who died in the earthquake along with their other children in the rebel-held town of Jandaris in Syria's Aleppo province.

The infant was treated in the Jihan Hospital further west in



Khalil Al-Sawadi, the uncle-by-marriage of a baby girl born during a deadly earthquake earlier this month, holds her and his own newborn daughter, in Jandaris, Syria

the Afrin district, also opposition-held, until medics could verify the identities of her relatives.

On Saturday, her paternal aunt Hala and uncle by marriage Khalil Al-Sawadi finally picked up their niece - whom they named Afraa, after her deceased mother.

"This girl means so much to us because there's no-one left of her family besides this baby. She'll be a memory for me, for her aunt and for all of our relatives in the village of her mother and father," Sawadi told Reuters.

He was carrying Afraa, wrapped in a pink blanket, in one arm and

his own newborn daughter Ataa, wrapped in blue, in the other. Ataa was born three days after the earthquake and Sawadi said he would raise them together.

"There were legal procedures to confirm the genetic relation, as well as a DNA test," he told Reuters.

More than 5,800 people have died across Syria as a result of the Feb. 6 earthquake, the bulk in the opposition-held north which had already suffered years of bombardment since conflict broke out in Syria in 2011.

The quake also left more than 39,000 dead in Turkey.

Jandaris, where Sawadi lives, is one of the hardest-hit towns in the rebel-held parts of the north. Other children have been left orphaned there by the quake, after surviving years of bombardment in the nearly 12-year war ravaging Syria.

Government-controlled cities have also been severely damaged. A woman gave birth to a child in the city of Aleppo during the earthquake and said he "brought her back to life."

Israel blames Iran for attack on oil tanker

Reuters | Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Sunday that Iran was responsible for a reported attack on an oil tanker last week.

An attack on the Liberian-flagged Campo Square was confirmed on Saturday by the ship's captain, who said it was lightly damaged by an airborne object on Feb. 10 while sailing through the Arabian Sea.

Shipping databases linked the tanker to Zodiac Maritime, which is controlled by Israeli shipping magnate Eyal Ofer.

"Last week Iran again attacked an oil tanker in the Persian Gulf and harmed



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

the international freedom of navigation," Netanyahu said at a weekly cabinet meeting.

Regional defence and security sources have said they suspected the assault was carried out by Iran, which did not comment on the incident.

Tehran has rejected accusations. British maritime security company Ambrey Intelligence said unmanned aerial systems had attacked two tankers and one bulk carrier in the Arabian Sea and assessed that Tehran had mounted the attack. Two of the merchant vessels were Israeli-owned and one was Emirati, it said.

Body of Ghana star Atsu killed in Turkey earthquake flown home

AFP | Accra

The remains of former Ghana international footballer Christian Atsu who died in a devastating earthquake in Turkey were being flown home yesterday, the country's foreign ministry said.

Atsu, 31, was caught up in a 7.8-magnitude quake that rocked Turkey and Syria on February 6, killing more than 44,000 people in both countries.

There were initial reports the former Chelsea and Newcastle player had been rescued a day after the quake, but these turned out to be false and his body was found on Saturday.

"The remains will be accompanied by his family and Ghana's ambassador to Turkey on a Turkish airlines flight and will arrive in Accra (Ghana's capital) at 7:40 p.m. Sunday," the foreign ministry



Christian Atsu

said. On Saturday, the ministry said that Atsu's older brother and twin sister were present at the site of the rescue when his body was recovered.

His widow Marie-Claire Rupio and their three children were in the stands at St James' Park on Saturday to join in a tribute to the player before Newcastle's Premier League match against Liverpool.

Office cake culture lives on in Britain

Reuters | London

When Katie Mulligan baked a beetroot cake for her colleagues at a London advertising agency, she was focused on getting the recipe right rather than whether it was acceptable to bring treats into the office.

But office cake culture has recently been challenged by the head of Britain's food regulator, Susan Jebb, who grabbed headlines last month by comparing it to passive smoking.

"I just don't think there's a real equivalence there," Mulligan, 30, said at her north London home. "With cakes, it's up to you whether you eat it."

With a passion to bake and cook, Mulligan says her cakes



British advertising strategist and baking enthusiast Katie Mulligan brings cake to the office to share with colleagues, in London, Britain

help colleagues beat the afternoon slump - and beetroot is a relatively healthy option.

Jebb, however, believes cakes in the office are an example of a society that is promoting unhealthy

food choices.

"If nobody brought in cakes into the office, I would not eat cakes in the day," Jebb told The Times newspaper.

"But because people do bring cakes in, I eat them. Now, OK, I have made a choice, but people were making a choice to go into a smoky pub."

Jebb, who was not speaking on behalf of the Food Standards Agency, made the comment days after parliament published a report that said 25.9% of adults in England were obese and a further 37.9% were overweight, citing a 2021 survey.

The United States ranked highest in the world for obesity levels with 43%, the report added cit-