

After France, UPI Services To Be Launched In Sri Lanka, Mauritius Today

A week after Unified Payments Interface (UPI) was launched in France, Sri Lanka and Mauritius are going to be the latest countries to enable the Indian digital payment system. RuPay cards will also be introduced in Mauritius today.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will join his Mauritius counterpart Pravind Jugnauth and Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe virtually to witness the launch event at 1 pm.

"Given India's robust cultural and people-to-people linkages with Sri Lanka and Mauritius, the launch will benefit a wide cross-section of people through a faster and seamless digital transaction experience and enhance digital connectivity between the countries," said his office. Indians visiting the two countries will be able to use UPI to make payments while Mauritian travellers to India will also be able to use it. The extension of RuPay services will also enable Mauritian banks to issue RuPay cards and use them for settlements in both India and Mauritius.

"India has emerged as a leader in Fintech innovation and Digital Public Infrastructure. Prime Minister has placed a strong emphasis on sharing our development experiences and innovation with partner countries," the government has said. UPI was launched at the Eiffel Tower in Paris on February 2 during the Republic Day reception, which the government had termed as part of PM Modi's "vision of taking UPI global". The UPI is a mobile-based payment system in India that allows round-the-clock payments via a virtual payment address. It powers multiple bank accounts into a single app and brings several banking features under one hood.

Ukraine Aid Package Clears Key Procedural Vote In US Senate



WASHINGTON: A sweeping US foreign aid package, including \$60 billion for Ukraine, passed a key procedural vote Sunday, although opposition from right-wing Republicans may block it from becoming law.

The \$95 billion package includes funding for Israel's fight against Hamas operations and for key strategic ally Taiwan, but the lion's share would help pro-Western Ukraine restock depleted ammunition supplies, weapons and other crucial needs as it enters a third year of war. The Senate, which has a very slim Democratic majority, voted 67-27 to break a procedural hold placed on the bill, making it almost certain it will pass a final simple-majority vote around mid-week.

It is unusual for the Senate to hold votes on the weekend, with Sunday's session also coinciding with the all-important NFL championship game. "I can't remember the last time the Senate was in session on Super Bowl Sunday, but as I've said all week long, we're

going to keep working on this bill until the job is done," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said before the vote. "As we speak, Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine has rendered parts of Eastern Europe a war zone the likes of which we have not seen in those regions since the Second World War," the New York senator said.

"The only right answer to this threat is for the Senate to face it down unflinchingly, by passing this bill as soon as we can." The aid had looked dead in the water after Republicans rejected an earlier version on Wednesday that also attached to it many of the US-Mexico border security measures they had spent months championing. Under pressure from ex-president Donald Trump, who is running for office again and wants to exploit Joe Biden's perceived weakness on immigration, Republicans instead appeared to decide that they would prefer stopping any border reforms until after November's election.

But Republican senators relented in a dramatic vote

Thursday after the Democrats decoupled the Ukraine aid from the border issue entirely. Border breakthrough goes bust

The two parties have been able to agree on little ahead of the elections. However, much of the dysfunction has been blamed directly on Trump, who looks almost certain to be the Republican standard-bearer in November despite losing the presidency to Biden in 2020 and being embroiled in multiple criminal charges.

Senate Republicans originally demanded border security as a condition for supporting pro-Western Ukraine as it battles the invasion launched by Putin in February 2022.

But Trump accuses Biden of failing to resolve the border issue, and has been loudly skeptical of Ukraine aid.

The hard-fought bipartisan compromise -- combining Ukraine and Israel funding with some of the toughest immigration curbs in decades -- was initially celebrated as a breakthrough on some of the most consequential issues facing the country.

However, the plan collapsed within days of its weekend release, as Trump warned lawmakers to reject it. Then in a campaign speech Saturday, he threatened to stop defending NATO countries that fall short of spending commitments, prompting Biden to slam his "appalling and dangerous" comments and warn that the Republican intends to give Putin "a green-light for more war and violence."

Israel Says 2 Hostages Rescued From Hamas Captivity In Gaza

JERUSALEM, UNDEFINED: The Israeli military announced early Monday that two hostages taken by Hamas during its October 7 attacks were rescued in an overnight operation in the southern Gaza city of Rafah.

The military said in a statement that "during a joint IDF (military), ISA (Shin Bet security agency), and Israel Police operation in Rafah, overnight, two Israeli hostages were rescued, Fernando Simon Marman (60) and Louis Har (70), who were kidnapped by the Hamas terrorist organization on October 7th from Kibbutz Nir Yitzhak".

"They are both in good medical condition, and were transferred for medical examination at the Sheba Tel Hashomer hospital," the statement added.

During the October 7 attacks, Palestinian militants seized about 250 hostages, according to an AFP tally based on official Israeli figures. Israel says around 130 are still in Gaza, but 29 are thought to be dead.

Israel responded to the attacks with a relentless offensive in Gaza, which the territory's health ministry says has killed at least 28,176 people, mostly women and children.

Dozens of captives taken on October 7 were released during a one-week truce in November that also saw the release of more than 200 Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails.

'I'm Singaporean': TikTok CEO Grilled By US Senator Repeatedly Over China Connections



TikTok's CEO Shou Chew recently appeared alongside the chief executives of technology companies including Meta, Snap and X to testify before American lawmakers over concerns about the harmful effects of social media on children. A viral video from the hearing shows Mr Chew being repeatedly asked by US Senator Tom Cotton about his nationality and possible affiliations to the Chinese Communist Party by Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark.

"You said today, as you often say, that you live in Singapore. Of what nation are you a citizen?" Senator Cotton asked.

Mr Chew affirmed that he is Singaporean and mentioned that Singapore does not allow its citizens to hold dual citizenship.

However, Mr Cotton pressed on, asking if Mr Chew was a citizen of any other nation and if he had ever applied for Chinese citizenship. Mr Chew responded no to both questions. Mr Cotton then asked if he had been a part of the Chinese Communist Party, Mr Chew said, "No Senator, again, I'm Singaporean."

During the hearing, Arkansas Republican Sen Tom Cotton questioned Mr Chew about his appointment as CEO coinciding with the Chinese Communist Party's acquisition of a 1 per cent stake in ByteDance's main Chinese subsidiary. Mr Chew dis-

missed any connection, stating, "It's a coincidence." Missouri Republican Sen. Josh Hawley pressed Chew on TikTok's links to China and its communist party. It was the first appearance by Mr Chew before lawmakers in the US since March, when the Chinese-owned short video app company faced harsh questions, including some suggesting the app was damaging children's mental health and that user data could be passed on to China's government.

CNN reported that the grilling was held at a dramatic Senate Judiciary Committee hearing of the CEOs of major tech companies, who faced intense scrutiny over the potential harms of their platforms on teens.

The video gathered an array of reactions from the netizens.

A user wrote, "Forced to

reiterate his Singaporean nationality multiple times, Chew defended TikTok's commitment to internet safety and its Project Texas initiative, emphasizing efforts to prevent foreign influences from affecting American creators' work."

"I can't believe that I'm siding with billionaires but not enough ppl are talking about this. Again nobody cares about blatant racism towards Asians cause its too normalized. did anyone notice that Shou Chew is the only one among the big CEOs who gets so much hate," another user wrote on X.

The third user commented, "I feel sorry for shou chew man like you're asking a Singaporean CEO questions about political leaders of other countries on an international platform when even official Singaporean reps can't answer to that?"

US Judge Orders Elon Musk To Answer To Regulators In X Probe

WASHINGTON, UNITED STATES: A US judge has ordered Elon Musk to comply with a subpoena to answer questions from regulators about his purchases of Twitter shares last year.

The order comes after Musk, who bequeathed his stake in Twitter -- now called X -- before buying the company for \$44 billion, did not show up for a scheduled deposition in September with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), according to a legal filing.

"The court grants the SEC's application to enforce the subpoena," the decision by California judge Laurel Beeler, published on Saturday and seen by AFP, stated.

The billionaire boss and the SEC now have a week to agree on a time and place for Musk to give testimony, it added.

The SEC investigation pertains to all of Musk's purchases of Twitter stock in 2022 as well as his statements and filings with market regulators, court documents stated.

Musk took part in two half-day depositions in July with the SEC, which told the court it has since received "thousands of documents" that have raised questions they want him to answer.

Musk's objections to the latest deposition included an accusation that the SEC is using its power to "harass" him, the commission said in the filing.

"The SEC has already taken Mr. Musk's testimony multiple times in this misguided investigation -- enough is enough," Musk attorney Alex Spiro said in reply to an AFP inquiry.

But the SEC had argued that "Musk's ongoing refusal to comply with the SEC's administrative subpoena is hindering and delaying the SEC staff's investigation to determine whether violations of the federal securities laws have occurred," according to court documents.

Musk's role at the social network has been marked by numerous controversies and led to various legal actions on the part of investors, former employees and companies that had contracts with Twitter. Shareholders, for example, have filed a lawsuit against Musk, accusing him of disclosing his five percent stake in Twitter too late, after the deadline set by the SEC.

What Happened In Pakistan's Disputed Election And What's Next

Pakistan went to the polls last week in an election that many thought would be a formality. Former cricket star Imran Khan was in jail, his party banned from running under its own banner or even using its famous cricket bat symbol. Analysts said the powerful military gave its blessing for the three-time former premier Nawaz Sharif - or anyone else other than Khan - to take power, and Sharif's return was the most likely outcome.

But in a surprise development, Khan loyalists - running as independents - thrived, winning the most seats of any group. Their against-the-odds performance highlighted voters' disillusionment with the status quo of Pakistan's politics, which is dominated by two family-controlled parties and, analysts say, the powerful military. It was also a triumph for democracy, leaders from Khan's party said, as the people of Pakistan demanded to be heard.

But even though candidates from Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party, or PTI, won the most seats, they may not form a gov-



ernment. That's because they don't have a simple majority, and the two other main parties may join forces. Khan supporters, who argue authorities are attempting to influence the outcome, took to the streets Sunday but not in large numbers, deterred by a heavy police presence.

Here's what you need to know about the historic election.

Which party won? Independents, the vast majority of whom are Imran Khan loyalists, took 101 of the 265 contested lower-house seats. Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz won 75, while Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's

Pakistan Peoples Party got 54.

All parties fell short of a simple majority of 133 seats. That is not surprising. Since military rule ended in 2006, no single party has won an outright majority.

What happened next? The Sharif and Bhutto parties held talks on joining forces, a move that analysts say is likely backed by the military, but they haven't yet reached an agreement yet.

Meanwhile, Khan's PTI has been complaining about the results, which it claims are being manipulated. It wants more transparency on the count. The US, European Union and UK

have expressed similar concerns, while Pakistan's foreign ministry disagrees.

What's likely to come now?

The most likely scenario is Sharif's party will broker a deal with Bhutto Zardari's PPP. Both parties could then attract other parties to the coalition and even some of the Khan-backed candidates. Sharif, or his brother, Shehbaz, would probably then become prime minister again.

Let's not forget that despite the Sharif and Bhutto clans' public opposition to each other, they formed a government together after Khan's ouster in April 2022.

It's unlikely, but not out of the question, that Bhutto Zardari, the son of assassinated former premier Benazir Bhutto, could end up negotiating to lead any coalition. He has some leverage, and at 35, he argues that he represents a fresh face in a country where more than 60% of the population is under 30.

It's harder to see a scenario where Khan's PTI forms a government given the military's opposition to it, analysts say.

US President Joe Biden Joins TikTok Ahead Of 2024 Election

WASHINGTON, UNITED: US President Joe Biden belatedly joined TikTok on Sunday, marking his debut on the social media platform with a 26-second video.

The move comes after fierce US government criticism of the video-sharing platform in recent years, most notably from Republicans but also from the Biden administration.

TikTok is owned by Chinese firm ByteDance and has been accused by a wide swath of US politicians of being a propaganda tool used by Beijing, something the company furiously denies.

In Sunday's video posted on the @bidenhq campaign account, the 81-year-old Democratic president touches light-heartedly on topics ranging from politics to the NFL championship game.

Asked his preference between the Super Bowl or its famed half-time show, this year headlined by singer Usher, he picks watching the actual game itself.

Queried if there's a secret plot to rig the game so that pop star Taylor Swift -- who is dating Kansas City



chiefs star Travis Kelce -- could use her fame to endorse Biden, the president jokingly leans into the unfounded right-wing conspiracy theory.

"I'd get in trouble if I told you," he says.

Citing security concerns, a slew of individual states and the federal government have banned the app on official government devices.

In Montana, a state government move to completely ban the app was recently blocked by a judge.

While the platform remains scrutinized by Washington, further federal action to ban or curtail use

of the app appears to no longer be in motion.

"It seems now like the idea of a ban was being pushed more so to make political points and less as a serious effort to legislate," David Greene, a civil liberties attorney, recently told British newspaper The Guardian.

As the election approaches, the platform provides a conduit to young voters.

Sunday's video ends with the president being asked who he prefers: himself or Republican frontrunner Donald Trump.

"Are you kidding?" he laughs. "Biden."

Bilawal Bhutto, Shehbaz Sharif Agree To 'Save Pak' After Shock Results

LAHORE: Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari and PPP President Asif Ali Zardari held a meeting with Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) President Shehbaz Sharif on Sunday. The two parties have agreed "in principle to save the country from political instability."

The leaders of two parties spoke about the overall situation of the country and political cooperation in the future, according to the statement released by PML-N President on X. Shehbaz Sharif and Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari agreed to cooperate politically to bring the nation to political stability. According to the statement, PPP leadership will put forward the proposals of PML-N in the Central Executive Committee meeting. The majority of the people have given us a mandate; we will not disappoint the people, expressed the opinion of the leaders. The PML-N delegation includes Azam Nazir Tarar, Ayaz Sadiq, Ahsan Iqbal, Rana Tanveer, Khawaja Saad Rafiq, Malik Ahmad Khan, Marriyum Aurangzeb and Shaza Fatima," it added.

Meanwhile, Secretariat of the PPP Chairman stated that it was the PPP's first meeting with PML-N over the government's formation. The two parties discussed government formation. In a post on X, Secretariat of the PPP Chairman stated, "LaHore: First official contact of Pakistan Muslim League-N with the leadership of Pakistan Peoples Party for government formation. PML-N President Mian Shabbaz Sharif reached Bilawal House to seek cooperation from the Pakistan Peoples Party in government formation.

cooperation in the future were discussed in detail. Lahore: The leaders agreed to cooperate politically to bring the country to political stability."

"The leaders of both parties agreed in principle to save the country from political instability. In the meeting, both parties consulted on the situation and discussed the proposals. PPP leadership will put forward the proposals of PML-N in the Central Executive Committee meeting. The majority of the people have given us a mandate; we will not disappoint the people, expressed the opinion of the leaders. The PML-N delegation includes Azam Nazir Tarar, Ayaz Sadiq, Ahsan Iqbal, Rana Tanveer, Khawaja Saad Rafiq, Malik Ahmad Khan, Marriyum Aurangzeb and Shaza Fatima," it added.

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Maldives Key Partner In Ensuring Free, Secure Indo-Pacific Region: US



JAKARTA: At an Indonesian presidential campaign event, 22-year-old voter Irene Putri Aisyah was busy uploading everything she saw - from cute dances to cooking demonstrations - to short video app TikTok.

To court young voters like Irene, all three candidates in the Feb. 14 race to lead Indonesia have gravitated toward TikTok, which has 125 million users in the country, second only to the United States.

But experts say the platform is also flooded with problematic content that attempts to manipulate young voters, who make up over half of about 205 million registered voters in the country.

In this new online battle-

ground, Prabowo Subianto, a once-feared military man, has rebranded himself as a cuddly statesman. Videos of his awkward dance moves, reminiscent of local martial arts, have got millions of views, inspiring others to mimic him.

When the frontrunner faced stinging barbs from rivals in a televised debate, women supporters shared videos of themselves crying for Prabowo.

Rivals Anies Baswedan and Ganjar Pranowo have also ramped up their presence on the app, answering questions in real-time during livestreamed sessions or sharing videos of heartfelt encounters with voters.

"TikTok is the most appealing app for first-time

voters, so it does have a big influence as a platform to campaign and propagate election-related information," said Anita Wahid, a researcher who has worked with TikTok on issues related to online trust and safety.

Enduring Popularity During the campaign period, TikTok became

Indonesians' second-most used source of information on politics, after television, according to a January survey by pollster Indikator Politik Indonesia.

"We can easily find information about Prabowo on TikTok," voter Irene said.

But experts have flagged some of this information may be incorrect.

Endah Triastuti, a communications researcher at the University of Indonesia, says that because of such content, many young voters may not be aware that Prabowo has been forced to deny allegations of human rights abuses during his time as special forces commander.

Manipulated images and 'deepfake' videos of the candidates have also circulated widely.

TikTok says on its website its policy is to remove "harmful misinformation" and work with fact-checkers to flag or debunk it.

5-Year-Old Boy, Man Injured After Armed Woman Opens Fire At Church In US

HOUSTON: Two people including a five-year-old boy were wounded after a woman opened fire at celebrity US pastor Joel Osteen's megachurch in Houston, Texas, one of the largest religious venues in the United States, police said Sunday.

The woman was armed with a long gun when she entered the non-denominational Christian church with a child just before 2:00 pm (2000 GMT), Houston police chief Troy Finner told a press conference.

Arriving at the church, housed in a converted former sports arena which can seat some 16,800 people, she began to fire, Finner said -- but off-duty police officers working security at the venue quickly shot back and she was killed.

A "five-year-old kid was hit and is in critical condition at our local hospital," Finner said, while a man in his 50s "who didn't have anything to do with it, I don't think" is being treated for a gunshot wound to the leg.

"When I entered the sanctuary I saw people running and saying: they are shooting, they are shooting, and we could hear gunshots," one witness told local television station KHOU.

"We tried to open some doors in the hallway but they were locked. Some people went out to get to their cars, but others like me did not know where to go."

A church volunteer hid them in the bathroom, piling furniture up against the doors and warning them not to move, she said. "There were children on the third and fourth floors, the parents were worried about the children. We put things in God's hands," she added.

Mass shootings are common in the United States, where there are more guns than people and about a third of adults own a firearm. Polls show a majority of Americans favor stricter gun regulations, but the powerful gun lobby and mobilized voters supporting the country's culture of strong gun rights have repeatedly stymied lawmakers from taking action.

Osteen, whose services are broadcast live to millions weekly and who has largely sought to keep his church apolitical, said he was "devastated" by the attack, and described himself as "kind of in a fog." The shooting began between services, just before the start of a Spanish-language service, the 60-year-old said, adding: "I can only imagine if it would have happened during the 11 o'clock service... we thank God for that."

"We don't understand why these things happen, but we know God's in control... There are forces of evil but the forces that are for us, the forces of God, are stronger than that," he told a press conference, adding that he would pray for the victims as well as the shooter.