



Finance Minister-designate pledges to stick with IMF programme

Page 2

2 arrested, shops closed down at Agbogbloshie market over Clean Ghana Campaign

Page 3



15% tariff increase has saved MTN from collapsing - CEO

Page 10

Borteyman Sports Complex to be converted to University of Sport for Dev't - Sports Minister

Page 7



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General News

School building in Eastern Region collapses on 4 students, teacher and 3 others

A school building collapse in the Upper West Akim District of the Eastern Region has left eight individuals, including four basic school pupils and a teacher, in critical condition. The incident transpired during the Domeabra Zonal Inter-School Sports event on Wednesday, February 14, 2024.

The victims, which also comprise three community members present at the tournament, are currently undergoing treatment at the Adeiso District Hospital.

Zonal Vice Chairman, John Priestly Badu, verified the occurrence, explaining that the event was happening at the Sukrung Awemfi D/A Primary School grounds.

Seeking shelter from the rain in the dilapidated school building, participants faced a tragic situation when three classrooms, housing classes one to three, collapsed around 4:30 pm, trapping those inside.

Bystanders promptly rescued the victims, rushing them to the hospital for medical attention. The

Gyasehene, Edward Kotey, and Mbrantihene Edem Atiemo have visited the victims at the health

centre.

Source: The Independent Ghana / Andy Ogbarmey-Tetty



File Photo

Finance Minister-designate pledges to stick with IMF programme

Finance Minister-designate Dr. Mohammed Amin Adam has restated the government's commitment to the current programme with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

He has assured that there will be no deviation from the existing trajectory.

Following a ministerial reshuffle, Dr. Amin Adam, assuming the role of Finance Minister, underscored the importance of maintaining continuity in collaboration with the IMF.

"If you look at the budget that was presented this year, there were a number of pro-poor initiatives, and I do not intend to depart from those pro-poor initiatives," stated Dr. Amin Adam.

"And I will ensure that business follows as usual as it should. We will make sure that we move faster to implement the tax reliefs that were made in the budget, and I am going to make sure the poor are insulated," he said in an interview on Citi FM.

Highlighting the importance of adherence to the IMF programme, Dr. Amin Adam said, "It is important to note that we are under an IMF programme, and I want to assure the IMF and the business community that I will ensure that the programme

remains on track. I will work to ensure that the programme does not suffer."

The ongoing programme signifies a strategic partnership aimed at addressing economic challenges and promoting fiscal responsibility in Ghana.

Background

On Wednesday, President Akufo-Addo relieved 13 ministers and 10 deputies of their duties with immediate effect, in a massive

government shake-up.

Ministers affected are Finance Minister Ken Ofori-Atta, Interior Minister Ambrose Dery, Health Minister Kwaku Agyemang Manu, Environment, Science, and Technology Minister Dr Kwaku Afriyie, Information Minister Kojo Oppong-Nkrumah, and Roads and Highways Minister Kwasi, Amoako-Atta.

The rest are Works and Housing Minister Francis Asenso-Boakyee;

Gender, Children, and Social Protection Minister Lariba Abudu; Local Government, Decentralisation, and Rural Minister Dan Botwe; Sanitation and Water Resources Minister Freda Prempeh; Tourism, Arts, and Culture Minister Ibrahim Ahmed Awal; Greater Accra Regional Minister Henry Quartey; and Oti Regional Minister Joseph Makubu.

Source: The Independent Ghana / Abigail Twumwaa Ampofo



Dr. Mohammed Amin Adam, Finance Minister

General News

Injunction against NPP Asante Mampong constituency primary dismissed by court

The New Patriotic Party (NPP) has set a new date, February 17, for the parliamentary primary in the Asante Mampong constituency following the Court of Appeal's dismissal of an interlocutory injunction.

Plaintiffs, led by Kofi Sarpong, contested the January 27 primary, objecting to the use of the current voter album for the elections. On February 14, a three-member panel, led by Justice Georgina Mensah-Datsa, rejected the application.

Confirming the court's decision, NPP's Mampong Constituency Secretary, Alhaji Agyei Malik, stated that the party has informed all relevant stakeholders about the

rescheduled primary. Mr. Malik emphasized the importance of party unity, urging collaboration between both sides.

"The case was dismissed by the court because the plaintiffs did not produce enough evidence... The party has set 17 February for the conduct of the elections... All relevant stakeholders, including polling station executives, have been duly informed," said Mr. Malik.

"We believe that this is not a win for certain people and vanquish for others... The onus lies on those people claiming victory to extend an olive hand to the other side and bring them on board," he added.

However, Emmanuel Osei Abu-Bonsra, counsel for the plaintiffs, expressed dissatisfaction with the ruling, hinting at the possibility of an appeal. He remarked, "I am not satisfied with the ruling, but I

respect the decision of the court... We have not exhausted all available channels yet."

Source: The Independent Ghana / Phoebe Martekie Doku



File Photo

2 arrested, shops closed down at Agbogbloshie market over Clean Ghana Campaign

The Clean Ghana campaign has taken action at the Agbogbloshie market in Accra, making two arrests and shutting down several shops due to unsanitary conditions.

The campaign's task force specifically targeted corn milling operations to ensure they were following regulations.

The team found that a significant number of people were not complying with the regulations, leading to the closure of many shops. This action highlights the campaign's commitment to improving sanitation and hygiene standards in Ghana.

"Last year, we were here, we took some action, so we are coming to see whether the people have complied. But unfortunately, when we came, it was just a handful that complied. We were compelled to lock four shops, arrested two people and served seven notices."

An Environmental Health Officer at the Accra Metropolitan Assembly, Florence Kuukyi, stated that those arrested during the inspection

would be processed for court.

She mentioned that the individuals arrested had previously been warned by the court but had failed to comply with the directives.

"After the closure and arrest, we will process them for court. We are

now going to apply for a summon because it is late, and we can't take them to court now."

"Those that we arrested, they are not the owners of the property. So we have arrested them to get the owners of the property. As we

have locked it, the real owners will come. So when the real owners come, we will get them and process them for court," she said.

Source: The Independent Ghana / Amanda Cartey



File Photo

General News

Gov't builds 16-unit housing bungalows for senior public officials

The Ministry of Works and Housing in a joint venture with the State Housing Cooperation (SHC) has successfully completed the construction of a 16-unit detached and semi-detached housing bungalow.

This exclusive accommodation is specifically designated for senior public officials, including court justices, ministers of State, and chief directors.

Situated on an expansive acre and a half in Ridge, Accra, the housing project represents a redevelopment initiative, transforming a previous three-unit structure on the same acre of land into a modern complex capable of housing 16 distinct families.

Mr. Francis Asenso-Boakye, the Minister of Works and Housing, expressed satisfaction during his inspection of the project, highlighting the Ministry's

commitment to optimising land use in various locations, including the airport residential area, Labone, Roman Ridge, Lartehbiokorshie, and Cantonments.

Pleased with the project's 95 percent completion status and the well-planned layouts of the bungalow, Minister Asenso-Boakye commended the use of plantation demarcation for the units, expressing a desire for broader adoption of such practices.

"It is one of the residential accommodations we provide for public servants, and I am thrilled that they used plantation to demarcate the units. I wish we could all learn from it," Minister Asenso-Boakye stated.

Emphasising the strategic location of the bungalow in close proximity to the offices of senior public officials, Asenso-Boakye

highlighted the convenience it offers, ensuring timely arrivals for work.

In a gesture of recognition for exemplary service, the Minister announced that the bungalow would be named after Mr. Hackman Owusu-Agyemang, honouring his outstanding contributions during his tenure as Minister of Water Resources, Works, and Housing.

Mr. Kwabena Ampofo Appiah,

the Managing Director of SHC, revealed that the Company had incorporated provisions allowing occupants to install air conditioning and satellite television without additional structural modifications.

This forward-thinking approach aims to maintain the bungalow in optimal condition for an extended period.

Source: The Independent Ghana / Sebastian Akaho-Tay



File Photo

Wrong timing - Kwadwo Mpiani reacts to Akufo-Addo's reshuffle

Former Chief of Staff during the Kufuor administration, Kwadwo Mpiani, has voiced apprehensions regarding the timing of President Akufo-Addo's recent ministerial reshuffle, occurring just ten months before a general election.

Speaking in an interview, Mr Mpiani expressed reservations, noting that while the President holds the prerogative to effect such changes, the proximity to the upcoming elections raises questions about the efficacy and ramifications of the reshuffle.

Mpiani, who held a pivotal role in the Kufuor administration, acknowledged the President's authority to reshuffle the cabinet based on performance evaluations. However, he questioned the appropriateness of implementing such changes mere months ahead of the general elections.

"I don't have a reaction to the ministerial reshuffle because it

is the President's prerogative. He works with the Ministers and the deputy ministers and he should be able to determine who is working well or otherwise.

"But I think that eight months to an election will not have any effect on the direction of government. So I think the timing is the problem, otherwise, it is his prerogative to do a reshuffle as he sees fit," he stated on Wednesday.

He further expressed concerns about the learning curve for the newly appointed ministers, emphasizing that the timeframe is insufficient for them to grasp the intricacies of their ministries adequately.

"Some of these appointees are completely new. How are they going to learn and know what goes on in the Ministries to enable them to direct the ministries as expected of them?" he questioned.

"So what do you want to achieve?

It is too close to the election, and I don't believe they can effect any massive change," he asserted to host Evans Mensah.

Mpiani's remarks align him with a chorus of influential voices in the country who have criticized the timing of the reshuffle, deeming it belated.

On Valentine's Day morning, President Akufo-Addo announced his inaugural significant ministerial reshuffle, impacting approximately 12 current ministers of state, including 10 cabinet ministers and two regional ministers.

Notable ministers, including Ken Ofori-Atta and Kwaku Agyeman Manu, lost their positions entirely - Finance and Health Ministers respectively.

One of the headline changes in this Valentine's Day ministerial shuffle is the replacement of the controversial Finance Minister,

Ken Ofori-Atta. Ofori-Atta, who has faced criticism from within his party's ranks, is set to be replaced by Dr. Mohammed Adam Amin Anta, MP for Karaga and a seasoned technocrat with extensive experience in the financial sector.

Another notable appointment is that of Lydia Alhassan, Member of Parliament for Ayawaso West Wuogon, who will take over as the new Minister of Sanitation and Water Resources after going through and passing the vetting process. She replaces Freda Prempeh and will be tasked with addressing key challenges in sanitation and water provision, previously overseen by Cecilia Abena Dapaah.

The reshuffle also includes Andrew Agyepa Mercer, the Deputy Minister of Energy and MP for Sekondi, who will assume the role of Minister of Tourism. Mercer's appointment is seen as a positive

General News

Wrong timing - Kwadwo Mpiani reacts to Akufo-Addo's reshuffle

Continued from page 4

step towards promoting Ghana as a top tourist destination and boosting the tourism sector.

Henry Quartey, a respected figure in the government, has been designated as the Interior Minister Designate, responsible for maintaining internal security and safeguarding the nation's borders. He replaces Ambrose Dery, who decided not to stand for re-election.

Other key appointments include Ophelia Hayford Mensah as the Minister for Environment Science, Technology, and Innovation, Fatimatu Abubakar as the Information Minister, and Francis Asenso Boakye as the Roads and Highways Minister.

Source: *The Independent Ghana* / *Jessie Ola-Morris*



President Akufo-Addo on the left, Kwadwo Mpiani, Former Chief of Staff on the right

Chief State Attorney disbarred by GLC for accepting GHC400,000 'bribe' from Woyome

Chief State Attorney Samuel Nerquaye-Tetteh is facing significant repercussions from the General Legal Council (GLC) for professional misconduct in handling a case involving businessman Alfred Agbesi Woyome.

The GLC, Ghana's regulatory body overseeing the legal profession, has decided to disbar Nerquaye-Tetteh after finding him guilty under Rule 2(2) of the Legal Profession (Professional Conduct and Etiquette) Rules, 1969 (L.I. 613).

This decision effectively bars Nerquaye-Tetteh from practicing law in Ghana for the remainder of his career.

The disciplinary action originates from a 2011 incident when Nerquaye-Tetteh, while representing the state in a lawsuit filed by Alfred Agbesi Woyome, personally arranged for the transfer of GHs400,000 from Woyome to his wife's bank account.

The GLC noted that Nerquaye-Tetteh failed to provide a reasonable explanation for this transfer, leading to allegations of professional misconduct.

In a notice dated January 31, 2024, the GLC outlined the details of the case, emphasizing the adverse impact of Nerquaye-Tetteh's actions on the dignity and reputation of the legal profession.

The notice officially disbars Nerquaye-Tetteh from practicing law and prohibits him from presenting himself as a lawyer or offering legal services to the public.

This withdrawal of Nerquaye-Tetteh's practising licence

underscores the gravity of the misconduct and reflects the council's commitment to upholding professional standards in the legal profession.

The case involving Nerquaye-Tetteh serves as a stark reminder of the importance of ethical

conduct and accountability among legal practitioners, underscoring the consequences of breaching professional standards.

Source: *The Independent Ghana* / *Phoebe Martekie Doku*



Samuel Nerquaye-Tetteh, Chief State Attorney

General News

Defreeze our salaries by Friday or blame yourself for what comes next - NAGRAT warns Special Prosecutor

The National Association of Graduate Teachers (NAGRAT) has issued a two-day ultimatum to the Office of the Special Prosecutor (OSP) to release the salaries of some teachers by Friday, February 16, 2024, or face their wrath.

The Association claimed that the OSP had withheld the salaries of over 400 teachers.

The OSP stated that they are investigating ghost names on the government's payroll, which is their justification for withholding the salaries.

However, NAGRAT President Angel Carbonu argued that this is not sufficient justification for

withholding their salaries.

"When you're auditing somebody, until the audit is completed and you have conclusively arrived indicating that A, B and C are not qualified to earn a salary, you don't go ahead to inflict perjury."

Speaking to the media on Wednesday, February 14, 2024, NAGRAT President Angel Carbonu warned that the association would be forced to resort to other measures if the Office of the Special Prosecutor fails to release the withheld salaries by Friday, February 16, 2024.

"He [Special Prosecutor] has not finished prosecuting people who have been given bribes in elections

and things like that, it is not poor teachers that he is coming to zero in on," he said.

"If he does not defreeze the salaries by Friday, he will have to

be blamed for whatever happens after Friday," he added.

Source: The Independent Ghana / Andy Ogbarmey-Tettey



Angel Carbonu, NAGRAT President

PAC reprimands UG over repeated procurement breaches

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of Parliament has issued a stern warning to the University of Ghana following repeated breaches of required procurement processes in its projects.

The warning came during a PAC sitting on Wednesday, February 14, 2024, where concerns were raised over the university's continuous flouting of procurement regulations highlighted by auditors.

Chairman of the Committee, James Klutse Avedzi, expressed his disappointment at the university's persistent violations despite assurances made during previous appearances before the PAC.

"You have been appearing here, and this issue has been coming up. You always promise that you will not do it again, but you are still committing the same crime," remarked Klutse Avedzi.

In response, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana, Prof. Nana Aba Appiah Amfo, acknowledged the challenges faced by the institution and outlined measures being taken to rectify the situation.

Prof. Amfo attributed the breaches to structural issues within the university and inadequate procurement resources, which the university is actively addressing.

"The challenge has to do with the nature of our business, our institution, and also the complexities because we operate in four colleges and the central administration," stated Prof. Amfo.

She further elaborated on efforts to enhance procurement resources, including the appointment of procurement officers across all colleges and improvements in resource allocation for procurement functions.

The PAC also summoned representatives from the University of Professional Studies, Accra, and the University of Media, Arts, and Communication to

address irregularities identified in their accounts by the Auditor General.

The repeated admonition from the PAC underscores the seriousness of the procurement breaches and the need for swift corrective action by the University of Ghana.

Source: The Independent Ghana / Jessie Ola-Morris



James Klutse Avedzi, Chairman, PAC Committee

General News

Love Project gives new life to school library in Afiénya

The Love Project, a non-profit organization, in a remarkable initiative, has revitalized the library at the Mante School of Excellence in Afiénya.

The once dilapidated space has undergone a major makeover, now featuring new books, furniture, and improved air conditioning.

The Love Project, dedicated to fostering reading and learning in underprivileged communities, chose the Mante School of Excellence as one of its beneficiaries.

Rebecca Lamptey, co-founder of the Love Project, sharing the genesis of the project during the unveiling of the first phase in December last year, said that their decision was birthed from their bi-annual trips to the school to provide career guidance and counseling to students.

"We identified Mante School of Excellence, and decided that we would be coming here at least twice a year, speak with them, do some career guidance and counselling with the JSS 2-3 students, so that at least they are sort of exposed to the many opportunities out there. Along the line, through our interactions, we realized that they were quite limited in what they knew, especially with exposure. They were very limited with exposure, and we had to think through how we could help bridge that gap. Books expose you to the whole world, a whole new world that you otherwise would not have

known. So we decided to help them with their library and try and set it up for them," she said.

The Love Project collaborated with friends and supporters who generously donated books and funds for the library's renovation. The project received support from the Ghana Library Authority, Akenkan Bookstore, Beulahland Floral Products and Services, and SkodPro, which provided expertise in fabricating the furniture in the library.

Sally Aryee-Atta, a volunteer and educationist, expressed her happiness in being part of the project, emphasizing her belief in the power of reading.

"I have been reading since I was a child, and it took me far. We have come to dedicate a beautiful library filled with books. And these books have been dedicated by friends and loved ones, all part of the Love Project," she stated.

George Tawiah Mante, the headmaster of the Mante School of Excellence, expressed gratitude for the transformation, emphasizing the positive impact on students' knowledge and learning.

"..they changed the face of our library into what we're seeing today. We're saying we're very grateful for all the partners and people who spent their money, their time, and their energies to bring this library to the state it has today. It has changed the face of our school and I believe that this school will have a lot of benefits

from it and also other people who will come into the library, they will increase their knowledge in reading and learning."

A few months after the first phase was completed, the Love Project returned to the school on Valentine's Day 2024 to finish what they had started by providing louvre blades for the windows, tables, and chairs so that students could have a comfortable place to sit and use the library facility.

Students and teachers expressed their appreciation to the organisers of the project. Ibrahim Rashidat, the school prefect, promised the students will efficiently use the facility to improve their reading and vocabulary, thanking the Love Project for their generosity.

"We really want to say thank you. We really appreciate it. We also promise that we will visit this

place and improve our reading and vocabulary. Thank you for everything," she said with a smile.

Araba Abaidoo, a Love Project member, highlighted the essential role of reading for children and its impact on building vocabulary and exposure to new ideas.

Edwin Dawutey, a teacher, expressed his excitement about the project, foreseeing a positive impact on students' reading habits for generations to come.

The Love Project, having now completed this transformative initiative, aims to extend its impact to other schools and communities in need.

They invite more individuals to join their cause and share the love for reading and learning.

Source: The Independent Ghana



Photo credit: Obed Afari Kumi

Borteyman Sports Complex to be converted to University of Sport for Dev't - Sports Minister

Minister of Youth and Sports, Mustapha Ussif, has revealed the government's plans to transform the Borteyman Sports Complex into the University of Sport for Development after the 2024 Africa Games.

Speaking during the commissioning of the multipurpose sports complex, on February 5, 2024, in Accra, Mr Ussif mentioned the "government's long-term

vision of transforming the entire infrastructure here at Borteyman into a University of Sport for Development."

Emphasising the advantages of this modern sports facility, he stressed that it would become a hub of excellence, fostering the growth of young talents and hosting international competitions.

"The construction of state-of-the-art sports facilities in the country not only provides a

platform for athletic excellence but also contributes to the overall infrastructure development, leaving a legacy for generations to come.

"After Accra 2023, these facilities will serve as centres of excellence, nurturing budding talents, and providing a platform for international competitions," he said during the commissioning of the Sports Complex on February 13, 2024.

Borteyman Sports Complex boasts four domes, comprising a temporary 500-seater dome for handball, a 1,000-seater aquatic complex, a multipurpose sports hall accommodating 1,000 spectators, and a tennis centre also seating 1,000.

During the upcoming 13th African Games hosted in Ghana, the Sports Complex is set to accommodate seven competitions: table tennis, handball, tennis, volleyball,

Continued on page 8

General News

Borteyman Sports Complex to be converted to University of Sport for Dev't - Sports Minister

Continued from page 7

swimming, badminton, and the triathlon.

Scheduled to commence on March 8 and conclude on March 23, 2024, the African Games will showcase the capabilities of this state-of-the-art facility.

The stadium covers a 150-acre land and has facilities for seven competitive sports, including table tennis, handball, tennis, volleyball, swimming, badminton, and triathlon

Four of these events will also serve

as qualifiers for the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, France.

The stadium is part of the government's commitment to sports development and infrastructure in the country

It is expected to host thousands

of athletes, officials, journalists, and fans from across Africa and beyond during the Games.

Source: *The Independent Ghana* / Abigail Twumwaa Ampofo



Borteyman Sports Complex



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Business

15% tariff increase has saved MTN from collapsing - CEO

Chief Executive of MTN Ghana, Selorm Adadevoh, has justified the recent 15% increase in tariffs for all its products and services, emphasising the necessity to safeguard the company's viability.

Engaging the media, Adadevoh explained that the decision to raise tariffs was driven by the company's need to share the increasing cost burden with subscribers after absorbing escalating costs for several years.

Adadevoh pointed out the impact of rising macro-economic conditions in the country, asserting, "MTN, for instance, was exposed to inflation pressures of more than 40% on average in 2023.

"We had gotten to the point where all our cost inputs have gone up significantly, and we have to find ways to share this cost with our subscribers", Selorm Adadevoh stated.

He highlighted that despite the 15% tariff increase, the company was absorbing a significant

portion (25%) of the cost.

"MTN for instance was exposed to inflation pressures of more than 40% on average in 2023. But your price increase was 15%, that is absorbing 25% of the cost.

"If you look at MTN records over 7 to 10 years, you acknowledge that there has not been any increase in prices in those periods", he added. The review encompassed two main changes, including the statutory 2.5 percentage point increase in VAT from 12.5% to 15% across all services, impacting both prepaid and postpaid customers.

Additionally, MTN Ghana proceeded with a 15% average upward review of its mobile data tariffs, affecting both pay monthly and pay-as-you-go users.

"So we think that it's very unfair, to say that MTN has not absorbed some of the cost, when it comes to our operations in Ghana today", he stressed.

Addressing concerns about Mobile Money fraud, Adadevoh assured that the company has taken substantial measures,

including blacklisting SIM cards and identifying handsets involved in fraudulent activities.

He emphasised ongoing efforts to implement further measures to combat the challenge.

On the National Roaming Programme, Adadevoh disclosed that MTN Ghana, Vodafone, and AT have collaborated to accelerate

digitalization through the program.

He expressed optimism about the initiative, highlighting its potential to enhance service delivery by allowing telecom operators to share infrastructure.

Source: The Independent Ghana / Sebastian Akaho-Tay



Selorm Adadevoh, CEO of MTN, Ghana

We will only give you lithium if you provide us factories – Mfantseman chiefs to Atlantic Lithium Ltd

The chiefs of Mfantseman are pushing for the establishment of factories as a prerequisite for the Ewoyaa Lithium mining project.

Their insistence stems from the belief that creating factories will provide employment opportunities for the local youth, counterbalancing the significant environmental impacts associated with mining.

The Omanhen of the Mankessim Traditional Area, Osagyefo Amanfo Edu VI, stressed that constructing factories would ensure that the communities within the project's catchment area benefit from the socio-economic advantages of the mining project.

These views were expressed during a meeting facilitated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The gathering aimed to enable Atlantic Lithium

to interact with the communities, presenting its findings as part of the environmental process required for obtaining an operational permit. It also sought community input, feedback, and recommendations on the proposed project by Barari DV Ghana Limited.

Osagyefo Amanfo Edu VI assured that the chiefs would prevent the challenges experienced in gold mining from affecting the Ewoyaa Lithium mining project. He pledged their commitment to supporting the venture for the benefit of the present and future generations.

Ransford Sekyi, the Deputy Director of Operations at the EPA, stressed the significance of collective efforts by the government and stakeholders in safeguarding the environment. He encouraged the communities

to act as watchdogs, ensuring the mining company complies with environmental regulations for their safety.

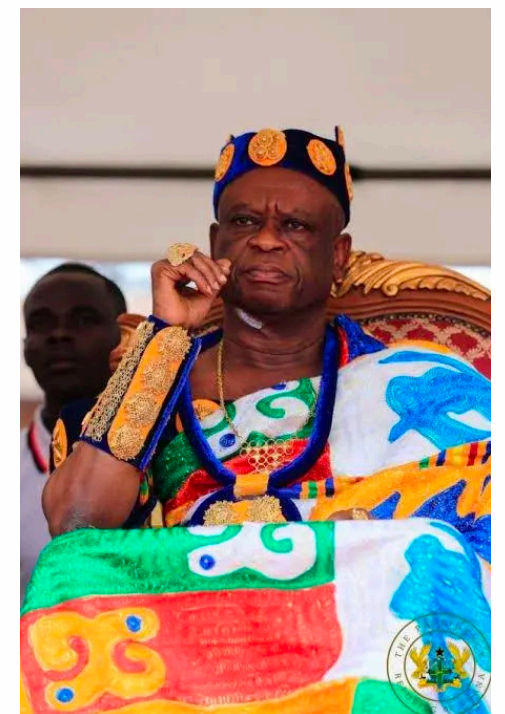
"Lithium is a natural resource that could significantly impact any country's fortunes, and people need to harness the opportunities that come with the project for national development," said Mr. Sekyi.

He assured that the Government, working through the EPA, would enforce strict adherence to all environmental protocols before issuing permits for operations. During a briefing attended by traditional leaders, government officials, security agencies, the media, and community members, the document's contents were discussed, and areas needing clarification were addressed.

Disagreements arose in areas such as compensation, resettlement,

and the mitigation of negative impacts of mining activities. The company assured that these concerns would be thoroughly addressed.

Source: The Independent Ghana / Amanda Cartey



Osagyefo Amanfo Edu VI, Mankessim Traditional Area

International

Trump to stand trial on March 25 in NY criminal hush money case

Donald Trump will become the first former U.S. president to stand trial on criminal charges after a New York judge on Thursday denied his request to dismiss an indictment stemming from hush money paid to a porn star and set a March 25 trial date.

Justice Juan Merchan's ruling during a testy hearing in Manhattan means that Trump will stand trial in at least one of the four criminal cases he faces as he pursues the Republican nomination to challenge Democratic President Joe Biden in the Nov. 5 U.S. election.

Trump, 77, had asked Merchan to toss the 34-count indictment, which charges him with falsifying business records to cover up the \$130,000 payment to porn star Stormy Daniels before the 2016 election. Merchan took less than 10 minutes to deny his request and confirm the trial date.

Ahead of the hearing, Trump repeated his claims that the case is politically motivated.

"They wouldn't have brought this except for the fact - no way - except for the fact that I'm running for president and doing well," Trump said in a hallway outside the courtroom.

A handful of protesters held signs denouncing Trump and shouted "no dictators in the U.S.A." outside the courthouse.

Trump has pleaded not guilty to the charges brought by Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, a Democrat. The trial is set to start before Trump's three other criminal cases.

The case centers on former Trump

lawyer Michael Cohen's \$130,000 payment to Daniels - whose real name is Stephanie Clifford - to prevent her from publicly speaking ahead of the 2016 election about a sexual encounter she has said she had with Trump a decade earlier. Trump has denied this occurred.

Cohen pleaded guilty in 2018 to violating federal campaign finance laws. Trump may effectively have wrapped up the Republican nomination by the time the trial is scheduled to start. He has won the first four state nominating contests.

Dozens more will have taken place before the trial date. Opinion polls show him with a wide lead over his lone remaining primary challenger, Nikki Haley, and effectively tied with Biden.

But one in four Republicans and about half of independent voters have indicated they would not vote for Trump if he is convicted in any of his four criminal cases, a Reuters/Ipsos poll showed on Tuesday.

Trump's lawyer Todd Blanche during the hearing pressed Merchan to reconsider the March 25 trial date, citing scheduling issues with the other cases.

"It is completely election interference to say that you are going to sit in this courtroom in Manhattan when there's no reason for it," Blanche said.

"He's not going to be at more than one criminal trial at the same time," Merchan said. "Stop interrupting me, please."

Blanche said he might try to move the trial out of Manhattan, where Trump is likely to face a liberal-

leaning jury pool.

Trump's political and legal calendars are increasingly overlapping ahead of his expected rematch with Biden, who defeated him in the 2020 election. Trump has used his frequent court dates to help raise money for his presidential campaign, though the strategy is seeing diminishing returns after he raked in millions around his first appearances last year.

IN GEORGIA, ANOTHER HEARING

In a separate court hearing on Thursday, Trump's lawyers asked a Georgia judge to disqualify the prosecutor who charged him and several allies with crimes involving trying to overturn his 2020 election loss to Biden in the state.

The prosecutor, Fani Willis, has admitted to having a romantic relationship with a lawyer on her team. Trump also faces federal charges in Washington over his efforts to overturn his election loss and in Florida over his handling of classified documents. Trump has pleaded not guilty in all the cases.

Prosecutors in the hush money case have said Trump's New York-based family real estate

company recorded Trump's 2017 reimbursements to Cohen as legal expenses, violating a state law against falsifying business records to conceal another crime.

They have said Trump was seeking to cover up federal campaign finance law violations as well as violations of a state law that prohibits promoting a candidacy by unlawful means.

Trump's lawyers have argued that he had been targeted for "selective prosecution." Bragg's office has said anyone else who behaved similarly would have been prosecuted, pointing to Cohen's guilty plea.

Trump's lawyers also have argued that state prosecutors cannot use Trump's alleged concealment of federal election law violations to justify the false records charges, and that the state law does not apply to federal elections.

Bragg's office has said the business records falsification law was not restricted to cases involving state-level crimes, and that the state law applies to both federal and state elections.

Source: Reuters



Donald Trump, Former US President

South African troops killed in DR Congo

South African troops in the Democratic Republic of Congo have suffered their first fatalities since their recent deployment to quell a rebellion.

Two soldiers were killed and three were injured after a mortar bomb

landed in their base on Wednesday. The attack has led to South African opposition politicians calling for the withdrawal of troops from DR Congo.

The troops are part of a regional force helping DR Congo's military

as it confronts a series of armed groups.

The most prominent group is the M23, which has taken up positions on the major routes leading into Goma, the main city in the east of DR Congo.

The M23's advance has resulted in tens of thousands being forced from their homes - adding to the nearly seven million who have fled because of multiple conflicts in the east.

But the South African army has

Continued on page 12

General News

South African troops killed in DR Congo

Continued from page 11

not linked Wednesday's attack to the M23.

In a statement, it says the "details of this incident are still sketchy".

South Africa began deploying troops to eastern DR Congo in December under the banner of the 16-member regional bloc, the Southern African Development Community (Sadc).

They are taking over from the Kenyan-led East African Force (EAF), which left in December - about a year after it was welcomed by President Félix Tshisekedi.

He was re-elected in December for a second term in office - and one of his key campaign promises was to tackle the insecurity that has wracked the east of the country for three decades.

What reason has been given for the deployment?

Sadc has acted in the interests of solidarity, as DR Congo is part of the regional grouping..

It previously warned that an attack against one of its members would be met with "immediate collective action", and its troops would help DR Congo's military in "fighting" armed groups.

This view is more in tune with Mr Tshisekedi's - he wants a partner who will tackle the rebels head on.

Mr Tshisekedi booted out the EAF, accusing it of being ineffective and refusing to go on the offensive against the M23.

He has also ordered a UN force, which has been in the country for around 25 years, to leave by the end of 2024 after levelling similar accusations against it.

Can the Sadc force succeed?

South Africa is the regional superpower, and will form the backbone of the force.

Mr Tshisekedi is hoping that it will repeat the success it had during a previous deployment. That was more than a decade ago, when the M23 - accused of being backed by Rwanda - also made huge territorial gains in the resource-rich east.

Though then operating under

the banner of a UN Intervention Brigade, Sadc troops forced the M23 to retreat. The M23 has since regrouped after a peace deal floundered, and is once again on the offensive.

Remadji Hoinathy, an analyst with the South Africa-headquartered Institute for Security Studies, said the M23 was now stronger and better equipped.

The AFP news agency has quoted a UN document as saying that the Rwandan army is using sophisticated weapons such as surface-to-air missiles to support the M23.

Rwanda has consistently denied backing the rebel group.

What is the strength of the Sadc force?

Dr Hoinathy said there was no clarity on its strength, but South Africa had a strong and well-equipped army.

Earlier this week, South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa said that 2,900 troops are to be deployed, without saying how many were already in DR Congo.

Malawi and Tanzania are also sending soldiers, but have not yet given any details.

South Africa's two biggest opposition parties - the Democratic Alliance (DA) and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), are not happy about the deployment and not convinced about the effectiveness of the troops.

At a press conference on Thursday, EFF leader Julius Malema called for the immediate withdrawal of South African soldiers from DR Congo.

"They [South African troops] are sent there to be killed because they are not properly trained," he said.

"We just don't have the army.

The ANC has collapsed the army," Mr Malema added, referring to the governing party, the African National Congress (ANC).

DA defence spokesman Kobus Marais said on X that the fatalities were "avoidable", and the government had been warned that the deployment was "irresponsible and unacceptable".

Mr Ramaphosa defended the deployment in parliament, saying South Africa was "part of peace-keeping missions all over the world".

"We salute our defence force personnel who brave great dangers to make Africa a more peaceful and stable continent. That is what we applaud them for and we dip our heads for those who are injured and for those who may have fallen," Mr Ramaphosa said.

Source: BBC



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