



U.N.: Global economy is growing at three percent

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The global economy is growing by about three percent — its highest rate since 2011 and a significant acceleration from last year, according to the United Nations. In its annual economic report and forecast, the U.N. said the upturn stems predominantly from faster growth in all major developed economies, with east and south Asia remaining “the world’s most dynamic regions.” Compared to 2016, when global growth was just 2.4 percent, “growth strengthened in almost two-thirds of countries worldwide in 2017,” the report said. Liu Zhenim, the U.N. undersecretary-general for economic and social affairs, called the rise “a welcome sign of a healthier economy.” But he warned that growth “may come at an environmental cost.” The “World Economic Situation and Prospects 2018” report said the economic upturn should now focus governments on longer-term issues, including tackling climate change and the growing inequality between rich and poor. “The frequency of weather-related shocks continues to increase, highlighting the urgent need to build resilience against climate change and contain the pace of environmental degradation,” the report said, adding that stronger GDP growth is likely to result in higher levels of global-warming carbon emissions. The U.N. said the world economy is forecast to expand at a steady pace of three percent in 2018 and 2019.

Mascot designs for 2020 Tokyo Olympics shortlisted

TOKYO (AP) — Japanese schoolchildren will help determine the mascot for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. Organizers of the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics unveiled three sets of designs for the games’ mascots. The 6.5 million schoolchildren will review the shortlisted designs with their classes casting a single vote in favor of one of the three sets. The three finalists were selected from among 2,042 entries submitted by the public. The winner will be announced February 28. The first set is a pair of humanoid characters clad in the *ichimatsu* checkered pattern of the games’ official logo. The second set features a *maneki neko* (good-luck cat) and a fox commonly seen at Shinto shrines. The third set features a fox and a dog with gold ribbons on their backs. The Tokyo Olympics are scheduled to take place July 24 to August 9, 2020.

Pope recalls suffering faces in Myanmar, Bangladesh

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis says he recalls so many “suffering” but “noble” faces from his recent trip to Myanmar and Bangladesh. In St. Peter’s Square, Francis thanked God for the voyage’s opportunity to meet residents in the two Asian countries, citing in particular the tiny Catholic communities there, adding he was “edified by their testimony.” He recounted that he spoke frankly but privately in Myanmar about Rohingya refugees’ plight and said he cried when he met some in Bangladesh, where they have fled a Myanmar military crackdown. “Impressed on me is the memory of so many faces, tried by life, but noble and smiling,” he said of his trip. Francis drew criticism for not publicly citing, while in Myanmar, the Rohingya suffering.

Basketball World Cup to be hosted in Asia in 2023

MIES, Switzerland (AP) — The Basketball World Cup in 2023 will be hosted by the Philippines, Japan, and Indonesia. The International Basketball Federation (FIBA) says its central board picked the Asian co-hosting bid over the Argentina-Uruguay joint candidacy. It is the first time the world championship will be hosted in more than one country. The United States will defend its title at the 2019 World Cup in China.

Former Cambodia opposition leader sued over online post

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (AP) — A lawyer for Cambodia’s military filed a lawsuit against former opposition leader Sam Rainsy a day after the prime minister said he should be charged with treason. The lawyer said the complaint accuses Sam Rainsy of inciting the military to not follow orders, insulting military leaders, and causing depression of the armed forces. In a Facebook post, Sam Rainsy called on soldiers not to obey any “dictators” if ordered to shoot innocent people. Prime Minister Hun Sen took issue with the post. Sam Rainsy lives in exile. His former political party was dissolved by the courts in November, meaning Hun Sen faces no serious opposition in next year’s election. The government has sought to neutralize opponents and critics ahead of the polls.

South Korea imposes new sanctions on North Korea

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea added several North Korean groups and individuals to its sanctions list in a largely symbolic move that is part of efforts to cut off funding for the North’s weapons programs. The government said those added were 20 North Korean groups, including several banks and companies, and 12 individuals. While the fresh sanctions are largely symbolic because all transactions between the two Koreas have been banned for years, the government said it hoped its move would prompt the international community to do likewise. The measure reminds the “international community of the risks of doing transactions with the groups and individuals,” Baek Tae-hyun, South Korea’s Unification Ministry spokesman, said during a media briefing. The blacklist includes Rason International Commercial Bank and Korea Zinc Industrial Group. Individuals are North Korean officials who work for the country’s banks or companies based in China, Russia, Vietnam, and Namibia. The U.S. has been urging the world to cut trade and diplomatic ties with Pyongyang. In November, North Korea test-fired its most powerful missile ever, an intercontinental ballistic missile that may be able to target the eastern seaboard of the United States.



DELICATE & DIRTY. Tourists walk around the Taj Mahal as workers clean the monument in Agra, India. The Taj Mahal typically draws between 7 million and 8 million visitors per year. Built by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his wife, Mumtaz Mahal, people are attracted as much by the love story as the spectacular architecture. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup)

India’s cleaning quandary: How to scale the Taj Mahal dome?

By Nick Perry
The Associated Press

AGRA, India — Authorities in India are trying to figure out how workers will scale the Taj Mahal’s majestic but delicate dome as they complete the first thorough cleaning of the World Heritage site since it was built 369 years ago.

Work on the mausoleum’s minarets and walls is almost finished, after workers began the makeover in mid-2015.

They’ve been using a natural mud paste to remove yellow discoloration and return the marble to its original brilliant white. Called fuller’s earth, it’s the same clay that some people smother on their skin as a beauty treatment.

But the metal scaffolding used so far is too heavy and rigid for the dome, said Bhuvan Vikrama, the superintending archaeologist from the Archaeological Survey of India. He said they’re considering other options, including designing and constructing special bamboo scaffolding.

He said there’s a precedent, after bamboo scaffolding was used on the dome in the early 1940s when some conservation work was done.

Vikrama said rain was enough to clean most of the Taj Mahal in the past, but air pollution over the last 25 years has taken its toll.

“It became visibly clear it was all yellow,” he said. “It even started becoming black in the

shaded areas not washed by rains.”

He said work on the dome would likely take 10 months, starting next year and finishing in 2019. The makeover is costing about \$500,000.

The work has prompted Fodor’s Travel guide to include the Taj Mahal on its list of places not to visit next year.

“Unless your dream Taj Mahal visit involves being photographed standing in front of a mud-caked and be-scaffolded dome, maybe give it until 2019 at the earliest,” the guide recommends.

Vikrama disagrees, saying photographs from the 1940s with scaffolding on the dome are interesting and historically important.

“If the tourism even fluctuates, we should not bother about that,” he said. “Tourists should also appreciate they are witnessing the work going on, the right kind of efforts for the preservation of monuments.”

The Taj Mahal typically attracts between 7 million and 8 million visitors per year. Built by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his wife, Mumtaz Mahal, people are attracted as much by the love story as the spectacular architecture.

“It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” said Kent Scheibel, a tourist from Los Angeles who was visiting the site. “It’s a living, breathing thing that emanates the absolute beauty of the human spirit.”

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Asian Currency Exchange Rates

Units per U.S. dollar as of 12/15

Bangladesh Taka	82.655
Cambodian Riel	4030.0
China Renminbi	6.6093
Fijian Dollar	2.0799
Hong Kong Dollar	7.8119
Indian Rupee	64.045
Indonesian Rupiah	13570
Iranian Rial	35624
Japanese Yen	112.6
Laos New Kip	8320.8
Malaysian Ringgit	4.0795
Nepal Rupee	102.57
Pakistani Rupee	109.88
Papua N.G. Kina	3.2435
Philippine Peso	50.45
Russian Ruble	58.762
Saudi Riyal	3.7503
Singapore Dollar	1.3488
South Korean Won	1089.3
Sri Lankan Rupee	153.15
Taiwan Dollar	29.994
Thai Baht	32.509
Vietnam Dong	22918