

Pope Francis names first woman to head Vatican office

ROME

POPE Francis on Monday named the first woman to head a major Vatican office, appointing an Italian nun, Sister Simona Brambilla, to become prefect of the department responsible for all the Catholic Church's religious orders.

The appointment marks a major step in Francis' aim to give women more leadership roles in governing the church. While women have been named to No 2 spots in some Vatican offices, never before has a woman been named prefect of the Holy See Curia, the central governing organ of the Catholic Church.

The historic nature of Brambilla's appointment was confirmed by Vatican Media, which headlined its report 'Sister Simona Brambilla is the first woman prefect in the Vatican'.

The office is one of the most important in the Vatican. Known officially as the Dicastery for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, it is responsible for every religious order, from the Jesuits and Franciscans to smaller newer movements.

In an indication of the novelty of the appointment, and the theological implications involved, Francis simultaneously named as a co-leader, or 'pro-prefect,' a cardinal: 'ngel Fernandez Artime, a Salesian. Brambilla, 59, is a member of the Consolata Missionaries religious order. AP

Simona Brambilla

Biden block on oil, gas drilling in US water to deter Don

Trump pushes back, says presidential order will be reversed after inauguration on Jan 20

WASHINGTON

PRESIDENT Joe Biden is moving to ban new offshore oil and gas drilling in most US coastal waters, a last-minute effort to block possible action by the incoming Trump administration to expand offshore drilling.

Biden, whose term expires in two weeks, said he is using authority under the federal Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act to protect offshore areas along the East and West coasts, the eastern Gulf of Mexico and portions of Alaska's Northern Bering Sea from future oil and natural gas leasing.

"My decision reflects what coastal communities, businesses and beachgoers have known for a long time: that drilling off these coasts could cause irreversible damage to places we hold dear and is unnecessary to meet our nation's energy needs," Biden said in a statement.

"As the climate crisis continues to threaten communities across the country and we are transitioning to a clean energy economy, now is the time to protect these coasts for our children and grandchildren," he said.

Biden's orders would not affect large swaths of the Gulf of Mexico, where most US offshore drilling occurs, but it would protect coastlines along California, Florida and other states from future drilling.

Biden's actions, which protect more than 625 million acres of federal waters, could be difficult for President-elect Donald Trump to unwind, since they would likely require an act of Congress to repeal. Trump himself has a complicated history on offshore drilling.



Joe Biden

He signed a memorandum in 2020 directing the Interior secretary to prohibit drilling in the waters off both Florida coasts, and off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina until 2032.

The action came after Trump initially moved to vastly expand offshore drilling, before retreating amid widespread opposition in Florida and other coastal states.

Trump on Monday declared that, after he's inaugurated on Jan 20, Biden's drilling ban will "be changed on day one."

"I will unban it immediately" Trump told conservative radio host Hugh Hewitt. "I have the right to unban it." He said the US has "oil and gas at a level that nobody else has and we're gonna take advantage of it. It's really our greatest economic asset." AP

Ready to free 34 hostages, says Hamas

GAZA STRIP

A Hamas official said on Sunday the group was ready to free 34 hostages in the "first phase" of a potential deal with Israel, after Israel said indirect talks on a truce and hostage release agreement had resumed in Qatar.

Now, "Hamas has agreed to release 34 Israeli prisoners from a list presented by Israel as part of the first phase of a prisoner exchange deal," said an official of the Palestinian militants.

Israel said that Hamas had yet to clarify whether 34 hostages it claimed it was ready to free were dead or alive, throwing doubt on the group's assertion that it needed time to ascertain their fate.

The Hamas official said the initial swap would include all the women, children, elderly



people and sick captives still held in Gaza. But Hamas needed time to determine their condition, he added. "Hamas has agreed to release

TOLL SO FAR 47,694

3 killed in West bank, says Israeli military

Gunmen opened fire on Monday on a bus and other vehicles near a village in the occupied West Bank, killing three people and wounding seven, the Israeli military and emergency services said. "Paramedics have confirmed the deaths of three victims, including two women and a man," emergency service provider Magen David said

the 34 prisoners, whether alive or dead," the official said. "However, the group needs a week of calm to communicate with the captors and identify

B'desh tribunal issues second arrest warrant against Hasina, 11 others

DHAKA

BANGLADESH'S International Criminal Tribunal (ICT) on Monday issued arrest warrants against deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina and 11 others, including former military generals and an ex-police chief, for their alleged role in incidents of enforced disappearances.

This was the second arrest warrant by the ICT against Hasina, who fled to India after her Awami League regime's toppling following unprecedented anti-government protests in August last year.

The tribunal has so far recorded three cases against her: "Justice Md Golam Mortuza

Mojudar, chairman of the tribunal, issued the arrest warrant after hearing a prosecution plea," an ICT official said.

The Inspector General of Police was ordered to arrest the twelve people, including Hasina, and produce them before the tribunal on February 12 in the case filed over complaints of enforced disappearances of several hundred people.

The deposed premier's then-defence adviser Major General (retd) Tarique Ahmed Siddique and former IGP Benazir Ahmed are among those named in the case.

While Siddique is currently under custody, Ahmed is believed to be on the run.

ICT Chief Prosecutor Mohammad Tajul Islam did not disclose the names of most of the accused 'in the interest of investigations and their arrest'.

"The next hearing for this case is also scheduled for February 12. The tribunal has instructed that the investigation report be submitted on that day if completed," Islam later told reporters. He, however, said if the investigation report could not be submitted by then, the law enforcement agencies would have to provide a progress report on the arrests.

Islam told the tribunal that the ousted regime had established a culture of enforced disappearances under state sponsorship. PTI

those who are alive and those who are dead."

Until the Hamas official's comment there had been no update on the talks, which both warring sides were to resume in Qatar over the weekend.

"Efforts are under way to free the hostages, notably the Israeli delegation which left yesterday (Friday) for negotiations in Qatar," Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz told relatives of a hostage on Saturday, according to his office.

In December Qatar expressed optimism that "momentum" was returning to the talks following Trump's election victory. But Hamas and Israel then traded accusations of imposing new conditions and obstacles.

In northern Gaza on Sunday, the Civil Defence agency said an air strike on a house in the Sheikh Radwan area had killed at least 11 people. AFP

Musk trying to undermine UK democracy, says Starmer

LONDON

BRITISH Prime Minister Keir Starmer on Monday condemned 'lies and misinformation' that he said are undermining UK democracy, in response to a barrage of attacks on his government from Elon Musk.

Asked about Musk's comments during a question session at a hospital near London, Starmer criticised 'those that are spreading lies and misinformation as far and as wide as possible,' particularly opposition Conservative politicians in Britain who have echoed some of Musk's claims.

Musk often posts on X about the UK. AP

EXPRESS READ

Rain, snow lead to flooding in parts of UK

London: Rescuers evacuated people on Monday from flooded homes and stranded cars as a soggy and cold spell continued to disrupt life across parts of the UK. Hundreds of schools were closed for the first day of classes of 2025, trains were halted and commuters experienced headaches as sections of highways and major roads were closed.

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