

[Transcript] Global News Podcast / Clashes as Macron pushes through controversial pension reforms

Hello, this is the Global News podcast from the BBC World Service with reports and analysis from across the world. The latest news seven days a week. BBC World Service podcasts are supported by advertising. The Financial Times follows the money to find business stories in unexpected places. We found a surprising one in the porn industry. I'm Alex Barker, co-host of the FT Pushkin podcast, Hot Money. Through the series, we reveal the real power behind this secretive global business. You can check out our podcasts and read selected articles for free at ft.com/slash/insights. If you're listening to this podcast, you must recognize the value of asking questions. At Aramco, our questions help us engineer a better future. How can today's resources fuel our shared tomorrow? How can we deliver energy to a world that can't stop? How can we deliver one of the fuels of the future? How can we sow curiosity to harvest ingenuity? To learn more about how innovation drives us forward, visit aramco.com/slash/poweredbyhow. This is the Global News podcast from the BBC World Service. I'm Valerie Sanderson and in the early hours of Friday the 17th of March, these are our main stories. Clashes in Paris after President Macron forces his controversial pension bill through parliament without a vote. Several big US banks pump billions of dollars into an ailing lender to try to avert more financial uncertainty. Also, the private Russian military group Wagner is using tens of thousands of Russian prisoners to overwhelm Ukrainian positions. We get access to the front line of the most ferocious fighting in Ukraine and my mission was to physically and psychologically shatter the system of white supremacy in Mississippi. A new BBC Sounds podcast about the first black person to go to the University of Mississippi in the US. In several cities in France thousands of protesters have been out on the streets demonstrating against President Macron's decision to bypass parliament and push through controversial pension reforms which increased the age of retirement from 62 to 64. In Paris scuffles with riot police broke out and water cannon were fired. French media are reporting more than 70 arrests. France's second largest trade union, the CGT, called for new nationwide strikes. Its leader is Catherine Perret. Given the support from a vast majority of the population that has been mobilized for weeks, the unions continue to independently demand the withdrawal of this reform with calm and determined actions and call on unions to hold small gatherings this weekend and for a new death strikes and demonstrations to be held on Thursday the 23rd of March. A correspondent in Paris who Scofield was watching at a chaotic session of parliament's lower house. There was pandemonium in France's national assembly, left-wing MPs in toning the national anthem as the Prime Minister, Elisabeth Bourne, struggled to make the formal announcement that her government was giving up the idea of a vote in parliament on the pension reform plans and instead forcing the measure through using a constitutional procedure known as the 49-3. Earlier she and President Macron had concluded that it was impossible to win over enough conservative votes to be sure of a majority. It means that Mr Macron should now get his way with the changes which he says are vital for the long-term viability of the pension regime, but it comes at a cost. By showing himself unable to muster a majority in parliament, he's effectively conceded to the opposition of left and right their argument that with these reforms he's overruling the will of

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the people. For weeks now France has been living through a campaign of strikes, demonstrations and now uncollected rubbish. This looks set to intensify.

He's co-filled in Paris. In an extraordinary move to contain panic in the banking system, almost a dozen of America's biggest financial institutions have agreed a multi-billion dollar bailout for the U.S. regional bank First Republic. Its share price fell dramatically in recent days, as investors worried it could be the next financial institution to fail.

Our North America business correspondent, Samir Hussein, explains why the banks had no choice but to act.

They are basically trying to shore up confidence in the American banking system. The collapse of those two U.S. banks really spooked investors and consumers that are left wondering, well, if those banks have collapsed, which ones could possibly be next? And a lot of investors were thinking it could be a regional bank like First Republic. In the recent days we saw that the share price for First Republic was cut in half and depositors took out billions of dollars from the bank. That had everyone very spooked about, again, that contagion idea. So a consortium of 11 banks have stepped in and said, okay, well, here's \$30 billion of uninsured loans going to First Republic. The U.S. government and U.S. regulators are really trying to get in front of the banking crisis. And in fact, the Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen was testifying to Congress. Now, she was meant to testify about the U.S. budget, but there were lots of questions about what has happened in the banking industry in the last few days. Have a listen to what she said. I can reassure the members of the committee that our banking system is sound and that Americans can feel confident that their deposits will be there when they need them. This week's actions demonstrate our resolute commitment to ensure that our financial system remains strong and that depositors' savings remain safe. Inflation has been the word de jour for many, many days, because interest rates have been climbing all around the world to try and contain inflation. And now we heard from the ECB that just said, we're still going to raise interest rates by half a percentage point, seeing all of what's happening and saying, well, look, we're still going to stay the course. The question is, of course, what are central banks to do in the midst of all of this? America's central bank, the Federal Reserve, they are going to be meeting next week. And they're obviously watching all of this and the impact that rising interest rates has really had on all of these banks. Samira Hussein. A new study spanning the seven decades up to 2021 shows how the life expectancy of countries has changed. Although people are living longer overall, rich nations, including the UK and the US, have plummeted in the rankings, with Britain falling to number 36 during the COVID pandemic, just above Chile, Costa Rica and Thailand.

Professor Martin McKee from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine is co-author of the study. I asked him what struck him most in his research.

What was surprising was the scale of the decline in some of the countries that we looked at, particularly the United Kingdom and the United States, that had really done badly relative to other countries. And what countries are doing well?

Japan has done very well, although it started from a low base in the post-war period. France was just a little bit below the UK in 1950 and has stayed relatively high.

And what about countries traditionally that have had low life expectancy like the African countries? Are they still at the bottom? Sadly, they have stayed low. And in fact,

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what we saw with the advent of HIV in many of them, the situation got considerably worse. Did the COVID pandemic make a difference? It has done so, but we don't have all the data from across the world yet. So it's a little bit too early to say, but we do know that there was a big variation in the excess mortality in different countries for which we have data. And what are the main reasons do you think for an increase or decrease in life expectancy? Because the Scandinavian countries, they were at the top, what, in the 1950s, and they still are, aren't they? That's right. And there's no single factor. We can look at things like obesity and smoking and alcohol, and often we can find explanations there. But fundamentally, when a country is seeing its life expectancy failing to improve, we have to look at the political context, the decisions that are being made that affect the conditions in which people live their lives. That's really what drives all of the other things. Is the room for optimism, though, because people in the 50s, what they live to something like 65, and that's gone way up, hasn't it? Obviously, at some point, we're going to reach a biological maximum, although we're certainly not near that yet, because we can see that life expectancy has got to a very high level in particularly the East Asian countries. There is a biological maximum. We don't have anybody in the world who lives beyond 120. But at present, we're getting up to maximum life expectancies in countries of the mid and high 80s. We can do a little bit better than that, but I think we will at some point reach a theoretical maximum somewhere in the 90s. The worrying thing is that we are seeing increases in what we call the deaths of despair. Those are people who are dying in middle age or even younger in some countries that have been experiencing significant economic problems, deindustrialization, and particularly the United States and parts of the United Kingdom. Professor Martin McKee. Poland descending four Soviet-era MiG fighter jets to Ukraine in the next few days. President Duda said other planes were being serviced and would be handed over soon. Meanwhile, intense fighting continues in Bakhmut, in eastern Ukraine, where tens of thousands have been killed. Two Ukrainian army brigades defending the city's southern flank last week gave the BBC access to their positions. The men have spent months facing regular Russian army forces and prisoners recruited by the Wagner private military group who've swarmed their trenches in droves. From there, our correspondent Quentin Somerville sent us this report. We're heading right to the very forward position. Do you hear shelling right now? I feel an automatic gunfire. There's more shelling. They get attacked here on a daily basis. The Russians are only 500 metres away, all along this line. It's got a need fire, automatic gunfire, and tank fire. Keep down. The enemy's positions are just there. Get ready to move fast. Boris, a captain with the 28th Mechanized Brigade, was an architect before the war. He and his brigade are from Odessa. They've been fighting since the very start, but Bakhmut is the most brutal battle they've faced. Their enemy, 150 metres away at the nearest point, is using new and cruel tactics. Have you captured any Russians here? Yeah. The private Russian military group Wagner is using tens of thousands of Russian prisoners to overwhelm Ukrainian positions in Bakhmut. The men are poorly trained and cut down by the dozen, but they reveal the defenders' positions and are then followed by specialist Russian forces. Wagner, they have absolutely no principles. We fight for our homeland, for our motherland,

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for our family. They came here to rob, steal, rape, and kill.

This mud that you can hear is like porridge that pulls you in all sorts of directions.

It's difficult for men, it's difficult for machines. It makes fighting here all the harder.

The battle for Bakhmut has been going on more than seven months,

and it has created an enormous wasteland. In the north, and in the east, and here in the south, the Russians have gained ground, but it's costing them. The Ukrainians say that for every soldier they lose, the Russians lose seven. Bakhmut is a place which no one believes has any kind of strategic value, yet thousands of men are dying here. And the reason they're dying is because Ukraine says the longer it holds on here, the more Russian casualties, the more Russian armour it absorbs and the longer it can hold out. These trenches are dug into the chalk, not very deep though. It's cold, it's wet, there's water dripping. I have to be quiet here and I've already been told to get my head down because we're about 800 metres from the Russians and we're within sniper range. The conditions here would be familiar to the men's grandfathers, and so too with some of the weaponry. Both brigades are using stout green belt-fed Maxim machine guns to see off Wagner and regular Russian troops, as Fox of the 28th Brigade tells me. So it's Maxim's machine gun, 120 years of history of killing Russians, a weapon from the first world war that uses in the third world war. And this is how the battle for Bakhmut is being fought. As winter turns to spring in 24th century Europe, a 19th century weapon still mows down men by the score in the black Ukrainian earth. Quentin Somerville in Bakhmut in Ukraine. This week we've been reporting on an increasingly toxic squabble between the Pakistani government and its main rival, the opposition politician Imran Khan. He lost a vote of no confidence as prime minister in April last year, but he retains considerable support in the country. On Tuesday some of Mr Khan's legions of supporters gathered at his residence in Lahore as police try to arrest him for failing to show up in court, where he faces multiple charges from corruption to sedition. Razir Iqbal spoke to Imran Khan at his home and asked him why he'd failed to appear in court. Personally Razir, I've been going to all the cases. As of yesterday, it's gone from 80 to 85 cases now. I went to two in Lahore High Court and Islamabad High Court, but unfortunately there was

no security for me. So my lawyers have asked the judiciary that, look, client is willing to attend all the cases. We only need two things. Either you give us security or you have me through video conferencing. The one court case which I didn't attend which they came to arrest me, you take me to court, my lawyers had made it clear that that place had had two terrorist attacks there. It's a death trap. So you clearly have concerns about your own security. What has resulted in what looks to be a bit of a thymasha outside your home over the last couple of days, just chaos with your supporters coming to support you presumably. But the accusation that's been levelled at you by the government is that you are using them as human shields, women and children included in the crowd. When the police announced, people just came spontaneously outside my house. There's a fair here that this is not being done just because they want some hoola flaw. It's because they want to get me out of the way of elections. That is the claim that you have made time and again. However, you have an awful lot of cachet as a leader. Why not just ask your supporters to leave?

First of all, I had protective bail in this case till the 18th. Number two, when the police came in then my lawyer gave them an assurity bond that I would be present at the court on the 18th. The law says that once you give them an assurity bond, the arresting officer, he does not arrest you. So

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it was going to be an unlawful abduction. The only reason these all these 85 cases have been made against me is to get me out of the way. The assassination attempt was made to get me out of the way of elections. Out of 37 by elections, we have won 30. The law will sweep the elections. The law says that your protective bail runs out on the 18th. On the 18th, will you hand yourself in to the police? I was already going to the court on the 18th. So what was this drama all about? This is why I suspect that if nothing do with law, they wanted to get me out of the way by putting him in jail. The current prime minister is suggesting that talking is the only way forward. Are you willing to engage in dialogue with the government? We are willing to hold dialogue with anyone. But unfortunately, right now, the one that is backing this government, the most powerful force is the military establishment. And I'm afraid this is where we have an issue. When the establishment is supporting this assortment of 12 parties, I'm afraid this is where the problem is. Who do you talk to? Because these people are just puppets. We had a very good working relationship with the military establishment. But what happened in the end? Why did the switchhorses when the country, according to the economic survey of Pakistan, was performing the best in 17 years? In Corona, we were considered the top three countries who dealt with COVID-19. So why did the switchhorses? I still don't know. The only way out of the quagmire which we are getting stuck day by day are free and fair elections. Anything else we do, we are only going to sink deeper. The government sitting in parliament right now, they are petrified of elections because as the economy sinks, the troubles of people are getting worse by the day. They are scared of elections. Imran Khan. Still to come in the Global News podcast. For the first time, we have the access to AI that is as empowering as it is powerful. As we move into this new era, all of us who build AI have a collective obligation to do so responsibly. A warning from Microsoft as it launches an AI tool, it says, will change work as we know it. As you may have heard in recent podcasts, Malawi is in desperate need of international

help following Cyclone Freddy, which has left thousands of people displaced and killed more than 300. A state of disaster has been declared at a time when the country was already in the midst of its deadliest cholera outbreak in its history, which has taken the lives of 1600 since last year. Before the Cyclone made landfall, the BBC's health correspondent, Rhoda Oriambo, went to a cholera

treatment centre and centres this report. Emily Song wants the family she has lost to cholera. We met her in a neighbourhood, a previously informal settlement of small concrete houses. I've lost three members of my family. This cholera outbreak has robbed us of strong, unable people who are breadwinners of this family. Cholera is found in contaminated food and water, and the bacteria thrives in the rainy season. I visited a nearby hospital where Emily and her relatives were treated. Nasdjanit Tembo shows me around the newly erected tents brought to the small centre in partnership with the wild health organisation. The place is now prepared to receive patients diagnosed with cholera, but she tells me it was a different story at the start. It hasn't been easy. We're working at a very tough condition. We would have a few staff working against lots of patients. We only had one tent, which was only 8-bed capacity. This centre is now well-equipped and spirits among the medical staff is high, but inside the tents is a reminder of how serious the disease is. Cholera causes vomiting and diarrhea. Spirit is key to treatment as severe dehydration is fatal. Inside this particular

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tent, I can see a lot of women, men and also children. Most of the patients are severely ill. They've lost a lot of water, so what the doctors and the nurses are doing right now is ensuring that they get rehydrated. Adam is looking after his sister who arrived yesterday. I ask him how he thinks she got cholera. We have a very big problem of vomiting in my area. I think it's the cause of this illness. We mostly drink and clean water. Health officials who speak to are key to stress personal responsibility when it comes to cholera by maintaining clean spaces. When I asked the principal health secretary, Dr Charles Monsambour, what the government is doing to ensure that people have access to clean water, he told me that the government cannot do it all. There's a limit as to what government can offer. We need to also look at the citizens responsibility as well because we all have to play our part to stop this epidemic. Cholera thrives in the rain, something nobody can control. The arrival of Cyclone Freddy makes the government's hope of ending cholera cases by the end of the month or the more unlikely. In China, police have detained 75 people in connection with the network thought to number around 300 which helped pregnant women determine illegally the sex of their baby.

The service, worth as much as \$30 million via the fees it charged, offered to smuggle blood samples into Hong Kong where a test would determine the gender of the fetus at eight weeks. It was brought to light after 101 vials of blood were found in the backpack of a passenger crossing from the mainland. A China media analyst, Kerry Allen told me more. There's been a lot of discussion about today on Sina Weibo which is China's equivalent of Facebook or Twitter. It's been happening for a number of years now and basically what it is is couples who are having a child, the mother wants to determine the sex of the child after eight weeks and this can be tested within the mother's blood. So what happens is some mothers actually send the blood to Hong Kong to be tested covertly. So in this case it was smuggled over in a carrier bag. Then if they are not happy with the gender of the child, they abort the child.

And they're doing this because testing for gender is illegal in China?

It is illegal in China, yes. There has been a long-term preference for couples to have a boy because previously China had the one-child policy meaning that couples could only have one child and there has been this preference to continue the family line. It's very much known in that period which lasted many, many decades in China between the 1980s and 2016. There was a lot of femicide and nowadays we see this because the population of China, there are millions more men than there are women. But they've lifted the one-child policies so why is there still a preference do you think for boys in China? I think there are a couple of reasons here. One it might be pressure from parents. Also this culture does still remain but also there are very, very few people in China who are actually having a child now. Couples simply can't afford to have a child and the government is trying to promote couples having as many children as possible at the moment because China does have a stalling birth rate. So that is the main reason but yes also there are cultural reasons that a son has long-term been preferred. And what's the attitude to testing for gender in Hong Kong because that's where this whole blood test was developed isn't it? It is yes and it's much more accepted. I mean you think now internationally that you hear of these gender reveal parties

that are happening in different parts of the world. This is something that doesn't happen in mainland China because of this culture of femicide that was very much happening during the one-child

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policy era. But yes there are still couples within China who would like to find out what child they're having and in mainland China it's very much the case that the government would like people to have as many children as possible and there are only very limited ways that people can find out the gender of their child before it's born and that's very much limited to there being medical reasons for example. Kerry Allen. Microsoft has announced that it's building artificial intelligence capabilities like chat GPT into Office 365 the most commonly used computer software in the world. The AI assistant called co-pilot can behave like a human and create PowerPoint presentations, draft emails, summarize meetings and analyze data from excel spreadsheets.

Our technology editor Zoe Kleinman explains. This is a real game changer for the millions of people who use Microsoft Office programs in their daily lives. During a demo the tech giant showed how co-pilot can effectively complete office admin type jobs in seconds that would take humans considerably longer and it did them in a natural way. He wouldn't necessarily spot that a draft email had been written by artificial intelligence and not the named sender. Microsoft has invested billions of dollars in the firm behind the viral AI chatbot chat GPT and while co-pilot isn't the same thing rebranded it does use the same tech. The chief executive of Microsoft is Satya Nadella. For the first time we have the access to AI that is as empowering as it is powerful. Of course with this empowerment comes greater human responsibility just as an individual can be aided by AI AI can

be influenced positively or negatively by the person using it. As we move into this new era all of us who build AI deploy AI use AI have a collective obligation to do so responsibly. This kind of tech is known as generative AI and it still makes mistakes sometimes sharing misinformation or just making stuff up. AI experts kindly call this hallucination or usefully wrong but it's a reminder that you can't completely rely on it especially if it's doing things in your name. Zoe Kleinman an international competition to decipher a charred papyrus scrolls

in Italy has been launched by a group of researchers. The fragile documents were discovered in what

used to be a library in a luxury villa in Herculaneum next to Pompeii where they'd been carbonized by the intense heat and blast of hot gas after the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79.

Scientists in I believe a 21st century artificial intelligence program can extract letters and symbols from high-resolution X-ray images of the scrolls. Tobias Reinhardt a professor of Latin at the University of Oxford says the contents of the library are truly exceptional.

We know from other books which have been recovered from this library that it was largely a philosophical library so we are hoping for texts written by Epicurus who used atomic theory to explain the world and stoic philosophers who have recently regained some currency. If you have a luxury complex like that and a library set out like this and you keep entire scrolls there then this isn't going to be a shopping list or cooking recipes although even those would be of use to the scholar because you could tell all sorts of things about the place from the plants, the animals, the fishes, whatever available at that time. It's most likely that it will be philosophical works. There is no parallel for an ancient library containing entire scrolls. Papyrus is a material that does not take damp at all well so we only have a few finds of papyri from Greece and Italy and the papyri that we do have tend to come from the dry sands of

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Egypt

and those wouldn't normally be entire scrolls so this is really in many ways a very unusual place and a very unusual set of documents. Tobias Reinhart Professor of Latin at the University of Oxford. Breaking Mississippi, a ten-part podcast launches on BBC Sounds this week. It tells the story of James Meredith who became the first black student at the University of Mississippi in defiance of the racial segregation in 1960s America. Jen White is the host of Breaking Mississippi and Amaran asked her to set the scene. People often talk about it as if it was ancient history and it's actually recent history. If you believe in states' rights, if you believe in segregation. Anytime you have people pushing for change, pushing for integration, you also experience a major backlash and that's what you were seeing in 1960, a backlash against racial equity, a backlash against segregation and that's the environment that James Meredith enters into and tries to attend the University of Mississippi. My mission was to physically and psychologically shatter the system of white supremacy in Mississippi and eventually all of America. Just tell us who he was. Well, James Meredith was born in 1933 in Mississippi. He was raised on his family's farm in Itala County. He attended high school. He served in the U.S. Air Force and then he went back home and decided he wanted to become the first black person to attend the University of Mississippi after attending Jackson State College. But he'd been told by his father when he was young that he had this divine destiny, that he had a role to play in the liberation of black people in America and he carried that story and that charge with him throughout his life and that's really what led him to the steps of the University of Mississippi. And ever since I was a little boy, he had told me it was my divine responsibility to save the black race. White supremacy was real and I always felt my job was to straighten it out. He's entering into an actual battlefield, not just a philosophical battlefield, but an actual experience where he is facing physical harm. When he actually makes it onto the campus of the campus of the University of Mississippi, a mob arrives on the campus as well and violence breaks out. This was a nasty, nasty mob and it was a mob that was challenging federal authority, armed federal authority. So it was a literal war. My overriding goal was clear and simple to continue my mission from God by inspiring black Americans in the South to overcome their fear and register to vote. What does James Meredith feel that his struggles tell us about modern America? James Meredith is almost 90 years old at this point and yet he connects his life to that of George Floyd and he says, I am George Floyd. In other words, it could have been me. I could have been George Floyd and he sees a direct line between his struggle to integrate the United States but the ongoing racial violence and dissension we have here in the United States. It's exactly the same as Emmett Till. Everyone is the same. I would love to have a conversation with him about where he thinks the current struggle for racial equity stands in America because clearly it's not over and in part the United States has never truly grappled with its origins and the fact that the country's wealth was built on chattel slavery. Jen White speaking to Amal Rajan about the new 10-part podcast on BBC Sounds called Breaking Mississippi. And that's it from us for now but there'll be a new edition of the Global News podcast later. If you want to comment on this podcast or the topics covered in it, send us an email. The address is GlobalPodcast at BBC.co.uk. You can also find us on Twitter at Global NewsPod. This edition was mixed by Lana Bowles and the producer was Emma Joseph. The editor as ever is Karen Martin. I'm Valerie Saunderson and until next time, bye-bye.