

HK housing estate fire kills at least 36, 279 missing, 29 in hospital

Buildings still burning this morning

HONG KONG – A huge fire engulfed a Hong Kong residential estate and killed at least 36 people yesterday, with firefighters saying they were blocked from reaching some of the people seeking help.

Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu said in a live broadcast that began at 1:18 a.m. that at least 36 people died in the inferno, while 279 were missing and 29 in hospital, including seven in a critical condition.

The fire, which started in the afternoon and was still burning early this morning, was the deadliest in decades in Hong Kong, which has some of the world's most densely populated and tallest apartment blocks.

Massive flames first took hold on bamboo scaffolding on several apartment blocks of Wang Fuk Court in Tai Po, which contains nearly 2,000 flats in eight towers and was reportedly undergoing estate-wide maintenance.

Residents heard loud cracking sounds, possibly from the burning bamboo, and saw thick plumes of smoke billowing from the buildings as flames and ash reached high into the sky.

A 65-year-old resident surnamed Yuen said he had lived in the estate for more than four decades and that many of his neighbours were elderly and might not be mobile.

"The windows were closed because of the



Thick smoke and flames rise as a major fire engulfs a residential estate at Wang Fuk Court in Hong Kong's Tai Po District yesterday afternoon. – AFP



maintenance, [some people] didn't know there was a fire and had to be told to evacuate via phone calls by neighbours," Yuen told AFP.

"I'm devastated, there is loss of property and loss of life, and even a firefighter has died."

While many people died at the scene, others, including a 37-year-old firefighter, were certified dead at hospital, the government said last night.

Sections of charred scaffolding fell from

the burning blocks and flames could be seen inside apartments, sometimes belching out through windows into the night sky, casting an eerie orange glow on surrounding buildings.

Continued on p.6

Sam mourns victims of deadly HK blaze

Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai has expressed his condolences to the families of the victims of the deadly fire that broke out yesterday afternoon in a residential estate in Hong Kong's Tai Po District, according to a statement released by the Macau Government Information Bureau GCS last night.

Sam stated that the fire had regrettably claimed the lives of a number of Hong Kong people, including a firefighter performing his duties. He expressed his profound sorrow and grief and, on behalf of the

Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR) Government, conveyed his deepest condolences to the families of those who died in the incident, as well as his sincere sympathies to all those affected by the fire, the statement said.

Sam has contacted his Hong Kong counterpart, John Lee Ka-chiu, to convey his condolences and a shared sense of loss, noting the close and fraternal relationship between Hong Kong and Macau. He added that, should any assistance be required, the local government stands ready to provide full support. –MPD

Xi extends condolences over HK building fire, urges all-out rescue efforts to minimize losses

BEIJING – President Xi Jinping yesterday extended condolences over a deadly residential building fire in Hong Kong, which killed at least 36 people.

Xi, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, expressed sympathy to the families of the victims and those affected by the disaster. He urged all-out efforts to extinguish the fire and minimize casualties and losses.

In the wake of the fire, Xi attached great importance to the accident and immediately

sought updates on the rescue efforts and casualties.

Xi instructed the director of the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) to convey his condolences and sympathies to HKSAR Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu.

He required the Hong Kong and Macao Work Office of the CPC Central Committee and the Liaison Office to support the HKSAR government in making all-out efforts to put out the fire, do everything possible in search and rescue, treat the injured, and comfort the victims' families. –Xinhua, MPD

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Israel returns 15 bodies to Gaza after hostage remains identified

The health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said Israel returned the bodies of 15 Palestinian prisoners yesterday as part of the exchange deal under the US-brokered ceasefire.

– Story on p. 10

Mystery foot belongs to ancient human relative: scientists

Newly discovered fossils prove that a mysterious foot found in Ethiopia belongs to a little-known, recently named ancient human relative who lived alongside the species of the famous Lucy, scientists said yesterday. – Story on p. 11

Guinea-Bissau rocked by coup d'état, suspension of electoral process

Military officers in Guinea-Bissau declared "total control" of the coup-prone west African country yesterday, closing its borders and suspending its electoral process three days after general elections. – Story on p. 12

Macau team wins 6-month-long, 500,000-pataca DSA contest

Armindo Neves

The six-month-long “2025 DSA International Innovation & Entrepreneurship Competition” concluded yesterday – and the local team won 500,000 patacas.

The contest’s finals were held at The Parisian in Cotai yesterday.

The contest was organised by RDSA Industry Alliance and the Macao Institute of Industrial Technology (MIIT), supported by Zhuhai Technology Industry Group Co. Ltd., Guangdong LeapFive Technology Co. Ltd., Advanced Micro Devices, Inc. School of Microelectronics Science and Technology, Sun Yat-Sen University, and the Beijing Institute of Technology (Zhuhai Campus).

According to a statement by the organisers, the theme of the contest was “Ultimate Innovation Boundaryless Symbiosis”. The contest aimed to break through the bottlenecks in AI computing power, attracting over 120 projects from more than 10 countries and regions to participate. Twenty teams advanced to the finals, competing for a total prize pool of 1,400,000 patacas and industry accolades.

Economic and Technological Development Bureau (DSED) Director Yau Yun Wah said that the local government was actively promoting the development of the technology industry, planning to establish a technology research industrial park, and vigorously cultivating new quality productive forces.

Yau underlined that the



This handout photo provided by the contest organisers shows Economic & Technological Development Bureau (DSED) Director Yau Yun Wah (left) presenting the first prize of the “2025 DSA International Innovation & Entrepreneurship Competition” to a representative of the Macau-based winning team, AI Memory Universe (AIMOU) at The Parisian in Cotai yesterday.

integrated circuit sector has become a key focus of this development. Macau will build high-end research and development platforms, improve its fund support system, and enhance entrepreneurial support services to create a significant hub for gathering international high-end innovation resources, Yau said.

According to MIIT vice-chairwoman and founder of the RDSA Industrial Alliance, Aglaia Kong Chio Fai, RISC-V’s DSA architecture presents three major opportunities for technological innovation in Macau. She also said in a speech that RISC-V’s open-source computing standards

lower the barrier to innovation, enabling local talent to pursue entrepreneurship in AI on an equal footing. Kong also said that DSA supports customised hardware-software acceleration solutions for specific applications, fostering the potential emergence of “the next NVIDIA”. She also said that Macau can leverage its international advantages to integrate global hardware and software talent.

She highlighted DSA’s application potential in three key scenarios in Macau – smart energy conservation, tourist flow management, and high-frequency trading – where customised chips can achieve



Macao Institute of Industrial Technology (MIIT) vice-chairwoman and founder of the RDSA Industrial Alliance, Aglaia Kong Chio Fai, delivers a speech before yesterday’s finals.

– Photo: Armindo Neves

breakthroughs in energy efficiency and computing power.

Reduced Instruction Set Computing – Five (RISC-V) is an open-source hardware instruction set architecture (ISA) based on the principles of reduced instruction set computing (RISC). RISC-V is designed to be simple, efficient, and extensible, making it suitable for a wide range of computing applications, from embedded systems to high-performance computing, according to AI chatbot DeepSeek.

DSA (Domain-Specific Architecture) refers to a computer architecture designed specifically to optimise performance, efficiency, or power con-

sumption for a particular application domain, according to DeepSeek

The award ceremony was also held at The Parisian yesterday. The contest was won by a Macau-based team named “AI Memory Universe (AIMOU)”.

According to a competition handbook, AIMOU is a startup team from the State Key Laboratory of Analog and Mixed-Signal VLSI at the University of Macau (UM SKL-AMS).

The team’s winning work was titled “Versatile 2.5D Compute-in-memory Chiplets on RDL Interposer with RISC-V based Compiler for Universal NN Inference”.

According to the competition’s handbook, Versatile 2.5D CIM chiplets (VersaCIM) and the RDL interposer dynamically optimise chiplet array granularity, dataflow, and memory allocation, achieving significantly improved energy-efficiency and scaling efficiency.

The book said that VersaCIM demonstrates up to 290 times higher system energy efficiency and 27 times higher scaling efficiency than state-of-the-art AI acceleration systems, while surpassing silicon interposer-based designs less than 70 percent lower cost. ■

* A Redistributed Debridged Layer (RDL) interposer is a type of substrate used in semiconductor packaging. “Debridged” refers to the process of removing or minimising the bridging of connections on a semiconductor, thereby allowing for more effective layout and integration of the circuitry. – Poe

Aviation regulator imposes no-fly zone for drones during torch relay of the 12th NGD, 9th NSOG

Khalel Vallo

The Civil Aviation Authority of Macau (AACM) announced in a statement yesterday that unmanned aircraft flights will be prohibited across the Macau peninsula from Saturday 8 a.m. till noon to ensure safety during the 12th National Games for Persons with Disabilities (NGD) and the 9th National Special Olympic Games (NSOG).

The four-hour drone ban over the peninsula, published in the Official Gazette (BO) No. 46, Series II, yesterday, is based on Article 66 of the Air Navigation Regulation of Macau. The measure aims to prevent risks or interference during the city’s torch relay activity.

Violators of the flight ban face fines ranging between 2,000 and 20,000 patacas, the statement said, urging the public to heed the ban in order to maintain safety and order throughout the relay. ■



This poster provided by the Civil Aviation Authority of Macau (AACM) yesterday shows its drone ban logo.

Indonesian, Thai TikTok mini dramas prove popular: MGTO

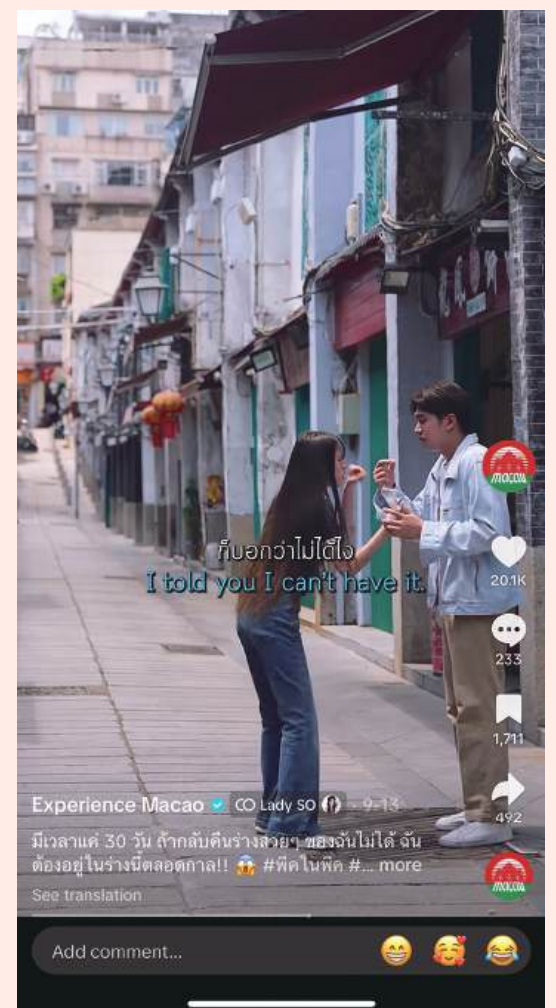
Rui Pastorin

The Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) said in a recent statement that its official account on social media and short-form online video platform “TikTok” has debuted an Indonesian and Thai mini drama series that altogether garnered over 180 million aggregate views and was proving popular among audiences from the two countries.

The series, of which the highest single-episode view count was close to 30 million and are localised productions, comprise the Indonesian series “Love between Time and Space”, which was released in June, and the Thai series “Switch Happen” that debuted in September, according to the statement, adding that both feature key opinion leaders from each country. Since their releases, the Indonesian series has so far racked up over 100 million views and 1.40 million interactions, while the Thai series garnered over 85 million views and nearly 500,000 interactions.

“The drama series portrays a panoramic picture of Macau’s cityscape, profound history and vibrant culture”, the statement said, comprising 22 episodes lasting between three to five minutes. Key filming locations feature 10 local attractions such as the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Ruins of St. Paul’s, Travessa da Paixão (戀愛巷), the Macau Tower Convention and Entertainment Centre, Cotai, and Taipa Village.

MGTO’s TikTok account currently has over 3.10 million followers from Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia and the Middle East, according to the statement. The ongoing popularity of the two series has led to an increasing follower count and international engagement, with some viewers expressing interest in visiting Macau, the statement said. ■



This screenshot recently provided by the Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) shows a scene from the Thai mini drama series on MGTO’s TikTok account.

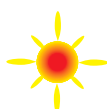
Published since Aug 2004

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- Printed by Tipografia Welfare Lda., 82-86 Rua dos Pescadores
- Wire services – AFP, Xinhua
- Chatbots: Poe, DeepSeek

MACAU POST

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FORCE 5 TO 6 NORTHERLY
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RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL
RANGE BETWEEN 25% AND 60%.



15°C~23°C

Source: SMG

FM Commissioner's Office, local govt co-host 'The Road to Chinese Modernisation' donation ceremony

Khalel Vallo

The Office of the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China in the Macao Special Administrative Region, in conjunction with the local government, held a donation ceremony yesterday to present the central authorities' official documentary "The Road to Chinese Modernisation" to public broadcasters of Portuguese-speaking countries (PSCs).

The ceremony, titled "Decoding China's Governance, Understanding China's Miracle", was organised by local public broadcaster TDM at its Macau Forum II Studio. The attendees included TDM Chairperson Lorman Lo Song Man, Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) President Deland Leong

Wai Man, the consuls-general of Angola, Mozambique and Portugal in Macau, and representatives of the public broadcasters of Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Portugal and Timor-Leste (East Timor).

Leong said in a speech that the foreign ministry's commission in Macau has presented outstanding documentaries about China to PSCs for four consecutive years, which "expanded Macau's role as an important window for cultural exchanges between China and Portuguese-speaking countries" aiming to strengthen bilateral friendship.

Meanwhile, Cheng Lei, acting foreign ministry commissioner, said in his speech that this year's documentary provides an in-depth description of the "success code of

China's governance," adding that the recent 4th Plenary Session of the 20th Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee sent a clear signal about China's commitment to high-level opening-up, which "will create broader development opportunities for all countries".

According to a TDM statement yesterday, the representatives from PSC public broadcasters expressed gratitude for the donated documentary, saying that the Chinese proposals and approaches have been well received among PSC audiences and that

they "hope to continue serving as a bridge for cooperation". The statement said that the PSC broadcasters will visit the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin today for a briefing on integrated development.

The statement said that the ceremony aimed to reinforce Macau's role as a platform for China-PSC exchanges and strengthen ties between broadcasters from the participating countries, supporting their continued cooperation in culture, media, and public communication. ■



TDM Chairperson Lorman Lo Song Man (left) and Acting Commissioner of the Office of the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China in the Macao Special Administrative Region Cheng Lei address yesterday's "Decoding China's Governance, Understanding China's Miracle" ceremony at the Macau Forum II TDM Studio in Zape.

— Photos: Khalel Vallo



A variety of works are displayed at the "ARTM 25 Years – Past, Present and Future" exhibition at the Rui Cunha Foundation (FRC) gallery. — Photos: Rui Pastorin

'ARTM 25 Years – Past, Present and Future' exhibition presents works by over 30 participants

Rui Pastorin

The ongoing collective exhibition "ARTM 25 Years – Past, Present and Future" is giving gallerygoers at the Rui Cunha Foundation (FRC) a retrospective of achievements as well as a showcase of artworks by over 30 participants until Saturday.

The exhibition of the Association of Rehabilitation of Drug Abusers of Macau (ARTM), which marks its 25th anniversary, features work including ceramics and acrylic and oil paintings. Upon entering, they will also be able to see pictures of the association and its activities throughout the years in addition to the many artworks displayed across the gallery.

The artworks were created by ARTM's residents, which are also showcased with pieces by senior residents that reflect "their unique experiences, life stories, and perspectives". Exhibitiongoers may also find creations made by inmates during the relapse prevention group in Coloane Prison, according to the FRC website.

The group highlighted in a statement

displayed at the gallery the importance of the arts in recovery, with ARTM residents motivated to use colour and shapes to express their thoughts and feelings. The association also remarked on the support it received that allowed the resulting arts and crafts to be shown at annual exhibitions, creating a meaningful journey. In all, the association "wanted to reinforce the importance of hope and courage in recovery but also in each one's life. The challenge is to learn from our experience, live the present moment, here and now, and visualise a happier and healthier life in the future", the statement said.

The group also highlighted in the statement that reflecting on the past reveals a journey of achievements built on persistence and dedication, providing a solid foundation for the present and fostering hope for an innovative future.

Exhibitiongoers may visit the exhibition from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. today and tomorrow, as well as from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. on Saturday. One can find the free-admission gallery at 749 Avenida da Praia Grande. ■

orbis 奧比斯

看見不一樣的可愛
Discover a Different Kind of Cuteness

Support 2025 Action for Sight

Action for Sight (AFS) is an annual key campaign of Orbis Macau that is launched alongside World Sight Day to draw attention towards avoidable visual impairment and blindness issues, while encouraging everyone to take action for sight.

Dedicated efforts are directed towards advocating the importance of eye health and care to the local community, as Orbis Macau fundraise for Orbis' global sight saving programs to transform lives and sustainable trainings to build capacity, so that equitable and quality eye care can be made accessible to more visually impaired patients living in under-resourced countries. Visit Orbis Virtual Exhibition at www.orbis.org/mo-afs to find out more about Orbis and our work.

This year, with the theme of **Discover a Different Kind of Cuteness** Orbis Macau aims to remind the public that it is through healthy sight that we can see clearly and perceive our surrounding and discern danger, and at the same time be able to discover all of which we find aesthetically appealing. While for patients living in low- to middle- income countries, when they are presented with sight-saving aid through the invaluable support extended to Orbis by each of our supporter, their lives are transformed, along with that of their families and communities.

Meet Charity from Zambia, who relied on farming work to provide for her family, but when the vision of one of her eyes affected her work, she lost her job. Soon after she became a widow and made matter worst, the vision of her other eye began to deteriorate. Thanks to our supporters and partners of who made Orbis' programs possible, she was diagnosed with bi-lateral cataracts during one of such programs, and received the sight-saving surgery. Like other patients helped, she regained her independence and can work once again to support her young family!

Prioritize eye health and care for yourself and your loved ones, as well as those in need!

Support 2025 AFS today! Each donation made will be presented with an adorable theme stickers, and donation of \$100 or above will receive an additional commemorative AFS pin.

It is because of the benevolent support extended to Orbis that we can present more visually impaired patients like Charity with healthy sight to thrive!

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This photograph, captured by Chan in 2012 using a multi-shot stitching technique, depicts a couple selling chicken at the Red Market.



Using a photo of the renovated Red Market as its source, Situ used an artificial intelligence program to create an image in the style of an oil painting, as part of her installation. – Photos provided by MyLand Culture

‘Echoes of the Red Market’: art & community in Macau’s historic heart

Interview by William Chan

The “Red Market Art and Cultural Fest 2025-2026,” a two-year programme spearheaded by local art group MyLand Culture launched its opening ceremony at the Red Market, officially known as Almirante Lacerda Market, on November 15, coinciding with the opening of the “Echoes of the Red Market” exhibition.

Its curators and artists talked to the *Post* in an exclusive interview at the traditional wet market on Monday.

“The festival’s programme is designed to revitalise community energy, attract foot traffic, stimulate economic activities, and foster collaborative learning,” Pal Lok Chok, president of MyLand Culture and Director of the Fest, noted. “The core aim is to explore how traditional markets can preserve local culture and folk wisdom amid evolving times, promoting creative placemaking with all Red Market stakeholders.”

“The ‘Echoes of the Red Market’ exhibition, displayed within the market itself, is a powerful testament to this vision,” curator Chang Chan explained, adding that the exhibition is divided into a photography collection and an art installation. “Through photographs of fleeting moments in the Red Market over the years and an installation which recreates a kitchen space, the exhibition invites visitors to explore urban memories and interpersonal connections within community public spaces.”

Chan Hin Io and the art of connection

Veteran photographer Chan Hin Io, whose work forms the first half of the exhibition, describes his practice as “rooted in the community.” His decades-long project of documenting Macau’s urban development and its people as a labour of love, built on genuine relationships with the market’s vendors.

“I will often meet with the neighbours, chat with them,” Chan shared. “This is a necessary part of my work as a community-based photographer. The information and



(From left to right) “Echoes of the Red Market” curator Chang Chan, installation artist Situ Jian, photographer Chan Hin Io and President of MyLand Culture Pal Lok Chok pose in front of the exhibition area at the Red Market. – Photo: William Chan

conversations we have are a great help to my photography.”

Chan’s collection spans decades, with some of the earliest photos dating back to the 2000s, capturing the now-vanished landscape of the surrounding area, such as the old Tou Fa Kong (“桃花崗”). His most striking pieces are large-format panoramic images of the market’s interior, which he revealed were created using a multi-shot stitching method with a specialised lens.

“I use three separate shots stitched together,” he explained, noting that the technique, which he believes is unique to his work, allowed him to capture the market’s vertical lines and vast scale without distortion. This meticulous approach is a fitting parallel to the structured chaos of the market itself.

The true value of his work, however, lies in its emotional resonance. “The people in the photos are often here at the market,” Chan said. “They can see the scenes of their past work, which creates a sense of familiarity and brings back memories of that time.”

Situ Jian and the domestic echo

The second half of the exhibition, Situ Jian’s installation, offers a deeply personal counterpoint to Chan’s documentary style. Titled “Kitchen Memory,” the work transforms one of the market stalls into a domestic kitchen space, symbolising the market’s role as a bridge between the public sphere and private homes.

Situ, an artist who has recently embraced installation and mixed media, explained her shift from traditional painting: “I started thinking about why I couldn’t paint anymore after having children. It wasn’t just time; it was the reality of keeping my art materials separate from the food preparation.” This conflict between the artist’s life and the demands of a mother and homemaker became the central theme.

Her installation is a collage of domestic life, featuring real kitchen objects that she used for paintings from her home – a chopping board, old jars – interspersed with

artistic elements. The jars, for instance, are filled with “memories” like stationery and dried food, mimicking the vendors’ own cluttered stalls. She even included a small, wilting plant, a nod to her interest in “marginal objects” in the city, such as stray animals and housewives.

Situ’s work is a deliberate attempt to connect with the market community. She uses elements familiar to the vendors, such as aprons, rubber gloves, and even a mock-up of salted fish made from tin foil, to create a sense of belonging.

“I really want the neighbours and the stall owners to like it,” she said. “They are here every day. If they find it jarring, it would be a failure.” The response has been overwhelmingly positive, with vendors recognising the familiar elements and the installation’s depiction of the market building itself.

“The exhibition space changes every day. People add things, and the plants might wilt, so it’s a living, breathing installation,” she said. This constant flux perfectly mirrors the organic, ever-changing environment of the Red Market, ensuring that the “echoes” resonate not just with the past, but with the present moment.

The exhibition is on view until December 14 at Stalls J-032 to J-035 on the ground floor. It is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., with a break between 1 p.m. and 2 p.m. Lok also drew attention to the hand-illustrated market zine*, “A Pocketful of Red Market,” created by the illustrator Yang Sio Maan. Visitors can either spend 50 patacas at the market or share a personal market story to redeem the zine. Looking ahead, the initiative will continue to offer a variety of activities, including market workshops, artist residency programmes, and art exhibitions.

*The word is a direct shortening of the word “magazine” or “fanzine.” It emerged from the science fiction fan communities of the 1930s and 40s (“fanzines”) and was later cemented by the punk and feminist movements of the 1970s-90s, which used zines as a vital communication tool.

Police nab local deliveryman for selling & using drugs



Judiciary Police (PJ) officers escort the hooded suspect to a PJ van outside the PJ headquarters in Zape yesterday. — Photo: Ada Lei

Ada Lei

A local deliveryman was arrested on Tuesday for selling and taking drugs, Judiciary Police (PJ) spokesman Ho Wai Lok said during a special press conference yesterday.

Ho identified the suspect as a 34-year-old male surnamed Leong.

According to Ho, based on a tip-off, the Judiciary Police (PJ) identified Leong as a suspect smuggling drugs from Hong Kong to Macau to sell them.

The police apprehended Leong when he was entering Macau on Tuesday evening through the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge (HZMB) Macau checkpoint. The police seized a total of four packets of methamphetamine (also known as ice), weighing 9.56 grams, and three e-cigarette cartridges containing etomidate*, with a total estimated street value of about 31,000 patacas.

Ho noted that the police later confirmed that Leong smuggled drugs from Hong Kong for personal use as well as to sell in Macau's night venues. Ho added that Leong tested positive for methamphetamine and has had a drug habit for at least eight years.

Leong was transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) yesterday, facing charges of drug use and drug trafficking. ■

*According to Wikipedia, Etomidate has been made into an e-cigarette liquid known as space oil (太空油) in Hong Kong or ketamine pod (popularly known as kpod) in Singapore, first emerging in mainland China in 2021. Vape liquids containing etomidate or its analogues may also be mixed with other drugs, including cannabis, synthetic cannabinoids, ketamine, designer benzodiazepines, and nitazene-derived opioid drugs.

Uni student loses 3 million yuan in 'fake police' scam: police

Ada Lei

A female university student from the Chinese mainland has fallen victim to a "fake police" scam, resulting in a total loss of 3 million yuan (3.37 million patacas), Judiciary Police (PJ) spokesman Ho Wai Lok said during a regular press conference yesterday.

According to Ho, the police received a report on Tuesday from the victim, who said that she had received a call on August 11 while in Macau. The caller claimed to be a "staff member from the Chinese mainland's immigration department" and accused her of sending a large number of fraudulent messages using her mainland phone number, requesting her cooperation in the investigation.

Ho noted that the caller requested that she ask her parents for money under the pretext of "paying a study abroad deposit." By August 30, her family had transferred 3 million yuan to her mainland bank account. After receiving the funds, between September 9 and November 12, she repeatedly transferred money



Judiciary Police (PJ) spokesman Ho Wai Lok looks on during yesterday's regular press conference. — Photo: Ada Lei

as instructed by the scammer to multiple designated mainland bank accounts, totalling 3 million yuan.

On November 17, the victim came across news reports related to similar scams. Suspecting she had been defrauded, she reported a total loss of 3 million yuan to the police on Tuesday. ■

MGTO, Amap launch smart tourism platform

Armindo Neves

The Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) announced in a statement yesterday that it has entered into a strategic partnership with Amap to jointly launch the "Smart Travel to Macau with One Click" platform.

Mainland web-mapping giant Amap is known as Gaode (高德) in Chinese.

The statement said that the platform leverages smart technology to enhance visitors' travel experience and deepen community tourism promotion, thereby establishing a comprehensive smart tourism service system and fostering cross-sector integration of tourism and technology.

According to the statement, Amap has designated Macau as its inaugural and premier "Super Destination" for this year, resulting in MGTO's partnership with Amap in launching the platform.

The statement said that the platform provides comprehensive tourism information and services covering dining, accommodation, transport, sightseeing, shopping and entertainment, thereby establishing a smart tourism service platform across the entire region.

According to the statement, the platform was officially launched yesterday on the Amap mobile app. By integrating official information from MGTO, including festival events, live status of attractions, transportation navigation, and curated travel routes, it provides users with personalised recommendations to help tourists deeply explore Macau, the statement said.

The statement pointed out that the platform utilises AI to enhance visitors' travel experience and includes a sharing feature designed to encourage users to exchange practical suggestions and travel tips.

According to the statement, the platform also introduces a "Street Scanning Rankings," which aims to reflect the popularity of businesses across different sectors by allowing visitors to rank them. The list helps tourists discover diverse in-depth experiences, aiming to drive foot traffic to local communities and to inject vitality into neighbourhood economies, the statement said. ■



This handout image provided by the Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) yesterday shows the "Smart Travel to Macau with One Click" platform on the Amap mobile app.

Health Bureau to host 4-month-long weight loss challenge

Armindo Neves

The Health Bureau (SSM) hosted a press conference titled "Healthy Weight Self-Management" yesterday at the bureau's conference hall adjacent to the public Conde de São Januário Hospital Centre.

According to SSM Disease Prevention and Control Centre Health Promotion Division Chief Wong Weng Man, the bureau will host the four-month long healthy weight promotion drive named "Citywide Weight Loss Challenge - The Power of Nutrition and Exercise" between February 9 and May 9. The online registration started yesterday.

Wong also said that the challenge is divided into individual and team categories. According to Wong, the individual category can accommodate up to 100 participants, while each team must consist of three to five members. The maximum number of participants in the challenge amounts to 250. Participants who reduce their body weight by 3 percent or more by the end of the challenge will receive a sports watch. For teams, if all members meet the weight-loss target, each will receive a sports watch, and the team will collectively be awarded an additional 500 patacas in sports equipment vouchers.

According to Wong, in



This handout image photo provided by the Health Bureau yesterday shows the prizes in its weight-loss challenge starting next year.

alignment with World Obesity Day on March 4, the bureau will organise a walking event on March 1 next year. The initiative, according to Wong, aims to engage participants in the weight-loss challenge and their families, encouraging them to incorporate physical activity into their daily routines as a sustainable approach to weight management. Wong also said that the event also seeks to foster mutual support among participants and enhance the collective momentum of the campaign.

Meanwhile, Wong also said that according to the "2016 Macau Health Survey" over half of the adult population in Macau exceeded the ideal weight range, reflecting a 5.7 percent increase compared to the 2006 data. Wong also pointed out that the bureau will conduct another "Macau Health Survey" next year to assess residents' current weight status. Wong said he expected that the weight metrics among local residents are likely to show an upward trend. ■

HK housing estate fire kills at least 36, 279 missing, 29 in hospital

Continued from p.1

"The temperature at the scene is very high and there are some floors where we have been unable to reach people who requested help, but we will keep trying," said Derek Armstrong Chan, the deputy director of fire service operations.

Speaking in a media briefing some five hours after the blaze started, Chan said scaffolding at Wang Cheong House at Wang Fuk Court caught fire first, and it quickly spread to all but one of the estate's eight blocks.

Chan described the situation in three of the eight blocks ablaze as severe.

"We received numerous assistance calls from the public, and also debris and scaffolding of the affected buildings are falling down, so they pose additional danger to our frontline personnel," he said.

"Besides, the temperature inside the buildings concerned are very high. It's quite difficult for us to enter the building and go upstairs to conduct firefighting and rescue operations."

Chan said more than 750

firefighters and paramedics have been deployed in the operation.

He said the fire likely spread from one building to another due to the wind and drifting debris, although he added authorities are investigating the cause of the blaze.

Hong Kong's hospital authority said 23 people were injured, with six in critical condition and 11 listed as serious.

'Dare not leave'

A Tai Po resident surnamed So, 57, earlier told AFP near the scene that the fire was "heartbreaking".

"There's nothing that can be done about the property. We can only hope that everyone, no matter old or young, can return safely," So said.

An apartment owner in his 40s who did not want to give his name told AFP that the government needed to help those made homeless by the blaze.

"The fire is not yet under control and I dare not leave, and I don't know what I can do," he said.

Residents were seen being evacuated via large coaches, with local media reporting that adjacent blocks were also being cleared.

Authorities set up a casualty hotline and opened two temporary shelters in nearby community centres.

Sections of a nearby highway were also closed by the firefighting operation.

Deadly fires were once a regular scourge in densely populated Hong Kong, especially in poorer neighbourhoods.

However, safety measures have been ramped up in recent decades and such fires have become much less commonplace.

The Association for the Rights of Industrial Accident Victims expressed "deep concern" over scaffolding-related fires, noting similar incidents in April, May and October.

Four people were hospitalised after a separate fire on the bamboo scaffolding of a building in Hong Kong's central business district last month. — AFP, RTHK, MPD

11 macaques to be relocated to Seac Pai Van



This undated handout photo provided by the Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) yesterday shows the concrete spalling and exposed steel beams in the macaque cages in Flora Park.

Kristina Vallesteros

The Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) announced in a statement yesterday that it plans to relocate the 11 macaques currently housed in Flora Park (二龍喉公園) to Seac Pai Van Park (石排灣郊野公園).

The statement said the relocation will be carried out in an "orderly manner" early next month to provide the monkeys with a more comfortable and suitable living environment.

The move was deemed necessary as the macaque cages in Flora Park have been in use for many years and are showing significant wear and tear, such as concrete spalling and exposed steel beams. Furthermore, the bureau highlighted the issue of visitors feeding the macaques, which poses risks to the animals' health and can contribute to the spread of diseases.

The decision was made after obtaining the opinions of animal care experts from the Chinese mainland, the statement pointed out. Taking the animals' safety and health into primary consideration, the bureau will house the eleven macaques in the monkey pavilion in Seac Pai Van Park.

The statement described the new facility as a "naturalistic setting" for the primates. It noted that the monkey pavilion features activity areas with structures for climbing. Each area is connected to animal quarters equipped with a temperature conditioning system to ensure a comfortable space for the macaques to live and rest in all weather conditions. This will provide the newly relocated group with a more ideal living space, the statement concluded. ■

Kam Pek Paradise Casino in Zape to shut for good on Monday night: govt

Tony Wong

Kam Pek Paradise Casino in Zape, one of the city's remaining five "satellite casinos", will close for good after midnight on Monday next week, the Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau (DICJ) announced in a statement yesterday.

"Kam Pek" means "Golden Jade".

The government announced in June that in compliance with the three-year transition period stipulated by the new legislation amending the gaming law, all of the city's then 11 satellite casinos had decided to close for good by December 31 this year. Grandview Casino in Taipa, which closed in late July, was the first of them to cease operations.

After Grand Dragon Casino, also in Taipa, closed in September, two satellite casinos in the peninsula, namely Emperor Palace Casino in Nam Van district and Waldo Casino in Zape, ceased operations late last month.

Legend Palace Casino, located in the Macau Fisherman's Wharf entertainment complex in Nape, closed for good two weeks ago, while Casa Real Casino in Zape ceased operations on Friday night last week.

Ponte 16 Casino located in the Ponte 16 hotel resort in the Inner Harbour district will close for good after midnight tomorrow.

Consequently, Kam Pek Paradise

Casino will be the eighth to cease operations. After its scheduled closure early next week, there will still be three satellite casinos in Macau.

Unlike all other satellite casinos which were or are located in hotels, Kam Pek Paradise Casino is housed in an office building, namely on the first to fifth floors of San Kin Yip Commercial Centre on Avenida da Amizade, near Hotel Lisboa.

After Kam Pek Paradise Casino's closure, the three satellite casinos still in operation comprise Fortuna Casino located in Hotel Fortuna in Zape, Landmark Casino located in New Orient Landmark Hotel in Zape, and Le Royal Arc Casino located in L'Arc Hotel in Nape.

The so-called satellite casinos in Macau are formally owned by gaming concessionaires but are actually run and managed by third parties as they are housed on premises that are not owned by the respective gaming concessionaires.

After the three-year transition period, which is scheduled to end on December 31 this year, all satellite casinos must close, unless the respective gaming concessionaire chooses to hire a "management company" to operate the casino. However, such a management company is only allowed to receive a management fee from the respective gaming concessionaire, no

longer being permitted to share in the casino's revenues.

The three respective gaming concessionaires, SJM, Galaxy, and Melco, decided in June to terminate the operations of all 11 satellite casinos before the expiration of the transition period based on their respective commercial decisions, meaning that none of the three gaming concessionaires decided to continue operating these casinos through the hiring of management companies after December 31 this year.

Among the 11 satellite casinos, Waldo Casino was formally owned by Galaxy, while Grand Dragon Casino was owned by Melco, with the other nine by SJM.

Unlike its other satellite casinos, SJM has signed an agreement to acquire the ownership of L'Arc Hotel in order to convert Le Royal Arc Casino into a "directly-operated" casino after its scheduled closure as a satellite casino. After the acquisition gets off the ground, Le Royal Arc Casino will continue operating, but no longer as a third-party managed business but as a casino directly operated by SJM.

Yesterday's DICJ statement announced that after business negotiations, Kam Pek Paradise Casino's third-party operator and SJM decided to terminate the operations of the casino after 11:59 p.m. on Monday next week, i.e., it will cease operations from Tuesday next week.

The statement pledged that the Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau, in collaboration with the Labour Affairs Bureau (DSAL), will ensure that SJM fulfils its promise to ensure the employment of those working at Kam Pek Paradise Casino after its closure.

According to the statement, there are currently 584 employees working at Kam Pek Paradise Casino. ■

Seminar explores Macau poetry & literary identity

Kristina Vallesteros

The Círculo dos Amigos da Cultura de Macau (CAC – "Circle of the Friends of Macau's Culture") will host a seminar titled "Fonte do Lilau: A Dive into Poetry in Portuguese and in Dôci Papiaçam of Macau" according to a statement from the cultural association yesterday.

The free-admission, Portuguese-language event, supported by the Macau Foundation (FM), will feature Jorge Manuel de Abreu Arrimar as the keynote speaker. The statement said the seminar is scheduled for next Tuesday from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. at Albergue SCM*.

The seminar will discuss the definition of "Macau literature", the statement noted. It will examine the duality between "Macanese literature", which is written by local authors in Portuguese or local creole, Patuá**, and "literature of Macau", produced by both resident and transitory writers.

Customarily, the term "Macanese" refers to Macau's community of mixed Portuguese and Asian descent, as well as their diaspora, accounting for less than 2.0 percent of the local population.

The statement emphasised that the event will highlight the "hybrid and multicultural nature of the city's literary production, which

reflects the historic encounter between East and West."

The statement outlined that Arrimar, a former director of the National/Central Library of Macau and the author of several poetry books inspired by the city, including "Fonte do Lilau" ("Lilau Fountain") and "Secretos sinais" ("Secret Signs"). He was awarded the Medal of Cultural Merit in 1997 and now lives in Portugal, where he continues to publish works related to Macau.

The statement confirmed that registration for the seminar is mandatory due to limited space. One must register online in advance on a first-come, first-served basis via: <https://forms.igle/nvSkXeSMenPkSphz6>. For further information, one can contact the CAC directly. ■

*SCM stands for Santa Casa da Misericórdia (Holy House of Mercy), Macau's oldest charitable organisation.

**Patuá is Macau's critically endangered Portuguese-Asian Creole, nowadays spoken by just a few dozen people in Macau and a number of hundreds overseas, in California in particular. Patuá is also known as "Dôci Papiaçam di Macau" ("Macau's Sweet Language"). — MPD



Pedestrians cross the road outside Kam Pek Paradise Casino in Zape last night.

— Photo: Tony Wong

Govt to draft bill on Committee for Safeguarding National Security: Chan

Tony Wong

Secretary for Security Chan Tsz King said yesterday that the local government will draft a bill regulating the operation of the Macau Special Administrative Region's (MSAR) Committee for Safeguarding National Security, the organisational structure and operation of which are currently governed by an administrative regulation (bylaw).

Chan made the remarks during yesterday's one-day Q&A session in the Legislative Assembly's (AL) hemicycle about his portfolio's policy guidelines for next year.

Chan took office as the government's secretary for Security on October 16, succeeding Wong Sio Chak who became the government's secretary for Administration and Justice on that day. Yesterday's plenary session of the legislature was the first one that Chan addressed in his capacity as the government's secretary for Security.

Government-drafted bills must be passed by the legislature to become law, while government-drafted administrative regulations, aka by-laws, do not require the legislature's approval.

The MSAR government set up its Committee for Safeguarding National Security in 2018 through an administrative regulation, which is tasked with various duties and

functions concerning the safeguarding of the nation's sovereignty, security and development interests, such as formulating local policies on the safeguarding of national security and promoting work on improving the local legal system on safeguarding national security.

The Committee for Safeguarding National Security is chaired by the MSAR's chief executive, with the secretary for security as its vice-chairman.

The committee has an office tasked with providing administrative support to the committee. The office is headed by the secretary for security.

Since its establishment in 2018, the committee's administrative regulation was amended in 2021 adding the posts of a national security affairs adviser and three national security technical advisers appointed by the central government to the committee.

The national security affairs adviser, according to the administrative regulation's current version, is tasked with supervising, guiding, coordinating, and supporting the MSAR in safeguarding national security, while the three national security technical advisers are tasked with assisting the national security affairs adviser and advising on matters pertaining



Secretary for Security Chan Tsz King addresses yesterday's Q&A session about his portfolio's 2026 policy guidelines in the Legislative Assembly's (AL) hemicycle. — Photo: GCS

to the duties and functions of the office of the committee.

The post of the national security affairs adviser is taken by the director of the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the MSAR, while the posts of the three national security technical advisers are taken by other officials from the Liaison Office.

Moreover, since the Chief Executive Election Law and the Legislative Assembly Election Law

were amended last year, the MSAR's Committee for Safeguarding National Security has also been tasked with assessing whether chief executive election candidates uphold the MSAR Basic Law and bear allegiance to the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the MSAR, as well as assessing whether legislative election candidates uphold the MSAR Basic Law and bear allegiance to the MSAR.

However, these new duties are currently not formally listed in the current administrative regulation governing the committee's operation.

During yesterday's Q&A session, Chan said that the local government will prepare the drafting of a new bill regulating the organisational structure and operation of the MSAR's Committee for Safeguarding National Security.

Chan said that the new legislation aims to formally define the functions and powers of the committee while improving its organisational structure and management.

Chan underlined that after the new law takes effect in the future, the committee's statutory powers will be strengthened.

Chan said that the new functions and powers to be listed in the new bill will enable the local government to strengthen its education campaigns for safeguarding national security.

Chan also said that the future new law will enable the local government to roll out measures and policies aiming to consolidate the achievements in the organisation of its annual National Security Education Exhibition and other related activities and events.

Macau's National Security Education Exhibition, aiming to mark the country's National Security Education Day, has been jointly held by the MSAR government and the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the MSAR annually since 2018.

The annual one-month exhibition starts on April 15, which marks the country's annual National Security Education Day, which started in 2016.

Meanwhile, Chan also said that the Public Security Police (PSP) are preparing to set up a police station in one of the new subsidised home-ownership scheme (HOS) estates in the Zone A new urban area where residents started to move into earlier this year.

Meanwhile, Chan said that the sixth phase of the police forces' citywide CCTV surveillance system is expected to come into operation in 2027, consisting of the installation of 680 cameras. In addition, 120 cameras will be installed in Zone A, also expected to be completed in 2027. ■

Hainan to host talent-exchange conference next month

HAIKOU – The second China (Hainan) International Talent Exchange Conference will be held in Haikou, the capital of Hainan Province, from December 6 to 7, local authorities announced on Tuesday.

Themed "Support Special Customs Operations and Jointly Build a Talent Hub," the event will be the largest talent-exchange event ever held in Hainan, coming just ahead of the province's full launch of island-wide special customs operations on December 18. The conference also coincides with the final year of the province's One Million Talent Recruitment Action Plan.

Zhang Yuhui, head of the Hainan provincial talent management bureau, said that hosting the conference at this critical time demonstrates Hainan's determination to build a hub for talent and technological innovation, and to improve its open, flexible talent policies.

According to its organizers, the conference will focus on three areas: showcasing achievements, promoting integration and expanding cooperation. It will release key outcomes of the action plan, highlight professional contributions to the development of the Free Trade Port (FTP) and outline future policy directions.

The event will establish

exchange platforms for key sectors such as seed breeding, deep-sea technology, aerospace, the digital economy and green, low-carbon development, facilitating dialogue, knowledge sharing and the commercialization of research results to promote the deeper integration of talent and industry.

Leveraging Hainan's unique ecological advantages and FTP policy framework, the conference will also promote deeper cooperation with the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area and other regions by way of coordinated talent recruitment, policy alignment and resource sharing.

Zhang noted that this year's conference will see high-level participation and strong cross-sector integration, and will have an international outlook. Senior officials, leading experts in multiple fields, and representatives of international organizations and multinational corporations are scheduled to attend.

A series of activities, including speeches, industry matchmaking sessions and recruitment events, will foster cooperation between key industrial parks and skilled professionals. The conference will also utilize multilingual communication channels to expand its global reach and enhance Hainan's ability to attract talent from around the world. — Xinhua



A teacher guides students in playing the violin at a primary school in Shizhong District of Jinan City, Shandong Province, yesterday. In recent years, authorities in Shizhong have been encouraging schools to enhance aesthetic education by exposing their students to diverse arts-related extracurricular programs. — Xinhua

Taiwan's DPP slammed for squandering money on external favor

BEIJING – A mainland spokesperson yesterday criticized Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) authorities for squandering money – which could have been used to improve people's livelihoods and develop the island's economy – on weapon purchases and currying favor with external forces, warning that such selfish acts will only push Taiwan toward disaster.

Peng Qing'en, a spokesperson for the State Council Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO), made the remarks in response to Taiwan leader Lai Ching-te's recent claim of plans "to

propose a special defense budget worth US\$40 billion."

"The trend of China's reunification is unstoppable. Attempts to seek independence through US support or by force are destined to fail," Peng said.

When commenting on a sarcastic saying that the United States regards Taiwan as its ATM, he said that such remarks prove again and again that the US treats Taiwan as a chess piece to contain China and a tool to serve itself.

"Incapable of protecting the legitimate interests of Taiwan's people, the DPP authorities instead

squander the people's hard-earned money to fawn over the US, which will end up being discarded after being exploited," he said.

Peng also expressed firm opposition to proposals from certain US senators to legalize the "Six Assurances to Taiwan Act," denouncing the so-called six assurances as "completely wrong, illegal and invalid."

"They gravely violate the one-China principle and the provisions of the three China-US joint communiques, as well as the basic norms of international relations," he said. — Xinhua

Junta hails end to US protected status for Myanmar nationals

YANGON - Myanmar's junta applauded the Trump administration yesterday for halting a scheme that protected its citizens from deportation from the United States back to their war-racked homeland.

Around 4,000 Myanmar citizens are living in the United States with "Temporary Protected Status" (TPS), which shields foreign nationals from deportation to disaster zones and allows them the right to work.

Myanmar nationals were made eligible for the TPS programme after the military snatched power in a 2021 coup, sparking a devastating civil war and a raft of repressive legal measures and arrests of activists.

However, Washington said on Monday it was removing Myanmar citizens' eligibility, citing "substantial steps toward political stability" that include upcoming elections and this summer's ending of emergency rule.

The move has been panned by monitors who describe the vote as a charade, while localised martial law remains in many places and the military is conscripting men to bolster its ranks.

Junta spokesman Zaw Min Tun said Washington's announcement was "a positive statement".

"Myanmar citizens in the United States can come back to the motherland," he said in a statement, urging them to "come back to

Myanmar and vote in the general election".

"We would like to inform you that you are all welcome to participate in building a modern and developed nation," he said.

Announcing the TPS stoppage, President Donald Trump's Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said "it is safe for Burmese citizens to return home".

However, the UN's Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM) warned yesterday that it was increasingly receiving reports of "serious international crimes committed in Myanmar in the run-up to the elections".

Detention of election critics and air strikes to claw back territory ahead

of the scheduled vote "may amount to persecution and spreading terror in a civilian population as crimes against humanity", IIMM head Nicholas Koumjian said in a statement.

There is no official toll for Myanmar's civil war and estimates vary widely.

According to non-profit organisation Armed Conflict Location & Event Data, which tallies media reports of violence, as many as 90,000 have been killed on all sides since the 2021 coup.

Me Me Khant, executive director and co-founder of US-based advocacy group Students for Free Burma, called the TPS stoppage "a slap in the face to the community" of exiled citizens.

"It's obviously really not safe to go back home," she told AFP. "Everyone is really upset by the news."

Myanmar's military is organising phased elections from December 28, projecting a return to normality after grabbing power and jailing democracy figurehead Aung San Suu Kyi.

Suu Kyi's party has been dissolved, new junta-enforced rules punish protests against the poll with up to a decade in prison, and swaths of the nation are locked in combat.

"To hold elections under these circumstances is unfathomable," Volker Turk, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, told AFP this month. — AFP



A man rides a jet ski through flood waters in Hat Yai in Thailand's southern Songkhla province yesterday, as severe flooding affected thousands of people in the country's south following days of heavy rain. Tens of thousands of people in Thailand and neighbouring Malaysia were displaced by widespread flooding, with streets submerged, homes inundated and at least 34 dead, officials said yesterday. — AFP

11 killed, 3 injured in road crash in the Philippines

MANILA—11 people were killed and three others were wounded, some critically, after a 10-wheeler truck collided with a passenger van along a highway in Albay province, southeast of Manila, yesterday morning, police said.

Police said the crash happened past 9 a.m. local time, along a

highway in the municipality of Camalig.

Video footage of the incident showed a truck travelling at high speed before crashing into the van carrying 14 people while travelling in the opposite lane.

The impact sent both vehicles plunging off the road, with the truck

landing on top of the van, pinning its passengers beneath it.

Rescuers worked for hours extricating the passengers from the totally wrecked vehicles.

Police said the truck's brakes failed, causing it to travel at high speed.

The truck driver and helper were among the injured. — Xinhua

Thai appeal court approves extradition of Vietnamese activist

BANGKOK — A Thai appeal court ruled yesterday to allow the extradition of a prominent Vietnamese activist who was granted refugee status by the UN and faces a decade in prison in Vietnam.

Judges in Bangkok ruled that Y Quynh Bdap, who has lived in exile in Thailand since 2018, could be sent back to his home country, where a court sentenced him in absentia in January 2024 for terrorism offences.

Bdap was convicted for remotely orchestrating 2023 attacks in which gunmen on motorbikes opened fire on two police posts in Vietnam's Central Highlands, killing nine people in a rare act of violence against the communist authorities. He has denied the allegations.

The appeal court upheld a lower court's decision, a Thai judge said yesterday.

"The court found insufficient evidence to support that he would be in danger of torture or forced disappearance, and his appeal is not reasonable," the judge read in court.

However, UN-affiliated experts warned last year that Bdap would be at risk of "torture or other ill-treatment or punishment" if sent back to Vietnam.

Vietnamese police have said Bdap is the founder of Montagnards Stand for Justice and accused him of directing people there to carry out the 2023 attacks.

The group advocates for freedom of religion for Vietnam's hill tribes and ethnic minority groups, which have been branded "terrorists" by the authorities.

Montagnards — the collective name for various tribes in the Central Highlands — sided with the

US-backed south during Vietnam's decades-long war.

Some have called for more autonomy, while others abroad advocate independence for the region.

Bdap was granted refugee status by the United Nations but he has been detained in a Bangkok prison since December when he was jailed for staying in the country without proper travel documents.

His lawyer Nadthasiri Bergman told AFP that he could be extradited to Vietnam as soon as today.

"This means he could face discrimination and ill treatment based on his religious practice when back in Vietnam," she said.

Thailand has no extradition agreement with Vietnam and the court decision needs to be approved by the government. — AFP

Myanmar election not free or credible: Thai FM

BANGKOK — Military-ruled Myanmar's election starting next month will be neither free nor credible, Thailand's foreign minister said, calling for the release of detained democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Myanmar's military ousted the Nobel laureate's elected government and seized power in a 2021 coup, sparking a civil war.

The junta is trumpeting the vote as an opportunity for reconciliation, but neither Aung San Suu Kyi nor her dissolved National League for Democracy (NLD) will take part.

The election will not be held in the swathes of the country not controlled by the military or its allies, and analysts have dismissed it as a ploy to disguise continuing military rule.

"We want it to be free and credible, but it's not going to be the case, we know that," Thailand's Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuanketkeow said late Tuesday.

"My feeling is that we won't be in a position to recognise the elections."

But he suggested it could be a stepping stone towards reform, saying that general Thein Sein was

elected president in an "imperfect" poll in 2010 and went on to release Aung San Suu Kyi, with the NLD winning the next poll.

"Maybe an imperfect election can also be a good opportunity to return the country back to stability and democracy," he told reporters in Bangkok.

Neighbouring Thailand hosts millions of people who have fled the conflict in Myanmar or left the country to seek work outside its moribund economy.

A career diplomat and former ambassador to France, Sihasak urged the Myanmar authorities to free 80-year-old Aung San Suu Kyi on humanitarian grounds.

"It's time to release her," he said. "Sometimes we must say things that are the right thing to say."

"She's been in custody for too long. At her age, we don't know the condition of her health, and so I hope that they do that the first thing, or immediately."

The first phase of voting in Myanmar begins on December 28, with a second slated for January 11, but subsequent rounds and a result date have not been announced.

— AFP



Palestinian Foreign Affairs and Expatriates Minister Varsen Aghabekian Shahin (second left) and Vietnam's Foreign Minister Le Hoai Trung (second right) attend a meeting in Hanoi yesterday. — AFP

Internet rights group challenges Australia under-16 social media ban

SYDNEY – An internet rights group launched a legal challenge yesterday to halt world-first Australian laws that will soon ban under-16s from social media.

From December 10, Australia will force the likes of Facebook, Instagram and TikTok to remove all users under the age of 16 or face hefty fines.

The Digital Freedom Project said it had challenged these laws in Australia's High Court, arguing they were an "unfair" assault on freedom of speech.

"This ban is a direct assault on young people's right to freedom of political communication" the Digital Freedom Project said in a statement.

The group said it filed the legal case along with two 15-year-olds to represent millions of young Australians who would lose their access to the "modern town square".

"We are the true digital natives and we want to remain educated, robust, and savvy in our digital world," said one of those plaintiffs, Noah Jones.

"We're disappointed in a lazy government that blanket bans under-16s rather than investing in programs to help kids be safe on social media."

There is keen interest in whether Australia's sweeping restrictions can work as regulators around the globe wrestle with the dangers of social media.

Australia's Communications Minister Anika Wells said the government would not back down.

Threats and intimidation

"We will not be intimidated by threats," Wells told parliament yesterday.

"We will not be intimidated by legal challenges. We will not be intimidated by big tech."

Hundreds of thousands of adolescents are expected to be impacted, with Instagram alone reporting about 350,000 Australian users aged 13 to 15.

Meta, the parent company of Facebook, has started deactivating accounts based on information such as the age given when they were created.

Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok are covered by the ban, as are streaming platforms Kick and Twitch.

Other popular apps and websites such as Roblox, Pinterest and WhatsApp are currently exempt – but the list remains under review.

Social media companies have previously described the laws as "vague", "problematic" and "rushed".

The Australian government concedes the ban will be far from perfect at the outset, and some underage users will fall through the cracks as issues are ironed out.

But platforms face the threat of US\$32 million fines if they fail to take "reasonable steps" to comply.

On paper, the ban is one of the strictest in the world.

But some experts are concerned that the law will be merely symbolic because of the difficulty in implementing and policing online age verification. – AFP



Hakyung Lee looks down during her sentencing to life imprisonment for the murder of her two children, whose bodies were found stuffed into suitcases in a storage locker, at Auckland High Court, Auckland, New Zealand, yesterday. Lee, a New Zealand citizen originally from South Korea, was earlier this year found guilty of killing her children in a grisly crime dubbed the country's "suitcase murders". – AFP

Bangladesh authorities seize 10kgs gold from Hasina's bank lockers

DHAKA – Anti-corruption authorities in Bangladesh have seized about 10 kilograms of gold worth about US\$1.3 million from bank lockers belonging to ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina, officials said yesterday.

Officials from the Central Intelligence Cell (CIC) of the National Board of Revenue said the discovery was made after opening lockers that had been seized in September.

"Following a court order, we opened the lockers and found about 9.7 kilograms of gold belonging to the former prime minister," a senior CIC official told AFP, requesting anonymity.

The haul included gold coins, bars and jewellery.

Investigators said Hasina had failed to deposit some of the gifts she

received while in office at the state treasury, known as "Toshakhana", as required by law.

The National Board of Revenue is also probing alleged tax evasion and examining whether Hasina declared the recovered gold in her tax filings.

Bangladesh has been in political turmoil since the end of Hasina's rule, and violence has marred campaigning for elections expected in February 2026.

Earlier this month, the International Crimes Tribunal sentenced Hasina to death over a deadly crackdown against a student-led uprising.

The United Nations says up to 1,400 people were killed in the crackdown as Hasina tried to cling to power. – AFP

Robots take centre stage at Singapore 'Olympiad'

SINGAPORE – The World Robot Olympiad opened in Singapore yesterday with hundreds of international students, some as young as eight, set to compete using automatons to solve real-world problems.

The annual competition, which began in 2004 in Singapore and was held in Türkiye last year, highlights the importance of technology and science in improving daily lives, using the inventive spirit of young students.

Organisers said 594 teams, comprising 1,571 participants from 91 countries, have registered for competitions to be held today and tomorrow on the theme "The Future of Robots".

The theme "explores the way robotics can help solve global challenges and improve our lives", according to a fact sheet issued by the organisers.

Contestants aged between eight and 22 have all advanced from local and national qualifiers to compete on the global stage.

They will be grouped according to age to compete in the various categories.



Participants from more than 90 countries attend the opening ceremony of the World Robot Olympiad competition in Singapore yesterday. – AFP

One challenges them to "build and programme a robot that solves challenges on a field" that changes randomly for each round to allow the machines to make independent decisions.

Robots will duel each other in "double tennis" in the "RoboSports" category, while participants in another category will "develop a robot project that helps solve real-world problems".

A new category for 14 to 22-year-olds involves autonomous driving, with teams instructed to

"build a steering-drive robot to navigate a track independently", organisers said.

"This year's theme... invites participants to design intelligent machines for a smarter future. Robotics is a growth area for Singapore," Grace Fu, Singapore's minister for sustainability and the environment, said.

"We're developing autonomous vehicles, drones for the safe washing of high-rise facades and robots that support health care services," she said. – AFP

Thousands of trade union workers protest India's new labour codes

MUMBAI – Thousands of trade union workers across India protested yesterday against the government's rollout of new labour codes, saying they would lead to corporate exploitation and erode their hard-won rights.

The world's fifth-largest economy last week implemented long-awaited labour laws that will replace colonial-era legislation and simplify a maze of confusing regulation.

The overhaul consolidates 29 existing labour laws into four key codes, with the number of rules being cut from more than 1,400 to about 350 but unions say the reforms will hurt workers' rights.

Gautam Mody from the New Trade Union Initiative said workers from across all sectors were protesting yesterday outside factories and in many city centres.

"Workers have been blindsided by the government," he told AFP.

"We want fairness, justice and equity before the law which are being denied under the new codes," Mody said.

While the new regulations boost safety standards and mandate guaranteed social security benefits for gig workers, they also allow for longer factory shifts, make it tougher for workers to conduct strikes and easier for medium-sized firms to fire employees.

A controversial key provision raises the threshold for firms that needed prior government permission for layoffs from 100 to 300 workers – which means companies with up to 300 employees can retrench staff without any approval.

'Deceptive fraud'

The move has sparked worry among trade unions, aligned with parties opposed to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who have called it a "deceptive fraud" against the nation's working people.

The Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) said in a statement that the government wanted to portray these codes as "pro-worker" and "modernising".

But "in reality they constitute the most sweeping and aggressive abrogation of workers' hard-won rights and entitlements since Independence, aimed at facilitating corporate exploitation, contractualisation and unrestrained hire-and-fire".

Modi has said the overhaul represented an opportunity to eliminate compliance-intensive labour laws, often seen as preventing the Indian economy from wooing foreign investors.

He has described the changes as "one of the most comprehensive

and progressive labour-orientated reforms since Independence."

India remains the world's fastest-growing major economy, but a slowdown over the last year has left it short of the eight percent growth rate that most economists say is needed to create millions of well paying jobs for its people.

US President Donald Trump's tariff blitz, partly sparked by the White House's anger over Delhi's purchases of Russian oil, has also clouded the country's economic outlook and raised questions over its energy security.

Analysts at Nomura said in a recent note that the labour law reform was an "attempt to modernise disparate, arcane and compliance-intensive labour laws" that have emerged as one of the "major challenges to the ease of doing business".

But they added it was "part of a broader trend by the government to hasten economic reforms, especially in the wake of the 50 percent Trump tariffs". – AFP



Indian Trade Union members hold placards during a protest against the government's new labour code in New Delhi, India yesterday. – AFP

Israel returns 15 bodies to Gaza after hostage remains identified

KHAN YUNIS, Palestinian Territories – The health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said Israel returned the bodies of 15 Palestinian prisoners yesterday as part of the exchange deal under the US-brokered ceasefire.

It came after Israel announced that a body handed over by Gaza militants on Tuesday was that of Dror Or, one of the last three deceased hostages held in the Palestinian territory.

Under the ceasefire deal, which came into effect on October 10, Israel is required to hand over the bodies of 15 Palestinians for every deceased Israeli returned.

“The Ministry of Health announces the receipt of 15 bodies of martyrs released today by the Israeli occupation via the International Committee of the Red Cross, bringing the total number of bodies received to 345,” the Gaza ministry said in a statement.

The ICRC facilitates the transfers in its role as a neutral intermediary.

Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem said in a statement that the handover “reflects Hamas’s steadfast commitment to fully complete the exchange process and its ongoing efforts to finalise it despite significant difficulties”.

AFP witnessed the 15 bodies, in white body bags, being carried inside the morgue at Gaza’s Nasser Hospital in the southern city of Khan Yunis.

Mahmud Ashour, spokesman for the forensic evidence department in Hamas-run Gaza, told AFP that of the 345 bodies received via the ICRC, 99 have now been identified.

“We always receive these bodies in a state of decomposition and with facial features missing,” he said.

“We also see signs of injuries on the bodies, and we do not know the true circumstances” that led to their deaths, he added.

“The families face extreme difficulty in identifying the bodies.”

‘Agonising uncertainty’

Earlier Wednesday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office said that Or’s family had been informed that his remains had been identified.

“The government of Israel shares in the deep sorrow of the Or family and all the families of the fallen hostages,” it said.

The Gaza war was sparked by Hamas’s October 7, 2023 attack on Israel, which resulted in the deaths of 1,221 people.

Militants took 251 people hostage during the attack.

Israel’s retaliatory assault on Gaza has killed at least 69,785 people, according to figures from the territory’s health ministry that the UN considers reliable.

Or, 48, was killed in the October 7, 2023 attack on his home in kibbutz Beeri and his body taken to Gaza. He was head chef and cheesemaker in the kibbutz dairy.

“Dror’s return provides some measure of comfort to a family that has lived with agonising uncertainty and doubt for over two years,” the Hostages and Missing Families Forum said in a statement.

“We will not rest until the last hostage is brought home.”

The last two hostages’ bodies still in Gaza are those of Israeli Ran Gvili and Thai national Sudthisak Rinthalak.

At the start of the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, militants were holding 20 living hostages and 28 bodies of deceased captives.

Hamas has since released all the living hostages and returned the remains of 26 dead hostages.

In exchange, Israel has released nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners in its custody and returned the bodies of hundreds of dead Palestinians. – AFP

Israeli army fortifying positions in Lebanon



A banner bearing a portrait of Pope Leo XIV is displayed in Hazmiyeh, east of Beirut, yesterday. In his first trip abroad since becoming head of the Catholic Church, US-born Pope Leo XIV will travel to Turkey and Lebanon, arriving in Beirut on Sunday. – AFP

Sylvie Husson

PARIS – One year after a ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah, the Israeli army still maintains five positions in south Lebanon, with fortifications and widened access routes, according to satellite images analysed by AFP.

The November 27, 2024 truce, which sought to end more than a year of hostilities between Israel and the Iran-backed militant group, required Israel to fully withdraw troops from Lebanon within 60 days.

Hezbollah was to pull its forces north of the Litani River, some 30 kilometres from the Israeli border, and its military infrastructure in the area was to be dismantled.

Israel has kept troops in five positions that it deems strategic, saying it wants to ensure Hezbollah does not carry out any military activities in south Lebanon.

AFP was able to pinpoint these bases through satellite images from Planet Labs PBC.

Located on ridges across the Blue Line – the de facto border – these positions allow the Israeli army to control a series of Lebanese border villages, a move it considers key to protecting nearby Israeli communities.

The positions offer a direct view of the towns and villages of Kfar Kila, Aita al-Shaab, Maroun al-Ras, Aitaroun, Blida, Markaba and Hula – among the most destroyed by Israeli strikes and ground operations.

Satellite images show that all buildings near the Hatzivoni military outpost, between Hula and Markaba, have been destroyed.

Surrounded by fortifications including those made of earthen embankments, the positions of approximately one to two hectares in size are usually made up of a larger section housing temporary buildings and a smaller part generally for military vehicles.

The westernmost outpost in Labbounh appears to have been built around 150 metres from a United Nations peacekeepers base and the Blue Line.

The easternmost base, on the Hamames hill, is the deepest position in Lebanese territory, located around 1.5 kilometres from the border.

Satellite images also show that the access roads to these positions have been significantly widened to facilitate vehicle movement.

As in the Gaza Strip, the Israeli army has carried out the systematic demolition of buildings and infrastructure in villages closest to the border, an area that was also heavily bombed.

According to a comparison of satellite images by American researchers Corey Scher and Jamon Van Den Hoek from the University of Oregon, last updated in late January, the village of Kfar Kila had been 65 percent destroyed, with Aita al-Shaab and Yarin at 57 percent and 55 percent destroyed respectively.

– AFP

Palestine Action launches court bid to scrap UK ban

Marie Heuclin and Helen Rowe

LONDON – The co-founder of Palestine Action challenged a UK ban on the activist group yesterday that has led to mass arrests and sparked concerns over free speech and civil liberties.

The ban – which makes being a member of the group or supporting it a serious criminal offence punishable by up to 14 years in prison – has resulted in at least 2,300 arrests of demonstrators, according to protest organisers Defend Our Juries.

United Nations human rights chief Volker Türk has called the ban “disproportionate and unnecessary”, while Europe’s human rights watchdog, the Council of Europe, criticised “excessive limits” on the right to protest.

The UK government proscribed the pro-Palestinian group in July days after activists, protesting the war in Gaza, broke into an air force base in southern England.

Prosecutors have said they caused an estimated £7 million (US\$9.3 million) of damage to two aircraft.

The legal action brought by the group’s co-founder Huda Ammori at London’s High Court is expected to end today.

The ban, under the Terrorism Act 2000, has put Palestine Action on a blacklist which also includes Palestinian militants Hamas and the Lebanese Iran-backed group Hezbollah.

Ammori’s lawyer, Raza Husain, argued yesterday the ban went against “the long tradition” of civil disobedience in the UK, and that the group “never encourages” harm against people.

He said “no direct action civil disobedience organisation” had previously been blacklisted under the UK’s terrorism laws and “such proscription is repugnant to the tradition of the common law”.

Those arrested since July include students, teachers, pensioners and even an 83-year-old retired vicar, with many carried away from the protests by police.

According to London’s Met Police, so far 254 out of the more than 2,000 arrested have been charged with a lesser offence which carries a sentence of up to six months.

A small group of protesters gathered outside the court yesterday, waving Palestinian flags and shouting support for Palestine Action.

The interior ministry, or Home Office, has accused Palestine Action of conducting an “escalating campaign” involving “sustained criminal damage”, including to Britain’s national security infrastructure.

It also accuses the group of “intimidation, alleged violence and serious injuries”.

‘Not non-violent’

At a separate court hearing last week, prosecutors alleged a Palestine Action activist struck a police officer with a sledgehammer at an Israel-based defence firm’s UK site after breaking into the factory in Bristol in August.

Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper, defending the ban in August, said some supporters of the group “don’t know the full nature of this organisation because of court restrictions on reporting while serious prosecutions are under way.”

“But it’s really important that no-one is in any doubt that this is not a non-violent organisation,” she said, adding the government had received “clear security assessments and advice” before opting for a ban.

Set up in 2020, the group’s stated goal on its now-blocked website is to end “global participation in Israel’s genocidal and apartheid regime”.

It has mainly targeted weapons factories, especially those belonging to the Israeli defence group Elbit.

Since the ban came into force on July 5, protesters have held a string of rallies at which they have held up signs saying: “I oppose genocide, I support Palestine Action.”

Acclaimed British film director Ken Loach has called the ban on Palestine Action “absurd” and accused the government of being complicit in Israel’s “incredible crimes” in Gaza.

“This level of political repression is not what we expect in a democracy – it’s the kind of tactic typically associated with authoritarian regimes around the world,” a spokesperson for Defend Our Juries said.

Areeba Hamid, co-executive director of Greenpeace UK, said the government had broken past pledges that the Terrorism Act would not be used to prosecute people taking direct action.

“Classifying a protest group as a ‘terrorist organisation’ should send a chill down your spine,” Hamid said. – AFP

Mystery foot belongs to ancient human relative: scientists

Daniel Lawler

PARIS — Newly discovered fossils prove that a mysterious foot found in Ethiopia belongs to a little-known, recently named ancient human relative who lived alongside the species of the famous Lucy, scientists said yesterday.

The discovery is the latest twist in the tale of human evolution and could even cast some doubt on the status of Lucy's species, *Australopithecus afarensis*, as the direct ancestor of *Homo sapiens*.

Until the foot was discovered in Burtele in northeastern Ethiopia in 2009, Lucy's species was thought to be the only human relative living in the area more than three million years ago.

But the appendage clearly does not belong to Lucy's species because it has an opposable toe — similar to a thumb — allowing its owner to grab onto tree branches like apes.

The team of scientists who found the mystery foot went on to name a new species, *Australopithecus deyiremeda*, in 2015 based on some roughly 3.4-million-year-old jaw bones found in Burtele.

The announcement was met with some scepticism in scientific circles. Due to the scarcity of fossils, attempts to add a new branch to the human family tree usually provoke fierce debate.

The team was also unable to say that the foot bones — dubbed the Burtele foot — belonged to their new species.



*This undated picture released by Institute of Human Origins at Arizona State University shows part of the juvenile jawbone of the ancient human relative *Australopithecus deyiremeda* discovered in Afar Region, in Ethiopia, on the ground before being collected.* — AFP

Now, in a study published in the journal *Nature*, the scientists announced that new fossils including a jawbone with 12 teeth found at the site show that the foot was that of *A. deyiremeda*.

"We have no doubt about the Burtele foot belonging to the same species as these teeth and the jaw," lead study author, Yohannes Haile-Selassie of Arizona State University, told AFP.

The research also revealed more details about this species, offering

further clues about who could have been the true ancestor of us *Homo sapiens*.

'Co-existence deep in our ancestry'

A CT scan of the teeth suggested that *A. deyiremeda* was more primitive than its cousin Lucy, the study said.

Isotope analysis of the teeth meanwhile showed that its diet consisted mainly of leaves, fruit and nuts of trees.



This undated picture released by Institute of Human Origins at Arizona State University shows the Burtele foot, which had been a mystery since being discovered in Afar Region in Ethiopia, in 2009, with its elements in the anatomical position. — AFP

The grasping big toe also suggested this human relative spent more time in the trees. Big toes played an important role in human evolution, allowing our ancestors to leave the trees behind and walk on two legs.

A lingering question about *A. deyiremeda* was how it could have co-existed with Lucy's species at the same place and time, Haile-Selassie said.

The new research suggests that the former spent its time in

the forest, more likely eating from trees, while the latter spent more time on the ground, a difference that allowed them to live together.

It also demonstrates that "co-existence is deep in our ancestry", Haile-Selassie emphasised.

Finding our roots

John McNabb, a palaeolithic archaeologist at the UK's University of Southampton not involved in the study, praised the new research.

"There will always be sceptics, but I think these new finds, and their validation of older ones, will help many researchers to be more accepting of *A. deyiremeda*," he told AFP.

It also "adds a new player into the mix" in the search for the identity of our true ancestor, McNabb added.

Because *A. deyiremeda* was more primitive and had a less human-like foot than Lucy, it is unlikely to dethrone her as the prime suspect in this search, both scientists agreed.

But the discovery "opens this possibility that we might still find more species within that time period because it looks like the Australopithecids were experimenting with bipedality", or walking on two legs, Haile-Selassie said.

"Could there be another species which could be a better candidate to be the ancestor of the genus *Homo*?" he asked.

"We don't know — it depends on what we find." — AFP

Swede says he got cold feet over grenade attack on Israeli embassy

COPENHAGEN — A man hired for a grenade attack got cold feet at the last minute when he realised the target was the Israeli embassy in Denmark, he told a Copenhagen court, with the bombs finally being lobbed into the yard of a neighbouring house.

The 21-year-old Swede said he and an accomplice were given an address in the Danish capital they were supposed to attack.

"When I got there, I saw the guards, the flag, and I understood it was the Israeli embassy," he told the court.

He said it was then too late to pull out of the plan, but after a string of phone calls with an unidentified intermediary, it was agreed that the grenades could be thrown into a neighbouring yard, which his co-accused did.

"I was very clear that I wanted nothing to do with throwing a grenade at the Israeli embassy," he said.

"The compromise after the discussions was that it had to be a house nearby, to send a message," he said.

Two explosions were heard near the embassy on the night of October 2, 2024.

The other Swede on trial, an 18-year-old who was 16 at the time, has admitted to throwing the grenades.

He has also admitted shooting at the Israeli embassy in Stockholm the day before.

The teen told the Copenhagen court he was recruited by Swedish criminal network Foxtrot when he was 12 years old.

Last year Swedish intelligence services claimed Iran was recruiting members of Swedish criminal gangs to carry out attacks against Israeli institutions, which Tehran has denied.

Since the start of the Gaza war between Israel and Hamas in October 2023, several "Israeli interests in Sweden" have been targeted, according to the Swedish government.

In February 2024, police recovered a grenade that had been thrown into the grounds of the Israeli embassy in Stockholm.

In May the same year, gunshots were heard outside the embassy, prompting Sweden to boost security measures for Israeli interests and the Jewish community. — AFP

Insurance giant Allianz signals job cuts in AI shift

FRANKFURT AM MAIN — German insurance giant Allianz signalled yesterday looming job cuts due to its adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) with a report saying up to 1,800 roles, mainly in call centres, could be axed.

Allianz Partners, the company's subsidiary dealing principally with travel insurance, said it was "leveraging AI" to strengthen its position in the industry and improve its services.

Such changes could however "impact positions which are heavily reliant on manual processes today," it said in a statement.

A spokesperson declined to give further details.

But a report in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* daily said the subsidiary planned to cut between 1,500 and 1,800 jobs in the next 12 to 18 months, citing company sources.

That is up to eight percent of the 22,600 people employed by Allianz Partners, many of whom work in call centres. Jobs will be lost in Germany, France, Spain and Britain, the report said.

Sources close to the company told AFP that discussions with staff representatives are still at an early stage.

Allianz Partners receives about 200,000 calls worldwide every day, many relating to simple matters such as the status of a claim, according to the paper.

In future many such enquiries will be dealt with by automated AI responses.

The news comes with Allianz in good financial shape — the group earlier this month reported a sharp jump in third quarter profits and raised its outlook for the year.

Many companies have been announcing job cuts due to adoption of AI as the boom in the technology gathers pace. — AFP

Greece mulls US\$2 billion for demographic issues in 2026

ATHENS — Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said yesterday that his government was looking at allocating 1.76 billion euros (US\$2 billion) in 2026, along with tax relief measures, to tackle demographic issues.

Greece has one of the European Union's lowest birth rates, calculated by births per 1,000 inhabitants, standing at 7.3 — above only Spain with 6.9 and Italy in last place with 6.7.

Mitsotakis, speaking at a symposium organised by the rightwing daily *Eleftheros Typos*, stressed the

importance of protecting families and highlighted the government's tax reforms benefitting families with children.

"For the first time in our country, we have a comprehensive strategy on demographic issues," he said. "The more children there are, the lower the taxes."

Demographic issues are not exclusively economic, the premier said, citing "other reasons that we need to analyse much more deeply if we want to solve" them.

Asked about using migrants and

refugees to address labour market and demographic issues, Mitsotakis defended his government's "strict" migration policy.

"We will do everything in our power to prevent anyone from entering our country illegally," he said. But Greece had nothing to fear from migrants who arrived regularly, could respond to employment needs and integrate into Greek society, he added.

He noted that Greece has recently received a limited number of Sudanese refugees who are set to work in agriculture. — AFP

Guinea-Bissau rocked by coup d'état, suspension of electoral process

BISSAU – Military officers in Guinea-Bissau declared “total control” of the coup-prone west African country yesterday, closing its borders and suspending its electoral process three days after general elections.

Their announcement followed heavy gunfire that rang out near the presidential palace earlier in the day, with men in military uniform taking over the main road leading to the building.

In the early afternoon, General Denis N’Canha, head of the presidential military office, told members of the press that a command “composed of all branches of the armed forces, was taking over the leadership of the country until further notice”.

He read the announcement seated at a table and surrounded by armed soldiers.

Incumbent president Umaro Sissoco Embaló, who had been favoured to win Sunday’s election, was inside a building behind military headquarters, “with the chief of staff and the minister of the interior,” a senior officer told AFP on condition of anonymity.

It was not immediately possible to confirm whether the president had been arrested.

Embaló and opposition candidate Fernando Dias had

already each declared victory in the presidential race, with official provisional results previously expected today.

The tumultuous west African country has experienced four coups since independence, as well as multiple attempted coups.

N’Canha, in his declaration, claimed to have uncovered a plan to destabilise the country “involving national drug lords” that had included “the introduction of weapons into the country to alter the constitutional order”.

In addition to halting “the entire electoral process”, he said military forces had suspended “all media programming” and imposed a mandatory curfew.

Guinea-Bissau is among the world’s poorest countries and is also a hub for drug trafficking between Latin America and Europe, a trade facilitated by the country’s long history of political instability.

Guinea-Bissau’s National Electoral Commission (CNE) was additionally attacked by unidentified armed men yesterday, its communications official Abdourahmane Djalo told AFP.

Repeat crises

More than 6,780 security forces, including from the Economic

Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Stabilisation Force, were deployed for Guinea-Bissau’s vote and the post-election period.

The country’s last presidential vote in 2019 was marked by a four-month post-election crisis as both main candidates claimed victory.

The election had pitted Embaló against Domingos Simões Pereira, the candidate from the country’s main opposition African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), which secured Guinea-Bissau’s independence from Portugal in 1974, after an over decade-long war of liberation.

The country’s 2025 election notably excluded PAIGC and Pereira, who were struck from the final list of candidates and parties by the Supreme Court, which said they had filed their official applications too late.

In 2023, Embaló dissolved the legislature – which was dominated by the opposition – and has since ruled by decree.

The opposition says PAIGC’s exclusion from the presidential and parliamentary elections amounts to “manipulation” and maintains that Embaló’s term expired on February 27, five years to the day after his inauguration.

– AFP, MPD

Adapt or die: Latin America’s response to Trump

BOGOTÁ – Latin America has navigated a minefield of economic and military coercion since Donald Trump’s return to the White House.

Some leaders have fought back, some acquiesced. Some played possum.

No country was left untouched by what many view as a return to US interventionism in what the Trump administration has taken to calling “our hemisphere.”

“Every Latin American country has a position of asymmetry with the United States. That is a baseline position,” said Alejandro Frenkel, international relations professor at Argentina’s San Martin University.

Here is an overview of the tumult – and the varying responses:

‘Whatever Trump wants’

At one extreme, ideological ally Javier Milei of Argentina “does whatever Trump does and whatever Trump wants,” analyst Michael Shifter of the Inter-American Dialogue think tank in Washington told AFP.

In desperate need of a powerful backer in his efforts to revive a long-ailing economy, Milei has been a vocal Trump cheerleader and has offered US manufacturers preferential access to the Argentine market.

Trump lifted restrictions on Argentinian beef imports in a reciprocal deal and gave the country a multi-billion-US-dollar lifeline.

Also firmly in the Trump camp is gang-busting President Nayib Bukele of El Salvador – the first country to accept hundreds of migrants expelled under the second Trump administration.

Rights groups said the men were tortured, but Bukele won concessions including a temporary reprieve for over 200,000 Salvadorans to live and work in the United States and send home much-needed dollar remittances.

In Ecuador, President Daniel Noboa agreed to receive deported migrants and praised Trump’s military deployment and bombing of alleged drug-smuggling boats in the Caribbean and Pacific.

Noboa won closer US cooperation in his own fight on gangs.

‘Rude and ignorant’

Colombia’s leftist leader Gustavo Petro has openly clashed with Trump, calling him “rude and ignorant” and comparing him to Adolf Hitler.

Petro repeatedly denounced the Trump administration’s treatment of migrants and the “extrajudicial executions” of more than 80 people in strikes on alleged drug boats.

He joined China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as he positioned Colombia closer to Beijing.

The Trump administration has responded by accusing Petro of drug trafficking and imposing sanctions.

Trump removed Bogotá from a list of allies in the fight against narco trafficking, but the country escaped

harsher punishment – possibly as Washington awaits the right’s likely return in 2026 elections.

Fellow leftist Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil has also tussled with Trump.

But he is more “pragmatic and firm,” says Oliver Stuenkel, an international relations professor at the Getúlio Vargas Foundation in São Paulo.

Lula denounced external “interference” after Trump imposed punishing import tariffs on Brazil in retaliation for the coup trial against his right-wing ally Jair Bolsonaro.

Twenty-five years ago, when the United States was its main trading partner, “Brazil would have had to make significant concessions,” said Stuenkel.

But “Brazil now exports more to China than to the United States and Europe combined.”

‘Silent diplomacy’

Mexico’s President Claudia Sheinbaum has fewer options. Her country sends more than 80 percent of its exports to the United States, with which she is renegotiating a trade agreement.

Sheinbaum has responded to Trump’s often harsh rhetoric about Mexican drug cartels and migration with what analysts dub “silent diplomacy” – hashing out issues behind closed doors.

The president upped intelligence sharing, drug seizures and arrests of cartel leaders, and has escaped the worst of Trump’s tariff wrath.

But she stood firm, insisting there can be no “subordination,” after Trump mulled military strikes on drug sites in Mexico.

Also walking a tightrope is Panama’s President José Raúl Mulino, who under US pressure withdrew his country from China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

He also allowed the sale of ports owned by a Hong-Kong-based conglomerate on the Panama Canal, which Trump had threatened the United States would be “taking back.”

No provocation

In its own category is Venezuela, which fears that a large-scale US naval deployment in the Caribbean is aimed at ousting President Nicolás Maduro.

The Venezuelan leader has few allies or economic backers.

Under pressure, Caracas agreed to free American prisoners as Washington allowed Chevron to continue operations in the country with the world’s biggest known oil reserves.

Venezuela has shifted to readiness mode in the face of the military buildup.

But the Venezuelans are “trying hard not to provoke the US,” said Guillaume Long, a senior research fellow at the Washington-based Centre for Economic and Policy Research and a former Ecuadoran foreign minister.

– AFP, MPD

By jailing Bolsonaro, Brazil gave ‘world a lesson in democracy’: Lula



Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (right) and his chief minister of the General Secretariat of the Presidency, Guilherme Boulos, talk as they arrive for the signing ceremony of the new Income Tax Law at the Planalto Palace in Brasília yesterday.
– AFP

BRASÍLIA – President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva said yesterday that Brazil had given the world a lesson in democracy after his predecessor Jair Bolsonaro was jailed for a failed coup attempt.

Bolsonaro, 70, began serving a 27-year prison sentence on Tuesday after his conviction over a scheme to stop Lula from taking office after 2022 elections.

His dramatic trial drew the attention of US President Donald Trump, who slammed a “witch hunt” of his ally and imposed sanctions and punitive tariffs on

Brazil. Many of the tariffs have since been rolled back.

“Yesterday, this country gave the world a lesson in democracy. Without any fanfare, the Brazilian justice system showed its strength, it was not intimidated by external threats,” Lula said.

“For the first time in 500 years of this country’s history, you have someone imprisoned for an attempted coup,” in a country which has had several coup attempts and lived under a military dictatorship between 1964 and 1985, he said in a speech.

“You have a former president and you have four four-star generals imprisoned, proving that democracy applies to everyone.”

Bolsonaro was convicted in September of leading a criminal organisation that conspired to ensure his “authoritarian hold on power.”

The plot allegedly involved a plan to assassinate Lula, his vice president Geraldo Alckmin, and Supreme Court judge Alexandre de Moraes.

Prosecutors said the scheme failed only due to a lack of support from military top brass.

– AFP

FIFA to keep top seeds apart in expanded 2026 World Cup draw

FIFA ZURICH - FIFA revealed on Tuesday that the top four seeded nations at the 2026 World Cup will occupy two separate halves of the draw for the expanded 48-team tournament, meaning they could avoid facing each other until the semi-final stage.

Top-ranked Spain and World Cup holders Argentina, the second seeds, will be drawn into opposite halves of the draw, and the same will apply to third-ranked France and world number four England.

This will ensure that, should they both win their groups, the two highest ranked teams will be kept apart until the final.

On Tuesday, FIFA published the four pots into which the 48 qualified teams will be placed, as well as the procedures for the World Cup draw which will take place on December 5 in Washington DC.

The top four nations are all placed in Pot 1 along with the three host nations - Canada, Mexico and the United States.

The draw will begin with the 12 teams in Pot 1, which includes Germany, who narrowly retained their seeded status.

The process will then continue with Pots 2, 3, and 4, in that order, FIFA explained.

Six more World Cup spots remain to be filled among the 18 nations still in contention through the play-offs in March.

Italy, four-time World Cup winners and 12th in the FIFA rankings, are in the play-offs and could find themselves, if they qualify, in Pot 4.

Debutants Uzbekistan are in Pot 3, with fellow first-timers Jordan, Cape Verde and Curacao in Pot 4.

Pot 1: Canada, Mexico, United States, Spain, Argentina, France, England, Brazil, Portugal, Netherlands, Belgium, Germany

Pot 2: Croatia, Morocco, Colombia, Uruguay, Switzerland, Japan, Senegal, Iran, South Korea, Ecuador, Austria, Australia

Pot 3: Norway, Panama, Egypt, Algeria, Scotland, Paraguay, Tunisia, Ivory Coast, Uzbekistan, Qatar, South Africa

Pot 4: Jordan, Cape Verde, Ghana, Curacao, Haiti, New Zealand, European playoff winners A, B, C and D, Inter-confederation playoff winners 1 and 2. — AFP



This combination of file pictures created on Tuesday shows Brazil's Flamengo Andreas Pereira looking at the ball during the Copa Libertadores group stage first leg against Peru's Sporting Cristal at the National Stadium in Lima on April 5, 2022, and Palmeiras' midfielder Andreas Pereira during the Brasileirao Serie A match against Flamengo at Maracana Stadium in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on October 19. Pereira, 29, played in the 2021 Libertadores final wearing Flamengo's colours. On Saturday he will play again in the final of the continental tournament. Palmeiras and Flamengo once again meet in the final, but this time Pereira be wearing Palmeiras' jersey. — AFP

Football shorts

Maresca says 'nothing has changed' for Chelsea after Barcelona win

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE LONDON — Chelsea head coach Enzo Maresca tried to keep his youthful side's stunning 3-0 win at home to 10-man Barcelona in perspective by insisting "nothing has changed" for the Blues.

Tuesday's Champions League triumph at Stamford Bridge kept the London club on course to reach the last 16 of the competition following a superb display of attacking football featuring a brilliant goal from teenage winger Estevao.

The 18-year-old Brazilian slipped inside defender Pau Cubarsi then glided across Alejandro Balde before letting fly with an unstoppable shot.

Estevao's strike came after Jules Kounde's own-goal had put Chelsea ahead, with Barcelona captain Ronald Araujo sent off in the first half for a second bookable offence.

Liam Delap scored Chelsea's third goal, his first goal since their pre-season Club World Cup triumph, to send the Blues into Sunday's clash with Premier League leaders and London rivals Arsenal in confident mood.

"It's a big win, especially because it was Barcelona, but nothing's changed in terms of what team we are and what we can achieve," said Maresca, whose side will cut Arsenal's lead at the summit to three points with another victory at Stamford Bridge.

He added: "Now we focus on the next one. The feeling was very good.

Reijnders adamant Man City will keep calm after Leverkusen loss



LONDON — Tijjani Reijnders has insisted there will be no loss of nerve at Manchester City following their surprise defeat by Bayer Leverkusen in the Champions League.

City manager Pep Guardiola felt confident enough to make 10 changes to his team only for the side to lose 2-0 at home to Bundesliga outfit Leverkusen on Tuesday.

Defeat ended City's unbeaten start to the league phase of European club football's elite competition ahead of a tie with Spanish giants Real Madrid and came just days after their loss to Newcastle in the Premier League last weekend.

"Of course, it's a bummer [but] we should not lose our confidence because we did great before and we have to get back on that winning streak, and that's by being ready for the next game on Saturday [at home to Leeds]," said Dutch midfielder Reijnders.

"Mentally we have to be ready. We know what we can do and what we showed before. It's on us to do that again - don't lose the confidence because we have a lot of quality in the team.

"We should not panic now. Of course, losing two times in a row



Bayer Leverkusen's Dutch goalkeeper Mark Flekken saves at the feet of Manchester City's Norwegian striker Erling Haaland during the UEFA Champions League league-stage match between Manchester City and Bayer Leverkusen at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester, north west England, on Tuesday. — AFP

is not a good thing but we know there are still plenty of chances this season and we have to go game to game."

Reijnders's fellow midfielder Nico Gonzalez was the only player to retain his starting spot from the defeat at St James' Park, with Guardiola opting to rest several star names including Erling Haaland, Phil Foden and Gianluigi Donnarumma.

But goals from Alejandro Grimaldo and Patrik Schick put Leverkusen on top and not even the introduction of Norway striker

Haaland, who has scored 32 goals for club and country this season, with 25 minutes remaining could turn the tide for City.

Reijnders, however, was adamant this defeat would have no bearing on City's match against record 15-time European champions Real Madrid at the Bernabeu on December 10.

"I don't think it will put extra pressure," he said. "We know what we can expect there from Madrid, but it's in a couple of weeks so first let's be ready for Saturday." — AFP

Betis has vital European game ahead of big city derby



MADRID — Real Betis play at home to Utrecht in the Europa League tonight although Manuel Pellegrini's players could be forgiven for having other things on their minds.

The game comes just three days before Betis faces Sevilla in the Seville derby - which is arguably the most bitter rivalry in La Liga and with that game kicking off at 16:15 local time, Betis has very little time to recover after today's match.

However, although Pellegrini is likely to make changes to his starting 11 today, with players such as Cedric Bakambu coming into his side, he has to keep his

eye on the ball as Betis currently sits just outside of the top-eight in the qualification group and needs a win if his side is to avoid an extra qualification round in February.

Pellegrini is also in the news in Spain as it appears the veteran coach is on the verge of signing a new contract to stay at the club for another year after his current deal expires at the end of June.

Penning a new contract would end speculation that Pellegrini could become Chile national team coach after the World Cup.

Celta currently sit fourth in the qualification group with three wins from its four games so far in the tournament and now face a long trip to play the Bulgarian side Ludogorets that have lost

their last three games.

Williot Swedberg returns for Celta after injury to add to Claudio Giraldez's options in attack, although the Celta coach is likely to name a team similar to that which won in Zagreb earlier in the month with Bryan Zaragoza and Pablo Duran leading his side's attack, with Borja Iglesias on the substitutes' bench.

Meanwhile in the Conference League, Rayo Vallecano travel to play a Slovan Bratislava side looking for their first points in the tournament.

The Real Betis game will be played at 4 a.m. tomorrow morning, while the Rayo Vallecano game will be played at 1:45 a.m. tomorrow morning Macau time. — Xinhua/MPD

At home with our fans, it's way nice to share this kind of moment. Now, next 48 hours completely switch off, have a rest, recover energy.

"We need to keep the momentum. It's much easier to recover energy when you win games." — AFP

Ronaldo can play in 2026 World Cup opener as FIFA 'suspend' ban



LISBON - Portugal superstar Cristiano Ronaldo can play in the opening matches of the 2026 World Cup after global football governing body FIFA gave him a partially "suspended" ban on Tuesday following a red card.

The 40-year-old was sent off as Portugal lost 2-0 in Dublin earlier in

November when he elbowed Dara O'Shea in the back, for his first dismissal in 226 international appearances.

FIFA banned Ronaldo for three matches, two of which will be suspended and the other has already been served, when Portugal sealed their qualification for next summer's tournament against Armenia.

"In line with article 27 of the FIFA Disciplinary Code, the serving of the two remaining matches has been suspended under a one-year probation period," said FIFA in a statement given to AFP.

"If Cristiano Ronaldo commits another infringement of a similar nature and gravity during the probationary period, the suspension set out in the disciplinary decision shall be deemed automatically revoked

and the remaining two matches must be served immediately at the next official [Portugal] matches."

Ronaldo, the men's all-time top goalscorer in international football with 143 goals, is aiming to play at a sixth World Cup next summer in the United States, Mexico and Canada.

The former Real Madrid and Manchester United striker, currently at Al Nassr in Saudi Arabia, has not yet lifted the trophy but did win Euro 2016 with Portugal.

Ronaldo attended a dinner in the White House last week where he met US President Donald Trump, who said his son Barron "is a big fan" of the forward.

The World Cup group stage draw takes place on December 5.

— AFP

IOC chief Coventry in tears as 2026 Winter Games torch relay sets off

Yannick Pasquet with John Hadoulis in Athens

OLYMPIA – New International Olympic Committee chief Kirsty Coventry fought back tears yesterday as she urged nations to come together in the 2026 Winter Games, as the torch relay set off from ancient Olympia in Greece.

Addressing guests during the torch ceremony at the Olympia archaeological museum, as the first woman to head the Olympic movement, a tearful Coventry stressed the power of sport to unite.

"I wasn't supposed to get emotional, but this place is very special," the 42-year-old Zimbabwean, who is also the first African to lead the IOC, added to applause.

"In a divided world that we live in today, the Games hold a truly symbolic place. It is our duty, our responsibility, to ensure that the athletes from around the world can come together peacefully," she said.

The former swimmer and Africa's most successful Olympic athlete with seven medals from Athens 2004 and Beijing 2008, Coventry repeatedly veered from her prepared speech to stress her emotional connection to the Games.

"The Olympic Games will always continue to exist, to break down walls that are put in our way," Coventry said.

"The flame we light today, carries not just the hopes of the athletes, but the dreams of all of those who believe in the power of sport," she added.

The torch was carried initially by Greek rower Petros Gaidatzis, a bronze medallist in Paris 2024,

and then jointly with Italian cross-country skier Stefania Belmondo, a two-time Olympic champion, as the relay began the countdown to the Milan-Cortina Winter Games, which will open on February 6.

The pair ran from the museum to the grove in Olympia, the birthplace of the ancient Games, where the heart of modern Olympics founder Baron Pierre de Coubertin is kept, and handed over the torch to Italian luge great Armin Zoeggeler, another double Olympic champion.

The flame ceremony was flanked by sculptures from the Temple of Zeus, the patron god of the ancient Olympics.

The ceremony to light the Olympic flame is usually held among the ruins of the 2,600-year-old Temple of Hera, near the stadium where the Olympics were born in 776 BC.

But a rainy weather forecast - which proved mistaken - raised concerns that the sun's rays would not be able to sufficiently heat up the parabolic mirror used by actresses dressed as ancient priestesses to light the flame.

That forced organisers to head indoors for yesterday's ceremony where they used a flame lit on Monday, during an outdoor rehearsal under the sun.

Following a December 4 handover ceremony at the Panathenaic Stadium in Athens, where the first modern Olympics were revived in 1896, the flame will head to Rome for a 63-day, 12,000-kilometre course through Italy's major cities and the archaeological site of Pompeii.

'Story of continuity'

"The Milano Cortina torch relay will respect our shared

classical heritage, passing through Rome's imperial monuments, Pompeii, Appian Way and regions of Magna Graecia, creating a story of continuity between ancient Greece, ancient Rome and modern Olympism," said Giovanni Malago, President of the Organising Committee for Milano-Cortina.

The Games themselves will take place at various venues spanning a vast area from Milan to the Dolomite mountains in Italy's north-east.

Ice sports will be held in Milan while Bormio and Cortina will host alpine skiing.

Across the Dolomites, the biathlon will be in Anterselva and Nordic skiing in Val di Fiemme, with Livigno in the Italian Alps hosting snowboarding and freestyle skiing.

The Paralympic Winter Games will be held from March 6-15.

Even though the outdoor events are at a sufficiently high altitude, organisers of the Milan-Cortina Games are stockpiling artificial snow, just in case.

The 2026 organising committee has said that it plans to make 2.4 million cubic metres of artificial snow, which will require 948,000 cubic metres of water.

Italy is the European country that uses the most artificial snow, with more than 90 percent of Italy's ski slopes using artificial snowmaking systems, according to an April report from Italian environmental group Legambiente.

According to a December 2024 study published in the *International Journal of Climatology*, the snow cover in the Italian Alps had decreased by half in the past 100 years. – AFP

Ahmedabad to host centenary Commonwealth Games in 2030

Julian Guyer

LONDON – The Indian city of Ahmedabad will stage the 2030 multi-sport Commonwealth Games 100 years after the inaugural edition was held in Hamilton, Canada, it was confirmed yesterday.

The choice of Ahmedabad, also known as Amdavad, was ratified by the Commonwealth Sport General Assembly in Glasgow following a recommendation from the executive board.

India has its eyes on a bigger prize, having submitted a formal letter of intent last year to the International Olympic Committee to host the 2036 Summer Olympics.

"We are deeply honoured by the trust shown by Commonwealth Sport," said Dr PT Usha, president of the Commonwealth Games Association of India.

"The 2030 Games will not only celebrate 100 years of the Commonwealth movement but also lay the foundation for the next century. It will bring together athletes, communities and cultures from across the Commonwealth in a spirit of friendship and progress."

Ahmedabad is the key city in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state of Gujarat, home to a 130,000-seater arena which is the world's biggest cricket stadium. The venue is named after the Indian premier.

Modi said he was "delighted" and that India looks "forward to welcoming the world".

The executive board announced in October that Ahmedabad was its preferred choice following a rival bid from Abuja, the capital of Nigeria.

Ahmedabad is the second Indian city to stage the Commonwealth Games, following Delhi in 2010, which was meant to showcase India's status as an emerging global power.

However, they were marred instead by construction delays, budget overruns and corruption allegations that saw the head of the organising committee jailed.

The future existence of the event was in doubt last year when the movement struggled to find a replacement host for 2026 after the Australian state of Victoria withdrew for cost reasons.

Daniel Andrews, the then premier of Victoria, said two years ago that an initial estimate of

Aus\$2 billion (US\$1.29 billion) needed to hold the Games would more likely be around Aus\$7 billion, which he called "well and truly too much".

The Scottish city of Glasgow stepped in and will stage a slimmed-down version of the multi-sport format, meaning that Britain will have hosted two editions in a row, after Birmingham in 2022.

In an age of increasing continental, regional and world championships across numerous sports, there have long been questions about the relevance of the Commonwealth Games, an event restricted to an international association where the vast majority of competing countries were once territories of the British Empire.

'Passion and relevance'

But Dr Donald Rukare, president of Commonwealth Sport, said yesterday: "India brings scale, youth, ambition, rich culture, enormous sporting passion and relevance, and I'm delighted to report strong interest from a range of nations to host the 2034 Games and beyond."

"We start our next century for the Commonwealth Games in good health."

Commonwealth Sport added between 15 to 17 sports will feature at the 2030 Games, which follows a programme review.

Athletics and para-athletics, swimming and para-swimming, table tennis and para table tennis, bowls and para bowls, weightlifting and para powerlifting, artistic gymnastics, netball and boxing have all been included.

The remainder of the programme is set to be finalised, with Ahmedabad able to either propose up to two new or "traditional" sports.

Among those under consideration are T20 cricket, hockey, wrestling, badminton, archery, rugby sevens, 3x3 basketball, cycling and diving.

A successful Commonwealth Games would strengthen any bid by India, the world's most populous nation, to stage an Olympic Games, with the next two Summer editions set for Los Angeles (2028) and the Australian city of Brisbane (2032).

– AFP

England's wing Abby Dow runs in a try during the Women's Six Nations international rugby match against Wales at the Principality Stadium in Cardiff, south Wales on March 29. England's World Cup-winning wing Abby Dow has retired from rugby aged 28, it was announced yesterday. One of the outstanding finishers of her generation, Dow scored 50 tries in just 59 Tests. – AFP



Bavuma relishes history and memories in 2-0 Test sweep of India

Cricket

Faisal Kamal

GUWAHATI - Skipper Temba Bavuma said his South Africa team had written their names in history after romping to a 2-0 Test whitewash in India yesterday.

The world champions thrashed the hosts by 408 runs in the second match in Guwahati for their first series win on Indian soil since 2000 and only second ever.

Asked to compare the latest tri-

umph to the World Test Championship final victory over Australia, Bavuma said: "It's definitely up there."

"Coming to India is always a tough prospect," Bavuma told reporters.

"I think what makes it sweeter is the fact that we're on the other side of the result. We know how dark it can be [touring India]."

He said: "Coming here, I would have never thought 2-0 would be the result at the end of the series."

"But I think it's an incredible achievement for the group of

players. Again, we've gone on to etch ourselves in history and we are creating some memorable moments."

Bavuma has an unbeaten record as Test captain in 12 matches, winning 11 and drawing one.

He missed the recent 1-1 draw in Pakistan, where Aiden Markram stood in as captain.

"I mean, for me it's really a process of discovery," said Bavuma. "I think now probably a lot more assured of myself as a person, as a captain and what I'm trying to do out there."

Off-spinner Simon Harmer excelled for South Africa with 17 wickets in the series and his 6-37 helped bundle out India for 140 in a mammoth chase of 549 on the fifth day.

Harmer outdid the Indian spinners in their own den with his guile and turn.

"I think Simon, obviously, he's come in and heavily boosted our resources from a spin point of view," said Bavuma.

"As a team over the years we've

highly relied on Keshav Maharaj. Probably wasn't at his best in the series at his own admission. But I think the way Simon came in and he did what he had to do."

South Africa were missing pace spearhead Kagiso Rabada after he injured a rib in training ahead of the series.

"Again, the way the guys have stepped up, even though we didn't have our main bowler being Kagiso, you know, it was incredible," said Bavuma. – AFP

Pianist behind Paris ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ flash mob aims higher

Jérémy Tordjman

PARIS – The man behind a recent viral video featuring musicians playing Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody” to stunned bystanders in a Paris square has revealed to AFP the meticulous work that went into his latest, even bigger production.

The “flash mob” Queen video has been viewed roughly 600 million times since being posted online in early September.

Backing singers appear at windows around the Place de la Contrescarpe, (“Square of the Counterscarp”) a child prodigy performs the famous guitar solo, and organiser Julien Cohen leads the troupe of 30 performers on a grand piano.

The 32-year-old Frenchman, who was already known as an online content creator, was the brains behind the idea and footed the 50,000-euro (US\$57,000) bill himself.

“I didn’t expect such success, but of course if I did it and invested so much in it, it’s because I believed in it,” he told AFP.

His latest project is even bigger, featuring 100 classical musicians performing five different songs including “Believer” by Imagine Dragons on a boulevard in central Paris.

It cost 300,000 euros and the first video – of the Christmas carol “Carol of the Bells” – has already been viewed more than nine million times on social media platforms since being published on Monday.

“It might seem like a race to get bigger and bigger, but I really enjoy doing ambitious things,” said the Cambridge University graduate, an admirer of the world’s most popular YouTuber MrBeast.

YouTube’s biggest content creators such as MrBeast are moving into more expensive productions that resemble the sort of big-budget creations previously reserved for television stations.

Fellow American creators such as Dhar Mann or Alan Chikin Chow have also created their own media companies with studios to produce content and series, further blurring the line between traditional TV and the online worlds.

AFP witnessed the filming of Cohen’s latest Christmas-themed video earlier this month, revealing how he produces the perfectly coordinated choreography and captures the surprise on the faces of observers.

He had 50 camera operators working to film the performers, as well as the reaction of the crowd, while some of the music was pre-recorded.

In total, there were three performances of each song, with editors then choosing the best takes from the footage for the final cut.

“It has to be top-quality,” Cohen explained, saying the aim was to entertain without making viewers think about the “huge amount of work” required to create it. – AFP



French pianist Julien Cohen poses during a photo session in Paris last week. No more videos on mobile phones in train stations or cafés: with his cardboard cut-out of “Bohemian Rhapsody” and 600 million views, classical pianist Julien Cohen has converted to the blockbuster productions that are all the rage on YouTube, where improvisation no longer has a place. Filmed in the summer of 2025 as a happening in a Parisian square, his cover of Queen’s global hit brought together dozens of artists and technicians in a production tailored for social media: singers bursting onto the scene from windows or on a horse-drawn carriage, a young prodigy performing guitarist Brian May’s solo. All under the astonished gaze of passers-by filmed in close-up. – AFP

With ‘Zootopia 2,’ Disney continues its battle against prejudice

Romain Fonsegrives

LOS ANGELES – The sentient animals of the fictional city of Zootopia are back with a fairytale for our times, examining how the powerful exploit our prejudices, in a family-friendly movie Disney hopes will be a big holiday hit.

Nine years after the Oscar-winning first installment, “Zootopia 2” – known as “Zootropolis 2” in some markets – delves deeper into a world that has grossed over a billion dollars at the global box office, despite – or because of – its clear moral ambition.

“The great thing about these movies is that they are like fables,” Byron Howard, one of the two directors, told AFP in Los Angeles.

“These animals are a great way for us to hold a mirror up to human nature and the mistakes that we make.”

We’re plunged back into the city of Zootopia, a modern metropolis where predators and prey have learned to coexist without devouring each other, but stereotypes continue to influence relations.

Judy, the first rabbit to join the city’s police force, has proven to her macho colleagues – buffaloes, hippos, and warhogs – that she deserves her place in the investigative department.

Along the way, she forges an unexpected partnership with Nick, a solitary fox whose past as a con artist proves to be a valuable asset in uniform.

Exploiting stereotypes

The budding friendship will be tested by a high-stakes heist, carried out during the city’s centennial gala by a snake, a species long banned from the city.

But when it comes time to arrest the culprit, Judy learns the rattlesnake – Gary – is simply trying to uncover a secret to restore his family’s honour.

“We have a lot of misconceptions about reptiles and snakes in general,” says co-director Jared Bush.

But Gary is “the most kind-hearted, warm, vulnerable character I think we’ve ever made.”

Over Nick’s objections, Judy lets her quarry escape – turning her and her partner into fugitives and setting them on the path to discovering how Zootopia’s rulers have exploited stereotypes to keep reptiles out of the city.

Like every odd couple, Judy and Nick clash repeatedly as they battle to the inevitable happy ending.

“They have very different ways of looking at the world,” said Howard.

“It was really fun for us to put them through the ringer and to basically have them look at each other and say: ‘Are these differences too much for our partnership to succeed?’”



Theatrical release poster for Disney’s “Zootopia 2” – Image courtesy of IMDb

A pro-diversity fable

With a soundtrack that includes catchy pop from Shakira – who also reprises her role as a gazelle – Disney has produced a pro-diversity tale that appears at odds with the current moment.

As with the first instalment, released in 2016 at the beginning of Donald Trump’s first term, this lesson in living together jars with the direction America has taken under a president who routinely disparages immigrants and has worked to undermine the notion of inclusivity.

Disney, which conservatives accuse of being “woke,” has been the target of an investigation by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which is examining its hiring practices.

But for the creators of “Zootopia,” these parallels with current events are simply a coincidence of timing for a story intended to be timeless and which took several years to develop.

“As human beings, there’s this natural tendency to look at a difference in someone else and to worry about it, or have an opinion about it,” says Bush.

“What we’re trying to say with this movie is, yes, those differences exist, but we’re stronger because of them.” – AFP

AI music platform Suno unveils deal with Warner to compensate artists

NEW YORK – The US artificial intelligence platform Suno and Warner Music Group on Tuesday announced a partnership to compensate recording artists in the fast-growing domain of AI music.

The agreement, announced jointly by the two companies, resolves a civil lawsuit brought by music giant Warner alleging that the artificial intelligence company mined music catalogues without authorisation or financial compensation.

The litigation was part of a group of complaints brought by legacy music labels against Suno and fellow AI music platform Udio alleging the upstarts violated the copyrights of top artists to train their generative AI engines.

Suno will launch new models

in 2026, requiring a paid account to download audio, the companies said in a press release.

Recording artists will have the right to opt in to Suno for the use of their “names, images, likenesses, voices and compositions to be used in new AI-generated music,” Suno said in an online letter to users.

“These will be new creation experiences from artists who do opt in, which will open up new revenue streams for them... and allow you to interact with them in new ways,” Suno said.

Warner’s CEO Robert Kyncl called the agreement a “landmark pact” that “benefits everyone,” according to the press release.

“With Suno rapidly scaling, both in users and monetization, we’ve seized this opportunity to

shape models that expand revenue and deliver new fan experiences,” Kyncl said.

“AI becomes pro-artist when it adheres to our principles: committing to licensed models, reflecting the value of music on and off platform, and providing artists and songwriters with an opt-in.”

Lawsuits brought by music giants cited prompts to churn out AI songs mimicking copyrighted works of Chuck Berry, James Brown, Michael Buble, ABBA, and others.

The Suno announcement comes on the heels of an agreement announced last month between Udio and Universal Music Group, whose roster includes Taylor Swift, The Weeknd and other stars.

– AFP

World Weather

CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -4°C~7°C	Manila 23°C~31°C	New York 1°C~8°C	Lisbon 7°C~16°C
Shanghai 1°C~14°C	Bangkok 17°C~29°C	London 9°C~14°C	Rio de Janeiro 18°C~25°C
Hong Kong 13°C~23°C	Tokyo 9°C~16°C	Frankfurt 2°C~5°C	Luanda 24°C~29°C
Taipei 15°C~22°C	Singapore 24°C~31°C	Vancouver 5°C~9°C	Maputo 21°C~33°C
Guangzhou 9°C~23°C	Kuala Lumpur 24°C~29°C	Paris 6°C~8°C	Dili 23°C~32°C
Nanjing -2°C~12°C	Jakarta 23°C~34°C	Moscow 4°C~6°C	São Tomé 25°C~29°C
Guilin 5°C~21°C	Seoul -2°C~11°C	Las Vegas 8°C~20°C	Praia 21°C~29°C
Xi'an 0°C~15°C	Sydney 18°C~30°C	Monte Carlo 6°C~14°C	Bissau 19°C~34°C

Pea-souper!

An aerial drone photo taken yesterday shows the fog-shrouded city view of Ankara, Türkiye. — Xinhua



Just a little joy

A municipality employee stands on a crane platform as he decorates the huge Christmas tree placed in Nativity Square for the first time following the Gaza War which erupted in October 2023, in the occupied West Bank city of Bethlehem on Tuesday. — AFP



Tradition lives on

An Afghan woman weaves a reed basket inside her home in the Zebak district of Badakhshan province, Afghanistan yesterday. — AFP

Hurrah! We are safe!

This picture, taken on October 31 shows rescued stray dogs in a dog shelter in Jakarta, some of which were saved from restaurants selling dog meat dishes. — AFP



A cat is a cat is a cat!

Palestinian tamer Mahmud Jomaa pets a lion at an emergency zoo in Deir al-Balah in the central Gaza Strip yesterday. — AFP



Stollen for all!

A 30-metre long stollen, a traditional Christmas fruit bread, is presented at the Berliner Humboldt Forum winter market in Berlin, Germany on Monday. — AFP