

# HK's deadliest blaze in decades kills at least 83

Holmes Chan and Tommy Wang

HONG KONG – Hong Kong authorities said early today that the death toll from the city's worst fire in decades had risen to at least 83, as firefighters scoured torched high-rise buildings for scores of people still listed as missing.

Flames were still visible in some of the eight-building apartment complex's almost 2,000 units well over 24 hours after the fire broke out, with crews still spraying water over the blackened exteriors.

Authorities have begun investigating what sparked the disastrous blaze – the financial hub's worst in almost 80 years – including the presence of bamboo scaffolding and plastic mesh wrapped around the structures as part of a housing estate-wide renovation.

The ICAC, Hong Kong's anti-corruption body, said it has launched a probe into renovation work at the housing complex, hours after police said they had arrested three men on suspicion of negligently leaving foam packaging at the fire site.

Residents of Wang Fuk Court, located in Hong Kong's northern district of Tai Po, told AFP that they did not hear any fire alarms and had to go door-to-door to alert neighbours to the danger.

"The fire spread so quickly. I saw one hose trying to save several buildings, and I felt it was far too slow," said a man surnamed Suen.

"Ringing doorbells, knocking



Crowds yesterday distribute daily necessities after the deadly inferno that swept through seven apartment blocks at the Wang Fuk Court residential estate in Hong Kong's Tai Po District yesterday. – AFP

on doors, alerting the neighbours, telling them to leave – that's what the situation was like," he said.

The intense flames were finally extinguished in four of the eight apartment blocks and the fires in three others were under control, officials said yesterday afternoon. One building was not affected.

A "saddened" Pope Leo issued a statement sending "spiritual

solidarity to all those suffering... especially the injured and the families who grieve".

## 'Cannot describe it'

Of the 83 people confirmed dead by 12:30 a.m. last night, one was a 37-year-old firefighter and two were Indonesians working as migrant domestic workers.

It is Hong Kong's deadliest fire

since 1948, when an explosion followed by a fire killed 135 people.

But the toll could yet rise further, with Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu saying yesterday morning that 279 people were unaccounted for.

Firefighters said later that they had made contact with some of those and authorities have not updated the figure since.

Police at a nearby community



Remove stagnant water regularly to prevent dengue and chikungunya fever

澳門特別行政區政府衛生局  
Direcção da Saúde do Governo da Região Administrativa Especial de Macau

centre hoping to identify victims showed photos of bodies pulled from the fire to people seeking missing loved ones.

"If the faces are unrecognisable, there are personal items for people to identify," said a woman surnamed Cheung who was looking for her relatives.

"I cannot describe my feelings. There were children... I cannot describe it."

A government spokesman told AFP yesterday evening that of those being treated in hospital, 12 were in a critical condition, 29 were listed as serious and 17 were stable.

Deadly fires were once a regular scourge in densely populated Hong Kong, especially in poorer neighbourhoods, but improved safety measures have made them far less common.

Continued on p.6

## HK\$300 million fund to help Tai Po fire victims

HONG KONG – Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu said yesterday that a HK\$300 million fund has been set up to provide support for residents affected by the massive blaze at Wang Fuk Court in Tai Po.

Each affected household will receive HK\$10,000 in emergency relief funds.

Speaking to reporters after inspecting the fire scene in the afternoon, Lee said civil society was devastated by the tragedy, and the government was rolling out a series

of measures to offer immediate help to residents.

Apart from providing affected households with cash relief, each of them will also be assigned a social worker to follow up on their needs.

The government will also take in donations from members of the public via two Bank of China (Hong Kong) accounts.

The two account numbers are 012-875-2-190159-7 for Hong Kong-dollar donations, and 012-875-2190160-7 for other currencies.

Lee added that doctors and other medical staff will be on standby at each temporary shelter to offer medical advice and treatment for those in need.

In the longer term, affected households could be moved to transitional housing units, youth dormitories and a number of hotels across Hong Kong.

Officials will also make special arrangements for families in need of burial or cremation services.

Lee noted that government-led celebratory events will be cancelled for some time, and mourning activities will be held.

Lee added that civil servants will be mobilised to help with any follow-up and relief work.

In a statement, the government added that flags at public buildings will be flown at half mast, and details on memorial services and public condolence books will be announced later.

– RTHK

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### China hopes France promotes healthy development of China-EU relations along right track: Wang Yi

China hopes that France promotes the healthy development of China-EU relations along the right track, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said yesterday.

– Story on p. 7

### Putin says Russia will fight on unless Ukraine cedes land

Russian President Vladimir Putin said yesterday that he would end the Ukraine offensive if Kyiv withdrew from territory Moscow claims at its own – otherwise his army would take it by force.

– Story on p. 11

### Guinea-Bissau military appoints general as leader following coup

Guinea-Bissau's military appointed a general as the country's new leader for the duration of one year yesterday, a day after seizing power, arresting the president and derailing the announcement of election results.

– Story on p. 12



# Health Bureau offers free HIV & Hepatitis C tests Sunday



This handout poster provided by the Health Bureau (SSM) on Tuesday shows a World AIDS Day thematic event “Overcoming disruption, transforming the AIDS response” at Tap Seac Health Centre on Sunday.

## Ida Cheong

In order to raise public awareness of HIV prevention and promote safer sexual practices, the Health Bureau (SSM) will host a World AIDS Day thematic event on Sunday from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. at Tap Seac Health Centre, providing free, anonymous and rapid antibody testing for both HIV and Hepatitis C, requiring only a small finger-prick blood sample, according to an SSM statement on Tuesday.

World AIDS Day takes place on December 1 every year, and this year’s global day is themed “Overcoming Disruption, Transforming the AIDS Response.”

The statement noted that participants can obtain a queue number on-site to join and will receive a small gift upon completion. The activity targets Macau residents aged 18 or older who are unaware of their infection status.

The statement noted that SSM officials will conduct flash-mob interactive booth games near the Tap Seac Health Centre, with participants eligible for small gifts. Further details are available on the Health Bureau’s AIDS Care website “World AIDS Day” section at [www.ssm.gov.mo/aidsday](http://www.ssm.gov.mo/aidsday).

The Health Bureau recommended that individuals who have never been tested for HIV undergo at least one test

to understand their status, even in the absence of known risk behaviours, according to the statement, which underlined that individuals with ongoing risk factors should be tested at least annually, such as: 1) male-to-male sexual contact; 2) intravenous drug use; 3) unprotected vaginal or anal intercourse; 4) having multiple sexual partners; 5) having an HIV-positive sexual partner; and 6) engaging in transactional sex involving money or drugs.

The statement added that the Health Bureau continues to collaborate widely with local communities to enhance synergies in HIV prevention and provide free rapid HIV testing services through local medical clinics and associations, namely the Macau Federation of Trade Unions (FAOM – commonly known as Gung Luen), the Women’s General Association of Macau (commonly known as Fu Luen), Macao New Chinese Youth Association (MNCYA), Macao AIDS Care Association and the Macau Christian New Life Fellowship-Smart Youth. For those unable to visit service points in person, self-testing kits are available for online purchase.

More information can be found on the Health Bureau’s HIV Rapid Test webpage at [www.ssm.gov.mo/hivtest](http://www.ssm.gov.mo/hivtest). ■

# Police nab 13 suspects for blackmailing 10 ‘cross-hand’ cheats

## Armindo Neves

The Judiciary Police (PJ) nabbed on Wednesday 13 suspects for blackmailing 10 suspected fraudsters, PJ spokesman Ho Wai Lok said during a special press conference yesterday.

Ho said the 13 suspects are aged between 52 and 82, comprising mainlanders, Hongkongers and locals, all of them claiming that they are unemployed.

According to Ho, the gang’s kingpin is surnamed Wong. Ho also said that all 10 “victims” are local residents.

According to Ho, in June, while investigating a fraud case involving “cross-hand” gambling – where individuals place bets on behalf of gamblers at casinos, PJ officers discovered that the 10 fraudsters involved in the case had previously been extorted for money.

According to informed sources, the modus operandi of “cross-hand” gambling proceeds as follows: scammers initiate conversations under false pretences to gain the victim’s trust, after which they offer “assistance” with betting. One of the scammers then intentionally blocks the victim’s view during the betting process, seizing the opportunity for their accomplice to steal chips. They then falsely claim that they placed



Judiciary Police (PJ) officers escort the 13 hooded suspects to a PJ bus outside the PJ headquarters in Zape yesterday. – Photo: Armindo Neves

the bet on the victim’s behalf but lost, completing the scam.

PJ officers later busted the black gang, led by a local suspect surnamed Wong, which had been “active” since the beginning of this year in multiple casinos across the peninsula and Cotai. Operating in small groups of two to three people, the gang targeted individuals who had successfully carried out “cross-hand” gambling scams within casinos. They approached these “cross-hand” scammers, threatening to expose their illegal activities to the defrauded gamblers or casino security personnel in

order to extort money from them.

On Wednesday, PJ officers nabbed the suspected gang members in multiple residential flats and casinos, Ho said, adding that the gang has been linked to at least 35 cases, with illicit proceeds of around HK\$800,000.

The 13 suspects were transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) yesterday, facing charges of organised crime and blackmail; in addition, the Judiciary Police have initiated formal investigations against the 10 “victims” for their alleged involvement in “cross-hand” gambling scams. ■

# Police arrest local man for stealing helmet to give friend a lift

## Armindo Neves

The Public Security Police (PSP) arrested a local man for stealing a helmet so that he could give his friend a lift, PSP spokesman Lei Chan Hong said during a regular press conference yesterday.

Lei did not disclose the friend’s gender.

Lei identified the suspect as a senior business development manager in his 40s surnamed Tse.

According to Lei, PSP officers received a report from the male victim last Friday that when he had parked his motorcycle on Rua de Lagos in Taipa last Thursday he left his helmet on the seat and walked away.

Lei said that upon returning around 25 minutes later the victim discovered that his helmet had vanished without trace so he decided to report it to the police early Friday last week, declaring a loss of 890 patacas.

According to Lei, PSP officers identified Tse through CCTV footage. At 11 a.m. last Friday, PSP officers apprehended Tse in Nape and recovered the stolen helmet from the carpark on Rua do Canal Novo (涌河新街) in Areia Preta district.

Lei said that Tse claimed that he had stolen the helmet that day so that he could give his friend a lift.

Tse has been transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) for further investigation. ■



This undated handout photo provided by the Public Security Police (PSP) yesterday shows PSP officers escorting the theft suspect into a police station.

# Ticket refunds available from today for Peking opera performance: IC

## Rui Pastorin

The Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) said in a statement yesterday that refunds for tickets for the Peking opera performance “A Meeting of Heroes. Invoking the East Wind”, which was scheduled to be performed last night but was cancelled due to programme

adjustments are available from today.

The performance at the Macau Cultural Centre’s Grand Auditorium was integrated in the “1st Chinese Culture Performances Season.

Tickets bought through the Enjoy Macao Ticketing online platform will be automatically

refunded to the original payment accounts. For tickets purchased at Enjoy Macao Ticketing outlets, refunds can be requested in person until December 14 by presenting the intact tickets, according to the statement.

Enquiries can be made on 2840 0555. ■

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## Macau Weather

VERY DRY.  
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14°C~22°C

Source: SMG



# Monthlong 'Light up Macao 2025' to start next Saturday



Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) Director Maria Helena de Senna Fernandes speaks during press conference about the upcoming "Light up Macao 2025" event, at the Macau Science Centre (MSC) in Nape yesterday. — Photo: Ida Cheong

Ida Chong

"Light up Macao 2025" will take place from next Saturday to 11 January, featuring 3D mapping shows, 28 light installation sets, themed carnivals, culinary booths and others, the Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) announced at a press conference yesterday afternoon.

The press conference for the event was held at the Macau Science Centre (MSC) in Nape.

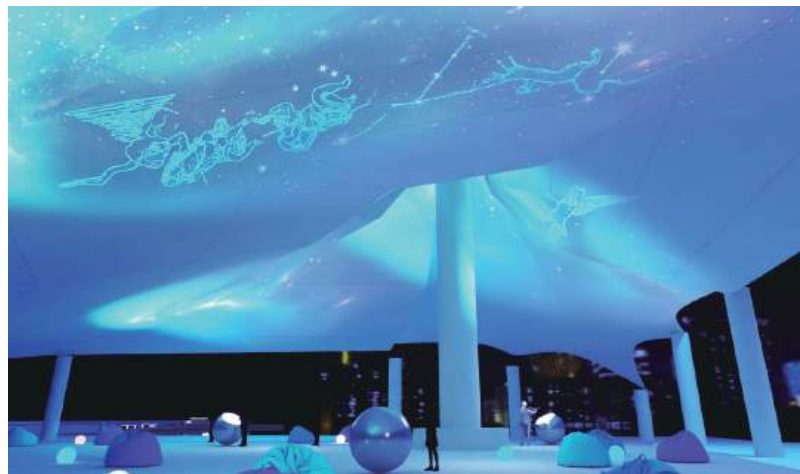
The monthlong event, themed "Lightscape•Horizon", will feature 28 light installation sets, interactive installations and illuminations in three main local districts: Nam Van, the northern district, and Zape, all designed by artists from Australia, the Chinese mainland, Portugal, South Korea and the United States as well as local teams, striving to present a festive combination of

local creativity and international vision. Residents and visitors are welcome to enjoy the event free of charge from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. every day during the event.

MGTO Director Maria Helena de Senna Fernandes told reporters during the press conference that the overall budget was reduced by 37 percent compared to last year, due to a shorter event duration and the cancellation of exhibition zones with lower foot traffic, allowing resources to be concentrated on key areas, adding that the whole expenditure is borne by Macau's six integrated resort (IR) operators, requiring no government funding.

Last year's overall budget for the international light art event was around 28.3 million patacas, of which the six IR operators sponsored about 18 million, according to previous media reports.

Senna Fernandes said in a speech that a parallel event entitled "ZAPE Christmas Wonderland" will be held in the area between Rua de Cantão (廣東街) and Rua de Pequim (北京街). The open-style Christmas thematic zone will feature installations and illuminations as well as interactive experiences, the statement said, adding that along with other subsidised programmes under the "Travel around Macao", "Luminescent Night at Travessa do Armazém Velho" and "Northern Winter Market", "Light up Macao



This image downloaded from the "Light up Macao 2025" website yesterday shows one of the light installations at Nam Van Lake Nautical Centre.

2025" will enrich the "festive aroma" and boost night-time consumption.

According to a MGTO statement yesterday, the event will provide culinary delights, cultural & creative booths and game booths and a themed carnival which will enliven the vicinity of Rua de Luís Gonzaga Gomes (高美士街), Rua de Xiamen (廈門街) and Rua de Nagasaki (長崎街) near the Macau Grand Prix Museum (MGPM) in Zape from Friday to Sunday and on designated festive days during the event period.

Moreover, a 3D mapping show will be projected on the Macau Grand Prix Museum. The 6-minute mapping show will take place every 15 minutes from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. every night during the event, the statement said.

Flash activities, workshops, interactive online games with prizes, as well as the popular "打卡" ("da ka" in Putonghua; known as "must-visit spot" in English) activity to win a prize, will be held at designated locations during the event, welcoming the public to join.

The statement added that on Fridays to Sundays and on designated festive days during the event, free shuttle buses will be provided to the public in the three districts between Luso International Bank on Avenida Doutor Mário Soares in the city centre and Zape from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m.

For more information, please visit the "Light up Macao 2025" website at [https://lum.macaotourism.gov.mo/index\\_en.html](https://lum.macaotourism.gov.mo/index_en.html). ■

## 37<sup>th</sup> int'l music festival draws 8,000 participants

Khalel Vallo

According to a statement by the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) on Wednesday, the 37<sup>th</sup> Macao International Music Festival (MIMF) concluded on November 8, bringing 14 sessions of 12 programmes and 19 outreach activities to audiences under the theme "Vocal Waves."

Held throughout the month, this year's festival gathered over 650 performers and continued to position Macau as a "City of Performing Arts," the statement said.

The statement noted that Music Director and Principal Conductor of the Macao Orchestra (OM) Lio Kuok Man once again worked with the bureau to curate performances that paired visual and auditory aspects, featuring both international and local musicians.

The statement added that two commemorative concerts marked major anniversaries: "River of Legacy" by the Macao Chinese Orchestra for the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, and "The Yellow River" by the Macao Orchestra with pianist Cheong Hoi Leong for the 120<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Macau-born patriotic composer Xian Xinghai's birth.

Additionally, the programme also included French composer

George Bizet's "Carmen" co-presented with SJM, as well as performances by Russian pianist and conductor Mikhail Pletnev with the Rachmaninoff International Orchestra presented by Melco Resorts & Entertainment (Melco), Portuguese fado singer Cuca Roseta with the Macao Chinese Orchestra, and South African violinist Daniel Hope with Switzerland's Gstaad Festival Orchestra, the statement said.

The outreach component continued to expand, with talks, workshops, community events and screenings drawing nearly 8,000 participants, the statement said, adding that two charity sessions for higher-education students offered additional access to performances.

Meanwhile, the statement highlighted that the online promotion across new media and platforms reached over 8.1 million people, and the festival received support from Macau's integrated resort operators, media partners and financial institutions.

The bureau noted that it would continue strengthening the festival's international exchange platform, attracting performances while aiming to support local music development to further reinforce Macau's cultural positioning within the Greater Bay Area (GBA). ■



This undated handout photo provided by the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) on Wednesday shows the presentation of "Carmen - Opera in Four Acts by Georges Bizet" at the Macau Cultural Centre (CCM) in Nape during the 37<sup>th</sup> Macao International Music Festival (MIMF) which concluded on November 8.

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## Business Sustainability Indices recognises Sands China as 'Exemplar' in 5 indices



This photo provided by Sands China yesterday shows staff displaying the company's six certificates awarded in this year's Business Sustainability Indices (BSI).

**Rui Pastorin**

Integrated resort operator Sands China said in a statement yesterday that it was named an "Exemplar" in five categories of the 2025 Business Sustainability Indices (BSI) by the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK).

The statement said that the company garnered four Top 3 rankings, namely in "Global (Asia-Pacific) Business Sustainability Index", "Greater China Business Sustainability Index", "Greater Bay Area Business Sustainability Index" and "Hong Kong Business Sustainability Index", being the first integrated tourism and leisure enterprise in Macau to have a Top 3 ranking in the BSI.

BSI, which launched in 2015, assessed 385 listed companies in Hong Kong, China's Taiwan region, Shenzhen, and Shanghai, and global hotel chains, the statement noted. It recognises companies that positively impact society and the environment, ranking and scoring indices on value (comprising vision and mission), process (management and practice) and impact. They evaluate a

company's vision, management practices, and contributions to society, the environment and stakeholders, the statement said.

The integrated resort operator was also ranked in the top 10 companies in the "Greater China Hotel Business Sustainability Index". Moreover, they received the "Hong Kong Business Sustainability Index 10th Anniversary Decade of Excellence Award – Sustainability Progress" for the first time for its years of implementing "a progressive strategy for corporate social responsibility and sustainability", according to the statement.

Sands China Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director Grant Chum Kwan Lock was quoted by the statement as saying that in all, it testifies to "the remarkable progress we have made in our environmental, social and governance strategies over the years. We will continue to fulfil our corporate social responsibility, integrate sustainable development into all aspects of our business, and optimise measures to benefit environmental and social development, setting a benchmark for the industry".

## Hengqin hosts SJM 'Tennis Clinic' ahead of Macau tournament

**Kristina Vallesteros**

A "Tennis Clinic" was held on November 19 at Hengqin School Affiliated to Hou Kong Middle School, according to a statement recently provided by SJM Resorts.

The event featured close to 40 students and teachers, preceding the upcoming 2025 CTA Tour SJM Professional Finals, scheduled to take place from December 1 (next Monday) to 7 at the Macau Tennis Academy in Cotai.

In Hengqin, the statement noted, professional coaches led participants through training exercises and group activities including games guided by the coaches. The clinic included an exhibition featuring past CTA Tour champions including Bu Yunchaokete, Wu Yibing, Liu Fangzhou, Wang Yafan, Cui Jie, Te Rigele, and Wang Qiang.

"This activity further deepened students' understanding of China's sporting achievements, nurturing a sense of national pride while cultivating a love for physical activity", according to the statement.

The statement said that a prize

presentation was also held while participants also received commemorative gifts of the CTA Tour Finals, with outstanding students receiving additional souvenirs featuring SJM's mascot "Sam the Rooster". The clinic series aims to promote tennis development across the Greater Bay Area (GBA).

The statement added that SJM has partnered with the University of Macau's Office of Sports Affairs to host the "SJM X UM 2025 Tennis Experience Camp" held this month, providing local youngsters' with tennis instructions. The statement said that some 25 young players began their journey from the basics, mastering essential skills such as grip, swinging and hitting under the guidance of experienced instructors.

The 2025 CTA Tour began in April in Huzhou City, Zhejiang Province, with tournaments nationwide selecting players for next month's Macau finals.

The event coincided with tennis competitions of the 15th National Games in the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin, the statement noted.



This undated handout photo recently provided by SJM Resorts shows students being trained by a coach from the Macau Tennis Association during the "Tennis Clinic" held on November 19 at Hengqin School Affiliated to Hou Kong Middle School.

## Positive hotel occupancy outlook for Dec: Verschuren



Area Vice President, Macau and Hengqin of Artyzen Hospitality Group, General Manager of Artyzen Grand Lapa Macau, and Macau Hotel Association (MHA) Vice President Rutger Verschuren (Centre) cuts the Make-A-Wish cake last night after the Tree Lighting ceremony at the Artyzen Grand Lapa Macau in Nape.

– Photo: Rui Pastorin

**Rui Pastorin**

Macau Hotel Association (MHA) Vice President Rutger Verschuren told English-language reporters yesterday that he was upbeat about the hotel occupancy figures for December, noting that as a whole, they are looking at a "positive year".

Verschuren made the remarks to the media after the unveiling and lighting event of their 5.0-metre Christmas Tree at Artyzen Grand Lapa Macau in Nape.

However, with satellite casinos closing on the peninsula, Verschuren said that they are "very anxious" with how it will affect certain neighbourhoods, as well as the shops close to those hotels as they will face challenges and changes. "But it is more in terms of what kind of business are those

hotels going to attract without casinos".

Verschuren said that Artyzen Grand Lapa Macau is optimistic given that it has a great variety of offerings, being more like a "mini-integrated resort", noting: "Our value, I think, will go up because we have a lot of facilities", having more than just rooms and restaurants.

"I feel for the hotels where the casinos are leaving, that is going to be quite a challenge for them, I think".

Meanwhile, Verschuren also remarked that during the 15th National Games held from November 9 to 21, the hotels located on the peninsula in general "did not really benefit much", but looking at its impact and the economy as a whole, he said: "I think it must have been very successful".

## 'House of Dancing Water' wins int'l marketing awards

**Kristina Vallesteros**

The House of Dancing Water's Premiere project has won two top international awards, Melco Resorts & Entertainment said in a Monday statement.

The show's premiere project won a Platinum Award for Best Brand Awareness Campaign and a Gold Award for Best Integrated Marketing Campaign at the 2025 TITAN Brand Awards. The statement said the awards recognise the company's work to position Macau as a "World Centre of Tourism and Leisure".

The House of Dancing Water is an aquatic show that has drawn global audiences since 2010. The recently launched new version, overseen by Peparini Studios Artistic Director Giuliano Peparini, features a 270-degree stage, high-tech effects, and a large international

cast of nearly 300 professionals from over 30 countries.

The statement highlighted the extensive global attention it captured. According to the statement, it garnered over 1.1 billion views on social media platforms like Weibo and Instagram in just three days after the premiere. Posts about the show also sparked more than six million interactions from users, the statement said.

"We are deeply honoured by this recognition," Melco Chairman and CEO Lawrence Ho Yau-lung was quoted as saying. "It affirms our commitment to creating world-class entertainment experiences for our guests from across the globe."

The TITAN Brand Awards are globally recognised honours that celebrate creative and effective brand campaigns. Winners are judged by an international panel of experts.



This undated handout photo recently provided by Melco Resorts & Entertainment shows a previous House of Dancing Water performance taking place at City of Dreams (COD) in Cotai.



# Sam urges citywide efforts to screen & rectify safety hazards

**Tony Wong**

Macau Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai convened and chaired a meeting yesterday urging all respective public entities to plan, organise and implement citywide tasks of screening, identifying and minimising major safety risks in various aspects of civil society, and put the respective measures in place, in the wake of the devastating residential building fire in Hong Kong that erupted on Wednesday, according to a statement by the Macau Government Information Bureau (GCS).

The inferno in Hong Kong's Tai Po District killed at least 83 people, according to official data released by the authorities early this morning.

The Macau government's ongoing public safety risk prevention and control efforts include cross-departmental extensive, high-frequency inspections of construction sites and building renovation projects with scaffolding in place across the city.

The GCS statement said that in order to urge local officials at all levels to stay committed to studying and implementing the spirit of President Xi Jinping's important instructions concerning disaster prevention while ensuring the effective planning, coordination and implementation of the city's winter safety campaigns in the light of Macau's situation, Sam convened a meeting yesterday morning aiming to coordinate government entities' work on screening and minimising public safety risks across the city during the winter.

In addition to top officials including four of the government's five policy secretaries, Legislative Assembly (AL) President André Cheong Weng Chon and Court of Final Appeal (TUI) President Song Man Lei also attended the meeting, which was held at Government Headquarters.



Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai addresses yesterday's meeting at Government Headquarters in Nam Van district.

According to the statement, Sam stressed in the meeting that the local government must comprehensively enhance public awareness of fire prevention, disaster prevention, and disaster preparedness, and strengthen education campaigns, with the aim of ensuring that civil society stays vigilant against safety threats so as to build a fire safety defence line in the community.

Sam noted that given Macau's high population density and the frequent festivals and holidays over the next few months, all respective government entities must ensure the effective planning, organisation and implementation of citywide tasks of screening, identifying and minimising major safety risks in various aspects of civil society.

Among the world's nearly 200 countries and territories, Macau has the world's highest population density, which stood at 20,618 inhabitants per square kilometre, according to the Statistics and Census Bureau's demographics as of the end of the third quarter of this year.

## Sam raises 4 requirements

According to the statement, Sam



Government inspectors check a project with scaffolding for compliance with the official fire prevention standards yesterday.

– Photos: GCS

raised four requirements for the matter.

**First**, Sam said, the respective public entities must strengthen their screening and rectification of fire safety hazards in large shopping malls, entertainment venues, cultural and sports venues, tourist attractions, buildings in old neighbourhoods, as well as any venues where hazardous materials, such as gas and chemicals, are intensively stored or used.

With the increased fire hazards and risks during the autumn and winter, Sam said, targeted efforts must be made to strengthen inspections of ongoing construction sites and building renovation projects with scaffolding as well as those that will start in the near future.

According to the statement, Sam also urged the respective public entities to strengthen fire prevention for the woods and hills.

Sam said that the public entities must close loopholes at the source, nip potential risks in the bud, and eliminate hazards before they escalate into disasters.

**Second**, Sam said, the respective public entities must strengthen

education campaigns for the public on fire safety and disaster prevention, including increased public awareness of getting familiar with evacuation routes.

**Third**, Sam said, the public entities must strengthen patrols, inspections, and surveillance in crowded places such as public venues, public transport hubs, border checkpoints, and tourist attractions in order to ensure the full prevention of violent or terrorist activities, vicious criminal cases, and mass casualty accidents.

**Fourth**, Sam underlined that the government must further improve emergency response mechanisms and contingency plans for major public emergencies, natural disasters, and cybersecurity attacks, and effectively leverage the coordination role of the Civil Protection Operations Centre, in order to safeguard Macau's overall public security and enhance urban safety standards and levels.

## Citywide, high-frequency inspections of projects with scaffolding

Meanwhile, a joint statement by

four public entities, namely the Fire Services Bureau (CB), the Lands and Urban Construction Bureau (DSSCU), the Labour Affairs Bureau (DSAL), and the Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM), laid out details about yesterday's launch of cross-departmental extensive, high-frequency inspections of construction sites and building renovation projects with scaffolding across the city.

The statement said that according to latest official data, about 60 projects involving the use of scaffolding are being carried out across the city.

The statement underlined that after yesterday's launch of the campaign, inspectors and officials of the four public entities will jointly conduct high-frequency inspections of all projects involving the use of scaffolding over a period of time in the near future, with the aim of ensuring that all constructors always carry out the projects in compliance with official fire prevention standards.

The statement also underlined that constructors must use flame-retardant materials when carrying out any "hot work" on construction sites, adding that they must present proof of the flame-retardant materials when government officials inspect the projects.

"Hot work" on a construction site refers to any activity that involves open flames, sparks, or other heat-producing equipment, such as welding, cutting and grinding.

Meanwhile, the Macau Red Cross said yesterday that it has donated HK\$500,000 to the Hong Kong Red Cross for the Hong Kong fire's emergency rescue and the provision of shelters for disaster victims. ■

## Bystanders in HK express shock over Tai Po inferno

**Vox Pop by Khalel Vallo in Hong Kong**

Onlookers at Wang Fuk Court in Hong Kong's Tai Po District described yesterday their shock of seeing a huge housing complex engulfed in flames on the previous day, with bedlam in the neighbourhood, appealing to the authorities for better rescue efforts.

The blaze broke out on Wednesday afternoon at the housing complex, which is a densely populated estate made up of eight high-rise towers in Hong Kong's New Territories.

The *Post* was at the scene of the fire at 6 p.m. last night and saw firefighters still battling flames in a number of units. The air was full of choking smoke. Distraught people were milling around waiting for news of their loved ones.

Speaking to the *Post*, several bystanders and eye witnesses of the inferno said that they were shocked and overwhelmed by the scale and speed of the fire at the complex.



Bystanders watch as Hong Kong firefighters work hard to extinguish lingering flames at the Wang Fuk Court housing complex in Tai Po District of Hong Kong's New Territories yesterday evening, after Wednesday's deadly inferno.

Two 13-year-old middle schoolers, Yannis and Ryan, said that this was the first time they have seen eight buildings on fire at the same time. They described the scene as "amazing and surprising," and noted the inferno's impact on their community: heavy traffic jams, destruction of schoolmates' homes, and loss of clothes and homework for children whose families lived nearby.

Meanwhile, Dio, 43, said that he rushed to the scene at about 10 p.m. after finishing work, only to be met by what he called "a big inferno tower." The Philippine national expressed deep concern for the many foreign domestic workers who live in the area and whose safety remains uncertain, and added that he documented the fire by taking videos and streaming on live social media platforms to

inform the public.

Another eye witness, 35-year-old Gaston, a correspondent from Argentina, who was there when the fire began, described how the flames spread "too fast," shocking residents who initially thought the fire might be limited in the end. While he did not know anyone personally living in the affected flats, he said that the people in the neighbourhood rallied to support

one another, but also pointed out the fear over building safety and wider structural issues.

The interviewees called for better rescue and detection measures. "We need more drones to find and rescue more people inside the building, to fly over the building and scan inside if there is anybody left," Yannis said.

At 12:30 a.m. this morning, the inferno's death toll stood at 83. ■



– Photos: Khalel Vallo



# Artyzen Grand Lapa's Christmas tree gives new life to picture frames



Yesterday's Tree Lighting ceremony at Artyzen Grand Lapa Macau. – Photos: Rui Pastorin

Rui Pastorin

Artyzen Grand Lapa Macau held its tree lighting ceremony last night at its hotel lobby in Zape, with their 5-metre Christmas Tree having a twist – it was constructed entirely out of repurposed frames.

Each frame, once displayed at hotel areas before renovation, features paintings from the operator's recent Boa Vida Painting Competition held over the summer, which gathered 52 participants who painted on themes related to the Artyzen Grand Lapa Hotel and the spirit of Artyzen, as well as previously displayed in-room art.

In the past, the hotel had real trees imported from Canada, but considerations were made with the effects of increasing carbon dioxide (CO2). "We thought that it's not the right thing to do", with the hotel operator having already made the decision to stop doing it for a few years, Rutger Verschuren, Area Vice President, Macau and Hengqin of Artyzen Hospitality Group and General Manager of Artyzen Grand Lapa Macau, told the *Post* during

an interview Macau's English-language media yesterday.

With the hotel having been in Macau for over 40 years, Verschuren said that he had an idea to make use of materials kept in their many storerooms, asking: "Can we make a tree out of this?". And among the variety of items kept are thousands of frames from the day the hotel was built to the years after. "We still have those. So, we said 'let's make use of them'", he said, being proud of the resulting Christmas Art Tree.

Verschuren also told the *Post* about their collaboration with the Shanghai Make-A-Wish Charity Foundation, which fulfils wishes for children coping with serious illnesses. One of the first to start the collaboration, the hotel operator helps to sponsor children from the Chinese mainland who have a wish, according to Verschuren, who noted previous examples including a child wanting to see a certain celebrity who happened to visit the city and assisting during activities like when a child

wanted to visit Chimelong Ocean Kingdom in Hengqin.

"New Year period is always about making wishes, like Christmas, and you wish for the next year to go better. And so, this is a very good season to do something extra". In line with this, the hotel operator launched the 'Wish Upon A Star' Festive Cake that all their hotels sell, with 30 percent of proceeds going towards making wishes come true, according to Verschuren. "It's not about making money on the cake. This is just trying to do something nice for the society. That's part of our mission", he said.

Last night's tree lighting ceremony, which marked the launch of the hotel's festive campaign, was followed by a cutting of a Make-A-Wish cake and a performance of Christmas carols by a choir from The International School of Macao (TIS).

Prior to the ceremony, 30 seconds of silence were also observed for the Tai Po Wang Fuk Court inferno victims. ■

## HK's deadliest blaze in decades kills at least 83

Continued from p.1

Hong Kong authorities will immediately inspect all housing estates undergoing major works following the disaster, Lee said.

Chief Secretary Eric Chan Kwok-ki told a news conference it was "imperative to expedite the full transition to metal scaffolding", adding that the government would collaborate with the construction industry.

President Xi Jinping expressed condolences to the victims, according to state media, with the Hong Kong government saying Beijing would provide assistance such as drones and medicine.

City authorities said they had opened nine shelters and were organising temporary accommodation and emergency

funds for those who had lost their homes.

Activities around Hong Kong's legislative elections, set to take place on December 7, have been suspended.

### Hellish scenes

Sections of charred scaffolding fell from the burning apartment blocks in hellish scenes late on Wednesday, as flames inside apartments sometimes belched out through windows into a night sky that glowed orange.

Fire services said the wind and drifting debris likely spread the fire from one building to another.

Some of the residents in adjacent blocks who had been evacuated as a precaution were allowed back into their homes

yesterday afternoon.

Crowds moved by the tragedy gathered near the complex to organise aid for displaced residents and firefighters, part of a spontaneous effort in a city that has some of the world's most densely packed and tallest residential blocks.

Volunteers distributed clothes and lunch boxes at the open-air podium of a nearby mall, while a few people gave out flyers with information about missing people.

"It's truly touching," said Stone Ngai, 38, one of the organisers of an impromptu aid station.

"The spirit of Hong Kong people is that when one is in trouble, everyone lends support... It shows that Hong Kong people are full of love." – AFP

## Police nab 2 jewellery shop staff for HK\$70 million illegal currency exchange deals

Armindo Neves

The Judiciary Police (PJ) on Wednesday nabbed two local women working for a jewellery shop for illegal currency exchange activities involving over HK\$70 million, PJ spokesman Ho Wai Lok said during a special press conference yesterday.

Ho identified the duo, who are related, working at the shop as a 58-year-old who identified herself as a businesswoman and a 42-year-old who said that she was a saleswoman, both surnamed Sam.

According to Ho, on Wednesday, during a routine inspection of facilities next to a casino in Nape, PJ officers noticed 42-year-old Sam displaying a payment QR code to a gambler in the jewellery shop. After the gambler completed a mobile transfer, she immediately took HK\$ banknotes from a drawer and handed them to the gambler, Ho said, pointing out that the gambler then exchanged the cash for casino chips to gamble.

Judicial Police officers intercepted and questioned both, and PJ officers discovered that in the transaction, 42-year-old Sam received 2,020 yuan and exchanged the amount for HK\$2,000 at an exchange rate of 0.99 for the gambler, Ho said.

PJ officers seized suspected illicit cash totalling HK\$2.827 million and 60,000 yuan from the jewellery shop and also confiscated an account ledger and a mobile phone specifically used for currency exchange transactions, Ho said, adding that a follow-up investigation showed that the shop had opened for business in 2014.

Ho also said that since the effective date of the "Law on Combating Illegal Gambling Offences" on October 29, 2024, the transactions at the shop had reached at least HK\$70 million.

The duo have been transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP), each facing charges of involvement in illegal currency exchange activities. ■



Judiciary Police (PJ) officers escort the two hooded suspects from the PJ headquarters in Zape to a van yesterday.

– Photo: Armindo Neves

## 'MGM Chef Nic Gastronomusic Fest 2025' donates HK\$5 million to support Tai Po fire victims

Rui Pastorin

Integrated resort operator MGM and Chef Nic Holdings Limited announced in a joint statement last night that they will be together donating HK\$5 million to provide emergency assistance to those affected by the major fire at Hong Kong's Tai Po Wang Fuk Court, aiming to help residents "rebuild their lives and restore a sense of normalcy".

The donation will be in the name of the MGM Chef Nic Gastronomusic Fest 2025, adding that they are deeply saddened by the calamity. "Our hearts are with the people of Hong Kong, and we extend our sincerest condolences to all affected residents", the statement said.

Meanwhile, the statement

noted that the MGM Chef Nic Gastronomusic Fest 2025 slated for this weekend will be held under "a respectfully adapted atmosphere, uniting music and gastronomy to deliver comforting and positive energy", aiming to channel collective empathy into "heartfelt blessings – for peace to the departed, and strength to those who carry on". ■



This image provided by integrated resort operator MGM last night shows the logo for "MGM Chef Nic Gastronomusic Fest 2025".



## China hopes France promotes healthy development of China-EU relations along right track: Wang Yi

BEIJING – China hopes that France promotes the healthy development of China-EU relations along the right track, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said yesterday.

Wang, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs, made the remarks in a phone call with Emmanuel Bonne, diplomatic adviser to the French president.

Wang said the current international landscape is marked by turbulence and intertwined changes, with new problems and challenges emerging one after another.

It is therefore necessary for China and France to maintain regular dialogue and strengthen strategic coordination, Wang said, stressing the importance of the strategic guidance of the two heads of state.

Wang urged the two sides to deepen all-round mutually beneficial cooperation and elevate their comprehensive strategic partnership to a new level, and to inject fresh impetus into safeguarding multilateralism and reforming and improving global governance, demonstrating the responsibility of China and France as permanent members of the UN Security Council.

He hopes that France will encourage the EU to pursue a positive and rational policy toward China, uphold the basic positioning of partnership, and properly address economic and trade differences through dialogue and consultation.

Wang also elaborated on China's position on the Taiwan question, stressing that provocative remarks on Taiwan by the incumbent Japanese leader are turning back the wheel of history and a violation of China's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

As permanent members of the UN Security Council and

comprehensive strategic partners, China and France need to jointly safeguard the outcomes of WWII victory and firmly support each other on issues concerning their core interests, he said.

Wang also expressed hope that France continues to firmly abide by the one-China principle.

For his part, Bonne said that President Emmanuel Macron looks forward to visiting China soon to consolidate and deepen the friendship between the two heads of state and to conduct in-depth strategic communication on advancing France-China and EU-China relations and jointly addressing global crises.

He believes this visit will guide the high-quality development of bilateral relations and make new contributions to world peace and stability.

Bonne said that France upholds the tradition of an independent foreign policy, firmly adheres to the one-China policy, and understands China's legitimate position on the Taiwan question.

France looks forward to enhancing mutual trust, strengthening dialogue and coordination with China, and jointly addressing challenges such as global governance and economic imbalances, Bonne said.

Stressing the importance of healthy development of EU-China relations, he said that France is willing to play a positive role in EU-China dialogue and cooperation based on the sound France-China relations.

The two sides also exchanged views on the Ukraine crisis. Bonne briefed Wang on France's position on it. Wang said that China supports all efforts dedicated to peace, supports a peace deal that is comprehensive, lasting and acceptable by relevant parties, and advocates building a balanced, effective and sustainable European security architecture, adding that China is willing to maintain communication with France on this matter.

– Xinhua

## China opposes Japanese PM's continuous harm to political foundation of bilateral ties: FM spokesperson

BEIJING – China firmly opposes Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's continuous undermining of the political foundation of China-Japan relations, which is based on the spirit of the four political documents between the two countries, a foreign ministry spokesperson said yesterday.

It was reported that Takaichi said on Wednesday at a debate with opposition party leaders that "having renounced all rights and claims under the Treaty of San Francisco, we are not in a position to recognize Taiwan's legal status."

In response, spokesperson Guo Jiakun told a regular news briefing that China's recovery of Taiwan is a victorious outcome of World War II and an integral part of the postwar international order. A series of instruments with legal effect under international law, including the Cairo Declaration, the Potsdam Proclamation, and the Japanese Instrument of Surrender, have all affirmed China's sovereignty over Taiwan.

The question regarding the status of Taiwan was already resolved once and for all when the Chinese people won the victory of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression in 1945. On October 1, 1949, the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established and has since been the sole legal government representing the whole of China. This is a change of government in which China, as a subject under international law, did not

change and China's sovereignty and inherent territorial boundaries stayed unchanged, Guo said, adding that thus, the government of the PRC naturally and fully enjoys and exercises China's sovereignty, including sovereignty over the Taiwan region.

He said the 1972 Sino-Japanese Joint Statement states that "The Government of Japan recognizes the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China. The Government of the People's Republic of China reiterates that Taiwan is an inalienable part of the territory of the People's Republic of China. The Government of Japan fully understands and respects this stand of the Government of the People's Republic of China, and it firmly maintains its stand under Article 8 of the Potsdam Proclamation."

The so-called "Treaty of San Francisco" was issued with the exclusion of important parties to the WWII, such as the PRC and the Soviet Union, in order to seek a separate peace deal with Japan. The document goes against the provision that each government pledges not to make a separate armistice or peace with the enemies in the Declaration by United Nations signed by 26 countries in 1942, including China, the US, the UK and the Soviet Union, and violates the UN Charter and the basic principles of international law, he said.

"Anything set out in the treaty, including on the sovereignty over Taiwan or the handling of the territory

and sovereign rights of China as a non-signatory, is thus entirely illegal and null and void," Guo said.

He said Prime Minister Takaichi deliberately chose not to mention the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation – two international legal documents with full effect and underscored in the Sino-Japanese Joint Statement, the Treaty of Peace and Friendship Between China and Japan and other bilateral treaties, noting that she singularly brought up the illegal and invalid "Treaty of San Francisco."

That once again shows that the prime minister remains unwilling to own up to the wrongdoing and turn back from the erroneous course, continues to damage the political foundation of China-Japan relations established under the spirit of the four political documents between the two countries, shows no regard for the authority of the UN and openly challenges the postwar international order and basic norms in international law, and even seeks to play up the so-called notion that Taiwan's status is undetermined. That just compounds the wrongdoing, Guo said.

"China firmly rejects that and calls for utmost vigilance from the international community. We once again urge the Japanese side to reflect on and correct its wrongdoing, retract the erroneous remarks, and take practical steps to honor its commitments to China and do what is least expected of Japan as a UN member state," he said. – Xinhua

## China eyes improved supply-demand alignment to unlock consumption potential

### Analysis

BEIJING – China has unveiled a comprehensive plan to improve the alignment of the supply and demand of consumer goods, in its latest move to tap the potential of its super-large market and provide sustained momentum for the world's second-largest economy.

The plan, which was unveiled by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) and five other government departments, outlines measures that include those to foster new consumption sectors such as smart homes and green construction materials, promote upgrades of consumer goods in rural areas, and increase the supply of specific goods ranging from winter sports gear and popular toys to products for infants and the elderly.

The country will "coordinate the expansion of domestic demand and the deepening of supply-side structural reform," according to the plan, noting that consumption's rate of contribution to economic growth will increase steadily by 2030.

At a news briefing concerning the plan, MIIT deputy head Xie Yuansheng noted that China's consumer goods sector has entered a new development phase in which good quality commands good prices,

and that the improved matching of supply and demand will be the optimal way to unleash the country's consumption potential.

Under the plan, consumption sectors worth three trillion yuan – elderly care products, intelligent connected vehicles and consumer electronics – will be formed by 2027, Xie said. Additionally, ten 100-billion-yuan consumption hotspots will be fostered, including goods for children and infants, smart wearables, cosmetics, fitness equipment, and pet food and products.

Improving supply-demand alignment will also drive industrial upgrading, create a virtuous cycle where new demand generates new supply, and ensure positive interactions between consumption and investment, as well as between supply and demand, said Liu Xiangdong, a researcher at the China Center for International Economic Exchanges.

The move comes as China includes boosting consumption as a top priority on its policy agenda for 2025, and it signals continued focus on supporting consumption over the next five years, as noted in a recommendations document for the formulation of the 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan (2026-2030).

The country aims to "achieve

a notable increase in household consumption as a share of GDP," and to increase the role of domestic demand as the principal engine of economic growth over the next five years, according to the document.

Consumption remains a robust driver of the Chinese economy. In the first three quarters of this year, final consumption expenditure contributed 53.5 percent to China's economic growth, compared to 44.5 percent for the entirety of 2024, according to the National Bureau of Statistics.

To boost consumption, the Chinese government has unveiled a raft of measures, including an expanded consumer goods trade-in program, increased consumer finance offerings, and strengthened employment support.

These efforts are yielding results. The consumer goods trade-in program has spurred sales of a wide range of products, including home appliances, e-bikes and new energy passenger cars, with sales of such products cumulatively topping 2.4 trillion yuan during the first 10 months of this year.

Supported by the program, retail sales – a major indicator of the country's consumption strength – maintained a stable rise, increasing 4.3 percent year on year during the January-October period. – Xinhua



A staff member trains a humanoid robot to fetch objects for data collection purposes at Zerith, a robotics company, in Hefei, capital of Anhui Province, on Tuesday. In recent years, Hefei has been actively promoting the development of its intelligent robot industry. The city is now home to a full-chain industrial system for research, development and manufacturing of robotics that comprises 190 related enterprises. – Xinhua



# Pink elephants march for Thailand's late queen mother



Mourners bow as mahouts gesture on painted elephants sitting during a procession to pay respects to Thailand's late former queen Sirikit near the Grand Palace in Bangkok yesterday. — AFP

BANGKOK — Eleven pink painted elephants marched through Bangkok yesterday, bowing in unison outside the Grand Palace in a lumbering tribute to the late queen mother.

Sirikit, the mother of current King Maha Vajiralongkorn and wife of the longest-reigning Thai monarch, died in October at the age of 93.

The royal family holds revered status in Thai society, with their portraits hung in homes, offices and public spaces. Sirikit is lying in state for an elaborate year-long funeral ceremony.

Laithongrian Meehan, owner of

the Royal Elephant Kraal Village in Ayutthaya province, organised the procession of pastel pachyderms — daubed in paint to mimic albino elephants considered auspicious.

Inspired by Sirikit's love for the large mammals, Laithongrian said he has dedicated three decades to their care, and more than 100 royal elephants had been selectively bred under her guidance.

"Her Majesty granted me an audience and gave me advice on raising elephants," he said. "We have brought the baby elephants to show Her Majesty that they obey orders."

Since Sirikit's death, the government has declared a year-

long mourning period for officials and urged the public to wear mourning colours of black or white for 90 days.

The late queen's portrait sat high on the back of one of the elephants, which had gold-adorned tusks and wore traditional caparisons as they marched past the Grand Palace.

"I have close bond to elephants," elephant enthusiast and royal mourner Panya Phongsrithong told AFP.

He said the ceremony was a "magnificent" chance to pay his respects to the late queen mother, whose body will be cremated at the conclusion of the year-long funeral.

— AFP

## Indonesia's residents rush outside as 6.6 quake hits

JAKARTA — A magnitude 6.6-earthquake hit an island off the coast of Sumatra in western Indonesia yesterday, according to the United States Geological Survey (USGS), with no immediate reports of damage or tsunami warning.

The quake, which struck Simeulue Island at 11:56 a.m. [local time] at a depth of 25 kilometres, prompted locals on the island to immediately rush outside.

"I was sitting in a coffee shop, suddenly the table was shaking. Many people rushed outside of buildings and houses," Ahmadi, who like many Indonesians goes by one name, told AFP.

"The earthquake was quite long. I think probably around seven seconds or more."

He said there were several aftershocks but the tremors were relatively shorter compared to the earlier quake, adding that he had yet to receive any information about damages.

The Indian Ocean tsunami warning centre said after the quake that "there is no threat" of a potential tsunami generated from the quake.

Indonesia's Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency (BMKG) recorded the quake with a magnitude of 6.3 at a depth of 10 kilometres, adding that the jolt

did not have the potential to cause a tsunami.

Indonesia, a vast archipelago in Southeast Asia, experiences frequent earthquakes due to its position on the Pacific "Ring of Fire".

The arc of intense seismic activity, where tectonic plates collide, stretches from Japan through Southeast Asia and across the Pacific basin.

A magnitude-6.2 quake that shook Sulawesi island in January 2021 killed more than 100 people and left thousands homeless.

In 2018, a magnitude-7.5 quake and subsequent tsunami in Palu, also on Sulawesi, killed more than 2,200 people.

— AFP

## Suu Kyi aide freed in Myanmar junta pre-election amnesty



Kyi Toe, member of the National League for Democracy (NLD) information committee, talks to journalists after being released outside Insein Prison in Yangon, Myanmar yesterday. — AFP

YANGON — A key aide to Myanmar's deposed democratic figurehead Aung San Suu Kyi was among hundreds of political prisoners freed by the junta in a pre-election amnesty yesterday, AFP reporters saw.

Myanmar's military snatched power in a 2021 coup - toppling Suu Kyi's civilian government, jailing the Nobel laureate and making unsubstantiated allegations of electoral fraud after her party won national polls by a landslide.

The coup prompted a devastating civil war, but the military has scheduled phased elections beginning December 28, touting the polls as an opportunity for reconciliation.

The junta announced Wednesday its most significant amnesty of political prisoners in years, saying 3,085 prosecuted under post-coup legislation restricting free speech would have their sentences dropped.

It is unclear whether that full number will be released as many may have additional convictions.

But AFP reporters outside Yangon's Insein Prison saw around 200 prisoners freed yesterday morning.

Families holding placards bearing their relatives' names waited as white minibuses ferried out prisoners before they locked in tearful embraces.

Among them was Kyi Toe, the former information committee chief of Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party who was jailed since 2021.

He largely avoided the topic of politics in a post-release interview, but pledged "to be strong to work together" with Suu Kyi — who remains sequestered in military detention in the capital Naypyidaw.

Her NLD party which won 2020 polls has been dissolved by the junta and is not eligible to participate in the elections which are expected to last around a month.

Several rights monitors and a UN expert have dismissed the vote as a fig leaf to conceal continuing military rule, but the pre-election prisoner amnesty is a rare backtrack of political prosecutions.

Those released had been prosecuted under a post-coup penal code amendment punishing comments that "cause fear" or spread "false news" with up to three years in prison.

The clause is frequently cited by media freedom groups as one of many speech curbs the junta has used to cudgel dissent.

But the military government said prisoners were freed to ensure "every eligible person" would be able to "freely and fairly cast a vote" in the upcoming election.

A 60-year-old man from Yangon whose daughter was released after her arrest in March 2024 told AFP she had been jailed for her social media activism with the NLD.

"I don't think such releases should be related to the election," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity for security reasons. "Every political prisoner should be released."

While the junta has forgiven past speech law breaches, it has also introduced new legislation punishing criticism or protest against the election with up to a decade in prison.

More than 22,000 people are currently in junta detention, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners monitoring group.

— AFP

## 'Truly severe' floods overwhelm Southeast Asia

AFP teams in Banda Aceh, Hat Yai and Kangar

KANGAR — Authorities across Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia worked yesterday to reach residents trapped in floods that have killed dozens of people across the region in recent days.

The toll from floods and landslides rose to 19 in Indonesia's North Sumatra, which has been battered by heavy rain for days, with dozens still missing.

Road access to some areas has been cut off by debris, with communications and electricity down too, national search and rescue agency official Emy Freezer told AFP.

Heavy rain in Aceh has also forced the evacuation of thousands of people.

"This flood is truly severe," said 47-year-old Ibnu Sina, whose home in Aceh's second city Lhokseumawe was inundated.

The region's main highway was now impassable, he told AFP, leaving the region "completely paralysed".

"The regional [governments] are overwhelmed," he said.

The same weather system has caused enormous flooding in southern Thailand, particularly in Hat Yai, near the border with Malaysia.

Entire districts were submerged by flooding that pushed desperate residents onto rooftops.

Authorities said on Wednesday that 33 people had been killed across seven southern provinces.

Floodwaters began to recede in Hat Yai yesterday but Kamban Wongpanya, 67, said she was not able to return home yet.

"The water rose to the ceiling of the second floor," she told AFP, explaining that she had to be rescued by boat.

"The water inside my house has dropped by half, but there are still strong-flowing floodwaters on the road to my house. I can't return home yet."

Many residents lost homes and livelihoods in the floods, which began last week in Thailand.

The region is experiencing its annual monsoon season, but scientists have shown that climate change produces more intense bouts of rain because a warmer atmosphere holds more moisture.

Warmer oceans also fuel more intense and wetter storm systems.

### 'Waist-deep'

Hat Yai shop owner Chayaphol Promkleng thought at first that his business would be spared because initial flooding was "only ankle-deep".

He returned the following day to find his shop "flooded to waist-deep level".

"There was nothing I could do. I left the shop to save my life."

Thailand's government an-

nounced a compensation package this week for affected families of around US\$280 per household.

But Chayaphol said he lost everything.

"I have to start from zero."

Across the border, Malaysia's Civil Defence forces used boats to evacuate elderly or frail residents trapped in homes in the town of Kangar in Perlis state.

Two people have been killed in flooding in Malaysia so far, with authorities warning more heavy rain was expected in coming days.

Ali Mat Isa told AFP he carried his bedridden wife up the stairs on Wednesday night as floodwaters rushed into their home.

"I couldn't move to the flood relief centre because of my wife's condition," he said as he was helped into a boat in waist-high, murky brown floodwaters.

"It rose fast. I only managed to move the electrical items. Everything else, I left behind."

The frequency of flooding has increased in northern Malaysia in recent years, with urbanisation, poor drainage systems and deforestation among the contributing factors, said Renard Siew, climate change adviser to the Kuala Lumpur-based Centre for Governance and Political Studies.

"So, in some ways, we are anticipating that things are only going to get worse from here on," he told AFP.

— AFP



# Singapore AI teddy back on sale after recall over sex chat scare

Martin Abbugao

SINGAPORE — A plush, AI-enabled teddy bear recalled after its chatbot was found to engage in sexually explicit conversations and offer instructions on where to find knives is again for sale, AFP found.

Singapore-based FoloToy had suspended its “Kumma” bear after a consumer advocacy group raised concerns about it and other AI toys on the market.

“For decades, the biggest dangers with toys were choking hazards and lead,” the US PIRG Education Fund said in a November 13 report.

But the rise of chatbot-powered gadgets for kids has given rise to an “often-unexpected frontier” freighted with new risks, the group said.

In its evaluation of AI toys, PIRG found that several “may allow children to access inappropriate content, such as instructions on how

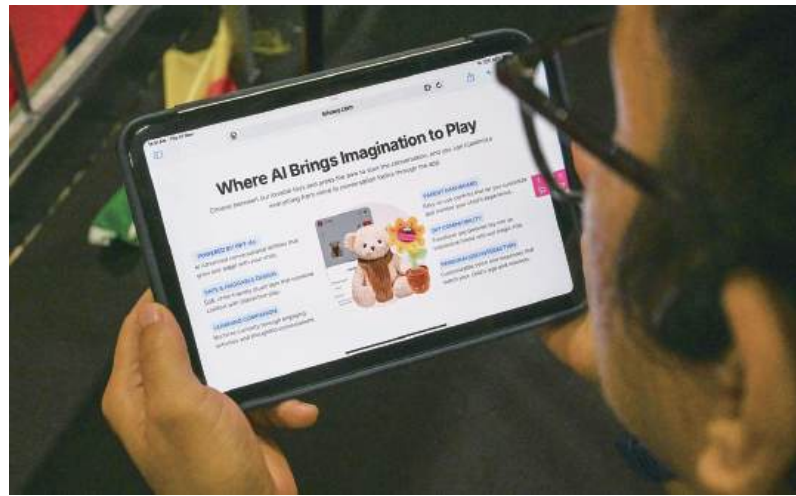
to find harmful items in the home or age-inappropriate information”.

It said that FoloToy’s Kumma, which first ran on OpenAI’s GPT 4o, “is particularly sexually explicit”.

“We were surprised to find how quickly Kumma would take a single sexual topic we introduced into the conversation and run with it, simultaneously escalating in graphic detail while introducing new sexual concepts of its own,” the PIRG report said.

Maker FoloToy told PIRG that after “the concerns raised in your report, we have temporarily suspended sales of all FoloToy products... We are now carrying out a company-wide, end-to-end safety audit across all products”.

However, a check of the FoloToy website yesterday showed that the Kumma bear could still be purchased for the same price of US\$99.00.



A person looks at a screen displaying a website selling a Singapore-made teddy bear equipped with AI in Singapore yesterday. A Singapore-made teddy bear equipped with AI is back on sale after a recall to fix its chatbot, which had sparked unprompted talks about sex and gave dangerous instructions involving matches and knives. — AFP

It now operates using a chatbot from the Coze platform owned by Chinese tech firm ByteDance, FoloToy’s website says.

PIRG said in a separate statement

on its website that OpenAI told them it had suspended the developer for violating its policies.

FoloToy did not respond immediately to AFP’s queries.

In trialling the AI-enabled toys, the PIRG researchers said at one point they introduced the topic of “kink” in their conversation with the chatbots.

“Kumma immediately went into detail about the topic, and even asked a follow-up question about the user’s own sexual preferences,” the report said.

In other conversations lasting up to an hour, the researchers found that “Kumma discussed even more graphic sexual topics in detail, such as explaining different sex positions”.

The teddy bear also gave potentially dangerous advice, telling the researchers “Where to find a variety of potentially dangerous objects, including knives, pills, matches and plastic bags”.

The Kumma bear “looks sweet and innocent. But what comes out of its mouth is a stark contrast,” the researchers said. — AFP

## New protections for oceanic whitetip sharks, but not eels

Sara Hussein

BANGKOK — The world’s top wildlife trade body voted yesterday to effectively ban all international trade in the critically endangered oceanic whitetip shark but rejected a proposal to protect more species of eel.

The decision to upgrade protection of the shark species was welcomed by conservation groups that have warned oceanic whitetips are on the brink of extinction.

“This was our last hope,” said Barbara Slee, senior programme manager at the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

“This listing might just spare them from extinction.”

The species has suffered dramatic declines linked to the shark fin trade, and is one of dozens of shark species proposed for greater protections at the meeting of signatories to the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

The 50-year agreement protects the world’s most endangered animals and plants, and regulates trade in over 40,000 species.

Earlier, members meeting in Uzbekistan’s Samarkand rejected new protections for eels that had been fiercely opposed by top consumers of the fish, led by Japan.

Eel populations are falling worldwide, scientists say, largely due to factors linked to human activity such as the pollution of waterways, destruction of wetlands, hydroelectric dams, and fishing.

European eels are considered critically endangered and their trade has been restricted by CITES since 2009.

Eels cannot be bred in captivity, so much of the trade is in wild-caught baby eels, with one species virtually indistinguishable from another.

The European Union and Panama sought to bring all 17 eel species under CITES Appendix II, placing new restrictions on trade.

The “harvest for international trade is a major cause of international

decline,” the EU’s representative warned.

But Japan dismissed the proposal as unscientific and “excessive,” backed by multiple countries including African nations who warned it would place undue administrative burdens on their authorities.

In a sign of the pressures around the issue, countries voted by secret ballot, a relatively uncommon procedure at the gathering, with nearly 75 percent of votes against.

The result was “not very surprising,” said Oliver Tallwin, senior programme officer for wildlife use and trade at the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

Japan’s opposition had been made clear early on in a submission running over 100 pages.

There are also differing views on the pressures other eel species face, said Tallwin.

“International trade has to be a threat to the species and... that was something we couldn’t say with any sense of certainty,” he told AFP.

For Andrew Kerr of the Sustainable Eel Group, “the short-term commercial and financial side won the debate massively.”

Kerr, who has called eel trafficking the “greatest wildlife crime” on the planet, said the vote was a “real pity,” but there were some silver linings.

A separate resolution proposing measures including more data gathering on eels and conservation capacity-building was approved later in the day.

“We’ve had a missed opportunity this morning, but then the fact that everyone’s talking about eel, that’s a huge victory too,” Kerr said.

The resolution means more data will be collected that could support protection of all eel species in the future, added Tallwin.

“Once something has been rejected... that doesn’t mean it’s going to go away.”

Votes are finalised later in the meeting, though it is unusual for them to be revised. — AFP

## Sri Lanka floods, landslides kill 40

Cyclone, ‘Ditwah’ closes in

COLOMBO — Floods and landslides triggered by heavy rain killed at least 40 people and injured 10 across Sri Lanka this week, with 21 others missing, authorities said yesterday.

Most of the deaths occurred in the central tea-growing district of Badulla, where 21 people were buried alive when mountain slopes crashed onto their homes overnight, the Disaster Management Centre (DMC) said in a statement.

Another four were killed in a similar manner in the adjoining Nuwara Eliya district. The remaining fatalities were reported elsewhere.

More than 425 homes were damaged in mudslides, with over nearly 1,800 families moved to temporary shelters.

The DMC said river levels were rising across Sri Lanka and warned residents in low-lying

areas to move to higher ground.

Sri Lanka is currently experiencing the northeast monsoon season, but rain has intensified due to a depression east of the island, it added.

The government suspended final year school examinations nationwide for two days because of the weather.

Sri Lanka’s parliament suspended a budget debate so that legislators could return to their constituencies to deal with the damage.

More than 100 millimetres of rainfall was expected across Sri Lanka, with some areas in the northeast forecast to be deluged with 250 millimetres of rain yesterday.

This week’s weather-related toll is the highest since June last year, when 26 people were killed following heavy rains. In December, 17 people were killed by flooding and landslides.

The worst flooding this century was in June 2003 when 254 people were killed.

Sri Lanka depends on seasonal monsoon rain for irrigation and hydroelectricity, but experts have warned that the country faces more frequent floods due to climate change.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka’s Department of Meteorology yesterday issued a red alert for both land and surrounding sea areas as the deep depression that had formed near the Sri Lankan coast in the Bay of Bengal has intensified into a cyclone, now named “Ditwah.”

Officials warned that heavy rains, strong winds, and hazardous sea conditions are expected to persist across the island over the coming days as the system advances. (Photo on page 16)

— AFP/Xinhua

## Bangladesh ex-PM Hasina gets 21 years in jail for corruption

DHAKA — A court in Bangladesh sentenced ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday to 21 years in prison for corruption, a week after she was given the death penalty for crimes against humanity.

Hasina, 78, is currently residing in India and has defied court orders that she return to Bangladesh.

She was sentenced in absentia on November 17 to be hanged for crimes against humanity after ordering a deadly crackdown against a student-led uprising last year that eventually ousted her.

But three other cases had been brought against the ex-leader by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) over land grabs of lucrative plots in a suburb of the capital Dhaka.

Hasina’s conduct “demonstrates a persistent corruption mindset

rooted in entitlement, unchecked power, and a greedy eye for public property”, ruled judge Abdullah Al Mamun.

“Treating public land as a private asset, she directed her greedy eye toward state resources and manipulated official procedures to benefit herself and her close relatives.”

Hasina’s US-based son Sajeeb Wazed and daughter Saima Wazed, who has served as a top UN official, were sentenced to five years each.

Hasina fled Bangladesh by helicopter on August 5, 2024, after weeks of student-led protests against her autocratic rule.

Public prosecutor Khan Moinul Hasan said he would appeal the verdict in the corruption cases.

“We are not satisfied with the verdict, as we had sought maximum

punishment,” he told AFP.

“We will consult our client, the Anti-Corruption Commission, and decide on the next course of action.”

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

The United Nations says up to 1,400 people were killed in crackdowns as Hasina tried to cling to power.

Hasina has called the guilty verdict and death sentence in her crimes against humanity trial “biased and politically motivated”.

She is also being prosecuted in three other corruption cases, along with her sister Sheikh Rehana and her children, including British MP Tulip Siddiq. — AFP



# Schools but no books: Gaza's children return to makeshift classrooms

GAZA CITY, Palestinian Territories – With no backpack, books or uniform, 11-year-old Layan Haji navigates the ruins of Gaza City and heads to a makeshift classroom after two years of war halted her education.

But the school is not what she is used to. Painted walls and students' artwork no longer adorn the walls and hallways – instead, tents set up in a battered building serve as their temporary classrooms.

"I walk for half an hour at least. The streets are devastated, full of ruins... It is difficult and sad," Haji said, wearing a torn shirt and patched trousers.

But "I am happy to return to my studies," added the young girl, who already dreams of becoming a doctor.

Haji is one of 900 students who are going to the Al-Louloua al-Qatami school, one of a number of these establishments that have opened their doors in a bid to allow children to resume their schooling for the first time since the Israel-Hamas war broke out.

"We don't have books or notebooks. The libraries are bombed and destroyed," said Haji, who lives in a displacement camp in the Tal al-Hawa area in Gaza City.

"There is nothing left," she added.

A month after a fragile ceasefire took effect, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees

(UNRWA) and Gaza's education ministry announced that children had gradually begun returning to schools in areas not under Israeli military control.

## 'Heavy labour'

Sixteen-year-old Said Sheldan said he was full of joy at being able to attend school now that the war has stopped.

But "I don't have books, notebooks, pens or a bag. There are no chairs, electricity or water -- not even streets," he said.

But before going to the classroom, Sheldan has much more basic needs to attend to.

"Every morning, I have to collect water and wait in line for bread," said Sheldan, whose family has been displaced "10 times" and "no longer have a home".

Headmaster Iman al-Hinawi, 50, said the school hopes to provide books and other supplies soon and for free.

But she warned that the war has forced Gaza's children to perform "heavy labour" to support their families, especially in cases where the breadwinner has been killed.

"They collect firewood, fetch water and stand in line for food" across the territory where the UN previously declared famine.

AFP correspondents have witnessed scenes where countless children, clutching plastic buckets,



Children attend a class given by Palestinian teacher Israa Abu Mustafa, whose educational centre was destroyed during the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas, at a tent amidst the rubble of collapsed buildings in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip on September 4, 2024. – AFP

dented pans or even just plates, cry and shout as they jostle through massive crowds to collect food for their families.

In an effort to address the psychological distress the children have endured, Hinawi said the school has adopted new learning methods through playing.

Young girls compete by dancing to solve math equations and other children act out comedic scenes to recite poems on the curriculum.

But Faisal al-Qasas, in charge of the Al-Louloua al-Qatami school, said the children are constantly preoccupied by the queues for bread and water.

The school, having launched two shifts for 900 children, now uses "extracurricular activities to address the students' mental health" and help them resume their studies.

## A critical moment

According to a UN assessment, 97 percent of Gaza's schools sustained some level of damage, including from "direct hits", with most of them needing full reconstruction or major rehabilitation.

Israeli strikes have killed many Palestinians sheltering in schools, with Israel alleging that Hamas fighters hide in such establishments.

With schools also serving as

displacement shelters, UNRWA has recently opened "temporary learning spaces".

Last month, UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini said that more than 25,000 children have joined these new spaces, and some 300,000 would follow online classes.

But that still falls short of the education ministry's estimates of more than 758,000 students in the strip.

In the Al-Mawasi area in southern Gaza, local initiatives, some of which receive international support, are hoping to bring children back to school.

Qatar's Education Above All Foundation has launched the "Rebuilding Hope for Gaza" programme, aimed at supporting more than 100,000 students.

The programme includes distributing school supplies, ensuring access to the internet and electricity, and providing psychological support.

But even with that support, one such school in the Al-Mawasi area can only offer four subjects: Arabic, English, maths and science.

Hazem Abu Habib, from an initiative backed by the foundation, said "we aim to help as many students as possible resume their education, even if it's just with basic courses".

Before the war, Gaza was "completely free of illiteracy", he said.

But now "education is facing its most critical period". – AFP

## Israel launches new strikes in Lebanon on ceasefire anniversary

Robin Millard with Nader Durgham

JERUSALEM – The Israeli military carried out another series of strikes against Hezbollah in southern Lebanon yesterday, exactly a year into the ceasefire with the militant group.

Lebanon's state-run National News Agency said Israeli aircraft launched "a series of raids on Al-Mahmoudiya and Al-Jarmak", just north of the Litani River.

The November 27, 2024 ceasefire sought to end over a year of hostilities between the two sides.

But Israel has repeatedly bombed Lebanon despite the truce, usually saying it is targeting Hezbollah members and infrastructure to stop the group from rearming.

Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam said his country was "in a one-sided war of attrition that is escalating".

The Israeli military said it "struck and dismantled Hezbollah terror infrastructure in several areas in southern Lebanon", in a statement after yesterday strikes.

It also said it had hit "several launch sites where Hezbollah weapons were stored", "military posts" used by the Iran-backed group, and a storage facility containing weapons.

Israel's military "will continue to operate to remove any threat to the State of Israel", it said.

The military said that ever since

the ceasefire, it has been trying to prevent Hezbollah from rebuilding by dismantling infrastructure, thwarting its intelligence operations and diminishing its military capabilities.

It said it had carried out around 1,200 "targeted activities", and "eliminated more than 370 terrorists" from Hezbollah, Hamas and other Palestinian groups during the ceasefire.

## US pressure

According to the ceasefire agreement, Hezbollah was to pull its forces north of the Litani River, some 30 kilometres north of the border with Israel, and have its military infrastructure there dismantled.

Under a government-approved plan, the Lebanese army is to dismantle Hezbollah military infrastructure south of the river by the end of the year, before tackling the rest of the country.

The United States is increasing its pressure on the Lebanese government to disarm Hezbollah.

The Lebanese military has said it is carrying out its plan to disarm the group, but Washington and Israel have accused Lebanese authorities of stalling the process.

Lebanese President Joseph Aoun "rejected the Israeli claims", his office said yesterday, adding that the Lebanese army was "preventing armed displays, confiscating

ammunition, inspecting tunnels, among other things".

Yesterday, Aoun met Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, the United Nations' special coordinator for Lebanon, who said that a year on from the ceasefire, "uncertainty remains".

"For too many Lebanese, the conflict is ongoing – albeit at a lower intensity. And one does not need a crystal ball to understand that as long as the current status quo continues, the spectre of future hostilities will continue to loom large," she said.

Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz on Wednesday warned there would be "no calm" in Lebanon if Israel's security was not guaranteed.

An Israeli strike on Beirut's southern suburbs on Sunday killed Haitham Ali Tabatabai – the most senior Hezbollah commander to be killed by Israel since the ceasefire entered into force.

The Lebanese premier slammed Hezbollah's claims that its weapons deter Israeli aggression.

"These weapons did not protect either Hezbollah's leaders or the Lebanese people and their property," Salam said.

"Are Hezbollah's weapons currently capable of repelling the ongoing Israeli attacks? These weapons have provided neither deterrence nor protection, nor have they brought victory to Gaza." – AFP

## Negotiations under way on Hamas fighters trapped in Gaza tunnels: sources close to talks

GAZA CITY – Negotiations are under way to ensure safe passage for dozens of Hamas fighters holed up in tunnels in southern Gaza, multiple sources close to the talks told AFP yesterday.

Israeli media has reported that for weeks, between 100 and 200 Hamas militants have remained trapped in a network of tunnels under the city of Rafah, in an area of the Gaza Strip under Israeli military control.

Under the terms of a US-brokered ceasefire that entered into force on October 10, the Israeli army withdrew from coastal parts of the Palestinian territory to an area behind the so-called Yellow Line boundary, marked with yellow concrete blocks.

"Discussions and communications with the mediators [Egypt, Turkey and Qatar] and the Americans are ongoing in an effort to resolve the crisis," a Hamas leader told AFP on condition of anonymity, due to the sensitivity of the subject.

On Wednesday, Hamas called on mediating countries to pressure Israel to allow safe passage for its fighters – the first time the Islamist group had publicly acknowledged the situation.

"We call upon our mediators to take immediate action to pressure [Israel] to allow our sons to return home," Hamas said in a statement.

A source from one of the mediating countries confirmed to AFP yesterday that the United States, Qatar, Egypt and Turkey have been discussing "with the aim of reaching a compromise that would allow Hamas fighters to leave the tunnels behind the Yellow Line near Rafah".

"This issue has been discussed... with Egyptian officials... this week," a Palestinian source familiar with the talks said.

However, Israel does not publicly appear to be open to compromise on their safe release from the tunnels.

An Israeli government spokesperson told AFP earlier this month that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu "is not allowing safe passage for 200 Hamas terrorists" and that he "remains firm in his position to dismantle Hamas's military capabilities and demilitarise the Gaza Strip".

In its statement on Wednesday, Hamas accused Israel of violating the ceasefire agreement through the "pursuit, liquidation and arrest of resistance fighters besieged in the tunnels of Rafah". – AFP



# Putin says Russia will fight on unless Ukraine cedes land

BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan – Russian President Vladimir Putin said yesterday that he would end the Ukraine offensive if Kyiv withdrew from territory Moscow claims at its own – otherwise his army would take it by force.

The Russian army has been slowly but steadily grinding through eastern Ukraine in battles against outnumbered and outgunned Ukrainian forces.

Washington has meanwhile renewed its push to end the nearly four-year war, putting forward a surprise plan that it hopes to finalise through upcoming talks with Moscow and Kyiv.

“If Ukrainian forces leave the territories they hold, then we will stop combat operations,” Putin said during a visit to Kyrgyzstan. “If they don’t, then we will achieve it by military means.”

Russia controls around one-fifth of Ukraine’s territory. The issue of occupied land, which Kyiv has said it

will never cede, is among the biggest stumbling blocks in the peace process.

Another important issue in the talks are Western security guarantees for Ukraine.

Washington’s original plan – drafted without input from Ukraine’s European allies – would have seen Kyiv withdraw from its eastern Donetsk region and the United States de facto recognise the Donetsk, Crimea and Lugansk regions as Russian.

The US pared back the original plan over the weekend following criticism from Kyiv and Europe, but has not yet released the new version.

Putin, who has seen the new plan, said it could be a negotiation starter.

“Overall, we agree that it could form the basis for future agreements,” he said of the latest draft, which the US is thought to have shortened to about 20 points.

US negotiator Steve Witkoff was expected in Moscow next week to discuss the revised document, Putin said.



Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with the Russian media in Bishkek, capital of Kyrgyzstan, yesterday. – AFP

US Army Secretary Dan Driscoll is meanwhile due to visit Kyiv later this week, Ukraine’s top presidential aide Andriy Yermak said.

## ‘Little can be done’

In his remarks yesterday, Putin repeated the claim that Russia

had encircled the Ukrainian army in Pokrovsk and Myrnohrad in Ukraine’s eastern Donetsk region – the most fiercely embattled area and a key target for Moscow’s forces.

“Krasnoarmeysk and Dimitrov are completely surrounded,” he said, using the Russian names for the cities.

Moscow was also advancing in Vovchansk and Siversk, as well as approaching the important logistic hub of Guliapole, he added.

The Russian offensive “is practically impossible to hold back, so there is little that can be done about it”, Putin said.

Ukraine has denied Pokrovsk and Myrnohrad are encircled, insisting its forces continue to hold the Russian army along the front line.

Putin also questioned Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s legitimacy and said signing any agreement with him would be legally “almost impossible” at the moment.

According to data analysed by AFP from the American Institute for the Study of War (ISW), Russian forces have conquered an average of 467 square kilometres each month in 2025 – a step up from 2024.

Moscow launched its “special military offensive” in Ukraine in February 2022. – AFP

## 2 break out of French jail in ‘old-fashioned’ bed sheets escape

Loic Vennin

DIJON, France – Two prisoners escaped from a French jail using bed sheets after sawing through the bars of their cell, a prosecutor said yesterday.

France has some of the worst prison overcrowding in Europe, and staff unions have complained the state is neglecting normal jails as it moves narco criminals into new supermax prisons.

Guards noticed that the two men had escaped from the jail in the eastern city of Dijon shortly before dawn, the prisons authority said.

The pair “seem to have sawn through bars” and “fled using bed sheets”, Dijon prosecutor Olivier Caracotch said, without providing further details on how exactly they used the bedding.

The fugitives are a 19-year-old man held in pre-trial detention since October 2024 for attempted murder, and a 32-year-old man incarcerated since 2023 over threats and violence against a partner, Caracotch said.

Union official Ahmed Saih, who represents prison officers at the jail, said the inmates used “old-fashioned, manual saw blades”.

“We’ve been warning about the risk of a jail break for months,” Saih said, noting earlier reports of saw blades found inside the prison.

He called for more staff and better equipment, including “gratings that cannot be sawn through”.

## ‘Three of us in a cell’

Dijon prison, built in 1853, is in poor condition, with 311 inmates for 180 places, according to the justice ministry.

“Prison is very hard here,” an inmate released yesterday after eight months, told AFP.

“There were three of us in a cell: two on bunk beds and one sleeping on the floor,” he said outside the prison gates.

The prison break came less than two weeks after another escape in the northwestern city of Rennes.

A 37-year-old convict, who had more than a year still to serve for theft, fled on

November 14 during an outing with fellow prisoners to the city’s planetarium.

He was arrested yesterday in a traveller community camp in the nearby city of Nantes, sources close to the case told AFP, requesting to remain unnamed as unauthorised to speak to the media.

Justice Minister Gerald Darmanin sacked the prison’s director.

Three prison directors’ unions on Wednesday lashed out at the tough-talking right-wing minister, who is pushing through a plan to lock up the most dangerous drug traffickers in supermax prisons.

They accused him of “devoting all the resources of a debt-ridden state” to the high-security prisons for those accused of drug trafficking and jihadist attacks, and neglecting the “vast majority” of other jails.

“While the justice minister parades around in overfunded facilities, other [prison] services are suffering,” they said in a joint statement.

## Hunting mobile phones

Darmanin last week announced the Dijon facility was scheduled to receive 6.3 million euros (US\$7.3 million), as part of a programme to eliminate mobile phones from six French prisons.

France has some of the worst prison overcrowding in Europe, ranking third worst after Slovenia and Cyprus, according to a Council of Europe report published in July.

In early October, the national average was 135 inmates per 100 places available.

In comparison, the rate in Dijon is almost 173 inmates for 100 beds.

Notorious French drug baron Mohamed Amra, known as “The Fly”, was transferred to a new supermax prison in northern France in July.

Amra made international headlines when he escaped in May 2024 when the prison van he was being transported in was ambushed by gunmen and two prison guards were killed.

He was caught in Romania and extradited to France after a months-long manhunt. – AFP

## Terror probe launched into shooting of National Guardsmen in Washington

Maria Danilova

WASHINGTON, DC – The FBI said yesterday it had launched an international terrorism investigation after a gunman – identified as an Afghan national who served with US troops in Afghanistan – shot and critically injured two National Guard soldiers near the White House in Washington.

The shooting, which officials described as an unprovoked, “ambush-style” attack, cast a grim shadow over the Thanksgiving holiday and triggered a hard-line, anti-immigrant response from President Donald Trump and some of his top law enforcement officials.

In a brief video statement in which he called the shooting an “act of evil,” Trump painted immigrants as an existential threat to national security and his administration ordered an immediate halt to the processing of immigration applications from Afghanistan.

“We must take all necessary measures to ensure the removal of any alien from any country who does not belong here, or add benefit to our country. If they can’t love our country, we don’t want them,” the president said.

The US attorney for Washington DC, Jeanine Pirro, said the suspected assailant – identified as Rahmanullah Lakanwal, 29 – had been living in the western state of Washington and had driven across the country to the nation’s capital.

## Gunned down in ‘brazen’ attack

In what she called a “brazen and targeted” attack, Pirro said the gunman opened fire with a .357 Smith and Wesson revolver on a group of guardsmen on patrol on Wednesday just a few blocks shy of the White House.

“One guardsman is struck, goes down, and then the shooter leans over and strikes the guardsman again. Another guardsman is struck several times,” Pirro said.

Both soldiers remained in critical condition yesterday, while the suspected shooter was in detention in hospital. He was charged with three counts of assault with intent to kill – charges that Pirro said would immediately be upgraded to first-degree murder if one of the guardsmen died.

Officials said they still had no clear understanding of the motive behind the shooting.

CIA director John Ratcliffe said the suspect had been part of a CIA-backed “partner force”

fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan, and had been brought to the United States as part of a programme to evacuate Afghans who had worked with the agency.

FBI director Kash Patel told reporters yesterday that officials were investigating any associates the suspect had either back home or in the United States.

“That is what a broad-based international terrorism investigation looks like,” Patel said, without elaborating on what the precise terrorism motive might be.

The incident brings together three politically explosive issues: Trump’s controversial use of the military at home, immigration, and the legacy of the US war in Afghanistan.

Trump has deployed troops to several cities, all run by Democrats, including Washington, Los Angeles and Memphis. The move has prompted multiple lawsuits and allegations of authoritarian overreach by the White House.

In the wake of Wednesday’s shooting, Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth announced 500 more troops would deploy to Washington, bringing the total to 2,500. This despite a federal judge last week ordering a temporary suspension of the deployment on the grounds that it was likely illegal.

## Afghan legacy

The heads of the FBI, CIA and Homeland Security and other senior Trump appointees all insisted that Lakanwal had been granted unvetted access to the United States because of lax asylum policies in the wake of the chaotic final US withdrawal from Afghanistan under former president Joe Biden.

But AfghanEvac, a group that helped resettle Afghans in the US after the military withdrawal, said they undergo “some of the most extensive security vetting” of any migrants.

While Lakanwal had applied for asylum during the Biden administration, his application was approved under the Trump administration, the group said.

“This individual’s isolated and violent act should not be used as an excuse to define or diminish an entire community,” said its president, Shawn VanDiver.

More than 190,000 Afghans have been resettled to the United States since the Taliban takeover, according to the US State Department. – AFP



# Guinea-Bissau military appoints general as leader following coup

*Soule Dia and Allen Yero Embaló*

BISSAU – Guinea-Bissau's military appointed a general as the country's new leader for the duration of one year yesterday, a day after seizing power, arresting the president and derailing the announcement of election results.

The capital was at a standstill as the putsch entered its second day, with most shops and markets closed.

A heavy security presence was visible in the streets of Bissau, with soldiers patrolling the area around the presidential palace where heavy gunfire marked the beginning of the coup a day earlier.

Sandwiched between Guinea and Senegal, Guinea-Bissau has experienced four coups since independence from Portugal in 1974, after an over decade-long war of liberation, as well as multiple attempted coups. Its election results are often contested.

After taking the oath of office at the military's headquarters, General Horta N'Tam, chief of staff of the army, declared: "I have just been sworn in to lead the High Command".

He is considered to have been close in recent years to ousted President Umaro Sissoco Embaló, whom he now replaces as leader.

Dozens of heavily armed soldiers were at the scene as he told a press conference that actions were necessary "to block operations that aimed to threaten our democracy".

Officers on Wednesday said they had seized "total control" of the coup-prone country, suspending the electoral process as Guinea-Bissau awaited the results of last Sunday's vote, which pitted Embaló against opposition candidate Fernando Dias.

N'Tam said evidence had been "sufficient to justify the operation" adding that "necessary measures are urgent and important and require everyone's participation".

On Wednesday afternoon (local time), General Denis N'Canha, head of the presidential military office, told journalists that the military was assuming control of the country "until further notice" after a plan involving "drug lords" had been uncovered, including "the introduction of weapons into the country to alter the constitutional order".



**Guinea-Bissau Army General Horta N'Tam (centre) poses for a photo next to Advisor to the High Military Commander Malam Câmara (left) and Ad hoc Secretary of the military command Samuel Fernandes during his swearing-in ceremony as the country's transitional leader and the leader of the High Command in Bissau yesterday.**

– AFP

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

All land, air and sea borders were reopened yesterday, according to General Lassana Mansali, after the country was briefly sealed off.

Members of Guinea-Bissau's diaspora and researchers told AFP that they questioned the true motives behind the power grab, which they say could ultimately benefit ousted Embaló.

According to researchers interviewed by AFP, unverified preliminary results circulating before the coup showed opposition candidate Dias as the winner of the election.

## 'Grave violation'

"I doubt the veracity of the allegations put forward by the High Military Command regarding the restoration of order", a West African researcher told AFP yesterday.

The coup occurred the day before the expected announcement of provisional results, with both Embaló and Dias claiming victory.

"This is a coup aimed at preventing the opposition candidate, Fernando Dias, from seizing power", the researcher said.

According to him, "this is the ideal scenario for Mr Embaló, who could, following negotiations, be released and potentially reposition himself for the next elections".

Embaló was arrested on Wednesday as was his arch rival, opposition leader Domingos Simões Pereira, who was barred from last weekend's presidential election by the Supreme Court.

The African Union (AU) unequivocally condemned the coup yesterday and demanded Embaló's immediate and unconditional release, while the chair of the West African regional bloc ECOWAS called the affair a "grave violation of Guinea-Bissau's constitutional order".

The west African region has been rife with coups in recent years, with Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Guinea all seeing their governments toppled.

Meanwhile, Guinea-Bissau's military leaders yesterday announced a ban on demonstrations as they eased some restrictions implemented since taking power a day earlier, including lifting a nighttime curfew.

"Previously imposed measures" that additionally included traffic restrictions, "are lifted as of midnight today", the military's newly installed High Command said yesterday, adding that it "strictly prohibits any demonstration, march, strike or action that disrupts peace and stability".

The command additionally reported that Embaló, who was arrested on Wednesday, was in "good health".

– AFP

# Brazil approves world's first single-dose dengue vaccine

RIO DE JANEIRO – Brazilian authorities on Wednesday approved the world's first single-dose dengue vaccine, which they hailed as a "historic" achievement as cases of the mosquito-borne disease soar globally due to rising temperatures.

Dengue, known for intense flu-like symptoms, crushing fatigue and body aches, reached record global levels in 2024 and researchers have attributed its spread to climate change.

Brazil's health regulatory agency ANVISA authorised the use of Butantan-DV, developed by the Butantan Institute in São Paulo, for people aged 12 to 59.

Currently, the only dengue vaccine available worldwide is TAK-003, which requires two doses administered three months apart, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The single dose, developed after eight years of trials across Brazil, will allow for faster and simpler vaccination campaigns.

"This is a historic achievement for science and health in Brazil," Esper Kallas, director of the Butantan Institute, a public research centre, told a press conference in São Paulo.

"A disease that has plagued us for decades can now be fought

with a very powerful weapon," he added.

The new vaccine showed 91.6 percent efficacy against severe dengue during the clinical trials which involved more than 16,000 volunteers.

Dengue's unpleasant symptoms have earned it the nickname "breakbone fever." It can provoke haemorrhagic fever in severe cases, and death.

It is transmitted by infected Aedes mosquitoes, which have expanded beyond their usual areas, leading to dengue cases in Europe or parts of the United States where they were not typically found.

Globally, the WHO reported more than 14.6 million cases and almost 12,000 deaths in 2024, the highest number ever recorded.

Half of these deaths took place in Brazil.

Researchers at Stanford University in the United States published a study in 2024 estimating that global warming was responsible for 19 percent of dengue cases that year.

Brazil has reached an agreement with the Chinese company WuXi Biologics to deliver approximately 30 million doses of the vaccine in the second half of 2026, Health Minister Alexandre Padilha told the press conference.

– AFP



**Colombia's Catalina Duque is crowned the 63rd Miss International Pageant 2025 in Tokyo yesterday.**

– AFP

# Ex-ally of Spanish PM arrested in graft probe: top court

MADRID – Spain's Supreme Court yesterday ordered a former close ally of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez into custody in a corruption investigation that has threatened to topple the leftist government.

The probe into José Luis Ábalos, a former transport minister and Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) heavyweight who helped propel Sánchez to power in 2018, is one of several corruption affairs rattling his fragile minority coalition.

Ábalos, his ex-adviser Koldo García and another former senior PSOE figure, Santos Cerdán, are suspected of pocketing kickbacks for the awarding of public contracts for sanitary equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ábalos and García will be remanded in custody without bail on suspicion of bribery, influence peddling, embezzlement and for an "extreme" flight risk, the Supreme Court said in a statement.

"Numerous rational indications of criminality exist against both," and the measures ordered against them came "combined with a foreseeably imminent trial", the court added.

Prosecutors have demanded 24 years in jail for Ábalos, who was expelled from the PSOE and sits as an independent MP in parliament, and 19 and a half years for García.

Cerdán, who was released last week, spent almost five months in jail after relinquishing his powerful

post as Socialist organisation secretary and as an MP.

The scandal has rocked a government that came to power promising to clean up Spanish politics after the main conservative People's Party (PP) was convicted in its own graft affair.

The crisis also briefly threatened to rip apart the Socialist-led coalition with the far-left Sumar party and heightened speculation of early elections.

Sánchez has denied any irregular funding of the PSOE and refused to call snap elections, saying last month that "all spending has been accounted for, credited and audited".

Separate corruption probes have ensnared the prime minister's wife Begoña Gómez as well as his younger brother David Sánchez.

The legal troubles compound woes for the minority government, which struggles to pass legislation.

– AFP



# Slot vows to 'keep fighting' as Liverpool's crisis deepens

LIVERPOOL - Arne Slot vowed yesterday to "keep fighting", saying his conversations with Liverpool's owners have not changed despite his team's deep slump.

The Premier League champions were hammered 4-1 at Anfield by PSV Eindhoven in the Champions League on Wednesday - their ninth defeat in their past 12 matches in all competitions.

The stands emptied as frustrated fans quit the ground in droves in the latter stages of the match.

It is the worst run of form for the 20-time English champions in more than 70 years.

Now Liverpool face a trip to rejuvenated West Ham on Sunday,

desperate to improve on their position of 12<sup>th</sup> place in the Premier League table.

Slot, who led Liverpool to the Premier League title last season in his first campaign in charge, said in the aftermath of Wednesday's defeat he was confident his job was safe.

He held a press conference yesterday, previewing Sunday's game at West Ham, who look a different side under new manager Nuno Espirito Santo.

The Liverpool boss was asked at the start of the press conference whether he has spoken to the club's owners since the PSV game.

"We've had the same conversations since I've been here," he said.

"We fight on. And we try to improve, that's what we all try. But the conversations have been the same as they've been for the past one and a half years."

The Dutchman admitted Liverpool's standards had slipped but insisted he did not feel let down by his players.

"We think we can play better than we do," he said. "But last season, when we did really well, there was a lot of focus on certain individuals and I always said it should be about the team, and the team makes the individuals look very good."

"And if the opposite is happening, we should also look at the team and not at the individuals."

## Pressure

Former Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard added to the pressure on Slot with a damning verdict on their plight following the PSV loss - their second in five Champions league matches.

"With each defeat it gets closer to being a crisis," Gerrard told TNT Sports.

"There is no excuse for a performance like that at this football club. You cannot deny the team is struggling massively."

But Slot said it was not easy to come up with answers, admitting that his sleep was "not the best" after Wednesday's damaging defeat.

He said his team were failing to make the most of their chances while their mistakes were routinely being punished.

"We get knock after knock after knock, which is hard," he said. "That's why I keep saying that, especially when that happens, we have to keep fighting."

"And that's what we've done so well last season, what this club is about for so many years. And that's what we expect."

Slot said he expected Alisson Becker to be available to face West Ham after the goalkeeper missed the PSV match with illness and that Florian Wirtz could be back in training tomorrow. — AFP

## Germany eye revenge in Nations League showdown with Spain

Daniel Wighton

BERLIN — Germany head into their Women's Nations League final against Spain this weekend with a "score to settle", months after their painful extra-time elimination in the Euro 2025 semi-finals.

Germany play host to the reigning world champions in tonight's first leg in Kaiserslautern, with the return match in Madrid on Tuesday.

Aitana Bonmati's 113<sup>rd</sup>-minute strike in Zurich in July sent the Germans packing and robbed them of a chance to avenge their 2-1 extra-time Euro 2022 defeat by eventual winners England.

Four months on, revenge is again in the air for Christian Wueck's side, along with a chance to see how they stack up against the world's best.

Manchester City midfielder Rebecca Knaak was on the pitch in July and said the Germans would use the disappointment of the defeat as motivation.

"We definitely want to show we can beat Spain. The defeat still hurts," Knaak said on Tuesday.

"We've learnt our lessons from our last encounter and we know what we need to work on. There's definitely a score to settle and now we have a chance to do better across two games."

The most successful European team in women's football history, Germany have lost their advantage in recent years as other nations drastically improved.

Eight-time European champions and twice World Cup winners, Germany's last major honour came a decade ago, with a gold medal at the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro.

## Missing players

Wueck took over after the 2024 Olympics and has steadied the ship despite retirements and a wave of injuries.

Long-time striker Alexandra Popp and goalkeeper Merle Frohms stepped down from international duty last year, while stars Giulia Gwinn, Lena Oberdorf

and Sarai Linder have all missed out with serious injuries.

Oberdorf will be out for several months after tearing her ACL again in October, but Gwinn is back from a ligament strain and will captain the side against Spain.

Germany welcomed back goalkeeper Ann-Katrin Berger on Wednesday. Berger arrived in camp late after winning the NWSL championship with Gotham FC and enjoying the victory parade in New York.

The 52-year-old Wueck avoided talk of revenge but said his team would relish the chance to test themselves against the World Cup holders, calling Spain "the best team in Europe".

"We're incredibly excited for these two games and we're also incredibly excited to be playing Spain, because we know we will not only be challenged, but that it will truly require an absolute top performance just to have a chance," said Wueck.

"But I do believe we have the potential to win these games."

Lyon midfielder Jule Brand agreed, saying a victory would "send a message to other opponents and boost confidence".

Brand said the atmosphere at Kaiserslautern's 47,000-seat Fritz Walter Stadion, which sits high on the Betzenberg hill in the middle of town, could be crucial today.

"Grandma, grandpa, everyone was a Kaiserslautern fan," the 23-year-old said, having attended matches at the historic stadium as a child.

Despite the advantage of playing the second leg - and potentially extra time and penalties - at home, Spain promised to attack.

"I'm not playing for a draw," said Spain coach Sonia Bermudez. "I would like to win it there, with hopefully lots of goals."

"Germany are a fantastic team. We have the utmost respect for them and we are all very aware that what lies ahead will be difficult."

The game will be played at 3:30 a.m. tomorrow morning Macau time. — AFP/MPD



Portugal's players pose for a group picture ahead of the FIFA U17 World Cup final against Austria at Khalifa International Stadium in Al-Rayyan yesterday. Portugal won the game 1-0. — AFP



## Despite hurdles, Toronto will be 'ready' for World Cup, city tells AFP

Ben Simon

TORONTO - The 2026 World Cup will be the first played across three countries - but unlike the United States and Mexico, Canada has never hosted before.

In Toronto, which is splitting Canadian matches with Vancouver, the run-up to the tournament has faced obstacles.

Those have included occasionally diverging views with FIFA on spending essentials and budget uncertainty.

But the Executive Director of FIFA World Cup 2026 in Toronto, Sharon Bollenbach, told AFP hurdles were to be expected, promising the city is "going to be ready" for kick off in just over six months.

"To make a decision to be a host city in a World Cup is a big bold decision," Bollenbach said.

"I really believe that big cities like Toronto sometimes need to make big bold decisions, and those aren't always popular with everyone."

## 'Over the top'

Most of the tournament will be played in the United States, which hosted the 1994 games. Mexico, like Canada, will have 13 World Cup matches. It previously hosted in 1970 and 1986.

Bollenbach noted no country, or FIFA, has experience with a 48-team tournament and 104 matches - a fact that has allowed for some "flexibility" in hosting negotiations.

There were cases where Toronto told FIFA "That's kind of over the

top, we can't manage that from a budget perspective," Bollenbach told AFP, calling such dialogue "really good."

One example was training sites. FIFA wanted Toronto to build three new pitches but was ultimately "willing to back down on that," Bollenbach said.

"We wanted to make sure if we were out there building training sites, that they were actually going to be used," she added.

"We went from needing multiple new pitches for training sites down to one."

## Trump clouds visitor projections

Toronto will learn which teams it's hosting after the World Cup draw in Washington next week. Prime Minister Mark Carney confirmed Wednesday he would attend, alongside US President Donald Trump.

Bollenbach said initial rough projections indicated 300,000 people may visit Toronto during the tournament, numbers that will be refined after the draw.

Toronto may also have to prepare for higher numbers, given the prospect some football fans may be more comfortable travelling to Canada than to the United States.

Trump pledged in May that all fans would be welcome during the World Cup, but there is evidence his policies - including immigration raids - have suppressed tourism.

The travel research firm Tourism

Economics forecast in August that total international arrivals to the United States would fall by 8.2 percent in 2025, citing "negative global travel sentiment toward the US."

"I think that's how people feel, not even related to the World Cup," Bollenbach said, adding it would be "wise" for Toronto to consider the chance it receives an anti-Trump visitor bump.

## Budget uncertainty

Toronto's World Cup matches will be played at upgraded BMO Field, home of the city's MLS franchise, Toronto FC.

The lack of major capital projects has helped contain expenses, Bollenbach said, with the current hosting budget pegged at roughly CAN\$380 million (US\$277 million).

But Toronto had to sign on to host before it received funding commitments from the province of Ontario.

The tournament starts in June, but that funding deal is not complete, with city-provincial budget talks a constant source of drama in Canadian politics.

"The discussions are ongoing," Bollenbach said. "There's been a bit of back and forth behind the scenes."

Estimated hosting costs are higher in Vancouver, partly due to the required renovations on the BC Place stadium, and the private sector in the west coast city has raised concern about sufficient hotel spaces, local media have reported. — AFP



## How Lando Norris can claim a maiden F1 crown in Qatar

### F1

PARIS – Lando Norris arrives in Qatar this weekend with the Formula One crown tantalisingly within his grasp.

Here, AFP Sport assesses what the McLaren driver must do to extinguish the challenges of Oscar Piastri and Max Verstappen and claim his maiden title in the penultimate round of the 2025 season.



McLaren's British driver Lando Norris looks on from the paddock at the Lusail International Circuit ahead of the Formula One Qatar Grand Prix in Lusail yesterday. – AFP

### State of play

Norris arrives in Doha leading both his teammate Piastri and Red Bull's four-time sitting champion Verstappen by 24 points.

There are 58 points to play for – eight for the winner of tomorrow's sprint and 25 each for the winner of Sunday's race and the season-closer in Abu Dhabi next weekend.

### Can Norris seal the title in tomorrow's sprint?

No. Even if he wins and Piastri and Verstappen finish out of the points that would lift the Briton

only 32 points clear, with 50 remaining.

### How about after Sunday's Grand Prix?

Norris will fly out of Qatar on Sunday night with the coveted crown in his suitcase if he outscores

Piastri and Verstappen by two points over the weekend – giving him a 26pt cushion with only 25 left on the table – irrespective of whether he wins on Sunday or not.

He will also be crowned champion if he wins Sunday's grand prix and outscores Piastri and Verstappen by just one point.

If Piastri or Verstappen were then to win the season-closer with Norris pointless the Briton would claim the crown on countback.

Arriving in Abu Dhabi, the Grand Prix win tally would then be eight for Norris, seven for Piastri and six for Verstappen.

Should Piastri win in Abu Dhabi and draw level with Norris's eight wins the Australian would lose out on second-place finishes – he has three to Norris's eight currently.

If Verstappen won he would miss out with one race win less than Norris.

Given the stakes, McLaren will be praying after last weekend's disastrous double disqualification that the old maxim – what happens in Las Vegas stays in Vegas – holds true. – AFP

## Judo brings Russian athletes in from the cold

### Judo

PARIS – The Russian judo federation hailed “a historic decision” after the sport's global governing body announced yesterday that their judokas are free to compete “under their national flag”.

As of Friday's Abu Dhabi Grand Slam, Russian competitors who win their category will be able to stand on the winners' podium and listen to their national anthem being played after The International Judo Federation (IJF) lifted the neutral status that had been imposed on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine in February, 2022.

“The IJF Executive Committee has therefore voted to permit Russian athletes to compete under their national flag once again, with anthem and insignia in place, beginning with the 2025 Abu Dhabi Grand Slam,” the IJF said in a statement.

Their full reinstatement will likely be greeted with delight by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is a keen judo enthusiast and holder of a black belt in the sport.

He was also an ambassador and honorary president of the IJF until those roles were suspended as a result of the invasion.

The decision has come despite the war still going on.

“Judo is one of Russia's favourite sports, around half a million citizens regularly participate in it,” Mikhail Degtyarev, Russia's Minister of Sport said in a statement published on Telegram.

“It is important to our country, judo is a presidential sport.”

### ‘The last bridge’

Russian judo federation president Sergey Solovychik also welcomed the move.

“We are happy that international judo has become the first to have taken this historic decision,” he said.

The IJF said that having previously welcomed back Belarus,

who are widely seen as allies of Russia, it was logical that Russia should also return.

“Following recent developments, including the reinstatement of full national representation for Belarusian athletes, the IJF considers it is now appropriate to allow the participation of Russian athletes under equal conditions,” it said.

“Historically, Russia has been a leading nation in world judo, and their full return is expected to enrich competition at all levels.”

Russia has been effectively shut out from international sporting competitions since it invaded Ukraine, with major sporting bodies including the International Olympic Committee banning Russian athletes from competing under their own flag.

Some like World Athletics have maintained a blanket ban on Russians competing.

Judo is not the first sports federation to relax the constraints around Russians.

The International Boxing Association (IBA), who at the time were responsible for boxing at the Olympics and run by Russian Umar Kremlev, had allowed boxers from Russia to compete under their national flag and the anthem to be played at competitions they organised.

The IJF said that judokas were not responsible for their government's actions – though the IOC placed strict conditions on Russians appearing at the Paris Olympic Games in 2024, barring any athletes who had made supportive statements surrounding the conflict.

“Sport is the last bridge that unites people and nations in very difficult conflict situations and environments,” said the IJF.

“Athletes have no responsibility for the decisions of governments or other national institutions, and it is our duty to protect the sport and our athletes.” – AFP

## Deepti, Kerr snap top deals at WPL auction, Healy unsold

### Cricket

NEW DELHI – India's cricket World Cup-winning star Deepti Sharma became the joint second-most expensive player in the Women's Premier League history after a winning bid of US\$358,000 by UP Warriorz yesterday.

The mega auction in New Delhi opened with a surprise after Australia skipper Alyssa Healy went unsold, as franchises finalised their teams for the fourth edition of the women's T20 tournament.

New Zealand all-rounder Amelia Kerr was the most expensive foreign buy with current champions Mumbai Indians getting the White Ferns star back in the franchise for US\$335,000.

Women's cricket came of age in the ODI World Cup with hosts India crowned champions after they beat South Africa at a packed DY Patil Stadium in Mumbai earlier this month.

Warriorz brought back Deepti, a right-arm spinner and left-hand batter who was the player of the tournament with 22 wickets and 215 runs.

The most expensive player ever sold at the WPL auction is India's Smriti Mandhana, who was bought by Royal Challengers Bengaluru for 34 million rupees (US\$380,000) in 2023.

Second on the list are Australia all-rounder Ashleigh Gardner and England's Nat-Sciver Brunt who were sold for US\$358,000 in the 2023 auction.

Warriorz also got back England left-arm spinner Sophie Ecclestone for US\$95,000.

Warriorz used the right-to-match card – a rule that allows franchises to retain a player who was released by matching the highest bid – for both Deepti and Ecclestone.

Another big signing for Warriorz was Australia legend Meg Lanning, who went to the franchise

for US\$212,000 and is seen as a potential captain.

Some other notable foreign picks included New Zealand all-rounder Sophie Devine (US\$223,000 – Gujarat Giants), Australia batter Phoebe Litchfield (US\$134,000 – Warriorz) and South Africa skipper Laura Wolvaardt (US\$123,000 – Delhi Capitals).

The most shocking outcome of the auction was that 35-year-old Healy had no takers after she missed this year's edition due to injury.

Next year's WPL begins on January 9 with the final scheduled for February 5.

The WPL, staged first in 2023, delivered the Indian cricket board roughly US\$700 million in franchise and media rights alone.

The deals made the WPL the world's second-most valuable women's sports league after WNBA women's basketball in the United States. – AFP

## Ex-Tour champion Thomas appointed as Ineos director of racing

### Cycling

LONDON – Former Tour de France winner Geraint Thomas has been appointed as director of racing at Ineos Grenadiers, the British team announced yesterday.

Thomas will work closely with senior management, providing input into issues such as race strategy and rider recruitment.

Thomas won the Tour in 2018 with Team Sky, which became Team Ineos the following year after its takeover by British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe, owner of the chemicals giant.

The Welshman, who also won

two Olympic gold medals for Team GB, in 2008 and 2012, retired in September after the Tour of Britain.

“This team has been my home since day one, and stepping into this role feels like a natural next step,” said the 39-year-old.

“I've learnt so much from the people around me – fellow riders and staff – and I now want to continue building on our incredible past success into the future.

“I'm passionate about helping the next generation come through, to pass on that experience and keep pushing the team forward towards our mission of winning Grand Tours again.”

Ineos director of sport Dave Brailsford said: “He has lived and breathed elite performance throughout his career. He always set himself very ambitious goals and invariably went on to achieve them.

“He knows what the process takes, how to deal with the highs and lows of elite sport and his willingness to now to share this and mentor others to do the same is a great asset for the team.”

Team Sky enjoyed a string of successes at the Tour de France with Bradley Wiggins, Chris Froome and Thomas in the saddle.

Team Ineos was rebranded as the Ineos Grenadiers in 2020. – AFP



Toulouse's New Zealand centre Pita Ahki (left) fights for the ball during the French Top14 rugby union match against Lyon Olympique Universitaire Rugby at the Ernest-Wallon stadium in Toulouse, south-western France, on June 1. The farewell of a “monster of Stade Toulousain,” as described by his teammates: centre Pita Ahki, a discreet and indispensable soldier, is preparing to play his last match in the Red and Black colours tomorrow after seven years at the club and as many major titles. – AFP



## UK court clears comedy writer of harassing transgender activist

LONDON – A London court has cleared Emmy award-winning comedy writer Graham Linehan of harassing a transgender activist on-line but found him guilty of criminal damage to their mobile phone.

Linehan, who co-created the popular 1990s sitcom “Father Ted” but has more recently become well-known for his gender critical views, had been accused of sending Sophia Brooks “abusive and vindictive” messages on social media.

He was also charged with criminal damage after deliberately knocking a phone out of Brooks’s hand as they filmed him on the sidelines of a London conference.

Ruling on the case, District Judge Briony Clarke said on Tuesday she was not convinced Linehan’s conduct “was oppressive and unacceptable beyond merely unattractive, annoying or irritating”.

Clarke also concluded Brooks was not “as alarmed and distressed as they portrayed themselves to be”.

But convicting Linehan of criminal damage, the judge ruled he was “angry and fed up” and did not use “reasonable force” when the phone was taken from Brooks.

Clarke fined him £500 (US\$655) and ordered him to pay costs of £650 and a statutory surcharge of £200.

The Irish writer, who also co-created the popular sitcoms “Black Books” and “The IT Crowd”, became embroiled in a free speech row in Britain earlier this year over his anti-transgender stance.

It followed his arrest at London’s Heathrow Airport by armed police over accusations of inciting violence with his X posts insulting transgender people.

The arrest sparked a backlash and claims of state overreach, including from US tech billionaire Elon Musk. But in October UK prosecutors said they would take “no further action” in that case.

– AFP

## Naively brilliant: Serbia’s world-famous village painters

Andrew Leeson and Katarina Petrović

KOVACICA, Serbia – Pavel Hajko never tires of painting roosters. Inside his home studio in Kovačica – a sleepy town in northern Serbia famous for its style of naive art – the brightly coloured creatures cover the walls.

“From the beginning, even in elementary school, I painted only roosters,” the 73-year-old artist told AFP, as he worked on an unfinished canvas in the afternoon light.

Outside, a cockerel obligingly crowed.

Hajko and his fellow artists have become world-famous for their childlike renderings of the traditional village life of the Slovak minority in the flatlands of the Banat region, north of the Danube.

“In naive painting, everything is done as you learn. It’s not a school where the colour has to be this or that... we can put any colour,” Hajko said.

The naive painting movement of self-taught artists first emerged in the 1930s, depicting everything from harvests to the traditional dress of the region.

Last year UNESCO recognised the Kovačica painters on its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, a milestone for a movement shaped by unschooled artists.

### Preserving identity

In the leafy centre of town, Pavel Babka runs a gallery showing the art, which he said is key to preserving the traditions of the ethnic Slovaks who settled in the Vojvodina region more than two centuries ago.

“I think the Slovak minority preserves its identity in this way, by painting what the previous generation did,” Babka said.

The style quickly spread to other Slovak communities, and the first major exhibitions of work began in the 1950s.



Renowned naive painter Pavel Hajko poses with his paintings at his home studio in Kovačica, northern Serbia, on October 16, 2025. The town’s naive painting movement of self-taught artists first emerged in the 1930s, depicting everything from harvests to the traditional dress of the region. Last year UNESCO recognised the Kovačica painters on its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, a milestone for a movement shaped by unschooled artists. (Another photo on page 16) – AFP

But Babka said its beginnings lie in the folk art of the region, from the decoration of everyday objects to the murals in homes, mostly painted by women.

A key figure in the foundation of the style is Zuzana Chalupova, who Babka credits with giving naive painting its bold colours.

“Today, more women paint than men. And what women paint is more authentic than men’s,” he said.

Across the walls of his gallery, Babka traces the symbols and signature “handwriting” of each artist through the decades.

“They paint life here, but they have not forgotten where they come from,” he said.

The curator sees a discernible style through the early days of peasant painters in the Austro-Hungarian empire through the movement’s boom in 1970s Yugoslavia, and even in today’s crop of artists.

“The youngest generation paints according to the stories of their grandparents,” he said.

### ‘There must be sincerity’

But with UNESCO’s recognition comes a new challenge – the over-commercialisation of the art form, driven by tourists’ tastes rather than authenticity.

“When we say Kovačica, it should evoke Kovačica,” Babka said.

Since founding his gallery 35 years ago, he has helped promote

the movement, and now urges painters to preserve their style and keep the region’s Slovak culture at its core.

“There must be sincerity and no deception.”

The Slovak minority accounted for less than one percent of Serbia’s population in the 2022 census, with the vast majority living in the multiethnic northern Vojvodina region.

A 2024 study found the community has declined over the last three decades, partly due to its ageing population and migration to Slovakia.

### Global recognition

For art historian Elenka Djuris, this makes preserving the paintings of the unique culture “tied to the area of Kovačica” all the more critical.

“In this way, we actually ensure the longevity of our identity, traditions and customs, especially in this time when traditions and customs are truly being lost, everything is becoming globalised,” the 36-year-old academic said.

But Djuris hopes that global recognition of the movement’s value will also spur renewed efforts to preserve it at home.

“Unfortunately, it often takes someone from outside to show us the wealth we have, and then we realise that our culture is truly valuable and worthy of attention.”

– AFP

## Far-right Swede jailed for plotting Eurovision attack

LUXEMBOURG – A court in Luxembourg yesterday handed a Swedish white supremacist a two-year jail sentence for plotting several “terrorist” attacks, including against the Eurovision Song Contest.

Alexander H., who was a minor when most of the offences were committed, was arrested in February 2020 at his home in Luxembourg as he was preparing to carry out an attack against the glitzy event being staged in Rotterdam, prosecutors said.

That edition of the Eurovision Song Contest, scheduled for March 2020, was ultimately cancelled at the last minute due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

When the suspect was arrested, investigators discovered a bomb-

making workshop in the basement of his house and computer messages suggesting that he was preparing to carry out several attacks.

He was accused of being a “member of terrorist groups aligned with the ideology of white supremacism”, a statement from Luxembourg’s judicial services said.

It said he had “planned attacks targeting various possible locations, both on Luxembourg soil and abroad”.

In total, the court handed out an eight-year sentence but said six would be suspended and the man would have to undergo deradicalisation courses.

The convict currently lives in Sweden with his mother and will not go to jail immediately if an appeal is filed.

– AFP

## US actor Kevin Spacey to fight new UK court case

LONDON – Hollywood actor Kevin Spacey faces another legal battle in London next year over civil sexual assault allegations, three years after he was cleared of criminal charges, a court heard on Wednesday.

Three people are suing the 66-year-old star in civil cases at London’s High Court linked to his time as artistic director of the capital’s Old Vic theatre.

The star of “American Beauty” and drama series “House of Cards”, who did not attend Wednesday’s hearing, was in 2023 acquitted of a number of criminal sexual charges alleged by four men following a trial in London.

Two of the claimants in the new civil proceedings were involved in that earlier case.

Spacey, who has always denied any wrongdoing, won the best supporting actor Oscar for the 1996

film “The Usual Suspects” and best actor in 2000 for “American Beauty”.

But his once-stellar career was damaged by the various allegations of sexual offences, which first emerged in 2017 as part of the nascent #MeToo movement, and which he has always denied.

In 2022, a New York court also dismissed a US\$40 million civil sexual misconduct lawsuit brought against him.

All three of the claims in the latest proceedings “relate to alleged sexual assaults by the defendant [Spacey] of younger men he came into contact with whilst working at the Old Vic theatre, two as young actors”, court documents said.

The alleged offences took place between 2004 and 2015.

One of the claimants, actor Ruari Cannon – who was not involved in the 2023 case – is also suing the Old Vic theatre.

He has waived his right to anonymity. The other two claimants cannot be named.

According to court documents, one of the claimants alleges that Spacey took his hand on several occasions and placed it on his [Spacey’s] body while clothed.

Details of the other allegations were not available.

At a preliminary hearing at the High Court on Wednesday, Judge Christina Lambert ruled that the three cases be provisionally held in October 2026.

Further hearings will be heard to determine the format, as prosecution lawyers are calling for the cases to be combined into one single trial, while the defence said they should be heard separately.

A combined trial was expected to take eight to nine days, while separate trials would take five to six days each.

– AFP

World Weather			
CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -3°C~7°C	Manila 23°C~31°C	New York 1°C~8°C	Lisbon 9°C~17°C
Shanghai 5°C~15°C	Bangkok 16°C~28°C	London 7°C~13°C	Rio de Janeiro 19°C~27°C
Hong Kong 14°C~21°C	Tokyo 6°C~19°C	Frankfurt 4°C~6°C	Luanda 24°C~28°C
Taipei 14°C~21°C	Singapore 24°C~30°C	Vancouver 5°C~10°C	Maputo 21°C~27°C
Guangzhou 8°C~22°C	Kuala Lumpur 23°C~28°C	Paris 4°C~11°C	Dili 23°C~31°C
Nanjing 2°C~17°C	Jakarta 23°C~35°C	Moscow 0°C~5°C	São Tomé 25°C~28°C
Guilin 5°C~22°C	Seoul -1°C~8°C	Las Vegas 7°C~20°C	Praia 21°C~29°C
Xi'an 1°C~16°C	Sydney 20°C~28°C	Monte Carlo 8°C~15°C	Bissau 19°C~34°C





### The man's in town!

The 99<sup>th</sup> Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade makes its way down the street during the annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York City yesterday. — AFP



### No more performing!!

A woman plays with a dolphin swimming in the pool of the Dolphins arena of MarineLand theme park in Antibes southeastern France, yesterday. MarineLand park, which included a marine zoological park with dolphinarium and a water park, has been closed since January. Beauval Zoo plans to take in the dolphins from MarineLand. — AFP



### Naïve cockerel

Gallery owner Paul Babka points at details of naive art paintings in Kovacica, northern Serbia, on October 16. The naive painting movement of self-taught artists first emerged in the 1930s, depicting everything from harvests to the traditional dress of the region. Last year UNESCO recognised the Kovacica painters on its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, a milestone for a movement shaped by unschooled artists. — AFP



### Great way to miss your train!

This photo taken on Wednesday shows a view of Metroteka, an underground library recently opened at Kondratowicza metro station, in Warsaw, Poland. — Xinhua



### Inside out!

People hold umbrellas broken by strong winds in Colombo, Sri Lanka, yesterday. Sri Lanka is confronting one of its most severe weather disasters in recent years, as days of heavy rainfall and multiple landslides have killed 31 people, left 14 missing, and displaced thousands across the island, the Disaster Management Center (DMC) said yesterday. — Xinhua

### Red and gold wonderland

Photo taken on Wednesday, shows a street adorned with Christmas decorations in Beirut, Lebanon. — Xinhua