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Kiang Wu Gut Microbiota Treatment Centre to be in use late February

Ida Cheong

Kiang Wu Hospital (KWH) Gastroenterology Department Head Yu Hon Ho told reporters yesterday that the hospital's Gut Microbiota* Treatment Centre is in the process of launching standardised and large-scale Faecal Microbiota Transplantation **(FMT) and Washed Microbiota Transplantation*** (WMT) therapies, adding that the centre is expected to be officially operational in late February.

Dr Yu made the remarks during yesterday's ceremony marking the opening of the KWH Hospital Microbiota Treatment Centre at the private hospital's Dr Henry Y. T. Fok Specialist Medical Centre.

Dr Yu noted that the centre has already begun collecting data from suitable patients and is currently preparing for the transition towards its fully-fledged operations, pointing out that the centre will recruit students aged under 23 from local campuses as screened donors.

Dr Yu added that the FMT and WMT therapies target a range of diseases for which traditional treatments have shown limited efficacy, including digestive system-related disorders such as inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), and neurological conditions like childhood autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and adult Parkinson's disease, adding that the therapies also address multi-system disorders, for instance, abnormal bowel movements such as diarrhoea accompanied by insomnia, aiming to enhance both treatment efficiency and patients' quality of life.

Kiang Wu Hospital (KWH) Gastroenterology Department Head Yu Hon Ho (first from right), KWH Vice President Cheung Chun Wing (third from right) and other attendees pose for a group photo during yesterday's opening ceremony for the hospital's Microbiota Treatment Centre at the Dr Henry Y. T. Fok Specialist Medical Centre. – Photo: Ida Cheong

Dr Yu pointed out that while these related diseases are not considered extremely common in Macau, there is, however, a significant number of patients. Some local children with autism have sought similar in the Chinese mainland with notable results, showing improvements in self-care abilities, Dr Yu said.

Kiang Wu Hospital Vice President Cheung Chun Wing said in a speech during the opening ceremony that his hospital has dispatched a study team to the Microecology Medicine Department of The Second Affiliated Hospital of Nanjing Medical University to receive training in WMT technology, including donor screening, laboratory procedures for bacterial preparation and full-cycle perioperative care, which will help establish a comprehensive knowledge system covering "diagnosis and treatment – procedures – nursing care."

In a medical context, perioperative care comprises all aspects related to patient management before, during, and after surgery to ensure optimal outcomes and minimise complications.

Dr Cheung pointed out that a substantial number of patients with conditions like autism and inflammatory bowel disease still face limited treatment options in Macau. Introducing standardised WMT technology to local clinical practices and establishing a safe, efficient diagnosis and treatment platform will provide patients with a new treatment choice, Dr Cheung added.

Meanwhile, the Gut Microbiota Therapy Seminar, co-organised by the Macao Society of Gastroenterology and Hepatology and Kiang Wu Hospital, which was held after the opening ceremony, aimed to enhance the relevant knowledge of local healthcare professionals. ■

**Gut Microbiota refers to the vast and complex community of trillions of microorganisms (microbes) that live symbiotically within the gastrointestinal tract, primarily in the large intestine (colon). - DeepSeek*

*** Faecal Microbiota Transplantation (FMT) is a medical procedure that involves transferring processed faecal matter from a healthy, carefully screened donor into the gastrointestinal tract of a recipient. -DeepSeek*

**** Washed Microbiota Transplantation is a refined and purified form of FMT that uses a standardised laboratory washing process to deliver the concentrated preparation of beneficial bacteria while potentially improving safety and consistency. - DeepSeek*

Public chooses names for China's space-traveled mice

BEIJING – A research team from the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) revealed the names of the four mice, which were part of a recent mission aboard China's space station, during a public science event on Saturday.

The mice have been named Wangtian, Lanyue, Zhuiyun, and Zhumeng, which respectively translate to "gaze at the sky," "reach for the Moon," "chase the clouds" and "follow the dream." The announcement was accompanied by the release of cartoon illustrations of the mice, co-created with Xinhua News Agency.

On October 31, the four mice – numbered 6, 98, 154 and 186 – were chosen from 48 candidates and flown aboard the Shenzhou-21 crewed spacecraft to their temporary habitat in space. During the mission, Xinhua invited the public to propose names for the mice, with the final selections based on popular submissions online.

The mice safely returned to Earth with the Shenzhou-20 crew on November 14.

"We have initiated a series of studies on the mice following their return," said Li Tianda, an expert at the Institute of Zoology (IOZ) of the CAS. "These studies aim to uncover how the space environment affects mammalian physiology and behavior, particularly in terms of stress response and adaptation."

The public science event themed "flying mice" will run for one month at the National Zoological Museum of China, offering the public a firsthand look at cutting-edge biological experiments conducted as part of China's major space programs.

The event is jointly organized by the Technology and Engineering Center for Space Utilization and the IOZ under the CAS.

– Xinhua

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China will continue to make efforts to rebuild peace between Thailand and Cambodia: Wang Yi

China will continue to make efforts to rebuild peace between Thailand and Cambodia and is willing to offer humanitarian assistance to people in need in both countries, said Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Yuxi City, Yunnan Province, yesterday. *– Story on p. 7*

3 dead in Syria as Alawites protest mosque bombing

At least three people were killed yesterday during Alawite protests in western Syria, health authorities said, as thousands took to the streets across the religious minority's heartland following a deadly mosque bombing. *– Story on p. 10*

France's screen siren Brigitte Bardot dies at 91

French film sensation Brigitte Bardot, a symbol of sexual liberation in the 1950s and 1960s who reinvented herself as an animal rights defender and embraced far-right views, died yesterday aged 91, her foundation said. *– Story on p. 11*

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Applications for young local doctors' GBA programme closes Jan 5

The handout photo provided by the Health Bureau (SSM) yesterday shows its director, Dr Alvis Lo Iek Long (second from left), addressing the bureau's December 18 briefing session about the upcoming "Macau Young Doctors Greater Bay Area Advanced Study Programme".

Ida Cheong

The "Macau Young Doctors Greater Bay Area Advanced Study Programme", accepts applications until next Monday, and those interested can register online via the programm's application website (www.cps.gov.mo), according to a statement released by the Health Bureau (SSM) yesterday.

The statement noted that the programme, jointly organised by the Health Bureau and four Greater Bay Area (GBA) hospitals, comprising The First Affiliated Hospital of Sun Yat-sen University, The Fifth Affiliated Hospital of Sun Yat-sen University, Nanfang Hospital of Southern Medical University, and Guangzhou Medical University Affiliated First Hospital Hengqin Hospital, aims to connect with the nation's high-quality medical training resources and establish a systematic and professional clinical training platform for local young doctors.

The statement added that selected qualified candidates will undertake clinical training at their chosen hospital listed for a period of three months, six months, or 12 months. During the respective period, they will receive a monthly study allowance of 10,000 patacas. The list of successful candidates is slated to be announced on January 26, and for enquiries about the programme, applicants may call 2883 6363 during office hours or send an email to info@cps.gov.mo, the statement said.

The statement pointed out that the programme with a quota of 25, targets Macau residents holding a valid certificate of recognition as a doctor, dentist, or traditional Chinese medicine practitioner. It has no age limit, but priority consideration will be given to those aged 35 or below.

A briefing session for the programme was held on December 18, which over 50 young local doctors, dentists and traditional Chinese medicine practitioners attended, the statement said.

SSM Director Alvis Lo Iek Long addressed the briefing session, underlining that the study programme represents a collaboration with four top-tier national Grade A tertiary hospitals within the Greater Bay Area, according to yesterday's statement. Dr Lo was also quoted as saying he hoped that the participating young doctors would seize this opportunity to enhance their professional technical skills and career competitiveness, as this would not only enable them to provide high-quality medical services to local residents, but also keep in Macau vital talent for the high-quality development of the local healthcare sector. ■

Police nab mainland trio for robbing illegal exchange dealer of HK$100,000

Armindo Neves

The Judiciary Police (PJ) arrested three robbery suspects from the Chinese mainland on Christmas Eve, PJ spokesman Cheong Un Hong said during a special press conference on Boxing Day.

Cheong said that the suspects are aged between 35 and 46 surnamed Meng, Song and Zhang, who told the police that they work in the decoration, restaurant and railway sector, respectively. Cheong said that there are two victims in the case, a local and a mainlander.

According to Cheong, on Wednesday afternoon, the local victim, upon the request of a friend and accompanied by a mainland victim, took gaming chips worth HK$100,000 to a hotel guestroom in Cotai. Upon arrival, Cheong said, Zhang and Meng seized the victims' phones and told them to hand over their belongings. After warning the victims not to report the case to the police, the suspects released them. Cheong stressed that the victims, however, promptly sought help from hotel security and reported the crime.

After receiving the report, Cheong said, PJ officers discovered that the three suspects had immediately headed to the local airport with the intention of leaving Macau. The officers rushed to the airport where they arrested the trio in the restricted area as they were waiting to board their flight.

According to Cheong, the investigation revealed that Song had booked the hotel guestroom and lured the victim there with the chips for purported currency exchange. After the robbery, the three suspects converted the chips into about 90,000 yuan through a third party, divided the proceeds equally, and transferred the funds to their respective bank accounts in the Chinese mainland. Cheong said that the Judiciary Police will continue to track the transfer of the illicit funds.

According to Cheong, the two victims in the case are suspected of involvement in illegal currency exchange activities which means the Judiciary Police will initiate a separate investigation into this matter.

The trio were transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) on Friday, each facing a robbery charge.

Illegal exchange dealer attracts gamblers with 100-yuan-HK$100 rate

Meanwhile, a man from the mainland was arrested on Christmas Day for the illegal currency exchange of HK$100, PJ spokesman Cheong Un Hong said during a special press conference on Boxing Day.

Cheong identified the suspect as a 51-year-old local resident surnamed U, who told police that he is unemployed.

According to Cheong, during a routine inspection of facilities in a casino in Zape on Thursday, PJ officers discovered that U was conducting an illegal currency exchange deal with a gambler. PJ officers intercepted both after they had finished the exchange and discovered that U attracted gamblers by offering them a 100-yuan-HK$100 exchange rate, Cheong said.

According to yesterday's BOC currency exchange rate, 100 yuan was worth HK$112.08.

According to Cheong, since early September U had earned 10,000 yuan through this arrangement, and PJ officers seized HK$75,000 in cash and his smartphone.

U was transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) on Friday, facing a charge of illegal currency exchange. ■

Judiciary Police (PJ) officers escort the three hooded robbery suspects to a PJ van outside the PJ headquarters in Zape on Boxing Day. – Photo: Armindo Neves

Gongbei Customs seizes drugs in man's underwear

Armindo Neves

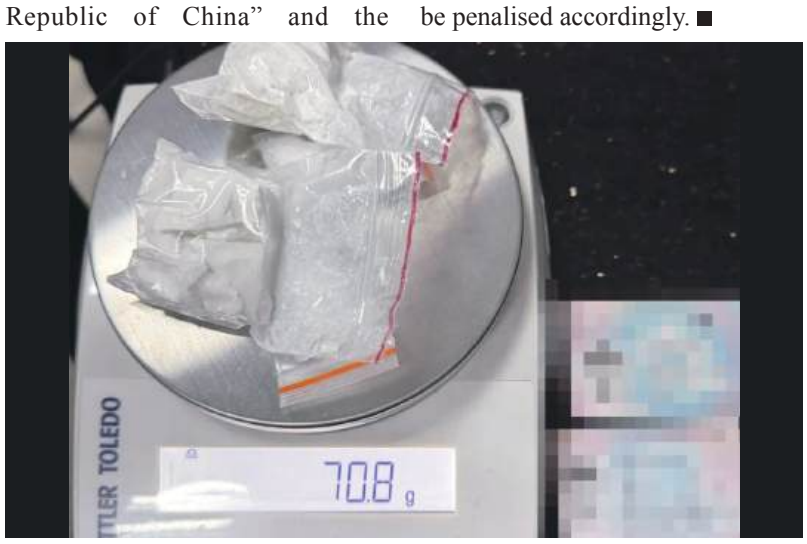
Zhuhai's Gongbei Customs announced in a statement yesterday that its officers at the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge (HZMB) discovered drugs a man had in his underwear.

According to the statement, late on August 14, customs officers at the delta bridge's Zhuhai Port (checkpoint) noted that a man passing through the "green channel" appeared nervous and exhibited unusual behaviour, prompting them to intercept and inspect him. Upon further examination, the officers discovered two transparent sealed bags containing a white, block-shaped substance, totalling 57.5 grams, and two bags of a white crystalline substance, totalling 13.3 grams, concealed in the crotch area of his underwear. The combined weight of the suspected drugs was 70.8 grams.

The statement did not reveal further information on the male smuggler.

After analyses by a professional institution, diacetylmorphine (commonly known as heroin) was detected in the white, block-shaped substance, and methamphetamine (commonly known as "ice") was detected in the white crystalline substance.

Gongbei Customs reminded the public that, according to various laws and regulations such as the "Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China" and the "Anti-Drug Law of the People's Republic of China," drugs refer to opium, heroin, methamphetamine (ice), morphine, cannabis, cocaine, and other narcotic and psychotropic substances controlled by the state that can lead to addiction. Smuggling or transporting drugs, regardless of the quantity, are subject to criminal liability and will be penalised accordingly. ■



This undated handout photo provided by Zhuhai's Gongbei Customs shows two packs of diacetylmorphine (heroin) and two packs of methamphetamine (ice), with a combined weight of 70.8 grams.

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Macau Weather

FINE APART FROM CLOUDY PERIODS.
HAZE DURING THE DAY.
FORCE 2 TO 3 EAST TO NORTHEASTERLY WINDS.
RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL RANGE BETWEEN 50% AND 90%.

14ºC~23ºC

Source: SMG

Team Conchita win 2025 MGM MACAU TENNIS MASTERS

Rui Pastorin

Two days of friendly tennis action took place over the weekend as some of world tennis's rising stars and legends gathered for the 2025 MGM MACAU TENNIS MASTERS at Macau Forum in Zape, with the team led by Spanish tennis legend Conchita Martínez taking the win.

Yesterday's second of the two-day exhibition tournament, co-organised by MGM and global events and experiences company MARI, featured three more singles matches that kicked off with a captain's challenge, which was this time won by Chinese tennis legend Li Na's team. The women's singles then followed, with Russia's Mirra Andreeva from Martínez's team squaring off against Alexandra Eala from the Philippines.

While Andreeva could not play on the first day as she wasn't feeling well, the 18-year-old came back strong as she marked victory against 20-year-old Eala, ending an exciting exhibition that drew fans with the scores 6-4 and 6-2.

The ensuing match saw Team Martínez's Wu Yibing from Hangzhou beating Beijing-born Jerry Shang Juncheng from Team Li Na. Twenty-six-year-old Wu marked his victory against 20-year-old Shang with 6-3 and 7-5.

The last match saw Team Li Na's victory for the day with Frenchman Ugo Humbert, 27, beating 26-year-old Alejandro Davidovich Fokina from Spain. Their match, which proved particularly playful, concluded with the scores 6-3 and 6-4.

Members of the winning Team Conchita – Wu Yibing (from left to right), team captain and tennis legend Conchita Martínez, Mirra Andreeva and Alejandro Davidovich Fokina – pose with their trophies at Macau Forum yesterday evening.

– Photo: Rui Pastorin

Overall, Team Conchita won the two-day event, with a total score of 12-5.

Speaking with reporters after her match, Andreeva said she was happy with the way that she played and felt that it was important to play well and bring those points to the team. She added she felt that she and Eala had a great and fun match, describing her opponent as "full of confidence". She added: "It was an exhibition tournament but still you could feel her toughness on the court", noting that Eala has a great future in the sport and is sure that they will be playing more tournaments and matches.

On playing in Macau, Andreeva said that it was her first time in the city and that she had an overall "very pleasant" experience and wished she had more time to explore it further. Preparing for the Australian Open 2026, Andreeva described playing these types tournaments prior to tournaments like that as being "very, very important", getting some matches in before the season starts as well as a chance to have fun on the court.

Meanwhile, Wu told media that matches like these were important to get ready for the season and work on certain techniques during pre-season, as well as try different things including playing mixed doubles. "It's always good to be a part of it and I am looking forward to the next season, he said, adding that he will be playing in Hong Kong and the Australian Open, while he also hopes to be able to play in the US Open.

Asked by the media about Shang, Wu described him as being an unbelievable player who has reached all his goals at such as young age, hoping that he will have a long, good and healthy career.

Lastly, Humbert remarked at the press conference that he was happy to win that one match, doing it for the team. He said that it was comfortable to play on the court and felt glad to play against Fokina. Humbert added that it was his first time in Macau and he was happy to be here, noting that he and the team enjoyed a really good atmosphere. It was also nice to be able to play a few matches before the Australian Open, he said. ■

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Academic Year 2026/2027
Central Registration for Children Entering Kindergarten for the First Time

教育及青年發展局 Direcção dos Serviços de Educação e de Desenvolvimento da Juventude

Aims

Optimise schools' enrolment mechanism; simplify the steps for parents to enrol their children in kindergarten for the first time; enable parents to confirm the preferred schools as early as possible.

Target group

Macao residents aged 3 by 31 December 2026, and will enrol in infant education in Macao for the first time.

Gentle Reminder:

- To enrol in schools in Macao, non-Macao residents must possess a stay permit or residence permit for over 90 days issued by the competent entity of the Macao SAR. Parents must process the registration at any of the DSEDJ counters.
- Schools set no limit to the number of registrants and interviews. There is also no priority for early registration in the Central Registration system. Therefore, there is no need to be hurry to process registration.
- Apart from selecting 6 schools in Macao, Macao residents can also select "school for Macao children" in Hengqin through Central Registration.
- At the time of interview, parents should show the screenshot of "Interview QR Code" on their mobile to the school staff. The QR Code can be reused.
- Parents only need to bring the screenshot of the child's "First-time Enrolment QR Code" to the school to process enrolment or school transfer procedure according to the requirement of the school.
- The DSEDJ will provide "Service of consultation and arrangement of school places" to parents who are in need.

Timeline (Year 2026)

Admission information	Starting from 1 January onwards, parents can consult the admission information on the DSEDJ website or school website
Central Registration	Parents register through "Macao One Account"/ on the DSEDJ website / at the DSEDJ counters Between 6 to 16 January
Schools announce the interview date and time	Between 10 to 12 February
School admission interviews	Between 1 to 25 March
Schools release the admission list and parents confirm online which school to enrol their children in	Release the admission list on the DSEDJ website and at schools 8 April
	Parents can check and confirm one school to enrol their children in through "Macao One Account" / on the DSEDJ website Between 8 to 10 April
Schools announce the students admitted from the waiting list	From 11 April onwards
Parents go to school to process enrolment/ school transfer procedures	From 13 April onwards (as informed by schools) Students on the admission list must process enrolment by 15 April
Enrolment at other schools	If a child has not yet been admitted to any school by 16 April, or the parents want to enrol their child in another school, parents can visit the DSEDJ website to check the availability of K1 places at different schools, and go to the schools that still accept enrolment for enquiries and enrolment

For enquiries:
8397 2309

For details, please browse DSEDJ website:
www.dsedj.gov.mo

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Tennis stars battle it out at the 2025 MGM Tennis Masters

Photos taken at Macau Forum in Zape yesterday by Rui Pastorin

Macau logs record-breaking 39.411 million visitors so far this year: police

Tony Wong

Macau has received more visitors since the beginning of the year than in the whole of 2019, thus setting a historic record, the Public Security Police (PSP) have announced.

A PSP statement released on its WeChat account on Saturday said that between the beginning of this year and 11 a.m. on Saturday, Macau recorded 39.411 million visitor arrivals, already surpassing the previous record of 39.406 million set in pre-COVID-19 pandemic 2019.

The PSP statement also said that the 39.411 million visitor arrivals recorded during the period represented a daily average of around 109,000.

According to calculations by the *Post*, the 39.406 million visitor arrivals recorded in the whole of 2019 was equivalent to a daily average of 107,962.

So far this year, according to the PSP statement, mainland Chinese accounted for 72.4 percent of all visitor arrivals, while Hongkongers accounted for 18.3 percent and Taiwanese for 2.5 percent. Foreign nationals accounted for the remaining 6.8 percent.

Tourists throng Rua de S. Paulo yesterday, a narrow pedestrian-only street near the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Ruins of St. Paul's landmark. – Photos: Tony Wong

Border crossers enter the Hengqin checkpoint's immigration hall en route to Macau early this month.

As of the end of the third quarter, according to the latest available official demographics, Macau had a population of 686,600 within a land area of 33.3 square kilometres, resulting in a population density of 20,619 per square kilometre.

Hengqin checkpoint's border crossings reach 30-million benchmark

Meanwhile, a PSP statement yesterday said that between the beginning of this year and 1 p.m. yesterday, the Macau-mainland joint checkpoint on Zhuhai's Hengqin island recorded 30 million entries and exits, up 32.6 percent year on year, exceeding the 30-million benchmark for the first time.

The entry and exit (border crossings) figures recorded by the Public Security Police, which run Macau's immigration service, comprise local residents, visitors, non-resident workers (NRWs), non-local students enrolled in Macau, and all others with a special permit to stay in Macau.

So far this year, according to yesterday's PSP statement, local residents accounted for 26.9 percent of all those crossing the Hengqin checkpoint, while visitors accounted for 38.9 percent, non-local students enrolled in Macau's higher education institutions for 17.9 percent, and non-resident workers for 15.7 percent.

Three of Macau's land border checkpoints with Zhuhai are Macau-mainland joint checkpoints, where the "joint inspection and one-time release" system is in operation, one of which is the Hengqin checkpoint, with the other being the Qingmao pedestrian border checkpoint and the Macau-Zhuhai checkpoint of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge (HZMB).

The "joint inspection and one-time release" model is a joint Macau-mainland immigration clearance system adopted at Macau-mainland joint checkpoints where border crossers are required to pass border controls only once when completing their departure and arrival formalities. ■

Woman loses HK$4.5 million in online romance scam: PJ

Armindo Neves

A local woman was defrauded out of HK$4.5 million in an online romance scam, Judiciary Police (PJ) spokesman Cheong Un Hong announced in a regular press conference on Boxing Day.

According to Cheong, the Judiciary Police (PJ) received a report recently from a local woman that she had been defrauded out of HK4.5 million (4.63 million patacas) by an online "boyfriend".

In September, Cheong said that the victim met an individual on Instagram, after which they switched to WhatsApp for communication and developed an online romance. Her "boyfriend" claimed that his company was experiencing cash flow issues and requested the victim's assistance, promising a reward of HK$10 million, Cheong said.

Believing the story to be true, according to Cheong, the victim followed the instructions and opened an account on a cryptocurrency trading platform. Between October 9 and December 11, the victim handed a total of HK$4.5 million in cash to the cage* of a casino in Macau on seven separate occasions to exchange the cash into gambling chips. Cheong said that the victim then purchased the corresponding cryptocurrency and, as instructed, transferred the money to multiple virtual wallets designated by the fraudster.

Subsequently, Cheong said, the victim's "boyfriend" then claimed that the company's issues had been resolved and provided a website link, which showed that HK$10 million had been deposited into her account. While the victim attempted to withdraw the funds, the transaction failed, according to Cheong. Later on, the website became inaccessible, leading the victim to suspect fraud and report the incident on Tuesday. ■

**In a casino, a "cage" refers to the secure area where cash transactions take place. It is essentially the main cash handling point. – Poe*

Judiciary Police (PJ) spokesman Cheong Un Hong looks on during Friday's regular press conference. – Photo: Armindo Neves

Govt to raise 4 social security allowances from New Year's Day

Tony Wong

The government has announced large increases in four types of its allowances paid to eligible local residents, namely unemployment, sickness, marriage, and funeral allowances, effective from Thursday, January 1 next year, with their increases ranging between 33.8 percent and 81.2 percent.

The increases were announced in an executive order, signed by Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai on December 18, published in the Official Gazette (BO) on Friday.

Earlier this year, the government raised all seven types of pensions and allowances paid out by the city's social security system, with their increases taking effect retroactively from January 1 this year. Macau's social security system is run by the Social Security Fund (FSS).

The two types of pensions paid out by the fund comprise old-age pensions and disability pensions, while the five types of the fund's allowances comprise unemployment, sickness, birth, marriage, and funeral allowances.

While the birth allowance was increased by 20.0 percent, the other six types of pensions and allowances were raised by between 4.3 percent and 4.7 percent, retroactively effective from January 1 this year.

According to Friday's executive order, the unemployment allowance will be raised to 210 patacas per day from January 1 next year, a 33.8 percent increase from the current 157 patacas per day.

Cars are parked outside the Social Security Fund's (FSS) service centre on Rua de Eduardo Marques, located near São Lázaro Church, yesterday. – Photo: Tony Wong

From January 1 next year, according to the order, the sickness allowance will be raised to 180 patacas per day for those whose treatment does not require hospitalisation, a 51.3 percent increase from the current 119 patacas per day, while the sickness allowance issued to those who have been hospitalised will be increased to 240 patacas per day, up 52.9 percent from the current 157 patacas per day.

According to the executive order, the marriage allowance will be raised to 4,000 patacas from the current 2,220 patacas, an 80.2 percent increase, while the funeral allowance will be increased to 5,200 patacas from the current 2,870 patacas, up 81.2 percent. Both allowances are one-off payments.

Concerning the other three types of FSS pensions and allowances not listed by Friday's order, the birth allowance will remain unchanged at 6,500 patacas next year, while both the old-age pension and the disability pension will remain unchanged at 3,900 patacas per month next year. The birth allowance is also a one-off payment.

Macau's social security system only covers local residents.

Both spouses can apply and each receive their own allowance, provided that both meet the eligibility criteria for the marriage allowance. Similarly, both parents, provided that both meet the eligibility criteria for the birth allowance, can apply and each receive their own allowance.

This means that both parents can receive birth allowances amounting to 13,000 patacas in total if both are eligible, while from January 1 next year a married couple can receive marriage allowances amounting to 8,000 patacas in total if both are eligible. ■

Le Royal Arc Casino to become SJM-directly-run casino tomorrow

Tony Wong

The government has announced that it has green-lighted gaming concessionaire SJM's application to convert Le Royal Arc Casino into a "directly-operated" casino from 2 a.m. tomorrow.

The Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau (DICJ) made the announcement in a statement on Friday.

Correspondingly, according to the statement, the casino, located in L'Arc Hotel in Nape, will cease operating as a "satellite casino" after 1:59 a.m. tomorrow.

As Le Royal Arc Casino will become a casino directly operated by SJM, Landmark Casino, located in New Orient Landmark Hotel on Avenida da Amizade in Zape, is now the city's last remaining third-party-operated satellite casino set to close down permanently.

Landmark Casino will close for good after 11:59 p.m. tomorrow, i.e., just 24 hours before the expiration of the statutory three-year transition period after which all satellite casinos in Macau must close.

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

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

Afterwards, three other satellite casinos closed down permanently at different times last month, namely Legend Palace Casino located in the Macau Fisherman's Wharf entertainment complex in Nape, Casa Real Casino in Zape, and Ponte 16 Casino located in the Ponte 16 hotel resort in the Inner Harbour district.

Kam Pek Paradise Casino in Zape and its adjacent Fortuna Casino ceased operations at different times early this month.

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

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

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

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

Unlike its other satellite casinos, SJM signed an agreement last month to acquire the ownership of L'Arc Hotel in order to convert Le Royal Arc Casino into a "directly-operated" casino after its scheduled closure as a satellite casino.

After midnight tomorrow, when Landmark Casino is scheduled to close, Macau's number of casinos will drop to 20, comprising five owned by SJM, five by Sands, three by Galaxy, three by Melco, two by Wynn, and two by MGM.

In 2021, Macau's number of casinos peaked at 42, according to the Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau (DICJ). ■

Vehicles travel past L'Arc Hotel in Nape on Saturday where Le Royal Arc Casino is housed on some of its podium floors. – Photo: Tony Wong

Sands China Asian Youth Elite Fencing League – Macao draws 1,300 young athletes

Local fencer Cheong Chong Kio (right) and HK fencer Leung Chun Ming compete in the U-14 Team Men's Foil during the Sands China Asian Youth Elite Fencing League – Macao, at The Venetian Macao's Cotai Expo yesterday. – Photo: Khalel Vallo

Khalel Vallo

The 2025 Sands China Asian Youth Elite Fencing League – Macao concluded yesterday, bringing together nearly 1,300 young fencers from across the Asia-Pacific region and beyond for three days of competition and exchange in Cotai.

Co-organised by integrated resorts operator Sands China Ltd and Asia Sports Development Ltd (ASD), in conjunction with the Sports Bureau (ID) and the Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO), the event ran from Boxing Day through yesterday at The Venetian Macao's Cotai Expo.

Boys and girls aged under six to 14 came from the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, Macau, China's Taiwan region, Australia, Canada, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

According to a Saturday statement provided by Sands China, now in its second year, the league expanded its programme with new categories, including individual events for the under-six age group (U-6) and team competitions for under-eight (U-8) and under-12 (U-12) fencers, which aimed to broaden participation among younger athletes.

Ahead of the competition, the organisers held the "Sands China Future Champions Fencing Camp" from December 21 to Christmas Day, where Olympic champions and top coaches provided training for young fencers aged nine to 20.

The nation's Olympic gold medallist Lei Sheng attended the opening ceremony and later shared techniques with young local athletes, alongside National Games sabre champion Deng Xiaohao.

According to the statement, the competition was complemented by parallel sports and community activities, including the ASD Elite Karate League and interactive booths, striving to create a festival-style sports atmosphere at the venue.

Sands China Chief Executive Officer Grant Chum Kwan Lock was quoted in the statement as saying that the turnout demonstrated "the vibrancy of Macau as a 'City of Sports'" and expressed hope that the league would support the long-term development of local sports talent.

Local boys Cheong Chong Kio, Ho Ian Chak, Ng Cheok Lam and Ngai Hong Seng won the U-14 Team Men's Foil competition.

Local girls Cheong Un Lam, Chiquita Bela Cunha and Ung Chin U won the U-10 Team Women's Foil competition.

Local girls Chai Ieok Sin, Ho Ian Chon, Huang Qia Ru and Sou Chi Io finished the U-12 Team Women's Foil in second place. ■

IC invites catering proposals for outdoor concert services

Khalel Vallo

The Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) announced in a statement on Boxing Day that it has launched a call for proposals inviting local catering operators to provide light meals and beverage services during an outdoor concert scheduled for January 10-11 at the Macao Outdoor Performance Venue in Cotai.

According to IC, the invitation aims to enhance supporting services for large-scale cultural events while creating opportunities for local food and beverage businesses. The statement pointed out that the application period opened on Friday and will close at 5:45 p.m. tomorrow.

The call is open to all locally registered catering operators, noted the statement, which did not elaborate on the two-day concert.

The Macao Outdoor Performance Venue is located at the junction of Avenida do Aeroporto and Rua de Ténis in Cotai.

The bureau stated that six food stalls will be set up on site to provide light refreshments during the two days that the concerts will be held. Each selected company will operate one stall and will be responsible for its own profits and losses, as well as for obtaining any required licences in accordance with existing regulations.

The bureau added that the applications will be assessed based on various criteria, including the feasibility and completeness of the operating proposal, compatibility with the atmosphere of outdoor performances, menu diversity and reasonable pricing, suitability of food offerings for the event, aesthetic and functional design of the stall, and the team's experience in catering operations and management.

Application guidelines are available on the bureau's website. Interested parties may submit their documents in person at the Cultural Affairs Bureau building in Praça do Tap Siac during office hours or by post, no later than 5:45 p.m. tomorrow. Enquiries can be made during office hours by calling 8399 6299 or 8399 6296. ■

This undated handout image downloaded from the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) website yesterday shows the Macao Outdoor Performance Venue in Cotai.

Japan will not buy its peace and security with high defense budget

China Daily Editorial

The Japanese government's decision on Friday to approve a draft budget for fiscal year 2026 with defense spending exceeding 9 trillion yen (US$58 billion) once again sounds an unmistakable alarm for the region and the international community.

At a time when the world is reflecting on the hard-won lessons of history as it marks the 80th anniversary of victory in the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1931-45) and the World Anti-Fascist War, Tokyo's relentless expansion of military expenditure underscores a troubling reality: Japan's right-wing forces are accelerating their push toward remilitarization and edging ever further away from the path of peaceful development it pledged to uphold.

Japan's military and security posture has never been a purely domestic issue. Given the innumerable crimes committed by Japanese forces during their aggression in Asia, every step Tokyo takes in the security realm inevitably attracts close scrutiny from its neighbors. Yet instead of showing restraint in the face of mounting international concern, the Japanese government has chosen to double down on accelerated remilitarization, especially since Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi took office.

Her government has sent out one dangerous signal after another: from erroneous remarks on the Taiwan question, calls by senior officials for Japan to possess nuclear weapons, contravening the country's "three nonnuclear principles", and attempts to revise key security documents. The latest defense budget hike is not an isolated action; it is the financial embodiment of a broader strategic drift.

Under the guise of "self-defense" and "counterstrike" capabilities, Japan has already removed the ban on exercising the right of collective self-defense, acquired the ability to strike "enemy bases", strengthened its extended deterrence cooperation, and transformed its frontier islands into forward military positions.

Equally alarming are Japan's recent moves in new domains. The adoption of a cybersecurity strategy enabling so-called "active cyber defense", which allows preemptive infiltration and destruction of alleged threats, marks a shift from defense to offense. For a country that once launched wars of aggression under the pretext of "self-defense" and has not reflected on its war crimes till now, such measures naturally raise the question of whether history is at risk of repeating itself in a new form.

These moves go far beyond an "exclusively defense-oriented" policy and amount to an attempt to breach both Japan's pacifist Constitution and the postwar international order. History indicates that militarism is often wrapped in euphemistic rhetoric designed to mislead the public and normalize escalation.

Notably, however, the Japanese people themselves are voicing growing opposition to the country's militaristic path. Across the country, rallies and protests have been held against the government's security policies, with demonstrators chanting slogans such as "Uphold the Constitution" and "Do not incite war". Some political figures and scholars have warned that soaring defense spending will neither bring peace nor enhance security, but will instead place a heavy burden on Japan's already strained economy, with the cost ultimately being borne by ordinary citizens. In fiscal year 2025, Japan's per capita defense expenditure and per capita defense personnel cost were more than three times and over two times that of China respectively, and Japan's defense spending already accounted for 2 percent of its GDP.

The current trajectory also intersects with historical revisionism. Members of the Takaichi government have repeatedly visited the Yasukuni Shrine, which enshrines 14 Japanese convicted Class-A war criminals. Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova has urged Japan to build a memorial for victims of Japanese militarism instead of paying homage at the shrine, a call that resonates strongly with the sentiments of countries that suffered under Japan's aggression.

The danger of Japan's current path has also been highlighted by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov who urged the Japanese government to think carefully about its accelerating military buildup. Such statements reflect broader international concern that Japan's actions are not only destabilizing the Asia-Pacific but also undermining the global postwar security architecture.

Facing history squarely and showing genuine remorse for its past aggression through concrete actions is not a matter of choice for Japan, but an obligation rooted in its wartime defeat and subsequent surrender.

China will defend the outcomes of the victory in the World Anti-Fascist War. It is willing to work with all peace-loving countries to firmly oppose any attempt to resurrect militarism or cultivate neo-militarism and uphold the postwar international order. Japan should heed the voices of its own people, respect the pacifist spirit of its Constitution, uphold its "three nonnuclear principles", and stop all actions that undermine regional peace and stability. Any attempt to overturn history or revive militarism will inevitably meet collective resistance from the international community.

Peace in the Asia-Pacific must not be sacrificed to the ambitions of a few right-wing politicians in Japan represented by Takaichi.

– Courtesy of China Daily

China will continue to make efforts to rebuild peace between Thailand and Cambodia: Wang Yi

KUNMING – China will continue to make efforts to rebuild peace between Thailand and Cambodia and is willing to offer humanitarian assistance to people in need in both countries, said Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Yuxi City, Yunnan Province, yesterday.

Wang, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, made the remarks when meeting with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand Sihasak Phuangketkeow.

Following the signing of a joint statement agreeing to a ceasefire, Cambodian and Thai foreign ministers are leading delegations to meet in Yunnan at the invitation of Wang. The two-day meeting began yesterday.

Wang said as a friendly neighbor of both countries, China least wants to see Thailand and Cambodia come to war and most hopes to see the two countries restore their friendship. It is believed that as long as Thailand and Cambodia communicate on an equal footing and move forward together, there will be no insurmountable obstacles.

China will continue to support ASEAN in playing its due role and is willing to provide assistance to the ASEAN observation mission in monitoring the ceasefire, Wang added. *(More on page 9)* *– Xinhua*

China will deliver humanitarian aid to Cambodia for displaced people along border: FM Wang

KUNMING – China is willing to provide humanitarian supplies to Cambodia for the settlement of displaced people in border areas, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said in Yuxi City, Yunnan Province, yesterday.

Wang, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, made the remarks when meeting with Prak Sokhonn, Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

Following the signing of a joint statement agreeing to a ceasefire, Cambodian and Thai foreign ministers are leading delegations to meet in Yunnan at the invitation of Wang. The two-day meeting ends today.

This handout photo taken and released by Agence Kampuchea Press (AKP) yesterday shows Foreign Minister Wang Yi (right) shaking hands with Cambodia's Deputy Prime Minister Prak Sokhonn, who is also the country's Foreign Minister, during a meeting in Yuxi City, Yunnan province. – Xinhua

China has been closely following the tense situation on the Cambodia-Thailand border and remained committed to facilitating peace through talks, Wang said, adding that China congratulates both sides on their ceasefire agreement.

The ceasefire marks the beginning of peacebuilding, Wang said, calling on the two sides to proceed in a phased and measured approach to promote a comprehensive and lasting ceasefire, restore normal interactions, rebuild mutual trust, achieve turnaround in bilateral relations, and uphold peace and stability in the region.

He said that both countries can make good use of this face-to-face opportunity for diplomatic and military representatives to engage in dialogue and communication in a flexible manner, enhance understanding, and establish mutual trust.

China supports ASEAN (Assocation of Southeast Asian Nations) in playing its due role and stands ready to provide assistance to the ASEAN observation mission in monitoring the ceasefire, Wang said.

China also hopes Cambodia will continue to enhance protection of Chinese citizens and projects in the country, he added.

For his part, Sokhonn said that the Cambodian side highly appreciates the positive role played by China in mediating the conflict, including the meeting of the foreign ministers of Cambodia, China and Thailand, as well as shuttle mediation conducted by the Chinese special envoy.

Thanks to the joint efforts of China and other parties, Cambodia and Thailand convened a General Border Committee meeting, and the two militaries signed a ceasefire agreement, he said.

Sokhonn said that looking ahead, Cambodia is willing to work together with Thailand to fully implement the ceasefire agreement, make effective use of various dialogue mechanisms, and continuously enhance mutual trust between the two countries and their armed forces. Cambodia looks forward to the early arrival of the dawn of peace and hopes that this trilateral meeting will contribute to rebuilding lasting peace.

With regards to bilateral relations, the two sides agreed that under the strategic guidance of the leaders of the two countries, the building of an all-weather China-Cambodia community with a shared future in the new era has made positive progress. The Cambodian side thanked China for its support and assistance to Cambodia's development, and said that China is the most reliable and most trustworthy partner, adding the Cambodian side will firmly adhere to the one-China principle, oppose "Taiwan independence," and support China's reunification. *– Xinhua*

Russia recognizes Taiwan as integral part of China: Lavrov

MOSCOW – Taiwan is an integral part of China, and Russia opposes Taiwan's independence in any form, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said yesterday.

In an interview with TASS, Lavrov said that Russia's principled position on the Taiwan question is well known and unchanged. "Russia recognizes Taiwan as an integral part of China and stands against the island's independence in any form."

As the top Russian diplomat noted, Russia consistently regards the Taiwan question as an internal affair of China and recognizes China's legitimate basis for safeguarding its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Lavrov also said in the interview that Japan's course towards militarization could negatively affect stability in the region.

"Recently, the Japanese leadership has been seeking to accelerate the country's militarization. The detrimental influence of such an approach on the regional stability is obvious," he said. *– Xinhua*

Myanmar junta stages election after 5 years of civil war

YANGON – Voters trickled to Myanmar's heavily restricted polls yesterday, with the ruling junta touting the exercise as a return to democracy five years after it ousted the last elected government and triggered a civil war.

Former civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi remains jailed, while her hugely popular party has been dissolved and was not taking part.

Campaigners, Western diplomats and the United Nations' rights chief have all condemned the phased month-long vote, citing a ballot stacked with military allies and a stark crackdown on dissent.

The pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party is widely expected to emerge as the largest bloc, in what critics say would be a rebranding of martial rule.

"We guarantee it to be a free and fair election," junta chief Min Aung Hlaing told reporters after casting his ballot in the capital Naypyidaw.

"It's organised by the military, we can't let our name be tarnished."

The Southeast Asian nation of around 50 million people is riven by civil war and there will be no voting in areas controlled by rebel factions that have risen up to challenge military rule.

While opposition factions threatened to attack the election, there were no reports of violence against polling day activities by the time voting ended at 4 p.m. [local time].

Limited turnout

Snaking queues of voters formed for the previous election in 2020, which the military declared void a few months later when it ousted Aung San Suu Kyi and seized power.

But when a polling station near her vacant home closed yesterday, only around 470 of its roughly 1,700 registered voters had cast ballots, an election official said – a turnout of less than 28 percent.

Its first voter, Bo Saw, 63, said the election "will bring the best for the country".

"The first priority should be restoring a safe and peaceful situation," he told AFP.

At a central Yangon station near the gleaming Sule Pagoda – the site of huge pro-democracy protests after the 2021 coup – 45-year-old Swe Maw dismissed international criticism.

"There are always people who like and dislike," he said at a polling station that later reported a turnout of below 37 percent.

The run-up saw none of the feverish public rallies that Aung San Suu Kyi once commanded, and the junta has waged a withering pre-vote offensive to claw back territory.

Members of Myanmar's Union Election commission (UEC) count ballots after the closing of polls at a polling station in the first phase of Myanmar's general election in Yangon yesterday. – AFP

"I don't think this election will change or improve the political situation in this country," said 23-year-old Hman Thit, displaced by the post-coup conflict.

"I think the air strikes and atrocities on our hometowns will continue," he said in a rebel-held area of Pekon township in Shan state.

The military ruled Myanmar for most of its post-independence history, before a 10-year interlude saw a civilian government take the reins in a burst of optimism and reform.

However, Min Aung Hlaing snatched power in a coup, alleging widespread voter fraud, after Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party trounced pro-military opponents in the 2020 elections.

The military put down pro-democracy protests and many activists quit the cities to fight as guerrillas alongside ethnic minority armies that have long held sway in Myanmar's fringes.

There is no official death toll for Myanmar's civil war and estimates vary widely, but global conflict monitoring group ACLED tallies media reports of violence and estimates that 90,000 people have been killed on all sides since the coup.

Aung San Suu Kyi is serving a 27-year sentence on charges that rights groups dismiss as politically motivated.

"I don't think she would consider these elections to be meaningful in any way," her son Kim Aris said from his home in Britain.

Vote 'disruption' banned

Most parties from the 2020 vote, including Aung San Suu Kyi's, have since been dissolved.

The Asian Network for Free Elections says 90 percent of the seats in the previous election went to organisations that did not appear on yesterday's ballots.

New electronic voting machines did not allow write-in candidates or spoiled ballots.

The junta is pursuing prosecutions against more than 200 people for violating draconian legislation forbidding "disruption" of the poll, including protest or criticism.

The United Nations in Myanmar said it was "critical that the future of Myanmar is determined through a free, fair, inclusive and credible process that reflects the will of its people".

The second round of polling will take place in two weeks before the third and final round on January 25, but the junta has acknowledged that elections cannot happen in almost one in five lower house constituencies. *– AFP*

Demonstrators hold placards that read "say no, just trap – Myanmar's sham election crap" during a rally protesting against Myanmar's general election staged by the country's military government, outside the Myanmar embassy in yesterday. Myanmar's heavily restricted polls began yesterday, with the ruling junta touting the exercise as a return to democracy five years after it ousted the last elected government, triggering civil war. – AFP

Bangladesh police say student leader's killers fled to India

DHAKA – Bangladesh police yesterday said the alleged killers of popular student leader Sharif Osman Hadi had fled to India, in comments likely to further strain relations with its neighbour.

Hadi, a vocal India critic who took part in last year's mass uprising, was shot by masked assailants in Dhaka earlier this month and later succumbed to his injuries at a hospital in Singapore.

His death set off violent protests with angry mobs torching several buildings, including two major newspapers deemed to favour India as well as a prominent cultural institution.

With protests being held across the country almost daily, pressure has been growing on Bangladesh's interim government to arrest the killers of Hadi, who was set to contest general elections in February next year.

"The killing was premeditated. Those behind it have been identified," SN Nazrul Islam, a senior Dhaka Metropolitan Police officer, said at a news conference.

Suspects Faisal Karim Masud and Alamgir Sheikh left Bangladesh through the Haluaghat border with India shortly after attacking Hadi on December 12, Islam said.

They were received at the border by two Indian citizens, who escorted them into the northeastern state of Meghalaya before handing them over to two accomplices.

Bangladeshi investigators were in contact with their Indian counterparts who had arrested the two suspected accomplices, Islam said.

"We are communicating with Meghalaya police, who have confirmed the arrest of two Indian nationals," he added.

Two senior Meghalaya police officers however did not comment when contacted by AFP.

The Indian foreign ministry had earlier said it rejects "false narratives" about New Delhi's involvement in Hadi's killing.

Ties between the neighbours have deteriorated since ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina fled the pro-democracy uprising and sought refuge in India.

India says it is still considering Dhaka's requests to extradite Hasina, who was sentenced to death in absentia for orchestrating a deadly crackdown on the uprising.

The lynching of a Hindu garment worker by a mob on December 18 has also hit ties.

Amid the deteriorating security situation in the Muslim-majority country, Khuda Baksh Chowdhury, special assistant to interim leader Muhammad Yunus overseeing the home department, stepped down on Wednesday. *– AFP*

Bangladesh uprising leaders form election alliance with Islamists

DHAKA – Bangladesh's largest Islamist party announced yesterday a seat-sharing agreement with a political outfit formed by students who spearheaded last year's uprising, some of whose members oppose the alliance.

Jamaat-e-Islami appears determined to gain a foothold in government after next year's general election, the first polls since the student-led revolt toppled prime minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2024.

Islamist movements that were crushed under Hasina's 15-year autocratic rule have regrouped since her fall, and the Jamaat regards the February 12 vote as its biggest opportunity in decades.

Yesterday, the Jamaat said it had reached an agreement with the student-led National Citizen Party following marathon talks, during which some NCP members had warned against the move.

Jamaat leader Shafiqur Rahman announced a separate agreement with the small Liberal Democratic Party.

"We were eight parties in the alliance. Now two new political parties have joined us," he said at a press conference.

The Jamaat-led alliance is dominated by fringe Islamist political parties, most of whom held only a handful of seats in previous parliaments.

The majority Muslim nation of 170 million has been in turmoil since the 2024 uprising, and the resurgence of Islamist forces has sparked concern among religious minorities including Sufi Muslims and Hindus, who account for less than 10 percent of the population.

Hardline Islamist groups have called for restrictions on cultural activities they consider "anti-Islamic", including music and theatre festivals, women's football matches, and kite-flying celebrations.

Ahead of the tie-up with the Jamaat, at least 30 NCP members wrote to party chief Nahid Islam, opposing the plan to join hands.

In a letter Saturday, they said NCP's ideology and its commitment to democratic values contradicted those of the Jamaat.

Tasnim Jara, who was looking to run on the NCP ticket, quit on Saturday, followed yesterday by another aspiring candidate, Tasnuva Jabin.

Senior party figure Samantha Sharmin warned in a social media post yesterday that the party would have to pay a "high price" for its alliance with Islamists.

The NCP was formed in March, promising centrist politics that would be "democratic, egalitarian, and people-orientated".

The party has not issued a statement concerning the alliance with the Jamaat.

With Hasina's Awami League barred from the election, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is widely tipped to win the polls.

The BNP has been energised by the return of its acting chairman Tarique Rahman to Bangladesh on Thursday after 17 years in exile in Britain. *– AFP*

Thais, Cambodians fear returning home despite border truce

Thanaporn Promyamyai with Suy Se in Phnom Penh

BANGKOK – At a Thai university-turned-shelter for displaced people, Kanlaya Somjettana is reluctant to go home even after a truce halted weeks of border clashes with Cambodia, fearing the violence may not be over.

She said some people forced to flee the fighting began returning home yesterday, a day after the ceasefire was announced, but many evacuees on both sides of the border preferred waiting for an official word that it was safe.

Some cited a lack of trust that the neighbouring country would respect the truce, after previous ones had been broken.

"I really hope this ceasefire will last long and we can return home," 21-year-old homemaker Kanlaya told AFP from the university campus in Thailand's Surin city.

"But I will not go back home as long as authorities do not confirm that it is safe," she said, adding that the evacuation centre was now less crowded, although hundreds remained there.

On the Cambodian side, 35-year-old So Choeun said she expected to give birth within days and hoped to then take her baby home, about one kilometre from the border.

But not yet, said the woman sheltering with family under makeshift tents at a Buddhist pagoda in Banteay Meanchey province.

"Despite the ceasefire, we dare not return home yet. We are still frightened," she told AFP.

"We will wait to see the situation for a few days, if it will stay calm."

Officials on both sides said the day-old ceasefire was holding yesterday, but for most areas, there has been no all-clear notice just yet.

The truce follows three weeks of renewed cross-border fighting that killed at least 47 people and displaced more than a million on both sides.

China has been involved in mediation efforts, and Beijing's top diplomat Wang Yi is hosting the Cambodian and Thai foreign ministers for talks in Yunnan province yesterday and today.

Wang told his Cambodian counterpart Prak Sokhonn that the ceasefire "has opened the process of rebuilding peace", according to a statement from Beijing's foreign ministry.

"In the next step, both sides should proceed step by step to promote a comprehensive and lasting ceasefire, restore normal exchanges, rebuild mutual trust, and achieve a turnaround in relations," Wang added.

'Good sign'

A previous round in the decades-old conflict – five days of fighting in July – killed dozens before a truce was brokered, and then broken.

Many of those displaced by the latest violence had evacuated in July, too.

Rice and cassava farmer Saichon Wongpitak said she could not afford to wait any longer, planning to return to her home in Thailand's Sisaket province yesterday afternoon.

"I talked to our neighbour who said there was no gunfire since yesterday [Saturday]," Saichon, 38, told AFP, adding that her family would evacuate again if necessary.

"We have fear... but we have jobs to do at home, we have cattle at home, we have our farm," she said.

Saichon said she was glad to hear of the truce, but did not expect it to last long "before Cambodia starts a new round of fighting".

"I live on the border and what I have learnt is not to trust Cambodia," she said.

Under the truce, the two countries agreed to cease fire, freeze troop movements and allow civilians living in border areas to return home as soon as possible, while Thailand was to return 18 Cambodian soldiers captured in July within 72 hours.

Kot Ngik, 43, from another camp for displaced people in Cambodia's Banteay Meanchey, said she was thankful for the truce since it may allow children to soon return to school.

But "we don't trust the Thai military yet", she said.

"At this point, we are not sure about the situation. They can fight again at any time."

While many evacuees, including Kot Ngik, were still too fearful to leave shelters, So Choeun said the ceasefire at least offered some hope.

"Yesterday [Saturday] morning, I could hear loud bangs, but I have not heard it since 12 p.m. [local time Saturday]," she said.

"This is a good sign." – *AFP*

Move Forward Party leader Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut shows the number of his party's draw during the constituency candidates' registration for the upcoming general election, in Bangkok yesterday. – AFP

Elusive wild cat feared extinct rediscovered in Thailand

Pasika Khernamnuoy

BANGKOK – An elusive wild cat long feared extinct in Thailand has been rediscovered three decades after the last recorded sighting, conservation authorities and an NGO said Friday.

Flat-headed cats are among the world's rarest and most threatened wild felines. Their range is limited to Southeast Asia and they are endangered because of dwindling habitat.

The domestic cat-sized feline with its distinctive round and close-set eyes was last spotted in a documented sighting in Thailand in 1995.

But an ecological survey that began last year, using camera traps in southern Thailand's Princess Sirindhorn Wildlife Sanctuary, recorded 29 detections, according to the country's Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation and wild cat conservation organisation Panthera.

"The rediscovery is exciting, yet concerning at the same time," veterinarian and researcher Kaset Sutasha of Kasetsart University told AFP, noting that habitat fragmentation has left the species increasingly "isolated".

It was not immediately clear how many individuals the detections represent, as the species lacks distinctive markings so counting is tricky.

But the findings suggest a relatively high concentration of the species, Panthera conservation programme manager Rattapan Pattanarangsan told AFP.

This handout picture taken with a camera trap and released on Friday, by Thailand's Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation (DNP) and Panthera Thailand shows a recently rediscovered flat-headed cat in southern Thailand's Princess Sirindhorn Wildlife Sanctuary. – AFP

The footage included a female flat-headed cat with her cub – a rare and encouraging sign for a species that typically produces only one offspring at a time.

Nocturnal and elusive, the flat-headed cat typically lives in dense wetland ecosystems such as peat swamps and freshwater mangroves, environments that are extremely difficult for researchers to access, Rattapan said.

Globally, the International Union for Conservation of Nature estimates that around 2,500 adult flat-headed cats remain in the wild, classifying the species as endangered.

In Thailand, it has long been listed as "possibly extinct".

Thailand's peat swamp forests have been heavily fragmented, largely due to land conversion and agricultural expansion, said Kaset, who was not involved in the ecological survey but has researched wild cats for years.

The animals also face mounting threats from disease spread by domestic animals, and they struggle to reproduce across isolated areas.

While the rediscovery offers hope, it is only a "starting point" for future conservation efforts, he said.

"What comes after this is more important – how to enable them to live alongside us sustainably, without being threatened." – *AFP*

Japan stabbing, liquid spray attack injures 15: official

Yuichi Yamazaki

MISHIMA – Fifteen people were injured in a stabbing attack in a rubber factory in central Japan on Friday during which an unspecified liquid was also sprayed, emergency officials said.

"All fifteen people were taken to hospital," a firefighting department official in the city of Mishima, southwest of Tokyo, told AFP.

The official, declining to be named, said that of the 15 injuries, eight were the result of stabbing and seven due to the liquid.

Some local media outlets, quoting unnamed sources, said the liquid appeared to be bleach.

Five of the victims were classified as "requiring emergency care" by emergency workers at the scene, but all have remained conscious, the official said.

Tomoharu Sugiyama, another official from the firefighting department, told AFP a call was initially received at about 4:30 p.m. [local time] from a rubber factory saying "people were stabbed by someone" and that a "spray-like liquid" had been used.

Japanese media, including public broadcaster NHK, reported that police had arrested a man on suspicion of attempted murder.

The *Asahi Shimbun* daily quoted investigative sources as saying that the man in his 30s was connected to the factory.

He was wearing what appeared to be a gas mask, the newspaper and other media said.

Asahi Shimbun also said that he was apparently armed with what it described as a survival knife.

NHK said the man told police that he was 38 years old.

A fleet of ambulances were dispatched to the Yokohama Rubber Co. factory, which according to its website makes tyres for trucks and buses.

NHK aerial footage showed emergency workers and vehicles including fire trucks parked outside the factory.

Violent crime is relatively rare in Japan, which has a low murder rate and some of the world's toughest gun laws.

However, there are occasional stabbing attacks and even shootings, including the assassination of former prime minister Shinzo Abe in 2022.

A Japanese man was sentenced to death in October for a shooting and stabbing rampage that killed four people, including two police officers, in 2023.

A 43-year-old man was also charged with attempted murder in May over a knife attack at Tokyo's Toda-mae metro station.

Japan remains shaken by the memory of a major subway attack in 1995 when members of the Aum Shinrikyo cult released sarin gas on trains, killing 14 people and making more than 5,800 ill.

On March 20, 1995, five members of the Aum cult dropped bags of Nazi-developed sarin nerve agent inside morning commuter trains on March 20, 1995, piercing the pouches with sharpened umbrella tips before fleeing. – *AFP*

3 dead in Syria as Alawites protest mosque bombing

LATAKIA, Syria – At least three people were killed yesterday during Alawite protests in western Syria, health authorities said, as thousands took to the streets across the religious minority's heartland following a deadly mosque bombing.

Thousands in coastal provinces and central Syria participated in demonstrations called by a religious authority to protest the mosque attack in Homs on Friday that killed eight people and reignited minorities' fears under the new Islamist authorities.

War monitor the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Syrian security forces shot and killed two people in the predominantly Alawite province of Latakia while dispersing a protest by members of the minority.

Syria's official SANA news agency later quoted the Latakia health directorate reporting "three deaths and 60 injuries" in "attacks by remnants of the former regime on security forces and civilians during protests in the city".

A medical source told AFP at least two bodies were taken to a local hospital in Latakia.

AFP correspondents in Latakia and the coastal city of Jableh saw security forces intervene to break up clashes between demonstrators and supporters of Syria's new Islamist authorities, firing gunshots in the air.

Latakia's head of internal security Brigadier General Abdul Aziz al-Ahmad said "our security forces and protesters were subjected to direct fire from an unknown source", resulting in civilian and security personnel injuries, the interior ministry reported.

Syrian forces were later deployed to also disperse government supporters, according to an AFP correspondent.

The Observatory also reported violence in the city of Homs itself, with several injured.

'Determine our destiny'

Yesterday's demonstrations came after calls from Alawite spiritual leader Ghazal Ghazal, who on Saturday urged people to "show the world that the Alawite community cannot be humiliated or marginalised" after the Homs bombing.

The Friday bombing, claimed by a Sunni extremist group known as Saraya Ansar al-Sunna, was the latest against the religious minority, which has been the target of violence since the December 2024 fall of longtime ruler Bashar al-Assad, himself an Alawite.

"We do not want a civil war, we want political federalism. We do not want your terrorism. We want to determine our own destiny," Ghazal, head of the Islamic Alawite Council in Syria and Abroad, said in a video message on Facebook.

In Latakia protesters carried pictures of Ghazal along with banners expressing support for him, while chanting calls for the new authorities to allow for decentralised government authority and a degree of regional autonomy.

Placards also called for an end to "sectarian speech", and demanded that the salaries of civilians and former soldiers be paid.

"Why the killing? Why the assassination? Why the kidnapping?" asked Numeir Ramadan, a 48-year-old trader protesting in Latakia before the clashes.

"Assad is gone, and we do not support Assad... Why this killing?"

The council in a statement yesterday accused authorities of attacking "unarmed civilians" demanding their "legitimate rights" and told supporters to return home.

Most Syrians are Sunni Muslim and the city of Homs – where the bombing took place – is home to a Sunni majority but also has several areas that are predominantly Alawite, a community whose faith stems from Shiite Islam.

Since Assad's fall, the Observatory and Homs residents have reported kidnappings and killings targeting members of the minority community.

Alawite massacres

The country has seen several bloody flare-ups of sectarian violence.

In March, Syria's coastal areas saw massacres of Alawite civilians, with authorities accusing armed Assad supporters of sparking the violence by attacking security forces.

In July, sectarian clashes in Druze-majority Sweida killed over 2,000 people, the Observatory said.

A national commission of inquiry on the March violence said at least 1,426 members of the minority were killed, while the Observatory put the toll at more than 1,700.

Late last month, thousands of people demonstrated on the coast to protest fresh attacks targeting Alawites in Homs and other regions.

Before and after the March bloodshed, authorities carried out a massive arrest campaign in predominantly Alawite areas, which are also former Assad strongholds.

Yesterday, protesters also demanded the release of detainees.

On Friday, Syrian state television reported the release of 70 detainees in Latakia "after it was proven that they were not involved in war crimes", saying more releases would follow.

Despite assurances from Damascus that all Syria's communities will be protected, the country's minorities remain wary of their future under the new Islamist authorities, who have so far rejected calls for federalism. *– AFP*

Israel's recognition of Somaliland 'threat' to regional stability: Somalia

MOGADISHU – Israel's recognition of the breakaway region of Somaliland is a "threat" to security and stability in the Horn of Africa and encourages secessionist groups, Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud said yesterday.

Israel announced on Friday it was officially recognising Somaliland, a first for the self-proclaimed republic that in 1991 declared it had unilaterally separated from Somalia.

Addressing an emergency parliamentary session, Mohamud said the move was "tantamount to a blunt aggression against the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, and the unity of the people of the Somali Republic".

He added that "the violations of [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu and his attempts to divide the Federal Republic of Somalia is [a] threat to the security and stability of the world and the region, and encourage the hardline groups and secessionist movements, which exist or can exist in many regions of the world".

Somaliland, which has for decades pushed for international recognition, enjoys a strategic position on the Gulf of Aden and has its own money, passport and army.

But it has been diplomatically isolated since its unilateral declaration of independence, even if it has generally experienced greater stability than Somalia, where Al-Shabaab Islamic militants periodically mount attacks in the capital Mogadishu.

Residents wave Somaliland flags as they gather to celebrate Israel's announcement recognising Somaliland's statehood in downtown Hargeisa, on Friday. – AFP

'Attack' on sovereignty

Somalia's government and the African Union (AU) reacted angrily after Israel's announcement.

Mogadishu denounced a "deliberate attack" on its sovereignty, while Egypt, Turkey, the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council, the Saudi-based Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the African Union all condemned the decision.

The European Union also insisted that Somalia's sovereignty be respected, with foreign affairs spokesman Anouar El Anouni calling for "meaningful dialogue between Somaliland and the Federal Government of Somalia to resolve long standing differences".

Regional analysts believe that a rapprochement with Somaliland would provide Israel with better access to the Red Sea, enabling it to hit Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Israel repeatedly hit targets in Yemen after the Gaza war broke out in October 2023, in response to Houthi attacks on Israel that the rebels said were in solidarity with Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

The Iran-backed Houthis have halted their attacks since a fragile truce began in Gaza in October.

In addition, press reports a few months ago said Somaliland was among a handful of African territories willing to host Palestinians expelled by Israel.

Neither the Somaliland authorities nor the Israeli government has commented on those reports.

"Somalia will never accept the people of Palestine to be forcibly evicted from their rightful land to a faraway place, let it be Somalia or elsewhere," Mohamud told parliament.

He also warned Netanyahu "against the transfer of its wars in the Middle East to Somalia. Somalia will not allow military bases that are used to attack other countries; it is ready to take part in the stabilisation of the region and the world in general." *– AFP*

Israel army ends crackdown on West Bank town after attack

JERUSALEM – The Israeli military said yesterday it had ended its operation in a town in the occupied West Bank that it had sealed off after a Palestinian from the area killed two Israelis.

Around 50 residents of Qabatiya were briefly detained during the two-day operation, the official Palestinian news agency Wafa reported, quoting the town's mayor Ahmed Zakarneh.

The attacker's father and two brothers remained in custody, it added.

The military launched the operation on Friday, shortly after a 34-year-old Palestinian fatally stabbed an 18-year-old Israeli woman and ran over a man in his sixties with his vehicle.

When contacted by AFP yesterday morning (local time), the military confirmed the end of its operation in the area.

Defence Minister Israel Katz previously said the army had completely sealed off the town.

Wafa also reported that Israeli troops had withdrawn from Qabatiya, near the city of Jenin.

Zakarneh said the town had been in a state of "total paralysis" during the military activity.

Israeli army bulldozers tore up pavement on several streets and erected roadblocks to halt traffic, he said, adding that around 50 houses were searched.

Wafa reported that a school had been turned into a detention and interrogation centre.

AFPTV footage filmed on Saturday showed Israeli soldiers carrying automatic rifles and patrolling the streets, where several armoured vehicles were deployed.

Shops were closed, though men and children were seen walking through the village.

Yesterday, the Israeli army said it had sealed off the assailant's home and was finalising "the procedures required for its demolition".

Israeli authorities argue that demolishing the homes of Palestinians who carry out attacks against Israelis has a deterrent effect.

Critics, however, condemn the practice as collective punishment that leaves families homeless. *– AFP*

Military vehicles drive through a street during an Israeli army raid in the Palestinian village of Qabatiya, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, on Saturday. A Palestinian killed two people in a stabbing and car-ramming attack in northern Israel on Friday, triggering a military crackdown on the assailant's home village in the occupied West Bank. – AFP

France's screen siren Brigitte Bardot dies at 91

Vincent-Xavier Morvan, Adam Plowright and Alice Hackman in Paris

SAINT-TROPEZ, France – French film sensation Brigitte Bardot, a symbol of sexual liberation in the 1950s and 1960s who reinvented herself as an animal rights defender and embraced far-right views, died yesterday aged 91, her foundation said.

She passed away in her Saint-Tropez home, La Madrague, on the French Riviera.

"The Brigitte Bardot Foundation announces with immense sadness the death of its founder and president, Madame Brigitte Bardot, a world-renowned actor and singer, who chose to abandon her prestigious career to dedicate her life and energy to animal welfare and her foundation," it said in a statement sent to AFP.

It did not give the cause of death. But Bardot was briefly hospitalised in October for what her office called a "minor" procedure. Bardot at the time had lambasted "idiot" internet users for speculation that she had died.

Tributes were immediately paid to the star who was known as "BB" in her home country, with President Emmanuel Macron calling her a "legend" of the 20th century.

An AFP reporter in Saint-Tropez saw a hearse enter then leave her property, as a handful of fans came to lay bunches of flowers near a police car that was blocking the road to her home.

Julia Gangotena, 36, was among the few to have made it up to Bardot's blue front gate, where she left some white roses near a Christmas wreath and a dog's bowl full of water, she said, showing AFP a picture.

"She's a woman who lived as much in the thronging crowd as she did alone – profoundly alone," she said.

Born on September 28, 1934 in Paris, Bardot was raised in a well-off traditional Catholic household.

Married four times, she had one child, Nicolas-Jacques Charrier, with her second husband, actor Jacques Charrier.

Bardot became a global star after appearing in "And God created Woman" in 1956, and went on to appear in about 50 more movies before giving up acting in 1973.

She turned her back on celebrity to look after abandoned animals, saying she was "sick of being beautiful every day".

Far-right leanings

"Brigitte Bardot embodied a life of freedom," Macron wrote on X.

His tribute, though, made no reference of Bardot's alignment with far-right views in her post-cinema years, which alienated many of her fans.

Bardot was convicted five times for hate speech, mostly about Muslims, but also the inhabitants of the French island of Réunion whom she described as "savages".

A supporter of far-right politician Marine Le Pen, Bardot declared herself "against the Islamisation of France" in a 2003 book, which argued that "our ancestors, our grandfathers, our fathers have for centuries given their lives to push out successive invaders".

The head of Le Pen's far-right National Rally party, Jordan Bardella, called Bardot an "ardent patriot".

Le Pen, who has been barred from public office pending an appeal trial next month, called her "incredibly French: free, untamable, whole".

In her final book, Mon BBcedaire ("My BB Alphabet"), published weeks before her death, Bardot fired barbs at what she described as a "dull, sad, submissive" France and at her home town of Saint-Tropez, now packed with the wealthy tourists she helped attract.

French actress Brigitte Bardot gives a press conference on December 1965 in Hollywood about the film "Viva Maria". *– AFP*

The book also contained derogatory remarks about gay and transgender people.

Saint-Tropez retreat

After retiring from cinema, Bardot withdrew to her home in the Riviera resort of Saint-Tropez where she devoted herself to fighting for animals.

Her calling apparently came when she encountered a goat on the set of her final film, "The Edifying and Joyous Story of Colinot". To save it from being killed, she bought the animal and kept it in her hotel room.

Bardot went on to found the Brigitte Bardot Foundation in 1986, which now has 70,000 donors and around 300 employees, according to its website.

"I'm very proud of the first chapter of my life," she told AFP in a 2024 interview ahead of her 90th birthday.

"It gave me fame, and that fame allows me to protect animals – the only cause that truly matters to me."

She added that she lived in "silent solitude" in La Madrague, surrounded by nature and content to be "fleeing humanity".

On the subject of death, she warned that she wanted to avoid the presence of "a crowd of idiots" at her funeral and wished for a simple wooden cross above her grave, in her garden – the same as for her animals. *– AFP*

Bardot: the screen goddess who gave it all up

Emilie Bickerton

PARIS, France – She was the ultimate sex symbol whose voluptuous figure and libertine lifestyle sent tremors through the straitlaced 1950s, but Brigitte Bardot soon tired of the male gaze and walked away from it all to care for animals.

In the early days, when her curves, kohl-rimmed eyes and pout were plastered on French film posters, the actor known widely by her initials BB drew comparisons with Marilyn Monroe.

But from one day to the next in 1973 she turned her back on celebrity to look after abandoned animals, saying she was "sick of being beautiful every day".

And God Created BB

In her brief film career, Bardot enjoyed a string of popular successes, without garnering much critical acclaim.

Most of her 50-odd films were fun but forgettable flops – with a few exceptions.

In 1956 she set the screen alight as an 18-year-old caught up in a love triangle in "And God Created Woman", directed by her then husband Roger Vadim.

Vadim's promise that the young dancer would become "the unattainable fantasy of all married men" proved prescient.

A scene of unbridled sexual energy, in which Bardot dances a mambo in a flowing skirt slit to the waist, sealed her film goddess status, while incurring the wrath of censors.

French actress and animal rights activist Brigitte Bardot poses in a dog pound in Nice, southern France,, holding one of 143 puppies seized by customs officers in a Hungarian van, on December 28, 2005. *– AFP*

Seven years later, her role as the sullen, frustrated wife of a screenwriter in Jean-Luc Godard's "Contempt" also resulted in scenes that became part of cinema folklore.

Playing with the expectations of producers and spectators to have shots of Bardot's naked body in the film, Godard created a montage of her limbs as she lay in bed with her husband, asking him which part of her body he liked best.

Leaving first

"Queen Bardot stands there where morality ends," French author Marguerite Duras wrote in 1958.

"She does as she pleases, and that is what is disturbing," philosopher Simone de Beauvoir declared a year later.

But far from revelling in her role as libertine, Bardot struggled with objectification.

On her 26th birthday in 1960 she attempted suicide, and then in 1973, just short of her 40th birthday, she turned her back on it all.

"I knew my career was based entirely on my physique," she explained in 1978, "so I decided to leave cinema just as I have always left men: first."

Animal love

Born on September 28, 1934 in Paris, Bardot was raised in a well-off traditional Catholic household.

Married four times, she had one child, Nicolas-Jacques with her second husband, actor Jacques Charrier.

Animal activism became the dominant feature of her life after film, as she retreated to the French Riviera resort of Saint-Tropez at the age of just 39.

In a 2011 letter to conservation group WWF, Bardot recounted her life-changing visit to Canada in the 1980s when she witnessed its annual seal cub culls.

"I will never forget these pictures, the screams of pain, they still torture me but they have given me the strength to sacrifice my whole life to defend the animal's one," she said.

In 1986 she set up the Brigitte Bardot Foundation dedicated to animal protection. She has crusaded for baby seals and elephants, called for the abolition of ritual animal sacrifice and the closure of horse abattoirs.

Far-right 'Joan of Arc'

In later decades Bardot veered to the far-right, increasingly prone to disparaging remarks about gays, Muslims and immigrants that led to five convictions for inciting racial hatred.

In her 2003 book "A Cry in the Silence", she warned against the "Islamisation of France" and a "subterranean, dangerous, and uncontrolled infiltration".

In the 2012 and 2017 presidential elections she publicly supported far-right leader Marine Le Pen, who called her the "Joan of Arc of the 21st century."

Not #MeToo

Bardot continued to shun the fashion and film worlds long after her retreat from both, frequently outspoken against the wearing of fur and proudly refusing to resort to plastic surgery.

In the whirlwind of the Harvey Weinstein scandal that unravelled in 2017, she again swam against the tide, hitting back at the #MeToo campaign which denounced the abuse of women.

"The vast majority are being hypocritical and ridiculous," she told Paris Match in 2018, referring to the actresses who had come forward with stories of abuse.

– AFP

‘At your service!’ Nasry Asfura becomes Honduran president-elect

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras – It took longer than expected, but Nasry Asfura has gone from businessman to mayor to president-elect of Honduras, carrying the blessing of US President Donald Trump who has described him as a “friend of freedom.”

Capping a career shadowed by corruption claims, but never prosecuted, the 67-year-old conservative ascended to the Central American country’s top job on his second attempt, having lost out to leftist Xiomara Castro in 2021.

More than three weeks after the election, Asfura held his razor-thin edge and was declared the winner on Wednesday over fellow conservative Salvador Nasralla, a 72-year-old TV star, by the plenary session of the national electoral council.

Asfura rose to the top as the head of the right-wing National Party (PN), which was tainted by the US imprisonment of a former leader, Juan Orlando Hernández, for alleged drug trafficking.

Hernández, however, walked out of prison a free man early this month after receiving a pardon from Trump, who embraced Asfura as an ally in the fight against “narcocommunists.”

“The only real friend of freedom in Honduras is Tito Asfura,” Trump had written on Truth Social, referring to the politician by his nickname.

He added: “Tito and I can work together to fight the Narcocommunists, and bring needed aid to the people of Honduras” – one of Latin America’s most impoverished and violent countries.

Asfura returned the PN to power, leaving the ruling leftist party out in the cold in a region where voters tired of hardship and crime have been punishing incumbent parties.

Honduran president-elect Nasry Asfura addresses the nation on Christmas Eve after he was officially proclaimed the Central American country’s next head of state and government, in Tegucigalpa on Wednesday. – AFP

‘Nothing to hide’

Asfura, a former two-time mayor of the capital Tegucigalpa, ran a campaign with promises to “save democracy” from the left, which the Latin American right associates with leftist governments in Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela.

He claims to lead a “renewed” party and has denied links to Hernández, though after Trump’s pardon, he expressed hope it would “bring hope and peace of mind to the family” of the former president.

The son of Palestinian immigrants, Asfura was born on June 8, 1958, in Tegucigalpa.

He studied civil engineering at the National University but dropped out to start what would become one of the country’s largest construction companies.

Later, as mayor, he was credited with building bridges, tunnels, and other infrastructure to ease congestion in the city of over a million inhabitants.

He was also accused of embezzling municipal funds, but the Supreme Court decided not to send the case to trial.

Asfura was later mentioned in the 2021 “Pandora Papers” list of offshore companies used to evade taxes, but was never charged.

“I owe nothing, I fear nothing. I have nothing to hide,” he once asserted.

‘Work and more work’

Grey-haired and moustachioed, Asfura is reputed to be a hard worker. He usually wears a light blue shirt, jeans, and dusty boots.

In his speeches, he promises “work and more work” for Hondurans, to develop infrastructure, and to attract investments to generate employment.

Those who know him say he is passionate about music and a man of few words but much action.

He greets supporters who approach him with his trademark phrase: “At your service!”

Asfura has described himself as “allergic” to smartphones, preferring to use a landline, and has not embraced social media campaigning.

He is married to Lissette del Cid, with whom he has three daughters and three grandchildren.

– AFP

Spain congratulates Trump-backed Honduran president-elect

MADRID – Spain’s leftist government on Thursday congratulated Honduran conservative Nasry Asfura, backed by US President Donald Trump, after he was declared winner of the Central American country’s disputed presidential elections.

The national electoral council said Asfura defeated his main rival, conservative TV personality Salvador Nasralla, by less than one percentage point, weeks after the November 30 vote.

The victory of the 67-year-old son of Palestinian immigrants marked Latin America’s latest rightward shift after recent conservative gains in Argentina, Chile and Bolivia.

“Spain congratulates the new president of Honduras and expresses its full willingness to continue working with the people and government of Honduras,” the Spanish foreign ministry said in a statement.

But claims of irregularities and voter fraud marred the sluggish count, with the prolonged wait breeding tensions among Hondurans.

Nasralla had demanded a full recount due to alleged irregularities and has not recognised Asfura’s victory.

“We trust that the challenges initiated during the count will be resolved with the utmost transparency,” added the statement by Spain, which maintains close ties with its former Latin American colonies.

Trump had endorsed Asfura before the result announcement and warned “there will be hell to pay” if his preferred candidate’s razor-thin lead was overturned in the count. *– AFP*

Felipe VI urges Spain to bridge political divide in Christmas message

Spain’s King Felipe VI delivers his traditional Christmas Eve speech at the Royal Palace in Madrid, broadcasted on Wednesday. – AFP

MADRID – King Felipe VI called on Spaniards to protect “democratic coexistence” against the perils of polarisation in a Christmas message on Wednesday.

Corruption cases and sexual harassment scandals have dogged Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez’s fragile minority coalition government and plunged Spanish politics into turbulence.

The conservative opposition constantly launches invectives against the government and demands early elections, but Sánchez refuses to resign, denouncing a smear campaign against his administration and his family.

“Citizens also perceive that tension in the public debate causes weariness, disenchantment and disaffection,” Felipe said in his traditional address to the nation from Madrid’s Royal Palace.

“Extremism, radicalism and populism feed off this lack of trust, disinformation, inequalities, disenchantment with the present and doubts about how to face the future.”

Spain this year marked 50 years since the death of Generalissimo Francisco Franco, which ended his 36-year autocratic rule and initiated a complex path towards restoring democracy.

“Coexistence is not an everlasting legacy. It is not enough to have received it: it is a fragile construct,” Felipe warned.

“It is up to all of us to preserve confidence in our democratic coexistence,” he said, adding: “In democracy, one’s own ideas can never be dogmas; nor can those of others be threats.”

The monarch, 57, called for “dialogue” and “exemplary conduct in the performance of all public authorities”. *– AFP*

UN urges end to arbitrary detentions in Guinea-Bissau

GENEVA – The UN rights office welcomed on Friday the release of six opposition members detained since last month’s coup in Guinea-Bissau but insisted all arbitrary detentions in the west African country must end.

The six people freed were close associates of Domingos Simões Pereira, head of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) that led Guinea-Bissau to independence from Portugal in 1974, after an over decade-long war of liberation. Pereira has been in custody since the coup.

“The release [last] Tuesday of six opposition figures from detention in Guinea Bissau is an encouraging step,” UN Human Rights office spokesman Thameen Al-Kheetan said in a statement.

“More needs to be done,” he added.

“The authorities must put an end to all arbitrary detentions and all forms of intimidation, including physical attacks on human rights defenders and restrictions on freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly.”

The army seized power on November 26 after ousting outgoing president Umaro Sissoco Embaló in the wake of a presidential vote.

The military suspended the electoral process and announced it was taking control of the west African country for a period of one year.

“Our office was granted access to four individuals in detention last week, which is an important step,” said Kheetan.

“However, the families of a number of others detained still have no information on their fate, whereabouts or charges against them. This may amount to enforced disappearance.

“We call on responsible actors to ensure that all those detained for the exercise of their human rights are released immediately and unconditionally.”

Before November’s coup, Guinea-Bissau had already undergone four military takeovers and a litany of attempted insurrections since gaining independence from Portugal in 1974.

– AFP

Football shorts

Sudan beat Equatorial Guinea for rare AFCON win

CASABLANCA – Sudan boosted their chances of qualifying for the knockout stage of the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) after a Saul Coco own goal gave them a 1-0 win over Equatorial Guinea yesterday.

Unlucky Torino centre-back Coco saw the ball come off him and ricochet into the net in the 74th minute in Casablanca when his teammate Luis Asue attempted to clear a Sudan free-kick.

Sudan won the Africa Cup of Nations in 1970 but this is just their second victory in 18 matches across six appearances at the tournament since then.

They lie 117th in the FIFA world rankings, compared to Equatorial Guinea in 97th.

The win leaves Kwesi Appiah's team on three points from two games in Group E, while Equatorial Guinea have lost both matches so far.

Sudan are competing at this AFCON in Morocco despite the country having been devastated since war broke out between the army and rival paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in April 2023.

They will play Burkina Faso in their last group game on Wednesday and will be aiming to reach the knockout stages of the Cup of Nations for just the second time since that 1970 triumph - they got to the quarter-finals in 2012 before losing to eventual winners Zambia. *– AFP*

Calvert-Lewin stretches hot streak as Leeds hold Sunderland

SUNDERLAND - Dominic Calvert-Lewin scored for a sixth consecutive Premier League game as Leeds denied Sunderland a place in the top five with a 1-1 draw at the Stadium of Light yesterday.

Simon Adingra fired the Black Cats into a half-time lead, but the in-form Calvert-Lewin levelled early in the second period to pull Leeds further clear of the relegation zone.

Sunderland are still yet to lose at home on their return to the top flight but have been severely depleted by the departure of six players to the Africa Cup of Nations.

Adingra was one of the Ivory Coast's key men in winning the AFCON on home soil last year, but was not selected this time.

Sunderland were grateful for that decision as the former Brighton winger curled in his first goal for the club from Granit Xhaka's fine through ball on 28 minutes.

Brian Brobbey headed against the crossbar in first-half stoppage time with the chance to double Sunderland's lead.

But Leeds had been the better side for large spells of the first period and started the second with a bang.

Calvert-Lewin latched onto Brenden Aaronson's low cross for his eighth goal of the season, seven of which have come in the last six games.

The former Everton striker's form has played a major role in edging Leeds towards safety and keeping his manager Daniel Farke in a job.

The German was reportedly on the brink of being dismissed prior to a five-game unbeaten run that has taken Leeds seven points clear of the bottom three.

Sunderland missed the chance to leapfrog Manchester United and Chelsea but sit seventh, just four points outside the top four.

Meanwhile, Tottenham Hotspur beat Crystal Palace 1-0. *– AFP*

Liverpool's set-piece problems a 'killer' – Van Dijk

LIVERPOOL – Liverpool captain Virgil van Dijk said the Premier League champions have to improve a woeful record defending set-pieces if they are to continue an upturn in form.

The Reds only edged past bottom-of-the-table Wolves 2-1 on Saturday after conceding a 12th league goal in 18 games from a set-piece.

No team has conceded more and, at the other end, Liverpool have only scored three times from set-pieces, excluding penalties, themselves.

That minus nine differential is their worst in any Premier League season.

"The fact is we've conceded too many set-piece goals and we don't score enough," said Van Dijk.

"It's something we have to improve. I would say at least 75 percent of the time or even more, it's not even about the first contact. It's the second phase that is the killer.

"Is it a mental thing? I hope not. If that's in your head then it's an issue. Personally, it's not in my head."

Liverpool boss Arne Slot has bemoaned his side's dead ball defending for much of the season.

But the Dutchman sees signs of progress overall as Liverpool beat nine-man Tottenham and Wolves in their last two matches despite conceding from a corner in each of them.

"Unfortunately, we're maybe the only team that hardly ever scores from a set-piece and, even worse, we constantly concede," said Slot.

"But then, I think I said two, three or four weeks ago, we have to make sure that when things go against us - it could be a set-piece, it could be other things - we still need to find a way to win.

"In the last two games we conceded from a set-piece but we were able to win and that hasn't happened many times this season. That's progress for me, but it's obvious there are more things for us to improve and this is definitely one of them."

Despite a string of unconvincing performances, Liverpool are on a seven-match unbeaten run.

Three consecutive league wins have lifted Slot's men back into the top four but they remain 10 points adrift of leaders Arsenal. *– AFP*

Nkunku fires Milan top of Serie A, Hojlund keeps Napoli in touch

MILAN – Christopher Nkunku fired AC Milan top of Serie A with a brace in yesterday's 3-0 win over Verona at the San Siro, the France forward's first goals in Italy's top flight.

Nkunku doubled Milan's lead two minutes after half-time with a penalty he had earned, ending a league drought stretching back to February when he was playing for Chelsea in England.

Five minutes later he tapped home the third to ensure the hosts a one-point lead over Napoli who won 2-0 at Cremonese thanks to a Rasmus Hojlund double.

The 28-year-old Nkunku's only previous goal for Milan since signing from Chelsea for an initial 37 million euros (US$43.6 million) in August came against Lecce in the Italian Cup in September.

"He's a sensitive lad, one who is keen to do well here... I think he can continue to improve just like we have to," said Milan coach Massimiliano Allegri.

"We're going to need everyone because we have a really busy schedule over the next month or so."

Milan were sent on their way to a comprehensive victory on the stroke of half-time by Christian Pulisic who continued his sensational form by scoring his eighth goal in 11 Serie A appearances.

Pulisic, who has lost around a month of this campaign to injury, has played a part in 50 goals in Serie A since arriving at Milan in 2023.

He broke Verona's spirited resistance when he prodded home Adrien Rabiot's flick-on at a corner in the first minute of stoppage time at the end of the first half.

It helped Milan confidently beat one of the lower ranked teams, something which Allegri's players have had a hard time doing even though they haven't been beaten in Serie A since the opening day of the season.

AC Milan's French forward Christopher Nkunku (bottom) fights for the ball with Hellas Verona's German defender Armel Bella-Kotchap during the Italian Serie A football match between AC Milan and Hellas Verona at the San Siro stadium in Milan, northern Italy, yesterday. – AFP

Nkunku made sure of the points and made his case to lead the line for Milan, with Mexico striker Santiago Gimenez out until February and Niclas Fullkrug set to sign from West Ham next month.

Verona, who had won their last two matches against Atalanta and Fiorentina, stay in the relegation zone, two points behind Genoa who sit just outside the bottom three and face Roma today.

Hojlund on a roll

Hojlund took his all-competitions goal tally for Napoli to nine as champions Napoli cruised to the three points in Cremona and maintained their push to retain the Scudetto.

Fresh from winning the Italian Super Cup in Saudi Arabia, Napoli were the better team from the first whistle and were deservedly ahead in the 13th minute when Hojlund pounced on a deflection to net from close range.

Hojlund was again in the right place at the right time seconds before the break when Alessio Zerbin could only divert Matteo Politano's cross straight to the Denmark striker, who calmly poked home.

Hojlund has scored six times in 12 Serie A appearances, two more than he managed in an entire Premier League campaign with Manchester United last season.

Yesterday's brace was his second for Napoli after he also scored both goals in their win earlier this month over fierce rivals Juventus who drop down to fourth, three points behind Milan.

"I'm just happy for the result. Obviously 2-0 here is not easy, Cremonese have done a lot of trouble to a lot of teams this season... It's a great three points," said Hojlund, who played in Italy for Atalanta before United.

"I'm getting better every season. Obviously when I was at Atalanta I was a bit younger and I've got a bit more experience now. I've played in the Premier League and in the Champions League and I'm playing with very good players now."

Inter could have reclaimed top spot later yesterday when they made the short trip to Bergamo to face Atalanta who have been revitalised since Raffaele Palladino took charge last month. *– AFP*

Gabon's goalkeeper Loyce Mbaba concedes a goal during the Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) Group F football match against Mozambique at Grand Stadium in Agadir, Morocco yesterday. Mozambique won the game 3-2. – AFP

Kyrgios beats Sabalenka in 'Battle of the Sexes'

Tennis

DUBAI – Nick Kyrgios beat women's world number one Aryna Sabalenka in the "Battle of the Sexes" yesterday, in a highly-publicised showdown with modified rules that divided tennis fans.

Former Wimbledon finalist Kyrgios won 6-3, 6-3 in an exhibition match in Dubai that bore little resemblance to the era-defining 1973 encounter between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs.

Back then, there was more at stake with the nascent women's professional tour, set up by King, fighting for its legitimacy and prize money for female players still far lower than for the men.

King, one of the all-time greats of the women's game who was at the peak of her powers, saw off the 55-year-old Riggs, a top player in his day, 6-4, 6-3, 6-3 in Houston.

Yesterday, each player received only one serve and the dimensions of Sabalenka's side of the court were nine percent smaller, in an attempt to restrict Kyrgios' power and speed advantage.

Kyrgios has dropped to 671 in the rankings after playing just six ATP matches over the past three seasons, but the 30-year-old Australian still had enough to see off four-time Grand Slam singles champion Sabalenka.

"Honestly, it was a really tough match. She's a hell of a competitor," said Kyrgios.

"I had to strap in because she was putting the pressure on and ultimately it was a really hard-fought battle." *– AFP*

Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka and Australia's Nick Kyrgios embrace at the net after the Battle of the Sexes tennis match at the Coca-Cola Arena in Dubai yesterday. *– AFP*

MCG curator in 'state of shock' after Ashes Test carnage

MELBOURNE – Melbourne Cricket Ground head curator Matt Page said yesterday he was in a "state of shock" watching the carnage unfold during the two-day fourth Ashes Test which has left Cricket Australia facing millions of dollars in revenue shortfall.

Page and his team left 10 millimetres of grass on the wicket, providing fast bowlers with excessive seam movement and bounce which made batting treacherous.

Thirty-six wickets tumbled in 142 overs, 20 on the first day, and the game was all over in the evening session of day two as England won by four wickets for their first victory in Australia since January 2011.

More than 90,000 fans were expected for day three and many more for days four and five.

But with ticket sales having to be refunded, Cricket Australia faces another big financial hit after the Ashes series opener in Perth also ended within two days.

Chief executive Todd Greenberg yesterday estimated that the Melbourne shortfall alone would cost the governing body more than Aus$10 million (US$6.7 million).

It is the first time the same series has had multiple two-day Tests for 129 years, dating back to the time when wickets were left uncovered to the weather.

"I was in a state of shock," Page said.

"I've never been involved in a Test match like it and hopefully never involved in a Test match like that again.

"We know this hasn't gone as we planned. We will look at what we need to do to improve."

A year ago the grass on the pitch had been shaved down to seven millimetres and produced a thrilling Test that went all the way to the final session on day five as Australia beat India.

Page said that cool and wet weather leading into this year's Test combined with forecast heat on days three and four meant he had needed to take a different approach.

Pitch 'a joke'

"We're trying to balance that contest between bat and ball throughout, over the four or five days, to provide that captivating Test for all," he said.

"We left it longer because we knew we were going to get [hot] weather at the back end that we knew we needed our grass [for]."

International Cricket Council referee Jeff Crowe is yet to deliver his assessment of the pitch, pondering whether to give it an "unsatisfactory" rating which would see the venue slapped with a demerit point.

England captain Ben Stokes and Australia counterpart Steve Smith were both critical of the surface, as were a string of former greats.

"Being brutally honest, that's not really what you want," Stokes said.

Smith added: "It was tricky. No one could really get in. When you see 36 wickets across two days, that's probably too much."

Former England captain Michael Vaughan labelled the pitch "a joke".

Greenberg said Cricket Australia would undertake an end-of-season review of the management of Test wickets, conceding that the financial deficits "sting".

"With the way batters are batting, and the way the game is evolving, are the preparation of our wickets in lockstep with that?" he told *cricket.com.au*.

"If they're not, how do we make sure that they are so that we can try to balance the commercial imperatives versus the performance?"

Despite the controversy, MCG chief executive Stuart Fox backed Page and his ground staff to continue.

"We bought Matt on eight years ago because he's considered one of the best in the country, if not the best," Fox said. "I still believe that, and I always will.

"You can see he's disappointed. He carries that responsibility and my job as a leader is to support people." *– AFP*

Top 10 world athletes of 2025

BEIJING – As the sporting year draws to a close, here is Xinhua News Agency's selection of the world's top 10 athletes in 2025:

1. Lando Norris (Britain, Formula 1)

Norris seized his first Formula 1 World Drivers' Championship with seven wins, eight runner-up's and three third-place finishes in 2025, ending Max Verstappen's four-year reign. The Briton also helped McLaren retain the constructors' championship.

2. Carlos Alcaraz (Spain, tennis)

Alcaraz finished as the year-end world No. 1 in 2025 after winning the French Open and US Open, collecting six Grand Slam titles so far. His remarkable year featured 71 wins and only nine losses, along with eight titles.

3. Ilia Malinin (United States, figure skating)

Malinin defended his World Championships title and secured his third consecutive crown at the ISU Grand Prix of Figure Skating Final. Notably, he became the first figure skater in history to land seven quadruple jumps in a single program at the Grand Prix Final, setting a new world record of 238.24 points in the men's free skating.

4. Chen Yuxi (China, diving)

Chen won three gold medals in women's 10m platform, women's synchronized 10m platform and mixed team at the World Aquatics Championships in Singapore. Her victory in the individual platform marked her fourth world title in the event and made her the first diver in history to achieve the feat. Chen also secured a fourth consecutive synchronized world title, second only to the five-title record held by compatriot Chen Ruolin. She was named the 2025 Female Diving Athlete of the Year by World Aquatics.

5. Armand Duplantis (Sweden, athletics)

Duplantis continued his reign in the men's pole vault, breaking the world record four times in 2025. His latest record of 6.30 meters set at the World Athletics Championships in Tokyo further solidified his status. Duplantis remained undefeated in 16 competitions this season, and was awarded the Men's World Athlete of the Year.

6. Faith Kipyegon (Kenya, athletics)

Kipyegon won her third consecutive world title in the women's 1,500m at the World Athletics Championships in Tokyo. The 31-year-old also broke her own 1,500m world record with 3:48.68 at Wanda Diamond League meeting in Eugene.

7. Summer McIntosh (Canada, swimming)

McIntosh broke world records in the women's 400m freestyle, 200m individual medley and 400m individual medley at Canada's national trials in June. At the World Aquatics Championships in Singapore, McIntosh dominated by claiming golds in the women's 400m freestyle, 200m individual medley, 400m individual medley and 200m butterfly events.

8. Tadej Pogacar (Slovenia, cycling)

Pogacar captured his fourth Tour de France crown in 2025. He also successfully defended his title at the UCI Road World Championships in Rwanda and triumphed in the European Championships in France.

9. Shai Gilgeous-Alexander (Canada, basketball)

Gilgeous-Alexander led the Oklahoma City Thunder to the NBA championship in the 2024-25 season. The 27-year-old became the fourth player in NBA history to sweep the honors of the MVP, scoring title and Finals MVP in a single season, after Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Michael Jordan and Shaquille O'Neal.

10. Ousmane Dembele (France, football)

Dembele had an outstanding 2024-25 season with Paris Saint-Germain, scoring 35 goals across all competitions to help PSG claim the Ligue 1, French Cup and its first-ever UEFA Champions League title. The French striker was named Ligue 1 Player of the Year and Champions League Player of the Season. He also won the Ballon d'Or and FIFA Best Men's Player awards. *– Xinhua*

Hugh Morris, Managing Director of England cricket, makes a statement at the Oval cricket ground in south London, on January 7, 2009. Glamorgan announced the death of Hugh Morris, the former chief executive of the England and Wales Cricket Board and England batsman, at the age of 62 yesterday. *– AFP*

A band performs during the annual Festival du Merveilleux ("Festival of Wonder") at the Musée des Arts Forains ("Fairground Museum") in Paris on Friday. – AFP

The Cure guitarist and keyboard player Perry Bamonte dies aged 65

LONDON – The Cure guitarist and keyboard player Perry Bamonte has died aged 65, the legendary British dark rock band announced on Friday.

Bamonte, who became a full member of The Cure in 1990, "passed away after a short illness at home over Christmas", according to a statement published on the band's website.

"It is with enormous sadness that we confirm the death of our great friend and bandmate Perry Bamonte," it said.

"Quiet, intensive, intuitive, constant and hugely creative, 'Teddy' was a warm hearted and vital part of The Cure story."

It added: "Our thoughts and condolences are with all his family, he will be very greatly missed."

The Cure – whose 66-year-old frontman Robert Smith is famous for his innovative approach to music as well as on-stage stamina – has transformed itself throughout its prolific decades-spanning existence.

When The Cure formed in 1976, Bamonte was initially part of its roadcrew from 1984 before enjoying two stints as a musical member, playing guitar, six string bass and keyboard.

The first, from 1990, spanned 14 years; the second stint was from 2022 onwards.

In its statement, The Cure noted he had helped create numerous albums, including "Wish" (1992), "Wild Mood Swings" (1996), "Bloodflowers" (2000), "Acoustic Hits" (2001), and "The Cure" (2004).

He performed in more than 400 shows during his first 14-year period in the band, and then played another 90 after rejoining three years ago, it added.

Those later gigs were "some of the best in the band's history", the statement said.

Led by Smith's plaintive, wailing voice and rich guitar textures, The Cure helped shape Goth rock with albums including 1982's "Pornography", which was full of suicidal imagery.

The band later had hits with much cheerier material, including "Friday I'm in Love".

It had kept up touring but before last year's release of "Songs of a Lost World" had not released a new studio album since 2008's "4:13 Dream".

The band's former drummer, Lol Tolhurst, said in a tribute posted on Instagram that he was "so sad" to learn of Bamonte's death, adding that he and his wife "send our condolences to all that knew him".

"Farewell Teddy," he added.

Bamonte was also the bass player in supergroup Love Amongst Ruin, which has released two studio albums.

– *AFP*

Perry Bamonte of The Cure performs at North Island Credit Union Amphitheatre on May 20, 2023 in Chula Vista, California. The Cure guitarist and keyboard player Perry Bamonte has died aged 65, the legendary British dark rock band announced on Friday. – AFP

Shanghai's elderly waltz back to the past at lunchtime dance halls

Rita Qian

SHANGHAI – A group of retirees cheered under disco lights as 60-year-old Xu Li leapt into her partner's arms, her legs spread akimbo in perfect splits.

It was just a regular Wednesday at one of Shanghai's many lunchtime dance clubs, a phenomenon born of the city's deeply rooted love of ballroom culture from its jazz-age heyday.

On any given day, multiple venues host hours-long daytime sessions across the finance hub, some starting as early as 6 a.m.

Establishments such as the historic Paramount Ballroom are time capsules from the 1930s, while others flash with neon pink and green rave lights in the early afternoon.

All are important spaces for their mostly elderly clientele to socialise and reclaim the past through the medium of foxtrot, rumba, and polka.

"I was quite lonely at home," 66-year-old Lin Guang told AFP at a dance hall called Old Dreams Of Shanghai earlier this month, explaining he had felt lost after retiring.

"Coming here to dance makes me feel young again. Now, I seem to have endless energy."

Wine-red velvet curtains and cabaret lights framed the sprung wooden floor as a live band played Shanghai jazz classics.

Women, some dressed in vintage gowns or sleek traditional qipao dresses, took out elegant dance shoes, while the men's footwear was meticulously polished and their hair neatly combed.

"We want to recreate a bit of old Shanghai culture," said 69-year-old bandleader Jin Zhiping.

For him and his similarly aged bandmates, the lunchtime sessions, priced at 60 yuan, are a source of purpose.

"It lifts our spirits, and makes us feel we still have value," said Jin.

For Xu, the athletic sexagenarian, the benefits of exercising are "tremendous".

"I feel beautiful, and I'm becoming more and more beautiful as time goes on," she said.

'Like my home'

In 1930s Shanghai, ballroom dancing symbolised modernity and sophistication.

"Shanghai is a port city," said Chen Yiming, the entrepreneur behind Old Dreams Of Shanghai. "We absorbed foreign cultures and blended them with our own."

The art deco Paramount Ballroom was a must-visit destination, counting warlords, poets and actor Charlie Chaplin among its visitors.

These days, it still opens its heavy brass doors daily, an elevator transporting a steady stream of guests back almost a century in time for 180 yuan each.

Wei Xiaomeng, 90, comes to the Paramount Ballroom five times a week.

"This ballroom is like my home," she told AFP.

She first snuck into a dance hall as a curious middle school student.

Couples dance at the Paramount Ballroom in Shanghai's Jing'An district earlier this month. – AFP

A couple dances at the Hai Shang Jiu Meng Dance Hall in Shanghai's Changning district earlier this month. – AFP

"I thought it was luxurious, and I loved it," she said.

As a waltz began, couples swept across the floor, hands clasped and feet moving in perfect synchronisation under the gilded cornices and glittering chandeliers.

"That feeling of loneliness? It's completely gone here," smiled 75-year-old Yuan Yingjie. "It's a familiar, homely feeling."

Fafa, a 70-year-old who visits the venue three times a week, put it simply: "Here, it's all joy."

'Just old, not dead'

Old Dreams Of Shanghai's Chen said for elderly clientele, dance halls are gyms, entertainment venues and social clubs rolled into one.

"An elderly person is just old, not dead. They have the same social and entertainment needs as anyone," she said.

But there are concerns the average age of the dancers could see this quintessential Shanghai phenomenon slowly die out.

It is unclear how many of these dance halls still exist. AFP found around a dozen online, while a recent local media report suggested around 20 still operate.

"Promoting dance culture to a younger generation is actually very necessary," said the Paramount's executive director, 33-year-old Stella Zheng.

In-person contact was especially important in the country's hyper-digitalised society, she said.

"The exchange of glances, body language... you can listen to music, make friends through dance."

The Paramount hosts parties for young people in collaboration with other dance institutions, and plans to offer classes in styles like modern and Latin.

Chen said she had observed a growing retro trend.

"More and more young people are starting to join in to dance modern or swing," she said.

Older dancers are excited to share the floor.

"We truly hope young people come," said Wang Li, 65.

"Young people have an energy, a bright liveliness. Being with them makes us feel younger too." – *AFP*

World Weather

CHINA		ASIA-PACIFIC		WORLD		LUSOPHONE	
Beijing	-5°C~6°C	Manila	22°C~31°C	New York	-1°C~12°C	Lisbon	5°C~14°C
Shanghai	6°C~18°C	Bangkok	21°C~34°C	London	4°C~7°C	Rio de Janeiro	22°C~31°C
Hong Kong	14°C~21°C	Tokyo	0°C~11°C	Frankfurt	-1°C~2°C	Luanda	21°C~29°C
Taipei	17°C~22°C	Singapore	23°C~30°C	Vancouver	4°C~9°C	Maputo	20°C~28°C
Guangzhou	11°C~23°C	Kuala Lumpur	23°C~32°C	Paris	-1°C~3°C	Dili	24°C~31°C
Nanjing	3°C~16°C	Jakarta	23°C~32°C	Moscow	-7°C~-4°C	São Tomé	26°C~30°C
Guilin	12°C~21°C	Seoul	-4°C~9°C	Las Vegas	2°C~16°C	Praia	18°C~25°C
Xi'an	-2°C~11°C	Sydney	14°C~25°C	Monte Carlo	7°C~15°C	Bissau	17°C~35°C

1. No bulls harmed!

A man is charged by a bull during the "Toros a la Tica" festival (Costa Rican-style bullfighting) in San José, Costa Rica on Saturday. *– AFP*

2. Totally chocolate

Tourists visit a chocolate museum in Tianjin, yesterday. A chocolate museum has officially opened to the public in Tianjin. The museum displays more than 20 handmade chocolate sculptures, with a total chocolate usage of nearly 10 tonnes. *– Xinhua*

3. Horsey laugh

Horse Josh Power reacts in the stable after a training session at the Le Long Bois in Saint-Come-du-Mont, northwestern France last Tuesday. Josh Power has qualified, and is one of the favourites, for the 105th edition of the Prix d'Amerique, which will be held at the Paris-Vincennes racecourse on January 25, 2026. *– AFP*

4. Tanoura dancer

Ibrahim Hassan performs during the annual Festival du Merveilleux at the Musee des Arts Forains in Paris on Friday. *– AFP*

5. Rabbits on horseback

People visit an ice sculpture festival in St. Petersburg, Russia, on Saturday. *– Xinhua*

6. Madness

A person explores one of the ice trails of the Ice Castles during the opening day in North Woodstock, New Hampshire on Saturday. Brent Christensen crafted his first icy creation in the front yard of his home to bring happiness and joy to his children, and since 2011, Ice Castles has been dedicated to creating a world of ice caves, frozen waterfalls, and glaciers formed into archways, caverns, slides, and tunnels. *– AFP*