

# Foreign Ministry Commissioner Liu concludes 5-year tenure, bids farewell to local dignitaries

Tony Wong

Liu Xianfa concluded his tenure as Commissioner of the Foreign Ministry in the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR) yesterday and returned to Beijing with his wife Li Ping, after he had “recently” paid farewell visits to MSAR Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai, Edmund Ho Hau Wah, the MSAR’s first chief executive and now a vice-chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), Sam’s two predecessors Fernando Chui Sai On and Ho Iat Seng, as well as the heads of the special administrative region’s legislative and judicial organs, and other representatives from various segments of civil society.

The commissioner’s office made the announcement in a statement on its WeChat account last night.

Liu had headed the Office of the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the MSAR since February 2021.

## Major, important, joyful events

The statement expressed Liu’s gratitude to the MSAR government and various segments of civil society for their long-standing strong support



This undated handout photo released by the Office of the Commissioner of the Foreign Ministry in Macau last night shows Commissioner Liu Xianfa (left) meeting with Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai before concluding his tenure and returning to Beijing.

for the work of the commissioner’s office. The statement quoted Liu as saying that it was his honour to have participated in a string of major, important, and joyful events in the MSAR over the past five years, and to have witnessed new

developments, new breakthroughs, and new achievements in the successful implementation of the “One Country, Two Systems” principle in Macau.

According to the statement, Liu noted that this year marks

the beginning of the nation’s 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan, while the MSAR government is vigorously drawing up Macau’s third five-year socioeconomic development plan.

Liu firmly believes that, with the strong leadership of President Xi



Jinping and the central authorities, the robust support of the people of the motherland, and the unity and hard work of Macau compatriots, Macau will certainly create an even brighter future, according to the statement.

The statement also pledged that the commissioner’s office will resolutely implement the central authorities’ decisions and deployments, and fully perform its duties and fulfil its responsibilities in accordance with the MSAR Basic Law, while continuing to create a favourable environment for Macau’s socioeconomic development.

Continued on page 5

## Spain busts cocaine ring that used swimmers on high seas

MADRID — Spanish police yesterday said they had busted a network that saw smugglers swim on the high seas to help stash Colombian cocaine on Europe-bound container ships and hijack vessels.

The network employed a so-called “monkeys” technique, which used “youngsters who are good swimmers and from low-income families to load the drug

on the vessels that were on the high seas”, police said in a statement.

Other members of the scheme travelled to Spain to “raid the containers by intercepting the ships before their arrival at the Gibraltar Strait”, a busy and narrow body of water separating Europe and North Africa.

Last year, the crew of a ship bound for the southern Spanish port of Cádiz reported stowaways on the deck, with 1.3 tonnes of cocaine

found in a container, police said.

Shortly afterwards, another ship passing through Portuguese waters raised the alarm about “the hijacking of the vessel” by armed stowaways who unloaded cocaine concealed in a container.

The investigation discovered that the network retrieved the drug by throwing it overboard merchant vessels to smaller, faster boats close to Europe, “subduing the

ships’ crew and extracting the drug from the containers using military techniques and weapons of war”.

The cocaine was then stored in southern Spain before its transportation by road to other European countries.

The authorities made 30 arrests and seized 2.4 tonnes of cocaine, military-grade weapons, ladders used to raid the ships, luxury vehicles and cash.

Spain’s close ties with Latin America and proximity to Morocco, a top cannabis producer, make it a key entry point for drugs into Europe.

On Monday, Spanish police announced their largest-ever seizure of cocaine at sea after impounding a Europe-bound container ship in the Atlantic Ocean carrying almost 10 tonnes of the drug. — AFP

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## China willing to work with Canada to foster new growth drivers: Li Qiang

China is willing to strengthen cooperation with Canada in areas such as clean energy and finance, to foster more new drivers of economic growth, Premier Li Qiang said in a meeting with Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney in Beijing yesterday. — Story on p. 7

## Gaza ceasefire enters 2<sup>nd</sup> phase despite unresolved issues

A US-backed plan to end the war in Gaza has entered its second phase despite unresolved disputes between Israel and Hamas over alleged ceasefire violations and issues unaddressed in the first stage. — Story on p. 10

## Spain hosts record 97 million foreign tourists in 2025

MADRID — A record 97 million foreign tourists visited Spain in 2025 as the economically vital sector set a new benchmark for the second year running, the tourism minister said yesterday. — Story on p. 12



# Police nab 2 tea & wine shop staff for HK\$33 million illegal currency exchange deals

Armindo Neves

The Judiciary Police (PJ) busted a HK\$33 million (34 million patacas) illegal exchange operation run by a tea and wine shop on Wednesday, PJ spokesman Leng Kam Lon said during a special press conference yesterday, adding that two men working for the shop have been arrested.

Leng identified the two suspects as a 42-year-old mainlander surnamed Fan and a 41-year-old local resident surnamed Chu.

According to Leng, PJ officers earlier received intelligence indicating that a shop in an integrated resort in Nape was suspected of engaging in illegal currency exchange activities.

Upon investigation, an operation was launched on Wednesday, involving surveillance of the shop and its surroundings, Leng said. During the operation, Leng said that PJ officers observed that the two suspects showed a payment QR code to two mainland women, who then made transactions via their mobile phones. The suspects removed cash from a drawer and handed it to the two female gamblers, who then entered the casino to gamble and were immediately intercepted and investigated by PJ officers.

During a search of the shop, according to Leng, PJ officers seized HK\$208,100 in cash suspected to be used for illegal currency exchange

deals, a ledger, and a smartphone used in the commission of the offence, adding that PJ officers confiscated HK\$3,000 worth of casino chips remaining after the two women had exchanged the money and began to gamble.

According to Leng, PJ officers confirmed that the shop had been operating an illegal currency exchange business since November last year, involving up to HK\$33 million and generating illicit profits of at least around one million yuan (1.15 million patacas).

Fan and Chu were transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) yesterday, each facing an illegal currency exchange charge. ■



Evidence such as HK dollar banknotes, gaming chips, a smartphone and a ledger are displayed during a special press conference about Macau's latest illegal currency exchange case, at the PJ headquarters in Zape yesterday. – Photo: Armindo Neves

## Pharma bureau warns of virility product with Western drug ingredient

Ida Cheong

The Pharmaceutical Administration Bureau (ISAF) warned residents in a statement on Wednesday against using a natural virility product named “The Goat Sublingual Strip”\*, which has been found to contain the prescription-only Western drug ingredient “Sildenafil”.

According to the statement, the bureau took action after receiving Wednesday’s warning from the Hong Kong Department of Health (DH) concerning the virility product.

Sildenafil is commonly used to treat male erectile dysfunction; the side effects may include low blood pressure, headache, vomiting, dizziness, and temporary blurred vision, the statement said, adding that the product may also interact with certain medications, such as nitroglycerin, potentially

causing blood pressure to drop to dangerous levels and posing serious health risks.

The statement urged residents to stop buying or using the product right away, adding that the bureau will closely monitor the circulation of the product in Macau, aiming to safeguard public health.

If residents have already purchased the product, they should cease using it at once and submit it to the bureau for disposal, the statement said.

For any enquiries, please contact the ISAF Monitoring Department on 8598 3233 during office hours. ■

\* Important Warning: “The Goat Sublingual Strip” is a brand name for a product that contains a form of sildenafil, the active ingredient in Viagra. It is an example of a growing category of products that pose significant health risks. – DeepSeek



This undated handout photo provided by the Pharmaceutical Administration Bureau (ISAF) yesterday shows the natural virility product named “The Goat Sublingual Strip” containing the prescription-only pharmaceutical ingredient “Sildenafil”.

## Police nab HK couple for HK\$28 million ‘VIP room’ fraud & document forgery

Armindo Neves

The Judiciary Police (PJ) arrested a Hong Kong couple for fraud and document forgery, PJ spokesman Leng Kam Lon said during a special press conference yesterday.

Leng identified the couple as a 69-year-old male and a 48-year-old female surnamed Lo and Yeung, respectively, both claimed to be jobless. Leng identified the victim as a middle-aged non-resident male.

According to Leng, on November 20 last year, the victim told police that he had been defrauded by the couple under the pretence of investing in a local casino’s VIP room operations, promising “high profits”. According to the victim, he lost around HK\$28 million (28.8 million patacas) in the investment scam.

In 2023, the victim was introduced by a friend to Lo, who claimed to run a Hong Kong company and to have secured a contract for VIP room operations at a casino in Zape, persuading the victim to invest, according to Leng. Later that year, the couple invited the victim to Macau for a visit, Leng said. During the trip, Leng added, the couple took the victim to “inspect” the casino’s VIP room, showing him photos of what appeared to be cooperation agreement documents signed with the casino operator.

Leng said that the couple also promised a monthly return of three percent on the invested principal. The victim, who trusted the couple’s offer, then transferred two million yuan to a designated Chinese mainland bank account at the end of October 2023, as instructed.

Between November 2023 and January 2024, Leng said, the victim received monthly “cash returns” of HK\$66,000 from Yeung. Lo then requested additional investment under various pretexts, after which the victim transferred a total of 6.4 million yuan and delivered HK\$19 million in cash.

By April 2025, the victim had invested around HK\$28 million in total and had received around HK\$4 million in purported “returns” during the period, according to Leng, adding that the victim reported the case after Lo stopped providing him with the promised monthly “returns”. Besides, the victim was unable to recover his investment.

Leng said that PJ officers investigating the case discovered that neither the couple nor their company had entered into any cooperation agreement with the casino, and their “documents” presented to the victim turned out to be forgeries. Furthermore, Leng said that the “returns” received by the victim were actually paid out from the



Judiciary Police (PJ) officers escort the hooded fraud and document forgery Hong Kong suspects to a PJ van outside the PJ headquarters in Zape yesterday. – Photo: Armindo Neves

victim’s principal investment funds.

On Wednesday afternoon, PJ officers arrested the couple at the Barrier Gate checkpoint arrivals hall and seized a company stamp, two smartphones and HK\$222,000.

The couple were transferred to the Public Prosecutions Officer (MP) yesterday, facing charges of fraud and document forgery. ■

## ‘Bad’ air quality forecast for Macau today, health warnings issued

Kristina Vallesteros

The air quality in Macau is forecast to reach “Bad” levels today, according to a statement issued by the Meteorological and Geophysical Bureau (SMG) on their website last night.

The SMG’s Air Quality Index uses a six-level scale to classify conditions, ranging from “Good” and “Moderate” to “Bad”, “Very Bad”, “Severe” and “Harmful”. A “Bad” rating is the third level on this scale.

In the statement, the local observatory advised sensitive groups

regarding air quality, including people with heart or respiratory illnesses, pregnant women, children, and the elderly, to minimise all strenuous outdoor activities. The general public is also advised to reduce time spent outside, especially in areas with heavy traffic.

The statement, updated yesterday, did not specify the cause of the expected poor air quality. The observatory regularly issues such warnings when pollution levels are predicted to rise. ■



This image downloaded from the Meteorological and Geophysical Bureau (SMG) website last night shows the “Bad” air quality logo used for its Air Quality Alert issued earlier yesterday.

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### Macau Weather

MAINLY FINE.  
HAZE DURING THE DAY.  
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NORTHEASTERLY WINDS.  
RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL  
RANGE BETWEEN 45% AND 95%.



15°C~24°C

Source: SMG



## Sinulog Festival promises vibrant celebration this Sunday

**Kristina Vallesteros**

The annual Sinulog Festival, a vibrant celebration honouring the child Jesus (Santo Niño), will be held in Macau this Sunday, organised by the Santo Niño de Cebu in Macau Association.

The local celebration is an iteration of the major festival held each year in Cebu, southern Philippines, and has been organised in Macau since 2003. It is held annually on the third Sunday of January.

The parade, which is the highlight of the event, will begin at 3 p.m. on Sunday in Praça da Amizade, commonly known as Sintra Square. Revellers will make their way to Avenida Dr. Mário Soares (蘇亞利士博士大馬路) and Avenida Panorâmica do Lago Nam Van (南灣湖景大馬路), before returning to the square.

In response to an enquiry by the *Post* about Sunday's event, a representative from the association noted that the programme will include a street dance competition

starting in Sintra Square that will last about an hour, before returning to the same location for a final stage performance and awards ceremony at 4 p.m.

The organiser noted that there will be three competing contingents, with the event slated to conclude at 7 p.m.

"Sinulog" is derived from the Cebuano word "Sulog", which means water current movement. It refers to the ritual prayer dance honouring Santo Niño ("Holy Child") and is reminiscent of the water current movement, according to a report by the *Post* last year. It is done to the drumming of Sinulog beats.

The event has free admission. For further details, the public can contact the organising association through its Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/santoninomacau/>. ■



Dancers wearing traditional garb during last year's Sinulog Macau Festival get ready for action.  
— Photo: Rui Pastorin

## Macao Arts Festival calls for local programme proposals



This photo downloaded from the Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) website yesterday shows a performance taking place during the 35<sup>th</sup> Macao Arts Festival (FAM) last year.

**Khalel Vallo**

The Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) announced in a statement yesterday that it is calling for locally produced programmes for the 36<sup>th</sup> Macao Arts Festival (FAM), which will take place from May to June this year, with submissions accepted until February 10.

According to the bureau, the festival continues its mission to promote the development of local arts by providing a platform for performance, exchange and showcasing in Macau.

The statement said that the call is open to all legally registered associations in Macau and individuals aged 18 or above holding a valid Macau Resident Identity Card (BIR).

This year's programme selection, according to the statement, will centre on the theme "Cultural Encounter on the Maritime Silk Road", encouraging proposals inspired by Macau's cultural heritage or featuring Macau-related elements such as historical architecture, notable figures, locations and folk tales.

The call is divided into two categories: "Individual Programmes" welcomes all forms of performances, including theatre, Cantonese opera, dance, children's shows and multimedia performing arts, with an emphasis on innovation and creative breakthroughs, while "Performing Arts Gala" focuses on family-friendly outdoor stage performances designed for community participation. Selected programmes will receive financial support for production costs and will be staged during the festival.

Application regulations and forms are available on the bureau's website at [www.icm.gov.mo/CN/CallForFAM36](http://www.icm.gov.mo/CN/CallForFAM36). Completed applications and supporting documents must be submitted by 5 p.m. on February 10 via [fam@icm.gov.mo](mailto:fam@icm.gov.mo), with the subject line "To Cultural Affairs Bureau: 36<sup>th</sup> Macao Arts Festival – Call for Proposals for Local Programmes".

Applicants who pass the initial selection will be invited to present their proposals to a jury panel in February, the statement concluded. ■

**Galaxy Macau**  
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澳門咖啡文化節  
Macau Coffee Cultural Festival

PRESENTED BY  
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GALAXY ENTERTAINMENT

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**1.17-18** 11A.M.-7P.M.

活動地點 Location

銀河國際會議中心  
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# 9 ARTISTS GIVE NEW LIFE TO DAILY ITEMS THROUGH DECOUPAGE

**Rui Pastorin**

Nine amateur art enthusiasts are giving new life to daily items through decoupage, an art technique with some similarities to collage, in a new exhibition titled “Art Accompanying Life” at the 10 Fantasia gallery.

Having kicked off on Saturday, the exhibition is on until January 30 and can be found on the second floor of the gallery.

The technique, as explained by AI chatbot Poe, involves decorating an object by gluing colourful paper cutouts onto its surface and then sealing it with a finish, like varnish, turning ordinary items into art through layered images and designs.

The resulting works at the exhibition sees tote bags, stools, coat hangers, clocks and a variety of boxes decorated with reorganised paper materials, which gallerygoers will see across the exhibition’s two rooms.

“The exhibition aims to breathe new life into old objects, embodying the creative spirit of ‘turning waste into treasure’”, noted a statement by the organisers.

In total, members of the public can view 98 works on display, each work crafted by the artists under the guidance of their teacher. The statement said that among the works are those that reflect on the beauty of East-West cultural fusion and others that evoke nostalgic memories.

The statement added that the organisers hope to invite gallerygoers to “rethink the relationship between people, objects, and the environment, making art not just an observation, but something to be used and felt”. This is hoped to encourage people to value resource regeneration and think collectively about sustainable living options, the statement said.

Meanwhile, the statement also highlighted the dedication of the participating enthusiasts, noting that despite juggling busy lives and responsibilities, each remains committed to their passion.

The free-admission gallery is located on Calçada da Igreja de S. Lázaro (瘋堂斜巷). One may view the works from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily, except Mondays.

Photos taken yesterday  
by Rui Pastorin





## 'Operation Oops!' to hit the stage in Jan-Feb

**Khalel Vallo**

The Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) announced in a statement yesterday that "Operation Oops! A Musical", a locally commissioned production, will be staged from January 31 to February 2 at the Macau Cultural Centre's (CCM) Small Auditorium in Nape, alongside a "Local Programme Presentation Session" aimed at creating new opportunities for the local performing arts sector.

The musical is the third work under the bureau's Commissioning Performing Arts Productions 2024-2026 programme, the statement said. During the production's run, the bureau will invite representatives from musical theatre production companies, theatre groups and arts festivals from the Chinese mainland and neighbouring regions to Macau for artistic and cultural exchanges, with the aim of promoting local original works and exploring collaboration opportunities.

The Local Programme Presentation Session will be held at 3:15 p.m. on February 1 at the CCM Black Box Theatre (Box I), the statement noted, adding that the session is open to performing arts-related associations or companies legally registered in Macau, as well as individuals aged 18 or above holding a Macau Resident Identity Card (BIR).

The session, conducted mainly in Putonghua without interpretation, will be limited to five minutes for each presentation, the statement said.

The online registration will be open via the Cultural Affairs Bureau website at [www.icm.gov.mo](http://www.icm.gov.mo) between 10 a.m. today and 5 p.m.

on January 27, with places allocated on a first-come, first-served basis. Completed forms should be emailed to [cpap@icm.gov.mo](mailto:cpap@icm.gov.mo), the statement noted, adding that the session will also be open for observation.

Adapted from a novel of the same name by local playwright Lawrence Lei I Leong, "Operation Oops! A Musical" brings together regional talents, the statement said. The production features music and lyrics by Leon Ko Sai-tseung, who also serves as music director, and is directed by Fong Chun Kit, assistant artistic director of the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre. The cast is led by Jordan Cheng (鄭君熾), a multi-award-winning local performer, with choreography by local choreographer and dancer Florence Cheong Ut Ieng. ■



This poster provided by the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) yesterday promotes the upcoming "Operation Oops! A Musical" slated to hit the stage from January 31 through February 2 at the Macau Cultural Centre (CCM) in Nape.

## MGM announces salary rise for 99 pct of staff

**Rui Pastorin**

Integrated resort operator MGM yesterday announced a salary increase for eligible staff, with the rise set to benefit 99 percent of employees and will be effective from March 23.

"A 2.0 percent increment will be awarded for all eligible team members in which 99 percent team members will be rewarded", MGM's statement said, noting that for staff with a monthly salary of or less than 16,000 patacas, a standard salary adjustment of 500 patacas will be granted, representing a 2.0 percent to 4.5 percent increment.

The statement quoted MGM China Holdings Limited Chairperson and Executive Director Pansy Ho Chiu-king as saying: "MGM extends its heartfelt appreciation to our dedicated team for walking alongside the company

over the years and embracing innovative thinking to continuously elevate our products and services. The Company takes great pride in sharing the fruits of our collective efforts with all team members".

Ho also highlighted that with the 15th Five-Year Plan set to launch, the company remains "steadfast in supporting the policies of our nation and the SAR Government".

The company is the last of Macau's six gaming operators to announce a salary increase, with statements from Sands China, Galaxy Entertainment Group (GEG), Wynn Macau, Limited SJM Resorts, and Melco Resorts & Entertainment released earlier this week. In addition to salary increments, all operators had also previously announced discretionary bonuses equivalent to a month's pay. ■



Photo courtesy by the Association of International Certified Professional Accountants website.

## Foreign Ministry Commissioner Liu concludes 5-year tenure, bids farewell to local dignitaries

*Continued from p.1*

### Sam, Edmund Ho, others praise Liu's work

Moreover, according to the statement, Sam, Edmund Ho, and others spoke highly of Liu's leadership of the commissioner's office over the past five years during which he pioneered and innovated with a pragmatic and effective approach.

They, according to the statement, praised Liu for vigorously promoting Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy, resolutely and effectively safeguarding national security, supporting Macau in expanding external exchanges and cooperation and in improving its systems and mechanisms related to foreign affairs, promoting the greater opening-up of the Guangdong-Macao

In-depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin, and fully protecting the overseas rights and interests of Macau compatriots.

According to the statement, Sam, Edmund Ho, and others also praised Liu for, based on concrete actions, practicing the principles of "Diplomacy Benefiting Macau" and "Diplomacy for the People" and making positive contributions to Macau's long-term prosperity



This undated handout photo released by the commissioner's office last night shows Commissioner Liu Xianfa (left) and CPPCC National Committee Vice Chairman Edmund Ho Hau Wah posing for a photo on the sidelines of their meeting.

and stability and to its appropriate economic diversification.

According to the statement, Sam, Edmund Ho, and others underlined that Macau will fully leverage its unique advantages to deepen economic, trade, cultural, and education exchanges and cooperation with Portuguese-speaking countries as well as neighbouring countries, while

better integrating its development into and serving the nation's overall development.

Liu, born in Shandong Province's port city of Qingdao in April 1963, holds a doctoral degree in Management Science. Before his posting to Macau in February 2021, Liu had been an assistant minister of the Foreign Ministry since 2019. ■

## Macau Red Cross receives 2.55 million patacas in donations for Tai Po inferno

**Ida Cheong**

Macau Red Cross President Eddie Wong Yue Kai told yesterday's media dinner that as the deadly blaze in Hong Kong's Tai Po District's Wang Fuk Court estate on November 26 resulted in significant casualties, his organisation received over 1,000 donations from local residents, totalling 2.55 million patacas.

Wong said that the funds will be transferred in full to the Hong Kong Red Cross to provide psychological support and related services for the inferno's victims.

Hong Kong Secretary for Security Chris Tang Ping-keung announced yesterday that the death toll of the huge fire stands at 168.

Wong made the remarks during a media dinner hosted by the Macau Red Cross at the Federal Restaurant in Nape, adding that his organisation promptly activated its emergency mechanism and donated HK\$500,000 to the Hong Kong Red Cross on the day after the blaze, specifically for emergency fire rescue efforts and the sheltering of affected residents.

Meanwhile, over the past year the Macau Red Cross made donations to 18 existing and ongoing projects in rural areas of Gansu, Guizhou, Guangdong, Jiangxi and other provinces,



Macau Red Cross President Eddie Wong Yue Kai addresses yesterday's media dinner at Federal Restaurant in Nape.

— Photo: Ida Cheong

including three kindergartens, 15 health stations, two bridges, as well as one project each for a primary school, with a total amount of 6.52 million yuan (7.51 million patacas), Wong added.

The Macau Red Cross has also responded to disasters in various regions, such as urgently allocating 300,000 yuan (345,000 patacas) from its disaster relief fund to aid victims of the 6.8-magnitude earthquake in Shigatse prefecture, Xizang Autonomous Region, and the drought in Henan Province, Wong said.

Wong pointed out that his

organisation has continued to make new progress in areas such as medical transport, first aid training, ambulance services, health education, care for the vulnerable, providing medical transport services 34,906 times for individuals with mobility difficulties and assisted with 9,548 hospital discharge transfers, and organising a total of 515 first-aid lectures and training courses over the year, training 10,907 members of the public, aiming to enhance the community's emergency response and first aid capabilities. ■



# China to cut rates, commercial property down payment to support growth

BEIJING – China announced yesterday a series of measures to support growth and facilitate structural improvements, including cuts to interest rates and the down payment ratio for commercial property mortgages.

The People's Bank of China (PBOC) will cut the interest rates on all structural monetary policy tools by 0.25 percentage points, Zou Lan, deputy governor of the central bank, said at a press conference.

According to a PBOC statement, the rate cuts for relending and rediscount facilities will take effect on Jan. 19.

The one-year relending rate will be reduced from 1.5 percent to 1.25 percent, with rates for other maturities adjusted accordingly.

Zou also said that the central bank will work with the National Financial Regulatory Administration to lower the minimum down payment ratio for commercial property mortgages to 30 percent.

The central bank will integrate the use of its relending and rediscount quotas to support agriculture and small businesses, with an additional 500 billion yuan allocated to the relending facility, Zou said.

Within the total quota, a dedicated relending facility of 1 trillion yuan will be established specifically for private enterprises, prioritizing support for small and medium-sized private firms, he said.

The PBOC also announced measures to support technological innovation, facilitate carbon reduction, and expand financial support for services consumption and elderly care.

The central bank will encourage financial institutions to enhance their services for hedging against exchange-rate risks by

enriching hedging products and providing enterprises with cost-effective, flexible and efficient exchange-rate risk management tools, Zou said.

Policy documents for these measures will be released in the coming days, Zou noted.

He said that there is still room to cut interest rates and the reserve requirement ratio this year.

China will continue to implement a moderately loose monetary policy in 2026, according to the Central Economic Work Conference in December.

Commenting on the outlook of the RMB (yuan) exchange rate this year, Zou said that China's exchange rate policy is clear and consistent, and adheres to the principle of allowing the market to play a decisive role in the RMB exchange rate formation while keeping the RMB exchange rate basically stable at an adaptive and balanced level.

"As a responsible major country, China does not need – nor does it intend – to gain an edge in international trade through currency devaluation," he said, adding that the RMB exchange rate is expected to see two-way fluctuations while maintaining flexibility.

Li Bin, deputy head of the State Administration of Foreign Exchange, said at the press conference that supply and demand in China's foreign exchange market has remained broadly balanced over the past year, with the total transaction volume hitting a record high of US\$42.6 trillion.

Looking ahead, China's foreign exchange market is expected to continue operating stably, with cross-border capital flows remaining smooth and orderly, and its resilience continuing to strengthen, Li said. – Xinhua



A live streamer is seen at a morning market in Qiqihar, northeastern Heilongjiang Province, on Wednesday. In winter, morning markets across Heilongjiang routinely open amid temperatures reaching minus 20 or even 30 degrees Celsius. Local residents and tourists stroll amid the stalls, steam rising among the cold air. – Xinhua

## FAW Audi sells milestone 10-millionth vehicle in China

CHANGCHUN – FAW Audi has sold a cumulative 10 million vehicles in China, becoming one of the first joint-venture premium car brands in the country to reach the milestone, the company said on Thursday.

The impressive number highlights the longevity of the German luxury carmaker's partnership with leading Chinese automaker FAW Group, which began in 1988 when the two sides launched the brand's Chinese market localization.

As the market pivots toward electrification, the two automakers have expanded their

cooperation footprint. In 2024, Audi FAW NEV Co., an electric-vehicle joint venture between Audi and FAW with a planned annual production capacity of more than 150,000 units, began mass producing all-electric models in Changchun, capital of Jilin Province.

"The brand will continue to pursue a dual-track strategy combining conventional fuel vehicles with electric and hybrid technologies while accelerating product upgrades," said Dong Xiuhui, general manager of FAW-Volkswagen. – Xinhua

## How China's robust foreign trade propels global prosperity?

### Analysis

BEIJING – Over the past five years, China's foreign trade volume has successively surpassed the thresholds of 40 trillion yuan and 45 trillion yuan, hitting 45.47 trillion yuan in 2025. This marks nine consecutive years of foreign trade expansion since 2017, according to customs data.

The country's robust foreign trade performance is far more than just impressive numbers. From high-tech and green product exports to tariff cuts and institutional opening-up, China's foreign trade is translating into more open, win-win and sustainable development opportunities for the world.

China's exports serve as a driver of win-win cooperation, with foreign-invested enterprises standing as key beneficiaries. Customs data indicates that in 2025, foreign-funded enterprises' foreign trade reached 13.27 trillion yuan, growing by 3.7 percent and maintaining expansion for seven consecutive quarters.

Notably, high-tech sectors, including semiconductors and auto parts, constitute the majority of these enterprises' exports. This trend is exemplified by Intel's Chengdu chip factory and Tesla's Shanghai Gigafactory, both of which deliver cutting-edge technologies to global markets.

Analysts believe that this model of manufacturing in China, and selling to global markets allows foreign enterprises to leverage China's complete industrial chain advantages and reap substantial profits. A 2025 KPMG report reveals that 64 percent of multinational enterprises plan to increase investment in China to expand production capacity and enhance local R&D capabilities.

Beyond benefiting businesses, "Made in China" products – from photovoltaic panels and new energy vehicles (NEVs) to household appliances and consumer electronics – also meet global market demands with cost efficiency and rapid delivery, easing living costs for consumers worldwide amid inflation.

The impact is confirmed by findings from the Australia China Business Council. A report released by the council shows that without access to Chinese imports, Australian households would have paid 4.2 percent more for the same basket of goods between 2022 and 2023.

### Exports of NEVs, photovoltaic equipment

China's exports of NEVs and photovoltaic equipment are driving the global green transition. U.S. academic journal Science in last December named the renewable energy surge as the 2025 Breakthrough of the Year, citing the notable growth of China's renewable technologies with the help of the scale of its economy and manufacturing capacity. Thanks to this, "wind and solar became the cheapest energy in much of the world," the magazine noted.

Despite its strong manufacturing capabilities, China does not pursue trade surpluses but advocates for healthy, mutually beneficial and sustainable international trade, through continued efforts to expand imports over recent years.

In 2025, China's imports hit a historic high of 18.48 trillion yuan, cementing its position as the world's second-largest import market for 17 consecutive years. Notably, Starting from June 2025, imports have maintained year-on-year growth for

seven consecutive months, with December imports accelerating by 4.4 percent, according to customs data.

### Service trade deficit

Beyond goods trade, China's service sector stands as another testament to its commitment – a facet often overlooked. Ministry of Commerce (MOC) data shows that in the first 11 months of 2025, China's service trade deficit reached 806.35 billion yuan, driven by steady imports of high-quality services to meet domestic demand.

Concrete policy measures are reinforcing China's dedication to expanding imports. To date, China's overall tariff level has been cut to 7.3 percent – a level nearing the average of developed countries. China continues to offer zero-tariff treatment on 100 percent of tariff lines to all the least developed countries having diplomatic relations with China. Moreover, it is the first major developing country and a major global economy to implement such a unilateral opening-up initiative.

Meanwhile, steady progress has been made in expanding access to foreign markets, aligning with high-standard international economic and trade rules, and advancing institutional opening-up to improve the investment environment and foster mutually beneficial cooperation between China and its trading partners.

### Hainan full-island special customs operation

Last month, Hainan Free Trade Port, a pivotal gateway for advancing China's high-standard opening-up, officially launched its full-island special customs operation. The move will bring numerous benefits to enterprises operating within the port. Notably, the proportion of tariff-free product lines has surged to 74 percent, now encompassing most production equipment and raw materials.

On the same day, Siemens Energy held a groundbreaking ceremony for its gas turbine assembly base and service center in Danzhou City, Hainan Province. "Hainan FTZ boasts a robust institutional framework, which provides a stable and efficient platform for cooperation and helps Siemens Energy build a full-industry-chain ecosystem," said Joern Schmuecker, senior vice president of Gas Services Central, Siemens Energy.

Commerce Minister Wang Wentao emphasized that during the 15th Five-Year Plan period (2026-2030), China will prioritize the balanced development of imports and exports, vowing measures such as promoting innovative trade development, advancing market diversification, and smoothing the domestic and international dual circulations.

"Not only should we attach importance to exports, but also actively expand imports," Wang said. To achieve this goal, China will foster an internationalized consumption environment, build the "Shop in China" brand, further improve the tax refund policy for departing tourists, and advance the development of international consumption center cities, he added.

As the global economy grapples with lingering uncertainties, China's robust foreign trade remains a beacon of stability. Analysts note that by adhering to high-standard opening-up and win-win cooperation, China is not only consolidating the fundamentals of its foreign trade but also steering global prosperity toward a more inclusive and sustainable future. – Xinhua



## China-EU deal on EV dispute is pragmatic, exemplary

### Commentary

BEIJING—The latest significant progress in addressing friction over electric vehicles (EVs) between China and the European Union (EU) once again demonstrates that dialogue and mutual respect remain the most effective path to managing differences.

After multiple rounds of consultations, China and the EU have achieved pragmatic and encouraging outcomes in the dispute, with the European Commission issuing a guidance document on the submission of price undertaking offers by Chinese EV exporters on Monday.

According to the commission, each offer will be subject to the same legal criteria, and the commission will assess them in a fair and objective manner, in line with the principle of non-discrimination and World Trade Organization (WTO) rules.

Price undertaking offers are a common practice allowed by the WTO as an alternative to anti-subsidy tariffs. This development marks an important breakthrough in the electric vehicle case, which saw the EU begin imposing definitive countervailing duties of up to 35.3 percent on Chinese-made EVs in 2024.

The outcome of these consultations “is conducive not only to ensuring the healthy development of China-EU economic and trade relations, but also to safeguarding the rules-based international trade order,” the Chinese commerce ministry said in a statement on Monday.

A soft landing of the EV dispute is the optimal outcome and serves the interests of both sides. It would not only help maintain the stability of automotive industrial and supply chains in China, the EU, and the wider world, but also create a stable and predictable environment for Chinese EV makers to strengthen cooperation with their European counterparts and better advance the EU’s green transformation agenda.

The triumph of pragmatism over protectionism demonstrates that China and the EU have both the ability and the willingness to resolve differences properly through dialogue and consultation, based on mutual respect and within the framework of WTO rules.

China and the EU are the world’s second and third-largest economies. They are each other’s second-largest trading partners. China-EU economic and trade relations are characterized by complementary advantages and mutual benefit. Such relations should — and absolutely can — achieve dynamic balance through development. The progress in resolving the EV dispute is both telling and exemplary.

Upholding a strategic and long-term vision and the spirit of dialogue, China and the EU, as constructive forces for multilateralism, openness and cooperation, should continue working together and deepen mutually beneficial economic and trade cooperation to provide greater certainty and stability for the world.

— Xinhua

## China’s export control on dual-use items to Japan fully legitimate, reasonable, lawful: MOC

BEIJING—The move by China to strengthen export controls on dual-use items to Japan is fully legitimate, reasonable and lawful, a commerce ministry spokesperson said yesterday.

At a regular press briefing, He Yongqian, spokesperson for the ministry, responded to recent remarks by Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, who claimed that China’s strengthened export controls on dual-use items target only Japan, and are inconsistent with international practices.

“China’s measures toward Japan stem from erroneous remarks and actions by Takaichi, a fact that the Japanese side is well aware of,” He noted.

Export control is a widely accepted international practice, He said, noting that safeguarding world peace and fulfilling international non-proliferation obligations constitute its fundamental purpose and principles. As a responsible major country, China has always actively fulfilled its non-proliferation obligations, the spokesperson added.

In accordance with laws and regulations, China announced bans on the export of all dual-use items to Japanese military users, for Japan’s military use, and for any other end-users and end-use purposes that could help enhance Japan’s military capabilities, He said, adding that the move is aimed at curbing Japan’s attempts at “remilitarization” and acquiring nuclear weapons, and it is completely legitimate, reasonable and lawful.

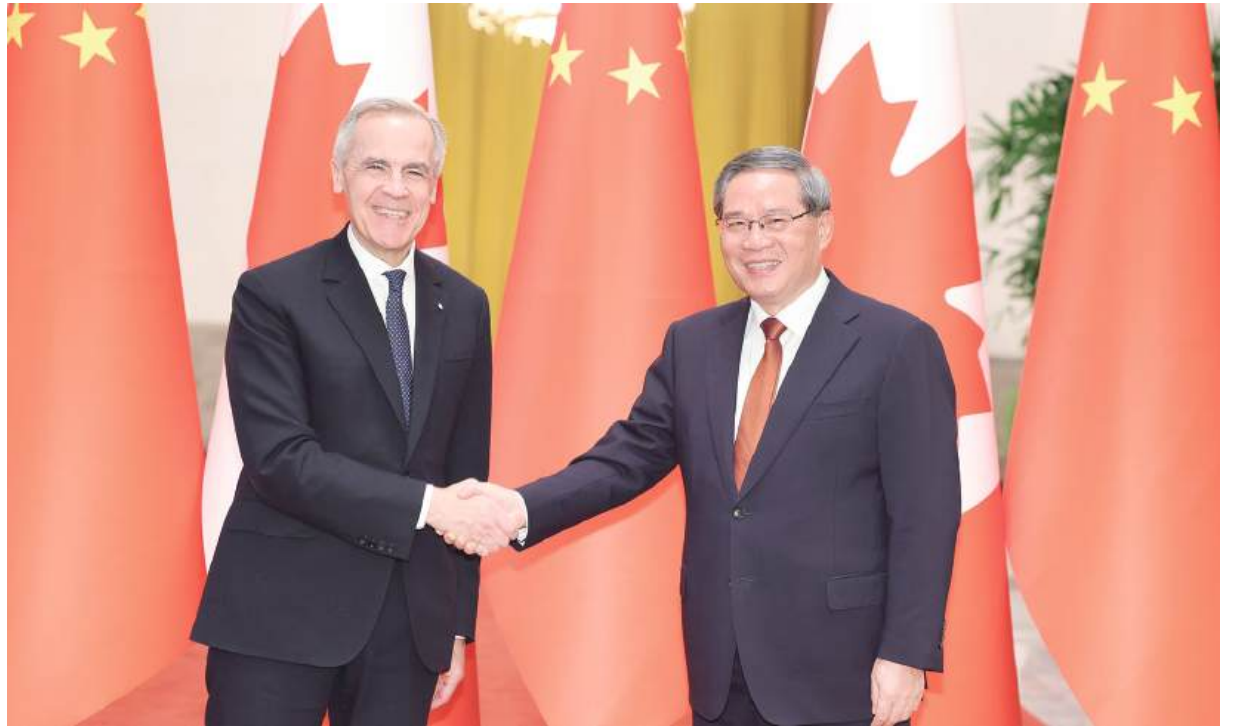
The spokesperson said the Japanese side, instead of addressing the root causes of the issue, has fabricated accusations of so-called “economic coercion” by China, which He described as a complete distortion of facts and groundless rhetoric.

The spokesperson warned that such remarks and actions are more troubling as they raise concerns about a resurgence of militarism.

“China once again urges Japan to engage in serious self-reflection, correct its mistakes, and avoid going further down the wrong path,” the spokesperson said.

— Xinhua

## China willing to work with Canada to foster new growth drivers: Li Qiang



Premier Li Qiang (right) shakes hands with Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, who is on an official visit to China, at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday.

— Xinhua

BEIJING — China is willing to strengthen cooperation with Canada in areas such as clean energy, digital technology, modern agriculture, aerospace, advanced manufacturing and finance, to foster more new drivers of economic growth, Premier Li Qiang said when holding talks with Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney in Beijing yesterday.

China welcomes more Canadian companies to invest in China and hopes that Canada will provide a fair and non-discriminatory business environment for Chinese enterprises investing in the country, Li said.

Through the joint effort of the two sides, the China-Canada relationship has achieved a turnaround, which has been widely welcomed by people from all sectors of both countries, he said.

Noting that maintaining the healthy and stable development of China-Canada relations aligns with the common interests of both nations, Li said China is willing to work with Canada to uphold the strategic partnership, enhance political mutual trust, respect each other’s core interests, continuously expand practical cooperation, and inject momentum into the development of both countries.

China and Canada enjoy strong economic complementarity, and their bilateral cooperation is driven by robust endogenous dynamism and holds vast potential, said Li, noting that China is ready to strengthen the alignment of development strategies with Canada, advance exchanges across various fields and levels, make effective use of bilateral governmental dialogues on economy, trade, science and technology, agriculture and other areas, promote stable growth in bilateral trade and enhance the level of trade facilitation.

He called on both sides to continue to support exchanges and cooperation in education, culture, tourism, sports, youth affairs, subnational engagements, and to facilitate people-to-people exchanges.

China is willing to enhance cooperation with Canada within frameworks such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the Group of 20 and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, jointly upholding multilateralism and free trade, added Li.

For his part, Carney said that since the establishment of diplomatic relations, the Canadian

government has firmly adhered to the one-China policy.

Canada is willing to strengthen dialogue with China in various fields on the basis of mutual respect, leverage complementary advantages, and promote cooperation in areas such as economy, trade, energy, green economy, agriculture, and people-to-people exchanges, he noted.

Chinese companies are welcome to invest and conduct business in Canada, and Canadian enterprises are confident in further deepening cooperation with China, said the prime minister.

He noted that in light of the profound changes in current international situation, Canada is willing to enhance communication and collaboration with China to jointly support the United Nations in playing a central role in international affairs.

Following the talks, Li and Carney witnessed the signing of multiple cooperation documents covering trade, customs, energy, construction, culture, and public security.

Prior to the talks, Li held a welcome ceremony for Carney in the Great Hall of the People.

— Xinhua

## Wang Yi says China opposes use or threat of force in int’l relations

BEIJING — China opposes the use or threat of force in international relations, opposes imposing one’s own will on others, and opposes a return of the world to the “law of the jungle,” Foreign Minister Wang Yi said yesterday.

China has consistently advocated adherence to the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter and international law, said Wang, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, during

a phone conversation with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi.

During the talks, Araghchi briefed Wang on the latest developments in Iran, stressing that the recent unrest was incited by external forces and that the situation has now stabilized.

He said that Iran is prepared to respond to external interference, while keeping the door to dialogue open, and expressed hope that China will play a greater role in promoting regional peace and stability.

For his part, Wang said that China believes that the Iranian government and people will stand united, overcome difficulties, maintain national stability and safeguard their legitimate rights and interests.

Wang also expressed hope that all parties concerned will cherish peace, exercise restraint, and resolve differences through dialogue, adding that China stands ready to play a constructive role to this end.

— Xinhua



## Philippines plans to ban Grok over deepfakes

MANILA – The Philippines said yesterday it plans to block Elon Musk’s Grok “by tonight” [last night], joining Southeast Asian neighbours Malaysia and Indonesia in barring access to the chatbot that has drawn fire over AI-generated sexualised deepfakes.

The news came hours after social media platform X said it was taking measures to prevent its chatbot from undressing images of real people – including children – amid a growing global backlash and the launch of an investigation in the US state of California.

“We need to clean the internet now, because much toxic content is appearing, especially with the advent of AI,” telecommunications secretary Henry Rhoel Aguda told a press briefing announcing the decision.

Renato Paraiso, acting executive director of the country’s cybercrime centre, told AFP the block would take effect within the day.

“By tonight or within today, [Thursday night or Thursday] we are expecting (Grok) to be blocked in the entire Philippines,” Paraiso said.

“We are expecting the telcos to

immediately comply with the (National Telecommunications Commission) order, so of course we will monitor it.”

He added that X’s pledge to limit access would have no effect on the government’s plans.

“We cannot make decisions based on announcements,” Paraiso said, adding they would watch to see if the platform carries through with its promises.

Indonesia on Saturday became the first country to block access to Grok entirely, with Malaysia following the next day. – AFP

## Indonesia proposes adding 21,000 forest police to strengthen forest protection

JAKARTA – Indonesia’s Minister of Forestry Raja Juli Antoni has proposed adding 21,000 forest police officers to strengthen supervision of forest areas across the country, local media reported yesterday.

The proposal follows recent floods and landslides in Sumatra that are suspected to be linked to deforestation, according to the reports.

Currently, Indonesia has about 4,800 forest police officers. The plan aims to raise the total number to 25,000, based on an ideal ratio of one forest police officer overseeing 5,000

hectares of forest. The additional personnel are expected to improve monitoring of illegal logging, enhance forest security, and better adapt oversight to regional characteristics and population pressures.

The ministry has also proposed expanding the number of Forestry Law Enforcement Units from 10 to 24. The expanded units would be equipped with forest protection functions as well as forest and land fire control capabilities in each province.

Raja Juli emphasized the need for more structured coordination between

the central and regional governments. To support this effort, the ministry has proposed establishing 35 Regional Forestry Coordination Centers to serve as policy coordination hubs and facilitate cooperation with local governments and regional leadership coordination forums.

“The establishment of these coordination centers will make the implementation of forestry programs more structured and integrated, from the central level down to the field,” Raja Juli was quoted by local media as saying. – Xinhua



*This photograph taken on December 17, 2025 shows Rohingya refugees studying in a crowded schoolroom inside a makeshift learning centre at the Kutupalong refugee camp in Ukhiya, Bangladesh. Books tucked under their arms, children file into a small classroom in Bangladesh’s vast refugee camps, home to more than a million Rohingya who have fled neighbouring Myanmar. In the aftermath of the 2017 exodus, international aid groups and UNICEF were running more than 6,500 learning centres by 2024 across the Cox’s Bazar camps, educating up to 300,000 children who escaped Myanmar’s brutal military crackdown. But the system is severely overstretched - a situation worsened by cuts to US aid under President Donald Trump. – AFP*

## Detained for months, Indonesian woman convicted of protest incitement

JAKARTA – An Indonesian court found a woman guilty of incitement yesterday over social media posts during nationwide protests, with activists saying hundreds of others are on trial on charges related to last year’s unrest.

Judges in Jakarta convicted 26-year-old Laras Faizati Khairunnisa of spreading incitement through social media, including an Instagram story calling on people to burn the National Police headquarters in the capital.

The posts were made as nationwide protests rocked the archipelago in late August and early September, sparked by lavish perks for lawmakers but later intensifying over footage of a police vehicle fatally running over a delivery driver.

Laras, a former worker of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, had been in pre-trial detention since September 1.

She was one of the first Indonesians convicted of incitement

related to the protests, with trials in Jakarta ongoing for at least four activists who face multiple charges including incitement.

The verdict called for a six-month prison sentence, but presiding judge I Ketut Darpawan said Laras would instead get a one-year probation.

She was released from custody following the hearing.

“The panel of judges chose a type of punishment that emphasises education... and gives the defendant the opportunity to improve herself so that she could be a more cautious individual when using social media,” Ketut said in the hearing which was broadcasted by local media.

Speaking to reporters later, Laras said: “Praise be to God that I can go home today, although still declared guilty.”

“Opinions, criticism and expression of anger... should not be considered as a crime,” added Laras, who has seven days to appeal the ruling.

Amnesty International Indonesia called the court’s decision a “devastating blow to freedom of expression and peaceful protest” which “could clearly create a chilling effect in society”.

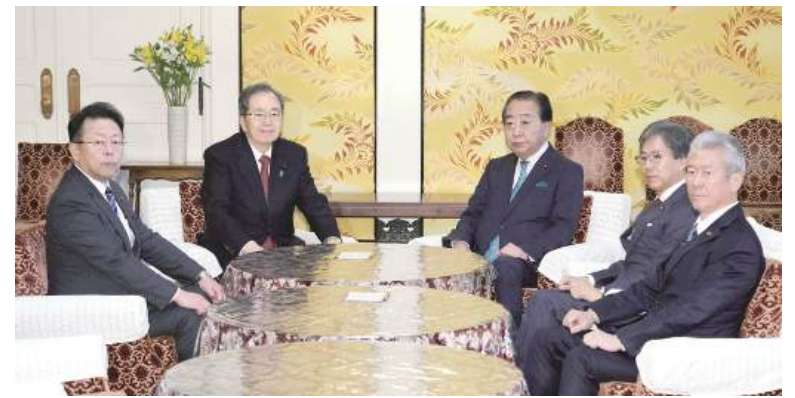
The ruling paints any expression of criticism of state violence as a “mistake”, the NGO’s executive director Usman Hamid said in a statement.

According to Amnesty, around 290 people are currently facing trial on charges related to last year’s protests, including 14 activists.

Police arrested thousands of people across the country during and following the protests – the most violent unrest since President Prabowo Subianto took office in 2024.

Many have since been released, but police in September said nearly 600 were still detained.

Authorities also named 959 people including nearly 300 minors suspected of incitement, destruction of property and other offences related to the protests. – AFP



*Leader of the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) Yoshihiko Noda (third from right) and Komeito leader Tetsuo Saito (second from left) attend a meeting at the National Diet in Tokyo yesterday. Top officials from the largest opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) and Komeito – the ruling Liberal Democratic Party’s former coalition partner – agreed to form a new “centrist” counterforce, CDP leader Yoshihiko Noda told reporters. – AFP*

## Death toll in Philippine landfill landslide rises to 25

MANILA – Search and rescue operations are continuing in the central Philippine city of Cebu, a week after a landfill collapsed on January 8, killing at least 25 people and leaving 11 others still missing, authorities said yesterday.

Cebu City Councillor Dave Tumalak said rescuers have not officially shifted to a retrieval-only phase despite the passage of time and the difficult conditions at the site, out of respect for the families of the missing.

“Most families are still hoping their relatives are alive, and we are also praying for miracles as the search for survivors continues,” Tumalak said in a radio interview.

The incident occurred at a privately operated landfill in the city on the late afternoon of January 8, when a massive mound of garbage collapsed, burying a facility and many workers.

As of last night, the city’s Bureau of Fire Protection confirmed 25 fatalities, while 11

individuals remain unaccounted for. Authorities earlier reported that 18 injured workers were rescued in the first few days after the collapse.

Rescue teams, including firefighters, coast guard, and military personnel, continue to face hazardous conditions at the site, such as unstable ground, methane gas buildup, and narrow tunnels beneath tons of compacted waste.

In response to the disaster, the Cebu City Council declared a state of calamity, enabling the release of emergency funds to support search-and-rescue operations and address the resulting waste-disposal crisis.

Meanwhile, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources has issued an immediate cease-and-desist order against the landfill operator, citing possible lapses in monitoring and safety protocols.

Families of the missing workers continue to hold vigil at the site, hoping and praying for positive news. – Xinhua

## Australian festival apologises for cancelling Palestinian author

SYDNEY – A leading Australian arts festival apologised yesterday for disinviting a Palestinian author, retracting claims her attendance would be “culturally insensitive” following a mass shooting targeting Jews at Bondi Beach.

The Adelaide Festival was forced to cancel its popular writers’ week on Tuesday as scores of participants pulled out over the treatment of author and academic Randa Abdel-Fattah.

With many questioning whether the backlash might spell the end of the event for good, organisers changed tack and apologised.

“We have reversed the decision and will reinstate Dr Abdel-Fattah’s invitation to speak at the next Adelaide Writers’ Week in 2027,” festival organisers said in a statement.

Australia’s premier annual cultural event, which lures artists from around the world, unleashed the storm last week when it told Abdel-Fattah it did not “wish to proceed” with her appearance.

“We stated that this was because it would be culturally insensitive to allow her to participate,” organisers said.

“We retract that statement. We apologise to Dr Abdel-Fattah unreservedly for the harm the Adelaide Festival Corporation has caused her.”

Abdel-Fattah said she accepted the apology.

“I accept this apology as acknowledgement of our right to speak publicly and truthfully about the atrocities that have been committed against the Palestinian people,” she said.

Abdel-Fattah has faced criticism over past statements including a post on X in October 2024 saying: “The goal is decolonisation and the end of this murderous Zionist colony.”

Some 180 participants, including former New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern, boycotted the festival after it cancelled Abdel-Fattah.

Writers’ week director Louise Adler resigned in protest, saying the board had been swayed against her advice by the “extreme and repressive efforts of pro-Israel lobbyists”.

Father-and-son gunmen allegedly killed 15 people in an ISIS-inspired attack targeting a Jewish festival at Sydney’s Bondi Beach on December 14. – AFP



## Fatal back-to-back Thailand crane failures tied to same firm

*Montira Rungjirajittranon,  
Pasika Khernamnuoy and  
Thanaporn Promyamyai with  
Watsamon Tri-Yasakda in Na-  
khon Ratchasima province*

BANGKOK – The collapse of a highway construction crane killed two people near Bangkok yesterday, with Thailand's leader vowing to blacklist the building firm which was also involved in a crane failure the day before that left 32 dead.

Car dashcam footage verified by AFP showed the moment the massive crane fell yesterday, unleashing clouds of dust as well as rubble across the area, as several vehicles pulled over or reversed to avoid falling debris.

Motorcycle-taxi driver Booncherd La-orium said he no longer felt safe driving in the area.

"I had goosebumps just thinking about how risky it is to be here. It could have happened to me," the 69-year-old told AFP.

Transport Minister Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn linked firm Italian-Thai Development to the country's second deadly crane collapse in two days, according to local media.

"We have to find out the facts," Phiphat told a local outlet.

Italian-Thai Development was also contracted to build a section of a China-backed high-speed rail project where a huge crane fell on Wednesday, in Nakhon Ratchasima province, derailing a passenger train below and killing 32 of nearly 200 people on board.

In a note to Thailand's stock exchange, Italian-Thai expressed condolences to the victims of the crane accident yesterday, saying it would provide compensation.

The firm also pledged to "review and improve safety measures to be more thorough and stringent moving forward", the note said.

Italian-Thai earlier promised compensation to victims of Wednesday's crane collapse and train derailment.

The company – one of Thailand's biggest construction firms – has seen several deadly accidents at its sites in recent years.

The crane that fell yesterday at the under-construction Rama II Expressway in Samut Sakhon province, outside Bangkok, left two people dead, a police official told AFP from the scene.

Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul told reporters his government would terminate the contracts with the contractor of the two projects where the accidents occurred, without specifying a firm by name.

Anutin said legal action would be taken and the contractor would be blacklisted.

"It has happened three or four times by one contractor. The

government is not comfortable letting this kind of company work for the government," he said.

### 'Death Road'

In other verified footage from the same vehicle as the dashcam, someone is heard saying: "I almost died... Please pull over first".

Another person replies: "That's okay now. It's not falling further."

"That was close," the first person says.

Rescue worker Sutthiwat Thanomsat told AFP he arrived at the scene shortly after the crane crashed down, and witnessed the aftermath of a pickup truck driver killed by the impact.

The Rama II Expressway, a main artery linking the capital to Thailand's south, hosts several major infrastructure projects, including tollway construction.

Construction work has been underway for years to expand the road's capacity and reduce congestion but the project has been beset by delays and fatalities, earning it the nickname "Death Road".

Surachai Wongho, a 61-year-old retiree who drives on Rama II regularly, said he is haunted by the thought that one day he could be hurt in an accident.

"It's the same incident happening over and over again in Thailand. It's time for the government to do something," he told AFP.

In March, a concrete beam forming part of an under-construction elevated roadway collapsed on Rama II, killing several people.

A crane collapse in November 2024 killed at least three workers.

### Silent prayers

The incident yesterday followed the crane collapse in Nakhon Ratchasima a day earlier, one of Thailand's deadliest rail accidents in years.

A massive launching gantry crane, used by Italian-Thai in the construction of a high-speed rail project, collapsed onto a passenger train below.

At the site of the deadly accident yesterday, construction workers milled around the scene, snapping photos of the wreckage, as relatives of victims visited to mourn and pray in silence.

The crane was left hanging off giant concrete pillars, built to hold up the future elevated high-speed rail line – a joint Thailand-China endeavour.

The nation's rail operator said it ordered Italian-Thai to halt construction until an investigation was completed.

The crane operator was Thai and had fallen and died in Wednesday's accident, an Italian-Thai worker who declined to give her name told AFP. – AFP

## S Korean health insurer loses appeal against tobacco companies

SEOUL – South Korea's state health insurer lost an appeal yesterday in its lawsuit seeking damages from the country's three largest tobacco companies over their alleged responsibility for smoking-related harms.

The case brought by the South Korean National Health Insurance Service (NHIS) sought to hold tobacco companies "socially accountable for the harms caused by smoking".

It also aimed to "prevent leakage in the national health insurance finances while promoting public health", the NHIS said.

The suit targeted the country's three largest tobacco firms, including giants British American Tobacco and Philip Morris Korea, and was valued at 53.3 billion won (US\$36.2 million).

It covers 3,465 patients who smoked for at least three decades and were diagnosed with related cancers, including lung cancer, for whom the NHIS paid out medical benefits.

Ninety percent of the patients have already died.

In the first hearing, filed in 2014, the court sided with the tobacco companies, saying the NHIS was obliged to pay medical benefits under



Jung Ki-suck (centre), president of the National Health Insurance Service, speaks to reporters after the verdict on South Korea's tobacco lawsuit at a court in Seoul yesterday. – AFP

the law even if it led to financial losses.

Proving a causal link between smoking and the patients' diseases would require additional evidence showing that other risk factors, such as lifestyle and other health conditions, were not present, it added.

In an appellate trial yesterday, the court again ruled in favour of the tobacco companies.

President of the NHIS Jung Ki-suck told reporters that the ruling was "deeply disappointing" but said he believed "the truth will one day be

recognised".

"I think tobacco companies are hit-and-run offenders. A car caused a traffic accident. Many people were injured and killed. But the driver fled the scene," he said after the verdict.

"In my view, that car driver is cigarettes, and the companies that sell them."

Smoking rates in South Korea have fallen over the past decade, with about one-fifth of the population now reporting that they smoke, according to the NHIS. – AFP

## Nepal's oldest party splits ahead of post-protest polls

KATHMANDU – Nepal's oldest political party, Nepali Congress, has split ahead of March general elections, with the dissident party faction unanimously electing a new president.

The rupture adds to Nepal's turbulent political environment, after nationwide protests in September over corruption, governance failures and demands for political renewal ousted the previous government.

"I am grateful to you all," newly-elected party president Gagan Thapa said, in a speech in the early hours of yesterday morning.

"You have given me the responsibility of the president of a party like Nepali Congress, this is not a small responsibility. I sincerely pledge in front of you that I will not let you down."

Questions remain on which Nepali Congress faction is now legitimate – and will be able to use to the iconic

tree symbol and party flag during the election scheduled for March 5.

"The commission has received letters and will make a decision," Election Commission spokesman Narayan Prasad Bhattarai told AFP.

Five-time prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba has served as Nepali Congress's president since 2016, but a special convention was called by dissident leaders to pave the way for leadership change.

Negotiations to prevent a split continued until Wednesday but collapsed after leaders failed to reach an agreement, including over whether Sher Bahadur Deuba would take a step back.

Thapa and two other leaders were then suspended before the break-away members voted him leader of their faction.

Thapa, 49, is one of the most prominent faces of the party's

younger generation and held the position of its general secretary.

The fragmentation of the Nepali Congress underscores a broader shift in the country's politics, where demands for a generational shift and political accountability are reshaping long-established parties and prompting new faces to join politics.

After Nepal's previous prime minister KP Sharma Oli was ousted in September, 73-year-old former chief justice Sushila Karki was appointed interim premier to lead the Himalayan nation until the next elections.

At least 77 people were killed during the unrest, which was triggered by anger over a brief government ban on social media, building on public frustration after years of economic stagnation.

Karki has promised to create a "fair and fear-free" environment for the polls. – AFP

## Singapore PM fires opposition leader

SINGAPORE – Singapore's Prime Minister Lawrence Wong fired the leader of the opposition in parliament yesterday, citing a criminal conviction and requesting the lawmaker's party to nominate a successor.

Singapore is one of few democracies where the ruling party holds direct power to choose an opposition leader, a system that has been criticised as reducing the autonomy of the legislature.

Wong's decision follows a parliament vote on Wednesday to declare Pritam Singh unfit for the role of opposition leader.

Singh, 49, head of the opposition

Workers' Party, has been found guilty of lying to a parliamentary committee, with the High Court upholding the verdict on appeal in December.

Wong, whose People's Action Party dominates the legislature, had reappointed Singh for a second term as opposition leader after elections last year.

The 2025 vote extended the ruling party's more than six decades of uninterrupted power.

"Having considered the matter carefully, I have decided that Mr Singh's criminal convictions, taken together with Parliament's considered view of his unsuitability,

make it no longer tenable for him to continue" as the leader of the opposition, Wong said in a statement.

Singh's termination with immediate effect "is necessary to uphold the rule of law, as well as the dignity and integrity of Parliament", the prime minister added.

There was no immediate comment from Singh.

Wong said he had sent a letter to Singh's party inviting them to nominate a replacement.

The Workers' Party confirmed it had received the letter, saying its members will deliberate "and respond in due course". – AFP



# Gaza ceasefire enters 2<sup>nd</sup> phase despite unresolved issues

Louis Baudoin-Laarman

JERUSALEM – A US-backed plan to end the war in Gaza has entered its second phase despite unresolved disputes between Israel and Hamas over alleged ceasefire violations and issues unaddressed in the first stage.

The most contentious questions remain Hamas's refusal to publicly commit to full disarmament, a non-negotiable demand from Israel, and Israel's lack of clarity over whether it will fully withdraw its forces from Gaza.

The creation of a Palestinian technocratic committee, announced on Wednesday, is intended to manage day-to-day governance in post-war Gaza, but it leaves unresolved broader political and security questions.

Below is a breakdown of developments from phase one to the newly launched second stage.

## Gains and gaps in phase one

The first phase of the plan, part of a 20-point proposal unveiled by US President Donald Trump, began on October 10 and aimed primarily to stop the fighting in the Gaza Strip, allow in aid and secure the return of all remaining living and deceased hostages held by Hamas and allied Palestinian militant groups.

All hostages have since been returned, except for the remains of one Israeli, Ran Gvili.

Israel has accused Hamas of delaying the handover of Gvili's body, while Hamas has said widespread destruction in Gaza made locating the remains difficult.

Gvili's family had urged mediators to delay the transition to phase two.

"Moving on breaks my heart. Have we given up? Ran did not

give up on anyone," his sister, Shira Gvili, said after mediators announced the move.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said efforts to recover Gvili's remains would continue but has not publicly commented on the launch of phase two.

Hamas has accused Israel of repeated ceasefire violations, including air strikes, firing on civilians and advancing the so-called "Yellow Line," an informal boundary separating areas under Israeli military control from those under Hamas authority.

Gaza's Hamas-run health ministry said Israeli forces had killed 451 people since the ceasefire took effect.

Israel's military said it had targeted suspected militants who crossed into restricted zones near the Yellow Line, adding that three Israeli soldiers were also killed by militants during the same period.

Aid agencies say Israel has not allowed the volume of humanitarian assistance envisaged under phase one, a claim Israel rejects.

Gaza, whose borders and access points remain under Israeli control, continues to face severe shortages of food, clean water, medicine and fuel.

Israel and the United Nations have repeatedly disputed figures on the number of aid trucks permitted to enter the Palestinian territory.

## Disarmament, governance in phase two

Under the second phase, Gaza is to be administered by a 15-member Palestinian technocratic committee operating under the supervision of a so-called "Board of Peace," to be chaired by Trump.

"The ball is now in the court of the mediators, the American guarantor and the international community to empower the committee," Bassem Naim, a senior Hamas leader, said in a statement yesterday.

Mediators Egypt, Turkey and Qatar said Ali Shaath, a former deputy minister in the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority, had been appointed to lead the committee.

Shaath, in an interview, said the committee would rely on "brains rather than weapons" and would not coordinate with armed groups.

US Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff said phase two aims for the "full demilitarisation and reconstruction of Gaza," including the disarmament of all unauthorised armed factions.

Witkoff said Washington expected Hamas to fulfil its remaining obligations, including the return of Gvili's body, warning that failure to do so would bring "serious consequences".

The plan also calls for the deployment of an International Stabilisation Force to help secure Gaza and train vetted Palestinian police units.

For Palestinians, the central issue remains Israel's full military withdrawal from Gaza – a step included in the framework but for which no detailed timetable has been announced.

With fundamental disagreements persisting over disarmament, withdrawal and governance, diplomats say the success of phase two will depend on sustained pressure from mediators and whether both sides are willing – or able – to move beyond long-standing red lines.

– AFP

# European military mission in Greenland as US aim 'remains intact'

Pierre-Henry Deshayes

NUUK – A European military mission was taking shape in Greenland yesterday, drawing a sharp rebuke from Russia, as Denmark said Washington still aimed to take control of the mineral-rich Arctic island.

Greenland's Prime Minister Jens-Frederik Nielsen insisted meanwhile that "dialogue and diplomacy are the right way forward", hailing in a Facebook post the fact that a dialogue was now "underway".

The developments came a day after a White House meeting failed to resolve "fundamental disagreement" over Greenland, an autonomous Danish territory that President Donald Trump insists the United States needs to ensure its security.

Two Danish troop transport planes landed in Greenland on Wednesday.

Britain, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden have also announced the deployment of military personnel as part of a reconnaissance mission to Greenland's capital Nuuk, under Denmark's "Arctic Endurance" exercise organised with NATO allies.

The modest military reinforcements – 13 soldiers from Germany, for example – are meant to prepare armed forces for future exercises in the Arctic, according to European defence sources.

"A first team of French service members is already on site and will be reinforced in the coming days with land, air, and maritime assets," French President Emmanuel Macron said yesterday.

Germany's defence ministry said the aim was to "explore the framework conditions for possible military contributions to support Denmark in ensuring security in the region".

## 'NATO consensus'

The foreign ministers of Denmark and Greenland met with US Vice President JD Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio in Washington on Wednesday.

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said in a statement yesterday that "a working group" was being set up to discuss how Arctic security could be improved.

"However, this does not change the fact that there is a fundamental disagreement, because the American ambition to take over Greenland remains intact," Frederiksen said, hailing the arrival of European military personnel in Greenland.

"There is consensus within the NATO alliance that a strengthened presence in the Arctic is crucial for European and North American security," she said.

Trump has argued that if the United States does not take Greenland, "China or Russia will", deriding Danish efforts to increase



Greenland's Head of Government (Naalakkersuisut) Jens-Frederik Nielsen gives a speech at the Greenlandic New Year's reception at the North Atlantic House in Copenhagen yesterday. – AFP

security for Greenland as amounting to "two dogsleds".

Denmark says it has invested almost US\$14 billion in Arctic security.

The Russian embassy in Belgium, where NATO is headquartered, said the arrival of NATO forces to Greenland was concerning.

"The situation unfolding in the high latitudes is of serious concern to us," the embassy said in a statement on Wednesday.

NATO is "building up its military presence there under the false pretext of a growing threat from Moscow and Beijing", it added.

## 'Frightening'

On the streets of Nuuk, where red and white Greenlandic flags fly in shop windows, on apartment balconies and on cars and buses in a show of national unity, some residents have described anxiety over the geopolitical tensions.

"It's very frightening because it's such a big thing," said Vera Stidsen, a 51-year-old teacher.

"I hope that in the future we can continue to live as we have until now: in peace and without being disturbed," she told AFP.

After attending the White House talks, Denmark's Foreign Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen posted yesterday on Facebook: "We agree on the objective: enhancing long-term security in the Arctic. But we disagree on the method."

"This is 2026 – you can trade with people, but you don't trade people."

After the meeting, Trump for the first time sounded conciliatory on Greenland, acknowledging Denmark's interests even if he again said he was not ruling out any options.

"I think something will work out," Trump said.

Trump has insisted Greenland is "vital" for his planned "Golden Dome" air and missile defence system, as it lies on the shortest route for missiles between Russia and the United States. – AFP

# Senior Tory politician sacked over 'plot' to join UK's hard-right party

LONDON – Britain's main opposition Conservative Party was yesterday caught up in a top-level row over allegations another senior Tory was planning to join Nigel Farage's anti-immigration Reform UK party.

Reform has been leading by double-digit figures in the polls for the past year as Prime Minister Keir Starmer's Labour government comes under fire over immigration, economic growth and the cost-of-living crisis.

Tory – as the Conservative Party is also known – leader Kemi Badenoch said she had fired her justice spokesperson Robert Jenrick, accusing him of "plotting in secret" to defect to Reform.

Badenoch said she had "irrefutable evidence" that Jenrick had been conspiring to defect "in a way designed to be as damaging as

possible" to the Conservatives.

Jenrick, 44, who stood against Badenoch for the leadership of the Conservative Party in 2024, served as immigration minister under former Conservative prime minister Rishi Sunak.

He has been outspoken on the subject of immigration, which has become a major political issue.

Last year saw the second-highest annual number of migrants arrive on UK shores in small boats since records were started in 2018.

A total of 41,472 migrants landed on England's southern coast in 2025 after making the perilous Channel crossing from northern France.

Reacting to Jenrick's sacking, Farage said that "of course" he had had conversations with Jenrick.

His ouster comes days after former Conservative finance

minister Nadhim Zahawi announced he had joined Reform.

Zahawi, who is no longer an MP, is the latest of about 20 ex-Conservative lawmakers to have switched to Reform in recent years.

Reform – founded in 2021 from the ashes of Farage's Brexit Party – won the most number of seats at last year's local elections in England.

That has prompted predictions it could seize power from the ruling centre-left Labour at the next general election, due by August 2029.

The party is also hoping to make major gains in fresh local elections slated for May.

Starmer's press secretary dismissed Jenrick as a "failed" Tory voters had rejected when they voted out the last Conservative government in July 2024.

Badenoch's party was a "sinking ship", she added. – AFP



## Trump threatens to invoke Insurrection Act over Minnesota protests

Roberto Schmidt

MINNEAPOLIS — US President Donald Trump yesterday threatened to invoke an emergency law that allows domestic deployment of the military, as protests roil Minnesota after a federal agent shot dead a woman last week.

Tensions rose further overnight and more protests broke out as another person was shot and wounded by a federal agent in the frigid northern city that is a Democratic stronghold.

Trump reacted on his social media platform Truth Social with his latest threat to invoke the Insurrection Act, a 19th century law that allows the president to deploy soldiers for law enforcement purposes to put down unrest deemed to be an insurrection. It has not been used in more than 30 years.

In recent months Trump has threatened several times to use the law as he reacted angrily to protests and court decisions blocking his drive to deploy the National Guard in his muscled crackdown on illegal immigration.

But so far he has stopped short of resorting to the law as he presses an agenda that has drawn accusations of authoritarian overreach and periodic mass rallies with the mantra “No Kings.”

“If the corrupt politicians of Minnesota don’t obey the law and stop the professional agitators and insurrectionists from attacking the Patriots of ICE, who are only trying to do their job, I will institute the INSURRECTION ACT...and quickly put an end to the travesty that is taking place in that once great State,” Trump posted on social media.

Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, addressing reporters outside the White House, declined to say if she thinks Trump should invoke the law.

“I think that the President has

that opportunity in the future. It’s his constitutional right, and it’s up to him if he wants to utilise it to do it,” Noem said. Asked if Trump is likely to take this major step, she said “I don’t know.”

Tensions rose further as an immigration agent shot and injured a man in Minneapolis Wednesday evening, triggering further protests.

The shooting marked the second time in a week an ICE agent had shot someone in Minneapolis.

The previous shooting resulted in the death of 37-year-old Renee Nicole Good on January 7. This sparked ongoing protests and a surge of federal agents into the northern US city.

Minneapolis Police Chief Brian O’Hara said the shooting late Wednesday (local time) resulted from a struggle between an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agent and a man he was trying to apprehend.

“During the struggle, the federal agent discharged his weapon, striking one adult male,” O’Hara told reporters at a press conference.

Amid the tussle, two people emerged from a nearby residence and attacked the federal agent with a snow shovel and a broom handle, the Department of Homeland Security said, identifying the wounded man as an illegal immigrant from Venezuela.

The man suffered a non-life-threatening gunshot wound to his leg and was transported to a hospital for treatment, while the two others were taken into custody, officials said.

The Insurrection Act was last invoked in 1992 by President George H.W. Bush at the request of the Republican governor of California, who was facing unprecedented riots in Los Angeles following the acquittal of police officers who had beaten Rodney King, a black motorist, the previous year. —AFP

## UN chief attacks world leaders putting cooperation on ‘deathwatch’

UNITED NATIONS, New York — UN Secretary-General António Guterres lashed out yesterday at world leaders who he said were seeking to “put international cooperation on deathwatch” amid brazen violations of international law, but held off naming offending countries.

He also reiterated that he was “deeply concerned about the violent repression in Iran,” ahead of an emergency Security Council meeting on the crisis.

Guterres, who will step down at the end of 2026, was giving his last annual speech setting out his priorities for the year ahead and said the world was riven with “self-defeating geopolitical divides [and] brazen violations of international law.”

He also slammed “wholesale cuts in development and humanitarian aid” — an apparent reference to deep cuts to the budgets of UN agencies made by the United States under the Trump administration’s “America First” policies.

“These forces and more are shaking the foundations of global cooperation and testing the resilience of multilateralism itself,” Guterres told the UN General Assembly.

“At a time when we need international cooperation the most, we seem to be the least inclined to use it and invest in it. Some seek to put international cooperation on deathwatch.”



UN Secretary-General António Guterres speaks on 2026 priorities to the UN General Assembly at UN Headquarters in New York City yesterday. — AFP

Guterres said the UN is “totally committed in the cause of peace in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan and far beyond and tireless in delivering life-saving aid to those so desperate for support.”

Those three deadly, protracted conflicts have come to define Guterres’s time at the helm of the UN, with critics arguing the organization has proved ineffective at conflict prevention.

Trump has questioned the UN’s relevance and attacked its priorities. The organization’s top decision-making body, the Security Council, is paralysed because of tensions between the United States and Russia and China, all three of which are permanent, veto-wielding members.

“As we meet today, the snares of conflict have trapped millions of members of the human family in miserable, prolonged cycles of violence, hunger and displacement,” Guterres said yesterday.

On Gaza, the UN chief called for humanitarian aid to “flow unimpeded” and on Ukraine he said “we must spare no effort” to stop the fighting.

He also called for the resumption of talks to bring about a lasting ceasefire in Sudan.

Guterres also used his wide-ranging remarks to urge action against the abuse of artificial intelligence (AI), to call for efforts to fight inequality. — AFP

## ‘Gigantic explosion’, fire in Dutch city, one hurt: authorities

THE HAGUE — A huge explosion and fire broke out yesterday in the central Dutch city of Utrecht, with at least one person injured, according to officials.

There was a “gigantic explosion”, Dutch news agency ANP cited a spokesperson for the local fire brigade as saying.

It was not immediately clear what caused the blast nor whether

there were more victims.

Officials called on the local population to stay away from the area, as emergency services rushed to the scene.

“It’s also possible that there are still people under the rubble,” city mayor Sharon Dijksma told public broadcaster NOS.

TV images showed a plume of smoke rising above the historical

city centre and rubble strewn across the streets.

“I knew right away that this was bad,” NOS quoted one witness, Margot Schroevers, as saying.

“The ground was shaking,” she said.

The local hospital in Utrecht has set up an emergency trauma centre. The Red Cross urged volunteers to head there as soon as possible. — AFP



Firefighters work to extinguish a large fire at a residential building in the Dutch city of Utrecht yesterday. — AFP

## Pope Leo offers comfort to families of Swiss fire victims

VATICAN CITY — Pope Leo XIV met yesterday with families of the victims of the New Year’s fire in a Swiss ski resort bar, saying faith can help in “the darkest and most painful moments”.

Leo received about 20 relatives of the Crans-Montana fire victims in a private audience at the Vatican, providing words of comfort two weeks after the disaster that killed 40 people and injured 116.

“I cannot explain to you, dear brothers and sisters, why it was asked of you and your loved ones to face such a trial. The affection and human words of compassion that I offer you today seem very limited and powerless,” said the pope in Italian, according to a

transcript of his speech released by the Vatican.

“The faith that dwells within us illuminates the darkest and most painful moments of our lives with an irreplaceable light, helping us to continue courageously on the path toward our goal,” said the US pope, adding that “you will find joy again”.

The group later met the undersecretary of the cabinet of Italy’s Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, Alfredo Mantovano, as well as Justice Minister Carlo Nordio.

Mantovano said Italy would request to be a civil plaintiff in the trial in Switzerland, and suggested the European Commission do the same. —AFP



## Spain hosts record 97 million foreign tourists in 2025



People sunbathe on Malvarrosa beach, Valencia, on August 3, 2025. Spain received a record 97 million foreign tourists last year, up from 94 million in 2024, when the previous record was set, according to a preliminary report unveiled by Spain's Minister of Industry and Tourism Jordi Hereu at a press conference in Madrid on January yesterday. – AFP

MADRID – A record 97 million foreign tourists visited Spain in 2025 as the economically vital sector set a new benchmark for the second year running, the tourism minister said yesterday.

The first estimation represented a 3.5-percent increase on the 2024 figure of 94 million, while spending climbed 6.8 percent to 135 billion euros (US\$157 billion), Jordi Hereu told a press conference in Madrid.

“This is a collective success by the whole country that perfectly demonstrates Spain’s enormous attractivity, because Spain is a country that seduces the world,” he said.

Most visitors are European, with British, German and French holidaymakers accounting for around half of the arrivals, said Pedro Aznar, a professor at Esade business school.

Like southern European neighbour Portugal, and Greece, Spain has rebounded from harsh austerity measures and heavy debt

in the early 2010s, with a tourism rebound following the COVID-19 pandemic playing an important role.

Tourism represents around 13 percent of the economy in the world’s second most-visited country after France, whose dynamic growth has outstripped EU peers.

The Bank of Spain has predicted growth of 2.9 percent in 2025 for the European Union’s fourth-largest economy, more than double the average expected in the eurozone.

Overtourism backlash

But as elsewhere, a backlash against the social and economic consequences of mass tourism is growing as Spain grapples with a persistent housing crisis.

Locals have protested in their thousands, complaining that surging visitor numbers are changing the fabric of their neighbourhoods, particularly in hotspots including Barcelona, the southern region of Andalusia and the Canary and Balearic Islands.

Although the sector’s growth generates wealth and jobs, the high numbers have “a clear impact on residents” in specific destinations as tourist accommodation “offers higher profitability”, Aznar told AFP.

Barcelona and the popular southern coastal city of Málaga have announced measures to clamp down on short-term tourist rentals in a bid to tame popular discontent at rampant housing prices.

The leftist central government, under pressure to find a solution to one of the population’s main concerns, has ordered online holiday accommodation giants Airbnb and Booking.com to take down tens of thousands of adverts deemed to have breached the regulations for short-term rentals.

“The impact on environmental sustainability is also relevant,” Aznar said, in a country that suffers persistent water supply stress and emerged from a years-long drought in 2025. – AFP

## Mexican president offers to mediate between US, Cuba

MEXICO CITY – Mexico’s President Claudia Sheinbaum said on Wednesday her government stood ready to mediate between the United States and Cuba, under growing pressure from Washington after the ouster of key ally Nicolás Maduro.

Sheinbaum told reporters Mexico was “fully prepared to be a vehicle for fostering dialogue” between the United States and communist-run Cuba.

Trump on Sunday warned Cuba to “make a deal” – the nature of which he did not reveal – or face consequences.

The Republican president, who says Washington is now effectively “running” Venezuela, earlier vowed to cut off all oil and money Caracas had been providing to its troubled ally.

Cuba, which is struggling through its worst economic crisis in decades, has reacted defiantly to the US threats even as it reels from the loss of a key source of economic support.

Sheinbaum told reporters both Washington and Havana would have to agree to mediation and the conditions under which talks would occur.

Cubans, she added, had the right to “decide their own destiny.” – AFP

Asked whether the continued shipment of Mexican oil and derivatives to Cuba risked provoking tensions with Trump, the president said: “Mexico is a sovereign country, and Mexico makes its own decisions.”

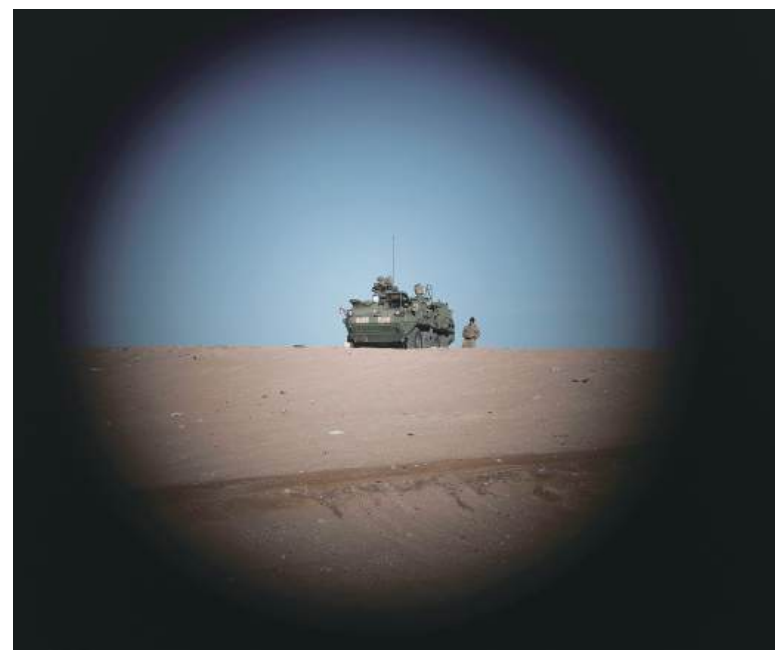
Last Friday, a tanker with 85,000 barrels of Mexican crude arrived in Havana, according to an industry expert at the University of Texas.

The state-owned Petróleos Mexicanos (Pemex) would not confirm the shipment.

Sheinbaum has walked a diplomatic tightrope with Trump, who has repeatedly threatened her country with tariff hikes since he took office for a second term last January.

In September, Pemex reported to the US Securities and Exchange Commission it had been sending oil to Cuba since 2023 – 17,200 barrels of crude and 2,000 of derivatives in the first nine months of 2025.

Sheinbaum had also offered to mediate a peaceful resolution to a months-long standoff between Caracas and Washington, which instead launched strikes on Venezuela on January 3 and toppled Maduro.



A US Army soldier stands near an armoured tank next to the US-Mexico border at Santa Teresa, New Mexico, US, as seen from Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua state, Mexico, on Wednesday. – AFP

## Floods kill 10 in S Africa, Mozambique on alert

JOHANNESBURG – Flooding triggered by torrential rains in northeastern South Africa claimed at least 10 lives overnight and forced the closure of the iconic Kruger National Park, officials said yesterday.

The weather service issued the maximum warning for more rain in parts of the country while neighbouring Mozambique was also on alert after flooding that inundated roads and homes.

Nine people died in a village in South Africa’s Limpopo province near Kruger National Park, a provincial spokesperson told AFP.

Nearly 200 people have been rescued, he said.

Images released by South Africa’s National Defence Force showed a military helicopter airlifting stranded residents from trees.

The Kruger National Park, a premier destination for wildlife tourism, had to evacuate six bush camps and some tented camps, the park’s communications director, Rey Thakuli, told AFP.

Day-visitor access to the park was suspended yesterday.

In Mozambique, authorities began evacuating residents from low-lying areas because of the high water levels, with reports of an unspecified loss of life.

Mozambique’s meteorology

department said more heavy rains accompanied by thunderstorms and gusty winds were expected in the coming days, including in the capital Maputo.

While the southern hemisphere summer typically brings seasonal rains, this year’s extremes have unfolded against a backdrop of deepening climate stress with downpours in northeastern South Africa and dry conditions and wildfires further south.

“Our summer of extremes is but a small foretaste of the climate impacts that could follow if we do not act now,” James Reeler, senior climate specialist at WWF South Africa, said in a statement. – AFP

## Portugal closes embassy in Tehran over ‘tension’

LISBON – Portugal yesterday announced a “temporary” closure of its embassy in Tehran, citing a “context of tension”, and advised its nationals not to travel to Iran.

Portugal’s foreign ministry said in a statement that eight Portuguese citizens had already left Iran, and others were preparing to do the same.

Another 10 Portuguese passport holders, including seven dual nationals, had decided to remain in the country, the ministry said.

The embassy closure was decided on Wednesday, a day after the government summoned Iran’s ambassador to lodge its protest against the violent repression of demonstrations against the regime, and to urge Tehran to respect the rights of Iranian citizens.

In a separate statement, posted on X, Foreign Minister Paulo Rangel said that Portugal was ready to join any concerted tightening of sanctions against Iran by the European Union. – AFP



## Morocco and Senegal prepare for final showdown but Salah's AFCON dream fades

Andy Scott



RABAT – Hosts Morocco and Senegal will fight it out in a heavyweight Africa Cup of Nations final on Sunday after tense last-four victories on Wednesday, but Mohamed Salah is left wondering if his dream of winning the title will forever remain unfulfilled.

The tournament has delivered a final showdown for the trophy between Africa's two modern footballing powerhouses, the continent's best sides according to the FIFA rankings.

For Morocco, winners on penalties against Nigeria following a 0-0 draw in their semi-final in Rabat, their run to this stage feels like a natural progression after Walid Regragui's side became the first African and Arab team to reach the World Cup semi-finals in 2022.

They have not lost since a shock exit from the 2024 AFCON to South Africa in the last 16 and are currently 11<sup>th</sup> in the world rankings, above Italy.

Morocco boast the reigning African player of the year in Paris Saint-Germain's Achraf Hakimi and are looking to add the AFCON title to a list of recent successes: they won the Under-20 World Cup in October and the Arab Cup last month, as well as Olympic bronze in 2024.

They were for a long time African football's big underachievers, with their only Cup of Nations title to date coming in 1976 - since then they have reached just one final, when Regragui was a player in 2004.

The Atlas Lions have not always been a scintillating watch in their home tournament and have even been whistled by their own supporters, while Regragui regularly faces criticism despite his success since being appointed in August 2022.

But the only goal they have conceded in six matches came from a penalty in a group-stage draw with Mali, while in Real Madrid winger Brahim Diaz they have arguably the competition's outstanding player.

"Obviously there are higher expectations on us after we got to the World Cup semi-finals and I know I will also be criticised if I lose the final," Regragui accepted as he spoke to media in the early hours of yesterday.

### Golden age

His team have also qualified for a third straight World Cup and the country is preparing to co-host the 2030 edition with Spain and Portugal.

"This is the golden age of Moroccan football but we must not forget where we have come from," Regragui added.

It is also a golden age for Senegal, the 2022 African champions who beat Egypt 1-0 in the semis thanks to Sadio Mane's goal in Tangiers.

The Lions of Teranga have qualified for a third straight World Cup too, and this is their third final in four editions of AFCON - they lost to Algeria in Cairo in 2019.

Senegal, who are 19<sup>th</sup> in the world rankings, were considered on paper to be the most obvious threat to Morocco's chances of winning the title on home soil and have also constructed their success here on a strong defence that has conceded just two goals.

### One last crack?

However, unlike Morocco this is an ageing team, with 33-year-old Mane saying on Wednesday that this would be his last AFCON.

"Let's hope we still have him for a few more years," insisted Senegal coach Pape Thiaw. "I hope it is not his last final."

Salah, meanwhile, may need time to come to terms with falling short at yet another Cup of Nations.

He turns 34 this year and came to Morocco hoping desperately for success with his country at a time when his club future at Liverpool is so uncertain.

Salah's Cup of Nations record is littered with disappointment, with defeats in the final in 2017 and in 2022, and a last-16 exit when Egypt hosted in 2019.

His last AFCON, two years ago in Ivory Coast, ended early with a hamstring injury.

Now he has fallen short again, and seven-time champions Egypt are still without a title since 2010.

Salah can still look forward to leading the Pharaohs at the World Cup, and he will surely try to rouse himself for at least one more AFCON - the next edition in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda is set for next year after all.

The game will be played at 3 a.m. Monday morning Macau time. – AFP/MPD



## Arbeloa must act fast to avert Real Madrid crisis

Rik Sharma

BARCELONA – In the space of just four days, Real Madrid lost a final to bitter rivals Barcelona, sacked coach Xabi Alonso and were knocked out of the Copa del Rey by a second division team, leaving them hurtling into a crisis.

New coach Alvaro Arbeloa will lead the team into battle tomorrow at the Santiago Bernabeu against Levante in La Liga, knowing that anything other than a victory would be a brutal blow to their hopes of deposing Barcelona from the domestic throne.

His first match at the helm ended in humiliation, a 3-2 defeat by Albacete in the Copa del Rey last 16 on Wednesday, sapping morale from the squad and disrupting any positive momentum his appointment might have brought.

Arbeloa celebrates his 43<sup>rd</sup> birthday tomorrow and the ideal gift would be three points against the 19<sup>th</sup>-placed visitors to cut back Barca's four point lead at the top of the table and offer Madrid a platform to build on.

Next week, the 15-time European champions host Monaco in an important Champions League match, as they bid to finish in the top eight of the league phase and avoid the treacherous play-off round.

First comes Levante, and even though the Valencian side are struggling near the bottom of the table, they are more than capable of causing an upset if Madrid do not improve sharply.

"This is surely the worst Real Madrid side in many years," lamented Spanish newspaper AS after the Albacete defeat.

"The most decorated club in the world are staring in the mirror and not recognising themselves," wrote *Marca*.

Captain Dani Carvajal agreed. "We've hit rock bottom," he said, pledging to pull Madrid back up onto their feet.

Arbeloa, a disciple of controversial former Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho, whom he played under, shouldered the blame for the cup debacle but said that his team would benefit from it.

"This is something that will make me improve, and it has to make everyone better," said Arbeloa.

The Spaniard must bring the best out of youngsters Franco Mastantuono and Arda Guler, who started the season well but lost confidence as they fell out of Alonso's plans.

Both started at Albacete and neither delivered, despite Mastantuono's goal, scrambled in from close range.

Arbeloa also used two players from the reserve side that he was coaching until Monday, but Madrid's more established stars are expected to return against Levante.

The likes of Thibaut Courtois, Jude Bellingham and Rodrygo Goes should come back into contention after being rested for the disastrous trip to Albacete.

However, top scorer Kylian Mbappe is not expected to play until the clash against his former side Monaco, to aid his recovery from a knee sprain.

Given Madrid's situation and the importance of the game, that may be subject to change.

Champions Barcelona, unbeaten in 10 matches across all competitions, on Sunday visit a Real Sociedad side yet to taste defeat under new American coach Pellegrino Matarazzo.

The game will be played at 9 p.m. tomorrow Macau time. – AFP/MPD

Bayern Munich's players including English forward Harry Kane (right) celebrate with their fans after the German first division Bundesliga match against FC Cologne in Cologne, western Germany on Wednesday. Bayern came from a goal down to win 3-1 at Cologne on Wednesday and restore their 11-point lead atop the Bundesliga table. Bayern were behind after Linton Maina scored on the counter, but roared back thanks to goals from Serge Gnabry, Kim Min-jae and Lennart Karl. Bayern's 11-point gap over second-placed Borussia Dortmund at the halfway point of the season equalled the biggest lead in league history. – AFP



## Football shorts

### Laimer joins Bayern's growing absentee list



MUNICH – Injured Bayern Munich midfielder Konrad Laimer became the latest player added to the club's growing absentee list, the defending champions announced yesterday.

Laimer, 28, will be missing "for the time being" the club said in a statement, ruling him out of tomorrow's trip to former side RB Leipzig.

Unbeaten Bayern are 11 points clear in the league but are coping with a wave of absences.

Germany captain Joshua Kimmich, Jamal Musiala and Josip Stanisic are also injured, Alphonso Davies and Sacha Boey are yet to play in 2026 due to illness while Senegal striker Nicolas Jackson is at the Africa Cup of Nations. – AFP



### Giuliano Simeone extends Atletico contract until 2030

MADRID – Atletico Madrid winger Giuliano Simeone signed a new contract with the club until 2030 yesterday.

The 23-year-old son of the club's coach Diego Simeone has become a key player under his father this season on the right flank for the Rojiblancos.

"Someone has renewed his contract with our club until June 30, 2030, thus extending his relationship with our club for two more years, as his previous commitment was due to end in 2028," said Atletico in a statement.

The Argentine winger has made 78 appearances for Atletico since making his first-team debut in 2022, scoring eight goals for the club. – AFP

### More than 500 million request World Cup tickets: FIFA



LOS ANGELES - Football's global governing body FIFA said Wednesday it had received more than 500 million requests for tickets to this year's World Cup despite rumbling controversy over sky-high prices to attend the event.

FIFA said in a statement it had received applications from fans in all of its 211 member nations and territories for the tournament staged in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

The window for submitting requests to be entered in a lottery which will allocate tickets closed on Tuesday. FIFA said fans would be notified of whether their requests had been successful "no earlier than 5 February."

Outside of the tournament's host nations, FIFA said the heaviest demand came from fans in Germany, England, Brazil, Spain, Portugal, Argentina and Colombia.

The most requested ticket was Colombia's clash with Portugal in Miami on June 27, followed by Mexico's game against South Korea in Guadalajara on June 18, and the World Cup final in New Jersey on July 19.

"Half a billion ticket requests in just over a month is more than demand - it's a global statement," FIFA President Gianni Infantino said. "I would like to thank and congratulate football fans everywhere for this extraordinary response."

"Knowing how much this tournament means to people around the world, our only regret is that we cannot welcome every fan inside the stadiums."

FIFA has faced sharp criticism over its ticket pricing strategy for the 48-team tournament, with fan groups branding the cost as "extortionate" and "astronomical."

Football Supporters Europe (FSE) said ticket prices were almost five times higher than at the 2022 tournament in Qatar.

Those criticisms prompted FIFA to introduce a new category of cut-price tickets in December set at US\$60 (51 euros) each. – AFP



## Sincaraz, Sabalenka and late nights: Australian Open storylines

Peter Stebbings



MELBOURNE – The Australian Open, the first Grand Slam of the season, starts on Sunday in Melbourne.

AFP Sports picks out five storylines to watch out for.

### Era-defining rivalry

Without doubt the biggest rivalry in men's tennis today – so much so that it has its own unofficial name, “Sincaraz”.

Spain's Alcaraz overtook the Italian to top the world rankings again at the end of the year. The 22-year-old Alcaraz enjoys a 10-6 lead in their head-to-head record.

However, while Alcaraz has won six major titles, he has never gone beyond the quarter-finals on Melbourne's hard courts.

In contrast, Sinner is the two-time defending Australian Open champion.

Underlining just how little is between the pair, who are good friends off the court, Sinner beat Alcaraz to win the ATP Tour Finals and Wimbledon last year.

Over the same 12 months, Alcaraz defeated his rival to win the US Open and French Open, plus 1000 titles in Rome and Cincinnati.

### Djokovic record at last?

Novak Djokovic has won the Australian Open a record 10 times and boasts 24 major titles to be tied with Australia's Margaret Court for the most Grand Slam crowns in history.

However, age and injuries are catching up with the 38-year-old Serb and he pulled out of an Adelaide

warm-up event this week saying he was “not physically ready”.

That, coupled with the outstanding form of Alcaraz and Sinner, means that Djokovic has not won a Slam since 2023 at the US Open.

He reached the semi-finals of all four majors last year but went no further, including retiring with an injury against Alexander Zverev in Melbourne.

Djokovic has refused to set a retirement date and recently said that the Los Angeles Olympics in 2028 – where he will be defending champion – was on his radar.

### Venus back at 45

Seven-time major singles champion Venus Williams will play at the Australian Open aged 45 after receiving a wildcard.

She will be the oldest woman ever to play at the season-opening Grand Slam.

The American will compete in the main draw at Melbourne Park for the first time since 2021.

Williams, a four-time Australian Open doubles champion, played at the US Open last year and lost in three sets to 11<sup>th</sup> seed Karolina Muchova in the first round.

The five-time Wimbledon winner and two-time US Open champion has played infrequently in recent seasons.

Her brief appearance at Flushing Meadows was only her fourth singles match of 2025.

### Who can stop Saba?

Aryna Sabalenka has taken a stranglehold on women's tennis, ending 2025 by finishing world number

one for the second straight year.

The 27-year-old Belarusian won a WTA Tour-leading four titles last year, including her fourth Grand Slam crown at the US Open.

So who can stop her? Well, Madison Keys can, the American winning a thrilling three-set final against the defending champion at Melbourne Park 12 months ago.

The hard-hitting Sabalenka was also beaten in the final of the French Open last year by Coco Gauff of the United States.

Moscow-born Kazakh Elena Rybakina defeated Sabalenka in the decider of the WTA Finals and in the quarter-finals at Cincinnati.

Other threats come from world number two and six-time major champion Iga Swiatek and Amanda Anisimova of the United States.

### How late? How hot?

Grand Slam matches can go on notoriously deep into the night, and nowhere more so than in Melbourne, despite some tepid attempts to improve things.

Andy Murray and home hope Thanasi Kokkinakis slugged it out until 4:05 a.m. in 2023, the Briton barking at one point: “Why are we playing at 3 a.m.?”

At the 2008 Australian Open Lleyton Hewitt outlasted Marcos Baghdatis in a clash that ended at 4:34 a.m.

Added to the mix, Melbourne's weather is notoriously fickle and the heat has played havoc with the schedule in the past.

Last week temperatures there topped 40C – but this week there is a bit of rain forecast and lows of 13C.

– AFP

## All Blacks fire coach Robertson less than 2 years before World Cup

### Rugby

WELLINGTON – New Zealand fired coach Scott Robertson yesterday less than two years before the Rugby World Cup, after a scathing 2025 performance review and rumours of a player revolt.

The 51-year-old led the team to 20 wins in 27 matches, below powerhouse New Zealand's expectations, while showing little improvement during his two years in charge.

New Zealand Rugby's internal review of performance found strong criticism from senior All Blacks, including a suggestion that star player Ardie Savea could walk out.

New Zealand Rugby chair David Kirk said it was the right time to make a change, with the 2027 Rugby World Cup the “key goal”.

“The mid-point in the Rugby World Cup cycle is the right time to look at the All Blacks' progress over the first two seasons,” Kirk said.

“We've taken an extensive look at the team's progress on and off the field and have subsequently had discussions with Scott on the way forward.

“Both NZR and Scott agree it is in the best interests of the team that he depart his role as head coach.

“On behalf of New Zealand Rugby I would like to thank Scott for his contribution to the All Blacks.

“As always, he has continued to put the All Blacks first and we respect that he has done the hard but right thing in agreeing to depart.”

Robertson said in a statement he was “gutted” to be leaving the team, but he was “incredibly proud” of what they had achieved.

“Coaching the All Blacks has been the honour of my life,” he said.

“As you can imagine, I am gutted by this outcome. I care deeply about this team.”

### In a spin

Robertson said he had ushered through a talented group of young

players, improving depth and setting good foundations for the future.

But he said he agreed to leave after reflecting on the end-of-year review.

Robertson took over as coach in January 2024 with a contract to the end of the 2027 World Cup in Australia.

His appointment was greeted with much fanfare after he led the Canterbury Crusaders to seven consecutive Super Rugby titles to 2023 with a reputation as a forward-thinking leader who had strong support from his players.

He endeared himself to fans with his winning record and his habit of break dancing on the pitch after his team's title wins.

But under his leadership, the All Blacks have been in a spin.

Robertson lost two of his assistant coaches in his first two years, with Leon MacDonald and Jason Holland quitting, citing differences with the head coach.

Robertson claimed last year that his authority had been undermined, telling the *New Zealand Herald* that his assistant, Scott Hansen, “effectively operates in the role most would recognise as the head coach”.

But Chris Lendrum, New Zealand Rugby's professional rugby and performance general manager, said the comments were taken “out of context”.

Otago Highlanders coach Jamie Joseph, the former Japan coach, or former Australia coach Dave Rennie could be potential successors to oversee a packed Test calendar in 2026 in the run-up to the World Cup.

The All Blacks travel to South Africa for an eight-match tour in August and September, playing the Springboks four times.

They also host France, Italy and Ireland in the Nations Cup in July, then play Australia home and away in the Bledisloe Cup before travelling to Europe in November for more Nations Cup matches.

– AFP

## Sport in brief

### Japan to make bid to host Rugby World Cup again in 2035

#### Rugby

TOKYO – Japan will bid to host the Rugby World Cup again in 2035, more than 15 years after becoming the first Asian country to stage the event.

Japan Rugby Football Union president Masato Tsuchida said an expression of interest had been submitted to the sport's governing body, World Rugby.

“The World Cup gets bigger each year and it would need all of Japan to get behind it,” he said on Wednesday.

“I want us to hold the best World Cup ever, for the sports world and for Japan itself.”

Japan staged the tournament in 2019, with the host country reaching the quarter-finals for the first time.

Australia will host the next edition of the tournament in 2027, with the United States staging the event for the first time in 2031.

Japan is likely to face competition to host the 2035 edition from Italy, Spain and the Middle East.

World Rugby is expected to select a preferred host in May 2027 and make an official decision in November the same year.

“In today's world, where divisions are often highlighted, we believe Japan's strength and spirit are important,” said Tsuchida.

– AFP

### Al-Attiyah closes on sixth Dakar Rally as Ekstrom wins 11<sup>th</sup> stage



PARIS – Sweden's Mattias Ekstrom won the car section of the 11<sup>th</sup> stage of the Dakar Rally yesterday, while American Skyler Howes clinched a maiden victory in the motorbikes.

Ekstrom, in a Ford Raptor, clocked 2hr 47min 22sec to win the eighth special stage of his career on the Dakar and his third this year.

The Swede sits fourth in the overall standings headed by Qatar's Nasser al-Attiyah, who has an 8:40 lead over Spaniard Nani Roma in second, with Frenchman Sebastien Loeb in third.

“We are so happy to finish today because today was not very

easy and we didn't know what pace to go at,” said the Qatari, a five-time winner of the Dakar, with just two more stages of this year's edition to race.

“When we saw Sebastien coming we let him pass and just stayed behind him all the way. Tomorrow [today], we just need to do the same as today. If we lose two, three or four minutes, it's no problem, we just need to finish this Dakar in first place.”

There was drama as South African Henk Lategan's hopes of pressing Attiyah went up in smoke, mechanical problems allowing Roma and Loeb to steal a march for a podium finish.

The motorbike section was won by Howes, the Honda rider finishing 21sec ahead of French teammate Adrien Van Beveren as he became the ninth American rider to win a Dakar bike stage.

Luciano Benavides, on a KTM, remains atop the overall standings, but the next five riders are all within a minute of the Argentinian, with American Ricky Brabec, a two-time winner, in second.

– AFP



Katie Ledecky reacts after winning the Women's 1500 Metre Freestyle final during the USA Swimming Pro Swim Series Austin at Lee & Joe Jamail Texas Swimming Center on Wednesday in Austin, Texas. Nine-time Olympic gold medallist Ledecky clocked the second-fastest women's 1500m freestyle time in history on Wednesday to launch the US Pro Swim Series event in Austin, Texas, with a dominant victory. Ledecky was untouchable as she cruised to victory in 15min 23.21sec, more than a minute in front of 16-year-old runner-up Brinkleigh Hansen, who touched in 16:31.31.

– AFP



# Julio Iglesias prepares defence against abuse allegations: ¡Hola!

Imran Marashli

MADRID – Veteran Spanish singer Julio Iglesias is preparing his defence against sexual abuse and human trafficking allegations by two women ex-employees that have dominated headlines in Spain, celebrity magazine *¡Hola!* reported.

The story published on Wednesday comes after the accusations against one of Spain’s cultural icons were revealed by Spanish newspaper *elDiario.es* and US television network Univision on Tuesday.

The women – a domestic worker and a physiotherapist – allege they suffered sexual and other forms of abuse while working at Iglesias’s properties in the Dominican Republic and the Bahamas in 2021.

Advocacy groups Women’s Link Worldwide and Amnesty International said a complaint filed with Spanish prosecutors on January 5 outlined alleged acts that could be considered “a crime of human trafficking for the purpose of forced labour” and “crimes against sexual freedom”.

Iglesias subjected them to “sexual harassment, regularly checked their mobile phones, restricted their ability to leave the home where they worked, and

required them to work up to 16 hours a day without days off”, according to testimony collected by the two groups.

Grammy-winning crooner Iglesias, 82, has made no public comments about the allegations.

*¡Hola!* said it spoke by telephone with Iglesias, who told them the truth would come out and everything would be clarified, but provided no direct quotes from the conversation.

Iglesias is preparing his defence and wishes to clear any doubts about what happened, *¡Hola!* wrote, saying it obtained the exclusive interview thanks to a years-long friendship with him.

Iglesias’s entourage has denied the accusations in private and is shocked, *¡Hola!* added.

Jovana Rios Cisnero, executive director of Women’s Link, told a press conference on Wednesday that the complainants would testify before public prosecutors at an unspecified date, saying it was “a very important step in the search for justice”.

The organisation’s legal director for Europe, Gema Fernández, said the complaint was submitted in Spain and not the Caribbean countries where the crimes allegedly took place because

Spanish legislation on gender-based violence and trafficking “may be an interesting option to provide access to justice for these women”.

## Public shock

The allegations have sparked strong reactions in Spain, with members of the leftist government backing the complainants and demanding that an investigation establishes the truth.

The head of the conservative opposition People’s Party (PP), Alberto Núñez Feijóo, who is friends with Iglesias, told Telecinco television on Wednesday he was “very, very, very surprised” but urged against “speculating”.

Iglesias’s former manager Fernán Martínez told Telecinco that he was “very affectionate” and enjoyed “physical contact” but stressed he never saw the music icon “behave aggressively”.

Iglesias is one of the most successful Latin artists of all time, with more than 300 million records sold in a career spanning decades.

Advocates say the wave of claims against high-profile entertainment and music figures in recent years, driven by the #MeToo movement that rose to prominence in 2017, has exposed systemic abuse.



Spanish singer Julio Iglesias smiles after receiving an award for artist who has sold the most records in Spain and the Latino Artist Award for the most albums sold in the world, at the Cervantes Institute in Madrid on December 16, 2011. – AFP

## Golden Globes viewership shrinks again

LOS ANGELES – The number of people tuning in to watch the Golden Globe Awards shrank this year, organisers announced on Wednesday, as Hollywood’s gala evenings continue to struggle with declining viewership.

Around 8.7 million people in the United States watched the star-studded ceremony in which Paul Thomas Anderson’s conspiracy epic “One Battle After Another” dominated the prizes.

That figure is down from the 9.3 million who tuned in last year, according to numbers from the Nielsen Institute, and is around half the size of the audiences just before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Globes, long billed as Hollywood’s biggest party, and the raucous forerunner to the awards season finale Oscars, were beset by scandal and accusations of racism that led to the Globes not even being aired in 2022.

The gala was ultimately dropped by long-time broadcaster NBC, but relaunched with CBS in 2024 under new ownership, and has undergone significant reforms aimed at stamping out perceptions of corruption and racism.

Sunday night’s bash saw

Hollywood’s supposedly best and brightest out in force for an evening fronted by comedian Nikki Glaser, whose acerbic opening monologue was watched nearly 14 million times on social media over the first 36 hours, organizers said.

Among her zingers was a jab at the US Department of Justice, which she said should be in line for the Best Editing Award for its handling of the heavily redacted files on President Donald Trump’s one-time friend, sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

As well as significant victories for “One Battle After Another,” key winners on the evening included William Shakespeare family tragedy “Hamnet,” which won best drama film and a best female actor prize for Jessie Buckley as a distraught mother.

Timothee Chalamet and Brazilian Wagner Moura added to their awards season momentum with prizes for “Marty Supreme” and “The Secret Agent,” respectively.

The Golden Globes are seen as a leading indicator of success in the Oscars, which take place in Hollywood this year on March 15.

– AFP



Brazilian actor Wagner Moura poses in the press room with his Best Actor in a Motion Picture – Drama award for “The Secret Agent” during the 83rd annual Golden Globe Awards at the Beverly Hilton hotel in Beverly Hills, California, on Sunday. – AFP

## Actor McConaughey seeks to patent image to protect from AI



September 5, 2025 photo of US actor Matthew McConaughey attending the 2025 Toronto Film Festival – Photo courtesy of Gabriel Hutchinson/ Wikimedia Commons

NEW YORK – US actor Matthew McConaughey has filed recordings of his image and voice with US patent authorities to protect them from unauthorised usage by artificial intelligence (AI) platforms, a representative said on Wednesday.

Several video clips and audio recordings were registered by the commercial arm of the “just keep livin Foundation”, a non-profit created by the Oscar-winning actor and his wife Camila, according to the US Patent and Trademark Office database.

Many artists are increasingly concerned about the uncontrolled use of their image via generative AI since the rollout of ChatGPT and other AI-powered tools.

Several US states have adopted legislation that serves as consumer protection against certain AI

systems and deepfakes, but much of this applies mainly to malicious use or commercial purposes.

Only a few, notably Tennessee’s ELVIS Act passed in 2024, offer more targeted protections for artists against AI-generated cloning or impersonation.

A few actors have taken legal action to assert their rights. Among the most notable is Scarlett Johansson, who sued the image-generating app Lisa AI in 2023 for creating an AI-generated avatar in her likeness for an advertisement without her consent.

McConaughey’s approach is novel in that he is taking the lead in protecting his image and voice.

The star of “Interstellar” and “Dallas Buyers Club” is no opponent of generative artificial intelligence.

He has acquired a stake in ElevenLabs, a startup specializing in AI voice modeling, and the company has created an AI audio version of McConaughey – with his permission.

Attorney Kevin Yorn, who represents McConaughey, said the aim of filing with the patent office was “to make sure that our clients have the same kind of protections that their businesses have.”

“The second part is to make sure that our clients are able to capture some of the value that is being created with this new technology using their voice and likeness,” he added.

– AFP

World Weather			
CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -8°C~5°C	Manila 22°C~31°C	New York 0°C~3°C	Lisbon 7°C~13°C
Shanghai 6°C~21°C	Bangkok 22°C~33°C	London 6°C~10°C	Rio de Janeiro 23°C~31°C
Hong Kong 14°C~23°C	Tokyo 2°C~17°C	Frankfurt 1°C~10°C	Luanda 23°C~29°C
Taipei 15°C~25°C	Singapore 23°C~32°C	Vancouver 5°C~12°C	Maputo 21°C~27°C
Guangzhou 12°C~26°C	Kuala Lumpur 23°C~33°C	Paris 6°C~11°C	Dili 24°C~33°C
Nanjing 4°C~21°C	Jakarta 23°C~30°C	Moscow -13°C~7°C	São Tomé 26°C~30°C
Guilin 13°C~23°C	Seoul -4°C~7°C	Las Vegas 5°C~21°C	Praia 17°C~26°C
Xi'an -1°C~12°C	Sydney 20°C~27°C	Monte Carlo 12°C~15°C	Bissau 19°C~36°C





### 1. Scratch that itch!

A West African chimpanzee looks around on the Fongoli home range in the Kedougou region of Senegal, on December 9, 2025. The group of rare chimpanzees, who dwell in the bush of hot, southeast Senegal instead of the forest, are living on the extreme edge of what is possible for their species. Their unusual lives offer clues as to humans' own evolutionary past as we migrated to new climates, while their adaptations to the heat feel timely in a world where temperatures are on the rise. — AFP

### 2. Well wrapped up

A vendor wears a pair of special cotton-padded boots to keep warm at a morning market in Heihe, Heilongjiang Province, on Wednesday. In winter, morning markets across Heilongjiang open amid temperatures reaching minus 20 or even 30 degrees Celsius. Local residents and tourists stroll amid the stalls, where steam rises due to the cold air. — Xinhua

### 3. Feather ball

This photograph shows a Goldcrest, a passerine bird and the smallest of European birds, on a branch at Vincennes Woods in eastern Paris on Wednesday. Most bird species are less abundant in France in areas where pesticide purchases are higher, researchers conclude in a study published on Wednesday, suggesting that reducing the use of these products would help protect biodiversity. — AFP



### 4. Celebrating disappearing art

A visitor sits on a neon motorcycle at the "Luminous Neon" and "The Light Within The Light Without" exhibition at the Hong Kong Design Centre on Wednesday held by Tetra Neon Exchange, a group focused on conserving the city's neon signs that are slowly being taken down due to building safety. — AFP

### 5. REALLY snowed in!

This grab from a handout footage released by the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations yesterday, shows Russian rescuers digging houses out from deep snow in the far-east Kamchatka region. — AFP

### 6. Butterfly dance

Dancers perform the 'Bagurumba' dance during a rehearsal for the upcoming Bwisagu festival, marking the Bodo New Year, at the Sarusajai Stadium in Guwahati, India yesterday. — AFP

