

Sam urges local officials to heed Xi's instructions

Tony Wong

Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai convened and chaired a meeting on Friday briefing principal and senior local officials about President Xi Jinping's appraisal of the local government's work over the past year, according to a statement by the Macau Government Information Bureau (GCS) that day.

The session held at Government Headquarters on Friday afternoon was attended by Sam's five policy secretaries and other principal officials, as well as all the heads of the government's about 70 bureaus and other bureau-level entities, according to the statement.

Sam made his first annual duty visit to Beijing in December last year where he briefed Xi about Macau's latest political, economic and social development, his government's work and achievements in 2025, and his government's policy guidelines for 2026.

During Friday's meeting, according to the statement, Sam noted that Xi and the central authorities fully affirmed the local government's work over the past year.

Sam said that Xi required the local government to align with the nation's 15th Five-Year Plan, uphold and improve Macau's executive-led system, solidly promote the city's appropriate economic diversification, continuously enhance governance efficiency, and better integrate into and serve the nation's overall development.

According to the statement, Sam highly commended the efforts and achievements of various public entities, primarily reflected in three areas.

Commendations

First, the establishment of a holistic view and the demonstration of persistence in acting in the fundamental interests of the



Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai addresses Friday's meeting at Government Headquarters about President Xi Jinping's appraisal of the local government's work in 2025.

nation and the overall interests of Macau, as well as in firmly safeguarding the nation's sovereignty, security, and development interests, Sam said.

Second, the strengthening of overall coordination and the reinforcement of cross-sector and cross-departmental cooperation, Sam said.

Third, the implementation of work strictly in line with his policy directions, Sam said.

6 requirements

According to the statement, Sam also raised six requirements for public entities.

First, liberate minds and break inertia in ways of thinking; second, plan ahead and proactively seize opportunities; third, be proactive and courageous in taking responsibility; fourth, be realistic and pragmatic, implementing precise and



Local officials attend Friday afternoon's meeting at Government Headquarters in Nam Van district.

– Photos: GCS

effective policies; fifth, be people-orientated, effectively improving residents' well-being; and sixth, remain vigilant, maintaining an awareness of potential dangers even in times of peace, according to the statement.

During the meeting, the statement said, Sam also emphasised the need for the local government to continue this year to implement the spirit of Xi's various important speeches concerning Macau's development.

Sam said that the local government must and closely align with the nation's 15th Five-Year Plan. On the basis of broadly listening to opinions from various sectors of Macau's civil society, conducting in-depth investigations and research, and using a scientific approach, Sam said, the local government will compile and publish Macau's third five-year socioeconomic development plan.

Sam also said that the executive-led

system must be upheld and improved, fully leveraging the core role of the chief executive and the local government in the governance system. Secretary for Administration and Justice Wong Sio Chak must effectively fulfil duties, strengthen overall coordination, and ensure that the local government assumes its central function within the governance system, with professionalism and a pragmatic approach to administrative activities, the chief executive said.

Sam also said that Wong must help form a governance pattern that flows smoothly from top to bottom and coordinates horizontally. This includes, Sam said, promoting arrangements whereby there is a benign interaction in how the executive and legislature cooperate institutionally, support each other politically, and help each other operationally. ■

Iran's president warns strikes on Khamenei would lead to 'all-out war'

TEHRAN – Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian warned yesterday that any attack on Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei would be considered a declaration of "all-out war" against the Iranian nation, following a sharp exchange of rhetoric with US President Donald Trump.

Pezeshkian's comments, posted on social

media platform X, come amid heightened tensions after Trump told Politico on Saturday that it was "time to look for new leadership in Iran."

"Any attack on our great leader will be tantamount to an all-out war against the Iranian nation," Pezeshkian wrote.

The Iranian president also blamed

Washington for the country's economic struggles, citing "longstanding hostility" and "inhumane sanctions" imposed by the United States and its allies as the primary drivers of hardship for the Iranian people.

The diplomatic spat intensified earlier on Saturday when Khamenei labeled Trump a "criminal," holding him responsible for

casualties and damages sustained during recent periods of domestic unrest in Iran.

Relations between Tehran and Washington have remained fraught since Trump's return to the White House, characterized by a continuation of the "maximum pressure" policy and frequent verbal confrontations between the two leaderships. – Xinhua

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Xi calls for advancing building of China-Canada new strategic partnership

President Xi Jinping and Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney met on Friday for the second time in less than three months, in a bid to chart the course for bilateral ties that began to thaw last year.

– Story on p. 7

Europe hits back at Trump tariff threat over Greenland

European leaders yesterday slammed US President Donald Trump's threat of tariffs over their opposition to his designs on Greenland, warning transatlantic ties were at risk.

– Story on p. 11

EU, Mercosul bloc ink major trade deal, reject 'tariffs' and 'isolation'

South American and EU officials on Saturday signed a major trade deal, which they hailed as sending a powerful message at a time of tariff threats, global uncertainty and protectionism.

– Story on p. 12

Police log over 14,600 traffic accidents in 2025, down 5.6 pct

Armindo Neves

The Public Security Police (PSP) announced in a statement on Friday their Traffic Police Department recorded 14,638 traffic accidents last year, representing a decrease of 5.63 percent from the 15,510 accidents recorded in 2024. On average 40.1 traffic accidents were recorded per day last year, against 42.4 accidents per day in 2024.

According to the statement, the top three primary causes of traffic accidents were failure to maintain a safe distance from the vehicle in front, failure to control speed, and careless steering, which recorded 3,087 cases, 2,024 cases and 1,892 cases respectively.

The statement noted that a total of 4,578 injuries resulting from traffic accidents were recorded last

year, representing a 0.68 percent increase compared to the 4,547 cases recorded throughout 2024, when there were four fatal traffic accidents, resulting in seven deaths, two more fatalities compared to the five deaths recorded in 2024.

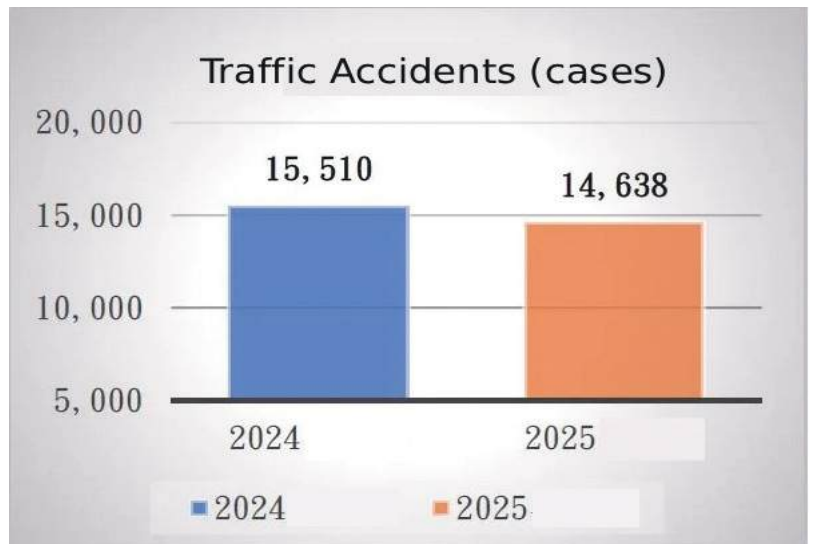
In 2025, the statement noted, the Public Security Police continued to conduct enforcement operations targeting pedestrians jaywalking across all districts of Macau, resulting in the prosecution of 7,651 cases of pedestrian violations, adding that the reported record number represents a 2.56 percent increase compared to the 7,460 cases recorded throughout 2024.

Throughout the previous year, the statement pointed out, there were 141 cases of drunk-driving offences, representing a decrease of 17.06

percent compared to the 170 cases recorded for the whole of 2024. Driving under the influence of drugs accounted for three cases, an increase of 50 percent compared to two cases in 2024, the statement said.

In promoting traffic safety initiatives, the PSP's Traffic Department organised 128 road safety seminars last year, attracting 12,218 participants. The participation record represents increases of 3.23 percent in the number of seminars and 7.06 percent in attendance compared to the 124 seminars and 11,412 participants recorded in 2024.

In order to reduce the occurrence of traffic accidents, the Public Security Police urged drivers and riders as well as members of the public in general to pay close



This handout statistical chart released by the Public Security Police (PSP) on Friday shows the total number of traffic accidents recorded in 2025 and 2024.

attention to road and weather conditions when on the road, and comply with the instructions of traffic signs. ■

HK, Macau lower age threshold to 7 for automated immigration clearance

Khalel Vallo

A joint statement released by the Public Security Police Force (PSP), Identification Services Bureau (DSI), and the Public Security Forces Affairs Bureau (DSFSM) on Friday announced new immigration clearance facilitation measures, lowering the minimum age for using automated channels from 11 to 7 years-old, starting today, to enhance cross-boundary travel convenience in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA).

The three local government entities, in conjunction with the Hong Kong Immigration Department (IMMD), said in the statement that the measures form part of efforts to implement the Outline Development Plan for the Greater Bay Area and to deepen regional cooperation.

Starting today, Hong Kong and Macau permanent residents aged at least 7 may use the automated immigration clearance channels of each side of the bridge, including

Hong Kong's e-channels and Macau's traditional two-gate automated channels, the statement said.

Permanent residents aged between 7 and 10 must be accompanied by a parent or guardian for joining the scheme and may start using the service about 30 minutes after successful registration, according to the statement. In Macau, the use of "joint inspection automated channels" and "iris recognition channels" is simultaneously extended to eligible Hong Kong permanent residents aged between 7 and 10, the statement noted.

After completing record filing procedures, these minors may use joint inspection automated channels at the joint Macau-Hengqin checkpoint, Qingmao checkpoint, and the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge (HZMB) checkpoint, the statement said, adding that upon registering for iris recognition, they may also use iris recognition channels at checkpoints including Barrier Gate checkpoint, ferry terminals and Macau International Airport (MIA).

Eligible Hong Kong and Macau non-permanent residents aged 18 or above may also use local self-service kiosks for pre-registration at the other side's automated clearance service, the statement noted. After successful registration, they may start using the relevant automated channels within about three hours, said the statement.

Non-permanent residents aged between 11 and 17 must register in person at the checkpoints's respective offices, accompanied by a parent or guardian, the statement added.

The statement concluded that Hong Kong and Macau will continue to strengthen communication, promote cross-boundary government services and deepen cooperation in immigration affairs, with the aim of building a more convenient and high-quality living area in the Greater Bay Area. ■

The immigration authorities of Hong Kong SAR and Macao SAR are jointly reducing the minimum age threshold for their permanent residents to use the other's automated immigration clearance channels, effective January 19, 2026. The minimum age for individuals eligible for accessing the said facilities is lowered from 11 to 7.

Hong Kong's e-Channels: Macao Permanent Residents between the ages of 7 and 10 to register for using Hong Kong's e-Channels.

Further information: Hong Kong Permanent Residents between the ages of 7 and 10 to register for using Macao's automated immigration clearance channels.

Macao automated immigration clearance channels: Further information.

This infographic released by Macau's Public Security Police Force (PSP), Identification Services Bureau (DSI), and Public Security Forces Affairs Bureau (DSFSM) on Friday shows Hong Kong and Macau jointly reducing the minimum age for using the automated immigration clearance channels from 11 to 7.

Police nab 6 for fake & illegal employment

Armindo Neves

The Judiciary Police (PJ) nabbed three local residents and three mainlanders for fake employment and illegal employment procedures on Thursday, PJ spokesman Leng Kam Lon said during a special press conference on Friday.

Leng identified the three local suspects as a 64-year-old businessman surnamed Ho, a 56-year-old businesswoman surnamed Ao Ieong who is also the wife of Ho, and a 41-year-old businessman surnamed U. The three mainland suspects are a 29-year-old salesman surnamed Liang, a 39-year-old salesman surnamed Huang and a 35-year-old technician also surnamed Huang.

According to Leng, PJ officers recently discovered that the older Huang had been employing Liang and the younger Huang for residential renovation work in Macau, paying them a daily wage of 700 to 800 patacas. The older Huang is suspected of having used fraudulent employment relationships to apply for non-resident worker ID cards (colloquially known as blue cards) on their behalf, Leng said.

Upon investigation, Leng said, the older Huang collaborated with

a construction company ran by Ho and Ao Ieong, which awarded renovation projects to the older Huang and facilitated fraudulent employment procedures on his behalf to help him obtain a blue card, Leng said, adding that the couple paid the older Huang a project fee of 100,000 patacas.

Through another trading company owned by U, Leng said, the older Huang arranged fake employment for the younger Huang and Liang by paying U a "fee" of under 40,000 patacas, enabling U to obtain blue cards for them both. Under questioning, police confirmed that the duo never actually worked for the trading company, Leng said.

On Thursday, Leng said, PJ officers arrested Liang and another mainland worker who did not have a blue card at a renovation project in Fai Chi Kei district, while the two Huangs were arrested at a flat in San Kio district. The three businesspeople involved in the case were arrested after questioning by police, according to Leng.

The sextet were transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) on Friday, all facing charges of fake employment, while the older Huang also faces an illegal employment charge. ■



Judiciary Police (PJ) officers escort the six hooded suspects to a PJ vehicle outside the PJ headquarters in Zape on Friday. — Photo: Armindo Neves

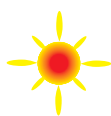
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Source: SMG

IAM orders engineering company to correct the warning sign

Ida Cheong

The Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) said in a statement on Saturday that it was investigating and following up on a case involving an erroneous signboard about ongoing maintenance work at a public sports ground, a picture of which was widely circulated on social media on Saturday.

The Chinese wording on the notice board mistakenly wrote “quiet entry” (靜止進入), instead of “prohibited entry” (禁止進入). According to the Putonghua (Mandarin) input method (IME), the “靜” is jing, and “禁” is jin, the similarity of the two words in pinyin may have caused the mistake.

The Portuguese wording was also wrong by erroneously misspelling the word “entrar” (“to enter”) as “entr ar”.

The sign containing the errors was posted at the ongoing renovation project of the public sports ground on Rua Central da Areia Preta (黑沙環中街). The engineering contractor admitted to producing and erecting the sign without verification by the Municipal Affairs Bureau, the statement said, adding that upon learning of the incident, the bureau immediately ordered its engineering unit to rectify and correct the sign.

The statement underscored that the fencing in of construction



This undated handout photo provided by the Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) on Saturday shows a worker taking down the misspelt signboard at a maintenance project of a public sports ground on Rua Central da Areia Preta (黑沙環中街).

sites, as well as the posting of signs must be strictly implemented in accordance with the respective requirements.

The statement added that the Municipal Affairs Bureau will fine the company responsible for the mistake in accordance with its engineering contract and strengthen inspections at all construction areas. ■

Forum discusses tiered mental health services in GBA

Armindo Neves

The Mental Health Association of Hong Kong and Macao (MHAHKM) hosted a forum on Friday at Artyzen Grand Lapa Macau in Nape, titled “Greater Bay Area Summit Forum on Medical-Social Collaboration in Mental Health”.

According to MHAHKM Chairman Dr William Lo Tak Lam, who is from Hong Kong, the one-day forum focused on tiered mental health services and youth support.

Dr Lo said in a speech that the forum’s selection of Macau as its venue symbolised the Greater Bay Area’s (GBA) mental health initiatives advancing towards deep integration across disciplines, borders and professions. He emphasised the need to pool resources from healthcare, social welfare, education and other sectors to weave a resilient and compassionate mental health safety net for residents across the region.

Mental Health Association of Guangdong Province President Prof. Jia Fujun said in his speech that as the development of the 11-city area has entered a new phase, a crucial task for deepening collaboration is to address the institutional differences and regulatory variations arising from the “One Country, Two Systems” policy. Prof. Jia underlined that



Mental Health Association of Hong Kong and Macao Chairman Dr William Lo Tak Lam talks to reporters on the sidelines of Friday’s forum at Artyzen Grand Lapa Macau hotel in Nape.
— Photo: Armindo Neves

mental health serves as a vital safeguard for achieving the vision of high-quality regional development.

According to a statement released during the forum, which was themed “Collaborating in the GBA, Co-Creating Health,” it brought together experts, officials, and frontline workers in the mental health field from Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macau to jointly explore regional collaboration and service innovation.

The forum, according to the statement, featured two keynote presentations, “The Tiered Management Model for Mental Health,” aimed at promoting broader participation in mental health work by social workers and professionals from other sectors outside the healthcare system, and “Strategies for Supporting Adolescent Mental Health,” which facilitated the sharing of current practices and case studies from the three regions – Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macau – to enable cross-regional exchange of experiences.

Dr Lo told reporters he hopes

that the forum will promote development in related areas across the three regions, including adolescent mental health, to help young people better regulate emotions and cope with stress. He mentioned that Macau has already initiated relevant research to understand the actual situation and make targeted improvements based on mental health research findings. The forum aimed to encourage cross-sector thinking and implement measures that support mental health, Dr Lo said.

Dr Lo also pointed that mental health encompasses a wide range of areas, including elderly services. In recent years, he said, the trend of Hong Kong and Macau residents relocating to the Chinese mainland for retirement has been increasing, providing retirees with more options. He said he hopes that Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macau will collaborate in policy services and professional training to jointly build a more comprehensive and forward-looking regional mental health support network. ■

‘Galaxy Macau Chill Coffee’ festival spotlights culinary tourism

Khalel Vallo

The three-day “Galaxy Macau Chill Coffee” Macau Coffee Cultural Festival opened on Friday at the eponymous integrated resort in Cotai, providing a free showcase and sales platform for 60 exhibitors, including more than 40 local small-and-medium enterprises (SMEs), aiming to highlight the integration of tourism and gastronomy.

Organised by Galaxy Entertainment Group (GEG) through its “GEG SME Series”, the festival ran from Friday afternoon to yesterday evening at Hall ABC of the Galaxy International Convention Centre.

The event was supported by the Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO), Economic and Technological Development Bureau (DSED), Commerce and Investment Promotion Institute (IPIM), and Macao Young Entrepreneur Incubation Centre (MYEIC).

As the first large-scale coffee culture festival in Macau hosted by one of its six integrated resort operators, the event brought together exhibitors from Macau, the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) and overseas.

According to a statement by GEG on Friday, it waived participation fees and provided logistical and promotional support, while it also launched a “Coffee Tasting Reward Programme” in order to encourage



Coffee aficionados check out stalls on the opening day of the “Galaxy Chill Coffee” festival at the Galaxy International Convention Centre in Cotai on Friday afternoon.
— Photo: Khalel Vallo

on-site consumption.

The festival was promoted through multiple channels, including live streaming and e-commerce livestreaming, to help local SMEs expand their markets, the statement said.

The opening ceremony on Friday was attended by representatives from government entities, GEG and supporting organisations.

GEG Director Philip Cheng Yee Sing said that “as the first integrated tourism and leisure enterprise to promote the ‘Large Businesses Leading Small Businesses’ model, GEG has remained steadfast in its commitment over the years, continuously building diversified

platforms to support the growth of local SMEs and young entrepreneurial enterprises”.

The festival’s objective was to serve as an industry exchange platform, featuring talks and activities by “world coffee champions” from China, Brazil, Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as hand-brew and latte art competitions and themed workshops, some led by local SMEs, the statement noted, adding that sustainability aspects were incorporated into the venue design through the use of recyclable and reused materials supplied by Macau’s Tai On Environmental Recycling and Reproduction Factory Co. Ltd. ■



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Sinulog Festival brings colour & beats to Macau

Rui Pastorin

Members of Macau's Filipino community danced in the sun in colourful self-made garb in honour of the child Jesus (Santo Niño) yesterday afternoon, swaying to the beat of drums and proudly proclaiming "Viva pit Señor! [Hail the Lord, Holy Child, listen to our prayers!]*]" as the Sinulog Macau Festival 2026 took place.

The annual festival is organised by the Santo Niño de Cebu in Macau Association, with the parade, the event highlight, seeing groups again dancing from Praça da Amizade (colloquially known as Sintra Square) to Avenida Panorâmica do Lago Nam Van before returning to the square for the ritual competition, which this year featured three groups. The celebration had started earlier in the morning with dozens of devotees and participants swaying and dancing to the unmistakable sounds of the Sinulog** beats after a solemn eucharistic mass at São Lourenço Church (聖老楞佐堂).

The Sinulog Festival, a major annual event observed in Cebu, has been held in Macau since 2003 but has been celebrated in the city for a total of 26 years. It is one of the most important events for Macau's Filipino community, which make up the second largest group of non-resident workers in the city, totalling 16,370, according to the latest available data from the Labour Affairs Bureau (DSAL), while there are those who are also Macau residents.

Santo Niño de Cebu in Macau Association President Violeta Duran told the *Post* during an interview with

the local English-language media that she was elated to see the event continue for as long as it has and are keeping up what they have been doing from the start – bringing the celebration and a bit of home to Macau's Filipinos.

"We have a gathering like this so that we can feel the Philippines, so that we can minimise our homesickness while here", Duran, whose family started the local celebration in the city, pointed out.

She also noted that many Filipinos are non-resident workers who are dealing with their own problems and tribulations, whether that's here in Macau or back home, along with life in the city being all about work. The event therefore not only attempts to reduce homesickness, but also to lessen their problems and stress for at least a short period of time. "It also gives hope to those who feel hopeless", Duran told the *Post*.

Duran also spoke to reporters about the intentions behind this year's festival, highlighting the current issues and problems that the Philippines is facing. The Sinulog is a dance that expresses not only thanksgiving, but wishes, love, healing and peace, with the latter together with prayers being among what they hope to convey back home the most, according to Duran.

She also continued to highlight to the *Post* the concept of the Sinulog dance and how they tie it to the realities that the world is going through, asking questions like "What is the world going through now?" and "How do we make it a little bit better for the people?", with the event providing some vibrance and unity as we continue to navigate challenges.

This year's festival drew around 600 revellers, including more tourists and many curious onlookers,



Santo Niño de Cebu in Macau Association President Violeta Duran poses in Praça da Amizade (Sintra Square) yesterday.
– Photos: Rui Pastorin

Duran estimated. She continued to highlight that the festival is made possible through the collective work of the association in conjunction with other Filipino associations in Macau, altogether working as a larger team.

*According to online sources, the phrase combines Spanish "Viva" ("long live") and "Señor" ("The Lord") with the Cebuano "Pit" (from sangpit, meaning to call out or appeal from afar), expressing a fervent, humble prayer to the Santo Niño (Child Jesus).

**The Sinulog Festival is a major event annually celebrated in Cebu, southern Philippines, and held on the third Sunday of January. "Sinulog", meanwhile, 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.



Reclaimed water unit price to be 15 pct lower than tap water: govt

Tony Wong

The government has announced that the unit price of reclaimed water*, the generation and supply of which is scheduled to start on March 1, will be 15 percent lower than that of tap water.

Coloane's sprawling Seac Pai Van public housing neighbourhood and the University of Macau (UM) campus will be the first two areas in Macau to where reclaimed water will be supplied.

The Seac Pai Van public housing neighbourhood comprises one social rental housing estate and three subsidised home-ownership scheme (HOS) estates.

The UM's current campus is situated in a one-square-kilometre area of Zhuhai City's Hengqin island that is under the Macau Special Administrative Region's (MSAR) direct jurisdiction, i.e., Macau's laws and regulations fully apply there.

Water reclamation, aka wastewater reuse or water recycling, is the process of converting municipal wastewater (sewage) into water that can be reused for a variety of purposes, such as toilet flushing, landscape irrigation, street cleaning, vehicle washing, and fire protection. Such water is known as reclaimed water.

The use of reclaimed water aims to save tap water consumption.

Reclaimed water in Macau will be used for two purposes first after its upcoming launch on March 1, namely toilet flushing and landscape irrigation. In the future, the government will study



Marine and Water Bureau (DSAMA) Director Susana Wong Soi Man speaks to reporters in a sitting-out area at the Seac Pai Van public housing neighbourhood on Saturday.

the feasibility of extending the use of reclaimed water to more non-potable purposes.

The Marine and Water Bureau (DSAMA) has recently launched a community promotional campaign concerning the use of reclaimed water for Seac Pai Van public housing households and the UM. The bureau has set up a reclaimed water information booth in a sitting-out area at the Seac Pai Van public housing neighbourhood and in a building on the UM campus, with a ceremony held in the sitting-out area on Saturday marking the two information booths' setting-up.

DSAMA Director Susana Wong Soi Man revealed the unit price of reclaimed water while speaking to reporters after Saturday's ceremony.

The upcoming reclaimed water will be generated and supplied



A reporter enters the new Coloane Reclaimed Water Station's first phase during a media tour organised by the bureau on Saturday. – Photos: Tony Wong

by the Coloane Reclaimed Water Station, the city's first treatment plant for wastewater reuse.

The station is located next to the Coloane Wastewater Treatment Plant near Concórdia Industrial Park. Construction of the station's first phase started in October 2024 and is now scheduled to be fully completed by the end of this month. The station will convert specially treated sewage supplied from its adjacent Coloane Wastewater Treatment Plant into reclaimed water.

The first phase of the Coloane Reclaimed Water Station, according to the DSAMA dedicated website on reclaimed water, will be able to generate up to 2,500 cubic metres of reclaimed water per day, which will be delivered to the Seac Pai Van public housing neighbourhood and the UM campus from March 1 this year.

These two areas are both equipped with dual-pipe systems, which were set up when they were built, where bathrooms and toilets are connected with normal pipes carrying tap water and purple pipes for carrying reclaimed water. Currently, still without the generation of reclaimed water in Macau, the two areas' purple pipes used for toilet flushing are carrying tap water. On March 1, the purple pipes will start carrying reclaimed water supplied from the Coloane Reclaimed Water Station.

Wong said on Saturday that the Coloane Reclaimed Water Station's second phase and the HZMB reclaimed water station are both expected to start operating in 2030 at the earliest.

The Coloane Reclaimed Water Station's second phase, according to the DSAMA website, will be able to generate up to 15,000 cubic metres of reclaimed water per day. After the completion of its second phase, Wong said, the station will start supplying reclaimed water to properties in Cotai.

According to the DSAMA website, the future HZMB reclaimed water station will be able to generate up to 25,000 cubic metres of reclaimed water per day. After its completion, the station will start supplying reclaimed water to properties on the HZMB man-made island, in the Zone A, B, C, D, and E land reclamation areas, and on Plot P in the peninsula's Areia Preta district.

Wong also underlined on Saturday that concerning medium-term and long-term planning, the government will study the feasibility of extending the use of reclaimed water in Macau to more non-potable purposes, such as cooling and circulating water used for large-scale equipment and facilities on commercial premises, as well as water used for decorative or entertainment purposes.

Concerning planning for the medium and long term, Wong said, the government aims for reclaimed water to account for 5 to 10 percent of the city's total water consumption. ■

**The term "reclaimed water" refers to wastewater that has been treated and purified for reuse in various applications, such as toilet flushing as well as irrigation or industrial processes. The term "recycled water" refers to water that has been reused in a different way, including processes like rainwater harvesting. In many contexts, both terms can be used interchangeably, but "reclaimed water" is more commonly associated with treated wastewater. – Poe*



This photo taken during Saturday's media tour shows the normal and purple pipes connected to a bathroom in a vacant flat in Block 5 of Lok Kuan Building, in the social housing estate in Seac Pai Van. The flat was unoccupied.

Two Macau chefs chosen for Young Chefs Programme 1st time Macau to be represented

Rui Pastorin

Galaxy Macau's Daniel Chio Ka Kin and Safa Rodas from City of Dreams (COD) have been chosen to join the Young Chefs Programme (YCP), with the two chefs, aged 30 and 33 respectively, going to represent Macau among chefs from around the world.

An initiative of the Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations and coordinated by the World Food Forum (WFF), a total of 10 young chefs from around the world are routinely chosen for the programme, the Macau Government Tourism Office

(MGTO) noted in a Thursday statement, marking the first time that Macau will be represented.

The statement said that the programme educates chefs aged 18 to 35 to "become advocates of sustainable practices" while aiming to empower them to "play a leading role in transforming agrifood systems through culinary practices in their communities".

Participants will engage in online masterclasses led by FAO and partner experts on nutrition, food safety, and advocacy, among others, the statement said. They'll also be matched with mentors from the World Association of Chefs'

Societies to develop community projects that enhance nutrition, promote sustainable consumption, and strengthen food security and biodiversity, the statement added. Chefs can also present their results at the WFF flagship event in October.

"The Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) congratulates the two chefs, believing their participation in the programme is set to further amplify Macau's efforts to develop as a Creative City of Gastronomy", according to the statement.

The statement did not elaborate on the programme's timing and venue. ■



These photos provided by the Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) on Thursday shows Galaxy Macau's Daniel Chio Ka Kin (left) and Safa Rodas from City of Dreams (COD) posing for their respective portraits.

6 local religious communities vow to promote social harmony



Macao Bahá'í Community Chairman Kong Siew Huat addresses Saturday's one-day "World Religion Day" event at the School of the Nations in Taipa.



A 'Word Religion Day' art exhibition themed 'Silent Radiance of Unity – Macao in Harmony' displays a Chinese painting on Saturday at the School of the Nations in Taipa.

– Photos: Ida Cheong

Ida Cheong

The annual World Religion Day celebration was held on Saturday, aimed at promoting interfaith understanding and social harmony through an art exhibition, workshops, and dialogue salons*.

The one-day event took place at the School of the Nations in Taipa, gathering six local religious communities, comprising the Bahá'í Faith**, Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism and Taoism, showcasing the potential of religious values to translate into positive action, and highlighting their crucial role as a cornerstone for social harmony and progress.

Hundreds of residents and representatives from various sectors attended the festival.

According to Wikipedia, World Religion Day is an observance that was initiated in 1950 by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, which is celebrated worldwide on the third Sunday in January each year.

The event featured a religious art exhibition, along with calligraphy

and painting workshops, handmade bead stringing, and children's mosaic creation activities, as well as multiple salons, which aimed to foster in-depth dialogues on topics such as work and wealth, education and excellence, and religion and development, exploring how to drive progress by balancing the spirit of service with rational spirituality.

Macao Bahá'í Community Chairman Kong Siew-Huat said in a speech that the event themed "Art Embracing Diversity, Uniting Macau: Dialoguing Through Art to Explore the Essence of Life" was a sincere invitation, aiming to pause briefly amidst the "busyness of life", to reflect and engage in dialogue together, "focusing on several themes deeply relevant to us all: work and wealth, education and excellence, religion, and development".

Kong noted that although the practices of various faiths may differ, their fundamental goal remains one: "to awaken the nobility within human nature and

to promote the shared prosperity of society, adding that through dialogue and collaboration with science, religion fosters the growth of individual lives, propels the progress of society, and guides the train of our times toward a brighter future".

Kong is an associate professor in Management at the University of Macau (UM). ■

**In a historical and cultural context, a "salon" was a pivotal social institution, especially during the Enlightenment in 17th and 18th century Europe. Usually hosted in private venues, brought together writers, artists, philosophers, scientists, and politicians for conversation to discuss and debate ideas on literature, philosophy, politics, and art. - DeepSeek*

***The Bahá'í Faith is a world religion founded in the 19th century that emphasises the spiritual unity of all humanity. Its core teachings revolve around the oneness of God, the oneness of religion, and the oneness of humankind. - DeepSeek*

China, Canada reach specific arrangements to address trade issues: MOC

BEIJING – China and Canada have reached specific arrangements to properly address trade issues related to electric vehicles (EVs), steel and aluminum products, rapeseed, and agricultural and aquatic products, the Ministry of Commerce (MOC) in Beijing said on Friday.

To implement the important consensus reached by the leaders of China and Canada, both sides have recently conducted multiple rounds of intensive consultations at various levels, focusing on key economic and trade issues of mutual concern, the ministry noted in a statement.

The two sides have reached positive consensus on increasing direct flights, improving the business environment, and inspection and quarantine of agricultural products, it said.

During Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's visit to China, the two countries signed an economic and trade cooperation roadmap, a major achievement under the framework of the China-Canada new strategic partnership, the statement quoted an official with the ministry as saying.

The two sides agreed to enhance the China-Canada Joint Economic and Trade Commission mechanism and comprehensively expand pragmatic economic and trade cooperation across all fields. They also reached a positive consensus on cooperation under multilateral and regional frameworks, according to the roadmap.

Canada will make positive adjustments to its unilateral measures against Chinese EVs as well as steel and aluminum products, and concerning specific cases involving the investment and operation of Chinese companies in the country, the official added.

China has taken note of Canada's recent statement that

it will allow an annual quota of 49,000 Chinese EVs into the Canadian market at the most-favored-nation tariff rate of 6.1 percent, exempting them from the 100-percent surtax imposed in 2024, the official said.

Considering the statement "a positive step in the right direction and welcome news for Chinese EV enterprises exploring the Canadian market," the official said China hopes that Canada will actively fulfill its commitments and continue to work with China to create a fair, stable and non-discriminatory environment to further expand trade and investment cooperation in the EV sector through friendly consultations.

China will also adjust its anti-dumping measures on rapeseed and anti-discrimination measures regarding certain Canadian agricultural and aquatic imports, in accordance with relevant regulations.

These arrangements are expected to boost bilateral industrial cooperation and benefit the people of both nations, the official said.

Looking ahead, both sides will jointly implement the hard-won outcomes of the consultations, accelerate finalizing of details, clarify timelines, develop action plans, expedite the completion of their respective domestic procedures and promote early implementation of the outcomes, the official stated.

The two sides will fully leverage the China-Canada Joint Economic and Trade Commission mechanism to continue expanding cooperation, resolve issues, manage differences, and promote the healthy, stable and sustainable development of China-Canada economic and trade relations, the official concluded.

– Xinhua

HK woman busted at local airport smuggling cannabis buds worth 17 million patacas

Staff Reporter

The Judiciary Police (PJ) arrested on Saturday a 31-year-old Hong Kong woman hired by a drug-trafficking gang to smuggle cannabis buds via the local airport, with the drugs seized having an estimated street value of 17 million patacas.

PJ spokesman Leng Kam Lon briefed reporters at the local airport on Saturday afternoon about the case.

The woman was hired by the gang to smuggle the cannabis buds from a Southeast Asian country, which Leng did not identify, to an unknown final destination via Macau.

Leng said that after assessing intelligence they had gathered, PJ officers intercepted the Hong Kong woman when she collected her luggage after arriving in Macau on Saturday morning, in which they found 30 bags of cannabis buds weighing

17.3 kilogrammes in total, with an estimated street value of 17 million patacas.

According to Leng, under questioning, the woman surnamed Lee, admitted that she had been hired by a gang to smuggle the drugs to a final destination via Macau. However, Leng said, the woman refused to reveal any further information about the gang, such as how much the gang had promised to pay her provided that she succeeded in smuggling the cannabis buds to the final destination.

Leng said that the police continued investigating the origin of the cannabis buds and tracing others possibly involved in the case.

The suspect has been transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) for further questioning, facing a drug trafficking charge. ■



Six PJ officers show journalists the cannabis buds seized from the suspect and her suitcase during Saturday's press briefing at the airport.

– Photo: Maria Cheang Ut Meng

Xi calls for advancing building of China-Canada new strategic partnership

BEIJING – President Xi Jinping and Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney met on Friday for the second time in less than three months, in a bid to chart the course for bilateral ties that began to thaw last year.

The Xi-Carney meeting last October in Gyeongju, Republic of Korea, marked a turnaround of bilateral relationship, and placed it on a new trajectory of positive development. The two sides have had in-depth discussions on resuming and restarting cooperation across various fields, and achieved positive outcomes.

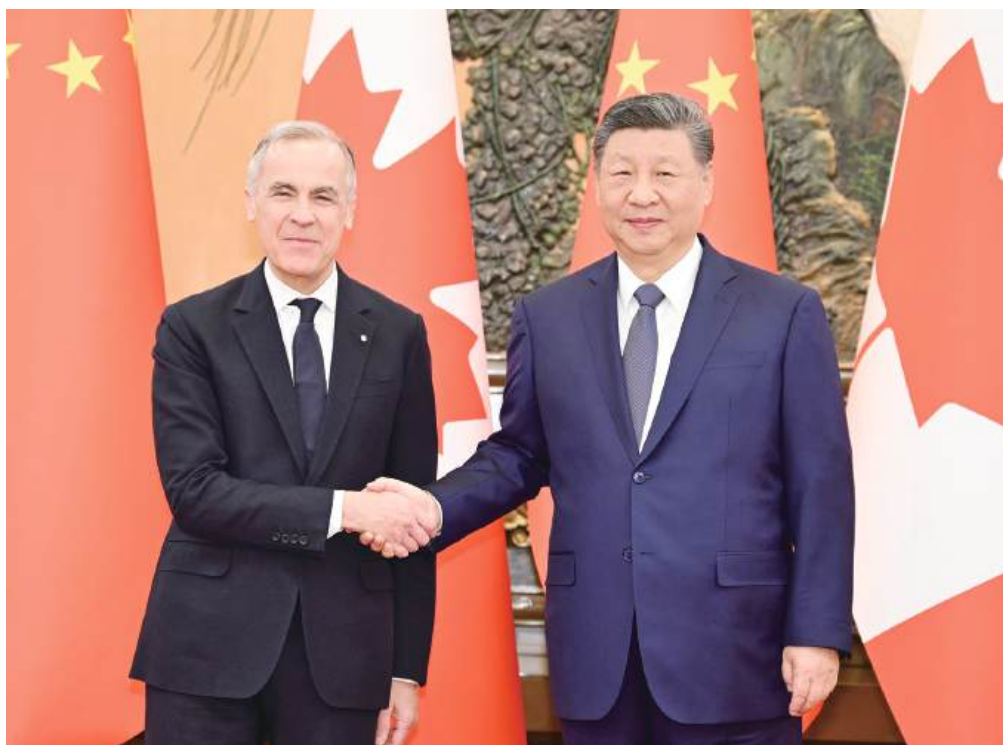
The healthy and stable development of China-Canada relations is in the common interests of the two countries and also conducive to world peace, stability, development and prosperity, Xi told Carney, who is on an official visit to China from Wednesday through Saturday, marking the first by a Canadian prime minister in eight years.

With a sense of responsibility for history, for the people and for the world, the two sides should advance the China-Canada new strategic partnership, steer their ties onto the track of sound, steady and sustainable development, and bring more benefits to both peoples, Xi said.

He said China and Canada should be partners of mutual respect, common development, mutual trust and collaboration.

He said that despite different national conditions, both countries should respect each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, respect the political systems and development paths they have chosen respectively, and adhere to the correct way of getting along with each other.

Xi said the essence of China-Canada economic and trade relations is mutual benefit and win-win cooperation, with both sides



President Xi Jinping (right) shakes hands with Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Friday. – Xinhua

benefiting from cooperation. China's high-quality development and high-level opening up will continue to provide new opportunities and expand new space for China-Canada cooperation.

Xi called on both sides to increase efforts to promote cooperation and reduce the negative list, thereby strengthening the bond of shared interests through deeper and broader cooperation.

Xi urged both sides to encourage exchanges and cooperation in education, culture, tourism, sports and sub-national areas, and facilitate two-way travel to entrench

public support for strong ties.

China is willing to enhance communication and coordination with Canada within the frameworks of the United Nations (UN), the G20 and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation to jointly address global challenges, Xi said.

Carney noted that with a long history of friendly engagement and strong economic complementarity, Canada and China enjoy extensive common interests and opportunities.

Canada wishes to build with China a new strategic partnership that is strong and enduring so as to deliver greater benefits to

the two peoples, Carney said.

The Canadian side reaffirms its adherence to the one-China policy and its commitment to working with China in the spirit of mutual respect and partnership to expand and strengthen cooperation in economy and trade, energy, agriculture, finance, education, climate change, and others, he said.

Carney said multilateralism underpins global security and stability, and the Global Governance Initiative put forward by President Xi is important.

Facing a fast-changing and turbulent world, Canada would like to intensify multilateral coordination with China to uphold multilateralism and the authority of the UN and to promote international peace and stability, he added.

During Carney's visit, both sides issued a joint statement of the China-Canada leaders' meeting, and signed multiple cooperation documents covering trade, customs, energy, construction, culture, and public security.

Premier Li Qiang held talks with Carney on Thursday. Li said 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.

Wang Wen, dean of Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at the Renmin University of China, said the new Canadian government's endeavor to mend bilateral ties reflects the pragmatic and rational approach of its new leadership.

Restoring stable bilateral relations will not only enhance political mutual trust but also bring exchanges in economy, trade, culture and other fields back on track, benefiting the people of both countries, Wang said. – AFP

China, Canada should jointly promote steady, sound, sustainable bilateral economic and trade ties: He

BEIJING – Vice Premier He Lifeng on Friday emphasized that China and Canada should make joint efforts to promote the steady, sound and sustainable development of bilateral economic and trade relations.

He, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, made the remarks while jointly attending a China-Canada trade and investment banquet in Beijing with Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney.

He noted that under the strategic guidance of the important consensus between the leaders of the two countries, China and Canada should uphold mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, win-win cooperation, and mutual achievement to jointly promote the steady, sound and sustainable development of bilateral economic and trade relations.

China is resolute in expanding high-standard opening-up and continually fostering new-quality productive forces, He said, adding that China stands ready to work with all countries, including Canada, to open up new prospects of cooperation.

Noting that China is Canada's second-largest trading partner, Carney expressed his willingness to enhance high-level exchanges with China, make good use of dialogue mechanisms on economic and trade cooperation and other areas, and advance cooperation in trade, agriculture, energy and other fields. – Xinhua

China, Canada should seize momentum for healthy, stable and sustainable development of ties

Commentary

BEIJING – In a world increasingly shaped by economic fragmentation, geopolitical tensions and resurgent protectionism, Canada, like many other countries, faces a practical challenge: how to sustain growth and build resilience amid mounting uncertainty?

Experience has shown that the answer lies not in confrontation or exclusion, but in steady and constructive engagement with major partners. For Canada, working with China is not optional, but necessary.

This reality is underscored during Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's visit to China, the first by a Canadian prime minister since 2017. The visit came after several years during which bilateral relations drifted from strain into stagnation.

During that period, trade frictions emerged, diplomatic exchanges were disrupted, and established dialogue mechanisms were left idle. Much of this downturn was shaped by external pressure rather than objective assessments of Canada's own long-term interests. The resulting costs – in lost opportunities, reduced trust and weakened cooperation – have been felt on the Canadian side.

China and Canada have enjoyed over 55 years of diplomatic relations. Although the relationship has experienced ups and downs, its underlying logic has remained unchanged. The two economies are highly complementary, and cooperation has consistently delivered tangible benefits to both peoples.

The difficulties encountered in recent years only serve to reaffirm a simple reality: disengagement runs counter to economic resilience and long-term stability.

As the global economy faces slowing growth, supply chain disruptions and rising protectionism, the need for practical and win-win cooperation has become more urgent. China's continued pursuit of high-quality development and high-level opening up provides sustained development opportunities for partners, including Canada.

For Canada, deepening cooperation with China should not be a matter of short-term calculation, but a practical choice to diversify markets, enhance competitiveness and strengthen long-term growth prospects.

A healthy and stable China-Canada relationship should be built on clear and enduring principles. Mutual respect is the political foundation. Despite differences in national conditions, political systems and development paths, both sides have a responsibility to respect each other's sovereignty and core interests, and to handle differences through dialogue and consultation rather than confrontation or coercion. History shows that only on this basis can cooperation be sustained.

Equally important is the expansion of mutually beneficial cooperation. The essence of China-Canada economic and trade relations is win-win. By focusing on cooperation and reducing unnecessary restrictions, the two sides can further

strengthen their bond of shared interests in areas such as trade, energy, agriculture, finance, education and climate action.

Such cooperation not only brings direct benefits to both countries, but also contributes to the stability and reliability of global supply chains at a time of heightened uncertainty.

People-to-people exchanges form the most solid and enduring foundation of bilateral relations. Expanded interaction in education, culture, tourism, subnational cooperation and youth exchanges can help reduce misperceptions, deepen mutual understanding and consolidate public support for cooperation. When societal ties are strong, the relationship becomes more resilient to political fluctuations.

At the global level, the case for China-Canada cooperation is equally compelling. Both countries have long supported multilateralism and the central role of the United Nations. Strengthening coordination within frameworks such as the United Nations, the G20 and APEC is not only in the interests of China and Canada, but also essential for promoting world peace, stability and development.

By approaching the relationship with a sense of responsibility to history, to their peoples and to the world, China and Canada can place bilateral ties back on a healthy, stable and sustainable track, one that delivers concrete benefits at home and contributes to greater certainty in an increasingly uncertain world.

– Xinhua

Full Text: Joint Statement of the China-Canada Leaders' Meeting

1. At the invitation of His Excellency Li Qiang, Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, the Right Honourable Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada, paid an official visit to China from 14-17 January 2026. During the visit, His Excellency Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, met with Prime Minister Carney. Premier Li Qiang held talks with Prime Minister Mark Carney. His Excellency Zhao Leji, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress also met with Prime Minister Mark Carney. Leaders exchanged views on China-Canada relations, as well as regional and international issues of common interest in an in-depth, pragmatic and constructive manner.

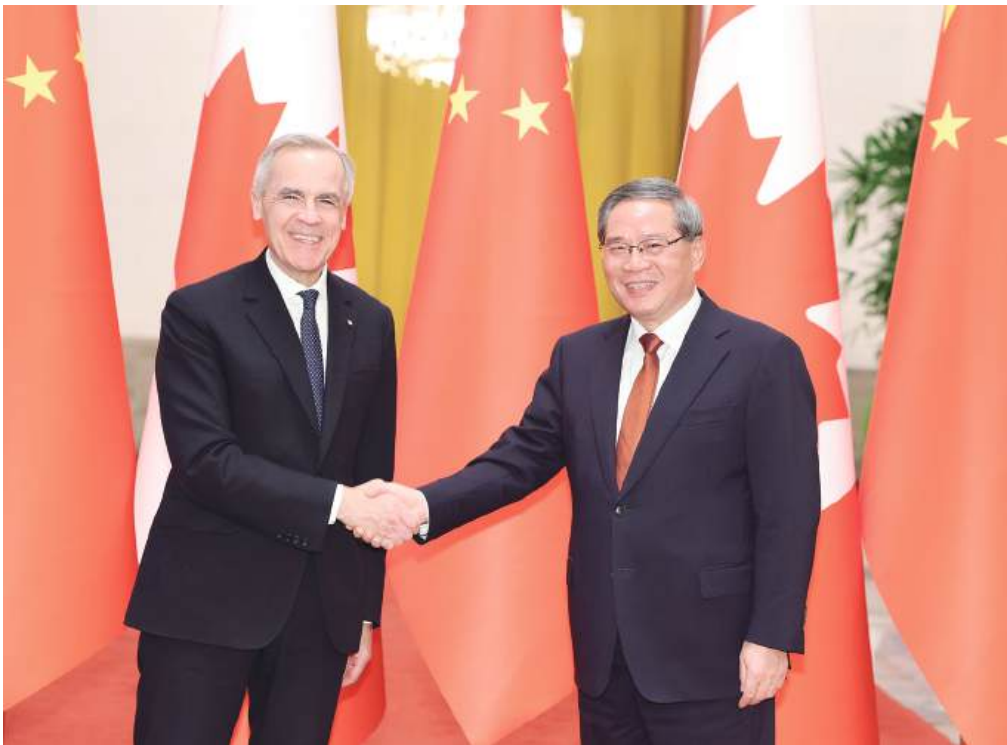
2. Leaders reaffirmed the principles and policies that have guided ChinaCanada relations. Canada reaffirmed its long-standing commitment to its one China policy. The two sides committed to advancing the China-Canada new Strategic Partnership in the spirit of mutual respect, equality, and mutual benefit to bring more positive outcomes to both peoples.

3. Leaders welcomed the progress made in recent bilateral dialogues. They committed to strengthening exchanges at all levels and to advancing outcomes in the following areas:

---Macroeconomic engagement. The two sides decided to reinvigorate the high-level China-Canada Economic and Financial Strategic Dialogue (EFSD) to discuss wide ranging related issues to strengthen bilateral economic relations.

---Economic and trade cooperation. Leaders committed to strengthening economic and trade partnership between China and Canada and welcomed progress in the negotiations to resolve trade issues. The two sides committed to expanding bilateral trade, strengthening two-way investment, and deepening cooperation in diverse sectors of mutual interest. The two sides reaffirmed the importance of a fair and open business environment for enterprises of both countries, and committed to addressing economic and trade issues of mutual concern through constructive consultation, including through a renewed China-Canada Joint Economic and Trade Commission (JETC). Leaders welcomed the signing of the ChinaCanada Economic and Trade Cooperation Roadmap, and instructed officials to advance the work related to the document. The two sides developed a preliminary joint arrangement to address bilateral economic and trade issues. The two sides committed to strengthening agricultural cooperation and food security, including through a revitalized ChinaCanada Joint Agriculture Committee.

---Energy. The two sides concurred to support exchanges and cooperation in



Premier Li Qiang (right) shakes hands with Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Thursday. — Xinhua

clean energy, and strengthen cooperation in conventional energy such as oil and gas resource development. The two sides decided to launch a Ministerial Energy Dialogue to outline key areas to support twoway investment and trade in clean and conventional energy. They also committed to building on existing collaboration for responsible management of bilateral civil nuclear energy and to strengthening cooperation in natural uranium trade in accordance with the highest international standards, including relevant International Atomic Energy Agency instruments.

---Finance. The two sides welcomed the establishment of a Financial Working Group to enhance bilateral engagement on financial issues. The working group will report to the co-chairs of the EFSD. Leaders welcomed the signing of the Third Agreement to Extend and Amend the Chinese Yuan/Canadian Dollar Bilateral Currency Swap Arrangement between the People's Bank of China and the Bank of Canada.

---Public security and safety. The two sides committed to strengthening law enforcement cooperation to combat corruption and transnational crimes, including telecommunication and cyber fraud and illegal synthetic drugs in accordance with their respective laws. The two sides committed to continuing their bilateral law enforcement cooperation annual working group meeting mechanism, under which a counternarcotics dialogue is a key part, and securing more concrete achievements to ensure the security and safety of the two peoples.

---People-to-people ties and cultural exchanges. The two sides concurred that

people-to-people ties are the foundation of the bilateral relationship and committed to fostering these ties to promote greater mutual understanding and cooperation. The two sides decided to restart the China-Canada Joint Committee on Culture. The two sides committed to strengthening exchanges and cooperation in areas such as culture, education, arts, heritage, creative industries and to promoting legislative and subnational exchanges. The two sides consented to provide mutual support and convenience for media to work in each other's countries, and provide greater convenience for two-way travel. The two sides concurred to provide facilitation for respective diplomatic premises.

---Multilateralism. The two sides reaffirmed their commitment to multilateralism, supporting the central role of the United Nations (UN) in international affairs, safeguarding and improving the rules-based multilateral trading system underpinned by the World Trade Organization (WTO), and keeping global industrial and supply chains stable and smooth. Canada notes the Global Governance Initiative (GGI) proposed by China. The two sides committed to working to improve global governance, and to strengthening coordination and cooperation in the accelerated implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and on the reform of the international financial system. Canada supports China's hosting of the 2026 AsiaPacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meetings and looks forward to a successful APEC year, and appreciates China's support for Canada's offer to host in 2029. The two sides will look for opportunities to

enhance exchanges and cooperation within the G20 and committed to deepening cooperation on climate and the environment, including under the frameworks of the Ministerial on Climate Action (MoCA), the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development (CCICED), and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), as well as under the Memorandum of Understanding on Climate Change Cooperation and the Memorandum of Understanding Concerning Environmental Cooperation.

4. Prime Minister Mark Carney expressed appreciation to the government and people of the People's Republic of China for their warm and friendly hospitality. China welcomed the invitation of the Canadian side for Chinese leaders to visit Canada at a mutually convenient time.

5. During the visit, the two sides signed the following cooperation documents:

a. Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Combating Crimes Between the Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police

b. Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of the People's Republic of China and the Department of Natural Resources of Canada, the Ministry of Forests of the Province of British Columbia on Cooperation on Modern Wood Construction

c. China-Canada Economic and Trade Cooperation Roadmap

d. Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China and the Department of Canadian Heritage on the China-Canada Joint Committee on Culture

e. Memorandum of Understanding between the General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency regarding Food Safety and Animal and Plants Health Cooperation

f. Arrangement between the General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency on a Protocol for the Quarantine and Hygiene Requirements for Pet Food to be Exported to the People's Republic of China

g. Memorandum of Understanding between the China National Energy Administration and the Department of Natural Resources of Canada on Strengthening Energy Cooperation

h. Letter of Intent for Cooperation between China Media Group and Destination Canada

Statement released by the State Council of the People's Republic of China (PRC) through Xinhua on Friday

China, Canada reach specific arrangements to address trade issues: MOC

BEIJING — China and Canada have reached specific arrangements to properly address trade issues related to electric vehicles, steel and aluminum products, canola, and agricultural and aquatic product, the Ministry of Commerce in Beijing said on Friday.

To implement the important consensus reached by the leaders of China and Canada, both sides have recently conducted multiple rounds of intensive consultations at various levels, focusing on key economic and trade issues of mutual concern, the ministry said in a statement.

The two sides have reached positive consensus on increasing direct flights, improving the business environment, and inspection and quarantine of agricultural products, it said.

This marks an important step in resolving bilateral trade concerns and represents a new starting point for deepening economic and trade cooperation.

Looking ahead, both sides will jointly implement the hard-won outcomes of these consultations, accelerate finalizing details, clarify timelines, develop action plans, expedite the completion of their respective domestic procedures and promote early implementation of the outcomes, the ministry said.

The two sides will fully leverage the China-Canada Joint Economic and Trade Commission mechanism to continue expanding cooperation, resolving issues, managing differences, and promoting the healthy, stable, and sustainable development of China-Canada economic and trade relations, it said. — Xinhua

China, Canada renew currency swap agreement

BEIJING — The People's Bank of China (PBOC), the country's central bank, has renewed a bilateral currency swap agreement with the Bank of Canada, the central bank of Canada.

The value of the swap is 200 billion yuan, the PBOC said in a statement on Friday.

The agreement is valid for five years and can be renewed upon mutual consent, per the statement.

The renewal of the currency swap agreement will help enhance financial cooperation between the two countries, expand the use of local currencies between China and Canada, facilitate bilateral trade and investment, and maintain financial stability. — Xinhua



A youth dives into floodwaters after heavy rain left residential areas partially submerged in Jakarta yesterday.

– AFP

Philippine Congress boosts army modernization budget to US\$673 million in 2026

MANILA – The Philippine Congress has allocated 40 billion pesos (about US\$673 million) in capital outlays for the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) modernization program under the 2026 national budget, a senior lawmaker said yesterday.

House of Representatives Minority Leader Marcelino Libanan said lawmakers also authorized an additional 50 billion pesos (approximately US\$842 million) under unprogrammed appropriations to further support the military's modernization projects.

Libanan said that the release of funds from unprogrammed appropriations would depend on the availability of

excess or new government revenues or on the approval of loans for foreign-assisted projects.

He said Congress introduced a new special provision in the 2026 General Appropriations Act, granting the Secretary of Finance authority to enter into loan contracts and other financing arrangements to help fund AFP modernization initiatives.

Under the provision, Libanan said, the finance secretary may arrange additional funding, including grants and loans, if necessary, in consultation with the Department of National Defense and subject to presidential approval and prior concurrence of the Monetary Board.

– Xinhua

6 killed, over 20 injured in shopping mall fire in Karachi

ISLAMABAD – At least six people were killed and over 20 others injured after a fire broke out at a shopping mall in Pakistan's southern port city of Karachi late Saturday night, officials said yesterday.

Spokesperson of the southern Sindh province, Sadia Javed, told Xinhua that the blaze erupted at Gul Plaza, a multi-storey shopping mall located on the MA Jinnah Road, which houses over 1,200 shops.

The spokesperson added that the firefighting teams have been working consistently to control the 3rd-degree fire, which spread to several floors of the plaza.

An official from Rescue 1122, Hassaanul Haseeb Khan, said that firefighting efforts had managed

to control about 40 percent of the blaze by early yesterday morning.

"The majority of the shops contain goods such as crockery, clothing, electrical appliances, cosmetics and perfumes, which intensified the fire," said the rescue official, adding that a section of the plaza collapsed and a rescue worker was buried under it.

The rescue official said that several people are still trapped in the building and efforts are being made to rescue them.

Police officials said the fire initially broke out in shops on the ground floor of the building and appeared to have been caused by a short circuit before spreading to other parts of the mall.

– Xinhua



People carry religious icons of baby Jesus during the annual Santo Niño feast in Manila yesterday.

– AFP

Indonesian rescuers find body from plane crash

MAKASSAR – Rescuers found debris and one body yesterday from a small plane that crashed in eastern Indonesia with 10 people on board, officials said.

The Indonesian Air Transport turboprop plane lost contact with the air traffic controller on Saturday afternoon while en route from Yogyakarta to the city of Makassar on Sulawesi island.

Among the debris, the joint search and rescue team found what is believed to be "the fuselage, the tail section, and the windows", local official Muhammad Arif Anwar told a press briefing.

The body of one victim was found on a steep mountain slope in the same area, said Arif, head of the Makassar search and rescue agency.

"One male victim was found... at a depth of roughly 200 metres in

the ravine and near aircraft debris," he said.

Another local rescue official, Andi Sultan, confirmed a body had been recovered, saying the remains would be evacuated today due to poor weather conditions.

A unit was also deployed by air to search for the missing passengers, according to Arif.

The plane crashed into Mount Bulusaraung in Bantimurung-Bulusaraung National Park, which borders the city of Makassar, Arif said.

Three government workers from the ministry of marine affairs and fisheries were on board the plane along with seven crew members.

Minister Sakti Wahyu Trenggono said the employees were on a mission to conduct aerial monitoring of resources in the area.

The search on land and by air

involved more than 1,000 people including members of the air force, police and volunteers.

Local military chief Bangun Nawoko told reporters that the search was hindered by harsh terrain and fog.

Indonesia, a vast archipelago in Southeast Asia, relies heavily on air transport to connect its thousands of islands. The country has a poor aviation safety record, with several fatal crashes in recent years.

In September, a helicopter carrying six passengers and two crew members crashed shortly after taking off from South Kalimantan province, killing everybody on board.

Less than two weeks after the September crash, four people were killed when their helicopter crashed in the remote Papua district of Ilaga.

– AFP

Social media sites block 4.7 million underage accounts in Australia

SYDNEY – Tech giants have blocked 4.7 million accounts under Australia's world-first social media ban for under-16s, the country's online safety watchdog said Friday.

Initial figures showed platforms were taking meaningful action to remove underage users, Australia's eSafety Commissioner Julie Inman Grant said.

"It is clear that eSafety's regulatory guidance and engagement with platforms is already delivering significant outcomes," she said in a statement.

Australia has required big platforms including Meta, TikTok and YouTube to stop underage users from holding accounts since the legislation came into force on December 10 last year.

Companies face fines of Aus\$49.5 million (US\$33 million) if they fail to take "reasonable steps" to comply.

Billionaire Mark Zuckerberg's Meta said last week it had removed 331,000 underage accounts from

Instagram, 173,000 from Facebook, and 40,000 from Threads in the week to December 11.

But Meta repeated its call for app stores to be required to verify people's ages and get parental approval before under-16s can download an app.

Fighting circumvention

This was the only way to avoid a "whack-a-mole" race to stop teens migrating to new apps to avoid the ban, the company said.

Australia's eSafety Commissioner said it takes time to verify ages accurately, but it expects platforms to improve their performance.

"It is also the responsibility of industry to prevent circumvention, as outlined in eSafety's industry guidance," the regulator said.

Inman Grant said it was too early to say whether platforms were complying completely but early signs were encouraging.

"While some kids may find creative ways to stay on social

media, it's important to remember that just like other safety laws we have in society, success is measured by reduction in harm and in resetting cultural norms," she said.

Downloads of lesser known platforms such as BlueSky and Lemon8 surged ahead of the implementation of the teen social media ban.

But both social media sites recognised that they were covered by the legislation, and they were cooperating with the Australian regulator, Inman Grant said.

"Given the vast number of online services and the fast-evolving nature of the tech industry, it's impossible to list all of the services which meet the conditions and are obliged to comply with the social media minimum age obligation," she said.

"As I have said for some time now, our compliance focus will remain on platforms with the highest number of Australian users."

– AFP

Afghanistan says wants to help malnourished women and children

KABUL – Afghanistan's Taliban government said on Saturday its goal was "to help all malnourished children and mothers", after the United Nations warned that millions would experience acute malnutrition this year.

The World Food Programme's Afghanistan director John Aylieff told AFP this week that five million women and children would experience life-threatening malnutrition in a worsening crisis in the country of 40 million people.

The United Nations agency has said that nearly four million children would require treatment for malnutrition, a figure also

supported by the UN-mandated Integrated Food Security Phase Classification.

"These numbers are staggering," said Aylieff.

The Afghan public health ministry gave lower figures on Saturday, saying that there were "around three million children and mothers suffering from malnutrition".

"About 1.3 million children are moderately malnourished, 700,000 suffer from acute malnutrition and 900,000 mothers are moderately to severely malnourished," ministry spokesman Sharafat Zaman told AFP.

The ministry said the number of facilities offering treatment for

malnutrition had grown from "800 to 3,200".

"Our goal is to reach all patients... and help all malnourished women and children," Zaman said.

"We must distribute medicines, food and assistance with the help of international organisations," he said, while also highlighting Afghanistan's efforts "to produce the necessary resources internally".

The WFP is seeking US\$390 million in an urgent appeal to feed six million Afghans over the next six months, although Aylieff described the chances of getting the funds as "bleak" after aid donations were slashed in recent years.

– AFP

Kurdish forces withdraw from Syria's largest oil field as govt forces advance



Residents bring down a statue of Habun Arab, who fought in the Women's Protection Units and died in June 2017 fighting Islamic State (IS) jihadists, after the withdrawal of Kurdish-led forces in Tabqa, in Raqa province, on the southwestern banks of the Euphrates, yesterday. — AFP

Bakr Alkasem

TABQA, Syria – Kurdish-led forces withdrew yesterday from Syria's largest oil field, a conflict monitor said, as government troops extended their grip over swathes of territory in the country's north and east.

The push came after President Ahmed al-Sharaa issued a decree granting the Kurds official recognition in an apparent goodwill gesture, even as his Islamist government seeks to assert its authority across Syria after the ousting of longtime ruler Bashar al-Assad in 2024.

The Kurds' de facto autonomous administration, which controls large parts of the northeast, has said the announcement fell short, while the implementation of a deal to integrate Kurdish forces into the state has been stalled for months.

Early yesterday (local time), the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) suddenly withdrew "from all areas under their control in the eastern Deir Ezzor countryside, including the Al-Omar and Tanak oil fields", the head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Rami Abdel Rahman, told AFP.

He said the SDF withdrawal in Deir Ezzor and Raqa provinces came as "fighters from local tribes, including Arab fighters who are part of the SDF, advanced in coordination with government troops".

The areas are now effectively controlled by government forces, the Observatory said.

Al-Omar is the country's largest oil field, and was home to the United States' largest base in Syria. It had been controlled by Kurdish-led forces since 2017 after the Islamic State (IS) jihadist group was pushed out.

The Kurds' reported withdrawal from Al-Omar follows the government's announcement that it had retaken two other oil

fields, Safyan and Al-Tharwa, in Raqa province.

'Opening the door'

The government's push has so far captured Arab-majority areas that came under Kurdish control during the fight against IS, whose defeat in Syria was secured with the help of the US-backed SDF.

Energy Minister Mohammad al-Bashir said the return of the area's resources to state control "means opening the door wide for reconstruction, revitalising agriculture, energy and trade".

Government troops drove Kurdish forces from two Aleppo neighbourhoods following clashes last week, and on Saturday captured an area east of the city, as well as Tabqa, in Raqa province, on the southwestern banks of the Euphrates.

The army also announced its control of the Euphrates Dam, adjacent to Tabqa.

The key water and energy facility includes one of Syria's largest hydroelectric power stations.

A security source on the ground in Tabqa told AFP that security forces and the army were combing neighbourhoods after the SDF pullout.

An AFP correspondent saw armoured vehicles and tanks around the city, with security personnel patrolling the streets.

Intermittent gunfire could be heard from what one security officer said were limited clashes with the SDF.

Shops were closed, but some residents milled outside their homes, lighting fires to keep warm.

One resident, Ahmad Hussein, told AFP that people were afraid.

"We have suffered a lot, and I hope that the situation will improve with the arrival of the Syrian army," he said.

Near the dam, an AFP photographer saw residents destroying a statue honouring a woman who fought with Kurdish

forces and who was killed by IS during the battle for Raqa city.

The city was the jihadists' main stronghold at the height of its reign across swathes of Syria from 2014 to 2019.

'Killing must stop'

Syrian authorities accused the SDF of blowing up two key bridges across the Euphrates River in Raqa province.

The Kurdish administration accused government forces of attacking their fighters "on multiple fronts" while the army said the SDF was not fulfilling a commitment to "fully withdraw" east of the river.

The Deir Ezzor province said all public institutions were closed on Sunday and urged people to stay home.

The Kurdish forces' withdrawal came after US envoy Tom Barrack met Syrian Kurdish leader Mazloum Abdi in Erbil on Saturday, and the US Central Command urged government forces "to cease any offensive actions" between Aleppo and Tabqa.

The United States has long supported the Kurdish forces, but it has also backed Syria's new Islamist authorities.

Damascus ally Turkey has praised Syria's operation, but imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, "sees this situation [in Syria] as an attempt to sabotage" the unfolding peace process between his group and the Turkish state, a delegation said after visiting him on Saturday.

In Qamishli, the main Kurdish city in the country's northeast, hundreds of residents demonstrated yesterday, an AFP correspondent said, chanting slogans including "we will defend our heroes".

Muhayeddine Hassan, 48, said that "we want a democracy that represents all Syrians".

If Sharaa "wants equality... the killing must stop", he said. — AFP

Syrian president announces deal with Kurds including truce

DAMASCUS – Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa yesterday announced an agreement with the chief of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, Mazloum Abdi, that includes a ceasefire after government forces advanced in Kurdish-held areas of the north and east.

After meeting US envoy Tom Barrack, Sharaa told reporters at Damascus's presidential palace that "I recommend a complete ceasefire," adding that a meeting with Abdi was postponed until today due to poor

weather but that "in order to calm the situation, we decided to sign the agreement".

The presidency published the text of the signed, 14-point deal, which includes integrating the SDF and Kurdish security forces into the defence and interior ministries, the immediate handover of Kurdish-run Deir Ezzor and Raqa provinces to the government, and for Damascus to take responsibility for Islamic State group prisoners and their families held in Kurdish-run jails and camps. — AFP

Netanyahu holds coalition meeting after objecting to Gaza panel

JERUSALEM – Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu convened a meeting of his ruling coalition partners yesterday after objecting to the composition of a Gaza advisory panel formed by the White House, according to an official and media reports.

The White House announced last week the setting up of a "Gaza Executive Board," which would operate under a broader "Board of Peace" to be chaired by US President Donald Trump as part of his 20-point plan to end the war in Gaza.

The executive board, described as having an advisory role, includes Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and Qatari diplomat Ali Al-Thawadi, alongside other regional and international officials.

On Saturday, Netanyahu's office objected to the composition of the executive board.

"The announcement regarding the composition of the Gaza Executive Board, which is subordinate to the Board of Peace, was not coordinated with Israel and runs contrary to its policy," the office of Netanyahu said.

"The Prime Minister has instructed the Foreign Affairs Minister to contact the US Secretary of State on this matter."

It did not explain the reason for its objection, but Israel has previously objected strongly to any Turkish role in post-war Gaza, with

relations between the two countries deteriorating sharply since the war began in October 2023.

In addition to naming Turkey's foreign minister to the executive board, Trump has also invited Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to join the overarching Board of Peace.

Media reports said that leaders of Israel's ruling coalition were scheduled to meet to examine the composition of the executive board.

Alongside Netanyahu's Likud Party, the coalition includes the Religious Zionist Party led by far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and Otzma Yehudit ("Jewish Power") led by far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir.

The White House said Trump's plan would include three bodies: the Board of Peace, chaired by Trump; a Palestinian committee of technocrats tasked with governing Gaza; and the Gaza Executive Board, which would play an advisory role.

The Palestinian technocratic committee held its first meeting in Cairo on Saturday.

The diplomatic developments came as the United States said this week that the Gaza truce plan had entered a second phase, shifting from implementing a ceasefire to the disarmament of Hamas, whose October 7, 2023 attack on Israel triggered the Israeli offensive in Gaza. — AFP



Displaced Palestinians live amongst the rubble and debris of homes and businesses destroyed by the Israeli military in over two years of military strikes on the Gaza Strip enclave, in Jabalia refugee camp, in the northern Gaza Strip on Saturday. US President Donald Trump's so-called "Board of Peace" for post-war Gaza began to take shape on Saturday, with the leaders of Egypt, Turkey, Argentina and Canada, among others, asked to join. — AFP

Shark mauls boy in Sydney Harbour

SYDNEY – A shark mauled a boy swimming in Sydney Harbour yesterday, leaving him in a critical condition with serious leg injuries, authorities said.

The predator bit the boy, believed to be about 13 years old, during the late afternoon off Shark Beach, New South Wales state police said.

“The injuries are consistent with what is believed to have been a large shark,” police said in a statement.

Officers pulled the boy from the water off the harbour beach within minutes of being alerted to the incident, police said.

They gave the boy first aid for “serious” leg injuries while he was aboard a police boat, applying two medical tourniquets.

Paramedics transported him to Sydney Children’s Hospital, where he was said to be in a critical condition.

“Swimmers are advised to avoid entering nearby waters at this time,” police said.

Shark Beach, in Sydney’s eastern suburb of Vaucluse, was closed and police evacuated nearby beaches in the harbour, the state government said.

Wildlife experts were working

to identify the shark species involved, it said in a statement.

“This is a tragic shark attack on a young boy having a swim on a Sunday afternoon near a harbour beach in Sydney’s east,” New South Wales Agriculture Minister Tara Moriarty said.

“Our thoughts are with the young boy and his family. I understand there were also other young people with him at the time of the attack, our thoughts are also with them.”

There have been more than 1,280 shark incidents around Australia since 1791, of which more than 250 resulted in death, according to a database of the predators’ encounters with humans.

Increasingly crowded waters and rising ocean temperatures that appear to be swaying sharks’ migratory patterns may be contributing to a rise in attacks despite overfishing depleting some species, scientists say.

A great white shark mauled surfer Mercury Psillakis to death at a popular northern Sydney ocean beach in September.

Two months later, a bull shark killed a woman swimming off a remote beach north of Sydney.

– AFP

Europe hits back at Trump tariff threat over Greenland

BRUSSELS – European leaders yesterday slammed US President Donald Trump’s threat of tariffs over their opposition to his designs on Greenland, warning transatlantic ties were at risk.

Several European countries – including Denmark, of which Greenland is an autonomous territory – emphasised they “stand united” against Trump’s vow on Saturday to hit them with tariffs of up to 25 percent unless Greenland is ceded to the United States.

“Tariff threats undermine transatlantic relations and risk a dangerous downward spiral,” Britain, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden warned in a joint statement.

France’s President Emmanuel Macron will ask the EU to activate a never-before-used “anti-coercion instrument” against the United States if Trump makes good on his tariff threat, Macron’s aides said.

The bloc’s weapon – dubbed its trade “bazooka” – allows for curbing imports of goods and services into the EU, a market of 27 countries with a combined population of 450 million.

Trump has repeatedly expressed his desire to seize Greenland since returning to the White House for a second term. His rhetoric towards that goal has hardened since he ordered a military operation against Venezuela early this month to capture its leader, Nicolás Maduro.

‘Blackmail’

Trump and his administration have argued that Greenland coming under US rule would serve American “national security”.

He and his aides have also argued that Denmark – although a NATO ally – would be unable to defend Greenland should Russia or China ever seek to invade.

Denmark and several of its European NATO allies responded by recently sending small numbers of military personnel to Greenland for an exercise, to which the United States was also invited.

Some German soldiers were seen boarding a flight yesterday to leave Greenland after completing a reconnaissance mission.



Military personnel from Germany’s armed forces (Bundeswehr) yesterday board an Icelandair flight leaving the airport of Greenland’s capital Nuuk for Reykjavik, capital of Iceland, on their way back home, after a few days on a recon mission in the autonomous Danish territory. – AFP

And on Saturday, thousands of people in Greenland and in Denmark held protests to declare that they did not want the Arctic island to fall under US control.

“Make America Go Away” read the wording on caps worn by many of the protesters, riffing on Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan.

Trump responded with a threat to slap goods coming into the US from Britain, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Finland with 10-percent tariffs starting February 1.

The tariffs would rise to 25 percent from June 1 “until such time as a Deal is reached for the Complete and Total purchase of Greenland”, Trump wrote on his social media platform, Truth Social.

Even Trump’s European allies balked at the threat.

Italy’s far-right Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, called the threatened tariffs a “mistake”.

“I believe that imposing new sanctions today would be a mistake,” she told journalists during a trip to Seoul, adding that “I spoke to Donald Trump a few hours ago and told him what I think”.

Dutch Foreign Minister David van Weel meanwhile called Trump’s threat an “inexplicable” form of “blackmail”.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer was planning to discuss the

situation with Trump “at the earliest opportunity”, UK culture minister Lisa Nandy told the BBC, calling the president’s tariff threat “wrong”.

“We believe it’s deeply unhelpful, and we believe it’s counterproductive, and the prime minister has not shied away from making that clear,” she said.

Trade war fear

France’s Agricultural Minister Annie Genevard warned that tariffs would hurt Washington, too.

“In this escalation of tariffs, [Trump] has a lot to lose as well, as do his own farmers and industrialists,” she told broadcasters Europe 1 and CNews.

Norway, targeted by Trump’s tariffs threat but, like Britain, not an EU member, said it was not currently looking at retaliation against US goods.

“I think one needs to stop and think so that a trade war can be averted that would lead to a downward spiral. Nobody would win,” Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store told NRK television.

Faced with the increased pressure over Greenland, Denmark’s Foreign Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen announced yesterday he would visit fellow NATO members Norway, Britain and Sweden in the coming days to discuss the alliance’s Arctic security policy. – AFP

Iraq announces complete withdrawal of US-led coalition from federal territory

BAGHDAD – Iraq said yesterday that US-led coalition forces had finished withdrawing from bases within the country’s federal territory, which excludes the autonomous northern Kurdistan region.

“We announce today... the completion of the evacuation of all military bases and leadership headquarters in the official federal areas of Iraq of advisers” of the US-led coalition, the military committee tasked with overseeing the end of the coalition’s mission said yesterday.

With the withdrawal, “these sites come under the full control of Iraqi security forces”, it said in the statement, adding that they would transition to “the stage of bilateral security relations with the United States”.

The vast majority of coalition forces had withdrawn from Iraqi bases under a 2024 deal between Baghdad and Washington outlining the end of the mission in Iraq by the end of 2025 and by September 2026 in the Kurdistan region.

US and allied troops had been deployed to Iraq and Syria since 2014 to fight the Islamic State (IS) group, which had seized large swathes of both countries to declare their so-called “caliphate”.

The jihadist group was territorially defeated in Iraq in 2017 and in Syria in 2019, but continues to operate sleeper cells.

The vast majority of coalition troops withdrew from Iraq over previous stages, with only advisers remaining in the country.

The military committee yesterday said Iraqi forces were now “fully capable of preventing the reappearance of IS in Iraq and its infiltration across borders”.

“Coordination with the international coalition will continue with regards to completely eliminating IS’s presence in Syria,” it added.

It pointed to “the coalition’s role in Iraq offering cross-border logistical support for operations in Syria, through their presence at an airbase in Erbil”, the capital of Iraq’s Kurdistan region.

In December, two US soldiers and a civilian interpreter were killed in Syria in an attack blamed on IS, sparking fears of a resurgence in the country.

The statement added that anti-IS operations would be coordinated with the coalition through the Ain al-Assad base in Anbar province in western Iraq.

IS attacks in Iraq have massively declined in recent years, but the group maintains a presence in the country’s mountainous areas.

A UN Security Council report in August said: “In Iraq, the group has focused on rebuilding networks along the Syrian border and restoring capacity in the Badia region.” – AFP

Cuba holds defence panel meeting amid tension with US

HAVANA – Cuba held a meeting of a key national defence committee to assess its readiness for war, state-run media said yesterday as tensions run high with the United States after the ouster of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro.

US President Donald Trump has been ramping up pressure on Cuba, one of the few Latin American countries still run by a leftist administration after US special forces seized Havana’s ally Maduro and his wife on January 3.

The National Defence Committee is supposed to take control of Cuba

in case of war or a natural disaster.

It met on Saturday “to increase and perfect the level of preparation and cohesion of the leadership and personnel organs,” said a statement published in state media.

The goal of the meeting was “to analyse and approve plans and measures for shifting to a state of war” in the event of conflict with another country, the statement added without giving details.

It was the first time the committee, led by President Miguel Díaz-Canel, has met since the US attack on Venezuela.

Among the dozens killed in the raid were 32 Cuban soldiers, some of them assigned to Maduro’s security detail.

Díaz-Canel last week reacted defiantly to Trump’s threat to Cuba to “make a deal” or pay the price in the aftermath of Maduro’s seizure by US soldiers.

Díaz-Miguel denied Trump’s assertion that the two countries were holding talks.

Trump has vowed to cut off all oil and money Venezuela had been providing to Cuba’s ailing economy. – AFP

EU, Mercosul bloc ink major trade deal, reject ‘tariffs’ and ‘isolation’

Martín Raschinsky

ASUNCION, Paraguay – South American and European Union officials on Saturday signed a major trade deal, which they hailed as sending a powerful message at a time of tariff threats, global uncertainty and protectionism.

The deal between the 27-nation European Union and Mercosur/ Mercosul* bloc members Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay creates one of the world’s largest free trade areas after 25 years of tricky negotiations.

It was given fresh impetus amid the sweeping use of tariffs and trade threats by US President Donald Trump’s administration, which has sent countries scrambling for new partnerships.

Trump on Saturday threatened multiple European nations with tariffs of up to 25 percent until he manages to gain control of the Danish-controlled island of Greenland.

“We choose fair trade over tariffs, we choose a productive long-term partnership over isolation,” EU chief Ursula von der Leyen said at the signing ceremony in Asunción, the capital of Paraguay.

Paraguay’s President Santiago Peña also praised the treaty as sending “a clear signal in favour of international trade” in “a global scenario marked by tensions.”

European Council head António Costa said the deal stood in contrast to “the use of trade as a geopolitical weapon.”

And Brazil’s Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira said the deal was a “bulwark ... in the face of a world battered by unpredictability, protectionism, and coercion.”

Brazil’s President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva – a key architect of the accord – was unable to attend the ceremony due to scheduling conflicts, and met with von der Leyen in Rio de Janeiro on Friday where he praised it as a victory for multilateralism.

In Paraguay, leaders said the treaty would bring jobs, prosperity, and opportunities to people on both sides of the Atlantic.

‘It’s not fair’

Together, the EU and Mercosur/ Mercosul account for 30 percent of global GDP and more than 700 million consumers.

The treaty – which still needs to be



Panama’s President José Raúl Mulino (from left to right), Bolivia’s President Rodrigo Paz, European Council President António Costa, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Paraguay’s President Santiago Peña, Argentina’s President Javier Milei, Uruguay’s President Yamandu Orsi and Brazil’s Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira pose at the end of the signing ceremony of the controversial trade agreement between the European Union and Mercosur/Mercosul, at the Gran Teatro José Asunción Flores of Paraguay’s Central Bank in Asunción on Saturday. – AFP

approved by the EU parliament and ratified by each Mercosur/Mercosul nation – eliminates tariffs on more than 90 percent of bilateral trade.

It is expected to come into force by the end of 2026.

The deal will favour European exports of cars, wine and cheese, while making it easier for South American beef, poultry, sugar, rice, honey and soybeans to enter Europe.

This has angered European farmers, who have rolled tractors into cities like Paris, Brussels and Warsaw to protest a feared influx of cheaper goods produced with lower standards and banned pesticides.

“We have good quality Irish beef and good standards here, and they don’t have the same standards in South American countries,” said Trisha Chatterton, a 50-year-old farmer at a protest in Ireland earlier this month.

“It’s not fair,” said Luis, a 24-year-old Belgian cattle farmer who took part in a December protest that turned ugly, as demonstrators set piles of tires on fire and hurled potatoes at police.

Key power Germany, as well as Spain and the Nordic countries, strongly support the pact, eager to boost exports as Europe grapples with Chinese competition and a tariff-happy administration in the White House.

Some in South America are also wary about the impact of the treaty.

In Argentina, it is estimated that there could be a loss of 200,000 jobs just from the dismantling of

the local automotive industry, trade and investment researcher Luciana Ghiotto told AFP.

Safeguard and quotas

In a bid to allay fears, the European Commission announced a crisis fund and safeguards allowing for the suspension of preferential tariffs in case of a damaging surge in imports.

However, Argentina’s libertarian President Javier Milei warned against quotas and safeguards which “will significantly reduce the economic impact of the agreement and will go against its essential objective.”

According to EU estimates, European exports to Mercosur/ Mercosul are expected by analysts to rise by 39 percent, while Mercosur/ Mercosul exports to the EU could increase by 17 percent.

By 2040, the agreement is projected by Brussels to boost EU GDP by 77.6 billion euros (US\$90.0 billion) and Mercosur/Mercosul GDP by 9.4 billion euros. – AFP

*The Southern Common Market (abbreviated as Mercosur in Spanish and Mercosul in Portuguese) is a trade bloc set up by the Treaty of Asunción in 1991. Its full members are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Venezuela is a full member but has been suspended since 2016. Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Panama, Peru, and Suriname are associate countries. Its motto is “Our North is the South”. – MPD

Portugal’s presidential vote wide open as far-right surge expected

LISBON – Portugal voted yesterday in the first round of a presidential election in which a far-right candidate could for the first time make it to a run-off, but with the final result hard to call.

Polls predict that André Ventura, leader of the far-right Chega (“Enough”) party, could top the first round but would lose round two, regardless of which of the other candidates he faces there.

This would be the first time in four decades that a candidate has not won outright in the first-round ballot, which requires securing more than 50 percent of the vote.

Among the record 11 candidates standing, only five seemed to have a realistic chance of making it to the decisive vote on February 8 to succeed conservative incumbent Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa.

In addition to Ventura, 43, they are: Socialist Party (PS) António José Seguro, 63; liberal European Parliament lawmaker João Cotrim Figueiredo, 64; centre-right candidate Luis Marques Mendes, 68 of the ruling Social Democratic party (PSD); and independent Henrique Gouveia e Melo, a 65-year-old retired admiral who led Portugal’s COVID-19 vaccination campaign.

Pollsters predict any of the four of Ventura’s potential rivals would trounce him in a second-round vote.

Polling stations opened yesterday at 8 a.m. and exit polls were slated to be announced at 8 p.m. (4 a.m. Macau time).

Chega won 22.8 percent of the vote and 60 seats in a general

election last May, overtaking the Socialists to become the biggest opposition party.

European Union and eurozone member Portugal, a country of 10.4 million inhabitants, accounts for around 1.6 percent of the EU’s gross domestic product (GDP).

Portugal’s president has no executive powers but can, in times of crisis, dissolve parliament, call elections or dismiss a prime minister.

Far-right popularity test

Ventura sees Sunday’s vote mainly as a test of his popularity, according to experts, who believe that he has his sights set on eventually running the country as prime minister.

“André Ventura is running to keep his voter base,” said António Costa Pinto, a political scientist at Lisbon University.

A stronger far right would add pressure on the minority government of centre-right Prime Minister Luis Montenegro, which relies on Chega for support to implement some of its policies.

“Another solid result for the far right would confirm its domination over the political landscape,” consulting firm Teneo said in a note.

Ventura, who has promised to put Portugal “in order”, urged the other parties on the right not to put “obstacles” in his way should he find himself facing the Socialist candidate, Seguro, in the run-off.

Seguro, meanwhile, said he was the only one capable of defeating Ventura’s “extremism”.

– AFP



A nun casts her vote in Portugal’s presidential elections at a polling station in Lisbon yesterday. – AFP



Residents sit on a Mozambican military truck transporting them across floodwater that blocked a road in the country’s southern Boane district near the capital Maputo on Friday. Mozambique has experienced weeks of heavy rains and residents of low-lying areas near the capital, Maputo, were urged to evacuate to higher ground on Friday. At least eight people have perished in the floods in since December 21, according to official data released on Friday. – AFP

Venezuela interim leader sacks industry minister

CARACAS – Venezuela’s interim president on Friday dismissed businessman Alex Saab, a close ally of deposed leader Nicolás Maduro, from his post as minister of industry.

In a Telegram message, Delcy Rodríguez announced the ministry would be combined with a commerce ministry and thanked Saab – a Colombian-born Venezuelan – “for his service to the homeland; he will be taking on new

responsibilities.”

The change came amid pressure from Washington following the January 3 US military raid that seized Maduro.

Saab, released in 2023 as part of a prisoner exchange with the United States, was appointed to office in 2024 by Maduro.

He had been arrested in Cape Verde in 2020 due to an Interpol notice over accusations he had

served as a money launderer for Maduro.

He was subsequently extradited to the US, where he and his business partner Álvaro Pulido were charged with running a network that exploited food aid destined for Venezuela.

Saab’s dismissal is among the latest key changes to Venezuela’s government by Rodríguez since the US capture of Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores. – AFP

Fiorentina honour deceased Commisso with crucial win at Bologna

MILAN – Fiorentina honoured deceased owner Rocco Commisso with yesterday's 2-1 win at off-form Bologna which boosted their Serie A survival bid.

Without a win until just before Christmas, Fiorentina claimed a deserved third success in six matches thanks to goals in the first half from Rolando Mandragora and Roberto Piccoli.

Paolo Vanoli's side sit just inside the relegation zone but level on 17 points with Lecce, who are 17th and faced AC Milan late yesterday.

Fiorentina have a superior goal difference than Lecce and only sit below them by virtue of having played a game more.

That means a defeat for Lecce at the San Siro against title-chasing Milan would push Fiorentina, who less than a month ago looked destined for the drop, out of the bottom three.

Yesterday's win was a fine way to pay tribute to American media mogul Commisso, who passed away on Saturday at the age of 76 and was remembered with a minute's silence ahead of kick-off.

During pre-match preparations,

Fiorentina players wore T-shirts with a picture of Commisso and the message "Thanks Rocco", in tribute to a man who just missed out on giving the Tuscan club a first major trophy since 2001.

Italian-born billionaire Commisso was the founder of Media-com Communications, one of the largest cable TV providers in the United States, and was a passionate football fan who had also owned the New York Cosmos before acquiring Fiorentina in 2019.

He invested in a new 120-million-euro (US\$139-million) training centre and redevelopment of the Stadio Artemio Franchi in Florence, works which are still ongoing ahead of Fiorentina's centenary next season.

He hired current Bologna coach Vincenzo Italiano, who took Fiorentina to three finals, two in the Conference League and one in the Italian Cup.

Italiano, who tasted cup success with Bologna last season, has had a tough time in recent weeks after a strong start to this campaign, with his eighth-placed team picking up just five points in nine matches since the start of December. – AFP



Egypt's forward Mohamed Salah (left) reacts with Nigeria's forward Moses Simon after the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) third place match between Egypt and Nigeria at the Mohammed V Stadium in Casablanca, Morocco on Saturday. Ademola Lookman converted the spot-kick that gave Nigeria a 4-2 penalty shoot-out victory over Egypt after a 0-0 draw on Saturday in the Africa Cup of Nations third place play-off. Victory for the Super Eagles in Casablanca followed the disappointment of losing shoot-outs that cost them chances to compete at the 2026 World Cup and in the 2025 AFCON final. – AFP

Jeong snatches Union late draw at Stuttgart



BERLIN – Union Berlin's Woo-yeong Jeong scored with seven minutes remaining to snatch his side a point in a 1-1 draw at Stuttgart in the Bundesliga yesterday.

Germany winger Chris Fuehrich's goal had Stuttgart on course for third spot but the South Korean's late equaliser leaves the German Cup holders in fourth, a point ahead of fifth-placed RB Leipzig.

Unfancied Union are now unbeaten since early December, a run of five matches, and sit eighth, five points behind the European placings.

After a first-half with few chances for either side, Fuehrich put the hosts in front just before the hour mark.

Stuttgart defender Ramon Hendriks charged forward before finding Fuehrich, who hit a low shot just inside the left-hand post.

Germany midfielder Angelo Stiller had a golden chance to double Stuttgart's lead with 10 minutes remaining but blasted wide with the goal beckoning and only Union goalie Frederik Ronnow to beat.

The miss came back to haunt the hosts almost immediately when former Stuttgart forward Jeong sliced his shot into the top corner on the 83rd minute mark.

Jeong, who did not celebrate his goal, had a chance to steal the match against his former employers in the dying moments, but his strike was well saved by Stuttgart's Alexander Nuebel. – AFP

Villa's title bid rocked by Everton loss, Newcastle held by Wolves

Steven Griffiths



L O N D O N

Aston Villa's Premier League title challenge suffered a huge blow in a 1-0 defeat against Everton, while Newcastle's push towards the top four was derailed by a 0-0 draw at Wolves yesterday.

Unai Emery's side could have closed to within four points of leaders Arsenal if they had beaten Everton at Villa Park.

But they wasted the chance to put pressure on the Gunners with a limp performance that was punished by Thierno Barry's second half winner.

After Arsenal's goalless draw at Nottingham Forest on Saturday, Mikel Arteta's men are seven points clear of third-placed Villa.

Second-placed Manchester City are also seven points behind the leaders following their 2-0 loss at Manchester United on Saturday.

Arsenal are chasing a first English title since 2004 and the stumbles from City and Villa this weekend have tightened their grip on the title race.

Adding to Villa's woes, their captain John McGinn limped off with a first half injury.

Villa had won their previous 11 home games in all competitions.

But Everton's Merlin Rohl nearly shattered that feeling of invincibility in just 11 seconds when he capitalised on sloppy defending to shoot against the post.

Despite being a boyhood Villa fan, Everton winger Jack Grealish was loudly jeered on his return to his former club.

Grealish almost silenced his tormentors with a goal-bound volley that was blocked by Evann Guessand.

Everton's Jake O'Brien headed home from a corner, only to see his effort disallowed for offside against Harrison Armstrong.



Everton's French striker Thierno Barry (top centre) scores the team's only goal during the English Premier League match against Aston Villa at Villa Park in Birmingham, central England yesterday. – AFP

Villa went close just before half-time when Youri Tielemans's cross picked out Guessand and the Ivory Coast forward looped his header onto the bar.

But Emery's men lacked a cutting edge and they paid the price in the 59th minute.

Newcastle frustrated

It was a shambolic goal to concede as Pau Torres carelessly surrendered possession just outside his own area.

Dwight McNeil pounced with a shot that Emiliano Martinez pushed out to Barry and the striker chipped the ball into the net from close-range for his third goal in his last five appearances.

Goalkeeper Jordan Pickford preserved Everton's victory with a brilliant tip-over from Morgan Rogers's curler, leaving Villa with only one win from their last four league games.

At rain-lashed Molineux, Eddie Howe's Newcastle were unable to prise open the Wolves defence as two points slipped away.

Wins over Burnley, Crystal Palace and Leeds had bolstered

their bid to qualify for next season's Champions League.

But the Magpies are stuck in eighth place after failing to beat bottom-of-the-table Wolves.

Following their disappointing 2-0 defeat against Manchester City in the League Cup semi-final first leg on Tuesday, it was another frustrating result for Newcastle.

"We needed to do more in attack. I expected us to do better and create more," Howe said after Newcastle took 85 minutes to muster a shot on target.

"Football is such a strange game. We scored four against Leeds and looked free-scoring, but today we struggled."

Nick Woltemade has now gone seven games without a goal, scoring just twice in 13 appearances after squandering two good headed chances.

With crucial matches against top four rivals Aston Villa and Liverpool looming before the end of the month, Howe's men must get back on track quickly.

Wolves are now unbeaten in four league games but still sit 14 points from safety. – AFP

Atletico edge Alaves to strengthen Liga top-4 hold



MADRID – Alexander Sorloth's towering header earned Atletico Madrid a narrow 1-0 win over Alaves yesterday in La Liga, helping them pull level on points with third-placed Villarreal.

After dropping points in a draw at Real Sociedad in their last league outing, Diego Simeone's side got back on track, moving seven points clear of Espanyol in fifth.

The Rojiblancos, fourth, trail leaders Barcelona by eight points before the champions visited Real Sociedad late yesterday.

"There are no easy games and we're happy for the victory," Atletico midfielder Pablo Barrios told DAZN.

"Sorloth is a player who gives us a lot, who can help us break through in games which are

blocked up, with crosses."

Atletico had the better chances of a solid but not overly exciting first-half display at their Metropolitano stadium, with Antonio Sivera keeping Sorloth at bay after he broke through.

Julian Alvarez was also denied by the Alaves goalkeeper as his dry spell continued, going a fifth game without scoring.

Coach Diego Simeone's son Giuliano Simeone signed a new deal until 2030 this week and was Atletico's biggest threat, offering energy on the right flank.

Atletico took the lead early in the second half, with Sorloth leaping high to nod home Barrios's cross and break the deadlock.

It was the Norwegian target man's sixth goal of the league campaign, and his third in his last

three games across all competitions.

Substitute Alex Baena came close to doubling Atletico's lead but hit Sivera's far post from just inside the area.

With Atletico leading by just one goal they endured some nervy moments during five minutes of added time but Alaves, 18th, could not find an equaliser.

Lucas Boye headed a free-kick inches over Jan Oblak's crossbar just before the final whistle with the Atletico goalkeeper rooted to the spot.

"It wasn't to be, we knew it was hard to play here, they haven't lost here yet," said Alaves defender Jonny Otto.

"We know we're down near the foot of the table but it's still quite even... the team is fighting well." – AFP

Chinese Taipei's Lin wins India Open marred by 'dirty' conditions

Badminton

NEW DELHI – Chinese Taipei's Lin Chun-yi won the India Open badminton men's singles title yesterday, after playing conditions that included bird droppings on court and a monkey in the stands drew criticism.

Lin, 26, beat third seed Jonatan Christie of Indonesia 21-10, 21-18 in 38 minutes to clinch the men's crown at the Indira Gandhi Indoor Stadium in New Delhi.

In the women's singles final, world number one An Se-young of South Korea beat China's world number two Wang Zhi Yi 21-13, 21-11 to extend her domination on the court.

An has won six consecutive titles since the Denmark Open in October last year, compiling a 30-match winning streak.

However, the sheen was taken off the on-court action after players, including Denmark's Mia Blichfeldt, slammed the "dirty and unhygienic" playing conditions.

"Everyone is stressed and frustrated by the conditions we are being met with at a World Tour Super 750 event," she said in a social media post on Friday.

"At first, you try to laugh it off, but in the end, it is neither funny nor fair to the players or anyone participating in this event."

Blichfeldt, ranked 20, bowed out in the second round.

There were problems on most days of the tournament, including play being disrupted during a semi-final on Saturday when debris from a bird's nest fell on the court.

Bird droppings were also seen on

courts, while TV pictures also showed a monkey making its way into the stands.

World number three Anders Antonsen of Denmark also withdrew from the tournament, citing "extreme" air pollution in Delhi.

The criticism will come as a blow to India's preparations for hosting the badminton World Championships in August, as well as the Commonwealth Games in 2030.

India, the world's most populous country, has also announced ambitions to host the 2036 Olympics.

Badminton Association of India (BAI) secretary Sanjay Mishra said the problems would be fixed before the World Championship.

"I know there are a few issues. But there's nothing that we can't manage," Mishra told local media.

– AFP



Al-Attiyah claims 6th Dakar car crown as Benavides edges bike title

YANBU – Qatar's Nasser Al-Attiyah secured his sixth Dakar Rally car title in Saudi Arabia on Saturday with Luciano Benavides scraping home by two seconds to claim the bike title.

"We've worked very hard since last year. I might not be showing much emotion yet, but it's there, deep down. We are so happy to win," said Al-Attiyah at the finish.

Al-Attiyah, at the wheel of a Dacia, only had to avoid a final day slip-up to top the podium after bringing his career tally of stage wins to 50 on Friday.

The 55-year-old, who took clay pigeon shooting bronze at the 2012 London Olympic Games, was adding to his previous Dakar wins in 2011, 2015, 2019, 2022 and 2023.

With Belgian co-driver Fabian Lurquin, Al-Attiyah took control of the overall standings early on in the motorsport marathon.

After placing ninth on the 13th and final stage in Yanbu on the Red Sea he had almost 10 minutes in hand over second-placed Nani Roma (Ford).

Roma's Swedish teammate Mattias Ekstrom won the final stage to complete the car podium in third overall.

For Romanian car manufacturer

Dacia this was their first Dakar victory at only their second attempt.

Al-Attiyah already had the second-most overall victories in the car section of the rally. He moved two ahead of Finn Ari Vatanen and Spaniard Carlos Sainz, who are tied for third with four each. Frenchman Stephane Peterhansel won a record eight times in cars between 2004 and 2021 to go with six victories in the bike category.

"This is my sixth victory. I still need to break Peterhansel's record," said Al-Attiyah

Last year's champion, Saudi Yazeed Al Rajhi, was forced to pull out with mechanical problems last week.

Earlier, Argentina's Luciano Benavides took the bike honours by a mere two seconds.

Second in the 13th and closing stage was enough for the 30-year-old KTM rider to deny Honda's American two-time champion Ricky Brabec and secure a debut Dakar crown.

'Glimmer of hope'

"I've dreamed of this moment my whole life," said the winner.

Brabec, winner in 2020 and 2024, was on target for a third title but lost

time when he went the wrong way close to the finish of the 105km ride around Yanbu.

"Even yesterday, it seemed impossible, but I still felt it could happen, and today Ricky took the wrong line and I took the right one," Benavides said.

"It was a glimmer of hope.

"I saw it was him and that he had to pull a U-turn to get back on the right line because crossing between the two was impossible. I saw the opening and I went for it."

Edgar Canet won the bike stage, with Spain's Toshia Schareina (Honda) finishing third and also taking the number-three spot in the overall standings.

Benavides's older brother Kevin won the marathon race in 2021 and 2023.

Benavides said he had given his all "from start to finish today".

"I'd told everyone before the start that this Dakar was mine," he added.

"Nine years in the Dakar and my first win. My brother and I are making history.

"He won by 43 seconds and I've won by two. I think I have him beaten on that front! It's a dream come true."

– AFP

NZ register first ODI series win in India despite Kohli ton

Cricket

INDORE – New Zealand overcame a valiant 124 by Virat Kohli to down India by 41 runs and seal their first-ever ODI series victory on Indian soil yesterday.

Daryl Mitchell and Glenn Phillips guided New Zealand to 337-8 with a fourth-wicket stand of 219 after the tourists slipped to 5-2 and 58-3 in Indore.

Mitchell made 137 and Phillips hit 106 off 88 balls.

The Black Caps then bowled out India for 296 in 46 overs despite Kohli's 54th ODI century and clinched the three-match series 2-1.

The in-form Kohli, who plays just the 50-over format after retiring from Test and T20 international cricket,

threatened to pull off the chase in a 99-run seventh-wicket partnership with Harshit Rana, who made 52.

New Zealand left-arm spinner Jayden Lennox returned figures of 2-42 from his 10 overs after captain Michael Bracewell left the field with a calf injury and did not return.

Mitchell led the team in Bracewell's absence, which also left New Zealand a bowler short.

Zak Foulkes and fellow seamer Kristian Clarke took three wickets each.

India slumped to 71-4 before Kohli hit back in an 88-run stand with Nitish Kumar Reddy, who made 53, and then with Rana.

Kohli struck 10 fours and three sixes in his 108-ball knock before he was caught off Clarke and walked

back to a rousing ovation after his 85th international century.

Earlier the in-form Mitchell picked up from where he left off after his match-winning 131 not out in the second ODI, which levelled the series at 1-1.

Mitchell reached his ninth ODI ton with a single off Ravindra Jadeja before Phillips also brought up his hundred.

Arshdeep finally dismissed Phillips caught behind to end the marathon stand and Mitchell soon followed, falling to Mohammed Siraj.

New Zealand wobbled, losing four more wickets but Bracewell hammered an unbeaten 28 off 18 balls.

The teams next play five T20 matches in a final tune-up for the T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka between February 7 and March 8. – AFP

No Venus fairytale as Alcaraz, Sabalenka win Melbourne openers



Peter Stebbings

MELBOURNE

– Top-ranked Carlos Alcaraz and Aryna Sabalenka launched their Australian Open title bids with straight-sets wins but there was no fairytale for 45-year-old Venus Williams yesterday.

On a hot Melbourne day in which a ball girl fainted, last year's men's beaten finalist Alexander Zverev dropped a set before easing into the second round.

World number one Alcaraz joined him, the Spaniard beating 81st-ranked home player Adam Walton 6-3, 7-6 (7/2), 6-2 on Rod Laver Arena.

Alcaraz, who is desperate to win the Australian Open to complete the career Grand Slam of all four majors, plays Germany's Yannick Hanfmann next.

"I think this kind of level and the difficulties in the first round is pretty good for me," said Alcaraz, who was pushed all the way in the second set.

"But overall just happy. I'm pleased about the level that I played today," added Alcaraz, who was playing his first competitive match for nine weeks.

Alcaraz has won the US Open, Wimbledon and French Open, but Melbourne is the one Grand Slam missing from his impressive resume.

The furthest he has gone at the opening major of the year is the quarter-finals and he has made it clear that dethroning rival Jannik Sinner as champion is his main aim for 2026.

If he does so, the 22-year-old would surpass compatriot Rafael Nadal to become the youngest man to complete the career Grand Slam.

Earlier, in steamy conditions approaching highs of 30C, Zverev threatened to implode in losing the first set to Canada's Gabriel Diallo.

But the 28-year-old German recovered to win 6-7 (1/7), 6-1, 6-4, 6-2 and next meets Australian Alexei Popyrin or Alexandre Muller of France.

Asked how he reset from his first-set wobble, the third seed said: "I was thinking it can't get worse than that."

British qualifier Arthur Fery scored the first big upset by taking down 20th seed Flavio Cobolli of Italy, 7-6 (7/1), 6-4, 6-1.

Novak Djokovic, who is chasing a record 25th major title, begins his title assault today, as does three-time runner-up Daniil Medvedev.

Organisers said that a record 100,000 people came through the

gates, although there were complaints about long queues in the heat.

Underlining how fierce it was on court, a ball girl collapsed during the match between Zeynep Sonmez and Ekaterina Alexandrova, with both players rushing to help her.

Venus makes history

Sabalenka began her bid for a third Australian Open title in four years with a patchy start before coming good in the second set.

The world number one, stunned by Madison Keys in the 2025 final, ultimately had too much power, guile and quality for French wildcard Tiantsoa Rakotomanga Rajaonah.

But the Belarusian took time to find her touch, making a series of unforced errors before taming the spirited 20-year-old 6-4, 6-1 on Rod Laver Arena.

"It is always tricky playing someone young, someone you don't know, and a lefty (left-hander)," said the top seed and title favourite.

Sabalenka said she had felt added pressure with tennis legends Roger Federer and Rod Laver court-side.

"I hope you guys enjoyed watching me play, I hope you enjoyed it even a little bit," she said in her on-court interview, addressing the duo.

Sabalenka faces Chinese qualifier Bai Zhuoxuan next.

Title rivals Iga Swiatek and Coco Gauff play today.

Also safely through was seventh-seeded Italian Jasmine Paolini as she outclassed Belarusian qualifier Aliaksandra Sasnovich 6-1, 6-2.

Elina Svitolina, the Ukrainian 12th seed, eased past Cristina Bucsa of Spain 6-4, 6-1.

But seeded fellow Ukrainians Dayana Yastremska and Marta Kostyuk were dumped out early, as was the American great Williams.

The seven-time major champion was the oldest woman to play in the history of the Australian Open.

She showed glimpses of what once made her world number one, but ultimately fell after an epic battle with an opponent more than 20 years her junior.

Olga Danilovic of Serbia outlasted the veteran 6-7 (5/7), 6-3, 6-4 over a gruelling 2hrs 17mins.

"It was such a great game, such a great moment. The energy from the crowd was amazing. That lifted me up so much," Williams said.

– AFP



This handout picture released by Tennis Australia on Friday, shows the USA's Venus Williams (left) kissing a koala during an event to meet native animals ahead of the 2026 Australian Open in Melbourne.

– AFP

Libyan filmmaker fights for cinema revival

Mohamed Rahoma

TRIPOLI – Mouayed Zabtia shoots most scenes for his latest movie in a studio he built at his Tripoli home. For the filmmaker, it is one way to overcome the obstacles he faces in a country where cinema once nearly vanished.

Before a 1969 coup that brought Muammar Gaddafi to power, Libya's capital Tripoli was home to more than 20 cinemas.

"Today we have none," Zabtia told AFP.

Gaddafi was overthrown and killed in 2011, and though the censorship of his era has declined, its effects are still deeply felt through underinvestment and public disinterest.

"You have to go abroad to see films in a movie theatre," said Mohammed Rizk, an actor in Zabtia's current project, which is set in 1980s Libya when a younger generation yearned for freedom under Gaddafi.

Under the longtime ruler, cinema was viewed as a tool of foreign cultural invasion, and only movies aligned with the state were funded and promoted.

Cinemas were seen as spaces for gatherings that were difficult to control.

'Disinterest'

Many like 47-year-old Zabtia believed that Gaddafi's fall, cinema would be resurrected, but the instability that ensued has delayed any revival.



Libyan filmmaker Mouayed Zabtia (centre) directs his crew during filming outside his home-come-studio, in Tripoli on October 19, 2025. – AFP

"The problem is disinterest from all governments since 2011," Zabtia said. "We were expecting that they would help."

The filmmaker said he had funded all his productions from his own pocket, mainly with revenue from a production company he founded in 2001 to create television series and wedding videos.

It was only after the 2011 revolution that he decided to take on cinema, a goal since childhood.

In his dim-lit studio, Zabtia oversees everything – from lighting and sound to costumes – as a small crew bustles about making his latest picture, "1986".

Zabtia said the film is inspired by true events, including the

estrangement from Libya of pioneering singer Ahmed Fakroun after Gaddafi cracked down on Western-influenced music.

Today, Zabtia said, it is no longer censorship that stifles filmmaking in Libya, but an array of other challenges compounded by a lack of public support.

Authorities have in recent years attempted to revive the artform through festivals and the creation of the Libyan Film Institute in 2021.

No story without women

Zabtia said most of his work is filmed in the studio as "filming outside in Libya is very tiring".

"We lack logistic support. You need big crews, food, drinks, help

with the police for outdoor sets."

"We don't have that experience, and people are not used to seeing these kinds of cameras in the street."

Added to that, some Libyans feel cinema clashes with their moral values, he added.

Portraying women on screen is particularly difficult, Zabtia said, although he insisted it was "impossible to make a film without women when it comes to telling a story."

"We have many hidden female talents who are afraid to come forward."

Yet the director believes one solution to these social obstacles is cinema itself: "The role of cinema – our role – is to pinpoint issues and try to address them."

Despite the obstacles, a handful of Libyan films have crossed borders.

"Freedom Fields", a documentary

by Libyan-British director Naziha Arebi about three women footballers, was screened at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2018.

In 2023, "Donga", a film by Muhannad Lamin about the 2011 uprising, was shown at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam.

While "cinema doesn't really have a market in Libya", Zabtia hopes the lack of interest will translate into an opportunity to stand out and establish a niche – particularly with platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime.

"We want to develop and highlight Libyan work, talent and skills," he said.

"And we want to reach audiences overseas. It's important that they hear about Libyan stories and culture, and get to know us as a people." – AFP

Boycott-hit Eurovision to go on tour to celebrate 70 years

VIENNA - The Eurovision Song Contest will go on its first-ever tour this year to celebrate its 70th anniversary, its organiser said last week, as it reels from a boycott due to Israel's participation.

Five countries have pulled out of the contest over Israel's war in Gaza, with 35 now participating in the world's biggest live televised music event – the fewest since entry was expanded in 2004.

The tour, in June and July, will bring together "iconic Eurovision Song Contest performers and 2026's artists", the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) said on its website on Thursday.

It hailed the tour as "a celebration of the contest's legacy, its global fan community, and seven decades of unforgettable music".

"Artists will perform their own Eurovision Song Contest entries plus cover versions of their favourite songs from the contest's 70-year history," the EBU added.

Ten European cities, including London and Paris, will host the tour from June 15 to July 2, following the contest finals in Vienna on May 16.

Last Monday, a draw determined that Israel would take part in the first semi-final on May 12.

Some nations have accused

Israel of manipulating the public voting system during the 2025 contest held in Switzerland, where it finished second behind Austria, and of violating press freedom during the Gaza war.

Broadcasters from Spain, Ireland, Iceland, the Netherlands and Slovenia said they were pulling out, while 2024 winner Nemo returned his trophy in protest.

On Tuesday, bearded drag queen Conchita Wurst, one of the contest's most emblematic winners, announced that she would not participate in any future Eurovision events, citing a "personal decision".

Johannes Pietsch or JJ, the 2025 winner, last year called for an Austrian edition "without Israel", but then apologised for the uproar his proposal had caused in his country.

Last Monday's semi-final draw got 69,000 viewers on YouTube in the first 24 hours, down from 79,000 for last year's draw in that same period, according to Eurovision.

But the EBU rejoiced over a "record sell-out of tickets" for the upcoming edition, following the launch of online sales on Tuesday. – AFP

Julio Iglesias says abuse claims 'absolutely false'

Martin de Montvalon

MADRID – Spain's veteran singer and cultural icon Julio Iglesias on Friday rejected allegations of sexual abuse lodged against him by two women ex-employees, in a case that has dominated headlines.

"I deny having abused, coerced, or disrespected any woman. These accusations are absolutely false and deeply sadden me," the 82-year-old wrote on his Instagram account.

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



Spanish singer Julio Iglesias attends the funeral of fashion designer Oscar De La Renta at Church of St. Ignatius Of Loyola on November 3, 2014 in New York City. – AFP

Two 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.

In his Instagram message, Iglesias wrote: "It is with profound sadness that I respond to the accusations made by two people who previously worked for me."

"I have never felt such malice, but I still have the strength to let people know the whole truth and to defend my dignity against such a serious accusation," he said, thanking the "so many dear people" who have sent him messages of support.

Strong reactions

The allegations against the beloved crooner have sparked strong reactions in Spain after being aired on Tuesday in a joint investigation by Spanish newspaper elDiario.es and

US television network Univision.

Members of the leftist government have backed the complainants and demanded an investigation to establish the truth.

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

Iglesias has publicly embraced a "Latin lover" image, especially in older interviews where he openly discussed his sexual appetite and romantic exploits.

Iglesias's former manager Fernan Martinez told Telecinco that he was "very affectionate" and enjoyed "physical contact" but stressed he never saw the music icon "behave aggressively".

Women's Link Worldwide has said the complainants will testify at an unspecified date before Spanish prosecutors, who have up to a year to perform a preliminary investigation.

The complaint was submitted in Spain and not the Caribbean countries where the crimes allegedly took place because of Spanish legislation on gender-based violence and trafficking, the organisation added.

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. – AFP

World Weather			
CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -15°C~5°C	Manila 22°C~31°C	New York -7°C~1°C	Lisbon 8°C~15°C
Shanghai 1°C~10°C	Bangkok 23°C~33°C	London 7°C~11°C	Rio de Janeiro 22°C~31°C
Hong Kong 15°C~22°C	Tokyo 2°C~11°C	Frankfurt -2°C~5°C	Luanda 23°C~29°C
Taipei 15°C~22°C	Singapore 22°C~32°C	Vancouver 4°C~10°C	Maputo 19°C~26°C
Guangzhou 13°C~26°C	Kuala Lumpur 22°C~33°C	Paris 5°C~11°C	Dili 24°C~31°C
Nanjing -4°C~5°C	Jakarta 23°C~30°C	Moscow -4°C~3°C	São Tomé 26°C~31°C
Guilin 5°C~19°C	Seoul -11°C~-1°C	Las Vegas 5°C~21°C	Praia 19°C~25°C
Xi'an -3°C~2°C	Sydney 18°C~25°C	Monte Carlo 11°C~15°C	Bissau 17°C~34°C



High speed fun

People look at a snow motorcycle during the 2026 BC Motorcycle and Powersports Show in Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada, on Friday. — Xinhua



Dancing on the terraces

Senegal supporters cheer prior the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) final against Morocco at the Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium in Rabat, Morocco yesterday. — AFP



Great and small

A child holds a hamster as she waits for the priest to bless it on San Anton Abad's Day (Saint Anthony, patron saint of animals), in Churriana, near Malaga, Spain on Saturday. Dogs, cats, rabbits and even turtles, many dressed in their finest, trooped into churches across Spain in search of blessing on Saint Anthony's Day, for the patron saint of animals.



— AFP

Heavy duty wetsuits

An aerial drone photo shows people in crayfish wet suits experiencing floating on the water at a park in Yinchuan, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region on Saturday. — Xinhua



Sweet revenge

A participant tries to control a bull during an annual bull-taming 'Jallikattu' festival in Palamedu village on the outskirts of Madurai, India on Friday. — AFP



3,563 carats

'Star of Pure Land' certified by the Gemmological Institute of America (GIA) as the world's largest natural purple star sapphire is unveiled in Colombo, Sri Lanka on Saturday. — AFP