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## Macau-issued bonds exceed one trillion patacas last year: local ICBC chief

Armindo Neves

The Macau Securities and Funds Industry Association hosted a summit meeting and an inauguration ceremony for the second term of its board members at Macau Tower in Sai Van yesterday.

According to Lo Jian, who chairs the association and the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (Macau) Limited (ICBC), said that bonds issued in Macau reached around 1.06 trillion\* patacas last year.

Lo said in a speech at the ceremony that institutional investor accounts in Macau have maintained double-digit annual growth, accelerating the formation of a modern financial industry. The association now boasts 53 full members, effectively consolidating industry strength, Lo said.

Macau Monetary Authority (AMCM) Acting President Vong Sin Man said in a speech that with the support of the central government, Macau's modern financial industry continues to develop, showing significant progress particularly in the bond market and wealth management sectors.

Vong underlined that the recent completion of the amendments to the Investment Funds Law and the interconnection of the bond settlement systems between Hong Kong and Macau have further



Macau Securities and Funds Industry Association Chairman Lo Jian addresses yesterday's summit meeting and an inauguration ceremony for its second-term board members at Macau Tower in Sai Van.

– Photos: Armindo Neves

strengthened Macau's financial infrastructure, creating new opportunities for the market.

Vong also said that AMCM is currently optimising the Central Securities Depository system in phases and promoting the regular issuance of national and local government bonds to support the development of the Greater Bay Area (GBA) and the internationalisation of the renminbi (colloquially known as yuan).

According to Ge Wenjie, who heads the China Construction Bank Corporation (CCB) Macau Branch, and delivered a report on the association's affairs, noting that last year, the association refined its organisational structure by establishing a new department for external liaison and forming two specialised committees about industry training, and about examinations and qualification certification. Ge said that the association also enhanced



Macau Monetary Authority (AMCM) Acting President Vong Sin Man addresses yesterday's event at Macau Tower.

market secure a place in the Asian bond market, Zhang said.

Macau's fiscal reserves stood at 661.1 billion patacas (0.661 trillion patacas, US\$82.6 billion) at the end of October 2025, according to the latest available official data. ■

\*One trillion is equal to one thousand billion, according to the short-scale numerical system used in the United States and most English-speaking countries. One billion is equal to one thousand million. – Poe

## Trump's fresh tariff threat has global investors running for cover

LONDON – International investors bought heavily into precious metals while switching out of stocks yesterday in a flight to safety after US President Donald Trump threatened fresh tariffs over opposition to his Greenland plans.

Gold and silver prices surged, with silver hitting a new record high, while stock markets slid after European countries said they "stand united" against Trump's weekend vow to hit them with tariffs of up to 25 percent unless

Greenland is ceded by Denmark to the United States.

"Gold surged to a record high and stocks wobbled as fresh worries about Greenland surfaced," noted Neil Wilson, investor strategist at Saxo UK.

Gold has broken record after record in recent months as the precious commodity, along with sister metal silver, benefits from safe-haven status.

Gold traded yesterday around 1.6 percent higher at the end of the

European trading day, while silver rose by more than four percent, having set a new record high.

Market jitters got worse after the US Treasury chief said yesterday that any retaliatory EU tariffs on the US would be "unwise".

Experts said investors were finding it difficult to absorb what Ipek Ozkardeskaya, senior analyst at Swissquote, called a constant stream of "abnormal" news surrounding the Trump's campaign to take over Greenland.

"I lose my words in the absurdity of the news flow," she said.

Wall Street was shut yesterday for Martin Luther King Day, but there was much selling in Europe's equity markets as the mood turned risk-averse.

The luxury and auto sectors were hit hard by Trump's threats, with the share prices of LVMH dropping by close to five percent, and that of BMW by nearly four percent.

But some defence stocks climbed, with Germany's Rheinmetall up by more than one percent.

The IMF yesterday upgraded its 2026 global growth forecast, citing a boost from tech investments but warning that a reevaluation of AI productivity gains or renewed trade tensions could bring disruptions.

World economic growth is projected to hold steady at 3.3 percent this year, the global lender said.

This would match the pace of growth in 2025. – AFP, MPD

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### China delivers on 2025 growth target, offering stability in an uncertain world

– GDP up 5 pct

China's economy grew by 5.0 percent in 2025, in line with official targets, bringing the country's 14<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan period (2021-2025) to a steady close amid rising global uncertainties. – [Story on p. 7](#)

### 13 students killed in S Africa minibus collision

A minibus carrying students to school collided with a truck south of Johannesburg yesterday, killing 13 students, South African police said.

– [Story on p. 10](#)

### Socialist to face far-right candidate for Portugal's presidency

Portugal's socialist candidate won the first round of the presidential election and will face the far-right candidate in the second round, near-complete results showed on Sunday.

– [Story on p. 12](#)

# Online fraud cases dip 35 pct, but losses rise 32 pct: PJ

**Armindo Neves**

The Judiciary Police (PJ) announced in a statement yesterday that in order to review existing cooperation mechanisms and discuss new prevention and control measures to address the evolving landscape of online and telecom fraud, they held an exchange meeting on Thursday about anti-fraud measures with the Macao Post and Telecommunications Bureau (CTT) and Macau's financial regulator AMCM.

According to PJ Director Sit Chong Meng, in 2025, a total of 810 online and telecom fraud cases were recorded, representing a year-on-year decrease of over 35 percent. However, the total losses incurred from such cases rose to 300 million patacas, marking a year-on-year increase of more than 32 percent, Sit said, adding that the number reflects increasingly sophisticated and deceptive tactics employed by fraudsters.

Meanwhile, CTT Director Derby Lau Wai Meng said that her bureau has been in touch with the telecom industry to implement several anti-fraud measures. These include fully executing caller ID notifications for overseas calls, cooperating with the police to block fraudulent calls and websites, and



Judiciary Police (PJ) Director Sit Chong Meng (centre), Macao Post and Telecommunications Bureau (CTT) Director Derby Lau Wai Meng (sixth from left), Macau Monetary Authority (AMCM) Administrative Committee member Henrietta Lau Hang Kun (sixth from right) and other representatives pose before Thursday's meeting at the PJ headquarters in Zape.

- Photo: GCS

intercepting suspicious text messages. Lau also said that the "Real-Name System" which took effect in November last year had further standardised the registration of mobile prepaid cards to strengthen supervision and prevent services from being used for illegal purposes.

Macau Monetary Authority (AMCM) Administrative Committee member Henrietta

Lau Hang Kun said that AMCM continues to promote the improvement of preventive measures within the financial industry. The measures include issuing guidelines to help businesses more effectively restrict suspicious transactions and alert potential fraud victims, Lau said.

Local card-issuing banks, according to Lau, have already introduced a mobile

banking authorisation feature for online bank card transactions and have prohibited the inclusion of hyperlinks or QR codes in messages sent to customers. AMCM is collaborating with the Judiciary Police and the financial sector, with plans to introduce a suspicious account identification function for Macau's Easy Transfer system within the year, Lau said. ■

## Police nab overstayer for damaging & stealing from 6 cars

**Ada Lei**

The Judiciary Police (PJ) arrested a man from the Chinese mainland on Saturday for stealing from six cars, PJ spokesman Ho Wai Lok said during a special press conference yesterday.

Ho identified the suspect as a 50-year-old male surnamed Fu who claimed to be jobless.

According to Ho, the police received reports from six middle-

aged locals on Friday and Saturday about their cars parked in the carpark of a residential building and an open-air carpark, both on Rua da Praia do Manduco (下環街). The victims told the police that the windows of their cars had been smashed with a hard object, and someone had entered the vehicles to steal valuables from inside.

Ho noted that the first victim lost 10 patacas in coins, with repair

costs estimated at around 2,000 patacas.

The second victim reported no loss of property, but repair costs of 3,000 patacas.

The third victim lost a laptop, a handbag, a wallet, and 2,000 patacas in cash, totalling 49,000 patacas, with repair costs amounting to 4,000 patacas.

The fourth victim reported a loss of property valued at 3,000 patacas, along with repair costs of 3,000 patacas.

The fifth victim lost 3,000 patacas in cash, with repair costs of 30,000 patacas.

The sixth victim reported no loss of property, but repair costs of 6,000 patacas. The total loss for the six victims, including repair costs, amounts to about 103,010 patacas.

The police discovered that Fu had broken into the residential building's carpark early Friday morning, using a small hammer to smash the windows of three cars to gain access and search them for valuables. He later entered an open-air car park in the same neighbourhood early Sunday morning, using the same method to smash the windows of three more cars, searching them for valuables.

The police arrested Fu in a casino in Zape on Sunday afternoon, recovering some of the stolen property from him. Ho added that Fu had overstayed his permission to remain in Macau by four months and had lived in a flat on Rua da Praia do Manduco. Ho said that Fu committed the thefts because he had gambled away all his money. Under questioning, Fu told the police that he had also gambled away all the stolen money.

Fu was transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) yesterday, facing theft charges. ■



Judiciary Police (PJ) officers escort the hooded car theft suspect to a PJ van outside the PJ headquarters in Zape yesterday.

- Photo: Ada Lei

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### Macau Weather

TEMPERATURE FALLING SLIGHTLY. CLOUDY APART FROM SUNNY PERIODS. FORCE 3 TO 5 EAST TO NORTHEASTERLY WINDS, BECOMING NORTHERLIES WITH GUSTS. RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL RANGE BETWEEN 55% AND 90%.

15°C~22°C

Source: SMG

## Police arrest 2 loan sharks for falsely imprisoning gambler



Judiciary Police (PJ) officers escort the two hooded usury and false imprisonment suspects to a PJ van outside the PJ headquarters in Zape yesterday.

- Photo: Ada Lei

**Ada Lei**

The Judiciary Police (PJ) arrested two men from the mainland on Sunday for usury and the false imprisonment of a male gambler, PJ spokesman Ho Wai Lok said during a special press conference yesterday.

Ho identified the suspects as a 37-year-old male and a 28-year-old male, both surnamed Lin, who claimed to be jobless.

According to Ho, the police received a report on Sunday morning about a young man who was being held against his will in a flat due to debts from high-interest gambling loans.

Ho noted that the victim had been approached on Sunday morning by a man, who was still at large at the time of the press conference, offering to lend him money for gambling. The victim agreed to borrow HK\$30,000 in gambling chips under three conditions: an advance deduction of HK\$3,000 as "interest" and a 20 percent "interest" on each winning round; moreover, he was required to sign an IOU for

30,000 yuan.

After signing the IOU, the victim was taken to a casino in Zape by the two Lins, receiving HK\$27,000 in chips for gambling. By 8 a.m., the victim had gambled away all the borrowed chips. The two Lins then confined the victim in a flat near the Patane wet market (沙梨頭水上街市), demanding repayment.

Ho added that while being held against his will the victim managed to call his family to tell them to report the case to the police. The police arrested the Lins at the flat and seized three smartphones, the signed IOU, a pen, a lipstick, and HK\$2,500 in cash from them. Ho said that while gambling the victim was charged HK\$10,000 by the loan sharks in "interest" and he was held for nine hours.

Ho said that the suspects used the lipstick for the victim to sign his IOU.

The duo were transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) yesterday, facing charges of false imprisonment and usury. ■

## Top skateboarders to join '2026 FISE: Battle of the Champions'

**Rui Pastorin**

Integrated resort operator Melco's Studio City will be hosting the skateboarding competition "2026 FISE: Battle of the Champions" in Macau from March 13 to 15.

Following the invitation-only street skateboarding tournament's 2025 Macau debut, the event will again gather the top street skateboarders from around the world at the Studio City Event Centre in Cotai, the statement noted.

Event highlights include a men's and women's ollie\* contests and seeding\*\* games for pro skateboarders, along with top 16 battles. In all, the statement said that over the event period, athletes will compete across Pro Men Women, Amateur, and Junior divisions.

Last year's champion, young professional skateboarder Cui Chenxi, will return for this edition. The 16-year-old skateboarder was born in Jinan, Shandong and, when she was 14, won gold in women's street skateboarding at the 19th Asian Games in Hangzhou, becoming the youngest Chinese gold medallist in the Asian Games, according to Wikipedia.



This image downloaded from the Studio City website promotes the FISE: Battle of the Champions slated to take place at the Cotai integrated resort's event centre March 13 to 15.

Other notable names revealed in yesterday's statement are South Korea's Juni Kang, mainland Chinese skateboarder Pan Jiajie and Margielyn Didal from the Philippines, with the full line-up, along with the park, to be unveiled in due course.

"More than a competition, FISE: Battle of the Champions is an urban festival, uniting fans, athletes, and creatives in a vibrant celebration of skate culture", according to the statement.

More details can be found on the Studio City website on <https://www.studiocity-macau.com/en/events/fise-battle-of-the-champions-macau>, with tickets now available. ■

*\*In skateboarding, an "ollie" is a fundamental trick where the rider leaps into the air while the skateboard remains beneath them. - Poe*

*\*\*According to AI chatbot Poe, in sport, "seeding" means ranking teams or players in a tournament based on their past performance or skill level. This helps ensure that the strongest competitors don't play against each other in the early rounds, making the competition fairer and more exciting.*

## 1<sup>st</sup> Chinese Culture Performances Season to stage 'Farewell My Concubine' from Jan 29 to Feb 1

**Khalel Vallo**

The inaugural "Chinese Culture Performances Season" is slated to present the immersive drama "Farewell My Concubine" by Beijing People's Art Theatre from January 29 to February 1 at the Macau Cultural Centre's (CCM) Box II in Nape, alongside a series of workshops and outreach activities, according to a statement by the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) on Friday.

Organised by the bureau under the patronage of the Secretariat for Social Affairs and Culture in conjunction with the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Macau SAR, the season aims to showcase innovative productions highlighting the depth and vitality of traditional Chinese culture.

Written by 2012 Nobel Literature Prize laureate Mo Yan, "Farewell My Concubine" departs from conventional historical drama narratives and examines themes such as power, survival and responsibility through layered encounters between Consort Yu Ji and Empress Lü Zhi that transcend time and space, the statement said.

The immersive stage design aims to place audiences inside a recreated "Chu" military



This undated handout photo provided by the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) shows the main cast for the "Farewell My Concubine" immersive drama by the Beijing People's Art Theatre, slated to be staged from January 29 to February 1 at the Macau Cultural Centre's (CCM) Box II in Nape.

tent", where they sit on woven mats and stools at varying heights to experience the characters' emotional entanglements at close range, according to the statement.

Founded in 1952, the Beijing People's Art Theatre is one of China's most influential drama companies, having staged more than 300 productions over the past seven decades and nurtured generations of theatre actors.

The statement noted that the production team will also conduct outreach activities, including an "Inter-regional Young Actors Dialogue" and themed workshops, adding that these sessions will explore character development and performance techniques, while additional activities such as an "Enamel Jewellery Workshop" and a "Calligraphy Workshop for Seniors" will introduce participants to traditional craftsmanship and stage aesthetics.

Registration for activities is

available through the "Activity Application" section of the Macao One Account app, with places to be allocated either on a first-come, first-served basis or by drawing lots.

The show will be performed in Putonghua (Mandarin) with Cantonese and English subtitles.

Tickets, which are priced at 220 patacas, for "Farewell My Concubine" and other programmes in the Chinese Culture Performances Season are now on sale via Enjoy Macao Ticketing ([ticketing.enjoymacao.mo](https://ticketing.enjoymacao.mo)). A 50 percent discount is available to eligible cardholders such as Macao Resident Identity Card (BIR), full-time Student Card, Macao Teacher Card, Macao Senior Citizen Card or Disability Assessment Registration Card. ■

*\*Chu (楚) was a powerful feudal state during the Zhou Dynasty in ancient China. It existed from around c. 1030 BCE to 223 BCE, making it one of the longest-lasting states of the period. - DeepSeek*

## MGTO to give free coach tickets to Macau-bound int'l visitors arriving at HK airport

**Khalel Vallo**

The Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) announced in a statement yesterday that it is rolling out a special offer today, giving international visitors free direct coach tickets from Hong Kong International Airport to Macau, in order to expand foreign visitor markets and promote extended travel to Macau.

According to the statement, MGTO has partnered with Hong Kong & Macao International Airport Transportation Service Company Limited (Macau HK Airport Direct) to launch the year-long offer, which runs from today through the end of this year.



This infographic provided by the Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) yesterday promotes its year-long special offer of free direct coach tickets from the restricted area of Hong Kong International Airport to Macau, starting today.

Bridge (HZMB) checkpoint.

According to the statement, the initiative is designed to stimulate foreign visitors' interest in visiting Macau, diversify visitor sources and support the city's tourism recovery and growth.

In order to maximise exposure, MGTO and the Hong Kong-Macao coach service operator will promote the offer through online and offline channels, including social media, as well as in collaboration with airlines and travel agencies in different markets, the statement said.

The promotion will be aligned with Macau's year-round calendar of events and overseas promotions, aiming to encourage visitors to experience the city's latest "tourism +" attractions and facilities, extend their length of stay and increase spending, MGTO said.

Foreign visitors may make advance bookings through the service operator's official website (<https://www.macauhkgairportbus.com/>) and enjoy free coach tickets an unlimited number of times during the promotion period, subject to terms, conditions and seat availability, the statement noted, adding that free tickets will only be available within a limited quota.

The statement did not elaborate on the quota. ■



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## Liang Jiajie presents artworks in ADVANCED Realm Artistry exhibition

**Rui Pastorin**

Exhibitiongoers stepping into the Youth Artist Exhibition Room at 10 Fantasia Gallery will find various watercolours along with mixed media works on display for “ADVANCED’ Realm Artistry: Liang Jiajie’s Art Exhibition”.

Organised by the Macau Youth Art Association and having recently kicked off, the exhibition showcases a total of 32 watercolours of various sizes presented throughout the exhibition venue located on the gallery’s basement level, with many featuring vibrant colours. Visitors to the gallery will find quiet moments of nature and greens among the over 30 works on show. Moreover, aside from Liang’s paintings are mixed media pieces designed with colourful floral themes.

Elaborating on the exhibition, a statement on the gallery’s website notes that it goes beyond showcasing art works, serving as a medium for expressing life’s emotions, weaving together Liang’s doctoral research on life and emotional art education through lines, colours, and composition. The website statement also highlights the guidance he has received from his four mentors throughout his art journey.

Moreover, through the ongoing art showcase, the statement also highlighted that the artist “captures the essence of changing seasons to convey life’s rhythm and depicts everyday minutiae to preserve the warmth of human existence”. Moreover, curator Leong Sin Teng noted in a statement provided at the venue that the exhibition presents “a contemporary artistic practice about “constructing artistic conception” and “coexistence of life.”

Originally from Kaiping, Guangdong Province, and currently residing in Macau, Liang is a teacher and an artist who has won multiple awards. His profile on the Macau Youth Art Association website notes that he focuses on elementary art education and the psychology of children’s painting, having also guided students to enter more than a hundred art contests to excellent results. He mainly focuses on oil painting and watercolour illustration, the website notes.

The exhibition is organised by the Macau Youth Art Association in conjunction with several other entities, namely the Macau Artist Society, the Creative Industries Promotion Association of St. Lazarus Church District, 10 Fantasia, the Art Teacher Communication Association of Macau, and the Mountain and Sea Art Museum in the Guangdong-Macao In-depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin.

One can visit the “ADVANCED’ Realm Artistry: Liang Jiajie’s Art Exhibition” through February 26, with the free-admission gallery open from 11 a.m. through 6 p.m. from Tuesdays to Sundays. It is closed on Mondays. One can find more details on the gallery’s Facebook page.

The gallery is located on Calçada da Igreja de S. Lázaro (瘋堂斜巷).

Photos: Rui Pastorin



## Govt proposes legal exemptions from 183-day minimum stay for locals living in Hengqin



**Social Security Fund (FSS) President Chan Pou Wan (left) speaks during yesterday's press conference at Government Headquarters as Secretary for Administration and Justice Wong Sio Chak, also the spokesman for the government's top advisory Executive Council, looks on.**

**– Photo: Tony Wong**

**Tony Wong**  
from the 183-day minimum stay requirement.

Macau's social security system only covers local residents, both permanent and non-permanent.

According to the current versions of the two laws, those who do not stay in Macau for humanitarian reasons or other duly substantiated reasons can also be exempted from the 183-day minimum stay requirement, in which case it will be the chief executive who decides whether to approve the respective application after consulting FSS officials.

The Macau government rolled out a measure in early 2024 enabling those living in Hengqin to be exempted from the 183-day minimum stay requirement listed in the two laws, by allowing them to submit their applications to the Social Security Fund requesting that they be exempted from the stay requirement due to "other duly substantiated reasons" listed by the two laws.

The amendment bill announced yesterday aims to enable those living in Hengqin to be formally and legally exempted from the 183-day minimum stay requirement listed in the two laws in the future.

According to Wong and Chan, the amendment bill proposes to add one more reason for exemption from the 183-day minimum stay requirement in the two laws, namely those working in the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin, or studying there either for a higher education degree or being enrolled in a school, or merely living there.

Chan noted that if the amendment bill is passed by the legislature in its final reading, the amended versions of the two laws will enable the Social Security Fund to directly assess applications submitted by those living in Hengqin for exemptions from the 183-day minimum stay requirement, a change from the current situation in which such applications must be passed to the chief executive for approval on a case-by-case basis. ■

Similarly, according to the current version of the law on the social security system, self-employed Macau residents are only eligible to register to pay their contributions (dues) if they stay in Macau for at least 183 days a year. Similarly, self-employed Macau residents who are not in Macau because of the special reasons mentioned above can be exempted

## Govt raises caregiver subsidy to 2,400 patacas per month

**Tony Wong**

The government announced yesterday that it has increased its caregiver subsidy to 2,400 patacas from 2,175 patacas per month, effective from this month.

The government's caregiver subsidy is issued to those who are looked after by a caregiver, rather than the caregiver.

The caregiver subsidy was launched in December 2020 as a pilot scheme, which was transformed into a permanent programme in December 2023.

Moreover, according to yesterday's government announcements, those with a severe or profound level of primary psychosis\* have been newly included as the subsidy's beneficiaries.

The caregiver subsidy is paid to the respective beneficiaries once every two months, meaning that they receive a payment equivalent to two months of their subsidies every time.

The 10.3-percent increase in the monthly amount of the caregiver subsidy was announced by an executive order by Secretary for Social Affairs and Culture Wallis O Lam published in the Official Gazette (BO) yesterday, when the Social Welfare Bureau (IAS) also issued a statement on the matter.

The executive order, which was signed by Wallis O on December 31 last year, takes effect today after its promulgation in the gazette yesterday.

This is the first time that the caregiver subsidy has been increased since its inception in December 2020.

The executive order gazetted yesterday amends the government's regulation governing its caregiver subsidy programme which came into force in December 2023.

After including the new category of beneficiaries (those with a severe or profound level of primary psychosis) announced yesterday, the caregiver subsidy programme now covers those who



**This file photo taken last year shows the headquarters of the Social Welfare Bureau (IAS) on Estrada do Cemitério.**

**– Photo: Tony Wong**

are bedridden; those with a severe or profound intellectual disability; those with a severe or profound physical disability; and those with a severe or profound mental disability (only limited to autism and primary psychosis).

Only permanent local residents who have habitually been living in Macau over the past 18 months are eligible for the caregiver subsidy.

Those who are bedridden are officially defined as those who are unable to sit or stand by themselves without the assistance of others or tools.

In Macau, those with disabilities need to be assessed by the Social Welfare Bureau first to determine the officially recognised levels of their disabilities. Under the assessment system, there are six kinds of impairment, namely visual, audio, verbal, physical, intellectual, and mental. There are four levels for the six kinds of impairment, namely slight, moderate, severe, and profound.

According to yesterday's announcements, another relaxation of the caregiver subsidy's eligibility is that those under the age of four with an intellectual disability, a physical disability or a mental disability are eligible for the subsidy regardless of the levels of their disabilities.

In order for the potential beneficiaries to be eligible to receive the subsidy, according to the regulation, the respective caregivers must also meet certain criteria.

The caregivers must be local residents – permanent or non-permanent – aged at least 16 and must live with those who depend on them. In addition, the caregivers must be officially regarded as being capable of providing proper assistance to those being taken care of.

The caregiver subsidy is only issued to those with financial hardship. The amendments to the subsidy's regulation announced yesterday also raise the maximum limits of the applicants' household monthly income.

For instance, according to the new limits which take effect today, the monthly income of a two-member household now must not exceed 29,560 patacas in order to be eligible for the subsidy, while the maximum limit for a household with eight or more members now stands at 75,000 patacas. ■

**\* Primary psychosis refers to a mental disorder where psychosis is the core and defining feature, rather than being secondary to another condition. This typically includes diagnoses such as schizophrenia and related psychotic disorders, where symptoms like delusions, hallucinations, and disorganized thinking are central. It distinguishes these conditions from secondary psychosis, which is caused by other medical issues like substance use, brain injury, or a mood disorder. The term emphasises that the psychosis is the principal illness itself. – DeepSeek**

## Customs seizes 50 kg of stony corals at mega bridge

**Armindo Neves**

The Macau Customs Service announced in a statement on Sunday that it officers seized 50 kilograms of stony corals\* – also known as hard corals – last Monday at the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge (HKZMB) checkpoint.

According to the statement, last Monday, customs officers at the mega bridge's Macau Port checkpoint arrivals lane intercepted a cross-border vehicle through the bridge's risk management system.

An investigation revealed that a local driver attempted to smuggle 50 kilograms of stony corals into Macau.

According to Macau's External Trade Law, the driver faces a maximum fine 100,000 patacas,

while the seized contraband has been confiscated, the statement said, adding that the local driver has been referred to the Economic and Technological Development Bureau (DSEDT) for follow-up action on suspicion of violating relevant provisions of the implementing legislation for the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). ■



**This undated handout photo provided by the Macau Customs Service on Sunday shows the 50 kilograms of stony corals seized by its officers last Monday at the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge (HKZMB) Macau Port (checkpoint).**

**\* "Stony corals" are marine animals in the order Scleractinia within the class Anthozoa. They are characterised by their ability to secrete a hard, solid skeleton made of calcium carbonate (aragonite). This skeletal structure forms the primary architectural foundation of coral reefs, making them the world's most significant reef-building organisms. – DeepSeek**

# Shenzhou-20 return capsule touches down on Earth

JIUQUAN — The return capsule of the Shenzhou-20 spaceship, carrying no astronauts, touched down at the Dongfeng landing site in the northern Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region at 9:34 a.m. yesterday, according to the China Manned Space Agency (CMSA).

On-site inspections confirmed that the return capsule's overall appearance was normal and that items inside were in good condition. The Shenzhou-20 spaceship return mission was a complete success, the CMSA said.

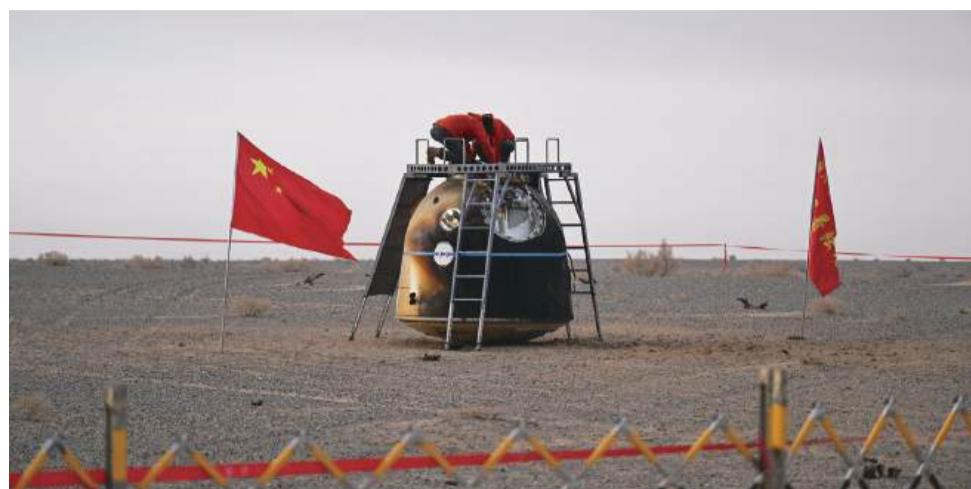
"With the return of the Shenzhou-20 spaceship, all main tasks of the space emergency response for China's space station have been successfully completed," it announced.

The Shenzhou-20 crewed spacecraft was launched from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in northwest China on April 24, 2025, and it later successfully docked with the space station. Its return was postponed in early November due to a suspected space debris impact incident, and it remained in orbit to conduct related experiments.

At 12:23 a.m. yesterday, the spacecraft undocked from the space station combination and began its unmanned return journey. With a total orbital duration of 270 days, the mission verified the spacecraft's capability to remain docked in orbit for nine months, the CMSA noted.

China on Oct. 31, 2025, launched the Shenzhou-21 crewed spaceship, sending three astronauts to its orbiting space station on a six-month mission.

To mitigate risks during the return of the Shenzhou-20 spacecraft, the Shenzhou-21 astronaut crew took the opportunity of extravehicular activities on Dec. 9, 2025, to capture close-up images of the return capsule's window using a high-definition



The return capsule of the Shenzhou-20 spaceship is pictured at the Dongfeng landing site in the northern Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region yesterday. The return capsule of the Shenzhou-20 spaceship, carrying no astronauts, touched down at the Dongfeng landing site at 9:34 a.m. yesterday, according to the China Manned Space Agency (CMSA).

— Xinhua

camera, further investigating the condition of window cracks stemming from a suspected collision with space debris.

Notably, in preparation for the emergency launch of the Shenzhou-22 spacecraft, a window crack treatment device was urgently developed and sent to the space station. The astronauts installed the device inside the Shenzhou-20 return capsule, effectively enhancing the capsule's thermal protection and sealing capabilities for the return journey.

The CMSA recalled that after the suspected impact damage was detected on the Shenzhou-20 spacecraft's window, the mission command promptly organized simulation analysis and experimental verification, adjusting the mission plan and activating emergency procedures.

On Nov. 14, 2025, the Shenzhou-20 crew safely returned to Earth aboard the Shenzhou-21 spacecraft.

Eleven days later, the emergency launch of

the Shenzhou-22 spacecraft was successfully carried out. This was the first such emergency launch in China's manned space program history, the CMSA said. This spaceship, which flew without crew, is expected to serve as a return vessel for the three Shenzhou-21 astronauts currently in orbit.

Meanwhile, the Shenzhou-23 spacecraft, which will be used for the rolling backup mission, has arrived at the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center, while a Long March-2F Y23 carrier rocket is about to be shipped to the launch site, the CMSA revealed.

The Shenzhou-20 astronauts, namely Chen Dong, Chen Zhongrui and Wang Jie, are all in good health. They met the press in Beijing on January 16, which was their first public appearance since returning to Earth.

The trio spent 204 days in orbit, setting a new record for the longest in-orbit stay among Chinese astronaut crews, the CMSA said.

— Xinhua

## Success of US firms in China demonstrates benefits of cooperation: FM spokesperson

BEIJING — The success of US companies in China shows that both sides benefit from cooperation, a Foreign Ministry spokesperson said yesterday, adding that China welcomes businesses from all countries, including the United States, to seize the opportunities of China's high-quality development.

A recent survey by the American Chamber of Commerce (AmCham) in China showed that a growing number of US companies in China are optimistic about market growth — more than half expect to be profitable or very profitable in 2025, over 70 percent report no plans to relocate operations, and nearly 60 percent plan to increase investment in China.

This once again shows that China's mega-size market offers enormous opportunities to the world, and investing in China means staying ahead of the curve and becoming profitable, spokesperson Guo Jiakun told a press briefing.

"The success of American companies in China demonstrates that China and the US benefit from cooperation and a steady, sound and sustainable relationship is in the interest of both sides," Guo said.

He said China's economy is gathering momentum and growth drivers are on the upgrade. China will remain a source of stability, growth and innovation for the world economy.

"We welcome US and other foreign companies to seize the opportunities of China's high-quality development and greatly benefit from China's multi-trillion-yuan market," he said.

— Xinhua

## Don't use 'democratic rhetoric' to weave an illusory myth of leadership

Commentary by Stefan Sigfried\*

In the West, freedom of expression is widely regarded as essential for revealing mistakes, exposing wrongdoing, and holding leaders accountable. It has become a sacrosanct principle, often accompanied by the assumption that societies without near-unlimited freedom of speech are inferior.

By this logic, a country with robust protections — such as the United States and its First Amendment to the Constitution — ought to work remarkably well. But what do we see? The United States has repeatedly been drawn into wars, has consistently sponsored colour revolutions abroad, and has failed to deliver broad-based prosperity for most citizens over recent decades. Freedom of expression, viewed as a guarantee of societal well-being, is clearly flawed: It may illuminate problems, but in a market-driven media environment, it often fails to do so, drowned out by wealthy elites. Professor Robert Cialdini calls simplified reasoning about something a "shortcut": a quick, superficial judgment that substitutes for comprehensive reasoning. The Western-held understanding of freedom of expression is such a shortcut.

As an engineer, it is natural for me to view a society as a system, and engineers build systems in two basic ways: closed-loop (with feedback) or open-loop (without feedback). Open-loop systems respond quickly but can't self-correct, lacking a feedback signal to realign them. Closed-loop systems, by contrast, achieve greater accuracy through feedback. This latter type is what we need in

a society, but it is worth noting that success hinges on the quality of the feedback signal itself. In system design, we know that if feedback signals are flawed, they can harm a system, for example, by causing instability.

Healthy feedback signals in a society deliver verifiable facts, expose corruption and waste, and offer constructive solutions, strengthening societal resilience and harmony. That kind of feedback signal is indispensable if a society is to thrive. But signals that spread fear, undermine security and ignore facts soon become poisonous. No society needs to tolerate such distortions. Think about the common rule that you can't falsely yell "fire" in a theatre because it could create a catastrophe, especially if the theatre is crowded and people panic, but if a fire is starting, yelling "fire" is most appropriate. Nor do we allow defamatory speech. A signal sent must thus be rooted in facts and be sent to make a society work, not to destroy it.

In an earlier article, "How is our democracy really doing?" I argued that democracy cannot be reduced to Western-style elections; the true test is whether citizens feel they live in a good society. A similar approach must be used when assessing the feedback signals a country provides: Does a society equip citizens with effective ways to voice their concerns and have them addressed by authorities? Thus, the test "Do we have freedom of expression?" is superficial, especially if a country is faltering. A meaningful test is rather: "Are there healthy feedback signals?"

The Chinese whole-process people's

democracy operates through an integrated ecosystem of feedback mechanisms, creating a closed-loop form of governance. A good example is the massive public consultation for the 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan (2026-2030), which collected over three million suggestions. By embedding consultation links and QR codes across widely used digital platforms, authorities sought to maximize reach and encourage mass participation. Each such suggestion is a feedback signal.

Other examples include the national 12345 government service hotline, the interactive "Leader's Message Board," where officials must publicly reply to citizens, and the Xinfang petition system, created in 1949 to allow citizens to petition over grievances and official misconduct. Together, these mechanisms operate within a broader governance framework that integrates public opinion into policy formation.

But what do healthy feedback signals mainly depend on? Forty years ago, I became convinced that the answer is leadership. During a quality-assurance course, two elderly, seasoned British instructors opened a session by stating: "Seventy percent of an organisation's problems are caused by management." After a pause — just long enough for us to assume the remaining thirty percent must be ours — they added, "And the other thirty percent are indirectly caused by management." Everything depends on leadership. For me, this truth has only been reinforced over the years.

As author and leadership expert Simon

Sinek observes, "Leadership is not about being in charge. It's about taking care of those in your charge," and taking care starts with listening. As when Chinese President Xi Jinping instructed the government and the Party to "investigate broadly and deeply the people's conditions, listen to the voices of the people, and gather the wisdom of the masses to ... push forward Chinese-style modernization and continuously realize the people's aspirations for a better life." Good leaders encourage and listen to healthy feedback signals, and this determines everything.

To sum up, invoking "democracy" and "freedom of expression" easily blinds us to what truly matters. We must look beyond the rhetoric, dig deeper, and judge by outcomes. If we evaluate societies by their fruits — stability, poverty reduction, infrastructure, social cohesion — it becomes evident which societies currently enjoy a higher-calibre of leadership. And it is not in Europe. With the Western system faltering, it is high time to look for inspiration about better feedback signals in places like China.

\*The author is based in Stockholm, Sweden, and worked as a journalist and with modeling of complex systems, software testing, quality assurance, and programming, including military applications. He has written several books, including *China Unbeatable? Why Creating True Wealth Brings Success*.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the positions of Xinhua News Agency.

— Xinhua

# China delivers on 2025 growth target, offering stability in an uncertain world – GDP up 5 pct

## Analysis

BEIJING – China's economy grew by 5.0 percent in 2025, in line with official targets, bringing the country's 14<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan period (2021-2025) to a steady close amid rising global uncertainties.

The world's second-largest economy saw its gross domestic product (GDP) reach a record of 140.19 trillion yuan last year, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) said yesterday.

The economy's fourth-quarter performance also firmed, expanding 4.5 percent from a year earlier and growing 1.2 percent from the previous quarter.

Facing abrupt changes in the external environment and mounting domestic difficulties and challenges, China adopted more proactive and effective macro policies. This approach has helped offset adverse external shocks and stabilize the foundation for development in the face of headwinds, Kang Yi, head of the NBS, told a press conference.

"For a super-large economy like China, achieving such stable development is by no means easy amid intertwined risks and challenges," Kang noted.

Looking globally, China has maintained a growth rate that ranks among the highest of major economies, serving as one of the most stable and reliable engines of world economic growth, with its contribution to global growth expected to be around 30 percent, he added.

## STABILITY UNDERPINNED BY POLICY

"Stability was a defining feature of China's economy in 2025," Kang said.

Consumption played a more pronounced "ballast" role as the country shifted toward making domestic demand the main engine and stabilizing anchor of economic growth.

Total retail sales of consumer goods topped 50 trillion yuan, rising 3.7 percent from a year earlier and consolidating China's position as one of the world's largest retail markets. Online retail sales climbed 8.6 percent as e-commerce and new sales channels continued to expand.

Service consumption added support. Service retail sales grew 5.5 percent, and



*This drone photo shows the robotic production line at the Seres Super Factory in Liangjiang New Area, Chongqing Municipality, on September 19, 2025. Seres is an electric vehicle (EV) manufacturer. The term "Super Factory" typically suggests advanced manufacturing capabilities, often involving automation and innovation. – Xinhua*

service-related spending accounted for 46.1 percent of per-capita consumption expenditure in 2025.

Final consumption expenditure contributed 52 percent of overall economic growth, up by five percentage points compared to a year earlier, making it "the main driver and a stabilizing anchor of economic growth," Kang said.

Policymakers reinforced the recovery with a slew of pro-consumption measures throughout the year, including a 500-billion-yuan re-lending facility aimed at boosting service consumption and elderly care, alongside a nationwide initiative funded by ultra-long special treasury bonds to support consumer goods trade-in programs.

Eliza Mileva, the World Bank's lead economist for China, recently noted that the country's proactive policies aimed at boosting household consumption, including raising pension benefits and providing childcare subsidies, would strengthen the social safety net, reduce precautionary savings and exert a more sustainable impact on driving domestic consumption.

Yesterday's data also revealed a clearer shift in the country's industrial sector toward

new growth drivers. Notably, equipment manufacturing and high-tech manufacturing accounted for 36.8 percent and 17.1 percent of value-added industrial output, respectively.

The added-value of the manufacturing sector reached 34.7 trillion yuan in 2025, up 6.1 percent year on year, keeping its share of GDP at around 25 percent. China is expected to remain the world's largest manufacturing country for the 16th consecutive year.

Such resilience was underpinned by a proactive stance on macro policy. Last year, the country cut the reserve requirement ratio by 0.5 percentage points and lowered a key policy rate by 0.1 percentage points, moves aimed at reducing financing costs and keeping liquidity ample.

On the fiscal side, authorities issued 1.3 trillion yuan in ultra-long special treasury bonds and established new policy tools to energize investment.

Authorities also took targeted steps to stabilize key sectors and support employment. In the property sector, efforts included credit-related policies and assistance for developers and homebuyers, while the government's emphasis on job creation helped keep the labor market broadly stable.

## MOMENTUM SET TO HOLD

Looking ahead, policymakers have signaled a more proactive stance in 2026 to cement the recovery. At December's Central Economic Work Conference, Chinese leadership put expanding domestic demand at the top of economic priorities in 2026 and reiterated a focus on high-quality development.

Policy support is already on the way, with 62.5 billion yuan in ultra-long special treasury bond funds front-loaded to back this year's trade-ins for consumer goods.

Monetary policy also remains supportive. Last week, the People's Bank of China (PBOC) announced a 0.25-percentage-point cut to the interest rates on all structural monetary policy tools. The rate cuts for re-lending and re-discount facilities took effect on Monday.

The central bank has also indicated that there is room to further cut interest rates and the reserve requirement ratio this year.

Meanwhile, the PBOC unveiled additional monetary and financial measures, including a dedicated 1-trillion-yuan re-lending quota for private enterprises and a move to lower the minimum down payment ratio for commercial property mortgages to 30 percent.

"China's economy has shown notable resilience despite facing multiple shocks in recent years," said Sonali Jain-Chandra, who led an International Monetary Fund (IMF) team that visited Beijing and Shanghai last month.

Liu Jing, chief economist for Greater China at HSBC, expects China in 2026 to stay on a path of structural transformation and achieve appropriate growth, with domestic demand, including both consumption and investment, providing the primary impetus amid a more balanced import-export mix.

"Over the medium to long term, service consumption will be a more critical growth driver," Liu was quoted last month by Shanghai Securities News as saying. HSBC forecast a recovery in fixed-asset investment, led by a strong rebound in infrastructure investment from early 2026.

It also sees innovation capacity becoming another key advantage of the country – alongside its massive production base and ultra-large-scale market – which has the potential to further attract foreign investment. – Xinhua

## China launches new internet satellite group

WENCHANG, Hainan – China launched a Long March-12 carrier rocket yesterday in the southern island province of Hainan, sending a group of internet satellites into space.

The rocket lifted off at 3:48 p.m. from the Hainan commercial spacecraft launch site. The payloads, the 19<sup>th</sup> group of low-orbit internet satellites, entered into preset orbit successfully.

Yesterday marked the second launch of low-orbit satellites for China's internet satellite constellation this year. The first of the year took place six days ago, when the 18<sup>th</sup> group of satellites was launched from the same site in Hainan.

In the recommendations for the formulation of China's 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan (2026-2030), the aerospace sector has been emphasized as an important part of the country's industrial system and real economy. Commercial aerospace companies, with high efficiency levels, market-driven technological innovation and mass production capabilities, have become an important part of China's space endeavors.

The satellite group launched yesterday was developed by GalaxySpace, which is a commercial firm based in Beijing and one of several Chinese aerospace firms to contribute to the construction of Starlink-style satellite networks over recent years. It was the second time the company has undertaken such space infrastructure development.

The seventh group of low-orbit internet satellites – also developed by GalaxySpace – was successfully launched into space on August 4, 2025.

Hu Zhao, chief model designer at GalaxySpace, said that the satellites launched on Monday are equipped with technologies developed by the company. For their R&D, the company fully integrated the entire digital process for the first time, greatly improving production efficiency.

"Satellite mass production capacity is seen as key to the development of new space infrastructure," Hu said.

While continuously shortening its development cycle, GalaxySpace's smart satellite factory has built a complete industrial ecosystem from R&D and the

production of satellite parts to the integration and testing of complete satellites, he added.

For smartphone-satellite direct connection technology, for example, GalaxySpace has built a framework including antennas, solar wings and satellite-borne base stations. It has successfully launched over 40 satellites equipped with such technology.

Yang Kuan, vice president of the Beijing Institute of Technology's aerospace policy and law institute, said that low-orbit satellite

constellations are not only the core support for emerging application scenarios such as smartphone-satellite direct connection, but are also a key to building an integrated 6G space-ground information network.

Commercial aerospace companies like GalaxySpace are cutting launch costs, accelerating technological iteration rates and playing an increasingly important role in expanding China's new space economy, Yang said.

*This drone photo shows the robotic production line at the Seres Super Factory in Liangjiang New Area, Chongqing Municipality, on September 19, 2025. Seres is an electric vehicle (EV) manufacturer. The term "Super Factory" typically suggests advanced manufacturing capabilities, often involving automation and innovation. – Xinhua*



# Trailblazer Eala exits Australian Open after 'overwhelming' scenes

**Peter Stebbings**

MELBOURNE – Packed crowds turned out to see Alexandra Eala at the Australian Open yesterday but the Philippines trailblazer was unable to deliver for her adoring fans in a first-round defeat, admitting it was “a bit overwhelming”.

The 20-year-old was playing in the main draw at Melbourne Park for the first time and even practice sessions were mobbed by large numbers of her followers.

She stormed to the first set against Alycia Parks in front of a full house at the intimate court six.

But the lower-ranked American fought back in front of the fiercely pro-Eala crowd to win 0-6, 6-3, 6-2.

The umpire had to repeatedly call for spectators to quieten down as they tried, unsuccessfully, to will Eala to victory.

Hundreds more Philippines fans watched on nearby big screens and waved their national flag.

Chants of “let’s go Alexandra” frequently rang out, then hush descended when her American opponent sealed the match.

Eala was rushed from the court afterwards surrounded by as many as a dozen security guards.

“It was so heart-warming,” she said of the hero’s welcome she received all week.

“That’s one of the things that makes a loss like today a little bit harder - I know a lot of people were rooting for me.”

Eala, who has put Philippines



*This handout picture released by Tennis Australia yesterday, shows Philippines' Alexandra Eala speaking at a press conference on day two of the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne.*

– AFP

tennis on the map, admitted however that some of the attention had been too much.

“It’s a process to take it all in. I think this week definitely there were elements that were a bit overwhelming, especially during my practices,” she said.

“I didn’t expect that many people to be there. So it’s a learning process.”

The 49th-ranked Eala has risen fast in the past 12 months.

She trains at the Rafael Nadal Academy in Mallorca and broke into the top 100 last year following her shock run to the semi-finals in Miami, where she beat world number two Iga Swiatek.

In August at the US Open, she carved out a piece of tennis history,

becoming the first player from the Philippines to win a Grand Slam singles match.

“I’m still young, so learning how to deal with all of this attention, but then at the same time being grateful,” Eala said after her loss to the 99th-ranked Parks.

Although disappointed, Eala said just being at the first major of the year was significant for her nation.

“I guess this is one of the moments that I can reflect on what this means for Philippine tennis,” she said.

“I’m the only Filipina in the draw this year. I’m the only Filipina that’s ever been in the draw, I think.

“So there are positives to take away.”

– AFP

## Fire at Pakistan mall kills at least 21

KARACHI – A fire that ripped through a shopping mall in Pakistan’s biggest city has killed at least 21 people, rescuers in Karachi said yesterday.

Families rushed to the Gul Plaza building after the blaze erupted on Saturday night at one of the coastal city’s busiest malls, where dozens of people were still missing.

“In total 21 bodies have been recovered,” Hassan Khan, spokesman for the Rescue 1122 Sindh

emergency service, told AFP.

“The search operation will continue,” he said.

The dead include a 25-year-old rescuer, Khan said, while at least 30 injured people were hospitalised.

Standing outside the burnt mall, Shehzad Ghulam said his nephew’s whereabouts were unknown.

“We have made requests to the authorities. We also request the media to help us in any way possible,” the 45-year-old said.



*Rescue workers search amid the debris using excavators after a massive fire at a shopping mall in Karachi, Pakistan yesterday.*

– AFP

“No matter what condition he is in, if he is found and returned to us, we will find some peace,” he told AFP.

The top police officer in Karachi’s southern district, Syed Asad Raza, told AFP the force has “a list of 60 missing persons”.

Rescue workers said that the blaze had been brought under control.

A government committee has launched an investigation, but it was not immediately clear what had caused the fire.

Among those waiting outside the mall was Muhammad Qaisar, who last heard from his wife, sister and daughter-in-law at 8 p.m. [local time] on Saturday.

“The phone kept ringing until 10 p.m., but no one answered. It continued to ring until midnight, but no one picked up,” Qaisar, 55, told AFP.

The three-storey shopping mall housed at least 1,200 shops, offering a wide range of goods and was famous for wedding shopping and home decoration items.

Shopkeepers and families criticised authorities for slow rescue efforts.

Fires are common in Karachi’s markets and factories, which are known for their poor infrastructure.

– AFP

## Gas discovery provides boost to Philippines fast-dwindling reserves

MANILA – Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos said yesterday that a “significant” discovery of natural gas had been made near the country’s sole producing offshore site.

About 98 billion cubic feet (2.8 billion cubic metres) of natural gas – enough to provide power to 5.7 million homes for a year – has been found east of the Malampaya Field near the island of Palawan, Marcos said.

The Philippines has some of the region’s highest energy costs and faces a looming crisis as the Malampaya gas field, which supplies about 40 percent of power to the archipelago’s main island, Luzon, is expected to run dry within a few years.

The discovery – five kilometres east of the Malampaya Field – is the first in more than a decade and suggested the potential to produce even more, Marcos said.

“This helps Malampaya’s contribution and strengthens our domestic gas supply for many years to come. Initial testing showed that the well flowed at 60 million cubic feet per day,” Marcos said in a statement.

The Philippines – regularly affected by electricity outages – relies on imported carbon-belching

coal for more than half of its power generation.

Kairos Dela Cruz, executive director of the Manila-based Institute for Climate and Sustainable Cities, told AFP that while the find was “relatively small”, it could point the way to finding other nearby gas resources.

“The discovery of these other gas fields will provide new indigenous supply and increase energy security,” he said.

“It also helps extend the operating life of the 500-kilometre undersea gas pipeline, long enough for larger gas fields in the area to be discovered.”

A former industry executive who spoke on condition of anonymity estimated the new find could extend the Malampaya Field’s life by two to three years.

Long-term, the country will still need to increase its focus on renewables ranging from solar to hydro to offshore wind projects, Dela Cruz said.

In 2022, then-president Rodrigo Duterte called a halt to oil and gas exploration in areas of the South China Sea disputed with China.

– AFP

## Japan PM calls snap election on Feb 8 to seek stronger mandate

**Hiroshi Hiyama and Kyoko Hasegawa**

TOKYO – Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi said yesterday she would dissolve parliament this week ahead of a snap election on February 8, hoping for a stronger mandate to push through her ambitious policy agenda.

The country’s first woman leader is banking on her high poll numbers to lead the unpopular ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to victory.

“Is Sanae Takaichi fit to be prime minister? I wanted to ask the sovereign people to decide,” she told a news conference.

“Following the dissolution of the lower house on January 23, the schedule will be set for campaigning to start on January 27 and voting and counting held on February 8.”

If elected, Takaichi pledged yesterday to cut a tax on food for a two-year period to “alleviate the burden” on people struggling with inflation.

Takaichi’s cabinet approved a record 122.3-trillion-yen (US\$768 billion) budget for the fiscal year from April 2026, and she has vowed to get parliamentary approval as soon as possible to address rising prices and shore up the world’s fourth-largest economy.

“We have a responsibility to overcome the shackles of excessive austerity and take immediate action against the crisis at hand,” she told reporters.

The LDP has governed Japan almost uninterrupted for decades, albeit with frequent leader changes.

Takaichi was appointed premier in October, and her cabinet is riding high in the polls despite her party’s flagging popularity.

The ruling bloc – which includes coalition partner Japan Innovation Party (JIP) – has only a slim majority in the powerful lower house of parliament.

This could hamper the passage of her policy agenda, including “proactive” fiscal spending and boosting the defence budget.

“If the LDP can get a majority by itself in the lower house, that’ll help her pursue policies” without concessions to other parties, said Sadafumi Kawato, professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo.

But opposition parties say Takaichi’s plan to dissolve the lower house risks delaying its passage, with Jun Azumi of the main opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) saying it would “sacrifice livelihoods”.

Masaaki Tokuno, a 64-year-old bicycle lot manager, told AFP that “carrying out policies to tackle inflation should be first, before holding the election”.

Under Takaichi’s predecessor, Shigeru Ishiba, the LDP and its former long-term coalition partner Komeito lost its majority in both chambers in the past two national elections – most recently in the July upper house election.

The July election led Ishiba to step down, while smaller parties gained support – including the populist Sansei, which called immigration a “silent invasion” despite foreign-born residents making up just three percent of the population.

Komeito and the leading CDP have agreed to join forces to fight Takaichi, hoping their alliance can draw swing voters.

– AFP

## Prabowo puts forward nephew for central bank job

JAKARTA – Indonesia's president has nominated his nephew to join the central bank board, a minister said yesterday, stoking concerns over the financial institution's independence.

The Southeast Asian archipelago has long struggled against graft and nepotism, with power often concentrated among a small group of political elites.

President Prabowo Subianto has tapped his nephew, who already serves as deputy finance minister, and two other candidates for the next deputy central bank governor after the incumbent's resignation.

State Secretariat Minister Prasetyo Hadi told a press conference that "several names were submitted" to parliament for consideration, in a list signed off by the president.

"It's true that one of the names that we have proposed was the deputy finance minister," said Prasetyo.

The president's nephew, Thomas Djiwandono, was made deputy minister in July 2024 under Prabowo's predecessor Joko Widodo.

The next step in the nomination

process is a "fit-and-proper" hearing in parliament, said Prasetyo, who did not provide details on the reasons behind the resignation of deputy governor Juda Agung.

The central bank confirmed Juda had submitted his resignation to the president last week.

Spokesman Ramdan Denny Prakoso told AFP that "Bank Indonesia will remain focused on its main tasks of achieving and maintaining the stability of the rupiah's value, maintaining the smooth functioning of the payment system, and safeguarding the stability of the financial system to support sustainable economic growth."

The bank's board of governors, consisting of a governor and several deputies, decides its monetary policy including setting key interest rates.

The central bank is set to announce its latest benchmark policy rates this week.

Prabowo has set an ambitious economic growth target of eight percent by 2029, up from current figures of around five percent. – AFP



An Afghan girl reads the holy Koran at a madrasa, or Islamic school, in the 13th district of Kandahar on Sunday. – AFP

## Bangladesh monk pleads not guilty at start of high-profile murder trial

CHITTAGONG - Bangladesh opened the trial of outspoken Hindu monk Chinmoy Krishna Das yesterday over a lawyer's murder in 2024, a case that has highlighted religious strife in the mainly Muslim country.

Das was brought before a court in the southeastern city of Chittagong, where he rejected the murder charge before being escorted back to detention under heavy security.

Dozens of lawyers shouted "murderer" as he was led out.

The case involves the killing of lawyer Saiful Islam Alif on November 26, 2024, during violent unrest that erupted after a court had rejected Das's bail application.

Prosecuting lawyer Md Raihanul Wazed told reporters that it was "a sensitive case" that touched on "communal harmony and national security".

He said that Das and the 38 other defendants, all followers of the influential monk, were responsible for Alif's death.

"The prosecution firmly believes that the evidence produced will prove their culpability, and that justice will prevail," said the lawyer.

The case has emerged as a symbol of strained religious relations in Muslim-majority Bangladesh.

The country has grappled with political instability since a mass uprising ended the iron-grip rule of former prime minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2024.

Das is a spokesman for the Hindu group Sammilito Sanatan Jagaran Jote, which organised several rallies after Hasina's ouster to decry alleged attacks and discrimination against Hindu communities.

Hindus are Bangladesh's largest religious minority, making up around eight percent of the country's approximately 170 million people.

Das was initially arrested in November 2024 on sedition charges after leading a rally in Chittagong, where he was accused of disrespecting the national flag.

His detention and the subsequent denial of bail triggered protests that spiralled into violence, culminating in Alif's killing.

Religious relations have come under heightened scrutiny as Bangladesh prepares for its first elections since the 2024 uprising, scheduled for March 12.

According to police figures released yesterday, out of 645 incidents involving members of minority group last year, about 12 percent were classified as having a sectarian motive. – AFP

## Over 400 Indonesians 'released' by Cambodian scam networks: ambassador

### Suy Se

PHNOM PENH – More than 400 Indonesians were freed by cyberscam networks in Cambodia this month, Jakarta said yesterday, after Phnom Penh announced a fresh crackdown following the arrest of an alleged boss of the illicit industry.

Scammers working from hubs across Southeast Asia, some willingly and others trafficked, lure internet users globally into fake romances and cryptocurrency investments, netting tens of billions of dollars each year.

Hundreds of foreign nationals have left suspected scam compounds across Cambodia this month as the government pledged to "eliminate" problems related to the online fraud trade, which the United Nations says employs at least 100,000 people in Cambodia alone.

Recent Cambodian law enforcement measures resulted in "many online scam syndicates... letting their workers go", Indonesia's ambassador to Cambodia, Santo Darmosumarto, said in a video posted to social media.

From January 1-18, 440 Indonesians came to the embassy in Phnom Penh after they were "released by online scam syndicates", many seeking to return home, according to a post on Instagram.

"Because Cambodia's crackdown will continue, the embassy predicts many more will flow in from the provinces," Santo said.

Some who went to the embassy were "involved in online scams for years, some only arrived in Cambodia a few months ago", he said.



People gather in front of the Indonesian Embassy in Phnom Penh yesterday. More than 400 Indonesians were freed by cyberscam networks in Cambodia this month, Jakarta said yesterday, after Phnom Penh announced a fresh crackdown on the illicit industry following the arrest of a prominent alleged boss. – AFP

"Some still hold their passports, while others had their passports confiscated by the syndicates; some have overstayed, while others still have valid residence permits in Cambodia" and hoped to "find other work".

Santo said the embassy would expedite repatriations but all Indonesians were "being directed to return home independently", and warned against getting involved in criminal activity abroad.

### 'Chinese boss'

Dozens of people, some with suitcases, lined up outside the Indonesian embassy yesterday morning.

An 18-year-old from Indonesia's Sumatra said he fled a compound in Bavet city, near Cambodia's border with Vietnam, where he was forced to scam people online for eight months without pay despite being promised US\$600 per month.

He told AFP he arrived in Phnom Penh on Sunday and came

to the embassy to ask for a new passport because his was "with a Chinese boss".

"They heard police were coming inside the compound, so they let everyone go," he said.

About 100 people were also queuing outside the Chinese embassy in Phnom Penh yesterday afternoon, but those approached by AFP declined to speak.

China's foreign ministry spokesman Guo Jiakun said Beijing "attaches great importance to the safety of Chinese citizens overseas" when asked at a regular news briefing about the lines outside the embassy in Cambodia.

Cambodia arrested and deported Chinese-born tycoon Chen Zhi, accused of running internet scam operations from Cambodia, to China this month.

Chen, a former Cambodian government adviser, was indicted by US authorities in October. – AFP

## Thailand seizes over 330 million meth pills in 3-month drug crackdown

BANGKOK – Thailand's Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul announced yesterday the results of a counternarcotics operation over the last three months, including the seizure of over 330 million methamphetamine pills and 1.1 tonnes of crystal meth.

According to authorities, 89,076 drug-related cases were processed between October 1 and January 18, leading to the arrest of 88,421 suspects. Meanwhile, assets totaling

3.37 billion baht (around US\$107.84 million) were frozen pending legal proceedings.

During a press conference, Anutin, who is also the minister of interior, said the success of this major crackdown is a testament to the dedication of all agencies united to root out drug networks.

The Thai government has pledged to fully support officers with policy, resources, and protection to ensure they can perform their duties

with integrity and fairness, he added.

He noted that the government has approved emergency budget funds to procure high-performance mobile X-ray vehicles for the Royal Thai Police to improve the detection of concealed drugs at checkpoints.

The prime minister also urged the public to utilize the emergency hotline to report suspicious activity, emphasizing that public cooperation is vital to the eradication of illicit drugs. – Xinhua

## Blast in Kabul kills at least 7

KABUL – A blast in central Kabul yesterday killed at least seven people and injured more than a dozen others, an NGO that runs a hospital in the Afghan capital said.

An AFP journalist saw emergency services at the scene following the explosion on a street known for its flower sellers in the Shahr-e-Naw area.

Italian NGO EMERGENCY said its hospital nearby had received "seven people dead on arrival", with 13 others admitted to the surgical department.

"Among the wounded are four

women and a child," Dejan Panic, the NGO's country director, said in a statement.

The owner of a flower shop, requesting anonymity for security reasons, said the blast happened at around 3:30 p.m. [local time] at the other end of the street from his business.

He told AFP he heard the "strong sound" of a blast in the crowded area.

"It was an emergency situation. Everybody feared for his own life," he said.

"I could see at least five wounded."

Kabul police spokesman Khalid Zadran said the explosion happened "in

a hotel", without detailing the cause.

There are also multiple restaurants in the area, which was surrounded by police officers.

The AFP journalist saw a police vehicle and a truck outside a restaurant, and a car with its windows shattered.

Two Chinese citizens were seriously wounded in the explosion, China's state news agency Xinhua reported, citing a restaurant employee.

An Afghan security guard was killed and the restaurant was severely damaged, Xinhua said.

– AFP

# Turkey diplomatic protocol under spotlight after US envoy meeting



This handout photo, taken on Friday and released yesterday by the Turkish Defence Ministry, shows Turkey's Defence Minister Yasar Guler (third from right), US envoy Tom Barrack (centre) and their delegations meeting in Ankara. – AFP

## Fulya Ozerkan

ISTANBUL – A photograph showing US Ambassador Tom Barrack seated in the defence minister's office has sparked controversy in Turkey, with critics accusing the envoy of adopting a "colonial governor" posture and questioning the seating arrangement as overly dominant.

Barrack—who is also US President Donald Trump's special Syria envoy—met with Defence Minister Yasar Guler in Ankara on Friday.

The picture posted by the defence ministry depicted Barrack positioned alone in the central chair while Guler and senior commanders, including the chief of staff, were seated to the side.

Social media swarmed with critics who interpreted the image as suggesting the ambassador appeared to dominate the setting, placing Turkish officials in a more subordinate posture.

"Is this man an ambassador or a colonial governor?", Lutfu Turkkan, lawmaker for the right-wing İYİ party, wrote on X. "It's nobody's right to portray Turkey in such a state of helplessness."

Defence ministry officials, quoted by Turkish media, said the seating protocol was not specific to Barrack and that the same arrangement is applied to all visiting officials.

Veteran diplomatic correspondents said the arrangement was highly unusual by international

standards, noting that in established protocol the head of a visiting delegation is not seated in the principal position, while the host's senior official is placed to the side.

"In nearly 35 years of journalism, including 25 years covering diplomacy, I have never seen such a protocol anywhere in the world," journalist Barçın Yılmaz told AFP.

She described the setup as inconsistent with long-standing diplomatic practice, saying that departures from established protocol have become more frequent under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AKP government in recent years.

"What makes it even more surprising is that it occurred at the defence ministry, an institution known for its strict adherence to hierarchy and formal rules," she said.

Critics also said state protocol is uniform and that hosting and reception practices are governed by established national conventions.

"Unless those assigned to handle protocol are individuals lacking professional expertise... they would be expected to be familiar with the state's established conventions," said Namık Tan, the main opposition CHP party's deputy leader and Turkey's former ambassador to Washington.

## It should be reviewed'

Contacted by AFP, there was no immediate comment from the US embassy.

The seating order also drew criticism from the government's ranks.

"Today's situation is another protocol misstep that is hard to justify," former parliament speaker and one of the ruling AKP's founders Bülent Arınç said on X.

"Although Mr Barrack may have been assigned special tasks by President Trump, he is still the US ambassador to Ankara, with the same status as any other foreign envoy," he said.

"An ambassador appearing to lead a meeting with the defence minister and military chiefs is inconsistent with state protocol. If such a practice has become customary, it should be reviewed immediately."

Turkey has faced similar diplomatic protocol controversies in the past.

In 2021, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen was left without a chair during a meeting with President Erdogan in Ankara.

The incident drew criticism after then EU Council President Charles Michel took the only seat next to Erdogan, a gaffe widely referred to as "Sofagate."

In 2010, Israel publicly snubbed Turkey's then ambassador Oğuz Celikkol following Ankara's criticism of the Jewish state, with an official refusing to shake the envoy's hand and seating him on a lower chair during a meeting.

– AFP

# 13 students killed in S Africa minibus collision

JOHANNESBURG – A minibus carrying students to school collided with a truck south of Johannesburg yesterday, killing 13 students, South African police said.

It was the latest in a string of deadly crashes in a country whose modern road network is undermined by rampant speeding, reckless driving and poorly maintained vehicles.

The crash happened near the industrial city of Vanderbijlpark, about 60 kilometres south of Johannesburg.

Police said the driver of the minibus appeared to have lost control while attempting to overtake other vehicles.

The toll rose to 13 after an injured child died of the injuries, the provincial education department said in a statement.

Several children were also badly hurt.

Authorities did not immediately release the ages of the schoolchildren but provincial education minister Matome Chiloane said they were from primary schools, where pupils are aged from six years, and also high schools.

Images on social media showed the crushed minibus on the roadside with distraught parents gathered behind the police tape. Some broke down wailing when they were allowed to see the bodies.

"It is a terrible scene," Gauteng premier Panyaza Lesufi said.

In a statement of condolence, President Cyril Ramaphosa said everything must be done to enforce the rules of the road and ensure the quality of school transport services in order

to protect learners, "the nation's most precious assets".

Many South African parents have to rely on private minibuses to get their children to school because of limited public transportation.

At least five students were killed and eight others injured in September when a school minibus ploughed into a creche in a KwaZulu-Natal township.

In July 2024, 11 children – some as young as seven and eight – were killed when a minibus taking them to school near Johannesburg overturned and caught fire after being hit by another vehicle.

More than 11,400 lives were lost on South African roads in 2025, according to the latest data from the transport ministry.

# Two babies dead after incident forces evacuation of Israel nursery

## Louis Baudoin-Laarman

JERUSALEM – Israeli doctors declared two babies dead after medics evacuated 55 children from a daycare centre in Jerusalem yesterday, with local media reporting the incident may have been linked to the facility's heating system.

A baby girl was pronounced dead after being brought to hospital in "critical condition", Gal Pachis, head of the emergency centre at Shaare Zedek Hospital, told journalists in a statement broadcast live on television.

A baby boy, approximately six months old, was declared dead despite resuscitation efforts, the Hadassah Medical Centre said in a statement.

Medics did not specify the cause of the deaths.

The centre, which officials said had operated without a licence, is located in an apartment on Hamem Gimel Street, in an area predominantly inhabited by members of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community.

Resident Zalmi Neufeld, 22, told AFP at the scene that he saw "emergency personnel pulling kids out of the building".

"I saw parents crying, a lot of kids crying, kids all over the place," he added.

"It was like a war zone."

Shay Nehemia, a commander for Israel's fire and rescue agency, told reporters that "there was a strong odour" when teams arrived on the scene, but that "no material has been found, no indication of any hazardous substance".

Nehemia said the investigation was ongoing.

Earlier, Israel's Magen David Adom emergency medical service said paramedics were "providing medical treatment and evacuating 55 casualties to hospitals in the city, including two infants in critical condition".

"Resuscitation efforts are ongoing, and 53 infants are undergoing further medical examinations and treatment," it said in a statement.

## 'Unspeakable tragedy'

Police said three caregivers present at the centre had been detained for questioning.

The Times of Israel reported that investigators were examining whether the incident was connected to the daycare centre's heating system.

Israel's Education Minister Yoav Kisch said he instructed authorities to formulate a plan to shut down private facilities operating illegally in the wake of the "tragic incident".

"Helpless infants lost their lives in a private facility that operated without a license and without oversight, in violation of the law," Kisch said in a statement.

Police said "forensic experts are on site conducting all necessary investigative measures to locate evidence and clarify the circumstances that led to the injuries".

The nursery is on the second floor of what looked like a residential building that bore no markings identifying it as a daycare centre, an AFP correspondent reported.

There were no signs of fire or any physical damage to the building, the correspondent reported, adding that several medics and police officers were deployed in the area.

Police earlier said the incident was suspected to have involved hazardous materials, but later ruled this out.

In a post on X, Israeli President Isaac Herzog said he shared the "deep sorrow" of the families involved.

"The loss of the lives of very young children is an immense, unspeakable tragedy, and my heart goes out to all the parents and children who have been affected," he wrote, calling for an investigation and accountability.

Several other Israeli politicians reacted to the incident, including opposition leader Yair Lapid, who called for the children's death not to be instrumentalised for political ends.

– AFP



Rescue staff work at the scene of a deadly traffic accident in which a minibus carrying schoolchildren collided with a truck, killing 13 students, in Vanderbijlpark, South Africa, yesterday. – AFP

# Yemen humanitarian crisis set to worsen in 2026: UN

**Robin Millard**

GENEVA – The humanitarian crisis in Yemen is set to get much worse in 2026 as food insecurity increases and international aid evaporates, the United Nations warned yesterday.

Julien Harneis, the UN resident and humanitarian coordinator for Yemen, said he feared the calamitous situation would go under the radar until the death toll mounts.

The picture in Yemen is “very, very concerning”, he told reporters in Geneva.

Last year, 19.5 million people in the country needed humanitarian aid – and the UN’s response plan for the country was only 28-percent financed, at US\$688 million.

“We are expecting things to be much worse in 2026,” said Harneis, pointing out that 21 million Yemenis were now in need, and aid was drying up.

He said food insecurity was increasing, particularly on the Red Sea coast, while the health system, assisted by the United Nations and the World Bank for the last 10 years, was “not going to be supported in the way it has been in the past”.

He said Yemenis would be “very vulnerable to epidemics” this year.

“My fear is that we won’t hear about it until the mortality and the morbidity significantly increases



A beekeeper pours honey for sale during the fourth Honey and Bee Products Exhibition in the Houthi-controlled Yemeni capital, Sanaa, on Saturday.

**UN response ‘hobbled’**

Yemen’s internationally recognised government is a patchwork of groups held together by their opposition to the Iran-backed Houthis, who ousted them from the capital Sanaa in 2014 and now rule much of the country’s north.

The Houthis have been at war with the government, backed by a Saudi-led coalition since 2015, in a conflict that has killed hundreds of thousands of Yemenis and triggered a major humanitarian crisis.

Harneis said the lack of a solution to the conflict was driving needs.

“It’s not active fighting, it’s not massive displacement, it’s not bombing,” he said.

“It is the collapse of the economy,” the damage to the ports and airports and the disruption of essential services.

“We can take the edge off it, we can save lives but we cannot stop the underlying dynamic which is creating all these needs,” he said.

Meanwhile, 73 UN staff members are being held in detention in Yemen, some since 2021.

“With these detentions and the seizure of our offices, the UN does not have the conditions to be able to work,” Harneis lamented.

“To see our humanitarian response so hobbled is terrifying.”

— AFP

this next year,” he added.

Under President Donald Trump, the United States has heavily slashed foreign aid and other key donor countries have been tightening their belts.

Harneis said that for many years, the United States was the biggest donor to Yemen, but “that’s no longer the case”.

“I am hoping that at least in

parts of Yemen, the US government will come back to fund,” he said, and also that Gulf countries would step up support.

“A humanitarian crisis in Yemen is a risk to the Arabian peninsula. Cholera, measles and polio cross borders,” he warned.

Harneis said the UN was trying to work with NGOs to see if they could plug any of the gaps.

“Children are dying – and it’s going to get worse,” he said.

“For 10 years, the UN and humanitarian organisations were able to improve mortality and morbidity,” he pointed out.

“With the conjunction we’re seeing this year, that’s not going to be the case. That is the simple story that everybody needs to understand.”

## Germany brings back EV subsidies to boost market

BERLIN – Germany yesterday reintroduced electric car subsidies as it seeks to accelerate the transition to less polluting vehicles, drawing praise from industry groups but criticism from environmentalists who demanded greater efforts.

Sales of electric vehicles (EVs) in Europe’s biggest auto market are growing but progress has been patchy, and the government and the struggling auto sector are keen to speed up the shift.

The previous government scrapped an earlier subsidy scheme in 2023 due to a budget crisis, prompting a collapse in EV sales, although they have been recovering in recent times.

The new programme “helps the environment, the automotive industry, and in particular families who otherwise couldn’t afford a new, environmentally friendly car,” said Environment Minister Carsten Schneider.

Private households with a taxable income of no more than 80,000 euros (US\$93,000) will be eligible for subsidies, Schneider announced.

Car buyers can apply for the support from May, which will apply to EVs registered from the start of 2026, he said.

Fully electric cars are eligible for a subsidy of at least 3,000 euros. Plug-in hybrids and cars with range extenders – in which a small combustion engine can charge the battery – are covered by a basic subsidy of 1,500 euros.

There are extra subsidies for

families with children as well as households on lower incomes.

The IG Metall labour union, which represents many auto sector workers, welcomed the scheme as an “important step in the right direction”.

The VDA auto industry group said the programme will “support the success of e-mobility in Germany” although it urged other steps, such as improving charging infrastructure.

But the group Environmental Action Germany voiced criticism, especially of subsidies for plug-in hybrids, which it said “offer hardly any climate benefits” over combustion engine cars.

“The government is still failing to implement effective climate protection policies in the transport sector,” said the group’s chief Jürgen Resch.

German carmakers – already struggling with slowing sales and fierce competition – desperately need electric sales to rise as they invested hugely in the EV shift and also face strict new European environmental rules.

Though the European Union in December proposed scrapping a planned 2035 ban on new combustion-engine vehicles, carmakers would still face having to cut emissions by 90 percent from 2021 levels under its latest plan.

After plunging in 2024 following the end of the last subsidy programme, German EV sales rebounded last year and represented almost a fifth of all new cars sold.

— AFP

## Iran police chief issues surrender ultimatum over ‘riots’

PARIS – Iran’s national police chief said yesterday that people who were “deceived” into joining demonstrations the authorities have deemed “riots” would receive lighter punishment if they turned themselves in within three days.

“Young people who became unwittingly involved in the riots are considered to be deceived individuals, not enemy soldiers”, and “will be treated with leniency by the Islamic republic system”, Ahmad-Reza Radan told state

television, adding they had “a maximum of three days” to surrender.

Demonstrations sparked in late December by anger over economic hardship exploded into protests widely seen as the biggest challenge to the Iranian leadership in years.

The protests subsided after a violent crackdown rights groups said left thousands dead.

Iranian officials have said the demonstrations were peaceful before turning into “riots” fuelled

by Iran’s arch-foes the United States and Israel and aimed at destabilising the Islamic republic.

Security officials cited by the Tasnim news agency said late last week around 3,000 people have been arrested in connection to the demonstrations, as rights groups say the number is up to 20,000.

Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said on Saturday authorities “must break the back of the seditionists” and said domestic and foreign “criminals” would not be spared punishment.

— AFP

## Trump tells Norway’s PM no obligation to ‘think purely of peace’ after Nobel snub

OSLO – US President Donald Trump told Norway’s prime minister he no longer needed to think “purely of peace” after failing to win the Nobel Peace Prize, in a message published yesterday.

Trump went on to reiterate his desire for the United States to take control of Greenland, an autonomous Danish territory, in the interest of world peace.

“Considering your Country decided not to give me the Nobel Peace Prize for having stopped 8 Wars PLUS, I no longer feel an obligation to think purely of Peace,” Trump said in a message to Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store.

He said although peace would still be “predominant,” he could “now think about what is good and proper

for the United States of America.”

Store’s office confirmed the authenticity of the document in an email to AFP.

In a written comment, Store underlined that the Nobel Peace Prize was not awarded by the Norwegian government.

“I have clearly explained, including to president Trump what is well known – the prize is awarded by an independent Nobel Committee,” Store said.

Trump also reiterated his desire for control of Greenland, which has sent jitters around Europe and beyond, in his message to the Norwegian premier.

“Denmark cannot protect that land from Russia or China,” Trump said.

“Why do they have a ‘right of

ownership’ anyway? There are no written documents, it’s only that a boat landed there hundreds of years ago, but we had boats landing there, also,” he said.

“The World is not secure unless we have Complete and Total Control of Greenland,” he added.

Trump had campaigned hard to win last year’s Nobel Peace Prize for what he says are his efforts to stop eight wars.

Instead it went to Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado, who appeared in Oslo last month to collect her prize – following a daring escape from Venezuela by boat.

She dedicated the prize to Trump and last week gave her medal to him.

— AFP

# Socialist to face far-right candidate for Portugal's presidency

Thomas Cabral

LISBON – Portugal's socialist candidate won the first round of the presidential election and will face the far-right candidate in the second round, near-complete results showed on Sunday.

With votes from 95 percent of constituencies counted, Socialist António José Seguro was leading with 30.6 percent of the vote, while far-right contender André Ventura came in second with 24.2 percent.

The liberal candidate João Cotrim Figueiredo was in third place with 15.5 percent.

Ventura and Seguro will face off on February 8 to decide who succeeds conservative incumbent Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa.

Opinion polls in the run-up to the election had suggested that Ventura was the favourite for the first round.

This will nevertheless be the first time a far-right candidate has made it to the second round of the presidential race.

During the campaign, Seguro had argued that he was the only one capable of defeating Ventura's "extremism" and had called on "all democrats" to unite behind him.

While the role of president is largely ceremonial, in times of crisis the incumbent can dissolve parliament, call elections or dismiss a prime minister.

Portugal's prime minister, Luis Montenegro of the centre-right Social Democratic Party (PSD),



Socialist candidate José António Seguro waves a Portuguese flag as he addresses supporters on the night of Portugal's presidential election's first round in Caldas da Rainha on Sunday. – Seguro won the first round. – AFP

said he would not be giving any advice on who to vote for in the second round.

His minority government relies on Ventura's Chega ("Enough!") party for support to implement some of its policies.

## Ventura 'confident'

This is the first time in four decades that no candidate has won outright in the first round by securing more than 50 percent of the vote.

Ventura said he felt "very confident" after casting his vote in the sunny capital.

"We cannot spend our time criticising things and then sit on the

couch on the day we are called to make a decision," he said.

"I believe in the good sense of the Portuguese," said Ventura after voting in his home city of Caldas da Rainha.

As he finished his first-round campaign, he called on other parties on the right not to stand in his way if he makes it to the second round.

And in his final election rally he toughened his tone, saying he would refuse to try to please everyone and promising to "put some order" into the country.

Voting in Lisbon, Alexandre Leitão, a 50-year-old biologist, said he had voted left-wing to stave



The leader of Portugal's far-right Chega ("Enough!") party, André Ventura, waves a Portuguese flag as he addresses supporters on the night of Portugal's presidential election's first round in Lisbon on Sunday. Ventura, who finished second in the first round, will face the centre-left Socialist Party's candidate José António Seguro candidate in the second round on February 8, near-complete results showed on Sunday. – AFP

off the "very negative shift toward the far right".

"We young people are not happy with the country we have," said 33-year-old Irina Ferestreou.

She said public approval of Ventura was "a warning sign for the country, because people are desperate to see change".

## Far right shift

Analysts say Ventura 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.

Ventura's party emerged as the biggest opposition party in parliament after a general election last May, overtaking the Socialists.

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

EU and eurozone member Portugal accounts for around 1.6 percent of the bloc's economic output. – AFP

# High-speed train collision in Spain kills 39, injures over 120

Imran Marashli and Marie Giffard

ADAMUZ, Spain – Officials in Spain said the death toll from a high-speed train collision in the south of the country, which stood at 39 yesterday, could rise further, with rescuers at work on the mangled wreckage.

It is already Spain's deadliest train accident since 2013, when 80 people died after a train veered off a curved section of track outside the northwestern city of Santiago de Compostela.



In this still image from video taken and released on yesterday by the Spain's Guardia Civil (gendarmerie), emergency workers are seen at the site where a high-speed Iryo train derailed and was hit by another train as rescue efforts continued in Adamuz, southern Spain, yesterday. – AFP

when a train operated by rail company Iryo travelling from Málaga to Madrid derailed near Adamuz in Andalucia.

It crossed onto the other track, where it crashed into an oncoming train, which also derailed.

The interior ministry said yesterday that 39 people died.

Over 120 people were injured, with 48, including five children, still in hospital yesterday, regional emergency services said. Of those, 12 were in intensive care.

Heavy machinery was being

deployed to lift the most severely damaged train carriages, the head of the regional government of Andalucia, Juan Manuel Moreno told reporters.

"Unfortunately, it is quite possible that additional victims will be found beneath the twisted wreckage. The goal is to identify the victims as quickly as possible," he added.

The cause of the derailment was not yet known.

Unlike the 2013 accident, the derailment occurred on a straight section of track, and the trains were travelling within the speed limit, officials said.

## Extremely strange'

Transport Minister Óscar Puente said the first train to derail was "practically new" and the section of the track where the disaster happened had been recently renovated, making the accident "extremely strange".

Train operator Iryo said the locomotive was built in 2022 and last inspected just three days before the accident. It said it "veered onto the adjacent track for still unknown reasons".

The company said around 300 people were on board its service from the Andalusian city of Málaga

to the capital, Madrid.

Renfe, the operator of the second train travelling to the southern city of Huelva, said it was carrying 184 passengers.

Human error has "been practically ruled out," Renfe president Álvaro Fernández Heredia told Spanish public radio RNE.

"It must be related to Iryo's rolling stock or an infrastructure issue," he added.

## PM heads to scene

The stretch of track where the accident happened had a speed limit of 250 kilometres per hour, Heredia said.

One train was travelling at 205 kilometres per hour, and the other at 210 kilometres per hour, he added.

Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez visited the site of the disaster yesterday, his office said.

"Today is a night of deep pain for our country owing to the tragic rail accident in Adamuz," he wrote on X on Sunday night, adding: "No words can alleviate such great suffering."

Spain has Europe's largest high-speed rail network, with more than 3,000 kilometres of dedicated tracks connecting major cities including Madrid, Barcelona, Seville, Valencia, and Málaga.

Emergency services said they struggled to free the hundreds of passengers trapped in the wreckage.

"The problem is that the carriages are twisted, so the metal is twisted with the people inside," Francisco Carmona, head of firefighters in Córdoba, told public broadcaster RTVE.

A passenger on the second train who gave only her first name, Montse, told Spanish public television the train, jolted, "came to a complete stop and everything went dark".

She described being thrown around in the carriage at the back end of the train and seeing luggage tumble onto other passengers.

"The attendant behind me hit her head and was bleeding. There were children crying," she added.

"Luckily, I was in the last car. I feel like I was given a second chance at life."

Police were focused at the moment "on identifying the victims and carrying out forensic work," a Civil Guard (gendarmerie) spokeswoman, Rosa Reina, told reporters in the village of Adamuz.

French President Emmanuel Macron and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen were among world leaders offering condolences. – AFP

## Under-fire Frank claims backing of Spurs hierarchy

**CHAMPIONS LEAGUE**  
LONDON – Thomas Frank insisted he retains the support of Tottenham's hierarchy after the under-fire boss met with the club's powerbrokers yesterday.

Frank's future was reportedly discussed by Tottenham on Sunday in the aftermath of a dismal 2-1 home defeat against struggling West Ham.

Tottenham fans jeered Frank and chanted "you're getting sacked in the morning" during the West Ham debacle.

But Frank took training with his players ahead of Borussia Dortmund's visit to north London in the Champions League today and remains adamant he will be given the chance to save his job.

The Dane spoke with Tottenham chief executive Vinai Venkatesham, sporting director Johan Lange and Nick Beucher, another member of the ownership group, over lunch yesterday.

"I've just been, how can you say, feeling the trust along the way. I've said that every press meeting. I had lunch with Nick, Vinai and Johan today and it was all good," Frank told reporters.

"All part of the media circus and I can only think about winning against Dortmund."

Just seven months after being hired from Brentford to replace the sacked Ange Postecoglou, Frank has been pushed to the brink by Tottenham's woeful form.

The West Ham defeat was Tottenham's third successive loss and their eighth in their last 14 matches in all competitions.

Frank's team are languishing in 14<sup>th</sup> place in the Premier League and have already been knocked out of the FA Cup and League Cup.

Accepting the responsibility for Tottenham's plight, Frank said: "Even the best manager in the world, Pep Guardiola, says 'I am nothing without my players' and it is fair to say they haven't been available enough the whole time.

"But hey, no problem. I am happy to take the blame as long as everyone supports the players.

"It is about keeping the noise out, staying calm, carrying on."

### 'You need resilience'

As the questions grew more pointed during his media briefing, Frank vowed to keep battling to turn the tide and called for unity at a club in crisis.

"If your back is against the wall, you fight. I am energetic and I fight," he said.

"It is not about me, we need to win football matches and we need to do that together.

"Unfortunately, it is a results business and emotions are in this as well.

"There are a lot of signs that this is going the right way. We still need to find a way to get over the line and we are much closer than we think."

Tottenham fans have been frustrated with Frank's prosaic game-plan, which prioritises defensive solidity and uses set-pieces as the primary method of attacking.

It is a stark contrast to the entertaining style used by Postecoglou, who ended the club's 17-year trophy drought by winning the Europa League.

"It is not about me. It is about supporting the team. In this game, you always need resilience. I believe I'm a guy that has good values," Frank said.

"The reality is that one in five people don't like you no matter what you do and one in five love you no matter what you do, both sides are probably biased, no matter what you do."

With Wales defender Ben Davies sidelined after ankle surgery, Frank's problems keep mounting.

He has only 11 fit outfield players available for the Dortmund clash.

"We are a little bit limited with the players available," Frank said.

"We need everyone to support us from minute one. If we get that support, anything can happen. Magic can happen."

The game will be played at 4 a.m. tomorrow morning Macau time.

— AFP/MPD

## Champions League crunch time as pressure piles on Europe's elite

**Neil Fulton**

**CHAMPIONS LEAGUE**  
PARIS – Real Madrid, Liverpool and Inter Milan may boast a combined 24 European titles, but they still have their work cut out to ensure their tickets to the knock-out stages of the Champions League.

While the top eight secure direct entry to the last 16, teams placed ninth to 24th must navigate an additional two-legged play-off round to join them.

Arsenal, Bayern Munich, holders Paris Saint-Germain, Manchester City and Atalanta have all already secured their places in at least the knock-out phase play-offs.

This leaves a number of European heavyweights still unsure of their presence when the business end of the Champions League begins.

AFP Sport looks at four big-hitters bidding to seal qualification as the league phase enters its penultimate matchday:

### Inter Milan

Of the teams in pole position to ensure progression on matchday seven, Serie A leaders Inter face the toughest task as they must bounce back from defeat last time out against Liverpool when they take on the only team with a 100 percent record so far, Arsenal.

However, Cristian Chivu's side can count on no favours from Arsenal at the San Siro today as the Premier League leaders will be desperate to sew up a top-eight finish ahead of the final round of league phase fixtures on January 28.

As the season turns the corner towards its final stretch, Chivu said after Saturday's Serie A win he believes his team is really starting to

understand the way he wants them to play.

"The desire to learn from this team is remarkable," said the Romanian.

"What we're displaying on the pitch is a testament to the desire of these players, because it's not easy to change habits."

One habit he won't want his players to change, however, is Inter's strong record against Arsenal, who they have bested in three of their four Champions League meetings.

The game will be played at 4 a.m. tomorrow morning Macau time.

### Real Madrid

New Real Madrid coach Alvaro Arbeloa will be under no illusions that his time in the Santiago Bernabeu hotseat will be judged in large part on his performances in club president Florentino Perez's most-cherished competition.

After crashing to defeat at second-tier Albacete in the Copa del Rey, Arbeloa oversaw a win against lowly Levante in La Liga on Saturday but the atmosphere in the Bernabeu was toxic with boos directed at the new coach, as well as star players Vinicius Junior and Jude Bellingham.

"I've always respected the Bernabeu (crowd), they whistled me a lot too, and it's one of the aspects that make this club so great, the demand of the fans," said Arbeloa.

Madrid, seventh, host Monaco today and if Arbeloa is to get the fans back on board with his side, anything other than progression in the Champions League is not an option.

The game will be played at 4 a.m. tomorrow morning Macau time.

### Liverpool

Under-fire manager Arne Slot

has stopped the rot with Liverpool now on a 12-match unbeaten run but with their chances of defending their Premier League crown dwindling with each passing week, the Anfield hierarchy will be putting more and more emphasis on a successful Champions League run.

The six-time champions visit the cauldron-esque atmosphere of Marseille's Stade Velodrome tomorrow where a win would constitute a big step towards booking their place in the last 16 and ease the pressure on Slot following a run of four successive draws in the league.

The Dutchman said ahead of Liverpool's frustrating 1-1 draw at home to newly-promoted Burnley last weekend that he was "happy" to have Mohamed Salah return from Africa Cup of Nations duty.

Should the Egyptian make his club return midweek, he could bring a much-needed cutting edge to Liverpool's lacklustre attack of late.

The game will be played at 4 a.m. Thursday morning Macau time.

### Barcelona

Trailing slightly behind the main pack of qualification contenders are Hansi Flick's La Liga-leading Barcelona, whose 11-match winning run in all competitions ended with a 2-1 loss at Real Sociedad at the weekend.

Last year's semi-finalists sit back in 15<sup>th</sup> place with 10 points, and Flick is eager to quickly turn the page on Sunday's domestic setback as they make the trip to Slavia Prague.

"The result doesn't reflect our performance," said Flick. "We have to keep going in this direction."

"On Wednesday, [tomorrow] it's time to win in Prague." The game will be played at 4 a.m. Thursday morning Macau time. — AFP/MPD

### Crystal Palace's English defender

**CHAMPIONS LEAGUE**  
Marc Guéhi holds the trophy base as he celebrates on the pitch after the English FA Cup final against Manchester City at Wembley stadium in London, on May 17, 2025. Manchester City have strengthened their defence, weakened by several injuries, with the signing announced yesterday of Guéhi, the Crystal Palace captain whose contract was expiring at the end of the season. — AFP



## Mbappe calls out Madrid fans after Vinicius jeered

**CHAMPIONS LEAGUE**  
MADRID – Kylian Mbappe yesterday told Real Madrid fans to go easy on his fellow striker Vinicius Junior after the Brazilian was booed at a moody Santiago Bernabeu over the weekend.

Vinicius and Jude Bellingham came in for ire from the home fans after a disastrous week in which they lost to Barcelona in the Super Cup and second-tier Albacete in

the Spanish Cup.

Madrid also fired coach Xabi Alonso last Monday.

"The fans shouldn't single out one individual to be booed, none of this is Vinicius' fault, it's all of our faults if we play poorly," said Mbappe.

"I didn't like that at all."

Mbappe described Vinicius, who narrowly missed out on the Ballon d'Or in 2024, as one of the

best players in the world.

"We must protect him better so that he is not alone in the face of criticism. He is not alone at Real Madrid. We are all with him," said Mbappe.

Madrid host Ligue 1 outfit Monaco at the Bernabeu today.

They closed to within a point of leaders Barcelona in La Liga this weekend after beating Levante 2-0 to record new coach Alvaro Arbeloa's first win at the helm. — AFP



Senegal's forward Sadio Mane poses with the Man of the Competition award after the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) final against Morocco at the Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium in Rabat, Morocco on Sunday. Senegal won the match 1-0. — AFP

# Centurion Djokovic romps to Melbourne win as Swiatek, Gauff move on

Martin Parry



MELBOURNE – Novak Djokovic began his latest bid for a record 25<sup>th</sup> Grand Slam crown with an emphatic straight-sets victory yesterday as fellow Australian Open title contenders Iga Swiatek and Coco Gauff also won but with less sparkle.

Three-time finalist Daniil Medvedev stayed alive, as did 40-year-old Stan Wawrinka, who rolled back the clock to reach the second round in his tournament farewell.

Serbian great Djokovic, 38, tamed Spain's 71<sup>st</sup>-ranked Pedro Martinez 6-3, 6-2, 6-2 on Rod Laver Arena, a court where he has won a record 10 Australian Open crowns.

The world number four owns 24 major titles, equal for the most ever with Australia's Margaret Court, but a 25<sup>th</sup> has remained agonisingly out of reach.

His last came at the 2023 US Open with Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz sharing all eight since then.

"What can I say? I like the sound of it. Centurion is pretty nice," he said after his 100<sup>th</sup> victory at the Australian Open.

"I always give my best whenever I'm on the court. Obviously, history-making is a great motivation, and particularly in the last 5-10 years of my career."

The 2014 champion Wawrinka lived to fight another day with a gutsy four-set victory.

The three-time major winner is playing his last season before retiring and gave his all to down Serbia's Laslo Djere 5-7, 6-3, 6-4, 7-6 (7/4) in front of a crowd willing him to victory.

"The passion is still intact. But I'm not young any more, so I need to be careful also," said the Swiss warhorse, who made his Australian Open debut in 2006.

Medvedev, runner-up in 2021, 2022 and 2024, warmed up for Melbourne with victory in Brisbane and ground to a 7-5, 6-2, 7-6 (7/2) opening round win over Dutchman Jesper de Jong.

The famously feisty Russian said he was trying to be more "positive" on court. "So far I'm doing it well," he said.

Sixth seed Alex de Minaur, the big home hope, was also a straight-sets winner on another hot day where temperatures reached about 30C and record crowds of



Serbia's Novak Djokovic hits a return to Spain's Pedro Martinez during their singles match at the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne yesterday.

— AFP

more than 100,000 faced long queues to get into Melbourne Park.

The tournament is over, however, for seventh seed Felix Auger-Aliassime, who retired from his match with cramp.

Auger-Aliassime won the opening set 6-3 against Nuno Borges but then lost the next two before calling time.

"I want to be on the court competing with my opponent. I don't want to be just standing there like a punching bag," he said.

The same fate befell tearful compatriot Marina Stakusic, who was taken off in a wheelchair when she cramped up against home player Priscilla Hon.

## Overwhelming'

In the women's draw, six-time major winner Swiatek was made to work unexpectedly hard against Chinese qualifier Yuan Yue.

The Polish second seed, who will complete a career Grand Slam of all four majors if she breaks her Australian Open duck, eventually saw off her spirited opponent 7-6 (7/5), 6-3.

"I was a bit rusty at the beginning," said Swiatek.

"For sure many ups and downs, but overall I have some stuff to work on."

Gauff beat Uzbekistan's Kamilla Rakhimova 6-2, 6-3, but was also less than convincing at the start and struggled with her serve.

"I am only satisfied if I win, but I am proud of myself regardless of how I get on," she said.

Her reward is a clash next with Venus Williams' conqueror Olga Danilovic.

Like Swiatek, Gauff has yet to go past the last four in Melbourne.

Gauff's fellow American, fourth seed Amanda Anisimova, began her quest for a third consecutive major final with a ruthless win over Switzerland's Simona Waltert, 6-3, 6-2.

Sixth seed Jessica Pegula and eighth seed Mirra Andreeva also progressed.

However, former champion Sofia Kenin crashed out and so did Alexandra Eala despite manic support from Philippines fans.

The 20-year-old Eala was in the main draw for the first time and even practice sessions were mobbed by large numbers of her compatriots.

"I think this week definitely there were elements that were a bit overwhelming," she said of the support following a three-set loss to Alycia Parks.

— AFP

## Brignone unsure about Olympics participation ahead of World Cup comeback

### Skiing

MILAN – Federica Brignone admitted yesterday that she still doesn't know if she will take part in the Winter Olympics ahead of her return to alpine skiing after a horror injury last spring.

Italian star Brignone confirmed to reporters that she will be skiing in today's World Cup giant slalom in Kronplatz, her first race since a double leg break in April 2025, with the Olympics getting underway in less than three weeks.

The 35-year-old has been a doubt for the Milan-Cortina Games since that training accident, which came just after the end of a triumphant season in which she won the World Cup title and was crowned giant slalom world champion.

"I don't think any athlete could say

that they'll participate in the Olympic Games until they've got their skiing sticks out, especially in our sport. It would be kind of a sin," Brignone said.

"We don't know. Obviously, anything could happen and you can't know whether it will. So right now I still don't know."

Brignone, one of Italy's flag bearers at the Olympics, said that today's race will serve as a test of her ability to compete, admitting that she still feels pain in her left leg.

"I haven't had a day without feeling pain since the day I injured myself, even just in my everyday business," said Brignone.

"I definitely feel it when I ski, around the tibia, halfway up the tibia and above, the fibula and the knee, everywhere really."

Some days I feel more pain than others, and some days I've not been able to ski."

Brignone added that she hasn't set herself any objectives for today's race, which is split into two runs.

"I'm coming back to competition after a long time and after a lot has happened," she said.

"Having objectives for my performance more than results should help me be more calm, and it's already a big deal for me to have got out my sticks."

"When I hurt myself last year I wasn't sure if I'd have ever got them out again for a race, and nor for training, so I suppose I can say that I've won."

The women's alpine skiing competition begins on February 8 with the downhill race and finishes 10 days later with the slalom.

— AFP

## Bangladesh face deadline over refusal to play World Cup matches in India

### Cricket

NEW DELHI – Cricket's governing body has told Bangladesh to agree to play their matches at next month's T20 World Cup in India or risk being kicked out of the tournament, reports said yesterday.

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) is refusing to play in India, citing security concerns, and have asked the governing International Cricket Council to shift their matches to co-hosts Sri Lanka.

The BCB held talks in Dhaka at the weekend with ICC officials over the impasse, but no agreement was reached.

"During the discussions, the BCB reiterated its formal request to the ICC to relocate Bangladesh's matches to Sri Lanka," a BCB statement said.

The ICC have not officially commented, but website Cricinfo and other Indian media reported yesterday that the deadline of tomorrow had been set for Dhaka to make a decision.

ICC sources have told AFP that Bangladesh could be replaced by Scotland, who are the highest-ranked team who did not qualify for the World Cup.

The T20 World Cup begins on February 7 with Bangladesh in England's Group C and scheduled to play all of their group matches in Kolkata and Mumbai.

One suggestion was for Bangladesh to swap with Group B's Ireland, whose matches are in Sri Lanka.

"Among other points, the possibility of moving Bangladesh to a different group as a means of facilitating the matter with minimum logistical adjustments was discussed," said the BCB.

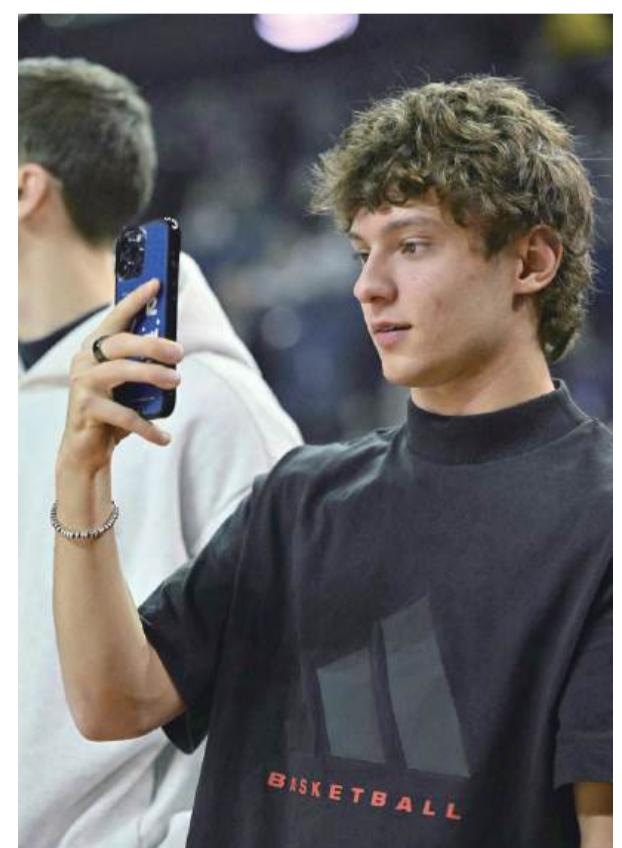
Pakistan will play all their matches in Colombo under an ICC agreement with India to play at neutral venues in global or regional tournaments.

The row erupted on January 3, when the IPL's Kolkata Knight Riders were ordered by India's cricket board to drop Bangladesh fast bowler Mustafizur Rahman, sparking fury in Dhaka.

Political relations between India and Bangladesh soured after a mass uprising in Dhaka in 2024 toppled then-prime minister Sheikh Hasina, a close ally of New Delhi.

India's foreign ministry last month condemned what it called "unremitting hostility against minorities" in Muslim-majority Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's interim leader, Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus, has accused India of exaggerating the scale of the violence.



Mercedes' Italian F1 driver Kimi Antonelli attends the 2025/2026 NBA season basketball match between the Memphis Grizzlies and Orlando Magic at the O2 Arena in London on Sunday. — AFP

## Louvre heist probe still aims to 'recover jewellery': top prosecutor

François Becker and Celine Cornu

PARIS – French investigators remain determined to find the imperial jewels stolen from the Louvre in October, a prosecutor has told AFP.

Police believe they have arrested all four thieves who carried out the brazen October 19 robbery, making off with jewellery worth an estimated US\$102 million from the world-famous museum.

"The interrogations have not produced any new investigative elements," top Paris prosecutor Laure Beccau said last week, almost three months after the broad-daylight heist.

But the case remains a top priority, she underlined.

"Our main objective is still to recover the jewellery," she said.

That Sunday morning in October, thieves parked a mover's truck with an extendable ladder below the Louvre's Apollo Gallery housing the French crown jewels.

Two of the thieves hoisted themselves up the ladder in a furniture lift, broke a window and used angle grinders to cut glass display booths containing the treasures, while the other two waited below, investigators say.

The four then fled on high-powered motor scooters, dropping a diamond-and-emerald crown in their hurry.

But eight other items of jewellery – including an emerald-and-diamond necklace that Napoléon I gave his second wife, Empress Marie-Louise – remain at large.

Beccau said investigators were

keeping an open mind as to where the loot might be.

"We don't have any signals indicating that the jewellery is likely to have crossed the border," she said, though she added: "Anything is possible."

Detectives benefitted from contacts with "intermediaries in the art world, including internationally" as they pursued their probe.

"They have ways of receiving warning signals about networks of receivers of stolen goods, including abroad," Beccau said.

As for anyone coming forward to hand over the jewels, that would be considered to be "active repentance, which could be taken into consideration" later during a trial, she said.

A fifth suspect, a 38-year-old woman who is the partner of one of the men, has been charged with being an accomplice but was released under judicial supervision pending a trial.

Investigators still had no idea if someone had ordered the theft, she said.

"It's a hypothesis under consideration, but it cannot be asserted as more certain than any other," she added.

"We refuse to have any preconceived notions about what might have led the individuals concerned to commit this theft."

But she said detectives and investigating magistrates were resolute.

"We haven't said our last word. It will take as long as it takes," she said. – AFP



Tourists in Paris stand behind barriers blocking access to the Louvre's main courtyard as the museum is closed due to a strike last Monday. – AFP

### World Weather

CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -14°C~3°C	Manila 22°C~31°C	New York -11°C~5°C	Lisbon 12°C~15°C
Shanghai -1°C~5°C	Bangkok 23°C~33°C	London 7°C~10°C	Rio de Janeiro 22°C~24°C
Hong Kong 11°C~20°C	Tokyo 0°C~11°C	Frankfurt -3°C~5°C	Luanda 24°C~30°C
Taipei 12°C~17°C	Singapore 22°C~33°C	Vancouver 3°C~11°C	Maputo 22°C~26°C
Guangzhou 9°C~21°C	Kuala Lumpur 22°C~33°C	Paris 7°C~11°C	Dili 23°C~31°C
Nanjing -6°C~1°C	Jakarta 23°C~28°C	Moscow -5°C~3°C	São Tomé 25°C~31°C
Guilin 0°C~6°C	Seoul -13°C~3°C	Las Vegas 5°C~19°C	Praia 18°C~25°C
Xi'an -4°C~2°C	Sydney 16°C~25°C	Monte Carlo 6°C~13°C	Bissau 19°C~31°C

## Italian influencer Ferragni acquitted in Christmas cake fraud trial

Taimaz Szirniks

MILAN – Italian fashion influencer Chiara Ferragni has been acquitted of aggravated fraud over charity endorsement deals in a case that has led to greater regulation of the sector in Italy.

The 38-year-old social media star and businesswoman had been on trial for promotions of a pandoro\* cake – a Christmas treat similar to a panettone\*\* – and Easter eggs that purported to raise money for charity or social causes.

"Chiara has been acquitted", lawyer Giuseppe Iannaccone said on Wednesday, as Ferragni told a scrum of journalists she was "happy" with the verdict.

"It's the end of a nightmare that lasted two years," Ferragni said, thanking "everyone who supported [me] during this period", especially her followers.

Ferragni's legal troubles related in part to her 2022 endorsement of a pandoro cake made by Italian confectionery company Balocco that purported to raise funds for children undergoing treatment at a Turin hospital.

Shoppers were led to believe that buying the special edition cake – with a price of 9 euros instead of about 3 euros usually charged – would directly benefit the hospital, but it only received a single 50,000 euro (US\$58,000) donation from the confectionery company.

Ferragni's companies, meanwhile, made about one million euros from the promotion.

Italy's competition watchdog (AGCM) hit two of Ferragni's companies with a one-million-euro fine (US\$1.2 million) in December 2023 for unfair commercial practices for the "Pandoro Pink Christmas" promotion.

Balocco was fined 420,000 euros – and those fines stand.

Easter eggs sold in 2021 and 2022 were also targeted in the scandal, which made headlines in Italy.



Italian fashion influencer Chiara Ferragni (centre), after being acquitted in her traditional Christmas cake fraud trial, exits the courtroom after her acquittal in Milan, northern Italy on Wednesday.

– AFP

### 'Pandoro gate'

Milan prosecutors asked in November for a sentence of one year and eight months in prison for Ferragni and associate Fabio Damato.

Ferragni denied the charges, adding in a hearing that she had always acted "in good faith," according to lawyer Iannaccone.

In Italy, aggravated fraud is punishable by one to five years in prison, but Ferragni opted for a fast-track trial, which offers defendants a reduced sentence.

Ferragni started out with a fashion blog, The Blonde Salad, in 2009, and in 2017 Forbes magazine named her its top fashion influencer.

Chronicling her glamorous lifestyle and being paid to promote high-end brands, she built the blog into a lucrative business, using it as a springboard to launch her own eponymous label.

In Italy and beyond, her fans also followed her personal life with

Italian rap star Fedez and their two children. The couple split in 2024.

But the fraud accusations hit her reputation, with a spate of endorsements cancelled or not renewed.

The Italian government also tightened the screws on influencers, mandating that those with more than 500,000 followers register with the Italian Communications Regulatory Authority (AGCOM) and comply with transparency rules. – AFP

\*Pandoro ("golden bread") is a traditional Italian sweet bread, primarily associated with the Christmas season. Originating from Verona, this cake is known for its tall, star-shaped structure and a soft, fluffy texture. – Poe

\*\*Panettone ("large bread") is a traditional Italian sweet bread that is typically enjoyed during the Christmas season. It is characterised by its tall, dome-shaped form and a soft, fluffy texture. – Poe

## 'Avatar: Fire and Ash' stays at No.1 in N America for 5<sup>th</sup> straight week

LOS ANGELES – "Avatar: Fire and Ash" showed no signs of slowing down, topping the North American box office for the fifth consecutive week over the long holiday weekend, industry estimates showed on Sunday.

The third instalment in director James Cameron's blockbuster fantasy series took in another US\$17.2 million from Friday to Monday, when Americans marked Martin Luther King Jr Day.

That put its US and Canadian haul at US\$367.4 million, and its worldwide total at more than US\$1.3 billion, according to Exhibitor Relations.

"Fire and Ash" stars Zoe Saldana as Na'vi warrior Neytiri

and Sam Worthington as ex-Marine Jake Sully, who must battle a new foe threatening their family's life on the planet Pandora.

It is the fourth Cameron film to pass the US\$1 billion mark, along with the first two "Avatar" films and "Titanic."

Debuting in second place with a disappointing US\$15 million was "28 Years Later: The Bone Temple," the fourth instalment in the zombie horror series, which comes less than a year after the last film.

"Returning after 7 months is quick – it's too quick, and it's hurting the numbers," said analyst David A. Gross of Franchise Entertainment Research.

Disney's feel-good animated film "Zootopia 2" showed its staying power, moving up to third place at US\$12 million over the four-day weekend.

In fourth place at US\$10.2 million was "The Housemaid," an adaptation of Freida McFadden's best-selling novel about a young woman who is hired by a wealthy couple with dark secrets. Sydney Sweeney and Amanda Seyfried star in the Lionsgate release.

"Marty Supreme," starring Oscars frontrunner Timothee Chalamet as a conniving 1950s table tennis player with big dreams, finished in fifth place at US\$6.7 million.

– AFP



### Changing or not?

A chameleon is seen on a man's shoulder during the Reptile and Plant Expo in Mississauga, Ontario, Canada, on Sunday. — Xinhua



### Icebergs forming?

Onlookers make their way through large chunks of ice and ice floes washed up along the banks of the Elbe river near Geesthacht, northern Germany, yesterday. Following several days of freezing winter temperatures and a low water level, ground ice started to form and to emerge to the surface. — AFP



### Out on a limb

This photo taken yesterday shows golden snub-nosed monkeys at the Dalongtan Golden Monkey Research Center in Shennongjia National Park under the Shennongjia Forestry District, Hubei Province. The district is now home to 11 populations of golden snub-nosed monkeys, totaling 1,618 individuals, with a habitat area of 401 square kilometers. — Xinhua



### Looks surreal

Tourists ride horses among the unique fairy chimneys rocks in Cappadocia, Türkiye, on Friday. — Xinhua



### Light wheel

A man rides a scooter past a Ferris wheel in Ahmedabad, India yesterday. — AFP



### Only survivor

A single tree is seen at a bulldozed new planting area for palm oil plantations in Lamno, Indonesia's Aceh province on Sunday. — AFP