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## Xia urges HK & Macau to improve executive-led system, enhance governance effectiveness

**Tony Wong**

Xia Baolong, the director of both the Hong Kong and Macao Work Office (HKMWO) of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office (HKMAO) of the State Council, said yesterday that the implementation of executive-led governance in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) and the Macau Special Administrative Regions (MSAR) is an essential requirement for safeguarding their constitutional order, ensuring the implementation of the principles of "Hong Kong people governing Hong Kong", "Macau people governing Macau", and a high degree of autonomy, and achieving efficient governance in the two SARs.

Xia made the remarks while delivering a speech during a thematic seminar in Beijing yesterday morning hosted by the Chinese Association of Hong Kong and Macao Studies (CAHKMS) about "Upholding and Improving Executive-led Governance to Promote Good Governance in the [Hong Kong and Macau] Special Administrative Regions".



Xia Baolong, director the Hong Kong and Macao Work Office (HKMWO) of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and the State Council's Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office (HKMAO), delivers a speech during yesterday's seminar in Beijing hosted by the Chinese Association of Hong Kong and Macao Studies (CAHKMS).

– Photo: HKMWO-HKMAO

The HKMWO and HKMAO released Xia's speech on their website yesterday.

A parallel session was set up in Hong Kong and Macau respectively where attendees listened remotely,

by video link, to the speech delivered by Xia in Beijing.

The parallel session in Macau was held at the San Chok Un Guesthouse ("New Bamboo Mansion") on Penha Hill, attended

by dignitaries such as Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai, Central People's Government Liaison Office in the MSAR Director Zheng Xincong, Deputy Foreign Ministry Commissioner Cheng

Lei, Legislative Assembly (AL) President André Cheong Weng Chon, and Court of Final Appeal (TUI) President Song Man Lei.

In his speech, Xia noted that when hearing work reports from the chief executives of the Hong Kong and Macau special administrative regions (SARs) respectively in December last year, President Xi Jinping raised clear requirements for both SARs to uphold and improve their respective executive-led governance.

Xia said that Xi's remarks have provided clear direction for the two SARs to ensure the implementation of their executive-led system, enhance governance effectiveness, and promote high-quality development.

Xia noted that executive-led governance, as a key principle in the design of the two SARs' political systems under their respective Basic Laws, originates from the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC), serving as an institutional guarantee for the comprehensive and accurate implementation of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle.

Continued on p.5

### Lula, Trump discuss 'Board of Peace', agree to meet in Washington: Brazil

BRASÍLIA – Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva yesterday asked US President Donald Trump to limit his "Board of Peace" to Gaza, in a phone call in which the leaders agreed to meet in Washington, according to the Brazilian presidency.

Lula, who was invited to join Trump's controversial global

conflict resolution organization, proposed that it "be limited to the issue of Gaza and include a seat for Palestine."

In a 50-minute call, "the two presidents agreed on a visit by President Lula to Washington ... on a date to be set soon," the Brazilian presidency said in a statement.

– AFP

### Russia says Ukraine talks in UAE held in 'constructive spirit'



MOSCOW – The Kremlin said yesterday that US-brokered trilateral talks in the UAE between Russian and Ukrainian negotiators had been held in a "constructive spirit" but there was still "significant work ahead".

"It would be a mistake to expect any significant results from the initial contacts... But the very fact that these contacts have begun in a constructive spirit can be viewed positively. However, there is significant work

ahead," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists.

The two-day meeting in Abu Dhabi on Friday and Saturday was the first time negotiators from Moscow and Kyiv faced each other to talk about a plan being pushed by US President Donald Trump to end the nearly four-year war.

"I wouldn't say there was any friendliness there, it's hardly possible at this stage," Peskov said.

"But if you're trying to achieve

something through negotiations, you need to speak constructively," he added.

The next round of trilateral talks is expected to take place on February 1, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said in his evening address yesterday.

"It would be good if this meeting could be brought forward," he added.

Zelensky said he expected "real results" from the next round of talks.

– AFP

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### Xi holds phone talks with Vietnam's To Lam

President Xi Jinping yesterday held phone talks with To Lam, general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) Central Committee.

– Story on p. 7

### Israel army says identified remains of last Gaza hostage

The Israeli military said yesterday that the remains of the last hostage held in Gaza, Ran Gvili, had been identified and repatriated to Israel for burial.

– Story on p. 10

### Jewish graves desecrated in Barcelona

Vandals desecrated a number of Jewish graves in a Barcelona cemetery this past weekend, Spanish police said Sunday, provoking outrage from Jewish groups and politicians.

– Story on p. 12

# Health Bureau urges residents to avoid travel amid Nipah outbreak in India

## Armindo Neves

The Health Bureau (SSM) said in a warning yesterday that it is closely monitoring recent media reports about Nipah virus infection cases in West Bengal, India.

The bureau urged residents to avoid travelling to the region and said that it will enhance screening and medical examinations at Macau's border checkpoints for individuals with a relevant travel history or exhibiting symptoms.

The statement said that five individuals in West Bengal have been diagnosed with the virus.

The West Bengal government has implemented measures in response to the outbreak that remains confined to the area, the statement said, adding that countries bordering West Bengal have strengthened quarantine and surveillance measures at airports and border crossings.

West Bengal borders Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan.

The bureau explained in the statement that the Nipah virus is a potentially fatal zoonotic\* virus. Since its discovery in 1999, human infection cases have been reported

multiple times in Bangladesh and India. The virus is primarily carried by fruit bats and can be transmitted to humans through contaminated food, such as fruit, or contact with infected pigs. Human-to-human transmission is also possible. The fatality rate among infected individuals ranges between 40 and 75 percent.

Infected humans may either be asymptomatic or develop acute respiratory illness and fatal encephalitis. Early symptoms resemble those of influenza, while severe cases may

involve breathing difficulties, drowsiness, confusion, and other complications. The incubation period typically lasts between four and 14 days, but can extend up to 45 days. Currently, there are no effective vaccines or specific treatments available for the virus, the statement noted.

The Health Bureau urged members of the public to maintain good personal and environmental hygiene. Unless necessary, travel to affected areas should be avoided, the statement said.

If travel is unavoidable, the

statement said, it is recommended to refrain from consuming unclean fruit, avoid contact with animals and sick individuals, and seek early medical attention and proactively inform healthcare providers of one's travel history if any discomfort occurs after returning from the affected region. ■

\*A zoonotic virus is a virus that can be transmitted from animals to humans. These viruses often originate in animals and may cause diseases in humans after crossing the species barrier.

## Police arrest 3 loan sharks for abetting overstayer

### Ada Lei

The Judiciary Police (PJ) arrested three men from the Chinese mainland on Saturday for usury and abetting an overstayer, PJ spokesman Cheong Un Hong said during a regular press conference yesterday.

Cheong identified the suspects as a 45-year-old male surnamed Li, a 47-year-old male surnamed Chen and a 36-year-old male surnamed Sun, all of whom claimed to be jobless.

According to Cheong, the police received a report on Saturday about a male gambler from the Chinese mainland who was being held in a hotel guestroom in Cotai due to debts from high-interest gambling loans.

Cheong noted that the victim had borrowed HK\$50,000 from Li after gambling away all his money last Monday. The victim agreed to the loan of HK\$50,000 in gambling chips under three conditions: 20 percent "interest" on each winning round, his identification card as "collateral", and the requirement to sign an IOU.

After signing the IOU, Li and Chen accompanied the victim to gamble in a local casino. By 5 a.m. the victim had gambled away all his borrowed money. Li and Chen then confined the victim to a hotel guestroom in Cotai and arranged for Sun to watch over him while demanding repayment. By Friday, the victim had been moved to another guestroom. On Saturday, the victim managed to



Judiciary Police (PJ) spokesman Cheong Un Hong looks on during yesterday's regular press conference.

— Photo: Ada Lei

call a friend, who then reported the case to the police.

The police arrested the trio in the guestroom and seized three smartphones as well as the victim's ID card. Cheong said that, while gambling, the victim was charged HK\$20,000 in "interest" by the loan sharks.

Cheong added that the victim had overstayed his visit permit in Macau by one day. According to the victim's statement, he was not detained against his will and was free to move around after gambling away all his borrowed money.

The trio have been transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP), facing charges of usury and abetting an overstayer. ■

## Islands emergency station to be handed over to Macao Union Medical Centre tomorrow

### Khalel Vallo

The Islands Emergency Station of Conde de São Januário General Hospital will be handed over to the Islands Healthcare Complex – Macao Medical Centre of Peking Union Medical College Hospital, colloquially known as "Macao Union Medical Centre" (PUMCH), tomorrow, with emergency services continuing under the existing operational model, according to a statement by the centre on Friday.

According to the statement, PUMCH said it will take over the operation of the Islands Emergency Station after six months of preparation, including staff recruitment, training and system testing, adding that the Emergency Department is now ready to commence operations and will provide 24-hour diagnostic, treatment, imaging, laboratory, and pharmaceutical services.

The statement noted that emergency service fees will continue to follow the current three-tier charging system: Tier 1, covering people already receiving free public specialist medical

services, will remain free of charge. Tier 2 applies to local residents, who will be charged 70 percent of the standard fees for consultations, nursing, laboratory tests, imaging and other services. Tier 3 applies to non-local residents, who will be charged 100 percent of the approved emergency service fees. PUMCH expressed gratitude to the Health Bureau (SSM) for its long-



This photo downloaded from the Health Bureau's (SSM) website yesterday shows its Islands Emergency Station of Conde de São Januário General Hospital, which will be handed over to the Islands Healthcare Complex – Macao Medical Centre of Peking Union Medical College Hospital, colloquially known as "Macao Union Medical Centre" (PUMCH), tomorrow.

## Dec flu cases rise 5.6 times year-on-year: SSM

### Armindo Neves

The Health Bureau (SSM) announced in a statement yesterday that a total of 5,078 cases of mandatorily notifiable diseases were recorded last month.

Influenza topped the list with 4,855 cases, a 5.6-fold surge compared to the 731 cases reported in December 2024.

The statement also said that the number of registered influenza cases also rose by around 35.7 percent compared to November's 3,578 cases.

The bureau noted that influenza commonly occurs during winter and spring, primarily spreading through airborne transmission and droplets.

Receiving the seasonal influenza vaccine remains the most effective preventive measure.

Enterovirus infection and chickenpox recorded 87 cases and 29 cases last month, respectively, the statement said.

The statement pointed out that December's cases of enterovirus infection showed a 57.8 percent decrease from November. However, the statement pointed out, the figure is around double that of the 43 cases recorded in December 2024.

The statement also said that last month's norovirus\* infection cases have shown a significant increase compared to November, with 21

cases reported in December – a 3.2-fold rise from the only five cases recorded in November.

The bureau noted in the statement that the norovirus causes gastroenteritis and can easily trigger outbreaks in settings such as residential care facilities and schools, pointing out that individuals of any age are susceptible to infection.

Currently, 45 types of diseases are subject to mandatory notification in Macau, according to the statement. ■

\*The norovirus is primarily associated with gastroenteritis, which is inflammation of the stomach and intestines. – Poe

## Clarification

The exhibition "Soul to Soul" by Portuguese architect-cum-artist Cristina Maria de Faria Rocha Leiria, currently held at the Gallery of Regency Art Hotel in Taipa, has been extended by one day. The sales exhibition will now remain open until Sunday night. Opening hours remain unchanged, from 12 p.m. to 2 p.m. and 4:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. daily.

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### Macau Weather

MAINLY FINE.  
FORCE 3 TO 4 EAST TO  
NORTHEASTERLY WINDS.  
RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL  
RANGE BETWEEN 50% AND 90%.



17°C~24°C

Source: SMG

Macau POST

# Macau's Shanxi visitors rise 5 pct in 2025: MGTO

**Armindo Neves**

The Shanxi Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism hosted a promotional event named "Celebrate Folk Traditions, Discover the Fun of Shanxi" at the Macau Fisherman's Wharf yesterday, during which Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) Deputy Director Si Tou Lam Lai pointed out that Macau's visitors from the northern province to Macau rose 5 percent year-on-year in 2025.

Si Tou said in her speech that Shanxi and Macau have long maintained "positive interactions". Last year, Macau welcomed over 210,000 visitors from Shanxi, marking a 5 percent year-on-year increase, she noted.

Shanxi ("west of the [Taihang] mountains") has some 35 million inhabitants.

Si Tou also said that with resources such as its UNESCO Historic Centre status and its designation as a Creative City of Gastronomy, Macau looks forward to further expanding tourism cooperation with Shanxi for mutual benefit and shared development.

Wang Aiqin, director of the Culture and Tourism Department of Shanxi Province, said in her speech



Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) Deputy Director Si Tou Lam Lai addresses yesterday's event at the Macau Fisherman's Wharf in Nape.

that Shanxi is home to 531 nationally protected key cultural relics sites and three UNESCO World Heritage sites. Wang also said that Shanxi's cultural and tourism industries have seen sustained growth. Between 2021 and 2024, the province recorded an average annual increase of 11.96 percent in domestic tourist visits and an average annual rise of 20.41 percent in tourism revenue, she said. Wang expressed Shanxi's desire to deepen cooperation with Macau in

areas such as cross-boundary tourism routes, joint brand promotion, and the exploration of international markets.

Shanxi lies some 1,600 km north of Macau.

At the one-day event venue, four interactive booths were set up to showcase Shanxi's intangible cultural heritage. The four interactive booths presented Jishan mother-of-pearl lacquerware, porcelain carving in Taiyuan,



Shanxi Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism Director Wang Aiqin addresses yesterday's event.

—Photos: Armindo Neves

woodblock Spring Festival prints, and portrait paper-cutting.

Meanwhile, the department pointed out in a statement on Sunday that it has signed a strategic cooperation agreement with Macau's Travel Industry Hub B2B Platform in Zhuhai, aiming to jointly promote the international development of Shanxi's cultural and tourism industry.

The statement said that both entities will integrate resources

and deepen cooperation in areas such as digital transformation and international market promotion.

According to the statement, the platform will leverage its global network to help align Shanxi's cultural and tourism products with international demand, expand overseas marketing channels, enhance the brand's global influence, and lay a solid foundation for building Shanxi into an internationally renowned tourism destination. ■

## Albergue's wishing well & love tree opens, invites all to pen hopes & wishes



This photo provided by CAC – Círculo dos Amigos da Cultura de Macau on Saturday shows the Albergue Wishing Well and Love Tree on the Albergue SCM patio.

**Rui Pastorin**

The "Albergue Wishing Well and Love Tree 2026" is now on display on the Patio of Albergue SCM\*, inviting members of the public to make wishes and jot down their hopes and messages for the coming Chinese New Year (CNY).

The "Albergue Wishing Well and Love Tree" is annually set up on the patio.

On until March 15, one may once again write down one's hopes and even greetings to loved ones on heart-shaped message cards, this time for the Year of the Horse, according to a statement by organiser CAC - Círculo dos Amigos da Cultura de Macau ("Circle of the Friends

of Macau's Culture"). The cards can be hung on the Love Tree or on the Wishing Well throughout the Macao Foundation-sponsored event's run on the patio.

CAC, the statement said, looks forward to visitors' participation, noting that everyone is invited to make "beautiful wishes for themselves, their

families, and Macau at the beginning of the New Year, kicking off a year full of hope and creativity as we welcome the wonderful times of the Year of the Horse". ■

\*Albergue is Portuguese for "hospice". SCM stands for Santa Casa da Misericórdia ("Holy House of Mercy"), Macau's oldest charitable organisation.

## Catholic Diocese of Macau celebrates 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary with raft of events

**Rui Pastorin**

Commemorative events for the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Catholic Diocese of Macau are slated to take place throughout the year, with the programme featuring events from exhibitions and symposiums to concerts.

The diocese was founded in 1576.

The celebratory activities, organised by the diocese and lasting through January 23, 2027, kicked off on Friday evening with a Mass and "Lux Vera – Passing on the True Light" launch ceremony at the Cathedral in the city centre. "Lux Vera" is a Latin phrase that translates to "True Light" in English.

Friday also saw the issuance of a set of stamps themed "450<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Catholic Diocese of Macau", which, according to a Macau Post and Telecommunications Bureau (CTT) statement last week, comprises a set of four stamps with buildings closely associated with the Catholic church comprising the Diocesan Curia, St. Lazarus' Church, St. Joseph's Seminary Church, and the head office of Caritas Macau.

Other upcoming events listed in a Pastoral Letter by Bishop Stephen Lee Bun Sang on the Diocese de Macau website for the anniversary, which is themed "From Macau to the World: Celebrating 450 Years of Mission & Mercy", are music concerts to be held throughout the year in addition to traditional devotions and processions.

The statement added that "The



Members of the public gather, take pictures of and walk past Igreja de São Domingos (玫瑰聖母堂 – St Dominic Church) in Largo do Senado.

—Photo taken yesterday by Rui Pastorin

Cross of Faith - Woven in Unity" will be held during Lent\*, while the highlight of this year's festivities will be the "Grand Celebration Ceremony and Mass" slated for October 31.

The website statement also unveiled that the Catholic Centre is scheduled to open in the middle of the year and will host two exhibitions: "We Build Future with an Eye to the Past" and "Witness to the Heritage, Mission in the World". Other upcoming events are "Diocesan Family Day Carnival" on November 28, and the "Walking Together, Setting Sail Anew" youth gathering on December 5.

Moreover, other events listed are

this month's "Diocesan Teachers' Volleyball Friendly Match" and a symposium and a Principals' Roundtable Conference on "Catholic Education's Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow" set to take place in May.

One can find more details about the upcoming events by visiting the Catholic Diocese de Macau website on <https://events450.catholic.org.mo/en> ■

\*Lent is a significant season in the Christian calendar that lasts for approximately 40 days, leading up to Easter. It is a time of reflection, penance, and spiritual growth, commemorating the 40 days that Jesus spent fasting in the wilderness. - Poe

# Creative team reveals vision behind 'Operation Oops! A Musical'



This poster downloaded from the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) website yesterday promotes the upcoming "Operation Oops! A Musical" slated to hit the stage from this Saturday through next Monday.

Director Fong Chun Kit (right) addresses yesterday's press conference alongside playwright Lawrence Lei I Leong at the Macau Cultural Centre (CCM).



The production crew – Bill Lu Ching Ue (left), Jordan Cheng (鄭君熾) (top left), Florence Cheong Ut leng (top right), Fong Chun Kit (second from left), Leon Ko Sai-tseung (second from right) and Lawrence Lei I Leong – pose for a group photo during yesterday's "Operation Oops! A Musical" press conference at the Macau Cultural Centre (CCM).

The creative team – (from left to right) Jordan Cheng (鄭君熾), Florence Cheong Ut leng, Bill Lu Ching Ue, Leon Ko Sai-tseung, Lawrence Lei I Leong and Fong Chun Kit – look on during yesterday's press conference at the Macau Cultural Centre (CCM). – Photos: Khalel Vallo

## Khalel Vallo

The Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) announced in a statement last week that "Operation Oops! A Musical", an original comedy produced under the "Commissioning Performing Arts Productions 2024–2026" project, is slated to be staged over three performances from this Saturday through next Monday at the Small Auditorium of the Macau Cultural Centre (CCM) in Nape.

Adapted from the homonymous novel by Macau playwright Lawrence Lei I Leong, "Operation Oops!" tells the prize-winning story of a band of misfits who, frustrated by soaring housing prices, decide to kidnap a real-estate developer. Thwarted by a string of unfortunate blunders, the zero-budget kidnapping plan spirals into chaos.

During yesterday's press conference, the musical's composer, Leon Ko Sai-tseung, said the script immediately stood out to him. "When I first saw his script, I thought it had the potential to make a very special musical," he said, adding that he wanted to create "a happy, but a little bit of a sad theme". He also described the collaboration with co-lyricist Bill Lu Ching Ue as a fresh experience, noting that "there was only me and him" left in the end to shape the musical language.

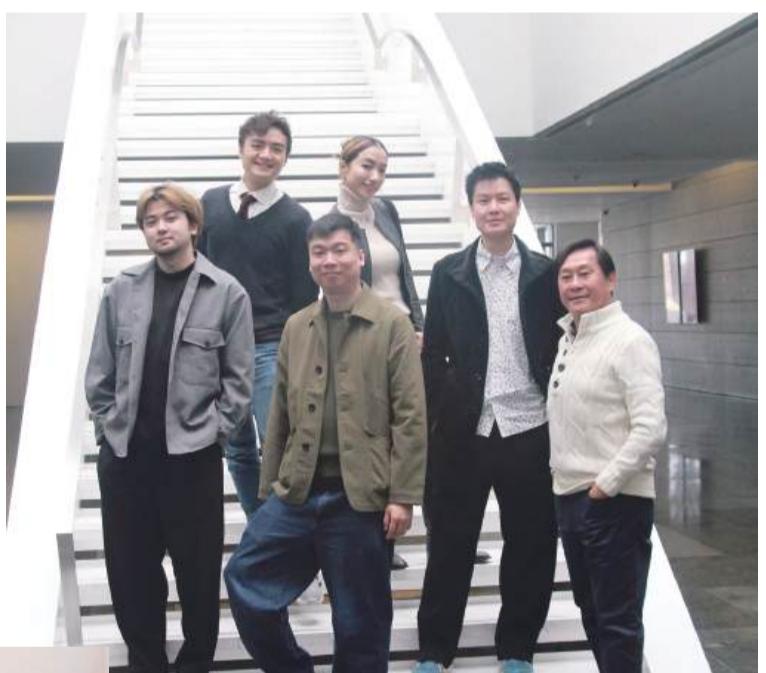
Leong said that adapting the original novel into a musical required a shift in mindset. "The stage play is based on dialogue to promote the plot, but the musical play is more important. It is the music and the song that promote the plot," he said.

Meanwhile, director Fong Chun Kit of the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre said that the visual and rhythmic style draws from a sense of confinement and struggle. Comparing the characters to sheep, he said they are "struggling to survive in a small space", with minimalist staging where "they can only use one thing in each scene", relying heavily on actors' performance and musical rhythm to drive the atmosphere.

Local choreographer Florence Cheong Ut leng stressed that movement was designed to express class struggle rather than beauty. "I don't think the dance should be beautiful or graceful. It's more about the character," she said, adding that the choreography aims for a "wild and rough texture" rooted in everyday life, while keeping the musical engaging and fun for audiences.

Jordan Cheng (鄭君熾), a multi-award-winning local performer and recipient of the Best Actor award at the 31<sup>st</sup> Hong Kong Drama Awards, described the rehearsal process as intense but joyful. "We are like a big pot in the rehearsal room. We all jump into it," he said, noting frequent laughter during rehearsals despite the physical demands of musical theatre. He added that the cast, drawn from Macau, Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland, created "a lot of sparks and interesting things".

Tickets are on sale via Enjoy Macao Ticketing, Damai and Maoyan platforms. Details on ticketing and promotional offers may be found via [www.icm.gov.mo](http://www.icm.gov.mo) or by contacting 2840 0555.



The creative team – (from left to right) Jordan Cheng (鄭君熾), Florence Cheong Ut leng, Bill Lu Ching Ue, Leon Ko Sai-tseung, Lawrence Lei I Leong and Fong Chun Kit – look on during yesterday's press conference at the Macau Cultural Centre (CCM). – Photos: Khalel Vallo

# Xia urges HK & Macau to improve executive-led system, enhance governance effectiveness

Continued from p.1

Xia noted that the two SARs' Basic Laws were drawn up in accordance with the nation's Constitution, where a distinctive feature of their political systems designed by their Basic Laws is the implementation of executive-led governance, adding that this design fully reflects Chinese characteristics and the features of Hong Kong and Macau's capitalist systems, complying with the "One Country, Two Systems" principle and the legal status of the two regions and possessing profound political, legal, and practical foundations.

## Xia lays out executive-led governance's 3 essential requirements

Xia said that the implementation of executive-led governance is an essential requirement for safeguarding the constitutional order of the two SARs. Xia noted that the two regions' Basic Laws each clearly stipulate that the chief executive is the head of the SAR and its government who is accountable to the SAR and the Central People's Government. Executive-led governance, Xia said, embodies the fundamental requirement for the chief executive to represent the entire SAR in being accountable to the central authorities, being conducive to properly handling the relationship between the central authorities and the SAR and maintaining its constitutional order.

Xia said that the implementation of executive-led governance is an essential requirement for ensuring the implementation of the principles of "Hong Kong people governing Hong Kong", "Macau people governing Macau", and a high degree of autonomy. In the design of the two SARs' political system under executive-led governance, Xia said, the chief executives and the governments of the two SARs play a leading role, representing the fundamental interests of Hong Kong and Macau and the overall interests of their compatriots. This is the best form of governance for realising the principles of "Hong Kong people governing Hong Kong", "Macau people governing Macau", and a high degree of autonomy, Xia said.

Xia also said that the implementation of executive-led governance is an essential requirement for addressing the realities of Hong Kong and Macau and achieving efficient governance in the two SARs. Implementing executive-led governance and fully leveraging the leading role of the chief executives and the



Attendees listen to Xia Baolong's speech during yesterday's thematic seminar about "Upholding and Improving Executive-led Governance to Promote Good Governance in the [Hong Kong and Macau] Special Administrative Regions", with the parallel sessions in Hong Kong (left) and Macau being displayed on the stage by video link.

- Photo: HKMWO-HKMAO

governments of the two SARs, Xia said, are conducive to enhancing the functionality and efficiency of the governance organs, uniting forces from all sides, flexibly responding to various risks and challenges, and maintaining the prosperity and stability of Hong Kong and Macau.

Xia underlined that the successful implementation of the executive-led system in the two SARs demonstrates its strong vitality and superiority. Since the return of Hong Kong and Macau to the motherland, Xia said, the two SARs' chief executives, with the central government's full support, have led the governments of the two SARs in implementing executive-led governance and uniting various segments of civil society to work hard, thereby maintaining the long-term prosperity and stability of Hong Kong and Macau and enabling the implementation of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle to achieve globally recognised success.

## Xia outlines executive-led governance's 5 advantages

Xia said that the experience since the return of Hong Kong and Macau to the motherland has proven that executive-led governance has the advantages of strengthening governance coordination and ensuring effective policy implementation, thereby effectively safeguarding the nation's sovereignty, security, and development interests; the advantage of seizing opportunities and flexibly adapting to the real situation,

thereby effectively promoting economic prosperity and development; the advantage of concentrating resources to accomplish major tasks while balancing the interests of all sides, thereby effectively improving people's social welfare and well-being; the advantage of innovating and maintaining policy stability, thereby effectively enhancing international competitiveness and influence; and the advantage of quickly responding to the latest situation and handling it efficiently, thereby effectively addressing and resolving various risks and challenges.

Xia emphasised the need for the two SARs to follow the correct direction of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle, uphold and improve their executive-led systems, and continuously enhance governance effectiveness.

Overall, Xia said, executive-led governance has operated smoothly and effectively in the implementation of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle, particularly playing an important role in promoting Hong Kong's transition from chaos to stability and from stability to prosperity, demonstrating strong institutional resilience.

However, Xia said, it must also be recognised that the implementation of executive-led governance in the special administrative region(s) has not always been smooth. For instance, Xia said, it once faced significant challenges in Hong Kong, providing profound lessons. Those against China and destabilising Hong Kong and external forces sought to hollow out

and change the executive-led governance established by the HKSAR Basic Law, advocating for "separation of powers" to undermine the authority of the chief executive and the government of the HKSAR, thereby harming the authority of the central authorities and even resisting or rejecting the power of the central authorities.

Xia also said that the key to upholding and improving executive-led governance in the two SARs is that their chief executives and the governments must strengthen their sense of responsibility as the leaders of Hong Kong and Macau and effectively shoulder the responsibility as the primary persons accountable for the governance of Hong Kong and Macau.

Xia also said that the chief executive and the governments of two SARs must implement executive-led governance in all aspects of governance, striving to build efficient and effective governments. Under the leadership of the chief executives, all government entities must proactively strengthen top-level design and strategic planning for the development of the two SARs, align with the nation's 15th Five-Year Plan, and enhance the foresight and initiative in the future development of Hong Kong and Macau.

Sam, the MSAR government's five policy secretaries, Legislative Assembly (AL) President André Cheong and Court of Final Appeal (TUI) Song Man Lei issued separate statements on Xia's speech to express their full support for his remarks. ■

# Police nab 2 illegal currency exchange dealers for cheating gamblers out of 895,000 yuan

## Ada Lei

The Judiciary Police (PJ) arrested two men from the Chinese mainland on Friday for cheating two gamblers out of 895,000 yuan (1.02 million patacas) in an illegal currency exchange deal, PJ spokesman Cheong Un Hong said during a regular press conference yesterday.

Cheong identified the suspects as a 47-year-old male surnamed Wu who claimed to be jobless, and a 38-year-old snack-shop owner surnamed Jiao.

According to Cheong, the Judiciary Police (PJ) received a referral on Friday from the Public Security

Police (PSP) about a fraud case.

Cheong noted that two female gamblers arrived in Macau on Friday, planning to pool money for gambling. They were introduced to Wu and Jiao for a currency exchange deal through a friend. They then communicated via WeChat and agreed to exchange 895,000 yuan for HK\$1 million.

The two gamblers later went to a hotel guestroom in Cotai for the transaction, during which they wanted to count the cash first. Wu and Jiao handed over HK\$1 million in cash for the gamblers to count, but then took it back immediately.

After counting, the two

gamblers transferred 398,000 yuan and 497,000 yuan respectively via their smartphones. However, Wu and Jiao suddenly claimed that they had not received the transfers and refused to hand over the cash, leading to a dispute. Suspecting that they had been scammed, the two gamblers immediately reported the case to the police.

Upon arriving at the scene, the police apprehended Wu and Jiao, seizing HK\$1 million in cash and two smartphones from them.

The duo have been transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP), facing charges of illegal currency exchange and fraud. ■



This undated handout photo provided by the Judiciary Police (PJ) yesterday shows the HK\$1 million in cash and two smartphones seized from the two suspects.

# Cinema fuels China's consumption boom, economic vitality



Spectators watch the Chinese animated film "Ne Zha 2" at a cinema in Guiyang, capital of Guizhou Province, on February 25, 2025. Hitting cinemas during the Spring Festival holiday in 2025, "Ne Zha 2" shattered numerous records to become the world's highest-grossing animated film.

— Xinhua

## Xinhua writer Shen Anni

BEIJING — Earlier this year, Xin Minghua, a devoted fan of the "Ne Zha" animated films, journeyed all the way from Shanghai to Sichuan Province, just to visit Nezha Palace, a site dedicated to the legendary mythological figure.

"We heard there was a Nezha Palace here and thought it was interesting, so we came to see it for ourselves," Xin said.

Visitor numbers at the Cuiping Hill scenic area in Yibin, where the palace was built in 1991, have surged since these movies became major hits, with attendance in 2025 tripling that of 2024 and a daily attendance peaking at 8,000, according to site operators.

The success of Chinese films is flowing beyond the big screen, driving a new wave of consumption across the country. From film-themed travel and spin-off merchandise to cinema equipment, box-office hits are opening up fresh avenues for economic growth.

Data from the China Film Administration (CFA) show that the country's film industry had generated a total output of 817.26 billion yuan in 2025, placing it among the largest in the world. Each yuan earned at the box office is estimated to create 15.77 yuan of output in related industries, a figure also among the global leaders.

Experts say this impressive performance reflects not only the growing strength of China's film sector, but also a broader shift from a box-office-driven model to a more diverse consumption economy.

That transition, notably, is being reinforced by policy support. In 2025, the CFA rolled out a series of "film-plus" initiatives nationwide.

"The film industry is taking practical steps to deepen integration with tourism, dining, technology, gaming and merchandise sectors," said Luo Yang, deputy head of the CFA.

"Nobody," an animated film inspired by the classic Chinese tale, "Journey to the West," has emerged as a standout example of this transformation.

This film has seen the launch of more than 800 licensed products, generating nearly 2.5 billion yuan in retail sales. It has also secured IP licensing and co-branding deals with over 30 companies. One collaboration with a coffee chain proved especially successful, with sales of the themed drinks surpassing 5 million cups within just three days of launch.

"The Legend of Hei 2," another animated blockbuster, has drawn large crowds to pop-up stores, thus boosting offline spending. Industry data reveal that for every yuan spent on a ticket, nearly five yuan is generated in related merchandise.

Beyond merchandise, films are sparking a tourism boom, with one movie after another turning entire cities into must-visit destinations.

In "Creation of the Gods II: Demon Force," elements of Yin-Shang culture, the ancient culture centered in central China's Anyang City, have become a magnet for visitors, boosting the city's cultural tourism.

Xu Hejian, deputy curator of Anyang's Yinxu Museum, said the museum has seen consistently high visitor numbers since the film premiered, with many visitors eager to track down the artifacts showcased on screen.

An official from the Anyang municipal government said the city plans to host a series of cultural and tourism activities over the Spring Festival holiday, with a total of 235 events scheduled.

China's flourishing film industry is also driving growth in cinema technology and the expansion of movie theaters.

In 2025, orders for LED cinema screens in China jumped

by roughly 50 percent compared with the previous year, cementing the country's position as home to the world's largest number of LED-equipped theaters. Nationwide, a total of 1,065 cinemas were newly built last year.

With virtual reality films now getting screening approval under China's national film regulatory framework, many cinemas in 2025 took the lead in investing in a new generation of screening halls. Beijing's 798 Hyper Vision, the country's first virtual reality cinema, has welcomed around 63,000 visitors since opening in May last year.

Despite its rapid growth, China's film economy still has significant room for expansion. According to a film industry report released in December last year, revenue from movie merchandise remained relatively low in China.

The Chinese market also faces a lack of stable, high-quality intellectual property and advanced industrial design and production capabilities, the report observed.

Even so, experts say China's film industry, underpinned by a vast domestic market, a complete industrial chain and strong policy support, has moved beyond the phase of simply catching up in scale and is entering a new stage of quality-driven growth. The potential of film to promote China's economic and social development is being realized at pace, with the film economy emerging as a powerful engine for upgrading the country's service consumption sector.

"The film industry is building new forms of cultural business and a more diverse consumption ecosystem, reflecting the vast growth potential of China's cultural economy and creating new drivers of economic growth," said Zhu Di, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

— Xinhua

# Chain supermarkets, convenience stores report steady gains in 2025

BEIJING — The country's chain supermarkets and convenience stores reported steady operational improvement in 2025, industry surveys have shown.

A recent survey released by the China Chain Store and Franchise Association revealed that 50 percent of surveyed companies reported year-on-year growth in total sales in 2025 — up from 38 percent in 2024 — while 46 percent reported an increase in net profits.

Among comparable stores, standard supermarkets and community supermarkets outperformed large-format supermarkets, according to the survey.

More than half of all supermarket outlets saw continued increases in customer traffic and online business, while 72 percent of surveyed companies reported higher online sales than year prior.

Many companies reported that they had carried out store renovations and adjustments to improve customer experience and product competitiveness.

More than 90 percent of companies that made such adjustments achieved performance growth, with bakery products playing a notable role in boosting store visits, capturing instant consumption demand and strengthening store image.

— Xinhua

## 20,000 evacuated after 5.5-magnitude quake in Gansu, no casualties reported

LANZHOU — A 5.5-magnitude earthquake jolted Tebo County in Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province, at 2:56 p.m. yesterday, according to the China Earthquake Networks Center (CENC).

No casualties were reported in the affected areas after the first round of comprehensive inspections, while cracks have been observed in some buildings, local authorities said.

Tebo County has arranged the urgent relocation of people from hazardous areas and is working to assess the full extent of the damage. As of press time, more than 20,000 residents in the county have been evacuated to safety.

Preliminary investigations indicate that tremors were felt near the epicenter in the county, and that power supply, communication and water services in the affected area remain normal.

According to multiple residents of the county, the quake was felt strongly, prompting people to rush to public squares for safety. No significant structural damage to buildings

Over half of all surveyed chain supermarket companies said they plan to pursue further development in 2026 through a range of measures, such as facility upgrades, a deepened regional presence and cross-regional expansion.

Overall, the sector is shifting from a scale-driven approach to growth toward a focus on quality and efficiency, with the foundation for growth strengthening gradually, according to the results of the survey.

A separate survey on convenience stores, which was also carried out by the association, showed that more than 60 percent of convenience store companies reported year-on-year sales growth in 2025, with the increase resulting mainly from comparable-store sales growth, followed by incremental sales from store expansion.

That survey found that the total number of convenience stores continued to grow in 2025, though the pace of growth moderated.

For 2026, nearly 70 percent of respondents said they will prioritize optimizing product categories, refining operations and developing private-label products, as strengthening product competitiveness becomes a shared focus across the industry.

— Xinhua

has been observed.

After the earthquake, public security authorities dispatched 350 officers to conduct search and rescue operations. The Gansu provincial fire and rescue corps has mobilized a total of 340 personnel, 65 vehicles and seven search dogs to affected areas.

Xinhua reporters who arrived in Tebo on Monday evening observed that buildings along the roads remained generally intact, with rescue vehicles passing frequently. Local officials told Xinhua that temporary settlement sites have been established, and emergency supplies, including quilts, stoves and coal, were arriving.

The office of the State Council earthquake relief headquarters, the Ministry of Emergency Management and the China Earthquake Administration activated Level IV emergency responses to the earthquake on Monday.

The epicenter was monitored at 34.06 degrees north latitude and 103.25 degrees east longitude. The quake struck at a depth of 10 km, a report issued by the CENC revealed.

— Xinhua

## China rejects US accusations on COVID-19, stresses commitment to WHO, multilateralism

BEIJING – China yesterday firmly rejected the groundless accusations of the United States regarding COVID-19, and reaffirmed its steadfast support for the World Health Organization (WHO) and multilateralism, following a US statement of withdrawal from the WHO.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and US Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr. released a joint statement on the termination of the United States' WHO membership on January 23. The US Department of Health and Human Services also made unsubstantiated claims about China's early handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to a relevant query at a daily press briefing, foreign ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun stressed that China has been open, transparent and responsible in its anti-pandemic efforts.

"From the outbreak of COVID-19, China put the people and their lives front and center, collaborated with other countries in trying times, and made significant contributions to international cooperation in the fight against the pandemic," he said.

He noted that there is a clear timeline of China's response to the pandemic, which is backed by solid data that has been widely recognized by the international community and brooks no distortion or slander.

He reiterated China's firm opposition to the politicization of the pandemic, saying that using COVID-19 as a tool for political manipulation and shifting blame onto China will gain no support and will fail.

Guo also noted that the WHO is a professional international institution and the authority in the field of global public health, and that it has expressed regret over the US withdrawal notification.

"Multilateralism is the cornerstone of the current international order, and it represents the trend of the times and the will of the international community," Guo said.

He emphasized that China will continue to support the WHO in playing its leading role, deepen international cooperation on public health, strengthen global health governance, and promote the development of a global community of health for all.

—Xinhua

## China firmly opposes US politicians pointing fingers at normal interactions between China, Central American countries

BEIJING – China firmly opposes certain US politicians pointing fingers at the normal interactions between China and Central American countries, foreign ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun said during a regular press briefing yesterday.

Guo made the remarks in response to the visit of a US delegation to Central American countries, which was led by US Representative from Michigan John Moolenaar, during which the politician made remarks slandering China.

"Such remarks are outright lies and fallacies, which are nothing

but a mirror image of their own ideological bias and Cold War mentality," Guo said.

He noted that China has always adhered to the principles of mutual respect, equality, mutual benefit, openness, inclusiveness and win-win cooperation in pursuing friendly cooperation with Central American countries, which has delivered tangible benefits to local people and been welcomed by relevant countries.

"We urge US politicians to stop manipulating China-related issues, and to make more contributions to the development and prosperity of the region," Guo said.

—Xinhua

## Xinjiang launches China's first express cotton freight train service

URUMQI – A freight train carrying 1,395 tonnes of cotton departed from Aksu railway station in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region yesterday, bound for Binzhou City in Shandong Province.

Its departure marked the official launch of China's first express cotton freight train service, providing new logistics support for the development of Xinjiang's cotton industry.

Operating at a speed of 120 kilometers per hour, the railway uses well-maintained, enhanced-speed carriages and has implemented customized loading plans for each warehouse to ensure the quality of

the cotton during transit, according to the China Railway Urumqi Group Co., Ltd.

The new express service makes shipping more convenient for cotton sellers and allows downstream textile enterprises to adjust production flexibly.

Yang Baofu, general manager of the China National Cotton Exchange, said that future plans include increasing the frequency of such trains, and expanding routes to Zhengzhou in central Henan Province and Shanghai, which will further reduce logistics costs for the industry chain.

—Xinhua

## Xi holds phone talks with Vietnam's To Lam

BEIJING – President Xi Jinping yesterday held phone talks with To Lam, general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) Central Committee.

Xi, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, expressed congratulations over the successful convening of the 14th National Congress of the CPV and To Lam's re-election as general secretary of the CPV Central Committee.

Xi expressed his belief that under the leadership of the CPV Central Committee headed by To Lam, Vietnam will surely fulfill the goals and tasks set forth by the 14th National Congress and realize at an early date the two goals set for the centenary of the party and the country respectively.

He added that China and Vietnam should keep to their paths and not sway in their commitment, unite and cooperate to promote development, and work together towards a bright future.

China is working to realize the Second Centenary Goal of building China into a great modern socialist country in all respects,

while Vietnam is also in a new era of national development, Xi noted.

The two sides should hold firm to their beliefs, uphold fundamental principles and break new ground, fend off and defuse various risks and challenges, jointly defend the cause of socialism, and preserve the political essence of China-Vietnam relations, Xi said.

Both sides should continue to strengthen exchanges and mutual learning on both party and state governance, make good use of mechanisms such as high-level meetings, theoretical seminars and cadre trainings, and continually improve the governance capacity of the party and the state, he added.

Both sides should strengthen the alignment of development strategies, deepen high-level mutually beneficial cooperation so as to bring more benefits to the two peoples and jointly advance towards socialist modernization, Xi said.

He also urged the two sides to strengthen coordination and collaboration in international and regional affairs, jointly oppose hegemonism and bloc

confrontation, and work together to promote the building of a community with a shared future for humanity.

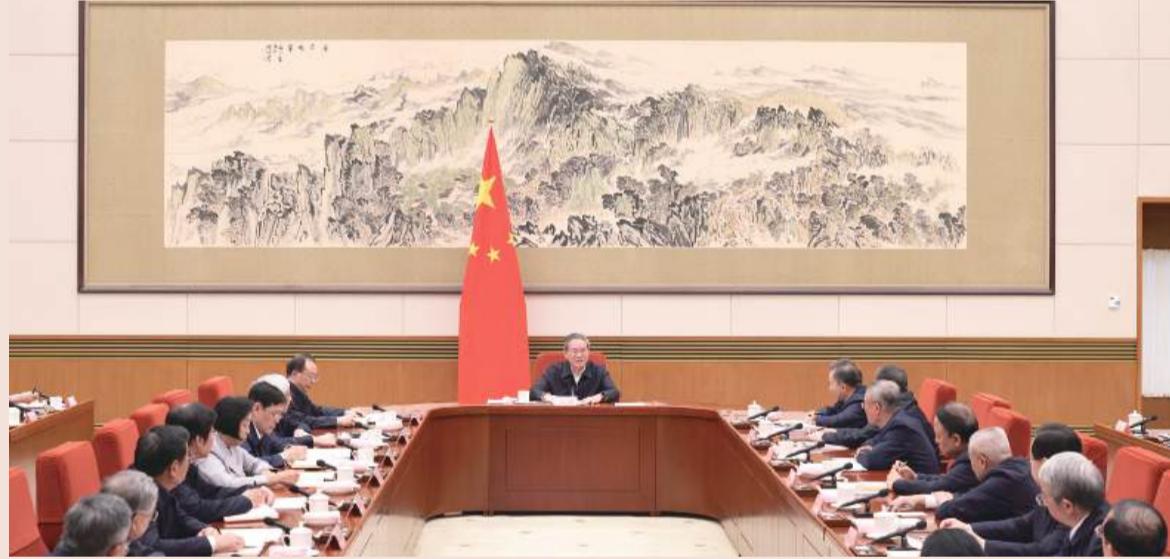
For his part, To Lam expressed appreciation to the CPC Central Committee for the congratulatory message on the successful convening of the 14th National Congress of the CPV, and thanked General Secretary Xi for the good wishes on his re-election as general secretary of the CPV Central Committee.

He outlined the main outcomes of the 14th CPV National Congress, and said Vietnam is willing to work side by side with China on a new journey, steadily deepen friendly cooperation between neighboring socialist countries in line with the requirements of "six more".

China's development has consistently provided inspiration and valuable experience for Vietnam's development, he said.

Vietnam will continue to adhere to the one-China policy, support General Secretary Xi's vision of a community with a shared future for humanity, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the four global initiatives, To Lam said. —Xinhua

## Li chairs symposium on draft govt work report, 5-year plan



Premier Li Qiang (center), also a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, presides over a symposium to solicit opinions and suggestions on the draft government work report and the draft outline of China's 15th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development, in Beijing, yesterday. Li heard opinions and suggestions on the two documents from leaders of the central committees of non-CPC political parties, the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce (ACFIC), and representatives of personages without party affiliation.

—Xinhua

BEIJING – Premier Li Qiang yesterday presided over a symposium to solicit opinions and suggestions on the draft government work report and the draft outline of China's 15th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development.

Li, who is also a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, heard opinions and suggestions on the two documents from leaders of the central committees of non-CPC political parties, the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce (ACFIC), and representatives of personages without party affiliation.

On economic and social development during the 15th Five-Year Plan period (2026-2030), representatives at the symposium offered suggestions on strengthening macroeconomic regulation, building a robust domestic market, fostering new quality productive forces, deepening reform and opening-up, and safeguarding and improving people's livelihoods.

Li said the opinions and suggestions offered were valuable and expressed appreciation for their support of the government's work.

He stressed that this year marks the beginning of the 15th Five-Year Plan period, uncertainties in the external environment are on the rise, and risks and challenges

remain in the country's economic development.

He called for pursuing more proactive and effective macroeconomic policies, strengthening coordination between reform measures and macro policies, and promoting higher-quality economic growth while achieving an appropriate increase in economic output.

Li expressed the hope that non-CPC political parties, the ACFIC and personages without party affiliation will continue to offer advice and suggestions actively, help address prominent challenges to development, and pool greater wisdom and strength in advancing high-quality economic and social development. —Xinhua

# Philippine ferry survivor describes scenes of panic, wait for rescue

**Pam Castro**

MANILA – As their ferry began listing heavily in the middle of the night off the southern Philippines, passengers instinctively raced to one side in a desperate bid to rebalance the doomed vessel.

Survivor Aquino Sajili told AFP he called a lawyer friend as he stood against the railing of the MV Trisha Kerstin 3, saying he expected it to sink and asking him to alert the Philippine Coast Guard.

“Ten minutes later, I heard a sudden, loud snap,” said the 53-year-old attorney from nearby Zamboanga City in Mindanao.

“Then the ship immediately capsized,” he said in an interview from his home, describing how panic quickly gripped the passengers.

“The women and children were shouting and crying,” he said. “There were many children present there.”

A client he had been travelling with to a sharia court hearing was among the 18 dead, Sajili said.

“Many of the casualties were women of old age... The ship was so big that when you are covered by it, you need strength to push yourself above water,” he said.

## No alert from crew

Sajili said he was awoken by a fellow passenger as the triple-decker ferry began to tilt precariously.

“He alerted us and gave us life jackets. No one from the crew alerted us,” he said.

“It was the passengers who were helping other passengers to stay calm and telling them not to jump ship.”

Sajili clung to a small part of the boat that stayed above the waterline until the last possible moment, before letting go and swimming towards a life raft.



*This handout photo taken and received yesterday courtesy of Aquino Sajili, an attorney based in Zamboanga City in Mindanao, shows Sajili taking a selfie showing other survivors of the MV Trisha Kerstin 3 ferry, which sank in waters off Basilan province, following their rescue at a port in Isabela, Basilan province.*

– AFP

The raft flipped over before he reached it as desperate people tried to pull themselves from the water.

“In the end, we just held on to the upside-down life raft and floated. We were floating at sea for more than three hours,” he said.

The first rescue vessels arrived at around 3:30 a.m. [local time], Sajili said, although those bobbing in the water faced a longer wait.

Small groups of survivors waited in turn to be picked up by fishing vessels as well as boats sent by the ferry’s owner, Aleson Shipping Lines.

## Unacceptable

“We were just floating and comforting each other, encouraging each other not to panic,” Sajili said.

The coast guard’s response time had been “unacceptable”, he said.

The ferry sank about five kilometres east of Basilan province’s Baluk-Baluk Island, near the Zamboanga peninsula.

“We’re near Basilan, but it took them more than three hours to respond to us,” he said.

He also disputed descriptions of rough seas at the time of the sinking, saying the waves had only become stronger after they had been in the water for hours.

After speaking with other survivors, he believed there was a strong likelihood that a lawsuit would be filed against the ferry’s owner.

“I think we can gather enough evidence to prove that the crew members of the ship were really negligent,” he said.

Aleson Shipping Lines, which also operated the Lady Mary Joy 3 ferry, on which 31 people were killed in a 2023 fire, did not respond to calls for comment.

“I’m just thankful that many survived,” Sajili said. “But I hope this also serves as a lesson to shipping lines for them to do their obligation under the law.” – AFP

# Duterte to face ICC hearing Feb 23

**Richard Carter**

THE HAGUE – Former Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte will face a hearing at the International Criminal Court (ICC) next month, judges ruled yesterday, rejecting arguments the 80-year-old was unfit to take part.

Duterte will face a so-called “confirmation of charges” hearing starting February 23, where judges decide whether the prosecution’s allegations are strong enough to proceed to trial.

“Having regard to the relevant legal principles, the medical assessment of the independent experts... and all of the relevant circumstances of the case, the Chamber was satisfied that Mr Duterte is able effectively to exercise his procedural rights,” the court said.

Duterte is “therefore fit to take part in the pre-trial proceedings,” the ICC added.

ICC prosecutors have charged Duterte with three counts of crimes against humanity, alleging his

involvement in at least 76 murders as part of his “war on drugs”.

The first count concerns his alleged involvement as a co-perpetrator in 19 murders carried out between 2013 and 2016 while Duterte was mayor of Davao City.

The second count relates to 14 murders of so-called “High Value Targets” in 2016 and 2017 when Duterte was president.

And the third charge is about 43 murders committed during “clearance” operations of lower-level alleged drug users or pushers.

These took place across the Philippines between 2016 and 2018, the prosecution alleged.

Duterte was arrested in Manila on March 11, flown to the Netherlands that same night and has been held at the ICC’s detention unit at Scheveningen Prison since.

He followed his initial hearing by video link, appearing dazed and frail and barely speaking.

In October, the court had already rejected a defence plea for early

release, arguing he posed a flight risk and could be in a position to influence witnesses if freed.

## Not persuaded

Duterte’s defence had argued the former leader’s short-term memory was “demonstrably impacted” to the extent he could not “retain information for more than a short space of time.”

The defence team said this made it impossible for him to follow a hearing fairly and to instruct his lawyers effectively.

However, the judges said they were “not persuaded by these arguments”.

Duterte’s lawyer, Nicholas Kaufman, told AFP the defence would “seek leave to appeal this decision on the grounds that Mr Duterte was denied due process.”

“The defence is disappointed that, contrary to accepted practice, it was denied the opportunity to present its own medical evidence,” said Kaufman.

# Japan court holds N Korea liable for fake ‘paradise on Earth’ scheme

**Tomohiro Osaki**

TOKYO – A Tokyo court ordered Pyongyang yesterday to pay more than US\$500,000 in compensation to four people lured to North Korea by a fantastical propaganda scheme promising a “paradise on Earth”.

More than 90,000 ethnic Koreans and their Japanese spouses are said to have migrated to North Korea between 1959 and 1984, drawn by the claims that North Korea was a paradise under a now-defunct repatriation initiative critics say amounted to state kidnapping.

Instead of finding a “paradise on Earth”, victims of the scheme said in a 2018 complaint that they had been denied basic human rights and even minimum sustenance under the programme, despite assurances of free education and medicine.

They later escaped, sometimes only after decades in the North.

The years-long and highly unusual case, seeking to directly sue Pyongyang, symbolically summoned North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to court, although he never showed up.

Yesterday, the Tokyo District Court ruled the four plaintiffs had “most of their lives taken away” by Pyongyang, and that each deserved at least 20 million yen (US\$130,000) in redress.

Plaintiff Eiko Kawasaki, now 83, said she was “overwhelmed with emotion” at the verdict, having arrived in North Korea as a teenager in 1960 and spending 43 years there before she fled.

Yesterday’s verdict was the first time “a Japanese court exercised its sovereignty against North Korea to recognise its malpractice,” Atsushi Shiraki, one of the lawyers

representing the plaintiffs, told reporters, calling it “historic”.

The district court initially dismissed the suit in 2022, ruling that a Japanese court did not have jurisdiction over Pyongyang’s “detainment” of the plaintiffs.

But this was overturned a year later by a higher court, which sent the case back to the district court for review.

Kanae Doi, Japan director of Human Rights Watch, hailed the ruling as “one very important, successful example of attempts to hold North Korea accountable” for its international crimes.

Under the programme, those suspected of disloyalty “faced severe punishment, including imprisonment with forced labour or as political prisoners”, according to HRW.

However, Kawasaki acknowledged that enforcing payment would be next to impossible.

“I’m sure the North Korean government will just ignore the court order,” she said.

Kenji Fukuda, chief lawyer for the case, said the most realistic option to retrieve the money was to confiscate North Korean assets and property in Japan.

The “paradise on Earth” programme was backed by the then Japanese government, with the media touting it as a humanitarian campaign for Koreans struggling to build a life in Japan.

During Tokyo’s 1910-45 colonial rule of the Korean peninsula, millions of Koreans moved to Japan, either voluntarily or against their will.

When Japan surrendered at the end of World War II, hundreds of thousands remained, reluctant to return to their devastated homeland.

– AFP



*One of the plaintiffs Eiko Kawasaki (centre) and chief lawyer Kenji Fukuda (left) hold a press conference in Tokyo yesterday, following a court ruling ordering the North Korean government to pay compensation over the repatriation programme to North Korea.*

– AFP

Kaufman added the defence team was also disappointed it could not “even question, in court, the contradictory findings of a panel of medical professionals selected by the judges.”

Such a high-profile hearing comes at a time when the ICC finds itself under unprecedented pressure.

Furious at arrest warrants issued for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the United States has slapped sanctions on top ICC judges and prosecutors.

The ICC is also lacking a chief prosecutor as Karim Khan has stepped down temporarily pending an investigation into sexual abuse allegations against him that he denies.

In October, the court dismissed Khan from working on the Duterte case, citing a “reasonable appearance of bias.”

This will have little practical impact on the hearing as Khan would have been on leave anyway.

– AFP

## Myanmar pro-military party declares victory in junta-run polls

YANGON - Myanmar's dominant pro-military party has won junta-run elections, a party source told AFP yesterday, after a month-long vote that democracy watchdogs dismissed as a rebranding of army rule.

The military snatched power in a 2021 coup, ending Myanmar's experiment with civilian rule and triggering civil war, but pledged a three-phase vote, which finished on Sunday, would return power to the people.

With massively popular democratic figurehead Aung San Suu Kyi detained and her party dissolved, critics say the ballot was stacked with army allies to prolong their grip on power.

Voting was not held in huge patches of the country controlled by rebel factions fighting in the civil war - another hurdle cited by those questioning the poll's mandate.

"We won a majority already," a senior official from the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) said on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to share preliminary results.

"We are in the position to form a new government," they said. "As we won in the election, we will move forward."

Many analysts describe the USDP - which is staffed by retired senior officers - as a civilian proxy of the military, which has stage-managed the poll to give its rule a veneer of civilian legitimacy.

"They won since before the election," said one 28-year-old Yangon resident, speaking on condition of anonymity for security reasons.

"They were the only ones in the race, and they were the referee," they added. "Almost everyone won't have faith in the government they will form."

Official results are expected later this week.

### Never in doubt

The USDP comfortably won the opening two phases of the election on December 28 and January 11.

A quarter of unelected parliamentary seats will be reserved for members of the armed forces, under the terms of a constitution drafted during a previous stint of military rule.

A combined house majority of MPs will elect the president after parliament convenes in March.

Touring Mandalay city polling stations in civilian dress on Sunday, junta chief Min Aung Hlaing again declined to rule out serving as the new government's president.

While the military has touted the poll as an opportunity for reconciliation, rebel factions regard it as illegitimate, and conflict monitors say it is unlikely to stymy the civil war.

Elections were called off in one in five of Myanmar's townships amid the fighting, but the military waged a withering pre-poll offensive, including attacks rights groups allege may include war crimes.

In junta-held territory, dissent has been purged, with new laws punishing protest or criticism of the election with up to a decade in prison.

Parties that won 90 percent of seats in 2020 did not appear on the ballot this time, the Asian Network for Free Elections said.

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

"While the election results within Myanmar have never been in doubt, the election result that matters most is the response of the international community," UN expert Tom Andrews said last week.

"International acceptance of this fraudulent exercise would set back the clock on genuine resolution to this crisis."

- AFP

## Indonesian landslide death toll rises to 17, dozens missing



Rescuers search for victims buried by a landslide in Pasirlangu village in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia yesterday. - AFP

**Dessy Sagita with Marchio Gorbiano in Jakarta**

CISARUA - The death toll in a massive Indonesian landslide rose to 17 yesterday as rescuers used heavy equipment to search for dozens still missing days after heavy rain unleashed a torrent of mud.

People gathered near the site in Java's West Bandung region, desperately awaiting news of their loved ones as rescuers, who fear another landslide, scoured the unstable area.

The flow of soil and debris barrelled through the village of Pasirlangu early on Saturday, burying residential areas and forcing dozens to evacuate their homes.

"It's impossible that they are still alive. I just want their bodies to be found," said Aep Saepudin, who has been coming to the village daily for updates about his 11 family members, including his sister, who are missing.

"My heart aches. I feel so sad seeing my older sister like that [buried by the landslide]," he told AFP.

Abdul Muhari, a spokesman for the national disaster agency, confirmed yesterday that at least 17 people were killed.

The number of people missing was later revised down to around 46 from an earlier figure of 73, local search and rescue head Ade Dian Permana told a news conference.

"This is based on the report from the village head," Ade said.

He also said rescuers had handed over nine body bags to authorities for identification.

Indonesia's military said yesterday that four Marines were among those confirmed dead and 19 remained missing.

The Marines had been training before a deployment to Indonesia's border with Papua New Guinea, the navy's chief of staff Muhammad Ali told local media.

More than 50 houses were severely damaged by the landslide, which also displaced more than 650 people, according to the local disaster agency.

Dozens of rescuers were searching at the foot of Mount Burangrang under dark rain clouds yesterday, an AFP reporter saw.

They dug manually and used heavy equipment, but said they had to tread carefully for fear of another landslide due to the unstable ground and bad weather.

"What we worry about most is the risk of subsequent [landslides]. Sometimes when we're in the operation, we aren't focusing on the slopes that still have the potential for landslides," rescuer Rifaldi Ashabi, 25, told AFP.

### Should be forested

Adar, one of the village residents who only provided one name, recalled the moment torrents of earth came crashing into the bedroom he shares with his grandchild.

"My grandchild and I were buried up

to here," he said, pointing to his waist, tears running down his cheeks.

The 63-year-old goat farmer said he managed to dig himself out and escape by kicking down a wall.

"I dug [through the mud] and then my grandchild and I immediately got out," he told AFP outside his wrecked home, a half-buried car parked out front.

The disaster comes after the government pointed to the role forest loss played in flooding and landslides on Sumatra island late last year, which killed around 1,200 people and displaced more than 240,000.

West Java's governor Dedi Mulyadi blamed Saturday's disaster on the sprawling plantations around Pasirlangu, mostly used to grow vegetables, and pledged to relocate affected residents.

"This area should be forested. Local residents should be relocated because the potential for landslide is high," Dedi said in a statement on Saturday.

Forests help absorb rainfall and stabilise the ground held by their roots, while their absence makes areas more prone to flash flooding and landslides. David Gaveau, founder of conservation start-up The TreeMap, told AFP in December.

Floods and landslides are common across the vast archipelago during the rainy season, which typically runs from October to March.

- AFP



This photograph taken on December 29, 2025 shows Kathmandu's Janasewa police station chief Krishna Kumar Chand standing next to a new Toyota HiAce quick response van acquired through fundraising led by youth social worker Ganapati Lal Shrestha (left) in Kathmandu. In the heart of Nepal's capital Kathmandu, the charred remains of a police station attacked during September's unrest stand in stark contrast to a brand-new, fully-equipped police van parked outside. Purchased through community crowdfunding, the vehicle has become a symbol of how local residents stepped in to help Nepal's police rebuild after one of the most violent episodes of unrest in recent years.

- AFP

## Israel army says identified remains of last Gaza hostage

JERUSALEM – The Israeli military said yesterday that the remains of the last hostage held in Gaza, Ran Gvili, had been identified and repatriated to Israel for burial.

“Following the completion of the identification process by the National Institute of Forensic Medicine, in cooperation with the Israel Police and the Military Rabbinate, Israel Defence Forces (IDF) representatives informed the family of the deceased hostage Sergeant First Class Ran Gvili, that their loved one has been identified and will be returned for burial”, an army statement said.

“With this, all hostages have been returned from the Gaza Strip to the State of Israel”, it added.

A non-commissioned officer in the Israeli police’s elite Yassam unit, Gvili was killed in action during Hamas’s attack on Israel

on October 7, 2023 and his body taken to Gaza.

He was 24 at the time of his death.

Officials had said on Sunday that Israeli forces were searching for his remains in a cemetery in the northern Gaza Strip on Sunday.

Of the 251 people abducted during the assault on Israel, which sparked the devastating war in Gaza, Gvili’s was the last body remaining in the Palestinian territory.

The gradual return of the hostages over several stages has been a complicated and arduous process for both sides.

“This is an extraordinary achievement for the State of Israel,” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told journalists in parliament.

“We promised – and I promised – to bring everyone back. We brought them all back, down to the very last captive,” he added.

The first phase of the US-backed ceasefire deal which came into effect in October had stipulated that Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas hand over all the remaining hostages, living and dead.

Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem said in a statement that: “The discovery of the body of the last Israeli prisoner in Gaza confirms Hamas’s commitment to all the requirements of the ceasefire agreement on the Gaza Strip, including the prisoner exchange process and its complete closure as stipulated in the agreement.”

In a statement, the Israeli group representing the families of hostages held in Gaza described Gvili as “a true friend, loved by everyone.”

“He loved life, was a young man of deep values, always spoke at eye level, and carried a powerful yet calm presence,” the Hostages and Missing Families Forum added. – AFP

## Saudi Arabia wants ‘strong, positive’ relationship with UAE after Yemen row: FM

WARSAW – Saudi Arabia said it hoped to have “strong, positive” ties with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the kingdom’s foreign minister said yesterday, but stressed that future relations were contingent on Abu Dhabi’s complete withdrawal from Yemen.

The two neighbours and economic powerhouses of the Gulf are traditional allies, but in the past few years they have increasingly become rivals when it comes to business and have backed rival actors in several countries.

The rivalry turned into a public row over Yemen after UAE-backed separatists seized swathes of land late last year, including areas along the Saudi border, infuriating Riyadh which retaliated with air strikes and through allies on the ground.

Riyadh also demanded that all Emirati forces be withdrawn from the country, a request which the UAE said it had complied with.

During a press conference in Warsaw yesterday, Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan said Riyadh was “always keen” to have a “strong, positive relationship with the UAE”.

“The UAE has now decided to leave Yemen and I think if that



Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Affairs Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud (left) and Poland’s Foreign Affairs Minister Radoslaw Sikorski give a joint press conference after their meeting at the Foreign Office in Warsaw yesterday. – AFP

indeed is the case and the UAE has completely left the issue of Yemen, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will take responsibility,” he added.

“I think that will be the building block for making sure that the relationship with the UAE continues strong and continues to serve the interests not just of both countries but the region.”

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.

It used to be split between UAE and Saudi-backed figures, but after Saudi Arabia and its allies reversed the Southern Transitional Council’s (STC) takeover and pushed the UAE out of the country, the government has been purged of most Emirati-backed members.

Saudi officials have accused STC leader Aidarous al-Zubaidi of fleeing to Abu Dhabi, where other separatist officials are also located. – AFP

## UN Palestinian refugee agency says demolished HQ set on fire

JERUSALEM – The United Nations’ agency for Palestinian refugees said on Sunday that its partially demolished headquarters in east Jerusalem was set on fire.

The agency, UNRWA, did not offer details on the cause of the incident on its premises, which Israeli authorities seized and began dismantling last week after banning the organisation from operating in the country in 2025.

“After having been stormed and demolished by the Israeli authorities, the UNRWA Headquarters in occupied East Jerusalem has now been set on fire,” the agency said in a statement.

It described the blaze as part of an “ongoing attempt to dismantle the status of Palestine Refugees”.

The fire and rescue service said early Sunday that it had responded to a call at the facility, where it was working to “extinguish the blaze

and prevent it from spreading”, also without offering a cause.

The UN had slammed last week’s seizure and demolitions, and UNRWA insisted that its property remained protected by the privileges and immunities of the UN, a view it repeated on Sunday.

“Like any UN Member State anywhere in the world, without exception, Israel is legally obliged to protect and respect UN facilities,”

## Voter registration closes for West Bank municipal elections: PA official



Commuters walk past members of Israeli security forces during a military raid in the neighbourhood of Kafr Aqab near Ramallah, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, yesterday. Violence in the West Bank, which Israel has occupied since 1967, has soared since the Hamas attack on Israel triggered the Gaza war in October 2023. – AFP

Tumallah said, without elaborating.

“Holding elections in the remaining municipalities of the Gaza Strip is not currently feasible due to compelling security and logistical circumstances,” the commission said in a statement.

This year’s municipal elections are being closely watched as part of what Abbas has described as a reform and renewal process within the PA, pledged amid growing international pressure for greater accountability, improved governance and political inclusion.

Western and regional donors have increasingly tied financial and diplomatic support to visible reforms, particularly at the local governance level, as national elections remain frozen.

With no presidential or legislative elections held since 2006, municipal councils have become one of the few functioning democratic institutions under PA administration.

Officials argue that strengthening local government, improving service delivery and renewing council mandates can help rebuild public trust at a time when the PA faces widespread criticism over corruption, stagnation and declining legitimacy.

The Fatah-dominated PA controls parts of the West Bank, while Gaza has been devastated by nearly two years of war following Hamas’s October 2023 attack on Israel.

The war has further complicated Palestinian political reconciliation and electoral planning.

Municipal councils are responsible for basic services such as water, sanitation and local infrastructure and don’t enact legislation.

While many candidate lists are aligned with political factions, independent lists are also permitted to run. – AFP

UNRWA spokesman Jonathan Fowler told AFP on Sunday.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was created specifically for the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians displaced during the creation of Israel in 1948, and provides refugee status registration and health and education services.

Its compound in Israeli-annexed

east Jerusalem has been empty of staff since January 2025, when the law banning its operations took effect.

Israel accuses UNRWA of providing cover for Hamas militants, and a series of investigations found “neutrality-related issues” at the agency but held that Israel had not provided conclusive evidence.

UNRWA still operates in the occupied West Bank and Gaza. – AFP

# EU opens probe into Grok over sexual AI deepfakes

**Max Delany**

BRUSSELS – The EU yesterday hit Elon Musk's X with an investigation over AI chatbot Grok's generation of sexualised deepfake images of women and minors, in the latest step of an international backlash against the tool.

Grok faces an outcry after it emerged that users could sexualise images of women and children using simple text prompts such as "put her in a bikini" or "remove her clothes".

"In Europe, we will not tolerate unthinkable behaviour, such as digital undressing of women and children," said European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen.

"It is simple – we will not hand over consent and child protection to tech companies to violate and monetise. The harm caused by illegal images is very real," she said in a statement to AFP.

EU tech commissioner Henna Virkkunen said the probe would "determine whether X has met its legal obligations" under the bloc's Digital Services Act (DSA), which is designed to police internet giants.

She said the rights of women and children in the EU should not be "collateral damage" of X's services.

Brussels said it was investigating whether X had properly mitigated "risks related to the dissemination of illegal content in the EU, such as manipulated sexually explicit images, including content that may amount to child



*This photo shows a smartphone bearing the logo of Grok, a generative artificial intelligence (IA) chatbot developed by US company xAI in front of a European Union flag in Brussels on January 12. – AFP*

sexual abuse material".

The EU move comes despite repeated US threats of retaliation against enforcement of tech rules President Donald Trump's administration attacks as curbing free speech and unfairly targeting US firms.

### Three million images

Under fire, Grok said earlier this month it was restricting image generation and editing to paying subscribers.

But that move did not stave off the EU's probe – which follows investigations in

multiple countries including France and the United Kingdom.

"Let's be very clear, child sexual abuse material is not a premium privilege," said EU commission spokesman Thomas Regnier.

According to research published on Thursday by the Centre for Countering Digital Hate, a nonprofit watchdog, Grok generated an estimated three million sexualised images of women and children in a matter of days.

As part of the new probe, the EU said it was widening an existing investigation into X aimed at tackling the spread of illegal content

and information manipulation.

That move was due to the fact that X announced last week Grok will now power its recommendation system for users and EU concerns that the company had not adequately assessed the risks.

Contacted by AFP, X did not immediately react to the EU announcement.

Musk's social media platform, formerly known as Twitter, has been the target of an investigation under the EU's digital content rules since December 2023.

Brussels slapped a 120-million-euro (US\$140-million) fine on X last month for violating the transparency obligations of the DSA, triggering angry reactions from Trump's administration.

The breaches included the deceptive design of its "blue checkmark" for supposedly verified accounts, and failure to provide access to public data for researchers.

The EU has insisted it will enforce its rules despite pressure from Washington – which has pressed the bloc to roll them back.

In presenting the new X probe, commission spokesman Regnier said the EU enforces its legislation "firmly, fairly, objectively" and did not "target any company based on its origin."

The dispute over tech regulation comes as the bloc has grappled with the Trump administration on multiple other fronts – from Ukraine to trade to Greenland. – AFP

## Gold hits records as US policy rattles investors

LONDON – Investors nervous about geopolitics, tariff threats and domestic US budgetary issues flocked to buy gold yesterday, pushing the safe-haven precious metal well into record territory.

The US dollar sank, meanwhile, amid speculation of US-Japanese central bank coordination to support the yen.

Gold climbed above US\$5,100 an ounce, having cracked US\$5,000 on Sunday, amid rising global uncertainty and turmoil set off by US President Donald Trump's policies.

"It vaulted over the psychologically important 5,000 mark on a glittering streak, heading sharply higher as trade tensions emanating from the US unnerved investors," said Susannah Streeter, chief investment strategist at Wealth Club.

By comparison, gold could be had for just over US\$2,000 an ounce only two years ago. Silver prices have also spiked to record territory.

"The relentless quest for hard assets continued amid yet more talk of tariffs and US government shutdowns," said Neil Wilson, a strategist at Saxo UK.

Several US senators have said they would vote against coming government spending bills after federal agents killed a second American citizen in Minneapolis, significantly increasing the chances of a government shutdown next week.

The US dollar was weighed down by a surge in the yen on speculation that authorities may intervene to prop up the Japanese currency, but also by limited visibility on the US economy and inflation fears.

"The FX [foreign exchange] market is front and centre at the start of this week and the focus is on the huge move higher in the yen," said Kathleen Brooks, research director at XTB trading group.

"Reports suggest that Japanese officials were joined by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York who bought yen to support the beleaguered currency," she added.

The yen had slid amid worries about Japan's fiscal position, the central bank's decision to hold off on interest rate hikes, and expectations that the US Federal Reserve will stay put on the rates front this week.

The stronger yen weighed on Tokyo's stock market because of its negative impact on exporters.

The US Fed is expected to hold interest rates steady this week despite Trump's pressure to slash them, which is seen as a threat to its independence, which has traditionally been one of the pillars of US assets' solidity.

US stocks came off to a firmer start, helping European equity markets reverse their earlier weaker trend. – AFP



*Workers clear snow outside the US Capitol yesterday in Washington, DC. A massive winter storm is bringing frigid temperatures, ice, and snow to millions of Americans across the nation. The storm has reportedly left at least 10 people dead and hundreds of thousands without power. – AFP*

## Sweden plans to jail 13-year-olds for serious offences

STOCKHOLM – Sweden's government said yesterday it was moving forward with a hotly contested bill to lower the age of criminal responsibility from 15 to 13 for serious offences, potentially allowing prison sentences in certain cases.

Several authorities, including police, prison officials and prosecutors, have opposed the plans.

Justice Minister Gunnar Strommer told a press conference that it was not "a general lowering of the age of criminal responsibility".

"Rather, we are talking about a lowering for the most serious crimes, such as murder, attempted murder, aggravated bombings, aggravated weapons offences and aggravated rape," Strommer said.

The Scandinavian country has struggled for more than a decade to

contain a surge in organised violent crime, linked primarily to settling of scores between rival gangs and battles to control the drug market.

The networks have increasingly recruited under-15s to carry out bombings and shootings, knowing that they will not face prison time if caught.

A government-ordered inquiry in January 2025 proposed lowering the age of criminal responsibility to 14.

But in September the government announced plans to lower it to 13, and sent out the bill for input from 126 authorities and organisations.

A majority of those that responded were critical of the proposal or opposed it outright.

At the time, the police authority said that lowering the age meant there was a risk that "significantly younger

children than today become involved in criminal networks".

Others pointed to the prison system not being equipped to handle such young offenders, and said it risked breaching children's rights.

Strommer said yesterday he had taken note of the criticism, but said the situation had become more urgent.

"We are in an emergency situation. The measures we take must reflect the seriousness of the situation," he said.

He added the change would be introduced temporarily, limited to five years to start.

The bill would first be sent to Sweden's Council on Legislation, which scrutinises bills the government intends to put before parliament.

Strommer said his government planned for the legislation to go into force this summer. – AFP

# What's driving Guatemala's surge in gang violence?

## Analysis

GUATEMALA CITY – The worsening gang warfare in Guatemala has piled pressure on President Bernardo Arevalo to crack down on crime and root out corrupt officials accused of links to organised crime.

The murder of 10 police officers this month in retaliation for the put-down of a prison mutiny caused deep shock in the Central American nation of around 18 million inhabitants.

The standoff began when gang members took dozens of guards hostage at three prisons to demand that incarcerated gang leaders be moved from a maximum-security prison to more lenient facilities.

A day later, the police and army entered the prisons to restore control, triggering retaliatory attacks on the police blamed chiefly on the powerful Barrio 18 gang.

The unrest underscored the stranglehold of Barrio 18 and its arch-rival MS-19, which operate in several Central American countries, on Guatemala's penitentiaries.

Arevalo, who declared a 30-day state of emergency, blamed "criminal-political elites" who fear losing control of a system of "shady dealings."

In a post on X, Juan Francisco Sandoval, a former anti-gang prosecutor who fled to the United States after being fired by Chief Public Prosecutor Consuelo Porras in 2021 while investigating corruption, also blamed "political-criminal networks."

Porras is Arevalo's arch-foe and has been sanctioned by the United States and European Union for corruption.

Porras, who twice attempted to block Arevalo's inauguration, has been accused by the government and NGOs of protecting criminals, which she denies.

Her term expires in May.

Porras blamed the gang attacks on Arevalo's leadership.

"Be serious, Mr. President, take responsibility and get to work," she told reporters last week.

## Turning point

The Barrio 18 gang – considered, like MS-19, a terrorist



Guatemalan police set up a checkpoint on Thursday in a street in the gang-ridden Gallito neighbourhood during the state of emergency declared by the government in Guatemala City on Thursday. Guatemalan soldiers began patrolling gang-controlled neighbourhoods in the capital on Thursday, after attacks that left 10 police officers dead and prompted the government to declare a state of siege. – AFP

organisation by Guatemala and the United States – went on the warpath last July when five of its top leaders were transferred to a high-security prison.

The government said they were moved because they continued ordering executions, selling drugs and extorting money from behind bars.

In October, 20 leaders of the gang escaped from another prison, amid allegations of complicity by prison authorities.

Only six were recaptured, while another was shot and killed.

The breakout sparked a crisis that culminated in the dismissal of the interior minister.

Speaking to the TanGente political podcast, crusading former anti-gang prosecutor, Juan Francisco Solorzano, said attacks were part of an ongoing strategy to "delegitimize" Arevalo.

This month's riot at one of the prisons was led by Aldo Dupie, alias "El Lobo" ("The Wolf"), who demanded to be transferred to a prison with looser security, a bigger bed, air conditioning and takeout food services, according to the government.

Dupie, a convicted murderer, is in a relationship with a niece of opposition leader Sandra Torres, a former first lady who has fought and lost the last three presidential elections.

## Judicial shake-up

The growing gang assertiveness comes ahead of a raft of planned new appointments in the judiciary, including members of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal and Constitutional Court as well as a new chief public prosecutor.

The Constitutional Court, Guatemala's highest judicial body, has been accused by Arevalo's party and rights activists of siding with the powerful.

Solorzano said he believed that Barrio 18 wants to remove Arevalo, who will pick Porras's successor in May, from power.

The standoff comes as voters in other Latin American countries plagued by gang violence swing right in search of a "mano dura" ("hard hand") on crime.

From Chile to Costa Rica, the iron-fisted approach of El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele's to Barrio 18 and MS-19 has inspired a host of imitators.

Gang violence is expected to feature prominently in Guatemala's general election next year.

Interior Minister Marco Antonio Villeda said he feared interference in the vote from organised crime.

The fortunes they amass from drug trafficking and extortion means they can fund campaigns and "promote their own candidates," he told AFP.

– AFP

# Spain remembers the dead a week on from rail tragedy

HUELVA, Spain – People in the southern Spanish towns of Huelva and Adamuz held ceremonies on Sunday a week on from the rail disaster that killed 45 people, many of them from the area.

Last Sunday's crash between two high-speed trains happened near the village of Adamuz in the southern region of Andalusia, but most of the victims came from Huelva.

The ceremony in Huelva began with a minute's silence, at 7:43 p.m., the time of the accident on January 18.

It was a Madrid-Huelva train

that collided head-on with another from Málaga travelling to Madrid. Of the 45 people who died, 36 were passengers on the Huelva-bound train.

As well as those killed, 22 people were still being treated in hospital for injuries yesterday.

In Adamuz, where local people were among the first on the scene to help the victims, a funeral Mass was held on Sunday.

Speaking at the ceremony, Mayor Rafael Ángel Moreno spoke of the grief local people felt

at what had happened.

The Bishop of Córdoba, Jesús Fernández, presided at the funeral ceremony.

The working theory for investigators is that a crack in one of the rails might have caused a derailment. Driver error has been ruled out. One of the two drivers died in the crash.

But the crash – and a series of separate incidents on Spain's rail network in the days that followed – have raised doubts about the safety of the country's railways. – AFP

# Jewish graves desecrated in Barcelona

MADRID – Vandals desecrated a number of Jewish graves in a Barcelona cemetery this past weekend, Spanish police said Sunday, provoking outrage from Jewish groups and politicians.

Spain's Jewish community reported Saturday's incident in the Jewish section of Les Corts ("The Courts") graveyard in Barcelona.

"We are aware of the incident and have opened an investigation," a Catalan police spokesperson told AFP, without specifying how many graves had been defaced.

But a spokesperson for Spain's Federation of Jewish Communities (FCJE) told AFP that more than 20 graves had been desecrated.

In a statement, the FCJE condemned the "despicable antisemitic act", calling on the authorities to "show the utmost resolve in confronting antisemitism".

It linked the incident to a map – created by pro-Palestinian activists and since removed from the internet – that marks Jewish or Israeli-linked

places and businesses in Barcelona.

"With these events, the level of antisemitism takes an alarming leap, moving from words to actions, from incitement to direct attack," said the FCJE.

Barcelona mayor Jaume Collboni denounced the incident in a statement on social media, adding that the authorities were "working to identify those responsible".

"Hate has no place in a pluralistic and respectful Barcelona," he added.

The Israeli offensive on the Gaza Strip began after the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023, and the scale of destruction in the Palestinian territory prompted a strong, pro-Palestinian movement in Spain.

Those actions have included regular demonstrations and boycotts against Israel, including that of the Vuelta a España over the participation of the Israel Premier Tech team.

According to the FCJE, Spain's Jewish community is made up of around 70,000 people. – AFP

# Portuguese charged with murder of mother in front of baby in France

MARSEILLE – A Portuguese man suspected of fatally shooting a woman a dozen times in her car while her baby sat in the passenger seat was charged with murder on Sunday, French prosecutors said.

Lizabete, a 23-year-old woman identified only by her first name, was shot dead on Wednesday, and her death has triggered an outpouring of grief in the southern French city of Nice.

Her seven-month-old baby was in the vehicle with her when a man on a scooter pulled up and repeatedly shot her at point-blank range. The infant survived the attack without injuries.

The main suspect behind the murder is believed to be Lizabete's stepmother's former partner.

The 45-year-old man, who was born in Portugal, has been placed in pre-trial detention and charged with murder, prosecutor Damien

Martinelli said in a statement.

He had been taken into police custody several days before Wednesday's murder for aggravated assault on his ex-partner, and ordered by a court not to approach the woman.

After Lizabete's death, he was arrested again on Saturday on the outskirts of Grasse, a town around 40 kilometres west of Nice.

The murder took place at an intersection near a high school in the west of the city. Firefighters rushed to the scene but were unable to revive her.

Her daughter, Ayla, was strapped into a baby chair in the passenger seat next to her.

Nice city hall held a vigil for Lizabete on Friday, with the city pledging to grant her daughter ward-of-the-state status as a way to support her throughout adolescence.

– AFP

# 11 dead in armed attack at soccer field in Mexico: mayor

MEXICO CITY – At least 11 people were killed and 12 more wounded on Sunday in an armed attack at a soccer field in the central Mexican state of Guanajuato, local authorities reported.

The attack occurred in a neighbourhood in the town of Salamanca, with a statement from the mayor's office saying that officials launched an operation to find those responsible for the assault.

"The deaths of 11 people have been confirmed, 10 of whom died at the scene and one more while receiving medical attention at a hospital," the statement said.

"Additionally, 12 people were

injured by gunfire and are receiving medical attention," it added.

Four bags containing human remains were also found Saturday night in the same town.

Guanajuato is a thriving industrial hub and home to several popular tourist destinations, but also remains the country's deadliest state due to gang turf wars, according to official homicide statistics.

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said at the beginning of the year that Mexico's homicide rate in 2025 had fallen to its lowest level in a decade, as a result of her administration's national security strategy.

– AFP

# Europe's elite jostle for Champions League last-16 places



PARIS — Holders Paris Saint-Germain, Real Madrid and Liverpool are among the clubs battling for direct passage to the last 16 of the Champions League going into the final round of the league phase this week.

Fifteen teams have already sealed their progress to the knockout rounds but a further 17 sides will be competing for the remaining places with all 18 games kicking off at the same time tomorrow.

The top eight receive a bye into the last 16 while the next 16 teams enter Friday's draw for the play-offs, although PSG demonstrated last season that is no obstacle to lifting the trophy.

AFP Sport looks at what's at stake on matchday eight:

## Qualified for last 16

Arsenal, with seven wins from seven, and Bayern Munich are the only two clubs already assured of a place in the last 16. The Gunners could become the first team to win all eight games since the league phase was introduced last season. They host Kairat Almaty, who are bottom of the table with just a single point.

Bayern's lone defeat in Europe came at Arsenal in November. Vincent Kompany's side go to PSV Eindhoven in their final fixture.

## Knockout place guaranteed

Real Madrid, record 15-time winners of the competition, will wrap up a last-16 berth with victory away to Jose Mourinho's Benfica. Liverpool will join them if they beat Qarabag at Anfield,

while Tottenham know victory at Eintracht Frankfurt will allow them to also bypass the play-offs despite their domestic struggles.

Eight teams - those placed sixth to 13<sup>th</sup> - are locked on 13 points, with reigning champions PSG hosting Newcastle at the Parc des Princes. Chelsea currently occupy the final top-eight spot but face a tricky assignment at Napoli, coached by former Blues boss Antonio Conte.

Barcelona and Manchester City are ninth and 11<sup>th</sup> respectively. They are poised to sneak into the top eight if any of the teams above them slip up. At least PSG or Newcastle, if not both, will drop points.

Sporting Lisbon, Atletico Madrid and Atalanta are also in the mix, while Inter - who have lost three matches in a row - and Juventus

sit on 12 points. All of those clubs will progress from the league phase regardless of tomorrow's results.

## On course for knockouts

Borussia Dortmund are all but certain to advance alongside Galatasaray. Azerbaijan's Qarabag are on track to reach the knockouts for the first time after a last-gasp win over Eintracht last week.

Marseille, Bayer Leverkusen, Monaco, PSV, Athletic Bilbao and Olympiacos round out the top 24 as it stands, but there are seven clubs beneath them who could force their way back into contention.

## Outside looking in

Italian champions Napoli are the most notable team at risk of missing out on the knockout phase. They are

25<sup>th</sup> - behind Olympiacos by virtue of fewer goals scored.

FC Copenhagen also have eight points but head to Barcelona for their final match. Benfica and Ajax, both former European champions, must win to stand a chance of qualifying. The same is true for Club Brugge, Bodo/Glimt, Pafos and Union Saint-Gilloise.

## Eliminated

Debutants Kairat and Villarreal have lost six of seven matches. Slavia Prague are also yet to win, while Eintracht sacked coach Dino Toppmöller earlier this month after a poor run of results both in Germany and Europe.

All the games will be played at 4 a.m. Thursday morning Macau time.

— AFP/MPD

## Ex-FIFA boss Blatter suggests fans should not travel to US for World Cup



PARIS — Former FIFA president Sepp Blatter yesterday suggested he supports fans boycotting World Cup matches in the United States this year due to security concerns.

Blatter gave his support to comments from anti-corruption lawyer Mark Pieth, who worked with FIFA on potential reforms when Blatter was boss, saying fans should stay away from the USA for the tournament.

"I think Mark Pieth is right to question this World Cup," Blatter said on social media.

Pieth cited the killing of protester Renee Good by an American immigration agent in Minneapolis earlier in January as one reason for supporters not to

travel to the USA, with Blatter's endorsement of his comments coming in the wake of the death of a second US citizen, Alex Pretti, last weekend.

The World Cup is due to be hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico from June 11-July 19.

"What we are seeing domestically - the marginalisation of political opponents, abuses by immigration services, etc. - hardly encourages fans to go there," Pieth said in an interview with Swiss daily *Tages-Anzeiger* last week.

"For fans, just one piece of advice: avoid the United States! You'll get a better view on television anyway."

"Upon arrival, fans should expect that if they don't behave

properly with the authorities, they will be immediately sent home. If they're lucky..."

Blatter stepped down as FIFA president in 2015 amid several scandals and was replaced by current boss Gianni Infantino.

Blatter and former UEFA chief Michel Platini were last year acquitted definitively on charges stemming from a delayed payment of two million Swiss francs (US\$2.5 million) FIFA made to Platini in 2011 for consultancy services.

Former France star Platini said earlier this month that Infantino, who has forged a close relationship with US President Donald Trump, has "become more of an autocrat" and "he likes the rich and powerful". — AFP

## Football shorts

### France midfielder Kone suffers hamstring tear: Roma



MILAN — Manu Kone is set to be out of action for around a month after his club Roma announced yesterday that the France midfielder had suffered a hamstring tear.

The 24-year-old limped off the field during Sunday's 1-1 draw with AC Milan which put Roma third in Serie A, and the club from the Italian capital said in a short statement that he had picked up the "grade two tear" in his right hamstring.

Roma did not say for how long Kone would be absent, but Italian media widely report that he will be out of action for at least a month.

That would mean Kone missing Roma's trip to Italian champions Napoli, who are fourth on goal difference behind Gian Piero Gasperini's side, on February 15.

He should be back in time for France's first pre-2026 World Cup friendlies against Brazil and Colombia in late March.

France face Norway, African Cup of Nations winners Senegal,

and an inter-confederation play-off winner in Group I of the World Cup, which will be held this coming summer in the USA, Canada and Mexico. — AFP

### Brazil coach 'counting on' Marta for home Women's World Cup



RIO DE JANEIRO — Brazil are counting on women's football great Marta for the 2027 World Cup on home soil, even though she will be 41 then, coach Arthur Elias told AFP.

Marta is a six-time FIFA women's player of the year but has never won the World Cup, playing in the Brazil team that lost 2-0 to Germany in the 2007 final in China.

"I'm counting on her, I'm counting on all the players who are in form, like Marta," Elias told AFP on Sunday.

"But neither she nor I know whether she will take part, only time will tell."

Last May, Marta was called up to the Brazil squad for the first time in nine months.

She had said following Brazil's Olympic final defeat to the United States in August 2024 that she had probably played her last match for her country.

But back in the squad, she was then selected for the women's Copa America in July 2025, winning that for the fourth time in her career.

She subsequently revealed that she was not ruling out playing on for the Seleção until the 2027 World Cup.

Her 17 goals in the tournament is a record.

Whoever he picks, Elias believes that Brazil, whose men's team have been world champions a record five times, have a great chance of finally winning a first women's title.

Brazil will become in 2027 the first South American nation to host the Women's World Cup.

"We have a great opportunity because the Seleção is going through a great moment and we have young players who will keep improving between now and the World Cup," he said.

"It will be difficult, but playing at home increases our chances. I'm feeling optimistic." — AFP



Lille's French forward Olivier Giroud controls the ball on the ground during the French L1 football match against RC Strasbourg Alsace at the Stade Pierre-Mauroy in Villeneuve-d'Ascq, northern France, on Sunday. Strasbourg won the game 4-1. — AFP

## Ex-Spain coach Moreno denies using AI to manage Sochi

### Football

BARCELONA — Former Spain coach Robert Moreno denied using artificial intelligence tool ChatGPT to prepare for games during his time in charge of Russian club Sochi yesterday.

Moreno left top-flight side Sochi in September 2025 after a poor run of results and reports emerged recently in Russia saying he had heavily relied on ChatGPT in his role, even using it to decide between potential signings.

"I have never used ChatGPT or any AI to prepare matches, decide line-ups, or choose players. That is completely false," wrote Moreno in an open letter sent to Spanish newspaper *Marca*.

The 48-year-old said he used technology in his job but made his decisions himself and with his staff.

"My career in football began precisely through data and video analysis. It's what I specialise in and what made the difference in my early days," continued Moreno.

"Like any professional coaching staff, we use analysis tools - GPS, Wyscout [a football analytics database], video, scouting platforms.

"Technology helps process information faster, but the sporting decisions are always made by the coaching staff."

Moreno said the reports about his use of ChatGPT came from former club executive Andrei Orlov whom he had differences with.

"My departure was by mutual agreement at a time of inconsistent results and disagreements over sporting planning, as is common in football," added Moreno.

"To present it as being 'fired for using ChatGPT' simplifies something much more complex and is also untrue."

Moreno, who has also coached Monaco and Granada, took over the Spanish national team on a temporary basis in 2019 from Luis Enrique.

He was appointed on a full-time basis in June that year after Luis Enrique resigned because his daughter Xana was diagnosed with a rare bone cancer.

Spain rehired Luis Enrique to replace Moreno in November 2019 after his daughter's death. The coach accused Moreno of being "disloyal" for trying to stay in charge for Euro 2020. — AFP

and an inter-confederation play-off winner in Group I of the World Cup, which will be held this coming summer in the USA, Canada and Mexico. — AFP

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# Wales to use domestic turmoil as Six Nations 'fuel', says Lake



Wales' Dewi Lake (from left to right), Scotland's captain Sione Tuipulotu, England's Jamie George, France's Antoine Dupont, Ireland's Caelan Doris and Italy's Michele Lamaro pose with the trophy during the 6 Nations rugby union tournament media launch in Edinburgh, Scotland, yesterday.

- AFP

**SIX NATIONS** EDINBURGH – Captain Dewi Lake insisted yesterday that Wales will use the turmoil and uncertainty engulfing the domestic club game as "fuel" to ignite their Six Nations campaign.

Wales have not won a Six Nations match since 2023, when they narrowly avoided the wooden spoon thanks to a 29-17 victory away to an error-strewn Italy.

They have won only two of their last 23 Tests - both of which were against Tier II Japan.

In the meantime, the domestic club game is in crisis with the Welsh Rugby Union keen on axing one of the four professional teams competing in the United Rugby Championship to save money.

And in the build-up to the Six Nations, which kicks off next week, the news that Ospreys' owners Y11 Sport and Media had been named as the preferred bidder by the WRU to take over domestic rivals Cardiff, who went into

administration in April 2025, sent more shockwaves through Welsh rugby.

"Obviously it's a tough situation for everyone to find out in the week [about the takeover]," Lake told reporters at the Six Nations launch at Edinburgh Castle.

"It probably is quite a welcome distraction" to be playing in the Six Nations, he added.

"Having the opportunity to step on the field and represent your country in one of the best competitions in the world is only going to take your mind away from things happening off the field."

"It's also massive fuel for the fire for us. What's going on off-field affects everyone in our group."

Should the Y11 deal go through, Ospreys and Cardiff would continue as separate sides, but be owned by one organisation.

Ospreys' future looks bleak as they have only been given playing guarantees until the end of the 2026-27 season.

Fans of both clubs protested against the plans at the weekend.

It has put an added weight on the shoulders of the Welsh players as they look to end their miserable run of recent results - their last victory over a Tier I nation was at the 2023 World Cup, when they thumped Australia 40-6.

Hooker Lake, 26, who will quit Ospreys for Gloucester at the end of the season, said he will try to focus the players' minds on the Six Nations.

"The only thing I will deal with is that come game time everyone is switched on," he said.

"The group and environment we've built will take care of itself, I don't think there will be too much of a hangover."

Even so, head coach Steve Tandy said he has encouraged players not to bury their concerns.

"If they've got something to share, rather than it being [an] elephant in the room and no-one talking about it, we encourage them to speak," he said. – AFP

## Pakistan delay final call on T20 World Cup participation



ISLAMABAD – Pakistan cricket chief Mohsin Naqvi said yesterday a final decision on the team's participation in next month's Twenty20 World Cup will be delayed by up to a week, keeping open a possible boycott over Bangladesh's withdrawal.

Naqvi met Pakistan's Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif yesterday to take his advice on the situation, after which a call was expected to be made, but the cricket board boss posted on X that "the final decision will be taken either on Friday or next Monday".

Describing a "productive meeting" with the premier, he said Sharif "directed that we resolve it while keeping all options on the table".

Naqvi threw the national cricket team's participation into doubt on Saturday, saying Pakistan could

pull out after the International Cricket Council (ICC) replaced Bangladesh in the tournament.

Local media also reported that Pakistan could also boycott a February 15 match against arch-rivals India over political tension.

Pakistan's reaction comes after the ICC rejected Bangladesh's demands to relocate their World Cup matches from India to Sri Lanka over security fears.

On Saturday, the ICC replaced Bangladesh with Scotland as per the Twenty20 international rankings.

Pakistan backed Bangladesh's stance in Wednesday's ICC Board virtual meeting, saying there was a precedence of relocating India's matches on security fears from Pakistan in last year's Champions Trophy.

Then India, who have not toured Pakistan since 2008, played all their matches in Dubai.

The same option was given to

Pakistan who will not tour India and play their Twenty20 World Cup matches in Sri Lanka under an agreement signed last year saying the two countries will play on neutral venues whenever one of them hosts an ICC event.

Pakistan and Bangladesh revived their sour relations after the ousting of prime minister Sheikh Hasina in a student-inspired uprising in Bangladesh.

In contrast, Dhaka and New Delhi fell out over demands India hand over the fugitive former premier.

Earlier this month, the Board of Control for Cricket in India told Indian Premier League franchise Kolkata Knight Riders to drop Bangladesh cricketer Mustafizur Rahman due to political tensions.

Bangladesh then refused to play in India and demanded their matches be relocated to co-hosts Sri Lanka, but the ICC rejected the appeal. – AFP

## Sinner races on, 'gross' pie for Keys as heatwave hits Melbourne

Peter Stebbings



MELBOURNE – Jannik Sinner sent an Australian Open statement in rolling

into the quarter-finals yesterday but fellow champion Madison Keys was dethroned as Melbourne braced for forecast 45C heat.

Fifth seed Lorenzo Musetti battled stifling conditions to set up a last-eight showdown with Novak Djokovic and six-time major champion Iga Swiatek progressed in rampant fashion.

Two-time defending champion Sinner raced to a 6-1, 6-3, 7-6 (7/2) victory over fellow Italian and close friend Luciano Darderi.

The second seed plays the United States' all-action eighth seed Ben Shelton after he beat Norway's 12th-seeded Casper Ruud in four sets.

Djokovic and Sinner are on course for a blockbuster last-four showdown.

Sinner told Margaret Court Arena, where temperatures hovered around 30C in the early evening: "It was difficult to put the match away, happy I closed it in three sets."

Sinner sent down a bumper 19 aces in the match, and said his hard work had paid off.

"Still room to improve but happy how I have come back in the new season," he added.

In another clash between compatriots and friends, Jessica Pegula defeated title-holder Keys, 6-3, 6-4.

The Americans host a tennis podcast together, "The Player's Box", and had even been planning to record an episode on the eve of their match.

All that was put aside as a clinical Pegula dominated to set up a last-eight encounter with another American in fourth seed Amanda Anisimova.

Anisimova, beaten finalist at last year's US Open and Wimbledon, cooled herself off with bags of ice before taming China's Wang Xinyu 7-6 (7/4), 6-4.

Pegula, the sixth seed, is chasing an elusive Grand Slam title aged 31, her best performance to date reaching the US Open final in 2024.

An erratic Keys made 27 unforced errors to Pegula's 17 and fired down six double faults as her title defence folded.

The forfeit, as a part of a jokey bet with Pegula, will be a slice of apple pie with melted cheddar cheese on top.

"A bet is a bet, so I'll do it. I hope it's less gross than I think it's going to be, but we will find out," said Keys, who described herself as proud despite defeat.

Fifth seed Elena Rybakina dismantled 21st seed Elise Mertens of Belgium 6-1, 6-3 and will play second seed Swiatek.

The Pole demolished home qualifier Maddison Inglis 6-0, 6-3 as she closes on a first Australian crown, having won all three of the other majors.

Inglis, ranked 168, was in the biggest match of her life after two-time Melbourne champion Naomi Osaka pulled out injured from their third-round meeting.

Just being in the fourth round earned Inglis a life-changing Aus\$480,000 (US\$330,000) - she plans to buy a toaster and a kettle with the windfall.

### Melbourne sizzles

After brutal weather caused the suspension of matches on Saturday, temperatures rose sharply again.

Longer matches yesterday had 10-minute breaks in certain circumstances as part of measures to protect player health.

Temperatures are forecast to hit a blistering 45C today, meaning matches are likely to be played under roofs on the three courts that have them.

In the last match of the day on Rod Laver Arena, Shelton defeated father-to-be Ruud 3-6, 6-4, 6-3, 6-4, letting out an almighty roar in victory.

Melbourne Park king Djokovic was supposed to face the 20-year-old Jakub Mensik in the night match.

But the Czech player pulled out injured on Sunday, sending 10-time champion Djokovic into the last eight without hitting a ball.

The 38-year-old Serb will play Musetti after the Italian defeated American ninth seed Taylor Fritz 6-2, 7-5, 6-4.

Djokovic has won nine of their 10 previous meetings, but Musetti said: "I feel ready to try to push him to his maximum." – AFP



Philippines' Alexandra Eala hits a return to Russia's Alina Charaeva during their singles match at the Philippine Women's Open tennis tournament in Manila yesterday. Eala won the game 6-1, 6-2.

– AFP

# Bollywood bets big on 'event cinema'

**Seema Sinha**

MUMBAI – India's Bollywood is moving decisively towards a cinema of scale and confrontation – where patriotism, spectacle, and ideological clarity increasingly trump nuance and narrative risk, industry insiders say.

The shift has fuelled what experts describe as "event cinema", as studios rely on big-budget spectacles and top-tier stars to lure audiences – especially smartphone-loving Gen Z viewers – back into cinemas.

That strategy appears to be working. Akshaye Rathi, a prominent film exhibitor, predicted a 45-50 percent rise in net Hindi box-office collections and a 25 percent increase in young cinemagoers this year.

"The year looks poised for historic numbers," Rathi told AFP.

The industry's financial model was shaken during the COVID-19 pandemic, which coincided with the rapid rise of streaming platforms and a shift to home viewing.

But its 2026 upcoming slate, packed with patriotic war dramas, spy thrillers, mythological epics and nationalist narratives – reflects not just a commercial recalibration,

analysts say, but a broader change in creative priorities.

## 'Propaganda'

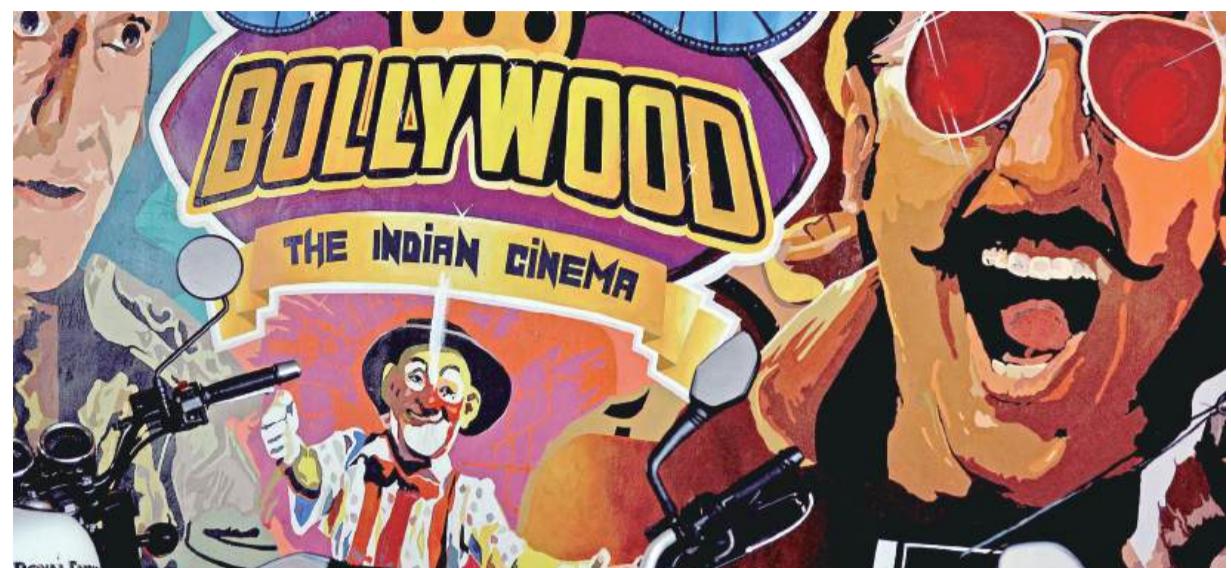
Critics argue Bollywood is increasingly producing polarising films aligned with the ideology of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu-nationalist government, using cinema's unrivalled mass reach to shape public sentiment.

"These days film themes also depend upon who is ruling at the centre – Hindu wave, propaganda... all these are big factors that filmmakers cash in on," said movie business analyst Atul Mohan, editor of film trade magazine Complete Cinema. "But only one or two films work, not all 10 or 15."

He cited the success of 2022 blockbuster "The Kashmir Files", depicting in harrowing detail how several hundred thousand Hindus fled Muslim militants in Indian-administered Kashmir in 1989-90.

And he compared that with the 2025 film "The Bengal Files", on alleged political violence in eastern India, which he described as a commercial "disaster".

Films centred on geopolitical conflict, internal enemies, and



This photo taken on July 21, 2020 shows a wall mural with images of Bollywood actors under a road bridge in Mumbai. – AFP

heroic masculinity now dominate mainstream Hindi cinema, reflecting both the political mood and the economics of theatrical survival.

Last year's gory action thriller "Dhurandhar", meaning "formidable", leaned heavily on hyper-nationalist tropes of Indian agents confronting Pakistan-linked foes, and became one of 2025's highest-grossing films – following a real-life four-day border clash with Pakistan.

Its sequel, "Dhurandhar 2", again starring Ranveer Singh, is set for release in March.

## 'Gratuitous violence'

Veteran Delhi-based film critic Arnab Banerjee said political messag-

ing now outweighs craftsmanship.

"It is not the quality of the film that matters today, it is propaganda films that are working," said Banerjee.

"The mood of the nation is such that people are lapping up these subjects. Pakistan-bashing and references to enemy countries are being accepted without questioning."

Banerjee also criticised what he called an excess of "gratuitous violence", arguing that "it is social media hype that is deciding the film's fate."

He pointed to "Ikkis", a film on the 1971 India-Pakistan war released in January, which struggled commercially despite positive reviews.

"It is a well-made film, but it

didn't work," he said. "Perhaps because Pakistan is not shown as the enemy."

Director Ahmed Khan, however, said quality still ultimately determines success, citing his upcoming action-comedy "Welcome to the Jungle", starring Akshay Kumar.

"Whatever the genre – action, drama, comedy or horror – it depends on how well you've made it," Khan said.

He pointed to the 2025 successes of the contrasting romantic drama "Saiyara" as well as high-octane "Dhurandhar".

"Both, poles apart in genre, did great business," he said. "People's mood can change any time."

– AFP

# ‘Mercy’ debuts atop N American box office, dislodging ‘Avatar’

LOS ANGELES – Sci-fi thriller "Mercy" starring Chris Pratt debuted atop the North American box office with US\$11 million in ticket sales, ending the five-week reign of "Avatar: Fire and Ash," industry estimates showed on Sunday.

Pratt plays a man on trial for murdering his wife in the Amazon MGM Studios film, with his fate in the hands of an artificial intelligence (AI) judge.

The brutal winter storm hitting a large swath of the United States cut into the weekend totals, according to David A. Gross of Franchise Entertainment Research.

"Considering the extreme weather that's closing theatres across two-thirds of the US and keeping people home, it's a very good opening," Gross said of "Mercy."

"Avatar: Fire and Ash," the third instalment in James

Cameron's blockbuster fantasy series, came in second in the United States and Canada with another US\$7 million, Exhibitor Relations said.

That puts its domestic box office haul at US\$378.5 million, with an additional US\$1 billion overseas, according to Box Office Mojo.

Disney's Oscar-nominated animated film "Zootopia 2" churned along, remaining in third place at US\$5.7 million and crossing the US\$400 million mark in the US and Canada.

In fourth place at US\$4.2 million was Lionsgate's "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.

In fifth place was "28 Years Later: The Bone Temple," the fourth instalment in the zombie horror series, at US\$3.6 million.

– AFP

PARK CITY – Most marriages have those moments: people are coming for dinner; one of you isn't really in the mood. But not everyone finds out that their guests are into raucous group sex – and want you to join them.

Olivia Wilde's blisteringly funny "The Invite" explores what happens when a husband and wife who have long since tired of each other find themselves sitting down with a couple very much in the throes of passion.

The film plunges Joe and Angela (Seth Rogen and Wilde) and Pina and Hawk (Penelope Cruz and Edward Norton) into a pressure cooker of awkward small talk, simmering anger, and sexual tension – with comedic and relatable results.

"Anyone who's ever been in a relationship of any kind, I think will recognise some of these themes," Wilde told AFP at the Sundance Film Festival, where the movie had its premiere on Saturday.

"We made this as a playful piece to allow people to laugh and get in touch with their feelings, maybe a little bit."

Joe, whose band had a minor hit two decades earlier, is now a ball of resentment over his life as a teacher in a second-rate music school. He's a curmudgeon whose back aches and who no longer touches the piano

that once gave him so much joy.

Angela has an arts school degree but never did anything with it, directing her energy into decorating the San Francisco apartment they inherited from Joe's parents, and listening with envy to the earth-shaking orgasms her upstairs neighbour has.

When Pina and Hawk arrive for dinner, Angela is desperate to get along and determined to stop Joe from complaining to them about what he calls those "animal" sex noises.

But it's Pina and Hawk who broach the subject, on their way to offering what turns out to be the real invite of the film.

## Improvisation

The blistering script by Will McCormack and Rashida Jones ("Celeste and Jesse Forever") is the framework on which an A-list cast wantonly improvises, delivering a rapid fire of provocative lines.

"We had this rehearsal period where the six of us sat in a soundstage and we just dug into it," said Wilde.

"Several of the greatest moments in the movie are written by the cast."

Then when it came to filming, the performers let rip, which made the editing process very tricky, she said.

"There was such an

embarrassment of riches," Wilde told the audience. "I had to lose this gold every day."

Rogan, who told AFP he is "a big fan of Olivia's," said when he first signed on to do the movie, Wilde was only set to direct – something he and Norton were adamant was not right.

"Me and Edward were texting each other. We're just, like, 'How... do we talk her into being in the movie?'" he told the audience.

"She kept sending us names of other people. I was, like, 'Why are you doing this? There's an obvious person who should do this.'

"Then once she decided to cast herself in this film... it really took off."

Norton said Wilde's third directorial project, after "Booksmart" and "Don't Worry Darling," had been a masterclass in keeping plates spinning.

"Seth and I both have directed films that we've been acting in as well," he told the audience.

"Inevitably, you come to moments where you say, 'This was a terrible decision.'"

But that never seemed to happen with "The Invite."

"It's hard for me to overstate the grace and wisdom with which Olivia gave that performance and directed us," he said.

The Sundance Film Festival ends on Sunday. – AFP

## World Weather

CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -9°C~4°C	Manila 22°C~31°C	New York -12°C~6°C	Lisbon 11°C~13°C
Shanghai 2°C~9°C	Bangkok 20°C~34°C	London 4°C~10°C	Rio de Janeiro 23°C~28°C
Hong Kong 13°C~23°C	Tokyo -1°C~10°C	Frankfurt 1°C~4°C	Luanda 24°C~29°C
Taipei 14°C~19°C	Singapore 23°C~31°C	Vancouver 6°C~9°C	Maputo 24°C~31°C
Guangzhou 10°C~24°C	Kuala Lumpur 23°C~35°C	Paris 2°C~10°C	Dili 23°C~32°C
Nanjing -2°C~9°C	Jakarta 23°C~28°C	Moscow -5°C~4°C	São Tomé 26°C~32°C
Guilin 4°C~12°C	Seoul -10°C~0°C	Las Vegas 4°C~17°C	Praia 18°C~27°C
Xi'an -3°C~8°C	Sydney 17°C~27°C	Monte Carlo 5°C~8°C	Bissau 21°C~32°C



### How to keep people away!

A model presents a creation by Rahul Mishra during the Women's Haute Couture Spring/Summer 2026 collection fashion show as part of the Paris Haute Couture Fashion Week, in Paris, yesterday.

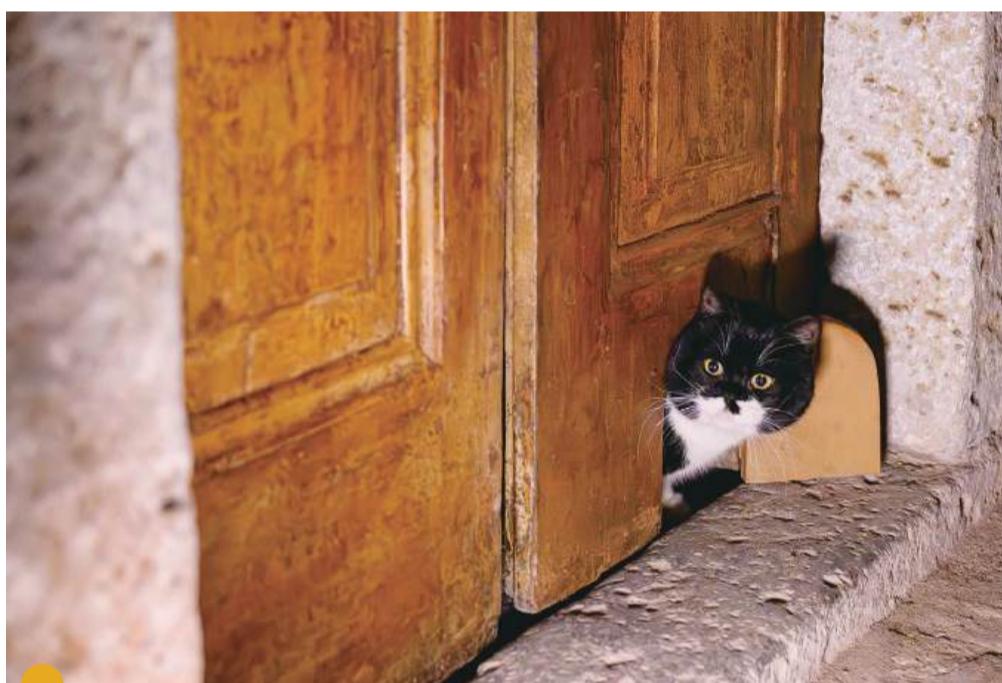
— AFP



### Love, good luck & cooling!

Brides from India's indigenous Bhil tribal community pose with their hands decorated with henna, during a mass marriage ceremony in Ahmedabad, India on Sunday.

— AFP



### Yes? Can I help you?

A cat uses a cat flap on the door at the Ottoman Topkapi Palace in Istanbul last Tuesday. At Topkapi Palace, for years the opulent residence of the Ottoman sultans, a centuries-old cat flap has just been restored. The presence of so many cats in Istanbul has often been explained with reference to "the deep affection the Prophet Muhammad had for them", explained Altan Armutak, an expert at Istanbul University's veterinary history department. According to City Hall, Istanbul has more than 160,000 cats living on its streets who are regularly fed and fussed over by the city's 16 million residents.

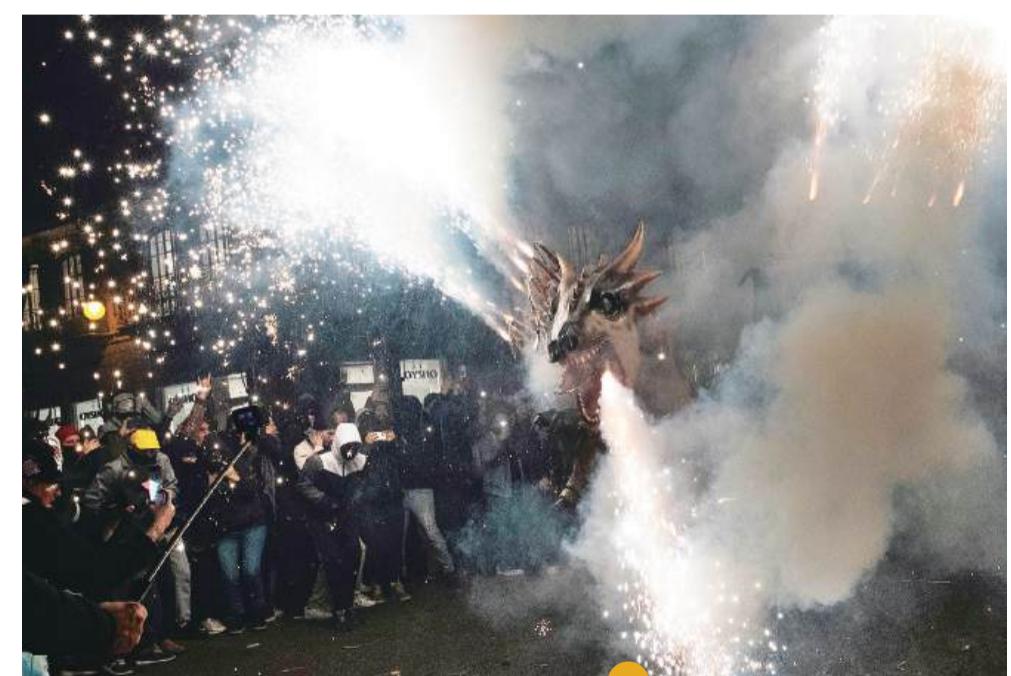
— AFP



### Varieties of jade

Jade stones split into two are displayed at the jade market in Mandalay, Myanmar yesterday.

— AFP



### Blazing fire & hot chocolate required!

People cross a street as trucks plough snow in the Manhattan borough of New York City on Sunday. A massive winter storm on Saturday dumped snow and freezing rain from New Mexico to North Carolina as it swept across the United States towards the northeast, threatening tens of millions of Americans with blackouts, transportation chaos and bone-chilling cold. — AFP



### Smaug lives

A dragon figure breathing fire is carried among revellers during the traditional 'Correfoc' (fire-run) festive event marking Saint Bartholomew's Day in Palma de Mallorca on Sunday. 'Correfoc' is a night of revelry in which participants dress up as demons and devils and run through the streets scaring people with fire and fireworks. — AFP