

Over 5,000 fined for illegal smoking in 2025, up 27 pct: Health Bureau

Tony Wong

Anti-smoking inspectors fined 5,008 people for illegally smoking in 2025, representing an increase of 27.0 per cent from 2024, the Health Bureau (SSM) announced in a statement last night.

In Macau, smoking is banned in all indoor public venues and facilities, except for smoking lounges in casinos and at the airport. Additionally, smoking is prohibited in certain outdoor public areas such as public parks and gardens, public beaches, footbridges, pedestrian underpasses, and within 10 metres of all public bus stops.

Illegal smoking carries a fixed fine of 1,500 patacas.

In addition to the 5,008 cases of illegal smoking, the Health Bureau, in conjunction with inspectors from other relevant public entities, fined 316 travellers for bringing e-cigarettes into or taking them out of Macau last year, while 134 offenders were fined for violating various other regulations outlined in the Tobacco Prevention and Control Law.



This undated handout photo released by the Health Bureau (SSM) yesterday shows its anti-smoking and anti-alcohol staff entering a restaurant for inspection.

According to the statement, 1,111 of the illegal smoking cases reported last year occurred in casinos, 780 in restaurants and other eateries, and 414 in parks and sitting-out areas.

Under Macau's anti-smoking

law, specifically the Tobacco Prevention and Control Law, the Health Bureau can designate additional outdoor public venues as no-smoking zones beyond those listed in the law. Since November 24

last year, smoking has been banned in outdoor areas within 10 metres of the entrances to three schools and a crèche on a permanent basis. Those violating the smoking ban will be fined 1,500 patacas.

16 Fined for Alcohol-Related Offences

Meanwhile, last night's statement also announced that last year the bureau's anti-alcohol inspectors fined 16 offenders for violating the Law on the Prevention and Control of Minors' Consumption of Alcoholic Beverages, including six cases involving the sale of alcoholic drinks to minors or providing them with such drinks at public venues.

According to the law, anyone selling alcoholic beverages to minors at public venues faces a fine of 20,000 patacas. The 20,000-pataca fine also applies to those providing alcoholic drinks to minors at public venues for commercial purposes.

The statement also reminded the public that even for non-commercial purposes, providing alcoholic beverages to minors at public venues is prohibited. However, violators in such circumstances face a more lenient fine, ranging between 1,500 and 20,000 patacas. ■

TikTok settles hours before landmark social media addiction trial

Glenn Chapman

LOS ANGELES – Video sharing app TikTok has made an eleventh-hour deal to avoid a landmark US trial accusing it, along with Meta and YouTube, of addicting young people to social media, lawyers said yesterday.

The deal was made as jury selection was to begin in a Los Angeles court that could establish a legal precedent on whether social media companies deliberately designed their platforms to addict children.

The case being heard in the California state court is being called a "bellwether" proceeding because its outcome could set the tone for a tidal wave of similar litigation across the United States.

The remaining defendants in the suit are Alphabet and Meta, the tech titans behind YouTube and Instagram.

Meta co-founder and Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg is slated to be called as a witness during the trial.

"The parties are pleased to have reached an amicable resolution of this dispute," the Social Media Victims Law Centre said, noting that the terms of the settlement with TikTok are confidential.

The case focuses on allegations that a 19-year-old woman identified by the initials K.G.M. suffered severe mental harm because she was addicted to social media.

After joining YouTube at age six, Instagram at 11, Snapchat at 13, and TikTok at 14, the Californian claims to have developed an addiction to the sites that contributed to her depression, anxiety, body image issues and that stoked suicidal thoughts.

Social media firms are accused in hundreds of lawsuits of addicting

young users to content that has led to depression, eating disorders, psychiatric hospitalization and even suicide.

Lawyers for the plaintiffs are explicitly borrowing strategies used in the 1990s and 2000s against the tobacco industry, which faced a similar onslaught of lawsuits arguing that companies sold a harmful product.

The trial before Judge Carolyn Kuhl is expected to start next week after a jury is selected.

'Significant victory'

"This is the first time that a social media company has ever had to face a jury for harming kids," Social Media Victims Law Centre founder Matthew Bergman, whose team is involved in more than 1,000 such cases, told AFP.

The centre is a legal organisation dedicated to holding social media companies accountable for harms allegedly caused to young people online.

"The fact that now K.G.M. and her family get to stand in a courtroom equal to the largest, most powerful and wealthy companies in the world is, in and of itself, a very significant victory," Bergman said.

Internet titans have argued that they are shielded by Section 230 of the US Communications Decency Act, which frees them of responsibility for what social media users post.

However, this case argues those firms are culpable for business models designed to hold people's attention and to promote content that winds up harming their mental health.

"The allegations in these

complaints are simply not true," said Jose Castaneda, a YouTube spokesperson.

"Providing young people with a safer, healthier experience has always been core to our work," he added.

Meta has also rejected the allegations.

TikTok's settlement joins Snapchat, which last week confirmed that it made a deal to avoid the trial brought by K.G.M. The terms were not disclosed.

The companies face two other similar trials in the same court scheduled for later this year.

Lawsuits, including some brought by school districts, accusing social media platforms of practices endangering young users are also making their way through federal court in Northern California and state courts across the country. — AFP

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The Macau Post Daily

Xi welcomes Finnish enterprises to 'take a swim in the vast ocean of the Chinese market'

President Xi Jinping yesterday welcomed Finnish enterprises to "take a swim in the vast ocean of the Chinese market" to enhance their global competitiveness.

— Story on p. 7

French lawmakers pass bill banning social media for under-15s

French lawmakers have passed a bill that would ban social media use by under-15s, a move championed by President Emmanuel Macron as a way to protect children from excessive screen time.

— Story on p. 10

China vows 'support' for Cuba after US threats

China promised yesterday to provide Cuba with "support and assistance" in the face of repeated threats from the United States, which weeks ago removed Havana's ally in Venezuela Nicolás Maduro.

— Story on p. 12

Shrimp found to contain excessive bacteria at Thai eatery in Taipa



This undated and unlocated file photo downloaded from the mainland's online and on-demand delivery platform Dianping yesterday shows raw marinated shrimp.

This undated handout photo provided by the Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) yesterday shows the US brand "Arrowroot Biscuits" infant teething wafers produced by Gerber, which has been found to contain excessive levels of *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*.

Ida Cheong

The Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) announced in a statement yesterday that shrimps sold at the "Thai Original" restaurant (泰原味) in Taipa were found to contain excessive amounts of *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* in a sample of raw marinated shrimp during a IAM routine food inspection.

The statement noted that the Municipal Affairs Bureau has ordered the restaurant to halt the sale of the product and to rectify its food preparation and handling procedures, adding that the business must comply with all safety and hygiene requirements and pass a re-inspection before it will be allowed to resume business.

The shrimp sample, rated as "unsatisfactory" for failing to meet the relevant standards set in the bureau's microbiological guidelines for "ready-to-eat food", was collected from "Thai Original" on Rua de Tai Lin (大連街) in Taipa, the statement said, adding that in addition to the business suspension, the bureau has mandated the person in charge of the establishment to attend food hygiene supervision courses, aiming to enhance the employees' awareness of hygiene practices in food handling and preparation.

V. parahaemolyticus is a halophilic* bacterium widely found in the marine environment and a common cause of food poisoning, the statement said, adding that foods susceptible to contamination

by *V. parahaemolyticus* are mainly seafood, including fish, shellfish, molluscs, and crustaceans.

According to the statement, *V. parahaemolyticus* can be effectively sterilised by thorough heating, and there is a higher risk of consumption of raw seafood dishes that have not been thoroughly heated, such as raw marinated shrimp and raw marinated crabs.

The incubation period of food poisoning caused by this organism ranges from two to 48 hours, and the main symptoms include watery diarrhoea, abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting and fever, which may last for two to five days, the statement said.

The statement reminded the food industry to be fully aware of the place of origin and specifications of food ingredients before procurement. Furthermore, the bureau called on the industry to adhere to food safety principles such as separating raw and cooked food during production, ensuring proper food handling and storage to prevent cross-contamination.

Plastic found in infant teething wafers

According to a separate IAM statement yesterday, a batch of "Arrowroot Biscuits" infant teething wafers from the US brand Gerber with a weight of 5.5 ounces (155 grams) may contain plastic or paper fragments and is currently under recall in its place of origin, and the bureau has immediately initiated

follow-up action. Specific details can be found via the webpage links: <https://www.gcs.gov.mo/news/detail/zh-hant/N26AahHDFK.jsessid=4A89A73733C19CDCF4FDCD51B4E918DC.app02>

The statement urged the public to seek medical attention promptly if discomfort occurs after consuming problematic foods, and if residents and businesses are in possession of the affected product, they should halt its supply, sale and consumption at once. ■

*Halophilic refers to organisms, particularly microorganisms, that thrive in high-salinity environments. — Poe

3 more French infant formula products contain *Bacillus cereus*: govt

Armindo Neves

Dairy companies Bledina, Laboratoire and Babybio from France have been ordered by the local authorities to recall certain batches of some of their infant formula products due to contamination of their raw materials with the microorganism *Bacillus cereus*, but the Pharmaceutical Supervision and Administration Bureau (ISAF) and Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) underlined that the products have not been imported by local businesses, according to a joint ISAF and IAM statement yesterday.

The two bureaux issued the statement after the official French General Directorate for Competition, Consumer Affairs, and Fraud Control recently issued the warning.

Bacillus cereus is a species of bacteria known for its ability to cause foodborne illnesses, such as diarrhoea and abdominal cramps.

The batches of the product have been identified by the statement; specific details can be found via the webpage link: <https://www.gcs.gov.mo/detail/zh-hant/N26Aa46Jom>.

Both bureaux urged residents to immediately stop letting infants and young children consume products from the affected batches, regardless of whether they were purchased

through online shopping, overseas purchasing services, or other channels, adding that if any infant or young child experiences discomfort after consuming the problematic products, they should seek medical attention right away.

For any enquiries regarding the products, please call the Food Safety Hotline on 2833 8181.

A raft of infant formula products has been recalled by their respective manufacturers around the world recently for containing the *Bacillus cereus*, including products from France, Switzerland, and Germany. ■



This image courtesy of the French government's DGCCRF website shows the BABYBIO OPTIMA 1 400G product, one of the affected batches of infant formula containing the *Bacillus cereus*.

Police nab brothers for stealing from temple offering box

Ada Lei

The Public Security Police (PSP) apprehended two men from the Chinese mainland on Saturday for stealing from an offering box in a temple, PSP spokeswoman Cheong Im Sim said during a regular press conference yesterday.

Cheong identified the suspects as a 44-year-old male and his 47-year-old brother, both surnamed Chen and claiming to be jobless.

According to Cheong, the Public Security Police (PSP) received a report on Saturday from a male tourist who witnessed the duo stealing money from the donation box of a temple on Estrada Governador Albano de Oliveira (柯維納馬路) in Taipa. The duo noticed that the tourist had spotted them and immediately fled the scene, failing to steal from the offering box. The police confirmed that if the theft had been successful, the temple would have lost about 5,400 patacas.

Through their citywide CCTV surveillance footage, the police identified the Chens as the suspects and apprehended them on Saturday in Rua da Felicidade (福隆新街), seizing various currencies totalling 12,000 patacas, along with a



This undated handout photo provided by the Public Security Police (PSP) yesterday shows PSP officers escorting the two theft suspects into a police station.

tape measure, flashlight, wooden sticks, double-sided tape, and a metal piece attached with a rope and covered in double-sided tape.

Under questioning, the younger brother admitted to stealing money from the collection box using homemade tools both on Friday and Saturday, while his elder brother was tasked with keeping watch nearby. The younger brother told the police that they had stolen over a thousand patacas from the box on

Friday, claiming that during their second attempt on Saturday, they were spotted by a passer-by and so were unable to steal any money.

However, the elder brother denied any involvement in the crime.

Cheong added that the younger brother has a criminal record related to stealing from a temple's offering box last year in Macau.

The duo have been transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP), facing theft charges. ■

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Macau Weather

TEMPERATURE FALLING SLIGHTLY. CLOUDY APART FROM SUNNY PERIODS. HAZE AT FIRST. FORCE 3 TO 5 NORTH TO NORTHEASTERLY WINDS, BECOMING EASTERLIES WITH GUSTS. RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL RANGE BETWEEN 45% AND 90%.



15°C~22°C

Source: SMG

Joint exhibition showcases characters by 2 local illustrators

Rui Pastorin

A collaborative exhibition titled “The Mysterious Visitor” is taking place on the first-floor exhibition room of the 10 Fantasia gallery, showcasing the characters created by local illustrators Aurelio Lewis (aka Oreo) and Joy Choi (蔡容容), who is also a graphic designer.

On until February 28, the exhibition features “Bumbo”, a brown bear who likes food and exploration, and a poodle named “Little P”, with the sport-loving character described as being courageous and curious, according to information describing the characters at the venue.

The two characters find themselves in different situations, with their journey starting from entering a book and presented in nine colourful digital paintings, all the while showcasing mutual support for each other.

“Bumbo” was created by Lewis, who established his IP brand “Bumboreo” (a blend of the names Oreo and Bumbo) in 2020. The local freelance illustrator, according to information displayed at the venue, is a graduate of the Illustration

Department at the University of Lincoln in the UK and has worked on illustrations for HSBC Life Macau and several small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Regarding his brand, it tells a story based on Oreo’s daily life, blending reality and imagination through Bumbo’s curious and creative perspective.

“Little P”, meanwhile, comes from the mind of Choi, who started creating a series of works focusing on the character and establishing the “Unique Family” illustration series in 2017. “It aims to convey the diverse aspects of daily life through vivid character settings and bright colours”, according to the statement. The statement added that Choi has a master’s degree in Visual Arts from Hongik University in South Korea, noting that Choi has joined exhibitions and related activities in the Chinese mainland, Macau and China’s Taiwan region, as well as South Korea and Japan.

10 Fantasia gallery, located on 10 Calçada da Igreja de S. Lázaro (瘋堂斜巷10號), is open from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. from Tuesday through Sunday. It is closed on Mondays. ■



Photo taken of the “The Mysterious Visitor” exhibition yesterday by Rui Pastorin

Northern district carnival draws flak from business figures

Vox Pop by Armindo Neves

The six-week Northern District Consumer Carnival, organised by the Macau Northern District Industry and Commerce Association (AICZNM) has been underway for only two weeks but it has already faced criticism from business figures.

AICZNM Chairman Raymond Wong Kin Chong stated during the carnival’s opening ceremony on January 12 that the event aims to stimulate spending through “appealing prizes” to boost the district’s economy. Wong announced an initial allocation of around one million patacas for e-vouchers.

Economic and Technological Development Bureau (DSED) Director Yau Yun Wah expressed hope that the carnival would attract consumers through e-vouchers, merchant discounts, and lucky draws. With the Chinese New Year (CNY) approaching, he noted that the event seeks to leverage the “festive atmosphere of renewal.”

During the carnival, consumers can use the Bank of China (Macau) mobile banking app “BOCPAY” from Monday to Friday to spend at least 100 patacas at participating merchants. The campaign’s e-vouchers are exclusively issued by the local BOC branch, with denominations ranging from 10 to 50 patacas. They are valid for 14 days and can be used daily.

The *Post* interviewed several shop owners in the northern district yesterday.

An eyewear store owner surnamed Lei, complained that the



This photo, taken yesterday, shows a poster promoting the Northern District Consumer Carnival displayed on the façade of a market in the district.

– Photo: Armindo Neves

carnival has yet to boost business or consumer spending. She noted that obtaining discount coupons was difficult and restricted to a single payment method, resulting in minimal impact. Lei questioned whether the initiative was merely “held for the sake of holding an event” and insisted that consumer vouchers should be distributed more widely to effectively stimulate the economy.

A Western pharmacy owner, surnamed Chan, criticised the carnival for its limited impact. Chan said the campaign lacked sufficient publicity and described the total value of the consumer e-vouchers – just one million patacas—as “a drop in the bucket.” Many residents, she noted, have given up on winning e-vouchers in the carnival’s lucky draw held three times a week. Compared to previous consumer promotion

campaigns, she found this one “paltry.” To truly stimulate the economy, she suggested expanding the scope and number of incentives and attracting visitors from outside the city.

The owner of a Chinese medicine pharmacy, who preferred to remain anonymous, echoed concerns about the “insufficiency” of the one million patacas allocated for e-vouchers. She highlighted that many participants in the lucky draw have never won, which has severely undermined consumer confidence. She raised doubts about whether the e-vouchers were distributed as promised and remarked that it might have been better not to hold the event at all. If such an event is to be organised, she argued, it should significantly expand in both scale and funding to ensure real benefits for consumers. ■

Beijing’s immersive drama team reveals vision behind ‘Farewell My Concubine’

Ida Cheong

The Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) announced in a statement this month that the immersive drama “Farewell My Concubine”, which is a part of the inaugural “Chinese Culture Performances Season”, will stage four performances from tomorrow through Sunday at Box II of the Macau Cultural Centre (CCM) in Nape.

“Farewell My Concubine”, written by Nobel Prize laureate Mo Yan and produced by the Beijing People’s Art Theatre, breaks away from conventional narrative frameworks of historical drama and explores timeless themes such as power, survival and responsibility through multiple encounters and dialogues between Concubine Yu (Xiang Yu’s beloved concubine) and Lu Zhi (Liu Bang’s wife) that intertwine time and space, within the so-called “Chu-Han Contention” (楚漢戰爭) background.

The Chu-Han Contention (BC 206–202) was a 4-year civil war for supremacy over China following the Qin Dynasty’s collapse, pitting Xiang Yu’s Western Chu against Liu Bang’s Han.

During yesterday’s press conference, the stage play’s director, Lin Cong, said that the latest production is adapted from a 1997 work by Mo. Unlike previous versions, the drama adaptation specifically invited Mo to revise the script, shifting the narrative from a predominantly male perspective to one

re-examined through a female lens, Lin said, adding that a dedicated monologue was added for Lu Zhi, enriching the narrative logic from a female standpoint.

Lin said that the performance venue – Box II – will feature tiered seating while ensuring an equal viewing experience for all spectators, adding that the stage is designed as the “Chu Army Tent”, with sliver pebbles at the centre and bamboo wind chimes hanging around, complemented by surround sound from all directions to recreate a “surrounded

by enemies situation”, while the 360-degree “Dome-shaped tent” venue allows for close contact and an immersive experience between the audience and the actors.

“So close that actors might kneel right beside the audience”, Lin said, pointing out that the actors will be extremely close to the audience, enabling viewers to engage with the story from every angle.

Lin added that the play is focused on uncovering contemporary relevance and exploring women’s choices and their

interpersonal dynamics. She pointed out that the production premiered in 2023 and has since been performed over 60 times. Compared to the debut, character interpretations and performance details have seen significant refinement, with core segments such as Consort Yu’s sword dance continually being improved, Lin said. ■



The production crew – Zhang Han Sheng (left), Wang Jun Qian (second from left), Lu Lu (third from left), Lin Cong (fourth from left), Sun Yi Lin (third from right), Zhang Han Sheng (second from right) and Wan Lu (right) – pose for a group photo during yesterday’s “Farewell My Concubine” press conference at the Macau Cultural Centre (CCM) in Nape.

– Photo: Ida Cheong



This poster provided by the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) yesterday promotes the upcoming immersive drama “Farewell My Concubine” slated to hit the stage from tomorrow through Sunday.



Local artist Ng Sekha poses next to one of her exhibits at her solo exhibition "Between Plastic" yesterday evening at the Rui Cunha Foundation's (FRC) gallery on Avenida da Praia Grande. – Photos: Khalel Vallo



Ng Sekha's 'Between Plastic' exhibition opens at FRC gallery



Khalel Vallo

The solo exhibition "Between Plastic" by local artist Ng Sekha opened yesterday evening at the Rui Cunha Foundation's (FRC) gallery, presenting painting, performance and installation works that explore "plastic" as both concept and material.

The exhibition displays 19 oil and acrylic paintings, sculptures and glass installations created by Ng, whose recent practice has focused on examining plastic's physical properties and its broader social, cultural and philosophical implications.

The exhibition is co-organised by the Rui Cunha Foundation (FRC), Macau Youth Art Association and Macau Artist Society, and is curated by Guo Yun, with academic guidance from Guilherme Ung Vai Meng.

According to a message by the co-organisers displayed at the gallery's entrance, Ng translated her earlier performance works into easel painting, while reintroducing plastic hemispheres into the pictorial field. The message elaborates that "transparent plastic is repeatedly inserted between painting, performance, and installation. Through its semi-concealing, malleable, and almost weightless materiality, it constructs an ambiguous perceptual structure – neither fully obstructive nor fully transparent – placing the body, the image, and the act of viewing in a constant state of tension and instability".

The exhibition also draws on the multiple meanings

associated with the word "plastic" across different cultures. As noted in the message, in a Western context the term extends beyond materiality to ideas of plastic surgery, consumer culture and "the social mechanisms through which the body is designed, regulated, and observed".

In contrast, the Chinese understanding of plastic (塑, "modelling")* according to the message, simultaneously refers to shaping, reshaping and regeneration, "pointing toward a state of incompleteness and continuous becoming".

"It is within this semantic tension that Ng operates, transforming plastic into a method rather than a singular medium," the message noted, adding that this approach mediates "between perception and structure, and between individual experience and social mechanisms".

According to an FRC statement yesterday, Ng holds a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth and is currently a PhD student in Art History and Art Theory at the Faculty of Humanities and Arts of the Macau University of Science and Technology (MUST).

The statement noted her artistic practice encompassing performance art, installation and easel painting, with a focus on gender philosophy, identity and contemporary art, adding that her works have been shown locally, in the Chinese mainland and overseas, including exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Beijing, the Shanghai Exhibition Centre, Tank Shanghai, the Chengdu Biennale,

the Guangzhou Museum of Art, Shenzhen's Luohu Art Museum, AsiaWorld-Expo in Hong Kong, the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea, and in Lisbon.

In a *Post* interview, prior to the opening ceremony, Ng said that the exhibition developed from her earlier performance works, in which she continuously wrote "inside an enclosed sphere until suffocation forced me to break free". She said that her practice weaves together performance, installation and painting, with traditional calligraphy serving as a bridge between her body and the canvas. "Since 2015, 'plastic' has been a continuous theme in my work. Its properties – transparent yet hazy, light yet resilient – reflect our complex perception of the world, navigating between isolation and transparency," she said, adding that she explores the concept across different media, allowing both the material meaning of plastic and its notion of shaping to surface naturally.

According to Ng, the exhibition represents an "unfinished" process, where traces of past performances evolve into new visual forms, linking personal experience with broader social structures.

With free admission, the works can be viewed until next Sunday, February 7, with exhibitiongoers welcome to visit the gallery at 749 Avenida da Praia Grande, Luen Pong Building. The gallery is open from Monday to Friday from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. and 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. on Saturdays.

*The Greek etymology of the word "plastic" means "fit for moulding". – Poe



Police nab man for harassing woman in short skirt

Staff Reporter

A 23-year-old man from the Chinese mainland was arrested on Friday for sexually harassing a 30-year-old local woman wearing a short skirt while shopping, Public Security Police (PSP) spokeswoman Cheong Im Sim said during a regular press conference yesterday. The suspect, surnamed Gou, told the police that he is jobless.

Cheong reported that while the woman was at a shop on Travessa dos Anjos (天神巷), a pedestrian-only alley running between Rua do Campo and the Ginza Plaza shopping centre on Rua de Pedro Nolasco da Silva, at around 11 p.m. on Thursday, a man approached her and touched her thigh and buttocks before fleeing the scene. Feeling sexually harassed, the woman reported the incident to the police.

After reviewing the store's CCTV footage and utilising the police forces' citywide CCTV surveillance system, Cheong stated that PSP officers identified Gou as the suspect and apprehended him near Praça da Amizade (commonly known as Sintra Square) in Nam Van at around 2 a.m. the next day, about three hours later.

Under questioning, Cheong said, Gou admitted to the offence, telling the police that he was driven by a sudden sexual impulse upon seeing the woman in a short skirt.

Gou has been transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) and faces a charge of sexual harassment.

3 credit-for-sex scams

Meanwhile, Judiciary Police (PJ) spokesman Chao Teng Hin announced during yesterday's regular press conference that three men separately fell victim to credit-for-sex scams, with a total loss equivalent to around 89,000 patacas.

In the first case, according to Chao, a man met a netizen last month who informed him about a mobile app where he could meet women for sex. After downloading the app, the man saw several chat

groups, where a member claimed that one could have sex with a woman for 6,500 yuan.

After transferring the amount to a designated account through the app last month, the man was still unable to arrange a meeting with a woman. Subsequently, someone in the chat group told him to make another transfer. The man then made two additional transfers through the app late last month and early this month, amounting to over 48,000 yuan in total. However, he still could not achieve his goal and finally realised that he had been scammed, reporting the case to the police earlier this week, according to Chao.

The man reported a total loss of 54,780 yuan, equivalent to around 60,000 patacas.

In each of the other two cases, which occurred separately last week, according to Chao, a man met a "female netizen" who asked him to purchase gift cards to pay for sex services. After the man bought the gift cards, the "female netizen" demanded that he buy more gift cards, citing various reasons.

Eventually, the two men realised they had been defrauded, losing 2,100 patacas and 27,439 patacas, respectively. ■



Public Security Police (PSP) spokeswoman Cheong Im Sim looks on during yesterday's regular press conference. — Photo: Ada Lei

Police nab cabbie for cheating passenger out of HK\$900

Ada Lei

The Public Security Police (PSP) arrested a local taxi driver on Saturday for cheating a passenger out of HK\$900, PSP spokeswoman Cheong Im Sim said during a regular press conference yesterday.

Cheong identified the suspect as a male in his sixties surnamed Lei.

According to Cheong, the police received a report on September 23 from a mainland man who said that he had taken a taxi from Rua de Cantão (廣州街) in Zape to the Qingmao pedestrian border checkpoint earlier that day, with a fare of 63 patacas. After the victim paid HK\$1,003 in cash, Lei returned only 40 patacas in change.

The victim left the taxi without counting.

Later, when the victim counted the change, he realised that Lei had only returned 40 patacas, significantly less than expected. Suspecting that he had been scammed, the victim immediately reported a loss of HK\$900 to the police.

Through their CCTV surveillance and the taxi's video footage, the police identified Lei as the suspect and summoned him to a police station on Saturday. Under questioning, Lei admitted to defrauding the victim out of greed.

Lei has been transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP), facing a fraud charge. ■

Macau to host 'China Expo Forum for Int'l Cooperation' in 2027

Khalel Vallo

Macau will host the "China Expo Forum for International Cooperation" (CEFCO) again in 2027, becoming the first city to stage the national-level industry event twice, following an announcement made during CEFCO 2026 in Wuhan last week, according to a Commerce and Investment Promotion Institute (IPIM) statement on Monday.

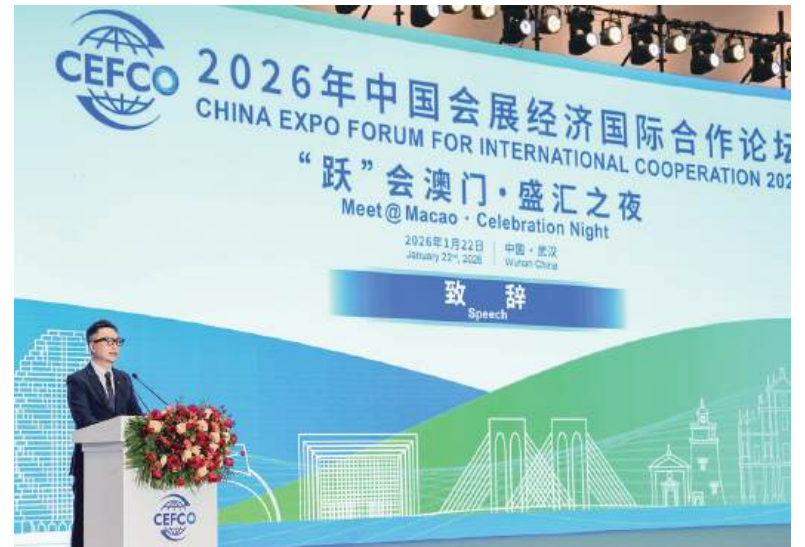
IPIM said it recently organised a delegation of representatives from the local exhibition industry to attend CEFCO 2026, where the organisers officially confirmed Macau as the host city for CEFCO 2027.

According to the statement, the forum is held nationwide on a rotating basis, and its return to Macau after a decade, which "reaffirms the city's strength as a high-quality exhibition destination".

The statement added that Macau was also awarded the "Most Influential Exhibition Destination Award" at the 20th China Events Industry Fair in 2024, marking the first time the city has received the honour.

At CEFCO 2026, IPIM led a delegation of 30 representatives from the Macao MICE industry, the statement noted. MICE stands for Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions.

The event attracted more than 600 participants from over 20 countries and regions, including exhibition organisers, corporate executives and industry experts. The statement said that the participation helped the local



This handout photo provided by the Commerce and Investment Promotion Institute (IPIM) on Monday shows President Che Weng Keong delivering a speech last Thursday, expressing his gratitude for the CEFCO organisers' trust and support, at the China Expo Forum for International Cooperation 2026 (CEFCO 2026) in Wuhan, capital of Hubei Province.

industry gain insight into global trends, expand market networks and explore co-operation opportunities, while promoting the advantages of the Macau-Hengqin MICE sector, adding that the delegation also met Li Qingshuang, vice president of the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT).

The statement noted that the CEFCO organisers selected Macau again after it stood out among several competing cities. At the exchange event "Meet@ Macao – Night of Prosperity", IPIM President Che Weng Keong thanked the organisers for recognising Macau's previous hosting performance and said the

city was eager to contribute to the high-level opening of the national exhibition industry and provide an efficient platform for international cooperation.

According to the statement, Macau has been rated "Best Convention City (Asia)" and "Best BT-MICE City" by traded magazines for three consecutive years. The statement said that this accumulated experience will add value to CEFCO 2027.

The statement also said that IPIM will work closely with the CEFCO organisers and local exhibition industry partners to prepare for the event under an integrated "exhibition + inspection + connection" model. ■

MUST's Agricultural Sciences enters ESI global top 1 pct

Rui Pastorin

The private Macau University of Science and Technology (MUST) said in a statement yesterday that its Agricultural Sciences discipline has entered the ESI global top 1 percent for the first time, following ten other disciplines already ranked.

The Essential Science Indicators (ESI) data was released by Clarivate, a global information services and analytics company that focuses on providing insights and analytics to the research and academic sectors, AI chatbot Poe notes.

ESI is a recognised tool for scientific research statistical

analysis based on the Web of Science Core Collection. It includes 22 disciplines and over 12,000 important academic journals globally, the statement said. ESI helps assess the "international academic level and influence" of universities, research institutions, and countries/regions, the statement noted, adding: "Only disciplines whose total citation frequency of papers published in the past decade ranks among the global top 1% can be included in the list".

MUST's 10 other disciplines previously ranked are Engineering, Computer Science, Pharmacology

& Toxicology, Social Sciences (General), Clinical Medicine, Molecular Biology & Genetics, Biology & Biochemistry, Chemistry, Materials Science, and Environment/Ecology.

This achievement highlights MUST's growing recognition in agricultural research, the statement said. Moreover, the statement also highlighted: "The interdisciplinary development of Traditional Chinese and Western Medicine, Pharmacy, Environmental Science, and other disciplines has played a key supporting role in enabling Agricultural Sciences to enter the ESI global top 1%". ■

InCites Essential Science Indicators					
Clarivate					
Results List Institutions	Report View by Selection				
	Total: 1429	Institutions	Countries/Regions	Web of Science Documents	Cites
					Cites/Paper
Filter Results By Changing the filter field removes all current filters. Add Filter Agricultural Sciences	1396	MACAU UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY	MACAU	258	3,840
					14.88

This screenshot provided by the private Macau University of Science and Technology (MUST) yesterday shows MUST's Agricultural Sciences on the ESI top 1 percent.

SSM reports 3 school clusters of flu-like illnesses

Kristina Vallesteros

The Health Bureau (SSM) reported three separate clusters of influenza-like illnesses on Monday, according to a statement issued on the same day.

The first cluster involves seven patients (five male, two female), all students from Primary 2, Class A in Colégio Diocesano de São José 5, located on Rua Central do Ilha Verde (台山中街). The second involves four patients (one male, three female), all students from Form 6, Class "Ai" at Macau Baptist College on Rua Central da Areia Preta (黑沙環中街). Meanwhile, the third involves seven patients (five male, two female), all students from Primary 4, Class D at Pui Tou Middle

School (Nam Van Campus) on Avenida da Praia Grande (南灣大馬路), noted the statement.

According to the statement, the patients began developing various symptoms, including fever and cough, starting on Saturday. Some have sought medical attention, with all cases reported as mild and without severe complications. Testing confirmed that 10 of the 18 patients tested positive for Influenza A.

The statement noted that the affected schools have implemented enhanced infection control measures, including cleaning, disinfection, and improved indoor ventilation, and are enforcing isolation rules for those who are ill.

The bureau reminded residents

to take preventive measures against influenza and other respiratory illnesses.

Recommendations include receiving the seasonal influenza vaccine and updated COVID-19 vaccinations, ensuring adequate rest, a balanced diet, and exercise, and maintaining good personal and hand hygiene, according to the statement.

The public is also advised to cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue or elbow, maintain air circulation and a clean environment, avoid crowded places, and wear a mask when experiencing symptoms, caring for patients, or visiting hospitals and clinics, the statement pointed out. Those feeling unwell should seek medical care promptly and rest at home. ■

Humanoid robot connects to satellite in pioneering trial

BEIJING — In a trial demonstration, a Chinese humanoid robot was directly connected to a low-Earth orbit satellite, achieving a breakthrough that enables robots to operate autonomously in remote areas without relying on ground networks.

The trial, conducted during a recent commercial space industry promotion event, saw the "Embodied Tien Kung" robot developed by the Beijing Innovation Center of Humanoid Robotics, or X-Humanoid, establish a stable link with an internet satellite from GalaxySpace, achieving synchronous transmission of the robot's visual data.

According to X-Humanoid, this was the first demonstration of its kind in the world. It also marked China's first instance of a humanoid robot connecting simultaneously to

a low-orbit satellite, a domestically made smartphone, and a computer terminal.

The connection was maintained as the robot received a document from an unmanned vehicle and delivered it to a newly built aerospace industrial park in suburban Beijing. Its coordinated movements and a 720p live video feed from its perspective were streamed back to a command center in real time via the satellite, without any lag.

Satellite internet can liberate robots from their dependence on cellular or Wi-Fi networks. In locations such as remote mountainous regions, offshore islands, or disaster relief sites, robots can maintain a real-time online communication wherever satellite coverage is available.

— Xinhua

China's int'l trade promotion body pledges stronger support for foreign trade in 2026

BEIJING — China's trade promotion system will continue intensifying efforts to stabilize foreign trade in 2026 amid a complex and challenging global trade landscape, said Ren Hongbin, chairman of the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT), addressing a national trade promotion work conference in Beijing yesterday.

Ren said the system will help companies expand their exports through channels such as cross-border e-commerce, overseas warehousing and export credit insurance, and support them to increase their imports of quality products and services from relevant countries. This will better meet the needs of industrial transformation, industrial upgrading and consumption upgrading, and promote the more balanced development of imports and exports.

He noted that competition among major countries is becoming more complex and intense, and that a handful of Western countries

clinging to a Cold War and zero-sum mentality have stepped up their comprehensive containment and suppression of China, increasing external pressures for the country.

Trade promotion efforts in 2026 should position synergy and efficiency at their core, and actively identify, respond to and steer changes. They should also strengthen services for enterprises, expand international partnerships, and help China's business community gain initiative and deepen cooperation amid intense global competition, Ren said.

To help Chinese companies explore new markets, build momentum and improve the business environment, the CCPIT arranged for 2,144 delegations to visit and conduct business matchmaking activities in 92 countries and regions last year, robustly supporting Chinese companies in expanding their overseas markets and advancing their global industrial layout.

— Xinhua, MPD

Japan in no position to interfere in affairs of China's Taiwan: FM spokesperson

BEIJING — A Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson said yesterday that the Japanese side is in no position to interfere in the affairs of China's Taiwan region, either from the perspective of history or law.

Spokesperson Guo Jiakun made the comments as Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi reportedly said on Monday that any crisis in Taiwan could spur Japan and the United States to take joint action to rescue their own citizens. She added that in such a situation, there was no way Japan could abandon its long-time ally, the United States.

"The remarks by the Japanese side once again reveal the Japanese right-wing forces' ambitions to provoke antagonism, make trouble, and take the opportunity to keep remilitarizing Japan and to challenge the post-war international order," Guo said, urging the international community to stay on high alert and firmly reject that.

Japan should be reminded that the 1972 Sino-Japanese Joint Statement states that "the Government of Japan recognizes the Government of the People's

Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China. The Government of the People's Republic of China reiterates that Taiwan is an inalienable part of the territory of the People's Republic of China. The Government of Japan fully understands and respects this stand of the Government of the People's Republic of China, and it firmly maintains its stand under Article 8 of the Potsdam Proclamation," Guo said.

The 1978 Treaty of Peace and Friendship Between China and Japan, ratified by the two countries' legislatures, affirmed that the principles set out in the 1972 Joint Statement should be strictly observed, he added.

A series of instruments with legal effect under international law, including the Cairo Declaration, the Potsdam Proclamation, and the Japanese Instrument of Surrender, require that all the territories Japan had stolen from China, such as Taiwan, must be restored to China, and Japan should be "completely disarmed" and not maintain such industries as "would enable her to re-arm for war," he said, adding that Japan's Constitution also

made strict restrictions on the country's military forces, the right of belligerency and the right to war.

"These are political commitments that Japan must strictly honor and legal obligations that they cannot deny," Guo said.

"Japan claims to act within the scope of law but has kept their gross interference in China's domestic affairs and even threatened the use of force against China. This is self-contradictory," he noted.

Japan committed innumerable crimes during its colonial rule over Taiwan of more than 50 years, and bears serious historical responsibilities to the Chinese people.

"Either from the perspective of history or law, the Japanese side is in no position to interfere in the affairs of China's Taiwan region," Guo said.

"We once again urge the Japanese side to abide by the spirit of the four political documents between China and Japan and Japan's own political commitments made to China, do soul-searching, correct its wrongdoings, and stop their manipulation and reckless moves on the Taiwan question," he said.

— Xinhua



Visitors shake hands with a robot at the Shanghai Science & Technology Museum in Shanghai yesterday. The museum launched its operational stress test yesterday after more than two years of systematic upgrading, with some visitors and the media being invited to visit. It will commence its trial opening to the public during the Spring Festival, aka Chinese New Year (CNY), which begins on February 17. — AFP



A vendor arranges vegetables at the Daguan Zhuanxin farmers' market in Kunming, capital of Yunnan Province, yesterday. While preserving the original function of a farmers' market, Daguan Zhuanxin has now been upgraded to a complex of cultural experience, dining and entertainment, which offers tourists a window to experience local flavor and vibe. — Xinhua

Xi welcomes Finnish enterprises to 'take a swim in the vast ocean of the Chinese market'

BEIJING – President Xi Jinping yesterday welcomed Finnish enterprises to “take a swim in the vast ocean of the Chinese market” to enhance their global competitiveness.

Xi made the remarks in his meeting in Beijing with visiting Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo, calling on both sides to deepen mutually beneficial cooperation in areas such as energy transition, circular economy, agriculture and forestry industries, and scientific and technological innovation.

Xi pointed out that Finland was among the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. Over the past 76 years since the establishment of diplomatic ties, China-Finland relations, characterized by mutual respect, equality, future orientation and win-win cooperation, have achieved steady growth regardless of how the international landscape has evolved, he added.

Noting that this year marks the beginning of China's 15th Five-Year Plan period, Xi said China will continue to advance high-quality development and expand high-standard opening up to the rest of the world.

Finland is a powerhouse in winter sports, and China has also emerged as a major winter sports nation, Xi said, calling on both sides to promote exchanges and cooperation in this area to carry forward their winter sports friendship.

He welcomed more Finnish people to visit China and experience its blend of ancient heritage and modern vitality.

Meanwhile, Xi pointed out that in a world confronted by multiple risks and challenges, the international community should join hands for response, adding that major countries should act as a good example to promote equality, observe the rule of law, pursue cooperation, and uphold integrity.

He expressed China's readiness to work with Finland to firmly uphold the international system with the United Nations at its core and the international order based on international law, to jointly respond to global challenges.

Xi also said China is willing to work with Finland to promote an equitable and orderly multipolar world as well as a universally beneficial and inclusive economic globalization.

China and Europe are partners, not adversaries, Xi emphasized. Cooperation between China and Europe outweighs competition, and their common ground outweighs differences, he noted, adding that China hopes Finland will play a constructive role in promoting the healthy and stable development of China-Europe relations.

Noting that Finnish enterprises take great interest in coming to China for cooperation, Orpo said Finland is willing to work with China to implement the important consensus

reached by the two heads of state, enhance high-level exchanges, and deepen practical cooperation in trade, investment, digital economy, clean energy, agriculture and other fields.

Orpo also said that Finland firmly adheres to the one-China policy. He added that Finland appreciates China's important and constructive role in international affairs and is willing to strengthen communication and

coordination with China to jointly safeguard world peace and stability.

Noting that the constructive development of Europe-China relations is of great significance, Orpo said Finland advocates Europe's strategic autonomy, supports free trade, and stands ready to play a positive role in helping properly resolve trade frictions between Europe and China and promote the healthy development of their ties. – *Xinhua*



President Xi Jinping (right) shakes hands with Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo, who is on an official visit to China, at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday.

– AFP

China willing to deepen cooperation with Finland for higher-level mutual benefits: premier

BEIJING – China stands ready to strengthen the alignment of development strategies with Finland, and deepen cooperation in sectors including telecommunications, clean technology, special vessel building, new-type urban development, and life and health to achieve higher-level mutual benefits, Premier Li Qiang said when holding talks with visiting Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo in Beijing yesterday.

Li said China is willing to work with Finland to carry forward the traditional friendship between the two countries, uphold mutual respect and equality, and deepen and solidify their future-oriented, new-type cooperative partnership for the benefit of both peoples.

Noting that this year kicks off China's 15th Five-Year Plan period, Li said China is ready to work with Finland to leverage the complementary economic strengths of the two countries in an improved manner and unlock the full potential of bilateral trade.

China welcomes more high-quality imports from Finland and encourages its enterprises to invest in Finland, Li said.

“We hope that Finland will continue to provide a fair, just and non-discriminatory business environment for Chinese enterprises there,” Li said, calling on the two sides to enhance cooperation in the fields of tourism, local exchange, youth engagement, and language and vocational education.

He noted that at a time when global unilateralism and protectionism are on the rise and impacting the world economy, the two countries should join hands to uphold an open, cooperative international economic and trade order, adhere to multilateralism and free trade, and safeguard the multilateral trading system with the World

Trade Organization at its core.

China hopes Finland will play an active role in promoting the development of China-Europe relations, he added.

Orpo said that China has achieved remarkable accomplishments in economic and social development as well as in sci-tech innovation, and it plays a significant role in international affairs.

Finland is committed to deepening its relations with China continuously, and is willing to enhance exchange with China at all levels and deepen practical cooperation and people-to-people exchange in various fields, said the prime minister.

The Finnish government welcomes Chinese enterprises to invest and start businesses in Finland, and is willing to create a favorable environment for this purpose, he added.

Noting that the current international order is facing severe challenges, Orpo said Finland is willing to enhance communication and coordination with China on multilateral affairs including climate change and sustainable development, and stands ready to safeguard free trade and the multilateral trading system.

The sound development of Europe-China relations is of great significance to both sides, he said, adding that the Finnish side is willing to play a constructive role in promoting the Europe-China relations.

Following the talks, Li and Orpo witnessed the signing of multiple cooperation documents covering science and technology, housing and urban-rural development, customs, culture and tourism, economy and trade, and energy.

Prior to the talks, Li hosted a welcome ceremony for Orpo in the Great Hall of the People. – *Xinhua*

China-Britain cooperation to enhance bilateral relations, smooth over misunderstandings: Chinese ambassador

LONDON – Cooperation between China and Britain will enhance relations between two countries and smooth over misunderstandings, Chinese ambassador to Britain Zheng Zuguang wrote in a signed article published in *The Times* on Monday.

“China welcomes [British Prime Minister] Sir Keir Starmer's forthcoming official visit. The last visit to China by a British prime minister took place in 2018. The past eight years have witnessed unprecedented changes in the world, and it has also been an eventful time in China-UK relations,” Zheng said in the article titled “China and Britain don't see eye to eye but we share many interests.”

Zheng noted that the resumption of high-level engagement serves the fundamental interests of both countries and both sides should work together to ensure that the visit delivers positive outcomes.

Zheng also called for enhancing political trust. “Mutual trust is the foundation of bilateral relations. This visit will provide a valuable opportunity for leaders of the two countries to have an in-depth exchange of views on their respective domestic priorities and the current complex international situation,” he said.

“China believes that our two countries should proceed from a long-term and strategic perspective, stick to our positioning as partners, and develop a stable and mutually beneficial relationship,” the ambassador said.

He said that closer collaboration with China will only benefit Britain in attaining its development goals.

“British businesses and consumers are becoming increasingly aware of this through first-hand experience. We should expand dialogue, co-ordination and co-operation across a wide range of fields, including trade and investment, financial services, clean energy, the fight against cross-border crime, education and culture, science and technological innovation, climate change and public health,” he said.

“We should seek common ground while managing differences,” he said, adding that it is a fact that China and Britain “do not see eye-to-eye on every issue.”

“Some of the differences arise from our different political systems and historical and cultural backgrounds; others from divergent practical interests; and many more from a lack of engagement and mutual understanding, which can make otherwise normal issues more complicated,” he said.

“No storm, no rainbow. I hope that both sides will move in the same direction, seize this historic opportunity, and begin a new journey in China-UK relations, one defined by more trust and collaboration,” Zheng said.

At the invitation of Premier Li Qiang, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer will pay an official visit to China from today to Saturday, a Foreign Ministry spokesperson announced in Beijing yesterday. – *Xinhua*

EU, India agree 'mother of all' trade deals



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi (centre) poses for a photograph with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (right) and European Council President Antonio Costa before their meeting at the Hyderabad House in New Delhi yesterday.

— AFP

Umberto BACCHI

NEW DELHI — India and the European Union announced yesterday the “mother of all deals”, a huge trade pact to create a market of two billion people, reached after two decades of negotiations.

EU chiefs and Prime Minister Narendra Modi hope the pact will help shield against challenges from the world's two leading economies, the United States and China.

The agreement will cut or eliminate tariffs on almost 97 percent of European exports, saving up to 4 billion euros (US\$4.75 billion) annually in duties, the 27-nation bloc said.

“A mother of all deals,” Modi said yesterday in the capital New Delhi, where he met with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Antonio Costa.

“This deal will bring many opportunities for India's 1.4 billion and many millions of people of the EU,” Modi said, adding the agreement “represents about 25 percent of global GDP, and one-third of global trade”.

The EU has eyed India — the world's most populous nation — as an important market for the future.

“Europe and India are making history today [Tuesday],” von der Leyen said in a statement, a day after she and Costa were feted as guests of honour at India's Republic Day parade.

“We have created a free trade zone of two billion people, with both sides set to benefit.”

‘Increasingly insecure world’

EU officials said the deal was the most ambitious India had ever agreed, and European companies would benefit from so-called “first mover advantage”.

Europe's key agricultural, automotive and service sectors stand to gain.

But sensitive agricultural sectors, such as beef, rice and sugar whose inclusion in an earlier deal struck with South American bloc Mercosur sparked farmers' anger in Europe, were left out of the agreement.

New Delhi sees the European bloc as an important source of much-needed technology and investment to rapidly upscale its infrastructure and create millions of new jobs.

It also includes a security partnership, providing “new opportunities” for defence companies, Modi said.

“We are not only making our economies stronger — we are also delivering security for our people in an increasingly insecure world,” von der Leyen said, speaking alongside Modi after exchanging agreements.

“By combining these strengths, we reduce strategic dependencies, at a time when trade is increasingly weaponised,” she added.

Bilateral trade in goods reached 120 billion euros (US\$139 billion) in 2024, an increase of nearly 90 percent over the past decade, according to EU figures, with a further 60 billion euros (US\$69 billion) in trade in services.

Under the agreement, India is expected to ease market access, and European firms will get privileged

access to the Indian financial services and maritime transport market, the bloc said.

‘Highest level of access’

Tariffs on cars will be gradually lowered from a top rate of 110 percent to as low as 10 percent — with a quota of 250,000 vehicles — while duties on wines progressively go down from 150 percent to as low as 20 percent.

Currently at 50 percent, tariffs on processed foods — including pasta and chocolate — will be eliminated, according to the EU.

Von der Leyen said she expected exports to India to double, and that the EU would “gain the highest level of access ever granted to a trade partner in the traditionally protected Indian market”.

For India, it would boost sectors including textiles, gems and jewellery, and leather goods, as well as the service sector, Modi said.

The accord comes as both Brussels and New Delhi seek to open up markets in the face of US tariffs and Chinese export controls.

India is on track to become the fourth-largest economy this year, according to International Monetary Fund projections.

New Delhi, which has relied on Moscow for key military hardware for decades, has tried to cut its dependence on Russia in recent years by diversifying imports and pushing its own domestic manufacturing base.

Europe is doing the same with regard to the United States. — AFP

Myanmar nationalists protest Rohingya

YANGON — A hundreds-strong crowd in Myanmar rallied yesterday against the country's prosecution for genocide, a rare public protest permitted by military authorities accused of the atrocities against the Rohingya minority.

Myanmar is defending itself at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) from allegations its crackdown on the mostly Muslim minority starting in 2017 breached the United Nations' genocide convention.

Dancing to drums in downtown Yangon, the crowd of nationalist activists and saffron-robed monks twirled miniature national flags and toted banners denying accusations of ethnic cleansing being levelled at The Hague.

“We gather today [Tuesday] for the dignity of our country, the truth for our country and for justice for our country,” ultra-nationalist activist Win Ko Ko Latt told AFP before taking the stage.

“Myanmar is a land where loving kindness flourishes. There is no such thing as genocide.”

Myanmar's leaders insist the Rohingya are descendants of immigrants from Bangladesh, and that their crackdown targeted a militant uprising.

Executions, rape and torture by the army and Buddhist militias forced an exodus of more than one million

Rohingya, who now live across the border in Bangladesh, in the world's largest refugee settlement.

The ICJ hearings against Myanmar began on January 12 and are due to conclude tomorrow, but a ruling could take months or even years.

While the UN court has no means of enforcing its decisions, a guilty verdict would heap more pressure on Myanmar, already considered a pariah state by many nations after the military snatched power in a 2021 coup.

Some countries, including the United States, already deem the military crackdown a genocide, and junta chief Min Aung Hlaing has been sanctioned over the armed forces' actions.

Other genocide cases are also open at the International Criminal Court and in Argentina under the principle of universal jurisdiction.

While Myanmar has a long history of military rule, the campaign began in a democratic interlude when the country was led by Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate who in 2019 appeared at The Hague to defend her country's generals against genocide allegations.

That defence did not spare Suu Kyi, 80, from military detention, where she has languished since the military coup five years ago. — AFP

Vietnam's VinFast partners with AI firm on 'robo-car' system

HANOI — Vietnamese electric car maker VinFast said yesterday it would partner with Israeli AI firm Autobrains to upgrade its autonomous driving technology and launch a lower-cost “robo-car” system.

The two companies are developing a “new autonomous vehicle architecture capable of transforming virtually any car into a self-driving ‘robo-car’”, VinFast said in a statement.

The system will rely mainly on cameras, rather than more expensive technologies such as LiDAR sensors and radar arrays.

VinFast and Autobrains will also work to gradually integrate more advanced autonomous capabilities into VinFast's whole product line, it said, including its VF 8 and VF 9 sport utility models.

Autobrains did not immediately reply to AFP's request for comment.

VinFast is part of the Vingroup conglomerate owned by Vietnam's richest man Pham Nhat Vuong and is the country's first homegrown EV maker.

It listed on the Nasdaq in 2023 as part of a global expansion bid to compete with EV giants such as Tesla and is trying to crack markets in Asia, the Middle East, Europe, the United States and Canada.

VinFast's e-scooters, e-cars and e-buses are ubiquitous in the country of 100 million people.

While truly driverless cars remain some way off, progress in the sector has been rapid, with major US players Tesla and Waymo testing robotaxi services, as are their Chinese rivals.

Last month, Japan's Nissan said it would integrate AI-powered systems made by autonomous driving firm Wayve into vehicles. — AFP

Philippines grounds ferry operator's fleet after deadly sinking

MANILA — The Philippines said it had grounded the passenger fleet of a local shipping line yesterday pending an investigation, as rescuers scoured the ocean for survivors of a ferry sinking that killed at least 18 people.

The MV Trisha Kerstin 3 was carrying 344 passengers and crew when it went down off southwestern Mindanao in the early hours of Monday. Most people were rescued in the immediate aftermath.

The 10 passengers still unaccounted for include the ferry's captain, eight crew members and a safety marshall, Philippine Coast Guard Commandant Ronnie Gavan said at a press briefing yesterday.

The triple-decker vessel sank on nearly the same route where 31 people died in 2023 after a fire aboard the Lady Mary Joy 3 ferry. Both ships were owned by locally based Aleson Shipping Lines.

Transportation secretary Giovanni Lopez said yesterday that the company's passenger fleet would be kept at port pending an investigation.

“As of now, the entire passenger fleet of Aleson Shipping Company (is) grounded,” he said, adding that the country's maritime regulator and coast guard would conduct a safety audit over the next 10 days.

“The president has ordered a full-blown investigation, so all the

angles will be looked at to determine what really happened,” he said.

“If it turns out the shipowners were deficient, they will expect the full force of the law,” Lopez told reporters.

He added that there had been 32 recorded safety “incidents” at sea involving the company but offered no specifics.

The coast guard's Gavan said that ongoing search-and-rescue efforts remained the immediate priority.

“The most important thing at this

point is lives,” he said, adding that 16 technical divers and a remotely operated vehicle were being flown in from Manila to assist in the coming investigation.

A coast guard press aide told AFP that the ship was believed to be sitting at a depth of about 76 metres.

An Aleson Shipping Lines employee who answered the phone said the company would release a statement addressing the situation within the day. — AFP

Trump says hiking tariffs on South Korean

Beiyi Seow and Kang Jin-kyu

WASHINGTON - US President Donald Trump said yesterday that he would raise tariffs on South Korean goods including autos, lumber and pharmaceuticals, accusing the country of not living up to an earlier trade pact struck with Washington.

The increase would bring tariff levels from 15 percent to 25 percent.

"South Korea's Legislature is not living up to its Deal with the United States," Trump wrote on his Truth Social platform.

He added that he was increasing tariff rates "because the Korean Legislature hasn't enacted our Historic Trade Agreement, which is their prerogative."

South Korea's presidential office said it had not been informed about the tariff hike plans in advance.

It said Trade Minister Kim Jung-kwan, currently in Canada, would head to Washington for talks on the issue with US Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick.

Trump's apparent about-face comes months after Washington and Seoul struck a trade and security deal, capping a period of tense negotiations.

The agreement was finalized after Trump met his South Korean counterpart Lee Jae Myung in October, and included investment promises by South Korea alongside tariff cuts by the United States.

Since then it remained in something of a legal limbo in South Korea.

Seoul's presidential office insisted in November the deal does not require parliamentary approval, arguing it represents a memorandum of understanding rather than a binding legal document.

Asked whether the tariff deal had been submitted to parliament for approval, a senior official told AFP yesterday they were looking into it but did not elaborate.

Under the pact, Washington would maintain levies of up to 15 percent on South Korean goods including vehicles, car parts and pharmaceuticals.

Crucially, the deal's terms brought US tariffs on South Korean cars down from a 25 percent level.

Trump's latest threat, if enacted, would reverse that.

Export pain

The auto industry accounts for 27 percent of South Korea's exports to the United States, which takes in nearly half of the country's car exports.

A reversal to a higher tariff level could also put South Korean exports in a less advantageous position compared with economies like Japan and the European Union, which have both struck deals for a 15 percent US tariff.

The Trump administration has yet to issue formal notices to enact the changes.

The US president's threat targeting South Korea is his latest against key trading partners in recent days.

— AFP



A protester wears a mask of US President Donald Trump during a rally condemning Trump's plans to raise tariffs on South Korea in front of the US embassy in Seoul yesterday.

— AFP

Japan's election campaign kicks off: 5 things to know

Julien Girault / Hiroshi Hiyama

TOKYO - Official campaigning began in Japan yesterday ahead of a snap election on February 8.

Here are five key issues in a high-stakes vote where Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi has laid her political future on the line.

Race to the polls

Candidates' posters are up, vans topped with loudspeakers are cruising the streets, and Takaichi held her first rally yesterday in central Tokyo, where dozens of people gathered to listen to her speak.

The lower house of parliament was officially dissolved on Friday, 16 days before the vote -- the shortest window between the two in the postwar era.

Yet the brevity of this pre-election period "will likely not have much of an effect", said Michael Cucek, assistant professor of Asian Studies at Temple University's Japan Campus.

"There is no need for time to introduce or explain anything: the parties are offering strikingly similar policy programmes," he told AFP, adding that the weather would likely have more impact on voter turnout, with severe snowstorms hitting the north.

Takaichi's slipping popularity

Appointed in October as Japan's first woman prime minister, hardline nationalist Takaichi is banking on strong poll numbers to boost her unpopular Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which holds only a slim majority in the powerful lower house.

Takaichi has staked her political future on the vote, saying she will resign immediately if her coalition fails to win a majority.

Her government's once sky-high popularity, while still solid, has started to slip: its approval rating fell from 75 percent in December to 67 percent, according to a survey by the Nikkei newspaper.

Voters are raising questions over a recent tax-cut pledge to counter inflation and how it would be financed, while many are also frustrated by the snap election, which has slowed parliamentary debate on the 2026-2027 budget.



Japan's Prime Minister and President of the Liberal Democratic Party Sanae Takaichi delivers her first campaign speech for the House of Representatives election in Tokyo yesterday.

— AFP

Ryutaro Kono, chief economist at BNP Paribas said that "the surveys... suggest that the prime minister's popularity does not necessarily translate into a significant increase in votes for the Liberal Democratic Party."

"Delaying the passage of the budget to proceed with the general election likely caused a significant number of supporters to leave (Takaichi)."

Rivals unite

Facing the LDP — a powerful party that has governed Japan almost continuously since 1955 — and its coalition partner, the Japan Innovation Party (JIP), opposition forces have vowed to fight.

The Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) and the small Buddhist Komeito party — a former LDP coalition partner — are joining forces under a "Centrist Reform Alliance".

Analysts believe the election could be tight depending on the success of the new alliance, but the opposition's chances of victory remain slim.

"There are no significant policy differences among the parties. This election is shaping up as a referendum on Takaichi," Hideo Kumano, an economist at the Dai-ichi Life Research Institute, told AFP.

Inflation looms large

Japan has grappled with a surge in living costs in recent years, and public anger over inflation played a major role in the downfall of Shigeru

Ishiba, Takaichi's predecessor.

Seeking to ease the pain, Takaichi unveiled in November a stimulus package worth US\$135 billion, and if elected, has pledged to waive the consumption tax on food for two years, joining opposition promises to cut various taxes.

This risks further inflating the country's already colossal debt, which rattled bond markets and revived memories of the short-lived British leader Liz Truss, who resigned after alarming investors.

According to the Nikkei poll published Monday, 56 percent of Japanese believe the promised tax exemption would not be effective against inflation.

Takaichi defended the measure on Monday, saying she was paying "considerable attention to fiscal sustainability".

Foreigners, diplomacy

Another voter concern is the role of foreigners in Japan, although immigration levels in Japan remain low compared with other rich economies.

Sanseito, a populist anti-immigration party, made a notable breakthrough in mid-2025 upper house elections.

Sanae Takaichi is promising a clampdown.

On Friday, a cabinet meeting proposed tougher action against foreigners staying illegally and stricter controls on property buyers, although it pledged support for those who have the right to stay.

— AFP

North Korea fires ballistic missiles towards Sea of Japan

Claire Lee

SEOUL — North Korea fired at least two ballistic missiles towards the Sea of Japan yesterday, Tokyo and Seoul said, a day after a visiting US official hailed Washington's "model ally" in the South.

Pyongyang has significantly increased missile testing in recent years, aimed according to analysts at improving precision strike capabilities, challenging Washington as well as Seoul, and testing weapons before exporting them to key ally Russia.

The Japanese coast guard, citing the defence ministry, said it had detected two ballistic missiles fired towards the Sea of Japan.

Japanese news agency Jiji Press reported the two missiles had landed outside of the country's Exclusive Economic Zone, citing defence ministry sources.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff also said it had detected several ballistic missiles fired by the North towards what Seoul calls the East Sea.

The test is Pyongyang's second of the month, following a salvo of missiles fired hours before South Korea's leader headed to China for a summit.

It comes a day after a high-level visit to Seoul by the Pentagon's number three official Elbridge Colby, who hailed South Korea as a "model ally".

Longstanding treaty allies, ties between the United States and South Korea were forged in the bloodshed of the Korean War.

Washington still stations 28,500 troops in South Korea as a deterrent against the nuclear-armed North.

Pyongyang routinely denounces Washington and Seoul's joint military drills as rehearsals for invasion.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un last month bashed Seoul's push to develop its own nuclear-powered submarines with the United States, calling it a "threat" that "must be countered".

'Heighten tensions'

Trump met North Korea's Kim

three times during his first term, in efforts to reach a denuclearisation deal.

But since a summit in Hanoi fell through over differences about what Pyongyang would get in return for giving up its nuclear weapons, no progress has been made between the two countries.

Trump had expressed hopes for a meeting with Kim ahead of a regional summit in South Korea in October, but these went unanswered by the North Korean leader.

Pyongyang meanwhile has dispatched thousands of troops to fight for Russia, according to South Korean and Western intelligence agencies, as Moscow presses ahead with its nearly

four-year invasion of Ukraine.

North Korea is also set to hold a landmark congress of its ruling party in the coming weeks, its first in five years.

Ahead of that conclave, Kim ordered the "expansion" and modernisation of the country's missile production.

Yang Moo-jin, chair professor at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul, told AFP that "with the party congress approaching, the latest launch appears intended to heighten tensions to reinforce internal discipline and consolidate regime unity."

He added that the timing of the launch "may also be a response to Colby's visit" to the peninsula. — AFP

French lawmakers pass bill banning social media for under-15s

Lucie Aubourg

PARIS – French lawmakers have passed a bill that would ban social media use by under-15s, a move championed by President Emmanuel Macron as a way to protect children from excessive screen time.

The lower house, the National Assembly, adopted the text by a vote of 130 to 21 in a lengthy overnight session from Monday to yesterday.

It will now go to the Senate, France's upper house, ahead of becoming law.

Macron, on X, hailed the vote as a "major step" to protect French children and teenagers.

The legislation, which also provides for a ban on mobile phones in high schools, would make France the second country to take such a step following Australia's ban for under-16s in December.

As social media has grown, so has concern that too much screen time and addictive algorithms are harming child development and contributing to mental health problems.

"The emotions of our children and teenagers are not for sale or to be manipulated, either by American platforms or Chinese algorithms," Macron said in a video broadcast on Saturday.

Authorities want the measures to be enforced from the start of the 2026 school year, in September, for new accounts.

Former prime minister Gabriel Attal, who leads Macron's Renaissance party in the lower

house, said he hoped the Senate would pass the bill by mid-February so that the ban could come into force on September 1.

He added that "social media platforms will then have until December 31 to deactivate existing accounts" that do not comply with the age limit.

While backing France's right to impose such a ban, the European Commission yesterday said that any enforcement would lie with the EU, provided the bill conforms to the bloc's laws.

Commission spokesperson Thomas Regnier told reporters it would ultimately be up to the EU to ensure that platforms implement adequate age-verification tools to help any ban become a reality.

'Destiny of our country'

In addition to combatting the impact of screens and social media on the mental health of young adolescents, Attal stressed that the measure would counter "a number of powers that, through social media platforms, want to colonise minds".

"France can be a pioneer in Europe in a month: we can change the lives of our young people and our families, and perhaps also change the destiny of our country in terms of independence," he said.

France's public health watchdog ANSES said this month that social media such as TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram had several detrimental effects on adolescents, particularly girls, though it was not the sole reason

for their declining mental health.

The risks listed include cyberbullying and exposure to violent content.

The legislation stipulates that "access to an online social networking service provided by an online platform is prohibited for minors under the age of 15".

The draft bill excludes online encyclopedias and educational platforms.

An effective age verification system would have to come into force for the ban to become reality. Work on such a system is underway at the European level.

An MP in the hard-left France Unbowed party, Arnaud Saint-Martin, criticised the ban as "a form of digital paternalism" and an "overly simplistic" response to the negative impacts of technology.

On Monday, nine child protection associations urged lawmakers to "hold platforms accountable", not "ban" children from social media.

Macron, though, has publicly backed the ban, along with prohibiting pupils having mobile phones in high schools.

In 2018, France banned children from using mobile phones in colleges, the schools attended between the ages of 11 and 15.

Former prime minister Elisabeth Borne expressed reservations about the measure on Monday.

"It's more complicated than that," she told broadcaster France 2. "We first need to make sure that the ban is properly enforced in middle schools." – AFP



Britain's Catherine, Princess of Wales, reacts during a guided walk in the Peak District with members of the Mind Over Mountains charity, near Curbar, northern England yesterday.

– AFP

Firefighters order evacuation as heatwave bakes Australia

SYDNEY – Firefighters told people to flee an out-of-control bushfire in southeast Australia yesterday as a heatwave baked much of the country.

Temperatures hit a record high in the eastern state of Victoria, preliminary data showed.

"Conditions are heating up across the state, and we're seeing those 40 degree temperatures roll in," said Country Fire Authority chief officer Jason Heffernan.

"Firefighters on the ground will now start to really notice how hot it is getting, and they'll really start to notice the picking up of the winds," he told public broadcaster ABC.

Authorities issued an immediate emergency evacuation warning for hundreds of people in four country towns at risk from the fire in the Otways region southwest of Melbourne.

Residents in another three rural areas nearby were urged to leave

as well, with the warning: "Due to extreme weather today, the fire is predicted to rapidly expand and pose a threat to communities."

A total fire ban was imposed on the state, where a total of six major bushfires were burning.

The temperature in the towns of Walpeup and Hopetoun, northwestern Victoria, peaked at 48.9C, according to the Bureau of Meteorology's website.

The temperature nudged past the state's record of 48.8C, but officials said it would need to be verified later to become official.

The heatwave forced the Australian Open to close the roof over its centre court to protect players and fans, with the temperature in Melbourne forecast to hit 45C.

Hot air has settled across swathes of Victoria, South Australia, and New South Wales. – AFP

US monster storm kills 30

Maggy Donaldson and Paul Nolz

NEW YORK – More than half a million Americans woke up without power yesterday, as freezing temperatures gripped swathes of the country in a monster storm that has killed at least 30 people.

A frigid, life-threatening Arctic air mass could delay recovery as municipalities from New Mexico to Maine tried to dig out following the storm, which dropped a vicious cocktail of heavy snow and wind,

along with freezing rain and sleet.

Forecasters warned that much of the northern half of the country will see temperatures that are "continuously below freezing through February 1," the National Weather Service said in an X post.

It added that "record low temperatures" hit southern states, which are unaccustomed to intense winter weather.

While skies began clearing in parts of the country, relentless snowfall in the northeast meant

parts of Connecticut saw over 22 inches (56 cm) of snow, with more than 16 inches (40.6 cm) recorded in Boston, Massachusetts.

Deadly plane crash

The storm was linked to at least 30 deaths, according to a compilation of state government and local media reports, with causes including hypothermia as well as accidents related to traffic, sledding, ATVs and snowplows.

Seven people were killed when the small plane they were traveling in crashed while taking off in a snowstorm in Bangor, Maine, the US Federal Aviation Administration said.

One man in New Jersey was found in the snow unresponsive with a shovel in his hand.

In New York City, eight more people were found dead amid plummeting temperatures, and an investigation to determine the causes was underway. It was not known if all of these fatalities were storm-related.

Electricity began blinking back on across the south but as of yesterday morning more than 540,000 customers remained without it, according to the tracking

site Poweroutage.com.

Tennessee, Texas, Mississippi and Louisiana in the south were especially impacted.

More than 9,000 flights were disrupted, as the storm paralyzed transportation across the country.

"We don't know if we are going to make it or not. We've been here since Sunday," Alan Vazquez told AFP at Dallas-Fort Worth airport in Texas.

Nashville Mayor Freddie O'Connell told journalists that trees were continuing to fall under the weight of encrusted ice across the Tennessee capital city, sometimes knocking out power that had already been restored.

Nashville and other municipalities across the country were establishing emergency warming shelters.

NWS meteorologist Allison Santorelli told AFP this storm recovery was particularly arduous because so many states were impacted – meaning northern states with more winter supplies were unable to share their resources with less-prepared southern regions.

"A lot of those locations don't have the means or the resources to clean up after these events," she

said. "We're particularly concerned about the folks in those areas that are without power right now."

Polar vortex

The snowfall and biting icy pellets that pummeled cities left impassable roads along with canceled buses, trains and flights – thousands of departures and arrivals were scrapped over the weekend.

The storm system was the result of a stretched polar vortex, an Arctic region of cold, low-pressure air that normally forms a relatively compact, circular system but sometimes morphs into a more oval shape, sending cold air pouring across North America.

Scientists say the increasing frequency of such disruptions may be linked to climate change, though the debate is not settled and natural variability plays a role.

Dave Radell, a NWS meteorologist based in New York, told AFP that the character of this storm's snow was "very dry" and "fluffy," meaning the wind could lash it around with ease, impeding roadway-clearing efforts and visibility.

"That makes it even more challenging," he said. – AFP



People go sledding near the Washington Monument on the National Mall in Washington, DC, yesterday.

– AFP

'Doomsday Clock' moves closer to midnight, a year into Trump term

Shaun Tandon

WASHINGTON – The “Doomsday Clock” representing how near humanity is to catastrophe yesterday moved closer than ever to midnight as concerns mount on nuclear weapons, climate change and disinformation.

The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, which set up the metaphorical clock at the start of the Cold War, moved its time to 85 seconds to midnight – four seconds closer than a year ago.

The announcement comes a year into President Donald Trump's second term, in which he has shattered norms – ordering unilateral attacks abroad, deploying force at home in defiance of local authorities and withdrawing from a slew of international organizations.

Russia, China, the United States and other major countries have “become increasingly aggressive, adversarial and nationalistic,” said a statement announcing the clock shift, determined after consultations with a board that includes eight Nobel laureates.

“Hard-won global understandings are collapsing, accelerating a winner-takes-all great power competition and undermining the international cooperation critical to reducing the risks of nuclear war, climate change, the misuse of biotechnology, the potential threat of artificial intelligence and other apocalyptic dangers.”

The Doomsday Clock board warned of heightened risks of a nuclear arms race, with the New START nuclear arms reduction treaty between the United States and Russia set to expire next week.

“For the first time in over half a century, there will be nothing preventing a runaway nuclear arms race,” Daniel Holz, a University of Chicago physicist who chairs the Bulletin's Science and Security Board, told a virtual news conference.

Trump has threatened to resume nuclear testing and is pushing a costly “Golden Dome” missile defense system that would further militarize space.

Minnesota approach spells conflict

The board members also voiced

alarm over Trump's crackdown in Minnesota, where he has deployed a phalanx of masked, armed anti-immigration agents who have aggressively repressed protesters and shot dead two people.

“History has shown that when governments become unaccountable to their own citizens, conflict and misery follow,” Holz said.

The board also noted record emission levels of carbon dioxide, the key driver of the planet's warming temperatures, as Trump sharply reverses US policy on fighting climate change and a number of other countries have backtracked in turn.

Underpinning the threats, board members warned of a dangerous fracturing of global trust.

“We are living through an information Armageddon – the crisis beneath all crises – driven by extractive and predatory technology that spreads lies faster than facts and profits from our division,” said Maria Ressa, the Filipina investigative journalist and Nobel Peace Prize winner who faced intense pressure from iron-fisted former Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte, now awaiting trial at the International Criminal Court.

Ressa pointed to Trump's use of force in Minnesota and threats to seize Greenland as examples of losing “the battle for information integrity” with memes turning into reality.

“The men who control the platforms that shape what billions believe have merged with the men who control governments and militaries,” she said.

The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, founded by Albert Einstein, Robert Oppenheimer and other nuclear scientists at the University of Chicago, initially placed the clock at seven minutes to midnight in 1947.

It was moved closer last year but by only one second, amid guarded hopes on newly reinaugurated Trump's promises to pursue peace and cooperation.

“The problem is that rhetoric has not matched actions at all,” said Alexandra Bell, president and CEO of the Bulletin.

– AFP

Gazans long for reopening of 'lifeline' Rafah crossing

GAZA CITY – With Gaza's vital Rafah border crossing expected to soon reopen, residents of the war-shattered territory are hoping to reunite with family members, or are looking to leave themselves.

The Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt is the Palestinian territory's only gateway to the outside world that does not lead to Israel and is a key entry point for both people and goods.

It has been closed since Israeli forces took control of it in May 2024, except for a limited reopening in early 2025, and other bids to reopen failed to materialise.

Following a US-brokered ceasefire that took effect in October, Rafah is expected to reopen for pedestrians, after visiting US envoys reportedly pressed Israeli officials to reopen the crossing.

“Opening the Rafah crossing means opening the door to life for me. I haven't seen my wife and children for two years since they left at the beginning of the war and I was prevented from travelling,” said 48-year-old Mahmud al-Natour, who hails from Gaza City.

“My children are growing up far away from me, and the years are passing by as if we are cut off from the world and life itself,” he told AFP.

Randa Samih, 48, also called the crossing “the lifeline of Gaza,” but is worried about whether she would be able to leave.

She had applied for an exit permit to get treatment for her injured back, which she fears might not be serious enough to be allowed out.

“There are tens of thousands of injuries in Gaza, most of them more serious than mine,” she said.

“We'll die or our health will decline before we get to travel.”

'Limited reopening'

Gaza, a tiny territory surrounded by Israel, Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea, has been under Israeli blockade even before Hamas's attack sparked the war.

Palestinian militants took 251 people hostage on October 7, 2023, in an attack that killed 1,221 others, most of them civilians.

Israel's retaliatory offensive has killed at least 71,662 Palestinians, according to figures from the



Fuel trucks enter through the Egyptian side of the Rafah border crossing with the Gaza Strip in northeastern Egypt yesterday, as the vital crossing to the Palestinian territory reopens. – AFP

health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza that the United Nations considers reliable. The ministry does not say how many of the dead were fighters, though its data shows that more than half were women and children.

Ali Shaath heads the National Committee for the Administration of Gaza (NCAG), created as part of the ceasefire agreement. He announced last week that Rafah would reopen in both directions.

Israel said it would only allow pedestrians to travel through the crossing as part of its “limited reopening” once it had recovered the remains of the last hostage, Ran Gvili.

His remains were brought back to Israel later on Monday.

A Palestinian official told AFP on condition of anonymity that “estimates indicate that the Rafah crossing could be opened in both directions by the end of this week or early next week”.

A member of the NCAG told AFP that the technocratic committee would be responsible for sending lists of travellers' names to the Israeli authorities for approval.

Outward travel will initially be limited to patients, the injured, students with university admission and visas, and holders of Egyptian citizenship or other nationalities and residency permits, the source said.

'Burning with anticipation'

Gharam al-Jamla, a displaced Palestinian living in a tent in

southern Gaza, told AFP she counted on the crossing's opening for her future.

“My dreams lie beyond the Rafah crossing. I applied for several scholarships to study journalism in English at universities in Turkey. I received initial acceptance from two universities there,” the 18-year-old said.

She added she would then want to return to Gaza “to be one of its voices to convey the truth to the world.”

Gaza's civil defence agency spokesman, Mahmud Bassal, appealed for the full reopening of Rafah to allow the entry of unlimited aid and equipment for reconstruction.

“There are thousands of bodies under the rubble, including children, women and people with disabilities, which have not been recovered since the beginning of the war,” he said.

The civil defence is a rescue force operating under Hamas authority.

Mohammed Khaled, 18, said he wanted to move on from the war.

“I'm burning with anticipation,” he told AFP.

“I haven't seen my mother and sisters for two years. My mother travelled for medical treatment, and they only allowed my sisters to accompany her.”

Khaled said he also hoped to be able to travel to have surgery for a shrapnel injury sustained during the war.

– AFP



Honduras' President Nasry Asfura (right) and his wife Lisette del Cid gesture from a stage following the inauguration ceremony at the Honduran Congress, in Tegucigalpa, yesterday. Asfura, a conservative businessman elected with the support of US President Donald Trump, took office as president of Honduras with an agenda linked to the United States to address the economic and security challenges facing the most impoverished and violent country in Central America. – AFP

Syria must avoid 'security vacuum' that could aid IS: European, US statement

PARIS – France, in a joint statement with the US and European allies, yesterday called on Syria's government and Kurdish forces to “avoid any security vacuum” that could benefit the Islamic State (IS) group.

“We reiterate the need to maintain and focus collective efforts on the fight against ISIS,” said the statement issued after a meeting between French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel

Barrot, Britain's Yvette Cooper, Germany's deputy foreign minister Serap Guler and US special envoy Tom Barrack in Paris.

“We call upon all parties to avoid any security vacuum in and around ISIS detention centers,” it said.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, who once controlled swathes of territory in the country's north and east, have withdrawn in the face of military pressure, as Syria's new Islamist

authorities seek to extend control across the country.

This has prompted uncertainty around the thousands of suspected jihadists and their families held in prisons long secured by Kurdish-led forces in the northeast since IS's defeat in 2019.

“To address these concerns, we agreed to promptly convene a meeting of the International Coalition against ISIS,” yesterday's statement said. – AFP

China vows ‘support’ for Cuba after US threats

BEIJING – China promised yesterday to provide Cuba with “support and assistance” in the face of repeated threats from the United State, which weeks ago removed Havana’s ally in Venezuela Nicolás Maduro.

Beijing and Havana are longtime socialist allies, and Chinese authorities have consistently opposed the economic blockade imposed on the island for decades by the United States.

Tensions have intensified this month as US President Donald Trump warned that Cuba “is ready to fall”.

Trump has told Havana to

“make a deal” or pay a price similar to Venezuela, whose former leader Maduro was captured in a US bombing raid on January 3 that killed dozens of people.

“China expresses its deep concern and opposition to the United States’ actions” on Cuba, foreign ministry spokesman Guo Jiakun said yesterday at a regular press conference.

“We urge the United States... to stop undermining regional peace and stability,” said Guo, also calling on Washington to “immediately lift the blockade and sanctions against Cuba”.

“China will continue to provide Cuba with as much support and assistance as possible,” he said.

Politico reported last week that the Trump administration is considering a naval blockade to halt all imports of oil into Cuba.

The report cited a person familiar with the plan as saying: “Energy is the chokehold to kill the regime.”

Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel on Saturday supervised military exercises, describing them as a deterrent against potential aggression from the United States.

– AFP



This handout picture released by the Brazilian Presidency shows Brazil’s President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (left) receiving a replica of the World Cup trophy from FIFA President Gianni Infantino during a meeting at the Planalto Palace in Brasília on Monday.

– AFP

‘Come more often!’ Mexican president urges K-pop stars BTS

MEXICO CITY – Around the world, hundreds of thousands of fans of K-pop megastars BTS are nursing disappointment after failing to secure a ticket for their highly-anticipated comeback tour.

But only in one country – Mexico – has the dearth of tickets become a matter for the highest office in the land.

BTS will perform three dates in Mexico City in May.

The tickets, which went on sale last weekend, sold out in minutes, demonstrating the growing fervour among Mexicans for all aspects of South Korean culture, from television series to cuisine, to of course K-pop.

The government has sought to cash in on the act.

When it was announced that BTS would perform in Mexico, Economy Secretary Marcelo Ebrard, a longtime fan, posted a video on TikTok in which he is seen greeting Jin, a member of the band.

Now, President Claudia Sheinbaum has gotten involved.

Addressing reporters on Monday, she declared that “nearly a million young people” had vied for one of the coveted 150,000 tickets to BTS’s Mexican gigs.

So moved was she by the disappointment of the unlucky many, she said she wrote to South Korea’s President Lee Jae Myung

to ask that he “bring the acclaimed K-pop artists more often” to her country.

Sheinbaum said she had also asked Ocesa, the promoter of the shows in Mexico, about the possibility of organising more dates, but received a negative answer.

BTS have not toured or released music since 2022 as they underwent the national military service required of all South Korean men under age 30.

The band’s label announced on New Year’s Day they would release a new album in March before heading on a mega-tour the following month that will take in 34 cities.

– AFP

Portugal makes record cocaine haul off Azores

LISBON – Portuguese authorities have seized a record haul of cocaine from a semi-submersible craft intercepted off the Azores archipelago.

The nearly nine tonnes of the drug are “the biggest seizure of cocaine ever in Portugal”, a police spokeswoman said on Monday.

Officers said they intercepted the craft “in recent days” some 230 nautical miles (426 kilometres) off

the islands in the Atlantic Ocean.

They were assisted by the navy and air force, as well as the UK and US authorities, in difficult weather conditions.

The submersible eventually sank with 35 of the 300 packages of drugs it was carrying, the police said.

It originated in Latin America and had three Colombians and a Venezuelan on board, it added.

– AFP

Lightning strike injures 89 at rally for Bolsonaro

BRASÍLIA – Lightning struck near a rally of supporters of Brazil’s former far-right president Jair Bolsonaro in Brasília on Sunday, injuring 89 people, according to the fire department.

Thousands gathered in the rain in the Brazilian capital to support Bolsonaro, who was sentenced to 27 years in prison last year for leading a failed coup d’état following his narrow re-election loss.

Footage shared online shows crowds with colourful umbrellas and plastic ponchos stunned by a sudden flash of light and rumbling sound.

The fire department told AFP they treated 89 people at the scene, including 47 who were taken to hospital.

Eleven people “required major medical care,” the fire department added.

The gathering was organised by Brazilian lawmaker Nikolas Ferreira to demand “amnesty” for Bolsonaro.

The former head of state is incarcerated in the Papuda penitentiary complex in Brasília.

He suffers from serious health complications related to a 2018 stabbing on the campaign trail and spent a week in hospital in December following surgery for a groin hernia and treatment for recurring hiccups.

Earlier this month he underwent tests after a fall in prison, but no serious injuries were found.

– AFP



A masked reveller takes part in the traditional carnival of Ituren, a village in the northern Spanish province of Navarre, on Monday. Locals from the neighbouring villages of Ituren and Zubietta dress up and participate in a pilgrimage through both villages in this annual three-day festival, revolving mainly around agriculture and sheep herding.

– AFP

Spain expels Nicaraguan ambassador in tit-for-tat move

MADRID – Spain has expelled Nicaragua’s ambassador to Madrid in a tit-for-tat move against the government in Managua, foreign ministry sources said on Monday, in another blow to already tense relations.

Spain decided to expel the Central American country’s envoy and “another accredited diplomat” on Sunday “in strict reciprocity for the unjust expulsion of Spain’s ambassador and deputy chief of mission in Nicaragua”, the sources said.

Spanish media said the

Nicaraguan authorities informed Madrid of their decision on Sunday without providing any reason. The ambassador, Sergi Farre, had only been in his post for several weeks.

Madrid refused to recognise the 2021 re-election for a fourth straight term of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega.

A firebrand Marxist in his youth, Ortega, 80, toppled a US-backed dictatorship in 1979 and then led the country for a decade. He returned to power in 2007 and

has governed ever since.

The United States has branded the government of Ortega and his wife and co-president, Rosario Murillo, a dictatorship, accusing it of seizing total power with a constitutional rewrite and crushing dissent.

Managua is under US and EU sanctions, while thousands of Nicaraguans have left the country.

Spain offered citizenship to hundreds of exiled Nicaraguan anti-government activists stripped of their nationality.

– Xinhua

State tribute to Spain’s train crash victims postponed

MADRID – A state tribute to the 45 victims of a high-speed train collision in Spain has been postponed at the families’ request to find a more suitable date, the prime minister’s office said.

The January 18 accident outside the southern village of Adamuz – one of Europe’s deadliest such disasters this century – plunged Spain into mourning and has raised doubts about rail safety in the country.

A national tribute had been planned for this Saturday, January 31 in the southern city of Huelva, the final destination of the train which suffered the most deaths.

“After speaking with a large majority of families of the victims of the

accident in Adamuz... a large number would find it impossible to attend the state tribute”, and many prefer a later date, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez’s office said on Sunday.

The ceremony would be postponed “to a new date in order to gather the largest possible number of relatives”, the office added, without specifying when it would be held.

The disaster struck when a train run by private firm Iryo derailed and crossed onto the adjacent track, smashing into an oncoming Huelva-bound service operated by state company Renfe.

A preliminary report released on Friday suggested the track was cracked before the catastrophe.

– AFP

Troubled Napoli staring at Champions League elimination against Chelsea

Terry Daley



MILAN — Napoli are on the brink of being eliminated from the Champions League as the troubled Italian club face Chelsea early morning tomorrow (Macau time) racked by a deep injury crisis and a faltering Serie A title defence.

Sat just inside the elimination zone on only eight points from seven matches after last week's miserable 1-1 draw at FC Copenhagen, Napoli must beat Chelsea to scrape a place in next month's play-offs.

That will be no easy task with the Blues, Antonio Conte's former club, needing a win to stay in the top eight and bag direct qualification for the last 16.

And Napoli come into the game still stinging from a 3-0 defeat at Juventus which left the Italian champions nine points behind current Serie A leaders Inter Milan.

Sunday's loss in Turin was a big slap in the face for Napoli and Juve icon Conte, who was full of praise for his players who have had to dig deep in the face of a host injuries.

"For us it (injuries) is something that we have to accept, it's a difficult situation which is not easy to manage. It's difficult for the staff and the players to continue with that rhythm," McTominay told reporters yesterday.

"But it's part of the game, you have to accept it, you have to turn up as often as you can for the ones that are ready and prepared to play. Tomorrow night the absolute maximum of our level of performance is going to be required."

Conte's bid to become the first Napoli coach to win back-to-back Serie A titles has been hampered by physical problems in his squad right from the start of the season.

It started with Romelu Lukaku suffering a hamstring injury in pre-season which kept him out of action until the 79th minute of Sunday's loss.

Napoli's 'emergency'

Lukaku replaced academy graduate Antonio Vergara who played in place of Italy international Matteo Politano, while new signing Giovane made his debut as a substitute, with Conte later saying he hadn't even seen him train.

Conte has also lost giant goalkeeper Vanja Milinkovic-Savic to a hamstring knock while winger David Neres flew to London for ankle surgery on Monday which will likely keep the Brazilian out until April.

Kevin De Bruyne has been out since October and won't be back until the Spring after surgery on his right hamstring, while another key midfielder in Andre-Frank Anguissa was supposed to be back on Sunday from another hamstring injury but was left out due to back problems.

"I challenge anyone to find me a team which has had all of these problems, because we're still only halfway through the season," Conte told reporters yesterday.

"We started with the idea that the emergency would finish, the problem is that the emergency hasn't finished, in fact it's got worse.

The boys are doing something incredible which is going unnoticed because of where we are in the league and results. I honestly believe that if we started the season a month ago saying that this was the squad for the season, you'd say 'you're going nowhere'.

"But we're still here, fighting and with our heads held high."

The only good news for Conte is the return of Lukaku who has replaced De Bruyne in Napoli's European squad, giving the Belgium striker the chance to get back at Chelsea where he failed so miserably four years ago.

Last season 11 points was enough to avoid elimination so a win will almost certainly get Napoli through and provide some relief to a creaking team. — AFP

Dortmund coach says Inter Milan improved under Chivu



BERLIN — Borussia Dortmund coach Niko Kovac said Inter Milan, who his team face in the Champions League on early morning tomorrow (Macau time), are a better side under Cristian Chivu than when they reached last season's final.

Kovac said Chivu's Inter, already five points clear in Serie A, had maintained the best elements of traditional Italian football while posing a modern threat.

Inter impressed in their run to the final last year under Simone Inzaghi but were dismantled by Paris Saint-Germain, losing 5-0 in Munich.

"In the past they've been dominant (in possession), but now they've adapted and added a very quick transition game. We need to be aware of this," said Kovac.

"Usually you say the Italians are playing it into the feet, they're

technical but a little bit slower — but at the moment this is a very dynamic and modern Inter."

Dortmund have 11 points in the Champions League, one fewer than the Serie A leaders, heading into their final league-phase game.

Both sides could potentially qualify for the last 16 directly and avoid the knockouts with victory, although Dortmund would need several other results to go their way.

Dortmund were Champions League runners-up two years ago, while Inter also made the final in 2023 before losing to Manchester City.

"You can see that they've been together for a few years and everyone knows what their teammate is doing," Kovac said.

Dortmund's Niklas Suele and Marcel Sabitzer are injured, while Chelsea loanee Aaron Anselmino was on Monday recalled by his parent club. — AFP

Guardiola blames Man City team for Haaland struggles



MANCHESTER — Manchester City's players must step up to help Erling Haaland end his goal drought, manager Pep Guardiola said on the eve of his team's crucial Champions League match against Galatasaray.

The Norwegian last scored against Brighton from the penalty spot in early January but has not found the net from open play since before Christmas.

Guardiola recently said his star forward, who remains top of the Premier League goalscoring charts with 20 goals despite his lean spell, was "exhausted".

He left the 25-year-old out of his starting line-up for Saturday's 2-0 win against bottom club Wolves, explaining the decision was to "clean his mind, his body".

Guardiola, speaking at his pre-match press conference yesterday, said his team needed to "play better" to help Haaland.

"Create more chances, he

will score," he said. "Never underestimate the strikers, the goalscorers, because always they will make you silent."

"We want him to score for the rest of his life, that's for sure."

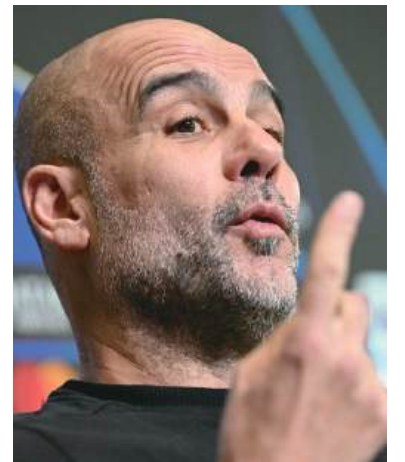
The 2023 European champions go into tomorrow's (Macau time) game at the Etihad on the back of last week's shock 3-1 loss away to Bodo/Glimt.

That left them 11th in the league phase of the Champions League, among eight teams on 13 points.

Only the top eight teams go straight into the round of 16, with the sides finishing between ninth and 24th competing in a two-legged play-off next month.

"I prefer to have more (points) but it is what we deserve," said Guardiola, whose team are fighting for four trophies. "We need to focus and try to win our game then see what position we finish."

Rodri is suspended for tomorrow's match after his sending-off in Norway.



Manchester City's Spanish manager Pep Guardiola speaks during a press conference at the Etihad Campus training ground in Manchester, north-west England, yesterday. — AFP

New signings Marc Guehi and Antoine Semenyo are both ineligible to play in the Champions League until the knockout stages.

Ruben Dias, Josko Gvardiol, John Stones, Savinho and Oscar Bobb remain sidelined with injuries. — AFP

Everton's Barry strikes again to rescue draw against Leeds



LIVERPOOL — Everton striker Thierno Barry extended his hot streak with a late equaliser to rescue a 1-1 draw against lowly Leeds in the Premier League early tomorrow morning (Macau time).

David Moyes' side were booed off at half-time after James Justin put Leeds ahead at the Hill Dickinson Stadium.

But Barry eased Everton fans' frustration with a composed finish 14 minutes from full-time.

The 23-year-old has scored four goals in his last five league games after netting just once in his first 18 following his move from Villarreal last year.

"If you're a centre forward, you need to score goals and he hadn't at the start. He's getting better," Moyes said.

"He's training well and getting used to scoring goals. We need to create more chances and we're still trying to get our attacking players back."

"I'm really pleased with the reaction. I've got a really strong group who demand from each other."

Everton are in 10th place, while Leeds sit six points above the Premier League relegation zone.

Wins for West Ham and Nottingham Forest at the weekend had increased the pressure on Leeds to counter with a victory of their own as the relegation battle heats up.

With that in mind, blowing the lead was a missed opportunity for Daniel Farke's team, who have lost only one of their last 10 league matches.

"We are a bit disappointed because we weren't far away from winning it. We were very dominant in the first half," Farke said.



Leeds United's English defender #24 James Justin (left) chased by Everton's English midfielder #07 Dwight McNeil (right) during the English Premier League football match between Everton and Leeds United at Hill Dickinson Stadium in Liverpool, north west England on early morning yesterday (Macau time). — AFP

"It was an excellent away performance. Nothing is achieved yet, but we have to keep going and we have to stay humble."

Farke had described Dominic Calvert-Lewin as "one of the best English strikers around" ahead of the Leeds striker's first return to his former club.

Calvert-Lewin has defied his critics since joining Leeds in August, scoring eight goals in his last 10 league matches after netting just three times in the final season of an injury-plagued spell with Everton.

But Calvert-Lewin was unable to haunt Everton in his return to Merseyside.

Leeds went ahead with a well-crafted move in the 28th minute.

Anton Stach crossed towards Calvert-Lewin and James Tarkowski was unable to clear, allowing Justin time to pounce with a clinical finish from 10 yards.

Calvert-Lewin was inches away from doubling Leeds' advantage moments later when he prodded Jayden Bogle's cross against the post from close-range.

Fresh from winning the Africa Cup of Nations with Senegal, Iliman Ndiaye had a chance to hauled Everton level after the interval but Sebastiaan Bornauw made a superb last-ditch block.

Barry went close with an audacious flick that forced a brilliant save from Leeds keeper Karl Darlow.

It was a warning Leeds failed to heed as Barry hauled Everton level in the 76th minute.

Barry made a perfectly timed run to meet Idrissa Gueye's low cross, clipping a deft finish over Darlow from six yards.

Everton pushed for a winner and Gueye, another of Senegal's Africa Cup of Nations heroes, almost got it when he thundered a fierce strike against the bar. — AFP

Alcaraz rolls into maiden Melbourne semi-final and date with Zverev



Peter Stebbings

MELBOURNE — A supremely focused Carlos Alcaraz swept into the Australian Open semi-finals for the first time yesterday and a clash with Alexander Zverev to take a step closer to tennis history.

The Spanish world number one silenced a partisan Melbourne crowd in brushing aside outclassed home hope Alex de Minaur 7-5, 6-2, 6-1 at Rod Laver Arena.

The 22-year-old Alcaraz is yet to drop a set as he arrows in on a maiden Australian Open crown.

"I'm just really happy how I'm playing every match, each round my level is increasing," he said, in a warning to his rivals.

"Today [Tuesday] I felt really comfortable, playing great tennis that I am really proud of," added Alcaraz, who had never previously gone beyond the quarter-finals in Australia in four previous visits.

The Australian Open is the only Grand Slam that Alcaraz has not won.

Should he beat Zverev and then win Sunday's final, he would surpass compatriot and legend Rafael Nadal as the youngest man to win all four majors.

Nadal was 24 when he did it.

Alcaraz was delighted to see some of his hard work in the off-season come to fruition.

"I've been working on the concentration, the focus. Not having ups and downs in the matches has been one of my main goals," he said.

'Great battle'

Top seed Alcaraz started like a train against the Australian sixth seed, who has reached the last eight of all the Grand Slams — and has still never gone further.

In a topsy-turvy opening set, the six-time



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz celebrates victory over Australia's Alex De Minaur after their men's singles quarter-final match on day ten of the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne yesterday. — AFP

major champion raced into a 3-0 lead, only for De Minaur to rattle off three games in a row for 3-3, to roars of approval.

A pumped-up Alcaraz stopped the rot and forged a 5-3 lead, but then squandered the chance to close out the set and was broken.

They were at 5-5 when Alcaraz ramped up the intensity to win the next two games and take the set, De Minaur left kicking himself for failing to take his chances.

The 26-year-old Australian paid the price, Alcaraz punishing him to seize the second set in 44 minutes.

He took that momentum into the third set and stepped it up another notch.

He grabbed a 3-0 lead in less than 20 minutes on his way to a ruthless win, sealing it with his fifth ace.

German third seed Zverev sent down 24

aces in a 6-3, 6-7 (5/7), 6-1, 7-6 (7/3) victory over Learner Tien of the United States to book his last-four spot.

"I have seen him throughout the whole tournament and I know he is playing great, aggressive tennis," Alcaraz said of Zverev.

"I have to be ready, not just me but my whole team as well.

"We need to play tactically really well, it's going to be a great battle."

Alcaraz and Zverev have met 12 times previously, with each winning six matches.

Today, 10-time Melbourne champion Novak Djokovic faces Italy's fifth-seeded Lorenzo Musetti in the quarter-finals.

The winner will face either two-time defending champion Jannik Sinner or United States eighth seed Ben Shelton in the semi-finals. — AFP

Svitolina hopes Gauff upset brings 'a little light' to Ukraine



MELBOURNE — Elina Svitolina said she hopes her stunning upset of third seed Coco Gauff at the Australian Open yesterday will bring "a little light" to her fellow Ukrainians during a bitter winter under attack by Russia.

The 31-year-old upset the American Gauff 6-1, 6-2 in Melbourne to set up a semi-final against Belarusian world number one Aryna Sabalenka.

Like other Ukrainian players, Svitolina does not shake hands with opponents from Russia and Moscow's ally Belarus.

"For my country, it's great," she said of her sweeping victory over Gauff.

"I know that lots of people have been watching, especially the matches that I had before.

"It's of course very close to my heart to

see a lot of support from Ukrainians, and lots of people get to know tennis in Ukraine, which is great.

"Because right now it's very — one of the toughest winters for Ukrainian people without electricity and everything.

"So I feel like bring this light, a little light, just positive news to Ukrainian people, to my friends when they are watching my matches, it's a great feeling for me."

Temperatures in Ukraine are freezing with Russia targeting energy infrastructure throughout the nearly four-year war.

A decade older than Gauff, former world number three Svitolina was playing her 14th Grand Slam quarter-final.

She had managed to press on to the semis only three times before, and never in Australia.

"Very, very pleased with the tournament so far," said Svitolina, who is on a 10-match win streak after a title-winning run at Auckland this month.

Making the semi-finals will propel her back into the top 10.

"It's always been my dream to come back after maternity leave to make the top 10. Always been my goal," she said.

"It means the world to me."

Two-time Grand Slam champion Gauff's serve deserted her, broken four times in the first set and twice in the second to leave her title aspirations in tatters.

She won just 41 percent of her first service points, while throwing in 19 unforced errors.

Gauff suffered from serving issues all tournament and was broken immediately.

Svitolina, with husband Gael Monfils watching on, failed to capitalise and conceded her serve as well, but Gauff then sent down two double faults at crucial moments to be broken yet again.

Clearly flustered, she was broken for a third time, to love, as the Ukrainian raced to 5-1 with a fifth double fault of the match gifting Svitolina another break and the set in 29 minutes.

Gauff summoned a ball kid and asked for three racquets to be restrung, and left the court for a toilet break after the first set annihilation.

But it didn't help, broken for a fifth straight time to open set two.

She finally managed to hold on her sixth attempt, but there was no way back.

It is the first time Svitolina has reached the last four in Melbourne after quarter-final runs in 2018, 2019 and 2025. — AFP



Ukraine's Elina Svitolina celebrates after winning against USA's Coco Gauff during their women's singles quarter-final match on day ten of the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne yesterday. — AFP

Doncic magic sparks Lakers over Bulls, Celtics bounce back



LOS ANGELES — Luka Doncic produced a 46-point masterpiece as the Los Angeles Lakers snapped the Chicago Bulls' four-game winning streak with a 129-118 victory on the road yesterday.

Doncic rattled in eight three pointers on 15-of-25 shooting from the field and finished with seven rebounds and 11 assists to lead an impressive Lakers effort at the United Center.

LeBron James chipped in with 24 points, five rebounds and three assists, while Rui Hachimura delivered an eye-catching cameo off the bench with 23 points from 9-of-11 shooting.

The win was another encouraging result for the Lakers after a 116-110 defeat of the Dallas Mavericks on Saturday.

"We did a great job in the first half, kind of relaxed in the third quarter — we've got to work on the third quarters — but overall, a great game by everybody," Doncic said after a win that lifts the Lakers to 28-17 in the Western Conference.

Coby White led the scoring for Chicago with 23 points, while Ayo Dosunmu had 20 off the bench.

The Lakers now head to Ohio to face the Cleveland Cavaliers for the next stop on their road trip today.

The Cavaliers warmed up for that encounter with a 114-98 defeat of the Orlando Magic thanks to Donovan Mitchell's 45-point display. Evan Mobley backed Mitchell with 20 points while Paolo Banchero led the Orlando scoring with 37 points.

In the Eastern Conference, the Boston Celtics led from start to finish in a 102-94 defeat of the Portland Trail Blazers.

Payton Pritchard (23 points) and Jaylen Brown (20) led the Celtics scoring as second-placed Boston improved to 29-17 to remain in pursuit of conference leaders Detroit (33-11).

In other games yesterday, Brandon Miller scored 30 points and grabbed eight rebounds to lead Charlotte's 130-93 blowout of Philadelphia as severe weather forced early starts for two NBA games.

Opening tipoffs were moved to the afternoon for the Hornets' home victory and Atlanta's 132-116 triumph over visiting Indiana after a severe winter storm on Sunday that dumped ice and snow over most of the United States.

The Hornets, 19-28, stretched their win streak to three games while the 76ers fell to 24-21.

Miller made 9-of-12 shots from the floor, including 6-of-9 from three-point range, and was 6-of-6 from the free throw line to lead the Hawks, who had seven other double-figure scorers but none over 13 points.

Kelly Oubre Jr. led the Sixers with 17 points with Tyrese Maxey — third in NBA scoring with 29.9 points a game — managing only six points on 3-of-12 shooting.

In Atlanta, C.J. McCollum came off the bench to produce 23 points, eight rebounds, seven assists and three steals to spark the Hawks.

Dyson Daniels added 22 points and nine assists while Nickeil Alexander-Walker had 21 points for Atlanta.

Cameroon's Pascal Siakam led the Pacers with 26 points and nine rebounds.

The Hawks improved to 23-25 with their ninth home victory in 22 games. — AFP

Ne Zha (哪吒): naughty-god legend scores box office gold

Stefan Hammond*

Na Cha the Great (1974)

Directed by Chang Cheh for Shaw Brothers Studios, Hong Kong

He’s an impish Chinese divinity who swans around on wheels of fire. The deity Ne Zha (哪吒)**, sometimes romanised as Na Cha, Na Tcha or Nazha, amid other spellings) burst onto screens in 2025 with the animated feature film *Ne Zha 2* (哪吒之魔童鬧海). The title literally translates as “Nezha: The Demon Boy Churns the Sea” and last year’s box-office blockbuster is the direct sequel to *Ne Zha* (哪吒之魔童降世, 2019).

The latest film incarnation of Ne Zha raked in box office lucre, but cinematic depictions of the precocious and feisty deity have been lensed since the silent era. The first film that anyone knows about was *The Date of Ne Zha’s Birth* (哪吒出世, 1928), a silent film credited to director Lee Chak Yuen (李澤源). Sadly, no copies exist (a common state of affairs for early Hong Kong and Chinese mainland films).

Nazha Conquered the Seven Devils at Mei Hill (哪咤梅山收七怪, 1949) seems to have opened the floodgates for films featuring this boy-god. The deity was played by Yu Kai (羽佳), who reprised his role in 1950’s *How Nazha Thrice Tricked the Six-eared Monkey* (哪咤三戲六耳猴).

Cinematic deities

The best-known Chinese deity to become a film star is the Monkey King, aka Sun Wukong (孫悟空), a simian superstar who’s been played by Hong Kong film stars from Donnie Yen (甄子丹) to Stephen Chow (周星馳). Sun Wukong’s roots lie in Hanuman, and according to Mythopedia, Ne Zha’s “Chinese myth is based [on] the Hindu god Nalakuvara”. Mythopedia suggests that Nezha is “a shortened transliteration of the word “Nalakuvara.”

Like all heroes, Ne Zha fights fearlessly against powerful evil forces. Shaw Brothers stalwart Alexander Fu Sheng (傅聲) played him in *Na Cha the Great* (哪咤, 1974). This followed Shaw’s 1973 feature *Na Cha and the Seven Devils* (梅山收七怪), directed by Tetsuya Yamanouchi and Doi Michiyoshi, two of the Japanese directors working for Shaw Brothers at the time.

Animating the prodigy

Nezha Conquers the Dragon King (哪咤鬧海, 1979) is a 61-minute animated film from Shanghai Animation Film Studio (上海美术电影制片厂). It’s available on YouTube with English subtitles (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xxa72iEZkfk>).

Does the latest animated incarnation of this boy god represent Chinese “soft power”? Will plushies of Ne Zha replace Labubu dolls in 2026? Only time will tell.

Partial Ne Zha filmography:

- The Date of Ne Zha’s Birth 哪吒出世 (1928)
- Nazha Conquered the Seven Devils at Mei Hill 哪咤梅山收七怪 (1949)
- How Nazha Thrice Tricked the Six-eared Monkey 哪咤三戲六耳猴 (1950)
- Na Zha’s Adventure at the East Ocean 哪咤鬧東海 (1948)
- Nazha Conquered the Seven Devils at Mei Hill 哪咤梅山收七怪 (1949)
- The Battle Between Ne Zha and the Scarlet Boy 哪咤大戰紅孩兒 (1950)
- Nazha Shatters the Yellow River Scheme 封神榜之一: 大破黃河陣 (1950)
- How Nazha Thrice Tricked the Six-eared Monkey 哪咤三戲六耳猴 (1950)
- The Battle Between Ne Zha and the Scarlet Boy 哪咤大戰紅孩兒 (1950)
- Nazha Causes Uproar at the East Ocean 哪咤大鬧東海 (1951)
- Nazha’s Adventures in the East Sea 哪咤鬧東海 (1957)



Nazha Conquered the Seven Devils at Mei Hill 哪咤梅山收七怪 (1949)



The Battle Between Ne Zha and the Scarlet Boy 哪咤大戰紅孩兒 (1950)



Nezha Conquers the Dragon King 哪咤鬧海 (1979)



Ne Zha (哪咤之魔童降世, 2019)



Ne Zha 2 (2025)

- Nazha’s Adventures in the Heavenly Palace 哪咤大鬧天宮 (1957)
- How Prince Xinling Stole the General’s Seal to Save the State of Zhao 信陵君竊符救趙 (1957)
- Ne Zha Is His Mother’s Escort (Part 1) 風火送慈雲 (上集) (1958)
- Ne Zha Is His Mother’s Escort (Part 2) 風火送慈雲 (下集大結局) (1958)
- The Birth of Nazha 哪咤出世 (1962)
- 3 Encounters of Na Zha and Scarlet Boy 哪咤三鬥紅孩兒 (1962)
- The Adventures of Nazha 哪咤三戲紅孩兒 (1965)
- Nyasa Lad Against Seven Devils 哪咤收七妖 (1966)
- Third Prince Na Cha 哪咤三太子 (1978)
- Nezha Conquers the Dragon King 哪咤鬧海 (1979)
- Ne Zha 哪咤 (1983)
- Nezha 少女哪咤 (2014)
- I Am Nezha 我是哪咤 (2016)

*Hong Kong-based writer and film critic
** *Nezha is a mythological figure from Chinese folklore, not a historical person, so he does not have a specific birth.*
In classical Chinese literature, most notably in the Ming Dynasty novel Fengshen Yanyi (封神演義, “The Investiture of the Gods”), Nezha is described as being born during the Shang Dynasty (around the 12th–11th century BCE in mythological chronology). – DeepSeek/MPD
N.B. Images provided by the writer and MPD

World Weather			
CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -6°C~3°C	Manila 21°C~31°C	New York -12°C~4°C	Lisbon 14°C~16°C
Shanghai 3°C~10°C	Bangkok 20°C~34°C	London 3°C~10°C	Rio de Janeiro 23°C~29°C
Hong Kong 15°C~20°C	Tokyo 1°C~10°C	Frankfurt 0°C~4°C	Luanda 24°C~29°C
Taipei 14°C~17°C	Singapore 23°C~32°C	Vancouver 7°C~8°C	Maputo 23°C~28°C
Guangzhou 11°C~22°C	Kuala Lumpur 23°C~34°C	Paris 0°C~9°C	Dili 24°C~31°C
Nanjing 0°C~10°C	Jakarta 23°C~27°C	Moscow -8°C~5°C	São Tomé 25°C~31°C
Guilin 9°C~17°C	Seoul -10°C~1°C	Las Vegas 5°C~18°C	Praia 18°C~27°C
Xi'an 0°C~10°C	Sydney 19°C~28°C	Monte Carlo 6°C~8°C	Bissau 20°C~32°C



1 The Year of the Horse is rearing up

Pedestrians walk past a Chinese New Year (CNY) of the Horse decoration in Singapore's Chinatown district on Tuesday. The Year of the Horse begins on February 17. — AFP

2 Too cold for comfort

A visibly forlorn great white egret sits atop a snow-covered boat at the Dal Lake in Srinagar, in the Indian administered Jammu and Kashmir region, on Tuesday. — AFP

3 Too hot for comfort

Spectators stand in front of a mist fan as venues look deserted amid soaring heat on day ten of the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne on Tuesday. — AFP

4 Aceh Tsunami Museum

A visitor holds his baby as they look at a display at the Aceh Tsunami Museum in Banda Aceh on Tuesday, established in 2009 to commemorate the December 26, 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami that struck the region. — AFP

5 Retro Bugatti

Bugatti retro classic cars drive at the Champ de Mars, with the Eiffel Tower in the background, during a Retromobile Night Parade in Paris on Tuesday, ahead of the 50th edition of the Retromobile classic car fair. — AFP

