

Edmund Ho calls for Macau-Hengqin development's alignment with central authorities' deployments



The handout photo provided by the Hengqin In-Depth Cooperation Zone's executive committee yesterday shows CPPCC National Committee Vice Chairman Edmund Ho Hau Wah (centre), Secretary for Administration and Justice Wong Sio Chak (third from left), Secretary for Economy and Finance Anton Tai Kin Ip (third from right), and four Macau members of the Standing Committee of the CPPCC National Committee (from left to right), Lao Nga Wong, Huang Liuquan, Chui Sai Cheong, and Alan Ho Ion Sang, addressing Wednesday's meeting with local CPPCC members.

Tony Wong

The management committee and the executive committee of the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin held two separate meetings in Macau earlier this week, one with Macau deputies to the National People's Congress (NPC) on Tuesday and one with Macau members of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) on Wednesday, gathering their opinions and suggestions concerning fresh policies and measures

aiming to ensure the full implementation of the spirit of President Xi Jinping's various important speeches so as to accelerate Hengqin's high-quality development, according to a statement by the zone's executive committee yesterday.

The 106-square-kilometre Hengqin island in Zhuhai City is officially known as Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin, after the zone was inaugurated in September 2021.

The zone's management committee is its top decision-making body jointly administered

by Guangdong Province and the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR). The zone's executive committee, which is run under the management committee, is the body tasked with the zone's daily functioning and execution of tasks.

The zone's management committee is run under a dual director system, jointly led by the governor of Guangdong Province and the chief executive of the MSAR.

Currently, the zone's management committee is jointly headed by Guangdong Governor Meng Fanli and Macau Chief

Executive Sam Hou Fai.

Macau Secretary for Administration and Justice Wong Sio Chak is the management committee's executive deputy director. The management committee has five deputy directors comprising officials from Guangdong and Macau.

The zone's executive committee, which is currently headed by Macau Secretary for Economy and Finance Anton Tai Kin Ip, has five deputy directors comprising officials from Guangdong and Macau.

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HK Customs seizes HK\$56 million in Macau-bound smuggled goods



Contraband seized from a Macau-bound vessel in Hong Kong last week, worth more than HK\$56 million, is shown to the media in Hong Kong yesterday. — Photo courtesy of RTHK

HONG KONG — Customs officers announced yesterday that they seized smuggled goods worth more than HK\$56 million last week on a Macau-bound vessel at Black Point near Tuen Mun.

Officers said after carrying out the appropriate analysis and risk assessment, the vessel departing from Hong Kong for Macau was selected for inspection on January 21.

Upon examination of the boat, customs officers found a large batch of suspected smuggled goods, including suspected pharmaceutical products, cosmetic injections, tobacco products, e-cigarette cartridges, watches, mobile phones, tablets, and clothing.

Syndicate Crimes Investigation Bureau

Special Unit investigator Shirley Woo told reporters at a briefing that there has been a growing trend of needles used for medical or beauty treatments being smuggled.

She reminded the public not to buy these needles from unknown origins.

"The general public should really read about the ingredients of different beauty needles they want to import or export, but mostly the majority of these beauty needles are strictly restricted under our law."

Customs officers believe smugglers had been trying to avoid paying tax on the items.

Investigations are ongoing and officers said the likelihood of arrests has not been ruled out. — RTHK, MPD

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The Macau Post Daily

China, Britain agree to develop long-term, consistent comprehensive strategic partnership in Xi-Starmer meeting

— Story on p. 7

Indonesian couple caned 140 times for sex outside marriage, alcohol

Sharia police caned a couple 140 times each in Indonesia's Aceh province yesterday for having sex outside marriage and drinking alcohol.

— Story on p. 9

Denmark hails 'very constructive' meeting with US over Greenland

Denmark's foreign minister said yesterday he was "more optimistic" after technical talks kicked off with the United States over Greenland.

— Story on p. 11



Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai delivers a speech at a lunch reception hosted for representatives of Macau-based Portuguese- and English-language media enterprises at MGM MACAU in Nape yesterday. – Photo: GCS

Sam stresses protection of press freedom

Staff Reporter

Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai hosted a lunch reception yesterday afternoon at MGM MACAU for Macau-based Portuguese- and English-language media enterprises. At the start of the reception, Sam delivered a speech in Portuguese in which he reaffirmed that “freedom of the press in the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR) is fully protected by the Basic Law of the MSAR and the Press Law.”

On the other hand, Sam urged the Portuguese- and English-language media “to report and promote Macau objectively, fairly, and attentively, telling good stories about China [as a whole] and Macau to the world.”

He also expressed his hope that journalists from the Portuguese- and English-language media will “proactively venture into the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin, the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area [GBA], and

various sister provinces and regions in the Chinese mainland to gain first-hand insights into its latest developments.”

The luncheon was also attended by two of his government’s five policy secretaries, namely Secretary for Administration and Justice Wong Sio Chak and Secretary for Economy and Finance Anton Tai Kin Yip, as well as senior members of his office and the Macau Government Information Bureau (GCS), including the latter’s acting director, Louie Wong Lok I.

Sam addresses luncheon reception hosted for Portuguese- and English-language media

Hello, representatives of the Portuguese- and English-language media!

It is a great pleasure to be here with my new and old friends today.

At the beginning of 2026, with the Chinese Spring Festival approaching, I extend my sincere New Year greetings to you all, and to all our friends in the media. I wish everyone good health, happiness with your family, and career advancements; and may all your wishes come true in the Year of the Horse.

Last year marked the full commencement of the current-term Macao Special Administrative Region (MSAR) Government. Benefiting from the care and support of the Central People’s Government and the prosperous development of the motherland, the MSAR Government has, while uniting and leading all sectors in Macao, shouldered responsibilities and forged ahead to effectively implement the various initiatives outlined in its first policy address.

In general, there is steady progress with Macao’s economic and social development, with major policy goals and tasks being fundamentally achieved. The MSAR Government’s work in the first year has proceeded smoothly and steadily, marked by reforms, innovation, breakthroughs and achievements, ensuring a good start to this current term.

President Xi Jinping and the central authorities fully acknowledged the MSAR Government’s work performance during the past year, highly praised our aggression,



Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai (centre, front) poses with principal and senior government officials and representatives of Macau-based Portuguese- and English-language media enterprises during an official lunch reception at MGM MACAU yesterday. – Photo: GCS

pragmatism, and determination in safeguarding national sovereignty, security and development interests, our success in holding the eighth-term Legislative Assembly elections, our efforts in promoting public administration reform, our active participation in the development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, and our new progress with various initiatives.

Over the past year, local Portuguese- and English-language media have played a crucial role as key sources of information about Macao for Portuguese- and English-speaking communities at home and abroad, serving as a significant channel for the MSAR Government to understand public sentiment. Our friends from these media care about social demands and people’s

livelihoods, follow up regarding major events and incidents, and monitor and support the Public Administration – enabling the world to understand Macao, facilitating global awareness of Macao, and fostering communications between the public and the MSAR Government. On behalf of the MSAR Government, I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to all friends from the media for playing their indispensable role.

This year, the MSAR Government will fully and thoroughly implement the spirit of the important speeches of President Xi, proactively align with the country’s 15th Five-Year Plan, formulate and implement the Third Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the MSAR, uphold and improve the executive-led administrative system, steadfastly promote appropriate economic diversification, continuously enhance the effectiveness of governance, better integrate with and contribute to overall national development, and spare no effort in achieving better development during the period of Macao’s third Five-Year Plan.

The MSAR Government will join hands with all sectors of society, including the media industry, to fully unleash the momentum for social and economic development.

Focusing on public administration reform and appropriate economic diversification, we will diligently advance the nine key initiatives outlined in the policy address. We will commence four major projects: the Macao-Hengqin International Education (University) Town, the Macao International Integrated Tourism and Cultural Zone, the Macao international air transport hub (port) on the west bank of the Pearl River, and the Macao Technology Research Industrial Park. To achieve these goals, we need and greatly value the support and cooperation of all friends from the media.

I would like to take this opportunity to outline three expectations:

First, I hope all of you will accurately sense the pulse of the times, master the latest developments of Macao’s politics, economy, society and culture, and maximise the media’s functions in promoting Macao as a city governed by the rule of law, and filled with vitality, cultural assets and happiness.

Second, I hope you will proactively venture into the Guangdong-Macao In-depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin, the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, and various sister provinces and regions in the Chinese mainland, to gain firsthand insights regarding the latest developments. This will

further strengthen media coverage of Macao’s integration with and contributions to overall national development.

Third, I hope you will continue leveraging your unique advantages of establishing a foothold in Macao, staying close to China, and interacting with global Portuguese- and English-speaking audiences, to report and promote Macao objectively, fairly, and attentively, telling good stories about China and Macao to the world. This will help Macao in becoming an essential gateway for China’s high-level opening-up and a significant window for exchanges between Eastern and Western civilisations.

I hereby reiterate that freedom of the press in the MSAR is fully protected by the Basic Law of the MSAR and the Press Law. The MSAR Government will continue with its administration in accordance with the law, coordinate all public departments, support the media industry in fulfilling its duties, assist the media in reporting and accessing information, and establish more positive and efficient interactive cooperation with the media industry.

Thank you!

P.S. English translation of the text provided by the Macau Government Information Bureau (GCS); minor edits, heading and bold added by The Macau Post Daily.

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MACAU POST

Macau Weather

**CLOUDY. PERIODS OF RAIN.
FORCE 3 TO 4 EAST TO
NORTHEASTERLY WINDS,
OCCASIONALLY FORCE 5.
RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL
RANGE BETWEEN 75% AND 95%.**



16°C~19°C

Source: SMG

Notice

UN Holocaust Memorial Day held in Hong Kong

On Tuesday evening, a commemoration ceremony for the United Nations Holocaust Memorial Day was held in Hong Kong.

January 27th is the day chosen to commemorate the memory of the Jewish victims murdered during the Holocaust. It was when the Nazi concentration and death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland was liberated. On this day every year, the world remembers the six million lives slaughtered, simply because they were Jewish.

The official representative of the Hong Kong SAR Government Mr. Clarence Leung, Under Secretary for Home and Youth Affairs, delivered a speech at this symbolic and important memorial ceremony in Hong Kong.

Ms. Gu Pan, Deputy Director of General Affairs Division of Consular Department Office of the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China in the HKSAR, was also present with almost 300

guests including consuls general and diplomatic representatives, leaders and members of the Jewish community and friends in Hong Kong.

In his remarks, Consul General of Israel to Hong Kong Mr. Amir Lati highlighted the alarming rise in anti-Semitic incidents worldwide since the October 7 terror attacks and 2025 being one of the deadliest years in recent memory: at least 20 people were murdered in antisemitic attacks in Washington, D.C.; Boulder, Colorado; Manchester, United Kingdom; and, most recently, in Sydney, Australia. He stressed the importance of global remembrance, education, and a shared commitment to prevent future atrocities.

Mr. Lati especially devoted his remarks to his former professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and retired diplomat Dr. Ambassador Jacob Cohen, a Holocaust survivor who carried the memories throughout his life until his passing six months ago.

93-year-old Madam Larissa Cain shared in person her testimony as a Warsaw Ghetto survivor who was rescued at age 10 and lived in hiding until the end of the war. Now based in Paris, she bears witness to the Holocaust through her writings, preserving the voices of those silenced by history.

The event and related educational activities were made possible by the event organizer - the Hong Kong Holocaust and Tolerance Center, and other supporters including the Hong Kong Jewish Community and the Consulate General of Israel in Hong Kong.

Consulate General of Israel in Hong Kong
info@hongkong.mfa.gov.il



Israeli Consul-General of Israel Amir Lati addresses Tuesday's Holocaust Memorial Day held in Hong Kong. - Photo courtesy of Consulate-General of Israel

Locals expect huge visitor influx during CNY holiday: vox pop



Tourists try free samples outside a cake shop on Rua de S. Paulo close to the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Ruins of St. Paul's and Na Tcha Temple yesterday.

- Photo: Khalel Vallo

Khalel Vallo

As Chinese New Year (CNY) is approaching, the *Post* spoke with locals yesterday to gauge their expectations for the festive period. While some businesspeople anticipate a huge influx of visitors and increased sales, others remained cautious, citing changing spending habits and lingering economic uncertainty.

The Chinese New Year begins on February 17.

Jay, 37, who works at a café near the Ruins of St Paul's landmark, said he was hopeful about the upcoming holiday period. "We're expecting many more tourists to come here because Chinese New Year is very important. It only happens once a year," he said. With the festive season traditionally bringing heavy foot traffic, Jay said he was upbeat about higher sales and better business overall. However, he admitted, this will be the café's first Chinese New Year at its current location. "Last year, we were still in Taipa. We only opened here in May, so this is the first time we will experience Chinese New Year in this area,"

he said, believing that footfall will be significantly higher both during and after the holiday.

Meanwhile, Marjorie, 32, who works in a café near Rua do Campo, shared a more cautious outlook. She noted that while Chinese New Year is usually busy, spending patterns can vary. "Sometimes people spend a lot before the holiday, then prefer to stay home and save money after coming back from visiting their families," she said. Still, Marjorie said she expects this year to be better than last. "Compared to last year, I think it will be busier. Last year, people were still recovering from COVID and didn't go out as much," she noted, adding that her café plans to reopen on the third day of Chinese New Year, a change from previous years when it remained closed, reflecting cautious optimism from the management.

The café will be closed on the first and second day of the Year of the Horse.

Moreover, 20-year-old Stephanie, a local university student, who spoke to the *Post* outside

Marjorie's café, expressed concern over the spending habits of some visitors. She said that many young tourists from the Chinese mainland tend to minimise expenses by collecting free samples and avoiding pay-to-enter attractions or in-restaurant dining. "So many people come here, but they don't really spend much money," Stephanie said, adding she hopes the government can find ways to encourage "more meaningful" consumption.

She also commented on the upcoming Tap Siac Chinese New Year market, saying she looks forward to it but remains sceptical. "Last time I went, a lot of the things sold there were just items you can find on Taobao. There wasn't much originality."

As Macau prepares for the Chinese New Year holiday, the vox pop showed that expectations remain mixed. While businesses seem to be hopeful about increased visitor numbers and improved sales, concerns remain over tourists' low spending and the overall economic impact. ■

Community eco-carnival slated for next Saturday in Iao Hon

Ida Cheong

The annual "Jointly Creating a New Environment for the Community 2026" public awareness promotion carnival will take place in Iao Hon Market Park next Saturday, February 7, aiming to further raise residents' awareness of crime prevention and reduction through a raft of themed educational activities, thereby enhancing collaboration between the government and the public, as well as building a safe and healthy community and fostering a favourable living environment in Macau, according to a statement released by the co-organisers yesterday.

The one-day event is co-organised by the Macau General Union of Neighbourhood Associations (commonly known as Kai Fong in Cantonese), in conjunction with the Unitary Police Service (SPU), Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM), Public Security Police (PSP), Judiciary Police (PJ), Fire Services Bureau (CB), Health Bureau (SSM), and the Environmental Protection Bureau (DSPA).



Macau General Union of Neighbourhood Associations (Kai Fong) Vice President Cheong Sok Leng (second from right) and other representatives of the co-organisers of next Saturday's "Jointly Creating a New Environment for the Community 2026" eco-carnival look on during yesterday's press conference at the Kai Fong headquarters in Toi San district.

- Photo: Ida Cheong

The entities co-hosted yesterday a press conference at the Kai Fong headquarters in Toi San district about the upcoming activity.

The upcoming event will kick off at 2:30 p.m. and end at 5 p.m. on February 7, featuring eight game booths, educational videos,

themed workshops, performances, equipment displays and on-site exhibitions, including fire engines, police vehicles, as well as rarely seen firefighting equipment, crime scene investigation vehicles, and investigative tools, allowing residents to see the equipment up

close and gain firsthand experience in crime prevention and fire safety.

Kai Fong Vice President Cheong Sok Leng said in a speech that in recent years online scams, phone fraud and emerging financial fraud techniques have been continuously evolving, making it

extremely important to strengthen public awareness of fraud prevention. Additionally, incidents of pedestrians failing to comply with traffic rules remain a concern worthy of attention.

Cheong noted she hoped that collaboration between the government and residents can be enhanced through this event. By focusing on five key areas, namely fire prevention, theft prevention, fraud prevention, crime prevention, and traffic safety, and utilising diverse approaches such as interactive booths, scenario simulations, and themed education, the event aims to elevate residents' self-protection awareness and response capabilities, Cheong said.

Meanwhile, as the Chinese New Year (CNY) is approaching, Cheong pointed out that the dry and windy weather significantly increases the risk of fires so it is crucial to heighten awareness of home fire safety and exercise caution when using gas stoves and electric heating devices while celebrating the festival. ■

Edmund Ho calls for Macau-Hengqin development's alignment with central authorities' deployments

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The meeting with local NPC deputies on Tuesday was chaired by Wong and Tai, as well as Kou Hoi In, the sole Macau member of the elite NPC Standing Committee, and Lao Ngai Leong, the head of the delegation of local NPC deputies.

The meeting with local CPPCC members on Wednesday was chaired by Edmund Ho Hau Wah, Macau's first chief executive and now a vice-chairman of the CPPCC National Committee, Wong, and Tai, as well as four Macau members of the Standing Committee of the CPPCC National Committee, namely Huang Liuquan, Chui Sai Cheong, Lao Nga Wong, and Alan Ho Ion Sang.

The two meetings, which was also attended by other officials of the zone and officials from various Macau public entities, were held at the Services Platform Complex for Commercial and Trade Cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking Countries (aka Forum Macao Complex) in Sai Van.

During Wednesday's meeting, according to yesterday's statement, Edmund Ho noted that the establishment of the in-depth cooperation zone in Hengqin and its development is a major decision personally planned, deployed and promoted by President Xi Jinping.

He underlined that Macau and Hengqin must align with the new strategic positioning of "Macau + Hengqin," unify their thoughts and actions with the central authorities' decisions and deployments, and always maintain strategic determination and a sense of responsibility, focusing on key areas and critical phases.

According to the statement, Edmund Ho urged Macau members of the CPPCC National Committee to continue playing their role in maintaining close communication with government entities in Macau and Hengqin, while offering suggestions and making greater contributions to the in-depth cooperation zone's high-quality development, with the aim of enabling the zone's development to



The handout photo released Hengqin executive committee yesterday shows Secretary for Administration and Justice Wong Sio Chak (second from right), Secretary for Economy and Finance Anton Tai Kin Ip (right), Kou Hoi In (second from left), the sole Macau member of the NPC Standing Committee, and Lao Ngai Leong, the head of the delegation of local NPC deputies, addressing Tuesday's meeting with local NPC deputies. Wong is the executive deputy director of the Hengqin in-depth cooperation zone's management committee while Tai heads the zone's executive committee.

constantly achieve new breakthroughs.

During Tuesday's meeting, according to the statement, Kou Hoi In said that the key to achieving the in-depth cooperation zone's high-quality development lies in the smooth convergence of rules between Macau and Hengqin.

Kou called for Macau and Hengqin to accelerate the convergence of rules, with the emphasis in the areas of border immigration clearance, medical care, education, social security, telecommunications, and payment systems, while strengthening coordination in industrial planning between Macau and Hengqin and enhancing the security and fluidity of the flows of people, goods, capital, and information.

During the meeting, according to the statement, Lao Ngai Leong called for the in-depth cooperation zone to make greater efforts to secure national support and promote synergy between Guangdong and Macau with

the aim of enhancing the effectiveness of the implementation of the zone's "tier-specific management" special customs arrangements.

Lao also called for the zone to more accurately respond to the needs of Macau residents and enterprises, advance the development of key projects in Hengqin, enhance the level of Macau-Hengqin integration, and foster improvements in quality and efficiency in the zone's development.

During the two meetings on Tuesday and Wednesday, according to the statement, Tai Kin Ip said that centred on the new strategic positioning of "Macau + Hengqin," the zone's executive committee last year drew up a new list of priority investment attraction projects, having successfully attracted the establishment of a number of domestic and foreign enterprises in Hengqin.

Tai said that the support for the incubation and development of high-quality projects in Hengqin will be strengthened, while a number

of large-scale projects will get off the ground there in an orderly manner later this year so as to accelerate the concentration of industrial and human resources.

During the two meetings, according to the statement, Wong underlined the need to proactively study and implement Xi's important instructions concerning the in-depth cooperation zone's development, and to strictly fulfil Sam's requirements regarding the zone's development.

Wong pledged that the zone's management committee will continue to strengthen its communication and coordination with the zone's executive committee with the aim of accelerating the convergence of rules and mechanisms between Macau and Hengqin.

Wong also underlined the management committee's commitment to sorting out and studying the opinions and suggestions raised by the local NPC deputies and CPPCC members. ■

2 Macau film subsidy scheme applications to start Monday

Ida Cheong

The Cultural Development Fund (CDF) announced in a statement yesterday that its two film subsidy schemes, namely "Macau Elements" and "Subsidy Programme for Cinematographic and Television Filming in Macao", will be expanded to short-form drama projects, and applications open on Monday.

Applications for the two schemes will be accepted in four rounds throughout the year; the first round runs from Monday to March 31, followed by April 1 to June 30, July 1 to August 31, and September 1 to

November 27. There is no quota limit for applications. However, the application period will close early if the total budget is exhausted, according to the statement.

The statement noted that applicants for both film subsidy schemes must be firms legally established and operating in Macau, the funding of which is provided in the form of a subsidy.

Subsidy programme for film in Macau expands to short-form drama

Regarding the "Subsidy Programme for

Cinematographic and Television Filming in Macao" scheme, applicants must serve as the Macau production unit for non-local film/TV projects, the statement said, adding that for this year, applications are newly accepted for short-form drama projects that conduct on-location filming in Macau and the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin.

The total budget for the scheme is 30 million patacas, with five million patacas allocated specifically for short-form dramas. The maximum subsidy is 30 to 40 percent of the project's film budget. Projects must

not have commenced filming or on-location work in Macau or in Hengqin before their application is formally submitted, the statement said.

'Macao Elements' scheme features Macau-Hengqin elements

Regarding the "Macao Elements" scheme, applicants must be the copyright holder or an authorised promotion and distribution agent, the statement said, adding that the scheme's scope will be expanded to include the overseas promotion of short-form dramas featuring Macau-Hengqin elements, as well as Chinese mainland films that have obtained a public screening permit for promotion and distribution in Portuguese-speaking countries from the China Film Administration (CFA).

The total budget for the "Macao Elements" scheme is five million patacas, with 1.5 million patacas allocated specifically for short-form dramas featuring Macau-Hengqin elements. The maximum subsidy is 60 to 80 percent of the promotion and distribution budget expenditure; all applications must be completed with audiovisuals ready for screening, the statement added.

For details of the subsidy schemes, please visit the CDF website (www.fdc.gov.mo). ■

文化發展基金
Fundo de Desenvolvimento da Cultura

2026年“澳門元素”影視及內地電影宣發資金補助計劃

Plano de Subsídio à Divulgação e Distribuição das Obras Cinematográficas e Televisivas com Elementos de Macau e dos Filmes do Interior da China de 2026

第一輪: 2026年2月2日上午9時至3月31日晚上12時
1.ª ronda: Das 9h00 de 2 de Fevereiro à meia-noite de 31 de Março de 2026

第二輪: 2026年4月1日上午0時至6月30日晚上12時
2.ª ronda: Da meia-noite de 1 de Abril à meia-noite de 30 de Junho de 2026

第三輪: 2026年7月1日上午0時至8月31日晚上12時
3.ª ronda: Da meia-noite de 1 de Julho à meia-noite de 31 de Agosto de 2026

第四輪: 2026年9月1日上午0時至11月27日下午5時30分
4.ª ronda: Da meia-noite de 1 de Setembro às 17h30 de 27 de Novembro de 2026

* 總預算500萬澳門元, 其中澳門元素資助預算150萬澳門元, 供預算用畢, 申請期提前結束。
* O orçamento total do Plano é de 5 milhões de patacas, das quais 1,5 milhões de patacas são destinadas a financiamento que incorporem elementos de Macau-Hengqin. Se o orçamento estiver esgotado, o período de candidatura terminará mais cedo.

This handout poster provided by the Cultural Development Fund (CDF) yesterday shows the "Subsidy Programme for Cinematographic and Television Filming in Macao" and "Macao Elements" subsidy scheme starting 4 application rounds from Monday.

Police nab Filipina, 2 Indonesians for drug use & sale

Armindo Neves

The Judiciary Police (PJ) arrested a Filipina and two Indonesians for drug use, trafficking and possession on Tuesday, PJ spokesman Cheong Un Hong said during a special press conference yesterday.

Cheong identified the three suspects as a 62-year-old unemployed Macau resident from the Philippines surnamed Trinidad, a 42-year-old Indonesian domestic helper surnamed Lina, and a 37-year-old Indonesian male surnamed Erman-syah who told police that he was unemployed.

Based on a tipoff, Cheong said, PJ officers investigated and carried out an operation in the city centre on Tuesday evening. PJ officers first intercepted Trinidad and seized a small quantity of methamphetamine (commonly known as meth), a quantity of drug paraphernalia, and suspected drug proceeds of 2,700 patacas, Cheong said.

Subsequently, outside her flat in the central district, PJ officers arrested Lina, according to Cheong. While searching Lina's flat, Cheong said, PJ officers arrested Ermansyah and PJ officers discovered a bag of meth weighing 25.32 grams,

an electronic scale, drug taking paraphernalia, and other related items. Cheong said that the trio's urine tests returned positive results for drug use.

According to Cheong, a total of 34.34 grams of meth, with a street value of around 103,000 patacas, was seized in the case.

The trio have been transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP), each facing charges of drug use, drug trafficking and possession of drug taking paraphernalia.

Police bust 4 local men for use, sale & possession of drugs

Meanwhile, the Judiciary Police arrested four local men for drug use, drug trafficking and possession on Monday and Tuesday, PJ spokesman Cheong Un Hong said during a regular press conference yesterday.

Cheong identified the four suspects as a 32-year-old cook surnamed Chao and three stagehands aged between 40 and 47, one surnamed Lei and two surnamed Wu aged 43 and 40, respectively.

According to Cheong, based on a tipoff, PJ officers first intercepted Chao in the northern district on

Monday evening, seizing 0.45 grams of meth. Subsequently, early on Tuesday, Cheong said, PJ officers intercepted Lei and seized 0.34 grams of meth from him and 0.18 grams of meth, drug taking paraphernalia, and an electronic scale from his flat.

Later the same day, PJ officers arrested the two Wus in a flat in the northern district, according to Cheong, they seized two bags of meth weighing 0.97 grams, a quantity of drug taking paraphernalia and an electronic scale. Cheong added that the four suspects tested positive for drug use.

According to Cheong, the investigation revealed that all four suspects have a history of drug abuse spanning over a decade. Among them, Lei and the older Wu repeatedly engaged in drug trafficking activities in Macau, Cheong said, adding that Chao had previously purchased drugs from Lei.

The quartet have been transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP), each facing charges of drug use and possession of drug taking paraphernalia, Cheong said, adding that Lei and the older Wu each face a drug trafficking charge. ■



Judiciary Police (PJ) officers escort the three hooded drug suspects to a PJ van outside the PJ headquarters in Zape yesterday. – Photos: Armindo Neves



This undated handout photo provided by the Judiciary Police (PJ) yesterday shows bags of meth, drug taking paraphernalia and an electronic scale seized from Chao and the two Wus.

Police arrest mainlander for fraud involving HK\$ 3.04 million

Armindo Neves

The Judiciary Police arrested a mainlander for fraud involving HK\$3.04 million (3.13 million patacas), PJ spokesman Cheong Un Hong said during a special press conference yesterday.

Cheong identified the suspect as a 44-year-old female surnamed Tong who told police that she is unemployed.

According to Cheong, the Judiciary Police received a report from the local victim that he was defrauded by Tong through an investment scam involving HK\$3.04 million.

Cheong said that in 2023, while working for the casino, the victim became acquainted with Tong after providing the limousine service for her on multiple occasions. In October 2024, the

suspect approached the victim, claiming to have access to a high-return investment channel. Tong persuaded the victim to invest in a casino-related business, promising a monthly return of HK\$5,000 for every HK\$100,000 invested, without informing the victim of the specific details of the projects, Cheong said.

Believing the claims to be true, Cheong said that the victim handed over HK\$1.26 million to Tong in October 2024. Later, when no returns were received, the victim enquired about the investment, Cheong said.

According to Cheong, Tong then claimed that the business funds had been lost and that she was facing financial difficulties, persuading the victim to lend an additional HK\$1 million for

emergency purposes. She promised to include this amount as part of the investment principal, Cheong said.

Subsequently, Tong continued to request additional funds from the victim under various pretexts, according to Cheong, adding that by April last year, the victim had transferred a total of HK\$3.04 million.

Cheong said that Tong only paid the victim HK\$50,000 in cash as purported "returns" – from the victim's fund in August last year and made no further payments afterwards. Despite the victim repeatedly demanding the return of the principal, the suspect failed to comply.

In late November 2025, the victim filed a complaint with the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) through a lawyer, according to Cheong, adding that PJ officers arrested Tong at a casino in Cotai.

Cheong said that the investigation revealed that Tong did not have access to any of the investment channels she had claimed to have, and that all the reasons provided by her were fabricated, adding that she had gambled away most of the fraudulently obtained funds in multiple casinos in Macau. PJ officers seized a mobile, HK\$243,000 and 2,000 yuan in cash from the Tong.

Tong has been transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) for further investigation, facing a fraud charge. ■



Judiciary Police (PJ) officers escort the hooded fraud suspect from the PJ headquarters to a PJ vehicle yesterday. – Photo: Armindo Neves

Female caught for illegal border crossing: Zhuhai immigration inspection



This video grab uploaded by the immigration inspection in Zhuhai on Wednesday shows a traveller in red tailgated by a woman in white attempting to illegally cross Zhuhai's Gongbei border checkpoint into Macau.

Armindo Neves

Zhuhai's immigration inspection uploaded a video clip on its WeChat official account on Wednesday that shows its officers arresting a mainland woman for illegal border crossing en route to Macau recently.

According to the video clip, the woman dressed in white, lacking valid entry or exit documents, followed other travellers into the e-channel to evade border inspection.

She was apprehended by Gongbei border checkpoint officers, according to the video clip.

Three days later, she once again tailgated other travellers into the channel, crouching down to use the

person in front as a shield to block the officers' line of sight, trying to slip through undetected she was ultimately intercepted.

The woman said in the video that she wanted to "stroll around" Macau but had "left her travel permit at home." After being intercepted, she attempted to leave by saying, "I'll just go back," to which the immigration officer responded, "You can't go back now; come with me," taking her away for investigation.

Later, the woman was placed under criminal investigation by the Ministry of Public Security on suspicion of committing the offence of illegally crossing the border. ■

Govt urges healthcare workers to be vigilant against Nipah

Tony Wong

During a special meeting on Wednesday, Health Bureau (SSM) Director Alvis Lo Iek Long urged private medical institutions to step up their vigilance against the threat of the Nipah* virus to Macau and enhance their ability to screen and identify potential patients.

An SSM statement on Wednesday night said that in the wake of Nipah virus infection cases in India's West Bengal, the Health Bureau convened a meeting that day to brief healthcare workers and representatives from private medical institutions about the Nipah virus' potential threat to Macau and the government's special measures to prevent the disease.

During the meeting, according to the statement, Dr Lo said that although India is geographically distant from Macau, international travel is convenient and personnel exchanges are frequent nowadays, meaning that if individuals who have been to the areas affected by Nipah virus infections seek medical treatment in



Health Bureau (SSM) Director Alvis Lo Iek Long speaks during Wednesday's meeting with local healthcare workers. – Photo: SSM

Macau but healthcare workers fail to identify those infected with the virus in a timely manner, this could lead to the spread of the virus in Macau.

Consequently, Dr Lo urged frontline healthcare workers to remain vigilant against the potential threat of the Nipah virus and enhance their ability to identify suspected cases. Dr Lo said that healthcare workers should ask patients with the

related symptoms whether they have travelled to India, with the aim of detecting and controlling sources of infection early. ■

**The Nipah virus is a rare but deadly virus that can spread from animals (like fruit bats) to humans, and then between humans. It causes severe brain swelling (encephalitis) and respiratory problems, with a very high fatality rate. – DeepSeek*

Long-term, consistent comprehensive strategic Sino-UK partnership benefits both and world

China Daily Editorial

Reflecting a shift in how major countries assess stability, development and cooperation in a volatile world, the first visit to China by a British prime minister since 2018 carries significance beyond bilateral ties.

Underscoring that China has always adhered to the path of peaceful development, President Xi stressed in his meeting with United Kingdom Prime Minister Keir Starmer yesterday that China will never pose a threat to other countries no matter how it grows and develops.

Sending a clear signal that dialogue and cooperation serve the fundamental interests of both countries, the two leaders agreed the two sides should develop a long-term consistent comprehensive strategic partnership. For the UK, this entails viewing China's development objectively in the first place. After several years of adjustment under so-called "de-risking" approaches, the UK, like some other European countries, now seems to recognize that artificially distancing itself from China is neither practical nor sustainable.

China is a reliable partner because of its openness, policy stability, long-term development potential and vast market. At a time when many European economies face mounting economic pressures, there is a strong impetus for them to strengthen practical cooperation with China, and the UK is no exception.

Xi called on the UK to expand the frontiers of cooperation with China in education, healthcare, finance and the service sector, and to strengthen joint research and industrial transformation in areas such as artificial intelligence, bioscience, new energy and low-carbon technologies. These are also the areas where the UK seeks new growth drivers and where China's vast

market, complete industrial system and continuous opening-up offer tangible opportunities.

Thus, Starmer's visit, accompanied by dozens of business leaders as well as representatives from academia and culture, which followed the visits of several European leaders and senior officials to China over the past months, reflects the pragmatic reassessment of major country relations underway in some European countries.

In recent years, the rise of unilateralism has become the major variable impacting Europe's strategic and diplomatic environment, disrupting global trade and squeezing the policy space of countries. Strengthening dialogue and exchanges with China has emerged as a viable and rational way for European countries to restore balance in their external relations.

What these visits highlight is China's role as a source of certainty, predictability and stability in a turbulent world. It is the world's second-largest economy's consistent support for multilateralism, economic globalization and the stability of global industry and supply chains that has gained its stabilizing role increasing recognition.

This recognition is grounded in hard facts. Despite a complex external environment, China's trade surplus topped US\$1 trillion in the first 11 months of 2025, demonstrating the competitiveness of its manufacturing and the attraction of its market. Meanwhile, measures to expand market access in services, enhance foreign investment facilitation and promote high-quality development have reinforced confidence among international businesses and investors. Such certainty stands in contrast to the unpredictability that has unsettled global markets and partnerships elsewhere.

Increasingly, European countries are realizing that formulating China policy solely through the prism of the transatlantic alliance is neither realistic nor in their interests. Adopting a more independent, rational and pragmatic approach toward China is gradually becoming a mainstream understanding in the core policymaking circles of more and more countries.

In this light, strategic coordination between China and the UK, along with other major countries, on the world stage is of practical importance. Foreign Minister Wang Yi in a phone call with Emmanuel Bonne, diplomatic adviser to the French president, on Wednesday conveyed a similar message.

To that end, countries should handle their differences properly. The differences should not be allowed to define their relationship. What matters is adhering to mutual respect, engaging in candid dialogue and preventing differences from escalating into confrontation. Good things often come with difficulties. Despite facing complex challenges, responsible leaders must display the courage to forge ahead as long as the actions align with the fundamental interests of the country and its people.

Yet it must be pointed out that the engagement sought by other countries with China should not be driven by short-term, utilitarian considerations or because of temporary external pressure but their true commitment to stable relations.

If the UK and Europe more broadly show greater vision and pragmatism and take concrete actions to strengthen strategic coordination with China within the framework of multilateral platforms, this will be conducive to promoting a stable, balanced and just international order that produces tangible benefits for the world.

– Courtesy of China Daily

Winners announced for student drawing, photo & AI art contests of 33rd Macao Int'l Fireworks Display Contest

Khalel Vallo

The Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) announced in a statement yesterday the list of awardees for its Student Drawing Contest, Photo Contest and AI Generative Art Contest held in conjunction with the 33rd Macao International Fireworks Display Contest, with a total of 104 winning works selected from over 2,600 entries.

Organised by MGTO, the 33rd Macao International Fireworks Display Contest was held in September and October last year. It featured three outreach activities aimed at encouraging public participation and creativity.

According to the statement, the Student Drawing Contest, Photo Contest and AI Generative Art Contest attracted strong interest from students, photography enthusiasts and AI creators, receiving a total of 2,635 entries.

A total of 1,567 participants took part in the three competitions, reflecting a high level of public engagement, the statement said, adding that the entries comprised 812 student drawings, 1,175 photographs and 648 AI-generated artworks.

After professional evaluation based on the criteria of each category, 104 works were selected for first, second, third and merit awards, the statement said.

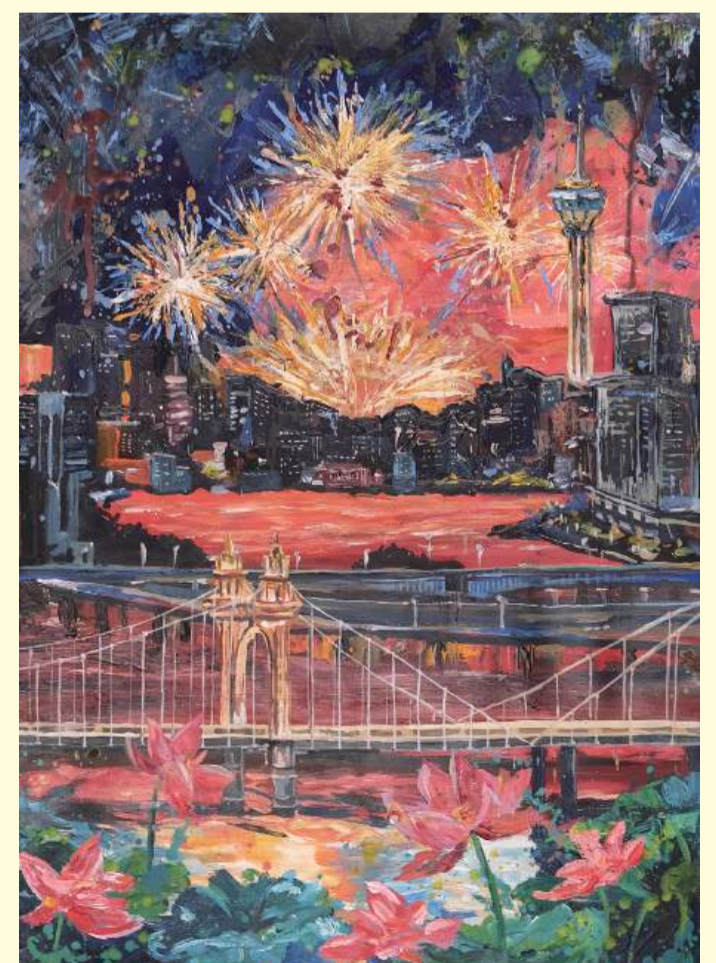
For the Student Drawing Contest, Category A (ages 6–10) awards went to Choi Chi Tong, Ma Chi Cheng and Leong Seong Tin. In Category B (ages 11–14), the winners were Chan Mei I, Chiang Hei Lam and Sam U Chin, while Category C (ages 15–18) awards were presented to Chan Cheok Lam, Mai Shao Man and Yin Weng. Category D (aged 19 or above) winners were Lei Meng Hin, Kuok Wai Kei and Lam Sam Chi.

In the Photo Contest, Jiang Junshen, Zeng Chi Fong and Leong Un Hei won the top three prizes in the Youth Category, while Zheng Xu Qiang, Wong Meng Kin and Lou Cheok Weng received the top awards in the Public Category.

For the AI Generative Art Contest, Chailyn, Wu Jinting and Xu Shuqi were awarded first, second and third prizes in the Youth Category, while Keong Fei Fei, Fung Chi Ian and Li Kaixin won the top prizes in the Public Category.

Merit awards were also presented across all categories, the statement said, adding that the competitions were jointly organised with the Macau Artist Society (MAS), Photographic Society of Macao (PSM), and the Association of Advertising Agents of Macao (AAAM), with representatives from all four entities forming the judging panel.

The full list of awardees has been published on the official Fireworks Contest website at <https://fireworks.macaotourism.gov.mo/en>. ■



This artwork provided by the Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) yesterday shows the first-prize winning work in Category C of the Student Drawing Contest by Chan Cheok Lam.

China, Britain agree to develop long-term, consistent comprehensive strategic partnership in Xi-Starmer meeting

BEIJING—President Xi Jinping and visiting British Prime Minister Keir Starmer agreed yesterday in Beijing that the two countries should develop a long-term and consistent comprehensive strategic partnership.

During their meeting, Xi said as the world today is undergoing both changes and turbulence, China and Britain, as permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and major economies, should enhance dialogue and cooperation in order to maintain world peace and stability, while promoting the economy and people's livelihoods of both countries.

Emphasizing the need to see history from a broader perspective, Xi called on the two countries to transcend differences and maintain mutual respect, so that they can translate the promising potential of cooperation into remarkable accomplishments, and open up new vistas for China-Britain relations and cooperation to better benefit both the two peoples and the world at large.

Stressing China's commitment to peaceful development, Xi said that China has never initiated a war, nor occupied an inch of foreign land.

China will never pose a threat to other countries no matter how it grows and develops, he told Starmer, who arrived in Beijing on Wednesday for a four-day official visit, the first by a British prime minister in eight years.

Xi said mutual benefit and win-win results constitute the essence of economic and trade cooperation between China and Britain, thus the two countries should expand mutually beneficial cooperation in education, health, finance and the service industry.

He also called on the two sides to carry out joint research and industrial application in the fields of artificial intelligence, bioscience, new energy and low-carbon technologies, among others, to achieve shared development and prosperity.

"It is hoped that the British side will provide an equal, fair and non-discriminatory business environment for Chinese enterprises," Xi said, adding that both sides should enhance people-to-people and cultural exchanges, and further facilitate travel.

He said members of the British government, parliament and various sectors of localities are welcome to visit China more frequently to foster a balanced, objective, and well-grounded perception of China.



President Xi Jinping shakes hands with British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who is on an official visit to China, at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. — Xinhua

China is actively considering granting unilateral visa waiver to British people, Xi said.

Noting that the international order has for some time suffered serious disruption, Xi said international law can only be truly effective when all countries, major countries in particular, abide by it. Otherwise, the world would risk regressing to the law of the jungle, he said.

China and Britain, as supporters of multilateralism and free trade, should jointly advocate and practice true multilateralism, and facilitate the establishment of a more just and equitable global governance system, so as to build an equal and orderly multipolar world and realize universally beneficial and inclusive globalization, Xi said.

Starmer conveyed King Charles III's greetings to President Xi, and said he was delighted to be the first British prime minister to visit China in eight years. This visit, with a delegation of around 60 important representatives from British business and cultural organizations, demonstrates the breadth of Britain-China cooperation and

Britain's commitment to deepening and expanding ties with China, said Starmer.

He said as major economies and permanent members of the UN Security Council, it is vital for Britain and China to build a long-term and consistent comprehensive strategic partnership with mutual respect and trust, especially in a volatile and fragile world.

On Taiwan, Britain's position is long-standing, well-known, and unchanged, Starmer said, adding that Britain would like to maintain high-level engagement with China, enhance dialogue and exchange, and strengthen cooperation in trade, investment, finance and environment, among others, to support each other's growth and prosperity.

Britain will work with China to promote exchanges between their legislatures and other sectors, Starmer said.

Hong Kong's prosperity and stability serve the common interests of both countries, and Britain welcomes Hong Kong as a unique and important bridge between the two countries, said the prime minister.

China plays a vital role in international affairs, and Britain would like to strengthen cooperation with China on climate change and other global challenges and jointly uphold world peace and stability, Starmer said.

Feng Zhongping, director of the Institute of European Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said that for both sides to unleash their full cooperation potential, Britain needs to develop a more objective and rational view of China.

Chen Yang, director of the Institute of European Studies at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, said artificial intelligence, bioscience, and new energy represent key development priorities in China's 15th Five-Year Plan, and deepening cooperation between the two sides on these fields will benefit the two peoples as well as the world.

He also suggested stepping up exchange and dialogue in such fields as education, culture, global governance, the international rule of law, and AI governance.

"Deeper and broader engagement at all levels is conducive to improve mutual understanding between the two peoples, which will contribute to the long-term and consistent development of China-Britain ties," Chen said.

On the same day, Chinese Premier Li Qiang also held talks with Starmer. Li said the Chinese government is committed to providing a favorable environment for enterprises from all countries, including Britain, to invest in China.

Following the talks, Li and Starmer witnessed the signing of multiple cooperation documents covering economy, trade, agriculture, food, media, education and market regulation.

As they both attended the closing ceremony of the meeting of 2026 UK-China Business Council, Li said the two sides can create a "new engine" for innovative development, taking the lead in and empowering each other in such fields as artificial intelligence, clean energy, biomedicine and high-end manufacturing.

"Both countries can begin by collaborating on a small scale in select fields, then broaden cooperation and build trust over time. Step by step, we can expect a fundamental improvement in China-Britain relations," Feng added. — Xinhua

China offers stability, predictability to an uncertain world

Commentary

BEIJING — As the world has navigated chaos and shocks since the start of 2026, encouraging and constructive developments are unfolding in China.

In January, leaders from Ireland, Canada, and Finland visited China, highlighting their growing willingness to deepen engagement with Beijing, amid a global backlash against unilateralism, protectionism and hegemonic bullying.

The latest such visit comes from British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who is in China for four days until tomorrow. The visit is the first by a British prime minister in eight years.

While the political and economic contexts of these visits vary by country, the flurry of diplomatic engagements shares a common emphasis on pragmatism, multilateralism, and the rules-based multilateral trading system. It also shows these Western countries' growing recognition and appreciation of China's role as a reliable partner for deepening win-win cooperation and tackling global challenges, and a steadfast champion

of multilateralism and world peace.

Talks have focused on areas including economic and trade cooperation, investment, culture, and joint efforts on climate change, resulting in concrete agreements. Businesses from Western countries are more eager than ever to take the opportunities China has offered.

Canada offers a telling example. Mark Carney, as the first Canadian prime minister to visit China in eight years, secured concrete reciprocity in trade and a series of cooperation documents. Furthermore, both sides reaffirmed their commitment to multilateralism.

For Britain, Starmer is leading a delegation of representatives from more than 60 major British companies and institutions across key sectors, including finance, medicine, manufacturing, and culture and creativity. Issues related to global peace, stability and development were also discussed.

These visits to China come at a time when the world is facing mounting economic and security challenges: tariff threats have been repeatedly brandished as an instrument of coercion, and the

sitting president of a sovereign state was forcibly seized by another sovereign state.

Unilateralism, protectionism, and power politics are surging. The foundations of international law and the bedrock norms of international relations are under sustained assault. In Davos last week, pro-globalization and anti-globalization thoughts clashed head-on. The resulting sense of disorder is not a problem unique to any single country but a shared challenge facing most nations.

Against this backdrop, world leaders, especially those from the West, are increasingly viewing China's role more constructively, as the country steadfastly champions peace and resolves disputes through diplomatic dialogue and consultation. China's virtues in its dealings with other countries, including upholding equality and the rule of law, pursuing cooperation, and honoring its commitments, are badly needed in the turbulent world.

Stability, consistency, and predictability are more precious than ever, and China embodies these characteristics. China's economy remains on a steady path, accounting

for 30 percent of global economic growth, with stable expectations for continued momentum. The year 2026 marks the launch of the 15th Five-Year Plan, which will provide a clear, consistent roadmap for China's development through 2030.

With a population of 1.4 billion, China offers a consumer base unmatched by most economies. China's concrete measures to expand high-standard opening up, improve its business environment, and relax market access, now evident in tangible policy actions, are expected to create significant opportunities for common development with countries around the globe.

The recent positive, constructive diplomacy between China and Western countries once again demonstrates that solidarity and cooperation are the right choice for all, while divisions, confrontation, and zero-sum games lead nowhere.

In today's uncertain world, China's stability and predictability provide a rare and valuable anchor, which is set to benefit other countries. — Xinhua

China, Britain should make better use of complementary advantages: Li



Premier Li Qiang shakes hands with British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who is on an official visit to China, at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. – Xinhua

BEIJING – China and Britain should better leverage their complementary advantages to expand and improve bilateral trade, Premier Li Qiang said when holding talks with visiting British Prime Minister Keir Starmer in Beijing yesterday.

Li said China and Britain's commitment to openness, cooperation and mutual benefit reflects the will of the people and serves the common interests of both sides.

China is willing to continue to move in the same direction with Britain, respect each other's core interests and major concerns, strengthen strategic communication, consolidate the foundation of mutual trust and deepen cooperation across all fields, said Li, adding that this will not only help the two countries jointly address risks arising from changes in the international landscape and advance common development, but also inject more positive energy into global peace and stability.

China is ready to work with the British side to improve the inter-governmental dialogue and cooperation mechanism, and conduct exchanges more frequently at all levels and in various fields, Li noted.

He called on both sides to enhance exchanges and alignment in areas such as financial regulation and financial market connectivity, and to deepen cooperation in emerging industries including artificial intelligence, advanced manufacturing, clean energy, the digital economy and modern shipping services.

The Chinese government is committed to providing a favorable environment for enterprises from all countries, including Britain, to invest in China, and also hopes that Britain will offer Chinese enterprises a fair, transparent and non-discriminatory

business environment for investment in Britain, the premier said.

Li added that as permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, China and Britain should demonstrate the responsibility of major countries, strengthen multilateral communication and coordination, deepen cooperation on prominent issues of governance deficits, uphold the authority of the UN, safeguard multilateralism and free trade, and promote the development of the international order in a more just and equitable direction.

Noting Britain and China are permanent members of the UN Security Council and members of the Group of 20 (G20) economies, Starmer said that a long-term and stable comprehensive strategic partnership is in the interests of both sides, and is in the interests of global economic growth and world prosperity.

Britain is willing to strengthen high-level and multi-field exchanges and dialogues with China, Starmer said, adding that the British side supports open and free trade, is willing to deepen exchanges and cooperation in trade, finance, investment, manufacturing, services, culture and other fields with China, and welcomes Chinese enterprises to carry out investment and cooperation in Britain.

Starmer expressed willingness to step up coordination with China in multilateral cooperation, in jointly addressing global challenges, and in developing bilateral relations to a new chapter.

Prior to the talks, Li hosted a welcoming ceremony for Starmer in the Great Hall of the People.

Following the talks, Li and Starmer witnessed the signing of multiple cooperation documents covering economy, trade, agriculture, food, media, education and market regulation. – Xinhua

China, Britain should carry forward 'ice-breaking spirit', tighten cooperation bonds: Li

BEIJING – China and Britain should continue to carry forward the "ice-breaking spirit" and tighten their bonds of cooperation, Chinese Premier Li Qiang told the closing ceremony of the 2026 UK-China Business Council meeting in Beijing yesterday.

This is not only a rational choice for the two countries to deal with risks and promote development together, but also their due responsibility as responsible major countries to work together on solving global problems, Li said.

Li said that China and Britain are important economic and trade partners sharing extensive common interests. As long as both sides adhere to mutual respect, move in same direction, eliminate interference, and stick to openness and cooperation, the two countries can achieve win-win results and create prosperity through mutual success.

Li pointed out that last year, despite mounting economic pressure, China has pushed forward with innovation-led and high-quality development, demonstrating extraordinary resilience and vitality of its economy.

Noting that China starts implementing the 15th Five-Year Plan this year, Li said Chinese economic aggregate will reach a new level in the next five years, with the structure continuously optimized and new growth drivers expanding, which will provide huge space for China-Britain cooperation.

Noting that the enterprises of the two countries have great



Premier Li Qiang delivers a speech at the closing ceremony of the 2026 UK-China Business Council meeting at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, yesterday. Li attended the event with British Prime Minister Keir Starmer. Both addressed the meeting. – Xinhua

potential, he said that they can focus their efforts on four areas.

Focus on 4 areas

The first is the expansion of the "new increment" of bilateral trade, and developing services trade into a new cooperation growth point, in particular.

Second, the two sides can create a "new engine" for innovative development, taking the lead in and empowering each other in such fields as artificial intelligence, clean energy, biomedicine and high-end manufacturing, Li said.

Third, they can explore "new blue oceans" of tripartite cooperation, carry out more cooperation in the global market – with a particular focus on the Southern countries – and achieve win-win and multiple-win situations, the premier said.

The fourth is the creation

of "new vitality" in people-to-people exchange, alongside the development of more brand projects that are popular among people in both countries, a boost for people-to-people interaction, and the achievement of a double harvest of economic value and people-to-people connectivity, Li said.

Visiting British Prime Minister Keir Starmer said during the closing ceremony that the purpose of his visit to China is to gain a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of China, and discover and seize more opportunities for cooperation, so as to better benefit the British people and support the growth and prosperity of the country.

It is hoped that entrepreneurs and organizations of the two countries can seize the opportunity and carry out closer dialogue and cooperation, he added. – Xinhua

Chinese, US business communities urged to promote steady economic, trade relations

BEIJING – Senior Chinese political advisor Wang Yong yesterday called on the Chinese and US business communities to deepen practical cooperation to promote the steady, long-term development of China-US economic and trade relations.

Wang, vice chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, made

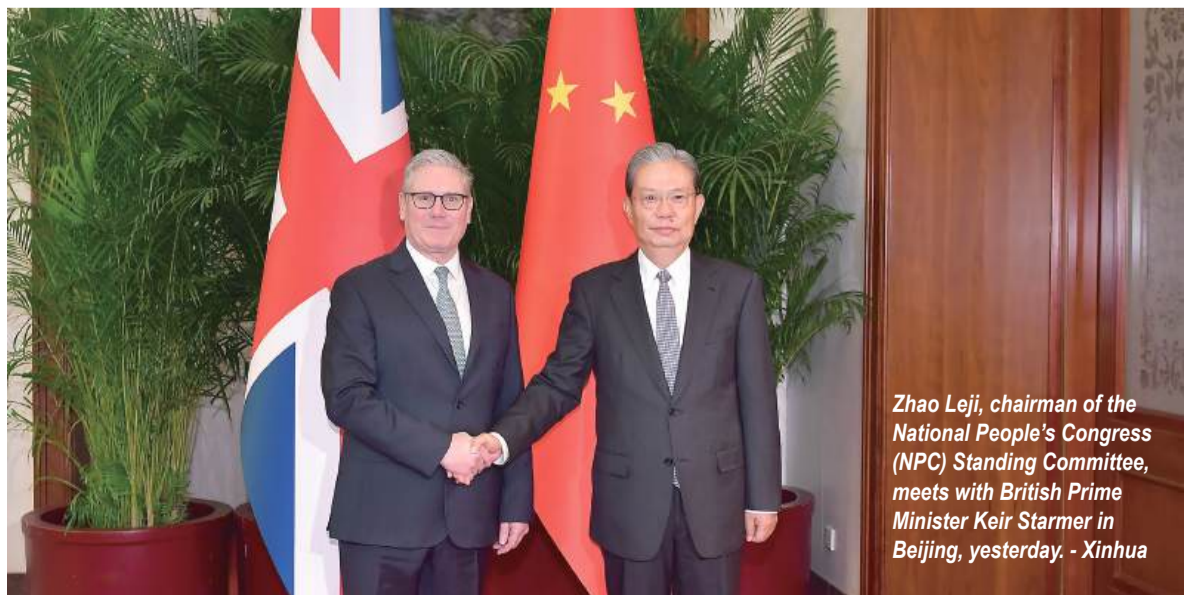
the remarks when addressing the annual appreciation dinner of the American Chamber of Commerce in the People's Republic of China (AmCham China) in Beijing.

He noted that in 2025, China and the United States undertook constructive dialogues and interactions under the strategic guidance of their heads of state, injecting stability into bilateral relations.

He said China will steadfastly

deepen its reform, expand its opening up and advance its innovation. It will also continuously unleash growth vitality through high-quality development, which will provide a big stage for enterprises from countries including the United States.

Approximately 400 representatives of the two countries' political and business circles attended the event. – Xinhua



Zhao Leji, chairman of the National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee, meets with British Prime Minister Keir Starmer in Beijing, yesterday. – Xinhua

Thai foreign minister hopes Myanmar polls 'start of transition' to peace

Pam Castro

CEBU — Thailand's foreign minister said yesterday that he hoped Myanmar's recent election would be the "start of a transition" that could lead to sustainable peace in the civil war-torn country.

Myanmar's pro-military party declared victory Monday in junta-run elections widely labelled a "sham" by rights groups.

Critics say the poll was stacked with army allies to prolong its grip on power after a 2021 coup that saw massively popular democratic figurehead Aung San Suu Kyi detained and her party dissolved.

Speaking on the sidelines of an ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] retreat in the central Philippines, Thai Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuangketkeow said he hoped the polls might pave the way to peace.

"It's not a perfect election, but we hope that it will be the start of the transition," he told reporters, with the end goal of a "sustainable solution".

Phuangketkeow later told AFP that Thailand had proposed what it termed "calibrated engagement", saying the country needed to be proactive given its status as Myanmar's next-door neighbour.

"It's not engagement that is meant to accord immediate legitimacy to the new government that will come to power after the election," he said in an interview, conceding the recent polls did not meet expectations "for many of us".

"But we hope that by way of engagement and by way of their positive response ... we can bring about positive changes. We have to try."

Theresa Lazaro, foreign minister of current ASEAN chair the Philippines, said "a good number" of the bloc's members held similar views, which she called "pragmatic".

"It's not an expression of support, but ... a view that these elections might be something positive," Lazaro said at a press briefing that concluded two days of meetings in Cebu.

"As far as the ASEAN collective, there is no endorsement at this time," she added.

'Sea of confrontation'

ASEAN foreign ministers had huddled a day earlier in a two-hour meeting devoted to the ongoing conflict in Myanmar.

The bloc's efforts to defuse Myanmar's ongoing civil war have centred around a five-point plan that Myanmar agreed to in 2021 but has borne little fruit.

— AFP

Indonesian couple caned 140 times for sex outside marriage, alcohol

BANDA ACEH — Sharia police caned a couple 140 times each in Indonesia's Aceh province yesterday for having sex outside marriage and drinking alcohol, likely one of the severest such punishments since the deeply conservative region adopted Islamic law.

Sexual relations between an unmarried couple are strictly outlawed in Aceh, the only place in Indonesia to impose a version of sharia.

The couple, a man and a woman, were struck on their backs with a rattan stick in a public park while dozens of people watched, according to an AFP reporter at the scene.

The woman fainted after enduring her punishment and was escorted to an ambulance.

In total, the pair received 140 lashes: 100 for sex outside marriage and 40 for consuming alcohol, the head of Banda Aceh's Sharia police, Muhammad Rizal, told AFP.

It is thought to be one of the highest numbers of cane lashes imposed since sharia was implemented after Aceh was granted special autonomy in 2001.

The couple was among six people flogged for breaking the



A medical team and Sharia police members carry a woman who fainted after being publicly caned by a member of the Sharia police in Banda Aceh, Indonesia yesterday.

— AFP

Islamic code, including a sharia police officer and his female partner, who were caught in close proximity in a private place.

That couple received 23 strikes each.

"As promised, we make no exceptions, especially not for our own members. This certainly tarnishes our name," Rizal said.

Caning retains strong support in Aceh to punish a range of offences, including gambling, drinking alcohol, having gay sex and having sexual relations outside marriage.

Last year, two men were publicly flogged 76 times each after they were found guilty of sexual relations by the sharia court.

— AFP

Bodies pulled from sea as Philippine ferry toll rises to 29

MANILA — Eleven more bodies were pulled from waters off the southern Philippines yesterday, the coast guard said, days after a ferry capsized and threw hundreds of people into the sea.

The discovery brought the confirmed death toll to 29, officials said in a statement, three days after the MV Trisha Kerstin 3 went down off southwestern Mindanao in the early hours of Monday.

The ferry was carrying at least 344 passengers and crew, most of whom were rescued in the immediate aftermath.

Rescuer Yushrina Julkanain told AFP yesterday the latest casualties had mostly been found in the vicinity of Baluk-Baluk Island, near where the ferry sank.

"They have been turned over to the coast guard," she said, adding that some had been discovered by fishermen.

A video uploaded to Facebook

and verified by AFP showed a fisherman pulling a victim, still wearing her life jacket, from the water with a hook.

Another video showed what appeared to be a small child.

The confirmation of 11 new victims has thrown into confusion estimates of the number aboard the ferry when it sank.

A previous tally had placed the number of people missing at 10, including the ship's captain, eight crew members and a safety marshal.

Philippine Coast Guard spokeswoman Captain Noemie Cayabyab told a local radio station the number of missing was now uncertain.

"Initially, the reported number of missing was 10 based on the [ship's] manifest," she said.

"However, we have received information from people that their loved ones are among the missing."

Divers flown in from Manila arrived at the site on Wednesday to assist in the recovery efforts. An unmanned vehicle was first deployed to pinpoint the location of the wreckage.

The ship is understood to be lying at a depth of approximately 76 metres.

The Philippines grounded the passenger fleet of the ferry's operator, Aleson Shipping Lines, on Tuesday pending what was described as a "full-blown investigation".

One of the ship's survivors described scenes of panic in the moments before the ship sank, with terrified passengers racing to one side of the listing vessel in a bid to rebalance it.

"No one from the crew alerted us," 53-year-old lawyer Aquino Sajili told AFP, adding he believed it was likely that passengers would file a lawsuit against the shipping company.

— AFP

Australian govt commits additional US\$35 million for humanitarian support in Afghanistan

CANBERRA — The Australian government yesterday announced an additional AU\$50 million (US\$35.4 million) in funding for humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan.

Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong and International Development Minister Anne Aly said in a joint statement that the people of Afghanistan are enduring one of the world's worst

protracted humanitarian crises.

The new funding takes the total humanitarian support provided by Australia to the people of Afghanistan to AU\$310 million (US\$219.6 million) since 2021.

Wong and Aly said that the new funding would focus on supporting women and girls, prioritizing food security, health services, and protecting dignity, safety and rights.

"Australia's humanitarian support

will help save lives, alleviate suffering, and meet the basic needs of communities affected by the ongoing Afghanistan crisis," Wong said.

UNICEF's representative in Afghanistan, Tajudeen Oyewale, said in Kabul on Tuesday that the country is facing one of the world's worst child malnutrition crises, with around 3.7 million children suffering from wasting annually.

— Xinhua

Police probe finds Japan Cabinet Office car ran red light at 130 kph in fatal crash

TOKYO — A Japanese Cabinet Office vehicle was traveling at an estimated 130 km per hour when it ran a red light and slammed into other cars at an intersection in central Tokyo earlier this month, killing one person and injuring six others, police said yesterday.

Analysis of vehicle data showed that the car was traveling at more than twice the 60-kph legal speed limit in the area, Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department said.

The crash, involving six vehicles, occurred on January 22 at an intersection in the Akasaka district of Minato Ward. A 32-year-old taxi passenger was killed after suffering a severe head injury in

the collision. Police initially said eight people were injured but later confirmed six had sustained injuries.

The government car was believed to have been involved in the crash roughly 30 seconds after leaving the prime minister's official residence, national broadcaster NHK reported, citing an investigative source.

The car, driven by a 69-year-old contracted worker, likely entered the intersection 68 seconds after the traffic light turned red, the source said.

Police are planning to question the driver after he recovers from injuries in a possible case of dangerous driving resulting in death and injury.

— Xinhua



Thailand's Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuangketkeow talks during an interview with AFP on the sideline of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Foreign Ministers' Meeting Retreat in Cebu yesterday.

— AFP

Sri Lanka reports 9 child marriages, 79 teenage pregnancies in 2025

COLOMBO-Sri Lanka recorded nine cases of child marriage and 79 teenage pregnancies in 2025, the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) said yesterday.

The NCPA said a total of 10,455 complaints related to children were lodged during 2025. Out of these, 545 involved sexual harassment and 231 involved grave sexual abuse.

The NCPA also received information on 38 cases of rape, 150 cases of cyber abuse targeting children and 20 attempted child suicides. Three abortions involving teenagers were also recorded.

In addition, the agency received 42 complaints concerning children without birth certificates and nine cases of children under the age of five being left behind when their parents migrated overseas.

The NCPA said the figures highlight continuing vulnerabilities faced by children and stressed the need for stronger preventive measures, public awareness and coordinated intervention to ensure child protection nationwide.

— Xinhua



Afghan horsemen compete during 'Buzkashi', a traditional Central Asian sport in the Jurm district of Badakhshan province yesterday. — AFP

Indian state mulls social media ban for children

NEW DELHI – Authorities in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh are preparing the ground for a ban on children using social media, a minister said yesterday, as concerns mount globally over online addiction and abuse.

Nara Lokesh, the southern state's information technology minister, said trust in social media was "breaking down" and warned that "children are slipping into relentless usage".

"The government has decided to act," he said in a statement posted on X, adding that officials had ordered a study into legal tools for enforcing "age-appropriate access".

India, the world's most populous nation, has about one billion internet users with all cities and 95 percent of villages connected, according to government figures.

Andhra Pradesh authorities have invited major platforms including Meta, Google, X and ShareChat to discuss and evaluate "global best practices", Lokesh said.

The move follows similar discussions in the western Indian state of Goa, where authorities were exploring the legality of a proposed social media ban for children.

Lokesh also flagged concerns about the online safety of women, saying many were "facing non-stop online abuse".

"This cannot be ignored," he added.

The federal government weighed in yesterday, with the annual economic survey recommending national guidelines on children's screen time.

"Policies on age-based access limits may be considered, as younger users are more vulnerable to compulsive use and harmful content," the survey said.

Global scrutiny over social media use by minors has surged in recent months.

Australia banned social media access for under-16s in December, while French lawmakers this week approved a bill barring under-15s from using the platforms.

Several other countries as well as the European Union are considering similar steps.

— AFP

Foam overflows from manhole near US base in Japan

TOKYO – White foam was seen overflowing from a manhole near a US base in Japan's Okinawa Prefecture yesterday, prompting local authorities to investigate a possible link to per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) contamination.

A police officer on routine patrol discovered the foam leaked from the sewer linked to the US Marine Corps Air Station Futenma around noon in the city of Ginowan.

The city government is investigating the cause of the incident and has collected foam samples to analyze whether it contains PFAS and other potentially harmful substances.

The latest overflow echoes earlier incidents reported in 2020, when extinguishant containing potentially harmful PFAS chemicals leaked from the Futenma base, causing white foam to spread through surrounding residential areas, Kyodo News reported.

The report said the US military denied any involvement in the case, saying it had no confirmation that foam fire extinguishers or similar equipment were used.

PFAS encompasses over 10,000 synthetic chemicals, which were once used for water-repellent finishing and foam-extinguishing agents.

A Japanese government survey in 2023 has found concentrations of PFAS chemicals in rivers and groundwater exceeded the country's provisional standard at 242 locations nationwide, raising concern about possible health risks such as cancer.

— Xinhua



A saree vendor reads a newspaper, while a dog is basking in the sun, outside his shop in Varanasi, India yesterday. — AFP

Singapore to conduct temperature screening at airport over Nipah outbreak

SINGAPORE – Singapore will step up health screening at Changi Airport after a Nipah virus outbreak in West Bengal, India, including temperature checks for flights from affected areas, authorities have said.

Health advisories will be issued to travelers at Singapore's points of entry, advising inbound travelers to seek medical attention if they feel unwell after travel, and providing outbound travelers guidance on health precautions, the Communicable Diseases Agency said in a statement on Wednesday.

The Ministry of Manpower is also stepping up surveillance of newly arrived migrant workers from South Asia, it added.

Nipah virus transmission is currently believed to occur mainly through exposure to bats or the consumption of date palm sap or fruit contaminated by bats. The agency noted that ongoing bio-surveillance programs monitoring Singapore's bat populations since 2011 have not detected the presence of the virus.

— Xinhua

Afghanistan inaugurates 1st national cancer treatment hospital

KABUL – Afghanistan's Ministry of Public Health inaugurated the country's first national cancer treatment hospital yesterday in the capital, Kabul, a 200-bed facility designed to reduce the need for patients to seek care abroad.

The inauguration ceremony was led by Public Health Minister Mawlawi Noor Jalal Jalali, who hailed the hospital as a realized dream.

"It is a great pleasure that, together, we are inaugurating the national cancer treatment hospital. This was our dream, achieved through joint efforts, and we will continue striving to provide standardized and high-quality services," Jalali stated.

He emphasized that many Afghan patients have been forced to seek diagnosis and treatment overseas, often encountering significant obstacles such as visa complications. "Therefore, we are striving to provide facilities domestically and put an end to the need for traveling abroad," the minister added.

— Xinhua

Cambodia-Thailand RBC meeting over border issues ends with no consensus

PHNOM PENH - The three-day Cambodia-Thailand Regional Border Committee (RBC) secretariat meeting over border issues wrapped up yesterday without reaching any consensus, said a Cambodian defense spokesperson.

Held at the Poipet International Border Checkpoint between Cambodia's Banteay Meanchey province and Thailand's Sa Kaeo province, the meeting was held between Cambodia's 5th Military Region and Thailand's 1st Army Area under the observation of the ASEAN Observer Team.

"Both parties have yet to reach common ground, [but] both parties agreed to return to their respective headquarters to continue exchanging documents and negotiating until a consensus is reached," Maly Socheata, a spokesperson for the Cambodian Ministry of National Defense, said in a press release.

She added that when a consensus is reached, there will be a Cambodia-Thailand RBC meeting and a formal signing ceremony between Cambodia's 5th Military Region and Thailand's 1st Army Area.

Cambodia and Thailand agreed to an immediate ceasefire on December 27, 2025, after three weeks of a new round of armed conflict that caused casualties on both sides.

— Xinhua

Turkey to offer mediation in US-Iran showdown

Fulya Ozerkan

ISTANBUL — Turkey will offer to mediate between Washington and Tehran when Iran's foreign minister visits today, officials said, as Ankara mulls reinforcing security along its border should the dispute escalate.

Today's visit by Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi comes after US President Donald Trump threatened a military strike on Iran over its deadly protest crackdown this month and the lack of a nuclear agreement.

A US naval strike group is in the Middle East and Trump has warned it was "ready, willing and able" to hit Iran "if necessary".

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan will tell Araghchi that his country "is ready to contribute to resolving the current tensions through dialogue", a Turkish diplomatic source said.

Fidan would reiterate Turkey's opposition "to military interventions against Iran [over] the regional and global risks such a step would entail", said the source, requesting anonymity because of the sensitivity of the talks.

'Security risks'

Speaking to Al-Jazeera television on Wednesday, Fidan said he had suggested Washington tackle outstanding issues with Iran "one-by-one", starting with the nuclear file rather than trying to address everything at once.

His remarks reflected Tehran's own stance on talks, said Serhan Afacan, director of IRAM, the Ankara-based Centre for Iranian Studies.

"If Trump invites the Iranians to reach a deal on the nuclear file, they are going to say yes. But if you put all of the issues in the same basket, that will be impossible," he said.

"For now, the ballistic missile programme remains a red line, as it sits at the core of Iran's defence architecture," he said.

"Compromise is not impossible, but it would only come after long rounds of negotiations and if Tehran's security concerns — especially vis-a-vis the US and Israel — are substantially addressed," he told AFP.

"It all depends on what President Trump is going to say: if he says 'I'm not going to attack Iran' we should expect

to see negotiations in a matter of weeks."

Turkey seeking trilateral talks?

As well as Turkey's diplomatic efforts to stave off a military confrontation, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has also been pushing Washington for a high-level trilateral meeting, Turkish media reports said.

There was no official confirmation.

"Turkey's focus in US-Iran relations is not necessarily on resolving all disputes, but on preventing a military intervention," Ankara-based Iranian academic Arif Keskin told AFP, saying a strike risked generating serious security problems and possible mass migration.

Turkey's stance aligned with the approach of pro-negotiation circles in Iran, he said.

"At this stage, it is widely acknowledged that the actor that would benefit most from negotiations and a potential agreement would be the Iranian leadership itself," Keskin said. "Even the initiation of talks is viewed as a significant gain for Iran."

Contingency plans

Alongside its diplomatic push, Ankara is assessing additional security precautions along its border with Iran if a US strike destabilises the country, a senior Turkish official told AFP.

Much of the 500-kilometre frontier is secured by a wall, but "it has proven insufficient", said the official.

Ankara has so far avoided the term "buffer zone" but options under review include deploying more troops and expanding technological surveillance systems, the official added.

Turkey began the wall in 2021 over concerns about a migrant influx following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan.

Despite unrest in Iran and the threat of a US strike, there has been no evidence of any large-scale movements towards the border, the defence ministry said earlier this month.

To date, Turkey has built 380 kilometres of concrete wall and 553 kilometres of trenches with nearly 250 surveillance towers, official figures show, with drones providing round-the clock reconnaissance. — AFP

Denmark hails 'very constructive' meeting with US over Greenland



An ice block floats in the water in the city of Nuuk, western Greenland, yesterday. — AFP

Camille BAS-WOHLERT

COPENHAGEN — Denmark's foreign minister said yesterday he was "more optimistic" after technical talks kicked off with the United States over Greenland.

"We have had the very first meeting at senior official level in Washington yesterday regarding the Greenlandic issue," Lars Lokke Rasmussen told journalists at an EU meeting in Brussels.

"It went well in a very constructive atmosphere and tone, and new meetings are planned. It's not that things are solved, but it's good."

The trilateral talks come after US President Donald Trump last week backed down from his threats to seize the autonomous Arctic territory of EU and NATO member Denmark.

"There was a major detour. Things were escalating, but now we are back on track," Rasmussen said. "I'm slightly more optimistic today than a week ago."

Meanwhile, the Danish royal house also announced Thursday that King Frederik X would travel to Greenland on February 18 to show his "concern" for the island's inhabitants.

Trump's threats over Greenland plunged the transatlantic alliance into its deepest crisis in years.

The unpredictable US leader backed off his desire to take control of Greenland after saying he had

struck a "framework" deal with NATO chief Mark Rutte to ensure greater American influence.

But few concrete details appear to have been agreed — with authorities in Denmark and Greenland refusing to discuss handing over any sovereignty.

"I have stated on many occasions, we, of course, share the US security concerns regarding the Arctic, this is something we want to solve in close cooperation," Rasmussen said.

'Unfettered' access

As part of the compromise with Washington, NATO members are expected to bolster their activities in the Arctic, while Denmark and Greenland could renegotiate a 1951 treaty on US troop deployments.

Louisiana governor Jeff Landry, who was named Trump's special envoy for Greenland in December said in an op-ed published in *The New York Times* that details were "being worked out".

"But the framework builds on the 1941 and 1951 defence agreements between the United States and Denmark and would enhance American, NATO and Greenlandic security and reaffirm longstanding trans-Atlantic defence obligations," Landry wrote.

"It would expand America's operational freedom, support new bases and infrastructure, facilitate deployment of advanced missile-

defence systems like the Golden Dome and crowd out hostile Chinese and Russian influence," he wrote.

At the same time, Landry stressed that "the reality is that no nation, or group of nations, is capable of securing Greenland without the United States."

Landry continued to add that Trump recognised the "uncomfortable fact" that "America must guarantee its own unfettered and uninterrupted access to key strategic territories in the Western Hemisphere, including both Greenland and the Panama Canal."

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Wednesday he expected a "good outcome" on Greenland as negotiations start.

Trump has repeatedly argued that the US needs the Arctic territory, home to some 57,000 inhabitants, for "national security".

In explaining his planned trip to Greenland, Denmark's King Frederik told reporters during a visit to Lithuania that "we feel very deeply for the Greenlandic people and we have been deeply affected by what has been happening in Greenland in recent weeks."

"We can sense from the media that the Greenlandic people have been very concerned. It is clear that this concerns us both," he added, referring to his wife, Queen Mary.

— AFP

Colombian president angers churches with Jesus sex comments

BOGOTÁ — Churches in deeply Christian Colombia have reacted angrily to assertions by President Gustavo Petro that Jesus Christ had engaged in sex.

On Tuesday, Petro said in a speech that Jesus had "made love," "perhaps with Mary Magdalene," a

disciple of his teachings.

"A man like that could not exist without love," the president said, adding that Jesus "died surrounded by women who loved him, and there were many."

While Colombia is constitutionally secular, a vast majority identify

as Catholic or Christian.

Jesus is widely thought to have never married and to have lived a chaste life.

The Evangelical Confederation of Colombia, which represents evangelical and Protestant churches, said Petro's statements "distort

historical, biblical and theological truth" and accused him of showing a "lack of respect."

The Catholic Church's Episcopal Conference, for its part, called for "respect, non-interference, and the protection of people in their beliefs" and urged politicians to steer clear

of "theological" statements.

Petro, who identifies as a non-practising Catholic, went to Catholic school and has expressed his admiration for "liberation theology" — a school of Christian thought focused on uplifting the poor and marginalised. — AFP

Venezuelans eye economic revival with hoped-for oil resurgence

Margioni Bermúdez

EL PALITO, Venezuela – Ronald Herrera remembered the prosperity that Puerto Cabello enjoyed decades ago as home to the El Palito refinery – once a symbol of Venezuela’s oil boom.

Now, the ex-refinery worker said, he hoped to see his coastal city rise again through a relaunch of the Latin American country’s oil industry by the United States, after Washington forcibly removed Nicolás Maduro from power on January 3.

“We’re looking at a very promising outlook because, since we live next to the refinery, we believe the flow of work is going to improve,” Herrera told AFP.

Delcy Rodríguez replaced Maduro as Venezuela’s interim president after US forces seized and took him to the United States during a military raid in Caracas.

She quickly signed oil agreements with US President Donald Trump, who has declared that his administration now controls the sector – the main engine of the Venezuelan economy.

Nowadays, Herrera sells coffee and cigarettes from a street stall in El Palito – a district by the refinery in the port city located on Venezuela’s Caribbean coast.

Five of his seven children live abroad – part of a Venezuelan diaspora of around eight million, according to UN estimates.

Herrera favourably views Rodríguez’s stance on the oil sector, which has reeled from years of underinvestment, allegations of corruption and US sanctions.

Since taking office, Rodríguez has pushed a reform of a hydrocarbons law to open the country’s petroleum industry to foreign firms.

“It’s going to give us a big boost because, with jobs available,



A fisherman carries a box loaded with fish at El Palito beach, in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela’s Carabobo state, last Friday.

– AFP

we have work to do,” he said.

The acting president is under pressure from the Trump administration to comply with its demands to overhaul the state-run oil industry and open it up to US companies.

‘Always full’

At night, the refinery’s lights and its tongues of fire soften the gloom.

This network of pipes and huge storage tanks connects to a port where ships unload crude to be refined into gasoline and diesel for the Venezuelan market.

At the intersection where Herrera works, a dilapidated hotel waits for buyers.

A “for sale” sign is barely legible at the top, its letters faded by sun and salt air.

With four floors and 147 rooms, it’s the tallest building in El Palito. Outside in the street, a row of colourful shops offers refreshments to tourists visiting a local surfing beach.

Jonathan Guarire, a 35-year-

old employee at the hotel, said he believed the establishment could regain its past glory through a resurgence of the oil industry that would attract buyers.

“It was always full...and I hope it becomes like it was before,” he said.

“All of that was always full of keys,” he recalled, showing the small wooden cubbies where they used to be kept.

‘Blackmail’

The refinery is the area’s most prominent landmark.

Its huge white storage tanks serve as canvases for slogans evoking Chavismo, the political ideology that governed Venezuela for the past 27 years and is named after late former leftist leader Hugo Chávez.

One slogan read: “Fatherland, socialism or death.”

On a beach near the refinery, fishermen arrived at dawn with their night’s catch.

Sergio Espina, a retired sailor in his 60s, was waiting to buy fish, which he would then sell.

The situation “is a little tough,” he said. “I’m hoping things will get completely better to see what happens from here on out.”

Another local, Gilberto Herrera, 67, works as a public employee and earns a paltry salary of less than one dollar a month. He attributes Venezuela’s economic crisis to the sanctions that the United States slapped on country’s oil industry in 2019.

The sanctions “did us a lot of harm,” he said, questioning the military strike that Trump ordered on Venezuela.

“It’s all blackmail, if you ask me. Why are they only now opening things up, as they say, to allow investment?”

– AFP



This photo taken last Friday shows Venezuela’s huge refinery El Palito in Puerto Cabello, Carabobo state.

– AFP

Trump orders re-opening of Venezuela airspace

WASHINGTON – US President Donald Trump said he had ordered the reopening of commercial airspace over Venezuela by the end of the day yesterday, nearly four weeks after the US military operation to topple Nicolás Maduro.

Trump told a cabinet meeting he had just spoken to Venezuela’s interim president Delcy Rodríguez “and informed her that we’re going to be opening up all commercial airspace over Venezuela.”

He added that he had instructed

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy “and everybody else concerned, including the military, that if you would, by the end of today, I’d like you to have the airspace over Venezuela” opened.

– AFP

Portugal storm death toll climbs, 450,000 without power

LISBON – Storm Kristin has claimed five lives and left nearly 450,000 clients without power yesterday, more than 24 hours after it barrelled through central and northern Portugal, authorities said.

The storm brought heavy downpours and strong winds, reaching speeds of up to 178 kmh on the night from Tuesday to Wednesday.

The fifth victim, whose death was announced yesterday, was a 34-year-old man who died in the centre of the country “as a result of the severe weather,” according to civil protection officials, who did not provide details.

Almost 450,000 customers were still without power early yesterday (local time), mainly in the centre of the country, according to E-redes, the electricity distribution network operator.

The majority were in the Leiria district in central Portugal where the storm knocking down poles and high-voltage lines.

Rail services remained suspended on several lines, including Lisbon to Porto, according to the state-owned rail company.

Several schools in the central part of the country remained closed.

Firefighters in Leiria responded to dozens of calls yesterday morning (local time) related to minor flooding and damage to roofs, regional official Ricardo Costa told reporters.

“Residents are calling for help because it’s still raining, although not very heavily, but it’s causing significant damage to homes,” he added.

The Portuguese government said the storm had “caused significant damage across several parts of the country.”

– AFP



A man walks past debris in a street of Leiria, central Portugal yesterday, after Storm Kristin hit Portugal.

– AFP

Brazil’s central bank holds interest rate at 15 pct

BRASÍLIA – Brazil’s central bank on Wednesday kept its benchmark interest rate at 15 percent for the fifth time in a row as it worked to tamp down inflation in Latin America’s largest economy.

The decision by the Monetary Policy Committee (Copom) was made due to a “still uncertain external environment,” the bank said in a statement.

The rate, known in Portuguese

as the Selic, remains at its highest level since July 2006 – though the bank anticipated it would begin a “flexibilisation” of its monetary policy at its next meeting in March.

Wednesday’s decision marks a blow to the administration of leftist President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who has repeatedly called for rate cuts since returning to power in 2023. He previously served from 2003 to 2010.

– AFP

Mexican President Sheinbaum reports ‘cordial’ call with Trump on trade, security

MEXICO CITY – Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum, who has been treading a fine diplomatic line with US counterpart Donald Trump, said yesterday the two of them had a “productive and cordial” telephone call on trade and security issues.

On security, “we both agreed that things are going very well,” she told reporters after Trump had threatened land attacks against drug cartels to follow recent US maritime operations in the Pacific and Caribbean.

Since seizing Venezuela’s president Nicolás Maduro in a deadly military operation, Trump has made threats against other leftist governments in the region, including Cuba,

Colombia and Mexico.

Sheinbaum said a review of the US-Mexico-Canada free trade agreement USMCA, which Trump has said is unfavourable to his country, was still “underway.”

The agreement is critical to the economy of Mexico, which sends 80 percent of its exports to the United States.

Trump has so far broadly adhered to the existing free trade agreement, which he signed and praised during his first term.

But the Trump administration has indicated it could seek major changes, or may move to scrap the pact entirely.

– AFP

Power, pace and financial muscle: How Premier League sides are ruling Europe

Kieran Canning



MANCHESTER – Premier League clubs have flexed their muscle on and off the field in Europe, with five English sides finishing in the top eight of the Champions League group phase.

Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester City, Newcastle and Tottenham all enjoyed a higher win percentage in their eight Champions League matches than they have in this season's Premier League.

Mikel Arteta's Arsenal are the first side to finish with a perfect record of eight league-phase wins under the current format while, Chelsea, City, Liverpool and Tottenham also progressed directly to the last 16.

Newcastle face a play-off next month but have little to fear based on the group stage.

"I think we've all said for a few years that the Premier League is the best league in the world and I think that's another sign of it, no doubt about that," said Tottenham boss Thomas Frank.

Bankrolled by television rights deals that dwarf those in other nations, Premier League clubs have long enjoyed a significant financial advantage over most of their European rivals.

In Deloitte's annual Football Money League, released last week, nine of the top 20 highest-earning clubs in the world last season were English.

Five of the six English clubs that have shone in this season's Champions League were in the top 10. Newcastle, in 17th spot, are backed by the Saudi sovereign wealth fund.

During the summer transfer window, spending by Premier League clubs hit an all-time high, surpassing £3 billion (US\$4.1 billion) - more than the Bundesliga, La Liga, Ligue 1 and Serie A combined.

Powerful squads

That has armed English clubs with deep squads, giving them a huge advantage in a packed football calendar.

Villarreal sit fourth in La Liga, but finished second from bottom in the Champions League group phase, losing to Tottenham and City among the eight matches they failed to win.

"We're a Champions League team, we had a Spanish international, and then Crystal Palace, not one of England's top clubs, came along and signed Jeremy Pino," said Villarreal coach Marcelino. "For a significant sum of money and with a higher salary than any Spanish team could pay."

English clubs have not only asserted their financial strength. On the field, they are often too physically imposing for their continental rivals.

Arsenal cruised to a 3-1 victory away at last season's Champions League finalists Inter Milan last week despite naming a largely second-string side.

"They had more intensity, technique and pace," said Inter boss Cristian Chivu. "I won't point out how much money they spent, as that would be too obvious, but the Premier League does have a very different type of intensity and pace to Italian football."

The success of Premier League sides in Europe this season has come despite underwhelming domestic campaigns for some teams.

Tottenham, 14th in the Premier League, finished fourth in the Champions League table, while Liverpool beat Real Madrid, Atletico Madrid and Inter on their way to securing third place - in sharp contrast to their wretched title defence in England.

"In the Premier League, it's become more physical than ever," said Newcastle winger Anthony Gordon when asked to explain the differences between playing in both competitions.

The England international has scored six times in this season's Champions League but has not netted from open play in the Premier League for more than a year.

"It's like a basketball game sometimes, it's so relentless physically," he said. "There's not much control. It's a running game and sometimes about duels - who wins the duels wins the game."

But that same physicality can take its toll in the latter stages of the Champions League, when players are feeling the strain after eight months of relentless action.

That is when they come up against European powerhouses such as Real Madrid, Bayern Munich, Barcelona and Paris Saint-Germain, who have the resources to match the Premier League's best.

Those clubs have ensured there have been only three English winners of European football's biggest prize in the past 13 seasons, giving hope to those who fear total domination.

– AFP

Former Chelsea forward Werner moves to MLS' San Jose



BERLIN – Former Chelsea forward Timo Werner has moved to MLS franchise San Jose Earthquakes from RB Leipzig, the German club announced yesterday.

Werner struck an agreement with Leipzig to end his contract six months early, allowing for the move.

"Timo Werner is and remains an undeniable part of the success story of RB Leipzig," the club's managing director for sport Marcel Schaefer said.

"We wish him all the best in the MLS and the USA, both professionally and personally!"

The 29-year-old joins San Jose on a contract that runs to June 2028, making him the second high-profile German international to sign for an MLS outfit following on from Thomas Mueller's August move to Vancouver Whitecaps.

"To have a player of Timo's calibre coming in is simply outstanding for the club and the community. I believe he'll offer us quality on the field, experience and leadership," Earthquakes sporting director and head coach Bruce Arena said.

After scoring 28 Bundesliga goals with Leipzig in a breakout 2019-20 campaign, Werner moved to Chelsea.

Despite winning the Champions



Tottenham Hotspur's German striker Timo Werner celebrates scoring the team's first goal during the English League Cup round of 16 against Manchester City at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in London, on October 30, 2024.

– AFP

League in 2021, Werner endured a difficult stint at Stamford Bridge and was often criticised for his wayward finishing.

He returned to Leipzig in 2022 and had a season-and-a-half-long loan spell at Tottenham but could not recapture his form.

After returning to Leipzig in the close season, he made only three Bundesliga appearances this season.

"The last few months have been challenging for me but I've learnt a

lot and will take that with me for the future," Werner said.

Werner will continue to train in Leipzig before moving to the US in mid-February, ahead of the start of the MLS season.

With 113 goals in 216 appearances across all competitions, Werner leaves Leipzig as the club's record goalscorer.

Werner played 57 times for Germany, scoring 24 goals, but has not been called up for international duty since June 2023.

– AFP



Holders PSG, Real Madrid among clubs awaiting Champions League play-offs draw

PARIS - Title-holders Paris Saint-Germain and record 15-time winners Real Madrid are among the European giants who will have to come through the play-off round of this season's Champions League after missing out on direct qualification for the last 16.

The draw for the knockout stage play-offs takes place today from 7 p.m. after the league phase concluded on Wednesday with the eighth and final round of games.

There was real drama on the last night, in particular in Lisbon where Jose Mourinho's Benfica beat his former side Real 4-2, goalkeeper Anatoliy Trubin scoring a 98th-minute goal that allowed the Portuguese giants to snatch the last spot in the play-offs and nudged their opponents out of the top eight.

Europe's elite club competition is now more bloated than ever since the expansion last season to 36 teams in the Champions League proper.

That means 144 matches are now required to eliminate just 12 teams, with the top eight in the overall standings going through to the last 16 and the next 16 teams advancing to the play-offs.

At the end of it all, there are few real surprises, with the top 17 berths all occupied by clubs from the so-called big five European leagues of England (six), Spain (three), Italy (three), Germany (three) and France (PSG), with one exception in Portuguese giants Sporting.

Some big names did fall by the wayside, with Italian champions Napoli being bundled out along with

three former champions in Marseille, PSV Eindhoven and Ajax. Athletic Bilbao, Villarreal and Eintracht Frankfurt were eliminated too.

The play-offs take place over two legs in February, with the eight winners completing the line-up for the last 16.

Bodo/Glimt, Qarabag the surprises

The most remarkable achievements in reaching the play-offs belong to Qarabag - the champions of Azerbaijan who advanced despite losing 6-0 to Liverpool in their final outing - and, above all, Bodo/Glimt.

Champions of Norway in four of the last six years, the outfit from north of the Arctic Circle beat Manchester City and Atletico Madrid in their last two matches to go through - despite their domestic season finishing at the end of November.

"We should be extremely proud," said their coach Kjetil Knutsen, and Bodo/Glimt can now look forward to a glamour tie against either Real or last season's beaten finalists Inter Milan.

The other possible tie for Madrid is an immediate rematch with Benfica, while other potential match-ups today include PSG having to face domestic rivals Monaco and Borussia Dortmund having to play Bayer Leverkusen in all-Bundesliga showdown.

"We will have to take the long route, but I don't think anyone else can be considered favourites more than us," said PSG coach Luis Enrique of having to face an extra knockout tie, mindful that doing so last year did not

stop the French side from going on to win the title.

"We deserve to be in this situation today," admitted Real star Kylian Mbappe after his side's loss in Lisbon saw them drop into the play-offs.

"Now we have to play two more play-off games. It hurts to have to play those, we wanted to have the time in February to work on our game."

Real came through the play-offs last season, beating Manchester City before eventually losing to Arsenal in the quarter-finals.

This time City are one of their potential opponents in the last 16 in March, along with Sporting, should they make it through the play-offs.

Meanwhile, PSG already know they will play either Barcelona or Chelsea in the last 16, assuming they reach that stage - the Parisians beat Barcelona away earlier this season but lost to Chelsea in the Club World Cup final last July.

Arsenal, having finished first in the league phase, will take on one of Dortmund, Leverkusen, Atalanta or Olympiacos in the last 16.

Champions League knockout phase play-off draw teams

Seeded: Real Madrid (ESP), Inter Milan (ITA), Paris Saint-Germain (FRA), Newcastle United (ENG), Juventus (ITA), Atletico Madrid (ESP), Atalanta (ITA), Bayer Leverkusen (GER)

Unseeded: Borussia Dortmund (GER), Olympiacos (GRE), Club Brugge (BEL), Galatasaray (TUR), Monaco (FRA), Qarabag (AZE), Bodo/Glimt (NOR), Benfica (POR). – AFP

Ayub stars in Pakistan’s win over Australia in first T20

Cricket

LAHORE – All-rounder Saim Ayub starred in Pakistan’s spin-assisted 22-run win over Australia in the first Twenty20 international in Lahore yesterday.

Ayub top-scored in Pakistan’s 168-8 with a 22-ball 40 that included two sixes and three fours, while Salman Agha added four sixes and a four in his 27-ball 39.

The tourists managed 146-8 in their 20 overs with spinners taking six wickets for Pakistan.

With the ball, Ayub dismissed Australian openers Matthew Short [five] and Travis Head, who hit two sixes and two fours in his 13-ball 23.

Cameroon Green resisted with a 31-ball 36 but Australia succumbed to spin with Abrar Ahmed taking 2-10 while Mohammad Nawaz and Shadab Khan took a wicket apiece.

Both teams were tuning up for the Twenty20 World Cup starting in India and Sri Lanka from February 7.

Pakistan skipper Agha praised a team effort.

“It was a great game with complete team effort,” said Agha. “We started well with the bat but couldn’t finish the way we wanted.

“It became challenging after



Pakistan’s Saim Ayub (right) plays a shot as Australia’s wicketkeeper Josh Philippe watches during the first Twenty20 international cricket match against Australia at the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore, Pakistan yesterday. – AFP

the first 10 overs as the ball stopped coming onto the bat, but I think we were outstanding with the ball.”

Head, standing in for regular skipper Mitchell Marsh who rested, showed disappointment over batting.

“It was disappointing, but that’s how batting goes sometimes,” said Head.

“We felt like we dragged it back well after the first 10 overs but as the ball got softer, it became harder to score.”

Earlier, Ayub led Pakistan’s batting after the home team won the toss and chose to bat.

Paceman Xavier Bartlett jolted

Pakistan by dismissing Sahibzada Farhan with the first ball of the match.

But Ayub and Agha restored the innings with a second wicket stand of 74, but spinner Adam Zampa put the brakes on Pakistan’s progress with 4-24.

Zampa dismissed both Ayub and Agha in successive overs before accounting for Babar Azam (24) and Usman Khan (18).

Debutant Mahli Beardman finished with 2-33 as Pakistan managed just 31 in the last five overs.

The last two matches are tomorrow and Sunday, also in Lahore. – AFP

Norris feels ‘good’ as McLaren hit track for F1 testing

F1

BARCELONA – World champion Lando Norris returned to the track Wednesday as McLaren made their first appearance at Formula One’s private testing sessions in Barcelona.

Norris completed 62 laps in McLaren’s new MCL40 car in clear and dry conditions, after the twice reigning F1 constructors’ champions sat out the opening two days of testing this week.

“It was just nice to be back, nice to see the number one on my car. Pretty cool, pretty surreal,” said Norris.

“This was the first time everyone saw the car in one piece - it’s literally not been built until this morning. It’s

an incredible thing to see it all come together.”

After Tuesday’s rain-affected session that saw only Red Bull and Ferrari venture out, six teams took advantage of improved weather on Wednesday, with Alpine, Audi, Haas, McLaren, Mercedes and Racing Bulls all taking to the circuit.

With the upheaval in technical regulations set to take effect for the upcoming season, teams are focusing this week on the reliability of their cars rather than performance.

“It’s pretty different,” said Norris. “It’s a bit more of a challenge, which is a good thing.

“Today was really just a first understanding of the whole car, how it

works really. So, a productive day.

“It’s still going to take a while. It’s just trying to gather as much information in every condition possible.”

Despite an unusually short winter break, Norris said he feels ready for what lies ahead.

“I think I’m still even now trying to just accept it and realise that it’s happened,” said Norris, who held off Max Verstappen and McLaren teammate Oscar Piastri to clinch the title in the final race last season.

“It gives me good confidence coming into this season. But it’s such a big challenge with all the regulations, all the changes this year, but I feel good.” – AFP

Sport in brief

Mitchell signs new deal with England’s Red Roses

Rugby

LONDON – England head coach John Mitchell has signed a new contract to lead the Red Roses to the next Women’s Rugby World Cup in 2029.

The 61-year-old New Zealander guided the team to World Cup glory on home soil in September last year following a 33-13 victory over Canada in the final at Twickenham.

England have won 25 matches in a row since Mitchell was appointed in 2023, also clinching two Six Nations Grand Slams.

“I am pleased to extend my time with the Red Roses,” said the 2025 World Rugby coach of the year, who has previously coached the men’s All Blacks.

“This extension provides continuity

across a World Cup cycle and enables the programme to operate with a clear, long-term vision.”

England return to action on April 11 when they host Ireland on the opening weekend of the 2026 Women’s Six Nations. – AFP

Allrounder Molineux named Australian women’s cricket captain

Cricket

MELBOURNE – Spin-bowling allrounder Sophie Molineux was named captain of the all-conquering Australian women’s cricket team across all three formats yesterday, replacing the retiring Alyssa Healy.

The 28-year-old will take the reins of the T20 side when Australia hosts India next month, before assuming the one-day and Test duties for their tour

of the Caribbean in March.

“It’s a real honour to be named Australian captain and something I’m incredibly proud of, especially following on from Alyssa, who’s had such a huge impact on this team and the game,” said Molineux, who captains Victoria and the Melbourne Renegades.

“We’ve got a really strong group with plenty of natural leaders, alongside a lot of exciting talent coming through.”

Healy, 35, announced earlier this month that she would retire in March, having taken over as captain in 2023 from Meg Lanning.

Tahlia McGrath, who had filled in for Healy before and was tipped by many as her successor, remains vice-captain alongside Ashleigh Gardner.

Australia is the top-ranked ODI and T20 team in the world. – AFP

No handshake as Sabalenka sets up repeat of 2023 Melbourne final

Peter Stebbings



MELBOURNE - Belarusian world number one Aryna Sabalenka crushed Ukraine’s Elina Svitolina in a politically charged Australian Open semi-final yesterday and faces Elena Rybakina for a third Melbourne title.

There was no handshake after Sabalenka dismantled Svitolina 6-2, 6-3, before Kazakhstan’s Rybakina was also a straight-sets winner, over Jessica Pegula of the United States.

The ruthless Sabalenka will take some stopping as she pursues a third Melbourne crown in four years.

She is on an 11-match win streak this year, having come into the first major of 2026 on the back of claiming the title in Brisbane.

The hard-hitting 27-year-old is into her fourth Australian Open final in a row and yet to drop a set all year.

Sabalenka and Moscow-born fifth seed Rybakina have met 14 times, with the Belarusian winning eight of them.

That includes the Melbourne final in 2023, when Sabalenka fought back to win in three sets.

Ahead of her semi-final clash with 12th seed Svitolina, an announcement was made at Rod Laver Arena that there would be no handshake afterwards, asking fans to “respect” that.

Like other players from Ukraine, Svitolina does not shake hands with opponents from Russia or Moscow’s ally Belarus because of the war.

Sabalenka and Svitolina also noticeably kept apart for the pre-match formalities and photos.

After a dominant victory, Sabalenka was close to tears as she reflected on the “dream” life she leads.

She had warm words for Svitolina, saying: “I’m super happy with the win, she’s a really tough opponent, she was playing really incredible tennis throughout the whole week.”

There was controversy at the start of the fourth game.

With the match on serve, Sabalenka was hit with a hindrance call from the umpire for grunting, triggering a long video review and boos.

A clearly irritated Sabalenka lost the point but recovered her poise and a break of serve early in the second set to surge home.

A reflective Svitolina said the plight of her homeland put the defeat into perspective.

“People are really living horrible and terrifying lives in Ukraine, so I should not be allowed to really be sad because I’m a very, very lucky person,” the 31-year-old said.

Rybakina denies Pegula

Rybakina, the 2022 Wimbledon champion, was always in control of her semi-final against sixth-seeded Pegula.

But she got nervous at the death, before making her supremacy count in a 6-3, 7-6 (9/7) arm-wrestle over 1hr 40min.

Like Sabalenka, the 26-year-old has not dropped a set at the tournament.

“It was such a battle. It was an epic second set,” said Rybakina.

“I’m really proud that no matter the situation, I was leading, and then, of course, it was very tight, I still stayed there.

“I was fighting for each point.”

Rybakina, who defeated second seed Iga Swiatek in the quarter-finals, has been in sizzling recent form.

She beat Sabalenka to win the WTA Finals in Riyadh in November and has won 19 of her last 20 matches.

‘Fine line’

Off court, Australian Open chief Craig Tiley said it was “a fine line” between player promotion and privacy after top stars complained about backstage cameras at the Grand Slam, with Swiatek comparing it to a zoo.

The debate ignited when Coco Gauff was caught on camera repeatedly smashing her racquet in the bowels of the stadium following her defeat in the quarter-finals.

The United States two-time major winner was unhappy that what she thought was a private moment to vent her frustrations was broadcast for the world to see.

Speaking publicly for the first time on the debate, tournament director Tiley told the Tennis Channel: “We want to listen to the players, we want to really understand what their needs and what their wants are.”

He pointed out that while television cameras were in places including the player gym, other rooms were off-limits - that included the locker room, coaches room and recovery rooms.

“It’s a fine line between the player promotion and event promotion and where the cameras are,” he said. – AFP

‘One Battle After Another’ and ‘Sinners’ top BAFTA nods

Clara Lalanne and Joe Jackson

LONDON – “One Battle After Another” and “Sinners” lead this week’s shortlist of films competing at Britain’s BAFTA awards next month, ahead of the Oscars in mid-March in which both also dominate the nominations.

“One Battle After Another”, an offbeat thriller set against a wild backdrop of radical violence, immigration raids and white supremacists, earned 14 BAFTA nods, including for the coveted best film award.

Vampire period music-infused horror film “Sinners” followed close behind with 13 and will also vie for best film, less than a week after it smashed the all-time Oscars record for nominations with 16 selections.

“One Battle After Another” enters the Oscars best film race in second place after it garnered 13 nods in the Academy shortlist for the March 15 awards to be held in Hollywood.

The British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) awards, the highlight of the annual British film calendar, will be held in London on February 22, three weeks before the Oscars.

This year’s selection process stood out for “bold storytelling and unique takes” on everything from the geopolitical landscape to more personal stories, BAFTA CEO Jane Millichip, told AFP.



British actor David Jonsson (left), 32, and actress Aimee Lou Wood, 31, pose for a picture at the announcement of the British Academy Film Awards (BAFTA) nominations in central London on Tuesday. In 2025, Jonsson won the BAFTA Rising Star Award and was nominated at the British Independent Film Awards in the Best Lead Performance category for his role in the film “Wasteman”. Wood was nominated for the BAFTA Rising Star Award in 2023.

– AFP

“A lot of filmmakers have not pulled their punches on quite big subjects,” she said, noting in particular “Sinners”, “One Battle After Another”, and “Bugonia”.

But she also commended “a group of really intimate, and personal films” including “Hamnet”, “I Swear”, and “Sentimental Value”.

“Hamnet”, a period drama in which William Shakespeare and his wife struggle to cope with the

loss of their son in plague-ravaged Elizabethan England, secured 11 BAFTA nominations and will also compete for best film.

Timothee Chalamet’s ping-pong drama “Marty Supreme” also snagged 11 nods, including in the best film category, while Norwegian dramedy “Sentimental Value” bagged eight nominations and is the final of the five BAFTA best film contenders.

Although “Sinners” topped the Oscars nominations, “One Battle” was still strongly favoured in this year’s awards season, having won almost every precursor prize so far this awards season.

It reigned supreme at the Golden Globes earlier this month, winning best comedy, best director, best screenplay and best supporting actress, while “Hamnet” sprung a surprise by taking best drama film, beating out “Sinners”.

‘Really rich year’

At the BAFTAs, Yorgos Lanthimos (“Bugonia”), Chloé Zhao (“Hamnet”), Josh Safdie (“Marty Supreme”), Paul Thomas Anderson (“One Battle After Another”), Joachim Trier (“Sentimental Value”) and Ryan Coogler (“Sinners”) will compete for best director.

The leading actor shortlist features Leonardo DiCaprio (“One Battle After Another”), Michael B. Jordan (“Sinners”), Chalamet (“Marty Supreme”), Ethan Hawke (“Blue Moon”), Jesse Plemons (“Bugonia”) and Robert Aramayo (“I Swear”).

As with the Oscars, Paul Mescal missed out on a nomination for his “Hamnet” performance.

Meanwhile, Oscar contender Jessie Buckley (“Hamnet”), Emma Stone (“Bugonia”), Chase Infiniti (“One Battle After Another”), Kate Hudson (“Song Sung Blue”), Renate Reinsve (“Sentimental Value”) and Rose Byrne (“If I Had Legs I’d Kick You”) will vie for the leading actress gong.

“I Swear” – based on a true story about a Scottish man whose life was irrevocably changed by Tourette’s Syndrome* – was the most nominated British film, with five nods.

“It’s a really rich year and a fantastic year for British talents too,” Millichip said.

– AFP

*Tourette’s Syndrome (TS) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterised by the presence of multiple, involuntary motor and vocal movements known as tics, i.e., sudden, rapid, recurrent, non-rhythmic movements or vocalisations. – DeepSeek

S Africa drops ‘Melania’ just ahead of release



US first lady Melania Trump appears at the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) where she rang the opening bell on Wednesday in New York City. She made the appearance as part of her publicity tour for the film, “Melania,” which documents her life in the 20 days leading up to President Donald Trump’s second inauguration.

– AFP

JOHANNESBURG – South Africa’s main cinemas have pulled a documentary about US First Lady Melania Trump just ahead of its release, with the distributor citing “the current climate”, local media reported.

“Melania” was not listed on the websites of the Nu Metro or Ster Kinekor cinemas yesterday, the day before its international release on January 30.

News24 media reported on Wednesday the South African distributor Filmfinitly had abruptly dropped the film.

“Given the current climate, the film will no longer be releasing theatrically in [the] territory,” the site quoted the distributor’s head of marketing, Thobashan Govindarajulu, as saying.

Nu Metro confirmed to AFP yesterday that it had been told by Filmfinitly to withdraw the film.

“The rights sit with Filmfinitly, and it’s at their request that we are not releasing it,” Nu Metro said in a statement.

The South African government has strained ties with the administration of President Donald Trump, which has criticised Pretoria’s position on a range of domestic and international policies.

Trump has notably repeated claims that Pretoria is behind a “genocide” of the white Afrikaner community, which he has invited to settle in the United States.

– AFP

‘No. 1 fan’: Rapper Minaj backs Trump

WASHINGTON – Rap icon Nicki Minaj declared on Wednesday she was Donald Trump’s “number one fan,” adding that “hate” directed at the US president made her support him more.

Republican Trump called the provocative singer-songwriter up on stage after she announced her support for so-called “Trump Accounts,” which provide trust funds for children.

“I will say that I am probably the president’s number one fan, and that’s not going to change,” said Minaj, who wore a furry white coat as she embraced Trump and took the podium.

“And the hate or what people have to say, it does not affect me at all. It actually motivates me to support him more.”

The Trinidadian star, 43, added that she would not let the billionaire president’s opponents “get away with bullying him and you know, the smear campaigns.

It’s not going to work.”

“He has a lot of force behind him, and God is protecting him. Amen.”

Trump, who had earlier joked that he would grow out his nails to emulate the “Starships” and “Super Bass” rapper, then held her hand while another speaker took the podium.

The self-proclaimed “Queen of Rap” is known for her shape-shifting musical and fashion styles – but she has also radically modified her politics in recent years.

Previously a critic of Trump’s hardline immigration policies, Minaj has moved in recent years to praising his leadership.

In November she made a surprise appearance at the United Nations to call for an end to faith-based persecution in Nigeria, an allegation by the Trump administration which the government there denies.

– AFP



Trinidadian-American rapper Nicki Minaj attends the Treasury Department’s Trump Accounts Summit at Andrew W. Mellon Auditorium on Wednesday in Washington, DC. “Trump Accounts” are a portion of recently passed tax and spending legislation where the federal government will deposit US\$1,000 into investment accounts for every child born between 2025 and 2028 once parents sign their children up while filing their income taxes.

– AFP

World Weather

CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -8°C~2°C	Manila 21°C~30°C	New York -15°C~-7°C	Lisbon 11°C~17°C
Shanghai 3°C~8°C	Bangkok 22°C~34°C	London 6°C~11°C	Rio de Janeiro 23°C~27°C
Hong Kong 16°C~20°C	Tokyo -2°C~9°C	Frankfurt 1°C~5°C	Luanda 24°C~28°C
Taipei 15°C~25°C	Singapore 22°C~32°C	Vancouver 8°C~10°C	Maputo 23°C~29°C
Guangzhou 15°C~21°C	Kuala Lumpur 23°C~33°C	Paris 5°C~12°C	Dili 23°C~32°C
Nanjing 1°C~5°C	Jakarta 23°C~28°C	Moscow -18°C~-11°C	São Tomé 25°C~31°C
Guilin 5°C~13°C	Seoul -11°C~-2°C	Las Vegas 7°C~21°C	Praia 18°C~26°C
Xi'an 1°C~5°C	Sydney 20°C~20°C	Monte Carlo 6°C~10°C	Bissau 21°C~33°C



Cold comfort

A visitor poses for photos in front of a plant-dyed ice house at the Harbin Ice and Snow World in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province, on Wednesday. Using plant-dyed ice for carving, ice sculptors brought a fresh visual experience to the art of ice sculpture at this year's Harbin Ice and Snow World. — Xinhua

Distorted sun

The sun rises behind a pylon and power lines in Frankfurt am Main, western Germany, last Tuesday. — AFP



Kept in the dark!

A model presents a creation by Celia Kritharioti for the Women's Haute Couture Spring/Summer 2026 collection fashion show as part of the Paris Haute Couture Fashion Week, in Paris, yesterday. — AFP

Storing snow??

A pedestrian crosses a street used for temporary snow storage in central Moscow yesterday. The snow depth in Moscow reached 60–62 cm, which is twice the climatic norm and repeats the absolute record of 61 cm, set in 1994, local media reports. — AFP



Still done manually

A drone photo taken yesterday shows employees stirring fermenting soy sauce at a traditional brewery in Tengzhou, Shandong Province. — Xinhua



Rehabilitation centre

A rescued green sea turtle patient named Porkchop, who had a flipper amputated, swims with her three flippers in the new sea turtle rehabilitation area at the Aquarium of the Pacific on Wednesday in Long Beach, California. Porkchop, who weighs 85 pounds and was rescued while entangled in fishing line in the San Gabriel River, will soon be released back to the wild. From yesterday, visitors to the aquarium will be able to view rescued sea turtles being rehabilitated in the new area which includes a 4,000-gallon pool. — AFP