

# Sam meets new FM commissioner Bian, vows stronger communication

Tony Wong

Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai met with the newly appointed commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR), Bian Lixin, yesterday at Government Headquarters where they exchanged views on various topics including the MSAR's external affairs and the successful implementation of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle in Macau, with Sam pledging to continue strengthening communication and coordination with the commissioner's office, according to a statement by the Macau Government Information Bureau (GCS).

Bian arrived in Macau to assume office on Friday last week, after the Central People's Government announced on January 23 its decision to appoint Bian as the head of the Office of the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the MSAR. Bian, a former head of the ministry's Personnel Department, succeeded Liu Xianfa at the helm of the commissioner's office. Liu concluded his five-year tenure in Macau on January 15, 2026.

Liu has meanwhile been appointed the central authorities' special representative on African affairs.

During yesterday's meeting, according to the GCS statement, Sam noted that since the establishment of the MSAR 26 years ago, the commissioner's office has provided long-term strong support to Macau and assisted the city in tackling various internal and external challenges.

Sam acknowledged the full support provided by the commissioner's office for Macau in leveraging its unique advantages, expanding external exchanges and cooperation, broadening external contacts, and strengthening its capacity to manage external relations.

According to the statement, Sam also acknowledged the office's commitment to fully safeguarding Macau residents' overseas rights

and interests, promoting the city's appropriate economic diversification, helping Macau leverage its institutional advantages brought about by the implementation of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle, and continuously creating new prospects for the high-quality development of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle.

During his meeting with Bian, according to the statement, Sam also underlined his government's commitment to strengthening Macau's role as "One Centre, One Platform, One Base", leveraging the city's advantages in its internal connectivity and external communication and its advantages from the blending of Chinese and Western cultures, proactively advancing the strategy of "going global and attracting investment", and constantly enhancing Macau's international competitiveness and influence.

The Macau government's "One Centre, One Platform, One Base" concept refers to Macau developing itself into a World Centre of Tourism and Leisure, a commercial and trade cooperation service platform between China and Portuguese-speaking countries, and an exchange and cooperation base with Chinese culture as its mainstream and co-existence of different cultures.

According to the statement, Sam also said that he is planning working visits to a number of foreign countries scheduled for this year, while his government is planning to establish economic and trade offices in Southeast Asian countries with the aim of further expanding Macau's tourism market and consolidating the city's position as a World Centre of Tourism and Leisure.

Sam pledged that the local government will continue to strengthen its communication and coordination with the commissioner's office, adding that he expects the office to continue supporting Macau in maintaining long-term prosperity and stability.

*Continued on p.6*



Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai (right) meets with newly appointed Foreign Ministry Commissioner Bian Lixin at Government Headquarters yesterday. — Photo: GCS

## Spain, Portugal on alert as storm arrives

MADRID/LISBON — The Iberian Peninsula yesterday braced for a violent storm, with southern Spain shutting schools and Portugal placed on fresh alert after severe weather killed five people last week.

Spanish weather agency AEMET issued its highest red alert for today in the Ronda and Grazalema areas of the southern region of Andalusia, warning of Storm Leonardo's "extraordinary danger" that could trigger floods and landslides.

Andalusia's leader Juanma Moreno, on the front line of emergency management in Spain's decentralised political system, pleaded for "utmost caution" and "common sense" from residents.

All Andalusian schools will be closed today apart from in the region's easternmost province of Almeria.

In neighbouring Portugal, weather agency IPMA put the entire coast under an orange alert yesterday as Leonardo closed in over the Atlantic Ocean.

Northern and central regions of the country were also under an orange alert ahead of expected heavy snowfall, with strong winds and precipitation due to continue until Saturday.

A string of storms has lashed Portugal in recent weeks. The most destructive, Kristin, killed five people and injured around 400 last week, particularly affecting the central region of Leiria.

Three other people died after falling during roof repair work, while a fourth person suffered fatal carbon monoxide poisoning from an electricity generator.

Prime Minister Luis Montenegro's government has approved a reconstruction plan worth 2.5 billion euros (US\$3 billion), with tens of thousands of homes still cut off from the power grid.

Scientists say human-driven climate change is making extreme weather events such as storms and heatwaves longer, more frequent and more intense.

In October 2024, Spain suffered its deadliest floods in decades with more than 230 victims, mostly in the eastern region of Valencia. — AFP

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### Xi calls for cooperation with Uruguay in multiple areas

China and Uruguay should strengthen the alignment of development strategies, and deepen cooperation in areas such as economy, trade, information technology, President Xi Jinping said yesterday. — *Story on p. 7*

### Sacked UK envoy Mandelson quits parliament over Epstein ties

The UK's former ambassador to the United States, Peter Mandelson, is stepping down as a member of the upper house of parliament, it was announced yesterday, as a scandal deepened over his ties to late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. — *Story on p. 10*

### Cuba confirms 'communications' with US, but says no negotiations yet

Cuba's government yesterday told AFP that it was in "communication" with US President Donald Trump's administration but not yet in formal talks on a deal to end Washington's pressure campaign on the island. — *Story on p. 12*



# MPU campus lectures on Constitution, Basic Law reaches 6,000 secondary students



This undated handout photo provided by the Macao Polytechnic University (MPU) shows a lecture on "Let's know more about the Constitution" at Sacred Heart Canossian College (English Section) held by the public university's "One Country Two Systems" Research Centre in Avenida do Ouvidor Arriaga.

**Khalel Vallo**

The public Macao Polytechnic University (MPU) said in a statement yesterday that its "One Country Two Systems" Research Centre hosted a series of campus lectures on the nation's Constitution, the Macau SAR Basic Law and Macau's National Security Law, reaching more than 6,000 secondary school students from nearly 30 schools last year.

According to the statement, the lectures formed part of the public university's continued support for the local government's policy direction of strengthening patriotic education. Through the programme, titled "Constitution and Basic Law on Campus", the university aimed to deepen students' understanding of the country's constitutional framework and the legal foundations underpinning the implementation of "One Country, Two Systems" principle in Macau,

the statement noted.

Throughout 2025, the university's "One Country Two Systems" Research Centre conducted a total of 33 lectures at multiple secondary schools, the statement noted, adding that the sessions focused on explaining the relationship between the national Constitution, the Macau Basic Law and the Macau National Security Law, and their role in safeguarding Macau's long-term prosperity, stability and residents' well-being.

The lectures' content also connected legal knowledge with Macau's development since its return to the motherland in December 1999, while incorporating discussions on changes in the global and regional security environment, according to the statement.

The statement noted that the lectures helped students understand that the Constitution provides

the supreme legal basis for implementing the "One Country, Two Systems" principle, while the Basic Law and the National Security Law serve as key legal guarantees for Macau's orderly development.

Through case studies and practical explanations, the programme highlighted that national security is closely linked to individual interests, stressing that personal safety and social stability depend on a secure nation, the statement underlined.

Students are encouraged to recognise their role and responsibility in safeguarding national security and observing the law.

The statement said that its "One Country Two Systems" Research Centre will continue to carry out campus-based legal education and outreach, with the goal to promote knowledge of the Constitution, the Basic Law, and the National Security Law. ■

## Police bust mainland woman married to ex-husband's brother to get IDs for her sons

**Ada Lei**

The Judiciary Police (PJ) arrested a woman from the Chinese mainland and a local man on Monday for their alleged involvement in a bogus marriage, PJ spokesman Cheong Kim Fong said during a regular press conference yesterday.

Cheong identified the suspects as a 42-year-old female surnamed Gao who claimed to be jobless, and her ex-husband's elder brother surnamed Im, who works as a security guard in Macau.

According to Cheong, the Judiciary Police received a referral from the Prosecutions Office (MP) on May 23, 2025 about a suspected sham marriage case.

The police discovered that Gao had married Im's younger brother in 2010 and had two daughters with him. She divorced Im's brother in September 2018 in the Chinese mainland, then registered a marriage in November 2018 with the older Im to ensure that any of their kids born in Macau would directly acquire a Macau ID card, as they would have a "father" who is a local resident, while also circumventing the childbirth restrictions still imposed by the Chinese mainland authorities at that time.

Cheong noted that after the bogus marriage, Gao gave birth



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

— Photo: Ada Lei

to two boys in Macau in 2020 and 2022, respectively. Im then made false declarations to the Identification Services Bureau (DSI), claiming to be the father of the two boys. Additionally, in 2024, Im applied for a Macau resident identity card for Gao based on their fake marriage, citing family reunification as the reason; Cheong said that this application was still under review when the police took action.

Cheong added that Gao did not live in Macau long-term but primarily lived in the Chinese mainland with her original husband, Im's brother. She only travelled to Macau as her due date approached so that she could give birth here.

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

## Police bust 5 illegal currency exchange dealers

**Ada Lei**

The Judiciary Police (PJ) separately arrested four men from the Chinese mainland and a local woman on Monday for engaging in illegal currency exchange activities, PJ spokesman Cheong Kim Fong said during a special press conference yesterday.

Cheong identified the suspects as a 40-year-old male surnamed He, a 35-year-old male surnamed Cai, a 29-year-old male surnamed Li and a 27-year-old male surnamed Xiong, all of whom claimed to be jobless; and a 56-year-old local saleswoman surnamed Wong.

According to Cheong, PJ officers patrolling a casino in Taipa on Monday witnessed He exchanging HK\$20,000 in chips for 18,120 yuan with a gambler. He was also found to have exchanged HK\$20,000 in chips for 18,040 yuan earlier that day with

another gambler. Cheong said that He had been involved in illegal currency exchange activities since early November, earning HK\$80 for every HK\$10,000 exchanged, accumulating a total profit of HK\$8,000. The police seized HK\$139,000 in chips and a smartphone from him.

Cheong noted that PJ officers on patrol on Monday at another casino in Cotai saw Xiong exchanging HK\$50,000 in chips for 45,000 yuan with a male gambler. The police discovered that Xiong had been engaging in illegal currency exchange activities since June, earning HK\$100 for every HK\$10,000 exchanged, amounting to a total profit of HK\$50,000. The police confiscated HK\$50,000 in chips and a smartphone from Xiong, along with HK\$5,000 in chips from the gambler.

Cheong said that PJ officers patrolling a casino in Cotai on

Monday discovered Cai providing his QR code in a smoking lounge to a gambler to transfer 45,150 yuan in exchange for HK\$50,000 in chips. After receiving the money, Li appeared and handed over the chips to the gambler. Cheong added that the duo had engaged in illegal currency exchange activities since November, earning HK\$50 for every HK\$10,000 exchanged, resulting in a total profit of HK\$7,000. The police seized a total of HK\$108,000 in chips, two smartphones from the duo, and HK\$1,000 in chips from the gambler.

According to Cheong, based on intelligence, the police identified a jewellery store in Cotai as a suspected illegal currency exchange operation where Wong was employed to carry out the illegal activities. On Monday, PJ officers discovered a female gambler handing her smartphone to Wong, who then took cash from a drawer and gave it to the gambler, exchanging HK\$40,000 for 37,000 yuan. Afterwards, another female gambler transferred 1,000 yuan for HK\$1,000 via her smartphone. The

police seized HK\$158,970 in cash, along with three account books and two smartphones from the store, as well as HK\$29,900 in chips from the two gamblers. The police discovered that the store had been operating since August, and Wong had been employed since October, earning a monthly salary of 13,000 patacas for her illegal currency exchange activities.

The five suspects were transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) yesterday, each facing an illegal currency exchange charge. ■



Judiciary Police (PJ) officers escort the five hooded illegal currency exchange suspects – two of them together, the others one at a time – to PJ vans outside the PJ headquarters in Zape yesterday. — Photos: Ada Lei

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### Macau Weather

CLOUDY APART FROM SUNNY INTERVALS.  
LIGHT RAIN AT FIRST.  
FORCE 3 TO 4 EASTERLY WINDS.  
RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL RANGE BETWEEN 65% AND 95%.



16°C~22°C

Source: SMG



# Councillors worry about safety of large events, illegal inns

Armando Neves

The government-appointed Taipa and Coloane Community Service Consultative Council held its regular monthly meeting yesterday, where various concerns about the safety of large events and illegal inns were raised by its members.

The three-hour meeting was held at the Seac Pai Van Community Complex (石排灣社區綜合大樓) in Coloane yesterday.

The first part of the meeting was open to the media, during which committee members raised various issues in their speeches. The meeting then proceeded behind closed doors. It included Judiciary Police (PJ) Gaming-related Crimes Division Chief Vong Chi Hou and Public Security Police (PSP) Islands Police Department senior officer Wong Wai Kit to present both police forces' recent and future measures to ensure public safety in the runup and during the Chinese New Year

(CNY) in Taipa, Cotai and Coloane, as well as during the winter.

In the post-meeting press briefing, the council's deputy convenor Li Yongjian cited a PSP statement released to the councillors during meeting, according to which, in response to Macau's visitor arrivals exceeding 40 million last year, the Public Security Police have implemented multiple measures for crowd management and security enhancement.

These include establishing temporary pedestrian zones and deploying additional police officers during holidays; implementing tidal flow crowd control and anti-collision arrangements for four outdoor concerts last year, with a total attendance exceeding 78,000; and ensuring rigorous security for national-level events such as the National Games, Li said.

During major events like the New Year's Eve celebrations, the

Public Security Police implemented crowd control measures in the Cotai Strip, with a total attendance exceeding 60,000, and at Hengqin Port (border checkpoint), Li said.

According to Li, the Public Security Police continue to conduct inspections of vehicles and bars, while collaborating with community organisations to promote crime prevention awareness.

Li quoted a statement presented by the Judiciary Police during the meeting on their 2025 "Winter Precaution Operation", according to which 47 operations were conducted, 1,874 individuals were investigated, 276 cases were resolved, and 348 individuals were transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) for further investigation. Regarding drug-related crimes, seven cases were cracked, 11 suspects were arrested, and various types of drugs, including heroin, methamphetamine (commonly known as meth) and



Taipa and Coloane Community Service Consultative Council Deputy Convenor Li Yongjian (left) and Councillor Lam Tsz Kwan pose during yesterday's press briefing after the government-appointed council's closed-door meeting at the Seac Pai Van Community Complex in Coloane.  
— Photo: Armando Neves

cannabis, were seized.

Councillor Lam Tsz Kwan said that multiple concerns and suggestions were raised during the meeting by fellow councillors, such as enforcement against unlicensed guesthouses and illegal currency exchange activities in and around hotels; potential risks of random violent attacks in neighbouring cities and the impact of large-scale events on police force deployment; proposals to launch new technological measures, such as using IP addresses to trace unlicensed guesthouses and monitoring online crowd data to optimise crowd management, as well as the trend of younger attendees at large-scale events than before, and the issue of

gatherings after spectators leave late-night events

Lam said the PSP officers told the meeting that the Public Security Police have been collaborating with the Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) in clamping down on unlicensed guesthouses and maintaining communication with the property management.

Regarding large-scale events, Lam said that the Public Security Police have been coordinating with organisers in advance and strengthened public information on exit routes and transportation arrangements. Additionally, patrols are conducted in the surrounding areas after such events to ensure public safety, Lam said. ■

## Uber launches HZMB cross-border & Macau taxi services



This handout photo provided by Uber yesterday shows its cross-border service vehicle parked outside the Londoner Macao in Cotai.

Armando Neves

US multinational transportation company Uber announced in a statement yesterday that it has launched a local taxi service as well as a Macau-Hong Kong cross-border service across the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge (HZMB).

Back in July 2017, Uber had decided to suspend its services in Macau after failing to secure the government's authorisation for its operations here. The company's cross-border and local taxi services started yesterday.

According to the statement, the launch of the travel service between Hong Kong and Macau, and the taxi service in Macau aims to provide more convenient travel options for both tourists travelling between Hong Kong and Macau, as well as local residents.

In response to the growing demand for cross-border travel, the statement said, Uber has partnered with Kwoon Chung Bus Holdings to launch the cross-border transport service across the bridge. The

statement said that users can book the service via the Uber app, travelling directly from Hong Kong to Macau or from Macau to Hong Kong without the need to switch vehicles at border ports. The cross-border service offers fixed fares, which cover all the HZMB toll and Hong Kong tunnel fees, the statement said, adding that passengers can make reservations from just 24 hours to 90 days in advance of their departure.

The Uber statement did not elaborate on what passengers will have to pay for a ride between Macau and Hong Kong across the mega-bridge.

The statement also said that users can book licensed Macau taxis through the app, with fares calculated according to the official rates. Payment can be made in cash or through the app. The service supports a multilingual interface and offers safety features such as trip tracking and emergency assistance, the statement said.

Currently, the Uber app is only available for credit card,

debit card, Apple pay and Google payments for its taxi and cross-border services, excluding local online payment apps such as Mpay and Boc Pay for the time being.

Uber will use Macau's common taxis, colloquially known as "black taxis" for its local transport services.

Meanwhile, the Macau Transport Bureau (DSAT) and Public Security Police (PSP) announced in a joint statement yesterday that operating cross-border taxi services between Hong Kong and Macau as well as in Macau require legal authorisation. Uber is required to collaborate with licensed cross-border vehicle operators and display official identification stickers on both the front windscreen and rear of the vehicles to facilitate easy recognition by passengers.

The statement also said that Uber's taxi service can only use vehicles that hold a Macau-issued taxi licence and be driven by individuals who possess valid taxi driver permits. ■

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### Notice

To uphold the operational order and reputation of the Islamic Association of Macau (hereinafter referred to as 'the Association'), in accordance with the Association's Statutes and the relevant laws of the Macau Special Administrative Region, the Association hereby issues the following notice:

It is notified that the Extraordinary Meeting of the Board of Directors of the Islamic Association of Macau, which was held on 25<sup>th</sup> January 2026, has discussed and deliberated on the following agenda, with immediate effect until further notice:

The membership, position and responsibilities of the following members are suspended with immediate effect. This suspension will be in force until further notice.

- Bin Amir Abdul Halek Junas (馬學智), former Secretary of the Director Board
- Osman Carim, former Board Member of the Director Board
- Binti Junas Bin Amir Ahmad Halimah (馬希雯), former President of the Supervisory Board

The Association hereby **clarify again** that the above three persons do not represent the Association and their acts and announcements, performed under their name or under the Association's name, made before and after 25<sup>th</sup> January 2026 do not represent the Association, and not the responsibility of the Association.

For matters concerning membership status or authorisation of duties, please refer to official written responses bearing the Association's stamp and signature of the President or Vice-President. All external documents issued by the Association shall only be valid upon signature by the President or Vice-President and affixation of the Association's stamp (as shown in this notice).

(Association contact details: aisha@iam.org.mo; request for minutes requires valid identification and a written application with valid reason and subject to prior approval from the Board of Directors of the Association)

AHMAD DIN KHAN  
President of the Board of  
Directors of the Islamic  
Association of Macau

AISHA DAD  
Vice-President of Board  
of Directors of the Islamic  
Association of Macau  
25<sup>th</sup> January 2026







## TouchDesigner workshop ignites local interest in interactive art skills

Interview by William Chan

**P**rojectPlayaround Macau, a six-day workshop organised by the Macao New Media Arts Association, kickstarted on Friday.\*

The first three-day session, the TouchDesigner Performing Arts Workshop hosted by Crystal Jow from the United States, concentrated on the widely-used TouchDesigner software, covering fundamentals, body and sound interactivity, and generative visuals. I attended the last section on Sunday afternoon at a commercial building in Nape and spoke to two students as well as Jow.

Before the course, I merely had a weak knowledge of what TouchDesigner is. TouchDesigner, according to DeepSeek, is a node-based visual programming language designed for creating real-time interactive multimedia content, such as audiovisual performances, interactive installations, and generative art. The application has been around for over two decades.

April, one of the students who came from Hong Kong to attend the lesson, works in Graphic Design and multimedia. She told me that TouchDesigner, which is ubiquitous in North America and Europe, was increasingly gaining popularity in Asia.

Sam, a local lighting designer, said that for him, the workshop provided a structured way to consolidate his existing knowledge. He mentioned that while he had used some components of the software before, the workshop provided a comprehensive, step-by-step overview that clarified the fundamentals. He noted that the visual, real-time nature of TouchDesigner provides a major advantage over traditional coding, as it allows for immediate feedback and adjustment. "The barrier to entry has been significantly lowered," he explained, adding that knowing the software is becoming a very valuable skill set.

Crystal Jow, an artist and educator who travelled from New York to host the workshop, has witnessed this surge in demand firsthand. "It's interesting that when I got here, there was interest from the Wynn Hotel in having an immersive space and wanting to teach their employees TouchDesigner."

"MGM, they're like, 'Oh, we need TouchDesigner people that are local to help,'" Jow said.

"There are a lot of places in Macau that have immersive spaces, but they need to hire people to know how to use it. It's interesting to see how there is a market that needs to be filled."

Jow, who teaches at several universities in New York, including the prestigious Parsons School of Design, has seen student demand for TouchDesigner courses skyrocket. "Five years ago, my colleague proposed to teach it, and students had to petition to get the class. Last semester, there were three classes for it because there was a long waitlist," she recounted. She adapts her curriculum continuously, incorporating newer techniques like machine learning with hand tracking to keep up with the evolving landscape. She finds the workshop environment, filled with artists eager to integrate the tool into their practice, particularly rewarding. "It's more fun to teach in that setting," she said.

The software's strength, Jow explained, lies in its remarkable flexibility. "TouchDesigner is a real-time software that can be used in different contexts, from doing art installations to lighting design to commercials... we've done fashion shows to concerts to brand activations, to television using the software." This versatility means that artists from diverse backgrounds – from music to computer science to, like Jow herself, drawing and painting – can find their own unique way of using the tool.

Perhaps more than its technical capabilities, what truly sets TouchDesigner apart is its vibrant and supportive community. Jow described it as a "giant family" where artists and developers openly share tutorials, tools, and knowledge. This collaborative culture, she believes, is intentionally fostered by the company behind the software, which has resisted buyouts to maintain its close-knit, community-focused ethos. "I met my husband through TouchDesigner," she laughed, illustrating the deep personal connections forged within this global network. "It's a very interesting industry... that it's so inclusive."

This supportive global network, combined with the software's accessibility and power, is a driving force behind its expanding footprint in the creative industries of Macau and beyond.

\*<https://macaupostdaily.com/news/26961>



Crystal Jow teaches the TouchDesigner Performing Arts Workshop in Nape during the weekend. – Photos provided by the organiser



## Shun Tak China Travel, Shenzhen Airport launch check-in lounge at Outer Harbour Ferry Terminal



**Alfred Ng Sio In (伍紹賢), director of the Macau Services Division of Shun Tak China Travel Shipping Management Limited, speaks to the media during the official launch of a check-in lounge for Shenzhen Bao'an International Airport at the Macau Outer Harbour Ferry Terminal yesterday morning.**

— Photo: Khalel Vallo

### Khalel Vallo

Shun Tak China Travel Shipping Management Limited announced deeper cooperation with Shenzhen Airport Group, in conjunction with the official launch of a dedicated city check-in lounge at the Macau Outer Harbour Ferry Terminal yesterday, to improve sea-air transfer services for transit passengers.

Following the launch of the “Macau-Shenzhen Airport Ferry” route in November last year, Shun Tak China Travel said in a statement yesterday that the new facility aims to provide greater convenience for passengers travelling via Shenzhen Bao'an International Airport.

According to Shun Tak China Travel, the establishment of the Macau Outer Harbour city check-in lounge represents a further step in strengthening collaboration with Shenzhen Airport, with the goal of providing a more seamless travel experience for residents and visitors travelling to and from the airport. Alfred Ng Sio In (伍紹賢), director of the Macau Services Division of Shun Tak China Travel, said the company will continue to invest resources through its subsidiaries TurboJET and China Travel Tours Motor Transport to enhance the Greater Bay Area's (GBA) integrated sea, land and air transport network. He added that the group also aims to contribute to the development of regional transportation and tourism, in line with national planning goals.

Speaking to the *Post*, Ng said the new arrangement reflects TurboJET's broader role in strengthening transportation connectivity within the GBA, describing the Macau-Shenzhen Airport link as “one of the examples” of how the operator is expanding its services. He noted that demand has grown noticeably following the implementation of the Chinese mainland's 240-hour visa-free transit policy, with more passengers flying into Shenzhen

and then getting the ferry to Macau. “Not only air passengers, but also some local residents are using the service”, he said, adding that during holiday periods, travellers tend to avoid road congestion by choosing sea transport instead. Ng also pointed out that Shenzhen Bao'an International Airport continues to expand its domestic and international flight network, attracting travellers from Macau, Hong Kong and other places who opt for the airport in Shenzhen. Since the ferry service began operating at the end of November, he said, passenger numbers have shown steady growth.

Meanwhile, Chen Fanhua, deputy general manager of Shenzhen Airport Group, said transportation synergy is a key pillar of Shenzhen-Macau cooperation, noting that the launch of the city check-in lounge marks both a new starting point and an important milestone in bilateral collaboration. He said the facility was expected to become an important transport platform linking Shenzhen and Macau while supporting the integrated development of the Greater Bay Area (GBA).

With one-hour high-speed ferry services, the newly opened city check-in lounge provides upstream check-in services for passengers transiting through Shenzhen Bao'an International Airport, as well as airport coach transfers upon arrival, according to the statement.

The services are designed to facilitate smoother travel for commuters, transit passengers and leisure travellers between Macau and Shenzhen. The Macau-Shenzhen Airport ferry route operates three round trips daily.

Departures from Macau to Shenzhen Airport are at 9 a.m., 12 p.m. [noon] and 3:30 p.m., while departures from Shenzhen Airport to Macau [Outer Harbour] are at 10:30 a.m., 1:30 p.m. and 5 p.m. ■

## ‘Good Fortune’: A shop where deals meet social good



**These photos downloaded last night from the Caritas Macau website show the “Good Fortune” Charity Shop located on Rua da Concórdia (和樂街) in Fai Chi Kei district.**

### Review by Kristina Vallesteros

For generations, thrift shops have served as a practical resource for communities. Whether for someone seeking a budget-friendly alternative, a collector hunting for vintage finds, or simply a bargain, these shops offer a second life for pre-owned items.

Beyond affordability, this cycle of reuse is a direct form of recycling, diverting goods from ending up in landfills and reducing environmental waste.

In Macau, the “Good Fortune” Charity Shop embodies this principle while channelling its purpose towards a specific social mission.

The shop operates as a social enterprise under Caritas Macau, a major Catholic charitable organisation established in Macau in 1951 that provides extensive social welfare, educational, and community support services across the territory. Every pataca spent in the shop becomes funding for these Caritas programmes.

The shop's name, as noted on its

website, is inspired by the Chinese idiom “goodness necessitates a sharing of itself” (行善積德，福有攸歸). Since its launch in 2011, it has created a three-fold benefit by promoting environmental sustainability through reuse, offering low-cost essentials to the public, and generating proceeds that support Caritas initiatives, including job training and reintegration programmes for vulnerable groups.

Located on Rua da Concórdia (和樂街) in Fai Chi Kei district, the modest two-story shop offers a wide assortment of donated goods. The ground floor is filled with clothing racks spanning various styles and periods, alongside shelves of toys and miscellaneous curios. Upstairs, visitors can find other items like electrical appliances, winter coats, and shoes.

But on top of what can be bought, the environment also provides a welcoming atmosphere. During my recent visit, a kind staff member

gently recommended a sweater and highlighted its unique pattern and warmth for the cooling weather, providing an exchange that felt less like a transaction and more like thoughtful advice.

“Good Fortune” Charity Shop relies on community donations to stock its shelves. It accepts new or fully operational used household appliances, toys, luggage, daily necessities, and brand-new clothing. Donors are encouraged to take items directly to the shop during business hours and to call ahead. However, one should keep in mind that the shop will not accept damaged furniture, faulty electronics, medicines, or used undergarments.

The shop also welcomes volunteers interested in its operations or simply to lend a helping hand. Application details are available on the Caritas website. The shop opens from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., Monday through Sunday, closing only on public holidays. ■

## MGTO chief expects over 1.42 million visitors during CNY holiday

### Ida Cheong

Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) Director Maria Helena de Senna Fernandes told reporters on the sidelines of yesterday's press conference that due to the Chinese mainland's official Spring Festival holiday period spanning nine days this year (starting from February 15 through 23), MGTO estimates Macau's total visitor arrivals will be between 1.42 million and over 1.5 million, averaging 158,000 to 175,000 visitors per day, adding that MGTO aims to sustain visitor attractions before and after the holiday.

Spring Festival is the official name of the Chinese New Year (CNY) in the Chinese mainland.

The press conference for the 2026 CNY activities, the float parade, drone and fireworks displays were held at the Macau Tower Convention & Entertainment Centre.

Senna Fernandes pointed out that Macau visitors' arrivals reached 40.06 million last year, MGTO expecting 41 million this year.

Meanwhile, in 2025, foreign visitor numbers increased by over 13 percent, with double-digit growth in markets such as Indonesia, Philippines, and

South Korea, Senna Fernandes said, adding that the number of foreign visitors for 2026 is expected to recover to the pre-pandemic period levels, targeting a minimum of 3 million foreign visitor arrivals.

Senna Fernandes said that her bureau will continue to leverage national policies, including the 240-hour transit visa-free policies at the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge (HZMB) and Hengqin Port (border checkpoint) to attract more foreign visitors and promote integrated itineraries across the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau region, adding that the policies such as Zhuhai's “One Trip Per Week” scheme and Hengqin's multiple Macau entry permit, facilitation at Hengqin Port will continue to support growth in the number Macau's Chinese mainland visitor arrivals.

Meanwhile, consolidating traditional markets in Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, the Americas and Europe will be one of the MGTO market expansion strategies this year, while continuing to explore the Middle Eastern market and initiating research into Central Asian markets such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, she said.

Senna Fernandes added that the



**Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) Director Maria Helena de Senna Fernandes poses on the sidelines of yesterday's press conference for 2026 CNY activities, the float parade and drone and fireworks displays, at the Macau Tower Convention & Entertainment Centre.**

— Photo: Ida Cheong

“International Cities of Gastronomy Fest” will be held in March (originally scheduled for June-July) to avoid adverse weather and typhoon impacts; the main venue will be at Fisherman's Wharf, with a secondary venue in Zape, focusing on international food-related products and specialties, without on-site cooking. ■



# Vendors at LRT Barra station hope for more promotion

Interviews by Rui Pastorin

At the LRT Barra Station, only a few shops that have been operating there for the past few months can be found. Souvenirs, food and specialty items like trading cards and perfumes are among the limited items currently available to commuters at the station or those making their way down to the Barra Public Transport Interchange.

What has it been like for the shops doing business in the area? Two shops told the *Post* about their experiences, highlighting a need for more promotion.

Lao has been running a trading card and model kit shop at the station for the past six months, with his interest in setting up a business there mainly stemming from the surrounding environment. "It's quite good, quite nice...you have the garden, the station, and it's peaceful".

The business caters to a specific group of customers, with Lao pointing out: "We're not mainly focused on tourists. We focus more on the users". Sales have not been the highest, Lao said. And in terms of visibility, Lao said that some customers may already know where the business is due to promotion on social media, but added that support in further promoting businesses in the area is needed.

"I think we need some more promotion here from the government [and] from the LRT station. They need more promotions to tell people that there are shops here", adding that so far, "not so many people know about it".

Asked whether or not he expects sales to improve during the coming Chinese New Year



This photo taken yesterday shows the LRT Barra Station from above.

— Photo: Rui Pastorin

(CNY) holiday period, he said they might just remain the same. But there is a chance that the situation might improve in the following months with more effort put into promotion, at least at their end. "Maybe more people will know there are shops here. Maybe more people will come".

A representative from a local brand that sells perfumes, along with items like various soaps, was more optimistic about sales during the coming holiday, noting that it might just be "a bit better".

The 40-year-old said that their shop at the Barra LRT station sees customers comprising both tourists and locals, though there are, comparatively speaking, not that many. However, she mainly attributed this to being a relatively new shop as they have only been open for around five months. However, like Lao, she also noted that not many people are aware that there are shops at the station, noting that mainly people who have been customers of the brand, or tourists passing by, know the products

At the moment, she thinks that there has not been much done to promote the shops in the area, but highlighted that as a whole, her local brand shop has been taking the initiative in joining events like the Macao International Trade & Investment Fair (MIF) to promote themselves.

## LRT sees an average of 30,000 passengers daily in Jan

The Macao Light Rapid Transit Corporation Limited website notes that the average number of passengers transported daily last month stood at 30,000 passengers, 4,700 passengers more than in the corresponding period in 2025.

Moreover, the data on the website highlights that the period from September through November saw the highest average number of passengers per day in 2025, with the figures standing at 30,600, 30,800 and 32,600 passengers a day in September, October and November respectively. ■

# CNY float parade set for Feb 19+28, featuring fireworks with drones

Ida Cheong

This year's Chinese New Year (CNY) falls on Tuesday, February 17, and the annual CNY parade will take place on February 19 and February 28 in the vicinity of Sai Van Lake Plaza and the northern district respectively, featuring 17 floats, performances and fireworks combined with drones, Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO) Director Maria Helena de Senna Fernandes announced in press conference yesterday.

The press conference for "2026 Chinese New Year Activities, the Parade for Celebration of the Year of the Horse and the 2026 Chinese New Year Drones and Fireworks Displays" was held at the Macau Tower Convention & Entertainment Centre.

## Float parade at Sai Van Lake & northern district

According to MGTO, the first session of the float parade will start in Sai Van Lake Plaza (西灣湖廣場) on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day (February 19) of the Chinese New Year at 8 p.m., proceed along Avenida Dr. Sun Yat-Sen (孫逸仙大馬路) and Macau Science Centre, ending at Macau Fisherman's Wharf. About 1,300 performers from Macau, Hong Kong, the Chinese mainland, Italy, the Philippines, Portugal, South Korea and Spain will participate in the opening ceremony for the first float parade at 5:40 p.m. in Sai Van Lake Plaza, such as local bands Daze in White, TiDe, and Hong Kong singer Mike Tsang Pei-tak (曾比特).

Meanwhile, a raft of performances, e.g., dance, singing and magic, for the opening ceremony will enliven the vicinity of Rua de Cantão (廣州街) and Rua de Xangai (上海街) in Zape from 5:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. on February 19; the float parade and the drones with a firework display will be broadcast live by local broadcasters TDM and Macau Cable TV from 8 p.m., according to the press conference.

The second session of the float parade will commence at 8 p.m. on February 28 in the northern district; the 17 floats will start from Rua Norte do Patane (沙梨頭北街), continue along Avenida do Conselheiro Borja (青洲大馬路), Estrada do Arco (拱形馬路), Estrada da Areia Preta (黑沙環馬路), Avenida de Venceslau de Moraes (慕拉士大馬路), and other streets,

ending in Iao Hon Market Park (祐漢街市公園). Meanwhile, the final performance will start in Iao Hon Market Park at 8:15 p.m. on that day, including Hong Kong and Macau artistes Andrew Chan, Winnie Lam and Kane Ao Ieong, according to a MGTO statement yesterday.

Meanwhile, the floats will be on display at the Macau Fisherman's Wharf from February 20 to 27, and in Praça do Tap Siac from March 1 to 8, the statement said.

Regarding the float parades' budget, Senna Fernandes told reporters during yesterday's Q&A session that this year's budget is around HK\$36.8 million, a year-on-year increase of about 5 percent, due to the parade being extended to more local communities.

The statement said that temporary traffic restrictions will be imposed during the parades during designated hours on the 19 February and 28 February.

## 3,888 drones combined with firework displays for first time

Meanwhile, three sessions of the 2026 Chinese New Year Drones and Fireworks Displays will start at 9:45 p.m. on February 19, and begin at 9 p.m. on February 23 and on March 3, featuring 3,888 drones with fireworks, music, and laser effects above the sea. Each session will last about 15 minutes, according to a separate MGTO statement yesterday.

Moreover, the "Golden Dragon Parade" and other performances will take place on February 17 and 18 in Zape, along with the "ZAPE Gallop Gala" activity from February 13 to 1 March, to celebrate Chinese New Year and Valentine's Day, which will engage businesses in Zape to launch special offers that aim to inject a special impetus to tourist spending there, the statement said.

Additionally, online and offline promotional activities, e.g., lucky draws, two interactive games, and a vote for favourite floats, will be set up from February 11 to March 3, the statement added.

For more information about 2026 Chinese New Year activities, please visit the website for destination promotion: <https://www.macaotourism.gov.mo>. ■

# Sam meets new FM commissioner Bian, vows stronger communication

Continued from p.1

## Bian vows to fully support Macau's expansion of external exchanges

Meanwhile, the commissioner's office also issued a statement last night about Bian's meeting with Sam, according to which Bian said during the meeting that the remarkable achievements that Macau has made in its socioeconomic development over the 26 years since its return to the motherland have fully demonstrated the significant institutional advantages and robust vitality of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle.

According to the statement, Bian said that the commissioner's office will resolutely implement the central authorities' major decisions and deployments concerning foreign affairs and Macau-related work, firmly build a solid barrier for safeguarding national security, thoroughly practice the principles of "Diplomacy Benefiting Macau" and "Diplomacy for the People", fully support Macau in expanding external exchanges and cooperation, make greater contributions to the development of the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin, and foster a favourable external environment for promoting Macau's long-term prosperity and stability.

According to the statement by the commissioner's office, Sam pledged during the meeting that the local government will further strengthen its communication with the commissioner's office, resolutely safeguard the nation's sovereignty, security, and development interests, better leverage Macau's role in internal connectivity and external communication, expand Macau's exchanges and cooperation with Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking countries as well as its neighbouring countries and regions, build Macau into a platform for higher-standard opening up, better serve the nation's diplomacy and overall development, and continuously advance the steady and sustained implementation of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle.

Yesterday's meeting was also attended by the deputy commissioner of the commissioner's office Cheng Lei, Sam's chief-of-cabinet Chan Kak, and Government Headquarters Affairs Bureau (DSASG) Director Derek Loi Chi San.

The commissioner's office is one of the three entities established by the central government based in Macau, alongside the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the MSAR and the local garrison of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). ■



A press conference about the upcoming "2026 Chinese New Year Activities, the Parade for Celebration of the Year of the Horse and the 2026 Chinese New Year Drones and Fireworks Displays" hosted by Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO) Director Maria Helena de Senna Fernandes (centre, front), is held at the Macau Tower Convention and Entertainment Centre yesterday. — Photo: Ida Cheong



# New exhibition to kick off at H2H Gallery

Rui Pastorin

A new exhibition titled “Your past ‘art’ is our present ‘encounter’” at the Hold On To Hope (H2H) Gallery in Ka Ho Village in Coloane is set to kick off this Saturday, highlighting the transformative power of art and community.

H2H Project is an initiative by the Association of Rehabilitation of

Drug Abusers of Macau (ARTM).

The Hold On To Hope Project announced on its Instagram page that the exhibition, curated by Mak Ka Man and featuring a variety of participants, will feature highlights such as the collaborative “Nine Dragons Wall” stitched together by six individuals and inspired by one of the nation’s treasured art pieces.

Twelve artists also use different mediums to showcase exhibits in the “Twelve Chinese Zodiac Signs”, while two “ancient embroidery” pieces will also be on show, the statement said.

The statement pointed out that the exhibition is grounded in the curator’s experience at a drug rehabilitation centre, which

motivated her to connect with diverse individuals while acting as a guide at the Village of Our Lady in Ka-Ho H2H Gallery.

The gallery is open from 10:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Monday, Tuesday and Friday, and is closed on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Meanwhile, it is open from 10:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. on weekends and public holidays. ■



Screenshot taken from the Hold On To Hope Project Instagram page last night.

## Wang Yi meets special envoy of Vietnam’s To Lam

BEIJING – Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Le Hoai Trung, special envoy of General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) Central Committee To Lam, in Beijing yesterday.

Wang, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, offered his congratulations on the success of the 14<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CPV. He said that General Secretary Xi Jinping and General Secretary To Lam had recently held phone talks, during which they agreed that both countries should unite and cooperate to promote development, and draw a grand blueprint to deepen the development of a China-Vietnam community with a shared future of strategic significance.

Wang said that China is willing to work with Vietnam to follow the important consensus reached between the top leaders of the two parties and countries, grasp the strategic nature of bilateral relations, enhance the mutual benefits of bilateral cooperation, and highlight the particularity of the China-Vietnam friendship.

China is also ready to work with Vietnam to strengthen high-level exchange, enhance strategic mutual trust, deepen connectivity, expand practical cooperation in such areas as sci-tech innovation, digital transformation and artificial intelligence, run successful activities such as “Red Study Tours,” strengthen cultural and people-to-people exchange, and continuously promote the construction of a China-Vietnam community with a shared future, he said.

Wang called on China and Vietnam to unite and cooperate closely, coordinate development and security, and resolutely safeguard

the international system with the United Nations at its core, as well as the international order based on international law. He said both countries should protect their own legitimate rights and interests, as well as the common interests of the Global South, and work together to become forces for peace, stability and development in the face of rapid changes unseen in a century.

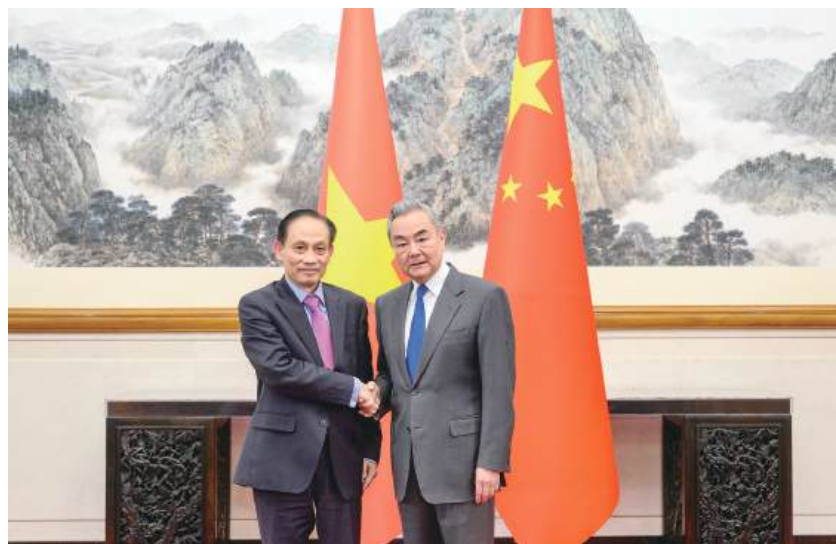
Trung, a member of the Political Bureau of the CPV Central Committee and minister of foreign affairs of Vietnam, expressed sincere thanks of the Party and people of Vietnam to General Secretary Xi for his congratulatory letter to General Secretary Lam, and for sending a special envoy to Vietnam to offer his congratulations after the successful conclusion of the 14<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CPV.

These gestures reflect the long-standing friendship and high-level mutual trust between the two parties and countries, and will vigorously promote the construction of a Vietnam-China community with a shared future, he added.

He said that Vietnam has always regarded its relations with China as its top priority and strategic choice, adhered firmly to the one-China policy, and opposed any form of “Taiwan independence” separatism.

Vietnam is ready to work with China to plan the next stage of high-level exchange and promote cooperation in areas including economy, trade, investment and emerging fields. It also anticipates close multilateral coordination and cooperation, and the joint elevation of the comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership between Vietnam and China, he added.

– Xinhua



Foreign Minister Wang Yi (right), also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, shakes hands with Le Hoai Trung, special envoy of General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) Central Committee To Lam, also a member of the Political Bureau of the CPV Central Committee and minister of foreign affairs of Vietnam, in Beijing yesterday. – Xinhua

## Xi calls for cooperation with Uruguay in multiple areas

BEIJING – China and Uruguay should strengthen the alignment of development strategies, and deepen cooperation in areas such as economy and trade, finance, agriculture and animal husbandry, infrastructure construction, and information and communications technology, President Xi Jinping said yesterday.

Both sides should explore the potential for cooperation in emerging fields including green development, digital economy, artificial intelligence, and clean energy, so as to drive economic growth and transformation, Xi said when holding talks with President of the Oriental Republic of Uruguay Yamandú Orsi in Beijing.

Orsi on Sunday began a week-long state visit to China. He is the first leader from Latin America to visit China in 2026, and his visit follows those of leaders from Ireland, the Republic of Korea, Canada, Finland and Britain.

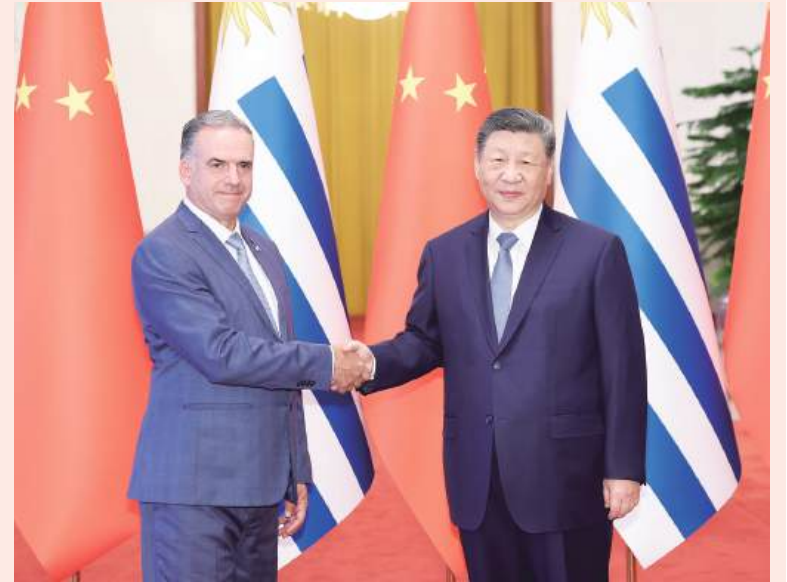
“On this day 38 years ago, China and Uruguay established diplomatic relations,” Xi said, pointing out that over the years, regardless of changes in the international situation, the two countries have always got along with each other on the basis of mutual respect and mutually beneficial cooperation.

Xi called on both sides to carry forward their traditions and deepen their comprehensive strategic partnership under the new circumstances, to make sure their friendship grows stronger and more vibrant.

China and Uruguay should continue to firmly support each other’s core interests and major concerns, strengthen friendly exchanges at all levels and across all areas, enhance exchanges of experience in governance, and continuously deepen strategic mutual trust, Xi emphasized.

Xi said that the fourth plenary session of the 20<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the Communist Party of China had adopted the recommendations for formulating the 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan, outlining a blueprint for China’s development over the next five years, which will offer broad opportunities for countries worldwide, including Uruguay.

The peoples of China and Uruguay share a natural affinity, Xi noted, adding the two sides



President Xi Jinping shakes hands with President of the Oriental Republic of Uruguay Yamandú Orsi, who is on a state visit to China, at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. – Xinhua

should continue to deepen exchanges in areas like culture, education, sports, media and subnational engagement, and facilitate personnel exchanges, to strengthen the bonds of friendship between the two peoples.

The world today is undergoing major changes unseen in a century, said Xi, noting the international landscape is marked by a mix of turbulence and transformation, while unilateral bullying is intensifying.

China supports Uruguay in taking over chairmanship of the Group of 77 and China for the year 2026 and is willing to work with Uruguay to strengthen solidarity in the Global South, jointly promote an equal and orderly multipolar world and universally beneficial and inclusive economic globalization, and work together to seek common development, so as to make greater contributions to building a community with a shared future for humanity, Xi said.

Xi added that China has always valued its relations with Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) countries and supports LAC countries in upholding their sovereignty, security and development interests.

China also supports Uruguay in assuming the rotating presidencies of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and the Southern Common Market (Mercosur), and stands ready to work with Uruguay and other regional countries to further promote the building of a China-LAC community with a shared future, Xi said.

Orsi said China is an important cooperation partner of Uruguay, and the comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries is at its best in history.

Noting that Uruguay firmly supports the one-China principle and supports the “one country, two systems” policy, he said Uruguay aspires to deepen the comprehensive strategic partnership with China and bring bilateral cooperation to a higher level.

Echoing Xi, Orsi called for boosting cooperation in wide-ranging areas to inject stronger momentum into Uruguay-China relations and deliver greater benefits to the two peoples.

Uruguay stands ready to work with China to stay committed to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, uphold multilateralism, safeguard the international trading system, further advance LAC-China relations, and defend the common interests of the Global South, he said.

After the talks, the two leaders witnessed the signing of more than 10 cooperation documents covering investment, trade and other fields.

Prior to the talks, Xi hosted a welcoming ceremony for Orsi in the Northern Hall of the Great Hall of the People. At noon, Xi hosted a welcome banquet for him in the Golden Hall of the Great Hall of the People.

During Orsi’s visit, the two sides issued a joint statement on deepening their comprehensive strategic partnership. – Xinhua



# Winning not enough for Thailand's most popular party

**Thanaporn Promyamyai, Sally Jensen**

BANGKOK — Thousands of young orange-clad supporters cheered the rallies of Thailand's most popular political party ahead of elections this weekend, but few expect it to take power.

While the People's Party is far ahead in the polls, promising to tackle corruption and reform Thailand's strict royal insult laws, even some of the party's lawmakers have their doubts.

"They will not let us become the government or come into power easily," 31-year-old firebrand Rukchanok Srinork told AFP.

"It is not a surprise that they will do everything to block us."

Dubbed "Ice Storm" by Thai media, Rukchanok is an inspirational figure for many young Thai voters who want to see change.

The People's Party is the latest incarnation of the organisation that won the last election, in 2023, pledging to relax lese-majeste laws, push back military influence and break up powerful business monopolies.

It struck a coalition deal with second-placed Pheu Thai — the grouping of ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, now in prison — only for military-appointed senators to reject its leader, Pita Limjaroenrat, as prime minister.

The constitutional court later

banned Pita from politics for 10 years for campaigning to change the lese-majeste legislation, known as Section 112, and dissolved the party.

Re-founded and renamed, the People's Party was around 11 percent ahead of its nearest rival, the ruling Bhumjaithai, in the last survey by respected pollster NIDA before a pre-election cut-off.

Half of 18- to 35-year-olds support the party, it found.

The party has half a million TikTok followers, its bright and playful daily content far outpacing Bhumjaithai's 38,000.

"I feel bored with the old style of politics," said Napat Sinakasa, a 23-year-old software developer and second-time voter.

"I wish new politicians who've never had the chance to run the country have the chance to."

## Mass protests

But elite and conservative forces retain their grip on the Thai establishment, and most analysts doubt the People's Party will manage to form a government, even if it emerges with the most seats.

The party's victory in May 2023 — when it was known as Move Forward — came on a record turnout of 75 percent.

Its dissolution sparked months of youth-led demonstrations in Bangkok, with protesters hurling



**People's Party MP Rukchanok Srinork speaks during a campaign rally ahead of the general election, in Bangkok on January 25. Thousands of young orange-clad supporters cheered the rallies of Thailand's most popular political party ahead of elections on February 8, but few expect it to take power.** — AFP

unprecedented public criticisms of the monarchy and demanding transparency and reform.

Protest leaders were later convicted under Section 112.

Analysts expect incumbent Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul's Bhumjaithai to come second this time and form a coalition with probable third-placed Pheu Thai.

Many young voters say that would dishearten them.

"I would probably be angry... not angry at the party, but angry at the rules or the people who caused it — those who might have made secret deals behind the scenes," said Patcharee Phadungsuksira, 26.

"I do feel a bit discouraged sometimes, but I still believe that one day it will be our turn," she added.

## Don't stop believing

The military-appointed senators

who blocked the party last time are no longer in parliament, and the vote is now by the lower house only.

But two of the three People's Party prime ministerial candidates have accusations hanging over them for supporting changes to the lese-majeste law, which could see them also banned from politics.

Voters, especially the younger generation, still "feel upset" about the fate of Move Forward, said political scientist Punchada Sirivunnabood, of Mahidol University.

There is no guarantee the People's Party will secure power even if it wins the popular vote, she said.

"So that's why there's a question: Should we really vote for this party? Because if we vote for them and they cannot form the government... we're going to lose our votes."

But on the campaign trail, its top prime ministerial nominee, Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut, hoped that this time there would be "no lawfare to destroy us".

"People still believe in their power," he told AFP, between pauses to snap selfies with young supporters, despite the party having been dissolved "many times before".

"We cannot stop believing, we cannot stop fighting." — AFP

## Vintage bomb found on campus in Manila

MANILA—A worker discovered a corroded vintage bomb while digging at a construction site on the campus of the University of the Philippines Diliman yesterday, the police said.

The Quezon City Police District (QCPD) Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) unit was called to the site,

conducted standard safety procedures and recovered one vintage bomb for custody and proper disposition, the QCPD said in a statement.

The Philippine Collegian, the official student publication of the university, reported that the bomb may date back to World War II,

when Japanese forces heavily bombed Metro Manila.

Unexploded wartime ordnance continues to surface in various parts of the country, particularly during construction and excavation activities, decades after the end of the war. — Xinhua

## Death toll from heavy Japan snow hits 30

**Hiroshi Hiyama**

TOKYO — Unusually heavy snow killed at least 30 people in Japan in the past two weeks, officials said yesterday, as the government deployed troops to help clear huge drifts that left residents in the country's north struggling to leave home.

Authorities recorded up to 4.5 metres of snowfall in parts of the worst-hit northern region of Aomori where many of the deaths took place, including a 91-year-old woman whose body was found beneath a three-metre pile of snow outside her house.

A major weather system has dumped huge volumes of snow along the Sea of Japan coast in recent weeks, with some central and northern areas of the main Honshu island seeing more than twice the usual amounts.

The central government has deployed troops to help local authorities cope and Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi hosted a special cabinet meeting yesterday to instruct her ministers to do all they

could to prevent further deaths.

Television images showed residents having to walk through trenches dug into the heavy snow, while drivers struggled to avoid their vehicles getting stuck.

Many local schools were closed and public transport services had been suspended in some areas.

Authorities must prioritise snow removal, a resident of Aomori city, the regional capital, told local broadcaster RAB yesterday after he helped to extract a stuck van.

"They must block traffic from the morning and clear snow. Otherwise, there is no solution to this," the unnamed man told RAB.

Authorities were deploying trucks and heavy machinery to attempt to shift the snow, but had not been able to keep up with the unending precipitation, officials said.

Walls of snow as high as 1.8 metres in Aomori city prevented even government officials from reporting to work, regional governor Soichiro Miyashita told a press conference.

"The snow is so heavy around

the regional government building that even our staff cannot convene, even if we were to call emergency meetings," he said.

Since January 20 until yesterday, 30 people have died as a result of the snow, according to the Fire and Disaster Management Agency.

Among them was Kina Jin, 91, whose body was found under snow at her home in Ajigasawa, Aomori, a local police official told AFP on a condition of anonymity.

Police believe snow from her rooftop fell on her. The cause of her death was suffocation, the official said.

"As it gets warmer, the accumulated snow melts and falls. It depends on the volume [of snow] and the temperature. Under the rooftop is a dangerous place," the official told AFP.

A local elderly woman thanked troops Monday after they cleared snow from her home in Aomori city.

"If they hadn't come, my house would have collapsed either today or tomorrow," she told local broadcaster ATV. — AFP

## Malaysian court acquits French man on drug charges

**Isabelle Leong**

ALOR SETAR — A French national facing a possible death sentence in Malaysia on eight drug-related charges was acquitted yesterday, freeing him after nearly two and a half years in detention.

The High Court in the northern city of Alor Setar ruled that prosecutors failed to prove that Tom Felix, 34, had control, custody or possession of the drugs in the case.

"The accused is, therefore, released and acquitted," Alor Setar High Court judge Evawani Farisyta Mohammad said.

Felix, in court wearing a white shirt and trousers, his hands cuffed, looked visibly pleased as the judge delivered the decision.

His parents, Jean Luc and Sylvie Felix, embraced after the ruling.

"We are very happy, relieved. It's finally the end of a nightmare, and we are so happy," Sylvie Felix told AFP.

"We are very grateful that we are supported by all our family and that now that he's acquitted... we [will] try to make his return [to France] safe and fast."

"This is the end of a very long nightmare for Tom, who had lived through the hell of an unjust accusation and an undignified detention," Felix's lawyer François Zimeray told AFP.

It was also the end for his family, "who held strong against the temptation of despair".

French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot said he was "immensely relieved" after Felix's acquittal.

"My thoughts are with his parents, whom I met twice last year and who will finally be able to reunite with their son," Barrot said on France Television, adding that Felix would be able to return to France.

Felix and his parents were at the Malaysian immigration office in Alor Setar yesterday afternoon, where he was expected to be handed his passport before being freed.

Felix, a former Veolia executive, and his Malaysian business partner were detained in 2023 after police discovered 1.86 kilograms of cannabis in the common area of a home they shared.

Authorities later said Felix was also found in possession of 11.7 grams of the drug.

He denied all the charges.

If convicted, Felix faced the death penalty or a cumulative sentence of 104 years in prison, 54 strokes of the cane and a 27,000 euro (US\$31,000) fine, his mother previously told AFP.

Drug trafficking and possession are serious offences in Malaysia, which still allows capital punishment for cases involving large quantities of narcotics.

However, death sentences are no longer mandatory, and no executions have been carried out since 2018.

— AFP



## India's opposition leaders say India-US trade deal against farmers' interests

NEW DELHI — India's opposition leaders yesterday criticized the India-US trade deal reducing tariffs on Indian goods to 18 percent, saying it jeopardized the country's farmers' interests.

On Monday night, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi held telephone talks with US President Donald Trump, during which the latter agreed to reduce tariffs on India-made products to 18 percent from 25 percent.

Trump had also announced that India had agreed not to buy oil from Russia, but from Venezuela, though Modi remained silent over the issue in his statement announcing his talks with Trump.

Manish Tewari, a lawmaker of the main opposition party, the Indian National Congress, lamented US Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins' statement that the new US-India deal would export more American farm products to India's massive market.

"This is a serious question which we want to ask the government of India, because it is related to our farmers' interests. That's why we want to raise this issue in the Indian parliament," said Tewari.

Leader of the Opposition in the Indian parliament's lower house Rahul Gandhi told the media that in the India-US trade deal, Modi had "compromised" himself and "sold the country's hard-earned progress."

He added that Modi had signed the deal under "immense pressure" from the United States.

However, an online report by India Today quoted Indian government sources as saying that India's crude purchases would be conducted globally from countries not under international sanctions based on prevailing market rates. "We did not buy from Venezuela when sanctions were in place. Now that sanctions are lifted, we will buy." — AFP

## Rural India powers global AI models

Aishwarya Kumar with Parvaiz Bukhari in Ranchi

BENGALURU — Tending crops by day and then logging on for a night shift of data labelling, 27-year-old Chandmani Kerketta is part of a rising rural Indian workforce helping power an artificial intelligence (AI) revolution.

From her home in India's eastern Jharkhand state, Kerketta is part of an AI-driven labour shift that the government hopes will transform lives, including by bringing more women into the workforce.

The work is basic but essential for machine learning: data labelling, annotation and quality checks.

It is the type of information key for driverless cars, for example.

"This job helped me finish my studies, and help at home on our farm," Kerketta said as she tended tomatoes and peas.

Kerketta, from one of India's constitutionally recognised tribal communities, was the first in her family to attend college.

She initially worked as an office assistant at a data-processing firm in Jharkhand's capital Ranchi, where she watched employees working at computers.

But after a computer course at her village school, Kerketta joined an estimated workforce of at least 200,000 annotators in India's villages and small towns - a growing figure, and roughly half of the world's data-labelling workforce, according to US-based Stry AI.

Rural-based workers can label hundreds of images, videos and documents during eight-hour shifts, either from home or from modest internet-connected centres.

"After my night shift of data work, I sleep a little, and then help in farming," said Kerketta, who now holds a history degree. "In Jharkhand, farming is everything."

Anju Kumari, 25, another rural AI worker in Jharkhand using a national fibre-optic cable network laid by Indian Railways, said the job had provided her with a pathway to a wider world.

Kumari said work can include painstaking "labelling videos frame-by-frame", giving the example of teaching AI whether a person using an ATM is "likely a burglar, or someone genuinely drawing cash".

### Small-town offices

India, which will host an international AI summit next month, has ambitious plans.



This photograph taken on January 16 shows AI data labeller Chandmani Kerketta working in a kitchen of a rented room for her work-from-home setup in Ranchi in India's Jharkhand state.

— AFP

It is now third in a global AI power ranking, overtaking South Korea and Japan, based on more than 40 indicators from patents to private funding calculated by Stanford University's Institute for Human-Centered AI.

In recent months, US tech giants including Google, Microsoft and Amazon have announced multi-billion-dollar investments to build some of the world's biggest data centres in India.

The country is no stranger to back-end work for global technology firms.

Cities such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Chennai host major international players, but India's AI push is also expanding into more remote regions.

In Tamil Nadu state, along a winding rural road, Indu Nadarajan travels to a small-town office where she labels images for autonomous vehicles, such as road markings, headlights and animals.

Nadarajan works for NextWealth, an AI-enabling services firm headquartered in Bengaluru, with offices across small towns, supporting clients from the United States, Europe and Asia.

"Many go to Chennai and Bengaluru to learn about AI," said Nadarajan, who has a master's degree in mathematics.

"But being here in our hometown and learning about AI makes me feel very proud."

### 'Anybody can be anywhere'

Every AI model relies on vast amounts of labelled data, regardless of its complexity. The more precise the labelling, the better the technology performs.

"When I can design a product for a US company 5,000 miles away, why can't I do it from 200 miles away?" said NextWealth founder Sridhar Mitta, 80, a former chief technology officer at Indian tech giant Wipro.

"Anybody can be anywhere and do the things, because the value goes through the internet."

His scattered employees earn anywhere between US\$275 to US\$550 a month.

While AI-driven automation may render some jobs obsolete, Mitta believes it will also generate opportunities.

"Micro-entrepreneurship will be the next phase for small towns," Mitta said.

"It may not be another billion-dollar company, but they will produce something which will be useful to the region."

As AI reaches rural India, it is quietly reshaping lives - particularly for women from conservative backgrounds.

For Amala Dhanapal, a colleague of Nadarajan and the first graduate in her family - her father is a tailor and her mother a homemaker - working in AI has changed attitudes.

"It's a big thing," Dhanapal said, saying it both provided a gateway to learning and greater financial independence.

"Most girls find it difficult to even pursue their education due to their family background."

When Kerketta first began her data-annotation work, villagers mocked her.

"Now, when they see me going around on my scooter, they look at me with pride," she said. "Just like I do myself." — AFP



This picture taken on Monday and released by North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) via KNS yesterday shows North Korean leader Kim Jong Un (centre) inspecting the dairy product production facility at the Samgwang Stockbreeding Farm in North Pyongan Province, North Korea. — AFP

## Australia launches world-first trial of personalized vaccines for children's deadly brain cancers

SYDNEY — Australia has launched a world-first clinical trial using personalized mRNA vaccines to treat children and adolescents with advanced or treatment-resistant brain tumors.

The PaedNEO-VAX study, co-led by Australia's University of Queensland (UQ) and the South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute (SAHMRI), will enroll patients at eight pediatric hospitals across Australia, offering new hope for families facing the country's deadliest childhood disease, said a UQ statement yesterday.

Clinical lead Jordan Hansford from SAHMRI said the trial was available for pediatric patients with relapsed and unresponsive high-grade brain tumors, including gliomas and medulloblastomas.

Phase I will assess safety, followed by Phase II to test

effectiveness and impact on survival and quality of life, Hansford said.

The trial's scientific lead Brandon Wainwright from UQ's Frazer Institute said personalized mRNA cancer vaccines had shown promising results in adults with rare and hard-to-treat cancers, including pancreatic cancer and melanoma.

"After identifying unique cancer markers in each child's tumor using genome sequencing and advanced data analysis, we will select tumor-specific vaccine targets," Wainwright said.

Customized vaccines for each child will be manufactured in the Australian state of Queensland by Southern RNA and sent to trial sites for dosing within about 10 weeks of trial enrollment, backed by AU\$2.58 million (US\$1.81 million) in federal funding, researchers said. — Xinhua

## Sri Lanka steps up anti-money laundering reforms ahead of global review

COLOMBO — Sri Lanka has intensified efforts to strengthen its legal and institutional framework against money laundering and terrorist financing as the government prepares for its third mutual evaluation under international standards, the President's Media Division (PMD) said in a statement yesterday.

The PMD said that a high-level discussion reviewed progress on meeting requirements set by the

Financial Action Task Force, which has issued 40 recommendations for countries to combat illicit financial flows and proliferation financing.

The mutual evaluation involves about 25 government institutions and is coordinated domestically by the Financial Intelligence Unit of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka.

Officials have been urged to expedite pending legal amendments, address staff shortages, speed

up recruitment and promotions, and retain trained officers in their current posts to avoid delays.

Sri Lanka previously faced setbacks during earlier evaluations, including a period of international greylisting, and the government aims to restore credibility and ensure full compliance ahead of the assessment scheduled for November, according to the PMD.

— Xinhua



# 10 men charged in France over rape of drugged 5-year-old

LILLE – French prosecutors said yesterday they had charged 10 men aged 29 to 50 in relation to an investigation into the alleged rape of a five-year-old boy while drugged.

The shocking case, in which the boy's father has been charged, is a rare example of sexual abuse using drugs involving a young child.

An investigation was opened on February 15, 2025, following a report on a "chemsex" party the previous night in the northern city of Lille. Chemsex is the practice of turbocharging sexual encounters with powerful drugs.

The allegations were that a five-year-old child who was "put in contact with adult males by his own father" suffered "acts of sexual violence aggravated by the use of chemical substances", it said.

It referred the matter to an investigating judge for acts committed in Lille between November 2024 and February 14, 2025, including for "rape and sexual assault involving the administration of a substance to the victim, without their knowledge, to impair their judgment or control their actions".

Following an investigation, the 10 men were charged between February last year and last month.

One of the main suspects killed himself while being held in pretrial detention in June last year, the prosecutor's office said, without providing further details on his identity.

The father has been indicted for "incestuous sexual assault" and "complicity in aggravated rapes and sexual assaults against his

son", the prosecutor's office said.

He too was allegedly raped and assaulted during the same party, Lille prosecutor Samuel Finielz said.

The child is being looked after by his mother, from whom the father had separated before the alleged abuse.

The local *Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace* newspaper reported that at least one of the men – a 30-year-old truck driver who was charged in January – was not accused of being a participant but someone who received a video and did not report it to the authorities.

Meanwhile, a French court yesterday found a former senator guilty of drugging a woman lawmaker with ecstasy with intent to sexually assault her, and handed him an 18-month sentence. – AFP

## WHO wants US\$1 billion for world's worst health crises in 2026

GENEVA – The World Health Organisation (WHO) yesterday appealed for US\$1 billion to tackle health crises this year across the world's 36 most severe emergencies, including in Gaza, Sudan, Haiti and Afghanistan.

Hit by deep cuts in foreign aid from wealthy countries, the WHO made its emergency request significantly lower than in recent years, saying it had to be realistic about how much money would arrive.

"We are deeply worried about the vast needs and how we will meet them," WHO health emergencies chief Chikwe Ihekweazu told reporters in Geneva.

"We are making some of the hardest choices we have to make."

The WHO estimated 239 million people would need urgent humanitarian assistance this year, and said the money would keep essential health services afloat.

"A quarter of a billion people are living through humanitarian crises that strip away the most basic protections: safety, shelter and access to health care," Ihekweazu said.

"In these settings, health needs are surging, whether due to injuries, disease outbreaks, malnutrition or untreated chronic diseases," he warned.

Washington, traditionally the UN health agency's biggest donor, has slashed foreign aid spending under President Donald Trump, who on his first day back in office in January 2025 handed the WHO his country's one-year withdrawal notice.

Last year, the WHO appealed for US\$1.5 billion, but Ihekweazu said only US\$900 million came through – below 2016 levels.

"We've calibrated our ask a little bit more towards what is available realistically, understanding the situation around the world, the constraints that many countries have," he said.

Ihekweazu said the WHO was "hyper-prioritising" high-impact services, focusing on "where we can save the most lives".

He said the WHO was shifting footing towards enabling 1,500 local partners to do more of the frontline work on the ground.

### 'Severe' consequences warning

The 2026 priority emergency responses also include the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen, plus ongoing cholera and mpox outbreaks.

Ihekweazu said if the funding

does not come through, it "absolutely" leaves the world more vulnerable to epidemics and pandemics.

"Imagining that these challenges will somehow disappear without global solidarity is wishful thinking," he said.

"The consequences might be not only severe for them but severe for the world."

Last year's top emergency donors were the European Union, Germany, Japan, Italy and Britain.

Ihekweazu said the immediate response to the appeal was "quite encouraging".

"There are many countries around the world we think can and should do more... countries that sometimes speak the loudest don't do the most," he said.

Last year, the WHO responded to 50 health emergencies in 82 countries, reaching more than 30 million people with essential services.

However, global funding cuts forced 6,700 health facilities across 22 humanitarian settings to either close or reduce services, "cutting 53 million people off from health care", Ihekweazu said.

"We are appealing to the better sense of countries, and of people, and asking them to invest in a healthier, safer world." – APP

## School pupil stabs, critically wounds teacher in France

MARSEILLE – A secondary school student stabbed an art teacher in southern France yesterday, leaving the 60-year-old in critical condition, a prosecutor said.

The pupil, in a class of early teenagers, stabbed the teacher at least three times. He was later arrested on suspicion of attempted murder, said Raphael Balland, the public prosecutor in the southern city of Toulon.

There were no known "religious or political connotations" at this stage, said Balland.

"All we know is that there had been tensions with this teacher recently, and that he was angry with her," the prosecutor added during a press briefing.

France's education minister, Édouard Geffray, said he was headed to La Guicharde secondary school, where the stabbing took place, in the town of Sanary-sur-Mer.

"My thoughts immediately go out to the victim, her family and the entire educational community, whose deep shock I share," he wrote on X.

France has seen a series

of incidents in which pupils have attacked teachers or other schoolchildren.

A 14-year-old schoolboy was last year charged with the murder of a teaching assistant after allegedly stabbing her to death in June.

He attacked the 31-year-old, a mother of a young boy, during a bag search in the eastern town of Nogent.

In a separate case, a student in April killed a girl and wounded several other pupils in a stabbing spree in the western city of Nantes.

– AFP

## Sacked UK envoy Mandelson quits parliament over Epstein ties

*Martin Pollard and Helen Rowe*

LONDON – The UK's former ambassador to the United States, Peter Mandelson, is stepping down as a member of the upper house of parliament, it was announced yesterday, as a scandal deepened over his ties to late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

The veteran Labour politician, former UK government minister and EU trade commissioner had announced he was resigning from the House of Lords as of today, speaker Michael Forsyth told members.

"The clerk of the parliaments has today [yesterday] received notification from Lord Mandelson of his intention to retire from the House, effective from February 4," Forsyth said.

The move came shortly after Prime Minister Keir Starmer said Mandelson had "let his country down" after a slew of emails released by US authorities which detailed his cosy ties with the American financier.

Starmer told ministers he was "appalled" at revelations regarding Mandelson that emerged over the weekend, according to a Downing Street readout of a cabinet meeting.

"The alleged passing on of emails of highly sensitive government business was disgraceful," the prime minister said, adding he was not yet "reassured that the totality of information had yet emerged" regarding Mandelson's links with Epstein.

Starmer also said he had asked officials to draft legislation to strip Mandelson of his peerage "as quickly as possible" and made it clear the government "would cooperate" with any police inquiries into the matter.

London's Metropolitan Police said on Monday that they were reviewing reports of a possible "misconduct in a public office... to determine if they meet the criminal threshold for investigation".

### 'Gobsmacking'

Starmer has faced mounting criticism of his initial decision to appoint Mandelson as Britain's ambassador to Washington, before sacking him last September, less than a year into his post, over his ties to Epstein.

The Epstein affair is casting a long shadow over Washington and Europe, entangling some of the most prominent names in politics.

The US Justice Department on Friday released what it said would be the final batch of pages, photos and videos from the Epstein files, adding fuel to a political drama that has put pressure on President Donald Trump.

Trump spent months trying to block the disclosure of investigative files linked to Epstein, who moved in elite circles for years, cultivating ties with billionaires, politicians, academics and celebrities.

On Monday, it emerged that former US president Bill Clinton and his wife, Hillary, will testify in a US House investigation into Epstein, heading off a potential vote to hold the couple in contempt.

Neither Trump nor the Clintons have been accused of criminal wrongdoing related to Epstein's activities.

Meanwhile, the European Commission said yesterday it will look into whether Mandelson, who served as the EU's trade chief between 2004 and 2008, broke its code of conduct over his Epstein ties.

Mandelson – a back-room architect of Labour's revival as an electoral force in the 1990s under Tony Blair – quit the party on Sunday to avoid causing it "further embarrassment" from the slew of revelations.

Bank records released on Friday by the US authorities suggested that in 2009, Mandelson, who was then business secretary, forwarded an economic briefing to Epstein intended for then-leader Gordon Brown, captioning it: "Interesting note that's gone to the PM."

Epstein also appeared to have transferred a total of US\$75,000 in three payments to accounts linked to the top Labour politician between 2003 and 2004.

Mandelson, 72, told the BBC on Sunday he had no memory of the money transfers and did not know whether the documents were authentic.

His comments were "gobsmacking" and caused the public "to lose faith in all politicians", Starmer told his cabinet.

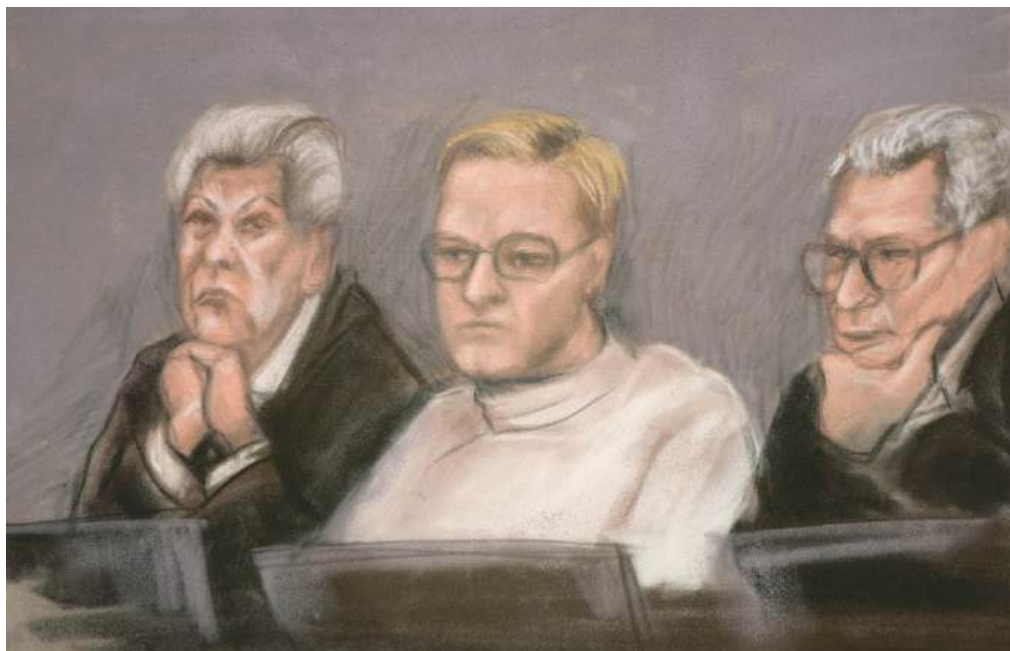
– AFP



Palestinian Huda Abu Abed reacts while sitting with her loved ones inside her family's tent in Khan Yunis, in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday, after returning from Egypt via the Rafah crossing. Abu Abed, who suffers from a heart condition, left the Gaza Strip through the Rafah crossing in early 2024 as part of a list of patients approved to receive treatment in Egypt. – AFP



## Sex was consensual, Norway crown princess's son tells rape trial



A court sketch depicts Marius Borg Hoiby (centre), son of Norwegian Crown Princess Mette-Marit, flanked by his defence lawyers during the first day of his trial in Oslo yesterday. — AFP

OSLO — The 29-year-old son of Norway's crown princess told an Oslo court yesterday that he did not rape four women, arguing that he perceived the sex as consensual.

Marius Borg Hoiby, Crown Princess Mette-Marit's son from a relationship prior to her 2001 marriage to Crown Prince Haakon, is accused of raping them between 2018 and 2024, as well as a string of other crimes.

His trial has thrown the Norwegian royal family into turmoil, at a time when Mette-Marit has also come under fire over recently unsealed US documents revealing her close friendship with the late convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

Clad in green trousers and a sweater, Hoiby remained expressionless in the Oslo district court as prosecutors read out the 38 charges against him, which could see him jailed for up to 16 years.

While Hoiby pleaded not guilty to the rapes, he admitted guilt for several of the more minor counts, including assaults, a narcotics charge, traffic offences and violations of restraining orders.

He was arrested again on Sunday on suspicion of assault, making threats with a knife and violating a restraining order, and was remanded in custody for four weeks.

The prosecution presented details of the alleged rapes and assaults to the packed courtroom as Hoiby, his head bowed, fidgeted nervously.

The alleged rapes — including one while he was on holiday in 2023 with his royal stepfather in Norway's Lofoten Islands — all took place after consensual sex, often following evenings of heavy drinking when the women were not in a state to defend themselves, the prosecution claimed.

"If Marius says he is not guilty ... it's simply because he perceived all of the acts as perfectly normal and consensual sexual relations," the defence argued.

One of his alleged victims testified, in tears, about an after-party in 2018 at Hoiby's residence on his parents' Skaugum estate outside Oslo.

Police discovered footage on Hoiby's phone showing what they described as Mette-Marit's son raping the alleged victim while she slept. The victim told the court that she could not remember having fallen asleep after cutting short a brief sexual encounter with Hoiby.

### Treated like anyone else

Hoiby "must not be treated more severely nor more leniently because of his family connections", prosecutor Sturla Henriksbo told the court.

The defence meanwhile criticised the "negative media tsunami" that risked convicting Hoiby in advance.

"The judgment must be handed down in this courtroom, nowhere else," lawyer Ellen Holager Andenaes told the court.

"It is really impossible for me to describe the impact that this has had on Marius's life and mental health during the past 18 months," she added.

Hoiby was first arrested on August 4, 2024 on suspicion of assaulting his girlfriend the night before.

Several days later, he admitted he had acted "under the influence of alcohol and cocaine after an argument", having suffered from "mental troubles" and struggling "for a long time with substance abuse".

Several ex-girlfriends then came forward and said he had abused them, both physically and mentally.

The police investigation uncovered a string of other suspected offences, including the rapes of four women while they were sleeping or passed out drunk, which he filmed or took pictures of.

The last alleged rape took place after the police investigation began.

In January, police announced six more counts against him, including a drug charge from 2020 after he confessed to transporting 3.5 kilos of marijuana.

### Kicks and punches

The identities of the seven alleged victims cannot be disclosed, with the exception of ex-girlfriend Nora Haukland, a model and influencer who has publicly accused him of physical abuse.

In 2022-2023, while the two were in a relationship, Hoiby repeatedly struck her in the face, kicked and punched her, grabbed her by the throat, threw her against a refrigerator and hurled insults at her, the prosecution said.

The scandal has dealt a blow to the monarchy's reputation, though it remains broadly popular thanks to King Harald and Queen Sonja — both 88 — who are respected as unifying figures.

A poll published yesterday by television channel TV2 suggested that more than 70 percent of Norwegians think the monarchy's standing has been weakened in recent years by various scandals.

The crown prince couple is not attending the trial, which comes as Mette-Marit, 52, faces battles on several fronts.

Besides questions over her relationship with Epstein, she suffers from an incurable lung disease and will likely need a risky lung transplant in the future.

The Hoiby verdict is expected several weeks after the trial ends on March 19. — AFP



### PRESS RELEASE

## MACAU LITERARY FESTIVAL CELEBRATES ITS 15<sup>TH</sup> EDITION FROM 5 TO 15 MARCH 2026

The event will feature literature, cinema, theatre, music and visual arts, and will return to Casa Garden.

Macau, 2 February 2026 — The 15<sup>th</sup> edition of the Macau Literary Festival — The Script Road will take place from 5 to 15 March 2026, once again establishing itself as a key meeting point between Eastern and Western cultures, languages and artistic expressions. Under the motto of celebration and intercultural dialogue, the festival will be staged mainly at the historic Casa Garden, extending to various theatres in the city with a rich programme that includes cinema, theatre, music and visual arts.

The 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition will pay special tribute to Portuguese poet Camilo Pessanha on the centenary of his death. His deep connection to Macau and his literary legacy will be revisited through various initiatives, highlighting the city's role as a bridge between worlds. António Carlos Cortez, Carlos Morais José and Christopher Chu are some of the authors involved in the celebration.

The opening of the festival, on 5 March, will be marked by the inauguration of the exhibition 'Human Territories: Photography, Belonging and Memory', which brings together the distinctive perspectives of Portuguese photographer Alfredo Cunha and Chinese photographer Liu Zheng. The exhibition explores identities and intersecting narratives and will be accompanied by the launch of two photography books.

This edition will see a constellation of international and local authors in attendance. Among the confirmed names are:

- **Amitav Ghosh**, a leading figure in world literature and author of a trilogy of novels centred on the time and space of the Opium Wars;
- **Hernán Díaz**, the most recent winner of the Pulitzer Prize;
- **Lawrence Osborne** and **Mike Goodridge**, both associated with the novel and film adaptation of *Ballad of Small Players*, a film shot in Macau and released in 2025;
- The renowned biographer **Adam Sisman**;
- The French-Swiss novelist of Korean origin **Elisa Shua Dusapin**;
- Acclaimed travel cartoonist **Guy Delisle**;
- Poet and spoken word artist **Carlos Andrés Gomez**;

Chinese-language literature will also be well represented, including:

- **Bi Feiyu**, one of the biggest names of his generation, winner of the Lu Xun Prize and the Man Asia Literary Prize for his novel *Three Sisters*;
- **Xiao Bai**, a journalist and thriller master, also winner of the Lu Xun Prize;
- **Gu Shi**, one of the leading voices of the new generation of Chinese science fiction, winner of the Nebula and Locus Awards;
- **Lu Jian**, poet of the human condition, winner of the Zhang Qian Poetry Prize;
- **Xie Youshun**, one of the most influential voices in the analysis of contemporary Chinese literature, winner of the Feng Um Literary Criticism Prize.

From the Portuguese-speaking world, journalists **João Miguel Tavares** and **Miguel Carvalho** will be present. They recently published investigative works on former Prime Minister José Sócrates and the right-wing Chega Party, respectively.

Two other Portuguese journalists, **Filipa Queiroz** and **Andreia Sofia da Silva**, will be returning to Macau, the former to screen the documentary *Salatinas*, about a historic case involving a threat to architectural heritage in Coimbra, and the latter to present the book *Lápis Vermelho*, about press censorship in Macau during the Portuguese 20<sup>th</sup> century old regime era.

The local literary scene will be well represented by authors such as **Yao Feng**, **Rai Matsu**, **Zita Si Tou Chi U**, **Cheung Wai Man**, **Ka Lo**, **Kam Um Loi**, **Nick Groom**, **Konstantin Bessmertny** and **Veiga Jardim**. The work of the recently deceased Macanese architect José Maneiras will be remembered by **Rui Leão**, **Maria José de Freitas** and other local authors.

In addition to the traditional book launch sessions and discussions on different topics, the festival will offer a multidisciplinary programme, ranging from cinema to theatre and music.

Portuguese cinema will be represented by director **Tiago Guedes** and two of his films: *A Herdade* and *Restos do Vento*.

Theatre will also feature at The Script Road, with the performance of *À Primeira Vista*, directed by Tiago Guedes, which will mark the return to Macau of actress **Margarida Vila-Nova**.

Originally titled *Prima Facie*, the play is the work of Australian playwright Suzie Miller and has already been staged in London, New York, and around 30 other cities worldwide, including Shanghai and Hong Kong.

Musically, the highlight of The Script Road will be the performance by **Rodrigo Leão** at the Macau Cultural Centre on the evening of 11 March.

Additional names to this initial guest list will be announced shortly.

The 15<sup>th</sup> Macau Literary Festival is organised with the support of the Macau Government, diplomatic representations, local associations, companies — with special emphasis on the hotel sector — and the media. Casa Garden, headquarters of the Orient Foundation, will once again serve as the base for The Script Road. This network of partnerships reflects the collective commitment to cultural life and exchange that defines Macau.

**For further information, images or interview requests, please contact:**

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### About the Macau Literary Festival:

The Macau Literary Festival is an annual event that celebrates the written word and the arts, promoting dialogue between writers, artists and audiences from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It has become an essential part of Macau's cultural calendar, highlighting the region's unique role as a meeting point between East and West. Launched in January 2012, it will hold its 15<sup>th</sup> edition in 2026.



# Cuba confirms ‘communications’ with US, but says no negotiations yet

Rigoberto Díaz

HAVANA – Cuba’s government yesterday told AFP that it was in “communication” with US President Donald Trump’s administration but not yet in formal talks on a deal to end Washington’s pressure campaign on the island.

“Today we cannot talk about having dialogue with the United States, but it is true that there have been communications between the two governments,” deputy foreign minister Carlos Fernández de Cossio said in an interview.

Trump on Sunday claimed the United States was in talks with “the highest people” in communist Cuba and that he expected to “make a deal” with its leadership, without saying what a deal might look like.

Fernández de Cossio repeated that Cuba was “open to dialogue” with the United States amid calls from Cubans for the government to negotiate to avert a humanitarian crisis.

Trump has been ratcheting up pressure on Havana since the January 3 capture by US special

forces of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro, a top Cuba ally and financial backer.

Pressured by Washington, Venezuela’s new administration has cut crude shipments to Cuba.

Trump said on Monday that Cuba’s other main supplier, Mexico, would also “cease sending them oil” after he threatened tariff hikes on any country that allowed Cuba to circumvent the de-facto blockade.

There was no immediate response from Mexico.

The United States’ largest trade partner had incurred Trump’s ire by sending oil to Cuba to make up for a sharp decline in Venezuela’s output under Maduro.

As recently as December, Mexico was still sending crude to Cuba.

President Claudia Sheinbaum had been loathe to cut the lifeline to Cuba, warning of a “far-reaching humanitarian crisis directly affecting hospitals, food supplies, and other basic services for the Cuban people.”

But she also admitted last week:



A man pushes a tricycle decorated with US and Cuban flags in Havana yesterday.

– AFP

“We don’t want to put our country at risk in terms of tariffs.”

A decree signed by Trump last week effectively forced her and other Cuban partners to choose.

‘The highest people’

The pressure tactics threaten

to plunge Cuba into complete darkness, with its power plants already struggling to keep the lights on due to fuel shortages.

Jorge Grosso, a 23-year-old student who spent nearly 24 hours last week queueing at a petrol station to fill up his Lada,

told AFP he backed talks “to see what conditions are imposed [by Trump] because in the end they’re strangling us.”

For months Cubans have been forced to cope with power outages lasting up to 20 hours a day in rural areas.

On Monday, Trump repeated his claim that Cuba, which is limping through its worst economic crisis in decades, is a “failed nation.”

He added he believed “we are pretty close [to a deal], but we are dealing with the Cuban leaders right now.”

His pressure on Sheinbaum comes as the United States and its southern neighbour begin talks on a review of a tripartite free-trade deal with Canada which is crucial to Mexico’s economy.

Over the past year, Sheinbaum has been scrambling to stave off the kind of tariffs pain Trump has imposed on other allies.

In a move widely seen as an attempt to appease him, Mexico in January imposed stiff tariffs on imports from China.

– AFP

## What’s changed in Venezuela a month after Maduro’s ouster

CARACAS – The landscape is quickly shifting in Venezuela without deposed leader Nicolás Maduro at the helm.

In the month since a deadly US military operation toppled the long-term president, interim leader Delcy Rodríguez has fallen in line with many of Washington’s demands while still supporting leftist Chavista rhetoric.

This is what has changed for Venezuela:

### Trump ties

Unlike the invasion of Iraq, Washington avoided a total break in continuity of leadership after US special forces captured Maduro, opting instead to allow the country’s vice president to assume power.

Trump has since said he has been working “really well” with Rodríguez, and the Venezuelan interim leader is expected to visit the United States.

The countries have moved to rekindle diplomatic relations, which were severed in 2019 under Maduro.

But Trump has also warned Rodríguez she could face a fate similar to Maduro’s if she fails to action US demands on policy reforms and access to oil.

### Oil reforms

Rodríguez’s interim government swiftly approved reforms to the oil industry, in what analysts have described as a law heavily influenced by Washington.

Private companies can now operate independently in the sector, instead of only as minority partners



A supporter of ousted President Nicolás Maduro displays a poster – demanding “Venezuela – We Want Nicolás Now” – as she takes part in a vigil in Caracas on February 2, 2026.

– AFP

in joint ventures with the state oil company.

The new regulations also lower royalty payments and relinquish state control of exploration.

“This is the only way to obtain significant investments,” said US-based Latin America energy analyst Francisco Monaldi.

Trump has also urged US oil giants to invest in the country – though some remain wary, citing political instability and massive costs in reviving the sector that has been marred by years of corruption and US sanctions.

In the meantime, the US government has directly seized and sold some Venezuelan oil.

### Balancing act

On paper, Rodríguez, previously the vice president, is leading an interim administration

of Maduro’s government.

But in reality, she’s introduced serious changes, including swapping out some ministers and high-ranking military officials.

Key players, like Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello and Defence Minister Vladimir Padrino, have remained in place.

“This is a phase of readjustment,” said Guillermo Tell Aveledo, a professor at Metropolitan University in Caracas.

US rapprochement, which has included talks between Rodríguez and US chief of mission Laura Dogu on the country’s “transition” comes as the government also continues to organise protests demanding Maduro’s release.

Rodríguez has also announced a general amnesty, which is expected to be adopted by the national assembly this week. – AFP, MPD

## Portugal’s ruling party MPs seek social media ban for teens

LISBON – Portugal followed France and Australia by seeking to ban social media for children in a proposal submitted by ruling party lawmakers to parliament on Monday.

Pressure has been rising in the European Union since Australia in December enforced a social media ban for under-16s.

France, which has just passed a bill banning social media for under-16s, had spearheaded a push for similar EU action alongside member states like Denmark, Greece and Spain.

“The digital age of majority for autonomous access to the platforms, services, games, and applications covered by this law is set at 16,”

said the proposal submitted by Portuguese lawmakers.

The proposed law says adolescents aged 13 to 16 may access social networks only with parental consent, and that these platforms must implement an age verification and parental authorisation system compatible with the software used by the Portuguese administration.

“Specialised literature and recent scientific data have shown that early use of these resources ... can compromise the normal social and cognitive development of children, proving increasingly addictive and harmful,” said an introductory text to the proposal. – AFP

## Spain seeks social media ban for under-16s: PM

DUBAI – Spain will seek to ban social media for under-16s to protect them from harmful content such as pornography and violence, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez said yesterday, in the latest such move by governments.

“Spain will ban access to social media for minors under the age of 16. Platforms will be required to implement effective age verification systems, not just checkboxes, but real barriers that work,” Sánchez told a summit in Dubai.

“Today, our children are exposed to a space they were never meant to navigate alone. Space of addiction, abuse, pornography, manipulation, violence. We will no longer accept that.”

The Socialist leader also pledged to change Spanish law to make the

chief executives of tech platforms “face criminal liability for failing to remove illegal or hateful content”.

Sánchez had broached a social media ban for under-16s in November, but fleshed out his idea on yesterday in a package of five measures to be approved “starting next week”.

However, his coalition government lacks a parliamentary majority and often struggles to pass legislation.

Australia established a world first in December when it banned young teenagers from some of the world’s most popular platforms, including Facebook, Instagram and TikTok.

France and Portugal have also sought to follow suit. Spain has joined Denmark, Greece and France in leading a push for similar action across the European Union. – AFP



# FIFA president Infantino defends giving peace prize to Trump

**FIFA** LONDON – FIFA chief Gianni Infantino defended his controversial decision to award a peace prize to United States President Donald Trump as he dismissed calls for a World Cup boycott.

Infantino was widely criticised for giving Trump the honour on behalf of his governing body at the 2026 World Cup draw in Washington DC in December.

The move drew further scrutiny after US forces seized Venezuelan president Miguel Maduro, while Trump caused more controversy with his desire to acquire Greenland for national security reasons.

However, Infantino insisted Trump was deserving of FIFA's inaugural peace prize, telling Sky News on Monday: "Objectively, he deserves it."

"Whatever we can do to help peace in the world, we should be doing it, and for this reason, for some time we were thinking we should do something to reward people who do something."

Infantino rejected suggestions there might be a boycott of this year's World Cup - to be held in the United States, Canada and Mexico from June 11 to July 19 - due to policies adopted at home and abroad by the

Trump administration.

There has been unrest in a number of US cities, most notably Minneapolis, over the Trump administration's approach to immigration enforcement.

But FIFA president Infantino said there were never calls for businesses to boycott a country, "so why football?"

The 55-year-old added: "In our divided world, in our aggressive world, we need occasions where people can come, can meet around the passion [for football]."

Infantino also said FIFA and UEFA – European football's governing body – would

"have to" look at allowing Russia back into international action.

Russia has been banned since its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, but the International Olympic Committee has now recommended sports federations allow Russian teams to compete at youth level.

"We have to [look at readmitting Russia]. Definitely," Infantino said.

"This ban has not achieved anything, it has just created more frustration and hatred."

"Having girls and boys from Russia being able to play football games in other parts of Europe would help." – AFP

## Football shorts

### Juventus sign Swedish defender Holm on loan

**SERIE A** ROME – Juventus have signed Swedish international defender Emil Holm on loan with an option to buy from Bologna, the Serie A club announced on Monday.

Juventus would have to pay 15 million euros (US\$17.7 million) to sign the 25-year-old outright when the loan finishes at the end of the season, a statement said.

He joined Bologna in 2024 after a season with Atalanta and scored two goals in 48 appearances for the club.

Juventus, who thumped Parma 4-1 on Sunday, are currently fourth in Serie A, one point behind third-placed Napoli but 10 points adrift of leaders Inter. – AFP

### Mateta move to Milan scuppered by medical concerns: source

**SERIE A** MILAN – Jean-Philippe Mateta's potential deadline-day move to AC Milan from Crystal Palace has fallen through for medical reasons, a source told AFP on Monday, confirming Italian media reports.

The France striker was left out of Palace's squad for their Premier League draw with Nottingham Forest on Sunday, in anticipation of a transfer to Milan.

"AC Milan requested further tests on his knee, and they did not provide the necessary assurances to finalise the transfer," the source told AFP, adding that Mateta was previously slated to sign for Milan at the end of the season.

"The decision had been made to bring his arrival forward by six months. The move has now been abandoned."

Mateta has scored 56 goals for Palace since joining the London club, initially on loan from Mainz in January 2021, and was a key part of the side which won last season's FA Cup.

The wheels have come off for Palace in recent weeks, with manager Oliver Glasner announcing he will leave Selhurst Park at the end of the campaign and defender Marc Guehi departing for Manchester City.

The Eagles are on a winless run of 12 games in all competitions.

The 28-year-old Mateta has netted 10 goals this season, but has scored only once in his last 12 appearances.

Milan had been hoping to bolster their attacking options to help boost their bid to chase down city rivals Inter Milan, whom they trail by eight points at the top of Serie A.

Italian media reported that Juventus could now attempt to sign Mateta before the window closes later Monday. – AFP

### Atletico complete triple transfer swoop on deadline day

**LaLiga** MADRID – Atletico Madrid signed midfielders Rodrigo Mendoza and Obed Vargas on Monday, as well as confirming the arrival of forward Ademola Lookman.

Coach Diego Simeone had asked for reinforcements with his team third in La Liga, 10 points behind leaders Barcelona, after Conor Gallagher and Giacomo Raspadori left earlier in the winter transfer window.

Mendoza joined from Elche for a reported 20 million euros (US\$23.5 million), although Atletico did not specify a price. He signed a contract until 2031.

Vargas, 20, moved from MLS side Seattle Sounders and played against Atletico last summer at the Club World Cup.

Atletico announced a deal to sign Lookman from Atalanta on Sunday, reported to be worth 40 million euros.

The Rojiblancos completed that transfer on Monday, handing the Nigeria international a contract at the club until 2030.

La Liga sides generally spent very little money in the winter window, with Barca bringing in Joao Cancelo on loan from Al-Hilal, while Real Madrid made no moves. – AFP

### Former France striker Benzema switches Saudi clubs

RIYADH – French striker Karim Benzema, who fell out with his club Al-Ittihad, has joined another Saudi club, Al-Hilal, the current league leaders, where he has signed an 18 month contract, the Riyadh club said on Monday.

"Karim Benzema is officially Hilali," the club announced on social media.

The 2022 Ballon d'Or winner, who scored eight goals in 14 league matches this season, joined on a free transfer, his new club added.

The 38-year-old did not take part in Al-Ittihad's last two matches because he was unhappy with the extension offer he received, media reported.

Benzema reportedly received an offer from Michael Emenalo, sporting director of the Saudi league, which he considered "insulting" as it would amount to "playing for free", apart from his image rights, according to his entourage.

The former France international moved to Saudi Arabia in 2023 after 14 seasons with Real Madrid. Last season he scored 21 goals as Al-Ittihad won the league.

This season Al-Ittihad trail leaders Al-Hilal by 12 points.

Al-Hilal, who play in Riyadh, and Al-Ittihad, in Jeddah, are both owned by the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund (PIF). – AFP



Strasbourg's Argentine defender Valentin Barco controls the ball during the French L1 match against Metz at Stade Saint-Symphorien in Metz on August 17, 2025. Argentine footballers are emigrating to Europe at increasingly younger ages, a risky gamble for all the actors in the market, but also for the much-touted renewal of the reigning world champion national team. – AFP

## Injury crisis for Athletic Bilbao ahead of Cup tie and big league games



MADRID - Athletic Bilbao coach Ernesto Valverde has to deal with a defensive crisis as his side prepares for today's Copa del Rey quarterfinal away to Valencia with none of the team's five specialist central defenders available.

Spain international Dani Vivian and Aymeric Laporte are both out with muscle injuries, while Unai Egiluz still has to play this season after tearing his cruciate knee ligament in the summer.

Yeray Alvarez still has two months to serve on a 10-month ban for using a product to prevent hair-loss which contained a prohibited substance and although he was able to resume training with the rest of his companions on Monday, he still can't play until April.

Finally, Aitor Paredes has a one-game ban after his red card in the 4-3 win away to Cultural Leon is the last round.

Valverde has been using left back Yuri Berchiche as a makeshift central defender in recent games such as Sunday's 1-1 draw at home to Real Sociedad, but will have to decide whether to use a player from the club's B-team [which plays in the third tier of the Spanish game] or use Inigo Lekue out of position.

Valverde's injury worries don't end there,

with midfielder Benat Prados out for the season with another knee ligament problem while forward Maroan Sannadi is also unlikely to return for at least another month after a knee operation and midfielder Oihan Sancet has a hamstring injury that he picked up last week against Sporting Clube de Portugal.

There are also worries about Spain international winger, Nico Williams after the younger of the Williams brothers has failed to recover from the pubalgia that has troubled him since the closing months of last season.

Club and player decided against an operation in the summer and opted for a more conservative treatment, but that has not given the desired results and Nico still looks considerably below his best with reports that the club is considering a new treatment that could sideline him for up to two months.

If that treatment works it should mean Nico is fit for the World Cup, but with Athletic Bilbao just three points above the relegation zone and vital league matches against Levante and Oviedo after the visit to Valencia, the feeling is the issue should have been dealt with much sooner.

The game will be played at 4 a.m. tomorrow morning Macau time. – Xinhua/MPD

## Argentina must stay humble, says former forward Saviola

### Football

RIO DE JANEIRO – Argentina must guard against complacency at this year's FIFA World Cup despite entering the tournament as favorites, former forward Javier Saviola said on Monday.

The Albiceleste will be aiming for their fourth consecutive major tournament victory, having won the 2022 World Cup in Qatar and the past two Copa America titles.

"I think that after becoming world champion, yes, Argentina arrives as favorites," Saviola told reporters during an event in Rio de Janeiro.

"But I also think you have to go about things with humility and keep your feet on the ground because we know that World Cups are serious business. We know there are tremendously competitive teams that will do

everything possible to win," he said.

Saviola, who represented Argentina at the 2006 World Cup in Germany and earned 39 caps for his country, said Lionel Scaloni's team would benefit from having an established squad that is used to playing together.

"For the most part, the players who were a part of the last World Cup will be there again this time," the former Barcelona and Real Madrid player said.

"There is a lot of excitement and a lot of expectation that Argentina can once again be the best national team in the world. They have the squad and the coaching staff to achieve it."

The World Cup will be played in the United States, Mexico and Canada from June 11 to July 19.

Three-time World Cup champions Argentina have been drawn in Group J alongside Algeria, Austria and Jordan. – Xinhua



# Italy's spread-out Olympics face transport challenge

Taimaz Szirniks

MILAN – One of the biggest challenges in this month's Winter Olympics may be off the slopes: moving hundreds of thousands of spectators and athletes over a swath of northern Italy.

The Games are being organised at seven sites – the most spread-out Olympics ever.

Italian authorities argue that organising events up to hundreds of kilometres from each other will limit the environmental impact.

But "the more fragmented the venue layout, the more complex the mobility demands – not only for athletes and officials, but especially for spectators, who generate the largest transport volumes", said Robert Steiger, a professor at Innsbruck University in Austria

specialising in the effects of climate change on tourism.

Andrea Gibelli, head of the local branch of Italy's state railways, said in November that "the real challenge will be to offer a service that can compete with private transport".

"With these spread-out Olympic Games, the first instinct is to say: 'I'll go by car,'" he said.

Spectators are "strongly encouraged to arrive by train or to park outside of sensitive areas and then continue by shuttle", Andrea Scrocco, transport director for the Olympics, told AFP.

## Train or car?

In Milan, there will be a stepped-up train, metro and bus service also at night.

But getting to the mountain sites will be more difficult as there is no

high-speed Olympic train as there was for Beijing in 2022.

A spectator going to watch the skiing in Cortina and arriving at the nearest major airport - Venice - would have to take a bus from the airport to Venice train station to take a regional train, then a bus, then walk to a ski lift and finally walk to the slopes.

A more convenient cable car to and from the entrance of Cortina has not been completed.

For spectators, car travel will often remain faster, despite the risk of traffic jams, very limited access to the resorts and reservation-only parking.

Uber, a partner of the Games, could benefit from the chaos and expects its activity to double in the Olympic zones during the event.

## Delays in infrastructure

Italy has pledged to invest

3.5 billion euros (US\$4.1 billion) in infrastructure for these Games, notably on roads and railways to reach the resorts.

Transport Minister Matteo Salvini is inaugurating infrastructure every week.

But most of the planned tunnels and bridges, presented and funded as the "legacy" of the Games, will not be ready for several years.

As of January 22, 40 of the 95 planned projects - including sports facilities - had been completed, according to the Olympic works delivery company Simico.

Two small tunnels were inaugurated on January 26 after many delays, to access Cortina from the plains by bypassing villages.

But the tender for the 1.5-kilometre tunnel that is supposed to ease access to the Longarone

valley has only just been launched.

Between Milan and the Bormio-Livigno hub, where ski and snowboard competitions are scheduled, a new road bridge was inaugurated with great fanfare in mid-January.

But only one of the two planned lanes is open.

The Swiss canton of Graubunden, through which many spectators will pass on their way to Bormio-Livigno, is moreover asking Lombardy for four million francs (4.4 million euros) for traffic and parking management.

"I believe we made the right decision in opting for a more dispersed Games, but that has... created additional complexities," Kirsty Coventry, the president of the International Olympic Committee, has said. – AFP

## Boy stranded over Olympic prices invited to opening show

ROME – An 11-year-old left stranded in the snow after failing to pay a bus ticket inflated for Italy's Winter Olympics will take part in Friday's opening ceremony, a spokesperson said.

Riccardo had boarded the bus home from school last week in the Cortina d'Ampezzo region with a 2.50 euro (US\$2.95) ticket, the usual fare.

But the operating company had raised the fare to 10 euros ahead of the February 6-22 Milan-Cortina Games, and he had to get off.

The story made headlines in

Italy and beyond and the bus driver apologised, saying he made a "serious mistake".

The Games organising committee has offered Riccardo a role in Friday's opening ceremony at Milan's San Siro stadium to try to make it up to him.

"He will play a symbolic role during the opening ceremony," a spokesperson confirmed to AFP, while noting that the role still needed to be defined.

Local authorities also said they would start offering discounts on bus prices for poorer local residents.

– AFP



Snow falls as Team China members walk in the Olympic Village ahead of the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy yesterday.

– AFP

## Hosts Australia to open Rugby World Cup against HK

SYDNEY – Hosts Australia will face debutants Hong Kong in the opening game of next year's Rugby World Cup, with defending champions South Africa kicking off against Italy, organisers announced yesterday.

Australia, two-time winners, will take on the new boys in Pool A on October 1 to start the tournament at the 60,000-capacity Perth Stadium.

The stand-out fixture in that group sees the Wallabies face three-time champions New Zealand on October 9 at Stadium Australia in Sydney, after the All Blacks play Chile a week earlier.

Holders South Africa begin their bid for a historic third straight title against Italy on October 3, before meeting Georgia the following week and then Romania seven days later.

"To kick off our campaign against Hong Kong will be special given it's their first time in a World Cup and we always feel incredibly well supported in Perth," said Australia skipper Harry Wilson.

"New Zealand a week later in Sydney will obviously be a massive occasion.

"Personally, I'm thrilled our

third pool game is in my home city of Brisbane against Chile who are one of the rapidly improving nations in World Rugby and will be a massive challenge."

Other high-profile group-stage games include England playing Wales on October 16 and Ireland against Scotland on October 10 in an expanded tournament featuring 24 teams for the first time.

Zimbabwe will return to the competition for the first time since 1991 and meet Wales in their opener on October 2 in Adelaide.

Antoine Dupont's France begin their campaign against the United States on the same day in Melbourne.

"The wait is over," World Rugby chair Brett Robinson said.

"This is the moment teams and fans have been waiting for and the start of their Rugby World Cup 2027 journey.

"We've assembled the most compelling match schedule to date, carefully designed to balance player welfare, fan experience and global reach."

Only four teams have won the World Cup – South Africa (4), New Zealand (3), Australia (2) and England (1).

– AFP

## IOC President Coventry stresses keeping sport as neutral ground



MILAN – International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Kirsty Coventry emphasized yesterday the critical need to keep sport a neutral ground in her speech to the 145th IOC Session, ahead of the 2026 Milano Cortina Winter Olympics.

"[We must] focus on our core. We are a sports organization. We understand politics, and we know we don't operate in a vacuum. But our game is sport," Coventry spoke in front of her fellow IOC members.

Keeping sport a neutral ground, she said, is paramount, "a place where every athlete can compete freely, without being held back by the politics or divisions of their governments. In a world that is increasingly divided, this principle matters more than ever. It is what allows the Olympic Games to remain a place of inspiration, where the athletes of the world can come together and showcase the best of our humanity."

Coventry, delivering her first Session speech as president, further underscored the need to focus on the IOC's core mission.

"We cannot be all things to all people. The Olympic Games, and the values they represent, are our greatest asset," she said.

She noted that while sport plays a broader role in health, inclusion and education - and the IOC will continue supporting that - its top responsibility is keeping the Games strong and meaningful.

"That's where our strength lies. That's what makes us different. And that's what the world needs from us."

Coventry, a double Olympic swimming champion, warned that the world was undergoing profound change that touches every area of life, and resting on past successes would be risky.

"We have to make sure the Games remain inspiring for young people everywhere - that they reflect their values, their sense of authenticity, and their search for something genuine," Coventry said.

That means striking a balance between tradition and innovation, stability and flexibility, she added. "It means we have to look at our sports, disciplines and events with fresh eyes - to make sure that we are evolving with our

times. And we must recognize that any evolution will affect all of us: athletes, federations, NOCs, organizers, fans and others."

Through Fit for the Future, Coventry said, the IOC is creating space for open, respectful dialogue to ensure decisions serve the Games' long-term interests. "I know these discussions can be, and potentially will be, uncomfortable, but they are essential if we want to keep the Games strong for generations to come."

Coventry called the IOC Session a vital chance to assess the organization's direction. "This is a time to think not only about what we do, but how we do it - and what it means to be an IOC Member today," she told members, highlighting that their collective experience and diversity are among the IOC's greatest strengths.

"Being an IOC Member today is about more than a title ... It's about being an advocate for the power of sport as a force for good in our lives," she said, urging all members to take an active role in shaping the organization's future.

– Xinhua



# Paying for a selfie: Rome starts charging for Trevi Fountain

Ella Ide

ROME – Italy’s Trevi Fountain launched a new ticketing system on Monday, making the famous Rome landmark the latest tourist site to charge entry in a bid to raise funds and battle overcrowding.

People posed in the sunshine in front of the Baroque masterpiece after paying the two-euro (US\$1.68) fee to access the now largely crowd-free area next to the basin.

“Tell me it’s not worth two euros! It’s worth thousands if not millions, it’s beautiful!” 41-year-old Polish

tourist Agata Harezlak told AFP.

The backdrop to the most famous scene in Federico Fellini’s film “La Dolce Vita” (“The Sweet Life”), when actress Anita Ekberg takes a dip, is top of the list for many visitors exploring the Eternal City.

But in the past, crowds in the public square have been so dense that it has been hard to get a proper look.

Briton Phillip Willis, wearing shorts and a T-shirt despite the cold, said he was pleased to get “a decent picture of myself without being

bombarded by lots of other people”.

It also felt good to spend money which would go to “preserving the fountain for many generations to come, hopefully”, he said.

Most of the square is still open to the public and many people snapped pictures from there rather than paying for a closer look.

Ticket-holders can visit between 9:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m., apart from Monday and Friday, when the area opens at 11:30 a.m.

City hall estimates the access ticket could bring in at least six

million euros a year, Rome’s council member for tourism Alessandro Onorato told journalists.

The earnings will go in part to pay for the 25 blue-vested stewards hired to staff the ticket office and usher people through the gated area at the top of the steps and down to the basin.

Funds raised would also permit free access for locals to a series of museums across the Italian capital, he said.

## ‘Happy to pay’

François Tricot, a 35-year-old from Belgium, said he was “happy to pay” to have room to snap the perfect picture of his partner, who was flashing a brand new engagement ring.

The couple laughed as they then tossed coins into the water, which traditionally ensures their return one day to Rome.

Making a wish and tossing a coin into the 18<sup>th</sup>-century fountain is so popular that authorities collect thousands of euros a week to donate to the Caritas charity.

Italian Mattia Loconte, 12, who

uses a wheelchair, said he hoped some of the funds would go to installing ramps.

Disabled people can access the basin for free – if they can get down the steps.

Unlike the others on his class trip, Loconte said “I can’t get... close up, or do the famous coin ritual”.

Nearby, a group of giggling tourists who had not paid for a ticket took advantage of a steward looking the other way to throw their coins from a distance, cheering as they went in.

Not all were convinced by the fee.

Albanian tourist David Lyucia said it was “ok for tourists”, but “it’s not right for Italians to have to pay”, while Argentine Vittoria Calabria said “it should be free” for all.

But Rome’s tourism czar Onorato brushed off complaints, saying that “if the Trevi Fountain had been in New York, they would have asked for 100 euros, not two”.

Roman’s Pantheon – a church and former Roman temple – began charging visitors in 2023, and Venice last year introduced a tourist entry fee during peak periods. – AFP



Tourists visit the Trevi Fountain in Rome, after the city introduced a two-euro paid entry, in Rome on Monday. – AFP

## Epstein links lead to French film producer’s resignation

PARIS – The daughter of former high-profile French culture minister Jack Lang resigned as head of a film producers’ group on Monday following revelations about family links to sex offender US financier Jeffrey Epstein.

Before his daughter Caroline’s resignation, Lang, who spent nearly 20 years as culture minister and education minister in different governments, told how he had been introduced to Epstein by American actor-director Woody Allen and had no knowledge of his crimes.

Lang, 86, knew Epstein for several years, requesting favours such as the use of his car or plane for himself or his family, French daily Le Monde reported.

French investigative website Mediapart reported that Epstein in 2016 founded a company based in the US Virgin Islands, half of whose shares were owned by Lang’s eldest daughter Caroline.

But it said no US Justice Department files it reviewed suggested either father or daughter had been implicated in Epstein’s sexual crimes.

Caroline Lang, a one-time actor and now a film producer, resigned as head of the Independent Production Union (SPI) following the reports.

“I do not want this situation to in any way harm the union,” said Lang, who was only named as the SPI head three weeks ago.

Caroline Lang said that Epstein was an “acquaintance” and a “generous sponsor”. She said they had planned to set up a fund to buy artworks but that she had not received any money from the fund.

Jack Lang said that he first met Epstein through Woody Allen “about 15 years ago”.

“I was completely shocked when I discovered the crimes he had committed,” Lang, who has been president of the Paris-based Arab World Institute since 2013, said in a statement.

“I fully accept the ties I may have formed at a time when nothing suggested that Jeffrey Epstein could be at the heart of a criminal network,” he added.

“Had I known, I would have immediately cut off all contact with him.”

## ‘Incredibly naive’

Epstein died by suicide in 2019 while in prison facing charges of sex trafficking underage girls.

Caroline Lang told Mediapart she met Epstein through Allen and his wife in 2012, and that the US financier told her he wanted

to “invest in young French and international artists”.

She said his lawyers set up the Prytanee LLC company, but that she did not invest any money in it. An email in the Epstein files suggests she contributed her art knowledge, Mediapart reported. She told the website she had been “incredibly naive”.

A leading French conductor, Frederic Chaslin, also named in the new batch of Epstein documents, meanwhile slammed reports of a 2013 email he sent to Epstein in which he said he had “found a formidable girl”.

“It is ... totally unacceptable and false to insinuate that I ‘found a girl’ for Jeffrey Epstein. The reality is simple and verifiable: he had asked me to recommend an interpreter to accompany him on visits to Parisian museums,” Chaslin wrote in a Facebook post in response to a report by the *Diapason* magazine on the email exchange.

In the 2013 email, Chaslin wrote: “I have found a formidable girl for your next stay in Paris. Philosophy student. 21. She looks a bit like the current wife of [Roman] Polanski.”

Epstein had at this time already been convicted of soliciting an underage person for prostitution.

– AFP

## ‘Send Help’ debuts atop N American box office

LOS ANGELES – Horror flick “Send Help” debuted atop the North American box office at US\$20 million, industry estimates showed on Sunday, as Melania Trump’s new documentary bested expectations.

20<sup>th</sup> Century’s “Send Help” stars Rachel McAdams and Dylan O’Brien as a woman and her boss trying to survive on a deserted island after their plane crashes.

It marks a return to the genre for director Sam Raimi, who first made his name in the 1980s with the “Evil Dead” films.

“This is an excellent opening for an original horror film,” said analyst David A. Gross of Franchise Entertainment Research. “This is terrific, broad-appeal entertainment.”

Debuting in second place was sci-fi thriller “Iron Lung” at US\$18 million, Exhibitor Relations reported.

The video game adaptation written, directed and financed by

YouTube star Mark Fischbach, known by his pseudonym Markiplier, is a post-apocalyptic adventure.

“Melania,” Amazon MGM’s documentary about the first lady, opened in third place with a better-than-expected US\$7 million in ticket sales.

“As good as this opening is for a documentary, for any other film, with US\$75 million in costs and limited foreign potential, it would be a problem,” Gross said.

“But this is a political investment, not a for-profit movie venture,” he added. “US\$75 million is insignificant to Amazon.”

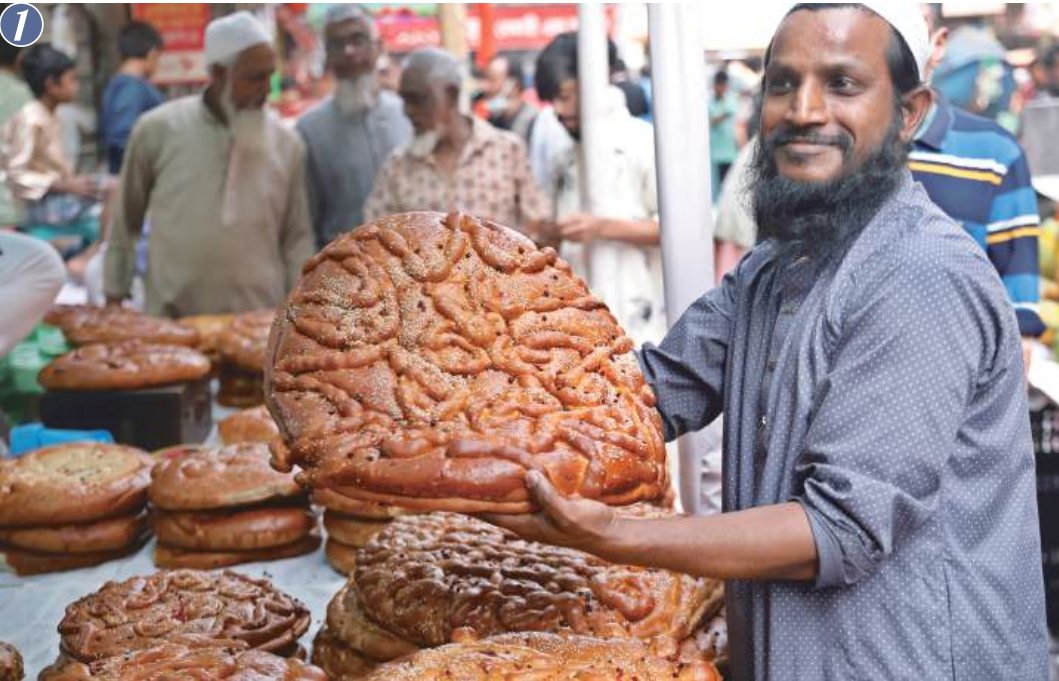
Disney’s Oscar-nominated animated film “Zootopia 2” kept chugging, finishing in fourth place at US\$5.8 million in the United States and Canada.

Opening in fifth place was action thriller “Shelter” starring Jason Statham with a disappointing US\$5.5 million.

– AFP

World Weather			
CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -1°C~12°C	Manila 20°C~31°C	New York -9°C~1°C	Lisbon 15°C~16°C
Shanghai 8°C~17°C	Bangkok 22°C~34°C	London 6°C~11°C	Rio de Janeiro 23°C~30°C
Hong Kong 15°C~21°C	Tokyo 2°C~11°C	Frankfurt 1°C~7°C	Luanda 24°C~29°C
Taipei 14°C~25°C	Singapore 23°C~31°C	Vancouver 6°C~14°C	Maputo 20°C~31°C
Guangzhou 13°C~23°C	Kuala Lumpur 24°C~35°C	Paris 7°C~12°C	Dili 24°C~32°C
Nanjing 6°C~17°C	Jakarta 23°C~29°C	Moscow -2°C~11°C	São Tomé 26°C~31°C
Guilin 13°C~20°C	Seoul -1°C~7°C	Las Vegas 9°C~24°C	Praia 16°C~25°C
Xi'an 3°C~13°C	Sydney 18°C~28°C	Monte Carlo 7°C~13°C	Bissau 20°C~33°C





1

**Great with curry**  
A vendor displays a traditional bread known locally as Rooti in Dhaka, Bangladesh, yesterday. — Xinhua

2

**Never too old!**  
An elderly woman runs between the wickets as others react during a cricket and physical training session in Jinja, on January 10. In eastern Uganda's Jinja district, groups of older women have embraced cricket as a way to stay physically active and socially connected later in life. Often referred to locally as "cricket grannies", they take part in informal games and training that combine light exercise with elements of the sport, part of broader community efforts to address non-communicable diseases and challenge assumptions about ageing and women's participation in sport. — AFP

3

**Braver than most!**  
A man comes out of the Mediterranean Sea on the French riviera city of Nice after an early morning swim, yesterday. — AFP

4

**Imagining a village**  
People have fun in an indoor ice and snow world in Shanghai, yesterday. — Xinhua

5

**Rather not be here!**  
A standard Poodle stands in the benching area during the 150<sup>th</sup> Annual Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in New York City on Monday. — AFP



6

**Bright sparks**  
A performer throws molten iron to create sparks during a performance on the Bund promenade along the Huangpu river, ahead of the upcoming Lunar New Year of the Horse in Shanghai on Monday. — AFP

