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YEAR 21 NO.5241

THURSDAY February 5, 2026

<https://www.macaupostdaily.com> MOP 6.00

## Union Hospital performs Macau's first 'CyberKnife' brain tumour treatment

Armindo Neves

The Islands Healthcare Complex – Macao Medical Centre of Peking Union Medical College Hospital (PUMCH) said in a statement yesterday that it has recently performed Macau's first brain tumour treatment using the "CyberKnife"\*(a stereotactic radiosurgery system using X-rays) device.

This marks the alignment of Macau's radiosurgery capabilities with internationally advanced technology, the statement said.

According to the statement, the CyberKnife system used in this procedure is the latest international model. It combines a high-precision robotic arm with a linear accelerator to perform stereotactic radiation therapy with sub-millimetre accuracy, the statement said.

It is not surgery in the traditional sense, as it is non-invasive so there are no incisions and no physical removal.

The key element of the system



This undated handout photo provided by the Islands Healthcare Complex – Macao Medical Centre of Peking Union Medical College Hospital (PUMCH) yesterday shows a patient undergoing "CyberKnife" brain tumour treatment at PUMCH in Cotai.

is the ability to deliver focused radiation from multiple angles to the tumour lesion, according to the statement, adding that it achieves

a high therapeutic dose while ensuring a rapid dose drop-off to surrounding healthy tissue, akin to the precision of a "scalpel."

The statement also said that the system is equipped with real-time tracking technology, capable of predicting and following the tumour's movement trajectory during radiation. This significantly reduces damage to healthy tissue and minimises treatment side effects, the statement said.

According to the statement, PUMCH has now Macau's largest and most technologically advanced radiation therapy centre for tumour treatment. The hospital is equipped with multiple cutting-edge systems, including a helical (spiral-shaped) tomography radiotherapy system (TomoTherapy), a stereotactic radiotherapy platform (TrueBeam), and an AI-powered online adaptive radiotherapy platform (Ethos), the statement said, adding that these three systems enable the centre to provide precise and individualised treatment plans for patients with various types of cancer.

With Macau's technical capabilities in the field of cancer

radiotherapy further advancing, the statement indicated that PUMCH will continue to accumulate and deepen its clinical experience in precision medicine. It is committed to improving the effectiveness of tumour treatments, bringing hope to more patients, and contributing to the goal of allowing Macau residents to receive major types of treatment locally, without having to leave Macau, the statement said. ■

\* The CyberKnife system is a radiation therapy device manufactured by Accuray, a radiation therapy company headquartered in Madison, Wisconsin, that develops, manufactures, and sells radiation therapy systems to deliver treatments including stereotactic radiosurgery (SRS) and stereotactic body radiation therapy (SBRT). Stereotactic refers to a minimally invasive surgical technique that uses a three-dimensional coordinate system to locate and precisely target small, specific areas inside the body, especially the brain. DeepSeek

## Police launch week-long anti-crime campaign for youth in run-up to CNY

Tony Wong

The Judiciary Police (PJ) yesterday launched their annual week-long crime-prevention awareness campaign targeting young people, in collaboration with various local schools, in the run-up to the Chinese New Year (CNY) holiday period, with the aim of enhancing schoolchildren's ability to stay vigilant against different types of frauds and say no to drugs.

As in previous years, members from two PJ training programmes for university and secondary school students, namely "Community Safety Youth Leader Programme" and "Youth Crime Fighter Programme", have taken part in the campaign to publicise crime prevention information to their peers in the community.

This time, representatives from 24 schools have joined the campaign, which started yesterday in Iao Hon district.

Speaking to reporters in Iao Hon

Market Park yesterday, Cheong Kim Fong, a senior officer of the PJ Youth Concern Group, said that during the one-week campaign, officers from his concern group, along with representatives from the 24 schools and members of the two PJ training programmes, will visit areas around schools across the city as well as facilities and venues frequently frequented by young people, where they will distribute crime prevention leaflets and souvenirs, with a particular focus on educating young people about the latest tactics of telecom and online fraud criminals and the respective preventive measures.

Cheong noted that young people generally spend more time online during a long holiday compared to when they go to school, adding that the campaign teams will remind them to remain vigilant when using social media platforms, carefully

protect their personal and financial information, refrain from easily trusting the identities claimed by netizens whom they have met online, and avoid easily agreeing to meet in person, with the aim of preventing financial loss or threats to their personal safety.

According to Cheong, the campaign teams will also urge young people not to panic when receiving unfamiliar calls or messages, and to avoid disclosing personal information or carrying out acts such as remittances, transfers, sharing smartphone screens, or clicking on attached links before verifying the other party's identity and the authenticity of the situation through reliable channels, with the aim of avoiding falling victim to scams and incurring losses.

Cheong said that the campaign teams will also urge young people to inform their family members of



Cheong Kim Fong (centre), a senior officer of the Judiciary Police's (PJ) Youth Concern Group, briefs two schoolgirls about the modus operandi of four types of commonly reported frauds, outside Iao Hon Market Park yesterday.

Photo: Tony Wong

their whereabouts when they are out and about to take part in celebratory activities, maintain regular contact with their family members, and take care of their belongings. While in entertainment venues, young

people are advised to particularly remain vigilant and firmly refuse drinks, food, or cigarettes offered by strangers, so as to avoid unknowingly consuming drugs or other harmful substances. ■

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### Xi says ready to work with Trump to steer giant ship of China-US ties steadily forward

BEIJING – President Xi Jinping said yesterday he hopes to work with US President Donald Trump in the new year to accomplish more big and good things.

Story on p. 7

### Xi calls on China, Russia to grow ties, work for global strategic stability

China and Russia should increase high-level exchanges and strengthen pragmatic cooperation in various fields, President Xi Jinping said in a virtual meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday.

Story on p. 7

### Thousands evacuated as storm hits Spain, Portugal

A storm unleashing up to 35 centimetres of rain in 24 hours battered the Iberian Peninsula yesterday, forcing thousands of people in southern Spain from their homes, shutting schools and cancelling trains.

Story on p. 12

# USJ adopts ARC sustainability assessment

## *Khalei Vallo*

The University of Saint Joseph (USJ) has become the first higher education institution in Macau to initiate the “ARC sustainability performance assessment”, adopting an international framework to evaluate and improve campus operations, according to a statement by the private university yesterday.

The statement said that the ARC assessment will measure the university’s actual operational performance instead of focusing only on design-based sustainability goals.

According to the statement, ARC Skoru is a global digital performance platform developed by Green Business

Certification Inc. (GBCI) in conjunction with the US Green Building Council, which is behind the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) rating system. The statement noted that the platform assesses verified performance data across five key areas: energy, water, waste, transportation and human experience.

The ARC framework provides performance benchmarks and allows transparent monitoring, helping institutions make informed decisions and pursue continuous improvements in line with international sustainability standards, the statement said, adding that it also converts operational data into a performance

score to provide a clear and comparable view of sustainability progress over time.

The statement said that the ARC process began in September last year, with data collection and analysis continuing throughout 2026, adding that sustainability consultancy firm Urban Practice is supporting USJ during the assessment process.

According to the statement, the initiative aims to reflect its strategic commitment to embedding sustainability into institutional governance and campus management practices, while aligning the private Catholic university’s academic values with global environmental responsibility. ■



*This image downloaded from the University of Saint Joseph’s (USJ) website yesterday shows the logo of ARC Skoru above the private university campus in Ilha Verde district as it becomes the first higher education institution in Macau to commit an ARC sustainability performance assessment.*

## Police nab mainland woman for stealing HK\$160,000 from hotel guestroom

### *Ada Lei*

The Judiciary Police (PJ) arrested a woman from the Chinese mainland yesterday for stealing HK\$160,000 (164,000 patacas) in cash from a hotel guestroom, PJ spokesman Cheong Siu Keong said during a special press conference yesterday.

Cheong identified the suspect as a 32-year-old female surnamed Pu who claimed to be jobless.

According to Cheong, the police received a report on Monday from a middle-aged mainland man who said that his HK\$160,000 in cash had been stolen from his hotel guestroom in Cotai.

Cheong noted that the victim had met Pu earlier and they travelled to Macau to

gamble together on Tuesday, sharing a hotel guestroom. The next morning, when the victim woke up, he found that Pu had already left. Upon checking, he discovered that the HK\$160,000 in cash in his coat pocket had vanished. Suspecting Pu had stolen the money, he immediately reported the case to the police.

The police discovered that after leaving the room, Pu went to another casino, where she gambled away HK\$138,000 before returning to the Chinese mainland. The police intercepted her yesterday as she was re-entering Macau at the Hengqin checkpoint.

Pu was transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) yesterday, facing a theft charge. ■



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

*– Photo: Ada Lei*

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### Macau Weather

**CLOUDY APART FROM SUNNY PERIODS.**  
**MIST IN THE MORNING AND AT NIGHT.**  
**FORCE 2 TO 3 EASTERLY WINDS.**  
**RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL RANGE BETWEEN 65% AND 98%.**



**17°C~24°C**

*Source: SMG*

## Police nab ex-bank manager for cheating client out of 700,000 patacas

### *Ada Lei*

The Judiciary Police (PJ) arrested a female former bank manager on Tuesday for cheating a client out of 700,000 patacas, PJ spokesman Cheong Siu Keong said during a special press conference yesterday.

Cheong identified the suspect as a 41-year-old local who formerly worked as a customer service manager at a bank in the northern district.

According to Cheong, an elderly man first met the suspect at the bank in 2022. She claimed that making fixed deposits could yield higher interest rates than usual. Trusting her, the victim handed over 100,000 patacas. The suspect later claimed to offer even more favourable fixed deposit rates, convincing the victim to provide an additional 100,000 patacas.

Cheong noted that the suspect not only sent the victim forged fixed deposit slips but also paid him 7,200 patacas in purported interest to build trust. She later persuaded him to invest another 500,000 patacas. However, the victim stopped receiving slips and “interest” payments. After



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

*– Photo: Ada Lei*

enquiring at the bank in October 2025, he discovered that he had been scammed and reported the case to the police, leading to the suspect’s dismissal.

The police arrested the suspect on Tuesday near her flat in the northern district. Under questioning, she admitted to defrauding the victim due to being over a million

patacas in debt from cryptocurrency investments, claiming that she had already spent all the money. She also confessed that the photos of the receipts she sent were forgeries of other people’s receipts.

The suspect was transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) yesterday, facing charges of fraud and computer forgery. ■

## Police bust smuggler with leg disability for trafficking drugs in cane

### *Ada Lei*

For the first time ever, the Judiciary Police (PJ) arrested a local smuggler on Tuesday for trafficking drugs hidden in his cane, PJ spokesman Cheong Siu Keong said during a special press conference yesterday.

Cheong identified the suspect as a 53-year-old male with a leg disability.

According to Cheong, based on a tip-off, the Judiciary Police (PJ) identified the local man as a suspect smuggling drugs from across the border into Macau. The police apprehended the suspect on Tuesday as he entered Macau through the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge checkpoint, seizing 17.43 grams of ice hidden inside his walking stick, with an estimated street value of 52,000 patacas. The police later confiscated drug paraphernalia from his flat in the northern district.

Cheong noted that the smuggler tested positive for ice and has a history of drug use dating back to the 1990s. He was last arrested three years ago for drug use and when he was caught on Tuesday had been selling drugs for about a month, Cheong said.

The suspect was transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) yesterday, facing charges of drug trafficking, drug use, and possession of drug paraphernalia. ■



*Judiciary Police (PJ) officers escort the hooded drug-smuggling suspect to a PJ van outside the PJ headquarters in Zape yesterday.*

*– Photo: Ada Lei*

# Kai Fong counsellors urge public to strengthen family communication to prevent child sexual abuse

**Armindo Neves**

According to Macau's total number of crimes reported in the first nine months of last year, announced by the Office of the Secretary for Security (GSS) in December, the number of child sexual abuse cases rose by 13 year-on-year to 28 cases in the same 9-month period.

The cases primarily concern consensual sexual activity involving minors, the spreading of pornographic images or videos, and acts of minor sexual harassment. Among these cases, some also involved suspects who are relatives of the victims.

The Post yesterday interviewed two student counsellors from a student counselling service centre run by General Union of Neighbourhood Associations of Macau (UGAMM – widely known as Kai Fong, its short name in Cantonese), Cheong Man I and Ng Weng Kei, about the ongoing effort to prevent child sexual abuse.

Cheong pointed out that many adolescents have a vague understanding of the legal boundaries regarding sexual activity and exhibit a sense of complacency, adding that

adolescents commonly believe that if "both parties consent" or if they are "underage," it's no issue.

Cheong also said that the online environment makes it extremely easy for young people to access various types of sexual information, including content presented in "packaged" forms such as novels and comics. The regulatory oversight in this area exists in a grey zone, which exacerbates adolescents' casual attitude towards and curiosity about different kinds of sexual behaviour, Cheong said.

Ng also said that sex education promotion in schools has become quite regular. However, the speed and directness of online information often expose young people to information beyond their age level, creating a gap with the age-appropriate designed content taught in schools, Ng said.

Ng pointed out that the key to sex education lies in whether families can provide timely follow-up and communication. Although resources such as "parent workshops" are available, parents commonly face the dilemma of "not knowing how to start the conversation," Ng said.



Outreach student counsellor Cheong Man I (left) and student counsellor Ng Weng Kei pose with children's sex education materials at a student counselling service centre run by the General Union of Neighbourhood Associations of Macau (UGAMM) on Rua das Estalagens in the city centre yesterday.

– Photo: Armindo Neves

Cheong emphasised that cases involving relatives are highly concealed, making identification and intervention difficult. She highlighted that closely observing

adolescents' emotional changes, social behaviour and online footprints is useful to detect signs. Building a trusting relationship is key to encouraging victims to seek

help, Cheong said.

Regarding preventive measures, Cheong suggested a multi-pronged approach, strengthening age-appropriate regulation of online content at the source; continuously communicating the legal consequences clearly to young people to eliminate grey areas; optimising existing sex education teaching materials and developing dedicated family-based sex education resources for parents. She also suggested that the government should consider optimising the environment of support services, such as healthcare, to provide safer and quieter waiting spaces for adolescent victims.

Both Cheong and Ng concluded that prevention efforts require a community-wide approach, with families, in particular, needing to invest more time. This involves adopting an open attitude to understand their children's online culture and social circles, thereby building close parent-child communication, both said, adding that this is crucial for early problem detection and reducing the concealment of such cases. ■

## UFC to return to Galaxy Macau in May



This undated handout photo provided by Galaxy Macau yesterday shows last year's United States' Ultimate Fighting Championship's (UFC) Fight Night at Galaxy Arena in Cotai.

**Khalel Vallo**

Integrated resort Galaxy Macau announced in a statement yesterday that the United States' Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) will return to Galaxy Arena in Cotai from May 28 to 30 with three consecutive days of competition, culminating in UFC Fight Night Macau.

According to the statement, the May events will include a triple-header featuring UFC Fight Night and ROAD TO UFC Season 5, with Galaxy Macau also hosting the opening round of ROAD TO UFC Season 5 on May 28 and 29.

Ahead of UFC Fight Night, Galaxy Macau will stage a week-long series of UFC-themed activities, including athlete meet-and-greets and fan experiences across the integrated resort. Fans

are encouraged to follow "Galaxy Ultimate" on WeChat and visit Galaxy Macau's official website for updates, the statement noted.

The statement said that the UFC's return aligns with the local government's vision of economic diversification and aims to strengthen Macau's role as an international sports and entertainment destination.

The events are part of a four-year strategic partnership established last year, which will bring three UFC Fight Night events to Galaxy Arena through to 2029, according to the statement.

The statement also noted that the upcoming UFC programme is expected to draw fans from across the region and further boost Macau's profile as a global hub for sport, tourism and entertainment. ■

## Observatory gives advice on spring weather

**Khalel Vallo**

Macau marked the Beginning of Spring, known in Putonghua as "Lichun"\*, the first of China's 24 solar terms, yesterday, but the local observatory stressed the solar term does not mean that spring weather has necessarily arrived, noting that strong winter monsoon conditions remain common during the period.

According to a statement by the Macau Meteorological and Geophysical Bureau (SMG), Lichun traditionally symbolises the beginning of growth and the revival of nature. However, the statement underlined that Macau's subtropical coastal location means that this month is still considered the tail end of winter, with weather mainly influenced by northern systems.

When strong continental cold highs move southward or shift eastward into the sea, Macau may experience dry and cold northerly or easterly winds. The statement noted that if the pressure gradient increases, local wind strength can intensify rapidly.

According to the statement, the bureau will issue a "Strong Monsoon Signal" when wind speeds reach or exceed 41 kilometres per hour, a warning commonly known among residents as the "black ball".

From 2016 to 2025, during the beginning of spring – from the day of Lichun until the day before the Rain Water solar term (Yushui), – the bureau issued a total of 14 "black ball" warnings. The statement noted that 2022 recorded the highest number in a single year, with four

warnings, reflecting particularly active cold air conditions.

Yushui (雨水) is the second of the 24 traditional Chinese solar terms, usually starting around February 18-20.

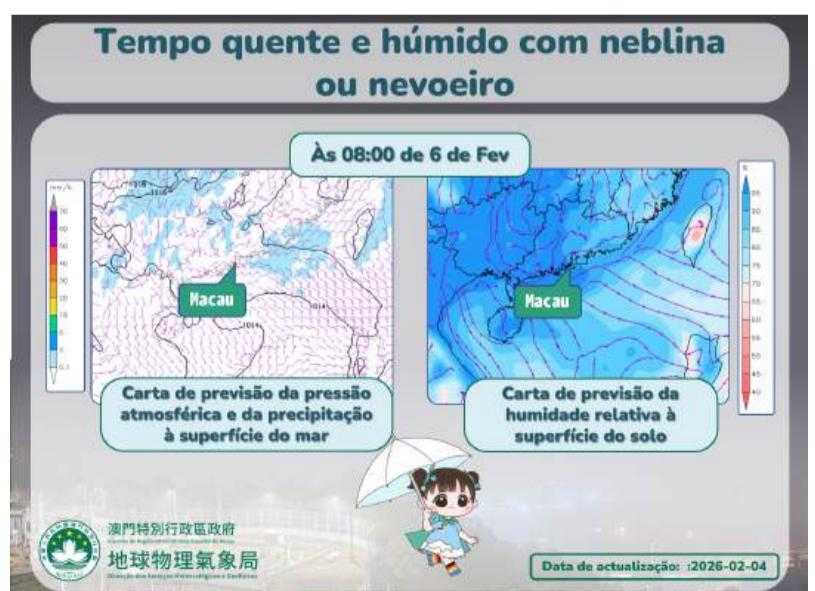
The statement also reminded residents that strong winds often occur along the leading edge of continental cold highs, advising the public to take precautions.

Meanwhile, the weather station urged residents to avoid staying in open areas for long periods, while those working at sea or engaging in water activities are advised to remain highly alert, the statement said, adding that the public is also reminded to pay close attention to updates from the local observatory, including the "Strong Monsoon

Signal" and the "Bridge Strong Wind Alert," as well as to prepare in advance by taking necessary wind prevention measures to ensure personal and property safety.

The statement said that while Lichun marks the beginning of spring in the traditional calendar, Macau is still prone to winter monsoon conditions during early February, and residents should remain cautious of strong winds. ■

\* Lichun (立春) is one of the 24 solar terms in the Chinese calendar, marking the transition from winter to spring. Lichun typically falls around February 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup>, depending on the year, and is associated with the awakening of nature and the start of agricultural activities.



This handout photo provided by the Meteorological and Geophysical Bureau (SMG) yesterday shows the forecast chart of atmospheric pressure and precipitation at ground surface, as well as the forecast chart of relative humidity at sea surface for tomorrow.



## 68 artworks on show at GalaxyArt 'Golden Fortunes' exhibition

**Rui Pastorin**

GalaxyArt is continuing to showcase the representative works of well-known artist Zhu Bingren in the exhibition "Golden Fortunes: the Macau Debut of Zhu Bingren's Copper Art".

Showcased until April 12, the exhibition marks Zhu's, a National-level Inheritor of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Copper Carving, first large-scale showcase in the city.

Entering the permanent contemporary art space located within Galaxy Macau in Cotai, gallerygoers will be able to explore five zones: "Success at Hand", "Year-end Elegance", "State Gifts and Global Blessings", "Colours of Spring", and "Macau's Molten Light", altogether showcasing a total of 68 sets or pieces on display.

Found among the artworks presented are 38 featuring horses created through techniques such as molten copper and copper carving, with art forms including bronze paintings and sculptures, among others. These pieces were sculpted with a high-

temperature glaze, according to a Galaxy Macau statement last week.

Other highlights include pieces that have been presented as state gifts to foreign guests, the large-scale 6-metre copper painting titled "The Eight Heavenly Horses", and pieces like "Fisherman's Song in the Rain" that features Zhu's self-developed molten copper technique, joining other pieces displayed in the Macau themed section "Macau's Molten Light". Moreover, exhibitiongoers will also find copper sculptures of year-end ritual flowers made by Zhu Bingren's son Zhu Junmin.

Two peacock sculptures, including one created for the art space, are also showcased in the exhibition, with the statement adding that the artist has a "special fondness" for the auspicious peacock.

A number of the artworks presented in Macau had not been displayed to the public until now, the statement pointed out.

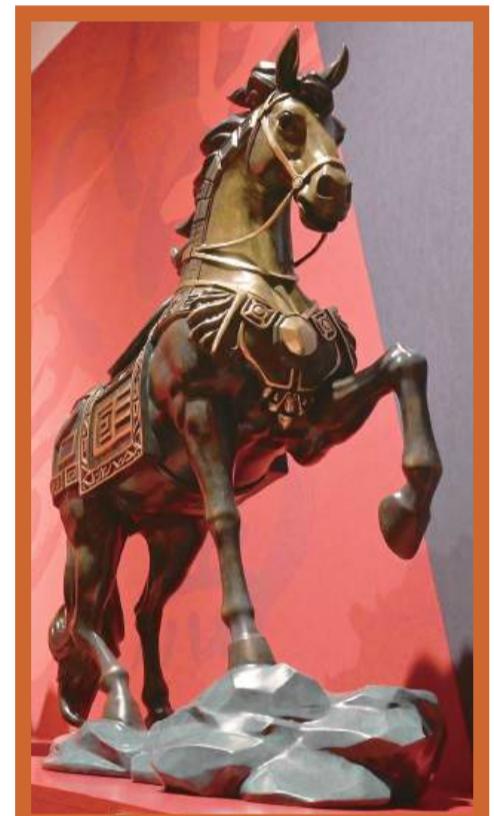
Hangzhou-born Zhu is a Master of Chinese Arts and Crafts and is a pioneer of

the molten copper technique. Among his titles listed in a recent GalaxyArt statement are Father of Contemporary Chinese Copper Architecture, Cultural and Creative Consultant at The Palace Museum in Beijing, and Research Fellow at the China National Academy of Arts.

The GalaxyArt statement added that Zhu, born in 1944, has inherited a century-old family legacy and has also pioneered eight other techniques including Geng Cai, which the Suzhou Museum website noted as a technique that builds upon the famille-rose (a Chinese porcelain decoration that emerged during the Qing Dynasty) style and is also influenced by enamel art.

One can view the works daily from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., with the art space located on the first floor of Galaxy Promenade.

The exhibition kicked off on January 28, with comments from the artist to the *Post* found in an article titled "Golden Fortunes' exhibition kicks off at Macau's GalaxyArt" (<https://www.macaupostdaily.com/news/27290>)



Photos taken during last week's opening ceremony at GalaxyArt by Rui Pastorin



# Edmund Ho meets new FM commissioner Bian, praises commissioner's office for extensive & effective work

**Tony Wong**

The newly appointed commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR), Bian Lixin, yesterday paid a courtesy call, after assuming office last week, to Edmund Ho Hau Wah, Macau's first chief executive and now a vice-chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), where she expressed gratitude to Ho for his long-standing care and support for Macau-related diplomatic work, according to a statement by the commissioner's office last night.

Yesterday's meeting between Ho and Bian came after the latter paid a visit to Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai on Tuesday when they had a meeting at Government Headquarters.

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 statement, Bian said that this year marks the beginning of the nation's 15th Five-Year Plan, adding that it is a great honour to be appointed as the head of the commissioner's office and she is fully aware of the magnitude of the responsibility entrusted to her.

Bian underlined that the commissioner's office will continue to fully fulfil its functions and duties and is committed to safeguarding the nation's sovereignty, security, and development interests, supporting Macau in expanding its international connections, and fostering a



CPPCC National Committee Vice Chairman Edmund Ho Hau Wah (right) meets with newly appointed Foreign Ministry Commissioner Bian Lixin yesterday.

— Photo: commissioner's office

favourable external environment for advancing the steady and sustained implementation of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle.

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).

The MSAR was established by the People's Republic of China (PRC) on December 20, 1999, after Macau was under temporary

Portuguese administration.

Edmund Ho served as the MSAR's first chief executive, for two consecutive five-year terms between December 20, 1999 and December 19, 2009.

During yesterday's meeting, according to the statement, Ho welcomed Bian to her new role in Macau and said that he personally witnessed the establishment of the commissioner's office in Macau, which, he said, has carried out extensive and effective work to promote the MSAR's expansion of external exchanges and cooperation and foster the city's appropriate economic diversification.

According to the statement, Ho said that he expects the commissioner's office to continue leveraging its diplomatic resources and strengths, with the aim of assisting Macau in expanding its external ties, building itself into a platform for higher-standard opening up, and better integrating into and serving the nation's overall development. ■

## Airport chief expects 8.14 million passengers this year

**Staff Reporter**

Simon Chan Weng Hong, chairman of the Executive Committee of the Macau International Airport Company Limited (CAM), said yesterday that he expects 8.14 million passengers this year, which would be an increase of 8.24 percent from last year's 7.52 passengers.

Chan made his forecast in a presentation of the single-runway airport's results last year and its plans and forecasts for this year, during a Chinese New Year (CNY) luncheon hosted by his company for dozens of media representatives.

According to the presentation, the airport suffered a 1.6 percent decrease in passengers last year, when aircraft movements dropped by 2.9 percent to 58,000.

This year, Chan said, CAM expects aircraft movements to reach 63,000, which would be an increase of 8.62 percent.



CAM Executive Committee Chairman Simon Chan Weng Hong gives a detailed presentation about the airport's results last year and its plans and forecasts for this year during yesterday's media luncheon at MGM COTAI. — Photo: Harald Brüning

## MGM HK Int'l Airport City Terminal now open



Guests and representatives including Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) Director Maria Helena de Senna Fernandes (centre), MGM China Holdings Limited Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director Kenneth Feng Xiaofeng (3rd from left) and Airport Authority Hong Kong Chief Executive Officer Vivian Cheung Kar-fay (3rd from right) pose for a group photo at the "MGM Hong Kong International Airport City Terminal" at MGM COTAI yesterday.

— Photo: Rui Pastorin

**Rui Pastorin**

The "MGM Hong Kong International Airport City Terminal" at MGM COTAI was launched yesterday at the integrated resort and is now operational, offering its users self-service check-in, flight information and transport connections to the Hong Kong and Zhuhai airports.

The city terminal extends the check-in services of HKIA and Zhuhai Airport directly to MGM COTAI and is a collaboration between the Hong Kong International Airport (HKIA), Zhuhai Airport, MGM, and China Travel Tours Transportation Services Hong Kong Limited. Travellers from Macau can reach HKIA within 90 minutes through the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge, or Zhuhai Airport in around 60 minutes.

MGM China Holdings Limited Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director Kenneth Feng

Xiaofeng highlighted in his speech yesterday morning the added convenience of the city terminal and how it can enable visitors to have more time to explore the city.

"In the past, travellers eligible for the 144 or 240-hour visa free transit policies might only have passed through Macau briefly. With the added convenience of the city terminal, they can now explore Macau at a more relaxed pace and experience its unique charm shaped by the fusion of Eastern and Western cultures", Feng said.

Airport Authority Hong Kong Chief Executive Officer Vivian Cheung Kar-fay pointed out the increasing number of people from Macau travelling from HKIA since the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge's opening. She noted that in 2025, over 240,000 passengers travelled between Macau and HKIA by bus via the HZMB, representing a 25.48 percent

increase compared to 2024.

"This new premium city terminal will help expand our high-end customer base and further enhance our connectivity with Macau. We will continue to develop our intermodal services, aiming to increase the number of city terminals to 50 by 2027 and attracting more GBA travellers to use HKIA", Cheung highlighted.

Meanwhile, during an interview with the media after the launch event, Airport Authority Hong Kong Director of Hub Development Chapman Fong (方瑞文) mentioned that they were assessing the possibility of adding baggage check-in services. Meanwhile, Albert Yau (丘昌賢), General Manager of Hong Kong-Zhuhai Airport Management Company Limited, highlighted during the interview that the initiative promotes closer cooperation in the Greater Bay Area (GBA). ■

# AI reshapes China's workforce via new professions, constant learning, one-person startups

## Analysis

BEIJING – The widespread rise of AI is modifying China's labor market in ways that go far beyond job replacement or creation. It has generated new professions, lowered the threshold for starting a business, and empowered employees to upgrade their skills in a bid to stay competitive.

At Xunfei Healthcare's office in Hefei, capital of east China's Anhui Province, Hu Pingping, a former doctor specializing in stomach and gut diseases, spends her days analyzing how a medical large language model diagnoses complex cases. Having transitioned into an AI trainer five years ago, her new profession merges clinical expertise with cutting-edge AI technology.

This shift also mirrors a broader evolution within China's professional landscape. As AI integrates into every sector, there has been a rapid emergence of new roles like AI content annotator, AI product manager and AI-assisted animator.

According to PwC's 2025 Global AI Jobs Barometer, nearly all AI-related positions are increasing globally, and workers with AI skills command a wage premium of 56 percent, up 25 percent from the previous year.

Data from online recruitment platform Zhaopin shows that in the fourth quarter of 2025, job openings in China's AI sector grew by 19 percent year on year, led by algorithm engineers, machine vision specialists and robotics algorithm developers.

"AI is pushing the labor force toward higher value-added roles centered on human-machine synergy and intelligent augmentation," said Liu Cong, head of the Chinese AI firm iFLYTEK's research institute.

With humanoid robots joining production lines, smart equipment running through farmlands, and AI models increasing work efficiency in newsrooms, there are also concerns about AI being a potential job killer.

The fast iteration of AI technology is shortening career lifecycles and challenging the traditional idea of "mastering one skill for a lifetime," with some workers finding it hard to transition into new professions.

Industry experts say in this context, accelerating the renewal of knowledge and skills to meet the demands of new technologies and changes in the labor market has become crucial.

This wave is reaching the legendary Hanzheng Street, a 500-year-old commercial center located in central China's Wuhan, known as the first small commodity market run by self-employed and private businesses after China's reform and opening up in 1978. An AI training session in January this year attracted over 50 local apparel business owners to this area in the capital city of Hubei Province.

"The enthusiasm was incredible," said Wang Ruijue, the AI training program organizer, pointing to late-night sign-ups in his WeChat group. Attendees ranged from post-00s designers seeking to update their traditional craft to veterans born in the 1970s, one of whom brought a postgraduate daughter along to assist with learning how to use this new tool.

Yang Jian, a fashion designer-turned AI entrepreneur, served as their instructor. He sees AI a "super tool" in

revolutionizing the apparel chain, from design and manufacturing to marketing.

Since large apparel enterprises are already mature in terms of AI adoption, Yang has dedicated his efforts to helping small and medium-sized firms use AI to improve their businesses.

On this old street in Wuhan, both tech-savvy youth and middle-aged business owners are now joining the AI learning journey, embracing not just a new tool for work but a new culture of lifelong learning.

AI, notably, is also lowering entrepreneurial barriers in China.

An example is the rise of One Person Companies (OPCs), where individuals leverage AI tools for content creation, operations and service delivery. Cities like Suzhou in east China's Jiangsu Province are promoting themselves as OPC-friendly hubs.

Industry insiders believe that this OPC rise is mainly driven by widespread adoption of AI technology, supportive local policies and platforms, and a growing talent pool.

Wei Qing, Microsoft China's chief technology officer, said that as AI becomes as commonplace as electricity and the telephone, using it to launch ventures and solve real-world problems is turning into an essential skill. Also, evolving applications like AI agents are making it possible for "one person to function like a full team."

With AI generating content at a staggering speed, one could be tempted to question if anything remains uniquely human in today's workplace. Experts respond to such musings by pointing to imagination, aesthetic sense, critical thinking and emotional intelligence as irreplaceable human advantages.

A "slash career," which refers to a working life revolving around multiple professions, will be important for future employment, said Zhang Junping, a professor at Shanghai-based Fudan University.

"Employees must avoid relying on a single skill or a single profession," Zhang explained, adding that since AI shortens the path from novice to expert, people have to develop comprehensive capabilities to enhance their capacity to withstand risks in terms of employment.

Zhang suggested including "AI thinking" in youth education, but at the same time also cautioned against "over-reliance on AI," stressing that priority should be given to exercising independent learning and cultivating unique imagination.

China's national initiative, known as "AI Plus," proposes support for AI skills training to stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship, while also boosting the potential to secure re-employment. Departments including the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology also issued a document outlining measures such as conducting forecasts for talent demand in the AI industry, releasing talent demand forecast reports, and supporting higher education institutions in planning and optimizing relevant disciplines and programs.

Minister of Human Resources and Social Security Wang Xiaoping said China will accelerate efforts to build a monitoring, early-warning and response system for AI's impact on employment and follow an employment-friendly technology development path. — *Xinhua*

## When will Japan atone for its past sins?

### Commentary by Shao Xia

There is one form of political hypocrisy that is even more corrosive than open aggression: the deliberate manipulation of memory to disguise guilt as innocence.

Post-war Japan, particularly its right-wing political populists, has elevated this hypocrisy into governing tactics.

Germany confronted its crimes through repentance. Japan chose denial, whitewashing, and silence. This difference is not cultural – it is political and moral.

That "amnesia" is now resurfacing in a dangerous form. Recent remarks by Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, portraying a so-called "Taiwan contingency" as a "survival-threatening situation" for Japan, were not a slip of the tongue. They were a calculated provocation. By framing China's internal affairs as a justification for Japanese military intervention, Tokyo crossed a red line established by historical facts, international law, and the post-war order.

China's firm response was not an overreaction, but historically necessary. China had no choice but to speak louder, clearer, and more forcefully – so that these crimes are neither diluted nor denied. Here are the five major crimes of Japan's right-wing forces and militarism.

### HABITUAL FABRICATION

Japanese militarism has always relied on a single rhetorical weapon: fabrication.

In 1894, Japan launched a surprise attack on Chinese troops on the pretext that the Qing Court threatened its interests in Korea. In 1931, Manchuria was declared Japan's "lifeline" – an excuse swiftly followed by the occupation of Northeast China. In 1937, Japan alleged that the "China situation" threatened its survival and initiated a full-scale invasion of China. In 1941, US sanctions were framed by Japan as strangulation, paving the way for the Pearl Harbor attack. Every so-called "survival-threatening situation," though none was real, preceded an aggression.

Today's "Taiwan contingency" narrative is a recycled script – an old lie in modern packaging. To pretend otherwise is an insult to history.

### SABOTAGE AGAINST CHINA'S SOVEREIGNTY, TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY

Japan's crimes against China are not isolated episodes; they form a continuous strategy of interference.

The Treaty of Shimonoseki forcibly severed Taiwan from China and extorted 200 million taels of silver, bleeding China at its weakest moment.

Japan then systematically blocked China's recovery: the Twenty-One Demands, the seizure of Qingdao after World War I, the Jinan Massacre during China's reunification, the creation of the puppet state of Manchukuo, the promotion of "North China autonomy," and ultimately a full-scale war of aggression.

The Nanjing Massacre was not an aberration. It was the appalling manifestation of a militarist ideology that views Chinese lives as expendable.

Such relentless imperialist onslaught against China fully exposes a chilling calculus of conquest.

### INGRATITUDE ELEVATED TO HOSTILITY

Post-war China exercised restraint as it chose reconciliation over vengeance. Some in Japan

responded not with gratitude, but with resentment.

Today, nearly every iteration of the "China threat" theory bears the imprint of Japanese right-wing strategists. Their obsession with containing China is less a matter of defense and more a psychological compulsion, rooted in the collapse of imperial superiority.

The irony is staggering. Japan's legal system, writing, calendar, architecture, philosophy and aesthetics are deeply indebted to Chinese civilization. For centuries, China shared its culture without conquest. Japan repaid kindness with killing.

A gift of civilization was repaid with the scourge of war.

### UNDERMINING POST-WAR ORDER FROM WITHIN

Japan was defeated as a fascist aggressor. Its obligations were clear. The Cairo Declaration and Potsdam Proclamation stipulate that all the territories Japan had stolen from the Chinese must be restored to China. Moreover, the Charter of the United Nations denounces militarism. Japan's pacifist constitution enshrines restraint as a national commitment.

Yet because post-war accountability was incomplete, militarism survived – at first covertly, then overtly.

Today, war criminals are worshiped at the Yasukuni Shrine, textbooks are distorted, military spending is surging, right-leaning constitutional revisions are endorsed, collective self-defense is normalized and nuclear taboos are being eroded.

These are not policy choices in isolation; they are coordinated steps, purposefully reversing the historical verdict.

### WILLING PAWN IN POWER POLITICS

Rather than pursuing genuine reconciliation in East Asia, Japan has chosen strategic subordination, positioning itself as a forward outpost for containing China.

Under the pretext of the so-called "Indo-Pacific Strategy," Japan has pushed for bloc confrontation, technological decoupling and regional instability.

But the illusion of shared values cannot conceal structural inequality. Japan, far from being a rule-maker, is merely a disposable pawn in Western power politics.

### WHERE WILL IT END?

A nation that turns its back on its historical crimes cannot achieve inner peace. Japan's burgeoning stagnation, pervasive anxiety and rising political extremism are not accidental – they are the psychological toll paid for its refusal to acknowledge its past wrongs.

Anthropologist Ruth Benedict once observed Japan's capacity to aestheticize violence. Today, that tendency has mutated into something more dangerous: moral numbness disguised as civility.

Japan is fully aware that it is standing at a critical crossroads. One way leads to even more denial, militarization and eventual ruin. The other requires honest reckoning, genuine repentance, and peaceful coexistence.

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

*Editor's note: Shao Xia is a commentator on international affairs, writing regularly for Xinhua News, the Global Times, China Daily, CGTN, etc.*

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



Children take part yesterday in a traditional game played on the occasion of "Lichun" at a kindergarten in Jiaozuo City, Henan Province. Yesterday marked "Lichun," or the Beginning of Spring, the first of the 24 solar terms on the Chinese lunar calendar. — *Xinhua*

# Xi calls on China, Russia to grow ties, work for global strategic stability

BEIJING — China and Russia should increase high-level exchanges and strengthen pragmatic cooperation in various fields, President Xi Jinping said in a virtual meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday.

Xi extended New Year greetings to Putin and the Russian people, stating that yesterday coincided with the Beginning of Spring on the Chinese lunar calendar, which represents a new start. On the auspicious day, Xi expressed his readiness to work with Putin to chart a new blueprint for bilateral ties.

Putin wished Xi and the Chinese people a happy Spring Festival, vibrant energy and immediate success in all endeavors.

Noting that their two meetings last year steered China-Russia relations into a new phase of development, Xi said the two countries commemorated the 80th anniversary of victory in the World Anti-Fascist War, sustained robust bilateral economic and trade exchanges, elevated people-to-people exchanges and cooperation, and remained committed to building a more just and equitable global governance system.



President Xi Jinping holds a virtual meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday.

— Xinhua

Highlighting that this year marks the beginning of China's 15th Five-Year Plan period, Xi emphasized that the country will be more proactive in expanding its high-level opening up and will share new development opportunities with countries around the world, including Russia.

This year also marks the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the China-Russia strategic partnership of coordination, the 25th anniversary

of the signing of the China-Russia Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, and the beginning of the China-Russia Years of Education, he said.

Xi said the two countries should ensure that bilateral relations continue to develop along the right track through deeper strategic coordination and more proactive assumption of responsibilities of major countries.

China and Russia should work

together to maintain global strategic stability as the international situation has become increasingly turbulent since the beginning of the year, Xi said.

As responsible major countries and permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, China and Russia have the obligation to encourage the international community to uphold fairness and justice, firmly safeguard the

victorious outcomes of World War II, and resolutely defend the UN-centered international system and the basic norms of international law, he added.

Expressing full confidence in Russia-China relations, Putin said that both sides should continue to support each other steadfastly in safeguarding their national sovereignty and security, and in achieving economic and social development and prosperity. They should also promote education and cultural exchanges to benefit the two peoples, he added.

Facing a complex and ever-changing international situation, Russia is willing to continue strengthening strategic coordination with China on multilateral platforms such as the UN, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS, thereby injecting positive energy into international affairs.

Russia will actively support China's hosting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Economic Leaders' Meeting, he said.

The two heads of state also exchanged in-depth views on international and regional hotspot issues of mutual concern.

— Xinhua

## Xi says ready to work with Trump to steer giant ship of China-US ties steadily forward

BEIJING — President Xi Jinping said yesterday that he hopes to work with US President Donald Trump in the new year to steer the giant ship of China-US relations steadily forward through wind and storms, and accomplish more big things and good things.

During his talks with Trump over the phone, Xi noted that he attaches great importance to China-US relations, saying that over the past year, he and Trump have enjoyed sound communication, and had a successful meeting in Busan, charting the direction and course for China-US relations. This has been welcomed by the people of both countries and the broader international community.

Just as the United States has its concerns, China for its part also has concerns, he said.

China always means what it says and matches its words with actions and results. If the two sides work in the same direction in the spirit of equality, respect and mutual benefit, we can surely find ways to address each other's concerns, Xi said.

Xi also said that both China and the United States have important items on their agenda this year — China will kick off its 15th Five-Year Plan, and the

United States will celebrate the 250th anniversary of its independence.

China will host the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting, and the United States, the G20 Summit, he added.

The two sides should follow the common understandings we have reached, enhance dialogue and communication, manage differences properly, and expand practical cooperation, Xi said.

It is always right to do a good thing, however small, and always wrong to do a bad thing, however small, he said, noting that the two sides should make progress step by step to build mutual trust, find the right way to get along, and make 2026 a year where the two major countries advance toward mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation.

Xi emphasized that the Taiwan question is the most important issue in China-US relations. Taiwan is China's territory, and China must safeguard its own sovereignty and territorial integrity, and will never allow Taiwan to be separated, he said.

The United States must handle the issue of arms sales to Taiwan with prudence, Xi said.

— Xinhua

## Xi says China consistently attaches great importance to ties with Vietnam

BEIJING — China will consistently attach great importance to the development of China-Vietnam relations, said Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and Chinese president, yesterday.

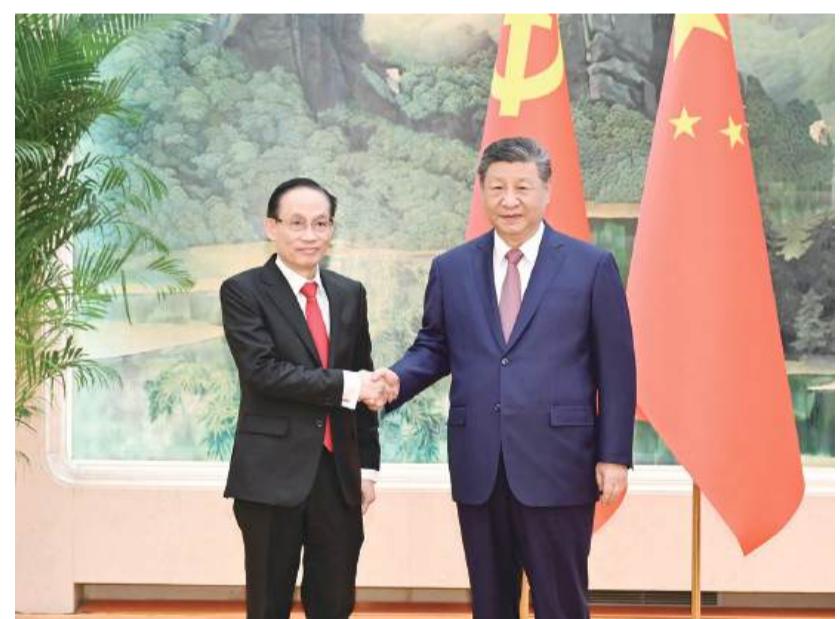
Xi made the remarks when meeting with Le Hoai Trung, special envoy of General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) Central Committee To Lam, in Beijing. Trung is a member of the Political Bureau of the CPV Central Committee and minister of foreign affairs of Vietnam.

Xi said the CPC and the CPV have maintained the fine tradition of reciprocal notification of their respective major political agendas, a practice that embodies the unique and friendly bond of comrades and brothers of the two countries, as well as their strong political mutual trust.

Xi said during his recent phone talks with Lam, the two sides exchanged in-depth views on further promoting the building of a China-Vietnam community with a shared future of strategic significance and reached important consensus.

It is believed that under the strong leadership of the CPV Central Committee headed by Lam, the Party, the country, and the people of Vietnam will successfully accomplish the goals and tasks set at the 14th National Congress of the CPV, Xi said.

Xi said China and Vietnam have made vigorous progress in all aspects of socialist development, demonstrating the vitality and vigor of the socialist system.



Xi Jinping (right), general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and Chinese president, shakes hands with Le Hoai Trung, special envoy of General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) Central Committee To Lam, at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. Le is a member of the Political Bureau of the CPV Central Committee and minister of foreign affairs of Vietnam.

— Xinhua

China is willing to work with Vietnam to follow the policy of long-term stability, forward thinking, good neighborliness and comprehensive cooperation, and the spirit of being good neighbors, good friends, good comrades, and good partners, Xi said.

He said China also stands ready to work with Vietnam to implement high-level consensus, carry forward traditional friendship, deepen exchanges at all levels and cooperation in all fields, properly manage differences, and promote the development of a China-Vietnam community with a shared future.

Trung conveyed a reply letter

of gratitude from Lam to Xi, along with a verbal message. Trung said that Vietnam consistently regards consolidating and developing relations with China as the top priority in its foreign policy and stands ready to move forward hand in hand with China on a new journey of development.

Guided by the important consensus reached by the leaders of the two Parties and two countries, both sides should reinforce the political, material, and public support foundations for bilateral relations, elevate Vietnam-China relations to new heights, and deliver greater benefits to people of both countries, Trung said.

— Xinhua

# Philippine lawmakers throw out Marcos impeachment bid

MANILA — A Philippine congressional committee rejected impeachment complaints against President Ferdinand Marcos yesterday over allegations he swindled taxpayers out of billions of dollars.

Marcos is facing a public firestorm over sham infrastructure projects meant to control flooding in the archipelago country, where typhoon-driven rains submerged entire towns last year.

One of the two complaints, endorsed by the Makabayan bloc of left-wing parties, accused Marcos of packing the national budget with projects aimed at redirecting funds to his allies.

Another focused on allegations that the arrest of ex-president Rodrigo Duterte and his transfer to the International Criminal Court constituted kidnapping.

But the committee voted overwhelmingly against both complaints, saying they lacked sufficient substance to move forward.



**Lawmakers vote on the two impeachment complaints against Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr as insufficient in substance at the House of Representatives in Quezon City, Metro Manila yesterday.**

— AFP

“It is clear from the complaint that the president did not do any overt act that shows that he directed” corruption schemes allegedly aimed at bilking taxpayers, Representative Ysabel Zamora, the committee’s vice chair, said during a hearing before the vote.

“Having an imperfect policy direction is not an impeachable offence.”

Lawmaker Alyssa Gonzales said the complaint failed to prove Marcos had participated in its alleged “systematic scheme of corruption”.

“The president’s specific role was never disclosed or included in the allegations,” she said.

## Block accountability

Under the Philippine constitution, an impeachment by the House triggers a Senate trial, where a guilty verdict means expulsion from office and a lifetime ban on political service.

Makabayan bloc lawmaker Sarah Elago said the committee’s decision was a “clear attempt to block the accountability process”.

“The real reason the majority refuses to let the complaints proceed to a full-blown hearing is clear: the administration’s allies do not want President Marcos Jr. to... explain and answer the serious allegations against him,” she told reporters.

Presidential spokeswoman Claire Castro said lawmakers had seen “the real truth”.

“We’ve seen that the complaints truly had no merit, and the president is confident he committed no impeachable offence,” she told

reporters after the ruling, adding Marcos believed it was now time to “move forward”.

The committee hearing came just two days after a pair of impeachment complaints hit Marcos’s vice president and arch political foe, Sara Duterte, Rodrigo Duterte’s daughter, who is widely considered a possible presidential contender in 2028.

The other case against Marcos thrown out yesterday, brought by a local lawyer, had cited not only Rodrigo Duterte’s arrest, but unproven allegations of drug abuse by the president.

In the Philippines, any citizen can file an impeachment complaint provided it is endorsed by one of the more than 300 members of Congress.

Dennis Coronacion, chair of the political science department at Manila’s University of Santo Tomas, told AFP last month that the complaints had little chance of advancing as “the president still enjoys the support” of House members.

— AFP

## Myanmar junta founds office to counsel post-poll government

YANGON — Myanmar’s junta announced a new office advising the president yesterday, a role which may allow the military chief to formally embed his power over the incoming civilian government.

Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing has ruled Myanmar by force since staging a 2021 coup deposing the democratic government of Aung San Suu Kyi and plunging the country into civil war.

The military concluded a heavily restricted election last month in the limited areas it controls, saying the vote will return power to the people when parliament convenes in late March.

With Suu Kyi detained and her party dissolved, rights experts say the junta orchestrated the vote to secure a walkover win for its civilian allies.

Analysts say the incoming government will prolong military rule in a civilian disguise, with lawmakers tethered tightly to the will of the top brass.

State media published a notice yesterday announcing the formation of the Union Consultative Council to advise

the president on “security and the rule of law, international relations, peacebuilding and legislation”.

While no names have been announced for the council, analyst Naing Min Khant said armed forces chief Min Aung Hlaing could opt to chair it, potentially giving him a formal perch in the civilian government.

“This structure appears to be the senior general’s strategy to consolidate power”, the analyst of the Institute for Strategy and Policy Myanmar think tank told AFP.

Being chair would allow “Min Aung Hlaing to retain his role as commander-in-chief while wielding supreme civilian authority”, and “the president’s role will likely be reduced to mere administrative execution”, he said.

Myanmar has been ruled by the military for most of its post-independence history. Even during its tentative decade-long experiment with civilian politics starting in 2011, generals wielded immense power.

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Suu Kyi was blocked from serving as president by military-drafted legislation forbidding the office to

those whose spouses or children are foreign citizens.

But she founded a “state counsellor” office, making her the power behind the throne of the president.

Naing Min Khant said the junta-founded council is a “dark mirror” of that arrangement.

“Both were engineered to circumvent constitutional barriers to leadership – one created for a civilian barred from the presidency, the other for a general who refuses to relinquish military command.”

“The fundamental difference is accountability,” he added, arguing the new council would operate “in a vacuum without any legislative oversight or democratic checks and balances”.

The pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party won a landslide victory in Myanmar’s elections, allowing it to pick the president.

Min Aung Hlaing has not ruled out taking over that role directly, although that would require him to surrender his command of the armed forces – historically the nation’s most powerful institution.

— AFP

## 9 killed as dump truck plunges into ravine in central Philippines

MANILA — Nine people were killed after the dump truck they were riding in plunged into a ravine in Negros Oriental province in the central Philippines yesterday, police said.

Police identified the victims as male government employees who were traveling to conduct field work for Bayawan City’s agriculture office when the crash

occurred yesterday morning.

Initial investigation showed the dump truck, which was also carrying five drums of crude oil, suffered brake failure while navigating a sharp descent.

Police told local reporters that the driver lost control, causing the vehicle to smash through a concrete safety barrier before tumbling

more than 50 meters into a ravine and landing in a river below.

Police said that emergency teams from the local fire department and rescue units rushed to the scene and extricated the victims from the mangled wreckage. The victims were taken to a local hospital, but were all declared dead on arrival by the attending physician. — Xinhua

## Researchers in Australia develop ultra-sensitive disease test strip

MELBOURNE — Researchers in Australia have developed a single-use test strip which could ultimately change how diseases like cancer are diagnosed.

The team from Australia’s La Trobe University reported in the journal *Small* that the new biosensor used enzymes to boost an electrical signal to detect disease-indicative molecules, also known as microRNAs, a university statement said yesterday.

The biosensor works in a similar way to glucose test strips, but is much more sensitive, detecting microRNAs in blood plasma at ultra-low concentrations that are up to a trillion times lower than glucose, it said.

“MicroRNAs provide early clues about health and diseases like cancer, but they can be difficult to detect even using standard laboratory

methods like PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) tests because they are often present in tiny amounts in blood, plasma, and saliva,” said La Trobe University senior researcher Saimon Moraes Silva.

The study’s lead researcher and La Trobe University PhD candidate Vatsala Pithaih said the team’s key breakthrough came from a specialized enzyme that amplified the biosensor test strip’s response.

The enzyme amplifies the change in the test strip’s electrical signal, allowing the detection of microRNAs at concentrations 1,000 times lower than usual, Pithaih said.

The innovation could underpin portable diagnostic devices for use outside traditional labs, making disease testing more affordable and accessible, the researchers said.

— Xinhua



**Hina dolls modelled after notable figures expected to make an impact this year including Japanese Major League baseball players, Los Angeles Dodgers’ Shohei Ohtani (front left), Chicago White Sox’s Munetaka Murakami (front right), as well as Olympic athletes, are displayed at the doll maker Kyugetsu in Tokyo yesterday, in anticipation of Hina Matsuri or Girls’ Day on March 3, a festival celebrating health and happiness of young girls.**

— AFP



Traditional dancers perform during Sri Lanka's 78th Independence Day celebrations at the Independence Square in Colombo yesterday.

— AFP

## Thousands of troops hit the streets in Nepal ahead of polls

KATHMANDU — Nepal deployed thousands of troops around the country yesterday to boost security ahead of the first elections since last year's deadly protests toppled the previous government.

In total, 300,000 security personnel and temporary election police were being sent out in the lead up to the March 5 vote, an increase from previous polls.

"We have deployed more security personnel in this election to make security arrangements more effective and to ensure the upcoming election is fair and secure," Ananda Kafle, the spokesman for the Ministry of Home Affairs, told AFP.

"Security wise, we are intact," said Kafle.

An interim government has been running the country since anti-corruption protests in September led to the resignation of veteran prime minister KP Sharma Oli.

Seventy-seven people were killed and thousands of buildings, including government properties, parliament

and courts, were torched or damaged in one of the most violent episodes of unrest in Nepal in recent years.

Nearly 80,000 of the total deployed are army troops, Nepal's Army spokesperson Raja Ram Basnet told AFP.

Tens of thousands of young Nepalis have also applied for temporary policing jobs to help with logistical tasks such as managing queues at polling stations.

The army will primarily conduct aerial patrols, oversee ballot box transportation and provide security during vote counting.

Almost two-thirds of Nepal's population of around 30 million people will be eligible to vote next month in polls that will determine the make-up of the country's parliament and which party can form a government.

Nepal's Election Commission has said it is ready to hold the election as planned despite concerns over weather conditions in high-altitude Himalayan regions. — AFP

## Air India finds no issue with Boeing fuel switch after grounding

NEW DELHI — Air India has completed inspections of fuel control switches on its 33 Boeing 787 jets, the private carrier said yesterday, days after grounding a flight over a possible defect.

The airline grounded a Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner on Monday after one of the pilots reported a possible defect in the fuel control switch.

But in its inspections, the airline said "no issues were identified".

The checks came as Indian authorities investigate the crash last year of a 787 Dreamliner operated by Air India that killed 260 people shortly after takeoff.

Air India said in a statement yesterday that the national civil aviation regulator had conducted "independent inspections" of its own into the fuel control switch, "subsequently clearing" it.

"The safety of our passengers and crew remains Air India's highest priority," said the carrier, which is owned by the Tata Group conglomerate.

The Directorate General of Civil Aviation said on Tuesday that incorrect handling of the fuel

switch, which regulates fuel into the plane's engines, had caused the issue in Monday's flight, and not a mechanical fault.

It advised the airline to reinforce crew training on Boeing's recommended procedures.

Last year, a London-bound Boeing 787 Dreamliner operated by Air India crashed shortly after taking off from Ahmedabad in June, killing all but one of the 242 people on board and 19 on the ground.

An inspection of the locking feature on the fuel control switches of the aircraft after the crash found no issues.

A preliminary report by India's Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau said fuel supply to the jet's engines was cut off moments before impact, raising questions about possible pilot error.

Two major Indian commercial pilots' associations, as well as the father of one of the dead pilots, have rejected suggestions that human error caused the crash.

Indian authorities have yet to release a final report into the crash.

— AFP

## Almost 200 separatists killed after attacks in Pakistan: official

ISLAMABAD — Pakistan's security forces have killed almost 200 separatist insurgents in southwestern Balochistan province since they launched a wave of attacks over the weekend, a security official said yesterday, taking the overall death toll past 250.

Fighting has continued between government forces and the militants following the coordinated attacks, with sporadic clashes still taking place in some districts after gunmen stormed banks, jails, police stations and military installations.

Pakistan has been battling a Baloch separatist insurgency for decades, with frequent armed attacks on security forces, foreign nationals and non-local Pakistanis in the mineral-rich province bordering Afghanistan and Iran.

A senior official, who spoke on

condition of anonymity, told AFP yesterday that "197 terrorists have been killed in the ongoing counter-terrorism operations".

He added that at least 36 civilians and 22 security personnel were killed during the coordinated attacks in restive Balochistan.

The chief minister of Balochistan, Sarfraz Bugti, told a news conference in the provincial capital Quetta on Sunday that all the districts under attack were cleared.

"We are chasing them, we will not let them go so easily," he said.

The Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), the province's most active militant separatist group, claimed responsibility for the attacks in a statement sent to AFP.

The group, which the United States has designated a terrorist organisation, said it had targeted

military installations as well as police and civil administration officials in gun attacks and suicide bombings.

The BLA has intensified attacks on Pakistanis from other provinces working in the region in recent years, as well as foreign energy firms.

Last year, the separatists attacked a train with 450 passengers on board, sparking a deadly two-day siege.

The United Nations on Tuesday called the recent attacks "heinous and cowardly".

A Security Council spokesman said members "expressed their deepest sympathy and condolences to the families of the victims and to the government and the people of Pakistan", a statement said.

Funerals of some of the victims were due to take place yesterday afternoon.

— AFP



This handout photo taken on Tuesday and received yesterday from Japan's Ministry of Defence shows members of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force's 5th Infantry Regiment, stationed in Aomori Prefecture, carrying out snow removal work in a town within Aomori Prefecture. Sustained snow since late January has buried northern communities like Aomori under drifts of around two metres that left residents struggling to leave home and forced schools and businesses to close. Heavy snowfall across Japan since January 20 has left 35 people dead and 358 injured nationwide, the country's Fire and Disaster Management Agency said yesterday.

— AFP

## Afghanistan's only public blood disease treatment center gives hope despite challenges

KABUL — The narrow hallway outside the leukemia ward of a public blood disease treatment center in Afghanistan is quiet, save for the soft shuffle of feet. Inside, the faint smell of antiseptic lingers, and patients lie quietly on their beds, some sleeping, others staring at the ceiling, waiting for their next round of treatment. Here, pain and struggle are constant, but so is hope.

Gul Ahmad, 40, from Herat province, brought his brother here after two months of unsuccessful treatment at home. "Despite trying many treatments back home, nothing worked. He was in severe pain. Since coming here, his condition has gradually improved day by day," he said.

This hospital is Afghanistan's only public center dedicated to treating blood disorders and leukemia. For thousands of families with limited resources, it has become a fragile lifeline.

Zakiya, 55, had spent months visiting doctors without understanding her condition. At the center, she was diagnosed with severe anemia and a chronic blood disorder. "I was suffering from severe headaches, trembling in my hands and feet, weakness, numbness, and sudden attacks of fatigue," she said.

Yet, thanks to the attentive care she receives, her strength is slowly returning.

Masooda Alizadeh, head nurse of the leukemia ward for seven years, said the hospital faces daily challenges. Many patients from poor families cannot afford expensive medicines. "Some families sell their land, animals, and belongings to continue treatment," she said.

Patients with dangerously low platelets often arrive bleeding from the nose or gums, requiring urgent transfusions to stabilize their condition.

Abdul Ahmad, a farmer from Bamyan province, recalled arriving at the hospital barely able to walk or breathe. After three months of treatment, his physical condition has improved, but the financial burden remains heavy. "I am a farmer. The medicine is very costly. Sometimes we borrow money just to continue treatment," he said.

Shortages of nurses and essential medicines make care even more difficult. In the 14-bed ICU and main ward, one nurse may be responsible for multiple patients.

Mohammad Hanif Mohammadi, a blood disease specialist at the center, said the facility treats 40 to 45 outpatients daily. "It is the only public facility of its kind in Afghanistan, serving patients from Herat, Bamyan, and other provinces. In winter, some patients are trapped by snow and miss vital treatment. One center cannot meet

nationwide demand, and many patients must wait for beds before being admitted," he said.

"The lack of trained doctors is another major challenge. If trained specialists and treatment centers existed in every province, patients would not need to travel such long distances," Mohammadi added.

"As medical technology and treatments advance rapidly, doctors and nurses require routine training to apply new medicines and techniques to patient care properly," Alizadeh said, highlighting the importance of continued international support.

Hope comes through training and international cooperation. Programs previously supported by China have improved medical practices and patient outcomes, enabling staff to apply modern treatments more effectively.

Inside this hospital, patients recover slowly, families sacrifice heavily, and medical staff work tirelessly under difficult conditions.

With more centers, ongoing training, and continued international support, Afghanistan's blood disease patients may one day receive the care they urgently need. Until then, this hospital remains a fragile lifeline, where courage, resilience, and hope walk side by side with suffering.

— Xinhua

# Gaza health officials say strikes kill 23 after Israel says shots wounded officer

GAZA CITY – Gazan health officials said Israeli air strikes yesterday killed 23 people, with Israel's military saying it struck after one of its officers was wounded by enemy gunfire.

Despite a US-brokered truce entering its second phase last month, violence has continued in the Gaza Strip, with Israel and Hamas accusing each other of breaching the agreement.

The latest bloodshed came days after Israel partly reopened the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt, the only exit for Gazans that does not pass through Israel.

The Gazan health ministry, which operates under Hamas authority, said that 21 people were killed, including three children, in a series of strikes, with at least 38 others wounded.

The Gaza civil defence agency said that two additional people were killed and eight injured in a strike on a tent in the central Gaza Strip.

The Israeli army said its retaliatory strike targeted a Hamas platoon commander named Bilal Abu Assi who led an assault on a kibbutz on October 7, 2023, during the attack on Israel that sparked the Gaza war.

The Israeli army said it took steps "to mitigate harm to civilians as much as possible" in its latest strikes.



Members of the Palestinian Red Crescent carry the body of a colleague who was reportedly killed in an Israeli strike on a camp housing displaced Palestinians, during his funeral in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday. – AFP

"We were sleeping when suddenly shells and gunfire rained down on us," said Abu Mohammed Haboush, whose son was killed.

"Young children were martyred, my son and my nephew were among the dead. We lost many young men," he said, adding that he and his family were living far away from the so-called "Yellow Line," where Israeli forces are stationed.

AFP images showed mourners offering prayers in the compound of Al-Shifa hospital in Gaza City, where several bodies wrapped in

white shrouds were laid out.

An AFP photograph showed a person holding the body of a child wrapped in a shroud as relatives gathered around him.

## Shortage of medical aid

Three bodies were brought to Nasser Hospital after Israeli strikes hit homes and tents housing displaced Palestinians in the southern Khan Yunis area, Gaza's civil defence agency said.

Fourteen more bodies were taken to Al-Shifa Hospital, its

director Mohamed Abu Salmiya said in a statement.

"We also received dozens of wounded. The situation is extremely difficult in the hospitals of the Gaza Strip due to the severe shortage of medicines and medical supplies," Abu Salmiya said.

Israel scrutinises all aid coming into besieged Gaza.

The Israeli military said it had launched strikes after "terrorists opened fire on troops" Wednesday, seriously wounding an officer, adding that it considers the incident a violation of the ceasefire.

It said the troops came under attack near the "Yellow Line", without specifying which side of the line the troops were on.

This week, Israel allowed the reopening of the Rafah crossing, reportedly following US pressure, but limited passage to patients and their travel companions.

Sick and wounded Gazans have begun crossing into Egypt to seek medical treatment since Monday.

On Tuesday, 45 people crossed into Egypt and 42 entered the territory, a source at the Palestinian Red Crescent Society told AFP.

Shortly after midnight yesterday (local time), those meant to enter during the day on Tuesday arrived

in Gaza through Rafah in a large bus, an AFP journalist reported.

## ‘My homeland’

Relatives of those returning from Egypt screamed in joy, hugging and crying.

"I am so happy to be back with my husband, my children, my family, my loved ones, and of course, my homeland," Fariza Barabakh, who returned that day, told AFP.

"It's an indescribable feeling, thank God. What can I say? My two young children didn't recognise me, but thank God. I hope it will be alright," Yusef Abu Fahma, another returnee, told AFP.

Gaza's health ministry says at least 556 people have been killed in Israeli strikes since the ceasefire took effect on October 10, while the Israeli military says four of its soldiers have been killed over the same period.

Saturday was among the deadliest days, with the civil defence agency reporting at least 32 people killed in Israeli attacks, which the military said were in response to a Hamas ceasefire violation.

Media restrictions and limited access in Gaza have prevented AFP from independently verifying casualty figures or freely covering the fighting. – AFP

# Palestinians in Egypt torn on return to a Gaza with 'no future'

Menna Farouk and Nada Abou El-Amaim

CAIRO – As Israel begins to allow a trickle of Palestinians through the Rafah border crossing, Gazans stranded in Egypt are torn between staying in exile without formal status or returning to a land in ruins.

"Return to Gaza for what? To live in a tent?" demanded Mohamed, a 78-year-old poet from Beit Lahia in northern Gaza.

"We have not turned our backs on Gaza, we will return. But right now, we cannot go back under these conditions," he told AFP, asking to be identified only by his first name.

Some 80 percent of Gaza's buildings have been destroyed or damaged, according to the United Nations.

Aid access remains drastically insufficient, and there are not yet detailed reconstruction plans.

Mohamed is among an estimated 80-100,000 Palestinians who came to Egypt through the Rafah crossing, before it was seized and shut by Israeli forces in May 2024.

Returns are tightly controlled, and by yesterday only a few dozen Palestinians had been allowed back, describing to AFP a humiliating journey through Israeli check points.

## Nothing to return to

Two years after their son, who lives in France, drained his savings to get them out, Mohamed's wife Sawsan, 72, said she could not imagine returning.



Humanitarian aid trucks enter through the Egyptian side of the Rafah border crossing with the Gaza Strip yesterday, days after Israel permitted a limited reopening of the Palestinian territory's border post. The crossing, which is Gaza's only gateway to the outside world that does not lead to Israel, had been largely closed since Israeli forces seized control of it in May 2024 during the war with Hamas. – AFP

"The situation that pushed us out hasn't changed, we lost our homes, our children, our livelihood," she told AFP, heartbroken over her family still in Gaza: a daughter, a son-in-law and three grandchildren aged three, seven and nine.

Across town, Nadra, 37, is focused only on her son, Hakim.

She brought him to Egypt in January 2024, seeking medical treatment after he suffered burns in an Israeli strike early in the war, at eight years old.

"There is no future in Gaza now. No clean water, no safety, no school for Hakim, nowhere for us to stay," she said.

Two years on, she lives off monthly transfers from her sister

abroad that barely cover rent for her studio apartment.

Skyrocketing rent prices and a state of limbo are among the many struggles of Gazans in Egypt, which has repeatedly warned against any mass displacement of Palestinians into its territory.

Egypt offers a measure of safety, but Gazans who arrived in recent years lack legal status, cannot work formally and are often denied access to public hospitals, schools and banking.

On the eastern outskirts of Cairo, Mahmoud Abdelrahman Rabie counts the days until he can return to Gaza.

He knows he may not be able to even find the remains of his former

home and chicken farm in Jabaliya, much of which has been bombed to the ground.

"I know what life is like in a tent, I lived like that for a year. But I still want to return to Gaza," the 65-year-old told AFP from his cramped studio, a kuffiyeh draped over his shoulders.

Rabie tried to make a living as a driver, but couldn't get a license without a residence permit, and has since survived on help from friends and relatives.

"Here I am alive only in name. My heart and soul are in Gaza," he said.

But he has little hope, with only a handful of Palestinians allowed through the crossing.

At the current rate, "my turn

will come in two years," Rabie said. "I don't even know how I'm paying next month's rent."

A year after he was medically evacuated by the UN, Rabie longs for his family, which includes 52 grandchildren scattered around Gaza.

"I cry myself to sleep every night... I just want to go back to my land."

## A tent over a palace

Yaela el-Beltagy, a 36-year-old former restaurant owner, has registered himself, his wife, son and four siblings to return to Gaza.

"I want to go back, see my father and mother, even if there is nothing there but tents," he told AFP by phone.

"We're a people deeply connected to our land, we cannot stay away from it," he said.

Palestinians have repeatedly warned of mass displacement from Gaza, and that those leaving will not be allowed to return.

"I would pick a tent in Gaza over a palace anywhere in the world," Beltagy said.

But though they long for home, many are unprepared to risk their family's health and safety.

Hala, a 40-year-old teacher's assistant, left Gaza a few weeks before the Rafah crossing shut.

She now lives with her parents, both of whom are in need of regular healthcare – impossible for most in Gaza.

"I can't go back there, not with my parents, and not without them. They're getting old, they deserve to live out their days in peace." – AFP

## Pope warns of 'new arms race' as US-Russia treaty to expire



Pope Leo XIV (centre) addresses the crowd during his weekly general audience, at Paul-VI Hall in the Vatican yesterday. - AFP

VATICAN CITY – Pope Leo XIV warned yesterday of the risk of "a new arms race" as the last US-Russia nuclear treaty is set to expire.

New START, the last nuclear treaty between Washington and Moscow after decades of agreements dating to the Cold War, is due to expire today, and with it restrictions on the two top nuclear powers.

"I urge you not to abandon this instrument without seeking to ensure that it is followed up in a concrete and effective manner," the American pope said at his weekly general audience.

"The current situation requires us to do everything possible to avert a new arms race, which further threatens peace between nations," he said.

Leo, the Catholic Church's first US pontiff, said it was "more urgent than ever to replace the logic of fear and mistrust with a shared ethic capable of guiding choices towards the common good".

The Kremlin has offered a one-year extension of the treaty, but while

US President Donald Trump said in September that an extension of the New START "sounds like a good idea", little has changed since then.

The treaty, which included a monitoring mechanism, was signed in 2010 by then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and his US counterpart Barack Obama.

But Russia suspended monitoring inspections during the Covid-19 pandemic and talks on extending the agreement have broken down in recent years due to tensions over the Ukraine war.

Moscow had also accused Washington of impeding monitoring missions on US soil.

In 2023, Russia froze its participation in New START, but it has continued to voluntarily adhere to the limits set in the treaty.

Moscow has last year tested its latest nuclear weapon carriers without atomic warheads, and Trump said he was moving two nuclear submarines closer to Russia. - AFP

## EU parliament lifts freeze on US trade deal after Trump U-turn on Greenland

Brussels, Belgium

BRUSSELS – EU lawmakers yesterday said they would resume work towards greenlighting a key trade deal with the United States after President Donald Trump backed off his threat to seize Greenland.

The parliament still needs to greenlight removing tariffs on US industrial goods under the deal, but it froze the process in January as Trump's pressure campaign escalated.

"Trade committee members remain committed to advancing work on the two legislative proposals expeditiously, provided the US respects the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the [European] Union and its member states" as well as the July 2025 deal, member of European Parliament (MEP) Bernd Lange, who leads the committee, said in a statement.

The committee could decide on the deal's implementation at its next meeting on February 24, ahead of a vote by the full chamber, he said.

The European Union and Trump clinched a deal last year after months of intense wrangling that saw Washington slap 15 percent tariffs on EU goods. - AFP

EU lawmakers opted to hold off ratifying the deal after Trump threatened tariff threats on eight European states for failing to go along with his demand on Greenland.

The US leader last month backed off his desire to take control of Denmark's autonomous Arctic territory after saying he had struck a "framework" deal with NATO chief Mark Rutte to ensure greater American influence.

The parliamentary committee would include in its amendments "grounds for suspension" in case of future threats to the territorial integrity of EU states, Lange said.

"The message to Washington is clear: respect for Europe's sovereignty and full compliance with the EU-US deal from Scotland are non-negotiable," Lange said.

The German MEP also took issue with the US tariffs of 50 percent on European steel and aluminium products. The EU has called on Washington to cut the duties.

"As long as these tariffs are not reduced to 15 percent, there can be no tariff-free access for US steel and US aluminium to the European market." - AFP

## Move on, says Trump as Epstein files trigger probe into UK politician

Danny Kemp, Martin Pollard and Helen Rowe

WASHINGTON – US President

Donald Trump made a fresh plea on Tuesday for Americans to move on from the Jeffrey Epstein scandal, even as it left a prominent British politician facing a criminal probe on the other side of the Atlantic.

Former British ambassador to Washington Peter Mandelson resigned from the upper house of parliament amid allegations he passed confidential information to late sex offender Epstein.

The fallout from the latest release of millions of documents linked to Epstein continued in the United States too, where former president Bill Clinton and his wife Hillary will testify in Congress later this month.

Republican Trump insisted once again that he had been cleared by the newest trove of files as he faced renewed questions at the White House over the disgraced financier.

"Nothing came out about me other than it was a conspiracy against me, literally, by Epstein and other people. But I think it's time now for the country to maybe get on to something else like health care or something that people care about," Trump said.

Trump added that it was "not a Republican, it's a Democrat problem," in a bid to turn the issue back to the Clintons, and away from the mention in the files of allies including his Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick and billionaire Elon Musk.

"It's a shame," he said of the Clintons.

### 'Too bad'

Hillary Clinton, the Democratic former US secretary of state who lost to Trump in the 2016 election, and her husband will now testify in a US House investigation into Epstein on February 26 and 27.

Neither Trump nor the Clintons

have been accused of criminal wrongdoing related to Epstein's activities.

Trump spent months trying to block the disclosure of files linked to Epstein, before relenting late last year when an initial tranche of files was released.

Fresh documents released by the US Justice Department last week contained emails between prominent figures and Epstein, who died by suicide in prison in 2019, often revealing warm relations, illicit financial dealings and private photos.

The names of some alleged victims, who were supposed to be anonymised, were left unredacted, prompting them to petition a US federal court for an "immediate takedown" of the government website showing the files.

However, a US federal judge on Tuesday cancelled a court hearing set for yesterday, saying that "the parties were able to resolve the privacy issues."

US attorney general, Pam Bondi, wrote to the judge on Monday that all documents requested by victims or counsel had been removed for further redaction.

Nevertheless, Trump's efforts to move on from the Epstein scandal have been hampered as it engulfs key figures from royals to politicians at home and abroad.

"I don't know too much about it," Trump said when an AFP reporter asked him to comment on Mandelson's resignation. "I know who he is. It's too bad."

Mandelson appeared in the Oval Office in May 2025 and shook hands with Trump as they announced a trade deal, but was sacked in September over earlier Epstein revelations.

### 'Misconduct in public office'

Now the often-divisive British political figure once dubbed the

"Prince of Darkness" has seen his decades-long political career effectively ended.

The former minister and ex-EU trade commissioner announced he was resigning from the House of Lords as of yesterday. Hours later British police said they were probing him for "misconduct in public office offenses".

Along with images of Mandelson in his underpants, records released on Friday suggested that in 2009 Mandelson, while business secretary, forwarded an economic briefing to Epstein intended for then-prime minister Gordon Brown.

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

The issue has caused a headache for British Prime Minister Keir Starmer's government.

The Epstein affair has also shaken the very pinnacle of the British establishment.

British police said they were "assessing" claims by a second woman who said she had been trafficked to the UK for a sexual encounter with former prince Andrew, who was stripped of his royal titles last October.

Pictures in the latest Epstein files showed Andrew kneeling on all fours over a woman lying on the floor.

Andrew, who has denied any wrongdoing, paid a multi-million-pound settlement in 2022 to Epstein accuser Virginia Giuffre without making any admission of guilt. Giuffre died by suicide last year.

Andrew's ex-wife Sarah Ferguson has also been caught up in the scandal with a series of embarrassing emails to Epstein. Her charity, "Sarah's Trust", said Tuesday it was now closing down. - AFP

## Panama leader rejects arbitration in canal port case

PANAMA CITY – Panama's President José Raúl Molina yesterday rejected the decision by Hong Kong-based CK Hutchison to launch arbitration over the annulment of its contract to operate two ports on the Panama Canal.

CK Hutchison's subsidiary Panama Ports Company (PPC) said it had begun arbitration after Panama's Supreme Court last week invalidated its contract.

US President Donald Trump last year put Panama under pressure to annul PPC's contract by threatening to reclaim the US-built waterway over what he claimed was China's outsize influence on the canal.

PPC said on Tuesday it had begun arbitration "after a campaign by the Panamanian state specifically against PPC and its

concession contract, throughout a year marked by a series of abrupt actions by the Panamanian state, culminating in serious damages."

The statement did not specify the amount of damages sought.

The Panama Canal connects the Atlantic and Pacific oceans through Central America.

It handles about 40 percent of US container traffic.

Since 1997, Hutchison had managed the ports of Cristóbal on the canal's Atlantic side and Balboa on the Pacific side.

The concession was extended for 25 years in 2021, but on his first day back in the White House last year Trump repeated a threat to "take back" the interoceanic waterway.

The United States built the canal and operated it for nearly a

century before ceding control to Panama in 1999.

In the aftermath of Trump's threats, the office of Panama's comptroller – an autonomous body that examines how government money is spent – requested that PPC's contract be annulled.

It argued the concession was "unconstitutional" and said Hutchison had failed to pay the Panamanian state US\$1.2 billion due.

After the Supreme Court ruling, the Panamanian government tapped Danish company Maersk to temporarily take over management of the port terminals until a new concession is awarded.

The case has drawn ire from China, which has warned it will take measures to "protect the legitimate and lawful rights" of Chinese companies. - AFP

# Thousands evacuated as storm hits Spain, Portugal

Jorge Guerrero

MADRID/LISBON – A storm unleashing up to 35 centimetres of rain in 24 hours battered the Iberian Peninsula yesterday, forcing thousands of people in southern Spain from their homes, shutting schools and cancelling trains.

Spanish weather agency AEMET placed parts of the southern region of Andalusia under the highest red alert for the torrential rain dumped by Storm Leonardo.

An “extraordinary amount of rain” was falling in a region where “the ground is very saturated and riverbeds are already carrying a lot of water” from recent precipitation, AEMET spokesman Ruben del Campo said.

The mayor of the nearby city of Ronda, Maria Paz Fernandez, told public broadcaster RTVE that “the ground can no longer absorb” the constant downpours, speaking of “numerous landslides” in the surrounding rural areas.

Andalusia’s top emergency official, Antonio Sanz, told a press conference that the situation was “very worrying” in the nearby mountainous municipality of Grazalema, where AEMET predicted up to 35 centimetres of rain in 24 hours.

Around 3,500 people had been evacuated in Andalusia, where more than 650 incidents were recorded, none of them causing serious damage, Sanz said, adding that one person was injured in a building collapse.

Spanish police published footage of flooded fields and torrents of water that were engulfing



A woman with an umbrella passes a pharmacy with sand bags at the entrance in Alcácer do Sal, southern Portugal, yesterday. 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. – AFP

buildings and vehicles.

Hundreds of soldiers deployed to assist the rescue services, while all Andalusian schools were closed apart from in the region’s easternmost province of Almeria.

State railway company Renfe announced the cancellation of almost all suburban, regional and long-distance trains across Andalusia, with no bus replacement services possible due to the state of the roads, dozens of which were closed.

Scientists say human-driven climate change is worsening the intensity, frequency and length of such extreme weather events.

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

## Portugal hit again

In Portugal, the emergency

services had dealt with more than 3,300 incidents since Sunday, mostly due to flooding, falling trees and landslides, according to the Civil Protection authority.

The service had deployed more than 11,000 people to respond to the emergency, and around 200 residents were evacuated in central Portugal on Wednesday.

In Alcácer do Sal, south of Lisbon, the Sado river had burst its banks and the rising water had submerged the town’s main avenue.

The Lisbon region and the Algarve in the south were most affected, with the rain and wind predicted to reach peak intensity overnight from yesterday to today.

Tens of thousands of customers remained cut off from the power grid following last week’s Storm Kristin, which killed five people and injured hundreds. – AFP

# Bus accident kills at least 16 pilgrims in Brazil

SÃO Paulo – A bus returning from a religious festival in northeast Brazil veered off the road on a curve and overturned on Tuesday, killing at least 16 people, including four children, officials said.

The bus had been carrying about 60 people when it tipped over in the rural interior of Alagoas state, ejecting some passengers while others were trapped underneath the wreckage.

The Alagoas regional government said in a statement seven women, five men and four children were killed in an accident

that remains under investigation and was described as “highly complex.”

Local media reported that the bus had been returning from celebrations for Our Lady of Candelária, a religious festival in the state of Ceará that attracts thousands of devotees every February 2.

“The bus went off the road on a curve, overturned, and some people were thrown out,” said Colonel André Madeiro, director of the Alagoas Aviation Department, which took part in the rescue operation.

“Some were trapped under the vehicle. It was a very bad accident,

even atypical,” he told a press conference.

The survivors, including a seriously injured child, were taken to local hospitals, where they remained under medical care.

Alagoas governor Paulo Dantas declared three days of mourning.

“I express my solidarity with the families and friends at this time of such great pain,” Dantas wrote on X.

Deadly road accidents are frequent in Brazil. In October last year 17 people died in northeast Brazil, in the state of Pernambuco, when a driver lost control of a bus. – AFP

# Remittances to Mexico drop for the first time in 11 years

MEXICO CITY – Remittances sent home by Mexicans living abroad declined for the first time in 11 years in 2025, official data showed on Tuesday, a phenomenon analysts said was likely due to a drop in migration to the United States.

Money sent home to their families from Mexicans living in the United States has traditionally made up about 95 percent of remittances – which totalled some US\$61.8 billion last year.

The figure represented a 4.6 percent drop from 2024, said Mexico’s central bank.

“After 11 consecutive years of growth in remittances, during which

these inflows nearly tripled, 2025 confirms the end of this growth streak,” Juan José Li, an analyst at the BBVA group, said in a report.

He said the trend coincided with a drop in Mexican migration to the United States.

Other risks to remittance flows in 2026 included a possible economic slowdown in the United States, which has been cracking down on undocumented migrant entries, as well as an appreciation of the Mexican currency against the dollar, said the expert.

In Mexico, Latin America’s second-largest economy after Brazil, remittances in 2024 were

equal to 3.5 percent of GDP.

In 2025, the country’s economy had its worst performance since the COVID-19 pandemic, growing 0.7 percent year-on-year as trade tensions with the United States took a toll.

The Mexican government announced on Tuesday it would increase public investment over the next five years, notably on infrastructure spending.

It announced a spending plan totalling 5.6 trillion pesos (US\$325 billion) for roads, railways and airports as well as energy, health and education, as it seeks to boost production and consumption. – AFP

# Top Colombia cartel halts peace talks after Trump-Petro pact

BOGOTÁ – Colombia’s most powerful cartel walked away from months-long peace talks yesterday, after Presidents Gustavo Petro and Donald Trump vowed a new offensive targeting three key cocaine trafficking bosses.

At the White House, the two presidents agreed to joint military and intelligence actions against Colombian criminal capos who together produce and supply much of the world’s cocaine.

Colombian Defence Minister Pedro Sánchez said the two countries would target Ivan Mordisco, Colombia’s most wanted rebel; Chiquito Malo, commander of the Clan del Golfo cartel; and Pablito, an ELN guerrilla leader operating on the Venezuelan border.

The Petro-Trump pact upends years of spluttering Colombian efforts to negotiate peace accords with big criminal groups.

Colombia produces about 70 percent of the world’s cocaine, and the United States is by far the world’s largest consumer.

“These are not new Colombian targets, but they are new targets for

a joint US-Colombia operation,” Sánchez told Colombia’s Caracol radio.

Sánchez said Venezuela would also be asked to join the campaign. Many cartel and guerrilla fighters have traditionally found safety crossing the Colombia-Venezuela border.

The Colombian governments have long accused Caracas of funding and offering a safe haven to leftist guerrilla and cocaine trafficking groups.

But after the ouster of Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro, there are hopes that security cooperation can improve.

Talks with the Gulf Clan

had been ongoing for about five months in Qatar.

“This would be an attack on the good faith and commitments of Doha,” the Gulf Clan said in a statement on social media announcing it would “temporarily” leave the negotiating table and hold internal consultations.

Government officials confirmed to AFP that the account posting the message belongs to the paramilitary-origin organization.

– AFP

# Tropical Cuba registers freezing point for first time

HAVANA – Cuba registered a record low of zero degrees on Tuesday, the first time freezing point has been documented on the Caribbean island, according to its Institute of Meteorology.

A weather station in the northern province of Matanzas “registered a value of 0 degrees Celsius, reaching freezing point for the first time on Cuban territory and setting a new national record,” the Insmet institute said on its Facebook page.

The island’s previous record, of 0.6C, was reported in 1996.

The provincial meteorological centre of Matanzas said frost had been reported on crops, a very unusual phenomenon on the usually hot, tropical island.

Insmet said the temperature drop was due to an intense cold

front that has dragged a mass of polar air from North America into the Caribbean.

An exceptional cold snap swept over large parts of the United States in late January, causing at least 13 hypothermia-related deaths in New York, whose mayor said on Monday the city could be in the “longest period of consecutive sub-32 degree (0C) weather” in its history.

Another storm hit the southern United States over the weekend, with cold-stunned iguanas falling from trees in normally mild Florida, roughly 145 kilometres from the coast of Cuba.

Cuba has kept meteorological records since the mid-19th century, though data has become more reliable since the second half of the 20th century.



Women shield their faces from the cold while waiting for a bus in Havana on Tuesday, when Cuba registered a record low of zero degrees, the first time freezing point has been documented on the Caribbean island, according to its Institute of Meteorology.

– AFP

## Japan eyes Premier League parity by aligning calendar with Europe

Andrew McKirdy

**J. LEAGUE** TOKYO – Japan's J. League can one day compete with England's Premier League if a calendar switch helps clubs bring in bigger transfer fees, its chairman told AFP ahead of the new season.

Japanese teams have sold a steady stream of players to Europe, including Brighton's Kaoru Mitoma, but the sums involved are only a fraction of the billions sloshing around the global transfer market.

J. League chairman Yoshikazu Nonomura wants to change that and he believes he has taken the first step by ditching the traditional February-to-December season to align with Europe.

A shortened interim competition lasting until June begins tomorrow, before a full league campaign kicks off after the World Cup.

Nonomura believes that will allow J. League clubs to take full advantage of European summer spending sprees and make up ground on the world's top leagues.

"If we do well on the business side, it wouldn't be a surprise if 20 years from now there was a different situation to what we have now, where the five biggest leagues are all in Europe," he said.

"We're always laying the groundwork for Japan to be part of a global market, and it could be alongside, say, England, Spain, Germany and the US."

Mitoma joined Brighton from Kawasaki Frontale for just £2.5 million in 2021 and his value skyrocketed after arriving in the Premier League.

Nonomura believes the calendar switch means Japanese clubs can start demanding "the proper amount" for their players.

"To make us conscious of competing and growing in the global market, it's very important to operate under the same conditions, aligning transfer windows, maximising transfer fees from Europe and going all out to beat them whenever we meet on the pitch," he said.

### Power play

More Japanese players are moving to Europe at an early age, preferring to learn their trade in Belgium, the Netherlands and Portugal instead of the J. League.

Nonomura wants to "convince players that they can develop here", and believes switching the calendar to avoid Japan's punishingly hot summers will help.

He is also hopeful that bigger revenue can attract overseas stars to the J. League, which has been devoid of big names since Spanish World Cup winner Andres Iniesta left in 2023.

"What we're trying to do is raise our top-line revenue to a level comparable with the Premier League, Barcelona and Real Madrid in Spain, and Germany," said Nonomura.

"If we can raise our top-line revenue and become a league of that financial scale, good players will naturally come to us."

The J. League quickly became one of Asia's strongest leagues when it launched in 1993 but its spending power has been eclipsed by Saudi Arabia, which has signed a host of top players from Europe.

That has brought the Saudis success on the field, with three of last season's Asian Champions League semi-finalists coming from the desert kingdom.

### Solid foundations

Kawasaki Frontale were the only non-Saudi team in the last four and they went on to reach the final, giving Nonomura hope that Japanese teams can remain competitive in Asia.

"A Japanese team has reached the final for the last three years, so it's not like we have no chance of winning," he said.

"Even if things carry on the way they are, Japanese teams have the quality to compete. And if we are able to bring in more money, the gap on the pitch will shrink."

Saudi investment has changed the Asian football landscape but there was a similar shift when Chinese clubs started spending big money in the 2010s.

Stars such as Carlos Tevez and Didier Drogba had lucrative stints there but it all came crashing down when team owners went bust as the Chinese economy fizzled.

Nonomura says the J. League's stability is its strength.

"Japanese clubs don't invest as much as Saudi clubs do but they have a very solid base," he said.

"The overall attendance in the J. League last season was the biggest ever. Our fundamentals are more solid than any other country in Asia so I don't think the J. League is going to decline."

– AFP



## France's Kante joins Fenerbahce after Erdogan 'support'

ISTANBUL – France midfielder Ngolo Kante has signed for Fenerbahce from Saudi side Al-Ittihad thanks to "support" from president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish club said yesterday.

World Cup winner Kante, who turns 35 next month, had been set to move to Istanbul earlier but the transfer seemed to have failed due to an administrative error.

The length of Kante's contract has not been revealed but it offers the two-time Premier League winning midfielder a chance to further his claim for a place in France's World Cup finals squad.

Erdogan was in Saudi Arabia on Tuesday, making his first visit to the country in more than two years.

"Our club has successfully completed the transfer of N'Golo Kante, a prominent figure in world football," Fenerbahce president Sadettin Saran said.

"On behalf of myself and our club, I would like to express my gratitude to our President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for his significant support in ensuring the positive conclusion of this process, which will contribute to the development of both Fenerbahce and Turkish football," he added.

Going in the opposite direction is Fenerbahce's experienced Moroccan international striker Youssef En-Nesyri.

The 28-year-old, who was part of the Morocco side that reached the 2022 World Cup semi-finals and last month's Africa Cup of Nations final, replaces Karim Benzema, who left Al-Ittihad for Saudi rivals Al-Hilal on Monday.

En-Nesyri, who has scored 25 goals in 92 appearances for Morocco, had signed a five-year contract with Fenerbahce when he joined from Spanish



France's midfielder Ngolo Kante kicks the ball during the Nations League match against Portugal, on October 11, 2020 at the Stade de France in Saint-Denis, outside Paris. – AFP

La Liga side Sevilla in 2024 but said he was unhappy and wanted to leave.

Fenerbahce, 19-time Turkish champions, have also signed Kante's fellow France midfielder Matteo Guendouzi during the winter transfer window.

They are locked in a tight battle for the league title, three points off fellow-Istanbul side Galatasaray, and face English club Nottingham Forest in the Europa League knockout play-offs later this month.

– AFP

## Football shorts

### Coach Thioune tasked with saving battling Bremen



BERLIN – Daniel Thioune was named Werder Bremen coach yesterday and tasked with saving the struggling Bundesliga side from the drop.

Bremen did not disclose the length of Thioune's contract, but German media reported that the coach's future will depend on whether Bremen manage to stay in the top flight.

The 51-year-old, who in 2017 became the first German-born Black manager in the country, has no top-flight experience but previously took Bundesliga 2 side Fortuna Düsseldorf to the cusp of promotion.

At the end of the 2023-24 season, Düsseldorf lost a two-legged playoff with first division Bochum on penalties. Had they won, they would have replaced Bochum in the Bundesliga.

Four-time German champions Bremen sacked previous manager Horst Steffen on Sunday, with the club sitting a point above the relegation placings after a 10-match winless run.

Thioune said he "could not correct in three days what hasn't gone optimally in the past three months".

"We demand to see energy released on the pitch and a team giving their all," he added.

"I am really looking forward to working with the team and I am convinced that we will succeed in achieving the club's goals."

Thioune previously coached Bremen's bitter northern rivals Hamburg but assured supporters that he had grown up in a Bremen-supporting household.

"My father was a huge Bremen fan," he said, adding that he remembered the "wonderful years" including the club's double-winning season in 2004.

Coming through a coaching course as a classmate of current Germany coach and friend Julian Nagelsmann, Thioune took Bremen for his first training session yesterday.

Thioune, whose father is Senegalese, became the first German-born Black manager in the country's professional football history when he took over at Osnabrück in 2017.

– AFP

### Germany rejects calls for World Cup boycott

BERLIN – Germany's government yesterday rejected calls for a boycott of the football World Cup co-hosted by the United States, after President Donald Trump retreated from his threats to seize Greenland.

A boycott of the tournament would not be "the right approach", government

spokesman Steffen Meyer told a press conference in Berlin.

"Political disputes should be settled at the political level, and sport should be left to be sport."

This year's World Cup is to be held between June 11 and July 19 in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Some German politicians had questioned whether the country should still participate after Trump last month stepped up his longstanding threats to annex Greenland, an autonomous territory of NATO ally Denmark.

He targeted eight European countries, including Germany, with tariffs for their opposition to his ambitions.

But the US leader later withdrew his tariff threats and vowed not to take the Arctic island by force, after saying he had struck a "framework" deal with NATO chief Mark Rutte to ensure greater American influence.

At the height of the crisis, Berlin had avoided taking a clear stance on a boycott, saying only it was up to the country's football association to decide.

Germany's minister for sports, Christiane Schenderlein, also said yesterday the government had decided that it did not support a boycott.

"Sport must not be exploited like this," she told the Sueddeutsche Zeitung daily.

– AFP

# Mir sets pace on Sepang day 2, Yamaha absent



Aprilia racing team's Spanish MotoGP rider Jorge Martin walks wearing his racing gloves along the service road during the second day of the 2026 MotoGP pre-season test at the Sepang International Circuit in Sepang, Malaysia yesterday.

— AFP

## MotoGP

SEPANG – Spaniard Joan Mir set the pace on the second day of MotoGP pre-season testing in contrasting conditions at the Sepang circuit yesterday, as Italian-Japanese factory team Yamaha opted to stay off track.

Mir became the pace setter after the 28-year-old clocked 1 min 56.874 sec on his Honda machine after 11 laps, to become the fastest rider over two days of testing in Malaysia.

Italian Franco Morbidelli came close to matching Mir's timing after he posted 1 min 56.983 sec, while his compatriot Fabio Di Giannantonio was third fastest on the day after registering 1 min 57.049 sec, both on their respective Ducatis.

The morning session witnessed only 17 riders set out for testing, with Yamaha's notable absence as they tried to resolve a technical issue from Tuesday's test.

Their withdrawal compounded Fabio Quartararo's absence from the remaining two days of testing after the Frenchman suffered a finger fracture following his crash on Tuesday.

As the skies changed from intense heat to a sudden downpour in the afternoon, only 11 riders emerged to weather the conditions.

Spaniard Alex Marquez, who crashed on the same turn as Quartararo the day before in the morning session, returned to post the fastest lap of the afternoon session as he stamped 1 min 58.094 sec on his Ducati.

"I was quite angry with myself after seeing the damage on the bike. I tried different things with the new tyres, the grip of the track is super high so, I had the problem," Marquez said.

"I understood the crash, and we look forward," he added.

Jorge Martin, the 2024 champion who endured a challenging previous season with injuries, was meanwhile spotted walking around shirtless with his racing gloves on.

The Spaniard appeared in good spirits as he posed for pictures with the medics and race marshals.

### Yesterday's pre-season test times at the Sepang Circuit

1. Joan Mir (ESP/Honda) 1 min 56.874 sec
2. Franco Morbidelli (ITA/VR46 Ducati) 1 min 56.983 sec
3. Fabio Di Giannantonio (ITA/VR46 Ducati) 1 min 57.049 sec
4. Pedro Acosta (ESP/Red Bull KTM) 1 min 57.116 sec
5. Maverick Vinales (ESP/Red Bull KTM) 1 min 57.126 sec
6. Marco Bezzecchi (ITA/Aprilia) 1 min 57.141 sec
7. Raul Fernandez (ESP/Aprilia) 1 min 57.274 sec
8. Francesco Bagnaia (ITA/Ducati) 1 min 57.302 sec
9. Ai Ogura (JPN/Aprilia) 1 min 57.376 sec
10. Enea Bastianini (ITA/Redbull KTM) 1 min 57.550 sec

— AFP

# Wang and Sun claim opening victories at Asian Cup

## Table tennis

HAIKOU – Team China had a strong start at the Asian Cup as all 12 paddlers including Wang Chuqin and Sun Yingsha claimed victories in the first round of group stage here yesterday.

Running from yesterday to Sunday, the Asian Cup in Haikou, Hainan Province consists of men's singles and women's singles events. The group stage adopts a round-robin format with 32 players divided into eight groups in each event, and the top two players in each group will advance to the knockout stage.

Men's singles world No.1 Wang of China breezed past India's Akash Pal

in straight games 11-3, 11-9, 11-5 in his first appearance on the international stage this year.

"I am basically satisfied with my performance today, but not good enough. I should focus more on details in following matches," Wang reflected.

Lin Shidong, who was born in Hainan Province, marked his first competition in his hometown by beating India's Snehit Suravajjula 11-1, 11-9, 11-4.

"As the host of such a high-level event, Hainan is showing its sports vitality. I am delighted to see table tennis getting popular here," Lin said.

In the women's singles, world No.1 Sun returned to the court after having

spent over a month recuperating from an ankle injury, who swept Chinese Taipei's Yeh Yi-tian 11-8, 11-3, 11-7.

Sun, 25, was excited to come back from injury while telling herself not to be over-anxious. "I need to gradually adjust and reach my best form," she said after the opener.

Defending champion Wang Manyu of China was not much challenged either, as she defeated Li Yu-Jhun of Chinese Taipei 11-2, 11-6, 11-8.

Other paddlers from Team China Chen Junsong, Xiang Peng, Zhou Qihao, Chen Yuanyu, Kuai Man, Chen Xingtong, Wang Yidi and Chen Yi also secured victories on the first matchday.

— Xinhua

## Selection process for future Olympic hosts set for reform



MILAN – The International Olympic Committee is considering reforming its procedure for awarding future Games to restore "transparency" and establish a clearer timetable, as the contest looms as to who hosts the 2036 Summer Olympics.

The 2036 race is considered wide open and is expected to feature bids from India and Qatar, with Saudi Arabia, South Korea, South Africa, Turkey and Chile among other interested parties.

"While there is no desire to return to the costly pre-2019 bidding process, the current election process requires refinement," former Croatian president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, now an IOC member, told delegates yesterday during the IOC Session in Milan ahead of the 2026 Winter Olympics.

Grabar-Kitarovic, who heads a working group on the designation of Olympic hosts set up by IOC

president Kirsty Coventry, said she believed "structured timelines, increased transparency and more meaningful participation by IOC members" were required.

Since 2019 – when Coventry's predecessor Thomas Bach was president – the IOC has radically changed the way it chooses Games organisers, with the aim of stemming the lack of candidates, reducing costs and avoiding inflicting public humiliation on unsuccessful bidders.

Gone are the suspense-filled elections, seven years before the event, in which the lucky winner was drawn from an envelope during a ceremony broadcast around the world, after costly campaigns to promote bids.

Negotiations are now confidential until the designation of a "preferred host", which is selected behind closed doors by the IOC's Executive Board and approved at the end of the process by the roughly 100 IOC members meeting in their Session.

Grabar-Kitarovic said her working group was proposing introducing a "transitional stage".

It would "allow shortlisting of a limited number of interested parties with advanced projects for deeper evaluation".

That evaluation "should be based on transparent criteria published in advance", she added.

Grabar-Kitarovic suggested such criteria could include "the importance of venue master plans, clarity on the sports programme, financial guarantees, and the added value of prior experience in hosting multi-sport events".

The current procedure for selecting hosts has led to extremes, ranging from awarding the 2032 Olympics to Brisbane 11 years in advance to granting the 2030 Winter Games to the French Alps less than six years before the event, while the venue map and sports programme still needed to be finalized, along with the detailed budget.

— AFP

## Vowles dismisses Williams 2026 title hopes as 'not realistic'

### F1

GROVE, UK – British Formula One team Williams has made progress but "it's not realistic" to target the title in 2026 or 2027, its principal James Vowles told AFP in the build-up to a new season marked by an overhaul of the technical regulations.

The 46-year-old, who took over at Williams after 12 years as a strategy guru with Mercedes, said he was determined that the team should do at least as well as their fifth place in the constructors' standings in 2025, their joint-best finish in 10 years.

"Our expectation is 2025 set the baseline. P5 is where I want us to be at our base, and we nudge forward from there," Vowles told AFP.

"But it's exponentially harder, in my experience, being P4, and exponentially harder being P3, P2, P1.

"And I think with what you can see at the moment, the journey to P2, P1 is simply not on the cards for 2026. We have work to do."

"But do I expect that, as a baseline, we perform at least where we were last year? Yes."

Williams won the last of their nine constructors' titles in 1997 when

Jacques Villeneuve also won the drivers' world championship.

For the last 20 years, apart from two seasons when Felipe Massa and Valtteri Bottas lifted them to third, they have struggled to make the top five.

This season they again have Carlos Sainz and Alex Albon at the wheel, with a Mercedes engine powering them, and Vowles is confident that the long-term planning is there to return to the glory days.

"Am I confident we as a business have made a step forward from 2025 to 2026 in the way we're working? Absolutely," he says.

"There's some elements of the car that are really quite impressive. Not all of it, but elements of it."

"Are we at championship level today? No. But I'm confident the way we are going about this will allow us to catch up in the time frame."

"I will always invest in our future. One of the great things about the cost cap is you are constrained."

"You can either think about today, next race, or you can think about a year down the line. It's the same money. You've got to spend it wisely in that regard."

"The decisions that we made in

2025 were the right ones to make sure we forward invest in this team.

"We moved a lot of our team onto this car. But what you don't do is print it early."

### Right decision

With only a month to go before the start of the new season in Australia on March 8, pressure is growing on every team to ensure that their new cars, massively overhauled to meet the new regulations, are in good working order.

Vowles, however, stands by his decision to skip the shakedown in Barcelona in order to tweak their revisions.

"One of the most difficult decisions I've made in my career is not going to Barcelona," he admitted.

"I'm confident it's the right decision though."

"We did VTT (virtual track testing) and other elements with the drivers that have positioned us in a good stead."

"It's not the same as going to Barcelona... But I'm confident that with six days of testing in Bahrain, we'll be absolutely fine coming to Melbourne."

"Ultimately, that's the line in the sand that's important. It's not whether you're at a shakedown test, it's where you perform in Melbourne."

— AFP

# Sumo diplomacy: Japan's heavyweight 'soft power' ambassadors

**Mathias Cena**

TOKYO – Two giants stare each other down before colliding with a dull thud. After years on the sidelines, sumo is back centre stage as part of Japan's soft power arsenal overseas.

Behind the scenes at the New Year Grand Sumo Tournament in Tokyo, preparations were already being made for a tour to Paris in June, following a stop in London last year.

The last time sumo wrestlers travelled to France was in 1995, when such tours were common, but they have become something of a rarity in recent years.

Before last year's visit to London's Royal Albert Hall, the previous time the Japan Sumo Association (JSA) held a tournament overseas was in Las Vegas in 2005.

Using the hulking wrestlers as ambassadors is a long-established practice.

As early as 1854, they displayed their strength before Commodore Matthew Perry, sent by the United States to secure Japan's diplomatic and commercial opening after two centuries of isolation.

In his journal, Perry described the performance as "barbaric", performed by wrestlers "more like bulls than humans".

Perry "observed everything about Japan from a position of almost total ignorance of the country", said Jessamyn R. Abel, professor of Asian studies at Penn State University.

Today, by contrast, "for a spectator who already thinks Japan is 'cool', sumo just reinforces" that idea, she added.

## Sumo vs. pandas

Japan has understood this well, said Kosuke Takata, associate professor at Waseda University's School of Sport Sciences.



Sumo wrestlers take part in the morning practice at the Kise sumo stable in Tokyo early last month. – AFP

"Government agencies for sport and tourism are seeking to promote 'martial arts tourism', not only sumo, but also kendo and karate," he said.

Such tours continued throughout the 20th century in the United States, Europe, the Soviet Union and China, complementing Japanese diplomacy during the Cold War.

In 1973, wrestlers travelled to Beijing to celebrate the previous year's establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and Mao Zedong's China.

China, in turn, exercised its "panda diplomacy" by sending two bears to Tokyo.

With relations now at a low point – Japan's last two pandas returned to China on Tuesday

– a sumo tour would no longer have the same impact, says Erik Esselstrom, professor of history at the University of Vermont.

At the time, China "was relatively weak and Japan quite strong" economically, and the two countries were "in a moment of rediscovery", he said.

Overseas trips became rare over the past two decades as the sumo association refocused on its domestic audiences while the sport's popularity waned, partly due to a series of scandals.

The COVID-19 pandemic then prevented travel abroad.

Yasutoshi Nakadachi, a former wrestler and organiser of the Paris trip, said the JSA

was in a "complicated situation", and also had a lack of interest from foreign countries.

## 'Not entertainment'

The context is now very different, with Japan welcoming a record number of tourists in 2025.

Overseas visitors are increasingly eager to see sumo, and tournaments in Japan are regularly sold out.

David Rothschild, promoter of the Paris tournament, recalled approaching the sumo association about 10 years ago but receiving no response until 2023.

"And then, after many exchanges, everything sped up: in a month we had practically done everything," he said.

The JSA's requirement? "Sumo must always be considered a tradition. It's not just a sport and it's not entertainment," Rothschild said.

"In every discussion they wanted to make sure I wouldn't do anything inappropriate, that I would be respectful."

Paris has already hosted the wrestlers twice, in 1986 and 1995, and officials from the sumo association remember the trip as wrestlers themselves at the time.

"We fought seriously but otherwise we were mostly happy to enjoy Paris," said Nakadachi.

Sumo official and former wrestler Sehei Kise said he was struck by meeting France's then-president Jacques Chirac, who was a great fan of sumo.

Current wrestler Wakamotoharu, a cinema enthusiast, hopes to take advantage of the trip to visit Place de la Concorde, where a scene from the film "The Devil Wears Prada" was shot.

Once on the Parisian cobblestones, he could well become the real attraction. – AFP

## Love in a time of war for journalist and activist in new documentary

**Huw Griffith**

PARK CITY – An unlikely love story blossoming in the thick of war provides the backdrop to a new documentary that raises questions about how modern media cover conflict.

"Birds of War" traces the growing relationship between Syrian activist-cameraman Abd Alkader Habak and Lebanese journalist Janay Boulos, who was working for the BBC in London as Syria's civil war unfurled.

What began as a strictly professional relationship – on-the-ground activists were vital for international media whose journalists found it difficult to operate in Syria – develops into something more.

"It's about understanding who this person is you're working with," Boulos told AFP on the fringes of the Sundance Film Festival, where the documentary premiered last week.

"He's not a source, he's not a story. He's not somebody who's helping me advance my career. He's a human being. He has emotions. He has a cause."

Through text messages and their own personal video archive created over 13 years, Boulos and Habak have reconstructed the growth of their relationship for a documentary that won the World Cinema Documentary Special Jury Award for Journalistic Impact at Sundance.

The film traces Boulos' growing disenchantment with her job in the Arabic language service at Britain's public broadcaster as global headlines inevitably moved on from the tragedy in Syria.

"The agenda changes quickly. At one point, we focus on the migration across the Mediterranean and the people dying... Then there is a tsunami in Indonesia.

"A week later, we forget about the tsunami. We're talking about something else. And I'm, like, 'What's happened to those people? Why are we not talking about them anymore?'"

In an effort to refocus her editors on the conflict in Syria, she asks Habak for human stories – "nothing with blood," she tells him – and the pair work on packages about rooftop gardening in a war zone.

As the topics soften, their relationship evolves.

Text messages and voice notes stray from the practical to the personal – a morning greeting or videos of pets – and the couple begin calling each other "little bird."

Then Habak becomes the story when he is photographed rescuing a child from the wreckage of a civilian convoy that is attacked while fleeing a city under siege.

The picture goes viral as it ricochets around the world and puts a target on his back for Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Habak sees no other option but to flee Syria, heading to Turkey, like hundreds of thousands of his compatriots during the war.

Determined to see the man she has been talking to for years, Boulos goes to meet him, and what she thought was harmless online flirting quickens into love.

They marry and move to London, where Habak struggles to reconcile the safety of his new life with his longing for a revolution he had been filming since it began when he was just 18.

"Everybody wants to be in their home, but some people can't be there," Boulos said.

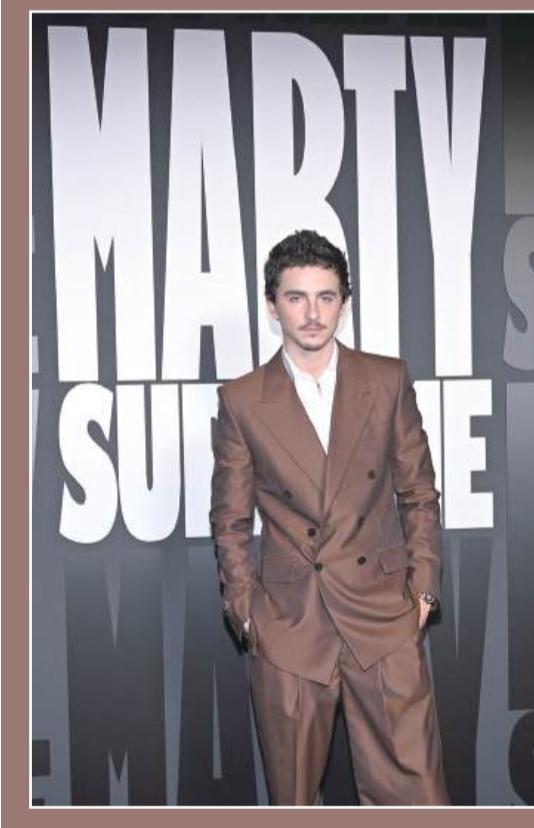
"We live in London because at that time, we didn't have a choice. But doesn't mean that we're not guilty about it. Doesn't mean we're not suffering from witnessing what's happening to our countries from a distance."

For Boulos, the world of mainstream journalism she has now left behind – she is no longer at the BBC – cannot paint the picture of such complexity because it cannot stop to focus for long enough.

She and Habak are now making independent documentaries that they hope will be better suited for this task.

"Everybody can be a story, but at the same time, everybody's a human being," she said.

"We all love. We all want to be loved. We all are fighting for survival. And I think once we understand that people have their own voices, and we give them the chance to use their voices, I think we will have a better journalism." – AFP



French-US actor Timothée Chalamet poses before attending a screening of the film "Marty Supreme" at the Grand Rex Cinema in Paris on Tuesday. "Marty Supreme" is a 2025 US sports comedy-drama film directed by Josh Safdie who co-wrote with Ronald Bronstein. Set in the 1950s, it follows fictional American table tennis player Marty Mauser (loosely based on Marty Reisman) in his quest to become world champion. Chalamet, 30, stars in the title role. – AFP

## World Weather

CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -9°C~5°C	Manila 20°C~31°C	New York -9°C~0°C	Lisbon 11°C~16°C
Shanghai 6°C~16°C	Bangkok 23°C~35°C	London 8°C~9°C	Rio de Janeiro 23°C~28°C
Hong Kong 17°C~23°C	Tokyo 2°C~14°C	Frankfurt -1°C~6°C	Luanda 24°C~29°C
Taipei 15°C~26°C	Singapore 23°C~32°C	Vancouver 6°C~13°C	Maputo 20°C~32°C
Guangzhou 14°C~26°C	Kuala Lumpur 24°C~35°C	Paris 8°C~13°C	Dili 23°C~31°C
Nanjing 4°C~16°C	Jakarta 22°C~30°C	Moscow -19°C~13°C	São Tomé 25°C~32°C
Guilin 14°C~20°C	Seoul -8°C~8°C	Las Vegas 12°C~23°C	Praia 17°C~25°C
Xi'an 3°C~13°C	Sydney 20°C~32°C	Monte Carlo 10°C~13°C	Bissau 22°C~32°C



## 1. Surely not!!!

People play chess on the frozen Motlawa River in central Gdansk, Poland yesterday.

— AFP

## 2. Scary ride

Members of a Carnival association repair floats during preparations ahead of Carnival celebrations in Heerlen, Netherlands on Tuesday.

— AFP

## 3. Burning through cash!

Silver coins are melted down to produce a silver bar at the Austrian Gold and Silver Refinery (Ögussa) in Vienna, Austria on Tuesday.

— AFP

## 5



## 6



## 4. Coffee anyone?

Illuminated drones fly over the Dr Sultan Al-Qasimi Centre, which is lit up in a colourful display for the 15<sup>th</sup> annual Sharjah Light Festival in the emirate of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates on Tuesday.

— AFP

## 5. Totally protected

Przewalski's horses run at the Przewalski's horses breeding base of the Gansu Endangered Animal Protection Center in Wuwei City Gansu Province, on Tuesday. The Przewalski's horse is listed as a national first-class protected animal in China and remains endangered globally.

— Xinhua

## 6. Extreme drumming

A drummer is filmed as they record a music video on the frozen Baltic Sea near Mikoszewo, northern Poland on Tuesday.

— AFP