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## Liaison chief urges Macau to 'soar higher & reach further', raises 4 requirements

**Tony Wong**

The Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR) hosted its annual Spring Festival reception yesterday, where Liaison Office Director Zheng Xincong raised, in his speech, four requirements for Macau, namely achieving new breakthroughs in appropriate economic diversification, taking new steps in enhancing governance effectiveness, presenting new outlooks in strengthening patriotism, and demonstrating new achievements in safeguarding national security and social stability.

Yesterday's Spring Festival reception was held at the Services Platform Complex for Commercial and Trade Cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking Countries (aka Forum Macao Complex) in Sai Van.

In addition to Zheng, the reception was attended by 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), Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai, Sam's predecessor Ho Iat Seng, newly arrived Foreign Ministry Commissioner Bian Lixin, Chinese



Central People's Government Liaison Office in Macau Director Zheng Xincong (left) and Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai deliver their speeches during yesterday's Spring Festival reception hosted by the Liaison Office at the Forum Macao Complex. – Photos: GCS

People's Liberation Army (PLA) Macau Garrison Commander Yu Changjiang, PLA Macau Garrison Commissar Lin Qinghua, the three incumbent deputy directors of the Liaison Office, Huang Liuquan, Lyu Yuyin and Zhang Yingjie, Macau Legislative Assembly (AL) President André Cheong Weng Chon, and Macau Court of Final Appeal (TUI) President Song Man Lei.

In addition to the dignitaries, the reception, according to a statement by the Liaison Office, was attended by around 1,300 members of Macau's civil society, including top officials of the local government, local lawmakers, members of the local government's top advisory Executive Council, Macau deputies to the National People's Congress (NPC), Macau

members of the CPPCC National Committee, as well as members from various segments of civil society.

### Zheng acknowledges Macau's achievements

In his speech, Zheng noted that last year was an extraordinary one for Macau, during which Sam united and led the new-term MSAR



government and all sectors of civil society in earnestly implementing the spirit of President Xi Jinping's various important speeches delivered during his inspection visit to Macau in December 2024.

Zheng said that the "patriots governing Macau" principle was fully implemented, while the election of the MSAR's eighth-term Legislative Assembly (AL) was held smoothly last year, acknowledging Macau's resolute and effective efforts to safeguard national security, thanks to which the city's overall social harmony and stability was maintained.

*Continued on p.6*

## Deadly storm disrupts Portugal's presidential election



ALCÁCER DO SAL – A deadly storm that triggered floods and thousands of evacuations in the Iberian Peninsula threw Portugal's presidential run-off into confusion yesterday as the far-right candidate requested the vote be postponed.

The country of around 10 million inhabitants had barely recovered from last week's battering by rain and winds that killed five people,

injured hundreds and left tens of thousands without power.

This week's Storm Leonardo has left one dead in Portugal and lashed the southern Spanish region of Andalusia, where rescuers were searching for a missing woman and evacuated thousands of people.

Civil Protection chief Mario Silvestre said it was the worst flood threat along the Tagus in nearly

three decades.

Local media quoted far-right presidential candidate André Ventura as saying he would ask for Sunday's second-round vote to be pushed back a week due to the emergency, as "a matter of equality among all Portuguese".

Any postponement is decided at the municipal level with the approval of the national electoral commission,

and Ventura did not provide further details on his proposal.

He is due to face the Socialist favourite António José Seguro, who won the January 18 first round, for the mostly ceremonial position.

Seguro told local media: "It is up to the authorities to hold the election in each municipality... I call on the Portuguese people who are able to vote to do so on Sunday."

In Alcácer do Sal, south of Lisbon, mayor Clarisse Campos told national news agency Lusa that the municipality of around 10,000 electors had decided to postpone voting day by a week.

"The conditions are not in place. We have several isolated localities, and the town centre is completely flooded," she said.

*– AFP*

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### China to step up tough crackdown on telecom scams: senior official

China will step up its tough crackdown on telecom and online fraud, a senior security official said yesterday.

*– Story on p. 7*

### Man sentenced to life in jail for plotting to kill Trump in 2024

A man who plotted to assassinate President Donald Trump at his Florida golf course in September 2024, two months before the US election, was sentenced on Wednesday to life in prison.

*– Story on p. 10*

### Cuba president says willing to talk to US, but 'without pressure'

Cuba is prepared to hold dialogue with the United States but not under pressure, President Miguel Díaz-Canel insisted yesterday after months of threats from US President Donald Trump.

*– Story on p. 11*

# 3 murder cases in 2025: Judiciary Police

Armando Neves

The Judiciary Police (PJ) hosted their annual press meeting at the PJ headquarters in Zape yesterday, where they presented the data of their work in 2025.

The one-hour meeting was chaired by PJ Director Sit Chong Meng.

According to last year's PJ data, there were three murder cases in 2025, which happened on June 13, August 18 and November 13. The causes of the cases were a family dispute between a married couple, a financial dispute between brothers, and relationship issues between two women respectively.

In 2024, Macau recorded just one murder case.

Sit said during the meeting that in 2025, the number of criminal cases amounted to 14,308, compared to 14,049 in 2024, representing an increase of 1.84 percent. Sit also said that the number of criminal investigation cases concluded in 2025 was 15,718, a rise of 22.26 percent from the 12,856 cases concluded in 2024.

Sit pointed out that the number of gaming-related crimes increased from 3,512 cases in 2024 to 4,614 cases in 2025. Specifically, criminal cases directly associated with gambling activities numbered 2,314, representing an increase of 62.6 percent compared to 2024, according to Sit, adding that the primary reason for the rise was the increase in case files for illegal currency exchange activities. From October 2024, when such activities were officially criminalised, to the end of 2025, according to Sit, a total of 567 illegal currency exchange cases were cracked, involving cash and casino chips worth over HK\$94 million (96.8 million patacas).

Sit said that in 2025, the number of offenders under the age of 16 was 13, with the youngest aged only 10, adding that the latter's case involved violation of privacy. Sit did not elaborate.

The total number of offences committed by individuals aged 16 to 18 was 31, representing a decrease of two cases compared to 2024, Sit said.

Regarding crimes against sexual freedom and sexual self-determination last year, the number of rape cases was 32, representing



Judiciary Police (PJ) Director Sit Chong Meng talk to reporters at the PJ headquarters in Zape yesterday.

— Photo: Armando Neves

a decrease of 16 cases compared to 2024, according to Sit, who added that cases of sexual abuse against children increased by 11, reaching a total of 26 cases.

Among other offences against sexual freedom, Sit said there were six cases of sexual abuse against a person incapable of resistance and one case of indecent exposure. Regarding other offences against sexual self-determination, there were 10 cases of sexual intercourse with a minor and two cases of procuring an underage person for prostitution, Sit said.

Sit told reporters on the sidelines that although the overall number of crimes in 2025 showed an increase, there was a downward trend in serious crimes. Among these, telecom and online scam cases decreased last year, Sit pointed out. He also underlined the particular attention that the public should pay to the risk of investment scams, which resulted in a total loss of about 300 million patacas last year, adding that the victims are mostly highly educated individuals or corporate management personnel.

Sit said that, consequently, the Judiciary Police have strengthened targeted anti-fraud awareness campaigns directed at financial institutions and other enterprises.

Regarding last July's national security case, Sit said that the evidence was substantial.

Sit did not name the suspect. However, media reports at that time

identified former lawmaker Au Kam San as a person of interest in the case.

As the case has already entered the litigation phase, relevant details will not be disclosed, Sit said, adding that the Judiciary Police place significant emphasis on national security work. He also said that if any indications or signs endangering national security or violating the National Security Law are detected, the Judiciary Police will certainly launch an investigation. If sufficient evidence is gathered, arrests will be made, according to Sit. ■

## Macau govt warns 2 countries' infant formula products contain Bacillus cereus

Ida Cheong

France's Rappel Conso (a French government website that raises alerts for dangerous or defective products) and the United Kingdom's Food Standards Agency (FSA) announced on Monday and Tuesday respectively that they are conducting a precautionary recall of multiple batches of infant formula produced in their countries due to contamination of their raw materials with the microorganism *Bacillus cereus*, but the Pharmaceutical Supervision and Administration Bureau (ISAF) and Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) said on Wednesday that the problematic products have not been imported by local businesses, according to a joint ISAF and IAM statement.

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

According to the statement, the problematic infant formula products comprise the French brand Popote (batch 910077 and 910143), BABYBIO CAPREA (batch 899014 and 911057), BABYBIO OPTIMA (batch 907179) and British brand SMA First Infant Milk (batch 53390346AB); specific details can be found via the webpage link: <https://www.gov.mo/zh-hant/news/1214539/>.

The Pharmaceutical Supervision

and Administration Bureau (ISAF) and the Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) will continue to closely monitor the situation and coordinate follow-up actions, their statement said.

Both bureaux urged residents to immediately stop feeding infants and young children with the affected batches, regardless of whether the products were purchased online, through personal shopping services, or other channels. If any discomfort occurs after consumption, medical attention should be sought promptly.

For enquiries related to the products, please call the Food Safety Hotline on 2833 8181. ■



This image courtesy of the Zoom by Ocado website from the UK shows the SMA First Infant Milk 800g, one of the affected batches of infant formula containing the *Bacillus cereus* that is potentially harmful to health.

## 26 tourists show gastroenteritis symptoms after meal at Macau Tower: IAM

Armando Neves

The Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) issued a warning yesterday that 26 tourists from the Chinese mainland developed symptoms of gastroenteritis after having a meal at Macau Tower.

According to the statement, the bureau received a report indicating that 26 members of a Hangzhou tour group, consisting of about 160 people in total, developed symptoms of gastroenteritis during their visit to Macau.

The statement said that the illness may be linked to the consumption of raw seafood, such as oysters and salmon, at the 360° Café of Macau Tower.

According to the statement, according to the Health Bureau's (SSM) investigation, the patients began to come down with symptoms such as fever, abdominal pain, diarrhoea, and vomiting on Tuesday evening, adding that based on the meal records and incubation period, the incident was most likely caused by a viral pathogen.

The statement said that the Municipal Affairs Bureau immediately dispatched personnel

to investigate, instructed the restaurant involved to suspend sales and seal the relevant products. They started by tracing the source of the various food items. If violations are discovered during the investigation, legal action will be taken, the statement.

The statement also said that as most of the tourists have already returned to the Chinese mainland, the actual number of patients may still increase.



High fever



Stomachache



Diarrhoea



Vomiting

Photo courtesy of Singapore based Mount Elizabeth Hospitals

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Macau Weather

CLOUDY APART FROM SUNNY INTERVALS.  
MIST AND FOG. LIGHT RAIN LATER.  
LIGHT WINDS.  
RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL RANGE BETWEEN 75% AND 99%.



18°C~24°C  
Source: SMG

# Northern district councillors worry about low birth rate

Armindo Neves

The government-appointed Northern District Community Service Consultative Council held its regular monthly meeting yesterday, where some of its members raised concerns about Macau's persistently low birth rate\*.

The nearly three-hour meeting was held at the Patane Activity Centre on Avenida de Demétrio Cinatti (爹美刁施拿地大馬路).

The first part of the meeting was open to the media, during which committee members raised various issues in their speeches. The meeting then proceeded behind closed doors. It included Social Welfare Bureau (IAS) Children and Youth Service Division Chief Lao Kit Im and Early Childhood Service Unit Chief Wong In Leng who introduced the government's support measures to improve childcare work.

In the post-meeting press briefing, the council's deputy convenor Chang Kam Pui cited an IAS statement released to the councillors during the meeting, which outlined the bureau's current primary initiatives in



**Northern District Community Service Consultative Council Deputy Convenor Chang Kam Pui (right) and Councillor Lei Choi Hong pose during yesterday's press briefing after the government-appointed council's closed-door meeting at the Patane Activity Centre on Avenida de Demétrio Cinatti. – Photo: Armindo Neves**

supporting child-rearing. These include, according to Chang, a raft of measures such as increasing the flexibility and accessibility of childcare services, offering parental education courses, and providing financial assistance. The government has already raised childcare subsidies and fee

support for childcare services, aiming to encourage childbirth through multifaceted policy support, Chang said.

Fellow councillor Lei Choi Hong said that multiple concerns and suggestions were raised during the meeting by fellow councillors about Macau's low birthrate and

childcare issues. Regarding financial support, they proposed further raising childcare subsidies beyond the existing framework, Lei said.

Lei also said that fellow councillors recommended providing more flexible childcare services for dual-income families and families with special needs, such as holiday and emergency support services, with reasonably formulated fees.

For family education, fellow councillors suggested focusing efforts on both families and schools to strengthen public awareness of the happiness derived from family life and the sense of responsibility associated with childbearing, aiming to enhance citizens' willingness to have children, Lei said.

Chang also said that fellow councillors expressed the hope that the government would engage in cross-departmental collaboration. They suggested involving entities such as the Education and Youth Development Bureau (DSEDT) and the Policy Research and Regional Development Bureau (DSEPRD) to conduct more professional and in-depth research into the trends

of Macau's low birth rate. Chang said the aim was to identify the root causes of the low birth rate and to publicly release the research findings. Committee members said they believe that only by basing decisions on accurate research and analysis can more effective policies be formulated to fundamentally drive an increase in the birth rate, Chang said. ■

*\*The terms "birth rate" and "fertility rate" are often used in demographic studies but represent different concepts – the birth rate is the number of live births in a specific year per 1,000 people in the population, while the fertility rate, specifically the Total Fertility Rate (TFR), estimates the average number of children a woman would have during her reproductive years (typically defined as ages 15-49), based on current age-specific birth rates.*

*The birth rate is a measure of births relative to the entire population, while the fertility rate measures the average number of children per woman, focused on reproductive behaviour. – Poe*

## Nearly 45,000 residents join colorectal cancer screening programme: Health Bureau

Ida Cheong

The Health Bureau (SSM) announced during a press conference yesterday that since the government's colorectal cancer screening programme was launched in 2016, a total of 44,956 residents had participated in it by last month, with 4,714 individuals (10.5 pct) testing positive in the initial faecal occult blood test.

The press conference, themed "World Cancer Day - Prevention and Treatment of Colorectal Cancer", took place at the Public Health Emergency Personnel Accommodation Building in Pátio da Guia.

According to the press conference, 3,550 participants underwent colonoscopies, which led to the discovery of 383 high-risk polyps\* and 208 confirmed cases of colorectal cancer, resulting in a detection rate of around 4.6 cases per 1,000 people screened; one-third of the cancers detected through the programme were at the "carcinoma in situ"\*\* stage. With a post-treatment five-year survival rate exceeding 95 percent for the early stage, the programme demonstrates the vital importance of early detection and intervention, Lei Wai Kei, a senior official at the SSM Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, pointed out that the eligibility age for the screening programme has been lowered from 55 to 50 years, remaining unchanged at up to 69 years. The change took effect on July 1 last year. She urged all eligible residents aged 50 to 69 to enter the screening programme promptly via the APP "Macau One Account", after which they will get a home testing kit from a local health centre.

Lei noted that early-stage colorectal cancer often presents no

obvious symptoms, making regular screening essential rather than relying on physical feeling alone, adding that most colorectal cancers develop slowly from precancerous polyps over many years. Screening allows for the identification and removal of these polyps, effectively preventing cancer development.

### Cancer prevention consultation stations to start weekend

Meanwhile, in observation of World Cancer Day on February 4, the Health Bureau, in partnership with local community organisations, will establish 10 colorectal cancer prevention consultation stations across the city; the stations will be open from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. tomorrow and Sunday, aiming to educate the public on colorectal cancer prevention and facilitate screening appointments through interactive

games, on-site health consultations, and the distribution of promotional gifts, Dr Ng Ka Kei, who is head of SSM gastroenterology department, said during yesterday's press conference.

According to yesterday's SSM statement, the 10 consultation stations will be located in Rotunda de Carlos da Maia, colloquially known as "Three Lamps" (三盞燈), Praça de Ponte e Horta (司打口公園), Pak Gap Chau Garden (白鵝巢公園), Wang Hoi and Wang Kin Leisure Area, Lok Yeung Garden Rest Area, Rua Quatro do Bairro Iao Hon, Hac Sa Van Park, Lotus Square, Flower City Park in Taipa, and Block 4 of Lok Kuan Villa in Seac Pai Van.

SSM Chinese medicine practitioner Mo Hui noted that traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) can offer a supportive approach focused on "reinforcing health" to balance the body and mind,



**Dr Ng Ka Kei, head of the Health Bureau (SSM) gastroenterology departments (centre), Lei Wai Kei, a senior official of the SSM Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (right), and SSM Chinese medicine practitioner Mo Hui pose during yesterday's press conference themed "World Cancer Day - Prevention and Treatment of Colorectal Cancer" at the Public Health Emergency Personnel Accommodation Building. – Photo: Ida Cheong**

adding that TCM should serve as a complementary therapy alongside standard Western treatments like surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy, or targeted therapy, not as a substitute.

According to the "2023 Macau Cancer Registry Annual Report", colorectal cancer ranks the third most common new cancer diagnosis for both men and women. However, the mortality rate has fallen by 18 percent compared to a decade ago, highlighting the positive impact of

integrated prevention, screening, and treatment programmes. ■

*\*A polyp is an abnormal growth of tissue that projects (sticks out) from a mucous membrane lining a body cavity, such as the colon, nose, or uterus. – DeepSeek*

*\*\*Carcinoma in situ (CIS) is a term used to describe a group of abnormal cells that are located in a specific tissue but have not invaded surrounding tissues or spread to other parts of the body. – Poe*



**This poster provided by the Health Bureau yesterday shows the locations of the 10 colorectal cancer prevention consultation stations.**

## 'World-renowned' magician Drummond Money-Coutts to make Macau debut

**Kristina Valles**

Magician and mentalist Drummond Money-Coutts (DMC) will perform in Macau for the first time later this month, according to a statement issued by SJM Resorts on Tuesday.

DMC will stage a series of shows from February 19 to 24 at SJM properties, including Grand Lisboa Palace (GLP) and Grand Lisboa. According to the statement, DMC is celebrated globally for his close-up magic and masterful mentalism, with performances spanning over 50 countries. He is known to international audiences from the Netflix series 'Death by Magic' and National Geographic's 'Beyond Magic with DMC'.

The British performer is the aristocratic heir and descendant of a distinguished banking family that founded Coutts, which, according to Wikipedia, is a private bank that provides services to some of the wealthiest families in Britain.

A couple of his shows will be held at the contemporary Portuguese restaurant Mesa by José Avillez at Grand Lisboa Palace on February 21 and 22. For these performances, the restaurant will offer a special six-course tasting menu priced at 1,288 patacas per person, allowing guests to experience the magic alongside a fine dining experience.

The statement also outlined a ticket redemption offer. Guests who spend 5,000 patacas or more at designated restaurants at Grand Lisboa Palace or Grand Lisboa, and who register as an SJM Supreme Card member, are eligible to obtain two tickets for a performance. Tickets are limited and will be allocated on a first-come, first-served basis.

SJM said that bringing the performer to the city reflects its commitment to establishing Macau as a "City of Performing Arts" by introducing "world-class talent". Further details regarding show schedules and ticket redemption will be announced on SJM Resort's official website and social media platforms.

Stay tuned for an interview with DMC in an upcoming article. ■



*This poster provided by SJM Resorts on Tuesday promotes the SJM Chinese New Year Magic Show to be held from February 19 to 24 at Grand Lisboa Palace (GLP) and Grand Lisboa.*

## Lisboeta Macau honours staff at award ceremony

**Rui Pastorin**

Lisboeta Macau recently held an award ceremony in recognition of staff's work performance in professional skills, service quality, teamwork and work attitude, the Macau-themed tourist destination said in a statement last week.

"The Best Team Member of the Fourth Quarter of 2025" took place on January 30, with the statement noting that awardees from various departments were recognised for their dedication and performance, standing out as an inspiration and positive influence for the entire team and "fully reflecting Lisboeta Macau's corporate culture of talent development and the pursuit of excellence".

The awards were presented by Lisboeta Macau Chief Operating Officer James Wong (黃水和) and Willie Tay, general manager of Hotel Operations of Lisboeta Macau.

"As the New Year begins, Lisboeta Macau will further improve talent development framework through



*This photo provided by Lisboeta Macau shows a group photo of staff posing with Lisboeta Macau Chief Operating Officer James Wong (黃水和, 2<sup>nd</sup> row fourth from right) and General Manager of Hotel Operations of Lisboeta Macau Willie Tay (2<sup>nd</sup> row, fifth from right).*

the diverse vocational training programmes, fostering the positive and supportive working environment, continue to create the stable and encouraging workplace for the growth of team members", according to the statement. ■

## MGM receives 6 honours for talent development

**Kristina Valles**

MGM has been recognised with six major awards at two prominent human resources competitions, underscoring its focus on employee training and development, according to a recent statement.

The integrated resort operator received three Excellence in Practice Awards from the Association for Talent Development (ATD), a leading global organisation in the field. According to the statement, MGM was the only enterprise from Macau to be honoured at the international ATD awards in Los Angeles this year, securing accolades in the categories of "Career Development", "Customer Service Training", and "Learning and Development". It stood among 47 organisations worldwide to receive an award.

Concurrently, the company was honoured with three awards at the 5<sup>th</sup> National Human Resources Innovation Competition. These awards recognised its leadership in employer branding, talent development, and human resources strategy.

In the statement, Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director of MGM China Holdings Limited Kenneth Feng Xiaofeng said the dual recognition reflects the company's sustained investment in nurturing local talent and validates that its efforts are gaining acknowledgment at both international and national levels. He added that the company would continue to establish clear career development pathways for its team members.

The statement provided data on the scale of its training programmes, noting that in 2025 alone, MGM team members participated in more than 1.2 million hours of training. This averaged 88 hours per employee, a figure the company stated places it well ahead of common industry benchmarks.

MGM said it views talent as a cornerstone of long-term business success. Its dedicated MGM Academy will continue to foster a learning culture and collaborate with community and industry partners. The company has now accumulated more than 260 honours in the field of human resources to date, including 39 awards in the past year. ■



*This photo recently provided by MGM shows the six honours recently earned by MGM at the Association for Talent Development (ATD) and National Human Resources Innovation Competition.*

## CEM crowns winners of 4<sup>th</sup> edition of Clean Energy City Challenge

**Rui Pastorin**

The winning schools of the "4<sup>th</sup> edition of Clean Energy City Challenge" were honoured during an award ceremony hosted



*This group photo taken and provided on Saturday by power utility CEM shows the participating groups and guests during the 4<sup>th</sup> Edition of CEM Clean Energy City Competition Awards Ceremony at the Macau Science Centre (MSC).*

by power utility CEM on Saturday at the Macau Science Centre (MSC) in Nape.

The competition, themed "Making Macau a Sustainable City", saw over 300 students of 56 teams in representation of 21 local secondary schools enrolled for the contest, according to a recent CEM statement. It was aimed at garnering students' interest in environmental protection and usage of clean energies.

The top prize of the F1-F3 students (Environment & Energy Conservation) category went to Colégio Diocesano de São José 5 (Chinese Section), who won 3,000 patacas and a trophy. The first and second runners-up in this category were Colégio do Sagrado Coração de Jesus (English Section) and Escola Fong Chong da Taipa, according to the statement.

For the F4-F6 students (Clean Energies & Technology) category, Colégio do Sagrado Coração de Jesus emerged champions and received 5,000 patacas and a trophy in prizes. Escola Secundária Pui Ching won first runner-up followed by Colégio Perpétuo Socorro Chan Sui Ki, as listed in the statement. ■

The statement highlighted that the three winning entries per category are being showcased in an exhibition held in conjunction with the Education and Youth Development Bureau (DSEDJ) at the Pavilion of Exhibitions and Artistic Shows for Young People (青少年展藝館展) in Praça do Tap Siac until March 15.

The statement added that the top 20 teams from both categories were chosen by a panel of professional judges. During the exhibition, teams competed for the final awards with professional judging (75 percent), students voting (15 percent), and public voting (10 percent), where 6,000 public votes were received, the statement said.

During her speech at the recent ceremony, the statement quoted CEM Regulatory Affairs and Corporate Communications Office Director Cecilia Nip Lai Peng as saying: "It is encouraging to see the enthusiasm and efforts of the younger generation towards environmental protection. In fact, it is important that all of us in society can all collaborate to achieve our country's dual carbon targets, to make Macau a better and more liveable place." ■

# MGM national art fund exhibition opens in Barra

**Khalel Vallo**

Integrated resort operator MGM opens the National Art Funds-backed “Talent Training on the Cultural and Creative Design of Maritime Silk Road” exhibition in Barra district to the public today, showcasing 30 original works created by trainees after nearly a year of study and field research.

The exhibition, part of the “2025 National Arts Fund” arts talent sponsorship programme, was formally inaugurated in Barra yesterday, at the site of a former abattoir.

The talent training programme ran for nearly a year and used the Poly MGM Museum as its study base, with support from the Beijing Palace Museum and Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology (BIFT), according to a statement by MGM yesterday.

The programme covered five key Maritime Silk Road cities and combined cultural theory, professional field visits and design practice, aiming to cultivate new creative talent.

Addressing the opening ceremony, MGM China Holdings Limited Chairperson & Executive Director Pansy Ho Chiu-king said that the trainees had transformed history and culture into works with contemporary aesthetics and cultural confidence, adding that the programme helped connect “traditional foundation” with “modern expression,” which she described as a key to achieving competitiveness by the cultural and creative industry.



**MGM China Holdings Limited**  
**Chairperson & Executive Director Pansy Ho Chiu-king addresses yesterday's opening ceremony of the "Talent Training on the Cultural and Creative Design of Maritime Silk Road" exhibition in Barra district.** – Photos: Khalel Vallo

The exhibition is divided into six sections—“Setting Sail,” “Exploration,” “Integration,” “Growth,” “Passing the Torch” and “Tides”—and features 30 original works including cultural creative products, fashion design, paintings, sculptures, and multimedia installations.

Speaking to the media before the opening ceremony, Wang Yu Ding, an artist from the Chinese mainland, said that she used 12 colours to represent the Maritime Silk Road in a “warm and steady” way. “The most difficult part of the design is to combine all the colours to create the design,” she said, adding she hopes the exhibition can show the value of contemporary design to audiences worldwide. Wang also noted that Macau invited local



**Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology (BIFT) Prof. Chu Yan (left) gives a presentation, alongside Dunhuang Academy researcher Lou Jie, during the "Silk Roads Beyond Borders: Where Creativity Converges, Culture Reimagined" symposium at the Poly MGM Museum yesterday afternoon.**

designers to provide professional feedback, which helped explore cross-border collaboration and business transformation.

Another artist, Leong Man Teng, said her work used composite material and drew inspiration from museum visits during the programme, including a Macau station experience at the Poly MGM Museum. She said she incorporated elements of a “green flower pool” into her work after being inspired by exhibits seen in museums such as the National Museum of China in Beijing and the Guangdong Provincial Museum in Guangzhou. Leong added the fact that project combined theory and creation helped deepen her thinking and supported her artistic development.

Meanwhile, in order to strengthen academic exchange, the Poly MGM Museum also hosted a symposium titled “Silk Roads Beyond Borders: Where Creativity Converges, Culture Reimagined” yesterday afternoon, with speakers including Dunhuang Academy researcher Lou Jie and BIFT professor Chu Yan.

Lou shared insights from a broader historical perspective, highlighting the cultural value of Dunhuang art and its role in East-West exchanges. She also drew parallels between Dunhuang\* and Macau, saying both have served as key bridges for cultural interaction. Lou noted that Macau plays an important role in connecting ancient and modern Silk Road civilisations, especially in

promoting dialogue between Chinese and Western cultures.

Meanwhile, Chu discussed how Silk Road aesthetics can be reinterpreted through contemporary design. Chu stressed that Silk Road aesthetics is not a one-way transmission, but an evolving process of mutual influence and integration. She encouraged participants to explore the “universal values” within traditional Chinese culture and transform them into creative inspiration, adding that Eastern aesthetics have the potential to become a driving force in global fashion innovation.

The exhibition runs until March 8 and is open to the public for free.

*Stay tuned for more photos and details of the free-admission exhibition in an upcoming Page 4. ■*

\*Dunhuang (敦煌) refers to a historical region and a city located in Gansu province, well-known for its rich cultural and artistic heritage. Dunhuang is a UNESCO World Heritage site, attracting tourists, historians, and scholars interested in its rich history and artistic achievements. The city is famous for the Mogao Caves (or Mogao Grottoes), a complex of Buddhist cave temples that house thousands of murals, sculptures, and manuscripts, illustrating the spread of Buddhism and showcasing ancient arts. Dunhuang was a pivotal stop along the ancient Silk Road, serving as a hub for trade and cultural exchange between East and West. – Poe

## Christopher Lei offers window to past & present at Creative Macau exhibition

**Rui Pastorin**

The latest exhibition at Creative Macau in Nape kicked off last night, drawing gallerygoers and supporters as local artist Christopher Lei Weng Kuong unveiled his 40 oil paintings in “Flowing Memory: The Artistic DNA of Macau in the Eyes of a Painter”.

Captured in Lei’s paintings are scenes offering a window to both the past and present, the East meets West found in Macau, and pieces featuring historical figures like English painter George Chinnery (1774 to 1852). Lei, who has a degree in Oil Painting from the College of Fine Arts of Huaqiao University and is now pursuing a master’s degree in the discipline, uses his brush to also depict quiet moments and historic places in the different frames, all under four key concepts\*.

Among the various highlights are the “Studio of 19<sup>th</sup> Century”, the thought-

provoking “Carousel Crossing”, two paintings special to the artist that were showcased during the Cultural Affairs Bureau’s (IC) “Annual Exhibition of Macao Visual Arts”, as well as pieces like “Refugees”, where Lei turns photographer Sergey Ponomarev’s Pulitzer Prize winning image into an oil painting.

“The works not only trace the ‘artistic genes’ of the intersection of Chinese and Western artists in Macau since the Ming and Qing dynasties, but also travel through DNA to the present-day stories of Macau”, a statement describing the works noted yesterday.

The exhibits are on display at CREATIVE MACAU on the ground floor of the Cultural Centre (CCM) until February 28, with free admission from Monday to Saturday, between 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. ■

*\*Lei talks more about the ideas behind his works in an exclusive interview with the Post. Stay tuned for more on a page 4 next week.*



**Gallerygoers at last night's opening ceremony view the various pieces on display at Creative Macau for “Flowing Memory: The Artistic DNA of Macau in the Eyes of a Painter”.** – Photo: Rui Pastorin

## UM, Heilongjiang Academy launch joint TCM lab

**Khalel Vallo**

According to a statement provided by the University of Macau (UM) on Tuesday, the public university and the Heilongjiang Academy of Chinese Medicine Sciences (HLJUCM) inaugurated a new joint laboratory on that day in order to strengthen cooperation in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) quality standards and product innovation.

The statement said that UM and HLJUCM held a plaque unveiling ceremony on the UM campus to mark the establishment of the Joint Laboratory for Quality Certification and Product Innovation of Chinese Medicines in Heilongjiang.

Heilongjiang is the nation’s northernmost province, with remote mountain ranges and a flat interior plain. It’s named for the Heilong (“Black Dragon”) River, bordering Russia.

The inauguration signals deeper collaboration between Macau and Heilongjiang in research related to quality certification and product innovation in Chinese medicine, the statement noted.

UM Vice Rector Xu Jian, according to the statement, said that UM remains committed to promoting Chinese medicine research, adding that the new joint laboratory will further integrate research and industrial resources in both Macau and Heilongjiang, contributing to the “high-quality development” of the Chinese medicine industry.

Ning Xia, representing the vice president of HLJUCM, said that the laboratory will support quality improvement, product innovation, and help align research outcomes with international standards, the statement noted.

The joint laboratory will focus on developing quality standard systems for



*This handout photo provided by the University of Macau (UM) on Tuesday shows Vice Rector Xu Jian addressing the opening ceremony of its newly joint laboratory in conjunction with the Heilongjiang Academy of Chinese Medicine Sciences’ (HLJUCM) on that day in the public university.*

Chinese medicinal materials and proprietary Chinese medicines, as well as conducting research and development on key testing technologies, the statement said, adding that it will also work on creating high value-added products and exploring pathways for international certification.

The statement added that the laboratory aims to promote mutual recognition between Heilongjiang medicine standards and relevant technical specifications in Macau and overseas, while exploring a collaborative development model spanning research and development, certification, and market application.

The statement concluded that the joint laboratory strives to strengthen Macau-Heilongjiang cooperation and advance Chinese medicine development through research, innovation, and international quality certification efforts. ■

## Liaison chief urges Macau to 'soar higher & reach further', raises 4 requirements

Continued from p.1

Zheng also outlined other aspects of achievements Macau made last year, including the acceleration of its appropriate economic diversification, the new progress made in the development of the Guangdong-Macau In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin, the record number of visitor arrivals (40.069 million), the in-depth advancement of public administrative reform, and the continuous enhancement of governance effectiveness.

In particular, Zheng said, the joint hosting of the 15<sup>th</sup> National Games by Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macau with shared commitment, as well as the united and effective response by the local government and all sectors of civil society to Super Typhoon "Ragasa" last year, vividly demonstrated Macau's profound foundation of patriotism and love for Macau and its fine tradition of unity and mutual assistance.

### Robust vitality of 'One Country, Two Systems'

Zheng said that all the achievements Macau made last year were the results of the central government's strong support as well as the joint hard work and dedication of the local government and all residents, fully demonstrating the institutional advantages and "robust vitality" of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle.

Zheng noted that as a pearl on the palm of the motherland, Xi has always kept in mind the development of Macau and the well-being of all its residents, pointing out that when hearing Sam's work report in December last year, Xi raised clear requirements for the MSAR government to proactively align with the nation's 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan, uphold and improve its executive-led governance, solidly advance Macau's appropriate economic diversification, continuously enhance its governance effectiveness, and better integrate into and serve the nation's overall development.

Zheng also noted that in his 2026 New Year's address, Xi stressed the need to unswervingly implement the "One Country, Two Systems" principle, and support Hong Kong and Macau in better



Dignitaries offer a toast during yesterday's Spring Festival reception comprising (from left to right) Liaison Office Deputy Directors Lyu Yuyin, Zhang Yingjie, PLA Macau Garrison Commissar Lin Qinghua, Foreign Ministry Commissioner Bian Lixin, CPPCC National Committee Vice Chairman Edmund Ho Hau Wah, Liaison Office Director Zheng Xincong, Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai, Sam's predecessor Ho Iat Seng, PLA Macau Garrison Commander Yu Changjiang, Liaison Office Deputy Director Huang Liuquan, Legislative Assembly (AL) President André Cheong Weng Chon, and Court of Final Appeal (TUI) President Song Man Lei. - Photo: GCS

integrating into the nation's overall development and maintaining long-term prosperity and stability, adding that Xi's remarks have given the direction for Macau to advance its development with courage.

Zheng noted that this year marks the beginning of the nation's 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan, urging Macau's civil society to keep firmly in mind Xi's earnest instructions and work hard to enable the city to "soar higher and reach further".

### Zheng's 4 requirements

In his speech, Zheng raised four requirements for Macau this year.

**First**, Zheng urged Macau to achieve new breakthroughs in advancing its appropriate economic diversification. Promoting appropriate economic diversification, Zheng said, is a "must-answer question" for Macau and must be pursued unswervingly. Macau should proactively align with the nation's 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan, draw up and implement its third five-year socioeconomic development plan effectively, make good use of its government industrial fund and its guidance fund for technological achievement transformation, foster landmark high-tech projects with driving effects, and accelerate the cultivation of new industries with international competitiveness, Zheng said.

Zheng said that breakthroughs should be achieved as soon as possible in resolving obstacles hindering the ongoing second-phase development of the Guangdong-Macau In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin, while the Macau government should

constantly advance its "One Centre, One Platform, One Base" campaign and develop the city into a high ground for gathering international high-end talent.

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

**Second**, Zheng said, the Macau government must take new steps in enhancing its governance effectiveness, which is an urgent need for Macau to better adapt to its socioeconomic development.

Macau must continue to uphold and improve its executive-led governance while vigorously exploring new approaches for positive interaction between the executive and legislative organs, Zheng said, urging the local government to deepen public administration reform, while promoting the standardised development of the city's community associations with the aim of constantly improving the city's grassroots governance system with its own characteristics.

Zheng said that the local government must adhere to a people-centred approach, always keep in mind Macau residents' urgent difficulties and aspirations, and ensuring that the fruits of development benefit all Macau residents more broadly and equitably.

**Third**, Zheng said, Macau must present new outlooks in strengthening the local forces promoting patriotism and love for Macau. Zheng said that patriotism and love for Macau is the core value of Macau's civil society, adding that Macau must maintain its tradition of valuing unity and consultation while also maintaining its social consensus where members of civil society generally resolve matters through discussions and advance work through coordination.

Zheng urged Macau to promote integrity and innovation among members of its patriotic camp, while paying greater attention to and support for young people to pursue their personal development, with the aim of enabling them to become the main force and successors for Macau's development while ensuring that the cause of "One Country, Two Systems" is passed on from generation to generation.

**Fourth**, Zheng urged Macau to demonstrate new achievements in safeguarding national security and social stability. He said that safeguarding the nation's sovereignty, security, and development interests is the highest principle of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle, adding that Macau's civil society must deeply understand the complex changes in the international landscape, where the local government must thoroughly implement the central authorities' holistic approach to national security, constantly improve Macau's systems and mechanisms for safeguarding national security, innovate in carrying

out national security education and publicity campaigns, resolutely combat forces that oppose China and destabilise Macau, and firmly prevent interference, infiltration, and sabotage by external forces.

Zheng also urged the local government to effectively prevent and resolve prominent conflicts and problems affecting the local economy and residents' well-being, comprehensively screen and resolve safety hazards in various aspects, and maintain social harmony and stability.

### Sam pledges 2 main pillars in govt work

Meanwhile, also delivering a speech during yesterday's reception, Sam pledged the local government will use its third five-year socioeconomic development plan as a key lever, proactively aligning with the nation's 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan in order to better integrate into and serve the nation's overall development.

Samsaidthatthe local government will exercise its administration in alignment with two main pillars. The first is to uphold and improve Macau's executive-led governance, deepen public administration reform, enhance governance effectiveness, and strengthen positive interaction and efficient collaboration between the executive, legislative and judicial organs.

The second pillar, Sam said, is to solidly advance Macau's appropriate economic diversification and pragmatically promote the development of the Guangdong Macau In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin.

Sam said that the local government expects the two pillars to work in synergy so as to promote Macau's long-term prosperity and stability.

Sam underlined that the local government will continue to carefully listen to public opinion, work diligently to resolve problems affecting residents' well-being, and improve urban governance, with the goal of building a smarter, more liveable, safer, and more inclusive Macau.

Sam also said that the local government will fully support the growth and development of the local forces promoting patriotism and love for Macau, while creating broader platforms for young people to develop and realise their potential.■

## Grand Emperor Hotel removes lobby gold bricks for HK\$99.7 million payoff

### Staff Reporter

The Grand Emperor Hotel in Macau announced on Wednesday it had removed the real gold bricks from its distinctive lobby floor and sold them for HK\$99.7 million, cashing in on the metal's market surge.

Opened in 2006 in Nam Van, the hotel was known for its opulent "golden pathway", showcasing dozens of one-kilogram bars of gold studded into its entrance hall floor.

The feature had aimed "to create a sumptuous and resplendent atmosphere", the hotel's Hong Kong-based parent company, Emperor Entertainment Hotel Limited, said in a filing Wednesday.

But with the price of gold leaping

in recent months as investors seek safe havens in turbulent geopolitical times, the company said it had recognised "a good opportunity".

The decision to sell the bricks was linked to a revamping of the hotel's facilities, said the company.

Last October, a casino on the hotel premises ceased operating following the government's order for all so-called "satellite casinos" to close for good by December 31, 2025.

"Satellited casinos" were formally owned by any of Macau's six gaming concessionaires but actually run by third parties.

In Wednesday's filing the group said the hotel has been actively planning for other entertainment and

amusement facilities.

"Given that the relevant area is planned to undergo renovation and redevelopment, the Precious Metal that was originally part of the hotel's interior design and outfitting are no longer relevant to the theme of the hotel in the future," the firm said.

The sale of "a number of gold bricks weighing 79 kg in total" for HK\$99.7 million would "strengthen the Group's financial position and enable it to invest should suitable investment opportunities arise", it said.

Other well-known features in the Grand Emperor include an antique gold carriage, which "exhibits the fine craftsmanship of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe", according to the hotel's website. ■



This photo taken yesterday shows the lobby of the Grand Emperor Hotel after the removal of dozens of gold bars previously embedded in the floor.

- Photo: Maria Cheang Ut Meng

# Foreign ministry holds 2026 New Year reception



Foreign Minister Wang Yi (center), also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, shakes hands with a diplomat as he is hosting the Foreign Ministry's 2026 New Year reception in Beijing yesterday.

— Xinhua

BEIJING — Foreign Minister Wang Yi hosted the Foreign Ministry's 2026 New Year reception in Beijing yesterday.

Nearly 500 people attended the event, including diplomatic envoys from various countries, representatives of international organizations in China, and representatives of Chinese government departments.

Addressing the reception, Wang, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, noted that 2025 marked the 80th founding anniversary of the United Nations. Despite headwinds in international relations, China has remained committed to the right path in its diplomacy over the past year, he added.

In particular, the Global Governance Initiative (GGI)

proposed by China has lit the way forward for the world during a critical time of evolution in the international order, Wang said.

He noted that no matter how the world has evolved, China's position of safeguarding international fairness and justice has remained steadfast, and its commitment to building a community with a shared future for humanity has not wavered.

Entering the new year, the world is becoming even more volatile and unstable, and peace and development face serious challenges, Wang said. China stands ready to work with all forces for progress across the globe — bearing in mind the future of humanity and the well-being of all people — to open up an even brighter future, he added.

He called for efforts to uphold

peace and the rule of law, promote openness and development, tackle crises and challenges, and deepen understanding and friendship.

Martin Mpanga, dean of the foreign diplomatic corps in China and Cameroon's ambassador to China, sent best wishes to the Chinese people for a happy New Year on behalf of the diplomatic corps.

He spoke highly of China's diplomatic achievements in 2025, and of the Global Governance Initiative in particular, describing it as crucial to global peace and development.

Countries around the world are willing to work with China to promote mutual understanding, deepen friendship and strengthen cooperation, aiming to safeguard international fairness and promote common prosperity, Mpanga said.

— Xinhua

## China to step up tough crackdown on telecom scams: senior official

BEIJING — China will step up its tough crackdown on telecom and online fraud, a senior security official said yesterday.

Addressing a national teleconference, State Councilor Wang Xiaohong said the authorities will keep launching successive waves of crackdowns, "leaving no breathing room for telecom fraudsters."

Wang, who is also a member of the Secretariat of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, underscored the need for a comprehensive

approach, calling for close monitoring of fraud-related individuals, phone cards, networks and channels to ensure effective law enforcement.

He also stressed the importance of prevention, with targeted early warnings, stronger technological safeguards, and broader public awareness efforts to build a robust protection network.

Wang urged deeper law enforcement cooperation to squeeze the operating space of telecom fraud, adding that China would contribute its solutions to tackling this global problem.



Spectators watch a humanoid robot performance at an event themed on the "Hubei New Spring International Consumption Season" in Wuhan, capital of Hubei Province, yesterday. The event kicked off yesterday, attempting to create diverse consumption scenarios for the upcoming Spring Festival (Chinese New Year).

— Xinhua

## Cooperation with China important for Europe's competitiveness: Swedish university president

### Interview

STOCKHOLM — Europe cannot afford to isolate itself if it wants to remain globally competitive, and cooperation with China "is essential," says Anders Soderholm, president of Sweden's KTH Royal Institute of Technology.

Soderholm made the remarks in a recent interview with Xinhua. He visited Chinese universities and research institutions in mid-October 2025, together with three other Swedish university presidents.

The trip aimed to gain first-hand insight into how Chinese universities organize scientific research and innovation, and to identify areas where cooperation could benefit both sides, he said.

"Overall, yes, the visit gave us valuable insights and several concrete ideas for cooperation," Soderholm said.

He said he was impressed by the rapid development of Chinese universities and their strong momentum in research and innovation. China's research environment, he noted, is well funded and strategically focused.

Both data and on-site observations point to an unprecedented pace of Chinese research and experimental development (R&D), he said, noting that China's R&D spending has risen rapidly, research output and citation impact have increased, and the country now leads in several key areas.

Looking ahead, Soderholm said research and academic cooperation needs to prioritize sustainability-related technologies, including energy systems, materials and climate technologies, where China's large-scale deployment and Europe's research strengths can complement each other.

Soderholm and the presidents of Lund University, Uppsala University and Chalmers University of Technology co-authored an opinion piece published in the Swedish newspaper Svenska Dagbladet in June 2025, calling on Swedish universities to strengthen cooperation with China.

The article notes that China invests heavily in R&D and that Europe could learn from China's progress in areas such as artificial intelligence, quantum technology and renewable energy.

"Europe needs to stay globally competitive, and in some areas cooperation with China is essential," Soderholm said.

"If Europe cuts itself off, we risk slowing our own innovation and weakening our long-term economic and security position," he said.

Soderholm noted that Sweden and China have broad potential for cooperation, including climate action, sustainable cities, green energy and circular materials, areas where both countries have strong capabilities.

— Xinhua

## Top political advisor meets with senior Cuban official

BEIJING — China's top political advisor Wang Huning met with Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla, who is the special envoy of the party and government of Cuba, a member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party and the foreign minister of Cuba, in Beijing yesterday.

President Xi Jinping and Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel met on two occasions last year to draw a blueprint for building a closer China-Cuba community

with a shared future, said Wang, who is a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).

Wang said that China will firmly support Cuba's just struggle against external interference and work with Cuba to safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of developing countries. He added

that the CPPCC stands ready to contribute to deepening friendly cooperation between the two countries.

Noting that China is an important force in safeguarding world peace and carries hope for the Global South, Rodríguez said that Cuba is willing to work with China to implement the consensus reached between the two heads of state, continuously enhance relations between the two parties and countries, and uphold international fairness and justice. (More about Cuba on pages 11 & 12) — Xinhua

## China-Russia Years of Education to boost educational cooperation: ambassador

MOSCOW — The China-Russia Years of Education will strengthen bilateral educational and people-to-people ties, Chinese Ambassador to Russia Zhang Hanhui said yesterday.

"These young people are not only seekers of knowledge, but also inheritors of our friendship, representing the future of China-Russia relations and the hope for the development of both countries," Zhang said at a Spring Festival reception in Russia.

He said the two countries have designated 2026 and 2027 as the China-Russia Years of Education, injecting new momentum into bilateral exchanges in education and people-to-people cooperation.

Zhang also noted that China stands ready to work with Russia to expand educational cooperation into broader fields and raise it to higher levels.

Konstantin Mogilevsky, deputy minister of science and higher education of Russia, said

Russia and China are deepening cooperation across a broad range of areas, from education to the sharing of large-scale scientific research infrastructure.

Alexander Matasov, a professor from the Faculty of Mechanics and Mathematics of Lomonosov Moscow State University, said that China-Russia educational cooperation has yielded positive results and will further promote exchanges between teachers and students.

— Xinhua

# Family affair: Thailand waning dynasty still election kingmaker

Thanaporn Promyamyai and Matt Surrusco

BANGKOK – Thailand's most successful political party of modern times is heading for its worst election performance, with its founder jailed and his daughter ousted as prime minister last year by court order.

Polling indicates Pheu Thai, the latest incarnation of the organisation founded by telecom billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra, is currently third, ahead of elections this weekend.

A nationwide survey of 2,500 people by the independent National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA) suggests Pheu Thai would capture only around 16 percent of the vote, a fraction of the support it commanded in its heyday.

Long reviled by conservatives, the populist machine also now appeals less to reformists, as they turn instead to the top-ranked People's Party.

While Thaksin serves a one-year prison sentence for corruption, his nephew Yodchanan Wongsawat has been installed as the party's prime ministerial candidate. If elected, he would be the family's fifth premier in 25 years.

The previous four were all removed by either military coups or court orders.

"All things considered, the party should be dead," political scientist Napon Jatusripitak told AFP.

"But on the ground, its network is still quite intact."

And the lesson of 21st-century Thai political history is to never rule out Thaksin's influence.

Pheu Thai just needs to "win enough seats to perform the role of kingmaker", Napon said.

## Red Shirts

In the early 2000s, Thaksin broke the mould of Thai politics with populist policies that earned him the adoration of millions, and previously unprecedented overall election victories.

He was ousted by a military coup and fled the country, while his die-hard red-shirted supporters took to the streets of the capital in 2010 after he was convicted in absentia of graft.

Human Rights Watch said



Thailand's former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (right) poses with his daughter Thailand's sacked prime minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra as they arrive at the Supreme Court in Bangkok on September 9, 2025, ahead of a ruling on whether he properly served a prison term in 2023. – AFP

at least 90 people were killed in clashes with authorities. Around a dozen protest leaders were jailed.

At a Pheu Thai campaign stop in Saraburi province, retiree Chanapa Lekhawattanakul sold party T-shirts for 100 baht (US\$3), some featuring Thaksin's likeness.

His government had provided her with free medicine, the 65-year-old said, and the shirts were "so that nobody forgets Thaksin".

"I have been a fan of this party for 20 years," she told AFP. "I will not leave him. He gave many people chances."

Even from prison, Thaksin retains a paramount role as the party financier and household name, said Napon, of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore.

At Pheu Thai rallies, he added, speakers urge the crowd to roar so that Thaksin "could hear your cheers from jail".

"In the minds of ordinary voters, they still remember some of the legacies of Thai Rak Thai, including the 30-baht universal health care, and more broadly, what the Shinawatra brand meant to them," he said, referring to the party's original name.

### Unholy alliance

But the country's pro-military, pro-monarchy elite see Pheu Thai's populist approach as a threat to the traditional social order.

The two foes came together in a marriage of convenience after the last election in 2023 to deny the previous version of the People's Party power despite it topping that poll, and Thaksin's daughter

Paetongtarn became prime minister.

The constitutional court removed her last year after she called a Thai military commander her "opponent" in a leaked phone call with former Cambodian leader Hun Sen, sparking political and public backlash.

Yodchanan, a professor of biomedical engineering, has now been plucked from the lecture halls of Mahidol University to carry the family banner.

"Thaksin is a really nice guy and intellectual," his 46-year-old nephew told AFP.

"We're quite close because we are family, but not recently."

As candidate for prime minister, he insisted, "I'm on my own."

"The land is very big," he proclaimed. "No shadow will cover the land."

No party is expected to win a majority, and some anticipate a coalition deal in which Pheu Thai back incumbent Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul to retain his post while Thaksin is released early from prison.

And while Pheu Thai was once considered a driving force for reforms benefitting ordinary Thais, critics say it has become a vehicle for its controlling family.

"Thaksin is still the owner of Pheu Thai, not only the spiritual leader," said Prinya Thaewanarumitkul, a law professor at Thammasat University.

"That is the problem of Pheu Thai," he added.

"Pheu Thai should develop to be a real party, not just like a family business." – AFP

## Mount Fuji cherry blossom festival cancelled due to overtourism

TOKYO – A cherry blossom festival boasting a highly Instagrammable view of Japan's Mount Fuji has been cancelled after residents complained of overtourism fuelled by the weak yen.

The city of Fujiyoshida, in central Japan's Yamanashi region, said Tuesday that the weeks-long event attracting around 200,000 people will be called off this year because "the quiet lives of local residents are threatened".

About 42.7 million tourists flocked to Japan in 2025, an all-time high, topping 2024's record of nearly 37 million as the weak yen boosted the appeal of the "bucket list" destination.

But complaints of overcrowding have grown in hotspots like Kyoto, where disrespectful tourists have been accused of harassing kimono-clad geisha performers in their frenzy for photos.

In Fujiyoshida, the influx of foreign tourists has seen traffic chronically jammed and cigarette ends tossed, with trespassing and even defecation in private gardens reported by its citizens, the city said.

"Behind [Mount Fuji's] beautiful landscape is the reality that the quiet lives of citizens are threatened. We have a strong sense of crisis," Shigeru Horiuchi, Fujiyoshida mayor, said in a statement.

"To protect the dignity and living environment of our citizens, we have decided to bring the curtain down on the 10-year-old festival."

The city, however, admits that even if the festival itself is cancelled, its venue – a park overlooking Mount Fuji, cherry blossom trees and a five-story pagoda – may still see a spike in visitors as spring nears.

Mount Fuji is a perennial tourist attraction.

To manage the influx of visitors, nearby towns have in the past erected a view-blocking barrier to dissuade photo-hungry tourists, introduced an entry fee for hikers and capped their daily numbers. – AFP

## Thailand's pilot PM on course to keep top job

Sally Jensen

BANGKOK – Heir to a construction fortune and hobbyist jet pilot Anutin Charnvirakul is widely expected to remain Thailand's prime minister after this weekend's general election, regardless of the result.

His Bhumjaithai party came third in the last vote, but the 59-year-old conservative – who championed Thailand's decriminalisation of cannabis – became prime minister in September after his predecessor Paetongtarn Shinawatra was ousted by court order.

"I came into office with a majority in the parliament," Anutin told AFP on the campaign trail in Bangkok. "So it is clearly democratic."

He secured the premiership with the backing of the reformist People's Party, the largest parliamentary grouping, which opinion polls project will come first again this time – ahead of Bhumjaithai.

But no overall majority is forecast, and analysts expect Anutin to emerge from the post-election negotiations at the head of a new coalition.

Its most likely partner is probable third-placed Pheu Thai, the party of the Shinawatra clan which has dominated politics for two decades, although founder and ex-prime minister Thaksin is now in prison.

"I have not prepared for loss," Anutin said, tucking into a bowl of noodle soup alongside party members in the capital's Chinatown neighbourhood.

Despite his wealth, he styles himself as a man of the people with a taste for street food, and appears on social media wearing a T-shirt and shorts while stir-frying with a wok, or performing 1980s Thai pop on the saxophone or piano.

## Family fortune

Ascion of a political and business dynasty himself, the family fortune centres on Sino-Thai Engineering, a construction firm that has secured lucrative government contracts over the decades, including for Bangkok's main airport and the parliament building.

His father was acting prime minister during a 2008 political crisis and went on to spend three years as interior minister.

Anutin's political fortunes have long been intertwined with those of the Shinawatras, both as ally and rival.

A New York-trained industrial engineer, Anutin joined Thaksin's party, then named Thai Rak Thai, in his early 30s and was banned from political activity for five years when it was dissolved in 2007.

Grounded from politics, he learnt to fly, collecting a small fleet of private planes he used to deliver donated organs to hospitals for transplants.

He returned as leader of Bhumjaithai, a party that has proved something of a political chameleon, joining several government coalitions – he served as deputy to his three prime ministerial predecessors, including Paetongtarn.

Earlier, he managed tourism-reliant Thailand's pandemic response as health minister under a military-led government, and made global headlines when he delivered in 2022 on a campaign promise to legalise cannabis, in an attempt to stimulate the economy.

The Shinawatras' grip on power is now faltering and their electoral appeal fading, with telecom billionaire Thaksin jailed for corruption during his time in office, and his daughter Paetongtarn removed as leader by the constitutional court over her handling of a simmering border dispute with Cambodia.

## Border conflict

Anutin pulled Bhumjaithai out of a coalition with Pheu Thai in June after Paetongtarn addressed Cambodia's former leader Hun Sen as "uncle" and referred to a Thai military commander as her "opponent" in a leaked phone call, causing widespread backlash.

Fighting broke out between the neighbours in July and December, leaving scores dead on both sides and displacing more than one million people.

Analysts say the wave of nationalism resulting from the border conflict has bolstered support for Bhumjaithai, whose opposition to loosening Thailand's strict royal insult laws is seen as evidence of its conservative instincts.

"The conflict reshaped voter priorities around the role of the military and its role in safeguarding Thailand's territorial sovereignty," said political scientist Napon Jatusripitak.

"The only credible party that can take... a nationalist and a hawkish stance on the issue would be Bhumjaithai," he added.

Three months after taking office, and before a late December ceasefire, Anutin dissolved parliament and called the election.

At his Chinatown appearance, he insisted: "Nobody wants fighting, nobody wants conflict. But we have to defend our integrity and sovereignty." – AFP



A worker cuts tofu at a tofu factory in Surabaya, Indonesia yesterday. – AFP

# Nepal's youth lead the charge in the upcoming election

**Paavan Mathema**

Kathmandu — Kishori Karki, 25, has been seeking blessings from elders in her community as the young candidate prepares to fight for change ahead of Nepal's landmark election next month.

The 25-year-old is among a slate of fresh faces on the March 5 ballot and said fighting against corruption and elevating youth demands are among her highest priorities.

"Our demands and aspirations should not be sidelined," she said while speaking with AFP in her hometown of Okhaldhunga in eastern Nepal.

Kishori had just graduated from law school and moved to Kathmandu in September when deadly youth-led anti-corruption protests erupted in the region.

A video of the young candidate taking an injured demonstrator to the hospital on a motorbike became one of the movement's defining images.

The two-day demonstrations had initially been triggered by rage over a brief government ban on social media and were spearheaded

by young protesters under the loose "Gen Z" banner.

But their anger ran deeper: years of economic stagnation and entrenched corruption had primed the country of 30 million for upheaval.

The resulting violence killed 77 people, wounded scores and saw hundreds of buildings torched.

"After the Gen Z movement, if educated youth like us stand back, then the same old parties will play the same game," Kishori explained.

Kishori is running under the newly formed Ujyalo Nepal Party, led by former minister Kulman Ghising, who won significant public support for easing the country's chronic power shortages.

Former chief justice Sushila Karki, no relation to Kishori, is serving as interim prime minister until the vote.

## New generation

Members for the 275-seat House of Representatives, the lower chamber of parliament, will be voted in — with 165 members chosen in a direct vote and 110 through

proportional representation.

A total of 3,406 candidates have registered for the direct election, of which 30 percent are under the age of 40.

"If you look at the candidates, the bigger portion are the new generation," said Prakash Nyupane, spokesperson for the election commission.

Younger candidates are "a bit different", Nyupane said, adding that "some older leaders have had to step back because of this".

Kathmandu's rapper-turned-mayor Balendra Shah, who resigned from his position to join the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), is also a strong contender.

A prime minister hopeful, Shah will challenge ousted premier KP Sharma Oli in his eastern Nepal stronghold, Jhapa.

Shah told AFP that the protest had "opened a door" for new faces to enter politics, while raising the importance of governance among younger constituents.

Sudan Gurung — a key figure of the September unrest — is also running for the RSP from the

Gorkha district in central Nepal.

Gurung, 38, has been urging families in his constituency to "vote for the right person".

Meanwhile, further west in the Rukum district, 28-year-old Sandeep Pun will challenge ex-rebel leader and Maoist chief Pushpa Kamal Dahal, also known as Prachanda, a term that means "fierce" in Nepali.

Several new parties and alliances have emerged nationwide, recruiting fresh and popular faces in a bid to reconnect with disillusioned voters, members have said.

Though many young candidates are also running in the election independently.

"It does seem that the September protest has galvanised young people to take part in politics, and not just as candidates," said journalist Pranaya Rana, who covers politics in the region.

## Back on track

Civil war engulfed Nepal, a former monarchy, for more than a decade until a peace deal brokered in 2008 saw Maoist insurgents

brought into government.

A revolving door of ageing prime ministers and a culture of horse-trading between the three dominant parties, however, has fuelled public frustration.

"It is very difficult for us to again be fooled by promises from the people who have already been in parliament so many times," said Manjil Rana, 37, a candidate for the Ujyalo Nepal Party in Tanahu.

"The recent revolution was a lot about young people, their voices and them participating in the government."

There are some 18.9 million eligible voters, including more than 800,000 first-time voters, according to the latest election commission data reviewed by AFP.

Sachin Timalsena, a 33-year-old candidate from Nepali Congress, said Nepal was at a "critical juncture", and the elections could bring the country back on track.

"I think the environment is supportive of the youth. I feel our society is ready for young people," he said.

— AFP

# Indian police investigate suspected suicide of 3 young sisters

New Delhi — Indian police said yesterday an investigation had been launched into the suspected suicide of three young sisters over concerns that they were heavily "influenced" by games and movies online that they were later denied access to.

Local media reported the sisters, aged 12, 14 and 16 had jumped from their home on Wednesday in the city of Ghaziabad on the outskirts of the country's capital.

Concern among experts and regulators has grown in recent years that too much screen time and addictive algorithms are harming child development, sparking authorities, including in India, to push for social media bans for children and teens.

"[An] investigation is underway based on the suicide note and their phones," Nimish Patil, a senior police official, told AFP yesterday.

Police in India routinely

investigate the factors leading up to suspected suicides.

The sisters had been "denied access" to K-Pop music and Korean games and movies that they had previously played and watched online.

"They were influenced by Korean culture: K-pop music, games and movies," Patil said.

He added that the family also appeared to be under financial distress.

Their father had recently taken away their devices and barred them from watching Korean dramas and playing online games, the *Indian Express* newspaper reported. AFP could not immediately reach family members for comment.

Korean culture has surged in popularity, especially among young people, in India over the past decades, beginning with rapper Psy's 2012 hit "Gangnam Style".

and expanding through K-pop and streaming platforms packed with Korean dramas.

The case has sparked debate in India with intense media coverage highlighting concerns about young people's skyrocketing online exposure deepening mental health vulnerabilities.

Two Indian states recently said they were preparing the ground for banning children from using social media.

Internationally, governments have been exploring social media restrictions for children and teenagers, led by Australia, which banned the networks for under-16s in December.

French lawmakers in the country's lower house last month passed a bill that if confirmed by its Senate will ban social media use by under-15s and bar mobile phones from high schools.

— AFP

# Younger siblings log more screen time: Australian study

MELBOURNE — Younger siblings spend more time on screens and less on educational activities than their older brothers and sisters, new Australian research has found.

A study by Monash Business School's Center for Health Economics found that when compared to firstborn children, second and third born children spend an extra nine and 14 minutes, respectively, per day having screen time, and less time on enrichment activities, said a statement from Australia's Monash University yesterday.

"While this may sound modest, it represents a 7-10 percent increase compared to the average daily screen time of firstborns," said

Danusha Jayawardana, a research fellow at the center.

Over a week, this adds up to roughly one and 1.5 extra hours of screen use, she said.

"This extra screen time also comes at the cost of other activities. In particular, later-born children spend 11 to 18 minutes less per day on enrichment activities, an 11-20 percent reduction compared to older siblings," Jayawardana said, adding that enrichment activities include reading, homework, playing board games or learning a musical instrument.

The study drew on survey data from about 5,500 Australian children aged two to 15, and included 24-hour

diaries showing how children spent their time from waking to bedtime, and whether activities were done with parents or alone.

The findings suggest that parental time and attention to foster subsequent children's development decline as families grow, and that later-born children experience more lenient parenting, including rules around screen use.

The researchers recommended parents spend quality time with younger siblings, actively encourage enrichment activities, and maintain consistent rules around screen time across children to support healthy development.

— Xinhua



Temporary police practice during their training ahead of Nepal's parliamentary elections, in Kathmandu yesterday.

— AFP

# Man sentenced to life in jail for plotting to kill Trump in 2024

FORT PIERCE – A man who plotted to assassinate President Donald Trump at his Florida golf course in September 2024, two months before the US election, was sentenced on Wednesday to life in prison.

Ryan Routh, 59, was convicted in September of trying to kill then-candidate Trump, the second attempt on the billionaire's life in the run-up to the vote that took him back to the White House.

According to an AFP journalist in the courtroom, Judge Aileen Cannon handed down the sentence of life plus seven years after a 90-minute hearing, saying it was "to protect the public from future crime" by Routh.

"The evil is in you. Not in everybody else," she told him.

US Attorney General Pam Bondi hailed the sentencing, calling Routh's attempted assassination "a direct assault against our entire democratic system."

Routh, of Hawaii, was arrested on September 15, 2024 after a Secret Service agent saw the barrel of a rifle poking from the bushes on the perimeter of the West Palm Beach golf course, where Trump was playing a round ahead of the November election.

The agent opened fire and Routh, who fled in a vehicle, was arrested shortly after.

Authorities recovered a loaded AK-style rifle, equipped with a scope and a magazine containing additional rounds of ammunition, from Routh's hiding place.

Wednesday's sentencing was the culmination of a trial that featured Routh representing himself, despite him having no legal training.

Among his bizarre attempts to prepare for trial, Routh reportedly



*This booking photo obtained on September 19, 2024 from the Palm Beach County Sheriff's office in Florida, shows the mugshot of Ryan Wesley Routh. Routh, who plotted to assassinate President Donald Trump at his Florida golf course in September 2024, two months before the US election, was sentenced on Wednesday to life in prison. Routh, 59, had been found guilty in September of five charges, including attempted assassination of a presidential candidate.* – AFP

requested strippers and a golf putting green while in detention, and asked that jurors be selected according to their views on Gaza and Trump's desire to purchase Greenland. The demands were rejected.

## Empty shell'

Routh took the stand at his sentencing hearing to read a rambling 20-page statement, prompting Cannon to interrupt several times and demand that he wrap up his remarks.

"My sentence is totally unimportant. Nothing stands before you, I am nothing but an empty shell," he said.

Routh, describing himself as a good person, concluded by saying: "Harming someone is totally wrong. You have to be nice and kind."

Prosecutor John Shipley had requested a life sentence, arguing that Routh had plotted for months on "a cold-blooded killing" with the "goal of upending American democracy."

Routh was convicted last September of all counts including attempted assassination of a

presidential candidate and assaulting a federal officer.

After the guilty verdict was read, Routh attempted to stab himself in the neck with a pen, before being restrained by marshals.

A witness testified during the trial that Routh had dropped off a box at his residence that included a handwritten letter which stated: "Dear World. This was an assassination attempt on Donald Trump, but I am so sorry I failed you."

His motive for wanting to kill Trump was unclear.

Routh's planned attack on Trump came two months after an assassination attempt on the Republican leader in Pennsylvania, where 20-year-old Matthew Crooks fired several shots during a rally, one of them grazing Trump's right ear.

The attack, in which a rallygoer was killed, proved to be a turning point in Trump's triumphant return to power. Crooks was immediately shot and killed by security forces and his motive remains unknown.

– AFP

# Carney scraps Canada EV sales mandate

TORONTO – Prime Minister Mark Carney yesterday cancelled a mandate for all vehicles sold in Canada to be electric by 2035, while announcing a multi-billion-Canadian-dollar plan to support

EV production.

The announcement marked another departure from the policies backed by his climate-focused predecessor Justin Trudeau, but Carney said he wanted to

incentivise EV production while bolstering a Canadian auto industry hammered by US tariffs.

"We know where the auto industry is headed. We're going to support that transition," he said.

– AFP

# Morocco says evacuated 140,000 people due to severe weather

RABAT – Authorities have evacuated more than 140,000 people from their homes since heavy rainfall flooded several provinces in northern Morocco last week, the interior ministry said yesterday.

Authorities have not announced any casualties, and the national weather service forecast heavy rains and strong winds to continue today across the north.

The severe weather came after Morocco struggled with seven consecutive years of drought.

The evacuations began last Friday and mainly concerned

Larache province, where the city of Ksar El Kebir – about 100 kilometres south of Tangier – has seen significant flooding.

Some residents including children and elderly people were stranded on rooftops before being rescued, at times in small boats.

In Sidi Kacem province, around 120 kilometres south of Ksar El Kebir, more than 10,000 people were rescued, some by helicopter, as floodwaters inundated roads and farmland.

AFP images showed Sidi Kacem residents struggling to move through muddy floodwaters,

sometimes using partly submerged tractors or motorbikes.

Other people were evacuated in areas near Oued Loukos, a major river flowing into the Atlantic Ocean.

In December, 37 people were killed in sudden floods in Safi, in Morocco's deadliest weather-related disaster in the past decade.

In recent weeks, severe weather and flooding in neighbouring Algeria killed two people, including a child.

In Tunisia, at least five people died, with others still missing, after the country saw its heaviest rainfall in over 70 years last month. – AFP

# Brother of Israel's Shin Bet chief indicted for 'assisting enemy in wartime'

JERUSALEM – Prosecutors yesterday filed charges against the brother of the head of Israel's domestic intelligence agency for offences including "assisting the enemy in wartime", over the alleged smuggling of cigarettes into besieged Gaza.

Israel controls the entry of all goods and people into the Palestinian territory, where humanitarian conditions remain dire despite a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas which came into effect on October 10.

Bezalel Zini, the brother of Shin Bet chief David Zini, is charged along with other defendants with "assisting the enemy in wartime, performing transactions in property for terrorist purposes, obtaining something by fraud under aggravated circumstances, and taking bribes", the justice ministry said.

"A central category of prohibited goods smuggled into the Strip was tobacco and cigarettes, which have put a total of hundreds of millions of shekels into Hamas's coffers since the start of the war," the ministry added in a statement.

Bezalel Zini, a reservist in the

Israeli military, is suspected of smuggling approximately 14 cartons of cigarettes into Gaza on three occasions, for which he received 365,000 shekels (US\$117,400).

Two other defendants were indicted along with Zini yesterday.

The smuggling was carried out "by misleading soldiers at the crossings into the Strip, and by presenting a false situation as if the defendants were entering as part of their military service for security purposes", the statement added.

It forms part of a wider smuggling network which the justice ministry described as a "serious case of organised, systematic, and sophisticated smuggling of various goods into the Gaza Strip for profit", which began in the summer of 2025, when war was still raging in Gaza.

Prosecutors on Wednesday filed charges against 12 individuals and a company in connection with the case.

A justice ministry statement on Wednesday said the smuggled goods were worth millions of shekels and included cartons of cigarettes, iPhones, batteries, car parts and more.

– AFP

# January settler attacks cause record West Bank displacement since Oct 2023: UN

RAMALLAH – Israeli settler violence and harassment in the occupied West Bank displaced nearly 700 Palestinians in January, the United Nations said yesterday, the highest rate since the Gaza war erupted in October 2023.

At least 694 Palestinians were forcefully driven from their homes last month, according to figures from the UN's humanitarian agency OCHA, which compiles data from various United Nations agencies.

The UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) said in late January that settler violence has become a key driver of forced displacement in the West Bank.

January's displacement numbers were particularly high in part due to the displacement of an entire herding community in the Jordan Valley, Ras Ein al-Auja, whose 130 families left after months of harassment.

"What is happening today is the complete collapse of the community as a result of the settlers' continuous and repeated attacks, day and night, for the past two years," Farhan Jahaleen, a Bedouin resident, told AFP at the time.

Settlers in the West Bank, which Israel has occupied since 1967, use herding to establish a presence on agricultural lands used by Palestinian communities and gradually deny them access to these areas, according to a 2025 report by Israeli NGO Peace Now.

To force Palestinians out, settlers resort to harassment, intimidation and violence, "with the backing of the Israeli government and military", the settlement watchdog said.

"No one is putting the pressure on Israel or on the Israeli authorities to stop this and so the settlers feel it, they feel the complete impunity that they're just free to continue to do this," said Allegra Pacheco, director of the West Bank Protection Consortium, a group of NGOs working to support Palestinian communities against displacement.

She pointed to a lack of attention on the West Bank as another driving factor.

"All eyes are focused on Gaza when it comes to Palestine, while we have an ongoing ethnic cleansing in the West Bank and nobody's paying attention," she told AFP.

West Bank Palestinians are also displaced when Israel's military destroys structures and dwellings it says are built without permits.

In January, 182 more Palestinians were displaced due to home demolitions, according to OCHA.

Excluding Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem, the West Bank is home to more than 500,000 Israelis living in settlements and outposts considered illegal under international law.

Around three million Palestinians live in the West Bank.

– AFP

## US ambassador accuses Poland parliament speaker of insulting Trump

WARSAW – The United States embassy will have “no further dealings” with the speaker of the Polish parliament after claims he insulted President Donald Trump, its ambassador said yesterday.

Tom Rose said the decision was made because of speaker Włodzimierz Czarzasty’s “outrageous and unprovoked insults” against the US leader.

“We will not permit anyone to harm US-Polish relations, nor disrespect [Trump], who has done so much for Poland and the Polish people,” Rose wrote on X.

Poland’s Prime Minister Donald Tusk responded the same day, writing on X: “Ambassador Rose, allies should respect, not lecture each other.”

“At least this is how we, here in Poland, understand partnership.”

On Monday, Czarzasty criticised a joint US-Israeli proposal to support Donald Trump’s candidacy for the Nobel Peace Prize.

“I will not support the motion for a Nobel Peace Prize for President Trump, because he doesn’t deserve it,” he told journalists.

Czarzasty said that rather than allying itself more closely with Trump’s White House, Poland should “strengthen existing alliances” such as NATO, the United Nations and the World Health Organisation (WHO).

He criticised Trump’s leadership, including the imposition of tariffs on European countries, threats to annex Greenland, and, most recently, his

claims that NATO allies had stayed “a little off the front lines” during the war in Afghanistan.

He accused Trump of “a breach of the politics of principles and values, often a breach of international law”.

After Rose’s reaction, Czarzasty told local news site Onet: “I maintain my position” on the issue of the peace prize.

“I consistently respect the USA as Poland’s key partner,” he added later on X.

“That is why I regretfully accept the statement by Ambassador Tom Rose, but I will not change my position on these fundamental issues for Polish women and men.”

The speaker heads Poland’s New Left party, which is part of Tusk’s pro-European governing coalition, with which the US ambassador said he has “excellent relations”.

It is currently governing under conservative-nationalist President Karol Nawrocki, a vocal Trump supporter.

In late January, Czarzasty, along with several other high-ranking Polish politicians, denounced Trump’s claim that the United States “never needed” NATO allies.

The parliamentary leader called the claims “scandalous” and said they should be “absolutely condemned”.

Forty-three Polish soldiers and one civil servant died as part of the US-led NATO coalition in Afghanistan. – AFP

## Justice minister to investigate Epstein’s Poland links

WARSAW – Poland’s justice minister said yesterday that secret service officials, prosecutors and police would join a team to look into Polish links to convicted US sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

Formed after the release of millions of new documents by the US Justice Department last Friday, which highlighted links between the alleged provider of under-age women to many powerful figures, the team’s work could lead to a formal commission inquiry.

Justice Minister Waldemar Zurek has been named to lead the team. “As you know from media reports, Epstein’s circle included Poles,” Zurek told journalists.

“It is said that his staff, which managed this dramatic, covert operation, included two Poles”.

Zurek said Polish officials know the names of the two individuals – “a Polish woman and a Polish man” – but did not provide further information.

The justice minister said the team will determine whether there were activities involving

Epstein and his network in Poland warranting further investigation, including the potential presence of Polish victims.

So far, according to Zurek, “no victims of this practice have come forward ... but we know that this recruitment of women may also be juvenile”.

The justice minister said the team’s work could eventually lead to a formal commission that would “want to request some of the classified documentation from the United States,” as part of an eventual investigation.

Prime Minister Donald Tusk announced on Tuesday that Poland would examine links between the disgraced financier and Russian intelligence.

But this was laughed off by the Kremlin. Its spokesman Dmitry Peskov said “let’s not waste our time,” in response to the accusations.

The first meeting of the Polish team is to take place next week, with much of its personnel already assembled. – AFP

## Cuba president says willing to talk to US, but ‘without pressure’

HAVANA – Cuba is prepared to hold dialogue with the United States but not under pressure, President Miguel Díaz-Canel insisted yesterday after months of threats from US President Donald Trump.

“Cuba is willing to engage in dialogue with the United States, a dialogue on any topic... but without pressure or preconditions,” Díaz-Canel said in an address to the nation on state TV and radio.

He added that any talks must take place “from a position of equals, with respect for our sovereignty, our independence, and our self-determination” and without “interference in our internal affairs.”

Trump has made repeated threats against communist-run Cuba in recent months, vowing to cut off its access to oil and stating the island was “ready to fall.”

Cuba, in the grips of an economic crisis, has long relied on oil supplies from Venezuela, whose leader Nicolás Maduro was ousted in a deadly US military operation last month.

Trump subsequently claimed to have control of Venezuelan oil, vowed to starve Cuba of the commodity, and threatened tariffs on any other nation stepping in to help US-sanctioned Havana.



*This TV screen shot from the Cuban TV channel released yesterday shows Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel speaking during a press conference, in Havana, on Wednesday.*

– AFP

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

Earlier Thursday, hundreds of thousands of people in the country’s east were left without electricity for hours after an electricity grid failure.

An AFP analysis of official statistics recently found that the island generated only half the electricity it needed last year.

Officials blame tight US

sanctions for the crisis, which includes food and medicine shortages. But poor economic management and a tourism collapse following the COVID-19 pandemic have contributed to the island’s woes.

Trump has repeatedly said Washington was in talks for “a deal” with Havana, which has denied any formal negotiations were under way. Trump has not specified the nature of the agreement he has floated. (More on p.12)

– AFP

## WEF opens probe into CEO Brende’s Epstein links

DAVOS – The World Economic Forum (WEF), which organises the Davos summit, said yesterday that it would conduct an independent review into its chief executive’s interactions with convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

Former Norwegian foreign minister Borge Brende, 60, has since 2017 been president of the WEF, which organises the annual gathering of the super-rich and powerful in the Swiss ski resort of Davos.

“The WEF seeks to clarify recent disclosures regarding its president and CEO, Borge Brende, and his participating in three business dinners with Jeffrey Epstein, along with subsequent email and SMS communications,” the forum said.

“In light of these interactions, the governing board requested the audit and risk committee to look into the matter, which subsequently decided to initiate an independent review.”

The forum said it was committed to transparency and aimed to handle the matter thoughtfully and efficiently.

The Geneva-based organisation said Brende would continue to fulfil his roles at the WEF, without involvement in the review process.

Brende was mentioned more than 60 times in the millions of new Epstein documents released last week by the US Justice Department.

Appearing in the released Epstein files does not in itself imply wrongdoing.

Epstein pleaded guilty in 2008 to procuring a child for prostitution and served 13 months of an 18-month sentence.

Epstein was facing charges of alleged sex trafficking when he killed himself in detention in 2019.

Brende said in a statement that during a visit to New York in 2018, he received an invitation for former Norwegian deputy prime minister Terje Rod-Larsen to join

him for dinner with several other leaders, plus “someone who was presented to me as an American investor, Jeffrey Epstein”.

“The following year, I attended two similar dinners with Epstein, alongside other diplomats and business leaders. These dinners, and a few emails and SMS messages, were the extent of my interactions with him,” he said.

“I was completely unaware of Epstein’s past and criminal activities.”

He said that had he known about Epstein’s background, he would have declined the initial invitation for dinner and any other subsequent invitations or communications.

Brende said he recognised that he could have conducted a more thorough investigation into Epstein’s history, and regretted not doing so.

He welcomed the independent review, “which I indeed requested”.

– AFP

## Under-fire Starmer says will ‘go on’ leading UK govt

LONDON – Keir Starmer vowed yesterday to remain Britain’s prime minister despite a storm over his appointment last year of disgraced politician Peter Mandelson, linked to late US

sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, as Britain’s envoy to Washington.

“I intend to go on doing that vital work for our country because I believe it is the absolute focus and of first importance

for this government,” he told reporters, after apologising to the victims of Epstein for believing Mandelson’s “lies” about their ties.

– AFP

# Spain, Portugal face floods, chaos after deadly new storm

ALCÁCER DO SAL – Spanish rescuers searched yesterday for a woman missing after a new storm hit the Iberian peninsula, as Portugal warned of a heightened flood risk after several months' worth of rain fell in a few hours.

One death has already been confirmed in Portugal from the seventh storm to hit the peninsula this year.

Portugal has barely recovered from last week's battering by rain and winds that killed five people, injured hundreds and left tens of thousands without power.

Scientists say human-driven climate change is increasing the length, intensity and frequency of extreme weather events such as the floods and heatwaves that have struck Spain and Portugal in recent years.

Storm Leonardo on Wednesday dumped more than 40 centimetres of rain in some districts of Andalusia, southern Spain, the equivalent of several months of rainfall. Thousands of people were evacuated and roads and rail lines paralysed.

Portuguese officials yesterday issued their highest flood alert for the Tagus river in the Santarém region.

Authorities in Santarém evacuated people from homes near the river. Portugal's civil protection chief Mário Silvestre said it was the worst flood threat along the Tagus in nearly three decades.

Already Wednesday, at Alcácer do Sal, south of Lisbon, the Sado



A man crosses a flooded street in Grazalema, southern Spain yesterday, amid Storm Leonardo. – AFP

river burst its banks and flooded the town centre. Fire brigade divers helped evacuate residents on inflatable boats. The Civil Protection authority told AFP that 89 people had been rescued.

## River search in Spain

Spain's Civil Guard told AFP they were searching for a woman who had fallen into the Turvilla river in the Sayalonga municipality on Wednesday.

Spain's AEMET national weather agency lowered its warning level for Andalusia, saying it would rain "less intensely". Schools reopened in most of Andalusia but remained suspended in worst-hit areas where roads and railways were still out of service.

"It's unheard of, with a little uncertainty, but whether we like it or not, Mother Nature has to

find her place," Mohamed Amar Mohamed told AFP in the village of Jimera de Libár on Wednesday.

"All we can do is try to adapt and hope for the best," said the 34-year-old construction worker.

"It is clear that these are complicated, difficult days," said Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez.

Portugal's IPMA weather agency said it had been the country's second-wettest January since 2000.

Train services were suspended in the north and central Portugal. In Lisbon, municipal authorities shut parks and tunnels and suspended several river transport connections faced with the risk of floods and falling trees.

A man in his 60s died in the southeast on Wednesday after being swept away by the current while attempting to drive across a flooded area. – AFP

# Lights back on in eastern Cuba after widespread blackout

**Jordane Bertrand**

HAVANA – Power was restored yesterday to eastern Cuba after an electricity grid failure plunged three provinces and part of a fourth into darkness the previous evening, authorities said.

In the early hours of yesterday (local time), the provinces of Holguín, Granma, Santiago de Cuba, and Guantánamo "were synchronised to the national power grid," said Félix Estrada of the ministry of energy and mines said on state television.

He added that scheduled power cuts however remain in place in the four provinces despite the reconnection, due to the country's "capacity deficit" beyond the latest outage, which left hundreds of thousands of people without electricity.

After six decades under a US trade embargo, the communist island's electricity system is in shambles, with frequent and prolonged outages.

To make matters worse, US President Donald Trump

threatened last month to cut off Cuba's heavily subsidised oil supplies from Venezuela.

The state-owned Unión Eléctrica de Cuba said on X that a problem at a substation in Holguín Wednesday night caused an electrical system disconnect that impacted the four provinces.

Cuba's second-largest city, Santiago de Cuba, home to more than 400,000 people, was hit by the blackout.

One resident said her power went out about 5:00 p.m.

"Since it goes out all the time, I didn't even realise it was a widespread outage," Isabel, 28, who did not want to give her last name, told AFP.

Cuba has endured several national blackouts since late 2024, some of them lasting days.

An AFP analysis of official statistics found that the island generated only half the electricity it needed last year.

Officials blame tight US sanctions for the crisis, which includes food and medicine

shortages. But poor economic management and a tourism collapse following the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the island's woes.

Despite imposition of the US trade embargo in 1962, Cuba had eight power plants built in the 1980s and 1990s. Thirty solar plants constructed with help from China have failed to stem the blackouts.

Since toppling Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro last month, Trump has threatened to slap tariffs on countries that give oil to Cuba – even as the United Nations chief António Guterres warned on Wednesday that an oil shortage could lead to a humanitarian "collapse" on the island.

Trump has said he wants to "make a deal" with leaders in Cuba – an island barely 145 kilometres from Florida – without saying what that deal might look like.

In December, a massive outage in western Cuba left millions of people without electricity – including in the capital Havana, a city of 1.7 million inhabitants.

– AFP

# Indigenous Brazilians protest Amazon river dredging for grain exports

**Fran Blandy**

RIO DE JANEIRO – Hundreds of indigenous people have been protesting in northern Brazil for two weeks outside the port terminal of US agribusiness giant Cargill, angered over the dredging and development of Amazonian rivers for grain exports.

Brazil's indigenous communities have raised the alarm for months about port expansion on rivers they see as vital to their way of life, a grievance they protested at COP30 climate talks last November.

"The government is opening up our territories to many projects ... to boost agribusiness," indigenous leader Auricélia Arapiuns told AFP in a video message from the Amazon port city of Santarém, in the same state that hosted COP30 in Belém.

"We have been here for 14 days, but this struggle didn't start now. We occupied Cargill to draw attention so that the government would come up with a proposal."

By Wednesday, some 700 indigenous people from 14 communities were taking part in the demonstration, according to the Amazon Watch advocacy group.

The protesters have blocked trucks from "entering and leaving the terminal," Cargill said in a statement sent to AFP, adding it has "no authority or control" over their complaints.

The Minnesota-based multinational has agricultural logistics operations across Brazil, where it employs 11,000 people.

Protesters on Wednesday demanded the cancellation of a decree signed by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in August which designates major Amazonian rivers as priorities for cargo navigation and private port expansion.

They also want the cancellation of a federal tender issued in December worth 74.8 million reais (US\$14.2 million) to manage and dredge the Tapajós River – a major Amazon tributary.

"This infrastructure that is coming is not a space for us, and it never will be. It is a project of death to kill our river and our sacred places," indigenous leader Alessandra Korap of the Munduruku people said in a statement.

The ports ministry said earlier in January that the contract of a

company for maintenance dredging was necessary to "increase navigation safety... and ensure greater predictability for cargo and passenger transport operations."

## 'Serious environmental risks'

The protesters criticized the government for only sending mid-level officials to meet with them and breaking a COP30 promise not to carry out projects on Amazonian rivers "without prior consultation."

Brazil's Ministry of Indigenous Peoples said in a statement on Monday it recognizes the "legitimacy of the concerns raised" and that no dredging or other projects can take place on the Tapajós river without the consent of those affected.

Fed up, the protesters were no longer in the mood to negotiate.

"We don't want a consultation. We want this decree revoked," indigenous leader Gilson Tupinamba, wearing a large headdress of blue and orange feathers, told a meeting with government representatives on Wednesday.

Brazil is the world's largest exporter of soybeans and corn, and in recent years has switched to northern river ports to export grains more cheaply.

Critics see plans to boost barge traffic on Amazonian rivers as yet another project where economic development is clashing with Lula's much vaunted commitment to the environment.

"What did the government do after the COP? They launched the dredging tender," Arapiuns told the government representatives.

After the meeting, the protesters blocked the road leading to the Santarém international airport – a popular hub for tourists.

Brazil's Federal Public Prosecutor's Office (MPF) – which has taken legal action against the dredging efforts – on Tuesday pointed to "serious environmental risks" for the river.

In a statement, the MPF referred to the release of heavy metals such as mercury into the water, and destruction of crucial habitats for threatened species of dolphins, turtles and aquatic birds.

– AFP



This handout picture released by the Amazon Watch NGO shows a group of indigenous people dancing during a protest in front of the port terminal of US agribusiness giant Cargill located in the city of Santarém, Pará state, northern Brazil, on Tuesday. Hundreds of indigenous people have been protesting in northern Brazil for two weeks outside the port terminal of US agribusiness giant Cargill, angered over the dredging and development of Amazonian rivers for grain exports. Brazil's indigenous communities have raised the alarm for months about port expansion on rivers they see as vital to their way of life, a grievance they protested at COP30 climate talks last November. – AFP

## Football shorts

### Germany goalkeeper Ter Stegen to undergo surgery

BERLIN — Germany goalkeeper Marc-André ter Stegen will undergo surgery on his injured hamstring on Friday, his club Girona confirmed on Wednesday.

Ter Stegen injured his hamstring while playing for the La Liga club last weekend.

Girona posted on social media that the 33-year-old "will undergo surgery this Friday for the hamstring injury he sustained in his left thigh".

Girona added that a recovery timeline will be determined after the operation.

Ter Stegen had moved to Girona from parent club Barcelona in January in hopes of additional game time in the lead-up to the 2026 World Cup, which gets underway in just over four months' time.

Spanish media reported Girona were considering sending the injured Ter Stegen back to Barcelona and were permitted to do so under the loan agreement.

The news is the latest setback for Germany's number one 'keeper, whose participation at the World Cup is in doubt.

Germany's number one since the retirement of Manuel Neuer in 2024, Ter Stegen has suffered a series of injury setbacks.

On Tuesday, Germany coach Julian Nagelsmann backed Ter Stegen after the "unbelievably cruel" injury.

"Right now all that matters is that he gets healthy in peace, without any additional pressure. We're all behind him," Nagelsmann said.

Nagelsmann confirmed Ter Stegen would be out until at least April, missing two Germany friendlies in March. —AFP

### Gnabry extends Bayern Munich deal until 2028

Munich — Germany forward Serge Gnabry has extended his contract at Bayern Munich by two years until 2028, the club announced yesterday.

Gnabry, 30, has been at the Bavarian giants since 2017, after stints at several clubs including Arsenal, West Brom and Werder Bremen. His contract was set to expire in the summer.

The forward has won six Bundesliga titles in Munich along with the Champions League.

After reports Gnabry was set to leave the club, he has put together an impressive season, scoring six goals and supplying five assists in 15 league matches.

Gnabry has struck up a partnership at Bayern with Harry Kane and wingers Michael Olise and Luis Diaz, forming a lethal attack for the Bundesliga leaders.

"We're a real unit and can achieve something big," Gnabry said in a statement, adding he "never thought" he would spend a decade with Bayern.



"The reasons to renew my contract are the team, the coaches, the whole club, the fans, the city and the environment. I feel very much at home at Bayern."

Gnabry has scored 100 goals across 311 appearances for Bayern in all competitions, adding 69 assists.

Bayern sporting director Max Eberl called Gnabry "one of the absolute pillars of this team".

"He's won it all with this club and still wants more. That makes him a role model. He represents Bayern," said Eberl.

Gnabry has re-established himself as a key member of the Germany team under Julian Nagelsmann after missing out on Euro 2024 on home soil due to injury. He has scored 25 times in 57 caps. —AFP

### No time frame to get Palmer in 'perfect' shape — Rosenior

LONDON — Chelsea boss Liam Rosenior said he will have to continue to assess Cole Palmer's fitness "game-by-game" after an injury disrupted season for the England international.

A persistent groin injury has hampered Palmer's impact for months.

The 23-year-old was used only as a second half substitute as Chelsea bowed out of the League Cup with a semi-final defeat to Arsenal on Tuesday.

Palmer had played the full 90 minutes just three days previously as Chelsea came from 2-0 down to beat West Ham 3-2.

One of the issues that led to Enzo Maresca's departure as Blues boss in January was a disagreement over his management of the squad with senior figures at the club insisting the medical department had a greater say on selection.

"We have the best medical team in the world and the best sports science team in the world and we want to make sure the players can play to the level needed to help us win," said Rosenior.

"There isn't a time frame that he's going to be perfect in one month or two or three - it's just game-by-game."

Trailing 3-2 from the first leg of their League Cup semi-final, Rosenior's cautious approach for the second leg drew criticism for not being daring enough.

Chelsea dominated the ball for long spells at the Emirates but rarely threatened before Kai Havertz scored the only goal of the night deep into stoppage time.

However, he defended his gameplan and the performance as Chelsea kept the tie alive for 97 minutes against the Premier League leaders.

"What people say outside the club makes no difference to my decision making," added Rosenior.

"In hindsight, we didn't go through so there are always things you can do differently, but that was a very, very solid performance against a team very good at home."

—AFP



Lens' Senegalese forward Abdallah Sima (centre) heads the ball and scores his team's second goal during the French Cup round of 16 against Estac Troyes at the Stade de l'Aube in Troyes on Wednesday. Lens won the game 4-2. —AFP

## Liverpool in 'good place' for years to come, says Slot

Kieran Canning

LIVERPOOL — Liverpool's recruitment of rising stars will put the club on a sure footing for years to come, according to manager Arne Slot despite a difficult season for the Premier League champions.

The Reds sit sixth in the Premier League after a difficult start to life at Anfield for a number of new recruits in a near £450 million (US\$616 million) spending spree in the summer transfer market.

Highly-rated French defender Jeremy Jacquet will also join for the start of next season after Liverpool agreed a deal with Rennes worth up to £60 million for the 20-year-old.

"Such a big talent and another example of the model we're using at this club," Slot said yesterday.

"Young, very talented players, sometimes at the start of their careers or sometimes already a little bit a few years into their career, but always players that are young and can improve us in the short term but

also definitely in the long term."

"We've signed a lot of them recently and the mid-long term future of this club, and even the short term, is in a very good place."

Hugo Ekitike and Florian Wirtz are two of the club's big money signings that are beginning to deliver returns on the near £200 million invested in signing them from the Bundesliga.

Ekitike scored twice in a 4-1 win over Newcastle last weekend to take his tally for the season to 15, while Wirtz has netted six times in 10 matches since ending a 22-game wait for his first Liverpool goal.

"As a manager, even if he is struggling a little bit at the start, you have to keep playing him because that is the only way he can improve," said Slot on Wirtz finding his feet in the Premier League.

"He didn't improve that much on the ball because from the start he was special. Maybe now he has a better connection with his teammates because they've played more and more together."

"Off the ball is where I see the biggest improvement with him, and some others, and that combination makes you ready for the Premier League."

Liverpool host Manchester City on Sunday in a match with huge ramifications for the title race and the battle to qualify for next season's Champions League.

City trail leaders Arsenal by six points and could find themselves nine adrift by the time they kick off with the Gunners hosting Sunderland on Saturday.

Liverpool could also be four points outside the top five, which should secure a place in the Champions League, should Manchester United and Chelsea win tomorrow.

Slot is keen to make amends for his side's 3-0 defeat to City in November.

"They were the better team and I think we want to show a different side of us this time."

The game will be played at 12:30 a.m. Monday morning Macau time. —AFP / MPD



Manchester City's English goalkeeper James Trafford (right) saves a shot from Newcastle United's German striker Nick Woltemade (third from right) during the English League Cup semi-final second leg between Manchester City and Newcastle United at the Etihad stadium in Manchester, northwest England on Wednesday. Manchester City won the game 3-1, making it 5-1 on aggregate. —AFP

## Wang sweeps Akae, Wong upsets Harimoto at table tennis Asian Cup

### Table tennis

HAIKOU – Women's singles defending champion Wang Manyu of China beat Japan's Kaho Akae in straight games, while Wong Chun Ting of Hong Kong upset Japanese paddler Tomokazu Harimoto in the men's singles at the Asian Cup group stage here yesterday.

Wang showed a good form when up against the 21-year-old Akae and seized her second consecutive win in the group stage 11-6, 11-7, 11-7 to book a slot in the last 16.

"We didn't compete with each other very often, so I prepared more before the match. I am satisfied with my execution today and gradually found my rhythm to take the win," said Wang, 26.

Wong felt excited after defeating world No.5 Harimoto 11-9, 11-9, 3-11, 11-8. "I finally ended my losing streak against Harimoto. I am decisive in each game today and really enjoyed the competition," he said.

"I communicated with players of Team China to seek advice, Xue Fei in particular, before the match against Harimoto. I also want to



Wang Manyu serves during the women's singles group match against Akae Kaho of Japan at the ITTF-ATTU Asian Cup Haikou 2026 table tennis tournament in Haikou, Hainan Province, yesterday.

– AFP

thank the fans here for supporting me," Wong noted.

The tournament running from Wednesday to Sunday features 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.

In other group matches, China's Wang Chuqin, Lin Shidong, Xiang

Peng, Zhou Qihao, Sun Yingsha, Chen Xingtong and Kuai Man all claimed their second straight wins to secure berths in the next stage.

While other paddlers from Team China including Chen Junsong, Chen Yuanyu, Wang Yidi and Chen Yi suffered losses yesterday.

The players listed for the knockout stage will be decided after the last round of group matches today.

– Xinhua

## Anti-doping boss 'uncomfortable' with Valieva's coach at Olympics



**WORLD ANTI-DOPING AGENCY**

MILAN – The head of the World Anti-Doping Agency said yesterday he was "uncomfortable" with the presence at the 2026 Winter Olympics of the coach of the doped Russian skater Kamila Valieva.

Valieva was banned for doping after the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics but her coach Eteri Tutberidze is back with a new Russian skater, Adelina Petrosian, at the Milan-Cortina Games.

Witold Banka, the head of the global anti-doping watchdog WADA, said his organisation was powerless to stop Tutberidze, who also guided the women's individual

Olympic gold medallist in 2014 and 2018, from being at the Games.

"It is not our decision the coach is here," Banka said at a news conference in Milan. "The investigation found no evidence that this person engaged in this doping so there is no legal basis to exclude her."

"Of course, if you are asking me personally about my feelings, I don't feel comfortable with her presence here in the Olympic Games."

Valieva, then aged 15, tested positive for the banned heart medication trimetazidine following the Russian championships in December 2021.

The medicine, commonly known as TMZ, is used to treat angina but is banned by WADA as a performance-enhancing drug.

The case only came to light in

February 2022 during the Beijing Games - a day after Russia's victory in the team event, in which Valieva became the first female skater to land a quadruple jump in Olympic competition.

Valieva told an arbitration panel she tested positive because of "contamination" from her grandfather's heart medicine.

She claimed it could have come from a chopping board that he had used to prepare his drugs that she also used to make a strawberry dessert.

Now 19, she returned to competition last month, at the end of her four-year ban.

She was not selected for the Milan-Cortina Olympics but Petrosian, 18, is considered among the favourites for gold.

– AFP

## Piastri plays down McLaren rivalry with champion Norris

### F1

#### Nicolas Revise

WOKING – Just a month before the Formula One season gets rolling again in Australia, McLaren's Oscar Piastri said he got a "fair shot" at the 2025 title and there were no hard feelings about his titanic tussle with teammate Lando Norris.

For much of the season, Piastri was in the ascendancy and even held a 34-point lead over Norris after the Dutch Grand Prix.

However, his form and lead disintegrated and, ultimately, it was Norris who ended Max Verstappen's hopes of a fifth consecutive title.

Piastri finished third, 13 points behind his teammate.

"Obviously, last season wasn't what I wanted, but I think it's good to move on," Piastri said at a McLaren-controlled press event with the two drivers at the team headquarters just outside London this week.

"I think I got a fair shot last year. And I'm expecting that to stay exactly the same."

The 24-year-old Australian admitted there were moments when the team's 'Papaya Rules', which meant each driver could race for victory, created some tension.

"We probably caused some headaches for ourselves that we didn't need to at points last year... I think that was probably clear for

everyone watching.

"But for me, at no point were there any bad intentions. Things could have been done better, situations could have been handled differently."

"But that is part of elite sport and part of Formula 1. You're never going to get every decision right, you're never going to make every single person happy."

"That's part of the unique nature of Formula One, given it's a team sport with an individual prize as well."

"We're working on how we can improve things and make sure that we try and become stronger."

If Piastri was playing down the rivalry with his words, it rose its

## Alex Marquez tops final day pre-season Sepang test

### MotoGP

SEPANG – Alex Marquez topped the timesheets on the final day of MotoGP pre-season testing in Malaysia yesterday as Italian-Japanese factory team Yamaha returned to the tracks after missing out on Wednesday.

Spaniard Marquez, who won the Malaysian MotoGP last year, blitzed through the Sepang circuit early in the morning session to secure a lap time of 1 min 56.402 sec on his third lap outing.

Aprilia's Marco Bezzecchi was a fraction off Marquez, turning in 1 min 56.526 sec to be just ahead of his Italian compatriot Fabio Di Giannantonio, who clocked 1 min 56.786 sec.

Ducati team-mates Marc Marquez and Francesco Bagnaia were the other two riders who dipped under the 1 min 57 mark, despite the Spanish reigning world champion crashing in the morning session.

Marc Marquez, who missed

### Yesterday's pre-season test times on at the Sepang Circuit (5.543km)

1. Alex Marquez (ESP/Ducati) 1min 56.402 sec
2. Marco Bezzecchi (ITA/Aprilia) 1min 56.526 sec
3. Fabio Di Giannantonio (ITA/VR46 Ducati) 1min 56.785 sec
4. Marc Marquez (ESP/Ducati) 1min 56.789 sec
5. Francesco Bagnaia (ITA/Ducati) 1min 56.929 sec
6. Franco Morbidelli (ITA/VR46 Ducati) 1min 57.130 sec
7. Raul Fernandez (ESP/Aprilia) 1 min 57.245 sec
8. Pedro Acosta (ESP/Red Bull KTM) 1 min 57.253 sec
9. Joan Mir (ESP/Honda) 1 min 57.268 sec
10. Enea Bastianini (ITA/Redbull KTM) 1 min 57.290 sec



Red Bull KTM Factory Racing team's South African MotoGP rider Brad Binder brakes during the third day of the 2026 MotoGP pre-season test at the Sepang International Circuit in Sepang, Malaysia yesterday.

– AFP

the final four races of last season after suffering a collarbone injury at Indonesia's Mandalika circuit, explained his crash.

"When you put [on] a new aero package, you need to change the bike's balance. I was trying a different aero package when I crashed on Turn 1," he said

"With small modifications, the bike balance changed a lot. Lucky it was in the middle of the corner and very slow."

His younger brother Alex Marquez, was pleased with the outcome from his Ducati on a largely bright and clear day in Sepang.

"We tried to improve the setup that was missing on the first and second day, and to strike the potential from the bike."

"I feel we are better than last year, more competitive. Quite happy about the test," he said.

The MotoGP competitors will next head to Buriram, Thailand, for the second pre-season test in a fortnight, ahead of the 2026 March curtain raiser at the Thailand GP.

"A lot of it is about the team, and enabling them to get the trophies, and to party, and to celebrate. So, yes, I'm not great."

The Briton, however, made it clear that he would be turning up in Melbourne looking to take the first step in winning back-to-back titles.

"I see many more years in Formula One, and I'd still try to win as many more championships as possible."

"If I never do, I'm so happy I achieved one. If you ever see me not smiling or something, just give me a punch or something to remind me."

"I achieved my goal in life and I'm very happy, so I'm proud. That's something I'll always take with me."

– AFP

# On a roll, Brazilian cinema seizes its moment

**Lucía Lacurcia**

RIO DE JANEIRO — For the second year in a row, a Brazilian movie has wowed international audiences and critics, securing multiple Oscar nominations and drawing fresh interest in the Latin American giant's film industry.

Experts say the success of "The Secret Agent", which has won four Oscar nominations, a year after "I Am Still Here" won Brazil its first Oscar, is no fluke, with a bit of a push from the country's political climate.

"This is neither a coincidence nor a miracle. It is the result of a lot of work, consistent policies, and, of course, talent," Ilda Santiago, director of the Rio International Film Festival and an Oscar voter, told AFP.

Directed by Kleber Mendonça Filho, "The Secret Agent" is a political thriller infused with magical realism. Like "I Am Still Here", it is set during Brazil's 1964-1985 military dictatorship.

It has been nominated for Oscars in the categories of Best Picture, Best International Feature Film, Best Actor for Wagner Moura and Best Casting.

Santiago said these two big Brazilian movies resonated with foreign audiences "because they show how our daily lives can be transformed by governments, and that is a mirror of today's world."

This is especially true for Brazil, whose far-right former president Jair Bolsonaro — an open admirer of the military dictatorship — is serving a

27-year prison term for plotting a coup.

Before Bolsonaro came to power in 2019, Brazil's film industry had well-established financing mechanisms, much like those in countries like France, Canada and Germany.

Brazil has enjoyed waves of international breakout moments, with films such as 'Central Station' in 1998, 'City of God' in 2002 and 'Elite Squad' starring Moura in 2007.

Mendonça Filho was also behind the art house hits 'Aquarius' (2016) and 'Bacurau' (2019).

## Film revived under Lula

During his time in office Bolsonaro cut the budget of the Audiovisual Sector Fund by almost half, froze bidding for film project grants and threatened to shut down the national film agency if it did not impose an ideological "filter."

"Brazilian cinema was plugged back in with Lula's election in 2022, after four years in which culture, in practical terms, was extinguished," Mendonça Filho told AFP in an interview.

Lula's government reactivated the funding application process and injected record amounts into the sector. The film industry received 1.4 billion reais (US\$269 million) in 2025, 180 percent more than in 2021.

Nevertheless, "putting each of those bricks that were dismantled back in place is a task that takes years", said Santiago.

Influential film critic Isabela Boscov said that in the past "there was a failure

to take advantage" of hit films.

She said Brazil was now "breaking out of the bubble", much like Iranian cinema in the 1990s, Mexican cinema in the 2010s, and more recently, South Korean cinema.

## Small and big victories'

Last year 'I Am Still Here' racked up several international awards, and won Fernanda Torres a Golden Globe for best actress.

The film won Brazil its first Oscar — for best international feature film.

"The Secret Agent" first earned plaudits at the Cannes Film Festival, where it won for best director and Wagner Moura won best actor.

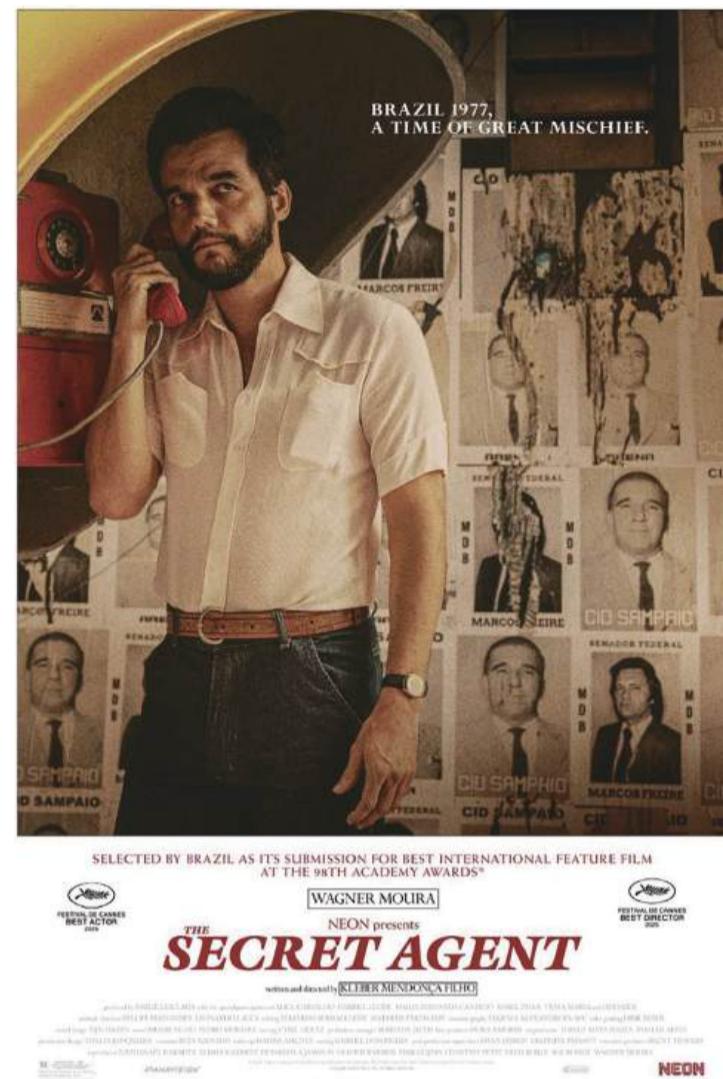
The movie then won two Golden Globes, for best non-English film and best male actor.

"It's an accumulation of small and big victories, like Cannes, which form the foundation on which a campaign is built," said Boscov.

She also pointed to the charm and wit of actors like Torres and Moura on the talk show circuit ahead of awards season as playing a fundamental role in promoting their films.

Several other movies have scored successes at film festivals, such as 'Manas' in 2024 which tells the story of a 13-year-old girl confronting abuse on an Amazon island, and the dystopian 2025 drama 'The Blue Trail' — in which Brazil's elderly are ordered to move to remote housing colonies.

— AFP



Theatrical release poster for "The Secret Agent" — Image courtesy of reddit



Leonel García (left) and Noel Schajris of the Mexican musical duo Sin Bandera ("Without Flag") pose after the presentation of their latest album, titled "Escenas" ("Scenes"), at the St. Regis Hotel in Mexico City on Wednesday. Sin Bandera perform romantic ballads, consisting of Mexican singer-songwriter Leonel García and Argentine-Mexican singer-songwriter Noel Schajris. They formed in Mexico City in 2000 and became one of the country's most popular artists after their eponymous debut studio album, Sin Bandera, was released on November 20, 2001.

## World Weather

CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -11°C~-1°C	Manila 23°C~31°C	New York -3°C~0°C	Lisbon 10°C~14°C
Shanghai 1°C~8°C	Bangkok 23°C~35°C	London 7°C~11°C	Rio de Janeiro 23°C~28°C
Hong Kong 16°C~23°C	Tokyo 3°C~15°C	Frankfurt 3°C~5°C	Luanda 24°C~30°C
Taipei 15°C~24°C	Singapore 23°C~32°C	Vancouver 8°C~13°C	Maputo 21°C~34°C
Guangzhou 15°C~27°C	Kuala Lumpur 23°C~33°C	Paris 5°C~13°C	Dili 23°C~31°C
Nanjing -4°C~6°C	Jakarta 23°C~30°C	Moscow -11°C~11°C	São Tomé 26°C~32°C
Guilin 8°C~16°C	Seoul -11°C~3°C	Las Vegas 9°C~22°C	Praia 17°C~25°C
Xi'an 2°C~11°C	Sydney 21°C~30°C	Monte Carlo 8°C~14°C	Bissau 21°C~35°C

## Barry Manilow cancels Las Vegas shows but 'doing great' post-surgery

LOS ANGELES — US singer-songwriter Barry Manilow on Wednesday announced the cancellation of his upcoming run of shows in Las Vegas, but assured fans he was recovering well from surgery to remove lung cancer.

The 82-year-old singer, known for 1970s hits "Copacabana" and "Mandy," revealed a lung cancer

diagnosis in December and planned to have an operation to treat it.

"I'm doing great and recovering very well after my surgery," he said in a post on Instagram Wednesday.

"With my doctor's guidance and recommendation, however, we have decided to postpone my residency dates at Westgate Las Vegas from

February 12-21 so I can stay focused on healing and getting ready for the tour that's kicking off at the end of February," he added.

Born and raised in New York, Manilow saw his biggest success in the 1970s, and has since continued to perform and record, with frequent residencies in Las Vegas. — AFP

## Michael Jackson film reveals unheard clips of thoughts on children

LONDON — A new Michael Jackson documentary aired in the UK on Wednesday features previously unheard audio of him sharing his thoughts on children, including that he believed they wanted to touch him.

The four-part "Michael Jackson: The Trial", produced by London-based Wonderhood Studios, looks at the pop star's 2005 criminal trial where he was charged with and later acquitted of sexual abuse of a minor, Gavin Arvizo, at his Neverland Ranch in California.

In a trailer of the film on Wonderhood's website, Jackson can be heard saying: "Children want to just touch me, hug me".

"Kids end up just falling in love with my personality," he is also heard saying. "Sometimes it gets me into trouble."

The documentary, which aired on the UK's Channel 4, uses

interviews, previously unseen footage, as well as the unheard audio of the singer, to step "beyond the media circus" of Jackson's infamous 2005 trial to ask "profound questions about fame, race, and the American justice system", Wonderhood said on its website.

The audio comes from interviews with a rabbi who Jackson turned to for "spiritual guidance", Channel 4 said in a statement.

"In hours of recorded interviews, Jackson confesses intimate secrets," the British broadcaster said.

"The tapes, most of which have never been broadcast before, deliver an unprecedented insight into Michael's mindset and his troubled childhood," the statement said, adding they also show his "fixation" with Arvizo.

The man dubbed the King of Pop who died in 2009 has been the subject of numerous films focusing

on allegations that he abused young boys, including "Leaving Neverland" (2019), also broadcast on Channel 4, which prompted an angry response from his family.

"Michael is not here to defend himself, otherwise these allegations would not have been made," the family said at the time.

The airing of the new documentary came just days after the release of the trailer for the Hollywood biopic "Michael", which stars Jackson's nephew, Jaafar, as Michael, due to open in cinemas on April 24.

Jackson, who died on June 25, 2009 after being given an overdose of the anaesthetic propofol, faced multiple allegations of child sex abuse during his lifetime.

In addition to his 2005 acquittal the performer paid a US\$15 million court settlement in 1994 over allegations involving another child.

— AFP



### ▲ Seasonal skater

A woman ice skates on a frozen pond on the National Mall in Washington, DC on Wednesday. – AFP

### ► U bar monster

People attend the first day of Mexico Art Week, the biggest Art fair in Latin America, drawing artists and collectors from all over the world in Mexico City on Wednesday. The annual fair runs from Wednesday until Sunday. – AFP

### ▼ Colourful homes

Houses of the old town are pictured in Nuuk, western Greenland, on Wednesday. – AFP



### ▲ Sweet horse

A child licks a syrup figurine at a fair featuring Chinese New Year goods in Yangzhou City, Jiangsu Province, on Wednesday. Fairs and events are held across the country, where people shop for goods in preparation for the upcoming Spring Festival, or the Chinese New Year. – Xinhua



### ▲ Eaten alive

Jean Pierre Povigna, 82, member of one of the four families of revellers who have been manufacturing Nice's Carnival floats for more than a century, walks past the carnival floats during the preparation of the upcoming 2026 Nice Carnival in Nice, France yesterday. – AFP



### ▲ Not a relic!

A stray cat sits on a tomb in the yard of Istanbul Archaeology museum yesterday. – AFP