

DIRECTOR: Harald Brüning

YEAR 21 NO.5243

MONDAY February 9, 2026

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

## UTM optimises tour guides training programmes

*New legal tour guides & travel agents' regime takes effect*



Macao University of Tourism (UTM) Rector Fanny Vong Chuk Kwan (centre, front) and other participants pose for a group photo during yesterday's 5th "Idea-cation" awards ceremony on UTM's Taipa campus.

– Photos: Ida Cheong

### Ida Cheong

The public Macao University of Tourism (UTM), as the special administrative region's sole tour guide training institution, will comply with the revised legal regime of travel agents and professional tour guides' requirements by consolidating resources and launching relevant training programmes, covering history, first aid and others, UTM Rector Fanny Vong Chuk Kwan told reporters on the sidelines of an awards ceremony.

Vong made the remarks on the sidelines of the 5th "Idea-cation" awards ceremony on UTM's Taipa campus.

The newly revised legal regime of travel agents and professional tour guides came into effect last Monday.

Vong said that the new law specifies the mandatory training durations of 102 hours for those who completed an accredited tourism higher education course, or 150 hours for those who completed senior high school only, which can help consolidate tour guides' knowledge and safeguard frontline tourism service quality.

The training programmes also cover foundational knowledge of Macau's history and culture, first aid, etiquette and others, aiming to build both knowledge reserves and service attitude, Vong said.

Vong said that her university will adjust the frequency of course offerings based on market demand and practical circumstances, including providing refresher courses to help

guides stay updated with the latest knowledge, continuously strengthen their expertise, and convey the most current information to tourists.

### 106 participants enter final round of 'Idea-cation'

Meanwhile, the 5th "Idea-cation" competition themed "Rural Revitalisations and Regional Development" featured 28 teams comprising 106 participants from local high schools, local and the Chinese mainland's tertiary education institutions as well as private enterprises.

"The competition is designed to inspire entrepreneurial and innovative thinking in tourism, which is a powerful driver for



Macao University of Tourism (UTM) Rector Fanny Vong Chuk Kwan speaks to reporters on the sidelines of yesterday's 5th "Idea-cation" awards ceremony on the UTM's Taipa campus.

sustainable regional development", Vong said, adding that by encouraging young people to take an active role in cultural heritage conservation and rural revitalisation, UTM is not only nurturing future leaders but also strengthening connections within the Greater Bay Area and highlighting career opportunities that extend beyond Macau.

The winners of the two groups were Chan Sui Ki Perpetual Help College of the high school group, while UTM won the open group. ■

\* The term "idea-cation" is a blend of "idea" and "vacation." It typically refers to a type of getaway or retreat focused on creativity, brainstorming, and the generation of new ideas. – Poe

## Senior diplomat resigns as Norway probes Epstein links

OSLO – Norway's ambassador to Jordan and Iraq has resigned after an investigation was launched into her ties to late US sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, the foreign ministry said yesterday.

Mona Juul, who played a key role in the secret Israeli-Palestinian negotiations which led to the Oslo Accords of the early 1990s, is among several high-profile Norwegian figures swept up in the latest Epstein file release.

"This is a correct and necessary

decision... Juul's contact with the convicted abuser Epstein has shown a serious lapse in judgment," Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide said in a statement.

The senior diplomat was temporarily suspended last Monday pending an investigation into her alleged links to Epstein, who died in 2019 while awaiting trial for sex trafficking.

Epstein left US\$10 million in his will to Juul's two children with her husband, fellow

diplomat and Oslo talks broker Terje Rod Larsen, according to Norwegian media.

Eide said that the ministry would continue to hold talks with Juul throughout the review to determine the extent of their dealings.

"It is important to understand the scope of the contact she, as an employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has had with Epstein," he said.

He added that the Jordan embassy would be led by the deputy ambassador until a new

envoy is appointed.

Norway's political and royal circles have been thrust into the eye of the Epstein storm, including the CEO of the World Economic Forum Borge Brende, and former prime minister Thorbjorn Jagland, who is being investigated for "aggravated corruption".

Norway's Crown Princess Mette-Marit has also come under scrutiny for her relationship with Epstein, which on Friday she said she "deeply regretted". – AFP

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### China's hosting of APEC meeting to boost regional cooperation, global growth: Vice-FM Ma

China's hosting of the 33rd APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting will inject strong momentum into regional cooperation in the Asia-Pacific, Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu has told Xinhua. – *Story on p. 7*

### Around 180 Gazans have left via Rafah crossing since reopening

Around 180 Palestinians have left the Gaza Strip since the limited reopening of the Rafah crossing with Egypt a week ago, according to officials in the territory.

– *Story on p. 10*

### Storm-battered Portugal votes in presidential election run-off

Portugal, which is reeling from fatal storms, voted yesterday in the second round of a presidential election in which the moderate favourite is expected to trounce his far-right rival.

– *Story on p. 12*

# National alignment key to success of Macau's 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan



Considering that the central authorities' 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan and Macau's Third Five-Year Plan are getting off the ground at a gallop in the run-up to the Year of the Horse, it is the right moment to reflect on the importance of making sure that the national plan and the two regional plans – Hong Kong has finally come up with its 1<sup>st</sup> Five-Year Plan – are aligned with each other.

I am convinced that national alignment is the key to success for the two regional plans. This editorial is focused on the alignment between the plans designed by the central authorities and those in the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR).

In economics, alignment offers a raft of benefits such as maximising limited financial and human resources and raising the effectiveness of investments by reducing duplication. Alignment refers to the synchronisation of economic activities, policies, and structures to achieve certain goals, such as sustainability, strategic business objectives and, increasingly, AI issues. Within this ambit, President Xi Jinping has introduced and promoted the concept of "new quality productive forces" as a core strategy to drive high-quality economic development, moving away from traditional, resource-intensive growth towards innovation-driven growth. First mentioned in 2023, this concept emphasises technological breakthroughs, high efficiency, and high quality.

The national 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan and the MSAR's 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan run from this year through 2030. The foundational recommendations for the national plan were adopted at the 4<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session of the 20<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) last October. The final version of the 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan is slated to be reviewed and approved by the National People's Congress (NPC) in Beijing next month during the annual "Two Sessions", i.e., the session of the NPC and concurrent one of the advisory Chinese People's Political

Consultative Conference (CPPCC).

According to observers, the national 2026-2030 plan will prioritise high-quality development, technological self-reliance, and green transformation as the country navigates increasing global uncertainties. President Xi's imprint on the plan is obvious.

Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai stated earlier this month that the local government is advancing the formulation of Macau's 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan, noting that it will be based on scientific evaluation and public consultation.

Evidently, the local plan prioritises Macau's "1+4" appropriate economic diversification strategy, national security, public administration reform, and the development of the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin.

"1+4" aims to consolidate Macau's position as a "World Centre of Tourism and Leisure" and to prioritise the growth of four emerging industries, namely Big Health (including TCM); modern financial services, such as developing a bond market and FinTech; High Tech and innovation, namely scientific research and developing the digital economy; and strengthening Macau's position as a hub for international conventions, culture, and sport.

The 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan marks a significant shift in how Hong Kong and Macau are to integrate with the Chinese mainland through their proactive involvement in the further development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA), as a crucial engine for high-quality development, focusing, among other things, on advanced manufacturing and sci-tech innovation, as well as "soft connectivity", i.e., the aim of boosting non-physical or intangible connections that enable communication, collaboration, and interaction among people, organisations, or systems. The ultimate objective is to strengthen ties between the 11-member GBA's nine Guangdong cities and the nation's two special administrative regions (SARs) – Hong Kong and Macau.

I am quite optimistic that the GBA will be the world's most successful "bay area" economy

long before the People's Republic of China (PRC) celebrates the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of its founding by the CPC on October 1, 2049.

The GBA covers a land area of around 56,000 square kilometres (the size of Togo in West Africa) and a population of over 87 million (the size of Turkey), accounting for 31 percent of the land area of Guangdong Province.

Within a mere seven years after its official launch in February 2019, the GBA has grown into a global power house of manufacturing and research. Where else would something like that be possible? Perhaps, if at all, on another planet...

Macau is the smallest of the 11 members of the GBA, covering just 0.06 percent of its land area and 0.8 percent of its population – but 2.4 percent of its GDP last year (417 billion patacas/US\$52 billion of the GBA's 15 trillion yuan/US\$2.15 trillion GDP).

Well, small is beautiful and, as we Macau residents know, our 33.3 km<sup>2</sup> "city-village" (as a decades-long resident here, I am convinced that Macau's peculiar charm – being the nation's celebrated "pearl on the palm" – consists of its duality of being an international city and a "very local" village simultaneously). Besides, Macau has been punching well above its weight for centuries – as a centre of Orient-Occident cultural exchange and learning, a commercial entrepôt, erstwhile a renowned manufacturing base of pyrotechnics (Macau firecrackers were globally sought after in the not so distant past), and a platform for commercial and cultural ties between China and the nine-nation Portuguese-speaking world; the 10 countries together representing about one-fifth of the world population).

The 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan focuses on Macau's further development based on the "One Centre, One Platform, One Base" strategy, with a push that is loud and clear for the "appropriate" diversification of its economy which continues to be overly dependent on its world-famous gaming industry.

I hope that Macau's gaming industry will further strengthen investment in non-gaming aspects of the ludic industry, such as concerts and other artistic and cultural events, conventional and e-sports, ideally involving educational aspects such as teaching and learning through play – well, that's what the Latin adjective "ludic" relates to. In ancient Rome, "ludic" referred not only to games, play and sport but also to educational activities, such as establishments where children were taught through play.

Of course, all this must always be based on economic reality – it would be imprudent to kill the proverbial goose that lays the golden egg. Government-concessioned gaming businesses have been

part of Macau's economic fabric since 1849. Indeed, the sector is a major element of Macau's cultural heritage. After all, culture is a significant part of the economy, in the case of Macau in particular, considering that our UNESCO World Heritage status is one of our best-known tourist attractions – just (try) to visit the area around St Paul's Ruins and Na Tcha Temple, not just at a weekend. The tight crowds belie the claim that "almost all" tourists are "only" interested in Macau's entertainment industry.

At last week's Spring Festival reception hosted by the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the MSAR, both Liaison Office Director Zheng Xincong and Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai highlighted in their respective speeches the commitment to proactively align Macau's development drive with the national 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan, based on the requirements raised by President Xi during his annual duty meeting with Sam in Beijing in late December.

Zheng singled out Xi's requirement to further improve its executive-led governance, solidly advance Macau's appropriate economic diversification, continuously enhance its governance effectiveness, and better integrate and service the nation's overall development.

Sam pledged in his speech that the local government will use its 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan as a key lever, proactively aligning it with the central authorities' 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan. Sam reaffirmed that 2026 will be pivotal year for aligning the MSAR with national strategies, "seizing opportunities and continuously advancing reform".

Deepening integration with the GBA in general, and with the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin in particular, will, undoubtedly, be the main focus of Macau's 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan, apart from the local authorities' determination of strengthening national security and developing Macau into a "smarter" and more liveable and sustainable city – which includes ongoing efforts to tackle our city's public transport and traffic woes, a predicament that affects both locals and visitors and is tarnishing our standing as a World Centre of Tourism and Leisure.

In my view, public transport is one of the most pressing challenges that Macau needs to tackle head on during the 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan. Local officials should ask their counterparts in the Chinese mainland for advice and assistance. Each time I am visiting the Chinese mainland, the GBA specifically, I am stunned by the effectiveness of public transport there.

I must admit that the transport and traffic situation – our bendy roads and narrow lanes have to cope with over 250,000 motor vehicles –

in Macau is complex and somewhat contradictory, and this sound almost like the understatement of the year. This reminds me of Mao Zedong's insistence that all problems can readily be solved by grasping the contradictions that cause them, in his essay "On Contradiction," written in August 1937.

Macau has the financial wherewithal to take on its development challenges. Among international credit agencies, the MSAR is known for its robust fiscal buffers and financial resilience. Its fiscal reserves amounted to 661 billion patacas (that's an astonishing US\$82.6 billion last November – or more than 0.6 trillion patacas), while its forex reserves amounted to 240.8 billion patacas – that's money, indeed!

On the public finance front, Macau's is, indubitably, the envy of the world. But I also believe that for financial reserves to be useful, a financially safe portion of them should be used to solve practical problems.

Based on the "One Country, Two Systems" principle, which is the constitutional cornerstone of the existence of the MSAR, Macau's 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan's alignment with the central authorities' 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year is both reasonable and sensible. To put it more plainly: it makes sense.

Macau is not only an autonomous region of the PRC, but also an inalienable part of it, as clearly stated by Articles 1 and 2 of the Basic Law of the MSAR of the PRC. That's why the alignment between the two plans is constitutionally valid. On top of that, "One Country" precedes "Two Systems".

For Macau to be able to maintain and even further grow its high standard of living (one of the world's highest), integration with the GBA is not only a fundamental requirement but also a desideratum. While Macau recorded a daily average of nearly 110,000 visitor arrivals last year, tens of thousands of Macau residents travel every day to Zhuhai and beyond in the GBA for shopping, eating-out, having their hair and nails done, or just for R&R.

Macau, Hong Kong and the Guangdong section of the GBA are quickly growing together into one of the world's top metropolises. That's an exciting development. I welcome it wholeheartedly.

I am sure that Macau's one-of-a-kind socio-cultural identity is vigorous enough to continue to play a meaningful role in the GBA. So let's go full steam ahead with the alignment concept, without which Macau's quinquennial plan would not be able to succeed, bearing in mind that its ever closer cooperation with the Chinese mainland is nowadays a matter of course.

– Harald Brüning

Published since Aug 2004

Director & Chief Editor – Harald Brüning  
Office Manager – Sally Chong  
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Printed by Tipografia Welfare Lda, 82-86 Rua dos Pescadores  
Wire services – AFP, Xinhua  
Chatbots: Poe, DeepSeek

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CLOUDY APART FROM SUNNY INTERVALS.  
FORCE 4 TO 5 EAST TO NORTHEASTERLY WINDS WITH GUSTS.  
RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL RANGE BETWEEN 55% AND 85%.



13°C~17°C

Source: SMG

## SSM probes gastroenteritis at local nursery

**Rui Pastorin**

The Health Bureau (SSM) said in a statement yesterday that it received a report of a collective case of gastroenteritis on Saturday involving five children studying at the "Fu Luen Little White Rabbit Nursery" (婦聯小白兔托兒所) at 10-12 Rua de Nam Keng in Taipa.

The patients comprise two males and three females, all from Class C of the nursery. Most have sought medical attention and no severe case or serious complications were found, the statement said. One of the patients was hospitalised for observation and reported to be in stable condition.

According to the statement, the patients started showing symptoms such as vomiting, diarrhoea, fever, and abdominal pain starting on Thursday. The bureau, based on patients' dining situations, has initially ruled out food as the root cause, noting that a virus is the more likely cause due to the onset time, symptoms, incubation period and signs.

The bureau highlighted two common and highly contagious causes of gastroenteritis, namely norovirus (Norwalk-like virus) and rotavirus.

Norovirus, aka the winter vomiting disease, is the most common cause of gastroenteritis, with symptoms, which usually appear 24 hours after exposure,

including diarrhoea, vomiting, and stomach pain, and sometimes fever or headache, according to Wikipedia, with most patients recovering within one to three days. Rotavirus, according to AI chatbot Poe, is a virus that causes severe diarrhoea and vomiting, mainly in babies and young children. It spreads easily from person to person or through contaminated food and water.

The statement said that norovirus can easily break out in collective settings like nursing homes and schools and has an incubation period of 24 to 48 hours. It affects all ages and can be transmitted through contaminated food or water, contact with vomit or faeces, touching contaminated objects or through droplets.

Symptoms of both the norovirus and rotavirus are similar, the statement said. The illness is usually mild and goes away on its own within one to five days, with few complications.

The bureau highlighted that they are investigating the collective case and has provided guidance on cleaning and disinfection, as well as isolating the patients, and ensuring good air circulation to control the spread of infection. Moreover, the bureau also reminded members of the public to pay close attention to personal, environmental, and food hygiene. ■

## CNY Market opens tomorrow in Praça do Tap Siac

**Khalel Vallo**

Macau's traditional Chinese New Year (CNY) Market will return to Praça do Tap Siac for its 2026 edition, offering festive goods, flowers, snacks and cultural performances, while striving to attract revellers ahead of the Spring Festival celebrations.

The Year of the Horse begins next Tuesday.

According to a statement by the Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) last week, the market will feature a total of 26 stalls, including 16 selling CNY products, six offering festive flowers and four selling snacks.

Visitors can browse a range of decorations and gifts, as well as seasonal food items, with fresh flowers, potted plants and traditional red couplets remaining popular choices for families preparing for the holiday.

Meanwhile, a variety of cultural

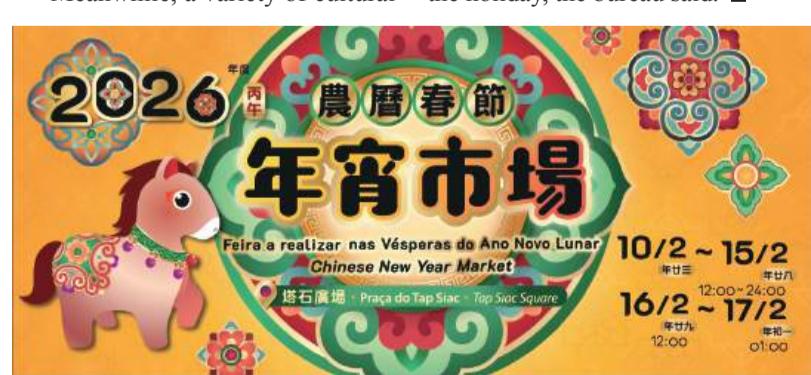
and entertainment performances will also be arranged from tomorrow through next Monday in the square, from 8:30 p.m. to 10 p.m. daily.

In addition, a large floral art exhibition and festive lighting decorations will be set up to enhance the seasonal atmosphere, according to the statement.

In order to facilitate shopping and logistics, temporary loading and unloading areas for the public and authorised vehicles will be arranged in Rua de Afonso de Albuquerque in order to provide convenience for the visitors to shop at the market, the statement added.

The market will run from tomorrow through Sunday from 12 p.m. to midnight, and next Monday and Tuesday from 12 p.m. to 1 a.m.

The CNY Market aims to provide a festive space to shop and enjoy seasonal cultural activities ahead of the holiday, the bureau said. ■



This poster provided by the Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) last week promotes its upcoming Chinese New Year (CNY) Market, slated to open in Praça do Tap Siac tomorrow.

## New smoking-free zone to start in Nape Thursday



This undated handout photo provided by the Health Bureau (SSM) shows the "Smoke-Free Zone" and the "Designated Smoking Spots" near the public Dr. Carlos d'Assumpção Park (宋玉生公園) being painted on the ground.

**Ida Cheong**

Aiming to safeguard public health and reduce smoking while walking, a pilot "smoking-free zone" will be implemented around Dr. Carlos d'Assumpção Park's (宋玉生公園) streets, pavements and open spaces in Nape starting on Thursday, according to a statement issued by the Health Bureau (SSM) yesterday.

During the pilot period, smoking will be prohibited throughout the "Smoke-Free Zone" except within the "Designated Smoking Spots". Health Bureau (SSM) inspectors will conduct irregular on-the-spot checks, the statement said.

The statement noted that

smokers found outside the designated smoking spots will be admonished but not fined during this trial phase. Further details will be announced later.

Starting last Friday, the Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) began painting the ground boundaries and markings for the "Smoke-Free Zone" and "Designated Smoking Spots", the statement said, adding that the official trial operation is set to begin on Thursday.

The Health Bureau urged smokers to quit for the sake of their own and their families' health. Those intending to quit smoking can seek a referral to the SSM



This image provided by the Health Bureau (SSM) on Friday shows the Dr. Carlos d'Assumpção Park's (宋玉生公園) surrounding streets, pavements and open spaces in Nape where a pilot 'smoking-free zone' will begin on Thursday.

"Smoking Cessation Consultation Clinic" through a health centre or the public Conde de São Januário Hospital Centre (CHCSJ), make appointment via the "My Health" section within the "One Account" app, or call 2848 1238 during office hours to schedule a consultation.

For more information, please visit the tobacco control information website: <https://www.ssm.gov.mo/apps1/smokefree/ch.aspx#clg3504>. ■

## LRT to launch CNY festivities Saturday

**Khalel Vallo**

Macau Light Rapid Transit Corporation Limited (LRT) said in a statement yesterday that it will roll out a series of festive activities for the Chinese New Year (CNY), including a themed train service and a celebratory event at Barra Station this Saturday.

The statement noted that it will hold an event titled "Light Rail Brings Prosperity to Barra for the New Year of 2026" at the LRT Barra Station this Saturday.

The event will take place from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. at the station's Exit A, the statement said. During the event, free CNY couplets and red envelopes will be given out, while visitors can also take part in interactive activities such as self-service printing of red envelopes, according to the statement.

The statement added that several calligraphy enthusiasts will be invited to write festive couplets on-site, and participants will also be able to try writing their own couplets.

The event will also feature colouring and drawing activities, as well as a selection of New Year-themed stamps designed for families and children to create festive crafts together, the statement noted, adding that two guided tours of Barra Station will also be held on the same day, with members of the public able to check details and register through the company's website at <https://www.mlm.com.mo/>.



This poster provided by Macau Light Rapid Transit Corporation Limited (LRT) yesterday promotes its "Light Rail Brings Prosperity to Barra for the New Year of 2026" event which will be held at the LRT Barra Station this Saturday.

Moreover, the Taipa Line will introduce a CNY-themed train starting this Saturday, featuring festive decorations inside and outside the carriages, the statement said, adding that a "mystery" themed train will be introduced

during the holiday period. Meanwhile, LRT mascot "Heng Chai" will also appear at stations during the holiday period to greet passengers, interact with the public and distribute small gifts, according to the statement. ■

# Local short 'The Rhythm of War' shines at Shandong film competition: director

Interview and review by William Chan

The local short film "The Rhythm of War" (烽火之聲), produced last year, recently won Best Film and Best Screenplay in the micro-film category at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Yellow River Estuary Revolutionary Movie Competition in Dongying, Shandong Province.

Its director, Keo Lou, spoke to the *Post* in an online interview last week.

"The Rhythm of War" is a 15-minute micro-film set against the backdrop of China's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. Through the perspective of patriotic youth Luo Zhensheng (羅振聲), it depicts the heroic deeds of Macau compatriots supporting the nation's resistance during the fall of Guangdong in 1938. The film blends real historical events with artistic creation, using a Ne Zha opera troupe as the narrative vehicle to portray the brilliance of humanity and patriotic sentiments amid the flames of war. The birth of "The Rhythm of War" stemmed from funding by the Macau Cultural Development Fund and a commission from the Association of Na Tcha Temple, with the key aim of blending the Ne Zha theme with an anti-war narrative.

At first glance, this merger seems difficult because the two themes are so disparate, but Lou's team perfectly fused them with Macau as the pivot. The team cleverly chose a father-son duo from a "Ne Zha" opera troupe in Guangdong as the main storyline. Through their encounter with a group of anti-Japanese volunteers from Macau, the film shows ordinary people's choices in the confusion of the times. This choice itself is full of symbolic meaning – Ne Zha, as a symbol of rebellion and justice in Chinese traditional mythology, forms a subtle echo with the heroic deeds of Macau compatriots during the War of Resistance.

Lou noted that this creation was a huge challenge – not just technically, but psychologically and aesthetically. The team not only had to tackle the relatively unfamiliar topic of Macau's local War of Resistance history but also master a grand war narrative within the limited budget of a micro-film. "Macau's War of Resistance history isn't that well-known," Lou explained. "We had to do extensive historical research

to ensure the story's authenticity. At the same time, we needed to transform this history into a story that moves audiences, rather than a simple history textbook."

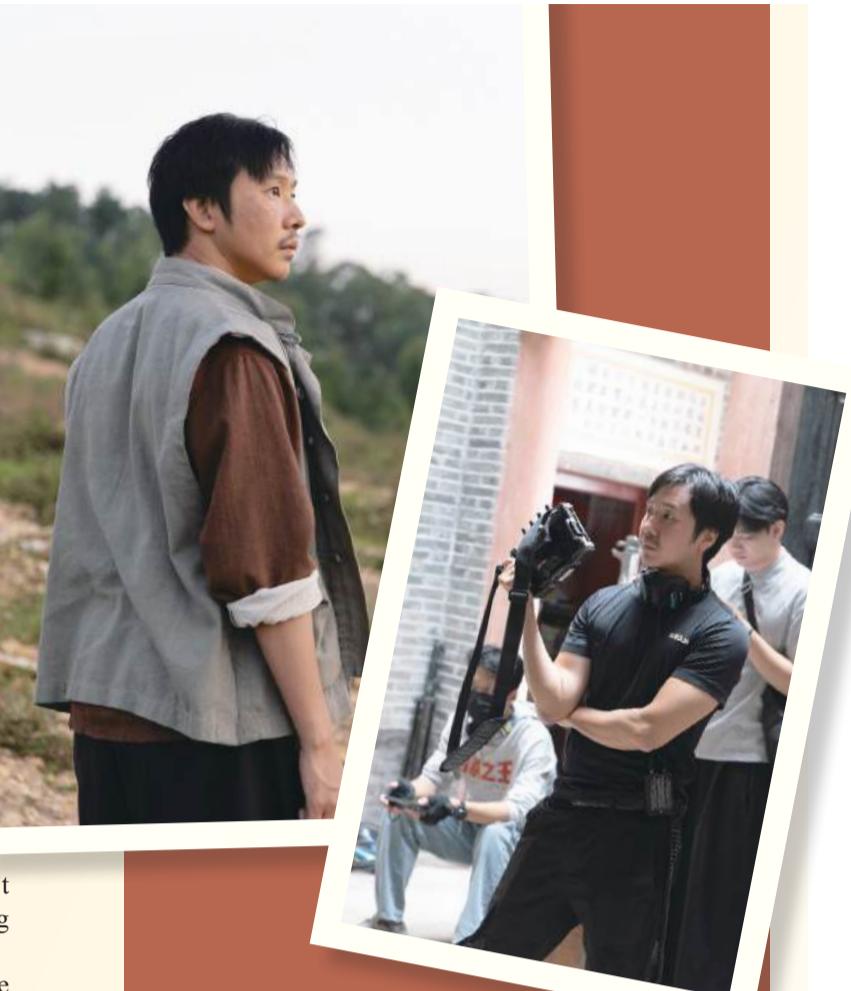
According to Lou, the entire story is not only backed by historical materials but also makes perfect sense. During World War II, Macau was one of the international cities in China, obtaining information much faster than nearby cities like Foshan and Jiangmen – most people there wouldn't even know they were under invasion – highlighting Macau's pivotal position.

The film's story structure revolves around a core conflict: When anti-Japanese volunteers from Macau arrive at the opera troupe asking for help in passing intelligence, the father initially resists. He thinks it has nothing to do with him – why risk his life? But when he hears gunfire and realises his son might be in danger, he ultimately chooses to sacrifice himself. Instead of a simple heroic narrative, Lou's team has crafted a complex story about humanity, family, and responsibility.

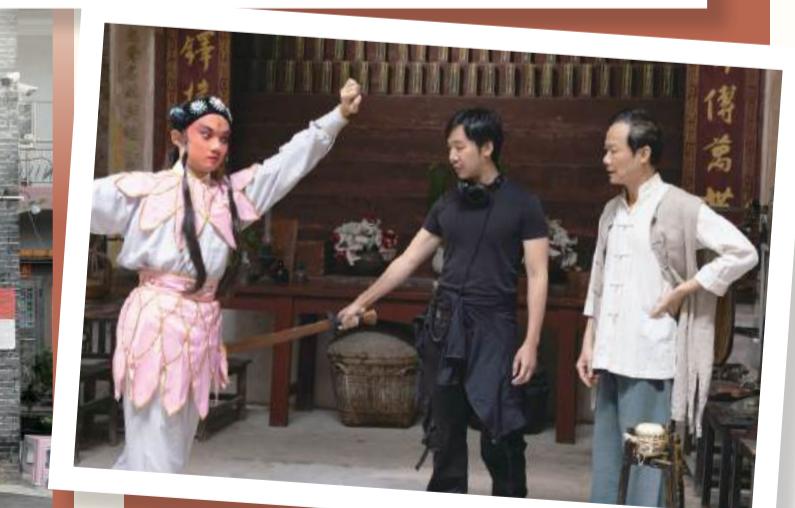
Lou emphasised that the film's core is not simply to praise heroes but, through this tragic father-son story, to explore war's devastation on humanity and the preciousness of peace. "Our stance isn't to judge right or wrong, but by showing the cruelty of war, to convey a deeper message: Everyone should approach others with a loving heart and understanding, so there will be no war." This "seeing the big through the small" technique makes the film more emotionally penetrating and avoids rigid, preachy expression.

Encouragingly, this history piece full of a "Macau perspective" received unexpectedly strong resonance at the mainland film exhibition, Lou noted. He pointed out that many mainland judges and audiences were surprised by "Macau's own heroic War of Resistance stories." This surprise precisely proves the potential value and unique appeal of Macau's local stories, powerfully refuting the outdated notion that "Macau topics have a narrow market."

Readers interested can watch the short film on WeChat by searching its Chinese title "烽火之聲."



Keo Lou, who directs *The Rhythm of War*, also acts in the short film as a side character. – Photos provided by Lou



Director Keo Lou interacts with the father and son actors during film shooting last year.



# Fire alerts drop 3.36 pct to 850 in 2025: CB

**Armindo Neves**

The Fire Services Bureau (CB) announced on Friday that the number of fire alerts in 2025 dropped by 3.36 percent to 850 compared to 2024.

The Fire Services Bureau hosted the annual press conference at its headquarters next to Sai Van Lake, near Macau Tower, where Wong Kin, the bureau's commissioner, announced its statistics on fire alerts, ambulance call-outs, and other rescue incidents for 2025.

According to Wong, the bureau attended to 53,190 incidents in 2025, a decrease of 1.74 percent from the 54,133 recorded in 2024. Among the 53,190 incidents, 45,370 involved ambulance call-outs, up 0.3 percent year-on-year.

Wong said that the 53,190 incidents recorded in 2025 included 850 fire alerts, a decrease of 3.36 percent from the 882 in the same period of 2024. A total of 705 of the 850 fire alerts last year did not require firefighters to extinguish the blaze with a fire hose after arriving at the scene, accounting for 82.94 percent of the total, Wong said.

Wong pointed out that the main causes of fire alarms were unattended cooking stoves, careless disposal of ignition sources, burning of incense, candles and joss paper,



Flanked by other senior officers, Wong Kin, commissioner of Fire Services Bureau (CB), addresses Friday's press conference at the bureau's headquarters next to Sai Van Lake.

– Photos: Armindo Neves

mechanical or equipment failure, and short circuits, adding that these causes combined accounted for 534 cases, accounting for 62.82 percent of all fire alarm responses. Among the fire-alert responses, incidents requiring hose deployment for firefighting totalled 145, a decrease of 18.54 percent compared to the 178 cases in 2024, Wong said.

## Daily average of 124 ambulance deployment last year

The total number of ambulance deployments in 2025 was 45,370, according to Wong, an increase of 134 compared to 2024, representing a slight rise of only 0.3 percent.

The daily average of ambulance deployments stood at 124 last year, or about five every hour.

Wong pointed out that ambulance cases were primarily for incidents involving dizziness, abdominal pain, fever, and contusions.

Wong noted that around 1,200 of these cases were assessed by the hospital as non-emergencies. He urged the public to use ambulance resources appropriately.

During the media Q&A session, journalists raised a series of questions.

In response to fire safety hazards in older buildings, Wong said that over 11,000 fire prevention inspections were conducted last year, primarily focusing on the



This photo taken on Friday shows fire engines and an ambulance parked at the Sai Van Lake fire station, which is also the Fire Services Bureau's (CB) headquarters.

unobstructed condition of fire escape routes and the maintenance of fire protection systems. Regarding obstructions in passageways, more than 2,400 cases were identified. Following warnings, nearly 90 percent of these cases were rectified, with a total of 126 cases resulting in penalties, Wong said.

As buildings increase in height and electric vehicles become more widespread, rescue operations are becoming increasingly complex. Wong said that personnel will be sent to the Chinese mainland and Hong Kong for exchange and training in the future, with a focus on strategies for responding to high-rise building fires.

Wong also said that new equipment such as 18-metre and 20-metre aerial ladder trucks have already been introduced for deployment to the city's old quarters, and the continuous acquisition of gear like fire blankets\* and robots are planned to address emerging risks such as lithium battery fires in electric vehicles. ■

\*A fire blanket is a safety device used to extinguish small fires, particularly those involving flammable liquids or grease. It consists of a large piece of fire-resistant material, typically made from fibreglass or other flame-retardant fabrics, which can be draped over a fire to smother it. - Poe

## PSP logs new single-day record for inbound, outbound travel

**Rui Pastorin**

A new single-day record was set on Saturday for the total number of inbound and outbound travellers across Macau, reaching 867,000 people, according to data announced by the Public Security Police (PSP) on their official WeChat account yesterday.

Tourists made up most of the figure at 39.1 percent, followed by Macau residents at 36.7 percent and non-resident workers (NRWs) at 21.6 percent, the PSP data noted. The number of visitors to Macau

had also reached 174,000 that day, according to the statement.

Moreover, on the same day, the Barrier Gate checkpoint also reported close to 463,000 travellers, with the statement pointing out that this number represents the highest single-day record for that checkpoint in the past five years.

The statement pointed out that the entry and exit traffic at various checkpoints in Macau are expected to remain high with the approach of the Chinese New Year (CNY) holiday. ■



This image shows crowds of locals and tourists walking through Largo do São Domingos in the city centre on Thursday.

– Photo: Rui Pastorin

## Police bust local woman & man for money laundering in separate cases

**Armindo Neves**

The Judiciary Police nabbed a local woman and a local man for money laundering on Thursday and Friday, respectively, PJ spokesman Cheong Kim Fong said during special press conference on Friday and Saturday.

Cheong identified the two suspects as a 52-year-old traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) pharmacy owner surnamed Hong and a 35-year-old chef surnamed Chong.

According to Cheong, in May 2025, the Judiciary Police received a report from a bank indicating that 34 mainland bank ATM cards had been used to conduct 60 transactions at a TCM pharmacy in the central district between March 22 and May 9 last year, with a total amount of 4.9 million patacas.

Cheong said that the investigation revealed that 1.39 million patacas of this sum were confirmed to be linked to 10 telecom fraud cases in the Chinese mainland, involving losses of around 2.67 million yuan, adding that the three individuals involved did not actually collect the goods after the transactions.

On Thursday, the Judiciary Police arrested Hong, who, under questioning, denied conspiring to launder fraud proceeds through false transactions and concealing facts, according to Cheong, who underlined that the three suspects from the Chinese mainland were still at large at the time of the press conference.

Hong, who faces charges of money laundering and other crimes, was



Judiciary Police (PJ) officers escort the hooded money laundering suspect from the PJ headquarters to a PJ vehicle on Friday.

– Photos: Armindo Neves



Judiciary Police (PJ) officers escort the hooded fraud and money laundering suspect from the PJ headquarters to a PJ vehicle on Saturday.

reported the case to the Judiciary Police, stating a loss of HK\$620,000.

Upon investigation, Cheong said, PJ officers identified the account holder, Chong, who had received the funds and had been defrauded of 300,000 patacas in a similar scheme and reported the case to the Judiciary Police last December. Subsequently, to recover his lost funds, he agreed to let the fraud syndicate use his bank account to process illicit money, according to Cheong, adding that Chong's account received a total of HK\$590,000 in involved funds.

Chong faces charges of money laundering and fraud. Chong was transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) after the press conference. ■

# Macau & mainland cops arrest 4 robbers in 2 cases

**Armindo Neves**

Macau's Judiciary Police (PJ) and the Chinese mainland Public Security Bureau (PSB) arrested four mainland men for robbery in two different cases, PJ spokesman Vong Kuan Hung said during a special press conference on Friday and Saturday, respectively.

Vong identified the four unemployed suspects by their surnames – Yang, Li, Lin and She, aged 29, 30, 25 and 36, respectively.

Vong said that Yang and Li were the suspects in the first case, while Lin and She were the suspects in the second case.

According to Vong, on December 1 last year, a man from the Chinese mainland went to a hotel guestroom in Cotai for a “business meeting”, as scheduled. There, he was threatened with a knife by Li and robbed of HK\$100,000 (102,676 patacas) in



**Evidence displayed at the PJ headquarters in Zape on Friday shows a fruit knife and blood-stained clothes related to the first robbery case.** — Photos: Armindo Neves

cash, while Yang kept watch outside the room. The victim sustained cuts to his forehead, ear, and hand, according to Vong, adding that Yang and Li left Macau immediately after the crime.

The Judiciary Police arrested Yang at the Macau Port (checkpoint)

of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge (HZMB) on December 22, according to Vong, adding that the Chinese mainland Public Security Bureau reported to the Judiciary Police through the local Sub-Bureau of the National Central Bureau of INTERPOL that Li was arrested



**Evidence displayed at the PJ headquarters in Zape on Saturday shows two zip ties and a sweat shirt related to the second robbery case.**

in Jiangxi Province on February 4, 2026.

## Robbers use zip ties to bind victim's hands & feet

According to Vong, on December 19 last year, a male mainlander engaging in illegal

currency exchange activities was robbed of gaming chips worth HK\$180,000 by Lin and She in a hotel guest room in Cotai, adding that the victim's wrists and ankles were bound with zip ties. Around half an hour later, Vong said that the two suspects left the room and the victim managed to free himself and reported the incident to the police.

The two suspects left Macau via the Hengqin Port (checkpoint), adding that the mainland's Public Security Police reported to the Judiciary Police through the local Sub-Bureau of the National Central Bureau of INTERPOL that the duo were arrested in Hubei Province on Thursday.

Vong also said that as the victim was involved in illegal currency exchange activities, he has been dealt with separately in another case. ■

## Robust traffic on China-Laos Railway strengthens connectivity, fuels development

**KUNMING** — The China-Laos Railway has seen robust growth in both passenger and freight transport since its launch, providing strong support for regional connectivity and economic and social development along its route, according to China Railway Kunming Group Co., Ltd.

As of February 2, the China-Laos Railway had operated a total of 90,000 passenger train trips, carrying 66.12 million passengers. Of these, 53.95 million travelled on the Chinese domestic section, while 12.17 million were transported on the overseas section.

This railway has significantly facilitated cross-border tourism,

education and business exchanges between China and Laos, the company said.

The China-Laos Railway corridor has entered its peak winter-spring tourism season. To meet rising demand, the railway operator has increased transport capacity, operating more than 70 passenger trains daily and handling over 60,000 passenger trips each day. This includes four cross-border passenger trains, which facilitate daily cross-border travel for more than 1,000 passengers.

Meanwhile, the railway has cumulatively transported 76.8 million tonnes of cargo, including 17 million tonnes of cross-border

freight. Its services now cover 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities in China, and extend to 19 countries and regions, including Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam. The variety of goods transported across borders has expanded to over 3,800 categories.

Stretching 1,035 km from Kunming in southwest China's Yunnan Province to the Lao capital of Vientiane, the China-Laos Railway commenced operations on December 3, 2021. To meet growing cross-border travel demand, international passenger train services between Kunming and Vientiane were introduced on April 13, 2023. — Xinhua

## Scientists make lunar chronology breakthrough with Chang'e-6 samples from far side of moon

**BEIJING** — For the first time, scientists have confirmed that the impact cratering rates on the near and far sides of the Moon are essentially consistent, laying a solid basis for the establishment of a globally unified lunar chronology system, according to the *Science and Technology Daily*.

A research team led by the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Institute of Geology and Geophysics successfully revised the decades-old lunar impact crater chronology model by analyzing remote sensing images.

Their study reveals a uniform impact flux across both hemispheres, provides evidence that early lunar impact events followed a smooth trend of gradual decline, rather than the dramatic fluctuations previously hypothesized. Their findings were published in *Science Advances* on Thursday.

Knowing the age of the lunar surface is crucial to understanding the moon's geological evolution. For decades, scientists have estimated the age of unsampled regions by counting impact craters, with a higher density indicating an older surface.

However, the existing crater chronology method relied entirely on samples from the near side of the moon, and the oldest specimens date back no more than 4 billion years. This limitation fueled ongoing debate about the moon's early impact history, including competing hypotheses such as the Late Heavy Bombardment.

A breakthrough came in June 2024, when China's Chang'e-6 mission returned 1,935 grams of lunar samples from the Apollo Basin, which is located within the South Pole-Aitken Basin on the moon's far side.

Analysis of these samples identified two key rock types: young basalt aged at 2.807 billion years old, and ancient norite formed 4.25 billion years ago.

The norite, in particular, originated from magma that crystallized after the giant impact event that formed the South Pole-Aitken Basin – the moon's largest and oldest impact structure. These samples have served as a critical anchor point in reconstructing the early history of the moon.

The researchers systematically

mapped crater densities across the Chang'e-6 landing area and the broader South Pole-Aitken Basin using high-resolution remote sensing imagery.

By then integrating this new density data with all historical sample data from the Apollo, Luna and Chang'e-5 missions, they constructed a new, more comprehensive lunar impact chronology model.

Their results show that far-side crater density data aligns perfectly with the confidence interval of the near-side-derived model. “This indicates that the impact flux was homogeneous across the entire moon, providing a reliable basis for a unified global lunar chronology,” said Yue Zongyu, the study's lead author and a researcher at the institute.

Yue noted that the study fundamentally advances our understanding of lunar impact history and underscores the pivotal scientific value of the Chang'e-6 samples. The refined chronology will serve as a more accurate reference not only for lunar study but also for the dating of surfaces of other planetary bodies in the solar system. — Xinhua



**A girl learns how to ride a horse at the racecourse of a cultural and creative base in Xiapu County, Fujian Province, on Saturday. Horse-themed tourism has surged recently in Xiapu as the Year of the Horse approaches.** — Xinhua

## Leveraging HK's strengths to serve national needs: Chan

**HONG KONG** — Paul Chan Mo-po, financial secretary of China's Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government, said yesterday that Hong Kong is determined to leverage its strengths to serve national needs under the 15th Five-Year Plan.

Chan said in his blog that institutions and organizations across Hong Kong are keen to see how the city can seize opportunities brought by the 15th Five-Year Plan, align with national strategies, and drive stronger growth for their own industries.

Under the HKSAR government's leadership, departments and public institutions are working together to accelerate the cultivation of new productive forces. This includes helping mainland innovation and technology enterprises “go global,” attracting them to set up research centers in Hong Kong, and fostering industry clustering, with the benefits steadily becoming visible, Chan said.

For example, the Hong Kong Productivity Council, a member of the Task Force on Supporting Mainland Enterprises in Going Global, established “The Cradle – Go Global Service Center” to provide funding and support services for enterprises expanding abroad. Since its launch in April last year,

over 350 enterprises have expressed interest, with more than 100 projects entering concrete follow-up stages.

To accelerate clustering, Hong Kong has intensified efforts to attract tech companies to establish a presence in the city. The Innovation, Technology and Industry Bureau, the Office for Attracting Strategic Enterprises, and InvestHK have all been actively promoting this work in recent years, he added.

Chan stressed that Hong Kong must also leverage its role as an international financial center, using finance to empower and accelerate industrial growth.

Last year, Hong Kong's IPO market led globally, with 119 companies raising over HK\$280 billion. Enterprises in information technology, biotechnology, new energy, and advanced industries accounted for about 70 percent of the funds raised, he said.

Chan said that Hong Kong will seize the opportunities of the 15th Five-Year Plan, actively integrate into and serve the country's overall development, further promote integration of technological and industrial innovation, and push the economy toward high-quality, high-value-added, and diversified growth. — Xinhua

# China's hosting of APEC meeting to boost regional cooperation, global growth: Vice-FM

BEIJING – China's hosting of the 33rd APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting will inject strong momentum into regional cooperation in the Asia-Pacific, and provide greater certainty, stability and positive energy for global economic growth and international cooperation, Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu said in an interview with Xinhua.

This year marks the APEC "China Year," with the theme of "Building an Asia-Pacific Community to Prosper Together." China will host the 33rd APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in November.

"This theme has garnered unanimous support and broad backing from APEC economies," Ma said.

Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) is the highest-level economic cooperation mechanism that enjoys the broadest scope and the most significant influence in the Asia-Pacific region, Ma told Xinhua.

The fourth plenary session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China held in last October pointed out that the world today is beset with changes and disturbances, with turmoil continuing to mount, unilateralism and protectionism on the rise, and the international economic and trade order facing grave challenges, Ma said.

He further noted that the Asia-Pacific region stands at a crossroads, while international cooperation faces a critical moment of either advancement or regression.

Against this backdrop, China's role as the host of 2026 APEC meeting carries significance that extends far beyond APEC itself, and even beyond the Asia-Pacific region, he said.

As a driver in regional cooperation, a defender of multilateralism, and a major engine of the global economy, China's hosting of the 33rd APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting fully demonstrates its sense of responsibility as a major country, Ma pointed out.

"This will not only inject strong impetus into Asia-Pacific regional cooperation, but also provide greater certainty, stability, and positive momentum for global economic growth and international collaboration," Ma said.

Noting the 2026 APEC "China Year" coincides with the inaugural year of China's 15th Five-Year Plan, during which the country will further deepen reforms and expand opening-up, Ma said that as the host of APEC meeting, China will play a leading role in shaping regional economic integration and advancing the development of an Asia-Pacific community.

The vision to build an Asia-Pacific

community must be translated into tangible actions, Ma stated, adding that for the 2026 APEC "China Year," openness, innovation and cooperation are three priorities.

"Openness" refers to fostering an open economy, opposing protectionism, and promoting trade and investment liberalization and facilitation, Ma said.

He added that "innovation" means upholding an innovation-driven development model, advancing new quality productive forces, and creating new growth drivers for APEC cooperation.

"Cooperation" is about leveraging the comparative strengths of APEC economies, enhancing policy synergy and experience exchanges to achieve mutual benefit, he added.

"These priorities have received broad endorsement from APEC economies," Ma said.

This year also marks China's third time hosting APEC meeting. Chen Xu, chair of the 2026 APEC Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM), said that in 2001 and 2014, China hosted APEC meetings, leaving an indelible mark on APEC's history.

China has actively participated in practical cooperation across various fields under the APEC framework, and joined hands with all parties to foster an open economy in the Asia-

Pacific, Chen said in a separate interview with Xinhua.

Chen said that China will host approximately 300 related activities throughout the year, including SOMs and ministerial meetings.

China is holding the first SOM and related meetings in Guangzhou from Feb. 1 to 10.

Chen noted that the SOM serves as the main channel for advancing APEC cooperation and preparing deliverables for the Leaders' Meeting. This year, except for the first one in Guangzhou, SOM meetings will also be held in Shanghai in May and Dalian in August, Chen said.

Chen added that from May to October this year, ten thematic ministerial meetings will be organized by relevant Chinese authorities in places including Beijing, Chengdu, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Suzhou, Hong Kong and Macao.

"These meetings will cover a wide range of fields such as energy, transportation, the digital economy, food security, human resources, trade, finance, tourism, small and medium-sized enterprises, and women's affairs," Chen added.

"Preparations for the 2026 APEC meetings are in full swing, with all tasks progressing smoothly," Chen said.

—Xinhua



Children perform a poetry recitation at a music hall in Qinyang, Henan Province, yesterday. Various extracurricular activities are available for students across China during the winter vacation.

—Xinhua

## Russian officials voice hope for greater cooperation as CNY comes

MOSCOW – During the Spring Festival reception for Russian friends held in the Chinese Embassy in Russia on Friday, Russian officials voiced hope for more cooperation with China while delivering Chinese New Year greetings.

"Chinese New Year in Moscow" festival attracted about 1.5 million visitors in 2025, and this festival for the Year of the Horse will open in the heart of the Russian capital on February 16, said Ivan Melnikov, first deputy speaker of the State Duma.

"The horse symbolizes vitality, dynamism, perseverance and loyalty in traditional culture," Melnikov said, noting that Russia and China will forge ahead with resolve, deepen mutual trust and expand practical cooperation in the new year.

Gennady Zyuganov, leader of Russia's Communist Party, expressed hope for success in the implementation of China's new five-year plan. "This will enable China to become a leader in economic development, scientific and technological

progress, and environmental protection," he said.

Glad to see great achievements made by the "brotherly Chinese people," Dmitry Novikov, First Deputy Chairman of the State Duma Committee on International Affairs expressed confidence that the Chinese people would achieve greater accomplishments in the Year of the Horse and extended his warmest wishes for prosperity and success.

"Mutual trust between Russia and China is as firm as granite," said Galina Kulikova, first deputy chairperson of the Russia-China Friendship Association, noting that China will continue to move ahead boldly and steadily with momentum in the Year of the Horse.

Andrey Denisov, first deputy chair of Russia's Federation Council Committee on Foreign Affairs, offered his Spring Festival greetings in Mandarin, wishing Chinese friends a joyful Year of the Horse, a prosperous New Year, good health, family happiness and all the best.

—Xinhua

## Letter from China: Witnessing a 'quiet' industrial revolution

Xinhua writer Ma Yujie

HEFEI – In early February, amid the soft pre-Spring Festival glow, I walked into a showroom of Chinese NEV startup NIO in Hefei, Anhui Province, ready to see how far the revolution of the new energy vehicle (NEV) sector had travelled.

What immediately caught my eye was not sleek vehicles, but a massive digital screen. On it, nearly 4,000 small lights flickered softly across a map of China, tracing a quiet revolution that connects bustling cities with remote outposts.

At the center of the display, a steadily climbing counter, already beyond the 99 million mark, marked the cumulative number of battery swaps across the country run by NIO. Just days later on February 6, I learned the figure had crossed the 100 million mark, a silent testament to change in motion.

It felt almost surreal to witness such a display of technological ambition not in Shenzhen or Shanghai, but here in Anhui, a province I had long associated with rolling farmlands and quiet rivers. Yet as I stood before that glowing map, I realized how outdated my own perceptions were.

I learned that Hefei, the provincial capital, has long been an important hub for traditional automobile manufacturing. That heritage, I came to understand, formed the foundation for what I was seeing: a shift toward smart, electric mobility that felt less like a sudden disruption and more like a natural evolution.

In 2025, Anhui produced more cars than any other provincial-level region in China, with nearly half of them being NEVs. Just five years earlier, it ranked eighth nationally.

Later, inside NIO's Hefei factory, I watched as cars moved smoothly along production lines, each one distinct from the last in color, trim and configuration. A staffer shared with me that customers can choose from over 3 million combinations, personalize their vehicles through an app, and take delivery in fewer than 10 days.

My colleague told me that such smart factories are not isolated. Also in Hefei, a facility jointly run by JAC and Huawei creates

a "digital file" for each vehicle, processing 300,000 data points per second, enabling real-time optimization of the production process.

Homegrown NEV automakers like NIO, Li Auto, and XPeng have acted as "icebreakers" in China's automotive industry transformation. They eschewed the path dependency of the traditional fuel vehicle era, using electrification and intelligence as a new starting point to redefine the industry's business models and user relationships, prioritizing "experience" and "data."

Looking back, the roots of this transformation date back over a decade. In 2013, heavy smog blanketed much of China, sparking public demand for cleaner skies and prompting the government to fasten pace for greener growth. In 2014, NIO, whose name means "Blue Sky Coming," was founded. Around the same time, China formally designated new energy vehicles as a national strategic priority.

The results have been staggering: in 2025, electric vehicles accounted for more than half of all new car sales in China for the first time. This milestone stands in stark contrast to 2014, when EVs represented less than 1 percent of the market – proof of how fast the country's roads have gone green.

"What's happening in Hefei is a model of how government guidance can align with market innovation," explained Professor Zhang Xianfeng of Hefei University of Technology's School of Economics. "It's not just about building cars, it's about building an ecosystem."

That ecosystem, I discovered, extended far beyond automobiles. In Hefei, scientists are advancing nuclear fusion research in a facility known as the "artificial sun," while quantum communication and computing projects point toward a future built on next-generation technology.

Leaving Hefei, I found myself reflecting on the quiet confidence I had observed in engineers, officials and entrepreneurs. Anhui's story, I realized, is not just about industrial upgrade; it is about the recalibration of identity, the blending of heritage and horizon, and the subtle yet steady momentum of a place writing its next chapter.

—Xinhua

# Conservative Thai PM heading for election victory: projections

Montira Rungjirajittranon

BANGKOK — Thailand's conservative prime minister was heading for a victory in the country's general election yesterday, television stations projected, with his party set to be by far the largest in parliament after riding a wave of nationalism.

Anutin Charnvirakul's Bhumjaithai was forecast to win nearly 200 seats by Channel 3 on the basis of results from the parties. The progressive People's Party trailed far behind, just below 100 seats, but ahead of jailed former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra's Pheu Thai party in third.

It would be a stunning turnaround for Anutin, whose party came third at the last election and who was only installed as prime minister by parliament in September, after two predecessors from Pheu Thai were ousted by the courts.

Conceding defeat, People's Party leader Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut told reporters in Bangkok that "we stand by our principle of respecting the party that finishes first and its right to form the government".

Foremost on many voters' minds was a longstanding border dispute with Cambodia that erupted into deadly fighting twice last year.

"We need a strong leader who can protect our sovereignty," said Yuernyong Loonboot, 64, the first voter to cast his ballot at a polling station in Buriram, Anutin's hometown.

"Living here, the border conflict has made me anxious. War was never something we used to think about."

Soon after taking office, Anutin authorised the armed forces to take whatever action they saw fit on the border, without referring to the government first.

Thailand's military took control of some disputed areas in the latest fighting in December, and a ceasefire is now in place.

After voting at the same polling station, Anutin — heir to a construction fortune and an amateur jet pilot who championed the legalisation of cannabis — told reporters he hoped voters would "trust us".

The Southeast Asian nation's next government will also need to contend with anaemic economic growth — the tourism sector is vital but arrivals yet to return to



Thailand's Prime Minister and Bhumjaithai Party leader Anutin Charnvirakul speaks to journalists before a press conference while awaiting final results in Thailand's general election in Bangkok yesterday

— AFP

their pre-COVID highs — and the multibillion-dollar transnational cyberscam networks operating from several neighbouring countries.

## Early release?

While Bhumjaithai looked unlikely to secure an overall majority in the 500-seat lower house, its seat share would give it the upper hand in coalition negotiations.

Thailand uses a mixed representation system, where 400 MPs are elected by individual constituencies, and 100 are allocated according to a separate ballot for party lists.

In its previous incarnation, Move Forward, the People's Party won the most seats at the last poll three years ago, but its candidate was blocked from the premiership and the party was later dissolved.

While Bhumjaithai touted its national defence credentials, especially after last year's clashes with Cambodia, the People's Party advocated ending conscription and cutting the number of generals.

Pheu Thai is seen as Anutin's most likely coalition partner — they were allies until Bhumjaithai pulled out of a deal over the handling of the border dispute by then prime minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, Thaksin's daughter.

Paetongtarn had referred to Cambodia's strongman Hun Sen as "uncle" in a leaked phone call and described a Thai military commander as her "opponent".

Thaksin is currently serving a one-year prison sentence for

corruption in office but many observers expect him to be released earlier than scheduled alongside a political agreement.

Phu Thai has been Thailand's most successful political organisation of recent years and Thaksin's nephew was seeking to become the family's fifth prime minister, but the party's support has dropped precipitously from its heyday.

All three major parties offered various populist handouts and socioeconomic policies, including Phu Thai's pledge to award nine daily prizes of one million baht (US\$31,000) each to boost the economy.

## Constitution referendum

Thailand's political history is replete with military coups, bloody street protests and judicial bans on prime ministers and parties.

A constitution drafted under military rule following the last coup in 2014 gives significant power to institutions appointed by the senate, which is not directly elected.

Move Forward was dissolved after the constitutional court ruled its pledge to reform the strict royal insult law amounted to an attempt to overthrow the constitutional monarchy.

The issue did not feature in the People's Party campaign this time.

But a referendum ballot yesterday also gave voters a chance to voice whether they want constitutional reform in principle, albeit with no specific measures on the table.

— AFP

## Indonesia arrests dozens in Bali gambling crackdown

JAKARTA — Indonesian authorities have arrested dozens of Indian nationals in a crackdown on online gambling operations on the popular tourist island of Bali, police said Saturday.

Gambling is illegal in the Muslim-majority archipelago, with punishments extended to bookmakers, punters and those who promote gambling content online.

Police raided two villas on the resort island last Tuesday, arresting 39 Indian nationals and seizing phones, laptops and computers, Bali police chief Daniel Adityajaya said.

He said 35 of the suspects had been charged with gambling-related offences, while four others remained under questioning.

The suspects, who entered Indonesia on tourist visas, have allegedly been promoting and managing transactions for an online gambling site since late last year.

The operation brought in up to 8 billion rupiah (around US\$475,000) a month, said the police chief.

A preliminary investigation shows that they opened and operated an office in Bali to take

advantage of Bali's status as an international tourist destination to avoid suspicion," he added.

They face multiple charges, including organising gambling activities, which under Indonesia's new penal code carries a sentence of up to nine years in prison, Bali police said in a statement.

Turnover linked to online gambling reached more than 280 trillion rupiah last year, official data showed, with more than 12 million Indonesians estimated to be engaged in the illicit activity. — AFP

## Colour and caution as banned kite-flying festival returns to Pakistan

ISLAMABAD — Brightly coloured kites soared through the skies over Pakistan's eastern city of Lahore this weekend, marking the return of a festival after a 19-year ban that had been imposed over safety concerns.

Families and groups of friends gathered on rooftops and in parks and streets for the three-day kite-flying festival in Punjab province, known as 'Basant', the Urdu language word for the spring season it traditionally marks the arrival of.

"Everyone is excited — all of Punjab, all of Pakistan. It has become hard to find kites and strings because they sold out," said Shahzaib, a kite flyer, with drums playing in the background.

Punjab authorities banned the festival in 2007 due to a series of fatal accidents caused by glass powdered-coated kite strings and celebratory aerial gunfire.

The exceptionally sharp strings, known as manjha, had badly injured and killed pedestrians and motorcyclists, prompting the crackdown.

But this year authorities relented, allowing the festival for three days but with ramped up safety measures in place in a move welcomed by many Lahoris and thousands who travelled to the city from across the country to take part.

"People had lost businesses when the ban happened. After the

ban lifted I sold 20,000 to 25,000 kites," said Tariq, a kite maker.

Rights groups and cultural activists have long criticised the ban, arguing that poor enforcement rather than the festival itself was to blame for past tragedies.

Some official events planned to take place during the festival were cancelled after a suicide blast at a mosque in Pakistan's capital Islamabad on Friday killed 31 people.

Police were deployed across the city to enforce safety rules, while hospitals were placed on alert to deal with potential injuries. Authorities also monitored kite sales — including using QR codes to track kites — and confiscated banned materials, including glass-coated strings.

Motorcycle riders placed protective rods on their bikes to intercept kite strings before they could cut riders.

Kite fighting was the main attraction of the festival with participants manoeuvring their kites to sever the strings of their opponents', often drawing cheers from neighbouring rooftops.

Workshops that once lay dormant were operating again to meet demand.

"Buying and flying kites should not be a one-time thing," said Chand Ustad, 51, string maker.

"Keep buying them, keep flying them, this helps our business as well," added Ustad. — AFP



People fly kites during the Basant festival in Lahore yesterday. Brightly coloured kites soared through the skies over Pakistan's eastern city of Lahore this weekend, marking the return of a festival after a 19-year ban that had been imposed over safety concerns.

## Tropical depression Penha kills at least 8 in Philippines

MANILA — Tropical depression Penha, sweeping across the Philippines, has killed at least eight people, the Office of Civil Defense (OCD) said on Saturday.

Four members of a family were killed after a landslide struck a village in Cagayan de Oro City in Misamis Oriental province late Thursday night, the OCD said.

Citing Iligan City Mayor Frederick Siao, the agency reported that three other people died in Iligan City, although the causes of death are still being verified. One person was reported

to have drowned in Agusan del Norte province.

Penha has triggered flooding and landslides in several parts of the country, particularly in the central and southern regions.

The state weather bureau, PAGASA, said late Friday that Penha had weakened into a tropical depression but would continue to bring heavy rain and strong winds as it traverses the central Philippines.

Penha is the second tropical cyclone to hit the Philippines this year. — Xinhua

## 8 killed in gas cylinder explosion in Afghan capital

KABUL – At least eight people were killed when a gas cylinder exploded inside a residential home in Afghanistan's capital Kabul, the city's governor's office said in a statement on Saturday evening.

According to the statement, the incident occurred in Police District 21 when a family was using a gas heater to warm their home during cold winter weather. The cylinder exploded due to a gas leak, resulting in the fatalities.

In a similar incident, three women were killed and another was injured on Thursday in the eastern Khost province.

Most households in Afghanistan, which lack widespread modern heating infrastructure, rely on gas cylinders or traditional stoves to heat their homes during harsh winters. Such accidents, often caused by gas leaks and explosions, are a recurring hazard in the impoverished country.

—Xinhua

## N Korea to hold party congress in Feb, first since 2021

SEOUL – North Korea's leadership will hold a party congress later this month, state media announced yesterday, in what will be the first such major gathering since 2021.

The decision was made Saturday in a meeting of top leaders of the country's ruling Workers Party of Korea (WPK), including Kim Jong Un, the state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported.

"The Political Bureau of the WPK Central Committee adopted with unanimous approval a decision on opening the Ninth Congress of the WPK in Pyongyang, the capital of the revolution, in late February 2026," KCNA said.

The last party congress - the reclusive nuclear-armed nation's eighth - was held in January 2021.

At that gathering, Kim was named the party's General Secretary, a title previously reserved for his father and predecessor Kim Jong Il, in what analysts said was a move to reinforce his authority.

The congress is the ruling party's top gathering, a grand political set-piece that reinforces the regime's authority and can serve as a platform for announcements of policy shifts or elite personnel changes.

The 2021 meeting came just days before the inauguration of US president Joe Biden and at the height of North Korea's strict border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Analysts described the choreographed messaging from the party congress as one of defiance toward the United States, after the breakdown in negotiations with Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump.

Trump, who returned to power in January 2025, has expressed willingness to restart talks, but yet with little result.

Tensions have meanwhile remained high, with Pyongyang most recently outraged over South Korea's moves to develop nuclear submarine technology with the United States.

Since the 2021 gathering, North Korea has continued to develop its nuclear arsenal, repeatedly test-launching intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) in defiance of bans ordered by the UN Security Council.

Late last month, Kim oversaw the test launch of missiles from a multiple rocket launcher and said that "next-stage plans for further bolstering up the country's nuclear war deterrent" would be clarified at the upcoming party congress, according to KCNA.

Lee Ho-ryung, principal researcher at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, told AFP the upcoming congress would likely see Kim announce "that the goal is now to maximise nuclear operational prowess".

"Kim Jong Un has used past party congresses to stress the completion of the country's nuclear capability, and this time he is expected to declare that such capability has now reached its peak," she said.

Kim was accompanied at the test by his daughter Ju Ae, believed to be his likely successor.

Pyongyang has also developed deep ties with Moscow during its war in Ukraine, with North Korean soldiers sent to fight alongside Russian forces.

In 2024, the two countries signed a treaty including a mutual defence clause.

—AFP

## Sanae Takaichi, Japan's triumphant first woman PM

TOKYO – Sanae Takaichi, a staunch conservative who admires Margaret Thatcher, entrenched her leadership yesterday four months after becoming Japan's first woman prime minister, but she has shown little appetite for framing it around gender.

Instead, it is her hardline stance on China, workaholic reputation and deft touch, especially with the young, that have shaped her still fledgling premiership and won endorsement from US President Donald Trump.

Takaichi, 64, looked to have won a resounding victory in snap lower house elections yesterday, likely with a handy two-thirds majority for her ruling bloc that will put her in a powerful position to push through her legislative agenda.

A hawk on defence and economic security, she became Japan's fifth leader in as many years after winning the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leadership in October.

She inherited a struggling LDP that voters had deserted en masse because of inflation, a slush fund scandal and the advent of the populist, anti-immigration Sanseito party.

True to her reputation as an ultraconservative, Takaichi as prime minister has sounded tough on immigration and has not shied away from incurring the wrath of China.

### Vocal critic

Beijing has reportedly been choking off exports of the rare earth products crucial for making everything from electric cars to missiles.

It was not the first time Takaichi has been on the wrong side of China.

As a former economic security minister, she was a vocal critic of Beijing and its military build-up in the Asia-Pacific.

She has also been a regular visitor to the Yasukuni Shrine, which honours convicted war criminals along with 2.5 million war dead and is seen by



Japan's Prime Minister and President of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Sanae Takaichi, speaks with media on the House of Representatives election day at the LDP headquarters in Tokyo yesterday.

—AFP

Asian nations as a symbol of Japan's militarist past.

### Heavy metal and gifts for Trump

Once a drummer in a college heavy metal band, she put her musical skills to full use last month when she played two K-pop songs during a session with South Korean President Lee Jae Myung.

Official footage of a smiling Takaichi drumming energetically with Lee led to widespread praise online, with some so surprised they wondered if the clip was AI-generated.

Echoing the playbook of her mentor, the assassinated former prime minister Shinzo Abe, she wasted no time after taking office in courting Trump, showering him with praise and gifts ranging from a golf bag and putter to American beef.

While declaring the late British prime minister Thatcher as her political idol, she has so far shown little sign of leveraging her gender to attract support.

Takaichi's views on gender in fact put her on the right of an already conservative LDP. She opposes revising a 19th century law requiring

married couples to share the same surname, a rule that overwhelmingly results in women taking their husband's name.

She has been married twice to the same man, a former member of parliament. Takaichi took his name during the first marriage. In the second, he took hers.

Despite her campaign promise to improve the gender balance in her administration to "Nordic" levels, she appointed just two other women to her 19-strong cabinet.

Japan ranked 118 out of 148 in the World Economic Forum's 2025 Gender Gap Report, chiefly because of the under-representation of women in government.

She supports aggressive monetary easing and big fiscal spending, echoing the "Abenomics" of her mentor which, if implemented again, could rattle markets.

Takaichi has so far lived up to a vow she made after being elected LDP president in October: "I shall work, work, work, work and work."

She said in November she only sleeps between two and four hours every night, having raised eyebrows by arranging a 3 a.m. staff meeting. —AFP



Activists and supporters of the LGBTQ community attend the Delhi Queer Pride parade in New Delhi, India yesterday.

—AFP

# Around 180 Gazans have left via Rafah crossing since reopening

RAFAH — Around 180 Palestinians have left the Gaza Strip since the limited reopening of the Rafah crossing with Egypt a week ago, according to officials in the territory.

The Rafah crossing, the only gateway for Gazans to the outside world that does not pass through Israel, reopened for the movement of people on February 2, nearly two years after Israeli forces seized control of it during the war with Hamas.

Between Monday and Thursday, 135 people crossed into Egypt from Gaza through the crossing, mostly patients and their companions, according to Ismail al-Thawabteh, head of the Hamas-run media office in the Palestinian territory.

"Official statistics on the movement at the Rafah crossing from Monday, February 2, 2026, until Thursday, February 5, 2026, show a severe restriction on travel," Thawabteh said.

He said the crossing was also closed on Friday and Saturday.

The Palestinian Red Crescent Society confirmed that 135 Gazans had left through the crossing between February 2 and 5.

Yesterday, another 44 people left the Gaza Strip through the crossing to Egypt, Mohammed Abu Salmiya, director of the territory's main Al-Shifa Hospital, told AFP.

They included 19 patients, while the rest were their companions, he added.

A source at the border on the Egyptian side also confirmed



War-wounded Palestinians and other patients prepare to leave the Gaza Strip for treatment through the Rafah border crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt after it was opened by Israel for a limited number of people, in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday. Israel partly reopened the Rafah crossing between the southern Gaza Strip and Egypt, the only gateway to the Palestinian territory that does not pass through Israel.

— AFP

the figure for travellers passing through the gateway yesterday.

It brought the total number to 179 people entering the Gaza Strip.

"My son was injured during the war and a metal plate was inserted in his leg for a year and a half," Rajaa Abu al-Jadian told AFP as she prepared to leave through the crossing earlier on Sunday.

"They told us it had to be removed to prevent further damage."

Travel through the crossing is also taking place in the opposite direction, with dozens returning to Gaza during the same period.

Thawabteh told AFP that 88 people entered the Gaza Strip from Egypt since the crossing reopened, often meeting their families in tearful reunions.

Israel allowed the reopening of the Rafah crossing on Monday, reportedly following US pressure, but has so far restricted passage to patients and their accompanying relatives.

The reopening of Rafah has long been demanded by the United Nations and aid organisations, and forms a key element of US President Donald Trump's truce plan for Gaza, where humanitarian conditions remain dire.

For thousands of sick and wounded Palestinians, the crossing's reopening offers a rare chance to seek medical treatment in Egypt or elsewhere.

Abu Salmiya said last week that around 20,000 patients in Gaza urgently require treatment, including 4,500 children.

— AFP

## Morocco flood evacuees still shaken, waiting to return home

KENITRA, Morocco It was through a call from her local mosque's loudspeakers that Kasia El Selami learnt it was time to flee as floodwaters rose in her Moroccan village of Ouled Ameur.

Selami is among more than 150,000 people to have been evacuated over the past week as heavy rainfall battered provinces in Morocco's north.

"We felt immense fear... especially for our children", said the 67-year-old while hanging a blanket by the tent in which she now lives.

The floods had killed four people by yesterday, including a two-year-old child, with one person still missing as of yesterday, Moroccan authorities said.

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

Others were rescued by helicopter as floodwaters inundated roads and farmland in several areas.

Near Kenitra, some 50 kilometres north of Rabat,

authorities have set up a vast camp of small blue tents sheltering nearly 40,000 people, including Selami and her children.

At the camp, evacuees make do with little while waiting to be able to return home.

One woman scrubbed laundry in a small basin just a few metres away from an enclosure where evacuated cows, horses, chickens and sheep were penned.

Nearby, sick or lightly injured men and women queued outside a mobile clinic.

### 'Terrified'

Despite the relative quiet, Ali Al Aouni said these were "very difficult days".

The 60-year-old complained about the cold and anxiety, adding that his children were still "terrified" after what had happened.

"The water level got about a metre and a half high" in his village, he recalled. "We're afraid to go home if the flood comes back."

Aouni said his eldest son stayed behind to watch over their property, updating him over the

phone that the water kept rising.

Not far away, the civil defence was handing out mattresses, warm clothing and food to the rescued families.

These came "in addition to health care and veterinary check-ups for livestock", Adil Al-Khatabi, an official, told AFP.

Selami is already thinking about going home.

"We're waiting for this ordeal to end as soon as possible, so we can return to our homes", she said.

Last 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, while others were still missing after the country experienced its heaviest rainfall in over 70 years last month.

And further north, Portugal and Spain have also endured storms and torrential rains in recent days.

— AFP

## Lebanon surprised after Kuwait includes hospitals on 'terror' list

BEIRUT — Lebanon's health ministry expressed surprise and said it would seek clarification after Kuwait inscribed several private hospitals in the Mediterranean country on its "terror" list yesterday.

Kuwait's foreign ministry issued a circular indicating that it had listed the eight hospitals as part of regulations related to "combating terrorism".

The facilities are located in and serve residents of south and east Lebanon and Beirut's southern suburbs — all strongholds of the Iran-backed militant group Hezbollah, which Kuwait's circular did not mention.

Lebanon's health ministry said it received the Kuwaiti statement "with great surprise", adding it had not been provided with "any information or notification from any Kuwaiti entity about this matter".

"The hospitals mentioned in the statement are registered with the syndicate of private hospitals in Lebanon and carry out their role in providing treatment and health services to all Lebanese without exception," the health ministry statement said.

It called the facilities "an

essential part of the Lebanese health system", and said it would contact the relevant authorities to request clarification and to "present the correct facts" and "protect Lebanon's health system".

It noted that "Kuwait has numerous joint projects with the ministry... and has been among the most prominent countries that have stood by the health system during the successive crises that Lebanon has faced".

The eight hospitals include two in Beirut's southern suburbs, an area Israel heavily bombed during hostilities with Hezbollah that largely ended with a November 2024 ceasefire.

They also include the Salah Ghandour hospital in south Lebanon's Bint Jbeil, which is run by the Hezbollah-affiliated Islamic Health Committee.

The hospital's grounds and its surroundings were struck in 2024 during the hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah.

Earlier this month, the ministry condemned what it called threats against south Lebanon hospitals after reports the Israeli military had dropped leaflets warning residents that Hezbollah operatives were using a hospital in Bint Jbeil. — AFP

## Ethiopia demands Eritrea 'immediately withdraw' troops from its territory

ADDIS ABABA — A bitter war of words has escalated further after Ethiopia ordered neighbouring Eritrea to "immediately withdraw its troops" from Ethiopian territory, with the pair seemingly inching towards a new conflict.

Relations between the two Horn of Africa countries have long been fraught.

In recent months, Addis Ababa has accused Eritrea of supporting insurgents on Ethiopian soil — allegations Asmara denies.

"Developments over the last few days indicate that the government of Eritrea has chosen the path of further escalation," Ethiopian Foreign Minister Gedion Timothewos told his Eritrean counterpart in a letter dated Saturday.

He demanded that Asmara "withdraw its troops from Ethiopian territory and cease all forms of collaboration with rebel groups".

The "incursion" along its northwestern borders and joint military operations there were "not just provocations but acts of outright aggression", he said.

Timothewos added, however, that he believed the "cycle of violence and mistrust" could still be broken through diplomacy.

"If we receive a positive response to our legitimate demand for respect for Ethiopia's sovereignty and

territorial integrity" then Ethiopia will be "willing to engage in good-faith negotiations", he said.

The Eritrean government did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Eritrea, one of the world's most closed countries, gained independence in 1993 after decades of armed struggle against Ethiopia.

They later fought a 1998-2000 border war in which tens of thousands died.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed initially sought rapprochement with Eritrea when he came to power, earning him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019.

The two governments cooperated against rebels from Ethiopia's Tigray region during the 2020-2022 conflict, but fell out over the peace accord, from which Eritrea was excluded.

The Tigray civil war killed at least 600,000 people and the resulting peace deal, known as the Pretoria Agreement, has never fully resolved the tensions.

Ethiopian authorities say Eritrea is "actively preparing for war" and funding armed groups fighting federal forces.

Eritrea meanwhile accuses Ethiopia of seeking to seize its port at Assab as part of the landlocked country's efforts to gain sea access.

— AFP

# Starmer's top aide quits in scandal over Mandelson links to Epstein

**Helen Rowe**

LONDON – Embattled British Prime Minister Keir Starmer's chief of staff resigned yesterday over the appointment of Peter Mandelson as ambassador to Washington despite links to US convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

"After careful reflection, I have decided to resign from the government. The decision to appoint Peter Mandelson was wrong. He has damaged our party, our country and trust in politics itself," Morgan McSweeney, Downing Street's chief of staff, said in a statement.

"I advised the Prime Minister to make that appointment and I take full responsibility for that advice," he added.

The 48-year-old Irishman always maintained a low profile but was dubbed by some as the "most powerful man in politics" having played a key role in Starmer's emphatic election victory in July 2024.

He is credited with helping to

move the Labour Party towards a more centrist policy agenda following leftist ex-leader Jeremy Corbyn's ill-fated tenure.

He was also said to have been close to Mandelson who previously helped ex-prime minister Tony Blair transform the party and its fortunes in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The resignation came as the foreign ministry said it was reviewing an exit payment to Mandelson, who was sacked by the Starmer last September over his friendship with the late Epstein.

Mandelson, a pivotal figure in British politics and the Labour Party for decades, received an estimated payout of between £38,750 and £55,000 (US\$52,000 to US\$74,000) after only seven months in the job, according to a report in the *Sunday Times*.

Documents released on January 30 by the US Justice Department appear to show that Mandelson allegedly leaked confidential UK government information to financier

Epstein when he was a British minister, including during the 2008 financial crisis.

The revelation has placed intense pressure on Starmer and triggered a police investigation into Mandelson, 72, for alleged misconduct in a public office.

The Foreign Office said in a statement it had launched a review into Mandelson's severance payment "in light of further information that has now been revealed and the ongoing police investigation".

Cabinet minister Pat McFadden earlier insisted Starmer should remain in office despite his "terrible mistake" in appointing Mandelson.

He said the real blame lay "squarely" with Mandelson for putting himself forward for the job despite knowing the extent of his relationship with Epstein.

## Regrets'

Starmer's deputy, David Lammy, became the first cabinet minister to

appear to distance himself from the premier, according to a report in the *Sunday Telegraph*.

The deputy prime minister had not been in favour of appointing Mandelson due to his known links to Epstein, the report quoted friends of Lammy as saying.

Starmer's Labour Party took power just over 18 months ago in a landslide election victory.

But it has been trailing Nigel Farage's anti-immigrant Reform UK as the government has come under fire over immigration, economic growth and the cost-of-living crisis.

Reform UK has led by double-digit figures in the polls for the past year.

Mandelson, also a former European Union trade commissioner, stood down from parliament's unelected upper chamber, the House of Lords, earlier this week.

The ex-envoy was one of numerous prominent figures further

embarrassed by last week's latest revelations of ties to financier Epstein, who died in jail in 2019 while facing charges of alleged sex trafficking.

US officials ruled Epstein's death a suicide.

A spokesperson for law firm Mishcon de Reya, representing Mandelson, said he "regrets, and will regret until to his dying day, that he believed Epstein's lies about his criminality".

"Lord Mandelson did not discover the truth about Epstein until after his death in 2019. He is profoundly sorry that powerless and vulnerable women and girls were not given the protection they deserved," the law firm said.

Starmer paid tribute to McSweeney in a statement. It was "largely thanks to his dedication, loyalty and leadership that we won a landslide majority", he said.

"Our party and I owe him a debt of gratitude," he added. —AFP

## Trump praises new Honduras leader after talks in US

WASHINGTON – US President Donald Trump praised conservative Honduran counterpart Nasry Asfura after a meeting at his Mar-a-Lago resort, with Asfura vowing yesterday to be Washington's "most reliable strategic partner."

Asfura, a businessman and former mayor of the Honduran capital Tegucigalpa, was sworn in last week after winning November elections with Trump's backing.

Trump had threatened to cut aid to Central America's poorest country if his "friend" was defeated.

"I had a very important meeting with my friend, and the President of Honduras, Nasry 'Tito' Asfura," Trump wrote on his Truth Social platform.

"Once I gave him my strong endorsement, he won his election! Tito and I share many of the same America First Values. We have a close partnership on security."

For his part, Asfura described his meeting at Mar-a-Lago as "productive" and said the two leaders agreed to boost investment and trade.

"Honduras is ready to grow, attract investment, and establish itself as the most reliable strategic partner of the United States in the region, with stability, security, and a clear vision of prosperity," Asfura said in a post on X early on Sunday.

The Honduran presidency released a photo of the two leaders smiling and giving a thumbs up.

Asfura also told reporters in Florida yesterday that they discussed Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Hondurans, which the Department of Homeland Security revoked last year only for a federal judge to vacate the order.

Some 60,000 Hondurans, who came to the United States after

Hurricane Mitch devastated the Central American nation in 1998, benefit from TPS that allows them to live and work there.

"We were talking about TPS, you know that TPS is still pending," Asfura said. "As for the rest of the migration issue, I would prefer not to comment, I reserve my comments, but we did agree to review all the laws and the work we need to do for Honduras."

Asfura had already met with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio on January 12, after which the two countries announced plans for a free trade deal.

His win gave Trump another ally in Latin America after conservatives campaigning heavily on crime and corruption replaced leftists in Chile, Bolivia, Peru and Argentina.

Trump has been pressuring countries in Washington's backyard to choose between close ties with Washington or Beijing.

Asfura, who succeeded left-wing leader Xiomara Castro, has said he is considering switching diplomatic ties from China to Taiwan.

Trump pardoned former Honduras president Juan Orlando Hernández in a surprise move on the eve of the Honduran election.

Hernández, from Asfura's party, was serving a 45-year prison sentence in the United States for drug trafficking. He was convicted of helping to smuggle 400 tons of cocaine into the United States.

Trump's decision to pardon him, even as US forces were blowing up alleged drug boats in the Caribbean and tightening the noose on Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro, whom Washington accuses of drug trafficking, drew heavy criticism.

—AFP



Members of the media gather outside the residence of former UK ambassador to the United States, Peter Mandelson, in central London yesterday. Britain's Foreign Office yesterday said it was reviewing an exit payment to Mandelson who was sacked over his links to convicted US sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. —AFP

## French police arrest 6 over crypto-linked magistrate kidnapping

### Manon Billing and Sabine Colpart

LYON – French authorities have arrested six suspects, including a minor, after a magistrate and her mother were held captive last week for around 30 hours in a cryptocurrency ransom plot, prosecutors said yesterday.

Four men and one woman were detained, three overnight and two yesterday morning, Lyon prosecutor Thierry Dran told AFP. He later confirmed a minor had been arrested yesterday afternoon.

The individuals were taken into custody following the discovery of the 35-year-old magistrate and her 67-year-old mother on Friday morning, found injured in a garage in the southeastern Drome region.

Two of those arrested overnight were detained as they attempted to take a bus to Spain, according to a source close to the case speaking on condition of anonymity.

Authorities continue to actively search for further suspects, a second source close to the case said, adding that the woman in custody is the

partner of one of the four male suspects.

During a press conference on Friday after the pair's escape, prosecutor Dran said the magistrate's partner – who was not home when the two victims were abducted overnight Wednesday to Thursday – has a leading position in a cryptocurrency start-up.

A massive police search involving 160 officers was launched after the magistrate's partner had received a message and a photo of her from the kidnappers demanding a ransom to be paid in cryptocurrency.

The captors threatened to mutilate the victims if the transfer was not made quickly, Dran told reporters, declining to specify the amount demanded.

But the two women managed to free themselves and call for help without any ransom being paid, by banging on the garage door in Bourg-les-Valence.

"Alerted by the noise, a neighbour intervened. He was able

to open the door and allow our two victims to escape," Dran said.

### Crypto-linked kidnappings

French authorities have been dealing with a string of kidnappings and extortion attempts targeting the families of wealthy individuals dealing in cryptocurrencies.

In January 2025, kidnappers seized French crypto boss David Balland and his partner. Balland co-founded a crypto firm called Ledger, valued at the time at more than US\$1 billion.

Balland's kidnappers cut off his finger and demanded a hefty ransom. He was freed the next day, and his girlfriend was found tied up in the boot of a car outside Paris.

In May, the father of a man who ran a Malta-based cryptocurrency company was kidnapped by four hooded men in Paris.

The victim, whose finger was also severed by the kidnappers and for whom a ransom of several million euros was demanded, was released 58 hours later in a raid by the security forces. —AFP



## PRESS RELEASE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Eva Un

Media Officer

info.macauliteraryfestival@gmail.com

#### About the Macau Literary Festival:

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

# Storm-battered Portugal votes in presidential election run-off



*This combination of pictures shows socialist candidate António José Seguro (left) casting his vote in Caldas da Rainha and far-right wing candidate André Ventura voting in Lisbon yesterday during the second round of Portugal's presidential election.*

– AFP

#### Thomas Cabral

LISBON – Portugal, which is reeling from fatal storms, voted yesterday in the second round of a presidential election in which the moderate favourite is expected to trounce his far-right rival.

Since the first-round vote in January, the election campaign has been upended by two weeks of storms and fierce gales that have killed at least seven people and created an estimated four billion euros (US\$4.7 billion) in damage.

The storm disruption forced around 20 of the worst-hit constituencies to postpone the vote by a week, but the election went head for nearly all the 11 million eligible voters in Portugal and abroad, starting at 8 a.m. (local time).

First exit polls were due at around 8 p.m., after the last polling stations in the Azores archipelago close.

Voters were being asked to choose between veteran Socialist António José Seguro, who won most votes in the first round of the election in January, and rightwing candidate André Ventura, who came second.

Ventura – who trailed Seguro in opinion polls – alleged the government's response to the fierce gales and floods had been “useless” and called for the entire election to be postponed.

The authorities rejected that demand and Seguro, during his last campaign rally on Friday, accused Ventura of “doing everything to keep the Portuguese from turning out to vote”.

Seguro, 63, is a veteran political operator and former Socialist Party (PS) leader.

Despite being out of the public eye for the past decade, one opinion poll on Wednesday credited him with 67 percent of voting intentions in the run-off election.

This predicted victory and the recent foul weather has raised concerns in Seguro’s camp that many voters will stay at home.

However, at midday, turnout stood at 22 percent, slightly higher than at the same time of day during the first-round vote.

#### Turnout

Seguro urged voters not to abstain.

Casting his vote in Caldas de Rainha, where he lives, he said: “Come and vote. Make the most of this window of good weather.”

His rival retorted that it showed “lack of respect to send people out to vote after what has happened”.

Casting her ballot in Lisbon, retired teacher Celeste Caldeira told AFP she thought the authorities had “made the right choice to go ahead with the election”.

“We have two candidates. Either we vote for the one who has everyone’s interests at heart or I don’t know where we’re going,” the 87-year-old said.

While Ventura, 43, has campaigned on a promise to break with the parties that have governed Portugal for the past 50 years, Seguro has positioned himself as a unifying candidate and warned of the “nightmare” the country could face if his opponent wins.

Seguro won the first round of the election, in which 11 candidates were standing, with 31.1 percent of the vote, ahead of the 43-year-old Ventura on 23.5 percent.

He has since secured the support of many political figures from the far left, centre and the right.

But Prime Minister Luis Montenegro – whose minority centre-right government has to rely on support from either the Socialists or the far right to get legislation through parliament – has declined to endorse either Seguro or Ventura in the second round.

Voting in Lisbon yesterday, 20-year-old medical student Júlia Rodrigues said she did not know who to vote for.

“It’s a really difficult choice because I don’t like either candidate,” she told AFP.

#### Political ambitions

Ventura is the first extreme-right candidate to make it through to a run-off vote in post-1974 Portugal.

His Chega (“Enough”) party, created as recently as 2019, became the leading opposition force at the May 2025 general election.

Analysts said that, while Ventura was expected to lose yesterday’s vote, he would turn the election to his political advantage.

He is seeking to “assert himself as the true leader of the Portuguese right”, political science professor José Santana Pereira told AFP.

Ventura has made no secret of his ambition to one day attain the powerful position of prime minister.

In Portugal, the head of state has the power to dissolve parliament and call early elections but otherwise has a largely symbolic role.

The new president will succeed outgoing conservative President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa in early March.

– AFP

## Late Guirassy winner for Dortmund temporarily trims Bayern's Bundesliga lead



BERLIN — Serhou Guirassy's late winner gave Borussia Dortmund a tense 2-1 victory at Wolfsburg on Saturday to provisionally cut Bayern Munich's lead at the top of the Bundesliga to three points.

A fifth consecutive league victory moved Niko Kovac's side to within a victory of erstwhile runaway leaders Bayern, who restored their six-point cushion with a 5-1 win at Hoffenheim yesterday.

After a record-breaking start to the season, the champions are winless in their last two games, giving Dortmund the chance to dream of a first title since 2012 with 13 games to go. Which lasted less than 24 hours.

It was not a vintage display by Dortmund, who suffered a blow pre-match with the news that captain Emre Can will be sidelined for another month.

But they ground out victory against a Wolfsburg team who have won only once since the turn of the year, thanks to goals by Julian Brandt and Guirassy, each side of a Konstantinos Koulierakis leveller for the hosts.

Max Beier almost put Dortmund ahead in the first half but his effort was deflected by Denis Vavro's last-ditch block onto the underside of the bar.

But the Wolves failed to heed that warning when a few minutes later Dortmund went ahead.

Julian Ryerson's 38th-minute corner from the left found Brandt at the near post to nod in.

Dortmund's advantage was erased seven minutes into the second half when Koulierakis chose the perfect moment to score his first goal for Wolfsburg, powering in a header from close range.

With 15th-placed Wolfsburg only a few minutes away from securing a precious point, Dortmund produced a silky winner as Guinean Guirassy supplied a fine left-footed finish in the 87th minute to hand Kovac a winning return to his former club.

"It was a brilliantly executed goal," Brandt said. "That is what individual quality is all about."

"We allowed Wolfsburg to believe in the second half. We are very relieved, considering how the game unfolded."

### Pivotal day at bottom

This also proved a pivotal day in the battle for Bundesliga survival as well as the fight for the coveted top-four places.

Relegation-threatened St Pauli, whose last win was before the winter break, won 2-1 at home to fourth-placed Stuttgart, who had not lost in the league since a 5-0 home drubbing by Bayern on December 6.

Daniel Sinani's clever dummy wrong-footed the Stuttgart defence and the loose ball was lashed in from the edge of the box by Manolis Saliakis for the opener on 35 minutes.

Sinani slotted home from the penalty spot 10 minutes after half-time following a Chris Fuehrich handball.

Stuttgart pulled one back through Jamie Leweling in the last minute but it was too little too late as St Pauli clawed themselves to within touching distance of a survival spot.

Fifth-placed Bayer Leverkusen failed to capitalise on Stuttgart's slip as they were held to a 1-1 draw in the late game at Borussia Mönchengladbach.

Yannik Engelhardt pounced to give the hosts the lead inside 10 minutes but an own goal by Gladbach's Philipp Sander on the stroke of half-time ensured a share of the points.

Mainz continued their remarkable turnaround under Swiss strategist Urs Fischer, who has guided Mainz from the bottom of the table to 13th in a matter of weeks, with a 2-0 win over Augsburg.

Nadiem Amiri scored both goals from the spot to make it four wins in five.

Hamburg also picked up a precious three points, winning their first game on the road this season 2-0 at bottom-placed Heidenheim.

Werder Bremen were edged out by a sensational solitary strike by Freiburg's Jan-Niklas Beste to extend their winless streak to 11 games.

— AFP/MPD

## Arteta backs confident Gyokeres to hit 'highest level'



LONDON — Mikel Arteta said Viktor Gyokeres has raised his game to the "highest level" after the much-criticised striker scored twice in a 3-0 win over Sunderland on Saturday.

Victory took the Gunners nine points clear at the top of the Premier League as they chase a first English title in 22 years.

Martin Zubimendi's fine strike broke the deadlock just before half-time at the Emirates before Gyokeres sealed victory in the second half.

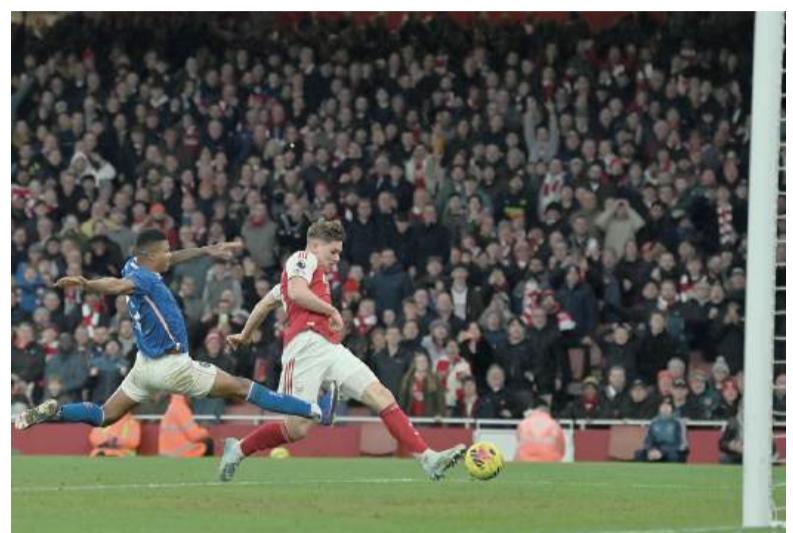
The Sweden international lashed home a shot from Kai Havertz's pass before Gabriel Martinelli teed him up to slot into an empty net in stoppage time.

Gyokeres has struggled to match his prolific form at Sporting Lisbon, which earned him a £64 million (US\$87 million) move to Arsenal.

But he is Arteta's top scorer with 13 goals in all competitions, including six in his last eight appearances.

"Confidence is the magic word. When you feel confident, when you feel important, when you feel at your best, that's when you can really take your game to the highest level," said Arteta.

"We are really behind him



Arsenal's Swedish striker Viktor Gyokeres (right) scores their third goal during the English Premier League against Sunderland at the Emirates Stadium in London on Saturday.

— AFP

in every moment to try to help him, to try to support him. He is delivering, and he's in a really good moment now.

"Obviously, when you put that shirt on, there is lot of responsibility and huge expectation, and you need to live with that."

Manchester City reduced the gap at the top back to six points last night, after beating Liverpool 2-1.

Arteta said he will be watching the clash between the two sides that have dominated English football

over the past decade, but insisted Arsenal still have plenty of work to do to deliver a long-awaited title.

"We still have to win so many games to achieve what we want," added the Spaniard.

"I'm going to have a beautiful dinner tonight. Tomorrow I start to prepare for Brentford [on Thursday], because it's going to be a really tough one."

"And in the meantime, I will be watching a big, big game."

— AFP / MPD

## Carrick brings Manchester United 'something special', says Fernandes



MANCHESTER — Manchester United

captain Bruno Fernandes hailed the impact Michael Carrick has made in transforming the mood around Old Trafford with four consecutive wins since taking charge.

Fernandes scored as the Red Devils beat 10-man Tottenham 2-0 on Saturday to solidify their place in the Premier League's top four.

Carrick is yet to lose in seven games during two spells as interim United boss.

The former midfielder insisted before this weekend that the United hierarchy cannot rush into

a decision over who will be the club's next permanent manager.

However, the results and performances since Ruben Amorim's departure last month are making a strong case for the former Middlesbrough boss to be handed a deal beyond the end of this season.

"Carrick came in with the right ideas, giving the players the responsibility and freedom on the pitch," Fernandes told TNT Sports.

"I was sure he would be a great manager and he is showing it. We hope we can help him even more."

"Everyone understands the pressure of playing for this club, everyone knows the expectations

around it. He knows what it means for this club to win. It adds something special to the team."

Victory takes United to within two points of third-placed Aston Villa and opens up a cushion on the chasing pack for a place in next season's Champions League.

A place in the top five is likely to secure a spot in next season's Champions League due to the strong performance of English sides in European competition this term.

United are five points clear of sixth-placed Liverpool, who lost 2-1 to title-chasing Manchester City yesterday.

— AFP

## Barcelona confirm exit from failed European Super League



BARCELONA — Spanish giants Barcelona confirmed their withdrawal from the failed breakaway European Super League project on Saturday, leaving Real Madrid as the only club still involved.

"Barcelona hereby announces that today it has formally notified the European Super League Company and the clubs involved of its withdrawal from the European Super League project," said the Catalans in a statement.

Barca president Joan Laporta said in October 2025 Barcelona wanted to reestablish links with UEFA, moving away from the

project launched by 12 clubs in 2021 which quickly collapsed under the weight of immense fan and institutional pressure.

Shortly after the semi-closed Super League project was announced five years ago, the six English clubs involved — Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester City, Manchester United and Tottenham — withdrew.

Four other clubs, Atletico Madrid, Inter Milan, AC Milan and Juventus, followed by 2024, leaving only Barca and Real Madrid still involved in the project championed by Real Madrid president Florentino Perez.

"We are in favour of peace because there is a way forward for the clubs in the Super League to

return to UEFA," said Barca chief Laporta in October.

"We feel very close to UEFA and the EFC (European Football Clubs, a sole, independent body representing football clubs within Europe)."

In 2024, a Spanish court ruled opposition to the Super League from world and European football governing bodies FIFA and UEFA "prevented free competition", and in 2025 an appeal from UEFA was rejected.

As a result, Real Madrid and the Super League, promoted by the A22 Sports Management group, were seeking more than US\$4 billion in damages from UEFA, a source told AFP.

— AFP



City's Norwegian striker Erling Haaland (centre) celebrates with teammates after scoring his team's second goal during the English Premier League match against Liverpool at Anfield in Liverpool, north west England yesterday.

— AFP

# England's Arundell eager to learn from Springbok star Kolbe



**Julian Guyer**

LONDON — Henry Arundell revealed how he had been inspired by South Africa hero Cheslin Kolbe in his quest to become a better rugby player after marking his first England start since the 2023 World Cup with a hat-trick of tries against a hapless Wales.

Arundell needed just the initial 35 minutes of England's Six Nations opener at Twickenham on Saturday to complete his treble as the hosts overwhelmed their old rivals 48-7.

The Bath wing has now scored 11 tries in 12 Tests, proof of his potency as a top-class finisher.

But Arundell, whose Test career was put on hold when at Paris-based Racing 92 as the Rugby Football Union do not consider players at non-English clubs for Test selection, has been keen to develop his defensive and aerial game since joining Premiership champions Bath before the start of this season.

And in double World Cup-winning Springbok wing Kolbe, the 23-year-old Arundell believes he has found an ideal example, with the South African now a threat in the air, despite being one of international rugby's smallest players, as well as a wing of dynamic speed and dazzling footwork.

"I've always focused a lot on my attack," Arundell said after Saturday's match. "It's a strength, so you want to make it a super-strength, but now it's about how good a player I can be. It's the all-round game."

"Someone I would look up to would be Cheslin Kolbe. I think he's probably the best winger in the

world in terms of his all-round game.

"I back my attacking game all the time so then it's about developing the other sides as well to help the team."

## 'Smarts and variations'

Arundell added: "All wingers want the ball - it would be a bit strange if you didn't as a winger - and there is always a bit of ego with wanting to score tries.

"But I've definitely learnt more in the sense of learning and improving different parts of my game, the kick chase and the kick battle and how that can influence the team.

"It's the smarts and the variations of the kicking game that make the best teams in the world and that's what we're trying to be."

England have now won 12 Tests in a row against all opponents, with coach Steve Borthwick delighted by Arundell's all-round improvement.

"We all know Henry is a player who has an incredible ability running with the ball and his ability to find a way to the try-line is excellent," said Borthwick, with England continuing their quest for a first Six Nations title away to Scotland on February 14.

"What I have been really impressed is over the last number of months is his attitude to go and improve other aspects of his game."

England stand-in captain Jamie George, who led the team against Wales instead of benched regular skipper Maro Itoje, said Arundell's play was reminiscent of a former Red Rose wing.

"He really reminds me of Jonny May in so many ways in terms of



England's wing Henry Arundell celebrates after scoring a try during the Six Nations international rugby union match against Wales at Allianz Stadium, Twickenham, in south-west London, on Saturday. — AFP

his diligence and preparation," explained George, adding: "When you've got a player like that on the field, it just gives everyone else so much confidence that if we work hard in the middle and create space for something like that, he's going to capitalise on it." — AFP

**MILANO CORTINA 2026**

**Medal Table**

Order	NOC	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
1	Norway	3	1	2	6
2	Italy	1	2	4	7
3	Japan	1	1	1	3
4	Austria	1	1	0	2
4	Czechia	1	1	0	2
4	France	1	1	0	2
4	Sweden	1	1	0	2
8	Switzerland	1	0	0	1
8	USA	1	0	0	1
10	Germany	0	1	1	2
11	Republic of Korea	0	1	0	1
11	Slovenia	0	1	0	1
13	Bulgaria	0	0	1	1
13	Canada	0	0	1	1
13	China	0	0	1	1



Stevenson Savart of Haiti greets the spectators after the cross-country skiing men's 10km+10km skiathlon at the Milan-Cortina 2026 Olympic Winter Games in Tesero, Italy, yesterday. — AFP

## Wang Chuqin retains singles title at table tennis Asian Cup

**Sun Yingsha claims her first Asian Cup singles title**

### Table tennis

HAIKOU — Top-ranked Wang Chuqin of China beat Japan's Tomokazu Harimoto 4-2 in the men's singles final to defend his title at the Asian Cup table tennis tournament here yesterday.

Harimoto started strongly with aggressive returns to lead 2-1 after three games (11-9, 8-11, 11-7), before Wang bounced back to rally past with three consecutive wins 11-5, 11-8, 11-6 to lift the trophy at home.

"It was a thrilling match. Harimoto performed better than me at the start, but I was not much affected by the score itself when trailing. I tried to find my rhythm gradually and showed my strength," Wang said.

"The victory belongs to our whole team with joint efforts. Throughout the matches, I demonstrated the outcomes of my recent training. I have made certain progress and will continue to make improvement in skills and mindset," he added.

Earlier in the day, Japan's Shunsuke Togami cruised past Chinese Taipei's Chang Yu-An 4-1 to finish third in the men's singles.

### Sun Yingsha comes out on top

China's Sun Yingsha clinched her first women's singles title at the Asian Cup table tennis tournament as she outlasted compatriot Wang Manyu 4-3 in the final yesterday.

It had been a see-saw game until the world top-ranked Sun took a 3-2 lead after winning the fifth game 11-7. Wang managed to take the sixth game 11-6, but Sun handled the pressure to seal the decider 13-11.

"We staged an excellent final together. I can feel the breath of Manyu during the match. The journey of winning this title left a wonderful memory for me," Sun said.

In 2025, Sun edged Wang 4-3 in the World Table Tennis Championships in Doha to retain her women's singles title. However, Wang had the upper

hand in October, defeating Sun to claim the World Table Tennis (WTT) China Smash women's singles crown. At China's National Games in November, Wang once again won over Sun in the women's singles final.

"I believe we are undergoing a healthy competition. Both of us have improved our skills and mentality during the process, which made me feel even more delighted alongside the victory," Sun added.

The tournament marked Sun's first appearance since December 13 last year, when the ankle injury forced her to pull out of the women's singles semifinal against compatriot Kuai Man at the WTT Finals. Although she insisted on competing in the mixed doubles final later in the day, Sun was affected by the injury and finished runner-up together with teammate Wang Chuqin.

Also yesterday, China's Kuai Man defeated Japan's Miwa Harimoto in five games (9-11, 11-5, 11-3, 11-5, 11-7) to take the third place. — Xinhua

## Sport in brief

**Maderova wins Olympic women's parallel giant slalom**



LIVIGNO — Czech snowboarder Zuzana Maderova won gold in the Olympic women's parallel giant slalom yesterday after the shock exit of defending champion Ester Ledecka.

The 22-year-old Maderova enjoyed a comfortable victory over Ledecka's conqueror Sabine Payer, cruising to victory by 0.83 seconds.

Italy's Lucia Dalmasso took bronze.

Maderova was quickly in control of the final in Livigno and Austria's Payer remained untidy in the middle section of the course, unable to make up ground.

Ledecka crashed out in the quarter-finals as she chased what would have been a historic third straight Olympic gold in snowboarding.

The Czech star and other athletes are lobbying to keep parallel giant slalom on the Olympic programme, with the sport, introduced at Salt Lake City in 2002, facing an uncertain future. — AFP

**Kamindu fireworks rescue Sri Lanka to 163-6 against Ireland**



COLOMBO — A late blitz from Kamindu Mendis saw Sri Lanka recover from early jitters to claw their way to 163-6 after being sent in to bat by Ireland in their World Cup opener in Colombo yesterday.

With the innings threatening to be derailed, Kamindu smashed 44 off just 19 balls to wrest the initiative back from Ireland's spinners, who had tied down the hosts.

The Sri Lankans were 86-4 in the 14<sup>th</sup> over when Kamindu strode out and ended a boundary drought that had stretched to 57 deliveries.

He broke the shackles with a cheeky reverse sweep and went on the charge in a 17<sup>th</sup> over that cost Ireland 21 runs.

By the time he departed, Sri Lanka were 153-6 with eight balls remaining.

His cameo included four fours and two towering sixes that had the crowd on its feet.

At the other end, wicketkeeper Kusal Mendis played the anchor role and remained unbeaten on 56 off 43 deliveries. — AFP

## Paul Thomas Anderson wins top director prize for 'One Battle After Another'

BEVERLY HILLS — "One Battle After Another" director Paul Thomas Anderson won top honours at the Directors Guild of America Awards in Los Angeles on Saturday, solidifying his film's position as a strong favorite for the Oscars.

Anderson, whose movie follows a former revolutionary who tries to protect his teenage daughter when the past comes back to haunt him, won the feature-film prize — the award considered a key indicator of what might happen at the Academy Awards, which cap off the Hollywood awards season.

"It's a tremendous honour to be given this," Anderson said upon accepting the award at the gala held in Beverly Hills.

"We're going to take it with the love that it's given and the appreciation of all our comrades in this room," he added.

Starring Leonardo DiCaprio, the film, which depicts a timeless America where white supremacists plot behind the scenes, immigration raids sweep through communities and revolutionary groups take up arms, also won recognition in January at the Critics' Choice Awards and the Golden Globes.

"One Battle After Another" will enter the Oscars as the second-most-nominated film, with 13 nominations. It is behind only the vampire film "Sinners" directed

by Ryan Coogler, which garnered 16 nominations, a record for the Academy Awards.

Coogler was also nominated for the feature-film prize at the Directors Guild Awards.

Anderson received the statuette from Sean Baker, who won last year with his dark comedy "Anora," which went on to be an Oscar winner.

Twenty of the 22 winners of the Directors Guild Awards have subsequently won the Oscar for best director, including the winners of the last three years: "Everything Everywhere All at Once," "Oppenheimer" and "Anora."

Also on Saturday, Oscar-winning Ukrainian filmmaker and journalist Mstyslav Chernov won the award for best documentary film. His film "2000 Meters to Andriivka" follows a Ukrainian platoon and offers a glimpse into the harsh realities of war.

"It's scary to live in a world where, instead of a camera, you have to get a gun to defend your home, to defend what you believe in," Chernov said at the event hosted by comedian Kumail Nanjiani.

"I want to thank... every soldier, every civilian, every filmmaker who made a choice to leave the camera for now and get a gun and go and fight so I have a chance," he added.

— AFP



US director Paul Thomas Anderson, winner of the Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Theatrical Feature Film for "One Battle After Another," poses in the press room during the 78th Annual Directors Guild Of America Awards at The Beverly Hilton on Saturday in Beverly Hills, California. — AFP

### World Weather

CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -3°C~6°C	Manila 21°C~28°C	New York -7°C~0°C	Lisbon 14°C~17°C
Shanghai 5°C~9°C	Bangkok 22°C~33°C	London 8°C~12°C	Rio de Janeiro 22°C~26°C
Hong Kong 14°C~17°C	Tokyo -4°C~7°C	Frankfurt -1°C~7°C	Luanda 24°C~30°C
Taipei 11°C~17°C	Singapore 22°C~33°C	Vancouver 5°C~7°C	Maputo 22°C~32°C
Guangzhou 12°C~19°C	Kuala Lumpur 22°C~34°C	Paris 8°C~11°C	Dili 24°C~29°C
Nanjing 1°C~9°C	Jakarta 23°C~29°C	Moscow -12°C~9°C	São Tomé 25°C~32°C
Guilin 8°C~12°C	Seoul -2°C~4°C	Las Vegas 11°C~23°C	Praia 17°C~27°C
Xi'an 1°C~11°C	Sydney 19°C~27°C	Monte Carlo 9°C~14°C	Bissau 19°C~38°C

## Elton John accuses UK tabloids publisher of 'abhorrent' privacy breaches

LONDON — Pop icon Elton John on Friday accused the publisher of two UK tabloids of "abhorrent" privacy invasions "outside even the most basic standards of human decency" as he testified at London's High Court.

Giving evidence in the joint legal action against Associated Newspapers Ltd (ANL) — the publisher of the *Daily Mail* and *The Mail on Sunday* — John claimed the news papers had unlawfully accessed his and his family's medical records.

Other complainants in the case include Prince Harry, King Charles III's younger son, and actress Liz Hurley.

"I have found *The Mail's* deliberate invasion into my medical health and medical details surrounding the birth of our son Zachary abhorrent and outside even the most basic standards of human decency," John wrote in a witness statement released as he began testifying by video link.

Wearing a green blazer and purple tie, the 78-year-old musician who has a rocky relationship with British tabloids appeared furious while giving evidence.

He and his husband David Furnish — who testified on Thursday — accuse the UK publisher of using unlawful means to gather information used in 10

articles between 2000 and 2015.

ANL has strongly denied claims made against its journalism calling them "lurid" and "preposterous".

Hurley, a friend of the couple, and Prince Harry each took the stand in the first two weeks of the trial.

The seven claimants suing ANL also include actress Sadie Frost, and two other public figures.

The case "contains the most horrendous things in the world that you can ever suffer from a privacy point of view," John told the trial, which is in its third week and expected to last until March.

The "Rocket Man" singer alleged that all three of the family's landlines "were hacked, including the junction box at the end of the road".

"I was incensed," John told the court, adding that he has "never been afraid of fighting my corner... with the British press".

### Not 'fair game'

Furnish on Thursday accused *The Mail* of "stealing" and publishing their son Zachary's birth certificate before the couple had received a copy.

The filmmaker, who also manages his musician husband, also accused tabloid of having been "actively homophobic" for years.

An emotional Prince Harry blasted the publisher when he was

in the box in January, accusing the tabloids of making his wife Meghan's life "an absolute misery".

ANL has countered that evidence will prove it sourced its stories legitimately and that claims around the use of private investigators were "clutching at straws in the wind".

Lawyer Catrin Evans for the publisher suggested that for some *Mail* articles mentioned in John and Furnish's case, a "certain amount of the information... had already been put into the public domain".

The publisher's lawyers have also suggested that the claimants were surrounded by a "leaky" circle of friends that passed on information to the media.

When quizzed about this, the singer replied bluntly: "My friends do not talk to the press, and that's why they are still my friends."

In his written witness statement, John said: "I have devoted my life to my music but this does not mean deeply personal things which I have a right to deal with in private are fair game."

"It has been truly sickening for David and me to see the disclosure in our case, with Zachary as a target when he was just born, with David and me as targets, with me as a target when I was sick and unwell," he said. — AFP

## Sells like teen spirit? Cobain's 'Nevermind' guitar up for sale

BEVERLY HILL — The guitar played by late rock legend Kurt Cobain on the anthemic grunge track "Smells Like Teen Spirit" is going under the hammer next month.

The 1966 Fender Mustang is among a treasure trove of instruments and musical memorabilia that also includes the logo-emblazoned drum that announced The Beatles to the United States when the Fab Four played "The Ed Sullivan Show" in 1964.

The Jim Irsay collection — put together by the one-time owner of the Indianapolis Colts NFL team — includes guitars played by musicians who defined the 20th century, including Pink Floyd's Dave Gilmour, The Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia, as well as Eric Clapton, John Coltrane, and Johnny Cash.

But at the centre of the collection are handwritten lyrics for The Beatles' smash "Hey Jude" as well as guitars played by John Lennon, Paul McCartney and George Harrison.

"I think it's fair to say that this collection of Beatles instruments... is the most important assembled Beatles collection for somebody who wasn't a member of the band,"

Amelia Walker, the London-based head of private and iconic collections at Christie's, told AFP in Beverly Hills.

"There are five Beatles guitars in his collection, as well as Ringo Starr's first Ludwig drum kit [and] John Lennon's piano, on which he composed several songs from Sergeant Pepper."

Also included is "the drum skin from Ringo's second Ludwig kit, which is the vision which greeted 73 million Americans who tuned in to watch 'The Ed Sullivan Show' on the ninth of February 1964 when the Beatles broke America."

The drum kit is expected to fetch around US\$2 million, while the guitars could sell for around US\$1 million at the auction in New York, Christie's estimates.

Perhaps the most expensive item in the collection is Cobain's guitar, which experts say might sell for up to US\$5 million.

"It's a talismanic guitar for people of my generation... who lived through grunge," said Walker.

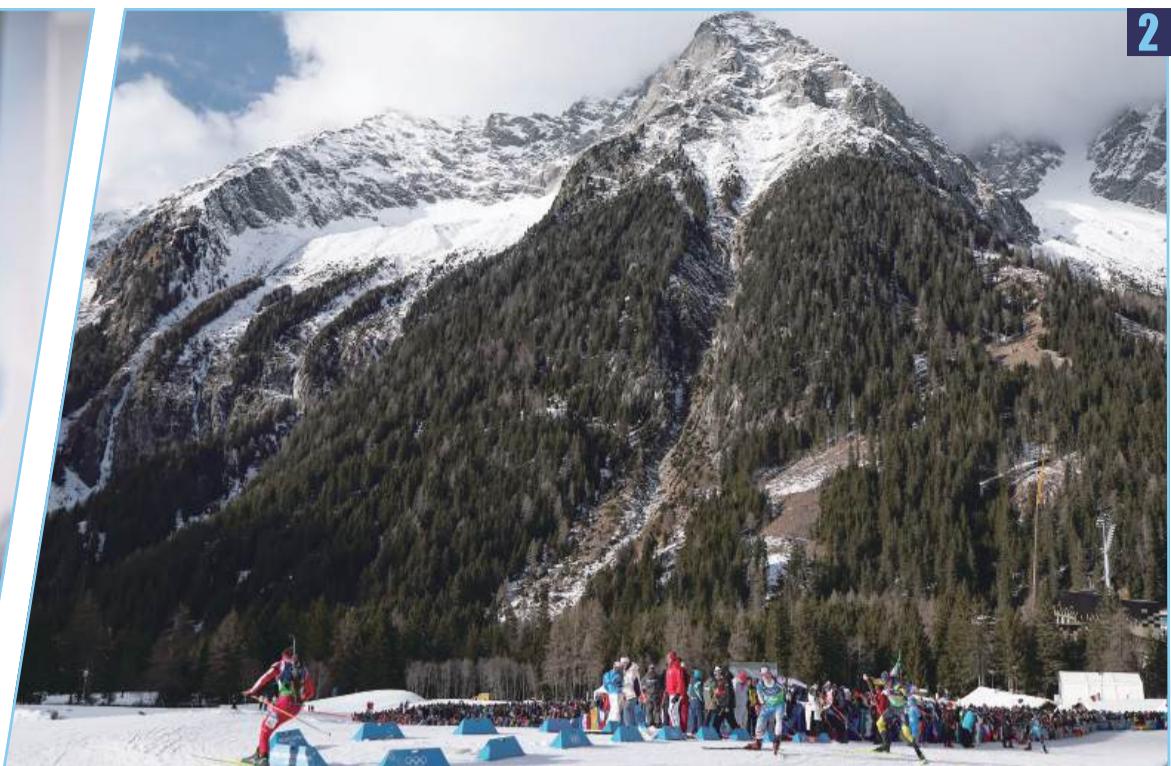
"[Smells Like Teen Spirit] was the anthem of that generation. That video is so iconic."

"We're incredibly proud and privileged to have that here."

KURT COBAIN  
'Smells Like Teen Spirit' Mustang



Kurt Cobain's 1966 Fender Mustang guitar is displayed during a press preview of The Jim Irsay Collection at Christie's Los Angeles in Beverly Hills, California, on Thursday. — AFP



1 Photo taken on February 3, shows the Chinese character "Fu" (meaning "Fortune") at the Olympic Village ahead of the 2026 Milan-Cortina Winter Olympics in Milan, Italy.  
– Xinhua

2 Athletes compete in the mixed biathlon 4 x 6km relay event during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at the Anterselva Biathlon Arena (Sudtirol Arena) in Anterselva (Val Pusteria), Italy yesterday. – AFP

3 French supporters hold a cutout of the face of France's Lou Jeanmonnot as they celebrate France winning gold in the mixed biathlon 4 x 6km relay event during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at the Anterselva Biathlon Arena, Italy yesterday.  
– AFP

4 Maruyama Nozomi of Japan competes during the Ski Jumping Women's Normal Hill Individual of the 2026 Milan-Cortina Winter Olympics in Predazzo, Italy, on Saturday.  
– Xinhua

5 Silver medallists Italy's Tommaso Giacometti, Lukas Hofer, Dorothea Wierer and Italy's Lisa Vittozzi, gold medallists France's Eric Perrot, Quentin Fillon Maillet, Lou Jeanmonnot, France's Julia Simon and bronze medallists Germany's Justus Strelow, Philipp Nawrath, Germany's Vanessa Voigt, Germany's Franziska Preuss, pose for a selfie on the podium of the mixed biathlon 4 x 6km relay event during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at the Anterselva Biathlon Arena (Sudtirol Arena) in Anterselva (Val Pusteria), Italy yesterday.  
– AFP

6 China's Liu Hanbin reacts after competing in the speed skating men's 5000m during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at Milano Speed Skating Stadium in Milan, Italy yesterday.  
– AFP