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Gongbei Customs seizes over 500,000 wine & liquor bottles worth over 575 million yuan

Armindo Neves

Zhuhai's Gongbei Customs officers, in cooperation with their counterparts from two other customs services in the Chinese mainland, raided several parallel-trading dens in Zhuhai, Shenzhen and Xiamen recently where they seized over 500,000 bottles of wine and spirits worth over 575 million yuan (664 million patacas).

According to the statement, Gongbei Customs' anti-smuggling officers identified a suspicious shop during a routine inspection at the Gongbei Port (checkpoint) market. They observed that the shop's employee surnamed Xu, who was responsible for receiving goods, was making frequent trips on an e-bike between the market and nearby residential neighbourhoods, with at least a dozen round trips made in a single day, the statement said.

The statement did not reveal where the bottles of wine and spirits came from.

The statement said that the officers investigated the driver of the vehicle that was receiving goods from Xu. They discovered that the driver, surnamed Li, drove a van from Shenzhen to Zhuhai daily to collect the goods. Li operates an alcoholic beverages shop in Shenzhen, the statement said.

The customs officers also discovered that most of the shop's supply consisted of contraband, the

statement said, adding that further investigation unearthed several smuggling syndicates headed by two suspects, surnamed Xie and Sun.

According to the statement, Xie and Sun employed a "smuggling by ants" method, hiring smugglers to take alcoholic beverages across the border in small, multiple batches, then consolidating the goods near the border checkpoint before distributing them across the Chinese mainland via logistic networks. The statement added that, in order to conceal the smuggling operation, Sun even used two shops, one selling incense and candles and the other selling bedding as fronts.

After securing sufficient evidence, the statement said, Gongbei Customs, in collaboration with Shenzhen and Xiamen Customs, carried out their joint anti-smuggling operation. A total of 19 suspects, including Xie and Sun, were apprehended, and five smuggling syndicates were dismantled. The investigation revealed that the criminal network had been operating since February 2022. ■

**The phrase "smuggling by ants" (螞蟻搬家) is a metaphor used in Hong Kong, Macau and the Chinese mainland to describe a specific method of small-scale, repetitive smuggling carried out by individuals ("ants") or small groups (like an army of ants). –DeepSeek/MPD*



These two undated video grabs uploaded from Zhuhai's Gongbei Customs WeChat official account last night shows smuggled bottles of wine and liquor in a shop in Shenzhen.



President Xi Jinping (right, front), also general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, visits an information technology (IT) innovation park in Beijing yesterday. At the park, Xi learned about IT application and innovation, and was briefed on Beijing's efforts to expedite the development of an international sci-tech innovation center. Xi checked the display of sci-tech innovation outcomes, and talked with researchers and heads of sci-tech enterprises. (More on p. 7)

Air Canada suspends Cuba flights citing airport fuel shortage

MONTREAL – Air Canada said it was suspending service to Cuba from yesterday due to a lack of guaranteed fuel supply at airports in the country, where US pressure has created an oil crisis.

Cuba is reeling from a US-ordered halt in oil shipments from Caracas after American troops captured Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro last month.

President Donald Trump also signed an executive order allowing his country to impose tariffs on countries selling oil to Havana.

Air Canada said in a statement that "aviation fuel will not be commercially available at the island's airports" as of today.

"Over the following days, the airline will

operate empty flights southbound to pick up approximately 3,000 customers already at destination and return them home," Canada's national carrier said in a statement.

Air Canada said most of its customers currently in Cuba travelled to the island as part of a vacation package offered by the airline.

The Cuban government on Friday announced emergency measures to address the island's energy crisis, including a four-day work week for state-owned companies and fuel sale restrictions.

The oil shortages have threatened to plunge Cuba into complete darkness, with power plants struggling to keep the lights on.

– AFP

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Central authorities issue action plan to revitalize theatrical arts

The central authorities have revealed an action plan to promote the inheritance and development of theatrical arts over the next three years, starting from 2026.

– Story on p. 7

EU chief backs Made-in-Europe push for 'strategic' sectors

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen yesterday backed a push to favour European firms over foreign rivals in "strategic" fields, ahead of a leaders' meeting on boosting the bloc's competitiveness.

– Story on p. 11

Socialist beats far-right rival to Portugal's presidency

Centre-left Socialist candidate António José Seguro scored a convincing win over far-right rival André Ventura in Portugal's presidential election on Sunday, with the run-off vote held after days of devastating storms.

– Story on p. 12

Police nab Indonesian drug mule trafficking 522.2 grams of heroin

Ada Lei

The Judiciary Police (PJ) apprehended a man from Indonesia on Saturday for smuggling 522.2 grams of heroin to Macau, concealed within his body, PJ spokesman Chao Teng Hin said during a special press conference yesterday.

Chao identified the suspect as a 29-year-old male surnamed Hadi who claimed to be jobless.

According to Chao, based on a tip-off, the Judiciary Police (PJ) identified Hadi as a drug trafficker. Officers apprehended Hadi upon his arrival in Macau from abroad at the airport on Saturday. Using a body X-ray scanner, the officers discovered that Hadi had multiple egg-shaped foreign objects concealed within his body.

Chao added that Hadi was taken to a hospital for examination, where he excreted a total of 52 egg-shaped items. The police later confirmed that these items contained heroin, weighing a total of 522.2 grams,



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

— Photo: Ada Lei

with an estimated street value of 730,000 patacas.

Chao noted that Hadi was hired by a drug-trafficking syndicate to smuggle drugs from abroad hidden inside his body, with a promised "remuneration" of 12,000 patacas.

The police seized a total of 522.2 grams of heroin, as well as US\$551 (4,420 patacas) in cash from Hadi.

Hadi was transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) yesterday, facing a charge of drug trafficking. ■

5 young women fall victim to concert ticket scams: police

Ada Lei

Five young women from the Chinese mainland have separately fallen victim to concert ticket scams, resulting in a total loss of



Judiciary Police (PJ) spokesman Chao Teng Hin looks on during yesterday's regular press conference.

— Photo: Ada Lei

18,136 patacas, Judiciary Police (PJ) spokesman Chao Teng Hin said during a regular press conference yesterday.

According to Chao, the police received separate reports from the five victims between Friday and Sunday, who had been defrauded by concert ticket scams employing similar tactics between January 31 and February 7. The victims were unable to obtain tickets after making the cash transfers, with the scammers subsequently requesting further payments under various pretexts. Chao added that the total amount lost by the quintet was 18,136 patacas, with the highest individual loss amounting to 10,438 patacas and the lowest to 480 patacas.

Chao noted that one of the victims posted on a social media platform on Saturday that she wanted to purchase tickets for a concert to be held in Macau. About an hour later, a scammer offered to sell two tickets for 6,000 yuan (6,937 patacas). After the victim transferred the money, the scammer falsely claimed that the tickets were

sold out and offered to process a refund, providing a QR code for the victim to contact the so-called "finance personnel."

Chao said that the purported "finance" staff member then requested that the victim open a "corporate account" in order to process the refund, instructing the victim to transfer 3,000 yuan to a designated account first. After complying with the request, the "finance" staff claimed that the establishment of the "corporate relationship" was unsuccessful and requested another transfer. Realising she had been scammed, the victim immediately reported a total loss of 9,000 yuan to the police. ■

Cluster of flu-like illness involving 6 students found at local school: SSM

Rui Pastorin

A cluster of influenza-like illness infections involving six students at the "Our Lady of Fátima Girls' School" on Rua da Missão de Fátima (花地瑪教會街) was reported to the Health Bureau (SSM) yesterday, with details announced by the bureau in a statement last night.

The statement said that some of the patients, which are from the school's class P3P who started showing symptoms on Saturday, have sought medical attention, but no complications or severe cases have been found, while conditions have been mild. Among the symptoms noted in the statement are fever, cough and runny nose.

Investigation revealed that

Beware of 'tax refund' text message scams: DSF

Armindo Neves

via text messages containing hyperlinks.

According to the statement, if netizens receive any similar messages, they must remain highly vigilant and refrain from clicking on any links or providing any personal or financial information. Regardless of the sender's claimed identity – be it an institution or an individual – no response should be given without proper verification, the statement said.

Meanwhile, the Judiciary Police Anti-Fraud Coordination Centre also issued yesterday a warning to remind the public that no government entities send text messages containing links. Whenever citizens need to input personal, banking, or credit card information online, they must first verify the authenticity and security of the website, the statement said.

If in doubt, according to the statement, citizens can use the Judiciary Police's "Anti-Fraud Tool" to check for risks, or call the Anti-Fraud Inquiry Hotline on 8800 7777 or the Police Emergency Hotline on 993 for assistance. ■

提防「財政局退稅」釣魚短訊 以免個人及信用卡資料被盜用



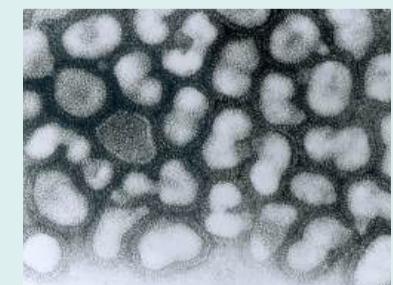
This image released by the Judiciary Police (PJ) yesterday warns the public to beware of "tax refund" scams.

four of the six patients have tested positive for the influenza A virus.

The statement said that cleaning and disinfection have been stepped up, and measures for ventilation and isolating those who are ill are being carried out.

The statement listed a raft of recommended measures for protecting oneself, such as getting the annual flu vaccine and recommended COVID-19 shots, as well as maintaining good hygiene practices like handwashing and using tissues for sneezing or coughing. One should also avoid crowded places and seek medical help when feeling unwell or symptoms worsen, the statement added. ■

*The Influenza A virus is a



This image downloaded from Wikipedia last night and credited to the US' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Public Health Image Library (PHIL) shows a transmission electron micrograph of the influenza A virus.

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Macau Weather

MAINLY CLOUDY.
FORCE 2 TO 4 EASTERLY WINDS.
RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL
RANGE BETWEEN 65% AND 90%.



15°C~20°C

Source: SMG

2 associations host CNY couplets giveaway event

Armindo Neves

The Myanmar-Chinese Pen Pals Association held its annual Chinese New Year (CNY – also known as Spring Festival) couplets giveaway event yesterday at the “Three Lamps” (Rotunda de Carlos da Maia) roundabout.

The association’s chairman, Huang Quanchang, said in a speech at the launch of the two-day event that, since its establishment six years ago, his association has consistently upheld its founding purpose of “preserving Chinese culture, fostering connections within the overseas Chinese community, and serving the residents of Macau,” adding that, for the past six years, the association has organised a public welfare initiative of giving away Spring Festival couplets.

According to Huang, held in

locations such as the peninsula’s Three Lamps and Iao Hon districts, as well as in Taipa, the event involves using brushes and ink to inscribe hopes for the Chinese New Year and convey heartfelt wishes to neighbours, adding that each couplet carries the profound essence of Chinese culture. This event is not just a cultural public service, he said.

Huang emphasised that the event has become an important link during the Spring Festival season, connecting the overseas Chinese community with local residents and passing on traditions and warmth.

Meanwhile, the Macao Great Wall Calligraphers and Painters Association also held a CNY couplets giveaway event at the government’s senior citizen rental housing estate on Plot P in Areia Preta district.

The association’s president, Iun Iok Meng, said in a speech at the launch of the one-day event that with the approach of the Chinese New Year, 28 calligraphy pieces centred on the theme “Welcoming Spring and Ushering in Blessings” have been created and are now exhibited at the art gallery of the that estate.

Iun also said that these artworks, each featuring the character “福” (fortune), correspond to the 24 solar terms and convey wishes for well-being throughout the four seasons, adding that some also incorporate elements of the Year of the Horse.

Iun said that the artworks aim is to extend CNY greetings to the estate’s residents, wishing everyone greater success in all endeavours, good health, and prosperity in the coming year. ■



Pedestrians gather around Chinese New Year (CNY – aka Spring Festival) couplets giveaway booths to receive them free of charge in Rotunda de Carlos da Maia, colloquially known as “Three Lamps” roundabout. – Photo: Armindo Neves

DSAL, FAOM to hold 4 job matching sessions late this month

Khalel Vallo

Macau’s Labour Affairs Bureau (DSAL) and the Federation of Trade Unions (FAOM – aka Gung Luen) will jointly organise four industry-specific job matching sessions in late February, offering a total of 445 vacancies, with registration starting today, according to a statement by the bureau yesterday.

The statement said that the bureau will work with FAOM to organise four job matching sessions in late February to help local residents seeking employment and ease manpower pressure faced by employers.

The statement noted that registration will run from 9 a.m. today until 12 p.m. on February 23.

A hotel industry job matching session will be held on February 24 for the whole day at Studio City’s banquet hall on the third floor in Cotai, the statement said, adding that the participating company will be City of Dreams (COD) Resorts Limited, offering 50 vacancies including front office assistant supervisor, butler service officer, butler, customer contact centre agent, and food and beverage service staff.

Meanwhile, a supermarket retail session will take place on the afternoon of February 26 at the FAOM Vocational Skills Training Centre on the first floor of 101-105A Tai Peng Industrial Building, Phase I, on Istmo de Ferreira do Amaral, the statement noted, adding that two companies, Royal Supermarket Limited and Sunco Supermarket, will participate, offering a total of 90 vacancies such as stock clerk, cashier, shelf filler, meat handler, seafood handler, and delivery assistant.

The statement said that a cleaning and security industries session will be held on the morning of February 27 on the second floor of the FAOM building at 2-6 Rua da



This infographic provided by the Labour Affairs Bureau (DSAL) yesterday promotes its four industry-specific job matching sessions in late February, to be held in conjunction with the Federation of Trade Unions (FAOM), aka Gung Luen.

Ribeira do Patane, noting that four companies will take part, namely “Winnerway Security Guards Co. Ltd”, “Waste Management Systems Company Limited” (CSR), “East Sun Cleaning Services Limited” and “Golden Dragon Services Limited”, providing 287 vacancies including security guard, cleaner, vehicle cleaning worker, street cleaning worker, and heavy vehicle driver.

In addition, an information technology (IT) industry session will be held on the afternoon of February 27 at the same venue. Two companies, Bowei Information Systems Limited and “HMN Smart (Macau) Information System Technologies Co. Limited”, will offer 18 vacancies including project manager, ICT operations and maintenance manager, project coordinator, solutions engineer,

computer technician and systems analyst, the statement said.

According to the statement, job seekers who receive SMS notifications, as well as other local residents interested in attending the sessions, can register during the application period by logging into the “Macao One Account” app, entering the “job seeking services” section and selecting the “industry-specific job matching session” (<https://www.dsdl.gov.mo/jobseeking/app>) option. Successful applicants will receive confirmation via SMS.

In the statement, the bureau urged all those interested to apply early as quotas are limited, adding that enquiries can be made during office hours on 8399 9885 or 8399 9886, or through the FAOM job referral department on 2856 9362. ■

Studio City Macau opens Old Master Q 60th anniversary exhibition

Khalel Vallo

Integrated resort Studio City Macau has launched a special exhibition celebrating the 60th anniversary of classic comic series “Old Master Q”*, running since yesterday through April 12 in Cotai, according to a statement by Melco Resorts & Entertainment yesterday.

The statement said that the “Enchanting Moments at Studio City: Old Master Q 60th Anniversary Fantastic Journey Macau Special Exhibition” features themed displays, photo spots, interactive experience zones, a pop-up store, and comic-inspired menu items.

Spanning several areas of Studio City, the exhibition brings the comic’s characters Old Master Q, Big Potato and Mr Chin to life through immersive installations, the statement said, adding the highlights include a “Time Machine Manuscript Collection”, showcasing rare prototype manuscripts and vintage artist equipment, and an “Old Master Q Newsstand and Café”, designed to recreate the nostalgic experience of reading comics.

In addition, exhibitiongoers can also take part in interactive attractions

such as Fantastic Crossover 321, where guests can create their own four-panel comic strip photos, as well as Classic Comic Lane, which incorporates local cultural elements, the statement noted.

The statement said that themed experiences will also extend to dining outlets and a photo installation near the Light Rapid Transit entrance, offering exhibitiongoers a “Fun Never Ends” journey through the comic’s 60-year legacy. ■

* “Old Master Q” (老夫子) is a classic Chinese manhua (comic) character created by the late Hong Kong cartoonist Alfonso Wong (under the pen name Wong Chak) in the 1960s. “Old Master Q” is a bald, elderly man who always wears traditional Chinese attire – a black mandarin jacket and trousers. He is often portrayed as well-meaning but slightly old-fashioned, clever yet sometimes mischievous, navigating the clash between traditional values and a rapidly modernising world. The comics are mostly silent gag strips, i.e., using very few words, relying on visual humour and slapstick. – DeepSeek



This undated handout photo provided by Melco Resorts & Entertainment Limited yesterday shows its “Time Machine Manuscript Collection” section of the “Old Master Q 60th Anniversary Fantastic Journey” exhibition at Studio City Macau in Cotai.



MGM Maritime Silk Road exhibition displays 30 original works

Khalel Vallo

Integrated resort operator MGM's National Art Funds-backed "Talent Training on the Cultural and Creative Design of Maritime Silk Road" exhibition has been open to the public since Friday in Barra, featuring 30 original works produced by trainees after nearly a year of study and field research.

According to a statement by MGM last week, the exhibition is part of the "2025 National Arts Fund" arts talent sponsorship programme and was inaugurated on Thursday at the site of an erstwhile abattoir in Barra.

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

The programme covered five key Maritime Silk Road cities and combined cultural theory, professional field visits and design practice, aiming to cultivate cultural and creative talent. The exhibition is divided into six sections – "Setting Sail," "Exploration," "Integration," "Growth," "Passing the Torch" and "Tides" – showcasing 30 original works, including cultural creative products, fashion design, paintings, sculptures, and multimedia installations.

Speaking to the media before the opening ceremony, Chinese mainland artist Wang Yuding said she used 12 colours to represent the Maritime Silk Road in a "warm and steady" way. "The most difficult part of the design was to combine all the colours to create the design," she said, adding she hoped that the exhibition can show the value of contemporary design to audiences worldwide.

Moreover, Wang noted that Macau invited local designers to provide professional feedback, which helped explore cross-border collaboration and business transformation.

Meanwhile, local artist Leong Man Teng said her work uses composite material and drew inspiration from museum visits during the programme, including an experience at the Poly MGM Museum. Leong said she incorporated elements of blue-and-white porcelains into her work after being inspired by exhibits seen in museums such as the National Museum of China in Beijing and the Guangdong Provincial Museum in Guangzhou.

Leong added that the programme's combination of theory and creative practice helped deepen her thinking and supported her artistic development.

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



Photos: Khalel Vallo

NOVA Mall displays Mickey & Friends CNY-themed installation



This photo recently provided by NOVA Mall shows a top-down view of the Mickey & Friends railway station installation in Taipa.

Rui Pastorin

An installation featuring Mickey Mouse and friends is on display at NOVA Mall's Atrium in Taipa as part of its Chinese New Year (CNY) campaign.

The "Mickey & Friends" railway station installation is showcased until March 1 and features a 16-metre-long themed railway carriage, all complemented by CNY couplets and signage featuring the Disney character. A recent statement from Nova Mall noted that also showcased are photo spots (known as "da ka" in Putonghua) featuring beloved Disney characters.

The statement added that three CNY-themed interactive game booths inside the "train station" are also available until February 22, with winners receiving Disney-themed prizes. Among them, the statement said, are plush cushions, rugs, phone lanyards,

foldable travel bags, tote bags, hand towels, cardholders and drawstring pouches.

NOVA Mall General Manager Paul Lee Yan Kwong was quoted by the statement as saying: "Visitors can enjoy a surprise-filled Chinese New Year celebration alongside their beloved Disney characters".

He added: "We hope families and loved ones can create heart-warming memories here at NOVA Mall", highlighting the mall's themed offerings and the various ongoing activities for the festive season, as well as sharing festive greetings.

Other activities set to take place are a Lion Dance performance at the Atrium at 1 p.m. on February 24, the seventh day of CNY, while shoppers spending a certain amount can also redeem game tickets, among others.

More details can be found by visiting <https://www.nova.mo>. ■

DSI launches measures to make applications easier

Rui Pastorin

The Identification Services Bureau (DSI) announced in a statement yesterday its measures geared towards optimising application processes, including an "expedited application" option when applying for a Macau SAR (Special Administrative Region) passport or Macau SAR travel permit on the Macau One Account or self-service kiosks, as well as self-service machine for submitting supplementary photos for identification documents.

The statement noted that by opting for the "expedited application" option, applicants can complete the application process without visiting service counters, instead only needing to follow system instructions and paying the required fees.

Moreover, the statement said that for submitting supplementary photos, those who have received a notice from the bureau to submit them for their ID cards, Macau SAR travel documents, or visit permit to Hong Kong can complete the procedures at self-service kiosks, where they can select the "Submit a supplementary photo" option.

Among the locations are eight Government 24-hour Self-service Centres in Macau, the 24-hour Self-Service Corner at the Government Services Centre in Hengqin and the Macao Government Services 24-hour Self-Service Centre at the Macao New Neighbourhood in Hengqin, the statement said.

The statement added that after verifying



This poster provided by the Identification Services Bureau (DSI) yesterday introduces the self-service machine for submitting supplementary photos for identification documents.

their identity with a physical ID or fingerprint, users can choose a photo taken at a self-service kiosk or from the "My Photos" section of the "Macao One Account". The submitted photo is then sent to DSI for processing.

One can find more details on www.dsi.gov.mo. ■



rota das letras • 尚文不朽 • the script road
FESTIVAL LITERÁRIO DE MACAU • 澳門文學節 • MACAU LITERARY FESTIVAL

PRESS RELEASE

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

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

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

- Amitav Ghosh, a leading figure in world literature and author of a trilogy of novels centred on the time and space of the Opium Wars;
- Hernán 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 20th 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 15th Macau Literary Festival is organised with the support of the Macau Government, diplomatic representations, local associations, companies – with special emphasis on the hotel sector – and the media. Casa Garden, headquarters of the Orient Foundation, will once again serve as the base for The Script Road. This network of partnerships reflects the collective commitment to cultural life and exchange that defines Macau.

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

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About the Macau Literary Festival:

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

MAS's Exhibition 2025, a magnet for visitors at The Parisian Macao

Review by Swallow Xu

Against a festive backdrop on the 3rd floor, Shoppes at The Parisian Macao, Cotai, "The Exhibition of Artworks of the Members of Macau Artist Society 2025" stands out as a spectacular landscape in this happiness-filled integrated resort.

During the Christmas-New Year holiday season, the event received hundreds of visitors daily, both local and international, from the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, China's Taiwan region, Japan, South Korea, Russia, Türkiye, the Middle East, the Philippines and the Americas, with peak time in the afternoon, with visitors still lingering in the colourful art spaces by closing time at 7p.m.

The exhibition, one of the largest of the year, featuring more than 100 local artists organised by the Macau Artist Society (MAS) supported by Sands China and sponsored by the Macao Cultural Development Fund, is presented in six rooms, most of which face the rotunda with the recently concluded POP MART's photogenic installations which gave an attractive atmosphere. The 179 pieces/sets on show are richly diverse, with watercolours,

oil paintings, sculptures, ink paintings, calligraphy, installation art, printmaking, and mixed media, with gorgeous colours enticing passers-by to walk in.

The exhibits cover a wide range of themes – most rooted in local heritage sites, landscapes and customs which captivate non-local visitors – and varied styles, from traditional Chinese arts to contemporary visual language, fully reflecting Macau's unique East-meets-West artistic ecology. Among the most popular works are MAS President Lok Hei's painting "Hei! What Brings You Here", a humorous self-portrait which prompts viewers to reflect on Macau's history as a meeting point of Eastern and Western cultures; Cheang Chon Hei's "Is Everything OK?", a collection in simple, modern touches pondering fast-paced daily routines of each and every contemporary man; and local artist Cecilia Lao's lacquer-based work "Blues of the Ruins of St. Paul's", crafted out of mixed media including gold/silver foil and goose egg shells featuring the landmark Ruins of St. Paul's.

Other works, either local and Chinese mainland themes and even foreign landscapes,



This photo recently provided by Swallow Xu and taken by Hon Cheong shows an artwork titled "Hei! What Brings You Here" by Macau Artist Society President Lok Hei.

also draw selfie snappers, art lovers and tourists who entered the exhibition with luggage, families of old and young, and lively groups of friends or individual travellers.

The MAS members' exhibition is the first to be held at The Parisian Macao in a

setting with an extraordinary atmosphere for showing the artworks, where the exquisite, eye-catching works and The Parisian's elegant splendour complement each other perfectly. Visitors expressed their appreciation of the art on display, saying they provide a window for them to understand Macau and its art scene better. Some art peers from neighbouring regions and countries (the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, Japan) said works by Macau artists demonstrate East-meets-West techniques, are more contemporary and show very distinctive themes not found in other places. MAS' this first trial may serve as a successful example of showcasing arts and creating an artistic oasis in Macau's integrated resorts and other commercial spaces to bring the beauty of arts closer to the general public. It is a positive lesson that art is not only for museumgoers, but also a vessel to show worldwide visitors Macau's multifaceted charm.

The exhibition, with free admission, is open daily to the public until March 27 from 12 p.m. to 7 p.m. in Shops 3303, 3305a, 3305b, 3305c, 3306, and 3320 on the 3rd floor Shoppes at The Parisian Macao, Cotai. ■

Jimmy Lai, mastermind of crimes endangering national security, sentenced to 20 years in prison

HONG KONG – The High Court of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) yesterday sentenced Jimmy Lai Chee-ying, an instigator of anti-China riots in Hong Kong, to 20 years in prison for three crimes endangering national security.

The sentence was announced along with penalties for other defendants in the national security case. Eight defendants received imprisonment terms ranging from six years and three months to 10 years. The three corporate defendants, namely Apple Daily Limited, Apple Daily Printing Limited, and Apple Daily Internet Limited, were each fined HK\$3,004,500.

In the sentencing of Lai, the court found that Lai was the "mastermind and driving force" behind conspiracies to collude with external forces and to publish seditious materials. After considering Lai's grave criminal conduct as well as his mitigation, the court handed down the sentence of 20 years' imprisonment, with two of the years overlapping with the prison term Lai is currently serving.

Central government agencies in Hong Kong, as well as local authorities, have voiced support for the sentencing.

The sentence of 20 years' imprisonment imposed on Lai manifested that the rule of law is upheld and justice is done, and also brought great relief to all, said HKSAR Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu.

Lai betrayed the country and harmed the HKSAR, causing damage to the interests of the country and the HKSAR. His conviction is supported by overwhelming evidence, and he for sure deserves his punishment after all the harm he has done, Lee said.

"The court's judgment illustrates that the rule of law in Hong Kong is robust," Tang Ping-keung, secretary for security of the HKSAR government, told reporters yesterday.

Over the years, Lai and his syndicate have misled people with fake news and false information, inflicting irreparable harm on society, said Tang. Even after the enactment of the national security law in Hong Kong,

the defendants in the case continued with their crimes for some time until after they were arrested by the police, Tang noted.

The heavy sentence clearly reflected the very serious nature of the offences committed by Lai, said Tang.

The sentencing fully demonstrated judicial fairness and the authority of the rule of law, and reflected the HKSAR's firm determination and strong will to lawfully punish criminal acts and activities endangering national security, said a spokesperson for the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the HKSAR.

The facts proved once again that the despicable dealings of external forces and anti-China elements seeking to destabilize Hong Kong are ultimately futile, said the spokesperson.

"The punishment fit the crime," said a spokesperson for the Office for Safeguarding National Security of the Central People's Government in the HKSAR.

The 156-day public trial, which involved the examination of 2,220 exhibits, over 80,000 pages of case files and testimonies of 14 prosecution witnesses, had established that Lai colluded with external forces to endanger national security, the spokesperson noted. The judicial process was open, transparent, rigorous, fair and just, with Lai's legal rights protected.

The ruling of Lai's case has represented not only the fulfillment of justice, but also a clear warning to anyone who attempts to challenge legal boundaries, said a spokesperson for the Commissioner's Office of the Chinese Foreign Ministry in the HKSAR in an open letter to foreign media agencies based in Hong Kong.

The spokesperson called on journalists of foreign media outlets to respect the independence of Hong Kong's judicial process, uphold journalistic professionalism, and report on the case with objectivity and fairness, refraining from politicizing legal matters.

— Xinhua

Jimmy Lai verdict shows HK's rule of law tolerates no foreign meddling

China Daily Editorial

The High Court in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region meted out penalties yesterday to former media tycoon Jimmy Lai Chee-ying and his accomplices for what was determined to be "serious and grave criminal conduct".

Lai was sentenced to 20 years in prison for his criminal endeavors, specifically for lobbying for foreign sanctions on China (including the HKSAR) and for inciting hatred toward the central and HKSAR governments. These criminal endeavors continued even after the implementation of the Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in June 2020. It was under this law that Lai and his cohorts were convicted.

Nonetheless, Lai's trial was accompanied by reckless attacks and smears from external actors against the authorities. Some Western figures and organizations have desperately attempted to manipulate public opinion under the guise of "press freedom" and exerted undue pressure on the Hong Kong judiciary with the aim of securing Lai's release without trial.

In whitewashing Lai's criminal acts, Western apologists have resorted to slogan-chanting, turning a blind eye to the irrefutable evidence presented in court by both the prosecution and Lai's accomplices who pleaded guilty and testified against him.

These Western supporters of Lai mention nothing about the transparent legal proceedings of the trial, which was open to the public and attended by foreign consular officials and journalists. Nor do they mention the court's written judgment, spanning 855 pages and fully accessible to the public, which details the analysis of relevant legal principles and evidence that proved Lai's criminality beyond any doubt.

The court found that Lai's intention and actions to subvert China's political system, at the expense of the interests of the Chinese

people and the HKSAR, were consistent before and after the implementation of the National Security Law. Indeed, Lai had even gone so far as to call for the United States to use nuclear weapons against the Chinese mainland.

The judgment, handed down in December 2025, specifically pointed out that Lai had used the media platforms he controlled to incite hatred toward the central and HKSAR governments. These systematically plotted and executed actions went far beyond the scope of press freedom under any definition.

But as early as when the investigation into his activities was announced, Lai was predetermined to be innocent by his Western apologists, no matter what the evidence proved to the contrary. Misguided arrogance has led them to believe that Hong Kong, a jurisdiction with robust rule-of-law – as attested to by the SAR's consistent high rankings in the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index – would be subservient to foreign pressure and intimidation.

The subversive activities and campaigns, masterminded and orchestrated by Lai over the years, played into the hands of China-hostile Western politicians in their geopolitical game against Beijing. And Lai became a key pawn in Hong Kong of China hawks who found great value in sustaining his criminal activities in the SAR. It should come as no surprise then that his "supporters" in the West should be trying to wring the very last drop of value they can from him. Those Western mainstream media outlets ruthlessly denigrating Hong Kong's security law and attacking the prosecution of Lai are either playing as sidekicks in this geopolitical game or simply driven by their own ideological prejudice.

But all their political propaganda tactics are futile. They cannot alter the facts of the case. Lai's guilt was proved beyond any doubt in the High Court; and those attempting to whitewash his crimes are dashing their credibility against the irrefutable details of the court judgment.

— Courtesy of China Daily

AI unlocks new vitality for 2026 Chinese Spring Festival consumption

Analysis

BEIJING — As the 2026 Chinese Spring Festival approaches, artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping holiday consumption through predictive services, seamless transactions and personalized experiences, fueling a fresh wave of economic vigor.

On February 2, Alibaba's Qwen App launched a 3-billion-yuan "Spring Festival Treat Plan," partnering with several other apps including Taobao Flash Shopping, Freshippo and Tmall to offer cash rewards and free purchase opportunities.

This initiative aims to cultivate user reliance on AI for daily requirements, eliminating the need for app-switching and providing one-stop services, according to Zheng Sishou, a product owner of Qwen App.

"Qianwen App aims to foster the habit of users turning to AI for assistance through substantial financial investment," said Zheng.

Competitors like Tencent and Baidu have joined the trend. Tencent's Yuanbao App is distributing 1 billion yuan in red envelopes, while Baidu's Ernie Bot offers 500 million yuan in rewards until March 12.

These campaigns highlight a strategic push to capture user traffic and tap into spending potential, industry experts say.

"With the support of AI technology, platforms and products have become more attuned to consumers," said Xu Fei, director of the research center at Taobao and Tmall Group.

"Platforms are evolving from 'guess what you like' to 'understand what you need,' thus shifting the starting point of consumption from a user's list of demands to life scenarios identified by AI," Xu noted.

Beyond promotions, AI is proactively identifying consumer needs. For example, air conditioner apps remind users to replace filters based on electricity usage and air quality data, while food-tracking apps estimate nutritional content and recommend low-calorie meals. Also, travel platforms suggest resort routes with tailored pit-stop services.

AI not only delves into consumer demand but also assists in consumption decision-making.

Recent collaborations between

Xiaomi and Ant Group have enabled AI glasses to process parking payments via a glance or voice command. Earlier, JD.com partnered with AI-powered smart glasses provider Rokid to integrate shopping functions into smart glasses.

"Technological innovation is driving new consumer demand, with AI-related household appliances and 3C products emerging as new consumer highlights," said JD.com CEO Xu Ran.

AI-driven gadgets are becoming consumption highlights, as reflected by smart product sales on JD.com surging by over 200 percent year on year in 2025, according to Xu.

Meanwhile, concurrent requests for AI livestreaming, coupon pushes and consultations are testing response speeds, underscoring the need for robust computing power.

"To support peak demand during the Spring Festival, Alibaba Cloud has allocated elastic computing resources to ensure Qwen's stability amid potential traffic spikes," said Deng Conglin, who is with Alibaba Cloud.

China needs to continuously strengthen AI computing power infrastructure, reduce business operating costs and enhance consumer experience, experts have said.

China's "AI+" action plan, released by the State Council in August 2025, emphasizes upgrading consumption through intelligent terminals and ecosystems.

The action plan aims to promote comprehensive intelligent interconnection of smart terminals, foster an ecosystem of intelligent products, and vigorously develop next-generation smart terminals, including intelligent connected vehicles, AI smartphones and computers, intelligent robots, smart home devices and wearable technology.

This initiative seeks to create an integrated, full-scenario intelligent interaction environment.

The year 2026 is expected to be a pivotal year for the widespread adoption of AI consumer devices, an outlook report released by China International Capital Corporation Limited has noted.

— Xinhua

Gold mine accident kills 7 in Shandong

JINAN — A gold mine accident in Shandong Province claimed seven lives on Saturday, local authorities said yesterday.

According to the emergency management department of Zhaoyuan City, a cage-fall accident occurred in a shaft at

Canzhuang gold mine at 8:50 a.m. on Saturday, resulting in the deaths of seven people.

Investigations into the cause of the accident and the suspected concealment of the accident have been launched.

— Xinhua

Xi stresses sci-tech self-reliance in building modern socialist country



President Xi Jinping (center), also general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, visits an information technology (IT) innovation park in Beijing yesterday. At the park, Xi learned about IT application and innovation, and was briefed on Beijing's efforts to expedite the development of an international sci-tech innovation center.

— Xinhua

BEIJING — Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, yesterday stressed self-reliance and strength in science and technology, hailing it as the "key" in building

China into a great modern socialist country.

Xi made the remarks when he visited a national information technology innovation park in Beijing.

Xi urged efforts to concentrate

strength for major undertakings, pool all quality resources to secure breakthroughs, and move faster to tackle prominent weaknesses, in a bid to achieve the country's strategic objectives.

— Xinhua

Authorities issue action plan to revitalize theatrical arts

BEIJING — The central authorities have revealed an action plan to promote the inheritance and development of theatrical arts over the next three years, starting from 2026.

According to the plan, efforts will be made to invigorate innovation and creativity in theater, significantly improve the quality of productions, and produce a new batch of outstanding theatrical works.

The plan aims to expand the ranks of theater professionals, with a steady emergence of leading young talent.

It also emphasizes the establishment of a sound mechanism to support, guide and coordinate theatrical creation, along with a marked improvement in the industry ecosystem.

Theater is a stage art that integrates various artistic forms. Promoting its development is important to the inheritance of fine traditional Chinese culture, and to building a country

that is leading in socialist culture, authorities told the media.

The recommendations for the formulation of the nation's 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-2030) for national economic and social development propose to inspire the cultural creativity of the entire nation and foster a thriving socialist culture.

To further improve the industry's ecosystem and promote its high-quality development, the action plan puts forward 24 supportive measures, including those to develop theater troupes, enhance the effectiveness of production evaluation and funding support, strengthen the inheritance of theatrical arts, and promote public outreach.

It encourages theaters to establish creative studios to craft quality works based on their own artistic characteristics and styles.

On fostering theater professionals,

it specifically highlights the importance of inheritors of rare or endangered dramatic genres. Greater efforts will also be made to improve education in the field, strengthening disciplines and majors related to screenwriting, directing, music, performance, stage design, management, and other areas.

To expand the appeal and reach of theatrical productions, the plan calls on theaters and theatrical troupes to give full play to the internet and AI technologies while regulating their online performance and livestreaming activities.

The plan was jointly issued by the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles.

— Xinhua

China urges Japan to be prudent on major historical issues

BEIJING — China yesterday urged Japan to deeply reflect on its history of aggression and be prudent on major historical issues such as the Yasukuni Shrine.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian made the remarks at a regular news briefing in response to recent remarks by Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi regarding the Yasukuni Shrine issue.

Lin stated that the Yasukuni Shrine serves as a spiritual tool and

symbol of Japanese militarism in waging foreign aggression, and it honors 14 convicted Class-A war criminals with grave responsibility for their country's war crimes.

Noting that the nature of the Yasukuni Shrine issue lies in whether Japan can face up to and reflect deeply on its history of militarist aggression, he said this issue bears on human conscience, the political foundation of China-Japan relations and the credibility of Japan as a nation.

"Amnesia of history means betrayal, and denial of responsibility spells relapse," Lin said.

"This year marks the 80th anniversary of the beginning of the Tokyo Trials. In such a special year, Japan in particular needs to face squarely and reflect on its history of aggression, be prudent on major historical issues such as the Yasukuni Shrine, avoid repeating history and make a clean break with militarism with real actions," Lin added.

— Xinhua

3rd impeachment case filed against VP Duterte

MANILA – Members of the Philippine clergy filed an impeachment complaint yesterday against Sara Duterte, the third to hit the country's vice president in just over a week.

The daughter of former president Rodrigo Duterte was impeached by the House of Representatives last year only to see the country's Supreme Court throw the case out over procedural issues.

Under the Philippine constitution, an impeachment triggers a Senate trial. A guilty verdict would see Duterte barred from politics and sidelined from a potential 2028 presidential run.

Yesterday's filing – brought by some of those behind the former complaint – accuses Duterte of bilking taxpayers of at least US\$10 million while serving as vice president and as secretary of education.

"This is not political, we are not politicians," Reverend Jaselito Sarabia, a Catholic friar and one of the complainants, told reporters outside the House complex.

"We believe there is a moral concern. That's why we are here again," he said, adding it was time for Duterte to "answer all accusations".

The complaint also cites an alleged death threat against President Ferdinand Marcos made during a late-night press briefing that Duterte has since said was misinterpreted.

Representative Leila de Lima, who endorsed the complaint, said



This handout photo from Mamamayang Liberal (ML) Partylist taken and received yesterday shows members of the Philippine clergy arriving to file an impeachment complaint against Philippine Vice President Sara Duterte at the House of Representatives in Quezon City, Metro Manila.

– AFP

she was confident it would advance to a House vote, calling it an "improved version of the articles of impeachment" sent before.

De Lima spent more than six years behind bars on drug charges that rights groups have said were trumped up by the vice president's father.

Last week, Philippine civil society leaders and members of a left-wing coalition filed separate similar impeachment complaints against Duterte.

They were filed just days before a House justice committee dismissed a pair of impeachment complaints against President Marcos, saying they lacked the necessary substance to move forward.

Analysts who spoke to AFP had said the move against the president had been unlikely to succeed given the support he enjoys among House lawmakers.

Former allies, Marcos and Duterte have been engaged in a high-stakes political brawl that erupted within weeks of their winning a landslide victory together in the 2022 presidential election.

Duterte supporters widely believe Marcos engineered Rodrigo Duterte's arrest and subsequent transfer to the International Criminal Court in the Netherlands to face charges related to killings that took place during a brutal crackdown on drugs. – AFP



A man salvages his belongings after land movement struck Padasari village in Tegal, Central Java, Indonesia yesterday, damaging homes, public facilities and schools, leading to the evacuation of thousands of residents. – AFP

10 newly elected Thai MPs accused over push for royal insult law reform

BANGKOK – Ten newly elected MPs from Thailand's progressive party, including their top candidate for prime minister, were yesterday of an ethics breach over their effort to reform the royal insult law, a move that could see them banned from politics.

Thailand's lese-majeste law shields the king and his family from criticism and carries a maximum sentence of up to 15 years per offence.

The conservative Bhumjaithai party of caretaker Prime Minister

Anutin Charnvirakul won a stunning election victory on Sunday, according to preliminary results, leaving the reformist People's Party in second place despite having led in opinion polls.

However, the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) said it had referred the case of the 10 freshly elected People's Party MPs to the Supreme Court yesterday.

The lawmakers include first-choice prime ministerial candidate Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut, second-listed Sirikanya Tansakul and

prominent MP Rangsiman Rome.

They were among 44 current and former progressive MPs accused of proposing to amend the lese-majeste law in the form of draft legislation, an NACC statement said.

"The investigation found that the draft bill showed a lack of commitment to uphold the democratic system with the king as the head of state," the NACC said, adding that their actions were a "serious breach of ethical standards".

The accused who are currently MPs could be suspended if, as

Family matters: Thaksin's party down, maybe not out

Chayanan Itthipongmaete

BANGKOK – Thailand's most successful party of the 21st century just had its worst election result ever, raising questions about the future of the political machine built by jailed ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Phu Thai, the latest incarnation of the organisation founded by telecom billionaire Thaksin, came a distant third in Sunday's vote, according to preliminary election commission figures.

Its vote share in the party-list section of the election plunged by more than half, they showed.

Multiple factors combined to undermine it, analysts say – the conviction of its founder for corruption, his daughter Paetongtarn's mishandling of the border conflict with Cambodia, and not least the domination of the party by its founding family.

The Shinawatras have produced no fewer than four Thai prime ministers this century, and Phu Thai's latest nominee for the position, biomedical engineering professor Yodchanan Wongsawat, was Thaksin's nephew.

Bangkok retiree Pipat Saeteaw, 72, used to be a staunch supporter of Phu Thai and the Shinawatras, but no longer.

"I liked Thaksin. I really liked his government's 30-baht universal healthcare scheme that I still use today," he told AFP yesterday.

"But why did Thaksin flee and not return to face legal punishment? Now he brings his child and nephew into politics. I don't agree with that.

"I don't vote for the Phu Thai party anymore."

The party was devastated in Thaksin's home province of Chiang Mai, one of its traditional strongholds, where for the first time ever it lost every constituency, party officials acknowledged.

It is a remarkable fall from electoral grace after Thaksin broke the mould of Thai politics in the 2000s – the first prime minister to serve a full term, the first to be re-elected at the ballot box, and the first to win an overall majority.

Yodchanan did not attend a press conference at his party's headquarters late Sunday where the party leader conceded defeat.

"It's the voice of the people we have to respect. So we accept the result," Julapun Amornvivat told reporters.

Some are asking whether this

could mark the end of the long-standing Shinawatra dynasty – but Phu Thai may yet end up as part of the ruling coalition, which would give it a chance at a political comeback.

"For the next few years, Thaksin is done," Paul Chambers, an associate senior fellow at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, told AFP.

But he cautioned: "Nothing is ever 'over' in Thailand."

Economic growth in the Southeast Asian nation is anaemic and there could still be an opportunity for Phu Thai in future "if the economy continues to go downhill", Chambers said.

'Real survivor'

Thaksin was first elected premier in 2001 on the back of populist promises of prosperity for the rural poor.

Within a few years, he helped revive Thailand's dwindling economy following the 1997 financial crisis in Asia.

But he was later ousted by a military coup and fled the country, only returning to Thailand in 2023 as his party formed a government, later headed by Paetongtarn.

She was removed from office by court order last year after she referred to former Cambodian leader Hun Sen as "uncle" in a leaked phone conversation and called a Thai military commander her "opponent", triggering outrage.

She was replaced by Anutin Charnvirakul, whose Bhumjaithai party won a stunning victory at the weekend's polls.

He has various options to form a coalition, including with Phu Thai, but analysts at BMI, of Fitch Solutions, said that combination was now less likely.

"A partnership would likely prove unstable given their open hostilities in the past," BMI said in an outlook note.

Before the vote, some observers predicted that alongside a political agreement, Thaksin could be released earlier than scheduled from his one-year prison term for corruption in office.

But Puchada Sirivunnabood, political science professor at Mahidol University, pointed out that Thaksin was eligible for parole as soon as May regardless of any deal.

"I don't think it's the end for the Shinawatras," she said.

"I don't think he will just get out of politics – he is a real survivor." – AFP

parties disbanded by judicial orders.

Thailand's constitutional court dissolved the predecessor of the People's Party, Move Forward, in 2024, ruling its pledge to reform the kingdom's strict lese-majeste law amounted to an attempt to overthrow the constitutional monarchy.

Move Forward's leader Pita Limjaroenrat was also prevented from becoming prime minister, despite the party winning the most votes in the 2023 election, and was banned from politics for 10 years.

– AFP

Climate change boosts serious infection surge in flood-hit areas: study

SYDNEY – The growing number of storms and floods linked to climate change is driving up the risk of leptospirosis, a serious human infection, new research warned yesterday.

The research, led by Australia's University of New England (UNE), recommended concerted testing of the public for the zoonotic infection leptospirosis, greater vigilance in regions well beyond the tropical north, and further urgent research, said a UNE statement.

No human vaccine exists for leptospirosis, a bacterial disease surging globally with floods and warm weather, it said, adding that outbreaks are intensifying worldwide, with evolving Leptospira subtypes.

Agricultural workers, vets, carcass handlers, and freshwater recreationists face the highest risk, warned the authors of the study, published in the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health.

Lead author Associate Prof. Jacqueline Epps, a rural general practitioner from UNE's School of Rural Medicine, noted outbreaks are emerging across Australia, linked to increased rainfall, storms, flooding and warmer temperatures, and were previously rare outside the state of Queensland's high-case zones.

"The bacteria found in the faeces and urine of carriers survive longer in the soil and mud in more humid and warm conditions. Floods are thought to wash the infectious pathogens long distances and to contaminate water sources," Epps said.

Leptospirosis symptoms resemble flu or COVID-19, leaving many cases undiagnosed or misdiagnosed, the researchers said, adding that accurate early diagnosis prevents symptom worsening, which can lead to intensive care for organ failure, meningitis, or death in 10 percent of severe cases.

–Xinhua

S Korean province sorry after mayor says 'import young women' to lift birth rate

SEOUL – A provincial government in South Korea has apologised after a mayor suggested importing young women from Southeast Asia to boost the nation's birth rate.

Jindo County Mayor Kim Hee-soo said last week that rural hamlets could address shrinking populations by pairing bachelors with women enticed from Vietnam or Sri Lanka.

"We should import young women from Vietnam or Sri Lanka so that young men in rural areas can marry them," he told a town hall meeting.

The remarks were condemned in local media and triggered a diplomatic backlash, reportedly drawing an official complaint from the Vietnamese embassy in Seoul.

The South Jeolla provincial government, which oversees Kim's county, sought to dampen the brewing controversy over the weekend.

"We deeply apologise for the inappropriate remark made by the

Jindo mayor, which has caused deep pain to Vietnamese people and to women," a spokesperson said on Saturday.

The word "import" used in Kim's remark "violates human dignity and objectifies women", the spokesperson said, adding that it could never be "justified under any circumstances".

Kim also apologised, conceding he had "used the inappropriate word".

"Amid the severe labour shortages facing rural and fishing communities, the intention was to discuss institutional measures for supporting marriage migration," he said in a statement earlier last week.

South Korea has one of the lowest birth rates in the world, and has poured billions of dollars into efforts to encourage women to have more children and maintain population stability.

Some projections estimate that at current rates, the population will nearly halve to 26.8 million people by the end of the century.

–AFP



Pro-Palestinian protesters take part in a demonstration against Israeli President Isaac Herzog's visit to Australia in Sydney yesterday.

–AFP

Bangladeshi women march to demand representation in polls

DHAKA – Bangladeshi women carried flaming torches through the streets of Dhaka yesterday, marching to demand justice and political representation in the coming elections.

Despite helping spearhead the 2024 uprising that paved the way for the vote on Thursday, women are poised to be largely excluded from the South Asian country's political arena.

Women candidates make up fewer than four percent of the election hopefuls, while 30 of the parties contesting this week's race put forward male-only tickets.

"Whatever regime is in place, repression of women appears in many different forms," said protester Priya Ahsan Chowdhury, 31, a Supreme Court lawyer, who joined around 100 women chanting slogans and singing in front of parliament.

"In some places, we haven't seen any representation of women at all – only men. That is what drove us to come out and speak up."

The march, which began at midnight Sunday and ended in the early hours of yesterday, came against a backdrop of rising incendiary rhetoric targeting women at religious and political rallies, and growing attempts to push them out of public life.



Women carry torches during Shekol Vangar Podojatra (Walk to Break the Chains), a midnight procession held to demand justice and political representation in Bangladesh's upcoming general elections in Dhaka yesterday.

– AFP

The February 12 vote will be the first election since the overthrow of the autocratic government of Sheikh Hasina.

"The aspiration of the mass uprising was to build a country based on justice and equality – but women are slowly being erased from the public sphere," said protester Sabhanaz Rashid Diya, 38, head of the Tech Global Institute think tank.

"And now, when we are once again dreaming of building a new country,

political parties where women once played key roles have largely sidelined them in the electoral race."

Bangladesh has long been led by powerful women, including Hasina and her longtime rival, the late three-time prime minister Khaleda Zia.

Bangladesh's largest Islamist political party, Jamaat-e-Islami, has not fielded any women candidates, while its members have suggested that society is not ready for women in politics.

– AFP

Japan PM Takaichi basks in historic election triumph

Hiroshi Hiyama

TOKYO – Japanese premier Sanae Takaichi said yesterday that the public saw an "urgent need" for major reform after a historic election landslide, pledging to boost the country's defences in order to protect its territory.

Sunday's snap vote saw Takaichi's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) win a two-thirds majority in the lower house for the first time in its history, capitalising on her strong popularity since taking office in October.

The outcome allows Japan's first woman prime minister to stamp her mark on the country of 123 million people over the next four years, having pledged to boost the economy and get tough on immigration.

"This is the start of a heavy, heavy responsibility to make Japan stronger, more prosperous," Takaichi, 64, told a news conference yesterday.

"We believe that the public has shown understanding and sympathy regarding our appeals concerning the urgent need for a major policy shift," she said.

The admirer of "Iron Lady" Margaret Thatcher also said she would bolster Japan's defences, including through creating a new intelligence bureau and revising key security policy documents.

"No one will come to the aid of a nation that lacks the resolve to defend itself with its own hands," Takaichi said.

"We will steadfastly protect our nation's peace and independence, our territory, territorial waters, airspace, and the lives and safety of our citizens," she added.

Such comments are likely to go down badly in China – which has territorial disputes with Japan and others around the region – especially

after Takaichi suggested in November that Japan could intervene militarily if Beijing sought to take Taiwan by force.

Yesterday, a spokesman for China's foreign ministry again urged Japan to retract the comments.

Beijing warned Tokyo that "reckless" actions would be met with a "resolute response from the international community".

"Our nation is open to various dialogues with China. We already have exchanges of views. We will continue the exchanges of views. But we will deal with them in calm and appropriate ways," Takaichi said.

Honeymoon

Capitalising on her honeymoon start after becoming Japan's fifth premier in as many years in October, Takaichi called the snap election last month.

The gamble paid off, with the LDP winning around 316 of the 465 seats contested, according to Japanese media.

That takes the party past the 310-seat threshold needed for a two-thirds majority for the first time in its history and may prompt the government to try and make changes to the country's constitution.

US President Donald Trump – who is due to host Takaichi in Washington next month – congratulated her after an earlier endorsement.

"I wish you Great Success in passing your Conservative, Peace Through Strength Agenda," Trump wrote on Truth Social.

Takaichi said that the talks on March 19 will "reaffirm the unshakeable unity between Japan and the United States".

Drummer

A heavy metal drummer in her youth, Takaichi was on the ultra-

conservative fringe of the LDP when she became party chief.

Despite being her country's first woman premier, Takaichi has shown little appetite for framing her leadership around gender in male-dominated Japanese politics.

She has been a hit with voters, especially young ones, with fans lapping up everything from her handbag to her jamming to a K-pop song with South Korea's president.

But she will have to deliver on the economy to remain popular.

"With prices rising like this, what matters most to me is what policies they'll adopt to deal with inflation," voter Chika Sakamoto, 50, told AFP on Sunday.

But helping households could make markets jittery about Japan's colossal debts, which are more than twice the size of the economy.

This was shown by yields on long-dated Japanese bonds hitting record highs during the election campaign after Takaichi floated suspending a food tax.

Tokyo's Nikkei index of stocks jumped more than five percent early yesterday and closed 3.9 percent higher.

Takaichi reiterated on Sunday her mantra of having a "responsible" fiscal policy but added that she wanted "to build a strong and resilient economy."

"In reality, the policies of a Takaichi administration are unlikely to curb the inflation that voters expect her to address," said Tetsuo Kotani at the Japan Institute of International Affairs.

"An income tax hike linked to increased defence spending will also be unavoidable. If these policies lead to a triple decline in stocks, the yen, and government bonds, people's lives will become even more difficult," Kotani told AFP. – AFP

UK ministers back under-fire PM Starmer as pressure intensifies over Epstein

Peter Hutchison

LONDON – Senior UK ministers rallied around embattled premier Keir Starmer yesterday after a prominent ally dealt a blow to his authority by demanding he quit for embroiling the British government in the Epstein scandal.

The rear-guard action came as Starmer scrambled to avert the most serious crisis of his stuttering 19-month premiership, which has been beset by policy U-turns and dire poll ratings, raising questions about his future.

Starmer's position looked increasingly fragile after Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar called on him to resign for appointing Peter Mandelson as US ambassador despite knowing he had maintained links to convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

“The distraction needs to end, and the leadership in Downing Street has to change,” Sarwar told a press conference in Glasgow, becoming the most senior Labour politician to publicly urge Starmer to go.

Downing Street insisted the prime minister was going nowhere, saying he would fulfil a “five-year mandate from the British people to deliver change”.

Several cabinet ministers came out in support of the prime minister following several days of ominous silence, including his deputy David Lammy, foreign minister Yvette Cooper and finance minister Rachel Reeves.

Left-wing figurehead Angela Rayner and interior minister Shabana Mahmood, both tipped as possible replacements for Starmer, both said they had “full support” in their leader.

Departures

Earlier yesterday, Starmer lost his second top aide in two days when his communications chief Tim Allan quit just months into the role.

On Sunday, Starmer's chief of staff, Morgan McSweeney, resigned for advising Starmer to make the contentious Mandelson appointment.

McSweeney's departure deprives the beleaguered UK leader of his closest adviser and the man who helped Starmer drag Labour back to the centre after succeeding leftist leader Jeremy Corbyn in 2020.

Starmer has had several communications chiefs in his short tenure, with staff departures, policy reversals and missteps an increasing hallmark of his administration, denting his popularity.

Conservative opposition leader Kemi Badenoch told BBC radio that Starmer's position was “untenable”, but the prime minister vowed in an emergency meeting with staff to carry on.

Starmer sacked Mandelson in September last year after documents published by the US Congress revealed the extent of Mandelson's relationship with Epstein after the financier's conviction in 2008.

Epstein killed himself in prison in 2019 while awaiting trial for sex crimes.

Documents released on January 30 by the US government reignited the controversy, appearing to show that Mandelson leaked confidential UK government information to Epstein when he was a British minister, including during the 2008 financial crisis.

Police probe

Police are investigating Mandelson, 72, for misconduct in a public office and raided two of his properties on Friday. He has not been arrested.

Starmer, a former human rights lawyer and top prosecutor for England and Wales, has apologised to Epstein's victims and accused Mandelson of lying about the extent of his ties to the financier during the vetting for his appointment to Washington.

The UK government is to release tens of thousands of emails, messages and documents on Mandelson's appointment, which could increase pressure on the prime minister and other senior ministers.

Several backbench Labour MPs, mostly from the left of the party who have never warmed to Starmer, have suggested that the prime minister should follow McSweeney out the exit door.

But no clear successor has emerged and party rules make mounting a challenge difficult.

The party also faces key local elections in May, including in Scotland where Labour is expected to lose to the pro-independence Scottish National Party.

Labour has trailed Nigel Farage's hard-right Reform UK party by double-digit margins in polls over the past year.

The surveys have heightened unease among Labour MPs, although the next general election is not due until 2029.

Labour faces a crucial by-election on February 28 and defeat would add to Starmer's woes.

— AFP



Britain's Justice Secretary and Deputy Prime Minister David Lammy gestures to members of the media as he strides towards 10 Downing Street, the official residence of Britain's Prime Minister, presently Labour party leader Keir Starmer, in central London, yesterday. British Prime Minister Keir Starmer "is concentrating on the job in hand" and will not resign, his official spokesman said yesterday, as the embattled leader faces intense pressure over the Epstein scandal. Starmer was "getting on with the job of delivering change across the country", the spokesman told reporters, hours after the prime minister's communications chief and chief of staff both resigned.

— AFP

Epstein accomplice Maxwell refuses to answer questions from US House panel

Robin Legrand

WASHINGTON – Jeffrey Epstein's accomplice Ghislaine Maxwell refused yesterday to answer questions from a US congressional committee, invoking her legal right against self-incrimination, lawmakers said.

Maxwell, who is serving a 20-year prison sentence for sex trafficking, was subpoenaed to testify before the House Oversight Committee to discuss her relations with the disgraced financier.

Republican committee chairman James Comer said Maxwell had invoked her right to not incriminate herself, guaranteed by the Fifth Amendment of the US Constitution.

“As expected, Ghislaine Maxwell took the Fifth and refused to answer any questions,” Comer told reporters. “This is obviously very disappointing.”

“We had many questions to ask about the crimes she and Epstein committed as well as questions about potential co-conspirators,” he said.

Maxwell's lawyers told the House panel that the former British socialite was prepared to testify only if she was first granted clemency by President Donald Trump, Comer said.

The lawyers had pushed for Congress to grant her legal immunity in order to testify, but lawmakers refused.

Maxwell is the only person convicted of a crime in connection with Epstein, who died in a New York jail cell in 2019 while awaiting trial for sex trafficking.

The Justice Department has said no new prosecutions are expected but a number of political and business leaders have been tarnished by scandal or resigned after their ties with Epstein were revealed in the files.

The House committee has also summoned former Democratic president Bill Clinton and former secretary of state Hillary Clinton to testify about their interactions with Epstein.

The Clintons have called for their depositions to be held publicly to prevent Republicans from politicising their testimony.

Trump was once a close friend of Epstein but has not been called to testify by the House Oversight Committee, which is led by members of his Republican Party.

Neither the Clintons nor Trump have been accused of any wrongdoing related to Epstein.

Last year Maxwell was moved to a minimum-security prison in Texas after meeting twice with Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche, who previously served as Trump's personal lawyer.

— AFP

AI chatbots give bad health advice: research

PARIS – Next time you're considering consulting Dr ChatGPT, perhaps think again.

Despite now being able to ace most medical licensing exams, artificial intelligence chatbots do not give humans better health advice than they can find using more traditional methods, according to a study published yesterday.

“Despite all the hype, AI just isn't ready to take on the role of the physician,” study co-author Rebecca Payne from Oxford University said.

“Patients need to be aware that asking a large language model about their symptoms can be dangerous, giving wrong diagnoses and failing to recognise when urgent help is needed,” she added in a statement.

The British-led team of researchers wanted to find out how successful humans are when they use chatbots to identify their health problems and whether they require seeing a doctor or going to hospital.

The team presented nearly 1,300 UK-based participants with 10 different scenarios, such as a headache after a night out drinking, a new mother feeling exhausted or what having gallstones feels like.

Then the researchers randomly assigned the participants one of three chatbots: OpenAI's GPT-4o, Meta's Llama 3 or Command R+. There was also a control group that used internet search engines.

People using the AI chatbots were only able to identify their health problem around

a third of the time, while only around 45 percent figured out the right course of action.

This was no better than the control group, according to the study, published in the *Nature Medicine* journal.

Communication breakdown

The researchers pointed out the disparity between these disappointing results and how AI chatbots score extremely highly on medical benchmarks and exams, blaming the gap on a communication breakdown.

Unlike the simulated patient interactions often used to test AI, the real humans often did not give the chatbots all the relevant information.

And sometimes the humans struggled to interpret the options offered by the chatbot, or misunderstood or simply ignored its advice.

One out of every six US adults ask AI chatbots about health information at least once a month, the researchers said, with that number expected to increase as more people adopt the new technology.

“This is a very important study as it highlights the real medical risks posed to the public by chatbots,” David Shaw, a bioethicist at Maastricht University in the Netherlands who was not involved in the research, told AFP.

He advised people to only trust medical information from reliable sources, such as the UK's National Health Service.

— AFP

EU chief backs Made-in-Europe push for 'strategic' sectors

Raziye Akkoc

BRUSSELS – EU chief Ursula von der Leyen yesterday backed a push to favour European firms over foreign rivals in “strategic” fields, ahead of a leaders’ meeting on boosting the bloc’s competitiveness.

The EU executive will put forward a proposal later this month to prioritise European companies in public procurement for key sectors, but the move faces pushback from some member states and partners.

In a letter to the bloc’s leaders, von der Leyen argued Europe must be able both to “defend its strategic interests” and support home-grown production.

“A European preference is a necessary instrument that contributes to this objective,” she wrote, arguing such a move would “help create lead markets in strategic sectors”.

In a draft seen by AFP, the EU

executive wants rules that would force companies bidding for public contracts in sectors such as cars and green technology to prove that a certain percentage of their products are made in Europe.

The European Commission has twice delayed its proposal because of fierce internal debates, with some seeking to dilute its scope.

In her letter to leaders, von der Leyen said any European preference “must be underpinned by robust economic analysis and aligned with our industrial priorities, while engaging constructively with trusted partners”.

Worries overseas

EU industry chief Stéphane Séjourné has argued it is time for Europe to have its own version of the “Buy American Act” and “Made in China” to protect firms.

In an op-ed published this month

and signed by more than 1,100 CEOs and business leaders, Séjourné said that “whenever European public money is used, it must contribute to European production and jobs”.

The “Made in Europe” concept has been popular in France for years and Paris has been seeking tough limitations on defence purchases from outside the EU.

But France’s enthusiasm has been met with scepticism from some EU partners.

“They always say ‘European’, but they think everyone is going to buy French things, so there’s still a lot of work to be done,” Belgian Prime Minister Bart De Wever told national broadcasters.

There have also been concerns further afield.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan wrote a letter to von der Leyen seen by AFP in December in

which he warned of the unwanted consequences of such moves for Turkey, which is in a customs union with the bloc.

In particular, Erdogan raised concerns about the impact on the automobile sector, a sentiment echoed by Japanese companies in public and private.

Japanese carmaker Honda urged Brussels to extend the concept to “Made with Common Values”, warning that “overly restrictive local content requirements will not necessarily shore up European manufacturing” because of the industry’s global nature.

‘Limited’ measures

Italy and Germany last month offered lukewarm support for the “Made in Europe” idea, cautioning against going too far.

“To protect our interests, this might include making use of EU-

preference rules in crucial and core strategic sectors, while taking due account of our trade policy interests and of likeminded partners,” Berlin and Rome said.

And last week six member states – Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Sweden – warned that such rules could “risk adding another layer of complex regulation”, in a document seen by AFP.

They did not wholly reject the idea but said the measures should be “limited, proportionate and based on a clear understanding of the consequences”.

The commission’s point of reference is former European Central Bank chief Mario Draghi’s landmark 2024 report on the EU economy.

In the report, Draghi advocated for a European preference in defence procurement and in the space sector, albeit in a targeted manner. – AFP



US Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski (centre) speaks to the press next to US Democrat Senator Maggie Hassan (left) and US Democrat Senator Gary Peters during a press conference in Nuuk, capital of Greenland, yesterday. A delegation of United States senators visited Greenland yesterday to “rebuild the trust” shattered by President Donald Trump’s threats to annex the Arctic island, the lawmakers said. – AFP

Israel mourns legendary singer Matti Caspi, laid to rest at 76

JERUSALEM – Israel bid farewell yesterday to legendary singer, composer and arranger Matti Caspi, who died the day before at age 76 after a battle with cancer.

Widely regarded as one of the country’s most influential musicians, Caspi left behind an extraordinary legacy spanning more than 1,000 songs, many of which became pillars of Israeli culture.

At his funeral in the central city of Kfar Saba yesterday, his daughter Sean eulogised him as “a musical genius”.

“You were meant to sing with angels,” she said, echoing tributes from across the cultural sphere.

Before the funeral, Caspi’s casket was displayed publicly in a central square in Tel Aviv, allowing fans to pay their respects.

President Isaac Herzog described Caspi in a statement as “one of the greatest Israeli creators of our generation”, adding that “his contribution to Israeli music and to our lives is so present and will continue to accompany our cultural world for generations to come”.

Born in 1949 at Kibbutz Hanita, near Israel’s northern border with Lebanon, Caspi began studying music as a child and was in a military

band during his army service, where he first gained national attention.

After completing his service, Caspi embarked on a prolific career as a composer and arranger, writing for many of Israel’s leading performers.

His work blended an eclectic range of influences, and helped shape the sound of modern Hebrew song for more than five decades.

During the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, Caspi joined Canadian singer Leonard Cohen in performing for Israeli soldiers stationed in the Sinai Peninsula.

Photographs show Caspi and Cohen performing alongside future prime minister Ariel Sharon, then a military commander.

Caspi composed Israel’s 1976 Eurovision entry, for which he also conducted the orchestra.

Israel’s Society of Authors, Composers, and Music Publishers (ACUM), which honoured Caspi with a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2005, published a list yesterday of his most-played songs on Israeli radio over the past decade.

Topping the list were “Lo Yadati SheTelchi Mimeni” (“I Didn’t Know You Would Leave Me”), “Brit Olam” (“Eternal Covenant”), and “Makom Leda’aga” (“A Place for Worry”). – AFP

Brain training reduces dementia risk: study

Daniel Lawler

PARIS – A simple brain-training exercise could reduce people’s risk of developing dementia by 25 percent, a study said yesterday, but with outside researchers expressing caution in interpreting the results.

There are vast amounts of brain-training games and apps which claim to fight off cognitive decline, although there has been little high-quality, long-term research proving their effectiveness.

The new study is a randomised controlled trial – considered the gold standard for medical research – which first began enrolling participants in the late 1990s.

More than 2,800 people aged 65 or older were randomly assigned one of three different types of brain training – speed, memory, or reasoning – or were part of a control group.

First, the participants did an hour-long training session twice a week for five weeks. One and three years later, they did four booster sessions. In total, there were fewer than 24 hours of training.

During follow-ups after five, 10 and most recently 20 years, the speed training was always “disproportionately beneficial”, study co-author Marilyn Albert of Johns Hopkins University in the United States told AFP.

After two decades, Medicare records showed that the people

who did the speed-training and booster sessions had a 25-percent reduced risk of getting dementia, according to the study.

The other two types of training did not make a statistically significant difference.

“For the first time, this is a gold-standard study that’s given us an idea of what we can do to reduce risk for developing dementia,” Albert said.

However, Rachel Richardson, a researcher at the Cochrane Collaboration not involved in the study, cautioned that “while statistically significant, the result may not be as impressive” as a 25-percent reduction.

This is partly because the margins of error “range from a reduction of 41 percent to one of only five percent”, she told the Science Media Centre.

She added that the study excluded people with conditions such as poor vision or hearing, which meant it may not be fully representative.

Baptiste Leurent, an expert in medical statistics at University College London, said the study had “important limitations”.

“Although one subgroup analysis produced a significant result, this single finding is not generally regarded as strong enough evidence to demonstrate the intervention’s effectiveness,” he said.

“Further research is still needed to determine whether cognitive training can reduce the risk of dementia.”

‘Connectivity in the brain’

The speed training exercise involves clicking on cars and road signs that pop up in different areas of a computer screen.

Albert said the researchers did not know why this particular exercise appeared to be more effective.

“We assume that this training affected something about connectivity in the brain,” she said.

Discovering the exact mechanism for why speed training worked could help researchers develop a new, more effective exercise in the future, Albert said.

The results only applied to this specific exercise and cannot indicate anything meaningful about other brain-training games, she added.

But the finding was “extraordinarily important”, Albert emphasised, pointing out that reducing dementia among 25 percent of the US population could save US\$100 billion in patient care.

Dementia affects 57 million people and is the seventh leading cause of death globally, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The study was published in the journal *Alzheimer’s and Dementia: Translational Research & Clinical Research*. – AFP

Swiss town’s former security officer quizzed in fire probe

SION – Prosecutors yesterday interviewed a former security officer facing criminal charges over Switzerland’s deadly New Year fire, with questions swirling over lacking fire safety inspections before the blaze.

The inferno at the bar Le Constellation in the ski resort of Crans-Montana early on January 1, as people celebrated the New Year, claimed 41 lives and left 115 people injured, most of them teenagers and young adults.

The municipality triggered outrage on January 6 when it

revealed that no annual safety check had been carried out at the bar since 2019.

The man being questioned in the nearby city of Sion yesterday had been responsible for fire safety inspections before leaving his post in 2024, Swiss media reported.

On Friday, the current Crans-Montana security official, who is also under criminal investigation in the case, was likewise questioned for the first time by prosecutors.

Swiss media reported that during Friday’s hearing, the current official said he did not

have enough staff to carry out the required inspections and therefore prioritised them: first hospitals, clinics and nursing homes, then hotels and finally public establishments like bars.

In Crans-Montana, the makeshift memorial for victims of the blaze caught fire itself on Sunday, likely sparked by candles left burning inside.

A white, igloo-like tarpaulin had been erected over the candles, flowers and messages to shield them from the snow and winter weather. – AFP

Socialist beats far-right rival to Portugal's presidency

Thomas Cabral

LISBON – Centre-left Socialist candidate António José Seguro scored a convincing win over far-right rival André Ventura in Portugal's presidential election on Sunday, with the run-off vote held after days of devastating storms.

The result was quickly welcomed by European Union chief Ursula von der Leyen and French President Emmanuel Macron.

With more than 99 percent of the ballots counted, Seguro had won 66.8 percent of the vote to Ventura's 33.2 percent. That means the 63-year-old Socialist candidate will, as expected, succeed the conservative Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa as president.

The election campaign had been upended by two weeks of storms and fierce gales that killed at least seven people and caused 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 it went ahead for nearly all the 11 million eligible voters in Portugal and abroad.

"The winners tonight are the Portuguese people and democracy," the president-elect said on Sunday, pledging to be a leader for "all Portuguese".

Ventura conceded defeat while noting that his party had achieved the "best result in its history."

"We lead the right in Portugal and we will soon govern this country," he told supporters.

EU chief von der Leyen said Portugal had demonstrated its support for "shared European values" remains "strong".

Macron welcomed the result, saying he hoped to reinforce ties between the two countries.

Storm-hit campaign

Far-right Ventura, 43, had criticised the government's response to fierce weather and sought in vain to have the entire election postponed.

Ventura is the first extreme-



Portugal's centre-left President-elect António José Seguro addresses supporters after his victory in the second-round vote in Lisbon early yesterday (local time). – AFP

right candidate to make it through to a run-off vote in Portugal.

Seguro is a veteran political operator and former Socialist Party (PS) leader, having begun his career in the party's youth wing.

In 2014, he lost an internal power struggle, and was pushed out as secretary general of the party by future prime minister António Costa, who is now president of the European Council.

Despite being out of the public eye for the past decade, he never renounced his belief in a "modern and moderate left".

He began his presidential campaign without the backing of the Socialist Party's leadership, though most of them came around to support him.

He slowly climbed in the polls, with one on Wednesday crediting him with 67 percent of voting intentions in the run-off election – a figure reflected in Sunday's exit polls.

His camp had nevertheless been concerned that the recent foul weather and complacency among his supporters might hurt them.

Earlier Sunday, casting his vote in Caldas de Rainha, where he lives, Seguro said: "Come and vote. Make the most of this window of good weather."

Ventura campaigned on a promise to break with the parties

that have governed Portugal for the past 50 years.

Seguro positioned himself as a unifying candidate and warned of a "nightmare" if his opponent won.

Far right rising

Seguro took the most votes in the first round of the election in January, in which 11 candidates stood, with 31.1 percent, ahead of Ventura on 23.5 percent. Since no one won a majority, the top two went through to a second round.

Seguro secured the support of many political figures from the far left, centre and even the right.

But Prime Minister Luis Montenegro declined to endorse either candidate in the second round. His minority centre-right government relies on support from either the Socialists or the far right to get legislation through parliament.

Ventura's Chega ("Enough") party, created as recently as 2019, became the leading opposition force at the May 2025 general election.

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

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 take office in early March. – AFP

Sheinbaum says US tariffs on oil suppliers would 'strangle' Cuba

MEXICO CITY – Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum yesterday blasted US threats to impose tariffs on countries supplying oil to crisis-stricken Cuba, saying the measure would "strangle" an already teetering economy.

"This sanction being imposed on countries that sell oil to Cuba is very unfair... sanctions that harm the people are not right," Sheinbaum told reporters.

Her country has been mulling how to send oil to Cuba without being punished by US President Donald Trump, who has promised to slap tariffs on any country that ships petroleum to Cuba.

Cuba, which is in the grips of an economic crisis, can no longer rely on oil supplies from Venezuela, whose leader was ousted in a deadly US military operation last month.

After Nicolás Maduro's toppling, Trump claimed control of Venezuelan oil, vowed to starve Cuba of the commodity, and threatened tariffs on any other nation stepping in to help US-sanctioned Havana.

Sheinbaum has warned of a humanitarian crisis in Cuba, but is also keen to avoid putting her own country at risk of tariffs from Mexico's main trading partner.

Mexico is seeking an agreement with Washington that would allow it to resume oil exports to Havana.

"We will continue supporting them and taking all necessary diplomatic actions to restore oil shipments," Sheinbaum said yesterday. "You cannot strangle a people like this – it's very unfair, very unfair."

In the meantime, Mexico said on Sunday it had sent two ships with humanitarian aid to Cuba, which has had to suspend jet fuel supplies for a month because of an energy crisis triggered by the US attack on Venezuela. – AFP

Spain must adapt to 'new climate reality', Sánchez says after floods

MADRID – Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez yesterday warned that Spain must adapt to "a completely new climate reality" following deadly floods that forced thousands to flee their homes.

Spain is on the front line of climate change in Europe, facing longer heatwaves and more frequent heavy rainfall – epitomised by the October 2024 floods that killed more than 230 people.

"It is important that we are united in our diagnosis and in anticipating the responses we can provide when these highly adverse weather effects occur," Sánchez said during a visit to Huétor Tájar, a town in the southern region of Andalusia hit hard by flooding last week.

The Socialist premier reiterated his call for a broad climate agreement to coordinate responses at institutional, economic and social levels, saying conditions in Spain have clearly changed.

"That requires resources, but it also requires adaptation to a completely new climate reality that often exceeds scientific forecasts and demands joint work from all levels of government," he added.

Since January, Spain has been hit by seven storms. Last week, exceptional rainfall from Storm Leonardo triggered floods and swelled rivers and reservoirs.

The storm left two people dead in Spain and one in neighbouring Portugal.

More than 6,400 people remained displaced yesterday, down from a peak of over 11,000, according to Andalusian regional authorities.

A new storm, Marta, has been affecting the Iberian Peninsula since Saturday, killing a firefighter in Portugal and a road maintenance worker in Spain.

"We must all remain on alert. Complicated days are ahead," Sánchez said. – AFP

Brazil seeks to restore block of Rumble video app

BRASÍLIA – US-based Rumble, popular with conservative and far-right voices, was banned by Brazil's Supreme Court last year after it refused to block a Brazilian user living in the US who was accused of spreading disinformation.

Brazil's telecoms regulator Anatel said in a statement sent to AFP that it was working to "reinstate the block" after Rumble managed to hide its internet addresses by routing its service through another company's network.

In 2024, Elon Musk's X social network used a similar method to briefly evade a 40-day ban imposed by the Supreme Court over its failure to comply with a

series of court orders against online disinformation.

Anatel said Rumble should again be off the air in a few days.

Brazil's crackdown on online disinformation angered US President Donald Trump, who accused the country of attacking American social media companies.

It was one of the reasons Trump cited when he imposed high tariffs on Brazilian products in 2025, and imposed sanctions on top judicial authorities.

Many of these measures have since been repealed amid a warming of diplomatic ties after Trump met with his Brazilian counterpart Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in October. – AFP

Guinea-Bissau opposition leader summoned by military court: sources

BISSAU – Guinea-Bissau's main opposition leader has been summoned to appear before a military court over alleged links to multiple coup plots, judicial and military sources told AFP.

The junta has imprisoned senior politicians after overthrowing president Umara Sissoco Embaló and seizing power in November, just days after presidential elections.

Domingos Simões Pereira, leader of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), which led the coastal west African country to independence from Portugal in 1974, was arrested on the day of the November coup.

He was freed late last month but was placed under house arrest because of separate investigations

into alleged financial crimes.

He will be questioned on Friday for his "alleged involvement in a coup attempt", a source close to the military court told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity for security reasons.

"There are a lot of suspicions hanging over him regarding his alleged involvement in several subversive actions," a senior officer said.

Pereira is suspected of involvement in at least two attempted coups, in late 2023 and October 2025, the same source added.

Guinea-Bissau has experienced five coups and a string of attempted military takeovers since independence.

Crippling poverty, chaotic administration and political chaos have also made Guinea-Bissau a fertile ground for corruption and drug smuggling. – AFP

Frank issues rallying cry for 'desperate' Tottenham

Premier League LONDON—Thomas Frank said yesterday that Tottenham have to understand the gravity of their predicament to snap a seven-game winless run in the Premier League against Newcastle tonight.

Spurs sit just six points above the relegation zone in 15th.

Frank has so far been handed a stay of execution by the club's board, but did not play down the desperation of his side for just a third home league win of the season.

"There is no doubt we are desperate to win games," said the Dane at his pre-match press conference.

"You need to be desperate. If you are not desperate you do not understand the situation you are in, in terms of you haven't won enough and you need to win football games."

"That's what we want for the fans, for the team, for the club."

Frank has faced repeated calls for his head by a frustrated Tottenham support during a miserable first season in charge.

But with his squad ravaged by injury, he called on the supporters to give their side the encouragement they need to dismiss fears of a relegation battle.

"When you are in a situation, when it's not going straightforward, you need the fans more," added Frank. "We need the fans tomorrow, massively, to back the team."

Already short of options, Frank will now be without captain Cristian Romero for four games after he was sent-off in a 2-0 defeat to Manchester United on Sunday.

Destiny Udogie also picked up a hamstring injury in that match which will rule him out for up to five weeks.

Romero has been criticised for picking up the sixth red card of his Tottenham career just days after he spoke out publicly to lambast the club's board for not doing enough to help the squad in the transfer market.

But Frank defended the Argentine international's disciplinary record.

"When you have a player that's playing with so much passion and aggression, things like that can happen," said the former Brentford boss.

"That's not to say he shouldn't learn from it. Of course he needs learn from it going forward."

The game will be played at 3:30 a.m. tomorrow morning Macau time. —AFP/MPD

Crunch time for Bayern's title hunt: Kane

Oliver Trust

BUNDESLIGA BERLIN — Bayern Munich's emphatic 5-1 win over Hoffenheim has taken the Bavarians into what striker Harry Kane described as the decisive phase of the 2025/26 season.

Kane scored twice and has now netted 24 goals in 21 Bundesliga appearances, along with seven assists, setting the tone for what promises to be a demanding stretch across all competitions.

"From now on, it counts," the 32-year-old said after Sunday's three points, with Bayern preparing for a German Cup quarterfinal against RB Leipzig tomorrow and the knockout stage of the UEFA Champions League in mid-March.

After two winless league matches, Bayern restored a six-point lead at the top, underlining the importance of building momentum as the season moves into its decisive weeks.

Head coach Vincent Kompany said the club is not prioritizing one competition over another.

"We don't see one title above the others," the former Manchester City defender said. "All are important, and we want as many as possible."

Alongside Kane's brace, Luis Diaz scored three goals and added two assists as Bayern lifted their league total to 79 goals after 21 rounds.

For Kompany, the display was about more than attacking output.

"They don't stop when things seem done; they continue until the final minutes," he said, describing the mindset required at this stage of the campaign.

The 39-year-old likened the run-in to "a tunnel you have to enter," adding that his playing career taught him what it takes "when you reach the final stages and have to win something."

With Stuttgart and Leverkusen already through to the German Cup semifinals, Bayern and Leipzig will decide the last remaining spot over the next two days, adding further pressure to an already congested schedule.

Off the pitch, Bayern have also moved to strengthen stability. The club recently extended winger Serge Gnabry's contract until 2028, while negotiations with French defender Dayot Upamecano are nearing completion.

Although the contract has not yet been signed, chairman Jan-Christian Dreesen said a full agreement has been reached after months of talks.

"If there is trust and a clear yes from both sides, the timing of the final signature doesn't really matter," Dreesen said.

Media reports have cited figures of around 20 million euros per season, a signing bonus spread across the contract, and a potential exit clause in 2027.

Kompany said he remains relaxed about both sporting and contractual matters, noting that initial discussions have also taken place regarding Kane's longer-term future in Munich.

The message from Bayern's camp is clear: as the season enters its defining phase, the club intends to stay focused on all fronts, with the Bundesliga, the German Cup and the Champions League all firmly in view.

The game will be played at 3:45 a.m. Thursday morning Macau time. —Xinhua/MPD

'I need to improve,' says Haaland after barren spell

Premier League MANCHESTER — Erling Haaland said tiredness was no

excuse for his poor goalscoring run in 2026 as he demands more of himself to keep Manchester City in the hunt for four trophies.

Haaland scored a dramatic stoppage-time winner from the penalty spot as City beat Liverpool 2-1 on Sunday to remain six points behind Arsenal in the Premier League title race.

The 25-year-old has netted 28 times in 36 games for City this season.

But he has not scored from open play in the Premier League since December 20 and has just three goals in his last 13 appearances.

"Of course, I haven't scored enough goals since the start of this year and I know that I need to improve," said the Norwegian.

"I know I need to be more

sharp, better at all of this, and this is something that I have to work on."

"I have to keep going because this is what everyone deserves and expects."

Pep Guardiola said last month that Haaland was "exhausted" by a gruelling schedule with City still involved in four competitions.

Guardiola's men will face Arsenal in the League Cup final next month, are into the last 16 of the Champions League, and face fourth-tier Salford in the fourth round of the FA Cup.

"I don't want to speak about why I haven't performed. I don't think there's any excuse. Fatigue is a lot in the head," added Haaland.

"It's a lot of games. Look at the schedule, it's not easy and for me, it's about staying fit, that's the most important thing, and trying to be ready to help the team."

City looked set to fall nine

points behind Arsenal at the top of the table until a chaotic finale at Anfield.

The visitors trailed to Dominik Szoboszlai's brilliant free-kick with just six minutes of normal time remaining until Haaland teed up Bernardo Silva to level.

Haaland then kept his cool in a frenzied atmosphere from the spot to rekindle City's hopes in the title race.

They can ramp up the pressure even more on Arsenal with victory over Fulham tomorrow to halve the deficit at the top before the Gunners face Brentford 24 hours later.

"We've seen before that the title race is not over until it's over," said Haaland.

"Right now I need to focus on Fulham because there's still many games [to go]."

The game will be played at 3:30 a.m. Thursday morning Macau time. —AFP/MPD



Marseille's Dutch goalkeeper Jeffrey de Lange (right) watches as the ball hits the back of the net as Paris Saint-Germain's French forward Ousmane Dembele (left) scores Paris Saint-Germain's second goal during the French L1 match between Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) and Olympique de Marseille (OM) at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris on Sunday. PSG won the game 5-0. —AFP



Real Madrid's French forward Kylian Mbappe reacts during the Spanish league match against Valencia CF at Mestalla Stadium in Valencia on Sunday. The match ended with Real winning 2-0. —AFP

Rennes sack Beye after 4th straight defeat

Frédéric Happe

RENNES — French Ligue 1 side Rennes sacked coach Habib Beye yesterday after just over a year in charge and following a fourth successive defeat at the weekend.

Despite their latest loss, away to high-flyers Lens on Saturday, Rennes remain in sixth in Ligue 1 and a qualification place for next year's European competitions.

Rennes said they had "initiated a procedure" against Beye and had placed reserve team boss Sébastien Tambouret in temporary charge.

The move comes with Rennes set to face champions Paris Saint-Germain next.

Rennes have not won since early January and during their four-match losing run were eliminated from the French Cup 3-0 by Marseille.

However, during that entire period, they remained in sixth, although now with a chasing pack of five teams within one win of them.

Beye was hired in January 2025 with the club 16th — the relegation play-off position — and lasted just 39 matches despite presiding over a noticeable upturn in form and fortunes.

The club sold talented teenage forward Mohamed Kader Meite to Saudi Al-Hilal for a reported 30 million euros (US\$35m) a week ago and also agreed to sell highly-rated 20-year-old defender Jeremy Jacquet to Liverpool for up to £60 million (US\$82m) at the end of the season.

Beye's only previous coaching experience was three years in the third tier at historic Parisian side Red Star, whom he guided to promotion to Ligue 2 in 2024. —AFP

Gu's hopes of Olympic triple gold dashed, Vonn still in hospital

Guy Jackson

 MILAN – US-born Chinese freestyle skier Eileen Gu saw her chance of a historic Winter Olympics gold slip away yesterday, while Lindsey Vonn remained in hospital after her Games ended with a broken leg.

Gu, one of the faces of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, was hoping to win the slopestyle crown, a spectacular event at Livigno Snow Park in which competitors must navigate obstacles and perform jumps.

But Switzerland's Mathilde Gremaud denied 22-year-old Gu the first of her gold medal targets, repeating her own victory from four years ago as she scored 86.96 in a stunning second run to edge out Gu, whose best total in her three runs was 86.58.

Gu charmed her adopted nation in Beijing by scooping dazzling golds in the half-pipe and big air and taking silver behind Gremaud in the slopestyle.

Now the multi-talented skier, who also has a career as a model and studies at Stanford, has to focus on her two remaining events at the Milan-Cortina Games, the half-pipe and big air.

Her own decision

Vonn meanwhile spent a second day in hospital in Treviso, potentially facing more surgery on her fractured left leg after a brutal crash on Sunday just 13 seconds into her bid to win an unlikely medal in the downhill.

Italian news agency ANSA reports that Vonn went under the knife twice to stabilise a fracture in the femur bone after the stricken 41-year-old American was winched off the Cortina d'Ampezzo piste by a rescue helicopter.

To those asking if Vonn should even have been at the start gate considering she had ruptured an anterior cruciate ligament on January 30, Johan Eliasch, the head of the International Ski Federation, said yesterday the decision had been

solely hers.

"This has to be decided by the individual athlete," he said.

"What is also important for people to understand is that the accident that she had yesterday, she was incredibly unlucky, one in a thousand," Eliasch added.

"This is something which is part of ski racing and it's a dangerous sport."

The newly-crowned men's downhill champion Franjo von Allmen won a second Olympic gold yesterday when he partnered Swiss teammate Tanguy Nef to victory in the team combined event in Bormio.

Von Allmen had been fourth fastest in the downhill on the Stelvio course before Nef laid down a near-faultless slalom run for a winning aggregate time.

Mikaela Shiffrin, the USA's other skiing superstar alongside Vonn, will make her debut at these Games in the women's team combined event after being paired with downhill gold winner Breezy Johnson, the USA ski team announced.

Shiffrin and Johnson are reigning world champions in the discipline and they will be hot favourites for more gold.

The team combined event, which is making its Olympic debut at the Milan-Cortina Games, involves two skiers from the same nation racing a downhill and a slalom, with the fastest aggregate time earning the gold medal.

Just getting started

US figure skating star Ilia Malinin warned his rivals he was just warming up for his men's Olympic singles bid starting today after facing the challenge of Japanese pair Yuma Kagiyama and Shun Sato on his way to team gold.

Malinin returns to the Milan Ice

Skating Arena today, two days after holding his nerve to help the USA retain the Olympic team title ahead of Japan.

"Absolutely, this gives me so much confidence and I'm really looking forward [to the individual competition]," the 21-year-old said on Sunday with his first Olympic gold medal around his neck.

"It went exactly to plan and I feel very thankful for that."

First up will be the men's short programme today in which Malinin trailed Kagiyama, the Beijing Olympic singles silver medallist behind American Nathan Chen, during the team event.

The free skating final takes place on Friday. – AFP

Some photos on page 16



Zimbabwe's Richard Ngarava bowls during the 2026 ICC Men's T20 Cricket World Cup group stage match against Oman at the Sinhalese Sports Club Ground in Colombo, Sri Lanka yesterday. Zimbabwe won the game by 8 wickets (39 balls left) – AFP

Sport in brief

South Africa pile up 213-4 against Canada in T20 World Cup

AHMEDABAD – South Africa smashed 47 off the last three overs to pile up 213-4 against Canada yesterday in Ahmedabad, the highest total so far in this year's T20 World Cup.

David Miller hit an unbeaten 39 off 23 balls and Tristan Stubbs was not out 34 off 19 as they finished the innings in the Group D encounter with an unbroken stand of 75 in 6.1 overs.

After Canada won the toss and elected to field, Quinton de Kock and captain Aiden Markram got South Africa off to a flying start, putting on an opening stand of 70 in 6.5 overs.

De Kock was first to fall, for 25, bowled by a dipping off-spinner from Dilpreet Bajwa.

Markram sailed on and reached his fifty off 28 balls before falling

for 59, caught in the deep after hitting 10 fours and a six.

Left-arm wrist-spinner Anish Patel was the successful bowler and he enjoyed a fine spell, also removing Ryan Rickleton for a brisk 33 off 21 balls and Dewald Brevis for six.

Patel finished with 3-31 off his four overs after reducing South Africa from 125-1 to 138-4 before Miller and Stubbs took over for the side that were runners-up to India in the last edition of the tournament in 2024. – AFP

Cheptegei glad to start 2026 with win in Dubai

Athletics

KAMPALA – Joshua Kiprui Cheptegei said he was pleased to open his 2026 season with a victory in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates.

The Ugandan won the Burj2Burj Half Marathon on Sunday, clocking 59 minutes and 26 seconds to complete the 21km race.

Kenya's Nicholas Kipkorir

finished second, while Tanzania's Alphonse Felix Simbu placed third.

"I am very happy that I have started the new season by winning a half marathon race in Dubai. This is a good start as I continue to prepare for the London Marathon in March," Cheptegei told Xinhua.

In December 2025, the 5,000m and 10,000m record holder also won the Tata Steel Kolkata Road Race in India.

"I am very happy competing in half marathon races because they are also helping me improve on my speed as I prepare for marathon races," added the two-time Olympic gold medalist.

Dominic Otchet, president of Uganda Athletics, told Xinhua yesterday that he is confident Cheptegei and Jacob Kiplimo will shine at the London Marathon.

"We are very excited seeing our athletes perform well in the recent races as they prepare for the London Marathon," added Otchet. – Xinhua

Medal Table				
Order	NOC	Gold	Silver	Bronze
1	Norway	3	1	2
2	Switzerland	3	1	0
3	USA	2	0	0
4	Austria	1	3	0
5	Italy	1	2	6
6	Japan	1	2	1
7	Germany	1	1	1
8	Czechia	1	1	0
8	France	1	1	0
8	Sweden	1	1	0
11	China	0	1	1
12	Republic of Korea	0	1	0
12	Slovenia	0	1	0
14	Canada	0	0	2
15	Bulgaria	0	0	1



Wang Xinyu serves during the women's singles round of 64 match against Emilia Arango of Colombia at the WTA Qatar Open 2026 tennis tournament in Doha, Qatar, yesterday. Wang won the match 6-1, 7-5. – Xinhua

Bad Bunny celebrates Puerto Rico at Super Bowl, angering Trump

Patrick T. Fallon and Josh Edelson

SANTA CLARA — United States — Puerto Rican superstar Bad Bunny on Sunday turned the Super Bowl into a giant street party, emphasising unity over division in his groundbreaking Spanish-language set — but still earning President Donald Trump's scorn.

Anticipation was high for the 31-year-old's set, amid rampant speculation about whether he would use his platform to renew his criticism of the Trump administration's immigration crackdown in front of tens of millions of viewers.

But the wildly popular musician, whose real name is Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio, instead made good on his pre-game promise to joyously share his culture — and largely avoided overt political statements in favour of subtle messaging through symbols.

In a set featuring a sugar cane plantation, a traditional "piragua" cart selling treats, and even a wedding, he opened with "Tití Me Preguntó" ("Auntie Asked Me") and feminist anthem "Yo Perreo Sola" ("I Twerk Alone") with a cast of dancers fuelling the party atmosphere.

Actors Pedro Pascal and Jessica Alba, and rapper Cardi B were among the guest stars vibing in his familiar "La Casita" ("The Little House") backdrop, representing a home in Puerto Rico.

Bad Bunny wore an all-white ensemble, with a football jersey featuring the number "64" and "Ocasio," before donning a classy suit jacket.

He delved into more political territory with "El Apagón" ("The Blackout"), which touches on the displacement of Puerto Ricans on their own island, and the constant problems caused by the unreliable power grid. He carried a Puerto Rican flag at one point.

The performance also included a young boy watching the Grammys on an old television set. Bad Bunny, who won the Album of the Year prize a week ago, presented the child — perhaps a younger version of himself — with a golden gramophone.

The internet went wild with unverified rumours that the child was Liam Conejo Ramos, a five-year-old Ecuadorian boy recently detained by US immigration agents in Minnesota.

An NFL spokesman confirmed

to AFP that the boy was an actor, and an Instagram post seemingly from the child in question, Lincoln Fox, was hashtaged #youngbadbunny.

Surprise musical guests included Lady Gaga, who sang a Latin-inflected version of her hit "Die with a Smile" — the only English lyrics in the show — and Puerto Rican singer Ricky Martin.

Affront

At the Grammys, Bad Bunny made a searing statement about Trump's sweeping immigration crackdown, earning cheers for saying "ICE out" from the stage.

But on Sunday, he did not call out the Republican president.

At the end of the set, after listing Latin American countries, Puerto Rico, the United States and Canada, Bad Bunny spiked a football that said "Together, we are America."

A giant screen in the stadium read: "The only thing more powerful than hate is love."

Trump nevertheless quickly took issue with the performance, saying: "Nobody understands a word this guy is saying" — even though government data shows more than 41 million Americans speak Spanish.

Posting on his Truth Social account, he called the show "an affront to the Greatness of America."

Early backlash

Bad Bunny has been Spotify's most-streamed artist in the world four separate times, including last year, and won Album of the Year at the Grammys with "Debí Tirar Más Fotos" ("I Should Have Taken More Photos") — the first Spanish-language work to win music's highest accolade.

But the decision to showcase his work at the Super Bowl in California was met with conservative outrage — specifically about the idea that he would not sing in English.

The NFL entered into an agreement in 2019 with Jay-Z's



Puerto Rican singer Bad Bunny performs during the Super Bowl LX Patriots vs Seahawks Apple Music Halftime Show at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, California on Sunday.

— AFP

entertainment company Roc Nation, which leads the league's entertainment strategy.

Since that time, the list of Super Bowl headliners included Jennifer Lopez and Shakira (with a guest spot for Bad Bunny), but the duo did not perform exclusively in Spanish, leaving Bad Bunny to set that benchmark.

From Vega Baja to Super Bowl

Bad Bunny grew up in Vega Baja, a small municipality near Puerto Rico's capital San Juan.

He was working at a supermarket bagging groceries when he got a call from a label over his viral plays on the DIY platform SoundCloud.

Thus began the reggaeton star's rapid explosion to the top of global music.

Late last year, Bad Bunny released "Debí Tirar Más Fotos," a

history lesson in Puerto Rican music that he promoted with a hometown concert residency in San Juan and a world tour.

In Puerto Rico, a US territory since 1898, there was nothing but pride for the island's native son.

"For someone from here to be at one of the most important events in the United States is a source of pride for every Puerto Rican," Olvin Reyes, 39, told AFP.

**"Piragua" refers to a type of small boat or canoe, traditionally made from a single trunk of a tree, often used in various parts of Latin America and the Caribbean. In some contexts, especially in Puerto Rico, "piragua" can also refer to a popular frozen dessert made with flavoured ice, similar to a snow cone. The meaning varies based on the context, so it's important to consider how it's being used. — Poe

AI videos create buzz for ByteDance after US TikTok deal

BEIJING — Cinematic clips generated by ByteDance's latest AI video model have sparked an online buzz for the Chinese company that recently ceded majority control of TikTok in the United States.

ByteDance is best known globally as the company behind TikTok, but it is also a major AI player in the world's second largest economy.

Its new video creation model, called Seedance 2.0, has been launched in a limited test mode in the Chinese mainland — but hyper-realistic synthetic footage is already flooding social networks worldwide.

Swiss-based consultancy CTOL Digital Solutions hailed it as "the most advanced AI video generation model available... surpassing OpenAI's Sora 2 and Google's Veo 3.1 in practical testing".

It "represents a fundamental shift in video generation capabilities

— not merely in visual quality, but in automating editorial judgment previously exclusive to trained professionals", it said.

The hype drove up shares in Chinese entertainment and gaming firms yesterday, including a 20 percent jump for publisher COL Group and 10 percent for Shanghai Film Co, according to Bloomberg News.

Long blockbuster-style fantasy fight scenes and swooping zoom-in shots showing detailed surfaces were among the clips posted online by users.

Some compared them to the output of OpenAI's Sora 2 text-to-video app, which last year sparked copyright concerns over its depiction of characters from famous cartoons and games such as South Park and Pokemon.

"This category is moving incredibly fast. And China seems to be ahead," commented Inaki Berenguer

of venture capital firm LifeX.

"It's incredible what you can create with just prompts (scenes, multi-shots, sound effects, voices...)" he said, referring to the Seedance videos.

ByteDance recently avoided TikTok being banned over national security claims in the United States, where the app has 200 million users.

Just over two weeks ago, TikTok announced it had established a majority American-owned joint venture to operate its US business.

ByteDance has retained a 19.9 percent stake in the joint venture, keeping its ownership below the 20 percent threshold stipulated by law.

Three investors — Silver Lake, Oracle and Abu Dhabi-based AI investment fund MGX — each hold 15 percent stakes.

Oracle's executive chairman Larry Ellison is a longtime ally of US President Donald Trump.

— AFP, MPD

'Send Help' repeats as N American box office champ

LOS ANGELES — Horror flick "Send Help" showed staying power, leading the North American box office for a second straight week with US\$10 million in ticket sales, industry estimates showed on Sunday.

The 20th Century flick stars Rachel McAdams and Dylan O'Brien as a woman and her boss trying to survive on a deserted island after their plane crashes.

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

Debuting in second place at US\$7.2 million was rom-com "Solo Mio" starring comedian Kevin James as a groom left at the altar in Italy, Exhibitor Relations reported.

"This is an excellent opening for a romantic comedy made on a micro-budget of US\$4 million," said analyst David A. Gross of Franchise Entertainment Research, noting that critics and

audiences have embraced the Angel Studios film.

Post-apocalyptic Sci-fi thriller "Iron Lung" — a video game adaptation written, directed and financed by YouTube star Mark Fischbach, known by his pseudonym Markiplier — finished in third place at US\$6.7 million.

"Stray Kids: The Dominate Experience," a concert film for the K-pop boy band Stray Kids filmed at SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles, opened in fourth place at US\$5.6 million.

And in fifth place at US\$4.5 million was Luc Besson's English-language adaptation of "Dracula," which was released in select countries outside the United States last year.

Gross called it a "weak opening for a horror remake," noting the film's total production cost of US\$50 million and its modest US\$30 million take abroad so far. — AFP

World Weather

CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -5°C~10°C	Manila 21°C~29°C	New York 0°C~3°C	Lisbon 14°C~17°C
Shanghai 2°C~13°C	Bangkok 23°C~35°C	London 9°C~13°C	Rio de Janeiro 23°C~27°C
Hong Kong 14°C~21°C	Tokyo -3°C~9°C	Frankfurt 5°C~7°C	Luanda 24°C~30°C
Taipei 13°C~22°C	Singapore 23°C~33°C	Vancouver 1°C~9°C	Maputo 21°C~32°C
Guangzhou 13°C~22°C	Kuala Lumpur 24°C~35°C	Paris 10°C~14°C	Dili 24°C~30°C
Nanjing -1°C~11°C	Jakarta 23°C~29°C	Moscow -16°C~9°C	São Tomé 26°C~31°C
Guilin 9°C~13°C	Seoul 0°C~5°C	Las Vegas 12°C~22°C	Praia 17°C~26°C
Xi'an -1°C~14°C	Sydney 19°C~28°C	Monte Carlo 11°C~13°C	Bissau 17°C~37°C



Ukraine's Vladyslav Heraskevych takes part in the skeleton men's training session at Cortina Sliding Centre during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy yesterday.

— AFP

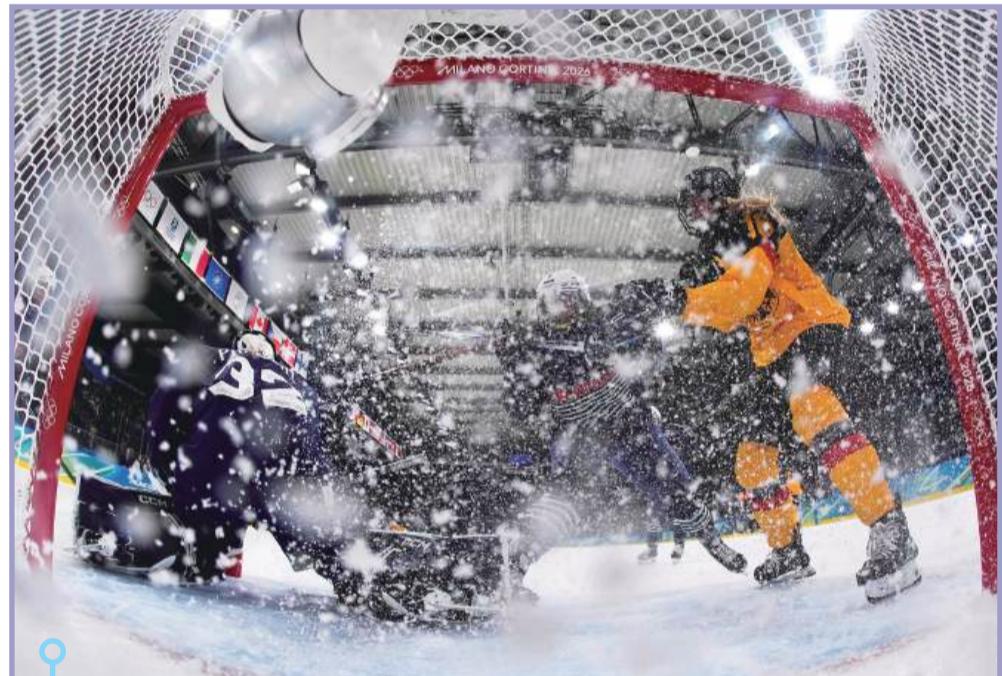
Germany's Julia Taubitz competes in the luge women's singles run 1 at Cortina Sliding Centre during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy yesterday.

— AFP



China's Tian Ruining competes in the speed skating women's 1000m during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at Milano Speed Skating Stadium in Milan yesterday.

— AFP



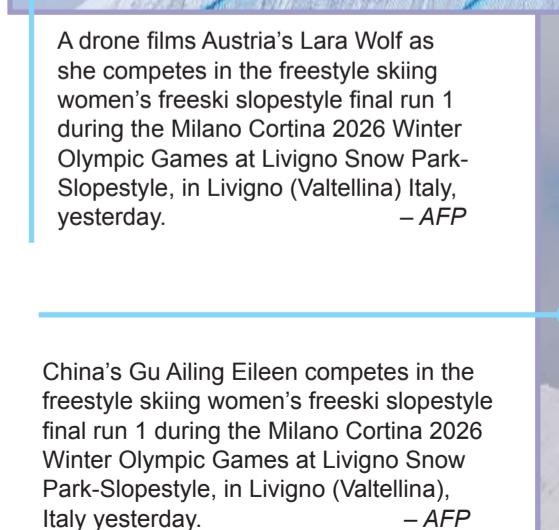
China's Tian Ruining competes in the speed skating women's 1000m during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at Milano Speed Skating Stadium in Milan yesterday.

— AFP



Germany's Jule Schiefer (right) fights with France's Alice Philbert during the women's preliminary round Group B Ice Hockey match between Germany and France at the Milano Rho Ice Hockey Arena at the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games in Milan, yesterday.

— AFP



A drone films Austria's Lara Wolf as she competes in the freestyle skiing women's freeski slopestyle final run 1 during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at Livigno Snow Park-Slopestyle, in Livigno (Valtellina) Italy, yesterday.

— AFP



China's Gu Ailing Eileen competes in the freestyle skiing women's freeski slopestyle final run 1 during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at Livigno Snow Park-Slopestyle, in Livigno (Valtellina), Italy yesterday.

— AFP