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## MOC inspects Macau's agricultural supply from Chinese mainland

**Armindo Neves**

The Macau Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) announced in a statement yesterday that Ministry of Commerce (MOC) Department of Foreign Trade Deputy Director General Li Na led a delegation to Macau yesterday for an inspection tour focused on ensuring a stable supply of agricultural and ancillary products.

According to the statement, the delegation conducted on-site visits to assess the supply situation of such products from the Chinese mainland to Macau. Delegation members included representatives from the ministry, the General Administration of Customs, and Guangdong Province's Department of Commerce.

The delegation was accompanied by IAM President Chao Wai Ieng and administrative committee member Ung Sau Hong during their visit to the Macau Wholesale Market and Taipa Municipal Market.

The statement quoted Li as saying that the central government places a high level of importance on ensuring Macau's supply of agricultural and ancillary products. Relevant departments and provincial authorities work in close coordination to implement the Central People's Government's directives, guaranteeing a safe and stable supply to the Macau market, Li said.

Li noted that in 2025, the Chinese mainland shipped 420,000 tonnes of agricultural and ancillary products to Macau, with increases recorded in live hogs, live cattle, poultry, fruit, aquatic products, and alcoholic beverages, while the supply of vegetables and grains remained stable, adding that the enterprises supplying Macau have established high-standard production and processing bases, ensuring food safety at the source.

The statement also said that the delegation focused on the supply sources, quality, and price fluctuations of meat, vegetables, poultry, eggs, and aquatic products supplied to Macau.

### 5 measures to ensure stable supply

In the statement, Li emphasised that, due to the approaching Year of the Horse, the ministry has introduced five measures to ensure a stable supply.

The five measures consist of optimising the organisation of supply sources, ensuring quality and safety, responding to emergencies, strengthening inter-departmental coordination, and reinforcing safety protocols – all measures aimed at guaranteeing Macau's stable supply of agricultural products during the festive period.

The Year of the Horse begins next Tuesday. ■



Ministry of Commerce (MOC) Department of Foreign Trade Deputy Director General Li Na (centre), Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) President Chao Wai Ieng (second from left), IAM administrative committee member Ung Sau Hong (right) and other officials pose at the Macau Wholesale Market on Avenida do Parque Industrial yesterday. – Photo: GCS

## China's central SOEs launch embodied intelligence consortium

BEIJING – State-owned enterprises (SOEs) directly administered by the central government have formed an embodied intelligence industry consortium in an effort to accelerate the development of artificial intelligence (AI).

Under the guidance of the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) of the State Council, the consortium brings together central SOEs alongside private companies, universities and research institutes.

It will focus on five priority areas: strategic high-value application scenarios, high-quality datasets, key and core

technologies across the industrial chain, coordinated development within the broader industry ecosystem, and the links between industry and finance to support the real economy.

The move comes amid a steady increase in AI investment among China's central SOEs over the last few years.

At a recent meeting, the SASAC said that central SOEs should expand effective investment in computing power, bolster independent innovation, accelerate breakthroughs of core technologies in key areas, and transform more innovations from prototypes to commercial products

and viable industries.

Central SOEs should also deepen their open-source collaboration and accelerate their upgrades to a new AI cooperation platform, the Huanxin Community\*\*, with the aim of cultivating a mutually beneficial industry ecosystem, according to the SASAC.

The Huanxin Community was launched by the SASAC in July last year and has since seen its user base increase tenfold. It has recently attracted the participation of tech firms such as Huawei, Moore Threads and Unitree Robotics.

The open-source platform offers

free public access to 2,200 domestically produced intelligent computing cards, and has aggregated more than 4,700 AI models and 1,200 datasets. – Xinhua

\* Embodied intelligence refers to the integration of AI into physical systems – such as robots, autonomous vehicles, or smart devices – enabling them to interact with, learn from, and adapt to the real world. – Google AI

\*\* The AI Huanxin Community (AI 焕 – “AI Renewal”) is a major national open innovation platform in China designed to accelerate industrial AI development. – Google AI

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### Xi extends Spring Festival greetings to service personnel

President Xi Jinping on Tuesday reviewed the armed forces' combat readiness and ongoing operations and extended Spring Festival greetings to all service members of the country via video link in Beijing. – Story on p. 7

### Shooter kills 9 at Canadian school, residence

A shooter killed nine people and wounded dozens more at a secondary school and a residence in a remote part of western Canada on Tuesday, in one of the deadliest mass shootings in the country's history. – Story on p. 10

### Portugal's interior minister resigns after flood criticism

Portugal's interior minister, who has been criticised over the handling of the deadly storms that battered the Iberian nation in the past weeks, has resigned, the presidency said on Tuesday. – Story on p. 12

## 2<sup>nd</sup> phase restoration of Ruins of St. Paul's bronze statues complete: IC

**Khalel Vallo**

The Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) announced in a statement yesterday that the second phase of restoration and maintenance work on the bronze statues of the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Ruins of St. Paul's façade has been completed, with the archaeological site behind the landmark now reopened to the public.

The statement said the restoration had been carried out since last year by the "Centre for the Preservation and Transmission of the Cultural Heritage of the Palace Museum in Macao", established under the auspices of the bureau.

According to the statement, the restoration team included experts from the Palace Museum, international metal conservation specialists and professionals from local higher education institutions.

In order to enhance conservation efforts, the project covered seven bronze statues on the façade and was divided into three phases, taking into account the typhoon season, site safety, peak travel periods and major events, the statement said.

The first phase of the restoration was completed last year, involving the Virgin Mary statue on the third



*This undated handout photo provided by the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) yesterday shows its UNESCO World Heritage-listed Ruins of St. Paul's after completion of its second-phase restoration.*

tier and two bronze statues on the right side of the second tier, the statement noted, adding that the second phase focused on two bronze statues on the left side of the second tier as well as the statue of Jesus Christ on the fourth tier, and has now been successfully concluded.

According to the statement, the third phase, covering the remaining

dove statue on the top tier, is scheduled to commence later this year.

Following the completion of the second phase, the archaeological site behind the Ruins of St. Paul's, including the "Visiting the Ruins of St. Paul's in Space and Time" virtual reality (VR) exhibition and the Museum of Sacred Art and Crypt, have been reopened to residents and tourists, the statement said. ■

## Citywide CCTV system now covers Zone A

**Tony Wong**

The Unitary Police Service (SPU) announced in a statement yesterday that 10 new cameras of the police forces' citywide CCTV surveillance system have come into operation in the Zone A new urban area, raising the total number of cameras in the system to 1,711.

The 10 new cameras are the first ones installed in the 1.38-square-kilometre land reclamation area.

Zone A, a new land reclamation area primarily being developed for public housing projects, is located between the peninsula's north-eastern coast and the man-made island where the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge (HZMB) Macau checkpoint is located.

Construction of the first three subsidised home-ownership scheme (HOS) estates in Zone A was completed in 2024, comprising a total of 3,017 flats.

The government started in September last year to allow those who had chosen and purchased their flats to move into the three estates, namely Tong Seng Building (東城大廈) comprising four blocks on plot B4, Tong Chong Building (東創大廈) comprising two blocks on plot B9, and Tong Kai Building (東啟大廈) comprising two blocks on plot B10.

Yesterday's SPU statement said that the 10 new cameras have been installed in areas around the three HOS estates, namely Tong Seng Building, Tong Chong Building, and Tong Kai Building. ■



*This undated handout photo released by the Unitary Police Service (SPU) yesterday shows a camera of the police forces' citywide CCTV surveillance system newly installed in Zone A.*

## Police nab local man for drunk driving

**Ada Lei**

The Public Security Police (PSP) apprehended a local man on Tuesday for drunk driving, with his blood alcohol concentration standing at 1.46 grams per litre, PSP spokesman Wong Chi Weng said during a regular press conference yesterday.

Wong identified the suspect as a technician in his forties surnamed Ho.

According to Wong, PSP officers conducting a vehicle check early Tuesday morning in Istmo de Ferreira do Amaral (關閘馬路), stopped the motorcycle driven by Ho. Upon inspection, the officers noticed that Ho was reeking of alcohol. A breathalyser test confirmed that Ho's blood alcohol concentration was 1.46 grams per litre, indicating a drunk-driving offence.

Under questioning, Ho admitted to drinking alcoholic

beverages in the Chinese mainland before riding home.

Ho has been transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP), facing a charge for drunk driving. ■



*This undated handout photo provided by the Public Security Police (PSP) yesterday shows a PSP officer escorting the drunk-driving suspect into a police station.*

## Macau aviation regulator imposes no-fly zone for drones during 2026 CNY drone & firework displays

**Khalel Vallo**

The Civil Aviation Authority of Macau (AACM) announced in a statement yesterday that unmanned aircraft flights will be prohibited across the Macau peninsula on February 15, 17, 19, 23, and March 3, from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. to ensure safety during the "2026 Chinese New Year Drones and Fireworks Displays" on those days.

The three-hour drone ban each time over the peninsula, published

in the Official Gazette (BO) No. 46, Series II, yesterday, is based on Article 66 of the Air Navigation Regulation of Macau.

The measure aims to prevent risks or interference during the city's traditional firework displays. Violations will result in penalties pursuant to Paragraph 2 of Article 59 of Law No. 4/2025 (Civil Aviation Activity Law). The statement urges the public to heed the ban in order to maintain safety and order throughout the displays. ■



*This poster provided by the Civil Aviation Authority of Macau (AACM) yesterday shows its drone ban logo.*

## Police bust illegal currency exchange dealer

**Ada Lei**

The Judiciary Police (PJ) arrested a man from the Chinese mainland on Sunday for engaging in illegal currency exchange activities, PJ spokesman Chao Teng Hin said during a regular press conference yesterday.

Chao identified the suspect as a 33-year-old male surnamed Meng who claimed to be jobless.

According to Chao, PJ officers on patrol in a casino in Cotai on Sunday evening witnessed Meng engaging in an illegal exchange deal with a middle-aged local male gambler. Chao noted that Meng and the gambler agreed to exchange 9,050 yuan for HK\$10,000 in chips.

Chao said that after the transaction was completed, the gambler immediately entered the casino to gamble. The police intercepted both and seized a smartphone and HK\$18,600 in chips from Meng, along with HK\$1,000 in chips from the gambler.

Under questioning, Meng admitted to having engaged in illegal exchange activities in Macau since the beginning of this month, claiming to have earned HK\$100 for every HK\$10,000 exchanged, resulting in a total profit of HK\$2,000.

Meng has been transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP), facing an illegal currency exchange charge. ■



*This undated handout photo provided by the Judiciary Police (PJ) yesterday shows a smartphone and HK\$18,600 in chips seized from the illegal currency exchange suspect, along with HK\$1,000 in chips confiscated from his client.*

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**CLOUDY APART FROM SUNNY PERIODS.**  
**FORCE 3 TO 4 EASTERLY WINDS, OCCASIONALLY FORCE 5.**  
**RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL RANGE BETWEEN 60% AND 95%.**



17°C~22°C

Source: SMG

## UM Vice Rector Rui Martins receives Portugal's Order of Merit medal



Rui Paulo da Silva Martins, vice rector of the University of Macau (UM), poses with his Commander of the Order of Merit medal at the Consulate General of Portugal on Rua de Pedro Nolasco da Silva yesterday evening. — Photo: Khalel Vallo

### Khalel Vallo

Rui Paulo da Silva Martins, vice rector of the University of Macau (UM), was awarded the rank of Commander of the Order of Merit by Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, recognising his long-standing efforts in promoting cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries (PSCs), as well as his contributions to higher education and scientific research in Portugal and Macau.

The medal was presented during a ceremony at the Consulate General of Portugal in Macau and Hong Kong on Rua de Pedro Nolasco da Silva yesterday evening attended by representatives from the academic sector and the Portuguese community.

"I feel deeply honoured by the recognition of His Excellency the President of the Portuguese Republic through the awarding of the Order of Merit. This honour rewards my work and dedication to the cause of Macau, through my contribution to the development of the university as an academic institution of global standing that serves as a bridge between the Chinese mainland, the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR), the Portuguese Republic, and Portuguese-speaking countries," Martins told public broadcaster TDM last month.

Portugal's Consul-General in Macau and Hong Kong Alexandre Leitão said the award recognised a figure who has remained "discreetly effective, exemplary and deeply solidary" throughout decades of service. Leitão added that Martins is a person who demonstrates to the world the best that the Portuguese have done and continue to do in Macau, the whole of China and the whole world, describing him as someone who has earned trust through his work and dedication.

In his speech, Martins expressed gratitude to the Portuguese president and those who supported his nomination, as well as his family.

Martins also reflected on his early years in Macau, noting that he arrived about 34 years ago with doubts about living in such a small city. However, he said Macau proved to be "a unique place" and a platform that allowed him to better understand Portugal and the wider Portuguese-speaking world.

"Here in Macau, I managed to get to know more about Portugal as a whole," he said, adding that the city serves as "a gateway, a platform for the whole world."

He also referenced Macau's global reputation for gaming, saying the city had long been better known for its "casino chips" than anything else, but stressed that his own experience demonstrated Macau's broader cultural and international significance.

The medal highlights Martins' decades of work bridging Macau, Portugal and the Portuguese-speaking world as a whole through academic exchange and cooperation, aiming to reinforce Macau's role as a key platform connecting China with Portuguese-speaking countries. ■

## Catholic Centre set to open in next quarter

### Kristina Vallesteros

The redevelopment of the Catholic Centre at the junction of Avenida da Praia Grande and Rua do Campo is nearing completion, the Macau Catholic Centre announced in a statement yesterday.

The 17-storey building is undergoing final refinements and government approvals. It is expected to officially open in the mid-to-late second quarter of this year, the statement said, coinciding with the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Catholic Diocese of Macau.

According to the statement, the centre will integrate a hotel, a restaurant, lecture halls, conference rooms, exhibition spaces, and multiple activity rooms. It is intended to serve as a central hub for the Catholic Church's mission, hosting both pilgrims and tourists, to "embrace Catholics and non-Catholics alike with hospitality and inclusivity", the statement noted.

The statement also said that the centre aims to continue the spiritual mission of the Catholic Church and embody the spirit of Christ, building upon the vision of Bishop Paulo José Tavares, who headed the local diocese between 1961 and 1973.

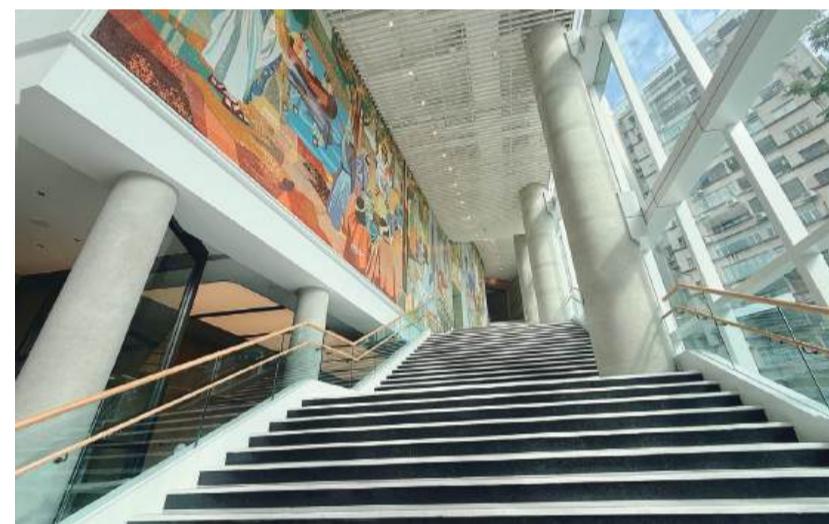
According to the statement, the centre aims to serve as a bridge for the Macau community, fostering dialogue and cultural exchange.

Construction costs rose significantly following the COVID-19 pandemic, the statement acknowledged, without revealing the final price tag.

The centre expressed gratitude to builders and contractors for their support in completing the project. Donations from the community are welcomed to help sustain its mission. Those wishing to contribute may contact the centre by email [press@centro-catolico.org.mo](mailto:press@centro-catolico.org.mo). ■



Pedestrians walk past the Macau Catholic Centre yesterday. — Photo: Tony Wong



This photo provided by the Catholic Centre of Macau yesterday shows the interior of the nearly completed centre on Rua do Campo.

## Govt mulls revitalising Coloane Market

### Armindo Neves

The Macau Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) hosted yesterday its regular residents' forum at the Seac Pai Van Community Complex (石排灣社區綜合大樓) in Coloane, which focused, among other things, on the possible revamp of Coloane Market.

According to Ho Man Him, chief of the IAM Municipal Construction Department, the bureau plans to carry out a revitalisation project on Coloane Market, which would involve redefining its purpose and redesigning its layout.

The central pavilion structure and pitched roof of the existing complex will be preserved, while the side buildings may be modified, demolished, reconstructed, reinforced, or renovated as needed, Ho said.

Ho also said that the project also includes assessing and reshaping the former wet market's various spaces to create a mixed-use model that would integrate conservation and catering, cultural and creative industries or retail outlets, as well as leisure activities.

Ho also provided an update on several municipal projects in Taipa and Coloane. The newly constructed aviary and butterfly pavilion at Seac Pai Van Park were completed last year, while the park's amphibian and reptile conservatory is expected to open to the public in the first quarter of this year.

Ho said that the conservatory covers around 1,080 square metres and features six themed exhibition rooms. Through science popularisation displays and

educational activities, it aims to enhance public awareness of natural ecological conservation, Ho said.

Regarding Seac Pai Van community facilities, Ho noted that the fourth phase of public infrastructure improvements in the residential neighbourhoods around Seac Pai Van are expected to be completed by March. Ho also said that the construction of a cycling path connecting Seac Pai Van to Coloane's residential area is also underway.

According to Ho, the bureau is simultaneously advancing hillside reinforcements, pedestrian walkway enhancements, and several sewerage projects. Efforts are ongoing to install additional rubbish compactors and carry out greening initiatives across Macau to further improve the community environment.



Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) Vice President Mak Kim Meng (third from right), IAM Municipal Construction Department Chief Ho Man Him (left) and other IAM administrative committee members look on during yesterday's community forum at the Seac Pai Van Community Complex in Coloane. — Photo: Armindo Neves



Photos recently provided by SJM Resorts.

# Drummond Money-Coutts brings magic to Macau

Interview by Rui Pastorin

English magician and mentalist Drummond Money-Coutts (aka DMC) is set to bring his tricks and illusions to Macau later this month, with shows scheduled to take place for his Macau debut at Grand Lisboa Palace (GLP) and Grand Lisboa from February 19 to 24.

Celebrated in his craft and having had performances of various sizes across continents, magic lovers might know Money-Coutts for shows including the Netflix 2018 series “Death By Magic”, which spanned eight episodes and explores magic acts that have led to performers’ deaths, or even National Geographic’s Beyond Magic with DMC, which aired in 2014 and saw him perform street magic in cities worldwide, including London, Paris, and Mexico City. Others might have also witnessed his magic on his YouTube channel “Magimation”.

With Macau as one of the latest stops, DMC, who has had performances in more than 52 countries, promises shows that blend his favourite effects from over 30 years of practice and study: magic and mentalism, with each show in Macau containing surprises.

“It will be my first time performing in Macau, and I’m truly excited”, DMC said in response to questions in a recent email interview by the *Post*. He added: “It’s [Macau] a city with such a rich blend of history, culture, and modern energy – which feels like the perfect environment for magic. There’s something very special about performing in a place where East and West meet, and I’m looking forward to sharing my work with the audience”.

DMC, the heir apparent to the Latymer Barony, comes from the family that founded Coutts, a private bank serving some of Britain’s wealthiest, including the Royal Family. His decision to pursue magic was unconventional and was both unexpected and, he noted, was not without raised eyebrows.

“Coming from a centuries-long legacy of financiers, choosing a life in magic was unexpected. But I’ve always believed that honouring a legacy doesn’t mean copying it – it means carrying its values forward in your own way. When people saw that this wasn’t just a hobby, but a lifelong discipline, they quickly understood my ambitions”.

Describing how it all began, DMC said magic found him at a very young age, capturing his fascination from the moment he could read, with his interest only growing deeper and stronger with time. As he tells it:

“When I was a child, my father took me to a tiny, hidden magic shop in London, and that was the moment everything clicked. I didn’t think of it as a career then; it felt more like discovering a secret language. Over time, that fascination never left me – it simply grew deeper and more serious. In that sense, it wasn’t something I planned, but something that quietly chose me”.

Now, with over 31 years of magic and mentalism\*, he has performed in different parts of the world to audiences of a variety of sizes and backgrounds. The success he has experienced, he said, is something he never could have envisioned, having been “the wildest and most unpredictable of journeys”.

The *Post* also asked about the most valuable lessons he has learnt throughout his career, to which he said that among the biggest were “commitment to gradual and consistent improvements, not giant leaps and bounds”. He added: “My focus was



always on mastery, not outcomes. If you stay obsessed with the craft, and on always improving by 1 percent – the rest cannot fail to follow in time”.

With years put into the craft, DMC said that the reactions that people have are what keeps him passionate about his craft. “The passion for me is in seeing the look of awe, wonder and surprise in people’s eyes. In a world that often feels predictable, offering someone a moment of true mystery is a rare and beautiful thing”.

He also noted that what continues to inspire him stems from great thinkers, storytellers, and performers who have “used illusion not just to fool, but to provoke wonder”.

“What truly inspired me was the idea that magic could be intelligent, emotional, and meaningful – a way of connecting with people, inspiring and enchanting them, rather than simply fooling them”, he pointed out.

Regarding his achievements, DMC noted that his career has been more about individual moments than great milestones. Among these moments were performing for Queen Elizabeth II to small villages in Kenya or the Himalayas. “Seeing the eyes light up in children who are watching magic for the first time, or showing old Egyptian’s magic in the shade of the great pyramid at Giza. If there’s an achievement I’m most proud of, it’s helping to reframe magic as something intelligent, story-based and meaningful”.

Authenticity, meanwhile, is what he believes to be the key to delivering a successful show while leaving audiences in awe. “Audiences are incredibly perceptive – they can sense when something is genuine. Technique is important, of course, but it’s only the foundation. What truly leaves an audience in awe is when they feel something. Astonishment is one thing, but meaningful astonishment is the ultimate goal”, he said.

\*Mentalism is a performing art and entertainment form that involves a performer (often called a mentalist) demonstrating highly developed mental or perceptual abilities. This can include mind reading, telepathy, clairvoyance, and psychological manipulation. – Poe

# New FM Commissioner Bian pays courtesy calls on ex-CEs Ho Iat Seng, Chui Sai On



Former chief executive Ho Iat Seng (right) shakes hands with newly appointed Foreign Ministry Commissioner Bian Lixin on the sidelines of their meeting yesterday. – Photo: commissioner's office

**Tony Wong**

The newly appointed Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR), Bian Lixin, yesterday paid a courtesy call, after assuming office late last month, on former MSAR chief executive Ho Iat Seng, where she expressed gratitude to Ho for his long-standing support for Macau-related diplomatic work, according to a statement by the commissioner's office yesterday.

Bian arrived in Macau to assume office on January 30, after the Central People's Government announced on January 23 its decision to appoint Bian as the head of the Office of the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the MSAR. Bian, a former head of the ministry's Personnel Department, succeeded Liu Xianfa at the helm of the commissioner's office. Liu concluded his five-year tenure in Macau on January 15, 2026.

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

Bian paid a courtesy call on MSAR Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai on Tuesday last week and on Edmund Ho Hau Wah, Macau's first

chief executive and now a vice-chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), the following day.

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

The MSAR was established by the People's Republic of China (PRC) on December 20, 1999, when Macau's temporary Portuguese administration came to an end.

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

Ho Iat Seng, Sam's predecessor, served as the MSAR's chief executive for a five-year term, between December 20, 2019 and December 19, 2024.

Sam took office as the MSAR's chief executive on December 20, 2024.

During yesterday's meeting, according to the statement, Bian underlined that the commissioner's office will continue to



Former chief executive Fernando Chui Sai On (right) meets with newly appointed Foreign Ministry Commissioner Bian Lixin on Tuesday. – Photo: commissioner's office

thoroughly fulfil its functions and duties, by supporting Macau in deepening external exchanges and cooperation and in accelerating its appropriate economic diversification, with the aim of and fostering a favourable external environment for maintaining Macau's long-term prosperity and stability.

During yesterday's meeting, according to the statement, Ho Iat Seng welcomed Bian to her new role in Macau and praised the commissioner's office for its achievements in Macau-related diplomatic work.

Ho Iat Seng, a former president of the local legislature, said that he expects the commissioner's office to continue making new contributions to broadening the MSAR's international network of friends and supporting its appropriate economic diversification.

Meanwhile, Bian paid a courtesy call on former MSAR chief executive Fernando Chui Sai On on Tuesday, where she also expressed gratitude to Chui for his long-standing support for Macau-related diplomatic work, according to a statement by the commissioner's office that day.

Bian underlined that the commissioner's office will continue to fully fulfil its functions and duties, resolutely a solid barrier for

safeguarding national security, and support Macau in strengthening its role as "One Centre, One Platform, One Base".

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

During Tuesday's meeting, according to the statement, Chui welcomed Bian to her new role in Macau and praised the commissioner's office for its important role in expanding the MSAR's external exchanges and cooperation and enhancing Macau's international influence.

Chui said that he expects the commissioner's office to build on its achievements to reach new heights and make new contributions to the steady and sustained implementation of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle.

Chui succeeded Edmund Ho as the MSAR's chief executive, serving two consecutive five-year terms between December 20, 2009 and December 19, 2019. ■

## Govt to provide new COVID-19 jabs for LP.8.1 subvariants from tomorrow

**Tony Wong**

The Health Bureau (SSM) announced in a statement yesterday that it will start the administration of a new type of COVID-19 jab tomorrow.

The statement said that in compliance with the World Health Organisation's (WHO) latest guidelines, the Macau Health Bureau has purchased Comirnaty mRNA jabs targeting the Omicron LP.8.1 subvariants.

Comirnaty is the brand name of the mRNA vaccine against COVID-19 jointly developed by German biotechnology company BioNTech and US pharmaceutical company Pfizer.

The Comirnaty mRNA vaccine against COVID-19 is administered to all those aged at least six months.

Appointments for a jab can be made from 10 a.m. today on <https://eservice.ssm.gov.mo/covidvacbook>.

The statement pointed out that the jabs are free of charge for all local residents, non-resident workers (NRWs), prison inmates, and non-locals studying in Macau.

The statement noted that all other non-locals holding a permit to stay in Macau have to pay 250 patacas per jab.

According to the statement, the Health Bureau recommends that everyone aged five or over receive an LP.8.1 jab, regardless of whether they have previously been vaccinated against COVID-19 or infected with the disease.

According to the statement, the bureau recommends that those aged from six months through four years receive three LP.8.1 jabs if they have never received any COVID-19 jabs.

Those in this age group who have previously received one non-LP.8.1 jab are recommended to receive two LP.8.1 jabs, the statement said.

According to the statement, those in this age group who have previously received two or more non-LP.8.1 jabs are recommended to receive one LP.8.1 jab.

The statement said that those aged from six months to four years who have received an LP.8.1 jab have to wait for at least eight weeks before receiving their next LP.8.1 jab.

The COVID-19 vaccine currently provided by the Health Bureau is Comirnaty mRNA jabs targeting the Omicron JN.1 subvariants, the administration of which started

in November 2024. Starting from tomorrow, the bureau will start the administration of the new LP.8.1 jabs.

Yesterday's statement also said that those who have recently been infected with COVID-19 or have received a non-LP.8.1 jab (such as a JN.1 jab) are recommended to have a dose of the new vaccine against the LP.8.1 subvariants three months afterwards.

According to the statement, the new vaccine will be available at six public health centres for those aged 12 or over, namely Ilha Verde, Ocean Gardens, Areia Preta, Praia do Manduco, Nossa Senhora do Carmo-Lago, and Seac Pai Van. The vaccine will also be available at the private Kiang Wu Hospital.

However, the new jabs will only be provided at the Ilha Verde Health Centre and the Ocean Gardens Health Centre for those aged from six months to 11 years.

The statement also urged high-risk individuals to receive an LP.8.1 jab, such as those aged 50 or over, those with chronic diseases, those with weakened immune systems, pregnant women, and health workers. ■

### LP.8.1 Vacina contra a COVID-19 já disponível!

A nova composição é eficaz contra as variantes actuais do vírus e destina-se a residentes com 6 meses ou mais de idade.

Se é:



Pessoa com 50 anos ou mais



Portador(a) de doença crónica / com imunidade comprometida



Grávida



Profissional de saúde

Marque já a sua vacinação para obter protecção adequada!

Para mais detalhes sobre a vacinação, consulte a infografia «Recomendações Mais recentes para LP.8.1 vacina contra a COVID-19 por Grupo Etáreo».



Data de actualização: 11 de Fevereiro de 2026

Services of the Government of the Macao Special Administrative Region

This poster in Portuguese released by the Health Bureau (SSM) yesterday promotes its new COVID-19 LP.8.1 vaccinations.

# Sands China sets new record with 7 Forbes Five-Star Hotels under one roof

**Rui Pastorin**

Seven of integrated resort operator Sands China's hotels have a Five-Star accolade in the 2026 Forbes Travel Guide, among which are The Londoner Macao's 313-suite Paiza Grand and The St. Regis Macao receiving the ratings for the first time.

In a statement yesterday, the integrated resort operator noted that Paiza Grand received the award in its first year of operation. With its accolades, Sands China has "the most Forbes Five-Star hotels under one roof, world-wide", the statement noted.

Sands China's other Forbes Five-Star award-winners this year are the Londoner Court and The Londoner Hotel, which both marked the fourth consecutive year of winning the award; Paiza Lofts at The Parisian Macao for the third consecutive year, Four Seasons Hotel Macao for the 13<sup>th</sup> consecutive year, and The Grand Suites at Four Seasons for the fifth consecutive year.

Meanwhile, The Huaiyang Garden at The Londoner Macao and Zi Yat Heen at Four Seasons Hotel Macao were also Forbes Five-Star award-winners for 2026, garnering them for the 2<sup>nd</sup> consecutive

year and the fourth consecutive year respectively. Moreover, The Spa at Four Seasons Hotel Macao received it for the seventh consecutive year. In all, a total of 10 awards were received.

Sands China Ltd. President and Chief Executive Officer Grant Chum Kwan Lock was quoted by the statement as noting: "Being honoured with these prestigious awards across our portfolio is an important milestone for Sands China and affirms our commitment to setting the highest industry standards. These unmatched results reflect both our dedication to excellence and our ambition to continually elevate Macao's profile on the global tourism stage."

Tane Picken, Chief Hospitality Officer – Asia, Las Vegas Sands Corp. was also quoted as saying: "These awards attest to the passion, professionalism and dedication of our team members, who deliver exceptional services and experiences to every guest. We view each Five-Star rating as an honour and a responsibility, and we remain determined to consistently exceed guest expectations and deliver unsurpassed Sands Lifestyle experiences."

*More news about other award winners tomorrow. ■*



*This photo provided by Sands China yesterday shows the Lancaster Suite of Paiza Grand at Londoner Grand.*

## MGM brings Singapore's Chatterbox Café to Macau

**Kristina Vallestros**

MGM has opened the first Macau outpost of Singapore-based dining brand Chatterbox Café, according to a statement issued by the integrated resort on Tuesday.

The restaurant celebrated its grand opening on Tuesday. According to the statement, Chatterbox has a legacy spanning over five decades and is known for blending authentic Singaporean flavours with contemporary culinary techniques.

The opening ceremony was attended by Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director of MGM China Holdings Limited Kenneth Feng Xiaofeng and Chief Executive Officer of OUE Restaurants Brian Riady, among other representatives.

Feng was quoted by the statement as saying: "Gastronomy is a universal language that speaks across borders and cultures". He noted that both Singapore and Macau are

crossroads of cultural exchange and expressed the hope that Chatterbox would allow the two cities to form a deeper connection through shared flavours.

The interior of the restaurant draws inspiration from the brand's Singapore flagship while incorporating local architectural elements, the statement said.

According to the statement, four bespoke paintings by Singaporean artist Tan Zi Xi depict signature dishes such as Singapore Mandarin Chicken Rice, Lobster Laksa, and Singapore Chicken Curry, alongside symbolic elements from Macau's wetlands, including the lotus flower and the black-faced spoonbill.

The restaurant operates daily from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. and is located at MGM MACAU on Avenida Dr. Sun Yat Sen. Further information is available on the company's official website <https://www.mgm.mo/en/dining/mgm-macau/chatterbox-cafe>. ■



*This undated handout photo recently provided by MGM shows the exterior of Singapore dining brand Chatterbox Café at MGM MACAU in Nape.*

## Chinese universities rise rapidly in global research output: Dutch researcher

**Interview by Xinhua writer Shao Haijun**

THE HAGUE – Chinese universities have shown remarkable growth in global research output in recent years, a senior researcher at the Center for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS) at Leiden University in the Netherlands said in a recent interview with Xinhua.

The 2025 CWTS Leiden Ranking Traditional Edition, released last October, which focuses exclusively on the research performance of universities worldwide, shows that eight Chinese universities now appear in the global top ten when ranked by the number of publications in international scientific journals during the period 2020 to 2023. Zhejiang University ranks first with more than 40,000 papers.

"Compared with earlier periods, you can clearly see that the number of Chinese universities in the top ten has increased when sorting universities based on the number of publications," said Nees Jan van Eck, senior researcher and head of data science at CWTS. "This is mainly due to the rapid growth in publication output from Chinese institutions."

While Chinese universities lead in publication volume, he noted that they are less dominant when citation impact is considered.

"When you look at size-independent citation impact indicators, a different picture emerges. Chinese universities do not dominate the top ten in the same way," van Eck said.

At the same time, he observed a steady rise in research influence from Chinese institutions, particularly in highly cited work.

"If you look at indicators such as the proportion of publications of a university that belong to the top 10 percent most cited of their field, you see an upward trend for Chinese universities," van Eck said. "The

proportion of highly cited publications has been increasing very steadily over time for these universities."

"If this trend continues, we may well see more Chinese universities in the global top ten or top 25 based on these citation impact indicators a few years from now," he added.

The Leiden Ranking includes two versions: a Traditional Edition covering more than 1,500 institutions, and an Open Edition based on open data from OpenAlex, which expands coverage to over 2,800 universities and provides full transparency of the underlying data and algorithms.

Unlike many global university rankings, the Leiden Ranking does not attempt to identify a single "best university."

"We don't think it is valid to answer the question of which university is the best in the world," van Eck said. "Universities perform in different dimensions. If you combine everything into one number, you no longer know what you are actually looking at."

Instead of composite scores, the Leiden Ranking presents multiple indicators across different dimensions of research performance, including scientific impact, collaboration, and open access publishing, both for science as a whole and for major disciplinary fields.

Van Eck described the ranking as more of a data tool than a traditional league table. Its main users include university leaders, policymakers and government agencies seeking to understand research trends and institutional profiles.

The researcher emphasized that rankings should support long-term development rather than drive short-term competition.

CWTS advises users to focus on indicator values rather than positions, consider multiple dimensions, and avoid over-interpreting small differences between institutions, he added.

*– Xinhua*

## China opposes US fabrication of pretexts for its resumption of nuclear tests

BEIJING – The foreign ministry said yesterday that the US accusation of Chinese nuclear explosive tests is completely groundless, and that China opposes the United States' fabrication of pretexts for its own resumption of nuclear tests.

Responding to a relevant query at the ministry's regular press briefing, spokesperson Lin Jian said that the US's persistent distortion and slander of China's nuclear policy essentially constitute political manipulation, through which the United States aims to pursue nuclear hegemony and evade its own nuclear disarmament responsibilities.

"China firmly opposes this," Lin said, stressing that the United States is the biggest source of disruption to both the international nuclear order and global strategic stability.

Lin noted that by allowing the New START Treaty to expire without renewal, the United States has severely undermined mutual trust among major countries and shaken global strategic stability.

The US clings to the policy of first use of nuclear weapons, has spent trillions of US dollars to upgrade its nuclear triad, and has been working to build a global anti-missile system and establish the forward deployment of its strategic assets, Lin said.

The country applies double standards when it comes to nuclear non-proliferation, seriously disrupting global strategic balance and stability, and undermining international and regional peace and security, he said.

Sitting on an enormous nuclear arsenal, the US should fulfill its special and primary responsibility of nuclear disarmament, Lin said, stressing that this is the international consensus.

"On New START, China has made clear its position on multiple occasions. We hope the US will resume dialogue with Russia on strategic stability to discuss the arrangements beyond the treaty's expiration, which is what the world would hope to see," he said.

China urges the US to renew the commitment of the five nuclear-weapons states to a moratorium on nuclear testing, uphold the global consensus on the ban on nuclear testing, and take concrete actions to safeguard the international nuclear disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation regime, Lin said.

"China is committed to peaceful development, follows a nuclear strategy that focuses on self-defense, and maintains long-term consistency in its nuclear policy. We will continue playing a constructive role in safeguarding international peace and security," the spokesperson said. – Xinhua

## Xi extends Spring Festival greetings to service personnel

BEIJING – President Xi Jinping on Tuesday reviewed the armed forces' combat readiness and ongoing operations and extended Spring Festival greetings to all service members of the country via video link in Beijing.

Xi, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), expressed sincere regards to service personnel of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the People's Armed Police Force, civilian personnel posted in the military, and members of reserve forces and militia, on behalf of the CPC Central Committee and the CMC.

The Spring Festival falls on February 17 this year.

Xi spoke via video link with nine units from different services of the military and the armed police, and commended them for their solid performance in their respective posts.

Describing the past year as highly unusual and extraordinary, Xi said the people's armed forces had advanced in-depth political rectification, effectively addressed various risks and challenges, and undergone "a revolutionary tempering" in the fight against corruption.

Officers and soldiers across the armed forces, especially those at the grassroots level, have been loyal to the Party, faithfully fulfilled their duties, and proven themselves capable and dependable, Xi said.

"Maintaining combat readiness during holidays is a fine tradition of our armed forces," Xi said, urging the military to stay vigilant and safeguard both national peace and the well-being of the people. – Xinhua



**Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), President of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), waves while inspecting the combat readiness and mission execution of the entire armed forces via video link from the Bayi Building in Beijing on Tuesday. – Xinhua**

## Wang Yi calls for comprehensive push in AI innovation, application

BEIJING – Premier Li Qiang yesterday called for a comprehensive push in the technological innovation, industrial growth and application of artificial intelligence (AI) to foster new quality productive forces and promote high-quality development.

Li made the remarks while presiding over a State Council group study session focused on AI development.

China must understand AI development trends accurately, Li said, encouraging breakthroughs

across the entire chain, and for broad implementation in diverse scenarios to unlock the potential of the technology in an improved manner.

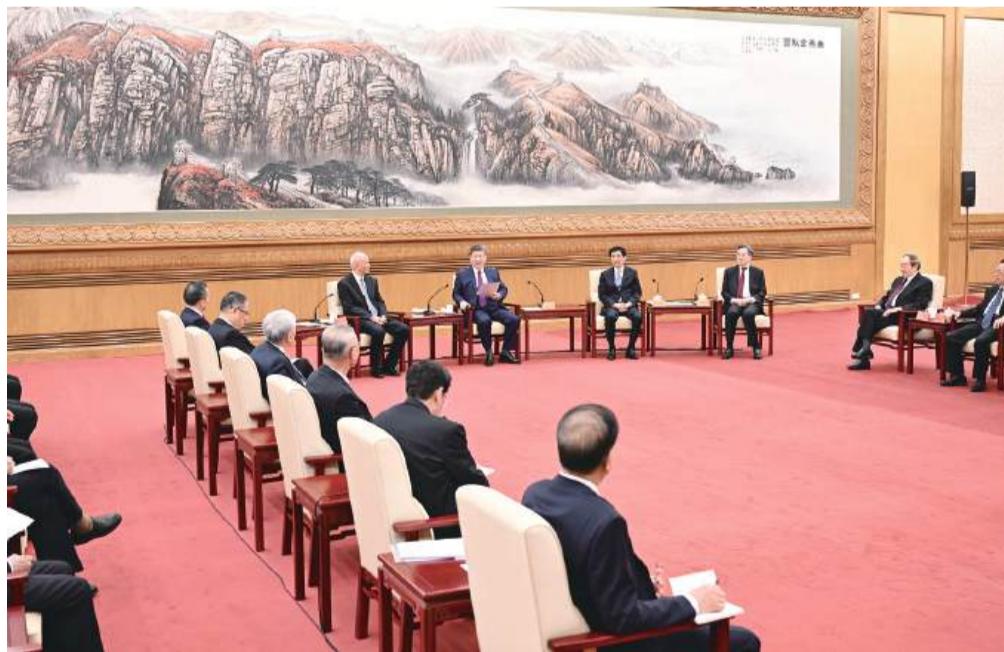
Li urged efforts to map out forward-looking strategies for new technologies and pathways, push for large-scale and commercial applications, better coordinate key resources ranging from data to computing power and electricity supply, expand international technology exchange, and strengthen AI governance with improvements to laws, policy

frameworks, application standards and ethical guidelines.

Additionally, China should build an open and inclusive environment, and cultivate a larger multi-skilled talent pool, Li said.

Zhou Bowen, head of the Shanghai Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, delivered a briefing at the session. Vice premiers Ding Xuexiang and Zhang Guoqing, along with State Councilor Wu Zhenglong, also participated in the discussions. – Xinhua

## Xi attends Chinese New Year gathering with non-CPC personages



**Xi Jinping (second from left facing camera), general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, also president of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), attends an annual gathering with non-CPC personages ahead of the Spring Festival, or the Chinese New Year, at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. The gathering was also attended by Wang Huning, chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Cai Qi, director of the General Office of the CPC Central Committee, and Vice Premier Ding Xuexiang. Wang, Cai and Ding are also members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee.** – Xinhua

BEIJING – Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, extended festive greetings yesterday to people from non-CPC political parties and the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce (ACFIC), personages without party affiliation, and other members of the united front ahead of the Spring Festival, or the Chinese New Year.

Xi, also Chinese president and chairman of the Central Military Commission, sent the greetings while attending an annual gathering with non-CPC personages at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.

Addressing the gathering, Xi noted that 2025 was an extraordinary year. He said that facing profound and complicated changes at home and abroad, the CPC Central Committee united and led the entire Party and all Chinese people to overcome difficulties and work hard to achieve the year's main economic and social development targets and tasks.

These hard-won achievements stemmed from the Party's strong leadership and the joint efforts of all Chinese people, including those from non-CPC political parties, the ACFIC and personages without party affiliation, Xi said.

Noting that 2026 marks the beginning of the 15th Five-Year Plan period, Xi urged non-CPC political parties, the ACFIC and personages without party affiliation to actively fulfill their duties and responsibilities, contributing to the implementation of the CPC Central Committee's decisions and plans.

He called on them to strengthen political guidance, forge unity, contribute to the country's development in the 15th Five-Year Plan period, and strengthen their own development to show a fresh look as political parties and forces participating in state governance under socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Xi also urged them to rigorously improve their conduct and enforce discipline, with the aim of consolidating a sound political environment.

The gathering was also attended by Wang Huning, chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Cai Qi, director of the General Office of the CPC Central Committee, and Vice Premier Ding Xuexiang. Wang, Cai and Ding are also members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee. – Xinhua

# 'Overloading' may have led to deadly Philippine ferry sinking

MANILA — Philippine authorities said yesterday that a ferry may have been overloaded when it sank in the country's south last month, killing dozens of people who received no warning from the ship's crew.

The death toll has risen steadily since the *Trisha Kerstin 3* went down off the coast of southwestern Mindanao on January 26, with the body of a woman pulled from the wreckage by divers yesterday morning bringing the tally to 52.

The triple-decker vessel capsized on nearly the same route where 31 people were killed in a 2023 fire aboard the *Lady Mary Joy 3* ferry. Locally based Aleson Shipping Lines owned both ships.

Yesterday, transportation secretary Giovanni Lopez cited multiple safety violations in announcing administrative charges against the company, including the fact that vehicles boarding the ferry were never weighed as required by law.

"One of the possible causes of the sinking of the ship was the possibility of overcapacity and overloading," Lopez told a news briefing.

"The investigation found that rolling cargo like trucks and motorcycles didn't pass through the weighing station," he said.

"If there was overloading or overcapacity, it's possible cargo shifted ... inside the vessel," Lopez said, adding it was "highly probable" other ships in the archipelago nation were sailing overweight.

Reinier Pascual, an investigator for the country's maritime authority, separately confirmed passengers had received no instructions from the crew as the ship began to list.

"Based on the statements of the crew ... there was no alarm or public



**Sonia Malaluan, Administrator of the Maritime Industry Authority (MARINA), (from left to right) Philippine Department of Transportation Secretary Giovanni Lopez and Philippine Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Ronnie Gil Gavan attend a press conference on the sunken M/V *Trisha Kerstin 3* in San Juan, Metro Manila yesterday.**

— AFP

address that took place during the emergency prior to the sinking and capsizing of the ship," he said.

While at least 368 people were on board at the time of the sinking, a precise tally may never be known as a mismatch between the ferry's manifest and actual passenger numbers became apparent as more bodies were discovered.

Aquino Sajili, an attorney who survived the sinking, told AFP he expected more bodies to be found by divers now searching the ship, which lies an estimated 76 metres deep.

## ‘Obvious negligence’

The incident has also raised corruption concerns, Lopez said, with members of the coast guard and the country's maritime authority tasked with permitting ships to leave port also under investigation.

The Philippines has a long history of disasters involving the inter-island ferries that ply its seas. Many people rely on cheap and poorly regulated boats and ships

for transport between the country's more than 7,000 islands.

Neil Baird, publisher of a worldwide ferry safety database, told AFP yesterday that while the Philippines had made huge strides in the past 10 to 15 years, Aleson Shipping's record was "shocking".

"Ninety-nine percent of so-called accidents are actually human error," the Baird Maritime founder said. "Obviously, this case is negligence."

"They should never be allowed back into business," Baird added, noting the recent disclosure of more than 30 maritime "incidents" involving the company since 2019.

Sajili, who was in Manila yesterday with other survivors to press for government action, said that would be the only just outcome.

"To be frank with you, the only time I think we can say we have achieved justice is ... [with the] total cancellation of the licence of Aleson Shipping Lines," he said.

Calls to the company were unreturned.

— AFP

# Camera traps reveal rare wildlife species in one of Cambodia's largest nature reserves

PHNOM PENH — A camera-trap biodiversity survey has revealed the remarkable diversity of wildlife species inhabiting the vast, untouched, and biodiverse Virachey National Park in northeastern Cambodia, said a joint press release yesterday.

"A total of 42 species were recorded, including 32 mammal species, nine bird species, and one invertebrate species," the press release said. "Among these, two species are classified as critically endangered, five as endangered, and 13 as vulnerable."

Notably, video footage documenting a herd of Asian elephants in the forest provides compelling evidence of the high ecological integrity and suitability of Virachey National Park as a critical habitat for wildlife, it said.

The key species identified in the survey include rare animals such as the Asian elephant, Dhole, Clouded leopard, Asian golden cat, Great hornbill, Marbled cat, Bengal slow loris, Green peafowl, Douc langur,

and Sunda pangolin and many others, the press release said.

"Virachey National Park is a treasure of Cambodia, home to a rich diversity of species," said Khvay Atiya, undersecretary of state and spokesperson for the Ministry of Environment.

"This survey provides invaluable knowledge that will guide our efforts to protect these forests and their wildlife, while also supporting the communities who depend on them," he added.

Lou Vanny, terrestrial program manager for Fauna & Flora-Cambodia Program, said Virachey National Park is alive with a host of incredible creatures, each playing a critical role in maintaining the forest ecosystems.

"This camera-trap data allows us to discover some of Virachey National Park's rarest species while also gaining a better understanding of their behaviour, preferred habitats, and interactions with human settlements," he said.

He added that the main goal of this survey is to strengthen conservation actions in this biodiversity hotspot, taking into account the needs of both wildlife and local communities.

First established in 1993, Virachey National Park is one of the largest protected areas in the Southeast Asian country.

It is a relatively untouched haven for biodiversity, with an area of approximately 332,500 hectares, and is home to a vast range of species found nowhere else in the world, many of which are yet to be discovered.

Vanny said people living near this protected area can play a key role in effectively protecting wildlife, but they face their own set of challenges.

"Therefore, harmonizing conservation goals with local development needs is not merely a social objective, but an ecological necessity for the survival of the region's extraordinary biodiversity," he said.

— Xinhua

# Study finds half of world's coral reefs bleached in 2014-2017 period

SYDNEY — Coral bleaching from ocean warming is escalating in severity, extent and frequency, with more than half of the world's reefs affected during the 2014-17 global bleaching event, a study has warned.

Researchers from Australia's James Cook University (JCU) and partner institutions, including the US National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration's Coral Reef Watch program, combined data from over 15,000 coral surveys with global satellite temperature data, said a JCU statement on Tuesday.

This approach allowed the scientists to better assess the true impact of the 2014-2017 Third Global Coral Bleaching Event and to predict the scale of damage expected during the current Fourth Event, it said.

The study, published in *Nature Communications*, found heat stress, bleaching and mortality during the 2014-2017 coral bleaching event were more severe than previously recorded, with more than half of the world's coral reefs suffering at least moderate bleaching and around one in six reefs losing over 10 percent of corals.

The central Pacific suffered the most severe bleaching and mortality, while severe heat in Fiji and the Great Barrier Reef caused some corals to rapidly die without bleaching first, the findings showed.

Coral bleaching results from the breakdown of the partnership between coral animals and their symbiotic algae due to stress, often due to unusually high summer temperatures. Under high levels of heat stress, corals can die, and the health of surviving corals remains impacted, researchers said.

"After the back-to-back bleaching events on the Great Barrier Reef in 2016 and 2017, coral cover began to rebound, only to be hit again by mass bleaching in 2020, 2024 and 2025," said JCU Professor and the study's co-lead author Scott Heron.

"This creates a downward ratchet effect, where reefs only partially recover before the next bleaching event impacts them even further," Heron said, adding that if greenhouse gas emissions will not be reduced in line with previous Paris climate agreement commitments, "we can expect to lose many of the ecosystem services coral reefs provide."

— Xinhua

# 3 injured in Thailand school shooting, gunman arrested

BANGKOK — Thai police shot and arrested a gunman who opened fire yesterday at a school in southern Thailand, injuring a woman and two children, police and other authorities said.

"Police shot the suspect in the Hat Yai shooting," Thailand's Central Investigation Bureau said in a statement, after earlier saying he had been killed.

A woman and a 14-year-old girl were hospitalised with gunshot wounds and both underwent surgery, the ministry of public health said in a statement.

A second child suffered an ankle injury after they "fell from a height", it added.

The suspect entered the Phatong Prathan Khiriwat School in "an agitated state while carrying a gun", the Songkhla provincial government said in a statement.

Shortly after he entered, "about two to three gunshots were heard", the provincial government said.

The national police said the suspect was arrested.

A school administrator told AFP she was at the scene and too scared to speak before hanging up.

Thailand has one of the highest rates of gun ownership in the region, with around 10 million firearms estimated to be in circulation — one for every seven inhabitants.

Past promises of tightening gun laws have not prevented repeated tragedies.

In 2023, a 14-year-old boy, who was undergoing treatment for mental illness according to investigators, shot dead two people at a packed mall in the capital, Bangkok.

The previous year, an ex-policeman armed with a gun and knife stormed into a nursery in the country's north and murdered 24 children and 12 adults, one of Thailand's deadliest massacres.

A former army officer gunned down 29 people in a rampage at a mall in the northeastern city of Nakhon Ratchasima in 2020. — AFP



**Artists perform a mask dance featuring the heroic Panji characters at Taman Budaya in Surabaya on Tuesday.**

— AFP

# Ancient Vietnamese village opens doors for tourists to explore Lunar New Year customs

HANOI – Carefully wrapping fresh ingredients inside thin rice paper, Do Thi Minh Nguyet instructs foreign visitors on how to make spring rolls inside her centuries-old home in Hanoi's Duong Lam ancient village as the festive season approaches.

Amid laughter, sizzling pans and the aroma of fresh herbs, the simple cooking class offers tourists an intimate glimpse into a traditional Lunar New Year dish of northern Vietnam, turning the ancient house into a living bridge between rural Vietnam's past and present.

Located on the outskirts of Hanoi, Duong Lam is widely regarded as one of Vietnam's best-preserved ancient villages, home to nearly 1,000 traditional houses built from laterite stone and wood.

Tucked among winding lanes and communal courtyards, the village has retained much of its original rural landscape despite rapid urbanization surrounding the capital.

In 2006, Duong Lam became

Vietnam's first ancient village recognized as a national cultural and historical relic.

While preserving their ancestral homes, Duong Lam's residents have gradually opened their doors to visitors, offering hands-on cultural experiences and traditional meals.

At the heart of the village, Nguyet's ancient house, built in 1674, once belonged to a high-ranking education official of the former Son Tay province.

"Since the 2000s, when Duong Lam was officially recognized as an ancient village, large numbers of domestic and foreign tourists have come to visit the house, bringing renewed vitality to our family's heritage," said Nguyet, 72, a former history teacher.

"In the first lunar month, especially during the Lunar New Year, the number of visitors increases significantly," she added.

Three generations of Nguyet's family, her mother, herself and her daughter, take part in welcoming



**Do Thi Minh Nguyet instructs foreign visitors how to make spring rolls in Duong Lam of Hanoi, Vietnam, on Monday.**

– Xinhua

visitors, guiding them in making traditional Lunar New Year dishes such as square glutinous rice cakes and spring rolls. Tourists can stay and enjoy their own cooking.

A typical traditional Lunar New Year meal in Duong Lam village features Vietnamese sausages, spring rolls and square glutinous rice cakes, and must include two signature local dishes: grilled pork and sugarcane chicken, a small but

plump and juicy local breed.

Visiting Nguyet's family in the days leading up to the Lunar New Year to learn how to make spring rolls, Andrea Baker, an American tourist, said it was such a great experience.

"Anytime we can do hands-on activities, it's just a great cultural sharing," Baker told Xinhua.

Baker was impressed by the interaction with local people during the activities, where both sides could

ask questions and share experiences.

Having previously traveled in China, she observed similarities in Duong Lam, including the presence of Chinese characters and language on walls and decorations.

Nguyet said Chinese visitors have also come to visit the house, with many noting similarities between the ancient houses in Duong Lam and elements of traditional Chinese culture.

She said the development of tourism has transformed the lives of Duong Lam residents in general, and her family in particular.

"In the past, most villagers relied mainly on traditional farming for their livelihoods. With the growth of tourism, supplementary occupations have flourished alongside it."

These include making traditional cakes and producing local soy sauce, according to Nguyet.

"The expansion of these side trades has improved incomes and made life in the village more prosperous overall," she said.

– Xinhua

## Bangladesh expects high turnout in post-uprising election

DHAKA – Bangladesh's Election Commission said yesterday it expected a strong voter turnout in the first polls since a 2024 uprising ended 15 years of autocratic rule.

Many young people now in their 20s and 30s had been effectively deprived of the freedom to vote for their choice during Sheikh Hasina's iron-fisted rule, commission official Abul Fazal Muhammad Sanaullah told reporters.

Ahead of today's vote, "we see euphoria among the people," he said.

Young voters aged 18 to 37 make up 44 percent of the South Asian country's 127 million-strong electorate.

Many never cast a ballot during Hasina's 15-year rule, which ended when she was toppled in August 2024.

According to the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), average voter turnout in Bangladesh stands at 53 percent.

Turnout peaked in 2008 at nearly 87 percent, when almost all major political parties participated under a military-backed interim government.

It dropped sharply in later elections as several parties boycotted polls they alleged were rigged.

Some former election commissioners from Hasina's tenure are now in jail.

"We have promised the citizens of Bangladesh that we will conduct a free and fair election," Chief Election Commissioner AMM Nasir Uddin said.

Opinion polls vary widely, though most place the Bangladesh Nationalist Party ahead of an Islamist-led coalition – sometimes by only a narrow margin.

Officials said they remained alert after several polling centres in the northern town of Netrakona were torched on Tuesday, an incident the election commission described as isolated.

"We don't rule out the possibility of such activities, and that's why we have warned all our returning officers and law enforcement agencies to be careful," Sanaullah said.

More than 300,000 security personnel, including the army and police, will be on duty.

Police records show that five people were killed and more than 600 injured in political clashes during the campaign period from December 11 to February 9.

– AFP



**Staff members check ballot boxes ahead of the general election in Dhaka, Bangladesh, yesterday.**

– Xinhua

## India ramps up AI rules for social media platforms

NEW DELHI – India tightened rules regulating artificial intelligence on Tuesday, requiring social media platforms to clearly label AI content and comply with takedown requests by authorities within three hours.

The updated rules, issued by the Ministry of Information Technology, will come into effect on February 20 and shrink the window for removing content that violates local laws from the previous 36-hour window.

India has more than a billion internet users, and AI generated misinformation is becoming widespread in the world's most populous country.

The announcement comes as New Delhi is preparing to host a

major global AI summit next week, which will be attended by French President Emmanuel Macron and a host of other world leaders.

The latest rules apply to content "created, generated, modified or altered through any computer resource" unless the information is generated in "routine or good-faith editing".

The rules, first issued in 2021, were amended to require online platforms like X, Instagram and Facebook to clearly label synthetic data or media manipulated by AI with permanent markings that cannot be suppressed or removed.

The updated regulations define synthetic data as information "that appears to be real...or is likely to be perceived as indistinguishable

from a natural person or real-world event."

They also require online platforms to deploy automated tools to prevent the dissemination of illegal content, including false documents and sexually abusive material.

Last year, the government launched an online portal called Sahyog – meaning "cooperate" in Hindi – aimed at automating the process of sending government notices to social media platforms such as X and Facebook.

Top AI and digital leaders like Microsoft and Google, looking to court users in the world's fifth-largest economy, have announced major investments in India in recent months.

– AFP

## Sri Lanka sentences 12 to death over lawmaker's mob killing

COLOMBO – A Sri Lankan court sentenced 12 men to death yesterday for the 2022 mob killing of a lawmaker during protests that toppled the president of the South Asian nation.

Lawmaker Amarakeerthi Athukorala, 57, was lynched after he had opened fire on people blocking his car in the town of Nittambuwa, outside the capital Colombo, investigators told the court.

Athukorala was overwhelmed by a mob and tried to take refuge in a building, but was surrounded by about 5,000 people, some of whom carried out the lynching. His bodyguard was also lynched.

The killing came amid nationwide protests in May 2022

against severe shortages of food, fuel and medicines as the country ran out of foreign exchange to finance even the most essential imports.

In a majority decision yesterday, a three-judge bench of the Gampaha High Court convicted 12 men while freeing another 23 suspects in Athukorala's case.

The verdict can be appealed to the Supreme Court.

Sri Lanka has not carried out capital punishment since 1976, although courts regularly sentence convicts to death by hanging for grave crimes.

During the 2022 protests, some 75 homes of government legislators were torched after loyalists of then-president

Gotabaya Rajapaksa tried to violently break up a peaceful demonstration in Colombo.

The president and his prime minister brother, Mahinda Rajapaksa, both resigned.

The protests had erupted after the government defaulted on its US\$46 billion external debt in April 2022, but Rajapaksa's successor, Ranil Wickremesinghe, negotiated a bailout loan from the International Monetary Fund in early 2023.

However, Wickremesinghe lost the September 2024 presidential election to leftist Anura Kumara Dissanayake, who has since stabilised the economy while maintaining the austerity measures of his predecessor.

– AFP

# Shooter kills 9 at Canadian school, residence



*This screengrab of a video provided by local journalist Trent Ernst shows the middle school and high school building where Tuesday's shooting took place, leaving at least nine people dead in the small town of Tumbler Ridge, British Columbia, Canada. – AFP*

**Ben Simon**

TORONTO – A shooter killed nine people and wounded dozens more at a secondary school and a residence in a remote part of western Canada on Tuesday, authorities said, in one of the deadliest mass shootings in the country's history.

The suspect, described by police in an initial emergency alert as a "female in a dress with brown hair," was found dead with an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound, officials said.

The attack occurred in Tumbler Ridge, British Columbia, a picturesque mountain valley town in the foothills of the Rockies.

A total of 27 people were wounded in the shooting, including two with serious injuries, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police said in a statement.

Prime Minister Mark Carney said he was "devastated" by the "horrific acts of violence" and announced he was suspending plans to travel to the Munich Security Conference in Germany this week, where he had been set to hold talks with allies on transatlantic defence readiness.

Police said an alert was issued about an active shooter at Tumbler Ridge Secondary School on Tuesday afternoon (local time).

As police searched the school, they found six people shot dead. A seventh person with a gunshot wound died en route to hospital.

Separately, police found two more bodies at a residence in the town.

The residence is "believed to be connected to the incident," police said.

At the school, "an individual believed to be the shooter was also

found deceased with what appears to be a self-inflicted injury," police said.

Police yesterday had still not yet released any information about the age of the shooter or the victims.

"We are devastated by the loss of life and the profound impact this tragedy has had on families, students, staff, and our entire town," the municipality of Tumbler Ridge said in a statement.

Tumbler Ridge student Darian Quist told public broadcaster CBC that he was in his mechanics class when there was an announcement that the school was in lockdown.

He said that initially he "didn't think anything was going on," but started receiving "disturbing" photos about the carnage.

"It set in what was happening," Quist said.

He said he stayed in lockdown for more than two hours until police stormed in, ordering everyone to put their hands up before escorting them out of the school.

Trent Ernst, a local journalist and a former substitute teacher at Tumbler Ridge, expressed shock over the shooting at the school, where one of his children has just graduated.

He noted that school shootings have been a rarity occurring every few years in Canada compared with the United States, where they are far more frequent.

"I used to kind of go: 'Look at Canada, look at who we are.' But then that one school shooting every 2.5 years happens in your town and things... just go off the rails," he told AFP.

## ‘Heartbreak’

While mass shootings are

extremely rare in Canada, last April, a vehicle attack that targeted a Filipino cultural festival in Vancouver killed 11 people.

British Columbia Premier David Eby called the latest violence "unimaginable."

Nina Krieger, British Columbia's minister of public safety, said it was "one of the worst mass shootings in our province's and country's history."

The Canadian Olympic Committee, whose athletes are competing in the 2026 Winter Games in Italy, said yesterday it was "heartbroken by the news of the horrific school shooting."

Ken Floyd, commander of the police's northern district, said: "This has been an incredibly difficult and emotional day for our community, and we are grateful for the cooperation shown as officers continue their work to advance the investigation."

Floyd told reporters the shooter was the same suspect police described as "female" in a prior emergency alert to community members, but declined to provide any details on the suspect's identity.

The police said officers were searching other homes and properties in the community to see if there were additional sites connected to the incident.

Tumbler Ridge, a quiet town with roughly 2,400 residents, is more than 1,100 kilometres north of Vancouver, British Columbia's largest city.

"There are no words sufficient for the heartbreak our community is experiencing tonight," the municipality said. – AFP

# Israel says killed Hamas operative responsible for 2004 bus bombings

JERUSALEM – The Israeli military said yesterday it killed a senior Hamas operative who had been convicted of orchestrating two bus bombings in 2004 that left 16 civilians dead and dozens more wounded.

The bombings were among the deadliest attacks during the second intifada, the Palestinian uprising of the early 2000s.

In a joint statement, the military and the Shin Bet domestic security agency said their forces killed Basem Hashem Al-Haymouni in a strike in the Gaza Strip last week.

They described him as "a senior operative" for Hamas who "had been active since 2004" as part of a cell responsible for carrying out deadly attacks in Israel.

They identified him as the mastermind of an August 2004 attack in the southern Israeli city of Beer Sheva, in which suicide bombers blew up two buses.

He "dispatched several suicide bombers to carry out a coordinated attack on two buses in Beer Sheva, in which 16 Israeli civilians were murdered and approximately 100 others were injured", the statement said.

Haymouni was apprehended and sentenced, but was released in 2011 as part of the so-called "Shalit deal", in which Israel freed more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the release of soldier Gilad Shalit.

Palestinian militants had seized Shalit in 2006 during a

cross-border raid near the Kerem Shalom crossing and held him hostage for five years.

His case became a major national issue in Israel.

The military and Shin Bet statement said that after Haymouni was released, he "resumed recruiting attackers and directing terrorist activity".

It added that the strike on Haymouni was also in response to violations of the ongoing ceasefire in Gaza.

"During the war he was involved in the production and placement of explosive devices intended to harm IDF [Israel Defence Forces] troops," it said, referring to the war in Gaza sparked by Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack on Israel.

The US-brokered Gaza ceasefire entered its second phase last month, and foresees a demilitarisation of the territory – including the disarmament of Hamas – along with a gradual withdrawal of Israeli forces.

Hamas has said that disarmament is a red line, although it has indicated it could consider handing over its weapons to a future Palestinian governing authority.

A Palestinian technocratic committee has been set up with a goal of taking over day-to-day governance in the Strip, but it remains unclear whether, or how, it will address the issue of demilitarisation. – AFP



*Children sort through waste at a trash mound at the Maghazi camp for Palestinian refugees in the central Gaza Strip yesterday.*

– AFP

# France's new top auditor sparks conflict of interest outcry

PARIS – French President Emmanuel Macron's government yesterday has, in a first, tapped a woman to head its independent Court of Auditors, sparking outcry from opponents over conflict of interest concerns.

Government spokesperson Maud Bregeon announced that Public Accounts Minister Amélie de Montchalin will on February 23 become president of the Court of Auditors, a post that requires

scrutinising the government deficit and spending decisions.

But opposition parties from the hard left to far right argue she cannot critique a budget she was involved in drafting.

Bregeon maintained that her nomination "does not pose a conflict of interest" because the court's structure, which relies on collegial decisions, "underpins its independence".

"Amélie de Montchalin has all the skills needed to carry out this

mission," Bregeon said, adding: "It is not unusual to have a political figure in this post, and we stand by appointing a political figure."

The post does not require approval by the parliamentary finance committees. Over the last two decades, it has been systematically filled by someone from the opposition rather than ruling party.

"How can the current minister give a credible opinion on the budget she herself prepared?" asked Éric Coquerel

of the hard-left France Unbowed (LFI) party, who sparred with Montchalin over the 2026 budget.

The conservative Republicans (LR) claimed earlier this week her nomination amounts to "turning a watchdog authority into an annex of the executive".

Opponents also claim Macron is trying to dominate government institutions by putting allies in key postings before his term ends next year.

Far-right leader Marine Le Pen

said Macron was trying to "install his loyalists and disrupt future democratic changeover".

The 40-year-old Montchalin has also raised questions, as the post is permanent and the mandatory retirement age stands at 68.

"She could remain in office for 28 years, whereas custom dictates a president is never appointed before the age of 58," conservative lawmaker Éric Ciotti said earlier this week. – AFP

# Eat less meat, France urges, for sake of health, climate

## Paris

PARIS – The French government issued a long-awaited report yesterday urging people to limit meat consumption for their health and also to fight climate change – and not everyone in the country of “steak-frites” is thrilled.

The contentious decision came as part of a “National Strategy for Food, Nutrition and Climate,” setting out the government’s aims until 2030 on balancing a healthy diet while reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

It was supposed to be published

in 2023, the culmination of a direct-democracy initiative that immediately raised the hackles of agriculture lobbies that accused the government of threatening their livelihoods.

The decisions struck a nerve in a country renowned for dishes like steak and fries and beef bourguignon – despite evidence that meat production generates significant greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change.

It also comes a month after the US government under President Donald Trump upended decades

of recommendations by touting consumption of red meat and full-fat dairy products.

Apart from the health concerns of such advice, food production overall produces one-fourth of French carbon emissions, with meat production representing two-thirds of that amount.

Hence the French government’s hesitation on whether to ask people to “reduce” their meat eating, or just “limit” it.

In the end, while promoting a diet focused on fruits, vegetables

and whole grains, the new guidelines call for “limited” consumption of meats overall, including cold cuts, and a “reduction” of imported meat.

“We’re relieved this plan was published, we were really worried it would be dropped,” said Stephanie Pierre of France Assos Sante, a patients’ health association.

“But we were hoping for a much more ambitious plan,” she said.

The guidelines also come just before the February 21 opening of France’s annual agriculture fair, a

hugely popular event in Paris where President Emmanuel Macron has often faced farmers’ ire.

Farmers were already up in arms over the EU’s signing of a free-trade deal with the Mercosur bloc of four South American countries, worried that a surge in beef and other agriculture imports would undercut their competitiveness.

The country’s powerful FNSEA farmers’ union had yet to comment on the government’s new guidelines.

– AFP

## US lawmakers grill attorney general over Epstein file release



US Attorney General Pam Bondi takes her seat before testifying before a House Judiciary Committee hearing on “Oversight of the Department of Justice” on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, yesterday.

– AFP

WASHINGTON – US lawmakers grilled US Attorney General Pam Bondi yesterday over the Justice Department’s slow release of the Jeffrey Epstein files and the redactions made to the documents about the convicted sex offender.

“You’re running a massive Epstein cover-up right out of the Department of Justice,” said Jamie Raskin, the ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee.

“You’ve been ordered by subpoena and by Congress to turn over six million documents, photographs and videos in the Epstein files, but you’ve turned over only three million,” Raskin said.

The Epstein Files Transparency Act (EFTA), passed overwhelmingly by Congress in November, compelled the Justice Department to release all of the documents in its possession related to the disgraced financier within 30 days.

It required the redaction of the names or any other personally identifiable information about Epstein’s victims, who numbered more than 1,000 according to the FBI.

But the powerful figures – including politicians like President Donald Trump and multiple business tycoons – who were friendly with Epstein could not be shielded, the law stated.

No records can be “withheld, delayed, or redacted on the basis of embarrassment, reputational harm, or political sensitivity, including to any government official, public figure, or foreign dignitary.”

Raskin said that the names of “abusers, enablers, accomplices and co-conspirators” of Epstein have nevertheless been redacted, “apparently to spare them embarrassment and

disgrace, which is the exact opposite of what the law ordered you to do.”

“Even worse, you shockingly failed to redact many of the victims’ names,” he added.

Bondi, during her opening statement to the House committee, defended the Justice Department’s handling of the Epstein files.

“More than 500 attorneys and reviewers spent thousands of hours painstakingly reviewing millions of pages to comply with Congress’s law,” she said.

“We’ve released more than three million pages, including 180,000 images, to the public while doing our very best in the timeframe allotted by the legislation to protect victims,” she said.

Epstein, who had ties to top business executives, politicians, celebrities and academics, was found dead in his New York jail cell in 2019 while awaiting trial for sex trafficking minor girls. His death was ruled a suicide.

Ghislaine Maxwell, Epstein’s former girlfriend, is the only person behind bars in connection with Epstein.

Maxwell, 64, was convicted in 2021 of sex trafficking underage girls to Epstein and is serving a 20-year prison sentence.

Trump fought for months to prevent release of the vast trove of documents about Epstein – a longtime former friend – but a rebellion among Republicans forced him to sign off on the law mandating release of all the records.

The move reflected intense political pressure to address what many Americans, including Trump’s own supporters, have long suspected to be a cover-up to protect rich and powerful men in Epstein’s orbit.

– AFP

## Starmer on back foot again in new appointments row

LONDON – Embattled UK leader Keir Starmer found himself under renewed pressure yesterday, this time for nominating a former aide to the House of Lords, despite his links to a convicted sex offender.

The Labour prime minister was forced to defend himself in parliament just days after facing down calls to resign for embroiling his government in the Jeffrey Epstein scandal.

The latest row centres on Starmer’s ex-communications chief Matthew Doyle who was suspended from the Labour Party on Tuesday over his ties to former local councillor Sean Morton.

The *Sunday Times* newspaper reported in late December that Doyle had campaigned for Morton in 2017 after he had been charged over possessing indecent images of children.

Morton later admitted the offences and was convicted for a second time in 2025.

“Matthew Doyle did not give a full account of his actions,” Starmer said, referencing the period before he nominated him on December 10 to the House of Lords, the upper house of the British parliament.

But Conservative opposition leader Kemi Badenoch questioned why Starmer allowed Doyle to be sworn in last month after the newspaper report was published.

She accused Starmer of “stuffing government with hypocrites and paedophile apologists”.



A farm tractor pulls a trailer displaying a banner which reads “Starmer full of sh1t” as a protest against Britain’s Prime Minister Keir Starmer, on the streets by Parliament Square in central London yesterday.

– AFP

Downing Street officials insisted “there is no established precedent for withdrawing a peerage nomination after the announcement stage”.

The row is raising fresh questions about Starmer’s acumen and comes after he admitted he had appointed Peter Mandelson as US ambassador despite knowing he had maintained links to convicted sex offender Epstein.

“To appoint one paedophile supporter cannot be excused as ‘misfortune’. To appoint two shows a catastrophic lack of judgement,” said the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Ed Davey.

Doyle has apologised “unreservedly” for supporting Morton and said he believed his claims of innocence at the time.

But Starmer is facing calls, including from his own party’s chairwoman, Anna Turley, to strip Doyle of his peerage altogether.

Starmer’s premiership looked precarious on Monday after he lost two of his closest aides over the Mandelson saga, and Labour’s leader in Scotland Anas Sarwar called on him to quit.

But a co-ordinated show of support from senior ministers staved off any imminent rebellion.

Starmer is deeply unpopular with the public and trails Nigel Farage’s hard-right Reform UK party in polls, although the next general election is likely three years away.

He faces a difficult by-election later this month and key local polls in May.

– AFP

## Brazil probes int’l network sharing rape videos

### Rio de Janeiro

RIO DE JANEIRO – Brazilian police yesterday arrested three people as part of a probe into an international network accused of sharing videos of women who were drugged and raped, sometimes by relatives, a police source told AFP.

In a statement, police said the investigation began in 2025 with the collaboration of Europol, involving 20 countries.

The probe focuses on “transnational networks dedicated to the distribution and exchange of videos of sexual abuse committed against women under sedation,” said the statement.

A police source told AFP that “in many cases, the perpetrators had a relationship of trust with the victims – such as intimate, family or close social ties.”

Due to the sedation, some of the women were unaware of the abuse.

The modus operandi is similar to that suffered by Frenchwoman Gisele Pelicot, who for decades was sedated by her husband and raped by him and dozens of men.

The trial of her husband, Dominique Pelicot, in 2024 drew global attention.

Police are investigating the crimes of “rape of a vulnerable person and dissemination of scenes

of rape or rape of a vulnerable person,” according to the statement.

The police source confirmed the arrests of three people.

The statement said seven raids were carried out in five Brazilian states.

Agents seized “electronic equipment, data storage devices, cell phones, computers, and other materials potentially linked to criminal activities.”

Seven Brazilian citizens are suspected of involvement and the suspects exchanged messages “discussing the use of drugs with sedative properties, demonstrating an awareness of the possible adverse effects of these substances.”

– AFP

# Colombian senator kidnapped, president targeted in election run-up

BOGOTÁ – A Colombian senator was rescued from kidnappers on Tuesday as the country's president reported an attempt on his own life in the run-up to elections that observers have warned could be marred by violence.

Senator Aida Quilcué, an award-winning indigenous activist, was taken by unknown people in her home department of Cauca, a conflict-ridden, coca-growing region fought over by dissidents of the now-disbanded FARC guerrilla army.

The 53-year-old was rescued by a group of indigenous people, her team reported on X, hours after the vehicle she had been travelling in with two bodyguards was found abandoned.

"I'm OK now," Quilcué said through tears in a video posted by Defence Minister Pedro Sánchez, which also showed her being bundled into an armoured vehicle by members of Colombia's military anti-kidnapping unit.

She later told AFP she had been taken by "various armed men," without saying which group they belonged to.

"They took us out of the vehicle and then forced us to walk to an unknown location," she said.

Noticing the indigenous trackers on the hunt for them, the kidnappers "ran away," Quilcué added, "and we were able to get away."

President Gustavo Petro had earlier warned the kidnappers to release Quilcué or risk crossing "a red line."

Petro on Tuesday claimed that he too had been targeted, escaping an assassination attempt after months of warnings about an alleged plot by drug traffickers against him.

On Monday night, his helicopter was unable to land at his destination on the Caribbean coast because of fears that unspecified people "were going to shoot" at it, the president reported.

"We headed out to open sea for four hours and I arrived somewhere we weren't supposed to go, escaping from being killed," Petro said.

## Risk of electoral violence

Over a quarter of a million people have been killed during six decades of armed conflict between left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries, drug traffickers and the military in Colombia.

The violence decreased dramatically after the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the country's biggest rebel group, agreed in 2016 to lay down arms.

But FARC dissidents opposed to the peace deal continue to fight other groups for control of Colombia's lucrative cocaine trade and to carry out attacks on the security forces, who frequently retaliate.

Colombia is the world's largest producer of cocaine.

Last week, a Colombian observer group said more than 300 municipalities – a third of the national territory – are at risk of electoral violence.

Under pressure from Washington, Petro has ramped up action on criminal groups, prompting the country's biggest cartel to suspend peace talks with the government.

The Nasa indigenous people, to which Quilcué belongs, have long lived under threat from armed groups in the most dangerous country in the world for human rights defenders.

Quilcué was a member of a political grouping that united behind Petro for 2022 elections from which he emerged as the country's first-ever leftist president.

In October that year, she reported an attack against her while running for the Senate.

There has been a surge in violence in Colombia ahead of this

year's presidential elections, with bomb and drone attacks in parts of the country and the assassination of a presidential hopeful.

Last week, gunmen killed two bodyguards of a senator in an attack on his convoy in the Arauca region near Venezuela. He was not in the car.

Petro, who is constitutionally barred from seeking a second term, has long claimed that a drug-trafficking cabal has had its sights set on ending his life since he assumed office in August 2022.

He reported another attempt on his life in 2024.

Colombia has a long list of leftist leaders, including presidential candidates, assassinated over the years.

The country is slated to hold legislative elections on March 8 and presidential elections on May 31, with a runoff planned for June if needed.

– AFP

## Tractors hit Madrid to protest EU's trade deal with S America

MADRID – Hundreds of honking tractors rolled into Madrid yesterday as Spanish farmers staged a protest against the European Union's trade deal with four South American countries.

The tractors arrived in five convoys from across Spain, converging on the city centre and moving from Plaza Colón to the Ministry of Agriculture, bringing traffic to a standstill.

Protesters carried banners reading "No to our ruin" and "The Spanish countryside is not for sale".

Miguel Ángel Aguilera, president of agricultural organisation Unasp, warned the deal with the Mercosur bloc would affect all citizens.

"People will consume lower-quality products, we will lose food sovereignty, and there will be no competition," he said.

Madrid authorities reported 367 tractors and around 2,500 protesters took part in the demonstration.

Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez defended the agreement in parliament, calling it "extraordinary news" for Europe.

He promised compensation for affected farmers and safeguards to limit imports if domestic producers



Spanish farmers protest with tractors against the recent EU-Mercosur trade deal and the economic pressures facing the Iberian country's agricultural sector, in Madrid yesterday. Spain on Monday celebrated the approval by EU nations of a vast trade deal with South American bloc Mercosur, championed by business groups but loathed by European farmers.

– AFP

were harmed.

The long-delayed deal, signed last month, would create one of the world's largest free-trade areas, boosting commerce between the 27-nation EU and the Mercosur bloc, which includes Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, and Uruguay.

The pact still requires approval from lawmakers in the European Parliament, which has referred it

to the EU's top court.

Farmers in Spain and other countries fear being undercut by a flood of cheaper goods from Brazil and its neighbours.

Major Mercosur exports to the EU include agricultural products and minerals, while the EU would export machinery, chemicals, and pharmaceuticals with lower tariffs.

– AFP

## UNESCO rep in Mozambique highlights cultural value of Chinese Spring Festival

MAPUTO – Michael Croft, representative of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Mozambique, said this week that the Chinese Spring Festival is not only a cultural celebration but also embodies important values in promoting social cohesion, inclusiveness and peace.

Croft made the remarks at a Spring Festival reception held in Maputo by the Chinese Embassy on Monday. Overseas Chinese, Mozambican government officials, and representatives of international and regional organizations attended the event.

Croft noted that the Spring Festival was inscribed in 2024 on the UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

UNESCO emphasized in its decision that the festival promotes harmony, integration, trust, inclusion, social cohesion and peace, not only in China but also in places around the world where it is celebrated, he pointed out.

The same spirit is reflected in the 2026 China-Africa Year of People-to-People Exchanges, as well as in the ongoing cultural, educational and people-to-people cooperation between Mozambique and China, he added.

– Xinhua

\*Hanfu refers to the traditional, historical clothing of the Han Chinese people, characterized by its cross-collar (wrap-over front), flowing silhouette, and lack of buttons (secured with sashes). It encompasses distinct styles from various dynasties (such as Tang, Song, Ming) and was the standard attire before the widespread adoption of Western-style clothing in the early 20th century. – DeepSeek

## Portugal's interior minister resigns after flood criticism

LISBON – Portugal's interior minister, who has been criticised over the handling of the deadly storms that battered the Iberian nation in the past weeks, has resigned, the presidency said on Tuesday.

Maria Lúcia Amaral "felt that she did not have the personal and political conditions necessary to carry out her duties", a presidency statement late on Tuesday said.

Her position will be temporarily filled by centre-right Prime Minister Luis Montenegro.

Montenegro's government has come under fire for its response to the two weeks of storms and fierce gales that have killed at least seven people and wrought an estimated four billion euros (US\$4.7 billion) in damage.

"The resignation of the interior

minister is proof that the government has failed in its response to this emergency," José Luís Carneiro, Secretary-General of the opposition Socialist Party (PS), told the Portuguese media immediately after the announcement.

The Iberian Peninsula has seen increasingly drawn-out and intense bouts of extreme weather, such as downpours and heatwaves. – AFP

## At least 6 dead, 5 injured in landslides in Brazil

RIO DE JANEIRO – At least six people have been killed and five others injured in landslides caused by heavy rains in southeastern Brazil, local authorities said on Tuesday.

The tragedies were reported in Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro

states. Children were among the victims, according to the authorities.

A state of alert was being maintained in both states as the authorities warned of the possibility of further landslides due to continuous rainfall and the rain-softened soil.

– Xinhua

# Barca missing Rashford, Raphinha for Atletico cup clash



BARCELONA — Barcelona will be without both of their left wingers Marcus Rashford and Raphinha for the Copa del Rey semi-final first leg clash at Atletico Madrid today.

Raphinha is still sidelined with a thigh strain, while Rashford did not train yesterday.

The England international is suffering from a knee problem after receiving a knock in Barca's 3-0 win over Real Mallorca on Saturday in La Liga.

"Marcus is not able to play, he got a hit and it's painful and we have to take care about this," Flick told reporters yesterday.

"I think this is not good news, but in the end I believe in my team always."

"When it's like this, the situation

is not easy, we grow and this is also necessary for tomorrow [today]."

Flick said the Copa del Rey holders had to go "step by step" with Raphinha's recovery.

"He's a player who is always giving everything, always [playing at] high intensity in the game. And when you feel something, we have to take care and we have to maybe go one step back," said Flick.

"This is at the moment the situation. And of course, I'm not happy with the situation because we need him."

Flick could use Ferran Torres or Dani Olmo out of position on the left wing to try and fill the gap at Atletico's Metropolitano stadium.

The Catalan giants also have Pedri, Gavi and Andreas Christensen out with longer-term injuries.

Barca defender Ronald Araujo,

who had a month-long mental health break towards the end of 2025, admitted that he has been suffering from anxiety and depression over the last 18 months, in an interview with Spanish newspaper *Mundo Deportivo* this week.

Flick said the Uruguayan centre-back was "very strong" but it was also up to coaches to look after the players.

"He is very strong, so to [be] open [about] this means you have to be strong in this moment," said Flick.

"It's all about us who are responsible also, for the players. We have to take care of them. We have to take care, also maybe the opposition's coaches the same."

The game will be played at 4 a.m. tomorrow morning Macau time.

— AFP/MPD



Barcelona's Brazilian forward Raphinha scores his team's third goal from the penalty spot during the UEFA Champions League league phase day 8 match against FC Copenhagen at the Camp Nou Stadium in Barcelona on January 28. — AFP

## Rosenior to protect Fofana after Chelsea star's injury woes



LONDON — Liam Rosenior insists he won't put Wesley Fofana's fitness at risk even if Chelsea's defence suffers in the absence of the France centre-back.

After Fofana endured two injury-plagued seasons prior to this term, Chelsea have been carefully managing his game-time in the current campaign.

He was rested for Tuesday's 2-2 draw with Leeds, when Chelsea's sloppy defending allowed the visitors back into the match after the Blues had taken a two-goal lead.

Josh Acheampong started in Fofana's place against Leeds and was a part of the defensive mix-up that allowed Noah Okafor to equalise.

Defending the decision to leave Fofana out, Rosenior said: "I think you can over-analyse. It doesn't matter who was on the pitch in that moment, we should have dealt with that situation."

"Wes has had injury issues. I want to make sure he doesn't break down again. Always you want consistency in your back line. I'm sure we'll get there in the end."

Fofana had played 90 minutes in the League Cup semi-final against Arsenal

and the Premier League win over Wolves, the first time since November he had completed consecutive matches played three days apart.

An anterior cruciate ligament injury caused him to miss the 2023-24 season, while the last campaign was also badly disrupted by a hamstring problem which required surgery.

But Rosenior is encouraged that Fofana has already made 24 appearances in all competitions this season.

"For the first time in a long time he played back-to-back from midweek to the weekend," he said. "That's a really positive sign."

Chelsea visit Rosenior's former club Hull in the FA Cup fourth round tomorrow.

He was sacked in 2024 after Hull narrowly missed out on reaching the Championship play-offs, with the 41-year-old managing Strasbourg for 18 months before being appointed at Stamford Bridge in January.

"Without Hull, without the experience of being there as a player and as a manager, I wouldn't be sat here," Rosenior said.

"I've got a lot to thank the club for. I had some amazing times there, both as a player and as a coach."

— AFP



Hertha fans display a banner reading "Abolish the VAR (Video Assistant Referee), it ruins our sport" during the German Cup (DFB-Pokal) quarter-final against SC Freiburg in Berlin on Tuesday.

— AFP

## Arsenal boss Arteta lauds 'extraordinary' Frank after Spurs axe



LONDON — Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta described Thomas Frank as "extraordinary" after the Dane was fired by Tottenham yesterday, but said football managers are all vulnerable to the sack.

Frank was dismissed after just eight months in charge following a 2-1 home defeat to Newcastle on Tuesday, which left Spurs just five points above the Premier League relegation zone and without a win in their past eight top-flight games.

League leaders Arsenal visit the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium for a north London derby a week on Sunday.

"It is always very sad news when you have a colleague that doesn't continue doing his job because Thomas is an excellent coach, he's an extraordinary man, and he's proven that in the league," said Arteta.

The Spaniard, speaking ahead of today's match at Brentford — the club Frank managed before joining Spurs in June — added: "But we know where we are."

"We know that our responsibility is beyond just performance. And results dictate what happens with us."

The 52-year-old Frank became the seventh Premier League manager to lose his job so far this campaign, with former Spurs boss Ange Postecoglou lasting just 39 days at Nottingham Forest.

Arteta, asked if Premier League clubs are now too impatient for success, replied: "In the context of every club it is very different, but it's always a possibility."

"But at the end as well, this league is so competitive. We are all vulnerable because anybody can beat you on the day, you know

that. And that's really tough to manage."

Harry Redknapp, meanwhile, said he would be delighted to return to Spurs amid suggestions he could act as a caretaker boss, but the 78-year-old Englishman won't be expecting a call.

Redknapp was Tottenham manager from 2008-2012, taking the club into the Champions League.

"Would I fancy it? Of course I would do it, without any shadow of a doubt," he told Sky Sports News.

"But I am a realist — I don't live in [cloud] cuckoo land. It is very doubtful if I would get the job. But could I do the job? Yeah, of course I could do the job."

The game will be played at 4 a.m. tomorrow morning Macau time.

— AFP/MPD

## Real Madrid, UEFA reach 'agreement' over Super League dispute



MADRID — The European Super League saga drew towards an end as Real Madrid, the last club still involved in the failed breakaway project, and UEFA announced yesterday an agreement to help resolve their legal dispute.

Spanish giants Madrid, whose president Florentino Perez has relentlessly championed the idea of a Super League, and promoters A22 Sports Management, were seeking US\$4 billion in damages from European football governing body UEFA after the project collapsed.

"UEFA, the European Football Clubs (EFC, the sole, independent body representing football clubs within Europe) and Real Madrid CF reach an agreement for the good of European club football," read a statement published by Real Madrid and UEFA.

"This agreement of principles

will also serve to resolve their legal disputes related to the European Super League, once such principles are executed and implemented."

In the statement Real Madrid and UEFA said their agreement was over "respecting the principle of sporting merit with emphasis on long-term club sustainability" and "the enhancement of fan experience through the use of technology".

Last week, Spanish champions Barcelona confirmed their withdrawal from the Super League, which was launched by 12 clubs in 2021 but quickly folded under the weight of immense fan and institutional pressure.

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

Four other clubs, Atletico Madrid, Inter Milan, AC Milan and Juventus, followed suit by 2024, leaving only Barca and Real Madrid still involved.

After a Spanish court ruled that opposition to the Super League from world and European football governing bodies FIFA and UEFA "prevented free competition", Madrid and A22 plotted legal action against UEFA.

A source close to the matter told AFP that yesterday's announcement was "a historic agreement" and the beginning "of a period of peace" which would benefit all parties.

In 2022, UEFA decided to expand the Champions League to 36 teams and introduce the league phase, grouping all sides in the same table and increasing the number of matches from six to eight, for the 2024/25 season onwards.

— AFP

# Von Allmen joins Olympic skiing greats, Kim seeks snowboard history

**Guy Jackson**

**MILAN** — Swiss skier Franjo von Allmen joined the Olympic greats yesterday by winning his third gold medal of the Milan-Cortina Games, while Chloe Kim stayed on track to make her own history in snowboarding.

On the slopes in Bormio, Von Allmen was victorious in the super-G event, adding that gold to his titles in the downhill and the team combined.

Von Allmen entered the pantheon of Olympic male alpine skiing greats to have three events at one Games, alongside Austrian Toni Sailer, at the 1956 Winter Games, and France's Jean-Claude Killy in 1968.

Croatia's Janica Kostelic is the only woman to have achieved the feat, at the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics.

Von Allmen hit speeds of 120km/h in the super-G, an event that combines the speed of downhill with the precise turns of giant slalom.

American Ryan Cochran-Siegle won silver in the event for a second successive Games while Switzerland's defending world champion Marco Odermatt rounded out the podium, picking up a medal after his bitter disappointment at missing out in the downhill.

US superstar Chloe Kim began her quest for her own piece of history as she tries to become the first snowboarder - man or woman - to win three gold medals at consecutive Olympics.

Two athletes have missed the chance to do so earlier in the Games in Italy, but in her first appearance at the Milan-Cortina Olympics Kim produced a sparkling run to top qualifying for the halfpipe event.

Kim, who is still only 25 despite winning golds at the two previous Winter Olympics, said "muscle memory" had kicked in as she began her quest.

"I've been doing this for 22 years, OK? Muscle memory is a thing. I might be better at snowboarding than I am at walking," she said.

Kim was almost ruled out of the Olympics last month by a dislocated shoulder but said it had not bothered her during her qualifying performance.

## We want him to compete'

The International Olympic Committee said yesterday it will try to convince Ukrainian skeleton racer Vladyslav Heraskevych to not wear a banned helmet that depicts victims of the war with Russia at the Milan-Cortina Games.

However, Heraskevych has already said he has no intention of backing down and he was wearing the helmet again in training at the Cortina Sliding Centre yesterday ahead of today's heats.

The gesture has been defended by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky but Heraskevych risks being disqualified as gestures of a political nature during competition are forbidden under the Olympic charter.

"We will contact him today [yesterday], and we will reiterate

the many, many opportunities that he has to express his grief," IOC spokesperson Mark Adams said.

Athletes are permitted to express their views in press conferences and on social media, and on Tuesday the IOC said it would "make an exception" for Heraskevych, allowing him to wear a plain black armband during competition.

"We want him to compete. We really, really want him to have his moment. That's very, very important."

Meanwhile, in a story that has tongues wagging, the ex-girlfriend of a Norwegian biathlete who won a bronze medal and then confessed on live television to an affair, says it is "hard to forgive".

Asked by Norway's NRK on Tuesday to share his feelings after his bronze in the 20km individual, a teary Sturla Holm Laegreid broke down and admitted he had cheated on his girlfriend.

"Six months ago, I met the love of my life, the most beautiful and best person in the world," said the 28-year-old.

"And three months ago, I made the biggest mistake of my life and I was unfaithful," he continued.

Yesterday, the woman in question, whose name has not been disclosed, said in a message to the *Verdens Gang* (VG) newspaper: "It's hard to forgive. Even after a declaration of love in front of the whole world.

"I didn't choose to be put in this position and it's painful," she added.

— AFP

Olympic photos on page 16



**Medal Table**

Order	NOC	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
1	Norway	7	2	4	13
2	Switzerland	4	1	2	7
3	USA	3	5	2	10
4	Germany	3	2	1	6
4	Sweden	3	2	1	6
6	Austria	2	4	0	6
7	Italy	2	2	7	11
8	Japan	2	2	4	8
9	France	1	2	1	4
10	Czechia	1	1	0	2
10	Netherlands	1	1	0	2
10	Slovenia	1	1	0	2
13	Canada	0	1	2	3
14	China	0	1	1	2
14	Republic of Korea	0	1	1	2
14	New Zealand	0	1	1	2
17	Latvia	0	1	0	1
17	Poland	0	1	0	1
19	Belgium	0	0	1	1
19	Bulgaria	0	0	1	1
19	Finland	0	0	1	1

## Davidson, the pathfinder for women referees, to make Six Nations history

**SIX NATIONS** — Hollie Davidson has achieved many firsts in her career, but on Saturday will come the highlight so far, becoming the first woman to referee a men's Six Nations match when Ireland host Italy.

The 33-year-old Scottish referee is already in the traditionally conservative sport's history books in being the first woman to take charge of a men's Test - Portugal against Italy (2022) - and of both a South Africa (2024) and a New Zealand international (2025).

She has also overseen successive Women's Rugby World Cup finals.

Now, she is just days away from entering the intimidating atmosphere of Lansdowne Road – a far cry from her days working for investment bank JP Morgan, and a markedly smaller pay cheque.

Davidson says she always thought a Six Nations match was out of her reach.

"When you start out, you think what you could achieve and you dream of certain things," she told Tuesday's edition of *The Times* newspaper.

"But then you get into it and you start questioning those ambitions. Something like the Six Nations, that just felt so far away, an unachievable goal."

"Now that it's happening, I can't quite believe it's becoming a reality."

It has been far from an easy road to these heady heights – Davidson has had a fair share of abuse.



Referee Hollie Davidson gives a yellow card to Wales' prop Gareth Thomas after a tackle during the Autumn Nations Series International rugby union test match against New Zealand at the Principality Stadium, in Cardiff on November 22, 2025.

"But I hope we don't get to a point where the only people left at the top are the people that can hack it."

"Because then we don't have the best officials, we just have the people with thicker skins."

If any of the players think they can intimidate Davidson, they should think again.

They might tower over her but she has shown before that she is more than capable of dealing with them as she did in a game in Scotland.

"Some of the comments shocked me when I was setting up a lineout," she told *The Guardian*.

"I wouldn't accept someone saying that to me if it wasn't my job. While I couldn't say much, I've got quite a strong look."

"I'd blown my whistle and I gave him the look - almost to say that if anything else happens, I either call this game off or you're gone."

This steely resolve has been a feature of Davidson's throughout her life - her love of rugby was such that she took a 50 percent pay cut to pursue her dream of reaching the top as a referee.

"My boss (at JP Morgan) was a huge supporter of my refereeing and he was so gutted I was leaving," she told *The Guardian* on Tuesday.

"But he also said: 'If you doubt your decision I'll be throwing you out of this office. The opportunity to go down this path is once in a lifetime'."

She has certainly seized that opportunity with both hands and the final whistle is a long way from blowing on her rise to the top.

— AFP

She is not the first referee to encounter online abuse - former England referee Wayne Barnes's family were targeted with death threats - but Davidson was appalled that it dragged in those closest to her.

The torrent of abuse in this case was sparked by what she admitted was a wrong call on a head contact in last season's Challenge Cup final.

"I made a wrong call on a head contact and my name was being pulled through the

mud and then my family received abuse," she told *The Guardian*.

"It really challenged me when I thought I was causing my family pain."

## 'A strong look'

Davidson, though, prays that such abuse does not drive good referees out of the sport.

"You have to accept this is part and parcel of our job," said Davidson, who has a degree in economics history.

# Britain's Harris Dickinson on John Lennon, directing and news overload

Interview by Adam Plowright

LONDON — He's acted as Nicole Kidman's love interest, delivered an acclaimed directorial debut, and been cast in Sam Mendes' upcoming "The Beatles" films, but Britain's Harris Dickinson insists he's keeping his feet on the ground.

The modest Londoner, who turns 30 later this year, has had a whirlwind year that has seen his stock rise further as an actor who can straddle both art house cinema and more commercial TV and film work.

But the "Babygirl" star and upcoming on-screen John Lennon insists he won't be swapping Hollywood for his beloved home in the British capital – now or ever.

"It feels like I'm grounded by London, east London specifically. It feels like a very important place," he told AFP in an interview recently.

"I have my people. I have my family. I have my own little community there," he added.

The city is the backdrop to "Urchin", his first film as a director which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival last May and which includes a cameo from his mum.

## Stay on track

The premiere in Cannes, where he starred in 2022 prize-winner "Triangle of Sadness" by Ruben Ostlund, was so stressful Dickinson felt sick before the screening.

But his film, about a homeless man struggling after his release from prison, won over critics with the strength of the acting and directing, as well as its wry humour.

Dickinson sees it as containing an important message about community: the importance of it, as well as the dangers for drug users of "exhausting [their] support networks".

"It's very common, even for people with good family setups, or friends and family, they get to a point where no one wants to help them anymore," he said.

Keeping destructive behaviour at bay is a battle he relates to, having seen the ravages of alcohol in his family – but also as a member of the notoriously addiction-prone entertainment industry.

"Ultimately no one's safety or path is guaranteed. You have to do a certain amount of work in order to stay on track, especially if

you've got addictive tendencies or destructive tendencies," he said.

## Get obsessed

Dickinson is currently in the middle of an exhausting filming schedule for four biographical films about "The Beatles" from "American Beauty" and James Bond director Mendes.

Each one is shot from the perspective of one of the Fab Four, with Dickinson landing what is arguably the plum role as Lennon. Paul Mescal ("Hamnet", "Gladiator II") plays Paul McCartney.

"I'm getting up at 4:45 a.m. every day, and I'm getting home at 8:00 p.m.," Dickinson said.

Working with Mendes has made a big impression – "he's a big canvas director" – but one of the hardest things is pulling himself out of the daily news doom cycle and his research into the 1960s.

"I do go through periods where I tune out from news a little bit because I can get obsessed with it. I go deep, and I get very troubled by it," Dickinson explained.

"I don't think our brains and our systems are designed to be that tuned into injustice and tragedy and darkness."

The troubled post-war era "doesn't feel any different to what we're going through today, that's the alarming thing really," he added.

"The Beatles" is a long-term job that will keep him busy until December.

After that?

"I'm quite interested in anything apocalyptic, anything dystopian, or a survival film," he said.

"I'm interested in the idea of what happens when society falls, what happens when we are left with nothing or we're stripped of everything."

— AFP



August 29, 2025 file photo of English actor and director Harris Dickinson posing at the 2025 Telluride Film Festival Patron's Brunch. — Photo courtesy of John Sears/Wikimedia Commons

## Britney Spears sells rights to her music catalog: US media

NEW YORK — US singer Britney Spears has become the latest musician to sell the rights to her catalogue that includes hits like "...Baby One More Time" and "Oops!...I Did It Again," US media reported on Tuesday.

The deal is believed to be worth around US\$200 million, according to sources cited by celebrity site TMZ, though it said the exact amount is not detailed in legal documents.

That sum would be comparable to the sale of Canadian singer Justin Bieber's catalogue in 2023.

Spears, 44, joins a growing list of artists who have sold their music rights in recent years including Bruce Springsteen and Bob Dylan, as well as Shakira and KISS.

US media reported that the rights were bought by music publisher Primary Wave, whose portfolio includes the works of Whitney Houston, Bob

Marley, Prince and others.

Owners of a song's publishing rights receive payment for every broadcast, album sale or use in advertising and films.

The growing music rights market allows artists to monetize their catalogues, which are attractive long-term assets for investors in the streaming era.

Major labels like Sony, Universal and Warner have also expanded in this line of business, alongside specialist investors Recognition Music Group and Concord Music Publishing.

Spears shot to fame in the late 1990s but has largely stepped back from the music scene in recent years.

In 2021, a US court terminated a 13-year conservatorship that had allowed Spears's father to control her finances – an arrangement the singer had described as abusive.

— AFP

## Glitz Oscar nominees luncheon back one year after LA fires

Paula RAMON

BEVERLY HILLS — Hollywood stars embraced and champagne corks popped at this year's Oscars nominee lunch, the glamorous pre-show gathering that was cancelled amid last year's devastating Los Angeles wildfires.

Timothée Chalamet, nominated for best actor in "Marty Supreme," flashed a smile while fellow Best Actor contenders Michael B. Jordan and Ethan Hawke also flitted around the annual luncheon in Beverly Hills.

Mexican director Guillermo del Toro chatted with his tablemates as Wagner Moura, the Brazilian star of "The Secret Agent," enthusiastically embraced Stellan Skarsgård and Oliver Laxe – the latter of whom has his film "Srat" up for best international feature film.

Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences President Lynette Howell Taylor praised the diversity of this year's nominees.

"Ballots were cast from 88 countries and regions," the British producer said, adding that "the mission of the Academy is to amplify your art, movies and your voices."

The more than 200 nominees

enjoyed a buzzy afternoon, all the more energetic after last year's lunch was cancelled as huge fires razed whole communities around Los Angeles. That year the lunch was replaced with a smaller dinner at the Academy's museum.

"This is a recognition of Brazilian cinema, and of the cinema of our region," Moura told AFP.

Nearby, "The Secret Agent" director Kleber Mendonça Filho joked he was feeling animated – "like a generator."

Skarsgård said that the impact of international films is growing, as evidenced by his historic nomination for Best Supporting Actor for Norwegian film "Sentimental Value."

Foreign films and their stars typically notch nominations in the international categories, but Skarsgård is competing against nominees from US blockbusters, including Benicio del Toro in "One Battle After Another" and

Delroy Lindo in "Sinners."

Benicio del Toro meanwhile told AFP he was doubly thrilled after watching fellow Puerto Rican Bad Bunny perform at the Super Bowl halftime show over the weekend.

"I got goosebumps," he told AFP, adding: "It was beautiful."

The luncheon's other legendary del Toro, the director Guillermo, meanwhile said he was "calm."

While his "Frankenstein" is nominated for Best Picture, Guillermo del Toro himself is off the hook for Best Director, which he said took the pressure off him and meant he could focus on promoting his team.

"I'm happy because nine nominations don't happen every day," he said.

Lanky heartthrob Jacob Elordi, up for best supporting actor, offered a similarly toned-down vibe at an impromptu photo shoot.

"I'm chilling," he said. "It's all good." — AFP

**British actor Lee Knight (left) and British-Australian actress Miriam Margolyes pose during a photo session ahead of the 98th Oscars Nominees Luncheon at the Beverly Hilton hotel in Beverly Hills, California on Tuesday.**

— AFP



## World Weather

CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -2°C~13°C	Manila 22°C~31°C	New York -5°C~4°C	Lisbon 13°C~16°C
Shanghai 4°C~15°C	Bangkok 24°C~36°C	London 5°C~11°C	Rio de Janeiro 22°C~32°C
Hong Kong 15°C~20°C	Tokyo 0°C~11°C	Frankfurt 6°C~10°C	Luanda 24°C~30°C
Taipei 13°C~21°C	Singapore 24°C~32°C	Vancouver 5°C~8°C	Maputo 24°C~33°C
Guangzhou 14°C~25°C	Kuala Lumpur 24°C~33°C	Paris 7°C~13°C	Dili 24°C~30°C
Nanjing 1°C~17°C	Jakarta 23°C~30°C	Moscow -1°C~10°C	São Tomé 25°C~32°C
Guilin 11°C~15°C	Seoul 0°C~9°C	Las Vegas 9°C~20°C	Praia 17°C~27°C
Xi'an 3°C~17°C	Sydney 19°C~26°C	Monte Carlo 10°C~17°C	Bissau 18°C~37°C



**1** Canada's Steven Dubois and Britain's Niall Treacy (left) crash during the short track speed skating men's 1000m heats during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at Milano Ice Skating Arena in Milan on Tuesday. – AFP

**2** Japan's Yuma Kagiyama competes in the figure skating men's singles short programme during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at Milano Ice Skating Arena in Milan on Tuesday. – AFP

**3** Goalkeeper Martina Fedel of Italy reacts before the ice hockey women's preliminary round group B match against Germany at the Milan-Cortina 2026 Olympic Winter Games in Milan, Italy, on Tuesday. – Xinhua

**4** Yang Lu of China competes during the snowboard women's halfpipe qualification at the Milan-Cortina 2026 Olympic Winter Games in Livigno, Italy, yesterday. – Xinhua

**5** Norway's Eirin Maria Kvandal jumps during the ski jumping mixed team 1<sup>st</sup> round at the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at Predazzo Ski Jumping Stadium in Predazzo (Val di Fiemme), Italy on Tuesday. – AFP

**6** Switzerland's Lukas Britschgi competes in the figure skating men's singles short programme during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at Milano Ice Skating Arena in Milan on Tuesday. – AFP