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Police expect up to 6.21 million entries & exits during CNY

Ida Cheong

The Public Security Police (PSP) forecast yesterday that the number of Macau border checkpoint entries and exits will reach between 6.0 million and 6.21 million during the Chinese mainland's upcoming 9-day Chinese New Year (CNY) holiday period.

The mainland's 9-day holiday, officially known in the Chinese mainland as the Spring Festival, will take place between Sunday and February 23, the seventh day of the Year of the Horse, which begins on Tuesday, February 17.

Lei Tak Fai, chief of the Public Security Police's (PSP) Public Relations Division, told reporters during yesterday's press conference they estimated Macau to exceed, on average, 670,000 entries and exits a day at its border checkpoints during the holiday.

Macau's immigration services are run by the Public Security Police (PSP).

Lei predicted the third day of the holiday to be the busiest, with over 780,000 entries and exits.

Macau's border checkpoint entries and exits comprise local residents, visitors, non-resident workers (NRWs), non-local students



Crowds of visitors and residents queue at immigration counters at the Barrier Gate checkpoint yesterday. – Photo: Ida Cheong

and other non-locals living in Macau such as diplomats and officials from the Chinese mainland posted to Macau.

Lei made the remarks during a press conference held at the Barrier Gate checkpoint yesterday morning about the local government's raft of CNY arrangements and measures to handle the huge number of expected entries and exits.

In order to cope with the major

surge in entries and exits, Lei noted that his division has formulated targeted operational plans focusing on public security, border control, and traffic management, adding that all major checkpoints have contingency crowd control measures, including the deployment of admin staff to frontline duties at CNY event locations and popular tourist spots, as well as the opening of additional immigration counters

to enhance clearance efficiency.

Un Kit Ling, a senior official from the Transport Bureau's (DSAT) Transport Management Division, urged taxi drivers to support diversified payment methods such as e-payments. She noted that promotional efforts are still underway. Visitors can access taxi fare information via the DSAT website or app, she underlined.

The authorities encourage



visitors to report cabbies' suspected violations by providing the date, hour, location and licence plate number to law enforcement agencies for follow-up action.

Un added that under the cross-departmental coordination mechanism, multiple entities have pre-arranged temporary public transport adjustments and emergency plans.

Enhanced traffic diversion measures will be implemented in high-traffic areas during the holiday period.

Public bus service details are available on the websites <http://www.tcm.com.mo> and <http://www.transmac.com.mo>. ■

White House border czar announces end of federal immigration crackdown in Minnesota

WASHINGTON – White House border czar Tom Homan announced the end of the federal immigration enforcement operation in the US state of Minnesota.

At a press conference in the city of Minneapolis, Homan said that with the coordination from state officials and local law enforcement, he proposed the end of the operation, and US President Donald Trump agreed.

The so-called Operation Metro Surge, launched by the Department

of Homeland Security in December 2025, deployed over 3,000 federal agents to the cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul.

The fatal shootings of two US citizens by federal law enforcement officers in Minneapolis in January sparked nationwide protests against federal immigration enforcement.

Homan was sent by Trump to Minnesota to be in charge of the field operation there, in an effort to de-escalate the situation.



– Xinhua



Revelers visit a flower exhibition at the Taipa Houses Museum yesterday. The flower exhibition celebrates the upcoming Chinese New Year. Many places in Macau have been festively decorated to welcome the Year of the Horse, which starts next Tuesday.

– Xinhua

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Chinese AI firms race to release models, angling for next DeepSeek moment

Chinese AI companies are racing to launch new models over the Lunar New Year holiday, angling for the next game-changing DeepSeek moment. – [Story on p. 7](#)

Israel president says at end of visit antisemitism in Australia 'frightening'

Antisemitism in Australia is "frightening" but most people want good relations, Israel's President Isaac Herzog said yesterday as he wrapped up a four-day visit and was met by protests in the city of Melbourne. – [Story on p. 10](#)

WHO chief slams 'unethical' US vaccine trial in Guinea-Bissau

The head of the World Health Organisation (WHO) on Wednesday slammed an "unethical" planned US-funded hepatitis B vaccine trial in Guinea-Bissau, saying it would deny children a proven safe and effective vaccine. – [Story on p. 12](#)

Maritime Museum guided tours start tomorrow



This handout photo provided by the Marine and Water Bureau (DSAMA) yesterday shows a guide introducing exhibits to visitors.

Armindo Neves

The Marine and Water Bureau (DSAMA) announced in a statement yesterday that the Maritime Museum will launch an on-site guided tour service tomorrow.

The statement said that in order to enrich the visiting experience, the Maritime Museum will offer complimentary on-site public guided tours at weekends, and no advance reservation is required.

One tour will be held every Saturday at 2:30 p.m., while two tours will be offered every Sunday at 2:30 p.m. and 3:30 p.m. respectively, the statement said.

According to the statement, the tours will be conducted in Cantonese only, each session lasting around 45 minutes, adding that anyone interested should gather at the designated meeting point inside the museum at the scheduled times.

Led by museum guides, the statement said, participants will learn about the history of Macau's maritime development and the stories behind the exhibits through the museum's collection of artefacts, historical

photographs, and ship models.

According to the statement, in 2025, the Maritime Museum provided 94 guided tours for schools and community groups by appointment.

The statement said that the tours aim to further promote maritime culture among residents and tourists.

According to the statement, the museum's themed temporary exhibition has attracted over 63,000 visitors since its opening on October 11 last year. The exhibition aims to showcase the centuries-long history of lighthouses and the evolution of maritime administration in Macau's waters through a diverse range of exhibits and historical materials, according to the statement, adding that the exhibition will run until June 8, 2026.

China's oldest lighthouse is the Maota Lighthouse (泖塔) in Shanghai, originally constructed during the Tang Dynasty (618-907), over 1,100 years ago.

Macau's Guia Lighthouse (东望洋灯塔) began operating in 1865. It is southern China's oldest Western-style lighthouse. ■

MGP Museum to launch Spring Festival activities on 1st day of CNY

Khalel Vallo

The Macau Grand Prix Museum (MGPM), run by the Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO), will roll out a string of festive activities to mark Chinese New Year (CNY), including interactive booths where visitors can create motorsport-themed spring couplets and lai sees (red envelopes), according to an MGTO statement yesterday.

The statement noted that the programme, titled "Full Horsepower Fortune Boost," will take place in the basement of the museum in Zape and feature two DIY stations: the "Spring Couplets Rolling Station" and the "Red Envelopes Rolling Station" from February 17, the first day of the Year of the Horse, to February 23, the seventh day of the Chinese New Year.

Museumgoers can use rubbing tools and roller stamps to print blessing messages and racing-themed designs onto festive items to take home, the statement said.

The statement noted that the museum will remain open as usual throughout the Chinese New Year holiday, welcoming visitors daily from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., including February 17, the first day of the Spring Festival (aka Chinese New Year), under a special arrangement.

Meanwhile, two themed exhibitions will also continue during the festive period, according to the statement.

The "Macao Grand Prix Museum X The Pirelli Legend" racing tyres exhibition will run until March 2, while the "A Racing Legacy – SJM Theodore Racing Interactive Exhibition" will remain on display until February 23, the statement said.

Moreover, the museum gift shop will launch a promotional sale from now until



This poster provided by the Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) yesterday promotes its "Full Horsepower Fortune Boost" programme slated to start on Tuesday, the first day of the Chinese New Year (aka Spring Festival), at the Macau Grand Prix Museum (MGPM) in Zape.

March 31, aiming to offer special gift bags and 30 percent discounts on selected items, the statement added.

The statement said the museum will continue enhancing its interactive facilities and exhibitions in order to preserve Macau Grand Prix (MGP) culture while striving to expand the city's "tourism +" offerings during major festivities. ■

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Macau's 6 IRs announce Five-Star Awards from Forbes Travel Guide

Rui Pastorin

The Forbes Travel Guide's 2026 Star Award Winners were unveiled this week, with Macau continuing to have the most five-starred hotels in any city, numbering 26, according to the Forbes Travel Guide (FTG) website.

Macau's six integrated resort (IR) operators have each announced Five-Star Awards from Forbes Travel Guide 2026, including inaugural awardees and those consecutively maintaining their ratings, in separate statements.

SJM Resorts

For SJM Resorts, Palazzo Versace Macau is one of four newly awarded hotels in Macau this year, while Grand Lisboa Palace (GLP) in Cotai has become the world's only integrated resort with all hotels FTG Five-Star rated and "the world's first integrated resort to house three FTG Five-Star spas—The Spa at Grand Lisboa Palace, The Spa at THE KARL LAGERFELD, and The SPA at Palazzo Versace Macau – under one roof".

Moreover, six restaurants have retained their FTG Five-Star ratings, four of which are located in GLP. In all, SJM received 14 Five-Star ratings across its properties this year.

SJM Managing Director Daisy Ho Chiu Fung was quoted by the statement as saying that Forbes Travel Guide underscores SJM's "long-term commitment to service culture, operational excellence and consistently elevated guest experiences, reinforcing SJM's leading role in global luxury travel and further strengthening Macau's position as a World Centre of Tourism and Leisure."



Galaxy Macau

Integrated resort operator Galaxy Macau garnered 12 Five-Star awards in the 2026 Forbes Travel Guide, marking "the fourth consecutive year it has broken its own record for having the most Five-Star hotels under a single roof".

Featured this year are three additions with the new Capella at Galaxy Macau in Cotai; and restaurants Sushi Kissyo by Miyakawa located at Galaxy Macau's Raffles and Lai Heen at The Ritz-Carlton, Macau.

Kevin Kelley, Chief Operating Officer – Macau at Galaxy Entertainment Group, was quoted by the statement as saying: "These new accolades are a reflection of our team's commitment to our 'World-Class Asian Heart' service philosophy. It's about delivering sincere, detailed service that defines a new standard for luxury, not just in Macau but globally."



Wynn

Wynn Resorts Macau this year achieved the most Forbes Travel Guide (FTG) awards of any individual resort in Macau, having a combined total of 63 stars this year.

For three years, Wynn Palace in Cotai has been the largest FTG Five-Star resort globally and is the only resort worldwide with six individual FTG Five-Star awards. The integrated resort operator added that Wynn Palace is again home to more FTG Five-Star Restaurants than any other individual resort in the world.

Wynn Macau, Limited Chief Operating Officer Frederic Luvisutto was quoted as saying: "With Wynn Resorts Macau earning more Forbes Travel Guide honours than any other individual resort in Macau this year, this distinction is a powerful testament

to the extraordinary commitment of our team members, who consistently go above and beyond to deliver world-class experiences for travellers from across the globe."



Melco Resorts & Entertainment

Melco Resorts & Entertainment received 19 Five-Star Awards this year, being "the world's integrated resort operator with the most FTG Five-Star Awards", its statement noted.

The achievement is anchored by the attainment of 107 FTG Stars across the company's Hotel, Restaurant and Spa categories for properties including City of Dreams, Studio City, Altria Macau, and City of Dreams Manila.

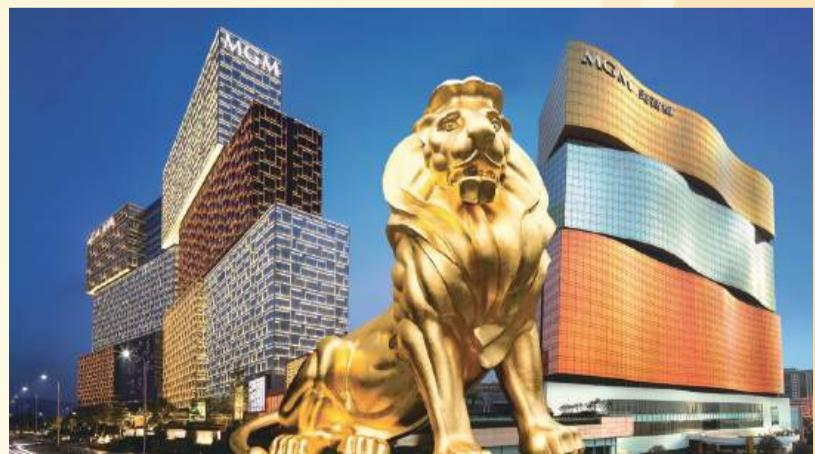
Melco Chairman & CEO Lawrence Ho Yau-lung was quoted as saying: "We are deeply honoured to have Melco recognised as the world's leading integrated resort company by Forbes Travel Guide in 2026. Attaining the most Five-Star awards globally among integrated resort operators is a testament to our team's unwavering commitment to excellence. We are thankful to our colleagues as such achievements would not be possible without their incredible efforts"



MGM

MGM said they received seven Five-Star Awards from Forbes Travel Guide. MGM MACAU earned its 11th consecutive Five-Star rating, while Tria Spa at both MGM MACAU and MGM COTAI has also garnered the accolade for the seventh consecutive year. Receiving the award for the fifth consecutive year, meanwhile, are Emerald Tower, Skylofts, Five Foot Road at MGM COTAI, and Imperial Court at MGM MACAU.

Kenneth Feng Xiaofeng, Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director of MGM China Holdings Limited, was quoted by the statement as saying: "Achieving sustained recognition from Forbes Travel Guide reflects a disciplined approach to service excellence and a steadfast commitment to maintaining high standards across the company's properties. I am deeply grateful to the Golden Lion Team, whose professionalism, dedication, and shared pursuit of excellence underpin these achievements."



Sands China set a new global record with seven Forbes Five-Star Hotels under one roof, details in a *Post* article yesterday on <https://www.macaupostdaily.com/news/27430>.

Sands China wins 2nd consecutive 'Top Employer' certificate

Rui Pastorin

Integrated resort operator Sands China has recently been awarded the "Top Employer" certification by the Top Employer Institute* for the second consecutive year.

According to a statement yesterday, the achievement follows last year's milestone as the first integrated resort operator in the Asia Pacific region and the first company in Macau's tourism and service industry to receive the accolade. It joins 2,500 certified organisations worldwide.

The statement added that Top Employer Institute is "one of the world's most authoritative certifiers of human resources strategies". The achievement showcases the company's commitment to international standards and excellence in HR strategy, the statement said.

Sands China excelled across over 200 assessment criteria, including leadership, talent acquisition, workplace environment, rewards, and recognition. The company was also noted for its initiative to create job roles for people with disabilities, highlighted as a best practice in the institute's white paper.

The statement added that Sands China, Macau's largest private employer, employs nearly 28,000 staff, with over 14,000 having served for a decade or longer by the end of 2025, representing nearly 50 percent of its workforce.

The company has created over 1,400 diverse job roles across the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions (MICE) segment, hospitality, entertainment, retail, and sports events, providing over 90,000 employment opportunities for Macau residents.

Sands China Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director Grant Chum Kwan Lock was quoted by the statement as saying that receiving the certification "reaffirms our steadfast commitment to a people-orientated approach and to nurturing talent for Macau."

He added: "Our team members are the company's most valuable asset, and being a dedicated employer remains our guiding principle. We have hence continuously striven to provide our team with a supportive work environment and innovative initiatives that enhance both career and personal development." ■

** The Top Employers Institute describes itself as the leading global authority on recognising excellence in human resources (HR) strategies and people practices. Founded in 1991, the institute headquartered in the Netherlands provides a global certification programme that benchmarks and validates organisations' HR environments.*

— Google AI Mode



This photo provided by Sands China yesterday shows executives distributing pastries to staff at back-of-house areas to celebrate the "Top Employer" award, thanking them for their dedication and contributions.

HK population rises by 10,200 in 2025

HONG KONG – Hong Kong's population was provisionally estimated at 7,510,800 by the end of 2025, up 0.1 percent from the previous year, local data showed on Thursday.

The increase of 10,200 people was created between a net inflow of 29,100 residents and a natural decrease of 18,900, according to data from the Census and Statistics Department of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government.

Births and deaths in 2025 stood

at 31,100 and 50,000, respectively, the data showed.

Among the total population at the end of last year, 7,242,400 are usual residents, while 268,400 are mobile residents, according to the data.

Various talent attraction and labor importation schemes have helped offset the impact of the natural population decrease, a spokesperson for the HKSAR government commented on the population uptick.

— Xinhua

New FM Commissioner Bian pays courtesy call on legislature's speaker Cheong

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 Legislative Assembly (AL) President André Cheong Weng Chon, where she acknowledged the good start made by the new term of the local legislature, according to a statement by the commissioner's office yesterday.

The current, eighth term of the MSAR's Legislative Assembly started on October 16 last year.

During yesterday's meeting, according to the statement, Bian praised the local legislature for its important role in advancing the MSAR's rule of law, ensuring the implementation of the city's executive-led governance, and enhancing the MSAR's governance effectiveness.

Bian underlined that the commissioner's office will continue to spare no effort in safeguarding the nation's sovereignty, security and development interests, and vigorously support the Legislative Assembly in carrying out duties related to external affairs and engaging in external exchanges, with the aim of fostering a more favourable external environment for Macau's prosperity and stability.

During yesterday's meeting, according to the statement, Cheong welcomed Bian to her new role in Macau and expressed gratitude to the commissioner's office for



Legislative Assembly (AL) President André Cheong Weng Chon (right) poses for a photo with newly appointed Foreign Ministry Commissioner Bian Lixin in the legislature's hemicycle on the sidelines of their meeting yesterday.

— Photo: commissioner's office

its guidance and assistance in the Legislative Assembly's work related to external affairs.

Cheong pledged that the local legislature will further strengthen its communication and exchanges with the commissioner's office, open up new horizons in the Legislative Assembly's external connections, and leverage its unique strengths to tell the global community the good story of the successful implementation of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle with Macau characteristics.

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.

Apart from Cheong, Bian has

already paid separate courtesy calls on Macau's current Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai as well as his three predecessors – Edmund Ho Hau Wah, Fernando Chui Sai On and Ho Iat Seng.

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.

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). ■

Govt to host 2nd 'tea-break' opinion gathering session later this month

Tony Wong

The government has announced that its second "tea-break" community session for officials under the Social Affairs and Culture portfolio to directly engage in conversations with residents will be held on February 24.

The government's first "tea-break" community session was held on January 15.

Secretary for Social Affairs and Culture Wallis O Lam told lawmakers in November last year about the government's plan to host "tea-break" sessions in different neighbourhoods regularly from 2026 where bureau directors under her portfolio will directly engage in exchange and communication with residents to gather their opinions and answer their questions.

The second "tea-break" session, to be held on February 24, was announced by the Health Bureau (SSM) in a statement on Wednesday as it will be about the government's psychological support services.

The statement noted that the government decided to launch its regular community exchange activity, starting from January 2026, in compliance with its people-centred



This undated handout photo downloaded from the Macau Government Tourism Office's (MGTO) website yesterday shows the Macau Cultural Centre in Nape.

Nape from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. on February 24.

Themed "People-centred, Delivering Life-friendly Services, and Addressing Mental Health", the upcoming session will be attended by officials under the Social Affairs and Culture portfolio, who will engage in direct exchanges with participating residents, the statement said.

Due to limited seating, the statement said, residents wishing to attend the upcoming "tea-break" session are encouraged to sign up in advance during office hours by calling 8390 7249 or by emailing quadmin@ssm.gov.mo, in order to "facilitate event arrangements". ■

Police arrest local thief for stealing from unlocked car

Armindo Neves

The Judiciary Police (PJ) arrested a local man for stealing from an unlocked car on Tuesday, PJ spokesman Chao Teng Hin said during a regular press conference yesterday.

Chao identified the suspect as a 62-year-old man surnamed Lei who claimed to be jobless.

According to Chao, PJ officers received a report from the Public Security Police (PSP) on January 23 that a female victim told them that on the night of January 22 she had parked her private car at a metered parking space in the northern district. Upon returning to her vehicle, Chao said, she discovered that a tablet valued at around HK\$8,000 (8,260 patacas) had been stolen from inside.

Following an investigation,

Chao said that the Judiciary Police identified Lei through CCTV footage, as he had walked past the location and randomly tried the door handles of several parked cars that day. Upon successfully opening the victim's unlocked car door, he entered the vehicle and committed the theft.

Chao said that Lei then left Macau via the Barrier Gate checkpoint immediately after the crime, adding that the suspect was intercepted by PJ officers upon re-entering Macau on Tuesday.

Chao said that a follow-up investigation revealed that Lei has been involved in at least four similar cases since March 2025. According to Chao, the Judiciary Police transferred Lei to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) on Tuesday, facing a theft charge.



Judiciary Police (PJ) spokesman Chao Teng Hin looks on during yesterday's regular press conference at the PJ headquarters in Zape.

— Photo: Armindo Neves

Chao also said that PJ officers are continuing efforts to trace the whereabouts of the stolen tablet. ■

China, US maintain close economic, trade communication at multiple levels: MOC

BEIJING — The economic and trade teams of China and the United States have maintained close communication at various levels through their economic and trade consultation mechanism, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Commerce (MOC) said yesterday.

The economic and trade teams of both countries have timely exchanged

views on implementing consensus reached by the two heads of state at their Busan meeting and the outcomes of economic and trade consultations in Kuala Lumpur, as well as addressing each other's concerns in economic and trade fields, spokesperson He Yadong said at a regular press briefing.

Following the consensus reached by the two heads of state, China

is willing to work with the United States to strengthen dialogue and communication, properly manage differences and expand pragmatic cooperation by upholding equality, respect and mutual benefit, in order to promote the healthy, stable and sustainable development of China-US economic and trade relations, He said.

— Xinhua

China poultry exports help lift Finnish food group to record sales, earnings

HELSINKI — Finnish food group Atria reported record net sales and adjusted operating profit for 2025 yesterday, citing efficiency gains at its new poultry plant in western Finland and the start of poultry exports to China at the end of 2024 as key drivers.

Atria's full-year net sales rose to 1.81 billion euros (US\$2.15 billion), up from 1.76 billion euros in 2024. Adjusted operating profit increased to 69.9 million euros from 65.4 million euros a year earlier.

"The year 2025 was strong for Atria and successful in many ways.

Both net sales and profits were at the highest level in the group's history," Chief Executive Officer Kai Gyllstrom said in a statement.

Gyllstrom said the performance reflected improved efficiency in poultry production and the concentration of operations at the group's new Nurmo plant in western Finland. He added that strong net sales growth in the second half of 2025 and the start of chicken exports to China in late 2024 supported profitability.

Looking ahead, Atria flagged volatility in Europe's pork market, animal disease risks and weak

consumer confidence in its home markets as key uncertainties. It also said the impacts of African swine fever in Estonia weighed on results.

Atria is a major Nordic food company with operations in Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Estonia.

The Finnish group began exporting chicken meat to China in December 2024 after securing approval during Finnish President Alexander Stubb's visit to the country. The company has said the move offers significant growth potential, citing China's large market and rising demand for imported protein products. — Xinhua

More price commitment deals expected between EU, Chinese enterprises

BEIJING — More Chinese companies are expected to reach price commitment deals with the European Union (EU), China's Ministry of Commerce said yesterday.

Ministry spokesperson He Yadong made the remarks at a press conference regarding the European Commission's approval of a tariff exemption for a Chinese-made Volkswagen SUV, which will now be imported under a minimum price and quota model.

Previously, China and the EU, after multiple rounds of consultations, achieved a "soft landing" in

the electric vehicle case within the framework of World Trade Organization rules, He said, adding that the outcome has been widely welcomed by the international community and industries on both sides.

Under the consensus reached through consultations, China and the EU support Chinese electric vehicle companies in making effective use of price commitments. To that end, the European side has issued a guidance document formulated during the bilateral talks and pledged to carry out assessments in a non-discriminatory, objective and fair manner, he said.

Noting that the Chinese and European automotive industries are deeply integrated and mutually beneficial, He expressed hope that the European side would earnestly implement the important consensus reached at the China-EU leaders' meeting and the outcomes of the case consultations.

China is ready to maintain dialogue and communication with the EU side to foster an open and stable market environment for the growth of the automotive industries in both China and the EU, He said.

— Xinhua

For Europe, true de-risking means de-Americanizing

Commentary

BEIJING — As leaders gather once again at the Munich Security Conference, Europe finds itself confronting an uncomfortable truth: The greatest strategic risk it faces now comes from across the Atlantic.

For years, European policymakers have echoed Washington's "de-risking" rhetoric, a term originally crafted to justify containing China's development under the guise of economic caution.

Yet if Europe truly believes its own rhetoric on safeguarding sovereignty, recent shocks demand a more honest reading: De-risking must now mean de-Americanizing. This does not mean severing ties with the United States, but rather freeing itself from a structural dependence, given Washington's unpredictability in its foreign policy.

The Munich Security Report 2026, tellingly titled Under Destruction, describes a world entering an era of "wrecking-ball politics." At the center of this transformation stands Washington, which, the report notes, is actively dismantling core elements of the post-1945 international order. More than 80 years after its construction began, that order is now "under destruction."

For Europe, the implications are profound. Washington's approach to European security is increasingly described, even by the report itself, as volatile, oscillating "between reassurance, conditionality, and coercion." It reflects transactional leverage.

A year ago in Munich, US Vice President JD Vance openly chastised European governments for what he called democratic "backsliding." In front of the world, Europe was being publicly lectured by a superpower that no longer treats it as partner, but as a subordinate.

This shift did not happen overnight. For decades, Europe's core strategic priorities have been dismissed by Washington when they clash with American interests.

The US bid for Greenland is a glaring example of Washington's readiness to grab whatever Europe has for its own gain.

Regarding defense policy, Washington's relentless pressure on European NATO members to meet a defense-spending target that rose from 2 to 5 percent has never been about strengthening Europe's security but about forcing Europe to fund a US-dominated military apparatus that serves America's global hegemony.

NATO, once framed as a collective defense alliance, has been proven to be a tool for the United States to project power, with European nations pressured to deploy troops to conflicts that serve no European interest, while Washington siphons off billions in defense contracts for its own military-industrial complex.

Economic policy tells a similar story. The United States has repeatedly imposed unilateral tariffs on European goods, from steel and aluminum to wine and cheese, tearing apart WTO rules and inflicting billions in losses on European businesses, all to protect its own industries.

For decades, Washington also weaponized its global financial dominance to impose extraterritorial sanctions on European companies that dared to do business with US adversaries.

The Inflation Reduction Act, hailed by US politicians as a domestic policy win, was in essence a blatant act of economic warfare against Europe.

Many in Europe have started to wake up to the illusion of transatlantic unity. Washington has proven time and again that it will prioritize its own hegemonic interests over Europe's survival, whether through economic plunder, military coercion or ideological bullying.

If Europe seeks to de-risk in a world of wrecking-ball politics, it must begin by terminating its addiction to US "protection." That is the price of true strategic autonomy.



Shoppers select "fanlihua," a paper-made traditional flipping toy, at a stall during a festive fair held in the Longfusi commercial area of Beijing's Dongcheng District. The fair, held in celebration of the upcoming Spring Festival, offers diverse consumption scenarios for citizens and tourists. It will last until March 3. — Xinhua

China reiterates call for two-state solution as Israel moves to expand control in West Bank

BEIJING – China believes a two-state solution is the fundamental way to resolve the Palestinian question, foreign ministry spokesperson Lin Jian said yesterday, adding that China has consistently opposed the construction of new settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories.

Lin made the remarks at a regular news briefing when asked to comment on measures Israel has adopted to strengthen its control in the occupied West Bank and

facilitate its settlement expansion.

Noting that Gaza and the West Bank are inalienable parts of Palestinian territory, Lin said China opposes all attempts to annex or encroach upon Palestinian territory, or to undermine the political foundation of the two-state solution.

He said the current situation in Gaza remains highly fragile, and that relevant parties should cease taking any actions that exacerbate conflict or heighten tensions. – (More on p.10) – Xinhua

Lai Ching-te's remarks cannot change fact that Taiwan is part of China: spokesperson

BEIJING – Regardless of what Taiwan leader Lai Ching-te says or does, it cannot change the historical and legal fact that Taiwan is part of China's territory, nor can it shake the fundamental framework upheld by the international community adhering to the one-China principle, a Foreign Ministry spokesperson said in Beijing yesterday.

It also cannot stop the historical trend that China will

eventually and inevitably be reunified, spokesperson Lin Jian told a regular news briefing.

Lin said that Lai's remarks once again exposed his nature as a stubborn "Taiwan independence" separatist, clearly showing that he is a disruptor of peace, a creator of crises and a warmonger, and fully demonstrating that "Taiwan independence" is the root cause of instability and conflict in the Taiwan Strait. – Xinhua



A craftsman makes a butter sculpture at a workshop in Lhasa, capital of the Xizang Autonomous Region, yesterday. Butter sculptures in vivid shapes of trees, flowers, birds, stars, etc. are gradually gaining popularity in the markets across the city ahead of the Tibetan New Year. These sculptures, made skillfully with colored butter, convey people's good wishes for the New Year. – Xinhua

China regrets EU request for WTO panel, pledges to defend rights

BEIJING – The Ministry of Commerce (MOC) yesterday expressed regret over the European Union's (EU's) decision to request the establishment of a World Trade Organization (WTO) dispute settlement panel in response to Chinese judicial rulings on standard essential patents (SEPs).

China will handle the request properly in accordance with WTO dispute settlement procedures, and will resolutely defend its legitimate rights and interests, an official from the ministry's department of treaty and law said in response to a media query.

Yesterday, Geneva time, the EU announced it would request the establishment of a WTO panel concerning its dispute with China over judicial rulings related to SEP licensing litigation.

The official emphasized that China has always attached great importance to the protection of intellectual property rights (IPR).

In strict compliance with WTO rules and its accession commitments, China has continuously improved its IPR legislation and enforcement, achieving results that are evident to all, the official noted. – Xinhua

Chinese AI firms race to release models, angling for next DeepSeek moment

Analysis

BEIJING – Chinese AI companies are racing to launch new models over the Lunar New Year holiday, angling for the next game-changing DeepSeek moment.

Days ago, a mysterious test version dubbed Pony Alpha became a hot topic in the AI community for its exceptional coding performance, sparking widespread speculation about its developer. Yesterday, it was revealed to be GLM-5 by Beijing-based AI company Zhipu AI.

The new model has achieved high scores on top agent benchmarks and has been used successfully in many agent flows during its stealth period, according to a post on OpenRouter's X handle. This stealth-testing approach demonstrates Chinese developers' growing confidence in their product capabilities.

Late last month, Moonshot, another tech firm from Beijing, unveiled its new Kimi 2.5 release, surprising the AI community with its open-source performance across agents, coding, image, video and a range of general intelligence tasks.

The open-source model is going to save 90 percent of the cost, and create a "Kimi 2.5 moment," said Chamath Palihapitiya, a prominent Silicon Valley analyst, calling it "incredibly profound."

DeepSeek has also quietly kicked off a gray-scale test on its app and web interfaces. The context window length has been expanded directly from the previous 128K tokens to one million tokens, suggesting a significant upgrade in the pipeline.

The push to replicate the significant global impact of DeepSeek's R1 launch in January 2025 has extended to video and image AI as well.

ByteDance's recently tested text-to-video tool Seedance 2.0, which can generate a multi-shot film sequence in roughly 60 seconds with rather simple prompts, has sparked a short video creation craze across the global cyberspace.

"The childhood era of AIGC is over," said Feng Ji, creator of the globally hit game Black Myth: Wukong, when discussing Seedance 2.0.

"It's fortunate that, at least for now, Seedance 2.0 originates from China," added Feng, awestruck by the AI capabilities.

Meanwhile, Alibaba's AI arm Qwen launched its next-generation image generation foundation model, Qwen-Image 2.0, on Tuesday. The open-source Qwen model is powering AI tools for the International Olympic Committee in preparation for the 2026 Milan Winter Olympics.

China's technology titans, including Alibaba, Tencent and ByteDance, are leveraging the upcoming Chinese New Year holiday season to lock in users for their intelligent assistants, gearing up to accelerate the build-out of an R&D-to-consumption ecosystem anchored on their respective AI models and platforms.

The country had 1.125 billion internet users by the end of 2025, and its user numbers of generative AI technology reached 602 million, a striking 141.7 percent increase from the end of 2024, according to the China Internet Network Information Center. – Xinhua

China to impose countervailing measures on certain EU dairy imports

BEIJING – China will impose countervailing measures on certain dairy products imported from the European Union (EU) for a period of five years starting today, the Ministry of Commerce (MOC) said yesterday.

According to the final ruling announced by the ministry, company-specific duty rates range from 7.4 percent to 11.7 percent.

At the request of China's

domestic industry, the ministry launched a countervailing investigation on August 21, 2024.

This investigation was carried out in accordance with Chinese laws and regulations, as well as relevant World Trade Organization (WTO) rules, following principles of fairness, impartiality, openness and transparency, a ministry spokesperson said, adding that the ministry widely solicited views

from interested parties and fully safeguarded their rights.

The ruling report shows that certain dairy products imported from the EU are subsidized, that these subsidized imports have caused material injury to China's related domestic industry, and that a causal link has been established between the subsidies and this material injury, the spokesperson noted.

– AFP

Commercial rocket SD-3 launches 7 satellites from sea

YANGJIANG, Guangdong – China yesterday launched a Smart Dragon-3 (SD-3) carrier rocket from the sea, sending seven satellites into planned orbits.

The SD-3 commercial rocket blasted off at 2:37 p.m. from waters off the coast of Yangjiang in Guangdong Province. The seven satellites include Pakistan's PRSC-EO2 satellite.

The offshore launch mission was carried out by the Taiyuan Satellite Launch Center.

Yesterday's launch was an important achievement of China-Pakistan space cooperation. The PRSC-EO2 satellite is equipped with high-resolution optical payloads. The remote sensing data it acquires will serve Pakistan in various fields such as land mapping,

environmental and natural disaster monitoring, and natural resource protection.

This is the fourth time that the SD-3 rocket has undertaken a commercial launch mission with multiple satellites onboard, showcasing its core advantages in payload adaptability, application scenarios and commercial service capabilities.

– Xinhua

Senior CPC official meets Panchen Rinpoche

BEIJING – Senior Communist Party of China (CPC) official Li Ganjie met with Panchen Erdeni Chos-kyi rGyal-po yesterday in Beijing.

Li, a member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and head of the United Front Work Department of the CPC Central Committee, extended Spring Festival and Tibetan New Year greetings to Panchen Rinpoche

and those from the Tibetan Buddhist community.

While acknowledging the achievements made by Panchen Rinpoche over the past year, Li urged him to reinforce the sense of the Chinese nation as one community, take an active part in building the community of the Chinese nation, and play an active role in systematically adapting religions to the Chinese context and

providing guidance to the Tibetan Buddhism so that it can adapt to socialist society.

Panchen Rinpoche said he will always firmly uphold the leadership of the CPC, resolutely safeguard national unity, and make greater contributions to promoting ethnic unity, religious harmony and Xizang's stability, development and progress.

– Xinhua

Principal dies after Thailand school shooting

BANGKOK – A teenage shooter accused of killing the principal of a school in Thailand using a police officer's weapon was in custody yesterday, authorities said, after an attack that also injured two students.

Police shot and arrested the 18-year-old on Wednesday after he stormed into the Phatong Prathan Khiriwat School in southern Songkhla province with a gun, police and other authorities said, adding that several shots were fired.

School director Sasiphat Sinsamosorn died in hospital early

yesterday after being admitted with gunshot wounds and undergoing surgery, the Songkhla public relations department said in a statement.

She was shot before police intervened and apprehended the teenager, Songkhla police chief Teerasak Chaiyotha told AFP.

The 18-year-old suspect was being treated in hospital after being grazed by a bullet and had not been charged pending an investigation, Teerasak said.

Police had responded to a report of a teenager "acting erratically", he said.

Teerasak told reporters on

Wednesday that the suspect was hospitalised for psychiatric treatment in December and had been discharged.

He said the teen stabbed a police officer with a knife and stole his weapon – a 9mm pistol – just before the incident at the school, which he then used to carry out the attack.

Brave teacher'

Sasiphat was shot in the chest and died in hospital from blood loss, the Songkhla department said, calling her a "brave teacher".

The school shared its "deepest

condolences" in a Facebook post.

"Although we have lost her, the memories and kindness she left behind will forever remain in our hearts," the post said.

A teenage girl was also hospitalised with gunshot wounds and underwent surgery, the ministry of public health said.

A second student was hurt after jumping from the second floor of the school building but had been discharged from hospital, the provincial department said.

Classes would be cancelled for two days while authorities collected

evidence and reviewed security measures at the school, it said.

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 shootings.

In 2022, an ex-policeman armed with a gun and a knife stormed into a nursery in the country's north and murdered 24 children and 12 adults, one of Thailand's deadliest massacres.

– AFP

Japan's organised fraud losses hit record US\$920 million

TOKYO – Japan's criminal syndicates raked in US\$920 million from organised fraud last year, almost double the previous record in 2024, using a sophisticated, cross-border network of scammers, police said yesterday.

Organised fraud and scams are typical crimes orchestrated by the so-called "tokuryu" ("anonymous and fluid") underworld – an emerging criminal force often seen as an alternative to Japan's old-school yakuza gangsters.

Tokuryu ringleaders shrouded in anonymity are known to use encrypted messaging apps to manipulate often naive foot soldiers as expendable pawns, while keeping themselves largely untraceable.

Forms of such fraud include

the classic "it's me" scam, where perpetrators impersonate family members in trouble to extract money from the victim.

Elderly people can also be cajoled into using ATMs to get non-existent "refunds" of their insurance premiums or pensions, police have warned.

Last year, these forms of fraud cost Japan a record 141 billion yen (US\$920 million), nearly twice as much as the 71.9 billion yen in 2024, according to data published by the National Police Agency (NPA) yesterday.

Tokuryu groups as well as the yakuza are believed to be behind these scams, the NPA said, citing their roles in everything from funding schemes to arranging perpetrators and equipping them

with criminal tools.

Some groups "base themselves overseas such as in Southeast Asia, where the leadership remotely issues instructions to perpetrators in Japan," the NPA warned.

Lately, fraudsters posing as policemen call targets and trick them into transferring money under the pretext of protecting their assets or probing their bank accounts, the police say.

On its website, the NPA warns against the rise in the so-called "fake police scam", reminding the public that unlike these scammers, real policemen would never make video calls, share screenshots of someone's arrest warrant or use their smartphones to show police badges.

– AFP

Singapore to establish national council to set AI direction: PM

SINGAPORE – Singapore will establish a national council on artificial intelligence (AI) to provide "strategic direction" on the use of the new technology, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong announced yesterday.

Speaking in parliament to unveil this year's national budget, Wong said AI is "advancing at a remarkable speed", with immense potential to raise productivity, unlock new discoveries and transform lives.

While AI has caused concerns about misinformation and jobs being displaced, Wong said the city-state must confront the technology and make it serve the country's needs.

He urged Singapore to move beyond "individual pilots and isolated experiments" and scale up the use of AI at the national level and across industries.

"Fear cannot be Singapore's response. If we allow uncertainty to paralyse us, we will fall behind in a world that is moving rapidly ahead," he said.

"We must act with clarity and resolve. AI is a powerful tool, but it is still a tool. It must serve our national interest and our people," said Wong, who is also the finance minister.

Wong said he will chair the AI council, which will "provide strategic direction and to drive

Singapore's AI agenda."

Tiny Singapore has been increasingly using technology to overcome structural constraints such as its limited natural resources, a rapidly ageing population and a tight labour market.

The government said last month it will invest more than S\$1 billion (US\$793 million) in public research on artificial intelligence through 2030 to bolster its capabilities and enhance global competitiveness.

"We define how AI is developed and used in Singapore. We will set clear rules to ensure it is applied responsibly and safely," Wong said in his speech.

– AFP

Faizal Ramadhan, head of the



People pose for photos in front of illuminated installations during a light festival in a park of the Lotte World Tower in Seoul yesterday, ahead of the Lunar New Year holiday.

– AFP

Indonesia tests using toll roads as air force runways

JAKARTA – The Indonesian air force is trialling the use of toll roads as back-up runways for its aircraft to help bolster the vast archipelago's defences, a deputy minister said.

A demonstration of two military planes taking off and landing on a toll road was held on the western island of Sumatra on Wednesday.

The roads would provide an alternative in the event military bases are attacked, deputy defence minister Donny Ermawan Taufanto said.

He described the test as a "good

milestone", adding that a plan for building roads that double-up as runways was already in place.

At least one toll road in each of the country's 38 provinces is hoped to serve as a makeshift runway for military aircraft, said air force chief of staff Mohamad Tonny Harjono.

"I want to emphasise that the use of toll roads as an alternate runway for fighter jets is temporary and situational," he said.

"This means it will not be used continuously. We will use it only

when necessary."

He did not specify a timeline for implementing the strategy, which has also been tested in other parts of the world.

Under President Prabowo Subianto, Indonesia is seeking to rejuvenate its ageing military equipment.

The archipelago of more than 17,000 islands received last month its first three French-made Rafale fighter jets as part of an US\$8.1 billion deal to purchase 42 jets from France.

– AFP

Lao govt reaffirms UXO clearance as national priority

VIENTIANE — The Lao government has reaffirmed that clearing unexploded ordnance (UXO) remains a national priority, underscoring its commitment to ensuring public safety and advancing socio-economic development.

In a press interview on Wednesday, marking the 30th anniversary of the Lao National Unexploded Ordnance Program, Thongloun Sisoulith, general secretary of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) Central Committee and Lao president, highlighted the lasting impact of UXO contamination in Laos, according to Lao News Agency report yesterday.

Thongloun stated that between 1964 and 1973, more than 580,000 bombing missions were carried out over Laos — an average of one flight every eight minutes. During this nine-year period, more than 2 million tonnes of ordnance were dropped on the country, including approximately 270 million cluster submunitions. As a result, Laos remains the most heavily bombed country in the world

on a per capita basis.

The widespread bombardment devastated infrastructure and significantly hindered national development, contributing to Laos' classification as a Least Developed Country.

Decades after the war, UXO continues to pose a serious threat. An estimated 30 percent of cluster munitions failed to detonate and remain scattered across the country. These remnants of war continue to cause casualties and obstruct development projects.

In 2025, 15 accidents resulted in 25 victims, including six fatalities. So far in 2026, two accidents have injured seven people, with no deaths reported.

Looking ahead, the government has pledged to strengthen cooperation with international partners and modernize the UXO sector. The ultimate goal is to bring operations in line with international standards and ensure lasting safety and development opportunities for the Lao people.

— Xinhua

Afghan police unearth firearms, ammunition

KABUL — Police in the northern Afghan province of Baghlan have seized a large quantity of illegal firearms, including 25 pistols, the Radio and Television of Afghanistan (RTA) reported yesterday.

The weapons were recovered in an intelligence-led operation in the Dahana-i-Ghuri district, according to security sources cited by the RTA.

No further details were provided. The report reiterated that no unauthorized individual is permitted to keep or carry weapons.

As part of efforts to uphold law and order, the Afghan government has vowed to collect arms and ammunition from all individuals outside official security institutions across the country.

— Xinhua

Death toll rises to 32 in coal mine blast in NE India

NEW DELHI — The death toll in a coal mine blast in India's northeastern state of Meghalaya rose to 32, local media reported yesterday.

The blast took place on February 5 inside a coal mine at Mynsinghat in East Jaintia Hills district, about 70 km east of Shillong, the capital city of Meghalaya.

The local government has already ordered a comprehensive inquiry into the incident.

Meghalaya is one of India's mineral-rich states and has nearly

640 million tonnes of coal reserves, according to the government website.

Activists say illegal coal mining is going on in the state despite a ban from India's environmental court, National Green Tribunal in 2014 on unscientific mining in the area.

Experts say locals illegally extract coal using dangerous "rat-hole" mines, which means digging into the side of hills and then burrowing horizontal narrow tunnels to reach a coal deposit.

— Xinhua



Members of trade unions and left political parties take part in a rally amid a nationwide strike over various issues in Hyderabad, India yesterday.

— AFP

Counting underway in first Bangladesh polls since deadly uprising

By Sheikh Sabiha Alam with Rasheed Mujib, Eyamin Sajid and Mohammad Mazed

DHAKA — Counting was underway yesterday in Bangladesh's first election since a deadly 2024 uprising, with powerful political heir Tarique Rahman bullish about defeating an Islamist-led coalition.

Leading prime ministerial hopeful Tarique Rahman, 60, said he was "confident" his Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) — which was crushed during the 15 years of ousted premier Sheikh Hasina's autocratic rule — can regain power in the South Asian nation of 170 million people.

However, he faces a stiff challenge from a coalition led by the Muslim-majority country's largest Islamist party, Jamaat-e-Islami.

Election Commission officials reported "a few minor disruptions" but top party leaders on both sides raised fears of threats, with the BNP's Rahman calling on people to vote so that "conspiracies will not succeed".

Jamaat chief Shafiqur Rahman, 67, mounted a disciplined grassroots campaign, hoping to form the first Islamist-led government in constitutionally secular Bangladesh.

Jamaat, which has campaigned on a platform of justice and ending corruption, senses its biggest opportunity in decades, with party leader Rahman saying it "will do whatever is required" to ensure a fair result.

"The early results indicate something positive", the Jamaat chief said, as counting continued.

BNP's Rahman has said he is "confident" of victory, and his advisor said the party would "secure a sweeping victory".

Many opinion polls give the BNP the lead, although some suggest a knife-edge race.

Significant first results are expected to be released overnight.

Ended the nightmare

Heavy deployments of security



An electoral official opens a ballot box as counting starts at a polling station during Bangladesh's general election in Dhaka yesterday.

— AFP

forces are posted countrywide, with UN experts warning ahead of voting of "growing intolerance, threats and attacks" and a "tsunami of disinformation".

Political clashes killed five people and injured more than 600 during campaigning, police records show.

Like millions of young voters, Shithi Goswami, 21, a student at Dhaka City College, cast her ballot for the first time.

"I hope after everything we went through the last few years, now is the time for something positive," she said.

Interim leader Muhammad Yunus, who will step down once the new government takes power, has said the vote would "determine the future direction of the country".

As counting took place, he urged all sides to stay calm.

"We may have differences of opinion, but we must remain united in the greater national interest", he said.

The 85-year-old Nobel Peace Prize winner has led Bangladesh since Hasina's rule ended with her ouster in August 2024.

His administration barred her Awami League party from contesting the polls.

Yunus, after casting his vote, said that the country had "ended the nightmare and begun a new dream".

Hasina, 78, sentenced to death in absentia for crimes against humanity, issued a statement from hiding in India, where she called the vote an "illegal and unconstitutional election".

Spirit of the uprising

Yunus has championed a sweeping democratic reform charter to overhaul what he called a "completely broken" system of government and to prevent a return to one-party rule.

Voters also took part in a referendum on the charter and whether to endorse its proposals for prime ministerial term limits, a new upper house of parliament, stronger presidential powers and greater judicial independence.

Yasin Arafat Emon, 25, said he had backed the charter because it "reflects the spirit of the uprising".

The next government will inherit a battered economy in the world's second-largest garment exporter, as well as delicate relations with India.

The BNP's Rahman — whose late parents both led the country — told AFP ahead of the vote that his first priority, if elected, would be restoring security and stability.

But he warned the challenges ahead were immense, and that "the economy has been destroyed".

— AFP

Sri Lanka installs thermal cameras on trains to prevent elephant collisions

COLOMBO — Sri Lanka Railways has started installing thermal-sensing cameras on locomotive engines to help prevent elephants from being struck by trains, the Department of Railways said yesterday.

A high-level committee appointed to implement practical measures to reduce wildlife-related rail accidents recommended the camera system, the department said.

Environment Minister Dammika Patabendi and Transport

Minister Bimal Rathnayake lead the committee. Sri Lanka Railways is also adjusting train timetables on locomotives operating on routes where elephants frequently cross or roam near the tracks, railway department said.

Authorities installed the first camera systems on Wednesday at the Dematagoda Railway Yard in Colombo and will conduct performance tests over the next week to assess how effectively the cameras detect elephants ahead of moving

trains, railways department said.

Research engineer Jayakamal Abeysekara, who is involved in the project, told journalists that the trains are being equipped with long-wave infrared thermal cameras designed to detect heat signatures by capturing thermal emissions rather than reflected light.

Forty-six elephants were killed in train accidents in 2025, according to official data. Overall, 397 elephants died in Sri Lanka in that year.

— Xinhua

Trump tells Israel's Netanyahu Iran talks must continue

Danny Kemp

WASHINGTON – US President Donald Trump told Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House on Wednesday that talks with Iran must continue, rebuffing the Israeli prime minister's push for a tougher stance against Tehran.

"There was nothing definitive reached other than I insisted that negotiations with Iran continue to see whether or not a Deal can be consummated," Trump said on social media after their three-hour meeting.

"If it can, I let the Prime Minister know that will be a preference. If it cannot, we will just have to see what the outcome will be," said Trump, adding a reminder of last year's US strikes against Iran's nuclear program.

Seeking to push for the Islamic republic's ballistic missile program to be included in any deal, Netanyahu had rushed to Washington for his seventh meeting with Trump since the US leader returned to power.

Netanyahu's office said that during the talks with Trump the Israeli premier had "insisted on the security needs of the state of Israel in relation to the negotiations" on Iran.

Trump has hinted at US military action against Iran following Tehran's deadly crackdown on protesters, but at the same time Washington and Tehran restarted talks last week with a meeting in Oman.

Talks had been suspended after the US strikes on Iran's atomic sites

during Israel's 12-day war with Iran last July.

What does Netanyahu want?

The White House meeting was held behind closed doors, with Netanyahu slipping in via a side entrance without receiving the traditional honour guard. Trump and Netanyahu were seen shaking hands in a photograph released by the Israeli premier's office.

Netanyahu said as he left for Washington his talks would "first and foremost" be about the Iran negotiations, while adding they would also discuss Gaza and other regional issues.

"I will present to the president our views regarding the principles for the negotiations," he said in a video statement. Netanyahu's office said he would highlight Iran's missile arsenal.

Israel's concerns came to a head during their unprecedented war last year, during which Iran launched waves of ballistic missiles and other projectiles at Israeli territory, striking both military and civilian areas.

What does Trump think?

While boosting hopes of a nuclear deal, Trump has also been dialling up the threat of possible US military action against Iran.

He warned in an interview with Axios news outlet Tuesday that he was "thinking" of sending a second aircraft carrier strike group to the region.

"Either we will make a deal or we

will have to do something very tough like last time," Trump said. "We have an armada that is heading there and another one might be going."

What does Iran say?

So far, Iran has rejected expanding its talks with the United States beyond the issue of its nuclear program, though Washington also wants Tehran's ballistic missile program and its support for regional militant groups on the table.

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian said on Wednesday that Tehran would "not yield to excessive demands" on its nuclear program.

But he insisted his country was not "not seeking to acquire nuclear weapons."

'Board of Peace' and West Bank

Netanyahu's visit will also include other issues, from Gaza to the West Bank.

He officially signed on as a member of Trump's "Board of Peace" during a meeting earlier Wednesday with Secretary of State Marco Rubio, the Israeli PM's office said.

The group was originally meant to oversee the Gaza ceasefire but Trump is now positioning it as a possible rival to the United Nations.

The meeting also came amid growing international outrage over Israeli measures to tighten control of the occupied West Bank by allowing settlers to buy land directly from Palestinian owners. – AFP

Israeli settlers demolish 15 Palestinian homes in West Bank: residents

JERICHO Israeli settlers demolished around 15 Palestinian homes and an animal pen in a village near Jericho in the occupied West Bank, residents and activists told AFP on Wednesday.

The structures, several of them tin shacks, were torn down in Al-Duyuk Al-Tahta the day before, amid rising settler violence that has repeatedly forced families to flee.

The latest violence came days after Israel's security cabinet approved measures to tighten control over the West Bank, paving the way for further settlement expansion.

"About 50 settlers arrived, forced everyone out of the houses and began demolishing them. Then they took everything – even the chickens," village resident Mustafa Kaabneh, who has lived in the area for nearly two decades, told AFP.

He said most of the settlers were armed and masked and were accompanied by an Israeli army vehicle before returning with a bulldozer.

The Israeli military did not immediately respond to AFP's request for comment.

Another resident, Bassem Kaabneh, 23, said settlers beat women and children, expelled families from their homes and seized personal belongings.

"They told me: 'Enough, you don't have a home here anymore'".

Abu Audi Al-Rajabi, who owns one of the demolished houses, said no demolition order had been issued.

"The house was built 13 years ago and has been lived in ever since," he said.

Rajabi, who primarily resides in Jerusalem, said he was unable

to reach the area because it had been sealed off.

Local activist Jihad Mahaleh said the demolished homes lie in Area C, a part of the West Bank that under the Oslo Accords signed in the 1990s falls under full Israeli control.

He said five of the structures were made of stone, while the rest were tin homes and animal shelters.

"We are now living under the trees," Bassem Kaabneh said.

On Sunday, Israel's security cabinet approved a series of measures that would allow Israel to expand its control in areas administered by the Palestinian Authority under the Oslo accords.

The plans, which have sparked international outrage, would also allow Jewish Israelis to buy West Bank land directly and allow Israeli authorities to administer certain religious sites even when they are located in areas under Palestinian Authority control.

Israel has occupied the West Bank since 1967.

Excluding Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem, more than 500,000 Israelis live in settlements and outposts across the West Bank, which are illegal under international law.

Around three million Palestinians live in the territory.

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

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

Israel president says at end of visit antisemitism in Australia 'frightening'

William West

MELBOURNE – Antisemitism in Australia is "frightening" but most people want good relations, Israel's President Isaac Herzog said yesterday as he wrapped up a four-day visit and was met by protests in the city of Melbourne.

Herzog's tightly policed visit to Australia this week was meant to offer consolation to the country's Jewish community following the mass shooting on Bondi Beach that killed 15 people in December.

However, it sparked demonstrations in major cities, including in Sydney, where police used pepper spray on protesters and members of the media, including an AFP photographer, during scuffles in the central business district on Monday night.

Herzog told Channel Seven's Sunrise ahead of his Melbourne stop that a "wave" of anti-Jewish hatred in Australia had culminated in the December 14 killings at Bondi.

"It is frightening and worrying," he said.

"But there's also a silent majority of Australians who seek peace, who respect the Jewish community and, of course, want a dialogue with Israel."

The Israeli head of state said he had brought a "message of goodwill to the people of Australia".

"I hope there will be a change. I hope things will relax," he said.

Herzog attended a Jewish community event after a meeting with Victoria's governor at Melbourne's Government House.

Protesters waving Palestinian flags and chanting slogans squared off with police outside the event.

Herzog told the audience at the community event: "We came here to be with you, to look you in the eye, to embrace and remember."

He also said demonstrators outside should instead "go protest in front of the Iranian embassy".

The Australian government accused Iran last year of orchestrating a recent wave of antisemitic attacks and expelled Tehran's ambassador.

Canberra, citing intelligence findings, accused Tehran of directing the torching of a kosher cafe in the Sydney suburb of Bondi in October 2024 and a major arson attack on the Adass Israel Synagogue in Melbourne in December 2024.

Controversial visit

Ahead of his arrival, national broadcaster ABC reported that a building at Melbourne University had been graffiti-ed with the phrase: "Death to Herzog".

Many Jewish Australians have welcomed Herzog's trip.

"His visit will lift the spirits of a pained community," said Alex Ryvchin, co-chief executive of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, the community's peak body.

But some in the community disagreed, with the progressive Jewish Council of Australia saying he was not welcome because of his alleged role in the "ongoing destruction of Gaza".

The UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry found last year that Herzog was liable for prosecution for inciting genocide after he said all Palestinians – "an entire nation" – were responsible for the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023.

Israel has "categorically" rejected the inquiry's report, describing it as "distorted and false" and has called for the body's abolition. – AFP



An ultra-Orthodox Jewish man stands close to the Israeli built controversial separation barrier at Rachel's Tomb, Judaism's third holiest shrine in Bethlehem, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank yesterday. The barrier is a combination of concrete walls and wire fences running north to south that Israel says is necessary to protect it self from Palestinian militants. However, large sections of it encroach on the West Bank, and the Palestinians call it a land grab. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued a non-binding ruling in 2004 that parts of the barrier in the West Bank are illegal and should be removed. The barrier is supposed to follow the Green Line that marks Israel's borders before the 1967 Six Day War, when the Jewish state captured the Golan Heights, east Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. – AFP

Norway police search ex-PM Jagland's properties in probe over Epstein links

Pierre-Henry Deshayes

OSLO — Norwegian police said yesterday they had searched properties belonging to former prime minister Thorbjørn Jagland following the launch of a corruption probe over his dealings with US sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

Jagland is being investigated after documents released by the US Justice Department in January suggested that he and/or his family stayed or vacationed with Epstein between 2011 and 2018.

Having served as prime minister from 1996 to 1997, Jagland was at that time secretary general of the Council of Europe and chaired until 2015 the committee that selects the winner of the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize.

In the documents released, Epstein referred to him as “the Nobel big shot”.

Pal Lonseth, chief of the specialised Okokrim economic crimes unit, said that Jagland's residence in Oslo had been searched and that he was now formally suspected of “aggravated corruption”.

“Okokrim also conducted searches at two other properties in Risør and Rauland” in southern Norway, Lonseth said.

Images shown on Norwegian TV showed several people at Jagland's Oslo apartment carrying boxes. He was filmed smiling as he left the premises with his lawyer.

The searches were made possible by the lifting of his immunity on Wednesday by the Council of



Lawyer Anders Brosveet (right) and former prime minister of Norway Thorbjørn Jagland walk along a street in Oslo yesterday.
— Xinhua

Europe, Lonseth explained.

Police opened an investigation against the 75-year-old last week.

In a separate statement, Jagland's lawyer, Anders Brosveet, said the searches were expected and standard procedure in these types of investigations.

“Jagland wishes to contribute to ensuring that the case is thoroughly clarified, and the next step is that he will appear for questioning by Okokrim — as he himself has stated he wants,” the lawyer said.

Paid vacation

In a letter sent by Okokrim to the Council of Europe requesting his immunity lifted, police said they are investigating whether the benefits Jagland may have received could amount to “passive bribery”.

Okokrim cited repeated instances, between 2011 and 2018, when Jagland and/or members of his family made use of Epstein's apartments in Paris and New York, as well as stays at his property in Palm Beach, Florida.

“For at least one of these private vacations, travel expenses for six adults appear to have been covered by Mr. Epstein,” Okokrim wrote.

In another exchange, Epstein offered to pay for travel and hotel expenses for six adults to the Caribbean, “which Jagland accepted, but which was later cancelled due to external circumstances”, it added.

“Mr Jagland further appears to have solicited Mr Epstein's assistance in relation to obtaining a bank loan, but it is unclear whether

this actually materialised,” Okokrim said.

Newspaper *Verdens Gang* (VG) has reported that emails showed that Epstein pressed Jagland on several occasions to try and arrange a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

After previously maintaining that his ties with Epstein were part of normal diplomatic activities, Jagland told newspaper *Aftenposten* this month that he had shown “poor judgement”.

A mere mention in the files does not imply wrongdoing, but several other prominent Norwegians have been caught up in the turmoil after the release of a new cache of nearly three million documents related to the investigation of Epstein, who died in US custody 2019 while awaiting trial for sex trafficking.

Among them are hundreds of emails dated between 2011 and 2014 — often with a strikingly intimate tone — between Norway's Crown Princess Mette-Marit and the financier, who had already been convicted in 2008 for soliciting a minor.

Also named in the files are World Economic Forum CEO and former foreign minister Borge Brende and another former premier, Kjell Magne Bondevik.

Norwegian police have also opened an investigation into “aggravated corruption” against high-profile diplomat Mona Juul, along with her husband Terje Rod-Larsen for suspected complicity.

— AFP

Hermès chief says Jeffrey Epstein visited workshop with Woody Allen

PARIS — Axel Dumas, chief executive of the French luxury house Hermès, acknowledged yesterday that he met Jeffrey Epstein in 2013 when the convicted sex offender invited himself to a workshop visit with actor Woody Allen and other guests.

“I had one single contact with Jeffrey Epstein, it was in March 2013,” Dumas said as the company presented its full-year financial results.

“He was not on the guest list and joined a group of guests invited by Woody Allen and his wife, without prior warning,” he said.

A photo in the mass of Epstein investigation files released by the US Justice Department shows the three men at a Hermès workshop outside Paris.

“Someone took the opportunity to take an impromptu picture, which he evidently kept preciously,” Dumas said. “And indeed, he had a bad reputation.”

“Afterwards, he tried to meet with me three times, which I always declined,” he added.

Emails consulted by AFP in the Epstein files, sent by Dumas's assistant, show he refused several of his invitations.

“Finally, in 2016, he took part in a charity auction and won a lot offered by the house, a course of workshop lessons,” Dumas said.

“When we learned that he was the winner, we refused and compensated the charity with the equivalent amount,” he said.

Dumas also said Hermès refused a request by Epstein to redecorate the interior of his jet.

“I can't tell you exactly what we knew about him or not, because I can't recall from 13 years ago, but he had an odious reputation,” he said.

Dumas's comments are the latest Epstein revelations that have shaken France following the Justice Department's latest release of Epstein investigation files last month.

On Tuesday, France's foreign minister said he had requested a probe into a French diplomat, Fabrice Aidan, who corresponded with Epstein, and who another envoy said was investigated while at the United Nations over child sex abuse websites.

Former French culture minister Jack Lang meanwhile resigned from his position as the head of a top cultural body, the Arab World Institute, after his name appeared in the statutes of an offshore company Epstein founded in 2016.

Lang's daughter Caroline, who allegedly owned half the shares in the company, has resigned from two positions.

— AFP

France bets on nuclear power to phase out fossil fuels

Nathalie Alonso and Djallal Malti

PARIS — France's government yesterday presented an energy plan to use less imported fossil fuels, including by ramping up nuclear-fuelled power production over the next decade.

France wants to phase out fossil fuels by 2050, and is hoping consumers will switch from burning oil and gas to consuming more low-carbon electricity in order to do so.

The plan for 2026 to 2035 foresees more use of the country's 57 nuclear power plants and the construction of six new ones, as well as more energy from offshore wind farms.

But it aims to rely less on solar parks and land-based wind farms.

The move is a reversal from a plan for 2019 to 2024, which had called for shutting down several of France's nuclear reactors.

Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu said the scheme was key to avoiding dependence on other countries for fossil fuels.

“There is no scenario in which we can be dependent,” he said on a visit to a hydroelectric dam in eastern France.

He said failing to move forward with the phaseout of fossil fuels “was becoming fundamentally dangerous for our sovereignty, for our ability to produce”.

Oil and gas still account for 60 percent of France's energy consumption and cost France 64 billion euros (US\$75 billion) in imports in 2024.

They fuel global warming and keep France dependent on other countries, including Russia and the United States.

According to the plan, the goal is for no more than 40 percent of energy consumed to be based on fossil fuel by 2030.

Nuclear myth

The use of nuclear energy as an alternative to fossil fuels is highly controversial, however, with many environmental groups warning about safety risks and the disposal of nuclear waste.

Greenpeace France said the government's plan for 2026 to 2035 “remains a model of political manipulation and mediocrity”.

It lambasted what it described as the government's “stubborn insistence on believing in the nuclear myth whatever the cost”, adding that many of the new nuclear plants will not be built for years.

France in December released a revamped roadmap to become carbon neutral by 2050.

The updated strategy was unveiled on the 10th anniversary of the Paris Agreement, the landmark climate accord designed to cut greenhouse gas emissions and keep global warming well below 2C, with efforts toward 1.5C.

France's updated National Low-Carbon Strategy (SNBC-3) foresees the end of oil use between 2040 and 2045. Fossil gas would be phased out by 2050.

— AFP

WHO chief slams 'unethical' US vaccine trial in Guinea-Bissau

GENEVA—The head of the World Health Organisation (WHO) on Wednesday slammed an “unethical” planned US-funded hepatitis B vaccine trial in Guinea-Bissau, saying it would deny children a proven safe and effective vaccine.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said it was up to the junta-run West African nation as to whether it wanted to go ahead, “knowing full well that it’s unethical”.

It comes two months after an advisory panel appointed by US health chief Robert F. Kennedy Jr – who has long voiced vaccine-sceptic rhetoric – voted to stop recommending that all newborns in the United States receive a hepatitis B vaccine.

The move to end the decades-old recommendation is the panel’s latest contentious about-face on vaccine policy.

Kennedy is in charge of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), while the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is the top US public health agency.

“The CDC is funding a gold-standard, independent study designed to answer questions about the broader

health effects of the hepatitis B vaccine,” HHS spokesperson Emily Hilliard told AFP.

“This research aims to fill existing evidence gaps to help inform global hepatitis B vaccine policy and is based on the highest scientific and ethical standards.”

At a press conference at the WHO’s Geneva headquarters on Wednesday, Tedros made his views clear about the study, which would randomise whether or not 14,000 newborns receive a hepatitis B vaccine birth dose.

Violation of 'basic protocol'

“Guinea-Bissau is one of the countries with high prevalence of hepatitis B and withholding a birth dose could actually expose infants to a high chance of infection, and that means including a significant proportion of deaths,” he said.

“This violates the basic protocol: while you have effective medicine, denying half of the population of children access to a vaccine that has been there for more than 40 years, which is safe and effective, is not ethical.”

Tedros said Guinea-Bissau was

a sovereign nation free to decide its position, but for the WHO, “it’s unethical to proceed with this study”.

“The country can proceed, knowing full well that it’s unethical, and the scientists can proceed, knowing full well that it’s unethical,” he stressed.

Tedros said the WHO was preparing a full statement, because “such studies could affect other countries” too.

It is understood that the trial had been paused, but is expected to proceed following further evaluation.

US health authorities previously recommended that all babies, not just those born to mothers believed to have hepatitis B, receive the first of three vaccine doses just after birth.

The approach aimed, in part, to prevent transfers from mothers who unknowingly had hepatitis B or had falsely tested negative, and had virtually eradicated infections of the potentially deadly liver disease among young people in the country.

Guinea-Bissau’s junta overthrew president Umara Sissoco Embaló and seized power on November 26, just days after the presidential election and before the official results were released.

— AFP

Russia expected to supply Cuba with oil as 'humanitarian aid': report

MOSCOW—Russia is expected to supply Cuba with oil as part of a “humanitarian” effort, the *Izvestia* newspaper reported yesterday.

Cuba is suffering its worst energy crisis in years, driven largely by the United States throttling supplies of Venezuelan oil.

Russia’s ministry of economic development told the daily that “as far as we know, Russia is expected to soon supply oil and petroleum products to Cuba as humanitarian aid”.

On Monday, the Kremlin, a traditional ally of Cuba, accused the United States of attempting to “suffocate” the island nation.

Already under US trade embargo for over 60 years, Cuba is struggling with fast-dwindling fuel stocks and taking drastic rationing measures, including preventing airlines from refuelling.

Several foreign airlines have dropped routes in response, while governments, including Russia’s,



A tourist takes a photo of a classic American car in Cuba’s capital Havana on Wednesday.

— AFP

have called on their citizens to avoid travelling to the island until the issue is resolved.

On Wednesday, Russia’s federal aviation regulator Rosaviatsia said in a statement that difficulties refuelling had “forced” Rossiya Airlines and Nordwind Airlines to adjust their flight schedules to Cuba.

“Rossiya Airlines will operate a number of return flights only – from Havana and Varadero to Moscow – to ensure the evacuation of Russian tourists currently in Cuba,” it added.

Around 5,000 Russian tourists may still be on the island, Russia’s Association of Tour Operators said earlier this week.

— AFP

US, Mexico seize cocaine in 'coordinated' Pacific operation

MEXICO CITY—The United States and Mexico seized several tons of cocaine from a ship in a “coordinated operation” in the Pacific Ocean, the Mexican navy said on Wednesday.

The unusual joint action came despite tensions between the two countries, with US President Donald Trump vowing to strike Mexican drug cartels that he said posed a grave threat to national security.

“About 188 packages containing

several tonnes of cocaine” were seized from the vessel off Clarión Island, about 1,100 kilometres from the Mexican port city of Manzanillo in Colima state, the Mexican navy said in a statement.

Multiple people were arrested, the statement added, without specifying how many.

Trump has threatened to slap additional tariffs on Mexico to pressure the country into beefing up drug raids and cartel arrests.

A free trade agreement between the two neighbors and Canada is up for renegotiation this year.

The Trump administration said on Wednesday that Mexican cartel drones around the US-Mexico border had forced a Texas airport to shut down temporary.

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum responded that her government had received no reports of drones belonging to cartels along the border.

— AFP

Brazil orders X to 'immediately' block Grok sexualised deepfakes

BRASÍLIA — Brazil on Wednesday told Elon Musk’s social network X to stop its chatbot from creating sexually explicit images, the latest country to pressure the billionaire to fix the AI tool.

Indonesia became the first country to block Grok entirely last month, while Britain and France said they would maintain pressure after the chatbot cranked out a flood of lewd photos of women and children.

X must “immediately implement appropriate measures to prevent the production, using Grok, of sexualised or eroticised content of children and adolescents, as well as adults who have not given their consent,” said Brazil’s chief prosecutor, the National Data Protection Agency (ANPD) and the National Consumer Rights Bureau (Senacor.)

The agencies gave the platform five days to comply with the order or risk legal action and fines.

X claimed it had deleted thousands of posts and suspended

hundreds of accounts after Brazil issued a warning last month, Brazilian authorities said.

But checks found that Grok users were still able to generate sexualised deepfakes, they added.

They slammed X for “not being transparent in its response.”

X announced measures on January 15 to prevent Grok from undressing images of real people in countries where such action is deemed illegal. It is not clear where these measures are in effect.

International pressure had been building on xAI to rein in Grok after its so-called “Spicy Mode” feature allowed users to create sexualised deepfakes of women and children using simple text prompts such as “put her in a bikini” or “remove her clothes.”

According to the Centre for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), Grok generated an estimated three million sexualised images of women and children in a matter of days. — AFP

Strong winds disrupt flights, injure 25 in Spain

BARCELONA — Powerful winds topping 100 kilometres per hour battered Spain’s northeastern region of Catalonia yesterday, injuring at least 25 people — one seriously — and forcing school closures and flight restrictions.

Gusts reached 105 kilometres per hour at Barcelona port, toppling trees and walls and prompting dozens of emergency calls, the region’s civil protection agency said.

Five people were hospitalised, including one who was seriously injured, the agency said. Another 20 people required medical attention.

At Barcelona’s El Prat airport — Spain’s second busiest — 53 flights were cancelled and eight diverted, airport operator Aena said.

Some roads and rail lines were also disrupted.

Authorities in the region of around eight million residents suspended classes and non-urgent medical appointments, urging people to limit movement for the time being.

The storm, named Nils, also hit parts of Portugal and France. Spain’s national weather agency issued a red alert for wind and high waves along the Basque coast.

— AFP

Trump to host Latin American leaders in Miami on March 7

WASHINGTON — US President Donald Trump will host Latin American leaders invited from Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia, El Salvador, Ecuador and Honduras at a summit in Miami later this year, a White House official told AFP on Wednesday.

The meeting comes after US forces recently captured and overthrew Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro and Honduras swore in a conservative president who won his election with Trump’s backing.

Some among the invitees, including Argentina’s Javier Milei and El Salvador’s Nayib Bukele, are firm Trump allies.

The official did not immediately provide details on the meeting, which is set to be held on March 7.

But a report in Argentine media said that the summit would focus on countering China, a major Latin American trading partner.

The United States under Trump has sought to reassert its dominance in the Americas, and has jostled

on trade with China, the world’s second-largest economy, with a tariff and trade war.

Trump described the raid to seize Maduro as an update of the Monroe Doctrine, the 1823 declaration by fifth US president James Monroe that Latin America was closed to other powers.

Weeks earlier, White House policymakers had given more intellectual gloss for the same idea in a national security strategy that announced a “Trump Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine.

The policy, the strategy said, will authorise US intervention in Latin America for goals such as seizing strategic assets, fighting crime or ending migration, one of Trump’s top domestic goals.

It was not immediately clear who among the invitees would be attending, or if other leaders were also invited.

The presidents of Brazil, Colombia and Mexico are major left-wing Latin American players and have had bristly relations with Trump.

— AFP



Hosts Pedro Pinto (from left to right) and Seema Jaswal, former Portuguese international Pepe and UEFA deputy General Secretary Giorgio Marchetti stand in front of the screen displaying the countries that will be part of the A groups of the 2026/27 UEFA Nations League league phase during the draw ceremony as part of the European football governing body's 50th annual Ordinary Congress in Brussels yesterday.

- AFP

World Cup ticket prices skyrocket on FIFA re-sale site

Cyril Julien

FIFA WASHINGTON

— Ticket prices for the 2026 World Cup have skyrocketed on FIFA's official resale platform, with seats for many matches listed at several times their face value even though most tickets have only recently been distributed following the end of the main sales phase in January.

Weeks after FIFA President Gianni Infantino warned that tickets made available on resale sites were likely to come with an exorbitant price tag, those fears have come to pass on world football's own platform.

As of Wednesday, a "category three" seat - the highest section of the stands - for the tournament's opening game between Mexico and South Africa at Mexico City's Azteca Stadium on June 11 was listed at US\$5,324, compared to an original price of US\$895.

One category three seat for the World Cup final on July 19 at East Rutherford, New Jersey, meanwhile, was being advertised for an eye-watering US\$143,750 - more than 41 times its original face value of US\$3,450.

The cheapest available ticket for the final on the resale site was listed at US\$9,775.

In a few rare cases, though, some ticket prices have actually decreased. One ticket for Austria's group game with Jordan at the Levi's Stadium in California - which hosted Sunday's Super Bowl - is being offered at US\$552 despite costing its original buyer US\$620.

For football fans around the world, some of the prices on FIFA's resale site are confirmation of what they have railed against since the tournament draw in December.

"These exorbitant prices unfortunately don't surprise me. It reflects what we know and what we fight against: many people buy to resell," Guillaume Aupretre, spokesperson for the France national team supporters group "Irresistibles Français", which has nearly 2,500 members.

"In the end, who pays the price? The passionate fans who end up with outrageous offers. We would prefer that this benefit real fans who come to support their team, but unfortunately, that's not the case."

Yet despite the steep price tag,

sales remain brisk, reflecting a global clamour that has seen some 500 million requests for tickets according to FIFA.

'Monumental betrayal'

While its resale platform benefits from FIFA's endorsement, the football body specifies in its terms of sale that it acts only as a facilitator - for a 15 percent fee - in this fan-to-fan market, and that resellers are the ones who determine ticket prices.

"Generally speaking, the pricing model adopted for FIFA World Cup 26 reflects the existing market practice for major entertainment and sporting events within our hosts on a daily basis, soccer included," FIFA said in a statement.

"This is also a reflection of the treatment of the secondary market for tickets, which has a distinct legal treatment than in many other parts of the world. We are focused on ensuring fair access to our game for existing but also prospective fans."

The resale market is unregulated in the United States and Canada. In Mexico, reselling a ticket above face value is prohibited, but only when the ticket is purchased in Mexico using the local currency.

Ticketing has become one of the most controversial issues surrounding the World Cup, with fan groups around the world such as Football Supporters Europe accusing FIFA of a "monumental betrayal" over pricing.

That in turn prompted FIFA to introduce a tiny sliver of tickets priced at US\$60 for official supporters groups. Critics maintain the cut-price category does not go far enough in addressing the problem.

FIFA meanwhile has been notifying applicants since February 5 whether they have obtained tickets during the second sales phase, which ended in January.

A final "last-minute" sales phase, from April until the end of the competition, will be organised on a "first-come, first-served" basis.

During these sales phases, FIFA states that it applies "variable pricing" whereby prices fluctuate "according to demand and availability" for each match.

However, it emphasises that it does not apply "a dynamic pricing model (...) given that prices are not automatically adjusted."

- AFP

Japan aim to make 'new history' at Women's Asian Cup



TOKYO - Japan coach Nils Nielsen said his team "want to make new history" by winning next month's Asian Women's Cup as he named 16 England-based players in his squad yesterday.

Japan are the only Asian country to have won the Women's World Cup but they have only lifted the Asian Cup twice in 20 editions of the competition. The last time was in 2018.

Greenlander Nielsen, the first foreign-born coach of the Japan women's team, says it is time they set the record straight when the tournament kicks off in Australia on March 1.

"It is not a tournament that has been easy to win for Japan historically," said the 54-year-old, who took over in December 2024.

"We want to make new history. This is why we cannot be happy until we have the final prize because we have a team that can win it."

Manchester United's Hinata Miyazawa, the top scorer at the 2023 World Cup, was included in the 26-player squad, along with Manchester City pair Yui Hasegawa and Aoba Fujino.

Defender Saki Kumagai, who has 164 international caps, remains from the team that lifted the 2011 World Cup.

Only four players from Japan's

domestic WE League made the cut.

Nielsen said a lack of injuries meant it "wasn't so hard" to make his final selection.

"What we ended up with was a little bit of everything, so we are pretty much prepared for every scenario," he said.

"We didn't pick so many players that are the same because when we replace a player on the pitch, we want to bring something different."

Japan should sail through a first-round group that also includes Taiwan, Vietnam and India.

"I really feel that no matter what our opponents come up with, we have possible answers in our squad," said Nielsen.

- AFP

LIGUE 1 Marseille aim to pick up pieces after De Zerbi departure

PARIS - Stability has rarely been the watchword at Marseille but it has been a particularly chaotic week for the former European champions who are looking for a new coach to revive their faltering season.

Italian firebrand Roberto De Zerbi left the club "by mutual agreement" in the early hours of Wednesday after just over 18 months in charge, and in the wake of a historic hammering by Paris Saint-Germain.

At the end of January De Zerbi insisted he felt ready to stay for "five or six more years" at the Velodrome, but the recent unravelling has been remarkable.

It really began with the humiliating exit from the Champions League on the final day of the league phase, when a 3-0 defeat away to Club Brugge combined with a 4-2 win for Benfica against Real Madrid saw Marseille miss out on qualification for the play-offs on goal difference to the Portuguese side.

They then threw away a two-goal lead to draw at Paris FC before the PSG debacle, for which De Zerbi - who led OM to second place in France last season - said he had "honestly no explanation".

The latter result left them fourth in Ligue 1, 12 points behind league leaders PSG, as well as three points adrift of Lyon in the third and final automatic Champions League qualifying spot.

De Zerbi appeared to have lost the dressing room at a club which never seems far away from a crisis.

"When a coach goes, it's like losing a member of your family," sporting director Medhi Benatia told sports daily *L'Equipe*. "It always hurts. He is far from being the only one to blame."

Marseille are through to the French Cup quarter-finals so have much still to play for this season. However, there had been real hope that De Zerbi was the man to install them as a force again in the Champions League, and end a trophy drought going back to 2012.

Instead they are now searching for their eighth permanent coach since Rudi Garcia left after almost three years in charge in 2019.

Pancho Abardonado, a member of De Zerbi's backroom staff, will now take charge of the team in tomorrow's game against Gary O'Neil's Strasbourg, who come into the weekend in seventh place.

While former Brighton and Hove Albion boss De Zerbi could now make a return to the Premier League, Marseille are on the lookout for a coach who can finally have a lasting impact amid a volatile environment in the south of France.

Among the contenders for the job is Habib Beye, the French-born former Newcastle United, Aston Villa and Senegal defender.

Now 48, Beye is an ex-Marseille captain who played for the club from 2003 to 2007. Conveniently, he is available having been sacked by Rennes on Monday.

The game will be played at 12 a.m. Sunday morning Macau time.

- AFP/MPD

England coach Tuchel extends contract to end of Euro 2028

Football

Julian Guyer

LONDON — England manager Thomas Tuchel signed a new contract yesterday that will see him remain head coach of the team till the end of Euro 2028.

The German was confirmed as the successor to Gareth Southgate in October 2024 and has overseen an unbeaten qualification run to this year's World Cup in North America, with England winning all eight group games.

"I am very happy and proud to extend my time with England," said the 52-year-old former Chelsea manager in an FA statement.

"It is no secret to anyone that I have loved every minute so far

of working with my players and coaches, and I cannot wait to lead them to the World Cup."

"It is an incredible opportunity and we are going to do our very best to make the country proud," added Tuchel, whose previous England deal ran only until the end of this year's global showpiece.

The FA said that the new agreement with Tuchel would provide "clarity and full focus" amid speculation about his future after the World Cup.

However, FA chief executive Mark Bullingham explained there are "performance conditions" in the deal.

"We tend to want to know where we are, to remove that uncertainty when you're going into

a tournament," added Bullingham. "It gives everyone - the support team and the players - that certainty."

Tuchel had been touted as a candidate to be the next permanent Manchester United manager.

But in signing a new England contract, Tuchel appears to have ruled himself out of a post-World Cup move to Old Trafford.

The FA added that Tuchel's senior backroom team had all also agreed contract extensions to the end of Euro 2028.

"I have had so much support from Mark, all my colleagues at the FA and from fans wherever I go that I did not hesitate when asked to continue in this dream job," added Tuchel.

- AFP

Comeback queen Brignone stars, Ukrainian banned over helmet

Guy Jackson and Terry Daley

MILAN – Federica Brignone crowned a sensational injury comeback to win the women's super-G and delight host nation Italy yesterday while Ukrainian skeleton racer Vladyslav Heraskevych said being banned from competing at the Winter Olympics was the "price of our dignity".

Brignone, at 35, became the oldest ever Olympic gold medal winner in alpine skiing, surpassing Norway's Aksel Lund Svindal by a few months. The Italian also surpassed Lindsey Vonn, who is coached by Svindal, as the oldest female medallist.

It was a remarkable result for Brignone, coming less than a year after she suffered a double leg fracture in April 2025.

"Being at home, a home Olympics, and bringing the flag, representing my country, after all I've been through, it's something so special," said Brignone, who saw a raft of rivals fail to finish a tricky course in Cortina d'Ampezzo.

"It has been hard. For so long, I couldn't walk, and I couldn't put pressure on my leg. I was telling myself, 'how can I ski at more than 100 kilometres an hour?'".

"But every day, I was telling myself, 'tomorrow, it will be much better'."

Helmet woe

Brignone's achievement followed

a spectacular end to the stand-off between the International Olympic Committee and Ukrainian skeleton racer Vladyslav Heraskevych.

The IOC banned Heraskevych from the Winter Olympics for refusing to ditch a helmet carrying pictures of Ukrainian sportsmen and women killed since Russian forces invaded Ukraine in 2022, arguing that he had failed "to adhere to the IOC athlete expression guidelines".

Gestures of a political nature during competition are forbidden under the Olympic charter. Athletes are permitted, however, to express their views in press conferences and on social media.

"This is [the] price of our dignity," Heraskevych reacted on X alongside a picture of his helmet.

The IOC had said it would "make an exception" for Heraskevych, allowing him to wear a plain black armband during competition.

IOC chief Kirsty Coventry even met with Ukraine's flag bearer early yesterday in a last-ditch attempt to persuade him to change his mind about the helmet before his competition started.

But it was to no avail and the athlete was disqualified, a move Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said played "into the hands of aggressors".

Australian freestyle skier Cooper Woods earlier won Olympic men's moguls gold in dramatic fashion, with

a tiebreak needed to separate him from Canadian great Mikael Kingsbury.

The athletes both scored 83.71 in their final runs in Livigno, meaning the marks they achieved for their turns came into play.

Woods' mark of 48.40 was marginally better than Kingsbury's 47.70, giving the 25-year-old a first Olympic medal.

"I didn't have any expectations this morning," said Cooper. "I just wanted to go out and ski my runs and stay true to what I know I can achieve."

Despite the pain of missing out on gold, Kingsbury became the first athlete to win medals in the same freestyle skiing event at four straight Olympics.

In addition to his gold in 2018, he won silver at the 2014 Sochi Games and again eight years later in Beijing.

Kingsbury said it felt "amazing" to win a fourth Olympic medal.

"I'm very happy with my skiing," he said. "It was close, a tiebreak – unfortunately I'm the guy not on the good side of it. But I've worked very hard for this medal."

After Brignone's success on the slope, there was a second triumph of the day for Italy thanks to speed skater Francesca Lollobrigida.

Lollobrigida won the women's 5,000m gold just five days after smashing the Olympic record to also win the 3,000m.

– AFP

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Norris quickest in Bahrain as Hamilton calls for 'equal playing field'

F1

SAKHIR – World champion Lando Norris topped the timesheets during Wednesday's pre-season testing in Bahrain as former champion Lewis Hamilton called on the FIA to make sure that all 11 Formula One teams would start the new season "on an equal playing field".

With the season opener in Melbourne under a month away, this was the second chance for teams to test their new cars on the track, following the shakedown behind closed doors in Barcelona at the end of January.

Every car has undergone a radical change since the end of last season following dramatic regulation changes to both chassis and engines.

There was no stopping Norris in his McLaren on this opening day as he posted the best lap of 1min 34.669sec.

However, nothing should be read into that as teams were testing different aspects of their cars with varying fuel loads.

Max Verstappen, who will be searching for a fifth world title this season, put in the most laps with 136 as he put his new power unit, built for the first time by Red Bull, through its paces.

The Dutchman was next quickest behind Norris, prompting a concerned nod from Mercedes team principal Toto Wolff.

"They (Red Bull) are able to deploy far more energy on the straights than everybody else," Wolff was reported as saying by the BBC.

"You are speaking a second, over consecutive laps."

"On a single lap we have seen it before but

now we have seen it on 10 consecutive laps with the same kind of straight-line deployment."

The Austrian reportedly said that on this first day of testing Red Bull had "set the benchmark".

Wolff's comments came with Mercedes widely tipped to be the team to beat while also fending off suggestions that they have used a loophole in the new regulations, which have allowed them to steal a march with the compression ratio in their power units.

McLaren, Alpine and Williams all use Mercedes engines while Red Bull have also been accused of exploiting the loophole.

The row prompted Hamilton, who won six of his seven titles during a 12-year spell with Mercedes before switching to Ferrari in 2025, to call for clarity.

"I hope we are in the mix [this season]," Hamilton told Sky Sports.

"Apart from Mercedes, we all look like we are quite close but we don't know what fuel loads everyone is on."

"There are whispers of certain fuel loads that Mercedes are on. There are whispers of extra power that they have that the rest of us don't have. And the compression ratio sort of thing."

Hamilton added he hoped the sport's governing body would resolve the matter.

"Hopefully that gets sorted and the FIA take care of that to make sure we are all starting on an equal playing field," he said.

Hamilton, 41, completed 52 laps in the morning session before handing over testing duties to Ferrari team-mate Charles Leclerc who clocked the third quickest time of the day.

– AFP

MILANO CORTINA 2026

Medal Table

Order	NOC	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
1	Norway	7	2	5	14
2	Italy	6	2	7	15
3	USA	4	6	3	13
4	Sweden	4	3	1	8
5	Switzerland	4	1	2	7
6	Austria	3	5	3	11
7	France	3	4	1	8
8	Germany	3	3	2	8
9	Japan	2	2	5	9
10	Netherlands	1	3	0	4
11	Czechia	1	1	0	2
11	Slovenia	1	1	0	2
13	Australia	1	0	0	1
14	Canada	0	3	3	6
15	China	0	1	2	3
16	Republic of Korea	0	1	1	2
16	New Zealand	0	1	1	2
18	Latvia	0	1	0	1
18	Poland	0	1	0	1
20	Bulgaria	0	0	2	2
21	Belgium	0	0	1	1
21	Finland	0	0	1	1



Nepal's captain Rohit Paudel congratulates Italy's Anthony Mosca after his victory in the end of the 2026 ICC Men's T20 Cricket World Cup group stage match between Nepal and Italy at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai, India yesterday. Spinners Crishan Kalugamage and Ben Manenti helped debutants Italy to a historic first win at the cricket T20 World Cup with a 10-wicket hammering of Nepal yesterday. Kalugamage (3-18) and Manenti (2-9) combined to bowl out Nepal for 123, a total Italy's openers overhauled with 44 balls to spare in their second match at Mumbai's Wankhede Stadium. Brothers Justin Mosca, who made 60, and Anthony Mosca, who hit 62, tore into the opposition attack with fours and sixes to fire their team to a win.

– AFP



Filipino-American comedian and actor Jo Koy, (right) and Mexican-American comedian Gabriel "Fluffy" Jesús Iglesias pose after Koy's Hand and Footprint Ceremony at TCL Chinese Theatre in Los Angeles on Wednesday. - AFP



Jury President and German director Wim Wenders attends a press conference of the International Jury of the 76th Berlinale, Europe's first major film festival of the year, in Berlin yesterday. The annual film-fest began yesterday. - AFP

World Weather			
CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -1°C~15°C	Manila 23°C~31°C	New York -2°C~5°C	Lisbon 9°C~14°C
Shanghai 8°C~19°C	Bangkok 24°C~35°C	London 1°C~9°C	Rio de Janeiro 22°C~32°C
Hong Kong 15°C~21°C	Tokyo 1°C~12°C	Frankfurt 3°C~10°C	Luanda 24°C~30°C
Taipei 15°C~26°C	Singapore 24°C~32°C	Vancouver 3°C~7°C	Maputo 22°C~33°C
Guangzhou 13°C~26°C	Kuala Lumpur 23°C~34°C	Paris 3°C~11°C	Dili 24°C~30°C
Nanjing 4°C~19°C	Jakarta 23°C~29°C	Moscow 2°C~3°C	São Tomé 26°C~32°C
Guilin 12°C~17°C	Seoul 3°C~11°C	Las Vegas 7°C~21°C	Praia 18°C~27°C
Xi'an 2°C~18°C	Sydney 19°C~24°C	Monte Carlo 10°C~15°C	Bissau 18°C~38°C

From 'Derry Girls' to 'heaven', Irish writer airs new comedy



Irish screenwriter Lisa McGee poses during a special screening for the new Netflix show 'How to Get to Heaven from Belfast', at the BFI Southbank in London on Tuesday. - AFP

Clara Lalanne

LONDON – Following the global success of "Derry Girls", the uproarious comedy about Northern Irish teenagers navigating life during the Troubles, writer Lisa McGee is back with a new show.

"How To Get to Heaven from Belfast" – which released yesterday on streaming giant Netflix – is set in the present day, and features a new band of "women running around being chaotic, crazy and flawed".

"I think female friendships are so complex, particularly those where you've known someone for a long time, and they've known every single version of you," McGee told AFP.

A crime caper blended with off-beat comedy, fans of "Derry Girls" will instantly recognise McGee's love of the absurd and larger-than-life characters.

The show follows three childhood friends whose very different lives converge at a wake for a former classmate in rural Ireland.

There they realise something is amiss and are soon swept up into a wildly unpredictable adventure.

"I really wanted to write a mystery, but I wanted to do it in a very Irish way. I wanted it to be funny and a bit surreal, and I like the idea of having a female ensemble at the heart of it," said McGee.

The protagonists – successful screenwriter Saoirse (Roisin Gallagher), stressed-out mum Robyn (Sinead Keenan) and carer Dara (Caoilfhionn Dunne) – are inspired by her own circle of friends.

'Small things'

Although the series does not directly address Northern Ireland's difficult history, McGee draws a parallel between the friends' buried secret and the way Belfast still feels "haunted by the past".

"There's loads of murals, there's the peace walls, the past is everywhere but you know it's a very different time," said McGee.

Born in 1980 into a Catholic family in Londonderry, McGee leaned heavily for "Derry Girls" on her own teenage years during the Troubles, which lasted from the late 1960s until a peace deal in 1998.

She had long resisted writing about the bloody conflict, which pitted mainly Catholic republicans against Protestant unionists in a struggle over Northern Ireland's status and cost some 3,500 lives.

But she was drawn to how, despite the chaos, people needed to get on with their lives.

"I think that's very profound that every day these people just did the small things you know, even though the world was falling apart around them," she said.

Her teenage characters are more preoccupied with crushes and exams than bombs and checkpoints, and their daily squabbles and concerns helped give the show "universal" appeal.

The three seasons of "Derry Girls" aired between 2018 and 2022 on Britain's Channel 4 before finding a global audience on Netflix.

'Cool for once'

When McGee studied drama in Belfast 20 years ago, before moving to London and working in the Royal National Theatre, "there was no television industry – you had to go away," she said.

Major productions like "Game of Thrones" in the 2010s transformed the creative landscape, helping to build a local industry that ultimately drew McGee back to the city.

"Derry Girls just cracked the door open ... because there's such trust in the fact that people will watch a story about that place, about those people," she said.

Now a BAFTA and International Emmy winner, McGee has "broken such amazing ground not just in Ireland, but internationally," said Dunne.

The success of "Derry Girls" has coincided with a broader cultural boom in Ireland, which will be highlighted again at the Oscars next month thanks to actress Jessie Buckley, nominated for her role in "Hamnet".

"It's amazing because it's a very small country and it's always had such incredible talent, but now maybe the exposure is just much greater," said McGee.

"It's really exciting and I feel very proud of everyone. It feels like we're cool for once!" - AFP

Shakira to rock Rio's Copacabana beach with free gig

RIO DE JANEIRO – Pop superstar Shakira will perform a free concert on Rio de Janeiro's iconic Copacabana beach, following in the footsteps of Madonna and Lady Gaga, city authorities said on Wednesday.

"Hips don't lie and the Rio town hall confirms: Shakira at Copacabana on May 2," city hall said in a post on X, alluding to her hit song.

The Copacabana concert is an annual event that featured Madonna in 2024 and Lady Gaga last year.

Word that the Colombian star will be this year's headliner ended weeks of speculation as to which entertainer would get the nod.

Rio de Janeiro Mayor Eduardo Paes had teased

people with AI-generated videos showing him with stars such as Shakira, Britney Spears, Bono, Beyoncé, Justin Bieber and Rihanna.

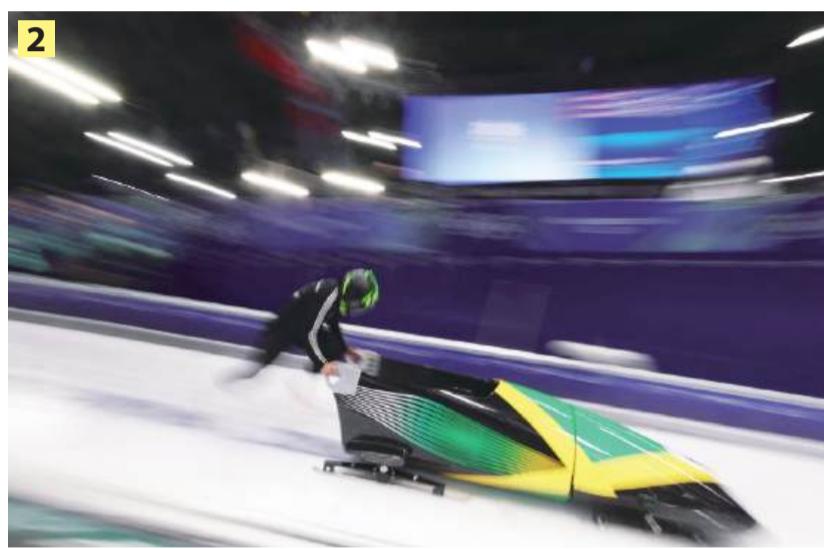
The free concerts draw gigantic crowds to the legendary Copacabana shoreline.

Lady Gaga's show attracted 2.1 million fans while Madonna performed for 1.6 million, according to city tourism agency Riotur.

Over the years the headliners have included the Rolling Stones, Stevie Wonder and Rod Stewart.

Shakira, 49, has performed several times in Brazil, most recently in 2025 as part of her "Women Don't Cry Anymore" world tour.

- AFP



1 Yin Zheng of China competes during the skeleton men's heat at the 2026 Milan-Cortina Winter Olympics in Cortina D'Ampezzo, Italy, yesterday. — Xinhua

2 Jamaica's Mica Moore takes part in the bobsleigh women's monobob training session at Cortina Sliding Centre during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy yesterday. — AFP

3 Britain's Hammy McMillan (front right) delivers the stone during the curling men's round robin between Britain and Sweden during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at the Cortina Curling Olympic Stadium in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy yesterday, while other teams compete in the background. — AFP

4 Federica Brignone of Italy reacts after the alpine skiing women's Super-G at the 2026 Milan-Cortina Winter Olympics in Cortina D'Ampezzo, Italy, yesterday. — Xinhua

5 Bronze medallist USA's Jessie Diggins (right) celebrates as gold medallist Sweden's Frida Karlsson looks on, on the podium for the women's cross-country skiing 10km interval start free event of the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at Tesero Cross-Country Skiing Stadium in Lago di Tesero (Val di Fiemme), Italy yesterday. — AFP

6 France's Jonas Chollet, (from left to right) USA's Nick Baumgartner, Italy's Lorenzo Sommariva and France's Loan Bozzolo compete in the snowboard men's cross small final during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at Livigno Snow Park, in Livigno (Valtellina), Italy yesterday. — AFP