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Pocket money increasingly turns digital as kids grow up: survey

Staff Reporter

The findings of a survey released on Friday show that while 57 percent of parents who have children aged between 7 and 12 said that they still give their children pocket money in cash, the remainder said that they give their kids pocket money via mobile payment apps.

The survey was jointly carried out between July and October last year by four community facilities run by the Macau General Union of Neighbourhood Associations (commonly known as Kai Fong in Cantonese), namely its community service centre in Areia Preta district, community centre in Iao Hon district, community centre in Mong Ha district, as well as Lok Chon Centre – a family service centre in Kai Fong's headquarters in Toi San district.

A press conference about the survey's findings was held at the Areia Preta community service centre.

The survey collected 813 valid questionnaires from local parents who have children aged between 7 and 12.

According to the press conference, the survey's findings show that most of the respondents with children aged between 7 and 10 said that they still give their kids pocket money in cash. More specifically, only 25 percent of the respondents with children aged



Kai Fong representatives present the findings of the survey during Friday's press conference at Kai Fong's Areia Preta community service centre.

– Photo courtesy of TDM

seven said that they give pocket money via mobile payment apps, while 38 percent of the respondents with kids aged 10 said that they give them their pocket money via payment apps.

However, for children aged 11 and 12, the number of the respondents giving their kids pocket money via mobile payment apps was higher than the number of those giving pocket money in cash,

according to the findings.

More specifically, 71 percent of the respondents with children aged 12 said that they give pocket money via mobile payment apps.

The findings, according to the Kai Fong representatives hosting the press conference, indicate that parents are increasingly likely to switch to digital payments when giving their children pocket money as they grow older.

Moreover, the findings also show that 80 percent of the 813 respondents said that they discuss with their children how to use the pocket money.

The findings also show that over half of the parents said that if their children spend all their pocket money faster than planned, they would go through the expenses with them to see how they have spent it.

Some 60 percent of the parents,



according to the findings, said they worried that the use of digital currency would undermine their children's sense of the value of money, thereby leading to overspending. Children spending money in the form of digital currency rather than physical money are unlikely to feel strongly that their money is decreasing, the Kai Fong representatives hosting the press conference said.

The representatives suggested that parents give their children pocket money in cash during their primary school years to help them develop a tangible concept of money.

They also suggested that the government require local schools to provide their students with financial education. ■

Tourist coach hits taxi, injuring 5

Ida Cheong

A traffic accident involving a tourist coach which collided with a taxi in Taipa at 4 p.m. yesterday, resulting in five people from the Chinese mainland being injured, according to a statement by the Fire Services Bureau (CB).

According to the preliminary investigation by the Public Security Police (PSP), two pedestrians were jaywalking opposite the People's Liberation Army (PLA) barracks on Estrada da Baía de Nossa Senhora da Esperança (望德聖母灣大馬路) in Taipa, causing a taxi to stop suddenly, causing the coach behind to rear-end the taxi and

resulting in the taxi hitting the jaywalkers.

The statement added that a male and two female passengers on the tourist coach sustained minor injuries to their lower back, legs, and head respectively, while the two jaywalkers suffered leg injuries. The injured are aged between 12 and 72; they are all holders of travel permits from the Chinese mainland.

All the injured were conscious and in stable condition, and were taken to the private Kiang Wu Hospital Taipa Medical Centre. The details and cause of the accident are pending announcement by the police, the statement said. ■



This undated photo courtesy of Macau Daily News shows firefighters and police officers working at the scene where a tourist coach collided with a taxi opposite of the military barracks on Estrada da Baía de Nossa Senhora da Esperança (望德聖母灣大馬路) in Taipa yesterday.

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Pop toy industry gallops into global market for Year of the Horse

As the Year of the Horse approaches, a creative wave from the mainland is sweeping across the global market, carrying millennium-old cultural symbols of auspiciousness.

– Story on p. 7

Singapore mulls regulating 'blind boxes' to curb gambling risks

Singapore said it plans to regulate the sale of "blind box" products after the controversial marketing strategy raised concerns worldwide about gambling inducement.

– Story on p. 8

Gaza civil defence says Israeli strikes kill 12

Gaza's civil defence agency reported that Israeli strikes killed at least 12 people since dawn yesterday, while a military official said the attacks were in response to ceasefire violations.

– Story on p. 10

Police bust Filipina maid for stealing employer's jewellery

Armindo Neves

The Judiciary Police (PJ) nabbed a domestic helper for stealing her employer's jewellery on Wednesday, PJ spokesman Chao Teng Hin said during a special press conference on Friday.

Chao identified the suspect as a 37-year-old Filipina surnamed Riptola, adding that the victim is a middle-aged local woman.

According to Chao, the victim hired Riptola in June 2025. While the victim was cleaning her flat in the northern district, Chao said,

the victim discovered that several pieces of jewellery were missing from a book cabinet.

When questioned, Chao said that Riptola admitted to the theft and confessed to having pawned the items, using all the ill-gotten proceeds for gambling. The victim reported a loss of six items of jewellery valued at 32,021 patacas and expressed the intention to take legal action.

Following the report, Chao said, the Judiciary Police confirmed that Riptola had begun stealing the items early this month.

In total, Riptola stole six pieces of jewellery from the victim's flat and took them to two pawnshops in the central district, pawning them for a total of HK\$10,900.

Chao said that PJ officers successfully recovered all the stolen items from the pawnshops, and the victim confirmed them as her property, adding that the recovered jewellery has been preliminarily valued at 17,845 patacas.

Riptola was transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) on Friday, facing charges of fraud and theft. ■



Judiciary Police (PJ) officers escort the hooded fraud and theft suspect to PJ van outside the PJ headquarters in Zape on Friday.

— Photo: Armindo Neves

Police arrest 3 mainland women for illegal currency exchange deals

Armindo Neves

The Judiciary Police (PJ) separately arrested three women from the Chinese mainland for illegal currency exchange activities on Thursday, PJ spokesman Chao Teng Hin said during a special press conference on Friday.

Chao identified the suspects, aged between 39 and 58, as surnamed Zhang, Chen and Zou.

They told the police that they're jobless, adding that they were arrested during PJ officers' operations targeting currency exchange offences.

On Thursday at a casino in Zape, Chao said that Zhang exchanged 480 yuan for HK\$500 in chips with a gambler. Zhang had been in Macau since early last month, claiming that she had earned HK\$1,500 from her illegal activities. During the operation, PJ officers seized HK\$10,450 in gaming chips, HK\$32,000 in cash, and two mobile phones.

On the same day, according to Chao, Chen and a female mainland gambler agreed near a casino in Zape to exchange 1,820 yuan for HK\$2,000. Chen had been in Macau since early this month and claimed to have earned around 4,000 yuan from the illegal activities, Chao said, adding that PJ officers seized HK\$39,500 in cash and two mobile phones at the scene.

Chao also said that on Thursday Zou exchanged 2,800 yuan for HK\$3,000 in chips with a gambler at a casino in Zape. Zou had been conducting illegal currency exchange activities since early this month, claiming to have earned HK\$240 from her illegal currency exchange deals. PJ officers seized HK\$2,100 in gaming chips, HK\$28,000 in



Judiciary Police (PJ) officers escort the three hooded illegal currency exchange suspects to PJ vans outside the PJ headquarters in Zape on Friday.

— Photos: Armindo Neves

cash, and two mobile phones.

Chao also said that the three suspects said they had gambled away all of the money obtained through the offences.

The trio were transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) on Friday, each facing an illegal currency exchange charge. ■

PJ warn against fraudulent BNU-phishing SMS messages

Khalel Vallo

The Judiciary Police (PJ) issued a warning on Saturday after discovering scammers impersonating Banco Nacional Ultramarino (BNU) and sending phishing SMS messages to locals, causing losses of over 43,000 patacas.

According to a PJ statement, fraudsters have been randomly sending text messages claiming users can have their credit card annual fees waived, while enticing them to click on a link to apply for a refund of 1,200 patacas.

Once the link is opened, victims are directed to a fake BNU website, the statement said, adding that the phishing site requests personal details including name and mobile number, and asks users to input credit card information such as card number, expiry date and security code for "verification".

After obtaining the information, the scammers use the stolen credit card details to carry out unauthorised transactions, the statement added.

According to the statement, at least two locals have fallen victim to the scam, with total losses exceeding 43,000 patacas.

The Judiciary Police reminded the public that local banks will not send SMS messages containing any links, urging residents not to click on any unverified links.

Residents who suspect they have been hit by a scam are advised to contact the Judiciary Police (PJ) Anti-Fraud Enquiry Hotline on 8800 7777 or call the emergency hotline on 993 for assistance.

BNU is a Portuguese bank and one of Macau's two note-issuing banks, alongside the local branch of Bank of China (BOC). ■

提防假冒大西洋銀行釣魚短訊 以免個人及信用卡資料被盜用



This poster provided by the Judiciary Police (PJ) on Saturday urges residents to beware of fraudulent SMS messages.

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Macau Weather

CLOUDY APART FROM SUNNY PERIODS.

MIST AND FOG IN THE MORNING AND AT NIGHT.

LIGHT RAIN LATER.

FORCE 2 TO 4 EASTERLY WINDS.

RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL

RANGE BETWEEN

65% AND 99%.



20°C~26°C

Source: SMG

Chinese New Year holiday break

Due to the Chinese New Year (Spring Festival) public holiday from tomorrow through Thursday, The Macau Post Daily's print edition's reporting and editing team will be taking today and the rest of the week off, returning to work on Sunday (February 22) so the print edition of your favourite newspaper will be on the newsstands or delivered to your home and office again on the morning of next Monday.

However, our website <https://www.macaupostdaily.com> will be updated by our digital edition team 24/7.

We wish all our readers, advertisers, distributors and contributors a restful break and a happy, healthy and prosperous Year of the Horse.

Government offices will be closed between this afternoon and Thursday, returning to work on Friday.

Banks will be closed tomorrow and reopen on Friday,

The Macau Post Daily's management office will be closed from today, reopening next Monday.

Chi Lam Vai's CNY couplets giveaway event aims to enrich community culture: convenor

Armindo Neves

Macau's Chi Lam Vai Concern Group hosted a one-day Chinese New Year (CNY) couplets giveaway event at its coffee shop Amigos do Espinho (茨林) on Saturday, with the objective of enriching the neighbourhood culture of one of Macau's most iconic, village-style communities.

According to the concern group's convenor-cum-Na Tcha Temple Association president, Ip Tat, the event aimed to enrich the neighbourhood culture of Chi Lam Vai Village.

The event was attended by former Executive Council spokesman and lawmaker Leong Heng Teng and Na Tcha Temple Association Vice-President Tang Kam Chun.

Speaking to the *Post* on the sidelines of the event, Ip said that he expressed his group's gratitude to the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) for restoring the ancient well in the village recently. Ip said he hopes that the well will be added to Macau's cultural heritage list and that street lamps will be installed there to attract tourists and ensure visitor flows' safety.

Ip said he also hopes that the government will speed up the revitalisation of the village and ensure better protection of its 400-year-old history, thereby contributing to the promotion of a peculiar aspect of Macau's unique heritage.

Pátio do Espinho ("Courtyard of the Thorn") – Chi Lam Vai (茨林圍) in Cantonese – is a 400-year-old walled village that lies just a street away from the UNESCO World Heritage-protected Na Tcha Temple, one of Macau's two temples dedicated to the divinity known in Putonghua as Nezha. It is also close to the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Ruins of St Paul's.

The coffee shop Amigos do Espinho is a



Chi Lam Vai Concern Group Convenor-cum-president of Na Tcha Temple Association Ip Tat (left), former Executive Council spokesman and lawmaker Leong Heng Teng (second from left), Na Tcha Temple Association Vice-President Tang Kam Chun (third from left) and Chi Lam Vai village residents pose during the Chinese Year New (CNY) couplets giveaway event at the Amigos do Espinho (茨林) café on Saturday.

– Photo: Armindo Neves

café dedicated to the Taoist Na Tcha belief. Na Tcha, known as Nezha in Putonghua, is a Taoist divinity. "Ne Zha 2" is a 2025 Chinese anime fantasy adventure film-based Taoist faith and the 16th century novel "Investiture of the Gods". The highly successful film was released on the first day of the Chinese New Year on January 29, 2025. It is the highest-grossing non-English language film and the first animated film in history to cross the US\$2 billion market.

Na Tcha is widely regarded as the patron god of children and filial piety, as well as the tutelary deity of professional drivers. Na Tcha is one of Macau's most popular tutelary gods, alongside Kun Iam (Guanyin) and A-Ma (Mazu). ■

Hennessy launches new limited edition CNY collection

Rui Pastorin

French cognac producer Hennessy has recently launched a new collection of limited editions to celebrate the Chinese New Year (CNY) and welcome the Year of the Horse.

The collection features Hennessy V.S.O.P, Hennessy X.O, and Hennessy Paradis that each have a "dynamic interpretation of the

horse", according to a recent Hennessy statement.

"Paradis" is French for "Paradise".

The design is rendered in metallic copper tones and deep mineral pigments and is grounded in a flowing red palette. Moreover, the sculpted forms and open spaces invite engagement, with the interaction aiming to reflect the complexity and evolving character of Hennessy's cognacs, according to the statement.

"Designed to evoke both movement and meaning, it is a celebration of bright perspectives and the momentum that defines the Year of the Horse", the statement noted.

Hennessy's connection to China began in 1859, when the company first shipped 12 crates of Old Pale Cognac, according to the statement. Over the years, Hennessy has celebrated Chinese culture through various festivals, milestones, and creative collaborations. Each initiative serves as a testament to their enduring relationship, the statement said.

Hennessy Chief Marketing Officer Vincent Montalecot was quoted by the statement as saying that the Year of the Horse is a moment of awakening that "symbolises freedom, new perspectives, and forward momentum – values that speak deeply to our own story. Through this collection, we honour over 160 years of shared history with China and celebrate the cultural energy that continues to inspire us."

Hennessy is headquartered in the town of Cognac, southwestern France. ■



This photo recently provided by Hennessy shows the "Hennessy Paradis" featuring the new design.

MGM kicks off 'Barra Lucky Blessing Market'

Rui Pastorin

The "Barra Lucky Blessing Market" kicked off on Friday in Barra district, with the event featuring art, shopping, performances and workshops for fairgoers until February 26.

The event is presented by MGM and Offside Concept.

Over 80 brands from Macau and elsewhere are gathered to showcase products ranging from accessories to pet essentials at the "Multi-Brand Concept Store" in the Navy Yard No.1 arts and culture compound, according to a statement released by the integrated resort operator that day. Also available are the "Blessing Lion" Intangible Cultural Heritage Paper-Cutting DIY package, launched by MGM in partnership with the Prince Kung Museum, aka Prince Gong's Museum,* in Beijing.

Moreover, the concept store is also where one can take part in workshops for DIY windmills and phone straps.

A variety of art installations is also displayed throughout the market, the statement said, among which are the fibreglass work "Golden Wishes" by local creative brand SEMSORRISO ("No Smile"), reimagining the brand's original IP "UNDERDOG" as "a lightweight, pink God of Wealth with a floating ingot boat".

Other installations include the fibreglass artwork "Embracing Fortune" by Veng Lei

Laboratory inspired by its IP "Fu Lu Shou", and BERTILO, an original character co-created by Italian 3D artist Bertil Butturini and Chinese illustrator Jingo Li, the statement said.

The event also saw a gathering of over 400 guests comprising community groups, partners and communities for the "Poon Choi** Banquet", which was held in two sessions, according to the statement.

Meanwhile, MGM is also set to launch CNY activities such as lion dance performances by the Macau 2049 resident show team, a "Stilt-Walking God of Wealth" parade, and Spring Couplet calligraphy giveaways, the statement added. ■

*Prince Kung Museum in Beijing is a historical site and museum that showcases the life and culture of the Qing Dynasty. Once the residence of Prince Kung, aka Prince Gong (1833-1898), it offers visitors a glimpse into the opulent lifestyle of Chinese royalty during the 19th century. -Poe

**Poon choi, or "basin dish," is a traditional Cantonese and Hakka celebratory meal originating from Hong Kong's New Territories, featuring multiple layers of premium ingredients—such as braised pork, seafood, and vegetables – slow-cooked in a large pot. It symbolises communal unity, prosperity, and abundance, commonly enjoyed during the Lunar New Year. – Google AI Mode



This photo provided by integrated resort operator MGM on Friday shows the Multi-Brand Concept Store at the "Barra Lucky Blessing Market"

GBA bassoon reveries: insights from a masterclass concert

Interview with Central Conservatory bassoon Prof. Li Lansong

William Chan in Zhuhai, interview and review

Since joining the Macau Youth Symphony Orchestra in 2013, I have been immersed in the world of wind instruments. From quintet rehearsals and masterclasses with renowned musicians to performances with the orchestra's wind ensemble and youth band, the bassoon* has become a steadfast partner in my musical journey.

At my bassoon teacher Zhu Wukun's invitation, I attended a masterclass and concert early this month in Zhuhai, led by acclaimed Central Conservatory of Music bassoon professor Li Lansong.

Li leads China's bassoon scene – not just with virtuoso playing but as a judge at premier international competitions. His scholarly and artistic renown echoes worldwide.

The venue, Aksen Concert Hall, is hidden inside a nondescript industrial building in Zhuhai. Its plain façade belies pro-level interior finishes and stellar acoustics—a gem of a space tailored for chamber music and intimate shows, something Macau desperately needs.

Eight of Zhu's students, all from the Greater Bay Area (GBA), took part, honing skills in the noon masterclass provided by Li before shining at the evening concert. The highlight? 11-year-old Chen Xuxin's flawless take on the first movement of Hummel's** F Major Bassoon Concerto. This piece is infamous for its daunting technical demands – a staple in major bassoon competitions that tests breath control, fingerwork, tonguing, and musical expressiveness to the extreme. Yet Chen delivered a near-flawless performance; "prodigy" seems the only fitting label. He navigated every challenging passage with complete fluency, exuding a poise and confidence beyond his years. His effortless command of the stage made it easy to forget he's just a middle schooler.

In our interview, Li lavished praise on the young talent: "That was simply phenomenal – it shocked me. It's not just that he could play the piece; from a stylistic, technical, tonal colour, and rhythmic standpoint, he handles the instrument with such ease and masters the music so confidently." Li's assessment pinpointed the essence of Chen's appeal: a wholehearted immersion in the music paired with masterful control of the instrument.

Teaching breeds excellence

Crediting Chen's flair to Zhu Wukun's nurturing, Li underlined: a teacher's artistic peak sets the student's ceiling. "You can only guide students to your own heights," he said. As Li's own pupil, Zhu exemplifies artistic succession: channelling techniques and pedagogy across generations to raise the bar. This lineage fuels the Greater Bay Area's recent bassoon boom.

Li noted that boosting regional or national music standards demands widespread access. Since 2009, Li's team has run the Beijing International Bassoon Festival to popularise the instrument across China. Over a decade on, he noted that the bassoon has gone from niche to hot ticket, with enrolment soaring. The Great Bay Area youths at Zhuhai's masterclass embodied this shift, swelling the talent pool for standouts.

Li also spotlighted his partnership with Jinbao*** ethnic instruments, as their endorsed artiste. In their bassoon's nascent days, he advised on tuning, keys, even cases. Such artiste-maker synergy propels China from maker to marque.

Li candidly admitted that a decade ago, domestic bassoons faced quality scepticism. But through persistent efforts, makers like Jinbao have made strides in craftsmanship and



Bassoon professor Li Lansong teaches young bassoonists from the Greater Bay Area (GBA) during the master class in Zhuhai earlier this month. – Photos provided by the students' parents



Zhu Wukun performs a tango piece originally written for cello at Aksen Concert Hall, accompanied by pianist Irene Leong.



standards. "I believe Jinbao now holds a solid place in China, and their exports to Asia and South America are going great," he said, adding that while top-tier materials still lag behind global leaders, Jinbao bassoons excel in intonation, tone, and overall quality.

I also own a Jinbao bassoon that's met all my band-playing needs, at just a fraction of the cost of European student models.

Coda

I recall Zhu emphasising inter-city collaboration in a prior interview****: "Macau has just 600,000 people, Zhuhai two million—less than a district in my birthplace Chengdu or Beijing." He argued that pooling teaching resources, sharing venues, and fostering musician exchanges would create regional win-wins and elevate standards.

This aligned perfectly with that evening's revelations. If venues like Aksen Concert Hall were shared across the Greater Bay Area, their value would multiply. Likewise, frequent circulation of master teachers like professors Li and Zhu, plus talented players like Chen, would immensely benefit students everywhere.

*The bassoon is a woodwind instrument known for its distinctive, rich tone and wide range. It is typically made of wood, although some modern versions are made from synthetic materials. The bassoon has a long, tubular body with a conical shape, a double reed mouthpiece, and multiple keys that allow the player to produce different pitches. – Poe

**Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778–1837) was a prominent Austrian composer, pianist, and conductor, known for his contributions to the Classical and early Romantic music eras.

***Jinbao is a well-known Chinese manufacturer of musical instruments, particularly recognised for producing brass and woodwind instruments. – Poe

****Past interview with Zhu: <https://macaupostdaily.com/news/15287>



11-year-old Chen Xuxin performs the first movement of Hummel's F Major Bassoon Concerto, accompanied by pianist Irene Leong. – Photo: William Chan



New FM Commissioner Bian pays courtesy calls on chief judge, prosecutor

Tony Wong

The newly appointed Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR), Bian Lixin, has paid separate courtesy calls, after assuming office late last month, on Court of Final Appeal (TUI) President Song Man Lei, and the prosecutor-general (chief public prosecutor) of the Public Prosecutions Office (MP), Tong Hio Fong.

During her meeting with Tong on Friday, according to a statement by the commissioner's office that day, Bian praised the contributions made by the MSAR's Public Prosecutions Office in safeguarding national interests, supporting the MSAR's executive-led governance, promoting judicial cooperation, and maintaining Macau's long-term prosperity and stability.

Bian underlined that the commissioner's office will continue to fulfil its functions and duties in accordance with the law, maintain close communication with the Public Prosecutions Office, and vigorously support its external exchanges and cooperation.

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



Newly appointed Foreign Ministry Commissioner Bian Lixin (fourth from left) and Court of Final Appeal (TUI) President Song Man Lei (fourth from right) pose for a group photo with other officials on the sidelines of Thursday's meeting at the Court of Final Appeal in Nam Van Lake district, including Deputy Commissioner Cheng Lei (third from right).

providing the Public Prosecutions Office with guidance and assistance in engaging in international judicial assistance and cooperation.

Tong pledged that the Public Prosecutions Office will strengthen its communication with the commissioner's office with the aim of further expanding the MSAR's external exchanges and cooperation in the judicial field.

During her meeting with Song on Thursday, according to a statement released by the commissioner's office late on Thursday night, Bian praised the contributions made by the MSAR's Court of Final Appeal in safeguarding judicial fairness, upholding and improving

the MSAR's executive-led system, and maintaining Macau's long-term prosperity and stability.

Bian underlined that the commissioner's office will continue to fulfil its functions and duties in accordance with the law, maintain close communication with the Court of Final Appeal, and vigorously support its external exchanges and cooperation.

During Thursday's meeting, according to the statement, Song welcomed Bian to her new role in Macau and expressed gratitude to the commissioner's office for providing the MSAR's courts with guidance and assistance in engaging in external exchanges and cooperation.

Song pledged that the Court



Foreign Ministry Commissioner Bian Lixin (fourth from right) and Prosecutor-general Tong Hio Fong (fourth from left) pose for a group photo with other officials on the sidelines of Friday's meeting at the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) in Zape, including Deputy Commissioner Cheng Lei (third from left).

- Photos: commissioner's office

of Final Appeal will strengthen its communication with the commissioner's office with the aim of promoting the high-quality development of the MSAR's external affairs concerning the rule of law.

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

well as Legislative Assembly (AL) President André Cheong Weng Chon.

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 Macau-based entities established by the central government, 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). ■

Spring Festival weather set to be warm, humid

Khaleh Vallo

Macau can expect to see mild and humid weather conditions during the Spring Festival, with temperatures on the rise since Saturday and forecast to reach around 26 degrees Celsius today, (Chinese New Year's Eve), according to a statement by the Meteorological and Geophysical Bureau (SMG) on Friday.

According to the local observatory, the Chinese New Year (CNY) weather will be influenced by a warm and humid air current brought by a weak ridge of high pressure, leading to higher daytime temperatures over the coming days.

The statement noted that the maximum temperature today could reach about 26 degrees Celsius, close to the historical record of 26.2°C recorded since 1952.

Relative humidity during mornings and nights may reach or even exceed 99 percent, with mist or fog expected, according to the statement.

Due to reduced visibility, drivers are advised to remain alert and drive carefully, the statement noted.

According to the statement, the observatory forecast that a northeast monsoon will arrive tomorrow, the first day of the Chinese New Year (CNY), bringing light drizzle at first, followed by stronger winds and a slight drop in temperature.

From the second day of the Year of the Horse, the weather is predicted to become drier, with mostly cloudy skies and occasional sunny intervals, the bureau said. Residents are advised to pay attention to weather changes and dress appropriately for outdoor activities. ■



This photo downloaded from the Meteorological and Geophysical Bureau (SMG) yesterday shows its weather forecast for the Spring Festival.

MGTO chief expects up to 80,000 spectators for CNY float parade

Ida Cheong

Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) Director Maria Helena de Senna Fernandes told reporters on the sidelines of a blessing ceremony on Saturday that this year's Chinese New Year (CNY) float parade is expected to attract 70,000 to 80,000 on-site spectators, or up to about 11 percent of Macau's population.

The blessing ceremony for the CNY float parade's celebration of the year of the Horse was held in Praça do Lago Sai Van (Sai Van Lake Plaza) on Saturday.

In the runup to the Chinese New Year (CNY) holiday period, hotel industry sources indicate that the hotel booking rates have already exceeded 80 percent, with the final average booking rate expected to surpass 90 percent, Senna Fernandes said, adding that hotel room rates might see a slight increase as the events and float parades approach, but, overall, the rates were expected to remain comparable to those in the last few years. She also said that the authorities will monitor and address any abnormal surges in hotel pricing.

Senna Fernandes said that around 1,300 performers from Macau, Hong Kong, the Chinese mainland, Italy, the Philippines, Portugal, South Korea, and Spain will take part in the parade, adding

that the capacity of the venues remains similar to last year, with no significant changes.

This year, firework performances will be integrated with drones for the first time. Previously held as separate events, this combination marks Macau's first attempt, aiming to deliver a novel experience and extending New Year wishes, Senna Fernandes added.

According to a MGTO statement, the annual CNY parade will take place on Thursday and February 28 in the vicinity of Praça do Lago Sai Van and the northern district respectively, featuring 17 floats, performances and firework display combined with drones.

The statement noted that over 4,200 spectator seats will be provided at five seating stands for the parade on the 3rd day of the CNY (February 19), comprising Praça do Lago Sai Van, Avenida Dr. Sun Yat-Sen (孫逸仙大馬路), the square in front of the Kun Iam Ecumenical Centre in Nape, the roundabout in front of the Macau Science Centre (MSC), and the Macau Fisherman's Wharf complex. The seats will be taken on a first-come, first-served basis.

Meanwhile, the "ZAPE Gallop Gala", which began on Friday, will be held through March 1 in the vicinity of Rua de Cantão (廣州街) and Rua de Pequim (北京街) in celebration of the Spring



Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) Director Maria Helena de Senna Fernandes talks to reporters after traditional ceremony for blessing the upcoming Chinese New Year (CNY) float parade in Praça do Lago Sai Van on Saturday. - Photo: Ida Cheong

Festival (as the Chinese New Year is also known) and Valentine's Day, which was celebrated on Saturday, aiming to bring a greater flow of people into the community for spending, driving positive interaction between destination marketing and community development, the statement said, adding that several integrated resort operators have launched special offers with attractive prizes such as star-rated hotel accommodation, dining and movie coupons. For more information about the activity, please visit: <https://zapegallopala.vangou.com/index-EN.html>. ■

Xi extends Chinese New Year greetings to ring in Year of Horse



President Xi Jinping, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, delivers a speech at a reception to usher in the Chinese New Year at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Saturday.

— Xinhua

BEIJING — President Xi Jinping yesterday extended Spring Festival greetings at a reception in Beijing to usher in the Chinese New Year — the Year of the Horse.

At the Great Hall of the People, Xi, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, conveyed New Year greetings on behalf of the Party Central Committee and the State Council to all Chinese people at home and abroad.

Describing the ending Year of the Snake as extraordinary, Xi said China met difficulties head-on and made new progress in the face of a complex and volatile environment at home and abroad, elevating China's economic strength, scientific and technological capabilities, national defense capabilities, and composite national strength to new heights.

Over the past year, China's economy withstood pressure and sustained growth, demonstrating strong resilience and vitality, Xi said.

Addressing the reception attended by over 2,000 people, Xi noted China's solid

progress in various fields, including law-based governance, cultural undertakings, ecological conservation, and defense, over the past year.

Xi emphasized several milestones, such as outlining the blueprint for the 15th Five-Year Plan period (2026-2030), commemorating the 80th anniversary of the victory in the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War, establishing the Taiwan Recovery Day, celebrating the founding anniversaries of the Xizang Autonomous Region and Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, and holding the 15th National Games in Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao.

China put forward the Global Governance Initiative, successfully hosted the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit and the Global Leaders' Meeting on Women. These efforts, he said, brought much-needed certainty and positive energy to a world fraught with changes and turmoil.

Anti-corruption efforts yielded notable results as the CPC steadfastly exercised the full and rigorous self-governance, Xi said.

He attributed such big achievements to the concerted efforts of the entire party and people of all ethnic groups across the nation.

The year 2026 marks the 105th anniversary of the founding of the CPC and the launch of the 15th Five-Year Plan. Xi called for advancing high-quality development, maintaining social harmony and stability, and consistently exercising full and rigorous Party self-governance, so as to strive for a sound start for the next five years.

The Spring Festival marks the beginning of the traditional Chinese New Year. The Year of the Horse will begin on February 17.

In Chinese culture, the horse embodies vigor, strength and resilience, symbolizing steady progress and lasting prosperity, Xi said.

Xi encouraged the Chinese people to maintain high morale and forge ahead on the new journey of Chinese modernization in the Year of the Horse.

Li Qiang presided over the reception. Senior officials Zhao Leji, Wang Huning, Cai Qi, Ding Xuexiang, Li Xi and Han Zheng were also present at the event.

— Xinhua



Party and state leaders Xi Jinping (4th left), Li Qiang (4th right), Zhao Leji (3rd left), Wang Huning (3rd right), Cai Qi (2nd left), Ding Xuexiang (2nd right), Li Xi (left) and Han Zheng attend a reception to usher in the Chinese New Year at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Saturday.

— Xinhua

Authory predicts over 285 million inter-regional trips on first day of Spring Festival holiday

BEIJING — Over 285 million inter-regional passenger trips were predicted across the country yesterday, the first day of this year's nine-day Spring Festival holiday.

The figure represents a 10.5 percent increase from the same period last year, the Ministry of Transport said yesterday.

Trips by road are expected to increase 10.8 percent year on year to total 268.75 million

yesterday, while journeys by rail and air are predicted to rise 4.3 percent and 6.4 percent. Waterway passenger trips yesterday are expected to surge 28.1 percent year on year.

The Spring Festival, which is also known as Chinese New Year, falls on February 17 this year. Though the official holiday lasts for nine days, this year's travel rush began on February 2 and will continue until March 13.

— Xinhua

China to grant visa-free policy to Canadian, British nationals from tomorrow

BEIJING — To further facilitate cross-border travel, China has decided to, starting from tomorrow, extend its visa-free policy to ordinary passport holders from Canada and the UK, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said yesterday.

According to the spokesperson, ordinary

passport holders from the two countries can be exempted from holding a visa to enter China and stay for up to 30 days for business, tourism, family/friends visit, exchange and transit purposes.

The policy will be effective until December 31 of this year, the spokesperson said.

— Xinhua

Xi's article on key tasks of China's current economic work to be published

BEIJING — An article by Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, on the key tasks of the country's current economic work will be published today.

The article by Xi, also Chinese president and chairman of the Central Military Commission, will be published in this year's fourth issue of the *Qiushi Journal*, a flagship magazine of the CPC Central Committee.

Drawing from a speech delivered by Xi at the Central Economic Work Conference last December, the article highlights that domestic demand will remain a focus in building a robust domestic market.

It will be essential to enhance innovation-driven development to

accelerate the cultivation of new growth drivers, the article says.

The article underscores the need to deepen reform to enhance the momentum and vitality of high-quality development, and the need to continue opening up to promote win-win cooperation in various fields.

Coordination in development should be promoted to facilitate integrated urban-rural development and regional synergy, and efforts should be made to promote a comprehensive green transformation with carbon emissions peaking and carbon neutrality as the goals, according to the article.

It also emphasizes prioritizing the improvement of people's livelihoods and the active, prudent management of risks in key areas.

— Xinhua

FM urges Norway to play constructive role in China-Europe ties

MUNICH – Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on Saturday called on Norway to play a constructive role in the stable development of relations between China and Europe.

Wang, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, made the remarks while meeting with Norwegian Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference (MSC).

China has always viewed its relations with Norway from a strategic and long-term perspective, said Wang, adding that China is ready to maintain close exchanges with Norway at all levels, deepen cooperation in various fields, and sustain the sound and stable momentum of bilateral ties.

Noting that multilateralism is a consensus at this year's MSC, Wang said that multilateralism should not mean acting as one pleases, nor should multipolarity be dominated by a few major powers. All parties should abide by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter and safeguard the international system

based on international law, he said.

To this end, Wang said, President Xi Jinping has proposed an equal and orderly multipolar world, in which "equal" means all countries, regardless of their size, have the right to participate in global affairs, and "orderly" means all parties should jointly abide by international law.

As both China and Norway support multilateralism and free trade, the two countries should further strengthen communication and coordination, Wang added.

For his part, Eide said that Wang's speech at the MSC clearly articulated China's propositions on reforming and improving global governance, which highly align with Norway's position.

Norway attaches great importance to its relations with China and hopes to continuously strengthen dialogue and cooperation, Eide said.

Norway is also ready to work closely with China in multilateral mechanisms such as the World Trade Organization to jointly safeguard multilateralism and free trade, he added. — Xinhua

China ready to work with Canada for healthy, stable development of ties: FM

MUNICH – China stands ready to work with Canada to promote the healthy, stable and sustainable development of bilateral relations, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said on Saturday.

Wang, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, made the remarks while meeting with Canadian Foreign Minister Anita Anand on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference.

Wang said that Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's recent visit to China had yielded fruitful results, fully demonstrating that the new Canadian government is pursuing a new policy toward China, which serves the common interests of both countries and is a completely correct choice.

President Xi Jinping and Carney have reached a consensus on building a new strategic

partnership between China and Canada, providing strategic guidance for better development of bilateral relations, Wang noted.

China is willing to work with Canada to implement the important consensus reached by the two leaders, remove obstacles and resume exchanges and cooperation in various fields, so as to promote the sound, stable and sustainable development of bilateral ties, said Wang.

For her part, Anand said that Carney's visit to China was very successful and has opened a new era in Canada-China relations.

She thanked the Chinese side for granting visa-free treatment to Canadian citizens, and expressed the hope that the two sides will maintain close dialogue and cooperation, strengthen people-to-people exchanges, and promote the positive and steady development of bilateral relations. — Xinhua



People visit a flower market in Yuexiu District, Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, yesterday. China is alive with vibrant celebrations with the Spring Festival just around the corner. — Xinhua

FM warns against Japan's challenge to post-war international order

MUNICH – Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi urged vigilance against recent dangerous trends in Japan, stating that the Japanese leadership's erroneous remarks regarding the Taiwan question directly challenge China's sovereignty and the post-war international order.

Wang, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, made the remarks at the "China in the World" session at the 62nd Munich Security Conference, where he delivered a speech and answered questions on Saturday.

Responding to a question about China's responsibility for the re-escalation of tensions in the Asia-Pacific, Wang said he does not agree that the regional situation is increasingly tense. Looking around the world, only Asia maintains overall peace, Wang noted, adding that even recent local conflicts, such as those on the Cambodia-Thailand border, were quickly quelled through the efforts of all parties, with China playing a role. China has become a pillar of peace in Asia and will continue to play a constructive role in regional stability as a significant force for global peace, he said.

However, Wang noted that the Asia-Pacific is not without its challenges, urging vigilance against recent dangerous trends in Japan.

He pointed out that the current Japanese prime minister has publicly claimed that any contingency in the Taiwan Strait would constitute a so-called "survival-threatening situation" for Japan to exercise collective self-defense. This is the first time in the 80 years since the war that a Japanese prime minister has publicly made



Foreign Minister Wang Yi responds to questions after delivering a speech at the "China in the World" session of the Munich Security Conference in Munich on Saturday. — Xinhua

such an outrageous statement, Wang said. He stressed that such remarks directly challenge China's national sovereignty, the post-war international order in which Taiwan was returned to China, and the political commitments Japan made to China. Wang emphasized that China will certainly not accept this, and neither will the 1.4 billion Chinese people!

Speaking in Germany, Wang compared the post-war treatments of history by Japan and Europe. He noted that Germany has carried out a comprehensive liquidation of fascism and enacted laws banning the promotion of Nazism. In contrast, Japan still enshrines Class-A war criminals in a shrine, where Japanese politicians frequently pay homage and revere them as "heroic souls." Such a phenomenon is unthinkable in Europe, Wang said, calling it the root cause of all problems.

The erroneous remarks by the

Japanese leadership on the Taiwan question reveal that Japan's ambition to invade and colonize Taiwan has not died out, and the ghost of militarism is still lingering, Wang emphasized. He recalled that Japan launched its aggression against China and attacked Pearl Harbor in the US under the pretext of a so-called "survival-threatening situation."

The lessons of history are not far away and must be closely examined, Wang said. If Japan refuses to repent, it will inevitably repeat the same mistakes, and kind-hearted people should be vigilant. He reminded the Japanese people not to be blinded and coerced by far-right forces and extreme ideologies again. Wang urged all peace-loving countries to send a warning to Japan: if it tries to go back on its path, it will bring about its own destruction, and if it gambles once more, it will only be defeated faster and suffer a harsher loss! — Xinhua

Pop toy industry gallops into global market for Year of the Horse

GUANGZHOU – As the Year of the Horse approaches, a creative wave from China is sweeping across the global market, carrying millennium-old cultural symbols of auspiciousness.

Blending smart technology, precision craftsmanship and modern aesthetics, Chinese pop toys are winning over consumers both at home and abroad.

In Dongguan, the mainland's largest production base for pop toys, factory lines are operating at full capacity. Guangdong Hayidai Toys Co. Ltd. has seen its sales soar since launching its Year of the Horse series late last year. One of its bestsellers, adorned with a traditional tiger-head cap and holding a gold coin, has seen average daily sales exceed 1,000 units.

"We don't just make static dolls; we focus on the spiritual and experiential needs of young people," said Xiao Senlin, chairman of Hayidai. Beyond traditional plush toys, the company has developed interactive products like a playful gadget that mimics a miniature claw machine.

While some toys focus on "cuteness," others draw inspiration from ancient treasures. Piececool, a brand under Dongguan Weishi Culture Technology Co. Ltd., has reimagined the "Galloping Horse Treading on a Flying Swallow," a bronze masterpiece from the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220).

Using ultra-thin metal sheets of 0.3 mm, designers created a 3D assembly model that features an innovative lighting system, swaying tassels and shimmering pearls. The design leverages advanced processes, such as specialized coating and light-transmitting films that give the metal a colorful, translucent glow.

"While preserving the charm of the original artifact, we make it closer to modern aesthetics," said Ye Zuwei, deputy general manager of Weishi Culture. In 2025 alone, Piececool's export value reached 25 million yuan (about US\$3.6 million), a 15 percent year-on-year increase.

The popularity of these toys is a vivid snapshot of "Made in China" transitioning toward "Created in

China." Dongguan, long known as the "world's factory," now produces one-fourth of the world's anime derivatives and nearly 85 percent of China's pop toys.

According to customs data, Dongguan exported toys to 131 countries and regions in 2025, with a total export value of 23.14 billion yuan.

Wang Xianqing, head of the modern industry research institute at Guangdong Baiyun University, said that the success lies in the unique philosophy of Chinese culture.

"Chinese brands are not just selling products; they are sharing Oriental aesthetics and wisdom to global consumers who are seeking diverse civilizations and spiritual satisfaction," Wang said.

By integrating traditional cultural IPs with modern design, precision manufacturing and global marketing, Dongguan's toy industry has carved out a unique track in the international market, Wang said, adding that China is evolving from a global workshop into a "cultural innovator" and "lifestyle curator." — Xinhua

Thai PM agrees coalition with Thaksin-backed party

Montira Rungjirajittranon

BANGKOK – Thai caretaker Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul's conservative party, which won a stunning election victory at the weekend, agreed to form a coalition with jailed ex-premier Thaksin Shinawatra's party, both announced on Friday.

Anutin's pro-military and pro-monarchy party had its best electoral performance in polls that took place after two rounds of deadly border clashes with Cambodia last year.

It campaigned on a nationalist platform, promising to build a wall on the frontier with Cambodia, keep all border crossings closed and recruit 100,000 volunteer soldiers.

Thaksin's Pheu Thai is Thailand's most successful party of the 21st century but had its worst election result on Sunday, raising questions about the future of the political machine built by the jailed billionaire.

"Although the election results have not yet been officially confirmed, we have a consensus that Pheu Thai will support us in leading the coalition, as planned," Anutin told a news conference at his Bhumjaithai party's headquarters.

Prasert Chanruangthong, secretary-general of Pheu Thai, told reporters the party "is ready to support Bhumjaithai Party in forming the coalition. Other issues will be discussed further".

The latest incarnation of the organisation founded by the telecom billionaire, Pheu Thai came a distant third in Sunday's election, its vote share in the party-list section plunging by more than half.

Voters also appeared to turn their backs on the reformist People's Party, which came second.

Pheu Thai and Bhumjaithai were previously coalition partners, until Anutin pulled out over a Cambodia border dispute scandal last June.

"Our priority is for the country to move forward for the greatest benefit of the people," Prasert said ahead of coalition talks on Friday.

Enduring dynasty

Thaksin is serving a one-year prison sentence for corruption in office, but many observers expect him to be released earlier than scheduled alongside a political agreement.

The Shinawatras have produced no fewer than four Thai prime ministers this century. Pheu

Thai had put forward Thaksin's nephew Yodchanan Wongsawat, a biomedical engineering professor, as their latest nominee for the position.

Thaksin's political clan has for two decades been the key foe of Thailand's pro-military, pro-royalty elite who view their populist brand as a threat to traditional social order.

Some analysts had said Pheu Thai's losses on Sunday marked the end of the Shinawatra dynasty.

But its inclusion in the coalition leaves open the possibility of a political comeback.

The Southeast Asian nation's next administration will need to tackle anaemic economic growth, with its vital tourism industry yet to rebound to pre-COVID highs, and manage fallout over multi-billion-dollar cyberscam networks operating from the region.

Perhaps most pressing is the Cambodia dispute, which erupted into open fighting in July and December, killing scores of people on both sides and displacing around a million altogether.

The conflict was a major factor for many voters, with analysts saying a wave of nationalism propelled Anutin to victory. –AFP



Tourists take photo along the railway track on the popular train street in Hanoi on Friday. –AFP

Philippine senators named 'co-perpetrators' in Duterte ICC case

MANILA – Two sitting Philippine senators have been identified as "co-perpetrators" in former president Rodrigo Duterte's crimes against humanity trial at the International Criminal Court (ICC), documents released by prosecutors show.

Senators Ronald Dela Rosa and Christopher Go are among eight current and former officials named in a document dated February 13 and posted on the court's website.

ICC prosecutors have charged Duterte with three counts of crimes against humanity, alleging his involvement in at least 76 murders between 2013 and 2018 as part of his "war on drugs".

"Duterte and his co-perpetrators shared a common plan or agreement to 'neutralise' alleged criminals in the Philippines [including those perceived or alleged to be associated with drug use, sale or production] through violent crimes including murder," the prosecution document reads.

Dela Rosa, the former national police chief and enforcer of Duterte's drug war, has previously said he believed he faced potential arrest and has not been seen publicly in months.

Go, re-elected in May in a landslide victory, was a key lieutenant of Duterte both during the latter's term as mayor of southern Davao City and while president.

In a statement on Saturday, the senator dismissed the allegations as "entirely unfounded", saying they bore "no relation" to his duties while serving under Duterte.

"Let me be clear, at no time did I have any involvement in, knowledge of, or authority over these allegations," said Go.

A representative of Dela Rosa told AFP they had not yet seen the document.

It was not immediately clear if any of the men named in the prosecution document will face charges in court.

Looming hearing

Duterte is facing a four-day "confirmation of charges" hearing starting February 23, where judges decide whether the prosecution's allegations are strong enough to proceed to trial.

Judges have rejected arguments that the 80-year-old, who was arrested in March last year and transferred to the Netherlands the same day, was unfit to stand trial.

Go and Dela Rosa have been named as co-perpetrators in acts that took place both while Duterte was mayor and later as president.

Former Philippine justice secretary Vitaliano Aguirre II, who served as lawyer for Duterte in cases involving the so-called Davao Death Squad, is also among the eight men named.

The first of three counts against Duterte concerns his alleged involvement as a co-perpetrator in 19 murders carried out between 2013 and 2016 while he was mayor of Davao City.

The second relates to 14 murders of so-called "High Value Targets" in 2016 and 2017 when Duterte was president.

The third charge covers 43 murders committed during "clearance" operations of lower-level alleged drug users or pushers.

These took place across the Philippines between 2016 and 2018, the prosecution alleged. –AFP

Vietnam licenses Musk's satellite internet firm Starlink

HANOI – Vietnam has granted a licence to Elon Musk's Starlink to operate its satellite internet services in the communist country, a government agency said.

The radio frequency regulator said local unit Starlink Services Vietnam Co. can initially deploy four gateway stations and a maximum of 600,000 terminal devices in Vietnam.

The licensing requires Starlink to ensure "no interference with existing radio communication networks", the Radio Frequency Management authority announced on Saturday.

The Starlink system would contribute to "expanding satellite internet connectivity" in the country, it added.

Starlink provides high-speed internet access to remote locations around the world via thousands of low Earth orbit satellites.

Nearly 80 percent of Vietnam's around 100 million people are internet

users, according to the Vietnam Internet Network Information Centre.

But gaps in access to internet service remain in rural and mountainous areas.

Parent company SpaceX, founded by the world's wealthiest person, Elon Musk, did not immediately reply to a request for comment from AFP yesterday.

US-based Starlink says its services in Vietnam are "coming soon", according to an availability map on its website.

Vietnam and the United States are in the process of negotiating a trade deal after Washington imposed 20 percent tariffs on Vietnamese goods last year.

The two countries held a sixth round of talks this month, but have not reached a final agreement.

Vietnam's top leader To Lam will travel to the United States this week for a meeting of President

Donald Trump's "Board of Peace", two sources briefed on the visit told AFP last week.

The board, of which Trump is the chairman, was originally intended to oversee the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip after two years of war, but its charter appears to extend beyond the Palestinian territory.

The first meeting is scheduled to take place on February 19 in Washington.

It was not clear if Communist Party General Secretary Lam would also hold trade talks with Trump.

Vietnam's government has not confirmed or publicly announced the trip.

The Southeast Asian manufacturing hub recorded 8.0 percent growth last year despite the US levies many feared would crush its export-orientated growth model.

Hanoi is targeting double-digit growth this year. –AFP



Students dance during the global action on violence against women and children dubbed "One Billion Rising" (OBR) at St. Scholastica's College in Manila on Friday. –AFP

Singapore mulls regulating 'blind boxes' to curb gambling risks

SINGAPORE – Singapore said it plans to regulate the sale of "blind box" products after the controversial marketing strategy raised concerns worldwide about gambling inducement.

Blind boxes are retail products, typically toys or collectibles, sold in sealed packaging that do not disclose their contents until after purchase.

Consumer advocates and policymakers have raised concerns that the scheme resembles gambling, particularly where buyers pay for a chance to get higher-value or rare items. Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam said in a written reply to

a question in parliament on Thursday, that the city-state was considering legislation making it mandatory for the boxes to disclose the probability of receiving certain items.

"The regulations are being drafted," said Shanmugam, who is also the Coordinating Minister for National Security.

His fellow MPs' "suggestion to have mandatory and standardised odds and probability disclosure will be among the points that will be considered for the regulations", Shanmugam added.

Blind boxes have been popularised in physical toy stores and

online marketplaces and have driven sales for toy makers such as China's Pop Mart, which has six outlets in Singapore, according to its website.

Digital variants, commonly referred to as "gacha" mechanics in online games and mobile apps, similarly involve randomised rewards.

While fans love it, regulators and critics increasingly view it as a predatory practice that blurs the line between shopping and gambling.

There is particular concern for minors, who are among the most vulnerable to the marketing scheme.

Pop Mart did not immediately respond to AFP queries. –AFP

Bangladesh's Islamist-led coalition submits poll complaints

DHAKA — Bangladesh's Islamist-led coalition, which lost its chance to form the country's next government in this week's polls, submitted complaints to the Election Commission yesterday, challenging results in 32 constituencies.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led by Tarique Rahman — the scion of one of the country's most influential political dynasties — celebrated a sweeping victory in the South Asian nation of 170 million after general elections on Thursday.

They were the first polls since a 2024 uprising ousted the autocratic government of former prime minister Sheikh Hasina.

The BNP alliance won 212 seats, compared with 77 for the Jamaat-e-Islami-led alliance, according to the Election Commission.

Jamaat chief Shafiqur Rahman conceded on Saturday, saying his party would "serve as a vigilant, principled, and peaceful opposition".

Newly elected lawmakers are expected to be sworn in tomorrow, after which Rahman is set to become the country's next prime minister.

But yesterday, Jamaat officials submitted their complaints.

"We have identified 32 constituencies where our candidates were unfairly defeated," said senior Jamaat official Hamidur Rahman Azad.

"The election day began smoothly, but the ending was not what we had expected. Fake votes, the circulation of black money (bribes), threats, assaults, and attacks marred the atmosphere."

Police records show that political clashes during the campaign period left five people dead and more than 600 injured.

But despite weeks of turbulence ahead of the polls, voting day passed without major unrest and the country has so far responded to the results with relative calm.

At least two people were killed in post-poll clashes, while scattered acts of vandalism and assaults were reported in several districts, police said.

Both Jamaat-e-Islami and ally the National Citizen Party (NCP) — formed by student leaders who spearheaded the uprising — reported attacks on their supporters.

NCP loyalists marched through Dhaka University campus against the BNP on Friday.

Police spokesman AHM Shahadat Hossain said that police were deployed to keep the peace.

"Over 150,000 police personnel were trained to tackle pre- and post-election violence," Hossain told AFP.

The Election Commission said turnout was 59 percent across 299 of the 300 constituencies where voting was held.

Only seven women were directly elected, although a further 50 seats reserved for women will be allocated to parties according to their share of the vote.

Four members of minority communities won seats, including two Hindus — a population that makes up roughly seven percent in Muslim-majority Bangladesh.

— AFP



Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami party's leader Hamidur Rahman Azad (centre) along with the alliance delegation addresses the media after a meeting with officials at the Election Commission (EC) office in Dhaka yesterday.

— AFP

2 US Marines suspected of theft, trespassing in Tokyo

TOKYO — Two U.S. Marines based in western Japan are suspected of breaking into restaurants in central Tokyo and stealing cash, a case that was recently referred to prosecutors, local media reported yesterday.

In the case referred to prosecutors on Friday, the two men, aged 26 and 20, allegedly stole a total of 27,000 yen (about US\$176) from cash registers at two restaurants in Tokyo's Kabukicho nightlife district on the morning of December 24, Kyodo News reported, citing Tokyo police.

The police also suspect their

involvement in a same-day theft of more than 10 million yen at another Kabukicho restaurant.

Investigators said the two, assigned to the US Marine Corps Air Station in Iwakuni, Yamaguchi Prefecture, may have committed around a dozen thefts in multiple locations across the country since around last fall, the report said.

In a separate case, a US Marine was arrested yesterday in Okinawa Prefecture for allegedly stealing a backpack containing a necklace and other items worth about 780,000 yen, local police said.

— Xinhua

India plans AI 'data city' on staggering scale

Bhuvan Bagga

NEW DELHI — As India races to narrow the artificial intelligence gap with the United States and China, it is planning a vast new "data city" to power digital growth on a staggering scale, the man spearheading the project says.

"The AI revolution is here, no second thoughts about it," said Nara Lokesh, information technology minister for Andhra Pradesh state, which is positioning the city of Visakhapatnam as a cornerstone of India's AI push.

"And as a nation... we have taken a stand that we've got to embrace it," he told AFP ahead of an international AI summit next week in New Delhi.

Lokesh boasts the state has secured investment agreements of US\$175 billion involving 760 projects, including a US\$15 billion investment by Google for its largest AI infrastructure hub outside the United States.

And a joint venture between India's Reliance Industries, Canada's Brookfield and US firm Digital Realty is investing US\$11 billion to develop an AI data centre in the same city.

Visakhapatnam — home to around two million people and popularly known as "Vizag" — is better known for its cricket ground that hosts international matches than cutting-edge technology.

But the southeastern port city is now being pitched as a landing point for submarine internet cables linking India to Singapore.

"The data city is going to come in one ecosystem... with a 100 kilometre radius," Lokesh said. For comparison, Taiwan is roughly 100 kilometres wide.

'Whole nine yards'

Lokesh said the plan goes far beyond data connectivity, adding that his state had "received close to 25 percent of all foreign direct investments" to India in 2025.

Stabbing in Osaka leaves teen dead, 2 injured as suspect flees

TOKYO — A 17-year-old boy was killed, and two other boys were injured after they were stabbed in central Osaka, western Japan, late Saturday, local media reported.

The police received an emergency call around 11:55 p.m. local time reporting that people had been stabbed on the first floor of a building located

"It's not just about the data centres," he explained while outlining a sweeping vision of change, with Andhra Pradesh offering land at one US cent per acre (three per hectare) for major investors.

"I'm chasing the companies that make those servers that go sit in those data centres, the companies that make the entire air conditioning, the water-cooling system — the whole nine yards."

The 43-year-old, Stanford-educated minister is the son of Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu, who helped turn Hyderabad into a major technology hub that is dubbed "Cyberabad".

They are allies of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who will host the AI Impact Summit from today.

India is now third in a global AI power ranking — sitting above South Korea and Japan — based on more than 40 indicators from patents to private funding calculated by Stanford University's Institute for Human-Centered AI.

With more than a billion internet users, India has seen a surge of investment as generative AI players seek inroads to the world's most populous country.

Microsoft said in December it will invest US\$17.5 billion to help build the country's artificial intelligence infrastructure, with CEO Satya Nadella calling it the firm's "largest investment ever in Asia".

But critics say India lags in access to high-end computing power or commercial AI deployment, and remains more a consumer than creator of the cutting-edge technology.

Some question whether data centres will create meaningful employment when up and running, but Lokesh rejects that.

"Every industrial revolution has always created more jobs than it has displaced," he said.

"But it has created those jobs in countries that have embraced the industrial revolution."



This photograph taken on January 4 shows information technology minister for India's Andhra Pradesh state Nara Lokesh speaking during an interview with AFP in New Delhi. — AFP

'Learnt from China'

Lokesh argues that the jobs and economic benefits would more than compensate for the giveaway cost of land.

He said the state government had accounted for the vast electricity and water demands for the energy-hungry industry, and would tap "surplus water" that drains into the Bay of Bengal to cool the massive data centres.

"It's a crime that so much water during monsoons goes into our oceans," he said.

He cited China as an inspiration — admiring how India's rival had "been able to systematically bring people out of poverty" at speed.

The state's plan to create industrial clusters was something he had "learnt from China".

With a target of six gigawatts of data centre capacity — three already signed and another three in the pipeline — Andhra Pradesh is betting that speed and scale will give it an edge.

New Delhi last year agreed to "in-principle approval" for six 1.2 GW nuclear power plants at Kovvada in Andhra Pradesh.

"We are on a journey," Lokesh said. "We will execute these projects at a pace that the country has never seen".

— AFP

in Osaka's busy Dotombori shopping area, Kyodo News reported, citing the Osaka police.

A young man suspected of carrying out the stabbings in the area with many eateries has fled on foot and remains at large, the report said.

The deceased victim from Nara Prefecture sustained stab wounds

to the chest and other areas and was pronounced dead at the scene, while the two other 17-year-old boys were taken to hospital with injuries, according to police.

The attacker, believed to be in his twenties, knew the three victims, and they had a dispute shortly before the attack, police said.

— Xinhua

Double-decker bus overturns in southern Thailand, over 40 injured

BANGKOK — A double-decker bus overturned in southern Thailand yesterday, resulting in injuries to more than 40 people, among whom over 10 were seriously injured, according to Thai media reports.

Local media Khao Sod reported that police in southern Thailand's

Trang Province received a case report stating that a double-decker bus had overturned on a road in the province that day.

The bus, with 52 people on board, set off from Phuket on Saturday and was originally scheduled to arrive in Betong

District, Yala Province, at noon yesterday.

The injured have been taken to the hospital for treatment, and the cause of the accident is still under investigation. The passengers on the vehicle said that the driver might have been driving while tired.

— Xinhua

Iran says ready for nuclear compromise if US lifts sanctions

TEHRAN – Iran is ready to compromise on its stockpile of highly enriched uranium in exchange for US sanctions being lifted, its deputy foreign minister said in a BBC interview published yesterday.

Majid Takht-Ravanchi's remarks followed a resumption of nuclear talks between Iran and the United States in Oman last Monday.

Switzerland on Saturday announced that a new round of talks would take place in Geneva next week, but without specifying which day.

Iran has not yet officially confirmed the new round of talks, but Takht-Ravanchi, who was in Iran's Oman delegation led by Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, said they would be on tomorrow, the BBC reported.

Western countries, led by the United States as well as by Israel, Iran's arch-enemy and considered by experts to be the only nuclear power in the Middle East, accuse the Islamic republic of seeking to acquire nuclear weapons.

Tehran denies having such military ambitions, but insists on its right to this technology for civilian purposes.

Iran is ready to compromise to reach an agreement with the United States including diluting its highly enriched uranium, but Washington must lift its sanctions which are crippling Iran's economy, Takht-Ravanchi said, according to the BBC.

"If we see the sincerity on their (American) part, I am sure we will be on a road to have an agreement," he said, speaking in English.

The BBC said he was also questioned about the possibility of Tehran agreeing to ship its stockpile of more than 400 kilograms of highly enriched uranium out of the country and did not rule out a compromise, staying "it is too early to say" what will happen at the talks.

Several countries, including Russia, have offered to take responsibility for the stockpile, an offer Iran has so far refused.

Considerable uncertainty surrounds the fate of Iran's stockpile of more than 400 kilograms of 60-percent enriched uranium that was last seen by nuclear watchdog inspectors last June 10, before Israeli and US strikes against Iranian nuclear sites.

Iran had been enriching uranium to 60 percent, well above the 3.67 percent limit allowed by the now-defunct 2015 nuclear agreement and close to 90 percent needed to make a bomb, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency.

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly called for zero enrichment in Iran.

"The issue of zero enrichment is not an issue any more and as far as Iran is concerned, it is not on the table any more," Takht-Ravanchi told the BBC.

The Fars news agency, citing a foreign ministry official, reported yesterday that the talks would also cover potential American investments in Iran's energy sector.

—AFP

Gaza civil defence says Israeli strikes kill 12



Palestinians displaced from their homes destroyed by Israeli military strikes, gather as they mourn during the funeral of several Palestinians killed in an overnight Israeli strike, according to medics at Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis, in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday.

—AFP

GAZA CITY – Gaza's civil defence agency reported that Israeli strikes killed at least 12 people since dawn yesterday, while a military official said the attacks were in response to ceasefire violations.

Despite a US-brokered truce that entered its second phase last month, violence has continued in the Palestinian territory, with Israel and Hamas blaming each other for violating the agreement.

The civil defence agency, which operates as a rescue force under Hamas authorities, said one strike hit a tent of displaced people in northern Gaza and another targeted an area in the south.

Five people were killed and several injured when an air strike targeted a tent sheltering displaced people in Jabalia in the north, the agency said in a statement.

Five more were killed and several injured in a separate early morning strike in the southern city of Khan Yunis, the agency said, adding that one more was killed in Israeli shelling in Gaza City.

It also said Israeli gunfire killed one person in Beit Lahia in north Gaza.

The Al-Shifa and Nasser hospitals confirmed receiving at least seven bodies.

"Israel doesn't understand ceasefires or truces," said Osama Abu Askar, who lost his nephew in the Jabalia attack.

He said the people were killed as they slept.

Funeral prayers

"We've been living under a truce for months, and they've still targeted us. Israel operates on this principle – saying one thing and doing another," Askar told AFP.

Dozens of relatives and mourners gathered at Nasser Hospital, where the bodies of some of those killed were laid out in white shrouds.

Men and women prayed before the funeral, facing the corpses in the hospital compound.

A military official said Israel attacked in response to Hamas violations of the ceasefire.

"The violation included an identification of several armed terrorists who took cover under debris east of the yellow line and adjacent to IDF troops, likely after exiting underground infrastructure in the area," the official said.

"Crossing the yellow line in the vicinity of IDF troops, while armed, is an explicit ceasefire violation, and demonstrates how Hamas systematically violates the ceasefire agreement with intent to harm the troops."

Under the terms of the ceasefire, which took effect on October 10, Israeli troops withdrew to behind a so-called "Yellow Line", although they still control more than half of the Palestinian territory.

Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem in a statement yesterday accused the Israeli military of violating the ceasefire.

"Targeting of displaced people in their tents is a serious violation of the ceasefire agreement," Qassem said.

Gaza's health ministry, which operates under Hamas authorities, says at least 601 people have been killed since the truce began.

Israel says at least four of its soldiers have been killed in the same period.

Media restrictions

Media restrictions and limited access to Gaza have prevented AFP and other news organisations from independently verifying casualty figures or freely covering the fighting.

International medical charity Doctors Without Borders, meanwhile, said it had suspended its "non-critical" work at Nasser Hospital after staff reported seeing gunmen there and weapons being moved.

"We don't know who these armed men are or if they belong to any group," MSF told AFP.

During the war, the Israeli military accused Hamas of using hospitals as command centres to attack its forces.

"The obvious question is: where was MSF until now?" COGAT, the Israeli defence ministry body for Palestinian civilian affairs, wrote on X.

"If MSF now acknowledges Hamas's deep presence in a hospital they work in, why has it repeatedly refused basic transparency – such as submitting staff lists – to ensure its organisation has not been infiltrated by Hamas operatives?"

Israel has said it will terminate all MSF activities in Gaza and the occupied West Bank from March 1 after the charity did not provide names of its Palestinian staff.

MSF says it did not do so because Israel failed to give assurances the staff would be safe.

—AFP



Demonstrators take part in a march in support of the people of Iran by members of the American-Iranian community in Los Angeles on Saturday. The demonstration comes after the bloody crackdown on protesters last month, while US President Donald Trump has been massing warships in the Middle East and declared Friday that a change of government in Iran would be the "best thing that could happen". —AFP

Trump tells Hamas to proceed with 'Full and Immediate' disarmament

WEST PALM BEACH – US President Donald Trump yesterday urged Hamas to move forward with disarmament under his plan for postwar Gaza, and said members of his so-called "Board of Peace" had pledged US\$5 billion to the Palestinian territory's reconstruction.

"Very importantly, Hamas must uphold its commitment to Full and Immediate Demilitarization," Trump said in a post on his Truth Social platform, ahead of a Thursday meeting of the board in Washington.

Disarmament is a key part in the second phase of the US-brokered ceasefire plan sealed in October between Israel and the Palestinian militant group to end the war triggered by Hamas's attack on Israel in October 2023.

The United Nations endorsed the plan in November.

The second phase stipulates that Israeli forces gradually

withdraw from Gaza and Hamas should disarm, with an international stabilization force deployed to ensure security.

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

Both sides accuse each other daily of ceasefire violations.

Although originally intended to oversee Gaza's rebuilding, the charter for the "Board of Peace" does not seem to limit its role to the Palestinian territory.

"The Board of Peace has unlimited potential," Trump said yesterday in his post.

After an initial meeting on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos last month, the board is due to meet Thursday in the US capital.

Countries have been asked to pay US\$1 billion for permanent

membership of the board, and the invitation for Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose country invaded Ukraine in 2022, has drawn criticism.

Key US allies including France and Britain have expressed doubts.

Trump said the US\$5 billion in pledges by member states would be formally announced then, and that members also "have committed thousands of personnel to the International Stabilization Force and Local Police to maintain Security and Peace for Gazans."

Trump has said the organisation will work "in conjunction" with the United Nations.

"The Board of Peace will prove to be the most consequential International Body in History," he said.

Under the ceasefire plan, a Palestinian technocratic committee has also been set up with a goal of taking over governance in the battered Gaza Strip.

—AFP

French 'ultra-left' behind killing of right-wing youth: justice minister

PARIS – The “ultra-left” in France was behind the deadly beating of a French youth aligned with the far right whose death has inflamed political tensions in the country, the justice minister said yesterday.

Gerald Darmanin also accused hard-left politicians, including from the France Unbowed (LFI) party, the largest left-wing faction in parliament, of fuelling violence with their language.

The victim, identified only as Quentin, aged 23, had been hospitalised and placed into a coma on Thursday after being attacked in the southeastern city of Lyon.

Supporters said he was providing security at a protest against an appearance by Rima Hassan, an LFI member of the European Parliament, at the Lyon branch of the Sciences Po university when he was assaulted by a gang of rival activists.

The office of the Lyon prosecutor on Saturday told AFP he had died of his wounds. An investigation has been opened into suspected aggravated manslaughter, it added.

“It was clearly the ultra left that killed him,” Darmanin told RTL television.

“There are indeed speeches, particularly from France Unbowed and the ultra-left, which unfortunately lead to unbridled violence on social networks and then in the physical world,” he said.

“Words can kill,” Darmanin added, accusing Hassan and LFI leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon of “not

having a word to say for the family of the young man”.

Calls for calm

Lyon prosecutors have yet to give details on the circumstances of the killing.

According to the Nemesis collective, which is close to the far right, Quentin was providing security for its protesters and was assaulted by “anti-fascist” activists.

The family’s lawyer said in a statement that Quentin appeared to have been ambushed by “organised and trained individuals, vastly superior in number and armed, some with their faces masked”.

LFI lawmaker Eric Coquerel, speaking to Franceinfo, condemned “all political violence” but said the activists responsible for Hassan’s security “were in no way involved in what happened”.

He pointed instead to a particular “context” in the southeastern city marked by violence from “far-right groups”.

Three-time presidential candidate Marine Le Pen, who is still hoping to stand in 2027 despite a graft conviction, said on X that the “barbarians responsible for this lynching” should be brought to justice.

With tensions between France’s far right and hard left intensifying ahead of the 2027 presidential election, centrist President Emmanuel Macron has called for “calm” and “restraint”. –AFP



A demonstrator dressed as a clergyman holds a cross reading “Pray for Quentin” as others hold French flags during a rally after the fatal beating in Lyon of 23-year-old Quentin, in Paris yesterday. –AFP

US forces board ship in Indian Ocean that fled Caribbean blockade: Pentagon

WASHINGTON – US forces boarded an oil tanker in the Indian Ocean that violated President Donald Trump’s blockade of sanctioned vessels in the Caribbean and fled the region, the Pentagon said yesterday.

The Panamanian-flagged Veronica III “tried to defy President Trump’s quarantine – hoping to slip away. We tracked it from the Caribbean to the Indian Ocean, closed the distance, and shut it down,” the Pentagon said on X.

The post included a video of US forces boarding a helicopter and

then boarding the tanker ship.

The Pentagon intercepted the Aquila II in similar fashion about a week ago.

In December, Trump ordered a “blockade” of sanctioned oil vessels heading to and from Venezuela. At least nine ships have been seized thus far.

But those ships seized in recent months make up only a tiny fraction of the total number of sanctioned “shadow fleet” vessels operating worldwide to evade sanctions, which a senior US Coast Guard officer said number up to 800. –AFP

Rubio says US does not want ‘vassal’ Europe on visit to Trump’s allies

León Bruneau

BRATISLAVA – US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said yesterday that the United States does not want a “vassal” Europe, the day after a speech where he called on Europeans to embrace US President Donald Trump’s vision for “renewal” of the global order.

“We’re not asking Europe to be a vassal of the United States,” Rubio said during a brief visit to Bratislava, following his appearance at the Munich Security Conference.

“We want to be your partner. We want to work with Europe. We want to work with our allies.”

Rubio told European leaders in Munich that they should rally behind Trump to defend “Western civilisation,” which Rubio said is in danger of “erasure” by mass migration and cultural and industrial decline.

Friends of MAGA

Rubio moved on from Munich to some of Trump’s staunchest right-wing allies in Europe. He met with Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico and then flew to Budapest where he is to meet nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban today.

At a press conference with Fico, Rubio asserted that Trump wanted to strengthen ties with Central Europe.

He also emphasised that it was in the US interest to have “a strong Europe” more broadly at a time when transatlantic relations are turbulent. He rejected the notion that the United States would feel threatened by a more independent Europe.

Fico has embraced a similar strand of right-wing nationalism to Trump and cultivated close ties with Trump’s MAGA movement.

During a recent visit to Trump’s Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida, Fico reportedly expressed concern about the US president’s mental state, according to Politico, which cited anonymous European diplomats. Washington and Bratislava vehemently denied the report.

The Slovak leader said after the Mar-a-Lago meeting that he and



US Secretary of State Marco Rubio (left) and Slovakia’s Prime Minister Robert Fico shake hands at the end of a joint press conference in Bratislava, Slovakia, yesterday. –AFP

Trump had had “extremely important” discussions on nuclear energy.

Slovakia shares a 100-kilometre border with Ukraine and Fico yesterday praised Trump’s “approach” to the war there, which he described as “rational and pragmatic”. Fico said however that the conflict would not be resolved in the near future.

Rubio said he appreciated the remarks and the stakes for Slovakia, saying that the US role is to “facilitate an end to a very deadly, very bloody, very, very costly war, with horrible suffering”.

The US chief diplomat then departed for Budapest, where Orban is facing his toughest electoral challenge since returning to power in 2010.

Trump has openly supported the Hungarian nationalist leader, whom he describes as a “strong and powerful man,” ahead of parliamentary elections on April 12.

Orban’s Fidesz party trails opposition leader Peter Magyar’s TISZA party in opinion polls.

A boost for Orban?

In a speech on Saturday, Orban pledged to continue his fight against “bought pseudo-civil organisations, journalists, judges and politicians”.

His rhetoric often echoes Trump, and he has cast himself as a European friend of Trump’s

MAGA movement.

Many American conservatives admire Orban’s hardline anti-immigration stance, resistance to LGBTQ rights and war against “gender ideology”.

Orban has announced plans to travel to Washington next week to attend the inaugural meeting of Trump’s “Board of Peace”.

Energy diplomacy

During a visit to the White House last year, Orban secured Hungary an exemption from US sanctions on importing Russian oil and gas.

Former Democratic president Joe Biden had a more hostile relationship with Orban, whom he accused of “looking for a dictatorship” in Hungary, including by muzzling independent media.

Slovakia and Hungary have sought to keep warm ties to the Kremlin since Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Both depend heavily on Russian fossil fuels, and both have found themselves locked in a standoff with the European Union over the decision to end imports of Russian gas.

Washington is seeking to strengthen energy ties with its two right-wing allies, and energy was discussed by Rubio in Bratislava.

According to US officials, it is expected to come up again in Budapest. –AFP

9 Nigerian children freed after church kidnapping

Lagos, Nigeria

LAGOS – Nine children abducted at gunpoint from a Roman Catholic church in central Nigeria last week have been freed, according to local authorities.

The worshippers were abducted on February 8 while praying at St John’s Catholic Church in the Ado local government area of Benue state.

The abduction added to a series of mass kidnappings in Nigeria that drew international scrutiny, notably from the United States, over the grim security situation in Africa’s most populous country.

“The rescued children, comprising six girls and three boys, are receiving care and support,” Solomon Iorpev, an adviser to

Benue state governor, said in a statement late Saturday.

“The governor, who received the news of the rescue in high spirits, appreciated the effective collaboration between the conventional security and the local vigilante groups that ensured the safe return of the victims,” Iorpev added.

No details of the operation were given.

Benue is part of Nigeria’s so-called Middle Belt region, which has seen clashes between farmers and herders over land and natural resources, as well as kidnappings by armed criminals.

While the practice of paying ransoms to kidnappers is illegal in Nigeria, the government is

suspected of regularly paying cash.

The police did not immediately respond to an AFP request for comment.

Mass kidnappings late last year included around 300 Catholic school children and staff.

The abductions drew US ire and President Donald Trump said Nigeria’s Christians face persecution. The Nigerian government and experts rejected the accusation, saying that the country’s myriad conflicts kill both Christians and Muslims, often without distinction.

Following the kidnappings, Nigerian President Bola Tinubu declared a state of emergency in November and launched a recruitment drive for more soldiers and police. –AFP

Relatives of Venezuela political prisoners begin hunger strike Caracas

Andrea Tosta

CARACAS — Relatives of political prisoners in Venezuela launched a hunger strike Saturday outside a prison in Caracas, as talks drag on over the adoption of a promised amnesty law.

The historic amnesty is the centerpiece of reforms undertaken by acting President Delcy Rodriguez since US special forces captured the country's longtime leader Nicolas Maduro in a deadly January 3 raid on Caracas.

It aims to turn the page on nearly three decades of state repression, and is expected to cover all charges brought against dissidents who opposed the rule of Maduro and his predecessor Hugo Chavez over the past 27 years.

A mass liberation of prisoners promised on January 8 did not materialize, with authorities instead freeing detainees little by little — leaving dozens of families camped outside prison facilities waiting for answers.

In Caracas, a group of about 10 women wearing medical face masks lay down in a line at the entrance to a national police facility known as Zone 7.

Many of them were sleeping, with one telling AFP, on condition of anonymity: "Sleeping eases the hunger."

"We hope to stay here until everyone is released," Evelin Quiaro, 46, an immigration official and the mother of a political prisoner, told AFP.

Quiaro, whose son has been in detention since November on terror-related charges, said she had eaten her last meal at about 1 am.

"We've already been waiting a very long time," she said, calling the hunger strike "a drastic measure that we believe is necessary to finish this once and for all."

Democratic coexistence'

Hours earlier, National Assembly President Jorge Rodriguez announced the release of 17 prisoners in a post on social



Relatives of political prisoners lie on the ground in front of police officers during a protest outside the Bolivarian National Police (PNB) Zona 7 prison in Caracas on Saturday.

— AFP

media, without naming them.

He called for Venezuelans to "continue this path of peace for the construction of democratic coexistence."

One of those freed was union leader Jose Elias Torres, who had been held since November, an advocacy group said.

The amnesty legislation covers charges of "treason," "terrorism" and spreading "hate" that were used to lock up dissidents, according to the bill text.

But on Thursday, after backing the amnesty bill on a first reading, lawmakers postponed its adoption after failing to reach an agreement on how to apply it.

Pro-government and opposition lawmakers clashed over an article requiring would-be beneficiaries to appear in court to request amnesty.

They agreed to continue the debate on Thursday.

According to the non-governmental organization Foro Penal, 431 political prisoners have been offered conditional release so far, and 644 are still behind bars.

Emil Brandt, regional coordinator for the political party of opposition leader Maria Corina Machado, arrived in his hometown of Barinas on Saturday, after two years in detention.

"It's important to highlight that our work continues. We still have people behind bars, and we will not rest until justice is served and they regain their freedom," Brandt said.

"The people [of Venezuela] deserve to live better, and that will be the case when our leader Maria Corina Machado comes home."

Speaking to a security conference in Munich, Machado did not say when that return might come.

US pressure

Rodriguez, Maduro's vice president, took over as the South American country's leader with the consent of US President Donald Trump — provided that she toes Washington's line.

The United States has taken control of Venezuela's oil sales, with Trump vowing a share for Washington in the profits.

The Trump administration has also pressured Rodriguez to release political prisoners.

As the post-Maduro transition takes hold, the fear once instilled by the state is beginning to dissipate.

Thousands of opposition supporters poured into the streets of Caracas ahead of the debate over the amnesty bill to demand the release of all remaining political prisoners.

— AFP

Argentina charges protesters with terrorism after violence

BUENOS AIRES — The Argentine government charged 17 people with terrorism at weekend after violent clashes with police during a protest against labor reforms that workers fear will leave them much worse off.

Budget-slashing President Javier Milei's chief of staff said on X the individuals had attacked police with stones and bottle bombs.

"The national government has filed terrorism charges against those responsible," Manuel Adorni wrote.

The security ministry published the identities of the 17 and issued warrants for their arrest.

Argentina's Senate voted 42-30 on Thursday to pass labor reforms

that would make it easier to hire and fire workers, reduce severance pay, limit the right to strike, increase work hours and restrict holiday provisions. But the bill is not yet law.

This came a day after demonstrators in the capital Buenos Aires hurled stones and Molotov cocktails at police who responded with tear gas and rubber bullets.

A few dozen people, many hooded and masked, clashed with police blocking access to the parliament as lawmakers inside debated the plans.

More than 20 people were arrested, most of whom were freed the next day.

Chinese experts save rice harvest in Guinea-Bissau after pump failure

DAKAR — At Carantaba Farm in northeastern Guinea-Bissau, the flow of water in the irrigation canals abruptly stopped. Under the dry-season heat, rice paddies began to pale and the soil hardened.

The breakdown threatened more than a single harvest. Carantaba is also a key site for producing improved rice seeds in a country where rice is a staple food.

Planting at the farm is staggered. Seedlings were entering the critical stage, when water demand surges. Any prolonged interruption in irrigation could wither young plants and sharply reduce yields.

Farm technician Luis Fombe paced anxiously around the generator set. The diesel engine roared to life but vibrated violently. The alternator showed no output, the voltmeter needle stuck at zero, and the pumps remained idle.

"Finding original parts here is almost impossible," Fombe said. "Even if we order them, the seedlings cannot wait."

Out of options, he called the Chinese Agricultural Technical Assistance Mission based in Bafata, the second-largest city in the West African country. Two mechanics, Liu Qingguo and Deng Changchun, packed a welding machine and testing tools and drove straight to Carantaba.

Their diagnosis was immediate: multiple faults across power generation, transmission and the water pipeline. With no spare parts available, they dismantled the system, repaired it section by section, and reassembled it piece by piece.

Inside the machine room, an angle grinder shrieked as sparks flew. Crouching near the coupling between the generator and the pump, Deng measured again and again. A substitute part "didn't fit."

"At high speed, even a small deviation can cause strong vibration," Deng explained. "The pump will not lift water, and it could fail."

The team decided to machine the adjustment on site — cutting,

grinding, testing and trying again. When the connectors finally aligned, another problem emerged: the modification had shifted the pipeline out of position. Liu made a quick decision. "Cut it. We re-weld it." The pipe segment was removed, re-angled and welded back into place.

On the third day, Liu pressed the start button. The generator roared back to life. The transmission stabilized. Minutes later, water pressure opened the main canal valve, and irrigation water once again flowed towards the thirsty fields.

"We had no spare parts," farm manager Fonseca Saqui said, shaking hands with the two mechanics. "You worked with what was there, and it runs again. Thank you."

According to Zheng Junjie, head of the 12th Chinese Agricultural Technical Assistance Mission in Guinea-Bissau, China has been sending agricultural experts to the country since 1998. Twelve teams and more than 240 experts have worked across regions including Bafata, Gabu and Oio.

"The goal is not only to help produce more, but to pass on methods," Zheng said. Over the past two years, the mission has helped select 54 rice varieties suited to local conditions and produced more than 30,000 kilograms of improved seeds.

The repair at Carantaba exemplifies an "end-to-end" approach, from field demonstrations to training technicians who understand both agronomy and machinery. More than 26,000 people have received technical training, and agricultural equipment and inputs have been donated to local partners.

As China's Spring Festival approaches, all nine members of the current mission have chosen to remain on duty during the dry-season planting period.

"For people who work the land, nothing beats seeing the water come back, not even New Year dumplings," Zheng said.

— Xinhua



Chinese agricultural experts and local staff members check rice growth at Carantaba Farm in northeastern Guinea-Bissau, on Wednesday.

— Xinhua

Rayo thrash Atletico who 'deserved to lose'

MADRID — Rayo Vallecano waltzed to a 3-0 victory over Atletico Madrid yesterday in La Liga, leaving Diego Simeone's side 15 points behind leaders Real Madrid.

Atletico dropped to fourth after their heavy defeat at Leganes's Butarque stadium, where Rayo hosted the fixture due to pitch problems at their own Vallecas ground.

Fran Perez, Oscar Valentin and Nobel Mendy struck for Rayo, who thoroughly deserved their triumph against an Atletico side that had thrashed Spanish champions Barcelona 4-0 in the Copa del Rey on Thursday.

With the Spanish cup their best chance of silverware this season it has seemed that Atletico have lacked some focus in La Liga, and that was reflected in this humbling by their city rivals.

The Rojiblanco have not won in their last three league matches.

"It seems like the league has slipped away, we can't lose games like this and we can't play a game the way we did today," angry Atletico goalkeeper Jan Oblak told DAZN.

"Competing like this is going to be too tough, you can't choose your games, every game has to be played at the highest level..."

"Today they were much better, congratulations to them, we lost and deserved to lose."

Simeone, who rotated much of the team that beat Barca with Wednesday's Champions League play-off against Club Brugge in mind, did not agree with all of Oblak's analysis.

"I don't share [his opinion], I thought the team gave what it could, they were better, but the truth is there is no need to criticise the team in terms of effort, work, of wanting to do well," said Simeone.

"We didn't have a good match, the opponent was better, congratulations to them and let's think about what's coming on Wednesday."

Indigo Perez's Rayo took the lead in the 40th minute when Perez finished Andrei Ratiu's cross, and Valentin doubled their advantage after Clement Lenglet gave the ball away.

Mendy netted the third in the 76th minute after some more poor Atletico defending to round off a miserable afternoon for Simeone's side.

Rayo, whose players have complained in recent weeks about the way the club is being run, as well as the state of the Vallecas pitch and their training ground facilities, backed by the coaching staff, climbed up to 16th.

"This is a battle-hardened team that adapts well to circumstances," said Rayo coach Perez.

"Today's match was very tough both because of the opponent and because of our own institutional and sporting situation."

— AFP

Flick calls for Barcelona reaction after Atletico Copa thrashing

BARCELONA — Barcelona coach Hansi Flick called on his team to show a "reaction" against Girona today in La Liga after their 4-0 thrashing by Atletico Madrid in the Copa del Rey.

The Catalan giants were pummelled by Diego Simeone's side in the semi-final first leg on Thursday, but Flick believes his team's attitude has improved in the days since.

"Atletico were ready for this fight, it was a Champions League level game and the first 45 minutes were not right," Flick told reporters yesterday.

"We did not have the attitude to be competitive in this situation, in every duel, one against one situation, they were much better, [more] dynamic -- this is what I want from the team."

"Today in training I appreciate what I saw and we have to bring it tomorrow on the pitch."

On Saturday, Real Madrid beat Real Sociedad to move two points ahead of champions Barca at the top of the table.

Flick backed his team's quality to shine through if they pick themselves up after the destruction at the Metropolitano stadium.

"It could happen that you lose against Atletico, a top team, now [we must] go on. We have to focus on the season to the end, it's a long

way, but everything is possible," continued the German coach.

"When we play as a team, everyone 100 percent, we have huge quality. Defeats happen, but it's important how you react. This reaction I want to see tomorrow."

Flick said Brazilian winger Raphinha was fit to face Girona but Marcus Rashford would still be out with a knee issue, although it was improving.

The coach said Raphinha's return was great news for his side.

"He's important. I always said this. We miss him. I think also, you can see it, in the training, everything, he increases the dynamic, the intensity," said Flick.

"This is the good thing. Last season, for me he was the best player in the world."

Flick had complained about some of the refereeing in Barcelona's defeat by Atletico and on Saturday the Catalan club filed an official complaint with the Spanish football federation about inconsistency in arbitration.

However, Flick walked back some of his anger and said his team had to take responsibility for the Atletico loss.

"It was not [the referee's] fault we lost the game," he added. "What we can change, we have to change, and we will do."

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

— AFP/MPD

Leeds survive an FA Cup scare to reach the 5th round



LONDON — Birmingham substitute Patrick Roberts snatched an 89th-minute equaliser at St Andrew's to cancel out Lukas Nmecha's 49th-minute opener for Leeds.

With a feisty fourth round tie level at 1-1 after extra-time, Leeds won the penalty shoot-out 4-2.

Joel Piroe, Dominic Calvert-Lewin, Brenden Aaronson and Sean Longstaff all converted their penalties for Daniel Farke's team.

Tommy Doyle's effort was saved by Leeds goalkeeper Lucas Perri before Roberts fired over the crossbar.

Battling to avoid relegation from the Premier League, Leeds are one win away from reaching the quarter-finals for the first time since 2003.

Wolves also avoided an upset as they won 1-0 at fourth-division Grimsby.

Grimsby stunned Manchester United in the League Cup earlier this season.

But Wolves avoided similar embarrassment thanks to Santiago Bueno's 60th-minute goal from the visitors' first shot on target on a mud-caked pitch at Blundell Park.

Grimsby did not manage to force Wolves' keeper Sam Johnstone into a save until Andy Cook's header in the 90th minute.

It was Wolves' first away win since beating Manchester United in April.

Mired in a miserable season that has left them bottom of the Premier League and almost certain to be relegated, Rob Edwards' side



Arsenal's Brazilian midfielder Gabriel Martinelli (right) tries to cross the ball during the English FA Cup fourth round match against Wigan Athletic at the Emirates Stadium in London yesterday.

— AFP

can still salvage some pride in the FA Cup.

Fulham came from behind to win 2-1 at second tier Stoke.

Cottagers boss Marco Silva made 10 changes from their midweek defeat at Manchester City and nearly paid for the gamble.

South Korean midfielder Bae Jun-ho capped a fine move to put Stoke ahead after 19 minutes.

But Brazilian winger Kevin got his reward for an impressive performance in the 55th minute, sending a first-time shot into the bottom corner.

Harrison Reed completed Fulham's escape act in the 84th minute, intercepting a poor pass

from Stoke keeper Tommy Simkin and slotting home.

Sunderland reached the fifth round for the first time since 2015 as Habib Diarra's controversial penalty clinched a 1-0 win at second tier Oxford.

Regis Le Bris' side went in front after 32 minutes when Dennis Cirkin tumbled under Christ Makosso's challenge.

Referee Thomas Kirk pointed to the spot despite Oxford's protests and Diarra rubbed salt into their wounds as he calmly converted the penalty.

In yesterday's late game, Premier League leaders Arsenal beat third tier strugglers Wigan 4-0.

— AFP

Nagelsmann facing goalkeeper issue ahead of 2026 FIFA World Cup

Football

Oliver Trust

BERLIN — Ahead of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, Germany head coach Julian Nagelsmann is facing an unprecedented goalkeeper crisis.

While 39-year-old Manuel Neuer has ruled out a return and Marc-Andre ter Stegen appears unavailable due to a recurring injury that has sidelined him for months, Oliver Baumann has to step in as the four-time World Cup winner's first choice.

Nagelsmann's issues become evident when discussing the need for additional replacements behind Baumann, as well as the Hoffenheim goalkeeper's lack of experience in major tournaments.

While Germany has, for decades, enjoyed top-class keepers, the upcoming World Cup in Mexico, Canada, and the USA is proving an unpleasant challenge.

MANUEL NEUER

The Bayern Munich keeper this week has once again refused

to return to international football, instead committing himself solely to club duties.

A final decision on whether to extend his career beyond the end of this season is expected in the upcoming months.

"I have the best German keeper around and will enjoy that fact," Bayern's coach Vincent Kompany said, adding, "We are in all three competitions, and I won't waste energy when it comes to next season."

Bayern said it's up to Neuer to stay or end his career.

MARC-ANDRE TER STEGEN

The 33-year-old experienced an injury setback after transferring from Barcelona to La Liga rival Girona.

Nagelsmann said the door is not entirely closed for the 33-year-old, but his return in time for the tournament is highly unlikely.

Ter Stegen's injury break is expected to last at least two months, making a return for the World Cup unlikely.

OLIVER BAUMANN

While the Hoffenheim goalkeeper has earned praise for his current league performances and recent national team appearances, his limited international experience is a topic of discussion.

Turning 36 this summer, Baumann is stepping into the limelight having previously been third choice.

Nagelsmann said Baumann will be the team's number one at the World Cup, with Neuer wishing Baumann "all good wishes" for the tournament.

ALEXANDER NUBEL

The 29-year-old Stuttgart keeper seems an outside candidate after recent inconsistent performances.

While Nubel is on loan at Stuttgart from Bayern, the latter is counting on Jonas Uebig as a potential Neuer successor. Germany's record international Lothar Matthaus has pleaded to convince Neuer to stay or sign an experienced keeper.

— Xinhua

History-maker Brignone completes Olympic fairy tale as Shiffrin's medal misery continues

Terry Daley

MILANO CORTINA 2026 —Federica Brignone completed a Winter Olympic fairy tale yesterday after claiming her second gold of the Milan-Cortina Games, as out-of-sorts Mikaela Shiffrin again missed out on the medals.

Italian veteran Brignone started her home Olympics by being one of her country's flag bearers for the opening ceremony, and she made history on the piste by becoming the first Italian woman skier to win gold in two events at the same Games after triumphing in the giant slalom.

The 35-year-old was already the new Olympic super-G champion and her achievements in Cortina d'Ampezzo are all the more remarkable for her having barely recovered from a broken leg suffered 10 months ago.

"I would exchange my medals to come back and not have this injury, of this I am sure," said Brignone, such was the pain endured since from her horror crash in April last year.

Nonetheless Brignone joins men's skiing icon Alberto Tomba in being the only Italians to take double gold in the same Games, Tomba winning the slalom and giant slalom in Calgary in 1988.

"It was such a surprise, a great surprise even to be here that all I did was try to stay relaxed, enjoy every moment," Brignone told reporters.

"I never felt any pressure. If I had had to come to the Olympics last year, with the idea of having to perform I would have found it a lot harder.

"That was the key, my secret, and I'm surprised about how well I've managed the mental side of things, because that is not easy."

'In her own league'

Brignone delivered two super smooth runs yesterday to finish 0.62sec ahead of joint silver medallists Sara Hector of Sweden and Norway's Thea Louise Stjernesund, and become Olympic and world champion in her favoured discipline.

Hector and Stjernesund, who



Tied silver medallists Norway's Thea Louise Stjernesund (centre) and Sweden's Sara Hector (right) react as Italy's Federica Brignone wins the gold medal in the women's giant slalom event during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at the Tofane Alpine Skiing Centre in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy yesterday.

— AFP

posted the same times in both runs, paid tribute to Brignone by bowing down to her at the finish as fans in the stands cheered in delight.

"I said to Sara, we should bow for 'Fede,'" said Stjernesund.

"Not just for the gold here, but for the super-G and for her being back... She was in her own league today, so it was not about hundredths [of seconds] and then you have to just bow."

Brignone's triumph extended by three days her own record as the oldest gold medallist, man or woman, in the history of her sport, performing incredibly again in brilliant sunshine despite near-constant pain from her career-threatening injury.

She did it on a course which for the second run was set by Shiffrin's coach Karin Harjo who pitched a slower, turn-heavy course in the hope of favouring her star charge.

But Shiffrin, who has an all-time women's record of 22 giant slalom wins on the World Cup circuit, was again below par, seventh in the first run and 13th in the second to place 11th overall.

'Very cool' Brignone

The 30-year-old hailed Brignone's

achievements, the American magnanimous and philosophical after another disappointing day following her an underwhelming display in the team combined which cost her and Breezy Johnson a podium finish.

"It is very, very cool to see that," said Shiffrin of Brignone.

"Her injury was so bad. The amount of rehab that she has been going through and pushing. The mentality that she has to trust sending it down the hill."

"I wish I could explain how impressive that is. The greatest giant slalom skier of this time is the Olympic gold medallist."

Shiffrin now only has Wednesday's slalom - her specialist discipline - in which she can bid to end her eight-year Olympic medal drought.

She left the 2022 Beijing Games without a single medal from six races, failing to even finish in three, but in the intervening years has established herself as the greatest of all time with a record 108 wins on the World Cup circuit.

Her last Olympic medal came with victory in the giant slalom during the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea.

— AFP

Medal Table



Order	NOC	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
1	Norway	11	6	7	24
2	Italy	8	4	10	22
3	USA	5	8	4	17
4	Sweden	5	5	1	11
5	France	4	7	4	15
6	Austria	4	6	3	13
7	Germany	4	5	4	13
8	Netherlands	4	4	1	9
9	Switzerland	4	2	3	9
10	Japan	3	5	8	16
11	Australia	3	1	1	5
12	Czechia	2	2	0	4
13	Slovenia	2	1	0	3
14	Great Britain	2	0	0	2
15	Canada	1	3	5	9
16	Republic of Korea	1	2	2	5
17	Brazil	1	0	0	1
17	Kazakhstan	1	0	0	1
19	China	0	2	2	4
20	Poland	0	2	1	3
21	Latvia	0	1	1	2
21	New Zealand	0	1	1	2
23	Finland	0	0	3	3
24	Bulgaria	0	0	2	2
25	Belgium	0	0	1	1



What they said as India beat Pakistan at T20 World Cup - reaction

India captain Suryakumar Yadav

COLOMBO — India thrashed Pakistan by 61 runs in a blockbuster T20 World Cup match in Colombo yesterday to book their spot in the Super Eights stage of the tournament.

AFP Sport picks out some of the best reaction:

"I think this is for India. We played the same brand of cricket that we wanted to play. Batting first was the better option on this wicket."

India captain Suryakumar Yadav

"We believed in our spinners and they had an off day today. Execution was missing when it came to bowling. We [still] believe in our spinners, they've done well in the last six months."

Pakistan captain Salman Ali Agha

"Ishan [Kishan] thought out of the

box. After 0-1, someone had to take responsibility and the way he took it was amazing."

Suryakumar

"India v Pakistan, it's always a special game, not only for us but also for our country as well."

India's man-of-the-match Ishan Kishan

"Winning this against Pakistan will give us a lot of confidence going ahead in the tournament and we will look to keep the momentum going."

Kishan

"There was slight nervousness. But I focused on one ball at a time. The way Ishan batted was brilliant. I told him: 'just keep playing the way you are'."

Pakistan captain Salman Ali Agha

"Ishan [Kishan] thought out of the

India's Tilak Varma

"It was a no contest. Indian bowlers bowled better. You have to hit the pitch and that's how Hardik Pandya started off with the ball. And [Jasprit] Bumrah is a class apart."

Anil Kumble, India spin great on ESPNcricinfo

"There is no contest between India and Pakistan any more. We are talking about this rivalry because of what happens off the field."

Irfan Pathan, former India pace bowler on JioHotstar

"India seem to intimidate Pakistan on the cricket field ... they are so much better in all facets of the game & such a better mentality of coping with the huge occasion."

Former England captain Michael Vaughan on X

— AFP



India's Ishan Kishan plays a shot during the 2026 ICC Men's T20 Cricket World Cup group stage match between India and Pakistan at the R Premadasa Stadium in Colombo, Sri Lanka yesterday.

— AFP

How Kylie Minogue built a wine empire in 6 years

Adam Plowright

PARIS - Australian singer Kylie Minogue says "nothing compares" to performing live, but becoming an international wine magnate in under six years has been quite a thrill for the "Spinning Around" star.

Minogue launched her first own-label wine in 2020 in partnership with celebrity drinks expert Paul Schaafsma, starting with a basic rose but quickly expanding to include sparkling, no-alcohol and premium rose offerings.

The actress and singer has since racked up sales of around 25 million bottles, with her carefully branded products pitched at low- to mid-range prices in dozens of countries.

Britain, Australia and the United States are the biggest markets.

"Nothing compares to performing because that, in the moment, is like the summation of what I do," the 57-year-old told AFP in Paris when asked if the joy of her wine venture compared to the buzz of stepping out on stage.

"But there are definitely parallels."

In Britain, wine sales data regularly show her rose, prosecco and no-alcohol sparkling among the best-sellers in their categories - uncorking a major new revenue stream for the performer-entrepreneur.

Not bad for someone who

confessed this week at the Wine Paris trade show that she knew very little about the industry when she started out.

"I entered the space really genuinely, hand ups, 'I don't know anything about anything, every step is a baby step,'" Minogue told a promotional event last Monday.

"And now I find myself with the terminology and the lingo and the understanding, and I'm like, 'who am I? How did this happen?'" she joked.

Growth areas

Minogue cut an incongruous sight at the fair - the princess of pop with 11 million monthly listeners on Spotify, mixing with wine merchants and aristocratic vineyard owners.

She stayed for two days, holding meetings in a backroom of her stand, which was decked out with flowers and ribbons in the brand's pale pink colour.

Though she played down her wine knowledge, Minogue's business acumen - in conjunction with the hugely experienced Schaafsma - is not in doubt.

"All her products are in the growth areas of the market, so she's in the right place," Patrick Schmitt, editor-in-chief of The Drinks Business industry website, told AFP.

He lists them: affordable rose, Prosecco, pink Prosecco and no-alcohol. She hasn't bothered with an unfashionable red in her 10-bottle range.

"Her brand is built around pink products and pink wines," Schmitt added.

The business model involves buying grapes from wholesale producers in France and Italy, assembling and labelling the wine as her own brand, then selling through mass-market retailers.

Her no-alcohol range - something she says she drinks while touring and is popular among her women friends - is made in Germany and uses grape juice fermented with bacteria which do not produce alcohol.

Chinese green tea is added to give it flavour.

British wine writer Nina Caplan described Minogue's wines as "part of brand Kylie, and as bouncy and approachable as her music, and her persona" in comments to AFP.

"She goes to wine fairs, she meets wine press, she knows what she is selling and why and who she is selling to," she added.

Celebrity vineyards

Minogue is far from the only celebrity in the wine business.

Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie

famously invested in Chateau Miraval in Provence in 2012 before their divorce, while George Clooney and John Malkovich are among other Hollywood stars-turned-vineyard owners in the south of France.

Rapper Jay-Z bought the Armand de Brignac Champagne brand, while former NBA player Tony Parker was also at Wine Paris this week, promoting a Champagne venture.

But Minogue has followed the route of British singers such as Elton John or Gary Barlow from 1990s boy band "Take That" in developing an own-label wine without growing the grapes.

Celebrity ventures are easy to sneer at, says Schmitt, but he gave Kylie's Provence rose a gold medal

in a blind tasting and her basic rose is "best-in-class" at around £10 (11,50 euros, US\$13.5).

Her top-sellers have a ranking of 3.6-3.8 out of 5.0 stars on the Vivino wine-rating app and serious wine publications such as Decanter have given them upbeat reviews.

"I think it's a positive," Schmitt concluded. "Wine is struggling to keep its market share. It's challenged by a younger generation that maybe drink less, and if they do drink, they drink other more affordable products.

"So something that raises the profile of wine, particularly at an affordable price, as long as the product is good, has got to be a positive," he said. - AFP

Ahead of Oscars, Juliette Binoche hails strength of Cannes winners

Romain Fongrives

LOS ANGELES - For Oscar winner Juliette Binoche, the head of last year's jury at the Cannes film festival, it's not hard to understand why the movies that succeeded on the Croisette go on to win accolades in Hollywood.

And it isn't because of reforms made to make the voting members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences more diverse.

"The strength of these films leads to their success," Binoche told AFP in an interview in Los Angeles.

It certainly seems like the Cannes jury made some prophetic choices: the crop of films that premiered at the festival earned a total of 19 Oscar nominations.

Norwegian family drama "Sentimental Value" - which won the second prize, Grand Prix - and Brazilian thriller "The Secret Agent" are both in the running for best picture.

Cannes' top Palme d'Or winner "It Was Just An Accident" and rave-themed road trip movie "Sirat," which took a special jury prize, will compete with those two titles for best international film honours.

"It's because these films are so beautiful, so unique and so strong that they sometimes go against the grain," said Binoche.

"It's not hard to recognize films with their own strength," said the 61-year-old actress who, besides her Academy Award for "The English Patient," has won prizes at the Venice, Berlin and Cannes festivals.

'Reconciliation'

The Academy Awards and the Cannes film festival have not always honoured the same films, with the prestigious event in France often leaning towards works by auteur directors, some of them extremely political.

But about a decade ago, when more international voters were invited to join the Academy in the wake of the #OscarsSoWhite scandal, the prizewinners from the two galas have often converged, and Cannes has embraced its role as an Oscars bellwether.

Over the last five years, two films have won both the Palme d'Or and the best picture Oscar: South Korean class satire "Parasite" and last year's "Anora" from Sean Baker, a darling of US indie cinema.

That has only happened four times in 80 years, and cannot happen this year, with Jafar Panahi's "It Was Just An Accident" not in best picture contention.

So was Panahi's work - which spotlights the dilemmas of a group of ordinary Iranians as they confront a man they believe to have tortured them in jail - not given its due?

For Binoche, "there is no such thing as fair value, because a film just belongs to itself."

"One could criticize the film by saying that it's not totally well acted, but it's just not actors we are used to seeing on screen because he used non-professionals," she explained.

But she added that Panahi, "who wrote this script in prison in

Iran, who went on hunger strike," has highlighted "space... for reconciliation with his executioner."

'Changes lives'

The French film legend says that the most important thing for her about a film "is that it changes lives, changes people's consciences."

Binoche is currently promoting her first directorial effort, which tells the story of an experience that profoundly affected her.

"In-I in Motion" offers a candid look at her preparations for the dance performance she created with British choreographer Akram Khan, which premiered in London in 2008.

The actress says those 120 shows taught her to face her fears.

"Each time, I thought I was going to die," she recalled.

The film features footage of rehearsals, which she edited, and invites the viewer to get a bird's eye view of the unusual creative collaboration between the actress and the dancer.

Binoche says making the documentary has taught her that directing is not so different from acting.

In both cases, "you have to be in sync with your own intuition... you have to believe in what you feel," she said.

After performing in dozens of films, Binoche is eager to get behind the camera again.

But when asked what her next subject might be, she said with a smile, "I can't say any more about it." - AFP



Turkish actress Naz Goktan, (from left to right) Turkish actor Caner Cindoruk, Turkish director Emin Alper, Turkish actor Berkay Ates, Turkish actress Ozlem Tas and Turkish actor Feyyaz Duman pose during a photo call for the film "Kurtulus" (Salvation) presented in competition at the 76th Berlinale, Europe's first major film festival of the year, in Berlin yesterday. - AFP



Men perform with molten iron fireworks in a park in Beijing yesterday ahead of the Lunar New Year of the Horse. - AFP

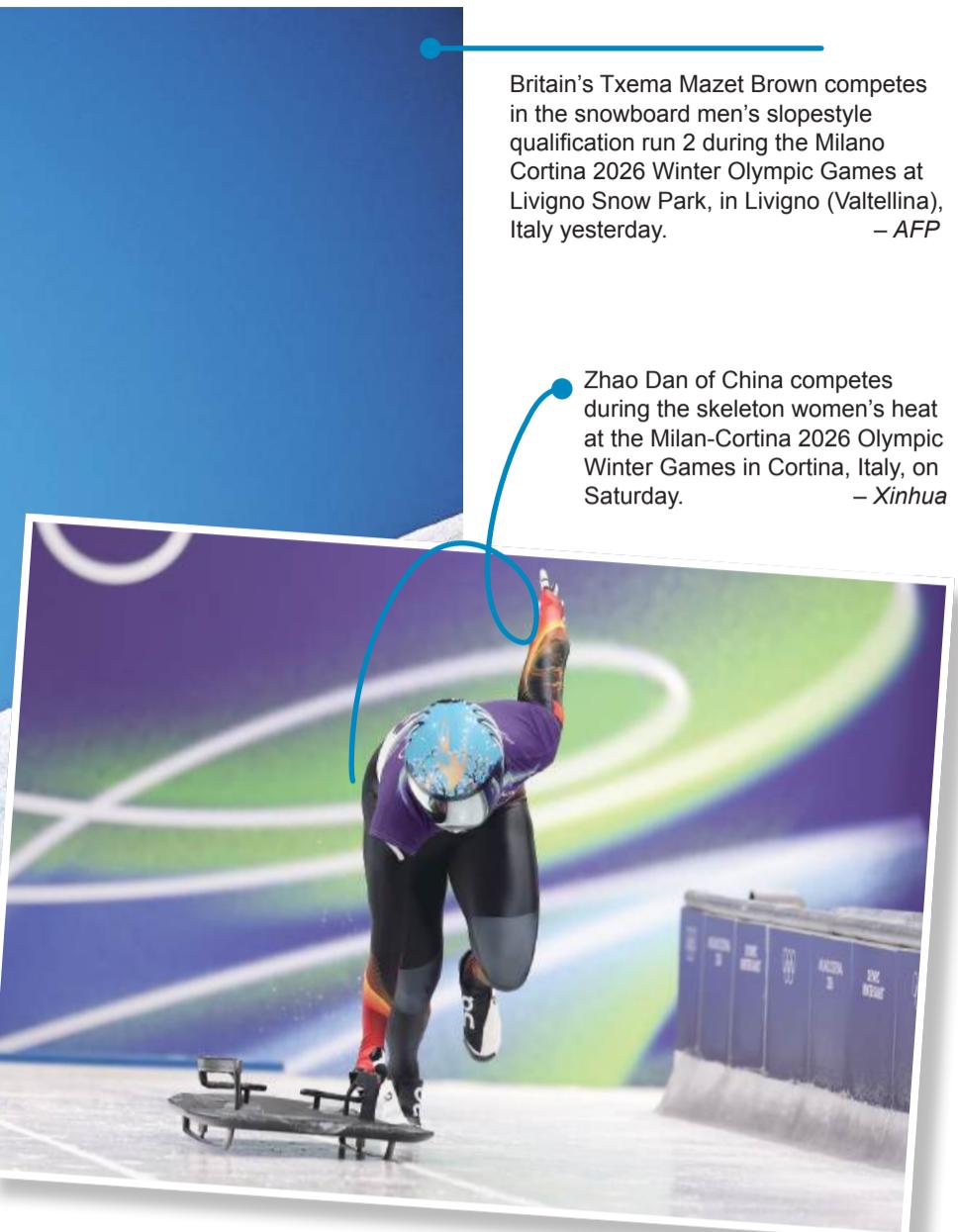
World Weather

CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -6°C~9°C	Manila 22°C~32°C	New York 2°C~6°C	Lisbon 10°C~16°C
Shanghai 3°C~8°C	Bangkok 26°C~35°C	London 3°C~10°C	Rio de Janeiro 22°C~31°C
Hong Kong 18°C~25°C	Tokyo 3°C~13°C	Frankfurt 2°C~8°C	Luanda 25°C~30°C
Taipei 16°C~25°C	Singapore 23°C~31°C	Vancouver 1°C~4°C	Maputo 19°C~28°C
Guangzhou 16°C~29°C	Kuala Lumpur 23°C~31°C	Paris 5°C~11°C	Dili 24°C~31°C
Nanjing 1°C~7°C	Jakarta 23°C~30°C	Moscow -14°C~11°C	São Tomé 25°C~33°C
Guilin 6°C~13°C	Seoul -5°C~7°C	Las Vegas 8°C~20°C	Praia 18°C~27°C
Xi'an 0°C~8°C	Sydney 16°C~25°C	Monte Carlo 9°C~16°C	Bissau 19°C~36°C



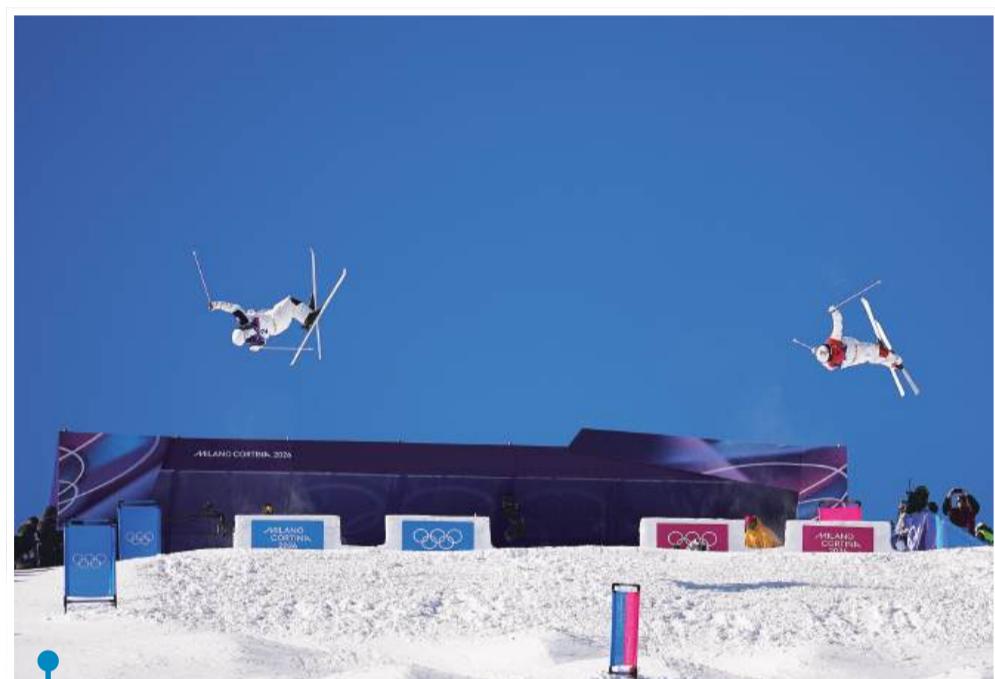
Britain's Txema Mazet Brown competes in the snowboard men's slopestyle qualification run 2 during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at Livigno Snow Park, in Livigno (Valtellina), Italy yesterday.

– AFP



Zhao Dan of China competes during the skeleton women's heat at the Milan-Cortina 2026 Olympic Winter Games in Cortina, Italy, on Saturday.

– Xinhua



Mikael Kingsbury (right) of Canada and Horishima Ikuma of Japan compete during the freestyle skiing men's dual moguls big final at the Milan-Cortina 2026 Olympic Winter Games in Livigno, Italy, yesterday.

– Xinhua



Germany's Patrick Beckert, (from front to back) Germany's Fridtjof Petzold and Germany's Felix Maly compete in the speed skating men's team pursuit quarter-final during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at Milano Speed Skating Stadium in Milan, Italy yesterday.

– AFP



Silver medalist Oceane Michelon of France reacts after crossing the finish line during the biathlon women's 7.5km sprint event at the Milan-Cortina 2026 Olympic Winter Games in Anterselva, Italy, on Saturday.

– Xinhua



Japan's Reira Iwabuchi competes in the snowboard women's slopestyle qualification run 1 during the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games at Livigno Snow Park, in Livigno (Valtellina), Italy yesterday.

– AFP