

# New FM Commissioner Bian vows stronger practice of 'diplomacy benefiting Macau'

Tony Wong

The newly appointed Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR), Bian Lixin, pledged yesterday that the commissioner's office, guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy, will align its work with the new development goals of the nation's 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan, further strengthen the barrier of national security in Macau, correctly and deeply implement the "diplomacy benefiting Macau" principle, assist Macau in expanding external exchanges and cooperation, and fully support the successful hosting of the APEC 13<sup>th</sup> Tourism Ministerial Meeting in Macau (scheduled for June this year).

Bian said that the commissioner's office will also promote international cooperation in the Guangdong-Macao In-depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin to accelerate Macau's appropriate economic diversification, help more Macau young people broaden their international horizons, tell the global community the good story of Macau, and better protect the legitimate rights and interests of Macau compatriots overseas.

Bian made the remarks while delivering a speech at a reception yesterday marking her assumption of office in Macau.

Yesterday's reception was held at the Services Platform Complex for Commercial and Trade Cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking Countries (aka Forum Macao Complex) in Sai Van.

Bian arrived in Macau to assume office on January 30, after the Central People's Government announced on January 23 its decision to appoint Bian as the head of the Office of the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the MSAR.

Bian, a former head of the ministry's Personnel Department, succeeded Liu Xianfa at the helm of the commissioner's office. Liu concluded his five-year tenure in Macau on January 15, 2026.

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

In her speech, Bian noted that on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its return to the motherland, President Xi Jinping paid an inspection visit to Macau in December 2024 and delivered various important speeches, providing guidance and direction for the implementation of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle with Macau characteristics on the new journey.

Bian acknowledged that the MSAR government, uniting and leading all sectors of Macau's civil society, has fully implemented the "patriots governing Macau" principle, upheld and improved executive-led governance, resolutely safeguarded national security, accelerated Macau's appropriate economic diversification, and comprehensively enhanced governance effectiveness.

Bian acknowledged that Macau has solidly advanced its "One Centre, One Platform, One Base" campaign, and established the Service Centre for Economy and Trade between China and Portuguese/Spanish-speaking Countries (with its office in Hengqin) to expand and deepen pragmatic cooperation with relevant countries.

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

Bian noted that this year marks the start of the nation's 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan and Macau's third five-year socioeconomic development plan. On the new journey, Bian said, Macau will undoubtedly play a more significant role in promoting economic diversification through expanding external exchanges and cooperation, pointing out that



Newly appointed Foreign Ministry Commissioner Bian Lixin addresses yesterday's reception at the Forum Macao Complex. — Photo: commissioner's office

the nation's 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan highlights Macau's role as "One Centre, One Platform, One Base" to promote its appropriate economic diversification.

With the joint efforts of the MSAR government and all sectors of Macau's civil society, and with the

great motherland's strong backing, Bian said, Macau will surely seize the opportunity to forge ahead with determination, further expand and deepen international exchanges and cooperation, proactively participate in the high-quality development of the nation's Belt and Road Initiative



(BRI), accelerate its appropriate economic diversification, and better act as an important bridge for the nation's high-standard opening-up.

On the new journey, Bian said, Macau's determined reform in enhancing governance efficiency in external affairs will undoubtedly achieve greater results. Bian noted that Xi has emphasised the need for Macau to uphold and improve its executive-led governance and enhance governance effectiveness, adding that Macau's success since its return to the motherland has proved that executive-led governance offers advantages in upholding fundamental principles while breaking new ground and ensuring consistent policy, effectively enhancing Macau's international competitiveness and global influence.

Continued on p.6

## Melania Trump to preside over UN Security Council meeting

UNITED NATIONS, New York — Melania Trump will preside over a UN Security Council meeting next week, her office has announced, in the first such appearance by a US first lady.

"First Lady Melania Trump is set to make history at the United

Nations, taking the gavel as the United States assumes the Security Council Presidency to emphasize education's role in advancing tolerance and world peace," her office said in a statement on Wednesday.

The meeting at 3 p.m. (20:00

GMT) on Monday will focus on education, technology, peace and security and marks "the first time a sitting US First Lady presides over the Security Council," the statement added.

— AFP



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### China, Germany achieve positive, practical results during Merz's visit to China: MOC

China and Germany conducted in-depth exchanges in the fields of the economy and trade during the visit of a high-level economic delegation, led by German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, to China, the Ministry of Commerce (MOC) said yesterday.

— Story on p. 7

### Chaos as jihadist relatives left Syrian camp, witnesses say

There were scenes of "utter chaos" when thousands of women and children related to suspected Islamic State (IS) jihadists escaped a camp in Syria last month.

— Story on p. 10

### Cuba vows to counter 'terrorist' attacks after clashing with US-based boat

Cuba vowed yesterday to defend itself against "terrorist and mercenary" attacks after reporting it had killed four gunmen on a US-registered boat.

— Story on p. 12

# Norovirus cases rise 2.5 times in Jan: Health Bureau

Kristina Vallesteros

The Health Bureau (SSM) yesterday released its mandatory disease notification data for last month, revealing a significant rise in gastrointestinal infections.

A total of 1,608 cases of notifiable diseases were recorded during the month, the statement said. The three most reported illnesses were influenza with 1,307 cases, the rotavirus with 84 cases, and the norovirus with 74 cases.

According to the statement, norovirus cases increased by approximately 2.5 times compared to December, rising from 21 cases to 74.

Rotavirus cases also showed a marked increase, with 84 cases reported in January.

Approximately 80 percent of

rotavirus cases were linked to a school-related gastroenteritis outbreak. Influenza cases, meanwhile, decreased by 73.1 percent, from 4,855 cases in December to 1,307 in January.

The bureau said that the norovirus is a leading cause of non-bacterial gastroenteritis and can affect all age groups. It spreads through contaminated food or water, contact with vomit or faeces from infected individuals, or contact with contaminated surfaces. Outbreaks are common in institutional settings such as schools and nursing homes during winter.

The rotavirus is an acute gastrointestinal infection primarily affecting young children, with symptoms including fever, vomiting, and watery diarrhoea. It

is transmitted through contaminated food or water, or through contact with infected individuals or contaminated surfaces. Cases are more common in autumn and winter.

Influenza cases totalled 1,307 in January, a decrease of 40.4 percent compared to the same month last year. The bureau noted that influenza is a highly contagious respiratory illness most common in winter and summer months, with vaccination being the most effective preventive measure.

The statement also reported three imported cases of dengue fever and one imported case of chikungunya fever during January. Both are mosquito-borne diseases transmitted by Aedes mosquitoes, with symptoms including fever, joint pain, and rash. ■

## Measures to prevent infection with influenza or other infectious diseases

### ① Overall health

✓ Get seasonal flu vaccine every year

✓ Make sure you and your family get enough sleep every day

✓ Balanced diet

✓ Regular exercise

✓ Avoid alcohol and tobacco

This poster provided by the Health Bureau (SSM) last night promotes ways to reduce the risk of influenza and other infectious diseases. The bureau calls on residents to strengthen personal protective measures.

# Police arrest mainlander for stealing friend's HK\$1 million, gambling away 90 pct

Armindo Neves

The Judiciary Police (PJ) nabbed a man from the Chinese mainland for stealing a male friend's HK\$1 million (1.025 million patacas) on Wednesday, PJ spokesman Cheong Kim Fong said during a regular press conference yesterday.

Cheong identified the suspect as a 37-year-old man surnamed Lu who claimed to be jobless. Cheong said that the victim is a middle-aged mainlander. Both have been friends for only about three months.

According to Cheong, on Tuesday, the victim arrived in Macau with HK\$1 million in cash

in a black backpack and stayed with Lu in a hotel guestroom in Cotai, Cheong said, adding that the victim did not tell police whether he smuggled the money across the border or just withdrew it in Macau.

Around noon on Wednesday, the duo returned to the room to rest, Cheong said, adding that the victim placed the backpack beside the bed before falling asleep.

Waking up around half an hour later, the victim discovered that Lu had left the room and, upon checking the backpack, realised that the HK\$1 million in cash was gone, Cheong said. The victim then reported the matter to the police.

Upon arriving at the scene, Cheong said that PJ officers discovered that the suspect had entered a casino immediately after leaving the hotel room, adding that Lu was intercepted by officers at the casino that same afternoon.

According to Cheong, the investigation revealed that Lu had stolen the money while the victim was sleeping. Lu subsequently gambled away HK\$900,000 of the stolen cash, Cheong said, adding that PJ officers recovered the remaining HK\$100,000 in cash from him.

Lu has meanwhile been transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP), facing a theft charge. ■



Judiciary Police (PJ) spokesman Cheong Kim Fong looks on during yesterday's regular press conference at the PJ headquarters in Zape.

— Photo: Armindo Neves

# Eco-fair MIECF to return next month

Kristina Vallesteros

The 2026 Macao International Environmental Co-operation Forum & Exhibition (2026MIECF) will be held from March 26 to 28 at The Venetian Macao's Cotai Expo, according to a statement issued yesterday by Macau's Commerce and Investment Promotion Institute (IPIM).

The event will run under the theme "Low-carbon, Zero Waste Cities: Embarking on a Global Collaboration." According to the statement, it aligns with Macau's "1+4" economic diversification strategy and the "Macao + Hengqin" regional co-operation framework.

The statement said that the fair's "Green Forum" component will bring together environmental experts and industry leaders from multiple countries to discuss topics including ecological civilisation, waste management systems, green finance, and regional environmental cooperation.

This year's "Green Showcase" will feature three thematic exhibition zones. The statement noted that the inaugural "Zero-waste Circular



This poster provided by the Macau's Commerce and Investment Promotion Institute (IPIM) yesterday promotes the 2026 Macao International Environmental Cooperation Forum and Exhibition (2026MIECF) set to be held from March 26 to 28 at The Venetian Macao's Cotai Expo.

Economy Exhibition Zone" has been established in response to global sustainability trends. It will host energy enterprises, environmental organisations from Portuguese-speaking countries, and technology firms focusing on waste management and green innovation. The other two zones are the "Green Mobility Zone" and the "Green and Low-carbon Project Zone."

A new "Green Synergy Hub" will be introduced to facilitate

business exchanges, featuring a business matching area and networking zone supported by technology systems, according to the statement.

The organisers stated that domestic and foreign buyers will be invited to participate, with the aim of strengthening links with Hengqin and the Greater Bay Area (GBA). Further information is available on the official website <http://www.macaomiecf.com>. ■

# S Korean seaweed snack 'probably' contains plastic contaminants: IAM

Ida Cheong

The Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) has received a report from food safety authorities in Australia and New Zealand that a South Korean seaweed product is being recalled due to the probable presence of plastic fragments, according to a IAM statement.

The statement pointed out that the affected product is "Pinkfong Seasoned Seaweed Flakes" of the South Korean brand KWANG CHEON, with a net weight of 40 grams, and best before date of 2026.08.20.

The statement noted that the bureau is closely monitoring and

following up on the incident, urging the trade to stop supplying and selling the affected product, and advising the public to cease consumption of the problematic batch.

As a precautionary measure, the bureau urges consumers in possession of the implicated product bought online, through a purchasing agent or other channels to stop consuming it immediately, the statement said, adding that any businesses holding the product should immediately cease supplying and selling it and contact the IAM Food Safety Department on 2833 8181. ■



This photo provided by the Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) yesterday shows the problematic product, South Korean "Pinkfong Seasoned Seaweed Flakes", which probably contains plastic contaminants.

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### Macau Weather

MAINLY CLOUDY. MIST. A FEW SHOWERS. POSSIBLE THUNDERSTORMS LATER. FORCE 2 TO 4 EAST TO SOUTHEASTERLY WINDS. RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL RANGE BETWEEN 80% AND 99%.



20°C~24°C

Source: SMG

# 10-day gastronomy-fest slated for March, with 100 booths

Ida Cheong

The 10-day “2026 International Cities of Gastronomy Fest, Macao” will be held from March 20 to 29 at Macau Fisherman’s Wharf, with an additional venue in Zape, featuring 100 food booths, Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO) Deputy Director Jennifer Si Tou Lai Lam announced in an investment and promotion briefing yesterday.

The briefing about the gastronomic event took place at Macau Fisherman’s Wharf Convention and Exhibition Centre yesterday afternoon. The first phase of recruitment for local food and beverage and food retail merchants is open through next Monday.

Si Tou said in a speech that this year’s event will collaborate with multiple UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) members designated as creative cities of gastronomy, featuring five major highlights, namely the “international gastronomic avenue” food booths, creative cities of gastronomy culinary demonstrations, Macau international gastronomy forum, and this year’s new additions – the global wine and spirits lounge as well as the international gastronomy premium products market, the latter in Zape.

The international gastronomic avenue, as the core segment of the event, will bring together 28 regional food booths from the Chinese mainland such as Chaozhou,



Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO) Deputy Director Jennifer Si Tou Lai Lam (centre) and other representatives pose during yesterday’s investment and promotion briefing for the 10-day “2026 International Cities of Gastronomy Fest, Macao” at Macau Fisherman’s Wharf Convention and Exhibition Centre. – Photo: Ida Cheong

Chengdu, Huai’an and Yangzhou, and 32 booths from overseas cities, along with 34 local food and beverage booths and six booths from the city’s integrated resorts, totalling 100 booths, offering eight types of cuisines including Macanese\* and Portuguese dishes, Cantonese cuisine, vegetarian options, Japanese and South Korean delicacies and others, according to a MGTO statement.

Regarding the layout of the exhibition area, Si Tou noted that the event will be divided into multiple zones, including a food exhibition area, a games area, performances, and a dining area. Each zone will set up creative photo spots (known as “da kart” in Cantonese) to attract visitors to take pictures and post them on social media, further enhancing the event’s reach and influence.

This year’s event will take place in late March instead of last year’s event in July due to weather and food safety considerations, Si Tou said, adding that her bureau will continue to hold large-scale events between the outgoing Spring Festival and upcoming May Day holidays.

According to the briefing, in order to alleviate operational pressure on local small and medium-sized enterprises (SME), participation in this event is free of charge; the main venue of the event will be open from Monday to Friday, from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m., and on Saturday and Sunday from 12 p.m. to 10 p.m.; the secondary venue will take place on Rua de Cantão (廣州街) and Rua de Xangai (上海街) in Zape from Monday to Friday, from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m., and on Saturday and Sunday from 3 p.m. to 10 p.m. During the event, a variety of special offers and performances will be provided for visitors and residents. Multiple free shuttle bus services will also be arranged. ■

\* Customarily, the term “Macanese” refers to Macau’s community of mixed Portuguese and Asian descent, as well as their diaspora, accounting for fewer than 2.0 percent of the population. Macanese cookery is a fusion cuisine dating back centuries featuring Portuguese, Chinese, Malay, Indian and other Asian ingredients and recipes. – MPD

## Winners of ‘Sports in Macao’ 2025, 72<sup>nd</sup> Grand Prix photo contests announced

Khalel Vallo

The Sports Bureau (ID) has announced the winners of its photography contests “Sports in Macao” 2025 and the 72<sup>nd</sup> Macau Grand Prix (MGP), with an awards ceremony held at the Mong-Ha Sports Centre yesterday.

Organised by the bureau in conjunction with the Macau Photographic Association, the two competitions were concluded last year.

Officiating guests included the bureau’s Vice-President Mok Chi Hang, Sports Development Department Chief Chao Kuok Wai, and Head of the Macau Grand Prix and Major Sporting Events Department Vong Ka Kun.

Selected works are on display until March 31 at the atrium of the sports centre.

“Hero and Competition”, Chiang Ka Chon won first place, Lam Kok Kun garnered second place, and Tang Kai Lon finished third.

Under the theme “Joy and Physical Fitness”, Tang Kai Lon claimed first place, Kuok Kim Va won second place, and Cheong Chan Hong finished third.

Meanwhile, for the “72<sup>nd</sup> Macau Grand Prix” photography contest, Wong Meng Kin won first place, while Tang Kai Lon and Cheong Chong Leong came second and third respectively.

According to a statement by the bureau yesterday, it will continue promoting sports for all and enhancing public health through diversified sporting activities. Members of the public can visit the bureau’s official website and social media platforms for more information on sports initiatives in Macau. ■

## Film screening aims to promote Chi Lam Vai: concern group vice-convenor



Chi Lam Vai Concern Group convenor-cum-president of the local Na Tcha Temple Association Ip Tat (blue jacket) and the concern group’s deputy convenor-cum-vice president of the association, Tang Kam Chun (white polo shirt), pose with visitors from Caritas Macau’s Hino Luminoso Elderly Centre at the Amigos do Espinho (茨林) café in Chi Lam Vai village on February 7.

– Photo courtesy of Tang Kam Chun

Armindo Neves

“Rainy Moment”, a film dedicated to exploring Macau’s vanishing urban fabric, takes the peninsula’s largest still existing, previously walled, village, Chi Lam Vai (茨林圍), as its central theme.

The Chi Lam Vai Concern Group hosted a film screening with Caritas Macau at the Hino Luminoso Elderly Centre on February 6, according to Tang Kam Chun, the concern group’s deputy convenor and vice president of the local Na Tcha Temple Association, the event aimed to promote and preserve Chi Lam Vai.

Through the camera lens, the film delves into the profound tension between the ongoing changes of the times and the village’s unique but potentially threatened cultural heritage, reflecting on how its small community navigates change while

holding onto memory and identity.

Chi Lam Vai (茨林圍, aka Chi Lam Chuen – 茨林村) known in Portuguese as “Pátio do Espinho”, is a 400-year-old, formerly 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.

Tang pointed out that after watching the film, the centre’s elderly residents were deeply moved. The movie evoked memories of the village’s former environment, and the seniors expressed a desire that the neighbourhood’s endangered environment be preserved, Tang said, adding that the centre organised a group to visit the ancient village on February 7.

Tang expressed hope that the film can be screened more widely for local communities and also be shown at schools, allowing the younger generation to learn about the history of the centuries-old neighbourhood. ■



Sports Bureau (ID) Vice-President Mok Chi Hang (left) and “72<sup>nd</sup> Macau Grand Prix” photography contest winner Wong Meng Kin pose on stage during the awards ceremony held at the Mong-Ha Sports Centre yesterday. – Photo: Khalel Vallo

Pacific Textiles Overseas Holdings Ltd.  
(In Voluntary Liquidation)  
Company No. (618865)

NOTICE is hereby given pursuant to Section 204, subsection (1)(b) of the BVI Business Companies Act, 2004 that the Company is in voluntary liquidation. The voluntary liquidation commenced on 9<sup>th</sup> February, 2026. The Liquidator is Humphry A. Leue of 531 Nottingham Estate, Long Look, PO Box 4754, Road Town, Tortola, VG1110, British Virgin Islands.

Dated 9<sup>th</sup> February, 2026

(Sgd.) Humphry A. Leue  
Voluntary Liquidator



# Tap Seac Gallery displays over 150 works of embroidery from Chongqing & Xinjiang

**Rui Pastorin**

A large-scale exhibition titled “Splendid Colours – Embroidery Art Exhibition from Chongqing and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region” is showcasing a total of 154 sets or pieces at Tap Seac Gallery, with members of the public able to admire traditional embroidery, one of the nation’s most representative traditional arts, until March 15.

Entering the free-admission venue, visitors will find a display of intricate and colourful pieces as well as a glimpse into the craftsmanship that went behind their creation. From traditional garments and accessories to other creative pieces including those that almost look like paintings, visitors will find a variety of displays to admire as well as get an introduction to the various techniques used in their creation. Accompanying these exhibits are also videos and written text to supplement the experience.

The exhibits on display are made up of four types of embroidery: Shu embroidery from Chongqing Municipality,

wedding embroidery from Wuxi, Miao embroidery from Youzhou, and “Xilankapu” (traditional brocade woven by the Tujia people), as well as three embroidery techniques by the Uyghur, Kirgiz and Kazakh peoples from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, according to a recent statement by the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC).

Exhibitiongoers will be able to see the results from the skills and craftsmanship of each work, with the statement adding that the embroidery techniques employed have been “inscribed as national or municipal representative intangible cultural heritage”, as well as that the exhibits have been created by intangible cultural heritage inheritors and masters of arts and crafts.

Moreover, aside from presenting the pieces, the exhibition also aims to become a point of exchange and preservation. This was highlighted in a recent message by IC President Deland Leong Wai Man displayed at the gallery, where she was quoted as saying: “This exhibition serves as a

bridge for cultural exchange, bringing Chongqing, Xinjiang, and Macau together in a shared endeavour to preserve and promote China’s rich cultural traditions, while deepening mutual understanding and strengthening cultural ties among the three regions”.

She added: “These exhibited works are all creations into which the artistes have poured their dedication and craftsmanship. They embody everyday life and distinctive cultural imprints of their places of origin, while also serving as cultural bonds that connect Macau with Chongqing and Xinjiang”.

One may view these items at the gallery, which is located in Praça do Tap Siac (塔石廣場) from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily, with guided tours in Cantonese available at 3 p.m. on weekends. Tours in Putonghua were also offered during the Chinese New Year (CNY) holiday.

More information can be found on [www.icm.gov.mo](http://www.icm.gov.mo).



-Photos taken yesterday by Rui Pastorin

# Legislature's speaker Cheong vows constructive oversight of executive-led governance

Tony Wong

Legislative Assembly (AL) President André Cheong Weng Chon pledged yesterday that the legislature will continue to firmly exercise its functions and powers conferred by the Macau Basic Law, while taking the initiative of upholding Macau's executive-led governance, fully supporting the chief executive and the local government in exercising law-based governance, and enhancing positive interaction with the government.

Cheong also pledged that the local legislature will, through rational, pragmatic, and constructive oversight, help the government identify problems affecting Macau, improve policies and measures, and enhance governance effectiveness.

Cheong made the remarks in a speech during a Spring Festival luncheon hosted by the legislature for local journalists and correspondents working for media enterprises in the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong and Portugal. Macau Government Information Bureau (GCS) Acting Director Louie Wong Lok I also attended the luncheon held at MGM MACAU in Nape.

The current, eighth term of the Macau Special Administrative Region's (MSAR) Legislative Assembly commenced on October 16 last year.

Cheong is a newcomer to the legislature after serving as the MSAR's

secretary for administration and justice between December 20, 2019 and October 15 last year. Cheong is one of the seven members whom Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai appointed to the 33-member legislature. Cheong was unanimously elected by his peers as the hemicycle's speaker during the new legislative term's first plenary session on October 16 last year.

Consequently, yesterday's annual Spring Festival media luncheon hosted by the legislature was the first one that Cheong addressed.

Cheong pointed out yesterday that during a seminar in Beijing late last month hosted by the Chinese Association of Hong Kong and Macao Studies (CAHKMS), Xia Baolong, the director of both the Hong Kong and Macao Work Office (HKMWO) of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office (HKMAO) of the State Council, noted in his speech that when hearing a work report from Sam in December last year, President Xi Jinping raised clear requirements for the MSAR to uphold and improve its executive-led governance.

Cheong noted that Xia's speech last month comprehensively and systematically elaborated on the principle of executive-led governance and set clear requirements for the MSAR's legislature and its members. In particular, Cheong noted, Xia

urged the local legislature to take the initiative in upholding the MSAR's executive-led governance, fully support the MSAR's chief executive and government in exercising law-based governance, and jointly explore new pathways for positive interaction between the executive and legislative organs within the capitalist system.

## Strengthening positive interaction b/w executive & legislative organs in 3 aspects

Cheong underlined that over the past four months since its operational start, the current-term legislature, with the aim of ensuring the implementation of the principle of executive-led governance and promoting positive interaction between the executive and legislative organs, has streamlined legislative procedures, strengthened communication with the government, and established closer liaison mechanisms with the government, fostering mutual understanding and cooperation through regular exchanges between both sides while consolidating a collaborative model based on mutual trust.

More specifically, Cheong said, the legislature has been implementing various new measures to streamline and improve its operations in terms of three aspects, namely, legislative duties, oversight



Legislative Assembly (AL) President André Cheong Weng Chon addresses yesterday's Spring Festival luncheon hosted by the legislature at MGM MACAU in Nape. — Photo: AL

duties, and internal management.

Concerning legislative duties, Cheong said, after assessing previous experience and discussing the matter with the government, the legislature has drawn up new guidelines and working procedures for the scrutiny and review of government-initiated bills, which more clearly define the mechanisms for collaboration between the legislature and the government and the schedules that both sides should comply with during the legislative scrutiny and review process, with the aim of ensuring that legislative tasks will proceed as scheduled and enhancing legislative efficiency and quality.

Concerning oversight duties, Cheong said, the legislature has refined the operating rules of its

three follow-up committees and more clearly defined their functions and powers, according to which, he said, the three committees can set up specialised working groups, whenever necessary, for more in-depth monitoring of key issues.

Cheong noted that the three follow-up committees have set up six working groups. In addition to monitoring issues in Macau, Cheong said, the three follow-up committees are also following up key projects in the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin, with the aim of contributing to its development.

Concerning internal management, Cheong said, with the aim of improving its operational effectiveness, the legislature has set up a new unit directly overseen by him, which is tasked with coordinating duties concerning legal technicalities and logistical support, drawing up the operating rules on the scrutiny and review of government-initiated bills and the three follow-up committees' operating rules, and maintaining close communication with the respective government entities to tackle key and challenging issues.

Moreover, Cheong said, the legislature has optimised the allocation of its advisory team's human resources, and is planning and preparing the setting-up of a new electronic platform for its work. ■

## Sands China extends staff's maternity, paternity leaves

Rui Pastorin

Integrated resort operator Sands China said in a statement yesterday that it is extending staff's paid maternity leave from 70 days to 90 days and paternity leave from 5 days to 7 days, effective from March 1.

The statement from the company, which employs over 28,000 staff, noted that with the updated policy, female employees with at least one year of service are entitled to 90 days of paid maternity leave, while male employees are entitled to 7 days of paid paternity leave.

Sands China Senior Vice President of Human Resources Paulo Cheong (張國軍) was quoted by the statement as saying: "Guided by our people-centred approach, we regard every employee as a valued member of our extended family. We remain committed to promoting their physical and mental well-

being, family happiness, and career development, while maintaining a sustainable and supportive work environment.

He added: "We hope that through this adjustment to paid maternity and paternity leave, employees will have more time to care for and bond with their newborns, while allowing postpartum mothers to get more rest, helping their families adapt more smoothly to the changes brought about by their new lives and build happy and fulfilling families."

Sands China noted that it has introduced a raft of support measures for parents in recent years. Moreover, it was also the first integrated resort operator in the Asia Pacific region and the first company in Macau's tourism and service industry to earn the "Top Employer" certification by the Top Employer Institute. ■

## UN Tourism delegation visits UTM to deepen cooperation

Khalel Vallo

A delegation from the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UN Tourism) visited the public Macao University of Tourism (UTM) on Wednesday to discuss innovation in tourism education and the further development of co-branded programmes, according to a statement by the tertiary education institution yesterday.

The delegation was led by Antonio López de Ávila, director of Innovation, Education and Investments at UN Tourism, and was received by UTM Rector Fanny Vong Chuk Kwan, Vice Rector Connie Loi Kim Ieng and representatives of academic units, the statement said.

During the meeting, both sides exchanged views on advancing innovation in tourism education and cultivating international talent, the statement noted, adding that they also discussed extending their co-branded programmes to the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin.

López de Ávila toured UTM's teaching facilities and reviewed its academic achievements, congratulating the university on its development progress, the statement said, adding that he expressed interest in the public university's integration of smart technologies and data analytics into tourism education, describing its approach as one that drives education through innovation while connecting industry through practice.



This handout photo provided by the Macao University of Tourism (UTM) yesterday shows United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UN Tourism) Director of Innovation, Education and Investments Antonio López de Ávila (centre left) and UTM Rector Fanny Vong Chuk Kwan (centre right) with others posing outside the public university's Educational Restaurant in Mong-Ha on Wednesday.

López de Ávila said he hopes to strengthen cooperation in joint curriculum development, faculty and student exchanges, and international training programmes, according to the statement. Meanwhile, Vong thanked UN Tourism for its longstanding support and said the extension of UTM's campus into the in-depth cooperation zone will create new opportunities for programme development in the coming academic year, the statement noted, adding that she expressed confidence that this will attract more international students and enhance talent cultivation and exchange.

According to the statement, Vong noted that UTM will continue leveraging its partnership with UN Tourism to share the "Macao experience" in global tourism

education. Moreover, the delegation visited UTM's Mong-Ha and Taipa campuses, including training restaurants, teaching hotels and other practical facilities, and interacted with students to understand the university's emphasis on integrating theory and practice, the statement said.

The following day, with support from the Livelihood Affairs Bureau of the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin, the delegation conducted a field visit to learn about the planning and construction of the Hengqin Dezhi Plaza project under the first phase of the Macao-Hengqin International Education (University) Town, the statement noted, adding that they were also briefed on the third-phase development site and plans to expand co-branded programmes in the zone. ■



This photo provided by Sands China yesterday shows The Venetian Macao in Cotai.

## New FM Commissioner Bian vows stronger practice of 'diplomacy benefiting Macau'

Continued from p.1

Bian said that Macau will surely leverage the strengths of its executive-led system to consolidate efforts to expand its international connections, and play a more active role on the international stage.

On the new journey, Bian said, Macau's unique strengths in serving major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics will undoubtedly lead to greater achievements. Bian said that the "One Country, Two Systems" principle with Macau characteristics is a good system for ensuring peaceful coexistence and mutual benefit between different social systems. The values embodied in the cause of "One Country, Two Systems", namely peace, inclusiveness, openness, and sharing, are relevant to not only China but also the whole world, she said.

Bian said that Macau will surely shoulder its mission and leverage its unique strengths to turn the city into an important window of exchanges and mutual learning between Chinese and Western civilisations, making greater contributions to serving major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics in the new era.

In addition to Bian, the reception was attended by Edmund Ho Hau Wah, Macau's first chief executive and now a vice-chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai, Sam's predecessor Ho Iat Seng, Central People's Government Liaison Office in the MSAR Director Zheng Xincong, Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Macau Garrison Deputy Commander Dai Jinsong, Macau Legislative Assembly (AL) President André Cheong Weng Chon, Macau Court of Final Appeal (TUI) President Song Man Lei, and Foreign Ministry Deputy Commissioner Cheng Lei. ■

## China, Germany vital for a changing world

David Gosset

The leaders of the world's second- and third-largest economies met in Beijing on Wednesday. When Chancellor Friedrich Merz sat down with President Xi Jinping, the discussion was bilateral. The consequences may not be.

Last year, China once again became Germany's top trading partner – a reminder that, for all the talk of "de-risking", the gravitational pull between Europe's industrial powerhouse and Asia's manufacturing colossus remains strong. The question facing the two leaders is not whether the relationship matters. It is how the two export-driven manufacturing superpowers can recalibrate their balance in an era when the old equilibrium has clearly shifted.

In relative terms, Germany is losing ground. Nowhere is this more visible than in the automotive sector. Once the uncontested symbol of German industrial supremacy, it is now an arena in which Chinese electric vehicle makers are setting the pace in battery integration, software ecosystems, and price competitiveness. German brands still command prestige, but prestige is no longer enough in a market defined by scale and speed.

And yet, the story is not one of simple decline. German companies continue to thrive in China under a "China for China" logic: producing locally, innovating locally, and tailoring products to one of the world's most dynamic consumer markets. For companies manufacturing chemicals, machinery, and premium autos, the Chinese market is not optional – it is foundational. Disconnection would not merely be costly; it would be strategically self-defeating.

Consider robotics and automation. Merz is expected to visit Unitree in Hangzhou, a symbol of China's rapid ascent in embodied AI and advanced manufacturing. For German industry, long synonymous with precision engineering, remaining plugged into China's innovation ecosystem is no longer a matter of opportunism. It is a matter of survival. To cut oneself off from one of the world's fastest-moving laboratories of industrial innovation would be to accept gradual marginalization.

Merz's trip is part of a striking diplomatic sequence. Coming after visits by French President Emmanuel Macron, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer – four Western leaders in the span of three months – it is clear that engaging Beijing is no longer controversial realism but a strategic necessity. Whatever rhetorical hedges are employed in various capitals, the underlying calculus is shared: one cannot shape the emerging order while ignoring one of its principal architects.

As Carney noted at the 2026 World Economic Forum in Davos in January, and as was reiterated at the Munich Security Conference, the "old order" has dissolved. The post-Cold War moment – anchored in uncontested US primacy and deepening globalization – has given way to something more fragmented and more fluid. The new order's contours remain uncertain, but one constant is evident: Beijing will be central to its formation. Not always loudly, not always dramatically – but persistently.

China is not merely reacting to global change; it is helping shape it. Through industrial policy, infrastructure

diplomacy, standards-setting in emerging technologies, and an expanding role in global institutions, it is quietly weaving itself into the structural fabric of the 21st-century economy. To pretend otherwise is to mistake preference for reality.

This is the context in which Merz must operate. Germany cannot afford naïveté about political differences, market asymmetries, or security concerns. Nor can it afford economic romanticism. Strategic disengagement would be an error of equal magnitude. The task is more demanding: to pursue optimal relations – sincerely cooperative where possible, firm where necessary, clear-eyed throughout – a method that mirrors China's.

What is increasingly evident is that China has become an engine of modernity – in green technologies, digital platforms, smart manufacturing, and urban scale. That modernity is State-shaped, politically conditioned, and strategically ambitious. But it is modernity nonetheless. For Germany, whose prosperity rests on mastering industrial transitions, the choice is not whether to engage. It is how.

Merz's challenge in Beijing is therefore neither to concede nor to confront reflexively. It is to anchor Germany within a transforming global system by recognizing a simple truth: in the world that is emerging, durable prosperity will depend less on choosing sides than on mastering complexity.

*\*The author is a sinologist and specialist in global affairs and Sinology, and the founder of the China-Europe-America Global Initiative.*

*The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.*

## Situation of the investments of the Financial Reserve of the MSAR in the year 2025

Statement by Monetary Authority of Macao (AMCM)

In order to properly manage the budget balance and protect the payment capacity of public finances, the Government of the Macao Special Administrative Region (MSAR) enacted Law No. 8/2011 (Legal Regime of the Financial Reserve), which assigns to the Monetary Authority of Macao (AMCM) the responsibility for ensuring the investments and management of the Financial Reserve. In 2025, the Financial Reserve of the MSAR recorded an investment income of 42.92 billion patacas, with an annual return of 6.9 percent, reaching a new record.

By the end of last year, the Financial Reserve's capital amounted to 666.74 billion patacas, of which the basic reserve represented 167.29 billion patacas and the extraordinary reserve amounted to 499.45 billion patacas.

### Diversified allocation for stable and sustainable development

In the first half of 2025, tariff measures changed the landscape of global trade, and geopolitics became more complex, leading to significant changes in international financial markets, with major equity and bond markets experiencing adjustments. Subsequently, with progress in trade negotiations and the gradual reduction of tariffs, coupled with the adoption of relatively accommodative monetary policies in major economies, supported by expansionary fiscal policies for economic support, as well as ongoing dynamism in the artificial intelligence sector, the prices of risk assets recorded a recovery and gradual increase. Throughout the year, equity and bond markets generally demonstrated resilient performance.

In this context of a complex and volatile financial market, the Financial Reserve made dynamic adjustments in the allocation among various asset classes, adequately optimising the structure of bond and equity portfolios and

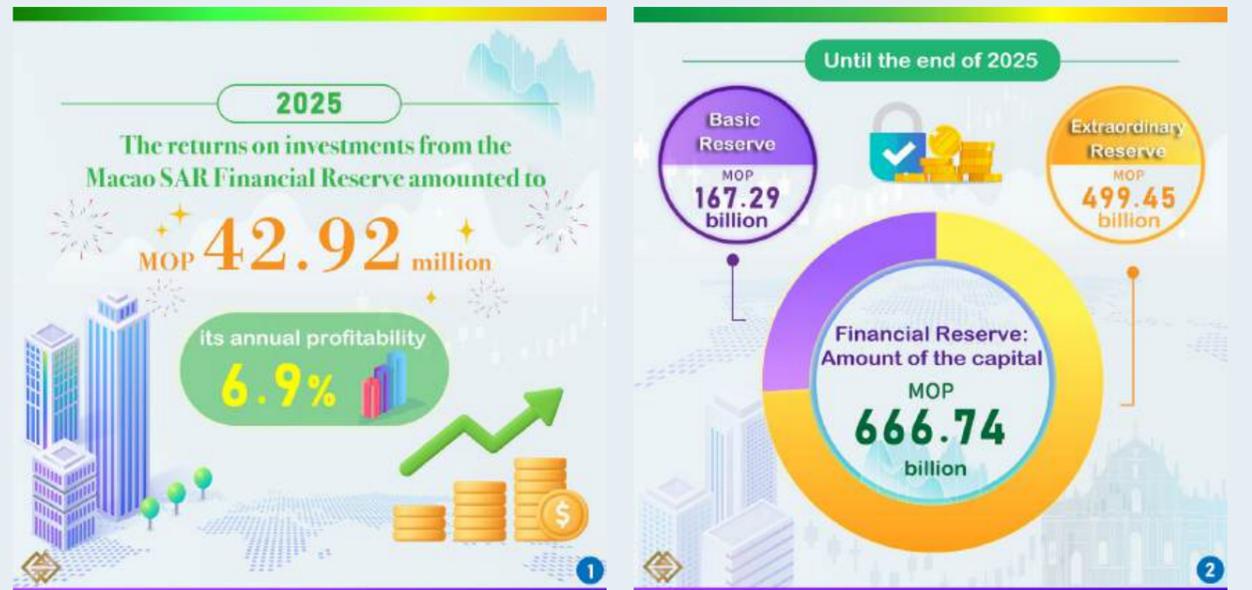
introducing quality assets, with the aim of maintaining liquidity and security in the overall investment portfolio, as well as achieving satisfactory investment returns through a more diversified and balanced asset allocation.

### Management of investments in reserves according to the principle of being "safe, effective, and stable"

Entering 2026, it is anticipated that major global economies will continue to resort to various measures and policies to stimulate economic growth, resulting in a coexistence of opportunities and challenges in the investment environment. The orientation of monetary policies by

major central banks, international trade relations, and the evolution of the geopolitical situation will be important factors to consider in the asset allocation decisions of the Financial Reserve. The Financial Reserve will continue to strictly adhere to the investment principle of being "safe, effective, and stable," balancing return and risk through prudent, flexible, diversified, and balanced asset allocation to achieve the medium- and long-term objective of capital preservation and asset appreciation of the reserve.

N.B. The AMCM statement released yesterday in Chinese and Portuguese has been translated into English by the Post.



## Pragmatic cooperation should continue to be defining trait of Sino-German relations

*China Daily Editorial*

The fourth G7 leader to visit China since December, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz's visit comes at a moment when the gravitational pull of geopolitics threatens to drag economics into rival camps. Yet the very composition of Merz's delegation, about 30 senior executives from companies forming Germany's industrial backbone, sends a different signal: that supply chains, innovation ecosystems and climate imperatives are not obedient to ideological fault lines.

President Xi Jinping put forward three suggestions for the further development of China-Germany relations in his meeting with Merz on Wednesday. Namely, the two countries should be reliable partners that support each other, be innovative partners featuring openness and mutual benefit, and be cultural partners built on mutual understanding and friendship.

The comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries has long been defined by actions and results. Fifty-three years after diplomatic ties were established, bilateral trade reached 251.8 billion euros (US\$297 billion) last year. China has been the largest trading partner of Germany since 2016 except 2024. This is what win-win cooperation looks like in practice – factories humming in Shanghai and Stuttgart, research labs exchanging talent and green technologies codeveloped across sectors.

Merz's itinerary tells a story of industrial evolution. Former German chancellor Angela Merkel's dozen visits to China from 2006 to 2019 often revolved around German auto plants and machinery ventures – symbols of China as the world's workshop. Her successor Olaf Scholz, visiting in 2022 and 2024, highlighted a new-energy joint venture, reflecting China's pivot to the green economy. Now Merz traveled to Hangzhou to tour Unitree Robotics. In two decades, the arc of German chancellors' visits traces China's shift from assembly lines to algorithms – a transformation that presents Germany not with a threat, but with a partner in the new industrial revolution.

This evolution explains why any "decoupling" rhetoric rings hollow on factory floors. Cooperation in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, new energy and advanced manufacturing aligns with Germany's Industry 4.0 ambitions and China's innovation-driven development strategy during the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30) period. The two economies complement each other well – one

strong in precision engineering and industrial systems, the other in scale, digital ecosystems and rapid commercialization.

To that end, it is hoped that Germany will provide a fairer and more equitable business environment for Chinese companies, ensuring that investment reviews, procurement policies and regulatory frameworks remain predictable and non-discriminatory.

Differences do exist, but they need not become barriers to cooperation. The two countries' relationship is not defined by the absence of disagreements but by the ability to manage them. Dialogue and consultation remain the rational means for properly settling differences. It should be pointed out that China's support for an early peaceful resolution to the Ukraine crisis and the establishment of a lasting, balanced and pragmatic security framework for Europe is aligned with Germany's and Europe's interests.

China and Germany, as well as the European Union, share broad common interests in consolidating political mutual trust, enhancing the resilience of the bilateral relationship, and continuously gathering momentum for their cooperation. Experience has proved that partnership is the correct positioning for China-Germany and China-EU relations, and a stable, predictable policy environment is indispensable to safeguard the smooth advancement of such cooperation. As the EU's largest economy, Germany is uniquely positioned to encourage the EU to reciprocate China's efforts to steady ties.

Stable China-Germany and China-EU relations also accord with global expectations for stability and sustainable development. A rational, objective view of China is not only essential but imperative to that end. The EU should refrain from succumbing to the misleading rhetoric of those who seek to mislead it into framing China as a "systemic rival" – all to serve their own narrow interests.

Merz's journey to Beijing and Hangzhou can be conducive to relations developing on the right track. His visit should by no means be a makeshift tactic for Berlin to counter Washington's economic coercion, trade bullying and territorial intimidation; instead, it ought to serve as an overture to a sincere, level-headed policy recalibration – rooted in the clear recognition that upholding strategic autonomy is inherently in Germany's interests. In an age of fragmentation, characterized by a yearning for common development, the most pragmatic choice is cooperation – practical and mutually beneficial. –Xinhua

## China, Germany achieve positive, practical results during Merz's visit to China: MOC



German Chancellor Friedrich Merz (center) communicates with Ola Källenius (left), CEO of Mercedes-Benz Group, and Cao Xudong, CEO of Chinese tech firm Momenta, after experiencing an urban and highway pilot driver-assist system, co-developed by Mercedes-Benz and Momenta, in Beijing yesterday. –Xinhua

BEIJING – China and Germany conducted in-depth exchanges in the fields of the economy and trade during the visit of a high-level economic delegation, led by German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, to China, the Ministry of Commerce (MOC) said yesterday.

During the visit, enterprises from both countries inked over 10 business agreements spanning industries such as automobiles, machinery, energy, logistics and finance, ministry spokesperson

He Yongqian told a regular press briefing in Beijing.

The spokesperson said that China's efforts to pursue high-quality development and expand high-standard opening up will bring broad opportunities for economic and trade cooperation between China and Germany.

The Ministry of Commerce will work with the German side to implement the important consensus reached between the leaders of the two countries, enhance dialogue

on economic and trade policies, and fully leverage mechanisms and platforms such as the China-Germany joint committee on economic cooperation and trade, as well as the China-Germany economic advisory committee, to expand cooperation with a view of promoting the healthy, stable development of China-Germany economic and trade cooperation, and of realizing new cooperation results, He said.

–Xinhua

## German Chancellor Merz promotes cooperation during China enterprise visits

HANGZHOU – German Chancellor Friedrich Merz took the new Mercedes-Benz S-Class for a test drive in Beijing yesterday morning, experiencing the intelligent assisted driving system during his official visit to China.

"This is amazing. I think it's one of the future technologies for mobility," Merz said after the experience, commending the close cooperation between German manufacturers and Chinese technology.

Mercedes-Benz has established a comprehensive local footprint and cooperation network spanning its entire industrial chain in China, the company said in a press release yesterday. Its Chinese R&D team is playing an increasingly crucial role within Mercedes-Benz's global R&D network, the statement notes.

Merz's official visit to China took place on Wednesday and yesterday. Visiting companies from both countries and promoting practical cooperation were key

items on his agenda yesterday.

Merz arrived in Hangzhou, capital of Zhejiang Province, at noon yesterday. At Unitree Robotics, he watched humanoid robots performing different tasks and was impressed by their agile movements.

Merz's visit reflects Germany's strong interest in China's technological innovation, said Wang Xingxing, founder and CEO of Unitree, who noted the vast potential of the German market and expressed hope for deeper cooperation in the robotics sector.

Merz also visited Siemens High Voltage Circuit Breaker Co. Ltd., Hangzhou, where he learned about the development of German-funded enterprises in China.

Executives from approximately 30 leading German companies in sectors such as automotives, chemicals, biopharmaceuticals, machinery and the circular economy accompanied Merz on his visit. More than 10 commercial agreements were reached, sending a clear signal of deepening pragmatic cooperation.

As his trip concluded, Merz said he was leaving China with deep impressions of the country, and noted that Germany and China enjoy good cooperation and also face challenges that they need to address together. –Xinhua



German Chancellor Friedrich Merz (right) watches a humanoid robot of Unitree Robotics writing the Chinese character "Fu", meaning "good fortune", in Hangzhou, capital of Zhejiang Province, yesterday. His two-day official visit ended yesterday. –Xinhua

# No proven link between Duterte speeches and drug deaths, defence tells ICC

Richard Carter

THE HAGUE – There is no proven link between the “uniquely colourful and crusty” speeches of former Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte and the murders he is accused of; his defence lawyer told the International Criminal Court yesterday.

On the third day of a hearing to decide whether Duterte should face trial on crimes against humanity charges over his “war on drugs”, lawyer Nicholas Kaufman said the prosecution had failed to show his client had directly ordered any murders.

“There is no smoking gun in this case,” Kaufman told the three-judge panel at the ICC.

“Not one witness relevant to any of the 49 incidents with which Mr Rodrigo Duterte is charged will testify that he received a direct order from the former president to go out and kill someone.”

Duterte has not attended proceedings, waiving his right to appear. Kaufman says the 80-year-old is not mentally fit to follow the hearing.

The lack of evidence of a “causal nexus” between Duterte’s words and alleged crimes “should be sufficient to convince any reasonable bystander... that Rodrigo Duterte is innocent of these charges levelled at him”, said Kaufman.

Earlier in the week, the prosecution laid out their case: that Duterte played a “pivotal” role in a campaign of extrajudicial killings that saw thousands murdered.

Duterte personally drew up death lists, incited murders and then boasted about them afterwards, prosecutors alleged.

They showed multiple videos of the former president



Families of victims in extrajudicial killings of former Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte's drug war raise placards of the co-perpetrators as they watch a live stream of Duterte's confirmation hearing from The Hague, in Quezon City, Metro Manila yesterday. – AFP

threatening to murder alleged drug users and joking about his skills in extrajudicial killing.

But Kaufman said the prosecution had “cherry picked” speeches, ignoring what he said were dozens of examples of Duterte stressing the need to act within the law.

“Do not kill if you are not in danger of losing your life,” Kaufman cited Duterte as saying in one speech.

## ‘Hearsay’

Kaufman also attacked the credibility of the witnesses the prosecution relied upon for its charges against Duterte – sometimes the direct killers themselves.

The prosecution witnesses are “inherently unreliable because [they are] self-confessed vicious murderers testifying in return for virtual immunity from proceedings at the ICC”, said Kaufman.

He said there was “something morally repugnant or even

questionable from a public policy standpoint to shield not only one but a number of murderers from prosecution at the ICC just in an attempt to nail Rodrigo Duterte”.

The defence lawyer also alleged that the statements of the witnesses contradicted each other in many key aspects.

He dismissed statements from prosecution witnesses as “assumption layered upon hearsay” and urged the judging panel to give them “negligible evidentiary weight”.

Following the week-long “confirmation of charges” hearing, the three-judge panel has 60 days to decide whether to proceed to a full trial.

A lawyer representing the victims told the ICC on Tuesday that the court was the “last refuge” for loved ones in their search for justice.

Kaufman stressed: “The defence does not disrespect the soul of any deceased person, nor does it make light of the loss of life.” – AFP

# Thai runner-up party seeks criminal case against election officials

Thanaporn Promyamyai

BANGKOK – A Thai political party that came second in this month’s vote filed a criminal complaint yesterday against the nation’s election commissioners, accusing them of violating election laws, the party’s deputy told AFP.

The reformist People’s Party “submitted a case” to a criminal court against seven election commissioners, the Election Commission’s secretary-general and another election official, deputy party leader Wayo Assawarungruang said.

“Two charges involve wrongful exercise of duties, and the last charge we claimed was about marking ballots with QR codes and barcodes which allow the votes to be traced and not kept secret as it should be,” Wayo said.

The Election Commission confirmed the victory of caretaker Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul’s conservative Bhumjaithai party on Wednesday, ratifying most of the vote results.

Bhumjaithai won 170 constituencies, the most of any party, while People’s Party – which had been polling first ahead of the election – came in second, with 88 constituencies, the commission said.

Some citizens and experts raised concerns after election day that QR codes and barcodes found on ballots could be used to identify individual voters.

But the commission said the markings were to ensure electoral security and prevent the use of fake ballots.

The Criminal Court for Corruption and Misconduct Cases said it will

decide whether to hear the case by March 24, according to Wayo.

If the court takes up the case, the nine face a maximum prison sentence of 20 years and the loss of their political rights for a decade.

## Old partners

With no party winning an outright majority in the election, Bhumjaithai and third-place Pheu Thai, the populist party of jailed former leader Thaksin Shinawatra, have agreed to form a coalition.

The progressive People’s Party has said it will be in the opposition.

The pro-military and pro-monarchy Bhumjaithai had its best electoral performance ever, riding a wave of nationalism following two rounds of deadly border clashes with Cambodia last year.

Pheu Thai, Thailand’s most successful party of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, meanwhile, had its worst election result ever.

The two parties were previously coalition partners until Anutin pulled out in June following a leaked phone conversation of his predecessor, Pheu Thai’s Paetongtarn Shinawatra.

In addition to the long-standing border conflict with its neighbour, Thailand’s next administration will need to tackle anaemic economic growth, with its vital tourism industry yet to rebound to pre-COVID highs.

The new government will also need to manage fallout over multibillion-dollar cyberscam networks operating from the region. – AFP



An official updates the vote count in Thailand’s general election at a polling station in Bangkok on February 8. – AFP

# Philippine volcano eruption sends ash 2.5 kilometres into sky

MANILA – A volcano erupted in the central Philippines yesterday evening, sending a billowing plume of ash about 2,500 metres into the nighttime sky.

The two-minute eruption began at 7:04 p.m. [local time], state volcanology agency director Teresito Bacolcol told AFP, saying “there might be a bigger explosive eruption in the next few days”.

Kanlaon Volcano, one of 24 active volcanoes in the archipelago nation, has had several major eruptions in the past century – including a 1996 blast that killed three hikers who were near the summit at the time.

“This is the second moderate eruption in a week,” Bacolcol said in a phone interview, adding his agency would monitor the

volcano for 24 hours before deciding if it should raise the alert level from two to three on its five-point scale.

“This event generated a plume that rose 2,500 metres above the crater before drifting southwest. Incandescent ballistics were observed to have rained around the crater,” the volcanology centre said in a statement released minutes later.

John De Asis, a rescuer in the nearby town of La Castellana, told AFP that ash had begun to descend on local neighbourhoods.

“Tonight [last night], we heard a sudden, loud boom, then after a few minutes, people started reporting that there was ashfall in their areas,” he said, noting that rescue personnel were handing out facemasks.

Bacolcol said it was possible that “gas pressure had built up at the vent” of the volcano. He said recent low sulphur dioxide emissions suggested a potential blockage that would have caused pressure to build.

The volcano, which straddles Negros Oriental and Occidental provinces, currently has a four-kilometre exclusion zone in place.

The Philippines is on the seismically active region of the Pacific known as the “Ring of Fire”, where more than half the world’s volcanoes are located.

The most powerful volcanic explosion in the Philippines in recent years was the 1991 eruption of Pinatubo, about 100 kilometres from Manila, which killed more than 800 people. – AFP

# Indonesia jails 2 Britons for drug smuggling

DENPASAR – Two British men were given lengthy jail terms yesterday by an Indonesian court after being found guilty of smuggling cocaine into the popular holiday island of Bali.

Kial Garth Robinson was sentenced to 11 years, while Piran Ezra Wilkinson landed a term of nine years.

Both were also ordered to pay a fine of around US\$60,000 or serve an additional 190 days.

Robinson, 29, was arrested in September last year at Ngurah Rai International Airport after an officer found two packages containing 1.3 kilograms of cocaine in his backpack.

Ho told the police that he was ordered by a man named Santos to transport the drugs from Barcelona to

Bali and deliver them to Wilkinson, who had arrived a few days earlier.

Wilkinson, 48, was arrested in Cangu the next day.

Prosecutors said Robinson and Wilkinson were friends who lived in Thailand and had met in Barcelona a week before their arrests.

Indonesia has some of the world’s toughest anti-drug laws, including the death penalty for traffickers, but has maintained a moratorium on executions for several years.

There are dozens of traffickers on death row in the country. Indonesia last carried out executions in 2016, killing one Indonesian and three Nigerian drug convicts by firing squad. – AFP

## Japan logs record child sexual assault cases in 2025

TOKYO - Japan's National Police Agency said yesterday that the police handled 4,858 sexual assault cases involving victims under 18 across Japan in 2025, marking a third straight annual increase and the highest level in the past decade.

According to the data, 1,566 minors were subjected to rape and other sexual assaults in 2025 after meeting perpetrators through social media. Among them were 167 elementary school students,

the highest number in the past 10 years.

The figures underscore mounting concern over crimes targeting minors, with authorities warning of a growing role played by social media platforms.

Cases involving sexually manipulated images of children created using artificial intelligence rose by four to 114, with middle and high school students accounting for nearly 90 percent of the victims, the police said. —Xinhua

## Nonagenarian in Japan arrested for alleged graffiti

TOKYO - Japanese police arrested a man in his 90s yesterday for allegedly graffitiing a sign at a prosecutor's office in the city of Osaka, a local officer told AFP.

A security guard at the government building in the western city made an emergency call saying "graffiti had been scrawled on a sign with red lacquer paint", according to the senior Osaka police officer.

Following the emergency call at around 9:45 a.m. [local time], officers rushed to the scene to "arrest the man, who had already

been held by the security guard, on suspicion of property damage", he said.

The stone sign at the front of the building bearing the words "Public Prosecutor's Office" had been defaced, the officer added.

The elderly man - who the officer said was in his 90s but declined to specify his exact age - later admitted to investigators that he had "dirtied" the sign.

The nonagenarian did not appear to be politically motivated, according to the officer. —AFP

## Kim shuns South but could 'get along' with US

Claire Lee

SEOUL - Kim Jong Un said North Korea could "get along" with Washington if it accepted Pyongyang's nuclear status, state media said Thursday, but has dashed any hopes of mended ties with "deceptive" neighbour Seoul.

Washington and Seoul have mounted a renewed push for high-level talks with reclusive North Korea, eyeing a potential summit between Kim and US President Donald Trump in China later this year.

Having largely ignored these overtures for months, Kim finally staked his position as thousands gathered in Pyongyang for a rare congress of the ruling Workers' Party.

If Washington "respects our country's current [nuclear] status... and withdraws its hostile policy... there is no reason why we cannot get along well with the United States," Kim said, according to the Korean Central News Agency.

The United States has for decades led efforts to dismantle North Korea's nuclear programme - but summits, sanctions and diplomatic pressure have had little impact.

The last summit between Kim and Trump in 2019 unravelled as the leaders argued over sanctions relief and what nuclear concessions North Korea might make in return.

Trump is slated to travel to China - North Korea's longtime ally - in late March through early April.

Speculation is mounting he may seek to meet with Kim on the sidelines of this trip.

A Trump-Kim meeting would be a major breakthrough after years of deadlocked diplomacy.

Trump stepped up his courtship of Kim during a tour of Asia last year, saying he was "100 percent" open to a meeting.

He even bucked long-held US policy by conceding that North Korea was already "sort of a nuclear power".

North Korea's economy has for years languished under heavy Western sanctions that aim to choke



This picture taken on Wednesday and released by North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) yesterday shows North Korean leader Kim Jong Un (centre), and his daughter Kim Ju Ae, along with his wife Ri Sol Ju (left), attending the military parade to commemorate the 9th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea at Kim Il Sung Square in Pyongyang. —AFP

off funding for its nuclear weapons programme.

### 'Leave us alone'

Held just once every five years, the Workers' Party congress offers a rare glimpse into the workings of a nation where even mundane details are shrouded in secrecy.

Speaking as the days-long political spectacle drew to a close, Kim took a far more combative tone on South Korea.

Seoul's recent efforts to lower the temperature with North Korea were a "clumsy deceptive farce and a poor work", Kim said.

North Korea has "absolutely no business dealing with South Korea, its most hostile entity, and will permanently exclude South Korea from the category of compatriots", Kim said.

"As long as South Korea cannot escape the geopolitical conditions of having a border with us, the only way to live safely is to give up everything related to us and leave us alone."

In response, Seoul vowed to keep working for peaceful coexistence.

"To achieve this, the two Koreas must refrain from hostile and confrontational words and actions and build a foundation of mutual respect and trust," the government said in a statement.

North Korea's latest announce-

ments reflect the view that "South Korea's continued insistence on North Korea's denuclearisation - directed at the US and the international community - fundamentally infringes on Pyongyang's national interests," said Hong Min, an analyst at the Korea Institute for National Unification.

Kim's remarks "signal an intention to pursue relations with the US independently, without going through South Korea," Yang Moo-jin, former president of the University of North Korean Studies, told AFP.

He was also making clear that he will "reject any negotiations premised on denuclearisation", Yang added.

The congress ended as thousands of soldiers marched through Pyongyang's Kim Il Sung Square in a grand military parade.

Kim and his daughter Ju Ae donned matching leather jackets as they watched the procession, fuelling speculation the teenager is being groomed for power.

"What we're seeing looks like deliberate image politics - projecting her as a potential inheritor of her father's authority," said Kyungnam University professor Lim Eul-chul.

Pyongyang said a range of military units took part in the event, including troops who aided Russia's war effort in Ukraine and those stationed near the inter-Korean border. —AFP



Revellers celebrate Lathmar Holi, the Hindu spring festival of colours, in Nandgaon near Mathura, India yesterday. —AFP

## Japan's births fall to record low in 2025

TOKYO - The number of babies born in Japan in 2025 fell from a year earlier to 705,809, the lowest since records began in 1899 and marking a 10th consecutive year of record lows, health ministry data showed on Thursday.

The figure, including those of foreign nationals, was down 2.1 percent from 2024, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare said.

Japanese media have widely predicted that the number of babies born to Japanese nationals within Japan - due to be released around June - could fall into the 600,000 range for the first time.

Kyodo News reported that the

decline in births happened amid a rapidly graying population and increased anxiety over child-rearing due to the higher cost of living amid inflation.

The number of deaths in 2025 stood at 1,605,654, health ministry data showed. Japan's natural population decline - subtracting births from deaths - reached 899,845, the largest drop since records began.

The health ministry said the trend of declining births has yet to be effectively curbed and pledged to step up efforts, including raising incomes for younger generations and expanding support for families with children. —Xinhua

## Sri Lankan Catholic Church praises spy chief's arrest

Amal Jayasinghe

COLOMBO - The arrest of a former Sri Lankan spy chief was a crucial step towards unravelling the conspiracy behind the 2019 Easter bombings that killed 279 people, the Catholic Church in the country said yesterday.

"If the current investigations by the CID (Criminal Investigation Department) are allowed to continue without political interference, we will soon uncover the conspiracy," church spokesman Father Cyril Gamini Fernando told reporters.

Sri Lankan investigators on Wednesday arrested retired Major General Suresh Sallay, the most high-profile official netted in the long-running investigation into the bombings.

Nine suicide bombers were involved in the coordinated strikes

that hit two Roman Catholic churches, an evangelical Protestant church, and three luxury hotels on April 21, 2019.

"We know that over 100 people have been questioned, but the latest arrest will help shed more light on the case," said Fernando.

He also urged opposition parties to allow the CID to complete its probe without interference after they condemned Sallay's arrest.

"Some people are making a lot of noise because the investigators are getting closer to the truth," Fernando said.

"That is why some people have got very agitated."

The church had earlier accused former president Gotabaya Rajapaksa of sabotaging CID investigations after coming to power on the back of the bombings.

Two days after the bombings, Rajapaksa, a retired army officer, declared his candidacy and went on to win the November election in a landslide after promising to stamp out Islamist extremism.

A jihadist group told reporters in 2019 that they were originally funded by a military intelligence unit to propagate a fundamentalist ideology in Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic Eastern Province.

Sallay was employed in the same intelligence unit that funded the jihadists, and the government at the time admitted that the military was behind the radical groups.

More than 500 people were wounded in the bombings, which crippled the island nation's lucrative tourism industry. —AFP

# Chaos as jihadist relatives left Syrian camp, witnesses say

**Bakr Alkasem**

SYRIA – There were scenes of “utter chaos” when thousands of women and children related to suspected Islamic State (IS) jihadists escaped a camp in Syria last month following the sudden withdrawal of Kurdish forces, witnesses have told AFP.

An AFP journalist who entered the huge Al-Hol camp on Wednesday found it virtually deserted after the Syrian government decided to evacuate the site.

Until recently, it housed 23,500 people and was the largest camp for relatives of suspected IS jihadists in northeastern Syria.

Since the territorial defeat of IS, it had been under the control of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

However, the SDF swiftly left the camp on January 20, under pressure from Syrian troops which were seizing swathes of the country’s north months after their ouster of longtime ruler Bashar al-Assad.

Syrian security forces say they took over control six hours later.

Thousands of family members of suspected jihadists left for parts unknown.

As soon as the Kurdish forces left, “it was utter chaos,” Salah Mahmud al-Hafez, who lives in the nearby Al-Hol village, told AFP.

“The SDF withdrew, and the locals and tribesmen came,” he said.

“Cars loaded people and drove off,” Hafez said, adding that the camp “remained without security control for three hours.”

## Toys, food left behind

The camp held mostly women



*This picture taken on Wednesday shows the severed head of a toy doll at the empty Al-Hol camp, which has been closed by the Syrian authorities in the northeastern Hasakeh governorate. Syria confirmed on February 25 the mass escape of relatives, mostly women and children, of suspected Islamic State (IS) group jihadists from the Al-Hol camp last month following the withdrawal of Kurdish forces who had overseen the facility.*

– AFP

and children, the majority of them Syrian or Iraqi.

However, a high-security annex housed more than 6,000 foreigners of around 40 nationalities.

Access to the camp remains prohibited and checkpoints have been set up on the road leading to it, according to the AFP journalist at the scene.

The paths of the empty camp are now strewn with rubbish bags, and white tents stretch as far as the eye can see.

Children’s toys and tricycles have been abandoned in the foreigners’ annex.

Clothes, notebooks and even food were left behind, signs of a hasty departure.

Last week, Syrian authorities evacuated the remaining families at the camp after determining that the conditions at Al-Hol – particularly security – were inadequate.

Syria’s interior ministry confirmed on Wednesday there were mass escapes from the camp, accusing the Kurdish SDF of withdrawing “suddenly, without coordination and without informing” them.

The SDF responded by saying their withdrawal was “a direct result of the military attack... targeting the camp and its surroundings by forces affiliated with Damascus”.

The SDF also said the families escaped after Syrian troops took control of the camp.

Local resident Hafez said that “when the state took over, it gave the people the choice to stay or leave.”

Morhaf Al-Olayan, a 43-year-old farmer who lives next to the camp, said that after the Kurdish forces departed, “cars came, loaded the families, and left”.

The father of five said he saw men “wearing camouflage military uniforms” among those transporting the families.

Farhan Abbas, an 86-year-old who lives near the camp, said that “people fled... in all directions”.

The detained family members had not been charged with any crime, but many had embraced the idea of living in the Islamic State’s self-declared caliphate.

## Women and children at risk

The foreigners’ annex held a large number of people from around the world, including Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

While the whereabouts of those who left the camp remain unknown, teachers in the former rebel stronghold of Idlib in northwestern Syria told AFP that several children from Uzbekistan have enrolled in their schools since late January.

In a report earlier this week, Human Rights Watch said that most of Al-Hol’s residents “left in a largely unplanned and chaotic manner”.

“The way these departures have unfolded has exposed women and children to serious risks, including trafficking, exploitation, and recruitment by armed groups,” the report warned.

Kurdish forces still control the smaller Roj camp in Syria’s northeast, where more relatives of suspected foreign jihadists including Westerners are detained.

The Kurds had repeatedly urged countries to take back their citizens but few did, fearing security threats and a domestic political backlash.

“For years, many governments claimed that difficulties negotiating with a non-state actor in charge of the camps was why they couldn’t repatriate their citizens, but now that excuse won’t hold,” Adam Coogole, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, said in the report.

For the jihadists themselves, the United States military has transferred more than 5,700 IS suspects from Syrian prisons to Iraq. – AFP

## Filmmakers defend Berlin festival chief in Gaza row

BERLIN – Actors and filmmakers rushed to defend the head of the Berlin film festival yesterday following a media report that her job was on the line over a director’s anti-Israel speech at the event.

Syrian-Palestinian filmmaker Abdallah Al-Khatib kicked off a controversy during Saturday’s closing ceremony by accusing Germany of being complicit in genocide in Gaza through its support for Israel.

German tabloid *Bild* had reported that Tricia Tuttle was due to be dismissed at an emergency meeting yesterday, citing sources close to state-owned KBB, the company that runs the festival.

Culture minister Wolfram Weimer’s office confirmed the meeting had taken place but made no mention of Tuttle being sacked, stating that discussions had been “constructive and open” and would “continue in the coming days”.

A group of cinema luminaries including Tilda Swinton, Todd Haynes, Sean Baker and Tom Tykwer signed an open letter

defending the Berlinale as a forum for free expression.

“As filmmakers in Germany and beyond, we are following the debates surrounding the Berlinale and the discussion about the dismissal of Tricia Tuttle with great concern,” they wrote. “We defend the Berlinale for what it is: a place of exchange.”

Angry rows over the Israel-Palestinian conflict have repeatedly rocked the Berlinale, held every February as Europe’s first major film festival of the year.

Environment Minister Carsten Schneider walked out of Saturday’s closing ceremony, labelling Khatib’s remarks “unacceptable”.

Germany, as it has sought to atone for the horrors of the Holocaust, has been a steadfast supporter of Israel, and criticism of Israel’s conduct in Gaza has been more muted than in many other countries.

Conservative lawmaker Ellen Demuth was among those who condemned the “antisemitic incident” at the awards ceremony and urged “a fresh start at the top of

the film festival”.

The Berlinale Team in an Instagram post meanwhile defended Tuttle, praising her “clarity, integrity and artistic vision”.

The writers’ association PEN Berlin said Khatib’s comments were protected by freedom of expression and that if Tuttle were to be sacked over them, it would cause “immense damage” to the festival.

“Such wanton destruction of the German cultural scene, such self-inflicted insularity, must not be allowed to happen,” it said.

The backdrop of the Middle East conflict led to a tense 76th edition of the festival from the start.

More than 80 film professionals criticised the Berlinale’s “silence” on the Gaza war in an open letter, accusing the festival of censoring artists “who reject the genocide” they believe Israel has committed in Gaza.

Award-winning Indian writer Arundhati Roy withdrew from the festival after the jury president, German director Wim Wenders, said cinema should “stay out of politics” when asked about Gaza. – AFP

## Swastikas tagged at former Nazi transit camp near Paris

DRANCY –Two swastikas have been found spray-painted on buildings in a Paris suburb that served as a World War II transit camp for some 63,000 Jews deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The Drancy internment camp served as the main departure point for Jewish deportees from France to Nazi death camps between August 1941 and August 1944.

The two swastikas were drawn in two different buildings. One measured a few centimetres across, while the other was nearly one metre in diameter.

A candidate in the upcoming municipal elections spotted the swastikas on Wednesday while campaigning, before notifying memorial associations, he told AFP.

“In this neighbourhood more than any other, which was once a transit camp for Holocaust victims before they were deported to death camps by the Nazis, these acts are extremely serious,” Gokhan Unver, a mayoral candidate for the

hard-left France Unbowed (LFI), told AFP.

Three local lawmakers had filed a report with judicial authorities, he added.

A memorial near the housing estate where the swastikas were spray-painted, was vandalised in March 2024.

France is home to western Europe’s largest Jewish population, at around half a million people, as well as a significant Muslim community sensitive to the plight of the Palestinian people in Gaza.

Members of France’s Jewish community have said the number of antisemitic acts has surged following the attack by Hamas on Israel on October 7, 2023 which triggered Israel’s military response.

The interior ministry recorded 886 antisemitic acts between January 1 and August 31, 2025, 20-percent down on the same period in 2024. – AFP

## Jersey lawmakers approve assisted dying bill

LONDON – Jersey is set to become the second part of the British Isles to legalise assisted dying, after lawmakers there approved yesterday legislation to allow it for some terminally ill people.

The move on the Channel island follows a similar approval last year by the Isle of Man, another self-governing British dependency – though that legislation is still awaiting royal assent in London.

The Jersey law passed in the island's parliament by 32 votes to 16 and also requires royal assent.

It will permit a person who has a terminal illness and is experiencing or expected to experience unbearable suffering to choose to end their life with the help of a medical professional.

They must have been assessed by medical professionals and diagnosed with a physical condition expected to cause their death within six months, or 12 months if the condition involves degeneration of the nervous system.

It comes amid an apparent setback in efforts to pass such a law

in London which would apply in England and Wales.

Sky News reported yesterday the UK government would not grant more time to debate landmark assisted dying legislation in the upper house of parliament, effectively ending its chances of becoming law.

Scottish lawmakers also voted last year in favour of a bill that would legalise assisted dying, the first step there in what will be a protracted process to pass a law for Scotland.

Those in Jersey seeking to undergo the procedure must have the capacity to make the decision, and it must be voluntary, clearly expressed, settled, and informed, according to the legislation.

The Isle of Man passed its assisted dying legislation last March, but has been waiting 11 months for royal assent, amid reports the justice ministry in London has been fielding questions about its compliance with European rights laws.

The ministry did not respond to a request of comment. – AFP

## Algeria welcomes pope visit as 'dream come true'

ALGIERS – Pope Leo XIV's newly announced visit to Algeria in April was welcomed as a dream come true by the archbishop of Algiers yesterday.

The trip will mark the first time a head of the Catholic Church has visited the North African Muslim-majority country.

"This dream of a pope visiting Algeria... has come true!" Jean-Paul Vesco, the Franco-Algerian cardinal of the Catholic Church who serves as the Archbishop of Algiers, wrote in a statement.

French-language newspaper *El Watan* said the "symbolic" visit was "of great historical significance in a country where ancient Christian memory coexists with the Muslim reality of today".

Arabic-language newspaper *El Khabar* agreed the visit, which was announced by the Vatican on Tuesday, "carries a great symbolic and spiritual dimension".

For Leo, the trip is in honour of fifth-century Saint Augustine, who was born in modern-day Algeria and whose order he follows.

Leo, who was elected in May last year, will visit the capital Algiers and the city of Annaba – where the Basilica of Saint Augustine stands – from April 13 to 15.

The 70-year-old pontiff said the trip would allow him to "continue the discourse of dialogue and bridge-building between the Christian and the Muslim worlds".

After Algeria, the pope will visit Cameroon, Angola and Equatorial Guinea.

The Algerian presidency on Wednesday said the pope's trip reflected Algeria and the Vatican's "shared belief in the need to build a world based on peace, dialogue, and justice, against the various challenges currently facing humanity". – AFP

## Iceland to set date for EU talks vote in coming weeks

REYKJAVIK – Iceland's government will soon propose a date for a referendum on resuming talks for its possible accession to the EU, the country's foreign ministry told AFP yesterday.

The Nordic nation had suspended European Union accession talks in 2013, but foreign ministry spokesman Aegir Thor Eysteinnsson said a parliamentary resolution on a vote to resume them was underway.

"A motion for a parliamentary resolution which will enable such referendum is being prepared and will be presented to Althingi, the Icelandic Parliament, this spring," he told AFP in a statement.

"The exact date to be proposed has not been decided yet," he added.

The Icelandic parliament's summer recess generally begins in June.

Under a government coalition agreement, a vote to determine "whether to continue negotiations on Iceland's membership of the European Union" needs to be held by the end of 2027.

In 2009 Iceland, then led by a left-wing government, submitted a membership application.

Negotiations began in 2010 but were suspended three years later following parliamentary elections.

A centre-right government withdrew Iceland's application in 2015.

According to a poll published in early February by public broadcaster RUV, public opinion is currently evenly split between opponents and supporters of accession. – AFP

## EU says member states can use bloc's funds for 'safe' abortion access

Umberto Bacchi

BRUSSELS – The European Commission affirmed yesterday that member states can tap EU funds to pay for safe abortions in answer to a million-strong petition, but stopped short of steps to actively facilitate access across the bloc.

Responding to the "My Voice, My Choice" campaign, commission vice-president Roxana Minzatu said countries can "voluntarily" draw from existing EU social funds "to support access to abortion care for girls and women in vulnerable situations".

"We wish that every woman can live confidently and freely. This is what member states can commit to, with EU support," said Minzatu, the bloc's commissioner for social rights.

Launched last year, the petition urged Brussels to help women from EU countries where abortion is not readily available to undergo the procedure elsewhere in the bloc.

After studying their demands, Brussels said there was no need for new legislation or funding, but that countries could draw from already allocated funds to facilitate travel and access to healthcare for

women from other member states seeking to terminate a pregnancy.

Liberalised across most of the 27-nation bloc, the right to end pregnancies remains severely restricted in some countries – notably Malta and Poland.

As a consequence, more than 20 million women in the European Union do not have access to safe abortion care, women's rights campaigners say.

Rather than requiring changes in national laws, the petitioners had asked Brussels to legislate to set up a financial mechanism to help liberal member states provide abortions to women from other EU countries.

The initiative secured more than one million signatures – forcing the European Commission to issue a reply outlining the actions it intended to take.

Campaigners welcomed the commission announcement as a big step forward – despite disappointment it did not allocate new funds for advancing bloc-wide access.

"What is historic today is that for the first time, the European Commission is very vocal that

European Union funds can be used to guarantee access to safe abortion," Nina Kovac, one of the petition organisers, told a Brussels news conference.

Left-wing EU lawmaker Manon Aubry, while also welcoming yesterday's news, was more vocal in vowing to push the commission for more.

"We're going to fight," she said, "until not a single woman is dying in Europe because she cannot access abortion."

In an interview with AFP ahead of the announcement, the EU's equality commissioner Hadja Lahbib presented it as "revolutionary".

"It will change women's lives," she said. "A woman who does not have the means to travel, to buy a train or plane ticket, or to pay for safe healthcare to have a proper abortion, will be able to go anywhere in the European Union".

Malta allows abortion only in cases where the mother's life is in danger or the foetus has no chance of survival, whereas in Poland ending a pregnancy is only permitted in cases of rape, incest or if the mother's life is in danger. – AFP



Britain's Catherine, Princess of Wales (left) shelters from the rain under an umbrella as she meets children during a visit to the Hanging Gardens in Llanidloes, central Wales, yesterday. – AFP

## Instagram to warn parents when teens search for suicide terms

SAN FRANCISCO – Instagram will begin notifying parents when their teenage children repeatedly search for content related to suicide or self-harm, platform owner Meta announced yesterday, as the company faces mounting legal pressure over its handling of young users.

The alerts, rolling out in coming weeks in the United States, Britain, Australia and Canada, will be triggered when a teen makes multiple searches for such terms within a short period of time.

The alerts will be expanded to other regions later in 2026.

Parents using Instagram's parental supervision tools will receive notifications via email, text or WhatsApp, as well as through

the app itself, along with expert resources to help them navigate potentially difficult conversations with their children.

Instagram already blocks searches for terms associated with suicide and self-harm, directing users instead to help lines and support organizations. The new alerts are designed to flag cases where teens persistently attempt such searches despite those restrictions.

Meta said it consulted with its Suicide and Self-Harm Advisory Group in setting the threshold for alerts, adding that it had deliberately erred on the side of caution even if that meant some notifications might be sent without genuine cause for concern.

The announcement came as the company faces mounting legal pressure over the use of its platforms by young people.

Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg testified this month at a landmark trial in California over accusations that his company and others deliberately caused addiction in minors – the first time such a case has reached a jury.

Meta is also contending with a sweeping global push to restrict children's access to social media, with Australia having banned under-16s from platforms in December and countries including France, Denmark, Spain and the UK racing to introduce similar measures. – AFP

# Cuba vows to counter ‘terrorist’ attacks after clashing with US-based boat



A woman wearing US flag leggings stands next to a vegetable and fruit vendor's street stall in Havana yesterday. – AFP

HAVANA – Cuba vowed yesterday to defend against “terrorist and mercenary” attacks after reporting it had killed four gunmen on a US-registered boat – a bloody incident that added to deepening tensions between Havana and Washington.

President Miguel Díaz-Canel denounced Wednesday’s incident as an attempted “infiltration” and said “Cuba will defend itself with determination and firmness against any terrorist and mercenary aggression against its sovereignty and national stability.”

Cuban authorities said their forces responded after coming under fire from a Florida-registered speedboat just off the communist island’s north coast.

Four of the alleged assailants were killed and six wounded, the interior ministry said. All aboard were Cubans living in the United States, according to the ministry.

The survivors were detained and are accused of intending to “carry out an infiltration for the purposes of terrorism,” the ministry said, reporting that assault rifles, handguns, Molotov cocktails and other military-style gear were seized.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Washington had nothing to

do with the clash and would “respond accordingly” after investigating.

The attorney general of Florida, which lies about 160 kilometres from Cuba across the Florida Straits, also ordered an investigation into the killings.

The Cuban interior ministry has released what it says are the names of seven of the people on the boat and said most of the 10 aboard had records in Cuba for “criminal and violent activity.”

Another man sent from the United States to take part in this operation was arrested on Cuban soil and confessed, it added.

The Cuban government frequently reports incursions by speedboats from the United States into its territorial waters but deadly clashes are rarer.

Incursion incidents are often related to people-smuggling to the United States or drug trafficking, and have included chases, shootouts and armed attacks on border guards.

## Venezuelan oil

The latest clash comes as Cuba is reeling from US economic pressure.

Cuba’s communist government lost one of its key diplomatic supporters – and a vital source of fuel

for the country – in January when US forces toppled Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro, effectively taking control of Venezuelan oil exports.

The country had relied on Venezuela for about half of its fuel needs.

Amid an outcry from Caribbean leaders, worried that starving 9.6 million Cubans of oil would cause the economy to collapse, the Trump administration said it would allow limited shipments of Venezuelan oil for “commercial and humanitarian use.”

The announcement came during a summit of Caribbean nations attended by Rubio, a Cuban-American who has spent his career calling for the downfall of Havana’s communist leadership.

The US Treasury Department said the Venezuelan oil would need to go through private businesses and not the Cuban government or the military apparatus that controls much of the island’s economy.

Mexico on Tuesday dispatched two military vessels carrying nearly 2,200 tonnes of aid to the island – its second aid shipment in under a month.

Canada also announced C\$8 million (US\$5.8 million) in aid on Wednesday. – AFP

# Ecuador fires new salvo in drug-related trade war with Colombia

QUITO – Ecuador escalated a month-old trade war with Colombia yesterday, hiking tariffs on imports from its neighbour to 50 percent over Bogotá’s alleged failure to combat organised crime along their shared border.

Ecuador’s President Daniel Noboa, a staunch Washington ally, last month announced 30-percent tariffs on Colombia for what he called its lack of cooperation in combating drug trafficking and illegal mining.

The move echoed US President Donald Trump’s tariff hikes on Canada and China – and threatened increases on Mexico – which he partly attributed to fentanyl trafficking into the United States.

Colombia responded in kind to the tariffs and also suspended electricity sales to Ecuador, which in turn hiked a levy on Colombian oil flowing through an Ecuadorian pipeline by 900 percent.

Foreign and security ministers from the two countries met in Ecuador in early February to try to resolve the dispute but failed to reach a breakthrough.

Announcing the new tariffs, Ecuador’s ministry of production and foreign trade said Colombia had failed to implement “concrete and effective” measures to combat drug trafficking on the border.

“This decision is based on national security criteria,” it said,

adding that the new duties would take effect on March 1.

Quito is demanding that Bogotá eradicate coca crops and illegal gold mining on its side of their porous 600-kilometre border.

Coca is the main ingredient in cocaine, of which Colombia is the world’s biggest producer.

Ecuador, long seen as a bastion of stability in South America, has become a major export hub for Colombian cocaine.

The drug trade has caused an explosion of violence in the Andean country, which registered around one murder every hour last year, according to the Geneva-based Organized Crime Observatory. – AFP

# Brazilian politicians convicted for ordering murder of black activist councillor

Brasília Juan Sebastian Serrano

Brazil’s Supreme Court on Wednesday sentenced two former lawmakers to 76 years in jail for ordering the 2018 assassination of Rio de Janeiro councilwoman Marielle Franco, a popular black activist whose murder exposed deep ties between politics and organized crime.

Franco, a lesbian activist who grew up in a favela (slum) and became an outspoken critic of Rio’s powerful militia groups, was 38 when she was gunned down in the city centre alongside her driver, Anderson Gomes.

The case sent shockwaves through Brazil and drew international condemnation.

The four-justice Supreme Court bench voted unanimously to convict former federal lawmaker Chiquinho Brazão, 62, and his brother Domingos, 60, a former state lawmaker, of ordering the hit on Franco.

The court found that Franco had been targeted as she was a threat to the interests of the Brazão brothers.

From her position on the city council, Franco worked to prevent the expansion of clandestine housing developments in poor neighbourhoods, one of the militias’ biggest sources of income.

The Brazão brothers “didn’t just have contact with the militia. They were the militia,” Judge Alexandre de Moraes said in court.

Franco was murdered to deliver a “message” to Rio’s political class, the court heard.

She was, said Moraes, “a black woman who dared to go against the interests of militia members, men, and white people.”

Tearful family members embraced after the sentencing.

“The political violence based on gender and race that exists in this country must stop,” Anielle Franco, Marielle’s sister and Brazil’s racial equality minister, told reporters outside the courthouse.

“This process has caused me great spiritual and psychological harm,” said Justice Carmen Lúcia, the only woman on the Supreme Court.

“How many Marielles will Brazil allow to be murdered?” the judge asked.

## ‘Cast the first stone’

Rio’s militias emerged around four decades ago when former police officers and security agents created so-called self-defence groups to protect communities from drug gangs.

They quickly evolved into powerful criminal organisations – controlling large parts of the city, extorting residents and seizing public land – while benefiting from high-level political support.

On Tuesday, the defence insisted on the Brazão brothers’ innocence, while noting that links between local power and criminals were an open secret.

“Let he who is involved in politics in Rio and has never asked drug traffickers or militia members for votes cast the first stone,” said Cleber Lopes, Chiquinho Brazão’s lawyer.

Three other defendants were convicted over the masterminding of Franco’s murder.

Rivaldo Barbosa, a former police commissioner who first led the investigation, was sentenced to 18 years for obstruction of justice and trying to protect the Brazão brothers.

Former military police officer and militia member Ronald Paulo de Alves was sentenced to 56 years for monitoring Franco’s routine and reporting on her whereabouts on the night of her murder.

A former advisor to Domingos Brazão, Robson Calixto Fonseca, got nine years for acting as an intermediary between the defendants and militia members.

Two former military police officers who carried out the murders were given hefty jail terms in 2024.

The investigation into the masterminds was based on the plea testimony of one of them, Ronnie Lessa, who confessed to his role in the murder and was sentenced to 78 years in jail in 2024.

He said during his trial he was “blinded” and “driven crazy” by the prospect of a million-US-dollar reward for Franco’s murder. – AFP



Brazil’s Supreme Federal Court Vice-President Alexandre de Moraes speaks during the trial of those accused of ordering the 2018 killing of black leftist politician Marielle Franco, at the Supreme Court in Brasília on Wednesday. – AFP

## Football shorts

### Barcelona's De Jong out for up to 6 weeks

BARCELONA – Barcelona announced yesterday their Netherlands midfielder Frenkie de Jong will be out for up to six weeks with a leg issue.

De Jong will miss the Champions League last 16 against Paris Saint-Germain or Newcastle as well as La Liga fixtures with Villarreal, Athletic Bilbao, Sevilla and Rayo Vallecano.

The 28-year-old will also be absent for next Tuesday's Spanish Cup semi-final second leg as the Catalans look to overturn a 4-0 deficit against Atletico Madrid.

In a short statement on their website, Barcelona said De Jong had injured his "right hamstring during training this morning and will be out for five to six weeks".

Barca are just a point clear of Real Madrid atop the La Liga table before hosting Villarreal tomorrow.

De Jong is set to be sidelined for the March international window as the Oranje face Norway and Ecuador in pre-World Cup friendlies. –AFP

### Turkish footballer hailed as hero after saving stunned seagull

ISTANBUL – A Turkish amateur footballer has gone viral for saving a seagull's life with CPR after it was struck down during an Istanbul match.

Gani Catan, a 32-year-old accountant and captain of amateur club Yurdu Spor, raced across the

pitch Sunday after a ball knocked the low-flying bird to the ground.

"I acted on instinct, or maybe I once saw someone do this on a dog or a cat," he told AFP a few days later as he watched the club's youth teams train.

As it hit the pitch, Catan leapt into action and started performing rudimentary CPR, pumping the bird's ribcage.

"When I started the chest compressions, it began moving its legs. The more it moved, the more I kept going," he said.

When it started breathing, he carried it off the pitch to medical staff, who took care of it.

By that evening, videos had gone viral on social media and Catan said his phone began ringing nonstop.

"We'd lost the match, so I wasn't in a good mood. Then overnight the messages started coming in. We were shocked by how fast it spread," he said.

"It's been in the press in Brazil, Italy, America..."

Since the Istanbul match, Catan has received animal rights organisation PETA's "Hero to Animals award".

Originally from the northern Turkish city of Tokat where he lives with his two cats, Catan had dreamed of playing football since childhood.

The story ended sadly, however, as the bird later died, according to a commentator who witnessed the incident.

Yurdu Spor is considering adding a seagull to its logo in tribute. –AFP

## English giants dominate line-up for Champions League last-16 draw



Juventus' Italian defender Federico Gatti (centre of jumping three) heads the ball next to Galatasaray's Turkish defender Abdulkemir Bardakci (left) and Galatasaray's Senegalese defender Ismail Jakobs during the UEFA Champions League, knockout round play-off second leg, between Juventus FC and Galatasaray SK at the Allianz stadium in Turin, on Wednesday. Juventus won the game 3-2. Luciano Spalletti's players came close to a stunning comeback against Galatasaray but left themselves with too much to do after a 5-2 thumping in the first leg. –AFP

PARIS - The draw for the latter stages of this season's Champions League takes place today with Newcastle United's midweek victory against Qarabag meaning an unprecedented six English sides will feature in the last 16.

The Premier League's financial might has not always translated into dominance in continental competition, with no English club featuring in the last two Champions League finals.

There has been an English winner of Europe's elite club competition just twice in the last six seasons, and just three times in the last 13 years.

One argument put forward for such a relative lack of success in the Champions League given the financial strength of England's top flight is the intense competitive nature of their domestic league.

That can sap energy from teams late in the season, while the likes of Real Madrid, Barcelona, Bayern Munich and Paris Saint-Germain often have such a margin over rivals within their own countries that they can be fresher going into crunch Champions League knockout ties.

But English clubs now have such a margin over most of their continental rivals that they cruised through the league phase of this season's Champions League and their shadow looms large over the rest of Europe.

Five Premier League teams - Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester City and Tottenham Hotspur - finished in the top eight to secure direct progress to the last 16.

Newcastle finished 12<sup>th</sup> and then crushed Qarabag of Azerbaijan in the knockout phase play-offs,

winning 9-3 on aggregate.

In 29 games against opponents from the other leading European leagues in France, Germany, Italy and Spain, English clubs lost just six times.

### Rich get richer

The primary reason for the Premier League's dominance is its overwhelming financial power, and it just keeps getting richer compared with every other league.

A report published yesterday by UEFA showed that television revenue for English top-flight clubs increased by 1.5 billion euros (US\$1.77 billion) between 2014 and 2024.

Over the same period the combined TV revenue increase across clubs from the 53 other European top-division leagues was 1.6 billion euros.

Across the last decade the total revenue of English top-flight teams has increased by 3.5 billion euros, while the combined increase across the French, German, Italian and Spanish top tiers was 5.9 billion euros.

Fifteen of the 30 richest clubs in the world in analysts Deloitte's latest Football Money League are from the Premier League.

The rest of Europe simply cannot keep up off the pitch and they can no longer keep up on it, with the physicality of the Premier League a factor being pinpointed by some continental rivals.

"They had more intensity, technique and pace," said Inter Milan boss Cristian Chivu after losing to Arsenal last month.

"I won't point out how much money they spent, as that would be too obvious, but the Premier League does have a very different type of intensity and pace to Italian football."

Inter, beaten finalists last season,

are out after a stunning loss to Bodo/Glimt of Norway, meaning Atalanta are the only Italian team left in the competition.

Spain is represented in the last 16 by the big three of Atletico Madrid, Barcelona and Real Madrid while Bayern and Bayer Leverkusen remain from Germany.

Reigning champions PSG are France's sole survivors, with Turkish giants Galatasaray, Sporting of Portugal and Bodo/Glimt completing the line-up.

The question now is how many Premier League sides will make the quarter-finals, with Newcastle against Chelsea the only possible all-English tie in the last 16.

The draw will take place from 1100 GMT today [7 p.m. Macau time] at the Swiss headquarters of European football's governing body UEFA.

Each team has only two potential opponents in the last 16, because clubs are paired based on their positions in the league phase.

That means for example Arsenal and Bayern, the top two in the league phase, will play either Atalanta (15<sup>th</sup>) or Leverkusen (16<sup>th</sup>), both of whom came through the play-offs.

The path for every team all the way to the final in Budapest on May 30 will then be established.

Champions League last 16 line-up: Paris Saint-Germain (FRA)/Newcastle United (ENG) v Chelsea (ENG)/Barcelona (ESP)

Galatasaray (TUR)/Atletico Madrid (ESP) v Liverpool (ENG)/Tottenham Hotspur (ENG)

Real Madrid (ESP)/Bodo/Glimt (NOR) v Manchester City (ENG)/Sporting (POR)

Atalanta (ITA)/Bayer Leverkusen (GER) v Arsenal (ENG)/Bayern Munich (GER) –AFP



Nacional Potosi's defender Juan Orellana (right) fouls Botafogo's defender Vitorino during the Copa Libertadores phase two second-leg between Brazil's Botafogo and Bolivia's Nacional Potosi at the Nilton Santos Stadium in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on Wednesday. Botafogo won the game 2-0. –AFP



## Man City case 'damaging' for Premier League says La Liga chief

LONDON – The protracted disciplinary case involving Manchester City has been "damaging" for the Premier League, according to Spain's La Liga president Javier Tebas.

English powerhouse City were charged in February 2023 with over 100 alleged breaches of the league's financial rules, with the club vigorously denying all charges against them.

Yet more than three years later no verdicts have been made public, with an independent commission

having heard the case between September and December 2024.

Tebas said his problem was not so much the length of time being taken to make a ruling, but rather the drawn-out process had created "uncertainty" regarding the application of rules, with other clubs charged and sanctioned over rule breaches all within the same period.

"I understand that it's a failure [of governance] - this happened with Manchester City and other clubs are looking and watching and listening,"

Tebas said yesterday during a media briefing at the Financial Times Business of Football Summit in London.

"[Other clubs are] being fined, having points deducted, and that's fine if you don't abide by the rules. But Manchester City has impunity. I speak to a lot of Premier League clubs, and the majority don't understand this either. That makes the institution weaker."

The chief of Spanish football's top flight added: "It's not just the delay, it's the general situation.

When a great institution like the Premier League, when you have to have rules for financial fair play, you need to have a lot of legal certainty in the competition and among clubs.

City have previously said they have a "comprehensive body of irrefutable evidence" to prove they've done nothing wrong.

Premier League chief executive Richard Masters was asked about the City case when he appeared at the same event later yesterday.

"I can't talk about it, I can't talk

about the timing of it," he said.

Asked whether the case had made the Premier League consider if there might be ways to have a quicker process should a similar incident arise in the future, Masters replied: "I simply can't comment. Having spent three years not commenting, I'm not going to start now."

"Stepping aside from that [specific case], any regulator wants its judicial system to be efficient and work swiftly. That's about as far as I can go." –AFP

# Injury forces Marquez to adapt for MotoGP opener

## MotoGP

BURIRAM—Defending MotoGP champion Marc Marquez said yesterday that a lingering shoulder injury has forced him to change his riding style as he prepares to open the new season in Thailand.

The Spanish Ducati rider launches his bid for a record-equalling eighth world title this weekend in Buriram after dominating the competition last season.

He clinched the title with five events to spare, but his campaign was cut short when a shoulder injury forced him to miss the last four races of the season.

The 33-year-old said the injury was “not an easy one”, and he is still feeling its effects, forcing him to change the setup of his bike until he returns to full fitness.

“I stepped back in the aerodynamics; one of the reasons is that I cannot ride the bike in the same way as last year at the moment,” said Marquez.

“The 2025 aerodynamic was a little bit more heavy, more demanding for the physical condition

“I’m trying to adapt my riding style to what I have now in my physical condition,” he added.

Marquez said his new setup was “working well but in a different way”.

“One of my abilities is to adapt to what I have and what I need,” he said.

“I will try one more time in my riding career to

adapt my riding style to this new situation until I feel more ready.”

Marquez capped a remarkable comeback from injury last year, winning his first championship since 2019 after a gruelling struggle that almost forced him to hang up his helmet.

He was in imperious form all season, winning 25 races, including sprints.

He said his latest injury would not change his objective for the new season.

“Let’s see how we can manage the situation,” he said.

“But the target, if you are wearing a red Ducati T-shirt, is to fight for the championship.”

Marquez’s nearest championship rival last season was his brother Alex Marquez.

The Gresini rider has made a strong start to the year, clocking the fastest times at the first pre-season test in Malaysia.

Alex Marquez said he was not reading too much into pre-season form.

“Not just after this race weekend but after three or four races we’ll see where we are and for what we can fight this year,” he said.

Aprilia’s Marco Bezzecchi was fastest in the second pre-season test, setting a new track record in Buriram.

—AFP



BK8 Gresini Racing MotoGP team’s Spanish MotoGP rider Alex Marquez, (front row left to right) Ducati Lenovo Team’s Spanish MotoGP rider Marc Marquez and Aprilia Racing team’s Italian MotoGP rider Marco Bezzecchi pose for a group photo at the Buriram International Circuit in Buriram, Thailand yesterday, ahead of the Thailand MotoGP Grand Prix. —AFP

## India thrash Zimbabwe in T20 World Cup, S Africa into semis



Faisal Kamal  
CHENNAI

Defending champions India thrashed Zimbabwe by 72 runs in their Super Eights T20 World Cup match yesterday, a result that guaranteed South Africa a place in the semi-finals.

India posted a mammoth 256-4 and then restricted Zimbabwe to 184-6 in Chennai to make their clash with West Indies on Sunday a winner-takes-all decider for the last semi-final berth.

South Africa hammered the West Indies by nine wickets earlier in Ahmedabad.

At Chennai’s M.A. Chidambaram stadium, opener Abhishek Sharma blasted 55 and Hardik Pandya an unbeaten 50 as India piled up the second highest total in the history of the tournament after being invited to bat first.

Zimbabwe, who stunned Australia and Sri Lanka to reach the Super Eights, were never in the chase despite a brisk start as the asking rate kept rising.

Opener Brian Bennett was not out 97, the highest individual score by a Zimbabwean in T20 World Cup history, as his side exited the semi-final reckoning with a game still to play.

India’s left-arm quick Arshdeep Singh took 3-24 from his four overs.

Zimbabwe’s bowlers conceded 510 runs in 40 overs in two Super Eights matches after West Indies posted 254-6 against the tournament’s surprise packages on Monday.

Zimbabwe captain Sikandar Raza won the toss and opted to field for the second match running, and again saw his bowlers hit to all parts.

Left-handed Abhishek, who had struggled with three ducks in four innings in this tournament, hit four fours and four sixes to return to form.

Pandya and left-handed Tilak Varma, who hit a 16-ball 44, put on an unbeaten stand of 84 at the end.

But India ended just short of the T20 World Cup record 260-6 made by Sri Lanka against Kenya in 2007.

Wicketkeeper-batsman Sanju Samson returned to the team to break the left-handed opening combination of Abhishek and Ishan Kishan and handed India a flying start.

Samson fell for 24 off Blessing Muzarabani but Abhishek kept up the charge, reaching his fifty off 26 balls in a 72-run stand with Kishan (38).

Abhishek fell to Tinotenda Maposa, caught at long-on, but his knock laid the platform for a big total.

Skipper Suryakumar Yadav hit 33 off 13 balls.

Pandya finished with a flourish with two sixes off Brad Evans to get to 50 on the final ball of the innings.

—AFP



India’s Abhishek Sharma plays a shot during the 2026 ICC Men’s T20 Cricket World Cup Super Eights match against Zimbabwe at the MA Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai, India yesterday.

—AFP

## Sport in brief

### World No. 1 Wang Chuqin leads Chinese players into last 8 in Singapore Smash

#### Table tennis

SINGAPORE—World No. 1 Wang Chuqin led a group of Chinese players into the quarterfinals of the 2026 WTT Singapore Smash here yesterday.

Wang beat Denmark’s Anders Lind 3-1 in the men’s singles event after a closely contested battle. He will next take on South Korea’s Jang Woo-jin.

Fellow Chinese Lin Shidong defeated South Korea’s Lim Jong-hoon 3-1 and is set to meet France’s Felix Lebrun. His teammate Xiang Peng lost 3-0 to Chinese Taipei’s Lin Yun-ju.

In the women’s singles, Wang Manyu fought back from one set down to beat South Korea’s Shin Yu-bin 3-1. She will face Japan’s Miwa Harimoto in the quarterfinals. Wang Yidi advanced with a 3-1 win over Japan’s Mima Ito while Chen Xingtong defeated Japan’s Miyu Nagasaki 3-0 to reach the last eight.

—Xinhua

### Irish wing Lowe ruled out of rest of Six Nations



#### DUBLIN — Livewire

Irish wing James Lowe will play no further part in the Six Nations it was announced yesterday owing to the groin injury he suffered early on in last weekend’s 42-21 thrashing of England.

The 33-year-old New Zealand-born Leinster star had only just returned to the starting line-up in the 20-13 win over Italy the previous weekend.

The 45-times capped Lowe was surprisingly omitted from the opening 36-14 hammering by France but was one of the few players to shine against the Italians.

“Unfortunately, James Lowe has been ruled out of the remainder of the Six Nations with the groin injury he suffered in last week’s win over England,” read the Irish Rugby statement posted on their X, formerly Twitter, account.

Lowe will miss Ireland’s two remaining matches - both at home

- against bottom-of-the-table Wales on March 6 and title contenders Scotland on March 14.

Lowe’s absence means coach Andy Farrell is without both his first choice wings, Mack Hansen having played no role at all in the campaign because of a foot injury.

However, Robert Baloucoune and Tommy O’Brien - who came on for Lowe - impressed in the rout of England at Twickenham.

Both the Irish and the Scots entertain outside hopes of winning the title - though France can seal it with a bonus point victory in Scotland on Saturday week.

Scotland are second in the table on 11 points, four adrift of the French, with the Irish third on nine.

On the final weekend, even if France have already clinched the title, the Irish and Scots could battle it out for the Triple Crown - the prize for one of the four Home Nations of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales if they beat all the others in a single Championship season. —AFP

## Medvedev sets up Dubai semi clash with Auger-Aliassime

### Tennis

DUBAI — Daniil Medvedev produced a clinical 6-2, 6-1 performance against Jenson Brooksby yesterday to advance to his third Dubai semi-final and book a showdown with Felix Auger-Aliassime.

The former world number one boasts 22 career titles but has never won the same tournament twice. He is trying to change that this week in Dubai, where he lifted the trophy in 2023.

“I felt great. I know that maybe he had some issues, shoulder or elbow, I’m not sure, but his first serve was not going as probably he can usually do,” said Medvedev, who is seeking a second title of the season to go with the one he won in Brisbane.

“But you still need to play, you still need to put the returns

in. He’s a big fighter...

“I’m happy with the way I’m playing here and I’m looking forward to the semis.”

In what was his second career meeting with Brooksby, two breaks of serve helped Medvedev scoop the opening set in just 28 minutes.

The third-seeded Russian kept up his momentum in the second, breaking early and cruising towards victory in just 57 minutes.

Medvedev advanced to the 53<sup>rd</sup> hard-court semi-final of his career, trailing just Novak Djokovic among active players.

The 30-year-old former US Open champion will next take on top-seeded Auger-Aliassime, who defeated Czech eighth seed Jiri Lehecka 6-3, 7-6 (7/2).

Auger-Aliassime, 25, punched his ticket to a second straight

Dubai semi-final with a one hour, 52-minute victory over Lehecka.

The Canadian world number eight has made the quarterfinals or better at 10 of his last 11 tournaments, and has won 11 of the 12 matches he has contested this month - a stretch that includes a title run in Montpellier and a runner-up showing in Rotterdam.

“I think the serve was great. Because we played in two different conditions from the first set to the second,” said Auger-Aliassime, who hit 16 aces yesterday.

“It was tough to get breaking chances and every time he came up with aces.”

Later yesterday, Andrey Rublev faced Arthur Rinderknech and won 6-2, 6-4 and Jakub Mensik lost to Tallon Griekspoor 3-6, 6-3, 2-6.

—AFP

# Béjart Ballet's iconic Bolero ignites Istanbul

Anne Chaon

ISTANBUL – Thirty-six dancers with raised arms glide slowly forward as they encircle their prey, a lone figure on a red table in a climactic scene from Ravel's "Boléro" choreographed by Maurice Béjart\*.

Marked by its stark staging and ritualistic intensity, the work remains one of the most enduring interpretations of Ravel's best-known work and continues to captivate audiences worldwide.

Once again, the Béjart Ballet Lausanne (BBL) – which was in Istanbul to kick off a new international tour – closed each of its four performances with the monumental "Bolero."

The 15-minute orchestral piece has inspired seven different choreographies, but is most widely associated with the version created by Béjart, which remains the best known.

"We call it a table, but it could be an altar or a pyre," Julien Favreau, BBL's artistic director, told AFP as he contemplated the 4.5-metre-diameter red structure which folds up like a camping table so it can travel around the world.

Favreau, who joined the BBL at the age of 17, danced his last Boléro in June 2024 in Tokyo, just before taking over the reins of the company, aged 47.

In his experience, performing this work meant everything.

"For a dancer, it is the ultimate achievement, the crowning glory," he said.

## Challenges

But the work is very demanding. "The main difficulty is respecting the score's crescendo and keeping your energy and strength

intact until the big leaps, when your legs start to burn," he said.

Memorising the choreography without being able to rely on variations in the music – whose melody and rhythmic pattern hardly changes – is another challenge.

"Some people ask for a teleprompter that displays the ballet sequences, but not at the BBL!" he laughs.

Towards the end, the whole body of dancers becomes engaged, menacing as they approach, their tense stomachs flexing as if hungry.

"According to Maurice Béjart's interpretation, the soloist represents the melody who knows from the outset he's going to die," explained Favreau, who speaks of the figure being "slain", the dancers acting like a "deadly jaw" that closes in.

Created in 1961 for a female soloist, it was later adapted in 1979 for the Argentine star dancer Jorge Donn, Béjart's partner.

Today, the role is played by a woman, with performances rotating between three different performers – although a male dancer is expected to join them soon.

He will join an illustrious line-up that includes the late French ballet legend Patrick Dupont, former Paris Opéra star Nicolas Le Riche and its current star, Hugo Marchand.

"The main thing is ultimately to show who you are," said Favreau.

## 'Oskar': A new work

Also on the Swiss ballet troupe's Istanbul programme was another classic Béjart interpretation of Stravinsky's "Firebird" – but the performance opened with a new work: "Oskar".

Performed for the first time abroad, it is a frenzied work



Dancers from "Béjart Ballet Lausanne" (BBL) of Switzerland perform during a rehearsal without costumes of "Boléro", choreographed by Maurice Béjart to the music of Maurice Ravel, as part of the three unique ballets brought together at the Zorlu Performing Arts Centre (PSM) in Istanbul last Friday.

– AFP

choreographed by Italian duo Riva & Repele which brings virtually the entire 40-strong ensemble onto stage, dressed in red.

It weaves the tale of a solitary artist whose dreams come up against the hard walls of reality – effectively the life story of the lead performer, Colombian dancer Oscar Chacón, who joined BBL in 2004 and has performed its entire repertoire.

"It's a ballet created especially for me, a reflection of my own life," he told AFP.

"I too am a street artist ... To come to Europe, I had to overcome barriers and travel long distances."

Favreau was keen to invite outside choreographers "to highlight the company's technical and artistic qualities and show it could do more than just Béjart".

When he took over in June 2024, Favreau inherited a ballet company shaken by allegations of harassment

with a tarnished reputation and financial difficulties.

"It was a period when we all suffered greatly, but it brought us together and made us stronger. And today, we're touring more, our finances are in good shape, the overall atmosphere is great," he said.

There are 17 different nationalities among the dancers, who range in age between 17 and over 50, their experience further

enriched by dancers who joined since the Russia-Ukraine war began four years ago.

– AFP

\*Maurice Béjart (1927–2007) was a renowned French choreographer and dancer, known for his innovative contributions to the world of ballet and contemporary dance. Born in Marseille, he initially studied dance at the Paris Conservatory and later went to the United States to explore various dance forms.

Béjart founded the Béjart Ballet Lausanne (BBL) in Switzerland in 1987, where he created numerous works that blended classical ballet with modern dance elements. He was noted for his theatrical productions, often incorporating strong emotional narratives and philosophical themes. One of his most famous works, "Boléro," set to Maurice Ravel's music, is celebrated for its powerful simplicity and beauty.

Throughout his career, Béjart collaborated with many notable dancers and musicians, and his works gained international acclaim, influencing generations of dancers and choreographers. He passed away in 2007, leaving behind a lasting legacy in the dance community.

– Poe

## BBC orders probe into 'serious mistake' over BAFTA racial slur

LONDON – The head of the BBC on Wednesday ordered a "fast-tracked" internal investigation into the "serious mistake" that saw a racist slur aired during the BAFTA awards.

Tourette's sufferer John Davidson, who inspired one of the winning films, has said he is "deeply mortified" after shouting the N-word at the London film and television awards ceremony, which he said was caused by an "involuntary tic".

He was heard shouting as "Sinners" actors Delroy Lindo and Michael B Jordan, who are both black, presented an award for special visual effects in the movies at the ceremony.

The investigation will probe why the slur was aired despite there being a two-hour delay between filming and the broadcast and why it remained on the BBC's streaming service iPlayer until the following morning.

"The BBC has been reviewing what happened at BAFTA on Sunday evening," the broadcaster said in a statement.

"This was a serious mistake and the Director-General [Tim Davie] has

instructed the Executive Complaints Unit [ECU] to complete a fast-tracked investigation and provide a full response to complainants," it added.

The probe was welcomed by Culture Minister Lisa Nandy, who described the broadcasting of a racial slur as "completely unacceptable and harmful".

"The BBC must ensure that this never happens again," she said.

The controversy comes after another damaging episode during the BBC's Glastonbury festival coverage in June 2025.

Staff failed to pull a livestream of a performance by Bob Vylan after the punk-rap duo's frontman led the crowds in an anti-Israel chant.

The BBC later apologised and said it would no longer live-broadcast musical performances it deemed to be "high risk".

## Concerns

According to the UK's domestic PA news agency, film studio Warner Bros was believed to have raised immediate concerns about the racial slur at Sunday's BAFTAs and requested it be removed from the broadcast.

But it could still be heard when it aired two hours later.

Tourette's campaigner Davidson said he believed the BBC should have "worked harder" to ensure his offensive words were not broadcast.

"I have made four documentaries with the BBC in the past and feel that they should have been aware of what to expect from Tourette's, and worked harder to prevent anything that I said ... from being included in the broadcast," he told US trade magazine *Variety*.

The BAFTA broadcast is the latest scandal to hit the BBC.

Davie is due to leave his post in April after he resigned in November over the editing of a documentary about US President Donald Trump.

The president has filed a US\$10 billion defamation lawsuit against the BBC over the edit for its flagship current affairs programme "Panorama".

Trump alleges the editing of his January 6, 2021 speech made it appear that he had explicitly urged supporters to attack the Capitol, where lawmakers were certifying Democrat Joe Biden's 2020 election victory.

– AFP



Keenyan born US actress Celeste O'Connor (left) and US actress and singer Mckenna Grace attend the "Scream 7" Global Premiere at Paramount Pictures Studios on Wednesday in Los Angeles, California. "Scream 7" is a 2026 US slasher film that is a sequel to "Scream VI" (2023) and the seventh instalment in the Scream film series.

– AFP

## World Weather

CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -1°C~9°C	Manila 22°C~33°C	New York 0°C~6°C	Lisbon 8°C~16°C
Shanghai 6°C~13°C	Bangkok 24°C~34°C	London 7°C~13°C	Rio de Janeiro 23°C~27°C
Hong Kong 20°C~24°C	Tokyo 8°C~16°C	Frankfurt 6°C~18°C	Luanda 24°C~29°C
Taipei 18°C~22°C	Singapore 23°C~33°C	Vancouver 3°C~9°C	Maputo 22°C~32°C
Guangzhou 19°C~25°C	Kuala Lumpur 23°C~34°C	Paris 9°C~14°C	Dili 24°C~30°C
Nanjing 6°C~13°C	Jakarta 24°C~31°C	Moscow -2°C~1°C	São Tomé 26°C~31°C
Guilin 11°C~17°C	Seoul 1°C~15°C	Las Vegas 15°C~28°C	Praia 18°C~25°C
Xi'an 7°C~16°C	Sydney 21°C~25°C	Monte Carlo 9°C~15°C	Bissau 19°C~36°C



**3D life**

People visit SUMMIT One Vanderbilt on Tuesday in New York City. – AFP

**Best guest yet!**

Britain's Queen Camilla greets Paddington Bear (right) and actress-singer Marisha Wallace (centre) during a reception with finalists, judges and celebrity readers, to celebrate the final of BBC's creative writing competition 500 Words, at Windsor Castle in Windsor on Wednesday. – AFP



**Lovebirds**

Two swans are seen on the Daling River in Chaoyang City, Liaoning Province, on Tuesday. Flocks of swans have migrated here since the beginning of winter, attracting many tourists. – Xinhua



**Beach bound**

Tourists pose for photos with kites flying over a beach in Pattaya, Thailand, on Wednesday. Pattaya International Kite On The Beach 2026 kicked off here on Wednesday and will last until March 1. – Xinhua

**Mosaic turtle**

A child plays on a beach in Beirut, Lebanon, on April 30, 2025. – Xinhua



**Spatial Concept**

The artwork 'Concetto spaziale' by Argentine painter Lucio Fontana is displayed during a photo call for a Sotheby's modern and contemporary sales preview ahead of an auction in March, in London yesterday. – AFP

