

Sam to attend NPC opening in Beijing tomorrow

Tony Wong

Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai travelled to Beijing yesterday for a three-day working visit where he will attend the opening meeting of the fourth session of the 14th National People's Congress (NPC) tomorrow morning, according to a statement by the Macau Government Information Bureau (GCS).

Sam is scheduled to return to Macau tomorrow after attending the opening meeting of the fourth session of the 14th NPC in the morning.

During Sam's absence from Macau, Secretary for Administration and Justice Wong Sio Chak will be acting chief executive, the statement said.

Sam's Hong Kong counterpart, John Lee Ka-chiu, will also attend tomorrow morning's opening meeting of the fourth session of the 14th NPC at the Great Hall of the People.

The opening meeting of the fourth session of the 14th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) will be held in the Great Hall of the People in the nation's capital this afternoon.

The annual sessions of the NPC and the CPPCC are known as the nation's "two sessions".

The fourth session of the 14th CPPCC National Committee, which will begin at 3 p.m. today, will conclude in the morning of Wednesday next week, spokesman Liu Jieyi told a press conference in Beijing yesterday.

Details of the schedules for the fourth session of the 14th NPC will be announced during a press conference in Beijing today.

Each term of the NPC and the CPPCC National Committee have five annual sessions, held in March every year. The fifth, last sessions of the 14th NPC and the 14th CPPCC National Committee are scheduled to be held in March next year.

Meanwhile, Hong Kong Chief Executive



Nine of Macau's 12 deputies to the NPC pose at the local airport yesterday before their flight to Beijing, comprising (from left to right) Wan Nang Hon, Sio Chi Wai, long Weng lan, Ho Sut Heng, Kou Hoi In, Ng Siu Lai, Chan Hong, Vong Hin Fai, and Kevin Ho King Lun. - Photo courtesy of TDM

Lee, who also travelled to Beijing yesterday, visited two central government agencies, separately meeting with the head of the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC), Song Zhiyong, and the chairman of the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC), Zhang Yuzhuo, according to a statement by the Hong Kong government.

As of last night, no follow-up statement was issued by the Macau government regarding Sam's schedule in Beijing yesterday.

Macau's NPC deputies, CPPCC National Committee members depart

Meanwhile, Macau deputies to the NPC and Macau members of the CPPCC National

Committee departed for Beijing yesterday, and some of them talked to the media at the local airport.

Macau has 12 deputies to the NPC and 38 CPPCC National Committee members.

The local NPC deputies and CPPCC members who talked to the media yesterday said that they will put strong emphasis on policies and measures aiming to enable Macau to better align its third five-year socioeconomic development plan with the nation's 15th Five-Year Plan.

Local NPC deputy Kevin Ho King Lun said that he will place emphasis on Macau's integration into the development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) as well as the stronger integration of data and information within the GBA.

Local NPC deputy Chan Hong said that she will focus on measures to make it more convenient for Macau residents to live in the GBA, while her fellow member Ho Sut Heng said that she will place special emphasis on measures to enable Macau to better seize the development opportunities brought about by the nation's 15th Five-Year Plan.

Local CPPCC member Frederico Ma Chi Ngai said that he will put stronger emphasis on how Macau can better serve the nation in terms of cultivating and attracting high-end talent, while his fellow member Wong Kit Cheng said that she will pay close attention to measures aiming to help Macau young people seize the development opportunities brought about by the nation's 15th Five-Year Plan. ■

Trump threatens to 'cut off all trade' with Spain

WASHINGTON - US President Donald Trump yesterday threatened to "cut off all trade with Spain" for Spain's rejection to allow the US military to use its base in Spain for attacks on Iran, while saying he is also not happy with Britain.

- Xinhua (More on page 12)



Trump says 'everything's been knocked out' in Iran

WASHINGTON - US President Donald Trump yesterday boasted of wide damage on Iran inflicted by the US-Israeli attack, while denying that Israel had forced his hand into launching the war.

"Just about everything's been knocked out," Trump said as he met German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, answering his first questions from reporters since the strikes began on Saturday.

Trump said that he acted to prevent Tehran launching an assault first.

"Based on the way the negotiation was going, I think they [Iran] were going to attack first. And I didn't want that to happen," Trump said in the Oval Office.

"So, if anything, I might have forced Israel's hand."

He said that two waves of US-Israeli

attacks on Iran had killed figures he had eyed as potential new leaders, adding that there had been a "substantial" new attack on a meeting to choose the new leadership.

"Most of the people we had in mind are dead," he said. "Now we have another group. They may be dead also, based on reports." (More on pages 7, 8, 10 - 12 & 14) - AFP

Macau's most popular English-language newspaper - Your trustworthy source of news & views

The Macau Post Daily

Customs busts 46 smugglers with 112 kg of silver granules & bars worth 2.2 million patacas

The Macau Customs Service have arrested 46 smugglers attempting to smuggle 112 kilogrammes of silver granules and bars worth 2,200,000 patacas. - Story on p. 2

Stranded in paradise: Mideast war traps thousands in Bali

Passengers stranded on the Indonesian resort island of Bali clamoured for flight news yesterday as the outbreak of war in the Middle East grounded planes and turned a tropical holiday dream into an ordeal for many. - Story on p. 8

Recognition, not competition, for Oscar-nominated foreign filmmakers

Foreign films used to be almost an Oscars afterthought, but the directors of the five movies nominated for the best international feature prize say they increasingly feel like part of a new normal on Hollywood's biggest night. - Story on p. 15

MPU students visit PJ anti-fraud centre to boost scam awareness



This undated handout photo provided by the public Macao Polytechnic University (MPU) on Monday shows its Anti-Fraud Ambassadors attending a briefing from a Judiciary Police (PJ) officer at the PJ Anti-Fraud Coordination Centre last week.

Khalel Vallo

Students from the public Macao Polytechnic University (MPU) visited the Judiciary Police's (PJ) Anti-Fraud Coordination Centre last week in order to strengthen their awareness of telecom and online scams, according to a statement by the tertiary education institution on Monday.

The visit was organised by the MPU Student Affairs Office (SAO) and involved members of the university's Anti-Fraud Ambassadors programme, the statement said, adding that during the visit to the PJ Anti-Fraud Coordination Centre, students received a briefing on the latest telecom and online fraud trends.

The statement noted that

officers highlighted how scammers exploit technological loopholes and psychological vulnerabilities, aiming to help the students better understand evolving tactics. The session also introduced the centre's work in cross-departmental collaboration, data analysis and public education, the statement said, adding that through seminars and outreach activities, the centre continues to raise public vigilance against fraud.

According to the statement, some of the participating students said that the briefing deepened their understanding of various scam methods and prevention strategies. As "Anti-Fraud Ambassadors", they pledged to promote awareness on campus through themed campaigns and peer sharing, with the aim of

integrating fraud prevention into daily campus life and encouraging fellow students to safeguard personal property and campus security, the statement said.

In addition to academic growth, the university places strong emphasis on fostering social responsibility and safety awareness, according to the statement. In support of the local government's "Campus Anti-Fraud Vaccine Programme," the SAO launched the "Eagle Eyes" Anti-Fraud Ambassador initiative, striving to empower students to take the lead in fraud prevention outreach, the statement noted.

Through these efforts, the statement said, it aims to build a stronger line of defence to protect lives, property and personal safety. ■

Online virtual tours of 4 more Historic Centre of Macao sites available

Rui Pastorin

Online virtual tours of four more sites in the Historic Centre of Macao are now available on vr.icm.gov.mo, the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) said in a statement earlier this week.

Virtual tours are now available for the Protestant Cemetery (基督教墳場), Headquarters Building of the Orient Foundation*, the Headquarters Building of the Marine and Water Bureau (Former Moorish Barracks), and the Guia Lighthouse (interior), joining the currently available 15 World Heritage sites, eight squares, and cultural facilities such as galleries, according to the statement.

Available in Cantonese, Putonghua, Portuguese and English, the

tours provide a "360-degree panoramic view of the building and its surrounding environment". It can be accessed on the website, the statement said, adding that one can also use a VR headset.

The statement said that the bureau will continue research and develop online tours for eligible World Heritage sites, promoting the integration of cultural heritage resources and technology.

One can find more Macao cultural heritage-related information by visiting the Macao Cultural Heritage website on www.culturalheritage.mo. ■

*Located in Casa Garden, the building serves as the headquarters of the Macau delegation of the Lisbon-based Orient Foundation (FO).



This image provided by the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) shows the starting point of the virtual tour of the Headquarters Building of Portugal's Orient Foundation (FO).

Illegally occupied plot to become temporary carpark

Ida Cheong

The Lands and Urban Construction Bureau (DSSCU) said in a statement yesterday that its officials, in conjunction with personnel from several other government entities, launched a joint operation to reclaim an illegally occupied plot located on Rua de Entre-Campos (田畔街) near the peninsula's Luis de Camões Garden yesterday, which will be developed into a temporary carpark.

The statement pointed out that the illegally occupied land measures around 1,685 square metres. There were various illegal constructions on the site, such as a brick-walled structure with a corrugated zinc sheet roof, several piles of metal scaffolding, as well as stored tools, construction materials, and miscellaneous items.

The Lands and Urban Construction Bureau had ordered the illegal occupant to vacate and return the land to the government within a specified deadline. Following the expiration of the deadline, most of the materials on the plot had been removed; however, the illegal constructions



This handout photo provided by the Lands and Urban Construction Bureau (DSSCU) shows its personnel removing unlawfully built structures in the illegally occupied plot on Rua de Entre-Campos in the Macau peninsula yesterday. Officials from the Housing Bureau (IH) were also present.

and a small amount of debris remained, the statement added.

Consequently, the government executed a joint operation to repossess the land so that the plot can be developed into a temporary carpark, the statement said, adding that the relevant entity will start setting up the carpark as soon as possible.

Simultaneously, given the presence of officially registered wooden huts on the land, the Housing Bureau (IH) also dispatched officials to assist with the operation, the statement said.

The statement noted that the plot is one of the 39 parcels planned for temporary use by the government. ■

Customs busts 46 smugglers with 112 kg of silver granules & bars worth 2.2 million patacas

Armindo Neves

The Macau Customs Service announced in a statement on Monday that its officers at the Barrier Gate and Qingmao checkpoints arrested 46 smugglers attempting to smuggle 112 kilogrammes of silver granules and bars worth 2,200,000 patacas.

According to the statement, between February 21 and last Thursday, customs officers at the Barrier Gate and Qingmao checkpoints noticed that 27 Macau residents, 18 mainlanders and a Hong Kong resident were acting suspiciously.

Upon inspection, the officers discovered that the 46 smugglers had concealed a total of 112 kilogrammes of silver granules and bars in their clothing and belongings, in an attempt to smuggle them into the Chinese mainland.

The ages of the 46 smugglers range between 26 and 78. The Macau Customs Service has initiated legal proceedings against the suspects in accordance with the External Trade Law. They face a maximum fine of 50,000 patacas. Furthermore, any seized goods will be declared forfeited to the local government. ■



This undated handout photo provided by the Macau Customs Service on Monday shows eight packs of silver granules seized by its officers at the Macau-Zhuhai Qingmao pedestrian checkpoint recently.

Published since Aug 2004

- Director & Chief Editor – Harald Brüning
- Office Manager – Sally Chong
- Marketing Manager – Kevin Cheung King Lok
- Managing Editor – Maria Cheang Ut Meng
- Editors – Lesley Wells, Johnny Un
- Senior Reporters – Tony Wong, Rui Pastorin
- Reporters – Ada Lei, Khalel Vallo, William Chan, Ida Cheong, Armindo Neves
- Chief Graphic Designer – Simon Wang
- Graphic Designer – Colin Zhong
- Administrative Assistants – Ester Mak, Carl Leong
- Printed by Tipografia Welfare Lda., 82-86 Rua dos Pescadores
- Wire services – AFP, Xinhua
- Chatbots: Poe, DeepSeek

Macau Weather

**MAINLY CLOUDY.
A FEW RAIN PATCHES.
FORCE 3 TO 4 NORTH TO
NORTHEASTERLY WINDS,
OCCASIONALLY FORCE 5.
RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL
RANGE BETWEEN 70% AND 98%.**



15°C~20°C

Source: SMG

ITTF World Cup Macao 2026 to return to Galaxy Arena

Khalel Vallo

The ITTF Men's and Women's World Cup Macao 2026 presented by integrated resort operator Galaxy Entertainment Group (GEG) will be held at Galaxy Arena in Cotai from March 30 to April 5, with tickets going on sale on Friday.

Sanctioned by the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF), the event is organised by the Sports Bureau (ID), GEG and World Table Tennis (WTT) Management Group Limited, and co-organised by the Macau Table Tennis General Association (MTTGA).

At yesterday's press conference, Sports Bureau Acting President See Lei Si Leng pointed out that Macau has hosted several major international table tennis events in recent years, noting that the successful staging of the ITTF World Cup in 2024 and last year drew "enthusiastic support from residents and visitors", while helping drive sports tourism and related sectors.

"ITTF's continued sanctioning of Macau to host the World Cup this year represents trust and recognition by the international sports community in Macau's capability to stage major sporting events," she said.

Meanwhile, GEG Director Philip Cheng Yee Sing said they are honoured to organise the tournament for the third consecutive year. This year also marks the ITTF's 100th anniversary. "We look forward to working together again to deliver a world-class, international table tennis event in Macau," Cheng said, adding that Galaxy Arena has become a key stage for the global competition.



Sports Bureau (ID) Acting President See Lei Si Leng (left) and Galaxy Entertainment Group (GEG) Director Philip Cheng Yee Sing address yesterday's "International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF), Men's and Women's World Cup Macao 2026" press conference at the Galaxy International Convention Centre (GICC) in Cotai yesterday. — Photos: Khalel Vallo

The competition will feature 48 male and female elite players. Defending champions Hugo Calderano of Brazil and the Chinese mainland's Sun Yingsha are set to return, alongside leading national team members including Wang Chuqin, Lin Shidong, Liang Jingkun and Wang Manyu, according to a statement by the bureau yesterday. Young champions Kawakami Ryusei of Japan and the Chinese mainland's Qin Yuxuan will also compete, together with qualifiers from Continental Cups and world rankings, the statement said.

The event will be held in two stages. Stage 1 consists of 16 round-robin groups of

three players each, with best-of-five matches. The top player from each group advances to Stage 2, a knockout draw featuring best-of-seven matches. Stage 1 group matches from March 30 to April 1 will be held in two daily sessions at 9:30 a.m. and 5 p.m.

The round of 16 on April 2 and 3, as well as the quarter-finals on April 4, will begin at 11 a.m. and 6 p.m. respectively. The semi-finals will start at 11 a.m. on April 5, followed by the final at 7:30 p.m. Both Easter Sunday and Ching Ming Festival fall on April 5 this year.

Tickets will go on sale at 12 p.m. on Friday through platforms including Galaxy Ticketing and MacauTicket.com. Prices

range from 90 to 1,720 patacas depending on session and seating, The statement said, noting that each person may purchase up to four tickets each time. Holders of full-time Macau Student Cards, residents aged 65 or above and Disability Assessment Registration Card holders can enjoy a 20 percent discount for sessions held between March 30 and April 3 when purchasing their tickets via MacauTicket.com, subject to availability.

Cheng expressed confidence that the centenary edition of the World Cup will deliver another world-class sporting spectacle while showcasing Macau's appeal as a "tourism + sports" destination. ■



澳門樂團
ORCHESTRA DE MACAU
Macao Orchestra

SJM Presents

Classics on Strings



澳娛綜合
SJM Resorts, S.A.

14 / 03 / 2026

20:00 | Saturday

Venue

**Macao Cultural Centre
Grand Auditorium**

Tickets

MOP 300 / 250 / 200 / 150

Programme

Beethoven:
Coriolan Overture, Op. 62

Mozart:
Sinfonia Concertante in E-flat Major, K. 364

Mendelssohn:
Symphony No. 3 in A minor, Op. 56 "Scottish"



Conductor and Violin
Julian Rachlin



Viola
Sarah McElravy

Approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes, including one interval

Ticket Reservation
www.macaoticket.com (853) 2855 5555



For more information about discounts, please visit
www.om-macau.org

澳門樂團 MacaoOrchestra



Hou Kong Lantern Festival event aims to deepen students' understanding of Chinese culture & national pride

Armando Neves

Macau's renowned Hou Kong Middle School (Primary Section) hosted a Lantern Festival* event yesterday, and Chan Pou Sin, the school's vice principal, told the *Post* during the festivity that it aimed to deepen students' understanding of Chinese culture and national pride.

The one-day event was hosted on the school campus on Rua de Afonso de Albuquerque. Hou Kong Middle School, which comprises a number of different campuses, has been a traditional Chinese medium school since 1932. "Hou Kong" is one of Macau's ancient names.

Chan told the *Post* that as a traditional patriotic school, Hou Kong Middle School has adhered to patriotic education for the past 93 years.

Chan emphasised that patriotism cannot rely solely on mere teaching, it must combine content and form to allow students to experience it personally. The school customarily takes advantage of traditional festivals such as the recent Spring Festival (Chinese New Year) and yesterday's Lantern Festival, enabling students to participate and gain a deeper understanding of Chinese culture, fostering a sense of national identity, Chan said.

According to Chan, during yesterday's event, which marked the formal end of the Chinese New Year period, the school focused on promoting home-school cooperation by inviting parents to participate. Through photos and videos, parents can better understand and support the school's educational efforts, Chan said.

Chan expressed his gratitude to the parent volunteers and students for their active participation.

Chan addressed the festivities, expressing his hope that all staff members and students will enjoy good health and continuous progress in the Year of the Horse. Against the backdrop of the world's current instability, he urged the participants to deepen their understanding of national culture, strengthen cultural confidence, and strive diligently in their studies to contribute to the future of Macau and the motherland, according to Chan.

The school's Chinese Panel Head** Choi Hom Chu and Deputy Head Cheng Ka Wai told the *Post* that the event was part of the Chinese language curriculum's teaching plan, which integrates traditional Chinese festivals, adding that the event included experiential activities such as lantern riddles and pitch-pot***.

For this year's event, both teachers underlined, the elements representing the nation's 56 ethnic groups were specifically incorporated. Building on the students' pre-class research and in-class learning, the aim was to deepen their understanding through a display of ethnic costumes, both said.

Choi and Cheng expressed the hope that through hands-on experience, students would come to appreciate the richness of Chinese culture, develop a love for traditions, and strive for academic progress in the new year.

The *Post* also interviewed several parent volunteers who helped to get the



Hou Kong Middle School Vice Principal Chan Pou Sin addresses yesterday's Lantern Festival event at Hou Kong Middle School (Primary Section) on Rua de Afonso de Albuquerque. – Photos courtesy of Hou Kong Middle School



event off the ground. They generally agreed that participating in such activities helped them gain a deeper understanding of the school's educational approach, while also allowing children to learn about the nation's diverse ethnic groups through hands-on experience, thereby nurturing a sense of patriotism.

Ho and Kuai, who were in charge of the traditional Chinese clothing (Hanfu) activity, said that the event provided an opportunity for parents and children to experience the beauty of traditional Chinese attire together. They also said that some parents were encouraged by their children's enthusiasm and gladly took part, enhancing parent-child interaction and strengthening the home-school connection.

Lei and Choi, who were responsible for makeup, designed looks based on the distinctive features of various ethnic costumes. Both said that the children were highly focused on the process, demonstrating a strong sense of responsibility for their roles.

Jeong, who led the origami workshop, mentioned that his child woke up early to attend, showing great interest in the event.

In the future, Chan said, Hou Kong Middle School will continue to uphold patriotic education, designing appropriate content for students of different age groups, such as that the sixth graders' graduation trip will incorporate patriotic elements – visiting revolutionary historic sites and advanced regions of the country.

Through comparisons, students will feel the changes in national development, especially before and after Macau's return, Chan said.

Chan pointed out that after Macau's return to the motherland, the special administrative region has benefited from the "One Country, Two Systems" policy. He stressed that the Central People's Government's deep care for Macau has supported its ongoing development, adding that students should understand the close connection between the nation and Macau.

*The Lantern Festival (元宵節 Yuanxiao jie in pinyin; while directly translated it means "First Night Festival", the term Yuanxiao is traditionally used to describe the sweet glutinous rice balls that are eaten during the festival) is a traditional Chinese festival celebrated on the 15th day of the first month in the lunisolar Chinese calendar. The day marks the final day of the traditional Chinese New Year – Spring Festival – celebrations. – DeepSeek

**A Chinese Panel Head is the Head of the Chinese Department in a Hong Kong or Macau school, responsible for everything from teaching classical Chinese poetry to organising the school's Mandarin curriculum. – DeepSeek

***Pitch-pot (Touhu - 投壺) is an ancient Chinese game involving throwing arrows into a pot, but historically it functioned as a Confucian ritual designed to cultivate grace, focus, and moral virtue among scholars and nobles. – DeepSeek

CAC Lantern Festival party braves downpour

Rui Pastorin

Revellers at Albergue SCM last night were undeterred by stubborn rain as they continued to celebrate the open-air “Celebration of the Chinese New Year of the Horse” Party.

Yesterday evening’s annual one-night event was presented by CAC – Círculo dos Amigos da Cultura de Macau (“Circle of the Friends of Macau’s Culture”) and Albergue SCM. Celebrating the Lantern Festival, which falls on the 15th day of the first month in the lunisolar Chinese calendar and marks the final day of the Chinese New Year celebrations, the event saw a slow trickle of participants arriving, some armed with umbrellas.

Whether sheltering under the overhang of a building or umbrellas, attendees joined to savour free festive snacks, listen to music performances, and watch a master calligrapher at work as well as view a new related exhibition titled “Success with Horses – Works by Choi Chun Heng and his Treasured Collections” that also kicked off last night, among other activities.

Attendees gathering at one of the two exhibition venues witnessed calligraphy master Choi at work, and received fai chun (揮春), or couplets, conveying good wishes and messages for the coming year.

Secretary of the CAC General Assembly Karena Lao (劉芷菁) told the *Post* in an interview last night that unpredictable weather will always be an issue when holding outdoor events. However, for last night, she noted that a continued general passion for the celebration still drove people to come irrespective of the wet weather. “I think the public are generally very passionate about this celebration, so even though the weather is not that good, I can still see a lot of newcomers”, she said.

She highlighted that most attendees to the annual event are normally made up of families, kids and seniors, pointing out that for the latter, they prepare food that is both suitable for their tastes as well as being easy to handle and enjoy. “They can eat it here or maybe they can take it home and enjoy it there”, according to Lao.

The festive event is aimed at celebrating the new year with members of the public. Alongside the annual Mid-Autumn Festival party in September, the CNY party has been held since around 2009, with the organisers doing their best to hold them annually, Lao noted.

The exhibition will be on until April 16, with more details and photos in an upcoming page 4. ■



Revellers, braving unyielding rain, take part in a host of activities at the annual Celebration of the Chinese New Year of the Horse Party at Albergue SCM last night. – Photos: Rui Pastorin

MGTO postpones drone & firework show to coming Saturday due to unstable weather

Tony Wong

The Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) announced in a statement last night that due to the unstable weather conditions, it decided to postpone its drone and firework show initially scheduled for 9 p.m. yesterday to 9 p.m. on Saturday, March 7.

The statement said that after a comprehensive assessment, MGTO made the decision with the aim of ensuring spectators’ enjoyment of the show.

Macau was affected by unyielding rainfall last night. The Meteorological and Geophysical Bureau (SMG), according to its website, forecasts that Macau will still be affected by showers today, after which the city is expected to enjoy sunny weather from tomorrow over the next six days.

MGTO had scheduled three drone and firework shows in celebration of the Chinese New Year of the Horse. The first show was held on the third day of the Year of the Horse, February 19, while the second show was held on the seventh day of the Year of the Horse, which was Monday last week.

Due to the rain, the third show, which was initially slated for last night, has now been rescheduled to this coming Saturday.

Yesterday was the Lantern Festival, which is celebrated on the 15th day of the first lunar month.

The postponed show, on Saturday night, is scheduled to last 25 minutes featuring a 15-minute drone display first before the conventional pyrotechnic display. ■



This file photo shows spectators along Nam Van Lake watching the drone show on Monday last week. – Photo: GCS

IC to launch local young musician training programme this year



Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) President Deland Leong Wai Man (right) and the government-appointed Cultural Development Consultative Council President Chan Ka lo pose during yesterday’s press conference after a closed-door regular meeting of the council at the Macau Cultural Centre (CCM) in Nape. – Photo: Ida Cheong

Ida Cheong

The Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) will collaborate with two local orchestras this year to launch its local young musician training programme, initially planning to recruit over 10 youths, IC President Deland Leong Wai Man announced in yesterday’s press conference.

Leong made the remarks during a press conference after a closed-door regular meeting of the government-appointed Cultural Development Consultative Council at the Macau Cultural Centre (CCM) in Nape. Leong noted that the training will be conducted by the Macao Orchestra and the Macao Chinese Orchestra, encompassing community performances, one-on-one mentorship, and professional orchestra rehearsals, aiming to cultivate local musical talent, provide a professional performance platform for young musicians, assist in building a performing arts talent pipeline, and enhance their employment opportunities in professional orchestras.

Love & Peace

Meanwhile, the “2026 Macao International Parade”, themed “Love, Peace and Cultural Integration”, will take place on March 29, Leong said, adding that the parade will bring together performance troupes from across the

globe as well as locals, featuring brand-new designs and presentations at various historic districts to showcase the city’s urban landscape.

Next month’s events

Moreover, the 3rd “Macao International Comedy Festival” will be held in both Macau and Hengqin in April, Leong said, adding that her bureau will facilitate the establishment of such international events in the Greater Bay Area (GBA) promoting regional cultural exchange, particularly in Hengqin.

Leong also noted that the inaugural cultural and sports carnival will integrate intangible cultural heritage with sporting activities, such as dragon boat races.

A string of activities and experiences will be held at various heritage sites and communities across the city in April, aiming to allow residents and visitors to experience the city’s diverse cultural and sporting elements, she said.

Leong added that in response to the Chinese mainland’s “Regulation to Promote Public Reading”, and coinciding with World Book Day on April 23, the former “Macao Reading Month” has been renamed “Macao Book Reading 2026 – National Reading Week”, providing an array of reading promotion activities throughout next month. ■

Woman loses 60,000 patacas in game top-up card fraud: police

Tony Wong

A middle-aged local woman lost 60,475 patacas in an online scam, Judiciary Police (PJ) spokesman Lei Chi Hou said during a regular press conference yesterday.

The victim reported the case to the police on Saturday last week.

On Friday last week, Lei said, the victim received a message in her mobile game's chatroom from a stranger who expressed an interest in buying her gaming account for HK\$8,000, to which she agreed. The next day, the victim followed the purported buyer's instructions to set up an account on a trading platform, after which the purported buyer told her that he or she had transferred the HK\$8,000 to her account.

However, Lei said, when the victim tried to withdraw the money from the trading platform, she discovered that her account had been "frozen" and immediately contacted the platform's "customer service". A "customer service agent" told her that she would have her account "unfrozen" after buying game top-up cards* and uploading photos showing the cards' information to the platform, and promised that the cost of the game cards would be refunded to her once the process was complete.

According to Lei, the woman believed what the "customer service agent" said. Eventually, the victim bought 25 game top-up



Judiciary Police (PJ) spokesman Lei Chi Hou looks on during yesterday's regular press conference.

- Photo: Tony Wong

cards in total from a convenience store, each worth 2,419 patacas, but she still did not have her account "unfrozen".

The woman finally realised that she had been defrauded, losing 60,475 patacas in total, and reported the case to the police, Lei said. ■

*Game top-up cards are prepaid vouchers (physical or digital) that contain a specific monetary value or a set amount of in-game currency. Players redeem these cards to add credit to their gaming account or wallet, which can then be used to make purchases within a game or on a gaming platform. - DeepSeek

SJM Resorts extends paid maternity, paternity leave

Rui Pastorin

SJM Resorts announced in a statement yesterday that female employees with at least one year of service are now entitled to 90 days of paid maternity leave, while male employees are entitled to 7 days of paid paternity leave.

The enhancement is in support of the government's policy on encouraging childbirth, and further demonstrates the company's "commitment to fostering a family-friendly workplace", the statement said.

SJM Managing Director Daisy Ho Chiu-fung was quoted by the statement as saying: "This latest enhancement is a true reflection

of our steadfast commitment to our people, and we hope that through our strengthened parental benefits, SJM can be the most reliable pillar of support for every employee during the most meaningful moments of their lives."

SJM Resorts is the last of Macau's six integrated resort operators to announce extended paid maternity and paternity leave. ■



This screenshot taken last night shows SJM Resorts' logo.



A dragon dance is staged in celebration of the Lantern Festival in Quzhou, Zhejiang Province, yesterday. Across the nation, a variety of vibrant activities were held in celebration of the Lantern Festival, which falls on the fifteenth day of the first month of the Chinese lunar calendar, or March 3 this year.

- Xinhua

How Chinese tea drink brands are cultivating a global footprint

Analysis

BEIJING – In recent years, Chinese tea beverage brands have become a more familiar sight overseas. From Kuala Lumpur to Singapore and as far as Los Angeles, Chinese milk tea and freshly brewed tea brands are establishing a presence in mainstream commercial districts, airports and university campuses.

As store networks expand and local teams grow, Chinese tea drink brands are entering a more structured and sustainable phase of international development.

Several brands have emerged as key players in this trend. Mixue Ice Cream & Tea has built one of the largest overseas networks among Chinese beverage chains, while Chagee has positioned itself around premium tea concepts and localized branding. Other major brands, including ChaPanda, Heytea and Nayuki, have also tested international waters at varying speeds and scales.

EXPANDING ABROAD

Among the fastest-growing players abroad is Mixue, which has entered 14 countries, with more than 4,700 stores operating outside China. Southeast Asia remains its core overseas market.

Mixue began its international operation in 2017 and opened its first overseas store in Vietnam in 2018. Supported by its self-built supply chain and in-house production of core ingredients, the company has replicated its cost-control model abroad.

"We are committed to ensuring that every consumer around the world can enjoy a high-quality product at an affordable price," said Bai Di, head of public affairs of Mixue Group.

Its first Los Angeles store, located near Hollywood Boulevard's TCL Chinese Theatre, offers ice cream at US\$1.19 and bubble tea starting at US\$3.99, positioning itself competitively within the local market.

"This is a must-try here ... especially the brown sugar milk tea," Sheila Ganesh

Acharya, a Singaporean Mixue consumer, told a reporter.

"The taste definitely stands out as well as the pricing," she said.

Chagee, meanwhile, has followed a more measured approach. After entering Malaysia in 2019, it has expanded to 196 stores in the market. In Singapore, it operates 22 outlets, including at Changi Airport and the National University of Singapore.

In Indonesia, operations have been carried out through a joint venture with a subsidiary of local retail group Erajaya, with halal certification secured to better align with local consumer expectations.

In the third quarter of 2025, Chagee achieved an overseas gross merchandise volume exceeding 300 million yuan, representing a year-on-year increase of 75.3 percent and a quarter-on-quarter growth of 27.7 percent.

"Whenever new products are launched, there are always long lines of customers in Chagee shops," said Hazaid, area manager of Chagee Malaysia.

LOCALIZATION AND CULTURAL INTEGRATION

For many brands, localization has become central to long-term growth.

For instance, Mixue has adjusted sweetness levels, tea bases and ingredient combinations to suit local tastes. In Southeast Asia's tropical climate, the company has increased the proportion of iced beverages and incorporated tropical fruit flavors.

"Taste is the entry ticket," said Shang Xiangmin, co-founder and vice president of Chagee. "Cultural connection and integration are what sustain consumer loyalty," Shang noted Chagee's goal is to present traditional Eastern tea in a modern and accessible way.

To that end, the company has experimented with culturally themed product launches, linking drinks to national celebrations or local design elements.

In August 2025, to commemorate Singapore's National Day, Chagee introduced a new orchid-flavored beverage, the "Orchid Biluochun Milk Tea," inspired by Singapore's national flower, the Vanda Miss Joaquim.

In Malaysia, it introduced a product incorporating traditional textile element "telepek" and collaborated with the Malaysian National Textile Museum on themed activities.

Most recently, it partnered with the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) and the Singapore Tourism Board to launch "Garden of Senses: A Tea Reverie," an immersive, multi-sensory tea culture exhibition. This marks a landmark collaboration, being ACM's first in-depth curatorial partnership with an international brand.

By the end of 2025, Chagee's overseas membership in the Asia-Pacific region had grown 177 percent from a year earlier, with 61 percent of members under the age of 30, demonstrating the brand's strong value recognition among local youth.

Mixue has pursued localization through its Snow King mascot. The endearing snowman, ubiquitous across Chinese cities, itself functions as a highly recognizable symbol, bridging Chinese cultural elements and connecting with overseas consumers.

The character has been promoted via multilingual animations and themed events, serving as a lighter, more culturally adaptable branding approach.

For many foreign consumers, "Chinese tea" used to mean premium, high-end products that felt distant from ordinary people. "But today's Chinese tea drink brands have completely shattered our impression of traditional Chinese tea – they taste modern and have such a stylish feel," said Natalie, a Gen Z Thai woman.

BUILDING A WIN-WIN PATH

Beyond business expansion, Chinese tea beverage brands are also integrating social responsibility into their global strategies.

In Singapore, Chagee opened a "silent store" employing hearing-impaired staff members, complete with accessible facilities. This initiative demonstrates a commitment to inclusive employment, while offering a practical example of how brand operations can contribute to local communities.

Mixue emphasizes local hiring and talent development. In Malaysia, the brand employs over 2,900 local staff and has trained more than 4,000 personnel to date.

In addition, it is exploring local sourcing of tropical fruits such as dragon fruit and passion fruit for product development in Cambodia, linking overseas business growth with support for regional agriculture.

Health and nutrition have also become part of the social responsibility agenda. In December 2025, Chagee Malaysia received certification under the health ministry's "Healthier Dining Programme."

The assessment criteria include limits such as sugar content not exceeding five grams per 100 milliliters. The certification made Chagee the first freshly made tea brand in Malaysia to receive the designation.

To support informed consumer choices, the company also introduced a calorie calculator on its app, allowing customers to view estimated calorie information for their customized drinks before ordering.

These efforts demonstrate an approach to overseas operations that combines commercial objectives with social contributions, reflecting how Chinese tea drink brands are aiming to create mutually beneficial outcomes for themselves and local communities, said analysts.

They believe that overseas expansion is transitioning from scale expansion to quality enhancement.

Analysts praise the combination of mature supply chain capabilities, digital operations, and the trend toward health upgrades as consistently raising the profile of Chinese consumer brands.

- Xinhua

Consultative suggestions provide policymakers with essential inputs to finalize five-year plan

China Daily Editorial

Economic policymaking is often judged by its outputs – growth rates, inflation prints, employment data. But the inputs matter just as much: the gathering of information, the weighing of trade-offs and the signaling of priorities. The fourth session of the 14th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference opens today in Beijing, providing the world with a window through which to view its deliberative process.

Over the past weekend, the Standing Committee of the 14th CPPCC National Committee finalized the agenda for the annual session of the country's top political advisory body, in which the participants will hear and deliberate the work report of the Standing Committee of the 14th CPPCC National Committee, review how last year's proposals were handled and sit in on the annual gathering of the National People's Congress to discuss the Government Work Report. In the process, they will examine the draft outline of the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30), a blueprint that will shape fiscal priorities, industrial policy, regional development and social reform.

The start of a new five-year plan marks a hinge moment in China's long-term economic and social trajectory. In such a year, its top political advisory body's consultative work takes on added weight. Concentrating deliberations on the forthcoming plan is about pooling expertise and building consensus around the to-do list in the country's modernization in a turbulent global environment.

The CPPCC National Committee's performance over the past year points to its efforts to embed professional knowledge into the planning process. In 2025, its more than 2,000 members submitted over 5,900 proposals; more than 1,400 members provided some 12,000 reports on socioeconomic issues and public concerns; around 6,000 consultative and public welfare activities reached more than 4 million people nationwide. The scale reflects a structured endeavor to connect policy discussion with field research, grassroots realities and sectoral expertise.

Such groundwork matters because the economic landscape remains complex. China's GDP grew by 5 percent in 2025, a hard-earned outcome. At home, stimulating consumption, adjusting the real estate sector, managing demographic changes and remedying the local government debt problem continue to test policymakers. Growth targets cannot be divorced from employment, fiscal sustainability or the quality of expansion. Constructive debate on how to balance steady growth with productivity gains and fairer income distribution is indispensable as the new plan takes shape.

Strengthening technological capability presents another priority. China's basic research still requires

stronger systemic support. Decisions about resource allocation therefore carry long-term consequences. How to better support efforts to resolve critical bottleneck issues, and how to prompt more breakthroughs in emerging industries are among the questions demanding answers.

Releasing domestic demand is equally pressing. Increasing demand requires measures to support job creation, expand the middle-income group, strengthen social safety nets and improve public services such as childcare and eldercare. These measures are social policies, but they are also macroeconomic levers. A more secure household sector is a more confident spending sector.

Regional disparities and the urban-rural divide call for long-term actions. Despite the historic success in its fight against absolute poverty, gaps in income levels and access to public services remain. Addressing these imbalances is closely linked to investment strategy, labor mobility, consumption patterns and fiscal transfers. More targeted efforts to integrate rural vitalization with broader development goals are critical to promote social fairness and sustain domestic demand.

Across all these domains runs a common thread: sequencing. Policymakers must preserve short-term stability while advancing structural reforms that may yield benefits only over time. This is precisely where the top political advisory body drawing members from academia, business, industry and research institutions can play a distinctive role. Its value lies in aggregating specialized knowledge, stress-testing policy assumptions and feeding informed recommendations into the legislative and executive process.

The two sessions that open this week – the annual session of the NPC starts tomorrow – will attract global attention for good reason. In a world marked by the policy volatility of major economies and shifting geopolitical currents, China's five-year planning framework signals a commitment to continuity and long-term orientation. It fosters the confidence of predictability about the direction of the world's second-largest economy and its ability to anchor expectations as specific measures evolve.

The emphasis on professional consultation, reliable data, field research and engagement with public concerns underscores one of the underlying forces in China's policymaking approach: long-termism combined with down-to-earth pragmatism and well-formed flexibility. By refining its new five-year blueprint through broad-based deliberation, China is seeking not only to address its own structural challenges but also to project a measure of stability and certainty into an increasingly uncertain world.

– Courtesy of China Daily

Annual session of nation's top political advisory body to run from today to March 11

BEIJING – China's top political advisory body, the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), will hold its annual session from today to 11 in Beijing, a spokesperson for the session said yesterday.

The fourth session of the 14th CPPCC National Committee will begin at 3 p.m. today and conclude on the morning of March 11, spokesperson Liu Jieyi said at a news conference.

During the session, national political advisors will hear and deliberate on a report on the work of the Standing Committee of the CPPCC National Committee and a report on the handling of the political advisors' proposals, according to the spokesperson.

They will sit in on the fourth session of the 14th National People's Congress, the country's top legislature, which is scheduled to open tomorrow, hear and discuss documents including a government work report, and discuss a draft 15th Five-Year Plan for national economic and social development, Liu said.

They are also expected to deliberate on and approve a political resolution of the annual session, a resolution on the work report of the Standing Committee of the CPPCC National Committee, a resolution on the report on the handling of proposals since the previous session, and a report on the examination of new proposals submitted during this year's session, he said.

The 2026 CPPCC National Committee session includes opening and closing meetings, group meetings and sector-specific consultations. Diplomatic



Liu Jieyi, spokesperson for the fourth session of the 14th Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) National Committee, attends a press conference at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. The CPPCC National Committee, the nation's top political advisory body, held a press conference yesterday, one day before the start of its annual session. – Xinhua

envoys to China will be invited to observe the opening and closing meetings, Liu said.

Looking ahead, political advisors will focus their consultations, deliberations and democratic oversight on helping the country secure a strong start to the 15th Five-Year Plan period (2026-2030), according to the spokesperson.

Summarizing the work of the CPPCC National Committee over the past year, Liu said political advisors have concentrated their efforts on advancing Chinese modernization. Their efforts included research on economic resilience and security, the sound development of artificial intelligence, and the green, low-carbon transition.

The CPPCC plays vital roles in multiparty cooperation and political consultation under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Its members are drawn from political parties, people's organizations,

personages without party affiliation and various sectors of society. The main functions of the CPPCC National Committee are political consultation, democratic oversight, and participation in and deliberation of state affairs.

Liu answered questions on a variety of topics at the news conference. On China's economy, he said that it rests on a solid foundation, with many advantages, strong resilience and great potential.

When responding to a media query about the Hainan Free Trade Port, Liu noted that China will unswervingly expand high-standard opening up, promote trade and investment liberalization and facilitation, and inject more positive energy and certainty into global development.

"China remains committed to its fundamental national policy of opening up; its door to the world will not close, but only open wider and wider," Liu said.

– Xinhua

No use or threat of force serves any parties, incl Israel: Wang Yi

BEIJING – Refraining from the use or threat of force in international relations is in the fundamental interests of all parties, including Israel, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said yesterday.

Wang, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, made the remarks when holding a phone conversation with Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar at the latter's request.

After listening to Sa'ar's briefing on Israel's position regarding the current situation, Wang said that China has consistently advocated resolving international and regional hotspot issues through dialogue and consultation, and that all

parties should abide by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter.

For many years, China has been committed to promoting a political settlement of the Iran nuclear issue, Wang said, adding that recent talks between Iran and the United States had been making clear progress and also addressed Israel's security concerns.

Regrettably, this process has now been disrupted by military strikes, Wang said.

China opposes the military strikes launched by Israel and the United States against Iran. The use of force cannot truly resolve the issue. Instead, it will create new problems and grave repercussions, Wang said.

The true value of military strength lies not on the battlefield but in preventing war, said Wang, noting that China calls for an immediate cessation of military operations to prevent the conflict from further escalating and spiraling out of control.

He said that China has consistently upheld a just position on Middle East issues and will continue to play a constructive role in promoting de-escalation.

Wang also urged the Israeli side to take concrete measures to ensure the safety of Chinese personnel and institutions. Sa'ar said that Israel attaches great importance to this matter and will safeguard the safety of Chinese personnel and institutions.

– Xinhua

Malaysia renews Lynas licence despite waste concerns

KUALA LUMPUR – Environmental watchdog Greenpeace voiced concern yesterday over Malaysia's decision to renew rare earths processor Lynas' licence for another decade, saying there were "unresolved long-standing concerns over radioactive waste management".

Lynas announced on Monday a 10-year renewal of its licence to operate in the Southeast Asian nation, but under tighter conditions set by the Malaysian government.

The Australian company's plant, situated at Gebeng in eastern Malaysia, is the largest commercial producer of separated rare earths outside of China.

It is a major producer of materials used in everything from electric cars and mobile phones to missiles – and has been operational since 2012.

Lynas has previously faced controversy over elevated radiation levels in byproducts linked to its raw material processing methods, raising doubts about whether its

licence would be renewed.

Under the latest agreement, the Malaysian government said on Monday, the company must now halt all activities that produce radioactive waste within five years of its renewed operating licence.

"This ensures there will be no continuous accumulation of radioactive waste in Malaysia," Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Chang Lih Kang said.

Existing radioactive waste will be stored in a permanent disposal facility, which is still being built and is set to be finished by the end of the year.

But Greenpeace Malaysia said the government's measures failed to address the core problem: large volumes of radioactive waste already stockpiled in the country which will continue to be stored domestically.

"Granting a long-term licence extension before fully resolving legacy waste management concerns risks normalising regulatory leniency in matters

involving radioactive materials," it said.

"Malaysia's participation in the global rare earth supply chain must not come at the expense of environmental governance integrity," Greenpeace said.

The group also called for independent scientific checks, open real-time updates, and clear rules with specific targets to ensure compliance.

An analyst said the extension granted to Lynas will ensure a steady supply of rare earth materials – and boost investor confidence in Malaysia.

Qarrem Kassim, based at Malaysia's Institute of Strategic and International Studies, told AFP with the extension of the new licence, the Malaysian government substantially tightened the conditions around Lynas' radioactive byproduct.

But the agreement over radioactive waste production and storage for the next five years remained a compromise, Kassim added.

"It is a compromise, whether good or not, we shall see," he said. – AFP

Thailand seeks arrest of foreigner accused of US\$30 million cross-border fraud

BANGKOK – A Thai court issued arrest warrants for a foreign businessman and his wife accused of investment fraud and money laundering, with one victim allegedly conned out of more than US\$30 million, police said.

Thailand's Central Investigation Bureau accused Ben Smith, also identified in news reports as South African Benjamin Mauerberger, and his wife, Cattaliya Beevor, of "cross-border investment fraud" dating back to 2016, according to a statement from the bureau on Monday.

Media reports have previously linked Smith to transnational scam operations in Cambodia, part of a multibillion-dollar illicit industry that has ballooned in the region.

Thailand's Caretaker Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul – who told reporters in December that he knew Smith "but was not close" to him – said Monday that the warrants were in line with the government's

policy of cracking down on scammers and money launderers "regardless of who they are".

A criminal court issued the arrest warrants on fraud and money laundering charges on Thursday.

Smith, 47, and Beevor, 40, were accused of deceiving an unnamed foreign victim into investing in stocks, real estate, a private jet and energy businesses, building credibility until the victim "believed the schemes and transferred more than one billion baht (US\$31.8 million)", the investigation bureau said.

According to the CIB, Smith portrayed himself as an investment expert and promised returns up to 11 percent.

Last week, authorities moved to confiscate assets worth more than US\$410 million from Smith and other individuals accused of fraud, the kingdom's Anti-Money Laundering Office said.

Last year, the "Whale Hunting" investigative newsletter reported that Smith once ran a "boiler room" fraud operation from Thailand, calling him a former "two-bit scammer" who went on to become a "shadow financial kingpin".

A legal representative for Smith, Witoon Kengngan, did not immediately reply to a request for comment yesterday.

Separately, a Thai lawmaker, Rangsiman Rome, pleaded not guilty last week to a more than US\$3 million defamation complaint brought by Smith over remarks the recently re-elected MP made to parliament and media, Rangsiman's lawyer Nithi Laieddee told AFP.

Smith's legal adviser, Witoon, told reporters last week that Rangsiman had accused Smith "of being a scammer".

The Bangkok Post reported that Smith and his wife left Thailand last year, citing a senior police official.

– AFP

Stranded in paradise: Mideast war traps thousands in Bali

DENPASAR – Passengers stranded on the Indonesian resort island of Bali clamoured for flight news yesterday as the outbreak of war in the Middle East grounded planes and turned a tropical holiday dream into an ordeal for many.

Hundreds were crowded at Ngurah Rai International Airport, many dressed in shorts, flip-flops and summer dresses, their expressions sour.

Many sat on the floor, exhausted, and one man repeatedly hit a wall in frustration.

"I just kind of want to see my family... right now it's a bit stressful," British tourist Adam Woo, transiting through Bali after holidaying on the neighbouring island of Lombok, told AFP.

The 23-year-old student said he saw the missiles start flying on the

news "and I was a bit worried about my flight" – especially after Dubai International Airport was hit in Iran's response to a US-Israeli attack.

"Obviously, everyone around the world at the moment is kind of stuck," said Woo.

"All the travel agencies are swamped with people calling in. So, it's literally impossible to even get on the phone with someone."

He said he was looking for an alternative flight via China.

Frustration

Around Woo, many at the airport were lugging around heavy luggage with slumped shoulders, frustration etched on many a face.

Many queued on foot and on chairs outside information centres hoping for news on replacement flights, receiving

occasional briefings with little news.

The airport's immigration office said in a statement at least 4,400 people had flights to Doha, Dubai and Abu Dhabi cancelled between Saturday and Monday.

With would-be passengers at risk of overstaying their visas, the Bali immigration office introduced a same-day emergency stay permit free of charge for affected foreigners.

Thirty-five have applied so far, according to immigration head Felucia Sengky Ratna.

Airports company Angkasa Pura said 15 flights from Bali to Doha and Abu Dhabi, and vice versa, have been cancelled between Saturday and Monday.

National carrier Garuda Indonesia has grounded all flights to Doha until further notice. – AFP



A protester wearing a mask of US President Donald Trump performs during a rally denouncing the US-Israeli strikes on Iran in front of the US embassy in Seoul yesterday. – AFP

Marcos says over 1,400 Filipinos seek repatriation amid Middle East tensions

MANILA – Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos said yesterday that more than 1,400 Filipino nationals have requested repatriation from the Middle East, as tensions continue to escalate in the region.

In a press conference, Marcos said the government cannot proceed with the repatriation at this time due to airspace and airport closures.

Marcos noted that land evacuation also poses serious risks, as convoys could be mistaken for

hostile movements.

Filipinos in Israel and other affected areas are advised to seek safe shelter and remain indoors.

While the Philippines is not directly involved in the ongoing conflict, the crisis has significant implications for the country, given that around 2.5 million Filipinos live and work across the Middle East.

Shrapnel killed a Filipino caregiver in Israel during the conflict over the weekend. – Xinhua

Helicopter crash kills 2 in Philippines

MANILA – A Malaysian national and a Filipino were killed yesterday when a helicopter crashed in a vacant lot about two hours southeast of Manila.

The helicopter was carrying five people, including two Malaysians, when it went down in a grassy area of a residential district in Pililla, a small town in Rizal province, at around 7:27 a.m. [local time], officials said.

Rizal provincial police officer Ramjae Pangga told AFP that two passengers, a Malaysian and a Filipino, were killed in the crash.

The pilot, meanwhile, had

been critically injured, said Pililla town mayor John Masinsin.

"The three survivors are ... still in shock, especially the pilot," he told AFP.

"They are now en route to a tertiary hospital in [Metro Manila], upon the request of their families," he said, praising the pilot for managing to put the aircraft down in the residential area without hurting anyone.

Pangga added the emergency landing had been forced "because their engine was about to shut down".

An investigation by the Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines is underway. – AFP

Marcos supports call for ceasefire between conflicted countries in Middle East

MANILA – Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos yesterday expressed his support for calls urging a ceasefire among countries involved in the ongoing conflict in the Middle East.

Speaking at a briefing, Marcos said while the Philippines is not in a position to formally call for

a ceasefire, the country remains optimistic about a prompt and peaceful resolution to the crisis.

Marcos noted that while the Philippines' involvement is only tangential, it remains deeply concerning due to the presence of Filipinos in the conflict areas. – Xinhua



Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos (right) and South Korea's President Lee Jae Myung shake hands during a bilateral meeting at the presidential palace in Manila yesterday. – AFP

AI disinformation turns Nepal polls into 'digital battleground'

Anup Ojha

KATHMANDU – Slick AI-generated disinformation has flooded election campaigns in Nepal, which votes tomorrow in the first polls since deadly protests triggered by a brief ban on social media overthrew the government.

The September 2025 protests were driven by tech-savvy youth angry at job shortages and flagrant corruption by an ageing political elite.

Now parties across the political divide are tapping social media to push their agendas and woo voters, especially the young, including a surge of people registering to cast their ballot for the first time.

But some of the content is manipulated or outright fake, experts and fact-checkers say.

"In a country where digital literacy is low, people believe what they see," said Deepak Adhikari, editor of the independent NepalCheck team.

Kathmandu-based technology policy researcher Samik Kharel described a "digital battleground" in the run-up to the landmark vote,

warning that Nepal lacked the expertise to monitor the onslaught of machine-generated content.

"It is even hard for experts to figure out what is real and fake," Kharel told AFP.

Around 80 percent of all of Nepal's internet traffic is through social media platforms, he said.

Internet analytics site DataReportal estimates more than 56 percent of Nepal's 30 million people are online, including 14.8 million Facebook users and around 4.3 million on Instagram. About 2.2 million are on TikTok, according to the Internet Service Providers' Association of Nepal.

"Disinformation remains a top concern that could undermine the integrity of the election process," said Ammaarah Nilafdeen of the US-based Center for the Study of Organized Hate.

"Nepal... is grappling with the scale of the threat that disinformation poses to society and democracy at large."

Threat to democracy

The protests last year began after

the government moved to regulate social media, briefly banning at least 26 platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and X.

At least 77 people were killed in two days of unrest, parliament was set on fire, and the government of four-time prime minister KP Sharma Oli collapsed.

Activists used the group-chat app Discord to put forward their suggestion of interim leader – and days later their choice, 73-year-old former chief justice Sushila Karki, was appointed to lead the country to elections.

Social media is playing a key role again.

Loyalists of the ousted premier's Marxist party have shared AI-generated images purporting to be drone photographs of a massive gathering – which were then reposted by top leaders, boasting a sea of more than 500,000 supporters.

Analysis by Nepali online fact-check experts TechPana found the images had been created using OpenAI's ChatGPT, while police

said less than 5,000 people were at the real event.

Another AI-generated video that circulated on TikTok purported to show Gagan Thapa, leader of the Nepali Congress party, urging voters to back a rival party. The platform has removed the video.

In neighbouring India, posts calling to restore Nepal's deposed Hindu monarchy have made the rounds on social media, said researcher Nilafdeen.

Such "ideological pushes" online – in this case "amplified by Hindu far-right supporters in India" – stand in contrast to "domestic demands for strengthening democratic institutions", she told AFP.

Misinformation race

The Election Commission says there is widespread use of hate speech and deepfake content, including videos created with readily available artificial intelligence tools purporting to show candidates insulting opponents or using obscene language.

"It is a concerning issue," commission information officer Suman Ghimire said.

More than 600 cases have been passed on to the authorities, he added, with around 150 handled by police.

In one case, police detained a pro-royalist supporter, Durga Prasai, for social media posts allegedly meant to intimidate potential voters.

The Election Commission can impose fines or bar candidates from running, but experts say the sheer scale of disinformation and hate speech online outstrips any effective response.

"Candidates and people close to political parties not only compete to win, but also compete to spread misinformation," said Basanta Basnet, editor-in-chief of news website Onlinekhabar, which has collaborated with Nepal FactCheck to verify posts.

The organisation has warned that "misinformation encourages citizens to take wrong decisions", which in turn could undermine the "foundation of democracy". – AFP

Rituals of resilience: how Afghan women stay sane in their 'cage'

KABUL – They feel imprisoned "like a bird whose wings have been torn off" but struggle on, defiant in their own way.

Five Afghan women talked to AFP about the things that help them cope with their lives tightly controlled by Taliban government rules, from singing to going up into the mountains to scream.

They are banned from education beyond the age of 12 and from a host of public places, including parks, pools, gyms and beauty salons.

They have to cover up when outside the home, with only their hands and eyes visible. Those who break the law risk imprisonment.

Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada insists women have been rescued from oppression since the Taliban authorities returned to power in 2021, enforcing their strict interpretation of Islamic law.

The United Nations says women are facing "gender apartheid".

The feeling of being trapped has grown as Europe and the United States further tighten entry rules, with neighbouring Iran and Pakistan forcing out 2.5 million Afghans last year alone.

"All doors are closed," said one of the women, who were drawn from across the country and whose identities AFP has disguised for security reasons.

Blue notebook

Sanam, 25, wanted to study medicine but lost her chance when universities were shut to women in 2022.

"I feel disenfranchised and angry because our rights have been taken away from us," she said.

"I feel like a bird whose wings have been torn off."

She lives in a very poor village but feels she is making a difference by teaching 30 girls and young women online.

Every day, they "are waiting for me to say good morning to them and teach them a new lesson".

"Teaching is not allowed and is a crime. I accept this risk because I know it's valuable and I feel valuable."

She also treasures a blue notebook.

"To cheer myself up, I write memories in my notebook every day. I keep the notebook in my closet, among my clothes, so that no one can access it," she said.

"Girls my age are free outside Afghanistan," she said.

"We are in a cage, we can't study, but we still try and have hope, and we continue despite all the dangers."

Screaming in the mountains

Sayamoy, a 34-year-old widow, lives in a two-room home in one of Afghanistan's biggest cities.

Her husband was a military officer who was killed by Taliban fighters before they took power.

"I feel very sad and I wish I wasn't a woman," she said.

"But when I see my children, I find hope again."

"Even if my eyes are filled with tears, I still smile for my children."

"I tell my children imaginary stories. I try to make the stories motivating and uplifting," she said, such as tales of a new home with separate rooms and beds.

She earns her living as a cleaner but also teaches primary school children in her home, pointing to a small whiteboard on the wall.

With women expected to be accompanied in public by a man they are related to, she remembers being turned away from an estate agent's office.

"They said: 'Go away auntie. We don't have any house for rent,'" she recalled.

When she sought help from the government, she was told to marry a Taliban fighter.



This photograph taken on February 17 shows an Afghan hospital medic, who studied public relations and journalism before universities were closed to women, applying lipstick inside a house in Afghanistan. – AFP

"The armed man [the fighter] was there too... I was scared and didn't go again," she said.

But she finds relief by her husband's isolated grave, on a plain between high mountains.

"There is no one to hear my voice. There, I scream a lot," she said, feeling the mountains share her pain as they echo back her cries.

"Then my heart is emptied of sorrow and I feel relieved."

Dressing up

Hura, 24, wanted to be a diplomat and was studying public relations and journalism before universities were closed to women.

"All doors are closed to girls. Only the door to getting married is open. I'm afraid of this door," she said, fearing being forced to stay at home.

"What makes my mood so much better is that I take videos and photos of myself and post them," she said, her nose piercing visible.

She appears in a low-cut blue velvet dress, her hair down and singing in a country where music is effectively banned.

Another post shows her in a colourful traditional dress, smiling and wearing make-up.

"I feel free because that photo is my reality. It's who I want to be.

"I feel free but I'm also scared," she said, having heard of women being imprisoned for social media posts.

She still dreams of being a diplomat and wants women abroad to help her access online courses to resume her studies.

"[Even] if my hair turns white like my teeth, I won't give up till I get my master's degree."

Music of exiled stars

Shogofa, 22, lives in a major city with her parents and eight siblings.

She was supposed to become a teacher.

"I pray that one day I will be free and can study without fear. I hope that one day all girls can laugh freely."

She misses studying and her classmates.

"I'd like to go back to those days, to be able to walk, see my friends," she said.

"I was very happy then and had hope for the future. Now, I'm in the corner of my house and only study online."

Shogofa suffers from arthritis. Music helps her keep her spirits up.

"To cheer myself up, I listen to music and watch cooking shows. I listen to songs by Aryana Sayeed and Farhad Darya," she said, of stars who left Afghanistan.

Darya's "Kabul Jaan" was the first song played on national radio after the Taliban government was ousted from its first stint in power in 2001.

Sayeed, meanwhile, was a judge on the TV show "Afghan Star".

She is known for songs denouncing violence against women and received death threats even before 2021.

Reading women's stories-

Mohjeza, 30, was an NGO worker who supported women farmers but lost her job last year because of President Donald Trump's cut to US aid.

She lives in a mountainous region with her mother and five siblings, relies on solar power and had to leave home in search of a phone signal to speak to AFP.

"I feel like a prisoner because I can't even go to the market alone," she said.

"There is no public place for us to breathe fresh air for a few minutes," she added.

She volunteers to teach girls in her community – which "motivates me to keep going" – and still offers advice to farmers she helped previously.

"I exercise for half an hour in the morning," she said.

She also loves reading books, which she downloads and shares with other women.

"The books I usually read are about women who have seen a lot of hardships... Their stories motivate me to keep going."

For the moment, she remains stuck in the mountains after a visa application to study in China was rejected.

"I made an asylum claim for the US but since Trump came, everything has been scrapped.

"My message to those outside Afghanistan is to never lose hope because the world I'm in is very dark," she said.

"Your world has light and if you follow that light, you will definitely achieve your dream." – AFP

What we know about strike on school in Iran

IRAN – Mourners gathered in the Iranian city of Minab yesterday for the funerals of victims of a reported air strike at a school which Iran has blamed on Israel and the US, state media reported.

Neither the US nor Israel has said it was behind the strike, although US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said on Monday that the Pentagon was investigating.

Iranian authorities said the explosion in Minab took place on the first day of the war on Saturday and is one of the largest single losses of civilian life reported in the conflict, with Iranian officials saying 150 people were killed.

AFP has been unable to access the location to independently verify the toll or the circumstances.

Iranian authorities have to give explicit approval to foreign media organisations wishing to report outside Tehran.

Here is what we know:

Verified footage

Footage filmed from a parking lot showed black smoke billowing from a damaged building adorned with murals featuring drawings of crayons, children and an apple.

AFP has geolocated the clip to a building in Minab in Iran's southern Hormozgan province that appeared to be a school, though it has not been able to independently verify the nature of the site.

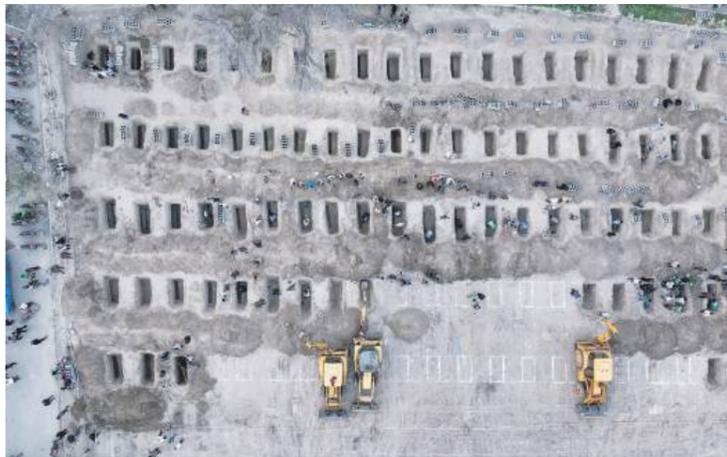
AFP has confirmed the building was located in close proximity to two sites controlled by the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

The Shahid Absalan clinic, under the supervision of the IRGC navy's medical command, lies 238 meters from the site, while the Seyed al-Shohada IRGC cultural complex is 286 meters away.

Minab is strategically located close to the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most vital shipping lanes, especially for oil and gas.

AFP could not independently verify the date the footage from the parking lot was filmed.

Iranian state television and a



In this aerial handout picture released by the Iranian Press Centre, mourners dig graves during the funeral for children killed in a reported strike on a primary school in Iran's Hormozgan province in Minab yesterday. – AFP

local official identified the site as the Shajare Tayyebah girls' elementary school in Minab.

What Iran says

Iran has said more than 150 people were killed in what President Masoud Pezeshkian described as US-Israeli strikes on the school near the strategic sea route of the Strait of Hormuz.

According to state media, Iran yesterday held funerals for at least 165 people including students killed in the alleged strike.

State television carried images showing a large crowd of mourners in Minab weeping over what appear to be bodies wrapped in white shrouds.

Other images released by state media yesterday show individuals preparing coffins draped in the Iranian flag – some bearing photographs of children.

A third clip also shared by state media shows a large crowd gathered around similar caskets with a caption in Persian reading: "Prayer service for the children of Minab who perished."

Another aerial image showed excavators digging out at least 100 graves at an unidentified mass burial site.

AFP has been unable to independently verify the date the images were taken or access the location to verify the circumstances surrounding the events.

Pentagon investigation

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio on Monday said that the United States would not intentionally target a school.

"The United States would not deliberately target a school. Our objectives are missiles, both the ability to manufacture them and the ability to launch them," he told reporters.

The Pentagon was investigating the alleged incident, he added.

Israel 'not aware'

For its part, Israel's military said on Sunday it was not aware of any US or Israeli strike on a school.

"At this point not aware of an Israeli or an American strike there... We're operating in an extremely accurate manner," military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Nadav Shoshani told reporters.

Human rights group

Norway-based rights group Hengaw said it was investigating the identities of the victims.

In a statement, the organisation said the Shajare Tayyebah school was holding its morning session at the time of the incident, which reportedly had about 170 students present.

The rights group said that the strike's intended targets were reportedly the nearby IRGC facilities – a claim that AFP has not been able to independently verify.

– AFP

Merz meets Trump for talks eclipsed by Iran war

Danny Kemp and Martin Trauth

WASHINGTON – Donald Trump hosted German Chancellor Friedrich Merz yesterday for the US president's first meeting with a foreign leader since joining Israel in strikes on Iran that have dragged the Middle East into war.

The long-scheduled White House meeting was supposed to focus on the war in Ukraine and rocky EU-US trade relations, part of a wider effort to salvage frayed transatlantic ties.

But Trump's signal that airstrikes against Iran could go on for weeks has upended the global agenda, with Tehran striking back against US bases and allies in the region.

Merz arrived at the White House by a side entrance, with none of the flag-bearing fanfare often accorded to foreign leaders outside the West Wing.

Merz, a harsh critic of the Islamic republic's leadership, said Berlin shared the Iranian people's "relief" that the "mullah regime is coming to an end".

Yet he declined to "lecture" the United States and Israel on the legality of the Iran strikes aimed at ending Tehran's nuclear and missile programs.

Germany, France and Britain have also said they will only assist their allies in the Gulf with "defensive action" against Iran.

That drew condemnation from US officials of a "soft" response to "Operation Epic Fury" – potentially putting Merz in the firing line for Trump's ire.

France's President Emmanuel Macron said later that eight European countries had agreed to join his plan to use France's nuclear stockpile to bolster security on the continent – with Germany a "key partner in this effort."

'Repair and revive' trust?

Much divides Merz, 70,

a Christian Democrat with multilateral instincts, and Trump, 79, a property tycoon and former reality TV star.

But Merz has managed to maintain cordial ties with Trump and escape his wrath or ridicule.

He has done so in part by meeting a key Trump demand for stepped-up defence spending among European NATO members, with huge increases in German investments.

But Merz has at times pushed back against the mercurial US president, especially over Ukraine, and often insists that Europe must become more sovereign in times of geopolitical upheaval.

At February's Munich Security Conference, Merz noted the "deep rift" between the traditional allies and urged America to "repair and revive transatlantic trust together".

During their first White House meeting last June, Merz had also challenged Trump to increase pressure on Moscow to end the "terrible" Ukraine war.

Trump at the time called Merz "a very good man to deal with" and wryly said he could be "difficult" – a comment that was widely read as approving rather than critical.

Merz also played up Trump's German family roots, presenting him with his grandfather's German birth certificate and inviting him to visit his ancestral homeland.

When it comes to Trump's tariffs blitz, Merz will outline the EU's "coordinated position", a spokesman said, adding that "businesses need planning security, and that applies on both sides of the Atlantic".

Germany's Mechanical Engineering lobby group urged him, "despite the current focus on the Iran war" to "use his good relationship with US President Trump to achieve a comprehensive and reliable tariff agreement between the EU and the USA".

– AFP

Israel, US strikes hit building of body to elect Iran's new supreme leader: media

TEHRAN – Israeli and US strikes yesterday hit the building of a body tasked with electing Iran's new supreme leader, local media reported.

Former leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was killed during a wave of US-Israeli attacks on Saturday.

"The American-Zionist criminals attacked the Assembly of Experts building in Qom," south of Tehran, according to the Tasnim news agency.

The assembly is tasked with appointing, supervising and potentially dismissing the supreme leader.

Local media showed footage of the building severely damaged in the strikes.

There was no information on any potential casualties.

The Mehr news agency reported

that the building was no longer being used for meetings.

Tasnim reported that strikes had already targeted the main headquarters of the Assembly of Experts in Tehran on Monday.

Iran declared on Sunday the start of a transition process after confirming Khamenei's death.

The plans include the formation of an interim leadership council including the president, the head of the judiciary and a jurist from the Guardian Council, the body that oversees legislation and vets electoral candidates.

Also playing a central role is Iran's top security chief Ali Larijani.

The interim leadership council will lead the country while a permanent successor is found for the supreme leader.

– AFP

Son of Iran's last shah urges unity from ethnic minorities

PARIS – The son of Iran's last shah Reza Pahlavi, who has positioned himself as an alternative if the Islamic republic falls, called yesterday for national unity from Iranian ethnic minorities as war engulfed the Middle East.

Iran's population of more than 85 million is ethnically diverse, with large Azeri, Lur, Kurdish, Arab, Baloch and Turkmen minorities.

The Islamic republic has long been accused of discriminating against ethnic minorities, with many groups supporting successive waves of anti-government protests in the country and some – particularly the Kurds and

Balochis – waging insurgencies seeking self-determination.

Pahlavi in an X post looked to assure ethnic minorities they would not be discriminated against if he were leading the country, and appeared to urge them not to use the current conflict to press for separation.

"We stand at the threshold of this regime's fall. Yet we must remain vigilant and prepared, and deny opportunistic forces – those who have long cast covetous eyes on Iran's soil – the chance to exploit this moment," he said.

"You are an inseparable part of Iran's historical and cultural

fabric... I am confident that you will remain steadfast in this covenant," he added.

"I firmly believe that through national unity and shared resolve, a bright future awaits you and every Iranian."

US-based Pahlavi – who has not been to Iran since before the 1979 revolution that ousted the monarchy – entered the global spotlight during nationwide protests that peaked in January, where many demonstrators chanted pro-Pahlavi slogans.

But the Iranian opposition remains fractured, and ethnic minority groups have long clashed with Pahlavi supporters.

– AFP

Trump says US-UK relationship 'not like it used to be'

LONDON – US President Donald Trump said the historical relationship between his country and Britain was “not like it used to be”, in an interview to British daily newspaper *The Sun*, amid a major transatlantic fall out over US-Israeli strikes against Iran.

“This was the most solid relationship of all. And now we have very strong relationships with other countries in Europe,” he said, singling out France and Germany, after UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s initial refusal to allow the United States to use British military bases in its war with Iran.

Trump said Starmer “has not been helpful”, adding: “I never thought I’d see that. I never thought I’d see that from the UK. We love the UK.”

In a telephone interview from the White House on Monday, Trump said: “This was the most solid relationship of all. And now we have very strong relationships with other countries in Europe.”

“It’s a different world, actually. It’s just a much different kind of relationship that we’ve had with your country before.

“It’s very sad to see that the relationship is obviously not what it was,” he added.

The scathing comments come a day after Trump described Starmer’s reaction as “very disappointing” in an interview with *The Daily Telegraph*.

He added that Starmer’s later decision to allow the use of UK bases on specific grounds as

“useful” but said it “took far too much time”.

Any potential military action in the Middle East is politically sensitive in the UK following former prime minister Tony Blair’s disastrous support for the US-led invasion of Iraq.

‘National interest’

Starmer defended his position to parliament on Monday.

“President Trump has expressed his disagreement with our decision not to get involved in the initial strikes, but it is my duty to judge what is in Britain’s national interest,” he told lawmakers.

“That is what I have done and I stand by it,” he added.

After initially refusing to have any role in the strikes, Starmer on Sunday announced that he had agreed to a US request to use British military bases for a “specific and limited defensive purpose”.

His Downing Street office said Starmer took the decision after Iran fired missiles over the weekend that put British interests and people “at risk”.

“We all remember the mistakes of Iraq, and we have learnt those lessons. Any UK actions must always have a lawful basis and a viable thought-through plan,” he added in parliament.

The prime minister also said that British military bases in Cyprus “are not being used by US bombers” during the US-Israeli war with Iran.

Britain’s Akrotiri air force base on Cyprus came under attack by an unmanned Iranian drone that hit the base’s runway on Monday.

Starmer said the strike “was not in response to any decision that we have taken,” adding that the British government believed the drone “was launched prior to our announcement”.

Iran’s approach is becoming “more reckless and more dangerous”, Starmer said.

“They are working ruthlessly and deliberately through a plan to strike, not only military targets, but also economic targets in the region, with no regard for civilian casualties. That is the situation we face today and to which we must respond,” he added. – AFP

Arab countries at UN slam Iran’s retaliatory strikes

Robin Millard

GENEVA – Arab countries on Monday slammed Iran’s wave of retaliatory strikes across the Middle East, decrying at the United Nations that Tehran had upended their attempts to avoid a regional escalation.

After the United States and Israel began striking Iran on Saturday, Tehran launched a wave of reprisal attacks at targets across the Middle East.

The Group of Arab States told the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva that Iran’s attacks were an “extremely grave” violation of international law that threatened regional stability.

“The Arab countries were seeking to bolster dialogue and openness. The is an unjustifiable escalation that destabilises all peace and stability efforts,” Saudi ambassador Abdulmohsen Binkhothaila said, speaking for the group.

The six Gulf Cooperation Council countries – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – plus Jordan – all hit by Tehran’s retaliation – also jointly condemned the “Iranian aggressions”, which came “despite our efforts to avoid escalation in the region”.

On Thursday, Oman had mediated talks in Geneva between US and Iranian negotiators. Washington and Israel launched their attack two days later.

“We call for the immediate cessation of military actions... and return to dialogue because it’s the only way to solve disagreements,” said the sultanate’s deputy permanent representative Mohamed Al-Balushi.

Kuwait’s ambassador Naser Abdullah H. M. Alhayan added: “Terrorising the civilians in countries seeking peace is an abhorrent crime.

“Iran should resort to self-restraint and... wisdom and refrain

from further military escalation,” he said.

‘Raw power’

Iran’s ambassador Ali Bahreini said his country was “under indiscriminate and invasive military attacks by the United States and the regime of Israel”.

He said Iran’s schools had been bombed, hospitals indiscriminately attacked, its leaders assassinated and “more than 160 innocent schoolgirls were massacred in Minab”.

“The deliberate killing of civilians” openly violates the UN Charter, he said, and the “ongoing, unlawful military aggression against Iran exemplifies the dominance of raw power over the principles of human rights”.

The European Union urged maximum restraint, while the African group said the situation was eroding trust among nations.

Iran’s neighbour Turkey warned: “There is no ambiguity about the gravity of the moment. We stand at a precipice.

“The danger of further escalation is real and immediate,” said ambassador Burak Akcapar, urging countries to prevent a “widening spiral of instability that could extend well beyond Iran and our region”.

Some countries voiced support for Iran at the UN’s top rights body.

China said the US-Israeli attack “brutally violates Iranian people’s human rights” and the killing of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei “seriously violates Iran’s sovereignty”.

Cuba said Washington was proclaiming the “exceptional right to conquer and to use force as a legitimate form of behaviour”.

Venezuela – citing the US capture of president Nicolas Maduro – said immunity for heads of state must be respected, otherwise others could be targeted with “unlawful bombing, abduction or assassination”. – AFP

Melania Trump leads UN Security Council as Iran war rages

Gregory Walton

NEW YORK – US first lady Melania Trump pressed the cause of children caught in conflict as she chaired a UN Security Council meeting on Monday as the US-Israeli war against Iran raged.

Ambassadors from all of the Security Council’s members, including Washington’s rivals Russia and China, lined up to meet with her, representing the US as it takes over the monthly rotating presidency of the Security Council.

She opened the meeting with a strike of a ceremonial gavel before thanking Britain for its month-long presidency, and spoke again later apparently to honour US service members killed in the war on Iran.

“To the families who have lost their heroes who sacrifice their lives for freedom, their bravery and dedication will always be remembered,” she said before the packed chamber.

“Enduring peace will be achieved when knowledge and understanding are fully valued within all our societies,” she added. “Societies ruled by knowledge and wisdom are therefore more peaceful.”

Ahead of the meeting, Iran’s ambassador to the UN Amir Saeid Irvani said “it is deeply shameful and hypocritical that on the very first day of its presidency of the Security Council, the United States convened a high-level meeting on protecting children.”

Moments later Melania Trump said “the US stands with all of the children throughout the world. I hope soon peace will be yours” – without referring directly to the attacks across the Middle East.

She was warmly received by the countries represented in the Council however, with Greece’s ambassador Aglaia Balta saying “thank you madam president,” while France’s envoy compared her to the celebrated former first lady and activist Eleanor Roosevelt.

Even Russia joined the chorus of



US first lady Melania Trump speaks as she chairs a meeting of the United Nations Security Council at the UN Headquarters in New York on Monday. – AFP

polite praise, avoiding any mention of Iran, which was mentioned only by Washington’s staunch ally Bahrain.

“I wish you all strength and resolve to succeed in preserving peace and security throughout the world,” Melania Trump said as she closed the two-hour meeting.

Financial, political tensions

Stephane Dujarric, spokesperson for the UN secretary-general, confirmed that Melania Trump’s appearance was the first time a first lady – or first gentleman – had presided over a Security Council meeting.

The United States holds the Council’s rotating presidency for March.

President Donald Trump’s third wife has dabbled in diplomacy before, notably to try to secure the release of Ukrainian children held by Russia.

Rosemary DiCarlo, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, paid tribute to her “for her work to give visibility to the issue of children in conflict, and particularly for her personal engagement to reunite Ukrainian children with their families.”

Political and financial tensions have mounted between the United States and the United Nations in recent years, with Washington chafing at its role as the main contributor to the body’s cash-strapped budget.

Many observers say the US president intends to bypass the Security Council with his new “Board of Peace,” which held its inaugural session in Washington last month, with several countries pledging funds and personnel to rebuild Gaza.

At that session, Donald Trump repeated his stance that the UN had failed in its mission.

Since returning to the White House last year, he has withdrawn support from several major UN agencies, including the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The world body has recently launched a reform programme, and a few days ago Washington paid US\$160 million into the organisation’s regular budget – after paying nothing in 2025.

But the United States is still US\$4 billion in arrears to the UN for its regular budget and its peacekeeping budget, with UN Secretary-General António Guterres warning of imminent financial collapse. – AFP

Ecuador launches joint anti-drug operations with US



Ecuador's President Daniel Noboa (right) shakes hands with US Southern Command chief General Francis Donovan in Quito on Monday. – AFP

QUITO – Ecuador's President Daniel Noboa on Monday announced the launch of joint operations with the United States to combat drug trafficking, which has caused an explosion of violence in the South American country.

Noboa, a close ally of US President Donald Trump, said the United States was among "regional allies" taking part in a "new phase" of Ecuador's war on the drug cartels which use its ports to smuggle cocaine to international markets.

"In March, we will conduct joint operations with our regional allies, including the United States," he wrote on X.

On Monday, Noboa held talks in Quito with US Southern Command chief Francis Donovan

and Mark Schafer, head of US Special Operations in Central and South America and the Caribbean.

During the meeting, they discussed plans for information sharing and operational coordination at airports and seaports, Noboa's office said in a statement.

Around 70 percent of the drugs produced by Colombia and Peru, the world's largest and second-largest cocaine producers, respectively, are shipped through neighbouring Ecuador.

The drug trade has unleashed a bloody turf war that has turned one of the Latin America's safest countries into one of its deadliest in the space of a few years.

At a meeting with police earlier, Noboa announced a curfew from March 15 to 30 in Ecuador's four

most violent provinces: Guayas, Los Ríos, Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas, and El Oro.

Interior Minister John Reimberg told reporters his advice to local residents was: "Stay home. We are at war."

The United States and Ecuador have boosted their security cooperation since the right-wing Noboa came to power in 2023.

Noboa last year pushed for the reopening of a shuttered US military base but was shot down by Ecuadorans who voted in a November referendum against overturning a ban on foreign bases.

In December, the United States announced a temporary deployment of Air Force personnel to the former US base in the port city of Manta. – AFP

Brazil's economy slows with 2.3 pct growth in 2025

RIO DE JANEIRO – Brazil's economy grew 2.3 percent in 2025, cooling from the previous year as interest rates remain among the highest in the world, official data showed yesterday.

The slowdown – in line with market expectations – comes seven months before Latin America's largest economy holds presidential elections in October.

Gross domestic product (GDP) had expanded 3.4 percent in 2024.

In the fourth quarter of last year, the economy grew 0.1 percent compared with the previous quarter, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) said.

"GDP remained stable compared to the third quarter, even

with the decline in investment, due to stable household consumption and growth in government spending," Rebeca Palis of the IBGE said in a statement.

She added that economic growth had been driven by activities "less affected by the tight monetary policy."

Brazil's central bank kept its benchmark Selic rate at 15 percent in January, for the fifth time in a row, in a bid to curb inflation which stood at 4.44 percent the same month.

However, the bank signalled a possible cut in March, depending on the "uncertain external context," referring to global trade tensions and US economic policy. – AFP

President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who is seeking a fourth term in October, has criticised high interest rates, which he says are holding back the economy.

In 2025, economic growth was led by the agricultural sector with record harvests of corn and soybeans – of which Brazil is the world's largest exporter.

Oil and gas extraction also made a strong contribution.

Manufacturing grew 1.4 percent and services 1.8 percent.

Brazil's economy was hit by US tariffs of up to 50 percent, which came into effect in August.

However, Washington has since exempted key export items such as beef and coffee. – AFP

10 Panamanians held in Cuba over 'subversive' signs

HAVANA – Ten Panama nationals have been arrested in Cuba for allegedly making "subversive" anti-government signs, the interior ministry in Havana said on Monday.

The ministry said the suspects "had been instructed to enter Cuba for the purpose of making signs with subversive content" on Saturday in Havana and had admitted responsibility.

The ministry added that they had been offered US\$1,000 to US\$1,500 each to take part in the alleged operation, the details of which the government did not disclose.

Panama's foreign ministry urged Cuban authorities to "respect due process" for the detained, without commenting directly on the allegations.

"The Panamanian government will act responsibly, cautiously and firmly to defend the rights of

its citizens, while respecting the judicial sovereignty" of Cuba, it said in a statement.

The communist island is on high alert for attack following repeated threats by US President Donald Trump.

Last week, the Cuban coast guard shot and killed four people aboard a US-flagged speedboat that came within one nautical mile of Cuba's shores "for terrorist purposes," according to Havana.

Six other passengers were injured in the shootout in what Cuba portrayed as an attempted incursion by US-based Cubans aiming to destabilize the government.

At least two of those aboard the speedboat were US citizens, one of whom was killed and the other injured.

The commander of the Cuban coast guard vessel was also injured. – AFP

Spain says US not using bases for Iran operations

MADRID – Spain said on Monday that the United States is not using joint military bases on its territory for operations against Iran, a mission opposed by Madrid.

"Based on all the information I have, the bases are not being used for this military operation," Foreign Minister José Manuel Albares told Spanish public television.

"The Spanish government will not authorise the use of the bases for anything beyond the agreement or inconsistent with the United Nations," he said, referring to Naval Base Rota and Morón Air Base.

Defence Minister Margarita Robles said the bases "will not provide support, except if, in a given case, it were necessary from a humanitarian perspective," adding that the treaty does not cover these operations.

The US operates at the bases under a joint-use arrangement but they remain under Spanish sovereignty.

Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez condemned US and Israeli strikes on Iran, calling them "an unjustified and dangerous military intervention that is outside of international law". – AFP

Milei's flagship labor reform challenged in court

BUENOS AIRES – An Argentine trade union launched a constitutional challenge on Monday to President Javier Milei's flagship labour reform, three days after it was adopted.

Milei's so-called "labour modernisation law" allows working days of up to 12 hours, reduces severance pay, limits the right to strike and lowers employer taxes, among other provisions.

Its adoption on Friday handed a victory to the libertarian president as he pushes to boost hiring by loosening what he calls Argentina's antiquated labour laws.

Its critics say the legislation rolls back hard-won worker rights.

The State Lawyers Association challenged the law as unconstitutional, arguing that it "harms workers," the union's deputy leader Roberto Álvarez wrote on social media.

The General Confederation of Labour (CGT), which called a general strike recently that ground

Argentina to a halt, has also announced plans for legal action.

On Monday, the CGT organised protests in several cities, insisting that bringing back labour practices that are "close to servitude or slavery" would not create jobs.

Milei argued that Argentina's labour laws discouraged formal hiring by being overly restrictive.

Over 43 percent of Argentine workers lack formal employment contracts.

Polls show Argentines divided on the reform, with a recent survey finding 48.6 percent in favour and 45.2 percent against.

Milei has accelerated his free market deregulatory reforms since winning October midterms, with backing from US President Donald Trump.

In a state of the nation address on Sunday, Trump's closest South American ally vowed to "Make Americas Great Again, from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego." – AFP

Arteta fires back at critics of Arsenal's set-piece success

Premier League LONDON – Mikel Arteta has hit back at critics of Arsenal's dependence on set-pieces, saying he is disappointed the Premier League leaders do not score even more goals from dead-ball situations.

Arteta's side have established a five-point lead at the top of the league thanks in large part to their success from set-pieces.

They equalled the Premier League single-season record for goals from corners with two in Sunday's 2-1 win over Chelsea to reach 16 for the campaign.

But Arsenal's excellence since Nicolas Jover took over as set-piece coach has sparked criticism of their reliance on the tactic.

The debate on whether set-pieces are ruining football as a spectacle is raging, with Liverpool boss Arne Slot revealing he no longer enjoys watching some Premier League matches.

Former Chelsea striker Chris Sutton, a Premier League title winner with Blackburn, said Arsenal will be the "ugliest" Premier League champions if they go on to clinch the title.

Arteta is unrepentant, insisting his only concern about the use of set-pieces is making sure Arsenal are even more efficient with them.

"I'm upset that we don't score more, and that we concede as well," he told reporters yesterday, on the eve of a trip to Brighton.

"We want to be the best and the most dominant team in every aspect of the game, and that's the trajectory and the aim of this team, and as a club, we want to be the same. So we try to do that."

Asked if he was surprised at the criticism aimed at his side, Arteta replied: "Part of the job."

City manager Pep Guardiola believes teams should focus on adapting to the set-piece strategy rather than complaining about the issue.

Arteta, who worked under Guardiola at City before joining Arsenal, agrees with his fellow Spaniard's assessment.

"Now teams are adapting. Chelsea, look at the quality that they have, the amount of set-pieces they score. Manchester United as well. I was at Man City, I used to work a lot on them," he said.

Undeterred by the claims that Arsenal will be "ugly" champions, Arteta said: "I don't know how you celebrate one goal different to another one. Maybe for YouTube it's nicer one or another. I don't know."

"I would like to play with three players extra in my own half to get some beautiful football. This is not the reality of football."

"If you want to watch that football, you have to go to a different country because in the Premier League, for the last two seasons or three seasons, this is not the case."

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



Flamengo's head coach Filipe Luis gestures ahead of the Recopa Sudamericana second leg final against Argentina's Lanus at the Maracana Stadium in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on February 26.
Winner of the Brasileirão and Copa Libertadores in 2025, Luis was dismissed yesterday as Flamengo's coach after a poor start to the season in which he lost the Recopa Sudamericana and the Brazilian Super Cup. Flamengo shocked Brazilian football by sacking coach Luis just hours after an 8-0 win in the Campeonato Carioca semi-finals.
Luis had been at the helm of the Rio de Janeiro giants since September 2024 and led them to their fourth Copa Libertadores title last season after a 1-0 victory over Palmeiras in the final.
But yesterday Brazil's richest club fired their coach, who was said to be taken aback as it came just hours after the 8-0 win over regional rivals Madureira gave Flamengo a crushing 11-0 aggregate victory in the state Carioca competition. – AFP

Football shorts

Real Madrid's Brazilian winger Rodrygo set to miss World Cup with knee injury

LaLiga MADRID – Real Madrid said yesterday their winger Rodrygo Goes has suffered a severe knee injury, and it is expected to keep him out of the World Cup with Brazil this summer.

"Following the tests carried out today [yesterday] on our player Rodrygo by Real Madrid's medical services, he has been diagnosed with a ruptured anterior cruciate ligament and a tear of the lateral meniscus in his right leg," said Los Blancos in a statement.

Rodrygo appeared as a substitute in Madrid's 1-0 home La Liga defeat by Getafe on Monday, where he sustained the injury.

The 25-year-old stayed on the pitch but tests revealed the severity of his injury yesterday.

Rodrygo had only just returned to action after a month out with tendonitis.

Carlo Ancelotti, formerly Rodrygo's coach at Real Madrid, will not be able to call on the forward for record five-time winners Brazil's bid to secure a sixth World Cup trophy this

summer in the United States.

Real Madrid will also miss the forward, particularly with French superstar Kylian Mbappe currently sidelined because of a knee sprain.

Alvaro Arbeloa only has three fit attackers available, in Vinicius Junior, Gonzalo Garcia and Franco Mastantuono, ahead of next week's Champions League last 16 clash against Manchester City at the Santiago Bernabeu. – AFP

Liverpool-bound defender Jacquet to undergo shoulder surgery

LIGUE 1 RENNES – Centre-back Jeremy Jacquet, who will join Liverpool from Rennes at the end of the season, needs surgery on a shoulder injury he suffered last month, the Ligue 1 club announced yesterday.

The 20-year-old was injured during a defeat to Lens on February 7.

"Following medical examinations, surgery has been scheduled in the coming days," Rennes said in a short statement.

Rennes did not specify when he would be able to return.

China, N Korea make winning starts at Women's Asian Cup



Bangladesh's Anika Siddiqui (left) tackles China's Chen Qiaozhu during the AFC Women's Asian Cup Australia 2026 match between Bangladesh and China in Sydney yesterday. – AFP



SYDNEY – China kicked off their Women's Asian Cup title defence with a battling 2-0 win over resilient tournament debutants Bangladesh in Group B yesterday, courtesy of Wang Shuang and Zhang Rui hitting the target.

But it was hard work in front of a boisterous crowd at Western Sydney Stadium against a young team ranked almost 100 places below them.

Earlier, Myong Yu Jong bagged a hat-trick as three-time champions North Korea marked their first game at the continental competition since 2010 with a slick 3-0 win over Uzbekistan in the same group.

China beat South Korea in Mumbai four years ago to win their ninth Asian Cup and are the most successful team in the tournament's history.

But they have struggled in recent times and are bidding to recreate their glory days under Australian coach Ante Milicic.

It was tougher than expected against a Bangladesh team that showed no fear and would have taken the lead but for a fine fingertip save by Chen Chen from Ritu Porna Chakma's dipping shot.

Playing at a fast and furious pace, China created plenty of opportunities but had to wait until just before half-time to open their account when Wang's long-range shot curled in.

Zhang added a second minutes later from outside the box to stun Bangladesh.

But the underdogs, coached by England's Peter Butler, refused to lie down and admirably regrouped to prevent any more goals despite China's constant threat.

North Korea were dominant against the Uzbeks, striking early to pile on the pressure, and there was no way back for a side that lost their starting goalkeeper to a neck injury after 10 minutes.

Midfielder Myong clinically finished on the turn in the sixth minute after a goalmouth scramble in front of a smattering of North Korean fans.

She doubled the lead with a penalty after Chae Un Yong was shoved over and made it 3-0 with another spot kick on 41 minutes, again planting the ball into the left-hand corner.

The second half was played almost exclusively in the Uzbek half, but they limited the damage by defending well.

One of Asia's most successful women's sides, North Korea are looking to replicate their titles from 2001, 2003 and 2008.

Their momentum from the 2000s was checked when they were banned from the 2015 World Cup qualifying for failed doping tests and they did not play any games from 2019 to 2023 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. – AFP

on purpose," Rico told Spanish radio station Cadena Cope.

"In the previous action [between us] the referee called for a foul and on his way back to defend he was saying things.

"Then on the very next play the ball came to me and you can see how he practically moved his team-mate out of the way just to smash my face in.

"If he had caught me wrong he could have left me there, flat on the pitch."

Rico was able to carry on playing after the incident.

The left-back said that if he had committed the same offence he would have been "banned for 10 games" and not played the rest of the season.

Madrid's defeat, their second in a row in La Liga, left them four points behind leaders Barcelona.

Former Chelsea and Roma defender Rudiger, who turned 33 yesterday, was given a six-match ban last season after throwing an object at a referee during Madrid's Copa del Rey final defeat by Barcelona. – AFP

Liverpool reached an agreement to sign the France Under-21 international during the January transfer window for a reported 70 million euros (US\$81.28 million).

Rennes sit sixth in the Ligue 1 table with 10 matches remaining this season, three points behind fourth-placed Marseille in the race to qualify for the Champions League. – AFP

Real Madrid's Rudiger tried to 'smash my face in': Getafe's Rico

LaLiga MADRID – Getafe's Diego Rico said yesterday Real Madrid's Antonio Rudiger tried to "smash my face in" in a La Liga match in the Spanish capital the previous evening.

There was an incident involving the two defenders in the first half of the match visitors Getafe won 1-0 at the Santiago Bernabeu on Monday

Germany centre-back Rudiger hit Rico in the head with his knee to the anger of Getafe's players.

"I think in these situations, an act of aggression, you can tell he's going for me

Chinese teenage swimmer Yu Zidi nominated for Laureus Awards



Yu Zidi of Hebei reacts after the women's 400m individual medley final of swimming at the 15th National Games in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province on November 17, 2025. — Xinhua

Awards

MADRID – China's 13-year-old swimmer Yu Zidi became one of youngest athletes to be nominated for the prestigious Laureus World Sports Awards when she was named among the candidates for the Laureus World Breakthrough of the Year category yesterday.

Yu formed part of the Chinese team that won the bronze in the 4x200 meters freestyle at the 2025 World Aquatics Championships in Singapore, becoming the youngest swimmer in history to win a world championship medal.

Yu also qualified for the final in the 200-meter individual medley and the 200-meter butterfly in Singapore, but finished fourth in both finals, just

missing out on a medal.

Her rivals at the Laureus Awards ceremony, which will be held in Madrid on April 20, include Formula One champion Lando Norris, world darts champion Luke Littler and Paris Saint-Germain footballer Desire Doue.

In other categories, Spanish tennis star Carlos Alcaraz and four-time Tour de France winner Tadej Pogacar are among the nominees for Sportsman of the Year, while Spanish footballer Aitana Bonmati, swimmer Katie Ledecky and tennis player Aryna Sabalenka are among the candidates for Sportswoman of the Year.

The Indian women's cricket team, Paris Saint-Germain and the England women's football team

are among the six nominees for Team of the Year, while there are also awards for Comeback of the Year, World Action Sportsman of the Year, Sportsman of the Year with a Disability.

Rugby For Good from Hong Kong is a candidate in the Sport for Good Award for its work using rugby programs to promote inclusion, well-being and social-emotional development for under-represented youth, including children with ADHD, and to strengthen community ties.

— Xinhua

Unbeaten S Africa face 'fresh start' in semis: Markram

Faisal Kamal



KOLKATA – South Africa captain Aiden Markram yesterday said his team's win over New Zealand in the group phase will count for nothing in the T20 World Cup semi-final, which will be a "completely fresh start".

The two teams clash at Kolkata's Eden Gardens in the first semi-final today, with both having never lifted a cricket World Cup.

South Africa are the only unbeaten side in the last four and are trying to rid themselves of a reputation for choking in the final stages at World Cups.

They have been the team to beat in this edition and got the better of New Zealand by seven wickets in a group game in Ahmedabad on February 15.

"We had a good run against them in the group stages, but both teams have played a lot of cricket since then," Markram told reporters.

"It's a completely fresh start tomorrow [today] and it being a semi-final which is exciting as well.

"I don't think it's as straightforward as just being able to repeat that. We'll try to bring our best game to the front again."

South Africa suffered a heartbreaking defeat in the 2024

T20 World Cup final against India in Barbados, when they needed 30 off 30 balls with six wickets and lost by seven runs after a clatter of wickets.

South Africa beat India and the West Indies in the Super Eights to have many marking them down as the favourites to lift the trophy.

"With regards to being favourites or not, that's all different people's opinions," said Markram.

"Us as a team really just try to focus on putting good games of cricket together and playing that exciting brand that we've been trying to play for the last 18 months or so.

Markram has led South Africa from the front with 268 runs including three half-centuries and a top score of 86 not out in seven matches.

He holds an impressive captaincy record of 15 wins in 16 T20 World Cup matches with the only defeat in the 2024 final.

"The senior guys in the team, we lean on them a lot. They help guide you and lead you when you have a few doubts," said Markram.

"I think because of that and a really strong group of players over the years, we've developed that. Fortunately, it reflects well, but it's definitely a reflection on the group as a whole."

The game starts at 9:30 p.m. this evening, Macau time. — AFP/MPD

UAE tennis tournament disrupted as drone attack sparks oil fire

Tennis

DUBAI – An ATP Challenger tennis tournament in the UAE's Fujairah was interrupted yesterday after drone strikes on nearby oil refineries.

Falling debris from the interception of a drone caused a fire in an oil field located around 15km from the site of the tournament on the men's second-tier global circuit.

"Play at the ATP Challenger Tour event in Fujairah was suspended today [yesterday] following a security alert," the ATP said in a statement.

"In line with established security protocols, play was immediately halted and players, officials and staff were directed to designated safe areas.

"The health, safety and wellbeing of our players, staff and tournament personnel is our priority.

"Following consultation with local authorities and security advisors, play has been cancelled for the remainder of the day as a precautionary measure."

A video on social media shows two players, Belarusian Daniil Ostapenko and Japan's Hayato Matsuoka, scrambling for shelter after a public announcement.

Ten matches in the first round of qualifying for the tournament were completed Monday.

"I just finished my match in Fujairah, second round, but the play is suspended for today," said Ukrainian player Vladyslav Orlov on Instagram.

"When I was playing, I heard the sound of the jets flying here and there. And there is smoke here, next to the mountain, so not very safe here right now."

The UAE has been targeted by more than 800 drones and 200 missiles since Saturday, according to its Ministry of Defence.

The US and Israel triggered the rapidly spreading war on Saturday with a strike on Tehran that killed supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and several more senior Iranian figures, followed by days of air and missile raids aimed at weakening the remaining government.

But Iran's armed forces responded with missile and drone attacks on Israel, US embassies and military bases and on its Arab neighbours around the Gulf.

On Monday, the International Tennis Federation told AFP that two third-tier men's tournaments scheduled for later in March in Fujairah had been postponed.

— AFP



New Zealand's Rachin Ravindra attends a training session on the eve of their 2026 ICC Men's T20 Cricket World Cup semi-final against South Africa at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata, India yesterday. — AFP

'Safety and wellbeing' will guide F1 Mideast planning: FIA chief

F1

MELBOURNE – FIA chief Mohammed Ben Sulayem said "safety and wellbeing" will guide decision-making with Formula One's calendar plunged into uncertainty by the war in the Middle East.

This weekend's season-opening Australian Grand Prix has been hit by travel chaos but is not under threat.

After Melbourne, Formula One heads to China then Japan, which are not expected to be affected.

However, concerns are mounting

over whether next month's Bahrain race from April 10-12 and Saudi Arabia a week later will be able to go ahead.

US President Donald Trump on Monday said the assault on Iran could go "far longer" than his initial estimates of about a month.

In response, Iran and its allies have launched retaliatory strikes on Israel as well as US military bases and other areas in a host of Mideast nations, including Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

Ben Sulayem, president of global motorsport governing body,

the International Automobile Federation (FIA), said he was closely monitoring the situation.

"At this moment of uncertainty, we hope for calm and a swift return to stability. Dialogue and the protection of civilians must remain priorities," he said in his first statement on the matter late Monday.

"We are in close contact with our member clubs, championship promoters, teams, and colleagues on the ground as we monitor developments carefully and responsibly.

"Safety and wellbeing will

guide our decisions as we assess the forthcoming events scheduled for the World Endurance Championship and the Formula 1 World Championship."

The Endurance Championship is a leading sportscar event due to open its season in Qatar at the end of March.

While freight, including the cars, is safely in Melbourne for the Grand Prix this weekend, the closure of airspace and airports in the Middle East has caused chaos to travel plans for team personnel.

Dubai and Doha are major flight hubs on the path to Melbourne and

around 1,000 race staff have had to scramble and change flights.

Australian Formula One chief Travis Auld on Monday said he was confident "everyone will be here ready for the race".

"We're in a space where we're really confident there will be no impact," he added.

McLaren world champion Lando Norris will kickstart his title defence in Melbourne, which will be the first race for new team Cadillac - with experienced pair Valtteri Bottas and Sergio Perez in the cockpits. — AFP

Recognition, not competition, for Oscar-nominated foreign filmmakers

Paula Ramon

BEVERLY HILLS – Foreign films used to be almost an Oscars afterthought, but the directors of the five movies nominated for the best international feature prize say they increasingly feel like part of a new normal on Hollywood’s biggest night.

Two of the 10 movies vying for best picture – Brazil’s “The Secret Agent” and Norway’s “Sentimental Value” – are not primarily in English. Both have produced acting nominees.

For Joachim Trier, whose “Sentimental Value” has an impressive nine nominations including for best director, being a part of the conversation is already a win.

“That’s not about competition. It’s more about recognition. And I like that,” he told AFP.

“Enough people among my colleagues voted and said: ‘You did a good job as director,’ and that means a lot,” said the 52-year-old Danish-Norwegian auteur filmmaker.

The increasing diversity of the 10,000-strong voting group of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, many of them former winners, is part of this inclusiveness, said Trier.

But the global success of films like his family drama, which stars best supporting actor hopeful Stellan Skarsgard, is down to the fact that they can illuminate the

deeply personal fears and feelings that we all have, he said.

“The whole clue is to try to get the big machine, the apparatus of cinema, to go to an intimate place,” Trier told AFP.

“That’s the kind of film I’m interested in making. And if that works for people, it’s a magnificent thing.”

‘Real changes’

Franco-Spanish director Óliver Laxe agrees with Trier.

The 43-year-old filmmaker believes that films like his “Sirat” succeed because they are honest.

“All directors have looked inward, tried to do something with their heart, with their soul. And I did it with my gut,” he told AFP.

For Laxe, the triumph of his disruptive production, a contemplative meditation that shakes the viewer, “proves that people are tired of seeing the same films and that we need to trust individual sensitivity a little more.”

Like Trier, Laxe doesn’t see the Oscar nomination for best international feature as a competition.

“I think nobody loses here. We all win,” he said.

Brazilian director Kleber Mendonça Filho told AFP he is “very impressed” with the impact of his film, “The Secret Agent.”

The thriller recounts the persecution suffered by an

academic (best actor nominee Wagner Moura) in 1970s Brazil during the military dictatorship.

“I made a Brazilian film... And it has had a very strong emotional and political reaction throughout the world,” he said.

Emilie Lesclaux – one of the film’s producers, and Mendonça Filho’s wife – said when the couple began making films more than two decades ago, “the Oscars seemed like something very distant, a party of the American film industry.”

“And little by little, we saw real changes,” she added. “This year, we see so many incredible films being treated the same as American films – powerful and different films, representing various ideas in the world.”

‘Exceeded my expectations’

One of those ideas came from Iran and was embraced by France to represent it at the Academy Awards.

“It Was Just an Accident,” by Iranian director Jafar Panahi, was filmed in secret and deals with a dilemma that victims of oppression sometimes face: should they take revenge or forgive those who imprisoned them?

Panahi, whose work has seen him jailed in Iran in the past, is using his Oscar campaign to highlight the tumultuous situation in the country today.

In an interview with AFP during



Danish-Norwegian filmmaker Joachim Trier poses onstage during Kodak’s Film Awards at ASC Clubhouse on Monday in Los Angeles, California. – AFP

the Academy’s traditional luncheon for nominees, the filmmaker lamented the recent arrest of one of his screenwriters and collaborators, Mehdi Mahmoudian, on suspicion of writing a statement for an opposition figure.

Tunisian director Kaouther Ben Hania’s “The Voice of Hind Rajab” highlights another hotspot in the Middle East – Gaza.

The harrowing docudrama follows a Palestinian girl stalked by Israeli bullets that killed her family in Gaza, and the rescue efforts to save her.

“My first obsession was how

to make this girl’s voice resonate,” Ben Hania told AFP.

“Arabic-language films with subtitles could easily fall into that niche film category. My ambition was to take the film out of that niche and show it to the world.”

Ben Hania, who won second prize at the Venice Film Festival, said her movie invites the viewer to acknowledge that as a witness to an event, they have a measure of responsibility.

“When I made the film, that was my intention,” she said. “But its impact has exceeded my expectations.” – AFP

Oscar-nominated documentaries take on hot-button US social issues

Paula Ramon

BEVERLY HILLS – From racial tensions and school shootings to abortion and the prison system, this year’s Oscar-nominated documentary short and feature films are taking a hard look at American society.

Several of the nominated filmmakers told AFP ahead of the March 15 gala in Hollywood that they hoped their work would spark debate.

They also were glad for the visibility that an Academy Award nomination brings, as documentaries are often independently made and rarely get the same exposure as big-budget features.

“I believe all art is political, and art is the vanguard of the revolution,” Geeta Gandbhir, whose “The Perfect Neighbour” is competing for best documentary feature, told AFP.

The film, on Netflix, delves into the thorny collision of race, firearms and so-called “Stand Your Ground” laws as a dispute in a Florida neighbourhood turns fatal.

“When you look at all my colleagues who are nominated in these categories, the films are deeply political,” Gandbhir said.

“They all have something to say... about a pressing issue in some way,” added the filmmaker, a double nominee with “The Devil Is Busy” competing for best documentary short.

That film, made in Atlanta, focuses on an abortion clinic beset by protesters after the US Supreme Court in 2022 eliminated the federal constitutional right to terminate a pregnancy.

Gandbhir’s co-director Christalyn Hampton said they hoped to “humanise the hot-button topic” by focusing on a religious woman who

runs security at the clinic.

The woman finds herself trying to manage the delicate balance of protecting patients and confronting demonstrators who, in some cases, are driven by beliefs that reflect her own.

“We felt like it was a very interesting and ironic twist,” Hampton said.

She added that the filmmakers hoped their work could help women “start to advocate for themselves and their health care, and not to get bogged down in the policies and what politicians say they should do.”

‘Human issue’

Director Joshua Seftel and journalist Steve Hartman sought to put a face on school shootings for everyday viewers when they made the documentary short “All the Empty Rooms.”

To illustrate the epidemic, the pair visited the empty bedrooms of the children and youths killed by assailants.

“It’s not a political issue, it’s a human issue,” Seftel told AFP.

“This is about something we all agree on, which is that we all want our kids to be safe when they go to school.”

Hartman said he hoped that seeing those empty spaces would help audiences understand the void left when a child is killed, and “feel that loss” so that progress could be made.

Using a similar approach, Andrew Jarecki and Charlotte Kaufman lifted the lid on American

prisons with documentary feature “The Alabama Solution.”

“We have two million people incarcerated, so you can’t really avoid it,” Jarecki told AFP at a luncheon for Oscar nominees.

“But the prisons do everything they can to keep the press out, to keep filmmakers out.”

Jarecki said filmmakers could help foster change by taking on tough subjects.

“Understanding and being able to see what [an issue] really is is the first step to fix it,” he said.

Attacks on the press

The role of journalists in society, and the increasing threats they face in some places, is the subject of “Armed Only with a Camera: The Life and Death of Brent Renaud,” the first US reporter killed after

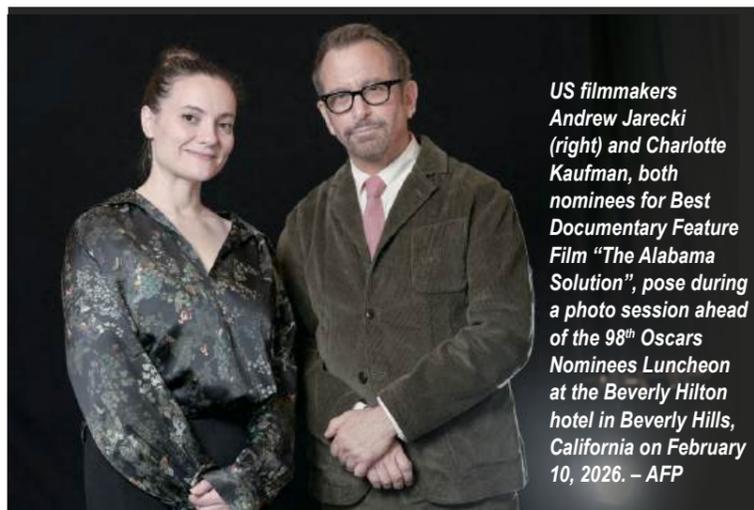
Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

“Sadly, we have now reached a point where – according to the Committee to Protect Journalists – it is the most deadly time on record to be a journalist,” his brother and the film’s director, Craig Renaud, told AFP.

Producer Juan Arredondo said the team hoped the film would raise awareness about the dangers faced by journalists everywhere, and not just those covering armed conflicts abroad.

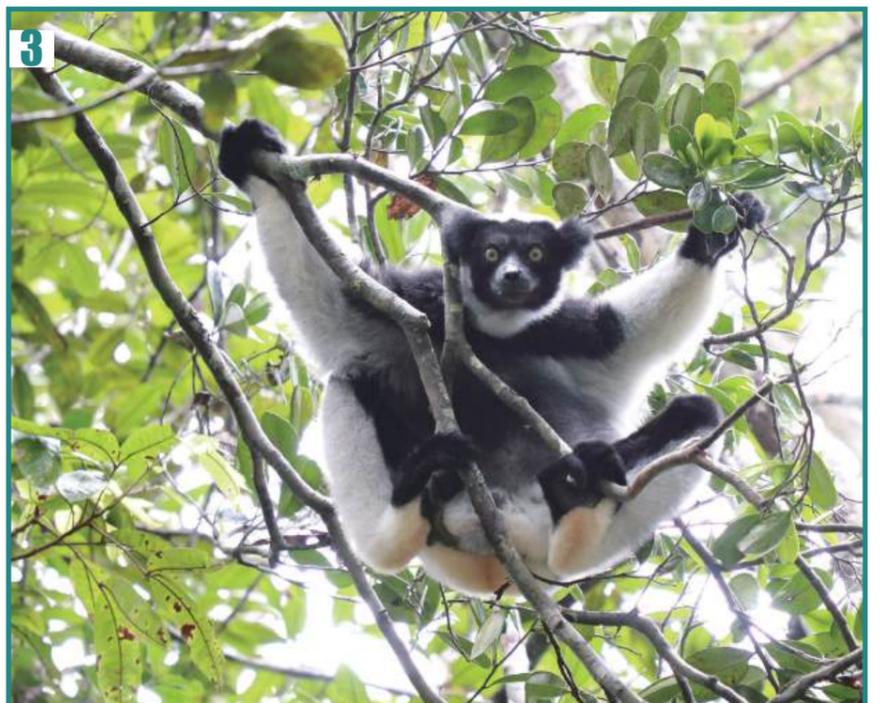
“I think we have come into a time where what we have been covering for many years abroad is coming to the United States,” he said, referring to increased attacks on and arrests of media professionals.

Arredondo said he hoped that audiences would “realise the importance of journalism.” – AFP



US filmmakers Andrew Jarecki (right) and Charlotte Kaufman, both nominees for Best Documentary Feature Film “The Alabama Solution”, pose during a photo session ahead of the 98th Oscars Nominees Luncheon at the Beverly Hilton hotel in Beverly Hills, California on February 10, 2026. – AFP

World Weather			
CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -2°C~5°C	Manila 22°C~33°C	New York 5°C~11°C	Lisbon 10°C~20°C
Shanghai 8°C~12°C	Bangkok 25°C~37°C	London 6°C~16°C	Rio de Janeiro 22°C~28°C
Hong Kong 16°C~19°C	Tokyo 4°C~14°C	Frankfurt 2°C~15°C	Luanda 24°C~29°C
Taipei 17°C~20°C	Singapore 23°C~33°C	Vancouver 7°C~11°C	Maputo 23°C~30°C
Guangzhou 14°C~20°C	Kuala Lumpur 24°C~34°C	Paris 5°C~18°C	Dili 24°C~30°C
Nanjing 7°C~12°C	Jakarta 23°C~29°C	Moscow -1°C~1°C	São Tomé 27°C~31°C
Guilin 8°C~21°C	Seoul 0°C~11°C	Las Vegas 11°C~25°C	Praia 17°C~25°C
Xi'an 7°C~17°C	Sydney 20°C~28°C	Monte Carlo 11°C~17°C	Bissau 20°C~37°C



1. Guarding the tulips

Children are pictured at a tulip fair in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, yesterday. The fair will run until March 10. – Xinhua

2. Not into this hat!

A woman holding a cat walks along a road in Beijing yesterday. – AFP

3. Here's looking at you!

A lemur is seen at Andasibe National Park in Madagascar, on Sunday. As the world's fourth-largest island, Madagascar is home to a unique ecosystem and an extraordinary variety of plant and animal species, with lemurs among the most distinctive representatives of the country's biodiversity. Scientists have identified more than 100 species of lemurs in Madagascar. – Xinhua



4. Clear sky view

This multiple exposure picture shows the full Moon also known as the "Blood Moon" during a total lunar eclipse, at Golaghat in Assam, India yesterday. – AFP

5. Unicorn - Pegasus

A man stands in a park during the Lantern Festival in Beijing yesterday. – AFP

6. Mellow yellow

Women smeared with coloured powder celebrate the Hindu spring festival of Holi in Mumbai, India yesterday. – AFP

