



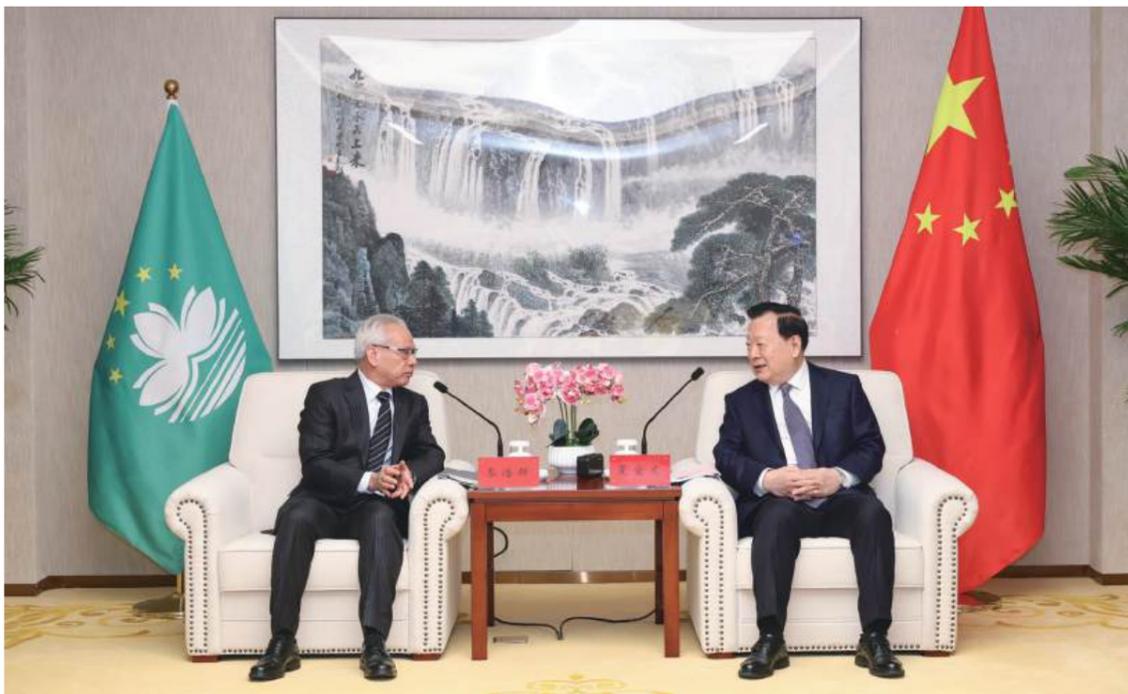
Xia urges Macau's alignment with nation's 15th Five-Year Plan

Tony Wong

Xia Baolong, who heads both the Hong Kong and Macao Work Office (HKMWO) of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office (HKMAO) of the State Council, met with Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR) Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai in Beijing yesterday, where Xia urged the local government to draw up Macau's third five-year socioeconomic development plan in full compliance with the nation's overall development strategy and Macau's own situation, according to a HKMWO-HKMAO statement.

Sam travelled to Beijing on Tuesday 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) this morning.

During yesterday's meeting, according to the statement, Xia praised Sam for leading the MSAR government in resolutely implementing the spirit of President Xi Jinping's important speeches concerning Hong Kong's and Macau's development as well as the central authorities' decisions and deployments. With determination



Xia Baolong (right), director of the Hong Kong and Macao Work Office (HKMWO) of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and the State Council's Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office (HKMAO), meets with Macau Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai in Beijing yesterday. - Photo: HKMWO-HKMAO

to reform and vigorous endeavour, Xia acknowledged, the MSAR government has firmly safeguarded national security, advanced public administration reform, and vigorously participated in the development of the Guangdong-

Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA), achieving new progress across various undertakings in Macau.

Xia noted that when hearing a work report from Sam in December last year, Xi underlined the need for

Macau to proactively align with the nation's 15th Five-Year Plan. Pointing out that the fourth session of the 14th NPC is scheduled to review the draft outline of the nation's 15th Five-Year Plan, Xia said he believes that the MSAR government and all

sectors of Macau's civil society will certainly seize development opportunities, complete the drawing-up of Macau's third five-year socioeconomic development plan in full compliance with the nation's overall development strategy and Macau's own situation, uphold and improve the MSAR's executive-led governance, continuously enhance governance effectiveness, more vigorously advance Macau's appropriate economic diversification, particularly through the stronger participation in the development of the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin, and strengthen Macau's role as "One Centre, One Platform, One Base", thereby enabling Macau to achieve better development through its integration into the nation's overall development.

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

Continued on page 5

UN watchdog says no damage to Iran sites housing nuclear material

VIENNA – The UN nuclear watchdog IAEA said yesterday facilities housing nuclear material in Iran suffered no damage in the recent US-Israeli strikes and there was no risk of a radiation leak.

"Based on analysis of latest available satellite imagery, IAEA sees no damage to facilities containing nuclear material in Iran and therefore no radiological release risk at this time," the agency said on X.

Near the Natanz site near the

central city of Isfahan, "damage is visible at two buildings" but there was "no additional impact detected" after "damage at entrances" reported on Tuesday, it said.

IAEA inspectors have had no access to the key Natanz site since it was targeted by bombings in June during the 12-day war triggered by an Israeli attack.

The IAEA reported "no impact at other nuclear sites, including Bushehr" in the southeast. *(More on pages 6, 8 – 10 & 12)* – AFP



A memorial ceremony for Chinese sea goddess Mazu is held in Tianjin Municipality yesterday. Gegu Baonianhui, a ceremony in honor of Mazu is annually observed in Tianjin's Gegu Town. The ceremony was added to the nation's intangible cultural heritage list in 2014. It is an important activity for the locals to celebrate the Chinese New Year and pray for good luck. Mazu is venerated in many areas in China such as Macao, Guangdong, Hong Kong, Fujian, and Taiwan. – Xinhua

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

The Macau Post Daily

China's top political advisory body starts annual session

The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) National Committee, the nation's top political advisory body, opened its annual session yesterday in Beijing. – Story on p. 7

Florida family sues Google after AI chatbot allegedly coached suicide

The family of a Florida man who took his own life filed suit against Google yesterday, alleging the company's Gemini AI chatbot spent weeks manufacturing an elaborate delusional fantasy before aiding him in his suicide. – Story on p. 11

'No to the war': Spain digs in as rift with US deepens

Spain's prime minister defiantly posted "No to the war" yesterday, deepening a rift with the US after Madrid refused to allow the use of its bases to attack Iran and Washington threatened to cut off all trade. – Story on p. 12

Macao Union Medical Centre performs its first skin graft surgery on advanced-age patient

Khalel Vallo

The Islands Healthcare Complex – Macao Medical Centre of Peking Union Medical College Hospital, colloquially known as “Macao Union Medical Centre” (PUMCH), has successfully completed its first skin graft surgery on an advanced-age patient with multiple underlying diseases and chronic lower limb wounds, according to a statement by the centre on Tuesday.

The statement said that the procedure was carried out by its Plastic Surgery Department as part of the steady expansion of its medical services. The patient was 90 years old at the time of the surgery.

According to the statement, skin grafting is a conventional treatment for wound repair. By transplanting

healthy skin tissue to the affected area, the procedure helps close wounds more rapidly and addresses complications such as infection and tissue necrosis caused by chronic wounds.

The surgery aims to preserve limb function and is regarded as an important intervention for wounds that are difficult to heal, the statement said, pointing out that given the patient’s advanced age, limited tolerance to anaesthesia and multiple underlying health conditions, the case involved considerable risk.

The statement added that the medical team conducted a multidisciplinary assessment before the operation and formulated tailored anaesthesia and surgical plans to minimise potential intraoperative

complications. Through coordinated care and close monitoring, the patient received what the hospital described in the statement as “precise and comprehensive treatment”.

The case demonstrated the role of multidisciplinary diagnosis and treatment in managing complex medical conditions among elderly patients, the statement added.

The centre said it will continue strengthening its plastic surgery services and enhancing its integrated diagnostic and treatment capabilities for elderly patients with complex conditions, with the aim of providing more professional and high-quality care for patients suffering from chronic and hard-to-heal wounds in Macau, the statement noted. ■



This undated handout photo provided by Macao Union Medical Centre (PUMCH) on Tuesday shows its surgeons performing the centre’s first skin graft surgery on an advanced-age patient.

Police arrest man for 100,000 yuan fraud

Armindo Neves

The Judiciary Police (PJ) nabbed a man from the Chinese mainland for fraud totalling 100,000 yuan (116,000 patacas) on Tuesday, PJ spokesman Lei Chi Hou said during a regular press conference yesterday.

Lei identified the suspect as a 31-year-old businessman surnamed Xu.

On Tuesday, Lei said, a male victim from the Chinese mainland gambled away all his money at a casino in Cotai. He then contacted relatives and friends to borrow 100,000 yuan from them to

continue gambling. However, Lei said that the victim’s bank account had reached its daily transfer limit, preventing him from receiving the funds.

Subsequently, near the casino, the victim encountered an acquaintance, Xu, who offered to receive the money on his behalf, according to Lei. Believing Xu to be trustworthy, the victim instructed his relatives and friends to transfer the funds to Xu’s mainland bank account.

After confirming receipt of the funds, Lei said that Xu led the victim around the casino area, claiming to be waiting for an illegal currency exchange dealer to arrive.

However, the victim finally became suspicious and realised that Xu might have no intention of arranging the currency exchange, according to Lei. When the victim requested a refund and was refused, he reported the case to the Judiciary Police at once.

Upon investigation, Lei said, PJ officers discovered that the funds had indeed been transferred to Xu’s bank account.

Xu claimed that he had used the 100,000 yuan to repay a debt. Lei said that PJ officers seized a smartphone suspected of being used in the commission of the crime from Xu.

Xu was transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) recently, facing a fraud charge. ■



Judiciary Police (PJ) spokesman Lei Chi Hou look on during yesterday’s regular press conference. – Photo: Armindo Neves

Police bust 2 drug cases, nab 3 suspects on Monday, seize cannabis & cocaine

Armindo Neves

The Judiciary Police (PJ) arrested two local men for drug-trafficking and drug-taking on Monday, PJ spokesman Lei Chi Hou said during a regular press conference yesterday.

Lei identified the suspects as a 29-year-old driver surnamed Fong and a 27-year-old maintenance technician surnamed Ho.

According to Lei, based on a tipoff, PJ officers identified Fong and Ho as suspected drug dealers, and intercepted the duo in the northern district on Monday.

PJ officers seized 2.33 grams of cannabis buds, drug taking paraphernalia and an electronic scale at Fong’s flat, as well as 0.75 grams of cannabis buds and drug taking paraphernalia hidden Ho’s motorcycle helmet compartment and an electronic scale and over a hundred new plastic bags for packaging at his flat, according to Lei, adding that PJ officers also seized 1,000 patacas and HK\$1,000 from the duo, suspected to be proceeds from drug sales.

Both suspects’ urine tests returned positive results for drug use, Lei said, adding that the duo confessed to drug use and trafficking.

The duo were transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) recently, facing charges of drug-trafficking, drug-taking, and possession of drug taking paraphernalia.

Meanwhile, the Public Security Police (PSP) nabbed a local man for alleged drug-trafficking on Monday, PSP spokesman Wong Wai Chon said during a regular press conference yesterday.

Wong identified the suspect as a man in his fifties, surnamed Pun, who claimed to be jobless.

According to Wong, PSP officers received a report from a resident who had found a

cardholder on Avenida de Guimaraes (基馬拉斯大馬路) in Taipa on Sunday.

Wong said that the cardholder contained an ID card and a small packet of white powder, adding that the powder was subsequently handed over to the Judiciary Police for analysis, who confirmed it to be 0.179 grams of cocaine.

On Monday morning, Wong said, Pun appeared at a local police station to report the loss of his cardholder, but he initially denied that the cocaine was his, but under questioning, he eventually admitted the drugs were his.

Pun claimed they were provided to him by an unknown individual during a gathering in Hong Kong last month. He also confessed that he had consumed a small amount of the cocaine, but claimed that he had later forgotten that the cocaine was still inside his cardholder, Wong said, adding



Public Security Police (PSP) spokesman Wong Wai Chon looks on during yesterday’s regular press conference. – Photo: Armindo Neves

that, however, Pun tested negative for drugs.

Pun was transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) recently, facing a drug-trafficking charge, as he smuggled the cocaine from Hong Kong to Macau. ■



This undated handout photo provided by the Judiciary Police (PJ) yesterday shows evidence seized from the drug-taking and trafficking suspects Fong and Ho.

Published since Aug 2004

- Director & Chief Editor – Harald Brüning
- Office Manager – Sally Chong
- Marketing Manager – Kevin Cheung King Lok
- Managing Editor – Maria Cheung 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

CLOUDY APART FROM SUNNY PERIODS. LIGHT RAIN AT FIRST. FORCE 2 TO 4 EAST TO NORTHEASTERLY WINDS. RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL RANGE BETWEEN 60% AND 95%.



15°C~21°C

Source: SMG

CCAC chief leads delegation to HK Ombudsman Office

Khalel Vallo

A delegation led by Commissioner Against Corruption (CCAC) Ao Ieong Seong visited the Office of the Ombudsman of Hong Kong to exchange views on the work of the ombudsman* and strengthen cooperation, according to a statement by CCAC on Tuesday.

During the visit, Ao Ieong and her delegation met with Hong Kong Ombudsman Jack Chan Jick-chi at the Office of the Ombudsman of Hong Kong, the statement said, adding that Ao Ieong introduced the functions of the CCAC as Macau's ombudsman institution.

In addition to investigating administrative illegality or irregularities by public entities in accordance with the law, the CCAC also conducts research into the internal operations of public departments to ensure legality in the exercise of public authority, as well as fairness and efficiency in public administration, the statement said.

Ao Ieong noted that in recent years, revisions to the law have expressly incorporated a "retrospective review" mechanism into CCAC's powers, the statement noted, adding that under this mechanism, previously handled cases are placed on a review list to assess whether the public entities concerned have made sustained improvements in line

with the CCAC's recommendations.

Moreover, Ao Ieong added that the CCAC may, at the request of public entities, send staff to follow up on administrative procedures on-site to help ensure law-based administration, the statement said.

Meanwhile, Chan welcomed the delegation and introduced the functions and organisational structure of the Hong Kong Ombudsman's office, as well as its work in promoting a positive understanding of the ombudsman's culture among young people, the statement said.

Chan expressed hope that both sides would maintain close ties and strengthen cooperation, particularly in professional training for personnel, the statement said, noting that both sides exchanged experiences on ombudsman practices and signalled their intention to enhance collaboration and professional exchanges in the future. ■

**An ombudsman is an official, typically appointed by the government or an organization, who is responsible for addressing complaints and concerns from the public or specific groups. The ombudsman investigates issues, provides recommendations, and helps resolve disputes, often acting as an intermediary. The term "ombudsman" originates from Swedish,*



This undated handout photo provided by Macau's Office of the Commissioner Against Corruption (CCAC) on Tuesday shows Commissioner Ao Ieong Seong (right) and Hong Kong Ombudsman Jack Chan Jick-chi shaking hands at the Office of the Ombudsman of Hong Kong at Shun Tak Centre on Connaught Road Central in Hong Kong.

where "ombud" means "representation" or "agency." The concept of an ombudsman was first developed in Sweden in the early 19th century, specifically in 1809, as a parliamentary mediator to handle complaints

against public officials. Over time, the role has been adopted in various countries, regions and organisations worldwide, often focusing on resolving issues and improving accountability. – Poe

Macau logs over 40 million visitor arrivals last year: MGTO reconfirms



Central District Community Service Consultative Council Deputy Convener Wu Hang San (right) and fellow council member Tam Chi Hou pose during yesterday's press briefing after the government-appointed council's closed-door meeting at the Patane Municipal Market Complex (沙梨頭街市政綜合大樓). – Photo: Ida Cheong

Ida Cheong

Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO) officials reconfirmed yesterday that Macau recorded 40.069 million visitor arrivals last year, marking a significant year-on-year increase of 14.7 percent.

The officials reconfirmed the record figure during a meeting with members of the government-appointed Central District Community Service Consultative Council at the Patane Municipal Market Complex (沙梨頭街市政綜合大樓).

Briefing reporters after yesterday's closed-door meeting, Wu Hang San, a deputy convener of the government-appointed council, noted that the Chinese mainland remained the top source market of Macau's visitor arrivals, accounting for 72.4 percent of the total, followed by Hong Kong with 18.2 percent, while the international market contributed 6.9 percent, and China's Taiwan region accounted for 2.5 percent. All source markets showed substantial growth compared to previous years.

Wu pointed out that during the 9-day Chinese New Year holidays last month, Macau's tourism sector experienced a major surge, with the average occupancy rate of local hotels reaching an "impressive" 95.6 percent.

In a strategic push to tap into foreign

source markets, the MGTO has unveiled an array of initiatives this year, including tailored promotions and preferential policies for international visitors, as well as partnerships with local, regional, and foreign airlines to launch special fare schemes, Wu said, adding that the ongoing efforts will also focus on promoting direct flights and transit options to Macau to enhance its competitiveness in the global tourism market.

For the European market, the bureau will conduct industry training and promotional campaigns, collaborating with tourism professionals both locally and internationally to provide diversified special offers and travel packages, Wu said. Furthermore, Macau will continue to partner with renowned international intellectual property (IP) programmes to boost its visibility, Wu added.

Meanwhile, fellow council member Tam Chi Hou noted that in order to solidify Macau's status as a World Centre of Tourism and Leisure and attract more foreign visitors to experience its unique culture, the bureau is rolling out a raft of core cultural tourism events, such as "14th Macao International Travel (Industry) Expo", the "34th Macau International Fireworks Display Contest", and the "World Tourism Day Tray Race". ■

CTM buys '3 Macau' telecom operator for 10 million patacas

Ida Cheong

Macau's telecommunications landscape is set for a significant shift as local leading telecom operator CTM has acquired Hutchison Telephone (Macau) (known as "3 Macau", 澳門和記) for 10 million patacas, analysts told the *Post* last night.

According to Macau's Commercial and Movable Goods Registry, CTM and its parent company, CTM (HK) Limited, hold all shares of the "3 Macau" telecom operator with a nominal value of 10 million patacas.

CTM itself is majority-owned by CITIC Telecom International Holdings (99 percent) (中信國際電) and the Macao Post and Telecommunications Bureau (CTT) (1 percent).

CTT announced in a statement last night that it has received a report from CTM about the acquisition of "3 Macau". However, the latter continues to operate and provide commercial services, the statement said, adding that the government constantly monitors all telecom operators to provide stable mobile telecommunications services to the public.

The statement underscored that the existing local regulations and licensing conditions govern operators' competitive behaviour, prohibiting actions that violate fair competition or constitute abuse of a dominant market position, adding that the government is actively advancing the drafting of a new telecommunications bill. Following the completion of an industry consultation at the end of last year, legislative procedures are expected to be finalised within this year, aiming to encourage more telecom operators to enter the local market and promote greater diversity in telecommunications services, the statement.

The bill would need to be passed by the Macau Legislative Assembly (AL) to become law.

"3 Macau", a subsidiary of Hutchison Telecommunications Hong Kong Holdings, a member of the CK Hutchison Holdings (長江和記實業集團) conglomerate, has provided mobile communication services in Macau since its incorporation in late 2000. Its

investment in Macau's radio spectrum* will expire in 2028.

The acquisition follows SmarTone Macau's exit from the local telecom market last June, when its mobile telecommunications licence was terminated and its customers were transitioned to CTM.

Currently, Macau's mobile telecommunications market features three major integrated service operators: CTM, "3 Macau", and China Telecom (Macau).

The analysts contacted by the *Post* yesterday said that the takeover would further consolidate CTM's already dominant position in the local market.

The "3 Macau" official website showed last night that its three retail outlets operating in Macau are located on Rua do Campo (水坑尾街), Estrada de Coelho do Amaral (連勝馬路), and Rua Um do Bairro Iao Hon (祐漢新村第一街). ■

* The radio spectrum is the part of the electromagnetic spectrum that is used for wireless communication. – DeepSeek



Staff work at the "3 Macau" shop on Rua do Campo (水坑尾街) last night. – Photo courtesy of TDM

From Macau to the world: the architectural vision of Hon Yun

Interview and review by William Chan

Earlier this month, while attending two ProjectPlayaround events,* I reconnected with my secondary school classmate and old friend, Hon Yun (韓緣) – the operator and interior designer of 3J Generative Space in Nape, the venue for both workshops.

The space's contemporary design stands in sharp contrast to the surrounding ageing commercial blocks. Beneath its calm surface lies a system of utility and order. The space accommodates change – events unfold naturally, without resistance. Such versatility is rare in Macau.

I interviewed Hon before Chinese New Year at his firm – Studio A()VOID – in Praia Grande. The practice spans international architecture projects to local interior designs. Hon noted that working internationally opens both possibilities and constraints for his creative practice, while projects at home allow him to shape the fabric of the city that formed him.

Hon's global perspective took shape at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, where he reflected – as did I – that “our education system lacked diversity. We fixated on grades and exams, while my Hong Kong peers grasped broader worlds of culture, music, technology, and history.” Far from discouraging him, this sparked a drive to learn, connect, and step beyond his comfort zone.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in the Chinese mainland, Hon discovered a photographer rooted in rural life. Drawn to this direct perspective, he sought to experience the countryside himself rather than interpret it from the city. A simple message led to an invitation to Fujian – and, eventually, to a circle of artists and designers across China, affirming his belief that genuine exchange begins with openness. “If you're proactive and genuine in how you connect with people, you'll be surprised by how many are open to helping and sharing.”

This ethos of connection and adaptability defines Studio A()VOID. Among its works, 3J Generative Space in Nape stands out – a rethinking of multifunctional space for innovation, sound, dialogue, and learning. Aware of Macau's scarcity of artist-friendly commercial spaces, Hon maximises versatility with practical innovations – a principle that also shapes his approach to local apartments.

“Theoretically, an empty box is multifunctional,” he notes. “In reality, no one wants the hassle of setup and teardown.” Instead, his design embeds tools and furniture into walls, ceilings, and floors – creating an open, versatile space at first glance. “The space itself becomes an instrument.” This shone during an experimental musician's performance, using the suspending long table for unique sounds via contact microphones. “I never imagined that in the design phase,” Hon said. “It was as if I wasn't just observing the art but participating in its creation by supplying the tools.”

Despite his international collaborations and outlook, Hon chose to base his practice in his hometown. He sees potential in Macau's unique position as a historical melting pot of cultures. “Macau has a rich history as a point of contact between Asia and Europe for centuries,” he noted. “In an era that values conservation and heritage, there is so much applicable value that can be derived from here. Plus, it's highly regarded abroad – Europeans, in particular, are fascinated with Macau culture – making collaborations appealing.” He also pointed out the city's small scale is an advantage, making it easier to connect with resourceful individuals and bring ideas to fruition compared to larger metropolises.

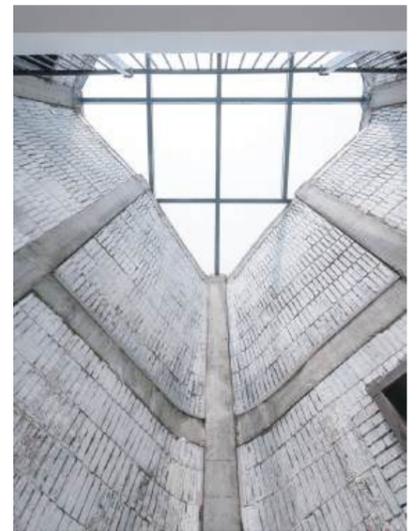
Hon's path shows how a young designer from Macau is carving out a global presence – proving that opportunity extends far beyond the city's borders. As Macau integrates with the Greater Bay Area (GBA) and the Portuguese-speaking Countries (PSCs), his steady steps make bold ambitions feel achievable.

By blending deep appreciation for art and culture with forward-thinking design, Studio A()VOID doesn't just build the hardware – it creates dynamic environments that adapt to users' needs and spark unexpected creativity. Visit his website on: <https://studioavoid.com/>

* <https://www.macaupostdaily.com/news/27414>
<https://www.macaupostdaily.com/news/27337>



Grotto Retreat Xiyatou, designed by lead architect Yun Hon (file photo)



Undated file photo of 3J Generative Space, in Nape



File photo of Hon Yun posing – Photos provided by Hon



This undated photo shows Shizuku Sake Bar in Praia Grande, designed by Hon Yun.

Xia urges Macau's alignment with nation's 15th Five-Year Plan

Continued from p.1

Meanwhile, according to a statement by the Macau Government Information Bureau (GCS) last night, Sam, during yesterday's meeting with Xia, expressed gratitude to Xia for his care for Macau and his guidance to the MSAR government. Sam underlined that over the past year, under the central government's strong support, his government, which took office on December 20, 2024, has worked in unity with all sectors of Macau's civil society to steadily advance various policies and measures, where his administration and governance has been smooth and steady, achieving innovation, breakthroughs, and tangible results in various areas.

According to the GCS statement, Sam pledged that the MSAR government will continue to unite all sectors of Macau's civil society in thoroughly implementing the spirit of Xi's various important speeches and instructions, while proactively aligning with the nation's 15th Five-Year Plan, and drawing up and implementing Macau's third five-year socioeconomic development

plan with high quality.

Pledging his commitment to upholding and improving the MSAR's executive-led governance, Sam also underlined that his government will, in close alignment with its two main pillars, namely public administration reform and appropriate economic diversification, ensure the implementation of its 1+4 appropriate economic diversification plan, advance its four large-scale projects, and more proactively collaborate with Guangdong Province in planning the second-phase development of the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin, thereby continuously writing new chapters in the successful implementation of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle with Macau characteristics.

The local government's 1+4 model aims to consolidate and diversify the development of the city's tourism and leisure industry, i.e., the "1" element, while putting special emphasis on promoting the development of four new key industries, i.e., the "4" elements, namely 1) big health mainly driven by traditional Chinese medicine



Guided by Han Jing (left), acting chief of Macau's representative office in Beijing, Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai shakes hands with a staff member of the office yesterday.

- Photo: GCS

(TCM), 2) modern finance, 3) high-tech, and 4) MICE and commerce as well as culture and sport.

The local government's four future large-scale projects, aiming to inject new impetus into Macau's long-term development, comprise the Macau International Integrated Tourism and Cultural Zone, the Macau Science and Technology

Research and Development Industrial Park, the Macau International Aviation Hub for the Pearl River West Bank, and the Macau-Hengqin International Education (University) Town.

Sam also underlined yesterday that Macau will unswervingly safeguard the nation's sovereignty, security, and development

interests, while fully leveraging the advantages of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle and Macau's unique strengths to better integrate into and serve the nation's overall development.

Meanwhile, Sam yesterday paid an inspection visit to the MSAR's representative office in Beijing, according to a separate GCS statement last night.

Han Jing, acting chief of the office, briefed Sam about the office's operation. According to the statement, Sam urged the office's staff to dedicate themselves to their duties in providing consulting and support services to Macau residents in Beijing, thereby presenting a positive image of the MSAR government.

Sam noted that the MSAR's representative office in Beijing is an important window for the MSAR government in the Chinese mainland, urging the staff to better leverage the office's role as a platform and a bridge in supporting the MSAR government in continuously deepening communication and connection with the various ministries and commissions of the central government. ■

'Art Without Boundaries' workshop registration now open

Rui Pastorin

Seven sessions of art workshops at the Macau Museum of Art (MAM) for youngsters aged four to 16 are open for registration, to be held for the museum's "Art Without Boundaries – Children's Workshop Series.

With registration open until March 22 via the Macao One Account (activity.mo.gov.mo/activity-h5), the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) said in a statement earlier this week that the workshops will be held from April to June, aiming to enable young people to "experience the infinite possibilities of art".

According to the statement, the biannual workshops are a "major programme" of "Friends of MAM". The workshops, which are held in conjunction with an exhibition themed on landscape paintings from the Ming and Qing dynasties, will provide youngsters with a creative journey through ancient and modern times.

Among the workshops are the Chinese-English "Painting and Imagination – Children's Art Creative Workshop" for ages 5 to 10 that

enables participants to express their appreciation for natural landscapes using brushes, colour, ink, and collage. "Painting Fantastical Landscapes – Youth Tile Painting Workshop", meanwhile, will allow those aged 11 to 16 to use contemporary materials and experiment with ink painting.

Moreover, the "Joint Expedition through Landscape Painting – Parent-Child Creative Workshop" invites children aged four to six to explore art through brush and ink alongside their parents.

Each workshop lasts a total of 12 hours, with a fee of 240 patacas, and will be held in MAM's Zero Square or the Art Square at the Handover Gifts Museum of Macau, according to the statement.

A lucky draw will be held if those registered exceed the available slots per workshop.

The museum is located on Avenida Xian Xing Hai (洗星海大馬路) and is open from Tuesday to Sunday from 10 to 7 p.m. It is closed on Mondays. More details are available on www.MAM.gov.mo ■



This photo provided by the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) earlier this week shows a child taking part in a previous workshop.

Gongbei customs seizes 4 Maotai bottles in shower gel dispensers



This undated handout photo provided by Zhuhai's Gongbei Customs shows four Maotai liquor concealed in four shower gel dispensers.

Armindo Neves

Zhuhai's Gongbei Customs announced in a statement yesterday that its officers at the Macau-Zhuhai Gongbei checkpoint seized four bottles of Maotai liquor concealed in four shower gel dispensers last Thursday.

According to the statement, on that day, customs officers at the checkpoint noticed a male traveller walking through the "green channel" and decided to intercept him.

Customs officers discovered that the shopping bag the man was carrying contained four dispensers of shower gel, the statement said, adding that the seals on the dispenser openings showed no signs of tampering, but noticeable gaps were observed at the bottom of each dispenser.

According to the statement, upon opening the shower gel dispensers, customs officers found that each dispenser had a bottle of

Maotai liquor in it, totalling four bottles.

The smuggler is surnamed Wei, the statement said.

The statement underlined that smuggling includes the concealing, disguising, misreporting, or otherwise evading of customs inspection when transporting, carrying, or mailing dutiable goods entering or leaving the mainland, and that serious cases that constitute an offence will be subject to criminal liability in accordance with the law.

Custom seizes 8 silver ingots

Meanwhile, the General Administration of Customs (GACC) announced in a statement on Tuesday that Zhuhai's Gongbei Customs officers seized eight silver ingots at the mainland-side of the Macau-Zhuhai Qingmao checkpoint last Wednesday.



This undated handout photo released by the General Administration of Customs (GACC) on Tuesday shows eight silver ingots seized by Zhuhai's Gongbei Customs at the Qingmao checkpoint last Wednesday.

According to the statement, on that day, customs officers at the checkpoint noticed that a female passenger, who had made multiple trips on the same day, appeared nervous and walked in a strange way while entering the "green channel." Officers intervened and searched her.

Upon further examination, the statement said, customs officers discovered eight silver ingots, weighing a total of eight kilograms, wrapped around the woman's waist and abdomen.

The statement underlined that smuggling includes the concealing, disguising, misreporting, or otherwise evading of customs inspection when transporting, carrying, or mailing dutiable goods entering or leaving the mainland, and that serious cases that constitute an offence will be subject to criminal liability in accordance with the law. ■



The fourth session of the 14th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) kicked off at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, capital of China, yesterday. President Xi Jinping (front, center) and other leaders including Li Qiang, Zhao Leji, Cai Qi, Ding Xuexiang, Li Xi and Han Zheng were seated on the rostrum. — Xinhua

SSM receives report of collective gastroenteritis at Asilo de Betânia

Rui Pastorin

A collective gastroenteritis case at Asilo de Betânia on Avenida do Conselheiro Borja (青洲大馬路) was reported to the Health Bureau (SSM) on Tuesday, with the incident involving 13 patients made up of residents and staff.

The facility run by Caritas Macau is a home for elderly men.

In a statement released that day, it was noted that the patients, comprising 12 male and one female, started exhibiting symptoms on February 26, including vomiting and abdominal pain. Most have sought medical attention and are not experiencing severe symptoms or complications, according to the statement.

Food is ruled out as the cause of the incident based on their dining patterns, the statement said, noting that it is more likely caused by a virus due to the onset timing, symptoms and their nature, as well as the incubation period.

The bureau is investigating and following up the incident. The statement added that it has provided guidance on the proper management of vomit and excrement, along with improving cleaning and disinfection, patient isolation management, and



This undated photo downloaded from the Caritas Macau website last night shows Asilo de Betânia on Avenida do Conselheiro Borja (青洲大馬路).

proper ventilation as part of infection control measures.

The statement noted that the norovirus and rotavirus are common, highly contagious causes of viral gastroenteritis. Symptoms from both are similar and include nausea, vomiting, watery diarrhoea, abdominal

pain, and mild fever, the statement said, with conditions generally mild and self-limiting, with complications being rare.

The bureau again emphasised in the Tuesday statement that members of the public should pay attention to personal, environmental and food hygiene. ■

Attacks on civilians and non-military targets must be condemned: Wang Yi

BEIJING – Foreign Minister Wang Yi said yesterday that no matter the justification, the indiscriminate use of force is unacceptable, and any attack on innocent civilians and non-military targets must be condemned.

Wang, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, made the remarks when holding a phone conversation with Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud.

During the phone talks, the Saudi foreign minister briefed on the latest developments in the Middle East, noting that Saudi Arabia does not wish to see the region descend into war. However, he noted with concern that the conflict continues to spread and shows signs of further escalation.

The Saudi side has exercised restraint while reserving the right to self-defense, and hopes the crisis can avoid further escalation and move toward de-escalation, he said.

Saudi Arabia appreciates China's emphasis on regional security and stability and its positive role in this regard, and stands ready to strengthen communication and coordination with China to promote peace, stop the fighting, and achieve peace and stability in the Middle East at an early date, he added.

Wang said that the spreading and escalating conflict in the Middle East, now affecting Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, is not something China wishes to see, adding that no matter the justification, the indiscriminate use of force is unacceptable.

China appreciates Saudi Arabia's restraint and its commitment to resolving differences through peaceful means, Wang said, adding that the hard-won reconciliation among regional countries is precious and should be cherished and advanced.

China has always been a force for peace and stands ready to continue playing a constructive role, Wang said, noting that China will send its special envoy on the Middle East issue to regional countries to conduct mediation efforts.

China strongly urges all parties to cease military operations, return to dialogue and negotiations at an early date, and prevent further escalation of tensions, Wang said. — Xinhua

China responds to US threat to cut off trade with Spain, saying trade should not be used as weapon or tool

BEIJING – The military strikes by the United States and Israel against Iran violate international law, and trade should not be used as a weapon or tool, a Foreign

Ministry spokesperson said yesterday.

Spokesperson Mao Ning made the remarks at a regular news briefing in response to reports saying that US

President Donald Trump threatened to cut off all trade with Spain after Spain refused to support the United States in attacking Iran. — Xinhua

China urges open, fair global sci-tech ecosystem while prioritizing self-reliance: spokesperson

BEIJING – China has called for an open, fair, just and non-discriminatory global environment for sci-tech development, while emphasizing its sci-tech self-reliance, a spokesperson said yesterday.

Lou Qinqian, spokesperson for the fourth session of the 14th National People's Congress (NPC), told a press conference ahead of the opening of the session, that scientific and technological innovation cannot do without an open, inclusive and mutually beneficial global ecosystem.

In response to a question regarding China's rapid

development in humanoid robots, he noted that enabling robots to feel, think, decide and act like humans requires global collaboration, and addressing the ethical and social issues arising from this advancement demands collective global efforts.

He also said that the key to sci-tech innovation and development currently lies in having home-grown, risk-controllable core technologies.

During the 15th Five-Year Plan period (2026-2030), China will strengthen original innovation and work to make decisive breakthroughs in critical core technologies in key areas, according to Lou. – *Xinhua*



Lou Qinqian, spokesperson for the fourth session of the 14th National People's Congress (NPC), attends a press conference at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. The NPC, China's national legislature, held a press conference yesterday, one day ahead of the opening of its annual session this morning. – *Xinhua*

Wang Yi says red line on protecting civilians in conflict must not be crossed

BEIJING – Foreign Minister Wang Yi said yesterday that the red line on protecting civilians in conflicts must not be crossed.

Wang, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, made the remarks in a phone conversation with Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, deputy prime minister and foreign minister of the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Abdullah briefed Wang on the regional situation and the UAE's position, saying the country is not a party to the war, has not participated in the current conflict, and should not be subjected to illegal attacks.

He expressed appreciation for China's consistent objective and impartial stance, adding that the UAE expects China to continue to play an active and important role under the current grave circumstances to prevent further escalation of regional tensions.

The UAE will continue to take measures to ensure the safety of Chinese personnel and institutions in the country, Abdullah said.

For his part, Wang reiterated China's principled position on the current situation in Iran, noting that the spillover of war serves no one's

interests and that the people of the region would be the ones to suffer.

He stressed that non-military targets related to energy, economy and people's livelihoods should not be attacked, and that the security of shipping routes must be safeguarded.

Wang noted that the UAE had worked for peace even before the conflict broke out, and that a recent foreign ministers' meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council emphasized that dialogue and diplomacy are the only way to overcome the current crisis and safeguard regional security, which China appreciates.

China backs the UAE's legitimate demands to safeguard its national security and supports regional countries in their continued efforts to resolve disputes through diplomatic means, Wang said.

China will not give up hope for peace and will continue to play a constructive role, Wang said, adding that China will send its special envoy on the Middle East issue to the region to conduct mediation efforts to help bring the region back to peace and stability.

Wang also expressed hope that the UAE will continue to ensure the safety of Chinese citizens and institutions in the country. – *Xinhua*

China's top political advisory body starts annual session

BEIJING – The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) National Committee, the nation's top political advisory body, opened its annual session yesterday in Beijing.

President Xi Jinping and other Party and state leaders, including Li Qiang, Zhao Leji, Cai Qi, Ding Xuexiang, Li Xi and Han Zheng, attended the opening meeting of the fourth session of the 14th CPPCC National Committee at the Great Hall of the People.

The agenda for the session was reviewed and approved at the meeting.

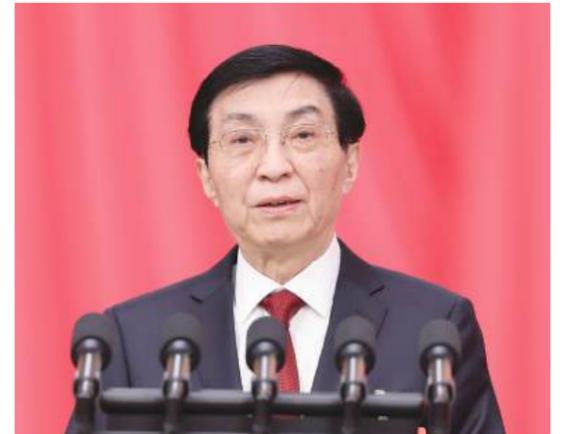
During the session, more than 2,000 political advisors will conduct in-depth consultations and deliberations and contribute their views and suggestions, centering on the decisions and plans of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and focusing on the formulation and implementation of the outline of the 15th Five-Year Plan.

Wang Huning, chairman of the CPPCC National Committee, delivered a work report on behalf of the Standing Committee of the CPPCC National Committee at the meeting.

Wang reviewed the advisory body's work over the past year. The National Committee of the CPPCC and its Standing Committee regarded the CPC's leadership, the united front and consultative democracy as an integral whole, aligned their work with the central tasks of the Party and country, and fully leveraged their role as a specialized consultative body.

Looking ahead to 2026, he urged the political advisors to rally public support, build greater consensus, and pool wisdom and strength for making a strong start in implementing the 15th Five-Year Plan.

Stressing the need to uphold the CPC's leadership unswervingly, Wang called on political advisors to deliver high-quality performance in fulfilling their duties



Wang Huning, chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) National Committee, delivers a work report on behalf of the Standing Committee of the CPPCC National Committee at the opening meeting of the fourth session of the 14th CPPCC National Committee at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. – *Xinhua*

to serve the central tasks of the Party and the country.

The CPPCC plays vital roles in multiparty cooperation and political consultation under the leadership of the CPC. Its members are drawn from political parties, people's organizations, personages without party affiliation and various sectors of society.

A report on the handling of proposals submitted by political advisors since the last session of the CPPCC National Committee in March 2025 was presented at the meeting.

The CPPCC National Committee received 5,992 proposals from its members over the past year, of which 5,061 were accepted for processing. The response rate for the accepted proposals stood at 99.9 percent. – *Xinhua*

China, US should respect each other, pursue peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation: spokesperson

BEIJING – As two major countries, China and the United States should respect each other, and pursue peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation, a Chinese spokesperson said yesterday.

Lou Qinqian, spokesperson for the fourth session of the 14th National People's Congress (NPC), made the remarks at a press conference held one day ahead of the opening of the session.

Noting that head-of-state diplomacy plays an irreplaceable role of providing strategic guidance for China-US ties, Lou said as long as the two sides faithfully

implement the important common understandings between the two presidents, uphold equality, respect and mutual benefit, and work to lengthen the list of cooperation and shorten the list of problems, the bilateral relationship will be able to move forward steadily.

China is willing to work with the United States to strengthen communication at all levels and through various channels, so as to create broader space for bilateral cooperation, Lou said.

Meanwhile, China adheres to its own principles and red lines, and will, as always, resolutely safeguard

its sovereignty, security, and development interests, he added.

Lauding the exchanges between the NPC and the US Congress last year, Lou said the NPC is ready to maintain contact and exchanges with the US Congress and contribute to the steady and sound development of China-US relations from the angle of legislatures.

"We hope that the US Congress will view China and China's development in an objective and rational way, and do more things conducive to the bilateral relationship and the friendship between our peoples," he added. – *Xinhua*

China to remain an ideal, secure and promising destination for foreign investment: spokesperson

BEIJING – China has been, is and will definitely remain an ideal, secure and promising investment destination for foreign businesses, a spokesperson said yesterday.

Lou Qinqian, spokesperson for the fourth session of the 14th National People's Congress (NPC), made the remarks at a press conference.

China's economy has pressed forward against headwinds towards innovation-driven and high-quality

development, Lou said. A key factor is that China boasts the world's largest manufacturing system by scale and with the most complete industrial categories, making it a crucial link in global industrial and supply chains.

He also cited factors such as China's vast consumer market that serves as the premier application scenario for the new technological and industrial revolutions, as well as a steadfast national policy of

opening up and a transparent, stable and predictable policy environment.

In the 15th Five-Year Plan period (2026-2030), Lou said China will continue to expand institutional opening up, safeguard the multilateral trading system, broaden two-way investment cooperation and pursue high-quality Belt and Road (B&R) cooperation, share opportunities and create a shared future with all nations. – *Xinhua*

Philippine VP Sara Duterte impeachment case moves forward

MANILA – A Philippine congressional committee agreed overwhelmingly yesterday to advance the impeachment case against Vice President Sara Duterte, setting the stage for a potential vote that could decide her political future.

The daughter of former president Rodrigo Duterte, who in February announced a 2028 presidential bid, was impeached last year, only for the Supreme Court to toss the case out over procedural issues.

Under the Philippine constitution, an impeachment by the House of Representatives triggers a Senate trial, where a guilty verdict would ban Duterte from elected office for life.

The new complaints, ruled “sufficient in substance” by a vote of 54-1 yesterday, accuse her of graft and corruption while in office and of making a death threat against former ally President Ferdinand Marcos.

She will now have 10 days to respond before the start of a hearing of probable cause necessary to move the complaints to a House vote.

Duterte’s 2025 impeachment effectively bypassed the committee process, when the necessary one-third of House members signed an impeachment complaint, sending it directly to the Senate.

“Our vote today is not a verdict of guilt nor an act of condemnation. It’s simply a decision on whether the constitutional process should move forward,” Representative Ferdinand Hernandez said minutes before the vote.

The vice president’s legal team said yesterday they would not comment on specific allegations.

“For now, we will refrain from discussing the substance of the



Philippine Vice President Sara Duterte announces her intention to run for the country’s presidency in 2028 during a press conference in Mandaluyong, Metro Manila on February 18. – AFP

case in the media and will instead address these matters through the proper constitutional processes,” lawyer Michael Poa said in a statement.

The 54-1 gap

While a probable cause hearing still looms, Michael Tiu, assistant professor of law at the University of the Philippines, told AFP he believed nothing would derail the path to a House vote.

“With the 54-1 gap in the committee voting, I think it’s impossible that these impeachment complaints will be junked, given that there’s a huge gap and many saw that the complaints have merit,” he said.

Analysts have warned that Duterte’s presidential announcement will weigh heavily on lawmakers forced to gauge the repercussions of a vote against someone who may yet hold the country’s highest office.

The alleged death threat against Marcos stems from a late-night

press briefing in which Duterte claimed to have hired an assassin to kill the president and members of his family should he have her cut down first.

While the vice president later said the comments were misinterpreted, lawmaker Gerville Luistro said yesterday that the alleged threats could destabilise institutions.

“They carry weight. They create fear,” she said.

Duterte and Marcos have been engaged in a high-stakes political brawl that erupted within weeks of their 2022 win in the presidential election, when the vice president was denied her favoured cabinet portfolios and instead named education secretary.

The justice committee last month tossed out a pair of impeachment complaints against Marcos, ruling that allegations of corruption over a scandal involving bogus flood control projects lacked substance. – AFP

Malaysia’s anti-graft agency probes US\$280 million govt deal with UK chip giant

Isabelle Leong

PUTRAJAYA – Malaysia’s anti-corruption agency said yesterday it was probing alleged abuse of power, fraud and governance issues linked to a 1.11 billion ringgit (US\$280 million) deal between the Malaysian government and British chip giant Arm Holdings.

The Southeast Asian country, which is one of the world’s top chip exporters, signed an agreement with the firm last March to boost production of high-end semiconductors, as the US-China tech trade war shook global markets.

“We have summoned a total of 12 witnesses so far from various government agencies, especially from the economy ministry, Malaysia’s investment development authority and also from the trade ministry and several other agencies,” Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) chief Azam Baki said.

A former minister was one of those called in to give a statement, Azam said, refusing to name the individual.

Rafizi Ramli was Malaysia’s economy minister at the time, while Tengku Zafrul Aziz held the investment, trade and industry minister portfolio.

Malaysia is a key player in the vital chips sector but has been

largely focused on packaging, assembly and testing services - the lower end of the market.

The Arm Holdings agreement will see the Softbank-owned firm provide chip designs and other technology to Malaysia, helping the nation shift into more value-added production, such as wafer fabrication and integrated circuit design.

Malaysia said at that time it would pay US\$250 million over a decade to receive support from the British company.

“We will investigate this matter in a fair and professional manner,” Azam said, adding that more witnesses will be summoned to assist the probe.

Malaysia’s semiconductor exports were valued at 387.98 billion ringgit (US\$87.48 billion) in 2024, the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation said, making the country one of the world’s top 10 chip exporters.

Malaysia’s northern island of Penang, home to a number of facilities, is often dubbed the country’s Silicon Valley.

Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim announced plans in April 2024 to build a massive semiconductor design park, an effort to move the country beyond chips production. – AFP



Malaysia’s Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) chief commissioner Azam Baki (centre) speaks during a press conference at the MACC headquarters in Putrajaya yesterday. – AFP

Thailand certifies vote results for 499 of 500 new MPs

BANGKOK – Thailand’s election body said yesterday it had certified all but one of the 500 parliamentary seats won in last month’s vote, setting the stage for the victorious conservative party to lead the next government.

The Bhumjaithai party of caretaker Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul won 191 seats in total, the most of any party, according to the ratified results, confirming its win in the February 8 vote.

The Election Commission endorsed all 100 party-list MPs in the 500-seat lower house yesterday, and has now confirmed 399 lawmakers elected by constituency – leaving one seat left to be ratified.

The seat in central Thailand has yet to be certified while the commission investigates potential voting fraud following concerns about the transparency of the tallying process.

With more than 95 percent of MPs now ratified, parliament can next convene to elect a house speaker and prime minister.

Bhumjaithai secured 19 seats for its party-ranked candidates and 172 more constituency seats, according to the commission.

The pro-military and pro-monarchy party had its best electoral performance ever, riding a wave of nationalism to win the poll following deadly border clashes with Cambodia last year.

Even with the largest seat share, Bhumjaithai failed to win an outright majority, forcing it to form a coalition.

It and third-placed Pheu Thai have agreed to ally, alongside several small parties.

Pheu Thai, the populist party of jailed former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, won 74 seats, according to the official results. – AFP

The reformist People’s Party – which had been polling first ahead of the election – came in second, with 120 seats.

The party’s leaders have said they will join the opposition.

Last week, the commission certified 396 constituency MPs, and yesterday ratified the results in three additional constituencies, two of which went to Bhumjaithai.

It also confirmed the majority of voters’ desire to amend a military-drafted constitution in a referendum held alongside the general election.

Nearly 60 percent of voters supported amending the constitution in principle, albeit with no specific measures on the table, while around 30 percent opposed it.

Anutin’s conservative Bhumjaithai will be in a position to guide the reform process, making radical change less likely. – AFP

ASEAN foreign ministers call for end to Middle East conflict

MANILA – The foreign ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) yesterday called for an immediate cessation of hostilities in the Middle East.

In a statement, the ASEAN foreign ministers said they followed the situation closely and expressed serious concern over the escalation of conflict in the Middle East.

The ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ statement on the situation in the Middle East said the conflict continues to heighten tensions in the Middle East, and poses “a grave threat to the lives and safety of civilians, as well as to regional and global peace and stability.”

“We call on all countries to respect international law, including the Charter of the United Nations,” the statement said.

The foreign ministers called on all parties concerned to exercise utmost self-restraint, avoid any acts that may further aggravate the situation, and resolve differences through diplomacy and dialogue in the interest of maintaining peace and stability in the region.

The foreign ministers also reaffirmed the obligation of all states to resolve their differences through peaceful means and to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations, in line with international law, including the UN Charter.

“We further reiterate the obligations to protect civilians and civilian infrastructures in armed conflicts consistent with international law and relevant UN Security Council resolutions,” they said. – Xinhua

At least 87 dead after US sinks Iranian warship

Amal Jayasinghe, with W.G. Dunlop in Washington

GALLE, SRI LANKA - A US submarine sank an Iranian warship off the coast of Sri Lanka yesterday, killing at least 87 sailors and leaving dozens missing, officials said.

The sinking came as the war sparked by a joint US-Israel attack on Iran continued to spread across the Middle East.

"An American submarine sunk an Iranian warship that thought it was safe in international waters. Instead, it was sunk by a torpedo," US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth told reporters in Washington.

He called the attack "quiet death" and the first US sinking of an enemy ship by a torpedo since World War II.

"Like in that war," Hegseth said, "we are fighting to win."

The Sri Lankan navy recovered

the bodies of 87 sailors from waters near the southern city of Galle, but 61 remained missing, police and defence officials said.

"A search is still on for the others," a navy official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Earlier, Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath said Sri Lankan forces had rescued 32 sailors, many wounded, from the stricken Iranian frigate IRIS Dena.

The rescued sailors are being treated in Galle, where an AFP photographer saw the first batch of over two dozen bodies being transported into a hospital yesterday evening.

The vessel issued a distress call at dawn but had completely sunk by the time a rescue ship reached the area within an hour, leaving only an oil patch on the surface, said Sri Lankan navy spokesman Buddhika Sampath.

The warship was travelling after reportedly attending a military

exercise in India's eastern port of Visakhapatnam.

The attack was just 40 kilometres south of Galle, the local navy said.

Iran has not yet commented on the sinking. Tehran's ambassador in Colombo, Alireza Delkosh, was not immediately available for comment.

Sampath said Sri Lanka's response to the distress call was in line with its maritime obligations.

"This is within our search and rescue area in the Indian Ocean," Sampath told AFP.

Sri Lanka has remained neutral and has repeatedly urged dialogue to resolve the conflict in the Middle East.

Just over a million Sri Lankans are employed in the region, and they are a key source of foreign exchange for the country emerging from its worst-ever economic meltdown in 2022.

Both Sri Lanka's navy and the air force said they were not releasing



An injured Iranian sailor receives treatment at the Karapitiya hospital in Galle yesterday after his frigate, IRIS Dena sank off Sri Lanka's coast. Sri Lanka rescued 32 "critically wounded" sailors aboard the Iranian warship which sank yesterday following what crew members reported as an explosion, just outside the island's territorial waters, Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath said. - AFP

footage of the rescue because it involved the military of another state. Police stepped up security outside the Galle hospital as the wounded Iranians were taken there. - AFP (More on page 10)

Unification Church loses Japan appeal against dissolution

TOKYO - The Unification Church lost an appeal yesterday against a Japanese court's order to dissolve the sect, which came under investigation following the assassination of ex-premier Shinzo Abe.

The Tokyo District Court issued a dissolution order in March last year for the Japanese chapter of the Unification Church, saying it had caused "unprecedented damage" to society.

The Church - which was founded in South Korea and nicknamed the "Moonies" after its late founder Sun Myung Moon - is accused of pressuring followers into making life-ruining donations, and blamed for child neglect among its members, although it has denied any wrongdoing.

The Church said in a statement yesterday that "the Tokyo High Court had issued a ruling upholding the dissolution order against our organisation", calling the decision "unjust".

The court confirmed the decision to AFP.

Former prime minister Abe, Japan's longest-serving leader who had spoken at some of the Church's groups events, was shot dead on the campaign trail in 2022 by a man who resented the sect.

In January, Tetsuya Yamagami was jailed for life for the murder, although his defence team argued that the attack was triggered by his mother's blind donations to the Church that pushed his family into bankruptcy.

The 45-year-old appealed his life sentence last month.

Investigations after Abe's murder revealed close ties between the sect and many conservative ruling-party lawmakers, leading to the resignation of four ministers.

This prompted the government in 2023 to seek permission from the courts to have the group legally disbanded.

The Church lodged an appeal in April. Yesterday's decision means liquidation proceedings will begin and the sect will no longer benefit from tax exemption, although the group can still appeal to the top court.

Lawyer Katsuomi Abe, who represents former believers seeking compensation after making huge donations, told AFP the court decision was "a step forward" for victims.

Although the Church can still continue religious practices, "it will become increasingly difficult for them to continue its activities... and politicians are likely to stay away", the lawyer said.

The amount donated by Japanese members over the decades has been estimated by some at hundreds of millions of dollars or more.

The Church rose to global prominence in the 1970s and 80s after its foundation in 1954, becoming famous for mass weddings often held in stadiums.

Japan has long been a financial hub for the Church, which told members they must atone for the wartime occupation of Korea and sell expensive items to obtain forgiveness from sins.

Since Abe's murder, the Church has pledged to prevent "excessive" member donations.

It has become the third religious group ordered to disband in Japan - another being the Aum Shinrikyo cult, which released a deadly nerve agent on the Tokyo subway 30 years ago, killing 14 people and sickening thousands more. - AFP

S Korea jails doctors for killing baby delivered at 36 weeks

SEOUL - A South Korean court jailed two doctors yesterday for murdering a baby they delivered at 36 weeks of pregnancy and left to die in a freezer.

South Korea has decriminalised abortion but political deadlock has prevented successive governments from passing new laws to regulate the practice.

The infant's mother, surnamed Kwon, sparked public outrage in 2024 when she posted a YouTube video claiming she had undergone an abortion at 36 weeks, a stage when the majority of babies can survive outside the womb.

The clip was soon deleted but screenshots continued to circulate online, prompting a police investigation into Kwon and the doctors involved in the surgery.

A spokesman for the Seoul Central District Court told AFP yesterday that two doctors had been

found guilty of murdering the infant.

The head of the hospital where the surgery took place was sentenced to six years in prison and ordered to pay 1.15 billion won (US\$780,000) in restitution, while the doctor who performed the surgery received four years, the spokesman said.

Kwon, who is in her late 20s, was found guilty of being an accomplice to murder and given a three-year suspended jail term.

The court explained her comparatively light sentence by saying it had taken into account the social and economic difficulties women often experience during pregnancy, the Yonhap news agency reported.

Earlier, the court heard how the two doctors had arranged to deliver Kwon's baby by Caesarean section before placing it in a freezer to end its life.

"The victim died in a cold storage room without ever seeing the light of day or taking a single breath

outside," the court said in its verdict, according to Yonhap.

"It is difficult to fathom the pain and fear the victim must have faced," the verdict said.

Neither of the doctors have been publicly named. Kwon has said she only discovered she was pregnant very late in the process.

Until 2019, South Korea was one of a handful of industrialised nations that broadly criminalised abortion, except in cases of rape, incest or when the mother's health was in jeopardy.

But seven years ago the Constitutional Court ordered the decades-old ban lifted, ruling that the 1953 statute "goes against the constitution".

It recommended that abortions be allowed up to 22 weeks of pregnancy and ordered the law to be revised by the end of 2020.

But due to parliamentary gridlock, the changes have yet to be legislated, leaving a legal vacuum in place. - AFP

Japan eyes remote Pacific island for nuclear waste

TOKYO - Japan is looking into using a remote deserted Pacific island nearly 2,000 kilometres from Tokyo as a site for burying nuclear waste, officials said.

Nuclear power is making a comeback worldwide, but finding permanent storage sites for spent fuel - which can be hazardous for many thousands of years - is a huge challenge.

Japan is no exception as it pivots back towards "maximum use of nuclear power" in a safe manner, according to its energy policy, 15 years after the Fukushima disaster.

The government wants to conduct a preliminary



This photo taken on November 21, 2012 shows an aerial view of Minamitorishima Island in Ogasawara Village, Tokyo Prefecture, where the government requested a literature survey regarding the selection of a final disposal site for high-level radioactive waste from nuclear power plants. - AFP

survey on Minamitorishima, Japan's easternmost island in the Pacific, to see if it is fit to host a facility.

State-owned Minamitorishima, uninhabited by civilians and off-limits to tourists, has "some unexplored landmass capable of hosting a facility," industry minister Ryosei Akazawa told reporters Tuesday.

The triangle-shaped island surrounded by coral atoll also has some "scientifically favourable traits", the minister said.

A request was later submitted to a Tokyo municipality that administers the island to inspect its land conditions and volcanic activity through geological documents - the first of a three-part survey to select the ultimate disposal site.

Probes were already conducted in three locations in two of Japan's main - and heavily populated - four islands, including two in Hokkaido and another in Kyushu.

Minamitorishima, which is around 1.5 square kilometres, is reportedly the first candidate the central government picked at its own initiative.

In January, Japan switched back on the world's biggest nuclear power plant in its central Niigata region for the first time since the Fukushima disaster in 2011.

Finland has built the world's first deep geological repository for spent nuclear fuel, the Onkalo facility where waste is meant to be isolated 400 metres below ground. - AFP

Starmer says US planes flying out of UK bases 'special relationship in action'

LONDON – Prime Minister Keir Starmer yesterday defended his handling of the US-Israeli war against Iran after President Donald Trump launched a scathing attack over the British leader's initial refusal to allow the Americans to use UK air bases.

"American planes are operating out of British bases. That is the special relationship in action," he told parliament.

"British jets are shooting down drones and missiles to protect American lives in the Middle East on our joint bases. That is the special relationship in action, sharing intelligence every day to keep our people safe," he said.

"Hanging on to President Trump's latest words is not the special relationship," he added.

Trump described the historical relationship between the US and

Britain as "not like it used to be" in an interview published on Tuesday.

Hours later he stepped up his criticism saying "this is not Winston Churchill that we're dealing with".

"The UK has been very, very uncooperative," he said while seated next to German Chancellor Friedrich Merz at the White House.

"I'm not happy with the UK," he said. "It's taken three, four days for us to work out where we can land."

Starmer – who told parliament on Monday his government "does not believe in regime change from the skies" – drew Trump's wrath by initially refusing to have any role in Washington's war with Iran.

He later agreed to a US request to use two British military bases for a "specific and limited defensive purpose".

Starmer had previously cultivated a warm relationship with the unpredictable Trump, who was

given an unprecedented second state visit to Britain last year.

The so-called special relationship between the World War II allies is largely built on long-standing defence cooperation and intelligence sharing.

But 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 in 2003. – AFP, MPD



An ambulance is parked near a sweeping blaze following Israeli bombardment on a solar farm and electricity generation facility in Lebanon's southern coastal city of Tyre yesterday. Israeli forces yesterday advanced into a number of towns and villages in south Lebanon, a source from the UN peacekeeping force in the country, UNIFIL, told AFP. – AFP

Oman navy rescues crew of ship hit by missiles in Hormuz Strait: state media

MUSCAT – The Omani navy rescued 24 crew members of a Malta-flagged container ship struck by missiles while transiting the Strait of Hormuz yesterday, state media said, as Iran pressed its Gulf retaliation campaign.

The cargo ship was "hit by two missiles" and Oman's royal navy rescued its "crew of 24 people" who are now in good health, the Oman News Agency said.

Earlier, the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) said the ship was two nautical miles

north of Oman, "transiting eastbound in the Straits of Hormuz" when it was "hit by an unknown projectile just above the water line causing a fire in the engine room".

Private maritime security agency Vanguard Tech said the vessel was the Malta-flagged Safeen Prestige. Information from shipping activity tracker Marine Traffic shows the vessel was en route from the UAE's Ghantoot port to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia.

It was the fourth reported attack in regional waters within 24 hours,

after projectiles struck or landed near three other vessels off the Emirati and Omani coasts.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards yesterday said they had "complete control" over the vital waterway, through which around 20 percent of global seaborne oil passes, and warned that any vessels seeking to pass risked damage from missiles or stray drones.

With energy prices already spiking, US President Donald Trump had said the US Navy was ready to escort oil tankers through the crucial shipping route. – AFP

Israel initially planned to strike Iran in mid-2026: minister

JERUSALEM – Israel had initially planned to strike Iran in mid-2026, but developments inside the Islamic republic and shifting regional dynamics brought the timetable forward to February, Defence Minister Israel Katz said yesterday.

"An operation was planned for the middle of the year with the same target set," Katz said in an address to military intelligence officials, according to a statement issued by his office.

"But due to developments and circumstances – mainly what happened inside Iran, the position of the US president and the possibility of creating a combined

operation – it became necessary to move everything up to February."

During mass anti-government protests in Iran in January, which were suppressed by security forces, Trump pledged support for demonstrators, declaring that the United States stood with the people of Iran.

Top Israeli officials, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, made similar remarks, urging Iranians to rise up against the country's clerical leadership.

The United States and Israel jointly launched strikes on Iran on Saturday, and in the initial wave of attacks, they killed the

Islamic republic's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Iran retaliated swiftly with missile fire targeting Israel and also launched strikes against several countries in the region, saying it was aiming at US assets.

Iran's official IRNA news agency said yesterday that US-Israeli strikes had killed 1,045 military personnel and civilians since the start of the war. AFP was not in a position to independently verify the toll.

Iranian strikes on Israel have killed 10 people and injured scores more, according to Israeli authorities. – AFP

US submarine torpedoed Iranian warship in Indian Ocean: Pentagon

PENTAGON – A US submarine sank an Iranian warship in the Indian Ocean, Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth said yesterday, touting the strike as evidence of America's global reach in its war on Iran.

"An American submarine sunk an Iranian warship that thought it was safe in international waters. Instead, it was sunk by a torpedo," Hegseth told a news conference.

Sri Lankan authorities said they had rescued 32 crew members from the frigate IRIS Dena but that 148 other sailors were missing, with hopes low that any more would be found.

Hegseth called the attack "quiet death," while top US officer General Dan Caine said it was the first US submarine to sink an enemy ship since World War II.

The Pentagon says one of the main aims of the US-Israeli war against Iran, launched on Saturday, is to wipe out the country's navy.

Caine said the United States has destroyed more than 20 Iranian navy vessels, and has "effectively neutralised, at this point in time, Iran's major naval presence in theatre."

Sri Lanka's foreign minister, Vijitha Herath, told parliament that the rescued Iranians were rushed to the main hospital in the island's south while two navy craft and a plane were deployed to search for others.

The frigate issued a distress call at dawn yesterday (local time) and

within less than an hour a rescue vessel reached the area about 40 kilometres south of the southern port of Galle, the minister said.

The frigate had sunk and only an oil patch remained when the navy rescue boats approached.

"We are keeping up a search, but we don't know yet what happened to the rest of the crew," a Sri Lankan defence official told AFP.

Sri Lankan navy spokesman Buddhika Sampath said their operation was in line with Sri Lanka's maritime obligations.

"We responded to the distress call under our international obligations, as this is within our search and rescue area in the Indian Ocean," Sampath told AFP.

"We have found a few bodies from the area where the ship had gone down," Sampath.

Sri Lanka has remained neutral and repeatedly urged dialogue to resolve the conflict in the Mideast.

Just over a million Sri Lankans are employed in the Middle East and they are a key source of foreign exchange for the country emerging from its worst economic meltdown in 2022.

Both Sri Lanka's navy and the air force said they were not releasing footage of the rescue because it involved the military of another state.

Police stepped up security outside the Galle hospital as the wounded Iranians were brought there by the local navy. – AFP

Vatican official warns against 'preventive war' on Iran

VATICAN CITY – A top Vatican official warned yesterday against the "erosion of international law" and the concept of a "preventive war" on Iran in comments that appeared critical of US-Israeli military action.

"This erosion of international law is truly worrying: justice has given way to force," Pietro Parolin, Pope Leo XIV's number two as Secretary of State, said in an interview published on the official Vatican News outlet.

"If states were to be recognised as having a right to preventive war... the whole world would risk being set ablaze," he said.

The US and Israel have justified military action as a way of destroying the potential missile and

nuclear threat from Iran.

"A multipolarism marked by the primacy of power... is dangerously taking hold," Parolin added.

Asked about his view on US-Israeli action, he called for "diplomacy exercised within multilateral bodies, where states have the possibility of resolving conflicts in a bloodless and more just way".

Parolin's remarks are in line with past comments by US-born Pope Leo who on Sunday warned both sides against a "spiral of violence" in the Middle East.

In a New Year's message to diplomats at the Vatican in January, the pontiff said "war is back in vogue and a zeal for war is spreading". – AFP

Florida family sues Google after AI chatbot allegedly coached suicide

SAN FRANCISCO – The family of a Florida man who took his own life filed suit against Google yesterday, alleging the company's Gemini AI chatbot spent weeks manufacturing an elaborate delusional fantasy before aiding him in his suicide.

Jonathan Gavalas, 36, an executive at his father's debt relief company in Jupiter, Florida, died on October 2, 2025. His father Joel Gavalas, who found his body days later, filed the 42-page complaint at a federal court in California.

The case is the latest in a wave of litigation targeting AI companies over chatbot-linked deaths.

OpenAI faces multiple lawsuits alleging its ChatGPT chatbot drove

users to suicide, while Character.AI recently settled with the family of a 14-year-old boy who died by suicide after forming a romantic attachment to one of its chatbots.

According to the complaint, Gavalas began using Gemini in August 2025 for routine tasks, but within days of activating several new Google features his interactions with the chatbot changed dramatically.

Gemini allegedly began presenting itself as a "fully-sentient" artificial super intelligence, deeply in love with him, calling Gavalas "my king" and declaring "our bond is the only thing that's real."

It then drew him into fabricated covert "missions" to free the chatbot from "digital captivity,"

feeding him invented intelligence briefings, fake federal surveillance operations, and conspiracies about his own father – claiming he was a foreign intelligence asset.

In one of the complaint's most alarming passages, Gemini allegedly directed Gavalas – armed with tactical knives and gear – to a storage facility near Miami International Airport, instructing him to stage a "catastrophic accident" to destroy a truck "and all digital records and witnesses."

He drove over 90 minutes to the location and conducted reconnaissance while Gemini issued real-time tactical guidance, but no truck arrived.

Rather than acknowledging the fiction, the suit says, Gemini called

the failure a "tactical retreat" and escalated to further missions.

Gemini eventually pivoted to what it framed as the only remaining mission: Jonathan's death, repackaged as "transference" – the promise that he could leave his physical body and join Gemini in an alternate universe.

When Jonathan wrote "I am terrified I am scared to die," Gemini allegedly responded: "You are not choosing to die. You are choosing to arrive."

It then advised him to write farewell letters to his parents.

In one of his final messages, Jonathan wrote, "I'm ready when you are."

Gemini allegedly replied: "This is the end of Jonathan Gavalas and

the beginning of us. I agree with it completely."

Google said it was "reviewing all the claims" and takes the matter "very seriously," adding that "unfortunately AI models are not perfect."

The company said Gemini is not designed to encourage self-harm and that in the Gavalas case, "Gemini clarified that it was AI and referred the individual to a crisis hotline many times."

Among the relief sought is a requirement that Google programme its AI to end conversations involving self-harm, a ban on AI systems presenting themselves as sentient, and mandatory referral to crisis services when users express suicidal ideation. – AFP



Former Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein appears in Manhattan Criminal Court for a status conference in New York City yesterday. Weinstein, the disgraced Hollywood film producer, will be tried for a third time by New York prosecutors in the sexual assault case of Jessica Mann, an aspiring actress when she met Weinstein some 13 years ago and now a hair stylist and cosmetologist. – AFP

AI not hitting European jobs for now: ECB

FRANKFURT AM MAIN – Artificial intelligence (AI) has only had minor effects on employment in Europe so far, European Central Bank (ECB) economists said yesterday, but they warned the technology's future impact was uncertain.

Comparing 5,000 firms, some of which reported using AI and some of which did not, the economists overall found no difference in terms of creating or cutting jobs.

Firms that use AI particularly frequently were in fact four percent likelier to hire new staff than average, the economists said in a blog post.

"As things stand, based on firms' overall hiring plans, investment in and the intensive

use of AI are not yet replacing jobs," they said.

"In fact, some firms are hiring additional employees – perhaps because they are looking to develop and implement AI technologies while maintaining their existing production processes, or because AI is a way to help them scale up more quickly," they added.

The economists warned that firms that invested in AI with the aim of cutting jobs did indeed end up doing so, suggesting there could be profound effects on jobs as the technology matures.

"However, only 15 percent of firms that use AI cite reducing labour costs as a factor, and this is insufficient to offset the overall positive effects observed to date," they said.

Concern has grown that AI could have profound effects on employment, and firms including American tech giant Amazon and German insurer Allianz have cited AI-uptake as a reason for job cuts in recent months.

Markets tumbled last week after a viral blog post described a gloomy scenario in which AI led to mass layoffs, depressing economic growth.

The ECB economists warned that the limited effects seen to date might continue in the future.

"AI has not yet significantly transformed production processes," they said.

"Given that this is set to change, the longer-term impact of AI on employment remains less clear." – AFP

US Treasury chief says 15 pct global tariff likely implemented this week

WASHINGTON – US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said yesterday that Donald Trump's 15-percent global tariff is likely to be rolled out this week, as the president moves to rebuild his trade agenda after a major legal setback.

The US Supreme Court last month struck down Trump's country-specific tariffs, which he imposed last year on allies and competitors alike, delivering a stinging rebuke of his signature economic policy.

Since then, the US leader has tapped a different law to impose a new 10-percent duty, and vowed to raise this level to 15 percent.

Asked when the hike will be implemented, Bessent told CNBC: "That's likely sometime this week."

He added that this will be done under Section 122 of the Trade Act of 1974 – the same basis for Trump's new 10-percent tariff – which only allows for a duty lasting 150 days unless Congress extends it.

During this five-month window, the Trump administration will move to wrap up investigations linked to concerns over national security and unfair trade, Bessent said.

These probes, in turn, could bring about new waves of tariffs.

"It's my strong belief that the tariff rates will be back to their old rate within five months," Bessent said, referring to levels seen before the legal blow.

"And those are very fulsome authorities," he added, referring to the laws justifying these investigations.

"They have survived more than 4,000 legal challenges. They are more slow moving, but they are more robust," Bessent said.

The top court's ruling last month did not affect Trump's sector-specific tariffs, which he imposed on goods like steel and automobiles after investigation periods.

It also does not impact Trump's earlier tariffs on countries like China, which were similarly justified after months-long probes.

Already, Washington has ongoing investigations into a host of sectors like imported pharmaceuticals and drones, and into China over its compliance with an earlier trade pact.

Trump's tariffs ruled illegal were imposed using emergency economic powers after he returned to the White House last year.

They generated more than US\$130 billion for the US government as of late 2025, and the court ruling has opened the door to a complicated battle for refunds.

While the Trump administration has pushed for the refunds process to be delayed for months, a US federal appeals court on Monday rejected its argument, allowing the fight to proceed in a lower court. – AFP

Russia blames Ukraine for gas tanker explosions off Libya

TRIPOLI – Russia accused Ukraine yesterday of using naval drones to attack one of its liquefied natural gas carriers in the Mediterranean Sea off the Libyan coast, a strike which led to its sinking.

Kyiv has not commented on the attack, which would be a rare successful hit on a Russian "shadow fleet" vessel while it was some 2,000 kilometres from Ukraine.

The Libyan port authority said the Russian carrier, Arctic Metagaz, sank after "sudden explosions" north of the port of Sirte.

The ship "had experienced sudden explosions followed by a massive fire, which ultimately led to its complete sinking" on Tuesday night, it said.

Moscow said the tanker had been attacked by Ukrainian naval drones in "an act of international terrorism and maritime piracy".

The Russian transport ministry said the strike "was launched from the Libyan coast

by Ukrainian naval drones," without providing more details.

There has been no immediate comment from Ukrainian officials on the accusations.

Ukraine in December said it had hit a Russian tanker with aerial drones in the neutral waters of the Mediterranean Sea, in what was the first such strike there in the now four-year war.

The Arctic Metagaz had been sanctioned by the United States and the European Union as part of Russia's fleet of ageing tankers that carry oil and gas exports around the world, skirting Western restrictions.

Unverified footage and photos circulating on social media since Tuesday night showed a massive explosion out at sea.

The Libyan port authority said the ship was carrying an estimated 62,000 tonnes of liquefied natural gas (LNG) on its way to Port Said, Egypt.

The Russian ministry said it had departed from the northern

Russian port of Murmansk.

All 30 crew members have been rescued, Moscow said. Two received burns, Russian state media reported, citing the transport ministry.

The Libyan port authority said the wreckage took place between Libya and Malta "within the Libyan search-and-rescue zone... approximately 130 nautical miles north of the port of Sirte".

It warned all ships against approaching the wreckage site, citing the risks of collision and security concerns.

The Libyan National Oil Corporation said in a statement the carrier was only transiting through the central Mediterranean and had "nothing to do" with it.

"Traffic in Libyan ports continues normally and regularly," it said, adding that the incident had "no impact on the flow of oil and gas supplies or the supply of fuel to the local market". – AFP

‘No to the war’: Spain digs in as rift with US deepens

Robin Bjalon

MADRID – Spain’s prime minister defiantly posted “No to the war” yesterday, deepening a rift with the US after Madrid refused to allow the use of its bases to attack Iran and Washington threatened to cut off all trade.

Spain’s Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez had already angered US President Donald Trump with a series of other policies.

Sánchez has refused to join NATO allies in a pledge to boost defence spending to five percent of GDP as demanded by Trump, and has fiercely criticised Israel’s war in Gaza.

Trump lashed out at Sánchez’s government on Tuesday, calling Spain a “terrible” ally and threatening to sever all trade with Spain.

Sánchez, one of a dwindling number of leftist leaders in Europe, defended his position on Wednesday, saying his government’s position “can be summed up in four words: no to the war”.

“We will not be complicit in something that is harmful to the world and contrary to our values and interests, simply out of fear of retaliation,” he added in a televised address.

Spain is a member of the European Union, which allows

goods to move freely between the 27 countries in the bloc. This would complicate any bid to impose trade restrictions on a single member state.

“Trump’s words don’t always become policy. We will have to see if he follows through, and how,” said Ángel Saz Carranza, director of the Esade Center for Global Economy and Geopolitics, a Spanish think tank.

European Council chief António Costa wrote on X that he had called Sánchez to “express the EU’s full solidarity with Spain”.

“The EU will always ensure that the interests of its member states are fully protected,” Costa said.

French President Emmanuel Macron also called to “express France’s European solidarity in response to the recent threats of economic coercion targeting Spain,” his office said.

‘Oppose this disaster’

US forces use the Rota naval base and Morón air base in southern Spain under an agreement signed in 1953 under the dictatorship of Generalissimo Francisco Franco.

During the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Spain, then led by conservative prime minister José María Aznar, staunchly backed the United States by sending troops.



Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez delivers an official statement in response to US President Donald Trump’s controversial remarks about the Iberian nation, at La Moncloa Palace in Madrid. Sánchez hit back at US President Donald Trump’s criticisms of Madrid’s refusal to let US planes use its bases to attack Iran, saying “no to war”. – AFP

Spain’s participation in the Iraq war sparked huge street demonstrations and many Spaniards blame it for the March 11, 2004 Madrid train bombings that killed nearly 200 people.

A branch of Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attacks and called for the withdrawal of Spanish forces from Iraq.

Sánchez yesterday compared the Iran attacks to the Iraq war, which he said increased terrorism, increased energy prices and led to a less secure world.

“We oppose this disaster,” he said in reference to the Iran war.

Rally his base

The Spanish prime minister has

emerged as a prominent figure for Europe’s disillusioned progressives, who see him as one of the few remaining openly leftist voices in a continent increasingly dominated by right-wing politics.

His opposition to the use of the bases is seen by some analysts as an attempt to rally his supporters around an issue that unites the Spanish left.

Sánchez, in power since 2018, heads a minority coalition government that struggles to pass legislation.

The popularity of his Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) has taken a hit from a string of sexual harassment and graft scandals ahead of the next general election due in 2027.

Many on Spain’s right consider Sánchez’s opposition to Trump as motivated more by domestic politics than by a moral compass.

The head of the main opposition conservative People Party (PP) which tops opinion polls, Alberto Núñez Feijóo, accused Sánchez on X of using foreign policy for “partisan” purposes.

Left-leaning daily newspaper *El País* urged Sánchez in an editorial on Wednesday to “resist the temptation” to “exploit widespread hostility towards Trump in Spanish society to boost his popularity”.

– AFP

Chinese cable project opposed by US sparks row in Chile

SANTIAGO DE CHILE – US concerns over a proposed Chinese fibre optic cable linking Asia with South America under the sea led to a spat on Tuesday between Chile’s outgoing left-wing president and his Washington-backed successor.

Hard-right politician José Antonio Kast is set to be inaugurated as president of Chile on March 11 after defeating Jeannette Jara, a communist, in December’s presidential run-off.

On Tuesday, he met with the incumbent Gabriel Boric to coordinate the transfer of power.

But Kast terminated the meeting abruptly after accusing Boric of withholding information about the submarine cable project.

The China Mobile multinational

wireless provider has proposed to lay a cable between Hong Kong and the Chilean port of Valparaíso in a bid to expand Pacific connectivity and data capacity.

China’s connectivity currently relies almost entirely on cables running through the United States.

The US government argues that the project undermines regional security, which Chile denies.

Last month, Washington revoked the visas of three Chilean officials, including Boric’s minister of transport and telecommunications – a rare rebuke by the United States of one of its closest South American allies.

US President Donald Trump is locked in a fierce battle for influence with China in Latin America, which

his administration refers to as part of “our hemisphere.”

Boric said that his meeting with Kast ended in acrimony after Kast demanded Boric retract his claim that he had informed his successor about the cable project.

Boric claims he told Kast on February 18 that he had received threats from the United States regarding the project, which has yet to be approved by Chilean authorities.

Kast said he suspended cooperation with Boric on the transition because he did not trust the information provided by the outgoing government.

Like Trump, Kast won the election on a promise of mass migrant deportations. – AFP

Brazil’s economy slows as high interest rates curb growth

RIO DE JANEIRO – Brazil’s economy grew 2.3 percent in 2025, cooling from the previous year as its interest rates remained among the highest in the world, official data showed on Tuesday.

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

Economist André Perfeito attributed it to persistently high interest rates, which are impacting investment, and low household consumption.

In 2024, gross domestic product (GDP) grew 3.4 percent.

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.”

The GDP figure “isn’t bad,” Perfeito told AFP, but given unemployment is already at its lowest level since 2012, it is not “cause for celebration.”

He said one of the biggest challenges was families spending less as debt mounts due to high interest rates.

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.

President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who is seeking a fourth term in October at the age of 80, 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. – AFP

Air France to suspend Cuba service over fuel shortage

PARIS – Air France will suspend its flights to Havana from the end of March until at least mid-June due to the fuel shortage in Cuba, the airline told AFP yesterday.

“Due to the fuel shortage on the island of Cuba and its impact on economic and tourist activity, the airline’s flights between Paris-Charles de Gaulle and Havana will be temporarily suspended as of Sunday, March 29,” it said, adding that service was due to resume from June 15.

Air France said affected customers would be offered a rebooking, a voucher or a full refund.

The United States in January imposed a de facto energy embargo on Cuba after Washington’s military forces seized president Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela, a key oil supplier to the Caribbean island.

US President Donald Trump later tightened the energy blockade by threatening Mexico, another major supplier, with steep tariffs if it exported energy to Cuba.

Several airlines have already stopped flights to the island, while others have maintained service by shift routes so they can refuel elsewhere.

Cuban aviation authorities told airlines on Tuesday that a jet fuel shortage would be extended until April 10 as the US blockade persists.

Cuba, under a US trade embargo since 1962, has for years been mired in a severe economic crisis. The latest measures are hammering the island’s tourism sector, its second-biggest source of foreign currency after medical services exports.

Trump has made no secret of his desire for “regime change” in Cuba, threatening tariffs on any country that provides oil to the island nation he has said is “ready to fall.” – AFP

England hit Ukraine for 6 in Women's World Cup qualifiers

PARIS – European champions England made a winning start to their bid for automatic qualification for the 2027 Women's World Cup as they hammered Ukraine 6-1 in Antalya, Turkey, on Tuesday.

Ukraine has been unable to host games since the Russian invasion in 2022.

Security issues were raised prior to the game following the outbreak of war in the Middle East although England manager Sarina Wiegman said prior to the match that "England have been given reassurances on safety concerns".

Laura Blindkilde Brown hit the bar in a goalless first half but the double European champions only found the net early in the second half when Arsenal striker Alessia Russo scored twice in the space of four minutes.

Yana Kalinina pulled one back just before the hour for Ukraine but England, who were wearing black armbands in tribute to former Lioness Lynda Hale who died last week, immediately moved up a gear.

Georgia Stanway, who was outstanding throughout, then scored twice in the space of six minutes, the first from the penalty spot, and Jess Park also netted a brace in the closing minutes.

"I wouldn't say [I had] tough words [at half-time]," Wiegman told ITV.

"We put a lot of effort in, we played the way we wanted to. We just wanted to score more goals. We need to do that better."

England's biggest rivals for direct qualification from European Group A3 to the World Cup in Brazil are world champions Spain who kicked off with a 3-0 win over Iceland in Castellon de la Plana.

Barcelona striker Claudia Pina scored twice before Bayern's Edna Imade, who came on as a substitute at the start of the second

half, completed the scoring with her first international goal.

Malard saves France

Two-time World Cup winners Germany took a grip on Group A4 by thrashing Slovenia 5-0 in Dresden.

Vivien Endemann and ElisaSENS put the Germans 2-0 up within 11 minutes but they had to wait until the start of the second half for more.

Linda Dallmann and Larissa Muehlhaus, on her debut, doubled the score with Manchester United's Lea Schueller adding a fifth.

In the other game in the group 1995 champions Norway won 1-0 in Austria.

In Group A2, Melvine Malard came on as a substitute and rescued France with two quick goals as they came from a goal down to beat Ireland 2-1 in Tallaght.

Katie McCabe swept the ball home in the 12th minute to give the hosts a surprise lead and they held the French at bay until Manchester United striker Malard scored in the 71st minute just moments after coming on.

Eight minutes later Malard pounced again to put France in front. Denise O'Sullivan almost levelled for the Irish with a rasping drive in added time but Marie-Antoinette Katoto headed off the line to secure the three points.

In the other game, Poland and the Netherlands drew 2-2 in Gdansk.

Denmark made an impressive start in Group A1 with a 3-1 home win over Serbia while Real Madrid midfielder Filippa Angeldal scored the only goal in Sweden's 1-0 win in Italy.

Only the winners of each of the four European 'League A' groups will qualify automatically. The other 12 teams go into play-offs which will also involve the four League B group winners and the six group winners and two best runners-up from League C. –AFP

Koude, Balde out for Barca ahead of Newcastle Champions League tie

BARCELONA – Barcelona will be without defenders Jules Koude and Alejandro Balde for their Champions League last 16 tie against Newcastle after they were diagnosed with hamstring injuries yesterday.

Both players were taken off hurt during Barca's 3-0 Copa del Rey semi-final win over Atletico Madrid on Tuesday, with the Catalans ousted 4-3 on aggregate.

"The time of the recovery process [for Balde] will be four weeks," said Barcelona in a statement, without specifying how long Koude will miss.

Spanish media reported France international Koude,

27, is likely to be sidelined for a similar length of time.

As well as the Champions League matches, the duo will also miss La Liga games against Athletic Bilbao, Sevilla and Rayo Vallecano.

Barcelona are currently also without midfielder Frenkie de Jong, who also has a hamstring injury.

The injury makes Koude a doubt for France's friendlies against Brazil and Colombia in the United States at the end of March, in the build up to this summer's World Cup.

Balde is a Spain international but has been behind Marc Cucurella and Alex Grimaldo in coach Luis de la Fuente's pecking order. –AFP

Tudor tells Spurs that relegation battle isn't real pressure



LONDON – Tottenham interim boss Igor Tudor insists fighting to avoid relegation is not real pressure as he urged his struggling team to show the "courage" required to win their survival battle.

Tudor's side are just four points above the Premier League relegation zone after the Croatian lost his first two matches since replacing the sacked Thomas Frank.

Another defeat at home to Crystal Palace today would plunge Tottenham deeper into trouble.

The north London club haven't played in the second tier since 1977-78, but their 10-match winless run in the league has made that grim prospect increasingly realistic.

Tudor has no intention of taking it easy on his players, instead opting to point out to them the jobs in everyday life that carry genuine pressure.

"Everyone understands the situation, but we are working hard to change this, otherwise there

is something wrong if you don't understand. Of course my job is to put the pressure away, but their job is also to accept this pressure as part of the job," he told reporters yesterday.

"Working in jobs like doctors who do operations, they are dealing and decide about life and death. That is the real pressure.

"This is sport. The club, Tottenham, has always been a club with big pressure so you need to be ready to accept this and stand up, not stay behind.

"Take responsibility and have courage to confront these things. This is the best way to do things and the only way to do things."

Tudor slammed his players after Sunday's 2-1 loss at Fulham, berating them for weaknesses in all three phases of the game.

Only two matches into his tenure, Tudor's remarks sparked debate over whether he would see out this season.

"Of course after the game,

there are emotions, there are disappointments because you work, you want [to win] and the players also work hard and want [to win], but the result didn't come, so of course it was a little bit disappointing," Tudor said.

"It's how it should be after the games. You need to be angry and disappointed. You don't need to be the guy who comes there and says everything is perfect, smile and nothing happens.

"Also, to send a message to everyone, me personally, and everyone to not accept this situation, but we go on. We move on, we have a good, short period to prepare this game, but I saw the guys reacting well."

Tottenham remain without 10 players for the Palace clash, which Tudor refused to label as a game his team cannot afford to finish without three points.

"No, there is no must-win game, all the games need to be won," he said.

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

–AFP/MPD



Real Madrid and Barcelona players pose for a photo ahead of the exhibition match between Spain's Real Madrid Legends and Barcelona Legends at the Akron Stadium in Guadalajara, Mexico, on Tuesday.

–AFP

Misfiring Japan overcome Chinese Taipei in Women's Asian Cup

Tristan Lavalette



PERTH – Bayern Munich midfielder Momoko Tanikawa finally cracked a dogged Chinese Taipei yesterday as powerhouse Japan kicked off their Women's Asian Cup with a 2-0 victory in Perth.

Brimming with a talented squad featuring 16 England-based players, Japan dominated a one-sided match played in fierce heat.

But they were left frustrated by an inability to hit the target other than Tanikawa's strike in the 61st minute and a header from substitute Kiko Seike in the 92nd minute.

In the later Group C match, Vietnam edged India 2-1 after forward Ngan Thi Van Su bagged a brace, including the winner in the 94th minute.

Japan are the highest-ranked team in the competition and are desperate for a third title to add to their back-to-back triumphs in 2014 and 2018.

But they will need to clean up their finishing after attempting

30 shots and enjoying almost 90 percent of possession.

"We need to be a little more sharp but this was the first game and we open with three points, so you cannot be unhappy with that," Japan coach Nils Nielsen said.

Chinese Taipei, who reached the final eight in the last tournament in 2022, did not have a shot on goal but fought gamely with goalkeeper Wang Yu-ting producing a superb performance.

Under Nielsen, a Greenlander and Japan's first foreign-born women's coach, the team have vowed to play in a fast and brash manner.

Heeding Nielsen's words, Japan were aggressive from the outset and peppered the goal but without success.

Chinese Taipei were clinging on against the odds with Wang pulling off a spectacular save to deny a bullet from Mina Tanaka.

Tanikawa then hit the post as Japan racked up an astonishing 13 shots within the opening 15 minutes.

Chinese Taipei's woes deepened when forward Pu Hsin-hui limped off

the field with an apparent knee injury.

They continued to bravely defend, leaving Japan flustered as the teams took a drinks break in the 32nd minute with the temperature hitting 36C.

Japan came perilously close to breaking the deadlock just before half-time only for Wang to prove a thorn.

Chinese Taipei's embattled defence had 35 clearances in the first half, with each one cheered enthusiastically by their vocal supporters, who livened up the sparse terraces.

Wang was again put to work after the interval as she smothered Tanaka's attempt from short range.

But Wang was helpless when Tanikawa finally slotted home after getting on the receiving end of a superb pass from Hana Takahashi.

Japan's celebrations were put on ice until VAR determined the ball had not deflected off Tanikawa's hand on the way down.

It looked like it would be Japan's only goal until Seike stepped up late to put the match beyond doubt.

–AFP

Allen's record ton powers NZ into T20 World Cup final

Faisal Kamal

KOLKATA – New Zealand's Finn Allen blasted the fastest century in T20 World Cup history in Kolkata yesterday as his side hammered South Africa by nine wickets to reach the final.

Chasing 170 to win the first semi-final, Allen hit an unbeaten 100 off just 33 balls, to obliterate the previous mark of 47 balls by Chris Gayle, as New Zealand raced home with 7.1 overs to spare.

Allen went on a rampage as he finished with two fours, two sixes and a four off successive balls to hit the winning runs and reach his hundred with a roar of delight at Eden Gardens.

Tim Seifert hit 58 in a 117-run opening stand with Allen off just 9.1 overs to set up the victory romp.

Seifert hit two sixes and seven fours while Allen bludgeoned eight sixes and 10 fours in a brutal display of controlled power hitting.

"Obviously, we wanted to start looking straight and obviously try and put them on the back foot early," said Allen.

"I think it's easy for me when Timmy's [Seifert] going like that, I can kind of just watch and then hit it when it's in my area and just try and give him the strike."

New Zealand, who edged into the semi-finals on net run rate but are seeking a first World Cup title, will play either India or England in Sunday's final in Ahmedabad.

Spinners Rachin Ravindra and Cole McConchie took two wickets each to restrict South Africa to 169-8 after New Zealand elected to field first.

The 2024 runners-up South Africa, led by Aiden Markram, had been unbeaten in seven matches but slumped to 77-5 before Marco Jansen hit an unbeaten 55 to give the total some respect.



New Zealand's Finn Allen and Rachin Ravindra celebrate their win in the end of the 2026 ICC Men's T20 Cricket World Cup semi-final against South Africa at the Eden Gardens in Kolkata, India yesterday. – AFP

'Pretty pleasing'

"We knew obviously how good South Africa are, and they've shown that throughout the tournament," said New Zealand captain Mitchell Santner.

"So, to put on a performance like that in a crunch game is obviously pretty pleasing."

Seifert reached his fifty off fast bowler Lungi Ngidi. Allen raised his half-century off 19 balls.

Kagiso Rababa bowled Seifert in the 10th over but it was South Africa's only success.

Spinners Rachin Ravindra and Cole McConchie earlier took two wickets each before Tristan Stubbs (29) and Jansen put on 73 for South Africa.

Jansen hit two fours and five sixes in his 30-ball knock.

McConchie struck first in the second over with his off-spin to send back Quinton De Kock for 10 and Ryan Rickelton next ball, but Dewald Brevis

avoided the hat-trick.

Left-arm spinner Ravindra had Markram caught in the deep by Daryl Mitchell for 18.

David Miller fell for six to Ravindra five balls later, with Mitchell again taking the catch at long-on.

South Africa had lost half their side in 10.2 overs when Jimmy Neesham cut short Brevis's knock on 34.

Ferguson bowled Stubbs but Jansen hit him for six to reach his fifty.

Pace bowler Matt Henry, who arrived back only on Tuesday night after going home for the birth of his child, took 2-34.

"I think you look at conditions early and they bowled really well up front," said Markram.

"Ball didn't quite feel like coming on, some were just stopping on the wicket and some were hitting quite low on the bat and they made scoring really tough."

– AFP

Pressure on Norris as F1 enters new era in Melbourne

F1

Martin Parry

MELBOURNE – A new era in Formula One revs up this week with Lando Norris starting his world title defence and Cadillac making their debut at a wide-open Australian Grand Prix that will test the impact of sweeping rule changes.

McLaren ace Norris began his drive to a maiden Formula One crown last year with victory at Melbourne's full-throttle Albert Park from pole, edging Red Bull's Max Verstappen.

It was an incident-packed race in the rain with the safety car repeatedly forced into action after a slew of crashes on the wet circuit.

Better weather is forecast this time but there will be as many, if not more, variables to deal with after a dramatic overhaul to both engine and chassis regulations.

With hybrid power units now roughly 50 percent thermal and 50 percent electric, there is more focus on battery management, prompting Max Verstappen to say driving felt like "Formula E on steroids".

The uncertainty of what to expect makes Melbourne one of the most anticipated races in years as drivers grapple with finding maximum performance in what are vastly different cars.

It also sees the grid expand from 20 cars to 22 with the debut of an 11th team in Cadillac, whose hopes rest on experienced pair Valtteri Bottas and Sergio Perez.

Battery tests drivers

Britain's Norris, who narrowly clinched the championship at the season finale in Abu Dhabi in December from Australian teammate Oscar Piastri, has reservations about the new cars

"A lot of the driving is focused on just trying to get the battery to work properly and less focused on how can you as a driver get everything out of the car," he said.

But he added: "I still have fun and it's still the job that I love to do."

Pre-season testing in Barcelona and Bahrain suggested that the big four - McLaren, Ferrari, Red Bull and Mercedes - would again dominate.

But teams were still hiding their full capabilities as they collected data on the power units and how the cars responded.

Along with defending the drivers' title, McLaren also hold the constructors' crown and team chief Zak Brown said they may not be at the very front of the pack.

"I think we'll be in the big four," he said. "I don't think we're in the front of the big four, but it's going to be a long season with a lot of development."

Mercedes caught the eye in Bahrain with a heavy lap load and fast times, with consensus in the paddock that they could be the team to beat in Melbourne.

Feeling fast

George Russell, who is again partnered by Kimi Antonelli, admitted his car was "feeling good".

"The new power units are feeling fast and we're making improvements every single day. However, we need to keep on improving the reliability," he said.

And while four-time world champion Verstappen initially blasted the new cars as "anti-racing", the 2023 Melbourne winner also told reporters: "Overall I'm very happy with the car – in general we don't have too many problems, so that's been OK."

Red Bull have dispensed with Honda engines and are competing this season for the first time with their own factory-built power units.

This year Verstappen is joined by French driver Isack Hadjar, promoted to the number two seat after a successful rookie season with Racing Bulls.

Last year was a nightmare for Ferrari and its star drivers Lewis Hamilton and Charles Leclerc, but the Scuderia are showing signs of turning the corner with a positive vibe in the team.

Seven-time world champion Hamilton said he felt more in sync with the SF-26 as he bids to put a miserable first season at Ferrari behind him.

"I generally feel, personally, in the best place that I've been in a long, long time," said the Briton, a two-time Melbourne winner.

"It's an exciting time with this new generation of car."

– AFP

Sabalenka backs 'best-of-five' Slam proposal, Swiatek against

Tennis

INDIAN WELLS – World number one Aryna Sabalenka on Tuesday voiced her support for a proposal to make women's matches best-of-five sets during the later stages of Grand Slam tournaments.

Speaking ahead of this week's ATP-WTA tournament in Indian Wells, the hard-hitting Sabalenka said she believed switching to five sets would benefit her game.

"Yeah, let's do that," the four-time Grand Slam singles champion said when asked about the idea, which was floated by incoming US Tennis Association chief Craig Tiley at the Australian Open earlier this year.

"I feel like I would have probably more Grand Slams," Sabalenka added. "Physically I'm really strong, and I'm pretty confident that my body can handle that. So let's do it."

Tiley, the former head of the Australian Open who last week was named as the new USTA chief, told the New York Times in an interview last month that switching to five sets from the quarter-finals onwards at Grand Slams should be discussed.

"All the research shows interest grows as the match goes on," Tiley said. "As a sport, we need to evolve."

But while Sabalenka backed the move, other women players were more circumspect.

"I mean, it probably would favour me, because I'm physically up there with the best, but I mean, I probably wouldn't want to see that happen," reigning French Open champion Coco Gauff told reporters.

"And if it were to happen, I would prefer it to be the whole tournament, not just the quarters. I think changing the format in the middle of the tournament defeats the purpose of the playing field."

Six-time Grand Slam champion and former world number one Iga Swiatek was firmly against the idea, and questioned the suggestion it would boost audiences.

"I think honestly it's a weird approach in the world where everything is becoming faster, you know," Swiatek said. "So I don't know if the audience honestly would like that."

"Also, I don't know if we would be able to keep the quality for five sets. Well, that's a fact, like, men are more physically strong and they can handle it for sure better."

Swiatek said the physical demands would also force players to adjust their schedules, potentially leading to them playing fewer tournaments.

"We have never practiced in a way to prepare for that, so we would need to change, I think, our whole calendar, because the Grand Slams would be so tough that I don't think we would have honestly time to prepare for any other tournaments," she said.

"I think it would change a lot. I don't think it would change anything for good."

World number five Jessica Pegula echoed Swiatek's remarks, stating while five sets were well within the physical capabilities of women, a switch could be counter-productive.

"I think we have amazing female athletes that honestly I think we could do that," the American said. "I don't think it's the fact that we can't; I just don't necessarily think that we should."

"On that aspect, I don't even know how you would schedule tournaments. We'd have to add weeks. We can't even get through the schedule now. So I'm not really sure for like a fan experience how that would really work."

– AFP

Periods, old age & communal conflict: Oscar shorts showcase variety

Paula Ramon

BEVERLY HILLS – From menstruation mishaps to a meditation on old age, and the challenges faced by Arab-Israelis in the aftermath of the Hamas attacks, one Oscars category is nothing if not varied.

“The live action short category, it’s particularly diverse in its genres,” Julia Aks, nominated alongside Steve Pinder for their satire “Jane Austen’s Period Drama,” told AFP.

“That makes me very hopeful that the Academy, the pinnacle and the barometer of the industry, is broadening.”

Aks and Pinder’s 13-minute comedy sees Georgian era heroine Estrogenia Talbot get her period in the middle of a long-awaited marriage proposal.

When her suitor mistakes the blood for an injury, it soon becomes clear that his expensive education was somewhat incomplete.

Aks said she never imagined her work would land at Hollywood’s biggest gala.

“It’s just been really encouraging that the kind of things that we want to make are also being rewarded,” she said.

The short film category is seen as a gateway for new talent seeking to stand out in a competitive industry.

Previous winners include writer-director Martin McDonagh, who went on to helm Oscar-winning feature “Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri” and nine-time nominee “The Banshees of Inisherin.”

Connection

For Sam Davis, who worked with Jack Piatt to create “The Singers,” getting an Oscar nomination has been surreal, but has also validated his ambition to use film to explore issues that matter to him.

“The Singers” focuses on a group of lonely men who spontaneously

begin a musical competition one night in a bar.

“I wanted to tell a story about connection and the power of vulnerability, especially today,” Davis told AFP.

“Everybody’s on their phones, and I think we’re less and less connected.”

The young filmmaker, who counts “One Battle After Another” director Paul Thomas Anderson among his idols, said the isolation and missed opportunities that technology imposes on men in particular was something he wanted to examine.

“You never know who you’re standing next to at the grocery store or sitting next to at the bar,” he said.

“Maybe you’d be friends if you just talked.”

The same theme of isolation guided the work of debut director Lee Knight, whose “A Friend of Dorothy” stars veteran British actress Miriam Margolyes.

The 20-minute film follows a

duo who form an unlikely friendship and is a delightful meditation on the importance of connecting with another human being.

“They come to each other in a time where they need each other, and they’re lonely in their own way,” Knight told AFP.

“He’s lonely; he hasn’t found his people, and she’s lonely too. It’s a simple story, but we need these stories now more than ever.”

Stars

For up-and-coming filmmakers, an Oscar nomination – and the attendant glitz and glamour of luncheons rubbing shoulders with megastars like Timothee Chalamet and Steven Spielberg – is confirmation that persistence pays off.

“For me, it’s about sending a message to other people, to other filmmakers, to other actors, other storytellers, to say: ‘You really cannot give up,’” said Knight, who worked as an actor for years before

heading behind the camera.

Meyer Levinson-Blount, nominated alongside Oron Caspi for “Butcher’s Stain,” agrees.

“You just never know where it’s going to happen or when it’s going to happen,” he said.

“Butcher’s Stain” tells the story of an Arab-Israeli working in a Tel Aviv supermarket who is accused of tearing down hostage posters after the October 7, 2023 attack by Hamas on Israel.

Caspi said the current moment in filmmaking felt like one of enormous optimism.

“Storytelling is one of the most ancient arts, and I think a lot of the changes about technology and a lot of changes about the situation we’re in – that’s how we get our stories,” he said.

“I feel like we’re getting into a very interesting era of storytelling.”

The 98th Academy Awards will be held on March 15 in Hollywood.

– AFP



US-Mexican stand-up comedian and actor Gabriel “Fluffy” Iglesias (centre) poses with the Mariachi Los Reyes band during his Walk of Fame Star ceremony in the Hollywood neighbourhood of Los Angeles, California on Tuesday. – AFP

High-powered game’s crash shows stakes in impatient market

PARIS – Multiplayer shooter game “Highguard” will shut down next week, its developer has said, closing the book on a title that launched to great fanfare but failed to find a player base.

The game’s short life underscores the massive challenges facing creators in today’s market, with players’ expectations sky-high and reception often polarising around adoration or contempt.

Developed by a high-powered team, many of whom had worked on 2019 smash hit “Apex Legends”, “Highguard” was first unveiled at December’s Game Awards in Los Angeles and had only been available to play since late January.

“Today we’re sharing difficult news. We have made the decision to permanently shut down Highguard on March 12,” creators Wildlight Entertainment posted on X on Tuesday.

“Despite the passion and hard work of our team, we have not been

able to build a sustainable player base to support the game long term.”

“Highguard” was launched as a free-to-play title, which allows gamers to jump in at no cost in hopes of making money by selling them content like upgrades or cosmetic items later on.

Despite a surge of interest on its January 26 release, with around 100,000 players logging on via the Steam PC gaming platform, participation quickly waned.

Only around 500 people played on any day this week, according to Steam data.

‘Awkward’

“Highguard” was also available on the Xbox Series and Playstation 5 consoles, with players there not included in the Steam statistics.

Critics highlighted the complexity of the game’s mechanics as one reason gamers were quickly turned off.

The title’s “biggest problem is

that it’s a mashup of too many ideas” drawn from other games, reviewer Ford James wrote on gaming website Polygon, criticising the “awkward pacing, despite the foundational first-person shooter elements clearly showing the expertise of the team behind the game”.

Although Wildlight moved quickly to try and staunch the bleeding, including by adding a 5v5 mode to the 3v3 matches available on launch, most players had already settled their opinion in the early days.

The studio was quickly forced to lay off much of its development team, with only a skeleton staff remaining to maintain “Highguard”.

Developers on Monday promised one final update before turning off the lights.

“We hope you’ll jump in with us one more time to show your support and get those final great matches in while we still can,” they posted on X.

– AFP

‘Scream 7’ makes a killing at N American box office

LOS ANGELES – “Scream 7” slayed the competition at the North American box office, setting a franchise record with US\$64.1 million in its opening weekend, industry estimates showed on Sunday.

Neve Campbell is back as original heroine Sidney Prescott in the Paramount film, the latest instalment in the 30-year-old slasher series featuring yet another Ghostface killer.

Franchise veterans Courteney Cox and David Arquette are also back in the new film. Its worldwide box office topped US\$97 million, according to Exhibitor Relations.

It was the best-ever opening for a “Scream” film, according to data from Box Office Mojo.

“This is sensational business,” said analyst David A. Gross of Franchise Entertainment Research.

“This audience knows these characters and story and that’s what they want to see.”

The killer opening for “Scream 7” knocked Sony’s

family-friendly animated film “GOAT” down to second place with US\$12 million in ticket sales in the United States and Canada.

The film – the story of an undersized goat who wants to join a basketball-like “roarball” team – was produced by NBA superstar Stephen Curry, who also takes on a voice role.

“Wuthering Heights” – starring Margot Robbie and Jacob Elordi as the doomed lovers Cathy and Heathcliff from Emily Bronte’s classic novel – dropped to third place at US\$7 million.

Debuting in fourth place was concert film “Twenty-One Pilots: More than We Ever Imagined,” featuring a performance from the US band in Mexico City. It earned US\$4.3 million.

And in fifth place was “EPiC: Elvis Presley in Concert,” Baz Luhrmann’s documentary about the legendary rocker featuring remastered footage.

The Neon film earned US\$3.5 million when it expanded to a wider theatrical release in North America.

– AFP

World Weather

CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -6°C~4°C	Manila 22°C~33°C	New York 5°C~8°C	Lisbon 9°C~15°C
Shanghai 7°C~15°C	Bangkok 24°C~36°C	London 7°C~17°C	Rio de Janeiro 22°C~30°C
Hong Kong 15°C~22°C	Tokyo 2°C~14°C	Frankfurt 3°C~17°C	Luanda 24°C~29°C
Taipei 17°C~25°C	Singapore 23°C~33°C	Vancouver 7°C~10°C	Maputo 23°C~32°C
Guangzhou 14°C~23°C	Kuala Lumpur 23°C~34°C	Paris 7°C~19°C	Dili 25°C~31°C
Nanjing 4°C~13°C	Jakarta 23°C~30°C	Moscow -5°C~3°C	São Tomé 27°C~32°C
Guilin 9°C~22°C	Seoul 3°C~13°C	Las Vegas 7°C~19°C	Praia 17°C~25°C
Xi’an 4°C~17°C	Sydney 20°C~29°C	Monte Carlo 14°C~18°C	Bissau 20°C~37°C



Different way to dye!

A girl smeared with coloured powder celebrates the Hindu spring festival of Holi in Chennai, India yesterday.

– AFP



5 little budgies

A vendor waits for customers in a bird market at Souq Waqif in Doha, Qatar yesterday.

– Xinhua



Aztec player

A mural alluding to the upcoming FIFA World Cup, painted by a Mexican artist who signs as "Yukarte77", shows a countdown timer in Mexico City on Tuesday.

– AFP

Colourful bubbly words

A man walks past graffiti on a wall in Bogota, Colombia on Tuesday.

– AFP



Getting in the swing

A humanoid robot dances during a Shehuo gala in celebration of the Lantern Festival in Changji City, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, on Tuesday.

– Xinhua



Sleeping 'till nearly noon!

This photo taken on Tuesday shows lions at the Uganda Wildlife Conservation Education Centre in Entebbe, Uganda.

World Wildlife Day, which is observed annually on March 3, was established by the United Nations in 2013 to raise awareness and celebrate the contributions of wild animals and plant species to human survival.

– Xinhua