

Health Bureau notes surge in influenza activity

Rui Pastorin

The Health Bureau (SSM) announced in a statement last night that influenza viruses in Macau have become more active, with the positive testing rate rising from 5.0 percent from the period between February 22 to 28 to 17.8 percent from March 8 to 14, with over 70 percent of the cases being type B influenza.

The statement said that this surpasses the 15.2 percent warning threshold, indicating “a high level of flu activity”.

Influenza viruses had a peak in activity from mid-November 2025 to early January 2026, primarily driven by the H3 subtype of type A influenza, according to the statement.

The statement said that emergency department data from three hospitals show a “significant increase” in children seeking treatment for influenza-like illnesses, noting a rise from 177 weekly visits from children to 342 since late February, the statement said. Cases among adults,

meanwhile, have been stable.

Kindergartens, primary and secondary schools have reported cluster infections, mainly due to type B influenza, adding that the number of cluster infections rose from zero in mid-February to 10 last week. The statement added that nine were reported in just the first three days of this week, according to the statement. No severe influenza cases have been recorded this year.

Cases reported yesterday include four cluster infection cases with a total of 42 students. According to the statement, eight students (6 boys, 2 girls) are from K1D and K3D classes at Sheng Kung Hui Choi Kou School Macau, six students (3 boys, 3 girls) are from the primary 3 E class of Escola Choi Nong Chi Tai, 21 students are from two junior high school classes at Lou Hau High School, and seven students are from P5D of Sacred Heart Canossian College.

The statement said that symptoms like

fever and cough appeared from March 13. Some have sought medical attention, the statement said, though conditions are relatively mild, with preliminary tests resulting in three positives for type A influenza and nine for type B.

The bureau also emphasised that that March is the peak influenza season, highlighting: “The available 2025-2026 influenza vaccine provides protection against both type A and B viruses, making it the most effective measure to prevent the currently circulating strains and reduce the risk of severe illness and death”, recommending residents who have not been vaccinated since September to get a jab. ■



Undated photo of a flu shot about to be administered, courtesy by Unsplash

China, US in communication regarding date of Trump’s visit: FM spokesperson

BEIJING – China and the United States are in communication with each other regarding the date of President Donald Trump’s China visit, and there is no further information available at present, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson said here yesterday.

Spokesperson Lin Jian made the remarks at a daily press briefing in response to a related query. Earlier on, certain media reported that Trump

said his visit to China might be postponed if China doesn’t provide assistance in escorting the Strait of Hormuz.

“We noted that the United States has publicly made clarifications on the misguided media reports, calling them completely false,” Lin said, adding the US side stressed that the visit is not linked to the issue over the Strait of Hormuz. *(More on p. 7)*
– Xinhua

Mexico prepared to host Iran World Cup games, says president

MEXICO CITY – Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said yesterday that her country is prepared to host Iran’s first-round matches at the 2026 World Cup if needed due to the conflict in the Middle East.

Iran’s participation at this summer’s finals in the United States, Canada and Mexico has been in doubt since the war began last month, with President Donald Trump warning that Iranian players’ safety would be at risk if they travelled to the US.

Iran’s football federation has opened talks with FIFA about potentially relocating its matches from the United States, though the global governing body has so far maintained that the tournament’s schedule remains unchanged.

Asked directly if Mexico was open to hosting the matches, and if the decision will purely come down to FIFA logistics, Sheinbaum told a press conference: “Yes.”

“Mexico maintains diplomatic

relations with every country in the world, therefore we will wait to see what FIFA decides,” she added.

Iran’s place at the tournament was thrown into question after the US and Israel launched a massive offensive against the Islamic Republic, which responded with waves of missiles and drones targeting Israeli territory and American targets across the Middle East.

FIFA president Gianni Infantino initially said that Trump had given assurances that the Iranian team – scheduled to face New Zealand and Belgium in Los Angeles, followed by Egypt in Seattle – would still be welcome.

But the Republican president then triggered uproar last week after stating that Iran’s football team should not travel to the tournament “for their own life and safety”.

Iran hit back at Trump’s comments saying that “no one can exclude Iran’s national team from the World Cup”.
– AFP



A worker welds at a steel company in an economic development zone in Hengshan County of Hengyang, Hunan Province, on Monday. China’s value-added industrial output, an important economic indicator, went up 6.3 percent year on year in the first two months of 2026, data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) showed. The pace was 1.1 percentage points faster than the level in December last year, according to the NBS. In February alone, the industrial output grew 0.83 percent from January.
– Xinhua

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

The Macau Post Daily

Wang Yi says power politics has no future

Foreign Minister Wang Yi yesterday said that power politics and unilateral bullying win no heart and have no future, calling for strengthened cooperation within multilateral frameworks to safeguard peace and stability in Asia. – *Story on p. 7*

Senior US counterterrorism official resigns to protest Iran war

A senior US counterterrorism official resigned yesterday to protest the US-Israeli war against Iran and said the Islamic Republic posed no imminent threat to the United States.

– *Story on p. 10*

São Paulo AI policing nabs criminals, and a few innocents

In the heart of São Paulo, a “prisonometer” keeps a live tally of people jailed due to Latin America’s largest AI facial-recognition system, but its successes have been marred by mistaken arrests.
– *Story on p. 12*

Police stop woman from losing 3 million patacas in scam

Armindo Neves

The Judiciary Police (PJ) stopped a woman from losing three million patacas in a “fake police” scam, PJ IT Crimes Division Supervisor Lao Kuok Cheong said during a special press conference yesterday.

According to Lao, during an anti-fraud awareness campaign held from March 6 to last Thursday, a female visitor from the Chinese mainland arrived at the event intending to receive a gift.

While answering questions related to fraud prevention, her hesitant responses raised the suspicion of the officers present, according to Lao, adding that with her consent, PJ officers examined her smartphone and discovered multiple fraudulent documents, including a forged detention warrant and overseas enrolment certificate.

After PJ officers patiently explained the situation, Lao said that the victim realised she had been deceived and immediately halted her plans to transfer funds to the scammers.

Lao said that in early November, the victim

had received a phone call from someone claiming to be from the local Immigration Department, alleging her involvement in a fraud case, adding that the call was subsequently transferred to a scammer impersonating police and prosecutors in the Chinese mainland.

Believing the ruse to be genuine, Lao said that the victim followed their instructions to participate in an “online investigation”, adding that the scammers provided the woman with fake overseas enrolment certificate, which the victim then used to repeatedly ask her parents to get the equivalent of 3 million patacas in total from them.

Lao said that it was not until the anti-fraud promotion event that the victim realised she had been deceived and immediately halted her plans to transfer the funds.

The Judiciary Police urged the public to remain vigilant against scams involving individuals impersonating government agencies.

Lao urged all those who receive a suspicious call, to hang up immediately and seek assistance from the police. ■

Police bust loan-sharking quintet



Judiciary Police (PJ) officers escort the five hooded loan-sharking suspects to a PJ van outside the PJ headquarters in Zape yesterday. – Photo: Armindo Neves

Armindo Neves

The Judiciary Police (PJ) on Monday arrested five men from the Chinese mainland for loan sharking PJ spokesman Leng Kam Lon said during a special press conference yesterday.

Leng identified the suspects as a 40-year-old man surnamed Wang and a 44-year-old man surnamed Wu, both of whom claimed to be jobless; a 39-year-old business man surnamed Zhou, a 34-year-old business man surnamed Yan, and a construction worker, age undisclosed, surnamed Cheng, adding that another suspect was still at large at the time of the conference.

According to Leng, the Judiciary Police received a report from a casino in Cotai on Monday about an argument in one of their smoking lounges. After arriving at the scene, PJ officers arrested the five suspected loan sharks, as well as a gambler who later turned witness.

PJ officers investigating the row discovered that at 2 a.m. on Monday the gambler was approached by one of the suspects in a casino in Cotai who offered to lend him money.

The suspect then arranged for the victim to meet with Wang in a hotel guestroom to discuss the terms of the instant gambling loan. According to the IOU, Wang lent the gambler HK\$350,000 (360,160 patacas). According to their agreement, if the victim won at the

baccarat table with 8 or 9 points, Wang would receive ‘interest’ equivalent to 25 percent of the betting amount. Leng added that the victim signed the IOU and surrendered his ID card and passport for the gang to photocopy.

At around 4 a.m. that day, the gang took the victim to another casino also in Cotai for gambling, according to Leng.

While gambling, Leng said, Zhou and Ng were tasked with collecting the “interest” and staying with the victim, while Wang, Cheng and Yan monitored the situation from nearby.

By around 6 a.m., the victim had gambled away all the money, Leng said, adding that throughout the session, a total of HK\$170,000 had been deducted by the gang as “interest”, adding that some of the “interest” has been taken away by the suspect who, at the time of yesterday’s press conference, was still at large

Afterwards, a dispute broke out between the two sides in the smoking lounge over the repayment of the debt, which alerted the casino security and led to the Judiciary Police being called for assistance, according to Leng.

PJ officers seized HK\$30,000 in gaming chip, HK\$12,000 in cash and seven smartphones from the gang.

The quintet was transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) yesterday, facing usury charges. ■



Judiciary Police (PJ) IT Crimes Division Supervisor Lao Kuok Cheong looks on before yesterday’s anti-fraud presentation at the PJ headquarters in Zape. – Photo: Armindo Neves

2nd round of ticket sales for ITTF World Cup opens today

Khalel Vallo

According to a statement provided by the Sports Bureau (ID) on Monday, a second round of ticket sales for the ITTF Men’s and Women’s World Cup Macao 2026 begins at noon today.

The tournament, sanctioned by the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF), will be held from March 30 to April 5 at the Galaxy Arena in Cotai, the statement said. The event is co-organised by the bureau, Galaxy Entertainment Group (GEG) and World Table Tennis Management Group Limited (WTT), as well as the Macau Table Tennis General Association (MTTGA).

According to the statement, the first round of ticket sales, which began on March 6, received an “overwhelming” response. The statement noted that the second round aims to meet continued demand from residents and visitors, adding that tickets are priced between 90 and 1,720 patacas depending on seating and match sessions.

Each person may purchase up to four tickets per transaction through designated platforms, including Damai, Galaxy Ticketing, MPay and MacauTicket.com (Kong Seng Ltd.), the statement said, underlining that spectators aged 1.2 metres or above are required to hold a valid ticket for entry, while children below this height may enter free of charge without occupying a seat if accompanied by a paying adult, with each adult limited to one accompanying child.

A 20 percent discount is available for full-time local students, residents aged 65 or above and holders of a Disability Assessment Registration Card for sessions held between March 30 and April 3, the statement noted, adding that discounted tickets can be purchased via MacauTicket.com, with a limit of one per person per session.

The statement said that the public are urged to purchase tickets through authorised channels and warned that reselling tickets at inflated prices is prohibited.

Further details are available on the official websites of the event and the Sports Bureau. ■



This poster downloaded from integrated resort Galaxy Macau’s official website yesterday promotes its ITTF Men’s and Women’s World Cup Macao 2026 slated to be held from March 30 to April 5 at the Galaxy Arena in Cotai.

The Macau Post Daily is looking for Reporter – full- or part-time

- Hard working, curious, dependable
- Proficiency in Chinese and English
- Good communication skills
- Familiar with Macau matters
- 5-day working week

Please send your application together with detailed resume indicating your expected salary via email to joininmp@gmail.com



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 – 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. MIST AT NIGHT. FORCE 2 TO 3 EAST TO SOUTHEASTERLY WINDS. RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL RANGE BETWEEN 70% AND 98%.



20°C~25°C

Source: SMG

Residents divided on impact of alcohol intake in Macau: vox pop

Khalel Vallo

Residents yesterday shared mixed views on alcohol consumption in Macau, with some describing it as a serious social issue while others see it as a matter of personal responsibility.

Speaking to the *Post* yesterday, several residents pointed to the ubiquitous visibility of drinking alcohol in daily life, particularly in nightlife and social settings.

For 21-year-old Nic, alcohol consumption is a noticeable part of social life in Macau, particularly among younger people. She noted that during her school years, drinking was often associated with having fun, and added that it remains common among young people to drink several times a week or as a way to unwind after work.

“Yeah, I would say so, there are a lot of bars around Macau and back in our high school days, we would associate fun with alcohol,” Nic said, adding she believes that young people are exposed too early due to peer influence, pointing out that stricter ID checks could help, saying existing age restrictions are “already enough”.

The legal minimum age for drinking alcohol in Macau is 18.

Meanwhile, Janelle, 21, described alcohol consumption as a serious issue, linking it to Macau’s broader social environment. She said consuming alcoholic drinks is highly visible in daily life, particularly through bars, casinos and events that promote alcohol consumption. Janelle warned that alcohol can lead to health problems and risky behaviour. “Alcohol can lead to various health problems, including addiction and mental health issues,” she said, adding that stricter regulations, education and stronger support services could help reduce harmful drinking.

Savanna, 21, took a more moderate view, saying she does not see alcohol consumption as a major issue but acknowledged that many people lack awareness of their limits. She also expressed frustration at irresponsible behaviour such as littering and public drinking. “I personally don’t see alcohol consumption as a serious issue but I am aware that not a lot of people know their tolerance,” she said. Savanna added that young people have easy access to alcohol and suggested stronger enforcement or restrictions could be considered.

Moreover, for Sky, 21, alcohol consumption can be linked to mental health issues, with some people using it as a coping mechanism. He warned that this can worsen long-term wellbeing and affect relationships. Sky suggested a range of measures to reduce harm, including raising prices, limiting availability and promoting healthier alternatives. “If your mental health is so bad that it’s leading you to the brink of drinking [alcoholic beverages], find someone you trust, or seek out help,” he said.

Rex, 26, highlighted how alcohol affects individuals differently, noting that some people may function normally while others display aggressive or disruptive behaviour when drinking. She said reactions to alcohol vary widely, adding that some individuals can become “belligerent” after drinking, while others remain in control, suggesting the issue is complex and requires deeper understanding.

While views differ on the severity of the issue, interviewees generally agreed that alcohol consumption remains highly visible in local society, with concerns centred on early exposure, social behaviour and the need for balanced measures to reduce harm. ■



This image downloaded courtesy of the website of the Mental Health Centre in India warns the public of the risks of excessive consumption of alcohol.

Tap water consumption set to rise 3 pct in 2026: Macao Water chief

Armando Neves

Macao Water Supply Company Limited Executive Director Nacky Kuan Sio Peng told reporters yesterday that Macau’s tap water consumption this year was forecast to increase 3.0 percent year-on-year.

The company hosted a Spring Festival media reception at Macau Tower in Sai Van yesterday.

Kuan noted in a speech that last year marked the company’s 90th anniversary, and a series of celebratory events were held to strengthen interactions with various sectors.

This year, Kuan said, the company will embrace new opportunities, including the official supply of recycled water in March and the hosting of the Greater Bay Area (GBA) Water Forum in the middle of the year.

Regarding tap water supply security, Kuan said that the expansion project of the Seac Pai Van Reservoir was progressing steadily, adding that the construction of the water supply network and common utility ducts in the newly reclaimed Zone A was also ongoing.

Kuan also said that the future connections between the water supply pipelines along three of Macau’s four sea-crossing bridges with the Seac Pai Van Reservoir extension project aim to further facilitate water supply coordination between Macau’s



Macao Water Executive Director Nacky Kuan Sio Peng speaks to reporters at Macau Tower on the sidelines of the utility’s Spring Festival media luncheon yesterday.

– Photo: Armando Neves

northern and southern districts.

Besides, earlier this year, the second phase of the expansion project of Zhuhai’s Pinggang Pumping Station was commissioned, enhancing the security of raw water supplies, Kuan said.

Kuan told reporters that the tap water consumption for 2025 saw a slight decrease of 0.7 percent, primarily due to reduced usage by residents and the construction sector. Asked the reason why by public broadcaster TDM, Kuan attributed the drop to the fact that many Macau

resident spend more time across border in Zhuhai nowadays.

She forecast that with the gradual occupancy of residential buildings in Zone A and Plot P, coupled with the commencement of operations of several new hotels in Taipa and Coloane, overall tap water consumption was expected to rise 3.0 percent this year.

The Seac Pai Van public housing complex and the University of Macau are supplied with recycled water for flushing toilets, averaging about 1,500 cubic metres per day, Kuan said. ■

IAM halts poultry imports from avian flu-hit regions

Khalel Vallo

The Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) announced in a statement yesterday new import restrictions on poultry products from several regions affected by the highly pathogenic avian influenza.

According to the bureau, outbreaks have been reported in multiple locations, including Bolívar Partido Province in Argentina, Eure Département in France, the Harz region of the state of Lower Saxony in northern Germany, Perugia Province of the region of Umbria in Italy, and the town of Nowy Tomyśl in Poland.

Poultry meat and related products from these areas will not be approved for import into Macau, the statement noted, adding that under current regulations, all fresh and live food products must be declared and undergo mandatory inspection and quarantine upon import.

Moreover, local authorities will verify health certificates issued by the relevant authorities at the place of origin to ensure that products come from non-affected areas and are safe for consumption, the statement noted, pointing out that once an outbreak occurs in a particular region, the local authorities will not issue the required health certification, meaning such products no longer meet Macau’s import requirements.

The bureau added that it will continue to monitor global developments in animal disease outbreaks based on

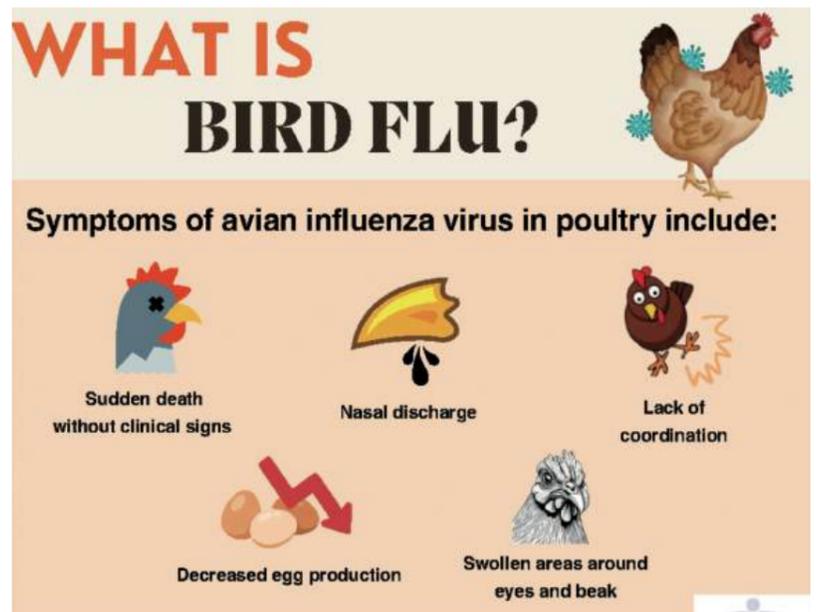
updates from the Paris-based World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) and implement corresponding preventive measures.

Local importers have been notified of the situation, and the authorities will continue to strictly inspect poultry products entering and being sold in Macau, the statement said, adding that it will maintain strict checks on imported fresh food to safeguard public health and ensure food safety in Macau.

Avian influenza, commonly known as avian flu, is defined by the WOAH as a viral infection that primarily

affects birds but can also infect other species, including humans. The disease is caused by influenza viruses that can circulate among wild birds and domesticated poultry.

Avian influenza is caused by various subtypes of the influenza A virus. It spread through direct contact with infected birds, contaminated surfaces, or through the air in areas with high bird populations. Symptoms in birds can range from mild to severe, including respiratory distress, decreased egg production, and high mortality rates, according to the WOAH. ■



This 2024 infographic downloaded from Facebook yesterday shows the various symptoms of avian influenza. – Photo courtesy: Springdale Health Department, Ohio



Hana Tou presents the beauty of watercolours at 10 Fantasia exhibition

Review by Rui Pastorin

At 10 Fantasia gallery, an exhibition titled “A Beautiful Glimpse” is being hosted at the “Youth Art Exhibition Room”, showcasing a variety of pieces created by local painter Hana Tou Mei Kun (杜美娟).

The Macau-born artist utilises an interplay of colours, light and detail to bring each piece to life. Varying in size, Tou provides exhibitiongoers with window to Macau and other parts of the world as seen through her eyes, translating that view into serene and tranquil paintings.

Using gentle brush strokes with a patient and skilful hand, Tou’s exhibition presents over 20 works mainly comprising watercolours, while sketches, acrylics and some tile paintings are also on display. The works were created over the years, including those made as recently as this year to those that go all the way back to 2016.

Visitors to the gallery will find something to appreciate regardless of whether or not they are well-versed in art, particularly due to her use of colour and knack for detail. One piece that is sure to stand out is one of the larger paintings on show titled “Gazing into the Sacred Distance”, which was created by the artist this year and may be one of the first pieces that visitors will encounter. Another piece filled with detail and vibrant colour is “Refined Elegance, Ancient Charm”, which was made in 2023.

Shifting to Macau-related works, the 2016 piece “A Glimpse of Macao- Lou Lim Ieoc Garden” sees the artist take on a rich use of green as a backdrop for the unmistakable vibrant yellow building that overlooks the water within the Suzhou-style garden. Rich colours also perfectly bring to life several works with more floral themes, while beauty is found amid construction works depicted in the 2024 pieces “A New City in the Making” and “Urban Transformation”.

The exhibition is curated by fellow local artist Kitman Leong, who is an assistant professor of Fine Arts at the private Macau University of Science and Technology (MUST) and vice president of the Macau Youth Art Association. In her foreword, she writes: “The exhibition’s title, A Beautiful Glimpse, calls to mind a line of Song verse: a soft breeze stirs the light dust, dawn lotus wafts a hidden scent. The same unhurried elegance pervades this exhibition, inviting you to step into Hana’s quietly spoken world – to let restlessness lift, to let entanglements dissolve, and to feel, in painting, a spirit set free and a heart at peace”.

Passionate about drawing from a young age, Tou studied the art of watercolour under the mentorship of renowned local artist Dor Lio Hak Man while she was in high school, according to information displayed at the gallery, developing a “deep affinity” for watercolour landscapes, sketching, and acrylic painting. Macau’s cityscapes, landscapes found while travelling and scenes of daily life are the main inspirations behind her works, according to the statement.

Aside from working as a secondary school visual arts teacher, Tou also serves as director of the Macau Youth Art Association, Macau Artist Society, and the Art Teacher Communication Association of Macau. As an artist, she has taken part in various group exhibitions and, in 2016, held an exhibition as part of 10 Fantasia’s “Artist-In-Residence Programme”.

The free-admission exhibition kicked off earlier this month at the gallery near Calçada da Igreja de S. Lázaro (瘋堂斜巷) and is organised by Macau Youth Art Association in conjunction with other entities such as the Macau Artist Society (MAS). It is on until April 29. One can visit the gallery from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. from Tuesdays to Sundays. It is closed on Mondays.



This photo recently provided by curator Kitman Leong shows local artist Hana Tou posing with her work at 10 Fantasia gallery.



Photos of the exhibition taken yesterday by Rui Pastorin



Visitor arrivals to HK rise 18 pct in Jan-Feb

HONG KONG – The Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) yesterday announced that 9.95 million visitors arrived in Hong Kong in the first two months of 2026, an increase of 18 percent over the same period last year.

Of these visitors, 7.9 million were from the Chinese mainland, marking a 22 percent year-on-year rise, driven by the Spring Festival holidays in the Chinese mainland

and various mega events in Hong Kong, according to the HKTB.

Visitor arrivals from the non-Chinese mainland markets totaled 2.06 million in the first two months, an 8 percent increase year-on-year. With notable results from long-haul markets, the number of visitors from Australia, France and Germany grew by 20 percent to 30 percent year-on-year. – Xinhua

New construction land rule seeks to curb urban sprawl

Xu Nuo

BEIJING – China is tightening the reins on urban expansion, moving towards a “one in, one out” land policy that prioritizes the revitalization of existing city spaces over the development of pristine land.

At a news conference held on Monday, officials from the Ministry of Natural Resources announced a strategic shift in how the world’s second-largest economy manages its territory.

The new mandate dictates that a city’s annual quota for new construction land must not exceed the amount of underutilized land it successfully repurposes.

Kong Weidong, director of the ministry’s department of natural resource development and utilization, said the simple rule is that a city must revitalize one hectare before it can add one new hectare.

The policy marks a definitive end to the era of “spreading the pancake” – a Chinese term for relentless, low-density urban sprawl – as the country’s urbanization transitions from a period of rapid growth to one of stabilization and quality enhancement.

With a population of 1.4 billion and limited arable land, China is treating its land as a finite strategic asset. Kong emphasized that the government is calculating “three sets of ledgers” consisting of market profit, national development, and public welfare.

Under the new guidelines, what little “new” land is made available will be strictly reserved for major infrastructure such as national-level energy, transportation, and water conservancy projects.

It will also be prioritized for “new quality productive forces” like modern industrial systems and high-tech

manufacturing, as well as livelihood projects such as the transformation of “urban villages” and the construction of public service facilities.

Crucially, the ministry clarified that new construction land will, in principle, no longer be allocated for commercial real estate development. This move comes as China grapples with a persistent housing glut.

By the end of 2025, the area of commercial housing awaiting sale reached over 76.6 million square meters, marking the sixth consecutive year of increase. In 100 selected cities, it is estimated that it would take more than two years to clear existing inventory at current sales speeds.

However, officials were quick to note that this is not a “stop work” order for developers. Instead, the government is pushing the real estate sector toward quality over quantity.

Kong said this does not mean the government is stopping the supply of residential land, but rather focusing on “precision supply” from existing resources. The goal is to encourage developers to acquire high-quality land and build better housing in prime urban locations with established amenities, rather than building speculative high-rises on the city fringes.

To facilitate this transition, the central government is putting significant financial weight behind the plan. Last year, the Ministry of Natural Resources collaborated with the Ministry of Finance to guide local governments in issuing over 540 billion yuan in special bonds.

These funds are specifically earmarked to buy back and store idle land, effectively cleaning up the balance sheets of stalled projects and prepping the land for more efficient use.

– Courtesy of China Daily

Melco to launch luxury hotel ‘REM’ in 2nd half of 2026

Rui Pastorin

Integrated resort operator Melco Resorts & Entertainment announced in a statement yesterday the upcoming launch of its new luxury hotel project REM at City of Dreams Macau (COD) in Cotai, with its soft opening and grand launch slated for the second half of the year.

The statement noted the project as a “key component in Melco’s strategic presence in Macau”, marking a “major upgrade” for COD as well as redefining contemporary luxury through its “ultimate suite experience,



This artist's rendition provided by City of Dreams (COD) yesterday shows its luxury hotel project REM at City of Dreams Macau (COD).

avant-garde artistic design, and innovative service philosophy”.

The statement noted that the hotel will also strengthen

the company’s position as an integrated resort that “seamlessly blends luxury, futuristic art and innovation”. ■

HK’s GNI up 4.6 pct in 2025

HONG KONG – In 2025, Hong Kong’s gross national income (GNI) increased by 4.6 percent over a year earlier to HK\$3,666.2 billion at current market prices, the Census and Statistics Department of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government announced yesterday.

Hong Kong’s GNI denotes the total income earned by Hong Kong residents from engaging in various economic activities. Data show that in 2025, Hong Kong’s GNI exceeded the local gross domestic product (GDP) of HK\$3,331.8 billion by HK\$334.4 billion.

After netting out the effect of

price changes, Hong Kong’s GNI increased by 3 percent in real terms in 2025 over 2024. In the fourth quarter of 2025, Hong Kong’s GNI rose by 5.1 percent in real terms compared with a year earlier, while GDP in the same period grew by 3.8 percent in real terms.

– Xinhua

Chinese fashion designers take off from European runways

Analysis by Mike Bastin*

LONDON – It is still the case that no launchpad better showcases emerging fashion talent than the established London and Paris fashion weeks. It was no different this time either. Chinese fashion designers continued to make their presence felt at the world’s major fashion capitals, proof of China’s increasing influence on the global fashion stage.

For example, London Fashion Week, from Feb 19 to 23, saw the rising global popularity of Chinese fashion brand Mithridate. Launched in London in 2018 but now based in South China’s Guangzhou, Mithridate provides Chinese artisanal craftsmanship beautifully combined with modern aesthetics; it deservedly received rapturous applause at the London Fashion Week. Mithridate has showcased its products at the London Fashion Week for the past eight seasons and each time it has been its traditional Chinese elements, such as embroidery, that have created a buzz.

But what is most important here is Mithridate’s switching base from London to Guangzhou. While this has much to do with Guangzhou’s geographical proximity to one of China’s major manufacturing hubs, it enables the brand to work ever more closely with Chinese embroiderers.

This is the change younger consumers of Chinese fashion are demanding, change that goes beyond lifestyle to a clear values shift, from “material possession” and “conspicuous consumption” to “experience” and a “self-rewarding” experience. A change the company

has recognized, and by basing itself in China, is bringing itself closer to.

Other notable Chinese fashion designers who also showcased their creations at the most recent London Fashion Week include the likes of Wang Yuhan and Susan Fang, both noted for extensive and increasingly intricate use of Chinese traditional elements blended with a modern look. But here again, on closer inspection, there is a significant difference in their “home” location. The thing that is common to many aspiring Chinese fashion designers is their Western education. In fact, both Wang and Fang graduated from London’s prestigious Central Saint Martins – University of the Arts London.

While Fang continues to be based in London, she makes great virtue out of the relocation back to China’s fashion capital, Shanghai. A Shanghai base enables close working relationships with Chinese artisans and greater insight into changing Chinese consumer tastes.

Wang, on the other hand, appears to rely on a London base even though her work is underpinned by the increasingly sophisticated integration of traditional Chinese elements with a modern aesthetic sense.

Paris Fashion Week, which followed hot on the heels of the London Fashion Week in February, also featured Chinese fashion designers. Chief among them with major runway shows were Uma Wang and Ruohan, both continuing to infuse their work with traditional Chinese elements.

Both have a Shanghai base. Even though Feng Chen Wang has a presence in both Shanghai and

London, both designers appear to value the importance of a Chinese base, enabling deeper coordination with younger Chinese fashion consumers and allowing for long-term partnerships with Chinese artisans.

Furthermore, the recent global fashion capital weeks have showcased more than just Chinese fashion designers; they have showcased the incredibly rich diversity of traditional Chinese cultural elements, merged with modern fashion design. A prime example was Shanghai-based Qin Xu showcasing Hami Uyur embroidery at the Paris Fashion Week. Being based in Shanghai, the Chinese designer can engage with Hami embroidery artisans such as Ranagul Sopi.

It is clear that traditional Chinese elements, subtly fused with a modern look, are in high demand, globally. We might soon witness the use of more varied local flavors from China’s rich source of cultural elements, and vibrant embroidery from far and wide.

Younger Chinese consumers are fuelling this internationalization of China’s cultural heritage by modernizing it, another reason why Chinese fashion designers must consider the merits of retaining a permanent base in China or returning soon. Those designers who refuse to do so will put themselves at a considerable disadvantage.

*The author is a visiting professor at the University of International Business and Economics and a senior lecturer at the University of Southampton.

The views don’t necessarily represent those of China Daily.

– Courtesy of China Daily



Medical staff from the municipal hospital of traditional Chinese medicine provide physiotherapy services for the elderly at a community health center in Rongcheng City, Shandong Province, on Monday. Shandong has been striving to strengthen the foundation of medical and health service system, and enhance grassroots medical service capacity. – Xinhua

S China's 'golden oranges' eye broader market with quality upgrades

NANNING – Rong'an County's kumquats in south China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region have recently become a social media hit. Known as "jinju," meaning golden orange in Chinese, the small, oval-shaped citrus fruit has surprised consumers from Jakarta to Toronto.

The fruit's biggest marketing boost came in late January, when Jensen Huang, Nvidia's founder and CEO, was filmed emerging from a wet market in Shanghai, carrying armfuls of Rong'an kumquats. He handed them out at his China office's year-end party ahead of Chinese New Year celebrations.

Few shoppers at the market recognized Huang. Yet around 1,600 km to the southwest in Rong'an, the gesture was read as powerful validation.

Unlike typical bitter citrus, kumquats are prized for being sweet, thin-skinned, and entirely edible. In Chinese culture, kumquats are a symbol of good luck and prosperity. During the Chinese New Year, they are often given as gifts or displayed as decorations.

In the rugged Karst landscape of Guangxi, kumquats have grown from a seasonal treat into the backbone of a fast-modernizing rural economy. What began as part of the local poverty-alleviation drive has become a technology-driven industry with global reach.

According to local government statistics, Rong'an had 231,000 mu (15,400 hectares) of kumquats by 2025, producing roughly 287,000 tonnes of fruit in the year. The full industry chain is valued at nearly 10 billion

yuan, with the "Rong'an Kumquat" having become a name brand nationwide.

More than 100,000 locals now earn their living from planting or processing of the fruit as well as its logistics.

At the center of the transformation is a new generation of returnee entrepreneurs who have traded urban high-rises for the orchards.

At Guangxi Rongan Ant Agriculture Development Co. Ltd.'s packing facility, Wei Xiaodong, who returned home in 2017 to found the company, has placed heavy emphasis on technology and strict quality controls.

Inside the sorting hall, it looks more like a high-tech laboratory than a warehouse. An AI system scans every fruit for appearance, color, surface defects, and internal quality – including sugar content, all tracked and monitored in real time on multiple screens.

"Manual sorting sometimes misses fruit that looks perfect but lacks sweetness," Wei explained. "The AI performs a complete internal and external check-up, ensuring every batch meets our standards."

Premium-grade fruit, roughly 20 pieces per kilogram, is then individually wrapped in food-grade preservative film, a labor-intensive process designed to extend shelf life and stop one bad kumquat from spoiling the rest in the box.

"Last year our export volume roughly doubled the amount from the year before," Wei said.

The level of quality control is made possible not just by technology but also by

the fruit's unique biology, according to Wu Qiqian, director of the government-backed Rong'an Kumquat Research Institute.

"In harsher conditions, kumquats tend to develop thorns, seeds, and thick, bitter skins as defenses," said Wu. "Here, with around 75 percent humidity and clean water sources, the fruit evolved to shed those protections."

Over decades, Rong'an kumquats have become thornless with exceptionally thin, edible skins.

The variety reached the acme of perfection in 2007 when a local farmer discovered a mutant tree that produced the now-prized "Crisp Honey" kumquat – seedless, thin-skinned and intensely sweet.

Researchers at the institute spent more than a decade developing cultivation techniques. A breakthrough in 2021 finally allowed large-scale production of the high-sugar variety without compromising its delicate nature.

To ensure product quality and consistency, Rong'an has implemented strict national standards across every stage, from planting and harvesting to cold-chain logistics. The "field-to-table" model is powered by a big data platform that tracks growth in real time, ensuring every piece meets the expectations of buyers.

To protect the local crown jewel's reputation, Wei's company runs its own pesticide-residue testing laboratory. Fruit is tested once at the orchard gate and again upon arrival at the factory. Loads that fail the inspection are rejected outright. The company

now operates a 5,800-mu eco-friendly production base and is preparing to meet even stricter international requirements.

The obsession with quality is seen as a key to cracking open more demanding markets.

Current export destinations include Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Canada and Qatar. In 2025, county-wide kumquat exports reached 6.34 million yuan – nearly quadruple the previous year's total.

To maintain and upgrade quality to meet more demanding market standards, local authorities are protecting the "Rong'an" name as intellectual property. They are also tapping into the country's ever-growing online shopping scene to sustain the viral traffic for the fruit.

"Rong'an kumquat isn't just a fruit; it is a product designed for the digital age," said Lai Yuanyuan, a local businesswoman who was a fruit farmer. "It is naturally suited for e-commerce: resilient during transport and possessing a long shelf life."

By linking 700 enterprises and 24,000 online stores into a digital network of fruit lovers, the county is actively elevating its native fruit from a rural staple to a "social media darling."

According to Lai, the efforts have lately culminated in a high-profile collaboration between the Italian chocolatier Ferrero and Chinese fruit retail giant Pagoda. The partnership upgraded the product's gift packaging from a humble plastic crate to one resembling a luxury chocolate box. – *Xinhua*



A farmer screens the seedling bed soil at a farming company under Beidahuang Group in Heilongjiang Province yesterday. In recent days, the agricultural production units of Beidahuang Group in the Heilongjiang Reclamation Area are making preparation work for spring ploughing. – *Xinhua*

Scientists transplant stem cell-derived islets to treat type 1 diabetes

SHANGHAI – Chinese researchers have achieved a medical breakthrough by using endoderm stem cell-derived islet-like tissues (E-islet) to restore pancreatic islet function in patients with diabetes, potentially offering a new therapeutic option for millions worldwide.

A study published in *The Lancet Diabetes & Endocrinology* shows that a Shanghai-based team has successfully treated three patients with type 1 diabetes using E-islet. This innovative therapy showcases the potential efficacy of such approaches in addressing this severe chronic condition, which traditionally necessitates lifelong insulin injections.

"Our approach is like replacing a 'part' for the patient," said Cheng Xin, co-corresponding author of the paper from the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Center for Excellence in Molecular Cell Science.

Conventional methods use pluripotent stem cells, which are the developmental "root" capable of becoming any cell type. However, the process of deriving pancreatic islets involves an in vitro "branching" process that is lengthy and often inefficient, frequently leading to the generation of non-target cells.

The new procedure reconstructed islet-like tissue using stem cells, or an endodermal branch, bypassing the prolonged differentiation process needed for traditional pluripotent stem cells. This reduces cultivation time from 40 days to just 14 days and minimizes the risk of tumor formation, as endoderm stem cells themselves do not proliferate in vivo.

The three cases detailed in the study include a 30-year-old woman with an 18-year history of diabetes, a 45-year-old man with fulminant type 1 diabetes, and a 15-year-old girl – the first ever juvenile case to receive such therapy. – *Xinhua*

China's high-tech driven development to reinforce its role as global growth engine, says economist

Interview by Martina Fuchs

GENEVA – China's emphasis on high-tech and the large-scale industrial development of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and digital technologies, will further cement the country's position as a global growth engine, said an economist.

"China's domestic economy is becoming more sophisticated and more complex," John Zhu, chief economist Asia at Swiss Re, one of the world's largest reinsurers, said in a virtual interview.

During the just-concluded "two sessions" – the annual meetings of China's top legislature and top political advisory body – China set an economic growth target of 4.5 to 5 percent for 2026, aiming for a good start to the new five-year plan that charts the course for high-quality development and offers much-needed certainty to a troubled world economy.

"The change in the growth target to that range was expected and it makes sense given that the world is very uncertain and unpredictable," he said. "China's role in global growth has been maintained for many years now ... a significant part of growth every year in the world comes from China," Zhu added.

The "two sessions" marked a pivotal moment as the world's second-largest economy embarks on the inaugural year of its 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-2030)

period, serving as both a review of past achievements and a strategic compass guiding the nation's future development.

Newly released data by the National Bureau of Statistics showed that in 2025, China's economy remained robust despite headwinds, achieving stable year-on-year GDP growth of 5 percent.

Commenting on China's economic and social development over the past year, Zhu highlighted the country's resilience and continued progress in green development.

"In 2025, growth was resilient despite very challenging external conditions and a huge amount of uncertainty. It was an achievement, really."

Zhu also noted progress in green development, which remains a priority. "The Chinese economy's energy transition continues on both the production and consumption sides," he said.

"The share of non-fossil fuel energy is rising, along with the installed capacity for green energy production and storage. China is effectively positioning itself for future industrial competitiveness, while maintaining long-term energy security," he said.

"These all feed into general industrial upgrading. So we see strong output growth in robotics, semiconductor-related sectors, and overall progress in upgrading the domestic supply chains," he said. – *Xinhua*

Wang Yi says power politics has no future

HANOI – Foreign Minister Wang Yi yesterday said that power politics and unilateral bullying win no heart and have no future, calling for strengthened cooperation within multilateral frameworks to safeguard peace and stability in Asia.

Concluding his visit to Vietnam, Wang, who is also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, talked in an interview with Chinese media that long-term peace and stability in Asia have not come easily and deserve to be cherished by all countries.

At present, the international landscape is undergoing profound changes and regional conflicts are spreading and spilling over, said Wang, adding that certain major powers resort to force willfully, posing a serious threat to world peace and stability.

Noting that this year marks the fifth anniversary of the China-ASEAN comprehensive strategic partnership, this year

and next, China and Vietnam will successively host the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting, and Vietnam will take over as a co-chair of Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, Wang said that China, as an important force for peace, stability, and justice in the world, is willing to work with Vietnam and other countries to strengthen coordination and cooperation within multilateral mechanisms such as APEC, ASEAN, and Lancang-Mekong Cooperation to safeguard their shared home of Asia, to jointly advance the building of an Asia-Pacific community, and to set an example for promoting the building of a community with a shared future for humanity.

During his trip to Vietnam, Wang attended the first ministerial meeting of the China-Vietnam "3+3" strategic dialogue on diplomacy, defense and public security, and co-chaired the 17th meeting of the China-Vietnam Steering Committee for Bilateral Cooperation. – Xinhua

Wang Yi outlines outcomes of China-Vietnam cooperation meeting

HANOI – Foreign Minister Wang Yi yesterday outlined the key outcomes of the 17th meeting of the China-Vietnam Steering Committee for Bilateral Cooperation.

Wang, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, shared the outcomes in an interview with Chinese media after attending the meeting and the first ministerial meeting of the China-Vietnam "3+3" strategic dialogue on diplomacy, defense and public security in Hanoi.

Both sides agreed to enhance strategic mutual trust, strengthen high-level exchanges, enhance exchanges of experience in governance, continuously improve governance capabilities, and jointly explore paths of strengthening the party and developing the country, Wang said.

He added that both sides agreed to enrich security coordination, deepen collaboration in areas such as cybersecurity, combating online gambling and telecommunications fraud, and fugitive repatriation and asset recovery, and strengthen cooperation between the two militaries in political work, joint exercises and training, and border and coastal defense.

Wang also noted that both sides agreed to expand pragmatic cooperation, strengthen cooperation in trade and investment, infrastructure, cross-border economic cooperation zones, and smart ports, and promote



Foreign Minister Wang Yi, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, shakes hands with Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Bui Thanh Son in Hanoi, Vietnam, yesterday. The 17th meeting of the China-Vietnam Steering Committee for Bilateral Cooperation was held in Hanoi yesterday. Wang and Son co-chaired the meeting with officials from various ministries and provincial governments of both sides participating online and offline. – Xinhua

cooperation in emerging fields such as technological innovation, digital economy, and artificial intelligence.

He said that both sides agreed to strengthen people-to-people exchanges, strengthen cooperation in areas such as culture and tourism, education and training, and healthcare, and accelerate the implementation of Chinese aid projects for improving people's livelihoods in Vietnam, making these projects tangible and accessible to the people of both countries.

He added that both sides agreed to properly manage differences, make good use of maritime negotiation

mechanisms, promote maritime cooperation in low-sensitivity fields, and push for substantive progress in the demarcation of the waters outside the mouth of the Beibu Gulf and joint maritime development as early as possible, so as to jointly safeguard peace and stability in the South China Sea.

Both sides agreed to enhance multilateral coordination, uphold genuine multilateralism, practice open regionalism, promote common values of all mankind, and push the global governance system towards a more just and equitable direction, according to Wang. – Xinhua

Trump says to make delayed China trip in '5 or 6 weeks'

WASHINGTON – US President Donald Trump said yesterday he expected to travel to China in a bit over one month, after postponing the trip slated for the end of March due to his war on Iran.

"We have a very good working relationship with China, so we're making it in about five or six weeks," Trump told reporters in the White House.

Trump sought to play down the significance of the delay and said he had a strong relationship with President Xi Jinping.

"We're working with China. They were fine with it," Trump said of the delay.

"I look forward to seeing President Xi; he looks forward to seeing me, I think."

Trump said that China "has become, economically for us, very good, very good," in what he called a shift for the United States.

Trump has repeatedly hailed his trade negotiations with China, saying that a better relationship can benefit the United States.

It marks a contrast with Trump's tone before returning to office, in which he cast China as a major adversary and vowed to focus the United States on countering the Asian power.

Trump on February 28 launched a war on Iran alongside Israel, despite the president's earlier criticism of US intervention in the Middle East.

Trump suggested earlier that his trip, which was supposed to run from March 31-April 2, would depend on whether China helped Washington to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, the vital maritime waterway that has been effectively closed by Iran in retaliation for US and Israeli strikes.

In Beijing, foreign ministry spokesman Lin Jian said earlier yesterday that it noted that the United States "has publicly clarified these false reports."

The trip, Lin said, "has nothing to do with the issue of the open navigation of the Strait of Hormuz." – AFP

Sino-US talks can't erase differences but can bridge them

Analysis by Zhang Zhouxiang in Geneva

By March 2026, China and the United States had held six rounds of economic and trade talks, with meetings across the Eurasian continent, reflecting both the complexity of the issues and the two sides' determination to keep talking to resolve their differences.

As Chinese international trade representative Li Chenggang said, the two sides held in-depth, candid, and constructive exchanges; discussed establishing a bilateral working mechanism to promote trade and investment cooperation; and agreed that stable bilateral economic and trade relations benefit both countries and the world.

The latest results, together with those of the five preceding rounds, show that these talks have gradually enhanced mutual understanding and helped both sides find common ground on a number of difficult issues.

In Geneva, London and Stockholm, the two countries agreed to suspend the additional 24 percent tariffs, easing tensions in bilateral trade and sending a reassuring signal to global markets. In Madrid, the two sides reached a basic framework consensus on the TikTok issue. Later, in Kuala Lumpur, they expanded agricultural trade and advanced cooperation on the fentanyl problem. Each of these topics touches on important economic and social

interests for both nations, and the progress made on such sensitive matters demonstrates the sincerity of the negotiating teams and their willingness to seek pragmatic solutions.

Perhaps more importantly, these rounds of talks have effectively established a pattern of face-to-face dialogue between China and the United States. The fact that Chinese and US delegations can sit at the same table and discuss issues of shared concern is itself valuable. Direct exchanges help dispel misunderstandings that remote communication often fails to resolve and foster expectations that dialogue will continue.

As the world's two largest economies, it is natural for China and the US to have differences. Yet experience has shown that when two sides sit down and talk, it becomes possible to reach meaningful consensus and practical agreements.

Such a mechanism of sustained in-person consultation is particularly valuable at a time of global turbulence. Conflicts in regions such as the Middle East have pushed oil prices higher and added volatility to energy markets, while many economies are erecting or strengthening trade barriers to protect domestic interests, placing additional pressure on global growth. Against this backdrop, China and the US engaging in candid

dialogue sends an encouraging message that both sides recognize the value of cooperation and there is ample space for them to cooperate.

Of course, their divergences still exist.

The US has introduced several restrictive measures toward China on trade and the economy. The recent launch of two Section 301 investigations targeting China in particular has raised Beijing's concerns. Li said China's position on Section 301 investigations is consistent: it opposes such unilateral probes.

That's the deeper meaning of continued dialogue: it will not eliminate all differences but can help manage them, reduce uncertainty, and contribute to a more stable global economic environment. That Chinese and US representatives can hold six rounds of talks and reach consensus is a step forward in bridging their differences.

More importantly, whether the world's two largest economies choose cooperation or confrontation will have a profound impact on the global economy. China has consistently been committed to safeguarding the international economic and trade order, and the world hopes the US will move in the same direction to advance the shared interests of both countries and the broader global community.

– Courtesy of China Daily

China firmly opposes EU's illicit unilateral sanctions against Chinese entities: FM spokesperson

BEIJING – China firmly opposes the European Union's (EU) illicit unilateral sanctions against Chinese entities and urges the EU to correct its wrong practices and work with China in a responsible and constructive manner to uphold peace, stability and prosperity in cyberspace, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Lin

Jian said yesterday.

Lin made the remarks at a regular news briefing when responding to a question on the EU on Monday imposing sanctions against two China-based and one Iranian companies on the excuse of cyberattacks against EU member states. – Xinhua

Japan court says restrictive sterilisation law 'lacks rationality'

Tomohiro Osaki

TOKYO – A Japanese court said yesterday that a law hugely restricting women's access to sterilisation "lacks rationality", a ruling hailed by plaintiffs as a "step forward".

The Tokyo District Court, however, stopped short of finding the decades-old "maternity protection" law – one of the world's most restrictive barriers to sterilisation – to be outright unconstitutional or illegal.

It dismissed the five women's claim that it is denying them their rights to bodily autonomy.

The landmark lawsuit saw the women unite over innate discomfort with their reproductive abilities, and aversion to what they describe as a patriarchal society that pushes women towards motherhood.

Under the law, a woman must have multiple children with her health at risk, or face life-threatening danger from pregnancy, to qualify for sterilisation. Even then, spousal consent is required.

That bans physicians from performing the procedure on healthy, childless women – such as 29-year-old plaintiff Kazane Kajiya, who never wanted children.

"This is a historic verdict," Kajiya told reporters, as she and others unfurled a banner outside the court welcoming the ruling as a "step forward".

Kajiya, who is married and at age 27 flew to the United States to have her fallopian tubes removed, considers her form of happiness "different to what is supposed to be the right answer in Japan" – a rapidly ageing society determined to boost falling birth rates.

But now with the ruling, "I can say I've done nothing wrong. I can hold



Plaintiffs head to the Tokyo District Court ahead of the ruling in the lawsuit concerning the Maternal Protection Law in Tokyo yesterday.

– AFP

my head high, and walk proudly."

'Contraceptive freedom'

In what lawyers said was a legal first, presiding judge Masahiro Kamano said women are "guaranteed contraceptive freedom" under the Constitution, and that they can "decide to avoid pregnancy, without interference from the state".

But sterilisation isn't the only way to achieve this, he said, noting "multiple other methods exist" for birth control.

Therefore, "it is difficult to conclude that undergoing sterilisation is essential to the survival of one's identity", Kamano said, denying the law goes so far as to be unconstitutional.

Still, he said its restrictiveness "lacks rationality," and called for more active debate over the status quo.

While happy with the judgement overall, Michiko Kameishi, lead lawyer for the plaintiffs, expressed regret that the court recognised sterilisation "merely as one way of contraception".

Instead, she said, the procedure

is fundamentally about "removing fertility altogether" and therefore is the only way plaintiffs "can feel alive in their own bodies".

For Kajiya, her battle against the maternity protection law, a holdover from a wartime, patriarchal era when women were considered less capable, will continue.

"It's a law that stigmatises women who choose to be child-free, and makes them feel guilty about doing whatever they want to do with their bodies," she said.

The lawsuit cited a 2002 study by EngenderHealth, a global NGO focused on sexual and reproductive health, that says more than 70 countries – including many industrialised economies – explicitly permitted the procedure as a method of contraception.

Japan was among eight countries that forbade or severely restricted it.

The Children and Families Agency, a government entity named in the lawsuit, was not immediately available to comment on the verdict.

– AFP

Indonesian police detain 3 Europeans accused of producing porn

JAKARTA – Indonesia has arrested two French nationals and an Italian on accusations of producing and distributing pornography in a nation where such content is illegal, police on the resort island of Bali said yesterday.

The trio, a woman and two men, were being held on suspicion of seeking to "profit from pornographic video and content," police chief Joseph Edward Purba of the Badung district of Bali told reporters.

The foreigners risk up to 10 years' imprisonment on a

pornography production charge and another six for online distribution.

Bali is predominantly Hindu and a magnet for millions of foreign visitors, but Muslim-majority Indonesia strictly forbids the production of pornographic material.

Last year, British adult film star Bonnie Blue was deported from Bali, after receiving a fine for a traffic violation that was the only charge to stick from an investigation into porn production.

Balinese officials have been complaining of unruly behaviour by foreign tourists, following a string of

deportations in recent years – including several Russian influencers expelled for posing naked at sacred sites.

Joseph said the latest investigation was sparked by "a viral video containing pornographic content circulating on social media."

Last Friday, immigration officials arrested the Frenchwoman – described as a "content creator" – and the Italian as they attempted to depart Bali for Thailand.

The Frenchman, described as the woman's "manager," was arrested days later in Badung.

– AFP

Cash handouts, fare hikes as Philippines battles soaring fuel costs

Pam Castro

MANILA – Hundreds of Philippine tricycle drivers queued yesterday in Manila for cash handouts they hope will provide temporary relief from a war-driven surge in fuel prices that has left the country scrambling for short-term answers.

Since US-Israeli strikes on Iran triggered the Middle East war last month, the archipelago nation has implemented a four-day work week for civil servants, seen ferry schedules reduced in some areas, and begun eyeing the possibility of Russian oil imports.

As the drivers awaited their handouts yesterday, officials unveiled a series of price hikes across a range of local transportation, including the ubiquitous smoke-belching jeepneys millions of Filipinos rely on to get to work each day.

But the increases did not extend to the country's hundreds of thousands of tricycle drivers, who earn money by carrying passengers down narrow, winding alleys on small motorbikes and carriages.

"These are the highest fuel prices I've ever experienced," said Romeo Cipriano, who has driven a tricycle for four decades.

The subsidy of 5,000 pesos (US\$84) would be "better than nothing", the 60-year-old said, describing how he had arrived at 6 a.m. [local time] to avoid standing in the tropical heat, something his high blood pressure would not allow.

Al de Ocampo said his daily earnings had been halved from 1,000 to just 500 pesos in recent weeks.

The handout he received would last no more than a week, he told AFP.

"The price of fuel rose again

today, but the fare is still the same," with customers unable to afford to pay any more, de Ocampo said.

"They must remove the fuel tax if possible... If they can't remove the tax entirely, then reduce it 50 percent. That would be a great help until the end of the war."

The Senate was expected to vote later in the day to grant President Ferdinand Marcos, who was on hand for the subsidy dispersal, the authority to temporarily suspend or reduce excise taxes on oil.

At a press briefing yesterday, Vigor Mendoza, chair of the country's transportation regulator, announced fare hikes that he said were "proof of... genuine concern" for both commuters and the embattled sector.

Most rides in jeepneys, the backbone of the country's transport system, were set to jump about eight percent on average, the regulator announced.

The Philippines, which depends almost entirely on the Middle East for its crude oil, is now also eyeing the possibility of purchasing from Russia, after a temporary easing of US restrictions on some oil sales following the closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

Yesterday, Ramon Ang, CEO of the Philippines' sole oil refiner Petron, confirmed to AFP the company was "in talks" to potentially purchase Russian oil, while declining to provide details.

Patiently awaiting his subsidy at the Manila community centre, Cipriano said he could only pray for a quick end to the war.

"We're not the only ones affected," he said of his fellow drivers.

"No one wins in war." – AFP
(More on pages 10 & 11)



Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos (centre) speaks in an interview during the distribution of a fuel subsidy to tricycle drivers in Manila yesterday.

– AFP

Thai eSports players sentenced over SEA Games cheating scandal

BANGKOK – A Thai court yesterday sentenced two eSports players to three months in detention for cheating at the Southeast Asian Games in Thailand last year.

Thai gamers Naphat Warasin and Kong Sutprom "jeopardised the credibility of the country", a court statement said.

Naphat, 29, was expelled from the Games in December for "using

unauthorised third-party software or hardware modification" during the Arena of Valor competition, a letter from a SEA Games delegate said at the time.

The 23-year-old Kong was convicted for attempting to play for Naphat remotely after she gave him access to her match, local media reported.

Police arrested the pair on

charges of violating the country's computer crime law last month after raiding their homes.

The Bangkok municipal court initially handed each of them a six-month sentence yesterday but reduced the terms to three months due to their cooperation with authorities.

The court granted them bail and ordered each to pay a fine of 24,000 baht (US\$740), local media said.

Under Thai law, offenders sentenced to three months or less may serve their term in a detention centre instead of prison.

ESports, or competitive video game tournaments, was included in the SEA Games for the first time in 2019.

In December the event included competitions in four categories: FC Online, Mobile Legends: Bang

Bang, Free Fire and Arena of Valor, a multiplayer online battle game.

The SEA Games drew thousands of athletes from across the region to Thailand for competition in events ranging from football and fencing to skateboarding and combat sports.

Host Thailand topped the medal table with 233 gold medals, followed by Indonesia and Vietnam.

– AFP



South Korean Buddhist monks perform full bows as they march towards the US embassy during a protest against the war on Iran in Seoul yesterday. — AFP

N Korea's new legislature to convene March 22

SEOUL—North Korea's rubber-stamp legislature will convene Sunday to consider revisions to the authoritarian nation's constitution and the election of state leadership, state media reported.

The gathering of the 15th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) follows a five-yearly gathering of the ruling party last month which elevated leader Kim Jong Un's powerful younger sister Kim Yo Jong to a top position.

On Sunday 687 deputies were "elected" to the SPA, with all North Koreans over 17 given the choice of approving or rejecting the sole candidate put forward by the ruling party.

The candidates were duly approved with 99.93 percent of votes in favour and 0.07 percent against, the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported, with turnout at 99.99 percent.

The result reflected citizens' "ardent desire and self-confidence to reliably defend their glorious state political system", the news agency said.

It followed the ninth Workers' Party congress in February, which directs efforts on everything from diplomacy to war planning and which closed with a grand military parade.

The SPA is expected to formalise decisions made in that congress, Hong Min, a senior analyst at the Korea Institute for National Unification, told AFP.

"The regime appears intent on swiftly codifying the decisions of the party congress," Hong told AFP.

The gathering elevated Kim Yo Jong — long considered one of her brother's closest lieutenants — to department director within the party's apex central committee, according to KCNA.

She has in recent years emerged as one of the most powerful figures in North Korea, playing a highly visible role in diplomacy, nuclear negotiations and other matters of state.

The SPA will also deliberate on the re-election of Kim as president of the State Affairs Commission, the country's top state post, and possible revisions to the constitution, KCNA said.

Kim is the third-generation ruler of the nuclear-armed state founded by his grandfather Kim Il Sung in 1948 and has ruled the country since his father's death in late 2011.

The possible constitutional amendments could include formally codifying inter-Korean relations as those between "two hostile states", analyst Hong said. — AFP

Vietnam's chemical boss arrested for 'dumping, mining, tax evasion'

HANOI — One of Vietnam's richest people has been arrested for "illegal waste dumping, illicit mining, and tax evasion" of millions of dollars, police announced yesterday.

Dao Huu Huyen, chairman of the Duc Giang Chemical group, and six other company officers — including Huyen's son, the group's former CEO — were held, the ministry of public security said.

The suspects were accused of "illegal dumping of millions of tonnes of waste across an area spanning tens of hectares", illegally extracting hundreds of thousands of tonnes of phosphate ores in Lao Cai province on the border with China, and tax offences, it added.

The offences took place over an extended period and sparked

"public outrage", police said in the statement.

Duc Giang Chemical is one of Vietnam's biggest companies, with a market capitalisation of around US\$1 billion and a member of the VN30 share index.

Originally set up as a state-owned company, it was partly privatised in 2004 and describes itself as a major player in chemicals, fertilisers and pesticides in the Communist country.

Three years ago, media reports listed Dao Huu Huyen among the 15 richest people in Vietnam, based on his ownership stake in the firm.

Its shares closed down 6.9 percent on the Ho Chi Minh City stock exchange yesterday, at a record low. — AFP

UN seeks independent probe into deadly Kabul clinic strike

GENEVA — The UN called yesterday for a swift and independent investigation after the Afghan government said a Pakistani strike on a Kabul drug rehabilitation clinic killed hundreds of people.

"Last night's tragic blast at a drug rehabilitation centre in Kabul, that reportedly left scores of patients dead, must be investigated promptly, independently and transparently," UN rights office spokesman Thameen Al-Kheetan told reporters in Geneva.

He called for those responsible to be "held to account in line with international standards", and insisted that the results of any investigation "be made public".

"Victims and victims' families are entitled to reparations," he said.

The Afghan government said yesterday that about 400 people were killed in a Pakistani air strike on a drug rehabilitation centre in Kabul that was the deadliest attack in the recent violence between the two neighbours.

Hundreds were said to have been wounded at the facility, which was hit on Monday night, flattening buildings used to treat people from across the

country for addictions to marijuana, amphetamines and other narcotics.

There was no immediate independent verification of the toll, but AFP reporters saw at least 30 bodies taken from the site on Monday night and more than 65 removed yesterday.

Calls for ceasefire

The Taliban government has accused Pakistan of deliberately targeting civilians, something it flatly denies.

Pakistan's information minister Attaullah Tarar said claims his government deliberately targeted the Kabul clinic were "entirely baseless".

The two sides have been in conflict for months, with Islamabad accusing its neighbour of harbouring Islamist extremists who have mounted deadly cross-border attacks on its territory.

Since the hostilities escalated at the end of last month, Kheetan said "289 Afghan civilians, including 104 children and 59 women, have been killed or injured", while tens of thousands have been displaced.

The United Nations mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said yesterday that it had confirmed at least 76 civilian deaths in

Afghanistan between February 26 and Monday, before the clinic strike.

It called for an "immediate ceasefire", as did UN rights chief Volker Turk.

Kheetan stressed that "under international humanitarian law, civilians and civilian objects are strictly protected".

"The laws of war clearly spell out that any attack must comply with the fundamental principles of distinction, proportionality and precautions," he said, highlighting that "international humanitarian law provides for specific and increased protections for medical facilities".

World Health Organisation chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus meanwhile said on X that the upsurge in hostilities since late February had "resulted in at least six health facilities being impacted in Afghanistan", in addition to the rehab clinic.

The UN health agency was "working to verify these incidents", he said.

"I urge all parties to de-escalate and prioritise peace and health," Tedros said, insisting: "Peace is the best medicine". — AFP



Environmental activist and former detainee Sonam Wangchuk (centre) with his wife Gitanjali Angmo (left) and lawyer and politician Vivek Tankha addresses a press conference in New Delhi, India yesterday, days after his release from jail. Prominent Indian activist Wangchuk yesterday called for fresh dialogue with the Narendra Modi government, just days after officials ended his detention over deadly protests in the Himalayan region of Ladakh. — AFP

Sri Lanka arrests 135 in alleged Chinese-run cyberscam

COLOMBO — Sri Lanka's immigration authorities raided an alleged Chinese-run online scam operation, officials said yesterday, arresting 135 suspects.

Most of the detainees were Chinese men and women, an official involved in the raid told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The official said the majority would be charged with violating the

conditions of their tourist visas and working illegally.

"We are still in the process of compiling a list of the suspects," the official said, adding that computers and mobile phones used by the suspects had also been seized.

Yesterday's arrests in the northcentral district of Anuradhapura were the biggest since October 2024 when authorities detained

230 Chinese nationals operating cybercrime centres in several parts of the island, immigration officials in the capital said.

At the time, the Chinese embassy said Beijing's crackdown on cybercriminals may have pushed some abroad.

In 2024, Sri Lankan police arrested 200 suspects, mainly Indian nationals, who were also accused of operating online financial scams. — AFP

Researchers develop smart bandage for wound monitoring, healing

MELBOURNE — Researchers in Australia have developed a "smart" wound dressing capable of both monitoring and treating injuries in real time, potentially transforming chronic wound care.

Researchers at Australia's Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) created a method of embedding tiny, multi-functional nanomaterials, known as carbon

dots, into a hydrogel dressing that serves the dual functions of monitoring and treating the wound, a RMIT statement said yesterday.

This new type of smart wound patch will change color when there is a pH change in the wound caused by infection, triggering the release of therapeutic nanozymes that help reduce inflammation and promote healing, researchers said, adding that

clinicians or patients can also manually activate the treatment by applying gentle pressure to the dressing.

The dual nature of this smart wound patch would support more timely and effective intervention from clinicians, said Nan Nan, RMIT PhD candidate and the first author of the study published in *Chemical Engineering Science*.

— Xinhua

Crowds gather in Iran after authorities urge nationwide rallies

PARIS – Crowds gathered in Iranian cities yesterday after authorities called for nationwide rallies to defy enemy “plots”, state television said, over two weeks into war with Israel and the United States.

The rallies came on a night usually marked by Persian new year (Nowruz) festivities, with the authorities apparently keen to prevent any anti-government dissent at a time when people traditionally take to the streets.

Large crowds rallied from the early evening in the capital Tehran and other cities, many waving the Iranian flag, images on state TV showed.

It had earlier broadcast a message from authorities urging people to join religious groups across the country for a “popular gathering to neutralise the potential plots of elements of the Zionist enemy”, referring to Israel.

The call came after Israel said it had killed Iran’s security chief Ali Larjani, which has not been confirmed by Tehran, and ahead of expected evening celebrations of Chaharshanbe Suri (“Scarlet Wednesday”), an ancient Iranian festival of light and fire

marked before Nowruz.

Reza Pahlavi, the eldest son of Iran’s last shah ousted by the revolution that brought the Islamic republic to power, yesterday called for peaceful Chaharshanbe Suri celebrations and for people to “avoid any tension, confrontation, or even approaching” security forces in the streets.

Iran was rocked by mass protests that peaked in January but were met with a violent crackdown.

Images on state TV showed a large crowd of men being led in prayer in Punak square in Tehran, which in January was a site of massive protests full of people chanting slogans against the Islamic republic.

Around 8 p.m. local time, Tehran’s main streets were quiet, with the exception of some cars flying Iranian flags.

But the smell of fire wafted over some streets and a few fireworks burst over the city as people whistled joyfully from apartment windows.

‘Tradition must not disappear’

Since the outbreak of the war, authorities

have warned against renewed anti-government rallies and imposed heavy security measures.

Judicial authorities had on Sunday warned people not to go into the streets as usual for Chaharshanbe Suri.

“To maintain public peace and safety, please refrain from lighting fires or setting off firecrackers” for the holiday, they said, according to the Tasnim news agency.

The news agency yesterday published an image of a bonfire burning the Israeli and American flags.

Judiciary chief Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei yesterday warned that if anyone disrupted public security over the upcoming Nowruz holidays, “they will face strict legal action and there will be no tolerance or forgiveness for these elements.”

State TV reported six people were arrested over accusations of being “ringleaders of the monarchist terrorist network” planning unrest yesterday. It did not give further details.

A near-total internet blackout imposed by Iranian authorities since the war started has severely hindered access to information inside

the country, though some Iranians manage to send messages out through sporadic connections.

A 35-year-old man living in Bukan in a Kurdish-populated region of northwestern Iran told AFP outside the country that despite pressures not to light the traditional fires, the city was preparing to celebrate.

“We know there’s a risk of clashes with government forces, but we’re trying not to provoke them too much so they don’t shoot at us,” he said, adding that more security had been deployed in the city centre.

“Our town is famous for its grand Chaharshanbe Suri celebrations. This tradition must not disappear because of the war or for any other reason,” he added.

Iranian officials had also called on citizens to join the funeral ceremonies yesterday of 84 navy sailors killed when their frigate was sunk by a US submarine.

Israel and the United States launched strikes on Iran on February 28, killing the Islamic republic’s supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, and triggering a conflict that has spread across the Middle East. – AFP



Members of the security forces, municipality officials and residents gather next to the wreckage of a car at the site of a strike in Rishon LeZion, on the outskirts of Tel Aviv, yesterday. On February 28, Israel and the United States launched strikes on Iran, killing its supreme leader and triggering a war that spread across the Middle East. – AFP

Mideast war could trigger ‘permanent’ refugee crisis: Turkey

ISTANBUL – If the Middle East war spreads, it could create a “permanent” refugee crisis, Turkey’s top diplomat warned yesterday as Lebanon said Israel’s bombardment had displaced over a million people.

“If the war... spreads, there is a possibility this will turn into a permanent refugee crisis with refugees seeking shelter outside the borders of their countries,” Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan told a joint news conference with his Canadian counterpart Anita Anand.

“This needs to stop as soon as possible.”

Lebanon was dragged into the Middle East war on March 2 when Iran-backed Hezbollah attacked Israel in response to the killing of Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei during the US-Israeli strikes on Iran.

Since then, more than one million people have registered as displaced, the Lebanese authorities said on Monday – representing more than a sixth of its entire population.

The news came as Israel’s military said it had launched a limited ground operation against Hezbollah in southern Lebanon.

“The humanitarian situation is deeply concerning in Lebanon and has the potential to worsen if there is a ground offensive there,” Anand told the news conference.

Fidan said the war “could lead to permanent damage... between countries of the region” pointing to the conflict “spreading across Lebanon, and things also becoming much more complicated in Iraq.”

He said Turkey had been “working very hard diplomatically since the outbreak of the war to prevent these crises from escalating”, saying he would travel to several countries in the region today.

Anand said Canada appreciated Turkey’s diplomatic efforts and its “role as an interlocutor in the current Middle East conflict” while also expressing its resolute opposition to Iran’s “reprehensible” strikes on regional nations.

“Canada absolutely condemns those retaliatory strikes.. Those retaliatory strikes must stop, whether they are in Doha or even against this very country,” she said.

– AFP

45 million more face hunger threat from extended Mideast war: UN

Robin Millard

GENEVA – An extra 45 million people could face acute hunger if the Middle East war rages on beyond June, swelling the number worldwide to a “terrible” high, the United Nations warned yesterday.

The war, now in its third week, and its shockwaves on food and fuel costs could price families out of staple foods far beyond the region, the UN’s World Food Programme (WFP) said.

“The escalating humanitarian fallout from the conflict in the Middle East is growing more concerning by the day,” warned WFP Deputy Executive Director Carl Skau.

“Our analysis projects that if the Middle East conflict continues through June,” and oil prices remain above US\$100 a barrel, “an additional 45 million people could be pushed into acute hunger by price rises,” he told a Geneva press conference.

“This would take global hunger levels to an all-time record, and it’s a terrible, terrible prospect,” he said, with a nearly 320 million people – already a huge number – currently acutely food insecure.

“Really it is again taking this to a whole other level,” said Skau.

“The consequences are falling on the world’s most vulnerable people who are already living in dire conditions. They do not have the margins to cope with a new jump in living costs.”

Skau called for countries to make more humanitarian resources available.

‘Stretched to the limit’

The United States and Israel launched their war on Iran on February 28, with Tehran in turn striking targets in Israel and Gulf nations. Lebanon was drawn into the conflict when Iran-backed Hezbollah attacked Israel.

WFP is providing hot meals and

bread to tens of thousands of people in Lebanon, and is seeking US\$77 million for its operations in the country over the next three months.

Skau said the agency was already facing a “perfect storm” before the war erupted.

“Hunger has never been as severe as now,” he declared.

The nearly 320 million people in acute food insecurity marks a three-fold increase in five years, driven by extreme weather events, conflict and pockets of famine.

Meanwhile, the WFP faced a 40-percent cut in its resources last year, as international funding dried up.

“We are basically stretched to the limit”, said Skau, and the Middle East is making the WFP’s operations “much, much more expensive”.

He said the WFP’s operating costs had surged – notably through soaring fuel prices and longer supply chain routes – with shipping costs up 18 percent and trucks running on pricier fuel.

The disruption to fertiliser exports through the Strait of Hormuz comes just as sub-Saharan Africa heads into a planting season, and poses a “major risk” to countries like Somalia and Kenya, he said.

“In Somalia we have clear indications that we’re heading into a famine: we have two consecutive droughts,” he said, but the WFP is struggling to assist around 700,000 people in the country and “we just don’t have the funding”.

The agency has cut life-saving food rations for people in famine conditions in Sudan, and is now only able to support one in four acutely malnourished children in Afghanistan, “which is now the world’s worst malnutrition crisis”, said Skau.

“People are dying in Afghanistan due to the lack of assistance.” – AFP

Trump vows to 'take' Cuba as island reels from oil embargo

HAVANA – US President Donald Trump vowed on Monday to “take” Cuba as the communist island plunged into darkness under a total power blackout linked to a crippling oil embargo imposed by Washington.

After nearly seven decades defying the United States, Havana’s communist authorities are under massive pressure from a Trump administration determined to make history.

“You know, all my life I’ve been hearing about the United States and Cuba. When will the United States do it?” Trump told reporters at the White House.

“I do believe I’ll be...having the honour of taking Cuba,” Trump said.

“Whether I free it, take it – think I could do anything I want with it, you want to know the truth. They’re a very weakened nation right now.”

It was one of Trump’s most explicit threats and came as the Caribbean island of 9.6 million people grappled with yet another major power cut.

The blackout resulted from a “complete shutdown of the national grid,” Unión Nacional Eléctrica de Cuba (UNE) said in a statement,

adding that work had begun to restore electricity flow.

Cuba’s ageing electricity generation system is in shambles, with daily power outages of up to 20 hours the norm in parts of the island.

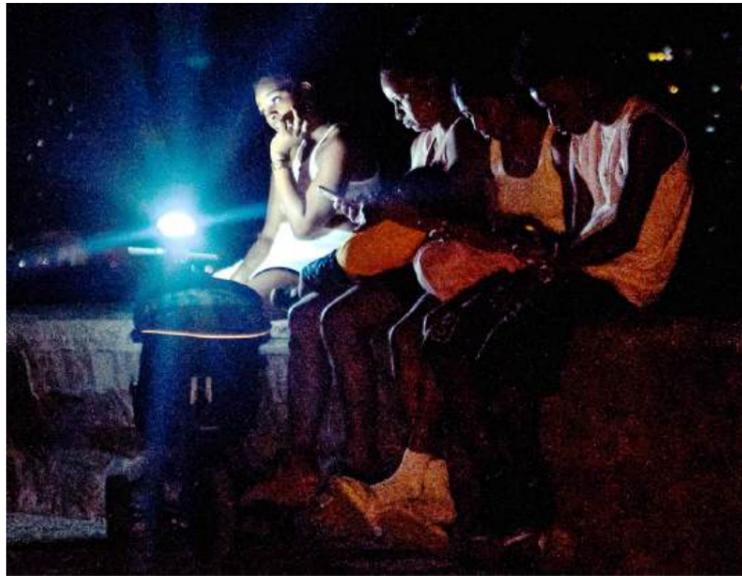
But since the US ouster of Cuba’s top ally, Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela, on January 3, the island’s economy has been hammered further as Trump maintains a de facto oil blockade.

No oil has been imported to the island since January 9, hitting the power sector while also forcing airlines to curtail flights to the island, a blow to the all-important tourism sector.

In a bid to relieve economic pressure – and meet US demands – a senior economic official in Cuba announced on Monday that Cuban exiles would now be able to invest and own businesses there.

“Cuba is open to having a fluid commercial relationship with US companies” and “also with Cubans residing in the United States and their descendants,” Oscar Pérez-Oliva, who is foreign trade minister and also deputy prime minister, told NBC News.

The New York Times reported



Cubans gather at the Malecón waterfront during a blackout in Havana on Monday. Cuba suffered a widespread power cut on Monday, according to the national electricity company, against the backdrop of a severe crisis on the island caused by the US energy blockade. – AFP

Monday, relying on anonymous sources, that Trump administration officials have signalled to Cuban officials that the US wants President Miguel Díaz-Canel to be removed from power.

Popular unrest

The blackouts, as well as regular shortages of food, medicine

and other basics, are spurring frustrations. In a rare moment of violence, demonstrators vandalized a provincial office of the Cuban Communist Party last weekend.

It was part of a new trend of protests in which people bang pots and pans at night, at times yelling “Libertad” (“Freedom”).

Fourteen people have been

arrested after the office assault in Morón, a town of around 70,000 people east of Havana, the regional party chief told state-run newspaper *Invasor*.

The violence prompted Díaz-Canel to acknowledge in an X post “the discontent our people feel because of the prolonged blackouts”, including a major outage in early March.

“What will never be comprehensible, justified or admitted is violence,” Díaz-Canel said.

The government has also rationed gasoline sales and some hospital services due to the fuel shortages.

Díaz-Canel confirmed last week that his government had held talks with the United States.

Trump has alleged the fuel blockade is a response to an “extraordinary threat” posed by Cuba to the United States.

Trump said on Sunday that Cuba “wants to make a ‘deal’”, which could come quickly after his administration has finished the war against Iran.

“I think we will pretty soon either make a deal or do whatever we have to do,” Trump told reporters aboard Air Force One. – AFP

Magnitude 5.8 earthquake hits off Cuba

HAVANA – A 5.8-magnitude earthquake struck off the coast of Cuba yesterday, the United States Geological Survey (USGS) said.

The quake hit at a depth of 11.6 kilometres about 49 kilometres south-southwest of Cuba’s easternmost municipality of Maisí at 12:28 a.m. (local time), according to the USGS.

There were no immediate reports of casualties or damage.

Cuba is trying to restore electricity following a total power blackout on Monday, as the United States pursues its oil blockade against the island’s communist government.

The USGS put the alert level

for shaking-related fatalities and economic losses at green, meaning “low likelihood for casualties and damage”.

The quake was first reported by the European-Mediterranean Seismological Centre, which also logged aftershocks of up to 4.7-magnitude.

Cuba’s seismological service said it received perceptibility reports from the Santiago de Cuba and Guantanamo provinces. The epicentre was around 95 kilometres from Guantánamo.

On March 6, a 5.0-magnitude quake was recorded off the coast of Cuba, according to the USGS. – AFP

Rubio says Cuba’s easing on investment ‘not dramatic enough’

WASHINGTON – US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said yesterday that Cuba’s decision to let exiles invest and own businesses did not go far enough, as the United States raises pressure.

“Cuba has an economy that doesn’t work in a political and governmental system that can’t fix it. So they have to change dramatically,” said Rubio, a Cuban-American and vociferous critic of the island’s ruling communists.

“What they announced yesterday [Monday] is not dramatic enough. It’s not going to fix it. So they’ve got some big decisions to make,” Rubio

told reporters alongside President Donald Trump.

Trump said of Cuba: “They’re talking to Marco, and we’ll be doing something with Cuba very soon.”

Cuba announced the openness to investment by exiles on a day that the island suffered a nationwide blackout, its latest woes after the United States in January toppled the leftist leader of Venezuela, the key provider of oil to Cuba.

Trump said on Monday he believed he will have “the honour of taking Cuba,” saying he can “do anything I want with it” because the country was weak. – AFP

Senior US counterterrorism official resigns to protest Iran war

Chris Lefkow

WASHINGTON – A senior US counterterrorism official resigned yesterday to protest the US-Israeli war against Iran and said the Islamic Republic posed no imminent threat to the United States.

“I cannot in good conscience support the ongoing war in Iran,” Joseph Kent, the director of the National Counterterrorism Centre (NCTC), said in his resignation letter to President Donald Trump.

Kent – a former member of the Green Beret special forces who served multiple combat tours – said “Iran posed no imminent threat to our nation, and it is clear that we started this war due to pressure from Israel and its powerful American lobby.”

Kent, 45, who was appointed to head the NCTC by Trump, is the first senior US official to resign from his administration to protest the war against Iran.

Trump, speaking to reporters in the Oval Office, accused Kent of being “very weak on security” and said it’s a “good thing that he’s out.”

White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt pushed back against what she called “false claims” in Kent’s resignation letter, calling “insulting and laughable” the suggestion that the decision to go to war was made “based on the influence of others.”

“As President Trump has

clearly and explicitly stated, he had strong and compelling evidence that Iran was going to attack the United States first,” Leavitt said.

“President Trump ultimately made the determination that a joint attack with Israel would greatly reduce the risk to American lives that would come from a first strike by the terrorist Iranian regime and address this imminent threat to America’s national security interests,” she said.

Kent’s wife, Shannon, also served in the US military and was killed in a suicide bombing in Syria in 2019.

“As a Gold Star husband who lost my beloved wife Shannon in a war manufactured by Israel, I cannot support sending the next generation off to fight and die in a war that serves no benefit to the American people nor justifies the cost of American lives,” Kent wrote.

‘Misinformation campaign’

As head of the NCTC, Kent worked under Tulsi Gabbard, the director of national intelligence, analysing and coordinating the US response to terrorist threats and serving as the principal counterterrorism adviser to the president.

“Until June of 2025, you understood that the wars in the Middle East were a trap that robbed America of the precious lives of our patriots and depleted

the wealth and prosperity of our nation,” Kent said in his letter to Trump, which he posted on X.

Kent accused “high-ranking Israeli officials and influential members of the American media” with engaging in a misinformation campaign that “sowed pro-war sentiments to encourage a war with Iran.”

“This echo chamber was used to deceive you into believing that Iran posed an imminent threat to the United States, and that should you strike now,” he said.

“This was a lie and is the same tactic the Israelis used to draw us into the disastrous Iraq war,” Kent said.

“I cannot support sending the next generation off to fight and die in a war that serves no benefit to the American people nor justifies the cost of American lives,” he added.

Senator Mark Warner, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, said Kent’s “record is deeply troubling.”

“But on this point, he is right: there was no credible evidence of an imminent threat from Iran that would justify rushing the United States into another war of choice in the Middle East,” Warner said.

Kent ran twice unsuccessfully – in 2022 and 2024 – as a Trump-endorsed Republican for a seat in the US House of Representatives from Washington state. – AFP

São Paulo AI policing nabs criminals, and a few innocents

Facundo Fernández Barrio

SÃO PAULO – In the heart of São Paulo, a “prisonometer” keeps a live tally of people jailed due to Latin America’s largest AI facial-recognition system, but its successes have been marred by mistaken arrests.

The digital counter stands outside the Smart Sampa monitoring centre, where dozens of police officers watch images streaming in from 40,000 cameras in the Brazilian megalopolis.

Latin America’s largest city has long battled high rates of crime, and the AI technology was introduced in 2024 to scan the streets and compare images to those in judicial databases.

Smart Sampa’s dragnet has swept up 3,000 fugitives, while nearly 4,000 people have been caught in the act of committing a crime.

“With the fugitives the system captured, we could fill seven prisons. Today I can no longer imagine São Paulo without Smart Sampa,” municipal security secretary Orlando Morando told AFP about the program, which costs the equivalent of about US\$2 million per month to run.

To show how it works, he uploads a photo of himself to the system. Within seconds, images of him in various locations around the city of 12 million people pop up on the screen.

“It reminds me of the book 1984 [by George Orwell], with all that control of people: I love it, I approve 100 percent,” said Sônia Ferreira Silva, a 68-year-old retiree, standing next to a Smart Sampa truck serving as a mobile surveillance post on the iconic Avenida Paulista.

Mistaken arrests

But the system is far from foolproof. Official transparency reports analysed



São Paulo’s Municipal Secretary for Urban Security, Orlando Morando, demonstrates the operation of the Smart Sampa monitoring system in the metropolis last month. – AFP

by AFP show that more than 8.0 percent of people identified as fugitives and arrested in Smart Sampa’s first year had to be released due to errors.

At least 59 detainees were freed because the system mistook them for other people.

In December, an 80-year-old retiree spent hours under arrest because Smart Sampa confused him with a rapist.

And a month earlier, a group of psychiatric patients were attending therapy at a mental health centre when armed police burst in and handcuffed one of them.

After hours at the police station, the detainee was released, and authorities said his

arrest warrant was no longer valid.

The system relies not only on street cameras but also on cameras in public buildings – including health centres – and private buildings that agree to participate.

At least 141 people were arrested due to outdated warrants, but the São Paulo government argues that those mistakes are the judiciary’s responsibility, not theirs.

“No one remained imprisoned by mistake: the people were released,” said Morando.

‘Civil control’

Among the fugitives captured by Smart Sampa, almost half had their crimes classified

as “other.”

Nearly all of them are people who owe child support, a civil offence “that has little to do with public security,” according to the report “Smart Sampa: Transparency for whom? Transparency of what?”

“Smart Sampa is presented as a solution to crime but is used for civil control,” warns Amarilis Costa, director of the lawyers’ network Liberdade (“Freedom”) and a co-author of the report.

The government denounces attempts to “discredit” Smart Sampa, boasting the city had seen a nearly 15 percent drop in robberies in 2025.

In 2024, nearly one in five cellphone robberies in Brazil, including violent muggings, occurred in São Paulo.

‘No prejudice’

The racial identity of more than half of those found guilty and jailed after being caught by Smart Sampa is not included in official data.

Costa said this creates an information gap that makes it impossible to know whether Smart Sampa suffers from “algorithmic racism” in a country with one of the world’s largest black populations.

Studies in several countries have suggested that AI facial recognition systems tend to make more mistakes with black people.

The government argues that the lack of racial data is the responsibility of the justice system.

“Smart Sampa has no prejudice – we do not arrest people based on colour,” said Morando, the security secretary.

Most Smart Sampa arrests have occurred in outlying neighbourhoods, with many of those detained migrants from poorer regions of Brazil’s interior. – AFP



Public security personnel work in the Smart Sampa monitoring centre in São Paulo last month. – AFP



Officers of the Metropolitan Civil Guard+ patrol a street in downtown São Paulo last month. – AFP

Brazil’s new climate plan targets deforestation

BRASÍLIA – Brazilian leaders unveiled a new national climate plan on Monday that prioritises enhanced forest protections as a key strategy in reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The Latin American giant hasn’t updated its main program to mitigate climate change since 2008, and the new plan looks forward to 2035, when Brazil is expected to have lowered its emissions significantly.

President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva’s leftist government has called for a reduction of greenhouse gases by 67 percent compared to 2005 levels.

Forty percent of greenhouse gas emissions in Brazil are generated by trees being razed, often to clandestinely create more agricultural land, Brazilian officials said.

Lula has pledged to reduce deforestation to zero by 2030.

Brazil has been hit by extreme weather disasters in recent years, including floods, fires and droughts, which experts link to climate change.

“We are living through a very serious situation of climate emergency,” Environment and Climate Change Minister Marina Silva told reporters.

Cláudio Ângelo, of the NGO network Climate Observatory, applauded the new Brazilian plan because it “begins to address the thorny issue of how to finance” its climate targets.

However, the plan falls “far short of delivering the economic transformation needed” in Brazil, when it comes to limiting global warming to 1.5C, Ângelo said. – AFP

Argentinian court blocks prediction betting app Polymarket

BUENOS AIRES – A court has ordered prediction platform Polymarket be blocked for users in Argentina, prosecutors said in a statement on Monday, dubbing the site “a clandestine online betting system.”

Polymarket allows users to buy and sell shares based on the probability of real-world events – from election results to military attacks.

Prosecutors in Buenos Aires said the site “did not require identity or age verification, and allowed the creation of accounts in a matter of minutes,” making betting available to children “without any kind of control.”

The investigation arose from a complaint filed by the Buenos Aires City Lottery.

The court also will instruct tech giants Google and Apple to remove access to Polymarket’s mobile apps in Argentina.

The decision came after a controversy in Argentina over a sudden surge in bets placed on the platform prior to the release of monthly inflation data Thursday, which led to some financial analysts speculating on a possible leak of the official index.

Polymarket has already been blocked in France, Italy, Germany and other European countries.

Polymarket calls itself the world’s largest prediction market, a realm of betting that was once dismissed as a niche crypto curiosity and has gone mainstream in recent years. – AFP

Japan set for tactical change to counter S Korea in Asian Cup semi



SYDNEY – Coach Nils Nielsen said yesterday that free-scoring Japan must change tactics in their Women's Asian Cup semi-final against South Korea as they zero in on a third continental title.

The clash in Sydney today will pit the two highest scoring teams of the tournament, with Japan blasting 24 goals in their four games to date and South Korea 16.

At stake is a place in Saturday's final against hosts Australia.

The odds are in Japan's favour. Ranked 13 places higher at eight in the world, they are undefeated against South Korea in over a decade and have yet to concede a goal in Australia.

That record though could be under threat against a disciplined side that made the final four years ago and is desperate for a maiden Asian Cup crown.

"It will be a challenging match because South Korea have threats so we need to respect that. We can't play like we have done," said Greenlander Nielsen, who has a squad packed with English-based players.

"We have a plan to negate their counter-attacking speed and we

also have other tactics should we need them. In general, we have to focus on our all-round game instead of just about how we attack.

"We haven't had to use it much so far but we are normally quite disciplined in defending and that will ensure that we don't get caught out."

South Korea are boosted by the return of forward Jeon Yu-gyeong, who missed their 6-0 quarter-final win against Uzbekistan.

"We're facing the best team in Asia in Japan but I'm expecting a good performance from my players," coach Shin Sang-woo said.

"It's true that it's been over 10 years since we've beaten them in a competitive game.

"But we've changed a lot since I took over as head coach [in 2024] and hopefully tomorrow [today] we'll be able to show that we have what it takes to beat Japan.

"Japanese players have high individual technical quality and tactically they are strong in their organisation," he added.

"To beat them we have to stop their strong points and show ours."

The game will be played at 5 p.m. Macau time, today.

– AFP/MPD

Chelsea striker Kerr sends Australia into Asian Cup final

Tristan Lavalette



PERTH – Chelsea striker Sam Kerr scored the winner to put hosts Australia into the Women's Asian Cup final with a tense 2-1 victory over defending champions China yesterday in Perth.

Kerr fired home from a tight angle in the 58th minute, her fourth goal of the tournament proving the difference in a gruelling semi-final in front of 35,170 fans on a balmy night.

The Matildas will face title favourites Japan or South Korea in Saturday's final in Sydney.

The match started at breakneck speed with Arsenal forward Caitlin Foord scoring in the 17th minute.

China levelled shortly after with Zhang Linyan converting a penalty, much to the delight of their flag-waving fans behind the goal.

But China were unable to contain hometown hero Kerr, who ensured Australia remained on track for a second continental title to sit alongside their 2010 triumph.

"Her presence, her aura, in the squad is immense," Australia head coach Joe Montemurro said of 32-year-old Kerr.

"She believes in the group and loves playing for her country."

Influential winger Hayley Raso did not take the field despite being cleared to play after passing concussion tests.

"Hayley's ready to go, she's part of the 26 [player squad]," Montemurro said.

"When they're called upon, they're asked to do a job and that's the only way we're going to win on Saturday."

China's bid for a record-extending 10th crown ended in heartbreak and they rued missed opportunities in front of goal after having 14 shots to eight.



Australia's Sam Kerr (right) scores a goal during the AFC Women's Asian Cup Australia 2026 semi-final against China in Perth yesterday.

– AFP

"I'm pretty devastated for them because I felt we played a good game," China head coach Ante Milicic said.

"All I asked was for them to give 100 per cent which they did. They carried out the game plan.

"But in football, the result matters. We didn't get it tonight."

Masterminded by Australian Milicic, who coached the Matildas at the 2019 World Cup, China made six changes to the line-up that needed extra-time to beat Chinese Taipei in the last eight.

Star striker Wang Shuang missed out through suspension after racking up yellow cards in consecutive matches.

Australia received a boost with key defender Steph Catley included in the starting line-up after missing the quarter-final with concussion.

Montemurro had urged the Matildas to be brave after they were outplayed by North Korea in the quarter-finals but escaped with a 2-1 win.

Australia almost landed the

first blow when Kaitlyn Torpey produced a superb cross from the left only for Mary Fowler to slice her volley over the crossbar.

China worked into the game with their defensive press forcing the Matildas into errors.

Midfielder Wurigumula caused havoc but China could not capitalise on a period of dominance.

The Matildas made them pay when Ellie Carpenter stormed down the right flank and found Fowler, who cleverly cut back to Foord.

China responded when Zhang pounced on sloppy Australia defending and earned a penalty after being taken down by goalkeeper Mackenzie Arnold, who was handed a yellow card.

Zhang rifled the penalty kick past Arnold as the intensity started to wane with players from both teams looking gassed by half-time.

It was an arm-wrestle after the interval until an on-rushing Kerr calmly evaded goalkeeper Peng Shimeng and fired in from an acute angle.

– AFP

Kompany warns of complacency as injury-hit Bayern host Atalanta



MUNICH – Bayern Munich coach Vincent Kompany said yesterday his "biggest role" was preventing complacency as his undermanned side host Atalanta today sitting on a 6-1 first-leg lead.

Despite being without striker Harry Kane, the Bundesliga leaders thumped Atalanta in Bergamo last Wednesday in their Champions League last-16 opener, racking up three goals in each half.

No team in European Cup history has ever overturned a five-goal deficit in a second leg but Kompany took the responsibility of ensuring his injury-hit side know the job is not yet done.

"That's precisely my biggest role in a situation like this," Kompany told reporters.

"The crucial foundation from which we have to work is a willingness to work, a willingness to run, and the joy of playing football, which we will also show."

Bayern were reduced to nine men but dug deep to draw 1-1 at Bayer Leverkusen on Saturday and Kompany said the result would spur his men.

"The result against Leverkusen was actually positive. It showed what kind of story our season could be.

"We don't have much room. I don't want to go into these games

too laid back. But my greatest confidence is in this team."

The six-time Champions League winners are odds-on to cruise into the quarter-finals but have been hard hit by injuries, particularly in goal.

Jamal Musiala, Alphonso Davies and Hiroki Ito are all injured, while Joshua Kimmich and Michael Olise are suspended.

In goal, Manuel Neuer and Sven Ulreich are injured, while back-up Jonas Urbig is facing a race against time to return from a concussion sustained in Bergamo.

If Urbig does not return, Kompany confirmed teenage debutant Leonard Prescott would be between the sticks.

At 16 years and 191 days, Prescott would become the youngest goalkeeper in Champions League history, beating the current record set by Maarten Vandevoordt by more than a year.

But Kompany said the 2009-born 'keeper was not showing any traces of nerves.

"He's very calm," Kompany said, adding "if he plays tomorrow, he'll get our full backing, our full support."

Kane returned off the bench against Leverkusen after missing two games and is in line to start today.

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

– AFP/MPD

Van de Ven insists it's 'nonsense' to say players don't care about Spurs' plight



LONDON – Micky van de Ven is adamant that it is "nonsense" to suggest that Tottenham Hotspur players are indifferent about the threat of relegation from the Premier League.

Spurs are just a point above the bottom three and their season went from bad to worse with a club-record sixth consecutive defeat in a 5-2 loss away to Atletico Madrid last week in the first leg of a last-16 tie in the Champions League.

Spurs did rally with a 1-1 draw at Liverpool on Sunday to provide fresh belief and Van de Ven, criticised for a red card against Crystal Palace earlier this month, has dismissed accusations that some players have "checked out" in the battle to beat the drop.

"The only thing I can say is it's not true," he told reporters yesterday

on the eve of the second-leg tie with Atletico.

"It would be strange if a player was in the dressing room now and saying, 'I'm going to leave either way, or... it doesn't affect me'. So, I think it's just nonsense."

The 24-year-old added: "The other day when we read something about one guy that said to everyone that he's probably going to leave and doesn't care about the situation they're in... People are just making things up.

"It's just frustrating for us because it brings so much more trouble, because the fans are starting to believe this.

"Trust me, all the people involved on the pitch, the staff, the players, everyone, they care so much about the situation we're in right now.

"We just want to turn things around and that's the most important, that's the main focus for everyone."

Van de Ven could only watch on television, following his red card against Palace, as Spurs battled hard for a point at Anfield and the Dutch defender is eager to play his part against Atletico, and in Sunday's relegation 'six-pointer' with Nottingham Forest.

"What they showed, the character they showed in the game was unbelievable, and when Richy (Richardson) scores and it's 1-1, it's just happiness at home, screaming towards the TV," he said.

"Tomorrow it's just a beautiful game. We have nothing to lose. We want to do something special.

"We're going to do everything to change things around, tomorrow first, and then afterwards in the Premier League games coming up."

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

– AFP/MPD

Hard-hitting Conway steers NZ to victory over S Africa

Cricket

HAMILTON – Devon Conway blasted a half-century before New Zealand skittled South Africa cheaply to win the second Twenty20 international by 68 runs yesterday and level the five-match series 1-1.

Conway's 60 off 49 balls set the home side up for a competitive

175-6 after being sent in to bat at Hamilton's Seddon Park.

The Proteas lost wickets regularly to be dismissed for 107 off 15.3 overs, with pace bowlers Ben Sears and Lockie Ferguson snaring three wickets each.

South Africa won game one in Mount Maunganui on Sunday by seven wickets.

Both sides are fielding largely second-tier lineups, choosing to rest their first-choice players in the wake of the T20 World Cup.

New Zealand lost the final of the global tournament to hosts India earlier this month, having beaten South Africa in the semi-finals.

Conway produced easily the most important innings of the game,

the 34-year-old posting five fours and two sixes.

The South African-born left-hander played with controlled aggression as wickets fell around him to reach his 13th half-century in the format.

Conway was delighted to contribute after being an unused squad member throughout the World Cup.

"It has been a very quiet couple of months for me, going over to India and not featuring at the World Cup," he said.

"It's been nice to come back and play and be able to contribute for

the boys and the group."

Josh Clarkson raced to 26 not out at the death while allrounder Wiaan Mulder took 2-14.

Mulder's addition was the only change to South Africa's team from game one, replacing Jordan Hermann, who was ruled out of the remainder of the series with a hamstring injury.

The tourists never recovered from 31-3 and four wickets fell for three runs late in the chase, before George Linde added some respectability by top-scoring with 33.

– AFP



New Zealand's Devon Conway (left) plays a shot as South Africa's Connor Esterhuizen reacts during the second Twenty20 international cricket match between New Zealand and South Africa played at Seddon Park in Hamilton, New Zealand yesterday.

– AFP

Defending champion Higgins crashes out, Trump advances to 2nd round at World Snooker Open

Snooker

NANCHANG – Defending champion John Higgins suffered a shock first-round exit at the World Snooker Open in Yushan county, Jiangxi province, yesterday.

The four-time world champion was edged 5-4 by Britain's 19-year-old Stan Moody, who reached the quarterfinals of this season's Wuhan Open after back-to-back wins over established names including Ding Junhui and Zhou Yuelong.

Moody, ranked 47th in the world, seized control early with his accurate long-potting and solid cueing, racing to a 4-1 lead after the first five frames to move within one frame of victory.

Higgins adjusted his rhythm in the sixth frame and made the most of his chances at the table, reeling

off the next three frames in a row. That run included a superb 135 break in the seventh frame, and he eventually leveled the match at 4-4 to force a decider.

In the final frame, Moody capitalized on a critical Higgins error and compiled a match-winning 65 break, taking the frame 65-15 to book his place in the last 32.

World No. 1 Judd Trump of Britain defeated Austria's Florian Nuessle 5-1 in the afternoon session.

"I'm really eager to get my form back on track here," Trump said in his post-match interview. "It's great to travel the world, but you never really know where you're living half the time. I love it out here in Asia, the events here are completely different, they're run incredibly well. Being here in China is so much easier to get around, and the

time zone is really manageable too."

Under the tournament schedule, Trump will face fellow Briton Jackson Page in his next match.

Speaking about the upcoming tie, Trump said: "Jackson Page is a tricky, complex opponent, he's got an incredibly dangerous game. Yeah, I've heard his game has improved loads, he's been putting the work in on the practice table, and he's still getting better all the time."

Highly watched Chinese prospect Zhao Xintong defeated Long Zehuang 5-4 in the evening session to advance to the last 32.

Meanwhile, fan favorite Ronnie O'Sullivan received a walkover into the last 32 after India's Ishpreet Singh Chadha withdrew from the tournament. He will face Matthew Selt today. – Xinhua

Kerr 'frustrated' at six-figure sum owed to him by Johnson's failed Grand Slam Track

Athletics

LONDON – Britain's Josh Kerr is "frustrated" by the six-figure sum owed to him by US athletics great Michael Johnson's failed Grand Slam Track project but still believes those behind it are "good people" who got themselves in a "horrible situation".

Grand Slam Track curtailed its inaugural 2025 season and then filed for bankruptcy in December, with millions collectively owed to athletes including Scottish two-time world champion Kerr - who has submitted a claim for US\$218,750 (£164,150).

A court filing by vendors earlier this month also claimed four-time Olympic champion Johnson was secretly paid US\$500,000 when he was aware vendors and creditors would be owed - accusations representatives for the project have reportedly denied.

"Of course I'm frustrated," said Kerr.

"I'm owed a lot of money, so in any business anyone's going to be frustrated. I don't particularly know right now where to push those frustrations and where they should sit.

"I've had conversations with Michael, I've had information given to me by my agents on this stuff. I don't think these are bad people. I

think this is a horrible situation."

Kerr, 28, has recovered from the calf tear he sustained during last year's 1,500m final at the World Athletics Championships in Japan.

This week in Poland, the 2023 world 1,500m champion will look to reclaim the world indoor 3,000m title he won on home Scottish soil in Glasgow two years ago, after injury and illness prevented the Edinburgh athlete from defending it last year.

"I believe I am the best athlete in the world at these distances," said Kerr.

"There's no one in the world who can convince me otherwise." – AFP

Georgia ready for rugby elite despite rare Portugal defeat

Rugby

Barnaby Chesterman

PARIS – Georgia are ready to join either an expanded Six Nations or to provide a team to join the United Rugby Championship as soon as authorities let them, interim head coach Marco Bortolami has told AFP in an interview.

Georgian club side Black Lion have played in the last three editions of the Challenge Cup, while the national team has beaten three Tier I sides in the last four years.

Georgia play in the second division Rugby Europe Championship, which they had won for eight years in a row until Sunday's surprise 19-17 defeat to Portugal in the final in Madrid.

Their build-up to the match was marred by a doping scandal.

World Rugby and the World Anti-Doping Agency revealed two days before the final that six Georgia internationals had been suspended for doping violations dating back to 2023.

"Definitely, it was an outside noise that wasn't ideal," Bortolami, an Italian, told AFP by telephone.

"I would question the timing of that, and it's an old story."

The issue related to the substituting of urine samples and the forewarning of impending tests ahead of the 2023 World Cup.

The samples showed the presence of recreational drugs, rather than performance-enhancing substances.

"It's something that happened three years ago and I'm sure that whoever made the mistakes, they're going to pay for that," said Bortolami.

"So, it was quite strange, to be fair, to see that amount of noise just two days before a big game."

Despite that defeat, Georgia are still in something of a limbo - generally too good for the Tier II tournament, but maybe not quite ready yet to compete consistently at Tier I level.

But if they want to kick on to the next echelon, they need to play matches against better opposition, said Bortolami, who will become Georgia's forwards coach when Frenchman Pierre-Henry Broncon takes over the reins as head coach in the summer, once his contract

with French second division outfit Brive expires.

"I would say the new calendar system where we just play against Tier II teams from now on until the World Cup doesn't help that," said Bortolami.

"Because to improve and to grow... you need to play against the best teams on a regular basis."

'Everything is manageable'

One idea would be to follow in the footsteps of his homeland, Italy, who joined the Six Nations in 2000 and 10 years later provided two teams to the United Rugby Championship.

Bortolami said that Black Lion, who are made up of domestic-based players, are ready to join the URC if invited.

"There's the funding, there's the agreements, we fulfilled every single requirement, every single request that the URC has made," he said.

"Now it's just, someone has to make that decision."

With the troubles affecting the domestic game in Wales and the Welsh Rugby Union's plan to cut the number of URC teams from four to three, there may soon be an opening in the URC.

"That's an opportunity. Obviously, geography doesn't help because we are not as close as maybe some other countries to the URC countries, but the South African teams joined the URC a few years ago, so everything is manageable," said Bortolami.

As for joining the Six Nations, the former Benetton Treviso and Sale Sharks coach was less hopeful.

"I'm very realistic about this topic because the Six Nations is a closed tournament and there's some financial reasons why not only the bottom teams but also the top teams don't want to run the risk of promotion and relegation," he said.

"A realistic opportunity for Georgia to join the Six Nations is maybe to join with another team."

That could be South Africa, whose professional franchises already play in the URC, or another European country, like Spain or Portugal.

But, "if it's difficult for Black Lion to join the URC, I think it's even more difficult for Georgia to get involved in the Six Nations," admitted Bortolami. – AFP

In Hollywood, AI's no match for creativity, say top executives

Alex Pigman

AUSTIN, United States – Artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming Hollywood at a pace that has sent shockwaves through creative industries, but human creativity will always prevail, a leading executive at the cutting edge of that change told AFP.

The disruption was a dominant theme at this week's South by Southwest conference in Austin, Texas where veteran director Steven Spielberg made clear he was drawing a line in the sand.

"I've never used AI on any of my films yet. We have a writer's room. All the seats are occupied," Spielberg said. "I am not for AI if it replaces a creative individual."

Joshua Davies, chief innovation officer of Artlist – a Tel Aviv-based AI video platform that has

most recently been positioning itself as a supplier of creative tools to filmmakers – told AFP the technology would never eclipse the human creative.

If given the choice between something made using an AI tool by a techie and a creative, "I know which one I would rather watch at the end," said Davies, who founded video editing software company FXhome before it was acquired by Artlist in 2021.

Davies acknowledged the industry's anxiety was not unfounded, with new video models having "struck fear in the hearts of everybody" – not just over copyright and personality infringement, but over the fundamental question of how film and television production will look in a matter of years.

"If I was bringing out an Iron Man movie in 2027, 2028 – would I be going to multiple visual effects houses, would I expect them to be utilizing AI? We're all kind of working out our way through that," he said.

Davies described the platform's AI video tools as a way to "fill in the bits that you can't shoot, or didn't shoot, or you don't have the budget to shoot," rather than a wholesale substitution for going out on location.

'Holy grail'

Yet the timing is charged. Editors, visual effects artists and other Hollywood professions have watched the rapid advance of generative AI with alarm, fearing that tools capable of producing broadcast-quality footage at a

fraction of traditional costs could hollow out entire job categories.

Major studios are actively evaluating how AI can be integrated into production pipelines, foreshadowing significant workforce changes across an industry that has already endured a bruising period following the covid pandemic and writers' and actors' strikes of 2023.

Artlist made headlines in February when it produced a Super Bowl LX spot in under five days using its own products, at a fraction of the multi-million-US-dollar cost typical of Big Game advertising.

Davies was keen to push back on the narrative that the ad represented the future of production without human involvement.

That wasn't what it was, he said. It was creatives "using the tool to get the very best out of it."

A self-described "techie guy," Davies said the platform's current obsession is on giving creators nuanced control over creating or editing footage – something he described as the company's "holy grail."

Existing models, he said, handle simple static shots reasonably well but struggle with complex camera movements and consistent performance across multiple takes.

You can prompt an elaborate shot, but for now "you'll get something random" that you can't work with.

On cost, Davies cautioned against unrealistic expectations, suggesting AI would reduce production expenses significantly but not eliminate them.

Davies said his long-term hope was that AI would serve as a leveling force for independent filmmakers and content creators who currently lack the budgets to realise their ambitions.

"There are definitely YouTubers who make some of the best action work out there on no budget," he said.

"AI will level that playing field completely – the story will be what matters."

He struck a cautiously optimistic note on the creative industry's direction, dismissing the most dystopian predictions.

"The idea that no one works at the end of it is the bit that doesn't hold any water with me," he said.

"There's been more and more of everything, not less and less – and the cream rises to the top anyway, because the human element is what we crave."

– AFP

BTS say they're 'just country kids' ahead of comeback mega-gig



A woman uses her smartphone in front of a billboard promoting a comeback concert of K-pop boy group BTS at Gwanghwamun Square in Seoul yesterday. BTS still see themselves as "country kids from South Korea", according to a trailer for a new documentary released yesterday, ahead of their huge comeback concert this weekend. – AFP

SEOUL – K-pop megastars BTS still see themselves as "country kids from South Korea", according to a trailer for a new documentary released ahead of their huge comeback concert this weekend.

More than a quarter of a million fans are expected to throng central Seoul on Saturday for BTS's open-air gig, the first performance in almost four years by the boy band seen by their fans as the biggest in the world.

A day before, the group's fifth studio album, "ARIRANG" – named after a beloved folk song about longing and separation, something of an unofficial national anthem of South Korea – will be released.

The documentary, "BTS: The RETURN", will be released on Netflix on March 27, chronicling

the seven-member group's comeback after completing their military service, widely seen as a gruelling experience for young conscripts.

"We are still just country kids from South Korea," the group's leader RM says in the trailer.

"We are trying to find out what makes us BTS," the 31-year-old added.

At the height of their fame prior to their hiatus, BTS frequently ranked among the most popular artists on music streaming platform Spotify, mixing with the likes of Taylor Swift and Justin Bieber.

After visiting the White House, releasing hugely successful English-language albums and performing at famous venues around the world, the group has chosen a historic stage at home for

the grand comeback this weekend.

The concert will be staged at Seoul's sweeping Gwanghwamun Square, near the historic Gyeongbokgung Palace.

The area is also where many of South Korea's political protests have taken place, including those following former president Yoon Suk Yeol's declaration of martial law in December 2024.

The trailer features the melody from "Arirang" the folk song, which is associated by many with themes of resilience and enduring longing.

"Arirang is a song imbued with han," an unidentified BTS member says in the trailer, referring to the Korean term for an unresolved grief rooted in the country's history, including war, division and family separation.

– AFP

'Buffy' reboot axed: Gellar

LOS ANGELES – A planned reboot "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," that was set to be directed by Oscar-winning director Chloé Zhao (趙婷), has been cancelled, US actress and producer Sarah Michelle Gellar has announced.

"Unfortunately, [US subscription streaming platform] Hulu has decided not to move forward with 'Buffy: New Sunnydale,'" Gellar said in a weekend Instagram post.

"I am really sad to have to share this, but I wanted you all to hear it from me," added the 48-year-old, who starred in the original series that ran for seven seasons.

The new Buffy was announced last year and was set to see Gellar reprise her role as Buffy Summers, who in the original series had been a teenager battling demons and vampires as she navigated high school.

"I want to thank Chloé Zhao, because I never thought I would

find myself back in Buffy's stylish yet affordable boots," Gellar said.

"Thanks to Chloé, I was reminded how much I love her and how much she means not only to me but to all of you. And this doesn't change any of that.

"And I promise if the apocalypse actually comes, you can still beep me," she quipped.

Zhao, whose period piece "Hamnet" missed out on the best picture Oscar on Sunday, told Variety on the red carpet that she hadn't been surprised by the project's cancellation.

"Things happen for a reason," Zhao said.

"I had an incredible time with Sarah, with the whole cast and crew doing this, and we, first and foremost, see ourselves as the guardians of the original show.

"Our priority has always been to be truthful to the show, and be truthful to our fans." – AFP

World Weather

CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing 0°C~14°C	Manila 20°C~31°C	New York 0°C~4°C	Lisbon 13°C~18°C
Shanghai 7°C~13°C	Bangkok 25°C~34°C	London 4°C~17°C	Rio de Janeiro 21°C~29°C
Hong Kong 17°C~24°C	Tokyo 11°C~15°C	Frankfurt 3°C~15°C	Luanda 25°C~29°C
Taipei 17°C~28°C	Singapore 23°C~32°C	Vancouver 11°C~13°C	Maputo 21°C~31°C
Guangzhou 17°C~28°C	Kuala Lumpur 23°C~35°C	Paris 5°C~16°C	Dili 25°C~30°C
Nanjing 6°C~13°C	Jakarta 23°C~33°C	Moscow -4°C~9°C	São Tomé 27°C~33°C
Guilin 10°C~17°C	Seoul 1°C~11°C	Las Vegas 19°C~35°C	Praia 18°C~27°C
Xi'an 2°C~12°C	Sydney 20°C~25°C	Monte Carlo 9°C~15°C	Bissau 19°C~36°C



Aliens have landed

A seagull is pictured near artwork displayed on Cottesloe Beach in Perth, Australia, on Monday. The 21st "Sculpture by the Sea, Cottesloe" is held here until March 23.

- Xinhua

Staying put!

A reveler wearing a giant Lego-style warrior costume attends the Family Day event of CelticFest in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, on Sunday. The annual CelticFest brings the local community in celebration of Celtic culture, featuring live Celtic music, Irish dance performances and family-friendly activities.

- Xinhua



Derpy and Sussy

People walk past a glass wall displaying animal characters from Netflix series "Kpop Demon Hunters" at a bakery in Seoul, South Korea yesterday.

- AFP



Special guardsman

Irish Guards' mascot Irish wolfhound Seamus and his handler Drummer Joseph Aldridge stand for a photograph at Mons Barracks, in Aldershot, England yesterday.

- AFP



Beautifully impractical

People view a custom vehicle at the 2026 Motorama Custom Car & Motorsports Expo in Mississauga, the Greater Toronto Area, Canada, on Friday. The three-day event kicked off here on Friday, showcasing more than 400 custom vehicles.

- Xinhua



Weeping willows

This photo taken yesterday shows the scenery of the Daming Lake in Jinan, Shandong Province. Willow trees around the Daming Lake have turned green as temperature rises, attracting tourists.

- Xinhua