

Legislators unanimously pass bill on Committee for Safeguarding National Security

Tony Wong

The Legislative Assembly (AL) yesterday passed a government-initiated bill establishing a law regulating the Macau Special Administrative Region's (MSAR) Committee for Safeguarding National Security, the duties, organisational structure, and operation of which are currently governed by an administrative regulation.

The new law, which will take effect on the day after its promulgation in the Official Gazette (BO), formally defines the committee as an entity tasked with the MSAR's affairs concerning the safeguarding of national security and assuming the MSAR's primary responsibility for safeguarding national security, with its operation subject to the oversight and accountability of the Central People's Government.

Government-drafted bills must be passed by the legislature to become law, while government-drafted administrative regulations, aka by-laws, do not require the legislature's approval.

The new law, when it takes legal effect, will replace the current administrative regulation governing the Committee for Safeguarding National Security.

The new law, with its final draft passed by the MSAR's legislature yesterday after a review process, formally regulates the duties, organisational structure, and operation of the Committee for Safeguarding National Security in the form of a law, which highlights the seriousness and authority of the committee tasked with carrying out various duties and functions concerning the MSAR's safeguarding of national security.

The bill's outline was passed during a plenary session of the legislature last month, after which the bill was reviewed article-by-article by its 3rd Standing Committee, before it was resubmitted to yesterday's plenary session, which Secretary for Security Chan Tsz King attended, when it was voted on article-by-article in its second, final reading.

The legislature passed every article of the bill unanimously, when the hemicycle's speaker, as is customary, did not vote while the other 32 of the 33-member legislature voted in favour of every article of the bill, which has 23 articles.

The MSAR government set up its Committee for Safeguarding National Security in 2018 through



Secretary for Security Chan Tsz King addresses yesterday's plenary session in the Legislative Assembly's (AL) hemicycle. — Photo: GCS

an administrative regulation, which is tasked with various duties and functions such as coordinating the local government's various tasks concerning the MSAR's safeguarding of the nation's sovereignty, security and development interests; studying and evaluating the situation in Macau concerning national security and the city's social stability; formulating local policies on the safeguarding of national security; and promoting

work on improving the local legal system on safeguarding national security.

Compared to the current administrative regulation, the new law upgrades the committee's statutory duties and functions. According to the new law, the committee will be tasked with various duties and functions such as studying the implementation of the Central People's Government's decisions



and deployments concerning the MSAR's safeguarding of national security; studying and evaluating the situation in Macau concerning the safeguarding of national security; formulating local policies on the safeguarding of national security; promoting work on improving the local legal system on safeguarding national security and its enforcement mechanism; coordinating the local government's key tasks and major operations concerning the safeguarding of national security; and carrying out other tasks assigned by the Central People's Government concerning national security.

Continued on p.3

Russia expects to build nuclear power station on Moon within 5-7 years

ST. PETERSBURG – Russia may develop a nuclear power station on the Moon within the next five to seven years, Mikhail Kovalchuk, president of Russia's Kurchatov Institute, said yesterday.

Kovalchuk made the remarks while attending a meeting of the government of the Leningrad region to discuss issues of scientific and technological leadership. During his presentation, he

outlined potential designs for nuclear power stations intended for lunar deployment.

Earlier yesterday, Alexei Likhachev, head of Russia's state nuclear corporation Rosatom, said the planned lunar nuclear power station would have a capacity of at least 5 kW and an operational lifespan of up to 10 years.

According to Likhachev, Rosatom is currently working

with the Kurchatov Institute and the state space corporation Roscosmos to design the facility.

Vasily Marfin, CEO of Russian developer and manufacturer of unmanned interplanetary probes NPO Lavochkin, has said that the nuclear power plant will be assembled on the Moon between 2033 and 2035. Three lunar power stations will be transported to the Moon for this purpose, he said. — Xinhua

Trump says he will not put troops in Iran

WASHINGTON – US President Donald Trump said yesterday he will not put troops in Iran as the US-Israeli war with Iran is escalating.

Trump made the remarks when meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi at the White House.

Asked by a reporter about sending US ground troops to

Iran, Trump said, "I'm not putting troops anywhere."

The United States and Israel began large-scale strikes on Iran on February 28, disrupting global shipping, sending oil prices soaring and shaking the global economy. (More about US-Israel war on Iran on pages 8, 10, 11 & 12)

— Xinhua

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The Macau Post Daily

Wang Yi says prolonged wars have no winners

Foreign Minister Wang Yi said yesterday there are no winners in the prolonged wars, and a ceasefire and an end to the hostilities are the will of the people.

— Story on p. 7

ECB warns of major hit from Mideast war

The European Central Bank (ECB) warned yesterday that the energy shock unleashed by the Middle East war would sharply push up inflation and hit the eurozone's growth this year.

— Story on p. 11

Portugal rules out military involvement in Mideast conflict

Portugal will not take part in the ongoing conflict involving the United States and Iran, Portuguese Foreign Minister Paulo Rangel said this week.

— Story on p. 12

Resolutely pursue a holistic approach to national security

Continuously improve the legal system for safeguarding national security

Source: Macao SAR Government

The Legislative Assembly of the Macao Special Administrative Region (SAR) conducted detailed examination and unanimously passed the Bill “Committee for Safeguarding National Security of the Macao Special Administrative Region” today [yesterday]. The SAR Government expresses its sincere gratitude to the Legislative Assembly, all sectors of the community and Macao residents for their strong sense of responsibility and unwavering patriotic sentiment demonstrated during the legislation process.

Safeguarding national sovereignty, security and development interests is the supreme principle of the “One Country, Two Systems” policy and the constitutional responsibility of the Macao SAR. From the successful completion of the local legislation of the “Law on Safeguarding National Security” in 2009 and then its amendment in 2023, to the passing of the Bill “Committee for Safeguarding National Security of the Macao Special Administrative Region” today [yesterday], these are all vivid demonstrations of the successful implementation of the principle “patriots governing Macao” and the pursuit of the holistic approach to national security while keeping

abreast of the times and meeting the latest needs to consolidate the legal foundation for safeguarding national security.

The Bill fully implements the organisational provisions of the “Law on Safeguarding National Security” and further strengthens the top-level framework for safeguarding national security. It is of great significance for the substantive operation of the Committee for Safeguarding National Security of the Macao Special Administrative Region and its Secretariat.

The Bill fully embodies the organic unity of the central authorities’ overall jurisdiction and the SAR’s high degree of autonomy, and is conducive to the supervision, guidance, coordination, and support offered by the National Security Affairs Adviser for upholding national security in the Macao SAR. It also holds paramount importance to ensure that the work of safeguarding national security of the Macao SAR advances in the right direction.

The Bill comprehensively enhances the capabilities of the Committee for Safeguarding National Security of the Macao Special Administrative Region in overall coordination, efficient execution, and supervised implementation when addressing various national security risks. It is of great significance for effectively safeguarding

national sovereignty, security and development interests.

At present, the world is undergoing accelerating changes unseen in a century. The international environment is becoming more complex, and there are new challenges and tests to upholding national security. The SAR Government will fully support the Committee for Safeguarding National Security of the Macao Special Administrative Region in performing its duties in accordance with the law, and continuously improve the legal system and enforcement mechanisms for safeguarding national security.

Looking ahead, under the strong leadership of the Central Government, with robust support from the Chinese mainland and joint efforts of all Macao residents, the Macao SAR will leverage its unique advantages, coordinate high-level security and high-quality development, proactively integrate into the national development, and compose a new chapter of the successful implementation of the “One Country, Two Systems” policy with Macao characteristics.

End Item

N.B. This English-language statement was provided to the Post last night by the Macao SAR Government through the Macao Government Information Bureau (GCS). Minor edits were made by the Post. Words within square brackets were added by the Post.



The Macao Special Administrative Region (MSAR) Government holds a flag-raising ceremony to celebrate the 74th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), on Praça Flor de Lótus in Zape on October 1, 2023. – Xinhua

Firmly uphold and support the Legislative Assembly for passing second reading of the ‘Macao Special Administrative Region Committee for Safeguarding National Security’ bill

Statement by Macau Lawyers Association

The Legislative Assembly unanimously passed on March 19, 2026 the second reading of the “Macao Special Administrative Region Committee for Safeguarding National Security” bill (hereinafter referred to as the “committee law”).

Such move is of great significance for Macao to strengthen its national security shield and enhancing Macao’s national security mechanism. The Macau Lawyers Association (AAM) expresses its firm support and endorsement.

As the “One Country, Two Systems” principle enters a new stage, and the international landscape evolves, the Macao Special Administrative Region (MSAR) faces new demands and new challenges in safeguarding national security.

Strengthening the top-level structure of Macao’s safeguarding national security framework – through the enactment of the “committee law” and its supporting administrative regulation “Organisation and Operation of the Secretariat of Committee for Safeguarding National Security” (hereinafter referred to as the “secretariat regulation”) – is timely, necessary, and urgent for further enhancing the legal system for safeguarding national security.

The “committee law” formally establishes, in statutory form, the responsibilities, powers, composition, and operational mechanisms of the MSAR Committee for Safeguarding National Security (hereinafter “the Committee”), providing a clear legal foundation.

This ensures that the MSAR can implement its holistic approach to national security in a more solid and stable manner, reflecting MSAR’s constitutional responsibility in fulfilling and implementing the holistic approach to national security.

The “committee law” also incorporates

amendments to the Judicial Organisation Framework Law. The newly introduced provisions – namely the special authorisation for litigation representative(s) taking part in the litigation and the framework for non-public litigation proceedings – serve as a legal “firewall” to safeguard national security interests during judicial processes.

These mechanisms are designed to prevent risks to national security without infringing upon the right of defence of the parties involved.

They do not affect lawyers’ professional qualifications. Lawyers can continue to perform their statutory duties and lawful rights. These amendments are essential and reasonable.

Therefore, the enactment of the “committee law” and the “secretariat regulation”, the refinement and optimisation of the Committee’s operational mechanisms, and the amendments to the Judicial Organisation Framework Law, collectively ensure that national security interests are protected throughout relevant judicial procedures.

These measures effectively guard against and curb external interference, better safeguard national sovereignty, security, and development interests, and adapt more closely to new requirements arising from the course of the “One Country, Two Systems” principle.

They further strengthen the constitutional order of the MSAR as established under the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China and the Basic Law of the MSAR, and better contribute to the long-term stability of Macao society and the well-being of its residents.

End Item

N.B. The English-language statement was provided to the Post last night by the Macau Lawyers Association. Minor edits; italics and bold type by the Post.

Published since Aug 2004

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- Printed by Tipografia Welfare Lda., 82-86 Rua dos Pescadores
- Wire services – AFP, Xinhua
- Chatbots: Poe, DeepSeek



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Source: SMG

MICHELIN Guide unveils 2026 restaurant selection for HK, Macau

2 restaurants newly awarded One MICHELIN Star

Rui Pastorin

The full selection of the MICHELIN Guide Hong Kong & Macau 2026 was unveiled during the ceremony for the 18th edition of The MICHELIN Guide Hong Kong & Macau last night at Grand Lisboa Place (GLP) in Cotai, with Macau this year seeing two restaurants awarded a One MICHELIN Star rating each.

The MICHELIN Guide Hong Kong & Macau 2026 comprises 278 establishments, 59 of which are in Macau, or 21 percent. Among the Macau awardees recognised yesterday, GLP's "Don Alfonso 1890" and "Palace Garden" were the newest recipients of the One MICHELIN Star accolade, both moving up from the MICHELIN Selected category.

Six Macau restaurants have meanwhile retained their two MICHELIN Star ratings, while Jade Dragon at City of Dreams (COD) and Robuchon au Dôme at Grand Lisboa have both retained their Three MICHELIN Star ratings.

In all, of the total 21 MICHELIN

Starred restaurants in Macau, two possess the 3 MICHELIN Star rating, six are 2 MICHELIN Starred, and 13 are 1 MICHELIN Starred including the newly awarded restaurants.

In terms of the other awards presented, the public Macao University of Tourism (UTM) retained its Green Star this year, while The Huiyang Garden's Jenny Ye was recognised with the "Service Award". The total number of Bib Gourmand* awarded restaurants in Macau stands at 13, including one that was newly added and another that was promoted, while there are 25 MICHELIN Selected, of which five are new, according to data from the MICHELIN Guide.

Tananya Nimsdavut, vice president of Michelin Lifestyle—East Asia, Oceania & Middle East, highlighted during her speech at yesterday's ceremony that this year marked the centenary since the first MICHELIN Star was awarded in 1926. Nimsdavut also pointed out that throughout the decades, Macau

and Hong Kong have "consistently upheld the highest standards of culinary achievement, inspiring admiration and setting a benchmark for excellence that resonate worldwide"

Moreover, during her speech, SJM Managing Director Daisy Ho Chiu-fung said that this marked the fifth consecutive year that SJM has hosted the MICHELIN Guide Ceremony. She noted that the event was "an occasion the industry anticipates every year because Michelin carries a rare authority in the world of dining. It is not simply a red plaque displayed on a wall. It represents credibility and consistency.

"The Guide embodies standards the profession holds in the highest regard, and welcoming this occasion to Macau reflects our enduring commitment to culinary excellence", she added. ■

**The Bib Gourmand is a special distinction honouring restaurants that provide outstanding food with excellent value, according to the MICHELIN Guide website.*



SJM Managing Director Daisy Ho Chiu-fung (centre) poses with Macau chefs after they received their awards during the 18th edition of The MICHELIN Guide Hong Kong & Macau last night at Grand Lisboa Place (GLP) in Cotai.

— Photo: Rui Pastorin

Fuel surcharges to rise by b/w 37 pct and 53 pct next month: Air Macau



This November 22, 2024 file photo shows an Air Macau jet parked on the local airport's apron. — Photo: Tony Wong

Armando Neves

Air Macau announced in a statement yesterday that fuel surcharges on all routes will increase by between 37 percent and 53 percent next month.

According to the statement, in response to the recent sharp fluctuations in international aviation fuel prices, which have soared from the previous range of US\$85 to US\$90 (686 patacas to 726 patacas) per barrel to a range of US\$150 to US\$200 per barrel – an increase of more than double and reaching a current high, Air Macau has decided to adjust its fuel surcharge.

The statement said that effective April 1, Air Macau will adjust its fuel surcharge, with an overall increase ranging from 37 percent to 53 percent across different route segments.

The surcharge for long-haul routes will rise from 258 patacas to 353 patacas; for medium-haul routes it will increase from 161 patacas to 241 patacas; and for short-haul routes it will go up from 113 patacas to 173 patacas.

Flights departing from Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan will follow the unified requirements set by the local civil aviation authorities, the statement said, adding that the specific adjustment plan was still subject to the final confirmation as announced on the official Air Macau website.

For further details, please visit the link <https://www.air-macau.com.mo/#/business-common?data=1578&type=lk>

Legislators unanimously pass bill on Committee for Safeguarding National Security

Continued from p.1

According to the new law, the committee will have the statutory power to determine whether political matters and other matters involving the public administration in the MSAR are in the interest of national security, and to make legally binding decisions on the respective matters.

Moreover, the new law formally lists the committee's current duties of assessing whether chief executive election candidates uphold the MSAR Basic Law and bear allegiance to the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the MSAR, as well as assessing whether legislative election candidates uphold the MSAR Basic Law and bear allegiance to the MSAR. The committee has been tasked with these duties since the laws on the two elections were amended in 2024. The individuals concerned cannot file an administrative nor judicial appeal against the committee's decisions, which are legally binding.

These duties are currently not formally listed in the current administrative regulation governing the committee's operation.

In addition to the government's assessments of the qualifications of chief executive election candidates and legislative election candidates, the Committee for Safeguarding National Security, according to the new law, will also have the statutory powers to issue legally binding decisions to other respective public entities tasked with

carrying out other aspects of government tasks involving the MSAR's safeguarding of national security. Similarly, according to the new law, the committee's decisions made for these cases are not subject to administrative nor judicial appeals.

According to the new law, the committee is chaired by the MSAR's chief executive, and its composition includes officials such as the local government's five policy secretaries, the commissioner-general of the Unitary Police Service (SPU), the director-general of the Macau Customs Service, the director of the Judiciary Police (PJ), the commissioner of the Public Security Police (PSP), the director of the Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau (DICJ), the director of the Legal Affairs Bureau (DSAJ), the president of the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC), and the director of the Education and Youth Development Bureau (DSEDJ).

The committee currently has an office tasked with providing administrative support to the committee.

Currently, it is the Judiciary Police which provide administrative, financial and technical support to the operation of the committee and the office under the committee.

According to the new law, the composition of the committee includes a standing secretariat to be tasked with the committee's daily operations and functioning. The standing secretariat, headed by the secretary for security, will replace the current office

operated under the committee. The operation of the standing secretariat will be equipped with financial resources and government staff, in which case the committee's operation will no longer need to be supported by the Judiciary Police.

Since its establishment in 2018, the committee's administrative regulation was amended in 2021 adding the posts of a national security affairs adviser and three national security technical advisers appointed by the central government to the committee.

The new law also upgrades the statutory duties and functions to be carried out by the committee's national security affairs adviser and national security technical advisers.

In addition to the regulation of the Committee for Safeguarding National Security, the new law also amends the Judicial Organisation Framework Law.

According to the current version of the Judicial Organisation Framework Law, only judges holding Chinese nationality can conduct trials for cases of the crimes listed in Macau's law on safeguarding national security, and only prosecutors holding Chinese nationality can also handle such cases.

According to the new version of the Judicial Organisation Framework Law amended by the newly enacted law on the MSAR's Committee for Safeguarding National Security, the rule (Chinese nationality) will also be extended to all types of litigation processes such as civil litigation, if the respective cases concern

national security.

Moreover, according to the amended Judicial Organisation Framework Law, trials for any types of cases shall be conducted behind closed doors if the respective judges have determined that open trials of such cases will adversely affect national security and the judges' decisions have been endorsed by the Committee for Safeguarding National Security.

In addition, according to the amended Judicial Organisation Framework Law, if the court determines that a case entails the necessity for the protection of national security interests, the respective lawyer must obtain special permission from the respective judge first before he or she can represent the defendant.

Meanwhile, the MSAR government, through the Macau Government Information Bureau (GCS), issued a statement yesterday following the legislature's passage of the bill, expressing sincere gratitude to the Legislative Assembly, all sectors of Macau's civil society and Macau residents for their strong sense of responsibility and unwavering patriotic sentiment demonstrated during the bill's legislative process.

The statement noted that the newly enacted law on the MSAR's Committee for Safeguarding National Security will strengthen the local government's top-level structure concerning the city's institutional system for safeguarding national security. ■



Exhibition curator, veteran artist and Distinguished Professor Guilherme Ung Vai Meng poses during an interview with the Post during the opening ceremony for "A Century of Iec Long Firecracker Factory in Radiance – An Exhibition on the Resonant History and Aesthetic Memory of Macao Firecrackers" on Wednesday. – Photos: Rui Pastorin



Sands China exhibition pays tribute to Macau's firecracker industry

Interview by Rui Pastorin

Macau's days of firecracker manufacturing may have long passed, but the history and memory of an industry that had once been among the city's most important has not been forgotten. Now, its storied legacy continues to be honoured with a large dedicated exhibition at Sands Gallery in Cotai.

Lining the walls of different sections of the gallery are hundreds of well-preserved colourful firecracker labels from different brands, along with a showcase of related documents including receipts and ledgers. Gallerygoers will also get to learn more about the development of what was once a booming local industry, alongside the craftsmanship and manufacturing processes that were behind it through exhibits including tools.

In all, "A Century of Iec Long Firecracker Factory in Radiance – An Exhibition on the Resonant History and Aesthetic Memory of Macao Firecrackers" showcases over 400 exhibits. Integrated resort operator Sands China presents all of these in collaboration with the private Macau University of Science and Technology's (MUST) Library and Faculty of Humanities and Arts, with its collection being where most of the exhibits come from.

At the helm of its curation is veteran Macau artist and Distinguished Professor at MUST, Guilherme Ung Vai Meng, who told the *Post* during Wednesday's opening that the exhibition took over two years to prepare. "This is the first time that we assembled all the materials including photos, labels, documents, association member cards and firecracker-making tools", he said, emphasising the past firecracker industry as one of the most important crafts in Macau that was a part of the lives and memories of its citizens, a "collective memory for the whole society".

While the exhibition was no easy task to put together, the passion from those involved for both the story of local firecrackers and its history are evident as drivers for its creation. And for Ung, who held senior positions including as first director of the Macau Museum of Art (MAM) and former president of the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC), he found that he personally had a fondness for collecting firecracker-related Macau memorabilia while he was studying fine art with a master at Rua das Estalagens, where a lot of antique and second-hand items including books and furniture were sold.

After finishing his lessons with the old master, Ung would go around the area in search of something interesting

to buy and take home. "I began to collect the labels, posters, postcards, day by day", he said, eventually thinking how these could be useful for researchers. "Now, I have the chance to organise this exhibition. I am very happy to see my dream realised", said Ung.

The exhibition is running for five months until August 31.

Ung said he hopes members of the public will have something to take away from the exhibition. For seniors and the older generation of Macau people, he hopes that the exhibition will be able to help them look back at the past. Meanwhile, for the younger generation, it can provide a glimpse into the city's past. Younger artists and designers may even get ideas and inspirations from the unique aesthetics of the items being exhibited.

Concluding his remarks to the *Post*, Ung emphasised he hopes that people visiting the gallery can appreciate the memory and craft of yesteryear's local firecracker industry. But more than that, he pointed out: "Macau still has a lot of treasures to be discovered. So, a lot of stories, memories. We have to find them and show them all".

For more details, visit: <https://en.sandsresortsmacao.com/sands-lifestyle/sands-art-gallery/iec-long-exhibition-2026.html>.



Police arrest female biker for drunk driving

Armando Neves

The Public Security Police (PSP) arrested a female biker for drunk driving, PSP spokesman Wong Chi Weng said during a regular press conference yesterday.

Wong identified the suspect as a local clerk in her 40s surnamed Yang, adding that a woman in her twenties was injured in the case.

According to Wong, on Tuesday evening, the Public Security Police (PSP) received a report of a traffic accident on Avenida do Almirante Lacerda (提督馬路).

PSP officers arrived at the scene where they questioned two motorcycle riders, Wong said, adding that the investigation revealed that Yang had consumed alcoholic beverages during a meal in Zhuhai.

Upon returning to Macau, Wong said, Yang retrieved her motorcycle and, while riding towards the site of the accident, she apparently failed to pay proper attention to the road conditions ahead, causing her to collide with a motorcycle that had stopped at a red traffic light, adding that the collision resulted in injuries to the female rider in her twenties.

The police administered a breathalyser test to Yang at the scene, and the result was 1.62 grams per litre.

The injured female biker was taken to the hospital for treatment and has since been discharged, Wong said.

Yang has been transferred to the



Public Security Police (PSP) spokesman Wong Chi Weng looks on during yesterday's regular press conference.

Public Prosecutions Office (MP), facing charges of drunk-driving and causing bodily harm.

Meanwhile, Wong said that at 2 a.m. on Wednesday, PSP officers arrested a male fitness coach in his thirties, surnamed Ao, on Rua de Fai Chi Kei (筷子基街) during their patrol.

Upon noticing that Ao was heavily intoxicated while riding a heavy motorcycle, the police administered a breathalyser test, according to Wong, which confirmed that Ao's blood alcohol concentration was 1.4 grams per litre. Ao confessed to having consumed alcohol earlier that night while dining and socialising in Fai Chi Kei district.

Ao has been transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP), facing a drunk-driving charge. ■



This undated handout photo provided by the Public Security Police (PSP) yesterday shows PSP officers escorting the drunk-driving suspect surnamed Ao into a police station. — Photo: Armando Neves

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THE MacauPOST DAILY

Police nab local man for smuggling ketamine in anus

Armando Neves

The Judiciary Police (PJ) arrested a local man for drug taking and drug-trafficking on Tuesday, PJ spokesman Leng Kam Long said during a special press conference yesterday.

Leng identified the suspect as a 33-year-old designer surnamed Ma.

According to Leng, based on a tip-off, the Judiciary Police launched an investigation and identified Ma as the suspect engaged in cross-border drug trafficking.

PJ officers intercepted him when he was entering the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge (HZMB) Macau checkpoint and immediately stopped him for a search in a nearby car park.

Leng said that PJ officers first seized a small packet containing 0.65 grams of ketamine and two banknotes with suspected drug residue from him, adding that they also discovered 2,700 patacas suspected to be drug proceeds, while a plastic bag that had drug residue in it was found in his car.

Leng also said that the investigation indicated that Ma was smuggling drugs internally.

The Judiciary Police took Ma to the public Conde de São Januário Hospital Centre for examination, where a foreign object was discovered inside his body, Leng said, adding that Ma spontaneously expelled seven small packets of ketamine from his anus, inside condoms and weighing around 18.06 grams in total.



Evidence seized from the drug suspect surnamed Ma and photos of his car is displayed at the PJ headquarters in Zape yesterday. — Photos: Armando Neves



Judiciary Police (PJ) officers escort the hooded drug suspect to a PJ van outside the PJ headquarters in Zape yesterday.

Leng said that the 18.71 grams of ketamine has an estimated street value of around 18,700 patacas.

Ma confessed to purchasing the drugs in Hong Kong and smuggling them into Macau, intending to use some of the drugs for personal

consumption and to sell the remainder, Leng said, adding that Ma's urine test returned a positive result for drug use.

Ma was transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP), facing charges of drug use and drug trafficking. ■

IAM updates pre-packed food database, calls for sector's participation

Khalel Vallo

The Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) announced in a statement yesterday that it has launched an update of its "database of pre-packed food products", calling on the food sector to participate in the information collection exercise.

According to the statement, the update aims to gather information on pre-packed food products supplied and sold in Macau, covering food retailers, supermarket chains and other businesses. The statement added that members of the sector can submit relevant information through the "food safety alert platform" between this coming Monday and April 17.

Under the Food Safety Law, businesses are required to promptly recall products that may pose safety risks, the bureau said. According to the statement, the bureau conducts database updates in the first and third quarters of each year to support risk assessment and improve response efficiency during food safety incidents, noting that the system enables authorities to quickly identify affected products in

the local market and issue alerts via email and SMS, allowing businesses to remove items from shelves and initiate recalls without delay.

The bureau said the collected

information will be used solely for food safety purposes, urging cooperation from the sector to strengthen Macau's ability to prevent and manage food safety risks. ■



Food is displayed at the entrance of a convenience store on Rua dos Mercadores last night. — Photo: Khalel Vallo

EASL Finals press conference previews semifinals

Khalel Vallo

The EASL Finals 2026 press conference was held yesterday at integrated resort Studio City in Cotai, as Asia's top basketball teams gathered in Macau ahead of the semifinals.

EASL stands for East Asia Super League.

Representatives from four semi-finalists – Alvark Tokyo, Ryukyu Golden Kings, Utsunomiya Brex, all from Japan, and Taoyuan Pauian Pilots from China's Taiwan region – attended the event alongside EASL founder and CEO Henry Kerins and Studio City's Senior Vice President and Property General Manager Kevin Benning.

Kerins highlighted Macau's long-standing role in the league's development, noting that the city has hosted EASL events since 2017. "Macau has been part of our story from the very beginning," he said. "What we're building here – bringing Asia's best teams together in one of the region's great cities – is exactly the kind of integrated sports experience that puts Macau on the map for the right reasons," Kerins added.

Meanwhile, Benning underlined that hosting the event for a second consecutive year reinforces Macau's positioning as a hub for major sports events. "For us, this is about more than just hosting a tournament, it's about bringing that 'Fun Never Ends' energy to life for fans across the region," he noted.

The semifinal matches are scheduled today at the Studio City Event Centre, with Ryukyu Golden Kings facing Utsunomiya Brex, followed by Alvark Tokyo against Taoyuan Pauian Pilots.

Speaking at the press conference yesterday, Alvark Tokyo's Kai Toews said the team had endured a demanding season leading up to the finals. "You know, for us it's been a very long season for the B-League and all the Japan games. We've had a lot of injuries, but throughout all that our team has really fought through to get as many wins as possible to come to this point,"



Ryukyu Golden Kings' Ryuichi Kishimoto speaks during yesterday's press conference at Studio City Macau in Cotai.

he said. "Obviously, there's no time for us to even talk about motivation. This is a big opportunity for us and we're ready to play tomorrow".

Meanwhile, Ryukyu Golden Kings' Ryuichi Kishimoto highlighted the challenge of adapting to different styles of play in the tournament. "It's different to the league we play in Japan. There are a lot of things that we don't do well as a team. It happens a lot in the game," he said. "In that sense, as a way of fighting, I think that the team's ability to adjust is being tested. In that sense, depending on the country, there are various styles of basketball. So, while adjusting in the game, personally, I'm looking forward to playing against foreign players."

The winners will advance to the final, competing for a top prize of US\$1.5 million (12.18 million patacas), as the tournament "continues to strengthen Macau's profile as a destination for international sporting events", according to statement by EASL yesterday. ■



EASL founder and CEO Henry Kerins (right) and Studio City's Senior Vice President and Property General Manager Kevin Benning address yesterday's EASL Finals 2026 press conference at Studio City in Cotai. – Photo: Khalel Vallo

Conflating crises not conducive to ending them

China Daily Editorial

The attacks and threats of further strikes on oil and gas fields and facilities both in Iran and other Middle Eastern countries mark a major escalation in the conflict initiated by the United States and Israel against Iran.

A few hours after Israel struck Iran's offshore South Pars natural gas field on Wednesday, Iran responded with a series of attacks targeting gas fields and infrastructure in Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The escalation of the Iran war has sent shock waves through the world market, with oil and gas prices skyrocketing again. The targeting of energy infrastructure in the Middle

East must stop as it could spin out of control if the vicious tit-for-tat cycle continues.

Apart from international energy supply security, concerns about a nuclear accident are also high, with Iran reporting that a projectile struck the grounds of the Bushehr nuclear power plant in the country on Tuesday. Although no release of nuclear material was reported, it underlines the validity of such apprehension.

Yet, the spillover of the Iran war does not stop here. Recent signs of a "grand bargain" being discussed by some in the European Union and the US, linking the Middle East crisis with the Ukraine crisis, threaten to pour oil on both fires rather than extinguish them.

The idea of bargaining with the US emerged during a question-and-answer session at London's Chatham House think tank on Tuesday, in which Finland's President Alexander Stubb said he saw real potential in offering the US what it wants: European military support to secure the Strait of Hormuz, while in exchange the US delivers all the help Ukraine needs to reach an acceptable peace deal with Russia.

The Ukraine crisis and the Iran war are two hot spot issues, each with its own distinct causes, nature and trajectory. To forcibly tie them together through geopolitical bartering is not only wrong but also dangerously irresponsible.

The logic of this entanglement is as simplistic as it is perilous.

This is not a theoretical risk; it is a clear and present danger of further escalation that would expand the theater of war, not contain it. The notion that exchanging favors can lead to stability is a dangerous illusion.

The EU remains deeply divided on multiple issues and is unwilling to undertake largescale military engagement as a unified bloc. Linking two separate crises will only aggravate differences and further complicate diplomatic solutions. The approach that tries to kill two birds with one stone will only prolong both hostilities, further disrupt global energy supplies and

Child-friendly society meaningful investment:

China Daily Editorial

In a move to better protect minors' lawful rights and interests and promote children's healthy and all-round growth, the central government has recently issued a guideline to advance child-friendly development across society.

This policy move, which marks a critical transition from pilot projects in select cities to a comprehensive nationwide initiative, underscores the government's commitment to the well-being of children. The endeavor aligns with the country's 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30), reflecting the importance policymakers attach to the healthy growth of the younger generation.

With China's socioeconomic development, the people's expectations regarding the environment in which their children grow up are also evolving, with parents increasingly demanding more supportive environments for children.

However, some challenges remain. In urban areas, public spaces often lack the necessary facilities for child-friendly activities. Meanwhile, in rural regions, families face inadequate childcare services. These issues necessitate the rollout of the guideline. Moreover, the country now faces demographic challenges posed by an aging population. This demands the building of a supportive environment for children. Investing in the younger generation is conducive to enhancing the quality of the country's population and increasing the birth rate.

The guideline sets forth a comprehensive framework for creating a child-friendly society. For example, it requires governments at all levels to take into account children's characteristics and needs when drafting policies and regulations, ensuring that children's needs are prioritized in urban planning and resource allocation. Efforts should be made to improve areas and facilities for children's sports,

recreation and extracurricular activities, so as to create well-equipped spaces for them.

The initiative also aims to expand access to essential public services, such as education and healthcare, by implementing policies such as preferential access to public amenities for children. For example, some cities have already increased the height limit for free public transportation for children. It is also proposed that the HPV vaccine be incorporated into the national immunization program, providing free vaccinations for girls aged 13 and above; and healthcare institutions be encouraged to establish 24-hour emergency treatment green channels for critically ill children aged under 3.

Strengthening the protection of minors is a cornerstone of the initiative, which includes rigorous enforcement of safety standards for food and children's products, the development of child-friendly healthcare facilities and enhanced legal protection of minors. The significance of advancing child-friendly development across society is profound. First and foremost, it directly enhances the well-being of children, providing them with the security and opportunities they need. This, in turn, can help cultivate future generations who are better able to tackle the challenges of tomorrow.

By investing in the development of children, China is effectively investing in its future workforce, ensuring a steady supply of talent and innovation. Through prioritizing the needs of children, the country is improving the quality of life for the people, demonstrating its commitment to its people-first principle.

Investing in children is the most worthwhile investment in the future of a nation. Through coordinated efforts across various sectors, China will be better able to create an environment where children can flourish. This also lays the foundation for a prosperous, inclusive and sustainable future for all.

– Courtesy of China Daily

increase global economic instability.

The EU ought to act as a responsible pillar in safeguarding international stability. Lasting peace requires patience and commitment, not short-term geopolitical bargains.

In the process, the EU should uphold the central role of the United Nations and avoid blindly following the US agenda, which has repeatedly led it into difficult positions.

Political negotiation and diplomatic dialogue remain the only realistic path toward resolving these crises.

The EU should refrain from exploiting US demands for allied support in the Middle East to pursue a hasty resolution in Ukraine.

– Courtesy of China Daily

China raises three proposals to boost energy cooperation in Asia-Pacific region

BEIJING – China has put forward three proposals regarding high-quality universal energy access, artificial intelligence (AI) plus energy and coordinated energy governance to promote energy cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region.

The proposals were raised at the 71st Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Energy Working Group meeting, held on Wednesday and yesterday in Nanchang, capital of Jiangxi Province.

The proposals call for inclusive development to extend energy benefits to all through regional collaboration and diversified technologies. They advocate for accelerated innovation to integrate AI and energy through aligned strategies and standards.

Additionally, they emphasize strengthened coordination to enhance the effectiveness, transparency and resilience of energy governance through policy dialogue and information sharing.

He Yang, deputy head of the National Energy Administration, emphasized the Asia-Pacific's pivotal dual role as a global energy consumption hub and the engine of global energy production and transformation.

China is committed to promoting the building of a safe, resilient and affordable energy system in the Asia-Pacific region, and contributing Chinese wisdom and solutions to the energy security, stability and sustainable development in the region and the world, He said.

– Xinhua

State Council approves Meishan as national historical and cultural city

BEIJING – The State Council has approved Meishan City, located in Sichuan Province, as a national historical and cultural city, according to a notice on the website of the Central People's Government released yesterday.

The notice highlighted Meishan's long history, profound culture, rich heritage, well-preserved traditional features and distinct regional traits, recognizing its great historical and cultural value.

It required Sichuan and Meishan governments to implement cultural relic protection laws, explore heritage value, clarify ancient Meizhou's layout, strengthen protection and utilization, and promote fine traditional Chinese culture, according to the notice.

Meishan, which is also called Meizhou, was home to the great Chinese poet Su Shi of the Song Dynasty (960-1279).

– Xinhua

Chinese researchers decode oriental fruit fly's egg-laying mystery to curb mango damage

CHONGQING – Chinese scientists have uncovered the mechanism behind a major agricultural pest's puzzling habit of laying eggs in mangoes at an early ripening stage, a discovery that may lead to smarter pest control strategies.

The oriental fruit fly causes immense damage to mango crops by preferring to lay eggs in fruit that is just beginning to ripen. This triggers premature fruit drop and significant losses. The damage often occurs before farmers can even detect an infestation.

Researchers at Southwest University in Chongqing Municipality, led by Professor Wang Jinjun, have discovered that a specific chemical compound called hesperidin is the key to combating damage caused by these fruit flies. The findings were published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

As mangoes mature, hesperidin levels rise. High concentrations of this compound prove toxic to oriental fruit fly offspring, reducing egg hatching rates, suppressing larval growth, and lowering adult emergence.

The female fly avoids this danger by "tasting" with its ovipositor – a tubular organ used to pierce fruit. The team detected clear electrophysiological signals from the ovipositor tip when exposed to hesperidin, confirming it houses specialized sensors.

This discovery opens new avenues for countering this pest by enabling targeted intervention methods based on the fly's unique sensory system. Researchers can also predict infestation risk by tracking changes in chemical composition in developing fruit, said Jiang Hongbo, a team member and a professor at Southwest University.

– Xinhua

Wang Yi says prolonged wars have no winners

BEIJING – Foreign Minister Wang Yi said yesterday there are no winners in the prolonged wars, and a ceasefire and an end to the hostilities are the will of the people.

Wang, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, made the remarks in a phone conversation with British Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper.

The two sides mainly exchanged views on the situation in the Middle East.

Cooper expounded on Britain's view on the current situation in the Middle East, stating that in the face of an increasingly turbulent world, the British side hopes to maintain close communication with China, push for an early end to the war, resume diplomatic negotiations, and seek long-term solutions.

Wang elaborated on China's position, saying that the current conflict in the Middle East is escalating, and the war is expanding, which not only impacts regional peace and stability, but also directly affects international energy, finance, trade and shipping, undermining the common interests of all countries.

China urges all parties to immediately cease military operations, resolve differences through equal dialogue, and jointly safeguard regional peace and stability, Wang said.

As permanent members of the UN Security Council, China and Britain shoulder the responsibility of upholding international peace and security, he noted.

Both sides should enhance communication, remain committed

to actions conducive to peace, and jointly uphold the purposes and principles of the UN Charter and the basic norms governing international relations, so as to prevent the international order from being further undermined and the foundations of world peace from being eroded, said the foreign minister.

The two sides also exchanged views on China-Britain relations and agreed that they should actively implement the consensus reached by the leaders of the two countries, enhance exchanges, and continuously promote the long-term and consistent comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Britain, thereby providing stability and certainty for a world fraught with changes and turmoil.

– Xinhua

This photo taken last Tuesday shows a bionic hand on display at the Suzhou Embodied Artificial Intelligence Robotics Innovation Center in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province. In recent years, Jiangsu has prioritized embodied robotics as a key future industry. Innovation centers and data collection and training hubs for embodied AI robots have been established in cities including Nanjing, Suzhou and Wuxi. A provincial embodied robotics industry alliance has also been formed, bringing together nearly 300 members, including manufacturers, research institutes, end users and financial institutions, to support the sector's development. In industrial robotics, Jiangsu is home to leading companies such as Estun Automation and Inovance Group, and has developed an integrated ecosystem covering both complete robots and core components. Exports of industrial robots from the province have maintained rapid growth. For future development, Jiangsu plans to build on policy support and industrial platforms to accelerate the development of a national robotics innovation hub, helping bring research results to the production line and inject fresh momentum into the high-quality development of manufacturing.

– AFP



Study offers new understanding of how 'Roof of the World' grows

BEIJING – A new study by Chinese scientists reveals that the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau did not experience a steady, continuous rise, but underwent two distinct cycles of dramatic uplift and fall.

Published recently in the journal *Geology*, the research was led by scientists from the Guangzhou Institute of Geochemistry under the Chinese Academy of Sciences. By linking deep-underground activities to changes on the plateau's surface, the findings offer new insights into how massive mountain plateaus form.

The team focused on two intermountain basins within the Gangdise Mountains in the southern part of the plateau, known as the "roof of the world." The sedimentary layers in these basins function like geological "diaries," preserving detailed records of landform changes over tens of millions of years.

Using uranium-lead isotope dating technology and mineral analyses of the basin sediments,

the team discovered that the two basins, formed tens of millions of years apart, share striking similarities in their hydrological systems. Their water systems both shifted from open to closed and then back to open.

The scientists explained that before a rapid uplift, the basins were relatively open, receiving input from complex, external river systems. As the terrain rose swiftly to form towering mountain barriers, they cut off rivers and isolated the basins. Later, when the land sank again, the rivers reconnected.

Based on this pattern, the study infers that the Gangdise Mountains underwent two periods of rapid uplift: the first between approximately 54 million and 51 million years ago, and the second between 15 million and 8 million years ago. Each uplift pushed the land up by about one kilometer. Critically, each uplift was followed by a period of subsidence.

The study also finds that

both uplifts were accompanied by thinning of the Earth's crust, suggesting that they were driven by similar deep processes.

According to the scientists, the first uplift was likely triggered by the break-off of the sinking Neo-Tethys oceanic plate. The second was caused by the delamination of a portion of the underthrust Indian continental plate. In both cases, the loss of part of the heavy, sinking plate allowed the land above to rebound upward, like removing a heavy weight. However, after the initial rebound, the continent's continued push pulled the surface back down, leading to subsidence.

"The growth of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau wasn't a simple story of 'getting taller,'" said Xue Erkun, a postdoctoral researcher at the Guangzhou institute. "It was the result of multiple, alternating phases of uplift and subsidence. Furthermore, similar surface changes were driven by similar deep-seated movement mechanisms." – Xinhua

Thailand's new parliament elects Anutin as PM

Montira Rungjirajitranon

BANGKOK – Thailand's new parliament yesterday elected Anutin Charnvirakul as prime minister, keeping the conservative in the top office after his party routed its election rivals.

"This parliament has voted for Anutin Chanvirakul to become prime minister," House Speaker Sophon Zaram said on the floor of the legislature, noting the incumbent had garnered more than half of the ballots cast.

Anutin received 293 votes from newly seated lawmakers to win the premiership, with his progressive rival Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut gaining 119 and 86 MPs abstaining, Sophon said.

"I hope to remain in my position to serve the people for as long as I can," Anutin told reporters ahead of the vote.

"Those who know me understand that whenever there is a problem affecting the public, I will respond immediately to their needs."

The Southeast Asian nation's new government will have to handle the fallout from the Middle East war, sluggish economic growth and lingering border tensions with neighbour Cambodia.

Anutin's anointment comes after his pro-military and pro-

monarchy Bhumjaithai party had its best electoral performance ever in February, following two rounds of deadly border clashes with Cambodia last year.

Bhumjaithai promised to build a wall on the Cambodian frontier, keep all border crossings closed and recruit 100,000 volunteer soldiers, winning the most seats of any party and putting Anutin in pole position to head the next government.

The third-placed Pheu Thai party of jailed former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra agreed to join Anutin in a coalition alongside 14 smaller parties, and parliament anointed him yesterday.

The 59-year-old millionaire heir to a family construction fortune—who championed the decriminalisation of cannabis in Thailand—was first elected prime minister in September.

He came to office after his predecessor, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, Thaksin's daughter, was ousted by court order over an ethics complaint.

In a leaked phone conversation, Paetongtarn referred to former Cambodian leader Hun Sun as "uncle" and called a Thai military commander her "opponent", triggering public and political outrage.

The Pheu Thai-led government fell after Anutin pulled Bhumjaithai



Thailand's caretaker Prime Minister and Bhumjaithai Party leader Anutin Charnvirakul (centre) poses for photo with fellow party members after a vote at Parliament in Bangkok yesterday.

Thailand's new parliament elected Anutin as prime minister, according to an AFP tally of the vote, keeping the conservative in the top office after his party routed its election rivals. — AFP

out of the then coalition, and parliament later elected him prime minister.

The reformist People's Party — which had been polling first ahead of the election but ultimately came in second — will lead the opposition.

But 10 of its newly elected MPs, including party leader Natthaphong, face accusations of an ethics breach over their effort to reform the royal insult law, which could see them banned from politics.

Speaking to journalists before the

vote, Natthaphong said the opposition aimed to "utilise this parliamentary stage to effectively communicate with our fellow citizens".

Challenges ahead

Thailand's economic growth slowed last year, with the incoming government facing a struggling tourism sector while fast-growing Vietnam is now attracting more foreign direct investment.

The day after Israeli-US strikes on Iran, which ignited the war that

has thrown global markets into turmoil, Anutin pledged to "turn this Middle East crisis into an opportunity for Thailand".

But the country is now reckoning with higher fuel prices and supply disruptions.

Political scientist Yuttaporn Issarachai said that the Thai government's primary agenda has shifted towards daunting external challenges, including the economic fallout of the Middle East conflagration.

"So far, the cabinet has failed to produce decisive measures to lower fuel costs, offering only 'band-aid' solutions like working from home," he told AFP.

The longstanding border conflict with Cambodia remains a challenge — even while a fragile ceasefire remains in place.

Soon after becoming premier the first time, Anutin authorised the armed forces to take whatever action they saw fit on the frontier.

The countries' 800-kilometre boundary is still not fully agreed, and Thailand's military took control of several disputed areas in the latest fighting in December.

But voters' attention had moved elsewhere, Yuttaporn said.

"The economy is now the public's top priority." — AFP

Transport strike erupts in Philippines to protest surging fuel costs

MANILA – Transport groups yesterday launched a nationwide transport strike in the Philippines to protest against soaring oil price hikes.

Local media reported that the strike covered 15 to 20 protest centers across Metro Manila, with similar actions staged in several major provinces.

Among the protesters' demands are the immediate rollback of oil prices, the removal of excise and value-added taxes on petroleum products, the expansion of subsidies to affected sectors, and the implementation of a living wage for workers.

The Philippines, which relies heavily on imported crude oil, has been grappling with sharp price increases linked to the growing tensions in the Middle East.

On the eve of the strike, the Philippine National Police placed



Jeepney drivers and activists protest in support of a jeepney drivers' strike in Manila yesterday.

Drivers began a transport strike demanding the government rollback the oil price, remove excise tax on oil and a fare increase, amid oil price increases due to the war in the Middle East. — AFP

Metro Manila on high alert, to ensure public safety and manage traffic. — Xinhua

32-km traffic jam in Bali kills 1, leaves dozens fainting

JAKARTA – A traffic jam stretching more than 30 kilometers on the road leading to Gilimanuk Port in Bali left one person dead and dozens of travelers fainting, local authorities confirmed yesterday.

Local media reported that a long line of vehicles during the peak of the Eid al-Fitr homecoming exodus caused severe delays and health risks for travelers.

The victim was a 39-year-old housewife who was traveling on a bus from Denpasar to Central Java, said Bali Police official Nyoman Supartha Wiryadarma, adding that she reportedly lost consciousness while trapped in the gridlock and was rushed to a nearby community health center, but could not be saved.

"The tragic incident was allegedly caused by severe fatigue

after the victim was stuck for hours in the prolonged traffic jam. The combination of extreme heat and uncertainty over waiting times is believed to have worsened conditions," said Wiryadarma in a written statement.

He also said at least 16 people fainted due to exhaustion and heat exposure while being trapped in the traffic, with medical teams deployed to assist the route. — Xinhua

Myanmar junta touts surrender of over 500 rebel fighters

MANDALAY – More than 500 Myanmar opposition guerrillas surrendered to the junta, the military said yesterday, with AFP journalists witnessing a disarming ceremony that one resistance faction suggested was a propaganda stunt.

Myanmar has been consumed by a civil war since 2021, when the military swept aside the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi in a coup.

A kaleidoscope of rebel factions have entered the fray including battalions of pro-democracy fighters formed after the putsch and ethnic minority armies which have long resisted central rule.

AFP journalists in central Mandalay city saw hundreds of personnel assembled on a military base in the grounds of the ancient Royal Palace before a table stacked with guns, bullets and weapon magazines.

"You went there because you didn't know any better, but now you have regained your conscience," head of Myanmar's Central Command, Brigadier General Aung Htay, told the assembled ranks.

"You all have experienced it firsthand. Living in the jungle is nothing like you see in movies or what other people say," he said. "A person in the light can live in freedom without any fear."

The mixed-gender ranks wore mismatched camouflaged and drab uniforms — many stamped with the logo of the Mandalay People's Defence Force (PDF), considered one of the most powerful pro-democracy battalions.

"There is no case of our PDFs

surrendering to the Myanmar military in those kinds of numbers," a Mandalay PDF spokesman said, suggesting the event was for propaganda purposes.

"There are a few that surrender with full uniforms and badges," he added.

"We found out that some people are wearing our uniforms but we saw some mistakes in the way they're being worn as the caps don't match with the uniform."

The military permitted press interviews with the assembled personnel.

"I first joined them because I don't like the regime and thought the revolution could win," said one man, remaining anonymous for security reasons, adding he was followed into the PDF by his wife and two daughters.

"Their leadership is very different to what we expected. That is why we came back," added the 39-year-old.

While battalions dubbed the People's Defence Forces (PDFs) are fuelled by idealism to topple the junta, their most notable victories have come fighting alongside the more experienced ethnic minority armed groups.

But recent interventions by neighbouring China have sealed landmark truces with two key ethnic factions, once the stalwarts of the opposition, leaving the more rag-tag pro-democracy forces back-footed around Mandalay.

Analysts say the ceasefires are a sign Beijing backs the military to maintain some semblance of stability in Myanmar. — AFP

Stalking cases hit record high in Japan in 2025

TOKYO – The number of stalking-related cases handled by police in Japan hit a record high in 2025 since a law criminalizing the act took effect in 2000, according to police data released yesterday.

Of the 3,717 stalking-linked cases investigated by police, 1,546 involved direct violations of the anti-stalking law, up 205 from the previous year. The remaining 2,171 cases, including two murders, were investigated under other laws, such as the penal code, up 428 from a year earlier, according to the National Police Agency.

Restraining orders issued to stop stalking and similar acts exceeded 3,000 for the first time, while 1,577 warnings against stalking were issued, up 98 from the previous year, according to the agency.

The data also showed that the number of stalking consultations with police climbed to 22,881, up 3,314 from 2024.

Among the cases, 679 were related to wireless tags and tracking via smartphones, up 309 from the previous year.

– Xinhua

Sri Lanka's ex-leader alleged to have received kickbacks over Airbus deal

COLOMBO – The former chief of Sri Lanka's main state-owned airline has admitted to paying the country's ex-president Mahinda Rajapaksa nearly half a million dollars in kickbacks to wave through purchases of 10 Airbus planes, a court heard yesterday.

Rajapaksa, who served as the island nation's president from 2005 to 2015, and his once-powerful family are the subject of several high-profile corruption allegations, which they deny and call politically motivated.

The case heard at Colombo Chief Magistrate's Court yesterday chiefly centred on accusations against Kapila Chandrasena, the former CEO of national carrier SriLankan Airlines.

Representatives for the bribery commission told the court that Chandrasena had admitted to paying Rajapaksa 60 million rupees in three instalments in 2013, while he headed the airline.

The alleged transactions occurred as the airline sought to seal a US\$2.3 billion deal with Airbus for 10 planes, which required approval from Rajapaksa's cabinet.

Chandrasena disclosed the alleged kickbacks, worth US\$461,000 at the time, in a statement to the commission after his arrest last week, its representatives said.

A spokesman for Rajapaksa denied the allegations and cast doubt on the commission's independence.

"You cannot rely on a statement from the main accused," Manoj Gamage told AFP.

"This is a political vendetta, and we will resist it."

Chandrasena is accused of conspiring to accept US\$16 million

from Airbus, though he allegedly only received around US\$1.7 million.

The court heard that the money went into a Singapore bank account, from which he paid Rajapaksa and also sent 20 million rupees (then around US\$154,000) to the then-aviation minister Priyankara Jayaratne.

Chandrasena remains in custody and has not commented publicly on the case. Jayaratne has not commented.

SriLankan Airlines is saddled with debt, with estimated accumulated losses of 596 billion rupees at the end of March last year.

Attempts to sell the airline have so far failed to attract a buyer.

Chandrasena was previously arrested and released on bail in a separate case in 2020. At the time, the United States, Britain and France named him in a joint investigation into Airbus business deals.

Earlier that year, a French court approved a fine of US\$4 billion to be paid by the European aircraft manufacturer to France, Britain and the United States to settle the probes.

Investigators in Britain accused Airbus of failing to prevent people associated with the company from bribing directors or employees of SriLankan Airlines to "obtain or retain business or advantage".

In June 2025, Nishantha Wickramasinghe, who was chairman of SriLankan Airlines when the carrier contracted to buy the aircraft in 2013, was arrested in an unrelated corruption case.

Wickramasinghe was accused of bankrolling Rajapaksa, who is his brother-in-law, in his failed bid for re-election. That case is still pending.

– AFP

Cambodia unveils ancient Shiva statue restored from 10,000 pieces

Phnom Penh, Cambodia

PHNOM PENH – A massive, 1,000-year-old "Dancing Shiva" statue, which was broken into more than 10,000 fragments decades ago, has been successfully restored in Cambodia, the culture ministry said yesterday.

The five-metre and seven-tonne sandstone sculpture – with 10 arms and five faces – dates back to the 10th century from the site of an ancient capital of the Khmer empire, Koh Ker.

The temple ruins of Koh Ker in northern Cambodia were listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2023.

The Dancing Shiva, which was "reborn after its complete restoration", was unveiled Wednesday evening

at the Angkor Conservation Centre in Siem Reap city, home of the renowned Angkor Wat heritage site, the ministry said.

Cambodian experts in cooperation with the French School of the Far East (EFEO) spent five years restoring the immense artwork, it added.

The statue "was toppled in the 14th century and shattered into more than 10,000 fragments by looters" during the country's years of civil war, according to a statement from the culture ministry, EFEO and others involved in its reconstruction.

"This restoration stands as a powerful testament to the efforts undertaken to ensure that looters do not have the final say," they said.

During the process, restorers recorded 2,750 fragments with

sculpted surfaces and identified more than 700 joins, the statement said.

Officials hope to return the sculpture to Koh Ker in an effort to attract more tourists to the site, the ministry said.

Cambodia welcomed home 74 cultural artefacts last month, returned to the country after being plundered by notorious British antiques smuggler Douglas Latchford.

Thousands of relics are believed to have been trafficked out of Cambodia over the years.

Experts say the trade thrived from the mid-1960s to the 1990s – a period of civil war and instability that saw the anti-intellectual Khmer Rouge regime rise to power and left precious heritage unprotected.

– AFP



People take a train to return home at Tongi Railway Station in Gazipur, Bangladesh, on Wednesday. The station is packed with huge numbers of home-bound passengers as the Eid al-Fitr is drawing near.

– Xinhua

Baby monkey Punch acclimatising, making new friends at Japan zoo

Tomohiro Osaki

ICHIKAWA – Clutching a monkey plushie, Eliete Ikeda screamed "Punch!" as she caught sight of the underdog baby macaque still drawing crowds of photo-hungry visitors to a Japanese zoo weeks after he shot to stardom.

Seven-month-old Punch was abandoned by his mother and became an internet sensation after clips of him clinging to a plush orangutan toy for comfort – and seemingly being roughhoused by fellow monkeys – proliferated online last month.

His plight at Ichikawa City Zoo outside Tokyo has since spawned a dedicated fanbase under the hashtag #HangInTherePunch, leading to the local facility being flooded with an unprecedented number of visitors, including foreign tourists.

"I think it's the relatability of it," 30-year-old Jon Frigillana of the United States told AFP when asked why the monkey is tugging at the heartstrings of so many.

Hand-raised in an artificial environment immediately after his birth in July, the small, dark-furred macaque is gradually acclimatising, the zoo said, no longer clutching the plushie all the time. He's also making a few friends.

"He's going through a lot, but seeing him come through

adversity... It's nice to see strength in that way," Frigillana said.

And with wars around the world dominating his newsfeed, "in this day and age, it's heartwarming to see" Punch, he added.

Ikeda, meanwhile, said seeing the "kawaii" – or "cute" – Punch was a "present" during a birthday trip to the zoo to celebrate turning 53.

"Happy birthday for me," she said excitedly.

Lately about 2,000 to 3,000 people a day have been flocking to the facility, roughly 10 times the usual number during the winter off-season, zoo official Takashi Yasunaga told AFP.

One local taxi driver said that "around a half" of pedestrians he drives past on the way to the zoo now appear to be non-Japanese – an "unprecedented" sight in his typically quiet neighbourhood.

"Some foreign tourists get in, and with big smiles on their faces, just tell me: 'Punch'" to convey their destination, said the driver, who declined to be named because he was not authorised to speak to media.

Rules of monkey society

But the attention showered on the zoo hasn't all been positive.

The People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)

called Punch's initial predicament a reminder of the cruelty faced by animals in captivity.

Widely circulated online clips focusing on a few pitiable interactions with other monkeys have exposed the zoo to criticisms, including from Europe over his state in the enclosure.

In the strictly hierarchical society of Japanese macaques, it is not uncommon for higher-ranked individuals to "discipline and scold" newcomers in behaviours that are "fundamentally different from abuse in human society," Yasunaga, the zoo official, said.

"We're watching with patience and care as Punch gets trained in the troop and learns rules of monkey society," he said.

On AFP's recent visit, Punch was spotted playing alone with chains and branches on the floor of his enclosure, and occasionally approaching others – only to be ignored – before going back to his plushie.

"We hope he will eventually let go of his stuffed toy and become bigger in size and indistinguishable from others," Yasunaga said.

"Such a sight might bring a bit of sadness to many of our visitors, but his growth into a full-fledged member of the troop is our ultimate hope."

– AFP



A woman gets her hands decorated with henna on the eve of the Muslim festival of Eid al-Fitr, in Islamabad, Pakistan yesterday.

– AFP

Iran attacks on gas and oil refineries heighten fears over war fallout

DOHA – Iranian attacks on the world's largest LNG plant in Qatar and refineries in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait sent shock waves through energy markets yesterday as the US said there was no time frame to end the Middle East war.

Amid growing fears over the economic damage from the war, Trump said Iran's key South Pars gas field would not be attacked again, after Israel struck it on Wednesday, but warned of a furious American response if Tehran did not end its attacks on Qatari energy sites.

Tehran responded that it would have "zero restraint" if its own energy infrastructure was hit again.

Oil markets have already been shaken by Iran's blocking of the Strait of Hormuz, but prices surged again amid fears of further attacks on energy sites.

The international benchmark Brent surged 10 percent to US\$119 a barrel before falling back to US\$112, while European gas prices rose 35 percent, after Iranian missiles hit Qatar's huge Ras Laffan liquified natural gas complex in retaliation for the Israeli strike on South Pars.

The nighttime attack left Ras Laffan, a repeated target since the start of the war on February 28, at a complete standstill.

Saudi Arabia's defence ministry said meanwhile that a drone crashed into the Samref refinery in the Red Sea port of Yanbu.

And in Kuwait, drone attacks sparked fires at the Mina Abdullah and Mina Al-Ahmadi refineries, which have a combined capacity of 800,000 barrels per day.

Saudi Arabia said it reserved the "right to take military actions" over repeated attacks on its facilities. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) said the strikes pose a "direct threat to global energy security".

Later yesterday, Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani said that Iran's attack on Ras Laffan was "clear proof" against Tehran's claims to have only targeted US interests in the Gulf.

He said the attacks "bring no direct benefit to any country, rather, they harm and directly impact populations".

'Zero restraint'

Trump indicated he did not know about Israel's raid on Iran's gas field, which supplies about 70 percent of the Islamic republic's domestic needs.

But the United States and Iran have fired off threats and counter-threats since.

Trump warned the United States would "blow up" the South



Iranians look at a vendor's stall at the Tajrish Bazaar in northern Tehran yesterday, as they shop on the eve of Nowruz (Noruz), the Persian New Year.

– AFP

Pars gas field if Tehran did not stop attacking Qatar.

Iran responded with defiance. The military's Khatam Al-Anbiya operational command vowed the "complete destruction" of Gulf energy infrastructure if the Israeli attack was repeated, according to a statement carried by Fars news agency.

Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said on social media there would be "zero restraint" if the country's infrastructure was hit again.

There is growing concern among the world's major economies over fallout from the conflict.

Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the Netherlands said they would "contribute to appropriate efforts to ensure safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz" but gave few details.

French President Emmanuel Macron condemned the "reckless escalation" in attacks and called for "direct talks between the Americans and Iranians on this matter".

UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer's office warned that "attacks on critical infrastructure risked pushing the region further into crisis", after talks with Macron and NATO chief Mark Rutte.

India and China also expressed new concern about supplies which depend on the shipping route. Fuel shortages have sparked long queues at petrol stations across Asia, where many economies are heavily dependent on oil.

No time frame for war's end

US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth said there is no time frame for ending the war, but said that "we're very much on track" and Trump would choose when to end.

"It will be at the president's choosing, ultimately, where we say, 'Hey, we've achieved what

we need to," he told a Washington news conference.

Meanwhile, Trump said yesterday, "I'm not putting troops" on the ground in Iran, amid ongoing speculation that a Marine expeditionary force being sent to the region could be used for ground operations.

Commentators said the energy attacks showed gaps between the United States and Israel over tactics.

"The conflict is drifting into a war of attrition – with no clear signs of regime collapse in Iran," said Danny Citrinowicz, a senior fellow at Israel's Institute for National Security Studies, on X.

The attacks "underscored just how unstructured this campaign has become – lacking strategic clarity, long-term planning, and a defined end state".

US media said the administration could seek more than US\$200 billion in additional war funding from Congress.

"I think that number could move. Obviously, it takes money to kill bad guys," Hegseth commented on the figure.

Tehran queues

Iran is gearing up for the key holiday of Nowruz, the Persian new year.

A US-based rights group has reported more than 3,000 people killed in Iran by the US-Israeli strikes, a figure that could not be independently verified.

In Tehran, however, there was little to suggest that the country was mired in war or that it had lost its supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and other key officials in US-Israeli strikes.

Tehran's city centre was filled with traffic jams and street vendors haggling over the price of clothes and fruit yesterday.

Security was greater than usual, with heavily armed security forces visible on certain streets as well as an increased number of armoured vehicles.

– AFP

UN shipping body urges 'safe maritime corridor' in Gulf

Pol-Malo Le Bris

LONDON – The UN's maritime body called yesterday for the creation of a safe shipping "corridor" in the Gulf to evacuate stranded vessels and seafarers, after an emergency meeting that also condemned Iran.

Following two days of urgent talks in London convened due to the Middle East war, the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) said the "safe maritime corridor" should be established as "a provisional and urgent measure".

IMO Secretary-General Arsenio Dominguez said the "humanitarian corridor" would "evacuate ships in the Persian Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz".

The UN agency – responsible for regulating international shipping safety – noted the focus should be on "those currently confined within the Gulf region through peaceful means and on a voluntary basis".

The IMO's 40-member council included the demand among several "decisions" that accompanied a 17-point declaration addressing various aspects of the situation in the Middle East.

However, such calls are non-binding.

It came as around 20,000 seafarers remained stranded on approximately 3,200 vessels west of the Strait of Hormuz, according to the UN body.

Iranian attacks on ships in the region have created an effective blockade of the crucial chokepoint, through which a fifth of global crude and liquified natural gas normally transits.

Alongside other strikes in the conflict, that has dramatically spiked oil prices and spooked markets.

'Condemned'

In its declaration the IMO council said members "strongly condemned the threats and attacks against vessels and purported closure of the Strait... by Iran, adversely affecting merchant and commercial vessels".

They demanded Tehran "immediately refrain" from its actions and – alongside the call for a safe corridor – requested a "coordinated international approach to the safety of navigation" in the region.

Iran, which is an IMO member but does not sit on its ruling council,

hit out at the declaration, branding it "one-sided, unfair, inaccurate and legally deficient".

"It condemns the victim state while disregarding the unlawful aggression that is the root cause of the present situation," its delegate to the UN body said, accusing it of "politicisation".

Bahrain, Japan, Mexico, Panama, Singapore and the UAE had tabled the plan for "a framework to allow the safe evacuation of seafarers and ships stranded in the Gulf".

It won the support of the US among others.

'Collaborate'

The IMO's declaration said it "aims to protect the lives of seafarers and ensure the mobilisation and commercial navigation of vessels intending to use this framework by avoiding military attacks and protecting and securing the maritime domain".

It asked Dominguez to "collaborate with the relevant parties and take necessary immediate actions to initiate the establishment of the framework".

The IMO head said he "shall be taking this instruction very seriously", calling the measure "of particular operational importance" which showed "we value seafarers".

Earlier yesterday, six major international powers – including Britain, France, Germany and Japan – said they were ready "to contribute to appropriate efforts to ensure safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz".

The grouping added they welcomed "the commitment of nations who are engaging in preparatory planning" but provided no further details.

At the IMO, the Cook Islands' delegate pressed Iran to confirm reported evidence that "there is a nascent ships registration system being set up for approved vessels to make safe passage through the Straits".

"It's important relevant information. If there is safe passage, what are the terms and the conditions for such safe passage?" he asked.

"I don't see how we can leave the Council now without getting some clarity on this."

Iran's IMO representative declined the opportunity to respond.

– AFP



Security personnel carry the bodies of the three Palestinian women killed in Iranian missile attacks, before their funeral in Beit Awa town near the occupied West Bank city of Hebron yesterday. Iranian missile attacks killed three Palestinian women in the occupied West Bank and a foreign worker in central Israel, medics said yesterday. Falling shrapnel struck a hair salon in the West Bank town of Beit Awa near Hebron on Wednesday, killing the three women, according to the Palestine Red Crescent Society, marking the first Palestinian deaths from Iranian attacks in the ongoing Middle East war.

– AFP

ECB warns of major hit from Mideast war

Sam Reeves

FRANKFURT AM MAIN – The European Central Bank (ECB) warned yesterday that the energy shock unleashed by the Middle East war would sharply push up inflation and hit the eurozone's growth this year.

The ECB kept borrowing costs on hold as expected but President Christine Lagarde dropped typical language that rates were in a "good place", and analysts raised their bets on hikes at forthcoming meetings.

From the United States to Britain and Japan, major central banks have all taken a cautious approach at meetings in recent days, keeping interest rates on hold even as worries grow about higher oil and gas prices pushing up inflation.

But Lagarde issued a stark warning that the world was undergoing a "severe shock" due to the war, pitting the United States and Israel against Iran, saying it had "made the outlook significantly more uncertain".

The conflict was a "risk to the euro area economy", potentially weighing on growth and pushing up inflation, she said.

"A prolonged war could increase energy prices further and for longer than currently expected and also weigh on confidence," she said.

New ECB projections forecast that eurozone inflation would come in at 2.6 percent over this year – above the Frankfurt-based institution's two-percent target, and higher than a pre-war forecast in December of 1.9 percent.

It also cut its 2026 growth forecast to 0.9 percent from 1.2 percent in December.

In a more extreme scenario, where oil prices surge higher than currently expected, the ECB warned 2026 growth could fall as low as 0.4 percent and inflation might come in at 4.4 percent over 2026.

Lagarde, however, repeatedly insisted the ECB was "well positioned" to deal with the unfolding shock.

The decision to hold rates for now was unanimous, she said, adding that the ECB's rate-setting governing council was "laser-focused" on dealing with the war's economic fallout.

Hikes on the cards?

Higher inflation would typically lead to rate hikes but, with the war just three weeks in and amid great uncertainty about how long it will last, Lagarde remained tight-lipped on future decisions.

Capital Economics, however, said the ECB's language indicated chances of a hike had risen.

"If energy prices keep rising, we suspect that the balance of opinion will shift towards getting on the front foot by hiking at the next meeting at the end of April", said Jack Allen-Reynolds, the group's deputy chief eurozone economist.

The 21-nation euro area is heavily dependent on energy imports, leaving it vulnerable to the fallout from the war.

Oil and gas prices surged anew yesterday after Iran hit the world's largest liquefied natural gas (LNG) facility in Qatar, following a strike on its own gas field.

The Strait of Hormuz, a crucial route for global energy exports, has also been almost entirely blocked to oil and gas tankers since the war began.

The expected jump in inflation will weigh on eurozone households and businesses while the growth slowdown could leave the region even further behind rivals the United States and China.

For now, higher energy costs are yet to show up in the latest inflation data, which covers the pre-war period.

The official eurozone inflation rate for February was 1.9 percent. The eurozone's benchmark interest rate has been at two

percent since June.

Other major central banks meeting this week have taken a similar approach, and all kept rates on hold.

The US Federal Reserve has, however, raised its inflation outlook citing the "uncertain" situation, the Bank of Japan warned higher energy prices would stoke inflation and the Bank of England said household energy bills could increase.

For Europe, the war has rekindled memories of the energy shock that followed Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

At that time, the ECB was criticised for moving too slowly to hike rates and tame red-hot prices, but Lagarde insisted yesterday the backdrop now was not the same.

Before the Ukraine war started, inflation had already been elevated due to pandemic supply chain problems and labour shortages whereas now it was below the ECB's target, she said.

With European governments scrambling to provide relief to citizens set to be hit by higher energy costs, Lagarde warned them not to go over the top.

"Any fiscal responses to the energy price shock should be temporary, targeted and tailored," she stressed. – AFP

Denmark, Italy warn Iran war could trigger migrant influx

COPENHAGEN – The prime ministers of Denmark and Italy have called for tougher border controls, warning that the war in the Middle East could trigger an influx of migrants and refugees into the European Union.

Mette Frederiksen and Giorgia Meloni wrote in a joint letter that Europe "cannot risk a repeat" of 2015-2016, when hundreds of thousands of people arrived – many fleeing the civil war in Syria.

The two leaders, who have drastically reduced immigration in their countries, called on the European Commission to adopt a 458-million-euro (US\$527-million) humanitarian aid package, in part to slow population movements toward the bloc.

"The ongoing conflict in the Middle East is increasingly worrying in a number of domains, spreading in a region already hosting large numbers of displaced people," the pair wrote in a letter to EU leaders dated Wednesday but obtained by AFP yesterday.

"We cannot risk a repeat of the refugee and migratory flows to the EU which we saw unfold in 2015-2016.

"This would not only be a humanitarian

catastrophe for the people directly affected but will also risk impacting on the security and cohesion of our Union."

They called for funding to help countries in the Middle East to deal with those affected by the conflict, which started with a bombardment of Iran by the United States and Israel in late February, before they try to come to Europe.

The two leaders added that Europe needed to "be prepared and take the necessary steps if the situation develops".

"We cannot afford to be taken by surprise as in the past. This means further strengthening our borders," they said.

Frederiksen, Meloni and Dutch Prime Minister Rob Jetten held an informal meeting with several other EU countries and the European Commission to discuss "innovative" ways to limit immigration to Europe in light of the war in the Middle East, Meloni's office said.

In early March, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz warned that a possible collapse of Iran could have "far-reaching consequences" including on migration. – AFP



Mayor Zohran Mamdani (centre) speaks during a press conference on the release of NYC High School student Dylan Lopez Contreras at Middle Church yesterday in New York City. Lopez Contreras was freed after spending nearly a year of detention after being arrested by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents at a Lower Manhattan courthouse while attending a mandatory hearing. – AFP

Iran demands 'clarity' from Germany on US airbase Ramstein: envoy

BERLIN – Iran has asked Berlin to clarify the role of the Ramstein airbase in the US-Israeli war on Iran, Tehran's ambassador to Germany Majid Nili told AFP yesterday.

"We have asked them to clarify or explain regarding the role of Ramstein," Nili said, charging that "the role of Ramstein is not officially clear for us".

"Till now, we don't have any answer."

Nili said Iran believes Washington's use of the airbase in western Germany may violate UN resolution 3314.

The resolution says that territory placed at the disposal of another state cannot be used by that state for perpetrating an "act of aggression" against a third state.

"We don't know yet whether Ramstein is in that line or not," he said.

Germany hosts thousands of US military personnel at the Ramstein airbase, which serves as a US Air Force headquarters for Europe and Africa.

Defence Minister Boris Pistorius on

Monday said he saw "no reason at present to doubt the legality of the use of Ramstein" in the war against Iran.

German officials in recent weeks have responded to questions about Ramstein's possible involvement in the war by saying that the US military's use of the base is governed by treaties.

Nili urged Germany and Europe to call on the "aggressors to stop".

An ongoing war "has certain consequences for Europe as well," he said, citing "economic consequences, refugee crisis, terrorism, disintegration of the region".

"We need a long-lasting ceasefire," he said, adding that "compensation is another question" regarding alleged attacks on civilian targets.

Nili said the Strait of Hormuz, a vital shipping channel effectively blocked by Iran since the start of the war, was still "open right now" for states that were "not aggressors or supporting aggressors". – AFP

US approves US\$16.6 billion in arms sales to Gulf states hit by Iran war

WASHINGTON – The United States yesterday announced the approval of US\$16.46 billion in military sales to the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, two Gulf states that have been hit hard by fallout from the Iran war.

Iran responded to the massive US-Israeli air campaign launched late last month with barrages of missiles and drones that have caused deaths and damage in various Gulf countries, which have been forced to expend significant military resources to counter attacks.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio has "determined and provided detailed justification that an emergency exists that requires the immediate sale" of the military equipment, thereby waiving the requirement that Congress give its approval.

The biggest single sale is of lower-tier air and missile defence sensor radars – which are designed to track high-speed targets and give data to a missile defence network – to Kuwait for US\$8 billion, according to a statement from the US State Department.

The next largest was to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for a long-range discrimination radar – which tracks ballistic missile threats – and related equipment at a cost of US\$4.5 billion, the State Department said.

The UAE also received approval to buy systems designed to defeat small, unmanned aircraft for US\$2.1 billion, advanced air-to-air missiles for US\$1.22 billion, and F-16 warplane munitions and upgrades for US\$644 million. – AFP

Portugal rules out military involvement in Mideast conflict

LISBON – Portugal will not take part in the ongoing conflict involving the United States and Iran, Portuguese Foreign Minister Paulo Rangel said this week.

“Portugal is not and will not be involved in this conflict. We will not participate,” Rangel told reporters on Monday, firmly rejecting calls from the United States for greater involvement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in the war.

The Trump administration has been pressing NATO members and other countries to help reopen the Strait of Hormuz, where one-fifth of the world’s oil was transported before the US-Israeli strikes against Iran. Transit through the strategic waterway has been nearly halted due to the threat of Iranians’ retaliatory attacks.

Rangel said Portugal supports efforts to restore freedom of navigation through diplomatic and political means.

“Everything that can be done to unblock the Strait of Hormuz and allow freedom of navigation is positive. There is a great deal that can be done at the political and diplomatic level, and that is where Portugal stands, and where the European Union (EU) will also stand, I believe,” he said.

Asked about US President Donald Trump’s threats to NATO members that refuse to back Washington, Rangel dismissed them outright. “From my side, that deserves absolutely no reaction,” he said.

The minister added that he has been in contact with his counterparts

in the Gulf region in search of a solution to prevent further escalation. “That is the main point for everyone. And the second is to return to the negotiating table,” he said.

On the broader European position, Rangel said EU members have a broad consensus in favor of working to restore navigation through the strait.

“Everyone is willing, especially those with greater means, including diplomatic ones, to cooperate in that direction. Obviously, that does not imply the deployment of military assets to the Strait of Hormuz,” he said.

The minister acknowledged that the conflict is already producing “disadvantages,” particularly for household economies, warning that further escalation “is a risk that cannot be ruled out.” – AFP



European Parliament President Roberta Metsola (left) and Portuguese Prime Minister Luis Montenegro arrive for a EU Summit at the EU headquarters in Brussels yesterday. European Union leaders meet in the context of the US-Israeli war on Iran that is directly affecting the Middle East, and its global consequences on energy prices and security. – AFP

China-backed road project in Mozambique set to boost local livelihoods

Analysis

MAPUTO – By 6:30 a.m., work is already in full swing along the Matambo section of National Road 301 in Tete city, Mozambique, as crews carry out rehabilitation.

Wearing a reflective vest, 20-year-old Miezinha Fulgêncio directs traffic along a temporary diversion, helping ensure the safety of both workers and motorists.

For the young woman from Tete’s outskirts, the project has opened new opportunities. After graduating in 2025, she joined the construction team to support her family and has gradually taken on more technical responsibilities.

The 117-km rehabilitation project, funded by Mozambican hydropower firm Hidroeléctrica de Cahora Bassa, includes the reconstruction of the 50-km

Matambo-Marara section. Carried out by China Henan International Cooperation Group (CHICO), the work encompasses road resurfacing, the construction of a weigh station, an intersection, four bus stops, culverts, bridges and a toll station.

Upon completion, the upgraded road is expected to facilitate the transport of hydropower equipment, improve mobility for local communities and strengthen regional logistics.

Shi Zhaohui, project manager of CHICO, said the project entered the implementation phase in January 2025 and that asphalt paving is now underway, marking a key stage of construction.

Noting that more than 700 local workers, including 72 women, have been employed so far, Shi said the project has provided direct economic benefits to an estimated

3,750 residents.

At the construction site, Chinese senior worker Peng Baofu trains local staff in basic masonry skills, such as mixing mortar and aligning bricks. Many people, initially with no construction experience, have gradually developed their expertise.

As new sections of asphalt continue to stretch along the route, the Matambo-Marara upgrade promises enhanced connectivity, convenience, and economic benefits for surrounding communities. Residents are eagerly anticipating the road’s completion.

Jemisse Agnicia, a local resident from Marara, said the previous poor condition of the road made travel to Songo take up to three hours.

“Once the road is improved, transport will be smoother, and the cost of daily goods may come down,” she said. – Xinhua

Costa Rica cuts ties with Cuba, closes embassy in Havana

SAN JOSÉ – Costa Rica on Wednesday cut diplomatic ties with Cuba and President Rodrigo Chaves declared that the “hemisphere must be cleansed of communists.”

Costa Rica’s leadership is allied with US President Donald Trump, who has escalated threats to topple Cuba’s authorities and is pressing a punishing energy blockade against the island nation.

Chaves’ statement came shortly after Costa Rica said it was closing its embassy in Havana and told Cuba to withdraw its diplomatic staff from San José, the Costa Rican capital.

Chaves told a press conference that Costa Rica “does not recognise the legitimacy of Cuba’s communist regime, in light of the mistreatment, repression and undignified conditions in which they hold the inhabitants of that beautiful island.”

“The hemisphere must be cleansed of communists,” said the right-wing leader, who is set to be succeeded by his

party colleague, Laura Fernández, on May 8. “We will not grant legitimacy to a regime that oppresses and tortures nearly 10 million Cubans today.”

When asked whether his decision signified a complete severing of ties, Chaves stated that “at this moment, Costa Rica and the Cuban communist regime do not have diplomatic relations.”

Chaves noted that, should it wish to do so, Havana may retain its consular staff in the country to attend to about 10,000 Cuban residents, while Costa Rica will serve its own citizens from Panamá. The Costa Rican embassy had been without diplomatic staff since February 5.

Under Pressure from Trump

Costa Rica is following in the footsteps of another Trump ally, Ecuador, which on March 4 expelled Cuba’s ambassador, Basilio Gutiérrez, accusing him of interfering in the country’s internal political affairs and

engaging in “violent activities.”

Costa Rica and Ecuador are part of a group of Latin American nations that recently formed an alliance with Trump to combat drug traffickers using military force.

Cuba is facing an economic crisis, exacerbated by the suspension in January of crude oil supplies from Venezuela following the ousting of president Nicolas Maduro in a US military intervention.

For weeks, Trump has escalated his threats against Havana and its leadership, while simultaneously asserting that the island – which is currently engaged in talks with Washington – wishes to “conclude an agreement” with the United States.

On Monday, Trump asserted that he hopes to have “the honour of taking Cuba, in some way.” Cuba, which has been under a US embargo since 1962, confirmed last Friday that it is indeed in talks with its powerful neighbour. – AFP

Cambodia, Brazil vow to boost ties, cooperation

PHNOM PENH – Cambodia and Brazil yesterday reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening bilateral relations and expanding cooperation in various areas of mutual interest, Cambodia’s foreign ministry said in a statement.

The commitment was made during a meeting between Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Prak Sokhonn and Susan Kleebank, secretary for Asia and the Pacific at Brazil’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The second bilateral consultations between the ministries of foreign affairs of Cambodia and Brazil were held on Wednesday in Phnom Penh, the statement noted.

Sokhonn said the consultations had produced fruitful and encouraging outcomes aimed at further strengthening and expanding cooperation for the mutual benefit of both nations, including trade and investment, tourism, agriculture, renewable energy, agro-processing, demining, education, environment, and parliamentary-to-parliamentary relations.

For her part, Kleebank reaffirmed Brazil’s commitment to deepening cooperation further, especially in areas of mutual interest to both countries.

They also discussed regional and international issues of common concern to both countries, the statement concluded.

– Xinhua, MPD

Guinea-Bissau, ECOWAS in deal on regional animal health center

BISSAU – The transitional government of Guinea-Bissau and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on Wednesday signed an agreement for the establishment of the bloc’s Regional Animal Health Center in Bissau.

The agreement sets out the legal and institutional framework for hosting the center in Guinea-Bissau, in a move to strengthen regional cooperation and food security.

The signing ceremony was attended by Guinea-Bissau’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, International Cooperation and Communities João Bernardo Vieira and ECOWAS Resident Representative in Guinea-Bissau Ngozi Ukaeje.

Vieira told reporters that the establishment of the regional animal health center in Bissau marked a strategic step for the country, reinforcing its role as host to a specialized ECOWAS agency.

“By hosting this reference infrastructure, Guinea-Bissau

asserts itself not only as a geographic point on the regional map, but also as a pillar in West Africa’s health resilience architecture,” Vieira said.

According to the document, the initiative forms part of a shared vision to promote regional integration, health resilience and sustainable development among member states.

The center will be tasked with coordinating strategies to prevent and combat transboundary animal diseases, which pose a persistent threat to the livelihoods of millions of livestock breeders and to the regional economy.

Ukaeje said the selection of Guinea-Bissau reflected ECOWAS’ confidence in the country and highlighted the significance of the agreement for harmonizing animal health policies across the region.

“This center will be essential to ensuring food and health security by protecting livestock and, consequently, the communities that depend on them,” she said. – Xinhua

Senegal to appeal CAF Africa Cup of Nations decision

DAKAR – The Senegalese Football Federation announced yesterday it has instructed its lawyers to lodge an appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) after the national team were stripped of its Africa Cup of Nations title.

The Confederation of African Football (CAF) reversed Senegal's win Tuesday, awarding the title to Morocco two months after the final.

"Senegal will remain standing and will legitimately defend this victory on the field which we acquired on the field with the talent of our players", the federation's president Abdoulaye Fall told a press conference.

"We have given our lawyers a mandate to pursue this procedure at the level of the Court of Arbitration for Sport", he added.

The continent's showpiece football final, in Rabat on January 18, descended into chaos when several Senegalese players walked off the pitch in protest after the hosts were awarded a penalty late in second-half stoppage time.

Senegal's players were coaxed back onto the pitch by captain Sadio Mane, but Morocco missed the penalty. Pape Gueye went on to score the goal in extra time that gave Senegal a 1-0 victory.

CAF said that having studied an appeal by Morocco, "the Senegal national team is declared to have forfeited the match" and the result was "officially recorded as 3-0" in favour of Morocco.

Asked what would happen to the trophy in the meantime, Fall told reporters the team would "comply with the statutory and regulatory provisions of CAF".

The revocation of the win elicited a strong response from fans in Senegal, where authorities called for an "independent international investigation" into corruption.

In a resolution issued by the federation's executive committee and read at the press conference, the federation said it would "use all possible legal, institutional and jurisdictional means to assert its rights and restore sporting fairness".

Senegalese President Bassirou Diomaye Faye appeared in his office in front of the Africa Cup of Nations trophy in a social media post Wednesday, expressing his "outrage" at CAF's decision.

The Moroccan Football Federation (FRMF), meanwhile has said the decision "upholds the rules and ensures the stability necessary for the smooth running of international competitions." – AFP

N Korea, Philippines qualify for 2027 Women's World Cup



GOLD COAST – North Korea reached their first Women's World Cup since 2011 yesterday with the Philippines also securing a spot at the global showpiece in Brazil next year.

The Koreans thumped Chinese Taipei 4-0 on Australia's Gold Coast in an Asian Cup playoff which pitted the losing quarter-finalists.

Midfielder Hong Song-Ok bagged a hat-trick with Kim Kyong-Yong adding the fourth to seal a clinical win.

The Philippines beat Uzbekistan 2-0 with Angela Beard volleying home in the 47th minute and Jaelyn Sawicki adding another five minutes later to secure their passage for only the second time.

Australia, China, Japan and South Korea have also qualified for Brazil, courtesy of making the Asian Cup semi-finals.

The 10th-ranked North Korea - the current U17 and U20 World Cup holders - will be at their fifth senior World Cup, but first for 16 years.

After appearing at four consecutive editions from 1999 they were banned from the 2015 tournament over a doping scandal, then failed to qualify four years later.



Philippine players observe the national anthems before the AFC Women's Asian Cup Australia 2026 football quarter-final against Japan at Accor Stadium in Sydney on Sunday. – AFP

They withdrew from the last World Cup due to a voluntary COVID lockdown, not playing any games from 2019 to 2023 because of the pandemic.

Ranked 40 in the world, the Philippines have been on the rise in recent times under Australian coach Mark Torcaso, winning gold at the Southeast Asian Games last year.

They played at a World Cup for the first time in 2023 when co-hosted by Australia and New Zealand.

Then led by another Australian in

Alen Stajcic, they won one and lost two to finish bottom of their group.

Uzbekistan have never been to a World Cup and Chinese Taipei just once, back in 1991.

They still have one last opportunity to qualify via the inter-confederation playoffs, which will offer an additional two tickets.

Australia and Japan meet in the Asian Cup final tomorrow.

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

– AFP

Europe's super elite teach English clubs a Champions League lesson

Andy Scott



PARIS – Four teams out of six eliminated, with a total of 28 goals conceded over the two legs – it has been a chastening week for most of England's representatives in the Champions League knockout phase.

Only Arsenal, the Premier League leaders, and Liverpool - the English team with the richest history in Europe - reached the quarter-finals.

Manchester City, Chelsea, Newcastle United and Tottenham Hotspur were sent packing. But does this really merit calling into question the standard of the Premier League?

England's top flight is easily the richest in Europe, with domestic and international broadcasting rights revenues dwarfing the rest.

A report last month by UEFA showed television revenue for English top-flight clubs increased by 1.5 billion euros (US\$1.77 billion) from 2014-2024 - the combined figure for the rest of Europe was almost the same.

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

However, three of the four English teams eliminated in the last 16 this week lost to clubs with larger revenues.

The exception was Tottenham, but they are having a dreadful season and so losing 7-5 on aggregate to Atletico Madrid was no surprise.

City, champions in 2023, lost 5-1 on aggregate to Real Madrid, the record 15-time European Cup winners and the only club with revenue over one billion euros in Deloitte's latest table.

Chelsea were crushed 8-2 on aggregate by reigning champions Paris Saint-Germain, while Newcastle lost 8-3 overall against Barcelona.

There have only been three occasions since 1955 in which an English team has conceded at least eight goals on aggregate in a European tie, two of them this week.

England's strength in depth is unrivalled, and shown by the presence of an unprecedented six sides in the last 16.

Higher revenues, better players?

But this level is also the territory of a small band of giant continental clubs perhaps not subject to the same levels of competitiveness in their domestic leagues.

The four clubs with the highest revenue in Europe last year were Real, Barcelona, Bayern Munich and PSG – they generate more money than anyone in England, and enjoy huge financial advantages over domestic rivals.

Nineteen of the last 21 Spanish titles have been won by Madrid or Barcelona. Over the same period the duo have won a combined 10 Champions Leagues.

Qatar-owned PSG have won 11 of the last 13 French championships and won their first Champions League last year after one final appearance and two semi-finals in the preceding five seasons.

Bayern, who hammered Atalanta 10-2 on aggregate this week, are set for a 13th Bundesliga title in 14 years.

They are also now almost always in the Champions League quarter-finals, and next face Real in a mouthwatering tie.

For all the Premier League's pulling power, few match-ups have the same

appeal as that impending confrontation.

"Both clubs are giant," said Bayern coach Vincent Kompany.

Bayern have been helped by a strategy of signing a big Premier League name in each of the last three seasons: Harry Kane, Michael Olise and Luis Diaz.

Kane's status as England's leading player is maybe threatened only by Jude Bellingham, who was joined last year at Real by Trent Alexander-Arnold, lured from Liverpool.

PSG boast Ballon d'Or winner Ousmane Dembele, and in Khvicha Kvaratskhelia they have a player who has terrorised English defences over the last year.

"In the Premier League, we don't have Dembele, (Desire) Doue, (Bradley) Barcola and Kvaratskhelia," said Chelsea boss Liam Rosenior. "They're an outstanding team."

They are also youthful like Barcelona, who are once more leaning heavily on their academy, La Masia - their average age against Newcastle was barely 25, and in 18-year-old Lamine Yamal they have the emerging global footballing superstar.

"La Masia did a fantastic job there," purred Barca coach Hansi Flick.

Those clubs may be best equipped to dominate in Europe, while Liverpool and Arsenal fly the flag for England which has provided only three of the last 13 continental champions.

But the Premier League will be there en masse again next year - it is on course to have five qualifying spots via the league and may again have a sixth if Aston Villa or Nottingham Forest win the Europa League. – AFP

Woltemade deployed too deep to be dangerous at Newcastle, says Nagelsmann

FRANKFURT – Germany coach Julian Nagelsmann said out-of-form Newcastle striker Nick Woltemade's lack of goalscoring impact was because he is being played in the wrong position at club level.

Newcastle's record signing after joining from Stuttgart in the summer, Woltemade, 24, scored in four of his first five Premier League games but only has three goals in his past 21 league matches, having not found the net since December.

Speaking in Frankfurt yesterday after naming Woltemade in Germany's 26-man squad for March friendlies against Switzerland and Ghana, Nagelsmann said the striker's versatility meant he was not always deployed in front of goal.

"Eddie Howe has obviously decided - without me knowing any more details - to simply swap his strikers. And that's perfectly within his rights."

"And lately, he's simply - and this is just my opinion - played very deep. When he's playing as a double pivot, Nick Woltemade has quite a long way to go to get a goal.

"He's not exactly a classic counter-attacking striker who runs at 36km/h, leaving opponents in his wake.

"If he's 80 metres away from goal, I don't think British journalists can expect him to score 20 goals, he's simply too far away."

Nagelsmann promised to play the 1.98-metre-tall forward, who has four goals in eight Germany games, in a more dangerous position.

"It (Woltemade's form) has a lot to do with the overall situation. What I can promise is he won't play 80 metres away from goal with us.

"If we're playing 80 metres from goal, he won't play. I'll try to play him closer, around 30 metres from goal. Then he'll be dangerous and do a lot of things well."

The coach said Woltemade would adapt to the demands of Newcastle and the Premier League, pointing to Woltemade's rapid development in recent years, developing from a bench player at Werder Bremen to leading the line for Germany within a year.

"He's undoubtedly having a tough time in Newcastle, but that's also normal," Nagelsmann said, adding "new culture, new league, new language.

"He also needed time in Stuttgart."

– AFP

Asian Games cruise ship and wooden huts will be 'unique experience'

Andrew McKirdy

TOKYO – Athletes at the Asian Games in Japan will have “a unique experience” staying on a cruise ship and in wooden containers, an organising official told AFP six months out from the event, but acknowledged there were concerns about the plan.

About half of the expected 15,000 athletes and officials will live in the eye-catching temporary accommodation during the Games, which are in Nagoya and the wider Aichi area from September 19 to October 4 - coinciding with typhoon season in Japan.

The rest will stay in hotels, including in Tokyo, where swimming, diving and equestrian events are taking place.

Organisers say using the cruise ship and container units are cheaper than building a traditional athletes' village, although they admit the unusual approach has raised eyebrows.

Kazuhiro Yagi, vice-secretary general of the Aichi-Nagoya Games organising committee, told AFP that the accommodation would offer “an experience that's difficult to come by”.

“If people were going to live there long-term, that would be a different story,” he said.

“But in this case it's a very limited period and athletes will spend much of their time training and then come back simply to rest.

“I would like them to go back home

having had a unique experience,” he added.

Between 4,000 and 5,000 athletes and officials will stay on the Italian cruise ship Costa Serena, which will be docked at Nagoya Port during the Games.

The vessel, which features 571 cabins, seven swimming pools, eight restaurants and nine bars, is being chartered at a cost of about 4.5 billion yen (US\$28 million), said Yagi.

According to the official website, the ship has “an elegant, surprising, ironic and magnetic soul”.

It is a sister ship of the Costa Concordia, which sank off Tuscany in 2012, killing 32 people.

A further 2,000 athletes and officials will stay in wooden shipping container-style huts in Nagoya's Garden Pier area.

Some of the units, which Yagi says are “essentially brand new”, have already been installed.

“I've heard some say the space is a bit tight, but from what I saw, they provide an adequately liveable environment,” he said.

Yagi says athletes will be assigned to a particular type of accommodation based on their sport, not by country.

Power of sport

He also says organisers will be ready to deal with Japan's typhoon season.

“We don't expect extremely large waves but we must be prepared for emergencies,” he said.

“Forecast accuracy has improved and we can generally see a typhoon's path

about a week in advance now.”

Yagi says preparations for the Games are on course, with the main athletics venue set to open next month.

He says there has been a “marked improvement” in public awareness in Japan of the event, and tickets started to go on sale for local residents last month.

Organisers hope to emulate the success of the world athletics championships, which were held in Tokyo last year in front of mostly sold-out crowds.

“It was incredible, I was there when [pole vaulter Armand] Duplantis set the world record,” said Yagi.

“It was close to 11 p.m. [local time] but no one was leaving, everyone was clapping along.

“The collective gasp when he broke the record was awe-inspiring, it really made me realise again how wonderful sport is.”

Japanese organisers are keeping a close eye on the situation in the Middle East, and say that at present the war there is not likely to have an impact on the Games.

Yagi says there are no special plans for the Iran team, or North Korea, which is reportedly preparing to send a delegation of more than 260 athletes and officials.

With just months to go, he says preparations are going “according to plan”.

“We are working to further reinforce coordination with the relevant organisations so that we can welcome the Games with everything in perfect order,” he said. – AFP



Siobhan Haughey of Hong Kong greets the audience after the awarding ceremony for the women's 100m freestyle at 2026 China Open Swimming Championship in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province yesterday. Haughey won the gold medal, finishing with a time of 52.79. – Xinhua

O'Sullivan, Trump and Wu reach last 8 at World Snooker Open

Snooker

NANCHANG – Ronnie O'Sullivan, Judd Trump and Chinese rising star Wu Yize advanced to the quarterfinals of the 2026 World Snooker Open yesterday; while reigning world champion Zhao Xintong suffered a 5-2 defeat to Gary Wilson.

Fan favorite O'Sullivan edged out Shaun Murphy 5-3 in a tightly contested last-16 tie. He came out firing with a 96 break to take the opening frame, but lost his touch to drop the next two, with Murphy notching a magnificent 139 total clearance in the second frame. The seven-time world champion quickly regrouped, dominating the fourth and fifth frames with runs of 77 and a 125 total clearance to retake the lead, before sealing the 5-3 victory in the eighth frame after a gritty battle with Murphy.

“Before coming to Yushan, I spent three weeks breaking down my technique, starting right from my cue action,” O'Sullivan told a post-match press conference. “Fortunately, I've been able to put together some good performances here.”

World No. 1 Trump continued his fine form, securing a convincing 5-2 win over Robbie Williams. After a hard-fought first session saw the pair locked at 2-2 at the mid-session interval, Trump unleashed his trademark relentless attacking play to take control of the match, firing in breaks of 117 and 94 in the fifth and seventh frames respectively to cruise into the last eight.

Chinese youngster Wu produced the most impressive comeback of the day, showing remarkable composure and consistency to fight back from 2-0 down, reeling off five consecutive frames to secure a 5-2 upset victory over Kyren Wilson and advance to the quarterfinals.

Meanwhile, local favorite Zhao's tournament run came to an end against Wilson. Zhao took the opening frame but dropped the next two, before levelling the match at 2-2 ahead of the mid-session interval. Unable to recapture his best form in the second half, Zhao lost three straight frames to suffer a 5-2 defeat and exit the competition.

O'Sullivan will next face Ryan Day, while Wu Yize takes on Mark Allen for a place in the semifinals. – Xinhua



Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland looks on from the 18th hole during the final round of THE PLAYERS Championship 2026 at THE PLAYERS Stadium course at TPC Sawgrass on Sunday at Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida.

McIlroy is pleased with his recovery from a back injury and excited to play the Masters in three weeks as defending champion after last year's emotional Augusta National triumph.

The 36-year-old captured his fifth major title by winning last year's Masters to complete a career Grand Slam.

“This is going to be the first time I drive down Magnolia Lane [as champion] and it's all going to be about enjoying my week and the perks that come along with being a Masters champion,” McIlroy said on Wednesday in a conference call. – AFP

Sport in brief

India to host 2028 world indoor athletics champs - Coe

TORUN, POLAND – The eastern Indian state of Odisha will host the world indoor championships in 2028, World Athletics president Sebastian Coe announced yesterday.

“The World Athletics Council this morning awarded the next two editions of the event, the world indoor championships, to Odisha in India in 2028 and Astana, Kazakhstan, in 2030,” Coe said ahead of the world indoors in Torun, Poland.

“The future of the world indoor athletics championships is looking bright and assured.”

The selection of Odisha, formerly known as Orissa, is the first time the world's most populous nation has hosted a major World Athletics event.

The city of Bhubaneswar in Odisha is home to the Kalinga Stadium Complex which boasts an indoor stadium.

Amdavad, the city also known as Ahmedabad – in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state of Gujarat - has been

confirmed as host city for the 2030 Commonwealth Games, which will feature a full track and field programme.

That is widely viewed as a stepping stone to bidding to host the 2036 Olympics, and erasing memories of the 2010 Commonwealth Games in New Delhi - an event marked by construction delays, substandard infrastructure and accusations of corruption.

When Amdavad was confirmed for the Commonwealths, Coe said at the time that India was “already expressing interest in hosting major global athletics events, and the long-term aspiration to host a World Athletics Championships - and one day the Olympic Games”.

Coe said it was a “powerful sign of a nation thinking boldly about its sporting future”. – AFP

ITTF launches Doubles World Cup in 2027

Table tennis

BEIJING – The International Table Tennis Federation announced yesterday the launch of ITTF Doubles World Cup

in 2027, bringing together the men's, women's and mixed doubles events on the world stage.

It means that every event in Los Angeles 2028 Olympic table tennis program now has an equivalent on the World Cup stage, with the ITTF Men's and Women's World Cup covering the singles events, as well as the ITTF Mixed Team World Cup.

At LA28, men's doubles and women's doubles will return to the Olympic program for the first time since Athens 2004, joining mixed doubles, introduced at Tokyo 2020, to complete a full doubles lineup.

“Doubles is returning to the Olympic Games, and the ITTF Doubles World Cup is how we rise to meet that moment, giving the world's best doubles players the World Cup stage they deserve, and building the pathway to Los Angeles,” ITTF president Petra Sorling said.

The Men's and Women's World Cup returned in 2024, while the Mixed Team World Cup was launched in 2023. – Xinhua

In Seoul square of protest and history, BTS fans welcome grand comeback

Claire Lee

SEOUL – Through months of winter protests in support of South Korean democracy, Prof. Lee Ji-young clutched her K-pop glowstick – a small but telling sign of her love for K-pop megastars BTS.

Now the world's biggest boy band is set for a comeback concert tomorrow after a nearly four-year hiatus for the septet to complete military service – and while the nation went through traumatic times.

“It feels like they’ve come back to reclaim their rightful place,” said Sung Young-rok, 45, a BTS fan and traditional Korean artist, ahead of the open-air concert expected to draw 260,000 people to Seoul.

In late 2024, in a wealthy nation where democracy was thought to be well-anchored, then-president Yoon Suk Yeol shocked the world by trying to declare martial law, sending troops and helicopters to parliament.

His bid failed – Yoon is now in jail – but for a few tense hours it was touch-and-go.

And day after day, night after night, hundreds of thousands of South Koreans braved the biting cold to protest against his move.

Like her fellow protestors, Lee – who has researched BTS's social impact – rarely let go of her glowstick signifying she is part of BTS's loyal fanbase known as ARMY.

The 55-year-old recalled how their lights shimmered as people marched at night, singing songs to keep up their spirits and warm up in the bitter cold.

“Holding it gave me a sense of protection. I remember feeling that if something dangerous happened, [other ARMY members] would see the glowstick and come help me,” she said.

“And when you turn it on at night, it's simply so beautiful. In many ways, it felt like a light that represented us – something beautiful and strong, a light that reminds you that you are not alone.”

Symbolic location

The protests were held in

the streets around the historic Gyeongbokgung Palace in downtown Seoul, and it's no coincidence that this will be the backdrop for BTS's concert.

South Korea's best-known landmark, built in 1395, has weathered centuries of destruction and restoration.

It has borne witness to hundreds of years of history, from the fall of the Joseon Dynasty to the brutal decades of Japanese colonial rule.

In recent years, it has seen mass protests.

The area is a “place that very much served as a national public square, where massive protests have taken place, and to stage a performance there is to try and directly engage with the national consciousness”, Keung Yoon Bae, Korean studies professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology, told AFP.

The title of BTS's new album, due to be released today, is in the same vein.

It takes its name from “Arirang”, a beloved Korean folk song about longing and separation often described as an unofficial national anthem through war, division and displacement.

Loukia Kyratzoglou, 48, a BTS fan from Greece, said the concept resonates for her.

“Years of conflict and socioeconomic change have led to the migration of thousands of Greeks who left their country seeking a better future for their families,” she told AFP.

“Much like a migrant who longs to reunite with loved ones and walk again on the sacred ground of their homeland, BTS are returning to their roots after years of separation,” she said.

“And ARMY are here to welcome them back.”



South Korean Prof. Lee Ji-young, a fan of K-pop boy group BTS, displays her collections of BTS-related goods during an interview with AFP in Seoul on March 7. – AFP

Social pain

It's been arguably a tough time for BTS members in their roughly 18 months of military service.

Four served near the heavily fortified inter-Korean border, which has separated thousands of families since the 1953 Korean War armistice and is known for barbed wire, harsh winters and gruelling training.

Member Jimin slept inside a self-propelled artillery vehicle.

BTS have generally steered clear of politics – including during the anti-Yoon protests – but they have not shied away from social issues.

They have spoken openly about mental health and racism, which they have experienced themselves, and donated US\$1 million to Black

Lives Matter (BLM) in 2019, inspiring fans to match the amount.

Their lyrics have tackled fame, loneliness and depression alongside themes of self-doubt.

Fans have responded with activism of their own, including projects supporting Korean adoptees seeking to reconnect with their birth families, often an emotionally painful and legally complex process.

“In this very complicated political climate, I am proud that they from day one gave full credit to black hip hop artists who inspired them,” Malene Vestergaard, a Korean adoptee and a BTS fan in Denmark, told AFP.

“That they didn't erase their Korean heritage, that they spoke on Asian hate during COVID.” – AFP



A promotional video for the comeback concert of K-pop boy group BTS is displayed on electronic billboards at Gwanghwamun Square in Seoul yesterday. – AFP

S Korean blockbuster game ‘Crimson Desert’ bids for Western success

PARIS – Less internationally successful than Japan, South Korea's games industry is hoping for a breakout global hit with yesterday's release of “Crimson Desert”, a medieval fantasy adventure in a sprawling open world.

Hooked on the atmosphere drawing on pop culture touchstones like “Game of Thrones” and gaming stalwarts such as “The Witcher”, more than three million people added the title to online wishlists ahead of release.

The figure is a rare achievement for a game not belonging to a well-established franchise.

South Korean studio Pearl Abyss spent seven years working on “Crimson Desert”, its second title, creating a medieval-style world of clashing factions for release on PC, Xbox and PlayStation 5.

Player-controlled protagonist Kliff, a warrior with supernatural powers, will take on monsters and

armies of human enemies on the battlefield.

Gamers will be able to roam freely across the vast game world, described as one of the largest ever built, which developers have crafted with detailed, realistic graphics.

Fantastical elements leavening the sword-fighting and archery will include rides on dragonback or at the controls of a military robot.

But the initial welcome from professional reviewers has been lukewarm, with “Crimson Desert” racking up a score of 78 out of 100 on aggregation site Metacritic from testers given early access to the PC version.

Most praise the vast universe and realistic graphics, while questioning the tricky-to-master controls and sometimes repetitive content.

Shares in Pearl Abyss fell 30 percent on the Seoul stock market yesterday.

“We are trying to appeal to

a global audience,” said Pearl Abyss' European marketing chief Rick van Beem had told AFP at August's Gamescom trade fair in Cologne.

He tied “Crimson Desert” to “a big entertainment push from South Korea into the West,” citing successes like Netflix show Squid Game and mania for K-pop among music fans.

Van Beem added that around 170 people have worked on the game, which he compared to Nintendo's long-running action-adventure series “Legend of Zelda” rather than more finicky, stats-heavy role-playing titles.

South Korean hits are traditionally “very PC and mobile centred”, such as “PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds” (PUBG) and “Lost Ark”, van Beem noted – although some console releases like “Stellar Blade” and “Lies of P” have won an international following. – AFP



Workers set up the stage for tomorrow's comeback concert of K-pop boy group BTS in front of Gwanghwamun Gate, the main entrance to Gyeongbokgung Palace, in Seoul yesterday. – AFP

World Weather			
CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing 1°C~16°C	Manila 20°C~32°C	New York 9°C~14°C	Lisbon 13°C~17°C
Shanghai 5°C~15°C	Bangkok 25°C~35°C	London 3°C~15°C	Rio de Janeiro 22°C~27°C
Hong Kong 18°C~22°C	Tokyo 3°C~11°C	Frankfurt 5°C~16°C	Luanda 24°C~29°C
Taipei 19°C~24°C	Singapore 23°C~34°C	Vancouver 5°C~13°C	Maputo 22°C~33°C
Guangzhou 17°C~26°C	Kuala Lumpur 24°C~35°C	Paris 4°C~17°C	Dili 23°C~30°C
Nanjing 4°C~16°C	Jakarta 23°C~34°C	Moscow 0°C~8°C	São Tomé 27°C~33°C
Guilin 11°C~17°C	Seoul 1°C~15°C	Las Vegas 19°C~37°C	Praia 18°C~28°C
Xi'an 5°C~18°C	Sydney 19°C~26°C	Monte Carlo 10°C~16°C	Bissau 21°C~36°C



1. Evolution...

A person looks at works from "New Humans: Memories of the Future" during a press preview of the New Museum in New York City on Wednesday.

After an US\$82 million expansion, New York's New Museum will bring contemporary art back to the heart of Manhattan, showcasing modern works alongside classics by Dali and Marcel Duchamp after two years closed.

- AFP

2. Scared to silence

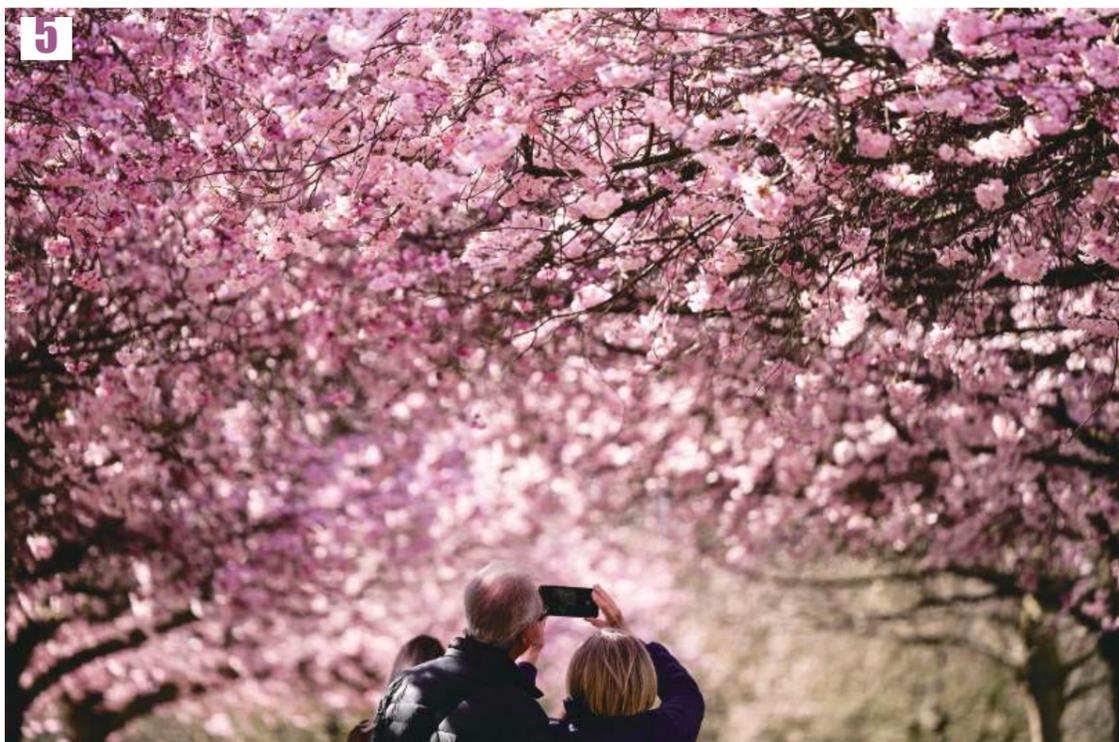
Hindu devotees carry effigies called 'ogoh-ogoh', symbolising an evil spirit, during a parade on the eve of Nyepi, the Day of Silence that marks the New Year in the Balinese Hindu calendar, in Denpasar, Bali on Wednesday.

- AFP

3. 'Inviting guests'

Hindu devotees celebrate the 'Pahchare Chariot Festival' in Kathmandu, Nepal yesterday.

- AFP



4. Blooming early

Flowering cherry blossoms and buds from a sample cherry tree, Somei Yoshino species, for phenological observation conducted by the Tokyo Regional Headquarters of the Japan Meteorological Agency, are seen at Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo yesterday.

- AFP

5. Joys of spring

People take pictures of cherry blossoms in the gardens of the Reggia di Venaria Reale near Turin, Italy yesterday.

- AFP

6. Tiny tot

A grey titi monkey (*Saguinus leucopus*), which was found abandoned alone on a road, cuddles a stuffed toy in Santuario, Antioquia, Colombia on Wednesday. The grey titi is being rehabilitated by Cornare (Regional Autonomous Corporation of the Negro and Nare River Basins), to be released back into its natural habitat.

- AFP