

Tai vows to facilitate French brands' entry into mainland market

Tony Wong

Secretary for Economy and Finance Anton Tai Kin Ip yesterday pledged the Macau government's commitment to making it more convenient for French brands to enter the Chinese mainland's vast market through Macau as a platform.

Tai made the remarks while delivering a speech yesterday during the opening ceremony of the Bonjour Brand Forum (Macao).

The Bonjour Brand Forum (Macao) has been held for the first time. "Bonjour" is the French greeting for "good morning".

Founded in Paris in 2014, according to its official website (<https://www.bonjourbrand.fr/>), the Bonjour Brand Forum is an annual gathering for creativity, supported by the Foundation for Foresight and Innovation and its president, Jean-Pierre Raffarin. "Each edition of the Forum celebrates creative ideas and inspiring, engaging exchanges between China and the rest of the world, between culture and industry, and between tradition and innovation," the organisation says on its website, adding that "together, these countries build shared visions through dialogue and establish collaborations to tackle the challenges of the 21st century hand in hand".

The one-day forum was held at MGM MACAU in Nape. In addition to Tai, yesterday's opening ceremony was attended by other dignitaries and representatives including Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR) Chief Executive Sam



Dignitaries applaud after symbolically launching the Bonjour Brand Forum (Macao) at MGM MACAU in Nape yesterday, including Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai (centre), French Special Representative for China Jean-Pierre Raffarin (fourth from left), Foreign Ministry Commissioner Bian Lixin (fourth from right), Secretary for Economy and Finance Anton Tai Kin Ip (third from left), Yin Rutao (third from right), a deputy head of the Publicity, Culture and Sports Department of the Central People's Government Liaison Office, and Consul General of France in Hong Kong and Macau Christile Drulhe (second from left). - Photo: GCS

Hou Fai, French Special Representative for China Jean-Pierre Raffarin, Foreign Ministry Commissioner in the MSAR Bian Lixin, Yin Rutao, a deputy head of the Publicity, Culture and Sports Department of the Central People's Government Liaison Office in the MSAR, and Consul General of France in Hong Kong and Macau Christile Drulhe.

Raffarin, 77, was France's prime minister

from May 2002 to May 2005.

In his speech, Tai said that the successful implementation of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle provides a solid foundation for Macau to fully leverage its unique advantages in connecting the Chinese mainland with the rest of the world. Over recent years, Tai underlined, Macau has been consolidating and deepening its roles

as a World Centre of Tourism and Leisure, a commercial and trade cooperation service platform between China and Portuguese-speaking countries, an exchange and cooperation base with Chinese culture as its mainstream and co-existence of different cultures, and a high ground for gathering international high-end talent.

Continued on page 6

Data canary shows economy already suffering from Middle East war

PARIS – Soaring fuel prices due to the Middle East war and snarled supply chains are already hurting businesses, business survey data published yesterday showed.

Now in its fourth week, the war sparked by US and Israeli strikes on Iran has seen global oil prices soar by more than 40 percent as Tehran has effectively shut the Strait of Hormuz through which a fifth of oil and liquefied natural gas supplied flowed before the conflict began.

Economists have warned that if they persist higher energy prices could trigger a fresh surge in inflation and slow economic growth.

The Purchasing Managers' Indices compiled monthly by S&P Global are the data equivalent of the canary in the coal mine.

They survey managers who have their thumbs on the pulse of businesses across many industries, and often reveal changes in business conditions months before official government data.

The latest batch of PMI surveys, which included the period since the war broke out on February 28, showed that businesses activity is already slowing and prices rising.

The initial reading for the composite US PMI dipped to an 11-month low of 51.4 points in March from 51.9 points in February, with services taking a hit while manufacturing edged higher.

A reading above 50 points indicates economic growth. - AFP



Data collectors conduct training and data collection on a humanoid robot at the Qingdao Humanoid Robot Data Training Center in Laoshan District of Qingdao City, Shandong Province, on Monday. Located in Laoshan, the Qingdao Humanoid Robot Data Training Center is equipped with data collection scenarios for humanoid robots such as intelligent industrial manufacturing, smart home, and commercial services, providing support for related research and development of humanoid robots. Data collectors control robots to complete specific tasks like logistics sorting, supermarket restocking, kitchen operations, and component assembly. Through thousands of repetitions and trials, massive amounts of motion data are generated, endowing robots with a smarter "intelligent brain," and helping humanoid robots enter all walks of life to serve thousands of households. - Xinhua

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

The Macau Post Daily

Wang Yi urges peace talks in phone call with Iranian FM

Foreign Minister Wang Yi said yesterday that all hotspot issues should be resolved through dialogue and negotiation, rather than through the use of force.

- Story on p. 7

NASA to build US\$20 billion Moon base, pause orbital lunar station plans

NASA's chief yesterday said the US space agency will invest US\$20 billion to develop a base on the Moon, while suspending its plans to create the lunar orbital space station known as Gateway.

- Story on p. 11

At least 66 die Colombian military transport plane crash

A Colombian military plane carrying 125 soldiers and crew members crashed on takeoff early Monday (local time), killing at least 66 people and injuring dozens of others, officials said.

- Story on p. 12

2026MIECF sees rise in int'l participation

Khalel Vallo

The 2026 Macao International Environmental Cooperation Forum and Exhibition (2026MIECF) will open tomorrow, recording a 20 percent increase in international participation compared to last year.

Hosted by the local government, the three-day event will be held at The Venetian Macao's Cotai Expo under the theme "Low-carbon, Zero-waste Cities: Embarking on Global Collaboration". According to a press conference held at Cotai Expo yesterday, the forum continues to position Macau as a regional platform for environmental exchange and cooperation, featuring forums, exhibitions, business matching sessions, and community activities.

During the press conference, the organisers outlined key highlights of this year's edition, including participation from more than 350 exhibitors across 12 countries and regions. Around 20 percent of the exhibitors are from overseas, showcasing over 500 green technologies and services throughout a 12,000-square-metre exhibition space.

New additions include the "Zero-waste Circular Economy Exhibition Zone", alongside the "Green Mobility Zone" and "Green and Low-carbon Project Zone", striving to offer insights into sustainable industrial transformation.

The Green Forum will feature four thematic sessions focusing on carbon markets, regional cooperation, environmental industry development and zero-waste city innovation. Experts and scholars from various regions will share perspectives on advancing low-carbon development and environmental governance.

Commerce and investment Promotion Institute (IPIM) President Che Weng Keong said in his opening remarks that the event aims to strengthen international collaboration and create opportunities for enterprises to expand into green industries. "The event will continue to serve as a platform for exchanges and cooperation in the environmental industry and international levels, helping enterprises from home and abroad to explore green business opportunities," he said.

In order to enhance business engagement, the event will host four themed business matching sessions covering new energy, environmental technologies, green buildings, and Macau-Hengqin cooperation.

Advanced technologies such as electronic check-ins and real-time translation tools will be introduced to improve efficiency and participant experience. The programme also adopts an "Exhibition + Inspection + Matching" model, featuring multi-venue activities in Macau and Hengqin to promote regional cooperation and extend the event's impact.

With expanded international participation and a strengthened focus on innovation and collaboration, 2026MIECF aims to advance green development and reinforce Macau's role in promoting low-carbon, zero-waste city initiatives. ■



Commerce and investment Promotion Institute (IPIM) President Che Weng Keong addresses yesterday's "2026 Macao International Environmental Cooperation Forum and Exhibition" (2026MIECF) press conference at The Venetian Macao's Cotai Expo. – Photo: Khalel Vallo

Sands Gallery booth kicks off at Art Central in HK

Rui Pastorin in Hong Kong

Macau integrated resort operator Sands China launched their Sands Gallery booth at Art Central in Hong Kong yesterday, presenting the works of Macau artists Leong Chi Mou, Lei Ieng Wai and Dor Lio Hak Man to an international audience.

Debuting in 2015, the international event in Hong Kong showcases the next generation of talent from Asia's most forward-thinking galleries alongside artists from around the world, with the event running from today until Sunday.

Sands China is the first integrated tourism and leisure enterprise from Macau to be invited as an Associate Partner to join Art Central, with their Sands Gallery booth, which marked its debut at the event, highlighting each artist's respective art styles.

Among the pieces* on display are those that incorporate metal with other media to represent a changing city, works where science meets art, and paintings that invite visitors to slow down and take a closer look. Alongside them are also a collection from the ongoing Sands Gallery exhibition dedicated to the memory, history, and aesthetics of Macau's firecracker industry.

Speaking with reporters on the sidelines of yesterday's opening, Sands China Executive Vice Chairman Wilfred Wong Ying-wai said that the non-profit Sands Gallery, which was established in 2022, acts as a "bridge for our local artists to go overseas", among other purposes, with Art Central being the first step towards introducing Macau artists to the international arena.

"From the initial feedback so far, we were told that they're [organisers] very happy with the level of excellence in our artists, and they are currently inviting us to participate next year", Wong pointed out.



Sands China Executive Vice Chairman Wilfred Wong Ying-wai (fifth from left), the three exhibiting artists Dor Lio Hak Man (left), Leong Chi Mou (second from right) and Lei Ieng Wai (third from right), along with other guests and representatives, pose for a group photo during the grand opening of the Sands Gallery booth at Art Central at the Central Harbourfront in Hong Kong. – Photos: Rui Pastorin

Moreover, in response to a question by the *Post*, Wong pointed out that art and culture is a "very important component" in the government's economic diversification, adding that this is a process that involves "long-term investment" and needs to be nurtured towards growth. Highlighting the three invited artists, Wong added that the company has cooperated with them since 2023, each having exhibited works at Sands Gallery to positive reception, and are glad to present their works at the event.

The company will "continue to nourish these local artists", as well as look for opportunities to promote artists outside of Macau in addition to Art Central, whether in other parts of the Greater Bay Area (GBA) or elsewhere. Using sport as an analogy, Wong noted that aside from playing local games, going to play international ones can also show one's level of skill. Art Central represents a



Visitors to the Sands Gallery booth browse the postcards themed on the ongoing exhibition at Sands Gallery in Cotai.

step from the local Sands Gallery to outside of Macau, he concluded. ■

* This article is the first of a two-part story, with more pictures, interviews with the artists and details on their work in tomorrow's Page 4.

MGM launches localised playing card recycling & upcycling programme



Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director of MGM China Holdings Limited Kenneth Feng Xiaofeng addresses yesterday's "Innovation and Technology Empowerment – MGM's Localised Playing Cards Recycling and Upcycling Programme" launch ceremony at MGM Cotai yesterday. – Photos: Khalel Vallo

Khalel Vallo

MGM has launched Macau's first fully localised playing card recycling and upcycling programme, aiming to advance the circular economy and support the city's green transition.

The initiative, titled "Innovation and Technology Empowerment – MGM's Localised Playing Cards Recycling and Upcycling Programme", has established an end-to-end system that processes used playing cards entirely within Macau. It was inaugurated at the MGM COTAI integrated resort yesterday.

The programme has been developed in conjunction with Shenzhen's Fnetlink



The world's first smart automated card-shredding solution shredding playing cards and converted into recycled fibres at MGM COTAI yesterday.

Technology Company Limited, building on the world's first smart automated card-shredding solution introduced in 2023. Through this system, used playing cards are shredded and converted into recycled fibres on-site without the use of water.

These fibres can then be repurposed into eco-friendly packaging materials, including filler materials and recycled boards.

According to Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director of MGM China Holdings Limited Kenneth Feng Xiaofeng, the initiative reflects MGM's commitment to integrating innovation and sustainability. "This programme not only reflects our efforts to enhance resource efficiency

through technology, but also highlights MGM's determination to collaborate with local tech enterprises in transforming research and development achievements into practical applications," he said.

According to a statement by MGM yesterday, once fully implemented, the system is expected to process around 3,000 tonnes of used playing cards annually in order to achieve a 100 percent recycling rate.

The localised processing model is also expected to reduce carbon emissions by minimising the need for cross-regional transportation, while contributing to the development of green materials and related industries. ■



Young musicians pose after the concert at Macau Cultural Centre's (CCM) Grand Auditorium on Sunday. – Photo: William Chan

MYSO's concert reminds us of importance of art for youth

Review by William Chan

The Macau Youth Symphony Orchestra (MYSO) – a local organisation dedicated to training young musicians in classical music, and one I had the opportunity to participate in for seven years during my school days – on Sunday hosted its 25th “Progressing Towards the Future” Macao New Generation Musicians Concert 2026 at the Macau Cultural Centre (CCM). The concert featured nine local musicians, all still in their mid-teens.

Eight years ago, I was one of them, playing bassoon on the stage. Still remembering that thrilling moment, I felt a deep empathy for the young performers on stage – the successes, the mistakes, the knowledge that this opportunity might only come once in a lifetime: having an orchestra behind you as a soloist, facing hundreds of audience

members. It is easily one of the most singular moments a person can experience.

No matter how advanced our technology becomes, no matter how much AI comes to dominate production, learning, and daily life, this kind of stage presence will never be replaced. On the contrary, it becomes rarer and more exciting precisely when so much of our lives grow virtual and unreal. To be “thrown” onto a stage before adulthood does wonders for a person. In the span of a ten-minute performance – which, at that age, feels like the biggest thing in the world – we experience triumph, regret, embarrassment, joy, and fulfilment. In that moment, we feel genuinely alive.

These experiences teach us how to enjoy and value life. Referencing my other review on this page – the disco – where I mentioned that I felt almost no embarrassment dancing with

strangers, only the desire to enjoy it as much as possible. I attribute that to years of performance experience, learning how to shed embarrassment and nervousness in order to be oneself. That is no small feat, as many of my peers would agree.

Finally, I must thank the Macau Youth Symphony Orchestra for organising this event for so many consecutive years. Locals, regrettably, often take such events for granted, but those behind the scenes know the effort it takes to put all the pieces in place. It is a great privilege that, from a young age, we have organisations like MYSO doing wonders for us, and as we grow older, we have organisations like Comuna de Pedra ensuring that we are all included. We are truly fortunate to have such amazing associations in our community.

Dancing through generations: a night at Comuna de Pedra's 'Noon Disco'

Review by William Chan

Comuna de Pedra's (“Stone Commune”) sixth edition of the “TODOS Fest! Inclusive Arts Festival” concluded on Sunday. I had the chance to participate in one of its standout events, “Noon Disco.”

Based on a previous interview* I had with the local organisation, I knew the concept was special. By recreating the vibrant disco culture of the 70s and 80s, “Noon Disco” aims to do more than just evoke collective memories for the “silver-haired generation.”

Jenny Mok, the festival's director, also noted that the gig aimed to actively encourage them to stay engaged and relive their “glory days” through familiar music. “We hope that through the simple act of dancing, they can feel vibrant again and reconnect with their younger selves.”

I initially thought “Noon Disco” was a performance designed for the elderly, where we, the audience, would watch them perform. But that wasn't the case. Instead, we were invited to dance. After a brief introduction to signature, easy-to-follow moves from an instructor, the audience became the life of the party.

The event was held at M8, a mall near the city's main square, Largo do Senado, and I attended Saturday's evening session. The space was well-decorated – simple, yet it matched my imagination of what a disco would feel like. I say feel because I had never actually been to one before, and only had some clues of what a disco is based on movies.

I had imagined dancing in front of a group of strangers would be awkward, but it wasn't that evening. The lighting was dim, with the signature disco ball flashing over the venue, and the vibe quickly took over. It was easy to let loose and just follow the groove. Over the course of the one-and-a-half-hour session, I found myself dancing to nearly every song. Participants, from young children to the elderly, danced alongside each other, fully immersed in the atmosphere and moving to their own physical limits.

It was one of those rare events where success feels effortless: simple, effective, engaging, nostalgic for some, and accessible to all. It also aligned perfectly with Comuna de Pedra's philosophy of inclusivity.

*<https://macaupostdaily.com/news/27646>



Participants dance in M8 mall's ballroom during the weekend's “Noon Disco”. – Photos provided by Comuna de Pedra



UTM to host SMS Schweizer Malschule's SVA Certificate exams

Armando Neves

The public Macao University of Tourism (UTM) held yesterday a cooperation signing ceremony with the Hong Kong Teaching Resources Centre (HKTRC) on its Mong-Ha campus, announcing that UTM will host SMS Schweizer Malschule's Switzerland Visual Arts (SVA) Certificate exams as the test venue.

HKTRC is the agent of SMS Schweizer Malschule for Hong Kong and Macau.

The signing ceremony was attended by UTM Rector Fanny Vong Chuk Kwan and HKTRC Chief Administrative Officer Clement Yeung Kwong-ho. Both signed the cooperation agreement, thereby designating UTM as the Swiss school's sole authorised examination venue in Macau.

SMS Schweizer Malschule (Swiss Painting School), according to its official website, is an art school based in Bern, the de facto capital of Switzerland. The school's SVA Certificate developed the Swiss Visual Arts Grading Examination (SVAGE), aiming to set assessment standards for candidates, the statement said, adding that the examination considers both drawing skills and creativity.

The examination is comprised of three parts, painting evaluation, written evaluation, and portfolio evaluation, according to the website, and the total number of points is 100.

The website pointed out that any person aged 4 or above is eligible to take the examination.

The exam is divided into nine levels with Elementary I, Elementary II, Intermediate I, Intermediate II, Advanced I, Advanced II, Premier, Professional, and Teacher Certificate. ■



Macao University of Tourism (UTM) Rector Fanny Vong Chuk Kwan (left) and Hong Kong Teaching Resources Centre (HKTRC) Chief Administrative Officer Clement Yeung Kwong Ho pose on the UTM Mong-Ha campus during yesterday's cooperation agreement signing ceremony. — Photo: Armando Neves

5-day Macau int'l sailing competition starts today



Vong Ka Kun, head of the Sport Bureau's (ID) Macau Grand Prix and Major Sports Events Department (third from right), Ursa Major Sailing Event Management Chairman Ma Man Wai (third from left) and other representatives pose for a group photo during yesterday's press conference about "2026 World Match Racing Tour - Macao Match Cup" sailing competing, at the pier of the International Yacht Club Hotel in Taipa. — Photos: Ida Cheong

Ida Cheong

The "2026 World Match Racing Tour - Macao Match Cup" sailing competition, which is being held over five consecutive days starting today, taking place in the coastal waters between Governador Nobre de Carvalho Bridge (commonly known as "old bridge") and Sai Van Bridge, Vong Ka Kun, head of the Sport Bureau's (ID) Macau Grand Prix and Major Sports Events Department, announced during a press conference yesterday.

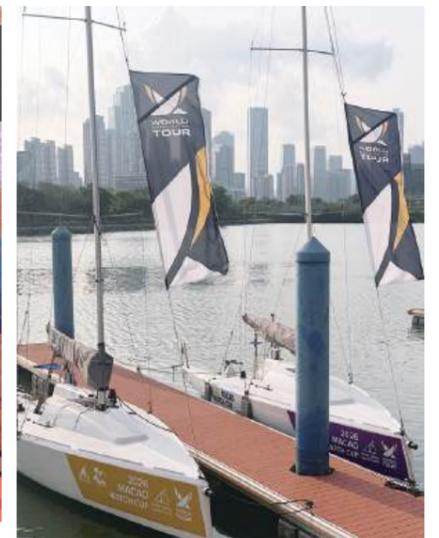
The press conference about the world sailing tour was held at the International Yacht Club in Taipa.

The Macao Match Cup, as the opening event of the "2026 World Match Racing Tour season", is a world championship-tier world sailing special event; over 70 of the world's top ranked professional sailing racing teams will compete on the tour this year, while 12 international teams are competing in Macau this week, including France, New Zealand and Sweden, according to the press conference.

Vong said that the event aims to attract strong attention from sailing enthusiasts around the world, further demonstrating the synergistic impact of major sporting events, and strengthen exchanges and cooperation between Macau and the international sports community.

Ursa Major Sailing Event Management Chairman Ma Man Wai told reporters on the sidelines of yesterday's press conference that this year marks the second edition of the Macau event, which serves as the opening leg of the annual touring circuit, adding that the competition will ultimately crown the season's overall champion - a title equivalent to a world championship level.

Due to land reclamation works and following recommendations from the Maritime and Water Bureau (DSAMA), the course has been moved to waters between Governador Nobre de Carvalho Bridge and Sai Van Bridge this year, and the new venue offers greater safety and better viewing conditions, and competitors have expressed satisfaction



Two sailing boats for the 2026 World Match Racing Tour - Macao Match Cup are moored at the pier of the International Yacht Club in Taipa.

with both locations, Ma said.

Macau is endowed with abundant coastal waters, making it well-suited for inshore match racing*, providing excellent racecourse conditions and allowing the public to enjoy the action from close range, Ma added.

Ma noted that compared with previous sailing events, this year's races are more exciting and fiercely contested, with the aim of drawing public attention to sailing and encouraging greater participation in the sport.

During the event, residents and visitors will be able to enjoy the races from shoreline viewing areas, while the races will also be broadcast live online, on the "Macao Major Sporting Events" YouTube channel and Facebook page, the event's official website www.macaomatchcup.com, and the World Match Racing Tour YouTube channel. ■

* Inshore match racing is a form of competitive yacht racing in which two boats compete head-to-head on a short course close to shore. — Poe

Paper offerings stall gutted by fire caused by short circuit: CB

Armando Neves

The Fire Service Bureau (CB) announced in a statement that it received a report at around 12:33 a.m. yesterday about a fire at the junction of Rua do Rebanho (群隊街) and Rua de Tomé Pires (道咩卑利士街) near the Red Market, resulting in flames and smoke.

Arriving at the scene, fireman confirmed that a fire had broken out on a stall and quickly extinguished the blaze, the statement said, adding that no one was injured but around 30 residents living nearby self-evacuated.

Incense sticks and miscellaneous items were scattered across the ground and the external wall of the adjacent building was blackened by smoke, the statement said, adding that electrical wiring had been damaged at the scene and that the blaze was suspected to have been caused by a short circuit.

The Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) confirmed in a statement later that the fire involved a street stall selling paper offerings.

According to the CB statement, the fire destroyed an area of around three metres by three metres and spread to an adjacent building, affecting an area of about five metres by four metres. ■



This photo was downloaded from social media platform Facebook last night. The Post cannot vouch for its authenticity.

Gongbei Customs seizes 2,150 game discs, cartridges at HZMB

Armando Neves

Zhuhai's Gongbei Customs announced in a statement yesterday that its officers seized 2,150 game discs and cartridges at Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge (HZMB) on March 4.

According to the statement, on that day, customs officers at the delta bridge's Zhuhai checkpoint noticed two male travellers who appeared to be walking stiffly and behaving in a visibly anxious way, because of which they stopped them for inspection.

Customs officers discovered a large number of game discs and cartridges strapped to the waist, abdomen and legs of the duo using cling film. Each of them was smuggling 584 and 468 game discs and cartridges when they were caught.

Twenty minutes later, customs officers at the checkpoint searched two female travellers and discovered similar game discs and cartridges concealed on them in the same way. Each of the women was smuggling 568 and 530 such items when caught.

Under questioning, the quartet admitted that they were part of a gang, adding that they had deliberately arrived separately in the late

hours attempting to blend in with regular passengers to evade customs supervision. ■



This undated handout photo provided by Zhuhai's Gongbei Customs yesterday shows game discs and cartridges strapped to two smugglers' waist, abdomen and legs.

Sam to attend Boao Forum for Asia

Tony Wong

Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai will travel to Hainan Province today for a two-day working visit where he will attend tomorrow's plenary session of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2026, according to a statement by the Macau Government Information Bureau (GCS) yesterday.

The GCS statement noted that the four-day Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2026 is being held in Hainan between yesterday and Friday, with the theme "Shaping the Future Together: New Trends, New Opportunities and New Cooperation".

The GCS statement also noted that amid global transformation, the forum will host discussions on injecting greater certainty into an uncertain world; investment in the future; the role of Global South nations in global economic governance; and Asia's leadership in the global economic transition.

Other topics, the GCS statement noted, include the evolving global trade landscape amid tariff tensions; climate governance challenges and prospects; and safeguarding shared economic security.



This file photo shows Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai addressing a closed-door meeting with other officials at Government Headquarters last week concerning the local government's upcoming drafting of Macau's third Five-Year Plan. — Photo: GCS

The aim of the forum, the GCS statement noted, is to build consensus, strengthen confidence, and provide greater stability and positive momentum for a world currently facing unrest and uncertainty.

The GCS statement also noted that with the implementation of its 15th Five-Year Plan, the country has introduced new measures to expand its high-level opening-up, adding that the forum provides an important platform to better understand emerging

opportunities for investment in China and to achieve mutual benefits.

The statement said that the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR), Bian Lixin, has joined Sam's delegation as an adviser.

The statement also noted that Secretary for Administration and Justice Wong Sio Chak is acting chief executive during Sam's two-day duty visit to Hainan Island. ■

Law on Committee for Safeguarding National Security takes effect

Tony Wong

The new Law on the Macau Special Administrative Region's (MSAR) Committee for Safeguarding National Security took effect yesterday after its promulgation in the Official Gazette (BO) on Monday.

The new law, with its final draft passed by the MSAR's legislature on Thursday last week, regulates the duties, organisational structure, and operation of the Committee for Safeguarding National Security in the form of a law.

The duties, organisational structure, and operation of the MSAR's Committee for Safeguarding National Security were previously governed by an administrative regulation, which came into force in 2018 when the committee was set up.

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, which took effect yesterday, has replaced the 2018 administrative regulation governing the Committee for Safeguarding National Security.

The new law formally defines the committee as an entity tasked with 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.

The committee is chaired by the MSAR's chief executive.

According to the new law, the composition of the committee includes a secretariat, which is

a standing administrative unit tasked with the committee's daily operations and functioning. The secretariat is headed by the government's secretary for security.

According to the new law, the organisational structure and operation of the committee's secretariat shall be governed by an administrative regulation.

The new administrative regulation governing the committee's secretariat also took effect yesterday after it was gazetted on Monday.

According to the new administrative regulation, the organisational structure of the committee's secretariat consists of 34 personnel, comprising a secretary-general, two deputy secretaries-general, two assistant secretaries-general, the heads of five departments, and 24 other personnel. ■

China deeply shocked by Japanese man's forcible entry into Chinese embassy in Tokyo: FM spokesperson

BEIJING — China is deeply shocked that a man claiming to be an active-duty officer of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF) forcibly broke into the Chinese embassy in Tokyo by climbing over a wall in the morning, foreign ministry spokesperson Lin Jian said at a regular press briefing yesterday.

According to Lin, the man admitted that his act was illegal and he also threatened to kill Chinese diplomatic personnel in the so-called "name of god."

Lin said that China has lodged strong démarches and protests with Japan, adding that the incident is a serious violation of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic

Relations and posed a grave threat to the safety and security of Chinese diplomatic personnel and facilities. "The incident is egregious in both nature and impact."

The incident once again highlighted the danger of the rampant spread of far-right impact and neo-militarism in the country, the spokesperson said.

It also reveals the toxicity of the Japanese government's erroneous policies on vital issues concerning China-Japan relations such as history and Taiwan, and Japan's failure in maintaining discipline in SDF and in fulfilling its responsibility to protect the Chinese diplomatic and consular premises and personnel, Lin added.

The Chinese side urges the Japanese side to immediately conduct a thorough investigation into the incident, severely punish those involved, and provide a responsible explanation to China, Lin said.

The Japanese side must ensure the safety and security of Chinese diplomatic and consular premises and personnel, reflect on and correct its erroneous policies on China, and get rid of the root cause for such incidents once and for all, Lin said.

The international community needs to stay on high alert against Japan's accelerating rightward turn and loss of control inside the rapidly expanding SDF, the spokesperson added. — Xinhua

Tai vows to facilitate French brands' entry into mainland market

Continued from p.1

Tai also said that with a free and open business environment and a diverse and inclusive culture, Macau has been building platforms for mutually beneficial cooperation between international brands and local enterprises.

Tai pointed out that Macau's free-trade and zero-tariff policies fully ensure the free flow of goods, intangible assets, and capital, recognised by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) as one of the world's most open economies for trade and investment.

Tai underlined that Macau has long maintained robust economic and trade relations with France and other European economies, adding that over the years, numerous renowned French brands have been developing deep roots in the Macau market, establishing solid marketing networks.

The policy secretary also underlined that the MSAR government has also encouraged and supported local enterprises in strengthening their brand development and promoting their quality products and unique cultural brands to the world.

Tai noted that the value of goods imported from France into Macau exceeded 17 billion patacas last year, demonstrating a solid economic and trade relation between the two sides. He also pointed out that Macau and France signed an agreement last year on launching cooperation on scientific research, offering new opportunities and prospects for cooperation in sci-tech research and development and technology transfer between the two sides.

Tai said that the hosting of the Bonjour Brand Forum (Macao) has not only fully demonstrated Macau's unique advantages as an international exchange platform, but has also created more opportunities for market expansion and the deepening of cooperation among enterprises from the Chinese mainland, Macau, and France.

Tai noted that the country has now started to implement its 15th Five-Year Plan, while the MSAR government is now working on the drafting Macau's third Five-Year Plan, with one of

its objectives to solidly advance Macau's appropriate economic diversification and its coordination in regional development.

Tai pledged the MSAR government's commitment to advancing the development of the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin and the high-quality development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA), and facilitating the regional flow of various production factors such as talent, capital, logistics, and data, thereby further enhancing market vitality and innovation capacity and bringing new development opportunities for international brands and Macau enterprises.

Tai also underlined the MSAR government's commitment to leveraging Macau's institutional advantages of being backed by the motherland and connected to the world, thereby facilitating the entry of French brands into the Chinese mainland's vast market using Macau as a platform while also creating favourable conditions for brands from the Chinese mainland to enter the international market via Macau.

Also delivering a speech during yesterday's ceremony, Raffarin noted that Macau features a combination of deep traditional Chinese culture and international opening-up, making it a unique place where civilisations converge and peace is practised.

Raffarin underlined that the Bonjour Brand Forum (Macao) has established an important platform for mutual learning between Chinese and French brands, adding that culture is one of the most important elements in China-France cooperation, where mutual respect is the essence.

Raffarin suggested that China-France cooperation can be deepened in two major aspects, namely promoting dialogue between creative elites from China and France and positioning Macau as a vehicle for cultural exchange between the two countries; and deepening two-way financial investment and leveraging fund instruments to support business interaction between the two sides. ■



Robots stage a performance at the Zhongguancun International Innovation Center in Beijing yesterday. Themed "Full Integration Between Technological and Industrial Innovation," this year's Zhongguancun Forum will be held in Beijing from today through Sunday. More than 1,000 guests from over 100 countries and regions are expected to participate in the forum, which features more than 100 events. — Xinhua

Asia still the locomotive of global growth



This photo taken on yesterday shows a panel discussion themed on "Free Trade Ports: Opportunities and Missions as Gateways for Opening-up" during the Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) Annual Conference 2026 in Boao, Hainan Province. — Xinhua

Analysis

BOAO — Asia remains the world's primary growth engine, as the region's share of global GDP continues to expand, according to a report released by the Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) yesterday.

The Asian economy is expected to expand by 4.5 percent in 2026, with its share of global GDP rising to 49.7 percent from 49.2 percent in 2025 on a purchasing power parity basis, noted the report titled "Asian Economic Outlook and Integration Progress Annual Report 2026."

Many people believe that the "Asian Century" has already arrived, BFA Secretary General Zhang Jun said when addressing a press conference.

Despite significant challenges, Asia's economy remains resilient with a positive outlook, and continues to make important contributions to the global economy, international trade and sustainable development, Zhang said.

Founded in 2001, the BFA is a non-governmental and non-profit international organization committed to promoting regional economic integration and bringing Asian countries closer to their development goals.

Running from March 24 to 27, this year's conference is themed "Shaping a Shared Future: New Dynamics, New Opportunities, New Cooperation," and is again being held in south China's Hainan Province.

According to the report, Asia continues to be the world's premier destination for foreign direct investment, recognized for its resilience, growth potential and enduring appeal to global investors, with China and ASEAN leading as the most attractive destinations.

On the tech front, the report said the global epicenter of artificial intelligence (AI) development is progressively shifting from Europe and the United States toward Asia.

"Capitalizing on their substantial digital populations, diverse application ecosystems, and coherent policy frameworks, Asian economies are rapidly evolving from AI followers into frontrunners," it said.

The AI industry chain is now extensive and complex, with different Asian countries possessing their own strengths across various vertical sectors, said Deloitte China Research partner Lydia Chen. "Moving forward, collaboration at the industrial, software, data and policy levels will help facilitate a more convenient and efficient flow of key factors."

A report on Asia's sustainable development was also unveiled on Tuesday, highlighting that Asia is emerging as a pivotal force in the

global shift toward greener, low-carbon energy, moving from "the largest center of traditional energy consumption" to "a leader in clean energy development."

In terms of Asian integration progress, the report noted that the foundations of Asian trade integration have continued to strengthen, citing data that intra-regional trade dependence had edged up from 56.3 percent in 2023 to 57.2 percent in 2024, as major economies across the region increasingly orient their trade ties toward one another.

Asia-Pacific economies are increasingly transitioning from individual integration into global value chains toward a model of shared regional integration, with many advancing up the value chain ladder buoyed by support from within the region, it said.

Fueled by rising investment in digital infrastructure, the demand dividend of Asia's vast markets, and deepening regional economic integration, the region is gradually transforming from a participant in global services trade into one of its principal engines of growth, the report said.

Describing Asia as a beacon of global growth in recent years, Denis Depoux, global managing director at Roland Berger, noted that China is playing a strong role in this trend, fueled by significant technological breakthroughs.

China, with its advantage of a vast market, is further expanding its opening up to the world, particularly by fostering a new type of economic globalization that is inclusive and beneficial for all, said Sang Baichuan, dean of the Institute of International Economy at the University of International Business and Economics. "This enables China's open and huge market to provide more opportunities for Asian economies and the wider world."

He added that as a result, the internal cohesion of Asia's economy will be further strengthened, and its resilience to external shocks will be enhanced.

Regional cooperation mechanisms serve as important tools for remaining open and providing policy certainty, said Rebecca Fatima Sta Maria, former executive director of the APEC Secretariat. "This certainty can attract investment and promote more sustainable and lasting development."

This year marks the APEC "China Year," with the theme of "Building an Asia-Pacific Community to Prosper Together." China will host the 33rd APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in November. — Xinhua

Wang Yi urges peace talks in phone call with Iranian FM

BEIJING — Foreign Minister Wang Yi said yesterday that all hotspot issues should be resolved through dialogue and negotiation, rather than through the use of force.

Wang, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, made the urge in a phone conversation with Iranian Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi at the latter's request.

Araghchi briefed Wang on the latest developments in the regional situation. Thanking China for providing emergency humanitarian assistance, he said the Iranian people are more united

in resisting foreign aggression and safeguarding the country's sovereignty and independence.

Iran is committed to achieving a comprehensive end to the war, rather than merely a temporary ceasefire, Araghchi said. The Strait of Hormuz is open to all and ships can pass safely, but countries at war with Iran are not under consideration, he said.

He expressed the hope that measures taken by all parties would help de-escalate the situation rather than intensify the conflict, expecting China to continue playing a positive role in promoting peace and ending the war.

For his part, Wang reiterated

China's principled position, saying that dialogue is always better than continued fighting. This serves the interests of Iran and its people, and also reflects the common aspiration of the international community, he said.

Wang called on all parties to the conflict to seize every opportunity and window for peace, and start peace talks as soon as possible.

China will continue to uphold an objective and impartial stance, oppose violations of other countries' sovereignty, actively promote peace and ceasefire, and work for regional peace and stability, Wang said. — Xinhua

How China is making tangible progress in TB control

Analysis

BEIJING — Yesterday marked World Tuberculosis (TB) Day. In China, the deadly infectious disease has killed millions over the past decades, but is now being brought under better control through improved treatment and prevention.

According to the World Health Organization's (WHO's) World TB Report 2025, the total TB incidence in China dropped significantly to 49 per 100,000 population in 2024. This has made China a country with moderate to low TB prevalence.

TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION

Medical professionals say technological innovation is important, as throughout the long fight between humans and Mycobacterium tuberculosis, each technological breakthrough has led to substantial declines in TB incidence and mortality.

"To win the battle against TB, technological innovation must be placed in a prominent position," said Li Liang, president of Beijing Chest Hospital affiliated with Capital Medical University, at a recent seminar on the role of technological innovation in TB control.

At the seminar, a biotech company introduced its tongue swab-based testing product, which can serve as an alternative to the traditional sputum testing method for patients who produce little or no sputum. It is China's first approved PCR test kit for TB based on tongue swab samples.

Researchers also shared progress on the innovative TB vaccine development. In March 2025, China's first domestically developed mRNA TB vaccine began clinical trials, and it is believed to offer greater protective efficacy than the BCG vaccine.

Pang Yu, a leading member of the vaccine development team at Beijing Chest Hospital, said preliminary clinical studies had shown promising immune cell response data among trial participants.

"Larger-scale clinical trials will be carried out this year, and we hopefully will contribute a Chinese

solution to global TB control," Pang said.

PREVENTIVE TREATMENT

According to Gao Lei, vice chairman and secretary-general of the Chinese Antituberculosis Association, preventive treatment remains the most direct way to reduce TB incidence and achieve the global goal of ending tuberculosis.

He noted that China's TB control is at a critical stage of strategic adjustment, shifting its approach focused on early detection, treatment and care to one that also emphasizes screening close contacts and providing treatment to people with latent Mycobacterium tuberculosis infection.

China began to establish a comprehensive network for TB preventive treatment in 2021, with related technical guidelines and national guidelines released in recent years.

According to the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC), from 2021 to 2024, the number of people receiving preventive therapy rose from 22,778 to 87,034, covering key groups such as household close contacts, students, and people living with HIV.

Preventive treatment efforts in Jiangsu Province, including high-tech assisted TB screening among high-risk groups, and specialized clinics providing both medical care and education to improve TB awareness, were presented as an illustrative example of "how a comprehensive approach to TB preventive treatment services can be put in place" in the World TB Report 2025.

According to a national TB control plan for the period 2024-2030, China aims to reach a preventive treatment coverage for close contacts of 80 percent by 2030.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

However, China is still among the countries with a high TB burden, accounting for 6.5 percent of all estimated incident cases worldwide in 2024, according to the WHO TB report.

Drug-resistant TB is a major challenge for the country to further control the disease, according to Zhang Hui, a senior researcher at the TB prevention and control center of the China CDC.

At the end of 2025, pretomanid, a specialized medicine for treating drug-resistant TB — caused by bacteria resistant to at least one TB treatment drug — was added to China's national reimbursement drug list.

This came a year after the drug was approved in China. Pretomanid has proven to be highly effective in treating drug-resistant TB, while its cost for a six-month regimen could be about 90,000 yuan before it was included in the reimbursement list.

Two other medications for drug-resistant TB, bedaquiline and delamanid, had previously been included in the reimbursement list.

Meanwhile, medical professionals and officials believe that the financial support should be further expanded to ease the burden on patients, many of whom are from disadvantaged groups.

"Patients with drug-resistant TB, a notifiable infectious disease, should not be denied treatment due to inability to pay," epidemiologist Zhang Wenhong told the media earlier, noting that it is necessary to strengthen insurance coverage for medications.

Liu Xiaoqing, deputy director of the disease control and prevention bureau of Jiangxi Province, where TB incidence remains relatively high, noted that the aforementioned three TB drugs are currently classified as Class B under the reimbursement list.

This means the cost of these drugs is not fully covered, and patients are required to pay a certain proportion out of pocket. He therefore suggested that the three drugs be moved to Class A, so that the cost can be fully covered in the reimbursement scope.

Liu also suggested establishing a special fund for drug-resistant TB prevention and control to ensure related medications are fully accessible to all patients.

— Xinhua

Manila's jeepney drivers struggle as Mideast war sends diesel cost soaring

Cecil Morella

MANILA – The sun was not quite up as Eric Helera unlocked the doors of his jeepney, wiped down its two long passenger benches, and checked his brake fluid before another day ferrying Manila commuters.

The makeshift minibus named Princess is part of a smoke-belching, colourfully decorated fleet that forms the backbone of a Philippine transportation sector being hammered by surging fuel prices driven by the US-Israeli war with Iran.

Like most jeepneys, Princess runs on diesel, the cost of which has hit historic highs in the archipelago nation since the partial closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

Helera, 43, is driving shorter routes but longer days in response, routinely working 18 hours to ensure he has something left over after buying fuel and covering “the boundary”, the amount he owes the jeepney’s owner each day.

“The margins are really thin now because of the skyrocketing diesel prices,” he told AFP while sipping instant coffee from a paper cup outside his neighbourhood grocery.

“Sometimes I earn less than 500

pesos (about US\$8) a day,” he said of shifts that can stretch until midnight.

Before the Middle East war, he could comfortably clear the same amount by lunchtime.

“There’s been a huge adjustment at home,” he said of life in the two-story Manila house he shares with his wife, seven children, and two other families.

“My children ... need money for school projects and stuff like that, and we don’t have it now,” Helera told AFP journalists who spent part of the day travelling with him.

A “full breakfast with rice” was now a luxury to be enjoyed on only top earning days, he said.

“I need 10 passengers or more for each trip. Below that, and I don’t earn anything,” he calculated, adding the jeepney ran at its full 16-person capacity only half a dozen times a day.

Fuel hikes he called the “most severe” he had ever seen had forced him to drop longer routes where the passenger load could not justify the cost of diesel.

Yesterday, the price jumped again by around 16 percent, with prices up to 134.30 pesos per litre at some pumps, the highest in the country’s history.

Jeepney driver unions have



Jeepney driver Eric Helera (left) speaks with fellow drivers at a terminal in Manila yesterday. – AFP

been demanding fare increases to help cover the burden, with one last week organising a “strike” that few drivers could afford to join.

A fare hike authorised by the country’s transport regulator, meanwhile, was quashed by President Ferdinand Marcos a day after it was announced.

“I’m on the side of the jeepney drivers,” salesclerk Trixie Brumuella said of potentially pricier rides.

“Fuel prices rose but fares didn’t, so they’re losing money,”

the 35-year-old told AFP outside one of Manila’s ubiquitous jeepney terminals, while conceding she was struggling to make ends meet herself.

“I told myself to stop spending on anything apart from my basic needs. I resolved to stop buying other stuff,” she said.

Near another terminal, college freshman Juliana Tonelete told AFP that while she sympathised with the plight of drivers, her own financial situation took priority.

“I think their reaction is valid given higher pump prices, but as a commuter, as a student with a limited budget, it’s difficult,” she said.

Helera said the cost of fuel had forced some fellow drivers to abandon the job entirely.

“Some went back to their home provinces, others looked for other lines of work.... I’m also considering that option, because we no longer earn anything.”

He worried his own options, however, were limited.

“Maybe construction. I only went to high school.”

And while a government cash handout expected today – the first for embattled jeepney drivers – would be welcome, “5,000 pesos ... won’t carry you that far,” Helera said.

“It’s sad,” he added, as his jeepney slowly filled with evening commuters.

“It feels as though you want to give up, but you also know you can’t surrender because you have a family.”

Helera noted with a sigh that he had yet to reach the “boundary” after nearly 11 hours on the road.

“It’s been a slow day,” he said.

“I’ll need to drive into the night.” – AFP

Indonesian police seek 2 for murder of Dutch tourist in Bali

DENPASAR – Indonesian police are hunting for two people wanted in the stabbing death of a Dutch tourist on the resort island of Bali, an official said yesterday.

Rene Pouw, 49, was attacked late Monday near a villa where he stayed in the Badung district, local police chief I Ketut Agus Pasek Sudina said.

The victim’s girlfriend, identified only by the initials PI, reported seeing two individuals attack Pouw

with a knife, Ketut said.

He suffered cuts to his head, neck, shoulder and lower thigh, and died from blood loss, the official added.

No personal items were taken from Pouw, and police are investigating the motive for the attack.

Pouw’s girlfriend said one of the perpetrators wore a type of black and green jacket commonly donned by Indonesian gig drivers,

while the other had on an orange shirt, according to Ketut.

This month, a Bali court sentenced two Australians to 16 years in prison for killing a compatriot over a debt dispute, while a third man was jailed for 12 years for organising the hit.

A court on the neighbouring tourist island of Lombok also sentenced two Indonesians to 18 years in prison last month for murdering an elderly Spanish tourist. – AFP

Thai court orders firm to pay villagers for mining damages

BANGKOK – A Thai court ordered a mining firm yesterday to compensate nearly 400 villagers for health and environmental damages linked to its decades-long operations, awarding up to just over US\$6,000 per person.

The case stems from long-running complaints against Akara Resources’ gold mine in Thailand’s central province of Phichit, where residents have alleged contamination of water sources and adverse health effects.

Owned by Australian gold and silver producer Kingsgate Consolidated and operated by its Thai subsidiary Akara, the Chatree mine began operations in 2001 but faced legal challenges and was closed in 2016, before reopening three years ago.

A Bangkok civil court ruled yesterday that the company must pay affected villagers up to 200,000 baht (US\$6,100) for the impacts caused by its operations.

“The defendant’s operations have affected both the plaintiffs and the environment, which is a key source of their livelihood,” one of the judges said in court.

“The defendant’s actions therefore constitute a violation of the plaintiff’s rights.”

The court said 382 people had undergone health assessments as part of the class-action lawsuit, and ordered Akara to make payments within one month or face possible asset seizures.

It also ordered the company to stop using one of its mining tailings ponds due to risks posed to the local community.

Around 40 villagers attended the verdict announcement, wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the message: “The gold around your neck is made of our tears.”

Manushya Foundation, an organisation advocating for the affected villagers, called the ruling a “win”.

“We are very happy for the villagers, but the fight is not over,” its founder, Emilie Palamy Pradichit, told reporters outside the court, adding the group would continue pushing for the closure of a second tailings pond.

She told AFP they plan to appeal for additional compensation.

Some residents said the ordered payouts do not make up for the damages suffered.

“I’m not satisfied. It’s not worth it for the loss of nature and our ways of life because these are irreplaceable,” farmer Pimkwan Sinthornthammatas, 54, told AFP.

A representative from Akara Resources said the company accepted the ruling but is reviewing its legal options.

“There are some legal complexities, and we will consult with our team before taking any further action,” Chersak Utha-aroon, a company manager, told AFP. – AFP

Marcos declares ‘national energy emergency’

MANILA – Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos declared a state of “national energy emergency” yesterday, citing risks to the domestic fuel supply and energy stability created by the Middle East war.

The state of emergency was declared just hours after the country’s energy secretary said the Philippines planned to boost the output of its coal-fired power plants to keep electricity costs down as the war wreaks havoc with gas shipments.

“A state of national energy emergency is hereby declared in light of the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, and the resulting imminent danger posed upon the availability and stability of the country’s energy supply,” the executive order released yesterday evening said.

The order authorises the country’s Department of Energy to make advance payments of 15 percent to secure fuel contracts while taking direct action against hoarding or profiteering.

“The declaration... will enable the government, through the (energy department) and other concerned agencies, to implement responsive and coordinated measures under existing laws to address the risks posed by disruptions in the global energy supply and the domestic economy,” the order said.

The order also grants the transportation department the ability to direct public transportation fuel subsidies and reduce or suspend toll charges and aviation fees, while fast-tracking aid to individuals in “crisis situations”.

The Philippines, which has some of the region’s highest energy costs, is heavily dependent on imported fuel

to keep its power plants running.

Leaning on coal

The archipelago nation of 116 million relies on coal for about 60 percent of its electricity generation.

Energy secretary Sharon Garin told reporters earlier yesterday that with the cost of LNG (liquefied natural gas) soaring, the country would “temporarily” be forced to lean even more heavily on the carbon-belching fossil fuel.

While hoping to “maximise” the use of local coal, the Philippines was also keeping the option of upping its purchases of coal from top supplier Indonesia, the energy secretary said.

“We talked to the generation companies, the coal-powered plants, to check how much they can increase their generation,” Garin said, calling it a “temporary measure” that could start as early as April 1.

“If we are successful in implementing this, at least we can decrease the electricity rate hikes because of the conflict in the Middle East,” she said.

Indonesia, meanwhile, had assured the Philippines it would place no limits on coal orders.

“There’s no restriction on our importation of coal from Indonesia as of today,” Garin said, adding increased purchases may not be necessary.

President Marcos in January announced a “significant” discovery of natural gas made near the country’s rapidly depleting Malampaya offshore natural gas field.

It was hoped the discovery could extend the life of the field, which supplies about 40 percent of power to main island Luzon and was expected to run dry within a few years. – AFP

India warns of misuse risk from cheap weight-loss jabs

NEW DELHI – India's health ministry warned yesterday of the risks of unregulated use of weight-loss drugs, as low-cost generic versions hit the market, stepping up inspections and enforcement across the pharmaceutical supply chain.

The warning comes after patents on semaglutide – the active ingredient in drugs such as Ozempic and Wegovy – expired on March 20 in India, the world's largest supplier of generic medicines.

Generic versions of the GLP-1 drugs – referring to the hormone that regulates blood glucose levels and appetite – will slash costs and transform the global fight against obesity.

But the Ministry of Health stressed that the drugs can only be used with a doctor's prescription.

"With the recent introduction of multiple generic variants of GLP-1... concerns have emerged regarding their on-demand availability through retail pharmacies, online platforms, wholesalers, and wellness clinics," the Ministry of Health said in a statement.

"These drugs, when used without proper medical supervision, may lead to serious adverse effects and related health risks."

It said the Drugs Controller of India had "intensified its regulatory surveillance", including barring manufacturers from any

"indirect promotion that could mislead consumers or encourage off-label usage".

Simon Barquera, president of the World Obesity Federation, told AFP that the "medication alone will not reverse the global rise in obesity."

"Obesity is a complex, chronic disease," he said, noting the importance of prevention efforts and healthier habits.

India's weight-loss drug sales have grown tenfold in five years to US\$153 million as of 2026, and are projected to soar to over half a billion by 2030.

While the country still accounts for a third of the world's undernutrition according to the

World Health Organisation (WHO), rising incomes and urban lifestyles have pushed obesity rates sharply upward.

Government data released March last year shows 24 percent of women and 23 percent of men are overweight or obese in India.

Still, high prices – often 15,000 to 22,000 rupees (US\$161-US\$236) a month – have limited greater adoption.

Since the expiry of the patent, several Indian drug makers have rolled out generic semaglutide products, with monthly injections costing anywhere between 1,300 rupees to 4,200 rupees (US\$15-US\$45). – AFP

Pakistan's PM says Islamabad 'ready' to host talks to end Mideast war

ISLAMABAD – Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said yesterday Islamabad was prepared to host negotiations to stop the US-Israeli war with Iran, after mounting speculation it could act as a mediator.

"Pakistan welcomes and fully supports ongoing efforts to pursue dialogue to end the WAR in Middle East, in the interest of peace and stability in [the] region and beyond," he wrote on X.

"Subject to concurrence by the US and Iran, Pakistan stands ready and honoured to be the host to facilitate meaningful and conclusive talks for a comprehensive settlement of the ongoing conflict."

Tehran's foreign ministry suggested on Monday that messages had been received from "some friendly countries indicating a US request for negotiations at ending the war", according to the official IRNA news agency.

Sharif then said he had spoken with Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian, promising his government's help in bringing peace to the region.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar also said he had

been in touch with his Iranian counterpart, Abbas Araghchi.

Yesterday, foreign ministry spokesman Tahir Hussain Andrabi told AFP earlier that Pakistan was "always willing to host talks" and had "consistently advocated for dialogue and diplomacy to promote peace and stability in the region".

The country's former ambassador to Oman, Imran Ali Chaudhry, told 92 News late on Monday that Pakistan's army chief recently held talks with US negotiators in the Gulf.

"Around two to two-and-a-half weeks ago, Field Marshal Asim Munir went to Oman on a trip that was not disclosed and he held a four-hour meeting with [Steve] Witkoff and [Jared] Kushner," he said.

Iran is a long-standing ally of Pakistan and Islamabad has condemned the killing of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. It also sent congratulations to his son and successor, Mojtaba.

Shia Muslims make up about 10-15 percent of Pakistan's population and Ali Khamenei's death sparked deadly riots at US diplomatic missions across the country. – AFP



Teachers march through Melbourne's city centre to protest over pay and conditions yesterday. Tens of thousands of public school teachers went on strike for the first time in thirteen years following a pay dispute with the state government, closing or disrupting some 500 state schools. – AFP

Vietnam greenlights program to protect children online

HANOI – Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh has approved a program to strengthen the protection of children online while improving their digital skills during the 2026-2030 period, the Vietnam News Agency reported yesterday.

Authorities plan to build a comprehensive protection framework based on five pillars, including a stronger legal system, nationwide awareness campaigns, accessible cybersecurity and digital education solutions, enhanced inter-agency coordination and

improved self-immunity among children through safety education, said the report.

During the period, all schools are expected to deploy cybersecurity solutions, while internet service providers must integrate filters to block harmful content, and localities nationwide adopt technologies to deliver digital skills education, counselling and smart support services.

The program also guarantees timely support and intervention for any child who is a victim of online abuse, upon request from the child, their family or the community. – Xinhua



Taliban security personnel escort US citizen Dennis Coyle (centre) to a chartered aircraft at the airport in Kabul yesterday after the Taliban released him. Afghanistan's Taliban government announced yesterday that it was freeing a US national who had been detained for more than a year. The foreign ministry said the family of linguist and researcher Dennis Coyle had written to the supreme leader of Afghanistan, requesting his release for Eid. – AFP

S Korea says hostile rhetoric doesn't promote peaceful coexistence on Peninsula

SEOUL – South Korea's presidential office yesterday criticized the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)'s designation of South Korea as "the most hostile state," saying such hostile rhetoric does nothing to promote peaceful coexistence on the Korean Peninsula.

Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is the official name of North Korea.

The office stressed that lasting peace and prosperity cannot be achieved through confrontation, but through dialogue and

cooperation, adding that the South Korean government will continue to pursue a long-term policy of peaceful coexistence.

According to the DPRK's official Korean Central News Agency, during a speech Monday at the Supreme People's Assembly, DPRK top leader Kim Jong Un said the DPRK will categorically reject, ignore and treat South Korea with the most explicit words and actions "by officially regarding it as the most hostile state." – Xinhua

Kim vows 'irreversible' nuclear status, warns Seoul of 'merciless' response

SEOUL – North Korea will never change its status as a nuclear-armed state, its leader Kim Jong Un said, state media reported yesterday.

The declaration – delivered on Monday – follows Kim's reappointment a day earlier as head of the authoritarian nation's highest policymaking body, the State Affairs Commission.

"We will continue to firmly consolidate our status as a nuclear-armed state as an irreversible course, while aggressively stepping up our struggle against hostile forces," he said in a policy speech at the rubber-stamp legislature in Pyongyang.

In a lengthy policy address reported by the official Korean Central News Agency, the third-generation leader addressed a wide range of issues, from nuclear weapons and defence policy to economic goals and relations with South Korea and the United States.

"We will, in line with the mission entrusted by the Constitution of the Republic ..., further expand and advance our self-defensive nuclear deterrent," he said, referring to nuclear weapons.

Pursuing an expansion of nuclear weapons to consolidate its status as a nuclear-armed

state has been "entirely justified", he added.

The isolated country will ensure "precise readiness" of its nuclear forces, he said, to fend off "strategic threats".

Kim did not mince words about his southern neighbour, which he called "the most hostile state".

"We will designate South Korea as the most hostile state and deal with it by thoroughly," he said.

Pyongyang will "make it pay mercilessly – without the slightest consideration or hesitation – for any act that infringes upon our Republic," he added.

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

The North's legislature re-elected Kim as president of state affairs, KCNA reported earlier, without saying whether the decision was unanimous or with dissent.

Critics argue that elections in North Korea are pre-determined and designed to give the leadership a veneer of democratic legitimacy. – AFP

Mammals cannot be cloned infinitely, mice study discovers

Daniel Lawler

PARIS – There is a limit on how many times a mammal can be cloned before suffering “mutational meltdown”, Japanese scientists have discovered, after making 1,200 clones over two decades that started off with a single mouse.

The 58th generation of mice did not survive, establishing for the first time that mammals cannot be cloned an infinite number of times, the scientists said in a study published yesterday.

It had been hoped that this method, which involves making clones of other clones, could have a range of uses in the future, including saving endangered species or mass-producing animals for their meat.

“We had believed that we could create an infinite number of clones. That is why these results are so disappointing,” the study’s senior author Teruhiko Wakayama of the University of Yamanashi told AFP.

It was Wakayama’s team that cloned the first mouse in 1997,

a year after the famous Dolly the Sheep became the first-ever mammal clone.

For the new research, the scientists first cloned the original female mouse in 2005.

Once a mouse reached three months old, they were cloned again, resulting in three or four new generations every year.

Over the next 20 years, they carried out more than 30,000 cloning attempts that created over 1,200 mice.

The process involves removing the DNA-containing nucleus of a cell from a donor animal and implanting it into an unfertilised egg from which the nucleus has been removed.

‘Critical turning point’

In the first few years, the method’s success rate steadily rose – reaching over 15 percent at one point – and the mice appeared to all be identical.

This gave the scientists hope that

they could make clones indefinitely.

However, there was a “critical turning point” around the 25th generation, according to the study published in the journal *Nature Communications*.

After that point, harmful genetic mutations built up over the generations, and each new set of mice was less likely to survive.

By the 57th generation, only 0.6 percent survived. Despite their accumulating mutations, these mice were still healthy.

However, all the mice in the 58th generation died shortly after birth.

“There were no visible abnormalities in the pups, and the cause of death is unknown,” Wakayama said.

The scientists sequenced the genomes of some of the clones, finding that they had three times more mutations than mice born via sexual reproduction.

They also had larger placentas – and some were missing a copy of their X chromosome.

“It was once believed that clones were identical to the original,” Wakayama said, but this was clearly not the case.

Wakayama admitted his team has “no idea” how to overcome this problem, suggesting that perhaps the answer was to develop a better cloning method.

The importance of sex

Importantly, when the later clones – even in the 57th generation – mated with male mice, they had healthy offspring with fewer mutations.

This discovery demonstrates “that sexual reproduction is indispensable for the long-term survival of mammalian species,” the study said.

It also supports a theory called Muller’s ratchet, which “predicts that in asexual lineages, deleterious mutations inevitably accumulate, ultimately producing mutational meltdown and extinction,” the study said.

The research “provides the first

empirical demonstration” that this meltdown occurs in mammals, it added.

The finding could also rule out all sorts of scenarios involving clones that have been dreamt up in science fiction.

For example, Wakayama joked that this finding meant it would have been impossible to create so many clone troopers in the Star Wars prequel “Attack of the Clones”.

It could also affect any plans to preserve Earth’s genetic resources in a vault in the hope of re-cloning a new population following some catastrophe in the future, the study pointed out.

Wakayama is also working on new ways to collect cells from animals without harming them, as part of efforts to bring endangered species back from the brink.

His team has already successfully made clones from cells found in urine – and are currently working to do the same with faeces.

– AFP

Oil prices jump as Trump’s Iran claims raise doubts

LONDON – Oil prices jumped yesterday as traders turned cautious over the prospect of a negotiated agreement between the United States and Iran to end the Middle East war.

Meanwhile European and US stocks held largely steady, having rallied on Monday after US President Donald Trump delayed strikes on Iranian energy sites and hailed “very good” talks with Iran.

Asian equities caught up with the strong gains yesterday but the rally fizzled in the European and US sessions.

Oil prices, which had tumbled on Monday, rebounded strongly with Brent popping back above US\$100 a barrel.

“The Iran war is not over, and the Strait of Hormuz remains closed,” said Kathleen Brooks, research director at XTB.

“It will take more conciliatory remarks from Donald Trump to extend Monday’s recovery rally and give hope that the war is close to wrapping up.”

Axel Rudolph at trading platform IG said European “markets began the day on a negative footing but ended it in the green, torn between fears that the conflict in the Middle East may not wind down anytime soon and the hope that it may.”

Trump on Monday stepped back from his threat to attack energy sites, citing “very good” talks to end the war.

However, Tehran’s parliamentary speaker said “no negotiations” were underway, insisting Trump was seeking “to manipulate the financial and oil markets”.

And hours after Trump’s apparent U-turn, Iranian media reported that Israeli-US strikes targeted two gas facilities and a pipeline.



A plume of smoke and a fragment of concrete rise from the site of an Israeli airstrike on the eastern outskirts of Tyre, in southern Lebanon, yesterday. – AFP

“Markets [are] increasingly questioning the validity of Trump’s claim of positive negotiations with Iran,” noted Joshua Mahony, chief market analyst at Scope Markets.

The economic impact of the war is also becoming clearer.

Business activity in the eurozone slowed significantly this month, according to a closely watched survey published yesterday, as the war sent energy prices surging and disrupted global supply chains.

The HCOB Flash Eurozone purchasing managers’ index registered a significantly lower figure of 50.5 for March, down from 51.9 in February. A reading above 50 indicates growth.

“The flash Eurozone PMI is ringing stagflation alarm bells as the war in the Middle East drives prices sharply higher while stifling

growth,” said Chris Williamson, chief business economist at S&P Global Market Intelligence, which published the findings.

The initial reading for the composite US PMI dipped to an 11-month low of 51.4 points in March from 51.9 points in February.

“The risk is that the PMI data, which is a lead indicator, is the start of a wave of weaker economic data to come down the line,” said XTB’s Brooks.

Iran’s choking of the Strait is also impacting airlines, with Lufthansa, Cathay Pacific, and Air France extending flight suspensions to destinations across the Middle East.

Lufthansa shares fell nearly two percent and Air France-KLM shares ended the day down three percent yesterday.

– AFP

US-Israeli war on Iran is ‘breach of int’l law’: German president

Femke Colborne

BERLIN – German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier spoke yesterday of a “deep rift” with traditional ally the United States and said the US-Israeli war on Iran was a “breach of international law”.

In unusually strong comments, the German head of state said that just as there was no going back from Russia’s 2022 military offensive in Ukraine, “there will be no going back to before January 20, 2025”, when US President Donald Trump entered the White House for a second time.

“The rift is too deep and the trust in American power politics has been lost, not only among our allies but... worldwide,” he said at an event to mark the 75th anniversary of the German foreign ministry.

Although Steinmeier’s role is largely ceremonial, his words carry weight in Germany, which has not officially condemned the war against Iran.

Steinmeier, a former foreign minister, said: “Our foreign policy does not become any more convincing simply because we do not call a breach of international law a breach of international law.”

He stressed that the US-Israeli war on Iran was, “in my view, in breach of international law”.

“There is little doubt that, in any case, the justification of an imminent attack on the US does not hold water,” he added.

Germany’s head of government, Chancellor Friedrich Merz, has harshly criticised Iran’s leadership and backed several key US-Israeli war goals.

But he has also stated that, had

Berlin been consulted in advance, it “would have advised against” the war.

‘Den of thieves’

Steinmeier called the military campaign “a politically disastrous mistake” and “a truly avoidable, unnecessary war”.

“Realism means we must be pragmatic in our dealings with this US administration and focus on our core interests,” he said.

“But realism also means we must not compromise our own principles.”

He added: “The US government has a different world view to ours, one that shows no regard for established rules, partnership or hard-won trust.”

“We cannot change that. We must deal with it. But this is my conviction: we have no reason to align ourselves with this world view.”

Volker Beck, president of the German-Israeli Society, labelled Steinmeier’s comments on the war “grossly inappropriate” and said they displayed a “smug know-it-all attitude”.

“The mullah regime has been threatening and waging war against Israel’s very existence for years,” he claimed, accusing Steinmeier of turning a “blind eye to these dangers”.

Yesterday’s comments were not the first time the German president has criticised the United States.

In January, shortly after the US intervention in Venezuela, Steinmeier spoke of a “breakdown of values” in the United States and insisted the world must not be allowed to turn into a “den of thieves”.

– AFP

NASA to build US\$20 billion Moon base, pause orbital lunar station plans

WASHINGTON—NASA's chief yesterday said the US space agency will invest US\$20 billion to develop a base on the Moon, while suspending its plans to create the lunar orbital space station known as Gateway.

"The agency intends to pause Gateway in its current form and shift focus to infrastructure that enables sustained surface operations," Jared Isaacman said in a statement given during a day-long event at NASA headquarters in Washington.

"Despite challenges with some existing hardware, the agency will repurpose applicable equipment and leverage international partner commitments to support these objectives," he said.

The European Space Agency (ESA) among other international organisations were partners on the planned Gateway project.

It's the latest shake-up at NASA in the wake of changes to the Artemis program, which aims to send Americans back to the Moon and establish a long-term presence there, paving the way for eventual missions to Mars.

The Gateway orbital lunar station was meant to serve both as a point of transfer for astronauts headed to the Moon as well as a platform for research.

The suspension of the initiative isn't entirely surprising: some had criticised it as wasteful or a distraction from other lunar ambitions.

Isaacman said NASA now plans to spend US\$20 billion over the next seven years to construct the lunar base over dozens of missions, "working together with commercial and international partners towards a deliberate

and achievable plan."

"There will be an evolutionary path to building humanity's first permanent surface outpost beyond Earth, and we will take the world along with us."

Artemis 2 on deck

Isaacman, who took the helm of NASA late last year, abruptly announced less than a month ago that it was reshuffling its Artemis programme that has suffered multiple delays in recent years, as it aims to ensure Americans can return to the Moon's surface by 2028.

That goal remains unchanged, but the US space agency is shifting its flight lineup to include a test mission before an eventual lunar landing to improve launch "muscle memory," Isaacman said.

That strategic revision came amid repeated delays to the Artemis 2 mission, which was originally due to take off as early as February, but is now targeting early April. It is meant to see the first flyby of the Moon in more than half a century.

During his first term, President Donald Trump announced he wanted Americans to once again set foot on the lunar surface.

China is forging ahead with plans for its first crewed mission to the Moon by 2030 at the latest.

The US effort depends in part on the progress of NASA's private partners.

SpaceX and Blue Origin, the respective space companies of duelling US billionaires Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, are contracted to develop lunar landers used in the Artemis programme. —AFP

Haiti violence killed more than 5,500 in less than a year: UN

GENEVA – Gang violence in Haiti and security operations targeting the gangs led to more than 5,500 deaths between March 2025 and mid-January, the United Nations said yesterday.

The UN rights office called for more action to tackle rampant corruption and impunity in the poorest country in the Americas.

"While gang violence remains endemic and expanded out of the capital, other sources of violence by self-defence groups and non-organised members of the population are also concerning," a new report by UN rights chief Volker Türk said.

According to data verified by the Human Rights Office, at least 5,519 people were killed in Haiti and 2,608 injured between March 1 last year and January 15, 2026.

Of those, at least 1,424 people were killed as a result of violence by gangs, while 790 were injured.

Operations against gangs led by security forces caused at least 3,497 deaths and 1,742 injuries.

Meanwhile, attacks against gangs by self-defence groups caused at least 598 people to be killed and 76 injured.

For years, Haiti has been in the throes of deadly gang violence, with frequent murders, rapes and kidnappings.

The report said that over the past 12 months, the gangs had expanded beyond the capital Port-au-Prince, pushing into its outskirts and moving further north.

Gangs have been able to "fortify strategic corridors and maintain dominance over critical maritime and overland routes that sustain their financing and operational resilience", the report said.

'Targeted killings'

The report also documented cases of unnecessary or disproportionate use of force by the police, including actual or attempted summary executions of gang members or their suspected supporters, which it said resulted in 196 deaths.

Since March 2025, a private military company, reportedly hired by the Haitian government, has taken part in security operations, including using drone strikes and helicopter gunfire, the report said.

Some, or even most, of these operations "could be described as targeted killings", the UN rights office said.

The report details violence perpetrated by self-defence groups and mobs, which have lynched individuals suspected of gang affiliation.

"Some killings were allegedly encouraged, supported or facilitated by police elements," the report said.

"Efforts to further bolster the rule of law, particularly in the justice and detention sectors, must remain a priority to be able to tackle corruption and impunity," said Türk.

The UN Security Council last year authorised a new international Gang Suppression Force tasked with neutralising the gangs.

It can only be effective "if there are also stronger efforts to identify, detain, investigate and prosecute, in accordance with international standards, those who fund, organise and support the gangs' activities", Türk added. —AFP

Car-burning in Antwerp Jewish quarter triggers 'terror' probe



Young members of the Jewish community pass a soldier armed with an FN SCAR assault rifle standing guard in central Antwerp, part of Belgium's heightened security at Jewish schools and synagogues. —AFP

BRUSSELS – Two minors have been arrested on suspicion of involvement in a "terrorist" organisation after a car was set on fire in Antwerp's Jewish quarter overnight, the public prosecutor in the Belgian port city said yesterday.

The arrests follow a spate of incidents targeting Europe's Jewish community since the start of the US-Israeli war on Iran, including in Belgium where a blast hit a synagogue in Liege earlier this month.

Based on initial findings, the prosecutor's office said, a judge is investigating the suspects for arson and "participation in the activities of a terrorist group."

"A claim video circulating online has been added to the case file," it added.

Investigators are still working to determine the suspects' motives, prosecutors said, without specifying whether they were believed to have deliberately targeted the Jewish community.

The Antwerp fire occurred shortly after 11:30 p.m. on Monday (local

time), and police arrested the two suspects – both from the city – about 15 minutes later.

The car was parked in the diamond district, home to much of Antwerp's Orthodox Jewish community.

In comments aired by Flemish public broadcaster VRT at the scene, the car's owner – a woman identified only by her first name Fatia, who did not specify her religion – said valuables had been stolen from her vehicle before it was set ablaze.

The arson incident comes with European authorities on alert for possible attacks linked to the Middle East war.

SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors jihadist activity worldwide, reported that a recently-formed group calling itself Harakat Ashab al-Yamin al-Islamiya (HAYI) group, meaning The Islamic Movement of the People of the Right Hand, had claimed responsibility for the Antwerp fire in a video.

The same group claimed, in another video, to have carried out an arson attack that destroyed four

Jewish community ambulances near a synagogue in London overnight Sunday to Monday – a claim UK authorities say they are examining.

HAYI had previously circulated claims of responsibility for a March 9 explosive attack outside the Liège synagogue and for similar nighttime incidents targeting a synagogue and then a Jewish school in the Netherlands on March 13 and 14 – none of which caused any injuries.

Belgian prosecutors said following the Liège blast they were examining an apparent jihadist video claiming responsibility, treating it with caution.

SITE describes the HAYI group as pro-Iranian, while the Dutch-based International Centre for Counter-Terrorism noted that the London claim video circulated on online accounts linked to pro-Iranian Shia militias.

The Belgian government has stepped up security around Jewish sites in response to the Liège incident, with soldiers deployed to support police as of Monday around synagogues, schools and daycare centres in Antwerp and Brussels. —AFP

At least 66 die in Colombian military transport plane crash

BOGOTÁ – A Colombian military plane carrying 125 soldiers and crew members crashed on takeoff early Monday (local time), killing at least 66 people and injuring dozens of others, officials said.

The C-130 Hercules aircraft went down shortly after departure from Puerto Leguizamo, near the southern border with Ecuador and Perú, strewn burning wreckage on the jungle floor.

A military source told AFP that 58 soldiers had died, along with six air force personnel and two police officers.

The updated toll came shortly after the local government secretary Carlos Claros told RCN television that 33 people had died, and that efforts were being made to treat and evacuate dozens of others injured.

He added that investigators were probing the cause of the crash.

The border area where the plane went down has been the scene of heavy military activity in recent weeks, as the Colombian and Ecuadoran militaries try to tackle drug-running cartels and militias.

AFP images from the scene showed civilians clambering around the broken tail of the aircraft, marked FAC 1016, as smoke and flames billowed above the trees.

Defence Minister Pedro Sánchez expressed his “deep sorrow” over the disaster, saying it was too early to determine the cause of the crash.

“It is a deeply painful event for the country. May our prayers bring some



This screen grab shows soldiers and rescuers near an Air Force Hercules emitting thick smoke after the aircraft crashed during takeoff in Puerto Leguizamo, Colombia, close to the southern border with Ecuador, on Monday. – AFP

measure of comfort,” Sánchez said.

General Carlos Fernando Silva Rueda said that 114 troops were aboard and 11 crew members, travelling from Puerto Leguizamo to an Amazon outpost nearby.

“The airport is small and there are several difficulties” hindering the evacuation of bodies and the injured, Jhon Gabriel Molina, governor of the Putumayo region, said in a Facebook video.

‘Horrorific accident’

Locals in the area recounted hearing a loud bang.

“I felt an explosion in the air and, when I looked up, the plane was flying close to the house on my plot,” said Noe Mota, a farmer.

Colombia’s President Gustavo

Petro shared footage showing the aircraft attempting to gain altitude before plummeting down.

He described the crash on X as a “horrific accident” and emphasised a need to modernise Colombia’s military hardware, though he did not specifically link the crash to the plane’s condition.

The crash is the second by a C-130 Hercules, a four-engine turboprop built by Lockheed Martin, in South America in under a month.

A Bolivian military cargo plane carrying banknotes crashed while landing near La Paz on February 27, leaving at least 24 people dead.

Renowned for its ability to operate from makeshift airstrips, it is widely used by militaries around the world. – AFP

8 arrested in Brazil for ‘brutal’ attack on capybara

RIO DE JANEIRO – Rio de Janeiro police said Monday they had arrested eight people for brutally beating a capybara – the world’s largest rodent whose chill demeanour has inspired countless memes online in recent years.

Resembling a giant, gentle guinea pig, the shaggy, light brown capybara (*Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris*) is often seen roaming in the Brazilian city, particularly near streams and lagoons.

In an incident filmed by security cameras before dawn on Saturday, a group of attackers beat the capybara

with sticks and iron bars in the working-class neighbourhood of Ilha do Governador.

“This is a brutal crime that shocks society,” said Felipe Santoro, the police commissioner in charge of the investigation, was quoted as saying by the *O Globo* daily newspaper.

“It is an act of extreme cruelty toward a creature that posed absolutely no threat...yet was deliberately attacked nonetheless,” he added.

The attackers – including two minors – were identified through CCTV footage and arrested on

Saturday, police said in a statement.

The capybara, a 65-kilogramme male, was taken to the Wildlife Care Center (CRAS) at the private Estácio University in southwestern Rio.

“We have been treating Rio’s wildlife here for 22 years, and I have never before received a capybara subjected to such extreme aggression,” veterinarian and head of CRAS Jeferson Pires told AFP on Monday.

He said the creature was doing better, but was “suffering from head trauma, swelling with internal bleeding around his left eye, and multiple injuries to his back.”

In recent years the semi-aquatic capybara – native to South America – has gained a devoted following online, and its image is increasingly used on toys, clothing and home decor items.

It is often used in posts about being zen (free of worries) and going with the flow.

One popular meme is “Comrade Capybara” – depicting the animal as a communist revolutionary – inspired by the 2021 “invasion” by capybaras of a luxury gated estate in Argentina that was built on a wetland that had been their natural habitat.

In early January, the death of a stray dog after it was beaten to death by teenagers sparked a massive wave of outrage in Brazil, even prompting a reaction from first lady Rosangela “Janja” da Silva. – AFP



Wounds are seen on the muzzle of a capybara (*Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris*) under care at the Centre for Wildlife Animal Recovery of Estácio de Sá University in Rio de Janeiro’s Vargem Pequena neighborhood on Monday. Eight people were arrested for beating the rodent with sticks and metal bars, according to local police, in a new case of animal abuse that has caused outrage in Brazil. – AFP

Aid flotilla arrives in Cuba as US oil blockade hurts

Elisa Colella aboard the *Maguro* with Lisandra Cots in Havana and Gerard Martínez in Miami

The first boat of a flotilla carrying medical supplies, food and solar panels reached Cuba yesterday to aid the island as a US fuel blockade deepens its energy crisis.

The *Maguro* shrimp fishing boat docked in Havana three days later than expected after battling strong winds, currents and a pesky battery during its journey from Mexico.

As they approached Havana’s colonial-era fortification, the international activists stood on the cabin roof of the boat – symbolically renamed “Granma 2.0” as a tribute to the yacht used by Fidel Castro’s guerrilla fighters to launch their revolution in 1956.

They held a sign reading “Let Cuba live” while others waiting for them on the dock chanted “Cuba yes! Blockade no!”

“I wish everyone would unite, even Cubans abroad, and come and do the same because it is the people who are suffering,” said Amado Rodríguez, a 59-year-old driver walking near Havana Bay.

The first shipments arrived by plane from Europe, Latin America and the United States last week as part of an air and sea mission, dubbed Our America Convoy, to bring some 50 tonnes of aid to Cuba.

Two more ships were slated to arrive yesterday and today.

Activists say the mission, which had the support of the government, aims to bring relief to Cubans amid a de facto US oil blockade that President Donald Trump launched in January.

Critics have slammed the effort as benefiting the Cuban government more than ordinary people.

Convoy organiser David Adler, a US citizen, told AFP the mission brought urgently needed

aid directly to Cubans and showed the world “the human costs of Trump’s siege on Cuba.”

“It demonstrated that international solidarity can triumph over forced isolation,” said Adler, coordinator of global left-wing group Progressive International.

The country has suffered seven nationwide blackouts since 2024 – two of them this past week – due to aging thermoelectric plants and oil shortages.

The situation has deteriorated since Trump ordered a military operation to capture Cuba’s chief regional ally, Venezuelan socialist leader Nicolás Maduro, in January – depriving the island of its main oil supplier.

Trump subsequently threatened to slap tariffs on any country shipping oil to Cuba.

Trump’s ‘greed’

The *Maguro* left from Mexico’s Yucatán peninsula on Friday carrying 32 people, including activists from Australia, Brazil, Ecuador, Italy, Mexico and the United States, and AFP journalists.

As the boat motored across the sea, Brazilian activist Thiago Ávila said other nations should come to Cuba’s aid.

“We cannot allow the world and international law to be buried under the greed of Donald Trump,” Ávila told AFP.

“That’s why we are here, that’s why people decided to mobilize for this and decided to donate.”

Ávila was among the organisers of a flotilla that had tried to bring aid to Gaza last year despite a naval blockade. That effort was intercepted by Israeli forces.

Fellow Brazilian activist Lisi Proença said the group was applying the experience it gained from the Gaza flotilla to bring aid to Cuba.

“The interesting thing is that we’re able to carry much larger items, like solar panels,” she told AFP. – AFP



Activists pose with Cuban, Mexican and Palestinian flags on board the vessel *Maguro* – symbolically renamed “Granma 2.0” as a tribute to the yacht used by Fidel Castro’s guerrilla fighters to launch their revolution in 1956 – as it arrives from Mexico with humanitarian aid as part of the Nuestra América (“Our America”) convoy, docking at the port of Havana yesterday. – AFP

Palestinian FA calls for Israeli ban after FIFA discrimination report

AL-BIREH, PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES – The Palestinian Football Association (PFA) yesterday called for the Israeli Football Association (IFA) to receive a ban after a FIFA report found “multiple breaches” of its anti-discrimination obligations.

“We maintain our right and continue our efforts to ensure that the Israeli Football Association is expelled from all international institutions,” PFA chief Jibril Rajoub, who also heads the Palestinian Olympic Committee, said during a press conference in the occupied West Bank city of Al-Bireh.

FIFA fined the IFA CHF150,000 (US\$190,700) for the breaches last week, “a significant decision” according to Rajoub, who said the penalty still “falls short of the minimum required”.

Rajoub cited the IFA’s “racist nature”, alleged criminal activity by some Israeli sports officials, and the inclusion of football clubs from Israeli West Bank settlements in the Israeli federation as grounds for a ban.

A recent report by the disciplinary committee of world football’s governing body found that the IFA “failed to take meaningful action against Beitar Jerusalem” for “persistent and well-documented racist behaviour”.

Rajoub, who is also Secretary General of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas’ Fatah party’s central committee, said yesterday that Beitar Jerusalem is “an extreme

example of racism, fascism, and discrimination” but that such attitudes are commonplace in Israeli football clubs.

On the alleged criminal activity of Israeli sports officials, Rajoub said he was referring to instances of players killed during two years of war in Gaza, and the destruction of many of the Palestinian territory’s sporting facilities during the same war.

“Some figures within Israeli sport either participated in or openly supported what has been happening,” Rajoub said, stating that 1,007 athletes and coaches were killed in Gaza and 265 sports facilities damaged since the war started in October 2023.

Media restrictions and limited access in Gaza have prevented AFP from independently verifying casualty figures or freely covering the fighting.

At least five football clubs based in Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank are members of the Israeli Football Association.

After a separate investigation, FIFA announced no action would be taken against the IFA over allegations that Israeli clubs based in the occupied West Bank were taking part in Israel’s leagues.

The UN has repeatedly condemned Israeli settlements in the West Bank, which Israel has occupied since 1967, as illegal under international law.

Israel is part of UEFA, European football’s governing body. – AFP



Atletico Madrid's French forward Antoine Griezmann celebrates scoring their third goal and his 200th during the UEFA Champions League, league Phase - matchday 2 against Eintracht Frankfurt at the Metropolitano stadium in Madrid on September 30, 2025. Griezmann will leave Atletico Madrid for MLS side Orlando City at the end of the 2025-2026 season, the two clubs announced yesterday. – AFP

Pressure on Italy as play-off hopefuls eye 2026 World Cup

Martyn Wood



PARIS – The final line-up for the 2026 World Cup will be decided over the next week, with 16 teams competing for the last four places allocated to European countries.

Twelve runners-up from the qualifying groups and four teams that earned spots through their UEFA Nations League results have a second chance to punch their ticket to football’s global showpiece.

AFP Sport looks at the four play-off routes that will determine the remaining qualifiers for the first 48-team World Cup:

Path A

Four-time World Cup winners Italy face immense pressure as they attempt to qualify for a first appearance at the tournament since 2014.

After lifting the trophy in 2006, Italy’s record at the World Cup has been dire. They suffered two successive group-stage exits before missing out entirely on the 2018 and 2022 editions.

In order to avoid another qualifying failure Italy must overcome Northern Ireland in Bergamo tomorrow, before a potential final against Wales or Bosnia and Herzegovina on March 31.

“It’s only normal that there’s pressure - only if you had no blood in your veins would you not feel it,” said Italy coach Gennaro Gattuso, who played in the 2006 final which the Azzurri won on penalties against France.

Northern Ireland are big underdogs against Italy but hope to end a 40-year absence from the World Cup.

Wales host Bosnia in Cardiff in the other semi-final.

Manager Craig Bellamy told AFP earlier this month that he “feels a responsibility” to lead Wales to a second straight final. Their appearance in Qatar was the country’s first at the World Cup in 64 years.



Italian former footballer Alessandro Del Piero speaks during the Los Angeles stop of The FIFA World Cup 26 Trophy Tour by Coca-Cola at LA Live in Los Angeles yesterday. – AFP

Path B

Ukraine’s footballers will hope to lift the morale of a war-torn country by competing at a first World Cup in 20 years. To get there, they need to beat Sweden on neutral ground in Valencia and then Poland or Albania.

Sweden picked up just two points in a dismal qualifying campaign but a team now coached by former Chelsea and Brighton boss Graham Potter will get another shot on the strength of their Nations League performances.

However, Sweden will be without key man Alexander Isak as the Liverpool forward is not yet ready to return from a broken leg suffered in December.

Poland can count on Robert Lewandowski who is eyeing a third World Cup, but Albania - led by former Arsenal and Barcelona defender Sylvinho - believe they have what it takes to qualify for the first time.

Path C

Kosovo stand two wins away from a first major tournament a decade on from their admission to UEFA and FIFA. They came second in their qualifying group after two wins over Sweden and a victory in Slovenia.

“It’s a massive opportunity for us. The whole country is buzzing with excitement. Everyone’s over the moon,” Kosovo captain Vedat Muriqi told FIFA.com.

Mallorca striker Muriqi sits second only to Kylian Mbappe in

La Liga this season with 18 goals. The 31-year-old is also Kosovo’s all-time record scorer.

Slovakia, who last featured at the World Cup in 2010, host Kosovo in Bratislava while Turkey and Romania square off in Istanbul.

Turkey have not played at the World Cup since a surprise third-place finish in 2002. Romania’s most recent appearance was in 1998.

Path D

Troy Parrott’s heroics snatched the Republic of Ireland a play-off berth, but there is much still to be done if the Irish are to return to the World Cup stage.

Ireland, who haven’t featured at the tournament since 2002, head to Prague to take on the Czech Republic in the semi-finals. The winner of that tie will host the final against Denmark or North Macedonia.

“There’s a quiet confidence in the group growing together, it’s great to see but we know there’s a lot of hard work to come,” said Ireland assistant John O’Shea.

Denmark missed out on automatic qualification after a dramatic defeat in Scotland but will be expected to see off North Macedonia, whose lone tournament appearance came at Euro 2020.

Kasper Schmeichel is absent for Denmark after revealing last week that he may have played his final game, with two surgeries required to repair his damaged shoulder.

– AFP

Supporters’ group file lawsuit against ‘excessive’ World Cup ticket prices



LAUSANNE – The Football Supporters Europe (FSE) group filed a lawsuit yesterday with the European Commission targeting football’s world governing body FIFA over “excessive ticket prices” for this year’s World Cup finals.

The FSE and the Euroconsumers organisation said the tickets for the June 11-July 19 tournament in the US, Canada and Mexico were overpriced and complained that FIFA has a monopoly over the sales.

“Euroconsumers and Football Supporters Europe (FSE) have filed a formal complaint with the European Commission against FIFA, alleging that the football body has abused its monopoly position to impose excessive ticket prices and opaque and unfair purchasing conditions and processes on European fans ahead of the 2026 World Cup,” the FSE said in a statement.

“FIFA holds a monopoly over ticket sales for the 2026 World Cup and has used that power to impose conditions on fans that would never be acceptable in a competitive market,” the group added.

The FSE said the prices for the final were way above those for the 2022 final in Qatar.

“The cheapest openly available final tickets now start at US\$4,185 – more than seven times the cost of the cheapest 2022 World Cup final ticket,” they said.

By contrast, it said the cheapest Euro 2024 final tickets were 95 euros (US\$100).

A European Commission spokesperson told AFP they would be “examining” the complaint but FIFA said they had yet to receive it.

The FIFA spokesperson told AFP: “FIFA is focused on ensuring fair access to our game for existing and prospective fans.”

According to FIFA, almost seven million tickets have been made available.

Each person can buy a maximum of four tickets per match and a total of 40 for the whole competition.

There will be a total of 104 matches played at this expanded World Cup, the first ever to feature 48 teams, and ticket prices have soared for the most in-demand games.

FSE said the North American bid team had initially promised tickets would be available

from as little as US\$21, but instead the cheapest tickets to go on sale have been for US\$60, for example for the Group J opener between Austria and Jordan at the Levi’s Stadium in California.

Most tickets cost at least US\$200 for matches involving leading nations.

‘Dynamic pricing’

FIFA president Gianni Infantino insists ticket prices are simply a consequence of the huge demand.

“In the US in particular there is this thing called dynamic pricing, meaning the prices will go up or down”, depending on the match in question, Infantino has said.

FSE said the problem with ‘dynamic pricing’ was there was no limit to how high the prices can go.

“FIFA used ‘variable pricing’, or dynamic pricing, with no cap and no transparency on how prices are set,” it said in the statement.

“Some tickets rose 25 percent between sales phases. Fans had no clear way of knowing the final price before joining the queue.”

Having faced sustained criticism over prices, FIFA announced a cheaper category of tickets priced at US\$60, but they were reserved for fans of qualified teams and would make up just 10 percent of each national federation’s allotment.

“FIFA repeatedly advertised US\$60 group-stage tickets,” FSE said.

“In practice they were so scarce that the entire Category 4 inventory was practically sold out before general public sales opened.”

FIFA is keeping aside an unspecified number of tickets which it will make available from April until the end of the tournament “on a first come, first served basis”.

Then there are the resale platforms, including FIFA’s own official site. But this controversial fan-to-fan market allows resellers to determine prices themselves, hence the huge price advertised for a final ticket.

The resale market is unregulated in the United States and Canada. In Mexico, reselling a ticket above face value is prohibited, but only when the ticket is purchased in Mexico using the local currency. – AFP

World Snooker Championship to stay at Crucible

Snooker

LONDON – Sheffield's Crucible will remain home to the World Snooker Championship until at least 2045, ending fears that the sport's flagship event would quit the celebrated venue.

An agreement between the World Snooker Tour (WST) and Sheffield City Council means the event will be held at the theatre for the next two decades, with an option to extend to 2050.

A planned £45 million (US\$60 million) redevelopment will provide the potential to add an additional 500 seats, but means the event must temporarily relocate in 2029, and possibly 2030, while work is in progress.

Traditionalists had feared the global showpiece could vacate the Sheffield theatre, which has staged every world championship since 1977, and possibly even Britain itself, once its lease expired in 2027.

WST chief Barry Hearn previously described the sport's long-term home, which has a capacity of 980, as "no longer fit for purpose".

China and Saudi Arabia were suggested as possible alternatives to stage the tournament.

"I thought we didn't have a home at one stage - I can't tell you how pleased I am," said Hearn,



A view of the Crucible before the table divider comes down ahead of play in the World Championship Snooker second round matches at The Crucible in Sheffield, England on April 25, 2022. – AFP

president of Matchroom Sport.

"Snooker's dream was to stay at the Crucible. This is the lifeblood of our sport."

Retired seven-time world champion Stephen Hendry said: "There is simply nowhere else like the Crucible or anywhere else that could replicate that atmosphere or the sense of history.

"It was always my favourite place to play and I still love going to Sheffield. I am thrilled that we are staying there long term."

The investment has come

primarily from a combination of council and government funding, and will be used to improve the theatre as a year-round venue.

"We have a deep cultural and sporting heritage here in the UK - sport, art and culture are the very best of us," said British Prime Minister Keir Starmer.

"It's what makes us proud not only of the country, but the places that we're from."

This year's World Snooker Championship starts on April 18.

– AFP

LIV Golf boosts local economy in S Africa with 100,000 visitors

Golf

JOHANNESBURG – South Africa received a significant economic boost as more than 100,000 visitors attended the LIV Golf tournament in Johannesburg, Gauteng Premier Panyaza Lesufi has said.

The tournament, held from Thursday to Sunday, generated over R1 billion (about US\$58.6 million) in economic activity. Lesufi said on Monday that the event increased demand for

hotels, restaurants, transport and entertainment services, supporting jobs across the hospitality and retail sectors.

He also welcomed the confirmation by organizers that the tournament will return to Gauteng next year.

American golfer Bryson DeChambeau claimed the individual title after defeating Spain's Jon Rahm in a playoff following a tied finish at 26 under par.

Meanwhile, DeChambeau's

team the Crushers, which also included Paul Casey, Charles Howell III and Anirban Lahiri, secured the team title at 76 under par, one stroke ahead of South Africa's Southern Guards.

Launched in 2022, LIV Golf is an international professional golf circuit featuring both individual and team competitions across multiple global venues. The Johannesburg leg, held at Steyn City Golf Club, marked the tour's first event on African soil. – Xinhua

IPL's Bengaluru to keep 11 seats empty in honour of stampede dead

Cricket

BENGALURU – Indian Premier League champions Royal Challengers Bengaluru will keep 11 seats at their M. Chinnaswamy Stadium empty in memory of the fans crushed to death in title celebrations last year, the team said yesterday.

Eleven supporters aged between 14 and 29 died in a stampede outside the stadium in June after RCB won the IPL for the first time.

The lucrative T20 tournament begins its 2026 season on Saturday when RCB host Sunrisers Hyderabad.

The Bengaluru team, including star batsman Virat Kohli, will warm up for the game in tops sporting the

number 11 and wear black arm bands for the match.

Along with the permanently empty seats, CEO Rajesh Menon said: "This is a tribute to our fans, who will always remain a part of our journey."

After the tragedy, authorities deemed the venue unsafe due to structural and crowd management deficiencies, and moved important fixtures elsewhere.

But earlier this month the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) said that the stadium would host games, including RCB home fixtures.

Menon said crowd management measures have been "significantly strengthened", including setting up AI-led cameras.

"This system provides real-time alerts, including stand-specific crowd counts, to ensure better monitoring and control," he said.

The stampede took place a day after RCB won the final against Punjab Kings and returned to a homecoming trophy parade.

Hundreds of thousands gathered on the streets to welcome their hero Kohli and his victorious teammates.

More than 50 people were injured.

Several officials, including a senior RCB executive, and representatives of event organisers DNA and Karnataka State Cricket Association, were questioned by police.

No one has been convicted.

– AFP

New Nice mayor poses a 'real problem' for 2030 Winter Olympics

Katia Dolmadjian

PARIS – The 2030 Winter Olympics in the French Alps, already bedevilled by several senior executives quitting, faces another potential headache with the election of far-right politician Eric Ciotti as mayor of Nice.

As with the recent Milano-Cortina Winter Olympics, the proposed venues for 2030 will stretch from the Alps to the southern Mediterranean city.

The new mayor, elected on Sunday, has no issue with Nice hosting the ice hockey, the figure skating, curling, short track skating and the closing ceremony, along with the Olympic Village, but he is opposed to where the venues have been allocated.

Ciotti wants the ice hockey to be moved from the stadium of the city's football club – he does not want the Ligue 1 side to be homeless for months at a cost, he claims, of 80 million euros (US\$92.5 million).

The new mayor also wants to cancel the organisers' plans to build a skating arena and the Olympic village in the west of France's fifth largest city.

Instead, Ciotti has floated the idea of holding the figure skating at the city's existing exhibition centre, which hosted the 2012 world championships, and says the Olympic Village should be built on the site of a police barracks, 15 kilometres from the site allocated by the organisers, which is due to be closed down in the next year.

Ciotti is adamant about the ice hockey being moved but admitted during the campaign that if the planning process for the skating rink was too far advanced then he was prepared to accept the existing plans.

The two sports would be a real cash cow for Nice as they represent 60 percent of the Games ticket revenues.

Ciotti, who once led the mainstream right-wing party the Republicans but was expelled in 2024 when he formed an alliance with the far-right National Rally (RN), is at odds with the region's president, Renaud Muselier.

When it came to the Games, Muselier - who since 2022 has been a member of President Emmanuel Macron's Renaissance party - was on the same page as Ciotti's predecessor, another former Republicans heavyweight, Christian Estrosi.

Indeed until they exchanged formal pleasantries on Monday, Muselier and Ciotti had not spoken

since 2022 when the former quit the Republicans.

"We have a real problem regarding Nice with a mayor elected who is for the Games, but not in line with the original plan," Muselier, who oversees the progress made by Solideo, the public institution responsible for the delivery of the venues for the Olympics, said on Monday.

"Those plans need to be put in writing in order to see if they are viable for Nice. If not we will have to re-evaluate."

Muselier said he would not "hesitate to change everything if necessary" and said he had a "Plan B".

'Part and parcel'

However, he cast doubt on the practicality of Ciotti's alternatives for the figure skating venue.

"I am not qualified to comment on such a matter but I have been told the venue (at the exhibition centre) is only at the level of a junior world championship," he said.

Muselier said time was short for Ciotti to come to a final decision.

"Solideo has been working on the figures which should be made public in April, so everything must be decided by the end of that month," he said.

As for the International Olympic Committee (IOC), its executive director Christophe Dubi told AFP last month that changes in political leadership were "part and parcel of organising a project over a seven-year period".

"Elections are held during that time. That is normal, it is part of the lifetime of a project.

"That won't force us to scrap plans which have been in the works for several years.

"Now it is for Solideo, who are working intensively on all these projects, to continue their excellent work," said Dubi, who unlike Muselier insisted there was no alternative plan.

Ciotti's election is just the latest problem to affect the 2030 Games.

The organising committee (Cojop) has lost four key players in the past three months owing to internal disagreements.

Last month chief executive Cyril Linette became the latest to step down after falling out with the Cojop president Edgar Grosjeon, who had hand-picked him for the role in April last year. – AFP



Jannik Sinner of Italy returns a shot to Corentin Moutet of France at the Miami Open Presented by Itaú at Hard Rock Stadium on Monday in Miami Gardens, Florida. Sinner, who is chasing a second victory in Miami after lifting the title in 2024, was comfortable in his third-round clash with French 30th seed Corentin Moutet, winning 6-1, 6-4 to advance to the last 16. – AFP

'Perfect Japan' posts spark Gen Z social media backlash

TOKYO – Take an everyday video on any suburban transport network, add anime-style music and a rosy filter, and it's suddenly a scene from the Japanese holiday of your dreams.

That's the "Japan effect": a Gen Z social media trend satirising the often-romanticised image of the Asian country, which welcomed a record number of visitors last year.

Residents of Kyoto and other tourist hotspots have expressed exasperation with selfie-taking crowds, and now an online backlash against Japan fever is growing.

The short video posts on platforms like TikTok show how even just the words "Tokyo, Japan" with a cherry blossom emoji can make an otherwise banal street scene more appealing for some users.

"The point is to make fun of Japan's 'cute' image online, with all its clichés and stereotypes," 25-year-old French YouTuber Rocky Louzemi, who analyses internet culture, told AFP.

Along with the chronically weak yen, the booming popularity of anime and game franchises such as Pokemon is drawing tourists to the island nation.

But some people take their love of Japan too far, said Louzemi, who goes by the handle rockylevrai.

To describe the phenomenon, he used the slang word "glazing" – to



Visitors pose for pictures at Fushimi Inari-taisha Shrine's Torii Path in Kyoto on March 10. – AFP

excessively praise something.

A "Japan glazer" is "someone who puts everything that comes from Japan on a pedestal, while disparaging things that come from their own country", Louzemi said.

'Not that clean'

Japan logged a record 42.7 million tourist arrivals in 2025, despite a steep fall in Chinese visitors in December due to a diplomatic row.

Many visitors post online about their trip – making pilgrimages to real-life locations from cartoons or joking about spending US\$1,000 on flights just so they can eat a US\$1 convenience store rice ball.

"The 'Japan' portrayed in an anime world is often quite different from how Japanese society is", said Marika Sato, a 29-year-old who works in marketing in Tokyo.

For instance, many women have experienced groping, said

Sato, a contributor to "Blossom The Project", an Instagram account focused on Japanese social issues.

Graphic designer and fellow Blossom contributor Maya Kubota, 28, said that she appreciates people liking Japan and wanting to visit.

But over-the-top comments such as "Japanese people are next level" give her an "icky vibe", Kubota told AFP.

Some of the online Gen Z pushback focuses on the exaggerated idea that Japan's streets are so spotless people don't even have to wear shoes.

"Japan is clean but not THAT clean," joked a US couple who post social media content about the country under the name The Hitobito – showing off their dirty white socks after a real-life experiment.

Viral effect

Japan's tourist boom has forced some authorities to take action.

A cherry blossom festival boasting a highly Instagrammable view of Mount Fuji was cancelled this year after residents complained of overtourism.

"People associate Japan with carefully composed visuals," said Seio Nakajima, a professor in the Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies at Waseda University.

That could be because of the detailed, beautiful backgrounds in anime, or because of a deeper "cultural tradition of emphasising form".

"If people focus on form rather than meaning, it becomes easier to go viral. Because you don't need to think," Nakajima told AFP.

Japan's formalities – from the complexity of polite language to extreme attention to detail in packaging or wrapping – may surprise visitors, he said.

But "Japan is not always clean and aesthetic. That's only part of the reality."

Despite the backlash, tourists in Tokyo's busy Tsukiji market told AFP that the country had lived up to their expectations.

"In Russia, it's very popular to hype Japan," said Tatiana Mokeeva, 25.

When asked if posts about Japan could be unrealistic, she said: "To tell the truth, no... I love all about Japan." – AFP

OnlyFans owner Radvinsky dies at 43

WASHINGTON – Leonid Radvinsky, the reclusive billionaire who acquired adult content platform OnlyFans and transformed it into a multibillion-US-dollar empire, has died of cancer aged 43, the company announced on Monday.

"We are deeply saddened to announce the death of Leo Radvinsky. Leo passed away peacefully after a long battle with cancer," an OnlyFans spokesperson said. "His family have requested privacy at this difficult time."

Florida-based Radvinsky, a Ukrainian-American entrepreneur

born in Odesa and raised in Chicago, purchased a 75 percent stake in Fenix International Limited – the London-based parent company of OnlyFans – in 2018, serving as its director and majority shareholder.

Under his ownership the platform surged in popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, growing to some 377 million users and 4.6 million content creators worldwide.

The company recorded US\$1.4 billion in net revenue in 2024, taking a 20 percent commission on most creator earnings, and had been valued at around US\$5.5 billion in early-

stage sale talks earlier this year.

Radvinsky, who held a bachelor's degree in economics from Northwestern University, had a net worth valued at US\$3.8 billion as of last May, according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index.

He had transferred his ownership stake into the LR Fenix Trust in 2024.

Beyond OnlyFans, Radvinsky ran Leo, a venture capital fund he founded in 2009 focused on technology investments. He was also known for philanthropic activities, including support for cancer research and open source projects. – AFP

Bill Cosby ordered to pay US\$ 19 million over sex abuse claim

LOS ANGELES – A woman who said she was drugged and sexually assaulted by veteran US entertainer Bill Cosby was awarded more than US\$19 million on Monday after a civil hearing in California.

Donna Motsinger said she was working as a waitress more than 50 years ago when the performer began to target her.

The hearing in Santa Monica was told how the comedian had initially come into the restaurant where the now-84-year-old Motsinger worked.

One day when he picked her up in his limousine, Cosby gave her a glass of wine and what she thought was an aspirin.

She began slipping in and out of consciousness and the next thing she knew she was waking up at home, wearing only her underwear.

"She knew she had been drugged and raped by Bill Cosby," the suit said.

Attorneys said Cosby, 88, did not remember any sexual contact with Motsinger, but that any that had occurred had been consensual.

The jury took three days to deliver its verdict, ordering Cosby to pay US\$19.3 million, a figure that could increase if they add punitive damages.

The case was heard in the same courthouse where a 2022 jury ordered Cosby to pay US\$500,000 in damages to Judy Huth after finding that he had molested her in 1975

when she was just 16 years old.

The man formerly known as "America's Dad" was jailed in Pennsylvania for drugging and molesting a woman in a separate criminal case in 2018, but was freed in 2021 when his conviction was overturned on a technicality.

Cosby was a towering figure in late 20th century American popular culture, including for his starring role in "The Cosby Show," which ran from 1984 to 1992.

Dozens of women have accused Cosby of being a calculating, serial predator who plied victims with sedatives and alcohol before assaulting them over four decades. – AFP

Shakira to wrap up world tour with Madrid residency

MADRID – Pop superstar Shakira will wrap up her record-breaking world tour with a concert residency in Madrid at a custom-built venue, promoter Live Nation said on Monday.

The six-night residency runs September 18-20 and September 25-27, with more dates possibly added depending on ticket demand.

The shows will be held at a temporary venue to be built in southern Madrid dubbed the "Shakira Stadium" with a capacity for roughly 50,000 people, the president of Live Nation Spain, Pino Sagliocco, told a news conference.

Shakira's Madrid concerts will be a "celebration of life" and Latin culture, he added.

"Spain is where we're really going all out. The show's going to be something people have never seen before. I'm really excited," Shakira said in an interview published Sunday in daily Spanish newspaper *El Pais*.

The concerts will mark her first performances in Spain in eight years, and her first since reaching a 2023 settlement with Spanish prosecutors to settle a tax fraud case.

As part of the deal, Shakira, 49, paid a fine of over 7.3 million euros (US\$8.6 million), after previously settling 17.45 million euros with the Spanish tax agency.

The case centred on the period when the Colombian singer lived in Barcelona with Spanish football player Gerard Pique. The couple, who have two sons, broke up in 2022.

The residency will mark the final dates of Shakira's "Women Don't Cry Anymore" world tour, which has become the highest-grossing tour ever by a Latin artist.

Shakira kicked off the tour last year in Brazil, where she is set to perform a free concert on Rio de Janeiro's iconic Copacabana beach in May, following in the footsteps of Madonna and Lady Gaga. – AFP

World Weather

CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing 10°C~25°C	Manila 22°C~33°C	New York 7°C~12°C	Lisbon 11°C~23°C
Shanghai 9°C~19°C	Bangkok 26°C~36°C	London 2°C~9°C	Rio de Janeiro 23°C~31°C
Hong Kong 19°C~26°C	Tokyo 11°C~15°C	Frankfurt 3°C~12°C	Luanda 25°C~29°C
Taipei 17°C~24°C	Singapore 24°C~35°C	Vancouver 2°C~8°C	Maputo 21°C~31°C
Guangzhou 19°C~31°C	Kuala Lumpur 24°C~36°C	Paris 3°C~10°C	Dili 24°C~30°C
Nanjing 10°C~20°C	Jakarta 23°C~32°C	Moscow -1°C~12°C	São Tomé 26°C~33°C
Guilin 16°C~23°C	Seoul 6°C~20°C	Las Vegas 18°C~35°C	Praia 18°C~27°C
Xi'an 10°C~18°C	Sydney 18°C~27°C	Monte Carlo 8°C~20°C	Bissau 19°C~35°C



1. Almost fluorescent

Visitors take photos of a weeping cherry blossom tree as part of a nighttime viewing at Rikugien Gardens in Tokyo yesterday. – AFP

2. Double cultural icons

A woman with her face painted looks on as she takes part in a procession of Catrinas wearing the Mexican World Cup national football team jersey in Mexico City on Sunday. – AFP

3. 70's return

June Ambrose, shoe detail, attends Fashion Scholarship Fund's 89th Annual Gala at The Glasshouse yesterday in New York City. – AFP



4. Supervisory role

Larry the Cat watches a red carpet being laid ahead of the arrival of Nigeria's President Bola Tinubu at 10 Downing Street central London on Friday, ahead of a meeting on the second day of a two-day State Visit to the United Kingdom by the president. – AFP

5. Hey! What about me??

Several raccoons are fed by tourists along the Cinta Costera at dusk in Panama City, Panama on Monday. – AFP

6. Mini Routemaster

People ride in a small bus at a mall in Doha on Monday. – AFP

