

# Sam urges Hengqin affairs officials to innovate to advance island's development

Tony Wong

Macau Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai travelled to the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin on Friday to convene a meeting about advancing Hengqin's high-quality development by putting the spirit of this year's "two sessions" into practice, where he urged officials of the zone's executive committee and those from the public entities administered under the committee to transform development opportunities available for Hengqin into concrete measures advancing its development, by adopting more innovative thinking and pragmatic approaches and complying with the nation's overall development strategy and the real situations of Macau and Hengqin, according to a statement by the Macau Government Information Bureau (GCS) that day.

The nation's two sessions refer to the annual sessions of the National People's Congress (NPC) and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).

The adjacent 106-km<sup>2</sup> Hengqin island in Zhuhai City is officially known as Guangdong-Macao In-Depth

Cooperation Zone in Hengqin, after the zone was inaugurated in September 2021. The Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR) covers a land area of 33.4 km<sup>2</sup>.

The in-depth cooperation zone's governance comprises a management committee and an executive committee.

The management committee is the zone's top decision-making body run under a dual director system, jointly led by the governor of Guangdong Province and the chief executive of the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR). The zone's executive committee, which is run under the management committee, is the body tasked with the zone's daily functioning and execution of tasks.

There are nine bureaux administered under the zone's executive committee.

Sam, one of the zone's management committee two directors, chaired Friday's meeting, which was also attended by Macau Secretary for Administration and Justice Wong Sio Chak, who is the committee's executive deputy director, Macau Secretary for Economy and Finance Anton



Macau Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai addresses Friday's meeting held at a government service centre in Hengqin. — Photo: GCS

Tai Kin Ip, who heads the zone's executive committee, as well as several deputy directors of the executive committee and officials from various bureaux under the executive committee.

During the meeting, according to the GCS statement, Sam noted that the nation's 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan, which was passed by the NPC in Beijing earlier this month, outlines the country's important plans and

deployments for Macau's better integration into the nation's overall development, the development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA), and Hengqin's development.

The plan, officially known as 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development, covers the period between 2026 and 2030.

Sam noted that the nation's 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan also outlines the

country's policy to deepen Macau-Hengqin integrated development.

Sam underlined that this year is a crucial year for the in-depth cooperation zone's second-phase development, as well as a year when the MSAR government is scheduled to complete the drawing-up of Macau's third Five-Year Plan and start implementing the plan, adding that one of the important policies to be outlined by the plan is to advance Hengqin's development with stronger integration with Macau.

During the meeting, according to the statement, Sam raised three views and requirements for Hengqin's development.

## Sam raises 3 views & requirements

First, Sam fully acknowledged the achievements made over the past year for Hengqin's development. He said that over the past year, his government has further strengthened internal coordination and resource input for its work advancing Hengqin's development, pledging that in the future Macau will continue to enhance its support for Hengqin.

Continued on p.6



A staff member trains a robot at an embodied intelligence tactile and multimodal perception digital training innovation center in Beijing's Shijingshan District on March 17. At the five-day 2026 Zhongguancun Forum, which ended yesterday, a large number of advanced intelligent robots attracted attention. At the Robot Data Training Center in Beijing, robots are becoming more and more intelligent through training at the "Robot School", where robots collect data in scenarios such as industrial manufacturing, smart homes, and commercial services, providing data support for the research and development of humanoid robots. Data collectors operate the robots to complete a series of specific tasks, generating massive amounts of motion data to enhance the robots' "brains." In the future, these robots will be deployed in factories, supermarkets, homes, and other application scenarios. (More on p.6)

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## Iran accuses US of plotting ground attack despite diplomatic talk

The speaker of Iran's parliament accused the US yesterday of plotting a ground attack despite publicly pushing for a negotiated deal, after a US warship with around 3,500 military personnel arrived in the Middle East. — Story on p.10

## Joy, scepticism across west Africa after UN vote on slave trade

Ghanaians in the streets of the capital Accra were full of pride – and already looking towards future "justice" – on Thursday after the United Nations recognised the transatlantic slave trade as "the gravest crime against humanity." — Story on p.11

## Sailboats carrying aid reach Cuba after going missing

Two sailboats carrying humanitarian aid to crisis-hit Cuba reached Havana on Saturday after disappearing during a longer-than-expected journey from Mexico that triggered a search-and-rescue operation. — Story on p.12

# The Committee for Safeguarding National Security has the authority to assess matters relating to the interests of national security

*Commentary by Prof. Leng Tiexun, Director of “One Country Two Systems” Research Centre of Macao Polytechnic University*

The Bill “Committee for Safeguarding National Security of the Macao Special Administrative Region” was deliberated and unanimously passed by the Legislative Assembly on 19 March. Compared to the proposed text presented on February 10 for general examination, the significant change of the revised text consists of the addition of a provision, i.e. the Committee for Safeguarding National Security of the Macao Special Administrative Region (hereinafter referred to as the Committee) is responsible for confirming whether the publication of certain procedural acts may harm the interests of national security, as well as deciding whether there is the need to protect such interests during the course of the proceedings. An analysis of the underlying legislative intent is of great importance for the complete and accurate understanding of the system and mechanisms for safeguarding national security in Macao.

## 1. The Committee is the legally competent organisation to assess matters relating to national security interests

Security is the premise for a nation’s survival and development, and national security is a crucial component of a nation’s core interests. When it comes to safeguarding national security interests, any government will remain resolute, intolerant of controversy, compromise, or interference. National security interests are highly political, complex, and dynamic, encompassing political, economic, military, scientific and technological domains. For this reason, in judicial practice, determining whether a given process or procedural act involves national security interests goes beyond the traditional scope of assessing legal facts. This requires an integrated evaluation of the macro internal and external situation, highly confidential information, and the country’s overall security strategy – capabilities that ordinary judicial bodies can hardly exercise autonomously, either due to limited access to information or insufficient specialised technical expertise.

Therefore, the legislative intent of the “Law on Committee for Safeguarding National Security of the Macao Special Administrative Region” is quite clear: the assessment of issues involving national security interests should only be carried out by the Committee. As the top unit for



Undated file photo of Prof. Leng Tiexun – Photo courtesy of the Jiangxi Provincial Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference  
<https://jxzx.jxnews.com.cn/system/2024/12/19/020734333.shtml>

shouldering the main responsibility of safeguarding national security in the Macao SAR, the Committee possesses the most complete and essential security information and is the most authoritative body with the necessary conditions and capabilities to make judgements on whether national security interests are involved. Therefore, it is absolutely reasonable and necessary for the “Law on Committee for Safeguarding National Security of the Macao Special Administrative Region” to stipulate that the Committee is the specialised unit endowed with the corresponding legal competences to make such judgements. Through the amendment of the “Judicial Organisation Framework Law”, the Law expressly establishes that, when a judge decides not to make certain procedural acts public because he considers that their publicity may harm national security interests, he must obtain confirmation from the Committee. Furthermore, with regard to granting special authorisation to legal representatives to intervene in procedural acts concerning national security interests, the judge must communicate the information of the case to the Committee, “so that it can decide on the need to protect the interests of national security”. This gives the Committee, a unit endowed with the highest authority

and expertise, the power of substantive assessment over the concept of “national security interests”, ensuring the accuracy of verification in matters of national security and effectively avoiding any risks arising from limitations of understanding on the part of the judicial authorities.

## 2. Rigorous legal provisions and a well-established system

Article 3, paragraph 2 of the “Law on Committee for Safeguarding National Security of the Macao Special Administrative Region” clearly and unequivocally establishes the fundamental competence of the Committee: “the Committee is responsible for assessing whether certain matters involve national security interests and issuing decisions with enforceable force”. In the absence of provisions regarding specific procedures that ensure its practical application, this fundamental competence may generate ambiguities in its application in specific judicial proceedings.

In the initial text submitted for general examination by the Legislative Assembly, the proposed amendments to the “Judicial Organisation Framework Law” were mainly based on the autonomous assessment by a “competent judge” or “competent judicial authority” regarding the need to safeguard

national security interests. This formulation could generate a logical contradiction with the provisions of paragraph 2 of Article 3: if the Committee has exclusive competence to assess matters relating to national security interests, why then, in judicial proceedings, would only the judge be responsible for carrying out the substantive assessment?

The revised text of the Bill precisely answers this question. By amending the “Judicial Organisation Framework Law” and introducing the “confirmation” and “decision” of the Committee, it is ensured that its competence to assess national security interests is fully and systematically implemented in all circumstances.

## 3. The design of this mechanism does not affect the professional qualifications of lawyers nor the right of defense of interested parties

The provisions of the “Law on Committee for Safeguarding National Security of the Macao Special Administrative Region” relating to the assessment carried out by the Committee on national security interests and the establishment of a special authorisation procedure for legal representatives do not constitute a deprivation of the rights and legitimate interests of interested parties, much less affect the professional qualifications of lawyers.

Firstly, after the Committee’s assessment, the fact that a legal representative does not obtain special authorisation decided by the court only means that this lawyer will not be able to participate in that specific case, without affecting in any way their legal professional qualification to practice law in the Macao SAR.

Secondly, the right of those concerned to a fair trial remains strictly protected by law. In criminal cases related to national security, defendants continue to be fully protected by the principles of presumption of innocence, equal opportunities for prosecution and defense, the principle of investigation, as well as other principles of criminal procedure. Defendants retain the right to defend themselves personally, as well as the right to hire a lawyer for their defense. Even if the lawyer they hire does not obtain special authorisation, or if they are unable to hire a lawyer, the court will appoint or designate, in accordance with the law, a qualified lawyer to defend them, thus ensuring that their right to a fair trial is not in any way prejudiced.

*Text of the commentary as provided to the Post by the author (unabridged and unedited)*

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# Police arrest psychotherapist for sexual assault, harassment of 5 women

**Armindo Neves**

The Judiciary Police (PJ) arrested a local male psychotherapist on Thursday for the sexual assault and harassment of five women, PJ spokesman Ho Wai Lok said during a special press conference on Friday.

Ho identified the suspect as a 47-year-old man surnamed Che, adding that the five victims are a patient and four intern psychotherapists.

According to Ho, in late February 2021, the female patient was undergoing treatment for emotional issues at a medical institution where Che worked. During her treatment, Che, under the pretext of providing massage to relieve stress, reached inside her clothing and touched her chest, waist, and abdomen over her undergarments, Ho said.

The victim did not resist due to Che's professional status and refrained from immediately reporting the incident out of fear of retaliation, as Che had access to her personal information, Ho said, adding that

after years of being unable to come to terms with the experience, the victim recently reported the matter to the police.

During their internship last year, Ho said that four female trainee psychotherapists were repeatedly touched by Che on their waists, thighs, and arms, under the pretext of assisting them in treating patients.

Out of fear that they would receive unsatisfactory internship evaluations, none of them reported the incidents at the time, Ho said, adding that it was only recently, after learning about each other's experiences through mutual the incidents, that they decided to report the incidents to the police.

Following the reports, Ho said that PJ officers identified Che as the suspect and arrested him at the medical institution.

Regarding reporters' questions whether the medical institution where Che works or worked is a public or private institution, as well as about its location and the length of Che's employment, the Judiciary Police only

responded that the facility in question remains in normal operation.

Che was transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) on Friday, facing charges of sexual assault and sexual harassment.

Meanwhile, the Macau Society of Registered Psychotherapists (MSRP) issued a statement in which it expressed concern about the incident, emphasising that practitioners must adhere to the "principle of beneficence and non-maleficence", strictly maintain professional boundaries, and safeguard the trust between practitioners and patients.

The MSRP urged experienced professionals to lead by example and provide a safe supervisory environment for trainees. The statement said it also encouraged trainees who experienced inappropriate treatment to actively seek help.

It pointed out that citizens have the right to stop treatment at any time and report their concerns to the relevant authorities if they feel uncomfortable during therapy. ■



Judiciary Police (PJ) officers escort the sexual assault and sexual harassment suspect surnamed Che to a PJ van outside the PJ headquarters in Zape on Friday – Photo: Maria Cheang Ut Meng

## Hou Kong student breaks 100-metre sprint record



Hou Kong Middle School student Leong Lok lo (fourth from right) crosses the finish line in first place at the Macau Olympic Sports Centre Stadium in Taipa yesterday. – Photos: Armindo Neves



Lou Hau High School student Ao U Kuan (third from left) crosses the finish line in first place at the Macau Olympic Sports Centre Stadium in Taipa yesterday.

**Armindo Neves**

Macau's three-day School Sports Competitions 2025/2026 Athletics section concluded at the Macau Olympic Sports Centre Stadium in Taipa yesterday, where Hou Kong Middle School student Leong Lok lo won the 200-metre and 100-metre races for athletes aged between 18 and 22, according to a statement by the Macau Sports Bureau (IC).

Leong, a Form 6 student, not only won the race, but also broke the local record of 10.73 seconds with a time of 10.68 seconds for his age group. The previous record was set by Leong himself last year when he was 17.

Leong told reporters yesterday that while his physical condition was not at its best during the competition, he was still satisfied with his performance. Leong said he hopes to break local sprinter Chan Kin Wa's Men's Open 100-metre local record of 10.53 seconds, set in 2024, as soon as possible.

Leong also said that athletics was his life goal. He also said that he was now in a strong position to qualify for this year's Asian Games.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Asian Games will be held between September 19 and October 4 in Nagoya, Japan.

On Saturday, Leong also won the 200-metre race, but he did not break the record he set last year. This time, he matched his own previous record of 21.67 seconds.

Meanwhile, the women's (aged 18 to 22) 100-metre race was won by Lou Hau High School student Ao U Kuan, a Form 6 student as well.

Ao told reporters that this time she achieved a personal best, of 12.82 seconds, in her final year of school competition, bringing her years of hard work to a fulfilling close without regret.

Her own record last year stood at 13.02 second.

Ao also expressed gratitude to her coach, her teammates and the friends who came to support her during the competition. Through her journey in athletics, she learnt to accept failure and to pick herself up again, Ao said, adding that she regards this personal growth as her most valuable gain from competing in athletics. ■

## GEG, MSO host Special Olympics table tennis fun day

**Khalel Vallo**

Integrated resort operator Galaxy Entertainment Group (GEG) and the Macau Special Olympics (MSO) co-hosted the one-day "GEG Macau Special Olympics Inclusive Table Tennis Fun Day 2026" yesterday, attracting nearly 1,000 participants and promoting inclusiveness through sports.

Held at integrated resort Galaxy Macau in Cotai, the event marked the 16<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of collaboration between GEG and MSO. This year's edition also celebrated the centenary of the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF), in conjunction with the start of today's ITTF Men's and Women's

World Cup Macao 2026.

Speaking at the opening ceremony, ITTF Event Director Bart Vermoesen said the event reflects the federation's mission of making table tennis accessible to all. Meanwhile, MSO National Director Hetzer Siu Yu Hong highlighted the importance of sport in fostering equality and community cohesion, while GEG Director of Corporate Affairs Buddy Lam Chi Seng emphasised the company's long-term commitment to integrating sport with community initiatives to promote inclusion.

The Fun Day featured a range of activities, including inclusive table tennis matches, interactive game booths, and the newly introduced "Caregivers Challenge", encouraging participation from families of individuals with special needs.

According to a statement by GEG yesterday, members of the GEG Staff Social Club also partnered with MSO athletes in "Inclusive Doubles", striving to reinforce teamwork and mutual support. In the lead-up to the event, inclusion workshops were held in local schools, engaging students in activities that promote empathy and understanding, the statement said.

The initiative aims to demonstrate how sport can serve as a platform for inclusiveness and community engagement, the statement said, adding that it will continue to support diverse sporting activities and partnerships to promote a more inclusive and cohesive society in Macau. ■



Macau Special Olympics (MSO) National Director Hetzer Siu Yu Hong addresses yesterday's opening ceremony at Galaxy Macau in Cotai.



Young athletes pose on the sidelines with integrated resort Galaxy Macau's mascot "Wavey the Peacock" during yesterday's opening ceremony of the "GEG Macau Special Olympics Inclusive Table Tennis Fun Day 2026" in Cotai. – Photos: Khalel Vallo



# Parade troupes add colour to Macau streets



*Rui Pastorin*

The theme song for the Macao International Parade could again be heard at various points in Macau's city centre as the 2026 edition took place yesterday afternoon, with troupes adding a rainbow to Macau's overcast streets as they marched, danced and performed their way to Praça do Lago Sai Van.

Now the 12<sup>th</sup> edition since its launch in 2011, this year's parade was themed "The Maritime Silk Road as a bridge for cultural exchange". It kicked off from the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Ruins of St. Paul's, where Secretary for Social Affairs and Culture Wallis O Lam and Cultural Affairs Bureau President Deland Leong Wai Man, along with other representatives from the government and Macau's integrated resort operators, officiated at the event.

With around 1,600 performers this year, participants consisted of 10 international groups comprising those from places along the Maritime Silk Road across Africa Asia, and Europe, alongside 50 local troupes.

Each group walked down the steps of the UNESCO World Heritage-listed site towards a route that covered areas including Largo do Senado, Rua da Sé (大堂前地), and Avenida Panorâmica do Lago Nam Van (南灣湖景大馬路), all the while catching the attention of curious crowds of all ages, many waiting to snap a photo or take a video and have a chance at interacting.

Observers noted there appeared to have been fewer spectators than last year.

Crowds also had a chance to watch certain groups perform at designated areas along the route such as on a stage in the city's main square, Largo do Senado, and under a white tent near the Nam Van Lake. Along the lake side was also where "VIVA Carnival" was set up, featuring a variety of booths that offered snacks and games, among other activities, to members of the public.

The parade concluded in front of Macau Tower, where participating local and international troupes joined hands for a final performance. ■

- Photos taken yesterday by Rui Pastorin



# Govt to launch new round of consumption scheme next week

*E-coupons to be used b/w Mondays & Thursdays*

**Tony Wong**

The government will launch a new round of its community e-coupon consumption stimulation programme next week; this round's modus operandi will differ significantly from all previous ones.

This time, e-wallet users will have the chance to win e-coupons on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, and will then be required to use them between the immediately following Mondays and Thursdays – otherwise they will expire.

In all previous rounds of the government's community e-coupon consumption programme, e-wallet users had the chance to win e-coupons between Mondays and Fridays, and had to use them on the immediately following Saturdays and Sundays.

As previous rounds, the upcoming new round of the programme will be run by the Economic and Technological Development Bureau (DSED) in collaboration with the Macau Chamber of Commerce (ACM), colloquially known in Cantonese as Chung Chung.

The programme's new round was announced during a press conference at the bureau's headquarters in Nam Van on Friday.

The new round will run between Friday next week, April 10, and June 18, lasting 10 weeks.

Unchanged from previous rounds, in the new round, all real-name authenticated users of any of the eight e-wallets covered by the programme, regardless of being local residents and non-locals, who have spent at least 50 patacas on a purchase at participating businesses will then have three chances to win e-coupons, with a face value of 10 patacas, 20 patacas, 50 patacas, 100 patacas, or 200 patacas.

However, each authenticated e-wallet account will be entitled to up to three draws per week, regardless of the number of 50-pataca-plus transactions they make during the period.

If a person holds an account of all the eight e-wallets, he or she will be entitled to up to 24 draws per week.

In all previous rounds, smartphone users received their e-coupons in their e-wallets between Mondays and Fridays and used them on Saturdays and Sundays.

In contrast, in the upcoming new round, according to Friday's press conference, they will instead receive their e-coupons on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, and must use them between the immediately following Mondays and Thursdays – otherwise they will expire.

Addressing the press conference, DSED Deputy Director Cheang Hio Man underlined that the government decided to change the programme's modus operandi with the aim of encouraging residents to stay more often in Macau to spend money during weekends, while also enabling them to use their e-coupons over a longer period of time (four days instead of two) per week, thereby enhancing their consumption choices and flexibility here.

Unchanged from previous rounds, in the new round, officially known as Community Consumption Grand Prize 2026, each e-coupon stored in the smartphone user's e-wallet will be automatically redeemed in a purchase if its amount is at least three times the face value of the coupon.

If the e-wallet has more than one coupon at the same time, the e-payment platform will automatically validate one or more



**Economic and Technological Development Bureau (DSED) Deputy Director Cheang Hio Man addresses Friday's press conference at the bureau's headquarters in Nam Van.**  
– Photo: DSED

coupons after the user spends at least three times the total value of these coupons.

## 4 rounds previously

The government first rolled out its community e-coupon consumption stimulation programme in 2024 but only for the peninsula's northern district at that time. The government launched the programme once again later the same year with that round extended to the whole city. Afterwards, the government launched two rounds of the programme last year, covering businesses across the city.

This time, the e-coupon consumption stimulation programme will continue to be a citywide one, covering over 20,000 businesses across the city.

As previously, this time the e-coupons cannot be used in certain types of transactions and businesses such as water and electricity bills, large supermarket chains, and all shops and businesses in resorts

and properties run by the city's six gaming operators.

## E-coupons for seniors

In the upcoming new round, according to the press conference, senior citizens can continue to receive additional 500-pataca e-coupons by topping up their version of Macau Pass cards at over 100 designated service points across the city.

Only local residents aged at least 65 are entitled to apply for a Senior Citizen Macau Pass card.

As previously, senior citizens can use their e-coupons in their Macau Pass cards every day during the programme's period. When a senior citizen makes a purchase, half of the transaction's amount will be paid by the e-coupons, while the other half will be deducted from the card's remaining balance that he or she has injected into with their own money. Consequently, with the 500-pataca e-coupons to be provided by the government, senior citizens can buy goods and services worth 1,000 patacas in total, with the other 500 patacas paid with their own money.

Additional e-coupons for holders of Senior Citizen Macau Pass cards were first rolled out in the programme's 2025 first round when the amount was 300 patacas. The government raised the amount to 500 patacas in the programme's 2025 second round. This time, the amount will remain unchanged at 500 patacas.

## E-coupons for people with disabilities

Moreover, in the new round, according to the press conference, people with disabilities will continue to receive an additional 500-pataca e-coupon.

The additional 500-pataca e-coupons for people with disabilities was first rolled out in the programme's 2025 second round, but the beneficiaries, namely those holding a government-issued Disability Assessment Registration Card, had to collect a "Care Card" containing the 500-pataca e-coupons from designated facilities at that time.

A Disability Assessment Registration Card is only issued to local residents. Disabled residents need to be assessed by the Social Welfare Bureau (IAS) first before they can get the card.

This time, according to Friday's press conference, holders of Disability Assessment Registration Cards will simply receive their 500-pataca e-coupons by topping up their version of Macau Pass cards at over 100 designated service points across the city, an arrangement similar to senior citizens.

Those holding a Disability Assessment Registration Card are entitled to apply for a Disability Macau Pass card.

Senior Citizen Macau Pass cards and Disability Macau Pass cards entitle their holders to free public bus and Light Rapid Transit (LRT) rides.

As previously, the modus operandi of the use of e-coupons in Disability Macau Pass cards will be the same as those in Senior Citizen Macau Pass cards.

According to the press conference, the government expects to spend 395 million patacas on the programme's upcoming new round, comprising 320 million patacas for e-coupons issued to those using any of the eight e-wallets and 75 million patacas for e-coupons issued to holders of Senior Citizen Macau Pass cards and Disability Macau Pass cards. ■

## 'Illusion Feather' culture-fest returns on expanded scale

**Khalel Vallo**

The 16<sup>th</sup> Illusion Feather Doujin Culture Festival (IF16) was held at the Fisherman's Wharf Convention and Exhibition Centre in Nape yesterday, bringing together nearly 100 doujin groups and organisations from Macau, Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland.

Organised by the Macao Illusion Feather Doujin Culture Exchange Association and supported by the Cultural Development Fund (FDC), the event featured over 130 booths showcasing original doujinshi and related creative products.

Doujinshi\* are self-published works produced by individuals or small groups outside the mainstream commercial publishing industry.

The programme included a doujin fair, cosplay\*\* exchange activities and stage performances, highlighting the diversity of anime and fan-created culture in the region.

The event invited Japanese voice actors Makoto Koichi and



**Festivalgoers and cosplayers engage with vendors during the 16<sup>th</sup> Illusion Feather Doujin Culture Festival (IF16) held at the Fisherman's Wharf Convention and Exhibition Centre in Nape yesterday.**  
– Photos: Khalel Vallo

Yura Akari to host fan meetings, autograph sessions and DJ performances.

One of the event's highlights was the animation sharing session featuring Polly Yeung (楊寶文) and Step Cheung (張小踏), who both took part in producing the Hong Kong animated film "Another World".

The session attracted local practitioners, including students and representatives from institutions such as the public Macao Polytechnic University (MPU) and the private Macau University of Science and Technology (MUST).

Additional activities included a



DJ anime dance session, alongside open stage performances and cosplay photography sessions, offering participants opportunities to showcase their talents. ■

\*Literally, (同人誌) means "publication by the same people" or "publication by a group with

shared interests" – Poe

\*\*Cosplay is a portmanteau of the words "costume" and "role-play". It is a performance art and hobby where participants, called cosplayers, wear costumes and fashion accessories to represent a specific character from a work of fiction. – DeepSeek

## Sam urges Hengqin affairs officials to innovate to advance island's development

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**Second**, Sam urged the executive committee to pay close attention to its existing shortcomings in its ongoing work to promote Hengqin's development and make the necessary improvements, suggesting that improvements should be made in four aspects, namely fully demonstrating the professionalism of Hengqin's officials and other staff; strengthening research and fact-finding tours; promptly understanding the genuine needs of enterprises and residents and then implementing targeted measures; and maintaining integrity in governance.

**Third**, Sam highlighted the importance of putting into practice the spirit of President Xi Jinping's various important speeches and instructions concerning Hengqin's development.

Sam underlined that every instruction from Xi provides clear guidance for the development of Hengqin and Macau, urging officials to



Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai talks with a staff member of the Service Centre for Economy and Trade between China and Portuguese/Spanish-speaking Countries in Hengqin while visiting there on Friday. — Photo: GCS

repeatedly study Xi's instructions, with the aim of gaining a deep understanding of them and transforming them into concrete measures promoting Hengqin's development.

According to the statement,

Sam also visited a number of facilities in Hengqin on Friday, including the Service Centre for Economy and Trade between China and Portuguese/Spanish-speaking Countries. ■

## Passengers can only have 2 powerbanks in carry-on luggage: AACM

Rui Pastorin

The Civil Aviation Authority (AACM) announced in a statement yesterday that passengers departing from the local airport can have no more than two powerbanks in their carry-on luggage, while charging powerbanks during flights is strictly prohibited.

The statement noted that both the airport and Air Macau were instructed to implement the measures, noting that the new requirements, effective from yesterday, are to "comply with the latest requirements announced by the International Civil Aviation Organisation" on the carrying and usage of lithium battery power banks by passengers.

In September 2025, the Civil Aviation Authority issued a safety notice, titled "Carriage of Power Banks/Spare Lithium Batteries as Carry-on Baggage on Board an Aircraft," to Macau's aviation



This photo provided by the Civil Aviation Authority (AACM) last night shows a notice stating that passengers cannot bring more than two powerbanks in their carry-on baggage.

sector to improve operational safety, the statement added.

"The Civil Aviation Authority will continue to follow up on the latest developments regarding the International Civil Aviation Organisation's (ICAO) safety standards for the transport of dangerous goods and co-ordinate with industry operators to implement them promptly", according to the statement. ■

## Tech-industry integration fuels China's innovation surge

Analysis

BEIJING — At the opening ceremony of the 2026 Zhongguancun Forum (ZGC Forum) Annual Conference held in Beijing on March 25, many international guests were drawn to the AR & AI-powered translation glasses showcased at the event.

After putting on the glasses and selecting their preferred language, users could see forum speeches instantly converted from audio into lines of clear subtitles displayed before their eyes.

This is just one of the technological achievements presented at this year's forum.

The 2026 ZGC Forum Annual Conference, themed "Full Integration Between Technological and Industrial Innovation," concluded yesterday, having attracted thousands of participants from more than 100 countries and regions to explore the latest trends in China's technological development.

From real-time translation glasses to brain-computer interface (BCI) technologies, a wide range of cutting-edge innovations converged at the annual event, showcasing China's ever-growing innovation vitality.

### AI INNOVATION GAINING MOMENTUM

At this year's forum, "AI" has become the defining keyword for many exhibits, including the translation glasses.

"These glasses are powered by large AI models capable of pre-learning specialized terminology. They currently support translation in eight languages, including Chinese, English, Spanish and Russian, while the commercial version can cover more than 100 languages," said Ma Qingyang, marketing manager of Beijing LLVision Technology Co.

Ltd., the developer of the AR & AI translation glasses.

"Our main customers include international business professionals, executives of foreign companies, overseas students and travelers. The glasses can also improve the quality of life for people with hearing impairments," he added.

Ma noted that the company hopes to find upstream and downstream partners in AR and AI at the forum to jointly conduct R&D and further expand application scenarios.

"China's rapidly evolving AI technologies are empowering our translation glasses with greater efficiency and accuracy," Ma said, adding that, supported by China's fast-growing AI sector and mature manufacturing capabilities, the product has undergone multiple iterations, becoming more portable with longer battery life.

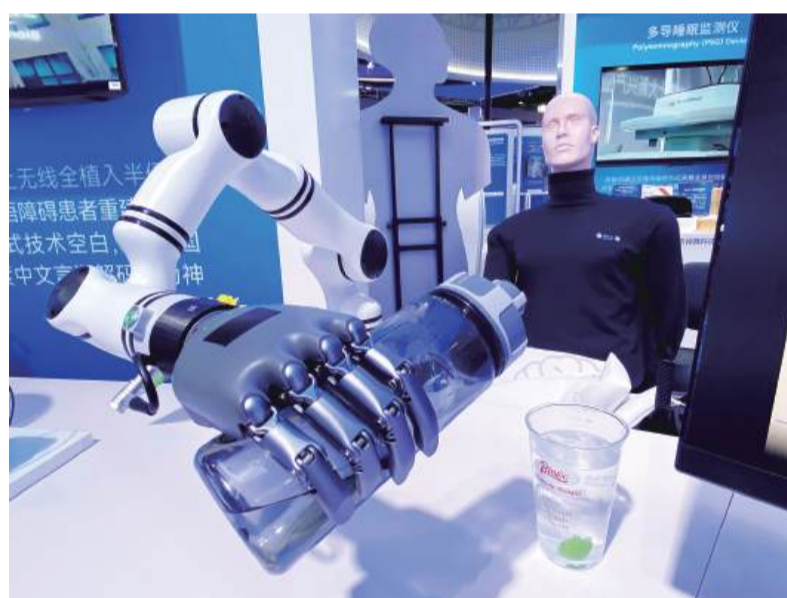
China's industrial advantages have also benefited the development of healthcare AI products by Ping An Insurance (Group) Company of China, Ltd.

Wang Xiaohang, the company's chief technology officer, said its multimodal early disease screening technology helps grassroots doctors identify high-risk patients at an early stage and has been applied in 1,500 medical institutions.

According to Wang, the company's medical AI large model is continuously evolving through feedback from tens of millions of users and over 100,000 daily diagnostic interactions, rapidly improving its accuracy.

As China steadily advances high-quality development, its vast market and well-established industrial system are providing broad prospects for AI applications.

In August 2025, the State Council released guidelines to advance the "AI+" initiative, calling



"Beinao-1", a domestically developed intelligent system, activates a robotic arm to pour water into a cup at an exhibition held during the 2026 Zhongguancun Forum (ZGC Forum) in Beijing on Friday. — Xinhua

for the accelerated development of new quality productive forces and ensuring that the benefits of AI are shared by all, thereby better supporting Chinese modernization.

By 2030, AI is expected to comprehensively empower high-quality development in China, with the penetration rate of next-generation intelligent terminals and agents exceeding 90 percent, making the intelligent economy a key growth driver.

Official data show that China's core AI industry exceeded 1.2 trillion yuan in 2025, with more than 6,200 related enterprises. Authorities estimate that by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan period (2026-2030), the scale of AI-related industries will surpass 10 trillion yuan.

### FUTURE INDUSTRIES BECOMING REALITY

At the forum, the deep integration of technological innovation and industrial foundations is unleashing

new momentum across sectors beyond AI.

At the newly upgraded Zhongguancun permanent exhibition, technologies and products in future industries such as BCI, 6G, and quantum technology attracted large crowds.

At one BCI booth, a matchbox-sized device was shown embedded in a simulated brain model. Under a microscope, images of electrodes inside the device were magnified on a computer screen into circular patterns.

"This is our core technology — stretchable flexible electrodes, which address the issues of displacement and detachment common in traditional linear electrodes, providing solid support for long-term use of high-throughput invasive BCI systems by patients with paralysis or spinal cord injuries," said Mu Yesha, marketing manager of BCIFlex Medical Technology Co. Ltd.

Mu said the development of such systems has taken over two

decades and required sustained investment in scientific research. Thanks to national and Beijing-level industrial funds and policy support, the product has now entered the approval process for market launch.

"Policy support has provided strong confidence for enterprise development. In the future, we aim to further integrate BCI with AI to achieve transformative progress in human-machine collaboration," Mu added.

China's government work report this year proposed establishing mechanisms for investment growth and risk-sharing in future industries, including future energy, quantum technology, biomanufacturing, embodied intelligence, BCI, and 6G.

To seize development opportunities, Beijing Municipality took the lead in issuing a dedicated action plan in 2025 to build a global hub for BCI innovation and industrial development.

In recent years, an increasing number of government-backed funds have acted as patient capital, not only helping startups grow into industry leaders but also boosting confidence across the sector.

Zuo Jiaping, co-founder of Linkerbot Beijing Technology Co. Ltd., said the company is expanding application scenarios for dexterous robotic hands and collaborating with firms in the automotive and consumer electronics sectors, with some products exported to the United States, Japan, the Republic of Korea and European countries.

The outline of the 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan identifies embodied intelligence as a new growth driver, further strengthening the company's confidence, Zuo said.

At this year's forum, joint efforts by the tech and industrial sectors are shaping the future of emerging industries. — Xinhua

## After 'The Three-Body Problem,' Chinese sci-fi writers expand once-niche scene, draw global attention

### Analysis

BEIJING – “Flickering like fireflies in the dark,” renowned Chinese sci-fi writer Liu Cixin wrote in the early 2000s, describing a small, largely unnoticed community of Chinese sci-fi writers and fans. “But like spring grass, we are spreading.”

A little over a decade later, Liu’s “The Three-Body Problem” captured global acclaim with the 2015 Hugo Award, turning a once-niche genre in China into a booming industry, with annual revenues exceeding 100 billion yuan for three consecutive years since 2023.

Across the country, people from various walks of life – journalists, engineers, even pop singers – have been inspired to take up the pen. Their stories, ranging from interstellar epics to near-future visions, have been translated into multiple languages, reaching audiences far beyond China’s borders.

On Thursday, in downtown Beijing, a seminar brought together some of the country’s rising sci-fi voices to explore the global outlook of Chinese sci-fi, drawing more than 120 writers, translators, publishers, and fans from over 20 countries.

“Liu is our current No.1 bestseller,” said Nicolas Cheetham, managing director of the British publisher Head of Zeus, which released the English edition of “The Three-Body Problem.”

“Liu’s success opened up a world of possibilities for Chinese sci-fi writers,” said Gu Shi, a rising author in the field. “It was a turning point. One day, we realized our work could reach readers around the globe.”

Since 2016, several of Gu’s short stories have appeared in English in *Clarkesworld*, a US science fiction magazine. Her story, “Strength Test,” was adapted into an animated short film in 2021 and screened at international film festivals in multiple countries, including the United States, Britain, Austria and India.

“Knowing your work could one day be read and watched worldwide brings both a weighty responsibility and a powerful motivation,” Gu said. “When I’m crafting a new story, I think carefully about how to weave Chinese cultural heritage into visions of the future.”

Translation, Gu emphasized, plays a critical role in a story’s success abroad – a point widely echoed in the room.

Despite differences in language and culture, writers and translators agreed that science fiction is uniquely suited for global audiences.

“Readers expect the new and the different, and science can serve as a kind of lingua franca to bridge cultural gaps,” Cheetham explained.

“I grew up and live in China, so it’s natural that the ideas and philosophies I encounter here find their way into my work,” said Liang Ling, a 1992-born sci-fi writer whose work often delves into the pressures of daily life in rapidly urbanizing cities.

“But science fiction deals with universal human concerns – time, life, memory. It’s a language the world can understand,” she added.

International scholars at the seminar noted that Chinese sci-fi authors are actively transforming traditional cultural elements into core narrative tools, thereby giving fresh life to history, ecology and gender.

This approach, steeped in rich Chinese culture, not only stretches the boundaries of the genre but also offers global readers a lens into contemporary China.

“Science fiction writers are the ones who tiptoe into the future – and sometimes see the future take shape,” said Wang Jinkang, whose 1993 debut envisioned brain-computer interfaces, decades before the concept appeared in the country’s latest five-year plan for future development priorities.

Seminar participants widely agreed that rapid technological advances provide fertile ground for sci-fi, while sci-fi itself serves as both a “laboratory for ideas” and an early-warning system for potential risks and challenges ahead.

To chart the unique contributions of Chinese science fiction to the global stage over the next decade, award-winning author Chen Qiufan said Chinese writers must approach their work with bold imagination – exploring not just literature but also thought, values and aesthetics.

“I’m crafting a sci-fi story inspired by my own research and everyday life,” said Zhao Xiaorui, an engineer and avid sci-fi fan, after the seminar. “With the society fast changing, life itself feels like science fiction, doesn’t it?”

– Xinhua

## China welcomes WTO interim arrangements on e-commerce agreement: commerce minister

BEIJING – Chinese Commerce Minister Wang Wentao has expressed support for the adoption of the World Trade Organization (WTO) agreement on e-commerce with interim arrangements announced on Saturday.

In his written remarks, Wang highlighted that the WTO Agreement on Electronic Commerce (E-Commerce Agreement) establishes global rules for digital trade, which will effectively promote more inclusive and sustainable digital growth.

China supports the timely implementation of the agreement and hopes WTO can play a greater role in shaping digital trade rules in the future, Wang added.

On Saturday, the co-conveners of the WTO negotiations on e-commerce – Australia, Japan, and Singapore – issued a

joint statement in Yaounde, the capital of Cameroon, announcing the establishment of interim arrangements for the E-Commerce Agreement.

At the 14<sup>th</sup> WTO Ministerial Conference (MC14) on Saturday, 66 WTO members, including China, announced that the interim arrangements would provide a pathway to bring the E-Commerce Agreement into force, while continuing to work towards its incorporation into the WTO legal framework of rules.

The E-Commerce Agreement, a significant milestone for the WTO in recent years, will enter into force for those members that have accepted it, after 45 members have deposited their instruments of acceptance, according to the joint statement.

– Xinhua

## Press the “stop button” before it’s too late

### Commentary

BEIJING – One month into the US Israeli strikes against Iran, the Middle East is once again caught in a cycle of escalating violence. Civilian casualties are mounting, regional tensions are intensifying, and the risk of a wider war grows by the day. The reality is increasingly evident: this war is not resolving problems, but multiplying them.

This war did not have to happen. There were still diplomatic options before the strikes began, but they were set aside by Washington. Experience shows that such actions rarely bring order. More often, they deepen divisions and make the situation worse.

More importantly, the way this conflict has unfolded raises serious questions about international norms. Military action taken without United Nations Security Council authorization undermines the foundation of the UN Charter. When such actions are justified in the name of urgency or self-defense, the line between rule and exception becomes blurred.

On the ground, the impact is immediate. The Middle East is once again facing rising violence, growing civilian casualties and the risk of wider conflict. Rather than stabilizing the situation, the strikes have added new uncertainty to an already fragile region.

Washington always argues that force can restore deterrence and security. But recent history suggests otherwise. Military interventions framed as preventive or stabilizing have often produced the opposite effect – prolonging conflicts, deepening divisions and leaving lasting instability.

One month of bloodshed confirms a simple truth: Military means do not yield genuine security. The people of the region need stability and development, not another prolonged conflict. Allowing the situation to deteriorate further risks pushing the Middle East into deeper quagmire.

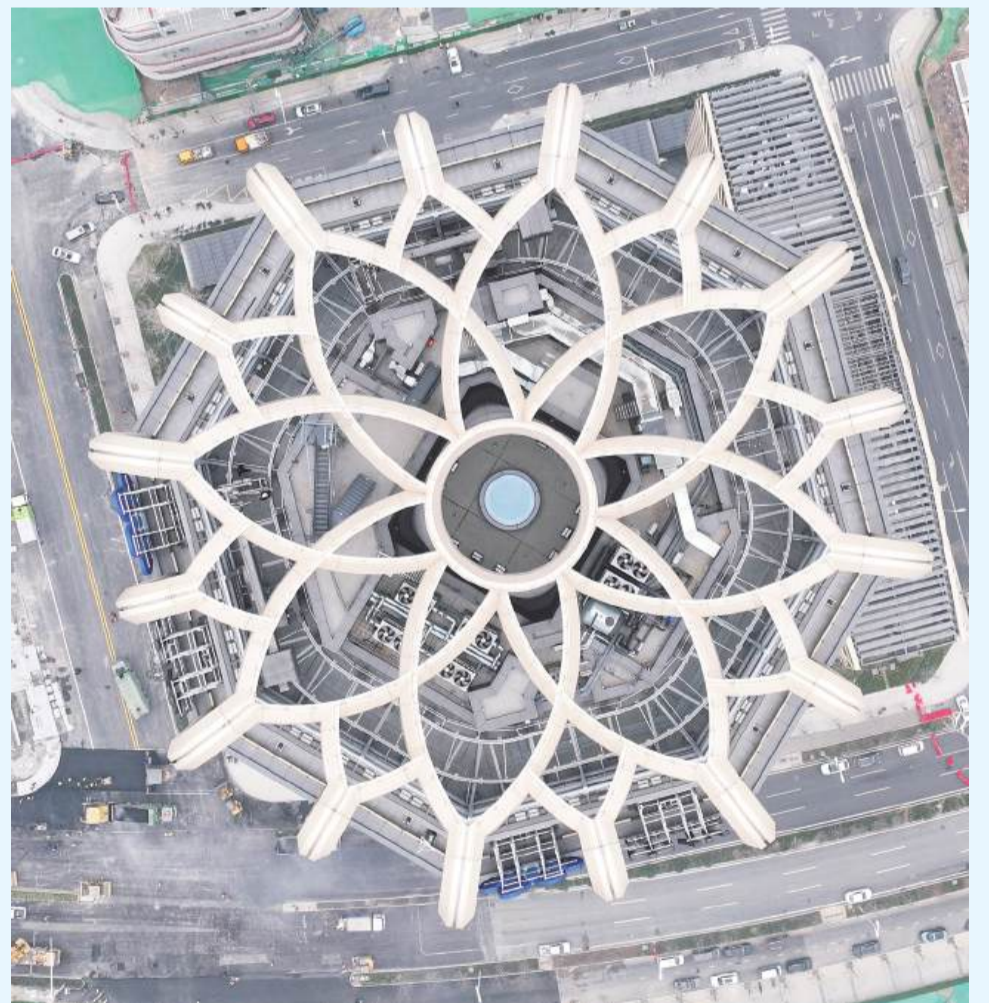
A ceasefire is therefore not a matter of choice, but an urgent necessity. The longer the fighting continues, the harder it becomes to contain. All parties should act to halt hostilities and create space for dialogue before the window for de-escalation closes.

A ceasefire, however, is merely the first step. Dialogue is the sole route out. Complex differences must ultimately be addressed through political means. Military force may deliver temporary gains, but it cannot resolve underlying differences. Dialogue, however difficult, remains the only viable path toward lasting stability.

At the same time, the international community must firmly reject unilateralism and power politics and jointly uphold fairness and justice. The foundation of international order lies in the international law, not in the law of the jungle. Major countries bear responsibilities, not privileges to act with impunity. If the notion that “might makes right” is allowed to prevail, the world risks sliding back into a dangerous era of brute force, a catastrophic setback for civilization.

The choice is stark: Continue down a path of escalation with no clear end, or press the “stop button” and return to reason. To end the loss of innocent life, the world must make the latter a reality.

– Xinhua



This aerial drone photo taken on March 17 shows the building of Sinochem Holdings in the Xiong'an New Area in Hebei Province. Since the central authorities announced plans to establish the Xiong'an New Area in April 2017, the city has evolved from a blueprint into a vibrant city. This new area is designed to relieve functions that are non-essential to Beijing's role as the national capital and advance the coordinated development of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region. In the nine years, Xiong'an has, from the very beginning, adhered to high standards of planning and design, adopting a “moving in after infrastructure is in place” approach, ensuring that networks of water, electricity, gas, roads and bridges are established first. Dubbed the “city of the future,” Xiong'an is undergoing rapid changes. Official data reveals a more detailed picture: the developed area spans around 215 square kilometers with more than 5,300 buildings shaping the urban skyline, housing 1.41 million residents and 669 high-tech enterprises.

– Xinhua

## Myanmar marks 1-year anniversary of Mandalay earthquake

YANGON – A ceremony marking the one-year anniversary of the Mandalay earthquake that struck on March 28, 2025, was held in Myanmar's capital Nay Pyi Taw on Saturday, according to state-owned Myanmar Radio and Television.

During the event, Myanmar's Acting President Senior General Min Aung Hlaing expressed sorrow over the loss of lives and property caused by the disaster and highlighted ongoing rehabilitation efforts.

He said the earthquake affected 10 regions and states, including Nay Pyi Taw, leaving 3,818 people dead and 5,104 injured. Over 160,000 households and more than 420,000 people were affected, with total damage estimated at over K7,979 billion [kyats] (about US\$3.79 billion).

More than 2,600 tonnes of relief supplies were provided by countries including China, Bangladesh, Belarus, India, Laos, Nepal, Russia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam and others, and were distributed to affected areas in a timely manner, he said.

In addition, China donated prefabricated offices and houses,



Firefighters leave after a memorial event at the Myanmar International Convention Centre (MICC) in Naypyidaw on Saturday, to mark the first anniversary since a 7.7-magnitude tremor struck, killing more than 3,800 people in Myanmar – and around 90 more in neighbouring Thailand. – AFP

gasoline for rescue operations, emergency medical facilities and medicines, which were used and distributed systematically, he added.

For emergency response efforts, over 1,900 search and rescue personnel and 845 healthcare workers from 25 countries worked together with the Myanmar Fire Services Department, police, Myanmar Armed Forces (Tatmadaw), the Red Cross Society and local rescue organizations, he said.

Due to their efforts, a total of 653 people were rescued alive. The

compassion, dedication, courage, unity and perseverance of those who participated in the earthquake rescue efforts are the greatest and most proud national assets of the country, he added.

Rehabilitation works are 80 percent complete, and the rest will be taken over by the new government, he said.

In the future process of national development, resilience to disasters and long-term sustainability must be taken into consideration, he said.

– Xinhua

## Marcos says ASEAN summit will focus on MidEast war

MANILA – President Ferdinand Marcos said Friday that an ASEAN summit the Philippines will host in May will be a streamlined affair, with a focus on how best to handle the economic shocks of the Mideast war.

The May 8-9 meeting of the 11-member Association of Southeast Asian nations will centre around the issues of oil, food and migration, Marcos told reporters after a graduation ceremony for the country's national police.

Marcos said he had consulted with other ASEAN members about the idea of postponing the summit in the face of an energy crisis that has struck the region hard before

determining to press forward.

"It is a bare bones ASEAN Summit... We will be talking about three main subjects – about the supply of petroleum and petroleum products, about the supply ... and the price of food, and migrant workers," Marcos said.

"What we really need at this time is for leaders to talk about ... what do we do, how can we help each other, and what is the ASEAN position regarding all of these shocks that are coming our way," he said.

Marcos declared on Tuesday a state of "national energy emergency", citing risks to the Philippines' domestic fuel supply created by the war.

The import-dependent archipelago nation of 116 million has seen the price of fuel hit historic highs since the US-Israeli war with Iran forced the partial closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

The war has also affected millions of guest workers from ASEAN states who are living in countries caught in the crossfire.

It was not immediately clear if other pressing priorities, including the civil war raging in Myanmar or a long-gestating code of conduct between the bloc and China over the South China Sea, would be completely off the table for discussion. – AFP

## Thai PM says reached deal with Iran for vessels to transit Hormuz Strait

BANGKOK – Thailand has reached an agreement with Iran to allow Thai oil vessels safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz, the Southeast Asian nation's prime minister said on Saturday.

Iranian forces have effectively slowed shipping through the strait to a trickle during the Middle East war, which began on February 28.

"An agreement has been reached to allow Thai oil tankers to transit safely through the Strait of Hormuz," Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul told a news conference, adding that the development would alleviate concerns over fuel imports.

"With this agreement in place, there is greater confidence that disruptions like those seen in early March will not recur," he added.

More than 80 percent of the crude oil and liquefied natural

gas (LNG) that passes through the Strait of Hormuz heads to Asia, according to the US Energy Information Administration.

Much of Southeast Asia is bearing the brunt of fuel supply difficulties, with Thailand initially capping the price for diesel before it rose this week by 6 baht (US\$0.18) per litre.

Anutin apologised for the public disruption caused by fuel price management, adding that it was hoped "the conflict might be short-lived".

"The government will continue to adapt to evolving situations and adjust measures to minimise the impact on the public," Anutin said.

A Thai bulk carrier travelling in the waterway was attacked this month and three of its crew members went missing.

Thai Foreign Minister Sihasak

Phuangketkeow said at the news conference with Anutin that "Iran has very recently indicated that it reached the vessel, but cannot confirm the condition of the three crew members".

Commodities shipping through the Strait of Hormuz plunged 95 percent between March 1 and 26 after the start of the war, according to the maritime tracking platform Kpler.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards said on Friday they had turned back three ships trying to transit the Strait of Hormuz, adding that the route was closed to vessels travelling to and from ports linked to its "enemies".

Twenty-four commercial vessels, including 11 tankers, have been attacked or have reported incidents in the Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz or the Gulf of Oman this month, according to the British naval maritime security agency UKMTO. – AFP

## Indonesia eyes US\$2.3 billion saving from cut in free meal distribution

JAKARTA – Indonesia is looking to save up to 40 trillion rupiah (US\$2.3 billion) by cutting back on its free meal programme, an official told AFP yesterday, in a first austerity measure taken in response to price pressures from the Mideast war.

The meals, primarily intended for schoolchildren across the country, will be distributed for five days a week instead of six starting March 31 in a move that is expected to save "around 40 trillion rupiah", National Nutrition Agency deputy head Nanik Sudaryati Deyang said.

She said the measure was taken as part of the government's moves to cushion Southeast Asia's largest economy from the fallout of the war in the Middle East, which has sent global oil prices soaring.

In a statement yesterday, the agency, which oversees the programme, announced the policy to adjust the distribution of meals in-line with students' five-day school week.

But recipients in remote areas or areas with high rates of stunting will see meals delivered for six days a week, agency head Dadan Hindayana said.

"The provision of the free nutritious meals on Saturdays for regions with a high risk of stunting is a strategic step to ensure that

children receive adequate nutrition every day," Dadan said.

The nutrition agency will work with local authorities to ensure that the programme reaches its intended target, Dadan said.

Prasetyo Hadi, a spokesperson for President Prabowo Subianto, previously said the country was seeking to set aside 80 trillion rupiah as the government looks to shield its economy from the Middle East fallout, without disclosing further details.

Prabowo previously insisted that the meal programme, originally budgeted for 335 trillion rupiah this year, would be untouched, claiming that there were many other cost saving measures Jakarta could implement as the government weighed options to respond to price pressures.

The government is considering whether to allow workers to work remotely for one day a week in a move to curb fuel consumption.

The free meal programme has drawn criticism following a spate of food poisoning cases since its launch last year, with critics calling for its suspension over hygiene concerns.

The initiative has served 61 million people, according to the agency. Children and toddlers, as well as pregnant and breastfeeding women, are the main recipients. – AFP



Supporters of former Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte gather at a park in Davao City, in Southern island of Mindanao on Saturday, to celebrate his birthday. Duterte is currently detained at a prison facility in the Hague Netherlands, awaiting trial at the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity. – AFP

## Indonesia begins enforcing social media ban for under-16s

JAKARTA – Indonesia began enforcing a social media ban for children under the age of 16 on Saturday, after a minister warned digital platforms there was "no room for compromise."

The Southeast Asian nation announced the ban this month citing threats from online pornography, cyberbullying and internet addiction, as concerns grow globally over the impact of social media on children's wellbeing.

Communications minister Meutya Hafid said at a press conference late Friday that digital platforms X and Bigo Live have fully complied with the new rules and adjusted their minimum user age in line with the regulation.

Other digital platforms operating in the country should "immediately align their products, features and services with applicable regulations," Meutya said.

"We reiterate that there is no room for compromise regarding

compliance, and that every business entity operating in Indonesia is required to adhere to the laws in force within the country."

TikTok said in a statement late Friday that it was committed to complying with the regulation including "taking appropriate measures related to under-16 accounts" in close consultation with the ministry.

Indonesia's ban follows a similar policy in Australia implemented in December – signs that the global reckoning over social media's potential harms to children is gathering steam.

A Los Angeles jury on Wednesday found Meta and YouTube liable for harming a young woman through the "addictive design" of their platforms, ordering the companies to pay \$6 million in damages.

Britain's upper house of parliament voted this week in favour of banning children from social media, adding pressure on the government to follow suit. – AFP

## Vietnam arrests 74 over 'falsified' environmental monitoring: state media

HANOI — Authorities in Vietnam have arrested more than 70 people, including government officials, accused of falsifying data from air and wastewater monitors at power plants and other major emitters, state media said yesterday.

The state-run *People's Police* newspaper said police had identified "nearly 160 environmental monitoring stations that had been tampered with, altered and had their data falsified" — accounting for more than half of the total number of stations nationwide.

Police arrested 74 people, including officials at state environmental agencies and others at dozens of businesses that discharge wastewater and install monitoring equipment, on charges related to environmental monitoring violations, the newspaper said.

"Even though the monitoring equipment is sealed and has its own surveillance camera system, it was still being remotely adjusted via

software," the state-run outlet said.

"The perpetrators interfered to reduce the output indicators thereby ensuring that the data sent to the management agency always remained within permissible levels."

Authorities said data sent to local environment departments from large-scale emitters of air pollution and wastewater, including the Quang Ninh Thermal Power Plant, Hai Phong Thermal Power Plant and Thai Binh 2 Thermal Power Plant, as well as aluminium and steel companies, were "being manipulated and altered in a sophisticated manner".

AFP could not immediately reach representatives of the three state-owned, coal-fired power plants or the environment ministry for comment yesterday evening.

The *People's Police* newspaper said the arrests followed a months-long investigation but did not say when or where the arrests occurred.

— AFP

## Singapore seizes record Asian pangolin scales disguised as 'dried fish skin'

SINGAPORE — Singapore has seized over 830 kilograms of Asian pangolin scales hidden in a shipment bound for Cambodia, authorities said Saturday, calling it the largest haul of its kind discovered in the city-state.

Falsely declared as "dried fish skin", the scales — estimated to be from more than 2,200 pangolins — were found in 30 bags on December 29 after officials intercepted an inbound lorry carrying sea cargo, Singapore's National Parks Board said in a statement.

The announcement came as Singapore released a report Saturday on the nation's role in tackling illegal wildlife trade in the shipping sector.

"Based on preliminary investigations, the cargo was transiting through Singapore en route from Indonesia to Cambodia," the statement said.

"This marks the largest seizure of Asian pangolin scales in Singapore to date," it added, noting that investigations are ongoing.

The scales were identified as belonging to Sunda pangolins, a

critically endangered species native to Southeast Asia, including Singapore.

Pangolins are protected under the wildlife protection treaty CITES, to which Singapore is a signatory.

"Singapore adopts a zero-tolerance stance on the illegal trade of endangered wildlife species, and their parts and derivatives," the statement read.

Pangolins are among the world's most endangered species, and their scales are prized in countries like China and Vietnam where they are used in traditional medicine as remedy for various ailments.

Their scales are similar in constitution to fingernails and provide no scientifically proven medicinal benefit.

Under Singaporean law, those found guilty of trading in protected species without a valid CITES permit face a fine of up to S\$200,000 (US\$154,702) per specimen (not exceeding S\$1 million or the market value of the items) and up to eight years in prison.

— AFP

## Pakistan hosts Saudi, Turkey, Egypt for talks on Mideast war

Zain Zaman Janjua

ISLAMABAD — Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey yesterday held talks about trying to end the war in the Middle East, as Islamabad acts as a go-between between the United States and Iran.

The four-way meeting between the top diplomats of the Muslim nations lasted several hours in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad.

Pakistan has emerged as a key facilitator between Iran and the United States as their war drags on, relaying messages between the two sides.

It is seeking to capitalise on its longstanding links with Tehran and close contacts in the Gulf, and the personal rapport that Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and army chief Asim Munir have struck up with US President Donald Trump.

Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar said the talks, held under tight security at his ministry but without any US, Israeli or Iranian representation, came a "critical moment".

"Our candid and constructive discussions focus on the evolving regional situation and advancing peace and stability, while strengthening our partnership and deepening cooperation," he wrote on X.

Egypt's foreign ministry said the talks addressed efforts to stop the conflict from escalating, as well as encouraging "a negotiations track" between Tehran and Washington to prevent the region "slipping into a state of complete chaos".

Dar, who is also Pakistan's deputy prime minister, held separate bilateral talks with his counterparts — Badr Abdelatty from Egypt, Hakan Fidan from Turkey, and Saudi Arabia's Faisal bin Farhan.

All three visitors also met Munir. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have a mutual defence pact and in another meeting, Sharif told Farhan that Riyadh had shown "remarkable restraint" in the crisis.

"While emphasising the



This handout photograph taken yesterday and released by Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs shows Pakistan's Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar (second from right) posing for a photograph with his counterparts Turkey's Hakan Fidan (right), Saudi Arabia's Faisal bin Farhan (second from left) and Egypt's Badr Abdelatty before their meeting at the Foreign Ministry office in Islamabad. — AFP

Kingdom's leadership role in the Muslim Ummah (worldwide community), the Prime Minister stressed upon the need to forge unity within the Islamic countries at this critical time," a statement read.

### 'Event planner'

Tehran has refused to admit to holding official talks with Washington but has passed a response to Trump's 15-point plan to end the war via Islamabad, according to an anonymous source cited by the Iranian Tasnim news agency.

Germany's Foreign Minister Johann Wadepuhl said on Friday he expected a direct US-Iran meeting in Pakistan "very soon", without revealing his source.

Shuja Nawaz, founder director of the South Asia Centre at the Atlantic Council, said Pakistan had taken on a "challenging task" in trying to get Washington and Tehran to agree to talks.

"It could only do this with Saudi blessing," Nawaz, author of "The Battle for Pakistan: The Bitter US Friendship and a Tough Neighbourhood", told AFP.

"The real challenge for Pakistan is to bring together a single person in the White House

who changes his mind frequently and an Iranian government that is debating whether to fight a long war or find an end to its economy being further devastated.

"Israeli autonomous decision-making will further complicate any Trump decision to claim victory and end a conflict that is hurting his popularity at home. Pakistan has limited leverage over both the US and Iran; none with Israel.

"Will it remain an event planner only?"

Sharif on Saturday said he had a detailed telephone conversation with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian lasting over one hour, detailing Pakistan's "ongoing diplomatic outreach".

Dar also said late Saturday that Iran had allowed 20 more Pakistani-flagged vessels — or two ships daily — to pass through the Strait of Hormuz, easing fears of an imminent fuel crisis.

"Dialogue, diplomacy, and such confidence-building measures are the only way forward," he wrote on X, tagging US Vice President JD Vance, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, envoy Steve Witkoff and Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi. — AFP

## Kim oversees test of high-thrust engine: KCNA

SEOUL — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un oversaw a ground test of an upgraded solid-fuel rocket engine, state media reported yesterday, in the latest sign of Pyongyang's push to enhance its strategic weapons arsenal.

Solid-fuel engines enable faster missile launches as they require little preparation before ignition and defence experts believe North Korea is planning to use them in the intercontinental ballistic missiles it is developing.

The test of the solid-fuel engine made of composite carbon fibre material was "part of the national defence development plan in the period of the new five-year plan", Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said.

Pursuing the high-thrust engines "conforms with the national strategy and the military demand for

modernising the strategic forces", Kim was quoted as saying by the news agency, which did not disclose the date or location of the test.

The latest engine being tested produced a higher thrust of 2,500 kilonewtons, KCNA reported.

The development demonstrates North Korea's "resolve to acquire missiles capable of hitting targets around the globe", Hong Min, an analyst at the Korea Institute for National Unification, told AFP.

"Given the increased maximum thrust, this indicates its intention to possess ICBMs with global strike range, as well as the ability to overwhelm missile defence systems," he added.

It was the first officially confirmed high-thrust solid-fuel engine test since September last year, when state media said an engine generated a maximum

thrust of 1,971 kilonewtons.

Photos released by the news agency showed Kim inspecting what appeared to be part of the engine, flanked by officials.

Another image showed flames erupting from a ground-mounted engine, illuminating the surrounding test site in orange light.

Kim added that North Korea's defence capabilities had entered "a significant phase of change" in the building up of its strategic forces.

Kim also visited a special forces training base, according to a separate KCNA report, inspecting drills in which photos showed soldiers wielding weapons, including an axe and a sledgehammer.

The demonstration "showed the physical and technical ability they have prepared to be a-match-for-a hundred combatants with iron fists", KCNA said. — AFP



Supporters protest against the arrest of Nepali former prime minister KP Sharma Oli in Kathmandu, Nepal yesterday.

A Nepal court yesterday extended by five days the detention of former prime minister Oli and his home minister after their arrest over alleged involvement in a deadly crackdown on the 2025 protests that ousted him.

Oli, 74, and ex-home minister Ramesh Lekhak were arrested in pre-dawn raids on Saturday, a day after Prime Minister Balendra Shah was sworn in following the first elections since the September uprising. — AFP

# Iran accuses US of plotting ground attack despite diplomatic talk

TEHRAN – The speaker of Iran's parliament accused the United States yesterday of plotting a ground attack despite publicly pushing for a negotiated deal, after a US warship with around 3,500 military personnel arrived in the Middle East.

Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf's comments came after more than a month of aerial bombardments of Iran by US and Israeli forces, and as key regional players held talks in Pakistan.

The war has escalated into a regional conflagration as Iran has retaliated with attacks on Gulf states and the Strait of Hormuz shipping lane, sending energy markets into a tailspin and threatening the world economy.

"The enemy publicly sends messages of negotiation and dialogue while secretly planning a ground attack," Ghalibaf said in a statement carried by the official IRNA news agency.

"Our men are waiting for the arrival of the American soldiers on the ground to set them on fire and punish their regional allies once and for all," he added.

## 'An uncertain future'

Ghalibaf called for unity among Iranians, saying the war was "at its most critical stage".

Weeks of unrelenting strikes have taken a heavy toll on ordinary people in the country.

"I miss a peaceful night's sleep," an artist in Tehran told AFP, saying night-time strikes were "so intense it felt like all of Tehran was shaking".

Farzaneh, a 62-year-old woman in Iran's western city of Ahvaz

contacted by AFP from Paris, said: "People wake up each day worried about an uncertain future."

A university in Iran's central city of Isfahan said it was hit by US-Israeli airstrikes yesterday for the second time since the war erupted.

In Tehran, the Qatari news channel Al Araby said an Israeli missile hit the building housing its office.

Footage from inside the office showed broken windows and shattered glass.

Outside, people could be seen clearing large piles of rubble.

## Talks in Pakistan

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly spoken of diplomatic contacts with Iran, although these claims have been denied by Tehran.

Pakistan, acting as a go-between for Washington and Tehran, hosted foreign ministers from Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt in Islamabad for talks on the crisis.

The four-way meeting would include discussions on "a range of issues, including efforts to de-escalate tensions in the region", Pakistan's foreign ministry has said.

Despite making diplomatic overtures including proposing a 15-point plan to end the war, the US has also been sending more military assets into the region.

The USS Tripoli, an amphibious assault ship carrying around 3,500 Marines and sailors, arrived in the Middle East on Friday.

The Washington Post reported the Pentagon was preparing plans for weeks of ground operations – potentially including raids on sites



*This image posted on social media yesterday and verified by AFP staff appears to show a destroyed US Air Force Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft, primarily used for air traffic control, in the aftermath of a projectile strike at Prince Sultan Airbase in Saudi Arabia. An Iranian missile and drone attack on the Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia has wounded at least 12 US soldiers, two of them seriously, according to The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, citing unidentified officials.* – AFP

near the Strait of Hormuz – though US President Donald Trump has yet to approve any deployment.

Iran says it has closed the Strait of Hormuz, a vital shipping lane which previously accounted for a quarter of the world's seaborne oil trade and a fifth of liquefied natural gas shipments, to vessels from hostile nations.

## Fire at desert complex

Iranian forces said they had fired a volley of missiles and drones at plants belonging to two of the world's largest aluminium producers in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, targeting what they described as industries linked to the US military.

Emirates Global Aluminium (EGA) said an Iranian attack wounded six and caused significant damage to its plant, while Bahraini state media said two Aluminium

Bahrain (ALBA) employees were injured in a second attack.

In Israel, thick black smoke could be seen rising from an industrial complex in the Negev desert in images released by the Israel Fire and Rescue Authority.

The military said the impact may have been caused by missile shrapnel, shortly after it detected a new barrage fired from Iran.

As the spectre of a widening conflict loomed, Yemen's Houthis on Saturday claimed their first attack of the war, firing what they described as "a barrage of cruise missiles and drones" at strategic sites in Israel.

The attacks raised concern about the war spreading to the Red Sea, with Saudi Arabia rerouting much of its oil exports there to avoid Hormuz.

During Israel's recent war in Gaza, the Houthis, claiming

solidarity with the Palestinians, attacked shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, forcing companies to take costly detours.

## Cardinal blocked

On another front, Israeli attacks have continued in Lebanon, which was drawn into the war when Tehran-backed Hezbollah fired rockets at Israel on March 2.

On Saturday, the Israeli military killed three journalists in the south.

Lebanese authorities condemned the killings as war crimes, while Israel alleged that one of the reporters was also a member of an elite Hezbollah combat unit.

Hundreds of people gathered in the rain for the funeral of the three journalists near Beirut on Sunday.

At a Palm Sunday mass in the Vatican, Pope Leo XIV warned that God "does not listen to the prayer of those who wage war".

He also paid tribute to Christians in the Middle East preparing for Easter saying that many "cannot fully live the rites of these holy days" because of the conflict.

The Pope spoke after Israeli police blocked the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem from celebrating mass at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Christianity's holiest site.

Since the start of the war, Israel has banned large gatherings – including in synagogues, churches and mosques – and capped public events at 50 people.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa had been stopped "out of special concern for his safety". – AFP

# Muted Palm Sunday in Syria after violence in Christian town

DAMASCUS – Worshippers attended a muted Palm Sunday service at a Greek Catholic cathedral in Damascus after the city's churches decided to limit celebrations to prayers only after violence hit a Christian town.

On Friday night, Suqaylabiyah, one of the largest Christian communities in central Syria, was attacked, with shops vandalised and cars burned.

In the capital yesterday, Fadi Shammas, a 37-year-old engineer, carried his infant daughter Nala, who wore a white dress.

"This is her first Palm Sunday," he told AFP. "We wish the situation was more relaxed and people weren't afraid."

Security forces deployed at the outer entrance to the church compound, and some roads leading into the Old City were closed.

People slowly filled pews decorated with olive branches, and lit candles in silence.

"We are hopeful for the future, but things need more time for people to feel more at ease," Shammas added.

In the alleyways of the Old City, there were none of the scenes residents remembered from previous years.



*Women help a girl on a swing outside during the Palm Sunday service at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Dormition, headquarters of the Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarchate in Damascus, yesterday. The Melkite Patriarchate announced on Saturday the cancellation of all its public Easter celebrations in Syria for 2026, citing ongoing security concerns and unstable conditions across the country, to be replaced with scaled-back services limited to prayers held inside churches.* – AFP

Troops of uniformed scouts used to parade, playing drums and brass instruments, as children waved olive branches amid crowds of worshippers and onlookers.

Syria's Islamist authorities vowed to protect minorities after ousting longtime Syrian ruler Bashar al-Assad in 2024, but a suicide bombing in a Damascus church last year fuelled Christian fears.

Christianity's presence in Syria

has dwindled from approximately one million people before the civil war broke out in 2011 to fewer than 300,000 because of waves of displacement and emigration, according to expert estimates.

## 'Hold on to hope'

"Given the current discouraging circumstances, we have decided, in coordination and agreement with all the churches, that Easter

celebrations this year will be limited to prayers only inside the churches," the Greek Catholic Patriarchate in Antioch and the East said in a statement on Saturday.

The decision was taken after Friday's attack on Suqaylabiyah.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that "masked gunmen launched an attack, coming from Qalaat al-Madiq and neighbouring villages", assaulting civilians and vandalising property.

The official SANA news agency said security forces intervened to break up a "mass brawl" in Suqaylabiyah between young men, and that calm was restored after a number of arrests.

In his Palm Sunday sermon at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Dormition, Youssef Absi, patriarch of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, said: "In the painful circumstances and conditions we are going through today... fatigue, sadness, distress and pain, Palm Sunday calls us to hold on to hope."

Outside in the churchyard, the silence was broken by the sound of children running and playing, as their parents took pictures of them.

Lawyer Milad al-Sabaa, 36, stood watching his five-year-old son Akram play.

"This year the situation is unstable, and it's not appropriate for scout troops to patrol," Sabaa said.

"We limited ourselves to religious services, and we hope next year the situation will be calmer."

"One fear to another"

Dozens of people held a silent sit-in on Saturday in Suqaylabiyah, raising banners. One read: "No to uncontrolled weapons... Yes to a Syrian state that includes all its components", local media reported.

Sectarian violence such as the killing of hundreds of mostly Alawite civilians in March 2025 stoked the fears of minority communities.

And in July, sectarian clashes erupted in the Druze-majority southern province of Sweida.

The international community has urged Damascus to respect freedoms, protect minorities and involve all sections of society, including women, during Syria's delicate transition.

The new authorities are trying to present an image of openness.

"During the years of war there was fear, and now there is fear," 57-year-old employee Nabil Samara said yesterday at the cathedral.

"People go from one fear to another. People want stability and to live in peace." – AFP

## 'No Kings' flagship protest brings spotlight back to Minneapolis

**Kerem Yucel and Romain Fonsgrives**

MINNEAPOLIS – Tens of thousands of protesters rallied in the northern US city of Minneapolis on Saturday as part of the national "No Kings" movement, months after it was wracked with protests due to federal immigration raids.

The January raids led to the deaths of two US citizens, Renee Good and Alex Pretti, both at the hands of federal agents, making the city a flashpoint of President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown.

Minneapolis hosted the flagship event for the third "No Kings" protest since the grassroots movement kicked off last year, in protest of Trump's strongman political leadership and right-wing agenda. Organisers later said an estimated 200,000 people went to the event.

US musician Bruce Springsteen headlined the rally in neighbouring "Twin City" capitol St. Paul, during which he played his song "Streets of Minneapolis," which he wrote in tribute to Good and Pretti shortly after their deaths.

"Their bravery, their sacrifice and their names will not be forgotten," Springsteen said about the two deceased Americans.

At the rally, thousands chanted the slogan: "no Kings, no ICE, no war!"

"Your strength and your commitment told us that this is still America, and this reactionary nightmare and the invasions of American cities will not stand," Springsteen told the crowd.

### 'Wannabe dictator'

Pamela Sinness, 73, told AFP she attended the rally because she believes "in equal rights for all people, including the immigrants who come to our country."

"It feels wonderful to see all the like-minded people gathered here, because the people of Minnesota were very traumatised by the violence and the disrespect shown to all people, and the murders in our streets of Renee Good and Alex Pretti," she said.

Among the throngs of people, many carried signs and banners with protest slogans, including some as simple as "ICE OUT," in reference to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) which carries out Trump's immigration agenda.

From the rally stage, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz, a Democrat, thanked the crowd for standing up to Trump, who he dubbed a "wannabe dictator."

Leftist US politician Bernie Sanders also addressed the Minnesota rally, telling attendees: "We will never accept a president who is a pathological liar, a kleptocrat and a narcissist who is undermining the Constitution of the United States and the rule of law every day."

Gina Bilotta-Racelis, who attended the fanfare, said Trump is "incompetent" and that "he has no idea what he's doing." Amid the escalating Middle East war spurred by US-Israeli strikes on February 28, the 73-year-old protester said Trump "should follow the rules and the laws like everyone else."

Between the Iran conflict and its economic fallout, including soaring oil prices, as well as the controversial immigration raids, Bilotta-Racelis said she thinks Republicans and their narrow majority in Congress will not survive the November midterm elections.

"I think they'll lose," she said. "If you're watching the polls, you can see it happening day by day."

– AFP



US singer Bruce Springsteen performs onstage as during a protest as part of the No Kings Rallies on Saturday in St. Paul, Minnesota. – AFP

## Joy, scepticism across west Africa after UN vote on slave trade

**Accra**

ACCRA – Ghanaians in the streets of the capital Accra were full of pride – and already looking towards future "justice" – on Thursday after the United Nations recognised the transatlantic slave trade as "the gravest crime against humanity."

The day prior, the resolution – pushed for by Ghanaian President John Mahama, who travelled to New York for the vote – was adopted to applause by a 123 in favour.

"It's not just a historic moment for us as a country, but it also validates the suffering of our ancestors and opens the door for justice," said Abigail Selikem Teye, a casually dressed student with a handbag slung over her shoulder.

The excitement was also evident in nearby Benin, which, like Ghana, has leaned into its painful past to encourage tourism and offer citizenship for descendants of slavery.

West and central Africa were devastated by the transatlantic slave trade, which from the 16th to 19th century saw millions of men, women and children shipped to the Americas to work in brutal – and often deadly – conditions.

In many of those same countries, black people continue to face discrimination and poverty today.

"This vote allows us to name things without fear of reprisals. The next step will, I hope, be an uninhibited call for reparations," said Ousmane Aledji, a Beninese writer in Cotonou, who told AFP he followed the vote "with much interest."

Others in the country's economic capital, like art historian Lylly Hounghin, were "disturbed by the abstention of certain countries – those which were the most enriched by the crime".

### 'Africa has suffered'

Despite being non-binding the vote at the General Assembly headquarters in New York was contentious.

The United States, Israel and Argentina opposed the measure, while 52 member states abstained.



A visitor takes a photo of a monument against slavery gifted by the Regional Council of the French overseas region of the Guadelupe, on Goree Island in Dakar, Senegal, on Thursday. The UN General Assembly on March 25 designated the transatlantic African slave trade as "the gravest crime against humanity," in a move advocates hailed as a step towards healing and possible reparations. The resolution was adopted to applause by a vote of 123 in favour, three against – the United States, Israel and Argentina – and 52 abstentions, including Britain and member states of the European Union. – AFP

Critics including France said the resolution's designation of the transatlantic slave trade as "the gravest" crime "risks pitting historical tragedies against each other".

It also comes, however, as countries like the United States have been criticised for restricting education on slavery and black history.

The resolution did not mention other slave routes in Africa, including across the Sahara Desert or Indian Ocean.

But it singled out the transatlantic trade's duration, brutality of the "racialised chattel enslavement of Africans" – as well as present-day consequences including "the persistence of racial discrimination and neo-colonialism".

It did not explicitly demand reparations, though it "encourages member states to support initiatives aimed at reparatory justice".

Many argue Africa is still living with the slave trade's dire consequences.

"Who will pay for all the problems this caused? Africa has unfortunately suffered the two greatest scourges in history: slavery and colonisation," said Franck

Ogou, director of a pan-African heritage preservation programme in Porto Novo.

Larissa Adjivon, a 42-year-old Beninese entrepreneur, told AFP: "Recognition is good, but concrete actions should follow."

"We talk about reparations or restitution, but for me, the question is, what does this change for Africa today?"

### 'Return' to Ghana, Benin

For Obadele Bakari Kambon, if "enslavement in totality is the wound," then the "healing part of it comes through repatriation."

The African American professor became a Ghanaian citizen in 2016, part of a wave of black people from the United States and elsewhere that Ghana has pushed to "return" to the country.

In recent years, more than 1,000 people have reclaimed citizenship as the country has also encouraged tourism as a way for people to learn about slavery – and for some, their direct family heritage.

At the end of last year, Benin also launched a citizenship programme for members of the African diaspora. – AFP

## Freed whale gets stranded again off German coast

BERLIN – A humpback whale struggling in shallow waters off Germany's northern Baltic Sea coast has become stranded for a third time, experts said yesterday, just hours after the animal had freed itself from a sandbank.

The 13.5-metre long mammal was first spotted last Monday on a sandbank near the city of Lübeck. It managed to free itself on Friday after a mechanical digger set up an escape route.

However, it has run into fresh difficulty after swimming further east. After escaping a second sandbank

late Saturday near Wismar, it was stranded once again yesterday.

"The prognosis as a whole doesn't look good," marine scientist Burkard Baschek told reporters yesterday after conducting an assessment at the scene.

Scientists say the whale's breathing frequency has reduced and that it is no longer exhibiting reactions to nearby vessels.

For the moment no further rescue actions are planned but the government of the German state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania says neither are there plans to

ethanise the whale.

Experts still held out some hope that the animal may free itself again after gathering enough strength.

However, Baschek warned that its health had "considerably deteriorated" and that the risk of it becoming stranded yet again was high.

Experts had hoped the whale would return to its natural habitat in the Atlantic through the North Sea.

Humpbacks are rarely seen in the Baltic and the experts said it may have been following a shoal of fish or been distracted by the noise of a submarine. – AFP

# Sailboats carrying aid reach Cuba after going missing

Laurent Thomet

THOMET – Two sailboats carrying humanitarian aid to crisis-hit Cuba reached Havana on Saturday after disappearing during a longer-than-expected journey from Mexico that triggered a search-and-rescue operation.

The crew of nine – who included US, French and German citizens and a four-year-old boy – appeared in good health and spirits, smiling and giving thumbs-up as they moored in the capital under clear skies.

The vessels delivered the final shipments of Our America Convoy, an international humanitarian effort that has brought aid to support Cuba as a US oil blockade deepens the island's energy and economic crisis.

"We are very sorry to make people worried about us. We were never in any real danger," Adnaan Stumo, a 33-year-old American and coordinator of the sailing convoy, told reporters.

"It was not a very difficult journey. It's just a circuitous journey," Stumo said. The boy, he said, "is a strong, young sailor."

"We're so happy to bring a crew from so many different countries that are demonstrating solidarity and support for the Cuban people in

the face of this criminal blockade," Stumo said.

The ships were greeted by scores of Cubans, including government officials, chanting "long live the revolution!" and "down with imperialism!"

"They scared us a little because we kept wondering, 'when will they get here?'" Gerardo Hernández, a former Cuban spy who served time in US prison, told the crowd.

## 'Not worried at all'

The Friend Ship and Tiger Moth, which set sail from southeast Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula on March 20, had been expected to arrive in Cuba on Tuesday or Wednesday.

But the Mexican Navy announced a search-and-rescue mission on Thursday after losing communication with them, raising concerns about their fate.

After a tense wait, organisers of the convoy reported early Saturday that the Mexican Navy had finally located the boats and that the crews were safe.

The Navy said one of its aircraft had spotted the sailboats 80 nautical miles northwest of Havana. It then deployed a ship to support them.



This photo shows one of the two sailboats (left) carrying humanitarian aid that had previously gone missing arriving at the port of Havana on Saturday. The two sailboats reached Havana on Saturday after a long journey from Mexico during which they went missing and triggered a search-and-rescue mission. – AFP

Stumo said the crews agreed to take a longer route north after facing strong winds from the east.

Contact was lost with the Mexican Navy because the boat's small satellite link "was on the fritz [not working properly]". They reestablished contact with the Mexican Navy plane.

"We were not worried at all," Stumo said, noting that arriving on

schedule is never a sure thing on sailboats. "We are very thankful that the Mexican Navy came out and looked for us last night."

The sailboats was carrying medicine, food, hygiene products and other supplies.

## 'Cuba is next'

The first shipments from the convoy arrived by plane from

Europe and the United States earlier this month.

A fishing boat that was converted into an aid vessel, which had also left Mexico last week, arrived in Cuba on Tuesday. It had been escorted by a Mexican Navy ship part of the way.

In total, the convoy brought more than 50 tonnes of medical supplies, food, water and solar panels to Cuba, with hospitals among the recipients.

Cuban exiles in Miami and other critics have slammed the convoy as benefiting the Cuban government more than ordinary people.

US President Donald Trump imposed a de facto oil blockade on Cuba in January after US forces seized Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro, whose government had been Cuba's principal source of fuel.

Trump has also threatened tariffs on countries that ship oil to Cuba, whose aging electricity system has been hit by regular blackouts, including two nationwide outages last week.

He renewed his threats on Havana on Friday, even as the US-Israeli war against Iran entered its second month, saying "Cuba is next." – AFP

## Russian tanker nears Cuba, defying US oil blockade

HAVANA – A Russian oil tanker subject to US sanctions is scheduled to arrive in Cuba today, challenging a de facto American fuel blockade of the energy-starved island, shipping data shows.

The Anatoly Kolodkin, which is carrying 730,000 barrels of crude, was north of Haiti on Sunday as it headed towards the port of Matanzas in western Cuba, according to maritime analytics firm Kpler.

Cuba lost its main regional ally and oil supplier in January when US forces captured Venezuela's

socialist leader Nicolás Maduro.

US President Donald Trump subsequently threatened to impose tariffs on any country sending oil to Cuba and has mused about "taking" the communist-ruled island.

The Cuban government says it has not received any oil since January, deepening an energy crisis in the country of 9.6 million people.

President Miguel Díaz-Canel imposed emergency measures to conserve fuel, including strict rationing of gasoline.

Fuel prices have soared, public

transport has dwindled and some airlines have suspended flights to Cuba.

The country has suffered seven nationwide blackouts since 2024, including two this month.

The Anatoly Kolodkin, which is under US sanctions, was loaded with oil in the Russian port of Primorsk on March 8.

It was escorted by a Russian navy ship across the English Channel, but the two vessels split when the tanker entered the Atlantic, according to the British Royal Navy. – AFP

## Brazil's presidential hopeful Flávio Bolsonaro praises 2nd Trump term



Brazilian senator Flávio Bolsonaro speaks during the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Grapevine, Texas, on Saturday. – AFP

GRAPEVINE, Texas – Flávio Bolsonaro, son of former Brazilian president Jair, on Saturday praised US President Donald Trump's second term, promising an improved version of his father's presidency if elected in October.

"Trump 2.0 is being much better than Trump 1.0, right? Well, Bolsonaro 2.0 will also be much better," the 44-year-old senator said during a speech at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) gathering in Texas.

"I'm going to win because it's the will of my people. But for that will to be preserved, we need free and fair elections."

The controversial far-right leader's son also repeated the accusation that the administration of former US president Joe Biden interfered to help leftist President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva rise to power in the 2022 election cycle.

Brazil's Supreme Court sentenced Bolsonaro to 27 years in prison last year after he was found guilty of having led a scheme to prevent Lula from taking office and to retain power.

Bolsonaro has maintained his innocence, declaring he was a victim of political persecution.

The younger Bolsonaro is expected to be the main rival of Lula, 80, who is seeking a fourth term in office.

He has described himself as more moderate than his firebrand father but also is a hardliner on security.

With seven months remaining until the vote, the two frontrunners are running neck and neck in the polls.

Bolsonaro called for the world to "monitor our people's freedom of expression" and to "apply diplomatic pressure so that our institutions function properly." – AFP

## US court overturns US\$16.1 billion judgment against Argentina over oil firm seizure

BUENOS AIRES – A US appeals court on Friday overturned a US\$16.1 billion judgment against Argentina for nationalising the oil company YPF in 2012.

The ruling was a big victory for President Javier Milei as he tries to boost Argentina's troubled economy.

"We won the YPF trial," Milei wrote in capital letters on the social media platform X, calling the 2-1 ruling by the 2nd US Circuit Court of Appeals in New York the "best possible outcome."

The court struck down a 2023 ruling from Judge Loretta Preska of the US District Court for the Southern District of New York that ordered Argentina to pay US\$16.1 billion to minority shareholder companies she said were harmed by the nationalization of YPF.

The appeals court said on Friday that breach of contract claims made by these companies

were not recognizable under Argentine law.

The case was heard in the United States rather than Argentina mainly because YPF is listed on the New York Stock Exchange.

Jurisdiction was consistently an issue, as Argentina argued the case should be argued back home but in the end the US courts kept it in New York.

In the expropriation, the Argentine state took over 51 percent of YPF, which at the time was partially controlled by the Spanish energy giant Repsol.

Two years later Repsol was awarded US\$5 billion in damages but smaller shareholders like Petersen Energía Inversora and Eton Park Capital Management, which together controlled a 25.4 percent stake, got nothing and sued in 2015.

They argued that the government had not made a tender offer, as mandated by Argentine law, to these two companies, which

were YPF's second- and third-largest investors.

Argentina has argued that having to pay the settlement – US\$18 billion including interest, it says – would cause severe harm to the finances of a country with persistent debt and inflation problems.

It said the settlement would have amounted to a large chunk of its foreign currency reserves.

YPF is an emblematic Argentine company founded in the early 20th century as a state-owned entity but it was privatised in 1993 and eventually came under the control of Repsol.

Then-president Cristina Kirchner re-nationalised YPF in 2012, arguing that it did not produce enough oil and gas to satisfy Argentine demand.

If the US\$16.1 billion judgment had been upheld, much of the money would have gone to Britain-based Burford Capital, a company that provides financing for other firms' lawsuits. – AFP



Portugal's midfielder Bruno Fernandes and Mexico's forward Julian Quinones (on the ground) fight for the ball during a friendly match between Mexico and Portugal at the Banorte (formerly known as Azteca) Stadium in Mexico City on Saturday. The game ended 1-1. — AFP

## US thrashed 5-2 by Belgium in reality check for World Cup hosts

### Football

Andrew Marszal

ATLANTA – The United States were routed 5-2 by Belgium on Saturday in a humbling defeat for Mauricio Pochettino's team as they prepare to co-host this summer's World Cup.

The thrashing comes as a wakeup call just 75 days before the tournament for the Americans, who after a good run of recent results were found severely lacking once again when facing top European opposition.

"I see this as a good check reality for us, because now is the moment to feel this type of situation, to improve," said Pochettino.

"We need to improve, of course," he said.

The US took an early lead against the world's ninth-ranked team, with Weston McKennie slotting in to the delight of a packed 67,000 Atlanta crowd.

But the Americans, knowing that their chances of making a deep run in the World Cup will likely depend on beating elite European opposition, saw any hopes of a statement victory dashed.

Having conceded, the Belgians swiftly came to life, with a deluge of goals from Zeno Debast, Amadou Onana, and Charles De Ketelaere, and a brace from substitute Dodi Lukebakio.

Patrick Agyemang grabbed a late consolation for the US, who play Portugal in another high-profile friendly tomorrow before Pochettino announces his final squad in May.

Christian Pulisic, the AC Milan forward who has become a poster boy for Team USA, told AFP that the team needs "to take this on the chin."

"It was a tough loss. It's a very good team, but in a lot of ways, there's things that we can do better," he said.

"I have to improve. The team has to improve."

### Red Devils

Long seen as minnows at the international level of football, the US hired former Tottenham and Paris Saint Germain coach Pochettino to oversee an increasingly star-studded roster including Pulisic and Juventus midfielder McKennie.

The US will play all of its games at the World Cup on home soil, further raising expectations.

But fans shelling out to support the home team will expect to see far more than they witnessed on Saturday.

In a fairly even opening half hour, Belgium winger Jeremy Doku threatened down the left flank, but the US enjoyed the better of the chances.

After seeing one effort from a corner saved by Senne Lammens – who is aiming to supplant the injured Thibaut Courtois in Belgium's goal – McKennie made no mistake from another corner.

Delivered by Antonee Robinson, it found him near the back post, where he tucked the ball into the net.

The goal seemed to spark Belgium into life. A wonderful strike from outside the box by Debast just before half-time gave the defender his first international goal.

### 'Pain is good'

After halftime, the floodgates opened. Dangerous Doku ran down the wing and passed into the box, with the ball scrambled to Onana, who side-footed it home.

Six minutes later, US keeper Matt Turner – hoping to win his place back from Matt Freese – thought he had made a tremendous double save, but the referee spotted the ball had brushed captain Tim Ream's arm. De Ketelaere slotted in the penalty.

"For me, it wasn't a penalty," said Pochettino, who queried why a VAR check failed to convince the official to overturn his on-field decision.

The afternoon went from bad to worse, as Belgium made a raft of substitutes on the hour mark, and one of those – Lukebakio – curled in a sumptuous shot under little pressure.

Lukebakio added Belgium's fifth before Ricardo Pepi took advantage of some sloppy late defending to set up Agyemang.

By that time thousands of US fans had left the domed arena, and full time was greeted with a smattering of subdued boos and whistles.

Having won his previous three games, including impressive defeats of Paraguay and Uruguay, Pochettino said the setback could help shape "the approach and the way that we are going to arrive to the World Cup."

"We were so happy against Uruguay, or against Paraguay," he said. "But to feel sometimes the pain is good."

The US Portugal game will be played at 7 a.m. Wednesday morning Macau time.

— AFP/MPD

## Japan strike late to win Scotland friendly

### Football

GLASGOW – Scotland's first outing since ending a 28-year wait to qualify for the World Cup ended in defeat as Junya Ito's late strike earned Japan a 1-0 win at Hampden Park.

In a stark contrast to the jubilant scenes that accompanied a thrilling 4-2 victory over Denmark in November to secure the Tartan Army's trip to North America, a subdued atmosphere contributed to a tame encounter.

Japan had left a number of their key men, including Ito, on the bench in preparation for tomorrow's clash against England at Wembley.

But they continued their impressive form in friendlies since securing qualification a year ago, which includes a first ever win over Brazil in October, as Ito scored the only goal six minutes from time.

Scott McTominay had Scotland's best chance of the match inside the opening 10 minutes, but the Napoli midfielder's effort was brilliantly saved by Zion Suzuki.

Japan then slowly began to take control to extend Scotland's miserable record of not having won a home friendly for the past 10 years.

"To lose it on the goal that we lost is

disappointing. The game at that stage looked like it was going to peter out to a 0-0 draw," said Scotland boss Steve Clarke.

"We played a lot of good stuff and I think we can be a bit more progressive to get to the top end of the pitch, but against top opposition sometimes that's difficult."

Angus Gunn made a fine save from Ito when the Genk forward ran clear on goal just after the hour mark.

Gunn faces a battle with 43-year-old Craig Gordon to be Clarke's number one for Scotland's opening game of the World Cup against Haiti on June 14.

The Nottingham Forest 'keeper did himself few favours in that debate for the winning goal, though, as he went to ground too early and allowed Ito's tame effort to trickle into the net.

Scotland are back in action tomorrow when they face the Ivory Coast at Everton's Hill Dickinson Stadium and have one more outing at Hampden against Curacao in June before travelling across the Atlantic for the World Cup.

The Scotland vs Ivory Coast game will be played at 2:30 a.m. Wednesday morning Macau time and the England vs Japan game will be played at 2:45 a.m. — AFP/MPD

## Tudor leaves after just 7 games as Spurs battle for survival



LONDON – Tottenham parted company with coach Igor Tudor by mutual consent yesterday after just seven games in charge as they battle to stay in the Premier League.

Tudor lost five of those matches in a 44-day reign to leave Spurs out of the Champions League and hovering just one point above the relegation zone in the Premier League.

The 47-year-old did not appear in front of the media after last weekend's damaging 3-0 defeat to fellow strugglers Nottingham Forest after learning of his father's death just after the game ended.

"We can confirm that it has been mutually agreed for head coach Igor Tudor to leave the club with immediate effect," Tottenham said in a statement.

"We also acknowledge the bereavement that Igor has recently suffered and send our support to him and his family at this difficult time.

"An update on a new head coach will be provided in due course."

Tottenham are not in action again for another two weeks when they travel to Sunderland.

Former Brighton and Marseille coach Roberto de Zerbi has been linked with the job, while reports have suggested the club could turn to Sean Dyche's Premier League experience to dig them out of trouble for the final seven games of the season.

Tudor was appointed in February following the dismissal of Thomas Frank.

Hired with a reputation of making an immediate impact during a nomadic coaching career, the Croatian was powerless to stop Tottenham's slide towards the relegation trapdoor for the first time since 1977.

The London club, ravaged by injuries this season, have not won a league match since late December and are out of every cup competition.

Even Tudor's sole victory was fruitless as a 3-2 win over Atletico Madrid failed

to overturn a 5-2 first leg deficit in the Champions League last 16.

His decision to start and then substitute back-up goalkeeper Antonin Kinsky after just 17 minutes of the first leg in Madrid summed up a chaotic short-lived reign.

### Premier League slide

In the Premier League, he managed just one point from five games, which came against the odds in a 1-1 draw at Liverpool.

A 4-1 home defeat against north London rivals Arsenal got the former Juventus boss off to a bad start and worse was to come in further losses to Fulham, Crystal Palace and Forest.

Spurs won the Europa League last year under Ange Postecoglou to end a 17-year trophy drought but the Australian was sacked following a 17th-place finish in the Premier League.

Frank arrived at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium with an impressive track record at Brentford and the club started the season with just one defeat in their first seven league games.

But they lost their way and club bosses axed the Dane under fan pressure following a run of just two wins in 17 league games.

With the fates of Burnley and Wolves almost certainly sealed, Spurs are battling for survival along with West Ham, currently in the relegation zone, Forest and Leeds.

Relegation to the second-tier Championship would be a seismic event in English football.

Spurs, who play in a gleaming new stadium that holds more than 60,000 fans, are one of the so-called "Big Six" in the Premier League and were ninth in Deloitte's latest Money League study for the richest clubs in world football.

Just a few years ago they were Champions League regulars under former manager Mauricio Pochettino, reaching the final in 2019, but their decline has been precipitous.

— AFP

## IOC reinstating gender tests 'a disrespect for women' - Semenya



South African Olympic champion Caster Semenya (left) competes during the Cape Town SPAR Women's 10km Challenge in Cape Town, South Africa yesterday – AFP

### Athletics

CAPE TOWN – South African Caster Semenya, a two-time Olympic 800 metres champion, said yesterday that the IOC's reinstatement of gender verification tests for the 2028 Los Angeles Games was "a disrespect for women".

The former hyperandrogenic athlete also expressed her disappointment that the measure was taken under the leadership of the new IOC president, Kirsty Coventry of Zimbabwe.

"For me, personally, for her being a woman coming from Africa, knowing how African women or women in the Global South are affected by that, of course, it causes harm," Semenya said during a press conference in Cape Town on the sidelines of a sporting competition.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) reinstated genetic testing to determine female sex on Thursday, starting with the 2028 Olympics, effectively banning transgender athletes and a large number of intersex athletes from women's sports.

The IOC had previously used chromosomal sex testing between 1968 and the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, before abandoning it in 1999 under pressure from the scientific community, which questioned its effectiveness, and from its own athletes' commission.

"It came as a failure. And that's why it was dropped," Semenya said in Cape Town.

"For you as a woman, why will you be tested to prove that you fit? You know, it's like now we need to prove that we are worthy as women to take part in sports. That's a disrespect for women."

Semenya has become the symbol of the struggle of hyperandrogenic athletes, a battle to assert her rights that she has waged since her first world title in the 800m in 2009, on the athletics tracks and then in the courtrooms.

### Trump order

Announcing the new policy on Thursday, an IOC statement said: "Eligibility for any female category event at the Olympic Games or any other IOC event, including individual and team sports, is now limited to biological females, determined on the basis of a one-time SRY gene screening."

They will be carried out through a saliva sample, cheek swab or blood sample.

The new policy removes a potential source of conflict between the IOC and US President Donald Trump at the Los Angeles Olympics.

Trump issued an executive order banning transgender athletes from women's sport soon after he came to office.

While sports such as swimming, athletics, cycling and rowing have brought in bans, many others have permitted transgender women to compete in the female category if they lowered their testosterone levels, normally through taking a course of drugs.

The new ban will also cover athletes with DSD, the rare condition in which a person's hormones, genes and reproductive organs may have a combination of male and female characteristics.

The best-known DSD athlete of recent years is Semenya, the two-time Olympic women's 800m champion who has male XY chromosomes.

The IOC is bringing in the new policy after the women's boxing competition at the 2024 Paris Olympics was rocked by a gender row involving Algerian fighter Imane Khelif and Lin Yu-ting of Chinese Taipei.

Khelif and Lin were excluded from the International Boxing Association's 2023 world championships after the IBA said they had failed eligibility tests.

However, the IOC allowed them both to compete at the Paris Games, saying they had been victims of "a sudden and arbitrary decision by the IBA".

Both boxers went on to win gold medals. – AFP

## Britain's Kerr to target El Guerrouj's mile world record

### Athletics

LONDON – British athlete Josh Kerr will attempt to break Hicham El Guerrouj's 27-year-old world record for the mile (1.6km) at the London Diamond League meeting on July 18.

The 28-year-old has a personal best of 3 mins 45.34 secs over the mile distance – good enough for a British record and sixth on the all-time list.

Moroccan great El Guerrouj's

current mark of 3:43.13 has stood since 1999.

A two-time Olympic medallist in the 1,500 metres, Kerr won his third world title by storming to indoor 3,000m gold in Poland last week.

"It's been a huge goal of my career. It's one of the oldest world records on the track and I think it's one of the most important ones," Kerr told the BBC.

"It's something that I feel confident to talk about going after. It's a really exciting time."

Kerr will take on the challenge shortly before going for gold on home soil at the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow.

"This sport needs moments. I think that setting my goals and being very clear on that is a huge part of giving this record the respect that it deserves," he added.

"To do it in front of a British crowd would just make it extremely special. It's going to be a tough one but I truly think that I'm capable of going after these times." – AFP

## Vingegaard clinches Tour of Catalonia victory

### Cycling

BARCELONA – Jonas Vingegaard triumphed at the Tour of Catalonia yesterday as he continued his strong start to the season, while Brady Gilmore sprinted to a surprise stage seven victory.

Vingegaard topped the general classification one minute 22 secs ahead of France's Lenny Martinez and a further eight seconds before German Florian Lipowitz.

Australian cyclist Gilmore, racing with former Barcelona football great Andres Iniesta's NSN team, edged out Dorian Godon and Remco Evenepoel over the line in a thrilling bunch sprint finale.

Yesterday's 95 kilometre final stage took in seven circuits of Montjuic in Barcelona, where the Tour de France will start in July.

Vingegaard, who was the race favourite in his first participation, took control in the Pyrenees with stage five and six solo victories.

The Dane, who also won two stages and the overall title at Paris-Nice earlier this month, is planning a Giro d'Italia and Tour de France double assault later in the year.

"We won two stages and now the GC, it's been a really good week and we're super happy with it, I'm super happy with it," said Vingegaard.

"It's been an amazing start to the year for me and I hope I can keep it going."

Vingegaard has six victories from just two weeks of racing this season.

"I feel very good at the moment, my shape is very good, (but) not the very best yet – we made a plan this year to progressively get better over the year. I'm pretty sure I still have more in me."

Godon, who won two sprint stages in the race, seemed set to grab a third but Gilmore edged him over the line.

"In the end maybe I was just too confident, there was another rider who came from behind and nabbed it," said Frenchman Godon, who won the points jersey. "Still a good week but disappointing today."

Double gold Olympic champion Evenepoel, who crashed earlier in the week and then cracked on the first uphill finish to scupper his chances of overall victory, frequently tried to attack but the Belgian Red Bull rider had to settle for third on the day's podium.

Some expected Vingegaard to try and seal his triumph with a third consecutive stage win but the two-time Tour de France champion said he had been focussed on defending his lead.

"My main focus today was the GC, and especially the Red Bull guys. They did a very good job today, they made me be there alone and tried to attack me on shift," continued Vingegaard.

"Luckily I was able to defend myself and my GC. From there it was more thinking about the GC rather than trying to win a stage."

– AFP

## F1 drivers call for safety changes after Bearman smash

### F1

SUZUKA – Formula One drivers called for changes to protect their safety after Haas's Ollie Bearman slammed into a barrier at high speed at yesterday's Japanese Grand Prix.

The 20-year-old avoided serious injury after spinning off the track midway through the race, although he was limping heavily as he was helped off the course by stewards.

Sweeping new energy-saving regulations in Formula One this year mean cars can be travelling at drastically different speeds on the track at the same time.

Bearman was moving at high speed as he approached the slower Franco Colapinto and had to take evasive action to avoid hitting him.

Williams driver Carlos Sainz called on racing authorities to make sure there was no repeat of the incident.

"As drivers, we have been extremely vocal that the problem is not only qualifying, it's also racing, and we were warning this type of accident was always going to happen," said the Spaniard.

"Here we were lucky there was an escape road – now imagine

going to Baku, Singapore, Las Vegas and having this type of closing speeds, crashes next to the walls."

Motorsport governing body the FIA said after the race that "a structured review would take place after the opening phase of the season".

"Any potential adjustments, particularly those related to energy management, require careful simulation and detailed analysis," the FIA said in a statement.

An X-ray revealed that Bearman had not suffered any fracture in the crash and he was cleared at the Suzuka track's medical centre.

He said he was "absolutely fine".

"It's a part of these new regulations that I guess we have to get used to, but also I felt like I wasn't really given much space given the huge excess speed that I was carrying," said the British driver.

"I think we've as a group warned the FIA what can happen, and this has been a really unfortunate result of a massive delta speed that we've never seen before in F1 until these new regulations." – AFP

# Five Apple anecdotes as iPhone maker marks 50 years

PARIS – iPhone maker Apple celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary on April 1 having marked pop culture and the tech industry like few other firms since its beginnings in 1976.

Here are five things you may not know about the history of the California giant.

## Apple logo

Designer Rob Janoff said that Apple cofounder Steve Jobs gave him one terse instruction when he commissioned a new logo in January 1977: “don’t make it cute”.

“I just wanted to make the computer easy and fun to be around,” Janoff told Forbes in 2018.

He included the bite mark for scale to set the apple apart from similar round fruit like cherries – learning only later it was a homonym for the computer term “byte”.

And belying urban legends, there was no link to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve or the death of computing pioneer Alan Turing.

Janoff added that the Apple job was “the only time in my entire career where I presented only one solution” to a client.

“But it was just so right”.

## ‘1984’ ad

In a totalitarian sci-fi world, a

hammer thrown by a young athlete smashes a “Big Brother” figure declaiming to brainwashed citizens from a vast screen.

Tens of millions of Americans saw director Ridley Scott’s one-minute Apple advert during the Super Bowl on January 22, 1984.

Broadcast with an announcement of the release of the Apple computer, it was more than a little inspired by George Orwell’s dystopian novel named for the year.

The ad’s originality lay in the fact it did not directly show off the product, but instead promised a new world of emancipation for consumers thanks to home computers.

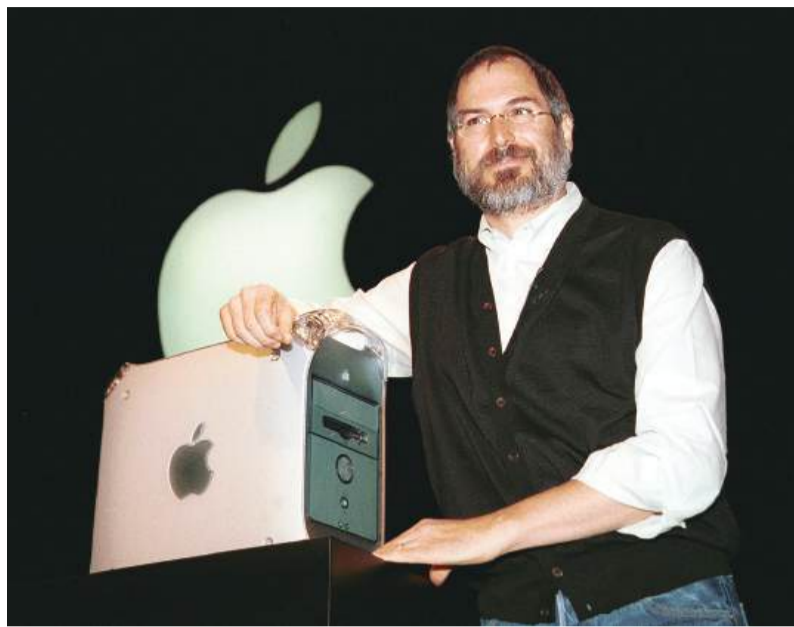
## Bold colours

Apple’s devices have over the years played with colour to set themselves apart from more staid competitors.

Its first-generation iMacs, released in 1998, offered transparent shells in candy-like blue, green and more – combining a pop of visual interest with a glimpse at the high tech workings within.

The iPod music player, at first available in metallic grey, quickly diversified into a whole spectrum of bright colours.

Later, the “rose gold” variant



Apple Computer interim CEO and co-founder Steve Jobs introduces the new Power Mac G4 computer during his keynote address at Seybold in San Francisco, on August 31, 1999. Apple, founded on April 1, 1976 by Steve Jobs, Steve Wozniak and Ronald Wayne, will celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary on April 1.

of the iPhone 6S in 2015, spawned many copycats, surfing a years-long trend dubbed “millennial pink”.

## 09:41 photos

Anyone who has watched more than one Apple product announcement or browsed its website will see a remarkable coincidence: almost every screen appears to show the time as 9:41 am.

Australian game developer Jon Manning said he asked Scott Forstall, then-head of Apple’s mobile operating system iOS, about the phenomenon when he bumped into him in California in 2010.

Forstall explained that the timing was down to Steve Jobs’ preferred structure for announcements.

“We design the keynotes so that the big reveal of the product

happens around 40 minutes into the presentation,” Forstall said.

“When the big image of the product appears on screen, we want the time shown to be close to the actual time on the audience’s watches. But we know we won’t hit 40 minutes exactly”.

## Apple’s third man

Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak have gone down in history as the Apple co-founders.

In fact, a third man also signed the three-page contract that launched the company on April 1, 1976: Ronald Wayne.

According to Walter Isaacson’s biography of Jobs, Wayne, an engineer at the Atari video game company, was in charge of hardware engineering and documentation in the fledgling business.

But while his two co-founders were throwing themselves into the business, Wayne feared losing what little savings he had if Apple failed.

Just 11 days later, he gave up his co-founder status, selling his 10 percent stake for two instalments of US\$800 and US\$1,500.

That 10-percent share of Apple would have been worth around US\$370 billion by 2026. – AFP

# Oscars to leave Hollywood in 2029: Academy

LOS ANGELES – The Oscars will leave Hollywood after celebrating their centenary, organisers said last week, as they announced a long-term deal to hold the gala in central Los Angeles.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences said on Thursday that the ceremony, the most important night of the year for the global film industry, would leave the Dolby Theatre on the Hollywood Walk of Fame after 2028.

The 2029 edition will instead be held at The Peacock Theatre, part of the vast LA LIVE complex, next to the Crypto.com Arena, home to the Los Angeles Lakers.

“For the 101<sup>st</sup> Oscars and beyond, the Academy looks forward to closely collaborating with [owners] AEG to make LA LIVE the perfect backdrop for our global celebration of cinema, both for our live in-theatre audience and for film fans around the world,” Academy

CEO Bill Kramer and President Lynette Howell Taylor said.

The 10-year deal with AEG comes as the ceremony leaves network television in the United States, to be broadcast instead worldwide by YouTube.

It also marks an end to a decades-long run for the ceremony at the Dolby, which is just a stone’s throw from the Roosevelt Hotel, where the very first Oscars were handed out in 1929.

While Hollywood is synonymous with the Oscars, the ceremony has not always been held there.

Stars have previously descended on a number of venues in the Downtown area, and for much of the 1960s, the ceremony was hosted in the beachside city of Santa Monica.

At this year’s awards, held on March 15, Paul Thomas Anderson’s “One Battle After Another” – a wild tale of leftist revolutionaries, white supremacists and immigrant detention centres – was crowned as best picture. – AFP

# World’s ‘ugliest’ city finds allure in decay

Matthieu Demeestere

CHARLEROI, Belgium – Belgian artist Nicolas Buissart started doubling as a tour guide as a joke after a newspaper in the neighbouring Netherlands named his city the ugliest in the world.

Some 15 years later, he is still arranging tours of Charleroi for visitors seeking beauty in dilapidated factories and rundown warehouses – the remnants of the city’s industrial past.

“Wallonia used to be prosperous; it’s a cradle of capitalism of sorts,” he says of the surrounding French-speaking region.

“The problem with capitalism is that it leaves a lot of waste behind”. Yet that’s exactly what the dozen pensioners from the northern French city of Lille he’s driving around Charleroi have come to see on a dreary March day.

Urban exploration, or “urbex” for short – the underground pastime of exploring abandoned places, at times skirting the law in the process – has grown into a global movement over the past two decades.

Haunting complexes with shattered windows and moulded ceilings draw amateur photographers, selfie takers and thrill seekers from as far away as Berlin or Detroit.

Buissart’s “city safari” takes visitors up close to the slag heaps and giant ruins of steel and concrete that shape Charleroi’s landscape.

“There’s an aesthetic here that I really like,” Véronique Moussu, a member of the Lille expedition, tells AFP.

“These spaces are enhanced by the play of light, shadows and street

art,” adds the retiree, who is on her second visit to Charleroi in four years.

The southern city was once a coal-mining hub.

More than 40 years after the last pit shut down, it is now mainly known for its airport – a major European hub for low-cost airline Ryanair.

## ‘Dead’ but attractive

For the first stop of his tour, Buissart takes the group of urbexers to an abandoned 1930s swimming and leisure complex that has become a playground for graffiti artists.

Built by a Belgian industrialist, the “Solvay Pool” aimed to provide workers with relaxation and entertainment a stone’s throw from a 19th-century manufacturing site for soda ash that is no more.

The pool’s old roof no longer holds water; rain and wind rush into the building, and the tiled floor is now an ankle-spraining, cracked mess.

Buissart, 46, a former design

student, issues safety instructions as he guides visitors inside, giving them half an hour to explore and snap photos.

The same happens at the second stop on the route, a massive warehouse that was used for treating stainless steel sheets but is now also falling into ruin.

Once owned by steel giant ArcelorMittal, the site has been closed for about 15 years.

“You can imagine all the workers who toiled here and brought these places to life; now it’s dead, it’s destroyed,” says Pascale Dufour-Floor, who lives on the French-Belgian border and joined the Lille group on the tour.

Tourism promoters are hoping to turn these vestiges of a bygone era into an asset.

“This heritage is what sets us apart and attracts tourists,” said Valérie Demanet, director of the Charleroi Tourist Office. – AFP



An urban explorer (urbexer) scouts an abandoned public swimming pool in Charleroi, southern Belgium, on March 11. Once a major industrial city of the coal industry, Charleroi still bears the marks of a working-class past now lying fallow. As they venture through its abandoned factories, urbexers end up telling the story of a system as much as of a pastime: that of a capitalism which pours investment into a place, exploits it, then withdraws, leaving behind nothing but ruins to explore. – AFP

World Weather			
CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing 7°C~18°C	Manila 22°C~34°C	New York 14°C~19°C	Lisbon 12°C~21°C
Shanghai 12°C~19°C	Bangkok 25°C~35°C	London 6°C~12°C	Rio de Janeiro 21°C~28°C
Hong Kong 21°C~27°C	Tokyo 14°C~20°C	Frankfurt 2°C~11°C	Luanda 25°C~30°C
Taipei 21°C~29°C	Singapore 24°C~33°C	Vancouver 3°C~9°C	Maputo 23°C~31°C
Guangzhou 21°C~31°C	Kuala Lumpur 24°C~34°C	Paris 5°C~13°C	Dili 22°C~31°C
Nanjing 8°C~16°C	Jakarta 23°C~31°C	Moscow 4°C~16°C	São Tomé 26°C~31°C
Guilin 15°C~26°C	Seoul 12°C~20°C	Las Vegas 19°C~31°C	Praia 18°C~28°C
Xi’an 9°C~17°C	Sydney 16°C~24°C	Monte Carlo 10°C~17°C	Bissau 19°C~34°C



**1. Totally innocent**  
A Palestinian volunteer cares for stray and injured cats at a temporary shelter they have established in Gaza City, on Friday. – Xinhua

**2. Green glowing hero**  
A cosplayer portraying Izuku Midoriya, also known by his hero name Deku, the main protagonist of the manga series My Hero Academia, at the DreamHack 2026 gaming convention at the NEC in Birmingham, central England on Friday. – AFP

**3. Purple haze**  
People stroll beneath illuminated cherry blossom trees during the Blossoms After Dark event in David Lam Park in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, on Friday. The two-night free outdoor event features illuminated cherry blossoms, performances, food vendors and interactive activities. – Xinhua



**4. Earth must be protected**  
An environmental activist with a face painting looks on during a procession ahead of Earth Hour in Banda Aceh on Saturday. – AFP

**5. Red stripe**  
This photograph taken on Saturday shows a field of tulips freshly opened at the Madrid botanical garden in Spain. – AFP

**6. Happy canvas**  
A woman views artwork on display at Artist Project 2026 in Toronto, Canada, on Thursday. Showing thousands of artworks and installations from over 250 independent artists, the 4-day event kicked off here on Thursday and ended yesterday. – Xinhua