

# MGTO launches Mak Mak licensing programme, applications open April 20

Rui Pastorin

Eligible companies and associations can apply to use local tourism mascot Mak Mak\* for products and experiences, either for commercial and non-commercial use, starting next Monday via MGTO's newly-launched licensing programme.

A launch ceremony for the programme, titled "IP Licensing Program for Macao Tourism Mascot 'Mak Mak'", was held yesterday within the 14<sup>th</sup> Macao International Travel (Industry) Expo, aka MITE, at The Venetian Macao's Cotai Expo.

The programme accepts applications for four categories, namely merchandise, food products, promotional materials and events. Those eligible to apply are natural person business owners with business commencement and registration in Macau, legal person business owners legally established in Macau, and associations legally established in Macau.

According to an infographic related to the programme, commercial use can be up to five years and may also be renewed, while non-commercial use can have a maximum of one year, with no renewal option. Profits from the use of Mak Mak or derivative and fusion works based on the tourism mascot belong to the licensed entities, as highlighted by an MGTO statement provided yesterday, noting that licensing fees will be waived.

During her speech at yesterday's launch,



Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO) Director Maria Helena de Senna Fernandes (centre) poses with other officiating guests and representatives during the launch of the "IP Licensing Program for Macao Tourism Mascot 'Mak Mak'" at The Venetian Macao's Cotai Expo. - Photo: Rui Pastorin

MGTO Director Maria Helena de Senna Fernandes said that through the programme, MGTO hopes it can showcase Mak Mak as an IP brand with diverse potential, helping more creative ideas take root and bear fruit, so that, together, they can turn Mak Mak into a representative tourism brand for Macau.

More details can be found on <https://ep.macaotourism.gov.mo/makmak-ip/?lang=zh-hant>

## 14<sup>th</sup> MITE concludes 3-day run

The 14<sup>th</sup> MITE concluded its three-day run yesterday, showcasing industry trends and resources in a packed programme.

Themed "Global Convergence, Future Horizons" and featuring a raft of highlights, the annual travel trade fair opened on Friday. The opening ceremony was officiated by Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai; Director of

the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Macao SAR, Zheng Xincong; Commissioner of the Office of the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China in the Macao SAR, Bian Lixin; Legislative Assembly President André Cheong Weng Chon; and Secretary for Economy and Finance Anton Tai Kin Ip, among others.

Continued on p. 7



Actors perform "The Magic Flute", an opera composed by Austrian musician Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, during the closing performance of the 41<sup>st</sup> Shanghai Spring International Music Festival in Shanghai yesterday. - Xinhua

## Portugal suspends new biometric system checks at airports amid long queues

LISBON – Portuguese authorities yesterday suspended biometric data collection at the airports of Lisbon, Porto, and Faro due to excessive passenger waiting times, a spokesperson for the Public Security Police (PSP) said.

The suspension, announced at around 11:45 a.m. (local time), concerns departures from Humberto Delgado Airport, Francisco Sá Carneiro Airport, and Gago Coutinho Airport.

"There is a large number of people leaving the Schengen Area through the airports of Lisbon, Porto, and Faro," said Sérgio Soares, noting that efforts were being made to keep waiting times manageable without compromising border security.

Soares said biometric data collection would resume once waiting times return to acceptable levels.

The system had already been

suspended on Saturday morning and was later reinstated in the afternoon after queues eased.

The disruption followed the full rollout on Friday of the European Entry/Exit System (EES), a new automated EU border control system that replaces passport stamps with digital biometric registration – including photographs and fingerprints – for non-EU citizens.

- Xinhua

## KMT chairwoman leaves mainland after 6-day visit

BEIJING – A delegation led by Cheng Li-wun, chairwoman of the Chinese Kuomintang (KMT), wrapped up its six-day visit to the Chinese mainland and departed Beijing for Taiwan yesterday afternoon. (More on pages 7 & 8) - Xinhua

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### Mainland unveils package of policies, measures to boost ties with Taiwan

The Chinese mainland yesterday rolled out a package of 10 policies and measures – spanning inter-party communication, infrastructure, travel, trade and culture – aimed at boosting exchanges and cooperation with Taiwan. - Story on p. 8

### Trump orders US naval blockade of Strait of Hormuz

President Donald Trump yesterday ordered a US naval blockade of the Strait of Hormuz in the wake of failed peace talks with Iran – a significant escalation that would test an already fragile ceasefire. - Story on p. 11

### Brazilian police dog sniffs out 48 tonnes of marijuana in record bust

Brazilian police last week seized a record 48 tonnes of marijuana in a slum in Rio de Janeiro, uncovered by chance by a sniffer dog during a regular operation against gangs. - Story on p. 12

# Sam, Portuguese parliament speaker vow to strengthen ties

Staff Reporter

Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai and the president of Portugal's Assembly of the Republic José Pedro Aguiar-Branco have vowed to strengthen relations between the two sides, according to a statement by the Macau Government Information Bureau (GCS).

Sam met at Government Headquarters with Aguiar-Branco on Friday afternoon to exchange views on deepening friendly cooperation between China and Portugal and continuously enhancing Macau's role as a bridge and link between China and Portuguese-speaking countries (PSC).

Aguiar-Branco visited Macau during an official visit to China last week, which ended in Hong Kong on Saturday.

The statement quoted Sam as saying that Aguiar-Branco's meetings with the chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, Zhao Leji, and Vice-President Han Zheng in Beijing earlier last week showed that the traditional friendship between the two countries and their mutually beneficial cooperation continue.

Sam also said that the inclusion of Macau in the visit's itinerary fully demonstrated the ongoing deepening of the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Portugal, as well as Portugal's profound friendship towards Macau.

According to the statement, Sam noted that he will lead a local government delegation to Portugal later this month, pointing out that the visit will include meetings with the highest number of Portuguese officials and the broadest scope to date, demonstrating the great importance the local government attaches to strengthening friendly relations



Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai (right) shakes hands with the president of Portugal's Assembly of the Republic (parliament), José Pedro Aguiar-Branco, at Government Headquarters in Nam Van on Friday. — Photo: GCS

with Portugal, and its determination to pragmatically expand areas of bilateral cooperation.

The Chief Executive emphasised that, under the leadership and support of the Central People's Government, the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR) has exercised governance in strict accordance with the national Constitution and the local Basic Law. He underlined that over the years, Macau's civil society has remained harmonious and stable, the economy has seen continuous growth, and the institutional advantages of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle have been fully demonstrated. He recalled that President Xi Jinping, during the ceremony celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Macau's return to the motherland, stressed that

principle represents a sound system that must be maintained in the long term, noting that the values embodied in the principle are shared by China and the rest of the world and deserve to be safeguarded together.

According to the statement, Sam thanked the Portuguese government for its long-standing trust and support for the "One Country, Two Systems" principle. At the same time, he highlighted that the MSAR government attaches great importance and commitment to preserving the cultural traditions of Portuguese residents in Macau, actively promoting the teaching and advancement of the Portuguese language to ensure the harmonious coexistence and mutual enrichment of the Chinese and Portuguese cultures in the region. He ensured that Macau will enhance its role as

a "precise interlocutor" between China and PSCs and make full use of the Forum for Economic and Trade Cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking Countries (Forum Macao) mechanism, with the aim of further improving Sino-Portuguese relations and achieving reciprocal benefits at a higher level.

In turn, Aguiar-Branco considered this visit to China significant, as it demonstrates the high importance the Portuguese Republic attaches to the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Portugal. The statement quoted him as saying that both countries hope to continue making joint contributions to promote friendly Sino-Portuguese cooperation, based on a solid foundation of mutual trust and support.

He added that the "One Country, Two Systems" principle has been successfully implemented in the MSAR, achieving remarkable results, and acknowledged Macau's efforts in safeguarding cultural diversity. He stressed that Portugal's position on the one-China policy is unequivocal in its foreign policy, and pledged continued support for Macau in enhancing its function as a bridge and link, contributing to the continuous deepening of cooperation between China, PSCs, and the Community of Portuguese Language Countries. He expressed his hope to further strengthen exchange and cooperation between China and Portugal through the Macau platform to face international uncertainties together. Furthermore, he welcomed the upcoming visit of the MSAR government delegation to Portugal as it will contribute to further raising the level of bilateral cooperation. ■

## Sam, Zhuhai CPC Secretary Chen vow to boost Hengqin development

Tony Wong

Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai has met with Communist Party of China (CPC) Zhuhai Municipal Committee Secretary Chen Yong at Government Headquarters in Macau where they exchanged views on further strengthening Macau-Zhuhai cooperation, with a stronger emphasis on continuously boosting the integrated development between Macau and Hengqin.

The Macau Government Information Bureau (GCS) announced the meeting, held on Thursday, in a statement late that night.

The 106-square-kilometre island of Hengqin in Zhuhai City is officially known as Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin, following its inauguration in September 2021. The adjacent island is three times the size of the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR).

During the meeting, the statement said, Sam expressed gratitude to the

CPC Zhuhai Municipal Committee and the Zhuhai Municipal People's Government for their long-standing full support for the development of the MSAR and the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin.

Sam noted that the nation's 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan, which was passed by the National People's Congress (NPC) in Beijing last month, outlines the country's important plans and deployments for Macau's better integration into the nation's overall 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.

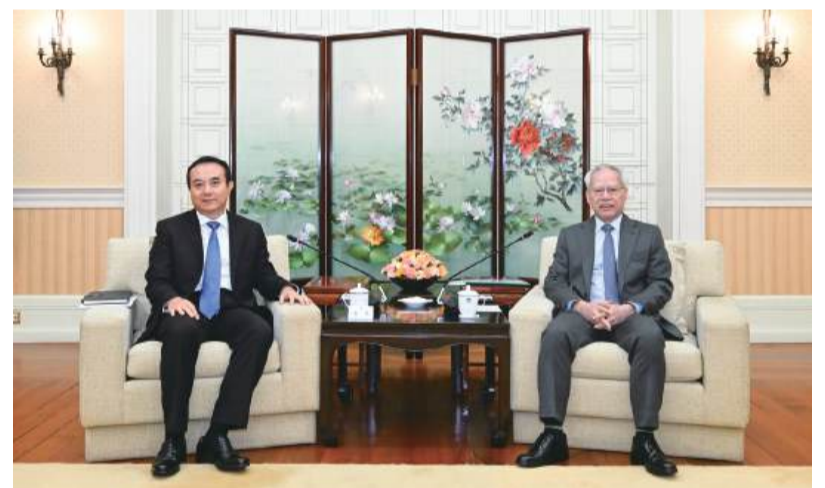
Sam noted that the nation's 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan also outlines the country's policy to deepen Macau-Hengqin integrated development.

According to the statement, Sam underlined that this year is a crucial year for the in-depth cooperation

zone's second-phase development. The MSAR government, Sam said, will fully put into practice the spirit of President Xi Jinping's various important speeches and instructions, align with the nation's 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan, and ensure the effective drawing-up and implementation of Macau's 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan. Sam said that advancing Hengqin's development with stronger integration with Macau will be an important component of Macau's 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan.

Moreover, the statement said, Sam also stressed his government's commitment to launching landmark projects with driving effects in Hengqin, including ensuring the development of its Macau-Hengqin International Education (University) Town project, which aims to expand the development space for Macau higher education institutions. Sam also said that his government will accelerate its study on the necessary alignment of rules that will fully enable Macau higher education institutions to operate in the future university town in Hengqin.

According to the statement, Sam said he expects Macau and Zhuhai to continue leveraging their geographical advantages of being located next to each other so as to promote more synergistic development, pledging that the MSAR government will firmly deepen pragmatic cooperation with Zhuhai across multiple areas, and work together with the adjacent city to advance Hengqin's development, thereby continuously raising



Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai (right) meets with Communist Party of China (CPC) Zhuhai Municipal Committee Secretary Chen Yong at Government Headquarters on Thursday. — Photo: GCS

bilateral cooperation to new heights and making greater contributions to the high-quality development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA).

According to the statement, Chen pledged during his meeting with Sam that Zhuhai will thoroughly put into practice the spirit of Xi's various important speeches and instructions concerning the development of Guangdong, Zhuhai and Hengqin, while fully supporting and serving the in-depth cooperation zone's second-phase development.

Chen underlined that Zhuhai will work with Macau to advance the alignment of rules and mechanisms and to promote market integration in the GBA. Chen also called for both sides to develop a joint initiative to attract investments based on a model of "Macau

channels + headquarters in Hengqin + manufacturing in Zhuhai".

The in-depth cooperation zone's governance consists of 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 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.

Chen is one of the five deputy directors of the zone's management committee.

Chen is also the secretary of the Hengqin Working Committee of the CPC Guangdong Provincial Committee. ■

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### Macau Weather

**CLOUDY APART FROM SUNNY INTERVALS.**

**ONE OR TWO SHOWERS. FORCE 3 TO 4 SOUTHERLY WINDS.**

**RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL RANGE BETWEEN 75% AND 95%.**



**25°C~28°C**

Source: SMG

# Sam to visit Portugal & Spain, WTO & EU headquarters

## Entourage includes 120 businesspeople

Interview by Gilberto Lopes\*

Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai previews his upcoming visit to Portugal and Spain and speaks about cooperation with Brazil and Mexico

Sam revealed, in an exclusive interview with the Portuguese-language TV and radio channels of TDM (“Canal Macau” and Rádio Macau”) earlier this month at Government Headquarters in Nam Van, that around 120 businesspeople and more than 20 companies from the Greater Bay Area (GBA) and elsewhere in the Chinese mainland will join his official visit to Portugal and Spain starting this Friday.

In the Portuguese-language interview, which was broadcast yesterday, Sam talked about cooperation with Portugal and Spain and admitted that one of his next visits could be to Brazil. He also pointed to Mexico as one of the countries Macau wants to focus on.

Sam also noted that, during his trip to Europe, he will also visit Geneva and Brussels, adding that no date has yet been scheduled for the next meeting of the Macau-Portugal Joint Commission.

Sam, who is slated to meet in Lisbon with the Minister of Justice [Rita Júdice] and President of the Supreme Court of Justice President [João Cura Mariano], told TDM that Macau intends to make progress in judicial cooperation with Portugal and reaffirmed his support for Macau’s Portuguese community.

### 39 cooperation deals to be signed in Portugal

Sam revealed in the interview that around 120 businesspeople and more than 20 companies from the Greater Bay Area and other areas in the Chinese mainland will take part in his visit to Portugal and Spain. Alongside political meetings, particular focus will be on economic and commercial issues, Sam said.

Therefore, a delegation of around 120 businesspeople from Macau and from the Chinese mainland will accompany Sam on what will be his first overseas visit since he took office on December 20, 2024.

“More than 39 cooperation deals will be signed with organisations or companies in Portugal, covering various areas such as trade and the economy, the China-Portugal platform, education, culture, tourism, training of qualified personnel, Big Health and cutting-edge technology”, Sam said.

In the interview, Sam previewed his trip to Portugal. “A photo exhibition on the principle of ‘One Country, Two Systems’ is intended to further the traditional friendship between China and Portugal. In this way, we will also invite a number of personalities who contributed to the successful return of Macau to the motherland [on December 20, 1999] to take part in this exhibition, as well as to show a video with interviews of some representatives



TDM Controller of Portuguese News & Programmes Division Gilberto Lopes (right) interviews Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai at Macau SAR Government Headquarters in Nam Van earlier this month. – Photo courtesy of public TV and radio broadcaster TDM

recalling historical moments and sharing their perspectives for the future”, he said.

### Hengqin & GBA company reps join visit

Sam also said that boosting economic and commercial cooperation was one of the aims of the visit. He outlined several aspects of the programme: “In addition to companies from Macau and Hengqin, more than 20 well-known companies from the Greater Bay Area and other [areas in the Chinese mainland] will take part. As this is the first time the government has organised a visit of this scale, I am confident we can better support and enhance Macau’s role as an ‘infallible link’ between China and Portuguese-speaking countries”, the chief executive added.

Sam also noted that he will meet senior representatives from Portugal’s executive, legislative and judicial branches to strengthen cooperation. His official agenda in Lisbon has not yet been disclosed, but TDM understands that meetings are planned with key figures of the Portuguese Republic, such as President António José Seguro, Prime Minister Luís Montenegro and the speaker of the Assembly of the Republic [parliament], José Pedro Aguiar-Branco.

### Sam expects progress in judicial cooperation

Judicial cooperation will be on the agenda for Sam’s visit to Lisbon. In the interview, the chief executive recalled the agreement signed in 2001, but underlined that he expects to secure further progress in relations between Macau and Lisbon in the field of judicial cooperation.

Sam also reaffirmed that he is keen to strengthen cooperation with Portugal. “We will discuss the continued strengthening of exchanges and bilateral cooperation in the judicial domain. In addition, we also expect to achieve greater progress in signing the judicial cooperation agreement”, he said.

Having served as president of Macau’s Court of Final Appeal (TUI) for more than two decades, Sam said that Macau’s recent

decision to recruit two Portuguese judges is a positive sign and recalled that “the courts of Macau have been operating well, with judicial independence widely recognised, and the contribution of Portuguese judges has been important”.

### Mexico to be future focus

After his top-level meetings in Portugal, Sam will visit neighbouring Spain with the aim of attracting companies and tourists to Macau, but Mexico also features in Sam Hou Fai’s outlook.

Relations with Spanish-speaking countries have become one of the strategic priorities for both the Central People’s Government and the local government, taking in account Macau’s economic diversification and integration into the Greater Bay Area.

It is in this context that Sam’s visit to Madrid fits in, scheduled for April 21 to 23. In the interview, Sam noted that “both Spain and Macau are well-known tourist destinations internationally, and both have a great deal of room for cooperation in the area of tourism”. He also announced that the local government will organise a major tourism promotion campaign in Madrid, with the goal of attracting Spanish and other international tourists to Macau.

### 10 cooperation deals to be inked in Madrid

Sam Hou Fai revealed that 10 cooperation deals with Spanish companies and organisations will be signed during his visit to Madrid.

Hengqin is also among the objectives for the future, he stressed.

“The MSAR Government will promote to the Spanish business sector the Economic and Trade Service Centre between China and Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking Countries, which was recently established in Hengqin. This is a significant measure by the MSAR in exploring the Spanish-speaking market, which could support companies from Spanish-speaking countries in establishing themselves in Macau and the Chinese mainland, and even assist companies from the Chinese mainland in expanding to Spanish-

speaking countries”, he said.

And Mexico is also in Macau’s sights. “The total population of all Spanish-speaking countries is approximately 600 million, which represents a market with great potential. Strengthening exchanges and cooperation with Spain is only the beginning; it will subsequently be extended to other Spanish-speaking countries, such as Mexico. We will also begin work in phases, and I am convinced that the expected results will be achieved”, Sam said.

### Sam flags Brazil as future destination

In the interview, Sam also said he expects to visit Brazil. Sam also announced his willingness to strengthen Macau’s relations with Brasília.

During the interview, Sam, the MSAR’s first chief executive fluent in Portuguese, also mentioned other priorities in Portuguese-speaking countries, with special emphasis on Brazil. “For Macau to continue to play its part well as a platform for cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries, I also hope that visits to other Portuguese-speaking countries will be carried out at an appropriate time, with Brazil being one of the relevant destinations”.

Sam pointed to what is already happening in the area of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). “In Macau, several TCM products have been registered and have entered the Brazilian market successfully. It is expected that, subsequently, with the proactive push of bilateral cooperation with Brazil, more Macau companies will find commercial opportunities in Brazil”, he said. He also expressed the desire that “more companies from the Chinese mainland may join the Brazilian market through Macau’s platform”.

In the interview conducted in Portuguese, the chief executive outlined what is intended for the future. “Macau will raise the level of cooperation with Brazil, extending it to more areas – covering the economy and trade, TCM, technology and innovation, culture and tourism, education and

personal exchanges – promoting the alignment and joint cooperation of the various industry sectors”.

### Geneva, Brussels on the itinerary

On his first trip abroad since taking office, Sam’s visit will not be limited to Lisbon and Madrid. In the interview, Sam revealed that he will also visit Geneva and Brussels during the April 17-23 trip. “Geneva represents an important window for Macau to deepen its link with international organisations and to boost cooperation. Thus, during the visit to Geneva, a meeting is expected with the head of the World Trade Organisation [Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala] and with the Ambassador of the Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the WTO [Permanent Representative & Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the WTO Li Chenggang], for a greater deepening of the connection between Macau and international organisations and entities,” he said.

The trip to Europe will also include a stop in Brussels. “The European Union continues to be a relevant cooperation partner for Macau, whether through commercial cooperation or personal exchanges. Therefore, the MSAR Government attaches great importance to establishing links with the European Union”, Sam he said, adding that in Brussels he will meet with EU leaders “to take stock of the successful implementation of the principle of ‘One Country, Two Systems’ in Macau, and at the same time to strengthen pragmatic cooperation with EU entities”.

### No date yet for Macau-Portugal Joint Commission

The Macau-Portugal Joint Commission still has no date set, Sam said.

Portugal’s prime minister had announced the Macau-Portugal Joint Commission meeting for early February, but it has been postponed.

In the interview, Sam said that the new date has not yet been set. “As for the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting, preparatory work began last year, but it has been postponed due to various factors. The MSAR Government is closely coordinating the work with the Portuguese authorities; the exact date and agenda will be announced in due course”, he noted.

Moreover, Sam reaffirmed the importance of the Portuguese community in the MSAR and highlighted the support the local government has provided to Portuguese-based institutions.

### End Item

\*TDM Controller of Portuguese News & Programmes Division

N.B.: Portuguese text courtesy of TDM, with minor edits. Unabridged translation arranged by the Post. Heading, subheadings, bold type and words in square brackets have been added by the Post.



## 3 collectors show their prized items at exhibition in Taipa

### Rui Pastorin

Three art collectors of different backgrounds are showcasing their prized items in the “Show-Off 4.0” exhibition at the Taipa Village Art Space, with the exhibition on until May 15.

Located at 29-31 Rua dos Mercadores in Taipa Village, the free-admission exhibition is the fourth instalment in the series. This time, it features a collection of artworks on display, among which are paintings and Chinese shop plaques. The items amassed over the years all belong to collectors José Isaac Duarte, Luís Pessanha, Chao Iok Leng.

In this exhibition, university economics lecturer Duarte presents pieces by Mozambican painter and poet Malangatana Valente Ngwenya (1936-2011), who, according to a statement provided at the gallery, is “widely regarded as one of Mozambique’s most important modern artists and a major figure in 20<sup>th</sup> century African art”, with work represented in major international collections, including at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York.

Luís Pessanha is a legal professional and researcher serving as a legal advisor to Macau’s Legislative Assembly and a part-time lecturer in the University of Macau’s (UM) Faculty of Law, the statement said. He is the son of Portuguese painter Ana Pessanha.

His collection mainly features works by local artists and photographers. The statement added that over the past decade, Pessanha and his partner have been engaged in acquiring artworks both locally and internationally.

Lastly, artist and Macau Yi Un Calligraphy and Painting Association Vice President Chao is showcasing two name plaques from her former shops, alongside with personal objects. Chao, who holds other titles including adviser to different local art associations, founded Macau’s Livraria Ngai Chi Hin (Ngai Chi Hin Bookstore) in the 1980s, as well as the specialty fan shop Nam Fan Lou in the early 2000s.

Taipa Village Cultural Association President João Ó was quoted by the statement as saying: “This rare and special exhibition aims to explore the nature of collecting and prompt visually stimulating conversations around the cultural possessions of individuals with very specific, highly personal interests.”

Gallerygoers may visit daily from 12 noon to 8 p.m., with more details available by visiting <https://www.taipavillagemacau.com/>



-Photos: Rui Pastorin

## Fuhong Society to launch Patane canteen for vocational training



Fuhong Society of Macau Director Jennifer Chau Wai I speaks to reporters at the organisation's Cheng Tou Centre in Ilha Verde on Saturday. — Photos: Armindo

Armindo Neves

Fuhong Society of Macau Director Jennifer Chau Wai I announced on Saturday that the organisation is establishing a community canteen in the Patane district.

The Fuhong Society of Macau (澳門扶康會) is a non-profit social service organisation. It provides services and support – especially for people with intellectual disabilities and persons with mental illness, including rehabilitation and community-integration support measures.

The canteen project aims to provide training and employment opportunities in the catering industry for people with disabilities, individuals in mental health recovery, and those on the autism spectrum.

Speaking at the organisation's Cheng Tou Centre in Ilha Verde, Chau detailed that the new facility spans about 460 m<sup>2</sup> across two floors.

"The upper floor will house the kitchen, while the lower floor will serve as a dining area for the public with a capacity for about 50 diners," Chau said, noting that renovation and electrical works are underway.

The canteen will be equipped with smart cooking devices, and job roles for participants will include cleaning, serving and food delivery, Chau said, adding that she expected the canteen to be operational by the middle of this year.

Beyond the canteen, Chau revealed plans for a second-hand market social enterprise in the same district. Spanning roughly 740 m<sup>2</sup>, the project seeks to integrate philanthropy with cultural tourism, drawing visitors into the community while showcasing the professional capabilities of people with disabilities.

Meanwhile, the organisation's awards ceremony of its micro-video creation contest "Stories Under the Starry Sky" was held at the centre on Saturday.

According to a Fu Hon statement released during the ceremony, the competition was themed "Embrace Inclusion, Accept Differences" and was divided into two categories: Student and Open.

The statement said that each category awarded champion, first runner-up and second runner-up prizes, as well as two merit prizes, while the winning teams received up to 6,000 patacas in prize money along with a certificate of award, adding that a total of 55 teams participated in the competition.

According to the statement, the competing teams created short videos centred on the life experiences of individuals with autism, showcasing their unique abilities and strengths, and expressing understanding, support, inclusion, and acceptance of individuals with autism in a positive manner.

### MAA urges govt to strengthen job support for people with autism

Meanwhile, Macau Autism Association (MAA) Director-General Ruby Hui Chiu Yin told reporters at the Macau Science Centre (MSC) in Nape on Saturday that among people with autism, only about one in ten can find full-time employment.

Chiu urged the local government to strengthen employment opportunities for people with autism.

According to Chiu, the employment situation for individuals with autism is severe, with a noticeable decline from the pre-COVID-19 trend when many received job offers even before graduation.



Macau Autism Association (MAA) Director-General Ruby Hui Chiu Yin speaks to reporters at the Macau Science Centre (MSC) in Nape on Saturday.

She recommended that the government offer a more diversified range of vocational training courses rather than focusing solely on job types such as cleaning or waiting tables, aside from providing seminars for employers to help them understand how to communicate with individuals on the autism spectrum.

Chiu pointed out that while some integrated resort operators are interested in hiring people with autism, there is a lack of professional referral channels to serve as a bridge.

Chiu expressed hope that the government would strengthen job-matching support.

Meanwhile, the MAA also hosted an opening ceremony titled "2026 World Care Autism Day Series Activities" and an art exhibition titled "Life Never Ceases, Whispers of Starlight" (森生不息, 星光絮語) at the Macau Science Centre.

MAA Chairwoman Sun Choi Man said in a speech that her organisation currently has 257 registered member families, serving nearly 1,000 family members, with over 11,000 service visits last year. In the future, it will organise a variety of pre-vocational experiences for autistic trainees to help them discover their potential, she said.

According to an MAA statement, the exhibition features nearly 300 works of art created by its members in collaboration with several partner organisations.

The exhibits include fluid paintings\*, light clay, traditional Chinese paintings, glass art, handmade bags, and other forms, allowing the public to step into and understand the inner world of individuals with autism through visual experience, the statement said.

The exhibition concludes on May 13. ■

\*Fluid painting (also known as acrylic pouring or flow art) is a contemporary abstract art technique that involves mixing acrylic paint with a liquid medium to achieve a runny, pourable consistency. Unlike traditional painting where colour is applied with a brush, the paint is poured onto a surface and manipulated by tilting the canvas or using tools like hair dryers and torches.

## Macau Customs seizes 1.3 tonnes of frozen steak worth 200,000 patacas

Armindo Neves

Macau Customs Service officers raided a parallel-trading den in the peninsula's northern district on Thursday where they seized 1.3 tonnes of frozen steak worth around 200,000 patacas in total.

According to a statement on Friday, on Thursday night the officers caught a 44-year-old local male who ran the business and hired parallel traders to smuggle frozen steak from Macau to the mainland.

The male faces a fine in compliance with the relevant provisions listed in the External Trade Law, the statement said.

Moreover, the statement added, the male violated the Food Safety Law as the supposedly frozen steak was stored merely at room temperature, adding that the Customs Service has meanwhile transferred the case to the Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) for follow-up action.

### Gongbei Customs seizes HK\$356,000 in cash at HZMB

Zhuhai's Gongbei Customs announced in a statement yesterday that its officers seized HK\$356,000 (366,500 patacas) in cash at the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge on March 28.

According to the statement, on that day, customs officers at the mega bridge's Zhuhai checkpoint noticed that the X-ray image of the handbag carried by a passenger walking through the "green channel" was abnormal, and they subsequently intercepted the passenger for inspection.

Upon inspection, customs officers discovered that HK\$356,000 in undeclared cash was hidden inside the handbag.

The statement did not reveal the person's gender.

Gongbei Customs reminded the public that a large amount of cash is a restricted entry and exit item. Passengers entering and exiting the mainland are required to follow the national regulations and take the initiative to declare any amount of cash exceeding 20,000 yuan or its equivalent in non-mainland currency they are carrying. Any traveller violating the regulations faces a fine. ■



This handout photo released by the Macau Customs Service on Friday shows the seized frozen steak stored at room temperature at a parallel trading den in the peninsula's northern district on Thursday.

### In Loving Memory

We regretfully share that our beloved sister **Maisy Ho** passed away peacefully on 12 April 2026 surrounded by family. We appreciate your condolences and ask for privacy during this difficult time.

In deep sorrow,

**Pansy, Daisy, Josie and Lawrence Ho**

# Macau Int'l Comedy Fest ends in Hengqin

**Khalel Vallo**

The four-day 3<sup>rd</sup> Macau International Comedy Festival concluded yesterday, wrapping up four days of performances, talent development initiatives and industry exchange across Macau and Hengqin.

Held at the Hengqin Culture and Art Complex and other venues, the festival adopted a “one festival, two locations” format, bringing together comedy performances, training programmes and industry events.

The festival was co-organised by Mahua FunAge\* and the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC), featuring a diverse programme including comedy showcases, immersive performances, industry summits and roundtable discussions.

A key highlight was the “Youth Actor Training Programme”, which provided around 70 local trainees with four months of training, culminating in stage performances and professional opportunities, according to a recent statement by Mahua. Selected participants were able to transition from training to performance and secure entry into

the industry, the statement added.

The closing ceremony was attended by Malaysian-Chinese Academy Award winner Michelle Yeoh Choo Kheng Todt (楊紫瓊), professionally known as Michelle Yeoh, aiming to blend international star power with local talent, striving to establish Macau as a cultural and entertainment hub within the Greater Bay Area (GBA).

Michelle Yeoh rose to fame in 1990s Hong Kong action films and is best known internationally for her roles in the James Bond film “Tomorrow Never Dies” (1997) and martial arts film “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” (2000).

Additionally, the closing ceremony was attended by mainland Chinese stars Shen Teng (沈騰) and Ma Li (馬麗). According to DeepSeek, Shen and Ma are a celebrated Chinese comedic actor duo, best known for their long-running partnership in sketch comedy, film, and theatre. They are the core members of the Mahua FunAge; their on-screen chemistry, often portraying a bickering couple or hapless partners,



Malaysian-Chinese Academy Award winner Michelle Yeoh (left) sits next to mainland Chinese comedian Shen Teng during yesterday's 3<sup>rd</sup> Macau International Comedy Festival at the Hengqin Culture and Art Complex closing ceremony.

has made them one of China's most beloved comedy pairs.

Speaking at the closing ceremony, Cheong Kok Kei, deputy director of the Executive Committee of the Hengqin-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone, said



Deputy Director of the Executive Committee of the Hengqin-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone Cheong Kok Kei delivers his closing remarks during yesterday's comedy festival in Hengqin. - Photos: Khalel Vallo

that the festival plays an important role in nurturing young talent and strengthening the cultural and creative industries. “Macau does not lack talented young people, but the pathway to the stage is being gradually built”, he said, noting

that the festival helped participants move “from students to signed performers”. Cheong also said the event demonstrated the integration of cultural resources between Macau and Hengqin, while contributing to broader industry development.

“In the past four days, the festival has not only brought laughter and joy, but also promoted tourism, exhibitions and cultural industries”, Cheong said, adding that the festival's influence, including online engagement and live broadcasts, is expected to further expand its impact in the future.

Cheong concluded his remarks that the festival will continue to serve as a platform for talent incubation and cultural exchange, aiming to support Macau's development as a performing arts and entertainment hub. ■

\* Mahua FunAge (開心麻花) is a leading Chinese entertainment powerhouse specialising in comedy. Founded in 2003 and headquartered in Beijing, it has grown from a niche theatre troupe into a massive “comedy ecosystem” that dominates the Chinese stage and film markets. - Google Gemini

## Local govt gathers views from Hengqin for Macau's 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan

**Tony Wong**

The Macau government convened a meeting in Hengqin on Friday to gather opinions and suggestions from representatives from various segments of Hengqin's civil society concerning its upcoming drafting of Macau's 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan.

The Macau government is scheduled to complete the drawing-up of Macau's 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan and start implementing the plan this year. It has underlined its commitment to aligning Macau's third five-year socioeconomic development plan with the nation's 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan.

The Central People's Government released the full version of the nation's 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan on March 13 after the plan's draft outline was passed by the National People's Congress (NPC) in Beijing on the previous day. The plan, officially known as 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development, covers the period between 2026 and 2030.

The Macau government is scheduled to launch a public consultation later this month to gather opinions and suggestions from Macau's civil society concerning its drafting of Macau's 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan.

The 106-square-kilometre island of Hengqin in Zhuhai City is officially known as Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin, following its inauguration in September 2021. The adjacent island is three times the size of the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR).

The meeting, held in Hengqin on Friday afternoon, was announced in a statement by the zone's Administrative Affairs Bureau on Saturday. The statement was also released through the Macau Government Information Bureau (GCS).

The in-depth cooperation



The two handout photos released by Hengqin's Administrative Affairs Bureau on Saturday shows Macau Policy Research and Regional Development Bureau (DSEPDR) Director Cheong Chok Man (left) and Li Chong, one of the five deputy directors of Hengqin's executive committee, addressing Friday's meeting.

zone's governance consists of 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 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, including the Administrative Affairs Bureau.

According to Saturday's statement, the meeting was chaired by Li Chong, one of the five deputy directors of the zone's executive committee. Macau Policy Research and Regional Development Bureau (DSEPDR) Director Cheong Chok Man led a delegation of officials from his bureau and other Macau public entities to attend the meeting where he presented details about Macau's drafting of its 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan.

The DSEPDR is the public entity tasked with the drafting of Macau's 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan.



The MSAR's 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan, officially known as 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development, covers the period between 2026 and 2030.

### Drafting of Macau's 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan is this year's top priority

According to the statement, Cheong listened to opinions and suggestions raised by representatives from various segments of Hengqin's civil society and answered their questions, including those from leading enterprises and those from Macau-invested enterprises in Hengqin, as well as Macau residents living in Hengqin who care about and support the Macau-Hengqin integrated development.

During the meeting, according to the statement, Cheong underlined that it is the top priority of the MSAR government this year to ensure the effective drawing-up and implementation of Macau's 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan in close alignment with the nation's 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan and in line with Macau's own situation.

Cheong said that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan aims to ensure that Macau

will resolutely put into practice the spirit of President Xi Jinping's various important speeches made during his inspection visit to Macau in December 2024, align with the nation's 15<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan, implement the policies and measures outlined by the candidacy platform of Sam Hou Fai when he ran in the chief executive election in 2024 as the sole candidate, and strengthen coordinated and integrated development with neighbouring regions. Sam took office as the MSAR's chief executive on December 20, 2024.

According to the statement, Cheong pledged that on the basis of reviewing the results in the implementation of Macau's 2<sup>nd</sup> Five-Year Plan, the Macau government will draft the 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan with a problem-orientated and pragmatic approach after fully listening to opinions from various segments of civil society while taking Macau's own situation into account.

### Hengqin an 'important component' of Macau's 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan

Cheong noted that advancing the high-quality development of the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin will be an “important component” of Macau's 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan, requiring the joint efforts and active participation of the governments and civil society from both sides.

According to the statement, 20 representatives raised their opinions and suggestions during the meeting, covering topics such as planning alignment, industrial synergy, flows of production factors, greater convenience for people's daily lives, immigration clearance, and employment. The representatives, according to the statement, said they expect Macau's

3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan to fully present new ways of thinking and to outline new measures for the Macau-Hengqin integrated development, providing clearer direction and stronger support for the synergistic development of both sides.

Cheong pledged that the Macau government will carefully sort out the representatives' opinions and thoroughly study them before effectively incorporating them into the drawing-up of Macau's 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan, with the aim of ensuring that the plan can be implemented and will deliver tangible results.

### Original intent to develop Hengqin

According to the statement, Li Chong, one of the five deputy directors of the in-depth cooperation zone's executive committee, noted during the meeting that the original intent to develop Hengqin is to serve Macau's appropriate economic diversification and foster its long-term prosperity and stability.

Li said that the inclusion of the Macau-Hengqin integrated development as an important component in Macau's 3<sup>rd</sup> Five-Year Plan fully demonstrates the MSAR government's strategic vision with a long-term perspective and its determination to advance the in-depth cooperation zone's ongoing second-phase development.

The statement pledged that the in-depth cooperation zone's executive committee will strengthen communication and coordination with the MSAR government's respective public entities, with the aim of promoting closer alignment between the development plans of Macau and Hengqin, stronger coordination of policies between the two places, and more efficient implementation of business and infrastructure projects. ■

## Health Bureau reports severe flu case

**Khalel Vallo**

The local Health Bureau (SSM) reported a severe influenza case on Friday afflicting a 68-year-old local male patient who was in a serious condition at the time, according to a statement by the bureau on Friday.

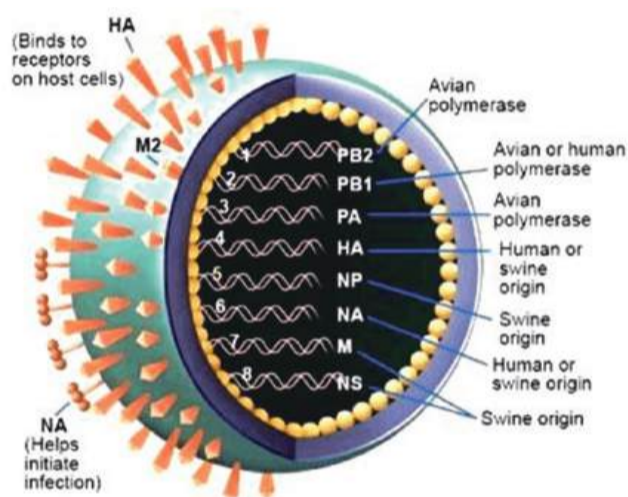
According to the statement, the patient has a history of chronic illness. He developed symptoms including cough and sputum on April 7 and initially sought medical treatment, but was not tested for influenza at the time. However, his condition worsened on Friday, with symptoms including fever, shortness of breath and vomiting, the statement added.

The statement noted that last week he attended the emergency department of Kiang Wu Hospital, where he was diagnosed with

influenza B complicated by acute respiratory and heart failure. The patient was subsequently transferred to the public Conde de São Januário Hospital Centre for hospitalisation and requires ventilator support, the statement added.

According to the statement, the patient had no recent travel history during the incubation period and had not received this season's influenza vaccination. No respiratory symptoms have been reported among his cohabitants.

The Health Bureau reminded residents, particularly high-risk groups such as the elderly and those with chronic illnesses, to receive seasonal influenza vaccination and seek timely medical attention if symptoms develop. ■



This downloaded image courtesy of New York's Creative Diagnostics website shows a schematic model of the influenza B virus

## MGTO launches Mak Mak licensing programme, applications open April 20



Fairgoers walk around the 14<sup>th</sup> Macao International Travel (Industry) Expo during its last day yesterday. – Photo: Rui Pastorin

*Continued from p.1*

During his speech at Friday's opening, Tai, as summarised by a statement released later that day, noted that Macau's total visitor arrivals exceeded 10 million in the first quarter, with a preliminary estimate of over 750,000 international visitors. "In face of uncertainties in the global situation and geopolitics, the SAR Government will continue to broaden the diversity of tourism products, organise events and activities, refine tourism facilities and step up promotional initiatives, while embracing the opportunities

amid challenges and actively tapping into various international visitor markets", the statement highlighted.

This year's fair gathered more than 700 tourism-related enterprises and governmental entities from 59 countries and regions, along with more than 600 hosted buyers from around the world. Forums, themed sessions, presentations and performances were also among those on offer for participants. There were over 1,500 booths featured.

Moreover, according to an MGTO statement yesterday,

close to 120 tourism and cultural/heritage-related organisations and associations held signing ceremonies at the expo on Saturday, while 60 cooperation agreements were signed on-site. ■

\* The official Chinese name for the Macau tourism mascot, Mak Mak, is 麥麥 (pronounced "Mai Mai" in Putonghua). The character is a black-faced spoonbill, a migratory bird that visits Macau every year. Its design is inspired by the Guia Lighthouse, with the red, yellow, and blue colours representing the vibrant energy of the city. – Google Gemini

## China's consumer market: where global companies are tested at the frontier

**Commentary Tang Hong\***

At the April 2026 China International Consumer Products Expo (CICPE) in Hainan\*\*, global brands are once again converging, reflecting continued interest in the Chinese consumer market.

Chinese is no longer simply a question of scale or growth. For many companies, it is where strategies are tested and refined. To engage China's consumer market today is, increasingly, to operate at the frontier of global consumption.

### A market defined by scale, speed, and diversity

China's consumer market is often described in terms of size, and for good reason. With a population of over 1.4 billion and a rapidly expanding middle-income group – estimated at over 400 million people. It represents one of the largest and most diverse demand bases in the world. Yet scale alone does not capture its complexity.

Rather than a single unified market, China is better understood as a multi-layered system of consumption. Premium demand in top-tier cities coexists with price-sensitive consumption in lower-tier markets. Trends do not simply trickle down; they often evolve simultaneously across different segments, creating a landscape where companies must operate with both precision and flexibility.

Equally important is the

digital-native nature of Chinese consumption. Official data from the Ministry of Commerce show that digital consumption has surpassed 23.8 trillion yuan, with the country maintaining its position as the world's largest online retail market for 13 consecutive years. Within this ecosystem, live-streaming commerce and social commerce\*\* have become central channels rather than marginal innovations.

These platforms do more than facilitate transactions. They compress the cycle between consumer feedback and product iteration. Brands are expected to respond in near real time, adjusting marketing strategies, pricing, and even product design based on rapidly evolving consumer preferences. In such an environment, rapid response is increasingly expected.

### The rise of domestic brands

Compounding this intensity is the rapid rise of Chinese domestic brands. Over the past decade, local companies have moved beyond cost competitiveness to build strength in branding, design, and technological integration.

In sectors ranging from consumer electronics to beauty and apparel, domestic players have demonstrated an ability to identify niche demand, scale quickly, and iterate products at a pace that challenges traditional multinational operating models.

This has fundamentally reshaped the competitive landscape. Foreign brands entering China today are not simply competing against other global players; they are facing highly adaptive local companies that often possess deeper insights into consumer behavior and faster execution capabilities.

### Why success in China resonates globally

Against this backdrop, success in China increasingly reflects a broader set of capabilities that are relevant in other markets.

First, operating in China requires a high degree of supply chain integration. The ability to coordinate production, logistics, and distribution efficiently, often at scale and under tight timelines, has become a defining competitive advantage. These capabilities are increasingly transferable as global supply chains face pressure to become more resilient and responsive.

Second, the pace of product iteration in China pushes companies to adopt more agile innovation models. Rather than relying on long product cycles, firms must continuously refine offerings based on data and real-time feedback. This approach aligns with broader global trends toward customization and responsiveness.

Third, competing in China demands a nuanced understanding of diverse and evolving consumer pref-

erences. The market's segmentation across income levels, geographies, and lifestyles requires companies to move beyond one-size-fits-all strategies. As consumption patterns in other parts of the world become more fragmented, this experience becomes increasingly valuable.

### Enduring appeal amid structural differences

Despite the intensity of competition, China's attractiveness to global brands remains evident. According to official figures, international brands account for approximately 65 percent of exhibitors at the sixth CICPE, underscoring continued foreign interest in the market.

This sustained engagement reflects not only the market's size, but also its growth potential and capacity for innovation. For many companies, China remains both a major revenue opportunity and a testing ground for new products and business models.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that China is not a perfect proxy for global markets. Its regulatory environment, platform ecosystems, and consumer culture retain distinct characteristics. Digital platforms that dominate in China often have no direct equivalents elsewhere, while consumer preferences, ranging from aesthetics to price sensitivity, can differ significantly from those

in Western markets.

These differences mean that success in China does not automatically translate into success globally. Strategies that work in one context may require substantial adaptation in another.

### A frontier, not a formula

Yet the broader implication remains. Competing in China is less about replicating a formula and more about building capabilities – speed, adaptability, and a deep responsiveness to consumers.

In an era where global consumption is becoming more complex, fragmented, and digitally driven, these capabilities are increasingly central to competitiveness everywhere.

Success in China does not guarantee global success. But as the frontier of consumption continues to evolve, the ability to compete in China is becoming an increasingly meaningful indicator of whether a company is prepared for the demands of the global market.

\*Tang Hong is a Beijing-based commentator focusing on China's economy, policy, and its role in the global economy, with a cross-cultural perspective.

\*\*The fair is taking place between today and Saturday (April 13-18)

\*\*\* Social commerce is the process of selling products and services directly through social media platforms.

# Xi meets KMT leader Cheng in Beijing

BEIJING – Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, met on Friday with Cheng Li-wun, chairwoman of the Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) party, in Beijing.

Invited by the CPC Central Committee and Xi, Cheng is the first KMT chairperson to have led a delegation to the Chinese mainland in the past decade. The delegation had visited Jiangsu Province and Shanghai before coming to Beijing.

Xi said this meeting between the CPC and KMT leaders after 10 years is of great significance for developing relations between the two parties and across the Taiwan Strait.

Xi stressed that no matter how the international landscape and the situation across the Taiwan Strait may evolve, the overarching trend toward the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will not change, and the prevailing momentum for the Chinese on both sides of the Strait to come together will not change.

He added that people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait hope for peace and tranquility, improved cross-Strait relations, and better lives. “This is a responsibility that the CPC and the KMT cannot shirk, and also a driving force for the two parties to work together,” Xi said.

Xi expressed the willingness to work with all political parties in Taiwan, including the KMT, as well as groups and people from all sectors, to strengthen exchanges and dialogue, promote peace across the Taiwan Strait, improve the well-being of the people and advance national rejuvenation, on the basis of the common political foundation of adhering to the 1992 Consensus and opposing “Taiwan independence.”

He called for forging closer bonds across the Strait by upholding a correct understanding of identity.

“Differences in social systems should not be an excuse for secession,” Xi said.

Xi called for safeguarding the shared homeland through peaceful development. The core issue for safeguarding the shared homeland lies in recognizing that both sides of the Strait belong to one China, Xi said.

“We welcome any proposals conducive to the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations and will spare no effort to advance any endeavors that promote such development,” Xi said, adding that “Taiwan independence” is the chief culprit undermining peace across the Taiwan Strait. “We should



Xi Jinping (right), general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, meets with Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) Chairwoman Cheng Li-wun in Beijing on Friday morning. — Xinhua

neither condone nor tolerate it.”

Xi called for fostering the well-being of the people through exchanges and integration.

Taiwan compatriots are welcome to visit the mainland, Xi said. He encouraged young people in Taiwan to seek development opportunities on the mainland.

Taiwan agricultural and fishery products, as well as other high-quality goods, are welcome to enter the mainland market, he added.

Xi called for joint efforts to achieve national rejuvenation. “We firmly believe that more and more Taiwan compatriots will gain a correct understanding of

the mainland’s social system and development path,” he said.

“They will recognize that Taiwan’s development prospects hinge on a strong motherland, and that the interests and well-being of Taiwan compatriots are closely linked to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” he added.

Xi expressed the mainland’s willingness to share its development opportunities and achievements with Taiwan compatriots and jointly build a stronger Chinese economy.

Cheng said that people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait are Chinese and belong to one family.

The KMT and the CPC should uphold the common political foundation of adhering to the 1992 Consensus and opposing “Taiwan independence,” strengthen mutual political trust, preserve Chinese history, promote Chinese culture, and expand exchanges and cooperation across all fields, Cheng said.

She called for efforts to promote the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations, foster a brighter future for ties across the Strait, and advance the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Senior Party officials Wang Huning, Cai Qi and other officials attended the meeting. — Xinhua

## Mainland unveils package of policies, measures to boost ties with Taiwan

BEIJING – The Chinese mainland yesterday rolled out a package of 10 policies and measures – spanning inter-party communication, infrastructure, travel, trade and culture – aimed at boosting exchanges and cooperation with Taiwan.

The announcement by the Taiwan Work Office of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee followed a meeting on Friday between Xi Jinping, general secretary of the CPC Central Committee, and Cheng Li-wun, chairwoman of the Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) party, the first such top-level meeting between the two political parties across the Taiwan Strait in a decade.

Invited by the CPC Central Committee and Xi, Cheng led a KMT delegation on a six-day visit to mainland cities including Nanjing, Shanghai and Beijing, which concluded yesterday.

Atop the 10 initiatives announced by the mainland yesterday is a proposal to explore a regular communication mechanism between the CPC and the KMT.

The CPC and the KMT will, on the common political foundation of adhering to the 1992 Consensus and opposing “Taiwan independence,” take “stronger measures” to promote cross-Strait exchanges, interaction and integration, the CPC’s Taiwan work office said in a statement.

The Taiwan question is a scar left over by a full-blown civil war fought between the forces led by the CPC and the KMT about eight decades ago. In 1949, the remnants of the defeated KMT retreated to Taiwan, and the People’s Republic of China was founded under the

leadership of the CPC.

The unresolved civil war and foreign interference have left the two sides of the Strait in a prolonged state of political confrontation. However, the fact that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China’s territory has never changed.

The latest policies and measures, according to the statement, aim to advance the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations and enhance the kinship and well-being of compatriots across the Strait.

The policy package demonstrates the mainland’s sincerity, goodwill and firm resolve in promoting the peaceful and integrated development of cross-Strait relations, said Wang Yingjin, director of the cross-Strait relations research center of the Renmin University of China. “The measures will inject fresh momentum into efforts to sustain the steady improvement of cross-Strait relations.”

### INFRASTRUCTURE, TRAVEL, TRADE

According to the statement, efforts will be made to support the coastal areas of Fujian Province – the mainland region closest to Taiwan – in sharing water, electricity and gas supplies with the offshore islands of Kinmen and Matsu, and to promote construction of sea-crossing bridges linking them, when conditions permit.

The mainland will also move to resume regular direct passenger flights across the Strait, including routes to and from Urumqi, Xi’an, Harbin, Kunming and Lanzhou.

Kinmen will be supported to use

a new airport under construction in the nearby mainland city of Xiamen, expected to begin operations by the end of 2026.

Lee Chou-hsi, a Tsinghua University graduate student from Taiwan, welcomed the new measures. “During my undergraduate study in Changsha, I had to transfer flights to and from Taiwan, which was very inconvenient at the time,” said Lee. “More direct flights between mainland cities and Taiwan will surely benefit students and tourists.”

A communication mechanism will be set up on the common political foundation of adhering to the 1992 Consensus and opposing “Taiwan independence” to facilitate the entry of Taiwan’s agricultural and fishery products that meet the quarantine standards into the mainland.

Efforts will also be made to help Taiwan’s agricultural and fishery products gain access to various mainland trade fairs to expand their sales channels.

The mainland will explore building wharves and berths in regions where conditions permit for distant-water fishing vessels from the Taiwan region, and mull providing convenience for the sales of their fish catch on the mainland.

It will also facilitate registration procedures for qualified Taiwan food manufacturers and the entry of their food products into the mainland market.

The mainland will explore the establishment of more trading markets for small-ticket items with Taiwan and support micro, small

and medium-sized enterprises from Taiwan to expand business on the mainland.

Mainland cities such as Fuzhou and Xiamen have long established such markets, allowing small businesses from Taiwan to directly sell specialty commodities to mainland buyers.

Wu Chia-ying, executive vice president of the Association of Taiwan Investment Enterprises on the Mainland, said that the measures respond to the practical needs of business development such as reducing operating costs and improving access to the mainland market.

“We hope these measures will be implemented as soon as possible,” Wu said, adding that the association will play a bridging role to help Taiwan businesses better seize opportunities and participate in the country’s modernization drive, contributing to a stronger Chinese economy.

### YOUTH, CULTURE

The statement said that an institutionalized platform will be set up to promote two-way exchanges between young people on both sides of the Strait. The All-China Youth Federation and other relevant mainland institutions will invite 20 youth groups from Taiwan to visit the mainland for exchanges every year.

Fan Chiang-feng, a young Taiwan entrepreneur based on the mainland, said that the establishment of a regular platform for young people on both sides of the Strait would help break down information

barriers. “Our generation on both sides of the Strait should move forward together,” he said.

To boost cultural ties, the mainland will allow qualified TV shows, documentaries and animations from Taiwan to be aired, and permit Taiwan residents to take part in the mainland’s fast-growing micro-drama industry.

Working in youth services in Xiamen, Wu Ping-chang from Taiwan was encouraged by the policies. “With more opportunities and confidence, I hope to take cross-Strait stories into the drama production in the future, enabling audiences on both sides to see more authentic and warm exchanges,” Wu said.

The statement also noted that the mainland will promote the resumption of individual tours for Shanghai and Fujian residents to Taiwan.

A pilot scheme allowing mainland individuals to tour Taiwan was introduced in 2011, but was suspended in 2019 – a few years after the secessionist Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) came to power in Taiwan and stepped up plots to seek “Taiwan independence.”

Sheng Jiuyuan, director of the center for Taiwan studies at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, told Xinhua that the cumulative effect of these measures may reshape the pattern of cross-Strait exchanges.

“The two-way integration across the Strait, grounded in tangible improvements to people’s livelihoods, will lay a broad and durable foundation of public support and foster profound mutual trust,” Sheng said. — Xinhua

## Indonesian women face jail for stepping on Quran

SERANG – Indonesian police said yesterday they had arrested two women on blasphemy charges after a video showing one of them stepping on a Quran went viral on social media in the Muslim-majority country.

The two women, whose names and ages were not disclosed, were nabbed by police in Banten province this week and risk five years in prison if found guilty under Indonesia's blasphemy law.

The law forbids anyone from making statements offending one of the country's six official religions or trying to prevent someone from adhering to one of those religions.

The incident happened on Wednesday when a salon owner in Lebak, Banten, some 140 kilometres from the capital Jakarta, accused a guest of stealing her belongings.

When the woman denied it, the salon owner insisted she swear an oath while stepping on a Quran, and took a video.

"The person who stepped on the Quran, and the person who asked her to swear an oath, have both admitted what they did. Police have summoned them, and they have now been named as suspects," Banten police spokesman Maruli Ahiles Hutapea told AFP.

The video of the incident spread like wildfire on social media, sparking public anger.

Rights groups have long campaigned against the blasphemy laws, which they say are frequently misused to target religious minorities.

Jakarta's ex-governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, better known as Ahok, was jailed for nearly two years on blasphemy charges in 2017.

In 2024, a court sentenced a stand-up comedian to six months in prison after he made a joke about the name Muhammad.

Indonesia is the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, with more than 240 million adherents. – AFP

## Mideast war takes a bite out of Filipino street food vendors



People eat braised beef stew locally known as 'pares' at a stall in Manila last Tuesday. – AFP

### Pam Castro

MANILA – Filipinos like their "pares", a traditional beef stew, served hot – but the soaring cost of liquefied petroleum gas has made that prospect increasingly difficult since war erupted in the Middle East.

To save a few pesos 20-year-old Eric Garcia delicately turned a knob to adjust the flame under his warming trays to the lowest setting as he grapples with fuel costs that have nearly doubled in price.

While sticker shock at petrol stations has garnered the biggest headlines since the war forced the partial closure of the Strait of Hormuz, the rising price of LPG has hit the import-dependent archipelago's humble street food vendors.

A day before speaking to AFP, Garcia said he had been forced to raise the price of a bowl of pares to 65 pesos (US\$1.08) after fuel costs reduced his daily earnings by a quarter.

"I'm only earning 1,500 pesos (per day), because the rest is spent on LPG," he said.

Garcia, who begins cooking at 3 a.m. [local time] every morning before hauling his stew to a middle-class neighbourhood on a converted motorbike, said an 11 kilo tank of fuel, which typically lasts four days, that once cost 870 pesos (about US\$14.50) now costs 1,600 pesos.

"It's the highest price of LPG that I've ever seen since I started here," said Carlo Manalad, a supervisor at a store selling tanks of the gas, 90 percent of which is imported.

"If (our suppliers') prices are high, we also raise our prices. Our profit is still the same," the 64-year-old told AFP.

Many of the capital's streetside food sellers, however, have no such luxury.

"If we raise our prices, our customers will buy from other stalls," said Ronilo Titom, who has run a kerbside canteen that caters call centre workers and jeepney drivers, for two years.

Even while holding the line on prices, Titom said he had noticed his customer base slowly shrinking since the war erupted.

"Many of them have started to bring packed lunches instead (to save money)," said the 48-year-old who, like Garcia, is using his LPG ever more judiciously.

"Sometimes we let the soup get cold," he admitted, noting that the cost of ingredients for his dishes had also been on the uptick since the war broke out.

### 'Very difficult for us'

The Philippines revealed Tuesday war-driven inflation figures that showed food prices

had increased nearly twice as fast in March as the month before.

French fry vendor John Mark Abella, 25, who has also upped his prices by five pesos to compensate for LPG costs, told AFP he believed inflation was putting the squeeze on his mostly student customers.

"I think we've got fewer customers ... because they're limiting their expenses because of the high prices of fuel and food," he said.

Sam Natividad, a 25-year-old call centre worker, said that was no illusion.

"I'm limiting my expenses because... I also have to pay bills at home. I don't have a big budget for my meals here," she told AFP at a roadside canteen, adding it was "understandable" if street vendors had to raise their prices.

Near Garcia's pares stall, Allan Palong, a driver for a motorbike ride-hailing app, said he understood the vendor's need to charge five pesos more for a bowl of stew, even if his own earnings were being crippled by fuel price hikes.

"It's very difficult for us now, all prices have gone up ... the five-pesos mean a lot," he said, while calling on the government to slash the excise tax on imported fuel.

"What they're doing is not enough... we can't feel it." – AFP (More on Middle East war on pages 10 & 11)



Cambodia's King Norodom Sihamoni greets people at the Independence Monument during a ceremony marking Cambodia's 71st Independence Day celebrations in Phnom Penh on November 9, 2024.

Cambodia's King Norodom Sihamoni has been diagnosed with prostate cancer, he said in a statement on Friday, and will stay in China for prolonged treatment for the disease. – AFP

## Cambodia urges Thailand to resume talks on disputed border

PHNOM PENH – Cambodia has urged Thailand to resume talks as soon as possible on their disputed border, a long-standing disagreement that led to deadly clashes last year.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet said on Saturday that he "strongly hopes" the two neighbours will be able to work together "quickly and with sincerity".

"This will be foundation for long-lasting peace that would allow our people living along shared border to live peacefully. Cambodia is fully ready," he said in a statement posted on social media.

Thailand's Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuangketkeow said earlier Saturday that his country was not ready to resume talks, even though a new government had just been formed.

When asked about Cambodia's renewed call for negotiations, he

said it had the "right" to do so, but that Thailand had its "own procedures" to follow.

The two Southeast Asian countries have been at odds for decades over the demarcation of their 800-kilometre border, a legacy of the French colonial era.

The dispute erupted into several rounds of clashes last year, killing dozens of people and displacing more than a million in July and December.

The countries signed a ceasefire agreement in late December that allows for border talks.

But tensions on the frontier remain, with both sides trading accusations of truce violations.

Cambodia claims Thai forces captured several areas in border provinces – contrary to their agreement – and has demanded their withdrawal. – AFP

## Prabowo to meet Putin in Russia for oil talks

JAKARTA – Indonesia's President Prabowo Subianto departed for Russia yesterday for talks with counterpart Vladimir Putin on oil, Prabowo's office said.

The presidency in Jakarta confirmed to AFP that Prabowo left yesterday evening.

Foreign Minister Sugiono said Saturday that oil, which is "of strategic importance for the Indonesian nation", would be on the agenda.

"He will meet with President Putin and will also discuss global geopolitics and, certainly, the energy situation," said Sugiono, who like many Indonesians has only one name.

Prabowo, who recently travelled to South Korea and Japan, has defended his foreign travels.

"Brothers and sisters, it's to secure oil, I have to go everywhere," he said in an address to his cabinet last week.

Like many nations, Indonesia has come under pressure from soaring global oil prices over the war in the Middle East.

Southeast Asia's largest economy, where fuel is heavily subsidised, is an oil producer but nevertheless a net importer.

Last month, Prabowo's government announced fuel rationing and mandated a day-per-week work-from-home policy for civil

servants to conserve energy stocks.

It has vowed not to increase the price of fuel in the near future.

Russia's ambassador to Indonesia Sergei Tolchenov told reporters in March that his country was open to selling oil to Indonesia.

"If Indonesia needs it, so please tell us and you will have it," Tolchenov said as the countries prepared for joint military exercises at a Jakarta port.

Last year, Jakarta joined the BRICS bloc of emerging economies that includes Russia and China.

But Prabowo has also signed a trade deal with US President Donald Trump and joined his so-called "Board of Peace". – AFP

# S Korea president clashes with Israel on rights, disinfo claims

SEOUL — South Korean President Lee Jae Myung on Saturday accused Israel of failing to “reflect” on allegations of rights abuses by its forces, after Israel decried him for amplifying social media “disinformation”.

The Seoul leader irked Israel’s foreign ministry this week with his comments on a social media video with a caption purporting it showed Israeli soldiers torturing and pushing a “Palestinian kid” off a roof.

“I need to look into whether this is true, and if so, what measures

have been taken,” Lee said Friday on X.

AFP was not able to immediately identify provenance of the video, which has been widely shared on social media.

However, it appeared to show the different angle of an incident captured by AFPTV in the West Bank two years ago, when reporters saw an Israeli soldier use his foot to push the body of an apparently dead adult man off a roof.

In 2024 the White House called the footage “deeply disturbing” and

said it had demanded an explanation from Israel amid its intensifying raids on the West Bank, which it has occupied since 1967.

Israel’s foreign ministry said in a statement on Saturday the incident was already “investigated and addressed”.

“President Lee Jae Myung, for some strange reason, chose to dig up a story from 2024 and to cite a fake account that falsely presented it as a current event,” said a ministry social media statement.

“This account is notorious for spreading anti-Israeli disinformation

and falsehoods about Israel,” it added.

South Korea’s foreign ministry attempted to defuse the escalating social media confrontation.

In a statement it said Lee’s post – which drew parallels between alleged Israeli abuses and historical atrocities against Jews and Koreans – was a call to “universal human rights rather than an opinion on any specific issue”.

But on Saturday Lee issued another pointed social media missive, commenting on a news article detailing Israel’s backlash

against his remarks.

“It’s disappointing that you don’t even once reflect on the criticisms from people around the world who are suffering and struggling due to relentless anti-human rights and anti-international law actions,” he said.

“When I am in pain, others feel that pain just as deeply.”

South Korea, an ally of Israel’s biggest international backer the United States, has generally maintained a balanced stance on strife in the Middle East, without backing any one side in the conflict. — AFP



Devotees pull a wooden chariot carrying an idol of the Hindu deity Bhairav during the ‘Bisket Jatra’ festival marking the Nepali New Year in Bhaktapur on the outskirts of Kathmandu on Friday. — AFP

## Songkran festival kicks off in Thai capital to showcase contemporary culture

BANGKOK — The Maha Songkran World Water Festival 2026 kicked off here in Thailand’s capital on Saturday, aiming to elevate the traditional Thai New Year into a major global attraction while showcasing the country’s contemporary culture.

Minister of Tourism and Sports Surasak Phanchaoenworakul said that the festive event held at Benjakitti Park in central Bangkok is designed to draw international crowds by blending ancient traditions with modern entertainment, underscoring

Thailand’s readiness to host large-scale global events.

Surasak said that the five-day festival, which runs through April 15, builds upon Songkran’s status as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

“By leveraging our unique cultural identity, we are driving tourism initiatives that align with the government’s policy of establishing Thailand as a top global destination,” he said.

He noted that the modernized

event is expected to encourage repeat tourism, stimulate job creation, and drive domestic economic growth.

In a statement, the Tourism Authority of Thailand expressed confidence that the integration of high-energy contemporary music with traditional water-splashing activities will create a new, dynamic image for Songkran, firmly establishing the Southeast Asian nation as a sustainable “festival destination” on the world stage. (Photo on page 16) — AFP

## Vietnam invites pope for historic visit

HANOI — Vietnam has invited Pope Leo XIV for a historic visit to the Southeast Asian country, according to state media, as diplomatic relations warm between the communist regime and the Vatican.

Tran Thanh Man, chairman of the National Assembly, presented the pope on Saturday with an “official invitation” from the General Secretary of the Communist Party and President of Vietnam, To Lam.

Pope Leo XIV expressed his “sincere thanks,” and his “wish to visit the Southeast Asian nation in the near future,” the Vietnam News Agency reported.

He also said he hoped to

“further deepen bilateral ties,” it added.

Hanoi and the Vatican have not had official diplomatic relations since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, but a joint working group has been meeting since 2009 in an effort to restore relations.

The two sides made a breakthrough in 2023 by agreeing to a “Resident Papal Representative” for the communist nation.

Pope Francis, Leo XIV’s predecessor, was also officially invited to visit Vietnam, and the Vatican’s de facto foreign minister travelled there in the spring of 2024.

During his meeting with the pope, Tran Thanh Man said the two sides would continue “working toward elevating bilateral relations to a new stage of development for the benefit of the people and for global peace and prosperity,” the Vietnam News Agency reported.

Vietnam has around six million Catholics, who make up roughly six percent of its population.

They have historically been perceived by the government as having close ties with former colonial power France.

Human rights groups have accused the country of restricting religious freedoms. — AFP

## Bangladesh mob beats spiritual leader to death: authorities

DHAKA — A self-proclaimed spiritual leader was beaten to death by a mob in Bangladesh on Saturday, officials said, in the latest violence fuelled by religious tensions in the country.

Muslim-majority Bangladesh has seen a sharp rise in religious intolerance and mob violence since the 2024 uprising that toppled the government of former premier Sheikh Hasina.

Shamim Reza Jahangir, believed to be in his 60s, died from his injuries after hundreds of people stormed his residence in Kushtia district and thrashed him with sticks, chief administrative official Touhid bin Hasan told AFP.

The mob was angered after an old video of the man resurfaced online on Friday. It allegedly showed him claiming that those who wrote the Quran were illiterate and those who read it were worse off.

“Sensing that something might happen, police went to the spot, and the administration tried their best.

But an angry mob of more than 200 people attacked his residence,” bin Hasan said.

Jahangir was taken to a nearby hospital, where doctors declared him dead.

Police sources told AFP that Jahangir had been briefly arrested in 2021 for making comments that angered villagers.

The sources said the video that circulated Friday was recorded during that time.

Bangladesh police spokesman AHM Sahadat Hossain said an investigation was underway.

Mob attacks are frequently reported in the South Asian nation of 170 million people.

At least 153 people have been killed by mob violence from August 2024 – when Hasina’s rule ended and she fled to India – to September 2025, according to a report by Dhaka-based rights organisation Odhikar.

Saturday’s killing was the first since the Bangladesh Nationalist Party swept to power in February. — AFP

## Death toll of shooting in Afghanistan’s Herat hits 11

HERAT — The death toll from a shooting in western Afghanistan rose to 11 on Saturday, the provincial authority said, after gunmen targeted civilians at a picnic spot in Herat.

Bullet marks were visible on a wall of the Sayed Mohammad Agha Shia shrine, an AFP journalist said, while bloodstains marked a blanket abandoned at the scene.

“Eleven people have been recorded dead and eight others wounded from Friday’s incident, with the condition of two of the wounded reported as critical,” Herat’s information office said in a statement.

The update raises a toll of seven killed provided on Friday by the interior ministry.

The attack [in the] southwest of Herat city was carried out by “unidentified armed men riding motorcycles”, ministry spokesman Abdul Mateen Qani said.

So far, no group has claimed responsibility for the shooting.

People from different parts of Herat usually gather beside the shrine to picnic among the trees, the AFP journalist said.

### ‘Help us’

Mohammad Mohsen Rezayi, a resident who had four relatives killed in the shooting, said he had declined the offer to join them.

“They called us and said: ‘Help us! We’ve all been shot,’” the 67-year-old told AFP.

Rezayi rushed to the scene, but said he was stopped by security forces around 500 metres away.

One suspect has been arrested, according to Herat’s information office.

There have been sporadic attacks since the Taliban authorities returned to power in 2021, including a deadly explosion at a Chinese restaurant in the capital Kabul in January.

Taliban officials have vowed to restore security to the country after decades of conflict. — AFP

## Iran Guards threaten to trap enemies in 'deadly vortex' in Hormuz

TEHRAN – The Revolutionary Guards said on yesterday that Iranian security forces had the Strait of Hormuz shipping bottleneck under their full control, warning that enemies would be trapped in a “deadly vortex” in the case of any miscalculation.

“All traffic... is under the full control of the armed forces,” the Guards’ naval command said in a Persian-language post on X after President Donald Trump ordered a US naval blockade of the Strait.

“The enemy will become trapped in a deadly vortex in the Strait if it makes the wrong move,” it added, posting a video showing vessels in crosshairs.

In a separate statement released by the Guards’ public relations office, the force’s naval command insisted that “contrary to the false claims of some enemy officials”, the Strait of Hormuz is “open to the harmless passage of civilian vessels

in compliance with specific relevant regulations”.

It did not give details on the nature of these rules but added: “Any military vessels that intend to approach the Strait of Hormuz under any pretext will be considered in violation of the ceasefire and will be dealt with severely.”

In a lengthy declaration on his social media platform, Trump said that his eventual goal was to clear the strait of mines and reopen it to all shipping, but that in the meantime Iran must not be allowed to profit from its control of the waterway.

Iran imposed a de-facto blockade on the Strait of Hormuz after the start of the war with the United States and Israel on February 28, leading to a spike in global energy prices.

A two-week ceasefire was agreed late last week but it remains shaky, especially after the failure of talks between Iran and the US in Islamabad. – AFP

## ‘No other way’: Mideast prepares for more fighting as talks fail

DOHA, Qatar – A sense of dread spread across the Middle East after talks between the US and Iran collapsed, as fears of renewed fighting rattled an already tense region with Donald Trump ordering a naval blockade of the Strait of Hormuz.

Following more than 20 hours of talks in the Pakistani capital Islamabad, US Vice President JD Vance admitted the yawning differences between the US and Iran proved to be insurmountable for the moment.

Questions about what would come next and whether the two sides would continue to respect a two-week ceasefire was anybody’s guess as both the Iranian and American delegations departed Pakistan without a deal.

“Things could change at any moment,” said Aishah, a 32-year-old economic consultant based in Doha.

“It’s more about taking each day as it comes.”

The failure of the talks however did not surprise many in the region.

“I didn’t have a lot of hope for them going in, because the two sides want completely opposite things,” Laura Kaufman, a 38-year-old school teacher in Tel Aviv, told AFP.

“There didn’t seem to be anyone willing to actually negotiate.”

A recent poll found that only 10 percent of the Israeli public believe the war against Iran had constituted a “significant success, compared to 32 percent who view it as a failure”.

In Iran, a brief spell of hope that talks would end the hostilities between the long-time foes were quickly dashed.

“I really wanted them to make peace,” said Mahsa, a 30-year-old employee of an export company in the Iranian capital.

“It’s been almost 45 days now that I’ve seen everyone stressed. It’s a bad situation.”

### ‘Worried’

Elsewhere in the Middle East, the negotiations’ failure only seemed to guarantee more uncertainty.

“I am worried about the continuation of the situation and the return of attacks again, because they were causing me tension,” said Imam, an Egyptian housewife living in the UAE capital of Abu Dhabi.

“I was making a great effort not to pass my tension on to the children.”

With nerves already battered, President Trump on Sunday ordered an immediate naval blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, vowing to intercept any ship that pays tolls to Tehran while also preventing Iran from earning future oil revenues.

“Any Iranian who fires at us, or at peaceful vessels, will be BLOWN TO HELL!” he wrote.

The news came as many in the region were hoping for a return to normality.

Earlier yesterday, Saudi Arabia’s energy ministry said its key east-west oil pipeline and other major energy facilities had been restored following attacks by Iran on targets across the Gulf.

“Of course, I am worried that the war will return again,” said Amin, a pharmacist living in Saudi Arabia’s eastern province, who asked to use a pseudonym for security reasons.

Back in Iran, a sense of the inevitable had begun to sink in for many there.

“I would have preferred peace, but I think there is no other way but war and confrontation,” said Hamed, 37.

“Based on what I see and hear, unfortunately we are going to war again and it seems like we will have a long war.” – AFP

## Trump orders US naval blockade of Strait of Hormuz

WASHINGTON – President Donald Trump yesterday ordered a US naval blockade of the Strait of Hormuz in the wake of failed peace talks with Iran – a significant escalation that would test an already fragile ceasefire.

In lengthy social media posts and an interview on Fox News, Trump acknowledged that the marathon negotiations in Islamabad had gone “well” and “most points were agreed to.”

But he said Tehran had been “unyielding” in its refusal to give up its nuclear ambitions, and had failed to open the strait, through which a fifth of the world’s crude oil passes – a condition of the two-week ceasefire currently in place.

And he threatened China with a massive 50 percent tariff on its goods entering the United States if it decides to help Tehran militarily.

“Effective immediately, the United States Navy, the Finest in the World, will begin the process of BLOCKADING any and all Ships trying to enter, or leave, the Strait of Hormuz,” Trump said on his Truth Social platform.

“Any Iranian who fires at us, or at peaceful vessels, will be BLOWN TO HELL!”

Trump initially suggested that “other countries” would be involved in the blockade effort, and then told Fox’s “Sunday Morning Futures with Maria Bartiromo” that Britain “and a couple of other countries” would be sending minesweepers.

### ‘Staggering’ tariff threat

US Vice President JD Vance left Pakistan without a deal after weekend talks with a team led by Iran’s parliamentary speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf – the highest-level meeting between the two sides since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

The talks were meant to solidify a fragile two-week ceasefire with a final deal to end the conflict that has engulfed the Middle East, leaving thousands dead and roiling global markets. But no conclusions were reached.

“We leave here with a very simple proposal, a method of understanding that is our final and best offer. We’ll see if the Iranians accept it,” Vance told reporters.

Trump said he had been fully briefed by the US negotiating team of Vance, special envoy Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, the president’s son-in-law.

The US leader slammed Iran for “knowingly” failing to deliver on a pledge to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, writing: “As they promised, they better begin the process of getting this INTERNATIONAL WATERWAY OPEN AND FAST!”

Iran has effectively blocked the strait for weeks, since the United States and Israel launched a bombing campaign against the Islamic republic more than six weeks ago.

On Saturday, the US military announced that two of its warships had transited the strait at the start of a mine clearance operation.

Trump yesterday warned China that it would face a high price if it were to help Tehran militarily at this phase of the war.

“If we catch them doing that, they get a 50 percent tariff, which is a staggering – that’s a staggering amount,” Trump told Bartiromo.

He also reiterated a threat to destroy Iranian power plants and other civilian energy infrastructure if no lasting deal is reached, and warned that US forces would “finish up the little that is left of Iran” if necessary.

“We are fully ‘LOCKED AND LOADED,’” he wrote. – AFP



Smoke rises from the site of an Israeli airstrike that targeted an area in the southern Lebanese city of Nabatieh yesterday. Lebanon’s health ministry said yesterday the death toll since the start of the war between Israel and Iran-backed Hezbollah had reached 2,020. The new toll from the Lebanese health ministry includes 248 women, 165 children and 85 medical and emergency personnel killed, along with 6,436 people wounded since Lebanon was drawn into the Middle East war on March 2. – AFP

## Iranian hopes dashed as US talks fail after weeks of war

TEHRAN – After weeks of war between Iran and the United States, Iranians clung to hope that negotiations could bring an end to the fighting – only to see them dashed when talks failed.

The negotiations took place on Saturday in Pakistan against the backdrop of a fragile two-week ceasefire announced days earlier that offered a lull in the bombing.

“I really wanted them to make peace,” said Mahsa, a 30-year-old employee of an export company in the Iranian capital.

“It’s been almost 45 days now that I’ve seen everyone stressed. It’s a bad situation.”

The United States and Israel attacked Iran on February 28, sparking retaliation from the Islamic republic that has plunged the Middle East into conflict and

shaken the global economy.

Hours before the announcement of the ceasefire, US President Donald Trump warned that “a whole civilisation will die... never to be brought back again” as he threatened to bomb infrastructure across Iran.

“I was stressed until 3:00 a.m.... No one slept that night,” Mahsa said.

It was not immediately clear whether the two sides would resume talks after Saturday’s discussions failure, or whether the ceasefire would hold.

### ‘No other way but war’

The main sticking points were not officially disclosed at the time, but Trump later castigated Iran for not opening the Strait of Hormuz and said it had refused to concede on the issue of its nuclear programme.

The weeks of bombardment have taken a huge toll on Iranians.

“We feel despair and hopelessness. We are tired of this uncertainty,” said Nahid, a 60-year-old housewife in Tehran.

Although disappointed, 42-year-old shop owner Farhad said he had expected the talks to fail.

“We knew from the beginning that the other side did not want to reach a conclusion,” he said, referring to the United States.

Hamed, 37, said the failure to reach a deal signalled more fighting ahead.

“I would have preferred peace, but I think there is no other way but war and confrontation,” he said.

“Based on what I see and hear, unfortunately we are going to war again and it seems like we will have a long war.” – AFP

# Venezuelan opposition demands elections after Maduro ouster

**Margioni Bermudez**

CARCAS – Venezuela’s opposition on Friday called for presidential elections, noting that the 90-day legal period for organising a vote on replacing ousted leader Nicolas Maduro had elapsed.

In a statement, the Vente party of opposition leader María Corina Machado said that with Maduro absent from the country since his capture by US forces in a January 3 raid, “presidential elections must be called within 30 days of this declaration.”

Maduro’s former vice president Delcy Rodríguez was sworn in as interim president on January 5, two days after longtime socialist leader Maduro was flown out of Venezuela by US forces to face trial in New York. He has appeared in court twice

since then to answer drug trafficking charges.

The Venezuelan Constitution says that “temporary absences of the president of the republic shall be filled by the executive vice president for up to 90 days, extendable by decision of the National Assembly for an additional 90 days.”

“If a temporary absence lasts for more than 90 consecutive days, the National Assembly shall decide by a majority vote of its members whether it should be considered a permanent absence,” says Article 234 of the constitution, which was cited by Vente.

Vente said the “entire country and the democratic international community know and can attest to” Maduro’s complete absence from power.

The move comes a day after

protesters calling for wage increases clashed with police in the centre of Caracas, in a sign that the fear that gripped Venezuelan society under Maduro had begun to subside.

By Friday, 97 days had passed since Venezuela’s authoritarian leader of 12 years was nabbed by US special forces at a military compound in Caracas, together with his wife Cilia Flores.

Caracas says that around 100 people were killed in the pre-dawn bombing raid that preceded his capture and the firefight between US forces and Maduro’s security detail.

Venezuela’s parliament, which has a pro-government majority, has not yet discussed calling new elections.

So far, its focus has been on rolling back state control over the economy to pave the way for more

foreign investment in the critical oil and mining sectors.

The reforms are a key demand of the United States, which has been content to let Maduro’s former inner circle retain power as long as it unlocks access to oil and eases state repression.

President Donald Trump has voiced satisfaction with Rodríguez – he has called her “terrific” – and threatened her with a similar fate to Maduro if she does not do his bidding.

Speaking in late February, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Venezuela “will need the legitimacy of democratic – fair, democratic – elections” but said Washington’s initial priority after Maduro’s capture had been to ensure stability.

Rodríguez told NBC News in mid-February that she was committed

to holding free and fair elections, but the timing would be decided as part of a “political dialogue.”

Maduro is accused of stealing the last presidential elections in July 2024.

The opposition’s tally of votes at that time showed Machado’s candidate, Edmundo González Urrutia, winning by a wide margin.

The National Electoral Council (CNE) proclaimed Maduro the winner without providing a detailed vote breakdown, triggering mass protests that were harshly suppressed.

Opposition parties have called for a change in the leadership of the CNE, which is accused of doing the bidding of the ruling “chavismo” movement founded by late socialist firebrand Hugo Chávez, who was president from 1999 to 2013. – AFP

## Russia’s deputy FM hails ‘special’ relations on Cuba visit

HAVANA – Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov hailed the “special nature” of relations with Cuba on a visit on Thursday, where he met President Miguel Díaz-Canel as tensions simmer between Washington and energy-starved Havana.

“Russia is not going to leave the western hemisphere, no matter what they say in Washington,” Ryabkov told a press conference after the meeting, according to Russian state news agency TASS.

“Our relations with Cuba are of a special nature... We can’t just betray Cuba, it’s completely out of the question, we can’t leave it to its fate.”

The meeting, confirmed by Díaz-Canel’s office on X, came 10 days after a Russian oil tanker arrived in Cuba despite a de facto US fuel blockade.

“We take this opportunity to send a hug to our dear friend, President Vladimir Putin,” Díaz-Canel said in the meeting, according to his office.

Ryabkov said Cuba’s economic issues, including its energy security, were among the main topics of discussion, TASS reported.

Under President Donald Trump, the United States has threatened tariffs on any country that attempts to sell oil to Cuba, resulting in an energy crisis on the communist

island that has worsened since January.

The US labels Cuba a threat to US national security, and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who is of Cuban descent, has demanded changes to the island’s leadership.

Earlier on Thursday, Díaz-Canel told US-based NBC News that he would not resign under US pressure.

Rubio has denied calling for Díaz-Canel’s resignation.

“At the present moment, Russia is one hundred percent in solidarity with Cuba; despite the complexity the country is going through, we are by your side, said the deputy foreign minister,” the Cuban president’s office wrote on X on Thursday. – AFP

## Brazilian police dog sniffs out 48 tonnes of marijuana in record bust



A female police dog that took part in an operation in which 48 tons of marijuana were seized, poses in front of packages containing the drug and weapons at the City of Police in Rio de Janeiro on Wednesday. – AFP

RIO DE JANEIRO – Brazilian police last week seized a record 48 tonnes of marijuana in a favela (shantytown) in Rio de Janeiro, uncovered by chance by a sniffer dog during a regular operation against criminal factions.

During the operation in the Complexo da Maré on Wednesday, a large complex of favelas in the north of the city, a dog named Hulk indicated there was something suspicious under an abandoned water tank.

An officer “discovered a bunker inside where this entire quantity of drugs had been hidden,” said Lieutenant Colonel Luciano Pedro Barbosa, commander of the Canine Operations Battalion.

He told AFP the seizure was the largest in Brazil’s history and “represents a financial loss of over 50 million reais (US\$10 million) for the criminal faction involved.”

“All of this was thanks to the work of the dog. It wasn’t based on intelligence.”

A military police statement said it took dozens of officers five hours to remove the drugs, which were removed in four trucks.

During the removal, officers came under fire from criminals “triggering a shootout” and leading to the arrest of a suspected gunman.

The previous record for the largest drug seizure in Brazil was in 2021 when highway police seized 36.5 tonnes in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul.

The police operation, launched on Tuesday, involved 250 military police officers, who also seized five rifles, four pistols, and 26 stolen vehicles, including cars and motorcycles.

Large swaths of Rio de Janeiro – mainly low-income, densely populated communities – are under the control of criminal factions who engage in drug trafficking and other crimes. – AFP

## Lula says Trump ‘threatening’ world, calling for peace

SÃO PAULO – Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on Friday called for peace, saying US President Donald Trump is “threatening” the world.

“The world is difficult, Trump

is threatening everyone,” Lula said during a speech at the inauguration of a federal education institute campus in Sorocaba, São Paulo state.

In his speech, Lula reiterated Brazil’s stance against involvement

in conflicts.

“We in Brazil do not want war, we want peace,” Lula said, adding that his government prioritizes improving access to social, economic and cultural services. – Xinhua

## Remains of 11 people found in graves in western Mexico

GUADALAJARA – The remains of at least 11 people were found in hidden graves in the western Mexican state of Jalisco, local authorities said on Thursday.

The skeletal remains were found in a rural lot in Ixtlahuacán, a suburb of Guadalajara, the state capital, the local prosecutor’s office said.

Another 12 bags containing human remains were found at a construction site in nearby Tlajomulco, Blanca Trujillo, the deputy prosecutor for missing persons, told a press conference.

Guadalajara is one of three

Mexican cities hosting World Cup soccer matches this summer.

The total number of victims from the two sites is still unknown, Trujillo said, adding that in both cases the remains appear to be from a long time ago, without specifying a timeframe.

The state of Jalisco has been hit hard by drug-related violence over the years.

In February, Mexican military forces killed Nemesio “El Mencho” Oseguera, leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel and one of the United States’ most-wanted drug lords.

After the incident, World Cup organiser FIFA reaffirmed its confidence in Guadalajara as a host city.

The Mexican federal government announced the deployment of nearly 100,000 troops to guarantee security in all three host cities, which also include Monterrey and Mexico City. Mexico is hosting the soccer tournament with the United States and Canada.

According to official figures, Mexico has more than 130,000 missing persons, most of them in the last two decades amid drug-related violence. – AFP

## Cologne push Bremen closer to the Bundesliga brink



BERLIN – Werder Bremen have edged closer to the Bundesliga drop zone after going down 3-1 at Cologne in an error-ridden performance yesterday.

Bremen gave away an early penalty, converted by Said El Mala, and lost captain Marco Friedl to a red card for a last-man foul midway through the first half. Cologne's Ragnar Ache and Isak Johannesson scored either side of a Romano Schmid penalty for Bremen.

The defeat leaves Bremen, who have played the joint-most seasons in the German top flight alongside Bayern Munich, three points clear of the relegation play-off spot with five games remaining in the campaign.

Cologne leapfrogged the visitors and are now five points clear of the drop zone. – AFP

## 7 Eritrean football squad members seek asylum in Eswatini: police

### Football

MBABANE, ESWATINI – Seven players and officials from an Eritrean football team that played in Eswatini last month are still in the kingdom and seeking asylum, police and officials told AFP yesterday.

Several members of the 24-member squad are believed to have absconded in mysterious circumstances after beating Eswatini in a March 31 Africa Cup of Nations qualifier.

Only three of 10 locally based players arrived back in Eritrea after they were due to return home via South Africa and Egypt, a Confederation of African Football (CAF) official told AFP this week.

Seven members of the team were in Eswatini, several sources told AFP in the small kingdom wedged between South Africa and Mozambique.

"The police are aware of the presence of three players and four officials from Eritrea," deputy police communication officer Nosipho Mnguni told AFP.

They had reported to the Lobamba police station after the match. "Reporting to the police is the first step of any person seeking asylum," Mnguni said.

The office of the Commissioner of Refugees had received written applications for asylum from seven Eritrean nationals, an official there said on condition of anonymity.

An Eswatini Football Association (EFA) official said the seven were being accommodated at a sports facility in Lobamba, about 15 kilometres outside the capital, Mbabane.

Some were being assisted by relatives also applying for asylum, the person said on condition of anonymity.

A journalist who covered the match said players had told him they did not intend to return home because they wanted to avoid conscription.

"They told me clearly that they are not going back," the journalist said, also speaking anonymously. "Their biggest fear is being forced into military service."

"They have submitted their asylum requests and are waiting for the process to unfold."

Eritrea has long faced criticism from human rights organisations over its system of indefinite national service, which has prompted many citizens to flee.

The United Nations estimates about 80 Eritreans involved in football, including players, coaches and officials, have defected from the east African country during the past 20 years.

– AFP

## Union's Eta becomes first female coach in top-5 European leagues



BERLIN – Bundesliga club Union Berlin yesterday named Marie-Louise Eta as head coach, making her the first female manager of a men's team in a top-five European league, after former mentor Steffen Baumgart was sacked.

The 34-year-old will take over for the remainder of the season.

"I am delighted the club has entrusted me with this challenging task," Eta said in a statement.

"One of Union's strengths has always been our ability to pull together in such situations. And of course, I'm convinced that we'll get the points we need with this team."

Eta became the first female assistant coach in Bundesliga history when she was promoted to the role in 2023.

Never before has a men's top-flight club in Germany, England, Spain, Italy or France - considered the top-five European leagues - appointed a woman in the head coach role.

Eta's first match in the dugout is on Saturday when Union host struggling Wolfsburg.

Baumgart was sacked early yesterday morning after the club's form flatlined in the second-half of the season, with Saturday's 3-1 defeat at last-placed Heidenheim the final straw.

A fan favourite who spent two seasons at the club as a player, Baumgart took over as coach at the beginning of 2025 and helped Union stay in the Bundesliga with a 13<sup>th</sup>-place finish.

The coach took Union close to the European spots at the end of 2025 but

the club have won just two games since Christmas and sit seven points above the relegation play-off spot with five games to play.

"We've had an absolutely disappointing second-half of the season," sporting director Horst Held said in a statement.

"Our situation remains precarious and we desperately need points to stay in the league."

"The performances in recent weeks don't give us the confidence we could turn things around with the current set-up."

As a player, Eta won the women's Champions League in 2010 with Turbine Potsdam - she was an unused substitute in the final against Lyon - along with three Bundesliga titles.

She retired at the age of 26 to start coaching, first with Werder Bremen youth teams before taking on a similar role at the German FA (DFB).

She has already committed to take over Union Berlin's women's Bundesliga team, who are playing their first season in the top-flight this campaign, from summer.

Women have managed men's football teams in the lower divisions but never in the top flight.

German third tier Ingolstadt FC are currently coached by Sabrina Wittmann, who became the first female coach of a professional men's team when appointed to the position in 2024.

French second-flight club Clermont were managed by Corinne Diacre for three seasons until 2017, until she left to take over the French women's national team.

– AFP



Union Berlin's assistant coach Marie-Louise Eta oversees a training session in Berlin on December 11, 2023, on the eve of their UEFA Champions League Group C match against Real Madrid CF. – AFP

## Spurs win would 'change everything': De Zerbi



SUNDERLAND - Roberto De Zerbi said one win can

"change everything" for Tottenham as the full extent of his task to save them from relegation became clear after yesterday's 1-0 defeat at Sunderland.

The Italian took over from interim boss Igor Tudor at the end of last month and Spurs started his first match at the helm in the Premier League drop zone after West Ham beat Wolves on Friday.

Their defeat, courtesy of Nordi Mukiele's heavily deflected strike in the second half, left them two points behind the Hammers with just six games to go.

Sorry Spurs have not won a Premier League game since late December and

are facing a huge battle to avoid their first relegation since 1977.

But former Brighton and Marseille boss De Zerbi - the London club's third manager of a shocking season - said a win would change the mood.

"We have to work on one win because with one win we can change everything this season," he told Sky Sports.

"I have 24 hours per day and it is not a problem of time. We created chances in the first half, the same [as] we have done in the week."

"The players have great quality but we have to believe more in ourselves and the crucial part is to win one game."

"We can play much better than today but

after five or six training games it is difficult. All together we have to stay focused to win one game."

Tottenham face Brighton next week, with a game against bottom club Wolves to follow but it is difficult to see where their next win is going to come from.

De Zerbi said his new team, who have lost half of their 32 league matches this season, had the quality but were suffering a crisis of confidence.

"I can be a big brother, father, they don't need a coach," he told the BBC. "They don't need to improve football. They can play better and they will play better once we reach a different level of confidence."

– AFP

## Napoli draw at Parma gives Inter chance to put one hand on Serie A title



PARMA – Napoli's Serie A title defence suffered a blow with yesterday's 1-1 draw at Parma which gave league leaders Inter

Milan the chance to move nine points clear. Scott McTominay's drilled finish on the hour mark gave Napoli a draw which may well not be enough for the champions to claim a third Scudetto in four seasons.

Napoli trail Inter by six points, a gap which could have increased following the late match between the Milan giants and Champions League chasers Como.

Antonio Conte's team were on the back foot within 36 seconds. That was how long it took for Gabriel Strefezza to race on to Nesta Elphege's knock-on and beautifully curl home Parma's opener.

Napoli struggled to break down the hosts who were content to sit deep and soak up the pressure and deny the away team a sixth straight league win.

Last weekend's win over AC Milan had reopened the prospect of retaining the title but a draw at the Stadio Ennio Tardini has made that feat less likely with six matches remaining in their season.

"I told the boys that there is a very thin line that separates winners and losers," said Conte.

"If you concede a goal after 30 seconds it's inevitable that a match which was already going to be against a deep-lying team was going to become even more like that."

"They rightly put up the barricades and tried to hit us on the counter... in the end I can't really criticise the team for their

desire and commitment."

Parma are level on 36 points with Genoa, who also took a step towards safety with a tumultuous 2-1 win over Sassuolo in the day's early fixture. Both teams were down to 10 men for the second half following a tunnel bust-up.

Caleb Ekuban tapped home Genoa's winner with six minutes remaining in front of a typically passionate crowd at the Stadio Luigi Ferraris who watched their team move nine points clear away from the relegation zone in 13<sup>th</sup>.

Genoa midfielder Mikael Ellertsson and Italy international Domenico Berardi were sent off after a row blew up just after the half-time whistle, with the hosts leading through Ruslan Malinovskyi. – AFP

## World champions England make winning start to Women's Six Nations

Julian Guyer

LONDON – World champions England launched their Women's Six Nations title defence with a comfortable, if not completely convincing, 33-12 win over Ireland at Twickenham on Saturday.

France, long England's main European challengers, ran in five tries after half-time to rout Italy 40-7 in Grenoble, while Scotland saw off Wales 24-19 in Cardiff.

England scored five tries in front of a crowd of 77,120 – a record for a Women's Six Nations fixture – in what was their first match since they beat Canada 33-13 in the World Cup final at Twickenham in September.

An England side showing eight changes to the team that started the World Cup final, with four players missing through pregnancy, were not at their best.

But this bonus-point success still extended their record winning run to 34 games, with the Red Roses chasing an eighth straight Six Nations title and fifth consecutive Grand Slam.

Victory came at a cost for England with lock Morwenna Taling suffering a serious injury and replacement scrum-half Natasha Hunt also leaving the field.

"It was a real arm-wrestle and

a real clunky stop-start match," England coach John Mitchell told the BBC.

"We had to deal with unexpected injuries and we have lost another international lock and possibly a great nine (scrum-half) as well, so you might see England full-backs all as back rows by the end of the competition.

"When we stuck to the plan we were very good, we were persistent and patience."

Ireland were thrashed 49-5 by England in last season's Championship. But they scored two late tries to share Saturday's second half 12-12 after England led 21-0 at the break.

"I am really encouraged with the spirit the Irish girls showed at the end," said Ireland coach Scott Bemand.

England ran in three first-half tries, hooker Amy Cokayne opening the scoring and prop Sarah Bern crossing twice against an error-strewn Ireland.

They should have had another try on the stroke of half-time but star full-back Ellie Kildunne dropped the ball as she went over the line.

The England backs did get in on the act in the 54<sup>th</sup> minute when wing Jess Breach scored her 54<sup>th</sup> try in as many Tests after a kick ahead by new captain Meg Jones, leading England for the first time in the

absence of pregnant World Cup-winning skipper Zoe Stratford.

Ireland replacement forward Anna McGann pulled a try back in the 65<sup>th</sup> minute only for Kildunne to atone for her earlier error moments later by finishing a flowing move.

Erin King marked her debut match as Ireland captain with a try seven minutes from time.

### Nelson's triumph

France overcame a sluggish first half to put away Italy to give new coach Francois Ratier a winning start.

"We expected it to be tricky from the outset, especially at the start of the tournament. It was to be expected that we'd have a few hiccups," said Ratier.

Scotland were firm favourites in Cardiff, having thrashed Wales 38-8 during last year's Women's Rugby World Cup, but they were made to work hard for their win.

Both sides scored three tries each but Scotland fly-half Helen Nelson's goal-kicking proved decisive, the fly-half landing three conversions and a penalty.

"It was a little bit tight at the end, we got our defensive play in finally," said Nelson.

Defeat left Wales still searching for their first Women's Six Nations win since April 2023. –AFP

## Tearful Van Aert finally wins Paris-Roubaix cycling Monument

Cycling

Barnaby Chesterman

ROUBAIX, FRANCE – Belgian Wout van Aert finally won one of cycling's cobbled Monuments as he outsprinted world champion Tadej Pogacar to take Paris-Roubaix victory yesterday.

The 31-year-old Van Aert collected one of the two prestigious cobbled classics after seven previous top-four finishes in either the Tour of Flanders or the 'Hell of the North'.

"It means everything to me. It's been a goal since 2018, when I first did this race," said a tearful Van Aert who dedicated the victory to his former teammate Michael Goolaerts, who died that day aged just 23 after suffering a heart-attack during the race.

"Ever since then, it has been my goal to come here and point my finger to the sky," added Van Aert.

"This victory is for Michael, but especially for his family, the staff, all my friends and teammates in the previous team."

"It was a really tough day, and ever since then, in some kind of way, I was unlucky in this race, but it brought me experience," he said.

It was Van Aert's second Monument victory after Milan-San Remo in 2020.

In crossing the line first at the famous velodrome in Roubaix, Van Aert prevented Pogacar from completing a sweep of the five Monument races, and stopped the 27-year-old Slovenian's run of four straight victories in these major classics.

Van Aert had a worrying moment with around 70km left as he suffered a puncture that dropped him out of the lead group, but he fought his way back.

"Even today, when luck was not on my side, I kept believing in it. Finally, the reward is there," said Van Aert.

"Obviously there's no more beautiful way than going to the line with the world champion," added Van Aert.

"He is a true champion, and he gave me such a hard time. Beating

him in the sprint 'mano-a-mano' is something really special for me.

"It's such a chaotic race. I think everyone coming to the line has his own story, and that is why it is so beautiful.

"It can be hard, but on a day like this, it is the best race there is."

### Too strong

In an incident-packed 'Queen of the Classics' race, Belgian Jasper Stuyven took third place 13 seconds back, with pre-race favourite Mathieu van der Poel relegated to fourth at 15sec.

That in itself was a remarkable result for three-time champion Van der Poel, who lost two minutes after suffering two punctures in the crucial 2.3km-long Arenberg forest cobbled sector with just under 100km to race.

Van der Poel was the first to congratulate Van Aert after the race.

The leading pair broke clear with 53km to ride, after which Van Aert worked hard to stick to Pogacar's wheel as the world champion put in several bursts of acceleration over cobbled sectors.

Pogacar, who had won his three previous races this season, was unable to distance Van Aert and so the pair arrived together at the Roubaix velodrome.

Pogacar led out the sprint but Van Aert proved too strong and breezed past to win convincingly.

Van der Poel impressed with his determination to win a record-equalling fourth Paris-Roubaix title, pulling back the majority of his deficit over a 40km stretch.

He had closed to just over 20 seconds behind the leaders when Van Aert and Pogacar broke clear.

Although he joined a group of six chasers, they were unable to close the gap.

Pogacar had his own problems. He suffered a puncture with 120km to ride and needed to change bikes again 50km later. With about 17km to ride he almost fell on the tough Carrefour de l'Arbre cobbled section.

He stayed upright but when it came to the sprint, Van Aert had his number. –AFP



Russia's Mirra Andreeva (left) poses with her golden trophy and Austria's Anastasia Potapova with her silver trophy pose after the women's single final match of the WTA Upper Austria Women's Linz tennis tournament in Linz, Austria yesterday. Andreeva made the perfect start to her clay court campaign as she came from a set down to beat Potapova 1-6, 6-4, 6-3 to land the WTA event in Linz yesterday. –AFP

## Teenage sprint star Gout powers to 200m win in blistering 19.67sec

Athletics

SYDNEY – Teenage sprint sensation Gout Gout ran a blistering 19.67 seconds to win the 200m at the Australian championships yesterday, faster than Usain Bolt at the same age.

Fellow Australian Aidan Murphy also cracked the 20-second mark, coming second in 19.88 – the two quickest times of the year and with a legal tailwind.

"This is what I've been waiting for," said Gout at the Sydney Olympic Park Athletic Centre.

"We have such incredible athletes in Australia and me being able to race these athletes, we push each other to the limits. Two Australians sub-20. I mean, this is amazing."

The 18-year-old burst on the scene in 2024 when he clocked 20.04 seconds at the Australian All Schools Athletics Championships.

It shattered Peter Norman's national record of 20.06 from the 1968 Olympics and was the quickest ever by a 16-year-old.

He had improved to 20.02 but never gone under 20 seconds legally before.

His time was faster at the same age as Bolt, who ran 19.93 in 2004.

"There's a big weight off my shoulders knowing I ran it legally, and I have the speed and my body to run times like that. So, it definitely feels great, and ready for more," Gout said.

The race was billed as a showdown with his closest

Australian rival Lachlan Kennedy.

But 22-year-old Kennedy, who is also on a rapid rise, withdrew after executing flawlessly to win the 100m in 9.96 on Saturday – the fastest time run by an Australian on home soil.

He also clocked 9.96 in his heat. "It's the standard I've set now, so hopefully I can go a bit quicker next time and see where it takes me," Kennedy said. "I think the sky is the limit."

### Hull treble bid fails

World under-20 mile record holder Cameron Myers reinforced his potential by running 3:29.85 in the 1500m, edging out reigning Commonwealth Games champion Oliver Hoare.

It was the best time globally this year and the quickest ever in Australia.

The 19-year-old Myers backed up by taking out the 5000m in a personal best 13:11.66.

But Paris Olympic 1500m silver medallist Jessica Hull's bid for a rare 800m-1500m-5000m treble fell apart.

Hull was leading the 1500m with 100m to go, but was clipped from behind and dramatically fell with fellow Olympian Claudia Hollingsworth crossing first.

Hollingsworth was initially disqualified over the incident, but reinstated on appeal.

Hull pulled out of the 800m, won by Abbey Caldwell in 1:58.57, but

returned to win the 5000m in 15:13.21.

The four-day meet also saw Olympic pole vault champion Nina Kennedy clear 4.65m to stand on top of the national podium for the fifth time in her career.

Kennedy continues to jump off a restricted run-up as she returns from a long injury layoff ahead of defending her title at the Glasgow Commonwealth Games in July.

"I'm happy with how I jumped. I got the win pretty comfortably out there, so there is no need to push the body," she said.

High jump world champion and Olympic silver medallist Nicola Olyslagers cleared 1.99m to outleap Olympic bronze medallist Eleanor Patterson (1.93m). –AFP

# Justin Bieber reconnects with fans on Coachella's 2<sup>nd</sup> day

Paula Ramon

INDIO – With a minimalist set and a trip through his musical past, pop superstar Justin Bieber returned to the stage on Saturday to headline the second day of Coachella.

The Canadian singer has not performed at a venue of Coachella's size since 2022, when he appeared at Rock in Rio in Brazil before cancelling the remainder of his international tour due to health issues.

Last year Bieber released the album "Swag," quickly followed by his eighth studio album "Swag II."

While Bieber has recently played smaller shows, Coachella was billed as the start of his full-scale comeback.

Bieber earlier said in an Instagram post that "We WILL be singing at the top of our lungs on Saturday."

Dressed in a red sweater, shorts and black boots, the 32-year-old artist made good on his promise, playing the role of DJ and taking requests from online viewers.

After opening with several tracks from "Swag II," Bieber sat at a

computer and began a journey into the past, searching for his videos on YouTube and singing snippets from "That Should Be Me," "Beauty and a Beat," "Never Say Never," the teen pop anthem "Baby" and others hits.

"This is special," he told the crowd. "This is a night I dreamed about for a long time, so to be here is amazing."

Bieber also showed his old clips on YouTube, as well as moments captured by the ever-present cameras following him and his wife, Hailey Bieber.

## Eclectic offerings

Earlier in the day, New York City rockers The Strokes took the stage and announced a new album for June, following a six-year hiatus for the band.

They played anthems including "Hard to Explain," "Reptilia," "Last Nite" and "Someday."

Other acts in the spotlight on Saturday included Nine Inch Noize – the collaboration between legendary industrial band Nine Inch Nails and



Fans show their Justin Bieber sweaters during the 2026 Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in Indio, California on Saturday. – AFP

German producer Boys Noize – who also have an album on the way.

With dramatic lighting and intense sound, the band had fans jumping with versions of songs like "Closer," "Heresy," "The Warning" and "Copy of A."

The set by rising indie star

Sombr featured Billy Corgan of Smashing Pumpkins, and together they performed the rock band's 1990s hit "1979."

With nine stages, the festival hosted a wide range of genres, including Brazil's Luisa Sonza, influencer-turned-singer Addison Rae, Britain's PinkPantheress, K-pop star Taemin and David Byrne, the legendary co-founder of the band Talking Heads.

Coachella kicked off on Friday with performances from headliner Sabrina Carpenter, Moby, Devo and surprise appearances from Lizzo, David Lee Roth and HUNTR/X, who performed their Oscar-winning "Golden" alongside KATSEYE.

Carpenter's performance of hits like "Manchild," "Espresso" and "Please, Please, Please" was helped by big-screen stars Sam Elliott, Susan Sarandon and Will Ferrell, who rounded out her 90-minute set.

The festival ran this past weekend and continues next weekend, with a nearly identical lineup. It can be viewed on YouTube. – AFP

# Michael Jackson fans swarm Berlin for biopic premiere

BERLIN – Thousands of Michael Jackson fans descended on Berlin on Friday for the premiere of a new biopic about the "King of Pop", undeterred by child sex abuse allegations that continue to haunt the star.

"Michael", in which the singer is portrayed by his nephew Jaafar Jackson, is expected to be one of the highest-grossing films of its kind in history.

In the queue for the screening, Andy Escobar, a 31-year-old

aircraft mechanic from the United States, said his nickname at school was MJ – "because everybody knew that I was a Michael Jackson fan".

Asked about the child abuse allegations, Escobar said simply: "We know that's not true."

"He was found not guilty," added Megane Kittler, a 31-year-old educator from France who lives in Berlin.

Only around 4,000 fans were able to watch the film on Friday

evening (local time), two weeks before its official release, after being allocated seats via prize draws.

For the rest, there were Michael Jackson-themed activities throughout the weekend including panel discussions with the film crew, an exhibition dedicated to the singer and themed parties.

Jackson, who died aged 50 in 2009 from an overdose of propofol, faced multiple allegations of child sex abuse during his lifetime.

## Release pushed back

Despite his 2005 acquittal in a criminal trial for child molestation, the star never managed to restore his image while alive.

Other alleged victims filed civil lawsuits after his death and several proceedings are ongoing. The artist has never been convicted in a criminal or civil court.

"Michael" was originally intended to explore the impact of the allegations on the star, according to industry magazine *Variety*, citing unnamed sources "with knowledge of the production".

However, a third of the film was cut after lawyers for the Jackson estate realised there was a clause in a settlement with one of the singer's accusers that barred any mention of him in a film, the magazine said.

As a result, large parts of the film had to be rewritten and the release – originally scheduled for April 18, 2025 – was pushed back.

Film studio Lionsgate is banking on making US\$700 million in global box office receipts for the feature-length film.

That figure would far surpass other productions in the same genre except for the Freddie Mercury-inspired "Bohemian Rhapsody", which took in US\$910 million. – AFP



US actor Jaafar Jackson poses as he arrives on the red carpet for the world premiere of the Michael Jackson biopic "Michael" at the Uber Eats Music Hall in Berlin on Friday. – AFP

# Legendary Indian singer Asha Bhosle dies aged 92



A portrait of late Bollywood playback singer Asha Bhosle is displayed on a digital screen as a mark of tribute before the start of the 2026 Indian Premier League (IPL) T20 match between Mumbai Indians and Royal Challengers Bengaluru at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai yesterday. Bhosle, whose voice defined Bollywood music through the 1970s and 80s, died yesterday in Mumbai aged 92, her family said. – AFP

MUMBAI – Legendary Indian playback singer Asha Bhosle, whose voice defined Bollywood music through the 1970s and 80s, died yesterday in Mumbai aged 92, her family said.

Two-time Grammy nominee Bhosle breathed her last at the Breach Candy hospital where she was admitted with complaints of "extreme exhaustion" and chest infection.

"My mother passed away today. Her last rites will be held tomorrow at Shivaji Park in Mumbai," her son Anand Bhosle told reporters yesterday.

Bhosle recorded more than 12,000 songs in multiple Indian languages over a seven-decade career.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi said he was "deeply saddened" by her death.

"Her extraordinary musical journey, spanning decades, enriched our cultural heritage and touched countless hearts across the world," he said in a post on X.

"She will continue to inspire

generations and her songs will forever echo in people's lives."

Born on September 8, 1933 to a musical family, Bhosle began singing as a child alongside her elder sister, Lata Mangeshkar, after their father's death.

Often compared to Mangeshkar – revered as "India's nightingale" who died in 2022 – Bhosle forged her own path, embracing genres from pop to folk.

Her early life was marked by struggle, including a turbulent marriage at 16.

She went on to become one of Indian cinema's most versatile and celebrated voices, receiving the prestigious Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 2001 and earning two Grammy nominations.

Bhosle continued collaborating with global artists well into her later years, including a recent feature on British virtual band Gorillaz's album *The Mountain* ("Parvat").

Beyond music, she nurtured her passion for food, launching her "Asha's" restaurant chain in Dubai and Britain. – AFP

## World Weather

CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing 10°C~20°C	Manila 23°C~35°C	New York 15°C~25°C	Lisbon 13°C~18°C
Shanghai 15°C~20°C	Bangkok 26°C~38°C	London 4°C~15°C	Rio de Janeiro 18°C~26°C
Hong Kong 22°C~28°C	Tokyo 13°C~23°C	Frankfurt 8°C~14°C	Luanda 25°C~30°C
Taipei 21°C~31°C	Singapore 26°C~33°C	Vancouver 7°C~12°C	Maputo 22°C~32°C
Guangzhou 23°C~31°C	Kuala Lumpur 25°C~34°C	Paris 3°C~14°C	Dili 22°C~32°C
Nanjing 13°C~19°C	Jakarta 24°C~34°C	Moscow 2°C~14°C	São Tomé 27°C~31°C
Guilin 19°C~30°C	Seoul 13°C~27°C	Las Vegas 10°C~20°C	Praia 19°C~27°C
Xi'an 12°C~21°C	Sydney 12°C~23°C	Monte Carlo 14°C~19°C	Bissau 21°C~38°C



### 1. Vessel graveyard

This photo taken on Friday shows wrecks of ships at the “ship cemetery” in Moynaq, Uzbekistan. The “ship cemetery” displays the wrecks of ships abandoned as a result of the Aral Sea crisis. Situated between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the Aral Sea, once the world’s fourth-largest lake, continues to shrink and has lost more than 90 percent of its original surface area since the 1960s, leaving behind vast stretches of desertified lakebed. — Xinhua



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### 2. Interesting outfit!

British actor Jo Foster poses on the green carpet upon arrival to attend The Olivier Awards at the Royal Albert Hall in central London yesterday. — AFP

### 3. Proud parents

A baby Bornean orangutan and its parents are seen in the display area of the Singapore Zoo, in Singapore, on Friday. — Xinhua



3



4

### 4. Cross between a yak and a cow

A farmer leads a hybrid animal called ‘dzo’ as he ploughs a field next to cherry blossoms during the harvest season in Leh, India on Saturday. — AFP

### 5. Easy meal

A fisherman carries a box of fish at Chorrillos beach in Lima, Peru on Saturday. — AFP



5

### 6. No water in eyes

Revellers take part in mass water fights on the eve of the Songkran, or Thai New Year, on Khao San Road in Bangkok yesterday. — AFP



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