

Sam voices 3 'hopes' for civic groups to bolster grassroots governance



Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai delivers a speech during yesterday's ceremony hosted by the Alliance for Common People Building Up Macau (API) at The Plaza Restaurant in Zape.



API Chairman Si Ka Lon delivers a speech during yesterday's ceremony.

– Photos: Armindo Neves

Armindo Neves

Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai yesterday voiced three “hopes” for Macau’s community organisations to boost local grassroots governance.

Sam made the remarks in a speech at the 18th anniversary of the founding of the Alliance for Common People Building Up Macau (API) and the swearing-in ceremony for its seventh board of directors and board of supervisors, held at Plaza Restaurant in Zape.

“During my annual duty visit last December, President Xi Jinping issued a clear directive for the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR) to consistently enhance its governance efficiency,” Sam said, adding, “This administration has remained steadfast in its philosophy that Macau’s affairs should be discussed and tackled collectively.”

Sam also said, “In partnership with patriotic community organisations loving Macau, we have worked to bolster the

MSAR’s governance, with a particular emphasis on strengthening the infrastructure and capacity of grassroots governance.

“By engaging more broadly and effectively with suggestions from all sectors of society, we continue to forge a powerful consensus and a unified force for the development of the MSAR.”

In his speech, Sam also said he hopes that Macau’s community organisations will uphold the core values of patriotism and

love for Macau, thereby 1) promoting social harmony and stability; 2) delivering diverse social services and providing targeted support for vulnerable groups; 3) supporting the local government in its law-based governance and working together to enhance administrative effectiveness.

He also called on all sectors of civil society to actively offer suggestions for Macau’s 3rd Five-Year Plan.

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Musk, Cook to head to China with Trump: W House

WASHINGTON, DC – Top US executives, including Tesla’s Elon Musk and Apple’s Tim Cook, will accompany US President Donald Trump on his visit to Beijing this week, a White House official said yesterday.

Beijing has said it is ready to work with the United States in pursuit of “more stability” and confirmed that Trump will visit, the first US president to do so since 2017. His trip runs from tomorrow through Friday.

Washington and Beijing have been at loggerheads over key issues ranging from

trade tariffs to the Iran war to Taiwan, which Beijing insists is an inalienable part of China.

While in Beijing, Trump will hold talks with President Xi Jinping, with the countries’ myriad trade and economic issues on the table.

Trump and Xi agreed in October to a one-year truce in a blistering trade war that saw tariffs on many goods exceed 100 percent.

The US president has been pressuring companies to build manufacturing facilities in the United States, a bid to both reduce imports and increase domestic economic activity.

Many top tech companies’ supply chains, however, heavily involve China, making them particularly exposed to bilateral trade tensions.

The United States has also sought to block China from accessing the highest-end artificial intelligence (AI) chips from US companies.

According to a list shared by a White House official, speaking on condition of anonymity, Musk and Cook will be accompanied by 15 other chief executive officers.

They include the chiefs of Boeing,

GE Aerospace, Citi, Goldman Sachs, Mastercard, and Visa.

Among tech companies, top executives from Cisco, Meta, Micron and Qualcomm will be on the trip, the official said.

Musk, the richest person in the world, heavily backed Trump on the campaign trail for his second term as US president, contributing more than US\$280 million.

The two had a public falling out in July last year, but appear to have since reconciled, with Musk reappearing in White House circles. (More on p.7) – AFP, MPD

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Tens of millions risk hunger as Hormuz standoff blocks fertiliser: UN official

Tens of millions of people could face hunger and starvation if fertilisers are not soon allowed through the Strait of Hormuz, the head of a UN task force aimed at averting a looming humanitarian crisis told AFP yesterday.

– Story on p. 7

Starmer vows to prove ‘doubters’ wrong

Embattled British Prime Minister Keir Starmer came out fighting yesterday, vowing to prove his “doubters” wrong as he sought to quell growing calls to step down following disastrous election results.

– Story on p. 11

Mexico announces new aid shipment to US-blockaded Cuba

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said yesterday that her government was sending a new shipment of humanitarian aid to Cuba, where a US oil blockade has created a worsening economic and humanitarian crisis.

– Story on p. 12

MAIDS trainees showcase 'indomitable spirit' at 40th anniversary



These photos taken yesterday show some of the "Spurring the Steeds for the Expedition" exhibits and award-winning works of the Macau Association for Intellectual Development Services' creative design and slogan competition "Take A Breath", on display at The Plaza Restaurant in Zape. - Photos: Armindo Neves

Armindo Neves

Chan Kuong In, chairman of the Macau Association for Intellectual Development Services (MAIDS), said yesterday that a new exhibition aims to showcase the 'indomitable spirit' of the association's trainees.

Chan made the remarks during an awards ceremony for the creative design and slogan competition "Take

A Breath". The event, held at The Plaza Restaurant in Zape, also features an art exhibition titled "Spurring the Steeds for the Expedition".

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the association's establishment. In order to celebrate the Year of the Horse, the exhibition features both two-dimensional and three-dimensional works centred

on the animal.

Chan highlighted that the pieces reflect the various experiences and challenges the trainees have faced during their personal growth, aiming to demonstrate their resilience and vitality. The "Spurring the Steeds for the Expedition" exhibition remains on display at The Plaza Restaurant until Friday.

According to a leaflet published by the association, MAIDS (formerly the Macau Association for the Mentally Handicapped) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to the holistic development of individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Its core values include a steadfast commitment to a person-centred approach, the continuous

improvement of professional therapeutic services, and the creation of a social safety net, according to the Chinese-language leaflet. The association states in the leaflet that it seeks to develop the potential of those with intellectual disabilities, enhancing their quality of life and putting the spirit of social inclusion into practice. ■

Sam voices 3 'hopes' for civic groups to bolster grassroots governance

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According to previous reports by the Post, the local government is set to complete the drawing-up of Macau's 3rd Five-Year Plan and start implementing it this year. Moreover, the government has underlined its commitment to closely align Macau's third five-year socioeconomic development plan, also covering the period between 2026 and 2030, with the nation's 15th Five-Year Plan.

Reflecting on the region's financial health, Sam noted that Macau's GDP recorded a real year-on-year growth of 7.1 percent in the first quarter of 2026. He hailed the economic rebound as a "collective effort" from across the community

API Chairman Si Ka Lon noted in his speech that his group has 35,000 registered members and over 1,200 volunteers. Between 2023 and 2025, on average, it provided community services 1.5 million times annually to the local population, and followed up on an average of over 5,700 livelihood cases per year, he said. Si, a long-standing member of

the Macau Legislative Assembly (AL), pledged that the newly sworn-in members of the API board of directors and supervisory board will continue to focus on advancing work in six key areas, such as staunchly safeguarding the "One Country, Two Systems" principle; strengthening grassroots' social security; improving the quality of policy advisory input; supporting the development of the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin; promoting urban renewal; and nurturing young people in Macau.

The hour-long event was attended by hundreds of API members and high-ranking guests including Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) National Committee Vice-Chairman Edmund Ho Hau Wah, Liaison Office Director Zheng Xincong, Legislative Assembly President André Cheong Weng Chon, and Secretary for Administration and Justice Wong Sio Chak.

API co-founders and ex-lawmakers Chan Meng Kam and Ung Choi Kun were also in attendance. ■

Guangdong-Macao fair opens exhibitor recruitment for SME zone

Khalel Vallo

The exhibitor recruitment has opened for the "Macao Featured Products Zone" of the 2026 Guangdong & Macao Branded Products Fair at The Venetian Macao's Cotai Expo, targeting local SMEs (small- and medium-sized enterprises), according to a statement by the Commerce and Investment Promotion Institute (IPIM) yesterday.

The statement said that the fair will be organised by IPIM in conjunction with the Department of Commerce of Guangdong Province, which will be held from August 6 to 9 at Cotai Expo's Hall A.

According to the statement, the event will feature six themed exhibition zones – the Guangdong Branded Products Zone, the Macao Featured Products Zone, the "Belt and Road" Products Zone, the Smart Senior Wellness Experience Pavilion, the Healthy Living Zone, and the New Gourmet Tasting Zone.

The statement underlined that the fair will focus on the silver economy* and healthy living, with supporting activities such as fora, business matching sessions and experiential programmes to facilitate cooperation opportunities, adding that local SMEs can apply to join the Macao Featured Products Zone until May 26 through the institute's online system.

The statement noted that the zone will cover sectors such as smart products for seniors, health-related goods, daily necessities and food and beverages, further adding that eligible SMEs may benefit from a preferential exhibition fee of 1,400 patacas per standard booth.

In addition, applicants must have been registered for tax purposes for at least one year, with at least half of their capital held by local residents, the statement said, noting

Call for exhibitors
6-9/8
Cotai Expo Hall A, The Venetian Macao

Cooperation between Guangdong and Macao
One of the annual economic and commercial MICE events
Macao SMEs interested in participating are welcome to register

Exhibitor recruitment - business areas to be considered (in priority)
"M-Mark" Macao Product Quality Certification
Products made in Macao
Agency services for products from Portuguese-speaking countries
Enterprises already exhibiting at the Macao Ideas
Enterprises already exhibiting at the Portuguese-speaking Countries Products Exhibition Centre

Participation Fees
Preferential exhibition participation fee of **MOP 1,400** for eligible Macao enterprises

Booth size
3m x 3m
* Due to limited availability, the Organizer reserves the right to make the final decision on the selection of shortlisted exhibitors.
* Each eligible enterprise can only apply for one booth at the preferential price.

Registration dates From today until May 26, 2026

Registration method Online application system
macaomice.ipim.gov.mo

For enquiries, please contact or visit the event organiser - "Creation Advertising Co., Ltd." during office hours.

Office hours Monday to Friday 9:30am - 1:00pm, 2:30pm - 6:00pm
Address Av. Sidónio Pais No 63B-65A R/C, Macau
Hotline (853) 8798 9636

Organisers: Commerce and Investment Promotion Institute of the Macao Special Administrative Region (IPIM) Department of Commerce of Guangdong Province

This infographic released by the Commerce and Investment Promotion Institute (IPIM) yesterday shows its exhibitor recruitment for the "Macao Featured Products Zone" of the 2026 Guangdong & Macao Branded Products Fair to be held in August at The Venetian Macao's Cotai Expo.

that priority will be given to local manufacturers, representatives of products from Portuguese-speaking countries (PSCs), and enterprises with recognised certifications.

The institute said the fair will provide a platform for local businesses to enhance brand visibility, expand sales channels

and strengthen regional economic cooperation, the statement added. ■

*The silver economy is the sum of all economic activity – production, distribution and consumption – that caters to the needs, demands and purchasing power of adults aged 50 and older. - Gemini

Published since Aug 2004

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- Chatbots: DeepSeek, Gemini, Poe
- Wire services – AFP, Xinhua

Macau Weather

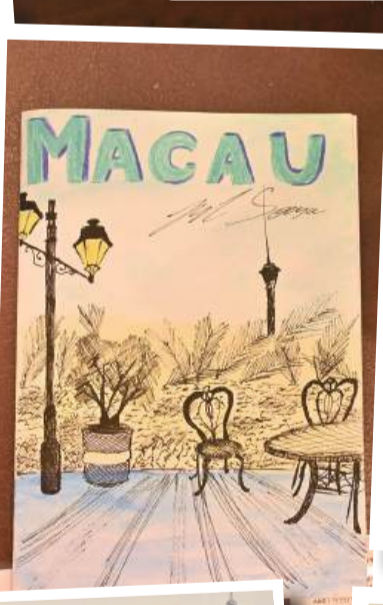
CLOUDY APART FROM SUNNY PERIODS.
FORCE 2 TO 4 SOUTH TO SOUTHWESTERLY WINDS.
RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL RANGE BETWEEN 65% AND 95%.



24°C~29°C

Source: SMG

Students create maps, artworks to showcase their perspective of Macau



Rui Pastorin

A variety of colourful artworks showcasing Macau through the eyes of youngsters are on display at Instituto Português do Oriente (IPOR) on Rua do Pato (醫院後街) for an exhibition held as part of the ongoing Letras & Companhia festival.

Letras & Companhia (“Literature and Companions”) is a literary and cultural festival for parents and children, being held until May 24. The event officially kicked off on Saturday, marking the event’s sixth edition; this year it is titled “A Minha Cidade” in Portuguese, or “My City”.

The ongoing free-admission exhibition, which shares the same title as the festival’s theme, is showcased until May 24 and presents artworks created by students from four schools invited by IPOR to participate.

Set up in areas easily spotted by visitors and passersby within the venue, the works on display showcases Macau through the eyes of students with the creation of their own maps, with a statement provided by the organisers noting that the works were made under the guidance of illustrator André Letria. Moreover, in addition to the maps are each youngster’s take on Macau and its urban environment, as well as the city’s characteristics.

According to the IPOR Facebook page, the participants were aged between eight and 14. Four schools participated in the event – Macau Portuguese School (EPM), Escola Sun Wah (新華學校), Zheng Guanying Official School, and the Generations International School. In addition to the works from these schools are 10 winning works from the CESL Asia Kids’ Drawing Contest organised by CESL Asia* in 2025.

Members of the public may visit the exhibition from 10 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. during the exhibition period. Meanwhile, one can view the variety of programmes and activities of the ongoing festival on <https://ipor.mo/noticias/letras-companhia-2026/>

The festival is title-sponsored by Galaxy Entertainment Group (GEG), with IPOR co-organising the event in conjunction with the Consulate-General of Portugal in Macau and Hong Kong.

* CESL Asia (盛世集團) is a Macau-based technology and services group specialising in environmental consultancy, facilities management, and sustainable investments. – Gemini.

Govt to draft bill raising maternity, annual leave

Tony Wong

The government said yesterday that it has decided to draft amendments to the Labour Relations Law in line with its proposals raised during its public consultation process earlier this year, namely an increase in the number of days for private-sector employees' statutory paid maternity leave, and an increase in the number of days for their statutory minimum paid annual leave.

The government also underlined yesterday that it is aiming to submit a bill amending the Labour Relations Law to the legislature within this year for debate, review and vote.

Labour Affairs Bureau (DSAL) Director Chan Un Tong made the remarks while speaking to reporters after a regular closed-door meeting of the Standing Council on Social Concerted Action.

The Standing Council on Social Concerted Action, headed by Macau's chief executive, is a government-appointed consultative body tasked with advising the government on its labour policies.

Customarily, meetings of the council are chaired by Macau's secretary for economy and finance. As the position of secretary for economy and finance was still vacant yesterday following Anton Tai Kin Ip's resignation last month, yesterday's meeting of the council, held at Government Headquarters, was chaired by Secretary for Administration and Justice Wong Sio Chak, on behalf of Chief Executive Sam Hou Fai.

The council consists of five business representatives and five labour representatives appointed by the government, as well as a number of government officials, one of whom is Chan.

Govt's public consultation proposes 90-day maternity, annual leave up to 12 days

The Labour Affairs Bureau carried out a 45-day public consultation between January 31 and March 16 this year on proposed amendments to the Labour Relations Law, during which it was proposing to raise the number of days for statutory paid maternity leave in the private sector to 90 days from the current 70 days, while also proposing to raise the number of days for private-sector employees' statutory minimum paid annual leave.

Currently, the number is six days for all private-sector employees with a minimum of one-year employment, regardless of their length of service. During its public consultation, the government was proposing to establish a system where the number of



Secretary for Administration and Justice Wong Sio Chak (centre) chairs yesterday's closed-door meeting of the Standing Council on Social Concerted Action at Government Headquarters. — Photo: GCS

days for employees' statutory paid annual leave will increase with their length of service, but with a maximum of 12 days.

The Labour Relations Law regulates the private sector's employment. The public sector has its own employment regulations that are much more generous than those of its private counterpart.

Civil society 'agrees' with gov't proposals

Speaking to reporters yesterday, Chan underlined that the government is aiming to submit a Labour Relations Law amendment bill to the legislature within this year as scheduled for debate, review and vote.

Chan also underlined that after assessing the around 10,000 opinions and suggestions gathered during the public consultation earlier this year, the government has concluded that members of Macau's civil society generally agree with its proposals to raise the number of days for private-sector employees' statutory paid maternity leave and the number of days for their statutory minimum paid annual leave.

Chan said that after gathering the opinions from the business and labour sectors during yesterday's meeting, his bureau will now prepare and submit a report to the chief executive, proposing to amend the Labour Relations Law in line with its proposals raised during the public consultation.

When the Labour Relations Law came into force in 2009, the number of days for statutory paid maternity leave was 56 days. The number was raised to the current 70 days on May 26, 2020 when the law's amended, current version took effect.

Private-sector employees with a minimum of one-year employment, regardless of local and non-resident workers (NRWs), are entitled

to statutory paid maternity leave. The Labour Relations Law's current version requires 63 days out of the 70 days of statutory paid maternity leave to be used immediately after the baby's birth, while the mother can choose to take the remaining seven days before or after the birth.

During its public consultation earlier this year, the government was proposing to raise the number of days for statutory paid maternity leave to 90 days from the current 70 days. It was proposing to require 60 days out of the proposed 90 days of statutory paid maternity leave to be used immediately after the baby's birth, while the mother can choose to take the remaining 30 days before or after the birth.

Govt proposes longer annual leave

Concerning the number of days for private-sector employees' statutory minimum paid annual leave, the government was proposing during its public consultation earlier this year that employees with up to two years of service for the same employers would continue to be entitled to six days of paid annual leave, with those with their length of service ranging between two and four years to be entitled to seven days of paid annual leave; those working for the same employers between four and six years to be entitled to eight days of leave; those working between six and eight years to be entitled to nine days of leave; those working between 8 and 10 years to be entitled to 10 days of leave; those working between 10 and 12 years to be entitled to 11 days of leave; and those working for the same employers for at least 12 years to be entitled to 12 days of paid annual leave.

After the Labour Relations Law's current version took effect on May 26, 2020, the government ran a three-year transition period during which the respective employers were

only required to pay at least 56 days out of the 70 days of statutory paid maternity leave, while the remaining up to 14 days was paid by the government.

After the three-year transition period ended on May 25, 2023, the government once again launched a scheme, on a provisional basis, subsidising eligible employers' payments of 14 days of maternity leave. Under the scheme, which is now running until December 31 this year, eligible employers must pay mothers the whole 70-day maternity period first before filing an application to the Labour Affairs Bureau to receive a subsidy of 14 days of maternity leave.

The current subsidy only applies to local female employees, because of which the employer of a mother who is a non-resident worker (NRW) still needs to pay the whole 70-day maternity period.

During its public consultation earlier this year, the government was proposing that it would continue to subsidise eligible employers' payments of maternity leave after the number of days for statutory paid maternity leave is raised to 90 days. The government was proposing that eligible employers could apply for a subsidy of up to 20 days of maternity leave.

Also speaking to reporters after yesterday's meeting, Kuong Chi Fong, a labour representative of the council, said that the labour sector agrees with the government's proposals raised during its public consultation to raise the number of days for private-sector employees' statutory paid maternity leave and the number of days for their statutory minimum paid annual leave.

Also speaking to reporters, Andrew Chan Chak Mo, a business representative of the council, said that the business sector also generally agrees with the government's proposals.

However, Chan urged the government, after the number of days for statutory paid maternity leave is raised to 90 days in the future, to run its scheme subsidising eligible employers' payments of maternity leave on a permanent basis.

Chan, a restaurateur and former lawmaker, also called for the gradual implementation of the future annual leave system, pointing out that after the future amended version of the Labour Relations Law takes effect, the number of days for statutory minimum paid annual leave for those working for the same employers for at least 12 years will "immediately jump" to 12 days from the current six days, which he said would increase the burden on employers in terms of their operating costs. He did not elaborate on his proposed gradual implementation. ■

Resident swindled out of 217,000 patacas in national security violation scam

Tony Wong

The Judiciary Police (PJ) announced yesterday that a local resident has lost 217,000 patacas in a fraud case after being accused by scammers of "violating national security laws".

The victim was coerced into transferring money to designated accounts for a purported "fund review". The details were released in a police statement yesterday and also raised during a regular press conference.

According to the PJ, the victim, whose gender was not revealed, recently reported receiving a phone call from a Cantonese-speaking individual claiming to be from the "Macau Judiciary Police". The caller was able to correctly state the resident's full name.

The fraudster claimed that a phone

number registered in the resident's name had been used to spread "untrue political remarks," thereby allegedly "violating the national security law". The victim was told that he or she must cooperate fully with an investigation.

The call was subsequently transferred to another scammer posing as a police officer from the mainland. Speaking in Putonghua, this individual instructed the victim to join a video call via WhatsApp. During the call, the scammer – wearing a counterfeit police uniform – accused the victim of involvement in a serious crime.

Under the guise of an "online investigation," the victim was ordered to provide regular updates on his or her whereabouts and transfer funds into specific accounts for "verification" purposes. The victim eventually lost a

total of 217,000 patacas.

The PJ reminded the public that law enforcement officers will never ask for bank details over the phone or via messaging apps. Furthermore, the police will never request that citizens share their mobile screens, perform banking operations, or transfer money.

The statement urged anyone who receives a suspicious call from a government entity to verify the caller's identity by visiting the respective entity in person or using official communication channels.

Members of the public are also advised to use the Judiciary Police's anti-fraud mini-programme on WeChat to check risk levels. Those seeking assistance can call the anti-fraud enquiry hotline on 8800 7777 or the crime-reporting hotline on 993. ■



This poster released by the Judiciary Police (PJ) yesterday shows the modus operandi of fake police scams. The AI-translated English text was arranged by the Post.

Tech plus culture: Chinese brands winning over overseas consumers

Analysis

HANGZHOU – When British consumers search online for electric vehicle (EV) brands, the name that increasingly pops up at the top is not Tesla, but BYD, the Chinese automaker that has rapidly gained ground in the UK market.

The latest figures underscore this momentum. According to data released earlier this month by the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, BYD officially claimed the top spot in the UK's EV brand rankings for the first four months of 2026.

BYD is among a widening cohort of Chinese brands accelerating their global expansion and winning over overseas consumers, not merely through competitive pricing, but through rapid technological innovation, cultural influence and increasingly confident brand identities.

That growing international presence was on display at the 2026 World Brand Moganshan Summit in Deqing, Zhejiang Province, where BYD was recognized alongside brands such as Chinese smartphone maker Vivo, China's leading liquor producer Kweichow Moutai, tech giant Alibaba, and other brands in the "Give a Like for My Favorite China's Brands" campaign this year.

Technological innovation is increasingly powering Chinese brands onto the global stage. In the frontier field of embodied intelligence, Unitree Robotics has emerged as another striking example of China's growing technological ambitions.

Speaking at the main forum of the World Brand Moganshan Summit, Unitree's founder and chief executive Wang Xingxing said the company had treated innovation as the foundation of its brand since its establishment in 2016, insisting on developing core components in-house rather than relying on external suppliers.

"From motors to core sensors and motion-control algorithms, every critical technology has been developed in-house, refined through years of independent research and continuous iteration," Wang said.

That strategy appears to be paying off. It is reported that in 2025, the company's humanoid robot shipments exceeded 5,500 units, while its global market share for quadruped robots remained stable at between 60 and 70 percent.

Beyond technological innovation, cultural resonance is becoming another powerful engine behind the global rise of Chinese brands. One distinctive example comes from

Zhu Zhengdong, who has sought to revive the once-fading tradition of Chinese incense culture while expanding specialty stores into overseas markets.

"Incense is more than an olfactory experience. It carries Chinese philosophy, aesthetics and cultural depth beyond our borders," said Zhu, chairman of an incense company named Dongfang Xiangtang.

If China is to cultivate globally influential luxury brands in the future, Zhu added, many of them are likely to emerge from the country's cultural traditions rather than manufacturing alone.

"Chinese brands are engaging global markets with a more open and collaborative approach, driven by the country's growing innovation capacity, market vitality and rising cultural appeal," said Wang Weiqiang, an associate professor at the business school of Zhengzhou University.

Consulting firm Kearney described Chinese brands as evolving from product sellers to ecosystem builders, and from market participants to network orchestrators. "By expanding global footprints in R&D and manufacturing, Chinese brands are strengthening competitiveness and becoming more integrated in local economic ecosystems," Kearney said in a report.

Those on the front lines feel the transformation of Chinese brands most acutely. You Xinyu, chairman of PASSION, revealed that his company's computers currently rank first in their price segment in Russia.

He added that Chinese brands have undergone a complete change in the Russian market over the past three years. "From being perceived as knock-offs and low-tier, Chinese products have evolved into high-end, quality ones," he said.

"Many people may have never been to China, but they experience Chinese culture through the products they use. In this sense, the brand serves as a pioneer in conveying that message. I hope Chinese brands will truly go global and help establish standards led by Chinese companies," You added.

Themed "Brands Bring Better Future for the World," the summit serves as a platform for brand dialogue, bringing together participants from government departments, Chinese and foreign enterprises, higher education institutions and industry associations to engage in in-depth discussions regarding brand development. – Xinhua

Researchers develop new lithium-sulfur battery to help drones fly farther

BEIJING – Chinese researchers have developed a new approach to significantly enhance the performance of lithium-sulfur batteries, a breakthrough that could one day enable drones to fly much farther on a single charge.

The study, recently published in the journal *Nature*, opens a new path toward longer-lasting, more powerful batteries for low-altitude aviation and beyond.

Most conventional drones currently rely on lithium-ion batteries, which are approaching their energy density limits. Their energy density – the amount of power stored per unit of weight – typically falls below 300 watt-hours per kilogram, leading to the "range anxiety" that restricts flight duration.

Lithium-sulfur batteries are considered a promising alternative due to their high theoretical energy density, as well as the abundance and low cost of sulfur. However, in practice, these batteries have faced a major hurdle, as during charging and discharging, sulfur undergoes a complex chemical process that generates lots of soluble intermediates. These intermediates tend to drift away, slow down the reactions, and waste energy.

A team led by Tsinghua Shenzhen International Graduate School (Tsinghua SIGS) has proposed a new solution by introducing a "premediator" for sulfur electrochemistry.

"Think of it as a special additive that sleeps inside the battery until it is needed.

When the sulfur reaction starts, the additive wakes up right where the action is and begins to work," explained Zhou Guangmin, a researcher at Tsinghua SIGS.

Once active, this molecule grabs onto the soluble intermediates and keeps them from drifting away. It also helps build fast lanes for the electrical reactions, making the whole process much smoother and more efficient, Zhou said.

The team also redesigned the reaction network at the molecular level. The newly developed molecule reduces the battery's internal resistance by 75 percent compared to conventional designs. In tests, the new battery ran stably for 800 charge-discharge cycles, retaining nearly 82 percent of its capacity. More impressively, the team constructed a practical prototype pouch cell with an energy density of 549 watt-hours per kilogram, nearly double that of many standard drone batteries currently in use.

"For drones, this matters a lot. Higher energy density means longer flight times, bigger payloads, and more working range. A delivery drone could fly farther to drop off packages. A power line inspection drone could cover more towers in one go. A search-and-rescue drone could stay in the air longer when every minute counts," Zhou said.

The team believes their molecular design strategy can also be extended to other fields, including flow batteries, lithium-metal batteries, and even direct battery recycling processes. – Xinhua

Top political advisor urges people across Taiwan Strait to promote Chinese culture

BEIJING – Top political advisor Wang Huning yesterday called on people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait to shoulder the mission of preserving and promoting Chinese culture.

Wang, a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, made the remarks when meeting with Taiwan and mainland guests attending the third Cross-Strait Chinese Culture Summit in Beijing.

Wang said the summit highlights the shared belief among people on both sides of the Strait that the territory cannot be divided, the country cannot be destabilized, the nation cannot be separated, and the civilization cannot be interrupted.

He added that people on both sides of the Strait should strengthen their confidence in Chinese culture and foster a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation.

Wang called for enhanced cross-Strait cultural exchanges, deeper cooperation and integrated development across the Strait, and urged efforts to promote the innovative development of Chinese culture.

Reaffirming the one-China principle and the 1992 Consensus, Wang said that both sides should firmly oppose secessionist activities seeking "Taiwan independence" and their attempts to sever cultural bonds between the two sides of the Strait.

He also encouraged young people across

the Strait to develop a correct understanding of history, the nation and the state, and to contribute their energy to national rejuvenation.

At the meeting, Chang Jung-kung, vice chairman of the Chinese Kuomintang (KMT), said that people on both sides of the Strait are all Chinese belonging to one family and nurtured by Chinese culture.

Chang called for efforts to jointly preserve and promote Chinese culture on the common political foundation of adhering to the 1992 Consensus and opposing "Taiwan independence," with the aim of pursuing peace, development and national rejuvenation.

The third Cross-Strait Chinese Culture Summit kicked off yesterday, drawing more than 800 representatives from cultural and other sectors across the Taiwan Strait.

Song Tao, head of both the Taiwan Work Office of the CPC Central Committee and the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, presided over the opening ceremony.

Song called on people from Taiwan's cultural sector to work with the mainland to guide Taiwan compatriots in maintaining a firm stance as members of the Chinese nation, firmly oppose "Taiwan independence" separatist activities and external interference, and work together toward national rejuvenation.

A main forum was also held on Monday. Other activities at the summit include a cross-Strait media professionals' forum, sub-forums, exhibitions, and exchange and visits. – Xinhua



Students take part in a fire emergency evacuation drill in Xinle City, Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province, yesterday. A variety of activities were held across the country marking today's National Disaster Prevention and Reduction Day. – AFP

VP Han attends World Digital Education Conference

HANGZHOU – Vice President Han Zheng yesterday attended the opening ceremony of the 2026 World Digital Education Conference.

Addressing the event, Han said the integrated development of AI and other digital technologies with education presents both a significant opportunity for global education development and a common challenge for all countries.

China is ready to work with all parties to explore the development vision and governance approaches for digital education, improve the systems of rules and standards, and jointly drive the transformation and innovation of digital education, Han said.

Han proposed adhering to a people-centered approach and cultivating new talents of the era

who possess lifelong learning abilities, are capable of harnessing AI, and can lead future development.

He also proposed promoting the joint construction and sharing of digital infrastructure, so that the dividends from the integrated development of digital technology and education can benefit more people.

Han said that efforts must be made to uphold the principle of using AI for good, ensure safe and orderly development, establish a risk monitoring and evaluation system, and prevent misuse.

He also emphasized deepening international exchanges and cooperation to jointly promote the healthy development of digital education. – Xinhua



Vice President Han Zheng addresses the opening ceremony of the 2026 World Digital Education Conference in Hangzhou, capital of Zhejiang Province, yesterday. – Xinhua

Xi, Trump to discuss bilateral relations, world peace and development

BEIJING – President Xi Jinping and U.S. President Donald Trump will have an in-depth exchange of views on major issues concerning China-US relations and world peace and development, foreign ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun said yesterday.

Guo made the remarks at a regular news briefing when asked about Trump's upcoming state visit to China, scheduled from tomorrow through Friday, which will be the first visit to China by a

US president in nine years.

Xi and Trump met last time in October 2025 in Busan, the Republic of Korea. Head-of-state diplomacy plays an irreplaceable strategic guiding role in China-US relations, he said.

China is willing to work with the United States in the spirit of equality, respect, and mutual benefit to expand cooperation, manage differences, and inject more stability and certainty into a turbulent and changing world, Guo said. – Xinhua

Xi navigates China-US ties amid global uncertainty

Analysis

BEIJING – The Chinese capital will soon become the setting for one of the most closely watched, high-stakes diplomatic encounters of the year, as the leaders of the world's two largest economies prepare to meet face-to-face.

This will be US President Donald Trump's first state visit to China since his re-election, and the second time Chinese President Xi Jinping has hosted him in the country – their last such meeting in the country took place nearly a decade ago.

Against the backdrop of a complex international landscape and shared global challenges, expectations are running high: How can President Xi and President Trump manage differences between the two sides? How can they navigate the world's most consequential bilateral relationship?

AT THE HELM OF A GIANT SHIP

"You and I are at the helm of China-US relations," Xi told Trump during their latest vis-a-vis talks held in Busan, South Korea, in October 2025. Lasting more than 100 minutes, the meeting marked another moment of direct engagement between the two leaders as they sought to steer China-US relations through uncertainty.

Using a maritime metaphor that has become a recurring theme in his remarks, Xi asked the US president to help keep the "giant ship" of bilateral ties sailing steadily forward.

Over the years, head-of-state diplomacy has anchored China-US relations, serving as a stabilizing force amid shifting global currents. Since Trump's re-election, Xi has spoken with him by phone five times, maintaining close communication on ties and global hotspot issues.

The two presidents first met in 2017, a year marked by an exchange of state visits that set the tone for their interactions. In April that year, Xi and his wife, Peng Liyuan, visited Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in the US state of Florida, where the two presidents dined together and Xi met Trump's family, including his grandchildren.

It was during that visit that Xi delivered a line often recalled in

discussions of bilateral ties: "There are a thousand reasons to make the China-US relationship a success, but not a single reason to break it."

Several months later, in November, Trump traveled to Beijing, where Xi hosted him during a series of special events. The two leaders and their spouses toured the Forbidden City along its central axis, visiting the Hall of Supreme Harmony, the Hall of Central Harmony and the Hall of Preserving Harmony – an experience imbued with the Chinese cultural ideal of "harmony" reflected in the names of the three grand halls.

Walking inside the ancient royal palace, Xi told Trump that China's history can be traced back more than 5,000 years, or even earlier, and its culture has been passed down in an unbroken continuum.

During a chat over tea on that trip, Trump showed Xi a video of his granddaughter, Arabella Kushner, singing and reciting classical poems in Mandarin. Xi said her performance deserved an A-plus. The clip quickly resonated with Chinese netizens and went viral online.

Those early exchanges were widely seen as helping to build a personal rapport between the two leaders, offering a channel to understand each other, manage differences and prevent the relationship from sliding into outright confrontation. "I have a lot of respect for President Xi," Trump has often said.

The past years have seen Xi's meetings with US leaders using this approach – from the Mar-a-Lago summit and the Yingtai evening talks in the Zhongnanhai compound to the long conversation by China's West Lake – often remembered as defining moments in bilateral ties.

The upcoming meeting is expected to continue the tradition of high-level engagement. "The real significance of this meeting may not lie in any grand deal," said Denis Simon, a senior fellow at the Quincy Institute. "Instead, it will test whether the United States and China can establish an equilibrium."

Earlier this year, on Feb. 4 – "Lichun," the traditional Chinese marker for the beginning of spring – Xi spoke with Trump by phone for the first time in 2026, returning

to the metaphor that has come to define his messages on bilateral ties.

"In the year ahead," Xi said, "I look forward to working with you to steer the giant ship of China-US relations through winds and waves, keep it on a steady course, and achieve more major and positive outcomes."

AVOIDING MISCALCULATIONS

In recent years, China-US relations have experienced twists and turns. Some observers fear that China and the United States may repeat the historical pattern of major-power rivalry known as the "Thucydides Trap." Yet, Xi has rejected this notion: "There is no such thing as a 'Thucydides Trap' in the world. But repeated strategic miscalculations between major countries could create one for themselves."

Avoiding such miscalculations, therefore, has become a critical task for China and the United States, which requires both sides to engage in candid dialogue on several key issues.

Foremost is the Taiwan question. President Xi has repeatedly and unequivocally conveyed China's fundamental stance to the US side. In the Feb. 4 phone conversation with Trump, Xi once again stressed that the Taiwan question is the most important and sensitive issue in China-US relations, urging the US side to handle arms sales to Taiwan with utmost prudence.

Trade is another critical issue. In the face of unilateral US tariff offensives, China, under Xi's leadership, has taken resolute countermeasures.

At the same time, Beijing has kept channels of engagement open. Xi has dispatched economic and trade teams that have held six rounds of talks with the US side, seeking to narrow differences step by step while expanding common ground. Currently, trade ties between the two countries remain roughly steady. The two sides will hold a new round of trade talks in South Korea today and tomorrow.

During their Busan meeting, Xi underscored the broader perspective needed to manage such frictions. "Both sides should take a broader and longer-term view," Xi told Trump, "focusing on the lasting

benefits of cooperation instead of falling into a vicious cycle of retaliation." Trump described Xi as a great leader and a firm negotiator.

How, then, does Xi envision the direction of bilateral ties leading into the future? In a speech delivered in San Francisco in 2023, he posed what he described as the number-one question: "Are we adversaries, or partners?"

"If one sees the other side as a primary competitor, the most consequential geopolitical challenge and a pacing threat," he warned, "it will only lead to misinformed policy making, misguided actions, and unwanted results."

Xi also stressed that China has no intention of challenging or unseating the United States. "China never bets against the United States," he said. "Likewise, the United States should not bet against China."

Drawing on the experience of China-US relations, Xi has outlined three principles – mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation – as the right path forward for the two countries.

"SMALL BALL MOVES BIG GLOBE"

This April, Xi sent a congratulatory letter to an event commemorating the 55th anniversary of China-US Ping-Pong Diplomacy, recalling the historic 1971 episode often described as "a small ball moving the big globe."

In 1971, a US table tennis team visited Beijing, a breakthrough that thawed more than two decades of estrangement, and helped pave the way for then US President Richard Nixon's landmark visit to China in 1972, and later the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries in 1979. Its impact extended far beyond the bilateral sphere, profoundly reshaping the global landscape.

More than half a century on, Xi referred to the story not merely as a historical memory, but as a reminder of the profound influence stable China-US relations can have on the wider world.

In a 2024 meeting with Antony Blinken, former US Secretary of State, Xi invoked a concept inspired by traditional Chinese culture – "tong qiu gong ji" ("working together for the

common good on the same planet").

"Planet Earth is only this big, and humanity is faced with so many common challenges," Xi said. "As an old Chinese saying goes, 'Passengers in the same boat should help each other.' Today, as I see it, 'dwellers of the same planet should help each other.'"

During their meeting in Busan, Trump also acknowledged the importance of cooperation between the two countries, saying that China and the United States can get many great things done for the world and have many years of success.

"There is no geopolitical relationship more important than the China-US bilateral relationship ... with by far the largest impact on global affairs," said Robert Lawrence Kuhn, chairman of the Kuhn Foundation.

For both countries, a stable China-US relationship helps remove obstacles to domestic development. More broadly, it carries profound significance for global stability and prosperity, according to Kuhn.

The timing adds further weight to the relationship. In 2026, China is embarking on its 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-2030), while the United States marks the 250th anniversary of its founding. The two countries will respectively host major global gatherings, the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in Shenzhen and the G20 Leaders' Summit in Miami, which will place them at the center of the international agenda.

Beyond red-line and trade issues, observers also point to several areas where cooperation remains vital for both sides, including climate change, counternarcotics and artificial intelligence.

For Xi, it is precisely these countless small acts of cooperation that carry lasting significance.

He once reminded Trump that for China and the United States, "it is always right to do a good thing, however small, and always wrong to do a bad thing, however small."

Just as the Chinese leader has noted on many occasions, China and the United States, as two major countries, can shoulder their responsibilities and work together to accomplish more great and concrete things for the good of both countries and the whole world. – Xinhua

Philippine lawmaker holes up in Senate as ICC confirms drug war warrant

MANILA – A sitting Philippine senator wanted by the International Criminal Court for his role in ex-president Rodrigo Duterte's drug war took refuge inside the Senate yesterday to avoid arrest by government agents.

Senator Ronald Dela Rosa, the country's one-time police chief, was under the Senate's protection "in accordance with our rules and Philippine laws", newly elected Senate President and Duterte ally Alan Peter Cayetano told reporters.

"We will allow an arrest under the condition that it is a Philippine court," he added.

The Senate was on "lockdown", officers told AFP journalists who saw barbed wire and riot police surrounding the compound's closed gates.

Only hours earlier, Dela Rosa – not seen publicly since November – had appeared at the Senate to cast a vote for Cayetano, a move that came just as members of the House of Representatives were impeaching Vice President Sara Duterte.

Video released by the Senate showed Dela Rosa being chased through the halls of the upper chamber, pursued by members of the National Bureau of Investigation.

Former senator Antonio Trillanes met with journalists shortly thereafter, holding a copy of the ICC warrant.

The ICC confirmed separately that the warrant had been confidentially issued last November and kept under seal. It was made public late yesterday.

Dela Rosa, meanwhile, took to Facebook to plead for support.

"They want to fly me to The Hague, to be surrendered there. So



Philippines Senator Ronald Dela Rosa attends a plenary session at the Senate of the Philippines in Manila yesterday. – AFP

please support me," Dela Rosa said on a livestream hosted by fellow Duterte loyalist Senator Robin Padilla.

"I became Philippine National Police chief to work, then this is what they will do to me?"

'Co-perpetrators'

In February, Dela Rosa, fellow Senator Christopher Go and six others were identified as "co-perpetrators" in former president Duterte's crimes against humanity trial in documents released by prosecutors.

"Duterte and his co-perpetrators shared a common plan or agreement to 'neutralise' alleged criminals in the Philippines (including those perceived or alleged to be associated with drug use, sale or production) through violent crimes including murder," the prosecution document reads.

ICC prosecutors have charged Duterte with three counts of crimes

against humanity, alleging his involvement in at least 76 murders between 2013 and 2018 as part of his "war on drugs".

Dela Rosa had previously said he believed he faced potential arrest and effectively disappeared from public view after attending a Senate session in November.

Yesterday's unexpected change in Senate leadership, meanwhile, could play a significant role in determining the vice president's political future.

Cayetano, who served as foreign secretary under former president Duterte, denied there was any connection between the House impeachment vote and his move to claim the Senate presidency.

Under the Philippine constitution, an impeachment vote triggers a trial in the Senate, where a guilty verdict would see Sara Duterte removed from the vice presidency and banned from elected office for life. – AFP

Philippine lawmakers vote to impeach VP Sara Duterte

MANILA – Philippine lawmakers voted yesterday by a wide margin to impeach Vice President Sara Duterte for the second time, setting the stage for a Senate trial that could end her 2028 presidential bid.

The articles of impeachment accuse the daughter of former president Rodrigo Duterte of graft, corruption, bribery and an alleged assassination plot against former ally President Ferdinand Marcos.

Under the Philippine constitution, a guilty verdict in the Senate would see Duterte removed and barred from elected office for life.

"This is no longer just about politics. This is about conscience, duty and the future of our nation," Representative Bienvenido Abante said immediately after the vote.

"This is not about 2028, this is not about political alliances, this is about whether we still believe that no one is above the law."

Lawmakers voted by a margin of 257 to 25 – with nine abstentions – to impeach Duterte. The House had earlier announced 255 votes in favour and 26 against.

The articles focus on misappropriation of public funds, unexplained assets, bribery of public officials, and an alleged death threat against Marcos and other family members.

The threat against Marcos stemmed from a late-night news briefing in which Duterte claimed to have hired an assassin to kill the president should he have her cut down first.

She later said her comments had been misinterpreted.

Duterte's defence counsel said in a statement after yesterday's vote that the burden of proof lay with her accusers.

"We are fully prepared to defend the Vice President before the Senate sitting as an Impeachment Court," it said.

Longtime Duterte ally Senator Alan Peter Cayetano was elected as the new Senate president minutes before yesterday's House impeachment vote began.

That unexpected Senate vote seemingly put the upper chamber firmly in the hands of the vice president's camp.

Second impeachment, new Senate

Duterte and Marcos have been engaged in a high-stakes political brawl that erupted within weeks of their 2022 presidential election victory, when the vice president was denied her desired defence portfolio and instead named education secretary.

The feud exploded into open warfare in 2025 with her first impeachment and the subsequent arrest and transfer of her father to face charges at the International Criminal Court at the Hague tied to his deadly drug war.

Yesterday marked the second time the vice president has been impeached on mostly the same charges.

In the Senate trial that followed her first impeachment, senators donned robes and convened a court on live television only to send the case back to the House in a decision one lawmaker called a "functional dismissal".

The upper chamber is now even more solidly stacked in Duterte's favour after a slate of candidates loyal to her outperformed expectations in May 2025's mid-term elections, winning five of 12 open seats.

Dennis Coronacion, chair of the political science department at Manila's University of Santo Tomas, told AFP before Cayetano's election he believed an acquittal was "highly possible" given the Senate's new makeup.

However, the impeachment process and presentation of evidence against her were likely to take a toll on Duterte's presidential hopes all the same, Coronacion said.

"I'm expecting that by the next survey cycle, we'll see the change in the public perception about the vice president. Filipinos really hate corruption," he said, noting that Duterte had declined to appear and defend herself at House committee meetings.

Student Matthew Silverio joined about 150 others outside the House to protest against corruption.

"She took millions and millions of pesos from the Filipino people, from the young people, from us students," the 23-year-old said of Duterte's time as education secretary.

"Only... those who are willingly blind themselves will not impeach Sara Duterte." – AFP

Myanmar complains over pariah treatment in ASEAN bloc

YANGON – Myanmar claimed yesterday that "discriminatory measures" are shutting it out of the ASEAN bloc after a summit last week saw the organisation continue to blacklist the country's post-coup leadership.

The 11-country Association of Southeast Asian Nations has shunned Myanmar from summits since the military in 2021 deposed the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi and detained the democratic figurehead, triggering a civil war.

After five years of martial rule, the junta staged a tightly restricted election excluding Suu Kyi's party that last month resulted in putsch-leading military chief Min Aung Hlaing taking over as civilian president.

At an ASEAN summit in the Philippines last week, the hosting country's President Ferdinand Marcos complained there had not been "any progress in Myanmar".

Myanmar's foreign ministry, in a statement, claimed that on the contrary, "positive developments taking place in Myanmar have been well recognised by the majority of

ASEAN Member States".

"However, it is observed that a few Member States continue to maintain restrictions, discriminatory measures, and the exclusion of the Myanmar Government from equal representation."

ASEAN is suffering from a fraying consensus over Myanmar, analysts say, with frustration growing over a lack of progress on the bloc's peace plan to end the nation's civil war.

Some countries, such as neighbouring Thailand, congratulated Myanmar's President Min Aung Hlaing when he was sworn in, pledging to make efforts to stabilise their shared border.

Others have remained aloof about Min Aung Hlaing's inauguration following an election widely criticised by democracy monitors for cracking down on dissent and not including opposition parties and voters in rebel-held territories.

At the summit in the Philippines, Malaysian Foreign Minister Mohamad Hasan said Myanmar was not ready to reclaim a seat at the table because "atrocities towards their own citizens are still occurring".

Countries including Indonesia and Singapore – which will take the bloc's rotating chair next year – are widely believed to side with Malaysia.

But Myanmar's foreign ministry said "non-constructive engagement with the new government of Myanmar" would "disregard the genuine will of the Myanmar people, who exercised their democratic rights".

"Over the past five years, despite facing unequal treatment arising from the positions of certain ASEAN Member States, Myanmar has exercised patience," it added.

While it did not name specific countries, it also accused some nations of "interfering in Myanmar's internal affairs through criticism and pressure".

Myanmar has used similar language to criticise East Timor, the bloc's newest member, after a Dili court opened a case against Min Aung Hlaing for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Rights activists in Muslim-majority Indonesia have also filed a complaint with their country's attorney general, accusing the junta he led of atrocities including genocide against the Rohingya minority. – AFP



University students burn a tyre during a protest outside the Governor's office in Banda Aceh, Indonesia yesterday, against reforms to the public health insurance system. – AFP

Thaksin released from prison

Thanaporn Promyamyai

BANGKOK — Thailand's former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra was released early from prison yesterday, raising the prospect of a return to the spotlight for the political heavyweight.

The 76-year-old telecoms billionaire served eight months of a one-year prison sentence for corruption and will be required to wear an electronic monitor while on probation until September.

Thaksin hugged family members outside the Bangkok jail where several hundred supporters wearing their signature red shirts had gathered, some shouting "we love Thaksin", an AFP journalist saw.

Thaksin "may stay away for a couple months, but he will not leave politics", said 70-year-old Janthana Chaidej who took a day off work as a restaurant cook to show his support.

The political patriarch has other pending criminal cases against him, which could dissuade him from making rousing speeches and

risking further prosecution, analysts say.

"I went into hibernation for eight months," Thaksin told reporters from a rear window of his car outside his home in the capital, adding that he felt "relief" after his release.

The former premier was fitted with an electronic monitor at a Bangkok probation office yesterday morning, and will not be allowed to travel outside of the capital without permission, the corrections department said in a statement.

'Home with a smile'

Thaksin's political machine has for two decades been a key rival of Thailand's pro-military, pro-royalty elite, who view his populist brand as a threat to the traditional social order.

His Pheu Thai party and its earlier iterations have been the country's most successful political outfit of the 21st century, with the Shinawatra family producing four prime ministers and drawing widespread support from rural voters.

But Pheu Thai had its worst

election result ever in February, slipping to third place and raising questions about the future of Thaksin's dynasty.

Yet Pheu Thai's inclusion in the ruling coalition of conservative Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul has left open the possibility of a political comeback.

For his die-hard supporters, Thaksin's release "will strengthen Pheu Thai in the short term because people will feel that the Pheu Thai owner is back", said political science lecturer Wanwichit Boonprong.

But Thaksin's "old enemies, the conservatives," will rally around Anutin, who "has what Thaksin does not have — the trust of the elites", Wanwichit added.

The anti-Thaksin conservatives will want to see him "stay away from politics", said the lecturer.

Anutin told reporters he was happy for Thaksin and his family.

"He returns home with a smile," the prime minister said.

Asked if he might eventually meet with Thaksin, Anutin did not

dismiss the idea: "Bangkok is not that big. Meeting with people we know and respect is not strange."

Ex-PM on parole

The corrections department announced last month that Thaksin would be paroled due to his age and the fact that he had less than a year of his sentence to serve.

Thaksin was jailed after the Supreme Court ruled last year that he improperly served a 2023 sentence in a hospital suite rather than a prison cell.

He was elected prime minister in 2001 and again in 2005, and took himself into exile after his second term was cut short by a military coup.

After returning to Thailand in August 2023, he was sentenced to eight years for corruption and abuse of power.

But, rather than prison, he was whisked to a private room in hospital on health grounds, his sentence was reduced to one year by royal pardon, and he was freed as part of an early release scheme

for elderly prisoners.

The timing of his return and his medical transfer, which coincided with Pheu Thai forming a new government, fuelled public suspicion of a backroom deal and allegations of special treatment.

The Supreme Court ruled in September that Thaksin had not been suffering from a critical health condition and his time spent in hospital could not count as time served, landing him in prison to serve his one-year term.

Thaksin was one of more than 850 prisoners who were approved for early release.

His daughter, former prime minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, told reporters on Thursday after meeting with Thaksin in prison that they had "not discussed anything about politics".

Thaksin's nephew Yodchanan Wongsawat, who became Pheu Thai's standard-bearer ahead of the February election, was made minister of higher education in Anutin's cabinet. —AFP

Pakistan summons Afghan diplomat over deadly suicide attack

ISLAMABAD — Pakistan summoned the top Afghan diplomat in the country yesterday after concluding that a deadly suicide attack at the weekend was "masterminded by terrorists residing in Afghanistan", the foreign ministry said.

A suicide attacker detonated a car bomb at a checkpoint in Pakistan's northwest and militants opened fire on police on Saturday, killing at least 15 people, according to officials.

The foreign ministry said in a statement it had summoned the Afghan charge d'affaires and "conveyed that a detailed investigation into the incident, along with evidence collected and technical intelligence, indicates that the attack was masterminded by terrorists residing in Afghanistan".

A senior administrative official in Bannu, the area near the Afghan border where the attack took place, said that "during the assault, the militants used quadcopters along

with heavy weaponry".

Speaking to AFP on condition of anonymity, the official said that more than 100 militants took part in the attack.

The US embassy in Islamabad said in a post on X it was "deeply saddened by the tragic events in Bannu".

"Pakistan's citizens deserve security, peace, and a future unburdened by the scourge of terrorist violence," it added.

Bannu has been gripped in recent years by militant activity that has grown across Pakistan's border regions.

Afghanistan's Taliban government has repeatedly denied Pakistan's accusations that Afghan territory was a safe harbour for militants.

The frosty relationship between the neighbouring countries has spiralled into deadly armed conflict in recent months, including Pakistani airstrikes on cities in Afghanistan. —AFP

Thai police arrest 9 in largest ivory seizure in decade

BANGKOK — Thai police announced the largest seizure of smuggled ivory in a decade yesterday, with nine people arrested and accused of trying to sell 250 kilograms of African elephant tusks via Facebook.

Thailand is a major transit hub for wildlife smugglers who often sell highly prized endangered animals and animal parts on the lucrative black market in Asia.

The arrests and seizures of ivory, valued at around US\$300,000 and smuggled by ship from Africa, occurred across seven provinces in Thailand on Thursday, anti-wildlife trafficking authorities said.

"It was the biggest lot we seized in 10 years," Patompong Thongchamroon, from the national police's environmental crime division, told AFP.

An officer discovered a private Facebook group selling smuggled African ivory in Thailand, Patompong said, adding that after months of investigating police had arrested nine Thais who were group administrators tasked with posting the ivory for sale.

The group were charged with



Pieces of seized ivory and other smuggled items are packed away after a press conference at the Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) in Bangkok yesterday. —AFP

illegal possession and trade of protected wildlife parts, which carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison, a million baht (US\$30,800) fine, or both, according to a police statement.

The ivory haul included cut pieces and fragments, as well as prayer beads, jewellery and knife handles, police said, adding that the target buyers were Thai and Vietnamese.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, or CITES, has officially banned the international trade of elephant ivory since 1990.

African elephants as well as Asian elephants — Thailand's national animal — are classified as endangered globally by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. —AFP

Pakistan's FM, US envoy discuss regional situation

ISLAMABAD — Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Mohammad Ishaq Dar met US Chargé d'Affaires Natalie A. Baker yesterday to discuss the evolving regional situation and broader Pakistan-US bilateral relations, the Foreign Office said.

During the meeting, Dar highlighted Pakistan's role in facilitating communication between the United States and Iran, expressing hope that ongoing diplomatic efforts

would help promote peace and stability in the region and beyond.

The foreign minister also appreciated ongoing US assistance in the repatriation of Pakistani and Iranian seafarers through Singapore, said the statement.

Pakistan has in recent weeks intensified diplomatic engagement aimed at encouraging dialogue between Washington and Tehran amid heightened regional tensions. (More on page 10) —Xinhua

Sri Lanka identifies US-based shell company linked to US\$2.5 million cyber theft

COLOMBO — Sri Lankan criminal investigators have identified a shell company allegedly used to siphon US\$2.5 million from national treasury funds, law enforcement authorities announced yesterday.

The stolen funds were transferred to multiple bank accounts in two different states in the United States after the theft. The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) said that the funds were

routed through a third-party entity called "Biz Solutions," an online business registration firm registered in the state of Delaware, the United States.

The company was found to have maintained four accounts at a branch of TD Bank. Investigators found most accounts were emptied, with one retaining roughly US\$200.

The massive cyber theft was brought to attention in April. Hackers breached the Department

of External Resources, hijacking official email channels to intercept and redirect funds from a bilateral debt repayment owed to Australia, authorities said. Four of six payment vouchers intended for Australian authorities were diverted to the fraudsters, CID said.

The CID has enlisted both the US Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Australian Federal Police to identify individuals behind the scheme. —Xinhua

Tens of millions risk hunger as Hormuz standoff blocks fertiliser: UN official

Susannah Walden

PARIS – Tens of millions of people could face hunger and starvation if fertilisers are not soon allowed through the Strait of Hormuz, the head of a UN task force aimed at averting a looming humanitarian crisis told AFP yesterday.

Iran has had the strategic waterway – through which a third of the world's fertilisers normally pass – in a chokehold for months in retaliation for the war launched by the United States and Israel on February 28, disrupting a trade critical for farmers around the world in a race against the end of planting seasons.

“We have a few weeks ahead of us to prevent what will likely be a massive humanitarian crisis,” Jorge Moreira da Silva, executive director of the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) and leader of the task force, told AFP in an interview in Paris.

“We may witness a crisis that will force 45 million more people into hunger and starvation.”

The UN secretary general created the task force in March to spearhead a mechanism to allow fertilisers and related raw materials such as ammonia, sulphur and urea through the strait.

For weeks, Moreira da Silva has been working to convince the belligerent parties to allow even a few ships through, and has met with “more than 100 countries” to rally UN member state support around the mechanism.

A growing number of countries are showing support for the plan, he said, but the United States and Iran, as well as Gulf countries –



Executive Director of the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) Jorge Moreira da Silva, a Portuguese UN official in charge of the United Nations task force on the Strait of Hormuz, poses during a photo session in Paris yesterday. – AFP

who are key fertiliser producers, are not yet fully on board.

While the ultimate hope is for a “lasting peace” deal in the region and “freedom of navigation for all commodities” through the strait, “the problem is the planting season can’t wait”, Moreira da Silva said, with some ending in African nations within weeks.

Global focus has been on the economic impacts of the throttled oil and gas trade, but the United Nations has been sounding the alarm of the threat the blockade poses to the world’s food security, with countries in Africa and Asia likely to be particularly hard hit.

‘Political will’

Moreira da Silva said the United Nations could have the mechanism up and running in seven days but even if the strait were to reopen now, it would take three to four months to return to normality.

“It’s just a matter of time. If we don’t stop the origin of the crisis soon, we will have to deal with the consequences through humanitarian aid.”

While food prices have not exploded yet, Moreira da Silva said, there has been a “massive increase” in fertiliser costs, which experts say would likely lead to a drop in agriculture productivity and send food prices soaring.

Moreira da Silva said moving just an average of five vessels a day of fertilisers and related raw materials through the strait would head off the crisis for farmers.

What’s missing, he said, is “the political will”.

“We can’t procrastinate on what is possible to do, and what is urgent to do – which is let the fertilisers cross the strait and, through that, minimize the risk of massive food insecurity at the global level.” – AFP

Trump declares Iran ceasefire on ‘life support’

WASHINGTON, DC – US President Donald Trump said yesterday that the Iran ceasefire is on “life support” and that he is considering restarting naval escorts through the Hormuz Strait waterway as he seeks “complete victory” in the war.

Amid growing pressure at home over the war’s impact on the US economy, Trump warned that Iran’s rejection over the weekend of Washington’s demands meant the already tenuous ceasefire is now “unbelievably weak.”

“I would say it’s one of the weakest right now, it’s on life support,” he told reporters in the White House. “I would say the ceasefire is on massive life support.”

Separately, Trump told Fox News that he was considering renewing a US attempt to escort oil and other commercial shipping through Hormuz, but that he had not yet taken a final decision.

The initiative, dubbed Operation Freedom, was first launched on May 6 but abandoned less than two days later.

The United States sent Iran a set of conditions for easing the conflict, mostly related to preventing the country from being able to expand its nuclear program.

At the weekend, Iran sent counter-proposals which Trump told reporters yesterday were “garbage.”

The impasse does not mean the United States will back off, Trump said.

“We’re going to have a complete victory,” he said. Iran thinks “I’ll get tired of this. I’ll get bored, or I’ll have some pressure. But there’s no pressure.”

Asked if he was still willing to negotiate with Iran, Trump said the leadership there was divided into “moderates” and “lunatics.”

“The lunatics want to fight till the end. You know, it’ll be a very quick fight.” – AFP



US President Donald Trump speaks during a Maternal Healthcare Event in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, DC, yesterday. – AFP

Israel jails soldiers for desecrating Virgin Mary statue in Lebanon

JERUSALEM – The Israeli military said yesterday it had sentenced two soldiers to imprisonment after one of them was photographed placing a cigarette in the mouth of a statue of the Virgin Mary in southern Lebanon.

An image widely shared online last week showed an Israeli soldier with his arm around the statue of the mother of Christ while holding a cigarette up to her mouth.

According to the military, the incident took place several weeks ago in southern Lebanon and was investigated by commanders on the ground.

“At the conclusion of the investigation, the soldier documented carrying out the act was sentenced to 21 days of military prison, and the soldier who filmed the incident was sentenced to 14 days of military prison,” the military said yesterday.

In a separate post on X, military spokeswoman Lieutenant Colonel Ariella Mazor said: “The IDF [Israel Defence Forces] views the incident with utmost severity and

emphasises that the conduct of the soldier completely deviates from the values expected of its personnel.”

It is not the first time the Israeli military has come under criticism in recent weeks over its soldiers’ conduct surrounding Christian statues in southern Lebanon.

In late April, the military said two soldiers would receive 30 days of military detention and be removed from combat duty over the destruction of a statue of Jesus Christ in the southern Lebanese village of Debl.

In that incident, a photo was shared online showing an Israeli soldier using a sledgehammer to strike the head of a statue of a crucified Jesus.

“The IDF respects freedom of religion and worship, as well as holy sites and religious symbols of all religions and communities,” Mazor said.

The military has “no intention of harming civilian infrastructure, including religious buildings or religious symbols,” she added. – AFP

World’s ‘largest energy shock’ may affect markets into 2027: Aramco CEO

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia – The Middle East war triggered the world’s largest energy shock with market recovery likely to extend into 2027 even if the Hormuz blockade is lifted soon, Saudi oil giant Aramco’s CEO told investors yesterday.

A day earlier, Aramco had announced a net profit rise of more than 25 percent in the first quarter of 2026 compared to the same period last year, fuelled by higher oil prices as exports remain blocked in the Strait of Hormuz.

“The energy supply shock that began in the first quarter is the largest the world has ever experienced,” said Aramco CEO and president Amin H. Nasser.

“If the Strait of Hormuz opens today, it will still take months for the market to rebalance, and if its opening is delayed by a few more weeks, then normalisation will last into 2027,” he added.

Crude prices jumped during the first quarter from the mid US\$60s in early February to more than US\$100 a barrel in March as Iran’s shutdown of the key waterway sparked a global energy crisis.

The market has seen an “unprecedented supply loss of about a billion barrels of oil”, he said, putting the figure at roughly 880 million barrels.

“If the current disruptions continue at this rate, the market will lose around 100 million barrels for every week the Strait of Hormuz remains closed,” he added.

The loss was offset in part by oil flows bypassing Hormuz, the release of strategic government petroleum reserves and Saudi Arabia’s East-West pipeline – which avoids the blockaded strait, he said.

Saudi Arabia has used the pipeline at its maximum capacity of 7 million barrels per day to deliver oil despite the blockade.

US-Iran talks have failed to produce a lasting deal following a truce last month, with US President Trump on Sunday rejecting Tehran’s response to Washington’s proposal as “totally unacceptable”.

“If and when normal trade and shipping resumes, we anticipate very robust return to demand growth significantly higher than the initial estimate for the growth in 2026,” Nasser said.

The oil-rich Gulf has borne the brunt of Iran’s attacks during the war, with Tehran targeting US assets but also civilian infrastructure including energy facilities.

In Saudi Arabia, facilities in Riyadh, the Eastern Province and the industrial city of Yanbu were all targeted. This included infrastructure for oil and gas production, transport and refining, and petrochemical plants and power facilities. – AFP

Starmer vows to prove 'doubters' wrong

Peter Hutchison and Helen Rowe

LONDON – Embattled British Prime Minister Keir Starmer came out fighting yesterday, vowing to prove his “doubters” wrong as he sought to quell growing calls to step down following disastrous election results.

Starmer pledged his ruling Labour party would be “better” and bolder as he tried to convince angry and restless lawmakers to back him in a crunch speech designed to reset his flagging premiership.

“I know that people are frustrated by the state of Britain, frustrated by politics, and some people frustrated with me,” Starmer said during an address in central London.

“I know I have my doubters, and I know I need to prove them wrong, and I will,” added Starmer, who returned Labour to power in 2024 after 14 years of Conservative rule.

He has since swerved from one policy misstep to another, and is engulfed in a scandal over the appointment, and sacking, of Peter Mandelson as UK ambassador to Washington, after revelations about the envoy’s ties to the late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

The prime minister has failed to spur economic growth as British citizens continue to feel the effects of a years-long cost-of-living pinch, but has been praised for resisting US President Donald Trump over Iran.

Voters issued a damning indictment of Starmer’s 22 months in power in local elections on Thursday, which saw huge gains for the hard-right Reform UK party and the left-wing populist Greens at Labour’s expense.

Starmer’s party lost control of the devolved Welsh parliament for the first time and failed to make up ground on the pro-independence



Larry the Downing Street cat walks outside 10 Downing Street, the official residence of Britain’s Prime Minister, currently Labour party leader Keir Starmer, in central London, yesterday. (More on p.16) – AFP

Scottish National Party (SNP) in the devolved parliament in Edinburgh.

Starmer has signalled that he hopes to stay in power until 2034, but some 48 Labour MPs out of about 400 have said they believe it is time for him to go.

After the speech, Catherine West, who had threatened to trigger a leadership challenge yesterday, said she was instead collecting the names of Labour MPs who want Starmer to set a timetable for the election of a new leader in September.

Starmer pledged to fight any challenge and warned Labour would “never be forgiven”

by voters if it imitated the “chaos” of the previous Conservative government, which went through three prime ministers in four months in 2022.

‘Change’

A leadership contest would likely spark a damaging bout of infighting as MPs from the left and right of the party battled to position their preferred candidate or shore up Starmer.

Under party rules, any challenger would need the support of 81 Labour MPs – 20 percent of the party in parliament – to trigger a contest.

It has long been rumoured that former deputy prime minister Angela Rayner and Health Minister Wes Streeting could try to oust Starmer, but neither is universally popular within Labour.

Rayner, who has stopped short of calling for Starmer to quit, said in a speech of her own yesterday that “what we are doing isn’t working, and it needs to change”.

Another much-touted possible contender, Andy Burnham, the mayor of Greater Manchester, is currently unable to challenge as he does not have a seat in parliament.

The absence of an obvious successor means Starmer could still hold on, particularly with the next general election not expected until 2029.

In his speech, Starmer acknowledged that “incremental change won’t cut it” with an increasingly disgruntled public, promising “a bigger response” in areas such as economic growth, closer European ties and energy.

He pledged to introduce legislation to fully nationalise British Steel and said his government would be defined by putting Britain “at the heart of Europe”, including through an “ambitious” youth experience scheme.

Starmer denounced Reform’s anti-immigrant leader Nigel Farage as a “chancer” and a “grifter”, adding: “If we don’t get this right our country will go down a very dark path.”

And he took aim at Farage’s virulent pro-Brexit campaign, saying he had taken Britain “for a ride”.

Starmer is due to lay out more detailed legislative plans in the King’s Speech tomorrow.

– AFP

White House press gala shooting suspect pleads not guilty

WHITE HOUSE – A California man charged with attempting to assassinate US President Donald Trump at a White House press gala last month pleaded not guilty yesterday.

Cole Allen, 31, entered the not guilty plea during an appearance before Judge Trevor McFadden in a federal district court in the nation’s capital.

Allen appeared in court wearing an orange jumpsuit and wearing handcuffs.

McFadden scheduled a status conference on the case to be held on June 29.

Allen faces four charges in connection with the April 25 attack at the White House Correspondents’ Association (WHCA) dinner at a downtown Washington hotel and potentially faces life in prison if convicted.

He is charged with attempting to assassinate the president, transportation of a firearm and ammunition across state lines with intent to commit a felony, using a firearm during a crime of violence and assaulting a federal officer.

Allen’s attorneys are seeking to have acting Attorney General Todd Blanche and Jeanine Pirro, the US attorney for the District of Columbia, removed from the case because they were guests at the WHCA dinner.

According to prosecutors, Allen, a highly-educated teacher and engineer, travelled from his home in California to Washington by train carrying an arsenal

that included a shotgun, a handgun and numerous knives.

Allen never got close to Trump or the other guests attending the White House press dinner on a lower floor. The president, Vice President JD Vance and other government officials were rushed out of the venue by security officers after gunshots were heard.

Allen was tackled and arrested by law enforcement almost immediately after charging through a security checkpoint and firing a single shot, which allegedly struck a Secret Service agent in the chest, wounding him slightly.

The agent, who was wearing a bulletproof vest, fired multiple times at Allen but did not hit him.

The annual dinner draws Washington journalists, administration officials, celebrities and entertainers.

Trump has traditionally boycotted the event but decided to attend this year.

It was the third alleged assassination attempt against the 79-year-old Trump in less than two years.

Trump was the target of an assassination attempt during a presidential campaign rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, in 2024.

A gunman fired several shots, killing an audience member and nicking the president in the ear.

A few months later, another armed man was arrested on a West Palm Beach golf course where Trump was playing a round.

– AFP

Hantavirus most infectious as soon as symptoms appear: WHO

GENEVA – The hantavirus behind the deadly outbreak on a cruise ship is most infectious as soon as symptoms appear, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said yesterday, explaining the need to quarantine contacts.

The outbreak of the rare virus on the Dutch-flagged vessel MV Hondius has claimed three lives and spurred global concern over its potential spread as evacuees head back to their countries.

“The first few moments of illness is when the infectiousness is highest,” Olivier Le Polain, who heads WHO’s epidemiology and analytics for response division, told a social media event.

The WHO has recommended that all the nearly 150 people who were onboard the ship when it arrived early Sunday (local time) in the waters off Tenerife for disembarkment be quarantined for six weeks.

That corresponds to the maximum incubation period for the Andes virus – the only hantavirus strain known to spread between humans – at the heart of the outbreak, which is around 42 days.

On average though, those infected with the virus begin developing symptoms after about three weeks, Polain said.

He stressed that it was important not to wait for symptoms to appear before isolating potential contacts.

If WHO recommends “quarantine it is because actually people are infectious at the very start of illness”, he said, adding that this was “also sometimes when it’s a bit difficult to recognise the symptoms”.

That is because “initial symptoms could be mild, ... some fatigue, maybe mild fever”, he said adding though that those symptoms then “sometimes deteriorate”.

Polain said the hantavirus’s long incubation period “means that we can see cases again coming up in the next few days, perhaps even next week”.

“That’s why we need to remain vigilant, make sure that at the first signs and symptoms ... are being recognised, isolated and taken care of.”

While WHO makes recommendations, it is up to each country to implement the health protocols they think are most appropriate.

Since contact tracing and the repatriation of passengers and crew from the MV Hondius began, most countries have followed WHO guidelines and implemented 42-day quarantines.

Several countries, including Germany, Britain, Switzerland and Greece, have opted for a 45-day quarantine, Australia and France have announced minimum observation periods of three and two weeks respectively, which can then be extended.

The United States, in contrast, has indicated that the 17 returning American passengers would not necessarily be quarantined – something WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned “may have risks”.

The ship presented an “environment that was conducive for transmission... It’s an environment where people live together in a fairly enclosed space”, Polain said.

“That’s why also we likely see more spread than we would see otherwise.” (More on p.12)

– AFP

Spain says took 'all measures' to stop hantavirus, after positive tests

MADRID – Spain yesterday said it took “all measures” to prevent the hantavirus spreading from evacuees on a cruise ship hit by the virus, after French and US nationals tested positive.

A complex repatriation operation from the Canary Islands on Sunday flew out 94 passengers and crew of 19 different nationalities from the Dutch-flagged MV *Hondius*, which is at the centre of an international alert after three passengers died.

Medical teams escorted travellers to an airport on Tenerife under close supervision and following sanitary checks on the ship.

French and US authorities have reported positive tests for hantavirus from one each of their evacuees.

“From the start, all the measures adopted have aimed at cutting the possible chains of transmission... all measures for prevention and control of transmission have been applied,” the Spanish health ministry said in a statement.

It said the French patient “started to feel unwell during the flight and not while she was on the ship”.

The US citizen’s tests in Cape Verde, where the *MV Hondius* stopped before reaching the Canary Islands, gave a result considered by the Americans as a “weak positive”, “although for us it was



The Dutch flagged hantavirus-stricken cruise ship *MV Hondius* receives provisions from a boat in the port of Granadilla de Abona on the island of Tenerife in Spain's Canary Islands yesterday. – AFP

not conclusive”, and another that was negative, the ministry said.

“The person in question did not show symptoms when they were in Cape Verde. However, the US authorities have decided to treat the case as positive. For that reason, they requested a separate evacuation, which was carried out in a separate boat.”

Of the 54 people left on the ship, “28 will disembark this afternoon in the Canary Islands and 26 will remain on board en route to the Netherlands,” Spanish Health Minister Monica Garcia announced on social media yesterday, updating an earlier figure of 22 evacuees.

The final evacuees will all leave on a single flight to the Netherlands, she had said earlier, changing an original schedule that had involved a second plane to Australia.

After refuelling and receiving fresh supplies, the ship was scheduled to depart at 7 p.m. (local time) with a skeleton crew.

No vaccines or specific treatments exist for the hantavirus, a known but rare illness that usually spreads among rodents.

Health officials have insisted that the risk to global public health is low and dismissed comparisons to the COVID-19 pandemic. – AFP

Costa Rica's new leader vows 'firm land' against drug gangs

María Isabel Sánchez

SAN JOSÉ – Costa Rica’s new President Laura Fernández vowed a “firm hand” against drug trafficking at her inauguration on Saturday as leader of the Central American tourism hotspot.

Fernandez, 39, succeeded her mentor Rodrigo Chaves, who survived two impeachment attempts by Congress over corruption allegations.

She easily won February 1 elections on a promise to crack down on crime in a country long considered one of the safest in the Americas.

Dressed in a cream blazer dress, she took the oath of office before large crowds of flag-waving supporters in the National Stadium of San José, Costa Rica’s capital.

“A firm hand is what you expect,” she said. “My hand will not tremble when confronting organised crime.”

Fernández, who served as a minister of the presidency under Chaves, was groomed to become his successor. He was barred by the constitution from seeking a second consecutive term but remains popular among voters.

Fernández has appointed him as a super-minister in her so-called “government of continuity,” fuelling suspicion that he will be calling the shots in her administration.

Costa Rica, a country of 5.2 million people famous for its white-sand beaches, has long been seen as an oasis of stability and democracy in Central America.

But in recent years, it has

developed into a logistical hub in the regional drug trade, fuelling local turf wars that have caused the murder rate to soar.

“I want to walk down the street without fearing a shootout,” Nancy Gutiérrez, a 50-year-old housewife, told AFP.

Fernández has vowed to overhaul what she portrays as an overly permissive judiciary.

“The reform we need is profound, and we are going to push for it,” she said, announcing plans to toughen prison sentences.

The Bukele model

Fernández cites iron-fisted Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele, who has locked up thousands of suspected gang members without charges, as an inspiration on how to reduce crime.

Costa Rica is currently building a maximum-security prison modelled on El Salvador’s mega-prison for suspected gang members.

Like Chaves, she is also an ally of US President Donald Trump.

Her election marked another win for the Latin American right, which has unseated a host of left-wing administrations in recent months, including in Chile, Bolivia and Honduras.

“We are experiencing signs of authoritarianism, and the wind has shifted to the right, but institutions are still strong,” political scientist Constantino Urcuyo told AFP.

“The Bukele model has no place in Costa Rica,” he said. – AFP



Costa Rica's new President Laura Fernández gestures as she speaks during her inauguration ceremony at the National Stadium in San José on Saturday. – AFP

Mexico announces new aid shipment to US-blockaded Cuba

MEXICO CITY – Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said yesterday that her government was sending a new shipment of humanitarian aid to Cuba, where a US oil blockade has created a worsening economic and humanitarian crisis.

“Today a humanitarian aid boat leaves for Cuba,” Sheinbaum said yesterday in her daily press conference, stressing that the shipment does not include oil.

“We’re orienting ourselves to other humanitarian support,” the leftist leader added.

US President Donald Trump has vowed to starve Cuba of oil after the US military ouster of former president Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela in January, formerly the nation’s main supplier of the commodity.

The situation has deteriorated

since the new measures were implemented, leading to daily blackouts that last several hours and shortages of supplies in hospitals.

Tourism has also plummeted as many international flights are unable to refuel.

In March, two Mexican Navy ships loaded with 1,000 tonnes of humanitarian aid arrived in Cuba.

On May 7, three UN special rapporteurs said the US fuel blockade amounts to “energy starvation” and has “grave consequences” for human rights and development.

“Cuba has been subjected to energy starvation by the United States, a condition in which the lack of fuel cripples the functioning of essential services required for a dignified life,” the experts said in a joint statement. – AFP

Trial of Bolivian ex-leader suspended after court no-show



Bolivia's former president Evo Morales (centre) takes part in a protest march on August 25, 2022. – AFP

TARIJA, Bolivia – A Bolivian court yesterday suspended the opening of the trial of former president Evo Morales, accused of trafficking a minor, after the defendant failed to appear in court, an AFP journalist observed.

The former socialist leader (2006 to 2019) and Bolivia’s first indigenous president is accused of having maintained a relationship with a 15-year-old girl while in office, with whom he is alleged to have had a daughter.

Morales rejects the accusations and did not appear at the trial that was supposed to open in the southern city of Tarija.

He has been in hiding from an arrest warrant issued in the case in his central Bolivian stronghold of Chapare since late 2024, where his supporters stand ready to resist a police raid targeting the former leader.

Morales was declared in contempt of court in January 2025 when he did not show for a pretrial detention hearing.

Luis Ortiz Flores, Tarija’s

highest judicial official, said Friday that this status can prevent a case from opening until the accused appears, except in corruption cases.

Wilfredo Chávez, one of Morales’ lawyers, told AFP Friday that the team would not appear at the hearing as it had not been “properly notified.”

The lawyer said the court did not send the summons to Morales’ address but instead served it through an edict – an official notice published in the media.

Morales, who rose from dire poverty to become one of Latin America’s longest-serving leaders, has slammed those “that persecute me and condemn me in record time.”

His refusal to give up power in 2019 after two terms led to a tumultuous exit that cast a shadow over nearly 14 years of economic progress and poverty reduction.

Forced to resign after elections tainted by fraud, he slipped away into exile in Argentina, returning home a year later. – AFP

Football shorts

Real Madrid's Mendy undergoes surgery

LALIGA LYON – Real Madrid defender Ferland Mendy underwent surgery for a recurring right thigh injury yesterday; AFP learnt from a medical source.

The operation, which was carried out in Lyon, went well, the source said, with the player expected to return within three to four months.

There had been fears the 30-year-old Frenchman could be out for a year with the career-threatening issue which flared up again during a Spanish league match on May 3.

This was the fifth injury this season for the former Le Havre and Lyon player, who came through the Paris Saint-Germain youth system from 2004- to 2012.

Mendy earned 10 caps for France between 2018 and 2024.

– AFP

Hellberg swerves 'spygate' row ahead of Boro-Southampton clash

sky bet LONDON – Middlesbrough boss Kim Hellberg refused to comment further on the "spygate" row that has overshadowed his team's Championship play-off semi-final against Southampton as he prepared his men for today's second leg.

Southampton allegedly spied on a Middlesbrough training session ahead of Saturday's first leg at the Riverside Stadium, which finished 0-0.

The English Football League charged Southampton after receiving a complaint from Middlesbrough "relating to alleged unauthorised filming on private property".

After the first leg, Hellberg accused his opponents of trying to cheat as temperatures rose.

But he swerved questions over the issue when speaking to reporters yesterday.

"I think I answered those questions so much on Saturday as honestly as I can to everyone," he said.

"I think I need to, and we need to, try to talk about the game. That's the most important thing now."

Hellberg revealed he had not spoken to Middlesbrough chairman Steve Gibson about the situation.

Saturday's post-match press conferences were dominated by talk of the accusations.

Saints boss Tonda Eckert walked out of his briefing after

sidestepping questions on the subject, while Hellberg said he could not believe Southampton's brazen attempt to "cheat".

The winners of today's semi-final at St Mary's will play Millwall or Hull for a place in next season's Premier League.

The game will be played at 3 a.m. tomorrow morning Macau time.

– AFP/MPD

Football fans urged to show ticket fraudsters red card ahead of World Cup

FIFA LONDON – Fans of Premier League clubs Arsenal, Liverpool, Chelsea and Manchester United have emerged as the main targets for fraudsters selling worthless fake tickets.

A new report released yesterday by Britain's interior ministry, the Home Office, said ticket scams rose 36 percent over the past six months compared with the same period a year earlier.

The report said victims of ticket fraud lost an average of £215 (US\$292), although some lost much more. The total amount of money lost by victims rose 42 percent compared with the same six-month period a year earlier.

"Some fans paid hundreds or even thousands of pounds for 'season tickets' or VIP seats that never existed," it added.

"Hopeful football fans are expected to pay much more for expensive World Cup tickets, meaning the potential loss for victims could be devastating - especially for those forking out on extra costs to travel across the Atlantic."

Almost a third, or 32 percent, of all ticket scams are football-related, with fraudsters expected to exploit international demand for the biggest games of the year.

The Home Office's warning to football fans comes just weeks before the FIFA World Cup kicks off in North America.

The Home Office is leading a "Stop! Think Fraud" campaign together with law enforcement agencies, banks, technology companies, retailers and charities. The campaign aims to equip individuals and small businesses with the tools and knowledge they need to protect themselves from fraud.

The Home Office also issued a checklist to help fans identify whether they are being cheated.

– Xinhua

The first 48-team World Cup – more opportunities, less jeopardy?

Andy Scott



PARIS – The 2026 World Cup will be the first to feature 48 teams, with the expansion of the field offering opportunities to several debutants - but will FIFA's determination to have more nations participating remove much of the jeopardy which helped make the competition so great?

The expansion is the delivery of a key proposal made by Gianni Infantino not long after he became president of world football's governing body in 2016.

He talked of the importance of giving "more chances for more teams" and indicated that the World Cup needed to be seen as "more than a competition, it's a social event."

'Natural evolution'

Certainly, for much of its history, the World Cup could not be described as genuinely global. It was dominated by Europe and a few South American nations as it settled on a 16-team format until being expanded to 24 in 1982.

Ten of the 16 participants in 1978 were European, while by 1990 in Italy there were 14 European sides out of 24.

Africa sent a total of four representatives to the first 11 World Cups before 1982. But even by 1990 there were just two teams each from Africa, Asia and the CONCACAF zone of North and Central America and the Caribbean.

The expansion to 32 teams from 1998 gave a fairer distribution of places worldwide, but still only five African nations went to Qatar in 2022, while 13 came from Europe.

The move to 48 ensures a more even share without removing qualifying spots from Europe - it now has 16 teams, while there are 10 from Africa, nine from Asia, six each from South America and CONCACAF plus New Zealand.

"It's a natural evolution. We want to make football global all over the world," Arsene Wenger, FIFA's chief of global football development, said in December.

"I believe that 48 teams is the right number. It's less than 25 percent for 211 countries who are affiliated to FIFA."

The expansion has allowed some of the world's smallest countries to qualify for the finals



Uruguayans Pedro Cea, (from left to right) Hector Scarone and Hector Castro celebrate after Uruguay beat Argentina 4-2 in the first-ever World Cup final in Montevideo on July 30, 1930.

The FIFA World Cup, the most important and influential tournament, took its first steps on 21 May 1904, when the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) was founded in Paris by seven European countries. However, it would be more than a quarter of a century before the first edition of what is now known as the World Cup became a reality. The First World War (1914-1918) put a stop to plans for a global tournament.

Ten years later, the aspirations of the footballing community of that era came to fruition with the first World Cup in Uruguay.

– AFP

for the first time - notably the tiny Caribbean island of Curacao with its population of barely 160,000.

"Once in a decade or once every four years, it happens that a small country is the surprise," Curacao coach Fred Rutten told AFP, as he hopes to cause a major upset or two.

Cape Verde, Jordan and Uzbekistan are other first-time qualifiers. And the new format gives the outsiders a better chance of making it beyond the group stage and into the last 32, the first knockout round.

With the top two in all 12 groups progressing along with the eight best third-placed sides, one win in the first round could suffice to advance.

'Dilution of spectacle'

But that means the competition will lose much of its early jeopardy, with the leading nations probably not too concerned even if they suffer a defeat straight off - unlike in 2022 when eventual champions Argentina were genuinely panicking after a defeat by Saudi Arabia.

Seeing a giant go out in the group stage, as Germany have done at the last two World Cups, is likely now a thing of the past.

In 2022 the group stage featured

48 games to eliminate 16 teams. This time there will be 72 matches in the first round to filter out the same number.

To go all the way, teams now have to play eight matches - potentially in energy-sapping conditions in a North American summer - instead of seven previously, further adding to an already heavy load for leading players.

"I see the argument about increasing representation but I think a 32-team finals was perfect," says Jonathan Wilson, author of *The Power and the Glory, A New History of the World Cup*.

"The biggest problem with this is not really the quality, it's the dilution of spectacle in the first round with eight third-placed teams to go through," he tells AFP, suggesting the group stage may end up "trying peoples' patience".

In addition, he says the risk with another knockout round is that "it might encourage quite dull, cautious football".

For the big teams, the first step is to just make sure you don't unexpectedly slip up early on.

"You just focus on the group, this is what you do, and make sure you are in the right head space," insisted England coach Thomas Tuchel.

– AFP

England women's great Mead to leave Arsenal at the end of the season

BARCLAYS LONDON – England forward Beth Mead will leave Arsenal when her contract expires at the end of the season, it was announced yesterday.

The 31-year-old made her decision public in an emotional video posted on the club's official website.

Mead has scored 86 goals in 263 appearances during nine seasons as she helped the north London club

win a Women's Super League, three League Cups, the FIFA Champions Cup and the Women's Champions League.

Mead, who joined Arsenal from Sunderland in 2017, said Arsenal were "not just the club, where I play football, but where I've grown up, where I found myself, and where I felt a love and belonging, I'll carry with me forever".

She added: "We've shared some unbelievable moments together,

winning the league title in 2019, lifting the league cups, and maybe the most special one last season, the Champions League.

"Those nights, those celebrations, hearing you all, those are memories I'll replay in my mind for the rest of my life... Leaving this club isn't easy. It breaks my heart in ways I didn't expect, but I leave it with so much love, so much pride, and so much gratitude.

"Arsenal will always be a part

of me, always. Thank you for everything."

Mead made her England debut a year after joining Arsenal and went to become a two-time European champion with the Lionesses, with the first of those triumphs, in 2022, seeing her named player of the tournament and also winning the golden boot as the competition's leading goal-scorer.

But she missed the 2023 Women's World Cup after suffering

a ruptured anterior cruciate ligament before regaining fitness to win the League Cup again in 2024 and the Champions League last season, when Arsenal defeated Barcelona in the final.

Arsenal's director of women's football, Clare Wheatley, said: "Beth has made a huge contribution to our football club over nine years, and will go down in history as one of our best forwards and a legend of the club."

– AFP

Sinner demolishes Popyrin to stroll into Italian Open last 16

Tennis

Terry Daley

ROME – Jannik Sinner breezed into the last 16 of the Italian Open yesterday after swatting aside Alexei Popyrin in straight sets 6-2, 6-0 and continuing his bid for a first title in Rome.



Italy's Jannik Sinner hits a return to Australia's Alexei Popyrin during the ATP Rome Open tennis tournament at Foro Italico in Rome yesterday. – AFP

The world number one easily won his 25th straight match, taking just over an hour to see off Australia's Popyrin and set up an Italian derby with Andrea Pellegrino in the next round.

Pellegrino, 29, who beat 20th seed Frances Tiafoe 7-6 (10/8), 6-1, is a qualifier ranked 155 in the world who before this week had never played in the main draw of a Masters 1000 tournament.

"It's fun to play a derby in Italy, he's having an incredible tournament with a lot of victories against some really good opponents," Sinner told reporters.

"We've played each other a long time ago (in 2019 in an ITF tournament), but he was a different player, and I was a different player."

Sinner meanwhile is trying to extend his own record-breaking run of overall victories in the ATP's top-ranked events after having won his last five.

The 24-year-old joins Novak Djokovic as the only player to win a year's first 25 Master 1000 matches, with the Serbian tennis icon's record run stretching to 31 matches in 2011.

Popyrin was suffocated by Sinner and made 23 unforced errors on his way to a comprehensive defeat.

The world number 60 only got 48 percent of first serves into play and that allowed Sinner to break five times and close out a match which was barely a contest.

"It has been a very good performance from my side," said Sinner.

"He's a big server so his percentage was not very high, which helped me to be sure a little bit, but I've been returning very well the second serves."

Should Sinner prevail at the Foro Italico he will be the first Italian to win there since Adriano Panatta 50 years ago, and would complete his collection of Master 1000 tournaments.

With great rival Carlos Alcaraz out injured and Novak Djokovic eliminated early, Sinner will be red-hot favourite as he builds towards completing the career Grand Slam at the French Open which starts next week.

Former Rome champion Daniil Medvedev beat Pablo Llamas Ruiz 3-6, 6-4, 6-2.

Gauff survives scare

Coco Gauff survived a scare against Iva Jovic coming back from a match point to win 5-7, 7-5, 6-2 and reach the women's quarter-finals.

American star Gauff, who is reigning French Open champion and reached the final in Rome last year, won a draining match on windy centre court which took the best part of three hours.

The 22-year-old has struggled on clay this season, with a last-16 exit in the Madrid Open coming after a disappointing run to the quarter-finals in Stuttgart.

Gauff was so annoyed with herself shortly after saving a match point against the serve at 5-4 down in the second set that she smacked herself in the head.

But she recovered to eventually see off her fellow American and set up a clash with Mirra Andreeva in the last eight.

"It was really hard," said Gauff. "I think the conditions made it tough to make some clean tennis. Really proud of how I was able to fight." – AFP/MPD



Bangladesh's Mahmudul Hasan Joy loses his bat while playing a shot during the third day of the first Test cricket match against Pakistan at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur, Bangladesh on Sunday. Skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto hit an unbeaten half-century as Bangladesh extended their lead by 179 runs on the rainy fourth day of the first Test against Pakistan yesterday. The hosts were 152-3 in their second innings, with Shanto on 58 not out alongside Mushfiqur Rahim on 16, when stumps were drawn for the day at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Dhaka. – AFP

Wizards win NBA Draft Lottery to capture first pick



NEW YORK - The Washington Wizards, who had the worst record in the NBA this past season, won the NBA Draft Lottery on Sunday to claim the top pick in next month's draft.

Washington went 17-65 in the 2025-26 campaign, their second-worst record in team history after a 15-win season in 2023-24 - the Wizards losing 26 of their last 27 games, including the final 10 in a row.

That gave the Wizards a 14 percent chance at the top pick, and they bagged the selection that that could add a star player to their struggling lineup.

The Wizards obtained star guard Trae Young from Atlanta in a January trade and power forward Anthony Davis in a February trade with Dallas.

The top pick would be another key player in trying to bolster a squad that has not advanced past the second round of the playoffs since reaching the 1979 NBA Finals.

The Wizards have not reached the playoffs since 2021 and have not won a playoff series since 2017.

A.J. Dybantsa, a 19-year-old forward of Congolese and Jamaican origin, and Darryn Peterson, a 19-year-old guard, are considered the most likely US college stars to be taken first overall.

The NBA Draft, the annual allocation of top available talent, will be staged on June 23-24.

Utah received the second pick with Memphis third and Chicago fourth, all three clubs moving up despite longer odds of doing so in the selection process.

The fifth pick went to the Los Angeles Clippers from Indiana in a trade for Croatian centre Ivica Zubac.

Brooklyn received the sixth pick followed in order by Sacramento, Atlanta (from New Orleans), Dallas, Milwaukee, Golden State, Oklahoma City (from the Clippers in a trade for Paul George), Miami and Charlotte.

All 14 teams that missed the NBA playoffs were entered into the lottery, with teams that finished worst in the regular season given the best chance at landing the first selection.

Washington, Indiana (19-63) and Brooklyn (20-62) each had a 14 percent chance at the first choice with Utah and Sacramento, both 22-60, each having an 11.5 percent opportunity.

The current system ensured the worst overall team selected no lower than fifth, but concerns over late-season tanking to boost lottery hopes have led NBA commissioner Adam Silver to say there will be changes to the lottery system before next season. – AFP

Focus, longevity: Scheffler-McIlroy rivalry sparks mutual admiration

Golf

Jim Slater

NEWTOWN SQUARE, US – Rory McIlroy and Scottie Scheffler, who together have won four of the past five major titles, have impressed each other with their mental focus and golfing skills.

As world number one Scheffler and second-ranked McIlroy prepared to face a world-class field at Aronimink in the 108th PGA Championship starting Thursday, they examined each other's most formidable strengths.

Scheffler captured last year's PGA Championship at Quail Hollow and British Open at Royal Portrush while McIlroy took the green jacket at the Masters last month and last year.

McIlroy finds Scheffler's focus and consistency among his greatest weapons.

"He has played consistently excellent golf for I would say ever since he got his first win back at the start of 2022, and he hasn't really dropped off since then," McIlroy said.

"It has been four years of really excellent, consistent golf. You look at his game, and you would have said a few years ago that the putting was a weakness, but you wouldn't say that now.

"And you look at all the other aspects of his game and you don't see a weakness, from a physical standpoint, from a mental standpoint."

Scheffler has runner-up finishes in his past three starts but has shaken off weak efforts quickly, McIlroy noted.

"He seems like he has a good mindset of last week's done, I'll move on to this week," McIlroy said. "Forget about whatever happened. He operates in the present so well, and that's one of his super strengths."

McIlroy impresses Scheffler in multiple ways as well.

"When you look at just his game, his ability to drive the ball is the best I've seen, not only with his speed but how accurate he is as well," Scheffler said of McIlroy.

"He's able to take out certain things on some golf courses that not many players can do. He does it in a way where he hits a lot of fairways as well."

Scheffler also admires how long McIlroy, who won his first major at the 2011 US Open, has played at a top level.

"Another thing is his longevity. Hard to have an understanding of what it takes to remain at the top for as long as he has," Scheffler said. "Rory is one of those guys that checks the box each week. He's a guy I always see in the gym, the practice facility.

"Players will have a greater appreciation when you see somebody like Rory who has had success over so many years. When you look at when he won his first major championship to now it has been 15 years.

"That's pretty difficult to do, so for him to still be at the top of the game for this long is quite impressive."

'High level'

Australian Adam Scott, the 2013 Masters winner making his 100th career major start, finds both stars impressive in different ways while saying, "These guys are both playing at a high level."

"I played 18 holes at Augusta with Scottie before the Masters and even in the practice round, his mental approach to not just the game, but a round of golf - it's like he picks the course apart," Scott said. "He's so good, so controlled with his shots.

"I was watching him even practicing and chipping, where he chipped from, it's very strategic. It seemed like he had all his bases covered. It's his approach, it's so smart, really."

McIlroy's willingness to open himself to the world earned Scott's appreciation.

"There are so many great things about Rory," Scott said. "Rory tells us a lot more about himself and his golf, and I think the fact that he has put himself out there, to be vulnerable with his game over the last couple years, is what impresses me about him.

"The way he's able to take his lumps but he also gets some big highs as well. He's so talented, so the ceiling of his golf is really high, but I think that's gutsy to do that." – AFP

Beatles to open first London museum on site of last gig

LONDON- The Beatles' first official London museum is set to open next year in the Mayfair building where the band recorded its final album and played its last gig, Paul McCartney announced yesterday.

The attraction – "The Beatles at 3 Savile Row" – will feature seven floors of never-seen-before archive material and a recreated basement studio where the Fab Four recorded their 1970 "Let It Be" album.

Visitors to the venue on the upmarket central London block – better known globally for its traditional bespoke tailors – will also get access to its rooftop

where the band staged an iconic performance in 1969.

"Tourists come to England and they can go to Abbey Road, but they can't go inside... so I thought this was a terrific idea," McCartney told the BBC.

The 83-year-old pop legend said it stemmed from efforts by Apple Corps – the company which has overseen the band's business interests since 1968 – to re-examine "what the Beatles mean, and what people want these days from us".

The company previously owned the Savile Row building for eight years from 1968 and it served as the

band's headquarters for two years prior to their 1970 break-up and for business purposes afterwards.

"We're thrilled to bring Apple Corps back to its spiritual home and give The Beatles fans something truly special," its CEO Tom Greene said in a statement.

"Every single day, fans are taking pictures of the outside of 3 Savile Row, he added.

"But next year they can go in and explore all seven floors of the iconic building, including the rooftop where even the railings remain the same from that famous day in 1969."

Footage of the famous January 30, 1969, concert – the last time anyone saw the Fab Four perform publicly – was recently restored and included in Peter Jackson's "Get Back" documentary about the band.

Speaking to the BBC, McCartney said visitors will ascend the Savile Row building and see "various things" including memorabilia before they can "pretend to be a Beatle" on the roof.

It will also feature rotating exhibitions and a fan store, according to Apple Corps.

"There are so many special memories within the walls, not to

mention the rooftop," McCartney added in the official statement.

Ringo Starr, 85, the only other living Beatle, called the exhibition "like coming home".

Apple Corps promised further details about it, and a second experience currently in development, in "due course".

In the meantime, fans can register for tickets on the band's website.

The band's hometown of Liverpool, in northwest England, already boasts two attractions – Liverpool Beatles Museum and The Beatles Story – but neither are officially licensed by Apple Corps. –AFP

'Devil Wears Prada 2' holds strong at N American box office

LOS ANGELES – "The Devil Wears Prada 2" withstood a strong challenge from "Mortal Kombat II" to remain atop the North American box office for a second week running, industry estimates showed yesterday.

The hotly anticipated sequel to the 2006 smash hit about the cutthroat world of high fashion – starring Anne Hathaway, Meryl Streep, Emily Blunt and Stanley Tucci – earned US\$43 million in US and Canadian cinemas, Exhibitor Relations reported.

That puts the worldwide total for the Disney/20th Century film at a whopping US\$433 million.

Streep won a Golden Globe and received an Oscar nomination for best supporting actress in her initial turn as the imperious magazine editor Miranda Priestly – who is not so subtly based on longtime *Vogue* editor-in-chief Anna Wintour.

"Mortal Kombat II," a Warner Bros sequel based on the popular martial arts fantasy video game, debuted in second place at US\$40 million.

"This is an excellent opening for the second episode in an action thriller series," said analyst David A. Gross of Franchise Entertainment Research.

"The weekend figure is well above average for the genre, and it's close to double the start of the previous film, although

that movie opened during the pandemic."

"Michael," the biopic about late music superstar Michael Jackson, dropped to third place but still took in US\$36.5 million.

The Lionsgate movie – which chronicles the legendary artist's rise from child star to one of the world's most famous pop icons, but does not include any material about allegations of sexual abuse – has taken in over US\$575 million at the global box office.

Jaafar Jackson, the singer's nephew, stars as his uncle, in his first acting role.

"The Sheep Detectives," a family-friendly mystery film from Amazon MGM, debuted in fourth place at US\$15.9 million.

The film stars Hugh Jackman as a shepherd who reads mysteries to his flock in an English village. When he is found dead, the sheep (voiced by Julia Louis-Dreyfus and Patrick Stewart, among others) band together to solve the crime.

"This is a solid opening for a live-action/animation hybrid," said Gross.

In fifth place was another debut, James Cameron's concert documentary "Billie Eilish: Hit Me Hard and Soft - The Tour Live in 3D" at US\$7.5 million.

The Paramount film follows the Oscar- and Grammy-winning singer at her shows in Manchester. –AFP



Journalists work at the media centre of the Eurovision Song Contest 2026 (ESC) in Vienna, Austria yesterday, on the eve of the first semi-final of this year's contest. –AFP

Cannes Festival signs up Meta as sponsor amid AI fears

CANNES – The Cannes Film Festival has signed a multi-year sponsorship deal with social network giant and major AI investor Meta, the US company announced yesterday, despite fears about the impact of its new video tools on the cinema industry.

Meta said in a statement that it was "proud to be an official partner of the Festival de Cannes in a new multi-year strategic partnership", replacing social video platform TikTok.

The group is set to organise a series of promotional events for its video-enabled Ray-Ban Meta glasses, which are becoming increasingly popular among influencers but have sparked privacy fears.

It will also showcase its new artificial intelligence-powered video generative technology, which has been embraced by Oscar-winning "Traffic" director Steven Soderbergh for his latest film.

Soderbergh partnered with Meta for a documentary about the last interview given by Beatles songwriter John Lennon before his death, which will premiere at the Cannes Festival.

The film features AI-generated footage of Lennon and his wife Yoko Ono – a major talking point



German model Heidi Klum arrives at the Grand Hyatt Cannes Hotel Martinez, on the eve of the opening ceremony of the 79th edition of the Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France, yesterday. –Xinhua

in an industry which mostly views the technology as a threat to jobs, as well as a danger for copyright and original storytelling.

Soderbergh told *Deadline* magazine last week that AI-generated video comprises about 10 percent of the film and was used for "sequences that have images that are impossible to shoot".

The use of AI was central to the 2023 strikes that shut down

Hollywood, as actors and writers warned that unchecked technology threatened their livelihoods.

Thousands of French actors and filmmakers warned in an open letter in February that AI tools were "plundering" talent across the industry, comparing them to a "devouring hydra".

The Cannes Festival kicks off today and runs until May 23.

–Xinhua

World Weather

CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing 19°C~33°C	Manila 26°C~36°C	New York 11°C~19°C	Lisbon 12°C~20°C
Shanghai 19°C~33°C	Bangkok 26°C~34°C	London 7°C~17°C	Rio de Janeiro 17°C~23°C
Hong Kong 22°C~29°C	Tokyo 14°C~25°C	Frankfurt 6°C~13°C	Luanda 21°C~26°C
Taipei 22°C~27°C	Singapore 25°C~32°C	Vancouver 13°C~23°C	Maputo 17°C~33°C
Guangzhou 22°C~31°C	Kuala Lumpur 25°C~34°C	Paris 8°C~15°C	Dili 25°C~32°C
Nanjing 19°C~33°C	Jakarta 24°C~34°C	Moscow 11°C~17°C	São Tomé 26°C~31°C
Guilin 20°C~27°C	Seoul 12°C~23°C	Las Vegas 23°C~39°C	Praia 20°C~28°C
Xi'an 19°C~33°C	Sydney 15°C~22°C	Monte Carlo 14°C~23°C	Bissau 21°C~35°C



Streets of flowers

The faithful attend the celebration of the Brotherhood of Flowers and Palms in the indigenous town of Panchimalco, El Salvador on Sunday. This year, the traditional religious and cultural festivity is being held following El Salvador's first inscription on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity announced on December 10, 2025. — AFP



Bright – not beautiful

Children play climbing the Mexico-US border wall during Mother's Day celebrations in Playas de Tijuana, Baja California state, Mexico on Sunday. — AFP



Bird's eye view

An aerial view of Mount Fuji, Japan's highest peak at 3,776 metres, is seen from the window of a flight from Tokyo to Hong Kong, above Shizuoka Prefecture yesterday. — AFP



Pikachu welcomes you!

People visit the Seoul International Garden Show (SIGS) in Seoul on May 3. The SIGS runs from May 1 to October 27. — Xinhua



Mixed emotions

Palestinian brides and grooms gather during a mass-wedding celebration organised by the Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) in Gaza City yesterday. — AFP



Sir Larry for PM!

Larry the Downing Street cat sits outside 10 Downing Street, the official residence of Britain's Prime Minister, currently Labour party leader Keir Starmer, in central London, yesterday. — AFP