



3 Royal Supermarket outlets, 1 eatery ordered to stop business over mouse infestation

Yuki Lei

Three branches of the Royal Supermarket chain and an eatery have recently been found to be infested with mice, in response to which the Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) has announced that it has ordered the three branches in the peninsula's Rua de Francisco Xavier Pereira, Taipa's Avenida Dr Sun Yat Sen and Coloane's Seac Pai Van estate, as well as the “孫尚香” Chinese restaurant on Rua de Entre-Campos in San Kio district to suspend their business for deep cleaning and disinfection and to destroy all the live seafood and fresh food on their premises.

Chicken congee and seafood rice soup are the eatery's signature dishes.

“In response to recent rumours circulating on social media platforms that mice had been found in a large supermarket chain in Macau, IAM officials were immediately dispatched to inspect all its branches, during which its three outlets at Ip Heng Building in Seac Pai Van, Treasure Garden on Avenida Dr Sun Yat Sen (孫逸仙博士大馬路) in Taipa and the basement of New China Plaza Building on Rua de Francisco Xavier Pereira (俾利喇街) were ordered to immediately suspend their business operations for rectification and destroy all live and fresh food products,” the bureau noted in a statement on Friday.

According to a 40-second clip posted on social media platforms on Thursday, a mouse is seen ripping open a packet of rice vermicelli on what appeared to be a fresh food shelf at a Royal Supermarket branch, with multiple comments pointing out that the outlet is located in Seac Pai Van.

The IAM statement pointed out the hygiene conditions at the three supermarkets were “mediocre” with no proper installation of



These handout photos provided by the Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) yesterday on Friday and yesterday shows IAM inspectors at a Royal Supermarket outlet and outside the “孫尚香” eatery investigating their mouse infestation and hygiene issues.



mouse-proof facilities in their food processing area and signs of a mouse infestation in the store rooms, saying that “the enterprise's mouse prevention and control measures were insufficient”.

While the three supermarket branches were ordered to suspend their business for rectification, the restaurant on Rua de Entre-Campos (田畔街) was also ordered to

suspend its business due to a mouse infestation, with the removal of the eatery from Macau's online food delivery platforms, according to a separate IAM statement.

Yesterday's statement said that the bureau has been stepping up inspections of catering establishments and supermarkets in various districts, during which it was discovered that the environmental hygiene in the “孫尚香”

restaurant was “unsatisfactory”, with signs of a mouse infestation found in its storage and dining areas. As in the three supermarket outlets, the restaurant was also confirmed by the IAM inspectors to have had inadequate mice prevention and control measures, resulting in a lack of properly installed mouse prevention facilities in the food processing area.

Continued on p.5

Chinese study reveals immune, metabolic adaptations in high-altitude climbers

BEIJING – Chinese researchers have recently unveiled dynamic changes that occur in both the human immune system and metabolism during high-altitude climbing, offering a fresh perspective on the physiological challenges faced by mountaineers at high altitudes.

Researchers from BGI Research utilized cellular omics and mass spectrometry detection techniques to examine multi-omics changes in 11 high-altitude climbers as they ascended. Their findings have been

published in the journal Cell Reports.

The study involved obtaining multi-omic profiles from the climbers' blood samples. This included a single-cell transcriptomic analysis of 375,722 immune cells, as well as plasma metabolomics and lipidomics.

Using this comprehensive data, the researchers were able to map the single-cell landscape of peripheral immune cells in the climbers. They observed significant shifts in the composition of immune cells during the climb.

Furthermore, the researchers investigated dynamic changes in terms of the proportion of immune cells, as well as the roles of gene expression, functional pathways and transcriptional regulatory factors during both the high-altitude acclimatization period and extreme-altitude mountaineering.

Their findings suggest that the human body can adapt to the extreme conditions found in high-altitude environments through complex immune and metabolic mechanisms.

Researchers also discovered that human immune cells undergo metabolic reprogramming in extreme high-altitude environments, enhancing their antioxidant capacity. This adaptation is crucial for maintaining the basic functions of immune cells.

Additionally, the researchers noted an increase in plasma metabolites such as glutamine and fatty acids. These metabolic changes could be an important mechanism for helping climbers improve their energy status in high-altitude conditions. – Xinhua

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The Macau Post Daily

Xi's New Year cards cement friendship between Chinese, Americans

“I felt extremely grateful when I received the greeting card from President Xi,” said Brian Suy, an 11th grader from the Lincoln High School in the US state of Washington.

– Story on p. 7

Italy's PM pays surprise visit to Trump at Mar-a-Lago

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni paid an unofficial surprise visit to President-elect Donald Trump at his Mar-a-Lago Florida residence, according to her office yesterday.

– Story on p. 11

Chinese medics sowing seeds of solidarity, friendship in São Tomé and Príncipe

Monazeri da Costa, an acupuncturist nurse from São Tomé and Príncipe, considers the Chinese medical teams among the most important mentors in his professional journey.

– Story on p. 12

SJM, HK Ballet hold open call for new residency

Rui Pastorin

SJM Resorts and the Hong Kong Ballet will host an open audition in Macau and Hong Kong for their new residency “The Adventures of ALICE @ Grand Lisboa Palace Resort Macau”, a collaboration set to debut in April.

According to a Friday statement from the integrated resort (IR) operator, the auditions, for which application requirements must be emailed before Thursday, is slated to take place this Saturday from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. at the Rehearsal Studio of the Macao Conservatory School of Dance. Auditions are also scheduled at Studio 6 of The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts the following day.

The statement noted that the upcoming residency at Grand Lisboa Palace (GLP) is inspired by ALICE (in wonderland), a show that has delighted audiences in Beijing, Hong Kong and the US. It was choreographed by Hong Kong Ballet Artistic Director Septime Webre, who will also be mentoring participants together with ballet masters, the statement said.

The statement said that production will take place on the integrated resort’s state-of-the-art 360-degree stage at the Atrium, complete with advanced lighting, sound, and projection technology, purpose-built for the show.

Rehearsals for the show are set to start as early as March, leading up to its debut. The shows will take place at weekends and public holidays, the statement said. Moreover, a parade, “whimsical performances”, and workshops are also on offer.

Those eligible are male or female dancers aged at least 18 and are required to have “strong classical and contemporary training or experience”. Application requirements are a video showing performances in classical and contemporary ballet, an English or Chinese resume, one headshot and additional dance shots, and a registration on the SJM Job Career website.

One can email the application requirements to artcareers@sjmresorts.com, while one can also contact 6882 7060 for enquiries. ■

誠徵古典及現代芭蕾舞團員參演2025年《愛麗斯夢遊澳門上葡京綜合度假村》
Recruiting male and female dancers proficient in classical and contemporary ballet to perform
The Adventures of ALICE @ Grand Lisboa Palace Resort Macau in 2025.

澳娛綜合 SJM
香港芭蕾舞團 HK BALLET

公開甄選 OPEN AUDITIONS

條件 REQUIREMENTS:
男女均可 Male and Female dancer
年滿18歲或以上 Aged 18 or above
紮實的古典及現代芭蕾舞技巧及經驗 Strong classical and contemporary ballet technique and experience required

澳門甄選 Macau Audition:
2025.01.11 (星期六 Saturday) 13:00 - 16:00
澳門演藝學院舞蹈學校 Macao Conservatory School of Dance

香港甄選 Hong Kong Audition:
2025.01.12 (星期日 Sunday) 13:00 - 16:00
香港演藝學院 The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts

報名時間: 即日起至2025年1月9日(星期四)
報名方式: 請於截止日期前把以下指定申請資料發送
artcareers@sjmresorts.com

申請資料:
- 展現古典及現代芭蕾舞技巧的個人影片連結
- 中文或英文的個人履歷
- 試鏡照片: 一張大頭照及個人芭蕾舞姿照片

掃描QR code查詢詳情或二維碼查詢詳情及報名資料
Scan the SJM Job Career website QR code to learn more and register personal information

查詢電話: 澳門演藝學院(53) 6882 7060或我們轉機

This poster provided by SJM Resorts on Friday promotes the open auditions for the upcoming “The Adventures of ALICE @ Grand Lisboa Palace Resort Macau Residency Show”.

UTM, UM to hold Open Days this weekend

Preparing YOU for New Ventures
旅業新篇章 與你同開創
澳旅大開放日
UTM Open Day 2025—01.11
望廈校區 Mong-Há Campus

活動概覽 Programme:
14:00 開幕式 OPENING CEREMONY
14:15 課程及招生攤位開放 PROGRAMME AND ADMISSION BOOTHS
14:30 聯誼課程及分享會 PROGRAMME SHARING SESSIONS
14:30 工作坊-學生表演 WORKSHOPS, STUDENT PERFORMANCE
18:00 活動結束 END OF THE EVENT

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1.12 2025
UM OPEN DAY
澳大開放日
SUN 星期日 11:00-17:00

澳門大學校園和珠海澳大科技研究院
The UM campus and the Zhuhai UM Science & Technology Research Institute are open to the public

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COME AND VISIT US

These posters promote each university's upcoming Open Days.

Rui Pastorin

The Macao University of Tourism (UTM) and the University of Macau (UM) are respectively slated to host their Open Days on Saturday and Sunday, with both tertiary education institutions offering a raft of on-campus events.

UTM's Open Day will take place on the public university's Mong-Há Campus, according to the event poster on the UTM website, adding that the event's opening ceremony will take place at 2 p.m.

Guided tours, programme and admission booths, games, workshops, various experiences, and performances are among the activities on offer for participants. Moreover, the website added that

programme discussion sessions will also be held during the event.

UTM's Open Day runs until 6 p.m., with more details available on <https://www.utm.edu.mo/admission/en/VirtualOpenDay/index.html>

Meanwhile, UM's “Connecting Macao and Hengqin - UM Open Day 2025” will take place in both Macao and Hengqin. Running from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., the event will feature over 200 activities throughout the day, according to a Friday UM statement. These include games, performances, and “A Day at UM” campus tour and the “Residential College Rewarding Tour”, along with learning more about admission and programmes.

Moreover, the Zhuhai UM

Science & Technology Research Institute in Hengqin will also be open, offering admission talks, research seminars, alumni sharing sessions, guided tours, and booth games, the statement from the public university said.

UM offers over 100 bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degree programmes in various fields, with the statement adding that the application deadlines for bachelor's programmes (admission examination) and postgraduate programmes are January 16 and March 14 respectively. More information is available on <https://www.um.edu.mo/study>.

One can also call 8822 8400 or email info@um.edu.mo for more information. ■

Trio cheat casino, exchange dealers & gamblers out of HK\$600,000 with fake chips

Yuki Lei

Using 77 fake casino chips with “a low-fidelity simulation”, three mainland men cheated a casino in Cotai, 11 illegal currency exchange dealers and gamblers out of a total of HK\$600,000 in just two hours or so on New Year's Day, but their scam was quickly uncovered by the casino.

Judiciary Police (PJ) spokesman Cheong Un Hong announced the case during a special press conference on Friday, during which he identified the three suspects, aged between 29 and 33, by their surnames – Guo, Tu and Lin. The trio arrived in Macau on January 1 and started their scam at 8:30 p.m. by mixing their bogus casino chips with real ones and exchanging them with gamblers and illegal currency exchange dealers in and around the casino. Their scam was uncovered at about 10 p.m. when a dealer exchanged a gambler's fake chip into several genuine chips worth HK\$10,000, after which the casino reported the case to the Judiciary Police.

According to Cheong, the Judiciary Police, in conjunction with the casino security guards, arrested

the trio at the casino later that day. Under questioning, all of them refused to cooperate with the police, but a PJ investigation found that among them, Lin had mixed fake chips with real ones and exchanged them at the casino's cage, while Tu had exchanged fake chips with gamblers for yuan in the casino's toilets.

In the operation, Cheong noted, the Judiciary Police seized a total of 77 counterfeit casino chips with a face value of HK\$10,00 each, two from the casino, 58 from gamblers and illegal currency exchange dealers as well as 17 from Tu and Lin.

PJ officers also seized 12 genuine casino chips – six worth HK\$1,000 each and six worth HK\$10,000 each, as well as HK\$17,000 in cash from the two suspects.

The Judiciary Police transferred on Friday the trio to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP), where they were facing fraud involving a considerable amount of money and illegal currency exchange charges respectively.

Meanwhile, the Judiciary Police have also filed separate cases against four of the 11 victims for running illegal currency exchange businesses at local casinos. ■



Evidence seized from the three mainland fraud suspects, including fake casino chips, is displayed during Friday's special press conference at the Judiciary Police (PJ) headquarters. - Photo: Maria Cheang Ut Meng

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Macau Weather

FINE.
FORCE 2 TO 4 NORTH TO NORTHEASTERLY WINDS.
RELATIVE HUMIDITY WILL RANGE BETWEEN 35% AND 85%.



13°C~22°C

Source: SMG

Macau has reached flu peak: SSM

Ginnie Liang

The Health Bureau (SSM) said in a statement yesterday that influenza virus positivity among flu-like illnesses stood at 15 percent at the end of last month, a bit higher than the early warning level of 14.5 percent, indicating that Macau has reached the peak of the flu season.

The statement said the bureau expected the flu season to continue to be active over the next few weeks, adding that the bureau would continue to pay close attention to the situation, urging the public to take note of precautionary measures.

According to the statement, a total of 21 critical influenza cases were recorded in Macau last year, aged between 3 and 92 years, of which five died. The statement underlined that only five of the 21

cases had received an influenza vaccination.

125 gastroenteritis cases per week last month

In addition, the Health Bureau (SSM) announced in a separate statement yesterday that it had recorded 12 collective gastroenteritis cases last month, with the average number of acute gastroenteritis cases reported per week amounting to 125 at the end of last month.

Among the 12 collective gastroenteritis cases, seven were caused by norovirus, two by Salmonella and three by undetected pathogens, involving a total of about 180 people with relatively mild symptoms, the statement said, pointing out that the number of norovirus cases had the most significant rise.

Macau has been going through an active stage of acute gastroenteritis since last month, the statement said, urging the public to be aware of personal, environmental and food hygiene to prevent the spread of the disease.

The bureau pointed out that acute gastroenteritis is usually caused by different pathogens such as viruses or bacteria. Common pathogens include norovirus and Salmonella. The routes of transmission include consumption of food or water contaminated with viruses or bacteria, contact with vomit or faeces of the patient, contact with virus-contaminated objects, or droplet transmission.

The common symptoms of acute gastroenteritis include nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal pain and fever, but are usually mild, the statement said.

MPMHPA calls for public awareness of mental health



Macao Populace Mental Health Promotion Association (MPMHPA) President Tang Ut Sim speaks to reporters on the sidelines of yesterday's community activity in Iao Hon Market Park. — Photo: Yuki Lei

Yuki Lei

The Macao Populace Mental Health Promotion Association (MPMHPA), together with the Graceful Rhyme Arts and Cultural Tutorial Centre, held yesterday a community activity in Iao Hon Market Park, aiming to raise public awareness of mental health through a variety of charity sales and performances.

MPMHPA President Tang Ut Sim said that her association "is a self-help organisation that focuses on improving the lives of mentally ill persons and their families as well as fighting for their legal rights", consisting of more than 200 members. Knowing that mental illness has a great negative impact on civil society, Tang added, she hoped that yesterday's activity "will remind everyone

to pay attention to their own mental health, so as to minimise the depletion of social resources caused by mental illness".

Speaking to the media on the sidelines of the activity, Tang said she was aware of the rising trend of mental health patients in the community, hoping that the government could increase its measures to support her association in areas such as community follow-up treatment or emotional support.

Having observed that many elderly people lose their goals in life after retirement and are prone to conflict with family members and negative emotions, Tang encouraged senior citizens to participate more in community activities organised by different organisations. ■

IC calls on local applicants for FILMART

Rui Pastorin

Local film and TV production entities can make submissions to join the "Macao Pavilion" at this year's Hong Kong International Film & TV Market (FILMART) in Hong Kong, with applications, which are free of charge, accepted until January 16.

The Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) noted in a statement on Thursday that FILMART is "an iconic event in the film and TV industry in Asia and a principal trading hub for films and TV series in the world", adding that last year's FILMART garnered over 7,500 practitioners from 27 countries and regions.



This screenshot downloaded from the event website last night shows the logo for Hong Kong International Film & TV Market (FILMART).

Those eligible to apply are local companies involved in at least six non-local film and TV projects shot in Macau between 2014 and 2024,

with eight companies to be selected to take part in the upcoming event.

The statement elaborated that the bureau will choose the companies based on experience in assisting film and TV projects from places other than the mainland, Macau, Hong Kong and Taiwan produced in Macau; the scale of non-local film and TV projects produced in Macau; and the tasks they were responsible for.

Required documents, for which more details can be found on www.macaucultural.gov.mo, can be submitted to SIF@icm.gov.mo

One can contact 8399 6256 or 8399 6295 for enquiries. ■

DSOP probes safety woes at IH redevelopment site

Ginnie Liang

The Public Works Bureau (DSOP) said in a statement yesterday that it expressed serious concerns regarding recent reports from residents about safety issues at the Housing Bureau's (IH) building redevelopment site on Rua Norte do Patane (沙梨頭北街), with complaints surfacing on social media, highlighting incidents of falling debris and paint dust damaging motorcycles parked in the vicinity.

In response, bureau staff were

dispatched to the site to assess the situation firsthand, and swiftly ordered a halt to all cleaning operations involving the scaffolding at the project, the statement said.

Additionally, the statement said that it mandated that DSOP supervisors would oversee the cleaning of the ground and vehicles affected by dust and debris, adding that preliminary investigations revealed that the incidents occurred while workers were clearing debris

from the scaffolding in preparation for subsequent dismantling activities.

During the process, cement fragments and paint dust fell from the scaffolding, raising suspicions about inadequate protective measures that led to the incidents, the statement said.

According to the statement, the bureau has instructed the contractor to fully cooperate with the ongoing investigation, which includes a comprehensive review of the construction site's safety conditions. A report detailing the findings is expected to be submitted shortly, the statement said.

Furthermore, the contractor and supervising unit must conduct thorough safety checks before work can resume, ensuring that all necessary precautions are in place to prevent similar occurrences, the statement said.

If the investigation concludes that negligence on the part of the contractor contributed to the incidents, the bureau said that it would initiate legal proceedings for possible penalties in accordance with regulations, the statement said. ■



This handout photo provided by the Public Works Bureau (DSOP) yesterday shows its officials cleaning the area and vehicles parked in front of the Housing Bureau's (IH) building development site on Rua Norte do Patane (沙梨頭北街) yesterday.

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A beginner's guide to prompt engineering: Here's how you should utilise generative AI

**Hoi Sio Hong, Form 4, Chan Sui Ki Perpetual
Help College**

Abstract

In the 21st century, technology is evolving at an unprecedented pace, with artificial intelligence (AI) at the forefront of this transformation. Since the launch of ChatGPT in late 2022, generative AI has garnered significant attention. This innovative technology is increasingly integrated into various electronic devices, revolutionising how we interact with digital content. This article will explore the principles of prompt engineering* and its application in generative artificial intelligence (GAI), particularly focusing on its use in academic settings, as well as discussing the significance of effective prompting techniques, the selection of appropriate AI models, and the potential benefits and challenges of integrating AI tools in education.

Understanding Prompts and Prompt Engineering

Prompts are the inputs or queries users provide to chatbots and language models, serving as a way to guide the AI in generating relevant responses. For example, the Poe platform allows users to input prompts to interact with various chatbots. A well-crafted prompt can improve the capacity of language models on a wide range of common and complex tasks such as question answering and arithmetic reasoning, while the practice of developing effective and optimised prompts is known as prompt engineering.

Prompt engineering allows users to efficiently use language models for a wide variety of applications and research topics. Although it may seem complex, developing effective prompts is a manageable skill. Below, you will find guides and tips to help you develop your prompt engineering skills, making your experience with AI more productive and rewarding.

1. Choosing the right AI model

Just as individuals possess unique talents, different AI models excel in various fields of knowledge. Generally, the latest models demonstrate improved performance in both speed and accuracy. For instance, the model GPT-4o developed by OpenAI masters general knowledge, while Claude-3.5 by Anthropic outperforms GPT-4o in coding tasks. Therefore, selecting the most suitable AI model for your specific needs is crucial before you begin crafting your prompts.

2. Always start simple

When crafting prompts, it's best to start as simply as possible. Try avoiding any ambiguity that might confuse the chatbot by asking targeted questions. A simple and concise prompt not only facilitates better responses but also makes later modifications easier. Additionally, avoid adding complexity to the prompt. Consider splitting the target into smaller simpler subtasks or steps to help the chatbot attain a better performance.

To start with, use direct commands that clearly instruct the model on your expectations. For example, you might use phrases like "Write," "Classify," "Summarise," "Translate," or "Order" to guide the AI in achieving your desired outcome.

To illustrate, let's consider a common academic task:



This screenshot provided by Hoi last night shows him being interviewed for one of the episodes of *Educação e Juventude Dinâmica* ("Education and Dynamic Youth") by the Education and Youth Development Bureau (DSEDJ).

summarising an academic article. Our initial prompt is going to be "Summarise this article."

3. Be specific

Once you've crafted your initial prompt, the next and final step is to iterate and enhance it for better results. You can begin by providing background information to guide the chatbot. The more descriptive and detailed the prompt is, the better the results. The details should be relevant and contribute to the task at hand. Taking our initial prompt for an example, the AI can achieve a more accurate and effective summary by specifying the focus. Here's a revised prompt: "Summarise the key findings of this research article on climate change, highlighting the main arguments and implications."

4. Formatting

After refining your prompt, it's essential to focus on formatting. A well-structured prompt not only enhances readability but also clarifies your instructions to the chatbot. One effective method for achieving this is through the CO-STAR Framework, which provides a structured approach to ensure clarity and relevance in the responses. Here's how we are going to enhance our refined prompt with the CO-STAR Framework:

1. C – Context:

○ Provide background on the article's subject and relevance.

2. O – Objective:

○ Define what you want to achieve with the summary.

3. S – Style:

○ Specify the desired formatting or presentation style.

4. T – Tone:

○ Indicate the emotional character or attitude you want in the response.

5. A – Audience:

○ Define who the intended audience is.

6. R – Response Format:

○ Clarify how you want the information structured.

By combining all six attributes, a more effective interaction with the chatbot can be achieved, leading to improved results. It provides clarity by giving the chatbot precise guidance on what to focus on, enhances specificity by including relevant context and details about the intended audience and tone, and establishes a clear structure by outlining the expected format. All these methods of prompt engineering make it easier for the chatbot to produce a focused and coherent response.

How Learners Can Utilise AI Tools

With the prompting techniques we've discussed, students can effectively integrate AI into their study routines. Think of it as a superior alternative to traditional flashcards. For example, if you're preparing for a biology exam, you can scan and upload your notes, then instruct the chatbot to generate a variety of questions – ranging from identification and short-answer questions to more complex case studies.

Once you've answered these questions, you can ask the chatbot to analyse your responses and provide a personalised study plan tailored to your needs. This approach not only helps reinforce your understanding but also strengthens your memory retention, making your study sessions more efficient and effective.

**Prompt engineering is the process of designing and optimising the input prompts given to AI models, particularly language models, to elicit the most relevant, accurate, and useful responses. – Source Poe (explanation added by the Post)*

Govt vows to tackle waterfront stench caused by sewers' wrong connection with rainwater drains

Tony Wong

The government has underlined that it is tackling the ongoing issue of wastewater being discharged untreated into the coastal waters off the peninsula's northern waterfront, east of the Barrier Gate border checkpoint.

The government also said that it has discovered that the waterfront stench is due to sewer pipes having been mistakenly connected into rainwater drain outlets off the peninsula's northern coast again.

However, the government has yet to announce when it expects the stench issue to be solved.

The Environmental Protection Bureau (DSPA) referred to the issue in a reply to a written interpellation made by directly-elected lawmaker Ron Lam U Tou in early November. The bureau made and signed the reply at the end of the same month, the copy of which was released by Lam's office to the media on Saturday.

A section of the underwater Light Rapid Transit (LRT) East Line project is being carried out off the peninsula's northern coast east of the Barrier Gate checkpoint, i.e., off the waterfront Avenida Norte do Hipódromo (馬場北大馬路) and Avenida da Ponte da Amizade (友誼橋大馬路). The project, which got off the ground in 2023, includes the land reclamation of the mudflats (aka tidal flats) off the coast.

The LRT East Line project is overseen by the Public Works Bureau (DSOP), the public entity tasked with organising and overseeing public infrastructure projects.

Sewage interception project in 2019

The Environmental Protection Bureau completed a sewage interception project off the coast in 2019 aiming to solve the then long-standing stench problem affecting residents living nearby. The project set up sewage interception facilities to collect wastewater at several rainwater drain outlets off the coast and divert the collected wastewater to the nearby Macau Peninsula Wastewater Treatment Plant.

In his written interpellation, Lam acknowledged that the sewage interception project completed in 2019 had significantly improved the then waterfront stench problem. However, Lam said, residents in the area have again been affected by waterfront stink since early last year.

Sewage still discharged from 2 rainwater drain outlets

According to Lam's written interpellation, a number of residents submitted complaints about the issue to the government early last year, after which the Public Works Bureau replied to them in April that after the mudflat-reclamation project had started, it found that there were five rainwater drain outlets off the coastal Avenida Norte do Hipódromo, three of which were equipped with sewage pumping and interception facilities, but wastewater was still being discharged from the other two rainwater drain outlets.

In his written interpellation submitted in November last year, Lam said that while the Public



This handout photo downloaded from the Public Works Bureau's (DSOP) website yesterday shows the underwater LRT East Line project including the mudflat reclamation being carried out late last year off the peninsula's northern coast.

Works Bureau had ordered the LRT East Line project's contractor to implement special measures aiming to improve the waterfront stench problem, the issue had still not seen much improvement by that time.

Lam asked the government why the Environmental Protection Bureau did not install interception facilities in all the five rainwater drain outlets off the coast in its project in 2019 and what measures the government would implement to intercept wastewater still being discharged from the other two rainwater drain outlets.

Lam also asked the government about the additional facilities to be installed in its mudflat-reclamation project off the coast aiming to more effectively intercept wastewater.

In its reply to Lam's written interpellation, the Environmental Protection Bureau said that a

research institution hired by the bureau concluded in 2016 that wastewater was being discharged from only three rainwater drain outlets off the coastal Avenida Norte do Hipódromo because of which its then interception project, completed in 2019, only covered the three rainwater drain outlets.

The bureau said in the reply that it has preliminarily concluded that the waterfront stench occurring again is due to sewer pipes having been "newly" connected mistakenly into rainwater drain outlets off the coast.

New interception facilities

The Environmental Protection Bureau underlined that in response to the new situation, it has been closely working with other relevant public entities including the Public

Works Bureau aiming to launch new measures to intercept wastewater still being discharged from other rainwater drain outlets.

The DSPA reply to Lam's interpellation also quoted the Public Works Bureau as saying that a project to install box culverts as well as sewage pumping facilities in the mudflat-reclamation area was being designed, adding that the design was expected to be completed in 2025 after which the project could start.

The reply also said that DSPA officials will closely monitor the new project to be overseen by DSOP officials, adding that the former will also advise the latter about the project's environmental protection aspect.

Meanwhile, the Public Works Bureau said in a statement last month that the former police tactical unit headquarters, on a site near the Barrier Gate checkpoint, will be demolished so that the current pick-up and drop-off area for tourist coaches, situated next to the checkpoint, can be temporarily relocated to the site, making way for the ES1 station's expansion of the LRT East Line project to get off the ground.

The underground LRT station to serve the Barrier Gate checkpoint, i.e., the ES1 station of the ongoing LRT East Line project, will be built 80 metres closer to the Barrier Gate checkpoint, thanks to the fact that the jurisdiction over a V-shaped area, situated southeast of Zhuhai's Gongbei checkpoint, was transferred from Zhuhai City to the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR) in May last year. ■

3 Royal Supermarket outlets, 1 eatery ordered to stop business over mouse infestation

Continued from p.1

According to the two statements, the three supermarket outlets and the eatery have all been required to pass a reinspection before they would be allowed to resume business.

Both statements highlighted the responsibility of the food trade to draw up effective pest control plans, conduct regular inspections of pipes and other facilities and equipment, regularly clean and reduce the accumulation of debris on the premises, and properly store foodstuff with the aim of "effectively" preventing pests and mice from entering, hiding and reproducing there. The statements added that "prosecution would be initiated if a breach of the Food Safety Law is found" at the three supermarkets and the restaurant.

Royal Supermarket, eatery pledge professional cleaning & disinfection

Meanwhile, the supermarket chain issued on Friday afternoon a written apology, noting that it

has hired a professional cleaning and disinfection company to carry out comprehensive cleaning and disinfection at the affected branches, and it also undertook to further optimise its management procedures and environmental hygiene to ensure that similar incidents would not recur: "We would like to apologise to everyone for the unpleasant shopping experience... We will take practical actions to ensure that our customers' shopping environment is safe and hygienic".

Public broadcaster TDM quoted the owner of the "孫尚香" (pronounced "Sun Seong Heong" in Cantonese) restaurant as saying that he had hired a professional for the mouse infestation and deep cleaning of the premises: "A mouse infestation is a headache for food establishments, and it is difficult to say that there won't be this kind of problem during eight to 10 years of operation". He also complained about the obvious increase in the number of mice in the district recently. ■

Cheong urges IAM to revamp structure



Tony Wong

Secretary for Administration and Justice André Cheong Weng Chon has urged the Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) to revamp its organisational structure with the aim of providing residents with better services, ensuring that Macau will not tarnish its reputation as "a pearl in the palm of the motherland" praised by President Xi Jinping during his inspection visit to Macau last month.

Cheong made the remarks in a speech during a ceremony on Thursday where he administered the oath of office of the newly appointed president of the bureau, Chao Wai leng, and newly appointed vice-president, Mak Kim Meng, according to an IAM statement on Friday.

Cheong's portfolio oversees

the bureau, which did not invite the media to cover the ceremony, but announced its information in Friday's statement.

Chao and Mak's one-year appointments started on New Year's Day.

According to the statement, Cheong noted in his speech that the IAM tasks are closely related to the population's well-being, urging Chao and Mak to lead the bureau's staff members in meeting their challenges with new attitudes and new mindsets, in close collaboration with other senior officials of the bureau.

Cheong said that the bureau's senior officials should seriously study how to revamp the bureau's organisational structure, functions, and personnel system, with the aim of enabling the

bureau to provide residents with better municipal services.

Chao has succeeded José Fonseca Tavares as the president of the bureau's top Administrative Committee who retired on Wednesday last week. Chao had headed the Identification Services Bureau (DSI) since March 2023 before his new appointment to the Municipal Affairs Bureau.

Mak, who had been a member of the bureau's Administrative Committee since 2010, has been promoted to a vice-president of the committee, effective from Wednesday last week.

Currently, the bureau has only one vice-president, although its organisational structure allows the appointment of up to two vice-presidents. ■

Secretary for Administration and Justice André Cheong Weng Chon (centre) poses for a group photo with newly appointed Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) President Chao Wai leng (third from right) and IAM Vice President Mak Kim Meng (second from left), as well as other officials, on the sidelines of Thursday's swearing-in ceremony of Chao and Mak. — Photo: IAM

Record-breaking travel reveals nation's strengthened economic vitality

BEIJING – China witnessed a remarkable surge in both rail and air travel in 2024, fueled by vigorous economic activities and robust consumer spending.

The country's railway network handled a record 4.08 billion passenger trips in 2024, a 10.8 percent year-on-year increase, according to China State Railway Group Co., Ltd.

Similarly, the latest data from the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) shows that air passenger trips are estimated to have hit a record 730 million in 2024, an 18 percent year-on-year increase.

As a bellwether of economic growth, the record travel figures signal a steady rise in China's consumption willingness, said Xu Hong, dean of the College of Tourism and Service Management at Nankai University.

This surge was partly driven by

a growing thirst for leisure travel, with the tourism sector standing out as a bright spot of China's economy in 2024, she noted.

In the first three quarters of last year, China reported 4.24 billion domestic trips, representing a year-on-year increase of 15.3 percent. The total expenditure of domestic tourists amounted to 4.35 trillion yuan, up 17.9 percent year on year.

With improved infrastructure making various regions and lesser-known destinations more accessible, the shift toward off-the-beaten-path travel has gained momentum, drawing travelers in search of niche experiences.

Lu Wei, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Macroeconomic Research, noted that lower-tier regions with airports have become increasingly popular among Chinese travelers.

Beyond the hustle and bustle

of the domestic travel market, international travel also flourished last year, with a boom in both inbound and outbound tourism.

This China travel boom, driven by the country's expanding visa-free travel policy, has led international tourists to flock to the country to experience its blend of centuries-old traditions and cutting-edge technology. An enhanced payment environment, bilingual signage and other supports have made travel in China more convenient for foreign tourists.

"The boom in the inbound tourism market aligns well with China's focus on stimulating demand," Xu said. She also highlighted the crucial role inbound travel plays in driving consumption and boosting employment in China.

In early December, the Chinese leadership positioned "boosting consumption" as a key policy task for 2025 at a tone-setting conference,

and called for the implementation of a special action plan to that end.

Looking ahead, this strong travel momentum is expected to carry through to the Spring Festival travel rush, a traditional peak period for China's transportation network. This year's travel rush will run from Jan. 14 to Feb. 22.

With family visits and tourism overlapping, the populous country is poised to see a record-breaking 9 billion trips made during the peak travel season. Rail journeys and civil aviation passenger trips are projected to hit record highs of 510 million and 90 million, respectively.

To accommodate the mass movement of travelers, the national railway system announced a new operating plan yesterday, adding 230 passenger trains to schedules across the mainland to bring the total to 13,028. Meanwhile, the civil aviation sector is set to handle an average of

18,500 flights per day during the Spring Festival travel rush, an 8.4 percent increase from 2024 levels.

In 2025, infrastructure investments in China's railway system will total 590 billion yuan, solidifying its position as the world's largest railway network. The country is set to put 2,600 kilometers of new railway lines into operation.

In the civil aviation sector, a strong performance during the upcoming Spring Festival travel season is expected to continue throughout 2025, said Li Dan, a researcher at Zheshang Securities, noting that international-route passenger traffic is expected to see double-digit growth this year.

Li also projects that the overall financial performance of listed airlines in 2025 will surpass that of 2024, fueled by improving seat utilization rates and steady growth in airfares. – Xinhua

Enterprises embrace new opportunities in ice and snow economy

HANGZHOU – In a bustling workshop of a sportswear company, workers were racing to fulfill an urgent order of 50,000 pairs of ski goggles, a popular item in the trolleys of megacity shoppers, around late December.

"Our production lines have been running at full tilt," said Pan Xinru, the workshop director of Zhejiang Vista Sports Goods Co. Ltd.

Located in a small coastal county-level city Wenling in Zhejiang Province, a manufacturing hub in eastern China, the company has been producing ski goggles since 2007, primarily for the European and American markets.

After China successfully hosted the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, the company sensed a shift in the market and swiftly adjusted its strategy by increasing investment in the domestic market.

Wang Keli, deputy head of the company's administration department, noted that the sales volume in the domestic market at present accounts for about one-third of the total.

In recent years, enthusiasm for ice and snow sports in China has surged, leading to a year-on-year growth in Vista's order book.

To efficiently handle the influx of orders, the company invested over 17 million yuan in 2024 to expand its capacity, now operating five state-of-the-art ski goggles production lines with an annual output value of 600 million yuan.

Beyond ski goggles, Vista has expanded its product lines to include snowboards. In 2023, the company secured orders for more than 10,000 snowboards, which generated a production value exceeding 20 million yuan. Their snowboards are particularly sought-after in markets across

Beijing, Jilin, Heilongjiang and Xinjiang, all of which are home to several famous ski resorts.

Liu Wen, from Ninghai Xingda Leisure Products Co. Ltd., noted that while their snow sports equipment was initially aimed at international customers, the surge in winter sports enthusiasm – particularly following events like the Beijing Winter Olympics – has sparked a significant rise in domestic interest.

"We used to get an occasional order from a merchant or a consumer, but now we're seeing more bulk orders," Liu said.

Liu added that as demand for ice and snow tourism becomes increasingly diversified and quality-driven, the demand for in-depth, personalized travel services is expected to grow explosively, which will undoubtedly benefit the ice and snow equipment industry.

"In-depth travel goes beyond simply admiring ice sculptures, snow landscapes, or enjoying basic skiing. It involves a deeper engagement with ice and snow activities and cultural experiences, which will further unlock the market's potential," Liu said.

Ninghai's ice and snow equipment sector, predominantly specializing in sports poles, has reached an annual production value exceeding 920 million yuan, capturing over 75 percent of the national market share in terms of output value.

In Yiwu, a Chinese city dubbed "the world's supermarket," business owners are also experiencing the growing surge of the ice and snow economy.

Since September 2024, Chen Jing has been swamped with orders. The latest hit is a new model of ice skates that can be converted into inline skates by

removing the blades, appealing to customers of all ages, Chen said, adding that sales of snow goggles, skiing protective gear, and related products have surged nearly 50 percent year on year.

Zhuji, renowned for its high-quality socks, has also benefited from the booming wave of ice and snow tourism.

"We roughly estimate that our annual sales exceeded 600,000 pairs in 2024," said Xu Zhongfu, head of Zhuji Yuanjin Textile Co. Ltd. Leveraging the rapid growth of the ice and snow economy in recent years, winter sports socks – particularly ski socks – have become increasingly popular with consumers.

Zhejiang, situated in the subtropical zone, lacks extensive ice and snow resources, yet the thriving ice and snow tourism and sports have injected new vitality into the local manufacturing sector and have also fueled local enthusiasm for related activities. According to figures from Zhejiang's sports bureau, there are now 29 ice and snow sports venues in the province, of which 19 are ski resorts.

Zhejiang is just a microcosm of a larger trend. A report published yesterday by China Tourism Academy noted that during the 2024-2025 winter season, the number of visitors engaging in ice and snow leisure tourism in China is projected to reach 520 million, with tourism revenue anticipated to surpass 630 billion yuan.

China has also aimed to boost its ice and snow economy as a new growth sector, targeting an economic scale of 1.2 trillion yuan by 2027 and 1.5 trillion yuan by 2030, according to guidelines issued by the General Office of the State Council in November 2024. – Xinhua

Direct high-speed rail routes link Shaanxi and Hubei with HK



Train attendants of a newly launched direct high-speed rail service from Xi'an to Hong Kong pose for a photo at Xi'an North Railway Station in Xi'an, capital of Shaanxi Province, yesterday. The direct high-speed train route was launched yesterday. A single trip in either direction takes less than 11 hours. – Xinhua

XI'AN/WUHAN – New high-speed rail services linking Hong Kong with Xi'an and Wuhan, two major mainland cities, were officially launched yesterday, significantly enhancing connectivity between the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and the Chinese mainland.

A train departed from Xi'an, the capital of northwestern Shaanxi Province, at 11:04 a.m., and another left Wuhan, the capital of central Hubei Province, at around 4 p.m., with both departure stations hosting performances and other celebratory activities.

Along the route linking Hong Kong with Xi'an, which also stops in Wuhan, a single trip in either direction takes under 11 hours, with other stations located in the provinces of Shaanxi, Henan, Hubei, Hunan and Guangdong.

Trains departing from Wuhan take no more than five hours to reach Hong Kong, stopping in Hunan and Guangdong provinces. Return trains on the route are scheduled to leave Hong Kong at 7:19 a.m. the next day.

"To ensure top-notch services, we've trained our attendants to master necessary working Cantonese

and English," said Luo Xin, deputy head of the Xi'an station under China Railway Xi'an Group Co. Ltd.

The direct train service from Xi'an – home to the world-famous Terracotta Warriors – to Hong Kong will make travel between the two cities more convenient, and will also boost cooperation and exchanges in the fields of the economy, trade, talent and culture, the group said.

According to China Railway Wuhan Group Co., Ltd., the opening of the two new routes means that four train services now operate between Hong Kong and Wuhan, which has a population of more than 13 million, bringing greater convenience to passengers traveling for short-term vacations, business, or visits.

Hong Kong entered its high-speed rail era in 2018, when the Hong Kong section of the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link opened.

The central government aims to expand the length of the nation's operational high-speed rail tracks to about 60,000 kilometers by 2030, up from 48,000 kilometers at the end of last year, according to railway operator data. – Xinhua

Xi's New Year cards cement friendship between Chinese, Americans

Analysis

BEIJING – “I felt extremely grateful when I received the greeting card from President Xi,” said Brian Suy, an 11th grader from the Lincoln High School in the US state of Washington.

On Jan. 1, President Xi Jinping and his wife, Peng Liyuan, replied to a New Year card from representatives of middle school teachers and students from Washington state.

In their reply card, the couple expressed their hope that the youth of China and the United States will continue to participate in China's initiative of inviting 50,000 young Americans to China for exchange and study programs in a five-year span.

Earlier, the US-China Youth and Student Exchange Association, as well as representatives of teachers and students from Lincoln High School and Stadium High School, who have visited China through the initiative, sent a New Year card to Xi, Peng and the Chinese people.

“I am willing to be a successor to keep the relations of the people of China and America strong and close,” Suy told Xinhua. “I believe that the world will ultimately be a better place if future generations strengthen these connections.”

BRIDGE OF FRIENDSHIP

After having received New Year cards twice from Xi and his wife in reply to their greetings, teachers and students from Washington state are greatly encouraged, said Zhou Shuqi, co-chair of the US-China Youth and Student Exchange Association.

In February 2024, Xi and Peng extended their good wishes for the

Year of the Dragon in their card to Lincoln High School, inviting students to visit China more often, including through the “50,000 in five years” initiative.

These cards are a token of US-China friendship and a bridge that connects young people, which “motivate us to move forward,” said Zhou.

Over a year, about 14,000 American youths have visited China for exchanges and study.

“Our experience in China was incredibly rich and rewarding,” Stadium High School Principal Shannon Marshall said. “This experience has created long-lasting friendship between American students and Chinese students.”

“We would love to send more students in 2025 and are so thankful for the opportunities,” she said.

“It was a privilege to have been able to sign a greeting card for President Xi,” said Lucy Arceno, a student from Lincoln High School.

Recalling her China trip, she said what impressed her the most was the hospitality of the Chinese people. “I made quite a few Chinese friends,” she said. “One of my Chinese friends had this to say after we got to know each other, ‘gradually it dawned on me that we are of no difference.’ I found this to be a very beautiful statement about friendships.”

“People-to-people exchanges – direct communications between Chinese people and their foreign counterparts in all walks of life – form part of the foundation of President Xi's international way of thinking,” Robert Lawrence Kuhn, chairman of the Kuhn Foundation, told Xinhua.

“President Xi puts extra emphasis on people-to-people

exchanges” in the development of bilateral relations, Kuhn said.

FRIENDSHIP THAT ENDURES

For Lincoln High School, warm interactions with Xi have been maintained for long. As early as in 1993, Xi visited the school as then secretary of the Fuzhou Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China.

In September 2015, he revisited the school with Peng during his first state visit to the United States as Chinese president, and encouraged students to travel to China to become more familiar with the country.

During their stay, the couple enjoyed in the school's auditorium a choir performance by students from both countries. Lynn Eisenhower, a music teacher at the school, was present.

“I have had the amazing opportunity to travel throughout China three times during 2024,” she told Xinhua in a recent interview. “Many of my friendships with Chinese teachers and students have begun while learning to do calligraphy together, singing side by side, or doing Tai Chi with each other.”

Eisenhower was amazed that when she joined a group from Washington state to visit China last year, an opportunity came for the group to perform again before Peng during a China-US youth exchange activity in Beijing, which was “a truly magical memory.”

“One of the ways our friendships continue to grow is through these shared experiences and the common bonds they help us to create,” Eisenhower said. “Peaceful connections and enduring friendships can make the world a better place for all of us.”

Maurice Chong from Washington state participated both in the choir in 2015 and the youth exchange activity in 2024. Now an exchange student at Peking University, Chong said he was inspired by Xi to study abroad back in 2015, when the Chinese president encouraged them with a Chinese adage: “Read 10,000 books and travel 10,000 miles.”

Xi's initiative to invite American students to China “will indeed have a big effect on people-to-people relations between the US and China, and that's what we need,” said Elyn MacInnis, founder of “Friends of Kuliang,” a group gathering descendants of US families who once lived in Kuliang, Fujian Province.

Communication is a good bridge to build trust, “and trust is very important for friendship,” MacInnis said.

‘LONG LIVE PEACE’

The year 2025 marks the 80th anniversary of the victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War.

During World War II, China and the United States fought together for peace and justice, and the friendship between the two peoples stood the test of blood and fire and is growing ever stronger, Xi and Peng said in their New Year card.

The couple's words were in response to the US students' card to them, which paid tribute to this part of history.

“‘Long Live Peace; Eternal Friendship.’ We wrote this wish in our card,” said David Chong, founder and president of the US-China Youth and Student Exchange Association.

“We want to convey the

significance of maintaining world peace and the longing for future peace to young people of both countries, and encourage them to inherit this precious friendship,” Chong said.

Among those sending the card was William Felagai, a 12th grader from Lincoln High School, who recalled hearing about the bilateral friendship from a Flying Tiger veteran. During World War II, a US air squadron composed of pilots from the United States Army Air Corps, Navy, and Marine Corps helped the Chinese fight Japanese invaders. They are better known as the Flying Tigers.

“He talked about how U.S. soldiers and pilots found refuge with Chinese villagers who were willing to risk not only themselves and their families' lives but their whole village from destruction by the Japanese military,” Felagai said.

Jeffrey Greene, chairman of the Sino-American Aviation Heritage Foundation, said that Xi has recalled the epic of the Flying Tigers on many occasions, including in a reply letter to the foundation in 2023.

The foundation has launched a Flying Tigers Friendship School and Youth Leaders Program, with the participation of dozens of Chinese and U.S. middle schools and universities. The program brought students from 11 US states to visit China in 2024, and will be expanded in the new year, Greene said.

“I'm very proud of the way that they've all understood the importance of what happened between China and the United States 80 years ago,” he said. “What they learn is that there's tremendous opportunity for cooperation between the Chinese people and the American people in the future.” – Xinhua

Next administration should consider wisdom of taking the baton of Biden's foreign policy

China Daily Editorial

As it approaches the end of its time in office, the Joe Biden administration is still trying to align its “Indo-Pacific” partnerships with its transatlantic alliance. Apparently, it wants to ensure that on handing over the reins of power to its successor it does not leave behind a vacuum to be filled by what its top diplomat called “a bad actor”.

In a lunch-with-the-FT report published by the *Financial Times* on Friday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told the British newspaper that his “greatest satisfaction” over the past four years was rebuilding alliances, pointing to the administration's efforts to “connect the Atlantic and the Pacific”, and pointed out that there's a “greater premium than ever” on cooperating with other nations to create more leverage to respond to China.

That explains the last round of foreign visits by senior officials of the administration. Blinken is visiting the Republic of Korea

(ROK), Japan and France from Saturday to Thursday; National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan visited India from Sunday to Monday; and Biden is scheduled to visit Italy from Thursday to Sunday.

France and Italy are two major European Union countries that have demonstrated strategic autonomy with regard to their China policy, and which Beijing is now trying to persuade to review their stance on the “anti-subsidy” duties the EU imposed on Chinese-made electric vehicles late last year under US pressure.

As Blinken hinted in the FT interview, portraying China as an enabler of the Russia-Ukraine conflict has proved an effective means to goad the bloc to jump onto the US' anti-China bandwagon, and it is also an excuse for the US to sanction Chinese entities that it actually identifies as indispensable for China to outcompete the US in high-tech.

In doing so, the Biden

administration is also trying to distract the EU's attention from the fact that it is the US that has been the sole party benefiting tremendously from the Ukraine crisis.

Blinken's visits to the ROK and Japan, and Sullivan's “capstone visit” to India come at a critical juncture as the relations between China and these countries are showing the positive momentum of recovery from the low that the Biden administration has painstakingly engineered.

Sullivan's concerns-raising visit shows the Biden administration is trying to drive a fresh wedge between the two neighbors after they reached a series of consensus on properly settling their border disputes.

Blinken's self-satisfaction at the Biden administration's scaremongering in relation to China is palpable in the interview, which makes no bones that spreading fears of China, and causing chaos and conflict around the world have been central to the Biden administration's foreign policy.

But the community of allies it has championed based on “common values” and “common interest” is just a castle built on the sand. The “commonality” in values and interests is only an illusion the US has tried to create for its own narrow end.

When asked about the Biden administration's recent blocking of Japanese Nippon Steel's purchase of US Steel citing “national security” concerns, and the sharp contrast between the US' nonchalance to Muslims' sufferings in Gaza and its “care” for what it claims is Beijing's “genocide” of Muslims in the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, the eloquent Blinken's quick quasi-no-comment responses to both questions speak volumes of the hypocrisy of the US' foreign policy.

Blinken said one of the big questions as the next administration prepares to take office is what stance it will take on China and in what fashion it will enlist US allies and partners to help. The answer rests

with whether the next administration is willing to inherit the Biden administration's brazenness in trying to convince itself that the policy aimed at derailing China's development has been a success.

The US has no legitimacy to deny China's right to development. The more the US tries to contain China's development and isolate it from the world, the more it will harm itself.

China has made it clear that it is willing to improve and develop its relations with the US in accordance with the principles of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation, no matter what changes take place in the US. Thus the future direction of China-US relations depends on the choice of the US side.

It is to be hoped the next US administration will adopt a correct strategic perception on China's development and work with Beijing in the two countries' common interests.

– Courtesy of China Daily

World's oldest person dies at 116 in Japan

TOKYO – The world's oldest person, Japanese woman Tomiko Itooka, has died at the age of 116, the city of Ashiya where she lived announced on Saturday.

Itooka, who had four children and five grandchildren, died on December 29 at a nursing home where she had resided since 2019, the southern city's mayor said in a statement.

She was born on May 23, 1908 in the commercial hub of Osaka, near Ashiya – four months before the Ford Model T automobile was launched in the United States.

Itooka was recognised as the oldest person in the world after the August 2024 death of Spain's Maria Branyas Morera at age 117.

"Ms Itooka gave us courage and hope through her long life," Ashiya's 27-year-old mayor Ryosuke Takashima said in the statement.

"We thank her for it."

Itooka, who was one of three siblings, lived through world wars and pandemics as well as technological breakthroughs.

As a student, she played volleyball.

In her older age, Itooka enjoyed bananas and Calpis, a milky soft



This handout file photo taken on May 23, 2024 and provided to AFP on August 22, 2024 by the Ashiya City government shows Japanese woman Tomiko Itooka as she celebrates her 116th birthday, in the city of Ashiya, Hyogo prefecture. The world's oldest person, Itooka of Japan, has died at the age of 116, the city where she lived announced on Saturday. Itooka, who had four children and five grandchildren, died on December 29, 2024 at a nursing home, the city of Ashiya said. – AFP

drink popular in Japan, according to the mayor's statement.

Women typically enjoy longevity in Japan, but the country is facing a worsening demographic crisis as its expanding elderly population leads to soaring medical and welfare costs, with a shrinking labour force to pay for it.

As of September, Japan counted more than 95,000 people who were

100 or older – 88 percent of whom were women.

Of the country's 124 million people, nearly a third are 65 or older.

After Itooka's death, the world's oldest person is now 116-year-old Brazilian nun Inah Canabarro Lucas, who was born on June 8, 1908, according to the US Gerontological Research Group and LongeviQuest.

– AFP

S Koreans protest in snow as Yoon arrest deadline nears

Hioun Shin, Jack Moore

SEOUL – Thousands of South Koreans braved a snowstorm yesterday to rally in support or opposition of former president Yoon Suk Yeol, suspended over a failed martial law bid and resisting arrest a day before the warrant expires.

Yoon plunged the country into political chaos last month with the bungled martial law declaration and has since holed up in the presidential residence, surrounded by hundreds of loyal security officers.

An attempt to arrest him by investigators Friday failed when a tense six-hour standoff with his presidential security service ended over security fears, with his supporters also camped outside.

Thousands descended on his residence again yesterday despite bitter snow conditions blanketing the capital – with one camp demanding Yoon's arrest while the other called for his impeachment to be declared invalid.

"Snow is nothing for me. They can bring all the snow and we'll still be here," said anti-Yoon protester Lee Jin-ah, 28, who had previously worked at a coffee shop.

"I quit my job to come to protect our country and democracy," she said, adding that she had camped outside the residence overnight.

Park Young-chul, in his 70s, said the snowstorm wouldn't deter him from showing up to back Yoon before the warrant expires at midnight local time today.

"I went through war and minus 20 degrees in the snow to fight the commies. This snow is nothing. Our war is happening again," he told AFP.

The rallies in the cold come as Yoon this week pledged to "fight" those trying to question his short-lived power grab.

Prosecutors report ministers' pleas

Yoon faces criminal charges of insurrection, one of a few crimes not subject to presidential immunity, meaning he could be sentenced to prison or, at worst, the death penalty.

If the warrant is executed, Yoon would become the first sitting South Korean president to be arrested.

A prosecutors' report for his former defence minister seen by AFP yesterday showed Yoon ignored the objections of key cabinet ministers before his failed martial law bid.

It said the country's then prime minister, foreign minister and finance minister all expressed reservations about the potential economic and diplomatic fallout in a cabinet meeting on the night of the decision.

The country's opposition Democratic Party called Saturday for the dissolution of the security service protecting Yoon.

Their announcement followed scenes of high drama on Friday, when hundreds of Yoon's guards and military troops shielded him from investigators who eventually called off the arrest attempt citing safety concerns.

Yesterday presidential security service chief Park Jong-joon said he had no intention of letting the investigators arrest Yoon by today's deadline, because those under his charge were legally obliged to protect the country's sitting leader.

"Executing an arrest warrant amid

allegations of procedural and legal impropriety undermines the PSS's fundamental mission of securing the president's absolute safety," Park, who has denied a police request for questioning, said in a speech.

Blinken wades in

Late yesterday US Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrived in Seoul, likely to wade into the crisis of a key security ally in talks today with his counterpart Cho Tae-yul.

Yoon's lawyers decried the warrant underpinning Friday's arrest attempt as "unlawful and invalid", and filed an objection to the Seoul court that issued it.

But the court told AFP yesterday the objection case was dismissed, saying the reasons could not be disclosed.

Yoon's lawyer said they would file another complaint against the head of the Corruption Investigation Office (CIO) that tried to arrest Yoon.

The president's legal team "intend to hold those who committed illegal acts strictly accountable under the law," Yoon Kab-keun said in a statement.

The Constitutional Court slated January 14 for the start of Yoon's impeachment trial, which if he does not attend would continue in his absence.

However, the suspended leader plans to appear at "an appropriate session" of the trial's five hearings, lawyer Yoon said yesterday.

South Korea's Constitutional Court has up to 180 days to determine whether to dismiss Yoon as president or restore his powers.

Former presidents Roh Moo-hyun and Park Geun-hye never appeared for their impeachment trials. – AFP

Buyer splashes out US\$1.3m for Tokyo new year tuna

TOKYO – The top bidder at a Tokyo fish market said they paid US\$1.3 million for a tuna yesterday, the second highest price ever paid at an annual prestigious new year auction.

Michelin-starred sushi restaurateurs the Onodera Group said they paid 207 million yen for the 276-kilogram bluefin tuna, roughly the size and weight of a motorbike.

It is the second highest price paid at the opening auction of the year in Tokyo's main fish market since comparable data started being collected in 1999.

The powerful buyers have now paid the top price for five years straight – winning bragging rights and a lucrative frenzy of media attention in Japan.

"The first tuna is something meant to bring in good fortune,"

Onodera official Shinji Nagao told reporters after the auction. "Our wish is that people will eat this and have a wonderful year."

The Onodera Group paid 114 million yen for the top tuna last year.

But the highest ever auction price was 333.6 million yen for a 278-kilogram bluefin in 2019, as the fish market was moved from its traditional Tsukiji area to a modern facility in nearby Toyosu.

The record bid was made by self-proclaimed "Tuna King" Kiyoshi Kimura, who operates the Sushi Zanmai national restaurant chain.

During the COVID-19 pandemic the new year tunas commanded only a fraction of their usual top prices, as the public were discouraged from dining out and restaurants had limited operations. – AFP

Marcos removes VP Duterte from Philippines security council

MANILA – Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos has removed Vice President Sara Duterte from the National Security Council, according to an executive order released Friday, a month after she allegedly plotted to kill him.

The order, signed last Monday by Executive Secretary Lucas Bersamin, removed the vice president and all former presidents from the council which advises the president on policies affecting national security.

Bersamin said the move was "to reorganise and streamline" its membership, which now comprises key legislative, defence, foreign and cabinet officials.

"At the moment, the VP is not considered relevant to the responsibilities of membership in the NSC," Bersamin told reporters, adding that the president was free to add other members or advisers as needed.

The move comes as Duterte is facing an investigation over her alleged threat to kill Marcos and his family.

In late November, Sara – the 46-year-old daughter of former president Rodrigo Duterte – delivered an expletive-laden online news conference in which she claimed to have told someone to kill Marcos if she was assassinated. She later said the comments were misinterpreted.

The vice president swept to power in 2022 in an alliance with Marcos that has unravelled spectacularly in recent months, with both sides trading allegations of drug addiction and extreme rhetoric ahead of this year's mid-term elections.

Duterte is also subject of multiple impeachment complaints over her alleged misuse of millions of dollars in government funds.

Duterte has yet to respond to AFP's request for comment. – AFP



People take part in the New Year's tradition called Mandi-Mandi, during which participants smear each other's faces with powdered paste to symbolise forgiveness and community unity, in Kampung Tugu, Jakarta, yesterday. Kampung Tugu, a historic community in North Jakarta founded by Mardijkers, freed individuals from the Dutch East India Company in the 17th century, is known for its unique traditions blending Portuguese and local cultures and as one of the origins of Indonesia's traditional Keroncong music. – AFP

Bangladesh shivers as temperatures dip

Naim-Ul-Karim

DHAKA – A thick blanket of fog accompanied by icy winds has left people in Bangladesh, where climate is tropical with a mild winter from October to March, shivering.

The severe cold wave sweeping through the capital Dhaka and other parts of Bangladesh led normal life and businesses to suffer, particularly in the country's northern region facing the Himalayan mountains.

Md Bazlur Rashid, a meteorologist of the Bangladesh Meteorological Department (BMD), said that the country's lowest temperature on Thursday was recorded at 9.8 degrees Celsius in Chuadanga district, some 215 km west of Dhaka.

He said the BMD recorded Dhaka's temperature at 14.2 degrees Celsius on Thursday morning.

Sky over Dhaka and most parts of the country remained cloudy for the last couple of days while cars and buses were running by switching on headlights in daytime on many Dhaka streets.

Sunlight was completely absent in Dhaka and the country's northern districts due to dense fog Thursday.

Chilling cold also slows the wheels of normal life in most parts of Bangladesh including the capital of Dhaka.

Amid the chilly weather, drifters in Dhaka have been facing hard time due to the cold spell. Poor people in Dhaka were seen taking warm by

firing woods. Sickness was rampant among these poor people.

Temperatures will gradually warm back up slightly from next week, said the meteorologist.

But he said there was a possibility of another two or three moderate (six to eight degrees Celsius) to severe (four to six degrees Celsius) cold waves in parts of the country this month followed by light to moderate rain or thundershowers, accompanied by temporary gusty wind.

However, chill in the air has sent people rushing for woollen clothes in Dhaka's markets and streets.

Sales of warm clothes, including blankets, sweaters, blazers, shawls, caps and socks, have been witnessing a sharp increase since the middle of this week when Dhaka dwellers experienced sudden temperature fall.

In Bangladesh, people from less affluent section of the society, particularly laborers, were the worst affected by the cold weather because they were lacking clothes, while many others, especially children and the elderly people, were prone to diseases such as pneumonia.

According to a local study published last year, there were at least 281 "cold wave induced" deaths on average annually in Bangladesh.

The month of January reportedly saw the highest number of such deaths, followed by December, according to the study. –Xinhua



A man walks past an ox covered with warm blankets on a cold winter afternoon in New Delhi, India yesterday. –AFP

35 evacuated after fire breaks out in eastern Singapore

SINGAPORE – About 35 residents were evacuated early yesterday morning after a fire broke out in a vacant three-story semi-detached house in eastern Singapore, authorities said.

The Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) reported that it was alerted to the fire at about 12:45 a.m. local time. Firefighters from the Kallang Fire Station and the Paya Lebar Fire Station arrived to find the blaze engulfing the first

floor and spreading to the upper levels.

The fire was fully extinguished by around 3 a.m., with the upper floors of the affected house sustaining smoke and fire damage. An adjacent unit was also impacted.

No injuries were reported. Approximately 35 residents from neighboring properties were evacuated as a precaution.

The cause of the fire is currently under investigation. –Xinhua

India's press watchdog demands journalist murder probe

NEW DELHI – India's media watchdog has demanded a thorough investigation after a journalist's battered body was found stuffed in a septic tank covered with concrete.

Freelance journalist Mukesh Chandrakar, 28, had reported widely on corruption and a decades-old Maoist insurgency in India's central Chhattisgarh state, and ran a popular YouTube channel "Bastar Junction".

The Press Council of India

expressed "concern" over the suspected murder of Chandrakar, calling for a report on the "facts of the case" in a statement late Saturday.

Chandrakar's body was found on January 3 after police tracked his mobile phone records following his family reporting him missing.

Three people have been arrested.

More than 10,000 people have died in the decades-long insurgency waged by Naxalite rebels, who say they are fighting for the rights of

marginalised indigenous people in India's resource-rich central regions.

Vishnu Deo Sai, chief minister of Chhattisgarh from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), called Chandrakar's death "heartbreaking" and promised the "harshest punishment" for those found responsible.

India was ranked 159 last year on the World Press Freedom Index, run by Reporters Without Borders.

–AFP



This picture taken on Thursday and released from North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) via KNS on Friday shows North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un (centre) meeting with players and coaches who won the championship at the 2024 U-17 Women's World Cup in November in the Dominican Republic, outside the Party Central Committee headquarters building in Pyongyang. –AFP

Kim Jong Un's sister seen with children in state media images

SEOUL – South Korea's spy agency said Friday it was analysing rare state media footage showing the powerful sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un with two children – saying they could be hers.

Key regime spokeswoman Kim Yo Jong was spotted with two youngsters – a boy and a girl – while attending North Korea's New Year art performance.

She was seen holding the boy's hand as the three walked together.

The isolated North has never officially disclosed any information about Kim Yo Jong's marital status or children, but Seoul's spy agency said it was examining whether the children in the state media footage were hers.

"We are conducting a detailed analysis while keeping the possibility open," it said in a statement.

The National Intelligence Service said they had previously

detected that Kim Yo Jong might have children, and the ones she was photographed with were in the correct age range.

Seoul's unification ministry told AFP that the art performance event in Pyongyang is understood to be one where participants are expected to accompany their family members, but said it was "unusual" to see Kim Yo Jong with children.

State media footage also showed leader Kim with his teenage daughter, known as Ju Ae.

Seoul-based specialist site NK News said the release of the images might be part of a "propaganda effort to humanise regime officials".

"It also follows a trend that started earlier in 2022 of showing elite officials in Kim Jong Un's inner circle arriving at special events or donating disaster relief with their spouses and family members," it said.

Kim Yo Jong has long been

among her brother's closest lieutenants, and one of the most influential women in the isolated regime.

Born in 1988, according to the South Korean government, she is one of three children born to Kim's father and predecessor, Kim Jong Il, and his third known partner, former dancer Ko Yong Hui.

She was educated in Switzerland alongside her brother and rose rapidly up the ranks once he inherited power after their father's death in 2011.

In April 2015, Seoul's spy agency said that Kim Yo Jong was presumed to be giving birth the following month.

Later, in 2018, the spy agency in the South said it was understood that Kim was pregnant during her visit to South Korea in February of that year for the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. –AFP

Search for Australian shark attack victim suspended

CANBERRA – Authorities in South Australia (SA) have ended the search for the body of a surfer who was killed in a shark attack.

Lance Appleby, 28, was surfing at Granites beach, about 480 km northwest of the state capital of Adelaide, on Thursday evening when witnesses reported seeing a shark attack him, triggering a major search and rescue operation by sea, land and air.

SA Police yesterday said that the search has concluded after four days.

"Police with the assistance of State Emergency Service, Country Fire Service, Council members including the mayor, and locals have searched the area over the past four days, but sadly have not yet located his body," a statement said.

"Police would like to thank all those who assisted during the tragic incident," it added.

Locals reported seeing a great white shark in the area earlier on Thursday.

According to Seven Network television, witnesses saw Appleby being flipped off his surfboard by a wave before being dragged underwater by the shark.

Following the attack, police said a witness on a jet ski went to the site and retrieved Appleby's surfboard, which had a bite taken out of it.

There were three fatal shark attacks off the coast of SA in 2023, including one at Granites beach, but zero in 2024. –Xinhua

Gaza rescuers say 23 dead in latest Israeli strikes

GAZA STRIP, Palestinian Territories – Israel pounded the Gaza Strip yesterday, killing at least 23 people according to rescuers, nearly 15 months into the war with Hamas Palestinian militants.

The latest deaths come after Israel late on Saturday said indirect negotiations had resumed in Qatar for a truce and hostage release deal.

An air strike on a house in northern Gaza's Sheikh Radwan area killed at least 11 people early yesterday (local time), according to Civil Defence agency spokesman Mahmud Bassal. He said the victims included women and children.

"Rescuers are still searching for five people trapped under the rubble of the house," he said, adding his crew members were using "bare hands" in the effort.

The Israeli military said yesterday it had struck more than 100 "terror targets" in Gaza over the past two days, marking an apparent escalation in its assault.

Gaza's Hamas-run health ministry said a total of 88 people were killed over the previous 24 hours.

In one strike, five people died when the house of the Abu Jarbou family was struck in the Nuseirat refugee camp in central Gaza, rescuers said.

AFP footage from another strike showed rescuers transporting bodies and injured people to a hospital.

In one scene, a medic attempted to resuscitate a wounded man inside an ambulance, while another carried an injured child to the hospital.

Relatives cried over the bodies of two men wrapped in white shrouds, the images showed.

Strikes against rocket fire

Several of the strikes targeted sites from which militants had



Women mourn their relatives who were killed by Israeli bombardment outside the Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir el-Balah in the central Gaza Strip yesterday, amid the ongoing war in the Palestinian territory between Israel and Hamas. – AFP

been firing projectiles into Israel in recent days, the military said.

An Israeli military statement reported the Air Force hit more than 100 targets throughout the strip "and eliminated dozens of Hamas terrorists" in the past two days.

Last week, Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz warned of intensified strikes if the incoming rocket fire continued, and Israeli hostages still held by militants in Gaza are not freed.

The renewed fire from Gaza has triggered air raid sirens in Israeli communities that were largely destroyed during Hamas's October 2023 attack that triggered the war.

Rocket fire had become less frequent as the war dragged on but intensified since late last month as Israel continues a three-month major land and air offensive in the territory's north.

The escalation coincides with indirect negotiations for a ceasefire and hostage release deal that both sides said were to resume this past weekend in Qatar.

Mediators Qatar, Egypt and

the United States have tried for months to strike a deal to end the war and secure the release of dozens of hostages held in Gaza. The latest effort comes just days before Donald Trump takes office as president of the United States on January 20.

"Efforts are under way to free the hostages," Katz told relatives of a hostage on Saturday, according to his office.

His comments followed the release of a video by Hamas showing a teenage Israeli soldier, Liri Albag, in which she called on the Israeli government to secure her release.

AFP has not been able to verify the footage.

The Gaza war began when Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023, resulting in the deaths of 1,208 people on the Israeli side, mostly civilians, according to official Israeli data.

Israel's retaliatory military offensive has killed 45,805 people in Gaza, a majority of them civilians, according to the Hamas-run territory's health ministry, which the United Nations finds reliable. – AFP

Lebanon rally calls for release of Islamists jailed during Syria war

TRIPOLI, Lebanon – Hundreds protested in Lebanon's second city Tripoli yesterday, demanding that authorities release Islamists detained during the civil war in neighbouring Syria.

The prisoners include Lebanese who had gone to fight with rebels and jihadists against the forces of longtime ruler Bashar al-Assad during the conflict, which began in 2011, and were arrested upon their return to Lebanon.

The rally in Tripoli's Nour Square came nearly a month after Islamist-led forces toppled Assad.

"We want to increase pressure on the Lebanese authorities to release all Islamist detainees," said protester Ahmad al-Shimali.

"Islamist detainees in Lebanon's prisons were arrested in the context of the Syrian revolution," he said of the more than 13-year civil war.

"Most went to Syria to fight, supported our people in Syria, or were found to have communicated with jihadists or fighters," Shimali added.

"But today the Assad regime has fallen."

Rights campaigners have long demanded fair trials for those accused of ties to Islamist extremism in Lebanon, some of whom have been behind bars for years without a trial.

In late December, Prime Minister Najib Mikati told relatives of the detainees that the issue should be "definitively" resolved, but also said parliament must first decide on whether to issue a general amnesty.

Parts of Tripoli saw clashes in the early days of the civil war in Syria, which was triggered by the Assad regime's clampdown on anti-government protests.

Tensions had been simmering for years between the city's Sunni Muslim district of Bab al-Tebbaneh and nearby Jabal Mohsen, where the majority of residents are from the minority Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam to which Assad belongs. – AFP



Protesters burn placards during a demonstration calling for the release of hostages held captive in Gaza by Palestinian militants since the October 7 attacks, outside the Defence Ministry headquarters in Tel Aviv on Saturday, amid the ongoing war in the Palestinian territory between Israel and Hamas. – AFP

Israel says Hezbollah not meeting ceasefire terms

JERUSALEM – Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz accused Lebanese group Hezbollah yesterday of not meeting the terms of a ceasefire, warning that if the militants continued to breach the deal, Israel would "be forced to act".

Katz issued his warning after visiting the military's northern command and it followed a similar accusation against Israel by Hezbollah chief Naim Qassem on Saturday.

Katz said Hezbollah had still not withdrawn "beyond the Litani river" in southern Lebanon, as stipulated in the ceasefire deal.

He added that "if this condition is not met, there will be no agreement and Israel will be forced to act on its own to ensure the safe return of residents of the north to their homes."

Other provisions had not been implemented, Katz said, such the

"dismantling of all [Hezbollah] weapons and the thwarting of terrorist infrastructures in the area by the Lebanese army".

"We will not allow the creation of a renewed threat to the northern communities and the citizens of the state of Israel," Katz said in a statement issued by his office.

On Saturday, Qassem accused Israel of violating the ceasefire and said the group was prepared to respond even before the expiry of a 60-day deadline for Israel to withdraw from southern Lebanon.

"We have said that we are giving an opportunity to prevent Israeli violations and to implement the agreement and we will exercise patience," Qassem said.

The fragile truce, which took effect on November 27 after two months of full-blown war

between Israel and Hezbollah, has been marked by accusations of violations from both sides.

Under the terms of the ceasefire, the Lebanese army is to deploy alongside UN peacekeepers in the south as the Israeli army withdraws over a 60-day period.

Hezbollah is to withdraw its forces north of the Litani River – some 30 kilometres from the border – and dismantle any remaining military infrastructure in the south.

A committee composed of Israeli, Lebanese, French and US delegates alongside a representative of UN peacekeeping force UNIFIL is tasked with ensuring any ceasefire violations are identified and dealt with.

The UN peacekeeping force has also repeatedly accused Israel of violating the ceasefire terms. – AFP

Israel military says missile from Yemen intercepted

JERUSALEM – The Israeli military said yesterday it intercepted a missile launched from Yemen, the latest in a series of recent attacks.

"Following the sirens that sounded a short while ago in Talmei Elazar, a missile launched from Yemen was intercepted prior to crossing into Israeli territory," the military said in a statement posted to Telegram.

On Friday, Israel's military said it shot down a missile and a drone launched from Yemen, where Iran-backed rebels have stepped up their attacks since a November ceasefire between Israel and another Iran-backed group, Hezbollah, in Lebanon.

Like Hezbollah – which began trading cross-border fire with Israel after Hamas's October 7 attack last year – the Huthis say they are acting in solidarity with Palestinians, and

have vowed to continue until there is a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.

While most of the missiles and drones launched from Yemen have been intercepted, one missile wounded 16 people in Tel Aviv in December, according to Israel's military and emergency services.

In response, the Israeli air force has struck Huthi targets in Yemen, including Sanaa's international airport.

The Huthi rebels have also been firing at ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden – destabilising a vital shipping lane and prompting reprisal strikes by the United States and sometimes Britain against Huthi targets.

The group's Saba news agency and Al-Masirah TV reported "three raids" yesterday east of the city of Saada, attributing the operations to the United States and Britain. – AFP

Russia says Ukraine launches 'counterattack' in Kursk region

MOSCOW – Russia said yesterday that Ukraine had launched a “counterattack” in the western border region of Kursk, where Kyiv’s forces began a shock ground offensive last August.

It was not immediately clear how much Ukraine had advanced in the region, but pro-Kremlin military bloggers reported earlier that a powerful new offensive was under way.

The assault comes at a critical juncture in the nearly three-year conflict, with both sides apparently seeking to boost their negotiating hand ahead of US President-elect Donald Trump’s return to the White House on January 20.

“At about 9 a.m. Moscow time, in order to halt the advance of Russian troops in the Kursk

direction, the enemy launched a counterattack,” the Russian defence ministry said.

Ukraine used two tanks, a dozen armoured vehicles and a demolition unit in the assault, which was headed towards the village of Berdin – about 15 kilometres northeast of Sudzha, it added.

“The operation to destroy the Ukrainian army formations continues,” it said.

Pro-Kremlin military bloggers admitted the Russian army had come under pressure but said Moscow was fighting back.

“The main events of the next attempted offensive by the Ukrainian army are clearly still ahead of us,” influential pro-Russian Telegram channel Rybar said.

Images purportedly showing a column of Ukrainian armoured vehicles driving through the snow were shared by pro-Russia military blogger Dva Mayora on Telegram.

Ukrainian officials gave little detail on the new offensive, with a prominent lawmaker urging silence.

“I can’t understand why it is necessary to officially report on the Kursk region. Maybe better to do it afterwards when the operation is over?” Ukrainian MP Oleksiy Goncharenko said.

The head of Ukraine’s Centre for Countering Disinformation, Andriy Kovalenko, said on Telegram that defence forces were “working” in the area, without elaborating.

Kyiv seized dozens of villages in the Kursk region shortly after

its incursion started on August 6, 2024, but its advances stalled after Moscow rushed reinforcements to the area, including thousands of troops from its ally North Korea.

A Ukrainian army source told AFP last November that Kyiv still controlled 800 square kilometres of the Russian border region, down from previous claims it controlled almost 1,400 square kilometres.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said last year the Kursk operation has boosted Kyiv’s “exchange fund” – its negotiating position on swapping prisoners of war – and diverted tens of thousands of Russian troops away from the eastern front.

But Kyiv has so far been unable to halt Moscow’s advances in Ukraine,

which were seven times higher in 2024 than the year prior, according to an AFP analysis of data from the Institute for the Study of War.

Airports shut

Both Russia and Ukraine have exchanged regular attacks since the year began.

Russia said yesterday it downed dozens of Ukrainian drones overnight in a barrage that damaged homes and triggered air alerts, while Kyiv said Moscow fired 103 drones into its territory.

Four Russian airports briefly suspended traffic early Sunday for “safety” reasons, forcing at least eight planes to divert course, a spokesperson for Russia’s civil aviation authority Rosaviatsia said. – AFP

Italy’s PM pays surprise visit to Trump at Mar-a-Lago



This handout picture released by the Chigi Palace press office yesterday shows Italy’s Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni (right) posing with US President-elect Donald Trump at his Mar-a-Lago Club on Saturday in Palm Beach, Florida. The Chigi Palace is the official residence of Italy’s prime minister in Rome. It is also the seat of Italy’s Council of Ministers (cabinet). – AFP

ROME – Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni paid an unofficial surprise visit to President-elect Donald Trump at his Mar-a-Lago Florida residence, according to her office yesterday.

Photos sent by the office of the far-right prime minister yesterday showed Meloni and Trump posing at the entrance to Mar-a-Lago and chatting in a reception room, a Christmas tree visible in the background.

Her office provided no statement, nor did it respond to repeated requests for confirmation of the Saturday visit, which US media reported included a film screening and dinner.

Photos of the two conservative leaders side by side were on

the front pages of all Italy’s newspapers yesterday.

Meloni is one of several foreign leaders, including Canada’s Justin Trudeau and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who have paid visits to Trump, who is due to be inaugurated for the second time on January 20.

The visit by Meloni, who heads the far-right Brothers of Italy party, came ahead of a four-day visit to Rome by US President Joe Biden, where he was expected to meet with Meloni and, separately, Pope Francis.

Photographs of Meloni provided by her office also showed her shaking hands with Florida Senator Marco Rubio.

– AFP

New York starts driver congestion charging despite opposition

NEW YORK – New York launched a controversial scheme yesterday to charge drivers entering parts of the city, a first in the United States, putting local authorities on a collision course with President-elect Donald Trump.

State Governor Kathy Hochul announced in November that drivers entering areas of Manhattan south of Central Park would pay a daytime toll of US\$9 from midnight January 4 (local time).

That plan revives one, originally with a US\$15 base fee, that she paused in June, saying there were “too many unintended consequences for New Yorkers.”

Republican lawmakers have called on Trump, a native New Yorker who has vowed to kill the scheme if elected, to intervene now to terminate it.

Areas neighbouring New York City have argued that a charge would hurt their businesses and

impair their residents’ ability to commute into Manhattan.

A judge denied an 11th-hour effort on Friday by neighbouring New Jersey state officials to block the scheme on grounds of its environmental impact on adjoining areas.

That denial cleared the road for the scheme, which had faced other legal challenges, highlighting the difficulty of charging drivers in a country where the car is king.

The plan is intended both to reduce congestion and to help fund the New York subway system. Hochul said it was revived after an assessment showed that it would work at a lower fee.

Some elected New York City borough officials as well as a powerful trade group representing haulers fought the project.

Taxi drivers’ associations also opposed the plan. Their members – both pre-booked ride-hail drivers and drivers of the city’s iconic

yellow cabs – will not pay the fee themselves, but affected customers will be hit by a surcharge.

The scheme will charge drivers for venturing below 60th Street in Manhattan, an area that encompasses the business districts of Midtown and Wall Street.

Some 700,000 vehicles enter the area every day, and gridlock means cars can travel just 11 kilometres per hour on average, and even slower in some areas, officials say.

There are numerous exemptions to the base fee, as well as a low-income discount plan. In addition, there are discounts for drivers entering the tolling zone more than 10 times per month.

Similar driver-tolling schemes have been operated for years in other megacities including London and Stockholm, but US cities will be watching closely to see what impact the New York scheme has on both traffic and revenues. – AFP

More records found linking Credit Suisse, Nazi accounts: US panel

WASHINGTON – An investigation by a US Senate panel has found that troubled investment bank Credit Suisse concealed information during previous inquiries into Nazi-controlled bank accounts during World War II.

Tens of thousands of documents discovered during an ongoing examination have provided new proof of the existence of account holders linked to the Nazis, the Senate Budget Committee said in a statement released on Saturday.

The bank did not reveal the existence of these accounts during previous investigations, notably in the 1990s, the committee said.

Credit Suisse, now a subsidiary of investment bank UBS, agreed in 1998 to take part in a US\$1.25 billion settlement of lawsuits brought by Holocaust survivors, but it has been accused of not being completely open about its past dealings with Nazis.

The Senate committee said on Saturday that one set of newly

discovered files, including 3,600 physical documents and 40,000 microfilms, was found to have a “high relevance rate” of Nazi connections.

It said the revelations stem from an interim report by former prosecutor Neil Barofsky, who was fired as an “independent ombudsperson” by the bank in 2022 after being pressed to limit his investigative work.

Barofsky was reinstated in the role in 2023 “as a result of the Committee’s investigation,” and after UBS’s takeover of Credit Suisse.

In a letter to the panel released Saturday, Barofsky noted the “extraordinary level of cooperation that Credit Suisse, under the leadership of UBS, has provided” since he rejoined the company.

But he said Credit Suisse had yet to share all the information it held.

The Barofsky team has discovered, among other things, accounts controlled by high-ranking SS officers, *The Wall Street Journal* reported.

In his letter, Barofsky highlighted “especially noteworthy” discoveries from a Credit Suisse research department.

“Numerous client files in the sample are marked with a stamp stating ‘Amerikanische schwarze Liste’ – meaning ‘American Black List’ – a list maintained by the Allies of individuals and companies that were directly financed by, or were known to regularly trade with, Axis powers,” he wrote.

“One file bearing this stamp relates to an entity that was involved in selling looted Jewish assets.”

Contacted by AFP, UBS said it was committed to providing a complete record of the former Nazi-linked accounts in Credit Suisse’s predecessor banks.

It said it would provide Barofsky with all necessary assistance in his work to shed light “on this tragic period.”

The Senate panel’s investigation is continuing. – AFP

Brazil takes over BRICS presidency, focusing on Global South cooperation

SÃO PAULO – Brazil assumed the rotating presidency of the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) on New Year’s Day, with an agenda focusing on strengthening Global South cooperation, the Brazilian government said in a statement.

It will also focus on reforming international governance, and creating mechanisms to facilitate trade among its members.

“The group is one of the key political and diplomatic forums for Global South countries, focusing on cooperation across various sectors,” said the Wednesday statement.

Its key goals include developing payment systems to simplify

trade and investment between members, promoting inclusive and responsible governance of artificial intelligence, and improving financing mechanisms to address climate change.

The agenda also emphasizes collaborative projects among Global South countries, particularly in public health, and strengthening the institutional structure of BRICS.

As the host nation until the end of this year, Brazil will also organize and oversee working group meetings, bringing together representatives from member countries to discuss and implement its priorities. – Xinhua

Brazil examining black boxes from crashed Russia-bound plane

BRASÍLIA – Brazil has started examining the black box recorders from a Brazilian-made jetliner that crashed in Kazakhstan, killing 38 of the 67 people aboard, the air force said last week.

The Azerbaijan Airlines plane, an Embraer 190, crash-landed on Christmas Day as it flew to the Chechen capital Grozny in southern Russia.

The Brazilian air force said in a statement on Thursday that the data from the recorders would be extracted and analysed as soon as possible.

These devices captured cockpit dialogue and flight data from the plane. They are being examined by the Aeronautical Accidents Investigation and Prevention Centre, a unit of the Brazilian air force.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has demanded that Moscow

admit it mistakenly fired on the plane as it tried to make a scheduled landing at the Grozny airport.

Russia has not confirmed that one of its air-defence missiles hit the plane, though President Vladimir Putin told Aliyev in a phone call that the systems were active at the time and that he was sorry the incident took place in Russian airspace.

Russia said Grozny was being attacked by Ukrainian drones when the airliner approached to make its landing through thick fog.

Investigators from Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Russia have travelled to Brazil for the investigation, officials said.

The Brazilian air force said Kazakhstan is in charge of releasing the results of the black box analysis. – AFP

Chinese medics sowing seeds of solidarity, friendship in São Tomé and Príncipe

SÃO TOMÉ – Monazeri da Costa, an acupuncturist nurse from São Tomé and Príncipe, considers the Chinese medical teams among the most important mentors in his professional journey. Through their guidance and support, he has mastered the “Chinese technique,” which enables him to treat illnesses and save lives.

“Promoting Chinese acupuncture here and witnessing patients improve, relieve their pain, and recover through my treatment makes me very happy. I am extremely proud to be a student of Chinese acupuncture in São Tomé and Príncipe,” he has pointed out in a recent interview with Xinhua.

In São Tomé, the country’s capital, the Chinese doctors’ acupuncture clinic is at the entrance of the Água Grande Polyclinic Health Center. Inside the clinic, Costa, 36, was applying needles to patients under treatment. After seven years of learning and continuous guidance from successive Chinese doctors, he has become a well-recognized acupuncturist.

“Acupuncture is already popular in São Tomé and Príncipe. On average, we receive more than 20 patients per day, many of them needing regular treatment for chronic illnesses. Others come attracted by the reputation of the Chinese medical team,” he said.

São Tomé and Príncipe is an archipelago in the Gulf of Guinea off the coast of West Africa. With a population of just over 220,000, it receives about 90 percent of its development funding from foreign aid and is considered one of the least developed countries in the world.

China and São Tomé and Príncipe resumed diplomatic ties in December 2016. Since 2017, the Chinese medical teams have been working in two of the country’s main health institutions: the Dr. Ayres de Menezes Hospital and the Água Grande Polyclinic Health Center.

Costa’s journey with acupuncture began that same year when he was a young, newly graduated nurse. Due to his proficiency in English, he was assigned to assist the first Chinese medical team after the two countries resumed diplomatic ties,

specializing in acupuncture.

“At that time, acupuncture was a novelty in São Tomé and Príncipe, but people quickly saw the results in treating and recovering from various illnesses and its affordable cost. As a nurse in the acupuncture department, I was also curious about this ‘new technique’ from China,” he recalled.

Over seven years, Chinese doctors guided him from theory to practice, offering daily training and instruction. Under this constant mentorship, Costa progressed from a beginner to an independent professional at the health center. In the small clinic, he witnessed moving stories: tireless Chinese doctors overcoming difficulties to “bring hope” to poor families, helping patients recover and resume their lives.

“There are many cases of people who were the only breadwinners in their families, but due to poverty, their illnesses worsened over time. When they arrived here, they had lost hope, but thanks to the treatment offered by the Chinese doctors, they were able to recover and get out of bed or off their wheelchairs,” he said.

Costa describes the Chinese medical teams as sowers of the seed of trust and friendship between the two countries. “People trust Chinese doctors a lot. Coming here is like visiting a friend. São Tomé and Príncipe is a small country; almost everyone has heard stories of Chinese doctors saving lives. This is also the first impression many have of China.”

According to official data from São Tomé and Príncipe, the country has more than 200 health professionals, less than 0.1 percent of the population. The shortage of medical equipment, qualified professionals, and resources often prevents patients from receiving proper treatment.

Virgílio Mandinga, director of the Dr. Ayres de Menezes Hospital, said that the arrival of the Chinese medical teams has brought new hope to the local healthcare system.

The biggest challenge in São Tomé and Príncipe’s healthcare

system is the lack of professionals and training, he said. The Chinese medical missions act as an “oxygen generator,” providing practical solutions to challenges once considered insurmountable.

“The possibility of accomplishing extraordinary things here is always made with the support of the Chinese medical team. For us, this is a testament to the Chinese people’s commitment to the community we serve. It is a responsibility of the mission to ensure healthcare, particularly in specialties where we have shortages,” he said.

In September, the 18th Chinese medical team concluded its mission in São Tomé and Príncipe. During the 18 months of work, the doctors performed 7,807 outpatient consultations, admitted 2,578 patients, completed 1,216 surgeries, performed 410 deliveries, and cared for 215 critical cases. They also conducted 4,265 acupuncture treatments and traveled over 6,300 km in 70 visits to remote areas, where they attended to 6,672 patients.

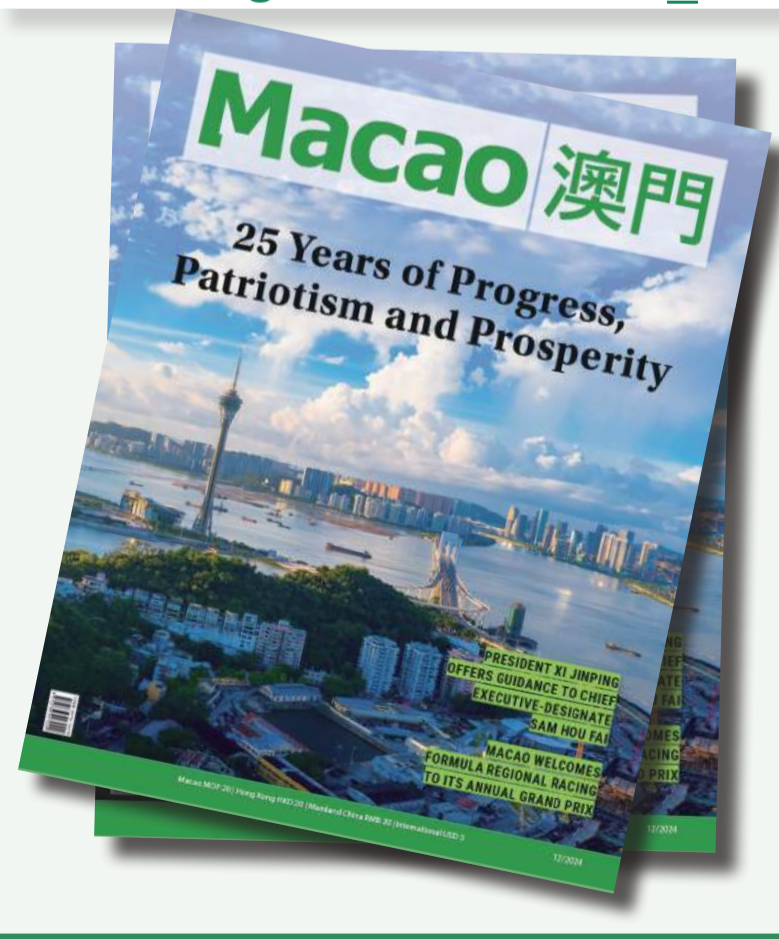
The 19th medical team, consisting of seven professionals from six departments of five hospitals in Sichuan Province and led by the West China Hospital of Sichuan University, has started its work as the successor.

Zhao Linyong, head of the team, said that the trust and respect shown by the population are encouraging. “Wherever we are, wearing the purple uniform of the Chinese medical team is a source of pride. Patients, local colleagues, and even passers-by always greet us warmly.”

According to Zhao, the West China Hospital of Sichuan University has been carrying out medical missions in São Tomé and Príncipe since 1988. Trust and friendship have been built over generations, thanks to the spirit of previous medical professionals.

“The 19th medical team will continue the projects left by its predecessors, as well as develop new innovative work according to the specialties of the team members, and carry forward the spirit and friendship passed down by previous generations,” said Zhao. – Xinhua

Macao Magazine on sale now _AD



Brazil says 2024 was its hottest year on record

RIO DE JANEIRO – Last year was Brazil’s hottest on record, its observatory said on Friday, after a record-breaking drought and flooding in the South American country that climate experts have linked to global warming.

The average temperature in 2024 was 25.02 degrees Celsius – 0.79 degrees above the 1991-2020 average, the National Institute of Meteorology said.

It was the warmest year since records began in 1961, exceeding the 2023 figure of 24.92 degrees Celsius, which was also a record high.

The observatory said that the “statistically significant trend... may be associated with climate change resulting from rising global temperature and local environmental changes.”

According to a study released at the end of last year, Brazil experienced an “alarming” increase in climate disasters between 2020 and 2023, with almost twice as many events each year, on average, as in the previous two decades.

Official data showed an annual average of 4,077 climate-related disasters in the four-year period,

including droughts, floods, violent storms and extreme temperatures, the research by the Federal University of São Paulo showed.

The study found a correlation between climate disasters suffered in the country and a warming of ocean surface temperatures.

The United Nations said last Monday that 2024 was set to be the hottest year on record for the planet.

China, India, Indonesia and China’s Taiwan and Hong Kong regions also reported last week that 2024 was their hottest year recorded yet. – AFP, MPD

Tottenham sign Czech goalkeeper Kinsky

Football

LONDON – Tottenham announced yesterday they have signed Czech under-21 international goalkeeper Antonin Kinsky from Slavia Prague in a deal worth about £12.5 million (US\$15.5 million).

Spurs have been without first-choice goalkeeper Guglielmo Vicario since he fractured his ankle during a 4-0 win over Manchester City in November and he is set to be sidelined until the end of February.

Fraser Forster has been deputising for injury-hit Spurs but the England international missed Saturday's 2-1 loss at home to Newcastle with illness, meaning Brandon Austin deputised.

Ange Postecoglou's Spurs have only won two of their past

11 games in all competitions and have slumped to 12th in the Premier League table.

The 21-year-old Kinsky, whose goalkeeping father was a Czech international, completed a medical at Tottenham on Saturday and has signed a contract until 2031.

He has made 29 appearances for Slavia Prague this season, keeping 14 clean sheets.

The goalkeeper told the Slavia Prague website the move was a "dream come true".

"It was clear that such an opportunity may not come again," he said. "I decided to go for it, and then it was all down to a deal between the clubs."

The move is subject to international clearance and the granting of a work permit. – AFP

'Difficult' to be Vinicius: Real Madrid coach Ancelotti

Football

MADRID – Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said yesterday it would be "difficult" to be Vinicius Junior after the player was sent off against Valencia.

The Brazilian winger pushed goalkeeper Stole Dimitrievski in the back of the neck amid a spat between the two players and was dismissed.

Vinicius was mocked by Valencia fans at their Mestalla stadium during the game, having squared off with some who racially abused him in a match in 2022.

"I think it is difficult [to be Vinicius], I'm not in his skin, but I think it's difficult," Ancelotti told reporters, after Vinicius saw red in Madrid's 2-1 La Liga win on Friday.

"To bear everything that has happened, the insults, everything, it's not so simple.

"Obviously he's sad about the red card, he said sorry and we have to look forwards."

Vinicius, who has suffered racial

abuse at numerous stadiums in Spain, is also often targeted by fans for his behaviour on the pitch.

The 24-year-old often complains to officials after clashing with defenders and sometimes engages and responds to fans who jeer him.

"What happens in stadiums... I think he has improved his attitude a lot, he can keep improving but nobody is perfect," continued Ancelotti.

"I think he's done a lot of work on that, and he has improved so much that he is the best player in the world."

Vinicius may face a ban after his red card, which will be decided next week, meaning he is available for Madrid's Copa del Rey clash against Deportivo Minera today.

"We're still convinced it was not worth a red card but a yellow, so we hope he is not banned," said Ancelotti.

League leaders and reigning champions Madrid then face Mallorca in the Spanish Super Cup semi-final on Thursday in Saudi Arabia. – AFP

Jimenez scores 2 penalties as Fulham fight back to draw against Ipswich

Football

LONDON – Raul Jimenez scored two penalties as Fulham twice came from behind to draw 2-2 with relegation-threatened Ipswich at Craven Cottage yesterday.

Sam Szmodics put the visitors ahead in the 38th minute, with Jimenez levelling from the spot midway through the second period.

Liam Delap restored Ipswich's lead with another penalty but Jimenez had the final say in stoppage time.

The result leaves Ipswich third from bottom of the table after falling agonisingly short of recording two consecutive league wins for the first time this season.

Mid-table Fulham enjoyed the lion's share of possession in the first half but Ipswich broke the deadlock against the run of play with their first chance of note.

Delap surged forward and fed Leif Davis, whose cross was

headed onto the bar by overlapping right-back Ben Johnson. After a scramble to clear the danger, Szmodics was on hand to crash the ball off Calvin Bassey and past Bernd Leno.

It took until the 69th minute for the Cottagers to get back on level terms. Harry Wilson found a pocket of space once more following Rodrigo Muniz's pass and was brought down inside the box by Sam Morsy.

Referee Darren Bond initially said no penalty but changed his original decision after a VAR check and Jimenez stepped up to slot his spot-kick to Christian Walton's left.

Delap put Ipswich back ahead just two minutes later after he was fouled by Timothy Castagne and they went close to a third when substitute Jack Clarke struck a post.

But Fulham continued to probe for an equaliser and it arrived in the first minute of stoppage time.

Jimenez picked himself up after

being fouled by Davis and coolly found the top-right corner to secure his side a share of the spoils.

"When you lead twice you always feel a little bit disappointed not to win," Ipswich boss Kieran McKenna told Sky Sports.

"I'm so proud of the way we played. We had some chances to get a two-goal margin but weren't able to take them."

Fulham boss Marco Silva praised the performance of Jimenez, who now has eight Premier League goals this season.

"He showed the character and the calmness," he said. "There are many positives I take from the game. In some moments we cannot concede like we did and we have been punished by some mistakes."

"Everybody can talk about European hopes. I prefer our team to speak on the pitch. If you want to be fighting you have to be much more ruthless and aggressive."

– AFP



Vietnam's players celebrate after winning the 2024 ASEAN Electric Cup final second leg against Thailand at the Rajamangala National Stadium in Bangkok yesterday. Vietnam won 5-3 on aggregate over the two legs. – AFP

Celtic stretch lead in Scottish Premiership after Rangers held

Football

GLASGOW – Celtic extended their lead at the top of the Scottish Premiership to 13 points with a routine 3-0 win against St Mirren yesterday after Rangers drew 3-3 against Hibernian.

Brendan Rodgers' side, who suffered a stinging 3-0 defeat by their Old Firm rivals at Ibrox on Thursday, took the lead in the 33rd minute when German winger Nicolas Kuhn swept home.

Two minutes before the break US international Auston Trusty headed in a second for his first Celtic goal since signing from Sheffield United in August.

Kuhn notched his second in the 68th minute for his fifth goal in five games, making it 16 in total for the season.

"It's a very good afternoon for us," said Celtic manager Brendan Rodgers.

"The effort of the players, the movement of the players, the quality that they showed in the game was a really, really good level."

Any notion of a credible title race was far-fetched even after Rangers' midweek Old Firm win and their hopes were dented further by more dropped points at Easter Road despite Hamza Igamane's hat-trick.

Rangers were 2-0 up in the 19th minute but Hibs drew level with a double from Martin Boyle, the second of which was a penalty.

Igamane restored the visitors' lead before Rocky Bushiri popped up with an 83rd-minute equaliser to make it six games in a row unbeaten for David Gray's side.

Rangers boss Philippe Clement was angered by the penalty awarded against his team.

"I saw a lot of good things from my team, good football, good goals, but also a goal against with the penalty that I don't understand," he said.

"It's a collision between two players or even the attacking player maybe on full speed tries to slow down to get a contact. You can give the foul to both sides. You can never give a penalty for a situation like that. That was a decisive moment. It gave Hibs a lot of energy and belief."

Aberdeen's dismal winless run was extended to 10 matches after they fell to a 2-0 defeat at Motherwell.

There were also wins for Hearts, Ross County and Dundee.

– AFP



Liverpool's Egyptian striker Mohamed Salah (centre) separates Manchester United's Uruguayan midfielder Manuel Ugarte (left) and Liverpool's Portuguese striker Diogo Jota during the English Premier League match between Liverpool and Manchester United at Anfield in Liverpool, north west England yesterday. Crisis-hit Manchester United held Liverpool to a 2-2 draw at Anfield yesterday but the runaway Premier League leaders moved six points clear at the top of the table. Cody Gakpo cancelled out Lisandro Martinez's shock opener for United before Mohamed Salah put Liverpool ahead from the penalty spot, but Amad Diallo scored a late equaliser. – AFP

Al Rajhi leads marathon Dakar stage as big names hit trouble



BISHA – Saudi driver Yazeed Al Rajhi led at the midway point of the marathon 48-hour second stage of the Dakar Rally yesterday as two big names suffered a wretched day in the dunes.

Carlos Sainz lost 40 minutes after his Ford Raptor flipped while Sebastien Loeb's hopes of winning his first title cooled with a fan issue on his Ford.

That left the veteran former world rally legend over half an hour behind virtual leader Al Rajhi, who can sympathise at his rivals' misfortunes

after having to abandon the Dakar during this very stage 12 months ago.

Introduced for the first time in 2024 the intrepid Dakar competitors on four wheels and two will cover almost 1,000km over the two days.

The 48-hour stage is held in the kingdom's Empty Quarter, a vast sea of sand with dunes as far as the eye can see.

Yesterday's first segment came to a close when the clock struck 1700 in Saudi Arabia, the time for all competitors to head to their nearest break zone and try to get some sleep under the stars before today's conclusion, setting off at sunrise.

Unlike last year's first two-day stage the routes for the bikes and cars have been separated, meaning drivers will be unable to follow the trails set by the faster bikes.

As the drivers headed off to get some well-earned sleep Al Rajhi, third in 2022, was 1min 19sec clear of Nasser Al Attiyah, and also provisionally heads the Qatari five-time winner in the overall rankings.

In the bike race Australia's Daniel Sanders, winner of the first stage, leads American defending bike champion Ricky Brabec by 2min23sec. –AFP

Gauff beats Swiatek to inspire team USA to United Cup triumph

Tennis

SYDNEY – Coco Gauff roared past Iga Swiatek to inspire team USA Sunday before Taylor Fritz sealed the United Cup title with victory over Poland's Hubert Hurkacz in Sydney.

Gauff opened with a statement 6-4, 6-4 win over Swiatek in 1hr 51min of hard-hitting tennis to fire a warning shot ahead of the Australian Open.

Big-serving Fritz then battled through against Hubert Hurkacz 6-4, 5-7, 7-6 (7/4) to spark wild celebrations as the Americans won the mixed-teams cup for the second time in three years after winning the inaugural event in 2023.

For Poland it meant falling at the final hurdle again after losing to Germany 12 months ago.

Gauff set the ball rolling with a second victory in a row over Swiatek after beating the former world number one at the WTA Finals in Riyadh on her way to the title.

Gauff had won all six of her previous singles and doubles matches this week and continued her streak when Swiatek double-faulted on match point at 4-5, 30-40 in the second set.

"I think I have the belief that I am one of the best players in the world, and when I play good tennis, it's hard for me to be beaten," said Gauff, who won the award as player of the tournament.

'Tough today'

The 20-year-old will go into the first Grand Slam of the year next Sunday unbeaten in singles since losing to world number one Aryna

Sabalenka in the Wuhan semi-finals in October, and brimming with confidence.

"Today I think I played great tennis, and I'm happy to get a point," she said. "It was tough today, I'm not gonna lie."

Gauff's victory left the United States one win away from lifting the title for the second time, and Fritz delivered after edging a third-set tiebreak to seal a tense encounter.

"It's been a great week," said Fritz.

"They're an incredibly tough team and the margins are very small," he added after a serve-dominated match that featured 30 aces and just three break points.

"I feel like it could have always gone either way. Just want to say thanks to my whole team."

Earlier, Swiatek took a medical timeout at 5-4 down in the second set to have strapping put on her niggling left thigh which has bothered her all week in Sydney.

After losing to Gauff, Swiatek left the court in tears, walking gingerly, but returned laughing and joking during the trophy presentations.

Red-hot Gauff, who did not drop a set in five singles matches, goes into the Australian Open as world number three.

She enjoyed United Cup singles wins over Leylah Fernandez, Donna Vekic, Zhang Shuai, Karolina Muchova and Swiatek.

Fritz, who is at career-best number four in the rankings, dropped his opening United Cup match to Felix Auger-Aliassime but then won four straight. –AFP



Players of Team USA celebrate with the trophy after beating team Poland in the finals of the United Cup tennis tournament on Ken Rosewall Arena in Sydney yesterday. –AFP

Sport in brief

France's Muller wins ATP HK Open

Tennis

HONG KONG – France's Alexandre Muller came back from one set down to defeat former world No. 4 Kei Nishikori of Japan in the ATP Hong Kong Open final yesterday.

Muller, ranked 67th in the world, dropped the first set 6-2. However, he turned the match around, winning the next two sets 6-1 and 6-3. The match lasted one hour and 43 minutes at Hong Kong's Victoria Park.

Nishikori, 35, entered the tournament with a wild card. This marked his first final since

2019, following the withdrawal of Chinese teenager Shang Juncheng in their semifinal clash due to illness on Saturday.

In recent years, Nishikori has struggled with injuries, causing him to drop out of the top 100 in the world rankings. –Xinhua

US rugby star Maher draws record crowd on Bristol debut

Rugby

LONDON – US rugby sevens star and social media sensation Ilona Maher made her eagerly anticipated debut for Bristol in the

English women's Premiership yesterday but could not prevent defeat for her new side.

The versatile American back, who won Olympic bronze at the 2024 Paris Games, has more than eight million followers across Instagram and TikTok, making her the world's most followed rugby player.

The 28-year-old, who has signed a three-month contract with Bristol, was also a runner-up in the most recent series of US television show Dancing With The Stars.

Maher's presence for the game against champions Gloucester-Hartpury generated a

Bristol record crowd of 9,240 for a women's game.

She came off the bench for the final 20 minutes at Ashton Gate to huge cheers but was unable to make a major impact and Bristol went down to a 40-17 defeat.

Maher has not played 15s rugby since 2021 but is aiming to gain selection for the US squad for the Women's Rugby World Cup, taking place in England later this year.

Her arrival at the English Premiership club has boosted replica shirt sales, while Bristol's Instagram following has soared from 21,000 to 67,000. –AFP

Captain Masood leads Pakistan fight back in 2nd Test



Pakistan's Shan Masood watches the ball after playing a shot during the third day of the second international Test cricket match between South Africa and Pakistan at Newlands stadium in Cape Town yesterday. –AFP

Cricket

CAPE TOWN – Shan Masood and Babar Azam shared a record opening partnership as Pakistan fought back after conceding a 421-run first innings deficit on the third day of the second Test against at Newlands yesterday.

Pakistan were 213 for one in their follow-on innings at close of play, still 208 runs short of making South Africa bat again.

Pakistan captain Masood made 102 not out, his sixth Test century, and Babar scored 81, his third successive half-century in the series.

Babar, who has not scored an international century since August 2023, fell short again when he was caught in the gully off Marco Jansen 14 minutes before the close of play.

Their partnership of 205 was the highest for the first wicket for Pakistan in Tests against South Africa. It also exceeded Pakistan's first innings total of 194, which prompted South African captain Temba Bavuma to enforce the follow on.

It was the second significant partnership of the day for Babar, who was forced to open the batting after Saim Ayub was ruled out of the match with a broken right ankle.

Babar made 58 in the first innings and put on 98 for the fourth wicket with Mohammad Rizwan (46) before his dismissal triggered a collapse.

Babar and Rizwan resumed

at the overnight 64 for three and batted comfortably through the first hour, seeing off the threat of Kagiso Rabada and Jansen, South Africa's premier strike bowlers.

The stand was broken by 18-year-old debutant Kwena Maphaka five balls after the morning drinks break when Babar was caught behind by Kyle Verreynne, glancing a loose ball down the leg side.

Babar had batted solidly in a 127-ball innings. He stood in seeming disbelief at his dismissal before returning to the pavilion.

Rizwan followed five overs later when he charged down the pitch against Wiaan Mulder and edged a wild slog into his stumps.

There was minimal resistance from the rest of the batsmen.

Masood and Babar showed in the second innings that there were no demons in a pitch on which South Africa scored 615.

They kept the scoreboard moving with positive stroke play and good running between the wickets and seldom looked in danger of getting out.

South Africa's frustration boiled over when Mulder, after bowling a ball which Babar struck back firmly, threw the ball at the batsman, who was on 56.

The incident led to an exchange of words, which also involved wicketkeeper Verreynne, and an intervention by the umpires.

The left-handed Masood struck 14 fours in posting his century off 159 balls. –AFP

Neil Young says he will play Glastonbury after all

LONDON – Folk legend Neil Young has had a change of heart and will now headline at the Glastonbury music festival, the singer-songwriter and the organisers said on Friday.

Shortly after pulling out of the iconic festival alleging it was under the “corporate control” of its partner the BBC, Young went back on the decision saying it had been based on “an error in the information I received”.

“Happily, the festival is now back on our itinerary and we look forward to playing! Hope to see you there!” the US-Canadian wrote on his website.

Organisers gleefully announced that he and his band The Chrome Hearts would now headline at the Pyramid stage during the June music fest.

“What a start to the year! Neil Young is an artist who’s very close

to our hearts at Glastonbury,” festival co-organiser Emily Eavis wrote on Instagram.

“He does things his own way and that’s why we love him. We can’t wait to welcome him back here to headline the Pyramid in June.”

The 79-year-old musician, who was once one of the line-up of the supergroup Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, had alleged earlier that the BBC “wanted us to do a lot of things in a way we were not interested in”, without specifying.

Young, who last played Glastonbury in 2009, had said the festival was “a corporate turn-off, and not for me like it used to be”.

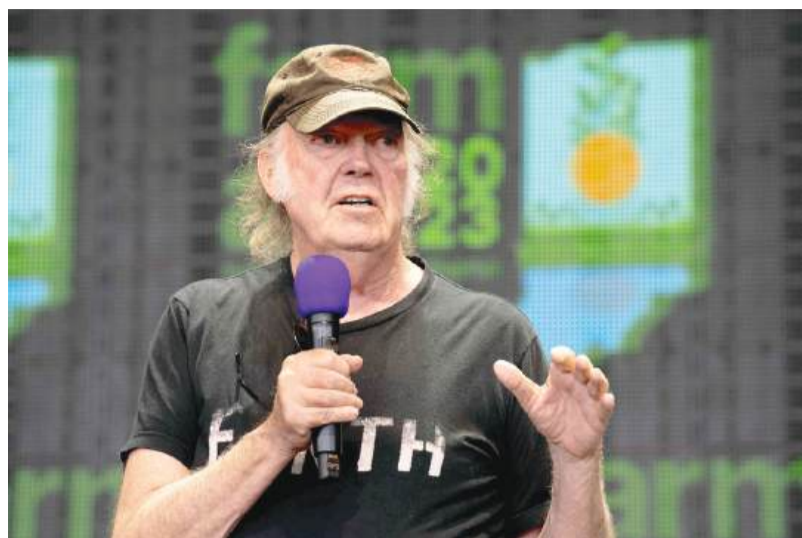
The full official line-up for the world-famous festival has not been announced yet. But this year’s event will see raspy-voiced British rock star Rod Stewart play the coveted legends slot.

Tickets for this year sold out within 35 minutes when they went on sale in November, with standard tickets priced at £373.50 (US\$471.50).

Glastonbury attracted more than 210,000 fans in 2024, hosting 3,000 performances across some 80 stages. Many of the gigs were broadcast by the BBC, which has partnered with the festival since 1997.

Glasto, as the festival is popularly known, was inspired by Britain’s 1960s counterculture and hippie movements, with its first iteration as the Pilton Festival in 1970.

Glam rockers T. Rex were the first headliners. Since then, it has attracted cult status and big names, from David Bowie and Paul McCartney to Stormzy and Elton John, who played his final UK gig there in 2023. –AFP



US-Canadian musician Neil Young speaks during the Farm Aid 2023 press conference at the Ruoff Music Centre on September 23, 2023 in Noblesville, Indiana. –AFP

Wayne Osmond dies, aged 73: brother

WASHINGTON – Wayne Osmond, the singer of the American family pop group the Osmonds, has died at the age of 73, his brother said last week.

Osmond passed away at a hospital in Salt Lake City, Utah, after suffering a “massive stroke,” his brother Merrill Osmond said in a Facebook post on Thursday.

“I’ve never known a man that had more humility. A man with absolute no guile,” the post read. “An individual that was quick to forgive and had the ability to show unconditional love to everyone he ever met.”

Wayne Osmond was the fourth of nine siblings raised in a Mormon household in the city of Ogden, Utah.

The siblings’ career began in the 1950s when Wayne, Alan, Merrill and Jay sang as a barbershop quartet.

In 1961, the four brothers were discovered singing at Disneyland. They gained exposure on television shows and their popularity grew.

Brothers Donny and Jimmy eventually joined, as well as sister Marie.

In 1971, the group reached the height of their fame after the release of “One Bad Apple.” The song spent five weeks at No. 1 on the Billboard 100, according to People magazine.

Shortly after, the band went their separate ways. Jimmy pursued a solo career, while Donny and Marie, now aged 67 and 65, began singing as a duo.

Wayne Osmond married Kathlyn White, a former pageant queen, in 1974. They had five children together.

Wayne Osmond experienced a number of health problems over the years. In 1997, he was diagnosed with a brain tumour and reportedly lost nearly all of his hearing as a result of the treatment.

Then, in 2012, he had a stroke that left him unable to play guitar.

“My brother Wayne endured much,” Merrill Osmond said in his Facebook post.

“He gave it his all. His legacy

will go down as someone who was not only a genius in his ability to write music, but was able to capture the hearts of millions of people and bring them closer to God.” –AFP



Wayne Osmond performs at the Orleans Hotel & Casino August on 14, 2007 in Las Vegas, Nevada. –AFP

Man arrested for supplying drugs to Liam Payne: Argentine police

BUENOS AIRES – Argentine police on Friday arrested one of the two men accused of supplying drugs to British singer Liam Payne before he fell to his death from his third-floor hotel room in Buenos Aires.

Braian Paiz, who is accused of having supplied cocaine to Payne, is one of five defendants indicted in connection with the death of the 31-year-old former One Direction pop star in October.

Three of the five were charged with manslaughter and the other two with supplying illegal drugs, prosecutors said earlier this week.

Prosecutors said Payne had consumed cocaine, alcohol and a prescription antidepressant before falling to his death from the balcony of his room at the Casa Sur Hotel.

Paiz, 24, is accused of supplying Payne with drugs two days before his death. His home has been searched, police sources said.

In November, Paiz denied in a television interview having given drugs to Payne, although he said that he met the pop star and spent time with him at his hotel.

Paiz denied taking money for the drugs, but the judge in the case said evidence suggested he had been paid.

Payne had spoken publicly

about struggling with substance abuse and coping with fame from an early age.

His death prompted a global outpouring of grief from family, former bandmates and fans, with thousands gathering in cities around the world to offer their condolences.

One of the highest-grossing live acts in the world in the 2010s, One Direction went on indefinite hiatus in 2016.

Payne enjoyed some solo success before his career stalled.

–AFP



British singer-songwriter Liam Payne poses on the red carpet on arrival for the BRIT Awards 2019 in London on February 20, 2019. –AFP

Stormzy banned from driving for 9 months



British rapper Stormzy poses on the red carpet upon arrival for the special screening of the movie “NOPE” at the Odeon Leicester Square cinema, in central London, on July 28, 2022. –AFP

LONDON – A London judge has banned British grime star Stormzy from driving for nine months, after an undercover police officer caught him using a phone behind the wheel of a Rolls-Royce in west London.

District judge Andrew Sweet on Thursday handed the 31-year-old rapper the ban after he had pleaded guilty via a letter to driving while using the device in west Kensington on March 7 last year.

The judge, sitting at Wimbledon Magistrates’ Court, also fined him £2,010 (US\$2,498) after six more points had been added to his licence.

Before Thursday’s hearing, Stormzy – whose name is Michael Ebenazer Owuo Junior – had six points on his licence for a previous speeding offence.

In the UK, drivers can be

disqualified if they build up 12 or more penalty points within a period of three years.

Sweet said that Owuo’s driving record was “not good” and criticised his “dangerous and irresponsible” actions.

The rapper’s lawyer, Peter Csemiczky, said his client accepted responsibility and apologised.

Stormzy is a cult figure in the British grime scene, which blends Jamaican dancehall and hip hop for a pulsating, hard-edged sound that first electrified London more than two decades ago.

His biggest hits now appear in TV ads and in 2019 he made history by becoming the first black UK solo artist to headline the Glastonbury music festival.

–AFP

World Weather

CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -3°C~7°C	Manila 23°C~32°C	New York -4°C~0°C	Lisbon 8°C~14°C
Shanghai 0°C~12°C	Bangkok 18°C~33°C	London 1°C~12°C	Rio de Janeiro 22°C~28°C
Hong Kong 13°C~21°C	Tokyo 5°C~11°C	Frankfurt 4°C~11°C	Luanda 23°C~30°C
Taipei 11°C~20°C	Singapore 23°C~31°C	Vancouver 1°C~8°C	Maputo 24°C~33°C
Guangzhou 8°C~22°C	Kuala Lumpur 23°C~32°C	Paris 3°C~12°C	Dili 24°C~31°C
Nanjing -3°C~11°C	Jakarta 23°C~33°C	Moscow -6°C~5°C	São Tomé 26°C~29°C
Guilin 7°C~20°C	Seoul -8°C~2°C	Las Vegas 6°C~17°C	Praia 16°C~27°C
Xi’an -4°C~7°C	Sydney 21°C~28°C	Monte Carlo 8°C~14°C	Bissau 18°C~34°C



1 Painter of musicians

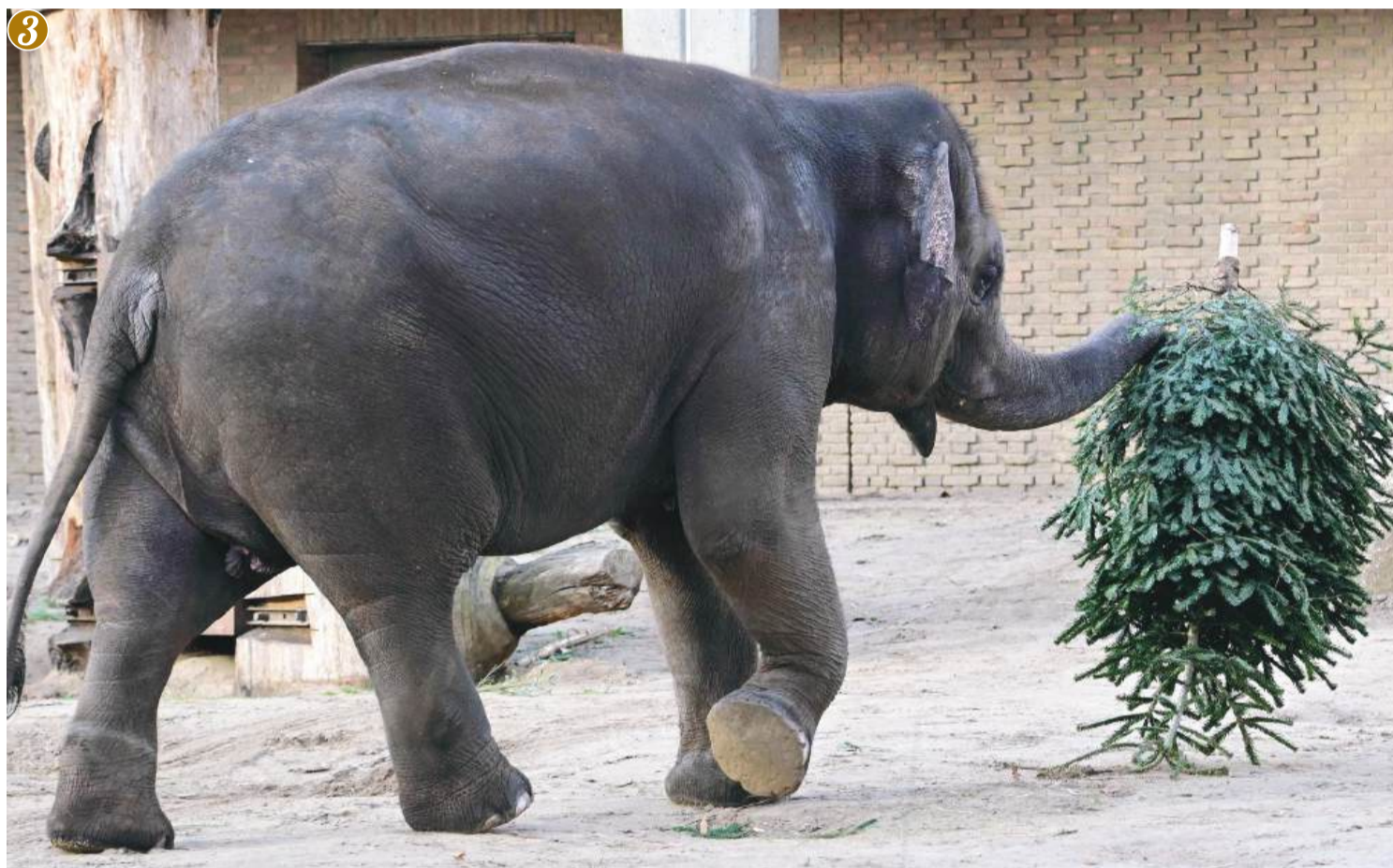
A vendor arranges paintings on display for sale at a roadside stall during 'Chitra Santhe', a day-long annual art carnival organised by Chitrakala Parishath, in Bengaluru, India yesterday. — AFP

2 Freezing paws

People walk their dog along the covered in snow footpath by the Atherfield narrow canal in Marsden, northern England, as heavy snow across parts of England is set to cause disruption. An amber weather warning - the second most serious - for snow and freezing rain was in place for much of Wales, central England and parts of northwestern England. — AFP

3 I'll take this one!

An elephant plays with a Christmas tree in its enclosure at the Zoologischer Garten zoo in Berlin on Friday. Traditionally, some animals at the Berlin zoo in January are offered leftover trees that were not sold before the Christmas holidays. — AFP



4 My name there!

A zookeeper poses with a Squirrel monkey during a photocall for the annual stocktake at ZSL London Zoo in central London on Friday. — AFP

5 Golden orb

The Sun sets behind the clouds in the Kerobokan district of Indonesia's resort island of Bali yesterday. — AFP

6 Roadworthy?

People look at a customized motorcycle during the 2025 North American International Motorcycle Supershow in Mississauga, Ontario, Canada, on Friday. Featuring hundreds of motorcycles, the annual three-day event kicked off on Friday. — Xinhua

