

Edmund Ho portrays central govt's work report as 'encouraging & confidence-boosting'

Yuki Lei

Chaired by Edmund Ho Hau Wah, the Hong Kong-Macau members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) National Committee held a joint meeting in Beijing yesterday morning, during which he quoted Premier Li Qiang's report on the work of the Central People's Government, describing it as "encouraging and confidence-boosting."

Ho, the first chief executive of the Macau Special Administrative Region, is a vice-chairman of the CPPCC National Committee.

In addition to CPPCC National Committee Vice-Chairpersons Leung Chun-ying and Xian Hui, as well as Xia Baolong, who heads the Hong Kong and Macao Work Office of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee as well as the State Council's Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office (HKMAO), Vice Premier Ding Xuexiang, who is in charge of Hong Kong and Macau affairs, also attended the meeting and responded to remarks made by the members.

The meeting was open to the media. "The presence of Ding at the joint meeting fully demonstrates the great importance that the central authorities attach to the "One Country, Two Systems" principle and their affectionate care for both Hong Kong and Macau CPPCC members, providing us with a deep sense of warmth and encouragement," Ho said in his opening remarks.

According to Ho, the meeting was convened to discuss the work report of the Central People's Government and to hear the report on the work of the Standing Committee of the CPPCC National Committee. He said that the meeting aimed to focus on the practical work of Hong Kong and Macau, providing advice on the study and implementation of President Xi Jinping's important speeches made at the celebration of the 25th anniversary of Macau's return to the motherland last December, safeguarding the long-term prosperity and stability of the two special administrative regions (SARs), promoting their accelerated integration into the nation's overall development, while maximising the



This screenshot captured from CCTV's live broadcast shows the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) Vice Chairman Edmund Ho Hau Wah addressing yesterday morning's joint group meeting for Hong Kong and Macau CPPCC members, in Beijing.

"dual and positive" roles of CPPCC National Committee members from Hong Kong and Macau.

Ho portrayed Tuesday's report on the work of the Standing Committee of the CPPCC National

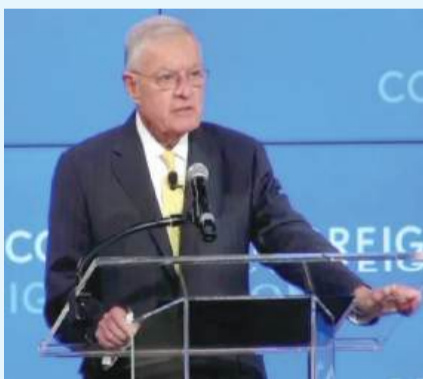
Committee, presented by Wang Huning, chairman of the CPPCC National Committee, and Tuesday's report on the members' proposals, presented by Jiang Zuojun, vice chairman of the CPPCC National



Committee, as "comprehensive, objective, and factual". He highlighted the clear objectives and strong political nature of Wang's report, along with its effective guidance, "which significantly boosts confidence". In contrast, he noted, Jiang's report features detailed data that fully expresses the unique and advantageous role of CPPCC members' proposals in advancing whole-process people's democracy and facilitating economic and social development.

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Trump envoy likens Ukraine aid freeze to whacking stubborn 'mule'



Special Envoy for Ukraine and Russia Keith Kellogg delivers the keynote address on "The current state of the war in Ukraine and how the war might end" at Council on Foreign Relations in New York. - Photo: CFR

WASHINGTON – An envoy of President Donald Trump said yesterday that Ukraine has itself to blame for the US suspension of war aid and compared the shock move to hitting a stubborn farm animal with a piece of wood.

Keith Kellogg, a retired lieutenant general named by Trump as special envoy on Russia and Ukraine, said President Volodymyr Zelensky had ample opportunity to sign a US mineral rights sharing deal touted as key to a still-vague post-war security plan.

"Very candidly, they brought it

on themselves – the Ukrainians," Kellogg said at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Cutting aid – vital to Ukraine's efforts to defend against the three-year Russian invasion – was meant to be a short-sharp shock, he said.

"I think the best way I can describe it is sort of like hitting a mule with a two-by-four across the nose," he said.

"You got their attention, and it's very significant, obviously, because of the support that we give," he said.

Kellogg said that the pause

should be temporary until Zelensky signs the deal, although he cautioned that Trump alone would make the decision.

"The protocol is – you sign a document and once you sign a document that you want to go forward, that you're serious about it, then I think you can move forward" on aid, he said.

Zelensky flew to Washington last week to sign an agreement demanded by Trump that in part would compensate the United States for billions of dollars in weapons sent since Russia

invaded Ukraine in 2022.

The two leaders' meeting dramatically unravelled as Zelensky questioned how to believe any Russian promises. Trump and Vice President JD Vance responded by angrily accusing him of ingratitude.

Kellogg insisted that the Trump administration was also pressuring Russia to make a deal including through enforcement of sanctions on ships selling oil.

"It's not so much more options," he said of Trump's approach to pressuring Russia. "It's the enforcement of the options." – AFP

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The Macau Post Daily

Xi stresses role of education in supporting sci-tech, talent development

President Xi Jinping yesterday stressed strengthening the role of education in supporting scientific and technological advancement as well as talent development.

– Story on p. 7

US trade gap hits new record in January as tariff fears loomed

The US trade deficit surged to a new record in January, government data showed yesterday, as imports spiked while tariff worries flared in the month of US President Donald Trump's inauguration.

– Story on p. 11

Portugal facing possibility of early elections after PM row

Portugal's Prime Minister Luis Montenegro is facing the possibility of returning to the polls in a few weeks, just one year after coming to power.

– Story on p. 12

Lawmaker promotes Macau's sports, youth & tech education at 'two sessions'

Staff Reporters

Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) National Committee member, Pui Ching Middle School principal-cum-lawmaker Kou Kam Fai told *The Macau Post Daily* on Wednesday in an exclusive online interview about his key proposals that will be outlined at the third session of the ongoing 14th CPPCC National Committee session at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.

Kou is currently in Beijing for the nation's annual "two sessions" – the session of the CPPCC National Committee (the nation's top political advisory body) and the session of the National People's Congress (NPC – the national legislature).

Kou emphasised leveraging Macau's role in hosting the 2025 National Games to boost the local sports industry. He suggested relaxing entry permit, residency, and professional certification requirements to attract mainland sports talent, creating a more dynamic and competitive environment.

Kou also addressed the growing mental health challenges among Macau's youth, proposing increased resources and support systems to reduce academic pressure and strengthen family-student relationships. "We must create a nurturing environment for our young people to thrive," he said.

Kou also highlighted his school's success

in integrating STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) education into its curriculum. Since 2012, his school has implemented project-based learning and interdisciplinary approaches, achieving a 100 percent university admission rate and winning national awards. Kou said he believes that Macau's educational innovations, particularly in technology and creativity, can serve as a blueprint for the nation's broader education goals.

Tech-driven education: challenges & opportunities

As a local pioneer in STEAM education, Kou highlighted the transformative potential of AI tools in schools, as at Pui Ching Middle School, AI systems have significantly improved learning outcomes, particularly for students who fall behind, and fostered cross-disciplinary innovation.

However, Kou acknowledged the challenges, including resistance from teachers accustomed to traditional methods and concerns from parents about AI's impact on foundational knowledge.

To address these issues, Kou called for the localisation of STEAM education models, aligning them with international trends and national policies, adding that since 2022, Pui Ching Middle School has successfully integrated WeChat Mini Programs into its

curriculum, enabling students to develop practical applications like a school sports event mini-programme.

Kou said he believes this low-threshold approach can serve as a model for other schools, encouraging innovation and real-world problem-solving.

Building skilled workforce for tech education

Kou particularly stressed the importance of cultivating "seed teachers"* to drive tech education forward, pointing out that teachers in his school are encouraged to innovate in curriculum design, project development, and teaching methods. The school has also partnered with tech companies and universities to provide training and resources, ensuring educators are equipped to navigate the fast-evolving tech landscape.

"We need to foster interdisciplinary talent and create a supportive ecosystem for tech education," Kou said, emphasising the need for better facilities, standardised curricula, and stronger school-enterprise cooperation to bridge the gap between education and industry. ■

*A seed teacher is an experienced and highly skilled educator who plays a pivotal role in the development and implementation of new educational programmes, methodologies, or schools. – DeepSeek



This undated handout file photo downloaded from the Government Information Bureau (GCS) website last night shows Pui Ching Middle School principal-cum-lawmaker Kou Kam Fai posing at his school's Chinese Cultural Centre.

Edmund Ho portrays central govt's work report as 'encouraging & confidence-boosting'

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Ho said, "We fully agree with the two reports".

Regarding the central government's work report delivered by Premier Li Qiang at the opening meeting of the third session of the 14th National People's Congress on Wednesday, Ho pointed out that "it's an excellent report that upholds the banner, is pragmatic, inspiring, and motivational". He added that the report thoroughly integrates Xi's Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, presents achievements with pragmatism, discusses issues objectively and in depth, sets scientific and reasonable goals, and proposes practical and effective measures, reflecting a spirit of hard work and responsibility that truly embodies the results of development.

CPPCC member says 'Macau's development is inseparable from nation's support'

Meanwhile, in a written statement sent to *The Macau Post Daily*, CPPCC member Lam Lon Wai, a school vice-principle, pledged that he and his fellow members will fully leverage the dual role of Hong Kong and Macau representatives to safeguard the long-term prosperity and stability of the two regions, and to integrate them into the nation's overall development, in line with Xi's important speeches.

Lam reaffirmed that the development of Hong Kong and Macau is inseparable from the nation's support, highlighting that the appropriate diversification of Macau's economy presents a valuable opportunity for the city to integrate into the nation's development.

Lam is a vice-principal of Lou Hau High School associated with the Macau Federation of Labour Unions (commonly known as Gung Luen, the short form of its name in Cantonese). ■

2025 Macau Int'l Parade set for March 23



Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) President Deland Leong Wai Man (centre, front) and other government officials, as well as representatives from the city's six integrated resort (IR) operators pose during a press conference at the Macau Cultural Centre (CCM) yesterday. – Photo: Ginnie Liang

Ginnie Liang

The 2025 Macau International Parade is slated to take place on Sunday, March 23, and Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) President Deland Leong Wai Man said yesterday during a press conference she estimates that there will be about 150,000 online and offline spectators this time, which is similar to that of last year.

Organised by the Cultural Affairs Bureau in conjunction with the city's six integrated resort (IR) operators – Galaxy Entertainment Group (GEG), Melco Resorts & Entertainment, MGM, Sands China, SJM Resorts and Wynn Resorts, the parade will be held in the afternoon of March 23, setting off from the Ruins of St Paul's at 3 p.m. and ending in Sai Van Lake Square at 6:30 p.m., featuring a total of over 1,800 performers from 60 local troupes and 23 troupes from around the world, including national ones from Hong Kong and Huzhou, as well as foreign ones from Argentina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Italy, Morocco, Polynesia, Portugal and Spain, aiming to uphold the spirit of "Love, Peace and Cultural Integration", with the theme of "East-West Encounter, Asia in Harmony" this year.

Leong said that the budget of this year's parade will be shared by the city's six IR operators, adding that about 90 applications had been received for the open call for local troupes, and 60 have been selected, the subsidies of which will be disbursed in accordance with the government's established rules and regulations, mainly to be used for props and costumes.

According to Leong, the parade will be the opening ceremony of the "Culture City of East Asia 2025 – Macao, China" event, in celebration of Macau being designated as a "Culture City of East Asia 2025", which will feature a series of activities, including the opening ceremony, the presentation of original musical compositions, art work from mainland China, Japan and South Korea, as well as an exchange programme targeted at youth.

During the parade, according to the press conference, before eventually arriving at Sai Van Lake Square for a closing performance to compete for a range of prizes, the performers will interact with residents and tourists alike in Largo do Senado and Avenida Panorâmica do Lago Nam Van, and a raft of artistes in dazzling costumes will stage a special show on Avenida Doutor Stanley Ho along the Praia Grande Bay (Nam Van) waterfront.

A wide range of games, workshops and interactive booths will be set up at the VIVA Carnival in Avenida Panorâmica do Lago Nam Van, with some of the troupes performing there, according to the press conference.

This year, the parade will feature several highlights, including world-renowned artistic groups, experienced in performing internationally as they have demonstrated high-level artistic competence, and all foreign performing groups will be participating in the parade for the first time, bringing new styles of performance and injecting new energy and multicultural elements into the event, the press conference pointed out. ■

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Macau Weather

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Source: SMG

Media essential for fair & impartial AL elections: CAEAL

Yuki Lei

The Legislative Assembly Electoral Affairs Commission (CAEAL) held a media forum yesterday to remind local reporters to pay attention to their work on the eve of and on election day, and CAEAL President Seng Ioi Man said in his opening remarks of the forum that the Macau media has consistently upheld professionalism, objectivity and impartiality in reporting, aligning with the commission's commitment to a fair election and equal treatment of all candidates, adding the commission expects to cooperate with the media to ensure election fairness.

The forum took place at the Public Administration and Civil Service Bureau's (SAFP) Public Servants Training Centre in Nape, with the participation of Chinese-, Portuguese- and English-language media representatives. A number of representatives raised their concerns at the meeting, focusing on how to do their job as journalists via-a-vis the official ban of electioneering on the eve of and on polling day, as stipulated in the Law on the Legislative Assembly Election.

The quadrennial Legislative Assembly (AL) poll, which consists of direct and indirect elections, has been scheduled for September 14 this year, marking its eighth election in the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR) and the first following the amendments to the



Local media representatives attend yesterday's forum organised by the Legislative Assembly Electoral Affairs Commission at the Public Administration and Civil Service Bureau's (SAFP) Public Servants Training Centre in Nape. CAEAL President Seng Ioi Man (fourth from left) chaired the forum.

Law on the Legislative Assembly Election. This year's election campaign period will start on August 30 and end on September 12. No campaigning is allowed on the eve of and on polling day.

In his remarks prior to the closed-door forum, lasting for about an hour, Seng emphasised the media's role as a bridge connecting various sectors of the community, highlighting the importance of news reporting for the public in obtaining information and for ensuring that the election campaign is conducted smoothly in a lawful, fair, just, and honest environment. He said: "The commission attaches great importance to the role of the

media and holds press freedom in high regard".

Seng also remarked that news reporting differs to election campaign publicity and expressed confidence in the media's professional ability to make this distinction, reminding the media about the clear legal definitions regarding such publicity, which, as in the past, requires that electioneering materials should be removed or deleted before the commencement of the two-day ban on campaign publicity, which starts one day before election day.

By law, Macau's legislative elections are always to be held on a Sunday, while the day before is informally known as "cooling-off day".

He clarified the distinction between news reporting and electioneering, noting that media activities related to electioneering are considered news reporting as long as they objectively present the candidates in accordance with journalistic standards and uphold the public's right to know, underlining that the media can interview candidates on the eve of and on polling day about current affairs and livelihood issues in line with their social status and relevant duties, but should refrain from involving themselves in electioneering matters.

Seng said that the media may retain news coverage involving electioneering activities on their

online platforms, but recommended that such coverage be avoided on September 13 and 14 by not placing it in a prominent position, warning members of the public against forwarding any relevant online news from the media on those two days, otherwise, they may be regarded as violating the law.

'This election is of great significance'

In a group interview after the forum, Seng stressed that "this election is of great significance," being the first election following last year's amendments to the Legislative Assembly Election Law, which have further implemented the principle of "patriots governing Macau", noting that the commission is "actively and orderly" advancing the election procedures and hopes to disseminate relevant information to the community through the media.

However, he was quick to add that the amended law does not introduce significant changes to the conditions directly related to the work of the media, but only those concerning commercial advertising.

Meanwhile, the commission will hold a briefing session on March 26 from 6:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. at the Macau Science Centre in Nape. Registration opens to residents today via their Macao One Account or in person at the Public Administration Building on Rua do Campo during office hours. ■



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- For the Food & Beverage sector, awards will be conferred according to the evaluation results which include Quality Tourism Services Merchant Award, Quality Tourism Services Gold Award, Quality Tourism Services Excellence Award and Special Theme Awards (Sustainable Dining Award, Community Care Services Award, Local Feature Award, Operational Innovation Award and Integrity Business Award)
- For Travel Agency sector, awards will be conferred according to the evaluation results which include Quality Tourism Services Merchant Award, Quality Tourism Services Gold Award, Quality Tourism Services Excellence Award and Special Theme Awards (Quality Training Award, Courtesy Merchant Award and Integrity Business Award)

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Supporting Entities



Sands China hosts 'Ne Zha 2' screening

Rui Pastorin

Integrated resort operator Sands China said in a recent statement that it has hosted a screening for the Chinese animated fantasy adventure film "Ne Zha 2" for 300 of its Sands Cares Ambassadors and their loved ones in appreciation of the volunteers' "unwavering dedication to the local community over the years".

The screening was held at BONA Cinema, which is located at the YOHO Treasure Islands Resorts World Hotel on the peninsula.

According to the statement, the popular "Ne Zha 2" is China's first film to gross over 10 billion yuan at the box office. It took five years to complete and had a production team of over 4,000 animators from 138 animation companies across the mainland.

The film has broken multiple box-office

records both inside and outside of China, according to Wikipedia, while the Sands China statement noted that the film is the first non-Hollywood film to break into the global box office top 10 for highest-grossing films.

The recent screening, the statement said, marked the film's "first screening for volunteers in Macau", with the event being appreciated by participants. It was organised to "bring positive impact to the community while promoting traditional Chinese culture and cultural pride", according to the statement.

The Sands Cares Ambassador programme was launched in August 2009 and now has over 3,600 volunteers across the integrated resort operator's properties, cumulatively contributing to over 310,000 hours of volunteers' service, the statement noted.



This recent handout photo provided by Sands China shows cinemagoers at its special screening for "Ne Zha 2" at BONA Cinema near Praça de Ferreira do Amaral.

Melco screens 'Ne Zha 2' for community

Kristina Vallesteros

Melco Resorts and Entertainment said in a Monday statement that it recently hosted an exclusive screening of the Chinese animation blockbuster "Ne Zha 2" at Studio City Cinema.

Aligning with the company's signature activity "Splendours of China", the initiative aimed to instil national pride among colleagues and the local community, according to the statement.

The statement noted that local children, youths and families were invited to the movie day through the integrated resort's community partners, including: Sheng Kung Hui Macau Social Services Coordination Office - Astor Shore (Star of Hope); Tamagnini Barbosa Community Centre of the Macau Federation of Trade Unions; YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association of Macau); Caritas Macau (Residential Centre Arco-Iris); "Mong-Ha" Children and Youth Home; DSEDJ Parenting Education Centre; Macau Deaf Association (MDA); Against Child Abuse (Macau) Association (ACAM); and Lok Chon Centre of the Macau General Union of Neighbourhood Associations (UGAMM; Kai Fong).

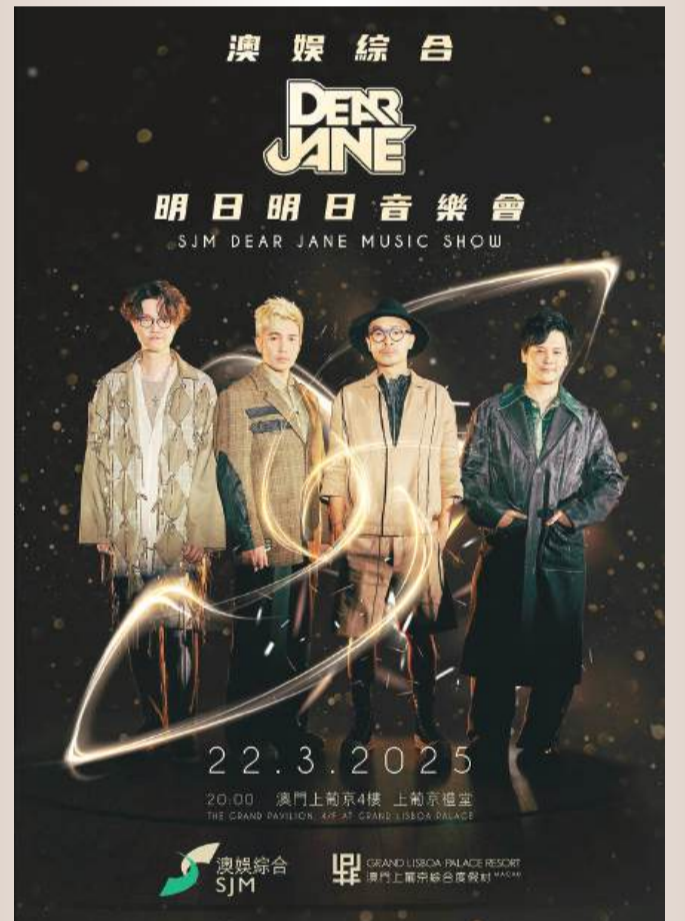
The statement added that Melco, in conjunction with the Women's General Association of Macau (commonly known as Fu Luen in Cantonese), will host a second screening of the movie for more members of the community, namely young children, women, expectant mothers and families, tomorrow.

To help attendees better understand the movie, the statement said, that a briefing will be held before the screening.



The undated handout provided by Melco Resorts and Entertainment earlier this week shows cinemagoers at the recent screening of "Ne Zha 2" at the Studio City Cinema.

'SJM Dear Jane Music Show' to take place at GLP



This undated handout photo provided by SJM earlier this week shows the promotional poster for "SJM Dear Jane Music Show" event.

Kristina Vallesteros

SJM Resorts is slated to present the "SJM Dear Jane Music Show" on March 22 at Grand Lisboa Palace's (GLP) The Grand Pavilion in Cotai.

According to the statement, the Hong Kong rock band Dear Jane* will perform their greatest hits, remastered in their signature style. The event promises an "electrifying atmosphere and high-energy rock music", to create an "unforgettable" night for their fans.

The statement noted that an "SJM Dear Jane Music Show" hotel package will also be available, with prices starting from 3,688 patacas. The package includes two Zone A tickets, one-night accommodation at GLP on the night of the music show and breakfast for two at the integrated resort's Grand Buffet. Reservations can be made until March 15 on a first-come, first-served basis, the statement said.

Moreover, by showing their concert tickets on show day, guests can have a 20 percent discount on food and beverages at participating GLP restaurants.

Ticketing and more details can be found on <https://www.sjmresorts.com/en/happenings/sjm-dear-jane-music-show>.

*Dear Jane, according to Wikipedia, is a Hong Kong band that consists of Tim Wong 黃天翱 (lead vocalist), Jackal Ng 伍漢邦 (bassist), Howie Yung 翁厚樑 (guitars/vocals) and Nice Lai 黎俊華 (drummer). The band's name refers to the term "Dear John letter" but from the point of view of a male writing to a female.

Four Seasons Hotel Macao to present Four-Hands event

Rui Pastorin

Four Seasons Hotel Macao is slated to present the "Four-Hands Culinary Extravaganza" on March 28-29, with the two-night event to feature Four Seasons Hotel Hangzhou at West Lake's Senior Executive Chinese Chef Wang Yong, and Four Seasons Hotel Macao Executive Chinese Chef Anthony Ho Yam To.

The event will take place at Zi Yat Heen, which is led by Ho. Among its accolades are Forbes Five-Star recognition for three consecutive years, one Diamond in the Black Pearl Restaurant Guide, and a Michelin star for eight consecutive years, the statement noted.

The "artistry and flavours" of Jiangzhe cuisine will be showcased by Wang, who the statement said has "elevated Jin Sha at Four Seasons Hotel Hangzhou at West Lake to legendary status", earning three Diamond awards in the Black Pearl Restaurant Guide for eight consecutive years.

In 2023, Jin Sha ranked 59th on Asia's 50 Best Restaurants 51-100 list and garnered a Michelin star.

Priced at 2,088 patacas per person, the menu will include Chef Wang's Jiangzhe dishes such as Braised Pork Belly with Fresh Abalone, Broad Bean Paste with Chinese Mahogany, Coddled Egg* with Sea Urchin, Stir-Fried Snow Crab Rice Cake with Shepherd's Purse, and Steamed Milk Pudding with Longjing Tea.

The statement added that Zi Yat Heen will offer "Cantonese masterpieces" such as Carabineros Prawn with Soya Sesame Sauce and Ice Plant, Kristal Caviar with Chilled South Australian Lobster, Double-Boiled Canadian Geoduck Soup with Italian Basil, Steamed Star-Spotted Grouper, and Bird's Nest with Pumpkin Panna Cotta.

One can also pay an additional 788 patacas for wine pairing. For details, call 2881 8818.

*A coddled egg is an egg that is gently cooked in a small dish (called a coddler) placed in a water bath, or in hot water just below boiling point. - DeepSeek



This undated handout photo provided by Four Seasons Hotel Macao shows one of the dishes to be on offer during the "Four-Hands Culinary Extravaganza" on March 28 and 29.

Health Bureau urges senior citizens to avoid hypothermia

Ginnie Liang

In response to the cold weather expected in the next few days, the Health Bureau (SSM) urged members of the public on Friday to avoid hypothermia, i.e., prolonged exposure to very cold temperatures, and to bundle up, senior citizens and patients with chronic diseases in particular.

An SSM statement quoted the Meteorological and Geophysical Bureau (SMG) as forecasting that under the impact of a strong monsoon, local temperatures would remain low over the next few days, and were expected to drop to as low as 10 degrees Celsius.

The bureau also urged people and associations responsible for caring for the elderly and patients with chronic diseases to take appropriate care measures, such as ensuring that they are wearing more clothes with dry, light, comfortable, breathable and warm materials, keeping warm at home, eating food that is high in calories and easy to digest, such as hot milk, soup, congee and noodles, and doing appropriate exercises indoors or in sunny areas to protect themselves from the cold weather.

The statement underlined that in order not to interfere with blood circulation and movement, the clothing should not be excessively bulky and tight. The statement added that if senior citizens have incontinence, they should have their wet nappies and trousers changed frequently.

Hot water bottles, electric gel heating pads and electric blankets should not be used by people that are heat intolerant, such as those suffering from diabetes and myelopathy (a disorder in which the tissue of the spinal cord is diseased or damaged), the statement added.

The bureau urged the public not to be deceived into believing that alcohol can keep the body warm, adding that although alcohol can dilate blood vessels that enables people to feel warm immediately after drinking, it will accelerate the loss of body heat afterwards.

The bureau also urged the public to pay close attention to weather changes, especially when the temperature drops sharply in a short period of time, and to be alert to prevent hypothermia due to the cold.

The statement pointed out that maintaining the right amount of exercise can generate heat energy in the body, help maintain body



This poster provided by the Health Bureau (SSM) yesterday provides members of the public with tips to keep warm.

temperature, keep joints flexible, and improve blood circulation.

The statement stressed that family members and relatives should care for and assist the elderly and encourage and remind them to take appropriate measures against the cold, whilst for those who live alone or are ill, neighbours are asked to call or visit them regularly, so as to reduce the chance of accidents.

If residents find any person suffering from hypothermia, or experiencing symptoms such as muscle stiffness, slow heartbeat, confusion or impaired awareness, they should get the person to a hospital for treatment as quickly as possible, or call the emergency hotline 999 or the Fire Service Bureau (CB) on 2857 2222.

Cold shelter opens as mercury drops

The city's temporary cold weather shelter located at E1 Bairro da Ilha Verde Building on Rua Leste da Ilha Verde (青洲東街34號青洲坊大廈E1) opened yesterday, the Social Welfare Bureau (IAS) said in a statement yesterday.

The shelter opened in response to the hoisting of the Yellow cold weather alert by the observatory yesterday.

The IAS statement noted that the shelter will provide facility users with a mattress and a quilt, as well as food and beverages free of charge.

Customarily, the shelter stays open between 6 p.m. and 8 a.m. when the temperature falls to 14 degrees or lower.

The bureau urged residents to keep an eye on senior citizens who live alone, suffer from chronic diseases or frail health, and to be ready for the cold weather.

Enquiries about the shelter can be made by calling 2827 0939 during office hours or 6399 1963 during non-office hours. ■

HK gov't aims to offer 'low cost, low risk' solutions to Macau businesses

Tony Wong

The Macau government's Commerce and Investment Promotion Institute (IPIM) and its Hong Kong counterpart Invest Hong Kong jointly held a presentation session in Macau yesterday briefing Macau businesspeople about the neighbouring city's latest business prospects and opportunities, where Invest Hong Kong officials said that the city can provide "low cost, low risk" solutions aiming to make it easier for those from Macau to launch their businesses there.

Invest Hong Kong, officially known as InvestHK for short, is a public entity of the Hong Kong government tasked with drawing and attracting investments to the city. The Chinese name of the agency is "投資推廣署", which, literally translated, means investment promotion department.

During yesterday's session, InvestHK officials presented alternative business models offered in Hong Kong aiming to enable prospective businesspeople to start their businesses there at a lower cost, thereby reducing risk, such as "shop-in-shop" as well as "shared-use kitchen" for food and beverage (F&B) companies. The session also briefed participants about the Hong Kong government's different subsidies provided to eligible business start-ups.

According to DeepSeek, "shop-in-shop" is a retail business model where a brand or merchant sets up an independent small store, counter or space within a larger retail shop or shopping mall. This model is often used for brand promotion, product display, or providing specific services. For example, a cosmetics brand may have a counter within a department store, or a coffee brand may open a small café inside a bookstore.

"Shared-use kitchen", according to DeepSeek, is a business model where multiple food and beverage (F&B) businesses share a single kitchen facility to prepare, cook, and package their products. This model is particularly popular among start-ups, small businesses, and delivery-focused operations, offering various benefits such as lower start-up cost, operational flexibility, and reduced overheads.

Yesterday's session was held at the Services Platform Complex for Commercial and Trade



Commerce and Investment Promotion Institute (IPIM) President Vincent U U Sang delivers a speech during yesterday's session at the Forum Macao Complex.

— Photo: Tony Wong

Cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking Countries (aka Forum Macao Complex).

'Close connections'

Delivering a speech during yesterday's session, IPIM President Vincent U U Sang underlined the close business connections between the two cities for many years, stressing that IPIM and InvestHK have been maintaining long-term cooperation.

U said that even during the COVID-19 pandemic, the two sides were still engaging in cooperation, such as a visit to Shanghai jointly paid by IPIM and InvestHK officials in collaboration with officials from the Department of Commerce of Guangdong Province in 2021 jointly promoting business opportunities available in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area (GBA).

U underlined that the session aimed to further boost investment cooperation between the two cities, enabling Macau businesspeople to gain a better understanding of Hong Kong's latest business prospects and opportunities.

Two InvestHK officials spoke to reporters before yesterday's session, Head of Consumer Products Angelica Leung Yiu-wen, and Head of Tourism and Hospitality Sindy Wong Sze-man.

'Shop-in-shop'

Leung said that while certain Macau companies may consider business operation costs in Hong Kong very high, different new business models are available in Hong Kong for businesspeople from Macau to make good use of with the aim of helping them lower their start-up cost, such as the "shop-in-shop" model.

Leung said that the session aimed to enable Macau businesspeople to "update" their understanding of Hong Kong's business prospects and opportunities, adding that InvestHK will continue its operation with IPIM, encouraging more Macau companies to launch and run their businesses in Hong Kong.

Leung said that InvestHK's services can help businesses from Macau understand different "shop-in-shop" options available in Hong Kong. For example, according to Leung, InvestHK can match Macau businesspeople with shopping malls or department stores in Hong Kong where they can first just rent a display cabinet or a counter without having to rent a shop unit, thereby providing a lower start-up cost because of which they can first explore business opportunities and launch businesses with a lower risk in Hong Kong.

'Shared-use kitchen'

Wong said that while certain F&B companies may consider business costs in Hong Kong to be high, alternative business models are now available to them such as the "shared-use kitchen" model.

Wong noted that, for instance, a large central kitchen run by a company is divided into different spaces, or units, each of which is equipped with various facilities such as fridges and cooking hobs. F&B business start-ups can rent a unit without having to apply for a licence because the central kitchen as a whole has already been issued with a food-processing licence because of which they can quickly start their business at a lower cost, providing higher flexibility for F&B companies to explore business prospects. ■

STOCK MARKETS

Hang Seng Index closes 3.29 pct higher in stock market rally

HONG KONG — Hong Kong's stocks rallied yesterday, with the benchmark Hang Seng Index soaring over 3 percent, as tech shares led the gains.

The Hang Seng Index jumped 3.29 percent to close at 24,369.71 points, while the Hang Seng China Enterprises

Index surged 3.57 percent to end at 8,938.09 points.

Hong Kong's Hang Seng Tech Index, which represents the 30 largest technology companies listed in Hong Kong, soared 5.40 percent to close at 6,068.77 points.

— Xinhua



Invest Hong Kong Head of Consumer Products Angelica Leung Yiu-wen (left) and Head of Tourism and Hospitality Sindy Wong Sze-man speak to reporters at the Forum Macao Complex yesterday.



— Photo combo: Tony Wong

Lawmaker raises concerns about govt's efforts to protect local staff

Yuki Lei

Citing the local gaming industry law, lawmaker Ron Lam U Tou submitted yesterday a written interpellation with nearly 10 questions to the Labour Affairs Bureau (DSAL) on a recent case in which several local employees of an integrated resort operator reported that their labour contracts were terminated immediately by their company without prior warning at the end of last month. Lam said he was seeking clarification from the bureau on the meaning of "reasonable grounds" for dismissal, including how the bureau supervises the provision of long-term and stable jobs by enterprises for local employees.

According to Lam, on February 28, several local employees approached him for assistance, reporting that they had suddenly received dismissal notices from their company, with their labour contracts terminated immediately and "without reasonable grounds". He quoted the fired employees as saying they had worked for the enterprise for about 10 years but were abruptly informed by



Undated file photo of lawmaker-cum-current affairs commentator Ron Lam U Tou provided by his office, along with his written interpellation.

the management that their contracts were terminated, despite being told by the company they had made no mistakes at work and that their performance was satisfactory.

Referring to the city's gaming industry law and the new concession agreements signed by the six integrated resort (IR) operators with the government in October 2022, Lam emphasised that the concessionaires must uphold corporate social

responsibilities, including ensuring labour rights and interests, as well as providing on-the-job training and opportunities for the upward mobility of local employees. He pointed out the discrepancy between the current ratio of increase in local employees and that of non-local workers (NRWs), noting that as of the end of last year, the number of NRWs among the six IR operators had reached 32,000, an increase of about 1,200 compared to last September. In contrast, when comparing September last year to December 2022, the number of local employees among the IR operators increased by only two percent, while the number of NRWs surged by a staggering 67 percent over the same period.

Lam said: "The local economy has not yet fully recovered..... If employment for local employees at large enterprises such as IRs remains unstable, it could cause irreparable damage to Macau's overall economy and employment environment," adding he believes that the job fairs organised by IR operators in conjunction with the Labour Affairs Bureau were just "going through the motions". ■

Man sexually harasses same woman 3 times in same street: police

Staff Reporter

A local man in his sixties sexually harassed a local woman on three occasions in the same street between December last year and early this month, a Public Security Police (PSP) spokesperson said during a regular press conference yesterday.

The suspect surnamed Wong told the police that he is jobless.

According to the spokesperson, the victim in her twenties only reported the incidents to the police on Tuesday after the man touched her thigh for the third time because when the man touched her on the first and second occasions, she thought that he merely carelessly touched her.

On the three occasions, according to the spokesperson, the man suddenly touched the woman's buttocks and thigh when walking past her in Estrada do Repouso (鏡湖馬路).

On the third occasion, the spokesperson said, the man touched the woman again on Tuesday, but this time she realised that he deliberately touched her to sexually harass her,

including the previous two times, because of which she decided to report the case to the police, after which PSP officers arrived at the scene to arrest him.

The man has been transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office (MP) facing a sexual harassment charge.

Police bust illegal mahjong parlour in Iao Hon

Meanwhile, a Judiciary Police (PJ) spokesperson said during yesterday's press conference that the police busted an illegal mahjong parlour in Iao Hon district on Tuesday.

The police raided the parlour, located in a unit of a shopping centre, on Tuesday night after an investigation, which was launched after the police received a tip-off last month.

According to the spokesperson, the police intercepted a 55-year-old local woman who was hired to operate the parlour for a payment of 16,000 patacas per month. The parlour had been operating since September last year. The person,



This undated handout photo released by the Public Security Police (PSP) yesterday shows a police officer escorting the sexual harassment suspect to a police station in the northern district.

whose gender was not revealed, who had hired the woman was still at large at the time of yesterday afternoon's press conference. ■

Applications to open for 43rd Macao Young Musicians Competition

Rui Pastorin

Applications for the 43rd Macao Young Musicians Competition are slated to open from 10 a.m. on March 27 to 4 p.m. on April 2, the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) said in a statement yesterday.

Dedicated to the piano category, the contest is slated to be held from July 19 to 31. To apply, one can access www.icm.gov.mo/CJMM,

while registration and payment can be made through the "Macao One Account". Late applications will not be accepted. The statement therefore reminded those interested to open their personal/entity "Macao One Account" in advance as the procedure takes time.

The statement said that on-site presentational consultation and assistance services will be provided at the IC

headquarters in Praça do Tap Seac (塔石廣場) from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on March 27, 28 and 31 and on April 1, as well as from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on April 2.

Competition rules will be available from today at 10 p.m. on www.icm.gov.mo/CJMM, where more information can also be found. One can call 8399 6849 or email cjmm@icm.gov.mo for enquiries, according to the statement. ■

Central govt work report charts course for high-quality development

Analysis

BEIJING – The central government work report, unveiled on Wednesday at this year's annual session of the national legislature for deliberation, has garnered widespread attention from home and abroad.

How did the world's second-largest economy perform in the past year? What are its major development goals and policy directions for 2025? In the latest episode of China Economic Roundtable, an all-media talk show hosted by Xinhua News Agency, guest speakers shared insights on the nation's commitment to achieving its growth target while advancing high-quality development.

STEADY PROGRESS AMID CHALLENGES

China's GDP expanded by 5 percent last year to 134.9 trillion yuan and contributed about 30 percent to global economic growth, according to the government work report.

Huang Lianghao, an official with the Research Office of the State Council, described the achievements as "hard-won and extraordinary."

"China promoted growth within a reasonable range and effectively improved the quality of its economy," noted Huang, also a member of the drafting group for the government work report, highlighting a 3.4-percent reduction in carbon emissions per GDP unit.

"In 2024, China's economy demonstrated resilience and the effectiveness of overall reform," said national lawmaker Yuan Yuyu, chairman of Medprin Regenerative Medical Technologies Co. Ltd., a Guangzhou-based biotech firm.

Last year, the number of newly established business entities in China exceeded 20 million.

"The rapid development of enterprises vividly reflects the advancement of the country's high-quality development and the steady growth of new quality productive forces," noted Yuan.

STRATEGIC REFORMS FOR SUSTAINED GROWTH

As 2025 marks the final year of China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025), experts believe that the around-5-percent growth target proposed in the government work report balances what is needed and what is possible.

Huang emphasized the target's alignment with employment stabilization, risk prevention, and the country's development goals through 2035.

"It not only demonstrates the government's precise grasp of the general principle of pursuing progress while maintaining stability amid a complex economic environment, but also conveys a profound strategic consideration for medium- and long-term high-quality development," said national political advisor Jin Li, vice president of Southern University of Science and Technology.

Huang expressed confidence in China's economic fundamentals despite external pressures, citing positive factors such as burgeoning technological breakthroughs and expanding domestic demand.

Regarding employment, the report sets a goal of creating over 12 million new urban jobs and an around-5.5-percent surveyed urban unemployment rate. Huang underscored reforms in vocational training to address structural labor mismatches, while Jin stressed educational reforms to cultivate talent for emerging industries.

Yuan advocated for deeper industry-academia collaboration: "Universities hold talent resources while enterprises possess application scenarios. Bridging them will accelerate technological breakthroughs."

PEOPLE-CENTERED POLICY ORIENTATION

More funds and resources will be used to serve the people and meet their needs, according to the government work report. China will raise the minimum basic old-age benefits for rural and non-working urban residents by 20 yuan and ensure an appropriate increase in the basic pension benefits for retirees. It will also continue to deepen the reform of public hospitals to better serve the public interest.

Highlighting healthcare commitments, Yuan said as health has become increasingly significant to the people, companies have the responsibility to provide more innovative products, drugs and medical apparatus and lower the costs to meet the people's needs.

The government also plans 300 billion yuan in ultra-long special treasury bonds to support consumer goods trade-in programs.

"The concerns of the public are the key issues highlighted in the government work report. It proposes various measures to benefit the people and enhance their well-being," said Huang. – Xinhua

Xi extends greetings to women ahead of Int'l Women's Day

BEIJING – President Xi Jinping yesterday extended festive greetings and best wishes to the country's women of all ethnic groups and from all walks of life ahead of tomorrow's International Women's Day.

Xi, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and

chairman of the Central Military Commission, sent the greetings when attending a joint group meeting at the third session of the 14th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), the nation's top political advisory body.

– Xinhua



Policewomen make cakes during an event in Rongcheng City, Shandong Province, yesterday. Various activities are held this week across the country to mark tomorrow's International Women's Day.

– Xinhua

China to cut RRRs, interest rates in light of economic, financial conditions in 2025

BEIJING – China will cut reserve requirement ratios (RRRs) and interest rates when appropriate this year in line with domestic and international economic and financial conditions as well as the performance of financial markets, the country's central bank governor said yesterday.

The average RRR for China's financial institutions now stands at 6.6 percent, and there is still room for further reduction, Pan Gongsheng, governor of the People's Bank of China (PBOC), said at a press conference on the sidelines of the third session of the 14th National People's Congress.

Pan said there is also room for lowering the rates of funds

that the central bank provides to commercial banks via structural monetary policy instruments.

He said the central bank will use a variety of monetary policy tools, including open market operations, medium-term lending facilities, re-lending and rediscounts, as well as policy rates, to maintain ample liquidity in the market, reduce banks' liability costs, and further drive down the overall costs of social financing.

The central bank will also study and introduce new structural monetary policy instruments to support the investment and financing in the area of sci-tech innovation, boost consumption, and stabilize foreign trade, Pan said.

– Xinhua

China to introduce interest subsidy policies to boost consumption

BEIJING – China will roll out new interest subsidy policies on certain loans to ease financial burdens on individuals and businesses to stimulate consumption, Minister of Finance Lan Fo'an said yesterday.

The fiscal interest subsidies will be provided to personal consumer loans in key sectors and business loans in industries

closely related to daily life, such as catering, hospitality, healthcare, elderly care, childcare, and domestic services, Lan told a press conference on the sidelines of the third session of the 14th National People's Congress (NPC).

Lan said the policies will reduce financial pressure on consumers and lower the financing costs for businesses.

– Xinhua

Xi stresses role of education in supporting sci-tech, talent development

BEIJING – President Xi Jinping yesterday stressed strengthening the role of education in supporting scientific and technological advancement as well as talent development.

Xi, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, called for a deep understanding of the needs of Chinese modernization for education, science and technology, and talent.

The goal is to cultivate a steady stream of talent, unlock their full potential, and ensure their abilities are fully utilized, Xi said while attending a joint group meeting during the third session of the 14th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), the top political advisory body.

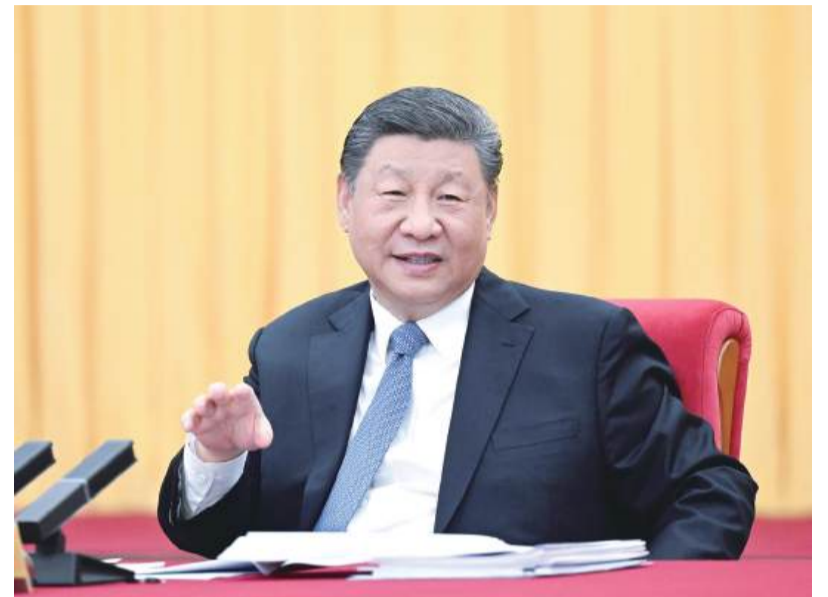
The meeting was attended by national political advisors from the China Democratic League, the China Association for Promoting Democracy, and the education sector.

Xi stressed the importance of maintaining a correct orientation in running schools in the process of building China into a leading country in education, science and technology, and talent.

He called for nurturing a new generation of capable young people with the moral grounding, intellectual ability, physical vigor, aesthetic sensibility, and work skills needed to join and carry on the socialist cause.

He emphasized the need to equip students with the Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.

To develop a high-quality



President Xi Jinping, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), exchanges views with national political advisors from the China Democratic League, the China Association for Promoting Democracy, and the sector of education, who are attending the third session of the 14th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), in Beijing yesterday. Xi attended their joint group meeting, and listens to their comments and suggestions.

– Xinhua

educational system that meets the people's expectations, the key lies in deepening comprehensive reform of education, said Xi.

It is important to refine the school management system, grant schools greater autonomy in decision-making, and continuously advance law-based school administration, he added.

To achieve a sound interaction between independent sci-tech innovation and self-reliant talent training, education must further play its fundamental and leading role in supporting such cause, Xi noted.

He stressed the need to refine the mechanism for aligning talent cultivation with the needs of

economic and social development to enhance the quality and efficiency of self-reliant talent training.

Noting that boosting education, sci-tech and talent development is a shared responsibility of the entire Party and society, Xi urged the CPPCC to fully leverage its role as a specialized consultative body.

Wang Huning, chairman of the CPPCC National Committee, and Cai Qi, director of the General Office of the CPC Central Committee, joined Xi in the discussion with political advisors. Wang and Cai are also members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee.

– Xinhua

China fully confident in achieving 2025 GDP growth target: official

BEIJING – China is fully confident in achieving the economic growth target of around 5 percent this year as there is solid foundation, support and guarantee, Zheng Shanjie, head of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), told a press conference in Beijing yesterday.

Describing last year's economic performance as satisfactory, Zheng said that the Chinese economy has shown strong resilience and vitality, laying a solid foundation for this year's development.

In 2025, China will step up efforts to boost consumer spending, Zheng said. The country will allocate 300 billion yuan to support the consumer goods trade-in program this year, up from 150 billion yuan in 2024, with the scope of the program to be expanded.

According to Zheng, a special action plan aimed at boosting consumption has recently been formulated by multiple departments and will be made public soon.

Effective investment will also be expanded this year, he said,

noting that the country will support investment by private enterprises in emerging industries and industries of the future.

China last year recommended over 8,000 projects to private investors to encourage their investment, he said, noting that the country will introduce a number of major projects that will be attractive to private capital in sectors including railways, nuclear power, water conservancy, major scientific and technological infrastructure this year.

– Xinhua

China-US cooperation serves fundamental interests of both peoples: commerce minister

BEIJING – China-US cooperation serves the fundamental interests of both peoples and meets the expectations of the international community, Commerce Minister Wang Wentao said yesterday.

The respective success of China and the United States presents each other with opportunities, rather

than threats, Wang said at a press conference on the sidelines of the third session of the 14th National People's Congress (NPC).

Commenting on the recent US move to impose additional tariffs on Chinese goods using the fentanyl issue as a pretext, Wang said this act "distorts facts and confuses right and wrong."

The US trade and investment restrictions are typical acts of unilateralism and bullying that "hurt others without benefiting itself," he noted.

"Attempts to coerce or blackmail China will not succeed, nor will they intimidate China," he said.

– Xinhua

Philippines' Palawan approves 50-year ban on new mining permits

Cecil Morella

MANILA – The local government in a resource-rich Philippine province has unanimously voted in favour of a 50-year ban on new mining permits, a decision its supporters said cannot be overridden by Manila.

Palawan province, a UNESCO "biosphere reserve" known for its diverse flora and fauna, has become a hotbed for mining as the national government seeks to widen its market share for minerals like nickel, a key component of electric vehicle batteries.

But locals have increasingly pushed back against new mine proposals, with environmental groups and activists pointing to effects ranging from deforestation and flooding to the displacement of Indigenous peoples.

There are currently 11 mines operating in Palawan, but scores of applications are pending.

Environmental lawyer Grizelda Anda, who worked in support of Wednesday's vote, said Manila would not be able to legally overrule the local government's decision, which now awaits the governor's signature.

"The [Philippine Mining Act of 1995] provides that you have to get the endorsement of the LGU (local government unit)," she said.

The new permit ban also imposes a 25-year pause on applications to renew or expand mining licences.

Existing mines can continue



This file photo taken on April 18, 2024 shows an aerial view of a tourist spot in Puerto Princesa in Palawan. – AFP

"as long as they do not increase their production" or move into new areas, Anda added.

'A really big win'

"This is a really big win not just for the people but for the environment, especially Palawan, which is our last frontier here in the Philippines," said Jonila Castro, a spokesperson for the Manila-based Kalikasan People's Network for the Environment.

"We hope that many other provinces will have the same moratorium."

Palawan resident Jade Cabasag, 23, whose church advocated for the ban, told AFP she was one of about 100,000 people who had signed a petition in favour of it.

"We are more than just a sector that values our faith, but we also value our environment," she said, adding she was proud she could help in her "own little way".

But the Chamber of Mines of the Philippines criticised the vote, saying in a statement yesterday that the environmental concerns were overblown given laws it said provided "stringent" safeguards.

The decision would also limit "the country's ability to plan and strategise about its mineral wealth at a time when the global demand for critical minerals is rising", it said.

"The Philippine government has a responsibility to the people to develop its mineral resources responsibly for the good of the many. Palawan cannot and should not limit the national government's ability to do so."

But mid-term elections in May, when 10 of the Palawan board's 11 members are up for re-election, could see the new ban undone if there is a dramatic shift in the body's makeup. – AFP

Malaysia aims to be 'global leader' in carbon capture

KUALALUMPUR – Malaysia's parliament yesterday passed legislation intended to help the country become a "global leader" in carbon capture, utilisation and storage – a technology touted as reducing planet-warming emissions.

The bill provides a legal framework for the so-called CCUS, which the Southeast Asian nation says could be a key economic driver, worth up to US\$250 billion and the source of hundreds of thousands of jobs by 2050.

CCUS seeks to eliminate emissions created by burning fossil fuels for energy and from industrial processes.

The carbon is captured at source and stored permanently in various underground environments.

It has been promoted by emitting

sectors including heavy industry and the oil and gas sector, and has backing from the United Nation's key scientific panel on climate change as a solution for difficult to decarbonise industries.

However, some scientists and environmentalists view it as a licence to continue burning fossil fuels and cite doubts over its effectiveness, given its cost and complexity.

Malaysia's Economy Minister Rafizi Ramli said the bill would help the country address climate change, while strengthening its position as a "regional frontrunner in low-carbon technologies."

CCUS offers a "new source of economic growth," he added.

"This will enable Malaysia to become a global leader in CCUS

because, at present, only Norway has successfully implemented it effectively."

Malaysia argues it is particularly well-placed for CCUS, in part because of an abundance of depleted oil reservoirs to store captured carbon dioxide.

The bill's regulations on the import and permanent storage of carbon dioxide in offshore areas come into force from March 31.

However, it will only apply to Peninsular Malaysia and the Federal Territory of Labuan – off the coast of the Malaysian portion of Borneo Island.

The eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak requested to be excluded as part of a broader push for greater economic autonomy. – AFP

S Korea fighter jets accidentally drop bombs, civilians among 15 injured

Hieun Shin

SEOUL – Two South Korean Air Force fighter jets accidentally dropped eight bombs on a village during a joint training exercise with US forces yesterday, officials said, with civilians among 15 people injured.

The Air Force KF-16 jets were participating in joint US-South Korea live-fire training exercises in Pocheon, about 25 kilometres south of the heavily fortified border with nuclear-armed North Korea, military and government officials said.

The two jets accidentally released eight MK-82 general-purpose bombs – four each – which landed "outside the designated firing range", the Air Force said.

"The pilot appears to have entered incorrect coordinates during the pre-flight preparation process," an Air Force official told reporters.

One Pocheon resident told Yonhap news agency he was watching television when he heard the bombs explode.

"I suddenly heard an enormous explosion, like a thunderclap, and the whole house shook," said the resident, who gave only his surname Park.

"When I went outside, everything was in chaos," he said.

The two aircraft were meant to fire simultaneously at a target as part of the exercise, the Air Force official said.

"It is believed that the first pilot entered incorrect coordinates, leading the second aircraft to drop its munitions as well."

A defence ministry official said an investigation was underway.

"We deeply regret the unintended release of the bombs, which resulted in civilian casualties, and wish those injured a swift recovery," the Air Force said in an earlier statement.

It said it would "take all necessary measures, including compensation for damages".

South Korea's National Fire Agency said the bombs had "fallen on a village during a South Korea-US joint exercise".

That resulted in "casualties and property damage, with many displaced residents", it said.

Fifteen people were injured,

including civilians and military personnel, the agency said.

One church building and sections of two houses were damaged, according to an agency statement.

'Simply unimaginable'

The mayor of Pocheon demanded that all military exercises cease until preventive measures were made.

"While there have been accidents where bullets bounced off targets and landed elsewhere, it is simply unimaginable that an aircraft would directly fire at civilian homes," said mayor Baek Young-hyeun.

Baek told reporters that "until a thorough and acceptable safety plan is established to the satisfaction of Pocheon residents, all military exercises must be suspended".

"I strongly urge the government to recognise the gravity of this incident and act swiftly in response," Baek said.

The blast was felt at a centre for seniors about a kilometre away.

"A sudden explosion shook the building. The windows shattered, and one of our teachers was injured and taken to the hospital," the centre's director, surnamed Yu, told Yonhap.

"Fortunately, none of the seniors were hurt but they were so frightened that we sent them all home," Yu said.

The South Korea-US "Freedom Shield" military exercises, one of the allies' largest annual joint exercises, are set to begin later this month.

The two Koreas remain technically at war since their 1950-1953 conflict ended in an armistice, not a peace treaty.

The United States stations tens of thousands of soldiers in the South, in part to protect Seoul against Pyongyang.

In 2022, a South Korean Hyunmu-2 short-range ballistic missile accidentally crashed into a military golf course in the South's eastern Gangwon province, after it was fired in response to a North Korean missile launch.

The missile did not explode and no one was injured in that incident. – AFP

Indonesia investigates land use violations after flooding in Jakarta

JAKARTA – The Indonesian Ministry of Environment and Forestry inspected upstream areas of rivers in West Java province yesterday and uncovered alleged violations of environmental laws, which are believed to have contributed to recent flooding in Jakarta and surrounding areas over the past two days.

The ministry installed four environmental monitoring boards

on lands where functions had been altered, rendering them unable to retain water. The landowners had been using these areas without obtaining the necessary environmental permits.

Indonesian Environmental Minister Hanif Faisol Nurofiq said that 33 other locations in the upstream areas, located in Puncak Cisarua of Bogor regency, also showed signs of environmental law violations.

"We will soon escalate the status

of this case to an investigation, as the natural conditions strongly indicate that changes in spatial planning have caused the flooding," Hanif said during the inspection.

He noted that any changes in land function must be supported by in-depth scientific analysis, particularly in upstream zones that serve as groundwater catchments.

According to data from the ministry, 15,000 hectares of the

upstream areas of the Ciliwung River should be allocated for protected areas, national parks, production forests, water sources, and limited settlements. However, since 2022, approximately 8,000 hectares have been converted for plant cultivation and residential purposes.

Additionally, 3,203.24 hectares of land in the upstream areas have become critically degraded, posing risks of landslides and erosion of up

to 180 tons per hectare annually.

The recent flooding, triggered by the overflowing of the Ciliwung and Cisadane rivers originating from Puncak Cisarua in Bogor regency, affected Jakarta and its satellite cities from Tuesday to Wednesday.

The disaster claimed three lives, forced large-scale evacuations, and disrupted business activities, particularly in goods transportation.

– Xinhua

Malala returns to Pakistan hometown 13 years after being shot

PESHAWAR — Nobel Peace Prize laureate and education activist Malala Yousafzai returned to her Pakistan home village on Wednesday, 13 years after surviving an assassination attempt by militants.

Yousafzai was a 15-year-old schoolgirl when Pakistan Taliban militants boarded a bus and shot her in the head in the remote Swat Valley near the Afghanistan border.

She has made rare visits to the valley since, but it was the first time she returned to her childhood home in Shangla since being evacuated to the United Kingdom after the attack.

“As a child, I spent every holiday in Shangla, Pakistan, playing by the river and sharing meals with my extended family,” she said on X.

“It was such a joy for me to return there today (yesterday) - after 13 long years - to be surrounded by the mountains, dip my hands in the cold river and laugh with my beloved cousins. This place is very

dear to my heart and I hope to return again and again.”

Yousafzai was accompanied by her father, husband and brother for the high-security visit by helicopter which lasted just three hours.

Authorities have been cautious in allowing her to return to Shangla district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province where militancy has soared following the return of the Afghan Taliban in Kabul in 2021.

The area was sealed off for several hours to provide security for her visit on Wednesday, which included a stop at local education projects backed by her Malala Fund.

“Her visit was kept highly secret to avoid any untoward incidents,” a senior administration official told AFP on condition of anonymity as he was not authorised to speak to the media.

“Even the locals were unaware of her plans to visit.”

The Pakistan Taliban is a separate but closely linked group to the Afghan Taliban and controlled

swaths of the border regions at the time Yousafzai was shot.

Militants had ordered girls to stay home, but she continued to secretly go to school and wrote a blog about her experience.

She went on to become an education activist and the world’s youngest Nobel Peace Prize winner at age 17.

In January, she addressed Muslim world leaders at an education conference in Islamabad where she called for action against the Afghan Taliban, who have banned teenage girls from going to school.

Her hometown visit comes in a week marred by violence in Pakistan, with 18 civilians and soldiers killed in an overnight suicide attack on a military compound in the same province.

“I pray for peace in every corner of our beautiful country. The recent attacks, including in Bannu yesterday (Tuesday), are heartbreaking,” Yousafzai said of the attack. —AFP



This handout photograph taken and released by the Malala Fund on Wednesday, shows Nobel Peace Prize laureate and education activist Malala Yousafzai posing during a visit to her home village in Shangla. —AFP



A jet ski with a surfer moves across record-breaking waves at Kirra Beach as the outer fringe of Tropical Cyclone Alfred started whipping eastern Australia, in Coolangatta yesterday. Tropical Cyclone Alfred was 285 kilometres east of busy Brisbane city after unexpectedly slowing above the Coral Sea overnight, government forecasts said. —AFP

Sri Lankan police seek public help to arrest chief

COLOMBO — Sri Lanka’s police issued a public appeal yesterday to locate their fugitive chief, who has been missing since a court order for his arrest following the death of an officer.

Spokesman Buddhika Manatunga said they had been unable to find Inspector-General of Police (IGP) Deshabandu Tennakoon despite deploying several special units.

“We urge the public to provide any information about his whereabouts,” Manatunga told reporters in Colombo.

“We also warn that anyone harbouring the IGP will be prosecuted for obstructing justice.”

Manatunga admitted that the failure to locate their own chief had “undermined public confidence in the police force”.

A foreign travel ban has been imposed in case he tries to flee the island.

“It is a serious matter, and we are working with more vigour to arrest him,” he added.

“As someone who is aware of the law, the IGP should have complied with the court order and surrendered,” Manatunga said.

A magistrate ordered Tennakoon’s arrest last week following allegations that he had authorised an illegal raid on a hotel in 2023.

Tennakoon had ordered a unit from Colombo to search for illegal drugs at the hotel in the southern coastal resort town of Weligama, about 150 kilometres from the capital.

Local police, unaware of the undercover operation, confronted the unit, sparking a gun battle in which one officer was killed and another was critically wounded.

No drugs were found.

Tennakoon was controversially appointed as police chief in November 2023, but his appointment was challenged in the Supreme Court, which suspended him last July pending the outcome of a hearing.

He was given the top job despite the country’s highest court ruling in a separate case that he had tortured a suspect in custody by rubbing menthol balm on his genitals.

The court ordered Tennakoon to pay half a million rupees (US\$1,600) in compensation to the victim, but the government at the time ignored judicial orders to take disciplinary action against him. —AFP

Australian scientists discover world’s oldest meteorite crater

SYDNEY — Australian scientists have discovered the world’s oldest known meteorite impact crater, which could reshape understanding of the origins of life and Earth itself, according to a study published yesterday.

The crater, found in a remote part of northwestern Australia, “significantly challenged previous assumptions about our planet’s ancient history”, researchers from Curtin University said in a report.

The team investigated rock layers in the North Pole Dome “and found evidence of a major meteorite impact 3.5 billion years ago”.

“Before our discovery, the oldest impact crater was 2.2 billion

years old, so this is by far the oldest known crater ever found on Earth,” study co-lead professor Tim Johnson said.

Co-lead author, professor Chris Kirkland, said the discovery shed new light on how meteorites shaped Earth’s early environment.

“Uncovering this impact and finding more from the same time period could explain a lot about how life may have got started, as impact craters created environments friendly to microbial life, such as hot water pools,” Kirkland said.

“It also radically refines our understanding of crust formation — the tremendous amount of energy

from this impact could have played a role in shaping early Earth’s crust.”

The meteorite is thought to have slammed into the area at more than 36,000 kilometres per hour, resulting in a crater more than 100 kilometres wide, and could have sent debris flying across the globe, the study added.

“Until now, the absence of any truly ancient craters means they are largely ignored by geologists,” Johnson said.

“This study provides a crucial piece of the puzzle of Earth’s impact history and suggests there may be many other ancient craters that could be discovered over time.” —AFP

Rohingya refugee food aid to be halved from next month: UN

Bangladesh — Rations will be halved for around one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh from next month due to a lack of funds, the United Nations food agency has said.

Huge numbers of the persecuted and stateless Rohingya community live in squalid relief camps in Bangladesh, most arriving after having fled from a 2017 military crackdown in neighbouring Myanmar.

Successive aid cuts have already caused severe hardship among Rohingya in the overcrowded settlements, who are reliant on aid and suffer from rampant malnutrition.

The UN World Food Programme (WFP) said in a letter on Wednesday that “severe funding shortfalls” had forced a cut in monthly food vouchers from US\$12.50 to US\$6.00 per person.

“Unfortunately, we have still not received sufficient funding, and cost-saving measures alone are not enough,” the letter said.

Md. Shamsud Douza of Bangladesh’s refugee agency told AFP that his office would meet community leaders next week to discuss the cuts.

A decision by US President Donald Trump’s administration to make drastic cuts to foreign aid has sent shockwaves through humanitarian initiatives worldwide.

But WFP’s Kun Li said that the United States remained a donor for Rohingya aid and the ration cuts reflected a “funding gap across multiple sources”.

Funds raised were only half the US\$852 million sought by foreign aid agencies, she told AFP.

Wednesday’s letter comes days before a visit by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who is

slated to meet Rohingya refugees to mark the annual Muslim Ramadan fast.

The 2017 crackdown in Myanmar — now the subject of a UN genocide investigation — sent around 750,000 Rohingya fleeing into neighbouring Bangladesh with harrowing stories of murder, rape and arson.

Bangladesh has struggled to support its refugee population. The prospects of a wholesale return to Myanmar or resettlement elsewhere are remote.

Rohingya living in the camps around Cox’s Bazar are not allowed to seek employment and are almost entirely dependent on limited humanitarian aid to survive.

Large numbers of refugees have attempted hazardous sea crossings in an effort to find a better life away from the camps, including more than 250 Rohingya who arrived in Indonesia in January. —AFP

Hamas says Trump's 'DEAD' threat to Gaza undermines ceasefire

GAZA CITY – Hamas said yesterday that Donald Trump's threats would encourage Israel to ignore the fragile ceasefire, after the US president warned that unless hostages were freed, the people of Gaza would be "DEAD".

Trump had earlier floated a widely condemned plan to relocate Palestinians from Gaza.

Weighing in yesterday, France welcomed an alternative Arab plan to rebuild the territory while keeping Palestinians on their land, but insisted Hamas must be excluded from governing Gaza.

Trump's warning followed his administration's revelation that it held unprecedented direct talks with Hamas – listed as a "terrorist" group by Washington – focused on US hostages in Gaza.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office confirmed Israel was consulted and said it had "expressed its opinion" on the talks.

Trump said he was "sending Israel everything it needs to finish the job", as his administration expedites billions of US dollars in additional military assistance to Israel.

"This is your last warning!" Trump warned Hamas leaders. "For the leadership, now is the time to leave Gaza, while you still have a chance," he posted on his Truth Social platform.

Israel killed Hamas chief Yahya Sinwar as well as the movement's military leader Mohammed Deif during the war in Gaza that began with Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack on Israel.

Trump also warned of repercussions for Gaza as a whole, where virtually the entire population has been displaced by Israel's relentless military campaign in response to Hamas's attack.

"To the People of Gaza: A

beautiful Future awaits, but not if you hold Hostages. If you do, you are DEAD! Make a SMART decision. RELEASE THE HOSTAGES NOW, OR THERE WILL BE HELL TO PAY LATER!"

Hamas's attack resulted in the deaths of 1,218 people on the Israeli side, most of them civilians, while Israel's military retaliation in Gaza has killed at least 48,440 people, also mostly civilians, data from both sides shows.

Leaning on a cane outside a makeshift shelter in Khan Yunis, southern Gaza, Mohammed Salim dismissed Trump's talk of turning Gaza into hell.

"It has already become one," he said. "We have been devastated, our homes reduced to rubble, our sons, fathers, and elders lost. There is nothing left to mourn."

'Political tool'

Hamas spokesman Hazem Qasim said Trump's words pushed Israel to disregard the terms of a ceasefire in place since January 19, after more than 15 months of war.

"These threats complicate matters regarding the ceasefire agreement and encourage the occupation to avoid implementing its terms," Qasim said, urging the United States to pressure Israel to enter the ceasefire's second phase.

The first phase – negotiated by the United States, Qatar and Egypt – ended at the weekend after six weeks of relative calm, during which Israeli hostages were exchanged for Palestinian prisoners.

Israel wants to extend this phase until mid-April, but Hamas insists on transitioning to the second phase, seen as leading to a lasting ceasefire.

Israel has ramped up its rhetoric and halted the flow of aid into Gaza, prompting Britain, Germany and



Palestinian children queue at a charity kitchen ahead of the "iftar" fast-breaking meal during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, near building rubble at the Bureij refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip on Wednesday. – AFP

France to warn against using aid as a "political tool".

"We lack drinking water. People are complaining of lack of water in general," said Abu Hammam al-Hasanat, 34, in Gaza.

Talks with Hamas

Trump's hawkish language came after the United States confirmed unprecedented direct talks with Hamas, with the US envoy on hostage affairs, Adam Boehler, discussing US hostages.

"Look, dialogue and talking to people around the world to do what's in the best interest of the American people is something that the president" believes is right, White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said.

Washington had refused direct contact with Hamas since designating it a terrorist organisation in 1997, but Leavitt said the envoy "has the authority to talk to anyone".

Five US citizens are believed to remain among the hostages – four have been confirmed dead and one, Edan Alexander, is believed to be alive.

US blacklisting of Huthis 'devastating' for Yemen: NGOs

DUBAI – The United States' move to re-classify Yemen's Iran-backed Huthi rebel group as a foreign terrorist organisation could have "devastating" effects on the country's largely aid-dependent, war-ravaged population, humanitarian groups warned yesterday.

The listing, which bans any interaction with the Huthis – who control large swathes of the Arabian Peninsula's poorest country – could push up prices and make it difficult to import essential goods, aid groups said.

The United States re-designated the Huthis on Tuesday. The rebels were also briefly placed on the terror list during President Donald Trump's first term in 2021.

The Huthis have fired missiles and drones at Israel throughout the Gaza war and waged a campaign against shipping in the vital Red Sea and Gulf of Aden trade route.

More than half of Yemen's 38 million-plus population is dependent on aid, according to the United Nations, which says the country is suffering one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.

"Yemen imports around 90 percent of its food, the vast majority through

commercial channels," Eri Kaneko, spokesperson of the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), told AFP.

"Constrictions in this supply – whether intended or incidental – will have devastating impacts on millions of people."

If the supply of essential food and medicine is not preserved, "it would have serious impacts on communities already on the precipice of disaster", Kaneko said.

Yemen's Huthi-controlled areas, home to about 70 percent of the population, are already facing rampant food insecurity, Action Against Hunger warned.

The full impact of the terror

listing is not yet known, Doctors Without Borders said.

"But the sanctions will inevitably impact the work of humanitarian organisations and increase the suffering of the population," it said in a statement sent to AFP.

Former president Joe Biden removed the Huthis from the US list of Foreign Terrorist Organisations after humanitarian groups protested that they could not get aid to Yemen's needy without dealing with the rebels.

Last year under Biden, they were placed on the less-severe list of Specially Designated Global Terrorist groups, which still had the effect of freezing their assets and cutting off sources of financing. – AFP



Yemenis receive a ration of food supplies at a distribution centre in Aden on Monday, during the holy Muslim fasting month of Ramadan. – AFP

Of the 251 captives taken during Hamas's attack, 58 remain in Gaza, including 34 the Israeli military has said are dead.

'Serious and credible'

Trump triggered global outrage by suggesting the United States

Turkey urges PKK to disarm 'immediately'

Fulya Ozerkan

ISTANBUL – Turkey yesterday insisted the PKK and all groups allied with it must disarm and disband "immediately", a week after a historic call by the Kurdish militant group's jailed founder.

"The PKK and all groups affiliated with it must end all terrorist activities, dissolve and immediately and unconditionally lay down their weapons," a Turkish defence ministry source said.

The remarks made clear the demand referred to all manifestations of Abdullah Ocalan's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has led a four-decade insurgency against the Turkish state, costing tens of thousands of lives.

Although the insurgency targeted Turkey, the PKK's leadership is based in the mountains of northern Iraq and its fighters are also part of the Kurdish-led SDF, a key force in northeastern Syria.

Last week, Ocalan made a historic call urging the PKK to dissolve and his fighters to disarm, with the group on Saturday accepting his call and declaring a ceasefire.

The same day, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned that if the promises were not kept, Turkish forces would continue their anti-PKK operations.

"If the promises given are not kept and an attempt is made to delay... or deceive... we will continue our ongoing operations... until we eliminate the last terrorist," he said.

Resonance in Syria, Iraq

Since 2016, Turkey has carried out three major military operations in northern Syria targeting PKK militants, which it sees as a strategic threat along its southern border.

Ankara has made clear it wants to see all PKK fighters disarmed

should "take over" Gaza, turn it into the "Riviera of the Middle East" and relocate Palestinians to Egypt or Jordan.

Arab leaders this week endorsed an alternative plan that would finance Gaza's reconstruction through a trust fund, and would see the return of the Palestinian Authority (PA) to the territory.

The PA currently has partial administrative control in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and is dominated by Hamas rivals Fatah.

French foreign ministry spokesman Christophe Lemoine said the Arab proposal "constitutes a serious and credible basis to respond to reconstruction, governance and security needs after the Gaza war."

Hugh Lovatt at the European Council on Foreign Relations said the Arab plan was "far more realistic" than Trump's.

But Ghassan Khatib, a Palestinian political analyst and former PA minister, said "there's no chance" Israel would adopt it over the one proposed by Trump. – AFP

wherever they are – notably those in the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, which it sees as part of the PKK.

The SDF – the bulk of which is made up of the Kurdish YPG – spearheaded the fight that ousted Islamic State (IS) extremists from Syria in 2019, and is seen by much of the West as crucial to preventing a jihadist resurgence.

Last week, SDF leader Mazloum Abdi welcomed Ocalan's call for the PKK to lay down its weapons but said it "does not concern our forces" in northeastern Syria.

But Turkey disagrees. Since the toppling of Syria's Bashar al-Assad in December, Ankara has threatened military action unless YPG militants are expelled, deeming them to be a regional security problem.

"Our fundamental approach is that all terrorist organisations should disarm and be dissolved in Iraq and Syria, whether they are called the PKK, the YPG or the SDF," Omer Celik, spokesman for Erdogan's ruling AKP, said on Monday.

Ocalan's call also affects Iraq, with the PKK leadership holed up in the mountainous north where Turkish forces have staged multiple air strikes in recent years.

Turkish forces have also established numerous bases there, souring Ankara's relationship with Baghdad.

"We don't want either the PKK or the Turkish army on our land... Iraq wants everyone to withdraw," Iraq's national security adviser Qassem al-Araji told AFP.

"Turkish forces are [in Iraq] because of the PKK's presence," he said, while pointing out that Turkey had "said more than once that it has no territorial ambitions in Iraq". – AFP

US trade gap hits new record in January as tariff fears loomed

Beiyi Seow

WASHINGTON, DC – The US trade deficit surged to a new record in January, government data showed yesterday, as imports spiked while tariff worries flared in the month of US President Donald Trump's inauguration.

Trump returned to the White House this year with pledges to ease cost-of-living pressures for voters, but on the campaign trail he also raised the possibility of sweeping levies across US imports.

The overall trade gap of the world's biggest economy ballooned 34 percent to US\$131.4 billion, on the back of a 10 percent jump in imports for the month, said the Commerce Department.

This was the widest deficit for a month on record, dating back to 1992, and the expansion was more

than analysts anticipated.

The latest figures came after the US economy saw its goods deficit hit a fresh record too for the full year of 2024 – at US\$1.2 trillion.

In January, imports came in at US\$401.2 billion, and this was US\$36.6 billion more than the level in December, Commerce Department data showed.

US exports, meanwhile, rose US\$3.3 billion between December and January to US\$269.8 billion.

Among sectors, imports of industrial goods jumped, and imports of consumer goods rose notably by US\$6.0 billion.

Tariff jitters

Analysts say that the deficit was likely bolstered by gold imports.

But “stripping out this

impact, all other imports rose 5.5 percent, indicating front-loading of shipments was in full swing,” said Oxford Economics senior economist Matthew Martin.

This refers to a tendency for businesses to try and get ahead of additional costs from potential tariffs, as well as possible supply chain disruptions down the line.

“The impact of new tariff proposals make the outlook uncertain,” Martin said.

Economists Samuel Tombs and Oliver Allen of Pantheon Macroeconomics said of the surge in gold imports: “Tariff threats are reportedly prompting a mass repatriation of gold holdings to the US from elsewhere, mostly via Switzerland.”

But other analysts like Carl

Weinberg and Mary Chen of High Frequency Economics caution that they are looking for a “snapback in imports” in February and March figures to show if importers are truly seeking to get ahead of Trump's levies.

“It is hard to prove that,” they said in a note.

US deficits with other economies were a key focus of Trump's first administration from 2017 to 2021, and at the time he waged a bruising tariffs war with China in particular.

This time the Trump administration has referred to tariffs as a means to raise government revenue, remedy imbalances and exert pressure on other governments over US priorities.

In January, US goods deficits with China and the European Union both widened.

On the campaign trail last year

ahead of November's election, Trump vowed reciprocal tariffs on nations that taxed US-made products, dubbing this the “Trump Reciprocal Trade Act.”

Since returning to office, the Republican has launched plans for “reciprocal tariffs” tailored to each US trading partner, to tackle trade practices deemed unfair by Washington.

He has promised an announcement on these levies on April 2, while also threatening tariffs on other imports ranging from semiconductors to autos.

Trump hiked tariffs on steel and aluminium imports in his first presidential term too – an action he has revived since returning to office.

A sharp 25 percent levy on the metals is set to take effect this month. – AFP



Russian President Vladimir Putin presents Olga Chebnyova, widow of Sergei Chebnyov, battalion commander of the 9th motor rifle regiment of the 11th army corps, who died repelling Ukraine's incursion into the Kursk region, with the Gold Star medal of “Hero of Russia”, posthumously given to her fallen husband, at the Kremlin in Moscow yesterday. – AFP

Albania to shut down TikTok in coming days

TIRANA – Albanian authorities said yesterday they were moving to shut down TikTok in the coming days, following through on a ban announced in December.

“Competent authorities, in cooperation with internet providers and technology platforms, will take the necessary measures to implement this decision in a few days or up to a week from now,” said Education Minister Ogerta Manastirliu, adding that the ban was set to last for 12 months.

Prime Minister Edi Rama first announced the ban months ago, after a confrontation that started on social media led to the killing of a 14-year-old student and another being injured in a fight near a school in the capital of Tirana.

The killing sparked a debate in the country among parents, psychologists and educational institutions about the impact of social networks on young people.

In a message published on X Thursday, Rama said talks with TikTok were ongoing following consultations with thousands of parents and teachers.

“We have started a very positive dialogue with TikTok, whose representatives will soon be coming to Albania to present us with a series of measures aimed at increasing children's safety”, Rama said.

TikTok's huge global success has been partly built on the appeal of its “challenges” – an interactive call that invites users to create videos featuring dances, jokes or

games that sometimes go viral.

The platform attracts young people with a never-ending scroll of ultra-brief videos, and has more than one billion active users worldwide.

Neighbouring countries such as Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia have also reported the platform having a negative impact, especially on young people.

TikTok has faced accusations of espionage in the United States, and is under investigation by the European Union over claims it was used to sway Romania's presidential election in favour of a far-right candidate.

In several countries, the use of the platform by state institution personnel also has been banned. – AFP

UK discounter Poundland for sale as owner blames tax

LONDON – Polish discounter Pepco Group said yesterday it may sell Poundland, its UK brand operating out of about 850 stores, joining other big retailers to act over a looming tax hike.

“Poundland is a strong brand that serves millions of customers every week... but it is also operating in an increasingly challenging UK retail landscape that is only intensifying,” Pepco said in a statement.

Finance minister Rachel Reeves announced in her inaugural budget that a tax on businesses would increase next month to help shore up public finances.

“From April 2025, the UK government's... tax changes announced in the budget will also add further pressure to Poundland's cost base,” added yesterday's statement from the company whose discounter brands across Europe comprise also Pepco and Dealz.

Poundland employs around 18,000 staff.

The UK economy has struggled to grow since the Labour Party won a general election in July, with businesses stating that the looming tax hike has forced them to cut costs.

Sainsbury's, Britain's second-biggest supermarket chain, announced in January plans to cut more than 3,000 jobs in the face of a “particularly challenging cost environment”.

Number one retailer Tesco followed this up by revealing it would cut 400 jobs as it sought “more efficient ways of working”.

Reeves has said that the Treasury will earn £25 billion (US\$32 billion) from hiking employers' national insurance – a payrolls tax used to help pay for social care.

“UK retailers from April must stomach significant extra employment-related costs and these will inevitably be passed on to the customer,” noted Russ Mould, investment director at AJ Bell.

Pepco Group yesterday added that it would look at spinning off Dealz further down the line.

Pepco Group chief executive Stephan Borchert said the company was “taking clear strategic action to focus on the Pepco brand as our single future format... and create a simpler business focused on higher margin clothing and general merchandise”. – AFP

Norwegian crown princess's lung disease worsens: palace

OSLO – Norwegian Crown Princess Mette-Marit's chronic lung condition has worsened and her public duties may have to be adjusted on short notice in future, the palace said yesterday.

The 51-year-old wife of Crown Prince Haakon announced in October 2018 that she had been diagnosed with a rare form of pulmonary fibrosis, an incurable disease that causes scarring of the lungs and shortness of breath.

The condition has at times affected her royal duties, requiring her to lighten her load or cancel engagements.

“The Crown Princess has daily symptoms and ailments that affect her ability to perform her duties,” the palace said in a health update.

“The Crown Princess needs more rest, and her daily condition changes more quickly than before. This means that changes to her official schedule may occur more frequently, and on shorter notice than previously,” it said.

In September 2023 and October



Crown Princess Mette-Marit of Norway (second from left) smiles as she stands next to hospital clowns Hedda Munthe (left) and Arturo Tover (right) during her visit to Ullevål Hospital in Oslo, Norway, on Wednesday. The hospital clowns work in hospitals all over the country, aiming to make life a little better for the patients. – AFP

2024, she was placed on sick leaves of several weeks, cancelling her public duties.

“When you get to be 50, you understand that life is not eternal,” she told Norwegian daily *DN* in an interview published in August 2023 ahead of her 50th birthday.

Mette-Marit has been in the

Norwegian headlines in recent months after her 28-year-old son – from a relationship prior to her marriage to the crown prince – was accused by several ex-girlfriends of assault, most recently in August 2024 when he admitted being under the influence of alcohol and cocaine. – AFP

Portugal facing possibility of early elections after PM row

Levi Fernandes

LISBON – Portugal’s Prime Minister Luis Montenegro is facing the possibility of returning to the polls in a few weeks, just one year after coming to power.

Montenegro, of the centre-right Social Democratic Party (PSD), took office in March 2024 but has been mired in controversy and pressure from the opposition over a conflict-of-interest row involving a family company.

Earlier this week, Portuguese media reported that a service company run by Montenegro’s wife and children had contracts with several private companies including Solverde, a hotel and casino group which receives concessions from the state.

Solverde said on Wednesday that it had terminated the contract, and Montenegro announced that the family business would now be run and managed by his children.

The Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), accusing Montenegro’s government of political and economic collusion, tabled a censure vote that took place on Wednesday, Montenegro’s second since his party won the largest share of the vote in legislative elections a year ago.

Although he survived the vote, Montenegro announced he would seek a vote of confidence from parliament – where he does not have an absolute majority.

The government adopted the confidence vote motion yesterday, publishing a text following a cabinet meeting stating that it was for the “stability” of the country.

“I feel that I’m fully in office,” Montenegro said on his arrival in Brussels yesterday, where he was due to attend a summit on Ukraine.

He added that there was “a question of internal politics to be resolved” and that “if Parliament has doubts about the legitimacy of the government”, then “we must abide by democracy”.

Both the far-right Chega party and the centre-left Socialist Party (PS), which is the primary opposition, have already



Portuguese Prime Minister Luis Montenegro arrives at the Special European Council to discuss continued support for Ukraine and European defence at the EU headquarters in Brussels yesterday. – AFP

announced that they will vote against the government in an eventual vote of no confidence, which parliament will debate next Wednesday.

‘Unpredictability’

Portuguese conservative President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa said he was working on “all scenarios” including early legislative elections that could be held on “May 11 or 18”, if the government lost the confidence vote.

“We need to move quickly” to “minimise the consequences” of this situation, said Rebelo de Sousa, who has the power to dissolve parliament and call elections.

Before making a decision, he must consult the parties and convene the Council of State, a consultative body comprised of the country’s top political figures.

This situation has led to a “certain unpredictability” which is “not good for economic and political stability”, University of Lisbon political scientist Paula Espírito Santo told AFP.

The president has “in a way anticipated an outcome that might be his own interpretation” of the political crisis, but he still has the option of “asking the government

to choose someone else to replace the current prime minister, without needing to dissolve parliament,” she said.

The daily newspaper *Público* said in its editorial yesterday that Montenegro had been slow to explain himself and that he saw “no political problems with holding a stake in a company” under contract with “a private company the state does business with”.

Alexandra Leitão, the president of the Socialist Party’s parliamentary group, said Montenegro would rather hold elections than “provide further clarification”.

However, the PSD’s parliamentary group president Hugo Soares said the Socialists were “seeking political squabbles and the government’s downfall”, adding that Montenegro would once again be a candidate for prime minister even if the government lost the confidence vote.

Montenegro’s predecessor, António Costa of the Socialist Party, resigned in November 2023 amid an investigation into alleged influence peddling. Costa has been the president of the European Council since last December.

– AFP

Parties in Mozambique sign deal on ending post-election crisis

MAPUTO – Mozambican President Daniel Chapo and the country’s main political parties have signed an agreement outlining the terms for state reforms as part of a political dialogue aimed at resolving a post-election crisis.

The agreement was signed on Wednesday by parliamentary parties, including the ruling Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO), the Optimistic People for the Development of Mozambique (PODEMOS), the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO), and the Mozambique Democratic Movement (MDM), along with five extra-parliamentary political groups in Maputo, the capital.

“This is the right moment to set aside our political differences and prioritize the interests of Mozambique and its people. Our beloved nation and our citizens are and will always be the reason for our existence and governance,” Chapo said during the public event, which was attended by religious leaders, civil society representatives, academics, and members of the diplomatic corps accredited in the country.

He said the signing of the agreement reflects the parties’ confidence in the government’s impartiality and ability to promote political, economic, and social stability.

“This commitment represents a crucial step toward maintaining peace and consolidating democracy in the southern African region, which is why we are honored by the presence of representatives from the governments of Zimbabwe and Tanzanian presidents,” Chapo added.

Albino Forquilha, leader of PODEMOS, the main opposition party, who spoke on behalf of the eight opposition parties that signed the agreement, said the commitment paves the way for new opportunities in Mozambique.

“Building consensus among the signatory parties is key to addressing the issues that have been at the center of the country’s recurring political, economic, and socio-cultural instabilities,” he said.

“The conditions have been set for different political actors, institutions, and Mozambican society to engage in this essential dialogue to build a Mozambique that is united in diversity,” Forquilha added, stressing that political instability must not become the norm.

The extra-parliamentary signatories included Nova Democracia (ND), the National Reconciliation Party (PARENA), the Social Renewal Party (PARESO), the Mozambican Humanitarian Party (PAHUMO), and the Democratic Revolution (RD).

– Xinhua

14 hurt in Mozambique anti-govt protest: NGO

MAPUTO – Mozambican police violently dispersed a march by opposition leader Venâncio Mondlane using live ammunition and injured at least 14 people, local civil society group Plataforma Decida said on Wednesday.

Hundreds of supporters had joined Mondlane’s caravan in the capital Maputo, part of his tour of the country to present his new political party.

“We can confirm that at this moment 14 people are injured, including two children,” Plataforma Decida coordinator Wilker Dias told AFP.

“The police were using live ammunition and tear gas to break up the Mondlane march,” he said.

In a video live streamed on social media, gunshot sounds could be heard as the march approached a camouflage-coloured armoured vehicle.

The crowd then dispersed in panic and the cameraman broadcasting the live stream dropped down, his face bloody.

“As soon as they arrived at the junction where it all happened, the police, armed to the teeth, started shooting, it was an ambush scenario. It was just a march,” 27-year-old protester Silvestre Alexandre told AFP.

“I saw some people bleeding from their wounds. My friend was wounded in the leg. I also saw a

child who was shot and lost his life in hospital,” he said, visibly in shock.

Mondlane came second in the October presidential election with 24 percent of the vote, but claims he was cheated of victory.

He instigated months of demonstrations following the vote where various international observer missions noted many irregularities.

More than 320 people were killed in the violence that lasted until early January, according to Plataforma Decida.

Mondlane recently split with the opposition Podemos party, which had supported his presidential candidacy but on Wednesday signed an agreement with President Daniel Chapo to end the electoral turmoil.

Mondlane, who is popular with the youth, has been touring the country to promote his new party, the National Alliance for an Autonomous and Free Mozambique – nicknamed Anamalala, which means ‘it’s over’, one of the slogans of the protests.

Chapo, of the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) party that has ruled the country since independence from Portugal in 1975, announced on Tuesday the plan to sign a post-election deal.

“The political situation in Mozambique is good,” he said during a visit to neighbouring South Africa.

– AFP

Ethiopian Airlines launches passenger flights to Porto

ADDIS ABABA – Ethiopian Airlines, Africa’s leading carrier, has announced the launch of a new passenger flight service to northern Portugal’s city of Porto.

The airline said last week in a statement that the new service, operating four times a week with a stopover in the Spanish capital Madrid will begin on July 2.

Ethiopian Airlines said the new route aims to expand travel options and enhance seamless

connectivity for passengers, reinforcing the airline’s regional growth across Europe.

Mesfin Tasew, group chief executive officer of Ethiopian Airlines, emphasized the airline’s commitment to broadening its network and improving connectivity. “We are thrilled to expand our network to Porto, Portugal, a vibrant city with rich cultural heritage and economic significance,” Tasew said last Friday.

With this new passenger service, Ethiopian Airlines strengthens its position in the region while fostering closer ties between the two countries and beyond, the statement said.

Currently, Ethiopian Airlines operates about 140 weekly passenger flights to 22 destinations across Europe and serves eight cargo destinations in the region.

– Xinhua



Brazil's forward Neymar controls the ball during the 2026 FIFA World Cup South American qualification against Venezuela at the Arena Pantanal stadium in Cuiaba, Mato Grosso State, Brazil, on October 12, 2023. After nearly a year and a half out through injury, star forward Neymar will return to the Brazil squad for March's South American 2026 World Cup qualifiers against Colombia and Argentina, his coach Dorival Junior said yesterday. — AFP

Football shorts ●●●●

4 British associations plan joint bid for 2035 Women's World Cup

LONDON—The four football associations of the United Kingdom are planning a joint bid to host the FIFA Women's World Cup in 2035.

The Football Association of England on Wednesday said it would submit an expression of interest to FIFA together with the football associations of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to jointly host the tournament.

The UK bid comes after the FIFA Council on Wednesday recommended that the 2035 Women's World Cup be hosted in Europe or Africa.

UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer confirmed that the intention to bid had his government's full support.

"Football is and always will be at the core of our country's identity. Whether we watch on TV, play at the weekends like I do, or simply enjoy soaking up the atmosphere in the pub, it brings communities together like little else," read a statement from Starmer.

England held the Women's European Championship in 2022 and the UK will jointly host the men's Euros in 2028 with Ireland.

Bids for the 2031 and 2035 Women's World Cup will be submitted during the fourth quarter of 2025, with a decision on both tournaments anticipated to take place during the second quarter of 2026.

— Xinhua

Bayern's Neuer sidelined after costly celebration

BERLIN — Bayern Munich captain Manuel Neuer is set for a stint on the sidelines after tearing his calf muscle during a celebration in Wednesday's 3-0 Champions League win over Bayer Leverkusen.

Neuer was seen limping and was subbed out in the second half of the last 16 first leg tie just after Jamal Musiala put Bayern 2-0 up.

Neuer's substitution brought debutant Jonas Urbig from the bench.

Bayern issued a statement yesterday confirming the 38-year-old's injury, saying Neuer "would be out for the time being".

"It happened while celebrating," Bayern coach Vincent Kompany said after the match, adding "that's a shame for us".

The veteran goalkeeper, who recently extended his deal at Bayern until 2025, missed almost a full year with a broken leg from a skiing accident from December 2022 until October 2023.

Urbig, 21, arrived from Cologne in the winter. Despite making his debut on the big stage on Wednesday, Urbig was largely untested as Bayern dominated the first leg against the defending German champions.

Bayern, who sit eight points clear in the league with 10 games remaining, travel to Leverkusen for the return Champions League leg next week in a dominant position. — AFP

Juventus lurch between crisis club and Serie A challengers ahead of Atalanta visit

Football

Terry Daley

MILAN — Juventus have spent much of this season in crisis but the apparently ailing "Old Lady" of Italian football has a great chance of entering the Serie A title race against Atalanta on Sunday night.

Five league wins on the bounce have pushed Juve to within six points of league leaders Inter Milan, with Thiago Motta's fourth-placed team creeping towards the summit just as fans launched protests against the players and coach.

Monday night's 2-0 win over Verona was preceded by furious fans barracking the team in their pre-match hotel, where they were staying as punishment for being dumped out of the Italian Cup by lowly Empoli.

The manner of that defeat, to a team sat in Serie A's relegation zone and with a raft of first-choice players out injured, sparked fury among supporters who had already watched their team get knocked out of the Champions League in the play-

offs by collapsing at PSV Eindhoven.

Fans also hung banners by the entrance to the Allianz Stadium in Turin questioning the players' commitment, saying that they "should play in yellow" rather than black and white.

They were booed off at half-time on Monday, with Juve level only because Tomas Suslov's rocket of a shot was disallowed due to Davide Faraoni straying offside in the build-up to what would have been a wonderful opening goal.

But in the league, Juve have gone from draw specialists to winning machine even though Motta hasn't yet established a convincing style of play on his new team.

Atalanta will be an acid test for Juve as they are the division's best team away from home with no defeats on the road since being hammered by Inter way back in August.

Gian Piero Gasperini's team are still in the Scudetto fight themselves thanks to that away form as they struggle for wins on home turf, and sit three points above Juve in third.

Juve will likely not close the gap on Inter this week as the champions host rock-bottom Monza tomorrow, but an injury crisis and a Champions League tie with Feyenoord could complicate their title defence, especially with a trip to face Atalanta coming up for Simone Inzaghi's team a week on Sunday.

Inter have four of five wing-backs out injured while Hakan Calhanoglu is not at his best after returning from a calf knock.

Former leaders Napoli will be hunting their first win since the end of January when they host Fiorentina on Sunday, boosted by an excellent display in their 1-1 draw with Inter last weekend.

Four draws and one defeat from five matches have left Napoli a point behind Inter in second place but Antonio Conte's side have a softer run-in than Inter and no European commitments clogging up their schedule.

Conte is still awaiting the return of Khvicha Kvaratskhelia's replacement David Neres and has Andre-Frank Anguissa out with a calf injury until after the international break later this month. — AFP

Japan says 'very disappointing' as 2031 World Cup hopes torpedoed

Football

TOKYO — Japan's football chief said yesterday it was "very disappointing" after FIFA torpedoed his country's hopes of hosting the 2031 Women's World Cup.

Football's world governing body said Wednesday that bids for the 2031 tournament would be limited to countries from North America and Africa, with the 2035 event going to either Europe or Africa.

Japan Football Association president Tsuneyasu Miyamoto told AFP in an interview last year that Japan wanted to

host the 2031 event to "raise the value of women's football here".

Japan, who won the Women's World Cup in 2011, must now wait until 2039 at the earliest before they can host the tournament for the first time.

"For us, who were aiming to host the 2031 Women's World Cup, this is very disappointing news," Miyamoto said in a statement.

"But this decision doesn't change our aim to widen the spread of women's football, increase the playing population and raise the level of the women's game in Japan."

Miyamoto, who captained his country at the 2002 and 2006 World Cups, had told AFP that Japan wanted to use the 2031 tournament to close the gap on Europe and North America.

Japan's women have not gone beyond the World Cup quarter-finals since they lost to the US in the 2015 final.

Miyamoto said Japan would consider a bid for the 2039 tournament and beyond.

"To everyone associated with the game in this country, let's move forward together," he said.

The 2027 Women's World Cup will be held in Brazil. — AFP

2026 World Cup final to have Super Bowl-style show: Infantino

PARIS — The 2026 FIFA World Cup final in New Jersey will make history by having a Super Bowl-style half-time show, world football chief Gianni Infantino said Wednesday.

Coldplay band members Chris Martin and Phil Harvey will determine the artists who will perform, FIFA president Infantino said.

"I can confirm the first-ever half-time show at a FIFA World Cup final in New York/New Jersey," Infantino wrote on Instagram.

"This will be a historic moment for the FIFA World Cup and a show befitting the biggest sporting event in the world."

Infantino revealed the decision following a meeting of FIFA's commercial and media partners in Dallas ahead of the 2026 tournament, which will be co-hosted in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

No further information about specific details or duration of the half-time show were revealed by Infantino.

The move mirrors the show held during the final of last year's Copa America in Miami, when Colombian star Shakira performed at half-time at the Hard Rock Stadium.

Infantino added that FIFA also planned to "take over" New York's Times Square on the final weekend of the tournament. — AFP

Rangers fan killed in Istanbul road accident

ISTANBUL — A Rangers fan who travelled to Istanbul to watch the Glasgow giants face Fenerbahce was killed in a traffic accident hours before the match, both teams said yesterday, offering condolences.

The fan, who was not named, had travelled to Turkey's largest city to watch Rangers face Jose Mourinho's Fenerbahce in the Europa League last-16 clash yesterday evening.

Turkey's SabahTV published traffic camera footage showing a person running over a pedestrian crossing on a wide boulevard before being hit by a car.

The incident reportedly took place in the Besiktas district before dawn on Thursday, with the driver and a second driver taken to court, it said.

The British embassy had offered consular assistance to the family of a British national, a spokesman said, but gave no further details about the incident.

"We are devastated to have learned of the passing of one of our supporters in a road traffic accident overnight in Istanbul," Rangers FC wrote on X, saying their thoughts were with his family and friends "at this incredibly difficult time".

Fenerbahce also said they had "learned with deep sorrow that a Rangers FC fan who came to Istanbul to support his team in the first match of the UEFA Europa League last 16 round" had "died as a result of a traffic accident".

"We would like to express our condolences to the family of the fan, the Rangers club and the community," the club wrote on X. — AFP

NZ set for 'scrap' with India on slower pitch: Santner

Faisal Kamal

DUBAI – New Zealand skipper Mitchell Santner yesterday said a slower pitch in familiar territory for India in Dubai will make for a tight contest in the Champions Trophy final.

The two teams clash on Sunday to decide the winner of the eight-nation tournament held in Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates.

Rohit Sharma's India are playing all their games at the Dubai International Stadium after they refused to tour hosts Pakistan because of political tensions.

They beat Australia in the first semi-final.

New Zealand defeated South Africa in the second semi-final in Lahore on Wednesday and now move back to Dubai where they lost the last group match to India by 44 runs.

"I guess finals cricket is different, but for us what we have been doing to get us to this point has been good," Santner said on his arrival in Dubai.

"But obviously we have come

against a good side, who have played all their games in Dubai and know that surface and we will be better for the run we had the other day against them," he said.

"Obviously the surface will dictate a little bit of how we want to operate. Will be slower than what we got in Lahore, might be more of a scrap."

The tournament's tangled schedule, with teams flying in and out of the UAE from Pakistan while India have stayed put, has been hugely controversial.

The pitches have been vastly different in the two countries.

Pakistan tracks produced big totals - the Black Caps posted a Champions Trophy record 362-6 before restricting South Africa to 312-9 in the semi-final in Lahore, in contrast to the slow and turning decks of the Dubai stadium.

But Santner said the team has taken the travel in their stride.

"It's all part of the challenge," said Santner. "We have been to every place here obviously into Pakistan and Dubai. But I think the

guys understand that it's part of it these days."

New Zealand won a tri-series tournament in Pakistan with South Africa as the third team and had many of their players in top form getting into the 50-over tournament.

Left-hander Rachin Ravindra hit his second century of this tournament in the semi-final clash and put on 164 runs with in-form Kane Williamson, who hit 102.

"Obviously that tri-series before - the tournament was handy in guys getting in form, especially into one of these tournaments which are quite short, three games and you're into the semis," said Santner.

"We have had a bit of a roll on and hopefully it continues."

The captain added: "We are here now and boys are pretty excited for the challenge ahead. One day off at training but the boys be fizzing and ready for the main event."

The match will start at 5 p.m. Sunday Macau time. –AFP/MPD



Naomi Osaka of Japan plays a backhand against Camila Osorio of Columbia in their match during the BNP Paribas Open at Indian Wells Tennis Garden on Wednesday in Indian Wells, California. Osaka's roller-coaster season continued with a first-round loss at Indian Wells on Wednesday that left the four-time Grand Slam winner apologising on social media.

"Worst match I've ever played in my life," the former world number one from Japan said in a post on Threads shortly after falling 6-4, 6-4 to Columbia's Camila Osorio. "Wow, I'm so sorry to everyone who watched that." –AFP

Cricketers' union warns over widening Hundred gender pay gap

Cricket

LONDON – Players' union chiefs say the growing gender pay gap in English cricket's newly cash-rich Hundred competition "cannot be allowed to continue".

While the overall pay pot for the eight-strong franchise competition, which features both men's and women's teams, has grown by 25 percent, the gulf between the earning potential of leading men and women is also increasing.

The top salary band in the men's squads is now £200,000 (US\$258,000) compared with £65,000 in the women's game, taking the differential at the highest level from £75,000 in 2024 to £135,000.

The Professional Cricketers' Association (PCA) said the current situation was indefensible at a time when the Hundred has been valued at nearly £1 billion following a huge cash injection from private investors.

The Women's Cricket Impact Report, published ahead of International Women's Day tomorrow, said: "The association is concerned that the disparity between the men's and women's top salaries has increased - this cannot be allowed to continue.

"Considering the tournament is marketed equally amongst the men's and women's squads with the two teams, one club mantra, which is to be applauded, it is

more than disappointing to see the gender pay gap increase."

The PCA said stakeholders should be working hard to close the gap "especially considering the increased interest, viewership and ticket sales for women's Hundred matches".

England women's captain Heather Knight, while noting the progress made, reinforced the point in a foreword to the report.

"It's imperative that progress continues as there's still a lot of catching up required, as we've seen recently with the disparity in the Hundred salaries, as we look to secure an equitable game in England and Wales," she said.

–AFP

Graham returns for Scotland's Six Nations match against Wales



LONDON – Scotland have recalled Darcy Graham in the only change to their starting side for tomorrow's Six Nations clash at home to Wales.

The Edinburgh wing was concussed following a sickening clash of heads with his own co-captain Finn Russell during a 32-18 defeat by champions Ireland at Murrayfield on February 9 and missed the 16-15 loss away to England a fortnight ago.

Graham replaces Glasgow Warriors' Kyle Rowe, who drops to the bench.

The 27-year-old Graham, Scotland's second-highest try-scorer of all time, passed his

head injury assessment before the England match on February 22.

But Scotland's coaches and medical staff decided upon a precautionary approach to ensure he was fully recovered given the severity of his clash with Russell.

Townsend, meanwhile, has reverted to a 5-3 split between forwards and backs on his bench after opting for a 6-2 formation against England, with scrum-half George Horne joining Rowe among the replacements.

Scotland are aiming to make it three wins in a row over Wales - now on a national record losing streak of 15 straight Test defeats - for the first time in the Six Nations era.

But another loss this

championship would raise fresh questions over whether Townsend, whose contract expires in April next year, remains the right man to lead Scotland into the 2027 Rugby World Cup in Australia.

The former Scotland playmaker is the longest-serving head coach of the Dark Blues in the professional era, having been appointed in 2017.

Townsend, however, has been unable to improve on Scotland's record of never finishing higher than third in the Six Nations.

Scotland last won a championship back in the last edition of the old Five Nations in 1999.

The game will be played at 12:45 a.m. Sunday morning Macau time. –AFP/MPD

PGA-LIV deal 'doesn't feel' closer: McIlroy

Golf

MIAMI – Rory McIlroy said yesterday that a deal to reunify golf does not feel any closer despite a flurry of recent meetings between the rival PGA Tour and Saudi-backed LIV Golf.

Hopes of a breakthrough in negotiations between the two circuits had risen after President Donald Trump hosted PGA and LIV golf leaders at a White House meeting last month.

However, despite optimism following that meeting and an earlier White House summit, McIlroy said Tuesday that a deal did not feel imminent.

"I don't think it's ever felt that close, but it doesn't feel like it's any closer," McIlroy told a press conference on Wednesday ahead of this week's Arnold Palmer Invitational at Bay Hill in Florida.

McIlroy had been one of the staunchest critics of LIV Golf after it was launched in 2022, luring a slew of star names from the PGA Tour with lavish signing fees and tournament purses.

The Northern Irishman's attitude has softened since the PGA unveiled a framework agreement with LIV's Saudi financiers in 2023, with McIlroy saying recently that PGA Tour players need to "get over it" for the good of golf.

However, on Tuesday, McIlroy suggested the progress towards reunification had reached an impasse in recent weeks.

"Look, I think it takes two to tango," McIlroy said. "So, if one party is willing and ready and the

other isn't, it sort of makes it tough."

McIlroy was also adamant that the PGA Tour could continue to operate successfully even without a deal that would bring the sport's top players together outside of majors.

"I think the narrative around golf, I wouldn't say needs a deal, I think the narrative around golf would welcome a deal in terms of just having all the best players together again," McIlroy said.

"But I don't think the PGA TOUR needs a deal. I think the momentum is pretty strong...the landscape might have looked a little different then than it does now over these past couple of weeks, and I think a deal would still be the ideal scenario for golf as a whole.

"But from a pure PGA Tour perspective, I don't think it necessarily needs it."

PGA Tour commissioner Jay Monahan meanwhile has said there were no further meetings planned between the leaders of the rival circuits following last month's White House sit-down.

However, Monahan remains optimistic that a deal will eventually be brokered, describing the meeting at the White House as a "huge step."

"I think anything that I've said ... is consistent with what should be said when you're in the middle of a complex discussion to try and reunify the game of golf," Monahan said.

"It doesn't speak to my confidence level, it speaks to the moment. I view that meeting as a huge step and so I look at that very positively." –AFP

Amazon Prime Video tests AI-assisted dubbing

SAN FRANCISCO – Amazon’s Prime Video streaming service announced on Wednesday it will begin testing AI-assisted dubbing to make its international content more accessible to viewers worldwide.

The pilot programme will initially feature 12 licensed movies and series that previously lacked dubbing support, including titles such as “El Cid: La Leyenda,” “Mi Mamá Lora,” and “Long Lost.”

The service will launch with English and Latin American Spanish dubbing options.

“At Prime Video, we believe in improving customers’ experience with practical and useful AI innovation,” said Raf Soltanovich, VP of technology at Prime Video

and Amazon MGM Studios.

“AI-aided dubbing is only available on titles that do not have dubbing support, and we are eager to explore a new way to make series and movies more accessible and enjoyable.”

The developments came as union leaders in the creative industries bill AI as an existential crisis for artists, who worry that their livelihoods will be wiped out by the technology.

The role of AI was a major factor in the 2023 Hollywood strikes by actors and writers who feared that studios would use generative AI to perform tasks typically done by paid creatives.

With over 200 million customers worldwide, Prime Video reports



The logo used for Amazon Prime Video since 2024. – Image courtesy of Amazon.com, Inc.

growing interest from viewers seeking to enjoy content regardless of its country of origin.

Unlike some competitors, Prime Video said its approach combines artificial intelligence with human expertise, as localisation professionals collaborate with AI technology to ensure quality control.

In December, YouTube

expanded its AI-powered auto-dubbing capability to “hundreds of thousands of channels” in its Partner Program that focus on knowledge and informational content.

YouTube’s system automatically generates dubs in eight languages for English content, including French, German, Hindi, Italian, Spanish, Indonesian, Japanese, and Portuguese.

Non-English videos in these languages currently receive only English dubs. YouTube at the time acknowledged that “this technology is still pretty new, and it won’t always be perfect.”

In another recent announcement, Lumiere Ventures and AI startup ElevenLabs unveiled a collaboration to recreate the voice of Alain Dorval, the late French voice actor who dubbed Sylvester Stallone for nearly five decades, for an upcoming film.

This project, developed with the support of Dorval’s family, aims to preserve the familiar voice French audiences associate with Stallone’s characters following Dorval’s passing in February. – AFP

East Asian pianists top applications at Poland’s Chopin contest

WARSAW – Over two-thirds of pianists accepted to play in the preliminary round of Poland’s prestigious Chopin competition hail from East Asia, the Warsaw-based event organisers said this week announcing this year’s edition.

The contest, which began in 1927, is held every five years and draws pianists from across the globe. Winning it opens the door to playing at venues around the world.

This year’s edition in October saw a “record number” of 642 pianists applying to compete, compared to 500 when it was last held.

The jury has selected 171 pianists who will compete in the preliminary round in April, with the majority representing East Asian countries.

“The most numerous groups are representatives of: China (more than

60 qualified participants), South Korea, Japan, Poland, Canada and Italy,” the Chopin Institute said in a statement.

Sixty-seven of the successful applicants come from China, 24 from Japan and 23 from South Korea – together making up two thirds of all pianists in the preliminaries.

“We will also hear representatives from countries as distant as Brazil, Thailand, Malaysia, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan,” the organisers said.

The full list of applicants who advanced to the preliminary round includes four people competing as “individual neutral pianists”.

In October, the Polish organisers said Russian pianists would only be allowed to enter the competition under a neutral flag and if they do not support Moscow’s military

operation in Ukraine.

“During the registration process, participants had to declare that they do not support aggression against Ukraine,” Artur Szklener, the Chopin Institute’s director told AFP.

According to Szklener, “two such declarations” were made by Russian pianists allowed into the preliminaries.

The forthcoming edition will be the first since Russia launched its full-scale war in Ukraine.

Host country Poland staunchly supports Kyiv’s efforts to fend off Russia’s military offensive.

The last event in 2021 – postponed for a year because of the novel coronavirus pandemic – ended with Canadian pianist Bruce Liu Xiaoyu clinch the top prize.

– AFP, MPD



US country music singer-songwriters Ella Langley (left) and Jamey Johnson pose during the opening of “American Currents: State of the Music”, at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum on Tuesday in Nashville, Tennessee. – AFP

Charli XCX, Raye, Olivia Rodrigo to headline Glastonbury alongside legends

LONDON – The UK’s iconic Glastonbury Festival unveiled its line-up yesterday, with new artists Charli XCX and Olivia Rodrigo set to perform alongside veteran stars Neil Young and Rod Stewart.

Other big names on the bill include Raye, The Prodigy, Alanis Morissette and Snow Patrol, organisers said.

Stewart is due to perform the Sunday legend slot while Rodrigo will close out the festival which runs from June 25 to 29.

Neil Young will headline for the second time despite pulling out in January saying the festival had become “a corporate turn-off, and not for me like it used to be”.

Young quickly had a change of heart and said he would be playing after all, blaming his decision on “an error in the information I received.”

Charli XCX, who picked up three Grammys last month, also scooped five gongs at The Brit Awards, the annual celebration of UK music on Saturday.

“Brat”, the 32-year-old artist’s sixth album, a celebration of a relaxed, partying lifestyle, transformed her into one of music’s top stars in 2024.

Tickets for this year’s Glastonbury Festival at Worthy Farm in southwest England 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



Fans hold Oscar statuettes and a banner reading “Latvia Can” in Latvia during a rally to welcome the crew of the Oscars winning movie “Flow” on Wednesday at the Monument of Freedom in the Latvian capital Riga. “Flow”, a dialogue-free tale of animals surviving disaster, won on Sunday the Oscar for best animated feature, capping a remarkable awards season for the Latvian film made on a minuscule budget. The moving film follows a solitary black cat who, confronted with a sudden flood, reluctantly embarks on a journey in the company of an unlikely menagerie including a buoyant golden retriever and an unruffled capybara. – AFP

World Weather

CHINA	ASIA-PACIFIC	WORLD	LUSOPHONE
Beijing -1°C~11°C	Manila 25°C~33°C	New York 4°C~9°C	Lisbon 10°C~15°C
Shanghai 2°C~12°C	Bangkok 23°C~31°C	London 7°C~15°C	Rio de Janeiro 21°C~28°C
Hong Kong 14°C~16°C	Tokyo 1°C~11°C	Frankfurt 1°C~17°C	Luanda 24°C~29°C
Taipei 15°C~18°C	Singapore 24°C~32°C	Vancouver 7°C~10°C	Maputo 22°C~31°C
Guangzhou 9°C~14°C	Kuala Lumpur 24°C~34°C	Paris 7°C~17°C	Dili 24°C~32°C
Nanjing 0°C~12°C	Jakarta 24°C~34°C	Moscow -2°C~8°C	São Tomé 27°C~30°C
Guilin 7°C~14°C	Seoul 1°C~10°C	Las Vegas 7°C~16°C	Praia 16°C~25°C
Xi’an 2°C~15°C	Sydney 20°C~25°C	Monte Carlo 8°C~16°C	Bissau 21°C~37°C



Unique Islamic architecture

This photo taken on Monday shows the spiralling minaret of Abu Dulaf Mosque on the outskirts of Samarra, in Salahuddin province, Iraq. Samarra Archaeological City, located about 130 km north of Iraqi capital Baghdad, contains the remains of an iconic Islamic city that during most of the 9th century served as the capital of the Abbasid Empire, and has been on UNESCO's list of World Heritage in Danger since 2007. – Xinhua



Good luck kiss

An Afghan Hound waits with its owner before being judged on the first day of the Crufts dog show at the National Exhibition Centre in Birmingham, central England, yesterday. – AFP



Nooo...don't wanna go...

Polar bear twins, born on November 27, 2024, are presented to the press in Nyiregyhaza zoo, Hungary yesterday during their first veterinary examination and an international press presentation. – AFP



Host of golden daffodils

Newly bloomed daffodils are pictured in the early spring sunshine in St James's Park in London yesterday. – AFP



Art – but not as we know it!

A person looks at AI artwork created by Grimes, Mac Boucher, Mary Jacobo and Eurypheus called 'Marie Antoinette After the Singularity #2' at a press preview for 'Augmented Intelligence' at Christie's on February 20 in New York City. Christie's first auction of art made by artificial intelligence (AI) ended on Wednesday, with mixed results, providing scant clues as to the future of the new and controversial medium. Fourteen of the 34 lots put on the block during the 14-day online auction either received no qualifying bids or were sold for less than the minimum Christie's had estimated. – AFP



Up, up and away!

A kitesurfer is seen off the Bahar ic-Caghaq coast in Naxxar, Malta, yesterday. – Xinhua