



UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Following a complaint from a passenger, the police caught a taxi driver who was driving his taxi under the influence of drugs

■ P7 CRIME



JUDGE SONG TO CHAIR CE ELECTION COMMITTEE

It will be the second time that the election committee that scrutinizes the election of the CE will be headed by judge Song Man Lei

■ P7



US NAVAL PATROL PROMPTS CHINESE PROTEST

■ P10 TRADE WAR



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WORLD BRIEFS

CHINA Concerns about potentially HIV-tainted blood products produced by a state-backed company, followed by conflicting information from regulators, is undermining confidence in mainland's drug industry as it seeks to join the global biotech race.
 More on p10



MALAYSIA A defense lawyer said former Malaysian leader Najib Razak's graft trial, scheduled for today, has been postponed by a court ruling. Najib has pleaded not guilty to 42 charges.
 More on p12

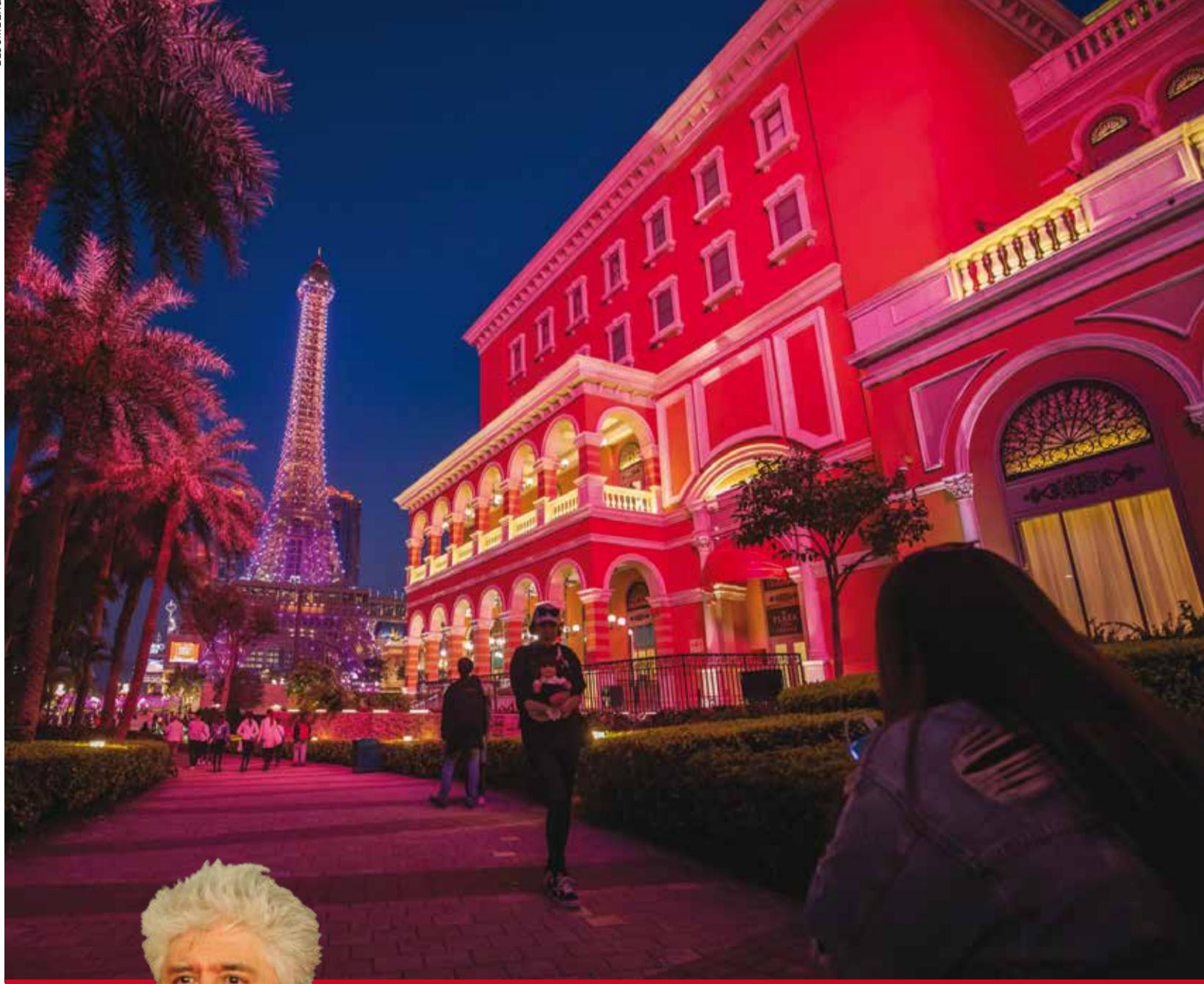


USA Denver teachers went today after failing to reach a deal with administrators on pay. The school district said schools will remain open during the strike and will be staffed by administrators and substitute teachers. However, the district has canceled classes for 5,000 preschool children because it doesn't have the staff to take care of them.

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Casino stocks higher on strong CNY tourism

■ P3 GAMING



Cinemateque to show Almodóvar retrospective

■ P2 FILM



Cinematheque to kick off Almodóvar showcase

Lynzy Valles

CINEMATHEQUE Passion is showcasing a series of films by Spanish Pedro Almodóvar as part of its first "Director-in-Focus" series this year.

To be held from February 16 to March 3, the program will showcase 13 of the director's works, including Oscar winners All About My Mother (1999), Talk to Her (2002) and Volver (2006). The six female cast ensemble shared the Best Actress award at the Cannes Film Festival.

Almodóvar is highly regarded as one of the most important directors in contemporary Spain and Europe. His films are marked by the use of strong colors, radical mood swings and sidesplitting humor.

Speaking to the Times, Rita Wong, CEO of Cinematheque Passion said that the festival aims to bring a younger audience to the venue.

"Every year, we try to introduce and bring in [films] for "Director-in-Focus". I think Cinematheque is trying to project more vibrant images and more energetic films because there are so many classic directors [but] we want to

show more in the Cinematheque language, which is bold, young and vibrant," Wong explained.

"From the very beginning of his first film to the latest, it's all colorful and in terms of the language, stories and people, it's all very different. [...] We also wanted to have colorful visuals and characters to [celebrate] the New Year," she added.

The program features the films Julieta, Dark Habits, Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown, Law of Desire, High Heels, Live Flesh, Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!, What Have I Done to Deserve This?, Broken Embraces, Talk to Her, All About My Mother, Bad Education and Volver.

To kick off the festival, Cinematheque Passion invited local artists to perform Spanish songs, in line with the theme of its festival.

A talk titled 'Make Room for Pedro Almodóvar: The Unorthodox Genius of Spanish Cinema' will be given by Hong Kong film critic Ka Ming.

To be held at the screening room of Cinematheque Passion on February 17, the talk explores Almodóvar's work and his story-

telling with the audience.

Detaileding the plans of the cinema for this year, Wong said that it will hold some eight film festivals this year, with the next one to be held in late March to April – also kicking off its anniversary.

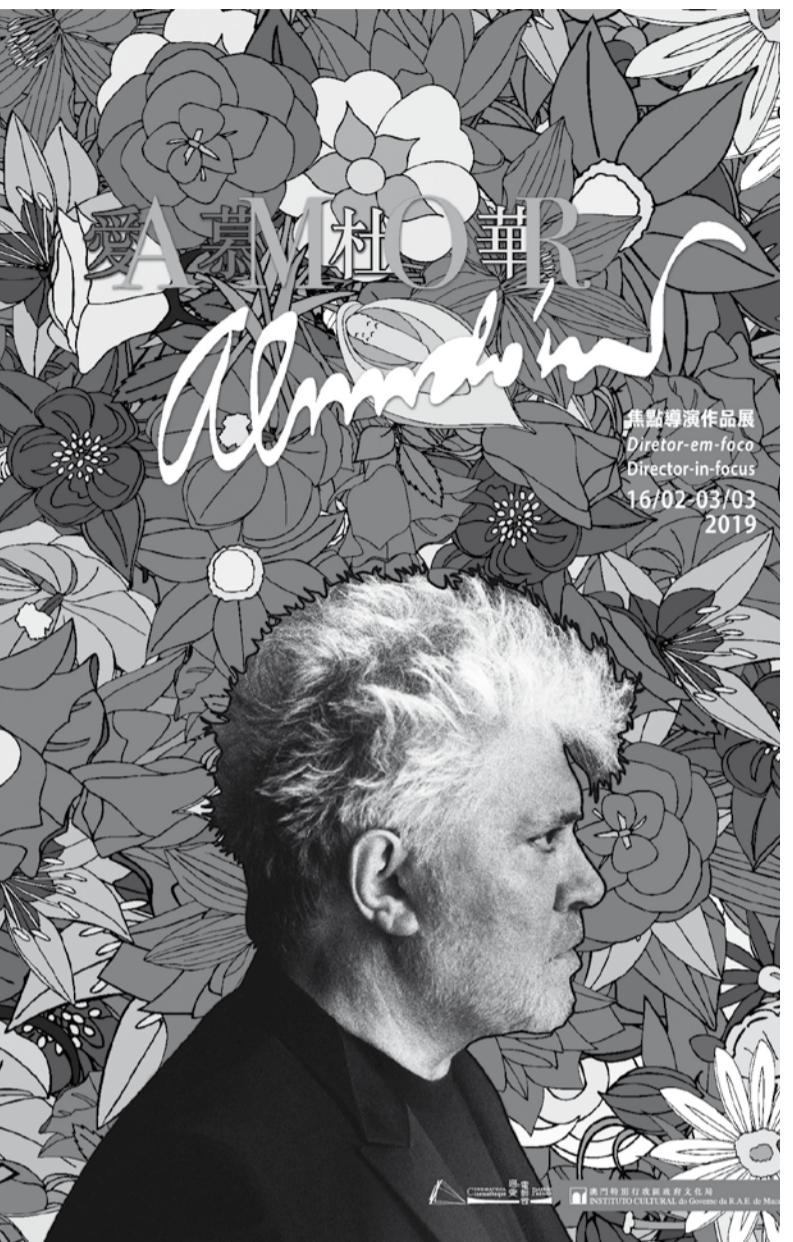
"In May, we will have a Macau-themed [festival], showcasing local movies [along] with a film shooting competition as well," said Wong.

During the summer, it will also hold its key festival – a festival on local documentaries, which is on its fourth edition.

"I think last year we had 40 documentaries in this session. The local government funds young filmmakers in making documentaries so we want to showcase more of these and their possibilities so they can learn and know what is going on in the documentary-making world," she added.

Meanwhile, Wong also added that they are working towards boosting the local film scene by regularly presenting films, particularly local films.

This month, Cinematheque Passion will present three sold out sessions of locally-produced and directed film "Sisterhood" by director Tracy Choi.



Cinematheque is trying to project more vibrant images and more energetic films.

RITA WONG



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GAMING

Casino stocks gain on strong holiday tourism

MACAU casino shares jumped after China's Lunar New Year holiday saw tourism growth double to the world's biggest gaming hub.

China mainland visitors to Macau climbed 26 percent from last year's festive holiday, according to Macau's tourism office. That accelerated from last year's 12 percent growth

and triggered a rally for the Hong Kong-listed casino operators.

Galaxy Entertainment Group Ltd. advanced 1.5 percent yesterday, leading the jump in the sector. Sands China Ltd., SJM Holdings Ltd. and MGM China Holdings also closed higher. Hang Seng Index advanced 0.7 percent.

The tourism numbers over

the lunar holiday are a bright spot amid concerns that high rollers are staying away from the gaming tables in the territory as China's economic slowdown and trade tensions pressure consumer spending. Monthly casino revenue in Macau fell in January for the first time in more than two years.

Tourism from China has seen a boost since October after the

opening of a bridge linking Zhuhai on the mainland to Macau and Hong Kong.

To be sure, actual casino revenue data may not look as rosy as the visitation numbers.

"The Chinese New Year holiday season was decent this year, but definitely not as strong as the visitation number shows," Grant Govertsen, a Union Gaming Securities Asia Ltd. analyst yesterday.

Based on spot checks on the ground, Govertsen said many mainland visitors to Macau are day trippers who travel to check out the new bridge and leave soon after without stopping at the territory's casinos or spending money in the city.

A Morgan Stanley survey in

GRANT GOVERTSEN
ANALYST

While the number of tourists and casual gamblers have increased, high rollers who can skew casino revenue were in short supply at the tables. Sun-city, the largest junket operator that extends credit to high-stakes gamblers, saw betting volume drop 3 percent during the first five days of the Year of Pig, according to Andrew Lo, executive director of Sun-city Group Holdings Ltd., the publicly traded unit of the group.

Lo said he isn't giving up yet, as big bettors often avoid the busiest festive days and may still show up in the next few days. **MDT/Bloomberg**

Macau residents and workers join CNY travel rush

MACAU witnessed a robust flow of cross-border movement during the Spring Festival, which lasted from February 4 to 10. The region welcomed over 1.21 million visitor arrivals during the holiday, up 26.6 percent over the corresponding period last year, the Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO) revealed yesterday.

The figures released by the MGTO show that the highest number of arrivals occurred on Thursday February 7, with 226,874 arrivals recorded.

According to a report issued by the Xinhua news agency yesterday, the Chinese New Year holiday "is changing the festive life of local people and Southeast Asian employees, as well as the traffic flow in the region."

Chan Laimen, a Macau resident in her early 30s,



opted to travel back with her family to her ancestral home for a reunion in Zhangzhou, in southeast China's Fujian province.

"This year I [will] take the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge to start my

trip to Zhangzhou. I will join my cousin in Hong Kong SAR and go back to Shenzhen by high-speed train, like other Chinese people will do during the Spring Festival travel rush."

She said some of her friends had traveled to Thailand or Japan to spend the week-long holiday, instead of going back to their hometowns. Chan's housekeeper, Nguyen Hao, a 51-year-old

Vietnamese resident, also enjoyed the festive holiday. She was making plans to go back to Hanoi and take a week off while Chan's family is in Fujian.

"I will go back to Hanoi from Macau by air in [a] one-hour trip. It is even faster than my relatives coming from other cities of Vietnam," Nguyen told Xinhua.

The MSAR had over 60,000 migrant employees from Southeast Asian countries working in home, hotel and restaurant services at the end of 2018, according to the SAR's migrant control department. Among them, about 15,000 are from Vietnam.

Most of them will go back home during the Spring Festival. Some of the other foreign migrant workers from the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and Cambodia will also

travel back to their hometowns, helping to apply remarkable traffic pressures on airlines operating from Macau International Airport (MIA). MIA saw passenger traffic volume and aircraft movements increase by 20 percent and 15 percent respectively in January 2019, compared to the same period last year.

In the first three days of the first month of the Chinese lunar calendar, over 80,000 inbound and outbound trips were made through the airport. Vicki Mou, MIA public relations official, said that the surging traffic flow in and out of Macau can be attributed to the region's attractive tourism industry, local residents' outbound travel and the homecoming trips of foreign migrant workers, which all add up during this Spring Festival. **MDT/Xinhua**

mid-January showed lower hotel booking rates overall for Chinese New Year, especially at luxury resorts. The firm's analysts expected lower gambling spending per visitor during the holiday season, even as the number of day trippers to Macau was forecast to grow.

The Chinese New Year holiday season was decent this year, but definitely not as strong as the visitation number shows.

AL committee discusses insurance business regime

Yesterday, the Third Standing Committee of the Legislative Assembly discussed the amendment to the insurance business regime for the first time. Some members of the committee noticed that the bill did not include compulsory insurance coverage for professional bodies, including doctors and engineers. The committee will also refer the bill to the government in order to understand the proposal of changing slight violation into administrative violation. It will also contact the Monetary Authority of Macao regarding the follow-up of the insurance industry's complaints.

Villa and hotels planned for Lisboa Garden land plots

Six land plots of the Taipa Lisboa Garden (Estr. de Sete Tanques) will be used to build standalone houses, hotels, clubs and residences, according to a planning draft currently being displayed. According to a statement released yesterday by the Land, Public Works and Transport Bureau, a batch of 10 planning drafts are being presented to the public until Feb. 25. According to one of the plans, the aforementioned land plots occupy an area of 15,431 square meters. The aforementioned buildings will be between 78 and 81.5 meters tall. The buildings should fit in with the mountain body and suitable greening measures will be taken in order to preserve the area's environment, according to proposals.

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13 restaurants ticketed for increasing prices during holiday

THE Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) fined 13 restaurants during the Spring Festival holiday, IAM president José Maria da Fonseca Tavares revealed yesterday.

During the Lunar New Year holiday, IAM carried out more than 200 inspections at local restaurants, finding that 13 of the inspected premises had not declared price increases to the government. The number of such violations is similar to that of the same period of the previous year.

The IAM president claims that his bureau has already enhanced promotional campaigning concerning the declaration procedure of price increases during holidays and, according to Tavares, this procedure has been simplified.

IAM will continue inspecting the restaurants, with the bureau examining whether the restaurants maintain their changed prices for a long period after the beginning of the Lunar New Year.

In addition, José Tavares reported that IAM Connect (the platform for immediate

RENATO MARQUES



José Tavares (center)

feedback about the bureau) had been receiving around 10 opinions on a daily basis since its launch.

Before the holiday started, the platform had received more than 700 opinions, 30 to 40 percent of which were related to trash piling up.

The bureau was able to reply to the opinions within 24 hours, according to José Tavares.

The IAM has been established for more than one month. Its president said that the bureau would try to deliver two bills to the Chief Executive Council within the first half of 2019 concerning the management of street markets and vendors.

The bill will be drafted to suit the future development of vendors and street markets.

Additionally, IAM expects to launch a public tender to build an animal embalming museum in Coloane in two to three months. It is hoped that construction of the museum will be completed by the end of this year, and operations are expected to start around the same time.

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Rina Tay

11th June 1958 – 10th February 2019

Rina's heart of gold stopped beating on Sunday, but her memory will live on forever in ours.

Rina Tay, our incomparable mother, daughter and sister passed away by our sides in the morning of 10 February in Macao. She was 60 and had been battling brain cancer since being diagnosed in August 2018.

Rina was born in Asahan, Indonesia and moved to Macao in 1966 where she was raised by her mother and aunt. Rina's passion for helping all those around her started when she was a young girl. She worked odd jobs to help the family and shared the responsibilities of caring for her younger siblings. Rina studied at the Sacred Heart Canossian College and loved music. She worked as a radio DJ at Radio Vilaverde. In 1980 Rina was invited to be part of the team at TDM that launched Radio Macao, which was responsible for the production of Ou Mun Tin Toi. Rina then worked for 16 years at the World Trade Centre.

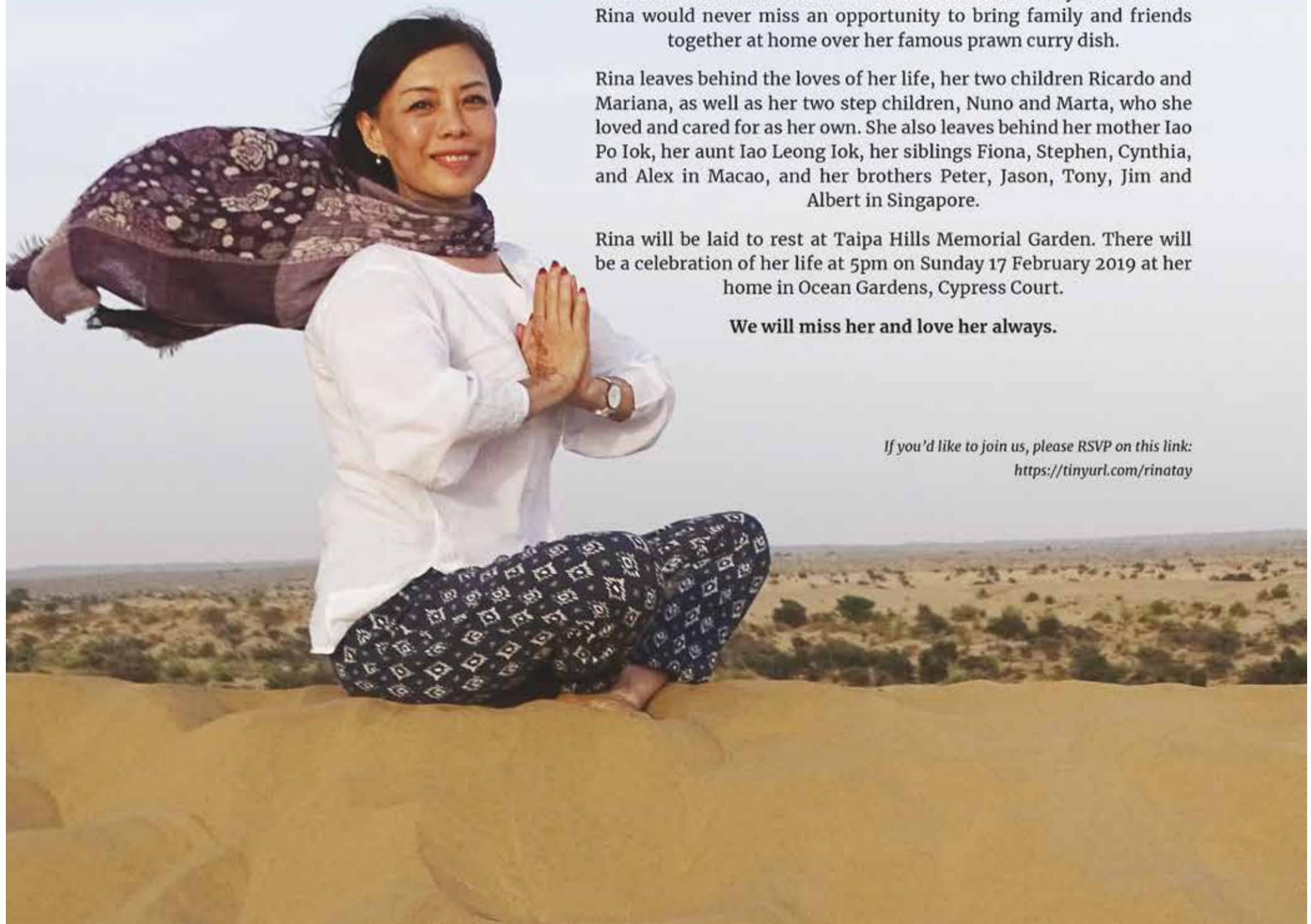
Rina was a Buddhist and dedicated Iyengar yoga practitioner and was happiest when she was traveling, cooking, tending to her beautiful garden, and helping her friends. Rina was always the life of any party and her infectious smile and kindness touched everyone she met. Rina would never miss an opportunity to bring family and friends together at home over her famous prawn curry dish.

Rina leaves behind the loves of her life, her two children Ricardo and Mariana, as well as her two step children, Nuno and Marta, who she loved and cared for as her own. She also leaves behind her mother Iao Po Iok, her aunt Iao Leong Iok, her siblings Fiona, Stephen, Cynthia, and Alex in Macao, and her brothers Peter, Jason, Tony, Jim and Albert in Singapore.

Rina will be laid to rest at Taipa Hills Memorial Garden. There will be a celebration of her life at 5pm on Sunday 17 February 2019 at her home in Ocean Gardens, Cypress Court.

We will miss her and love her always.

If you'd like to join us, please RSVP on this link:
<https://tinyurl.com/rinatay>



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British Business Association of Macao

Business Luncheon

Thursday 14 February
with
Guest Speaker: Irene Va Kuan Lau
Acting President of IPIM
Macao Trade and Investment Promotion Institute

Macao's MICE Overview

The MICE industry in Macao has been growing rapidly in recent years. Conferences and exhibitions bring business opportunities to different sectors and boost local economy, together with the opening of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge as well as the development of the Greater Bay Area will open up new business opportunities for Macao. In this session, Mrs. Irene Va Kuan Lau (Acting President of Macao Trade and Investment Promotion Institute) will give you more insights on Macao's MICE industry and the new opportunities that it will bring.

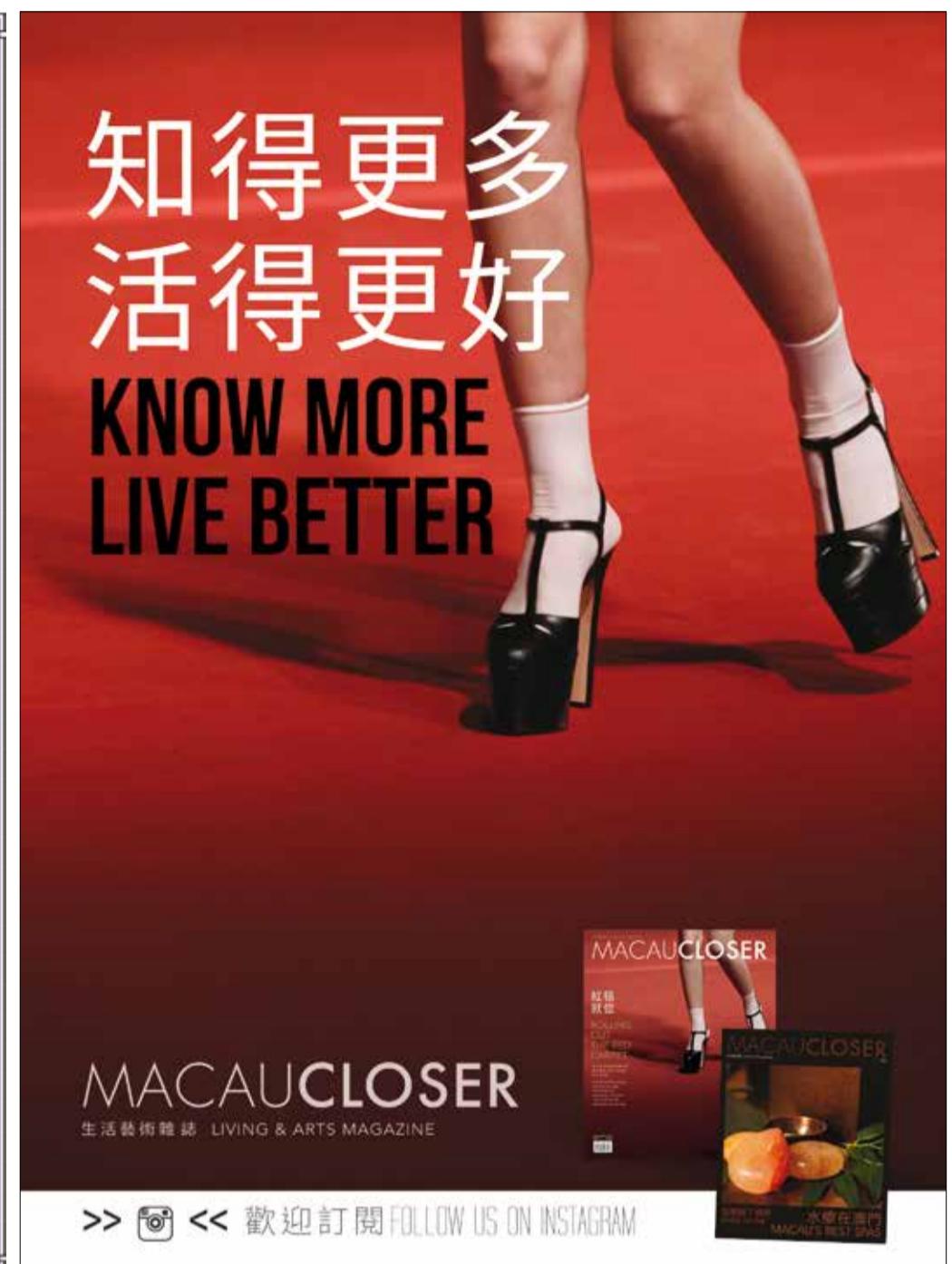
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CRIME

Taxi driver caught driving under the influence of drugs

Renato Marques

THE police caught a taxi driver who was driving his taxi under the influence of drugs on Saturday, the Public Security Police Force (PSP) spokesperson said yesterday during a police press conference held at the PSP facilities.

The man in his late 20s was caught by the PSP at the Istmo Roundabout in Cotai after a call from a customer who noticed the driver's strange behavior.

The complainant was a local female resident who said that the taxi driver was talking to himself, kept nodding and shaking his head, and constantly wiping his nose.

The man was intercepted at Cotai at around 5:10 p.m. and brought to the Traffic Department, where breathalyzer testing revealed there was no alcohol in his system.

After being taken to the public hospital to perform a urine test, the man was finally detained at around 9:30 p.m. when the sample tested positive for methamphetamine.

After questioning, the man revealed that he had taken the

RENATO MARQUES



More infractions recorded during CNY holiday

DURING Golden Week, the Public Security Police Force (PSP) recorded a total of 313 taxi violations, according to the statistics released by PSP yesterday.

Out of the 313 total cases, 244 overcharging incidents were reported. In 42 cases, taxi drivers had refused to take passengers. There were 8 cases involving unlicensed taxis illegally taking passengers.

In addition to taxi violations, the PSP also made four prosecutions for illegal firework sales and illegal use of fireworks or firecrackers.

During the same period, the PSP also received

187 noise complaints. PSP officers handled 59 of the complaints using persuasion measures, two were eventually filed as cases and the remaining complaints were unconfirmed.

Compared to the same period last year, the number of taxi violations grew. The main driver of the growth is the number of overcharging incidents.

During the 2018 Spring Festival, the PSP recorded a total of 254 violations, 183 of which were overcharging incidents.

The number of visitors also increased in association with the increased number of taxi infractions.

Judge Song Man Lei to chair CE election committee again

THE judge from the Court of Final Appeal (TUI), Song Man Lei, has once again been chosen to chair the election committee that scrutinizes the election of the new Macau Chief Executive.

This is the second time that the committee has been chaired by Song, who was first appointed with the task in 2011 with the election of Chui Sai On.

In a notice published in the Official Gazette yesterday, the CE has also appointed the other committee members, including Tong Hio Fong, who presided over the Electoral Affairs Commission for the Legislative Assembly Election in 2018. The director of the Public Administration and Civil Service Bureau, Kou Peng Kuan, the deputy public prosecutor, Chan Tsing King, and the director of the Government Information Bureau, Victor Chan, are also members of the management committee.

According to Macau's law on the election of the new CE, the current CE should also appoint a manage-



Song Man Lei

ment committee with a president and members within 15 days of the date of election before members of CE election committee are published.

The CE, with a five-year tenure each term, shall be elected by a 400-member committee. The election of members of the CE election committee is scheduled for June 16.

It is expected that the election will take place in late August or early September this year.

Association wants journalists to be informed of AL committee meetings

THE Macau Portuguese and English Press Association (AIPIM) has called on the Legislative Assembly (AL) to inform local journalists of committee meetings held by the legislative body.

The letter addressed to Ho Iat Seng, president of the AL, was sent on Friday after journalists were not informed of the AL Committee on House Rules that was held on Jan. 31.

Although local journalists eventually discovered the committee meeting and attended the AL session, it was only afterwards they found out that two meetings of the committee were to be held.

"AIPIM hereby requests that the existence of such meetings will be made known to journalists, in the same terms as the meetings concerning other AL committees," the letter read.

"This step is important so

that journalists can, in the light of the principles of transparency, public interest and right to information, perform their work best," it added.

Last week, lawmaker Sulu Sou filed a complaint regarding what he claims to be the unlawful behavior of the Legislative Assembly's Committee of Rules and Mandates.

The lawmaker criticized the fact that not even lawmakers had been informed about the first meeting of the committee.

According to Sou, who had expressed his concerns to committee president Kou Hoi In, the president only replied saying that the first meeting was an "internal meeting" and that was why no other lawmakers, besides those on the committee, had been notified. The lawmaker also sent a letter to the AL complaining about this procedure. LV

Bus breaks sharply, three mildly injured

Yesterday, an incident at Av. do Alm. Lacerda injured three passengers onboard a public bus. The bus braked sharply in order to avoid crashing into a motorbike which was in front of the bus and had come to a sudden stop. The driver passed blood alcohol tests. The three people who were injured were all local residents. The male injured passenger (aged in his 70s) sustained an injury to the head, with the other two sustaining injuries to the waist and left shoulder respectively.

Ella Lei asks for laws on Cotai border relocation

Yesterday, lawmaker Ella Lei made an inquiry in writing to the government, asking for legislation concerning the Cotai Frontier Post. Lei considers the relocation of the port to Hengqin conveys the establishment of a Macau port in the city of Zhuhai. Such a measure should be coordinated with corresponding laws, Lei says. She proposes that the local government establish laws regarding the relocation. The lawmaker also wants the Macau SAR government to reveal legislative progress on the matter, and wonders whether the government can complete legislation around the same time as the relocation is finished.

Nearly 6,000 newly incorporated companies in 2018

Macau's newly incorporated companies totalled 5,953 in 2018, up by 776 year-on-year, and the number of companies in dissolution was 813, the Statistics and Census Service (DSEC) announced on Friday. The latest DSEC report indicated that in 2018, newly incorporated companies' registered capital declined by 87.9 percent to MOP986 million, due to a decrease in capital in financial services. The registered capital of companies in dissolution totaled MOP453 million. Analyzed by size of registered capital, there were 4,562 new companies (76.6 percent of the total) with registered capital under MOP50,000 in 2018. Meanwhile, 111 new companies were registered with capital of MOP1 million or over. At the end of 2018, the total number of registered companies in Macau increased by 5,141 year-on-year to 66,186.



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Larry Silverstein

PROPERTY | US

Silverstein eyes building final WTC Tower without signed tenant

Lily Katz

SILVERSTEIN Properties Inc., the developer that rebuilt lower Manhattan after the destruction of the twin towers in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, may begin work on its final World Trade Center skyscraper before signing a lease for the building.

The firm might build 2 World Trade Center "on spec," or without a committed tenant, Chairman Larry Silverstein said in an interview. The building's foundation was started, with no further work done because the developer hadn't found a company to anchor the space. But a strong economy and leasing progress at neighboring towers may change those plans, he said.

"I think we're in an increasingly good spot, in a good position, to do that," said the 87-year-old

developer, who founded Silverstein Properties in 1957. "For all intents and purposes, it wouldn't be a bad idea to start on Tower 2 because it won't be finished until about 2022, 2023."

The 260,000-square-meter office building, designed by Bjarke Ingels Group, will be the last of Silverstein's four skyscrapers at the downtown site. It marks the culmination of the Financial District redevelopment undertaken by Silverstein, who also built towers 3, 4 and 7. The final skyscraper is slated to be about 80 stories and feature floor-to-ceiling glass windows, basketball courts, a running track and rooftop parks, with renderings showing a cascading, staircase-like silhouette for the building.

"It's a riskier strategy to start without the anchor tenant lined up, but it just speaks to the optimism in the marketplace," said Jeffrey

Langbaum, a real estate analyst with Bloomberg Intelligence.

Finding a primary tenant for 2 World Trade Center has proven challenging, with competition from the new Hudson Yards development on the west side and hesitation among some firms to move all the way downtown. Citigroup Inc. had considered moving to the tower, but in 2013 opted to stay in Tribeca. Two years later, Rupert Murdoch's 21st Century Fox Inc. and News Corp. reached a tentative agreement to lease space in the building before deciding instead to stay put in midtown Manhattan.

Still, Silverstein has managed to attract high-profile tenants to the World Trade Center buildings, including Moody's Corp. and Spotify Technology SA. In June, the developer opened 3 World Trade Center, which is now more than 50 percent leased. **Bloomberg**

Apple's iPhone shipments plunge in China as Huawei tightens grip

AP PHOTO



20 percent in past months - an unusual move that illustrated waning enthusiasm for Apple's gadgets.

Huawei shored up its lead after unit shipments soared 23.3 percent, leading all major brands, according to IDC. That's despite grappling with an unusually turbulent few months during which its finance chief was arrested on allegations of bank fraud, and the U.S. marshalled its allies to try and block the company from selling next-generation networking equipment.

Apple was ranked fourth by shipments in the country during the period, following Oppo and Vivo, IDC said. Fifth-ranked Xiaomi, a Chinese name that experienced rapid growth just before its 2018 initial public offering, incurred a 34.9 percent plunge in shipments thanks to inventory corrections and an internal restructuring, IDC said.

"The domestic smartphone market environment in 2019 doesn't look very optimistic," IDC senior analyst Wang Xi said in the report. And "5G phones will still only comprise a very small portion of the overall market. We've a long way to go before they become mainstream," IDC said. **Bloomberg**

corporate bits

GALAXY RECEIVES GAMING AWARDS



Galaxy Entertainment Group won two awards at the International Gaming Awards (IGA) ceremony in London last week, the gaming operator announced in a statement.

The group was named Casino Operator of the Year Australia/Asia in the fifth time that GEG has received the award.

In addition, Galaxy Macau won the Integrated Resort of

the Year award for the third year running.

It also marks the eighth consecutive year that GEG has been honored by the IGA.

IGA is regarded as the "Oscars" of the gaming industry and serves to highlight the achievements of outstanding online and land-based operators globally.

Francis Lui, vice-chairman of GEG, pledged, "We will continue to deliver quality product offerings and memorable customer experiences to our guests across our properties in Macau. Additionally, we are committed to promoting our brand around the world through our expansion plans, such as Hengqin and Japan."

LOCAL BANKS VISIT LUSOPHONE COUNTRIES TO PROMOTE FINANCIAL PLATFORM



Banco Nacional Ultramarino (BNU) and Bank of China – Macau Branch (BOC) were part of a delegation, headed by the Monetary Authority of

Macao, to three Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa last month: Mozambique, Angola and Cape Verde. The delegation sought to

promote Macau as a financial platform between China and the Portuguese-speaking countries, fostering the use of the RMB in financial transactions between the parties.

This visit was also intended to gather information about current conditions on the use of the Chinese currency in said countries, including existing obstacles and opportunities.

According to a statement issued by BNU, during the visit BNU was also invited to participate in a seminar, organized by BOC in Angola, with the theme "Macau – RMB Clearing Center for the Portuguese Speaking Countries."



U.S. Navy guided-missile destroyer USS Barry

TRADE WAR

US naval patrol prompts Chinese protest as talks start

CHINA accused the U.S. of “tricks” as two American warships sailed through waters claimed by Beijing on the eve of high-level trade talks.

China’s foreign ministry said the country’s navy “warred off” off the U.S. warships yesterday as they attempted to assert free navigation rights in the disputed South China Sea. The ships sailed close by Mischief Reef, where China has built an airbase on reclaimed land, and the adjacent Second Thomas Shoal, which is occupied by the Philippines.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying deflected a question about whether the move would impact trade talks expected to get underway Tuesday in Beijing. “You have observed very carefully, and observed a series of tricks by the U.S. side. I believe you all see through these small tricks by the U.S. side,” Hua told a regular news briefing in Beijing.

The so-called freedom-of-navigation patrols were reported earlier yesterday by Reuters, which cited an unidentified U.S. official. The report said two guided-missile destroyers passed within 12 nautical miles of Mischief Reef, a maneuver the U.S. uses to assert that a waterway is free to international transit.

U.S. Indo-Pacific Command didn’t respond to an email seeking comment on the patrol. The American-side often doesn’t announce such sail-bys in the South China Sea, where China’s claims overlap with those of Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan

and Vietnam.

The sail-by comes as Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer head for Beijing, the latest high-profile effort to resolve the two countries’ trade dispute before their tariff cease-fire expires March 1. The trade fight has exposed a series of strategic disputes between the world’s two largest economies, ranging from China’s territorial claims in the Western Pacific to accusations of spying.

The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative last week said China dispatched almost 100 vessels to the Spratly chain in an effort to stop the Philippines from building on another feature known as Thitu Reef. Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana in a statement last week called on China to respect the country’s sovereignty.

The island that is home to about 100 civilians and a small military garrison is the largest of the nine occupied by the Philippines in the Spratly islands and serves as its administrative center in the area. Thitu and is also claimed by China, Taiwan and Vietnam.

The ramp will facilitate the delivery of construction equipment and material for upgrading the island’s airstrip and other infrastructure, AMTI said. Bigger ships with deeper drafts would be able to offload supplies directly onto the island, rather than having to transfer them to smaller vessels as was the case before.

Additionally, satellite imagery shows excavators depositing sand over a larger area

to the north about the size of three city blocks, AMTI said. Lorenzana had earlier said there were plans to expand facilities on the island, including building a “fish port, desalination plant, solar power array, improved housing, and marine research facilities,” AMTI said.

AMTI says satellite photos show the number of Chinese vessels fluctuating from as high as 95 in December to just 42 by late January. It gave no word on any attempt by them to intervene in the ongoing work.

“Manila appears intent on upgrading its facilities in the Spratlys despite any detente or objections from Beijing,” AMTI said in its report.

The Philippines’ land reclamation efforts are much more modest than those of its neighbors in the Spratlys. Once completed, it will have created 3.2 hectares of reclaimed land in the island group in recent years, compared to about 49 hectares by Vietnam and 1,295 hectares by China.

The U.S. has conducted several freedom of navigation patrols in recent months. In January, China urged the U.S. to halt “provocative actions” after a U.S. guided-missile destroyer conducted a sail-by near the Paracel Islands, which are occupied by China and claimed by Vietnam. American warships have also sailed through the strait separating mainland China from democratically run Taiwan.

“We respect all countries’ right for freedom of navigation and flight under international law, but we firmly oppose any action to jeopardize the

sovereignty and security of countries under the pretext of freedom of navigation,” Hua said.

American F-35B Lightning II aircraft operating off the Navy’s amphibious assault ship USS Wasp conducted “milestone flight operations” with weapons fully loaded in the Philippine and East China Seas, Jan. 26 through Feb. 6, the Marine Corps said.

The training mission demonstrated an “increase in lethality and integrated amphibious capability,” it quoted Col. Robert Brodie, commanding officer of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit as saying.

The fifth-generation fighters carried CATM-9X air-to-air missiles and dropped 500-pound GBU-12 Paveway II and 1,000-pound GBU-32 Joint Direct Attack Munition bombs.

“We achieved mission success by using the full capabilities of the F-35B at sea,” Lt. Col. Michael Rountree, the F-35B detachment officer-in-charge was quoted as saying in a news release.

Rountree said the planes engaged role-playing enemy aircraft and hit simulated targets before landing vertically on the Wasp.

It was the first time such a level of training had been carried out by an operationally deployed F-35B detachment with the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit, Rountree said.

While the area of operations was east of the South China Sea, the exercise illustrates the continuing U.S. military presence in the area, to which China routinely objects. **MDT/Agencies**

HEALTH

Potential HIV contamination revives drug safety fears

CONCERNs about potentially HIV-tainted blood products produced by a state-backed company, followed by conflicting information from regulators, is undermining confidence in China’s drug industry as it seeks to join the global biotech race.

Over Chinese New Year, the National Medical Products Administration said a batch of intravenous human immunoglobulin in blood plasma by Shanghai Xinxing Medicine Co. tested positive for HIV antibodies in the eastern province of Jiangxi. Shanghai regulators conducted their own tests, which came back negative for the virus, and ordered a production halt and recall. Xinxing is investigating as well, according to China Meheco Co., which owns 51 percent of the blood producer and is controlled by a state firm.

The incident, which sparked social media outcry in the country, follows protests and President Xi Jinping’s reprimand of the drug industry after children in Jiangsu province received ineffective vaccines last summer. Xi’s government has been ramping up spending on the nation’s health sector and overhauling its drug approval process in a bid to spur medical innovation.

“It’s another scandal that will hit market confidence in China’s healthcare sector,” said Linus Yip, chief strategist with First Shanghai Securities in Hong Kong. “Looking forward, investors will continue to prefer market leaders with better reputations, as the confidence in the overall drug market isn’t ready to recover yet.”

Previous drug scares have caused shares declines for the entire sector - the CSI 300 index of health-care shares has fallen 31 percent since July when the vaccine scandal broke. For now, investors have factored in the risks of potential quality and safety issues in the current valuations of most companies in the healthcare sector, he said.

Meheco said the probe of Xinxing’s products will have little impact on its financials, because the latter’s business scale and profit comprise a small share. Meheco said it ordered Xinxing to halt all operations and close quality-control loopholes, according to statement. Shanghai Xinxing makes and distributes blood products often used to treat immune deficiencies and disorders.

Shanghai Xinxing and the National Medical Products Administration did not respond to requests for comment.

Alarms over unsafe drugs occasionally flare up and can stoke government worries about social unrest. China has grappled with HIV contamination before. In 2005, leaders struggled to manage a tainted blood supply damaged by illegal blood buying stations in the northern province of Henan. **Bloomberg**

Nick Perry, Wellington

NEW Zealand's national carrier admitted a registration mistake turned back a flight to China over the weekend, prompting Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern to say yesterday that politics were not involved.

She said the incident had no bearing on the relationship between the two nations and she wouldn't be seeking reassurance on that point from Chinese officials.

"I see absolutely no need, given that Air New Zealand have said themselves that they know exactly what the issue was — that they did not meet requirements on behalf of China," she said.

Ardern added, "I think it's important to be really clear and not confuse administrative and regulatory issues as issues to do with the relationship."

In Beijing, foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said failure to properly register was a breach of regulations.

"They themselves noted this issue and made a U-turn," Hua told reporters at a daily briefing.

Relations between China and New Zealand have been strained in recent months after New Zealand's spy agency in November halted mobile company Spark from using Huawei equipment in its planned 5G upgrade. The agency said the Chinese company's equipment posed a "significant network

AP PHOTO



Registration mistake turned back New Zealand flight to China

security risk."

Under the previous conservative government, New Zealand had fostered much closer ties with China. New Zealand was the first developed nation to sign a free-trade deal with China in 2008, and China has since become New Zealand's largest trading partner.

But New Zealand is also part of the "Five Eyes" security alliance

that includes the U.S., Britain, Canada and Australia, which have also expressed concerns about Huawei. And under Ardern, New Zealand has embraced a warmer relationship with Japan.

Since taking office in 2017, Ardern has yet to make a long-promised official visit to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

"Look, I have received an invi-

tation from the Chinese administration to visit," she said. "The outstanding issue simply is a matter of setting dates, and those have not been finalized yet."

Air New Zealand Flight 289 from Auckland to Shanghai was about four-and-a-half or five hours into its journey Sunday when a "technicality" was discovered that meant the plane was not registered in China, the air-

line said. The flight returned to Auckland.

"We know customers will be deeply disappointed and frustrated by this situation and we are very sorry for the disruption to their travel plans," the airline said. "These customers have now since arrived in Shanghai."

Air New Zealand did not immediately respond to further questions on the incident. AP

US following case of missing Chinese-born Kazakh refugee

THE U.S. Embassy in Beijing says it is following the case of a Chinese-born Kazakh man who had been fighting attempts by Beijing to return him to China from neighboring Uzbekistan and whose current whereabouts are unknown.

A spokesman said yesterday that the embassy was aware of Halembieke Xiaheman's situation and was in close touch with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and "relevant governments" on his case.

"We urge third countries to allow UNHCR and other UN organizations and non-governmental organizations access to these asylum seekers to assess their protection claims and pro-

vide assistance," the spokesman said in an emailed response to a question from The Associated Press.

Halembieke had filmed a video from inside the transit zone at the airport in Uzbekistan's capital, pleading for help, saying the Chinese Embassy there wanted him sent back to China. It was distributed Thursday.

In response, the Uzbek foreign ministry issued a statement saying he flew to Bangkok on Saturday.

"We inform that he did not enter the territory of Uzbekistan and on February 9, 2019 flew out to Bangkok," it said.

The statement said Halembieke had earlier flown from Thailand to Kazakhstan's capital Almaty after transiting in

Tashkent, but gave no details.

It wasn't immediately clear whether Halembieke had arrived in Bangkok. The UNHCR office in Thailand said it was unable to comment due to confidentiality rules.

China has clamped down severely on its Muslim minority groups, especially Kazakhs and their more numerous cousins, the Uighurs, detaining an estimated 1 million of them in re-education camps where they are forced to renounce their native culture and the Islamic religion and pledge loyalty to Communist Party leader Xi Jinping.

That followed a deadly riot in 2009 between Uighurs and the majority Han Chinese population

in Urumqi, the capital of the Uighur homeland of Xinjiang, and sporadic ensuing violence blamed on Islamic separatists in the years after.

On Saturday, Turkey's foreign ministry issued a statement calling China's treatment of Uighurs "a great cause of shame for humanity," in a rare show of public criticism by a majority Muslim nation. Numerous Western nations have called previously on Beijing to close the camps and end persecution of its Muslim minority groups.

China's embassy in Turkey fired back with a statement defending Beijing's actions and accusing Turkey of applying double standards in the fight against terrorism.

ABDUREHIM HEYIT

Beijing condemns Turkey over claim of famed musician's death



CHINA is condemning Turkey over its claim that a celebrated musician from China's Turkic Muslim Uighur ethnic group has died in custody.

Foreign ministry spokesman Hua Chunying said yesterday that a brief video clip of Abdurehim Heyit issued by state media shows he is still alive.

She told a daily briefing that the Turkish side had "made a very bad mistake which is qui-

te irresponsible."

Turkey's foreign ministry issued a statement Saturday calling China's treatment of Uighurs "a great cause of shame for humanity," in a rare show of public criticism by a majority Muslim nation. China has interned an estimated 1 million Uighurs and other Muslim minorities in re-education camps.

Heyit had reportedly been sentenced to eight years over one of his songs. AP



Former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak (center) arrives at a court house in Kuala Lumpur, last July

MALAYSIA

Court postpones Najib 1MDB graft trial

Eileen Ng, Kuala Lumpur

A defense lawyer said former Malaysian leader Najib Razak's graft trial, scheduled for today, has been postponed by a court ruling.

Najib has pleaded not guilty to 42 charges of criminal breach of trust, graft, abuse of power and money laundering linked to the multibillion-dollar looting of the 1MDB state investment fund that has battered the country's standing abroad.

The first of his many trials was due to start today, but lawyer Farhan Read said the defense won a stay of proceedings in the Appeal Court yesterday. He said the Appeal Court will hear Najib's appeal over a technical issue that the defense says could impair the validity of the trial.

From appearing in an R&B music video and trolling social media to vilify the new government, former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak has been combative before the start of his graft trial, linked to the multibillion-dollar looting of the 1MDB state investment fund that has battered the country's standing abroad.

The trial comes nine months after Najib's spectacular election defeat, spurred by voters' furor over the 1MDB scandal that is being investigated in the U.S. and several other countries for alleged cross-border money laundering and embezzlement.

U.S. investigators say more than USD4.5 billion was stolen from 1MDB by associates of Najib between 2009 and 2014 and the ill-gotten gains were laundered through layers

of bank accounts in the U.S. and other countries to finance Hollywood films and buy hotels, a luxury yacht, art works, jewelry and other extravagances. Some \$700 million from the fund that Najib set up for Malaysia's economic development allegedly landed in his own bank account.

One of only a few Southeast Asian leaders to be arraigned after losing office, Najib has denied any wrongdoing. He is charged with 42 counts of criminal breach of trust, graft, abuse of power and money laundering in one of Malaysia's biggest criminal trials. His wife Rosmah Mansor also has been charged with money laundering and tax evasion linked to 1MDB. She has pleaded not guilty and her trial has not been set.

The first of Najib's multiple criminal trials begins Tuesday but instead of lying low, Najib has fought back with a political makeover on social media that aims to transform his image from an out-of-touch elitist to a leader for the working class.

A Malay-language catchphrase translating to "What's to be ashamed about, my boss?" was coined while he was campaigning in a by-election last month and has become his new rally cry. Expensive tailored suits have been replaced by hoodies and jeans. A picture Najib posted on social media showing himself posing on a Yamaha motorcycle with his new "no-shame" meme resonated with many Malay youths disenchanted by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's new government.

In another offbeat music vi-

deo that he uploaded on social media, Najib slammed the new government as "liars" and crooned about the "slander and revenge" against him in a Malay-language rendition of the 1970's R&B soul hit "Kiss and Say Goodbye" by the American group, the Manhattans.

He posts a dozen messages daily on social media, mostly mocking the new government and its policies, and touching on the plight of the needy.

Last month while visiting vendors at a wet market, Najib jeered government leaders on Facebook: "Let the ministers sleep on this Saturday morning."

The trial comes nine months after Najib's spectacular election defeat

Bridget Welsh, political science professor at the John Cabot University in Rome, said Najib is seeking to tap into anger from those who were displaced politically and those disappointed by the new government.

"There will actually be two battles — that in the courtroom and that in the public — in which Najib has used a flush-funded social media machine to build support," said Welsh, a Southeast Asia expert. "He has fanned two sentiments — supposed political victimization and racial insecurity — stemming from the fact that Malay

chauvinists do not have the same level of political power in the new government."

Najib's online campaign isn't likely to extend beyond his Malay political base but it could split Malaysia along racial lines, she said. Ethnic Malays makeup about 60 percent of Malaysia's 32 million people, followed by large Chinese and Indian minorities.

Despite his smiles and cool public persona, the patrician Najib — whose father and uncle were Malaysia's second and third prime ministers respectively — could face years in prison if convicted.

Once a towering figure in politics and literally beyond the law, Najib has fallen from grace swiftly since his historic electoral loss on May 9, which led to the first change of government since Malaysia's independence from Britain in 1957.

The new government soon after it took office reopened investigations into 1MDB that had been stifled under Najib. He and his wife were barred from leaving the country and grilled by anti-graft officials, and their properties were raided. Truckloads of luggage stashed with cash, jewelry and hundreds of expensive designer bags worth a staggering 1.1 billion ringgit (\$270 million) were seized from their home and other properties.

The trials for both Najib and his wife will be closely watched but are expected to be long-lasting as defense lawyers could appeals up to the top court. Najib has a team of top lawyers, who are appealing yesterday to delay his trial.

Farhan Read, one of Najib's lawyers, told The Associated Press that the defense team wants a deferral to resolve a technical issue that could impair the validity of the hearing. He said Najib's trials are scheduled back-to-back and that it was unprecedented for a person to be hit with 42 charges. AP

INDONESIA

Police admit using snake to terrorize Papuan man

INDONESIAN police have acknowledged officers terrorized a Papuan man with a live snake after a video of the incident circulated online showing the man screaming in fear and his interrogator laughing.

Police in Indonesia's easternmost Papua region apologized but also attempted to justify the officers' actions by saying the snake was not venomous and that they hadn't resorted to beating the man, who was suspected of theft.

Human rights lawyer Veronica Koman said yesterday [Macau time] that the interrogation methods were torture and violated police policies as well as several laws. She said it was only the latest of several reports of police and military using snakes to terrorize Papuan detainees and symptomatic of a culture of racism against indigenous Papuans.

Sam Lokon, a member of the West Papua National Committee, which advocates for independence from Indonesia, was put in a cell with a snake and also beaten after being arrested in January, Koman said.

Police indicated the incident with the alleged thief happened recently, during a crackdown on petty crime in Jayawijaya district.

The spread of the video had forced police into a "very rare" apology, Koman said, while also criticizing the attempt to provide a justification.

The one minute and 20 second video shows the dark brown snake, at least two meters long, wrapped around the handcuffed suspect's neck and waist and an officer pushing its head into the man's face as he becomes increasingly hysterical.

Officers appear to be asking how many times he'd stolen cellphones.

Jayawijaya police chief Tonny Ananda Swadaya said in a statement the officers had been disciplined by being given ethics training and moved to other locations.

Papua province's police spokesman said the officers involved are being questioned by an internal affairs division of the national police.

"We apologize for the incident," Kamal told The Associated Press. "Institutionally we do not recognize such an unprofessional method of interrogation, and we guarantee that such an inhuman method will not happen again in the future." AP

AThai court ordered the release of a refugee football player yesterday after prosecutors said they were no longer seeking his extradition to Bahrain in a case that had drawn worldwide attention.

Court spokesman Suriyan Hon-gvilai said that Hakeem al-Araibi was being processed for release.

Thailand had come under great pressure from Australia's government, sporting bodies and human rights groups to send al-Araibi back to Australia, where he has refugee status and plays semi-professional football.

Prosecutors on yesterday submitted to court a request to withdraw the case to extradite al-Araibi to Bahrain, where he faces a 10-year prison sentence for an arson attack that damaged a police station. He has denied those charges and says the case is politically motivated.

Prosecutors made the decision after Thailand's foreign ministry sent their department a letter Monday morning that indicated that Bahrain had withdrawn its request for al-Araibi, said Chatthom Akapin, the director general of the attorney general office's international affairs department.

Officials in Bahrain, an island kingdom off the coast of Saudi Arabia that's home to the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet, did not immediately respond to calls and

THAILAND

Bahrain refugee football player released

emails seeking comment Monday.

The state-run Bahrain News Agency reported Sunday that Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa had a phone call with Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, but offered no specifics on their discussions.

Separately, BNA said Bahrain's Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa met Sunday with Thailand's foreign minister who was visiting the island. Again, no specifics on their talks was offered.

Al-Araibi, 25, a former Bahraini national team player, has said he fled his home country due to political repression. He has been living in Melbourne, where he plays for a semi-professional football team.

His supporters had said he should be freed and is protected under his status as a refugee with Australian residency. He was detained at the request of Bahrain relayed through Interpol upon his arrival in Bangkok in Novem-

ber while on honeymoon with his wife.

Activists praised yesterday's developments.

"This is a huge victory for the human rights movement in Bahrain, Thailand and Australia — and even the whole world," said Sayed Alwadaei, the director of advocacy at the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy. "Hakeem's ordeal ended after 70 days when there was a clear public stance and solidarity movement."

Former Australia national team captain Craig Foster, who has been leading the campaign for al-Araibi's release, praised all those who worked on the campaign.

"Many wonderful people stepped forward to help Hakeem," he wrote yesterday in comments on Twitter. "They all deserve to be in front of camera now, not only me. I can't list them, but will thank each of them in time. My thoughts are with Hakeem's wife. Her nightmare will shortly be at an end. Our

AP PHOTO



Bahraini Hakeem al-Araibi leaves the criminal court in Bangkok earlier this month

prayers answered."

Al-Araibi, a former player on Bahrain's national team, says he fled Bahrain due to political repression and that he fears torture if he returns.

He has said he was blindfolded and had his legs beaten while he

was held in Bahrain previously. He said he believed he was targeted for arrest because of his Shiite faith and because his brother was politically active in Bahrain. Bahrain has a Shiite majority but is ruled by a Sunni monarchy. AP

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AD

Raphael Satter, London

WHEN mysterious operatives lured two cybersecurity researchers to meetings at luxury hotels over the past two months, it was an apparent bid to discredit their research about an Israeli company that makes smartphone hacking technology used by some governments to spy on their citizens. The Associated Press has now learned of similar undercover efforts targeting at least four other individuals who have raised questions about the use of the Israeli firm's spyware.

The four others targeted by operatives include three lawyers involved in related lawsuits in Israel and Cyprus alleging that the company, the NSO Group, sold its spyware to governments with questionable human rights records. The fourth is a London-based journalist who has covered the litigation. Two of them — the journalist and a Cyprus-based lawyer — were secretly recorded meeting the undercover operatives; footage of them was broadcast on Israeli television just as the AP was preparing to publish this story.

All six of the people who were targeted said they believe the operatives were part of a coordinated effort to discredit them.

"There's somebody who's really interested in sabotaging the case," said one of the targets, Mazen Masri, who teaches at City University, London and is advising the plaintiffs' attorney in the case in Israel.

Masri said the operatives were "looking for dirt and irrelevant information about people involved."

The details of these covert efforts offer a glimpse into the sometimes shadowy world of private investigators, which includes some operatives who go beyond gathering information and instead act as provocateurs. The targets told the AP that the covert agents tried to goad them into making racist and anti-Israel remarks or revealing sensitive information about their work in connection with the lawsuits.

NSO has previously said it has nothing to do with the undercover efforts "either directly or indirectly." It did not return repeated messages asking about the new targets identified by the AP. American private equity firm Francisco Partners, which owns NSO, did not return a message from the AP seeking comment.

The undercover operatives' activities might never have been made public had it not been for two researchers who work at Citizen Lab, an internet watchdog group that is based out of the University of Toronto's Munk School.

In December, one of the researchers, John Scott-Railton, realized that a colleague had been tricked into meeting an operative at a Toronto hotel, then questioned about his work on NSO. When

EXCLUSIVE

Undercover spy exposed in NYC

AP PHOTO



Mazen Masri, an academic and a consultant to the legal team suing the NSO Group in Israel over alleged abuses involving its spyware, photographed in London

a second operative calling himself Michel Lambert approached Scott-Railton to arrange a similar meeting at the Peninsula Hotel in New York, Scott-Railton devised a sting operation, inviting AP journalists to interrupt the lunch and videotape the encounter.

The story drew wide attention in Israel. Within days, Israeli investigative television show Uvda and The New York Times identified Lambert as Aharon Almog-Assouline, a former Israeli security official living in the plush Tel Aviv suburb of Ramat Hasharon.

By then, Scott-Railton and the AP had determined the undercover efforts went well beyond Citizen Lab.

Within hours of the story's publication, Masri wrote to the AP to say that he and Alaa Mahajna, who is pursuing the lawsuit against NSO in Israel, had spent weeks parrying offers from two wealthy-sounding executives who had contacted them with lucrative offers of work and insistent requests to meet in London.

"We were on our guard and did not take the bait," Masri wrote.

Masri's revelation prompted a flurry of messages to others tied to litigation involving NSO. Masri and Scott-Railton say they discovered that Christiana Markou, a lawyer representing plaintiffs in a related lawsuit against NSO-affiliated companies in Cyprus, had been flown to London for a strange meeting with someone who claimed to be a Hong Kong-based investor. Around the same time, Masri found out that a journalist who had written about NSO was also invited to a London hotel — twice — and questioned about his reporting.

"Things are getting more interesting," Masri wrote as the episodes emerged.

OPERATIONAL ERRORS

Like Almog-Assouline, the undercover operative the AP exposed in New York, the covert agents who pursued the lawyers made a string of operational errors.

The attempt to ensnare Alaa

Mahajna, the lead lawyer in the Israeli suit, was a case in point.

On Nov. 26 he heard from a man who said his name was Marwan Al Haj and described himself as a partner at a Swedish wealth management firm called Lyndon Partners. Al Haj offered Mahajna an intriguing proposition. Al Haj said one of his clients, an ultra-rich individual with family ties to the Middle East, needed legal assistance recovering family land seized by Jewish settlers following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

"I believe you may be a good fit for this challenging task," Al Haj wrote.

The request made sense. As a human rights lawyer based in Jerusalem, Mahajna has defended Palestinian activists and others at the receiving end of the Israeli government's ire. But Mahajna became suspicious as he tried to learn more about the case. Al Haj was cagey about his client and seemed unwilling to provide any paperwork, Mahajna told the AP.

"Not even the basic stuff," Mahajna said. "Usually people flood you with documents and stories."

Mahajna said he was unsettled when Al Haj suddenly offered him an all-expenses-paid trip to London; no one had even asked him whether the case had any hope of success.

"At some point it was abundantly clear that this is not a bona fide approach," Mahajna said.

Ten days later, Masri, the legal adviser in the Israeli lawsuit, received an email offering him a place on the advisory board of a Zurich-based company called APOL Consulting.

Masri became skeptical after he checked out the company's website. Consulting firms typically trade on their employees' intelligence and skill, so Masri expected the company's site to prominently display the names, headshots and qualifications of its staff.

"Here there wasn't even a name of one human," he said.

When Masri turned down the

mid, a London-based journalist who wrote a story about NSO, said he was also invited to a London hotel on two separate occasions to discuss his coverage of the Israeli company.

The purported company used in the operation targeting him was Mertens-Giraud Partners Management, which was described as a Brussels-based wealth management firm.

Neither MGP — nor any of the other companies — truly existed. The AP's searches of the Orbis database of some 300 million companies, local corporate registries and trademark repositories turned up no trace of a Swiss firm called APOL, a Swedish company called Lyndon partners, a Belgian company called Mertens-Giraud or a Hong Kong-based firm named ENE Investments. Local phone books didn't carry listings for a Zurich-based man named Cristian Ortega, a Hong Kong-based man named Olivier Duffet or anyone in Sweden bearing the name Marwan Al Haj.

There was no hint of APOL when the AP visited its supposed office not far from Zurich's central train station; tenants said they'd never heard of the company. It was the same story in Hong Kong; a management representative at the Central Building, where ENE Investments was supposedly located, said he didn't know anything about the company. An AP journalist wasn't able to speak to anyone at Mertens-Giraud's alleged office on Brussels' Rue des Poissoniers; the entire building was boarded up for renovations.

At the modern office block in downtown Stockholm where Lyndon Partners claimed to have its headquarters, service manager Elias Broberger said he could find no trace of the wealth management firm.

"It says they are located here," Broberger said as he examined Lyndon Partners' professional-looking website. "But we don't have them in any of our systems: not the booking system; not the member system. We don't bill them; they don't bill us."

"I can't find them."

TAILORED PITCHES

Who hired the undercover agents remains unclear, but their operational and digital fingerprints suggest they are linked.

The six operatives all began approaching their targets around the same time with individually tailored pitches. Their bogus websites followed the same patterns; all of them were hosted on Namecheap and many were bought at auction from GoDaddy and used the Israeli web design platform Wix. The formatting of the websites was similar; in at

was one of many

least two instances — MGP and Lyndon Partners — it was identical. Even the operatives' email signatures were the same — consisting of three neatly packed, colorful lines consisting of a phone number, web address and email.

The operatives' LinkedIn pages were similar, too, featuring men in sunglasses shot from a distance, facing away from the camera, or at unusual angles — a tactic sometimes used to frustrate facial recognition algorithms.

Despite the indications that the undercover agents are all linked, there is no conclusive evidence who they might work for. An Israeli television channel, Channel 12, broadcast a report on Saturday claiming that an Israeli private investigation firm, Black Cube, had been investigating issues around the lawsuits against NSO. The TV channel showed secretly shot footage of the Cypriot lawyer, Markou, and the London journalist, Hamid, which matched the pair's description of their encounters with undercover agents.

The TV segment was critical of the lawyers suing NSO, and quo-

ted NSO founder Shalev Hulio in an interview accusing Markou and her colleagues of pursuing the lawsuits as a "PR exercise."

NSO has previously denied hiring Black Cube, and Black Cube in a letter sent last month to the AP said it was not involved in the effort to ensnare researchers at Citizen Lab. "Black Cube had nothing to do with these alleged events," the letter said, adding that no one acting on the company's behalf did either.

Black Cube does have a possible tie to Almog-Assouline, the man who held the hotel meeting about NSO in New York. During a long-running Canadian legal battle between two private equity firms — Catalyst Capital and West Face Capital — one man caught up in the litigation said he recognized Almog-Assouline because he'd been approached by the same operative under a different identity several years ago.

"I recognized the individual, down to the accent and the anecdotes," said the man, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation.

In court filings, Black Cube

has acknowledged dispatching agents to meet with "various individuals" involved in the private equity firms' feud. But it's unclear if other investigations firms might also have done work connected to the two companies' legal battle.

Black Cube did not respond to repeated questions about whether it had ever employed Almog-Assouline. The firm previously drew international opprobrium for its unrelated work protecting the reputation of disgraced Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein.

Almog-Assouline himself denied working for Black Cube when two AP reporters confronted him in New York last month.

He has refused to answer any questions since.

When an AP reporter rang the door at his penthouse in Tel Aviv suburb of Ramat Hasharon a week ago, a woman who identified herself as his wife said he wasn't home. When the reporter followed up with a phone call to Almog-Assouline, he said: "I have no interest in speaking to you." **AP Exclusive**



A man who identified himself as Michel Lambert, a director at the Paris-based agricultural technology firm CPW-Consulting, reacts during an interview at a restaurant in New York



3 Pedder St., Central in Hong Kong. The building was supposedly the home of ENE Investments, but an AP investigation has found that the firm is a front for an elaborate undercover operation targeting security researchers, lawyers and a journalist

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what's ON

MASTERPIECES OF RUSSIAN ART FROM THE STATE TRETYAKOV GALLERY

TIME: 10am-7pm (last admission 6:30pm; closed on Mondays)

UNTIL: April 22, 2019

VENUE: Macau Museum of Art

ADMISSION: Free

ENQUIRIES: (853) 8791 9814

ONENESS: CALLIGRAPHY BY PROFESSOR JAO TSUNG-I

TIME: 10am-6pm (No admission after 5:30pm, closed on Mondays)

UNTIL: September 30, 2019

VENUE: Jao Tsung-I Academy

ADMISSION: Free

ENQUIRIES: (853) 2852 2523

SPARKLING GARDEN – GUAN HUAI BIN WORKS

TIME: 10am-7pm (last admission 6:30pm; closed on Mondays)

UNTIL: February 24, 2019

VENUE: Macau Museum of Art

ADMISSION: Free

ENQUIRIES: (853) 8791 9814

BIMIMICRY – INSPIRED BY NATURE

TIME: 10am-6pm (closed on Thursdays)

UNTIL: March 31, 2019

VENUE: Gallery 2, Exhibition Center, Macau Science Center

ADMISSION: MOP25

ENQUIRIES: (853) 2888 0822

EXHIBITION OF NEW WORKS IN MAM COLLECTION - CHE Ho

TIME: 10am-7pm (last admission 6:30pm; closed on Mondays)

UNTIL: April 14, 2019

VENUE: Macau Museum of Art

ADMISSION: Free

ENQUIRIES: (853) 8791 9814

ASSEMBLAGE OF TREASURES - EXHIBITION OF THE MACAU MUSEUM COLLECTION FOR CELEBRATION OF THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY

TIME: 10am-6pm (ticket booth closes at 5:30pm; closed on Mondays)

UNTIL: February 24, 2019

VENUE: Macau Museum

ADMISSION: MOP15 (free admission on Tuesdays and on the 15th of every month)

ENQUIRIES: (853) 2835 7911

Offbeat**TROOPERS: TEEN ARRESTED FOR TAKING CONTROL OF ALASKA FLIGHT**

Authorities say a 16-year-old boy was arrested after he briefly gained control of a small aircraft during a short commercial flight over western Alaska.

KYUK-AM reports the teen was seated in the front passenger seat of the Piper Cherokee Six on a recent Yute Commuter Service flight from Napakiak to Bethel.

Alaska State Troopers say the teen grabbed the aircraft controls shortly after takeoff, causing the "plane to enter a steep climb and then a dive toward the ground."

Authorities say a woman sitting behind the teen pulled him away, and the pilot regained control.

The teen ran away after the flight returned to Napakiak, but he was arrested earlier this month in Bethel.

TV canal macau

13:00	TDM News (Repetição)
13:30	Telejornal RTPi (Diferido)
15:00	Mistura Fina
16:05	Os Compadres
16:50	Quem Quer Ser Milionário
17:45	Tempo Final
18:30	TDM Desporto (Repetição)
19:35	Os Nossos Dias Sr.2
20:30	Telejornal
21:15	TDM Entrevista
21:50	China - Portugal: 40 Anos Relações Diplomáticas
22:20	O Contrato Sr.1
23:15	TDM News
23:50	Filhos da Nação Sr.2
00:25	Telejornal (Repetição)
01:10	RTPi Directo
04:00	Liga dos Campeões: Roma - Porto (Directo)
06:00	RTPi Directo

cinema**CINETEATRO**

11 - 14 FEB

I LOVE YOU, YOU'RE PERFECT, NOW CHANGE!

ROOM 1

2:30, 4:30, 7:30, 9:30 pm

Director: Wong Cho Lam

Starring: Eric Tsang, Teresa Mo, Ivana Wong,

Language: Cantonese (Chinese & English)



MARY POPPINS RETURNS

ROOM 2

2:15, 4:45, 7:15, 9:45 pm

Director: Rob Marshall

Starring: Julie Andrews, Meryl Streep, Colin Firth

Language: English

Duration: 130min



A LIFETIME TREASURE

ROOM 3

7:30, 9:30 pm

Director: Andrew Lam Man Chung

Starring: Louis Cheung, Ivana Wong, Andrew Lam Man

Language: Cantonese (Chinese & English)

Duration: 90min



THE LEGO MOVIE 2

ROOM 3

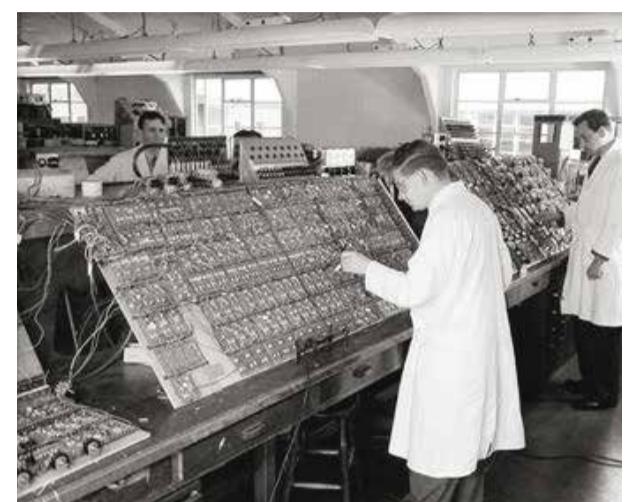
4:00, 7:45 pm

Director: Mike Mitchell

Starring: Chris Pratt, Elizabeth Banks, Will Arnett

Language: Cantonese (Chinese & English)

Duration: 106min

this day in history**1954: NEW AUTHORITY FOR ATOMIC ENERGY**

A new body has been established to control the production and development of atomic energy in the UK.

The Atomic Energy Authority Bill was introduced in the House of Commons by Minister of Work Sir David Eccles yesterday and has been published today to update legislation passed in 1946, when the first facilities were established.

Former Chief Planning Officer to the Treasury Sir Edwin Plowden, 47, will chair the new authority.

He will be joined on the Authority by between six and 10 members, who have so far been identified as:

- Sir John Cockcroft, 47, Director of the Atomic Energy Research Establishment since 1946;
- Sir Christopher Hinton, 53, Deputy Controller of Atomic Energy since 1946;
- and Sir William Penney, 44, who designed Britain's first atomic bomb.

The Atomic Energy Authority (AEA) will be responsible for producing and disposing of atomic energy and radioactive waste and with government approval it may allocate grants and loans for developing research and production.

The government will retain close links and strict control over atomic weapons.

The re-organisation is in line with the findings of the committee set up by the government last April under the chairmanship of Lord Waverley.

The Waverley Report - which is not publicly available for security reasons - formed the basis of a White Paper presented to parliament last November.

It described the growing importance of atomic energy and the variety of commercial applications for it which suggested it would be better run as a large industrial facility than by a government department.

Changes began at the beginning of the year when responsibility for atomic energy was moved from the Minister of Supply to the Lord President of the Council, Lord Salisbury, a non-departmental post.

His role is to decide government policy for the industry and to distribute large sums of money voted for it by parliament.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

The United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA) has continued to pioneer the development of nuclear energy.

It is responsible for six sites at Dounreay in Caithness, Risley in Cheshire, Sellafield in Cumbria, Winfrith in Dorset and Culham and Harwell in Oxfordshire.

Much of its current work is concerned with safely decommissioning old nuclear sites for conventional or other use.

It remains a non-departmental public body, under the direction of the Department of Trade and Industry.

The UKAEA provides the UK's input into the European fusion research project and expert advice on nuclear installations round the world.

YOUR STARS



Aries

Mar. 21-Apr. 19

Do not waste your precious time on trying to change the behavior of an annoying person this morning. You won't be able to, and he or she will only resent your efforts.



Gemini

May 21-Jun. 21

It's important for you to keep thinking about your goals, and not to get too emotional about your current situation. There's no reason to feel hopeless—in fact, you have every reason to feel hopeful!



Leo

Jul. 23-Aug. 22

Wait until you can do the research you need to do. Shop around for a better price or wait for an upcoming sale. There is no need to rush on this, so don't feel bad if you have to take your time.



Libra

Sep. 23-Oct. 22

Get ready to have your daily routine turned on its head in the best way possible. There is an exciting surprise coming your way soon, and it's going to push a few of your carefully made plans off the track.



Sagittarius

Nov. 22-Dec. 21

Whatever endurance-oriented activities you have scheduled early in the day should be pushed into the afternoon if you can—your energy won't be as strong as you would like it to be in the morning.



Aquarius

Jan. 20-Feb. 18

If you're seeking attention or recognition, appealing to the masses is not the way to go—don't try to please the lowest common denominator. Instead, target your messages.



Taurus

April 20-May 20

There have been some major changes in this pal's life, but that does not mean that she or he thinks of you any differently—or that your relationship has to shrink in any way.



Cancer

Jun. 22-Jul. 22

Good energy is extremely contagious today, so if you aren't feeling as revved up as you'd like to feel, get with the people who have the biggest smiles on their faces.



Virgo

Aug. 23-Sept. 22

You have a very generous spirit and are known as someone who is always there to offer some assistance if your friends need it. Today, you need to extend that generosity toward how you give feedback.



Scorpio

Oct. 23 - Nov. 21

Let the people you care about know how much you care about them. Send some sweet emails or make some phone calls. Put some happiness out there, and it will come back to you.



Capricorn

Dec. 22-Jan. 19

The competition might be intimidating today, but you have one thing that none of your adversaries has: creativity. Use it to your advantage, and it will never let you down.



Pisces

Feb. 19-Mar. 20

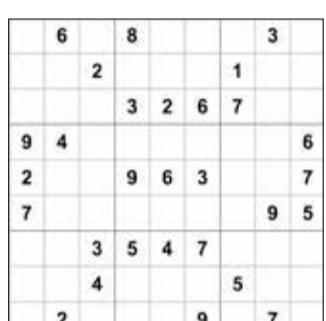
Your empathy is turned up to the max, and you may suddenly have the urge to become someone's teacher or mentor. It makes sense because there is someone in your life who could use a pointer or two.

THE BORN LOSER by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

Easy



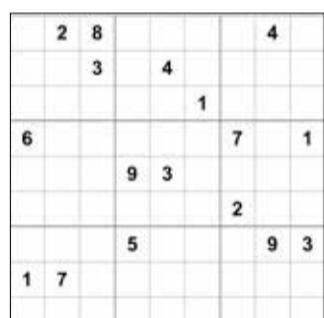
Easy+



Medium



Hard



WEATHER

CHINA

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
Beijing	-6	-3	cloudy/flurry
Harbin	-22	-9	clear
Tianjin	-4	-1	overcast/flurry
Urumqi	-16	-6	clear
Xi'an	-5	7	clear
Lhasa	-5	11	cloudy/clear
Chengdu	2	11	cloudy
Chongqing	8	13	overcast
Kunming	6	21	clear
Nanjing	0	6	cloudy/moderate rain
Shanghai	3	9	overcast/moderate rain
Wuhan	0	4	drizzle
Hangzhou	3	8	drizzle/moderate rain
Taipei	17	23	drizzle/cloudy
Guangzhou	12	20	cloudy
Hong Kong	18	22	cloudy

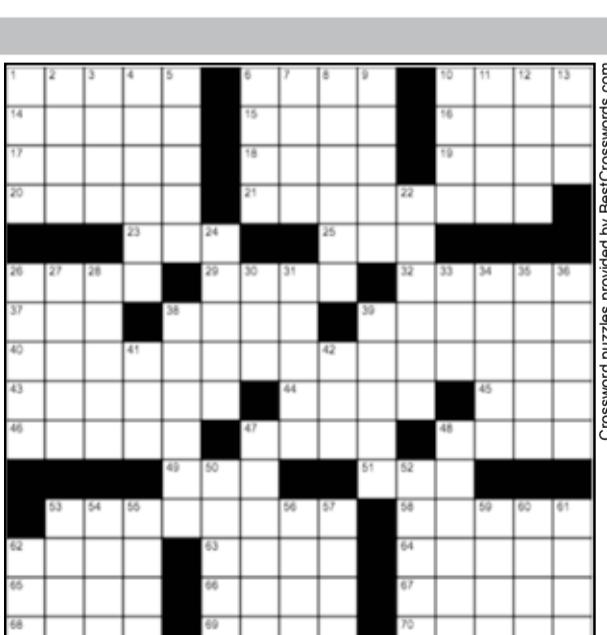
WORLD

Moscow	-3	2	flurry/sleet
Frankfurt	2	4	drizzle
Paris	3	5	drizzle
London	3	10	cloudy/overcast
New York	-2	4	sleet/drizzle

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS: 1- Talons; 6- Swell; 10- Endure; 14- Goddesses of the seasons; 15- Strong ___ ox; 16- Gen. Bradley; 17- Solo; 18- Gambling haven; 19- Liver fluid; 20- Time off; 21- Catamaran, for one; 23- PC panic button; 25- ___ Paulo; 26- Asterisk; 29- Vow; 32- Championship; 37- Sea eagle; 38- Ultimatum word; 39- Intense dislike; 40- In spite of; 43- Coercion; 44- Impose, as a tax; 45- Filled pastry crust; 46- Dutch painter Jan; 47- Identical; 48- Sawbucks; 49- Legal conclusion?; 51- Heston's org.; 53- Make again; 58- Troy story; 62- Round number?; 63- ___ go bragh!; 64- Curt; 65- Shakespearean villain; 66- Chilled; 67- For want of ___; 68- Story line; 69- Comin' ___ the Rye; 70- Pilfer;

DOWN: 1- Blacken; 2- "Damn Yankees" character; 3- Elvis's middle name; 4- Roam; 5- Prophets; 6- Bloody conflicts; 7- Cruising; 8- Disappear; 9- ___ Gay; 10- Timber wolf; 11- What ___ mind reader?; 12- Preservative; 13- Uno + due; 22- Plant science; 24- Young male horses; 26- Dispatches; 27- Freshwater fish; 28- Cave; 30- Volcanic fallout; 31- Inventor Nikola; 33- ___ be an honor; 34- Nonsense; 35- Bolshevik leader; 36- Peripheries; 38- Disney honcho; 39- Refuge; 41- Itsy-bitsy; 42- Pro ___; 47- Quest; 48- Aptitude; 50- Now you ___; 52- Rudner and Moreno; 53- Actual; 54- Thus; 55- Codger; 56- Stadium level; 57- Opposite of ecto-; 59- Dies ___; 60- Bhutan's continent; 61- Big name in PCs; 62- Pizzazz;



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PJ (Open line)	993	Telephone	Report 1000
PJ (Picket)	28 557 775	Electricity	Report 28 339 922
PSP	28 573 333	Macau Daily Times	28 716 081
Customs	28 559 944	S. J. Hospital	28 313 731
Kiang Wu Hospital	28 371 333	Commission Against	
Corruption (CCAC)	28326 300	IACM	28 387 333
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HKD 5,291 sq ft
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Ref: 18085559

Nova Taipa Gardens, T21
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2,500 sq ft / HKD 14.5 M
HKD 5,800 sq ft
Four Bedroom Apartment
Ref: 18115570

Taipa, Nam Long
Taipa
550 sq ft / HKD 4.08 M
HKD 7,418 sq ft
Two Bedroom Apartment
Ref: 18095561

WA BAO, TAIPA
Taipa
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HKD 8,333 sq ft
Two Bedroom Apartment
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AP PHOTO



FOOTBALL

Real Madrid enjoying winning run as Champions League returns

Ciaran Fahey

THREE-TIME defending champion Real Madrid appears to have hit its stride again just in time for the return of the Champions League.

The knockout stages begin today [Wednesday, 4:00am] with Manchester United hosting Paris Saint-Germain and Porto going to Roma in the first leg of the round of 16 games.

Madrid, confident after six wins and one draw from its last seven games across all competitions, visits Ajax tomorrow, when the Spanish side will hope to record its seventh successive win over the Dutch club.

Also tomorrow, Tottenham hosts Bundesliga leader Borussia Dortmund.

Madrid's hopes of claiming a record-extending fourth straight Champions League title appeared fanciful earlier this season after a run of five losses in seven matches across all competitions, culminating in the 5-1 defeat at Barcelona that left the side ninth in the Spanish league and saw Julen Lopetegui dismissed as coach.

Lopetegui's successor, Santiago Solari, endured a difficult start but he finally appears to have turned the side around with a run of good results.

Saturday's 3-1 win at Atletico Madrid moved Solari's team into second place in the Spanish league, just a few days after Madrid took a 1-1 draw at Barcelo-

na in the first leg of their Copa del Rey semifinal.

Solari, a member of Madrid's 2002 Champions League-winning team, has got Croatia midfielder Luka Modric back to his best after his lackluster start to the season. The 2018 Ballon d'Or winner was a pivotal figure in the win over Atletico.

Solari's decision to promote young players like 18-year-old Brazilian Vinicius Junior and 22-year-old Spanish left back Sergio Reguilón has also paid off.

While Madrid has been improving, Ajax has been going in the other direction. Its defense has struggled since the Eredivisie resumed after its winter break, conceding four in a draw with Heerenveen and crumbling even further in a 6-2 defeat at rival Feyenoord.

Ajax bounced back with a 6-0 win over VVV Venlo but slumped to a 1-0 defeat at Heracles Almelo on Saturday.

Ajax midfielder Frenkie de Jong will get a taste of things to come against Madrid after agreeing to transfer to Barcelona next season in a deal that could cost 86 million euros (\$99 million). De Jong was substituted late in the second half Saturday, but did not appear to be seriously injured.

Wednesday, 04:00am
Man Utd v PSG
H 2.4, D 3.54, A 3.2

When Jose Mourinho was fired in December, it looked like

Manchester United could need to win the Champions League as the only way to qualify for the tournament next season.

But Ole Gunnar Solskjær has reignited United's top-four challenge since being appointed manager until the end of the season.

Lifting the European Cup, just as Solskjær did as a player with United in 1999, would make it hard for the club not to hand the job to the Norwegian on a permanent basis.

United was 11 points off fourth place when Mourinho was fired, but the side has only dropped two points since then, and beat Fulham 3-0 on Saturday.

PSG coach Thomas Tuchel has a major dilemma with star forwards Neymar and Edinson Cavani both out injured. Tuchel has to decide whether to pair French league top-scorer Kylian Mbappé with the ineffective Eric-Maxim Choupo-Moting — who has scored only one goal in 12 league matches and was poor in Saturday's 1-0 win over Bordeaux — in a 4-4-2 against United. Tuchel could push Julian Draxler further up in a 4-5-1, with Draxler effectively operating as a playmaker behind Mbappé.

Draxler could also find himself in a central midfield role if Marco Verratti is unable to play against United. Verratti only just returned from a sprained ankle and played about an hour of the game against Bordeaux.

If Verratti doesn't play, Tuchel is likely to put central defender Marquinhos as one of his two holding midfielders along with either Draxler or the newly signed Leandro Paredes.

Wednesday, 04:00am
Roma v Porto
H 2.1, D 3.5, A 4.95

The trip to Rome should hold no fear for Porto after an impressive campaign so far. Group D winner Porto is undefeated in the Champions League since losing to Liverpool in the first leg of last season's round of 16, while it hasn't lost in the Portuguese league since a 1-0 defeat at Benfica in October.

Porto has won its last five Champions League matches to match a club record and claimed 16 points — more than any other team — in the group phase.

Roma had a seven-game winning European run at the Stadio Olimpico until it was ended by a 2-0 defeat to Madrid in Group G.

Thursday, 04:00am
Tottenham v Dortmund
H 2.38, D 3.6, A 3.25

Dortmund's Champions League ambitions could be undermined by its propensity to concede late goals in games most sides would consider wrapped up and won.

Dortmund squandered a 3-0 lead to draw 3-3 with

Hoffenheim in the Bundesliga on Saturday, allowing its league lead to shrink to five points. Lucien Favre's side travels to London having failed to win any of its last three games, and it has injury worries over captain Marco Reus.

Reus, Dortmund's best player this season with 13 goals and nine assists in 19 league games, has a muscular injury picked up in the German Cup exit to Werder Bremen last week.

Tottenham is definitely without top striker Harry Kane due to ligament damage in his left ankle and midfielder Dele Alli due to a hamstring problem.

But at least the side has Christian Eriksen, who created the opener before scoring himself as Tottenham warmed up for Dortmund's visit with a 3-1 win over Leicester on Sunday.

Though it was third-placed Tottenham's fourth successive Premier League win, coach Mauricio Pochettino was unhappy his stretched squad had to play a day after Dortmund.

"I cannot understand why we're playing with a massive disadvantage," said Pochettino, whose side is chasing a first trophy since 2008. "Twenty-four hours in this type of competition, the last 16, is a massive disadvantage."

The game will be played at Wembley as Tottenham's new stadium at White Hart Lane is delayed.

opinion

Our Desk

Renato Marques



FORECASTS FOR A 'PIG' YEAR

To start with, I must say that my knowledge on topics such as astrology, horoscopes, the zodiac and similar things is absolutely null. In fact, my absolute disbelief in these things is such that I consider them solely in the context of amusement and entertainment.

Having said that, I believe I am the right person to bring you forecasts for the prosperous (as it always is) Year of the Pig which has just started and has already brought joy and fortune to all Macau residents through a flood of over one million (who knows really) visitors, who were said to have visited this little corner of the universe in a week.

If you are one of those (few) that did not feel any joy or fortune from such a (friendly) invasion, I suggest you reset your system by pressing "Ctrl + Alt + Greater Bay Area." When the system reboots, make sure you choose the option "Belt and Road" and tick the small square under it to accept all the conditions attached without reading them. Ok, now we are all ready to go!

For the Year of the Pig, I forecast that although the number of tourists has exponentially risen, the retail sector will continue to struggle, complaining of high rental fees and difficulties hiring manpower, among other things.

This year, we will continue to see taxi drivers overcharging, refusing transportation and locking passengers inside taxis as hostages.

Under the sign of prosperity brought by the Pig, our health system will also continue to be the "best in the world," so says our Secretary for Social Affairs and Culture.

Another of the many metrics on which Macau will continue to be world's number one this year is gaming revenue. This is an industry that keeps growing according to the words of everyone involved, although in the eyes of those not involved it does not seem to be that way exactly – a fact that is easily explained by a lack of knowledge in the field from those who are just observers and outsiders.

Without asking the opinion of any Feng Shui specialist, I can still forecast that our real estate market will continue to be unbalanced, and that real estate agents will also continue to invade our social networks with amazing bargains that only an Arabian Prince or Ali Baba could afford.

Moving onto legislation, I dare to forecast that all bills proposed by the government this year will pass without hassle at the Legislative Assembly, with just a few remarks by one or two lawmakers who will then vote in favor of the bill's approval anyway.

By the same token, I can predict that lawmaker Mak Soi Kun will continue to bring up the topic of "water infiltration" as often as Zheng Anting will continue to mention the government's inability to solve the case of the "Pearl Horizon buyers."

Last but not least, let's not forget that the Year of the Pig is the year of elections for the new Chief Executive. In this matter, I can forecast right now that the sole candidate running will be pronounced the winner, and approved by the Central Government and will do an amazing job leading the fate of this Special Administrative Region to further regional integration, to better participation and influence in the "Greater Bay Area" and to a relevant role in the "Belt and Road Initiative."

If you do not agree with these forecasts, please reboot your system as many times as necessary throughout the year.

P.S.: I still wanted to talk about the LRT, but unfortunately there was some issue that caused a delay and an added budget so I could not finish that part on time.

THE BUZZ BENFICA SCORES 10, BREAKS DECADES-OLD RECORD

Benfica became the first team since 1965 to score 10 goals in a Portuguese top-flight match as they thrashed struggling Nacional. The Lisbon giants, who moved one point behind leaders Porto, led after 33 seconds through Alex Grimaldo. Haris Seferovic scored twice but they were only

3-0 up at the break.

Jonas' last-minute goal, his second of the game, made it 10-0 after strikes from Joao Felix, Pizzi, Ferro, Ruben Dias, Jonas and Rafa Silva.

Benfica were also the last team to achieve the feat, beating the now defunct Seixal 11-3 in 1964-65 season.

Station	Air quality
Roadside	20-40 Good
High Density Residential Area	20-40 Good
Ambient	20-40 Good

SOURCE: DSMG

WORLD BRIEFS



HUNGARY U.S.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is in Hungary on the first leg of a five-nation European tour during which he will raise concerns about China and Russia's growing influence in Central Europe. Pompeo was meeting in Budapest yesterday with nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban (pictured) and other senior officials to stress the importance of promoting democracy and the rule of law.

ISRAEL The Associated Press exposed an undercover operation targeting at least six individuals who have raised questions about the use of an Israeli firm's spyware. More on p14-15



SYRIA Fierce fighting is underway between U.S.-backed Syrian forces and the Islamic State group around the extremists' last foothold in eastern Syria, with the besieged militants fighting back using suicide car bombs, snipers and booby traps, a Syrian war monitor and a Kurdish news agency said.



UK The economy slowed last year to its weakest growth rate since the global financial crisis as mounting uncertainty over Brexit weighed on businesses and kept a lid on their investments, official figures showed yesterday. For 2018 as a whole, the economy grew by 1.4 percent, its lowest rate since 2009, when it contracted by 4.2 percent in the wake of the global financial crisis.

AP PHOTO



Nasser Karimi, Tehran

WAVING Iranian flags, chanting "Death to America" and burning U.S. and Israeli flags, hundreds of thousands of people poured out onto the streets across Iran yesterday, marking the date that's considered victory day in the country's 1979 Islamic Revolution.

On Feb. 11 that year, Iran's military stood down after days of street battles, allowing the revolutionaries to sweep across the country while the government of U.S.-backed Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi resigned and the Islamic Republic was born.

In Tehran, crowds streamed in the rain from a dozen of the capital's far-flung neighborhoods to mass in central Tehran Azadi, or Freedom Square waving Iranian flags and chanting "Death to America" — a chant that has been standard fare at anti-U.S. rallies across Iran.

Chants of "Death to Israel" and "Death to Britain" followed, and demonstrators burned U.S. and Israeli flags. Iranian state TV, which said millions participated in the celebrations, ran archive footage of the days of the uprising and played revolutionary songs. It later broadcast footage showing crowds across this country of 80 million.

The 6-mile-long downtown Enghelab, or Revolution Street, in Tehran was decorated with huge balloons as loudspeakers blared out revolutionary and nationalist

songs to encourage people to join the rallies.

Every year, the anniversary festivities start on Feb. 1 — the day Khomeini returned home from France after 14 years in exile to become the supreme leader as Shiite clerics took power — and continue for 10 days, climaxing on Feb. 11.

This year's anniversary comes as tensions rise with the United States and Iran grapples with the aftermath of President Donald Trump's pullout last May from the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers and tough U.S. economic sanctions, re-imposed in November.

Speaking from a podium in central Tehran, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani addressed the crowds for nearly 45 minutes, lashing out at Iran's enemies — America and Israel — and claiming their efforts to "bring down" Iranians through sanctions will not succeed.

"The presence of people in this celebration means that plots by the enemies ... have been defused," Rouhani said. "They will not achieve their ill-omened aims."

In the backdrop to yesterday's marches, the military displayed Iranian-made missiles, which authorities showcase every year during anniversary celebrations and which now have a range of up to 2,000 kilometers (1,250 miles) and are able to Israel and U.S. military bases in the region.

Over the past decade, Iran has frequently test-fired and displayed missiles, sent se-

veral short-lived satellites into orbit and in 2013 launched a monkey into space.

Washington alleges Iran's launches defy a U.N. Security Council resolution calling on Iran to undertake no activity related to ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons. Tehran denies the charge, insisting its satellite launches and rocket tests do not have a military component.

"We do not and we will not ask permission for producing any type of missiles from anybody," Rouhani said in his speech, though he stressed that Iran would "continue constructive engagement" with the international community.

Rouhani also promised the crowds that Iran would overcome the economic hardship amid the country's spiraling economy and the newly imposed U.S. sanctions.

Elsewhere, the head of the elite Quds Force of Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guard, Gen. Qassem Soleimani, attended the rally in the southern city of Kerman.

In Tehran, 27-year-old medical student Hossein Hosseinpour, walked with his wife and their 18-month son Amir Ali. He said he wanted to teach his son to support the revolution. "I see a bright future for him and our nation," Hosseinpour said.

Last week, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei defended the "Death to America" chants, saying they are aimed at America's leaders such as Trump and not its people. AP