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GOODBYE SANTA MARIA



China said it had agreed with the U.S. to take up climate change and a handful of other issues, a sign of small but possible progress at recently concluded talks that were otherwise marked by acrimonious public exchanges over the divisions between the world's two largest economies. However, in a sign that differences will be difficult to overcome, U.S. officials said no formal agreements had been reached on resuming any dialogues or starting new initiatives.



Philippines The government expressed concern after spotting more than 200 Chinese fishing vessels it believed were crewed by militias at a reef claimed by both countries in the South China Sea, but it did not immediately lodge a protest. A government body overseeing the disputed region said that the vessels were seen moored at Whitsun Reef. It released pictures of the vessels lying side by side in one of the most hotly contested areas of the strategic waterway.



Philippine troops killed an Abu Sayyaf rebel commander blamed for years of ransom kidnappings and yesterday rescued the last of his four Indonesian captives, the military said. Marines wounded Amajan Sahidjuan in a gunbattle Saturday night and he later died from loss of blood on Kalupag Island in the southernmost province of Tawi Tawi. Two other militants managed to flee and dragged along the last of four Indonesian hostages but troops finally rescued him.

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MACAU HOTEL ASSOCIATION

HOTELS TO 'STAND TOGETHER' ON GOV'T'S STIMULUS PACKAGE

LYNZY VALLES*

THE Macau Hotel Association (MHA) is set to meet tomorrow to discuss the possible promotional roll-outs it could offer in line with the upcoming e-voucher scheme implemented by the government from May.

Under the government's third stimulus scheme, each resident can receive a one-off MOP200 to subsidize their staycation.

According to Rutger Verschuren, president of the Board of Directors of MHA, the hotels are "very pleased with the rollout of benefits for Macau residents, which will surely support our business, as well as other Macau business[es]."

However, the executive also stressed that the majority of hotels are still facing serious losses, despite a slow recovery taking place.

"Hotel patrons should not be misled by thinking that all is okay when seeing busy restaurants, as food and beverage business is usually not very profitable, unlike room business which has been hit as never seen before," Verschuren told the Times.



Though hotel occupancies are on the rise, the room rates are a fraction of what they were in 2019.

Latest data shows that in January, the average occupancy rate of guest rooms in the city stood at 40.3%, securing a total of 446,900 hotel visitors – a 40.7% plunge when compared to January 2020 before the beginning of the pandemic in Macau.

During the same month in 2019, hotel rooms occupancy were at 92.9%.

With such plunge, the association cannot merely wait for the government's instruction on its requirement from the hotels with the stimulus package program.

"So far we understand that the program is still being reviewed and revised, so we have to wait a little," said Verschuren.

"As soon as we are fully briefed on exactly what the government requires from the hotels and how the program will be rolled out, we will enthusiastically and immediately participate. You can imagine that the price war among the hotels is raging and [businesses] are competing among each other for business - but with this government stimulus we stand together," he added.

REVIVING THE INDUSTRY THROUGH STAYCATIONS

Cheung Kin Chung, president of the Macau Hoteliers and Innkeepers Association, recently remarked that the government's stimulus plan regarding hotel staycations and local tours will promote the revival of the industry.

Local tours are a crucial part of the government's latest stimulus scheme, which was announced last Monday following the popularity of last year's measures. The government added staycation incentives to the scheme this year in order to also benefit the hospitality industry.

Cheung stressed that the policy will likely incentivize spending by residents and facilitate the hospitality industry's recovery from the downturn that began last year.

According to Cheung, the average hotel occupancy rate has risen to 50% already. He expects the rate to further climb by about 10% in response to stimulus measures.

In response to the government's stimulus scheme, according to Cheung, the industry will very likely offer more attractive staycation packages to residents. For example, for the price of a night's stay, the customers may receive coupons or reward.

Moreover, hotels may work with other industries such as catering and entertainment to offer cross-industry privileges to benefit different industries and further incentivize spending.

He highlighted the fact that although the hospitality industry was severely hit by the travel restrictions and economic downturn, it has been closely following the government's health measures and encouragement to retain its employees.

Last year, under the Macao Government Tourism Office's (MGTO) "Macao Ready Go! Local Tours" scheme, each Macau resident was sponsored with a total of MOP560 to join two tours, with MOP280 allocated to each. The 15 itineraries in the scheme are separated into two categories – six for "Community-based Tours" and nine for "Leisure Tours".

*WITH ADDITIONAL REPORTING FROM ANTHONY LAM

GOV'T TO OPTIMIZE CRITICIZED E-VOUCHER SCHEME

THE government is slated to optimize issuance of vouchers via locally-recognised electronic payment platforms.

This comes after several local groups have called for the government to improve the forthcoming e-voucher scheme, part of the third round of stimulus package.

Many social media users have also expressed similar sentiments regarding the scheme since its announcement on March 15. A significant number were not happy with the complicated model of the scheme, as well as the spend-for-reward model of the shopping incentive.

On Sunday, lawmaker Au Kam San will lead a demonstration to call for a change to the scheme. The Macau Gaming Staff Rights Association has already submitted a letter to the Chief Executive expressing the group's dissatisfaction.

On Saturday, in a statement, the Government Information Bureau announced, "The Secretary for Economy and Finance and his team have met recently with representatives of community associations in a bid to garner their opinions regarding the e-voucher proposal."

The proposal was put forward as part of a 2021 scheme aiming to support employment and stabilize the economy. "The government is aware that members of the public had varied views regarding the e-voucher proposal."

However, the government added that the 2021 scheme, as a whole, "takes as its reference point the new economic model in the region. This includes boosting the internal cycle, particularly in relation to encouraging domestic demand," while last year's priority had been to prevent stagnation of the economy. LV

MACAU LEGEND ANTICIPATES UP TO HKD2 BILLION LOSS FOR 2020

HONEY TSANG

MACAU Legend Development Ltd is anticipating a substantial financial loss of between HKD1.9 billion to HKD2 billion in the full year of 2020, according to a statement filed last week.

The expected loss of 2020 represents a significant year-on-year escalation in losses. In 2019, the group recorded an estimated total loss of just HKD190 million.

Chan Weng Lin, the group's co-chairman, executive director, and chief executive officer, stated that the significant decrease in revenue was attributed to "the social distancing measures and travel restrictions imposed by government authorities in response to the Covid-19 pandemic" in 2020.

It was also exacerbated by "impairment losses recognized for the certain business unit(s) due to the adverse changes in the economic situation under the Covid-19 pandemic," he added.

Chan said the group has so far implemented "various mitigating measures" to cushion against the impact of the pandemic, such as active measures to control operating costs and expenses. The group is still finalizing the figures for its 2020 annual results and stressed that the estimated tally is only gauged by "preliminary review" by the firm's management, and has not yet been reviewed or audited by the firm's independent auditor.

Locally, Macau Legend operates the Macau Fisherman's Wharf resort and three casinos - Landmark Casino, Babylon Casino and Legend Palace Casino. These are operated under a "service agreement" with Macau gaming operator SJM Holdings Ltd.

Abroad, the group has funded the development of the Savan Resorts Hotel and Entertainment Complex in Laos.

Earlier in February, the New Macau Gaming Staff Rights Association, representing some of the group's casino staff, accused the casinos of forcing them to accept consumption vouchers as a substitute for their yearly bonus or be subject to demotion.

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GRAND PRIX MUSEUM

Ticketing system to go online today

HONEY TSANG

THE long-overdue Macao Grand Prix Museum, now six times larger than its former venue upon the completion of the expansion project, has initiated its trial operation period. Today, the museum's ticketing system will go online for visitors.

The debut unveiling of the museum, prior to the trial operation, was organized for Macau's media delegation by the Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO) on March 19.

Director of the MGTO Maria Helena de Senna Fernandes revealed at the media briefing that the authorities will coordinate the opening of the museum with the MOP120 million domestic travel scheme, part of the government's third round of stimulus packages.

"We are now in discussion with local accommodation industry and other [tourism-related] sectors to pursue some partnerships, to launch some combo tourism packages comprising both accommodation and museum ticket offerings," Fernandes told the media.

The total cost for the renovation of the museum amounted to approximately MOP479 million, Deputy Director Ricky Hoi revealed. This breaks down to MOP379 million in expansion construction, MOP69 million in hardware facilities & supporting services and MOP30 million in exhibits.

The museum final costs are a significant saving of public money given the government's proposed budget of MOP830 million, itself revised from the preliminary budget of around MOP300 million.

The expanded venue consists of a total floor area of around 16,000 square meters. The museum can now accept a "reasonable" visitor flow of 568 persons at a time, and 2,272 daily. Each visit will be limited to two hours.

However, in accordance with the social distancing guidance of the Health Bureau, the upper visitation limits for each time and every day will be halved for the



time being, he stressed.

The four-story museum features interactive experiences, brighter lighting, a new escalator, a spiral staircase and Macau's first six-ton machine-room-less lift glass lift, designed to transport motor exhibits from the basement car park to the museum floor.

The museum is eco-conscious in its design, equipped with energy management systems and 446 solar panels on rooftops. In addition, it provides a series of all-inclusive facilities, such as a tactile exhibits zone and an induction loop system for patrons with visual and hearing impairment to have a barrier-free touring experience.

Some facilities, including two race simulators and several wax sculptures of racers, have not ope-

ned yet. These facilities require the skills of technicians from Hong Kong and other places to assemble and maintain, who, Hoi explained, have been unable to come to Macau due to travel restrictions.

When asked if the Grand Prix museum would offer free admission to Macau ID holders during the trial period due to the financial strain of the pandemic, Fernandes said there is no plan to provide complimentary tickets for local residents. She added that the new experience will be worth the price.

The general public can register and schedule their visits via the online booking system for weekends and public holidays in April, and across the entire month of May.

During the trial operation period in April and May, the ticket

price for each Macau ID holder and non-Macau resident will be MOP20 and MOP40, respectively. Children aged 12 and under and elderly people 65 and above, among some other groups, will be granted free admission.

Since the museum's founding in 1993 in commemoration of the 40th-anniversary celebration of the Macau Grand Prix, it has undergone one other renovation and expansion in 2003. This year marks its second and largest upgrade by far, Fernandes said.

The museum was closed in July 2017 for refurbishment. The Museum was originally slated to open at the end of 2018. However, it had been pushed back several times due to technical issues and the pandemic.

OVER 36,000 RECEIVE COVID-19 JAB

A total of 75,587 people have made appointments for the Covid-19 vaccination, the Novel Coronavirus Response and Coordination Center announced. Of these, 36,459 vaccinations have been completed as of 4 p.m. yesterday. Since the start of vaccination, 97 adverse event notifications, including one serious adverse event, have been reported. Health authorities continue to call on residents to make appointments for vaccinations to achieve a Covid-19 herd immunity in the SAR.

QUARANTINE FOR HK ARRIVALS REDUCED TO 14 DAYS

People arriving in Macau from Hong Kong and who have been in the neighboring region for at least the prior two weeks will now see their quarantine time in medical observation in Macau reduced from 21 to 14 days, the Novel Coronavirus Response and Coordination Center announced in a statement. The center also noted that after the 14-day isolation period, these people will continue to be subjected to the seven days of self-health management.

19 SUSPECTED ILLEGAL WORKERS IN FEB

The Public Security Police Force reported that a total of 19 suspected illegal workers were detected last month. This was following both joint and sole operations against illegal workers launched by a different bureau. The inspections were carried out in approximately 373 construction sites, private flats, commercial and industrial establishments, among others.

Tourism fares well in March, still needs local boost: Fernandes

The daily visitor arrival in March is satisfactory, but the local tourism market still needs the boost offered by local residents to recover during the pandemic, stated the director of the MGTO Maria Helena de Senna Fernandes at the trial opening ceremony of the Ma-

cao Grand Prix Museum on March 19.

"March has fared pretty well in terms of visitor arrivals. The daily visitor arrivals in March peaked at around 31,000 on one day," Fernandes said in her address to the media.

As of now, the tourist group visa to Macau has

not been reinstated by the central government. Fernandes posited that the market still requires local spending for a much-needed boost.

Fernandes called on local residents to actively participate in the MOP120 million domestic travel program, part of the third

round of stimulus package announced by the government last week.

Through the aforementioned program, Macau residents will be granted a subsidy of MOP280 and MOP200 to encourage spending on domestic tours and local accommodation, respectively, to

support the city's tourism industry.

The scheme is also intended to encourage local tourism companies to conceive more novel travel offerings to provide a more diverse travel experience to local residents.

When asked by the media if Macau was planning

to form a quarantine-free travel bubble with other low-risk countries and regions, Fernandes said there is currently no plan to do so at the MGTO level.

Last week, Taiwan and Palau inked an agreement to launch a travel bubble with each other, starting from April 1. HT

SOCIAL HOUSING

CCAC RULES OUT MALFEASANCE DURING ILHA VERDE FIRE SHUTTERS REPLACEMENT

LYNZY VALLES

THE Commission Against Corruption (CCAC) said that its investigation did not find evidence that any departments or authorities had committed any illegal acts during the replacement of the fire shutters of Edifício do Bairro da Ilha Verde.

Between the end of 2018 and the beginning of 2019, the fire shutters inside the underground car park and the podium of the economic housing complex Edifício do Bairro da Ilha Verde failed to meet the relevant requirements and did not pass inspection. Following inter-departmental discussion, it was decided that 100 fire shutters would be replaced. The cost of the works amounted to over MOP12 million. The incident raised social concern and sparked queries as to whether unlawful acts were involved.

In a recently released statement, CCAC said that there was no legal violation in the procedure of awarding the works.

However, the corruption watchdog questioned the necessity of replacing the fire shutters. The



watchdog reported that the relevant departments and/or authorities were not found to have endeavoured to look for solutions through other channels. As a result, the newly installed fire shutters worth over MOP4 million were replaced wastefully.

The CCAC also stated that the issue "significantly reflected the problem of coordination and cooperation among public departments."

"It seems that the construction project of Edifício do Bairro da Ilha Verde was completed in an unorganised manner during the phases of vetting and approval, construction and rectification," said the CCAC. The bureau added that the Housing Bureau

(IH) failed to rigorously perform its role of coordination as vested by the Economic Housing Law. "The Land, Public Works and Transport Bureau (DSSOPT) and the Fire Services Bureau (CB) had all successively failed to inform the Infrastructure Development Office (GDI) or the IH concerning their policy on the standards for fire resistant class of fire shutters," it stated.

During the investigation, the CCAC obtained documents and information from the IH, DSSOPT, CB, GDI and private entities. The full report, titled "Investigation Report on the Fire Shutters of Edifício do Bairro da Ilha Verde," has already been submitted to the Chief Executive.

OBITUARY

Aida de Jesus, 'Godmother of Macanese Cuisine'

RENATO MARQUES

AIDA de Jesus, one of the most recognizable figures of the Macanese community passed away last week at the age of 105, leaving behind a legacy and the earned title of "Godmother of Macanese Cuisine."

Commencing her cooking life in the kitchens of Hotel Lisboa and the Sintra Hotel, Dona Aida, as she was widely known in Macau, put herself to the task of keeping local roots alive through food when she founded the restaurant Riquexó in the 1980s.

Besides keeping Macanese traditional values alive through the original flavors of Macanese cuisine, Dona Aida was also keen to retain her heritage through communication. She



has kept the Macanese dialect "Patuá" alive by speaking it and supporting the activities of those who were striving to preserve it.

Miguel Senna Fernandes, lawyer, and leader of the Patuá theatre group "Dóci Papiaçám di Macau" said, "She was

a housewife who influenced Macanese cuisine, to the point of it becoming her symbol." He believes that at 105, Dona Aida departed from this world "satisfied, because she left a handful of talented people with the tough task of continuing [the tradition of] Macanese gastronomy."

Dona Aida passed away last Wednesday from natural causes at the Conde de São Januário Hospital Centre.

She is survived by her daughters Sónia Palmer and Carolina de Jesus and her son Manuel António de Jesus, as well as numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

A funeral mass will be held today at 8 p.m. at the Casa Mortuária Diocesana de Macau in her memory.

45.6% OF LOCAL ENTERPRISES PESSIMISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE EXPORT MARKET: SURVEY

HONEY TSANG

AROUND 45.6% of local companies surveyed have expressed that they are pessimistic about the outlook for the export market for the coming six months, the Economic and Technological Development Bureau (DSED) revealed on the basis of the latest survey data.

The percentage of companies who were optimistic about the future market dropped from 51.6% in the third quarter (Q3) of 2020 to 28.9% in the fourth quarter (Q4) 2020. However, the Q4 tally represented an improvement of 13% points year-on-year.

Just 0.4% of companies said they believed the export market would "significantly improve," while another 28.5% thought it would "slightly improve."

Meanwhile, the average monthly duration of orders received by the local companies surveyed was 3.1 months in Q4 of 2020, up 0.3 months from the 2.8 months recorded in the third quarter of 2020.

The duration of orders for the pharmaceutical, clothing manufacturing, electronics/

electrical, and other industries lasted for 4.9, 3, 2.8 and 2.5 months, respectively.

In general, the surveyed enterprises regarded the United States and the mainland as relatively superior markets for exports.

The confidence of local manufacturers towards the export outlook for the next six months has declined in Q4 2020, quarter-to-quarter. The DSED said the drop indicated that the Covid-19 pandemic is still having an impact upon the global economy.

Employment in export manufacturing grew by 1.3% in Q4 2020 from Q3 2020, yet down 12.4% year-over-year.

Around 39.7% of the surveyed companies said that they still face a manpower shortage, an uptick from the previous quarter and the same period last year. This problem in the clothing manufacturing industry was found to be the most pronounced.

Insufficient orders, price competition, rising prices of raw materials, and shortages of manpower are the most concerning issues for the enterprises over the coming three months.

GBA

CULTURE, TOURISM PLAN MAPS OUT 'CLEAR DIRECTIONS' FOR CITY'S INDUSTRY

THE Macau SAR government has affirmed that the Culture and Tourism Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area has mapped out "clear directions for the concerted development of the cultural and tourism industries," as cited in a statement issued by the Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO).

The government has agreed with the principles raised by the plan about innovation, regional cooperation as well as integration between the fields of culture and tourism, which will "serve a major guideline for Macau's initiatives to push forward cultural and tourism development in the future."

Such statements were made in a recent meeting in Guangzhou, which was the first meeting held since the launch of the plan.

The meeting aims to enhance communication and colla-

borative efforts in putting the plan into effective practice.

Within the framework under the tutelage of the Leading Group for the Development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, the related departments of Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macau will "enhance coordination and communication."

Convened in a hybrid online and offline format, the meeting gathered representatives of the National Development and Reform Commission; the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China; Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office of the State Council; among others. Representatives from the cultural and tourism authorities of the nine Pearl River Delta cities were also present.

The "Culture and Tourism Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area" was promulgated on December 24, 2020. LV



Exclusive license endows SMEs with business opportunities

HIGH-QUALITY food products have always been the main focus in the food and beverage industry, especially after the outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic. Some local small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have succeeded in obtaining exclusive agency licenses to well-known overseas brands, and thus gained the attention of local large-scale enterprises.

7 Stars International Food mainly deals in frozen foods such as frozen bakery products. The company targets hotels and the catering industry. Also, 7 Stars is the exclusive agent for Simplot French fries' products in Macao. The brand is long-established in the U.S. and can be seen in many fast-food chains.

COOPERATION BEGINS

Sands China continues to amass high-quality branded products from around the world. Aware that 7 Stars obtained the exclusive license for Simplot, Sands took the initiative to approach the SME and their cooperation officially began at the end of 2019.

"Sands China purchased around 10 kinds of products including French fries, hash browns, sauces, and other semi-finished products from us," advised Tony Cheong, Managing Director of 7 Stars.

After a year of cooperation, Sands is satisfied with its su-

ppplier, according to Sands China's procurement and supply chain senior supervisor Alex Mok, assistant manager Bella Pun and executive chef Alen Chow.

"The services, prices and quality of the products provided by the company are very good and stable. In terms of food procurement, Sands China's primary concern is food safety. 7 Star International Food has high standards in storage, transportation, and distribution facilities. What's more, 7 Stars has obtained HACCP certification, which adds to their reliability. In terms of product quality, we have had no problems since our cooperation began."

HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point) is an internationally accepted technique for preventing microbiological, chemical and physical contamination along the food supply chain. Believing that the core competitiveness of an enterprise lies in its products and services, 7 Stars obtained the certification in 2018. "We require strict adherence to our own service quality before customers put forth their requests," said the farsighted entrepreneur Cheong.

PROFESSIONAL TEAM, ADVANCED EQUIPMENT

Cheong says the company's advantage lies in having a professional team and equi-

pment. The team covers various roles in the functions of marketing, accounting, and logistics. They also constantly update their systems, such as electronics and financial systems, to optimize operating procedures and thus improve efficiency. In addition, they use five warehouses in Macao, located in different parts of the city, which allows more flexibility in terms of distribution and warehouse inventory. Their latest plan is to add more refrigerated vans to further improve their deliveries.

But updating their assets is not enough. Employees of 7 Stars also participated in the Sands Procurement Academy, a training program for suppliers to learn about the procurement process and advantages of large enterprises. In addition, Sands China's Local SME Supplier Open Day offers potential suppliers a chance

to connect with Sands China procurement representatives to learn about opportunities in various departments, bridging communication between suppliers, large corporations, and experts.

RUN-IN PERIOD UNDER EPIDEMIC

The outbreak of Covid-19 occurred soon after Sands China and 7 Stars commenced their relationship, which saw a decline in orders or delayed logistics. The SME reacted proactively. For ad hoc orders, if the warehouse was out of stock, 7 Stars would quickly contact the brand's Hong Kong agent and transferred inventory. "The situation demonstrated our company's ability for emergency response. And since then, we have been accumulating experience in the supply process," said Cheong.

TIPS FOR FUTURE COOPERATION

Like most SMEs, 7 Stars aims to increase their scope of business with Sands. Cheong said, "We have diversified our quality products. In addition to French fries, we also have cooked food, baked goods, and sauces. We hope that the supply of French fries is just the beginning and that there will be more opportunities to explore and expand in the future. At the same time, the company will continue to pursue higher-quality products and service packages, so that both parties achieve a win-win result."

Sands China also believes the scope of future purchases will not be limited to French fries. The enterprise encourages SMEs to explore more quality products. "Sands China will communicate with users and determine if the price and quality are appropriate."

Sands recommends that similar suppliers actively explore and obtain agencies of unique brands to create more opportunities for Sands China to become familiar with the supplier company, its services and supporting facilities through their products.



'SANTA MARIA' FEARED DISMANTLED

RENATO MARQUES

THE Jetfoil Conservation Concern Group has issued a statement on Saturday expressing their sorrow over the dismantling of the Jetfoil "Santa Maria," which was due to have started last Friday, according to the group.

Titled "Goodbye Santa Maria," the statement hints that the dismantling of the longest-serving ferry between Hong Kong and Macau should have happened on March 19 at the Wang Tak shipyard in the neighboring region of Hong Kong.

The group said that, while they have confirmed that one jetfoil was dismantled on this day, they nevertheless noted that "At this moment, we cannot confirm if the dismantled Jetfoil is Santa Maria."

Santa Maria was one of the two Jetfoils directly purchased by Boeing from the manufacturer known at the time as Far East Hydrofoils (it is now TurboJET) under the initiative of gaming tycoon Stanley Ho.

The ferry, named after one of the islands of Azores Archipelago in Portugal, serviced trips between the two regions from 1975 to 2019, without any significant



failures or accidents in its record.

According to the group which is knowledgeable of the history of this type of vessel, the "Santa Maria," is the record holder of the longest-serving jetfoil in the Hong Kong-Macau ferry route.

If confirmed, Santa Maria will be the first Jetfoil being dismantled in Hong Kong.

The last sailing of Santa Maria was a return journey to Hong Kong from Macau on August 14, 2019, at 6:30 p.m.

[The group fears] "that the once-proud Jetfoil fleet will never return to service, even after the lift of the travel ban between the two cities."

The same group has previously expressed concerns over the dismantling of at least two other vessels of the same type, including the Jetfoil One named "Flores."

This Jetfoil entered into operation in 1974 in Hawaii, and was later acquired by Far East Hydrofoils for operation along the Hong Kong-Macau route in 1978.

At that time, two other Jetfoils were already serving this route - the "Madeira" and "Santa Maria."

In August last year, a rumor suggested that TurboJET was planning to sell its retired vessels Flores and PS-30 hydrofoil "Balsa" for HKD700,000, which began a heated, ongoing discussion on the importance of preserving the historical vessels.

At that time, TurboJET denied the news in a statement, but on September 29, a video surfaced online showing that Balsa has been scrapped in Wang Tak. The group also noticed that Flores has been moved to Wang Tak on or before October 9, leading to fears it had met a similar fate.

The Jetfoil Conservation Concern Group added that due to the pandemic, the Hong Kong-Macau ferry route was forced to halt services that, as of now, has lasted for over a year. The group said that this fact contributes to their "growing concerns that the once-proud Jetfoil fleet will never return to service, even after the lift of the travel ban between the two cities."

The service, already affected by a passenger shortage since the opening of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge, is now considered to be in danger.

"We are expecting more Jetfoils to be dismantled in the near future," they concluded.

AD

HOLIDAY RENTAL HOUSES

Lugar das Letras Casa de Gouvães

The houses are set in the heart of the World Heritage Site of the Douro Valley and its famous winery landscape where the worlds Ports are produced. Both restored relics overlooking the Rio Douro, these eight rooms houses have been blessed with gorgeous wooden floors, plush queen beds and marble baths; the best have dazzling river views. But it is the welcome that makes this place stand out from the crowd.

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BioNTech vaccine uptake jumps in Hong Kong as younger residents qualify

JINSHAN HONG

BIONTECH SE's Covid vaccine was in high demand in Hong Kong on Friday, with 15,700 people receiving a dose on the first day all adults ages 30 and over became eligible, government data showed.

The figure covers people who received a first dose in the 24 hours through 8 p.m. and marked a sharp increase from 10,800 a day earlier, when only those ages 60 and over and workers in high-risk contact positions qualified.

Demand wasn't as high for the Chinese-made Sinovac Biotech Ltd. shot, the only other vaccine currently available in Hong Kong. A total of 11,800 people took that one, steady with Thursday's number. The Sinovac product has been available to the widened pool of residents since Wednesday.

Hong Kong expanded eligibility for vaccinations as it campaigns to encourage more of its 7.5 million population to get inoculated. After the vaccine drive began at the



end of February, initial uptake was muted, with only about 200,000 people -- or 5.4% of those eligible -- coming forward for shots before the criteria were widened.

Reports of seven deaths following Sinovac vaccinations added to the hesitancy, despite health authorities and experts saying that none were directly linked to

the injections. Hong Kong's coronavirus caseload also remains relatively low at 11,363 since the start of the pandemic, meaning there could be less of a rush to sign up. The city reported a death following a BioNTech shot late Friday, with the authorities studying the cause.

A Covid outbreak last week

stoked a greater sense of urgency, particularly among the city's expatriate community caught up in the cluster. Hundreds of people were taken to government quarantine centers for lengthy spells in isolation after being found to be close contacts with infected people, even if they tested negative.

With the loosening of restric-

tions on vaccinations, more than 70% of the population is now eligible and Hong Kong is one of the first places to expand access to such a wide age group. People can book online for their first and second vaccination slots at community centers and private clinics.

Batches of the BioNTech vaccine were flown in directly from Germany. Shanghai Fosun Pharmaceutical Group Co. secured rights from BioNTech to develop and market the mRNA shot in mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. The vaccine is marketed by Pfizer Inc. elsewhere.

It isn't yet clear if the younger adult population will ultimately help boost Hong Kong's vaccination rate after the initial burst of pent-up demand. Daily bookings have been falling since the criteria were expanded on Tuesday. To drum up demand, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam indicated that social distancing rules may be relaxed and borders opened sooner if there is a higher vaccination rate. **BLOOMBERG**

AVIATION

Gambler who bet millions on AirAsia wants everyone to notice

KIUYAN WONG

WHEN Stanley Choi became one of AirAsia Group Bhd.'s biggest shareholders a month ago, he did so with no intention to pursue the aggressive tactics favored by activists in Europe and the U.S. Instead, he saw an opportunity to create a buzz.

Choi, a poker-playing Hong Kong financier, boosted his stake in the Malaysian budget carrier to almost 9% on Feb. 18 in a private placement at a cost of about \$27 million. He hadn't previously been looking to invest in the travel industry.

"If I bet on Boeing or American Airlines, I probably wouldn't be seen in any media," 51-year old Choi said in an interview in his penthouse office in Hong Kong. "With this kind of size, no big airline would pay any attention."

The shares have surged more than 50% since his stake purchase was made public.

Choi said he went into



the investment without an exit strategy or an ideal return rate, and has yet to meet the two founders Tony Fernandes and Kamarudin Meranun in person. He bought the shares about seven months after the firm's auditor Ernst & Young said the carrier's ability to continue as a going concern may be in "significant doubt." The statement triggered

an 18% plunge in AirAsia's shares on the day.

"If it can survive, its stock price should be much higher than where it is now," said Choi, who is chairman and founder of local brokerage Head & Shoulders Financial Group. "If it cannot survive, the rest of the aviation companies won't be able to survive either. AirAsia will be one of the last groups to fall."

Like most airlines around the world, AirAsia has been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic and its devastating impact on travel. The company's Japanese unit filed for bankruptcy in November and a month later it sold its stake in AirAsia India Ltd. to local partner Tata Sons Ltd. Long-haul unit AirAsia-X, meanwhile, is undergoing debt restructuring and has

been essentially grounded by the virus.

Choi is used to playing the odds. He won more than HK\$50 million (\$6.4 million) as first prize in a super high-roller poker championship in Macau in 2012. A framed photo of him holding the outsized check sits on a side-table in his office in Hong Kong's Central district.

While he was initially skeptical of the investment in AirAsia, which he came across via "some common friends" in Malaysia, he said he is confident in the ability of Fernandes and Kamarudin as "world-class entrepreneurs" to lead the airline out of its difficulties.

"As long as they keep running and keep creating value for their passengers and clients, the market will reward us," Choi said. "The aviation industry has bottomed out."

A second private share placement saw billionaire David Bonderman and several partners of TPG Capital, the private equity firm he co-founded, emerge as

shareholders, along with Aimia Inc., AirAsia said in a statement Wednesday. Choi didn't take part.

Choi hasn't always made the right call. In 2018, International Entertainment Corp. - a company he controls - bought Wigan Athletic, a U.K. soccer team, before selling it to fellow Hongkonger Au Yeung Wai Kay last year. Just weeks later, Au Yeung put the club into administration, generating a stir in British media.

"It was a mistake, not a good decision to buy for sure," Choi said.

Choi now has a way to deal with misfortunes. He had the phrase "let it be" tattooed on the inside of his left forearm in cursive script in December, which he looks at to calm himself in times of trouble.

"My poker master told me that you shouldn't get mad because of the result," Choi said, the scent from a recently smoked cigar lingering in his office. "You only get mad because the way you play didn't fit yourself." **BLOOMBERG**

Fleeing coup, Myanmar police refugees in India seek asylum

ANUPAM NATH,
MIZORAM

MYANMAR police officers who fled to India after they said they defied orders to shoot people protesting their country's military coup are urging India's government not to send them back and to grant them asylum on humanitarian grounds.

One of the officers who has sought refuge in a village in the northeastern Indian state of Mizoram along the border with Myanmar said they didn't want to return to their country until the problems there are solved.

That officer and others who spoke to The Associated Press did so on condition of anonymity out of concern for the safety of family members still in Myanmar.

Another officer who fled told AP that soldiers ordered them to "arrest, beat, torture the protesters" and said police were always sent to the front whenever there was protest. She said the officers had "no choice" but to leave Myanmar.



AP PHOTO

The security crackdown following Myanmar's Feb. 1 coup has forced scores of refugees over the border into India. India's state and federal authorities haven't given any figures, but some state ministers have said the number could be in the hundreds. One Indian village has given shelter to 34 police personnel and one firefighter who crossed into India over the last two weeks.

The AP has not been able to independently verify their claims that they were ordered to shoot protesters, though images and

accounts of the security forces' crackdown inside Myanmar have shown intensifying violence against civilians. More than 200 people have been killed by security forces since the coup.

India's federal government and the state of Mizoram are at odds over the influx of refugees. Earlier, the Mizoram government had allowed refugees to enter and provided them with food and shelter.

But last week, India's Home Ministry told four Indian states bordering Myanmar, including Mizo-

ram, to take measures to prevent refugees from entering India except on humanitarian grounds.

The ministry said the states were not authorized to accord refugee status to anyone entering from Myanmar, as India is not a signatory to the U.N. Refugee Convention of 1951 or its 1967 Protocol.

On Thursday, Mizoram's top elected official Zoramthanga wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and said "India cannot turn a blind eye" to the humanitarian crisis unfolding in his state.

Zoramthanga, who uses one name, wrote in the letter that the people of his state, who share ethnic ties with the refugees from Chin communities in Myanmar, "can't remain indifferent to their plight." He urged the federal government to review its order and allow refugees into India.

Earlier this month, Myanmar asked India to return the police officers who crossed the border. India shares a 1,643-kilometer border with Myanmar, and is home to thousands of refugees from Myanmar in different states. AP

NETANYAHU'S VACCINE OBSESSION HASN'T SWUNG ELECTION IN HIS FAVOR

YAACOV BENMELEH

VACCINE "world champions." Israel's "the first" to return to normal life. Other leaders in awe of Benjamin Netanyahu's achievements in taming the pandemic.

In the weeks before tomorrow's election, Israel's prime minister flooded social media with flattering portrayals of the country's world-leading vaccination program to obscure memories of painful and mismanaged lockdowns and edge out a crowded field of challengers. The latest polls suggest it hasn't given him the dramatic boost he sought.

Netanyahu's Likud party is likely to get between 30 to 32 of parliament's 120 seats, according to a batch of final polls released Friday, a slight increase over the past few

weeks, but lower than the 36 it won last year.

Likud is still on course to be the biggest party, and together with old allies and other nationalist factions is close to a 61-seat majority. But with 13 parties in contention to win representation, and a prospective kingmaker refusing to say who he'd join with, post-election jockeying will be intense.

"People have made up their minds on Netanyahu, for better or worse," said Simon Davies, a Tel Aviv-based pollster at Number 10 Strategies. "There is only so much the vaccines can do to sway the relatively few undecided voters between blocs."

Yair Lapid, the head of the Yesh Atid party who has hammered the premier over his alliance with right-wing

ideologues and ongoing corruption trial, leads a camp running neck-and-neck in the race.

Israel's economy has largely reopened, almost half the population has been fully inoculated, and Covid-19 cases continue to drop. So it's little surprise Netanyahu chose to focus on his leadership of the vaccine drive in more than half of 608 Facebook posts in the three months since elections were called. Less welcome news like an unemployment rate of 18% and Iran's accelerating nuclear program hasn't got much of a mention.

The social-media blitz has included clips of Pfizer Inc. Chief Executive Officer Albert Bourla citing Netanyahu's "obsession" with vaccines for his decision to flood Is-

rael with shots, and a South Park episode in which an Israeli jet delivered boxes of jobs to grateful inhabitants of a fictional Colorado town.

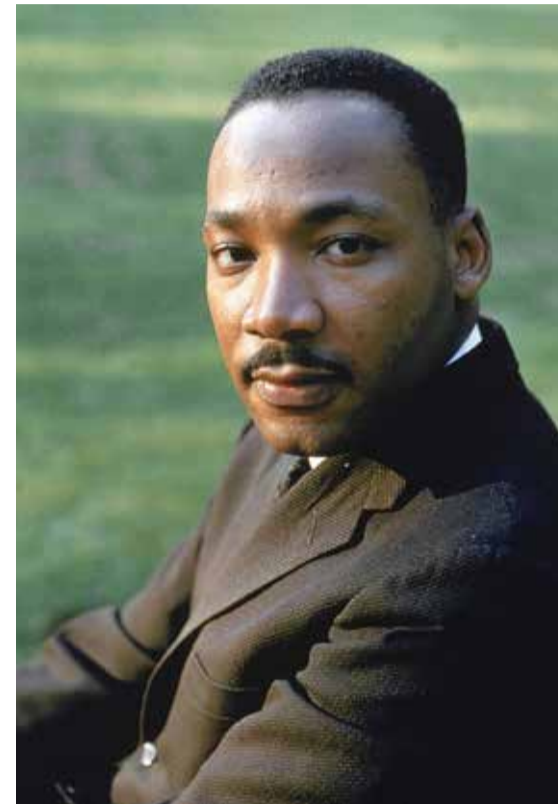
The stakes are high for Netanyahu, Israel's longest-serving prime minister, as his graft trial proceeds. Staying in office offers his only chance of passing laws shielding a sitting premier from prosecution.

In light of the forecast deadlock, he's urging right-wing voters to fend off a government headed by Lapid, whom he portrays as a clueless left-winger unable to solve economic woes or fight for Israel diplomatically.

"Lapid's name carries strong associations for self-defining right wing voters," said Davies. "It's like at the Trump rallies when he said 'Hillary' and everyone then says, 'Lock her up.'" Netanyahu is betting that putting Lapid at the forefront will get him to 61." **BLOOMBERG**

this day in history

1956 KING CONVICTED
FOR BUS BOYCOTT



Civil rights leader, the Reverend Martin Luther King, has been convicted of organising an illegal boycott by black passengers of buses in the US state of Alabama.

Mr King, 27, was fined \$500 (£178) and ordered to pay an equal amount in costs.

However, his lawyers immediately gave notice of their intention to appeal and the fine was converted into a prison sentence of 386 days, suspended until the appeal hearing.

The 17-week-old boycott in the town of Montgomery was sparked by the arrest of a black woman, Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her seat for a white passenger on 1 December last year.

The town's segregation laws stipulate separate areas on buses for blacks and whites and require blacks to give up their seats for whites if necessary.

Black travellers have long complained of being called racist names by bus drivers and being forced to stand even if seats were vacant in the whites-only section.

Mrs Parks, 42, was not the first to be arrested for refusing to give up her seat but she was a well-known and respected figure in Montgomery's black community.

Four days after her arrest an almost universal boycott of the town's buses by black passengers began which has seriously diminished the companies' revenues.

Mr King was found guilty under an archaic law dating from 1921 designed to break trade union action.

The law carries a maximum penalty of \$1,000 and six months in prison.

But Judge Eugene Carter said he had been lenient with Mr King because he had advocated non-violence.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

The bus boycott lasted a total of 382 days. It ended in December 1956 after bus companies throughout Alabama were forced to comply with a US Supreme Court ruling that segregation on public transport was illegal. Martin Luther King organised non-violent campaigns for equal rights throughout the 1950s and 1960s and was jailed many times. In August 1963 he made his famous "I have a dream" speech at a march in Washington which attracted more than 250,000 demonstrators. The following year he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He survived several attempts on his life but was assassinated in April 1968.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS

ARIES
Mar. 21-Apr. 19
 You may find yourself in an uncomfortable situation if you have overloaded your plate unintentionally. Call someone you haven't seen in a long time. Strengthen your position among your peers.

TAURUS
Apr. 20-May. 20
 This is not the day to be extravagant. Your diplomatic nature will help you in straightening out unsavory situations. Your mate may not have been honest with you.

GEMINI
May. 21-Jun. 21
 Take care of your personal needs. Try not to donate to organizations if you can hardly afford to take care of yourself. Try to curb your tongue and let others at least get a word in.

CANCER
Jun. 22-Jul. 22
 You will find that you are able to clear up a number of small but important details. This will not be the day to start new business ventures or make drastic changes in your career.

LEO
Jul. 23-Aug. 22
 Partnerships with creative people could lead to financial gains. It's hard to stay mad if the object of the anger refuses to react. You should not get involved in joint ventures.

VIRGO
Aug. 23-Sep. 22
 Don't play on your partner's emotions. You can make excellent career moves if you are open to the opportunities that exist. You will be misinterpreted if you get involved in other people's problems.

LIBRA
Sep. 23-Oct. 22
 Opportunities for travel must be carefully considered. Try not to allow your partner to lead you astray or upset your routine. Disharmony in your relationship may cause minor ailments.

SCORPIO
Oct. 23-Nov. 21
 Your love will not be willing to listen to your criticism. You may end up being blamed if anything goes wrong. You will have a childlike approach today, big hearted and full of spunk.

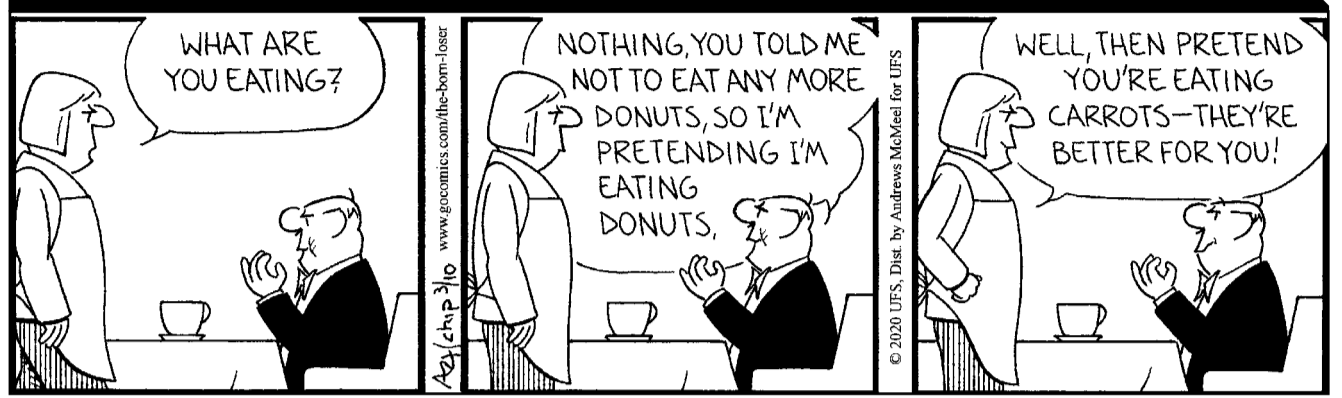
SAGITTARIUS
Nov. 22-Dec. 21
 You can make progress professionally. Hassles with female colleagues may lead to problems with your boss. Romantic opportunities will be plentiful if you go out with friends.

CAPRICORN
Dec. 22-Jan. 19
 Only offer to do the things you have time for. Luxury items will cost you more than you can truly afford. Ferret out information that will hold them responsible.

AQUARIUS
Jan. 20-Feb. 18
 Channel your efforts into achieving your goals. Past partners are likely to reappear. The emotional state of peers may cause a problem for you. Be careful not to show your temper.

PISCES
Feb. 19-Mar. 20
 Try to be patient with other's inability to accept your new beliefs. Toning, fitness, pampering should all be scheduled. Put your efforts into physical fitness programs or competitive sports.

The Born Loser by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

EASY					EASY+				
6			8 4 2		3		2		
1			8	9	2 5		8		1
2	8	3 9			4			2 6	
3 7 5 1	6 9				7		9		
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9 1	4 7 5 2						8	4	
	6 5	4 3			4 7				3
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MEDIUM					HARD				
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		7	3 5				8	6	
		4				8			
8 1	3				2		1		
	2		9 4				9		2
4			8 6		5 3				
6		4	3		1				

WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	-19	-6	clear
Harbin	-28	-20	cloudy
Tianjin	-16	-8	clear
Urumqi	-24	-16	clear
Xi'an	-10	-3	overcast
Lhasa	-3	12	clear
Chengdu	0	3	overcast
Chongqing	5	8	drizzle
Kunming	7	19	overcast
Nanjing	-8	-4	cloudy
Shanghai	-6	3	overcast
Wuhan	-4	2	clear
Hangzhou	-4	4	overcast
Taipei	9	15	drizzle
Guangzhou	7	15	overcast
Hong Kong	13	18	cloudy
WORLD			
Moscow	-5	-4	flurry
Frankfurt	-1	4	sleet
Paris	0	3	sleet
London	0	5	sleet
New York	0	7	overcast

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Swedish pop band whose hits include "Waterloo"; 5- Pulls down; 10- Capital city of Western Samoa; 14- Shape; 15- Quality; 16- Leave in, to an editor; 17- Composer Khachaturian; 18- Japanese three-line verse; 19- Delhi wrap; 20- Livable; 22- Attack on all sides; 23- Flee; 24- Commit a faux pas; 25- Garments; 29- Apparel; 33- Make watertight; 34- Architect Saarinen; 36- Big rig; 37- MSNBC rival; 38- Capital of Vietnam; 39- Televiser; 40- Loaded; 42- Between ports; 43- Pineapple fiber; 45- Bring to a successful end; 47- Culinary department; 49- Bleaching agent; 50- Popular rental; 51- Slender part of the leg; 54- Sugar; 60- Crux; 61- Writer Loos; 62- Used to be; 63- Prefix with -drome; 64- Make less tense; 65- Hankering; 66- Cease; 67- Pretty girl; 68- Wading place;

DOWN 1- Eastern nanny; 2- Aboriginal rite site; 3- Spill the beans; 4- Commander in chief of a fleet; 5- Natural gas component; 6- Bedouin; 7- Complain; 8- Greek goddess of victory; 9- Actor Erwin; 10- States; 11- School orgs.; 12- Able was ____; 13- Fighting; 21- Istanbul resident; 22- Pal in the 'hood; 24- "The Time Machine" race; 25- Ghana's capital; 26- Overwhelming fear; 27- Blow with the fist; 28- Flat contract; 29- Frog sound; 30- Moor; 31- "South Pacific" hero; 32- Femme fatale; 35- Hydrocarbon suffix; 38- Possess; 41- Summit of an earthy mound; 43- Let's just leave ____ that; 44- Foul-up; 46- Spud bud; 48- Mountaineering aid; 51- Latin lesson word; 52- Nair rival; 53- Corn syrup brand; 54- Dagger of yore; 55- Voltin; 56- Catchall abbr.; 57- Pianist Peter; 58- As a result; 59- Winder for holding flexible material; 61- Short trader?;

Friday's solution

T	A	L	I	V	I	S	T	A	L	E	T	S
A	G	I	N	I	N	T	E	R	U	I	R	E
N	E	E	D	L	E	S	S	L	I	C	O	T
G	E	N	O	A								
O	B	I		R	E	N	A	L				
T	H	A	R	N	E	A	R	M	E	D	A	L
R	E	C	E	A	D							
E	N	C	H	R	I	P	T					
A	R	R	A	N	T							
T	I	A	R	A								
B	A	R	R	O	O							
A	N	T	I									
S	T	E	P									
E	S	S	E									

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PSP 28 573 333	Macau Daily Times 28 716 081
Customs 28 559 944	
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EXPLAINER

Tokyo Olympics march on without fans from abroad

STEPHEN WADE, TOKYO

TOKYO Olympics and the International Olympic Committee have banned fans from abroad with the games opening in four months. It's part of the fallout from holding the Olympics in the middle of a pandemic.

IOC President Thomas Bach said Saturday he was "sorry" when the decision was announced. In truth, what matters to the IOC — like any sports business that relies for most of its income on selling broadcast rights — is getting the Olympics on television. Broadcast rights in the latest four-year Olympic cycle accounted for 73% of the IOC's income. That broadcast income amounts to about USD4 billion with American network NBC paying about half.

The IOC must get the 11,000 athletes into the venues and in front of cameras. Japanese residents will fill the stands to whatever level is allowed. The decision on venue capacity will come next month.

But barring fans from abroad has created collateral damage and lots of questions.

LOOKING FOR REFUNDS

Ticket sales for fans from abroad is handled

by so-called "Authorized Ticket Resellers" scattered across the globe. They are typically appointed by national Olympic committees and work as middlemen. They are allowed to tack on service fees of up to 20% on tickets. They also sell pricey package deals including hotels.

It's likely the actual ticket price will be refunded, although the timeline is anyone's guess. The fees may be more difficult to recover.

Tokyo organizing committee CEO Toshiro Muto has already said his body is not responsible for refunds on hotels or airline flights.

Muto said 600,000 Olympic tickets had been sold to fans abroad. This pales in comparison to the 4.45 million sold to Japan residents. Organizer said 7.8 million tickets would be available when ticket sales started several years ago.

Muto seemed to rule out fans entering who may have received tickets from sponsors.

"If they are part of the operation of the games, if they are somewhat involved in the operation then there is still a possibility they may be able to enter into Japan," Muto said. "But solely as spectators for watching games — no, they will not be allowed to make an entry."

THE BUDGET TAKES A HIT

Ticket sales were to generate \$800 million in income for the privately funded operating budget — the third largest income source after local sponsors and contributions from the IOC.

Any shortfall will have to be made up by Japanese government entities.

This puts even more burden on Japanese taxpayers. The overall cost of the games is officially \$15.4 billion, the largest on record according to a University of Oxford study. Several Japanese government audits suggest the cost might be twice that much. All but \$6.7 billion in public money.

COVID-19 AND VACCINES

Japan has attributed fewer than 9,000 deaths to COVID-19 and has handled the pandemic better than most countries its size. A state of emergency was lifted on Sunday for Tokyo and three adjacent prefectures. Cases are expected to start increasing again, but the hope is to avoid a large spike and public concern. New cases in Tokyo have been around 400 in the last several days.

The vaccine rollout in Japan has been slow. Relatively few local spectators are expected to be vaccinated when the Olympics open on July 23. The 11,000 Olympic and 4,440 Paralympic athle-

tes will not be required to have a vaccine to enter Japan. But the IOC is encouraging as many vaccinations as possible. It also does not want to be seen

to push young athletes to the front of the line ahead of the elderly and other vulnerable populations.

Athletes will have to pass a COVID-19 test before leaving home. They are to be tested again upon arrival, and then frequently in the Athletes Village, the venues, and training sites. All of these will operate like a bubble. Athletes are also being told to leave Japan as soon as their competition ends.

PRESSURE AT HOME

Several polls have shown 80% in Japan want the Olympics canceled or postponed again. The IOC and local organizers must turn around public opinion. Two scandals in the last few weeks have not helped. Yoshiro Mori, the president of the organizing committee, was forced to resign after making demeaning comments about women.

Last week creative director Hiroshi Sasaki resigned after saying a female, "plus-size" celebrity should appear in the opening ceremony dressed up like a pig — the "Olympig."

Almost forgotten is the vote-buying scandal two

years ago that forced out Japanese Olympic Committee president and Tsunekazu Takeda. Takeda denied any wrongdoing and also resigned from the IOC. Takeda signed off on payments that French investigators say were used to buy the votes of IOC members when Tokyo was picked by the IOC in 2013 ahead of Istanbul and Madrid.

THE TORCH RELAY BEGINS A BIG TEST

The torch relay opens on Thursday from northeastern Fukushima prefecture. It's a giant test that starts four months ahead of the opening ceremony. The relay is set for 121 days with 10,000 runners crisscrossing Japan.

The torch kickoff will be closed to the public. Fans along the route are being asked to wear masks, social distance, and to cheer quietly, if at all. Organizers reserve the right to stop the relay, reroute it, or do whatever it takes to keep it from becoming a mass spreading event. The relay started a year ago but was stopped almost immediately when the Olympics were postponed. **AP**

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OPINION

World Views

The Editors, MDT/Bloomberg

THE US MILITARY MUST
GET SERIOUS ABOUT
DOMESTIC EXTREMISM

Among the unsettling revelations about the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol is the number of rioters who served in the military. Of the more than 300 people so far charged with crimes, at least 30 are veterans, and three are currently enlisted in either the Army Reserve or National Guard. The Pentagon believes some active-duty troops also participated in the siege.

In response, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has ordered all military units to conduct a one-day “stand-down” to address extremism in the armed forces. That’s a good start, but the Pentagon shouldn’t stop there. The department should carry out a comprehensive policy review to upgrade the military’s tools for identifying extremists and their potential to commit acts of ideologically motivated violence. Doing so is crucial for the safety both of the public and of service members themselves.

The first task is assessing the scale of the problem. Last year, active-duty troops were arrested in connection with at least three far-right extremist plots, including an Army sergeant who allegedly attempted to conspire with a neo-Nazi group to stage an attack on his own unit. Racial intolerance in the ranks may also be on the rise. A 2019 survey found that 36% of service members reported seeing evidence of racist or white supremacist attitudes, up 14 points over the previous year.

It’s unclear whether such figures actually reflect a growing risk of violence. The military should in any case be paying attention to deep-seated bigotry among some service members — and the possible nexus between white supremacy and anti-government extremism makes it all the more urgent. The Pentagon doesn’t currently collect system-wide data on disciplinary cases involving violent extremism. Investigations into troop misconduct are handled by the respective service branches, with lower-level supervisors allowed to take action without always reporting their decisions up the chain of command.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 (NDAA), which was passed over former President Donald Trump’s veto, requires the Pentagon to create a new deputy inspector general charged with reviewing the military’s progress in combating racial discrimination. Congress should broaden the office’s mandate to include responsibility for tracking violent extremist threats of all kinds. The Pentagon should also issue annual reports on the number of incidents of extremism across all service branches, including those that don’t produce criminal charges.

Beyond data collection, the military should do more to target individuals susceptible to radicalization. The Pentagon should work with the FBI to give military recruiters and unit commanders access to the bureau’s database of tattoos signifying membership in extremist organizations. Training programs similar to those used by FBI counterterrorism investigators should be expanded to help recruiters spot warning signs among potential enlistees.

The military should also amend the Uniform Code of Military Justice to make active participation in domestic extremist activity a violation of military law — a proposal introduced by Democratic Representative Jackie Speier and endorsed by the Pentagon that was stripped from the 2021 NDAA by Senate Republicans. The Department of Veterans’ Affairs should coordinate with grassroots veterans’ organizations and law-enforcement authorities to disrupt efforts by extremist groups to recruit and radicalize former service members.

At the same time, U.S. officials should be careful not to overreach. Even as the Pentagon takes steps to root out domestic extremism, it should resist policies that trample on troops’ free speech and privacy rights. Investigations into the social-media histories of current and prospective service members should remain limited to those who display other signs of extremist proclivities, as well as troops whose jobs require top-secret security clearances.

The risk of violent domestic extremism among military personnel is concerning, but the Pentagon has the resources to manage it. A focused strategy to track and deter the threat would protect America’s troops and the democracy they are sworn to defend.

The U.S. Navy said yesterday it will hold a major naval exercise alongside Belgium, France and Japan in the Mideast amid tensions over Iran’s nuclear program in the region.

The Group Arabian Sea Warfare Exercise will see ships from the four countries conduct drills in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman. Ships involved include the French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle, as well as the amphibious assault ship USS Makin Island.

The Belgian frigate HNLMS Leopold I and the Japanese destroyer JS Ariake also will take part, as well as aircraft from the four nations. The drill comes as Iran has abandoned all limits of its 2015 nu-

clear deal with world powers in the wake of then-President Donald Trump’s 2018 decision to unilaterally withdraw from the accord.

President Joe Biden has expressed a desire to return to the deal if Iran honors the deal’s limits on its nuclear program. However, tensions remain high after militias in Iraq — likely backed by Iran — continue to target American interests.

Biden last month launched an airstrike just over the border into Syria in retaliation, joining every American president from Ronald Reagan onward who has ordered a bombardment of countries in the Middle East.

There was no immediate reaction from Iran to the naval drill.



AP PHOTO

N. KOREAN DIPLOMATS
LEAVING MALAYSIA
AFTER TIES ARE SEVERED

EILEEN NG,
KUALA LUMPUR

NORTH Korean diplomats vacated their embassy in Malaysia and prepared to leave the country yesterday, after the two nations cut diplomatic relations in a spat over the extradition of a North Korean criminal suspect to the United States.

The North Korean flag and embassy signage have been removed from the premise in a Kuala Lumpur suburb. Two buses ferried the diplomats and their families to the airport, where they were seen checking in for a flight to Shanghai.

Ties between North Korea and Malaysia have been virtually frozen since the 2017 assassination of the estranged half brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un at Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

Two days after Kuala Lumpur extradited a North Korean man to the U.S. to face money laundering charges, a furious North Korea on Friday announced it was terminating ties with Malaysia. Malaysia denounced the decision and in a tit-for-tat response, gave North Korean diplomats 48 hours to leave.

Kim Yu Song, the chargé d’affaires and counselor in Kuala Lumpur, said Malaysia had “committed an unpardonable crime.” Echoing Pyongyang’s earlier statement, he accused Malaysia of being subservient to the U.S. and being part of

a U.S. conspiracy aimed at “isolating and suffocating” his country.

“The Malaysian authority delivered our citizen to the U.S. in the end, thus destroying the foundations of the bilateral relations based on respect of sovereignty,” he said in a short statement outside the embassy, before heading to the airport.

North Korea has called the money laundering charges an “absurd fabrication and (a) sheer plot” orchestrated by the U.S. and warned Washington will “pay a due price.”

Some experts say cutting ties with Malaysia was North Korea’s way of showing anger with President Joe Biden’s administration, without jeopardizing an eventual return to nuclear negotiations with Washington.

North Korea has insisted it won’t engage in talks with Washington unless it abandons what Pyongyang perceives as a “hostile” policy. But experts say North Korea will eventually seek to return to diplomacy to find ways to get sanctions relief and revive its moribund economy.

Malaysia has defended its move to extradite Mun Chol Myong, saying it was carried out only after all legal processes have been exhausted. A top court ruled Mun can be extradited after rejecting his appeal on grounds that the U.S. charges were politically motivated.

Mun, who lived in Ma-

aysia for a decade and arrested in May 2019, has denied U.S. accusations that he was involved in supplying luxury goods from Singapore to North Korea in violation of U.N. sanctions while working in the city-state. He denied laundering funds through front companies and issuing fraudulent documents to support illicit shipments to his country.

North Korea has long used Malaysia as a crucial economic hub where it handled trade, labor exports and some illicit businesses in Southeast Asia, but their relations suffered major setbacks over the 2017 killing of Kim Jong Nam.

Two women — one Indonesian and the other Vietnamese — were charged with colluding with four North Koreans to murder Kim Jong Nam by smearing his face with VX nerve agent. The four North Koreans fled Malaysia the day Kim died. The two women were later released.

Malaysian officials never officially accused North Korea of involvement in Kim’s death, but prosecutors made it clear throughout the trial that they suspected a North Korean connection.

North Korea denied the victim was Kim Jong Nam and disputed it had any role in the man’s death. Longtime North Korea watchers believe Kim Jong Un ordered his brother’s killing as part of efforts to remove potential rivals and cement his grip on power. AP

Japan’s Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga pledged yesterday to do his utmost to prevent a resurgence of the coronavirus ahead of the Olympic torch relay and his upcoming visit to Washington. Suga was addressing his ruling Liberal Democratic Party’s annual convention, just hours ahead of the planned lifting of a virus state of emergency in the Tokyo region. Suga said after the state of emergency is lifted is “an extremely important time” for virus prevention.



AP PHOTO

Thailand Scores of people were injured and arrested in the Thai capital after police used water cannons, tear gas and rubber bullets to break up a rally by pro-democracy protesters calling for the release of detained activists, constitutional changes and reform of the nation’s monarchy. The rally outside Bangkok’s Grand Palace was a continuation of student-led protests that began last year and have rattled Thailand’s traditional establishment, which is fiercely opposed to change.



AP PHOTO

India Top defense officials from India and the United States pledge to expand their military engagement, underscoring the strengthening defense ties between two countries concerned over China’s growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region. U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh met in New Delhi and agreed to deepen defense cooperation, intelligence sharing and logistics.

Romania yesterday recorded its highest number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care units since the pandemic began. The increasing pressure on ICU wards, where today 1,334 people are currently receiving care, comes amid a surge of COVID-19 cases in the Eastern European country.