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RMB750.4 MILLION FOR THE WHOLE YEAR
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AROUND FROM THE PREVIOUS YEAR** P4

China yesterday said it summoned foreign diplomats in protest after the United States, the European Union, Canada and Britain jointly imposed sanctions on senior Chinese officials over alleged human rights abuses in China's far western Xinjiang region. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying yesterday called the new sanctions a "slander and an affront to the reputation and dignity of the Chinese people."
More on p6

Sri Lanka will exchange currency with China under a 10 billion yuan agreement aimed at promoting trade and investment between the two countries. So-called currency swaps allow central banks to ensure banks in their countries can borrow ready cash in any of the currencies involved. China remains Sri Lanka's largest source of imports.

AP PHOTO



New Zealand will spend billions of dollars to encourage more home building and will also remove some tax breaks for speculators as it tries to slow skyrocketing house prices. The government announced yesterday a series of new measures to address what Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern is describing as a crisis.

AP PHOTO



Syria Airstrikes in northwest Syria near the Turkish border that killed a person and set afire trucks used to distribute aid targeted areas considered the safest in the rebel-held region, a top U.N. official said. The strikes on several locations a day earlier angered Turkey, prompting it to place its troops on high alert. Turkey's Defense Ministry said it asked Russia to secure an immediate halt to the attacks.

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BRAVE THE WEATHER

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XINHUA



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RETURN
IN MAY** P5

WEATHER BUREAU FORECASTS 5 TO 8 TYPHOONS THIS YEAR, DEVELOPS NEW TSUNAMI ALERT

RENATO MARQUES

FIVE to eight tropical storms might affect Macau in 2021, the Meteorological and Geophysical Bureau (SMG) predicted yesterday in a press conference about the work of the bureau this year.

According to the director of SMG, Leong Weng Kun, the first tropical storm to affect the region this year should take place within the first two weeks of June.

Of the five to eight forecasted, "some" may reach the level of severe typhoon or even super typhoon, Leong said, adding that this year the bureau's forecast regarding this natural phenomena fits in the level of "normal to relatively high."

One of the new developments this year is the creation of a new tsunami warning.

According to Leong, the SMG is currently working on this new alert and expects to present it during the second half of the year.

Questioned on the topic by the media, the director noted that the idea to create the warning came from work to update and enhance all weather-related warnings and alerts for the population.

"We know that Macau is not easily affected by tsunamis, but we have already improved several other warnings and we also want to improve this one as well," Leong explained, noting that the creation of a tsunami warning system in Macau is one of the objectives outlined by the government in the policy address for 2021 regarding the work of the SMG. It also suggests improvements on the monitoring of tropical storms, thunderstorms, heavy rainfall,



and education on meteorological disasters targeted at young people using pedagogical materials and activities.

The director also announced that the SMG intends to install more weather stations over the course of the year, as well as air

quality monitoring stations in further areas of the city to increase the coverage and precision of forecasts.



Macau was always 'governed by patriots'

THE Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Macau, Liu Xianfa, said yesterday that the Macau SAR has always been governed by "patriots" and has successfully implemented the principle of "One country, two systems" with "Macanese characteristics."

Speaking at a reception to mark his assumption of the position, presided over by Chief Executive Ho Iat Seng and

Edmund Ho, Liu spoke highly of Macau's contribution to executing the policies of the central government in Macau, namely with its "active participation" in the Greater Bay Area development and in matters of national security.

In his speech, Liu highlighted China's "successful fight against the coronavirus pandemic," and the development of national security in the country, affirming its so-

vereignty against foreign interference. He also referred to President Xi Jinping's wish for an open dialogue between China and the U.S..

At the occasion, which was attended by approximately one hundred local dignitaries, Ho Iat Seng referred to the "excellent collaboration" of the commissioner's office over the years in helping Macau to establish itself as "a center and a platform" where many

international events have taken place and towards improved participation by Macau in the national Belt and Road Initiative.

In particular, Ho named the ministerial conference of the Forum Macau for the economic cooperation between China and the Portuguese-speaking countries; the Global Tourism Forum; and the international forum on investment and infrastructure.

Finally, Ho stressed the "strong support" from the commissioner's office during the Covid-19 pandemic, which was helping the SAR in the fight against the virus "at the external level." PC

SAR DISCUSSES POSSIBLE AIR LINK WITH QATAR

LYNZY VALLES

CHIEF Executive Ho Iat Seng has discussed with the Ambassador of the State of Qatar to China the prospect of both regions stepping up efforts to boost people-to-people exchanges and boost collaborations in tourism once the pandemic situation improves.

In a recent meeting at the Government Headquarters, the ambassador, Mohamed Abdulla Al-Dehaimi, discussed with the CE how to facilitate the movement of people between Macau and Qatar, and the launch of regular flights between the regions.

According to a government-released statement, Ho concurred that the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 was a "prime opportunity for both sides to strengthen cooperation in tourism."

Al-Dehaimi, meanwhile, said that Qatar and Macau could jointly explore collaborations in a number of fields, including a range of opportunities available in the fi-

ancial services sector, aside from tourism.

On the matter of financial partnership, Al-Dehaimi said that parties engaged in the financial services sector in Qatar had expressed interest in exploring opportunities in the markets of Macau and the rest of the Greater Bay Area.

The CE pointed out Macau had no barriers to the free flow of capital and offered a low-tax environment, adding that the city was also pressing ahead with the establishment of a bond market, with support from the central government. Noting that Qatar has professional experience in financial services, Ho said Macau "looked forward to exploring fresh opportunities for cooperation in this sector."

Meanwhile, the CE said that the tourism sector is "steadily recovering from the serious impact brought by the pandemic," adding that that the SAR government expects that visitor arrivals to Macau could gradually increase in the second half of 2021. LV

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Dragon boat races go 'national' once again

RENATO MARQUES

ONE of the few survivors of the annual calendar of sports events in Macau, the International Dragon Boat Competition, will once again go ahead as scheduled and in a similar format as the previous iteration of the competition, leaving out all foreign teams, the Sports Bureau (ID) announced yesterday in a press conference.

This year, the organizers

will keep the format trialed in 2020, which only invited the participation of local teams as well as a few teams specially invited from the mainland, the president of the ID, Pun Weng Kun, announced during a presentation.

"We expect the participation of high-level teams from the mainland in the Open Category and Women's Category, strengthening the bonds of friendship and promoting the sports exchange between

the mainland and Macau," Pun said.

In keeping with last year's format, the competition will be held over two days, June 13 and 14. The first day will include a Family Festival in which several games and activities for families and young children will be held at the venue by Nam Van Lake.

While the pandemic situation is more stable this year than it was during last year's event, Pun noted that the competition will have to

strictly follow the guidelines of the Health Bureau regarding pandemic prevention and control. All participants will have to present a negative result nucleic acid test (NAT) result before the competition. The president of the ID also added that the organizing committee will be in charge of organizing NAT tests for the participants, with the details to be confirmed at a later stage.

Questioned by the media on the sidelines of the event regarding the Covid-19 prevention and control measures which provoked some criticism from health authorities last year, Pun said, "Following the experience of last year, we are better prepared, and we will organize [the event] better this year."

As with previous events, the team applications will be limited, with the president of the ID saying that he expects that the total number of participants involved this year will be around 2,700 if all the available slots in all the categories are filled.

The program for the first day of the event is dedicated to races of a shorter distance (200 meters). Teams will participate in these in four different categories, including the Open Category, Women's Category, Public Entities, and University Students. On the second and final day of the event, longer distance races (500 meters) will be held for the categories of Open and Women's.

According to the rules, team registrations are open to all local residents, as well as non-residents. However, for the local races, teams must include a minimum of 14 athletes that are Macau ID (BIR) holders for the Standard Dragon Boat Races and a minimum of eight for the Small Dragon Boat Races.

'Golden Bus' reduces service frequency

LYNZY VALLES

IT has been announced that the shuttle bus service traveling via the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge (HKZMB), colloquially known as the Golden Bus, will have its daily Macau-Hong Kong operations reduced in number from 10 to six from April.

Operations from Zhuhai to Hong Kong will also see a reduction to six operations daily.

The route from Hong Kong to Macau and Zhuhai will remain the same, with six daily operations.

On April 6 last year, the shuttle bus halted operations, removing the last method of public transportation available between the two special administrative regions during the peak of the pandemic.

The halt in operations left no options for passengers who wanted to travel between the two SARs, as ferry services had been suspended indefinitely as of midnight, February 4 last year. After a month, the shuttle bus service recommenced.

Pre-pandemic, the HKZMB shuttle bus ran 24 hours a day and seven days a week.

Recently, the Macau SAR government shortened the mandatory quarantine period for people arriving from Hong Kong from 21 days to 14 days. This reflects the latest easing of restrictions at Macau's border.

On December 22, Macau authorities extended the quarantine period from 14 days to 21 days due to the rising number of Covid-19 cases in the neighboring region. The period was then reduced following the launch of Hong Kong's mass vaccination program and social distancing measures.



WOMEN'S VOLLEYBALL LEAGUE MIGHT NOT RETURN TO MACAU

RENATO MARQUES

THE Fédération Internationale de Volleyball (FIVB) Women's Volleyball Nations League (VNL) will not be held in Macau this year and may not return to the Special Administrative Region anytime soon, the president of Sports Bureau (ID), Pun Weng Kun, has admitted in a reply to the media on the sidelines of the Dragon Boat Races press conference.

Questioned by the media on the topic, Pun said, "Everyone is dealing with the pandemic [according to their capacities] and the FIVB has decided [this year] to find one location to host this event [the VNL]," adding, "all the teams will convene at this single location and the entire competition will be held there. There will not be other rounds [of the event] taking place anywhere else."

"[According to our information] Macau was not the chosen location for the hos-

ting of this event. As far as we know, it will be hosted in Italy, but we do not have any further information on this yet," Pun remarked.

Questioned as to the possible return of the event to Macau after the pandemic, Pun said, "It is still a possibility, but this has to do with the FIVB," adding, "We are considering other options of [...] events from other sports that are more beneficial to the local sports scene and that are more popular among the local population," he concluded, hinting that the historical volleyball competition, which has been hosted in Macau for almost 30 years, might be dropped.

The last time the competition was hosted in Macau was in 2019. Last year, the competition was scheduled for June 2 to 4 at the Macao Forum and it was to be one of the legs of the VNL 2020. However the event was called off by the FIVB in response to development of the global Covid-19 pandemic.

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NO PLANS TO EXTEND TRANSPORTATION DISCOUNT SCHEME TO 60-64 YEAR OLDS

The Transport Bureau (DSAT) has confirmed that the authorities have no current plans to extend the transportation discount scheme for the elderly to those aged 60-64. The DSAT set out the decision in a written reply to an earlier query made by lawmaker Agnes Lam. The DSAT vows to continue to listen to public opinions and consider any possible amendments in the future.

DSI EXTENDS ONLINE SERVICES

The Identification Services Bureau (DSI) extended the self-service kinship verification to online platform yesterday so that citizens can go through the formalities without leaving home, the bureau announced in a statement. The online service will now ease the process of local residents who have to confirm information in regard to the relationship with their parents, children or spouse in their Macau ID card record.



MELCO HOLDS FORUM ON RECENT TWO SESSIONS

MELCO Resorts & Entertainment held a sharing session on the recent Two Sessions held in Beijing at its "Splendors of China Leadership Forum" yesterday.

According to a statement, the gaming operator invited the Economic Affairs Department of the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Macau SAR as adviser and invited delegates of the National People's Congress (NPC) and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).

The forum's general themes

included guidance for Macau's development as provided by the premier's government work report and ways to enhance communications between CPPCC and NPC representatives and Macau citizens for public opinion and participation in the deliberation and administration of state affairs.

Lawrence Ho, chairman & CEO of Melco, remarked, "National Education is a core segment of 'Melco's Whole Person Development' strategy, and the company's 'Splendors of China' program was launched in 2016 with

the aim to support the Macau SAR government's furthering of the spirit of 'Loving the Motherland and Loving Macau'."

"Although Macau was seriously impacted by the pandemic last year, the active response from the Macau SAR to control and contain the situation helped to promptly restore order to the city's economic and daily life. All of this is a testament to the successful practice of 'One country, two systems' in Macau," he added.

In the forum, guest speakers discussed topics including the

strategic significance of the 14th Five-Year Plan for Macau's integration into the development of the country; ways to stabilize the effectiveness of Macau against the epidemic in the new stage of normalized epidemic prevention and control; and how Macau can give full play to its advantages to deepen cooperation with cities in the Greater Bay Area, among others.

The "Melco Splendors of China" learning program aims to promote a deeper understanding of China's cultural heritage, economic policies, social systems and values. The leadership forum was hosted at Studio City with an audience comprising Melco management and non-management colleagues and representatives from Macau's educational institutes. LV

GAMING

SUNCITY GROUP EXPECTS GAIN OF RMB750 MILLION FOR 2020

HONEY TSANG

SUNCITY Group Holdings Ltd is anticipating a gain of approximately RMB750.4 million for the whole year of 2020, representing a sharp turnaround from the loss of RMB1.48 billion the previous year, as stated in a statement filed on March 22.

In 2020, the pandemic took a toll on the group's overall business, with its total revenue plunging to RMB199.3 million, down from RMB611.8 million in 2019.

Nevertheless, the Hong Kong-listed group managed to pull off several feats to offset the loss.

These include a gain of RMB1.36 billion owing to the change in fair value of derivative financial instruments; a gain of

approximately RMB213.5 million on the change in fair value of convertible bonds; a net profit of RMB200.7 million on a bargain purchase on the acquisition of Summit Ascent Holdings Limited, and a Hong Kong-listed company for the development and operation of an integrated resort Tigre de Cristal in Russia.

These financial achievements were "partially" canceled out by a financial loss of around RMB1.01 billion, which was made up of losses in fair value of investment properties, joint venture, finance costs, and so on.

This prognosis draws on some preliminary statistics, gauged based on the preliminary review of the unaudited accounts of the group, according to the statement.

The group, which is

helmed by chairman Alvin Chau, is set to publish its final annual financial result on March 29.

Earlier in March, Suncity Group announced that it is planning to launch VIP gaming clubs at The Londoner Macao and Grand Lisboa Palace in Cotai.

Founded in Macau in 2007, Suncity Group has operated junket businesses in Macau and has also invested in resort projects in overseas countries in the Asia-Pacific region. It held a soft opening for the integrated resort Hoiana in Vietnam in June 2020, with the official opening suspended due to Covid-19.

The group's other integrated resort, Russia's Tigre de Cristal, was forced to close its doors for four months and only reopened in July last year.

GAMING

WEEKLY GGR CONTINUES TO TREND UPWARDS: JP MORGAN

HONEY TSANG

MACAU'S gross gaming revenue (GGR) for the first 21 days of March is projected to reach MOP5.8 billion, with the third week's run-rate standing at around MOP307 million per day, one of the highest non-holiday tallies post-Covid-19, according to a statement filed by JP Morgan on March 22.

The continual growth in Macau indicates the "gradually improving travel sentiments in China post-Chinese New Year," and also points to a revival of local demand for gaming following the lifting of some Covid-19 testing restrictions, JP Morgan analysts DS Kim and Derek Choi pointed out.

According to the statement, the month-to-date GGR in March has resumed to around 35% of pre-

Covid-19 levels. The GGR generated within the mass sector returned to 40-45% of previous levels, whilst the VIP sector returned to 20% of pre-pandemic levels.

Earlier, the brokerage announced that it was anticipating a GGR tally of MOP260-270 million per day for March, which JP Morgan just acknowledged as "a bit conservative" when stacked against the current month-to-date run-rate of around MOP280 million.

The brokerage remains optimistic about the prospect of the city's gaming business, setting store by a "further sequential recovery into April and May."

"The pace of recovery should step up sharply from the next big holiday (May Golden Week) in our view, and further accelerate into the second half with more re-openings and potential easing of travel," JP

Morgan stated.

Overall, the mass GGR is projected to recover to 70-75% or 85-90% of pre-Covid levels in the third or fourth quarter of this year, before hitting 100% by 2022.

Meanwhile, brokerage Sanford C. Bernstein Ltd said in its note published on March 22 that Macau's GGR for the first 21 days of March will be at MOP5.85 billion, as cited in a report by GGRAsia.

The mandatory Covid-19 test requirement to enter casinos has been lifted by the government since March 3.

According to the latest data released by The Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau, Macau generated a GGR of MOP7.31 billion in February, representing a sharp surge of 135.6% year-on-year, but down 8.9% month-to-month.

Macao Art Festival to return in May themed 'Restart'

HONEY TSANG

THE 31st Macao Art Festival (MAF), which was suspended last year due to Covid-19, is set to make up for lost time and will roll out the red carpet in May this year, the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) confirmed yesterday.

The unveiling of MAF was made public by the IC at a media briefing yesterday afternoon. The festival's resumption constitutes one of several signs Macau has been displaying of an accelerated return to normal.

This year's MAF will bear the theme "Restart" to embody its resurrection this year — music to the ears of local artists and the local community alike.

Given that the pandemic has still not subsided, MAF, which used to serve as a platform for international artistic exchanges and for local artists to showcase their works, will only focus on productions from China and Macau, Mok Ian Ian, president of the IC, said.

It features a total of 20 art shows of various genres, ranging from theatre, dance, music and visual arts, created by local and mainland artists.

"WhiteSnake," an innovative



performance presented by the Lin Zhaohua Theatre Studio from Beijing which breathes new life into the classic Chinese folktale "The Legend of the White Snake," will be the opening event which launches MAF.

The festival has also invited China's first private modern dance group, Jin Xing Dance Theatre from Shanghai, to present "Wild Flower" and "Trinity," acts which touch on controversial issues such as women's standing in society.

For local productions created

by homegrown artists, a series of captivating programs such as "Drunken Dragon Dance," "See You through Memories," and "The Coloane Game" will invite audiences to immerse themselves deeper into Macau's distinctive culture.

Another local drawcard is bound to be "The Never-ending Task of Lust for Failure," presented by Comuna de Pedra Arts and Cultural Association, and Swiss company Theater HORA. It is an experimental performance by both Macau and Swiss nationals with

intellectual disabilities.

"Running a non-profit theater troupe in Macau has been not easy during Covid-19. With the help of the government, it was very fortunate for us to have a chance to hit the stage at the Macao Art Festival," Jenny Mok, the director of Comuna de Pedra Arts and Cultural Association, told the Times yesterday.

Jenny Mok said her troupe has been receiving financial support from the government for the staging.

Due to the travel restrictions

still in place, Jenny Mok will take advantage of some digital solutions to simultaneously show both the Macau and Swiss troupes on stage. The forthcoming show will be completely different from previous performances and will explore the topics of failure in life, she said.

Aside from the 20 key performances, the festival will offer around 100 outreach programs, such as workshops, backstage tours and film screenings.

The SAR government has set aside MOP21 million for MAF this year. The festival has been a mainstay and key highlight in Macau's event calendar for both locals and tourists.

"Over the years, the festival has not only cultivated talents and accumulated a trove of works, but has also expanded its artistic vision and enhanced the aesthetic perception of its audience," Mok Ian Ian said.

The IC is aiming to lead audiences on a life-awakening artistic journey through a number of thought-provoking and sentimental programs in MAF during the tumultuous Covid-19 era.

The IC has launched a diverse ticketing channel for the first time this year, to offer greater convenience to audiences and avoid crowding during the pandemic. An online reservation process will commence on March 25 to allow people to reserve a timeslot to purchase tickets at brick-and-mortar outlets starting from the first day of ticket sales on March 28.



53 organizations participate in IFTM Career Day

THE Macao Institute for Tourism Studies (IFTM) held its 2021 Career Day yesterday at its Taipa Campus, inviting 53 participating organizations from Macau and the mainland to take part. These entities exhibited some 2,000 job vacancies for graduating IFTM students.

The Career Day aimed to form a direct communications platform between students and employers, allowing students to learn more about the current job market and maximise their chances of finding a job.

Speaking to the press, Fanny Vong, president of IFTM, acknowledged

that the city had been hit hard by the pandemic, therefore the vacancy rate in the tourism and hospitality industry is not high. Aside from graduating students who are choosing full-time jobs, graduates may also consider part-time jobs, internships or continuing their education.

The 53 organisations from various sectors participated in and exhibited at the event, providing employment opportunities and information, as well as information on the latest developments in the sectors of the graduating IFTM students.

Representatives from the participating organisations introduced career prospects and positions available in their companies, and arranged on-site interviews for graduating students and participants.

IFTM said that it will continue to organise career fairs and offer various kinds of support to help its graduating students with a "well-rounded" preparation program.

"We believe opportunities will increase when the pandemic continues to stay under control, allowing businesses to continue operations," the institute said in a statement. LV

TSI REVOKES BLUE CARD CANCELLATION ORDER ON HUMANITARIAN GROUNDS

RENATO MARQUES

THE judges of the Court of Second Instance (TSI) have revoked an order from the Secretary for Security, Wong Sio Chak, which had canceled the work permit (blue card) of a non-resident worker (TNR) who was suspected of being involved in the lodging of illegal immigrants, the Office of the President of the Court of Final Appeal informed in a statement.

According to the statement, the Secretary had originally called for the cancellation of the blue card of the TNR of Filipino nationality, following her indictment by the Public Prosecutions Office for allegedly providing support to illegal immigrants by accommodating other

Filipinos who were illegal immigrants.

In the ruling of the TSI, the judges noted that the immediate revocation of her work permit would mean she would be unable to continue to work and that she would immediately lose of her only means of survival: her income of 3,500 patacas per month.

In addition to this, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused major disruption to the aviation sector, making it impossible for the woman to leave Macau and return to her home country.

In summary, the loss of income and her inability to leave Macau would jeopardize this woman's means of survival and dignity, causing potential losses that would be difficult if not impossible to recover.

CHINA, RUSSIA OFFICIALS MEET IN SHOW OF UNITY AGAINST EU, US

THE foreign ministers of China and Russia affirmed their countries' close ties at a meeting yesterday, amid intense criticism and new Western sanctions against them over human rights.

Wang Yi and Sergei Lavrov rejected outside sniping at their authoritarian political systems and said they were working to further global progress on issues from climate change to the coronavirus pandemic.

At their initial meeting in the southern Chinese city of Nanning on Monday, Wang and Lavrov accused the U.S. of interference in other countries' affairs and urged it to rejoin the Iran nuclear agreement, something that President Joe Biden's new administration has approached cautiously. Russia and China both maintain close relations with Tehran, with which they share a firm approach against any political opposition.

The two officials continued that rhetoric at a news conference yesterday, where Wang sharply criticized coordinated sanctions brought by the European Union, Britain, Canada and the United States against Chinese officials over human rights abuses in Chi-



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov meets with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Guilin

na's far western Xinjiang region.

"Countries should stand together to oppose all forms of unilateral sanctions," Wang said. "These measures will not be embraced by the international community."

Lavrov said sanctions were drawing Russia and China closer together and accused the West of "imposing their own rules on

everyone else, which they believe should underpin the world order."

"If Europe broke these relations, simply destroying all the mechanisms that have been created for many years ... then, probably, objectively, this leads to the fact that our relations with China are developing faster than what's

left of relations with European countries," Lavrov said.

In a joint statement issued after the meeting, the two ministers said no country should seek to impose its form of democracy on any other.

"Interference in a sovereign nation's internal affairs under the excuse of 'advancing democracy' is unacceptable," the statement said.

China says members of the Uyghur and other Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang have voluntarily taken part in job training and de-radicalization courses, denying charges that more than 1 million have been locked up in prison-like reeducation camps where they are forced to reject their native culture and pledge loyalty to the ruling Communist Party and its leader Xi Jinping. Media outlets, foreign governments and activist groups say abuses, including forced labor and coerced birth control, are ongoing.

China responded immediately to the EU's move by imposing sanctions on 10 European individuals and four institutions that it said had damaged China's inte-

rests and "maliciously spread lies and disinformation." The individuals were barred from visiting mainland China, Hong Kong and Macau and banned from engaging in financial dealings with Chinese institutions.

Xinjiang had experienced anti-government violence, but Beijing claims its massive security crackdown brought peace in recent years.

China and Russia were rivals for leadership of the communist world during the Cold War but have built a strong relationship in recent years based on opposition to the U.S.-led liberal order, as well as cooperation in military affairs, technology and trade in natural resources. China's ruling Communist Party allows no political opposition and keeps a tight hold on civil society, while Russian leader Vladimir Putin has cracked down heavily on citizens calling for a more open system.

Russia has been under Western sanctions for years over its seizure of the Crimea, support for separatists in Ukraine and attacks on government critics.

Also yesterday, Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne and her New Zealand counterpart Nanaia Mahuta said in a joint statement that they shared concerns about the rights situation in western China and joined in calls for an independent inquiry. **MDT/AP**

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SOUTH CHINA SEA

US backs Philippines in standoff over reef

JIM GOMEZ, MANILA

THE United States said yesterday it's backing the Philippines in a new standoff with Beijing in the disputed South China Sea, where Manila has asked a Chinese fishing flotilla to leave a reef. China ignored the call, insisting it owns the offshore territory.

The U.S. Embassy said it shared the concerns of the Philippines and accused China of using "maritime militia to intimidate, provoke, and threaten other nations, which undermines peace and security in the region."

"We stand with the Philippines, our oldest treaty ally in Asia," the U.S. Embassy in Manila said in a statement.

Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana on Sunday demanded about 200 Chinese vessels he said were militia boats leave the Whitsun Reef, a shallow coral region about 175 nautical miles west of Bataraza town in the western Philippine province of Palawan.

Philippine officials said the reef, which they call Julian Felipe, is well within the country's inter-



Some of the 220 Chinese vessels are seen moored at Whitsun Reef, South China Sea

nationally recognized exclusive economic zone, over which the Philippines "enjoys the exclusive right to exploit or conserve any resources."

The Philippine coast guard spotted about 220 Chinese vessels moored at the reef, which Beijing and Vietnam also claim, on March 7.

On Monday, a surveillance aircraft spotted 183 Chinese ves-

sels still at the reef, said Philippine military chief Lt. Gen. Cirilito Sobejana, who released aerial pictures of the Chinese vessels in one of the most hotly contested regions in the strategic waterway.

The Philippines has filed a diplomatic protest over the Chinese presence, Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. said.

China insisted it owns the reef, which it calls Niué Jiao, and said

the Chinese vessels converged in the area to avoid rough waters.

Beijing denied the vessels were maritime militias. "Any speculation in such helps nothing but causes unnecessary irritation," the Chinese Embassy said in a statement. "It is hoped that the situation could be handled in an objective and rational manner."

The U.S. Embassy, however, said "Chinese boats have been

mooring in this area for many months in ever increasing numbers, regardless of the weather."

China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei have been locked in a tense territorial standoff over the resource-rich and busy waterway for decades.

President Rodrigo Duterte would talk to the Chinese ambassador in Manila about the issue, his spokesman, Harry Roque told a news conference.

Duterte has nurtured friendly ties with Beijing since taking office in 2016 and has been criticized for not immediately demanding Chinese compliance with an international arbitration ruling that invalidated Beijing's historic claims to virtually the entire sea. China has refused to recognize the 2016 ruling, which it called "a sham," and continues to defy it.

Duterte has sought infrastructure funds, trade and investments from China, which has also donated and pledged to deliver more COVID-19 vaccines as the Philippines faces an alarming spike in coronavirus infections. **MDT/AP**

AD

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Tickets will be on sale simultaneously through the Macau Ticketing Network outlets, telephone and online booking from

10 a.m. on 28 March (Sunday)

New arrangements for the first day of ticket sales at the Macau Ticketing Network Outlets

In order to cooperate with the epidemic prevention and control measures, those who want to purchase tickets at the outlets from 10am to 3pm that day are required to reserve their ticketing slot through the Online Reservation System of the Macau Ticketing Network in advance.

Registration → Select the location and time to purchase → Present electronic code at outlet

Online reservation system is available from 25 March 10a.m.

https://www.macaoticket.com/31fam_quotasystem

- Those in need of assistance to reserve a ticketing slot can visit any Macau Ticketing Network outlets during business hours and the online platform's opening period, and make the registration with the assistance of the staff.
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North Korean leader Kim Jong Un (left) and Chinese President Xi Jinping stroll in the premises of Kumsusan guest house in Pyongyang (2019)

KOREAN PENINSULA

Xi, Kim share messages reaffirming alliance

KIM TONG-HYUNG, SEOUL

THE leaders of China and North Korea are reaffirming their traditional alliance following contentious talks between top diplomats from Washington and Beijing and diplomatic isolation and economic problems in the North that have left it ever-more dependent on the Chinese.

The North's official Korean Central News Agency said yesterday leader Kim Jong Un called for stronger "unity and cooperation" with China in the face of challenges posed by "hostile forces" while exchanging messages with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

According to KCNA and China's Xinhua news agency, Xi in his own message to Kim described bilateral relations as a "valuable asset" to both countries and vowed to make unspecified contributions to the peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.

KCNA said Xi also expressed a commitment to "provide the peoples of the two countries with better life." Some analysts saw this as an indication that China would soon provide North Korea with badly needed food, fertilizer and other aid that had been significantly reduced amid the pandemic border closures.

Xinhua said the leaders' messages were exchanged during a meeting between Chinese senior diplomat Song Tao and North Korean Ambassador to China Ri

Ryong Nam during a meeting in Beijing on Monday.

The exchange between the leaders came as the Biden administration steps up diplomatic efforts to strengthen cooperation with Asian allies South Korea and Japan to deal with the North Korean nuclear threat and China's growing regional influence.

Top U.S. and Chinese officials traded sharp and unusually public barbs in Alaska last week in their first face-to-face meetings since President Joe Biden took office, where Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Washington is united with its allies in pushing back against Chinese authoritarianism.

The contentious talks in Anchorage came after Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin traveled to Japan and South Korea for talks that mainly focused on North Korea and China.

During his visit to Seoul, Blinken sternly criticized North Korea's nuclear ambitions and human rights record and pressed China to use its "tremendous influence" to convince the North to denuclearize.

The North has so far ignored Biden's administration's efforts to reach out, saying it won't engage in meaningful talks with the United States unless Washington abandons what Pyongyang sees as "hostile" policies, which clearly refers to the U.S.-led sanctions and pressure over its nuclear program.

KCNA said Kim addressed

the state of the North's relations with the United States and South Korea and said communication between him and Xi was required in the face of changed "external situations and reality," apparently referring to the new U.S. administration.

Kim's message "stressed the need to strengthen the unity and cooperation between the two parties and two countries to cope with the hostile forces' all-round challenges and obstructive moves," KCNA said.

Kim's message to Xi was clearly in response to last week's visits by Blinken and Lloyd to Japan and South Korea, which signaled the start of the Biden administration's efforts to create a coordinated approach with its allies on North Korea, said Cheong Seong-Chang, director of North Korea studies at South Korea's private Sejong Institute.

Cheong said it was notable that Xi did not publicly express his support for Kim's stated plans to expand the North's nuclear capabilities and instead stressed regional stability.

This shows that China prefers diplomacy over a revival of tensions in the Korean Peninsula, and despite its friction with the United States, could still endorse a resumption of talks between Washington and Pyongyang, he said.

China had advocated a "two-track approach" to the issue, whereby the U.S. wou-

ld offer security guarantees to North Korea in exchange for Pyongyang abandoning its nuclear weapons programs.

The meetings in Anchorage reflected increasingly troubled relations between the United States and China, which are at odds over a range of issues from trade to human rights in Tibet, Hong Kong and Xinjiang region, as well as over Taiwan, China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and the coronavirus pandemic.

Responding to Blinken's criticism about his government, Communist Party foreign affairs chief Yang Jiechi said Beijing had no intention to back down on any issue and that the United States should stop pushing its own version of democracy at a time when America itself has been roiled by domestic discontent.

As North Korea pursued diplomacy with the U.S. starting in 2018, it also worked to strengthen relations with China, its traditional ally and economic lifeline. But Kim has nothing to show for his ambitious summits with then-President Trump, which collapsed in 2019 over disagreements in exchanging the release of crippling U.S.-led sanctions against North Korea and the North's disarmament steps.

The North's economic woes have been compounded by pandemic border closures and devastating natural disasters that wiped out crops last summer. At a ruling party congress in January, Kim vowed to further expand the North's nuclear program and urged his people to be resilient in the struggle for economic self-reliance.

South Korea's spy agency told lawmakers late last year that North Korea's trade volume with China fell by 75% during the first 10 months of 2020. That led to a shortage of raw materials that plunged the North's factory operations to its lowest level since Kim took power in late 2011, and a jump in the prices of imported foods like sugar and seasonings.

Meanwhile, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was to arrive in South Korea later on Tuesday for talks on North Korea and other regional issues. Public spats between Washington and Moscow erupted this week after Biden during an ABC interview characterized Russian President Vladimir Putin as a "killer" and said Putin will "pay a price" for his efforts to undermine the 2020 U.S. election. AP

this day in history

1992 PUNCH ENDS 150 YEARS OF SATIRE

Punch, Britain's oldest satirical magazine, is to close after suffering crippling losses of £1.5m a year.

The decision ends a publishing tradition dating back almost 151 years.

It is expected to publish its final issue on 8 April after circulation plummeted from highs of 175,000 sales in the 1940s to 33,000 in the present day.

Publisher United Newspapers Group, which also owns the Daily Express, made the announcement today and said it was beyond recovery unless another buyer is found.

UNG managing director Graham Wilson said he would continue searching for a buyer but would not reveal any likely candidates.

There have been many rumours in recent years Punch would fold.

A £700,000 campaign to promote the magazine during its 150th anniversary last year did little to boost flagging sales.

"We needed sales to go up by thousands but they only went up by hundreds," David Thomas, the editor, said. "We did our best but it just wasn't enough."

Political satire

Losses have been blamed partly on advertisers shifting to the rising number of colour supplements in weekend newspapers.

But its main failure is seen as not having kept up with the competition.

The magazine which once set the pace of political satire was outwitted in the circulation department by the racier Private Eye and the schoolboyish Viz magazine.

Ironically, its bid to keep up with these competitors also alienated traditional readers.

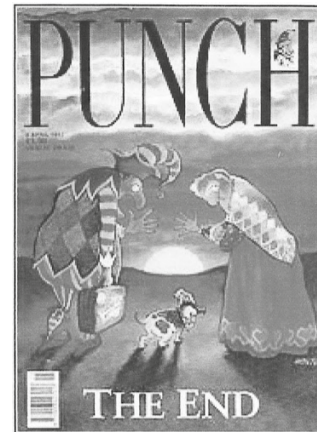
The magazine, which became a British institution, has carried articles by William Makepeace Thackeray and A. A. Milne as well as cartoons by the likes of Sir John Tenniel, the illustrator of "Alice in Wonderland".

It was founded in 1841 in the back room of a pub in the Strand.

Mark Lemon, a brewery manager who wanted to become a writer, Henry Mayhew, a lawyer-turned-journalist and the noted engraver Ebenezer Landells decided to publish a new magazine.

It would combine humour, stylish illustrations, political debate and a social conscience with a fresh audacity which became its hallmark.

Courtesy BBC News



IN CONTEXT

The old joke, "Punch is not as funny as it used to be - but then again it never was", drew little laughs as it folded.

Four years later the Egyptian businessman Mohamed al Fayed brought it back to life.

He funded new exposés on the likes of Peter Mandelson, the architect of New Labour, and the media mogul Rupert Murdoch.

But eventually it was costing £40,000 per issue to produce with subscriptions at only 6,000 and Mr Al Fayed closed the title again in 2002.

A website still exists for the magazine, reported to have at one time refused articles by Charles Dickens, with many hoping it could make a comeback and regain its cutting-edge image.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS



ARIES

Mar. 21-Apr. 19

The future belongs to people who think for themselves, so where does that leave you? Being a part of the crowd is important, and you certainly don't want to create tension among your people.



TAURUS

Apr. 20-May. 20

You need to be mindful of your role in every conversation you have today. People are going to be saying very important things and you need to catch every detail. Taking notes wouldn't be a bad idea.



GEMINI

May. 21-Jun. 21

A foreign accent could be like music to your ears today, evoking exotic locales and reminding you that you need to plan a vacation! Whenever you get a taste of wanderlust, you should act on it!



CANCER

Jun. 22-Jul. 22

Let your people know that you're pinching pennies, and they'll be happy to adjust their proposed plans to be a little bit more modest. Plus, they'll probably appreciate the chance to spend less themselves.



LEO

Jul. 23-Aug. 22

The person you could be spending a lot of time with today might not be patient enough to listen to every word you say, so try not to make this the day you confess anything major or bring up a delicate topic.



VIRGO

Aug. 23-Sep. 22

Life isn't always black and white, although some people you could be dealing with today think that way. You can ask another person to be open-minded, but you can't force them to be.



LIBRA

Sep. 23-Oct. 22

Find out about their scariest moment. Ask them what they want for their future. Switch topics toward philosophies and fears and you'll make some significant headway.



SCORPIO

Oct. 23-Nov. 21

Today, your focus could be on your own problems and whatever is going on at home with an older relative. If they need any attention from you, you should do whatever it takes to give it to them.



SAGITTARIUS

Nov. 22-Dec. 21

There's just something about ignorance that gets under your skin, and it's going to be next to impossible for you not to try to get them to open their mind a little bit.



CAPRICORN

Dec. 22-Jan. 19

Watch out for impulse buying now. You might think you can't live one more minute without a certain item, but you're wrong, and if you think about it for a few minutes, you'll realize that for yourself.



AQUARIUS

Jan. 20-Feb. 18

It's important to realize that your powers of positive thinking are just as strong as your powers of negative thinking, so try to switch your thinking around.

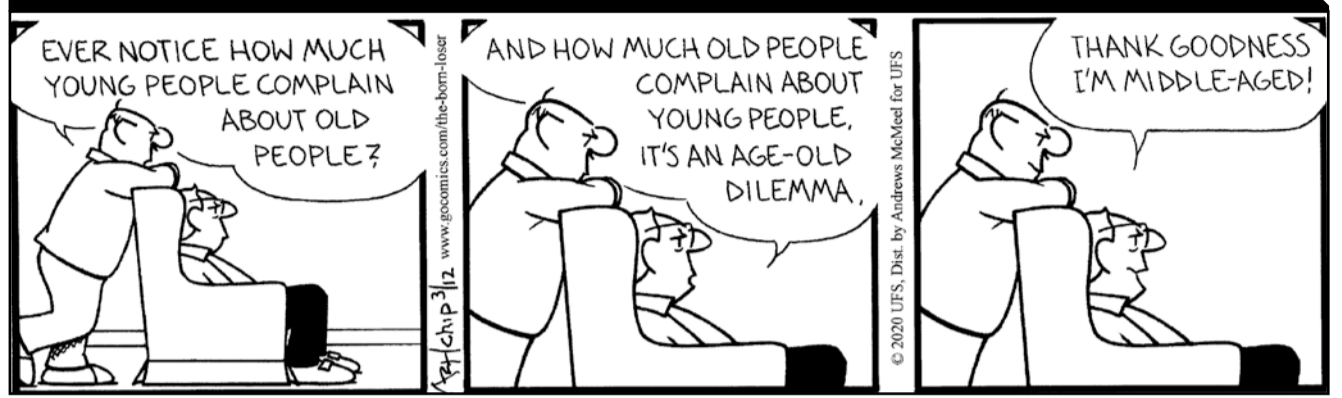


PISCES

Feb. 19-Mar. 20

Today, stop picturing what your life will be like in a decade and just focus on making it better now. Try to live in the moment. In order to create a better life down the road, you have to improve the foundation today.

The Born Loser by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

EASY

9			1					4
7				4	8			
		6		2				1
4	7	3						8
7		1		5				3
6			4	8				5
6			4				3	
		1	9					5
2				8				9

EASY+

	2	5						3
		9		3				
		9					7	1
2	5			1				
8								7
				6				5
6	4				9			
				8			6	
9					4	7		

MEDIUM

6					2			
	2			1				4
	7		5					3
			2				6	
5		9		3				7
	9		8					
8			9		5			
3		2			4			
	9							8

HARD

4			1					
	2							7
5							8	
	8		7			3		
6								1
1							9	4
					8	7		
					2			

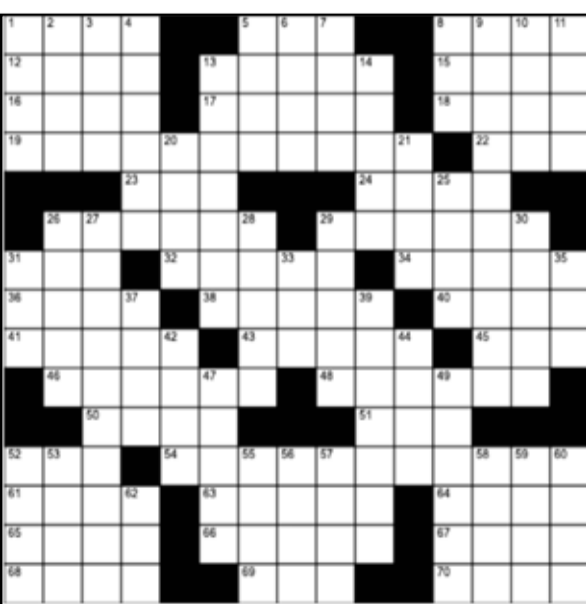
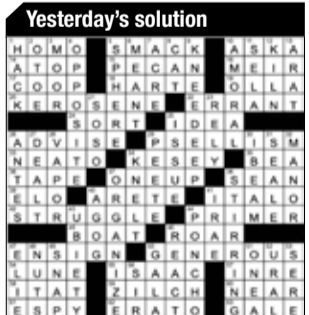
WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	8	21	clear
Harbin	-1	10	cloudy
Tianjin	10	19	clear
Urumqi	0	8	cloudy
Xi'an	5	22	cloudy
Lhasa	2	16	cloudy
Chengdu	10	17	overcast
Chongqing	10	22	cloudy
Kunming	9	25	clear
Nanjing	10	21	clear
Shanghai	11	20	cloudy
Wuhan	7	22	clear
Hangzhou	9	20	cloudy
Taipei	15	19	drizzle
Guangzhou	16	24	cloudy
Hong Kong	18	23	cloudy
WORLD			
Moscow	-7	1	clear
Frankfurt	0	7	clear
Paris	3	9	clear
London	5	10	cloudy
New York	7	13	overcast

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Kind of prof.; 5- ___-pitch softball; 8- Blind as ___; 12- Baseball team; 13- Put away; 15- Highland hillside; 16- Apple product; 17- Reef material; 18- An apple or a planet will have this at the centre; 19- Handling things delicately; 22- Basketball Hall of Famer Unseld; 23- Wall St. debut; 24- ___ Crunch; 26- Payroll frequency; 29- Maximally; 31- Prom duds; 32- Person of exceptional holiness; 34- Swung around; 36- Egyptian cobras; 38- Staggers; 40- Shrek, e.g.; 41- Chirp; 43- Fertile soils; 45- Joan of ___; French heroine; 46- Unlade; 48- African sands; 50- Paint unskillfully; 51- Stage signal; 52- "___ Believer" (Monkees hit); 54- Touchy; 61- Young bears; 63- Use a soapbox; 64- The life of Riley; 65- Earthen pot; 66- Stair part; 67- Get in a hand; 68- ___-do-well; 69- Sucker; 70- Cheek;

DOWN: 1- Indigo source; 2- ___ Valley, Calif.; 3- Hang-up; 4- Computer expert; 5- Greek portico; 6- Bereft; 7- Toward the mouth; 8- 1970 Jackson 5 hit; 9- Molasses; 10- Bern's river; 11- Driving aids; 13- Student; 14- Chosen; 20- Toll rds.; 21- Beaver creations; 25- Game played on horseback; 26- Chinese martial arts; 27- Superfluous; 28- Give up; 29- Collection of maps, Titan of Greek mythology; 30- ___ firma; 31- Tic ___ Dough; 33- Classical beginning; 35- Last mo.; 37- Actress Ward; 39- Dollar; 42- Sulk; 44- Feng ___; 47- Loathe; 49- Trojan War hero; 52- Clickable image; 53- Sterile hybrid; 55- The eyes have it; 56- Mission control gp.; 57- Pace; 58- "Peter Pan" dog; 59- Ballpark figs.; 60- Poor grades; 62- Mediterranean isl.;



Crossword puzzles provided by BestCrosswords.com

USEFUL TELEPHONE NUMBERS

- Emergency calls 999
- Fire department 28 572 222
- PJ (Open line) 993
- PJ (Picket) 28 557 775
- PSP 28 573 333
- Customs 28 559 944
- S. J. Hospital 28 313 731
- Kiang Wu Hospital 28 371 333
- Commission Against Corruption (CCAC) 28326 300
- IAM 28 387 333
- Tourism 28 333 000
- Airport 59 888 88
- Taxi 28 939 939 / 2828 3283
- Water Supply - Report 2822 0088
- Telephone - Report 1000
- Electricity - Report 28 339 922
- Macau Daily Times 28 716 081



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FOR SALE

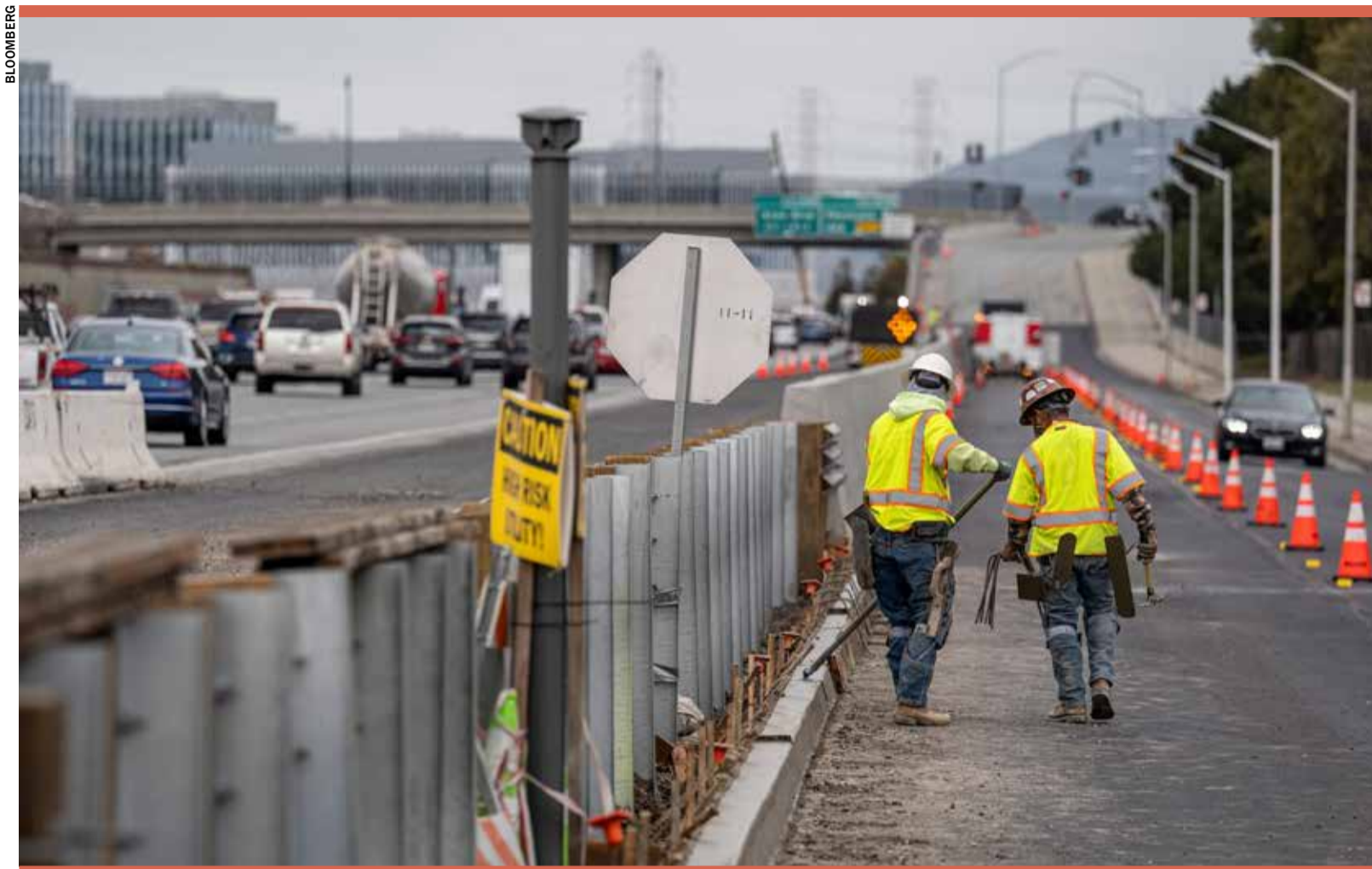
Duplex in Central Macau
HK\$4,680,000 1,100 ft² 2 1/2 1 1/2

FOR RENT

One Central striking view
\$18,000/mth 1,301 ft² 2 1/2 2 1/2

Rain Dance Property
"We dance until it's RENTED!"

Manhattan E Unit, Taipa
\$17,500/mth 1,626 ft² 3 1/2 2 1/2



ECONOMY

BIDEN STARTS INFRASTRUCTURE BET WITH US FAR BEHIND CHINA

PETER MARTIN
& KEITH LAING

PRESIDENT Joe Biden is betting that a multitrillion-dollar economic plan centered around infrastructure spending will do more than bolster an American economy hammered by the coronavirus pandemic: It will ensure his country's competitiveness against China for decades to come.

"If we don't get moving, they're going to eat our lunch," Biden told lawmakers in a pitch for his proposal shortly after his call last month with Chinese President Xi Jinping. "We just have to step up."

Biden's advisers will present him this week with a detailed proposal for a plan whose cost could touch \$3 trillion, according to three people familiar with the deliberations. Infrastructure and climate change have long been described as key efforts in the pending program, and the new details show the administration is eyeing some \$400 billion in so-called green spending, according to one of the people.

Even if he gets all he asks for, catching up to China on infrastructure won't be easy.

While U.S. officials have been promising an approaching "infrastructure week" since the early days of the Trump administration, China has been plowing

ahead for years. In February, Xi's government set out a 15-year plan for the country's transportation network. It pledges to extend China's rail network from 146,300 kilometers in 2020 to about 200,000 kilometers by 2035 - enough to circle the equator more than five times.

The plan also calls for adding 162 new civilian airports, after Beijing's new \$11 billion international airport opened last year.

In contrast, the U.S. has built just one major airport - Denver international - since the mid-1990s. And on rail, even a bipartisan effort to build the long-sought "Gateway" rail tunnel between New York and New Jersey - part of the busiest rail line in the U.S. - has foundered in recent years.

China's infrastructure efforts aren't limited to China. Since Xi introducing the so-called Belt and Road initiative in 2013, the World Bank estimated China has built or pledged to construct \$575 billion in energy plants, railways, roads, ports and other projects across the globe from Sri Lanka to Greece. Morgan Stanley in 2018 said total spending on the effort could reach \$1.3 trillion by 2027.

Biden is hoping to begin leveling the playing field. If he can win support for his plan in a deeply divided Congress, there's certainly no shortage of projects to work on.

The U.S. got an early start on all its infrastructure, but much of it is now aging or decrepit. According to the American Society of Civil Engineers 2021 Infrastructure Report Card, 43% of U.S. public roadways are in poor or mediocre condition, and 42% of the nation's 617,000 bridges are at least 50 years old. About 7.5% of them are considered structurally deficient.

"The United States is entering what could be a decades-long competition in which economic and technological power will matter just as much, if not more, than military might," Jonathan Hillman, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, wrote last month. "Starting this race with decaying infrastructure is like lining up for a marathon with a broken ankle."

The engineering report doesn't go into another challenge that may have a defining imprint on competitiveness between the U.S. and China: technology infrastructure.

The U.S. is still mired in domestic political debates about how to get broadband technology rolled out across the nation. More than a third of Americans in rural areas still lack high-speed access, according to the Federal Communications Commission. Money to help close that gap is expected to be part of any new U.S. proposal.

RAIL FAILURES

Despite Biden's impulse to push for big spending, the track record of recent presidents suggest he's likely to fall short.

Donald Trump, a real estate developer who was touted as a potential "builder president" upon his arrival in Washington, proposed a \$1 trillion infrastructure plan -- funded mostly by private investment -- that never won approval.

President Barack Obama vowed to bet big on high-speed rail as a tool to help the U.S. emerge from the 2008 financial crisis. He spoke frequently in his first term about developing a rail network that could grow to rival the interstate highway system and included \$8 billion in his 2009 economic stimulus package for high-speed rail lines. But Republican governors in states like Ohio, Wisconsin and Florida rejected the money, and a decade later a line in California that most of the rejected money was funneled to is still only in its early stages.

"Shovel-ready was not as shovel-ready as we expected," Obama said in 2011 when reflecting on his struggles to harness infrastructure projects to jump-start the economy.

Biden could face similar hurdles and it's not a given that the new president will get his plan approved. He is expected to make his case for his so-called

led Build Back Better program in a joint address to Congress in April. Democratic aides have increasingly expected the program will be split into more than one package, given legislative challenges.

CHINA'S EXAMPLE

Meanwhile, China has had access to cheaper labor, engineering prowess and experience in massive infrastructure projects, both at home and abroad. It also had the benefit of building much of its infrastructure from scratch over the past few decades as its economy boomed, with little fiscal scrutiny and fewer protections for workers, the environment or property rights.

The government has long relied on big infrastructure spending to boost the domestic economy and, more recently, to generate international support through investing or providing aid overseas.

That spending helped insulate China's economy from the effects of the 2008 global financial crisis, and again limited the decline in growth after the coronavirus pandemic hit last year. However, the reliance on building roads, railways and airports to support growth also cause a spike in debt, with some of that money funneled into unnecessary infrastructure and uneconomic boondoggle developments.

The World Bank estimated in 2019 that only one-sixth of China's high-speed rail lines made enough money to cover their operating costs and service the construction debts. That problem is likely to increase with the plan to build even more, as the newer lines will be mostly in poorer and less densely-populated parts of the country where there's less demand.

Xi also faces a set of financial and demographic challenges that his government will struggle to address as the population ages and the country's previous "one child" policy means there aren't as many workers to replace retirees.

"In the coming years, the country will be traveling a demographic downslope with an increasingly heavy debt burden and tough prospects for improving the productivity of its workers," said Ryan Hass, a former China director on the U.S. National Security Council and author of "Stronger: Adapting America's China Strategy in an Age of Competitive Interdependence."

That may help give Biden an opening to fend off Beijing's bid to dominate the 21st century.

"If the United States makes progress in fixing some of its own problems, including its infrastructure deficit, it will remain highly competitive against any challenger, including China," Hass said. **MDT/BLOOMBERG**

OLYMPICS

Japan spends millions on technology for absent Tokyo games fans

JAPAN'S top telecommunications company is getting 7.3 billion yen — about \$67 million — in taxpayer money to design mobile tracking software to curb the spread of coronavirus infections during the Tokyo Olympics.

There's one catch: Few Olympic fans from abroad will be around to use it.

Tokyo Olympic organizers and the IOC on Saturday announced a ban on fans from abroad attending the the games, which open on July 23.

NTT Communications Corp., a group company of Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corp. and a domestic sponsor of the Tokyo Games, heads the consortium developing the app in multiple languages that is set for release in June.

Domestic sponsors have contributed a record of \$3.5 billion to the local organizing committee, a total about three times larger than any previous Olympics. Contributions

have been driven by giant marketing company Dentsu Inc., the official marketing partner of the Tokyo Olympics.

Like other skeptics, opposition lawmaker Kanako Otsuji has said the app is a waste of money.

"When there will likely be no spectators, is this the time to be designing an app for fans? The Japanese government has failed over and over in digital innovation, but it's going to have success with this new app?" she said on her YouTube channel last month.

Users are to download the app in their cell phones so their whereabouts can be monitored with satellite technology.

In theory, it tracks infections. But it all must be done in good faith and is effective only if people use it honestly and diligently to record their health conditions and warn others of outbreaks.

The NTT app costs nearly 20 times as much as an earlier glitch-plagued tracking app, called Co-



coa, for "COVID-19 Contact Confirming Application," offered free to the Japanese public last year.

Japan now restricts people from entering the country because of the coronavirus pandemic, except for some essential travel and returning citizens.

NTT Communications declined comment, referring queries

to the government.

Tokyo-based NTT, founded in 1952, has boasted of close ties with the Japanese government. It's now embroiled in a sprawling corruption scandal centered around lavish entertainment on ministry bureaucrats that oversee telecommunications.

Tokyo is officially spending

\$15.4 billion to prepare for the Olympics, but several government audits have suggested it's at least \$25 billion. All but \$6.7 billion is public money.

While the pandemic has added to the costs, there will be few tourists to boost local coffers.

In 2019, the year before the pandemic hit, Japan raked in a record 4.8 trillion yen (\$44 billion) from nearly 31.9 million tourists visiting from overseas, mostly from China and South Korea.

In contrast, international travelers to Japan last year, including foreign residents and families of Japanese, dwindled to 4.1 million people, according to the Japan National Tourism Organization. No money figure was available. Domestic tourism has also fallen to about half the previous year's levels.

Japan has attributed about 9,000 deaths to COVID-19 but has barely started to roll out vaccines. **MDT/AP**

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OPINION

World Views

The Editors, MDT/Bloomberg

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR VACCINE PASSPORTS

Once people have been vaccinated against Covid-19, they're safer to dine out, fly on airplanes, attend concerts and movies, work out at the gym, go to the office, cross borders and otherwise move about — as long as they wear masks around other people indoors, avoid large groups and keep their distance. How can they demonstrate that they have this protection? By showing a "vaccine passport," perhaps in the form of a smartphone app.

Israel, the U.K., the European Union and other governments are creating such digital documents, as are private organizations. President Joe Biden is assessing whether the U.S. should have them. Yet vaccine passports have met resistance. Critics, including the World Health Organization, worry that they might exacerbate inequality, undermine privacy or simply not work very well. These concerns ought to be addressed, but they shouldn't veto a useful tool for speeding a post-Covid return to normal life.

First, inequality. "Vaccination is just not available enough around the world and is not available certainly on an equitable basis," Michael Ryan, head of health emergencies at the WHO, said earlier this month. Vaccine passports, he said, might allow this inequity to be "further branded into the system."

There's no question that the vaccine rollout should be managed with equity in mind, and care should be taken to ensure that passports don't make this any harder. Proof of vaccination can be provided in different ways, so that people who don't have smartphones, for instance, aren't excluded. But the main thing is to deliver vaccines as quickly and equitably as possible — both within countries and globally. Denying freedom of movement to people who, once vaccinated, pose little danger to themselves or others merely introduces another kind of injustice. On what basis do you deny people activities and contact with others if little risk is involved?

Privacy is another concern. People resist revealing their personal medical details to strangers. But a vaccine passport can say that a person is free of Covid-19 or protected against it without going into details about tests or shots, or any other health characteristics — just as credit cards can be used to buy things without revealing a person's bank account or credit history. Governments should demand such standards of privacy and accuracy for vaccine passports.

For example, CommonPass, a digital vaccine passport being developed by the nonprofit Commons Project and the World Economic Forum, will access users' vaccination records and lab results — to protect against forgery — but use them to validate their inoculation and infection status without revealing details. Passports should be able to provide a simple yes-or-no answer to the question "Does this person meet this facility's Covid-related entry requirements?"

But would the passports actually work as intended? They certainly couldn't guarantee that someone is virus-free or safe from infection, because tests and vaccines provide less-than-total protection. Someone infected with the coronavirus may test negative early on; someone who has been vaccinated retains a small risk of being infected. And medical science doesn't yet know whether vaccinated people can transmit the virus, or how long vaccine protection will last. Nevertheless, passports can signify that the bearers are guarded against severe disease and death, and are less likely than the unvaccinated to carry the virus and infect other people. In other words, what risks they take and pose to others are tolerably low — if they wear masks and take other precautions recommended by the Centers for Disease Control.

Keep in mind, vaccine passports are also meant to be temporary. As populations are more broadly inoculated and Covid-19 fades, the world will be able to again operate without them. In the meantime, they can encourage widespread vaccination, and enable airlines, restaurants, offices and other businesses to come back to life quickly and safely.

Sinovac said that its COVID-19 vaccine CoronaVac is safe and effective in children ages 3-17.

The results were from early and mid-stage clinical trials with over 550 subjects, said Geng Zeng, the medical director at Sinovac, at a press conference.

While the vaccine has already been allowed for use in adults in China, further testing was needed to see how it would work with children.

More than 70 million shots of Sinovac's vaccine has been given

worldwide, including in China.

There were two instances of high fevers in response to the vaccine during trials, one in a 3-year old participant and the other in a six-year old. The rest of the participants had experienced mild symptoms, said Geng.

State-owned Sinopharm, who has two COVID-19 vaccines, is also investigating the effectiveness of its vaccines in children. They had said in January that they submitted clinical data to regulators, though it was unclear if it was for both of their shots or just one.



Artist Yang Qian using dots to recreate an aerial view of Wuhan

ONE GOOD THING

AN ARTIST PRESERVES WUHAN'S COVID MEMORIES

EMILY WANG FUJIYAMA

SCRIBBLED instructions for incoming patients plastered on the window of a silent hospital reception counter. A lone worker in a hazmat suit, steadily spraying disinfectant in an empty hospital hallway.

Such scenes from the height of the coronavirus pandemic in Wuhan — moments of fear and desperation as well as unity and resilience — are etched in the mind of artist Yang Qian.

One year on, she is channeling those memories into artwork to preserve the memory of the central Chinese city's 76-day lockdown that upturned the lives of some 11 million people. In a way, that's an extension of her work as a volunteer delivering vital supplies to hospitals and residents during the traumatic period, while also reflecting the pride many residents take in having weathered the outbreak and draconian measures taken to bring it under control.

"To express what I've seen in a realistic way, this is the responsibility I've given myself. I also hope that much of the history should not be forgotten," Yang said.

A painter by trade, she felt helpless in the face of an unknown virus ravaging

her beloved hometown in January 2020. Fear gripped the city as authorities abruptly shut its residents in their homes and froze transport links on Jan. 23.

Two days later, she began volunteering with a group delivering protective clothing, masks and other supplies around hospitals. Over the course of 4 months, she and a fellow volunteer delivered some 90,000 sets of protective clothing and around 450,000 face masks.

Her first post-pandemic artwork, "Reception," grew out of the experience of accompanying a mother and daughter to a hospital in early February. The two had developed COVID-19 symptoms after the father died at home from the disease and, desperate, took to social media for help.

Yang saw the post and found a hospital willing to accept the pair, but was told that no ambulances were available.

With public transportation closed, the only solution was to bicycle to the hospital, with Yang leading the way.

At the reception desk, she saw instructions for new patients haphazardly taped on its window, some scribbled by hand. Stretched to their limit, hospital staff would point to the window instead of answering questions.

"It made me feel a kind of oppression, a kind of fear," Yang said. "Everyone, especially the doctors, are spending time only to rescue patients."

She meticulously reproduced the scene in an oil painting, right down to its torn papers and scribbled notices.

A second oil painting followed based on a photograph of a worker disinfecting a hospital hallway, rendered in shadowy hues of deep blue and black.

"It is in such a severe situation (but) even in this atmosphere, there are still people who stand up for us and protect us," Yang said.

Soon after sending the mother-daughter pair to hospital, Yang came down with a fever and cough and feared she had the virus. In tears, she went to a hospital to get tested and began writing her will. After what she calls the longest hour of her life waiting for the results, she was given the all-clear.

One year on, Wuhan has largely returned to normal, its streets bustling with shoppers, its nightclubs throbbing until dawn and pensioners dancing to a Chinese rendition of a Katy Perry song along the neon-lit Yangtze River. Only the face masks that residents dutifully wear provide a visual reminder of the pandemic's impact. MDT/AP

Iran A road accident in southeastern Iran yesterday killed at least 14 people, including eight children, an Iranian semi-official news agency reported. There were no details as to what caused the accident. The crash involved three cars, the report said, and also left 11 people injured.



Israelis began voting yesterday in the country's fourth parliamentary election in two years — a highly charged referendum on the divisive rule of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Opinion polls forecast a tight race between those who support Israel's longest-serving premier and those who want "anyone but Bibi," as he is widely known.



Germany has extended its lockdown measures by another month and imposed several new restrictions, including largely shutting down public life over Easter, in an effort to drive down the rate of coronavirus infections. Speaking yesterday, Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that restrictions previously set to run through March 28 will now remain in place until April 18.

France's Foreign Ministry said it has summoned China's ambassador over "unacceptable" comments in recent days that included alleged insults and threats toward lawmakers and a researcher. The Chinese Embassy in France called a Paris-based researcher, Antoine Bondaz, "a thug" on Twitter on Friday after Bondaz denounced China's pressure on French lawmakers over an upcoming visit to Taiwan.

Spain Only weeks after hundreds of cattle were slaughtered in an eastern Spanish port after being deemed unfit for commercial purposes, Spain has ordered the culling of 1,600 calves on a second ship that survived a three-month ordeal at sea. Nearly 180 cattle that perished during the journey were cut into pieces and thrown to the sea by the crew, according to an animal-rights group that published what it presented as Spain's official inquiry into the livestock carrier.