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CTM 40th ANNIVERSARY

LETTER TO THE EDITOR: MACAU JOURNALISTS ASSOCIATION URGES ELECTORAL AFFAIRS COMMISSION TO RETRACT MISLEADING STATEMENT ABOUT WHAT'S 'NEWS' AND 'PROPAGANDA' P2

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AP PHOTO



China announced tax breaks yesterday to spur growth of its semiconductor industry following U.S. sanctions that alarmed the ruling Communist Party by cutting off access to American processor chips for tech giant Huawei and some other companies. Leaders declared accelerating efforts to transform China into a self-reliant "technology power" to be this year's top economic priority.

AP PHOTO



Japan Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi denounced Myanmar's escalating crackdown on pro-democracy protests in talks yesterday with his Indonesian counterpart, who is visiting Tokyo for security discussions focusing on China's growing assertiveness in regional seas. Motegi "strongly criticized" the growing military crackdown on civilian protesters in Myanmar, and welcomed efforts by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to respond to it. [More on p7](#)

AP PHOTO

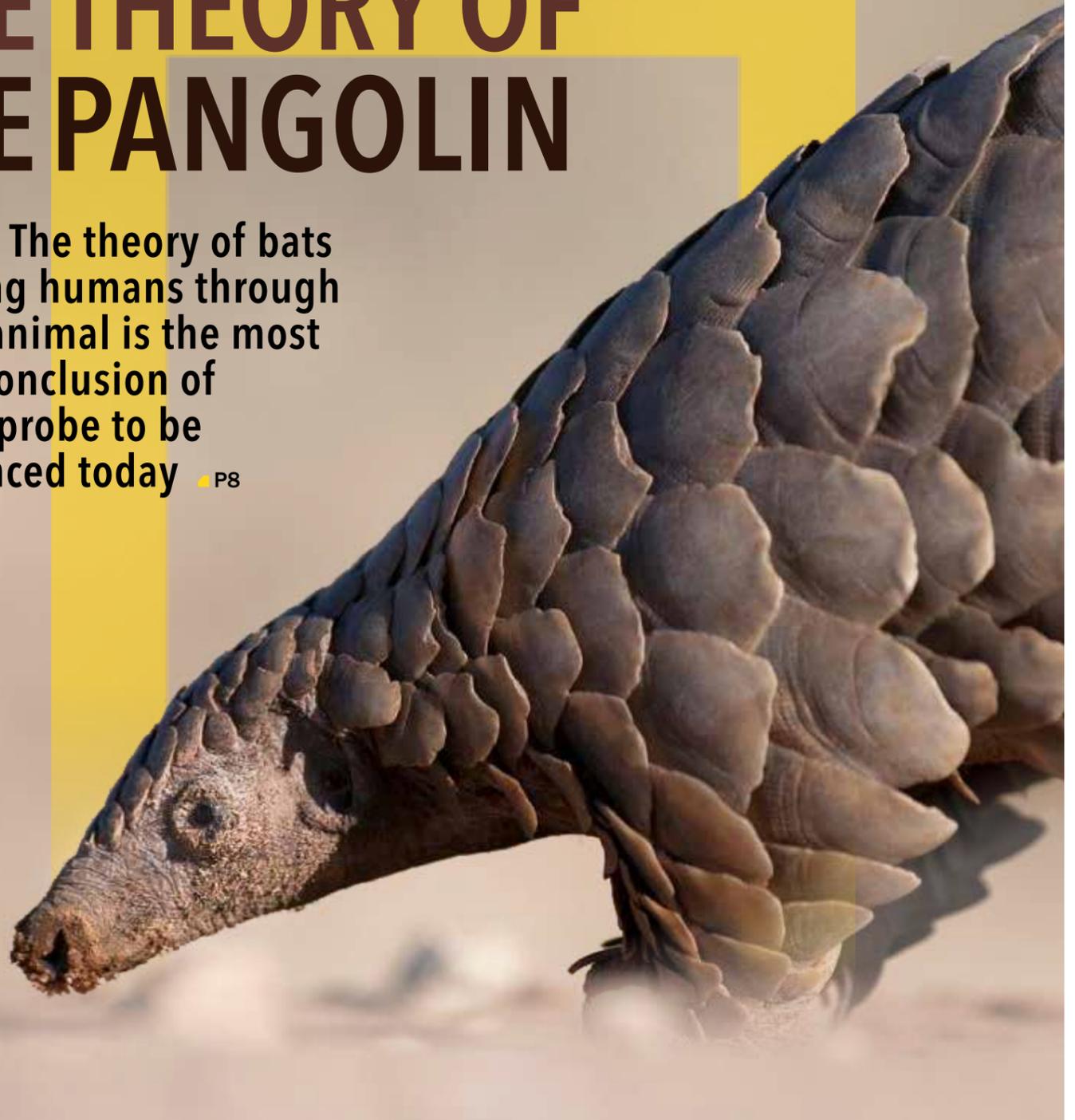


Indonesia More than 900 people from a nearby village were evacuated after a massive fire broke out yesterday at the Pertamina Balongan Refinery in Indonesia's West Java province, officials said. About 20 people were injured, including refinery workers and several villagers who suffered burns while passing through the area.

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THE THEORY OF THE PANGOLIN

Report: The theory of bats infecting humans through a host animal is the most likely conclusion of WHO's probe to be announced today P8



BIONTECH'S PACKAGING DEFECTS POSSIBLY LINKED TO LONG SHIPMENT: GOV'T

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AP PHOTO



THAILAND SEES CHINESE LEADING TOURISTS TO PHUKET AFTER REOPENING

P7

THREE MEN BLACKMAILED AFTER NUDE VIDEO CHAT, WITH THE YOUNGEST AGED 16

ANTHONY LAM

THREE men were recently blackmailed after conducting a nude video chat with acquaintances, the Judiciary Police (PJ) reported yesterday, with the youngest victim being only 16 years old.

At about 6pm on March 26, a local male teenager student was contacted online by an unknown woman and invited to a video call about an hour later. They conducted three intermittent calls, with each lasting for about 10 minutes. In total, they spent about 30 minutes on the calls.

During the calls, both parties agreed to undress and conduct the call while naked.

Subsequently, the woman contacted the teenager again, saying that she had recorded the video calls in which he was nude and sent one of the clips to him.

The woman blackmailed him for MOP20,000's worth of online game vouchers and instructed the teenager to send the activa-

GABRIEL BENOIS



tion code of the vouchers back. If the student refused to do as instructed, the woman threatened to send the clips to the victim's friends.

The victim reported the case to the PJ at 8:22pm on the same day, and did not pay the woman.

In a separate case, a male non-resident worker from Vietnam, surnamed Tran and aged 29 years, fell into a similar trap on March

24, although the case was only reported to the police two days later.

At 8pm on March 24, the man was contacted by an unknown woman over an instant messaging system. They then conducted three separate video chats, with all of which done while undressed.

The victim reported to the police that he did not feel he had been coerced to undress.

Following the calls, the woman told the man that she had recorded clips from the nude video calls, and sent him a link that connected to one of the clips.

She demanded the man to pay her in the form of online game vouchers. Otherwise, she claimed she would send the clips to people on his contact list.

The victim bought vouchers worth MOP1,332 at a nearby

convenient store and sent the activation code to the woman. Afterwards, he got a call from an unknown man, who demanded the victim buy an extra MOP5,000 worth of vouchers before he would delete the clips. The victim bought MOP2,664 worth of the vouchers because he had insufficient funds for the full amount.

Later, the suspect called Tran's family in Vietnam and revealed to them the nude video calls. The victim thus felt pressured to buy another MOP2,931 of vouchers. However, he decided to report the case to the police afterwards.

The third man, aged 31 years, surnamed Cheng, who works as a casino croupier, disclosed to the police that he was blackmailed in a similar plot on March 21. After conducting nude video calls with an unknown woman, he was asked for MOP10,000 in online game vouchers. He reported the case immediately to the police.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

WHAT'S ILLEGAL ABOUT REPORTING ELECTION-RELATED NEWS?

MJA is shocked by the Legislative Assembly Electoral Affairs Commission's (CAEAL) recent statements that misleadingly interpreted "news" as "publicity for election" as denoted in the Election Laws. What is more surprising is that the CAEAL – led by a judge – said it has the right to request that media outlets delete election-related news on their respective online channels before campaign silence days, and violators are liable to be accused of committing the crime of aggravated disobedience. This very interpretation masks a warped understanding of the law, which creates a "white terror" for media professionals. MJA urges the commission to retract its misleading statements and comments. The commission should [clarify] how the laws are applied so as to maintain the credibility of the MSAR government.

There is no article in the Election Laws that stipulates media institutions must delete election-related news published or aired during the campaign period (August 28 to September 10). There are only legal clauses that specify: "media should not publish election-related advertisements", and a "non-discriminatory approach should be adopted when making election-related news reports", "with each elec-

toral candidate positioned in equal condition" (Article 81). Also, on the campaign silence day and the voting day, individuals "should not publicize" election activities (Article 197, 160).

DOUBTS ON CAEAL'S LEGAL REASONINGS

Article 76 of the Election Laws ensures press freedom, which protects the rights to the access of information and news reporting from being hurt by political pressure. This article says: "During the electoral campaign period, reporters or broadcasting enterprises should not be sanctioned for acts related to the campaign; without prejudice to the responsibilities they incur, which can only be pursued after the election day."

CAEAL claimed that the legal basis for requesting media outlets delete election-related news ahead of the campaign silence days is derived from the definition of "Electoral Propaganda" (Article 75A) within the Electoral Laws, which states: (a) to heed public attention on certain electoral candidate(s); (b) to explicitly or implicitly suggest voters to vote or not vote for certain electoral candidate(s). With the arbitrary application of the above two articles to media outlets, could

we conclude it as a fact that any regular citizens, people managing social media discussions, or editors and commentators of Facebook pages dedicated to the forwarding of election-related news and expressing of opinions on candidates are all liable for prosecution?

MEDIA OUTLETS ARE NOT 'TOOLS FOR PROPAGANDA'

In response to an enquiry from MJA, the CAEAL revealed that they are referring to Article 4.3 of Instruction No.1/CAEAL/2021, which states that media outlets deemed to be in violation of the rule are liable for committing the crime of aggravated disobedience. However, this article – as per past [interpretations] – explicitly states that what it regulates is the "posting of propaganda materials in pictures or texts," but not news reports. Article 4.3 also states that "agents of the electoral tickets; electoral candidates; agents of the candidacy committee; and whoever that is responsible" for the posting or allowing the posting of election campaign-related materials should remove posters, banners or posts before midnight of September 10, 2021. The subject that this article targets at is clearly not media.

Even the former CAEALs have never conflated the targets of this article in the past.

What is more regretful is that the CAEAL chairman Tong Hio Fong acknowledged on March 18 of the targeting of media outlets with Article 4.3, with the rationale that there have been more people using the internet for publicity purposes and that there had been members of electoral candidate tickets prosecuted for not removing publicity posts relating to them. This has no relevance to media outlets. But the CAEAL has just deemed web-based news reports a source for irregularities in the election process and scapegoated media outlets.

MJC believes that "news" is not equivalent to "election propaganda". The very act of CAEAL in dwarfing media outlets [into] "tools for propaganda" shows its misunderstanding of how press works, and also constitutes an insult to media professionals.

MISINTERPRETING 'CAMPAIGN SILENCE DAYS'

The intention of the campaign silence days is to stop the campaign by electoral candidates, but not to prevent voters from finding or receiving information. Only when there are sufficient

and diversified sources of information are voters are informed before making a decision. To realize an open and just election process, all people should be given the room to express their opinions. To purge information disseminated via the internet is a misinterpretation of the Election Laws, and the freedom of speech that the laws ordained.

Today's news is tomorrow's history. There is no government in the world that has ordered media outlets, en masse, to remove their news in a particular frame of time – unless it is an authoritarian state. MJC urges the MSAR government to recognize the severity of this legal misunderstanding of the CAEAL. The MJC also urges the CAEAL to retract its misleading statements, which potentially affect the election process, and hurt the reputation and credibility of the MSAR government.

Macau Journalists Association

Editor's note: For consistency - in compliance with our style-book - we have used the official Portuguese acronym of the Legislative Assembly Electoral Affairs Commission, which is CAEAL.

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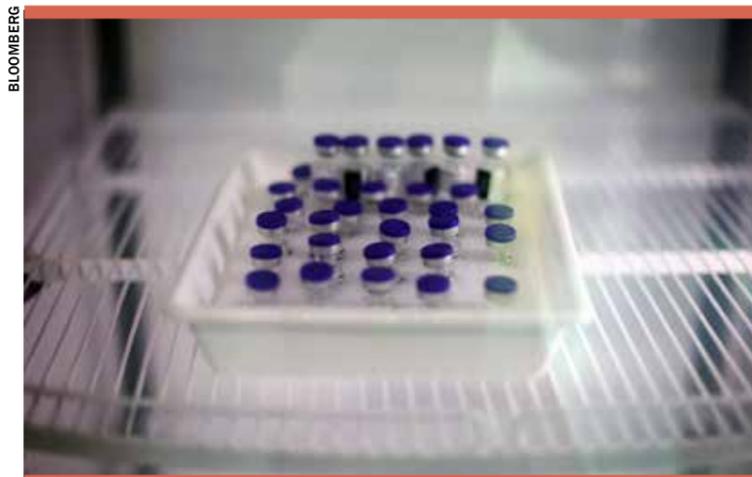
BioNTech's packaging defects possibly linked to long shipment

HONEY TSANG

THE packaging defects found in a batch of BioNTech-produced mRNA vaccines are likely to have been caused by environmental factors across the course of the delivery process from Germany to Macau, Leong Iek Hou, coordinator at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), revealed at yesterday's weekly media briefing concerning Covid-19.

In the briefing, Leong cited the preliminary results of an interim investigative report co-released by BioNTech and Shanghai Fosun Pharmaceutical Group Co.

The affected batch of vaccines, numbered 210102, was delivered to Hong Kong and Macau directly from Germany on February 27. Of the shipment, 585,000 were sent to Hong Kong, whilst 100,000 doses were delivered to Macau, accor-



BLOOMBERG

ding to Bloomberg.

The packaging defects are said to predominantly involve loosely-sealed aluminum caps on the vaccine bottles. The two enterprises have conducted a joint investigation to uncover the underlying reason behind packaging defects.

"In the report, they [the two

enterprises] do not rule out any possibility that the packaging defects were brought about by the environmental factors the vaccine bottles faced during the long-time shipment process," Leong said.

Additionally, the report said that there is no conclusive evidence pointing to the existence of risk for

this batch of vaccines. "As a result, those who were inoculated with mRNA vaccine earlier do not need to be concerned," Leong added.

BioNTech and Fosun will continue the investigation and anticipate that they will release the final result after a week, which will confirm whether the affected vaccine bottles are safe to use.

Since the issue was reported to the Macau SAR government, the use of the specific batch was suspended on March 24 until "further notice," as stated in an official memo.

Ever since the rollout of mRNA vaccination began on March 3, the authorities by far thawed 1,430 mRNA vaccines, around 30 of which were found with loose caps, Tai Wa Hou, coordinator of the Health Bureau's (SSM) Covid-19 Vaccination Operation, confirmed yesterday.

"The number [of found flawed

bottles] is small," Tai said, adding the involved bottles were sealed and stored shortly after the discovery.

However, he stressed that the authorities cannot conduct any inspection of other bottles from the same batch, as they are stored in a frozen environment at around minus 70 degrees Celsius.

March 29 marks the anniversary of Macau having no local cases of Covid-19 for 365 consecutive days.

Yesterday, the authorities announced a new built-in function for the city's health code: the addition of a hyperlink on the interface which will direct to an individual's vaccination certificate upon completing the whole course of inoculation.

Macau also reported its very first case of N501Y mutation, a Covid-19 mutated strain originating from the UK. The patient infected with the strain is a 24-year-old female student who returned to Macau from the UK on March 7. She tested positive for the IgG antibodies test on March 20 and positive for the nucleic acid test on March 26. She is currently in an isolated medical facility, and is not displaying any symptoms.

Police don't rule out action against 12 Tap Seac protesters

ON Sunday, the Public Security Police Force (PSP) deployed dozens of officers and apprehended 12 individuals for investigation in response to a protest regarding the e-voucher scheme that had been canceled by the Health Bureau (SSM).

When questioned yesterday as to whether the authority will press charges against the 12 individuals, the police emphasized that investigations were still in progress but did not rule out the possibility of further action against the 12.

Last week, the police gave a green light to the original protest organizers, but one day before the protest, the SSM levied a ban on the activity while blaming the organizer for not being able to ensure the health conditions of prospective marchers.

Some individuals at the Tap Seac Square told the press that they felt helpless and wanted their voice to be heard by the Chief Executive, which was why they wanted to attend the march.

Others told the press



COURTESY ALL ABOUT MACAU

that they were part of a four-person family, two of whom were currently unemployed. They stressed that it was not consumption stimulus or a consumption card that they wanted; they wanted a job.

They suggested the government should reduce the number of non-resident workers so as to safeguard the employment rights of local residents, saying that they did not want to surround the Labor Affairs Bureau (DSAL) building, as they were accused of doing some weeks

ago, and instead claimed that the government was behind the clash that subsequently occurred.

Weeks ago before the incident, a group of about 500 unemployed individuals visited the DSAL, but the visit subsequently turned into a protest. Some of the individuals took to the road right in front of the bureau entrance and blocked the traffic to attract attention to their cause.

In relation to this most recent protest, although it was banned by the SSM at the last minute, according

to Portuguese newspaper Ponto Final, the Holi Festival, organized by the Macau Indian Culture Association, was allowed to go ahead on Sunday in Cheoc-Van Beach, where dozens of participants gathered without facemasks or social distancing, which were the practices the SSM required from the protest organizer.

When questioned by the media as to whether the government is demonstrating double standards with regard to mandating yesterday's protest and earlier outdoor events like Macau Food Festival and marathon, Tai Wa Hou, coordinator of the SSM's Covid-19 Vaccination Operation, said yesterday at the media briefing that the SSM has treated all events "equally," provided that they all conform to all the safety measures to avoid contagion risks.

Tai pointed out that the other approved events, which involved gatherings of a crowd, had met all the requirements, including a fixed entrance and exit at the venue, a temperature checkpoint at the entrance, a requirement for all guests to display their health code before entering, and measures to keep order and keep the number of participants in check. **AL**

FEB OCCUPANCY RATE AT 38.5%, DOWN 1.8% POINTS FROM JAN

HONEY TSANG

THE city saw an average hotel occupancy rate of 38.5% in February, up 23.7% points from the same time last year, yet down 1.8% points month-to-month, according to the latest statistics provided by the Statistics and Census Service (DSEC).

In February, there were a total of 120 hotels & guesthouses open for business in the city, an increase of three year-on-year.

Despite the uptick in the number of accommodation properties, the number of available guest rooms in February declined by 4.4% year-on-year to 36,000.

During the first two months of 2021, the city's average occupancy rate dropped by 10.9% points year-on-year to 39.4%. Meanwhile, the number of guests contracted by 32.5% to 833,000, with the average length of stay bucking the trend to show an increase of 0.1 nights to 1.7 nights.

In terms of package tours, the number of visitors engaging in local tours dropped by 79.8% year-on-year to 1,900 from January to February 2021, whilst the number of outbound residents using the services of travel agencies for the same period plunged by 89.3% from last year to 9,100.

Despite the fall in the city's average occupancy rate for February, last week, Macau saw a record high in terms of weekly visitor arrivals since the outbreak of Covid-19 last year.

According to the figures provided by the Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO), the city welcomed a total of 189,843 visitor arrivals from March 20 to 26.

The weekly tally is equivalent to an average daily volume of 27,120 visitors, which represents an increase of 109.5% and 77.8% in arrivals during the Spring Festival Golden Week (12,947) and February (15,254), respectively.

SECRETARY BIDS FOR APPROVAL OF URBAN MASTER PLAN THIS YEAR, DETAILED PLANS SOON

RENATO MARQUES

THE government is bidding for the approval of the Urban Master Plan to take place by the end of this year, promising to move forward promptly with the detailed plans for the project, the Secretary for Transport and Public Works, Raimundo do Rosário, said yesterday afternoon at the Legislative Assembly (AL).

Replying to an inquiry from lawmaker Ng Kuok Cheong, Rosário said, "By the end of this year we will have the [Urban Master] Plan finalized and ready to be approved. We will do everything in our capacity to have it approved within this year," adding, "After that, we will work immediately on the detail plans."

Ng asked about the specific plans from the government in terms of the proportionality and loca-



Lam Hin San (left) and Raimundo do Rosário

tion of the various types of housing, which is a piece of information that according to the Secretary, is not yet possible to clarify.

"Macau is divided into 18 areas and I can't tell

when we will have all the detailed plans to all these areas ready. I can only say we will be working on them as soon as the Master Plan is approved," the Secretary explained.

According to Rosário, the Urban Master Plan is divided into eight different parts, and housing is only one element. He further noted that there is no identifying which type of housing will be allowed or prohibited in each area.

"We have no details on what areas [land plots] are going to be for private or public [development]. We don't have this division or classification," he clarified.

Primarily addressing the plans, which include the development of five land plots in the Zone A of the new landfills and Avenida Wai Long, Rosário said, "We are planning in total 32,000 new housing units from which 28,000 will be of public housing and, from these, 24,000 will be dedicated to economic renting. For Avenida Wai Long, we will have between 4,000 to 6,000 units, all for public housing."

EFFORTS CONCENTRATED ON ZONE A

Replying to a question from lawmakers Ng and Ella Lei, the Secretary admitted that the government's priorities in relation to the construction of public housing are in Zone A of the new landfills, as well as the land plot of the Avenida Wai Long in Taipa.

"We are concentrating all our efforts on Zone A [of the new landfills] where we are planning to build from next year 24,000 [public] housing units," he said. He added that in addition to the planned units at the Avenida Wai Long, the government will achieve the goal of building around 30,000 public housing units, a figure that according to Rosário, "will account for the most important part of the needs."

"We want to move forward with Zone A and Wai Long. But we need time. Even accelerating ... the [whole] process, we will still need a couple of years to achieve this [goal]," he said.

He noted that the government only expects that it will have a clear picture in terms of the distribution of the types of housing units on the land plots by 2024.

"We will start developing five land plots [from Zone A] this year," he said.

50% OF SENIOR CITIZENS WISH TO LIVE IN THE FORTHCOMING RESIDENCE FOR ELDERLY

RENATO MARQUES

APPROXIMATELY 50% of the aged population surveyed by the Social Welfare Bureau (IAS) have said that they wish to move from their current apartment buildings into the new Residence for Elderly, a residential building that the government aims to build by 2024, the IAS director, Hon Wai, announced yesterday at the Legislative Assembly (AL).

Hon was at the AL, where the government was expected to reply to a series of inquiries from the lawmakers on several topics.

Adding to a reply to an inquiry to the Secretary for Transport and Public Works, Raimundo do Rosário, Hon said that, according to a survey which interviewed 549 senior citizens who fulfill the eligibility criteria to apply for such a housing program, "over 50% of them said they wish to request a residence to live there."

According to the reply provided by the government officials on the topic, a total of 1,800 housing units will be built for such a purpose on the land plot P of Areia Preta, where around 2,800 senior citizens can be housed.

The government survey indicated that around half of the respondents intending to apply will do so as single applicants, while the other half will be applying to live as couples.

This building will be part of a larger government-run development, which includes the construction of other public housing buildings, namely those for exchange on urban renewal projects, which will also be available for acquisition for some of the eligible buyers of the former Pearl Horizon development, which was planned to occupy the same land plot.

'SANDWICH CLASS' HOUSING WAITING FOR FINAL REPORT

At the same assembly, lawmaker Sulu Sou raised questions regarding the status of the new type of housing dedicated to the so-called "sandwich class," that is, residents that are not eligible to apply for economic housing but do not have an income that can afford a housing unit on the private market.

According to the reply from the government, the entities in charge of the public consultation process held between October and December last year are currently compiling all the information and opinions received to produce the final report, which will soon be made public.

According to the government official, "Over 300 people have participated in the 10 sessions held (3 to general public and 7 to the different sectors). The government has collected over 28,608 pieces of opinion, that are now being gathered into around 2,300 opinions that will be included in the final report."

The government noted that, according to the preliminary results, some "90% of the population is in favor of this model" and "most of the opinions collected are regarding the income ceiling" that would allow residents to be eligible for this type of public housing.

Also in focus was the price for the acquisition of the units. According to the government, 80% of opinions believe that the main criteria to define the price should be based on the market price according to the area of the city in which the unit is located.

ROSÁRIO: BRACE YOURSELVES FOR MORE TRAFFIC CHAOS

SPEAKING at the Legislative Assembly (AL), the Secretary for Transport and Public Works, Raimundo do Rosário, offered a warning to the city's population. "The traffic will soon be ... complete chaos," he said, adding, "This will happen because [this year] we will have even more construction works [than last year]."

The warning came after several lawmakers questioned the traffic situation in Macau and the disruption that is occurring on several roads due to construction works.

In reply, the Secretary noted that things are not expected to get any better soon. In fact, he said they will almost certainly become worse, "Especially when the works on the Zone A of the new landfills kick off in full steam. This will be a consequence of the many works that we are developing and there is no way to go around this."

Confronted with contrasting opinions from several lawmakers on the topic, Rosário added, "We



need to decide if we want to do this fast or in a phased manner. From one side, you tell me that you want things done as fast as possible, but now you are also telling me that there are too many constructions at the same time. This is contradictory."

He also remarked that while some lawmakers feel disgruntled with the quantity of construction works being done, others, including the majority of the population, want public facilities and improvements to be completed as fast as possible.

"We need to take into account the ambitions of the population," he said,

noting that it is impossible to please everyone.

Questioned by lawmakers Ip Sio Kai and Sulu Sou specifically on the project that aims to create a pedestrian flyover at the Avenida de Guimarães in Taipa, Rosário said that the project only suffered one delay, caused by the halt in construction due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and he noted that the government has a contract signed with the contractor for the conclusion of the project which will be running in a "reasonable manner."

According to the Secretary, this project will be completed by the end of this year. **RM**



Easter-themed workshops and pastries are at MGM MACAU and MGM COTAI

Enjoy a Joyous Easter at MGM with Fun-Packed Happenings and Sumptuous Dining Offers

Easter marks the arrival of a lively season, a perfect time to unwind and gather with friends and family under the light meadow breeze of spring. Make the most of this Easter long weekend with MGM's fun-packed activities and sumptuous dining offers.

EASTER EGG SURPRISES

The Easter Egg Surprises gashapon machines at the Spectacle of MGM COTAI and Grande Praça of MGM MACAU will be the centerpiece of MGM's Easter celebration. With any spending at any MGM dining, spa, retail outlets and art workshops made during April 2 to 5, guests will be eligible to redeem a token to draw a capsule that guarantees to contain one of the egg-cellent prizes, including one complementary night of hotel stay at either one of MGM's properties, spa and dining gift vouchers, and many more. MGM's lion mascots Leo and Leona will also make appearances in Easter costumes to wish everyone a Happy Easter with chocolate eggs and balloons.

GET HANDS ON WITH CHOCOLATE!

While crafting Easter eggs is one of the fun rituals of Easter, here at MGM, the craft just gets extra creamy and sweet for the kids. On April

3 to 5, you may paint your own edible chocolate eggs at the "Chocolate Egg Painting Workshop" at the Spectacle, or recreate the festivity in a mason jar filled with bunnies, mini Easter eggs and more at the "Easter Jar Decoration Workshop" at Grande Praça, both priced at MOP100 per person. Guests with on-day dining spending receipt may enjoy a 50% discount for a maximum of two persons.

EASTER FEASTING DONE RIGHT

Best way to enjoy the long weekend is to savor an Eggs-travaganza Easter brunch with friends and family, another Easter ritual to embrace the holiday spirit. As the warmer season approaches, Grill 58, MGM COTAI is bringing back brunch under the sun every weekend and is especially serving an Easter special menu from April 3 to 4. Enjoy a 4-course brunch that includes delicacies from garden, land and sea, such as Fine de Claire Oyster, Fermented Tomato & Smoked Bonito Oil and the restaurant's classic favorite Wagyu Beef Burger, Emmental Cheese, Bacon, Fries, priced at MOP588* per person. Complete the sumptuous brunch with a free-flow champagne and beverage option with an extra MOP380* per person. The restaurant has also prepared the "Bunny-tail", a range of

fun Easter-themed mocktail options especially curated for the little guests.

Recently returned to the local dining scene, Aux Beaux Arts, the rendezvous of the locals at MGM MACAU offers a semi-buffet brunch option serving exquisite French classics on April 4 under a charmingly atmospheric setting, priced at MOP480* per person. Guests may also top their brunch table with free-flow bubbles, with extra MOP380* per person. The restaurant's a-la carte menu is also available for lunch and dinner, for those who opt for an old-world brasserie dining experience inside the vintage indoor dining room.

On the other hand, Coast and Rossio both serve Easter Feast lunch and dinner buffet, perfect for those who are up for a holiday feasting. Pastry Bar and Anytime also have a lineup of adorable Easter pastries, as well as Egg-citing Easter Afternoon Tea Set and Eggs-static Sugar Crush to please everyone with major sweet tooth.

For reservations and enquiries, please call (853) 8802 3888 or visit www.mgm.mo.
*Subjects to 10% service charge



Sumptuous brunch at Grill 58



Aux Beaux Arts at MGM MACAU



MACAU LEGEND REPORTED TENFOLD INCREASE IN LOSS FOR 2020

HONEY TSANG

THE Macau Legend Development Ltd (Group) posted an aggregate net loss of around HKD1.96 billion for the full year of 2020, ten times the net loss in 2019, according to the Group's finalized financial report released last week.

The confirmed yearly loss meets the Group's earlier gloomy prognosis for a range of loss between HKD1.9 billion and HKD2 billion across 2020.

The Group associated the "significant increase in loss" with the sharp decline in revenue — which was hindered by the "social distancing measures" and "travel restrictions" and an ensuing plunge in visitor arrivals to Macau and Laos during 2020.

In terms of revenue for 2020, the conglomerate generated a combined revenue of approximately HKD700.7 million, a 70.3% drop from the HKD2,359.7 million received in 2019.

Of all posted revenue figures, HKD526.8 million came from the Group's gaming business, down 72.2% year-over-year. The drop



was predominately caused by the significant decline in revenue across three casinos in Macau and another in Laos.

Owing to the impact of Covid-19, the Group's three casinos in Macau — Legend Palace Casino, Babylon Casino, and Landmark Casino, all operating under a "service agreement" with Macau gaming operator SJM Holdings Ltd — posted a substantial decrease in gaming revenue

of HKD689.6 million, HKD87.9 million and HKD407.5 million, respectively.

The Savan Legend Casino, operated by the Group within Savan Legend Resorts in Laos, registered a drop of HKD186.3 million in gaming revenue last year.

Similar to other casino and resort operators, the Group shifted its business strategy to focus on the premium mass market in 2020 and cost control measures, in an

attempt to offset the loss caused by the effects of the pandemic.

In terms of non-gaming operations, including the operations at Macau Fisherman's Wharf (MFW) and Savan Legend Resorts in Laos, the Group reported a total revenue of approximately HKD173.9 million, down 62.3% year-on-year.

The company ascribed the loss in non-gaming revenue to revenue fall from hotel operations and

food and beverage businesses during the pandemic. The average occupancy rate for Legend Palace Hotel and Harbourview Hotel in Macau stood at 40.2% and 30.1% in 2020, showing a significant drop from 93.4% and 92.7%, respectively, in 2019.

The Group also focused on growing non-gaming elements across last year, such as upgrading dining and entertainment offerings at MFW and implementing facilities upgrades in the Convention and Exhibition Center.

Overall, the adjusted earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization (EBITDA) of the Group registered a loss of HKD429.3 million, a drop of 217.4% from the positive adjusted EBITDA of HKD365.8 million in 2019.

"Looking ahead to 2021, with increasing popularity of vaccines and gradual relaxation of travel restrictions by local governments in recent months, the Group expects that the number of visitors coming to Macau will be increasing steadily this year," the statement noted.

Since 29 December 2020, Chan Weng Lin, the founder and chairman of the city's junket enterprise Tak Chun Group, has become chief executive officer at the Group. He increased his stake in the Group to 33.19% in November last year.

AD

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Japan faces pressure to join China sanctions ahead of US trip

JAPANESE Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga is under pressure to join other major democracies in imposing sanctions on China over human-rights violations as he prepares for his first face-to-face summit with U.S. President Joe Biden.

Numerous reports of serious human-rights abuses against the Uyghur ethnic group in China's far western region of Xinjiang have prompted several countries in the West to sanction Communist Party officials. Beijing has routinely dismissed the accusations about its behavior against the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs

as politically motivated lies, and on Saturday it announced retaliatory sanctions on individuals in the U.S. and Canada, adding to those imposed earlier on the U.K. and EU.

While Japan has long resisted putting economic penalties on its largest trading partner, some in Suga's ruling party are calling for him to take a more radical line—particularly with the Group of Seven summit in the U.K. coming up in June.

"Japan is the only G-7 country not taking part in the sanctions," said Gen Nakatani, a former defense minister, who co-chairs a cross-party group of lawmakers on Chi-

na policy. "It's shameful for Japan to be seen as a country that's pretending not to know what's going on."

Suga is set to become the first foreign leader to visit Biden at the White House, with media reports saying the summit may take place as soon as April 9. China is likely to be on the agenda there, as well as at the G-7 talks, to which Asian democracies will be invited to counter China and other states criticized for being authoritarian.

"We hope Japan can be prudent about its actions and rhetoric, and does not make groundless attacks on China just because it is an ally

of the U.S. It does not serve Japan's interest in doing so," Zhao Lijian, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, warned at a regular briefing yesterday in Beijing.

Japan, similar to neighbor South Korea, is stuck in the awkward position of being deeply entwined with China economically, even as it relies on the U.S. for defense as its sole military ally.

While the Biden administration has signaled a renewed focus on human rights in its foreign policy, Japan's government has often sought to maintain ties with U.S. adversaries and traditionally keeps criticism of other countries low key. **MDT/BLOOMBERG**

OPINION

China Daily
Editorial, China Daily

HYPING LIES ABOUT XINJIANG WILL ALWAYS EXACT A PRICE

China will not stir up trouble, but it is not afraid of trouble either. That was the unequivocal message Beijing conveyed to the world last week.

Showing that it refuses to be threatened by any political blackmail, and demonstrating its determination and resolve to safeguard its national sovereignty, security and development interests, China responded in kind to the sanctions imposed on Chinese individuals and an entity by the European Union and some Western countries on the pretext of alleged human rights abuses in the Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region.

China immediately rebutted the lies and misinformation and imposed sanctions in three batches on individuals and entities of the EU, the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada.

This was a necessary and justified response by China to the troublemaking of some anti-China forces in the US and other Western countries who have fabricated rumors and lied to distort what China is doing to combat extremism and terrorism in Xinjiang.

Thanks to the effectiveness of these efforts to raise community resistance to extremist ideology, people of all ethnic groups and religions in Xinjiang enjoy peace and prosperity. But these efforts to safeguard people's lives and livelihoods and maintain peace and stability in the region are being deliberately misrepresented by those hoping to foment unrest in the region to turn it into a pressure cooker creating internal pressure within China.

In this process, think tanks, institutes, media outlets, social organizations and political advisory bodies are vying with one another to mount the stage in full regalia. Despite the diversity of their identities they cannot hide their links with the anti-China forces in the West or that their claims about Xinjiang are inevitably based on the lies, distorted facts and doctored data from knowledgeable sources who invariably prove to be advocates of terrorism, secessionism and extremism.

And some, out of ideological prejudice, would rather believe in the lies concocted by these few anti-China elements than listen to the voice of the 25 million people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang and face squarely their approval of the measures and basic facts of development and progress in Xinjiang.

As Hua Chunying, a spokeswoman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry said, the so-called Uyghur issue in Xinjiang is just a strategic conspiracy staged by some Western politicians and media outlets who whether knowingly or not are colluding with extremist and separatist forces against China. And these individuals and entities have brooked no delay in integrating themselves into Washington's strategy to contain China.

The lies on Xinjiang do not withstand scrutiny, and the region's development achievements are the most powerful repudiation of them. As always, human rights are nothing but a fig leaf the West is using to cover up its true intentions.

Thailand sees Chinese leading tourists to Phuket after reopening



THAILAND expects about two million foreign tourists, mostly Chinese and Europeans, to visit Phuket this year after the nation's most popular resort island reopens to vaccinated visitors from July 1.

The holidaymakers may generate about 105 billion baht (\$3.4 billion) in revenue in the second half, according to Vichit Prakobgosol, vice president of the Tourism Council of Thailand. It will be the first time in more than a year that the island allows visitors without the mandatory two-week quarantine.

Phuket's plan to waive quarantine for inoculated visitors is part of a gradual reopening of borders by Thailand, where tourism contributed to about one-fifth of its pre-pandemic economy.

A successful reopening of Phuket to foreign visitors, who used to contribute almost 90% of the island's tourism receipts, may pave way for other popular destinations to end movement restrictions.

China, Russia, the U.K., Germany, France, Sweden

and the U.S. are likely to be the key origins for tourists to Phuket, Vichit said.

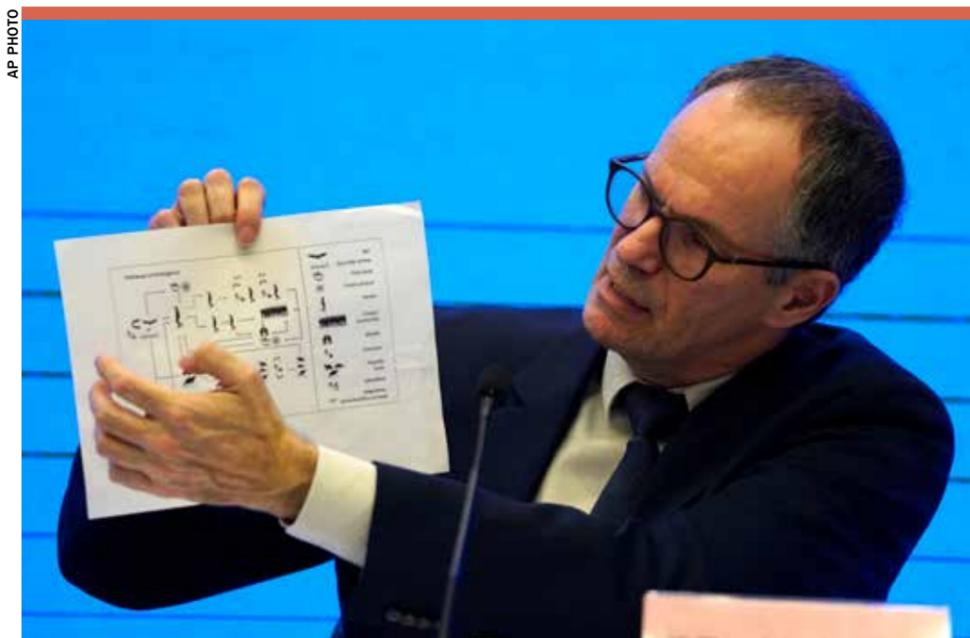
The Chinese, who were the biggest group of tourists to Thailand before the pandemic, are expected to return in July on chartered flights, while visitors from Europe will likely start arriving during the winter months, he said.

"It's good that the majority of countries with high numbers of vaccinations are the main markets for Thai tourism," Vichit said yesterday. "The focus for the government should now be to

finalize agreements and vaccine passports with various countries to allow visitors to return without having to quarantine."

Phuket province has ramped up its capacity to administer as many as 12,000 doses of vaccine per day, from 400 previously, to reach its target of fully inoculating 70% of its residents before the reopening, said Thaneth Tantipiriyakij, vice president of the Phuket Tourist Association. The island will complete the rollout of 930,000 doses by June, he said.

MDT/BLOOMBERG



Peter Ben Embarek of the World Health Organization team holds up a chart showing pathways of transmission of the virus during a press conference, in February

EXCLUSIVE

WHO report says animals likely source of Covid

KEN MORITSUGU & JAMEY KEATEN, BEIJING

A joint WHO-China study on the origins of COVID-19 says that transmission of the virus from bats to humans through another animal is the most likely scenario and that a lab leak is “extremely unlikely,” according to a draft copy obtained by The Associated Press.

The findings offer little new insight into how the virus first emerged and leave many questions unanswered, though that was as expected. But the report does provide more detail on the reasoning behind the researchers’ conclusions. The team proposed further research in every area except the lab leak hypothesis.

The report, which is expected to be made public Tuesday, is being closely watched since discovering the origins of the virus could help scientists prevent future pandemics — but it’s also extremely sensitive since China bristles at any suggestion that it is to blame for the current one. Repeated delays in the report’s release have raised questions about whether the Chinese side was trying to skew its conclusions.

“We’ve got real concerns about the methodology and the process that went into that report, including the

fact that the government in Beijing apparently helped to write it,” U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a recent CNN interview.

China rejected that criticism yesterday.

“The U.S. has been speaking out on the report. By doing this, isn’t the U.S. trying to exert political pressure on the members of the WHO expert group?” asked Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian.

The report is based largely on a visit by a WHO team of international experts to Wuhan, the Chinese city where COVID-19 was first detected, from mid-January to mid-February.

In the draft obtained by the AP, the researchers listed four scenarios in order of likelihood for the emergence of the coronavirus named SARS-CoV-2. Topping the list was transmission from bats through another animal, which they said was likely to very likely. They evaluated direct spread from bats to humans as likely, and said that spread through “cold-chain” food products was possible but not likely.

Bats are known to carry coronaviruses and, in fact, the closest relative of the virus that causes COVID-19 has been found in bats. However, the report says that “the evolutionary distance between these bat viruses

and SARS-CoV-2 is estimated to be several decades, suggesting a missing link.”

It said highly similar viruses have been found in pangolins, which are another kind of mammal, but also noted that mink and cats are susceptible to the COVID-19 virus, suggesting they could be carriers, too.

The AP received the draft copy yesterday from a Geneva-based diplomat from a WHO-member country. It wasn’t clear whether the report might still be changed prior to release, though the diplomat said it was the final version. A second diplomat confirmed getting the report too. Both refused to be identified because they were not authorized to release it ahead of publication.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus acknowledged that he had received the report over the weekend and said it would be formally presented Tuesday.

“We will read the report and discuss, digest its content and next steps with member states,” Tedros told a news conference in Geneva. “But as I have said, all hypotheses are on the table and warrant complete and further studies from what I have seen so far.”

He declined to comment on whether political pressure had influenced the report.

The draft report is inconclusive on whether the outbreak started at a Wuhan seafood market that had one of the earliest clusters of cases in December 2019.

The discovery of other cases before the Huanan market outbreak suggests it may have started elsewhere. But the report notes there could have been milder cases that went undetected and that could be a link between the market and earlier cases.

“No firm conclusion therefore about the role of the Huanan market in the origin of the outbreak, or how the infection was introduced into the market, can currently be drawn,” the report said.

The market was an early suspect because some stalls sold a range of animals — and some wondered if they had brought the new virus to Wuhan. The report noted that a range of animal products — including everything from bamboo rats to deer, often frozen — were sold at the market, as were live crocodiles.

As the pandemic spread globally, China found samples of the virus on the packaging of frozen food coming into the country and, in some cases, have tracked localized outbreaks to them.

The report said that the cold chain, as it is known, can be a driver of long-distance virus spread but was skeptical it could have triggered the outbreak. The report says the risk is lower than through human-to-human respiratory infection, and most experts agree.

“While there is some evidence for possible reintroduction of SARS-CoV-2 through handling of imported contaminated frozen products in China since the initial pandemic wave, this would be extraordinary in 2019 where the virus was not widely circulating,” the study said.

The report cited several reasons for all but dismissing the possibility the virus escaped from a lab in Wuhan, a speculative theory that was suggested and promoted by former U.S. President Donald Trump among others.

It said such laboratory accidents are rare and the labs in Wuhan working on coronaviruses and vaccines are well-managed. It also noted that there is no record of viruses closely related to SARS-CoV-2 in any laboratory before December 2019 and that the risk of accidentally growing the virus was extremely low. **MDT/AP**

this day in history



1981 PRESIDENT REAGAN IS SHOT



President Ronald Reagan has been shot and wounded after a lone gunman opened fire in Washington.

He is currently undergoing emergency surgery at George Washington University Hospital but there are unconfirmed reports he walked in unaided.

Initial reports claim he may have a punctured lung. Five to six shots were fired as he left the Washington Hilton Hotel where he had been addressing a union convention, about one mile from the White House.

A man, firing at close range, also wounded White House Press Secretary James Brady in the head.

A Secret Service official and a Washington policeman were also injured before the gunman was pushed to the ground by police.

The president had appeared from the hotel smiling and walked towards his limousine turning momentarily to acknowledge calls from the waiting press.

A burst of gunfire was then heard before the president was bundled into a bullet proof limousine and whisked away.

First Lady Nancy Reagan is understood to be on her way to the hospital to visit her 70-year-old husband.

The attacker is described as being in his twenties and blonde.

He was pinned to the wall by secret service agents and he has now been arrested.

The assassination attempt has sent shock waves around the country where memories of the murder of president John F Kennedy remain vivid.

President Reagan has only been in office for 69 days and the attack leaves the running of the country in some confusion as his vice-president George Bush is currently on his way back from Texas.

Until the arrival of Vice-President Bush it is unclear who is in charge.

The American Stock Exchange has stopped trading and the Academy Awards have been postponed until tomorrow night in the wake of the attacks.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

The president initially appeared to have escaped serious injury, but had been hit by a ricocheting bullet as he was bundled into his limousine by Secret Service Agents. He was operated on and made a fast recovery.

Mr Brady suffered severe head injuries, and policeman Thomas Delahanty and Tim McCarthy of the Secret Service were also injured.

John Hinckley, 25, the son of an affluent oil industry executive, was charged with trying to assassinate the president fuelled by an obsession with actress Jodie Foster and a desire to impress her.

The following June, Hinckley was found not guilty by reason of insanity and was committed to hospital.

Ronald Reagan went on to win a second term in office by a wide margin almost four years later.

He died in June 2004, aged 93, after suffering from Alzheimer’s disease for 10 years.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS

ARIES
 Mar. 21-Apr. 19
 You should be able to tie up loose ends today. Problems with your partner are apparent. Relatives may be less than easy to deal with.

TAURUS
 Apr. 20-May. 20
 Today will be hectic. Don't bother trying to make someone you live with see your point of view. Don't make those you live with feel unloved or unworthy.

GEMINI
 May. 21-Jun. 21
 You'll be surprised how much you can accomplish. Physical limitations are possible if you aren't careful. Don't upset elders in your family who don't understand your present situation.

CANCER
 Jun. 22-Jul. 22
 You need to concentrate on your business ventures more than on your relationship today. You can make major decisions regarding your professional direction.

LEO
 Jul. 23-Aug. 22
 Try to be reasonable. Try not to skirt issues if you think you'll hurt someone's feelings. Finish those changes you've been talking about making to your residence.

VIRGO
 Aug. 23-Sep. 22
 You may have to take a short trip to visit someone who hasn't been well. You can make extra cash if you act on a hunch. Outdoor sports events should entice you.

LIBRA
 Sep. 23-Oct. 22
 Your confidence is growing and advancement is apparent. Expect to pay more than anticipated for entertainment or other purchases. You will be accident prone if you aren't careful today.

SCORPIO
 Oct. 23-Nov. 21
 You can anger others quickly today. Avoid overspending on items for your home. You will be encouraged to get involved in a moneymaking venture. Someone you care about may not be too pleased with you.

SAGITTARIUS
 Nov. 22-Dec. 21
 Tempers will mount if you are too pushy at work. Don't count on others to cover up for your shortcomings. You have a lot to offer.

CAPRICORN
 Dec. 22-Jan. 19
 Keep tabs on your spending. Someone envious of your popularity may challenge you to a debate. Don't make promises you can't keep.

AQUARIUS
 Jan. 20-Feb. 18
 Cultural activities open your eyes to new ways of doing things. Don't let your boss make you feel guilty enough to take work home with you.

PISCES
 Feb. 19-Mar. 20
 You need to do more research before you make your final decision. Go out with friends. You will be emotional when dealing with coworkers or employers.

The Born Loser by Chip Sanson



SUDOKU

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

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

WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	6	21	cloudy
Harbin	2	11	cloudy
Tianjin	9	22	clear
Urumqi	-1	8	snow storm
Xi'an	10	22	overcast
Lhasa	3	15	cloudy
Chengdu	17	24	drizzle
Chongqing	18	27	cloudy
Kunming	14	25	cloudy
Nanjing	16	23	overcast
Shanghai	14	19	overcast
Wuhan	17	21	moderate rain
Hangzhou	15	21	drizzle
Taipei	20	25	drizzle
Guangzhou	23	31	cloudy
Hong Kong	24	29	cloudy
WORLD			
Moscow	0	5	drizzle
Frankfurt	4	22	clear
Paris	6	22	cloudy
London	5	19	clear
New York	4	15	clear

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Participant; 6- Shatter; 11- I get it!; 14- Call; 15- Bay city; 16- Oh yeah? ___ who?; 17- Great reviews; 18- Shed ___; 19- Big bang cause; 20- Gardening tool; 22- Burning; 24- Sends back into custody; 28- Sardonic; 29- Code of silence; 30- Passover meal; 32- Kind of cod; 33- New Mexico's state flower; 35- JFK postings; 39- Otherwise; 40- Average; 41- Sharp to the taste; 42- Actor Connery; 43- Filament; 45- Switch back?; 46- Strong thread; 48- Borrowed; 50- Less strict; 53- Domesticated fowl collectively; 54- Tourist draw; 55- Vigilant; 57- This ___ stickup!; 58- Fuji rival; 60- Coherent light beam; 65- Rocky hilltop; 66- Muse with a lyre; 67- "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina" musical; 68- Sunblock letters; 69- Street show; 70- Brief;

DOWN 1- Spring mo.; 2- Ballroom dance, when doubled; 3- Mazel ___!; 4- Washington bill; 5- Take as an affront; 6- Does' beaus; 7- Spouse; 8- From the U.S.; 9- Health haven; 10- Zimbabwe's capital; 11- John of "The Addams Family"; 12- Painter Rousseau; 13- Montezuma, for one; 21- WWII turning point; 23- Prophecy; 24- Actor's parts; 25- "South Pacific" hero; 26- Brainy bunch; 27- Containing divalent silver; 28- Highest mountain in Crete; 30- Fish covering; 31- Light brown; 34- ___ arms (angry); 36- Fortune-telling cards; 37- Bellowing; 38- Rocklike; 43- Evergreen tree; 44- Heath; 47- Less strong; 49- Squirrel food; 50- Gives off; 51- Author of fables; 52- Sash; 53- Black tea; 55- Purim month; 56- Like the White Rabbit; 59- ... ___ mouse?; 61- ___ Maria; 62- Round Table title; 63- French connections; 64- Actress Charlotte;

Yesterday's solution

A	R	A	B	S	H	E	L	F	B	A	S	E			
S	A	G	O	W	A	G	E	R	E	L	K	S			
O	N	E	R	O	Z	O	N	E	A	V	I	S			
F	I	R	E	F	L	Y	D	I	C	T	A	T			
D	A	L	G	E	L										
S	C	O	O	T	E	R	W	H	O	E	V	E			
A	R	A	M	N	I	G	H	T	S	E	S	E			
M	I	S		S	U	I		R	S	T					
B	R	E	P	A	R	T	I	N	A	I	D	E	A		
A	D	S	I	G	N	E		S	E	R	O	O	I	N	G
R	E	N	C		E	N	G		G	O					
R	E	C	R	U	I		S	U	N	L	A	M	P		
E	P	I	C		L	A	H	T	I		I	C	E	R	
N	E	N	E		L	U	M	E	N		Z	I	T	I	
D	E	E	D		A	S	O	N	G		E	D	A	M	

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PJ (Open line) 993	Telephone - Report 1000
PJ (Picket) 28 557 775	Electricity - Report 28 339 922
PSP 28 573 333	Macau Daily Times 28 716 081
Customs 28 559 944	
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AP PHOTO



The Ever Given, a Panama-flagged cargo ship, is pulled by one of the Suez Canal tugboats yesterday

SHIPPING

GIANT CONTAINER SHIP THAT BLOCKED SUEZ CANAL IS FINALLY FREE

ISABEL DEBRE
& SAMY MAGDY, SUEZ

SALVAGE teams yesterday freed a colossal container ship stuck for nearly a week in the Suez Canal, ending a crisis that had clogged one of the world's most vital waterways and halted billions of dollars a day in maritime commerce.

Helped by the tides, a flotilla of tugboats wrenched the bulbous bow of the skyscraper-sized Ever Given from the canal's sandy bank, where it had been firmly lodged since March 23.

The tugs blared their horns in jubilation as they guided the Ever Given through the water after days of futility that had captivated the world, drawing scrutiny and social media ridicule.

The giant vessel headed toward the Great Bitter Lake, a wide stretch of water halfway between the north and south ends of the canal, where it will be inspected, said Evergreen Marine Corp., a Taiwan-based shipping company that operates the ship.

The Suez Canal Authority also will inspect the area where the vessel ran aground, to see if it is safe for shipping to resume through the waterway and clear a traffic jam of ships waiting to enter.

"We pulled it off!" said Peter Berdowski, CEO of Boskalis, the salvage firm hired to extract the Ever Given, in a statement. "I am excited to announce that our team of experts, working in close colla-

boration with the Suez Canal Authority, successfully refloated the Ever Given ... thereby making free passage through the Suez Canal possible again."

Buffeted by a sandstorm, the Ever Given had crashed into a bank of a single-lane stretch of the canal, about 6 kilometers (3.7 miles) north of the southern entrance, near the city of Suez. That created a massive traffic jam that held up \$9 billion a day in global trade and strained supply chains already burdened by the coronavirus pandemic.

At least 367 vessels, carrying everything from crude oil to cattle, are backed up as they wait to traverse the canal. Dozens of others have taken the long, alternate route around the Cape of Good Hope at Africa's southern tip — a 5,000-kilometer (3,100-mile) detour that costs ships hundreds of thousands of dollars in fuel and other costs.

Egypt, which considers the canal a source of national pride and crucial revenue, has lost over \$95 million in tolls, according to the data firm Refinitiv. President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi, who for days was silent about the crisis, praised yesterday's events.

"Egyptians have succeeded in ending the crisis," he wrote on Facebook, "despite the massive technical complexity."

In the village of Amer, which overlooks the canal, residents cheered as the vessel moved along. Many scrambled to get a

closer look while others mockingly waved goodbye to the departing ship from their fields of clover

"Mission accomplished," villager Abdalla Ramadan said. "The whole world is relieved."

The U.S. Embassy in Cairo tweeted its congratulations to Egypt.

While the canal is now unblocked, it is unclear when traffic would return to normal. Analysts expect it could take at least another 10 days to clear the backlog on either end.

The breakthrough came after days of immense effort with an elite salvage team from the Netherlands. Tugboats pushed and pulled to budge the behemoth from the shore, their work buoyed by high tide at dawn that led to the vessel's partial refloating. Specialized dredgers dug out the stern and vacuumed sand and mud from beneath the bow.

The operation was extremely delicate. While the Ever Given was stuck, the rising and falling tides put stress on the vessel, which is 400 meters (a quarter mile) long, raising concerns it could crack or break.

Berdowski told Dutch radio station NPO 1 the company had always believed it would be the two powerful tugboats it sent that would free the ship. Yesterday's strong tide "helped push the ship at the top while we pulled at the bottom and luckily it shot free," he said.

"We were helped enormously by the strong falling tide we had

this afternoon. In effect, you have the forces of nature pushing hard with you and they pushed harder than the two sea tugs could pull," Berdowski added.

The crew on the tugs was "euphoric," but there also was a tense moment when the huge ship was floating free "so then you have to get it under control very quickly with the tugs around it so that it doesn't push itself back into the other side" of the canal, he said.

Jubilant workers on a tugboat sailing with the Ever Given chanted, "Mashhour, No. 1," referring to the dredger that worked around the vessel. The dredger is named for Mashhour Ahmed Mashhour, assigned to run the canal with others when it was nationalized in 1956 by President Gamal Abdel-Nasser.

Once the Ever Given is inspected in Great Bitter Lake, officials will decide whether the Panama-flagged, Japanese-owned ship hauling goods from Asia to Europe would continue to its original destination of Rotterdam, or if it would need to enter another port for repairs.

Canal officials also will do a detailed inspection of the area where the Ever Given was grounded, especially the bank "to see how much of that rock has been displaced and might have impacted the deep water of the canal," said Capt. Nicolas Sloane, vice president of the International Salvage Union who was involved in salvaging the Costa Concordia, the

cruise ship that tipped over off Italy in 2012.

If all goes well, the canal authority could open up the waterway to a northbound convoy by Tuesday morning, he told The Associated Press.

The crisis cast a spotlight on the vital trade route that carries over 10% of global trade, including 7% of the world's oil. Over 19,000 ships ferrying Chinese-made consumer goods and millions of barrels of oil and liquefied natural gas flow through the artery from the Middle East and Asia to Europe and North America.

The unprecedented shutdown, which raised fears of extended delays, goods shortages and rising costs for consumers, has prompted new questions about the shipping industry, an on-demand supplier for a world now under pressure from the coronavirus pandemic.

"We've gone to this fragile, just-in-time shipping that we saw absolutely break down in the beginning of COVID," said Capt. John Konrad, the founder and CEO of the shipping news website gcaptain.com. "We used to have big, fat warehouses in all the countries where the factories pulled supplies. ... Now these floating ships are the warehouse."

International trade expert Jeffrey Bergstrand predicted "only a minor and transitory effect" on prices of U.S. imports.

"Since most of the imports blocked over the last week are heading to Europe, U.S. consumers will likely see little effect on prices of U.S. imports, except to the extent that intermediate products of U.S. final goods are made in Europe," said Bergstrand, professor of finance at the University of Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business. **MDT/AP**

FOOTBALL

Ibrahimovic adapts to mentor role with Sweden after comeback

TWO starts. Three assists. Six points.

The return of Zlatan Ibrahimovic to international soccer has been a resounding success for Sweden's national team, even though the AC Milan striker failed to score in either of the wins over Georgia or Kosovo in World Cup qualifying.

At 39 years old, Ibrahimovic is about more than just goals at this stage of his career. He sees himself as a mentor to an exciting crop of young attackers, led by Alexander Isak.

"I told them, 'I do not have to score goals, I will help you instead,'" said Ibrahimovic, who is no longer the complete focus of Sweden's attacking game plan like he was before retiring from international duty in 2016.

Fears that Ibrahimovic's return would affect the balance of the team have so far proved unfounded, with Sweden following up a 1-0 win over Georgia on Thursday with a 3-0 victory at



Kosovo on Sunday.

There are much sterner tests to come for the Swedes — notably at home against Spain in their next qualifier in September — but coach Janne Andersson is delighted with how the country's

star player has been reintegrated.

"I am very happy with him and his professionalism in everything he does," Andersson said. "He is impressive. He does not want us to talk about his age but if we do, I can say

that his professionalism is one of the reasons why he is still at this level.

"And it was fun that we could use him better in his own game. It's fun that he was able to contribute."

Ibrahimovic, who will be rested for a friendly against Estonia on Wednesday in an effort to manage his workload, started up front alongside the 21-year-old Isak for both of the qualifiers last week. Isak did more of the running — not just in the wide attacking channels but back into midfield to help out defensively — leaving Ibrahimovic to stay further upfield and find areas to worry his opponents.

Ibrahimovic's hold-up play inside the area was particularly impressive, using his height and close control to bring the attackers around him into play. It was clear that was a specific game plan of Andersson's.

That was the origin of Viktor Claesson's winner against Geor-

gia, which came after Ibrahimovic brought down a long ball and turned it back into the middle of the penalty box with his next touch. The opening goal against Kosovo was scored by Ludwig Augustinsson from Ibrahimovic's acrobatic flick.

His low, square pass to Isak led to the Real Sociedad striker scoring on the second attempt also in the first half, while Ibrahimovic was off the field when Sebastian Larsson converted a penalty to make it 3-0.

"When we hit the long ball ... Zlatan is fantastic in that part of the game," Andersson said. "Neither he nor I care if he scores a goal or not. It just feels very good to have him out there."

Isak, who looks to have established himself ahead of Marcus Berg, has flaws in terms of his ruthlessness in front of goal and strength on the ball. But he has spoken of the influence Ibrahimovic, Sweden's record scorer and possibly its greatest ever player, has had on him in only a few days of training.

And that appears to be a key part of Ibrahimovic's role in the Sweden squad heading into the European Championship.

"I will put pressure on the other players," he said, "so that they push themselves to perform even more." **AP**

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OPINION

World Views

Mihir Sharma, MDT/Bloomberg



AFTER COVID, LET'S KEEP OUR MASKS ON

It has been a year since the pandemic hit India and, for me, the oddest thing is how healthy I've been. Like most but not all of the people I see on the streets, I have been masked up these past 12 months. I've washed my hands religiously and avoided crowds. As a result, for the first time in my life, I haven't caught a cold all year.

This is remarkable. Living in Delhi, with its crowds and its sudden changes of season, usually means one picks up pretty much every bug that's going around.

I am not fond of masks. And, in the steam-bath summers of north India, wearing something on your face can be stifling. And yet I find myself hoping that once this pandemic ends, the habit of mask-wearing will remain.

Not all the time, of course. That might be asking too much. But wouldn't it be great if city-dwellers across the world began to behave a little more like those in East Asia? If, during flu season, people wore masks whenever they planned to take a flight or join a crowd? That if they caught themselves sniffing, they grabbed a mask on their way out the door?

I recognize that this dream might be a little difficult to achieve in some parts of the world. This century has set a ridiculously high bar for partisanship and polarization but, even by those standards, the transformation of mask-wearing into a political statement in the United States and elsewhere has been appalling.

Surely, of all the things one could do to prevent the spread of disease, mask-wearing is the easiest to understand. Instead, it's as if one whole section of humanity decided it was perfectly polite to cough in people's faces.

Nor have the health authorities always been as sensible about this as one would like: Last March, remember, people like Dr. Anthony Fauci were telling Americans that "there's no reason to be walking around with a mask." While they changed their minds later, inconsistent messaging is still damaging.

There's another reason why masks have been the silver lining of this awful year, at least as far as I'm concerned. Last March, Prime Minister Narendra Modi ordered India into one of the most restrictive lockdowns in the world. Markets were shut, deliveries stopped, nobody could buy anything — but I felt rich. Because, lying by the door of my Delhi flat, I had lots of N95 masks.

This was not because I miraculously foresaw the pandemic. (If I had, I would have shorted the market, not bought masks.) Nor had I hoarded masks the moment news of the virus emerged.

The reason I had masks on hand was simple: I had bought a large number of them a few winters earlier. Not for fear of the flu but because, in Delhi, even breathing is dangerous. This is the most polluted megacity in the world. In 2020, two-thirds of the world's most polluted cities were in India, most of them in the northern plains around Delhi. Sensible people, faced with air quality more than 10 times worse than it should be, wear a mask to protect their lungs.

Yet, the first few times I went out in Delhi with a mask, I felt foolish. In those halcyon pre-pandemic days, nobody around me was wearing one. They stood chatting to each other in the mild winter weather, manfully breathing in the gray, toxic air.

That's yet another reason why I'm glad that people have gotten used to wearing and seeing masks. Even when there's no pandemic around, going maskless in Delhi can kill you.

HUNGARY FIRST IN EUROPEAN UNION FOR VACCINATIONS, AND DEATHS

THE BUZZ

Hungary has vaccinated more of its population than any other country in the European Union, according to figures from an EU agency, but it continues to be one of the world's worst in the number of COVID-19 deaths per capita.

The Central European country has given at least a first dose of a vaccine to 21.6% of its population, according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, just ahead of the small island nation of Malta and surpassing the 27-member bloc's average of 12.3%.

But Hungary's high vaccination rate, a product of a procurement strategy that secured doses from China and Russia in addition to those provided by the EU, has been unable to slow a surge in the pandemic that has given it the highest two-week mortality rate per capita in the world, according to Johns Hopkins University.

Viktor Orban, Hungary's prime minister, has been critical of the speed of the EU's vaccine rollout, and pushed for his country to break with the bloc and secure vaccine contracts with eastern countries.

AP PHOTO



THOUSANDS FLEE INTO THAILAND FOLLOWING MYANMAR AIR STRIKES

A series of airstrikes by Myanmar's military along the country's border raised concerns yesterday that more villagers might flee to neighboring Thailand in large numbers, adding a new dimension to an already volatile crisis.

The strikes in areas populated predominantly by ethnic Karen people represent another escalation in the increasingly violent crackdown by Myanmar's junta on protests of its Feb. 1 coup. On Saturday, more than 100 people were killed in and around demonstrations throughout the country — the bloodiest single day since the takeover.

Myanmar aircraft carried out three strikes overnight Sunday, according to Dave Eubank, a member of the Free Burma Rangers, a humanitarian relief agency that delivers medical and other assistance to villagers. The strikes severely injured one child but caused no apparent fatalities, he said. Strikes over the weekend sent about 2,500 people into northern Thailand's Mae Hong Son province, according to the agency.

Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha yesterday acknowledged the problems along his country's western border and said his government is preparing for a possible influx of people.

"We don't want to have mass migration into our

territory, but we will consider human rights, too," Prayut said.

Asked about people who have already fled into Thailand, Prayut said, "We have prepared some places, but we don't want to talk about the preparation of refugee centers at the moment. We won't go that far."

Video shot Sunday showed a group of villagers, including many young children, resting in a forest clearing inside Myanmar after fleeing their homes. They carried their possessions in bundles and baskets. In addition to those who have fled to Thailand, an estimated 10,000 people are believed to be displaced inside Myanmar's northern Karen state, according to the Free Burma Rangers.

The bombings may have been in retaliation for a reported attack by the Karen National Liberation Army in which they claimed to have captured a Myanmar government military outpost on Saturday morning. The group is fighting for greater autonomy for the Karen people.

According to Thoolei News, an online site that carries official information from the Karen National Union, eight government soldiers were captured and 10 were killed. The report said one Karen guerrilla died.

Before the overnight bombings, Myanmar mili-

tary aircraft had attacked a Karen guerrilla position in Karen state's Mutraw district on Sunday, according to humanitarian workers. Two guerrillas were killed and many more were wounded in those attacks.

On Saturday night, two Myanmar military planes twice bombed a village in the same district, killing at least two villagers.

The government has battled the Karen fighters on and off for years — as it has with other ethnic minorities seeking more autonomy — but the airstrikes are a worrying development at a time when the junta is also violently suppressing anti-coup protests in cities across the country.

The coup, which ousted the government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, reversed years of progress toward democracy after five decades of military rule. As of Sunday, at least 459 people have been killed since the takeover, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. The true toll is thought to be higher.

On Saturday alone, at least 114 people across the country were killed by security forces, including several children — a toll that prompted a U.N. human rights expert to accuse the junta of committing "mass murder" and criticize the international community for not doing enough to stop it. MDT/AP

Libya At least 480 migrants were intercepted by local coast guard forces over the weekend, according to the United Nations' migration agency. They are among the 4,500 people who have been brought back to Libya this year after attempting the dangerous Mediterranean Sea crossing to Europe, the International Organization for Migration said in a tweet.



Germany The government is buying a minority stake in defense supplier Hensoldt — a company that derives from European aircraft manufacturer Airbus' former defense and security electronics division — for security reasons. The state-owned KfW development bank said yesterday that it was buying 25.1% of the shares in Hensoldt on behalf of the federal government in Berlin. That gives the government a blocking minority under German law.

AP PHOTO



UK has embarked on a major easing of its latest coronavirus lockdown that came into force at the start of the year, with families and friends able to meet up in outdoor spaces and many sports permitted once again. Under yesterday's easing, groups of up to six, or two households, can socialize in parks and gardens once more, while outdoor sports facilities can reopen after the stark stay-at-home order, which has seen new coronavirus cases fall dramatically over the past three months, officially ended.

Spain launched yesterday a diplomatic push into Africa, marking out the continent as a political priority with an ambitious plan to build closer economic and institutional ties. Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez said he wanted to "turn this decade ... into the decade of Spain in Africa."