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THREE CHINESE ASTRONAUTS IN SPACE STATION TIANGONG HELD A VIDEO CHAT WITH STUDENTS IN BEIJING, HONG KONG AND MACAU ON THE FIRST DAY OF 2022

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North Korean leader Kim Jong Un vowed to further bolster his military capability, maintain draconian anti-virus measures and push hard to improve the economy during a speech at a key political conference this week, state media reported. A state media report on Kim's speech at the five-day plenary meeting of the ruling Workers' Party didn't carry any specific comments on dealings with the United States and South Korea. Some experts say this implies Kim has no interest in resuming talks with Washington and Seoul anytime soon.

Portugal The websites of the Portuguese newspaper Expresso and SIC TV channels were attacked by a group of hackers, known as the Lapsus Group on Sunday, who demanded the payment of a ransom to unlock access to the websites. Blitz magazine's website was also affected by the ransomware attack. "The data will be erased if the necessary amount is not paid." The ransom value was not disclosed, and the sites were still unavailable last night.



Indian health authorities began vaccinating teens in the age group of 15 to 18, as more states started to enforce tighter restrictions to arrest a new surge stoked by the infectious omicron variant. State governments across India administered doses at schools, hospitals and through special vaccination sites amid a rapid rise in coronavirus infections, particularly in the country's densely populated cities.

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XINHUA FOCUS

CHINESE ASTRONAUTS, STUDENTS IN SPACE-EARTH TALK ON NEW YEAR'S DAY

THREE Chinese astronauts in space station Tiangong held a video chat with students in Beijing, Hong Kong and Macau on the first day of 2022.

The live space-Earth talk was attended by around 500 young students at the three venues. The astronauts shared their space dream and aspirations.

Astronaut Zhai Zhigang, commander of the Shenzhou-13 mission, shared his experience with the young people and encouraged them to overcome difficulties and dangers.

"No matter how far we fly, the motherland is forever our strongest supporter. Love for the country always inspires us in space flights," Zhai said.

Astronaut Wang Yaping expressed hope that the live class from Tiangong could guide more young people to look up at the stars and plant the seeds of "loving science, pursuing dreams and exploring the unknown" in their hearts.

Wang earned the title of China's first space teacher after delivering a televised science lecture during the Shenzhou-10 space mission in June 2013. While in the Shenzhou-13 mission, she and the other two crew members also gave a lecture in Tiangong in December 2021.

As China's national space laboratory, the space station Tiangong is expected to play a unique role in encouraging the public, especially the youth, to explore space and carry forward the scientific spirit.



Photo taken in Beijing on Jan. 1, 2022 shows a screen displaying a painting exhibition held in space station Tiangong during a live space-Earth talk between Chinese astronauts and students in Beijing, Hong Kong and Macau

"Despite being weightless in space, we feel firmly grounded at heart," said astronaut Ye Guangfu, a newcomer to space.

With the support of space professionals, painstaking trainings, and valuable experience from aerospace predecessors, Ye said that they have the confidence, determination and ability to accomplish the mission.

Tan Zuwei, student of the School of Aerospace Engineering of Tsinghua University, felt deeply impressed by the astronauts' passion for their dreams and the space cause. He said he was inspired by their spirit and would contribute to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Zhou Ting, a medical student from the University of Hong Kong (HKU), felt lucky to pose her question to the astronauts. "As a would-be doctor, I have been confronted with harsh study and work, and I sometimes thought of giving up. But the astronauts have given me the courage to carry on."

Qian Chunzheng, a freshman from the Macau University of Science and Technology (MUST), said that he felt the care of the motherland for students in Hong Kong and Macau, and the development and progress of the country's space cause. All this has enhanced their sense of pride and duty to the country.

"As we have our own space station right now, I believe that in the future, Chinese people will surely step further into deep space. As a student in Macau, I hope to contribute to the country's space cause one day," Qian added.

"Today's event is a great gift sent to Hong Kong by our motherland. We are cheered up!" said Yeung Wai-Kwok, an HKU professor, adding that Hong Kong youth are expected to be down to earth, study hard, innovate and pursue dreams bravely, so as to become "stars" in the country's space exploration.

A series of activities held in Hong Kong and Macau fully demonstrated the care from the cen-

tral government. Young people in Hong Kong and Macau have realized that there is a vast space for them to bring their talents into full play, said Zhang Keke, head of the State Key Laboratory of Lunar and Planetary Sciences based at the MUST.

During the video talk, the trio also showed the people on the ground around a painting exhibition in the space station. Around 20 paintings drawn by teenagers from central and western China were displayed in the exhibition.

Prior to the talk, Cheng Tangming, chief designer of the Long March-7 carrier rocket system, answered questions from the students, and shared with them touching stories of how scientific researchers defeated difficulties and pioneered innovations.

"I feel very honored to be able to participate in this event, and I hope to do my part to contribute to students' space dream and help them build up confidence in the country's self-reliance in innovation," said Cheng.

The activity, co-hosted by the Hong Kong SAR government, the Macau SAR government, the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in Hong Kong SAR, the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in Macau SAR, the China Manned Space Agency and the China Media Group, was broadcast live.

The three astronauts went into space onboard the Shenzhou-13 spaceship and entered the space station on Oct. 16, embarking on the country's longest crewed mission for space station construction.

According to the plan, China will complete by 2022 construction of the country's space station, which is expected to support long-term and consecutive manned stay. Crew rotation will be done in-orbit. XINHUA

Man sustains burns, arrested for setting fire to school

A 21-year-old local man was arrested at the scene after setting fire to the door of the Xinhua School in Iao Hon. It can be seen from an online video posted on social media that he sustained burns to all his limbs.

According to the police, during his arrest, the man did not say anything.

The video first showed him splashing a container of liquid along the entryway of the school building. The man then squatted down to set fire but when he stood up, fire was seen on his four limbs.

In both the online video and from the police statement, the man did not show any sign of fleeing

the scene. With his limbs on fire, he wandered around the corner of the school building, attempting to put out the fire on his clothing.

When he started the arson, he was wearing a motorcycling helmet, but he removed this in the attempt to extinguish himself.

Later in the video, he took his clothes off, leaving

only red briefs and socks.

The school evacuated 630 workers, teachers and students. There are no other injuries or casualties. The principal of the school assumed the suspect to be a former student.

Due to the criminal nature of the incident, the investigation has been passed to the Judiciary Police. AL



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SEND NEWSWORTHY INFORMATION AND PRESS RELEASES TO: NEWSROOM@MACAUDAILYTIMES.COM WEBSITE: WWW.MACAUDAILYTIMES.COM.MO

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Beijing to test digital yuan in Macau casinos

CHINA authorities want to use Macau casinos to test the Chinese crypto-currency. Regulators will take the opportunity of the new concessions tender to force operators in the offshore gaming hub to become testing sites for the digital yuan, Reuters reported yesterday.

The agency cited the recent

public consultation paper on the rebidding process which pitched ideas like appointing government agents to supervise daily operations.

The average high roller lost over 27,000 on each visit to the tables in Macau, Bernstein analysts estimate.

The city's casinos have also been a haunt for corrupt officials

and businessmen. In December, junket operator Suncity's boss Alvin Chan was implicated in an investigation into illegal cross-border gambling activities and money laundering.

Suncity facilitated bets for wealthy VIPs, a market segment worth around 8 billion in gaming revenue in 2019.

The central bank's governor

Yi Gang suggested China's newly developed crypto-currency could be useful for fighting crime and resolving complex cross-border payments problems, including money-laundering. Macau might have been on his mind, Reuters wrote.

Migrating the gaming hub to digital payments would complement Beijing's desire for greater oversight of cash flows and customers. Situated outside Chinese capital controls, Macau is also an ideal place to test the technology before rolling it out more widely on the Mainland. Others are already considering the concept of cashless casinos using traceable funds. Australia's Star Entertainment, for example, says it is exploring digital payments to assuage its watchdogs.

VIP favorites like Galaxy Entertainment and Wynn Macau might once have worried that big spenders would shy away from such scrutiny. However, high rollers no longer rule income statements. The mass market now accounts for two-thirds of gaming revenue and almost 90% of earnings according to official data and estimates.

According to Reuters, testing is already underway, and pilots have already seen Chinese consumers splurge 10 billion in digital yuan. While watchdogs have much to win, and operators have less to lose, 2022 will be the year when the new digital currency will enter casinos, Reuters concluded. **MDT**

RESIDENT RETURNS FROM THAILAND, TESTS POSITIVE FOR DELTA

A 45-year-old resident who tested positive for Covid-19 after arriving from Thailand on January 1 has now been confirmed as being infected with the Delta variant, the Novel Coronavirus Response and Coordination Center reported. According to the report, the case continues to be recorded as an imported asymptomatic infection case as the patient continues to show no symptoms of the disease. The Center said that the man arrived in Macau from Thailand on a connecting flight in Singapore. He had tested negative before boarding the first flight in Thailand on December 31. According to the record, the resident has been fully vaccinated with two doses of AstraZeneca vaccine in October and December.

WYNN ANNOUNCES SPECIAL ALLOWANCE

Wynn Macau Ltd. has recently announced the issue of a special allowance for its team members, which is equivalent to one month's gross salary. The money will be paid on January 28 to eligible members, amounting to 97.8% of its entire workforce. The company currently employs 12,000 people. However, in the statement announcing the decision, the company did not elaborate on the eligibility. The company added that the special allowance is being awarded to show the company's appreciation to all team members for their collective efforts during the past challenging year.

SJM GIVES ANNUAL LIVING SUBSIDY TO EMPLOYEES

SJM Resorts is giving all eligible employees an annual living subsidy equivalent to between 1.5 months to two months salary. The payment will be made in two equal installments, the first on January 6 and the second in July. Daisy Ho, Chairman of the Board of Directors of SJM, said, "Thanks to the concerted efforts of and tremendous support from our team members, SJM has continued to make significant strides amidst the [Covid-19] pandemic. As a company firmly rooted in Macau, SJM stands in solidarity with the local community in opening a new chapter for Macau's growth and development in the coming year."

Gaming closes 2021 44% up from 2020, but still 70% down from 2019

RENATO MARQUES

THE gaming industry closed 2021 with an increase of 44% year-on-year compared with 2020, figures released by the Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau (DICJ) show.

According to the report, December closed with a gross gaming revenue (GGR) of MOP7.96 billion, a figure that represents a growth of 1.8% from November.

Overall, the year closed with a GGR of MOP86.86 billion, that is, 43.7% up from the MOP60.44 billion recorded in 2020.

Nonetheless, the positive result obtained at the end of 2021 is still very far (less than one-third) from the GGR obtained in 2019, when in pre-pandemic times, the full-year recorded MOP292.46 billion.

Comparing the results month-on-month throughout the whole year, December emerges as the fifth-best month of 2021, behind May, July, April, and March.

May remains the best month of the year

for GGR, with MOP10.4 billion in revenue recorded.

On the other hand, the worst month of 2021 for local casinos was October when the GGR reached only MOP4.37 billion, a result driven by Covid-19

outbreak in the community that led to the enforcement of special border restrictions including a mandatory medical observation in quarantine for all Mainland residents returning to the Mainland after visiting Ma-

cau. This led most of the casino patrons to avoid traveling to Macau from late September until late October.

Data on VIP and Mass Market gaming activities from the last quarter of 2021 is not yet available: the DICJ will publish it a later stage. Nonetheless, it is likely that VIP Baccarat results will record a significant drop following the halting of junket operations in December.

MONTHLY GROSS REVENUE

	Monthly Gross Revenue			Accumulated Gross Revenue		
	2021	2020	Variance	2021	2020	Variance
Jan	8,024	22,126	-63.7%	8,024	22,126	-63.7%
Feb	7,312	3,104	+135.6%	15,336	25,229	-39.2%
Mar	8,306	5,257	+58.0%	23,642	30,486	-22.5%
Apr	8,401	754	+1014.4%	32,043	31,240	+2.6%
May	10,445	1,764	+492.2%	42,487	33,004	+28.7%
Jun	6,535	716	+812.5%	49,023	33,720	+45.4%
Jul	8,444	1,344	+528.1%	57,467	35,064	+63.9%
Aug	4,442	1,330	+234.0%	61,908	36,394	+70.1%
Sept	5,879	2,211	+165.9%	67,787	38,605	+75.6%
Oct	4,365	7,270	-40.0%	72,152	45,875	+57.3%
Nov	6,749	6,748	+0.01%	78,901	52,623	+49.9%
Dec	7,962	7,818	+1.8%	86,863	60,441	+43.7%

*Units: MOP million

MACAU 2021

The year of 'big transformation' to reflect

RENATO MARQUES
& ANTHONY LAM

2021 was the year when ideas concerning the diversification of Macau's economy started to translate into actions. Several specialists and market analysts in different fields told the Times that the past year probably marked the start of a new era and the beginning of the second "big transformation" of Macau following the liberalization of the gaming market.

Some professionals also described last year as challenging due to both natural and human factors. All in all, they all hope that the new year will yield more and better fruits.



BEN LEE
GAMING EXPERT, MANAGING PARTNER
OF IGAMIX MANAGEMENT & CONSULTING

THIS decade's most significant event is the realization in 2021 that Macau and its gaming industry are no longer sheltered, as seen from China's recent moves to crack down on economic activities that it deems undesirable.

Influencers, celebrities, video gaming and even educators (who are one of the pillars of Chinese Confucian culture) have all been subject to the direct intervention of Beijing last year.

The closure of Macau's biggest junkets and the message for gaming stakeholders should be clear: no more VIP business and no "rebadged" Direct VIP [market]. Gaming may be tolerated, provided it is nothing more than a minor part of holiday entertainment activities.

Just as Macau turned itself into the world's largest gambling hub, it now has to remake itself into a holiday, financial, technological, and medical tourism destination, using the economic engine of the gaming industry to drive the transformation.

Expertise and know-how will again have to be imported to facilitate this change, along with

encouraging international entrepreneurs to stimulate grass-roots economic development. A new gold mountain awaits the bold.



SÉRGIO DE ALMEIDA CORREIA
LAWYER, POLITICAL SCIENTIST

THE biggest challenge in 2021 was to continue to live in Macau with successive restrictive interpretations and violations of the Basic Law. This brought, in consequence, a reduction of rights, and the strangling of the civil liberties of Macau residents, including the [rights] of demonstration, [freedom of the] press, freedom of movement. [It has involved] abusive and discriminatory quarantines, and reduced the quality of life (inflation, unemployment, high rentals, poor air quality, poor internet, bad roads, lack of top medical services, etc.).

The year 2021 saw several landmark and constructive judicial developments, but the most positive one I would highlight is the lawsuit of Asian American Entertainment Corporation vs Las Vegas Sands. [In the court trial hearings] we could finally understand how certain important decisions, which concern all of us and our future, are made; [and we also see] the role of certain people in Macau.

The final ruling in the Dore case [the former gaming promoter, Dore Entertainment Company Limited], the Central government's renewed commitment to fight corruption and money laundering, and the demise of the junkets and their local business partners are also major noteworthy events that will continue into 2022.

As the most disappointing events of 2021, I would choose a few, starting with the exclusion of candidates in the elections to the Legislative Assembly.

The lack of consistent ideas, competence and strategy from the Macau government to handle the ongoing economic and

social crisis, [which is becoming more clear every day], is also to be noted as it is the lack of critical and independent thinking in the media and the erosion of freedoms.

In 2022, we will continue to follow US-China and EU-China relations, and hope that tensions will calm down.

We will also see how far the erosion of freedoms and the separation of power in Macau will go, following the coming Congress of the Chinese Communist Party and the legal developments in Macau in the areas of the casino industry and individual freedoms.



STEVE VICKERS,
POLITICAL AND CORPORATE RISK
CONSULTANT SPECIALIST, CEO OF STEVE
VICKERS AND ASSOCIATES

THE looming expiry of casino concessions in Macau in mid-2022, and an intensive crackdown on junket promoters, presage an extremely challenging year for the sector (and hence the economy). Moreover, doubts are arising as to how much autonomy Macau will enjoy under the "One country, two systems" mechanism, given the central government's emphasis on the Greater Bay Area initiative.

A relative lack of clarity as to how the concession holders might extend their rights, or tender for a new concession, looms over the casinos.

The Macau government has raised the prospect of controls on the payment of dividends out of Macau, and of requirements that casinos hand a bigger ownership stake to local partners, all of which will affect the industry. US casino operators will be at a greater disadvantage in future changes.

Perhaps more importantly, the arrest of Alvin Chau, the principal of Macau's biggest junket Suncity Group, and Suncity's subsequent closure in December 2021, suggests that the Beijing and Macau governments will no longer allow the junket model to continue its current form and that it will act to pre-

PHOTO ARCHIVE



vent wide-scale infringement of Chinese capital controls.

Given the importance of junkets and capital outflows in underpinning the industry's growth hitherto, investors must prepare for much lower returns.

Looking forward, a concern in 2022 will be the treatment of capital flows out of China into Macau. The Mainland and Macau authorities in 2022 may seek to ensure that as much gaming activity as possible is denominated in Chinese yuan [renmimbi] and hence does not affect China's capital account and transfers through digital means, and is thus traceable. This approach would enhance government control but would damage gaming interests.



JOE CHAN
ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCATE

NATURE-LOVER and environmental advocate Joe Chan started by saying that in the past two years, the city has faced a lot of big environmental challenges. "We are faced with a poorer environment," he said.

In the past two years, Chan

says, not only the city, but the whole world has run into a virus-phobia. There were periods when members of the public were not willing to conduct interpersonal contacts. Even now, it is not uncommon to see people pressing elevator buttons with the tips of their keys.

Nonetheless, what concerns Chan most is the use of disposable resources, such as facemasks and takeaway containers. Although he understands that reducing human contact is a way to cut the spread of the Covid-19 virus, he recommends that in more stable times, the use of reusable containers should be encouraged.

Meanwhile, he also finds light pollution in Macau concerning. "In Macau, we have no guidelines on the use of spotlights," Chan said. "Authorities in Zhuhai are [implementing] strict restrictions on that. The Chimelong [Zoo] still uses spotlights but they were told to shorten their duration [of use]."

However, he admitted that there was good news, such as the ban on disposable plastic straws and stirrers, besides styrofoam. "That was a bit of good news," Chan said.

Looking into the future, Chan hopes that the government can adopt real policies to help the city achieve the national goals of "carbon peak" and "carbon neutral", since, he says, these goals are now more slogans than targets in Macau.

He added that the city is good at exploiting the resources of others for its own good. "For example, we're now taking water from Guangxi Province to ease

upon in 2022 and beyond



SUSANNA LEI
COLUMNIST AND BLOGGER

AS for many people, last year was not very easy for Susanna Lei, a regional columnist and blogger. Although working as a freelance only, Lei has been providing lifestyle reviews, on fields such as the arts, food and travel, and more, to a wide array of readers. Her writings have been

regularly published not only on her blog, but also on columns in many regional publications, such as ELLE China, Vogue China and Ctrip.

She admitted that many projects have been halted due to her personal situation. "For example, there were business trips that I couldn't take because of travel and other restrictions," Lei recalled.

The question of "why not travel to mainland China?" may arise. To that, Lei frankly explained that throughout the year, new Covid-19 infections have been recorded in different places of the country, which led to the requirement to quarantine after returning to Macau.

"I was invited by the tourism authorities in Guizhou and Beijing for familiarization trips but I didn't go, out of the fear that if anything happened, I might be quarantined," Lei said, hinting that there

may not be "later" as chances can slip away unintentionally. "Another trip was delayed due to new infections. But when the situation calmed, the contact person had left the position and we lost contact ever since."

Another trip was for a concert in Hong Kong. "It was planned early last year for the concert of the Cheung Brothers in Hong Kong late last year. I wasn't able to go due to quarantine requirements and it was their last concert as a duo!" Lei exclaimed.

Nonetheless, Lei said she is optimistic and believes that things will get better. "I believe that when there's a door closed, a window will be opened instead," she declared.

The past year has justified her attitude. Although she lost her column in ELLE Hong Kong due to economic reasons, because of the "extra free time", she was able to accept an offer from an online international travel media outlet.

Ultimately, her primary wish for the year is that the pandemic will end so that normal life can return.

our salinity problem. We're actually robbing others' resources to ensure our comfort," Chan said.

"It's easy to do small deeds like banning straws, but how can we have a roadmap and a timetable to achieve environmental goals," Chan said, adding that in the Mainland, the government draws links between power use and gross domestic product (GDP) creation. "Businesses are encouraged to generate the greatest GDP possible with the level of power they use."



SOK CHAN NG
PAINTER

HAVING returned to her hometown from the US in July last year, emerging painter Sok Chan Ng described last year as an "adversity". "I participated in several exhibitions and rarely saw sales of paintings," she disclosed.

Not being able to sell their work has made a second source of income indispensable for artists.

With that situation, she said, many artists had to change to

the field of education to survive. This is not the best option not because they do not like teaching, but because they could not focus on producing artworks.

"Most of the time, we need to calm ourselves down and look into ourselves to get inspired," Ng said. "When we prepare for and give classes, we need to concentrate on the classes rather than painting our own works."

She just started her own workshop, but the process was quite time-consuming. "I waited for five months to get the education license [for the workshop] to be approved. It means five months rent was paid for nothing," Ng disclosed.

What she saw as another hardship is the economic downturn with many people earning less than normal, if not earning nothing at all. "Many artists have become less brave to try," Ng said. "And as many have used up their continuing education subsidy, fewer people are enrolling in classes."

She even referred to Maslow's hierarchy of needs to explain why arts are not the first thing on people's minds in hard times.

Despite all these, in the coming year, she will do her part. "I never thought about relying only on the government [subsidy]," Ng said. "Although I have registered as an eligible continuing education program educator."

She will also try to invest more time in painting. "Without work, there won't be any peripheral trades, such as marketing," she said.

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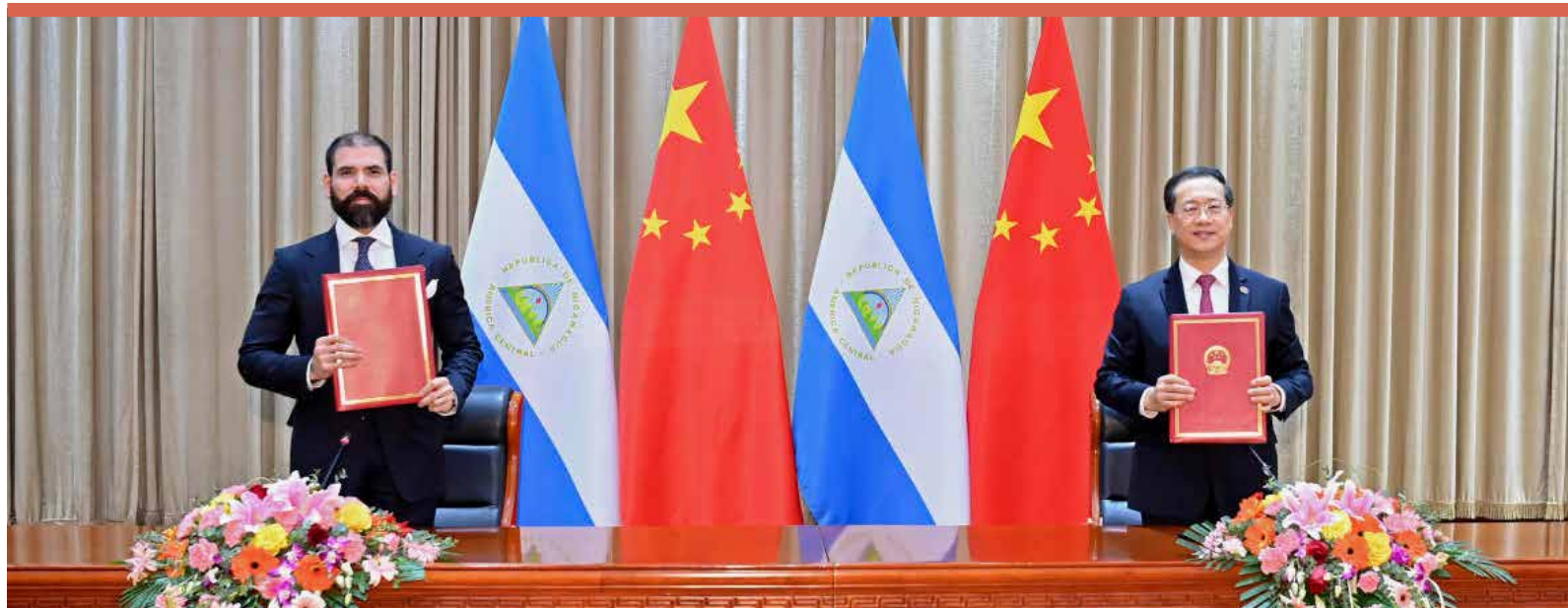
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AP PHOTO



Representatives Laureano Ortega Murillo, son of and advisor to Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega (left) and Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu display their jointly signed communique on the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two countries in Tianjin in early December

DIPLOMACY

CHINA OPENS EMBASSY IN NICARAGUA FOR FIRST TIME SINCE 1990

CHINA opened an embassy in Nicaragua on Friday for the first time since 1990, acting just over three weeks since President Daniel Ortega's government broke off relations with Taiwan.

Foreign Minister Denis Moncada said there is an "ideological affinity" between the two countries. Moncada also thanked China for donating one million doses of the

Sinopharm coronavirus vaccine.

Ortega established relations with China in 1985, but after he lost the presidential election in 1990, the government of Nicaragua's new president, Violeta Chamorro, recognized Taiwan.

The Nicaraguan government broke relations with the Taiwanese on Dec. 9 and last week it seized the former embassy and di-

plomatic offices of Taiwan, saying they belong to China. However, China's new embassy is located elsewhere, and it is unclear what China will do with the Taiwan building.

Before departing a week ago, Taiwanese diplomats attempted to donate the properties to the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Managua. But Ortega's govern-

ment said that any such donation would be invalid and that the building in an upscale Managua neighborhood belongs to China.

Taiwan's cabinet condemned the "gravely illegal actions of the Ortega regime," saying the Nicaraguan government violated standard procedures by giving Taiwanese representatives just two weeks to get out of the country.

It said Taiwan "also condemns the arbitrary obstruction by the Nicaraguan government of the symbolic sale of its property to the Nicaraguan Catholic church."

Monsignor Carlos Avilés, vicar of the archdiocese of Managua, told the newspaper La Prensa that a Taiwanese representative had offered the church the property, but added: "I told him there was no problem, but the transfer was still in the legal process."

The Central American country said in early December it would officially recognize only China, which claims self-ruled Taiwan as part of its territory.

The move increased Taiwan's diplomatic isolation on the international stage, even as the island has stepped up official exchanges with countries such as Lithuania and Slovakia, which do not formally recognize Taiwan as a country. Taiwan has 14 formal diplomatic allies remaining.

China has been poaching Taiwan's allies over the past few years, reducing the number of countries that recognize the democratic island as a sovereign nation. China is against Taiwan representing itself in global forums or in diplomacy.

Taiwan depicts itself as a defender of democracy, while Ortega was reelected as Nicaragua's leader in November in what the White House called a "pantomime election." **MDT/AP**

HONG KONG

Citizen News site to shut; pro-Beijing lawmakers sworn in

HUIZHONG WU & ZEN SOO, HONG KONG

A group of lawmakers loyal to China's Communist Party were sworn in to Hong Kong's Legislature yesterday following an election without opposition candidates, as yet another pro-democracy news outlet announced it could no longer operate amid a growing crackdown on freedoms in the territory.

The founders of news outlet Citizen News said the news site will stop publishing on Tuesday. While they have received no order to close, they said yesterday that deteriorating media freedoms in the financial hub put them in an impossible position.

"We all love this place, deeply. Regrettably, what was ahead of us is not just pouring rains or blowing winds, but hurricanes and tsunamis," Citizen News said in a statement on Sunday, when it announced

AP PHOTO



Chris Yeung, founder and chief writer of Citizen News waves to journalists after a press conference

the closure.

The outlet is the third to close in recent months, following the shuttering of the territory's last pro-democracy print newspaper, Apple Daily, and the online site Stand News.

Citizen News was founded in 2017 by a group of veteran journalists. The small site focused on political news and analysis pieces, as well as investi-

gations — and in recent months became a refuge for many journalists who had lost their jobs when other outlets closed or faced other pressures.

"With Apple Daily's sudden closure in the past summer, the journalism majors who were originally supposed to intern with them, Citizen News made arrangements to take them in, so that students wou-

ldn't lose this internship opportunity," said Vivian W.W. Tam, a senior lecturer at the Chinese University of Hong Kong's journalism school, in a public Facebook post. Tam declined to be interviewed.

But a new sweeping National Security Law — imposed on Hong Kong by China's central legislature — has made independent reporting increasingly dangerous. Journalists and political activists have been arrested under the law, and it has forced civil rights groups and unions to disband. Many more activists have fled.

Meanwhile, new laws have changed how Hong Kongers vote for their representatives, including a requirement that any who seek office must be "patriots," effectively bringing the body under Beijing's control.

Yeung said at a news conference on that the trigger for their decision to

shut down was what happened to Stand News. Last week, authorities raided Stand News and arrested seven people — including editors and former board members — for allegedly conspiring to publish seditious material. Stand News announced on the same day that it would cease to operate.

Two of Stand News' former editors who were arrested were later formally charged with sedition.

In the summer, authorities forced the closure of Apple Daily, the newspaper owned by media tycoon and democracy activist Jimmy Lai. Lai is currently in jail and was newly charged with sedition last week.

The Society of Publishers in Asia, a group based in Hong Kong that hosts an annual journalism award, said yesterday it is concerned about pressures against independent media in the city.

"We call on the Hong

Kong authorities to respect freedom of expression and the press which are vital to the success of our industry," it said in a statement.

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam last week defended the raid on Stand News, telling reporters that "inciting other people ... could not be condoned under the guise of news reporting."

The only remaining independent news media with reach in the city are Hong Kong Free Press, an English-language news outlet, and Initium, a Chinese-language news outlet which moved its headquarters to Singapore in August, but still has staff in the city.

Citizen News likened itself to a small dinghy in rough waters.

"At the center of a brewing storm, we found (ourselves) in a critical situation. In the face of a crisis, we must ensure the safety and well-being of everyone who are on board," it said. **MDT/AP**

KOREAS

North Korea defector likely made rare border crossing: Seoul

HYUNG-JIN KIM, SEOUL

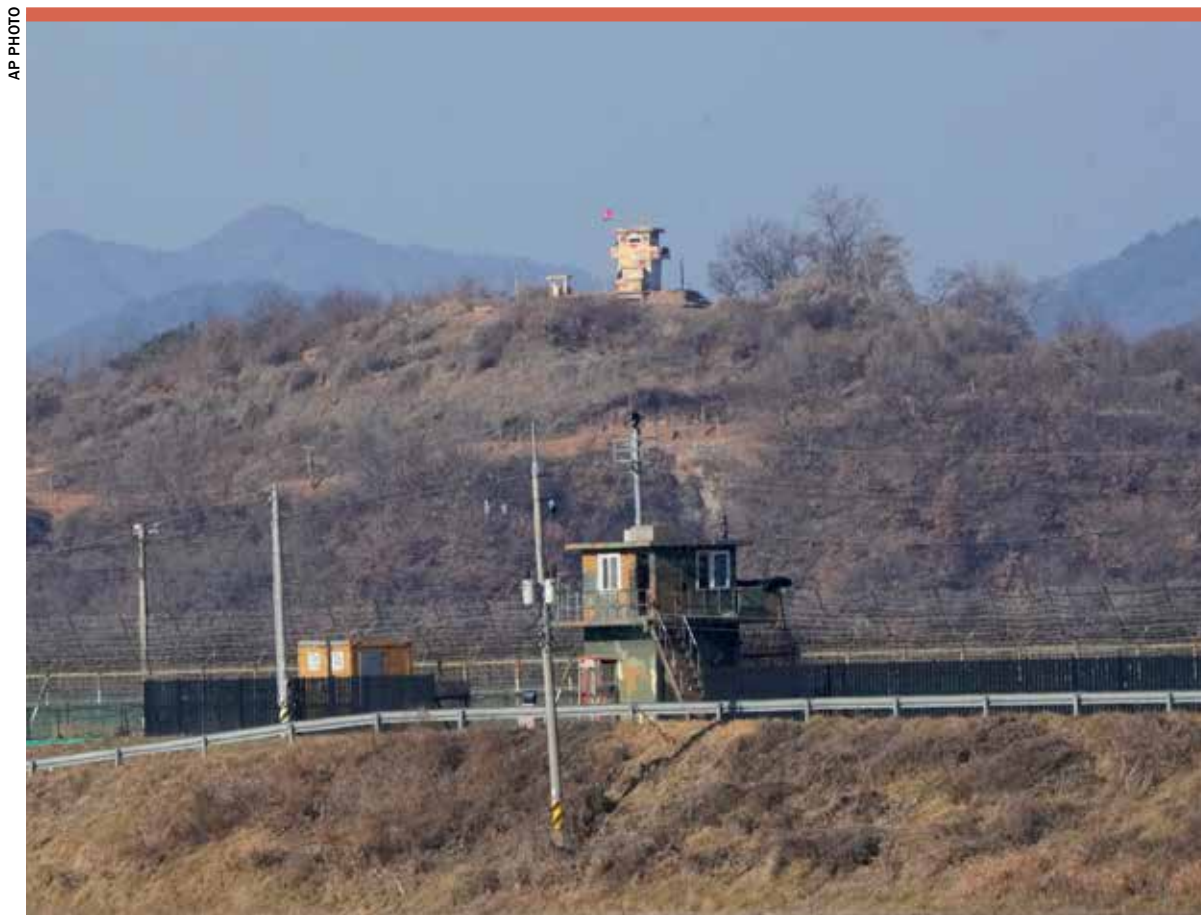
A person who crossed the border from South Korea into North Korea on New Year's Day was likely a defector who had slipped through the same heavily fortified frontier in the other direction to settle in South Korea in late 2020, the military said yesterday.

South Korean surveillance equipment detected an unidentified person moving into North Korean territory across the eastern portion of the border on Saturday. The military said a security camera showed a person earlier Saturday crawling over a barbed-wire fence along the southern edge of the border.

On Monday, the Defense Ministry said in a statement it suspects an earlier North Korean defector was the border crosser and that it is trying to confirm related information.

A ministry official said the statement refers to a former North Korean citizen who was captured south of the border in November 2020. The man identified himself as a former gymnast and told investigators that he had crawled over barbed wire fences to defect before being found by South Korean troops, the official said, requesting anonymity citing department rules.

The official said the appearance of the person detected by



Military guard posts of North Korea and South Korea (front) are seen in Paju, near the border with North Korea, South Korea Sunday

the South Korean security camera on Saturday matched the former defector.

The person's fate isn't known.

A South Korean thermal observation device detected four people in the northern part of the border after Saturday's border crossing, the Defense Ministry official said. This could suggest three North Korean soldiers came to take the border crosser away from the border.

South Korea asked North Korea to ensure the person's safety via a military hotline communication channel. North Korea replied that it received the South Korean messages but didn't elaborate on the border crosser, according to the South Korean Defense Ministry.

In September 2020, North Korea fatally shot a South Korean fisheries official found floating in its waters along

a sea boundary. South Korea said North Korea troops were under orders to shoot anyone illegally crossing the border to protect against the coronavirus pandemic.

South Korean media reports said the former gymnast defector worked as a cleaner in South Korea and had economic difficulties. The Defense Ministry refused to confirm the reports but said an initial investigation

showed he wasn't engaged in espionage or other suspicious activities in South Korea. The ministry didn't speculate on why he returned to the North.

About 34,000 North Koreans have fled to South Korea for economic and political reasons since the late 1990s, and only about 30 have returned home in the past 10 years, according to South Korean government records.

Observers say those returnees likely failed to adjust to their new highly competitive, capitalistic lives in South Korea, had big debts or were blackmailed by North Korean agents who threatened to harm their loved ones if they didn't return.

Defecting via the border is rare. Unlike its official name, the Demilitarized Zone, the 248-kilometer (155-mile)-long, 4-kilometer (2.5-mile)-wide border is guarded by land mines, tank traps and combat troops on both sides as well as barbed wire fences. A vast majority of the North Korean defectors in South Korea came via China and Southeast Asian countries.

Saturday's border crossing raised questions about South Korea's security posture because the person's entry into the DMZ was not noticed by South Korean troops for a few hours, though surveillance equipment detected the person. The military acknowledged it had sent soldiers but failed to locate the person before he or she crossed the border.

In recent years, the South Korean military faced similar criticism when North Koreans passed through DMZ areas unnoticed to defect, including one who knocked on the door of a South Korean army barracks. **MDT/AP**

AUSTRALIA

Prime Minister Morrison upbeat amid virus surge

AUSTRALIAN Prime Minister Scott Morrison yesterday said his country's health system can cope with the new wave of coronavirus infections as Victoria state reported a record number of new cases and hospitalizations surged in New South Wales.

Morrison spoke in two television interviews before yesterday's figures were released.

Victoria reported 8,577 new cases, a record for the state which eclipsed the previous peak of 7,442 on New Year's Day.

New South Wales, Australia's most populous state, saw a slight decline in case numbers from a record 22,577 on Saturday to 20,794 yesterday. But the number of people in hospitals rose to 1,204 from 1,066 the day before. There were 95 people in intensive care, a rise of 12 on the previous day.

Speaking with the Seven Network, Prime Minister Morrison said Australia's health system is well equipped to deal with the surge in case numbers caused by the spread of the omicron variant.

"It's important that with the rising case numbers, we see that the severeness of this illness is already being shown to be around 75 percent less than what we saw with delta," Morrison said. "Rising case numbers is part of the omicron period, it's part of the new phase of the pandemic we're in."

"That doesn't mean to say it can't put pressure on the hospital system. It can and that's why we're working very closely with the (state) premiers and chief ministers to make sure those resources are

there," Morrison added.

Morrison said the federal government would take steps to ensure hospitals had the resources they need to cope with rising admissions. His government last week changed the definition of "close contact" to ensure health workers who might have been exposed to an active case do not have to isolate and can return to work.

"We're looking to make further changes on that this week to get more staff back into our hospitals and deal with the need," Morrison told 9 News. **MDT/AP**



AP PHOTO



this day in history

1951 COMMUNIST FORCES TO RE-TAKE SEOUL



Chinese and North Korean troops are reported to be close to capturing the South Korean capital of Seoul for the second time since the war began last year.

The authorities have ordered the evacuation of Seoul and thousands of people have started streaming south out of the city and across the Han river.

Over the past few weeks, many families have taken refuge in Seoul from the advancing enemy. Now they are being forced to move on again, mostly by foot, although some have been lucky enough to get a lift on a military vehicle.

The BBC's cameraman Cyril Page was in Seoul as the communist forces were reported to be less than 50 miles from the city.

His pictures show the only sign of normal life in the city was the trams, which were still running.

To the south, the steady stream of refugees made its way through freezing temperatures to the River Han flats. It was so cold the river had frozen over and people were able to walk across to the relative safety of the other side.

They have left behind them a city devastated and burning.

The United States Eighth Army is also pulling out, but reports of its movements have been banned by army censors.

Speaking at a Pentagon briefing, the US Secretary of Defense, General Marshall, said the advance of the enemy troops had been anticipated.

The odds against the United Nations forces were heavy - "almost incredible in some respects," he said. The Communists forces outnumber UN troops by three or four to one and they are capable of covering difficult terrain on foot carrying heavy loads.

Lieutenant-General Matthew Ridgway, commander of the Eighth Army, has been reported in press dispatches as saying the flight of the Korean refugees is "perhaps the greatest tragedy to which Asia has been subjected in the course of its long history."

Seoul first fell to the powerful North Korean and Chinese communist forces last June - days after the invasion began.

In September, a United Nations force led by US marines re-captured the city.

Courtesy BBC News

ENERGY

EU draft on financing nuclear and gas plants raises ire

RAF CASERT & KIRSTEN GRIESHABER, BRUSSELS

DRAFT European Union plans that would allow nuclear and gas energy to remain part of the bloc's path to a climate-friendly future came under immediate criticism over the weekend from both environmentalists and some governing political parties in EU member nations.

In draft conclusions seen by The Associated Press, the EU's executive commission proposes a classification system for defining what counts as an investment in sustainable energy. Under certain conditions, it would allow gas and nuclear energy to be part of the mix.

The plans would have a huge impact on nuclear-fired economies like France and on Germany's gas-fueled power plants since they might have had to fundamentally change their strategies.

Energy use accounts for about three-quarters of the greenhouse gas emissions produced in the EU and is thus instrumental to the 27-nation bloc's efforts to meet its commitments for curbing global warming.

The plans still need the backing of a large majority of the 27 member states and a simple majority in the European Parliament. But the initial thrust from the EU Commission is a key element of the procedure for passage.

"Classifying investments in gas and nuclear power as sustainable contradicts the Green Deal," the EU's initiative that is intended to make the bloc climate-neutral by 2050, said Ska Keller, the president of the Green group in the European Parliament.

France has asked for nuclear power to be included in the so-called "taxonomy" by the end of the year, leading the charge with several other EU countries that operate nuclear power plants and want to make it eligible for green financing.

French Minister for European Affairs Clement Beaune said the proposal is good on a technical level and insisted on Sunday that the bloc "cannot become carbon neutral by 2050 without nuclear energy.

Germany, the EU's biggest economy, is heading the other way, Germany shut down half of the six nuclear plants it still had in operation last week, a year before the country draws the final curtain on

its decades-long use of atomic power.

Gas is a polluting fossil fuel, but it is still considered a bridge technology by the EU to reach a cleaner energy future.

German Economy Minister Robert Habeck criticized the plan to classify investments in gas and nuclear power plants as climate-friendly.

"The EU Commission's proposals water down the good label for sustainability," Habeck, who represents the Germany's environmentalist Greens in the country's coalition government, told German news agency dpa. "We don't see how to approve the new proposals of the EU Commission," he said.

"In any case, it is questionable whether this greenwashing will even find acceptance on the financial market," Habeck stressed, referring to the practice of painting investments as sustainable when they actually are not.

In Austria, Climate Protection Minister Leonore Gewessler from the Greens also sharply rejected the proposed regulation, saying "the EU Commission took a step towards greenwashing nuclear power and fossil gas in a night and fog action."

"They are harmful to

the climate and the environment and destroy the future of our children," Gewessler said.

The environmental NGO Greenpeace called the Commission draft proposals "a licence to greenwash."

"Polluting companies will be delighted to have the EU's seal of approval to attract cash and keep wrecking the planet by burning fossil gas and producing radioactive waste," said Greenpeace's Magda Stoczkiewicz.

Especially nuclear power remains extremely controversial in Europe, where many are still vividly remember the fear following the 1986 nuclear accident in Chernobyl, Ukraine. In Germany, children weren't allowed to play outside anymore for months, couldn't go mushroom hunting for years and the farmers had to destroy their entire harvest the year it happened.

On the other hand, nuclear plants release few pollutants into the air, which have made them an option as nations around the world seek clean energy to meet climate change targets.

Climate activists also say that relying on nuclear power risks slowing the rollout of renewable energy sources. **MDT/AP**

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER


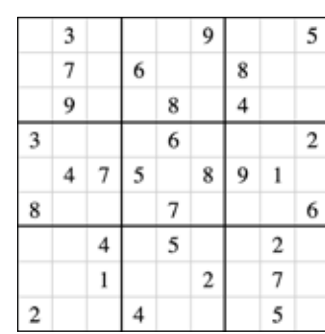
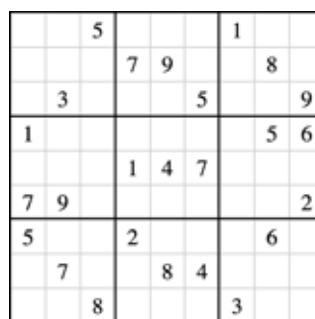

YOUR STARS

 ARIES Mar. 21-Apr. 19 Changes in your residence may be financially favorable. You could be tempted to overspend on unnecessary items. Nothing can be resolved if you don't want to talk about it.	 TAURUS Apr. 20-May. 20 You may have the day off but your thoughts will be on your work and your cash situation. Although upsetting, changes in your domestic situation will be favorable.
 GEMINI May. 21-Jun. 21 Be prepared to make changes to your personal documents. You will be able to get to the bottom of things today. Finish off old projects before starting something new.	 CANCER Jun. 22-Jul. 22 If you want to make your mark, try to get involved in projects that will bring you some glory. Offer consolation, but don't give them any direction. Try not to make waves.
 LEO Jul. 23-Aug. 22 Now is a good time to ask for favors. You need to do something energetic and different. Get involved in sports groups or hobbies that attract you.	 VIRGO Aug. 23-Sep. 22 You don't need to pay out in order to have fun. Ask those in key positions to help you overcome the delays and to support your concerns in order to move on.
 LIBRA Sep. 23-Oct. 22 Unfortunately, your personal life may suffer from a lack spare time. Invite friends in for a visit. Older family members may take advantage of you by making you feel guilty.	 SCORPIO Oct. 23-Nov. 21 You can ask for favors or run your ideas by those who will be able to support your objectives. Self-deception about relationships is a problem. Do something that will be stimulating and creative.
 SAGITTARIUS Nov. 22-Dec. 21 Change will be required to make your life more harmonious. New hair, new outfit, new you. Avoid boredom by being creative in your endeavors.	 CAPRICORN Dec. 22-Jan. 19 You can find out important information if you listen to friends and relatives. Relatives may play an important role in your social activities.
 AQUARIUS Jan. 20-Feb. 18 Don't let someone talk you into parting with your cash unless you can truly see the benefits of doing so. Don't let your emotions take over.	 PISCES Feb. 19-Mar. 20 Outbursts of passion may cause arguments with your mate. Self-deception is likely. Make sure that you take time to remember those you love.

The Born Loser by Chip Sanson



SUDOKU

EASY 	EASY+ 
MEDIUM 	HARD 

WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	-7	4	fine
Harbin	-20	-9	fine
Tianjin	8	13	overcast
Urumqi	7	10	cloudy
Xi'an	8	10	overcast
Lhasa	-6	0	fine
Chengdu	11	20	overcast
Chongqing	12	20	rain
Kunming	8	12	rain
Nanjing	17	22	cloudy
Shanghai	4	14	cloudy
Wuhan	-21	-13	fine
Hangzhou	0	10	rain
Taipei	-15	-1	fine
Guangzhou	12	25	cloudy
Hong Kong	19	21	overcast
WORLD			
Moscow	-11	-13	snow
Frankfurt	1	9	rain
Paris	2	10	rain
London	2	8	rain
New York	-1	3	overcast

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Similar; 5- FedEx rival; 8- Helper; Abbr.; 12- New Haven students; 13- Wool source; 15- Garbage boat; 16- Nair rival; 17- Conger catcher; 18- Wife of Shiva; 19- Promotion in rank; 22- The French word for "no"; 23- Tasteless items, junk; 24- They're charged; 26- Fix beforehand; 29- Sieve; 31- It may come before long; 32- Shady spot; 34- Paddled; 36- Separate by a sieve; 38- Water wheel; 40- Fuzzy fruit; 41- Tending to a definite end; 43- ___ Ark; 45- Tankard filler; 46- Bristly; 48- Lethal; 50- Geezer; 51- 100 square meters; 52- Bran source; 54- Plan beforehand; 61- Thrifty competitor; 63- Vinegary prefix; 64- Pearl Buck heroine; 65- Possess; 66- Pier; 67- ___ arms (angry); 68- Consumer; 69- United; 70- It may be landed;

DOWN 1- Actress Olin; 2- ___ Three Lives; 3- Capital of the Ukraine; 4- Fancy home; 5- Peter Fonda title role; 6- Conceal, as a card; 7- "Peter Pan" pirate; 8- Pop the question; 9- Adapted for climbing; 10- Han ___ was a "Star Wars" character; 11- Matching; 13- Desk with slanted top; 14- Golfer with an army; 20- American space agency; 21- ___ avail; 25- Mont. neighbor; 26- Gets nosy; 27- Thoughtful; 28- Steak order; 29- Common chord; 30- In a fresh manner; 31- Part of i.e.; 33- Guadalajara gold; 35- Casino cube; 37- Bandleader Puente; 39- Leading; 42- Poultry enclosure; 44- Delhi wrap; 47- Dry stalks; 49- Circuitous way; 52- Island of Hawaii; 53- Gardner and others; 55- Repeat; 56- Intend; 57- French 101 infinitive; 58- Iams alternative; 59- Follow; 60- Feminine ending; 62- Sun. talk;

Friday's solution

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Fire department 28 572 222	Water Supply - Report 2822 0088
PJ (Open line) 993	Telephone - Report 1000
PJ (Picket) 28 557 775	Electricity - Report 28 339 922
PSP 28 573 333	Macau Daily Times 28 716 081
Customs 28 559 944	
S. J. Hospital 28 313 731	
Kiang Wu Hospital 28 371 333	
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REDUCED! [Original Price] ~~HKD 7,888,000~~



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MORE INFO



Property Hotlist



FOR SALE

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HKD 15,750,000

2,305 ft²
4
2



Ref: 2005 6001

FOR RENT



Buckingham
HKD 13,900/mth

1,080 ft²
2 1



Ref: 2112 1004

FOR RENT



Saint Lazarus
HKD 6,900/mth

650 ft²
2 1



Ref: 2112 1001

More Listings

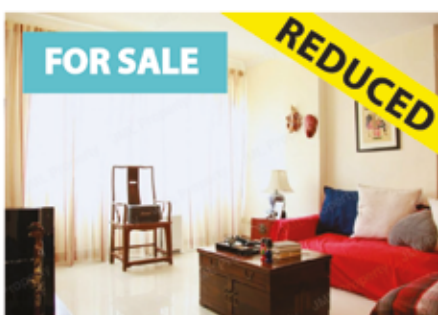
For Sale

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- [Taipa] Manhattan 4 2 2,305 ft² **HKD 17,980,000** Ref: 1807 5558

For Rent

- [Coloane] One Oasis 2 2 1,112 ft² **HKD 14,200/mth** Ref: 2102 1004
- [Taipa] Kingsville 3 2 1,510 ft² **HKD 14,900/mth** Ref: 2108 1002
- [Macau] One Central 2 2 1,269 ft² **HKD 16,500/mth** Ref: 2005 1002

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FOOTBALL

Chelsea takes a stand, pioneers end to all-seater EPL games

ROB HARRIS, LONDON

CHELSEA 2, LIVERPOOL 2

COMING to watch his beloved Chelsea since the 1960s, Gary Owen has witnessed first-hand the changing matchday experience.

From the dangers that saw soccer fans penned behind barbed wire — and threatened with electric fences — to stadiums becoming too placid, the 63-year-old Owen had been lamenting the loss of the raw passion of Stamford Bridge.

No longer.

For the first time since Premier League stadiums were ordered to be all-seater in 1994, Owen and thousands of other Chelsea supporters could legally stand again on Sunday — without being ordered to sit.

Chelsea's stadium was the pioneer as trials began with the visit of Liverpool with what's called "safe standing" in the Shed End

AP PHOTO



where Owen had a ticket, and in a stand behind the other goal.

"It brings back the old days," the 63-year-old Owen said. "It might create a bit more atmosphere. Football now has gone a sort of corporate way, so you lose the old-fashioned atmosphere."

It would have been hard to keep fans off their feet as Chelsea conjured a comeback to draw 2-2 with Mateo Kovacic and Christian Pulisic scoring in a high-intensity clash with Liverpool.

"Sitting is like being in your front room, which is not the same," Owen said. "I think a lot of grounds you go into, they've lost the atmosphere when you used to come here 30 years ago, this place used to go mad, jumping at the rafters. But now it's really, really quiet from what it used to be."

All-seater stadiums became mandatory in the top two tiers of English football following safety recommendations made after the crush at Liverpool's 1989 FA Cup

semifinal against Nottingham Forest at Hillsborough Stadium that led to the deaths of 97 fans.

"We have learnt a lot of lessons since the Hillsborough tragedy, and football has been as safe in the last 30 years as it has ever been," said Chief Constable Mark Roberts, who leads on football policing in England. "However we must not get complacent and, whenever measures such as this are introduced, the safety of those attending football must be absolutely para-

mount to any decisions made."

So much has changed since then, with the inception in 1992 of the Premier League which has become the wealthiest soccer competition in the world and spurred investment in stadiums.

"Things have moved on, obviously for the better because the old days we had a bad reputation," Owen said.

The government determined that now was the time to start testing procedures for fans to no longer be required to sit.

"It's the evolution of football," Sports Minister Nigel Huddleston said. "What we're not doing is going back to the old days of terraces — this is very, very different.

"Everybody has a seat, and there are bars in front and behind them, and that's really good because that will stop any surges going backwards or forwards, particularly in those heightened moments when there's a goal or something. So this is safe standing — exactly what it says on the tin."

Police are more cautious over new risks potentially being introduced, especially after some England fans highlighted the dangers of areas becoming overcrowded after violently forcing their way into the European Championship final against Italy at Wembley Stadium in north London in July. **MDT/AP**

AD

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OPINION

China Daily
 Editorial, China Daily

**CHINA CANNOT REST
 UPON ITS LAURELS, THE
 NATION 'STILL HAS A
 LONG WAY TO GO'**

The New Year speech President Xi Jinping delivered on Friday sheds light on how China has emerged stronger from the harsh tests of the past 12 months, and should consolidate the confidence that the nation can embrace a brighter future in the coming year.

Under the leadership of the Communist Party of China Central Committee with Xi at the core, the nation has effectively responded to all the challenges and difficulties of what Xi called a year "of exceptional significance".

Over the past year, a "resilient and dynamic" China has shown that it has a solid foundation on which to build as it embarks on the next stage of its development journey. It has also shown that with Xi at the helm and guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, there is a clear understanding of what kind of development the nation should pursue and how it should pursue it at this critical juncture in its development journey.

The resolution on historical issues adopted at the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee in November only the third such resolution in the Party's history connected the past, present and future, showing that the Party has a thorough understanding of the characteristics of the current stage of Chinese economic development and is well-prepared to fulfill the task of building China into a modern socialist country in all respects.

It is under the leadership of the Party, which celebrated the 100th anniversary of its founding in 2021, that the nation has realized the historic achievements of becoming moderately prosperous in all respects and eliminating absolute poverty, and the knowledge and practical experience the Party has gained in attaining those hard-won accomplishments that are also "contributions to the world" will stand the country in good stead as it pursues its modernization amid a challenging and ever-changing development environment.

Now, as the country begins to implement its 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25) and starts its advance toward the Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035, the focus is on improving the quality and returns of economic growth, promoting sustainable and healthy economic development, and making substantive progress in promoting common prosperity.

To these ends, Xi stressed the nation should maintain a long-term perspective, remain mindful of potential risks, and maintain its strategic focus and determination, paying attention to issues both great and small, and he offered the timely reminder that "If we do not fail Nature, Nature shall never fail us", effectively a rallying cry as the nation pursues the challenging goal of carbon neutrality.

Calling for unity and concerted efforts to ensure "a brighter future for our nation" and the realization of the Chinese people's shared aspiration for the complete reunification of the motherland, Xi said that the nation is on an extraordinary journey, a journey in which the CPC continues to lead the Chinese people on a march forward.

Hundreds of empty, parked cars go up in flames in France each New Year's Eve, set afire by young revelers, a much lamented tradition that appeared in decline this year, which saw only 874 vehicles burned.

The number of cars burned overnight has declined compared to New Year's Eve 2019 when 1,316 vehicles went up in flames, Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said Saturday on Twitter.

Fewer arson attacks occurred because of massive police presence on cities' streets this New Year's Eve, enforcing law and order and restrictions on public gatherings and wearing face masks as infections driven by the fast-spreading omicron variant

surge, he said.

There is no information on burned cars last year because of a nation-wide lockdown in 2020 during the coronavirus pandemic.

Like many countries, France sees cars set on fire during the year for many reasons, including gangs hiding clues of their crimes and people making false insurance claims.

But car-torching took a new step in France when it became a way to mark the arrival of the New Year. The practice reportedly began in earnest among youths - often in poor neighborhoods - in the 1990s in the region around Strasbourg in eastern France.



**MEXICAN FISH EXTINCT
 IN WILD SUCCESSFULLY
 REINTRODUCED**

THERE once was a small fish called "tequila splitfin" or "zoogoneticus tequila" that swam in a river in western Mexico, but disappeared in the 1990s. Scientists and residents, however, have achieved the return of a species extinct in nature — but conserved in captivity — to its native habitat.

Its success is now intertwined with the community's identity and being touted internationally.

It began more than two decades ago in Teuchitlán, a town near the Tequila volcano. A half-dozen students, among them Omar Domínguez, began to worry about the little fish that fit in the palm of a hand and had only ever been seen in the Teuchitlán river. It had vanished from local waters, apparently due to pollution, human activities and the introduction of non-native species.

Domínguez, now a 47-year-old researcher at the University of Michoacán, says that then only the elderly remembered the fish called "gallito" or "little rooster" because of its orange tail.

In 1998, conservationists from the Chester Zoo in England and other European institutions arrived to help set up a laboratory for conserving Mexican fish. They brought several pairs of tequila splitfin fish from the aquariums of collectors, Domínguez said.

The fish began repro-

ducing in aquariums and within a few years Domínguez and his colleagues gambled on reintroducing them to the Teuchitlán river. "They told us it was impossible, (that) when we returned them they were going to die."

So they looked for options. They built an artificial pond for a semi-captivity stage and in 2012 they put 40 pairs there.

Two years later, there were some 10,000 fish. The result guaranteed funding, not only from the Chester Zoo but also a dozen organizations from Europe, the United States and the United Arab Emirates, to move the experiment to the river.

There they studied parasites, microorganisms in the water, the interaction with predators, competition with other fish, and then introduced the fish in floating cages.

The goal was to re-establish the fragile equilibrium. For that part, the key was not so much the scientists as the local residents.

"When I started the environmental education program I thought they were going to turn a deaf ear to us... and at first that happened," Domínguez said.

But the conservationists succeeded with patience and years of puppet shows, games and explanations about the ecological and health value of "zoogoneticus tequila" — the fish help control mosquitos that spread dengue.

Some residents made up a nickname for the little fish: "Zoogy." They made caricatures and formed the "River Guardians," a group mostly of children. They collect garbage, clean the river and remove invasive plants.

Domínguez said it is difficult to say if water quality is better because there is no previous data to compare, but the entire ecosystem has improved. The river is cleaner, there are fewer non-native species and cattle are no longer permitted to drink in some areas.

The fish rapidly multiplied inside their floating cages. Then they were marked so they could be followed and set free. It was late 2017 and in six months the population increased 55%. Last month, the fish had expanded to another part of the river.

The reintroduction into nature of species that were extinct in the wild is complex and time-consuming. Przewalski's horse and the Arabian oryx are among successful examples. The Chester Zoo said Dec. 29 that the tequila splitfin had joined that small group.

"The project has been cited as an International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) case study for successful global reintroductions — with recent scientific studies confirming the fish are thriving and already breeding in the river," the zoo said in a statement. **MDT/AP**

Baghdad Two armed drones were shot down at the airport on Monday, a U.S.-led coalition official said, an attack that coincides with the anniversary of the 2020 U.S. killing of a top Iranian general. There were no reports of damage or injuries from the incident, which was also confirmed by an Iraqi security official.

Yemen's Houthi rebels seized an Emirati-flagged ship in the Red Sea, officials said yesterday, the latest sign of Mideast tensions as hackers targeted a major Israeli newspaper's website to mark America's 2020 killing of a top Iranian general. The seizure of the Rwabee marks the latest assault in the Red Sea, a crucial route for international trade and energy shipments.



Germany last week shut down half of the six nuclear plants it still has in operation, a year before the country draws the final curtain on its decades-long use of atomic power. The decision to phase out nuclear power and shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy was first taken by the center-left government of Gerhard Schroeder in 2002. His successor, Angela Merkel, reversed her decision to extend the lifetime of Germany's nuclear plants in the wake of the 2011 Fukushima disaster in Japan and set 2022 as the final deadline for shutting them down.

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Netherlands Thousands of people defied a ban on assembling and demonstrated against the Dutch government's coronavirus lockdown measures, gathering on a central square before marching toward a park in Amsterdam. A small group of demonstrators briefly clashed with riot police as officers worked to clear the crowd from Museum Square based on an order from Amsterdam Mayor Femke Halsema.