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GOV'T REFUTES THE CONTENTS OF A VIRAL VIDEO WHERE HO IAT SENG ALLEGEDLY DISCUSSES HOW HE ACHIEVED WEALTH THROUGH CRYPTOCURRENCY

P5

HAO VS LVS: TRIAL REACHING CLOSING STAGE, DEFENSE TRIGGERS COURT INCIDENT

P2

CHAA CAFFEINE & TREATS KEEPING UP WITH COFFEE TRENDS WITH CROFFLES AND MATCHA, AS REVIEWED BY MDT'S LYNZY VALLES

P11



AP PHOTO



China COVID-19 has caused major disruptions in trade along China's borders with its Southeast Asian neighbors, particularly with the country's prevention regime targeting food products, especially perishables such as tropical fruit and frozen items including fish and shrimp. State media reports say Longbang port, in China's Guangxi region along the border with Vietnam, has suspended imports of refrigerated food and other commodities since Dec. 25.

AP PHOTO



Thailand reported its biggest spike in coronavirus cases in weeks yesterday after a holiday season in which people traveled and gathered in large numbers amid the rapid spread of the omicron variant. Officials recorded 5,775 new cases, prompting the Ministry of Public Health to raise the official warning level to 4 on a scale of 5, permanent secretary Kiatphume Wongrajit said.

AP PHOTO



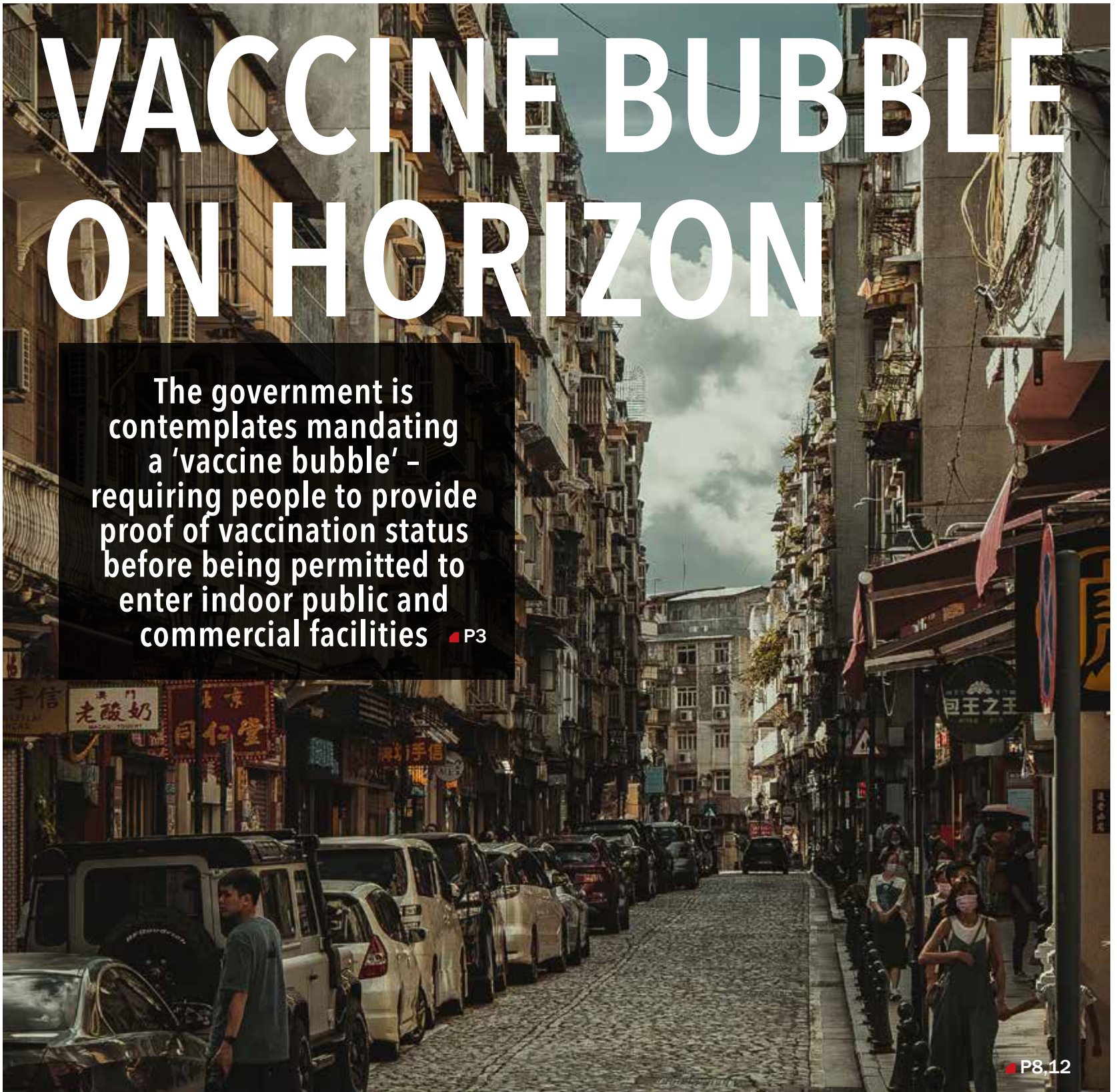
Vietnam continues to ease virus restrictions in some major cities despite well over 10,000 new cases reported nationwide each day in recent weeks. Ho Chi Minh City, the country's largest metropolis, allowed entertainment venues including bars and karaoke lounges to reopen earlier this week. They had earlier been shut in an effort to curb the outbreak. In Hanoi, non-essential businesses are still required to be closed, as the capital leads the country with over 2,000 new cases a day.

More on backpage

VACCINE BUBBLE ON HORIZON

The government is contemplates mandating a 'vaccine bubble' - requiring people to provide proof of vaccination status before being permitted to enter indoor public and commercial facilities

P3



P8,12

XPLORER PRIZE TO AWARD YOUNG MEDICAL SCIENTISTS IN MACAU

P4

AP PHOTO



XI'AN HOSPITAL PUNISHED FOR REFUSING ENTRY TO PREGNANT WOMAN

P7

LAWMAKER QUESTIONS THE NEED FOR MACAU PASS ID REGISTRATION

Lawmaker Che Sai Wang questioned the need for the government to require owners of Macau Pass to register their card in order to receive discounted bus fares "on disease control grounds", noting that buses have now posted footprint registration QR codes. These codes and the unique serial number of the card are sufficient to track down any passenger. Moreover, given the use of surveillance cameras to monitor the city – including on buses – Che questioned the need to collect an abundance of personal data. He also criticized the government for not adequately explaining to the public how personal privacy will be maintained.

MELCO TO OFFER ONE MONTH BONUS TO EMPLOYEES

Melco Resorts & Entertainment (Melco) has announced that a one month discretionary bonus will be paid to all eligible non-management employees before Chinese New Year. Lawrence Ho, chairman and CEO of Melco, said: "The special payment of this discretionary bonus is to recognize the dedication, loyalty and hard work of our eligible non-management colleagues. We are thankful for the efforts of all colleagues in maintaining Melco's service excellence as we continue to adapt to changes together." The other five gaming operators have also recently announced bonuses to their staff.

IFTM OPENS EXAM REGISTRATION

The Macao Institute for Tourism Studies' (IFTM) Bachelor's Degree Programmes (English Medium) are now open for applications from now until January 19. The admissions are for: Bachelor's Degree Programmes in Cultural and Heritage Management, Culinary Arts Management, Hotel Management, Tourism Event Management, Tourism Business Management, and Tourism Retail and Marketing Management. According to a statement, eligible new students may receive full tuition fee waiver scholarships. In addition to the Joint Admission Examination (JAE), IFTM also offers other admission channels.

HAO VS LVS

TRIAL REACHING CLOSING STAGE, DEFENSE TRIGGERS COURT INCIDENT

RENATO MARQUES

THE Las Vegas Sands Corporation (LVS) legal representative Luís Cavaleiro de Ferreira has triggered a procedural incident at the First Instance Court (TJB), claiming that a document sought to be added to the process by the plaintiff Asian American Entertainment Corporation (AAEC) is falsified.

On the line is a copy of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the two sides, allegedly delivered to the Macau Gaming Commission as part of the tender process of the consortium composed of AAEC and LVS when they first submitted a bid for the gaming license tender 20 years ago.

Although the document is not new to the case, the plaintiff recently requested to join several documents to the process, including a copy of the MOU signed by William Weidner, former president and chief operating officer of LVS.

The defense alleges that the signed copy of the document was fabricated and that Weidner's signature was unlawfully transposed from a different document.

The incident prompted the judge to request the Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau (DICJ) to issue an official document confirming whether the MOU was delivered as part of the initial tender documents, and, if so, whether the document in the DICJ archives was signed by Weidner and AAEC's Marshall Hao.

The judge also ordered the plaintiff's lawyer to present evidence to the court demonstrating when and how they came to acquire the document, within five days of the request.

At the instigation of the defense, both sides also consented to requesting written testimony from Weidner regarding the authenticity of the MOU, including his awareness of having signed it or of someone signing it on his behalf. Weidner is to provide the requested information within 10 days.

The defense lawyer also requested that the court extend

RENATO MARQUES



the 20-day review period for a series of new documents added to the process, on the grounds that the additional documents contain important information relevant to the case that should be considered in the court's decision. The request for an extension of time was denied, with the presiding judge explaining that the stipulated time period is a legal deadline that cannot be extended.

DEFENSE CLAIMS INTENTION TO PROCEED WITH CASE

After an exchange of arguments between the two sides regarding the authenticity and relevance of the document, the

defense lawyer requested that the court extract a certificate from the process of the MOU. The defense aims to file a criminal case regarding these documents, which they claim are falsified.

The judge explained that the court is aware of the documents and the claims that they are falsified. The judge further explained that once a decision is made, and if the court is satisfied that there are grounds for instigating criminal proceedings, the courts and the public prosecution will certainly seek penalties for criminal liability of the act, if proven.

Represented by Jorge Mene-

zes, the plaintiff expressed surprise at the claims made by the defense, in part due to the fact that the document was presented as a copy and not as an original.

"The majority of the documents used in this case have been copied from originals which none of us have had access to. I find it strange that only now this seems to be a problem for the defense," Menezes said.

The judge also questioned both sides about their intentions to add more documents to the lawsuit, given that the case is approaching the final stages.

"It looks like we are playing ping-pong here. The plaintiff presents a new document and then the defense adds a new one in response," the judge said.

Closing allegations for the case are scheduled for January 21, if no other situations cause further delay. In that time, the judge has said that the court should have received the reply from DICJ and the written statement from Weidner.

The case is a compensation claim by AAEC to LVS amounting to the equivalent of almost 96 billion patacas for damages caused by the breach of an agreement that established the consortium to bid on the tender. The amount claimed was said to be based on damage caused to the AAEC, and is guided by the profits obtained by four LVS subsidiaries in Macau over the course of over 20 years of exploring gaming activities through the casino license obtained through the tender.

DUCKER REPORT: AAEC LOSSES ESTIMATED AT NEARLY MOP58B

THE estimated loss for Asian American Entertainment Corp. (AAEC) stands at MOP57.9 billion, according to a report issued by consulting firm Ducker Research & Consulting. The report was dated January 4 and is based on data presented by The Venetian to the gaming bureau between 2002 and 2020. In the 41-page report analysts say that if the deal had been maintained then AAEC, headed by Taiwanese mogul Marshall Hao, would have invested the same as LVS, if not more. The loss is a result of the failed bid for a casino

license with Las Vegas Sands in the region, as cited in an Asia Gaming Brief report. Another report, by local veteran economist José Duarte, noted that MOP3.6 billion in gaming taxes paid and MOP400 million in corporate taxes were already factored into the net profit of the group. Therefore, any analysis of damages should not make further downward revisions for such items, according to a report issued by Ponto Final. The two independent expert reports were added to the lawsuit by the plaintiff.

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COVID-19

Vaccine proof or negative NAT for restaurants, entertainment venues on the table

ANTHONY LAM

THE city should buckle up early for vaccinated dining-in, though it remains too early to permit border crossings, a government doctor suggested at yesterday's health press briefing.

Public health doctor Leong Iek Hou, division head for prevention and control of contagious disease at the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, disclosed that the government is contemplating the possibility of mandating a "vaccine bubble" – requiring people to provide proof of vaccination status before being permitted to enter catering establishments and other venues.

Concerns over when the measure will take effect were raised at the press briefing. The official did not provide a definitive response to these concerns, merely reiterating that the government is considering it as a possibility.

Leong attributed the need for the measure to the transmissibility of the new Omicron variant, stating that she did "not dare say that when there is an infection, there is only a single case."

As such, she said that implementing the vaccine bubble measure only after the detection of new case is likely to be too late to be effective.

"We won't wait until there is a case to implement the [vaccine bubble] measure," Leong proclaimed.

However, when asked about the need for vaccination for the purposes of border crossing, Leong did not give a direct answer as to whether measures will be put in place.

She stressed again that measures will be put into place according to the development of the pandemic.

"If we see full vaccination across Macau, it will not be explicitly required for border crossing," she said. "Otherwise, we won't rule out the possibility of the measure."

Individuals who cannot or do not want to receive the vaccine will, when the "vaccine bubble" measure takes effect, be required to show evidence of negative SARS-CoV-2 nucleic acid test results in order to enter venues.

In addition, the public health doctor stated for the first time that the existing guidelines and measures are in effect due to the current pandemic. "All our disease control measures are in place as per the situation. If the necessity fades, they will be lifted, of

CLAY LECONEY



course," Leong said.

Leong was also questioned about the compulsory footprint registration measures by a journalist who said that she was asked to register her attendance upon entering the press briefing venue. The journalist said that she was asked to do so at other public venues.

The Health Bureau has reiterated the voluntary nature of footprint registration.

The public health doctor stressed that footprint registration is completely voluntary, stating that staff at public venues should encourage users to register their attendance but cannot force them to do so.

THE TRANSMISSIBILITY OF OMICRON

Many reports have suggested that the Omicron variant is more transmissible but ultimately weaker than previous variants.

At the press briefing, Leong agreed that while this was suggested by some studies, the reality of the situation was that the Omicron variant was still a variant of concern notwithstanding the fact that it is a weaker strain.

"Looking at the reality across Europe and the US and their respective medical systems, in many places [health systems] are overloaded," she said. "What does this mean? It means that a certain number of people require hospitalization, which indicates the occurrence of severe or

even fatal cases."

She added that the new variant may cause weaker symptoms but "it doesn't mean that we don't need to care about it." The Omicron variant, she said, may still result in severe complications in the unvaccinated, elderly and patients with chronic diseases.

"With such strong transmissibility, even a 1% rate of severe cases will shock society in general," Leong said, adding that for the time being, containment tactics will rely on prevention and control.

With that said, the UK announced yesterday that certain restrictions would be lifted despite the widespread incidence of new cases.

QUARANTINE HOTEL ADDED DESPITE BAN

Liz Lam Tong Hou, division head of public relations at the Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO), announced yesterday that the Regency Art Hotel will resume its status today as a self-selected quarantine hotel.

A self-selected quarantine hotel requires the guests to pay for their accommodation regardless of their residency status or whether it is their first time staying at a quarantine hotel in Macau.

The announcement came after the government's decision to ban incoming passengers from foreign flights from January 9. Government officials yesterday defended the need for an extra quarantine hotel.

All quarantine hotels are reportedly fully booked until the Lunar New Year.

Leong said that, although passengers will not enter Macau directly from jurisdictions outside Greater China by flight, "they can still fly into mainland China, quarantine there and enter Macau."

Moreover, she initially said that returnees can also consider flying in via Taiwan. However, the island's main international airport in Taoyuan has suspended transit services since May last year.

The official later clarified at the press briefing that she was referring to Macau residents currently located in Taiwan who may enter Macau, as there are still flights flying between the two jurisdictions.

MRNA JAB SUGGESTED AS BOOSTER SHOT

THE Health Bureau, stating that it has followed suggestions by the World Health Organization (WHO), encourages individuals receiving the inactivated vaccines for the first two doses to receive an mRNA jab as their booster shot "in order to trigger higher antibody levels," Dr Leong Iek Hou said.

However, the practice of receiving the inactivated vaccine as a booster shot for those who have already received inactivated vaccines as their first and second doses will be nevertheless be accepted by the local authorities.

The interval between receiving the second shot and booster shot will be shortened for individuals with an urgent need to travel, who may now receive the booster shot 12 weeks from their second jab.

Prior to the roll-out of the vaccine, it was initially thought that the vaccine would help prevent infection. It was subsequently thought that the vaccine would be able to prevent onset of the disease. The vaccine is now said to only be effective in reducing the number of severe cases and death.

At yesterday's press briefing, Leong addressed the matter of the evolving understanding of vaccine efficacy, admitting for the first time that the use of the vaccine in reality differs from what scientists had initially expected.

She added that despite this, the vaccine is still very useful in avoiding the need for hospitalization, as well as reducing the severity of infection and death. "We should hold this belief firmly," Leong said. **AL**

SOUTHCN.COM COLLABORATES WITH LOCAL MEDIA TO EXCHANGE GBA STORIES

SOUTHCN.COM of Nanfang Media Group has recently signed cooperation agreements with five media outlets in the SAR in a bid to diversify available information on investment, employment, and living in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area (GBA).

The collaboration is an initiative under the general plan for building the Guangdong-Macau in-depth cooperation zone in Hengqin in September, aiming to bring new and expanded opportunities to Macau.

The plan has defined the strategic position of the zone as a new platform to boost Macau's economic diversification, a new space for Macau residents' life and employment, and a new model to enrich the practice of



"One country, two systems." The collaboration is aimed to bring GBA development news to the SAR consistent with the enactment of the plan.

Previously, Southcn.com established cooperative relations with overseas media channels

such as Lianhe Zaobao in Singapore and South China Morning Post in Hong Kong in order to facilitate active joint reporting, resource sharing, and cultural exchange.

The five media outlets include Macau Daily Times, Ponto Final, TDM-

-Teledifusao de Macau, Business Intelligence, and Plataforma. This has the support of the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Macau SAR and the Information Office of the People's Government of Guangdong Province. **MDT/GDTODAY**

XPLORER PRIZE TO AWARD YOUNG MEDICAL SCIENTISTS

THE Xplorer Prize, one of China's highest grants for young scientists, will set up a new category of medical science starting from 2022.

A non-government award, the prize was initiated by Tencent Chairman and CEO Ma Huateng, together with a number of renowned scientists in 2018. It aims to support full-time Chinese mainland, Hong Kong and Macau-based science professionals aged 45 or below engage in fundamental science and cutting-edge technology research.

The aim of adding the new award category is to "encourage research to improve people's health and solve funda-

mental problems in the field of medical science," Tencent said in a statement.

It will award scientists for their contribution across fields including basic medicine, clinical medicine, pharmacy, public health and biomedical engineering.

Despite the category addition, the annual award quota of 50 people remains unchanged. Each winner will be awarded a total of 3 million yuan (about USD470,700) over the course of five years, according to the company.

The prize nomination and application will be open until April 15, and the winner's list will be announced in September. **MDT/XINHUA**



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GOV'T REFUTES VIDEO CLAIMING CE ACHIEVES WEALTH WITH CRYPTOCURRENCY

ANTHONY LAM

THE government refuted the contents of a recent video going viral on social media platforms. In the video, Chief Executive Ho Iat Seng apparently discusses how he achieved wealth through cryptocurrency transactions. "The government hereby clarifies that the content of the

video is false and that the Chief Executive never conducted such an interview nor made such claims at any interview," the government declared in the statement. As a follow-up, the case has been reported to the police.

Meanwhile, the Monetary Authority of Macao (AMCM) has reminded the public in a statement that

"cryptocurrency is neither legal tender nor a legal financial tool, but rather a virtual commodity of highly speculative nature."

It added that cryptocurrency transactions are highly risky and not subject to regulatory oversight or otherwise supervised by the AMCM. Members of the public should remain vigilant against instances

of fraud and other illegalities. The AMCM has also ordered local banks and financial institutions to refrain from facilitating cryptocurrency transactions or the provision of related financial services directly or indirectly. It stressed that it is against the law to provide financial services without permission from the local authority.

CRIME

SCAMS INVOLVING ONLINE SALES PROMOTION AND INVESTMENT SCHEMES CONTINUE

RENATO MARQUES

FIVE local residents have reportedly been involved in a scam involving the advertisement and promotion of product sales on the internet, the Judiciary Police (PJ) announced.

According to separate reports made to PJ within the past week, four different residents saw an advertisement by a company "HK Tv Mall" seeking to recruit collaborators for online sales.

The scheme involved an initial investment from the "freelance" sellers who were required to obtain a quantity of products up front, which they could then sell for a commission of 20% of the sale price.

The five residents decided to take up this opportunity and inves-

ted amounts ranging between HKD22,000 and HKD82,000.

According to the reports, the sales were made through social media platforms, and products were handed to the clients. However, none of the people received the commission to which they were entitled. They filed complaints against the company with the PJ in response.

Concurrent to this, another five people reported falling victim to an online investment scam advertised on social media.

The five victims reportedly lost sums ranging between RMB17,000 and 256,000. They informed PJ that soon after the investments were made and money transferred, they lost contact with the purported investment agent.

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CHINA LASHES OUT AT US OVER SUPPORT FOR LITHUANIA

CHINA lashed out at the United States yesterday over its support for the European nation of Lithuania in its feud with Beijing over relations with Taiwan.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said Washington was using the Baltic state to “use Taiwan to contain China.”

“The U.S. side has defended Lithuania’s erroneous act of creating ‘one China, one Taiwan,’ and attempted to put together a small clique condoning the Taiwan independence forces,” Wang said at a daily briefing.

His remarks came after the top U.S. and German diplomats on Wednesday said Chinese pressure against Lithuania was unwarranted.

Lithuania broke with diplomatic custom last year by letting the Taiwanese office in Vilnius bear the name Taiwan, instead of Chinese Taipei, which most other countries use to avoid offending Beijing.

China considers Taiwan part of its territory with no right to diplomatic recognition, and Lithuania’s move infuriated Beijing, which withdrew its ambas-



The closed Lithuanian Embassy is seen in Beijing yesterday

sador to Vilnius and expelled the Lithuanian ambassador to Beijing. Lithuania has since closed its embassy in Beijing.

Constant Chinese pressure has reduced the number of Taiwan’s formal diplomatic allies to just 14, although it has robust

informal relations with the U.S., Germany and most other major nations.

Lithuania, a country of 2.8 million people, is a member of the European Union and NATO and a close U.S. ally.

Wang also blasted Taiwan’s

move to create a \$200 million investment fund for Lithuania to offset China’s economic reprisals as “dollar diplomacy,” adding that “soliciting foreign support to Taiwan independence will only lead to a dead end.”

Taiwan’s office opened in

November, and Lithuania is planning to open its own trade office in Taiwan later this year.

Taiwan said it is ready to help Lithuania in resupplying trade, with the island saying goods are stopped from entering China.

“There are more than 120 sea containers — at least 1.5 million euro worth — blocked by Beijing. We’re ready to take all of those and help Lithuanian companies,” Huang said.

In his remarks after a meeting with his German counterpart, Annalena Baerbock, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, “We have immediate concern about the government of China’s attempts to bully Lithuania.”

Blinken said China has been pushing European and American companies to stop building products with components made in Lithuania or risk losing access to the Chinese market.

Baerbock said “we as Europeans stand in solidarity at Lithuania’s side.”

China’s Foreign Ministry has not directly confirmed its trade ban on Lithuania or other forms of retaliation, but said that Vilnius had crossed a “red line.”

China’s ruling Communist Party has vast powers to pressure Chinese companies that don’t hew to the government’s political and diplomatic agenda. **MDT/AP**

DIPLOMACY

Beijing to appoint Horn of Africa envoy amid Ethiopia crisis

CHINA’S foreign minister says his country will appoint a special envoy to the Horn of Africa region, where Ethiopia and Eritrea have been fighting forces from Ethiopia’s Tigray region and Somalia is in the grip of a political crisis caused by a long-delayed election.

Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in comments to reporters during his yesterday visit to Kenya, didn’t say when the appointment would be made. He urged countries in the Horn of Africa, a strategic but at times turbulent region, to hold a peace conference and said China’s envoy could provide “necessary support” for that process.

The announcement came as the United States’ special envoy for the Horn of Africa, Jeffrey Feltman, is again visiting Ethiopia in the hope of taking advantage of a relative lull in the country’s conflict to press for a cease-fire and path to peace.



Foreign Minister Wang Yi speaks with Kenya's Foreign Affairs Cabinet Secretary Raychelle Omamo in Mombasa

The U.S. has said Feltman would meet with senior officials. Washington has seen Kenya as a key partner in the mediation efforts.

China’s envoy announcement came after Wang visited Eritrea, which neighbors Ethiopia and has been accused of some of the worst atrocities in the Tigray conflict. While there, Wang criticized recent U.S. sanctions

against Eritrea’s military and ruling party over their role in the war.

Without naming countries, the Chinese foreign minister said conflicts in the Horn of Africa hamper the region’s “tremendous potential for development” and “such a situation should not be allowed to continue.”

He also urged Horn of Africa countries to “resolve various ethnic, reli-

gious and regional differences in an African way.”

China, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, has been blamed in part for blocking action on Ethiopia’s war that some other members have sought.

The war has killed an estimated tens of thousands of people and created a vast humanitarian crisis, with the Tigray region under a government blockade since late June.

Witnesses, lawyers and human rights groups have said ethnic Tigrayans have been detained by the thousands, while Ethiopia’s government says it is targeting people suspected of supporting the Tigray forces,

In neighboring Somalia, President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed’s government is under growing pressure as the country’s election nears a year of delay in February. **MDT/AP**

THREE CHINESE NATIONALS ABDUCTED IN NIGERIA, POLICE SAY

POLICE in Nigeria said gunmen abducted three Chinese nationals working in the country’s north central region, the latest incident in a cycle of violence in Africa’s most populous nation.

The gunmen also killed two Nigerians who were working with the expatriates Tuesday at a hydroelectric power plant under construction in Niger state, which neighbors Nigeria’s capital, Abuja.

The workers were installing a transmission line tower at the plant in the village of Gussase when the attackers arrived and opened fire, police spokesman Wasiu Abiodun said in a statement on Wednesday.

“Police tactical team attached to the facility engaged the hoodlums in a gun duel while four of the expatriates were rescued,” Abiodun said, adding that with one of the Chinese workers and two local workers sustained bullet injuries.

He said an “aggressive manhunt” was underway to rescue the three hostages.

Criminal gangs have abducted scores of foreigners in Nigeria, though security forces reduced the frequency of the attacks over the years.

Workers in the southern oil-rich Niger Delta region are most often targeted. Ransoms for hostages sometimes run into hundreds of thousands of dollars.

In November, Chinese authorities issued a travel advisory warning their citizens and companies against travel to “high-risk” areas in Nigeria and other parts of Africa.

The state of security across Nigeria has deteriorated under President Muhammadu Buhari, a retired military general who served as Nigeria’s military head of state during 1983-1985 before returning to power in 2015. **MDT/AP**

Xi'an hospital punished for refusing entry to pregnant woman

HOSPITAL officials in the northern Chinese city of Xi'an have been punished after a pregnant woman miscarried after being refused entry, reportedly for not having current COVID-19 test results.

The city government announced yesterday that Gaoxin Hospital General Manager Fan Yuhui has been suspended and the heads of the outpatient department and medical department sacked.

A government statement said the incident "caused widespread concern in society and caused a severe social impact."

The statement was read at a news conference by the head of the city's health department, Liu Shunzhi, who bowed in apology to the woman, who is undergoing recovery, and for "providing poor access to medical treatment and inadequate service for those with special requirements."

The system will "open green channels for those with special needs and make every effort to ensure all received attention amid the pandemic," state media quoted Liu as saying.

The pregnant woman was suffering abdominal pain but was forced to wait outside the hospital on a pink plastic stool for two hours on New Year's Day. She then began bleeding uncontrollably, according to widely circulated accounts that accompanied a video taken by her husband showing a pool of blood at her feet.

Xi'an has been under strict lockdown for more than two weeks,

XINHUA



Volunteers wearing protective suits package meals for delivery to people under lockdown in Xi'an

prompting scattered criticisms over shortages of food and heavy-handed behavior by authorities, who are under intense pressure to bring down COVID-19 case numbers.

The city said an investigation into the incident was carried out but gave no details. The hospital was ordered to issue a public apology, provide compensation and "optimize the medical treatment process."

It wasn't clear how many hos-

pital staff had been punished in total, but they joined a growing list of officials disciplined over their handling of the outbreak.

The city government said two other ranking officials with the Xi'an Emergency Center and Xi'an Municipal Health Commission had been given formal warnings by the ruling Communist Party.

Xi'an recorded another 63 cases of COVID-19, reported to be the delta variant, yesterday, bring-

ing its total over its month-long outbreak to more than 1,800, with no reported deaths.

Officials have said the city, home to the famed Terracotta Warriors statues along with major industries, has basically halted community transmission because all of the new cases were among people already quarantined.

While those numbers are relatively small compared to outbreaks in the U.S. and elsewhere,

re, they come less than a month before Beijing is due to host the Winter Olympic Games.

That has put officials under intense pressure to contain infections, prompting a stepping up of already severe measures under China's "zero tolerance" strategy of quarantining every case, conducting mass testing and placing entire cities under lockdown.

Xi'an's main airport suspended all international flights on Wednesday. Domestic flights had already been put on hold as part of measures to seal off the city. Tens of thousands of close contacts of infected people have been placed in quarantine centers.

Authorities are also implementing increasingly stringent measures following an outbreak in Henan province, just west of Shaanxi province, of which Xi'an is the capital.

An additional 69 cases were reported there yesterday, and officials have been enforcing a ban on intercity travel except for special purposes.

One city in the province, Yuzhou, was also placed under lockdown after the discovery of three asymptomatic cases. Since then, case numbers have been ticking up, with 55 reported by yesterday afternoon.

Only emergency vehicles are allowed on the roads, classes have been suspended and businesses catering to the public have closed for all but essential needs in the city of 1.17 million.

Several other cities in the province have ordered mass testing and shut public venues, despite only small numbers of cases being detected.

In neighboring Shanxi province, the city of Yongji and its population of almost 500,000 was placed under lockdown after traces of coronavirus were detected at an exit point at the local train station. **MDT/AP**

HONG KONG

Carrie Lam disappointed over officials' large party

HONG Kong leader Carrie Lam said yesterday she was disappointed that nine government officials attended a large birthday party that has sparked fears of a new omicron cluster after a guest tested positive for the coronavirus.

At least one official who was a guest, Secretary of Home Affairs Caspar Tsui, will be quarantined at a government facility after being designated a close contact of the COVID-19 patient.

Lam said authorities are still investigating if the eight other officials will be classi-

fied as close contacts.

"I must say I am disappointed. We have been mounting an all-out effort in fighting the epidemic," Lam said. "As top government officials, there is all the more reason for us to set a good example and avoid attending private gatherings that may pose a major hazard."

Over the past week, Hong Kong has locked down multiple residential buildings and tested thousands after omicron clusters emerged in the city, many linked to several Cathay Pacific crew members who had broken

isolation rules and dined at restaurants and bars before testing positive for the omicron variant.

Local media, including the South China Morning Post, reported that the party was held at a restaurant on Jan 3. for Witman Hung, principal liaison officer for Hong Kong at the Shenzhen Qianhai Authority, which oversees economic development between Hong Kong and the Greater Bay Area.

Other officials present at the party included Hong Kong police chief Raymond Siu, according to Lam. **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



EXPLAINER

What's behind unrest rocking oil-rich Kazakhstan

KAZAKHSTAN is experiencing the worst street protests the country has seen since gaining independence three decades ago.

The outburst of instability is causing significant concern in Kazakhstan's two powerful neighbors: Russia and China. The country sells most of its oil exports to China and is a key strategic ally of Moscow.

A sudden spike in the price of car fuel at the start of the year triggered the first protests in a remote oil town in the west. But the tens of thousands who have since surged onto the streets across more than a dozen cities and towns now have the entire authoritarian government in their sights.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has cut an increasingly desperate figure. He first sought to mollify the crowds by dismissing the entire government Wednesday. But by the end of the day he had changed tack. First, he described demonstrators as terrorists. Then he appealed to a Russian-led military alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, for help in crushing the uprising and the CSTO agreed to send an unspecified number of peacekeepers.

WHY ARE PEOPLE ANGRY?

Of the five Central Asian republics that gained independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan is by far the largest and the wealthiest. It spans a territory the size of Western Europe and sits atop colossal reserves of oil, natural gas, uranium and precious metals.

But while Kazakhstan's natural riches have helped it cultivate a solid middle class, as well as a substantial cohort of ultrarich tycoons, financial hardship is widespread. The average national monthly salary is just under \$600. The banking system has fallen prey to deep crises precipitated by non-performing loans. As in much of the rest of the region, petty corruption is rampant.



Smoke rises from the city hall building during a protest in Almaty

The rally that set off the latest crisis took place in the dusty western oil town of Zhanaozen. Resentments have long festered in the area over a sense that the region's energy riches haven't been fairly spread among the local population. In 2011, police shot dead at least 15 people in the city who were protesting in support of oil workers dismissed after a strike.

When prices for the liquified petroleum gas most people in the area use to power their cars doubled overnight Saturday, patience snapped. Residents in nearby cities quickly joined in and within days large protests had spread to the rest of the country.

WHO IS LEADING THE PROTESTS?

The suppression of critical voices in Kazakhstan has long been the norm. Any figures aspiring to oppose the government have either been repressed, sidelined, or co-opted. So although these demonstrations have been unusually large — some drawing more than 10,000 people, a large number for Kazakhstan — no protest movement leaders have emerged.

For most of Kazakhstan's recent history power was held in the hands of former President Nursultan Nazarbayev. That changed in 2019 when Nazarbayev, now 81, stepped aside and anointed his long-time ally Tokayev as his successor. In his capacity as head of the security council that oversees the military and security services, Nazarbayev continued

to retain considerable sway over the country. Tokayev announced Wednesday that he was taking over from Nazarbayev as security council head.

Much of the anger displayed on the streets in recent days was directed not at Tokayev, but at Nazarbayev, who is still widely deemed the country's ultimate ruler. The slogan "Shal ket!" ("Old man go") has become a main slogan.

HOW ARE AUTHORITIES RESPONDING?

A police official in Almaty said yesterday that dozens of protesters were killed in attacks on government buildings. At least a dozen police officers were also killed, including one who got beheaded.

There were attempts to storm buildings in Almaty during the night and "dozens of attackers were liquidated," police spokeswoman Saltanat Azirbek said. She spoke on state news channel Khabar-24. The reported attempts to storm the buildings came after widespread unrest in the city on Wednesday, including seizure of the mayor's building, which was set on fire.

The initial reaction was in keeping with usual policy in the face of public discontent. Police and the National Guard were deployed in large numbers. The crowd that made its way to City Hall in the commercial capital, Almaty, early Wednesday was met by large phalanxes of riot police and armored personnel carriers. While gatherings are nor-

mally dispersed with ease, the number of people on the street this time was too large.

With government buildings coming under assault in several large cities, Tokayev appealed for help from the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Moscow-led military alliance. He justified the appeal for external intervention by claiming the protesters were operating at the behest of international terrorist groups. He offered no details on what he meant by that.

IS THE GOVERNMENT LIKELY TO BE TOPPLED?

This is uncharted territory for Kazakhstan. The country has seen major demonstrations before: In 2016, after the passage of a contentious land law. And again in 2019, after the contentious election that secured Tokayev's hold on power. But never anything on this scale.

In one of his appeals to the public Wednesday, Tokayev pledged to pursue reforms and hinted that political liberalization might be possible. His darker remarks toward the end of the day, however, suggested he would instead go down a more repressive road.

Still, because the street protests are so lacking in focus, at least for now, it's difficult to see how they might end. But even if they fail to topple the government, it looks possible they might lead to deep transformation. What is not clear is what that might mean. MDT/AP

this day in history

1990 LEANING TOWER OF PISA CLOSED TO PUBLIC



The Leaning Tower of Pisa has been closed to the public for the first time in 800 years amid speculation the structure is on the verge of toppling over.

Over the past 100 years the belfry at the top of the mediaeval tower has moved 9.6 inches (nearly a quarter of a metre).

The tilt is currently 16ft (4.9m) off the perpendicular and increases by about one-twelfth of an inch (2mm) every year because the layer of clay and sand on which it is built is softer on the south side than on the north.

So, the Italian government has set aside 100bn lire (€47m) and appointed an international team of experts to come up with a detailed plan within three months to save the building from collapse.

The 13th century monument, which took more than 200 years to build, attracts in excess of one million visitors each year, many of whom climb to the top to enjoy the panoramic view of Pisa.

The tower's closure is therefore bound to have a significant impact on the city's tourism industry.

The eight-storey structure began tilting almost immediately after it was completed in 1350 and although there are no plans to completely straighten it, experts believe urgent work is required to reverse the tilt.

Attempts have been made in the past to stop the building moving. Mediaeval builders tried to correct the tilt but their efforts resulted in the upper section of the tower leaning at a different angle to the lower section.

The Leaning Tower's ornate and unique exterior balconies were built to enable local dignitaries to be seen by the populace during religious processions in the Middle Ages.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

The Leaning Tower of Pisa did not reopen until 2001. The first stages of the restoration project began in 1992 and by 1993 the tower had stopped leaning. However, in September 1995, the mediaeval monument suddenly lurched 2.5mm (0.09in) in one night - about 10% of the lean that the commission had corrected since 1990.

To prevent this happening again the structure was held up by two steel supports while the stabilising work was completed.

Engineers then placed lead weights on the north side of the tower, and removed tonnes of soil from underneath the building using corkscrew drills - the tower then gradually sunk into the cavity.

By 2001 the lean had been corrected by 45cm at a cost of £200m. But it is predicted that in 300 years the tower will be back at the angle it was in 1990 and on the brink of collapse.

British engineer, Professor John Burland, who oversaw the restoration work said it was hard to explain how the tower had not fallen prior to its closure in 1990. Computer models suggested it should have toppled once it reached a tilt of 5.44 degrees - but by 1990 it was leaning by 5.5 degrees.

YOUR STARS



ARIES

Mar. 21-Apr. 19

If you're feeling uncertain, spend some time alone and reevaluate your motives as well as your needs. You need more time to think this whole situation through.



TAURUS

Apr. 20-May. 20

You should get into programs that will enhance your appearance and help you to be the best that you can. You can continue to make gains if you call a few people who can help you close an important deal.



GEMINI

May. 21-Jun. 21

Resistance leading to conflict will only make it twice as hard to turn the situation around. You can get a great deal accomplished if you bring work home.



CANCER

Jun. 22-Jul. 22

You can dazzle members of the opposite sex with your quick wit and aggressive charm. You will have the perfect chance to make yourself known to that special someone.



LEO

Jul. 23-Aug. 22

You can enhance your reputation by making contributions to worthwhile causes. Make arrangements to spend quality time together. You can bet that situations will get out of hand if you allow others to interfere.



VIRGO

Aug. 23-Sep. 22

Finish overdue paperwork and catch up on letter writing and reading. You may need help with your financial situation. It might be best to keep your ideas to yourself today.



LIBRA

Sep. 23-Oct. 22

Don't neglect these problems; deal with them once and for all, then move on to more pleasurable tasks. You can make new friends and experience new things if you do a bit of traveling.



SCORPIO

Oct. 23-Nov. 21

You can make money through your creative efforts. Wait and get all the information before consulting your boss. Don't spend too much in order to impress others.



SAGITTARIUS

Nov. 22-Dec. 21

Be honest in your communication and don't lose your cool if someone backs you into a corner. You can expand your circle of friends if you get out and socialize.



CAPRICORN

Dec. 22-Jan. 19

Don't volunteer private information about yourself unless you're prepared to be talked about behind your back. Unreliable people will be negative about your ideas.



AQUARIUS

Jan. 20-Feb. 18

You may want to put everyone to work on a project that will keep them all too busy to complain. Difficulties with your mate may lead to estrangement.



PISCES

Feb. 19-Mar. 20

You will be drawn to individuals who can provide you with both intellectual conversation and physical passion. Your colorful conversation may attract new mates.

The Born Loser by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

EASY

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

EASY+

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

MEDIUM

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

HARD

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

WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	-7	5	fine
Harbin	-18	-4	fine
Tianjin	4	8	rain
Urumqi	6	9	rain
Xi'an	-5	4	fine
Lhasa	6	15	cloudy
Chengdu	7	10	rain
Chongqing	3	6	rain
Kunming	17	20	cloudy
Nanjing	5	9	cloudy
Shanghai	4	10	overcast
Wuhan	-22	-9	fine
Hangzhou	0	9	cloudy
Taipei	-9	1	fine
Guangzhou	11	21	cloudy
Hong Kong	19	16	overcast

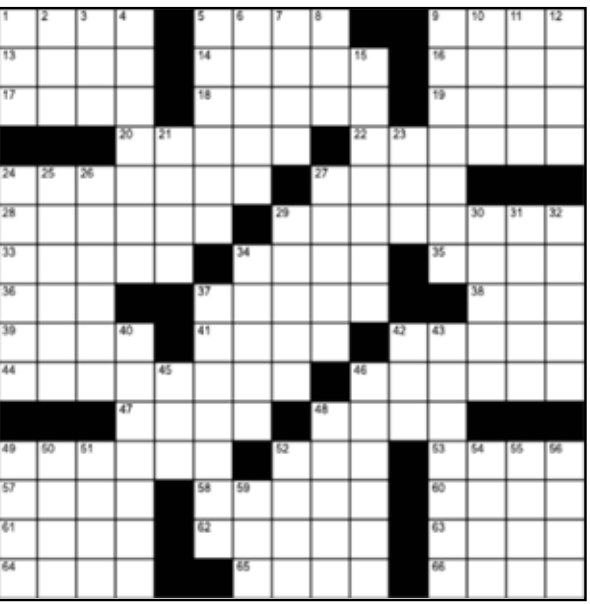
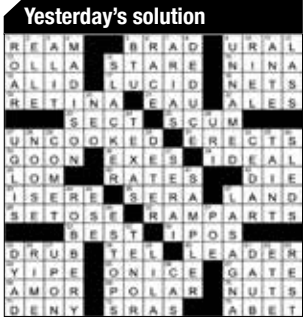
WORLD

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
Moscow	-2	-11	snow
Frankfurt	3	0	rain
Paris	4	8	rain
London	7	12	rain
New York	2	6	rain

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Pack firmly; 5- Pluto's tail?; 9- Toll road; 13- Ashtabula's lake; 14- Ruin; 16- Medical suffix; 17- Immediately following; 18- More aloof; 19- Mickey's creator; 20- Domesticates; 22- Brought to ruin; 24- Sailor; 27- Ceremonial act; 28- Happenings; 29- Champignon; 33- Hint; 34- Cut-price retail event; 35- Dextrous, lively; 36- Far out!; 37- Sleek swimmer; 38- Make lace; 39- Single, individual unit; 41- Exploit; 42- Aggregate of qualities that make good character; 44- Sacred observance; 46- Closer; 47- Prefix with -drome; 48- Delhi wrap; 49- To-do list; 52- Tachometer abbr.; 53- Sci-fi princess; 57- Sites; 58- Currency unit in Nigeria; 60- Commendably; 61- Pull down; 62- Rare delight; 63- Smell ____; 64- Garden pest; 65- Literary collection; Abbr.; 66- It's used to walk the dog;

DOWN 1- Sawbuck; 2- Modern art?; 3- Blend; 4- Necking; 5- Rings bells; 6- One on track?; 7- Budget rival; 8- Foot digit; 9- Like talc or volcanic ash; 10- Golfer Aoki; 11- Potter's oven; 12- Ferrara family; 15- Warship; 21- Poker payment; 23- Advanced degree?; 24- Type of ton; 25- Fly; 26- Pay as due; 27- Governed; 29- British buddy; 30- Western; 31- Emulate Cicero; 32- Unit just above a yard; 34- Pad user; 37- Something smelly; 40- Expressive; 42- ____ Lingus; 43- Railroad; 45- Kind of school; 46- Super Bowl III MVP; 48- Herring type; 49- Draft picks; 50- Score; 51- Beige; 52- Nothing, in Nice; 54- Architect Saarinen; 55- Now ____ me down...; 56- Choir member; 59- First name in Notre Dame football;



Crossword puzzles provided by BestCrosswords.com

USEFUL TELEPHONE NUMBERS

Emergency calls 999	Taxi 28 939 939 / 2828 3283
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	
Commission Against Corruption (CCAC) 28326 300	
IAM 28 387 333	
Tourism 28 333 000	
Airport 59 888 88	



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Ref: 2005 6001
HKD 15,750,000
2,305 ft² 3 2 2

Rain Dance Property
"We dance until it's SOLD!"
Hellene Gardens
Ref: 2109 6001
HKD 7,680,000
1,663 ft² 3 2 1

DRIVE IN

A SPIDEY SENSE OVERDOSE IN 'NO WAY HOME'

JAKE COYLE, MDT/AP
FILM WRITER

SPIDER-MAN movies have come in such flurries over the last two decades that you could almost tell time by them. Who needs the long centuries of the Triassic, Jurassic and the Cretaceous, when, in the span of just one generation you can have the Tobey epoch, the Garfield era and the Tomozoic?

The franchise's constant (and contractual) regenerative velocity has by now become a familiar punchline. But in "Spider-Man: No Way Home," the distinct, if cluttered, time zones of Marvel's webslinger overlap and collide in ways that are often entertaining and likely to be satisfying to fans, even if they still lack quite the Spidey sense tingle they're designed to provide an overdose of. This movie is like two Spider-Man jabs and a booster all in one. In its retrospective sweep and supergroup construction, "No Way Home" is Spidey's own "Endgame."



Tom Holland (left) and Benedict Cumberbatch in Columbia Pictures' "Spider-Man: No Way Home" (Sony Pictures via AP)

That also means it comes with plenty of twists that, if you don't want spoiled, you really ought to see the movie before reading reviews like this one. The clever reveals and appearances of "No Way Home" are so much a part of its fabric

that it's difficult to consider the movie without referencing some of them. In a message before the film, Jamie Foxx (who played the villain Electro in "The Amazing Spider-Man 2") warns of revealing spoilers before it's pointed out that he,

himself, is a spoiler.

Jon Watts' "No Way Home" begins as its two previous installments, also directed by Watts, did: with the breezy high-school vibe that has characterized Tom Holland's reign as Spider-Man. It's been a chapter defined by Holland's wholesome charm. He's a pleasant, if somewhat vanilla Spider-Man, who has sometimes seemed most suited to the role offscreen, as student to Robert Downey Jr. and in his genial, goofy media appearances. But Holland's earnest, easy manner has also lightened the sometimes heavy load of Marvel movies, and his mostly winning albeit easily forgotten Spider-Man films have been refreshingly unencumbered by the larger franchise's exposition-leaden, interconnected apparatus.

"No Way Home" picks up precisely where 2019's "Far From Home" left off: Outside New York's Penn Station, where Jake Gyllenhaal's Mysterio revealed Peter Parker's identity just before perishing. The new notoriety brings news helicopters hovering over Peter's apartment and disrupts his previously clandestine relationship with girlfriend MJ (Zendaya) and best pal Ned (Jacob Batalon). They are on the cusp of getting into MIT (Paula Newsome is especially good as a college admissions officer), but Mysterio has made Peter a divisive figure. Our stay in Midtown High School,

where Peter is mobbed, is brief — too brief, considering the teaching staff includes JB Smoove, Hannibal Buress and Martin Starr.

Wanting his old anonymity back, Peter turns to Benedict Cumberbatch's Doctor Strange, who summons an amnesia spell that goes awry. Instead of wiping the memory of those who know Spider-Man's secret, it conjures villains from Spider-mans past, opening portals between parallel universes — which in this case means between movies. Electro, Green Goblin (Willem Dafoe), Doctor Octopus (Alfred Molina), Sandman (Thomas Haden Church) and Lizard (Rhys Ifans) tumble forth like dazed travelers who took a wrong turn at Albuquerque.

By opening pathways of connection between the Spider-Man films, "No Way Home" binds together a much-remade fictional universe with a new spirit of cohesion and a warm bath of fan service. If we are stepping between movies, it's tempting to want some of the portals to lead into other films — to Cumberbatch's character in "The Power of the Dog" or Andrew Garfield in "Tick, Tick ... Boom!" Or better yet, Dafoe's mad wickie in "The Lighthouse." Now that would be meta.

Really, it was the Chris Miller and Phil Lord-produced "Into the Spider-verse" that opened this gateway by riffing metaphysically with the webslinger. "No Way

Home" adopts some of that comic energy but doesn't have the same whip-smart, freewheeling uninhibitedness. If "Spider-verse" was about how anyone can be Spider-Man, "No Way Home" is a more authorized Spider-Man compendium; its tone leans more operatic than antic. Still, Watts has a human touch that can be lacking in superhero films, and nearly all of the actors who appear in "No Way Home" come across as individuals despite the high-concept narrative.

It also offers a more direct compare and contrast between our three Spider-Men, each a variant of the same theme. The Sam Raimi films, with Tobey Maguire — or at least the first two — are still top of the class. But while Garfield's pair of movies are probably the easiest to dismiss, it's his appearance here that's the most potent. Not because he's at home as Spider-Man but because he isn't. Now seven years older and doing some of the best work of his life, a more mature Garfield exudes something that doesn't enter into this ever-recycling, short-term-memory franchise — that there is life after Spider-Man.

"Spider-Man: No Way Home," a Columbia Pictures release, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association of America for sequences of action/violence, some language and brief suggestive comments. Running time: 150 minutes. ★★★★★

AD



MDT REVIEW

Chaa Caffeine & Treats keeping up with coffee trends with croffles and matcha

LYNZY VALLES

THE power of social media, along with the evolving coffee culture trends among millennials, have inspired new businesses adapting to these changes in consumer behavior and preferences.

Located in the historical Rua das Estalagens, a recently opened café is now serving specialty coffee and matcha to keep up with trends in millennial café culture. Chaa Caffeine & Treats is serving out-of-the-ordinary dishes and drinks for its young target market in a humble space accented with colors of green and

cream. Speaking to the Times, young entrepreneur Hugo Lo said: "Now it's important for youngsters to be able to sit down, enjoy the drink, and feel relaxed. It wasn't this case 10 years ago."

Maximizing the power of social media, the brand promotes itself both on Instagram and Facebook, as its target market are regular users of these social media platforms. "The generations X, Y, and Z are always striving to improve and become better than before. If you really want to stand out from the crowd, then you need to bring out new ideas," said Tiffany Law, Lo's business partner.

"We are also discovering and experimenting with other drinks that have not yet been seen before," she added. The café serves both savory and sweet croffles, which are a mashup of croissants and waffles – a dish that is uncommon in the small city.

The "Big Breakfast" is recommended as its features croffles, mushrooms, tomato, scrambled egg, sausages and mixed greens. For the sweet tooth, "Chaffle" is the chef's recommendation – featuring charcoal croffles, matcha, mascarpone and white chocolate chips. Lo recommends guests try these dishes with

their signature hand-whisked "Creamy Matcha" and "Creamy HoujiChaa" drinks.

The local brand sources their products from a known matcha producer in Malaysia, and its coffee products are locally sourced from Lotus Café. Lo believes that opening the café amid the economic crisis triggered by the global pandemic was just the right decision. Although borders remain partially closed and the café cannot cater to a larger market, the young entrepreneur believes that it is a good time to "promote local brands, with the aim of bringing it to China."



INGREDIENTS

Any kind of beef
Flour tortilla
Green Chili
Red Capsicum
Coriander
Parsley
Salt & Pepper
Olive Oil
Limes



KNOW HOW

Season, sear steak & slice
Blend chili, coriander, parsley
Add lime for acidity
Roast Capsicums and slice
Heat or grill tortilla
Assemble



RECIPES

www.eighty8s.com



BY ALEX TORRÃO
MDT

OPINION

Editorial

Paulo Coutinho



NO ROOM TO GET

Residents who went abroad – mostly to visit their family in their countries of origin for Christmas and New Year's celebrations – and booked their flights back to Macau in the coming two weeks received the news with a shock. I'm talking about, you guessed it, the halting of flights to Macau from any country in the world. I mean originating from all other countries in the world, needless to say, because this tiny-shiny piece of land is China.

I was shocked too – as I was editing yesterday's edition and looking delightfully at the Cebu Pacific Air announcement that their Macau-Manila flights would resume from February! I was already imagining a week of sunshine on the shores of a southerner South China Sea island. Well, that is if the Philippines wouldn't impose quarantine on arrival, and if Macau had reduced quarantine to 7+7 days; and if, meanwhile, there were no more Omicron "outbreaks" of imported cases in quarantine.

Too many ifs that were dashed in a matter of hours when the Macau health authorities announced in a statement Wednesday night a two-week ban on flights from "countries and regions outside the mainland China from January 9 to January 23."

The move is to deter the spread of Covid-19 variants, the Novel Coronavirus Response and Coordination Centre said.

The move followed a Hong Kong announcement of a two-week ban on flights from the United States and seven other countries: eight countries, not all.

There is a pattern here that by now we should have learned to detect in a blink: when it rains in Hong Kong, it pours in Macau. The stock market players, they know better, reacted immediately to the government news in the neighboring SAR, bearish on the Big Six gaming chips by up to 7 percentage points at the closing bell Wednesday.

However, stocks move digitally on a screen, all orders directed from home to the pit. Something a common person can take some control – with more or less risk and success.

What we cannot control is the virus, variants, and SAR governments' decisions that insist on a zero-tolerance policy when all over the world they are doing otherwise. They follow the lead from Beijing, but mainland China has other concerns and has different problems to deal with.

This is not one-size-fits-all decision-making. The SARs should have autonomy, and we formally have, in health policies.

On top of the latest news, quarantine hotel rooms are fully booked till the end of January, which is also preventing residents from coming and getting a room to quarantine with enough time to celebrate the upcoming Chinese New Year with family and relatives.

One thing I grant the local government and even HK's: people here and over there are apathetic and reluctant to get Covid vaccinations, and that, my friends, is a real drag for us all – more isolated than ever from the world.

I'm no Macron, but, "The unvaccinated, I really want to [piss off] them. And so we will continue doing so, to the end."

AUSTRALIA, JAPAN SIGN DEFENSE PACT AS CHINA CONCERNS LOOM

The leaders of Japan and Australia signed a "landmark" defense agreement yesterday that allows closer cooperation between their militaries and stands as a rebuke to China's growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida met in a virtual summit to sign the Reciprocal Access Agreement, the first such defense pact signed by Japan with any country other than the United States.

The agreement follows more than a year of talks between Japan and Australia aimed at breaking down legal barriers to allow the troops of one country to enter the other for training and other

purposes.

"Japan is our closest partner in Asia as demonstrated by our special strategic partnership — Australia's only such partnership," Morrison said. "An equal partnership, shared trust between two great democracies committed to the rule of law, human rights, free trade and a free and open Indo-Pacific."

Kishida hailed the agreement as "a landmark instrument which will elevate security cooperation between the nations to new heights."

While China wasn't mentioned, its significance at the signing was implicit.

AP PHOTO



A Long March-2F Y12 carrying a crew of Chinese astronauts in a Shenzhou-12 spaceship lifts off at the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in June

CHINA PLANS SPACE STATION COMPLETION, MANY LAUNCHES IN 2022

CHINA has recommitted itself to completing its orbiting space station by the end of the year and says it is planning more than 40 launches for 2022, putting it roughly level with the United States.

Launches would include those of two Shenzhou crewed missions, two Tianzhou cargo spacecraft and the station's additional two modules, the official Xinhua News Agency reported yesterday, citing a recent announcement by the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation known as CASC.

Named Mengtian and Wentian, the science modules will join the Tianhe core module that is currently home to a three-person crew.

The launch schedule shows how China's traditionally cautious program is increasing the cadence of its missions as it seeks to take a leading role in space exploration.

The U.S. expects around the same number of launches this year, after the pace slowed in 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Supply chains for crucial items such as computer chips were disrupted and liquid oxygen used as rocket fuel had to

be diverted to hospitals to save patients.

Among the most anticipated is the launch expected around March of the Space Launch System — a 1,010-meter-tall rocket slated for future lunar missions.

China's military-run space program was barred from the International Space Station, mainly due to U.S. objections.

Working largely on its own, China has pushed ahead with its Tiangong space station program, building and then abandoning two experimental stations before embarking on the latest iteration.

The current six-month mission Shenzhou-13 by the crew aboard Tianhe is China's longest since it first put a human in space in 2003, becoming only the third country to do so after Russia and the U.S.

The crew has conducted a pair of spacewalks — including the first by a Chinese female astronaut — and carried out tests alongside the station's robotic service arm, which yesterday successfully undocked then redocked the Tianzhou-2 cargo spacecraft for the first time.

The three are the se-

cond crew on the permanent station, which upon completion will weigh about 66 tons, about a quarter the size of the ISS, which launched its first module in 1998 and weighs around 450 tons.

China has also chalked up success with uncrewed missions, and its lunar exploration program generated media buzz last year when its Yutu 2 rover sent back pictures of what was described by some as a "mystery hut" but was most likely only a rock of some sort.

The rover is the first to be placed on the little-explored far side of the moon. China's Chang'e 5 probe returned lunar rocks to Earth for the first time since the 1970s in December 2000 and another Chinese rover is searching for evidence of life on Mars.

The program has also drawn controversy. In October, China's Foreign Ministry brushed off a report that China had tested a hypersonic missile two months earlier, saying it had merely tested whether a new spacecraft could be reused.

China is also reportedly developing a highly secretive space plane. **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



Philippines reported 17,220 new infections yesterday, up sharply from 10,775 a day earlier, the Department of Health said, bringing total confirmed cases in the country to 2,888,917. The test positivity rate also rose to a record 36.9%, up from 31.7% on Wednesday, the department's data showed. That means more than 1 in 3 people tested that day were infected, after the rate spiked from below 1% just two weeks ago.

India A toxic gas leak from an industrial tanker truck killed at least six people yesterday, police said. Another 25 people were hospitalized after they inhaled the gas in an industrial complex in Surat, a city in Gujarat state, said police officer Mahesh Patel. The gas leak occurred while the driver was trying to dump some waste in a drain from the parked tanker.

Israel A deputy minister was under fire yesterday for calling residents of an unauthorized West Bank settlement outpost "subhuman," sparking an outcry that underscored the fragility of Israel's ideologically diverse coalition. Yair Golan, a former deputy military chief and a member of the dovish Meretz party, has previously prompted a backlash for comments appearing to liken the atmosphere in Israel to that of Nazi-era Germany.

AP PHOTO



Vatican Christians around the world yesterday marked Epiphany, known as Three Kings Day for Catholics and the Baptism of Christ for the Orthodox, with a series of celebrations. Pope Francis used a Mass at St. Peter's Basilica to decry consumerism, parades were held in Spain the night before, and Orthodox believers watched swimmers plunge into icy waters despite the pandemic to retrieve crosses.