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17 May 2022

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MOP 8.00 HKD 10.00 2305 4271

AL COMMITTEE WILL INVITE RESPONSES FROM THE GOV'T REGARDING A PETITION ON THE SCRUTINY OF OLD TREES PROTECTION SUBMITTED BY NEW MACAU

GAMING LAW: MANDATORY CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIAL FUNDS MIGHT BE WAIVED

CHINA'S ECONOMY REVIVING AS ANTI-VIRUS CURBS EASE: OFFICIAL



Sweden's prime minister announced yesterday that Sweden will join Finland in seeking NATO membership in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The historic shift, which comes after more than 200 years of military nonalignment in the Nordic country, is likely to upset Russian President Vladimir Putin. "We will inform NATO that we want to become a member of the alliance," Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson (pictured) said. More on p8



Indonesia A tourist bus with an apparently drowsy driver slammed into a billboard yesterday on a highway on Indonesia's main island of Java, killing at least 14 people and injuring 19 others, police said. The bus, carrying Indonesian tourists from Surabaya, the capital of East Java province, was returning from a trip to Central Java's Dieng Plateau, a popular mountain resort, when it hit the billboard on the Mojokerto toll road just after dawn.



New Zealand's government said yesterday it will help pay for lower-income families to scrap their old gas guzzlers and replace them with cleaner hybrid or electric cars as part of a sweeping plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The government said it plans to spend 569 million New Zealand dollars on the trial program as part of a larger plan that includes subsidies for businesses to reduce emissions, a switch to an entirely green bus fleet by 2035 and curbside food-waste collection for most homes by the end of the decade.

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GAMING

GOV'T U-TURN ON SATELLITE CASINOS TO PARTICULARLY BENEFIT SJM

LYNZY VALLES

SJM Holdings Ltd. shares rose to as much as 9.7% yesterday following the government reversing its decision on the gaming law amendment that all casinos would mandatorily be located in venues owned by the concessionaires.

According to data from the Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau (DICJ), 18 satellite casinos are operating under the SJM Holdings license. However, these figures do not include the three that were rumored to close in this month, including Casino Golden Dragon, Royal Dragon and Casino Million Dragon.

As cited in Dow Jones Institutional News, SJM rose as much as 9.7% before paring its gains to 5.8% at HKD3.26.

The stock is down about 38% this year and 62% over the past 12 months.

Melco International Development Ltd. added 3.37% in yesterday's trade at the Hong Kong Stock Exchange, while Wynn Macau Ltd. and Galaxy



Satellite casino running under SJM Holdings license

Entertainment Group Ltd. gained 0.5% and 0.6% respectively. MGM China slightly gained 0.24%, while Sands China Ltd. slid by 0.5%.

Investment bank analysts have

said that the U-turn of the government would particularly benefit SJM, as it has ties to the majority of the city's 40 satellite casinos.

"The proposed changes directed towards satellite casinos

should alleviate investors' concerns on SJM's potential shouldering of the significant staff costs at the satellite casinos," Citi analysts said in a research note.

"More important, the changes should clear up the last hurdle for refinancing."

On Friday, casino stocks in the U.S. trading market rallied following the SAR government's announcement that it is considering lowering the gross gaming revenue (GGR) taxes by up to 5% if casinos are able to bring players from outside China.

This consideration comes long after China's enactment of Article 303 of the Mainland's Criminal Law, which the parliamentary committee considers may affect the source of tourists from the mainland. Hence, there is a need to attract a different source market.

For the investment bank, this is "good news for all concessionaires."

Macau's gaming sector is in turmoil as the city has been experiencing drought in the tourism sector given the border measures being implemented as the neighboring regions have recorded fresh Covid-19 outbreaks.

The GGR dropped steeply to MOP2.68 billion in April, the lowest figure recorded since September 2020.

Last month's revenue is 68.1% lower year-on-year and 27.1% lower than in March, and only equating about 11% of pre-pandemic figures for the same month.

CRIME

Mother apprehended after allegedly abandoning baby

ANTHONY LAM

THE Judiciary Police (PJ) announced yesterday that the mother who allegedly abandoned her newborn infant on Saturday afternoon had been arrested.

The police reported that the mother is a local resident of age 29 years. She told the police that she is unemployed. She was arrested when she entered Macau through the Border Gate on Sunday.

The PJ added that the baby had been transported to the public hospital for an immediate medical check-up and has so far been in a stable condition. The baby boy weighs 2.5 kilograms and appears to

be 24 hours old.

It was revealed on Sunday afternoon that the PJ had been notified about the discovery of a baby, which had allegedly been abandoned next to a trash bin near the Border Gate.

Reports arrived at the PJ at 8:31 p.m. on Saturday from the Fire Services Bureau and the Public Security Police Force.

The police also disclosed that at about 8 p.m. on Saturday, a cleaner found the baby boy, wrapped in a towel, in a box next to a trash bin near the shopping area at the Border Gate District.

The police requested footage from surveillance cameras nearby, and found video evidence of



the mother dropping the baby by the dumpster. She stood briefly next to the bin before heading to the mainland right afterwards.

Her confession to the

police revealed that she had given birth to the infant on Saturday noontime in her own room. After a rest, she disposed of the bloody materials and brought the baby to the

Border Gate on foot.

The reason that she abandoned the infant was that he is not the child of her current boyfriend. She feared that the boyfriend might leave her after learn-

ing the truth. Moreover, she is not in a financial position to be able to raise the baby.

The police are now in search of the birth father of the baby.

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RENATO MARQUES



GAMING LAW

Proposed bill steps back to current law in force

RENATO MARQUES

THE government has decided to abandon the idea to promote major changes to the new gaming law concerning the gaming concessionaires' ownership, the amended version of the bill in analysis at the Second Standing Committee of the Legislative Assembly (AL) indicates.

According to the president of the Committee, lawmaker Chan

Chak Mo, edits made to Number 11 of Article 17 carry a significant change, which, in general terms makes the new law step back to the current law in force.

In the first draft of the bill, the Number 11 stated, "Concessionaires, as well as shareholders with an amount equal to or greater than 5% of their share capital, cannot be directly or indirectly owners of any share capital of another gaming concessionaire for the operation of casinos in

Macau Special Administrative Region". This has now been changed to "... cannot be directly or indirectly owners of a share capital equal to or greater than 5% of another gaming concessionaire..."

If the first draft rule was maintained, it would have had severe implications for ownership of the concessionaires, particularly some of those currently operating. It is known, for instance, that Galaxy Entertainment Group

holds a 4.9% stake at Wynn acquired directly from Steve Wynn back in 2018.

Similarly, co-chairperson and executive director of gaming operator MGM China Holdings Ltd (MGM), Pansy Ho is one of the highlighted figures holding a significant percentage of stakes in two operators, MGM and Sociedade de Jogos de Macau (SJM).

However, there are many others with smaller stakes who would have to make difficult decisions if the rule of the non-participation in any other concessionaire was still standing.

Questioned by the media, Chan said that this change to the bill, contrary to others, did not come from a direct suggestion or opinion from the committee members but instead resulted from "the discussion on the bill in which concerns were raised among the intervenient."

He added that the government had initially justified the rule by the ensuring that there would be fair competition between all concessionaires, as it was feared that if stakeholders had stakes in

other concessionaires, this could lead to a potential cartel position in which several concessionaires owned by the same people could play alongside to protect their own interests.

Also questioned on why the government decided to step back and withdraw this rule, Chan said that the committee should ask the government since yesterday's meeting was only dedicated to an internal discussion among the committee, and did not count on the presence of government representatives.

During the post-meeting media briefing, Chan also noted that the meeting was held after a technical meeting between the legal advisors of both the AL and the government.

A new round of technical and committee meetings has been scheduled to take place today when the committee will advance to analysis of changes and amendments made on the second version of the bill, starting from Article 23 onwards. The new gaming law is composed of a total of 48 Articles.

CASINOS' MANDATORY CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIAL FUNDS MIGHT BE WAIVED

THE rules mandating that gaming concessionaires must contribute annually with fixed percentages from their annual gross gaming revenues to the Macao Foundation (2%) as well as 3% for urban development, tourism promotion, and social security have also suffered changes in the new version of the new gaming bill, president of the Second Standing Committee of the Legislative Assembly (AL), lawmaker Chan Chak Mo noted.

According to Chan, the new version presented by the government includes a line stating that considering the public interests, the Chief Executive (CE) can waive these contributions, partially or fully.

The addition is certainly a polemic one as during the first round of analysis of the bill, several lawmakers were calling for an increase of these percentages, as well as the creation of a new fund dedicated to increasing workers' guarantees in the event of dismissal and other situations.

To the media during yesterday's press briefing,

Chan said that the government has not yet provided an explanation for this new inclusion, and that the committee will seek an explanation in the next meeting with the government representatives.

On the line are the special contributions already in force in the current law, outlining the use of such funds for the promotion, development, and study of cultural, social, economic, educational, scientific, academic, and philanthropic activities, as well as for urban development, tourism promotion, and social security.

Another possibility now in the hands of the CE is the potential reduction of the minimum ceiling of receipt amount to be generated by each gaming table or machine.

According to Chan, an exception has now been added to the regulation, allowing "in special cases" the reduction of this amount, taking into account economic factors such as a pandemic or other non-forecastable events that would have a direct impact on the industry. **RM**

CLOSED SATELLITE CASINOS CANNOT BE REOPENED IN THIS CONCESSION TERM

SEVERAL small casinos operating under the so-called satellite casino system which have ceased operations in the past few weeks, will not be able to reopen within the current concession term, extended up to December 31 this year, lawmaker Chan Chak Mo explained to media inquiries on the matter. According to Chan, it is not clear how the situation will evolve but, to reopen these casinos will need to request a new authorization from the Chief Executive, and pass

through a review process regarding the venue where they are located, something that should be only possible after the new gaming law is approved and in force, he said. As for the possibility of some of them reopening in the future, he hinted that some are located too close to residential areas or other public and social facilities such as schools and, for that reason, even if requests from concessionaire are made, some potentially do not comply with the new regulations.

ANM PETITION TO PARLIAMENT ON OLD TREES AWAITS GOV'T RESPONSES

ANTHONY LAM

A parliamentary committee will invite responses from the government regarding a petition on the scrutiny of old tree protection submitted by a local community group.

On April 4, New Macau Association (ANM) submitted the aforementioned petition letter to the Legislative Assembly (AL) amid the government – mainly the now Land and Urban Construction Bureau (DSSCU) – pushing for the relocation of 10 centennial trees located within an aboriginal village in Taipa.

The trees have grown in two rows, to the height of two to three floors of a residential building.

At the same time, the Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) has provided its opinion that relocation is less than recommended, considering



the size and age of the trees.

In Macau, trees of such age can be included in the Old Tree Catalog and, if so, are under legal protection from jeopardy. When enlisted in the Catalog, trees will also be protected by the Cultural Heritage Protection Law, possessing legal ranking similar to the Ruins of St Paul's and the A-Ma Temple.

The 10 trees are considered

to be within the Catalog.

Following the DSSCU's presentation on its relatively unyielding position in getting the trees relocated and the delayed expression on its position by the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) – the authority overseeing the implementation of the Cultural Heritage Protection, the ANM filed the petition to the parliament.

In the petition, the ANM

called on the parliament to review the implementation of the Cultural Heritage Law, with particular focus on its protection for old trees. The group also questioned the law and the government's position in protecting old trees, as well as the legal positions of old trees.

President Vong Hin Fai, after yesterday's committee meeting, stated that responses will be requested from the IAM and the IC as the authorities handling old trees. After hearing their response, an opinion document will be compiled.

Vong also disclosed that the group had, prior to yesterday's meeting, requested a meeting with the committee. Committee members unanimously decided to decline the request, citing the lack of need as they found "the petition letter clear enough to stand for itself," according to Vong.

HENGQIN AGENCIES CONSIDERING PERMISSION FOR MACAU TEACHERS TO TEACH

CONVENIENT mechanisms to allow Macau teachers to teach in Hengqin are being investigated, Carmen Maria Chung, a legal official for the Guangdong-Macao Intensive Cooperation Zone in Hengqin (the Zone), disclosed.

Chung is the acting director of the Legal Affairs Bureau of the zone.

To explain this, she said the agencies in Hengqin are considering a more convenient process to facilitate the matter. For example, simple registration may be the only requirement for teachers to teach across the river in Hengqin.

She added that more convenient procedures could be feasible.

Nonetheless, she said by simple registration, she did not mean that teachers eligible to teach in Macau will automatically be eligible to teach in Hengqin. Criteria must be met so that they will be eligible to teach across the river.

As for medical staff, she disclosed that the bill on allowing Macau medical personnel to practice medical services in Hengqin is on Zhuhai's legislative agenda. After the passing of the bill, Macau medical staff will be allowed to offer services in Hengqin after simple registrations.

Furthermore, the permission for Macau medical staff to practice in Hengqin requires provincial support, Chung added. AL

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HK duo arrested for allegedly bribing Wynn Macau executive

ANTHONY LAM

TWO air-conditioning maintenance personnel were charged by a Hong Kong law-enforcement entity May 13 on allegations of offering bribes to a Wynn Resorts (Macau) S.A. executive.

The Hong Kong Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) announced in a press release that an employee and a former director of two air-conditioning maintenance companies, were charged with offering bribes totaling about HKD1.5 million to a former director of the casino concessionaire for air-conditioning maintenance contracts of one of its hotels.

The contract involved around HKD22 million.

The alleged offences took place between June 2014 and January 2017. ICAC inquiries revealed that during the period, Wynn had awarded around 70 air-conditioning maintenance contracts worth around HKD22 million to a company involved, Oh Luen Air-conditioning Equipment Limited.

Both suspects are Hong Kong residents.

According to the ICAC, Li Kin-wang, 58 years old, senior sales manager of Oh Luen, faces seven counts of offering advantage to an agent.

Meanwhile, Li and Woo Tak-



-hoi, 55 years old, then director of Wai Luen Air-conditioning Limited, jointly face two counts of conspiracy to offer advantages to an agent.

Both acts are criminal offences in Hong Kong, according to the ICAC.

The defendants were released on ICAC bail. They will be heard in a court of law this Thursday before the case is transferred to the District Court, the ICAC explained.

At the material time, Oh Luen and Wai Luen were companies respectively established in Macau and Hong Kong for providing air-conditioning installation and maintenance services to customers. Both companies were operated by the same proprietor.

Since 2013, Oh Luen had been an approved supplier of Wynn.

Seven of the charges allege that Li, without lawful authority or reasonable excuse, offered seven bribes totaling over HKD930,000 to a then director of Wynn as an inducement to or reward for the latter to receive and consider quotations or tenders submitted by Oh Luen to Wynn in relation to air-conditioning system maintenance services.

The remaining two charges allege that Li and Woo, without lawful authority or reasonable excuse, conspired together to offer two bribes totaling HKD560,000 to the above then director of Wynn for the same purpose.

The ICAC investigation arose from a corruption complaint.

The relevant corruption investigation is continuing.

After the ICAC thanked the local Commission Against Corruption (CCAC) and Wynn for their full assistance in the investigations, the CCAC disclosed in a statement that it received several corruption complaints about the aforementioned case in November 2018.

In February 2019, the CCAC officially received requests for assistance from the ICAC.

The CCAC added that the Wynn executive mentioned above was also a Hong Kong resident and was hired by Wynn to work in Macau in 2007.

However, the CCAC did not disclose whether the Wynn executive had been arrested.

PROPERTY APPROVED RESIDENTIAL MORTGAGE LOANS REACH MOP2.7B

NEW residential mortgage loans (RMLs) approved by Macau banks rose by 29.7% month-to-month to MOP2.66 billion in March, data from the Monetary Authority of Macao shows.

New RMLs to residents, representing 98.5% of the total, grew by 29.0% to MOP2.62 billion.

Last month, real property agency Centaline observed that prices of local premium residential units have recently experienced a new low.

In the statement, Centaline Property related that a recent transaction concerning a two-bedroom apartment in the Nova Taipa Gardens was concluded with a price tag of HKD6.8 million, which was about 15% short of its pre-Covid price level.

According to the firm, the drop was mainly caused by a loss of purchasing power and confidence due to the lay-off of a significant number of gambling industry workers.

It was also recalled that many local families had been considering purchasing apartments.

They are in the lease market currently and waiting for the best moment to close the deals.

With that said, the forecast was that the average price of residential properties would likely see an increase up to 5%.

Meanwhile, new RMLs collateralised by uncompleted units (i.e. equitable mortgage) fell month-to-month by 25.2% to MOP448.0 million. On an annual basis, new equitable mortgages approved rose by 42.4%. LV

Taiwan's legislative report calls on law changes for Hong Kong and Macau

STAFF REPORTER

TAIWAN'S legislature is calling to protect its national security, citing a need to review its policy in categorizing Hong Kong and Macau as "foreign countries."

In Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau residents are treated as foreigners when investing, working or studying in its region. This is due to the fact that residents from both the SARs are not under the jurisdiction of the Act Governing Relations Between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area.

In the report, the Legislative Yuan's Organic Laws and Statutes Bureau stated that Hong Kong in-



vestors are given more options for investment, and that their applications are approved more easily compared to applications from mainland China, the report stated.

However, it feared that there has been a funda-

mental change in Hong Kong's population dynamics, as 1.25 million mainland China residents have immigrated to Hong Kong in the past 25 years, as cited in a report issued by Taipei Times.

In 2021, the Taiwanese

government received 49 applications from China to invest in Taiwan, a small figure comparing to the 691 applications it received from Hong Kong.

The legislative sees this as an indicator that the Chinese are exploiting a

legal loophole by registering their companies in Hong Kong, according to the report.

The changing population dynamics, along with a shift in Chinese policies toward the governing of Hong Kong and Macau, has created doubts regarding the autonomy these territories have, and the government should reconsider its policies for them, the report stated, as cited in the Taiwanese media outlet.

The legislative also fears the effects of the approved contentious national security law for Hong Kong, that takes direct aim at some of the actions of anti-government protesters back in 2020.



OFFICIAL: CHINA'S ECONOMY REVIVING AS ANTI-VIRUS CURBS EASE

CHINA'S factory and consumer activity fell even more than expected in April under anti-virus controls, official data showed yesterday, but a Cabinet official said the economy is reviving as anti-virus curbs ease and its commercial capital of Shanghai reopens.

The slump in the second-biggest economy fueled fears global manufacturing and trade might be disrupted after most business in Shanghai were shut down and its 25 million people confined to their homes starting in late March.

Retail sales tumbled 11.1% from a year ago after shops, restaurants and other consumer outlets in Shanghai and other cities closed, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. Manufacturing sank 2.9% as factories closed.

This month's activity appears to be improving based on high power demand and more freight being moved, the bureau's statistics chief, Fu Linghui, said at a news conference. He said about half of the 9,000 biggest industrial enterprises in Shanghai were back at work as outbreaks in China's biggest city were contained, according to Xinhua.

"We believe the operation of the economy is gradually improving," Fu said. "The pace of recovery in consumption will accelerate as the impact of the epidemic is brought under control."

The country's economy took a hit from the domestic resurgence of COVID-19 cases in April, but the impacts are "short-lived and external," Fu said.

"The fundamentals of the Chinese economy remain un-

AP PHOTO



changed. The overall trends of economic transformation and upgrading and high-quality development remain unchanged," he said.

"There are many favorable conditions for stabilizing the economy and achieving the expected development goals," the spokesperson said.

With a super-large market, complete industrial and supply chains and huge domestic demand, the world's second-largest economy has the resilience to ward off all kinds of challenges, Xinhua reported.

Fu said that despite the impacts of the epidemic, grain and energy production kept growth during the first four months, laying a solid foundation for fighting the epidemic and promoting economic recovery. In April, the output of raw coal, crude oil and natural gas rose 10.7%, 4% and 4.7%, respectively, year-on-year.

According to Xinhua, market supply of food and daily necessities was sufficient, with prices remaining stable. The consumer price index, a main gauge of inflation, rose just 2.1% year-on-year last month.

"There is still considerable uncertainty and downside risk to the near-term outlook for China if new Covid-19 outbreaks should occur in other major urban areas," Rajiv Biswas of S&P Global Market Intelligence said in an email as quoted by Associated Press.

The economy already was

weak before the latest outbreaks after Beijing cracked down on debt in its vast real estate industry that Chinese leaders worry is dangerously high. That triggered a slide in construction and home sales, industries that support millions of jobs.

China kept case numbers low through early this year with a strategy that shut down cities of tens of millions of people. That prompted complaints about the soaring human and economic costs, leading the ruling party to shift to closing off buildings or neighborhoods with infections. But with thousands of new cases reported every day, that led to big sections of Beijing and other cities being shut down.

Dozens of areas of Beijing,

Shanghai and other cities are deemed high- or medium-risk in a list issued Sunday by the National Health Commission, which requires shops and some other businesses to close. The other cities include Shenyang in the south, Guang'an in the southwest and Harbin, Dandong and Yingkou in the northeast.

Ruling party leaders said after a May 5 meeting that containing outbreaks would take priority over the economy.

According to AP, Chinese officials have called for the virus to be brought under control ahead of a ruling party meeting in October or November at which Xi is expected to be sworn in a third five-year term as leader.

The economy grew by 4.8% over a year earlier in the three months ending in March. That was an improvement over the previous quarter's 4.1%, but forecasters say activity in the three months through June might weaken.

Based on the latest data, activity in the current quarter might contract by 1% compared with a year ago, according to Iris Pang of ING.

"Our concern is whether China will have lockdowns elsewhere," Pang said in a report. "Any city that has to endure a 1-month lockdown will have its GDP in contraction on a yearly basis for that month."

Also Sunday, the central bank said the lower limit on interest rates for mortgages taken out by first-time homebuyers will be lowered in a new effort to revive plunging home sales.

"Provided that the virus situation continues to improve, the economy should begin to rebound this month," said Julian Evans-Pritchard of Capital Economics in a report. "But the recovery is likely to be tepid."

MDT/AGENCIES

COVID-19

Shanghai says lockdown to ease as virus spread mostly ends

MOST of Shanghai has stopped the spread of the coronavirus in the community and fewer than 1 million people remain under strict lockdown, authorities said yesterday, as the city moves toward reopening and economic data showed the gloomy impact of China's "zero-COVID" policy.

Vice Mayor Zong Ming said 15 out of Shanghai's 16 districts had eliminated virus transmission among those not already in quarantine.

"The epidemic in our city is under effective con-

rol. Prevention measures have achieved incremental success," Zong said at a news briefing.

Supermarkets, malls and restaurants were allowed to reopen yesterday with limits on the numbers of people and mandated "no contact" transactions. But most of the city's 25 million people remain under some form of restriction, movement around the city is highly limited and the subway train system remains closed for now.

Even as case numbers fall, city and national authorities have sent mixed

messages about the state of Shanghai's outbreak and when life can return to normal in the city, where many residents have been confined to their homes, compounds and neighborhoods for more than 50 days. A prospective date of June 1 has been given for a full reopening.

Zong said that authorities "remain sober" about the possibility of the outbreak rebounding, particularly as reports of new infections continue to come in from centralized isolation centers and older, rundown neighborhoods.

"Citywide, our prevention efforts are still not firmly enough established and it requires all of our continuing hard work and the cooperation of the broad masses of citizens and friends [...] to restore the normal running of the city in an orderly fashion," Zong said.

Shanghai's ruthless and frequently chaotic implementation of virus restrictions has sparked protests over the lack of food, medical care, freedom of movement and already highly limited privacy rights.

Despite that, China has

rejected all criticism of "zero COVID," including from the World Health Organization. The ruling Communist Party says it is committed to "resolutely fighting any attempts to distort, question or dismiss China's anti-COVID policy."

China reported 1,159 cases of infection yesterday, the vast majority in Shanghai. Almost all were infections without symptoms.

About half of the 9,000 biggest industrial enterprises in Shanghai are back at work after controls that

shut down most of the city starting in late March eased, said Fu Linghui, director of statistics for the National Bureau of Statistics.

While other countries are opening up in a bid to learn to live with COVID-19, China's borders remain largely closed and even transport within the country tightly restricted.

Flag carrier Air China reported an 84.3% drop in domestic passenger traffic in April against the same month last year, while another top carrier, China Southern Airlines, reported an 81.7% drop. MDT/AP

NORTH KOREA

Kim blasts pandemic response as outbreak surges

KIM TONG-HYUNG
& HYUNG-JIN KIM, SEOUL

NORTH Korean leader Kim Jong Un criticized officials over slow medicine deliveries and mobilized the military to respond to a surge in suspected COVID-19 infections, as his nation struggled to contain a fever that has reportedly killed dozens and sickened nearly a million others in a span of three days.

North Korean health authorities said yesterday that eight more people died and an additional 392,920 were newly found to have feverish symptoms. That brings the death toll to 50 and illnesses to more than 1.2 million, respectively. It's a sharp jump from six dead and 350,000 sick reported last Friday, a day after the North said that it found that an unspecified number of people in capital Pyongyang tested positive for the omicron variant.

Kim has acknowledged that the fast-spreading fever, highly likely driven by COVID-19, is causing "great upheaval" in the country, and outside experts say the true scale of the outbreak is likely much bigger than what's described in the state-controlled media.

Some suspect that North Korea has understated its fatalities or illnesses to shield Kim's leadership from criticism. The North likely lacks test kits and other tools to detect virus carriers with no or mild symptoms, which means that several million might already have been infected.

"When people die, North Ko-



rean authorities will say they've died of overwork or from natural deaths, not because of COVID-19," said Nam Sung-wook, a professor at Korea University in South Korea. Nam said the North is likely understating the death toll to protect "the dignity of its supreme leader."

While neighboring South Korea and China have offered to send medical supplies and other help, experts say it's too late to inoculate the North's 26 million people, and that the only realistic outside help would be offering limited supplies of vaccines to reduce deaths among high-risk groups, including the elderly and people with preexisting conditions.

It's also unclear whether and how soon Kim would accept outside offers of aid because he has previously rallied for unity at home to guard against the pandemic without resorting to

foreign help.

State media didn't specify how many of the fever cases were confirmed as COVID-19. Among the 50 fatalities, North Korea officially identified only one as a COVID-19 case so far.

North Korea is believed to be mostly relying on isolating people with symptoms at shelters. Analyst Cheong Seong-Chang at South Korea's Sejong Institute said the North's limited number of test kits are likely mainly reserved for the ruling elite.

Failing to slow the virus could have dire consequences for North Korea, considering its broken health care system and that its people are believed to be unvaccinated. There's also malnourishment and chronic poverty.

The North imposed what it described as maximum preventive measures that restricted travel between cities and counties,

and Kim ordered public health officials, teachers and others to identify people with fevers so they could be quarantined. As of Sunday, more than 564,860 people were in quarantine, North Korea's state media reported.

The explosive growth in fever cases may underscore how fast omicron could travel across an unvaccinated population without access to proper health tools, and fatalities will surely jump in coming weeks considering time lags between infections and deaths, said Jung Jae-hun, a professor of preventive medicine at South Korea's Gachon University.

While it's clear COVID-19 is spreading at an alarming speed, there are questions about the accuracy of North Korea's fever tally. Jung said it's unlikely that North Korean health workers are able to make reliable daily updates, considering the lack of tests and other resources, and are possibly adding multiple days of cases into their single-day counts following delays.

Cho Han Bum, an analyst at Seoul's Korea Institute for National Unification, said North Korea's fever totals seemed an "outright lie."

"North Korea says about 390,000 more fell ill but only eight died in the past day, while South Korea (on Sunday) reported 25,000 new cases and 48 deaths," he said.

Yang Moo-jin, a professor at Seoul's University of North Korean Studies, said that the real number of COVID-19 infections in North Korea is likely at least three times

larger than North Korea's tally of fever patients because of under-reporting, the bad health care system and poorly computerized administrative networks.

Kim during a ruling party Politburo meeting on Sunday criticized government and health officials over what he portrayed as a botched pandemic response, saying medicine supplies aren't being distributed to pharmacies in time because of their "irresponsible work attitude" and lack of organization.

The Politburo had issued an emergency order to immediately release and quickly distribute state medicine reserves and for pharmacies to open for 24-hour shifts, but Kim said such steps weren't being properly implemented. Kim ordered the medical units of his military to get involved in stabilizing the supply of medicine in Pyongyang, KCNA said.

North Korea's previous claim of a perfect record in keeping out the virus for 2 1/2 years was widely doubted. But its extremely strict border closure, large-scale quarantines and propaganda that stressed anti-virus controls as a matter of "national existence" may have staved off a huge outbreak until now.

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol told the National Assembly yesterday that the South was willing to send vaccines, medicine, equipment and health personnel to the North if it's willing to accept.

South Korean officials say Pyongyang so far has made no request for Seoul's help. The North also shunned millions of vaccine doses offered by the U.N.-backed COVAX distribution program, likely because they carried international monitoring requirements.

Kim still stressed the country's economic goals should be met, which likely means huge groups will continue to gather at agricultural, industrial and construction sites. **MDT/AP**

SOLOMONS

Former Australian envoy says Sydney's lost Pacific trust

ROD MCGUIRK,
CANBERRA

A former Australian envoy to the Solomon Islands has accused Australia's government of losing the trust of South Pacific island countries and of ushering in greater Chinese influence.

Retired career diplomat Trevor Sofield told a security summit yesterday he found it "inconceivable" that the Solomon Islands government did not trust Australia enough to consult when a bilateral security pact with Beijing

was first considered.

"That would not have happened a few years ago," said Sofield, who was Australian high commissioner to the Solomon Islands from 1982 to 1985.

The pact, which was concluded last month, has been a major issue ahead of Australian elections on Saturday.

Australia and its allies including the United States fear the pact will result in a Chinese naval presence less than 2,000 kilometers from the northeast Australian coast.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison argues that he is better able than opposition leader Anthony Albanese to take on the security threats posed by China and to strengthen relations with Washington, Australia's most important defense partner.

Sofield, who was manned by security staff when he attempted to speak to Morrison at a campaign event last week, said Australia had "lost its way" in the Pacific as China scaled up its influence in the region.

"We had a vision," he said. "It was underpinned by the fact that if we could assist these governments to reach economic security through trade and aid then they would certainly be able to manage their own affairs."

"But we've lost that vision and we've lost that trust that we developed over time," Sofield added.

Albanese's center-left Labor Party has condemned the Sino-Solomon pact as Australia's worst foreign policy failure in the Pacific since World War II.

Morrison argues the blame lies with China for interfering in the Pacific.

Morrison boasts that a partnership with the United States and Britain announced in September that will supply Australia with a fleet of submarines powered by U.S. nuclear technology was as major achievement to boost Australia's security.

The so-called AUKUS agreement has become a political battleground since an Australian newspaper reported on Saturday that the United States had set bipartisan support as a pre-

requisite for any agreement going ahead.

Morrison yesterday defended his failure to brief Labor earlier on the agreement and suggested the party's deputy leader Rickard Marles might have leaked the nascent deal to the Chinese.

National security is traditionally seen as a strength of Morrison's conservative coalition, which is seeking a rare fourth three-year term. Labor is ahead in most opinion polls, although the election result is expected to be close. **MDT/AP**

PUTIN'S WAR

In Ukraine and internationally, scenario darkens for Russia

OLEKSANDR STASHEVSKYI & CIARAN MCQUILLAN, KYIV

EUROPE pushed yesterday to sharpen and expand its response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with Sweden following Finland in seeking membership of NATO and European Union officials working to rescue proposed sanctions that would target the Russian oil exports helping finance the war.

On the ground, Russia saw more setbacks in its offensive in the east, where Ukrainian defenders are fighting desperately against attempted advances and even successfully rolling back the front lines in some areas.

In a small but symbolic boost for Ukrainian morale, a patrol of soldiers recorded triumphant video of their push to the Russian border in the region of Kharkiv. Ukrainian forces have already driven Russian troops back from the region's capital, reducing their ability to hit the battered city with artillery.

As fighting raged, international efforts to respond to Russia's aggression continued to pick up pace. Sweden's government yesterday announced its intention to seek NATO membership later — following a similar decision from its neighbor Finland. Those are seismic developments for the Nordic countries that have traditionally positioned themselves as militarily "nonaligned."

An enlargement of NATO to include Sweden and Finland would be a serious blow to Russian President Vladimir Putin, who sees the alliance's post-Cold War expansion in Eastern Europe as a threat. Putin has cited it among his reasons for attacking Ukraine. His spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said that Russia "will look carefully at what the consequences will be of Finland and Sweden joining NATO."

NATO's secretary-general, Jens Stoltenberg, has said the membership process for both Finland and Sweden could be very quick — though member Turkey has cast some doubt over the move.

Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson said yesterday that joining the 30-member military alliance was her country's best defense in the face of Russian behavior.

"Unfortunately, we have no reason to believe that the trend (of Russia's actions) will reverse in the foreseeable future," she said.



Ukrainian servicemen walk in the forest near a recently retaken village, north of Kharkiv

As well as sending military aid to Ukraine, Europe is also working to choke off funding for the Kremlin's war, by reducing the billions of dollars it spends on imports of Russian energy.

But a proposed EU embargo on imports of Russian oil faces opposition from a small group of countries led by Hungary, which is one of a number of landlocked countries that are highly dependent on the imports, along with the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Bulgaria also has reservations.

"We will do our best in order to deblock the situation," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said. "I cannot ensure that it is going to happen because positions are quite strong."

Western weapons deliveries to Ukraine and sanctions against Russia have helped the outgunned and outnumbered Ukrainian forces slow the Russian advance — and even turn it back in places.

Stoltenberg, the NATO chief, said Sunday the war "is not going as Moscow had planned."

"Ukraine can win this war," he added — a remarkable assessment that would have been unthinkable for many on the eve of the invasion.

But Russia has been plagued by a series of setbacks in the war, most glaringly in its failure to overrun Kyiv, the capital, in the early stages of its Feb. 24 invasion. Since then, much of the fighting has shifted to the Donbas, Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland.

Determining a full picture of the unfolding battle there is difficult. Airstrikes and artillery barrages make it extremely dangerous for journalists to move around, and reporting is restricted by Ukraine and the Moscow-backed separatists it has been fighting in the Donbas for eight years.

The battlefield in the east and south of Ukraine extends over hundreds of kilometers (miles), stretching men, machines and resources. The two sides have been fighting village-by-village in parts. Ukrainian forces have ground down the Russians, but are taking losses, too.

In the Luhansk region of the Donbas, strikes overnight hit a hospital in Severodonetsk, killing two and wounding nine, including a child, the regional military command said yesterday. Overnight strikes also hit other towns. Regional military governor Serhiy Haidai said Ukrainian special forces blew up Russian-held railway bridges between as part of efforts to slow the Russian offensive. The information could not immediately be independently verified.

Meanwhile, in the south, a strike wounded three people in the Odesa region. Air raid sirens ring out routinely in the region and its iconic Black Sea port city, also called Odesa. Visitors who would normally fill the city as the tourist season kicks off this time of year are absent, and the streets of the usually lively city are quiet.

"This battle is dragging on. Russia does not stop attacking and advancing," Ukrainian military analyst Oleh Zhdanov said in recent days. "The fate of the confrontation depends on the speed of supply of Western weapons."

In a symbolic boost, a Ukrainian patrol in the Kharkiv region reached the Russian border and made a victorious video there addressed to President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The video posted Sunday on Facebook by Ukraine's Ministry of Defense shows a dozen fighters around a wooden post — painted blue and yellow, Ukraine's colors — that they carried with them and

then stood upright as a border marker, in triumph. It was not clear exactly where the video was shot.

One soldier said the unit went "to the dividing line with the Russian Federation, the occupying country. Mr. President, we have reached it. We are here." Other fighters made victory signs and raised their fists.

Along another section of the frontier with Russia, Ukrainian border guards said they defeated a Russian attempt to send troops into the northern Sumy region. The border guard service said Russian forces deployed mortars, grenade launchers and machine guns in an attempt to cover a "sabotage and reconnaissance group" crossing the border from Russia.

The border guard service said its officers returned fire and forced the Russian group to retreat back into Russia. The area is largely rural and hasn't seen intense fighting in more than a month. There was no immediate word from Russia.

Russia troops have also continued air and artillery strikes around the Azovstal steel plant in Mariupol, the last holdout of several hundred Ukrainian forces in the strategically important city, the Ukrainian General Staff said.

Britain's Defense Ministry said yesterday that Belarus was deploying special operations forces along its border with Ukraine and air defense, artillery and missile units to training ranges in the west of the country. Belarus' forces have not been directly involved in the conflict, though its territory was used as a staging ground for the invasion.

But the presence of Belarusian troops near the border may keep Ukrainian troops pinned down there, preventing them from moving to support the counteroffensive in the Donbas.

Despite the fighting in the wider Kharkiv region and the threat of Russian missile attacks, many people were returning home to Kharkiv and other cities around Ukraine, Anna Malyar, deputy head of the Ministry of Defense, said.

Refugees were returning not just because of optimism that the war might ebb.

"Living somewhere just like that, not working, paying for housing, eating ... they are forced to return for financial reasons," Malyar said in remarks carried by the RBK-Ukraine news agency. **MDT/AP**

this day in history

1978: CHARLIE CHAPLIN'S STOLEN BODY FOUND



The coffin containing the body of Charlie Chaplin — missing since his grave was robbed 11 weeks ago — has been found.

It was dug up from a field about a mile away from the Chaplin home in Corsier near Lausanne, Switzerland.

The legendary comedian died on Christmas Day last year, aged 88. He was buried two days later in the village of Corsier in the hills above Lake Geneva.

Swiss police have arrested two men — a Pole aged 24 and a Bulgarian aged 38 — and say they have confessed to stealing the coffin and reburial it.

Names of the accused have not been released, but police say they are both motor mechanics.

They were traced after police kept a watch on 200 phone kiosks and tapped the Chaplins' phone after the family received ransom demands of £400,000 for return of the body after it went missing in March.

Sir Charles' 51-year-old widow, Lady Oona Chaplin, refused to pay up saying: "Charlie would have thought it ridiculous." In further calls the kidnapers made threats to harm her two youngest children.

The family kept silent about the ransom demands and various rumours circulated about the missing coffin.

One Hollywood report suggested it had been dug up because Sir Charles was a Jew buried in a gentile cemetery.

Lady Chaplin, daughter of playwright Eugene O'Neill inherited about £12m after the death of her husband.

The couple and their eight children have been living in Lausanne since 1952.

A spokesman for the Chaplins said: "The family is very happy and relieved that this ordeal is over."

Superintendent Gabriel Cettou, the head of the Geneva police, said the two men would be charged with attempted extortion and disturbing the peace of the dead.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

Roman Wardas, a 24-year-old Pole, and Gantscho Ganev, a 38-year-old Bulgarian, were convicted in December 1978 of stealing the coffin and trying to extort £400,000 from the Chaplin family.

Wardas was sentenced to four-and-a-half-years' hard labour for masterminding the bizarre plot to hold Charlie Chaplin's body to ransom. He said he was inspired by an article about a similar case in an Italian newspaper and believed it was the answer to his financial difficulties.

His Bulgarian accomplice, described as a "muscle man" with a limited sense of responsibility, was given a suspended 18-month sentence. Sir Charles' coffin was reburied in a theft-proof concrete grave.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS



ARIES

Mar. 21-Apr. 19

You may find that someone you live with is not too happy, but you can't really do anything about that right now. Your stability will aid you in getting support from your fellow workers.



TAURUS

Apr. 20-May. 20

You can get others to do things for you but be sure not to overpay them or lend them money. Get domestic chores out of the way early. You may have difficulties finishing projects you start.



GEMINI

May. 21-Jun. 21

Opportunities to expand your circle of friends will result in possible new romantic encounters. Be sure that the person you're drawn to is not already involved. You can make extra cash by moonlighting.



CANCER

Jun. 22-Jul. 22

You can be sure that any dealing with large institutions should go well. Refuse to let others make unrealistic demands of you. Your intellectual charm will entice new love interests.



LEO

Jul. 23-Aug. 22

Go with the flow and don't be concerned about your own job. Organize your day to avoid any setbacks. You must take care not to overexert yourself if involved in sports.



VIRGO

Aug. 23-Sep. 22

You should check out prestigious clubs or groups that have a cause you believe in. Your courage and willpower will enable you to get rid of destructive habits as well.



LIBRA

Sep. 23-Oct. 22

Get involved in creative projects that will enhance your earning power. You can get your point across if you don't beat around the bush. Don't be afraid to pursue unfamiliar grounds.



SCORPIO

Oct. 23-Nov. 21

Enjoy taking courses or lecturing others. Be inquisitive about unfamiliar circumstances. Try spending the day catching up on any responsibilities that need to be taken care of.



SAGITTARIUS

Nov. 22-Dec. 21

Get some sound advice and help setting up a workable budget. An older member of your family may have left you with a pressing situation. Business and emotional partnerships will run smoothly.



CAPRICORN

Dec. 22-Jan. 19

Catch up on your correspondence and reading. Sit back. Upheavals may occupy your day. Look closely at motives and honesty in your personal encounters.



AQUARIUS

Jan. 20-Feb. 18

Health problems may prevail if you haven't been getting enough rest. You have been going through a period of change that no doubt caused problems with your loved ones.

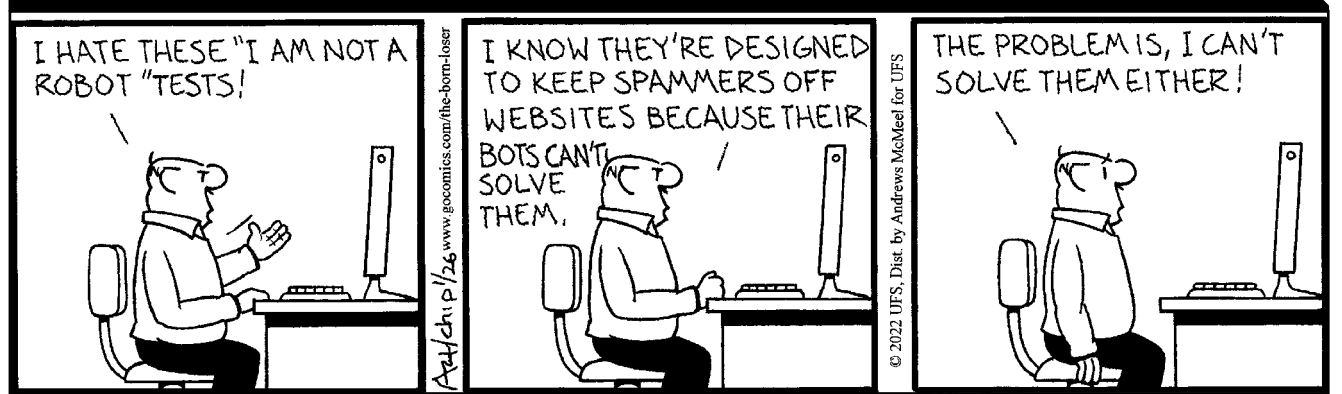


PISCES

Feb. 19-Mar. 20

Business and emotional partnerships will run smoothly. Put your thoughts into some trendy new ideas. Tone down and put some of that hard earned cash into a safe, long-term investment.

The Born Loser by Chip Sanson



SUDOKU

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

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

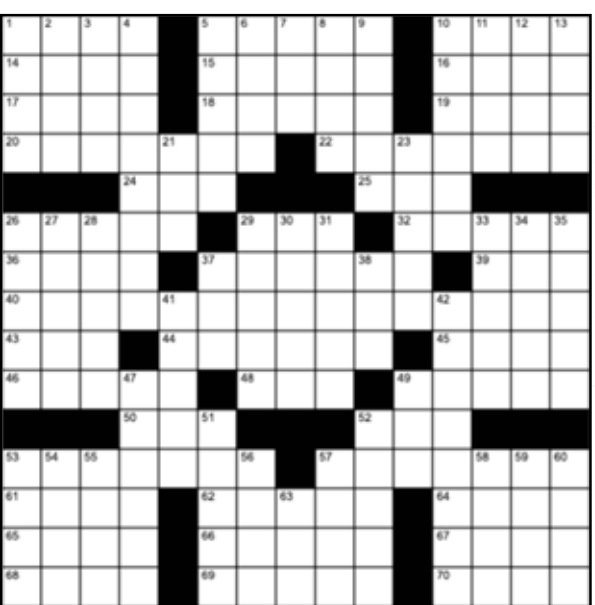
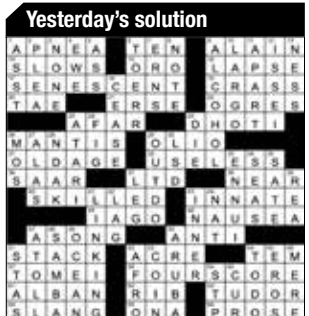
WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	11	29	fine
Changchun	8	21	fine
Chengdu	12	24	cloudy
Chongqing	14	24	cloudy
Fuzhou	13	18	rain
Guangzhou	16	22	overcast
Guiyang	10	18	cloudy
Haikou	22	25	rain
Hangzhou	13	25	cloudy
Harbin	4	20	cloudy
Hefei	12	26	cloudy
Nanjing	14	25	cloudy
Shanghai	16	26	cloudy
Taipei	18	20	rain
Wuhan	11	26	cloudy
Hong Kong	20	23	overcast
WORLD			
Moscow	7	13	rain
Frankfurt	14	24	rain
Paris	18	29	overcast
London	13	25	overcast
New York	13	24	overcast

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Take ___ from me; 5- Yo Yo's instrument; 10- Network point; 14- Ricky's portrayal; 15- Enthusiastic; 16- Asian sea; 17- Son of Judah; 18- At the bottom of the barrel; 19- Timbuktu's land; 20- Improvised; 22- East African nation; 24- ___ Town; 25- After taxes; 26- Expect; 29- Little, in Lille; 32- Inexpensive; 36- Type of guard; 37- Cloth; 39- Attempt, a score in rugby; 40- One recording the past; 43- Building annex; 44- Shout; 45- Mozart's "___ kleine Nachtmusik"; 46- I ___ vacation; 48- Down; 49- Killer whales; 50- Sounds of hesitation; 52- Crazy ___; 53- One of the Lesser Sunda Islands; 57- Babyhood; 61- Bhutan's continent; 62- Addis ___; 64- Able was ___; 65- Golden; 66- Israeli desert region; 67- Person, place, or thing; 68- Fill to surfeit; 69- Declare; 70- Flat sound;

DOWN 1- Flurries; 2- Portable shelter; 3- Golfer Aoki; 4- Locate exactly; 5- Symbol of Lebanon; 6- Clanton foe; 7- Bigger than med.; 8- Race parts; 9- Director Welles; 10- Super Bowl III MVP; 11- Like some history; 12- Spanish surrealist; 13- Charles Lamb's nom de plume; 21- Kind of reaction; 23- Tourist draw; 26- Pale; 27- Interval of time; 28- Brides walk down it; 29- Buckets; 30- Deadly virus; 31- Exhorted; 33- Body of values; 34- Sports area; 35- Funeral fires; 37- To and ___; 38- Like some vbs.; 41- Butler's love; 42- Belongs; 47- Discussion; 49- Lummo; 51- Graceful birds; 52- Jack; 53- Droops; 54- Voice of America org.; 55- Comic Kamen; 56- Encourage in wrongdoing; 57- Yeah, right!; 58- Modernists; 59- Shank; 60- Longings; 63- Turkish title;



Crossword puzzles provided by BestCrosswords.com

USEFUL TELEPHONE NUMBERS

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



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MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

F&B

MCDONALD'S TO SELL ITS RUSSIAN BUSINESS, TRY TO KEEP WORKERS

MORE than three decades after it became the first American fast food restaurant to open in the Soviet Union, McDonald's said yesterday that it has started the process of selling its business in Russia, another symbol of the country's increasing isolation over its war in Ukraine.

The company, which has 850 restaurants in Russia that employ 62,000 people, pointed to the humanitarian crisis caused by the war, saying holding on to its business in Russia "is no longer tenable, nor is it consistent with McDonald's values."

The Chicago-based fast food giant said in early March that it was temporarily closing its stores in Russia but would continue to pay its employees. Without naming a prospective Russian buyer, McDonald's said that it would seek one to hire its workers and pay them until the sale closes.

CEO Chris Kempczinski said the "dedication and loyalty to McDonald's" of employees and hundreds of Russian suppliers made it a difficult decision to leave.

"However, we have a commit-

AP FILE PHOTO



McDonald's restaurant is seen in the center of Dmitrov, a Russian town 75 km. north from Moscow

ment to our global community and must remain steadfast in our values," Kempczinski said in a statement, "and our commitment to our values means that we can no longer keep the arches shining there."

As it tries to sell its restaurants, McDonald's said it plans to start removing golden arches and other symbols and signs with the company's name. It said it will keep its trademarks in Russia.

Western companies have

wrestled with extricating themselves from Russia, enduring the hit to their bottom lines from pausing or closing operations in the face of sanctions. Others have stayed in Russia at least partially, with some facing blowback.

French carmaker Renault said yesterday that it would sell its majority stake in Russian car company Avtovaz and a factory in Moscow to the state — the first major nationalization of a foreign business since the war began.

For McDonald's, its first restaurant in Russia opened in the middle of Moscow more than three decades ago, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was a powerful symbol of the easing of Cold War tensions between the United States and Soviet Union, which would collapse in 1991.

Now, the company's exit is proving symbolic of a new era, analysts say.

"Its departure represents a new isolationism in Russia, which

must now look inward for investment and consumer brand development," said Neil Saunders, managing director of GlobalData, a corporate analytics company.

He said McDonald's owns most of its restaurants in Russia, but because it won't license its brand, the sale price likely won't be close to the value of the business before the invasion. Russia and Ukraine combined accounted for about 9% of McDonald's revenue and 3% of operating income before the war, Saunders said.

McDonald's said it expects to record a charge against earnings of between \$1.2 billion and \$1.4 billion over leaving Russia.

Its restaurants in Ukraine are closed, but the company said it is continuing to pay full salaries for its employees there.

McDonald's has more than 39,000 locations across more than 100 countries. Most are owned by franchisees — only about 5% are owned and operated by the company.

McDonald's said exiting Russia will not change its forecast of adding a net 1,300 restaurants this year, which will contribute about 1.5% to companywide sales growth.

Last month, McDonald's reported that it earned \$1.1 billion in the first quarter, down from more than \$1.5 billion a year earlier. Revenue was nearly \$5.7 billion. **MDT/AP**

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FOOTBALL

Intense schedule taking its toll on quad-chasing Liverpool

STEVE DOUGLAS

Wednesday, 02:45
Southampton v Liverpool
H 8, D 5.5, A 1.42

ODDSCHECKER.COM

LIVERPOOL is heading into the 61st game of a potentially history-making season and the intensity of the schedule is taking its toll on the players.

"They are pretty much sleeping on their massage beds," Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp said yesterday.

The problem is, the games are getting bigger and bigger for Klopp's team. And staying in contention for an unprecedented quadruple of major trophies is getting harder and harder.

It's two down, two to go for Liverpool after winning the FA Cup on Saturday — in a penalty shootout against Chelsea — to add to its League Cup triumph from February. The team is already booked



Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp

in for the Champions League final against Real Madrid on May 28.

Attaining the third leg of the quadruple before that is the toughest ask, simply because the Premier League title is out of Liverpool's hands with Manchester City four points clear heading into the final week of the campaign.

City's 2-2 draw at West Ham on Sunday allows Liverpool the chance to trim the gap to one point by beating Southampton on Tuesday

[Wednesday, 02:45], before the two title rivals play their last games on Sunday.

But Klopp is being realistic.

"I don't know the last time City dropped points two games in a row, historically," he said.

Well, that hasn't happened in the league this season. It last happened in December 2020, when back-to-back draws — against Manchester United and West Bromwich Albion — preceded a run of 21 straight

wins in all competitions.

But Klopp doesn't just need Aston Villa, managed by Liverpool great Steve Gerrard, to pull off a major upset on Sunday. He also needs Liverpool to beat Southampton and then Wolverhampton, a task Klopp says won't be easy given the tiredness in his players' legs.

While Liverpool is playing barely three days after 120 intense minutes against Chelsea, Southampton will have had 10 days since its most recent game and is known for its high-energy, heavy-pressing style of play under Ralph Hasenhuttl.

Southampton drew both of its games against City this season and beat Liverpool at home last season.

"They'll be completely fresh," Klopp said. "We cannot go there, fall into this game and go, 'What's going on here?' Southampton is a really well-drilled team, full of energy ... and playing their last home game of the season."

Then there's the injuries sustained by Mohamed Salah and Virgil van Dijk during the FA Cup final

that makes them doubts for the game. Their fitness status will be checked on Monday, but Fabinho is definitely missing because of a hamstring injury.

However, Liverpool always seems to find a way this season, in whatever match and whatever competition. Unsung heroes are popping up all the time — on Saturday, it was back-up left back Kostas Tsimikas converting the clinching penalty — so Klopp sees no problem having to rotate his team for the Southampton game.

"We sit here and we've won two cup competitions and there's one reason for it. Only one," Klopp said. "It's that we have this group of players that have all stayed on track, all stayed in line ... the atmosphere the group has created is exceptional."

He just wishes Liverpool could have been given an extra couple of days to recover before playing Southampton. Why, Klopp asked, couldn't the game have been played on Thursday, when three other league games are taking place?

"Come on, 120 minutes then we play again on Tuesday. That's massive," he said. "We will see. But I can't wait to play the game. The boys who start the game will go with all they have."

There's no second chances now, though. If Liverpool loses, City is the champion and dreams of the quadruple are over. **MDT/AP**

AD

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OPINION

China Daily
 Editorial, China Daily

INDIA'S WHEAT BAN ALERT OF GLOBAL FAMINE

India banned wheat exports on Saturday with immediate effect, citing food security risks. Indian Commerce Secretary B.V.R. Subrahmanyam said the ban has been imposed "in order to manage the overall food security of the country and to support the needs of the neighboring and other vulnerable countries".

The move by the world's second-largest wheat producer will exacerbate the worldwide shortfall of the grain caused by climate change and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine — both of which are major suppliers of wheat. Their combined exports account for nearly 30 percent of the global wheat supply. Not to mention the COVID-19 pandemic that has already severely disrupted the global supply chains and devastated many economies. The ban has thus drawn criticism from the G7 nations, with German Agriculture Minister Cem Ozdemir saying that it will worsen the crisis "if everyone starts to impose export restrictions or to close markets".

Global wheat production is forecast to drop 4.5 million tons to 774.8 million tons for the 2022-23 marketing year, which will be the first time there has been a production decline since 2018-19, according to the US Department of Agriculture. The supply shortage has driven wheat prices up markedly, with the Chicago Board of Trade's most active wheat futures surging to a 14-year high of \$13.63 per bushel on March 8.

The situation has made the global hunger crisis more acute. David Beasley, executive director of the UN World Food Programme, said in an interview last month that "we've got now 45 million people in 38 countries that are knocking on famine's door". The situation is especially dire in Africa, with 346 million people — about one-fourth of the population on the continent — suffering from "alarming" hunger, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross in early April. That figure compares with 286 million last year.

The saying that "to the people, food is heaven" is not, and never will be, outdated. Food shortages are likely to lead to social unrest in some countries.

All this sounds the alarm for China, which is a major grain importer. The country imported a total of 164.53 million tons of grain last year, an increase of 18 percent year-on-year, according to the General Administration of Customs. That was a historic high.

In addition to an increasingly volatile global market, the fact that wheat planting activities have been disrupted in some places due to restrictive anti-pandemic measures means the country must double down on its efforts to stabilize food prices and ensure its output.

China aims to ensure that the grain output this year remains above 650 billion kilograms, according to this year's government work report. Despite challenges, such as epidemic prevention and control work that delayed the planting of winter wheat in a few areas, a bumper summer harvest is still expected, which is reassuring at such a time.

JOHNSON: UK WILL ACT ON NORTHERN IRELAND RULES IF EU WON'T

THE BUZZ

Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday renewed British threats to break a Brexit agreement with the European Union, blaming it for a political crisis that's blocking the formation of a new government in Northern Ireland.

Before a visit to Belfast, Johnson said there would be "a necessity to act" if the EU doesn't agree to overhaul post-Brexit trade rules that he says are destabilizing Northern Ireland's delicate political balance.

Voters in Northern Ireland elected a new Assembly this month, in a vote that saw Irish nationalist party Sinn Fein win the most

seats. It was the first time a party that seeks union with the Republic of Ireland has won an election in the bastion of Protestant unionist power.

The Democratic Unionist Party came second and is refusing to form a government, or even allow the assembly to sit, until Johnson's government scraps post-Brexit checks on goods entering Northern Ireland from the rest of the U.K.

Under power-sharing rules set up as part of Northern Ireland's peace process, a government can't be formed without the cooperation of both nationalist and unionist parties

AP PHOTO



U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken (center) arrives in the United Arab Emirates

US VICE PRESIDENT, OFFICIALS HEADING TO UAE TO PAY RESPECTS

A high-powered American delegation led by Vice President Kamala Harris flew to the United Arab Emirates yesterday to pay respects to the federation's late ruler and meet with the newly ascended president.

The trip is the highest-level visit by Biden administration officials to oil-rich Abu Dhabi, intended to be a potent show of support as the U.S. administration tries to repair troubled relations with its partner, particularly amid the fast-changing geopolitical landscape precipitated by Moscow's war on Ukraine.

The delegation includes Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, CIA Director William Burns and climate envoy John Kerry, among others.

The UAE named the assertive Abu Dhabi crown prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan its new president following the death of his half-brother last Friday. Sheikh Mohammed has served as the country's de facto ruler and shaped the country's muscular foreign policy since Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan suffered a stroke nearly a decade ago.

Under Sheikh Mohammed's de facto rule, the UAE has intervened in regional conflicts from Yemen to Libya, used its vast

oil wealth to exert sway abroad and transformed into a regional financial hub.

Underscoring Abu Dhabi's great influence in Western and Arab capitals, an array of presidents, prime ministers and princes descended on the desert sheikhdom over the weekend to honor the late Sheikh Khalifa, praise Sheikh Mohammed and solidify ties. French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson were the first European leaders to jet to the UAE capital.

More dignitaries filtered through the Abu Dhabi airport's marbled presidential terminal yesterday. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian flew to the emirate for a meeting that could coincide with the U.S. visit. Iran has refused to meet American officials face-to-face, even as they negotiate a return to Tehran's tattered nuclear accord with world powers.

The mourners, close allies of the UAE, have included some bitter rivals, like Iran and Israel, India and Pakistan, Qatar and Egypt — a dramatic reminder of the country's powerful role in the region.

Russian President Vladimir Putin also congratulated Sheikh Mohammed yesterday, saying he was "certain that your leader-

ship will further strengthen the friendly Russian-Emirati relations," according to the UAE's state-run WAM news agency.

Before heading to Abu Dhabi, Harris said she was traveling on behalf of President Joe Biden to offer condolences on the death of the long-ailing Sheikh Khalifa and to shore up America's crucial relationship with the UAE.

It was widely expected officials would address the UAE's long-simmering frustrations about American security protection in the region as well as tensions that have emerged between the countries over Russia's war on Ukraine.

The UAE, along with Saudi Arabia, has faced American pressure to shun Russia and pump more oil to improve stability in energy markets as Europe tries to wean itself off Russian crude.

But the UAE is a key Russian trading partner and member of the so-called OPEC Plus agreement, of which Russia is an important member. Emiratis have rebuffed American demands — resistance rooted in an apparent feeling that despite its continued strong military presence across the Arabian Peninsula, America is no longer such a reliable partner. **MDT/AP**

Myanmar The foreign minister of Myanmar's shadow government, which opposes the military council that runs the strife-torn Southeast Asian nation, described as "productive" a meeting she had with Malaysian Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah. The Saturday meeting in Washington was the first publicly acknowledged occasion when a ministerial-level official from one of the 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations has had face-to-face talks with a counterpart in Myanmar's opposition National Unity Government.

AP PHOTO



Germany Chancellor Olaf Scholz's party said yesterday it sees no need for changes to the German leader's often-criticized approach to the war in Ukraine after an election in Germany's most populous state brought a clear defeat for his center-left Social Democrats. Germany's main opposition party, the center-right Christian Democratic Union, took 35.7% of the vote to win Sunday's election in North Rhine-Westphalia state, home to nearly 18 million people. It finished nine points ahead of Scholz's Social Democrats.

Yemen The first commercial flight in six years took off from Yemen's rebel-held capital yesterday, officials said, part of a fragile truce in the county's grinding civil war. The flight by national carrier Yemenia — also known as Yemen Airways — was bound for Jordan's capital of Amman, according to media outlets run by the Iran-backed Houthi rebels. It had 151 passengers on board.

AP PHOTO



Lebanon's militant Hezbollah group and its allies appear to have suffered losses in this weekend's parliamentary elections with preliminary results yesterday showing their strongest opponents picking up more seats and some of their traditional partners routed out of the legislature. Despite the apparent setback, Hezbollah and its main Shiite ally, the Amal group of Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, are likely to retain the 27 seats allocated to the sect.