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SECRETARY LEI WAI NONG PROMISES THAT THE NEXT STIMULUS PACKAGE WILL INCLUDE SUBSIDIES FOR THE UNEMPLOYED POPULATION

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CHINESE BOND ISSUANCE OVERSUBSCRIBED IN TWO HOURS

▲ P5

CHINA'S EXPORT GROWTH SINKS IN AUGUST, IMPORTS SHRINK

▲ P10



China The death toll in this week's earthquake has jumped to 74 with another 26 people still missing, the government reported yesterday, as frustration rose with uncompromising Covid-19 lockdown measures that prevented residents from leaving their buildings after the shaking. The 6.8 magnitude quake that struck just after noon Monday in Sichuan province caused extensive damage to homes in the Ganze Tibetan Autonomous Region and shook buildings in the provincial capital of Chengdu.

More on p7



Japan's defense minister said he has ordered a ministry-wide special investigation into growing reports of sexual assault after allegations of harassment were brought by a former soldier. Defense Minister Yasukazu Hamada's (pictured) order came after a female former soldier, Rina Gono, came forward in late August to request a reinvestigation of an alleged assault of her by former male colleagues last year. She also said she had received information from 146 servicemembers who said they had been harassed while on duty.



South Korea The most powerful typhoon to hit the country in years killed at least six people, dumped a meter of rain, destroyed roads and felled power lines on Tuesday. The death toll could have been higher if not for proactive evacuations and school closures, officials said. There was also greater public awareness about the storm and its risks. Typhoon Hinnamnor made impact just weeks after heavy rain around the capital, Seoul, caused flooding that killed at least 14 people.

More on backpage

XI, PUTIN TO MEET IN UZBEKISTAN

AP FILE PHOTO



Russian diplomat says the Chinese and Russian leaders plan to meet next week in the Uzbek city of Samarkand

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LACKLUSTER HOTEL BOOKINGS FOR MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL

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RENATO MARQUES

METaverse INDUSTRY MACAU HAS THE 'INGREDIENTS' BUT MISSING THE 'MINDSET'

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METaverse INDUSTRY

MACAU HAS THE 'INGREDIENTS' BUT MISSING THE 'MINDSET'

RENATO MARQUES

PEOPLE in Macau have a natural appetite for new and trendy technology but lack a mindset supportive of entrepreneurship and have a culture rooted in traditional values, says Thomas Ao, president and founder of the Metaverse Industry Association Macau (MIAM).

Ao is also a founding partner of Mindfulness Capital, a company specializing in blockchain, the metaverse, non-fungible tokens (NFTs) and Web 3.0. In an interview with the Times, he talked about the association's prospects and challenges, and how the metaverse could grow roots and expand locally as it already does in other places in the world.

"For the past 20 years, young kids in Macau have been following the latest videogames and electronics — I am pretty sure that when the iPhone 14 comes out, a lot of people will stay up overnight to buy it. So I think the ingredients are here, but when it comes to whether a company makes use of their cashflow to invest in an [unknown] space, and when even the word 'metaverse' is not that well defined, there is a challenge here," Ao told the Times in an interview on the sidelines of the opening of a metaverse NFT art exhibition titled "Dream Space: New Wave in the Metaverse NFT Art Exhibition," located at The Parisian Macao.

But Ao feels that the natural local interest in trendy new things might clash with the traditional local culture meaning potential slow progress in this field.

"I don't think there is [a local] culture built into [Metaverse-related jobs]. I think kids here in their 20s think about buying an apartment, while in Europe, people in their 30s may not even consider that as an option. The fact that parents here are not so supportive of their kids being entrepreneurs or doing something that's disruptive or that is non-standard is potentially a big challenge [for the industry here]," Ao told the Times.

"Also, when it comes to Chinese culture, they tend to reinforce that a 'proper' job can provide



Thomas Ao

more safety and guarantees and are less inclined to do new things that disrupt the whole industry. But I think [Macau] is catching up from an entrepreneur's perspective and is learning from Silicon Valley, Hong Kong and other

places. At the government level, we have some initiatives in conferencing online, especially since Covid disrupted the whole idea of physical meetings. I think the government would be interested in doing something in this seg-

ment," he remarked.

Ao thinks the sectors in which the metaverse could achieve more, or have more relevance locally, include the consumer and fashion sectors, conferences and IT services. He explained that, for

example, brands like Gucci, Louis Vuitton or Nike already have a well-established presence in the metaverse which, in some cases, has already generated high revenue.

"Gucci [was one of the first] to enter the metaverse and Nike has already sold over 180 million [USD] worth of NFTs, so I think when it comes to fashion and trendy items and playful stuff, Macau naturally has the eye for it," he said.

Ao thinks it is not necessarily a bad thing that Macau might be lagging behind other places because it might arise from Macau historically being a very developed place.

"It doesn't mean it is bad [that Macau is lagging a bit behind in the metaverse and NFTs]. If, for instance, we look at Vietnam, which has a less developed economy, they are more familiar with NFTs and other new technologies. They basically skipped the PC (personal computer) era and jumped straight into the mobile [era]. It [also] has to do with the existing internet infrastructure. If the infrastructure is too good, people are satisfied with it," the MIAM president noted, adding, "Macau has been quite close with trendy IT stuff so I think that if Macau wants to catch up, the gap is not really that big."

MIAM HOLDS NFT ART EXHIBITION AT THE PARISIAN MACAO

THE Metaverse Industry Association Macau (MIAM) yesterday inaugurated a new non-fungible token (NFT) art exhibition at The Parisian Macao.

Titled "Dream Space: New Wave in the Metaverse," the exhibition will present different trendy and upcoming NFTs, including some creations with Macau as a background. It opens to the public today and continues until February 24, 2023.

Visitors can engage in a metaverse egg hunt, which allows them to use eggs collected in the metaverse for real-world rewards.

The exhibition features over 40 artworks, including CryptoPunks by Larva Labs, BAYC by Bored Ape Yacht Club and Outsad by Leon Wang (both courtesy of Collinstar Capital), Mr.DavYuan by David Yuan, and Blockchainism I by Ting Song, as well as work by local artist Álvaro Barbosa.

The art will be updated occasionally over the exhibition period, meaning visitors can see a different exhibition if they visit more than once during the exhibition period, which spans over five months.

Clips from André Chiang's collection "We Are What We Eat," the world's only edible NFT dining experience, will also be screened during the event.



ned during the event.

An interactive area has also been set up on-site, where visitors can experience the metaverse with virtual characters through leading facial motion capture and 3D scene rendering technology by May.Social, a metaverse social platform.

At the official opening ceremony, founder and president of MIAM and Mindfulness Capital partner Thomas Ao said, "the exhibition kicks off our series of activities in the second half of 2022. This time, we are

breaking barriers by connecting the metaverse with the real world [by presenting a platform] where customers get to play in the metaverse and gain real rewards when they shop at a bricks-and-mortar store — a first in Macau." Ao added, "we are excited to be partnering with The Parisian Macao for this exhibition, as we witness how the metaverse and NFTs continue to revolutionize the way people shop and interact, and bring far-reaching impact to our daily lives." RM

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MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL

Hotel bookings half-empty after China outbreaks: Report

MACAU'S hotel sector insiders have lamented over the Mid-Autumn Festival, finding it hard to tell if the occupancy rate target of 70-80% suggested last week could be achieved amid the Covid relapse in mainland China, the Macau Daily News reported.

The mainland reported 323 local Covid cases yesterday, along with 1,247 local asymptomatic cases. 58 symptomatic infections were found on Monday in Guangdong Province.

In light of this and visa issues, hotel bookings for the festive period currently stand at about 40-50%. It is unclear if these bookings will be honored by customers.

The conservative outlook is based on Covid-19 relapses in several regions in mainland China discouraging travel across the country.

With China still abiding by its zero-Covid policy, lockdowns or other restrictions are in place in areas with new cases.

As such, people who reside

XINHUA



in affected regions will not be allowed to travel. People in other regions may be discouraged from traveling even to lower risk areas.

Difficulty obtaining travel en-

dorsements is also an issue.

Hoteliers have pointed out that, against such a backdrop, it is difficult to be optimistic about tourism performance over the ho-

liday period.

Despite the city allowing certain foreigners to enter, it is still not very appealing as quarantine requirements remain in place. **AL**

CASINO SUPPLIERS LEAVE ZERO-COVID MACAU FOR SINGAPORE, PHILIPPINES

Suppliers of slot machines, baccarat table systems and other casino equipment are moving out of Macau to more welcoming markets in Asia, Bloomberg has reported. With demand in Macau waning, Light & Wonder, a leading provider of products used in casinos, is relocating its expatriate staff to the Philippines, which has become its top market in Asia and where it is opening a new office. The agency revealed that another equipment maker from Japan is also shifting employees to the Philippines and Singapore after seeing revenue plunge about 90 percent in Macau as casinos shelved purchasing plans amid a prolonged industry slump.

MAINLAND MAN ARRESTED FOR MOP82,000 BURGLARY

A 30-year-old male mainland resident has been arrested for burglary. Investigations have revealed that while the suspect was visiting Macau, he climbed a fence and entered a low-rise unit in Taipa where he stole watches, rings, jade pendants, gold plating and commemorative bank notes, and escaped through the front door with about MOP82,000 worth of goods. The suspect did not admit the crime but failed to explain the source of the seized goods. The suspect has been transferred to the Public Prosecutions Office to be charged with aggravated theft and fraud.

Gov't still mulling details of second MOP10B subsidy

ANTHONY LAM

SECRETARY for Economy and Finance Lei Wai Nong revealed yesterday that his team is compiling documentation for the next MOP10 billion subsidy scheme, hinting details should be available soon.

Lei has promised the public that the scheme will include subsidies for the non-working population. The parliament has approved funds though no plan has been presented.

"Both regulatory and implementation documents are being prepared," Lei revealed for the first time, adding they will be announced when ready.

"The scheme will be used in Macau for people in Macau; so we'll consider ways that people will find convenient and familiar," Lei added, but did not confirm whether it will be a hybrid form of issuance comprising both a cash



handout and a consumption subsidy.

The financial official also revealed the annual budget would likely require another amendment, given the lower income from casinos in the past month.

The government's current estimate for this year's gross gaming revenue (GGR) is MOP130 billion. In the first eight months, the city only garnered

MOP20 billion.

It was on this basis that Lei admitted the need for a budget amendment. He admitted the weak performance was generally caused by the June 18 and August 2 outbreaks.

"These 44 days have had a major impact on our economy and livelihood," Lei said, adding that "we do not rule out the possibility of amending the annual budget at the Legisla-

tive Assembly."

Once again, he expressed hope the public would work together for a better recovery in the fourth quarter.

To attract tourists and offer entertainment to local residents, the government is contemplating October 1 celebrations, which may include a fireworks display. The government is also working harder to attract more convention and

exhibition events.

"We're still working on bringing a fireworks show to the city on October 1," the secretary said. "On the other hand, many convention and exhibition events will return to the track."

When questioned about his expectations for tourist arrivals over the October 1 - October 7 "Golden Week" in light of Zhuhai restricting daily border crossings by certain people, Lei referred to recent arrival figures - about 16,000 daily - as a reason for optimism.

Promotions in both the public and private sectors will continue to attract more tourists, he added.

In addition, he said, apart from the attempt to attract more tourists, the fireworks show will also act as a means to give residents "stronger confidence" despite the current economic downturn.

"As we know, the Chief Executive has met with Xia Baolong, who has strongly assured us of the backing of the Central People's Government," Lei said. Xia is the director of the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office of the State Council.

RED CROSS DISPATCHES 4,500 AID PACKS FOR SICHUAN RESIDENTS

The Macau Red Cross has sent 4,500 relief packs to Sichuan province to assist rescue work after a magnitude 6.8 earthquake occurred on September 5 in Chengdu, injuring over 100 people, damaging over 10,000 houses and disrupting communications, water and electricity infrastructure. In addition to the 4,500 packs, the Red Cross has also dispatched rescue support workers.

STAFF REPORTER

FOR improved amenity to residents, the “Macao One Account” has had two new services added to it, the government said at a press conference this week.

The press conference was fronted by the Public Administration and Civil Service Bureau (SAFP) and the Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM), with other representatives from the Education and Youth Development Bureau (DSEDJ) and Macao Foundation (FM) attending.

The two new services — event applications and facilities bookings — were added to the mobile app “Macao One Account.”

The government hopes to make services more accessible as there will be no need to re-enter personal information. Residents may finish a simplified application process and make bookings for facilities and apply for events. Meanwhile, residents will be able to check the latest news published by the government, apply and take records of applications, and make payments online.

“In the first stage, IAM and SAFP will jointly launch a total of 19 facilities and activity centers in the app,” said Ng Wai

TWO NEW SERVICES ADDED TO ‘MACAO ONE ACCOUNT’

FLORA TANG



Han, subdirector of the SAFP.

Of the 19 facilities and activity centers included in the facilities booking service, five are administered by the IAM, namely S. Lourenço, Rotunda de Carlos

da Maia, Fai Chi Kei, Seac Pai Van and Edifício do Bairro da Ilha Verde Activity Centre. The facilities include badminton courts, table-tennis tables, art rooms, dance practice rooms

and computer rooms.

Details such as name, pictures, size, capacity, and charges for use of the facilities will be presented in the app.

A variety of activities held by DSEDJ, IAM, and FM are open for application using the app from yesterday such as community short courses, workshops and lectures. Special activities for teaching staff and other professionals are not included. Over 120 different activities with slots to accommodate 2,500 people are available via “Macao One Account” for activities during September and October.

Once a resident makes a booking or has their application for an activity accepted, they can check their online “My to-do list” as a reminder of activities booked. The service will also send a message as a reminder.

According to DSEDJ, the authorities have made available more than 40 activities via the “Macao One Account” with over 880 slots ready for residen-

ts to register online.

“It is believed that this service could [enable] more residents to participate in future activities. We will also continue to promote this service,” said committee of the IAM.

Furthermore, as IAM facilities are included in the booking service, from Monday, “Friends of IAM” membership card has been added to the “Macao One Account.”

As of the end of July, the “Friends of IAM” had over 40,000 members. The application process is done by filling out simple personal information. A membership card is then shown when participating in the activities and using IAM’s facilities.

To improve ease of access, in addition to online applications, the original application method and telephone booking service (Tel: 28337676) will be maintained, so members of the activity center can retain access to their discounts.

According to the IAM, the authorities are holding 260 different summer activities, and more than 16,500 people have applied.

In the next phase, the government will launch more services run by the Sports Bureau and the Cultural Affairs Bureau.

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OVERSUBSCRIBED

Second Chinese bond launch in Macau sees RMB5 billion ordered in two hours

ANTHONY LAM

THE second batch of RMB3 billion Chinese bonds to be sold in Macau was launched yesterday, attracting 5 billion yuan of orders in the first two hours, which means it was largely oversubscribed.

Lin Jingzhen, executive vice president of the Bank of China, revealed the figures in a speech at the launch ceremony. The ceremony commenced exactly two hours after the trading of the bonds.

The bank is the sole global coordinator for the trading of this batch of bonds.

Lin also revealed there was a "wide array" of entities purchasing the bonds, from central and commercial banks to insurance and securities companies. He further revealed that orders were received from a wide range of regions, such as Greater China, Korea, Brazil and Portugal.

"This data is proof that the-



se bonds are of high quality and carry the recognition of global investors of China's prospects in terms of economy and society," Lin said.

This is the second time in history that Chinese bonds have been released in Macau. The previous Chinese bond launch in

Macau was in 2019.

At the launch ceremony, the Secretary for Economy and Finance, Lei Wai Nong, emphasized that this batch of bonds is the first released in Macau under the Macao Central Securities Deposits System (CSD). He described this as a sign Macau's infrastructure

for bonds has taken a step up.

He also thanked the central government's long-time support for Macau in the area of modern finance, with particular emphasis on the development of a securities market.

The government is currently constructing the foundations

for financial infrastructure, legal systems, tax privileges and talent allocation. At the launch, he also expressed hope that Beijing will regularly issue bonds in Macau in the future, so as to foster a beneficial market environment capable of attracting a larger number of market participants.

Wang Kebing, chief of the Department of Finance of the Ministry of Finance, said the central government had firmly supported the moderately diversified development and transformation of Macau's economy. He added that the construction of the bond market and the development of modern finance are key to achieving the aforementioned goal.

Wang said Beijing's support has been demonstrated through various activities, such as the launch of bonds for the first time in Macau in 2019.

The Bank of Communications is a co-leading, bookkeeping and financial agent bank for this batch of bonds.

AD



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Presented by:
Prof. Glenn McCartney PhD, MBE

britcham Brews & Buzz - Thursday, 22 Sep 2022

In the 2.5 years backdrop of COVID-19 lockdowns, travel restrictions and plummeting gaming revenues, the casino concession retendering process is well underway - 14 September is the final day for accepting bids. The Macao authorities have put forward criteria to judge casino tenders and award new 10-year casino concessions. But how will all this play out in the bigger picture of Macao's future gaming revenue recovery, visitation mix and tourism position?



Prof. Glenn McCartney PhD, MBE is Associate Dean (Curriculum and Teaching) and Associate Professor in International Integrated Resort Management at the Faculty of Business Administration, University of Macau. He is also the British Honorary Consul in Macao, as well as a Founder and subsequent Honorary Member of Britcham.

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RELIGION

CHINESE CHURCH MEMBERS SEEKING ASYLUM OVERSEAS FEAR PERSECUTION

TASSANEE VEJPONGSA
& DAKE KANG, BANGKOK

DAYS after flying to Thailand to seek asylum, members of a Chinese church huddled in a restaurant to share their stories with journalists. But when they peered over their shoulders, they spotted strangers taking videos of them with cellphones.

In seconds, they scattered, fearing they were being followed supposedly by Chinese agents - a suspicion which couldn't be confirmed.

"Political pressure is rising, and there's more and more ideological control," said Pastor Pan Yongguang, whose church has been on the run for years. "The persecution is growing worse."

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs said the matter was "not a diplomatic question" when asked for comment.

The story of the exile of the Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church illustrates how the Chinese government is going to increasing lengths to control religious faith and its citizens, even far outside its borders.

Since leaving China for South Korea's resort island of Jeju three years ago, Pan's 61 congregants "have been stalked, harassed, and received threatening calls and messages despite fleeing hundreds of kilometers away," he said. Relatives back in China "have been summoned, interrogated and intimidated."

In China, Christians are legally allowed to worship only in churches affiliated with Communist Party-controlled religious groups, but for decades, the authorities largely tolerated independent,



Members of the Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church in China prepare to submit their applications for asylum at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees UNHCR office in Bangkok

unregistered "house churches." They have tens of millions of worshippers, possibly outnumbering those in the official groups.

However, in recent years, house churches have come under heavy pressure, with many prominent ones shut down. Unlike previous crackdowns, such as Beijing's ban of Falun Gong, a spiritual movement it labels a cult, the authorities have also targeted some believers not explicitly opposed to the Chinese state.

Most members of Pan's church are young, married middle-class couples, with their children making up about half the group.

Bob Fu, founder of ChinaAid, a Christian group helping Pan, cited tightening controls on religion aimed at rooting out foreign influence and bolstering national security.

"What national security threat?" Fu said. "They're not going to public squares, they're not trying to shame the Chinese government. They're just trying to seek religious freedom."

Ministering in China was never easy, Pan said. Since starting the church in 2012, it has had to move from house to house as authorities ordered landlords to turn them away. Police kept close track of church gatherings, recording attendees and hauling Pan in for questioning from time to time. The questions grew sharper after they discovered he was ordained into the Presbyterian church in Philadelphia, sharper still after new religious regulations in 2018. Police homed in on his ties overseas.

"They want to seal off Chinese churches from the outside world," Pan said.

Pan said the church began thinking of leaving after his friend, an outspoken pastor from the same denomination, was arrested.

The final straw came after millions began taking to the streets of Hong Kong in 2019 to protest Beijing's tightening grip on the city. Pan said they had no connection to the protests, but authorities

in their city of Shenzhen on the mainland bordering Hong Kong were on high alert under "quasi-martial law." The church came under excruciating pressure.

Pan decided it was time to put the matter to a vote. Most members elected to leave.

"At the time, I thought maybe we could return after things settled down," said Nie Yunfeng, who joined the church months after its founding. "I never imagined things would get this bad."

At the beginning of this year, her parents were summoned by police and questioned about Nie's faith, as were dozens of relatives of other church members who had left for South Korea. Officers all over the country, from central Hubei province to tropical Hainan island, threatened the relatives with confiscation of state benefits or the closure of their businesses if the congregants didn't return to China.

"Your descendants may suffer," they told Nie's terrified father. "Tell them to come back right now, or

else they will face serious consequences."

Officers found Pan's brother, sisters and mother and accused Pan of "treason," "collusion with foreign forces" and "subversion of state power." Evidence obtained by Pan and seen by the AP indicates that state security was ordered to investigate the church.

They left South Korea for Thailand after meetings with local and U.S. officials made it clear that prospects for refuge were dim. Despite being home to a large, active Christian population, South Korea's cultural and ethnic homogeneity can make it unfriendly toward refugees. Government statistics show less than 1% of asylum seekers were granted refuge there last year.

So, the church decided to flee again. On Monday, church members gathered outside the United Nations refugee office in Bangkok. They piled manila envelopes stuffed with asylum papers on a mailbox hanging by the entrance.

In Bangkok, members have split between different hotels and attend Sunday service on Zoom, wary of being tracked by Chinese police. They spend their days praying, worrying about an uncertain future.

Xie Jianqing, a church elder, said the transition has been tough. The church members, largely white-collar workers in the glittering high-tech metropolis of Shenzhen, had to get used to picking fruit and digging dirt in the volcanic soil of Jeju island. Now, they have no work, and their future is even cloudier.

Still, such sacrifices are worth it, Xie said. In China, he wasn't able to give his children the religious upbringing he wanted because state schools are compulsory and mandate an atheist, communism-infused curriculum. Abroad, he said, his children can learn about the God he believes in.

"We're willing to pay this price," he said. "God always has the best plan." MDT/AP

HONG KONG

Speech therapists convicted of sedition over books

FIVE Hong Kong speech therapists were convicted of sedition yesterday after they printed a series of children's books about sheep and wolves that a court said was aimed at inciting hatred against authorities.

The five executive committee members of the General Union of Hong Kong Speech Therapists could face up to two years imprisonment. They had pleaded not guilty to the charge of

conspiring to print, publish, distribute and display and/or reproduce seditious publications.

Authorities have cracked down on dissent in Hong Kong since pro-democracy protests in 2019, arresting dozens of activists while others have fled abroad. The clampdown has led to criticism that China's ruling Communist Party has reneged on a 1997 pledge when Hong Kong was handed over from Britain to China

to retain the city's Western-style freedoms, including free speech.

The five — Lorie Lai, Melody Yeung, Sidney Ng, Samuel Chan and Fong Tsz-ho — had been remanded in custody for over a year prior to yesterday's conviction.

They were arrested in July 2021, after they published three books with stories that revolved around a village of sheep that has to deal with wolves from a different village.

The sheep take action like going on strike or escaping by boat, according to the synopses published on the association's website. Police said that the stories published in the books paralleled the incidents linked to political unrest in Hong Kong, such as the 12 Hong Kong activists who were arrested at sea while attempting to flee the city.

The convicted speech therapists will face sentencing on Sep. 10. MDT/AP



AP FILE PHOTO



DIPLOMACY

Putin and Xi to meet in Uzbekistan next week, official says

RUSSIAN President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping plan to meet next week in Uzbekistan, a Russian official said yesterday, announcing a summit that could signal another step in warming ties between two powers that are increasingly facing off against the West.

The meeting at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization — a political, economic and security

forum that China and Russia dominate — comes at delicate times for both leaders.

Putin is dealing with the economic and political fallout of his war in Ukraine that has left Russia more isolated. Xi, meanwhile, is also facing a slowing economy as he seeks a third five-year term as Communist Party leader. While he's expected to secure it, that would represent a break with precedent. Both have seen their

countries' relations with the West deteriorate.

Russian Ambassador to China Andrei Denisov told reporters that the two would meet at the organization's summit in the Uzbek city of Samarkand on Sept. 15-16. "We are actively preparing for it," Denisov was quoted by Russia's state news agency Tass as saying.

The visit to Uzbekistan, if it goes ahead, would be part of Xi's first foreign trip in 2½ years. Xi

has only left mainland China once — to make a one-day visit to the semi-autonomous city of Hong Kong — since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak in late 2019.

When asked about the trip, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning told a daily briefing yesterday: "On your question, I have nothing to offer."

Moscow and Beijing have increasingly aligned their foreign policies to oppose liberal demo-

cratic forces in Asia, Europe and beyond, making a stand for authoritarian rule with tight borders and little regard for free speech, minority rights or opposition politics.

The Russian military held sweeping military drills that ended yesterday in the country's east that involved forces from China, another show of increasingly close ties between the two.

Each leader may also be hoping to bolster his standing at home with the meeting. For Putin, it's an opportunity to show that he still has powerful allies. For Xi, it could be a chance to be seen as standing up to Western opposition to the Ukraine war and burnish his nationalist credentials at a time when relations with the U.S. have grown increasingly tense over trade, technology, human rights issues and its threats to attack Taiwan.

Coming just ahead of China's party congress, the overseas visits would also show Xi as confident of his position.

Putin and Xi last met in Beijing in February, weeks before the Kremlin sent troops into Ukraine. The two presidents oversaw the signing of an agreement pledging that relations between the sides would have "no limits."

While offering its tacit support for Russia's campaign there, China has sought to appear neutral and avoid possible repercussions from supporting the Russian economy amid international sanctions.

Even though Moscow and Beijing in the past rejected the possibility of forging a military alliance, Putin has said that such a prospect can't be ruled out. He also has noted that Russia has been sharing highly sensitive military technologies with China that helped significantly bolster its defense capability. **MDT/AP**

SICHUAN

Earthquake deaths rise to 74 as lockdown anger grows

THE death toll in this week's earthquake in western China has jumped to 74 with another 26 people still missing, the government reported yesterday, as frustration rose with uncompromising COVID-19 lockdown measures that prevented residents from leaving their buildings after the shaking.

The 6.8 magnitude quake that struck just after noon Monday in Sichuan province caused extensive damage to homes in the Ganze Tibetan Autonomous Region and shook buildings in the provincial capital of Chengdu, who-



se 21 million citizens are under a strict COVID-19 lockdown.

Following the quake, police and health workers refused to allow anxious

residents of apartment buildings out, adding to anger over the govern-

ment's strict "zero-COVID policy" mandating lockdowns, quarantines and other restrictions, even while the rest of the world has largely reopened.

Footage circulating online showed residents of the central city of Wuhan, where the pandemic is believed to have originated in late 2019, chanting "lift the lockdown, refuse to be tested" at police.

The restrictions have prompted protests online and in person, rare in China's tightly controlled society where the all-powerful Communist Party can easily sentence people to

months or years in prison on loosely defined charges such as "picking quarrels and provoking trouble."

In all, 65 million Chinese in 33 cities, including seven provincial capitals, are currently under varying levels of lockdown. The government is also discouraging domestic travel during the Mid-Autumn Festival on Saturday and the weeklong National Holiday at the start of October.

Outbreaks have been reported in 103 cities, the highest since the early days of the pandemic in early 2020. **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



A firefighter works to extinguish a fire after a Russian attack that heavily damaged a residential building in Sloviansk

PUTIN'S WAR

Shelling resumes near Ukraine nuclear plant, despite risks

YURAS KARMANAU, KYIV

RUSSIA resumed shelling in the vicinity of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, a local official said yesterday, a day after the U.N. atomic watchdog agency pressed for the warring sides to carve out a safe zone there to protect against a possible catastrophe.

The city of Nikopol, located on the opposite bank of the Dnieper River from Europe's largest nuclear power plant, was fired on with rockets and heavy artillery, regional governor Valentyn Reznichenko said.

The reports of nearby shelling, which couldn't be independently verified, have caused international alarm. The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Rafael Grossi, warned the U.N. Security Council that "something very, very catastrophic could take place" at Zaporizhzhia.

"There are fires, blackouts and other things at the (plant) that force us to prepare the local population for the consequences of the nuclear danger," Reznichenko said.

The potential peril led the U.N. atomic watchdog agency to urge Russia and Ukraine to establish a "nuclear safety

and security protection zone" around the plant.

There are fears the fighting could trigger a catastrophe on the scale of the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. The plant was built during the Soviet era and is one of the 10 biggest in the world.

Neither Moscow nor Kiev officials would immediately commit to the idea of a safety zone, saying more details of the proposal were needed.

The plant is currently generating electricity only to power its safety systems, a senior Ukrainian official said.

Any further disruption could force the plant to use a back-up diesel generator, but that would entail bringing four diesel transport trucks a day through the fighting, said Oleh Korikov, acting Chief State Inspector for the Nuclear and Radiation Safety of Ukraine.

"We could potentially be in a situation where we run out of diesel," he said. "And this can lead to an accident with damage to the active zone of the reactors, and, accordingly, the release of radioactive products into the environment."

Authorities could consider shutting down the plant, he said, without offering details about how that would work.

Russian President Vladimir Putin defied pressure to halt

the war, saying yesterday that Moscow will forge ahead with its military offensive in Ukraine until it achieves its goals. He also mocked Western attempts to stop Russia with sanctions.

The eastern city of Sloviansk came under Russian fire yesterday morning, damaging a school and another building, according to the head of the city administration Vadym Lyakh.

Firefighters in the city dug deep into the still-smoldering rubble of an apartment building and removed at least one body bag.

Chunks of bricks, masonry and concrete lay among the torn branches of nearby trees, mixed with broken glass and roof tiles. Metal doors, buckled by the force of the blast, hung off their hinges.

The strike came at around 4 a.m., said local resident Raisa Smelkova, 75, who lives in another part of the building. She and her husband were unhurt.

Smelkova and her husband lived through the previous war in Ukraine in 2014, when Russia annexed the Crimea region. But this time, she said, things are much worse.

"What is happening now is not just scary, it's gruesome," she said. "There is more destruction. Everything is worse.

Just everything."

Three civilians were killed in Russian shelling in the Donetsk region, the Ukrainian presidential office said. Kharkiv city was hit by rockets twice during the night.

But Ukrainian forces have taken control of an unspecified number of towns in the Kherson region, according to Nataliya Humenyuk, a spokesperson for the southern military command. She said details would come later from the military leadership.

The U.K. defense ministry said there had been heavy fighting on three fronts: in the north, near Kharkiv; in the east in the Donbas; and in the south in Kherson Oblast.

Amid a Ukrainian counterattack in the east, "multiple concurrent threats spread across 500 kilometers will test Russia's ability to coordinate operational design and reallocate resources across multiple groupings of forces," the ministry said.

The Russian military held large-scale military drills that began last week and ended yesterday in the country's east that involved forces from China. It was seen as another show of increasingly close ties between Moscow and Beijing amid tensions with the West over the military action in Ukraine. **MDT/AP**

this day in history

2000 FRENCH FUEL PROTESTS SPREAD TO UK



The fuel protests which have been crippling France for the past week have now reached Britain with a series of actions across the country.

The protesters - mainly road hauliers and farmers - are displaying their anger at Europe's highest fuel prices, which are due to rise another 2p per litre within the next few days.

This afternoon there was a 100 lorry "go-slow" protest on the A1 in Tyne and Wear and a convoy of 200-300 people set off to Wales to block the Texaco refinery near Pembroke.

The actions follow blockades at oil installations at Ellesmere Port in Cheshire and Hemel Hempstead in Hertfordshire.

The chairman of the Farmers for Action UK group said the demonstrations were only the beginning of a "winter of unrest".

A taxi driver taking part in the A1 protest said drivers were frustrated with their plight being ignored by the government.

"Everything's gone up and our money's gone down, so that's why we feel so strongly - we're losing out all the time, we're always on the sharp end," he said.

But the Transport Minister, Lord McDonald, said the government was in tune with motorists.

He told the BBC that Chancellor Gordon Brown had reduced road taxes and stopped fuel duty escalating as it had done under the Conservatives.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

The protests spread rapidly and gained widespread public support.

Although the protesters did not actively stop tankers leaving refineries, some drivers were reluctant to cross the unofficial picket lines.

The lack of fuel crippled Britain, preventing vital deliveries to supermarkets, hospitals - and petrol stations.

Food and fuel rationing became commonplace across the country, and the government had to resort to using emergency powers to get tankers moving.

The protests ended on 14 September, but UK Prime Minister Tony Blair ruled out giving in to public opinion and cutting taxes to bring fuel prices down.

TRADE

CHINA'S EXPORT GROWTH SINKS IN AUGUST, IMPORTS SHRINK

CHINA'S trade weakened in August as high energy prices, inflation and anti-virus measures weighed on global and Chinese consumer demand, while imports of Russian oil and gas surged.

Exports rose 7% over a year ago to \$314.9 billion, decelerating from July's 18% expansion, customs data showed yesterday. Imports contracted by 0.2% to \$235.5 billion, compared with the previous month's already weak 2.3% growth.

Demand for Chinese exports has softened as Western economies cool and the Federal Reserve and central banks in Europe and Asia raise interest rates to contain surging inflation. At home, repeated closures of Chinese cities to fight virus outbreaks has weighed on consumers' willingness to spend.

"The slowdown in China's export sector is adding to headwinds for the Chinese economy," said Rajiv Biswas of S&P Global Market Intelligence in a report. Lack of import growth highlights "continued weakness of Chinese



domestic demand."

Growth in the world's second-largest economy fell to 2.5% in the first half of 2022, less than half the ruling Communist Party's 5.5% annual target, after Shanghai and other industrial centers were shut down to fight virus outbreaks.

Factories have reopened, but restrictions more recently in areas including the southern business

center of Shenzhen weighed on activity. So has a dry summer that left reservoirs in the southwest unable to generate hydropower and disrupted river shipping.

The International Monetary Fund and private sector forecasters have trimmed their already low growth forecasts.

China's global trade surplus widened by 36.1% over a year earlier to \$79.4 billion.

Exports to the United States sank 3.8% from a year ago to \$49.8 billion while imports of American goods declined 7.3% to \$13 billion. The politically sensitive trade surplus with the United States that helped to spark a tariff war narrowed by 2.4% to \$36.7 billion.

President Joe Biden has left in place tariff hikes imposed by his predecessor, Donald Trump, in a fight over Beijing's technology de-

velopment tactics. Beijing retaliated by raising its own import duties and told Chinese companies to stop buying American exports.

Envoys from the two sides talk by phone but have yet to announce a date to resume negotiations.

Imports from Russia, mostly oil and gas, surged 59.3% to \$11.2 billion as China appeared to take advantage of discounts offered by the Kremlin to attract buyers in the face of Western sanctions over its war on Ukraine.

China's purchases of Russian energy irritate Washington and its allies but don't violate sanctions on Moscow. Last year, China bought 20% of Russian crude exports, according to the International Energy Agency.

Beijing declared ahead of the February invasion that it had a "no limits" friendship with Moscow. It criticizes the sanctions but has avoided helping President Vladimir Putin for fear of losing access to Western markets and the global banking system.

Exports to Russia rose 26.5% to \$8 billion.

Exports to the 27-nation European Union tumbled 18.4% to \$51.3 billion, reflecting weak European demand.

Imports of European goods plunged 33.1% to \$26 billion. China's trade surplus with Europe widened by 5.4% to \$25.3 billion. MDT/AP

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FOOTBALL

Mbappé, Haaland shine in Champions League, Benzema injured

MATTIAS KARÉN

KYLIAN Mbappé and Erling Haaland took their high-flying scoring acts into Europe as the Champions League returned yesterday [Macau time], while last season's standout star Karim Benzema limped off with an injury after less than 30 minutes.

Mbappé and Haaland both netted two goals as their respective clubs Paris Saint Germain and Manchester City began their European campaigns with victories, underlining just why those two teams are again among the favorites for the title.

Real Madrid's chances of defending its crown probably depend largely on having a fully fit Benzema, but the France forward had to come off with an apparent knee injury in the 30th minute against Celtic. Second-half goals from Vinícius Júnior, Luka Modric and Eden Hazard still secured a 3-0 win for the Spanish giant in Glasgow.

Benzema was in a league of his own in the competition last season, netting 15 goals in 12 games to lead Madrid to the title. But Mbappé and Haaland look ready to challenge the Frenchman for the status of Europe's top striker as they try to lead their clubs to an elusive first Champions League title.

The 23-year-old Mbappé, who has seven goals in five league games so far, scored his double in the first 22 minutes of a 2-1 home win over Juventus to become the youngest player to reach 35 goals in the competition — beating the mark held by teammate Lionel Messi.

The 22-year-old Haaland has 25 goals in 20 Champions League games — also a record — after scoring once in each half of Man City's 4-0 win at Sevilla. The Norway striker, who has 10 goals in six Premier League games this season, has now netted on his Champions League debut for three clubs — Salzburg, Borussia Dortmund and City.

Also, Dinamo Zagreb upset Chelsea 1-0 at home while Serie A champion AC Milan was held to a 1-1 draw at Salzburg.

PSG 2, JUVENTUS 1

Mbappé's opening goal for PSG came after just five minutes following some audacious link-up play from Neymar.

Mbappé played a short pass to the Brazilian before making a run into the area, with Neymar

AP PHOTO



PSG's Kylian Mbappe celebrates after scoring his second goal

holding onto the ball just long enough before chipping it over a defender and into the path of the France striker, who volleyed it first-time past goalkeeper Mattia Perin.

The second came after he exchanged passes with Achraf Hakimi and beat Perin with another first-time finish. United States midfielder Weston McKennie pulled one back for Juventus in the 53rd, creating a tense finale in Paris.

In the other Group H match, Benfica defeated Maccabi Haifa 2-0.

DINAMO ZAGREB 1, CHELSEA 0

Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang couldn't give Chelsea's stuttering attack any kind of instant spark as the Blues failed to impress once again following an inconsistent start to the season.

Aubameyang made his Chelsea debut after his move from Barcelona, playing with a face mask to protect his injured jaw, and had one goal ruled out for offside while his teammates repeatedly failed to beat goalkeeper Dominik Livakovi.

Instead it was Mislav Oršić who continued his scoring

streak against English teams, racing away from Wesley Fofana — another of Chelsea's marquee signings — to score on a breakaway in the 13th minute.

"It's an underperformance from us," said Chelsea manager Thomas Tuchel, whose team has lost twice in the Premier League already. "We are clearly not there where we need to be. At the moment everything is missing."

Noah Okafor put Salzburg ahead against Milan near the half-hour mark by shooting through the legs of goalkeeper Mike Maignan, but Alexis Saelemaekers equalized before the break.

Rafael Leão then nearly won it for Milan in stoppage time when he had a shot deflected off the post.

U.S. international Sergiño Dest came on in the 57th minute for his Milan debut following his transfer last week from Barcelona, one of six Americans in action on the night.

SEVILLA 0, MAN CITY 4

Haaland could well be the piece that Man City has been missing as it repeatedly came up short in Europe under Pep

Guardiola.

The Norwegian again showed his uncanny ability to be in the right place at the right time as he was on hand to steer in a cross from Kevin De Bruyne in the 21st minute and then tapped in a rebound for the third goal in the 67th. Phil Foden and Ruben Dias scored the other goals for City in a dominant performance at Estadio Ramón Sánchez-Pizjuán.

Also in Group G, Marco Reus took his tally to 22 goals in 57 Champions League matches by opening the scoring in Borussia Dortmund's 3-0 win over Copenhagen. U.S. international Gio Reyna set up the other two goals for Dortmund, exchanging passes with English teenager Jude Bellingham in a slick move for the third.

CELTIC 0, REAL MADRID 3

If Benzema has to miss significant time for Madrid, Hazard signaled that he may be ready to pick up some of the slack.

The Belgium playmaker — who was on the bench before replacing Benzema — set up the first two goals before scoring the third himself against

Celtic. It was his first Champions League goal in 651 days and first in any competition since January.

Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti was hopeful that Benzema will be back soon, though.

"It seems not so serious," Ancelotti said about the striker's injury.

Callum McGregor had nearly put Celtic ahead in the first half when he struck a fierce shot against the post in the 21st minute.

In the other Group F game, Maryan Shved scored twice as Ukrainian club Shakhtar Donetsk beat RB Leipzig 4-1. Shakhtar's domestic season only recently started after a lengthy break because of Russia's invasion but the team got some help from Leipzig goalkeeper Peter Gulacsi for the first goal.

Gulacsi made the blunder of the evening by giving the ball away to Shved as he stood well outside his own area, giving the midfielder a simple finish into an empty net.

Leipzig leveled with a goal by French defender Mohamed Simakan in the 57th but Shved restored the lead one minute later. MDT/AP

OPINION

China Daily
 Editorial, China Daily

CHINA AND INDIA CAN BE PILLARS OF ASIAN CENTURY

It is estimated that India overtook the United Kingdom to be the world's fifth-largest economy in March, after the United States, China, Japan and Germany.

China is happy to see India's development. The two countries are partners and opportunities to each other, rather than threats, and both China and India are committed to multilateralism and share a common interest in maintaining regional peace and security.

China therefore supports India playing a more constructive role in the international arena where it can add its voice to express the positions and appeals of developing countries, which is conducive to making the international order more equitable.

With the world once again facing division along Cold War lines, India is one of the few countries that can bridge the divide. On the one hand, India is a member of the US-led Quad and a participant in the "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity" initiated by the Joe Biden administration. On the other hand, India maintains friendly and cooperative relations with Russia. It is also a member of BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and maintains institutional communication and cooperation with China and other developing economies.

But for India to enjoy more diplomatic space it needs to maintain its strategic independence. India will not become a major power if it submits to being a piece on Washington's game board.

The pressure the US has been exerting on India for its neutrality on the Ukraine crisis speaks volumes of Washington's intentions to solicit New Delhi to participate in its games. To contain China is a major reason that the US is trying to curry favor with India. And New Delhi should realize that Washington will deem India a threat should it seek to extend its regional influence.

India should take full advantage of its role as a bridge between the two sides of the divide that is forming, and maintain its strategic independence. By doing so, it can set itself at a higher stage to better fulfill its international responsibility as a major player in the world.

China and India have a lot to do to improve the well-being of their people and their common interests far outweigh their differences. They should not let their border dispute, which is essentially a legacy problem of the colonial era, be an obstacle preventing them from advancing their partnership.

The two neighbors have no reasons not to work together to usher in the "Asian Century" — something the early generations of leaders of the two sides envisioned decades ago when they firmly upheld the nonalignment principle and Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence with other developing countries.

To do so, India needs to maintain its long-term strategic independence and not let the US drive a wedge between it and China.

WHO: COVID CASES DROP EVERYWHERE, BUT PANDEMIC NOT OVER

The number of new coronavirus cases fell everywhere in the world last week by about 12%, according to the World Health Organization's latest weekly review of the pandemic issued yesterday.

The U.N. health agency reported that there were just under 4.2 million new infections last week and about 13,700 deaths - a 5% drop.

"This is very encouraging, but there is no guarantee these trends will persist," said WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus at a press briefing. "The most dangerous thing is to assume (that) they will," he said. He added that even though the

number of weekly reported deaths have plummeted more than 80% since February, one person still dies with COVID-19 every 44 seconds and that most of those deaths are avoidable.

In its pandemic report, WHO said COVID-19 deaths dropped in Southeast Asia, Europe and the Middle East, but increased in Africa, the Americas and the Western Pacific.

Maria Van Kerkhove, WHO's technical lead on COVID-19, noted that the virus has not yet settled into a seasonal pattern and that its continued evolution will require constant surveillance and possible tweaks to diagnostics, treatments and vaccines.

THE BUZZ



East Timorese President Jose Ramos-Horta (left) and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese

EAST TIMOR PRESIDENT HORTA PUSHES BACK ON ENVIRONMENTAL CRITICISM

NICK PERRY, WELLINGTON

GIVE our country \$100 billion — or stop lecturing us about making money from fossil fuels.

That was the message East Timor President and Nobel Peace Prize winner José Ramos-Horta had yesterday for those raising environmental concerns about his nation's proposal to build a new gas-processing plant.

Ramos-Horta was speaking in Australia after the two countries signed a new defense agreement. He delivered his remarks at the National Press Club in Canberra with humor but also with an edge.

East Timor, an impoverished nation of 1.5 million, is hoping to break a 20-year deadlock with the new Australian government over the development of the Greater Sunrise gas field that lies beneath the seabed separating the two countries.

Australia wants the gas piped to an existing gas hub at its northern city of Darwin. East Timor expects more economic benefit if the gas is piped to its south coast.

Ramos-Horta was visiting Australia in part to try and resolve the dispute. A reporter asked how East

Timor could justify the project given the climate impacts.

Ramos-Horta replied that gas was cleaner than some fossil fuels. He then listed countries that had benefitted from fossil fuels, including the U.S. and Japan, and then later China and India.

"But first the Europeans, you were the ones who polluted the whole world with coal, with oil, and everything that you can imagine," he said. "And we, unfortunately, discover oil and gas only now. And the Europeans are lecturing us: We have to move away from fossil fuel."

He said the gas field could generate \$100 billion or more in revenue.

"I have no authority to make any proposal, but I can make one off the top of my head," Ramos-Horta said. "The Europeans, Australia, the U.S., give us \$100 billion and we give up on the Greater Sunrise development. As simple as that."

Earlier yesterday, Australia and East Timor signed a defense agreement aimed at increasing the military and security cooperation, especially along their shared maritime border.

The agreement aims to increase joint military exercises and training, as well as cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

"We have been working towards a DCA (defense cooperation agreement) for over a decade and today's signing is a significant step forward in our partnership," said Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese.

The agreement comes at a time of heightened tensions in the region, particularly after the Solomon Islands in April signed a new security pact with China.

Asked about his views on the move by the Solomon Islands, Ramos-Horta said he wasn't that familiar with the nation but that the wider region is a "very sensitive strategic location."

"Any leader that is serious about being a leader, you have to be sensitive to your neighbors," he said. "Don't bring in extraterritorial, regional interests, powers, that might not be welcomed by our neighbors."

Ramos-Horta shared the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize with East Timorese Bishop Carlos Belo for their efforts to end conflict in their homeland. **MDT/AP**



Ukraine The U.N. atomic watchdog agency urged Russia and Ukraine on Tuesday to establish a "nuclear safety and security protection zone" around the Zaporizhzhia power plant amid mounting fears the fighting could trigger a catastrophe in a country still scarred by the Chernobyl disaster. "We are playing with fire, and something very, very catastrophic could take place," Rafael Grossi, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, warned the U.N. Security Council, days after leading an inspection visit to the plant. **More on p8**

Germany's parliament paid tribute to Mikhail Gorbachev yesterday, holding a minute of silence for the former Soviet leader who paved the way for German reunification 32 years ago. Flags at the parliament's Reichstag building in Berlin were lowered to half-staff as lawmakers opened the day's session, one of the first since Gorbachev's death last week, with the tribute.

Emirates Gulf Arab countries yesterday asked Netflix to remove "offensive content" on the streaming service, apparently targeting programs that show people who are gay and lesbian. A joint statement issued on behalf of a committee of the Gulf Cooperation Council made the request, saying the unspecified programs "contradict Islamic and societal values and principles."



U.N. humanitarian chief predicted that at least \$1 billion will be needed urgently to avert famine in Somalia in the coming months and early next year when two more dry seasons are expected to compound the historic drought that has hit the Horn of Africa nation. Martin Griffiths said in a video briefing from Somalia's capital Mogadishu that a new report from an authoritative panel of independent experts says there will be a famine in Somalia between October and December "if we don't manage to stave it off".