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AP PHOTO



Philippines Nobel Peace Prize winner Maria Ressa (pictured) and her online news company were cleared yesterday of tax evasion charges she said were among a slew of legal cases used by former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte to try to muzzle critical reporting. The Court of Tax Appeals ruled that prosecutors failed to prove beyond reasonable doubt that Ressa and Rappler Holdings Corp. evaded tax payments in four instances after raising capital through partnerships with two foreign investors. Rappler welcomed the ruling as a “triumph of facts over politics.”

Indonesia A magnitude 7.0 earthquake shook eastern Indonesia and southern Philippines on Wednesday, with no damage immediately reported and no tsunami warning issued. Some residents tried to escape from houses in the Indonesian town of Tobelo in North Maluku province. The U.S. Geological Survey said the quake occurred 48 kilometers deep under the sea, centered 154 kilometers northwest of Tobelo.

AP PHOTO



UK The Church of England said it will allow blessings for same-sex, civil marriages for the first time but same-sex couples still will not be allowed to marry in its churches. The decision followed five years of debate and consultation. It is expected to be outlined in a report to the church’s national assembly, the General Synod, which meets in London next month. Under the proposals, the Church of England’s stance that the sacrament of matrimony is restricted to unions between one man and one woman will not change.

MDT ARCHIVE



Macau lower court sentenced Suncity’s boss Alvin Chau to 18 years in prison, lawyers to appeal

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MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER



STATEMENT

Liu Xianfa*

CHINA'S COVID-19 POLICY IS SCIENTIFIC, TARGETED AND EFFECTIVE

Recently, in light of the evolving situation, China has been refining its COVID-19 policies which adopt the measures against Class-B, instead of the more serious Class-A infectious diseases, in accordance with the law. This is an adjustment to China's response approach based on a comprehensive assessment of the mutation of the virus, the COVID-19 situation, and ongoing response efforts including a high vaccine rate. It helps make response more science-based, targeted and effective, restore normalcy to people's work and life, meet regular medical and health needs, and minimize the impact of COVID-19 on economic and social operations.

However, a few countries, in disregard of science and facts, have insisted on taking discriminatory entry restriction measures targeting China. Some Western media discredited China's COVID-19 policy adjustment, alleging that China's COVID-19 response has failed. They deliberately hyped up and even misrepresented China's COVID-19 policy adjustment, and yet avoided reporting on the deficiencies and heavy price paid in their own countries' COVID-19 response. In fact, this is nothing but double standards and is clearly against journalistic ethics.

Since COVID-19 began, China has always put the people's lives above all else, made the best effort to protect people and poured all resources into treating every patient. Over the past three years, we have effectively responded to five global COVID-19 waves and avoided widespread infections with the original strain and the Delta variant, which are relatively more pathogenic than the other variants. We have greatly reduced the number of severe cases and deaths, bought precious time for the development and application of vaccines and therapeutics, and for getting medical supplies and other resources ready. The achievements are there for all to see.

Recently, as the virulence of the Omicron sub-variants wanes and Chinese vaccine uptake and response experience grow, China has downgraded the management of the virus and shifted the focus to health protection and severe cases prevention. This is a timely and necessary change, based on science and adopted from a long-term perspective, still with the people as the center. It in no way means letting go of the virus or a complete exit from prevention and control measures. We continue to make every effort to meet people's drug

needs and protect key groups and rural residents, to further ensure our measures are well-targeted and effective. Many provinces have gone through the infection peak and people's lives are returning to normal. Facts have proved that China is well prepared for the battle and we have the confidence and ability to score new victories. Those who hype that "China's medical system is collapsing" are sheer ruffians.

Since COVID-19 began, China has not only safeguarded the lives, health and safety of its own people, but also actively called on the international community to unite in fighting against the epidemic. We've taken the lead in proposing vaccines as international public goods. So far, we have provided 2.2 billion doses of vaccines and a large amount of anti-epidemic materials to the world, especially developing countries. As the prevention and control work has entered a new stage, China has implemented new policies in a smooth and orderly manner, and further optimized the entry and exit policies, making the exchange of Chinese and foreign personnel smoother. Our economic potential and vitality will be further released, and a series of newly introduced policies will have a superimposed effect, which will continue to bring more benefits to maintaining the stability and smoothness of the international supply and industry chains, promoting mutually beneficial cooperation among countries, and boosting the recovery and growth of the world economy.

Actions speak louder than words. With aforesaid facts, all people without prejudice will gain an objective and comprehensive understanding of China's policy adjustment. We strongly believe that from the experience of fighting against COVID-19 in the past three years, China will be able to effectively coordinate epidemic prevention and control with economic and social development, and win the final victory in fighting against the epidemic. The continuous optimization and adjustment of China's epidemic prevention and control policies will also provide a more stable and reliable turbine to the recovery of the world economy and help the world to end the epidemic as soon as possible.

***Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China in the Macau Special Administrative Region**

SUNCITY TRIAL

Court sentences Alvin

ANTHONY LAM & RENATO MARQUES

THE boss of the former casino intermediary, Suncity, Alvin Chau has been sentenced to 18 years in prison for illegal gambling, running a triad and major fraud, among others charges.

The verdict was handed down yesterday morning by the Court of First Instance.

Chau was charged with 289 allegations, of which 229 concern operating illicit gambling in authorized venues. The court convicted him of 103 of the 229 allegations. The remaining 126 charges were dropped due to the expiry of the statutes of limitations. Chau was found guilty on 59 other charges and was cleared of the charge related to money laundering.

The prosecution involves 21 defendants. Besides Chau, 12 other defendants were found guilty.

Cheung Ning Ning, Sou Iek Meng, Sou Cho Hou, Sou Kuai Weng, Lam Chi Chi, Lei Siu Chong, Pang Kexun and Zhou Yongjun were cleared of the charges against them.

The other convicted defendants received sentences ranging from suspended sentences to 15 years in jail. The fifth defendant, Cheung Chi Kin, whom the presiding judge described as operating a side betting scheme with Chau, was sentenced to 15 years in prison. The second defendant, Si Tou Chi Hou, was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Speaking after the court hearing yesterday, Pedro Leal, the lawyer who represented defendant Celestino Ali, said that he did not agree with the conviction, mainly on account of the allegations relating to illegal gambling and scams.

"I have already made

RENATO MARQUES



it clear in my concluding statements," the lawyer emphasized.

Leal also argued that the defendants were charged with crimes that were more severe than necessary – and that these in turn incur penalties that are more severe. The prosecution made charges under the statutes against triad gangs provided in Law No 6/97, which carries a more severe penalty than the charge widely considered appropriate: criminal organization.

Although the presiding judge explained the reason why the court had preferred triad gang to criminal organization statutes, the lawyer did not accept the justification.

"We know that this law was created at a special time and to tackle a particular type of crimes that are related to organized crime," Leal explained.

Concerning the defense's next move, the lawyer said he would discuss the conviction and meet with his client for a discussion.

"But I think he'll want to file an appeal," he added and thought that Chau would file for an appeal as well.

Apart from the fact that he saw no grounds for the conviction related to illegal gambling and fraud, the lawyer also felt that punishments were disproportionate between defendants even on the same allegations.

"What was proven is that Ali [was employed by] Suncity and that eventually got him sentenced to 15 years [imprisonment], when there are other defendants who have been sentenced to 10 years and had profited from illegal betting," he explained.

Speaking in the interests of his client, Leal protested

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Chau to 18 years jail, hefty fines



that “it was never proven that Ali had any link or practice on this illegal gaming or has had any benefit from it.”

The lawyer also commented on the court’s jurisdiction over crimes that took place outside Macau. He handled the topic with caution and said that, because of the rapid unfolding of events, he needs time to study the verdict.

He added, however, that the court noted that the illegal gaming activities “were promoted” in Macau, possibly providing grounds for the local court’s jurisdiction.

On the matter of compensation to the government and casino opera-

tors, the lawyer emphasized that he does not consider the accusation of fraud to be legitimate. Given this ground, he does not see any grounds for compensation either.

According to several media outlets, including public broadcaster TDM, Presiding Judge Lou Ieng Ha, while reading the judgment, recapped her view that Suncity used the word “operation” to refer to side betting. Her understanding was that “operation” is a very common term, and the association with side betting is therefore very difficult to establish.

Her opinion is that Suncity employed the codename tactic to co-

ver its tracks concerning side betting, since management was aware of the illegality of the practice.

Furthermore, the judge continued, several accounting clerks and accountants who worked for Suncity also reportedly worked at the company owned by Cheung. This implies that management approved of this arrangement allowing them to work for two companies at the same time.

Moreover, the fact that Chau’s secretary sent him voice messages about Cheung’s discussions related to side betting, besides departmental phones recording information about the “ope-

ration”, has led the presiding judge to believe that Chau and Cheung were complicit in the side betting scheme.

Chau had also been charged with aggravated money laundering, the only crime of which he was cleared. The presiding judge said that the evidence was sufficient to establish his guilt, because he and certain defendants had transferred the illegally earned interests using winding channels.

The reason why Chau was acquitted of the charge is that the cause of the allegations was based on phone betting, online betting and side betting, for which the maximum penalties are less than

three years of imprisonment. The judge did not find the penalty severe enough to convict him of aggravated money laundering.

The court ordered concerned defendants to compensate the Macau government and five of the six casino operators, who are co-plaintiffs in the civil case. The defendants must pay HKD6.52 billion to the government, HKD349 million to MGM, HKD770 million to Wynn, HKD290 million to Venetian, HKD550 million to Galaxy and HKD178 million to SJM.

Chau’s wife was present at yesterday’s hearing but did not comment following the verdict.

CUTTING TIES

SUNCITY has sought to cut ties with its former boss Alvin Chau following his arrest. The listed arm, Suncity Group Holdings Ltd. (which doesn’t run junket operations) was taken over by executive director Andrew Lo in July, and later renamed LET Group Holdings Ltd.

Since starting Suncity in 2007,

Chau developed the group into Macau’s dominant junket operator and branched out into overseas casinos from the Philippines to Russia, as well as side lines in entertainment, real estate and travel. His early career has remained shrouded in mystery while his personal life became tabloid fodder.

He was a former associate of notorious Macau triad boss, “Broken Tooth” Wan Kuok-koi, according to an Australian state government inquiry into Crown Resorts in 2020, and as reported by the Sydney Morning Herald.

Chau even found his way into China’s political scene, serving as a member of the Guangdong provincial committee of China’s top advisory body, the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference

from 2013 to 2017.

Before his arrest, Chau had become increasingly vocal in asserting his patriotism for mainland China.

In an interview with state media in 2020, Chau discussed how his entertainment unit co-funded the 2018 action blockbuster Operation Red Sea, about the Chinese navy evacuating expatriots from a fictional North African country torn by civil war.

GOV’T EXPECTS DAILY AVERAGE OF 47,000 ARRIVALS DURING CNY

The government said yesterday that it expects there will be on average 47,000 visitors arriving in Macau per day during the Lunar New Year holiday period, which in mainland China lasts seven days. It also expects that the peak arrivals will occur on the third day of the Lunar New Year, which is January 24 on the Gregorian calendar. The Public Security Police Force emphasized that it would deploy sufficient officers to maintain order, including but not limited to major events such as the Walk Freely on San Ma Lo, Lunar New Year Float Parade and fireworks display gala.

SHOPPING SPREE BLOSSOMING

Sellers at the Lunar New Year Floral Fair told local public broadcaster, Radio Macau, that the demand for flowers has been fluctuating, though overall revenues have risen. The most popular decorative flowers in recent days have been Orchid, Mandarin and Peach Blossoms. Some sellers operating outside the floral fair saw lower revenues due to higher delivery costs or other undisclosed reasons, despite the fact that people have recently become more eager to go shopping. Flower shoppers are seeing lower prices than in previous years, and demand for festive flowers has surged.

FORTUNE TOWER SEES YET ANOTHER FIRE

Block A of Edificio Fortune Tower, located on the Avenida Ouvidor Arriaga, saw a flat on its ninth floor on fire yesterday morning. The blaze required the evacuation of about 50 people. Four, including a 90-year-old woman, were sent to the hospital for smoke inhalation. The Fire Services Bureau (CB) disclosed that the fire started near the television set in a bedroom of the apartment. The main blaze area measured about 3 x 4 meters, and the flames were put out quickly. The walls were discolored by smoke. CB suspected that an electrical short-circuit was the cause of the fire.

CNY

MACAU AIR TRAFFIC TO REACH 50,000 PASSENGERS DURING HOLIDAYS

TAIPA airport is predicted to serve 50,000 passengers during the five-day Chinese New Year period, up 92.3% year-on-year, Macau Airport Company (CAM) said yesterday.

That traffic represents only 28% of the all-time high 180,000 passengers served over the equivalent period in pre-pandemic 2019 (5-10 February), according CAM.

Since Mainland China and Macau reopened their borders early this month, the airport has witnessed an accelerating resumption of flights.

According to Macau Daily News, CAM now serves 11 airlines flying to 29 destinations, including ten that were added recently. In addition to Air Macau, there are six airlines from the Mainland, two from Taiwan, and two from Southeast Asia.

More airlines are scheduled to resume flights in March, including Tigerair Taiwan, Hainan Airlines, Sichuan Airlines and Shenzhen Airlines. Charter flight operators are also planning to restart flights from Macau to overseas destina-

AP PHOTO



tions such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Palau.

The Macau Government Tourism Office last week said that daily inbound tourist arrivals through all entry channels during the Lunar New Year period are expected to reach between 40,000 and 50,000.

TRAVEL RUSH STARTS ALL OVER MAINLAND CHINA

The Chinese government expects over 2.1 billion journeys to be made during a 40-day travel pe-

riod around New Year's Day, which falls on Sunday, the Associated Press reported yesterday.

The relaxation of restrictions let loose a wave of pent-up travel desire, particularly around China's most important time for family gatherings. Referred to in China as the Spring Festival, it may be the only time of the year when urban workers return to their hometowns.

Hairdresser Wang Lidan is making an emotional Lunar New

Year journey from Beijing to her hometown in northeastern China — her first in three years after the government lifted its strict “zero-COVID” policy that kept millions of people at home and sparked protests.

“The restrictions are lifted, which made me relaxed. So I think it's time to go home,” Wang said before heading into Beijing Train Station for a trip to Heilongjiang province.

In December, China abruptly

dropped near-daily coronavirus testing and QR code monitoring of residents after public frustration boiled over into protests in Shanghai and other cities. This month, it dropped most remaining restrictions, including the demand that travelers from overseas must go into lengthy and expensive quarantine.

Many local governments had also imposed their own quarantine on travelers from outside the area, and it was those that Wang said had deterred her from leaving Beijing.

“If there was an outbreak in Beijing, I would have to be quarantined in my hometown. And when I came back to Beijing, I would be quarantined again,” she said.

“I would miss the Spring Festival and delay my return to work if I was quarantined twice. So inconvenient!”

While Lunar New Year has also become a popular time to travel overseas, airlines are still only gradually restarting international flights and government departments are just beginning to issue or renew travel documents.

Many countries have imposed testing requirements on travelers from China that the Foreign Ministry has protested, and worries remain about the spread of the virus in China since containment measures were lifted. **MDT/AP**

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'Wishing Well 2023 & Love Trees' initiative opens at Albergue SCM

ANew Year charity event in support of World Cancer Day, organized by CAC - Círculo dos Amigos da Cultura de Macau and sponsored by Macau Foundation, has opened to the public at Albergue SCM this week, and will run until March 18.

A note from the organizers says that the theme of this year is “Wishing Well and Love Trees.”

Since 2015 every Lunar New Year and Valentine's Day, the protective glass cover of the well in the Patio of Albergue SCM, in Bairro de S. Lázaro, is removed for the public to make New Year wishes.

The funds raised will be donated to different charities to support various groups and people in need, organizers said.

According to Albergue SCM's press release, to mark the World Can-



cer Day (February 4th of every year), the event this year will continue to support the charity Caritas-Macau “to promote love and the message of cherishing life, moreover to pray for an early end to the pandemic, and welcome a healthy and

vibrant new year!”
“All are welcome to make a wish and put the donations into the wishing well or donation box.”

The event is organized by CAC - Círculo dos Amigos da Cultura de Macau with free admission.

Electric faults cause majority of fires: CB

RENATO MARQUES

ELECTRICITY-RELATED issues are the cause of the higher number of fires in Macau, the Fire Services Bureau (CB) announced today in the presentation of their annual activity report.

According to the statement, of the 816 cases of fire recorded in 2022 (-4.23%), the majority related to short circuits and malfunctioning electric equipment.

This was also the cause of the recent blazes that affected street hawkers' stalls at Fai Chi Kei.

Other reasons mostly related to the burning of incense, joss papers, candles, and other religious items as well as cooking accidents. According to CB figures, in 2022 the brigade was called to 170 fires caused by burned food.

In total, the number of emergency call-outs for firemen rose 25.57% last year, equating to 11,694 more cases than in 2021.

Contributing significantly to this rise was the number of calls from ambulances which increased 24.72%. As the report explained, this was mostly due to the need for the CB to cooperate with health authorities in the transportation of confirmed Covid patients during the pandemic (until December 2022).

"With the entry of the transition period of the epidemic



in Macau, at the end of last year, the cases related to the calls from ambulances from the CB have registered a sharp increase in a short period, reaching an average of 400 calls per day," Commander Leong Lok Sam said, emphasizing the acute emergency for the CB at the time.

Leong noted that many of the cases were considered

"abusive" which contributed to the 46.21% increase in the "special cases" item of the report. According to the figures collected, about half of all calls for ambulances in Macau are considered abusive.

Leong advanced that there is a slow return to some normality with the number of calls from ambulances currently around 150 per day.

THREE FINED UNDER FIRE SAFETY FOR BUILDINGS

A total of three people have been fined by the CB under the new Legal Regime on Fire Safety of Buildings and Sites that entered into force on last August 17, Leong said yesterday. He noted that officially the CB only started to apply sanctions from October 17 after a period where warnings alone were issued.

Concerning the three closed cases that have resulted in fines, the CB said that the fines issued were due to the placing of pushcarts, chairs, cabinets and shoe racks in the common areas of the buildings that are considered escape routes and emergency exists in case of fire.

Such cases are considered serious administrative offenses under the new law.

Leong added that, in two of the three cases, the residents have already paid the fines.

INTELLIGENT FIREFIGHTING SOLUTIONS IN OPERATION

In reply to an inquiry from the media, the Commander also noted that the equipment acquired by the CB under the intelligent firefighting program is already in operation. It includes remotely operated surveillance cameras at the control center to provide decision-makers with a clear overview of the operations theater even when they are not on-site. The new equipment also includes drones for inspecting blazes in locations with difficult access, providing a fast and more accurate picture of the situation to aid the decision-making. These drones can also be used for incidents that are not fire-related to help assess the deployment of emergency rescue resources, Leong remarked. Leong gave the example of landslides and other situations that require the immediate deployment of search and rescue teams.

Fire department asserts that a contingency plan for EVs is in force

RENATO MARQUES

THE Fire Services Bureau (CB) already has a contingency plan in force to respond to traffic accidents or other incidents related to electric vehicles (EVs), Commander Leong Lok Sam told the Times.

"In case of either a traffic accident or another [type] of incident [related to EVs] we will execute our contingency plan dedicated to EVs," Leong said in response to an inquiry from the Times.

The CB Commander also added, "all members from every operations

post [fire station] need to possess knowledge about this rescue plan so we are following up on this matter to provide everyone with the necessary training."

Recently, the CB was criticized by online activists for the methods used to tackle a malfunction that occurred with an EV bus belonging to one of the public transport companies.

The EV bus was in Co-tai in the early hours of Saturday when smoke began issuing from the upper section of the roof.

Firemen deployed to the scene were seen using water hoses and

pouring large quantities of water into the area emitting the smoke.

Many criticized the procedure, since in any electricity-related fire a CO2 or dry powder fire extinguisher should be used instead of water.

Although a final explanation for the issue has not yet been given, according to information from the bus manufacturer, the area that was releasing thick smoke is not the location of the lithium batteries. Rather, it is the site of a battery cooling system which mostly operates when the batteries are charging or when there are

high air temperatures.

Commander Leong also told the Times that the CB has been in close communication with the different vehicle manufacturers to receive crucial information about the vehicles, the batteries, and other systems as well as the exact location of emergency devices.

Usually, EVs possess an emergency "power cut" (First responder Cut Loop) mechanism which allows the drivers, passengers, or anyone to cut the connection to the batteries in case of severe accident or fire to minimize damage.





Lai Ching-te speaks during a press conference at the Democratic Progressive Party's headquarters after being sworn in as the party's chairman in Taipei

TAIWAN

RULING PARTY'S NEW CHAIR VOWS TO SAFEGUARD DEMOCRACY

THE new head of Taiwan's ruling party who described himself as pro-independence vowed to uphold the self-ruled island's democracy in face of China's authoritarianism and continue with policies that have defined relations with China and the U.S.

Lai Ching-te, who is currently Taiwan's No. 2, yesterday assumed the new role of the Democratic Progress Party chair.

He won the internal party vote on Sunday and took over for the interim chair, after leader Tsai Ing-wen resigned as party chair when the DPP suffered a big loss in the mayoral races across Taiwan in November. Lai is also expected to be the party's candidate in the 2024 presidential elections.

"Facing China's threat in the future, our new mission is to guard Taiwan, promoting Taiwan's democracy, peace and prosperity," said Lai, a long-time politician who once served as mayor of the southern city of Tainan. "Peace is something everyone hopes for."

Observers will be watching out for how Lai handles China and U.S. relations if he does become the presidential candidate.

Lai had described himself as a "political worker who advocates for Taiwan independence" when he was serving in Tsai's Cabinet in the previous administration, but that did not preclude extending a "hand of friendship" to China.

He is likely to continue Tsai's foreign policy by working closely with Japan and the United States, said Kao-cheng Wang, a professor at Tamkang University and an expert in international relations.

"I think everyone is rather concerned with how he will handle cross-straits relations, because he had called himself a 'pragmatic worker for Taiwanese independence,'" Wang said. "This has become an important label that has stuck to him."

In his speech yesterday, Lai said he would carry on with Tsai's policy of "four continuances" that concern Taiwan and China, affirm Taiwan's democratic system and maintain that Taiwan and China do not belong together.

Taiwan and the mainland have been ruled separately since 1949 following a civil war.

Beijing views Taiwan as a Chinese territory that must be brought under its control, by force if necessary. A string of visits in recent months by foreign politicians to Taiwan, including by then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and delegates from the European Union, spurred displays of military might from both sides.

China refuses to acknowledge Taiwanese self-determination or recognize Tsai's government. The two sides have not had any formal contact since the first of her two terms began in 2016.

Lai has previously served as the head of the Executive Yuan — Taiwan's Cabinet — and was a doctor practicing internal medicine before joining politics.

"He is an honest politician," You Ying-lung, a former DPP vice secretary, said of Lai. "He will not play the role of a political risk-taker on cross-straits issues." **MDT/AP**

FINANCE

US, China officials agree to

FATIMA HUSSEIN, ZURICH

U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen met yesterday [Macau time] with her Chinese counterpart and pledged an effort to manage differences and "prevent competition from becoming anything ever near conflict" as the two nations try to thaw relations.

Yellen's first face-to-face meeting with Vice Premier Liu He in Zurich is the highest-ranking contact between the two countries since their presidents agreed last November to look for areas of potential cooperation.

Liu, for his part, said he was ready to work together to seek common ground between China and the U.S.

"No matter how circumstances change, we should always maintain dialogue and exchanges," he said.

A U.S. Treasury readout of their meeting says the two agreed that the U.S. and China would cooperate more on climate finance

issues and would both work to support "developing countries in their clean energy transitions." The readout also indicates that Yellen plans to travel to China and welcomes her counterparts to the U.S. in the near future.

The meeting comes as the U.S. and Chinese economies grapple with differing, but intertwined challenges on trade, technology and more.

Yellen, in opening remarks in front of reporters, told Liu: "While we have areas of disagreement, and we will convey them directly, we should not allow misunderstandings, particularly those stemming from a lack of communication, to unnecessarily worsen our bilateral economic and financial relationship."

She said the two countries "have a responsibility to manage our differences and prevent competition from becoming anything even near conflict."

Both economies have their challenges.

The Chinese economy is reopening after a COVID-19 resurgence



Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen (right) shakes hands with Chinese Vice Premier Liu He during a meeting in Zurich

killed tens of thousands of people and shuttered countless businesses. The U.S. is slowly recovering from 40-year-high inflation and is on track to hit its statutory debt ceiling, setting up an expected political showdown between congressional Democrats and Republicans. The debt issue is of keen interest to Asia, as China is the second-largest holder of U.S. debt.

There is also the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which hinders

ANALYSIS

THREATS, ADVANTAGES SEEN IN

KEN MORITSUGU, BEIJING

FOR seven decades, China's Communist Party has ruled the world's most populous country. As the nation's population crests and begins to shrink, experts say, it will face challenges ranging from supporting the elderly to filling the ranks of its military.

Population growth has been slowing for years, but the announcement Tuesday that the country's population fell by about 850,000 in 2022 came sooner than earlier projections.

"Those developments ... may well feed domestic challenges at home and strategic challenges abroad. The Party, in short, may be in for a rough go," said Mike Mazza, an analyst of Chinese military modernization at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington.

Others are less pessimistic.

"China's increasingly becoming a higher-tech nation, so concentrating on improving the educational system, particularly in impoverished rural areas, and even in cities, is vital. So as well is increasing productivity. Wealthier people will

buy more, which also increases GDP," said June Teufel Dreyer, a Chinese politics specialist at the University of Miami.

With the trend expected to continue, the U.N. estimates China's population will fall from 1.41 billion to about 1.31 billion by 2050 and keep shrinking from there.

Beijing previously tried to rein in its population growth. Worries that China's population was getting too big prompted it to adopt its "one-child policy" in the late 1970s. Beijing says the policy prevented 400 million additional births, but demographers disagree about how much of the drop in birth rates is explained by the policy.

The one-child policy came on top of existing societal changes, notably the flocking of people to live in cities during the economic boom, demographers say.

"Of course, the one-child policy had an effect," said Sabine Henning, who heads the demographic change section at the U.N. Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok. "But lifestyles have changed. Living



climate finance work



meets with Vice-Premier Liu He during a bilateral meeting in Davos, Switzerland

we could see the global economy head into a recession in 2023," said Josh Lipsky, senior director of the Atlantic Council's GeoEconomics Center. "Both countries have a shared interest in avoiding that scenario."

The World Bank reported last week that the global economy will come "perilously close" to a recession this year, led by weaker growth in all the world's top economies — including the U.S. and China. Low-income countries are expected to suffer from any economic downturns of superpowers, the report said.

"High on the list is debt restructuring," Lipsky said of Wednesday's talks. Several low-income countries are at risk of debt default in 2023 and many of them owe large sums to China.

"Leaders have been trying for two years to get some agreement and avoid a wave of defaults but there's been little success and one reason is China's hesitancy. I expect Yellen to press Liu He on this in the meeting," Lipsky said.

Liu laid out an optimistic

vision for the world's second-largest economy in an address Tuesday at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

"If we work hard enough, we are confident that in 2023, China's growth will most likely return to its normal trend. The Chinese economy will see a significant improvement," he said.

After her stop in Switzerland, Yellen will travel to Zambia, Senegal and South Africa this week in what will be the first in a string of visits by Biden administration officials to sub-Saharan Africa during the year.

Zambia is renegotiating its nearly \$6 billion debt with China, its biggest creditor. During a closed-door meeting at the Africa Leaders Summit in Washington in December, Yellen and Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema discussed "the need to address debt sustainability and the imperative to conclude a debt treatment for Zambia," according to Yellen.

The Zurich talks are a follow-up to the November meeting

between President Joe Biden and China's Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Group of 20 summit in Bali, Indonesia. The two world leaders agreed to empower key senior officials to work on areas of potential cooperation, including tackling climate change and maintaining global financial, health and food stability. Beijing had cut off such contacts with the U.S. in protest of then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's trip to Taiwan in August.

"We're going to compete vigorously. But I'm not looking for conflict," Biden said at the time.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken will be traveling to China in early February.

Among economic sticking points, the Biden administration blocked the sale of advanced computer chips to China and is considering a ban on investment in some Chinese tech companies, possibly undermining a key economic goal that Xi set for his country. Statements by the Democratic president that the U.S. would defend Taiwan against a Chinese invasion also have increased tensions.

And while the U.S. Congress is divided on many issues, members of the House agreed last week to further scrutinize Chinese investments.

New House Speaker Kevin

McCarthy of California has identified the Communist Party of China as one of two "long-term challenges" for the House, along with the national debt.

"There is bipartisan consensus that the era of trusting Communist China is over," McCarthy said from the House floor last week when the House voted 365 to 65 — with 146 Democrats joining Republicans — to establish the House Select Committee on China.

Last year, the U.S. Commerce Department added dozens of Chinese high-tech companies, including makers of aviation equipment, chemicals and computer chips, to an export controls blacklist, citing concerns over national security, U.S. interests and human rights. That move prompted the Chinese to file a lawsuit with the World Trade Organization.

Yellen has been critical of China's trade practices and its relationship with Russia, as the two countries have deepened their economic ties since the start of the war in Ukraine. On a July call with Liu, Yellen talked "frankly" about the impact of the Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the global economy and "unfair, non-market" economic practices, according to a U.S. recap of the call. **MDT/AP**

global economic growth — and has prompted the U.S. and its allies to agree on an oil price cap on Russia in retaliation, putting China in a difficult spot as a friend and economically of Russia.

And high interest rates globally have increased pressure on debt-burdened nations that owe great sums to China.

"A wrong policy move or a reversal in the positive data and

CHINA'S SHRINKING POPULATION



expenses have increased so people are less inclined to have children. All of this has resulted ... in a further decline in fertility since the one-child policy stopped."

Experience in Europe and Japan shows how difficult it is to change mindsets and reverse the decline with government incentives and campaigns.

Faced with a crashing birthrate, the policy was abandoned seven years ago, but efforts to encourage bigger families have been largely unsuccessful, like similar efforts in other countries. Europe and Japan have also struggled to change mindsets and reverse the decline with government incentives and campaigns.

"It amazes me how everyone seems to agree that the planet already has too many people whose demands for even the basics of existence like food, water and shelter are placing intolerable demands on the ecosystem — yet as soon as the population of a country begins to decline, its government reacts with near panic," Dreyer said.

Beijing's most immediate demographic challenge is an

aging population: Tuesday's figures showed almost 20% of the population is now age 60 or older, and Chinese estimates say the number will rise to 30%, or more than 400 million people, by 2035.

Similar changes took decades in Europe.

"They had more time to adjust, whereas it's happening much faster in Asia," said Srinivas Tata, director of the social development division at the U.N. commission in Bangkok.

To support this population of retirees, China may increase the retirement age, currently 50-55 for women and 60 for men.

The demographic news comes as China's economy is still recovering from the three-year struggle against COVID-19, which not only battered the economy but sparked rare antigovernment and anti-party protest.

Even with a shrinking population, China maintains considerable economic advantages over emerging manufacturing rivals such as Vietnam and India, which is set to overtake China as most populous this

year. China has superior infrastructure and long-standing private sector relationships that it can rely on for years to come, said Mazza.

China's political system also plays a role, said Mary Gallagher, a scholar of Chinese politics at the University of Michigan.

"Becoming the workshop of the world... requires a political system that can take advantage of that cheap young labor without much regard for the laborers' political and civil rights," Gallagher said.

U.S. economic sanctions and its push to block Beijing's access to cutting-edge processors and chip-making technology are further complicating efforts at recovery.

The Party also faces a challenge finding qualified recruits for its military, the 2 million-member People's Liberation Army, experts say.

"It is doubtful that the PLA is getting the best and the brightest, given that families who have the means will discourage military service," said Daniel Blumenthal, director of Asian Studies at the American Enterprise Institute and an expert on

East Asian security issues and US-China relations.

Blumenthal warns, however: "That said, if (Chinese leader Xi Jinping) decides he wants a war over Taiwan he will not be deterred by caring about one-child families."

Some American observers argue that these challenges could prompt Beijing to make aggressive moves sooner. With the U.S. refocused on the Indo-Pacific, China's economy slowing and the population shrinking, some in Washington see Beijing as facing a narrowing window for military action against the self-governing island that it claims as its territory.

Still, the effects may not be known for some time.

"Since demographic changes happen slowly, at least at the start of the turn, their effect on China's standing and influence globally will take time to happen," said Steve Tsang, director of the China Institute at the London University School of Oriental and African Studies and a longtime observer of Chinese political and social trends.

President Xi is committed to his program of achieving "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2049, Tsang said — even if his country may be 100 million people smaller by then. **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



UN Secretary General António Guterres at Davos World Economic Forum

DAVOS

UN chief warns the world is in a 'sorry state'

JAMEY KEATEN, DAVOS

THE world is in a "sorry state" because of myriad "inter-linked" challenges including climate change and Russia's war in Ukraine that are "piling up like cars in a chain reaction crash," the U.N. chief said at the World Economic Forum's meeting yesterday.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres delivered his gloomy message on the second day of the elite gathering of world leaders and corporate executives in the Swiss ski resort of Davos. Sessions took a grim turn when news broke of a helicopter crash in Ukraine that killed 16 people, including Ukraine's interior minister and other officials.

Forum President Borge Brende requested 15 seconds of silence and Ukrainian first lady Olena Zelenska dabbed teary eyes, calling it "another very sad day," then telling attendees that "we can also change this negative situation for the better."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was scheduled to address the conclave by video link as the Ukrainian delegation that includes his wife pushes for more aid, including weapons, from international

allies to fight Russia. Speaking shortly before Zelenskyy is German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who is facing pressure to send tanks to help Ukraine and is the only leader to attend Davos from the Group of 7 biggest economies.

Guterres said the "gravest levels of geopolitical division and mistrust in generations" are undermining efforts to tackle global problems, which also include widening inequality, a cost-of-living crisis sparked by soaring inflation and an energy crunch, lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, supply-chain disruptions and more.

He singled out climate change as an "existential challenge," and said a global commitment to limit the Earth's temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius "is nearly going up in smoke."

Guterres, who has been one of the most outspoken world figures on climate change, referenced a recent study that found scientists at Exxon Mobil made remarkably accurate predictions about the effects of climate change as far back as the 1970s, even as the company publicly doubted that warming was real.

"We learned last week that certain fossil fuel producers were fully aware in the 1970s

that their core product was baking our planet," he said in his speech. "Some in Big Oil peddled the big lie."

Critics have questioned the impact of the four-day meeting where politicians, CEOs and other leaders discuss the world's problems — and make deals on the sidelines — but where concrete action is harder to measure. Environmentalists, for example, slam the carbon-spewing private jets that ferry in bigwigs to an event that prioritizes the battle against climate change.

On the second day, government officials, corporate titans, academics and activists were attending dozens of panel sessions on topics covering the metaverse, environmental greenwashing and artificial intelligence.

Ukraine has taken center stage as the anniversary of the war nears, with Zelenska pressing attendees to do more to help her country at a time when Russia's invasion is leaving children dying and the world struggling with food insecurity.

The crash added more tragedy after a Russian missile strike hit an apartment building over the weekend in the southeastern Ukrainian city of Dnipro, killing dozens of people in one of the deadliest single attacks in months.

But Ukraine is gaining additional international support: Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said Tuesday that the Netherlands plans to "join" the U.S. and Germany's efforts to train and arm Ukraine with advanced Patriot defense systems.

The German government has faced mounting pressure to make another significant step forward in military aid to Ukraine by agreeing to deliver Leopard 2 battle tanks. U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin is scheduled to visit Berlin this week and then host a meeting of allies at Ramstein Air Base in western Germany.

Guterres was not optimistic that the conflict, being waged less than 1,000 kilometers (620 miles) from Davos, could end soon.

"There will be an end of this war. There is the end of everything. But I do not see the end of the war in the immediate future," he said. Deep historical differences between Russia and Ukraine make it more difficult to find a solution based on international law and that respects territorial integrity, he added.

"For the moment, I don't think that we have a chance to promote or to mediate a serious negotiation to achieve peace in the short term," Guterres said. **MDT/AP**

this day in history

1966 INDIRA GANDHI TAKES CHARGE IN INDIA



Indira Gandhi, only daughter of India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, is to become the country's next leader.

She was chosen at the end of a bitter leadership battle with former finance minister Morarji Desai.

Following her win, Mrs Gandhi pledged herself to serve the Congress Party and the country, and said she would "strive to create what my father used to call a climate of peace."

Crowds had gathered outside Parliament House while the election was held, and cheered Mrs Gandhi wildly as she went to the President's House to report.

She will not become prime minister until she submits her cabinet to the president.

Mrs Gandhi did not confirm she would be a candidate until four days ago, when chief ministers from 11 of India's 16 states let it be known they would support her to take over.

Another leading candidate, Gulzarilal Nanda, withdrew once it was clear Mrs Gandhi would be running.

He has been acting as prime minister since the unexpected death of Mr Nehru's successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri, earlier this month.

Mr Desai was under extreme pressure to pull out as well and avoid a potentially damaging leadership contest, but he insisted on going to a vote.

It was predicted he would get less than 100 of the 526 votes from Congress MPs, but he surprised many by winning 169 votes to Mrs Gandhi's 355.

Afterwards, Mr Desai pledged to cooperate fully with Mrs Gandhi. It is the second time running he has been defeated in a leadership contest: the first time, against Mr Shastri, he withdrew his candidacy without a vote.

Mrs Gandhi, 48, was educated at West Bengal and Oxford and has two sons, Rajiv and Sanjay, who are both studying in England.

She gets her name not from Mahatma Gandhi, the legendary independence campaigner and founder of the Congress Party, but from her husband Feroze Gandhi, a lawyer who died in 1960.

The couple spent 13 months in prison for subversion after fighting against British rule in India during the 1940s.

She has played a key part in the Congress Party since 1955, and served as information minister in Mr Shastri's government.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

Morarji Desai went on to form a right-wing faction opposed to Mrs Gandhi within the Congress Party. Nevertheless, she won general election victories in 1967 and 1971.

She presided over the 1971 conflict with Pakistan which created Bangladesh, and then in 1975 she was convicted of corruption and banned from holding office for six years.

She responded by refusing to resign and declared a highly controversial national state of emergency which lasted for nearly two years.

In 1984 she ordered the storming of the Golden Temple in Amritsar to flush out Sikh militants pursuing self-rule for Punjab.

Two months later, she was assassinated by her own Sikh bodyguards. About 1000 people, mostly Sikhs, died in the four days of rioting which followed her murder.

Her eldest son, Rajiv, succeeded her as prime minister. He too was assassinated in 1991.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS



ARIES

Mar. 21-Apr. 19

Trips will be enjoyable, and communication with your lover will clear up any misconceptions. Be careful what you say. Don't count on correspondence to clear up major problems.



TAURUS

Apr. 20-May. 20

You have bent over backward trying to help them and now it's time to let them stand on their own two feet. Don't let opposition from those envious of your talents daunt your progress.



GEMINI

May. 21-Jun. 21

Try spending the day catching up on any responsibilities that need to be taken care of. Problems on the home front might be a little disconcerting.



CANCER

Jun. 22-Jul. 22

You should get out and meet new people today. Don't spend too much on products that promise amazing cosmetic results. Pushy people must be kept at arm's length.



LEO

Jul. 23-Aug. 22

Get together with friends and catch up on reading and letter writing. Your ability to put a deal together will surprise others. Get involved in activities that will be fun for the whole family.



VIRGO

Aug. 23-Sep. 22

Hassles with your boss are sure to erupt if you speak your mind. You must be careful not to reveal secrets or get involved in gossip. Stress may cause minor health ailments.



LIBRA

Sep. 23-Oct. 22

Your lack of responsibility and attention has been a key issue in your relationship. Tempers could boil if someone you work with has not been pulling their weight.



SCORPIO

Oct. 23-Nov. 21

Do not trust others with important information. You must strive to get the most important projects completed properly, rather than doling everything in a half baked way.



SAGITTARIUS

Nov. 22-Dec. 21

You can make a difference if you offer your help at functions that involve children. You will upset your partner if you have spent money on things that aren't necessary.



CAPRICORN

Dec. 22-Jan. 19

Your tendency to take on too much will end in fatigue. Your high enthusiasm will be sure to inspire anybody around you. Someone you work with could try to undermine you.



AQUARIUS

Jan. 20-Feb. 18

You should sign up for creative courses. Concentrate on your work. Don't be afraid to pursue unfamiliar grounds. You'll be an emotional basket case today.

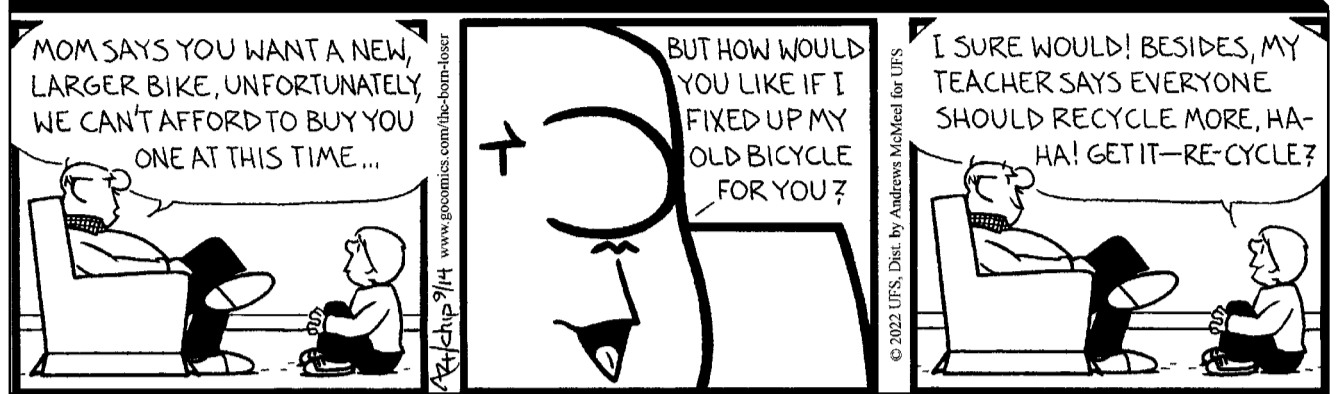


PISCES

Feb. 19-Mar. 20

There will be hidden matters that you may find disturbing. Self-deception about relationships is a problem. You will meet potential new mates through business.

The Born Loser by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

EASY

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

EASY+

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

MEDIUM

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

HARD

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

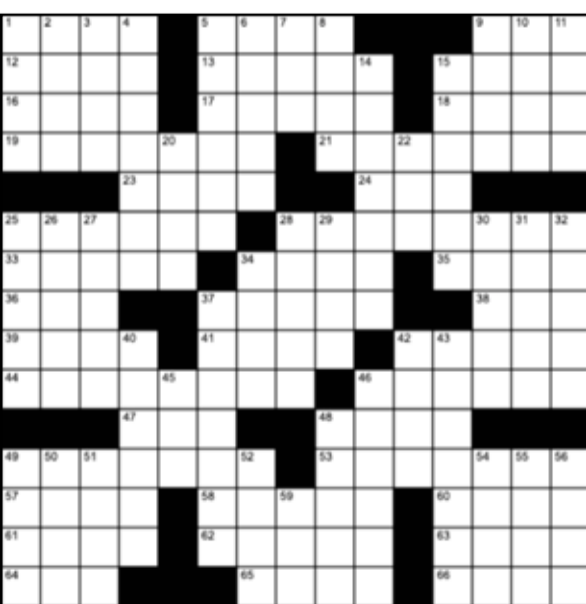
WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	-6	4	fine
Changchun	-13	-7	fine
Chengdu	0	11	fine
Chongqing	2	9	cloudy
Fuzhou	7	17	fine
Guangzhou	7	17	fine
Guiyang	-1	4	overcast
Haikou	10	16	cloudy
Hangzhou	-1	9	cloudy
Harbin	-17	-12	cloudy
Hefei	-2	11	cloudy
Nanjing	-2	11	cloudy
Shanghai	1	9	fine
Taipei	12	16	rain
Wuhan	-2	11	fine
Hong Kong	14	20	fine
WORLD			
Moscow	2	3	rain
Frankfurt	-3	3	snow
Paris	-1	6	rain
London	-2	4	overcast
New York	5	7	rain

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Related by blood; 5- Boxer Max; 9- "You've got mail" co.; 12- Yearn deeply; 13- Unit of volume; 15- Bandleader Puente; 16- Lab fluids; 17- Host; 18- Coloured part of the eye; 19- Intimidate; 21- Cut in pieces; 23- Writer Wiesler; 24- Some docs; 25- Counterbalance; 28- Confounded; 33- Roofing stone; 34- Actress Skye; 35- Paris pronoun; 36- Fall from grace; 37- Adored; 38- Computer key; 39- South American Indian; 41- Farm females; 42- Refrain in a children's song; 44- Inhabitant of Cairo; 46- Primate; 47- Small batteries; 48- Female lobsters; 49- Firearm; 53- States; 57- Succulent; 58- Brings up; 60- Karate blow; 61- Air France destination; 62- Conger catcher; 63- Actress Hatcher; 64- DDE's command; 65- Beaver creations; 66- Spahn teammate;

DOWN 1- Lhasa ____; 2- Capital of the Ukraine; 3- As to; 4- Most proximate; 5- Edible pale-bluish mushroom; 6- Actress Anouk; 7- And so on; 8- Oboe, e.g.; 9- Yorkshire river; 10- Auricular; 11- Missing; 14- Ruled; 15- Fine cloth; 20- "Hard ____!" (sailor's yell); 22- Sunblock letters; 25- Actor Davis; 26- Throw with force; 27- Imagination; 28- Assembly of witches; 29- Singles; 30- Streamlined; 31- Beast of Borden; 32- Lure; 34- Hawkeye's home; 37- Unhurried ease; 40- Absence of passion; 42- Seemingly forever; 43- Six legged creatures; 45- Label; 46- Mr. and Mr.; 48- Seraglio; 49- Blackthorn fruit; 50- Injure; 51- Scandinavian capital city; 52- Call for; 54- Ostrichlike bird; 55- Actress Spelling; 56- Whirl; 59- According to;



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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AD

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

GAMING

NJ GAMBLING REVENUE MATCHES ALL-TIME HIGH, WITH ONLINE HELP

WAYNE PARRY,
ATLANTIC CITY

NEW Jersey's gambling revenue matched its all-time high of \$5.2 billion in 2022, but only half that amount was won by casinos from in-person gamblers.

Figures released yesterday [Macau time] by the New Jersey Division of Gaming Enforcement show the casinos, the horse tracks that take sports bets, and online partners of both types of gambling won \$5.21 billion last year, up 10% from a year earlier and matching a level last seen in 2006. That was just before the advent of casino gambling in neighboring Pennsylvania sent New Jersey's gambling industry into a downward spiral that eventually led to the closures of five of the 12 casinos that were operating at the time.

But the 2022 number was reached with a hefty assist



AP PHOTO

from internet gambling and sports betting — revenue streams that help contribute to the bottom line but are also heavily shared with third parties such as sports books and tech platforms.

Sarah Grady, assistant director of the Lloyd Levenson Institute at Stockton University, which studies the Atlantic City gambling industry, said it took an enormous amount of

work by the casinos and state government to replicate the levels of 2006, when gambling revenue consisted solely of what was won from in-person gamblers.

"To compare these returns, it is important to consider how much the market has changed in the past 16 years," she said. "To achieve the returns we have today took a substantial expansion and di-

versification of the New Jersey gaming product to compete with increased competition from neighboring states."

That included the legalization of internet gambling in 2013, and the introduction of sports betting in 2018 following a U.S. Supreme Court ruling in a case brought by New Jersey that cleared the way for any state to offer legal sports betting; about two-thirds of the states now do.

"In 2022, the Atlantic City casino industry continued to face challenges, including the lingering effects from the pandemic, a difficult economy and high inflation," said Mark Giannantonio, president of the Casino Association of New Jersey. "As we move into a new year, Atlantic City casinos are committed to providing the best possible experience for our customers, which includes making significant investments that will continue to solidify Atlantic City's position

as a world-class resort destination with top-notch dining, shopping and entertainment offerings."

In-person winnings from gamblers finally surpassed pre-pandemic levels of 2019 — a long-sought goal of the Atlantic City casino industry. The casinos won \$2.78 billion from in-person gamblers in 2022, compared with \$2.68 billion in 2019.

But only three of the nine casinos — Borgata, Ocean and Resorts — had more in-person revenue in 2022 than they did in 2019.

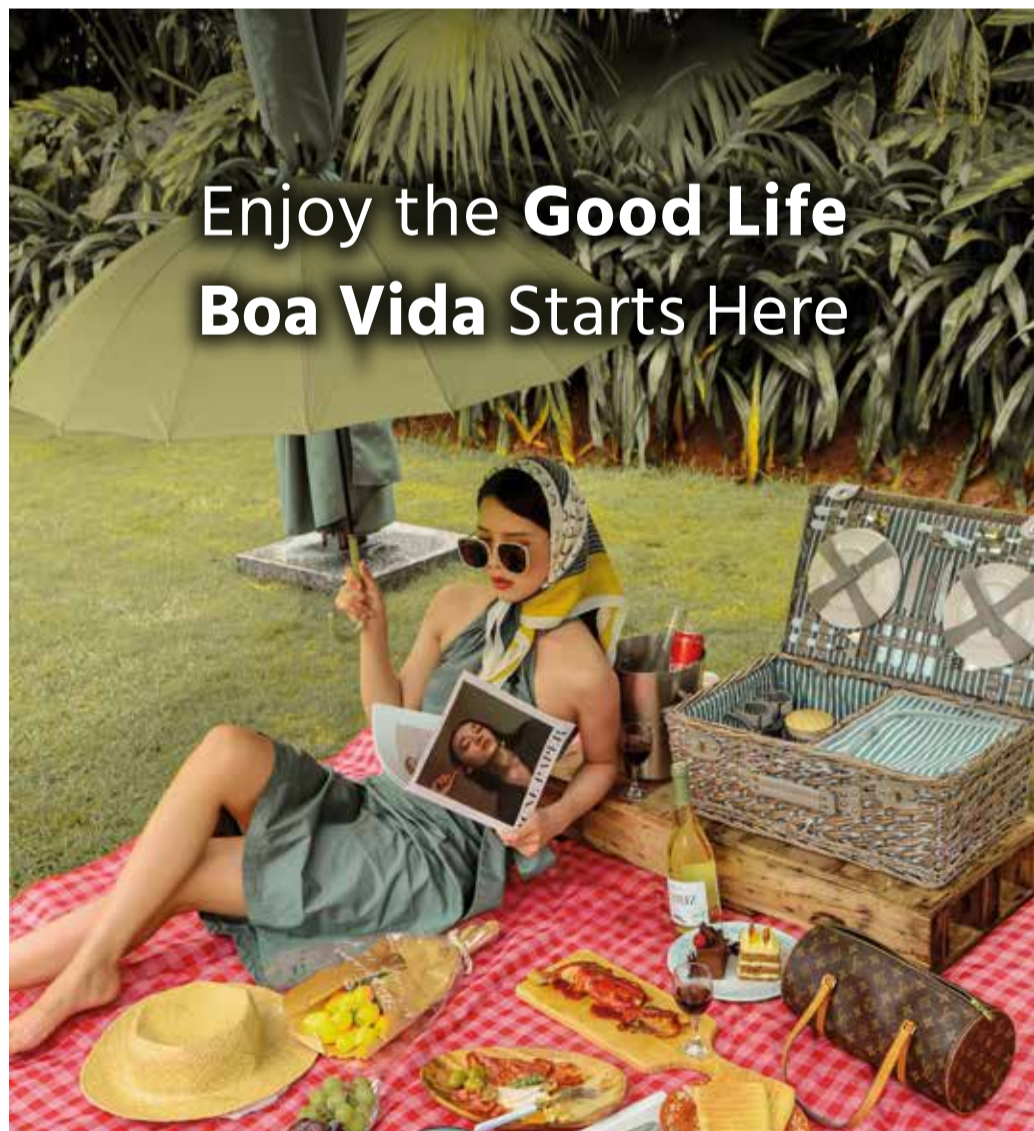
Six casinos had more total gambling revenue in 2022 than they did the year before.

The market-leading Borgata won \$1.3 billion in overall gambling revenue, up 18.2%. The Golden Nugget won \$581 million, up 10.2%; Hard Rock won \$576 million, up 12.7%; Ocean won \$389 million, up 13.6%; Tropicana won \$365 million, up 2.9%, and Bally's won \$198 million, up 37.3%.

Harrah's won \$258 million, down 3.4%; Caesars won \$239 million, down 1%, and Resorts won \$168 million, down 0.3%.

Resorts Digital, the casino's online arm, won \$546 million, up 21.3%. Caesars Interactive NJ won \$113 million, up 1%. MDT/AP

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FOOTBALL

It's Messi vs. Ronaldo again in unlikely Saudi reunion

JAMES ROBSON

ONE of the greatest rivalries in soccer history is set to resume at the unlikely venue of Riyadh's King Fahd International Stadium.

The stage is set today [Friday, 01:00] for Lionel Messi vs. Cristiano Ronaldo when Messi's Paris Saint-Germain takes on a combined XI of Saudi Arabian teams Al Nassr and Al Hilal in an exhibition match.

Riyadh is where Ronaldo has decided to base possibly the final years of his storied career after signing a deal worth a reported \$200 million-a-year to join Al Nassr.

The game against Messi and PSG offers a reminder of the Portugal international's glory days before Ronaldo focuses on Al Nassr's domestic title challenge and bid to qualify for the Asian Champions League.

The Messi-Ronaldo rivalry was never greater than when they played for Barcelona and Real Madrid, respectively, and their scoring feats saw the players dominate Spanish and European soccer.

The showdown with Messi in these circumstances would have been unthinkable just a year ago when Ronaldo was still scoring with regularity for an albeit struggling Manchester United team.

Messi and Ronaldo have experienced vastly differing fortunes over the last 12 months. Messi finally won the World Cup with



Lionel Messi (Barcelona) duels for the ball against Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid) back in 2012 when they were disputing the Copa Del Rey

Argentina in December. Ronaldo was dropped by club and country, had his United contract terminated and eventually joined Al Nassr in one of the most surprising moves in soccer history.

It will be Ronaldo's first action in Saudi Arabia after serving a two-match suspension issued by the English Football Association for slapping a mobile phone out of the hand of a fan after a match between Man United and Everton last April.

His debut for Saudi league leader Al Nassr is set for Sunday against Ettifaq.

Ronaldo will not be short on

motivation when coming up against Messi and an all-star PSG team which could also include Kylian Mbappe and Neymar.

He has already been handed his trademark No. 7 shirt and the armband in what feels like a fitting way to kick off his latest adventure.

It will be a chance to make a statement against some of the best players in the world, as opposed to who he will face in the Saudi league, which represents a step down after his career in elite European soccer.

The 37-year-old forward, who was presented to Al Nassr's su-

pporters to great fanfare earlier this month, is facing questions over his ability to rediscover his form after a disappointing first half of the season for United and an underwhelming World Cup.

Ronaldo managed only three goals in 16 appearances for United before his explosive interview with Piers Morgan, in which he criticized manager Erik ten Hag and the club's owners, led to the termination of his contract.

With an opportunity to put himself on the market at the World Cup, he was dropped by Portugal as his country suffered a shock elimination by Morocco

in the quarterfinals and likely ended his last chance of winning the one major trophy that has eluded him. Ronaldo did become the first men's player to score at five different World Cups.

Messi is also aiming to win back-to-back French league titles with PSG and could yet lead the Paris club to its first Champions League success.

While Ronaldo said he rejected offers from around the world to join Al Nassr, it is not known if any interest came from Europe's biggest clubs.

The Saudi move is likely to take him out of the spotlight for the first time since he established himself in his first spell at United in 2003.

The Riyadh Season Cup, which is at stake today, will at least be an opportunity to showcase his talent in a match likely to attract widespread interest given his rivalry with Messi as the two finest players of their generation. Between them they have shared 12 Ballon d'Or awards — Messi seven, Ronaldo five.

Ronaldo has the edge in the Champions League, winning European club soccer's biggest trophy five times, compared to Messi's four.

In total they have won 56 major trophies between them, which has made it so difficult to separate them when trying to determine who is the greatest of their generation.

However, Messi's inspirational performances in leading Argentina to the World Cup trophy in Qatar in December strengthens his case to have the edge on his great rival.

Nothing that happens in Riyadh is likely to move the dial either way on that argument. It could, however, offer Ronaldo the chance to remind his doubters that he can still go toe-to-toe with Messi. **MDT/AP**

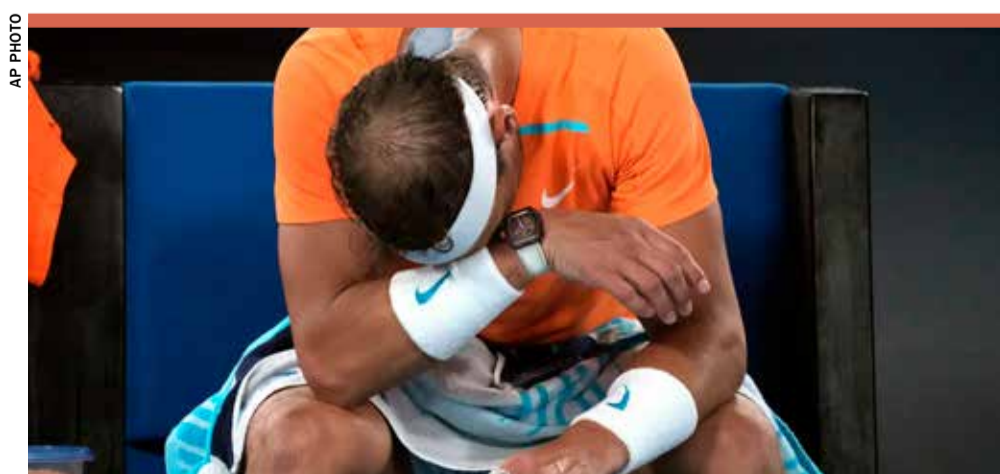
TENNIS

Hampered by bad hip, Rafael Nadal loses at Australian Open

RAFAEL Nadal bowed his head during changeovers and rested his elbows on his knees, the very picture of resignation.

What already was a poor start to 2023, following a year marred by all manner of health issues, reached a low point at the Australian Open yesterday.

The defending champion and No. 1 seed at Melbourne Park, Nadal injured his left hip and lost to Mackenzie McDonald 6-4, 6-4, 7-5 in the second round, abruptly ending his bid for a record-extending 23rd



Grand Slam trophy. "It's a tough moment. It's a tough day," said Nadal,

a 36-year-old Spaniard. "I can't say that I am not destroyed mentally at this mo-

ment, because I would be lying." He pulled up awkwardly

at the end of a point late in the second set against the 65th-ranked McDonald.

Nadal was visited by a trainer on the sideline, then left the court for a medical timeout. Up in the stands, his wife wiped away tears. Nadal returned to play, but was clearly compromised and not his usual indefatigable self, saying afterward that he could not hit his backhand properly and could not run much, either.

But Nadal added that, as the reigning champion of the tournament, he did not want to leave the court via a mid-match retirement.

He said the hip had been bothering him for a couple of days, but it was never as bad as it became yesterday. Nadal was not sure exactly what the nature of the injury was, saying that he will have medical tests to deter-

mine if it has to do with a muscle, joint or cartilage.

"It's never over until it's over' type thing. He didn't even want to roll over and quit. He kept fighting until basically the end, even though he maybe didn't have all his game," said McDonald, a 27-year-old American who won NCAA championships in singles and doubles for UCLA in 2016.

"I was in the locker room," McDonald said about the aftermath of the match, "and I was like, 'Hey, that's actually really big for me, because I haven't beaten someone of that caliber.'"

This is Nadal's earliest exit at any Grand Slam tournament since bowing out in the first round in Melbourne in 2016 against No. 45 Fernando Verdasco. **MDT/AP**

OPINION

China Daily
Editorial, China Daily

PROFOUND CHANGES TO THE ECONOMY SET PATH FOR HIGH-QUALITY DEVELOPMENT

China's gross domestic product grew 3 percent year-on-year last year, the National Bureau of Statistics announced on Tuesday. This is a hard-earned result given the downward pressure the country has had to overcome.

Due to the inherent resilience of the Chinese economy, as well as the implementation of a series of support policies, the country's grain output increased 0.5 percent last year, the value added of industries above designated scale rose by 3.6 percent and the service sector grew by 2.3 percent.

This guaranteed the country's food security, while the world has been enduring the worst food shortage in decades, enabled the creation of 12.06 million jobs, above the targeted 11 million, at a time when unemployment-fueled social unrest has roiled many countries, and maintained the health and dynamism of the economy, as indicated by the investment in fixed assets increasing by 5.1 percent and the consumer price index growing mildly at 2 percent.

True, the growth in the net profit of the major enterprises, the total retail sales of consumer goods and the production index of service industries were all negative. But the margins of decrease are narrowing fast with the optimization of the COVID-19 protocol from last month, and all of them are showing strong rebound momentum.

Global confidence in the Chinese economy and market remains high, as it is well known that the fundamentals of the world's second-largest economy remain stable, its comparative strengths in scale and efficiency are still remarkable and its status as a major source and destination of foreign investment and as a logistics hub have only been consolidated by its renewed commitment to opening-up. While the 7.7 percent increase in its foreign trade last year, despite the decoupling attempts of the United States, has reinforced its position as the largest goods trader.

The challenges China has faced over the past year from the epidemic and geopolitics have only served to spur the country to double down on its efforts to accelerate the upgrading of its industries and promote innovation-driven growth. The added value of high-tech manufacturing and equipment manufacturing grew by 7.4 percent and 5.6 percent last year, and investment in high-tech industries grew by 18.9 percent, outpacing total fixed-asset investment by 13.8 percentage points. Investment in high-tech manufacturing and services grew by 22.2 percent and 12.1 percent, respectively.

That infrastructure investment grew by 9.4 percent, manufacturing by 9.1 percent, while that in the real estate industry, a major guzzler of investment for a long time, was down by 10 percent shows that the economy is restructuring in favor of sustainable growth and innovation.

Last but not least, although the country's population was 850,000 less last year than the year before, the first time it has shrunk in 61 years, that does not merit much ado, as the easing of the pandemic situation, the improvement in the quality of the labor force, people's livelihoods and public services can help prolong the plateau period to avoid a sharp decline of the population and its consequential shocks on the economy.

In a nutshell, the Chinese economy is undoubtedly undergoing profound changes. But the country still grips the initiative of its development in its own hands. It can, and will, continue to make the most of what it has to pursue high-quality development.

CHINA'S NETEASE CRITICIZES BLIZZARD OFFER AS UNEQUAL, UNFAIR

THE BUZZ

China games company NetEase Inc. has rejected a proposal from World of Warcraft creator Activision Blizzard to temporarily extend its partnership while the U.S. company seeks a new partner, calling the proposed terms "unequal and unfair" in an escalating public spat.

Blizzard said in November that its 14-year partnership with NetEase was set to end, spelling the imminent withdrawal of games such as World of Warcraft, the Starcraft series, and Overwatch from the world's biggest games market as of Jan. 23.

In a statement, NetEase said yesterday that Blizzard proposed to extend the partnership for six months under existing terms while it continued seeking for a new partner in China.

"We believe that Blizzard's proposal ... is rude, inappropriate, and not in line with business logic," NetEase said.

The Chinese company criticized Blizzard for its "excessive confidence" in making requests that it said demonstrated a lack of consideration for NetEase and gamers.

Blizzard has yet to find a new Chinese publisher for its games as required for releasing its titles in China.

UKRAINE INTERIOR MINISTER, OTHERS KILLED IN HELICOPTER CRASH

UKRAINE'S interior minister died yesterday in a helicopter crash near the capital that killed another 15 people, including other officials and three children, authorities said.

Interior Minister Denys Monastyrskyi, who oversaw Ukraine's police and emergency services, is the most senior official to die since Russia invaded nearly 11 months ago. His death, along with two others from his ministry, was the second calamity in four days to clobber Ukraine, after a Russian missile strike on an apartment building killed dozens of civilians.

There was no immediate word on whether the crash, which was near a kindergarten, was an accident or related to the war. No fighting has been reported recently in the Kyiv area.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the crash was "a terrible tragedy" on a "black morning."

"The pain is unspeakable," he wrote on Telegram.

Monastyrskyi's deputy Yevhen Yenin and State Secretary of the Ministry of Internal Affairs Yuriy Lubkovych were also among those killed, according to the chief of Ukraine's National Police. Senior

officials routinely travel by helicopter during the conflict.

Nine of those killed were aboard the chopper when it crashed in Brovary, an eastern suburb of the Ukrainian capital, Ihor Klymenko said. The others who died were apparently on the ground.

Kyiv Regional Governor Oleksii Kuleba said 18 people overall were killed, including three children, and that 25 were injured. Ukraine's Emergency Service, however, put the death toll at 15. It was not immediately possible to confirm if that was old information or a revised figure. MDT/AP



UK Thousands of nurses in Britain walked out yesterday in a new protest over pay, with no end in sight to a wave of strikes that has piled pressure on the U.K.'s overburdened public health system. Two 12-hour nursing strikes on Wednesday and Thursday affect about a quarter of hospitals and clinics in England. Emergency care and cancer treatment will continue, but thousands of appointments and procedures are likely to be postponed.



Brazil The office of the prosecutor-general has presented its first charges against some of the thousands of people who authorities say stormed government buildings in an effort to overturn former President Jair Bolsonaro's loss in the October election. The prosecutors in the recently formed group to combat anti-democratic acts also have requested that the 39 defendants who ransacked Congress be imprisoned as a preventive measure, and that 40 million reais (\$7.7 million) of their assets be frozen to help cover damages.



Tech Microsoft is cutting 10,000 workers, almost 5% of its workforce, joining other tech companies that have scaled back their pandemic-era expansions. The company said in a regulatory filing yesterday that the layoffs were a response to "macroeconomic conditions and changing customer priorities." The company said it will also be making changes to its hardware portfolio and consolidating its leased office locations.

World's oldest known person, French nun, dies at 118

A French nun who was believed to be the world's oldest person has died a few weeks before her 119th birthday, the spokesperson for her nursing home in southern France said yesterday [Macau time].

Lucile Randon, known as Sister André, was born in the town of Ales, southern France, on Feb. 11, 1904. She was also one of the world's oldest survivors of COVID-19.

Spokesman David Tavella said she died at 2 a.m. on Tuesday (French time) at the Sainte-Catherine-Laboure nursing home in the town of Toulon.

The Gerontology Research Group, which validates details of people thought to be 110 or older, listed her as the oldest known person in the world after the death of Japan's Kane Tanaka, aged 119, last year.

Sister André tested po-



Sister Andre poses for a portrait at the Sainte Catherine Laboure care home in Toulon, last April

sitive for the coronavirus in January 2021, shortly before her 117th birthday, but she had so few symptoms that she didn't even realize she was infected. Her survival made headlines both in France and beyond.

In April last year, asked about her exceptional longevity through two world wars, she told French

media that "working ... makes you live. I worked until I was 108."

She was known to enjoy a daily glass of wine and chocolate.

The oldest living known person in the world listed by the Gerontology Research Group is now American-born Maria Branyas Morera, who is living in Spain, and is 115. MDT/AP