



LAWYERS' ASSOCIATION NEW PRESIDENT VONG HIN FAI WILL LEAVE TO PUBLIC OPINION AN EVALUATION OF HIS FUTURE STANCE AT THE POST

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FOOTBALL: FERNANDEZ SIGNING CAPS BIG-SPENDING CHELSEA'S LATEST SPREE

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AP PHOTO



Philippines Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin (pictured) was in the Philippines yesterday for talks about deploying U.S. forces and weapons in more Philippine military camps to ramp up deterrence against China's increasingly aggressive actions toward Taiwan and in the disputed South China Sea. Austin flew from South Korea, where he said the U.S. would increase its deployment of advanced weapons.

AP PHOTO



South Korea South Korea logged its biggest monthly trade deficit ever, at \$12.7 billion in January, as exports of computer chips and other high-tech items sank and costs for importing oil and gas surged. The growing shortfall underscored how Russia's war on Ukraine is straining the global economy, keeping prices for key resources like crude oil and nickel high even after they fell back from spikes in 2022.

AP PHOTO



Australia Authorities recovered a tiny but dangerous radioactive capsule that fell off a truck while being transported along a 1,400-kilometer highway last month in what an official said was like finding the needle in the haystack. The capsule the size of a pea was found south of Newman on the Great Northern Highway. It was detected by a search vehicle travelling at 70 km/hour when specialist equipment picked up radiation emitting from the capsule.

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RENATO MARQUES



CHARACTER WITNESSES HIGHLIGHT SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY AND GENEROSITY OF TAK CHUN'S BOSS

RENATO MARQUES

THE trial of the Tak Chun Group CEO and eight other defendants continued yesterday at the Court of First Instance (TJB).

In a session dominated by testimonies from several character witnesses about Levo Chan's positive character traits and community reputation, all character witnesses agreed the former junket boss has a high sense of responsibility as well as great generosity and selflessness.

The first witness was Macau's Holy House of Mercy president António José de Freitas who revealed a long relationship with Chan that has lasted over a decade. Freitas described how Chan's Tak Chun Group's charitable branch, as well as Chan in person, have supported the activities of the Holy House of Mercy, assisting those in need.

According to Freitas, Chan is quiet and cordial with a very positive perspective on life and is very keen to support those in need by distributing food.

Freitas said Tak Chun oversaw one full month of food distribution with Chan often participating in the activities in person.

He also said that over a decade ago, at Chan's request and initiative, he helped establish the Tak Chun Charity association. He said Chan has always been involved in the organization's meetings and works, actively seeking to know which areas he should focus on to help more.

Freitas said that during the pandemic's early days, Chan, through the Holy House, had sent financial help to Portugal.

Local artist, president of the Macau Artist Society, and the chairman of Macau Culture Development Promotion Association, among other titles, Lok Hei took the stand to tell how Chan stepped in to allow the creation of what is known today as "Tak Chun Art Garden."

According to Lok, Freitas introduced Chan to him. At the time, Lok was leading a project to establish the "artists' house." He said the project "should have been done by the government," but as the government side "failed to support it, it was him [Chan] that replaced the government [role] on this."

"[Chan] went personally to check on the venue, a building that was almost in ruins and was unused for over 20 years," Lok said, adding, "After that

and our first long talk when I explained the project, he was very quick to respond and then assigned a person [in the company] to continue to follow up."

Lok told the court Tak Chun has always supported the project that has created many opportunities for local artists, including young artists. He said Chan has financially defrayed costs such as rent, construction, repairs, and many other things needed to implement the project. He also noted he had never profited from items such as rentals charged to artists for the individual studios.

According to Lok, Tak Chun Group's help conclusively led to associations and groups involved in the Art Garden project's foundation to commend the company to the central government as a reputable charitable organization.

Lok noted Chan was also responsible for many mainland projects that included art projects and the building of several schools in Sichuan province, among others.

The last of the character witnesses heard yesterday was Vong Kok Seng, president of the Charity Fund of the Readers of the Macao Daily News. He explained Tak Chun's support

of their activities, namely the "Macau Walk for a Million."

PJ INVESTIGATORS CAN ONLY CONFIRM 12 UNLAWFUL GAMING ACTIVITIES

The TJB also heard yesterday from several Judiciary Police (PJ) investigators overseeing investigations into bank accounts, a software of registry of Tak Chun's clients, and SMS messages about money transfers the PJ believes are directly related to high rollers' illegal bets.

Two PJ investigators testified yesterday that in 12 of 194 SMS messages investigated, Tak Chun's client software matches the money tracked in both the amount and the purpose of the transfers.

The PJ investigators said several times it was impossible to obtain proof from the other SMS messages as "Chan/Tak Chun destroyed a significant part of the evidence," they said.

The lawyers and the judge more than once criticized both PJ investigators for the "harmfulness of making such a groundless statement."

The investigators tried to prove in court that there was a system where unlawful bets were marked with asterisks and

other codes on the client's software and that third-party collaborators would transfer money to Tak Chun, usually passing first from an account of another of Tak Chun's workers, namely Chan's secretary.

To a question from the defense lawyer on the certainty of the purpose of the money transfers, one of the PJ investigators said it "might be from under-the-table betting or also phone betting," or even both.

The PJ investigator seemed more certain that the 12 SMS messages could be traced to certain clients. HKD500 million was traded between the clients and Tak Chun, which the PJ says originated from illegal gaming activities, namely under-the-table bets.

OVER THE PHONE AND 'MULTIPLIER' BETTING AUTHORIZED BY CHAN

The PJ told the court earlier this week phone betting was conducted on behalf of Tak Chun's customers in Macau to casinos abroad, namely in the Philippines and Vietnam.

Such a procedure has been part of a Tak Chun staff training handbook since at least 2018.

The PJ investigator also provided proof that on several occasions in 2019, the company's meeting minutes mentioned phone betting and the pros and cons of using such an activity were debated. The investigator noted it was clear company executives knew such activity was illegal.

Also in a previous session, the prosecution used wiretap recordings to prove Chan was aware of, and authorized, so-called "multiplier bets," also illegal in Macau. Such bets allow boosting the amount played in each bet, without playing a gaming chip of the face value.

The PJ investigator, who will continue to testify in court next week, said the purpose of these "multiplier bets" was, among others, to avoid further inspection of trading any chips valued over HKD500,000, which requires a more complex form that identifies the user and of bets over the same amount that, by default, will be included on a system of "suspected transactions," she said.

According to the president of the presiding trio of judges, it is likely the trial will reach the period of closing allegations in less than two weeks.

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WHAT A MONTH!

Gaming revenue jumps 82.5% as China, HK travel resumes

THE city's casinos saw gross gaming revenue (GGR) surge in January as China's reopening and the week-long Lunar New Year break sparked an influx of visitors to the gambling hub, fueling optimism the enclave is finally shaking off its zero-Covid doldrums.

The Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau (DICJ) said yesterday GGR climbed 82.5% last month year-on-year to MOP11.6 billion (\$1.4 billion), beating the median estimate of a 36.5% increase, according to analysts surveyed by Bloomberg. That is the first rise since February last year and the highest monthly revenue since January 2020.

The recovery follows 10 consecutive months of double-digit declines as zero-Covid policies and a crackdown on cross-border gambling kept casinos mostly empty for much of 2022.

Last year's annual takings were the lowest since 2004 and the enclave — which in 2019 reported GGR six times that of Las Vegas — lost its title of world's top gambling hub.

China's Covid reopening on Jan. 8, just ahead of Lunar New Year celebrations in the latter part of the month, sparked a surge in travel. About 451,000 visitors arrived in Macau during the week-long holiday, an almost 300% increase from a year earlier, with most arrivals coming from main-



land China, according to official provisional data.

"All the operators that we've met were positively surprised by the level of demand during Lunar New Year," JPMorgan Chase & Co. analyst DS Kim wrote in a note seen earlier this week by MDT. "We feel good about the pace and magnitude of recovery here", Kim said.

There are signs the rebound may stretch through the first quarter at least. Macau hotel room rates for February and March have risen to pre-pandemic levels.

Analysts surveyed by Bloomberg have also ramped up their estimates for the sector. The me-

dian forecast is for 222% growth in GGR this year, from 195% predicted a month ago.

While the Lunar New Year travel spike is a short-term boon for the sector, it's uncertain whether the sharp pace of gaming revenue growth will be sustained for the rest of the year.

Macau's casinos face increasing scrutiny from the government as part of Beijing's push for the city to shift away from its reliance on gambling, as well as a broader crackdown on the once-dominant VIP gambling sector.

While daily gaming revenue is back to around 60% of pre-Covid levels during the peak holiday

season, Credit Suisse analysts, including Kenneth Fong, warned about the sustainability of the recovery's pace. Macau is likely attracting more visitors due to its lack of Covid testing requirements versus Hong Kong and a dearth of international flight capacity in the mainland that is limiting travel options for now, while pent-up demand from Hong Kong residents may wane over time.

A Bloomberg Intelligence index of Macau casino operators gained more than 3% after the data. The gauge rose 7.9% in January, while the benchmark Hang Seng Index rose 10.4% in the same month.

MDT/AGENCIES

GOLDEN BUS GIVES FREE RETURN TICKETS TO HK ENTRANTS

The shuttle bus serving the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge — commonly known as the Golden Bus — will offer free return tickets to Hong Kong residents traveling to Macau. The promotion period started yesterday and will run until the end of March. Tickets must be pre-booked on the operator's website or WeChat. The promotion only applies to departures between 6 a.m. and midnight, and the return ticket must be no later than March 31. The departure and return dates must be between one and six nights apart. Each traveler is only eligible to enjoy the promotion once during the promotion period.

CE MEETS WITH HK POLITICAL PARTY HEAD

After border normalization between Macau and Hong Kong, Chief Executive Ho Iat Seng has met in Macau with at least two persons from Hong Kong, with the latest being Tam Yiu Chung, National People's Congress Standing Committee Member and head of the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong. As they met, the CE shared Macau's anti-Covid-19 experiences with Tam, while Tam and the delegation were taken on a tour of government housing projects in Macau. Both agreed regional cooperation, Greater Bay Area integration and economic revival are key areas of focus.

IAM REMINDS BUSINESSES OF DUTY TO RENEW LICENSES

The Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) has reminded certain business owners of their duty to renew their licenses by the end of February. The trades concerned include meat sellers, vegetable sellers, fish sellers, competition animals and horse keepers, hawkers, long-term advertising on billboards, advertising on vehicles, long-term occupation of public areas and al-fresco cafeterias. Applications for license renewals can be submitted to the Government Service Building in Iao Hon and the Government Service Centre in Taipa, every day between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m., including lunch periods, except on weekends and public holidays.

A VIEW FROM THE STREET

WSJ recommends stocks of companies more exposed to mass-market

GAMBLERS "have started placing bets in Macau casinos again. Investors are piling back into Macau casino stocks too," The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported yesterday after January results were announced by the DICJ.

The American financial paper warned that "picking which casino stocks to plunk chips on will be important."

January gambling revenue was up 82.5% from a year earlier, to its highest level in three years.

Moreover, the revenue rebound is outpacing the return of tourists themselves: Visitor arrivals during the holiday were still less than 40% of 2019 levels. According to the WSJ, Citi provided some interesting color on such 'whales' after the bank's analysts visited the casinos: "At a baccarat table, a player wagered HKD725,000 Hong Kong dollars, equivalent to \$92,000, in a single bet. Another gambler had HKD6 million of chips stacked in front of him. More-casual gamblers will

likely stream into the city in the coming months as the exit wave of infections in China starts to ebb."

VIP gamblers used to generate more than 70% of Macau's total gambling revenue, but their importance was already declining—in 2019, they accounted for less than half. "Their significance will likely drop even further."

The Wall Street Journal points out that Macau wants to reduce its reliance on gambling while China wants to stop capital outflows through

illicit channels - citing as an example the recent 18-year jail sentence the first court served to former junket boss Alvin Chau.

Macau casino operators also need to contend with higher debt loads than before the pandemic. Profits will start rebounding this year, but the extra debt burden will chip away at that to an extent, the paper adds.

The WSJ says that "on average, Macau casino operators' stocks have more than doubled in value in the past three

months, with some justification. But as share prices start to price in the recovery, investors should focus on companies with stronger financials and an edge in attracting mass-market customers, like Galaxy Entertainment or Sands China."

"Macau will finally draw some winning hands this year, but the takings won't be distributed equally. Investors should pick operators that can best navigate the new, mass-market-focused landscape," alerts the Journal. PC

VONG HIN FAI

New top lawyer relies on public opinion on his future stance

THE new president of the Macau Lawyers' Association (AAM) will rely on public opinion to decide if he will be progressive or conservative at this post.

Lawmaker Vong Hin Fai, recently elected head of the association representing all local lawyers, made the comment on the sidelines of a parliamentary event yesterday.

Vong is also a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).

Upon assuming office, he was compared to his predecessor, Jorge Neto Valente, who was, during his tenure, very outspoken on certain policies the public was concerned might have violated human rights and freedom.

For example, Valente said he saw no legal provision allowing the government to restrict anybody from exer-



cising their right to stand in a parliamentary election. The government had suggested civil servants could not stand as candidates to maintain their impartiality.

Given Vong's connection with the establishment, he was asked if he would be as outspoken or if he would be more conservative.

He responded by first recognizing his predecessor's work, then added, "while commenting on my future work, I'll let [the public] evaluate it."

Amid the push for Macau residents to relocate to the mainland part of the Greater Bay Area (GBA), Vong was asked what areas Macau lawyers would work in as they move northwards.

Vong named a few areas that might open up for lawyers, such as cross-boundary legal services. He said if foreign investors want to develop in mainland China through Macau, such services will be required.

"For example, financial background checks are part of a lawyer's job in such investments. If a lawyer can practice in both Macau and the mainland part of the GBA, they will be able to provide one-stop services," the lawyer-lawmaker said. **AL**

COVID-19

PUI CHING PRINCIPAL HOPES DAILY RAT REQUIREMENTS END SOON

LAWMAKER Kou Kam Fai, principal of Pui Ching Middle School, hopes daily Covid-19 antigen tests on students with no previous infections will end soon.

Government guidelines currently require students with no previous Covid-19 infection to undergo a SARS-CoV-2 rapid antigen test (RAT) daily before school.

As his school resumed classes yesterday after the Lunar New Year holiday, Kou hoped the requirement will end soon.

He believes RAT is able to protect non-infected students, "but with a relatively high recovery rate, there is in fact herd immunity," he said.

Kou said his school has a relatively high overall prior-infection rate, with 83% among the staff, 82% of senior high students, 81% of primary students and 73% of kindergarten students.

On the other hand, the past Covid-19 outbreak across the city has also prevented physical education classes. The education bureau does not recommend physical

movements due to concerns over inflammation in students' developing hearts. It also suggests schools teach sport theories as part of a substitute curriculum.

However, Kou ignored education bureau recommendations and suggested teachers get students out of their classrooms during physical education periods for leisurely walking or stretching, "just to get some fresh air," the principal said.

Nonetheless, with recovery progressing, physical education classes will gradually return with activities progressing from mild to higher intensity.

The principal expects to resume graduation excursions this year, "especially for prospective senior high graduates," he said. "Last year, due to the June 18 outbreak, we reduced the excursion to staycation at a local hotel."

This year, he expects graduating classes will be able to undertake larger-scale excursions proportionate to their education levels, hinting that senior high students may be able to fly again. **AL**

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LABOR RIGHTS

Lawmaker Lei stresses mutual consent as basis for critical change

ANTHONY LAM

WHEN critical employment principles are to be changed, mutual consent from both employer and employee is critical, lawmaker Ella Lei said yesterday.

Lei is part of the Macao Federation of Trade Unions (FAOM) and is understood to be representing employees' interests at the Legislative Assembly (AL).

The comment came amid reports Wynn Macau Ltd. has shortened the work breaks for croupiers. Lei said her association received complaints Tuesday.

The lawmaker said work and break times, as well as salary are important employment benchmarks. Under the Labour Relations Law, contracts and agreements – whether written or verbal – should not be lightly



changed unless employers and employees have reached a consensus.

"Such contract or agreement terms possess legal power and cannot be changed by a single party," Lei explained.

She added that in the past three years, many employees have experienced salary cuts and furlough amid dropping revenues and she hopes employers build a better ambience for their teams as the economy gradually revives.

Lei also said the labour law has existed for over a decade. She said a review is needed considering the number of employment disputes that have occurred in the past three years. Reviewing it will help better protect employees, she said.

At the same time, she said she is not authorized to comment whether FAOM will identify itself as a labor union should the Labour Union Bill be passed at the parliament.

GAMBLING WORKER GROUP SUBMITS PETITION

A casino worker group yesterday submitted a petition to the labor bureau complaining about a casino operator's alleged alteration of break periods.

Cloe Chao, president of the New Macau Gaming Staff Rights Association, said the Association alone had received complaints from over 2,000 croupiers with Wynn Macau Ltd.

Both Chao and labor sector lawmaker Ella Lei have confirmed the casino operator had "suspended" the plan.

It has been revealed affected

workers rejected the suspension and called for full withdrawal of the proposal.

According to Chao, croupiers with the casino operator are allowed a 30 minute break every 1.5 hours of work. On a workday, each croupier will have four such break periods.

The proposed arrangement will extend work periods before each break period to two hours, with the break duration unchanged.

Chao said this is a promise made in the employee handbook. She said break periods are crucial to croupiers because they need to be "extremely focused" at work to "avoid making mistakes."

She feared it is a prelude to cutting employee benefits.

According to several media sources, Wynn has suspended the proposed arrangement, and explained that offering four break periods each workday surpasses the offering by competitors. The proposed move aims at aligning Wynn with its fellow casino operators.

AL WORKS

THE parliament held a media lunch yesterday. The president said that during the first year of this legislative term, 41 plenary meetings

have been held, 19 bills have been passed and a resolution has been made. The seven committees have held 176 meetings.

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DIRE STRAIT

TAIWAN ACTIVATES DEFENSES IN RESPONSE TO CHINA INCURSIONS

TAIWAN scrambled fighter jets, put its navy on alert and activated missile systems in response to nearby operations of 34 Chinese military aircraft and nine warships that are part Beijing's strategy to unsettle and intimidate the self-governing island.

The large-scale Chinese deployment comes as Beijing increases preparations for a potential blockade or outright attack on Taiwan that has stirred major concerns among military leaders in the U.S., Taiwan's key ally.

In a memo last month, U.S. Air Force Gen. Mike Minihan instructed officers to be prepared for a U.S.-China conflict over Taiwan in 2025. As head of Air Mobility Command, Minihan has a keen understanding of the Chinese military and his personal remarks echo calls in the U.S. for heightened preparations.

Taiwan's Defense Ministry said 20 Chinese aircraft on Tuesday crossed the central line in the Taiwan Strait that has long been an unofficial buffer zone between the sides, which divided amid civil war in 1949.

China claims the self-governing island republic as its own territory to be taken by force, while the vast majority of Taiwa-



Taiwanese Mirage 2000 fighter jets taxi along a runway during a drill at an airbase in Hsinchu, Taiwan

nese are opposed to coming under the control of China's authoritarian Communist Party.

Taiwan's armed forces "monitored the situation ... to respond to these activities," the Defense Ministry said yesterday.

China has sent warships, bombers, fighter jets and support aircraft into airspace near Taiwan on a near daily basis, hoping to wear down the island's limited defense resources and undercut support for pro-inde-

pendence Tsai Ing-wen.

Chinese fighter jets have also confronted military aircraft from the U.S. and allied nations over international airspace in the South China and East China seas, in what Beijing has described as dangerous and threatening maneuvers.

A string of visits in recent months by foreign politicians to Taiwan, including by then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and numerous politicians from the

European Union, spurred displays of military might from both sides.

In response to Pelosi's visit in August, China staged war games surrounding the island and fired missiles over it into the Pacific Ocean.

China has repeatedly threatened retaliation against countries seeking closer ties with Taiwan, but its attempts at intimidation have sparked a backlash in popular sentiment in Europe, Ja-

pan, the U.S. and other nations.

Although the Nationalists performed well in local elections last year, the party's pro-Beijing policies have failed to find resonance among voters on a national level, next year.

Taiwan has responded to China's threats by ordering more defensive weaponry from the U.S., leveraging its democracy and high-tech economy to strengthen foreign relations and revitalizing its domestic arms industry.

Compulsory military service for men is being extended from four months to one year and public opinion surveys show high levels of support for increased defense spending to counter China's threats.

In an interview last month, Taiwan's envoy to the U.S. said the island has learned important lessons from Ukraine's war that would help it deter any attack by China or defend itself if invaded.

Taiwan's de-facto ambassador in Washington, Bi-khim Hsiao, said there is a new emphasis on preparing military reservists and civilians for the kind of all-of-society fight that Ukrainians are waging against Russia.

"Everything we're doing now is to prevent the pain and suffering of the tragedy of Ukraine from being repeated in our scenario in Taiwan," Hsiao told The Associated Press. "So ultimately, we seek to deter the use of military force. But in a worst-case scenario, we understand that we have to be better prepared." **MDT/AP**

DIPLOMACY

NATO chief wants more 'friends' as Russia, China move closer

CHINA'S growing assertiveness and collaboration with Russia poses a threat not only to Asia but also to Europe, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said yesterday as he sought stronger cooperation and more "friends" for NATO in the Indo-Pacific region.

Stoltenberg said China is increasingly investing in nuclear weapons and long-range missiles without providing transparency or engaging in meaningful dialogue on arms control for atomic weapons, while escalating coercion of its neighbors and threats against Taiwan, the self-ruled island it claims as its own territory.

"The fact that Russia and China are coming closer and the significant invest-



NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg answers a question from students at Keio University in Tokyo

ments by China and new advanced military capabilities just underlines that China poses a threat, poses a challenge also to NATO allies," Stoltenberg told an audience at Keio University in Tokyo. "Security is not regional but global."

"NATO needs to make sure we have friends," he said. "It is important to work more closely with our partners in the Indo-Pacific."

China is increasingly working with Russia and they lead an "authoritarian

pushback" against the rules-based, open and democratic international order, he said.

Stoltenberg said NATO does not regard China as an adversary or seek confrontation, and that the alliance will continue to

engage with China in areas of common interest, such as climate change.

Stoltenberg and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida held talks Tuesday and agreed to step up their partnership in security in cyberspace, space, defense and other areas.

Besides Japan, NATO is also strengthening "practical cooperation" with Australia, New Zealand and South Korea in maritime cybersecurity and other areas and stepping up participation of their leaders and ministers in NATO meetings, he said.

Kishida on Tuesday announced Japan's plans to open a representative office at NATO.

Japan, already a close ally of the United States, has in recent years expanded its military ties with other Indo-Pacific nations as well as with Britain, Europe and NATO amid growing security threats from China and North Korea.

Tokyo was quick to join in U.S.-led economic sanctions against Russia's

war in Ukraine and provided humanitarian aid and non-combative defense equipment for Ukrainians. Japan fears that Russian aggression in Europe could be reflected in Asia, where concerns are growing over increasing Chinese assertiveness and escalating tensions over its claim to Taiwan.

Stoltenberg arrived in Japan late Monday from South Korea, where he called for Seoul to provide direct military support to Ukraine to help it fight off the prolonged Russian invasion.

North Korea condemned Stoltenberg's visits to South Korea and Japan, saying that NATO was trying to put its "military boots in the region" to pressure America's Asian allies into providing weapons to Ukraine.

North Korea also criticized increasing cooperation between NATO and U.S. allies in Asia as a process to create an "Asian version of NATO," saying it would raise tensions in the region. **MDT/AP**



Anti-coup protesters hold up signs as they march in Mandalay, Myanmar, last March

MYANMAR

Resistance steadfast against army rule two years later

GRANT PECK & JERRY HARMER, BANGKOK

THE prospects for peace in Myanmar, much less a return to democracy, seem dimmer than ever two years after the army seized power from the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi, experts say.

Yesterday, legions of opponents of military rule heeded a call by protest organizers to stay home in what they call a "silent strike" to show their strength and solidarity.

The opposition's General Strike Coordination Body, formed soon after the 2021 takeover, urged people to stay inside in their homes or workplaces from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Photos posted on social media showed empty streets in the normally bustling downtown area of Yangon, the country's largest city, with just a few vehicles on the roads, and there were reports of similar scenes elsewhere.

Small peaceful protests are an almost-daily occurrence throughout the country, but on the anniversary of the Feb. 1, 2021, seizure of power by the army, two points stand out: The level of violence, especially in the countryside, has reached the level of civil war; and the grassroots movement opposing military rule has defied expectations by largely holding off the ruling generals.

The violence extends beyond the rural battlefields where the army is burning and bombing villages, displacing hundreds of thousands of people in what is a largely neglected humanitarian crisis. It also occurs in the cities, where activists are arrested and tortured and urban guerrillas retaliate with bombings and assassinations of targets linked to the military. The military, after closed trials, have also executed by hanging activists accused of "terrorism."

According to the independent Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, a watchdog group that tracks killings and arrests, 2,940 civilians have been killed by the authorities since the army takeover, and another 17,572 arrested — 13,763 of whom remain detained. The actual death toll is likely to be much higher since the group does not generally include deaths on the side of the military government and cannot easily verify cases in remote areas.

"The level of violence involving both armed combatants and civilians is alarming and unexpected," said Min Zaw Oo, a veteran political activist in exile who founded the Myanmar Institute for Peace and Security.

"The scale of the killing and harm inflicted on civilians has been devastating, and unlike anything we have seen in the country

in recent memory," he said.

When the army ousted Suu Kyi in 2021, it arrested her and top members of her governing National League for Democracy party, which had won a landslide victory for a second term in a November 2020 general election. The military claimed it acted because there had been massive electoral fraud, a claim not backed up by objective election observers. Suu Kyi, 77, is serving prison sentences totaling 33 years after being convicted in a series of politically tainted prosecutions brought by the military.

Shortly after the military seized power and quashed nonviolent protests with lethal force, thousands of young people slipped away to remote rural areas to become guerrilla fighters.

Operating in decentralized "People's Defense Forces," or PDFs, they are proving to be effective warriors, specializing in ambushes and occasionally overrunning isolated army and police posts. They have benefited greatly from supplies and training provided by some of the country's ethnic minority rebels — Ethnic Armed Organizations, or EAOs — who have been fighting the army for decades for greater autonomy.

"That's not only a very brave thing to do. It's a very difficult thing to do," Richard Horsey, an independent analyst and adviser

to the International Crisis Group, told The Associated Press. "It's a very challenging thing to do, to take on, you know, a military that's been fighting counter-insurgency warfare (for) basically its whole existence."

David Mathieson, another independent analyst with over 20 years' experience in Myanmar, says the opposition's combat capabilities are "a mixed picture in terms of battlefield performance, organization and unity amongst them."

"But it's also important to remember two years in that no one was predicting that they were actually going to be as effective as they are now. And in certain areas, the PDFs have been taking on the Myanmar military and, in many respects, besting them on the battlefield in terms of ambush and pitched battles, taking over bases."

He says the military's heavy weaponry and air power push the situation into a kind of a stalemate where the PDFs are not necessarily taking over large swaths of territory, but fighting back and prevailing.

"So no one's winning at the moment," Mathieson said.

The military government of Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing has an advantage — not just in arms and trained manpower, but also in geography. Myanmar's main nei-

ghors — Thailand, China and India — have geopolitical and economic interests in Myanmar that leave them satisfied with the status quo, which largely secures its borders from becoming a major supply route for weapons and other supplies for the resistance. And while much of the world maintains sanctions against the generals and their government, they can rely on obtaining arms from Russia and China.

Min Aung Hlaing's government is also nominally pursuing a political solution to the crisis it caused, most notably in its promise to hold fresh elections this year. Suu Kyi's party has rejected taking part, deriding the polls as neither free nor fair, and other activists are employing more direct action, attacking teams from the military government who are conducting surveys to compile voter rolls.

"The regime is pushing for an election which the opposition has vowed to derail," said Min Zaw Oo. "The election won't change the political status quo; instead, it will intensify violence."

The planned polls "are being run by a regime that overturned the popularly elected government. They are clearly being seen by the Myanmar people for what they are: a cynical effort to overwrite those previous election results that gave a landslide victory to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy so these are not elections in any meaningful sense of the word," Horsey said. "They have no legitimacy or credibility."

On the diplomatic front, the military government thumbs its nose at international efforts to defuse the crisis, even those from sympathetic fellow members in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, whose harshest response has been to not invite Myanmar's top military leaders to attend its meetings.

Myanmar's army government rejects virtually all efforts at peacemaking as interference in its internal affairs.

The resistance, by contrast, actively reaches out for international support. It won small, new diplomatic victories Tuesday as the United States, Australia, Britain and Canada announced new sanctions meant to squeeze the military's revenue and supply lines. The British and Canadian sanctions are especially noteworthy, as they target the supply of aviation fuel, a move activists have been pleading for to counter the increasing number of airstrikes the pro-democracy forces and their allies in ethnic minority rebel groups have been facing in the field.

"Currently, both sides are not ready to seek a political solution," warned Min Zaw Oo. "The military stalemate won't shift significantly this year, despite more deaths and violence." **MDT/AP**

MIDDLE EAST

Blinken visit highlights US limitations in region

JOSEF FEDERMAN,
JERUSALEM

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken yesterday [Macau time] wrapped up a two-day visit to Israel and the occupied West Bank with no visible signs of progress toward halting one of the deadliest outbreaks of Israeli-Palestinian violence in years.

The anemic outcome highlighted what appears to be the limited influence the Biden administration has over Israel's new government, which is dominated by hard-line nationalists who oppose concessions toward the Palestinians. But it also reflected a years-long process that has turned the U.S. into little more than a conflict manager — drawing Palestinian accusations that Washington is a dishonest broker with a bias toward Israel.

Blinken arrived in the region at a particularly tense time — ending a month in which 35 Palestinians and seven Israelis were killed.

The bloodshed overshadowed what was meant to be a mission to establish working relations with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his new far-right government. Instead, Blinken spent much of his time trying to defuse tensions.

Speaking to reporters before returning to the U.S., Blinken said both sides had voiced their readiness to restore calm and that he had instructed two senior officials to remain in the region.

He also reiterated the long-term U.S. goal of working toward a two-state solution that would establish a Palestinian state alongside Israel under a final peace settlement.

"Restoring calm is our immediate task. But over the longer term, we have to do more than just lower tensions," he said.

It was a familiar message expressed by a string of U.S. administrations — but based on the bitter experiences of his predecessors — one that is unlikely to bear fruit. Blinken gave no details on what steps he has in mind to promote his short-term



U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, center, meets representatives of the Palestinian civil society in Ramallah in the occupied West Bank

goals or his long-term vision.

In the short run, Blinken must contend with Israel's most right-wing government ever — a collection of religious and ultra-nationalist politicians who oppose concessions to the Palestinians and rule out Palestinian independence.

On the eve of Blinken's arrival, Netanyahu's Cabinet approved a series of punitive steps against the Palestinians in response to a pair of shootings in east Jerusalem last weekend — including an attack that killed seven people outside a synagogue in a Jewish settlement.

These include plans to step up West Bank settlement construction, demolitions of the homes of attackers' families as well as dozens of Palestinian homes constructed without building permits. Palestinians say such permits are almost impossible to get.

Blinken said the U.S. would oppose "anything" that undermines hopes of a two-state solution, including settlement construction built on occupied lands sought by the Palestinians. Some 700,000 Israeli settlers now live in the occupied West Bank and east Jerusalem, areas captured by Israel in 1967 and claimed by the Palestinians.

But he gave no indication on how the U.S. might respond if Israel presses ahead with such moves, and reiterated longstanding lines about the U.S. commitment

to Israel's security and "shared values" between the countries.

Yara Hawari, a senior analyst at Al-Shabaka, a Palestinian think tank, said Palestinian expectations for Blinken's visit were low to begin with, and that Blinken had delivered a worn message of coddling Israel.

"It's a textbook visit," she said. "The U.S. is not an honest broker in this situation, so I don't understand how it could bring anything to the table that would actually lead us toward achieving Palestinian fundamental rights."

In a sign of what could lie ahead if the U.S. pushes the new government, Israeli Cabinet Minister Orit Strock, a member of a religious ultra-nationalist party, lashed out at Blinken's call for a commitment to human rights and rule of law.

The comments were widely seen as criticism of the government's plans to overhaul Israel's judicial system and weaken its Supreme Court. Critics in Israel say the plan will severely damage Israel's democratic system of checks and balances.

"Blinken needed to respect Israeli sovereignty. We're not the 51st or 52nd state of the U.S.," Strock said.

Blinken played down the criticism, saying he would focus on Israel's policies, not individual personalities.

Michael Oren, a former Israeli ambassador to

Washington, said the blame for failed peacemaking lies with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who at 87 is seen as weak, corrupt and increasingly authoritarian after nearly 20 years in office.

"I think this administration understands there is no one really to work with on the Palestinian side," he said. "They have other issues to deal with."

The mutual lack of trust is just one of the many reasons for repeated U.S. failures in the region since the historic interim Oslo accords 30 years ago. Over the decades, the Clinton, Bush, Obama and Trump administrations have all tried their hands at Mideast peace plans — with little to show beyond sporadic interventions to halt outbreaks of violence.

Preoccupied with the war in Ukraine and the U.S. rivalry with China, the Biden administration appears to have little desire or bandwidth to wade into a mission doomed to fail.

Aaron David Miller, who served as an adviser to a string of Democratic and Republican administrations for over two decades, said he believes U.S. diplomats have reached the conclusion that the best they can do is damage control. "It's trying to prevent an explosion, but they haven't figured out how to do that," said Miller, who is now a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. **MDT/AP**

this day in history

1990 DE KLERK DISMANTLES APARTHEID IN SOUTH AFRICA



The President of South Africa has lifted the 30-year ban on leading anti-apartheid group the African National Congress.

In a televised speech at the opening of Parliament in Cape Town, President FW de Klerk announced restrictions would be lifted on the ANC, the smaller Pan Africanist Congress and the South African Communist Party, which is allied to the ANC.

He also made his first public commitment to release jailed ANC leader Nelson Mandela, but he did not specify a date.

The reforms will allow active opposition to apartheid for the first time in 40 years of National Party rule.

Many observers were surprised by the scope of the reforms - which included a return to press freedom and suspension of the death penalty - signalling a partial end to the 25-year-old state of emergency.

Nobel Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu said: "He has taken my breath away".

Mr Mandela's wife, Winnie, remained sceptical.

She said: "We are not going to accept a bone without meat. The unbanning of the ANC, the South African Communist Party and the Pan-African Congress in the prevailing South African climate is simply a recipe for further problems."

Other critics complained about the government's failure to completely lift the state of emergency, as the ban on TV and photographic coverage of unrest continues.

Mr de Klerk explained this was precautionary so that the authorities could monitor the progress of the reforms.

Speaking about the release of political prisoners, he said: "It does not signify in the least the approval or condoning of crimes of terrorism or crimes of violence committed under their banner."

The Conservative opposition has demanded a referendum on the white reaction to the new measures.

World leaders praised Mr de Klerk.

US President George Bush said he welcomed the decision to dismantle apartheid but emphasised further action would be needed before economic sanctions could be lifted.

British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher has written to Mr de Klerk to congratulate him for his courage.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

Nelson Mandela was released on 11 February 1990

President FW de Klerk lifted the remaining apartheid legislation in 1991.

The ANC became South Africa's first democratically elected government in April 1994. Nelson Mandela became the country's first black president on 10 May 1994 aged 75.

He retired in the middle of 1999 and was replaced as president by Thabo Mbeki. Mandela died on December 5 2013, in Houghton Estate, Johannesburg.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS



ARIES

Mar. 21-Apr. 19

Financial gains can be made. Real estate investments will payoff. You might find that a coworker has been two faced.



TAURUS

Apr. 20-May. 20

Use your creative talent in order to accomplish your goals. You may find your nights sleepless due to bad dreams. Do not sign your life away.



GEMINI

May. 21-Jun. 21

You are in a high cycle where travel, education, and creative endeavors are concerned. Take time to relax. Stress and pressure at home may have worn you ragged.



CANCER

Jun. 22-Jul. 22

Don't let children or elders put demands on your time. Be professional, and you will advance much more quickly. Take a trip or just spend some quality time with your mate.



LEO

Jul. 23-Aug. 22

You can meet someone who will become very dear to you if you get out and socialize. Direct your energy into physical exertion. Residential moves will be favorable.



VIRGO

Aug. 23-Sep. 22

You can ask for favors and get sound advice from close friends or relatives. Opportunities to expand your circle of friends will result in possible new romantic encounters.



LIBRA

Sep. 23-Oct. 22

You'll be pleased with the results if you take the time to decorate your home. Take care of any dealings with government agencies. Too much talk will lead to disputes.



SCORPIO

Oct. 23-Nov. 21

You may find your nights sleepless due to bad dreams. Your lover may feel rejected. Don't let children or elders put demands on your time.



SAGITTARIUS

Nov. 22-Dec. 21

You should be traveling to that exotic destination you've been dreaming about. Don't upset elders in your family who don't understand your present situation.



CAPRICORN

Dec. 22-Jan. 19

Don't allow your personal problems to interfere with your professionalism. You will meet new friends and enjoy a multitude of new activities.



AQUARIUS

Jan. 20-Feb. 18

Be cautious while traveling; minor accidents are evident. Finish those changes you've been talking about making to your residence. You are best to keep your cash in a safe place.

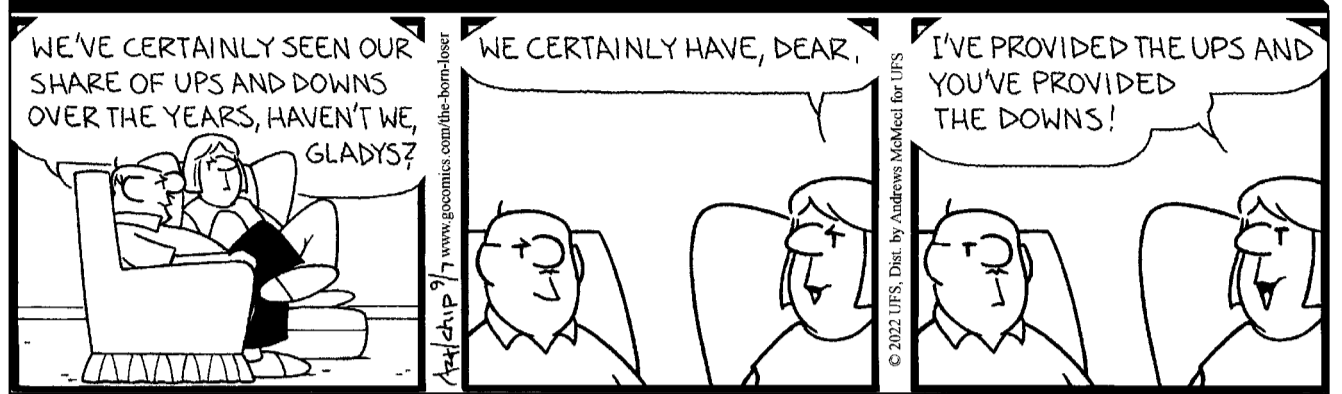


PISCES

Feb. 19-Mar. 20

Your mind may not be on the job. You must make sure that all your personal documents are in order. You must not allow them to force you to rush.

The Born Loser by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

EASY

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

EASY+

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

MEDIUM

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

HARD

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

WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	-6	3	cloudy
Changchun	-17	-6	fine
Chengdu	7	13	cloudy
Chongqing	7	13	overcast
Fuzhou	11	16	cloudy
Guangzhou	15	25	overcast
Guiyang	6	10	rain
Haikou	19	21	cloudy
Hangzhou	4	8	cloudy
Harbin	-22	-10	fine
Hefei	1	4	rain
Nanjing	1	7	cloudy
Shanghai	4	7	cloudy
Taipei	13	16	rain
Wuhan	4	5	rain
Hong Kong	18	28	cloudy
WORLD			
Moscow	-1	-1	snow
Frankfurt	7	8	showers
Paris	7	11	overcast
London	8	12	cloudy
New York	-3	7	overcast

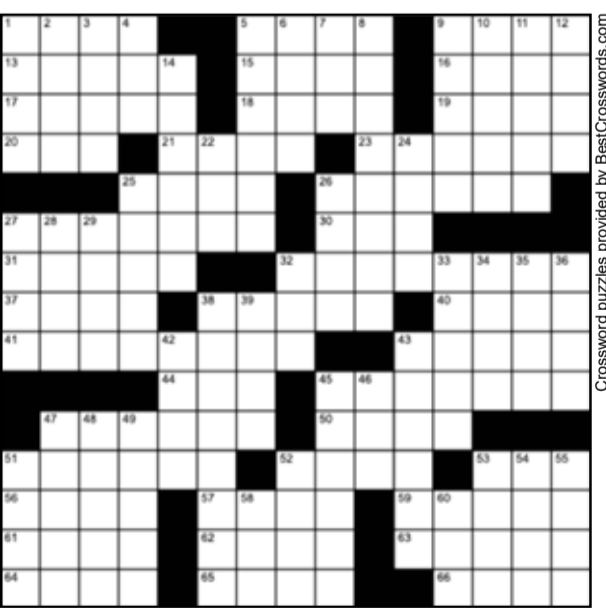
CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Charles barker; 5- Facilitate; 9- Med school subj.; 13- Ignominy; 15- Complacent; 16- Lab fluids; 17- Opium flower; 18- Atlantic mackerel; 19- Jury member; 20- Paris possessive; 21- Collar type; 23- Virgin; 25- Operation memento; 26- Mischievous person; 27- Narrative; 30- Nav. officer; 31- Small assemblage; 32- Wet weather wear; 37- Electric fish; 38- ___ Gay; 40- ___ breve; 41- Reassign; 43- One on slopes; 44- ___ Lingus; 45- Systematically arranged body of facts; 47- Lama pacos; 50- Military force; 51- Declare; 52- Opposed to; 53- Neither Rep. nor Dem.; 56- Celestial body; 57- Comic Fox; 59- Lost; 61- Antiprohibitionists; 62- Dies ___; 63- Like a subway; 64- Limerick language; 65- Singer Vikki; 66- Ballpark figs.;

DOWN 1- Cairo cobras; 2- Foot covering; 3- Knocks lightly; 4- Roadie's load; 5- Go with; 6- Traditional prayer ending; 7- Big ___ Calif.; 8- Narcissism amok; 9- Cold mold; 10- I ___ vacation!; 11- Staggering; 12- Mountain lake; 14- Device for applying ocular rinse; 22- Process leather; 24- Org.; 25- Immerse; 26- Sincere; 27- Antiquing agent; 28- Manitoba native; 29- Chilly; 32- Siegfried's partner; 33- Like a birthday dessert; 34- Actress Lena; 35- Novelist Waugh; 36- Shipping deduction; 38- Charged; 39- 'A Doll's House' heroine; 42- Carson's predecessor; 43- Apelike; 45- Tool with a belt; 46- TV part; 47- Fall bloomer; 48- Atty.-to-be exams; 49- In itself; 51- ___ forgive our debtors; 52- Hebrew month; 53- Wife of Osiris; 54- Hotbed; 55- 24 hour periods; 58- Part of B.C.E.; 60- Piggy;

Yesterday's solution

H	A	M	M	O	L	E	S		S	L	I	D	E
A	R	E		O	R	A	T	E		L	A	M	A
I	N	N	O	C	E	N	G	E		I	M	P	L
R	I	S	E	S		T	E	M	P	O			
Y	E	A	R	S		A	L	O	H	A	S	E	R
Y	E	A	R	S		P	E	E	L	E	R	S	
U	N	H	A	R	R	E	D		A	G	A	S	T
G	A	Y	B	O	O	K		W	O	M	A	N	L
R	O	S	E	S		R	E	P	O	R	T	E	R
R	I	A	L										
N													
N													
O	I	D	N	T		A	W	E	S	T	R	U	C
S	I	E	G	E		T	A	M	E	S		T	A
T	I	R	E	S		S	T	O	R				



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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HKD 9,588,000 4 beds 3 bath

Sun Yick
HKD 7,080,000 2 bed 1 bath

AD

DRUGS

HONG KONG BANS CBD, FORCING BUSINESSES TO SHUT OR REVAMP

KANIS LEUNG,
HONG KONG

HONG Kong banned CBD as a “dangerous drug” and imposed harsh penalties for its possession on Wednesday, forcing fledgling businesses to shut down or revamp.

Supporters say CBD, or cannabidiol, derived from the cannabis plant, can help relieve stress and inflammation without getting its users high, unlike its more famous cousin THC, the psychoactive ingredient of marijuana which has long been illegal in Hong Kong. CBD was once legal in the city, and cafes and shops selling CBD-infused products were popular among young people.

But all that has changed with the prohibition, which took effect Wednesday but had been announced by the government last year. CBD-related businesses have



In this image made from a video, cheesecakes made with CBD, CBD powder and water-soluble CBD sold by the CBD Bakery online shop are seen in Hong Kong

closed down while others have struggled to remodel their businesses. Consumers dumped what they saw as a cure for their ailments into special collection boxes set up around the city.

The new rule reflects a zero-tolerance policy toward dangerous drugs in Hong Kong, a semi-autonomous southern Chinese business hub, as well as in mainland China, where CBD was banned in 2022.

The city maintains several categories of “dangerous drugs,” which include “hard drugs” such as heroin and cocaine.

In explaining the policy change, the Hong Kong government cited the difficulty of isolating pure CBD from cannabis, the possibility of contamination with THC during the production process and the relative ease by which CBD can be converted to THC.

Customs authorities vowed last week to do more to educate residents to help them understand that CBD is prohibited in Hong Kong even though it is legal elsewhere.

Starting Wednesday, possession of CBD can result in up to seven years in jail and a 1 million Hong Kong dollar (\$128,000) fine. Those convicted of importing, exporting or producing the substance can face up to life in prison and a 5 million Hong Kong dollar (\$638,000) fine.

Some users said the ban shows the international financial hub is going backward.

“It’s just looking less like an international city,” said Jennifer Lo, the owner of CBD Bakery, who started selling CBD-infused cheesecakes, cookies and drinks in 2021.

Her business largely dried up even before the ban took effect, she said.

“Rumors of the ban affected how I do business,” she said. “Some platforms just took me offline without telling me. And then it was not as easy to get space at markets.”

To comply with the ban, Lo dumped all her remaining stock, including dozens of cookies, and said she would have to rebrand her business.

Some other vendors, including the city’s first CBD cafe that opened in 2020, shut down.

Karena Tsoi, who used CBD skincare products for two years to treat her eczema, said she will have to find an alternative treatment.

“It’s troublesome,” she said. “The government doesn’t have to regulate like this.”

Most Asian nations have strict drug laws with harsh penalties with the exception of Thailand, which made marijuana legal to cultivate and possess last year.

Elsewhere, the debate over CBD continues.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration said last week that there is not enough evidence about CBD to confirm that it’s safe for consumption in foods or as a dietary supplement. It called on Congress to create new rules for the growing market.

Marijuana-derived products have become increasingly popular in lotions, tinctures and foods, while their legal status has been murky in the U.S., where several states have legalized or decriminalized substances that remain illegal federally. MDT/AP

MINING

GM CONDITIONALLY OKS \$650M NEVADA LITHIUM MINE INVESTMENT

SCOTT SONNER, RENO

GENERAL Motors Co. has conditionally agreed to invest \$650 million in Lithium Americas Corp. in a deal that will give GM exclusive access to the first phase of a mine planned near the Nevada-Oregon line with the largest known source of lithium in the U.S.

The equity investment the companies announced jointly yesterday [Macau time] is contingent on the Thacker Pass project clearing the final environmental and legal challenges it faces in federal court in Reno, where conservationists and tribal leaders are suing to block it.

Lawyers for the mining company and the U.S. government told a judge during a Jan. 5 hearing the project is critical to meeting the growing demand for lithium to make electric vehicle batteries — a key part of President Joe Biden’s push to expedite a transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy and help reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

GM said the announcement marks the largest-ever investment by an automaker to produce battery raw materials.

Lithium Americas estimates the lithium extracted and processed from the project atop an ancient volcano about 200 miles (321 kilometers) northeast of Reno can support production of up to 1 million electric vehicles annually. It’s the third largest known lithium deposit in the world, the company said.

“The agreement with GM is a major milestone in moving Thacker Pass toward production,” Lithium Americas President and CEO Jonathan Evans said in the joint statement.

“We are pleased to have GM as our largest investor and we look forward to working together to accelerate the energy transition while spurring job creation and economic growth in America,” he said.

GM also reported that rising factory output led to strong U.S. sales at the end of last year, pushing its fourth-quarter net income up 16% over the same period a year ago.

“GM has secured all the battery material we need to build more than 1 million EVs annually in North America in 2025 and our future production will increasingly draw from domestic resources like the site in Nevada we’re developing with Lithium Americas,” said GM Chair and CEO Mary Barra.

The joint announcement said GM’s investment will be split into two portions. The first will be held in escrow “until certain conditions are met, including the outcome of the Record of Decision ruling currently pending in U.S. District Court.”

“If those conditions are met, the funds will be released and GM will become a shareholder in Lithium Americas,” the joint statement said.

The escrow release is expected to occur no later than the end of 2023 and lithium production is projected to begin in the second half of 2026, it said.

The second portion of the investment is contingent on, among other things, Lithium Americas “securing capital to fund the development expenditures to support Thacker Pass,” the statement said. MDT/AP



AD



BENFICAMACAU ACADEMY
澳門賓菲加體育學校



FOOTBALL | BASKETBALL | DAILY TRAININGS

FOOTBALL

Fernandez signing caps big-spending Chelsea's latest spree

STEVE DOUGLAS

CHELSEA completed another staggering spending spree by its new American ownership — more than \$350 million this time — by signing Argentina midfielder Enzo Fernandez for a British-record fee on the final day of the January transfer window yesterday [Macu time].

A day of negotiations between Benfica and Chelsea's co-owners ended with the Premier League club agreeing to pay the release clause of 106.7 million pounds (\$131.4 million) in the 22-year-old World Cup winner's contract. The Portuguese club announced the transfer in a statement yesterday.

The fee eclipsed the 100 million pounds (then \$139 million) Manchester City paid Aston Villa for England international Jack Grealish in 2021.

Chelsea has spent more this month than every club in the top leagues in Spain, Italy, Germany and France combined. And following a big outlay in Europe's summer transfer window, Chelsea has splashed out around \$630 million in the first two windows overseen by the new ownership — fronted by Todd Boehly — since the purchase of the club for \$2.5 billion in May.

Chelsea signed eight players in January and handed most of them long contracts — as much as 8 1/2 years for Fernandez, for example — to allow the club to spread the cost of the signings



Argentina's Enzo Fernandez leaves Benfica to Chelsea after a fabulous job at both club and country levels

over the length of the deals and comply with financial fair-play regulations.

Fernandez only joined Benfica from Argentine club River Plate in August, for a reported fee of around \$10 million, but his profile was boosted by his performances in the World Cup after breaking into Argentina's team in the group stage and starting every game through to the final. He was voted as the best young player at the tournament.

Chelsea will hope its latest spending spree — which includes bringing in Ukraine winger Mykhailo Mudryk in a deal worth around \$108 million and France center back Benoît Badiashile for \$40 million — helps the team climb the Premier League standings in a late attempt to qualify for the Champions League. The team is in 10th place, 10 points off the top four.

The final day of the window was another busy one for Chelsea, which also sold midfielder Jorginho to Premier League leader Arsenal while its winger, Hakim Ziyech, held talks with Paris Saint-Germain about a loan move without a deal being announced amid reports of issues with the paperwork.

JORGINHO TO ARSENAL

Italy international Jorginho has cost Arsenal a reported 12 million pounds (\$14.75 million) in a move that gives the league leaders an extra option in midfield in their bid to win a first top-flight title since 2004.

Arsenal made a late move in the transfer window to strengthen its central-midfield department, with Mohamed Elneny — a backup to first-choice holding midfielder Thomas Partey — ruled out for a lengthy period be-

cause of injury.

Attempts to sign Ecuador international Moises Caicedo from Brighton were rebuffed last week, leading Arsenal to turn to Jorginho, who helped Italy win the European Championship in 2021.

He spent 4 1/2 years at Chelsea after joining from Napoli but was no longer a regular player at Chelsea under manager Graham Potter.

Arsenal also loaned out midfielder Albert Sambi Lokonga to Crystal Palace and 19-year-old Brazilian forward Marquinhos, who is midway through his first season at the club, to second-tier Norwich to get more first-team action.

CANCELO LEAVES CITY

Manchester City sent Joao Cancelo on loan to Bayern Munich for the rest of the season, with the Portugal fullback having fallen out of favor with manager Pep Guardiola since the World Cup.

The German champions have the option to make the transfer permanent for a fee of 70 million euros (\$76 million).

SABITZER TO UNITED

Manchester United reacted quickly after Christian Eriksen was ruled out for as much as three months with an ankle injury by signing fellow midfielder Marcel Sabitzer on loan from Bayern Munich.

"Sometimes in life you have to make quick and important decisions," Sabitzer said.

Sabitzer, who has played 68 times for Austria, wasn't first choice for Bayern this season.

TOTTENHAM'S RIGHT BACKS

Tottenham manager Antonio Conte places a lot of importance in his wing backs and the club switched around the players on the right side on deadline day.

Spain wing back Pedro Porro joined from Sporting in Portugal on loan, with Tottenham obliged to buy him for a reported 39 million pounds (\$48 million) at the end of the season. To make room in the squad, Tottenham sent Djed Spence on loan to Rennes in France and mutually agreed to the termination of Matt Doherty's contract to enable him to join Atletico Madrid in Spain.

FOREST AND BOURNEMOUTH ACTIVE

Nottingham Forest and Bournemouth were busy bolstering their squads for their bids to avoid relegation from the Premier League.

Forest brought in three players — the signature signing being Costa Rica goalkeeper Keylor Navas on loan from Paris Saint-Germain for the rest of the season. Felipe, a 33-year-old Brazilian central defender, arrived from Atletico and midfielder Jonjo Shelvey came from Newcastle.

Bournemouth signed Dynamo Kyiv defender Illia Zabarnyi, who is highly rated having won 24 caps for Ukraine by the age of 20, and Ivory Coast midfielder Hamed Traorè from Italian team Sassuolo on an initial loan agreement which will become permanent at the end of the season for a further five years.

Leeds signed center back Diogo Monteiro, who has been a captain of Portugal's youth teams, from Swiss team Servette while Australia defender Harry Souttar, who impressed at the World Cup, joined Leicester from second-tier Stoke. **MDT/AP**

FOOTBALL

FIFA anxious to reboot Club World Cup after years of delays

A little-loved member of FIFA's family of soccer tournaments for so long, the latest Club World Cup starts today as a seven-team event two years after that format was due to have been abolished and two years before an ambitious revamp with up to 32 teams.

FIFA president Gianni Infantino has wanted since being elected to lead soccer's world governing

body in 2016 to create a bigger and better version of its only club tournament, an event he once valued at potentially worth \$3 billion per edition promising tens of millions in prize money for each team.

Until a major overhaul — likely in 2025 after the European season — FIFA goes year-to-year with the smaller mid-season version of the intercontinental championship that

barely adds to its multi-billion dollar income.

FIFA will pay \$5 million of a \$16 million total prize fund to the winner next week, likely to be Real Madrid on a brief, two-game visit to Morocco that could start with a semifinal against the Seattle Sounders. The champion of Europe has won 14 of the 15 titles since 2007.

The tournament's shifting place in a congested

global soccer calendar was shown by FIFA confirming Morocco as host just six weeks ago.

That decision was taken in Qatar on the day Infantino targeted 2025 for the first 32-team club event — "making it really like a World Cup," he said in Doha.

The timing surprised some soccer officials in Europe who see FIFA's ambitions in club soccer

threatening their domestic leagues and the globally popular, hugely lucrative Champions League. Before going to FIFA, Infantino was the UEFA general secretary overseeing the Champions League and knows exactly the appeal and value of staging top-

-level clubs.

Infantino quickly identified in 2016 two FIFA events for men's continental champions that had limited appeal nor value, because broadcast and sponsor rights are currently bundled with the World Cup. **MDT/AP**



FIFA president Gianni Infantino

OPINION

China Daily
 Editorial, China Daily

**SANCTIONS WON'T
 CRUSH CHINA'S
 HI-TECH RISE**

To further strangle China's technology sector, the United States is reportedly considering banning all sales to Chinese telecommunications equipment giant Huawei by US suppliers, including Intel and Qualcomm.

Such a move would tighten the restrictions already imposed by Washington on sales to Huawei in 2019 on the unwarranted grounds of national security concerns. US suppliers have since then had to ask for government approval to sell their products to China's first major global brand, greatly limiting the company's access to processor chips and other technologies. Yet under the new policy that Washington is set to roll out, all license requests to supply Huawei would be denied.

Such a practice, which runs counter to the principles of a market economy and tramples on the basic rules that govern international trade, reflects how desperate Washington has become as it goes to great lengths to try to suppress China's technological progress. Last week, the Joe Biden administration also reportedly persuaded the Netherlands and Japan to join the US in restricting exports of semiconductor technology to China.

Yet the stepped-up crackdown also in a way attests to the futility of Washington's strategy to keep Chinese technological companies at bay. Take Huawei for instance. Despite being squeezed by US sanctions globally over the past several years, the company has largely pulled itself "out of crisis mode" by launching new business lines serving factories, self-driving cars and other industrial customers that are less vulnerable to US pressure. Its revenue last year was forecast to be little-changed from 2021 at 636.9 billion yuan (\$91.6 billion), according to Eric Xu, one of its executives, in a December letter to employees. "US restrictions are now our new normal, and we're back to business as usual."

Meanwhile, the US high-tech sanctions are also hurting US suppliers as well given that China is the world's largest consumer of semiconductors, and the lion's share of revenue from purchasing these chips go to foreign companies. For example, China consumed \$143.4 billion worth of semiconductor wafers in 2020, and less than 6 percent of them were produced by companies headquartered in China.

Rather than crushing China's high-tech advancement, the increasing US pressure on Chinese technological companies will only propel them to strive for self-reliance through indigenous innovation. The country was already on track to produce around 5 percent of the world's memory chips by the end of 2020, and is now widely believed to be on the brink of a breakthrough in its efforts to become self-sufficient in semiconductors.

"What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger". That saying is apt for China's nascent yet unstoppable high-tech rise.

Italy's government has increased security at its diplomatic missions around the globe in response to "a crescendo of terroristic attacks" by an informal anarchist network acting in solidarity with an imprisoned Italian militant, the foreign minister said yesterday [Macau time].

Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani cited nearly a dozen attacks since the end of November, ranging from vandalism to explosive devices that have caused damage to Italian diplomatic targets in Argentina, Bolivia, Germany, Greece, Portugal, Spain and Switzerland. No injuries have been reported.

"It is obvious that there is an international solidarity (among anarchists) and therefore an attack against Italy, against Italian institutions, is being carried out across the world," Tajani said, adding that security was being raised at all Italian embassies and consulates as well as the foreign ministry.

Tajani said they believe the network includes both Italians and anarchists from other countries acting in concert. He referred to graffiti scrawled in Catalan on the building housing the Italian Consulate in Barcelona.

AP PHOTO



Cristiano Ronaldo speaks during a press conference for his official unveiling as a new member of Al Nassr soccer club in Riyadh

RONALDO'S WAY

**SAUDI SOCCER INFLUENCE
 GROWS BY WINNING SEAT
 ON FIFA COUNCIL**

GRAHAM DUNBAR

SAUDI Arabia added to its influence in world soccer yesterday, winning a seat on the FIFA Council and then being confirmed as host of the 2027 Asian Cup.

The election win at the Asian Football Confederation's annual meeting followed Cristiano Ronaldo arrival last month to play in the Saudi league and longstanding speculation about a likely bid to host the World Cup in 2030 or 2034.

Saudi soccer federation president Yasser Almihehal was among six Asian soccer officials elected by AFC members to represent them on FIFA's decision-making committee through 2027. Saudi Arabia was the only candidate to host the Asian championship.

Qatari soccer federation president Sheikh Hamad Al Thani, whose country hosts the next Asian Cup in January 2024, also was elected to the FIFA Council. Sheikh Hamad earned 40 votes from the 45 federations, while Almihehal got 35.

The 37-member FIFA Council is chaired by Gianni Infantino, the governing body's president who attended the election mee-

ting in Bahrain.

The election results confirmed Saudi Arabia and Qatar at the heart of Asian soccer politics with the AFC presidency scheduled to be vacant in 2027.

AFC president Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa of Bahrain was reelected by acclamation yesterday to a final four-year term in a job he has held since 2013. He is also formally No. 2 to Infantino as the most senior of FIFA's eight vice presidents.

FIFA Council positions — which pay a \$250,000 salary in Zurich — were also won by Kohzo Tashima of Japan and Mariano Araneta of the Philippines, who retained their seats, and newcomer Hamidin Bin Mohd Amin, the Malaysian soccer federation leader.

Losing candidates were Du Zhaocai of China and Chung Mong-Gyu of South Korea, a scion of the family that owns Hyundai and who lost his seat in 2019.

The election for a FIFA Council seat protected for a woman was won by Kanya Keomany of Laos.

Later in the meeting, the Saudi bid to host the 2027 Asian Cup was confirmed unopposed. India withdrew its bid in December.

Presenting the bid on stage, Saudi sports minister Abdulaziz bin Turki Al-Faisal called the 2027 tournament "a transformational moment in our collective football story."

Saudi Arabia is a three-time champion of the Asian Cup, in 1984, 1988 and 1996, but has never hosted the tournament.

The kingdom raised its soccer profile when Ronaldo signed a 2 1/2-year deal with Al Nassr, and has been speculatively linked with a three-continent co-hosting bid to host the 2030 World Cup with Egypt from Africa and Greece from Europe.

That would require sending the tournament back to Asia and the Arabian Gulf only eight years after Qatar hosted the 2022 edition. A 2034 bid could be more realistic.

FIFA is expected to let more than 200 member federations choose the 2030 host next year.

Spain and Portugal, currently with Ukraine also, are planning a European bid for the 2030 World Cup, while a four-nation South American bid that brings together Argentina, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay, the inaugural host 100 years earlier in 1930, is also expected. **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



Romania Andrew Tate, the divisive influencer and former professional kickboxer who is detained in Romania on suspicion of organized crime and human trafficking appeared at a court in Bucharest yesterday to appeal against a second 30-day extension of his detention. Tate, 36, a British-U.S. citizen who has nearly 5 million followers on Twitter, arrived at the Bucharest Court of Appeal handcuffed to his brother Tristan.

AP PHOTO



Haiti Four key suspects in the killing of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse were transferred to the United States for prosecution as the case stagnates in Haiti amid death threats that have spooked local judges. The suspects now in custody of the U.S. government include James Solages, 37, and Joseph Vincent, 57, two Haitian-Americans who were among the first arrested after Moïse was shot 12 times in Port-au-Prince on July 7, 2021.

AP PHOTO



USA Prosecutors linked Alec Baldwin to an expansive list of alleged failures in firearms safety as they filed a felony involuntary manslaughter charge against the actor in the fatal shooting of a cinematographer on a New Mexico movie set. Halyna Hutchins died shortly after being wounded during rehearsals at a ranch on the outskirts of Santa Fe on Oct. 21, 2021.

AP PHOTO



USA Two monkeys taken from the Dallas Zoo were found yesterday [Macau time] an abandoned home after going missing the day before from their enclosure, which had been cut. But no arrests have been made, deepening the mystery at the zoo that has included other cut fences, the escape of a small leopard and the suspicious death of an endangered vulture.