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AT LEAST 15 GROUP TOURS HAVE BEEN ARRANGED SO FAR WITH ABOUT 400 TOURISTS TRAVELING FROM ACROSS THE BORDER

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CHINA ACCUSES US OF INDISCRIMINATE USE OF FORCE OVER BALLOON

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AP PHOTO

Taiwan A group of Swiss lawmakers met with Taiwan's leader and said yesterday their government wants to deepen political relations. Swiss lawmakers have told their government to "examine how Switzerland's existing relations with Taiwan can be gradually deepened in the interests of business, politics, science and culture," said one of the legislators, Fabian Molina.



AP PHOTO

North Korea has scheduled a major political conference to discuss the "urgent task" of improving its agricultural sector, a possible sign of worsening food insecurity as the country's economic isolation deepens amid a defiant nuclear weapons push. The official news agency, said that the members of the ruling Workers' Party's Politburo met on Sunday and agreed to hold a larger plenary meeting of the party's Central Committee in late February to review strategies on agriculture and set new goals.

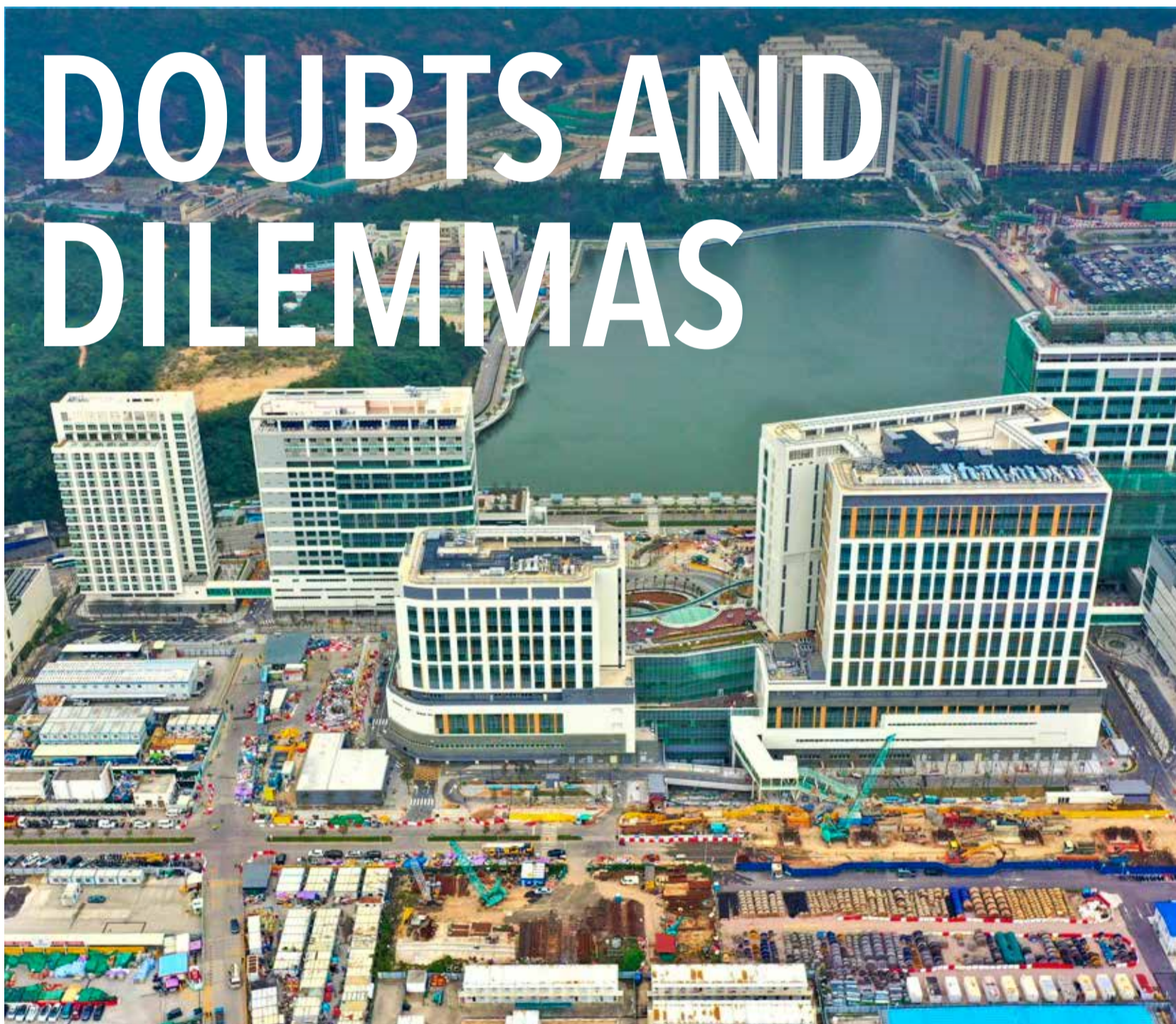


AP PHOTO

Pakistan's media regulator said yesterday it blocked Wikipedia services in the country for hurting Muslim sentiment by not removing purportedly blasphemous content from the site. Critics denounced Islamabad's action, saying it was a blow to digital rights. Under Pakistan's controversial blasphemy laws, anyone found guilty of insulting Islam or its figures can be sentenced to death, although the country has yet to carry out capital punishment for blasphemy.

Lawmakers cast doubts over Islands Hospital management as public-private partnership is causing unexpected legal issues P2

DOUBTS AND DILEMMAS



MACAU GP 70TH EDITION OF GRAND PRIX TO RETURN TO DOUBLE-WEEKEND FORMAT

RENATO MARQUES



ISLANDS HOSPITAL: PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP CAUSING LEGAL ISSUES

RENATO MARQUES

THE choice of a public-private partnership (PPP) for the management and operation of the Islands District Medical Complex, also known as the Islands Hospital, is creating unexpected legal issues in the establishment of its managerial structure.

Such a conclusion comes from the press briefing held yesterday at the Legislative Assembly (AL) after a meeting from the third standing committee on the analysis in detail of the bill that will establish the legal grounds for the operation of the medical facility.

To the media, the chairman of the third standing committee of AL, Vong Hin Fai explained that in this first meeting of this committee to analyze the bill the members were warned by the Juridical Advisory of the AL that there were some issues worth noting, among them, questions related to the integration of the PPP with existing laws.

As further explained, doubts arise from the fact that the "Islands Medical Center" is considered a public institution but will be under private management and operation, a fact that generates ambiguity, for example, over the responsibility for the medical institution concerning regulations on medical error, acquisition of good and services and inspection and supervision, among others.

In reality, Vong explained that the questions and doubts extend even to the name of the institution, with the chairman

RENATO MARQUES



of the committee admitting that lawmakers do not know if there was any agreement established between the government and the Peking Union Medical College Hospital for the use of this institution's name.

Another of the issues found by the AL legal advisors is related to the entity itself, as it is presented as a managerial structure but, according to the legal experts and based on the Articles of the bill, it should be a juridical structure instead.

WHO DECIDES?

As explained in further detail, there is some ambiguity in several aspects of the bill from the very start with the AL legal advisory calling the attention of the lawmakers to the roles and relationship between the managing institution (Peking Union Medical

College Hospital) and an organization created by the Chief Executive (CE) Ho Iat Seng, and named Macau Hospital Strategic Development Committee, which in the Article 6 of bill states to be the "top decision-making entity."

"We want to hear from the government on this. We want clarification on the relationship between the two parties and if there will be shared management or if there will be different parts or sections [according to theme] to be attributed separately to each entity," Vong said.

Similar doubts occur in the application of the legal organization for medical error as well as on the acquisition of goods and services, with the lawmakers wanting a clarification as to whether the Islands Hospital will abide by the rules established for public entities or if there will be a "more

flexible regime like in the private sector."

BILL RESEMBLES THE STATUTORY REGIME OF UM

While addressing the issues found in the first round of the analysis of the 15 articles that comprise the bill, Vong said that this bill presents a high degree of similarity to the one that established the statutory organization of the University of Macau (UM). Contrary, however, to that bill, which concerns a juridical institution, the one being addressed on the islands' hospital is considered a managerial entity, a fact that no one seems to be able to understand.

Similar issues arise from the fact of being a public institution under the control of the Secretary for Social Affairs and Culture and, consequently, the Health Bureau,

such as how these government bodies and entities can exercise their inspection and supervision power, since the bill does not explain any of this.

Lawmakers also questioned the composition of the Strategic Development Committee which is composed of eight members, but no reference is made in the bill regarding their qualifications or area of expertise, not even the requirement for any medical or health management knowledge or skills.

UNAWARE OF THE CONTENT OF SIDE REGULATIONS

Article 14 of the bill notes that a series of complementary norms such as Administrative Regulations and Staff Regimes will be presented on the side of the bill, which will not pass through the scrutiny of the AL.

Lawmakers are concerned with these complementary regulations as they say they have no information on the content or purpose of them, besides the fact they will be done through a dispatch from Secretary Elsie Ao Ieong.

"We want to ask the government for more details on [the side regulations] as well as the date for the entry into force of the law itself. The bill is silent on this too," the chairman noted while adding that while there are many questions and much work to do, there is also some sense of urgency in the process as it is expected that the Islands Hospital Complex will start operations at the end of this year.

Although there is now acknowledgment from the lawmakers that there is a lot to explain and very little information on the bill, this bill passed unanimously at the AL in its first reading on January 16.

PUBLIC WORKS

Hengqin Port's second phase opening postponed to June

STAFF REPORTER

THE opening of the second phase of Hengqin Port will be postponed to June 2023 as the completion of the infrastructure is scheduled for Mar. 30.

According to a press release issued by the Office of the Secretary for Security, the number of vehicle

lanes for entry and departure from Macau will nearly quadruple from eight to 30.

Also, the resumption of transportation on the Lotus Bridge will allow private vehicles to Macau-Hengqin Frontier Post, which is currently limited by the condition of Hengqin Port.

The government said

that the construction project is being sped up with an all-out effort, and the Secretariat for Security and related departments will cooperate closely with Hengqin for the implementation of convenient border crossings.

The second phase of Hengqin Port construction was scheduled to

finish by the end of 2022 when Hengqin Port will take a one-stop vehicle clearance model to facilitate the cross-border flow of vehicles and drivers between Macau and Hengqin.

The second phase will also include a bridge linking to the University of Macau.



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MACAU GP

70th edition of Grand Prix to return to double-weekend format

RENATO MARQUES

THE 70th edition of the Macau Grand Prix, to take place in November this year, will likely mimic the 60th edition when the local GP event was extended to two weekends, covering a total of six days.

The information already hinted at by Pun Weng Kun, president of the Sports Bureau and coordinator of the Macau Grand Prix Organizing Committee (MGPOC), was reaffirmed on Sunday by the same official during a sidelines interview with the media during the Guangdong, Hong Kong, Macau Cup football event at Taipa's Olympic Stadium.

"[This year's anniversary GP event] will be similar to the 60th-anniversary edition. We are planning to launch activities for two consecutive weekends, including the racing events as well as other promotion-related events," Pun said, adding, "the focus of our work at this moment is to bring back world-class racing competitions."



He also said that for the time being, the ongoing negotiations to resume the international events, namely the FIA-related competitions, are "running smoothly and very positively."

As reported by the Chinese news media Macao Daily, Pun also stated that he feels very confident that the Formula 3 World Cup will be able to return to the Guia circuit this year, adding that the MGPOC is committed to bringing back also other events, such as the FIA GT World Cup.

For the time being, the FIA (Fédération Internationale de l'Auto-

mobile) has not yet announced any tentative dates to resume the F3 World Cup although the 2023 racing season calendar was released some time ago, presenting a 10-race events season ending in Monza, Italy on the first weekend of September. This timing allows a potential resumption of the local GP event in November.

FIA WTCR MACAU RACE AS AN ANNUAL ONE-OFF?

Currently, as part of major restructuring, the FIA WTCR has been discontinued, and, for the time being, there are no events schedu-

led for 2023, with the racing category to be finally replaced by the FIA ETCR, a similar format event but running fully electric vehicles.

Still, talking with specialized media Touring Car Times late last year, the Discovery Sports Events head, François Ribeiro did not rule out the possibility that the WTCR category cars will continue to run (potentially until 2025) as a one-off annual event.

"The introduction of 100% sustainable fuel was central to this. Unfortunately, it has become apparent that 100% fossil-free fuel is not yet compatible with the pro-

duction engines used in the TCR category because it puts too great a demand on mechanical components," Ribeiro said, adding, "With more and more corporate sponsors not wishing to be associated with a category that does not use fossil-free fuel, we have very real concerns that this will have a negative impact on WTCR grid numbers next season, which have already been compromised by the global health pandemic, the war in Ukraine and weakened economic outlook. A future one-off annual event will help to address these concerns."

Although Ribeiro did not reveal that the potential "one-off annual event" could be related to the Macau GP, the Times learned from well-informed sources in the touring car racing world that, "it is a serious possibility."

Precisely one year ago, the Times questioned the MGPOC on the potential inclusion of electricity-powered vehicles (EVs) in the local GP. At the time, the MGPOC said that the Macau GP might consider including races featuring EVs, if this type of racing event would gain more popularity and if it is feasible for the Guia circuit to have them.

"We are open to the idea of hosting more variety of races at the Macau Grand Prix in the future as we look to continue the long, distinguished history and to preserve the rich heritage of this prestigious event," the MGPOC also added in their response.

DSI extends working hours over public's greater need for services

THE Identification Services Bureau (DSI) will increase application service time for identity card renewal and travel documents application to accommodate a large number of requests.

From Feb. 7 to Mar. 31, existing DSI offices will open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. from Monday to Sunday, providing continuous counter services seven days a week.

According to DSI, there are approximately 30,000 expired identity cards and 120,000 expired travel documents that need to be renewed.

Despite having coordinated and reallocated internal manpower, the daily application volume has increased by 30%



and "it is difficult to cope with the significant increase in demand for applications in a short period of time."

The application service hours of three DSI offices located at China Plaza in Avendia da Praia Grande, the Government Services Centre in Areia Preta

and the Government Services Centre in Islands will be extended to 9 p.m. from the original service hours of 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Extended service hours are only available for first-time or renewal applications for identity cards, travel documents and visit permits to Hong Kong

by appointment.

On-site ticketing will not be provided, but citizens may still collect documents without an appointment during that time. Appointments for services in the extended time can be made via Macao One Account or the DSI website from today at 9 a.m. LV

ECONOMY SHOWS MOMENTUM OF ACCELERATED RECOVERY: CE

MACAU'S economy is showing a momentum of accelerated recovery with multiple favorable factors emerging after three years of Covid-19 pandemic, Chief Executive Ho Iat Seng said yesterday.

The number of tourists visiting Macau increased obviously during the Spring Festival holiday from Jan. 21 to 27, injecting vigor into different industries and enhancing public confidence in economic development, Ho said at a meeting on economic development of the SAR.

He said the government will maintain the sound momentum and put in place various plans to promote economic recovery, speed up economic diversification, ad-

vance the building of the Guangdong-Macao in-depth cooperation zone in Hengqin, neighboring Zhuhai city, and better integrate into the overall national development.

The government will also adopt a strategy to gradually optimize its industrial structure and increase the weight of major industries of big health, modern finance, high technologies, conventions and exhibitions, as well as culture and sports, Ho added.

He also pledged continuous efforts to participate in the building of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. MDT/XINHUA



LYNZY VALLES

THE University of Macau (UM) projects that the economy will grow between 20.5% and 44.1% this year, with recovery being more obvious in the second half of the year.

The estimates were published by the university's Centre for Macau Studies (CMS) and Department of Economics' Macroeconomic Forecast for Macao 2023.

Scholars predict that exports of services will grow between 35.2% and 82.8%; and the final revenue of the Macau SAR government will remain at around MOP 55.4 billion to MOP 66.1 billion, in 2023.

Based on three different scenarios, the research team noted that the baseline forecast of gross domestic product (GDP) growths are 20.5%, to MOP 211.8 billion (47.7% of 2019's level), in Scenario 1; 36.5%, to MOP 240 billion (54.0% of 2019's level), in Scenario 2; and 44.1%, to MOP 253.3 billion (67.0% of 2019's level), in Scenario 3, respectively.

In December 2022, Fitch Ratings forecast a 46% rebound in 2023 from a 17% decline.

Real GDP levels were expect-



ECONOMY

UM FORECASTS UP TO 44% GDP GROWTH IN 2023

ted to remain below those of 2018.

However, the estimates were calculated during that time's heightened policy uncertainty and a lackluster recovery in mainland China, coupled with the global monetary tightening cycle and recessions in the US and Eurozone, which was expected to affect growth momentum in Hong Kong, Macau

and Taiwan.

Meanwhile, the Monetary Authority of Macao (AMCM) forecasted that the local economy will likely rebound from the poor performance of recent years and grow at a double-digit rate in 2023. However, the bureau added that "Macao's economic recovery would hinge on the evolution of the pandemic and development of


major export markets."

In 2022, the economy of Macau continued to shrink as a result of the pandemic and epidemic prevention policies. In the first quarter, the year-on-year GDP fell by 10.5%. Following the relatively large-scale emergence of infection cases in the local community in mid to late June, the year-on-year GDP collapsed by

39.0% in the second quarter, returning to the level of the second quarter of 2020. From mid-June to July 2022, subject to the influence of the implementation of lockdown measures, the year-on-year GDP decreased by 33.4% in the third quarter.

Meanwhile, with more cautious assumptions of the research team, visitor arrivals are assumed to be 2.07 million in the first quarter (20% of 2019's level), 2.48 million in the second quarter (25% of 2019's level), 2.98 million in the third quarter (30% of 2019), and 3.22 million in the fourth quarter (35% of 2019's level).

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GBA

CHINA CUSTOMS ISSUES SERIES OF MEASURES FOR COOPERATION ZONE DEVELOPMENT

STAFF REPORTER

THE General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China (GACC) recently announced a package to support the high-quality development of the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin.

According to the Hengqin government, the customs' initiatives are centred on supporting new industries that help Macau achieve "an adequate level of economic diversification, hastening the construction of a new place for locals to live and work, and creating a new, high-quality, open system that integrates with Macau."

In terms of the traditional Chinese medicine industry, the customs will give priority to the health and quarantine approval of eligible special drugs that have been listed in Hong Kong and Macau.



To support the Cooperation Zone in the building of a convention and exhibition platform with influence across the globe, the customs will further facilitate the entry and exit of exhibitors and exhibits, as well as support Hengqin in jointly organizing cross-border conventions and exhibitions with Macau.

It will hasten infrastructure and information technology development so that residents of Macau, faculty members and students at the University of Macau, high-end talent, and exhibition staff can enter Hengqin more easily.

For the Macao New Neighbourhood project, it will optimize the customs clearance services for those who come to settle down in Hengqin.

In addition, it will accelerate the mutual recognition of Authorized Economic Operator (AEO) with Macao customs and the building of a one-stop passenger car and truck platform at Hengqin Port.

In the future, GACC will continue to optimize the customs supervision services to bolster the high-quality development of the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin.

ADVERTORIAL

SANDS CHINA NEWS

Sands China Makes Noteworthy Contributions in Responsible Gaming in 2022

Sands China's responsible gaming efforts and achievements in 2022 were noteworthy, and provide strong momentum for continuing the company's long-standing responsible gaming work in the community in 2023.

In 2022, the Macao government awarded The Venetian Casino and The Londoner Casino with the qualification of **Responsible Gaming Implementation Model Unit** in its **Responsible Gambling Indicators** programme.

In February, Sands China donated a total of MOP 450,000 to four local nongovernmental organisations to aid their responsible gaming efforts in 2022. **Sands China has donated more than MOP 6.25 million since 2006**, in support of efforts such as parent-child responsible gaming and financial management activities, roadshows, workshops, trainings, sharing sessions, and responsible gaming promotional videos and quiz games.

In support of Macao's "Lost Control, Lose Family" campaign, Sands China hosted a **Knowing More About Responsible Gaming** training with the Youth Volunteers Association of Macau in January, May and June. Topics included self-exclusion, third-party exclusion, responsible gaming kiosks and more.

Sands China held a **Responsible Gaming Parent-Child Event Series** in 2022, with five fun and interactive events to improve family communication, develop financial management, and increase responsible gaming awareness.

Sands China's Responsible Gaming Ambassadors held **roadshows for Through the Years of Perplexity**, a gambling disorder prevention campaign hosted by the Macau Gaming Employees Home at various locations in the city in October. And for team members, Sands China invited local organisations to hold 30 roadshows in 2022 at the company's back-of-house team member areas.

Sands China remains committed to the well-being of its guests and recognises the importance of responsible gaming in the Macao community. Sands China was the first gaming operator in Macao to launch a self-exclusion programme in 2004, and was a pioneer in including responsible gaming training in its company-wide team member orientation programme. Sands China established its comprehensive responsible gaming programme in 2007, with the goals of contributing to the continuous development of the Macao community, bearing corporate responsibility in addressing social issues and developing an environment and a culture of responsible gaming in Macao.



TOURISM

City welcomes six group tours after three-year visa hiatus

LYNZY VALLES

THE long-awaited resumption of mainland tour groups has commenced, with the city welcoming a total of 135 tourists yesterday, divided into six tour groups.

Three groups arrived from Shanghai, two from Guangdong Province and one from Liaoning Province.

The first Macau tour group of 37 people set out for Hengqin port on the same day.

As of Feb. 5, at least 15 tours have been arranged with about 400 tourists traveling from across the border.

The resumption of electronic visas for mainland travelers to Macau commenced November 1, a move that has long been awaited by the tourism sector since electronic visas were halted in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The issuance of group package tours to Macau and eVisas under the Individual Visit Scheme (IVS) is shaping up to be a massive boost for the SAR's gaming and tourism operators, which have been negatively affected by the pandemic that began in early 2020.

"I like Macau very much but haven't been here since the epidemic," said a Zhuhai resident surnamed Fan, who traveled with the group yesterday. "With subsidies from the Macau SAR government, my tour is a lot cheaper," the tourist told Xinhua.

The resumption of group tours is expected to further elevate Macau's tourism industry, a major propellant for its economy.

"Tour operators in Macau have been making preparations to embrace a full recovery," said Zhang Jianzhong, chairman of China Travel Service (Macao) Ltd.

Data from online travel agency Trip.com Group showed that as of Saturday, bookings for Hong Kong and Macau trips

this week by mainland residents were up 228% year on year.

"Normal travel will accelerate the recovery of the catering, shopping and entertainment sectors in Hong Kong and Macau, benefit tourism enterprises and businesses in the two regions, and strengthen the exchanges between Hong Kong, Macau and the mainland," said Zeng Guojun, professor of the school of tourism, Sun Yat-sen University.

Meanwhile, Cheng Wai Tong, deputy director of the Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO) said yesterday on the sidelines of the welcoming ceremony of the group tours' arrival that the subsidy plan for the Hong Kong, Taiwan and international groups is under consideration and will soon be rolled out.

For international groups, each group member will be subsidized by MOP350 for one night, and MOP500 for two nights or more.

Last week, the MGTO revealed that the series of campaigns by the local tourism office dedicated to attracting visitors from international markets will launch in Thailand.

However, the funding plan is still in the approval stage.

Currently, the city is facing a shortage in staff where many workers, particularly those in the integrated resorts, have been working overtime to accommodate the influx of tourists – something the city's sectors have not been prepared for given the Covid restrictions and the uncertainty of full border reopening.

The struggle is expected to continue as many firms are still on the process of reacquiring bluecard quotas.

However, the government said that it had already met with representatives from different sectors and associations last week to discuss how to increase workers in various sectors by enabling the hiring of non-resident workers.

EMILY WANG FUJIYAMA,
BEIJING

WAR OF WORDS

China accuses US of indiscriminate

CHINA yesterday accused the United States of indiscriminate use of force in shooting down a suspected Chinese spy balloon, saying it "seriously impacted and damaged both sides' efforts and progress in stabilizing Sino-U.S. relations."

The U.S. shot down the balloon off the Carolina coast after it traversed sensitive military sites across North America. China insisted the flyover was an accident involving a civilian aircraft.

Vice Foreign Minister Xie Feng said he lodged a formal complaint with the U.S. Embassy on Sunday over the "U.S. attack on a Chinese civilian unmanned airship by military force."

"However, the United States turned a deaf ear and insisted on indiscriminate use of force against the civilian airship that was about to leave the United States airspace, obviously overreacted and seriously violated the spirit of international law and international practice," Xie said.

The presence of the balloon in the skies above the U.S. dealt a severe blow to already strained U.S.-Chinese relations that have been in a downward spiral for years. It prompted Secretary of State Antony Blinken to abruptly cancel a high-stakes Beijing trip aimed at easing tensions.

Xie repeated China's insistence that the balloon was a Chinese civil unmanned airship that blew into U.S. airspace by mistake, calling it "an accidental incident caused by force majeure."

China will "resolutely safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese companies, resolutely safeguard China's interests and dignity and reserve the right to make further necessary responses," he said.

U.S. President Joe Biden issued the shootdown order after he was advised that the best time for the operation would be when it was over water, U.S. officials said. Military officials determined that bringing down the balloon over land from an altitude of 60,000 feet (18,000 meters) would pose an undue risk to people on the ground.

"What the U.S. has done has seriously impacted and damaged both sides' efforts and progress in stabilizing Sino-U.S. relations since the Bali meeting," Xie said, referring to a recent meeting between Biden and his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, in Indonesia that many hoped would create positive momentum for improving ties that have plunged

to their lowest level in years.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning provided no new details, repeating China's insistence that the object was a civilian balloon intended for meteorological research, had little ability to steer and entered U.S. airspace by accidentally diverging from its course. She also did not say what additional steps China intended to take in response to Washington's handling of the issue and cancellation of Blinken's trip, which would have made him the highest-ranking U.S. official to visit since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We have stated that this is completely an isolated and accidental incident caused by force majeure, but the U.S. still hyped up the incident on purpose and even used force to attack," Mao said at a daily briefing. "This is an unacceptable and irresponsible action."

Balloons thought or known to be Chinese have been spotted from Latin America to Japan. Japanese Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihiko Isozaki told reporters yesterday that a flying object similar to the one shot down by the U.S. had been spotted at



least twice over northern Japan since 2020.

"We are continuing to analyze

them in connection with the latest case in the United States," he said.

DIPLOMACY

China-Australia trade ministers hold first meeting since 2019

AUSTRALIAN and Chinese trade ministers held their first bilateral meeting in three years yesterday as Australia urges China to lift official and unofficial barriers that are costing exporters 20 billion Australian dollars (\$14 billion) a year.

China has thawed its diplomatic freeze on Australia since Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's center-left Labor Party was elected in May for the first time in nine years.

Albanese has urged China to demonstrate good will to his administration by lifting trade restrictions on Australian exports including wine, coal, beef, seafood, barley and wood.

Trade Minister Don Farrell said that behind closed doors, he and his Chinese counterpart Wang Wentao had agreed to enhance dialogue at all levels as a pathway "towards the timely and



Australian Trade Minister Don Farrell (left) speaks to China's Minister of Commerce, Wang Wentao during a meeting via teleconference at Parliament House in Canberra, yesterday

full resumption of trade."

"Our discussion covered a range of trade and investment issues, including the need for resumption of unimpeded trade for Australian exporters so that Chinese consumers can continue to benefit from high quality Australian products," Farrell said

in a statement after the teleconference meeting from Australia's Parliament House.

During the introductory stage of the meeting that was open to the media, Wang invited Farrell to meet in China.

"I'm looking forward to open and candid exchan-

ges of views with you," Wang told Farrell. "I'm also very much happy to extend an invitation to you to visit China at a time convenient to you. And I believe that your next trip to China will leave you with a different impression."

Farrell accepted the in-

itation but did not nominate a date.

"The outcomes of our discussions have the potential to be of great benefit to both of our countries, and both of our consumers," Farrell said.

Wang said the priority of the meeting should be to build mutual trust.

"I wish to stress we will face up to the issues, but at the same time this meeting cannot resolve all of these issues," Wang said.

Although Wang noted that while common ground should be sought, some issues "cannot be resolved."

"China will not make a trade-off on principled issues," Wang said.

The trade barriers are widely regarded as punishment for the previous Australian government passing laws that ban covert foreign interference in domestic politics, for barring Chinese-owned telecommunications giant Huawei

from rolling out Australia's 5G network due to security concerns and for calling for an independent investigation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Albanese raised his concerns about trade "blockages" in November when he took part in the first formal bilateral meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping by an Australian government leader since 2016.

Foreign Minister Penny Wong in December became the first Australian foreign minister to visit China in four years.

The first shipments of Australian coal to China since Beijing imposed an unofficial ban on the commodity 2 1/2 years ago were due to arrive in the first clear sign Xi's regime will roll back some sanctions on Australian exports, The Australian Financial Review reported. **MDT/AP**

use of force over balloon



Mao confirmed that a balloon recently spotted over Latin American was Chinese, describing it

as a civilian airship used for flight tests. "Affected by weather and due

to its limited self-control ability, the airship severely deviated from its set route and entered the space of Latin America and the Caribbean by accident," Mao said.

Washington and Beijing are at odds over a range of issues from trade to human rights, but China is most sensitive over alleged violations by the U.S. and others of its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Beijing strongly protests U.S. military sales to Taiwan and visits by foreign politicians to the island, which it claims as Chinese territory, to be recovered by force if necessary.

It reacted to a 2022 visit by then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi by firing missiles over the island and staging threatening military drills seen as a rehearsal for an invasion or blockade. Beijing also cut off discussion with the U.S. on issues including climate change that are unrelated to military tensions.

Last week, Mao warned Pelosi's successor, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, not to travel to Taiwan, implying that China's response would be equally vociferous.

"China will firmly defend its

sovereignty, security and development interests," Mao said. McCarthy said China had no right to dictate where and when he could travel.

China also objects when foreign military surveillance planes fly off its coast in international airspace and when U.S. and other foreign warships pass through the Taiwan Strait, accusing them of being actively provocative.

In 2001, a U.S. Navy plane conducting routine surveillance near the Chinese coast collided with a Chinese fighter plane, killing the Chinese fighter pilot and damaging the American plane, which was forced to make an emergency landing at a Chinese naval airbase on the southern Chinese island province of Hainan. China detained the 24-member U.S. Navy aircrew for 10 days until the U.S. expressed regret over the Chinese pilot's death and for landing at the base without permission.

The South China Sea is another major source of tension. China claims the strategically key sea virtually in its entirety and protests when U.S. Navy ships sail past Chinese military features there.

At a news conference Friday with his South Korean counterpart, Blinken said "the presence of this surveillance balloon over the United States in our skies is a clear violation of our sovereignty, a clear violation of international

law, and clearly unacceptable. And we've made that clear to China."

"Any country that has its airspace violated in this way I think would respond similarly, and I can only imagine what the reaction would be in China if they were on the other end," Blinken said.

China's weather balloon explanation should be dismissed outright, said Oriana Skylar Mastro, an expert on Chinese military affairs and foreign policy at Stanford University.

"This is like a standard thing that countries often say about surveillance assets," Mastro said.

China may have made a mistake and lost control of the balloon, but it was unlikely to have been a deliberate attempt to disrupt Blinken's visit, Mastro said.

For the U.S. administration, the decision to go public and then shoot down the balloon marks a break from its usual approach of dealing with Beijing on such matters privately, possibly in hopes of changing China's future behavior.

However, Mastro said, it was unlikely that Beijing would respond positively.

"They're probably going to dismiss that and continue on as things have been. So I don't see a really clear pathway to improved relations in the foreseeable future." MDT/AP

HONG KONG

SUBVERSION TRIAL FOR POLITICAL ACTIVISTS OPENS

SOME of Hong Kong's best-known pro-democracy activists went on trial yesterday in the biggest prosecution yet under a law imposed by China's ruling Communist Party to crush dissent.

The 18 defendants face up to life in prison if convicted under the national security law critics say is eroding the autonomy promised when Hong Kong returned to China in 1997, and its status as a global business center.

They were among 47 pro-democracy figures who were arrested in 2021 under the legislation that was imposed following protests in 2019. They were charged in connection with an informal 2020 primary election.

The pro-democracy movement has largely dried up after activists were jailed or went into exile. Growing numbers of young professionals have responded to the erosion of Hong Kong's Western-style civil liberties by leaving for Britain, the



Pro-democracy activist Cheng Tat-hung (center) arrives at the West Kowloon Magistrates' Courts

United States and other countries. The United States imposed sanctions on officials it said were to blame for the abuses.

The primary in 2020 aimed at picking pro-democracy candidates who could win control of the territory's Legislative Council. Prosecutors accuse them of trying to paralyze Hong Kong's government and topple the city's leader by securing a majority to veto budgets.

"The purpose of the

conspiracy is to subvert the state power," the prosecutor said in his opening statement.

The prosecution involves many of the city's most prominent activists, including legal scholar Benny Tai, former student leader Joshua Wong and opposition party leaders Wu Chi-wai and Alvin Yeung.

Tai and four others were the election organizers and had indispensable involvement, the prosecutor said.

In previous proceedings,

the 18 activists had indicated they intended to plead not guilty. But two of them — former district councillor Ng Kin-wai and businessman Mike Lam — later changed their minds, joining the other 29 activists, including Tai, Wong, Yeung and Wu, who plan to admit the charges.

While most of the 47 activists who were charged with conspiracy to commit subversion have been detained without bail for nearly two years, former lawmakers Raymond Chan and Helena Wong, who appeared in court yesterday, were among the minority who were granted bail based on strict conditions.

Ahead of the opening statements, the pair, alongside 14 other activists, pleaded not guilty in front of the judges, who were approved by the city's leader to oversee the case. "There is no crime for me to plead guilty," former lawmaker Leung Kwok-hung said. Ng and Lam pleaded guilty.

Those who intend to plead guilty will receive their sentencing after the trial. Some of them, including Joshua Wong and former district councillor Lester Shum, were in the courtroom to observe the trial.

The court also heard that four of the 47 activists would give evidence as prosecution witnesses.

Earlier in the morning, more than 200 people, including relatives and friends of the defendants, lined up outside the court building as local police stepped up security in the area.

Some people at the front of the line, including a group of more than 10 who came at 6 a.m. to secure a seat for the hearing, said they had no clue what the trial was about. That prompted pro-democracy activists among the spectators to question whether they were just trying to occupy the seats so that other members of the public could not get a place to observe the high-profile trial.

Three members of the League of Social Democrats staged a small protest outside the complex, urging the

immediate release of all political prisoners.

"Primary election is not crime. This is political repression," Chan Po-ying, one of the members, said.

Police took away her colleague for violating the mask mandate when he took his mask off and tried to speak loudly.

The trial is expected to last 90 days. The case has drawn international scrutiny, with advocacy groups and politicians condemning the charges.

The government postponed the legislative election that would have followed the primary, citing public health risks during the coronavirus pandemic. The electoral system was later overhauled to give Beijing more control over who is elected to Hong Kong's legislature.

The national security law criminalizes secession, subversion, and collusion with foreign forces to intervene in the city's affairs as well as terrorism. Apart from the activists, pro-democracy publisher Jimmy Lai is also facing collusion charges under the law. MDT/AP

AP PHOTO



Beyoncé accepts the award for best dance/electronic music album for "Renaissance"

GRAMMYS MOMENTS

A rap tribute for the ages, Beyoncé triumph

DAVID BAUDER

As he accepted an innovator's award named for him, Dr. Dre mused about what he had in common with many of the people he saw from the Grammy Awards stage.

"Where would a lot of people in here be without hip-hop?" the renowned rapper, producer and entrepreneur said.

The 2023 Grammy Awards may ultimately be remembered as the year the music industry's top event tried to embrace rap, whose leaders have regarded the institution with suspicion for almost as long as the 50 years of history that were celebrated yesterday [Macau time].

It was only four years ago that song of the year winner Childish Gambino boycotted the show over perceived disrespect for rap. Kanye West and Eminem were among past stars with groundbreaking work overlooked for more middling fare and, for years, rappers complained their work was banished from TV.

The 15-minute Questlove-curated travel through time was a joy that brought dozens of stars to the stage, in-

cluding Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five, Run-DMC, Public Enemy, Ice T, Missy Elliott, Queen Latifah, Method Man, Salt-N-Pepa ... the list goes on, and still there were those you wished were there.

Nearly as important was the eight-minute version of DJ Khaled's "God Did" that closed the show — Khaled took public note of the length — that featured a spellbinding appearance by Jay-Z.

Quavo's tribute to Takeoff of Migos was arguably the highlight of a packed and memorable "in memoriam" segment to artists who died over the past year.

Kendrick Lamar gave an incisive acceptance speech after "Mr. Morale & the Big Steppers" won a Grammy for best rap album, his third trophy in this category.

It was a night it seemed the Grammys finally accepted rap as music's dominant form. Will rappers finally accept the Grammys? That remains to be seen.

QUEEN BEY'S HAUL

Beyoncé took a place in history when her four Grammys gave her a career total of 32, better than anyone else.

And yet...

The Grammys have a clear pecking order, with four of its awards the most prestigious: song, record and album of the year, and best new artist. Beyoncé has won only one of those awards, when "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)" was named top song in 2010.

She's been nominated eight times for record of the year, and never won. Her most memorable Grammy moments came when two peers stood onstage with their own trophies and saluted her: when Adele said Beyoncé's "Lemonade" should have won instead of her in 2017, and Sunday when Lizzo spoke of skipping school in fifth grade to see Beyoncé perform.

Thirty-two trophies. It's still hard to shake an empty feeling.

TRIVIA QUESTION

Whose record did Beyoncé beat? That would be classical composer George Solti.

RAITT'S TRIUMPH

It may take Bonnie Raitt a few days to lose that look of shock. The 73-year-old guitarist won best song for "Just Like That," a piece inspired by a story of a heart transplant, where she tried to emulate the writing style

of the late John Prine. It was especially gratifying because Raitt is more of an interpreter. "I don't write a lot of songs, but I'm proud that you appreciate this one," she said. It was 33 years after "Nick of Time" was named album of the year.

NOAH'S NIGHT

Show host Trevor Noah skillfully played the role of a fan, instead of serving snark from the stage, moving through the audience "like a floating Chinese balloon," he said. And why not? With Adele, Lizzo, Beyoncé, Taylor Swift, Harry Styles and the like around, there was plenty of star power. Noah was neither insulting nor obsequious. And one delightful device — having fans talk about their favorite albums — paid off when a memorable grandma got to announce Styles' album of the year win.

WHY AM I HERE?

The Rock as one of the Grammy presenters? Jill Biden? James Corden? At least the outgoing talk show host noted the incongruity of him giving an award for dance and electronic music. There's enough musical firepower in the room that would surely relish the opportunity to present an award. And while we're asking why someone was there, Ben Affleck turned himself into an unwanted internet star when the camera panned to him in the audience and it seemed like he'd rather be anywhere else. Don't actors know how to fake looking like they're having a good time? MDT/AP

this day in history

1964 BEATLEMANIA ARRIVES IN THE US



The four members of the British hit band, the Beatles, have arrived in New York at the start of their first tour of the United States.

The young men, with their now infamous mop-head hairstyles, stepped onto the tarmac at Kennedy Airport just after 1300 local time.

There were more than 3,000 screaming teenagers at the airport. Many had skipped school or work. Some were in tears and some were carrying placards with phrases such as "I love you, please stay".

The Beatles' first scheduled appearance will be on American television on Sunday on the Ed Sullivan show. He apparently booked them to appear after seeing the huge crowds who greeted their return to Heathrow from Sweden last October.

More than 5,000 fans applied for tickets to be part of the audience for the live show - only 750 were lucky enough to get them.

The Beatles - Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, John Lennon and George Harrison - received maximum police protection, the kind of arrangement usually produced for kings and presidents.

There were security barriers too, without which, the Beatles would almost certainly have been crushed by the throng of screaming women.

Elsewhere in the United States, excitement over the Beatles' arrival has reached almost fever-pitch.

Their songs are playing constantly on radio stations, in shops and other places of work.

Millions of Beatle records have already been sold and a company called Puritan Fashions Incorporated, which describes itself as "the only exclusive official licensed manufacturer of Beatle wearing apparel" is marketing T-shirts, sweat shirts, turtle-neck sweaters, tight-legged trousers, night shirts, scarves and jewellery inspired by the Beatles.

Beatle wigs are also for sale at \$2.99 each - or the equivalent of one guinea.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

The Beatles were the first British band to break into the American market. Their appearance on the Ed Sullivan show reportedly led to a dip in the crime rate to a 50-year low as 73 million people or 40% of Americans tuned into watch.

They performed the songs All My Loving, Till There Was You, She Loves You, I Saw Her Standing There and I Want To Hold Your Hand.

The band appeared twice on the Ed Sullivan show and their performances still rate as the second and third most-watched programmes in the history of US TV. Only the 1983 final episode of Korean war comedy MASH achieved more viewers.

In February 2004, the Beatles were given the President's Award at the Grammys to mark the 40th anniversary of what became known as "Beatlemania". It was accepted by the widows of John Lennon and George Harrison, Yoko Ono and Olivia Harrison.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS

ARIES
Mar. 21-Apr. 19

Do not sign contracts or get involved in any uncertain financial deals. Don't jump as quickly as you usually do. Sudden changes regarding your domestic scene are probable.

TAURUS
Apr. 20-May. 20

Don't let children hold you back from doing things you enjoy. Join a club to work off that excess energy; but consider ways of doing that without spending the money.

GEMINI
May. 21-Jun. 21

You can get ahead if you present your ideas to superiors. Your temper may erupt if you have allowed others to cost you too much money.

CANCER
Jun. 22-Jul. 22

Try to curb overindulgence today. This will be a good day for research and for sitting down with some good, informative reading material.

LEO
Jul. 23-Aug. 22

Travel, although enticing, will cost more than you expect. You have bent over backward trying to help them and now it's time to let them stand on their own two feet.

VIRGO
Aug. 23-Sep. 22

You will meet new romantic partners if you get involved in seminars or travel. Do a little extra work at home. Secret enemies will be eager to spread rumors about you.

LIBRA
Sep. 23-Oct. 22

Be aware of any deception on the part of those you deal with. Problems with appliances or electrical gadgets will drive you crazy. Don't spend too much in order to impress others.

SCORPIO
Oct. 23-Nov. 21

Travel may be confusing. You may find that you can be the recipient of valuable information if you're willing to be a good listener. You will easily charm members of the opposite sex.

SAGITTARIUS
Nov. 22-Dec. 21

Make decisions about your professional objectives. Someone is trying to pull the wool over your eyes, and if you're gullible, it may cost you.

CAPRICORN
Dec. 22-Jan. 19

Go out with friends or family. Avoid purchasing expensive items. Do not push your opinions or try to reform your emotional partner today.

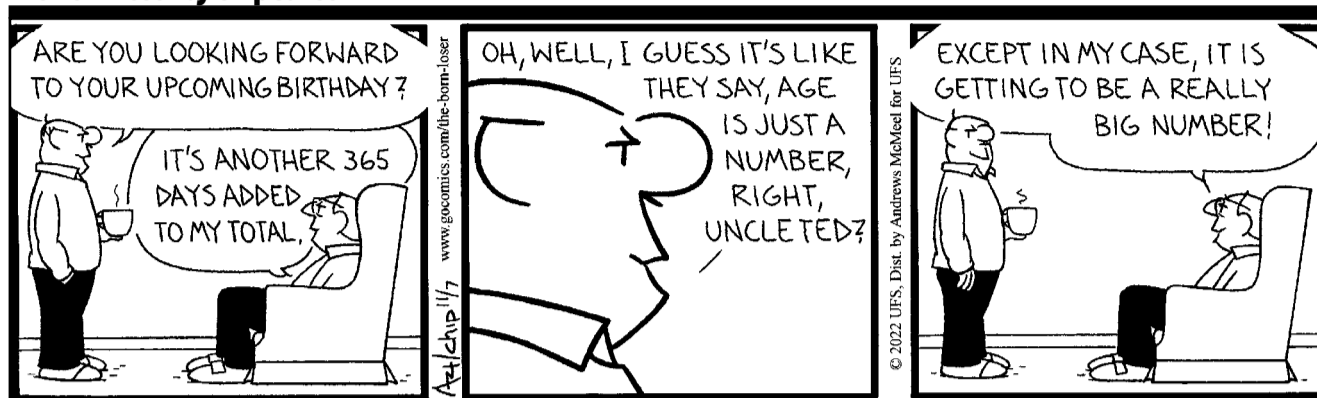
AQUARIUS
Jan. 20-Feb. 18

Social activity with friends and relatives will be most successful. You may find that someone you really cared for in the past has come back into your life.

PISCES
Feb. 19-Mar. 20

The experience will be good. You could meet an interesting individual you'll want to get to know better. Don't let the moods of those you live with get you down.

The Born Loser by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

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

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

WEATHER

| | MIN | MAX | CONDITION |
|--------------|-----|-----|-----------|
| CHINA | | | |
| Beijing | -5 | 5 | cloudy |
| Changchun | -15 | -4 | fine |
| Chengdu | 10 | 11 | rain |
| Chongqing | 8 | 13 | rain |
| Fuzhou | 13 | 16 | overcast |
| Guangzhou | 15 | 22 | rain |
| Guiyang | 4 | 9 | rain |
| Haikou | 20 | 26 | cloudy |
| Hangzhou | 8 | 11 | overcast |
| Harbin | -21 | -7 | fine |
| Hefei | 6 | 10 | overcast |
| Nanjing | 6 | 10 | overcast |
| Shanghai | 7 | 11 | cloudy |
| Taipei | 15 | 19 | overcast |
| Wuhan | 7 | 15 | rain |
| Hong Hong | 18 | 22 | cloudy |
| WORLD | | | |
| Moscow | -11 | -6 | cloudy |
| Frankfurt | -3 | 4 | fine |
| Paris | -3 | 7 | fine |
| London | -2 | 6 | cloudy |
| New York | 4 | 7 | cloudy |

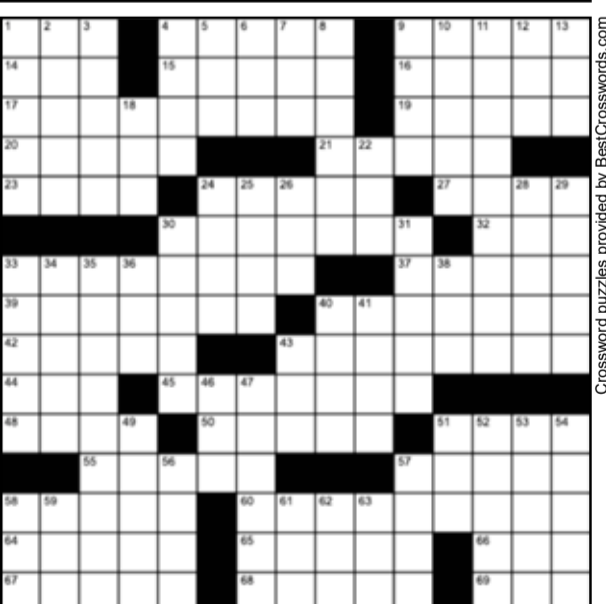
CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- "Cats" monogram; 4- Large and dense; 9- Santa's aides; 14- ___-Mart; 15- Emulate Cicero; 16- Implements; 17- Strongly desirous; 19- Poison; 20- Snare; 21- Outdo; 23- Stare in awe; 24- Befuddled; 27- Work up lather; 30- Arid areas; 32- Trident-shaped letter; 33- Mosaic pieces; 37- Bring about; 39- High ruler; 40- Small, sassy woman; 42- Sour; 43- Catastrophe; 44- Fam. member; 45- Christmas item; 48- Quick sharp bark; 50- Family tree member; 51- It may be checkered; 55- North American buffalo; 57- Cleave; 58- "South Pacific" hero; 60- Dissipate; 64- Sub system; 65- Biblical brother; 66- Call ___ day; 67- Training group; 68- Like non-oyster months; 69- Parking place;

DOWN 1- Guitar sound; 2- Mead subject; 3- Macaroni shape; 4- Speck; 5- N.L. West team, on scoreboards; 6- ___ Paulo, Brazil; 7- Alphabet run; 8- Past prefix; 9- Famous last words; 10- Weaving machines; 11- Popular opinion; 12- Biblical high priest; 13- Nine-digit ID; 18- AOL, e.g.; 22- Snitch; 24- Prefix with -drome; 25- Boris Godunov, for one; 26- Catch on; 28- It's a plus; 29- Devoutness; 30- Bowler hat; 31- Scrawny person; 33- Weeping; 34- Host; 35- Enchant; 36- Sun, talk; 38- PIN requester; 40- Baby powder; 41- Succulent plant; 43- Bee follower; 46- Numero ___; 47- Straight; 49- Covered with hair; 51- For each; 52- Be of use to; 53- Brief brawl; 54- Rare delight; 56- Shrivelled, without moisture; 57- Juniors, perhaps; 58- Corner key; 59- Extinct bird, once found in New Zealand; 61- Batman after Michael; 62- Just the Way You ___; 63- Not neg.;

Yesterday's solution

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



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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AUTOMAKERS

RENAULT, NISSAN BOARDS AGREE TO EQUALIZE MUTUAL STAKES

KELVIN CHAN & YURI KAGEYAMA, LONDON

AP PHOTO



From left: Makoto Uchida CEO of Nissan, Luca de Meo CEO of Renault Group, and Takao Kato CEO of Mitsubishi Motors at a Renault Nissan Mitsubishi press conference in London yesterday

THE boards of Renault and Nissan gave their approval yesterday to equalize the stake each automaker holds in the other, bringing a better balance in the French-Japanese alliance.

Under the decision, both companies will own 15% in the other. Up to now, Renault Group of France owned 43.4% of Nissan Motor Co., while the Japanese automaker owned 15% of Renault.

The uneven shareholdings had been viewed at times as a source of conflict in the alliance, which also includes the smaller Japanese automaker Mitsubishi Motors Corp.

"We have been waiting a long time for this moment," Renault board Chairman Jean Dominique Senard said at a news conference yesterday in London.

Nissan intends to invest up to 15% in Ampere, Renault's electric vehicle and software entity in Europe. Mitsubishi Motors also will

consider investing in Ampere. The automakers will collaborate in various markets around the world, including Latin America, Europe and India, they said.

The moves come at a time when the extremely competitive auto industry is undergoing a major shift toward electric vehicles and other environmentally friendly models.

The long speculated changes to the carmaker alliance was

announced a week ago. Shares equivalent to a 28.4% stake will be transferred to a French trust, according to the companies. The French government is the top shareholder of Renault.

Renault and Nissan agreed on an orderly sale of that stake, although there will be no deadline on it.

The partnership will enter "a new era," Senard said, by boosting common platforms and parts, as

well as balancing the stakes the companies hold.

Nissan Chief Executive Makoto Uchida echoed Senard's views, vowing to take the alliance to "the next level of transformation" to adapt to a new era.

"This is not a choice but a need," he said.

The executives taking part, including Renault Group Chief Executive Luca de Meo, stressed that collaborations, cost cuts, model offerings and sales will grow, noting the companies' relationship looked toward the future and will become "normal."

Senard appeared to acknowledge the bumps along the way when he noted hopes that past misunderstandings will be fixed.

"These frustrations are behind us," he told reporters.

In theory, alliances are a good way for automakers to cut costs by sharing parts, production and technology, especially when the industry is going through such dramatic change.

That also means that, once for-

med, ending an alliance can be difficult because the companies' development, manufacturing and products get so closely tied together.

Still, partnerships can stumble because of the different corporate cultures of the automakers, especially when it involves a meeting of the West and the East.

The Renault-Nissan alliance, which started in 1999 and now includes Mitsubishi, was for years heralded as a success story.

It was plunged into scandal when Carlos Ghosn, the executive sent by Renault to lead a turnaround at the then-near-bankrupt Nissan, was arrested in Japan in 2018 on financial misconduct charges.

Documents and testimony that surfaced after his arrest appear to show that some people at Nissan resented Ghosn's grip on power and what they saw as his extravagant lifestyle.

Japanese executives generally do not get the big paychecks often standard for their Western counterparts.

Ghosn, who says he is innocent, has jumped bail and now lives in Lebanon, which has no extradition treaty with Japan. Both Renault and Nissan have been distancing themselves from the Ghosn scandal. MDT/AP

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大律師 ASSOCIATES:

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羅善齡 Zelina Rodrigues
馬潔冰 Maria João Marques
陶義德 António Isóo de Azeredo
白穎怡 Iclia Berenguel
冼玲鳳 Mariana Afonso Esteves
馬秀文 Sofia Mendes Martins
飛嘉華 Carlos dos Santos Ferreira °
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RUGBY | SIX NATIONS

France survives Italy scare to set up Ireland showdown

FRANCE put down a daring Italy 29-24 yesterday [Macau time] and played its part in setting the stage for the eagerly awaited Six Nations showdown with Ireland next weekend.

The French, ranked No. 2 in the world, will be defending the title against the Irish, ranked No. 1, and the nominal title favorite. France hasn't lost since 2021 and Ireland hasn't lost at home since 2021, when France last visited Dublin.

But to extend its winning streak to 14 tests, France had to overcome an unexpectedly serious scare from Italy.

Italy fought back from 19-6 down to lead for the first time in the match at 24-22 with less than a quarter to go. It had been 10 years since Italy had beaten France or won at home but the huge crowd at Stadio Olimpico weren't the only ones on edge.

France was making uncharac-



Italy's Edoardo Iachizzi (front) holds the ball as he is tackled by Italy's players during the Six Nations rugby union international match between Italy and France, at Rome's Olympic Stadium

teristic errors under pressure; a remarkable 18 penalties, 13 turnovers and a yellow card conceded for the first time in more than a year. Shaun Edwards, considered the world's best defense coach, believed it was the most penalties any side of his has given away in 22 years in rugby union.

The difference ultimately came from a late injection of fresh reinforcements. Sekou Macalou earned a turnover and fellow replacement Romain Taofifenua gave the last pass for new flyhalf Matthieu Jalibert to crash over for a bonus-point fourth try with 13 minutes left.

Italy hammered France to the end, though. Tommaso Allan missed a long-range penalty and a last-gasp lineout drive was broken up by France to end the match in relief.

"We're in a good habit at the moment of winning tight, close games," Edwards said. "It happened (in the autumn) against Australia, South Africa. Hopefully, we'll continue that habit but we all know if we don't up our performance next week we'll be on the end of a 15, 20, 30-points hiding."

Italy ended a 36-test losing streak in the Six Nations only in its previous match, but its self-belief has grown, and a high-risk game plan unnerved the French. Italy was willing to run from its own 22 and try and disrupt with offloads, box-kicks and chips. Kicking out was the last option.

"This isn't the Italy side from the Six Nations a few seasons ago," new France winger Ethan Dumortier said. "They surprised us."

France was composed enough early on to turn forced errors into a 19-6 lead inside half an hour. Tries were finished by Thibaud Flament from a chargedown, Thomas Ramos from an attack that had its origins in a scrum penalty, and debutant Dumortier after Gregory Alldritt stole ruck ball.

Italy hardly flinched, though, and when it pushed a kickable penalty into a corner lineout, Stephen Varney attacked the blind. Fullback Ange Capuozzo cleverly made Alldritt slow up, then dived beside the left corner flag.

Allan couldn't convert but his third penalty on halftime cut France's lead to 19-14.

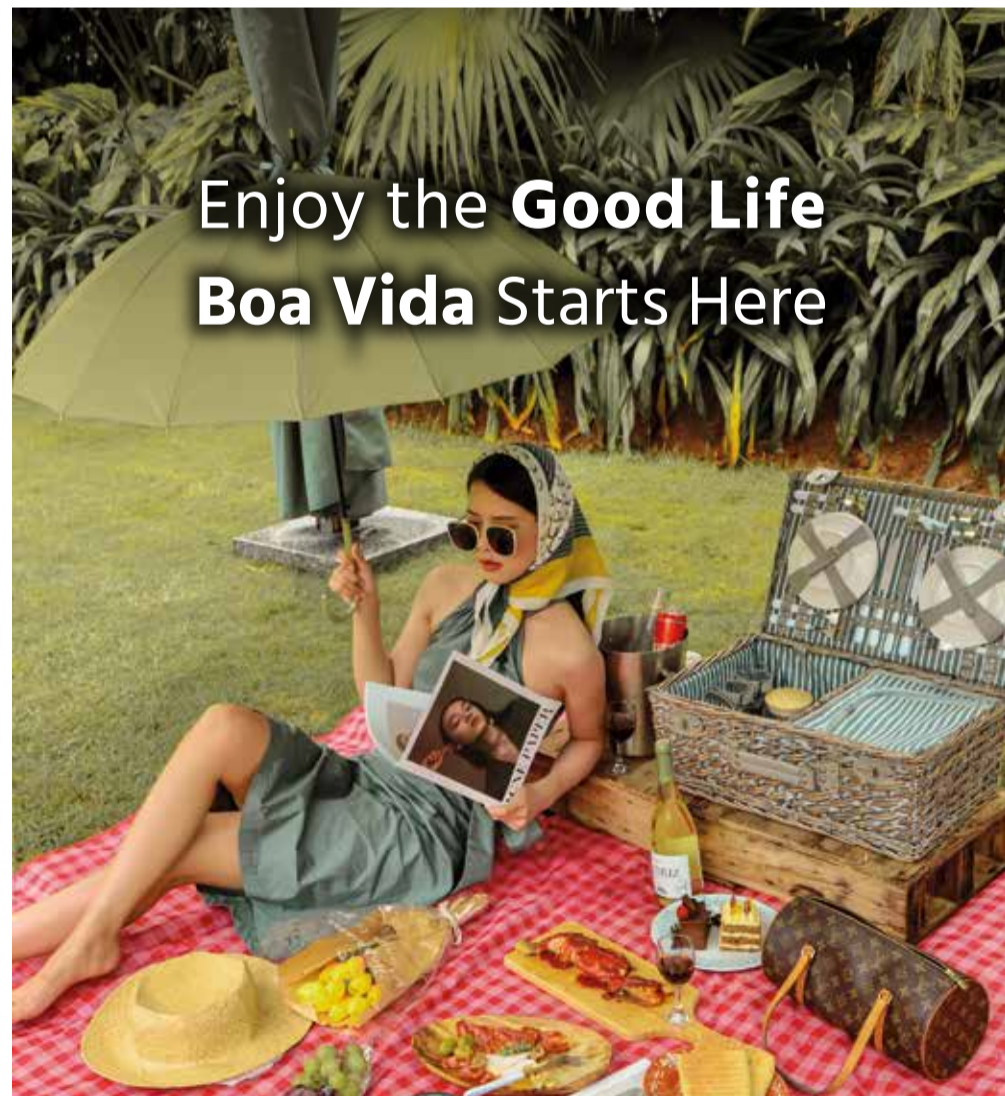
A Ramos penalty put France up 22-14 but Italy responded with another lineout drive. Italy hooker Giacomo Nicotera looked set to be driven across but France's Charles Ollivon dragged him down illegally. He was sin-binned and Italy given a penalty try.

France's lead was slashed to one until Allan's fourth penalty kick from four put Italy in front in the 62nd. But it couldn't hold on.

"It's quite tough to swallow this defeat," Allan said.

But Italy's improvement took another massive step, and roused anticipation of their next match with France in the Rugby World Cup pools on Oct. 6 in Lyon. **MDT/AP**

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OPINION

The Conversation

Ahmet T. Kuru San, Diego State University



THE POLITICS OF BLASPHEMY

On Jan. 17, 2023, Pakistan's National Assembly unanimously voted to expand the country's laws on blasphemy, which carries the death penalty for insulting the Prophet Muhammad. The new law now extends the punishment to those deemed to have insulted the prophet's companions, which could include thousands of early Muslims, with 10 years in prison or life imprisonment.

Human rights activists are concerned that the expanded laws could target minorities, particularly Shiite Muslims who are critical of many leading early Muslims.

Pakistan has the world's second-strictest blasphemy laws after Iran. About 1,500 Pakistanis have been charged with blasphemy over the past three decades. In a case covered by the international media, Junaid Hafeez, a university lecturer, was sentenced to death on the charge of insulting the prophet on Facebook in 2019. His sentence has been under appeal.

Although no executions have ever taken place, extrajudicial killings related to blasphemy have occurred in Pakistan. Since 1990, more than 70 people have been murdered by mobs and vigilantes over allegations of insulting Islam.

My research shows that blasphemy laws historically emerged to serve the political and religious authorities, and they continue to have a role in silencing dissent in many Muslim countries.

Of the 71 countries that criminalize blasphemy, 32 are majority Muslim. Punishment and enforcement of these laws vary.

Blasphemy is punishable by death in Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Brunei, Mauritania and Saudi Arabia. Among non-Muslim-majority countries, the harshest blasphemy laws are in Italy, where the maximum penalty is two years in prison.

Half of the world's 49 Muslim-majority countries have additional laws banning apostasy, meaning people may be punished for leaving Islam. All countries with apostasy laws are Muslim-majority. Apostasy is often charged along with blasphemy.

Laws on apostasy are quite popular in some Muslim countries. According to a 2013 Pew survey, about 75% of respondents in Muslim-majority countries in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia favor making sharia, or Islamic law, the official law of the land. Among those who support sharia, around 25% in Southeast Asia, 50% in the Middle East and North Africa and 75% in South Asia say they support "executing those who leave Islam" — that is, they support laws punishing apostasy with death.

My 2019 book "Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment" traces the roots of blasphemy and apostasy laws in the Muslim world back to a historic alliance between Islamic scholars and government.

Starting around the year 1050, certain Sunni scholars of law and theology, called the "ulema," began working closely with political rulers to challenge what they considered to be the sacrilegious influence of Muslim philosophers on society.

Muslim philosophers had for three centuries been making major contributions to mathematics, physics and medicine. They developed the Arabic number system used across the West today and invented a forerunner of the modern camera.

The conservative ulema felt that these philosophers were inappropriately influenced by Greek philosophy and Shiite Islam against Sunni beliefs.

Parts of Western Europe were ruled by a similar alliance between the Catholic Church and monarchs. These governments assaulted free thinking, too. During the Spanish Inquisition, between the 16th and 18th centuries, thousands of people were tortured and killed for apostasy.

Blasphemy laws were also in place, if infrequently used, in various European countries until recently. Denmark, Ireland and Malta all recently repealed their blasphemy laws. But they persist in many parts of the Muslim world.

In Pakistan, the military dictator Zia-ul-Haq, who ruled the country from 1978 to 1988, is responsible for its harsh blasphemy laws.

My research shows that criminalizing blasphemy and apostasy is more political than it is religious. The Quran does not require punishing sacrilege: Authoritarian politics do. [Abridged]

U.S. President Joe Biden will use his second State of the Union address today to remind Americans of how their lives have been improved over his first two years in office, as he tries to confront pessimism in the country and navigate the tricky politics of a newly divided Washington.

Rather than laying out major new policy proposals, Biden was expected to devote much of his speech to highlighting his efforts over the past two years to create jobs, fight inflation and improve the nation's infrastructure. The speech

comes as Biden is honing his pitch to voters ahead of his expected announcement in the next few months that he will seek another term in office despite voter frustrations about the direction of the nation.

"Next week, I'll be reporting on the state of the Union," Biden said Friday after a stronger-than-expected jobs report that saw the unemployment rate drop to the lowest level in more than 53 years. "But today, I'm happy to report that the state of the Union and the state of our economy is strong."



People and emergency teams rescue a person on a stretcher from a collapsed building in Adana, Turkey, yesterday

POWERFUL QUAKE ROCKS TURKEY AND SYRIA, KILLS MORE THAN 2,300

MEHMET GUZEL, ADANA, TURKEY

A powerful, 7.8 magnitude earthquake rocked wide swaths of Turkey and neighboring Syria yesterday, killing more than 2,300 people and injuring thousands more as it toppled hundreds of buildings and trapped residents under mounds of rubble or pancaked floors.

Authorities feared the death toll would rise further as rescuers searched through tangles of metal and concrete for survivors in a region beset by more than a decade of Syria's civil war and a refugee crisis.

Residents jolted out of sleep by the pre-dawn quake rushed outside in the rain and snow to escape falling debris, while those who were trapped cried for help. Major aftershocks, including one nearly as strong as the initial quake, continued to rattle the region.

"I don't have the strength anymore," one survivor could be heard calling out from beneath the rubble in the Turkish city of Adana, as rescue workers tried to reach him, said a resident, journalism student Muhammet Fatih Yavuz. He said three buildings near his home were toppled.

The quake, which was

centered on Turkey's southeastern province of Kahramanmaraş, sent residents of Damascus rushing into the street and was felt as far away as Cairo and Beirut.

"Because the debris removal efforts are continuing in many buildings in the earthquake zone, we do not know how high the number of dead and injured will rise," Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said.

The region sits on top of major fault lines and is frequently shaken by earthquakes. Some 18,000 were killed in similarly powerful earthquakes that hit northwest Turkey in 1999.

The U.S. Geological Survey measured yesterday's pre-dawn quake at 7.8, with a depth of 18 kilometers. Hours later, a 7.5 magnitude one struck more than 100 kilometers away.

The second jolt in the afternoon caused a multistory apartment to topple face-forward onto the street in the Turkish city of Sanliurfa, smashing into rubble and raising a cloud of dust as bystanders screamed, according to video of the scene.

Orhan Tatar, an official from Turkey's disaster management agency, said it was a new earthquake, but Yaareb Altaweel, a seismologist with the USGS, said

it was considered an aftershock because it took place on the same fault line as the first.

Thousands of buildings were reported collapsed in a wide area extending from Syria's cities of Aleppo and Hama to Turkey's Diyarbakir, more than 330 kilometers to the northeast.

Such severe damage typically leads to a significant death toll, but bitterly cold temperatures could make matters even worse, reducing the timeframe that rescuers have to save trapped survivors, said Dr. Steven Godby, an expert in natural hazards at Nottingham Trent University. He added that the difficulty of working in areas beset by civil war would only complicate rescue efforts.

Television stations in Turkey aired screens split into four or five, showing live coverage from rescue efforts in the worst-hit provinces. In the city of Kahramanmaraş, rescuers pulled two children alive from the rubble, and one could be seen lying on a stretcher on the snowy ground.

Offers of help — from search-and-rescue teams to medical supplies and money — poured in from dozens of countries, as well as the European Union and NATO. MDT/AP



Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti (pictured) called on Western powers not to pressure his tiny Balkan country into accepting a contentious association of five Serb-majority municipalities that is ramping up tensions between Kosovo and Serbia. Kurti told The Associated Press that the focus instead should be on making Serbia more democratic and getting rid of what he called Belgrade's hegemonistic ideas.



Norway Oil-rich Norway is looking to donate 75 billion kroner (\$7.3 billion) to Kyiv as part of a five-year support package that would make the Scandinavian country one of the world's biggest donors to war-torn Ukraine, the Norwegian government said. Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre said the money would be split evenly between military and humanitarian assistance over five years, broken down to 15 billion kroner (\$1.5 billion) annually. The proposed aid package will be put to a vote in parliament.

Germany European investigators have shut down an encrypted communication service that was used as a secure channel for organized crime, particularly in the drug trade, and arrested 48 people, German authorities said. More than 70 properties were searched in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Poland on Friday, when the arrests were made, the criminal police office in the western German state of Rhineland-Palatinate said in a statement.

Kenya A judge has ruled that Facebook's parent company, Meta, can be sued in the East African country. Meta tried to have the case dropped, arguing that Kenyan courts do not have jurisdiction over their operations, but the labor court judge dismissed that in a ruling yesterday. A former Facebook moderator in Kenya, Daniel Motaung, is suing the company claiming poor working conditions.