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**ON-SITE INSPECTION FOR VIOLATIONS CONCERNING TAXI SERVICES SHOULD BE DONE REGULARLY: GOV'T TRANSPORT AFFAIR ADVISOR**

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**US HOLDS DRILLS IN SOUTH CHINA SEA AMID TENSIONS WITH BEIJING**

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AP PHOTO



**China** yesterday said more than 10 U.S. high-altitude balloons have flown in its airspace during the past year without its permission, following Washington's accusation that Beijing operates a fleet of surveillance balloons around the world. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin (pictured) gave no details about the alleged U.S. balloons. "It is also common for U.S. balloons to illegally enter the airspace of other countries," Wang said.

AP PHOTO



**Australia** Fifteen years after the Australian Parliament's historic apology to its Indigenous people for past wrongs, the government yesterday announced 424 million Australian dollars (\$293 million) in new funding to improve the lives of Australia's original inhabitants. In 2008, a newly elected center-left Labor Party government apologized to the Indigenous population for "laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians."

AP PHOTO



**Israel** Tens of thousands of Israelis — hoisting flags, blowing on horns and chanting "democracy" and "no to dictatorship" — protested outside the parliament building in Jerusalem yesterday as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government formally launched a contentious plan to overhaul the country's legal system.



**Macau poised to exceed Las Vegas' gaming revenues amid rebound after losing title of top gambling hub in 2022 in historic win for sin city, analysts say**

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# GAINS AHEAD

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**CRIME**  
**PHONE SCAMS RETURN AND CREATE MORE VICTIMS**

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RENATO MARQUES

CRIME

# PHONE SCAMS RETURN AND CREATE MORE VICTIMS

THE phone scams targeting residents from the mainland studying or working in Macau have returned, with several cases being reported by the Judiciary Police (PJ) in the last couple of days.

As has happened in the past, the target of at least one of these was a 20-something-year-old university student who fell victim to a scammer on the mainland pretending to be a member of the authorities.

According to the report presented yesterday during the regular joint press conference of the police forces by a PJ spokesperson, the victim received a call on February 10 (Saturday) from someone speaking in Mandarin, who claimed to be from an undisclosed police authority.

The fraudster said that the mainland authorities had caught a suspect and that in his possession was a bank card with the victim's name, and so they would need to verify all her data.

After that, the fraudster requested the victim to transfer all the money in her bank account to a



different account under the pretext of being inspected. After the transfer concluded, the victim soon realized she had lost some RMB12,000, which she had transferred to this unknown account. She reported this to the PJ.

A very similar case was also reported by a different woman,

also from the mainland. This time, the amount lost was a total of RMB58,300 from two different bank accounts.

In a separate case that has already resulted in a warning being issued by the PJ over the weekend, the police received four cases of the same scam over the last

weekend. The scam involves an SMS being sent, allegedly from a local telecommunications operator.

In this case, the fraudsters contact the victims, claiming to be the telecommunications company. Claiming that their reward program points are expiring soon,

the fraudsters instruct the victims to follow a link to "choose the gift they want to exchange for the reward points."

In the process, victims are asked to fill out a form that requests, among other information, their credit card details. Those who did so soon received a notification from their bank stating that a transaction involving HKD2,378 had been processed via their credit cards.

In three of the four cases reported, local residents saw this same amount being taken via their credit cards. One of the potential victims found the activity suspicious and called the telecommunications company to cancel the transaction before the credit card was charged.

The PJ issued a warning on this scam on Sunday (February 12), fearing that more people could soon be targeted.

All the victims targeted by the scam were clients from the same operator. However, the telecommunications operator has denied sending any of the SMS messages or being in any way involved with this case.

# Tims China to develop Popeyes in Macau, mainland

THE International Limited, the exclusive operator of Canadian coffee chain Tim Hortons coffee shops in China (Tims China), announced that it had approved a transaction for the exclusive development of fast-food chain Popeyes in mainland China and Macau.

Like Tim Hortons, Popeyes is an iconic brand owned by Restaurant Brands International (RBI).

Popeyes was founded in Louisiana in 1972, and has opened more than 3,900 stores worldwide, making it one of the most popular fried chicken fast-food chains in the world.

"Tims has been a huge success in Chi-



na—with more than 600 locations on our way to 1,000 by year-end," said Peter Yu, chairman of Tims China.

In the all-share transaction, Tims China is expected to acquire the exclusive rights to develop and sub-franchise the Po-

peyes brand in mainland China and Macau. The acquisition is also expected to bring significant cash to Tims China and strengthen the company's balance sheet, as cited in the group's statement.

"We are thrilled to have the opportu-

nity to welcome Popeyes, a beloved global brand and proven winner, to the Tims China family," said Yongchen Lu, CEO of Tims China. "The two brands are a natural fit, with complementary product offerings and exceptional growth potential." LV

## TRANSPORTATION

# HIGHEST DAILY RECORD OF CROSS-BORDER MACAU-PLATED VEHICLES

STAFF REPORTER

DAILY car crossings by Macau-plated cars at the Zhuhai border has surpassed 1,200 trips on February 11, which is the highest daily record since the execution of the "Northbound Travel for Macau Vehicles" scheme.

Aiming to facilitate convenient border crossings for private vehicles in Macau, the scheme allows eligible Macau-plated drivers to make appointments to cross the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge for Macau-mainland transportation. The number of daily car trips has increased since January 1 – when the port was officially opened

for this purpose – from 500 trips on January 24 to 800 trips during the Lantern Festival. The total number of northbound car trips until February 11 has exceeded 14,000.

Over 8,000 inbound and outbound traffic movements occurred last Friday, which broke the record in 2018, being the opening of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge.

Eligible drivers should use an online system to apply for permission and book for the date of their border crossing. Over 22,000 drivers have registered with the system; however, 58 broke their appointments to cross the border in January.



RENATO MARQUES

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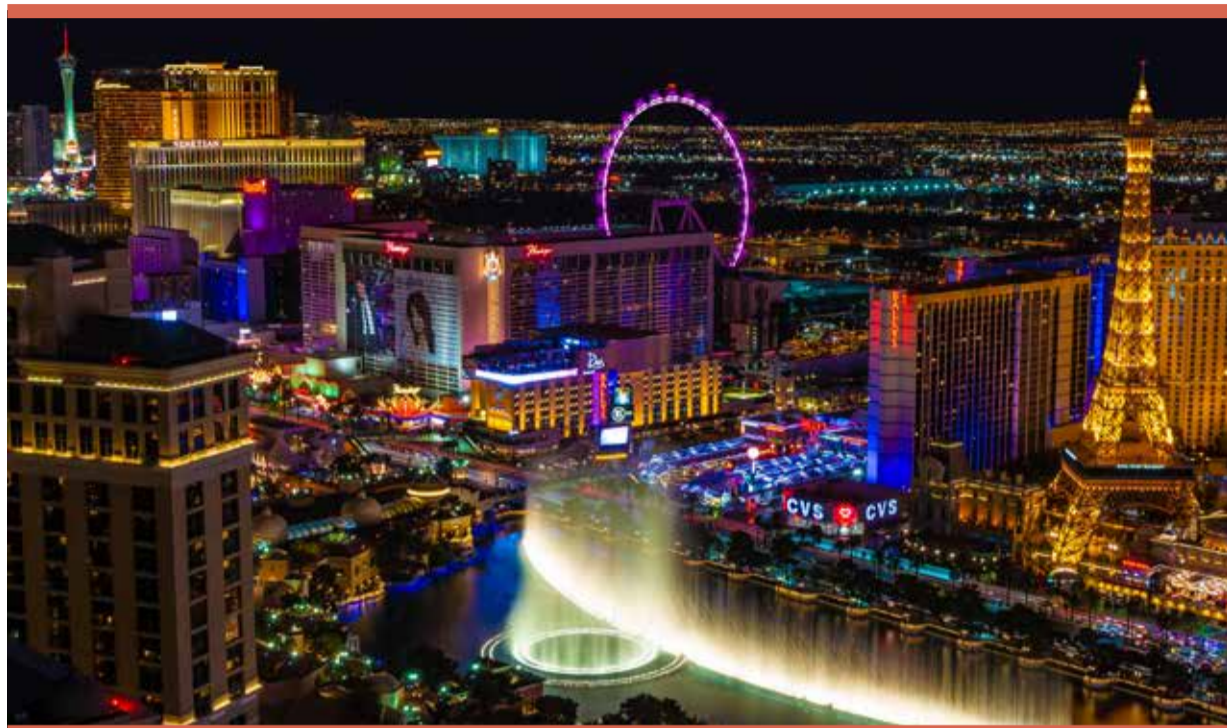
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**GAMING**

# Las Vegas topping Macau's GGR in 2022 only 'one-off'

LYNZY VALLES

**L**AS Vegas' casino revenue has hit higher than Macau for the first time in 18 years as the casino sector in the city struggled to ride out the pandemic storm that brought heavy losses.

In a historic moment for the sin city, the casino hub surpassed Macau's gross gaming revenue (GGR) for the first time since 2005, when Vegas earned around USD200 million more.

However, the instance may just be a one-off due to the setbacks the industry faced in 2022.

The gaming sector has faced a double whammy with the pandemic restrictions as the city adhered to Beijing's strict Covid policy, a crackdown on cross-border gambling kept casinos mostly empty for much of 2022, as well as

the uncertainties due to the pending licensing renewals of the six gaming concessionaires.

Aside from trying to make up for the losses given they have been bleeding cash since 2020, casino operators were dealing with the extra burden of trying to expand non-gaming ventures as a requirement for the license renewal.

The proposals required them to include billions in investment in non-gaming offerings for the next decade.

Although the big six have raked in billions of dollars from their casinos for the past 20 years, receipts have turned sour since the outbreak.

In 2022, the SAR recorded a GGR of MOP42.2 billion, a heavy plunge of 51% when compared year-on-year. The figure is also the lowest in nearly two decades,

and is down 40% when compared to Las Vegas.

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

The year 2022 was good for gambling and tourism in Nevada, where winnings at casinos statewide set calendar year records and Las Vegas visitor tallies nearly approximated levels prior to the coronavirus pandemic.

Figures from the Nevada Gaming Control Board show that 459 large casinos statewide won an all-time high of USD14.8 billion last year, up more than 23% from the calendar year 2019.

Nevada has also enjoyed its 22nd straight month of over USD1 billion revenue in December.

However, analysts at new ga-

ming outlet Vegas Slot Online believe that it was just a one-off, as Macau is primed to rebound strongly following the easing of travel restrictions last month, as cited in its report.

Although Vegas casinos are expected to be bullish, the city is feeling the effects of pent-up demand from Covid-19, and the full year of 2023 may not acquire significant double-digit growth percentages, due to potential economic slowdowns.

In Macau, the government has retained its expectations of MOP130 billion in GGR in 2023, similar to what it had forecast in 2022. It failed to reach this target last year, given the several border-restrictions due to outbreaks in the neighboring region that deterred mainland visitors from entering Macau.

In January, casinos saw GGR surge, as China's reopening and the week-long Lunar New Year break sparked an influx of visitors to the gambling hub.

Data shows that GGR climbed 82.5% last month year-on-year to MOP11.6 billion, beating the median estimate of a 36.5% increase, according to analysts surveyed by Bloomberg.

This is the first rise since February last year and the highest monthly revenue since January 2020.

Meanwhile, February is rebounding far better than expected.

Brokerage Morgan Stanley expects February GGR to stand at MOP11.2 billion as the demand for gaming, as well as the hotel occupancy rates and prices remain robust, even a few weeks after the Chinese New Year.

Analysts have previously noted that earnings were estimated at MOP1.9 billion in the first five days of February, as the city has been swarmed by visitors amid the significant easing of restrictions, a figure that represents a recovery of 45% of 2019 figures.

The average daily revenue amounts to MOP380 million, slightly more with the daily average of MOP374 million in January.

## TURBOJET INCREASES FREQUENCY OF NIGHT SAILINGS

TurboJET has increased the frequency of its night sailings and will be available from Thursday night. In a statement, routes from Sheung Wan to Macau will depart at 6:30 p.m., 8:30 p.m., and 10:30 p.m.; while ferries from Macau will operate from 8 p.m., 11 p.m. and 11:59 p.m. Ferry services between the Outer Harbour Ferry Terminal and Sheung Wan resumed operations Jan. 19, with about 10 round-trip sailings per day. The resumption of services comes amid the easing of Covid measures in the region from Jan. 8, the same day the Taipa Ferry Terminal resumed sailings after three years of suspension.

## EMPLOYERS' SUBSIDY SCHEME TO END MAR. 31

The application period for the temporary subsidy scheme that encourages employers to hire local residents to help the unemployed during the pandemic will end on Mar. 31. Launched in June 2022, the scheme has helped 2,328 local employees as of mid-December. The Labour Affairs Bureau (DSAL) urged prospective applicants to conclude their employment and application on time. According to the bureau, 70% of cases have been processed, with about 20% of the applications still pending. Other cases still require supplementary materials. The scheme requires subsidized employers to keep the employees on for at least a year.

**TRANSPORTATION**

# Gov't advisor suggest constant spot-checks for taxi misconduct

**O**N-SITE inspection for violations concerning taxi services should be done regularly, Cheong Sok Leng, government transport affair advisor, recently proposed.

After the abrupt termination of almost all Covid-19 restrictions within China, tourism activities



LYNZY VALLES

have promptly regained momentum, with tourists flocking into Macau over a matter of days. As business revives, taxi misconduct was on the

rise as well, as reflected in official data and seen on many social media groups.

To prevent further deterioration of the situation, apart from the aforementioned suggestion, Cheong recommends that the government escalate its promotion of the taxi law. Passengers

should also be encouraged to report any violations they experience or become aware of. The government advisor believes that these measures will help resurrect confidence in public transport.

In addition to misconduct, the difficulty in getting a taxi ride has also returned amid the return of tourism activities. Cheong admitted that complaints had been received from local residents, while she was aware of the difficulty of getting a taxi in older or residential districts.

Responding to the situation, she suggested the government operate reward and incentive schemes to attract taxi drivers to enter these districts, so as to ease these difficulties.

Between January 21 and 27, which was the first seven days of the Lunar New Year, the Public Security Police Force (PSP) logged 16 acts of taxi misconduct. In pre-Covid years, taxi services in Macau had been infamous for their selectiveness in accepting passengers and inhospitable attitudes. **AL**

# GOV'T NOT ADMITTING VIOLATION IN BARRA TRANSPORT HUB FLAWS

ANTHONY LAM

**D**ESPITE assuring follow-up actions, the Public Works Bureau (DSOP) did not admit to the existence of procedural flaws in the road defects found in the Barra Transport Hub.

Lam Wai Hou, director of the DSOP, made the comment in his reply to lawmaker Leong Sun Lok's written inquiry. The inquiry was dated January 6 and the reply January 30.

After five long years, the construction of the transport hub was concluded in 2020. Certain parts of the structure were opened for public use in December 2022. However, the asphalt floor of the bus terminus level started peeling off less than a month after the opening. The lawmaker even cited workers with bus companies who revealed that the peeling situation started "not long" after the opening.

This situation raised public concerns over the efficient use of public resources, especially in terms of money.

Leong emphasized that the situation did not only cause incon-



venience to users of the facility, but also highlighted the fact that the lack of supervision still exists. As such, he asked the government why the defects existed even after government engineers approved the project, and if there was any misconduct.

In the second half of the question, the lawmaker asked how the government would review and refine the supervision mechanism to improve the quality

of work and inspection.

To this question, Lam only said that the bureau was seriously concerned with the quality of public works projects.

"With regards to the Barra Transport Hub project, the government has commissioned design, supervisory and quality control units to monitor the technical requirements and quality of the engineering work," Lam said in the reply, adding that in

the tender notice, the quality of work, the specifications of materials and the standard of acceptance had been stated.

He assured that his bureau would do its best in supervising the construction of all public work projects.

On the responsibility of the builder, the official noted that the affected areas had already been repaired, as "the project was still within [the] guarantee period."

The lawmaker also asked how the government would improve the quality of local traffic infrastructure to ensure durability, given the city is seeing more heavy vehicles. To this, Lam pointed out that certain roads had seen integrated materials being introduced in anticipation of their heavy loads.

In another written inquiry, lawmaker Lei Chan U raised questions on vocational training. In his opinion, the current vocational training programs offered by the government do not fit its policy direction of "1+4" economic development.

Amid the government offering

hands-on training to young people with a focus on the "1+4" diversification development strategy, the lawmaker questioned what the difference was between this training and the paid on-job training.

In addition, seeing the talent committee making estimates only on requirements for the next three years, Lei asked if the government would request estimates spanning longer periods, from the mid to long term.

Currently, the government is offering short term intensive training in electrical work as well as eastern and western culinary skills.

Another lawmaker, Ron Lam, asked the government for plans on the sale of gasoline products for vehicles with an octane level of 95.

In his inquiry, he demanded the government expedite designating a plot of land for a new gas station on the New Urban Zone A and expressly require that the gas station offer this type of gas product.

The reason behind his request is that the city has no outlet for gasoline with an octane level of 95, which is 15% cheaper than the currently-offered gas with octane level 98. He added that the manufacturers of most vehicles in Macau recommend using gas with the lower octane level.

## AL PLENARY

# Maternity leave subsidy and minimum wage among labor rights to be revised

**T**HE complementary subsidy for paid maternity leave, the minimum wage, and the compensation system for work-related accidents or occupational hazards are among a group of matters related to the labor laws soon to be revised, the Secretary for Economy and Finance, Lei Wai Nong, said at the Legislative Assembly (AL).

Lei's comments came in response to a spoken inquiry from lawmaker Lei Chan U delivered last Friday at the AL.

Lei recalled that when they were established, the rules included a revision mechanism. The deadlines for such revision are coming, in some cases later this year, with Lei



announcing that the government is preparing to update these rules.

The secretary also noted that the government has the intention of revising the whole legal regime, including the laws and the implementation mechanisms.

On the same topic, the deputy director of the

Labour Affairs Bureau (DSAL), Chan Chon U, added that concerning the minimum wage, revision of the regime is already on the agenda of the Chief Executive, who will soon initiate the consultation of the different parties involved aiming to gather opinions to help draft the new labor policies. **RM**

## AIRASIA SET TO RELAUNCH SEVEN INT'L DESTINATIONS IN CHINA

**M**ALAYSIA-BASED low cost airline AirAsia is set to relaunch seven international destinations in China, namely Macau, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Kunming, Shanghai, Hangzhou and Chengdu, as it returns to service stronger than ever in the post-pandemic era.

The budget airline said in a statement on yesterday that AirAsia Malaysia will restart four China destinations from two hubs, Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu in the northern Borneo state of Sabah, to Macau, Shenzhen, Guangzhou and Kunming with a total of 10 flights weekly, with the plan to increase the frequency by up to 27 flights weekly in March.

Tonight, Macau will hold a welcome ceremony for arrivals from Kuala Lumpur.

The first flight to/from China recommenced on Feb. 10 to/from Guangzhou with strong load factors both ways.

Complementing the resumption of the short-haul destinations, AirAsia X Malaysia will also reconnect



Kuala Lumpur to Shanghai, Hangzhou and Chengdu with 10 flights weekly starting March 1.

AirAsia Malaysia CEO Riad Asmat said China is an integral market for AirAsia Aviation Group, where it was the largest international low-cost carrier by capacity before the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Based on the impressive load factor of our inaugural flight to/from Guangzhou, the restart of our services will not only provide greater value and accessibility to essential travelers from Malaysia and tourists from China, but will significantly boost tourism, trade and economic growth in both countries," he added.

AirAsia X Malaysia CEO Benyamin Ismail said China will be the company's next primary market focus as it resumes its growth strategy flying its most popular and profitable routes.

"We have witnessed tremendous success with our services to China in the past where we carried over 1.8 million guests to/from China in 2019 alone," he added.

"We believe the commencement of our services to China will be popular for business travelers, international students, those visiting family and relatives as well as stimulating regional demand between two large markets through great value fares and services." **MDT/XINHUA**

# Find Your Sweeter Kind of Love at **FONDANT ART EXHIBITION**

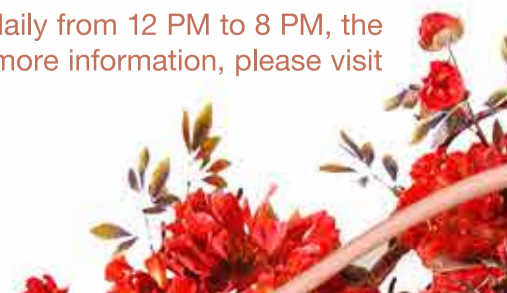
February is a romantic month for many as the season of love is here! MGM plays cupid this year by curating romantic activities for you all. If you are looking for a taste of culture during this month of sweetness and hearts, consider visiting the **Fondant Art Exhibition** at MGM COTAI, a collaboration between MGM and China's "Sugar King" Zhou Yi. Your journey of sweetness begins with the beautiful fondant sculptures that showcase contemporary fondant art and the classics of Chinese culture including **Na Cheng** and **Qin Ying**.



To keep everyone entertained on this sugary-sweet season, you do not want to miss out on the following meaningful scenes. **Na Cheng**, or The Betrothal, in the "Three Books and Six Rituals" of marriage customs of Han people in ancient China, takes place on an auspicious day chosen by the groom's family. Upon proposing to the bride's family, the matchmaker will bring the full blessing of the groom's family as well as wedding gifts. The acceptance marks the completion of the engagement and is an imperative step for the establishment of marriage. The artwork captures the lively and joyous mood of the wedding ritual. Everyone beams and chitchats, hinting at the joy and sanctity of the upcoming wedding and the prosperity of the family. On a full-bloom lotus, the flowers of a magnolia bloom upwards and surround the full moon, wishing for a beautiful marriage.

Marriage is a promise of love. **Qin Ying**, or the Wedding Ceremony in the marriage etiquette is when the groom marries the bride. In the bright and festive hall of the groom's house, the newlyweds perform a worship ceremony. The bride wears an intricate bridal gown embroidered with dragon and phoenix, where both mystical creatures symbolize prosperity – a euphemism for eternal love. The people gathered presents a customary worship ceremony at a traditional wedding. The details in the artwork complement and enhance each other. Since ancient times, festive events have been decorated and lit up with lanterns. Red lanterns, peonies, and a fondant auspicious cloud highlight the sense of ceremony and create an inviting atmosphere. Each one of these evokes a cheerful mood, symbolizing happiness and harmony between husband and wife.

Looking for things to do during the season of romance does not have to be cliché. There are always options beyond a fancy dinner reservation to partake in with your loved ones. Savor the edible art at MGM as a romantic activity. Open daily from 12 PM to 8 PM, the exhibition is entirely free of entry. For more information, please visit [mgm.mo](http://mgm.mo)



JIM GOMEZ, MANILA

MILITARY

# PHILIPPINES SAYS CHINA SHIP USED LASER TO HINDER COAST GUARD

**T**HE Philippines yesterday accused a Chinese coast guard ship of hitting a Philippine coast guard vessel with a military-grade laser and temporarily blinding some of its crew in the disputed South China Sea, calling it a “blatant” violation of Manila’s sovereign rights.

The Chinese ship also maneuvered dangerously close, about 137 meters, to block the Philippine patrol vessel BRP Malapascua from approaching Second Thomas Shoal, a submerged reef that has been occupied by Philippine forces, on Feb. 6, the Philippine coast guard said in a statement.

The Philippines has filed nearly 200 diplomatic protests against China’s aggressive actions in the disputed waters in 2022 alone.

China claims the South China Sea virtually in its entirety, putting it on a collision course with other claimants. Despite friendly overtures to Beijing by former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and his successor, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., who met Chinese leader Xi Jinping in January in Beijing, tensions have persisted, drawing in closer military alliance between the Philippines and the U.S.

Although the Chinese coast guard had tried to block Philippine coast guard ships in the disputed waters before, this was the first time it used lasers and caused physical suffering among Filipino personnel, Philippine



This photo provided by the Philippine Coast Guard shows a Chinese coast guard ship in the disputed South China Sea, on Feb. 6

coast guard spokesperson Commodore Armand Balilo told The Associated Press.

There was no immediate comment from the Chinese Embassy in Manila.

“The Chinese ship illuminated the green laser light twice toward the BRP Malapascua, causing temporary blindness to her crew at the bridge,” the Philippine statement said.

The Philippine vessel was for-

ced to move away from the area, where it was escorting a supply vessel that was delivering food and sailors to a Philippine navy sentry ship, the BRP Sierra Madre, which has been marooned on Second Thomas Shoal since 1999, the coast guard said.

“The deliberate blocking of the Philippine government ships to deliver food and supplies to our military personnel on board the BRP Sierra Madre is a blatant dis-

regard for, and a clear violation of, Philippine sovereign rights in this part of the West Philippine Sea,” the coast guard said, using the name the Philippines has adopted for the stretch of waters close to its western coast.

It was not immediately clear if the Philippine resupply mission pushed through despite the incident.

The Chinese coast guard also blocked Philippine ships

escorting a supply vessel from approaching Second Thomas Shoal in August, the coast guard said. At the time, one of the two Chinese ships that were joined by two Chinese civilian vessels removed the cover of its 70mm armament, the coast guard said, adding it would not be deterred by China’s aggression in protecting Philippine sovereignty in the disputed sea.

Aside from China and the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei also have overlapping claims in the resource-rich and busy waterway, where a bulk of the world’s commerce and oil transits.

The United States lays no claims to the disputed sea but has deployed forces to patrol the waters to promote freedom of navigation and overflight — moves that have angered Beijing, which has warned Washington to stop meddling in what it says is a purely Asian dispute.

The U.S. has been taking steps to rebuild its military might in the Philippines more than 30 years after the closure of its large bases in the country and reinforcing an arc of military alliances in Asia. **MDT/AP**

MILITARY

# US holds drills in South China Sea amid tensions with Beijing

**T**HE United States Navy and Marine Corps are holding joint exercises in the South China Sea at a time of heightened tensions with Beijing over the shooting down of a suspected Chinese spy balloon.

The 7th Fleet based in Japan said yesterday [Macau time] that the USS Nimitz aircraft carrier strike group and the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit have been conducting “integrated expeditionary strike force operations” in the South China Sea.

It said exercises involving ships, ground forces and aircraft took place Saturday but gave no details on when they began or whether they had ended.

China claims virtually the entire South China Sea and strongly objects to



An MH-60S Sea Hawk helicopter lands aboard the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz in the South China Sea last weekend

military activity by other nations in the contested waterway through which \$5 trillion in goods are shipped every year.

The U.S. takes no official position on sovereignty in the South China Sea, but maintains that freedom of navigation and overflight must be preserved. Several

times a year, it sends ships sailing past fortified Chinese outposts in the Spratly Islands, prompting protests from Beijing.

The U.S. has also been strengthening its defense alliance with the Philippines, which has faced encroachment on islands and fisheries by the Chinese

coast guard and nominally civilian but government-backed fleets.

The U.S. military exercises were planned in advance. They come as already tense relations between Washington and Beijing have been exacerbated by a diplomatic row sparked by the balloon, which was

shot down last weekend in U.S. airspace off the coast of South Carolina.

The U.S. said the unmanned balloon was equipped to detect and collect intelligence signals, but Beijing insists it was a weather research airship that had accidentally blown off course.

The balloon prompted Secretary of State Antony Blinken to abruptly cancel a high-stakes trip to Beijing aimed at easing tensions.

After first issuing a highly rare expression of regret over the balloon, China has toughened its rhetoric, calling the U.S. shutdown an overreaction and a violation of international norms. China’s defense minister refused to take a phone call from U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin to discuss the matter.

The United States has since blacklisted six Chinese entities it said were linked to Beijing’s aerospace programs as part of its response to the incident. The House of Representatives also voted unanimously

to condemn China for a “brazen violation” of U.S. sovereignty and efforts to “deceive the international community through false claims about its intelligence collection campaigns.”

The balloon was part of a large surveillance program that China has been conducting for several years, the Pentagon said. The U.S. says Chinese balloons have flown over dozens of countries across five continents in recent years, and it learned more about the balloon program after closely monitoring the one shot down near South Carolina.

In its news release, the 7th Fleet said the joint operation had “established a powerful presence in the region, which supports peace and stability.”

“As a ready response force, we underpin a broad spectrum of missions including landing Marines ashore, humanitarian disaster relief, and deterring potential adversaries through visible and present combat power,” the release said. **MDT/AP**

AUSTRALIA

# Wife of former US pilot complains of Australian treatment

**T**HE wife of a former U.S. military pilot accused by the United States of illegally training Chinese aviators said yesterday her husband was being held in inhumane conditions as he fights extradition from Australia.

Saffrine Duggan said her husband Daniel Duggan had already been kept 115 days in a "tiny cell" in Sydney's Silverwater Correctional Complex because of U.S. charges that had yet to be heard in court.

"He is suffering the harshest possible prison classification in Australia as an 'extreme high risk restricted inmate' despite having no prior (or current) convictions," she said in a statement.

"This is unprecedented and an affront to Australia's rule of law and manipulation of the Australian legal system by the United States, at the expense of the Australian taxpayer," she said.

Having already filed a complaint with Australia's Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security, Saffrine Duggan said a further complaint would be filed with the United Nations Human Rights Committee.

"The manner and circumstances behind this prosecution



Lawyer for former U.S. military pilot Daniel Duggan speaks to the media outside the court in Sydney, last week

of Dan are something you would expect to find in an authoritarian country, but not in a democratic Australia where its citizens expect a more fair and balanced equal application of the law and the overriding principle of a 'fair go' for all," she said.

Daniel Duggan, 54, was arrested in October last year near his family home in Orange, in New South Wales state, and was accu-

sed of providing military training to pilots working for China.

He has denied the allegations, saying they were "political" posturing by the United States, which unfairly singled him out.

His wife said the treaty under which the FBI had attempted to extradite her husband was not being used properly.

"The treaty specifically states that alleged crimes under its pro-

visions should not be of a 'political character,' should require dual criminality — which is not the case in this instance — and should be in Australia's national interests," she said. Dual criminality means illegal in both Australia and the United States.

The case is proceeding through Sydney courts where a magistrate will decide whether the husband is eligible for extradition. A hea-

ring is scheduled for March 20.

Daniel Duggan's lawyer, Denis Miralis, told reporters outside Sydney's Downing Center Local Court yesterday that Australian and U.S. government agencies had been reluctant to hand over documents critical to Duggan's defense.

"Regrettably, to date, we haven't been getting the cooperation that, in our view, would be essential to ensure that Mr. Duggan's rights are properly protected," Miralis said. "Government agencies, perhaps unsurprisingly, are refusing to produce documents on the basis of secrecy provisions."

Born in Boston, Duggan served in the U.S. Marines for 12 years before immigrating to Australia in 2002. In January 2012, he gained Australian citizenship, choosing to give up his U.S. citizenship in the process.

A 2016 indictment from the U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., was unsealed late last year. In it, prosecutors say Duggan conspired with others to provide training to Chinese military pilots in 2010 and 2012, and possibly at other times, without applying for an appropriate license.

Prosecutors say Duggan received about nine payments totaling about 88,000 Australian dollars (\$61,000) and international travel from another conspirator for what was sometimes described as "personal development training."

The indictment says Duggan traveled to the U.S., China and South Africa, and provided some training to Chinese pilots in South Africa. **MDT/AP**

CAMBODIA

# Independent radio station shut on order of PM

**O**NE of Cambodia's last free media outlets, Voice of Democracy radio, yesterday ceased operations after Prime Minister Hun Sen ordered its closure for allegedly slandering his son.

The story, which was also published on the website of VoD, as the station is better known, claimed that Hun Sen's son, Lt. Gen. Hun Manet, had signed a donation on his father's behalf of \$100,000 for Turkey earthquake relief aid.

Hun Sen said the article misinterpreted the facts and that only the prime minister has the authority to make decisions on foreign aid. VoD acknowledged it had made a mistake, but that did not satisfy Hun Sen, who has ruled Cambodia with an iron fist for 38 years, during which he has cracked down on critics and independent media.

His son heads the army and has been nominated by Hun Sen's



Journalists take photographs at a newsroom of the Voice of Democracy in Phnom Penh

Cambodian People's Party to succeed him when he steps down. With most opponents silenced, including the only credible opposition party, Hun Sen is certain to lead his party to another victory in a general election scheduled for later this year.

VoD has reported extensively on sensitive issues such as lan-

d-grabbing and criminal gangs operating with near impunity to carry out internet scams with people, especially foreigners, tricked into working under conditions of near-slavery. The media clampdown has already hounded several outlets out of business on disputed grounds that they had not properly paid their taxes.

The Information Ministry said yesterday that VoD's license was being revoked "because it has seriously violated the ethics of professional journalism and did not make a correction according to the press law, affecting the honor and prestige of the government"

Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director of Human Rights Watch,

said the Cambodian government "has never liked VoD's reporting, and given Prime Minister Hun Sen's authoritarian attitude towards independent media, it's likely VoD have been living on borrowed time for a while."

"But that's no excuse for this outrageous and ridiculous order to shut them down based on the silliest of rationales about who signed a government document to give aid to Turkey. This flimsy and absurd decision barely masks the government's real intent to further suppress media freedom."

He said that historically, Hun Sen and his party usually crack down hard on any independent voices ahead of a national election. "Going after VoD is a good indication that scheduled July 23 poll will be neither free nor fair."

Hun Sen had ordered VoD to cease operating at 10 a.m. yesterday, and the station's personnel were at their desks when representatives from Phnom Penh City Hall and the Information Ministry arrived to serve the order. The road outside was closed in an evident effort to quash any street protests. **MDT/AP**

UFOS?

# US jets down four objects in eight days, unprecedented in peacetime

A U.S. fighter jet shot down an “unidentified object” over Lake Huron yesterday [Macau time] on orders from President Joe Biden. It was the fourth such downing in eight days and the latest military strike in an extraordinary chain of events over U.S. airspace that Pentagon officials believe has no peacetime precedent.

Part of the reason for the repeated shootdowns is a “heightened alert” following a spy balloon from China that emerged over U.S. airspace in late January, Gen. Glen VanHerck, head of NORAD and U.S. Northern Command, said in a briefing with reporters.

Since then, fighter jets last week also shot down objects over Canada and Alaska. Pentagon officials said they posed no security threats, but so little was known about them that Pentagon officials were ruling nothing out — not even UFOs.

“We have been more closely scrutinizing our airspace at these altitudes, including enhancing our radar, which may at least partly explain the increase,” said Melissa Dalton, assistant defense secretary for homeland defense.

U.S. authorities have made clear that they constantly monitor for unknown radar blips, and it is not unusual to shut down airspace as a precaution to evaluate them. But the unusually assertive response was raising questions about whether such use of force was warranted, particularly as administration officials said the objects were not of great national security concern and the downings were just out of caution.

VanHerck said the U.S. adjusted its radar so it could track slower objects. “With some adjustments, we’ve been able to get a better categorization of radar tracks now,” he said, “and that’s why I think you’re seeing these, plus there’s a heightened alert to look for this information.”

He added: “I believe this is the first time within United States or American airspace that NORAD or United States Northern Command has taken kinetic action against



an airborne object.” Asked if officials have ruled out extraterrestrials, VanHerck said, “I haven’t ruled out anything at this point.”

The Pentagon officials said they were still trying to determine what exactly the objects were and said they had considered using the jets’ guns instead of missiles, but it proved to be too difficult. They drew a strong distinction between the three shot down over this weekend and the balloon from China.

Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz tweeted that airmen in the 148th Fighter Wing, an Air National Guard fighter unit in Duluth, shot down the object over Lake Huron.

The extraordinary air defense activity began in late January, when a white orb the officials said was from China appeared over the U.S. and hovered above the nation for days before fighter jets downed it off the coast of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. That event played out over livestream. Many Americans have been captivated by the drama playing out in the skies as fighter jets scramble to shoot down objects.

The latest brought down was first detected on Saturday evening over Montana, but it was initially thought to be an anomaly. Radar picked it up again Sunday hovering over the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and it was going over Lake Huron, Pentagon officials said Sunday.

U.S. and Canadian authorities had restricted some airspace over the lake earlier Sunday as planes were scrambled to intercept and

try to identify the object. According to a senior administration official, the object was octagonal, with strings hanging off, but had no discernable payload. It was flying low at about 20,000 feet, said the official who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters.

Meanwhile, U.S. officials were still trying to precisely identify two other objects shot down by F-22 fighter jets, and were working to determine whether China was responsible as concerns escalated about what Washington said was Beijing’s large-scale aerial surveillance program.

An object shot down Saturday over Canada’s Yukon was described by U.S. officials as a balloon significantly smaller than the balloon — the size of three school buses — hit by a missile Feb. 4. A flying object brought down over the remote northern coast of Alaska on Friday was more cylindrical and described as a type of airship.

Both were believed to have a payload, either attached or suspended from them, according to the officials who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to discuss the ongoing investigation. Officials were not able to say who launched the objects and were seeking to figure out their origin.

The three objects were much smaller in size, different in appearance and flew at lower altitudes than the suspected spy balloon that

fell into the Atlantic Ocean after the U.S. missile strike.

The officials said the other three objects were not consistent with the fleet of Chinese aerial surveillance balloons that targeted more than 40 countries, stretching back at least into the Trump administration.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer told ABC’s “This Week” that U.S. officials were working quickly to recover debris. Using shorthand to describe the objects as balloons, he said U.S. military and intelligence officials were “focused like a laser” on gathering and accumulating the information, then compiling a comprehensive analysis.

“The bottom line is until a few months ago we didn’t know about these balloons,” Schumer, D-N.Y., said of the spy program that the administration has linked to the People’s Liberation Army, China’s military. “It is wild that we didn’t know.”

Eight days ago, F-22 jets downed the large white balloon that had wafted over the U.S. for days at an altitude of about 60,000 feet. U.S. officials immediately blamed China, saying the balloon was equipped to detect and collect intelligence signals and could maneuver itself. White House officials said improved surveillance capabilities helped detect it.

China’s Foreign Ministry said the unmanned balloon was a civilian meteorological airship that had blown off course. Beijing said the U.S. had “overreacted” by shooting it down. **MDT/AP**

## this day in history

### 1989 AYATOLLAH SENTENCES AUTHOR TO DEATH

Iranian Muslim leader Ayatollah Khomeini has issued a death threat against British author Salman Rushdie and his publishers over the book *Satanic Verses*.

Scotland Yard is providing the author with specialist protection and advice and all

11,000 staff at publishers Viking have received internal memos about the potential danger.

Security has been increased at offices, bookshops and distribution depots.

Mr Rushdie’s editorial director has said a promotional tour of America may have to be cancelled.

The Ayatollah - as Imam, or chief spiritual guide, of Shia Muslims across the world - broadcast a fatwa (edict) on Tehran Radio to eliminate the writer and declared the rest of the day should be one of mourning.

His message said: “I inform the proud Muslim people of the world that the author of the *Satanic Verses* book, which is against Islam, the Prophet and the Koran, and all those involved in its publication who are aware of its content are sentenced to death.”

Mr Rushdie, 42, responded hours later. “I am very sad it should have happened,” he said. “It is not true this book is a blasphemy against Islam.”

“I doubt very much Khomeini or anyone else in Iran has read this book or anything more than selected extracts taken out of context.”

He explained the *Satanic Verses* attempts to investigate conflicts between religious and secular viewpoints.

Published last September, the *Satanic Verses* has sold 100,000 hardback copies in the UK and US and was runner up for the Booker and Whitbread literary awards.

Already banned in five countries, the first demonstrations against the book took place in Bradford, West Yorkshire, where a copy was publicly burned.

Politicians in Westminster have expressed outrage at the threat and have called on the government to complain formally to Iran.

The Iranian Prime Minister Hussain Mousavi has sanctioned Hezbollah groups to “take the necessary action” against the author.

Courtesy BBC News

## IN CONTEXT

Protests against the *Satanic Verses* took place across the world and several individuals were assaulted in connection with it.

Salman Rushdie spent the next nine years living in 30 secret locations across the UK. He denied reports that police protection cost up to £11m a year.

In September 1998, the new Iranian President Mohammed Khatami publicly declared the state would not support the fatwa.

Mr Rushdie was able to make more public appearances, including a cameo in the film *Bridget Jones’ Diary*.

However Islamic hardliners continue to uphold the death sentence and one Iranian foundation has put a \$2.8m bounty on the author’s life.

Technically a fatwa cannot be revoked and only dies with the person it is directed against.



MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

**YOUR STARS**

**ARIES**  
 Mar. 21-Apr. 19  
 Be prepared to deal with groups and organizations of greater magnitude. Check your personal papers and make sure everything is in order. You will gain a lot if you listen.

**TAURUS**  
 Apr. 20-May. 20  
 They will jump at the chance to do something without you if it sounds like more fun. Don't overspend on entertainment, on children, or make poor investments.

**GEMINI**  
 May. 21-Jun. 21  
 Don't blow situations out of proportion. Encourage the youngsters in your family. One sided attractions are likely. Be sure not to burn any bridges

**CANCER**  
 Jun. 22-Jul. 22  
 Coworkers may not be giving you all the pertinent information. Your ability to take hold of a situation will surely bring you popularity and leadership.

**LEO**  
 Jul. 23-Aug. 22  
 Socialize with friends, but don't overspend on lavish entertainment. Take time to do some writing, whether it's correspondence, poetry, or keeping a journal.

**VIRGO**  
 Aug. 23-Sep. 22  
 Your need to put great detail into everything you do may cause you to miss the overall picture. Be sure not to burn any bridges. Be sure to take care of the needs of your immediate loved ones first.

**LIBRA**  
 Sep. 23-Oct. 22  
 Use your quick wit to win points and friends. Romance will develop through work. Travel will promote new romantic encounters.

**SCORPIO**  
 Oct. 23-Nov. 21  
 Opportunities to get ahead will be evident. You can make a difference if you offer your help at functions that involve children.

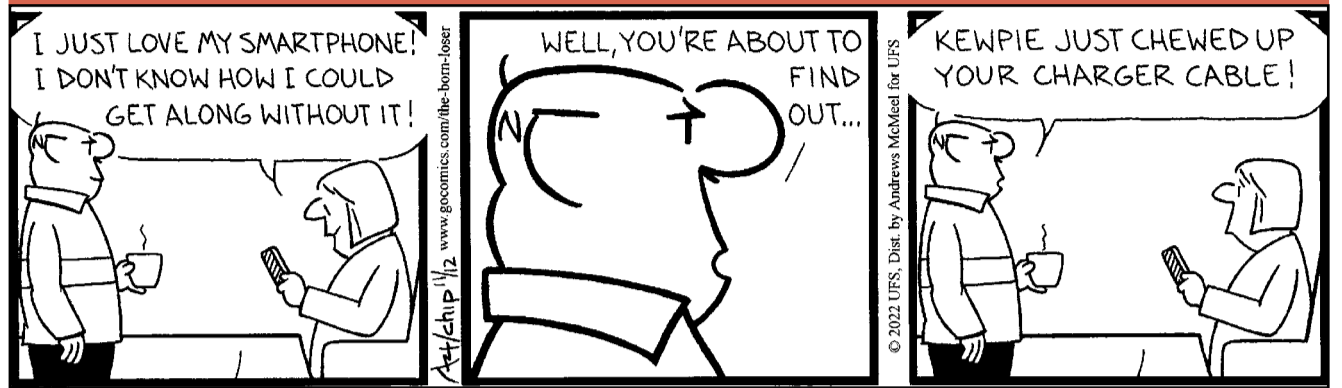
**SAGITTARIUS**  
 Nov. 22-Dec. 21  
 Opportunities for financial gains through investments and games of chance are likely. You can make new connections through friends or relatives. Join a choir or a drama club.

**CAPRICORN**  
 Dec. 22-Jan. 19  
 Any capricious behavior will confuse loved ones and your mood swings will result in loneliness. You may blow situations out of proportion when dealing with the one you love.

**AQUARIUS**  
 Jan. 20-Feb. 18  
 You will have to do a lot of running around, so be prepared to fall short of your expectations. Your ability to ferret out secret information will lead you to an inside scoop on an amazing financial deal.

**PISCES**  
 Feb. 19-Mar. 20  
 Back off if you want to keep the relationship intact. Your trendy style and unique way of doing things will entice new acquaintances. Emotional situations could bring out your stubborn nature.

**The Born Loser by Chip Sansom**



**SUDOKU**

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

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

**WEATHER**

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
<b>CHINA</b>			
Beijing	-3	6	cloudy
Changchun	-14	-7	fine
Chengdu	5	12	rain
Chongqing	8	12	overcast
Fuzhou	10	13	overcast
Guangzhou	11	15	overcast
Guiyang	2	7	overcast
Haikou	16	17	rain
Hangzhou	3	8	cloudy
Harbin	-22	-12	fine
Hefei	0	7	cloudy
Nanjing	0	7	cloudy
Shanghai	3	7	overcast
Taipei	12	13	rain
Wuhan	0	8	fine
Hong Hong	13	18	cloudy
<b>WORLD</b>			
Moscow	-1	3	snow
Frankfurt	-1	7	overcast
Paris	1	13	cloudy
London	3	13	fog
New York	6	12	fine

**CROSSWORDS**

**ACROSS** 1- Skeptic's scoff; 5- Accumulation of fluids; 10- Discontinue; 14- Method; 15- Pick up; 16- Pasternak heroine; 17- Wings; 18- Atlas feature; 19- Actor Stoltz; 20- Dedicated; 22- Pig out; 23- Intense anger; 24- Rule, for short; 25- Class where you learn ser, estar, and haber; 29- Topmost; 33- Supermodel Cheryl; 34- Blind as \_\_\_; 36- Family portrait?; 37- Calendar abbr.; 38- Shut; 39- Barely beat; 40- Control; 42- Author Hunter; 43- Anwar's successor; 45- Molasses; 47- Enticed; 49- Up to, informally; 50- Caviar; 51- Arrogant; 54- Auction space; 60- It may be happy; 61- Caper; 62- Competent; 63- Quechua speaker; 64- Guide; 65- Some digits; 66- Satirist Mort; 67- Unfolds; 68- Socialite Maxwell;

**DOWN** 1- Apple variety; 2- String tie; 3- Dutch cheese, wrapped in red wax; 4- Abounding; 5- In groups; 6- Fender ding; 7- Alleviate; 8- TV horse; 9- Tiny toilet; 10- Dexterity; 11- Mountain lake; 12- Not a dup.; 13- Step; 21- Coloured part of the eye; 22- Panhandle; 24- Ceremonial act; 25- Maze word; 26- Scottish musician; 27- Lofty nest; 28- Cleave in two; 29- Lacks; 30- Director Lubitsch; 31- Paris divider; 32- Halfhearted; 35- Fur scarf; 38- Unit of an insurgency; 41- Chemical-free; 43- Med. care providers; 44- Run; 46- Heston's hero, with Loren: El \_\_\_; 48- Builds; 51- Greek letters; 52- Author Jaffe; 53- "That smarts!"; 54- Use scissors; 55- Salt tree; 56- Hero; 57- Ancient Greek coin; 58- Corrida cries; 59- Small plateau; 61- Mil. address;



**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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BLADE RUNNER

# DUBAI AGAIN PLANS FOR FLYING TAXI TAKEOFF, THIS TIME BY 2026

**D**UBAI again is planning for the takeoff of flying taxis in this futuristic city-state on the Arabian Peninsula, offering its firmest details yet yesterday for a pledged launch by 2026.

Since 2017, the commercial capital of the United Arab Emirates has offered promises to launch flying taxis in the city already home to the world's tallest building and other architectural wonders. A series of different types and companies have cycled through those promises as well, most timed to be included at Dubai's annual World Government Summit, which saw this year's edition begin yesterday.

Dubai's ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, announced the relaunched flying taxi program on Twitter Sunday. This time, Dubai highlighted the six-rotor electric flying taxi made by Joby Aviation of Santa Cruz, California, in the promotional video.

The inclusion of Joby Aviation,



A man experiences a driving simulator of a flying taxi at the Dubai Roads and Transportation Authority's stand during the World Government Summit in Dubai

rather than the Chinese-made EHang 184 and XPeng X2 or the German-made electric Volocopter all previously displayed in Dubai, wasn't explained by Emirati officials. Joby aircraft featured at a stand at the World Government Summit.

"We're excited about the opportunity and actively exploring the possibility," said Oliver

Walker-Jones, a spokesman for Joby Aviation.

Ahmed Bahrozian, an official in the emirate's Roads and Transport Authority, similarly told the state-owned Dubai Eye radio station yesterday that "it's early days" for the plan.

"We haven't yet signed with any partners yet," he said.

Another difference in this

year's promise on flying taxis is the release of specifics about the program. The city plans four "vertiports" by Dubai International Airport, the world's busiest for international travel, downtown Dubai, the manmade Palm Jumeirah archipelago and Dubai Marina. Those points will include two launching pads and four charging points for the flying taxis.

"We believe those are attractive areas with business hubs and tourist hubs that could generate considerable demand," Bahrozian said.

The pricing for the flying taxis "will be in the range of a limousine service in Dubai, maybe slightly higher," Bahrozian said. The RTA describes limo services rates as "at least 30% higher than taxi fares" in the city. Taxis have a minimum fare of around \$3.25 and charge \$0.50 a kilometer.

Another departure from earlier plans include the RTA planning to have piloted flying taxis at first,

rather than autonomous ones as previously discussed. Dubai officials described the taxi as having a pilot with four seats for passengers on board, which match Joby's electric flying taxi. However, Bahrozian said tests would continue with autonomous flying taxis as well.

The Joby prototype can fly over 240 kilometers (150 miles) before needing a charge — something which would put Abu Dhabi and other areas of the country within range. It takes off and lands vertically, while its rotors tilt forward in flight. It has a maximum speed of 320 kph (200 mph).

The video posted by Sheikh Mohammed's Twitter account also included the logo of London-based Skyports Infrastructure, which also refers to its support projects as "vertiports." The company already is testing its "vertiport" model outside of Paris and is working with Joby. Skyports did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Opening the skies to flying taxis would add to the "Blade Runner" skyline of Dubai, while also easing the real-world grind of daily traffic that's only worsening as its population booms to over 3.5 million people. **MDT/AP**

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FOOTBALL

# Champions League back with Messi, Mbappé doubt, legal drama

GRAHAM DUNBAR

**T**HE Champions League returns today to a very different European soccer scene than it was before a three-month midseason break.

In the interim, Lionel Messi won his first World Cup title. Kylian Mbappé almost won his second, then got injured. Early-season favorites for the European title fell into slumps at home.

Meanwhile, one standout team before the World Cup, Napoli, has marched on and aims for its first quarterfinal place in the competition's 68-year history.

Off the field, the Super League project that tried to effectively kill the Champions League met a serious legal setback, and English title holder Manchester City faces Premier League charges of financial wrongdoing that could one day stop the club entering future Champions Leagues.

It adds up to plenty of drama



even before soccer's most prized club competition resumes with a stellar game between Paris Saint-Germain and Bayern Munich.

A rematch of the 2020 final won by Bayern pairs two powers that helped stop the Super League in 2021 by refusing to join it. What it was not expected to have at Parc des Princes were the goalscorer and goalkeeper with the best records from the group stage.

Mbappé, who scored seven goals across five different Champions League games in the fall, was set to miss most of February with a thigh injury. He made a surprise return to training on Sunday.

Bayern goalkeeper Manuel Neuer's season is over because he broke a leg skiing on a vacation taken after Germany's quick exit from the World Cup.

The other game pairs AC Mi-

lan and Tottenham, two of the seven round-of-16 teams that are currently outside the Champions League qualifying places in their domestic leagues. Chelsea is another and visits Borussia Dortmund on Wednesday, when Club Brugge hosts Benfica.

Four more first-leg games are scheduled Feb. 21-22.

### MESSI QUEST

At age 35, Messi finally has a World Cup title for Argentina. Now back to the business of winning a fifth Champions League.

When Messi won his fourth title with Barcelona in 2015 Barack Obama was president, Britain was in the European Union and Jose Mourinho won a league title, at Chelsea.

Messi has not been to the final since and his first try with PSG ended in the round of 16 against Madrid. When he last faced Bayern it was an 8-2 rout over Barcelona in the single-leg quarterfinals of the

pandemic-hit 2020 edition.

Both PSG and Bayern have misfired since the World Cup. PSG was unbeaten entering 2023 then lost three in the league and is out of the French Cup. Bayern still leads the Bundesliga after restarting with three straight draws.

### DARK HORSES

Napoli and Benfica topped their groups in November — ahead of Liverpool and PSG, respectively — to be seeded in the draw and avoid teams like Madrid, Bayern and Man City. Napoli travels to Eintracht Frankfurt on Feb. 21, and Benfica plays Wednesday at Brugge.

Both are set up for domestic titles after strong returns from the World Cup break. Could an elusive Champions League title follow? Benfica has not been European champion since 1962, Napoli never got close.

However, Napoli mostly stayed out of January trading while Benfica sold Argentina midfielder Enzo Fernandez to Chelsea for a British record fee of about 120 million euros (\$128 million).

Benfica should have enough to eliminate Brugge, which fired coach Carl Hoefkens in December after poor domestic results despite overachieving in the Champions League. Brugge hired Scott Parker, whose previous game had been a 9-0 loss at Liverpool in August with Bournemouth. **MDT/AP**

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Dress Code: Black Tie/Tartan/Scottish Highland

Date : 24th February, 2023 (Friday)  
Venue : Artyzen Grand Lapa, Chinnery Ballroom  
Time : Welcome Drinks - 7pm, Dinner - 7.30pm  
Fee : MOP 800 for Members & Guests

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**OPINION**

**The Conversation**

Jonathan Kaplan, University of Texas



**WHY IS A LOVE POEM FULL OF SEX IN THE BIBLE?**

Many Americans have heard the expression “I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine” – in fact, a quick Google search turns up myriad websites offering wedding bands inscribed with the much-loved line. Search Etsy for Valentine’s Day gifts, and you’ll see jewelry, T-shirts and coffee mugs printed with the phrase. But perhaps not all of the quotation’s admirers know that its origins lie in a biblical text: the Song of Songs, which has created difficulties for readers for 2,000 years.

Also known as the Song of Solomon or Canticle of Canticles, the Song of Songs stands out in the Bible because of its extensive and candid sexual content. It is a work of sensual lyric poetry that portrays scenes of actual and imagined trysts between the poem’s female protagonist and her lover.

Graphic descriptions of both male and female bodies pervade the work and are certainly titillating, even bordering on pornographic. Sensual metaphors such as “grazing among the lilies” and “drinking ... from the juice of my pomegranates” suggest sexual practices that are anything but vanilla.

It’s not just the emphasis on sex that makes the text unusual. The Song of Songs is the only work in the Bible that focuses exclusively on human-to-human love, not human-to-divine – at least on the surface level of the poem.

Ancient Jews and Christians were troubled by the inclusion of such a graphic love poem in the biblical canon and came up with their own ways to remedy the dilemma.

The Bible includes other references to sex – including graphic depictions of sexual violence. And other books certainly contain depictions of human love, such as that of the patriarch Jacob, who labored for 14 years to win his wife Rachel in the Book of Genesis.

But when other biblical books talk about love and marriage, they primarily use this language to depict God’s relationship with people – specifically, the people of Israel, who have a special covenant with him according to the Torah. In contrast, the Song of Songs may possibly allude to Israel’s God only once, in chapter eight.

Yet ancient interpreters of the Song of Songs did not interpret this poetic work as a depiction of human-to-human love. In fact, while researching my book about early rabbinic interpretation of the Song of Songs, I noticed that no such interpretations – Jewish or Christian – survive from before the modern era.

Instead, the earlier commentators “reread” the Song of Songs exclusively as a portrayal of divine-to-human love, God’s relationship with a beloved individual or community.

In the modern period, even more understandings of the poem have emerged, including some about human-to-human love. For instance, feminist readings have highlighted the female character’s power, autonomy and sensuality. Conservative Christians, meanwhile, often approach the poem as an ideal expression of acceptable love between a husband and wife.

From the first few centuries up to today, these many meanings highlight readers’ creativity – and the evocative power of the Song of Songs’ poetic language.

[Abridged]

**PORTUGAL CHURCH SEX ABUSE STUDY FINDS 512 ALLEGED VICTIMS**

**THE BUZZ**

A committee that has been examining historic child sex abuse in the Portuguese Catholic Church said Monday that 512 alleged victims have come forward.

Senior Portuguese church officials had previously claimed that only a handful of cases had occurred.

The Independent Committee for the Study of Child Abuse in the Catholic Church, set up by Portuguese bishops just over a year ago, looked into alleged cases from 1950 onward. The panel produced its final report yesterday. Portuguese bishops are due to discuss the report next month.

The statute of limitations has expired on most of the alleged cases.

Only 25 allegations were passed to prosecutors, the panel said.

The report came four years after Pope Francis gathered church leaders from around the world at the Vatican to address the sex abuse crisis in the church. That meeting was held more than 30 years after the scandal first erupted in Ireland and Australia and 20 years after it hit the United States.

Bishops and other Catholic superiors in many parts of Europe at the time continued to deny that clergy sex abuse existed or insisted on giving little weight to the problem.

Pedro Strecht, a psychiatrist who headed the panel in Portugal, said it estimates the true number of victims during the period is at least 4,415.

AP PHOTO



**CARDI B BRINGS ENERGY AT PRE-SUPER BOWL CONCERT, JOINS CROWD**

**C**ARDI B teamed with her husband Offset onstage, embraced Serena Williams and later partook with a lively crowd during the rapper’s energetic pre-Super Bowl concert in suburban Phoenix.

The Grammy winner joyfully danced and performed her biggest jams from “Up” to “I Like It” at the Hall of Fame party Sunday [yesterday, Macau time]. She brought high energy into a laid-back nightclub atmosphere at the Gila River Resorts & Casino in Chandler, Arizona.

The crowd rose to their feet and pulled out their phones to capture Cardi

B’s show as they recited almost word-for-word all the lyrics during her 30-minute set. She kicked off her performance with “Money” as she pranced across the stage.

“How are we doing tonight?” she asked the enthusiastic concertgoers. “I need to take a shot... Do I look good? Yeah. Let’s get it poppin’.”

After Cardi B’s quick speech, Offset joined her onstage to perform their hit “Clout.” She amped the crowd while her husband rapped his verse before she returned the favor and finished the song.

Cardi B went on to per-

form her other hits such as “WAP,” “Finesse” and “Bodak Yellow,” her final song of the night. Afterward, she shook her hips then hugged Williams onstage before the rapper ventured offstage and marched with her security through a sea of audience members, which included comedian Tiffany Haddish, who cheered her on and took selfies and videos of her.

Earlier, Offset opened up for his wife, performing “Roc Flair Drip,” “Taste” and played a snippet of “Bad and Boujee” from his former group Migos. **MDT/AP**

**Pakistan** Cash-strapped and nuclear-armed Pakistan will impose new taxes of 170 billion rupees this month in a bid for massive bailout officials and analysts said Monday, even as they warned the new taxes could accelerate the country’s spiraling inflation. The dire outlook from economists and political analysts comes after the International Monetary Fund delayed the release of a crucial \$1.1 billion portion of a 2019 deal worth \$6 billion, on hold since December over Pakistan’s failure to meet the terms.

AP PHOTO



**Tech** Google will initiate a new campaign in Germany that aims to make people more resilient to the corrosive effects of online misinformation. The tech giant plans to release a series of short videos highlighting the techniques common to many misleading claims. The videos will appear as advertisements on platforms like Facebook, YouTube or TikTok in Germany. A similar campaign in India is also in the works. It’s an approach called prebunking, which involves teaching people how to spot false claims before they encounter them.

AP PHOTO



**Britain** has announced a security review after several unidentified objects were shot down in the skies over North America. Defense Secretary Ben Wallace said “the U.K. and her allies will review what these airspace intrusions mean for our security.” He said “this development is another sign of how the global threat picture is changing for the worse.”

AP PHOTO



**EU** The European Union’s executive branch has raised its economic growth forecast for the year, saying Europe will narrowly avoid a recession and has already passed its inflation peak as natural gas prices fall from astronomical highs. But the European Commissioner for Economy Paolo Gentiloni (pictured) warned yesterday that the high prices plaguing consumers will keep holding back the economy for months to come.

**THE DECISIVE MOMENT**

AP Photo/Francisco Seco



Survivors. Thousands who survived the earthquakes that struck Turkey and Syria are pondering what comes next, especially in freezing temperatures.