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"THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN' "

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DOXING MAY BE CONSIDERED CYBERBULLYING AND VIOLATORS MAY FACE CRIMINAL PROSECUTIONS: PERSONAL DATA PROTECTION OFFICE

NEW CONSTRUCTION HEALTH & SAFETY LAWS ALLOW TNR AS SAFETY OFFICERS

BEIJING PURGING 'WESTERN ERRONEOUS VIEWS' FROM LEGAL EDUCATION



AP PHOTO



Hong Kong will lift its mask mandate today, ending the city's last major restriction imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The city's chief executive, John Lee, said masks will no longer be required both outdoors and indoors, including on public transit, but some high-risk areas including hospitals and elderly homes can still require their use.

AP PHOTO



Pakistan A court yesterday issued an arrest warrant for former Prime Minister Imran Khan, as the cricket star-turned-politician called on his supporters to keep up protests amid a roiling political crisis. The court in the capital Islamabad that ordered the former premier's arrest said Khan had skipped a hearing on charges of selling state gifts and concealing his assets.

AP PHOTO



NATO membership for Finland and Sweden is "a top priority," the military alliance's chief Jens Stoltenberg said Tuesday, urging members Turkey and Hungary to urgently ratify the Nordic countries' accession. Stoltenberg told a news conference Helsinki with Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin in Helsinki that progress is being made on securing membership for the two countries, but didn't disclose details. "I am absolutely confident that both Finland and Sweden will become members of NATO," he added.

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HENGQIN INC.

RENATO MARQUES



SURVEY

ONLY 18% OF LOCALS OWN CRITICAL ILLNESS INSURANCE PLAN

HEALTH

ONLY 18% OF LOCAL RESPONDENTS OWN CRITICAL ILLNESS INSURANCE PLAN

LYNZY VALLES

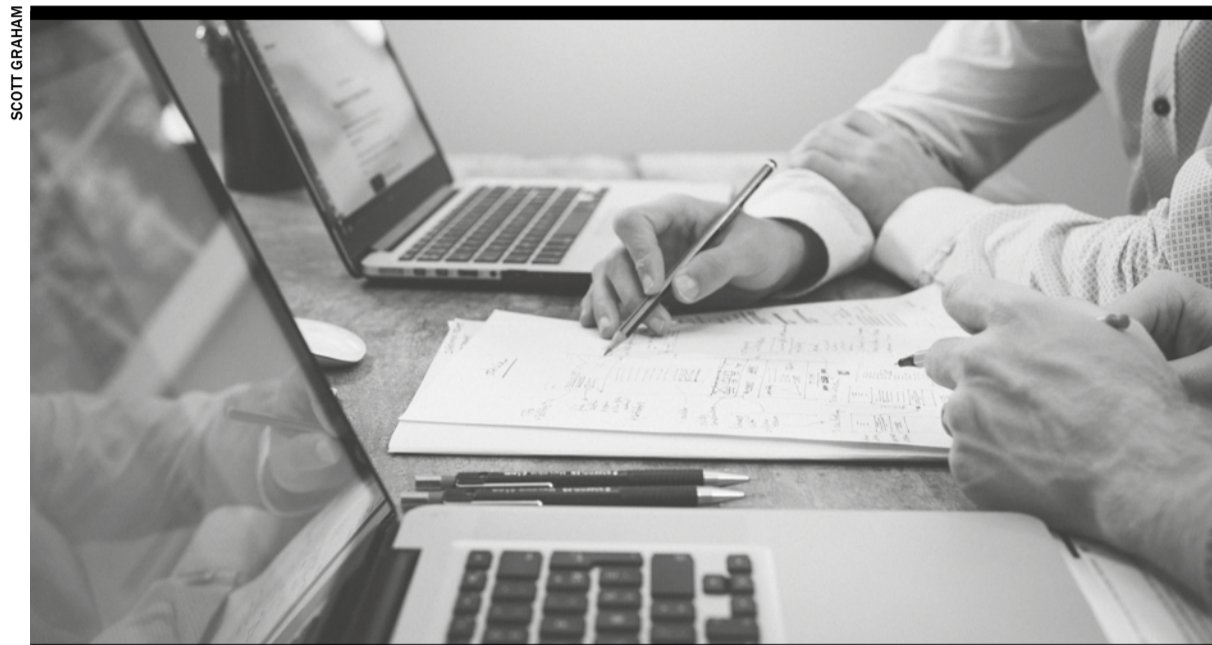
A recent survey has found that only 18% of Macau respondents have a critical illness insurance plan, which is much lower than in Hong Kong (53%) and mainland GBA cities (52%).

In case of a serious illness, 70% of Macau respondents said their family members would pay for medical expenses, compared to 28% in Hong Kong and 44% in mainland GBA cities.

According to the Manulife GBA Health Protection Survey, despite the differences, the high estimated cost of treatment highlights the size of the protection gap affecting consumers across the 11 cities in the GBA, which includes Hong Kong, Macau and nine cities in mainland China. Macau respondents (47%) and mainland GBA respondents (45%) are more confident about covering the cost compared to just one-in-eight (12%) people in Hong Kong.

People in Macau who are confident about their personal finances cite having personal insurance (38%), a stable job (37%), enough savings (32%) and being healthy (32%) as reasons for the confidence.

Meanwhile, the survey revealed that GBA residents are most worried about cancer as a critical illness. There is, however, a wide disparity in the anticipated



cost of treating critical illnesses across the GBA. Taking cancer as an example, Macau respondents expect to pay only around MOP468,000, or 15 months of their average personal income for the associated cost to treat cancer.

This is in stark contrast to the rest of the region, where in the mainland GBA cities, the estimate is as high as 51 months of the average monthly personal income (RMB698,000). In Hong Kong, respondents expect to spend around 35 months of their average personal income (HKD1.07million) in treating cancer.

"Concerns over ever-increa-

sing medical expenses combined with inadequate financial planning present a protection gap challenge for the GBA. While the majority of the Macau respondents say their family will be a main source of funding for critical illness treatment, less than half are actually confident about paying for medical costs," said Carrie Tong, Manulife's chief strategy officer for Hong Kong and Macau and Head of Macau Branch.

RESIDENTS MORE WORRIED OVER HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

They survey shows that in Macau, respondents are more

worried about high blood pressure (29%) than cancer (27%), with liver disease (23%) more of a concern than heart disease and stroke (both 19%).

In Hong Kong it is cancer (65%), stroke (41%), and heart disease (35%); mainland GBA city respondents are worried about cancer (42%), heart disease (27%), and high blood pressure (25%).

In case of a medical event, around half of people in the GBA will use emergency savings (Macau: 52%; Hong Kong: 47%; mainland GBA 52%). If a person unfortunately suffers from a critical illness, 97% of people in Macau expect a family member to be a

long-term caretaker compared to 79% in mainland GBA cities and 60% in Hong Kong.

28% OF LOCALS THINK THEY ARE OVERWEIGHT

Despite more than a quarter (28%) of people in Macau perceiving themselves to be overweight, 44% said they have good physical health compared to 46% in mainland GBA cities and only 9% in Hong Kong. In Macau, 39% said their health management action involved improving their diet, such as eating less salt and sugar. In addition, consumers in mainland GBA cities also say that maintaining good mental health (40%) is their main health goal, significantly higher than Macau (31%).

GROWING APPETITE FOR INSURANCE PROTECTION

There is a demand for critical illness protection among the population in the GBA, with people looking to do more to protect themselves, but they do not know where to start. Out of the respondents, people in Macau are the most eager (71%), followed by mainland GBA cities (69%) and then Hong Kong (62%). Many also expressed interest in buying new or additional health insurance if they can afford it. People in mainland GBA cities (85%) are the most interested, followed by Macau (80%) and then Hong Kong (65%).

Personal data office warns of possible criminality of doxing

DOXING may be considered cyberbullying and violators may face criminal prosecutions, the Personal Data Protection Office (GPDP) stressed in a statement yesterday.

Doxing uncovers personal data of a particular person or a group of people. The data is usually then published online and occasionally offline without the consent of the person or people to whom the data relates.

The office added that doxing is usually carried out

for cyberbullying purposes.

Such activities, according to the Office, may breach the Personal Data Protection Law and lead to administrative or criminal violations.

"The office has always attached great importance to related issues," the office noted in the statement, adding that as early as in 2011, it formulated the "Precautions for Publishing Personal Data on the Internet" for public reference.

"In recent years, the Office has dealt with many

cases involving doxing, punished the relevant offenders, and transferred some cases with suspected criminal grounds to the police for investigations," the office recapped.

Some doxing cases were triggered by money or transaction conflicts, as well as employment disputes. The office described doxing as an immoral and irrational act that appears trivial but in fact carries significant legal ramifications.

To support its statement, the office highlighted se-

veral cases where punishments had been handed down. In one case, the complainant's partially covered photo, name and date of birth, as well as full gender marker, current and past employers were published on an open group on a social media platform.

In the discussion string, the complainant was identified by some users and the full name was published.

After investigations, the office imposed a fine of MOP8,000 on the perpetrator. AL



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Cooperation Zone launches support measures for Macau companies

RENATO MARQUES

THE Executive Committee of the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin published a series of measures yesterday aimed at Macau companies to support their establishment in Hengqin.

The support measures aim to back the growth of Macau-funded enterprises in the Cooperation Zone by establishing a fund to benefit Macau players and lower the operational costs for these enterprises.

The measures apply to all Macau-funded enterprises whose place of business registration, tax registration, and place of statistics are located in the Cooperation Zone, and who have opened business deposit accounts in banks of the Cooperation Zone as main conditions.

The series of measures and funding include rent subsidies for office spaces and commercial properties as well as a commercial properties renovation subsidy.

The rent subsidies apply to companies with a lease agreement of no fewer than three years. This rent subsidy is based on a maximum of 70% of the evaluated rental and shall not exceed RMB70 per square meter per month. The subsidized area cannot exceed 15 square meters per capita, based on the number of employees at the company.

RENATO MARQUES



In relation to renovation works, there is also a ceiling of the equivalent to 70% of the renovation expenditure which cannot exceed RMB1,000 per square meter and a cap of a maximum of RMB1 million per enterprise. The renovation subsidy will be paid in two years with 50% of the subsidy amount paid each year.

Besides these subsidies, the Cooperation Zone will also grant cash rewards to particular types of companies, namely those that possess a "Macau Classic Brand" and who are settled in Hengqin. These companies will be granted a one-off settlement reward of RMB300,000 paid after at least one year since commencing operations in the Cooperation Zone.

Another type of reward is to be granted to "Macau Distinctive Shops" and enterprises selected by "Macau Ideas" who will be granted a one-off settlement reward of RMB150,000, also after at least one year of actual operation.

Special grants to local catering enterprises, residents, or Macau legal persons listed in the latest edition of the "Michelin Guide" are also being considered. Eligible entities will be those that opened their first restaurant in the Cooperation Zone with an area of no less than 200 square meters, and have had at least one year of actual operation. They will be rewarded with a one-off settlement reward of RMB500,000 yuan, RMB1 million, and RMB2 million, depending on

how many Michelin stars they possess (1, 2, or 3 stars, respectively).

Bib Gourmand restaurants can also be awarded a one-off settlement reward of RMB300,000 if their first restaurant in the Cooperation Zone has an area of at least 100 square meters and has had at least one year of actual operation. The same applies to those selected by the latest edition of Meituan's "Black Pearl Restaurant Guide."

Other subsidies and support measures will be also considered for Research & Development projects as well as Conferences & Exhibitions and Legal consultations.

The support measures are already in effect and have been since January 1, 2023, and will remain valid until December 31, 2025.

CROSS-BORDER VEHICLE TRAFFIC SURGES IN JANUARY

Macau's cross-border vehicle traffic in January grew by 45% year on year to 430,011 trips, the city's statistical service said yesterday. The latest report from the Statistics and Census Service (DSEC) showed that the gross weight of port containerized cargo in January went down by 20.2% year on year to 11,501 tonnes. Arriving and departing commercial flights totaled 1,687 trips in January, an uplift of 14.8% year-on-year, showed the report. The report also showed that the number of traffic accidents in January dipped by 2.5% year-on-year to 1,072, with two people killed and 327 people injured.

MERCHANDISE EXPORT DOWN 37%

Total merchandise export amounted to MOP899 million in January 2023, down by 37.2% year-on-year. Data from the Statistics and Census Service (DSEC) shows that value of re-exports (MOP810 million) fell by 34.3%, of which re-exports of Diamond & diamond jewellery and Watches declined by 83.1% and 63.8% respectively, while those of Articles for casino leapt by 735.3%. Meanwhile, total merchandise import went down by 24.7% year-on-year to MOP10.45 billion. Also, External merchandise trade totalled MOP11.35 billion in January 2023, down by 25.9% compared with MOP15.32 billion a year earlier.

IAM PLEDGES TO REDUCE OVERCROWDING OF ANIMAL SHELTERS

The Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) pledged to build more animal enclosures by means of modular construction, increase the shelter space and add ancillary facilities for veterinarian care, office and backup by reorganising the facilities and equipment of Coloane Municipal Kennel. After the facilities come into use, the overall shelter space for animals of the municipal kennels, including Macao Municipal Kennel, for dog and cat enclosures will be increased by about 45%. Currently, there are a total of 75 dog enclosures and 46 cat enclosures in Macau and Coloane Municipal Kennels. Due to limited space, a total of 135 dogs and 76 cats are sheltered in Municipal Kennels currently.

PUBLIC WORKS

Horta e Mitra Market vendors request subsidies during revamp

ANTHONY LAM

AS Horta e Mitra Market will see its renovation starting this month, all of its vendors will temporarily suspend operations but some would like to see government subsidies, local media reports.

The Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM) held a press conference earlier this week and announced that the market would be suspended effective yesterday. Renovations will occur from Mar. 3 to the end of the year, according to IAM estimates. The renovation is budgeted at MOP11



million.

During this period, trading for all vendors will be suspended and no provisional market will be established.

A local fish vendor who has operated in the market for 35 years expressed his happiness at the renovations commencing to local media outlet All About

Macau. He considered the market's current environment to be less satisfactory when compared to other markets.

In addition, the vendor hopes that the government will consider issuing subsidies to vendors, even at subsistence index level. "MOP100 a day equates to about MOP3,000 per month," the vendor said, suggesting that it would not be a heavy burden on public finances.

Before its suspension, the market was home to 13 vending stalls. After the renovation, the number of stalls will be in-

creased to 18.

In contrast to their indoor counterparts, outdoor vendors located on the periphery of the square-shaped market will be allowed to operate during the early phases of the renovation project. Subsequent meetings will be held for negotiations as to which vendors will be given a spot, the IAM added.

Meanwhile, regular shoppers will inevitably find it more inconvenient once the market commences renovation. Additionally, some shoppers find wet markets more convenient: "I could pay outstanding amounts days later if I didn't have enough cash," a shopper said.

On the decision not to establish a provisional market, an IAM official said that it was the consensus of all vendors to take a break.

NEW CONSTRUCTION HEALTH & SAFETY LAWS ALLOW TNR AS SAFETY OFFICERS

RENATO MARQUES

THE new laws that regulate the health and safety of workers in construction sites have passed the Legislative Assembly (AL).

Although all lawmakers have approved the law in its final reading, some questions were raised about the fact that it allows non-resident workers (TNR) to work as construction safety officers.

The matter was raised by lawmaker Ron Lam and later justified by the members of the government as a necessary measure with a non-permanent purpose.

"Employment of non-residents as safety officers is considered exceptional and will be subject to a rigorous approval process," the Secretary for Economy and Finance, Lei Wai Nong said, adding that it will only happen when there are no local workers to fill the role.

The director of the Labour Affairs Bureau (DSAL), Wong Chi Hong, added that the measure addresses the lack of safety officers at



RENATO MARQUES

construction sites, noting that the safety of workers and the workplace is more important than protecting local jobs.

The director of DSAL also noted during the discussion that the number of accidents in construction sites in Macau has been dropping, as well as deaths (8 in 2021 compared to 4 in 2022) caused by accidents. Also in decline were the

number of accidents causing permanent or long-term disabilities to workers, which sharply declined from 42 in 2021 to 16 cases last year.

For Wong, safety officers are also responsible for the decrease in non-compliance with the construction sites' safety rules, which decreased from nine cases in 2021 to one in 2022.

NEW CIVIL SERVANTS' REGIME ADDS FLEXIBILITY, EYEING HENGQIN

RENATO MARQUES

THE new regime established by the statute of civil servants passed its final reading at the Legislative Assembly (AL).

The proposal to amend the current regime was approved unanimously with 32 votes in favor, adding more flexibility for the government to transfer workers between services and deploy them to the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin.

During the debate over the bill, lawmakers expressed concerns that the new regime may be misused by department heads or other leadership posts to forcibly transfer staff members that they do not like to different service lines as a form of punishment.

The Secretary for Administration and Justice, André Cheong, remarked that although the regime allows civil

servants to be transferred without their consent to different services based on need, the system "should not be used to demote or punish civil servants," adding that they can submit a report, should they believe this is the case.

Nonetheless, some lawmakers continued to express concerns over the lack of an independent mechanism or body to investigate and process complaints from civil servants, saying that they can only resort to appeals to their superiors in cases of disagreement with colleagues of the same rank, but never with those of higher rank.

During the discussion of the several articles of the bill, Cheong said that the flexibility mechanism is also being considered as a form of training, namely for some less experienced department heads who can benefit from working in a different department to gain more experience.

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National Security Bill wiretapping provision differs from existing provisions

GOVERNMENT officials assured a parliamentary committee yesterday that wiretapping provisions in the National Security Amendment Bill are different from existing ones.

The First Standing Committee of the parliament continued studying the Bill with officials sitting in and answering lawmakers' questions.

After the meeting, Ella Lei, president of the committee, told a press conference about the matter. Last year, the Communication Interception and Protection Legal System was passed at the parliament. It has provisions that deal with wiretapping.

Despite this, proposals on wiretapping were also included in the Bill. This



prompted questions from lawmakers at the meeting about the necessity of putting the same provisions in two different laws or bills.

In response, Secretary for Security Wong Sio Chak emphasized that the provision and the proposal are different in both nature and aim. Lei cited him as explaining that the wiretapping-related proposals in the Bill are of a preventive nature. In contrast, relevant provisions in the law passed last year are of a judicial nature

and are part of the procedure of obtaining evidence.

The committee was assured that both will be subject to approval by competent judges. A rigid supervision system will also be adopted. When illegal interception and violation of regulations are discovered, punishments will be imposed.

Lei cited the official as saying that the purpose of this bill is to obtain security intelligence. Generally, evidence obtained by wiretapping will not be eligible for

use in criminal procedures. Wiretapped information will be transferred to the judiciary for handling if connections with a national security breach is discovered. In contrast, information obtained from wiretapping that has no connection with a national security breach but can prove other violations will be handled in accordance with the law passed last year.

There are also procedural differences. Wiretapping related to national security will see procedures triggered by criminal police officers under the preliminary approval of the Secretary for Security. These documents and approval will then be subject to further approval by competent judges. The Public Prosecutions Office will also be copied on the requests for approval.

CRIME

WOMAN LOSES 100K IN INVESTMENT SCAM

A female victim reported to the Judiciary Police (PJ) on Feb. 24 that she had lost 100,000 Chinese yuan in an alleged investment trap, the police recently disclosed.

According to the disclosed part of her testimony provided to the police, on Feb. 2, she came across a man on a chat app. The man lured the woman into making investments by telling her that he had a formula. He claimed that, provided the woman followed the formula, her investments would yield guaranteed profits.

Believing the man, on Feb. 21, the woman downloaded a cell phone app for securities investments – as instructed by the man – and started her investment journey. On this night, she transferred the sum of 100,000 yuan from her mainland bank account to the app's operator.

The man then taught

her how to buy and sell securities using the app. The app showed that her investments had yielded a profit of 70,000 yuan. When she wanted to quit and withdraw the money, she was met with an error message.

Contacting the so-called customer service section, she was told that her money could only be withdrawn at a later date due to technical issues. She then made several additional attempts but still could not withdraw her money.

She tried to contact the customer service section again but her requests went unanswered, and the man could not be reached. The app was also suspended.

Only then did she suspected she had been scammed. She reached out to the police and requested the suspects be held accountable for her loss. **AL**

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CULTURE

BEIJING PURGING 'WESTERN ERRONEOUS VIEWS' FROM LEGAL EDUCATION

CHINA has ordered closer adherence to the dictates of the ruling Communist Party and leader Xi Jinping in legal education, demanding that schools "oppose and resist Western erroneous views" such as constitutional government, separation of powers, and judicial independence.

The order was dated Sunday, a week before China's parliament begins its annual session and reinforces the leading role on ideology assumed by Xi, who is named no less than 25 times in the document. Already China's most powerful leader in decades, Xi was granted a third five-year term as party leader last year and has removed term limits on the presidency.

Similar directives have been issued in past, with students encouraged to report on professors who speak positively about Western concepts of governance.

Despite the intertwining of the Chinese and global economies, Xi has sought to purge liberal Western concepts from the education system, ordered that foreign religions be "sinicized" in order to operate in China. He has also attempted, with limited success, to reorganize popular culture along more conservative lines, going so far as to ban "effeminate" men from the state broadcaster.



Xi Jinping delivers a speech for a Spring Festival reception the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, last January

The legal profession has been a particular target, and in the early hours of July 9, 2015, three years into Xi's first term as party general secretary, a series of raids nationwide resulted in the detention of some 300 human rights lawyers and associated activists. Under such relentless pressure, activist lawyers have been intimidated into silence, effectively preventing the emergence of dissenting voices and public intellectuals independent of the party.

Such approaches are in line with Xi's more muscular foreign policy that seeks to challenge and possibly supplant the American-

led international order that advocates for multiparty democracy, civil society and human rights.

The directive from the party's General Office said teachers and students of law and legal theory workers must be guided to have a "clear-cut position and take a firm stance in the face of issues of principle and major issues of right and wrong." The General Office circulates information within the 96 million-member party, including drafting directives and memos.

In a section titled "Adhere to the Correct Political Direction," the directive says teachers and students must "comprehensively

implement the party's education policy, insist on educating people for the party and the country, and focus on cultivating builders and successors of the cause of socialist rule of law."

"Oppose and resist Western erroneous views such as 'constitutional government,' 'separation of three powers,' and 'independence of the judiciary,' it says.

While China's constitution pays lip service to ideas such as freedom of speech and religious observation, it places the interests of the party above all. Past attempts at promoting even grassroots democracy at the village

level have sputtered in the face of the party's overwhelming power and the authorities' willingness to use force and coercion to achieve their desired outcomes.

Apart from a tiny and beleaguered dissident community, the Chinese public has been largely willing to accept total party control in return for consistent improvements in quality of life. That arrangement has at times been challenged, however, amid a drastically slowing economy, a crisis in local government finances and heavy handed enforcement of COVID-19 containment measures that have prompted rare public protests.

Criticism of the party and government policies is much more lively online, despite censorship and the threat of punishment for those who create and disseminate them.

The annual session of the National People's Congress, comprised of 2,977 handpicked members, opens Sunday with an annual report on the work of government presented by outgoing Premier Li Keqiang.

The chairman of the body is also due to issue a report, which in past years has also contained pledges to eschew Western political government such as separation of powers and an independent judiciary. **MDT/AP**

DIPLOMACY

Belarus leader and Putin ally Lukashenko on China visit

BELARUSIAN President Alexander Lukashenko, a close ally of Russian leader Vladimir Putin, is due in Beijing to begin a three-day state visit this week as geopolitical tensions rise over Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

China says the visit is an "opportunity to promote the further development of all-around cooperation between the two countries," but there have been growing concerns that China is considering providing military assistance to Russia, something United States officials say would bring serious consequences.

China has called the U.S. allegations a smear campaign, saying it is committed to promoting peace talks and accusing Washington and its allies of fueling the conflict by providing



Brothers in arms: Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko

Ukraine with defensive weapons.

"The U.S. has no right to point fingers at China-Russia relations. We will by no means accept the U.S. pressure and coercion," Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said Monday at a daily briefing.

Beijing claims to maintain a neutral stance in the year-old war, but has also said it has a "no-limi-

ts friendship" with Russia and has refused to criticize Moscow's invasion, or even call it that. It has accused the U.S. and NATO of provoking the conflict and condemned sanctions leveled against Russia and entities seen as aiding its military effort.

Last week, those sanctions were expanded to include a Chinese company known as Spacety China,

which has supplied satellite imagery of Ukraine to affiliates of Wagner Group, a private Russian military contractor owned by a close associate of President Vladimir Putin. A Luxembourg-based subsidiary of Spacety China was also targeted.

Belarus has strongly backed Moscow and allowed its territory to be used as a staging ground for the initial invasion of Ukraine a year ago. Belarus continues to host Russian troops, warplanes and other weapons.

China has long retained close ties with Lukashenko, Belarus' only president since the position was created in 1994. Lukashenko crushed 2020 protests over his disputed reelection in a vote that the opposition and Western countries regard as fraudulent.

Despite its brutality, Lukashenko's suppression does not appear to have ended all opposition activity.

On Sunday, Belarusian guerrillas attacked a military air base that hosts Russian warplanes outside Belarusia's capital, Minsk, according to activists.

Belarusian opposition organization BYPOL, in an online messaging app channel run by the activists, said an A-50 early warning and control aircraft was seriously damaged in the attack at the Machulishchy base near Minsk. The activists provided no evidence to support the claims, which couldn't be independently verified. Belarusian and Russian officials made no comment, but Lukashenko urged top military and security officials Monday to tighten dis-

cipline.

Also Monday, prosecutors demanded 19-year prison sentences for exiled opposition leaders Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Pavel Latushka, as well as fines of \$15,000 and \$10,000 respectively, amid a continued crackdown on dissent in the ex-Soviet republic.

Tsikhanouskaya, Latushka and three other opposition figures are being tried in absentia in Minsk on charges of conspiring to overthrow the government, creating and leading an extremist group, inciting hatred and harming national security. The prosecution also sought 12-year sentences for Maryya Maroz, Volha Kavalkova and Siarhei Dylevski. All five left Belarus following the unprecedented mass protests in 2020. **MDT/AP**

PHILIPPINES

Marcos Jr. urges military to focus on South China Sea

JIM GOMEZ, MANILA

THE Philippine president said the main mission of his country's military has changed to ensure the protection of its territory as disputes with China and U.S.-China rivalry intensify.

President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. stressed the urgency of shifting the military's focus to external defense in a speech before troops earlier this week. He spoke two weeks after summoning China's ambassador to protest the use of a military-grade laser by the Chinese coast guard that briefly blinded some of the crew of a Philippine patrol vessel in the South China Sea.

The Philippines condemned the Feb. 6. incident in one of the more than 200 diplomatic protests it has filed against Beijing's increasingly aggressive actions in the disputed waterway since last year.

China has accused the Philippines of intruding into its territory and said its coast guard used a harmless laser to track the Philippine vessel. China claims the South China Sea virtually in its entirety.



Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., left, walks beside honor guards during his visit at Brigadier General Benito N. Ebuena Airbase in Lapu-Lapu City, Cebu province

"I'm saying that your mission in the AFP has changed," Marcos told the troops, referring to the Armed Forces of the Philippines. "For many, many years, we were able to maintain that peace and maintain that understanding with all of our neighbors. Now things have begun to change and we must adjust accordingly."

He said that the country's boundaries were being put into question, "and there are many things that are happening so the air force has a very big mission to fully secure the Philippines." He also cited "the intensification of the competition between the superpowers."

Marcos did not offer specifics nor mentioned China in his spee-

ch in central Cebu province, but underscored that Philippine foreign policy remains committed to peace.

Despite being a relatively small country, "we still have to fight for the rights of every Filipino because the Philippines is a sovereign nation and the Philippines has a functioning gover-

ment," he said.

After decades of combating Muslim and communist insurgencies, the military has begun to focus on defending the country's sea borders. It has launched efforts to modernize in a program that has faced delays and financial constraints.

Many of the weapons and equipment have been aimed to improve its air and sea patrols to guard the archipelago's vast coastline and build a minimal deterrence.

Under a 2014 defense pact with the United States, Marcos recently approved a wider U.S. military presence in the Philippines by allowing rotating batches of American forces to stay in four more Philippine military camps. That's a sharp turnaround from his predecessor Rodrigo Duterte, who feared that American military footprint could offend Beijing.

China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei have been locked in an increasingly tense territorial standoff in the South China Sea, where U.S. Navy ships and fighter jets have carried out patrols to promote freedom of movement, challenge Beijing's expansive claims and reassure allies like the Philippines.

The disputes have intensified after China turned seven disputed reefs into missile-protected island bases to bolster its claims. The disputed waters have been regarded as a possible Asian flashpoint and a delicate front in the U.S.-China rivalry in the region. **MDT/AP**

NORTH KOREA

Kim calls for unity to boost grain production

KOREAN ruler Kim Jong Un called for stronger public solidarity behind his leadership to increase the country's grain production significantly, state media reported yesterday, amid outside worries about the country's worsened food insecurity.

Foreign experts say North Korea is experiencing a serious shortfall of food in the aftermath of COVID-19 border restrictions and a reported push for greater state control over grain supply. The experts say they've seen no signs of mass deaths or famine due to the shortfall.

During a ruling Workers' Party meeting on Monday, Kim expressed his government's determination "to bring about a revolutionary turn in the agricultural production without fail," according to the official Ko-



rean Central News Agency. "Nothing is impossible as long as the strong leadership system is established in the whole party and there is the united might of all the people," Kim was quoted as saying.

KCNA didn't elaborate on whether Kim presented any specific steps to boost grain production. Many observers say meaning-

ful steps to produce more grain would require more purchases of fertilizer, pesticides and agricultural machinery, as North Korea devotes much of its scarce resources to advance its nuclear weapons program.

North Korea's chronic food shortage has likely deteriorated due to COVID-19 restrictions that choked off its external

trade, persistent U.S.-led sanctions and its own mismanagement.

According to South Korean assessments, North Korea's grain production last year was estimated at 4.5 million tons. In the previous decade, its annual production was an estimated 4.4 million to 4.8 million tons. South Korea's spy agency has said Nor-

th Korea needs 5.5 million tons of grain to feed its 25 million people each year.

In past years, unofficial grain purchases from China offset about half the gap, but pandemic-caused curbs on border traffic has likely cut those transactions. Further worsening the situation was a decline in people's earnings and authorities' unsuccessful efforts to supply grain via state-run facilities while restricting private dealing at markets, according to Kwon Tae-jin, a senior economist at the private GS&J Institute in South Korea.

Most analysts say North Korea's current food shortage is nowhere near the extremes of the 1990s, when hundreds of thousands of people died in a famine. They say the meeting of the party's Central Committee was in part likely convened

to promote Kim's image as a leader caring about his people at a time when he's locked in confrontations with the United States over his nuclear program.

The plenary session, which opened Sunday, was expected to last at least another day.

KCNA cited Kim as saying in Monday's session that the main purpose of the conference was to find immediate ways to reach this year's grain production goal and scientifically feasible long-term objectives to radically increase agricultural production within a few years. Other senior officials analyzed unspecified shortcomings in past rural development projects and proposed how to fix them, according to KCNA.

Boosting grain production is one of the 12 economic objectives North Korea's ruling party adopted in an earlier party meeting in December. State media said recently that grain production must be increased at all costs. **MDT/AP**

USA

Coronavirus origins still a mystery three years into pandemic

LAURA UNGAR & MARY CLARE JALONICK, WASHINGTON

A crucial question has eluded governments and health agencies around the world since the COVID-19 pandemic began: Did the virus originate in animals or leak from a Chinese lab?

Now, the U.S. Department of Energy has assessed with “low confidence” in that it began with a lab leak, according to a person familiar with the report who wasn’t authorized to discuss it. The report has not been made public.

But others in the U.S. intelligence community disagree.

“There is not a consensus right now in the U.S. government about exactly how COVID started,” John Kirby, the spokesman for the National Security Council, said Monday. “There is just not an intelligence community consensus.”

The DOE’s conclusion was first reported over the weekend in the Wall Street Journal, which said the classified report was based on new intelligence and noted in an update to a 2021 document. The DOE oversees a national network of labs.

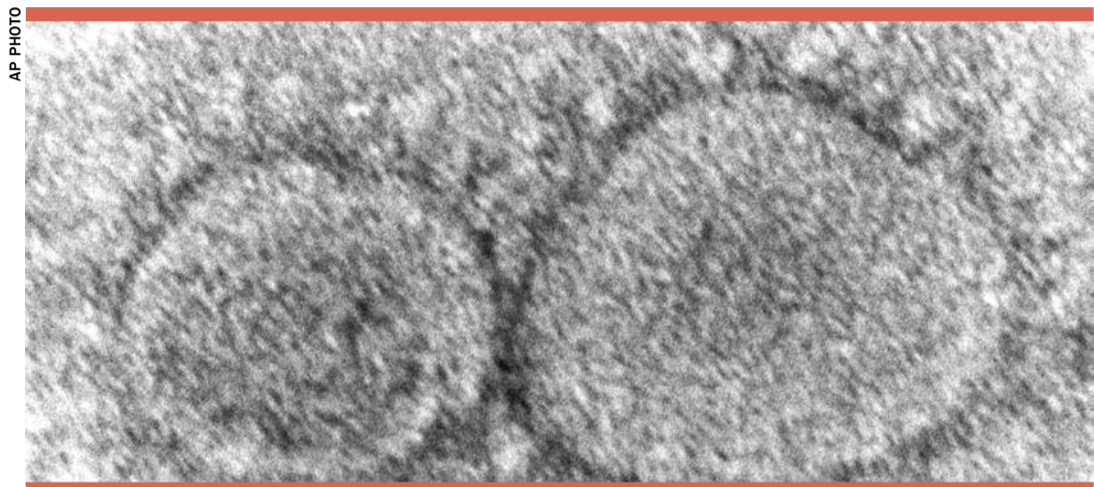
White House officials yesterday [Macau time] declined to confirm press reports about the assessment.

In 2021, officials released an intelligence report summary that said four members of the U.S. intelligence community believed with low confidence that the virus was first transmitted from an animal to a human, and a fifth believed with moderate confidence that the first human infection was linked to a lab.

While some scientists are open to the lab-leak theory, others continue to believe the virus came from animals, mutated, and jumped into people — as has happened in the past with viruses. Experts say the true origin of the pandemic may not be known for many years — if ever.

CALLS FOR MORE INVESTIGATION

The U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence declined to comment on



the report. All 18 offices of the U.S. intelligence community had access to the information the DOE used in reaching its assessment.

Alina Chan, a molecular biologist at the Broad Institute of Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard, said she isn’t sure what new intelligence the agencies had, but “it’s reasonable to infer” it relates to activities at the Wuhan Institute of Virology in China. She said a 2018 research proposal co-authored by scientists there and their U.S. collaborators “essentially described a blueprint for COVID-like viruses.”

“Less than two years later, such a virus was causing an outbreak in the city,” she said.

The Wuhan institute had been studying coronaviruses for years, in part because of widespread concerns — tracing back to SARS — that coronaviruses could be the source of the next pandemic.

No intelligence agency has said they believe the coronavirus that caused COVID-19 was released intentionally. The unclassified 2021 summary was clear on this point, saying: “We judge the virus was not developed as a biological weapon.”

“Lab accidents happen at a surprising frequency. A lot of people don’t really hear about lab accidents because they’re not talked about publicly,” said Chan, who co-authored a book about the search for COVID-19 origins. Such accidents “underscore a need to make work with highly dangerous pathogens more transparent and more accountable.”

Last year, the World Health Organization recommended a deeper probe into a

possible lab accident. Chan said she hopes the latest report sparks more investigation in the United States.

China has called the suggestion that COVID-19 came from a Chinese laboratory “baseless.”

SUPPORT FOR ANIMAL THEORY

Many scientists believe the animal-to-human theory of the coronavirus remains much more plausible. They theorize it emerged in the wild and jumped from bats to humans, either directly or through another animal.

In a 2021 research paper in the journal Cell, scientists said the COVID-19 virus is the ninth documented coronavirus to infect humans — and all the previous ones originated in animals.

Two studies, published last year by the journal Science, bolstered the animal origin theory. That research found that the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan was likely the early epicenter. Scientists concluded that the virus likely spilled from animals into people two separate times.

“The scientific literature contains essentially nothing but original research articles that support a natural origin of this virus pandemic,” said Michael Worobey, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Arizona who has extensively studied COVID-19’s origins.

He said the fact that others in the intelligence community looked at the same information as the DOE and “it apparently didn’t move the needle speaks volumes.” He said he takes such intelligence assessments with a grain of salt because he doesn’t think the people making

them “have the scientific expertise ... to really understand the most important evidence that they need to understand.”

The U.S. should be more transparent and release the new intelligence that apparently swayed the DOE, Worobey said.

REACTION TO THE REPORT

The DOE conclusion comes to light as House Republicans have been using their new majority power to investigate all aspects of the pandemic, including the origin, as well as what they contend were officials’ efforts to conceal the fact that it leaked from a lab in Wuhan. Earlier this month, Republicans sent letters to Dr. Anthony Fauci, National Intelligence Director Avril Haines, Health Secretary Xavier Becerra and others as part of their investigative efforts.

The now retired Fauci, who served as the country’s top infectious disease expert under both Republican and Democratic presidents, has called the GOP criticism nonsense.

Rep. Mike McCaul, R-Texas, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, has asked the Biden administration to provide Congress with “a full and thorough” briefing on the report and the evidence behind it.

Kirby, the National Security Council spokesman, emphasized that President Joe Biden believes it’s important to know what happened “so we can better prevent future pandemics” but that such research “must be done in a safe and secure manner and as transparent as possible to the rest of the world.” MDT/AP

this day in history

1966 BRITAIN TO GO
DECIMAL IN 1971



The Chancellor of the Exchequer, James Callaghan, has confirmed the “historic and momentous” decision to change over to decimal coinage.

It was just one of a number of proposals announced in his “little Budget” statement in the Commons. Other proposals included a new gambling tax - the proceeds from which will be used to fund cheaper mortgages for the less well off.

Loud cheers greeted Mr Callaghan’s announcement of the switch to decimal currency.

He said: “It is the government’s conclusion, shared I know by large sections of industry, commerce, science and banking, that the change to a decimal coinage will bring considerable benefit to the economy at large.”

Preparations for the change-over will begin at once, with the introduction of a Decimal Currency Bill. One of its functions will be to establish a new Decimal Currency Board to oversee the switch which will take place in February 1971.

There were more cheers as Mr Callaghan confirmed the pound would remain the major unit of currency. It will be divided into 100 units, to be called either cents or new pennies.

Preliminary estimates suggest the cost of switching to decimal coinage may be as much as £120m. However, Mr Callaghan said he hoped the long change-over period may mean the total cost was lower than this.

Companies obliged to invest in new equipment will not be compensated, but they will be entitled to tax relief.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

The United States pioneered decimal coinage in 1786 with one dollar worth 100 cents. At one time, the British system of pounds, shillings and pence was a major currency in the world. Many former Commonwealth countries switched to decimal once they gained independence. On 15 February 1971, otherwise known as “D Day” for Decimal Day, the United Kingdom adopted a decimal currency. This replaced the £.s.d. - pound shilling and pence system - in which there were 20 shillings in each pound and 12 pence in each shilling. The existence of 240 pence in each pound was a legacy from Anglo-Saxon times when a Roman pound in weight of silver was divided into 240 silver pennies. Plans to introduce a decimal currency in the UK had been over delayed over disagreement about whether to retain the pound or replace it with a smaller unit as South Africa, Australia and New Zealand had done.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS

ARIES
Mar. 21-Apr. 19
Don't lend to people who have given you negative vibes. Get some sound advice and help setting up a workable budget. Property investments will payoff.

TAURUS
Apr. 20-May. 20
Today is not the day to try to come people by giving them ultimatums. You will be tempted to shop till you drop. You will have a tendency to put on pounds.

GEMINI
May. 21-Jun. 21
Your charm and generosity will bring new friends and romantic opportunities. Luck is with you, regardless of the financial venture.

CANCER
Jun. 22-Jul. 22
You are best to avoid confrontations. Do not invest in joint ventures. Relatives may not be telling you the whole truth about a family situation.

LEO
Jul. 23-Aug. 22
You may need to lend an ear to an old friend. Your emotional attitude with respect to your status and direction in society may be unrealistic. Get on with business.

VIRGO
Aug. 23-Sep. 22
If you can work at home, do so. Minor accidents may occur if you don't concentrate on what you're doing. Older family members will make demands on your time.

LIBRA
Sep. 23-Oct. 22
You'll find travel or involvement in large groups gratifying. Try to avoid serious discussions with loved ones. Rely on yourself and you will look good to superiors. Social events will be rewarding.

SCORPIO
Oct. 23-Nov. 21
You must strive to get the most important projects completed properly, rather than doling everything in a half baked way. Changes regarding family members will set you off.

SAGITTARIUS
Nov. 22-Dec. 21
Your accomplishments could exceed your expectations if you mix a little business with pleasure. Take work home but be sure to spend some time with your mate.

CAPRICORN
Dec. 22-Jan. 19
Proceed with caution if operating equipment or vehicles. Attend seminars that will bring you in contact with the right people. Don't be disappointed if you don't get your way emotionally.

AQUARIUS
Jan. 20-Feb. 18
Travel could bring you the adventure and excitement you require. You will have a greater involvement in groups; however, they may not be to your advantage.

PISCES
Feb. 19-Mar. 20
Make plans that will take you to exotic destinations. Family get-togethers will be interesting. Try to stay calm and do the best you can.

The Born Loser by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

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

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

WEATHER

| | MIN | MAX | CONDITION |
|--------------|-----|-----|-----------|
| CHINA | | | |
| Beijing | -1 | 12 | fine |
| Changchun | -6 | 1 | cloudy |
| Chengdu | 11 | 18 | fine |
| Chongqing | 11 | 14 | rain |
| Fuzhou | 12 | 25 | cloudy |
| Guangzhou | 11 | 25 | fine |
| Guiyang | 8 | 10 | rain |
| Haikou | 18 | 26 | cloudy |
| Hangzhou | 7 | 17 | rain |
| Harbin | -8 | 1 | snow |
| Hefei | 4 | 18 | overcast |
| Nanjing | 7 | 18 | cloudy |
| Shanghai | 8 | 16 | cloudy |
| Taipei | 12 | 18 | cloudy |
| Wuhan | 7 | 18 | cloudy |
| Hong Kong | 18 | 22 | fine |
| WORLD | | | |
| Moscow | -7 | -3 | cloudy |
| Frankfurt | -1 | 8 | overcast |
| Paris | -2 | 9 | cloudy |
| London | 2 | 8 | cloudy |
| New York | 6 | 7 | overcast |

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Words of resignation; 6- Break; 10- Med school subj.; 14- Chew vigorously; 15- Vogue rival; 16- Lab fluids; 17- One in a cab, say; 18- ___ out a living (barely got by); 19- Jury member; 20- Hot time in Paris; 21- Assisted; 23- Conceals; 24- Out of practice; 26- Fable finale; 27- Actress Mason; 29- Designer Geoffrey; 31- Some nest eggs; 32- Got along; 33- Wish undone; 36- Make urban; 40- Compass pt.; 41- Suckle; 42- Devil's doing; 43- Fungal infection; 44- Religious dissent; 46- Running wild; 48- Abbreviated time off; 49- First American to orbit Earth; 50- Intertwine; 52- Actor Erwin; 55- Fasteners; 56- Not a dup.; 57- Fool; 59- Entr___; 60- Peseta replacement; 61- Training group; 62- Authenticating mark; 63- Antlered animal; 64- Paradises;

DOWN 1- Hungary's Nagy; 2- Pack it in; 3- Underestimate; 4- Bump off; 5- Flog; 6- Like marshes; 7- Actress Sommer; 8- Dog-powered snow vehicle; 9- Abbreviation of the name Edward; 10- Have high hopes; 11- I ___ vacation!; 12- Staggering; 13- Swabbies; 22- Give ___ rest; 23- Accord maker; 25- The Beatles' "Back in the ___"; 26- Run into; 27- Silent performer; 28- Ancient Athens's Temple of ___; 29- Model airplane wood; 30- Fort ___ captured by U.S. forces in 1814; 32- Golfer's "watch out!"; 33- Bank of a waterway; 34- Israeli weapons; 35- Slippery; 37- Pungent bulb; 38- Football kick; 39- Square; 43- Showy pretense; 44- Suffers from; 45- Tempt; 46- Wonderland girl; 47- Oscar de la ___; 48- Strictness; 49- Transcript figs.; 50- Test choice; 51- Metal filament; 53- Undecided; 54- Western Native Americans; 56- Brit. lexicon; 58- June honoree;



Crossword puzzles provided by BestCrosswords.com

USEFUL TELEPHONE NUMBERS

- Emergency calls 999
- Fire department 28 572 222
- PJ (Open line) 993
- PJ (Picket) 28 557 775
- PSP 28 573 333
- Customs 28 559 944
- S. J. Hospital 28 313 731
- Kiang Wu Hospital 28 371 333
- Commission Against Corruption (CCAC) 28326 300
- IAM 28 387 333
- Tourism 28 333 000
- Airport 59 888 88
- Taxi 28 939 939 / 2828 3283
- Water Supply - Report 2822 0088
- Telephone - Report 1000
- Electricity - Report 28 339 922
- Macau Daily Times 28 716 081



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HKD 29,800/mth 3 beds 3 bath

Manhattan
HKD 17,500/mth 3 bed 2 bath

AD

SCIENCE

FOR MAN BEHIND GENE-EDITED BABIES, A ROCKY RETURN TO SCIENCE

LAURA UNGAR

FIVE years ago, scientist He Jiankui shocked his peers and the world with claims that he created the first genetically edited babies. Now, after serving three years in a Chinese prison for practicing medicine without a license, he faces obstacles and critics as he tries to re-enter science.

For months he's been touting plans to develop affordable gene therapies for rare diseases, starting with the muscle-wasting condition Duchenne muscular dystrophy. He announced on social media last fall that he had opened a lab in Beijing. He spoke remotely about this new endeavor at an event in early February hosted by the University of Kent in the United Kingdom.

And last week, he announced to the press that he'd received a Hong Kong visa and might want to work in



Chinese scientist He Jiankui arrives to speak at a brief press conference in Beijing

the financial hub. But Hong Kong officials revoked that visa hours later, saying false statements had been made and a criminal investigation would be launched.

The Associated Press has reached out to He several times by phone and email, but he has not agreed to an interview. He said on Twi-

ter over the weekend that he will pause posting there to focus on his research. Others in the scientific world, meanwhile, are divided about his efforts at a comeback — with some expressing serious doubts.

"We have to be clear: He has no expertise in gene editing" and his previous

experiment was "a total, total disaster," said Kiran Musunuru, a University of Pennsylvania gene editing expert who wrote a book on the case. "I understand maybe some of this is a play to rehabilitate his reputation ... But how can anyone think this is a good idea?"

Some scientists worry he may return to the sort of work he did before, which involved using a tool called CRISPR-Cas9 to genetically edit embryos, disabling a gene that allows HIV to enter cells. The idea was to try to make the children resistant to AIDS.

The gene editing tool is a powerful one that may lead to treatments for many diseases. The scientists who discovered it were awarded the Nobel Prize in 2020. But He's work was criticized across the globe because, by making edits to embryos, he was attempting changes that could be passed to future generations — potentially altering the course of human evolution. The work was also medically unnecessary and carried the risks of changing other genes.

It's unclear how the three children who grew from the embryos — twins known as Lulu and Nana and a third child known as Amy — are doing.

Given He's ambition, "I wouldn't be surprised that a few years down the line if the opportunity arises, that he would go back" to that sort of work, said Dr. Samira Kiani, a genetic engineer and researcher at the University of Pittsburgh who produced a documentary on He's story called "Make

People Better."

But Benjamin Hurlbut, an expert in bioethics and biomedicine at Arizona State University who is in touch with He off and on, said "there's absolutely no reason" to believe he will do anything similar, and that He has the know-how and connections to build respectable projects in biotech.

"He's done his time and he's trying to start over," Hurlbut said.

A REVEALING TALK

Kent sociologist Joy Zhang, an organizer of the U.K. event where He spoke, said most participants were scientists and academics based in China, and many arrived with open minds about him and his latest project.

"It was really shocking how shameless he was boasting about his gene therapy when he had very little substance to show, either scientifically or ethically," Zhang said. "He proved that he's not a misunderstood genius. He's just a very egotistic opportunist."

During his 25-minute presentation, He spent most of the time explaining basic science, discussing his Duchenne research for less than two minutes, according to a scathing report published by event organizers. That included sharing his goal to raise 50 million Chinese yuan through charity (about \$7.3 million) and start clinical trials by March 2025.

"We've exposed that there is little substance" behind He's ambitious Duchenne gene therapy plans,

the report said. "We were concerned that he might endanger another vulnerable population if his new venture remains unchecked."

Organizers said they invited He because China hadn't had an open discussion about CRISPR technology and ethics since his stunning announcement in 2018. They were disappointed He wouldn't talk about his recent past. A day earlier, he had pulled out of a planned talk at Oxford University, saying on Twitter he wasn't ready to do that.

Kiani said inviting He to speak at such events is a good idea because the scientific community can communicate what's right and wrong — and hear about his plans. "It would be very naive of us to think that if we don't engage him in any conversation, he will just go away," she said.

After He's presentation, a fellow scientist pressed him about whether he thought so-called "heritable human genome editing" should be banned. The question has become especially timely, experts say, as the U.K. fertility watchdog agency pushes for an overhaul of fertility laws that some worry could eventually lead to the legalization of the practice.

He wouldn't answer.

SCIENCE'S COMPETITIVE CULTURE

Cultural anthropologist Eben Kirksey, a fellow of St. Cross College at the University of Oxford, who wrote the book "The Mutant Project," said he's concerned about what He's past actions might portend about the future. For example, Kirksey said He misled the public about the health of the twin girls in the gene-editing experiment; Kirksey revealed in his book that they were born at 31 weeks gestation by emergency C-section.

Kirksey said, He's pursuit of fame and potentially-profitable breakthroughs again threaten to get in the way of "good, stable, well-thought-out science."

Besides the Duchenne research, He said last year on the social media platform Weibo that he was seeking funds from the Chinese government to develop an advanced type of machine that creates synthetic DNA that could be used for information storage. A tiny piece of synthetic DNA can store vast amounts of data. **MDT/AP**

AD



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FOOTBALL | BASKETBALL | DAILY TRAININGS

BASKETBALL

Serbia grabs the last spot in World Cup field

TIM REYNOLDS

THE Basketball World Cup field is now filled, with Serbia grabbing the last spot in this summer's 32-team tournament.

Serbia clinched the berth with a 101-83 win over Great Britain yesterday [Macau time]. The win means two-time reigning NBA MVP Nikola Jokic of the Denver Nuggets will have the chance to play for a World Cup this summer, when the tournament gets held in the Philippines, Japan and Indonesia.

Serbia's win in Belgrade eliminated Belgium, the last team that still had a chance to qualify.

Most teams at the World Cup will use NBA players when they can. The U.S. used G League and internationally based players almost exclusively in its qualifying games, but it will go to a roster of NBA players for the tournament this summer.

"We're looking forward to competing for another gold medal," USA Basketball men's coach Steve Kerr said in a video released by the federation yesterday. Kerr also lauded the work of U.S. qualifying team coach Jim Boylen, who led the Americans in all 12 of their games in those cycles.

Spain is the defending champion. The U.S. finished seventh at the last World Cup in 2019.

THE FIELD

Serbia qualifying means 10 of the top 11 teams in the world rankings reached the World Cup. The exception was No. 4 Argentina, the silver medalist in 2019.

No. 1 Spain, No. 2 United States, No. 3 Australia, No. 5 France, No. 6 Serbia, No. 7 Slovenia, No. 8 Lithuania, No. 9 Greece, No. 10 Italy and No. 11 Germany have qualified. There will be two first-round groups that include two of those teams. And none of the four teams involved in that scenario will be thrilled when they see that draw.

The lowest-ranked teams in the field are four of the five African qualifiers: No. 43 Ivory Coast, No. 55 Egypt, No. 63 South Sudan and No. 66 Cape Verde.

AP PHOTO



NBA's Serbian star Nikola Jokic holds the ball

HELLO

Cape Verde, South Sudan, Georgia and Latvia are in the tournament for the first time.

THEY'RE BACK

There are 23 teams that were in the 2019 World Cup and have qualified again for this year's event, a list led by the United States and Brazil — the only nations to appear in all 19 editions of the tournament.

Spain has been to each of the last 11 World Cups. Puerto Rico has been to each of the last 10.

The other 19 nations that are back from 2019: Angola, New Zealand, France, Greece, Australia, Lithuania, Serbia, Iran, Dominican Republic, Philippines, Montenegro, Jordan, Venezuela, Japan, Ivory Coast, Germany, China, Italy and Canada.

Finland, Slovenia, Egypt and Mexico are back in the field after last reaching the World Cup in 2014. Lebanon is back, after its most recent appearance was in 2010.

THEY'RE NOT BACK

These nine nations appeared in the 2019 tournament and won't be back this summer: Argentina, South Korea, Turkey, Senegal, Nigeria, Tunisia, Poland, the Czech Republic and Russia.

FIBA banned Russia's teams and officials from its competitions last year in response to that country's invasion of Ukraine.

THE TOURNAMENT

The group phase — eight groups of four teams — runs from Aug. 25 through Aug. 30. The second round is Aug. 31 through Sept. 4.

Quarterfinal games will be played on Sept. 5 and 6. The semifinals are Sept. 8, and the championship and third-place game in Manila are Sept. 10.

That's about two weeks before NBA training camps are scheduled to open, barring a lockout this summer.

THE DRAW

Each nation will be assigned to a four-team opening-round group on April 29. The top two teams from each of those groups will make the second round.

The U.S. will play its group-stage games in the Philippines, and will stay there for the entirety of its stay in the tournament — as will the Philippines.

Slovenia and Japan will play group-stage games in Okinawa, Japan. Canada will play its group-stage games in Jakarta, Indonesia.

All teams will find out their opponents, and all the other teams that don't already know their group-stage destinations, at the April 29 draw.

AT STAKE

The World Cup will be a way for seven teams to qualify for the 2024 Paris Olympics. Of those, two will come from the Americas Region, two from Europe, one from Africa, one from Asia and one from Oceania.

The other five Olympic

berths will be decided by qualifying tournaments this summer, with 40 nations set to be invited to play for those spots.

There are 39 nations that now have confirmed invitations: Argentina, Bahamas, Bahrain, Belgium, Bosnia

and Herzegovina, Cameroon, Chile, Chinese Taipei, Colombia, Congo, Cuba, Czech Republic, Estonia, Great Britain, Guinea, Hungary, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Israel, Kazakhstan, Korea, Mali, Netherlands, Nigeria, North Macedonia,

Panama, Poland, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Sweden, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda, Ukraine, Uruguay and the Virgin Islands.

The 40th spot is likely to go to Croatia, a decision that FIBA is set to finalize on April 28. **MDT/AP**

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OPINION

China Daily
Editorial, China Daily

TIKTOK TARGET OF ANTI-CHINA PARANOIA

The furor in the United States over so-called Chinese spying, sparked by the Joe Biden administration's botched response to an errant Chinese meteorological research balloon, has been given a new lease on life, with the White House on Monday giving government agencies 30 days to remove the Chinese video-sharing app TikTok from all federal devices and systems, alleging that it poses national security risks.

Canada, which always toes the US' line in its anti-China strategy, also announced it is banning TikTok from all government-issued mobile devices.

Some US agencies, including the departments of defense, homeland security and state, already have restrictions on the Chinese app in place, as Congress passed the "No TikTok on Government Devices Act" in December, which requires the social media app to be removed from the information technology of federal agencies. The ban does not apply to entities not associated with the federal government, or to the millions of US people who use the hugely popular app.

While the Biden administration claims the ban is due to its intensifying scrutiny concern and data privacy, it is nothing more than an ideologically motivated move. It is another instance of the US using national security as an excuse to abuse state power in its clampdown on Chinese high-tech companies.

The ban, in addition to many other restrictions targeting China's high-tech sector, including advanced semiconductors, has been introduced based on the spurious claim that the popular app is being used by the Chinese government to "manipulate and monitor its users while it gobbles up Americans' data to be used for their malign activities". There has been nothing to support this allegation except the anti-China hysteria of some US politicians.

It is the app's Chinese ownership that is the app's "original sin". The ban in December was passed without any deliberation, and unfortunately that approach has served as a blueprint for other world governments, as TikTok spokesperson Brooke Oberwetter said, describing the ban as being "little more than political theater". The ban has also drawn criticism from within the US. "Americans have a right to use TikTok and other platforms to exchange our thoughts, ideas, and opinions with people around the country and around the world", the American Civil Liberties Union said on Monday.

It said that the ban will "limit Americans political discussion, artistic expression, free exchange of ideas and even prevent people from posting cute animal videos and memes".

It is sad that despite the world becoming increasingly interdependent and interconnected economically, the ghost of McCarthyism still haunts the US, riding on the paranoia about anything related to China.

NEW CHINA US COMMITTEE DEBUTS WITH EYE ON MAJOR POLICY SHIFTS

THE BUZZ

A special House committee dedicated to countering China will make its debut today, the opening act in what lawmakers hope will be a robust effort to overcome partisan divisions and address a "generational challenge" to America's national security.

The committee's chairman, Rep. Mike Gallagher, R-Wis., says he's looking to bridge differences rather than exploit them. One of the former Marine's first efforts in that regard will be a hearing focused on informing Americans about what he says is the "threat posed by the Chinese Communist Party."

Gallagher has grand visions for the Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party. He hopes it can shepherd competing bills over the finish line during the next two years and issue a set of recommendations on long-term policies. But as the committee holds its first hearing today [Macau time] in prime time, his first mission will be to communicate to Americans what is at stake.

So far, Gallagher appears to have Democratic buy-in and support. The vote to create the committee was bipartisan, 365-65.

HK MURDER MYSTERY

POLICE LOOK FOR EVIDENCE IN SLAIN MODEL ABBY CHOI'S CASE

KANIS LEUNG, HONG KONG

HONG Kong police began searching a landfill yesterday for evidence related to the grisly killing of model Abby Choi, whose dismembered body parts were found in a refrigerator and pots.

Ex-husband Alex Kwong, his father Kwong Kau and his brother Anthony Kwong were charged with murder after police found her remains in a house rented by Kwong Kau in a suburban part of Hong Kong near the border with mainland China. Alex Kwong's mother, Jenny Li, faces one count of perverting the course of justice. All four were detained without bail.

They have not yet entered their pleas, and it does not appear that their lawyers have commented on the case to the media. The hearing was adjourned until May.

Yesterday morning, more than 100 officers wearing protective gear went to North East New Territories Landfill in Ta Kwu Ling, about a 15-minute drive from mainland China, to search for the missing body parts with excavators and shovels. Police had said earlier they were still looking for her hands and torso.

"The suspects threw away several bags of important evidence in the morning of Feb. 22. They may be some human body parts or they could be the clothes and the phone of the victim, or even the weapons," Superintendent Alan Chung told reporters.

Chung said they could not find anything substantial yet, other than bones, which police could not ascertain if they belonged to a human or animals.

Choi's family, dressed in black, gathered near the house where her body parts were found to pay respects. They earlier visited



Model Abby Choi, holding a cat, poses for a photo on Feb. 1, in Hong Kong

a mortuary to identify her. Some mourners were emotional but the family did not appear to have responded to reporters' questions.

Alex Kwong appeared in another court yesterday for a previous theft case, where he jumped bail.

Choi, who had more than 100,000 followers on Instagram, disappeared Feb. 21, according to a report filed later with the Hong Kong Police. Her last post was Feb. 19, featuring a photo shoot she had done with fashion magazine L'Officiel Monaco.

Choi had financial disputes involving tens of millions of Hong Kong dollars with her ex-husband and his family, police said, adding that "some people" were unhappy with how Choi handled her finances.

The gruesome killing has transfixed many in Hong Kong and across the border in mainland China, since the self-governed

southern Chinese city has a very low level of violent crime.

Choi's friend Bernard Cheng earlier said he initially thought she had been kidnapped.

"I haven't imagined a person who's so good, so full of love, so innocent, a person who doesn't do anything bad will be killed like this," he said. "My heart is still heavy. I can't sleep well."

Cheng said Choi had four children, aged between 3 and 10. Alex Kwong, 28, was the father of the older two, who are being taken care of by Choi's mother. Choi had remarried to Chris Tam, father of the younger children, who are staying with his family.

Choi had good relationships with her family, including her in-laws, Cheng said, and would travel with the families of her current and former husbands together. MDT/AP



Russia Regional officials in southern and western Russia reported a string of drone attacks near the border with Ukraine and deep inside the country that caused no casualties, but provoked a security stir yesterday, as the war with Kyiv stretched into its second year. The hacking of Russian television channels and radio stations, and the temporary closure of airspace around St. Petersburg's airport, fed suspicion that Kyiv could be behind the disruption.



Germany's foreign minister voiced concern about the Israeli government's plans to overhaul the country's legal system during a visit by her Israeli counterpart, and said that introducing the death penalty for Palestinians convicted in deadly attacks would be "a big mistake." Israel has seen large and regular protests in recent weeks against the judicial overhaul proposed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's new coalition government, which includes a bill that would enable lawmakers to overturn a Supreme Court decision with a simple majority.



Cyprus' new president affirmed the island nation's Western foreign policy orientation as a member of the European Union that seeks to further strengthen its bonds with the U.S. and stands firmly with others on "the side of justice" to condemn Russia's war in Ukraine. Speaking after taking his oath of office at a ceremony in parliament yesterday, President Nikos Christodoulides said his administration will strive to make Cyprus a "credible and creative partner with substantial input" in European affairs.