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“ THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN’ ”

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A SURVEY BY MUST FOUND THAT EMPLOYEES IN MACAU ARE INCREASINGLY CONFIDENT IN THE JOB MARKET, LESS SATISFIED WITH THEIR CURRENT ROLES

P4

PH CONSULATE AWAITS AUTOPSY OF WOMAN'S DEATH, READY TO ASSIST

P3

CHINA RAIDS OFFICES OF BUSINESS CONSULTANCY CAPVISION

P5



AP PHOTO



India Security measures are keeping the peace in a remote northeast Indian state where 60 people were killed and 35,000 civilians were displaced in rioting and ethnic clashes last week, officials said. Manipur state's chief minister, N Biren Singh, told reporters that around 230 people were injured and about 1,700 houses were burned by protesters after fierce fighting broke out when members of tribal groups clashed with a non-tribal group over demands of economic benefits and reservation status.

AP PHOTO



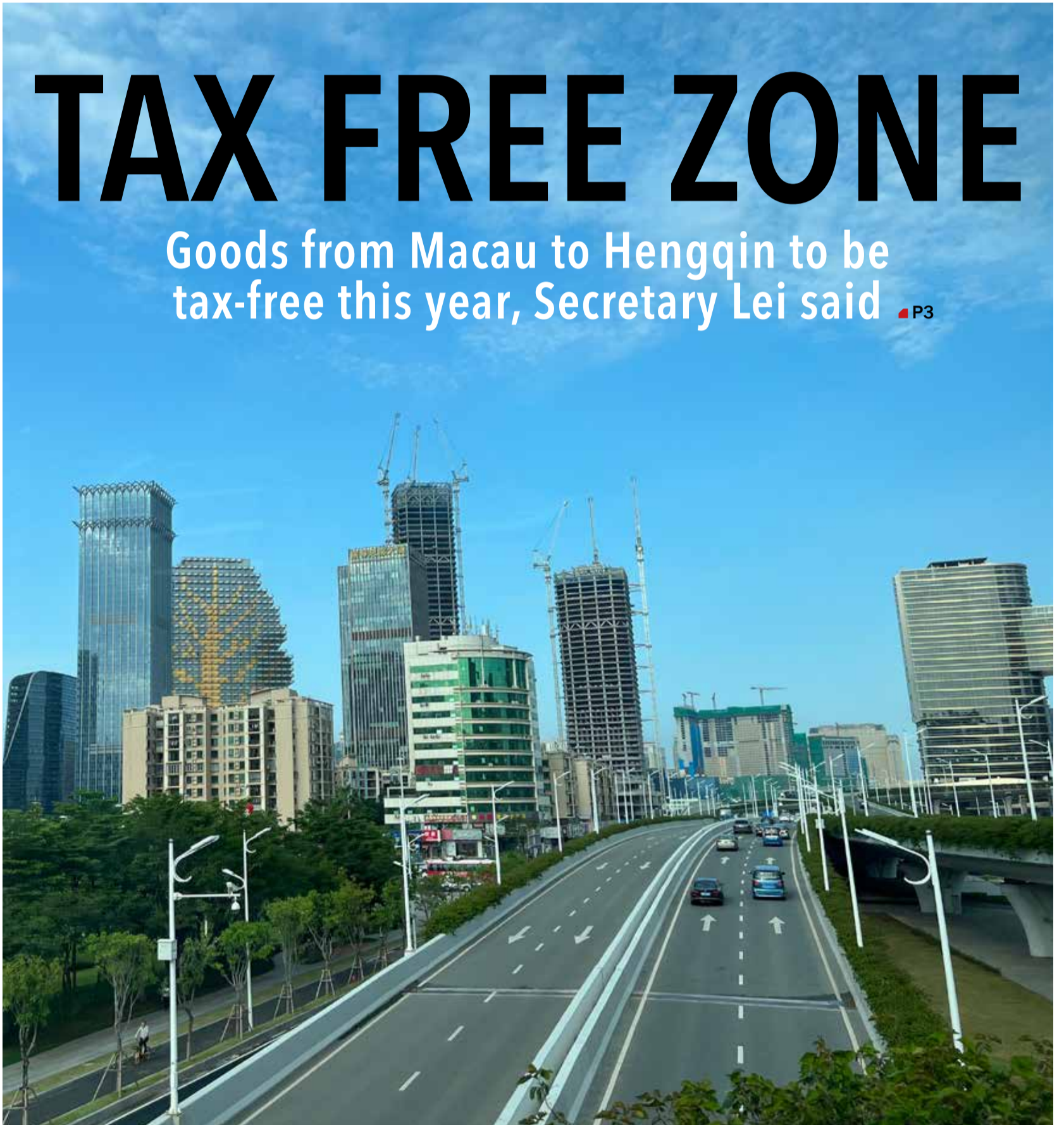
New Zealand Authorities in Auckland declared a state of emergency yesterday as flooding again hit New Zealand's largest city. Further north in the city of Whangārei, a high school student was missing after a school group that was exploring caves got into trouble when floodwaters hit. Fire and emergency crews said they had responded to more than 200 calls, most of them in Auckland. Many were for floodwaters entering buildings, but they had also responded to landslides, falling trees and trapped cars.

AP PHOTO



Thailand's self-exiled former prime minister said yesterday he wants to return home by July, making his declaration less than a week before the country heads to polls in which his daughter is a frontrunner. Thaksin Shinawatra tweeted for the second time this month that he would like to come home to see his grandchildren. He said he is prepared to face justice, including several convictions on charges including abuse of power and corruption.

More on backpage



LYNZY VALLES

TAX FREE ZONE

Goods from Macau to Hengqin to be tax-free this year, Secretary Lei said P3

CRIME

PJ CONCLUDES THREE-DAY 'IN-DEPTH' INVESTIGATION ON STALKER ALLEGATIONS

P2

NATIONAL SECURITY LAW

MEDIA AND INTERNET AMONG KEY SECTORS

P4

CRIME

PJ CONCLUDES THREE-DAY 'IN-DEPTH' INVESTIGATION ON STALKER ALLEGATIONS

ANTHONY LAM

A three-day "in-depth" investigation into a protest organizer's accusations of being persecuted by law-enforcement authorities was closed yesterday, the Judiciary Police (PJ) told a press conference.

Last Friday, Wong Wai Man, head of a local construction bar-bender trade union, said that he had been followed and harassed by plainclothes police officers after his declaration of the May 1 protest.

The report on his comment prompted Secretary for Security Wong Sio Chak to order an investigation be initiated.

The PJ disclosed yesterday that on May 6 it invited Wong Wai Man to assist in the investigations. Wong met with the police for four hours that afternoon.

He was asked to show inspectors the WeChat messages that he claimed to have received from the Public Security Police Force (PSP). He only showed some to the authorities. The PJ said that due to data privacy considerations, the police could not force Wong to disclose all the messages.

Wong said last Friday that the PSP had attempted to persuade him to drop the protest over WeChat messages. The PSP was claimed to have cited the risk of the protest being hijacked by

RENATO MARQUES



adjacent causes and the need to preserve societal harmony as reasons behind their persuasion efforts.

According to the PJ, during the meeting, Wong admitted to withdrawing the protest declaration on the grounds of "protecting the interests of society as a whole and not wanting the topic of the pro-

test to be hijacked."

The police also disclosed that after meeting with Wong, they also retrieved surveillance camera footage near the locations where Wong claimed to be followed. The police also reviewed the PSP logs as part of the investigation.

As a result of these investigations, the PJ found that Wong's

allegations were groundless and unfounded. The police also described the first news report as "not true."

Wong also said last Friday that he was once forced to drive over the legal speed limit to escape another car, which he believed to be following him. He also said his association headquarters were

investigated without cause as the association was reported to have links with illegal gambling and the Falun Gong.

The PJ referred to PSP records to attempt to prove that traffic violation charges pressed against Wong were legitimate. According to the PJ, from 2018 to 2022, Wong has been found guilty of five traffic violations and 111 instances of parking illegally.

From Jan. 1 to yesterday, Wong was fined 15 times for illegal parking and once for speeding. During the period of those 15 fines, 124 other vehicles were also fined. As such, the PJ believed that there was no preferential law-enforcement.

As for his association headquarters, the PJ said, from 2018 to April 2023, at least five complaints of illegal gambling had been received by the PSP. However, Wong told the police that the four mah-jong tables were set up to allow association members to conduct games for leisure.

The PSP yesterday issued a statement, saying that Wong's accusations were "completely inconsistent with the facts as well as seriously violating the reputation of the police. The PSP strongly condemns the act and will follow up the possible offences related to the incident, and consider whether the relevant persons should be held criminally responsible."

Police investigating alleged case of teacher raping student

An investigation has commenced into an alleged case of a teacher raping his student, the Judiciary Police (PJ) announced.

Information about the case was first revealed by a social media group. The social media post was allegedly written by a student studying at a girl's school in the Northern district.

It was said that the student was raped several months ago by a teacher. The student requested

that her parents call the police but her parents did not believe her.

The student then contacted other teachers and the principal but was told to keep the incident under wraps and "to resolve it with money." The student further said that she experienced recurring flashbacks from the incident, causing insomnia.

In response to media inquiries, the police said that it had not received any reports of similar cases, but noted it had ope-

ned an investigation. The police have issued a suggestion that the alleged victim contact the police immediately.

The police also took the opportunity to remind the public to seek help from police and trusted individuals around them should they experience violence or be subject to any other criminal act.

Apart from the police, a girl's school in the Northern district - Our Lady of Fátima Girls' School -

issued a notice to parents of its students, underlining its "close monitoring" of the incident.

It stated that as of yesterday, its principal, teachers and counsellors had not received reports about similar incidents to the one in the social media post, revealing that it had already discussed the incident with "competent government entities."

The school said it would protect the reputation of both its students and teachers. AL



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CRIME

PH consulate awaits autopsy of woman's death, ready to provide assistance

THE Philippine Consulate General is in touch with local police as authorities investigate the recent death of a Filipino national who tested positive for Influenza A and passed away after being injected with glutathione.

The 30-year-old foreign worker was pronounced dead on May 6, two days after undertaking the whitening injection performed by a fellow domestic worker from Indonesia. That same day, she was sent to the public hospital by ambulance due to a high fever and disorientation.

According to the Philippine Consulate, the office's national assistance section have already reached out to local police and was assured that the case is being investigated by the Judiciary Police.

"The next of kin of the deceased has already reached out to our office, so appropriate government assistance will be rendered as required," Consul General Porfirio Mayo, Jr. told the Times.

"If it happens that the deceased is an active Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) member, then of course, appropriate OWWA assistance will be given."

Under OWWA's assistance, her beneficiary is entitled to PHP100,000 (around MOP15,000) for death due to natural causes and PHP200,000 for accidental death.

A funeral grant of PHP20,000 will also be given.

However, according to Mayo, appropriate assistance will be provided to the national's family once the investigation is closed and her remains are ready to be brought back home.

Currently, the police have not ruled out the possibility of pressing additional charges against the suspect, who practices medical procedures without a license, should the post-mortem analysis reveal a connection between the death and the injections.

The cause of death has not been confirmed. LV



COOPERATION ZONE

Lei: Goods from Macau to Hengqin to be tax-free

LYNZY VALLES, HENGQIN

GOODS from Macau that will be transported to Hengqin will be tax exempt this year, Secretary for Economy and Finance Lei Wai Nong announced yesterday at the Hengqin 2023 Global Investment Promotion Conference.

Lei, who is also the executive committee director of the Guangdong-Macao In-depth Cooperation Zone, said that the zone will operate as an autonomous customs zone before the end of the year.

The announcement was made at the event that gathered some 300 representatives - ranging from Consul Generals, business associations and major enterprises, aiming to encourage investors to invest in the zone.

Established a year ago, Lei said the zone has achieved "remarkably good results," recalling that the gross domestic product (GDP) of the zone has reached RMB22.39 billion last year, a year-on-year increase of 2.5%, while general fiscal revenue increased 2.2% to



Lei Wai Nong

RMB20.03.

For the first quarter of this year, the zone has recorded a 3.8% increase in its GDP to RMB10.91 billion.

According to the official, Hengqin's progress in developing new industries such as traditional Chinese medicine, technology, finance and healthcare have helped boost Macau's economic di-

versification.

This is the zone's first global promotion conference held at Hyatt Regency Hengqin, which also includes remarks of key enterprises in the cooperation zone.

In the afternoon, a visit to the Exhibition Hall of Guangdong-Macao In-depth Cooperation Zone was made, followed by a tour at

the Zhuhai Hengqin Bringuys Network Technology Co Ltd, a foreign-funded enterprise that was launched in Macau and grew in Hengqin. The delegates also toured the Traditional Chinese Medicine Science and Technology Industrial Park, where 230 enterprises have been registered, including 60 enterprises from Macau.

LIU: COOPERATION ZONE REACHING 'NEW HEIGHTS'

THE Guangdong-Macao In-depth Cooperation Zone has introduced favorable policies in areas such as finance and customs, reaching "new heights" in the overall development of the zone, said Liu Xianfa, Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China in Macau.

Liu was at yesterday's Hengqin 2023 Global Investment Promotion Conference as his office organized Consulate Generals in Macau and Hong Kong, international organizations and chambers of commerce, and media to visit the zone.

The trip was aimed at encouraging visitors to "deeply understand and fully tap into the policies and resources" in Hengqin, as well as to "build a bridge of economic and trade cooperation" between Macau, Hengqin and other countries.

The commissioner has stressed that the plan for the zone is being fully planned, deployed and promoted by President Xi Jinping, with the intention to create favorable conditions for the economic development of Macau.

"[We invite you] to facilitate oppor-



Liu Xianfa

tunities for exchange and cooperation, promote and support companies, investors, artists, scientists, engineers, etc. from your countries to come and

live and work in this In-depth Cooperation Zone and to jointly write the 'Story of Spring' for Hengqin's development," said Liu to the delegation.

MUSEUM DAY CARNIVAL THIS SUNDAY AT MSC

To celebrate International Museum Day on 18 May, 20 museums in Macau will co-organize the annual event of the museum sector, "Macao International Museum Day Carnival 2023." The opening event will be held this Sunday at the Macao Science Center. The event will feature a wide range of activities, including game booths, workshops and online games. The museums will host a rich array of activities on the day of the carnival, such as interactive games, experiences, and workshops. Throughout this month, participating museums will also hold exhibitions, workshops, guided tours and other celebratory activities, and will be open to the public at designated times for free.

COMMEMORATIVE POSTMARK CANCELLATION SERVICE OFFERED

To celebrate World Telecommunication and Information Society Day, a temporary post office counter will be set up at the Philatelic Shop of General Post Office from 9.00am to 5.30pm on May 17 (next Wednesday). It was announced yesterday that the counter will provide a commemorative postmark cancellation service for the day, the Macao Post and Telecommunications Bureau (CTT). Commemorative envelopes will be distributed and the public is welcome to come and collect one, the bureau added. World Telecommunication Day has been celebrated annually on 17 May since 1969, marking the founding of the International Telecommunication Union and the signing of the first International Telegraph Convention in 1865.

EMERGING FASHION DESIGNERS SHOWCASE WORKS TO GUANGDONG

The Macau Productivity and Technology Transfer Center (CPTTM) has recently organized for a group of emerging fashion designers from Macau to participate in a trade show in several cities across the Greater Bay Area (GBA). The trade show brought together 32 independent design brands from the mainland, Hong Kong and Macau, as well as the new generation of seven design schools in the GBA. The trade show exhibited a total of 78 fashion works. The six young talents from Macau who participated in this event are all from the fashion design and production diploma program of the CPTTM. Interactive sessions between the brands and designers were also available.

LEGISLATION

MEDIA AND INTERNET AMONG NATIONAL SECURITY KEY SECTORS

ANTHONY LAM

THE National Security Law Amendment Bill, if passed, will authorize the government to manage national security topics in a number of sectors.

These sectors include education, association, publication, audio and visual broadcast, including over the internet.

To carry out these management functions, the government must abide by relevant specialist laws applicable to each field, such as the Publication Law.

The First Standing Committee of the parliament yesterday signed its lists of opinion to signal the conclusion of its discussions on the National Security Law Amendment Bill.

Committee president Ella Lei met with the press after yesterday's meeting.

When questioned about the aforementioned proposal, Lei disclosed that the committee did not express any concerns with the proposed provision, although she admitted that the committee had explored this proposal.

The committee has asked if and how the laws relating to the management functions would be amended "to coordinate with the future National Security Law," she noted. She added that these specialist laws will be auxiliary to the future National Security Law, hinting a higher status will be afforded to the latter.



Traditionally, codes of law are superior to local laws.

It was also recapped that the committee had conducted comparisons and contrasts between this Bill and national security laws in other places, such as the National Security Law in Hong Kong drawn up in Beijing and put into effect in Hong Kong.

On whether the government has explained why the aforementioned sectors were specifically identified in the proposal, Lei said that the committee had not raised any concerns.

Under this Bill, "probation in imprisonment will not be allowed for those who commit deliberate acts in breach of na-

tional security or their preparation activities, while parole will be barred for repetitive violators."

Provisional bars from leaving Macau will also form a part of the preventive measures applied to those suspected of committing a national security breach. This is necessary, according to the government, to obstruct these suspects from further participating in national security violations.

Committee members were concerned with the scope of activities promoting national security, the balance between protecting residents' rights and combating national security breaches, the areas of applica-

tions, as well as the role of the National Security Committee.

Standards for evaluating punishments as well as the differentiation between abetting and supporting sedition, among other topics, were also of concern to the committee.

Criminal procedures and preventive measures, with the latter being new to this law review, were also discussed. In contrast to the current law that was put into effect about a decade ago, this amendment has proposed greater use of new technologies, such as communication interception methods, to achieve the preventive and investigative purposes of the Bill.

Wiretapped data obtained for preventive purposes, according to the committee president, will not be allowed for judicial purposes.

The committee has fully agreed on the amendment's future mission as the backbone legislation governing national security in Macau.

On the balance between residents' rights and national security, the government told the committee that the amendment was drafted on the grounds of respecting both traditions and human rights.

Existing legislation on criminal procedures, provided their effectiveness can be confirmed, will be retained and used in prosecutions against national security breaches. The committee has also accepted this point.

STAFF REPORTER

LABOR

A survey by the Macau University of Science and Technology (MUST) has found that employees in the city are increasingly confident in the job market, but less satisfied with their current roles.

The poll surveyed 807 full-time workers between 24 March and 1 April and uncovered an 11.87% increase in the confidence index concerning Macau's job market, despite it being 2.5% down compared to 2019. However, overall satisfaction with work declined by 2.6% compared to 2019, largely due to a drop in work quality and job stability.

Meanwhile, the salary and personal development indices increased by

4% and 2.6% respectively.

The survey's researchers suggested that companies offer more training and learning opportunities, and be more receptive to staff suggestions and open to rewarding employees for good ideas.

The three satisfaction indicators with the largest increase are (1) the impact of work on health (20.34%), (2) salary (17.69%) and (3) other benefits (15.96%). These three indicators experienced the largest decrease

reported in 2021's press conference.

"We explained that time that the impact of pandemic on health and the probable infection in the workplace constituted top concerns contributing to the largest decrease in satisfaction. Clearly, with the end of the pandemic and economic recovery, employees' concerns about health have significantly decreased," the researchers from MUST's Institute for Sustainable Development yesterday said.

Local workers more confident, less satisfied: MUST study



CONSULTING

China raids offices of business consultancy Capvision

CHINA'S chief foreign intelligence agency has raided the offices of business consulting firm Capvision in Beijing and other Chinese cities as part of an ongoing crackdown on foreign businesses that provide sensitive economic data.

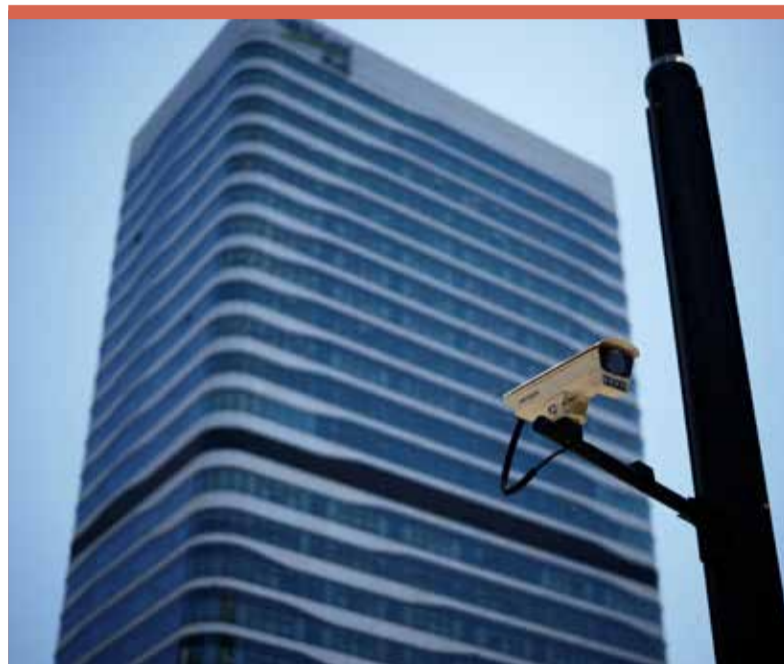
Foreign companies operating in China have come under increasing pressure, driven primarily by national security considerations, as Xi Jinping's government tightens control over business, clashing with efforts to lure back foreign investors after COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were lifted.

Investigators simultaneously visited Capvision branches in Beijing, Shanghai, and the southeastern manufacturing hubs of Suzhou and Shenzhen, along with other locations the state media reports did not identify.

Officers from the Ministry of State Security, police and market regulatory bodies questioned staff, the reports said. There was no word on arrests or detentions, although the reports said investigations had been opened into the company and "personnel involved in the case according to law."

No details were given about the specific legal issues at stake, and state media did not give the exact dates of the raids on Capvision, which is headquartered in New York and Shanghai.

"Over recent years, in order to realize the strategy of containing and suppressing China, certain Western countries have become increasingly rampant in stealing



A surveillance camera in front of an office building, where the office of Capvision is located, in Shanghai

intelligence and information pertaining to our country's military industry, economy and finance," state broadcaster CCTV said Monday.

The report alleged domestic consulting companies were tools of stealing such secrets. "Some domestic consulting companies have weak awareness of national security and seek to benefit financially by straddling the legal barriers," the CCTV report said.

Asked about the recent actions against Capvision and other companies, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said China's national security authorities and other "competent departments" have recently been carrying out "open law enforcement on rele-

vant enterprises in accordance with the law."

"This is a normal law enforcement action in accordance with Chinese law, aiming to promote the regulated and sound development of the industry and safeguard national security and development interests," Wang told reporters at a daily briefing yesterday. The spokesperson gave no further details.

Capvision bills itself on its website as a "leading global expert network platform that excels at identifying the right advisors for specific business insights." The company says it serves more than 2,000 clients through more than 600 researchers and 450,000 industry professionals.

China "needs to be more transparent about law enforcement actions against companies such as Capvision" that carry out the sort of due diligence that firms need to make investment decisions, said Eric Zheng, president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai said in a press statement.

"It would be helpful if the authorities would more clearly delineate the areas in which companies can or cannot conduct such due diligence," Zheng said. "This would give foreign companies more confidence and enable them to comply with Chinese regulations."

Capvision has not commented on the raids, but on its WeChat social media channel posted a flyer Monday marking National Security Education Day, which fell on April 15.

"As a leading Chinese industry specializing in providing information services, Capvision is resolutely committed to the outlook on national security and is leading the industry in its healthy and orderly development," the flyer said.

The company is just the latest to be investigated, apparently over its attempts to obtain information that would not be considered state secrets in other countries.

Last month, consulting firm Bain & Co. said police questioned staff in its Shanghai office. It gave no details of what they were seeking. Prior to that, the corporate due diligence firm Mintz Group said its Beijing office was raided by police who detained

five employees. An employee of a Japanese drug maker has also been detained on spying charges, and the government announced a security review of memory chip maker Micron Inc.

Last week, U.S. Ambassador Nicholas Burns said American companies were deeply concerned about a recent expansion of China's anti-espionage law that could put them at legal risk simply for seeking standard information on China's economy and local businesses they might seek to partner with.

Burns said the mixed signals were prompting many to put major investments on hold until more clarity was available, although they were unlikely to pull out of the world's second-largest economy, which, despite the vitality of the private sector, is still dominated by major state-run companies and financial institutions.

Still, some global companies are shifting investment plans to Southeast Asia, India and other economies where political risks are considered lower.

Whether politically motivated or not, the investigations come as China's relations with Washington, Europe and Tokyo are strained by disputes about human rights, Taiwan, security and technology.

Changes to the espionage law give authorities powers to gain access to electronic information. The law covers all "documents, data, materials and items related to national security," according to the official Xinhua News Agency. It remains unclear how national security is defined.

The crackdowns paint a jarring backdrop for official efforts to reverse a decline in foreign business interest in China. The ruling party wants foreign companies in electric cars and other fields to bring in technology and provide competition to force Chinese companies to improve. **MDT/AP**

CORPORATE BITS

Sands China supports ARTM's Therapeutic Garden



As part of its environmental sustainability efforts under the Sands ECO360 global sustainability strategy, Sands China is sponsoring the Therapeutic Garden, a farming project created by the Manna for People Association.

The project aims to promote sustainability and provide a healing experience for the members of the Association for Rehabilitation of Drug Abusers of Macau (ARTM).

Around 80 Sands ECO360 ambassadors participated in

workshops on April 15 and May 6 at the ARTM service center in Coloane's Ka Ho village.

The 520-square-metre garden is being constructed on the rooftop of the service center, as part of an effort to raise awareness about mental health and sustainable living in Macau.

"Sands China is very proud to be the first integrated resort operator to provide support to ARTM's Therapeutic Garden program, a unique and impactful initiative in the community," Sands China's executive Vice President of Operations Sean McCreery said.

The executive added that urban farming can contribute to building a green city, counteracting climate change, and supporting the local community.

SJM hosts Mother's Day Floral Workshop to promote positivity and family time



In preparation for Mother's Day this Sunday, May 14, SJM hosts a Floral Workshop on Level 1 of Grand Lisboa Palace. Families from the Women's General Association of Macau were invited to

come together and celebrate.

Under the guidance of professional florists, children and their mothers created unique floral arrangements during the quality family time, which

was intended to provide participants with an opportunity to express their love and gratitude, and create memories.

As a local enterprise rooted in Macau, SJM is deeply committed to creating events like this that highlight social responsibility and bring people together while promoting positivity and strong community relations.

In the future, SJM will continue to work closely with local associations to develop activities that demonstrate care and promote cultural and community development.

China expels Canadian diplomat in tit-for-tat response

CHINA announced the expulsion of a Canadian diplomat yesterday in retaliation for Ottawa ordering a Chinese consular official to leave the country over alleged threats he made against a Canadian lawmaker and his family.

The Foreign Ministry said China was deploying a "reciprocal countermeasure to Canada's unscrupulous move," which it said it "firmly opposes."

It said Jennifer Lynn Lalonde, the top Canadian diplomat in the business hub of Shanghai, has been asked to leave by May 13 and that China "reserves the right to take further actions in response."

The Canadian Embassy in Beijing had no immediate comment on the expulsion order.

Canada earlier yesterday said that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government is expelling a Chinese diplomat whom Canada's spy agency alleged was involved in a plot to intimidate an opposition lawmaker and his relatives in Hong Kong.

A senior Canadian government official said Toronto-based diplomat Zhao Wei has five days to leave the country. It wasn't immediately clear if Zhao was still in Canada.



Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin is reflected in a wall of mirrored glass as he gestures during a regular press conference in Beijing, yesterday

Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly said in a statement that Canada declared Zhao "persona non grata" and that Canada would "not tolerate any form of foreign interference in our internal affairs."

"Diplomats in Canada have been warned that if they engage in this type of behavior, they will be sent home," she said.

Canada's spy service indicated that in 2021, opposition Conservative lawmaker Michael Chong and his Hong Kong relatives were targeted after Chong criticized Beijing's human rights record. Ca-

nada's spy agency has not released details publicly.

Chong has been critical of Beijing's treatment of members of the Turkic Muslim Uyghur ethnic group in China's Xinjiang region, hundreds of thousands of whom have been detained in reeducation camps. China says attendance at what it calls vocational training centers is purely voluntary and aimed at eliminating tendencies toward Muslim extremism while teaching job skills.

Chong said Zhao's expulsion should have happened years ago. In a statement posted on its

website, the Chinese Embassy in Ottawa said Zhao's expulsion was "based on rumors of the so-called 'China Interference' hyped up by some politicians and media."

"This has seriously violated international law, basic norms governing international relations and the related bilateral agreements, and sabotaged the China-Canada relations," the statement said. It added that "all consequences arising therefrom shall be borne by the Canadian side."

"China never interferes in other countries' internal affairs," it said. Chinese Foreign Ministry

spokesperson Wang Wenbin doubled down on China's rejection of the accusations and threats to take further action against Canada.

"China is unwavering in its determination to safeguard its own interests," Wang told reporters at a daily briefing.

"We urge the Canadian side to immediately stop unreasonable provocations. If Canada does not listen to the advice and acts recklessly, China will fight back resolutely and forcefully, and the Canadian side must bear all the consequences arising from this."

China in recent years has expelled members of the foreign media in retaliation for their reporting or limitations placed on members of the Communist Party-controlled Chinese state media posted in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Expulsions of diplomats are much more rare. In 2020, China ordered the closure of the U.S. Consulate in the southwestern city of Chengdu in retaliation for Washington ordering the closure of the Chinese Consulate in Houston, which it said was a center of state-sponsored commercial espionage. China denied the allegation.

The revelation about Chong is the latest in a string of foreign interference attempts allegedly made by the Chinese government in Canada in recent years, including efforts to meddle in the 2019 and 2021 federal elections.

Trudeau has appointed former Governor General David Johnston to further study the issue, including whether a public inquiry is needed. **MDT/AP**

HONG KONG

UK official visits SAR after years of strained ties

THE first British minister visiting Hong Kong in five years said his country will not "duck" its historic responsibilities to people living in its former colony while engaging with China in areas they share common interests.

The remarks by Dominic Johnson, minister of state in the Department for Business and Trade, were published in an opinion piece in the South China Morning Post yesterday. He wrote that the U.K. will be clear about its right to act when China breaks its international commitments or abuses human rights.

Johnson's trip this week came after relations between Hong Kong and Britain became increasingly tense following the enactment of a Beijing-imposed national security law, which the U.K. earlier called "a



Dominic Johnson, British minister of state in the Department for Business and Trade (right) visits the Cyberport business park in Hong Kong

clear breach" of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration. The declaration included a promise to retain Hong Kong's rights and freedoms for 50 years after it was returned to China's rule in 1997.

Following the introduc-

tion of the sweeping security law in 2020, 105,200 residents have started new lives in Britain via a special visa that allows them to live and work in the U.K. and apply for British citizenship after six years, according to U.K. official data.

Johnson said his trip included meetings with the city's leading investors and government officials to foster investment ties between both sides. He tweeted on Monday that he met with CK Hutchison chairman Victor Li, the elder son of

tycoon Li Ka-shing, to discuss their investment plans in Britain.

In another tweet, he said he also talked to Christopher Hui, Hong Kong's secretary for financial services and the Treasury, on their works to remove market barriers and increase trade between both sides.

"I'm in Hong Kong as part of my mission to promote the UK as a leading destination for investment and trade," he wrote on Twitter.

The British consulate in Hong Kong said the visit would allow Johnson to reengage on dialogue including trade and investment, clean growth and future bilateral visits, in addition to promoting collaboration between Hong Kong and the U.K. after the COVID-19 pandemic and the imposi-

tion of the security law.

His visit also includes a meeting with Hong Kong Commerce Minister Algernon Yau, a lunch with some members of the British Chamber of Commerce and a visit to local tech hub Cyberport, it added. Johnson is slated to conclude his trip on Tuesday evening.

When asked about Johnson's visit, Hong Kong leader John Lee said he welcomed any foreign officials to visit Hong Kong and encourage the promotion of economic development, commercial exchanges and people-to-people relationship. Lee said the city's success is built on regional and international cooperation.

"It's just some countries make some moves to meet their political interest, perhaps due to political reasons," he said, without identifying any countries.

He added he hoped all will act pragmatically in their cooperation and policies for development and the benefits of their people. **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



Indonesian Air Force commandos patrol Komodo Airport ahead of the 42nd ASEAN meetings in Labuan Bajo

ASEAN SUMMIT

Alarm over Myanmar, sea feud under spotlight

JIM GOMEZ & EDNA TARIGAN, LABUAN BAJO

ALARM over Myanmar's still-unfolding deadly civil strife, including an armed attack on an aid convoy, and China's aggressive actions in the disputed South China Sea are expected to be put under the spotlight this week when Southeast Asian leaders meet in Indonesia.

Top diplomats of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations convened yesterday in the resort town of Labuan Bajo to finalize the agenda ahead of the two-day summit of the 10-nation bloc's heads of state.

The United States and China are not part of the twice-yearly summit, but their escalating rivalry looms large over the high-profile Asian gathering. Beijing has warned that U.S. efforts to strengthen security alliances and intensify combat-readiness drills with Asian allies would endanger regional stability.

Founded in 1967 in the Cold-War era, ASEAN has struggled to avoid getting entangled in the major-power competition as a bloc. But that often seemed futile given the regional group's diverse membership — from authoritarian Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, which are closely geopolitically aligned with Beijing, to liberal democracies like the Philippi-

nes, which is Washington's oldest treaty ally in Asia and recently allowed an expansion of American military presence in the country, to China's outrage.

The rest — Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam — have heavy economic and security engagements with the U.S. and China.

"ASEAN wants to remain open, to cooperate with anyone," said Indonesian President Joko Widodo, this year's ASEAN chair. "We also don't want ASEAN to be anyone's proxy."

Bedrock principles of non-interference in each other's domestic affairs and deciding by consensus have held the unwieldy club of tyrants, monarchs and democracies together for decades. But that approach has also constrained it from rapidly dealing with crises that spill beyond borders.

Those principles were being tested after Myanmar's army seized power from the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi in February 2021 and plunged the country into deadly chaos. It's become one of ASEAN's gravest crises since its establishment.

Myanmar military airstrikes in April killed as many as 100 people, including many children, who were attending a ceremony by opponents of army rule, according to witnesses.

Lina Alexandra of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in

Jakarta said ASEAN's inability to persuasively and rapidly address a potential political conflagration like the Myanmar crisis should prompt it to take a second look at its founding principles.

"ASEAN can no longer hide under the principles of non-interference and consensus," she told the AP. "All of that can work in a non-urgent situation that does not require speed and immediate decision-making to control a crisis."

Over the weekend, around the time Widodo was frantically calling for an end to such violence, a convoy delivering aid to displaced villagers and carrying Indonesian and Singaporean diplomats came under fire by unidentified men armed with pistols in Myanmar's eastern Shan state. A security team with the convoy returned fire and a vehicle was damaged, but no one in the convoy was injured, state-run television MRTV reported.

Indonesia had arranged for the delivery of the aid after a long-delayed assessment "but it was very unfortunate that in the middle of the trip there was a shootout," Widodo said.

"This will not dampen the level of ASEAN and Indonesia to call again to stop violence," Widodo told reporters Monday, renewing his call for dialogue among contending parties in Myanmar. "This condition will not make anyone win."

More than 3,450 civilians

have been killed by security forces since Myanmar's military forcibly took power, and thousands more remain imprisoned, said the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which keeps tallies of casualties

and arrests linked to the repression by the military government.

As ASEAN's current leader, Indonesia has considerably eased its fierce criticism of Myanmar's military and took "a non-megaphone diplomacy approach" to encourage dialogue and an immediate halt to the violence, which are part of a five-point peace plan Southeast Asian leaders forged with Myanmar's top general in 2021, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi said.

Under international pressure to do more to address the violence, ASEAN leaders stopped inviting Myanmar's top general to their summits, instead allowing only non-political representatives. Myanmar's military-led rulers have protested the move as a violation of the bloc's non-interference policy.

"To put it mildly, the organization is now facing nothing short of an existential crisis," said Richard Heydarian, a lecturer on international affairs at the state-run University of the Philippines.

Even regional diplomats who were involved in ASEAN work before have

either been guardedly optimistic of the bloc or harshly critical of it. When asked by The Associated Press to give one word that best describes the bloc's current status, a Southeast Asian diplomat replied, "Beleaguered." Another said, "Opprobrium."

They spoke on condition of anonymity because of a lack of clearance to comment publicly on the issue.

In a post-summit communique to be issued by Widodo on behalf of the ASEAN leaders, they plan to renew a call for self-restraint in the disputed South China Sea, where China has set off alarms from time to time due to its increasingly assertive actions to fortify its expansive claims.

"Concerns were expressed by some ASEAN member states on the land reclamations, activities, and serious incidents in the area, including damage to the marine environment, which has eroded trust and confidence, increased tensions, and may undermine peace, security, and stability in the region," said a draft of the communique, which was obtained by the AP, without naming China. **MDT/AP**

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BRUSSELS EFFECT

In global rush to regulate AI, Europe set to be trailblazer

KELVIN CHAN, LONDON

THE breathtaking development of artificial intelligence has dazzled users by composing music, creating images and writing essays, while also raising fears about its implications. Even European Union officials working on groundbreaking rules to govern the emerging technology were caught off guard by AI's rapid rise.

The 27-nation bloc proposed the Western world's first AI rules two years ago, focusing on reining in risky but narrowly focused applications. General purpose AI systems like chatbots were barely mentioned. Lawmakers working on the AI Act considered whether to include them but weren't sure how, or even if it was necessary.

"Then ChatGPT kind of boom, exploded," said Dragos Tudorache, a Romanian member of the European Parliament co-leading the measure. "If there was still some that doubted as to whether we need something at all, I think the doubt was quickly vanished."

The release of ChatGPT last year captured the world's attention because of its ability to generate human-like responses based on what it has learned from scanning vast amounts of online materials. With concerns emerging, European lawmakers moved swiftly in recent weeks to add language on general AI systems as they put the finishing touches on the legislation.

The EU's AI Act could become the de facto global standard for artificial intelligence, with companies and organizations potentially deciding that the sheer size of the bloc's single market would make it easier to comply than develop different products for different regions.

"Europe is the first regional bloc to significantly attempt to regulate AI, which is a huge challenge considering the wide range of systems that the broad term 'AI' can cover," said Sarah Chander, senior policy adviser at digital rights group EDRI.

Regulators are concerned about new ethical and societal risks posed by ChatGPT and other general purpose AI systems, which could trans-



form daily life, from jobs and education to copyright and privacy.

The White House recently brought in the heads of tech companies working on AI including Microsoft, Google and ChatGPT creator OpenAI to discuss the risks, while the Federal Trade Commission has warned that it wouldn't hesitate to crack down.

China has issued draft regulations mandating security assessments for any products using generative AI systems like ChatGPT. Britain's competition watchdog has opened a review of the AI market, while Italy briefly banned ChatGPT over a privacy breach.

The EU's sweeping regulations — covering any provider of AI services or products — are expected to be approved by a European Parliament committee Thursday, then head into negotiations between the 27 member countries, Parliament and the EU's executive Commission.

European rules influencing the rest of the world — the so-called Brussels effect — previously played out after the EU tightened data privacy and mandated common phone-charging cables, though such efforts have been criticized for stifling innovation.

Attitudes could be different this time. Tech leaders including Elon Musk and Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak have called for a six-month pause to consider the risks.

Geoffrey Hinton, a computer scientist known as the "Godfather of AI," and fellow AI pioneer Yoshua Bengio voiced their concerns last week about

unchecked AI development.

Tudorache said such warnings show the EU's move to start drawing up AI rules in 2021 was "the right call."

Google, which responded to ChatGPT with its own Bard chatbot and is rolling out AI tools, declined to comment. The company has told the EU that "AI is too important not to regulate."

Microsoft, a backer of OpenAI, did not respond to a request for comment. It has welcomed the EU effort as an important step "toward making trustworthy AI the norm in Europe and around the world."

Mira Murati, chief technology officer at OpenAI, said in an interview last month that she believed governments should be involved in regulating AI technology.

But asked if some of OpenAI's tools should be classified as posing a higher risk, in the context of proposed European rules, she said it's "very nuanced."

"It kind of depends where you apply the technology," she said, citing as an example a "very high-risk medical use case or legal use case" versus an accounting or advertising application.

OpenAI CEO Sam Altman plans stops in Brussels and other European cities this month in a world tour to talk about the technology with users and developers.

Recently added provisions to the EU's AI Act would require "foundation" AI models to disclose copyright material used to train the systems, according to a recent partial dra-

ft of the legislation obtained by The Associated Press.

Foundation models, also known as large language models, are a subcategory of general purpose AI that includes systems like ChatGPT. Their algorithms are trained on vast pools of online information, like blog posts, digital books, scientific articles and pop songs.

"You have to make a significant effort to document the copyrighted material that you use in the training of the algorithm," paving the way for artists, writers and other content creators to seek redress, Tudorache said.

Officials drawing up AI regulations have to balance risks that the technology poses with the transformative benefits that it promises.

Big tech companies developing AI systems and European national ministries looking to deploy them "are seeking to limit the reach of regulators," while civil society groups are pushing for more accountability, said EDRI's Chander.

"We want more information as to how these systems are developed — the levels of environmental and economic resources put into them — but also how and where these systems are used so we can effectively challenge them," she said.

Under the EU's risk-based approach, AI uses that threaten people's safety or rights face strict controls.

Remote facial recognition is expected to be banned. So are government "social scoring" systems that judge people based on their behavior. **MDT/AP**

this day in history

1978 ITALY MOURNS MURDERED STATESMAN



The murdered Italian politician Aldo Moro has been buried after a private funeral service and the Interior Minister, Francesco Cossiga, has resigned.

Italians stopped work to pay tribute to Mr Moro, leader of the ruling Christian Democrat Party who was twice prime minister and considered the chief candidate for president.

He was also the architect of a plan to include the Communists in government for the first time in Italy's history - a plan which came into being the day after he was captured 55 days ago.

Mr Moro was kidnapped on 16 March after left-wing Red Brigade gunmen ambushed his car killing his chauffeur and five policemen.

For eight weeks, they held him at a secret location in Rome allowing him to send letters to his family and fellow politicians begging the government to negotiate with his captors.

They demanded the release of 13 Red Brigade members. It is reported that in the last few days the kidnapers told Mr Moro's family they would release him if just one of their gang were released.

The government, under President Giulio Andreotti, resolutely refused all pleas from family, friends, even the Pope himself to concede to any demands.

Eight weeks after he was taken, his body was found riddled with bullets in the boot of a red Renault 5 parked strategically between the headquarters of the ruling Christian Democrat Party and Communist Party HQ in central Rome.

When news of his death broke out, crowds gathered round the car and police had to force their way through to let Mr Cossiga identify the body.

In a public statement, Mr Cossiga then said he was responsible for the decision not to negotiate with the kidnapers and was now stepping down from his post.

About 100,000 people crammed into the St John Lateran square in Rome to protest against the killing holding up banners that read "Murderers" and black-bordered photos of Mr Moro.

The crowd chanted "Moro lives" and union leaders made emotional speeches calling for a united front against terrorism.

Pope Paul VI, a personal friend of Mr Moro who had pleaded with the government to negotiate with the Red Brigade, said the murder was "a stain of blood that dishonours our country".

The pontiff was addressing Italy's parliament which today voted in tough new anti-terrorist legislation aimed at the Red Brigade.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

The Red Brigade was a left-wing terrorist group formed in 1970 with the sole aim of overthrowing capitalist Italy by violent means. Most of their leading members had been captured and imprisoned by the mid-1980s.

The daring kidnap and murder of such a well-known and respected statesman such as Aldo Moro left the nation in a state of numbed shock. There were some who said police incompetence in finding him and government intransigence were all part of a grand conspiracy.

Francesco Cossiga was not long out of power. The following year he became prime minister and was Italy's president from 1985 to 1992.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS

ARIES Mar. 21-Apr. 19
Your high energy will enable you to take the role of leader in group functions. Don't tell others of your plans. It may not be the best time to socialize with clients or colleagues today.

TAURUS Apr. 20-May. 20
Don't overreact if your partner has a poor attitude. Get involved in creative projects that will enhance your earning power. Look into real estate. You can make extra money.

GEMINI May. 21-Jun. 21
New romantic ties can be made; however, you must make sure that your motives are not selfish before you make your move. Don't blow situations out of proportion.

CANCER Jun. 22-Jul. 22
Your business sense will be leading you in a direction that indicates more travel and communication. Take time to talk things over. Travel for business or pleasure.

LEO Jul. 23-Aug. 22
Be very careful while in transit or while traveling in foreign countries. Arguments with children or friends may leave you steaming. Don't give in too quickly.

VIRGO Aug. 23-Sep. 22
Take a break; you can finally mend any disputes on the home front. Raise your self esteem and your confidence if you want to get back into the mainstream again.

LIBRA Sep. 23-Oct. 22
Deal with in-laws today. You can enhance your cash flow if you pick up additional skills. You should be raising your self esteem and confidence in order to promote your work.

SCORPIO Oct. 23-Nov. 21
You may find that your boss is not delighted with your work lately. You should sign up for creative courses. Concentrate on your work. You can convince anyone of anything.

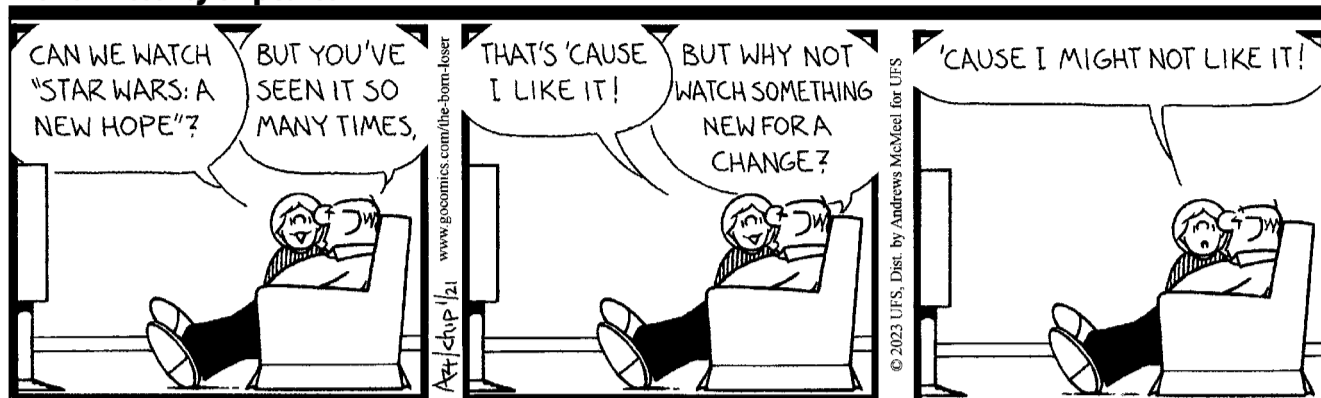
SAGITTARIUS Nov. 22-Dec. 21
Be prepared to jump quickly if you wish to stay in the forefront of your industry today. You will do best to entertain those you wish to close deals with.

CAPRICORN Dec. 22-Jan. 19
Difficulties will result if you have to deal with controversial groups today. Don't be too eager to give a piece of your mind or even your opinion today.

AQUARIUS Jan. 20-Feb. 18
Don't be too shy to promote your own interests. Mingle with those who have similar interests, and you should be able to start something.

PISCES Feb. 19-Mar. 20
You will have original ideas for ways to make extra money. Focus on what's important rather than spreading yourself too thin and accomplishing little.

The Born Loser by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

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

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

WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	14	28	cloudy
Changchun	6	19	fine
Chengdu	14	22	rain
Chongqing	17	22	rain
Fuzhou	15	27	fine
Guangzhou	21	27	overcast
Guiyang	11	18	showers
Haikou	24	29	thunderstorms
Hangzhou	12	22	overcast
Harbin	2	17	fine
Hefei	13	21	cloudy
Nanjing	12	21	overcast
Shanghai	14	23	cloudy
Taipei	16	24	fine
Wuhan	16	19	rain
Hong Kong	24	27	cloudy
WORLD			
Moscow	7	16	snow
Frankfurt	9	17	cloudy
Paris	9	17	rain
London	9	17	rain
New York	13	23	fine

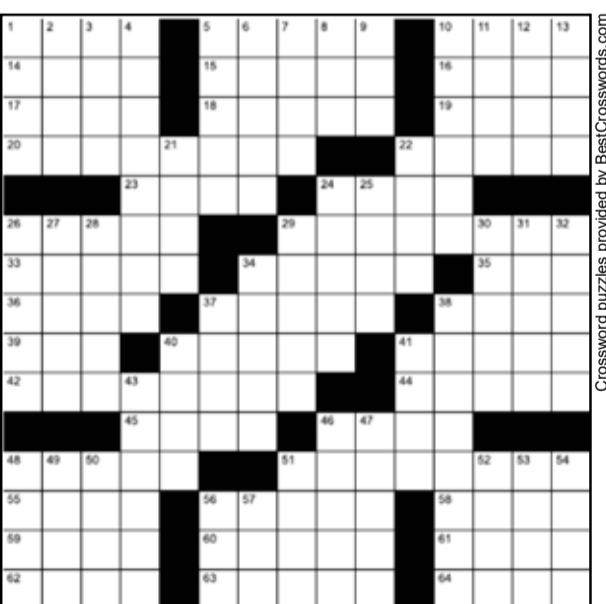
CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Blues singer James; 5- The Younger and The Elder; 10- Beaver creations; 14- ___ Pack; young 1980s actors; 15- In conflict with, with "of"; 16- Leave; 17- Waist band; 18- Part of TNT; 19- Actor Lugosi; 20- Buttonwood; 22- English royal house; 23- Manitoba native; 24- Duration; 26- Supple; 29- Enclosure; 33- Made a mistake; 34- Fortune-telling cards; 35- Decoration at the top of a chair leg; 36- Female servant; 37- Spud; 38- Lady of Sp.; 39- U of U athlete; 40- Songwriters' org.; 41- Silent; 42- Hold back; 44- Hives; 45- Spanish muralist; 46- Turn over; 48- Bewildered; 51- Conflate; 55- And ___ goes; 56- Appliance brand; 58- Mid-month times; 59- Frat party purchases; 60- Suggest; 61- Cong. meeting; 62- Tennis great Arthur; 63- Ph.D. hurdles; 64- Ferrara family;

DOWN 1- Subsidies; 2- Low card; 3- Apply powder to oneself; 4- Connected; 5- Slender boat; 6- Ablaze; 7- Carry; 8- ___ Town; 9- ___-mo; 10- Expose as being false; 11- Canned; 12- Actor O'Shea; 13- Toronto paper; 21- TV horse; 22- Diplomacy; 24- Throat problem; 25- Wanting; 26- Madagascar monkey; 27- Steamed; 28- Attempts; 29- The devil; 30- Eagle's home; 31- Outmoded; 32- Muse of poetry in Greek mythology; 34- Unsaid; 37- Boris Godunov, for one; 38- Astonishment; 40- Carpeting calculation; 41- Witty remark; 43- African fly; 46- Ultimate; 47- Atty.-to-be exams; 48- ___ silly question...; 49- Some digits; 50- [Oh, well]; 51- Group of individual facts; 52- Lyric poems; 53- Sleeveless garment; 54- "___ quam videri" (North Carolina's motto); 56- "...and seven years ___"; 57- Debussy's "La ___";

Yesterday's solution

A	L	L	A		R	O	E		N	O	R	A			
T	E	E	N	S		R	O	D	S		O	V	V	M	
O	N	E	P		B	O	S	S		H	A	R	I		
P	O	R	T	R	A	I	T	A	G	O	R	T	A	S	
I	T	S		T	A	Y	N		E	L	S				
E	N	R	A	G	E		A	D	I	E					
L	O	O	M	S		C	L	A	S	S	N	A	T	E	
A	L	A	I		T	N	E	R	T		R	I	O	T	
L	O	N	G		T	C	O	R	N		F	E	D	E	R
M	A	E		O	S	E		T	A	I					
A	R	D	E	N	T		S	O	L	V	A	B	L	E	
T	R	I	M		O	R	E	O		E	L	I	O	T	
T	A	C	T		R	I	E	L		R	E	T	R	O	
T	R	I	S												



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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
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POP MUSIC

SET TO HOST, UK TAKING EUROVISION VERY SERIOUSLY THIS YEAR

HILARY FOX, LONDON

THERE'S nothing like nearly winning to wake people up. And the U.K.'s second-place position at last year's Eurovision Song Contest has helped kickstart widespread enthusiasm for 2023's edition — taking place in Liverpool this week.

Sam Ryder's "Space Man" restored the nation's interest last year with his smiling enthusiasm, soaring vocals and great song despite coming on the heels of James Newman in 2021, who received no points at all, and 2019's Michael Rice, who also came in last.

Normally the winner of the previous contest would host the next one, but that winner was Ukraine, and the ongoing war there has made that impossible. So the U.K., as runnerup, is hosting instead.



King Charles III and Camilla meet the presenters of this year's Eurovision Song Contest, from right; Scott Mills, Hannah Waddingham, Rylan Clark and Julia Sanina, as they visit the host venue of Eurovision Song Contest, the M&S Bank Arena in Liverpool

Singer Rita Ora says Eurovision — the semi-finals begin today [Ma-

cau time] and the final is Saturday — has received another lease on life in

the U.K.

"The Eurovision is suddenly just (becoming) huge again and I'm really here for it," she said.

She's performing during the interval at a semifinal in Liverpool, but her connection to the event goes back much further: Ora was lined up to represent the U.K. in 2009, but decided not to.

After all, until Ryder, competing in Eurovision was no guarantee of a sparkling career for a Brit.

The last time the U.K. won the contest was 1997, thanks to Katrina and the Waves and "Love Shine A Light."

The intervening years have seen five last-place results for the U.K.

That could add up to a lot of pressure on this year's U.K. entry, Mae Muller, but she seems to welcome it.

"The energy feels different," Muller said.

The London singer-songwriter is representing the U.K. with "I Wrote a Song," and says Ryder helped change the way people inside and outside the U.K. view its participation in Eurovision.

"I feel like with the

U.K., we have the tendency to be quite like self-deprecating," Muller said. "We don't take ourselves too seriously and I feel like that might have been like half our problem maybe with Eurovision. And I feel like now we're like, 'Let's take this seriously. Like, let's do this.'"

Liverpool singer Rebecca Ferguson is performing in her hometown alongside Ukrainian singer Aloysha in a duet during the semifinals interval.

Ferguson thinks that the U.K. had become disheartened with the scores, but that being "so close" in 2022 changed things.

"The U.K. were like, yeah, OK then ... I can get into this," she said. "We like winning, basically."

Ukrainian rock star Julia Sánina, the frontwoman of The Hardkiss, is one of this year's Eurovision hosts and a lifelong fan of the competition.

She agrees that the U.K. is taking it more seriously in 2023 "because of Sam Ryder and his musicality." But in addition to last year's success, there is added enthusiasm because Li-

verpool is hosting on behalf of Ukraine.

The Ukrainian entry Kalush Orchestra won in 2022. When the U.K. agreed to host in Ukraine's place, it promised to celebrate Ukraine's culture and people in every way.

Sánina says she has felt that warm welcome in Liverpool.

"Beautiful city, super friendly people. And what was heartwarming for me that I saw lots of Ukrainian flags and Ukrainian blue and yellow colors all over the city," she said.

After all, the U.K. does like a party.

"Eurovision, in my culture and when I grew up, was everything," Ora said.

The Kosovo-born singer grew up with Albanian parents in London.

"It was like getting around the TV, all the music, like, 'Everyone shut up,' when there's like a song on. There's drinks flowing, everyone's having a good time because it's like, it was almost like rooting for your country or like where you're from," she added.

"It's just a cool way of everyone getting together," she said. **MDT/AP**

16
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MACAO ARTS FESTIVAL

FOOTBALL

Lionel Messi's next move fuels frenzy of speculation

LIONEL Messi's next stop could mark his return to Barcelona. Or he could make a hugely profitable move to Saudi Arabia. Staying at Paris Saint-Germain is the most unlikely of outcomes.

Increasingly fevered speculation continued to build yesterday into where the World Cup winner from Argentina will play next season. Inter Miami in Major League Soccer is also chasing the seven-time Ballon d'Or winner.

French media have reported that Messi has a verbal deal with an unnamed Saudi club, a move that would put him back into the same league as Cristiano Ronaldo. But one soccer transfer gossip specialist, Fabrizio Romano, was quick to update his 14.6 million followers on Twitter that there will be no decision until after the season.

Both Barcelona and Al Hilal clearly want Messi, who turns 36 next month and also wants to keep playing for Argentina. South

American qualifying for the 2026 World Cup starts in September, with Argentina at home against Ecuador.

Messi's trip last week to Saudi Arabia — and subsequent suspension by PSG for the unauthorized absence — has re-ignited talk he will play in the Middle Eastern country if he leaves the French capital as expected. One French media report claimed Messi has agreed to a massive deal with an unnamed Saudi club worth at least 500 million euros (\$548 million).

PSG declined to comment when asked by The Associated Press if there is an agreement in place for Messi to leave the club.

Messi was linked with a move to Riyadh-based Saudi club Al Hilal last month, the same city where Ronaldo's team, Al Nassr, is located.

Messi played against Ronaldo in January in an exhibition game in Riyadh, with the Qatari-owned PSG facing a combined team from

Al Nassr and Al Hilal. Ronaldo's arrival has already boosted Saudi Arabia's soccer profile in the Middle East in a regional rivalry fueled by Qatar hosting last year's World Cup.

Having Messi playing against Ronaldo would do even more for the country as Saudi Arabia prepares to stage the Club World Cup for the first time in December.

Messi returned to training with PSG this week after the club lifted his suspension following the promotional trip to Saudi Arabia. He missed practice last Monday, the day after PSG's 3-1 loss to Lorient. The club announced his suspension last Tuesday.

Messi subsequently apologized to the club and his teammates for traveling without PSG's permission.

Messi joined PSG on a two-year deal after tearfully leaving financially stricken Barcelona against his will in 2021, with an option for an extra year if both parties agreed. His contract runs until the end of



AP PHOTO

June, but talks about extending reportedly broke down, making Messi's exit seem inevitable.

Barcelona coach Xavi Hernandez, who is poised to lead his team to the Spanish league title this season, has openly said he wants his former teammate to come back.

Barcelona is the club closest to the heart of Messi and his family. They moved to Spain in 2001 and Messi scored 672 goals — including an extraordinary 50-goal league season in 2012 — and won four Champions League trophies with Barcelona among a glittering array of silverware.

Barcelona president Joan Laporta is also eager to bring Messi back, but must overcome

the club's severe debts and restrictions imposed by the Spanish league.

Barcelona's return to the Champions League could also be affected by an ongoing UEFA investigation into payments of millions of dollars over more than a decade to a company linked to a Spanish refereeing official. No evidence of suspected match-fixing has yet emerged.

Playing in Saudi Arabia would lessen the wear and tear on Messi's body while also offering lower-quality games ahead of World Cup qualifying and the 2024 Copa America in the United States, with Argentina the defending champion. **MDT/AP**

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OPINION

China Daily
 Editorial, China Daily

**PANDEMIC ENDING, BUT
 LESSONS NEED TO BE LEARNED**

The World Health Organization declared an end to COVID-19 as a global public health emergency on Friday, but that does not mean, as WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said, the disease is no longer a global threat.

The world health body made the decision based on the fact that all main indexes of the pandemic including the numbers of infections, hospitalized patients and deaths have dropped. It remains a health threat, however, even if it can be treated at a relatively low cost, medically, socially and financially.

By lifting the global public health emergency, the WHO means to help countries downgrade their prevention and control measures, so as to facilitate the full resumption of cross-border flow of people and goods.

China, for example, downgraded the management of COVID-19 from class A to class B from Jan 8, in accordance with the country's law on prevention and treatment of infectious diseases, and removed it from quarantinable infectious disease management. Thanks to the move, the just-concluded May Day holiday witnessed about 274 million domestic trips and a boom in outbound travel.

Yet the three devastating years of the pandemic should not be forgotten nor should the lessons learned overlooked. Had some countries, especially the developed ones, taken COVID-19 more seriously and made proper arrangements for testing, tracking and treatment, many lives could have been saved. For instance, had the US administration adopted a scientific approach to the pandemic, a large number of the 1.12 million COVID-19 deaths in the country could have been prevented.

What complicated many countries' fight against the pandemic are the anti-mask, anti-vaccine and anti-social distancing "movements", which also put other people's lives in danger.

And what hindered the global fight against the pandemic and worsened the situation are politically motivated "origin-tracing" campaigns, driven especially by US politicians. The threat of the disease may have lessened, but no one should take it for granted that another virus or bacterium will not bring down the world to its knees again in the near future. The lessons learned should drive all the countries to prepare, and prepare well, for another medical emergency.

**POPULATION POLICY PROMOTES
 HIGH-QUALITY DEVELOPMENT**

President Xi Jinping hosted the first meeting of the Central Commission for Financial and Economic Affairs on Friday which proposed to systematically deal with the population issue and promote high-quality development through reforms and innovations.

The road map worked out by the meeting proposed to include population development in the grand blueprint of national modernization, in order to facilitate high-quality overall development. In its conclusion, the meeting said that given the declining birth rate, rising aging population and regional population growth, it is necessary to adapt to the changing situation and promote demographic development.

A declining birth rate and rising aging population have been a common problem for many developed economies. Now, according to National Bureau of Statistics data, even China's population is declining — it declined by 850,000 in 2022.

While new births fell below the 10 million mark for the first time — 9.56 million — in 2022, the aging population exceeded 280 million, accounting for 19.8 percent of the total population.

Given these facts, the meeting proposed to focus on improving people's quality of life, and strive to maintain a moderate fertility rate and population size. The proposal includes using innovative policy tools to provide basic eldercare for senior citizens and reducing the burden on young people.

Friday's meeting proposed measures to unleash the full potential of human resources and build a better future for all.

Chinese exports grew 8.5% in April, customs data showed yesterday, displaying unexpected strength despite weakening global demand. Exports grew to \$295.4 billion compared with a year earlier, although at a slower pace, building on momentum seen in the March data when exports rose 14.8%.

But imports shrank at a faster pace, with the total slumping 7.9% to \$205.2 billion compared to the same time last year, according to data Tuesday from the General Administration of Customs. It was down 1.4% in March. Trade with the U.S. and European Union showed a contraction in comparison with last year.

China's trade surplus in April widened, growing 82.3% compared to the same period last year.

In the first four months of the year, exports edged up 2.5% over the same period of 2022 to \$1.12 trillion, the General Administration of Customs of China reported. Total imports contracted 7.3% to \$822 billion.

Despite that, forecasters say exports should weaken this year.

Citing the slower pace of expansion for export data compared to last month, analysts said the 8.5% figure may not reflect a real uptick in exports.

AP PHOTO



**THOUSANDS MARCH IN
 SILENCE IN SERBIA AFTER
 MASS SHOOTINGS**

JOVANA GEC, BELGRADE

THOUSANDS marched in silence yesterday [Macau time] in Serbia in a major outpouring of grief and anger against the populist government and how it reacted after two mass shootings last week that left 17 people dead and 21 wounded, many of them children.

The gatherings in Belgrade and the northern city of Novi Sad were dubbed "Serbia against violence."

They were called by opposition parties, which demanded the resignations of government ministers and the withdrawal licenses to the state controlled mainstream media that promote violence and often host convicted war criminals and crime figures on their programs.

After the protest officially ended, some of the protesters chanted slogans against Serbia's increasingly autocratic president, Aleksandar Vucic, demanding that he step down, as they passed by government headquarters in Belgrade.

The president later dismissed the protest as "shameful" during an interview on pro-government Happy television. He accused the opposition of abusing people's grief for their political ends and inciting violence.

"It's pure politics," said Vucic, also describing the

organizers as "vultures."

The shootings — on Wednesday in Belgrade at an elementary school, and on Thursday in a rural area south of the capital — left the nation stunned. They triggered calls to encourage tolerance and rid society of widespread hate speech and a gun culture stemming from the 1990s wars.

Education Minister Branko Ruzic submitted his resignation on Sunday and authorities launched a gun crackdown, but opposition said this was too little, too late.

There were no official estimates of crowds that streamed into central Belgrade streets yesterday, but observers described the gathering as the biggest in years against Vucic and his government.

In Novi Sad, participants held a banner reading "Everything has to stop" and threw flowers into the Danube River to commemorate those killed in the shootings.

"We have to learn anew how to speak to each other and how to create a healthy future ... to nurture the beauty of living, of art, science and humanity," said Biljana Stojkovic, a leader of the leftist Zajedno, or Together, party. "The worst among us have been in power for an entire decade, and they imposed the norms of aggres-

sion, intolerance, crime and lies."

One of the largest anti-government protest in recent years in Serbia also reflected how rattled the nation has been by the shootings.

The school shooting on Wednesday was the first in Serbia's recent history. A 13-year-old boy took his father's guns and opened fire at the school he attended in the heart of Belgrade, shooting at his peers and killing seven girls, one boy and a school guard.

A day later, a 20-year-old man used an automatic weapon in a shooting rampage in two villages in central Serbia, randomly killing eight people and wounding 14. Prosecutors said that he has confessed to the killings and said he wanted to spread fear among residents, state media have reported.

Earlier this week, police deployed in schools throughout Serbia in an effort to restore a shaken sense of security as children largely returned to classes. Teams of experts have been sent with the backing of U.N. children's agency UNICEF, offering support and guidelines for children, their parents and teachers.

Thousands have lit candles and left messages, toys and flowers to commemorate the victims. MDT/AP

AP PHOTO



Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan was arrested yesterday as he appeared in a court in the country's capital, Islamabad, to face charges in multiple graft cases. Security agents dragged Khan outside and shoved him into an armored car before whisking him away. The arrest, which marks a dramatic escalation on Pakistan's political scene, drew nationwide condemnation from supporters of the popular opposition leader and former cricket star turned Islamist politician.

AP PHOTO



Israel carried out a series of targeted airstrikes in densely populated areas of the Gaza Strip yesterday, killing three senior commanders of the Islamic Jihad militant group and at least 10 civilians, Palestinian health officials said. Two of the commanders' wives, several of their children and other bystanders were among the dead. The attacks set the stage for what is likely to be a new round of heavy fighting. They hit the top floor of an apartment building and a house in Gaza City, and a third house in the southern town of Rafah. The Palestinian Health Ministry said 20 people were wounded, and that some were in serious or critical condition.

AP PHOTO



UK An anti-monarchy group says it plans to take legal action against London's Metropolitan Police after several of its members were arrested as they prepared to protest the coronation of King Charles III. Civil liberties groups are accusing the police, and Britain's Conservative government, of stifling the right to protest with new powers to clamp down on peaceful but disruptive demonstrations. The police force expressed "regret" that the activists were prevented from protesting, but defended its handling of the coronation.