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Bangladesh's High Court yesterday commuted the death sentences of seven Islamic militants to life in prison for their role in a 2016 attack on a cafe in the capital, Dhaka, that killed 20 people, mostly foreigners. A special anti-terrorism tribunal in 2019 sentenced the seven members of a banned militant group to death in the attack that triggered a major crackdown on extremists. The group behind the attack on the Holey Artisan Cafe, the Jumatul Mujahedeen Bangladesh, wants to establish Sharia law.

AP PHOTO



China-US A major influx of Chinese migration to the United States on a relatively new and perilous route that has become increasingly popular with the help of social media. Chinese people were the fourth-highest nationality, after Venezuelans, Ecuadorians and Haitians, crossing the Darién Gap during the first nine months of this year, according to Panamanian immigration authorities.

More on macaudailytimes.com.mo

AP PHOTO



Israel expanded its military assault deeper into the northern Gaza Strip as the U.N. and medical staff expressed fears over airstrikes hitting closer to hospitals, where tens of thousands of Palestinians have sought shelter alongside thousands of wounded. Relief workers said the largest convoy of humanitarian aid to arrive in Gaza still fell far short of needs.

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EXPORTS DROP MOP9.5 BILLION

From January to September, the total value of merchandise exports dropped 6.1% year-on-year to MOP9.51 billion, with re-exports (MOP8.35 billion) and domestic exports (MOP1.17 billion) falling 3.1% and 23.4% respectively. The total value of merchandise imports grew 3.5% year-on-year to MOP105.80 billion, according to data from the Statistics and Census Service (DSEC). Analyzed by destination, merchandise exports to mainland China (MOP688 million), Hong Kong (MOP6.98 billion), the USA (MOP360 million) and the EU (MOP119 million) declined 28.7%, 10.4%, 27.7% and 16.7% respectively year-on-year in the first nine months of 2023.

LEI WAI NONG VISITS PHARMACEUTICAL FIRM TO CREATE PARTNERSHIPS

The Secretary for Economy and Finance, Lei Wai Nong, went to Zhangzhou City and visited a renowned local brand – Zhangzhou Pien Tze Huang Pharmaceutical Co., Ltd, with a view to seizing the development opportunities of Macau's "1+4" industrial diversification and the Guangdong-Macao In-depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin. The visit was also aimed at creating "more possibilities of in-depth cooperation between Fujian and Macau in the big health sector," according to a statement from Lei's office.

MACAU SENDS 234 ATHLETES TO NATIONAL YOUTH GAMES

Macau has sent a 234-member sports delegation to participate in the first National Youth Games (NYG) to be held in Guangxi from Nov. 5 to Nov. 15. The local sports delegation will participate in 17 competitions, including swimming, track and field, badminton, martial arts, fencing and judo. This event will include 57 competitions, with 10 of the competitions limited to students in middle schools and universities and the other 42 competitions open to the public. These competitions will be held in multiple venues across 14 Guangxi cities, eight counties and 12 higher education institutions.

CUSTOMS UNVEILS SMUGGLING CASES INCLUDING DOZENS OF MOUTAI

Macau Customs last week unveiled three smuggling cases using cross-border vehicles including a vehicle transporting 34 bottles of Moutai liquor to Macau from Zhuhai, via the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge Port. In the other two cases, 235 kilograms of fruit and nine kilograms of hairy crabs were smuggled in cross-border vehicles at Hengqin and Border Gate respectively. In the past six days, Customs also intercepted 80 incidents of smuggled goods in and out of the region at various ports, and seized more than 8,200 cigarettes, more than 100 old mobile phones and more than 400 beauty products.

TRANSPORT HEAD SUGGESTS LAWMAKER PROMOTE GOV'T CONCEPT OF PARKING

ANTHONY LAM

THE Transport Bureau (DSAT) has called for associations to better help the government promote and implement land transport policies.

Director of Transport Kelvin Lam made the suggestion in response to the lawmaker José Pereira Coutinho's written inquiry, adding that local associations should persuade people to use public parking lots. Coutinho is part of the management of the Association of Workers in Public Services of Macau.

Coutinho's inquiry noted local roadside parking spots are too small for ever-larger vehicles such as seven-seater cars and EVs.

Lam, in response, said "the basic dimensions" of such parking spots are 5 meters by 2 meters to 2.5 meters. However, he added, dimensions can fluctuate depending on geographical conditions and the number of spots, among other criteria.

In addition, the transport



official said the government has been phasing out roadside parking, before noting that the city has 62 government-managed public parking lots, comprising 23,000 and 18,000 spaces for light vehicles and motorcycles respectively.

In another inquiry, lawmaker Ron Lam criticized the government proposal to increase monthly parking fees

at seven public parking lots, namely Qingmao Border Checkpoint, Nam Van, Pak Vai, Vasco de Gama Garden, Edificio Cheng Chong, Pai Wai and Carlos D'Assumpção Plaza.

The DSAT has proposed the price rise to "increase the turnover rate" of these parking lots.

Citing bureau data, the lawmaker said that on ave-

rage, the Qingmao parking lot has 65% occupancy and is ranked 28th in Macau. Of the 17 parking lots that have occupancy rates surpassing 80%, four are among those listed above. The lawmaker said the Carlos D'Assumpção Plaza parking lot has an average occupancy rate of only 38%.

Lam said a more flexible tariff should be adopted to help ease occupancy during office hours. A general price hike will not help with the situation, he said.

He also expressed dissatisfaction in increasing parking fees for motorcycles, because it will further discourage the use of parking lots, which is currently unpopular. Moreover, increasing monthly rentals will not help encourage monthly ticket users to discard their tickets and use hourly parking instead.

On the contrary, he said, drivers are wondering if the bureau is trying to push up parking spot rentals in affected neighborhoods.

GAMING

Junkets tax plunges 92% to MOP3.5 million

STAFF REPORTER

REVENUES from junkets' tax paid to the government has plunged 92.5% to MOP3.5 million amid the junket crackdown and low gross gaming revenue (GGR) figures in 2022.

Data submitted to the Legislative Assembly shows revenues from the tax were far below the government's expectations of MOP43 million – which was listed in its budget for last year.

Last year in January, records show the number of gambling promoter licenses in the city decreased nearly 50% in one year, in the aftermath of the arrest of Suncity Group CEO and junket mogul, Alvin Chau.

Figures from the Gaming

Inspection and Coordination Bureau in 2022 showed Macau had 46 junket licensees: far fewer than the approved 85 licensed gaming promoters during that year.

However, the numbers continued to fall, dropping 21.7% in 2023. Government data shows the number of these gaming promoters in the region fell from 46 to 36 earlier this year – far from the 235 licensed junkets the city had in 2013.

Before the crackdown, junkets accounted for 75% of Macau's VIP gaming revenue, equating to around USD3 billion each year.

In December 2021, Chief Executive Ho Iat Seng admitted the existence of junket



operators was a "problem" for Macau. Consequently, he said that when the gambling law was amended, the government would enforce it rigorously.

Under the big gaming law

overhaul implemented on Jan. 1, gaming promoters can only work with one gaming concessionaire at a time and, even so, their contract must be approved by the local government, among other requirements.

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ECONOMY

IMF: Macau has highest GDP growth rate until 2024

LYNZY VALLES

MACAU has the highest growth rate projection for 2023 and 2024 among advanced economies listed by the IMF World Economic Outlook (WEO).

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) report said Macau is expected to grow 74.4% this year and at a slower rate of 27.2% in 2024, with the leading growth rate among advanced economies in Asia including Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong.

The rebound comes after the economy plunged 26.8% in 2022 amid the city's strict border regulations, halting international tourism arrivals from 2020.

Last year, the IMF warned that Macau SAR's economic recovery is expected to continue, but that it will take time before the economy fully regains its losses from the pandemic.

After a 54% decline in GDP in 2020, the economy expanded by

MDT ARCHIVE



19% in 2021, supported by the partial recovery of the gaming sector.

In terms of unemployment, the IMF projects a 2.8% and 2.9% unemployment rate in both 2023

and 2024 respectively.

The report released earlier this month states the IMF is warning of the world economy losing momentum in the face of higher interest rates, the ongoing war in

Ukraine and widening geopolitical rifts.

The IMF forecasted global economic growth to slow to 2.9% in 2024 from an expected 3% this year.

The forecast for next year is

down from the 3% it predicted back in July.

"We see a global economy that is limping along," IMF chief economist Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas previously told reporters ahead of the IMF and World Bank's fall meetings in Marrakech, Morocco, as cited in media reports.

The IMF expectation of 3% growth this year is down from 3.5% in 2022 but unchanged from its July projections.

Earlier this month, Fitch Ratings anticipated growth of up to 65% in Macau's economy this year, driven by sustained recovery in the gaming and tourism sector.

In its recent report, the firm said the strong growth comes amid China's faltering economy – which adds to worries over surging youth unemployment and a weak property sector.

"We project economic growth will remain robust at 17% in 2024, with full-year gaming revenue recovering further to almost 80% of its 2019 level," said Fitch Ratings.

Local government data, meanwhile, shows that for the first half of 2023, GDP grew 71.5% year-on-year in real terms, and Macau's overall economic output returned to 71% of its level in the same period of 2019.

The improving economic sentiment and employment environment facilitated an increase in private consumption activities.



SURVEY

Youth unhappy with gov't talent cultivation

ANTHONY LAM

A survey has shown local young people are dissatisfied with the outcome of government talent cultivation measures and the resources invested into them.

The Macao New Chinese Youth Association street-interviewed 662 people aged between 18 and 44 at the end of May and interviewed another 39 in six focus groups in early

August.

It discovered that out of a maximum of 10 points – indicating the highest satisfaction level – average scores of 4.74 and 4.88 were recorded for the outcome of the government's talent cultivation measures and the resources the government had invested in these measures.

About 47% of respondents agreed resources should be invested in cultivating prospective talent for the four major indus-

tries the government wants to develop, namely "big health," modern finance, high and new technologies, as well as MICE, business, culture and sports. These industries will revolve around Macau's position as the world tourism leisure center.

Less than 34% of respondents agreed Macau had sufficient reserves of professionals. People in Macau lack global horizons, creative and innovative capacities and expert knowledge and skills, as nearly 40%, 36% and 33% of respondents indicated respectively when asked. About 46% of respondents agreed local young people lack digital literacy compared with their counterparts in developed regions. Slightly over 60% of interviewed youths said they were willing to improve themselves through training sessions.

The survey operator recommended incentives to encourage employers to support in-house vocational training, refinements to the Continuing Education and Development Plan, the increase of support for license examinees, and expansion of investments in scholarships and grants, as well as improvement of digital literacy through formal and vocational education.

The group particularly called for a wider choice of training courses and tiered subsidies in continuing education planning.

TOURISM BOARD PROMOTES MACAU GP ON CATHAY PACIFIC FLIGHTS

CAMPAIGNS are being conducted with airline companies to promote the Macau Grand Prix (GP), such as screening marketing videos on Cathay Pacific flights, the local tourism chief said yesterday.

On the sidelines of the religious rituals for the Macau GP yesterday morning, director of Tourism Maria Helena de Senna Fernandes was asked how the car racing event – marking its 70th edition this year – is being marketed.

The official said campaigning with airline companies is an advertising channel. Promotional videos of the Macau GP are being played on Cathay Pacific flights, for example, to raise awareness of the event and persuade Hong

Kong-bound passengers to visit Macau for the GP.

In response to questions about the projected hotel occupancy rate, the tourism official said relevant data had not yet been collected, but said hotel bookings had been satisfactory recently.

She expressed confidence that the local hotel occupancy rate may surpass 90% during the two weekends of this year's Macau GP. She hoped the variety of activities that will be held in November will create interconnecting synergies.

To celebrate the event's 70th edition, the Macau GP organizing committee has decided to split – or expand – the normally one-weekend event into two. **AL**

RENATO MARQUES



SOCIAL AFFAIRS SECRETARY PLEDGES IMPROVEMENTS AFTER INFANT DIES

ANTHONY LAM

AFTER a baby's death while snapping at a daytime nursery, the Secretary for Social Affairs and Culture, Elsie Ao Ieong, yesterday pledged better training will be provided to childcare facilities.

On Oct. 19, a four-month-old girl was found unconscious at Fong Chong (Taipa) Nursery during an afternoon nap, before being declared dead at the hospital.

When asked about the incident yesterday morning on the sidelines of the religious rituals for the Macau Grand Prix, the official refrained from making extensive comments, citing on-going investigations and the lack of evidence as the reasons.

However, she pledged improved communications must be applied to ensure nurseries are compliant with relevant guidelines. She said adequate training must be conducted for nursery operators and



workers.

When asked if there is a shortage of workers at local nurseries, she avoided comment, saying such opinions are more suitable after investigations. She feared any opinions expressed may interfere with police investigations.

She also did not know when an investigative conclusion will be available.

Meanwhile, she said she felt "shocked and saddened," adding that the Social Welfare Bureau (IAS) would work with the police on whether guidelines had been fully followed.



GBA

AVERAGE GUANGDONG SALARY REACHES RMB9,100

A survey has revealed Guangdong Province's average monthly salary in 2023 is RMB9,100, a 5.8% growth year-over-year.

Several private entities under the Guangzhou Talent Group conducted the survey. It covered nine localities in the province and 17 professions.

According to the survey operator, the lower income group has logged "more obvious" salary growth, which "reflected certain effects in the provincial promotion of common wealth."

The survey found 60% of salaries were fi-

xed while 40% fluctuated.

Shenzhen led the province's salary level, with Guangzhou – the provincial capital – close behind. Macau's neighbor, Zhuhai, was third. The three cities recorded RMB12,300, RMB11,300 and RMB9,300 respectively in average salaries.

The three cities also recorded the fastest growth rate in salary levels. Shenzhen marked 7.2% year-over-year growth rate, with Guangzhou and Zhuhai between 6% and 7%.

The survey operator believes the income gap across the province

will continue to shrink due to the implementation of coordinated regional development strategies and policies.

Finance and computer-related industries, as well as the production and supply of public necessities paid the most: RMB21,400, RMB15,800 and RMB12,700. However, as far as growth rate is concerned, car manufacturing, e-commerce and equipment manufacturing logged the largest leaps, at 8.3%, 8% and 7.8%.

It was also shown that larger employers offered more competitive salaries. **AL**

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SOCIAL MEDIA

In Myanmar, a Facebook post deemed inflammatory led to an ex-minister's arrest

A former high-profile Myanmar army officer who had served as information minister and presidential spokesperson in a previous military-backed government has been arrested and charged with spreading false or inflammatory news, a statement from the current military government said.

In a statement sent to journalists, the military's information office said 64-year old Ye Htut, a retired lieutenant colonel, was arrested for violating Section 505(A) of the penal code, a provision called "incitement," for writing and spreading false news on his Facebook social media account.

His arrest came the same month a Myanmar military tribunal sentenced two high-ranking generals to life imprisonment after they were found guilty of high treason, accepting bribes, illegal possession of foreign currency and violating military discipline.

Those sentences appeared to



Deputy Information Minister and spokesperson of Myanmar's President Ye Htut, talks to journalists in Yangon yesterday

be the harshest so far for the senior members of the military's administrative bodies that were set up after the army seized power from the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi more than 2 1/2 years ago. The country has been in turmoil since then, with widespread armed resistance to military rule, which the army has been unable to quash despite its superiority in weapons and manpower.

Myanmar's military leadership is known for being close-knit and secretive, and this month's arrests are a rare public indication that there may be splits within its ranks.

Ye Htut was the spokesperson from 2013 to 2016 for President Thein Sein in a military-backed government and also information minister from 2014-2016.

The offense he is charged with

makes it a crime to publish or circulate comments that cause the public to hate the government and the military, a definition that allows prosecution of anyone the authorities deem to have made offending remarks. It is punishable by up to three years in prison.

The charge is frequently used against journalists and activists who displease the military, with the number of prosecutions soaring after the army's 2021 takeover.

News of Myanmar, an online media outlet sympathetic to the military, reported on its Telegram social media channel that Ye Htut was arrested Saturday night after a military officer from Yangon Regional Military Command filed a charge against him at a police station in Ahlone township in Yangon, the country's largest city.

The report said Ye Htut was taken to Insein prison in northern Yangon.

Data for Myanmar, an independent research group, said in

a report earlier this month that more than 1,300 people were detained for criticizing the military regime and showing support for opposition groups on social media between February last year and September this year.

After leaving government in 2016, Ye Htut took the role of a political observer and wrote books and posted articles on Facebook. For a time, he was a visiting senior research fellow at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, a center for Southeast Asia studies in Singapore.

After the army's 2021 takeover, he often posted short personal vignettes and travel essays on Facebook in which he made allusions that were generally recognized to be critical of Myanmar's current military rulers.

Ye Htut's arrest came a few days after pro-military Telegram accounts published his address and urged the military to arrest him for revealing on his own Facebook page the address of a retired military official. MDT/AP

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FINANCE

CHINA HOLDS CONFERENCE AS LEADERS MANEUVER TO GET SLOWING ECONOMY BACK ON TRACK

ELAINE KURTENBACH,
BANGKOK

CHINA'S leaders are expected to search for ways to mend the country's fractured property market, create jobs for millions of unemployed youths and spur faster growth in a meeting that reportedly began yesterday in Beijing.

The National Financial Work Conference, usually held twice a decade, is expected to further fortify leader Xi Jinping's control of the country's \$61 trillion financial sector. It follows the announcement last week of plans to issue 1 trillion yuan (\$330 billion) in bonds for infrastructure projects and disaster prevention.

By dipping deeper into deficit, the government is looking to counter a sharp slowdown in housing construction. Economists say the challenge lies in finding ways to ensure sustainable, balanced growth while unwinding massive debt held by real estate developers, local governments and regional banks.

The gathering, held behind closed doors and without any formal public announcement, will tackle such long-term reforms, Takehiko Nakao, former president of the Asian Development Bank, said in an interview with



China's CGTN network while attending an international financial conference in southern China's Guangzhou.

"Overall, the financial sector in China has made progress but at this moment they face challenges," said Nakao. While longer-term reforms are likely on the agenda, he suggested that more immediate problems such as the real estate sector are a priority.

The last financial work conference was held in 2017, but disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic caused it to be postponed in 2022.

The sudden death last week of former Premier Li Keqiang, an English-speaking economist who represented a generation of politicians schooled during a time of greater openness to liberal Western ideas, was seen by many observers to symbolize the shift toward stronger party controls.

Li was sidelined in a leadership shakeup last year. Since then, Xi has conducted a thorough reshuffle of economic and financial leadership positions and set up an entity called the Central

Financial Commission, seen as a move to coopt and weaken other regulators like the China Securities Regulatory Commission.

Last week, Xi reportedly visited the central bank, or People's Bank of China, a rare step that underscores the party's consolidation of controls over markets and financial institutions.

A newly appointed finance minister, Lan Fo'an, will be taking on a substantial challenge given the tide of debt that has engulfed many local governments as revenues from land concessions, a major source of funding, have dried up with a property downturn.

Although the economy, the world's second largest, expanded at a 4.9% annual pace in the first nine months of the year, close to the government's target of about 5%, the International Monetary Fund has warned that debts of local governments have risen to hazardous levels, raising the level of total government debt to nearly 150% of the country's GDP.

While retail sales and other services have revived since China ended its stringent anti-virus controls late last year, the jobless rate for young Chinese topped 20% earlier this year and demand has yet to fully bounce back.

Dipping deeper into deficit by issuing bonds will help counter the steep slowdown in housing construction as Chinese hold onto their savings while developers struggle to deliver new homes they've already sold.

As officials convened their meetings in Beijing, a court in Hong Kong adjourned until Dec. 4 a winding-up hearing for property developer China Evergrande, which got caught short when regulators began cracking down on excessive borrowing two years ago. Fears of a possible Evergrande default in 2021 rattled global markets, but they eased after the central bank said its problems were contained and Beijing would keep credit markets functioning.

With more than \$300 billion in liabilities, Evergrande is the biggest of dozens of developers that have defaulted. Its efforts to restructure overseas debts have been hindered by the detention of its chairman, Hui Ka Yan, in an investigation into unspecified suspected crimes.

Country Garden, another major developer, failed last week to meet a deadline to pay interest on a dollar bond. The company, based in the southern Chinese city of Foshan, had about \$187 billion in liabilities as of June.

The government has adopted various measures to try to contain fallout from the property crisis. It has eased controls on housing purchases and reduced the amount of funds banks must hold as reserves. It has adopted measures to support private industries, which provide the lion's share of jobs in China. It has also promised tax relief for small businesses and rural families. **MDT/AP**

XIANGSHAN FORUM

Russia's envoy uses the stage to accuse the US of fueling tensions

RUSSIA'S defense minister accused the United States yesterday of fueling geopolitical tensions to uphold its "global dominance by any means" and warned of the risk of confrontation between nuclear-armed countries.

Speaking at a defense forum in Beijing, Sergei Shoigu also accused NATO of trying to expand its footprint in the Asia-Pacific under the pretense of seeking dialogue and collaboration with regional countries.

"Washington for years has deliberately undermined and destroyed the foundations of international security and strategic stability, including the system of arms control agreements," Shoigu said at the Xiangshan Forum, China's biggest annual event centered



Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, in Beijing, yesterday

on military diplomacy. He added that the U.S. and its Western allies are threatening Russia through NATO's expansion "to

the east." Shoigu also reiterated Moscow's stance that Russia was open to negotiations about the war in Ukraine under what he described as the right conditions.

"The Western line of steady escalation of the conflict with Russia carries the threat of a direct military clash between nuclear powers, which is fraught with catastrophic consequences," he said.

Shoigu's speech followed that of Zhang Youxia, China's second-ranking military official and vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, who opened the three-day event in the absence of former defense

minister Gen. Li Shangfu, who would have normally hosted the event.

The Beijing event, attended by military representatives from dozens of countries, is an occasion for China to project regional leadership and boost military cooperation. The U.S. is represented by a delegation led by Xanthi Carras, the Defense Department's leading official on China.

Zhang said China was "willing to develop military ties with the U.S. on the basis of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation."

China suspended military communication with the U.S. in August 2022 to show its displeasure over a visit by former U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to self-ruled Taiwan.

Without directly naming the U.S., Zhang criticized "certain countries" that "keep stirring up troubles around the world."

He also urged for "an immediate cease-fire" in the latest Israel-Hamas war, sparked by the Palestinian militant group's deadly Oct. 7 incursion into southern Israel, and called for a "resumption of peace talks" between Israel and the Palestinians.

China claims it's neutral in Russia's war on Ukraine but maintains close ties with Russia, with frequent state visits and joint military drills between the two nations. It has similarly sought to project a mediator role in the Israel-Hamas war, though experts say Beijing's influence in the conflict is limited.

Zhang reiterated threats by the Chinese government regarding any efforts toward Taiwan's independence, saying that "no matter who tries to split Taiwan from China in any form, China and the Chinese military will never allow that to happen." **MDT/AP**

DIPLOMACY

Beijing believes the path to a Xi-Biden meeting in San Francisco won't be 'smooth sailing'

CHINA'S foreign minister believes the road to an expected meeting between President Xi Jinping and U.S. President Joe Biden will not be "smooth sailing" and both sides must work together to achieve results, the foreign ministry said.

Wang Yi met with Biden, as well as Secretary of State Antony Blinken and White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan, during a three-day visit to Washington. Both sides agreed to work toward a bilateral meeting on the side of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in San Francisco that begins Nov. 11.

In an statement released Sunday by China's foreign ministry summarizing the discussions, Wang said the road to the bilateral meeting would not be "smooth sailing" and that they could not rely on "autopilot" to make it happen.

Wang's visit to Washington came at a time when tensions between the countries remain high, including over U.S. export controls on advanced technology and China's more assertive actions in the East and South China seas.

The statement said that al-



Foreign minister Wang Yi

though there are still many issues to be resolved, both sides believe that it is both beneficial and necessary for the U.S. and China to maintain dialogue.

The meeting is the latest in a series of high-level contacts between the two countries as they explore the possibility of stabilizing an increasingly tense relationship at a time of conflict in Ukraine and Israel.

According to the foreign ministry statement, Wang also said that China and the U.S. needed a "return to Bali," in a reference to Xi and Biden's meeting at a G20 summit last year, where both officials discussed issues relating to Taiwan, U.S.-China trade tensions as well as cooperation to address issues like climate change, health and food security.

Wang said that the two coun-

tries must "eliminate interference, overcome obstacles, enhance consensus and accumulate results."

Other issues discussed between Wang and Biden included military exchanges between the U.S. and China, as well as financial, technological and cultural exchanges and cooperation, as well as the crises in the Middle East and Ukraine. **MDT/AP**

HONG KONG

FOUR FORMER STUDENT LEADERS JAILED OVER THEIR PRAISE OF KNIFE ATTACK ON POLICE OFFICER

FOUR former student leaders from the University of Hong Kong were sentenced to two years in prison yesterday for inciting people to wound others through their praise of a man who stabbed a police officer before killing himself in 2021.

Kinson Cheung, Charles Kwok, Chris Todorovski and Anthony Yung are being held responsible for their roles in passing a motion in the students union council. The motion expressed "deep sadness" and appreciated the "sacrifice" of the man who took his own life.

The resolution came against the backdrop of widespread public anger against the police, who were condemned as being heavy-handed in quelling the 2019 pro-democracy protests.

Handing down the sentences, Judge Adriana Noelle Tse Ching said the words they used were likely to incite hatred against the police. The charge the four were facing was a serious offense and a lenient sentence would send "the wrong message" to society, she said.

Leung Kin-fai stabbed a police officer with a knife before turning the weapon on himself on July 1, 2021, the anniversary of the former British colony's handover to Chinese rule in 1997. Leung was described by the city's authorities as a "lone wolf" domestic terrorist who was politically radicalized.

The passing of the motion drew criticism from the university and Hong Kong's security bureau, prompting Kwok and his peers to apologize and retract the resolution. Some student leaders also stepped down from their posts.

But their apology did not end the political storm, and police arrested the four in August 2021.

They were originally charged with advocating terrorism under a national security law imposed by Beijing following the 2019 protests. But that charge was dropped after they pleaded guilty to an alternative charge of incitement to wound with intent last month.

The security law has prosecuted or silenced many leading activists under a crackdown on dissent. But Beijing and the Hong Kong government says the law helped bring back stability to the city. **MDT/AP**

HONG KONG

Firearms charge against Washington state senator dismissed in court

KANIS LEUNG, HONG KONG

A Hong Kong court dismissed a gun charge yesterday against a Washington state senator who had been arrested after he carried a gun into the Chinese territory in what he called an "honest mistake."

Republican Jeff Wilson self-declared that he was carrying the gun at the airport Oct. 21, has a clear criminal record in Hong Kong and made his admission in an open manner, the prosecution said at the court hearing.

Principal Magistrate Don So approved the arrangement for a bind-



Washington state Sen. Jeff Wilson covers himself as he arrives at West Kowloon Magistrates Courts, yesterday

-over order rather than a plea to possessing an unlicensed firearm, saying he was inclined to believe Wilson was innocent.

The bind-over order

requires Wilson to keep the peace and avoid committing further firearms offenses for two years. The magistrate said Wilson would be fined 2,000

Hong Kong dollars (\$255) for breaching the order if he doesn't comply.

With the case dispensed without a conviction, Wilson is free to leave the territory. A statement posted earlier on the Longview lawmaker's website had said that while the gun was not registered in Hong Kong, it is registered in Washington.

Hong Kong has stricter gun laws than the United States. Those convicted of carrying a firearm without a license can be fined up to 100,000 Hong Kong dollars (\$12,800) and sentenced to up to 14 years in prison.

According to his website, Wilson was tra-

veling with his wife for a five-week vacation in Southeast Asia. He discovered the weapon during the flight between San Francisco and Hong Kong, it said.

The court heard that Wilson had told a customs inspector it was "a horrible accident" after his arrest. His luggage had passed through security in Portland before he transited in San Francisco, he said during an earlier interview with the inspector.

In a statement published on his website on Monday, Wilson said he was relieved that the matter could be resolved efficiently and apologized for the concern he created. He said he packed quickly and failed to check thoroughly what was inside his briefcase.

"This was a mistake on my part, and I regret it," Wilson said. **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



USA

Biden wants to move fast on AI safeguards

JOSH BOAK & MATT O'BRIEN, WASHINGTON

PRESIDENT Joe Biden on Monday will sign a sweeping executive order to guide the development of artificial intelligence — requiring industry to develop safety and security standards, introducing new consumer protections and giving federal agencies an extensive to-do list to oversee the rapidly progressing technology.

The order reflects the government's effort to shape how AI evolves in a way that can maximize its possibilities and contain its perils. AI has been a source of deep personal interest for Biden, with its potential to affect the economy and national security.

White House Chief of Staff Jeff Zients recalled Biden giving his staff a directive to move with urgency on the issue, having considered the technology a top priority.

"We can't move at a normal government pace," Zients said the president told him. "We have to move as fast, if not faster than the technology itself."

In Biden's view, the government was late to address the risks of social media and now U.S. youth are grappling with

related mental health issues. AI has the positive ability to accelerate cancer research, model the impacts of climate change, boost economic output and improve government services among other benefits. But it could also warp basic notions of truth with false images, deepen racial and social inequalities and provide a tool to scammers and criminals.

The order builds on voluntary commitments already made by technology companies. It's part of a broader strategy that administration officials say also includes congressional legislation and international diplomacy, a sign of the disruptions already caused by the introduction of new AI tools such as ChatGPT that can generate new text, images and sounds.

Using the Defense Production Act, the order will require leading AI developers to share safety test results and other information with the government. The National Institute of Standards and Technology is to create standards to ensure AI tools are safe and secure before public release.

The Commerce Department is to issue guidance to label and watermark AI-generated content to help differentiate between authentic

interactions and those generated by software. The order also touches on matters of privacy, civil rights, consumer protections, scientific research and worker rights.

An administration official who previewed the order on a Sunday call with reporters said the to-do lists within the order will be implemented and fulfilled over the range of 90 days to 365 days, with the safety and security items facing the earliest deadlines. The official briefed reporters on condition of anonymity, as required by the White House.

Last Thursday, Biden gathered his aides in the Oval Office to review and finalize the executive order, a 30-minute meeting that stretched to 70 minutes, despite other pressing matters including the mass shooting in Maine, the Israel-Hamas war and the selection of a new House speaker.

Biden was profoundly curious about the technology in the months of meetings that led up to drafting the order. His science advisory council focused on AI at two meetings and his Cabinet discussed it at two meetings. The president also pressed tech executives and civil society advocates about the technology's capabilities at multiple gatherings.

"He was as impressed and alarmed as anyone," deputy White House chief of staff Bruce Reed said in an interview. "He saw fake AI images of himself, of his dog. He saw how it can make bad poetry. And he's seen and heard the incredible and terrifying technology of voice cloning, which can take three seconds of your voice and turn it into an entire fake conversation."

The possibility of false images and sounds led the president to prioritize the labeling and watermarking of anything produced by AI. Biden also wanted to thwart the risk of older Americans getting a phone call from someone who sounded like a loved one, only to be scammed by an AI tool.

Meetings could go beyond schedule, with Biden telling civil society advocates in a ballroom of San Francisco's Fairmont Hotel in June: "This is important. Take as long as you need."

The president also talked with scientists and saw the upside that AI created if harnessed for good. He listened to a Nobel Prize-winning physicist talk about how AI could explain the origins of the universe. Another scientist showed how AI could model extreme weather like 100-year floods, as the past data used to assess these events has lost its accuracy because of climate change.

The issue of AI was seemingly inescapable for Biden. At Camp David one weekend, he relaxed by watching the Tom Cruise film "Mission: Impossible — Dead Reckoning Part One." The film's villain is a sentient and rogue AI known as "the Entity" that sinks a submarine and kills its crew in the movie's opening minutes.

"If he hadn't already been concerned about what could go wrong with AI before that movie, he saw plenty more to worry about," said Reed, who watched the film with the president.

With Congress still in the early stages of debating AI safeguards, Biden's order stakes out a U.S. perspective as countries around the world race to establish their own guidelines. After more than two years of deliberation, the European Union is putting the final touches on a comprehensive set of regulations that targets the riskiest applications for the technology. China, a key AI rival to the U.S., has also set some rules.

U.K. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak also hopes to carve out a prominent role for Britain as an AI safety hub at a summit this week that U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris plans to attend. **MDT/AP**

this day in history

1984 INDIAN PRIME MINISTER SHOT DEAD



Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India, has been killed by assassins in New Delhi.

Mrs Gandhi was thought to have been walking through her gardens this morning when she was shot. She was taken to the All India Medical Hospital where she underwent an emergency operation to remove the bullets but died an hour and a half later.

Initial reports suggest the two attackers were guards at her home who were then shot by other security officers.

No exact motive is known but it is believed the pair were Sikh extremists acting in retaliation for the storming of the Sikh holy shrine of the Golden Temple in Amritsar in June.

Mrs Gandhi had been receiving death threats since the attack on the temple in which 1,000 people died.

The night before her death she told a political rally: "I don't mind if my life goes in the service of the nation. If I die today, every drop of my blood will invigorate the nation."

Security throughout the country has been stepped up. Roads to the hospital and the home of the prime minister have been sealed off and borders around Delhi have been closed.

The Indian cabinet has started an emergency meeting to choose a successor.

India's High Commissioner, Prakash Mehrotra, said: "Democracy is very deep rooted in our country and the country is prepared to face any situation. A meeting is being called in Delhi, it is usual that the number two man in the cabinet takes charge for the time being."

Mrs Gandhi first became prime minister in 1966 and again in 1980 and was praised for her battle against famine in rural areas.

Stan Orme from the Anglo Indian Parliamentary Association said: "It is a very terrible thing. She was a very impressive person, very strong-willed. It is a real tragedy."

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

Riots erupted across India following the murder of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, as Hindus took their revenge on Sikhs who were blamed for the assassination.

In the days following the death of the prime minister up to 1,000 people are thought to have died. The army were ordered to go into the cities and quell the violence.

Mrs Gandhi's son, Rajiv, was sworn in as her successor within hours of her death. He went on to win a landslide victory in the general election in December 1984.

On 6 January 1989, Satwant Singh and Kehar Singh were hanged for killing Mrs Gandhi. Balbir Singh was acquitted.

Rajiv Gandhi was himself assassinated by a suicide bomber on 21 May 1991.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS

ARIES
Mar. 21-Apr. 19
Keep the promises you've made or you can expect to be in the doghouse. If you can't trust someone, question the connection. Don't count your chickens before they hatch.

TAURUS
Apr. 20-May. 20
Don't do something silly just to get back at your mate. Travel will promote new romantic encounters. Don't back down but don't ignite the situation.

GEMINI
May. 21-Jun. 21
Your creative ideas will be put to good use if you dig in and do things around the house that will make your family happy. Travel will be favorable and bring you the greatest rewards.

CANCER
Jun. 22-Jul. 22
Your desire for excitement and adventure may be expensive. Older members of your family may try to take advantage of you. Such over indulgence due to emotional upset will be your downfall.

LEO
Jul. 23-Aug. 22
Don't be too hard on yourself. Do your best, but don't make too many promises or you may exhaust yourself. Expect to experience a sudden reversal of fortune.

VIRGO
Aug. 23-Sep. 22
Things at home may be somewhat rocky. Investments that deal with property will pay off but could cause conflict with some family members.

LIBRA
Sep. 23-Oct. 22
Get out and rub shoulders with people in high positions if possible. Don't let your mate force you into making a decision that you aren't ready to make.

SCORPIO
Oct. 23-Nov. 21
Your creative ability will surface, giving you good ideas for ways of making money. Make the necessary changes that will enable you to advance financially.

SAGITTARIUS
Nov. 22-Dec. 21
You will do your best work on your own. Be sure to spend time helping children with projects that are too difficult for them to accomplish alone.

CAPRICORN
Dec. 22-Jan. 19
You may be considering moving to larger quarters. Try to get others to stand behind your good judgment. You should be putting in some overtime.

AQUARIUS
Jan. 20-Feb. 18
Raise your self esteem and your confidence if you want to get back into the mainstream again. Your ability to relate will close the generation gap.

PISCES
Feb. 19-Mar. 20
Don't let opposition from those envious of your talents daunt your progress. Tempers could boil if someone you work with has not been pulling their weight.

The Born Loser by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

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

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

WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	11	22	fine
Changchun	3	17	rain
Chengdu	15	22	cloudy
Chongqing	16	22	rain
Fuzhou	18	27	cloudy
Guangzhou	19	30	fine
Guiyang	10	24	cloudy
Haikou	24	27	cloudy
Hangzhou	15	27	fine
Harbin	0	11	showers
Hefei	11	28	cloudy
Nanjing	14	26	fine
Shanghai	17	26	fine
Taipei	21	24	rain
Wuhan	14	27	cloudy
Hong Kong	22	26	cloudy
WORLD			
Moscow	7	9	cloudy
Frankfurt	10	14	rain
Paris	11	15	rain
London	10	14	overcast
New York	6	12	overcast

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Benny, Björn, Anni-Frid, and Agnetha; 5- Acquire; 8- Let's just leave ___ that; 12- ___-do-well; 13- State of confusion; 15- Free from contamination; 16- Chinese weight; 17- Cover story; 18- Hurler Hershiser; 19- Floating above the surface; 22- Close friend; 23- Nope; 24- Story; 26- Handy; 29- Powerful; 31- Polo Grounds legend; 32- Govt. security; 34- Put ___ to (halt); 36- Bouillabaisse, e.g.; 38- Walk; 40- Drinks slowly; 41- Strange and mysterious; 43- Cinder; 45- It may be picked; 46- Trust; 48- Be right with ya; 50- Other, in Oaxaca; 51- Plant juice; 52- Frequently, in verse; 54- Freed; 61- Purchases; 63- Fold; 64- Function; 65- Little devils; 66- Torment; 67- Periods of history; 68- Watchful one; 69- "As if!"; 70- Unpleasantly moist;

DOWN 1- Farm dwellers; 2- Boyfriend; 3- Page; 4- She's a Dahl; 5- Arizona river; 6- Way out; 7- Big brass; 8- Wall St. debut; 9- Oil derived from the resin of pine trees; 10- Specialty; 11- Blab; 13- Organized search for a criminal; 14- Old Ford; 20- Floating platform; 21- Parting word; 25- Not so much; 26- Say; 27- Anything unoriginal; 28- "Arabesque" actress; 29- Singer Bryson; 30- Theme; 31- Sugary suffix; 33- President pro ___; 35- L.A. clock setting; 37- Wither; 39- Compactness; 42- Bronte heroine; 44- Get as a result; 47- Pizazz; 49- Was merciful to; 52- Village Voice award; 53- Fumelike; 55- King of comedy; 56- Emperor of Rome 54-68; 57- Wagon; 58- When said three times, a 1970 war movie; 59- Dash; 60- Writing table; 62- Georgia, once; Abbr.;

Yesterday's solution

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

USEFUL TELEPHONE NUMBERS

Emergency calls 999	Taxi 28 939 939 / 2828 3283
Fire department 28 572 222	Water Supply - Report 2822 0088
PJ (Open line) 993	Telephone - Report 1000
PJ (Picket) 28 557 775	Electricity - Report 28 339 922
PSP 28 573 333	Macau Daily Times 28 716 081
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	

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AP PHOTO

NATURE & TRADITIONS

IN BENIN, VOODOO'S BIRTHPLACE, BELIEVERS BEMOAN STEADY SHRINKAGE OF FORESTS THEY REVERE AS SACRED



Gilbert Kakpo, a Voodoo priest, stands by a sacred tree, who he claims is the protector of women at the Bohouezoun sacred forest in Benin

SAM MEDNICK, PORTO-NOVO

FOR many people in Benin, the forests empowered them before they were born, or in the first months of their lives.

Barren women performed Voodoo rituals by sacred trees to get pregnant. Others were brought as newborns by parents seeking to ward off evil spirits. Some entered at a crossroads as adults, asking for guidance.

In the cradle of Voodoo, the forests were places of hope. Yet as the woodlands shrank, due to economic development and other factors, it has dealt a blow to communities struggling to protect the spirits believed to live within them.

In many cases, according to believers, the spirits fought back.

When residents in the village of Houeyogbe agreed to let the government destroy much of its forest to build roads and install electricity, locals say the spirits unleashed a plague, with inexplicable deaths and mounting illnesses.

In Ouidah, Benin's epicenter of Voodoo, a gas station that replaced the Aveleketezou forest years ago has not turned a profit, residents say. Station employees said that when they filled cars with gas, it turned to water.

Benin is home to thousands of sacred forests, which believers say are vital to a religion rooted in nature. They see the forests as homes for spirits, which priests pray to and seek guidance from.

But for decades the West African nation's forests have been threatened, initially by anti-Voodoo attacks and then by the expansion of farming and urbanization.

Between 2005 and 2015, the total area of Benin's forests decreased more than 20%, with the rate of deforestation continuing at more than 2% a year, according to the World Bank.

As the government grapples with preserving the forests while developing the country, Voodoo worshippers worry the loss of its spaces could have profound effects. Not only is it an environmental concern but believers say it threatens the social fabric of Benin's 13 million people — approximately 11% of whom practice Voodoo.

"When (the government) brought roads to our region and we had to stop everything in the sacred forest, people started getting sick and having all kinds of problems," said Benoit Sonou, a Voodoo priest who witnessed the destruction of his community's forest as a young man.

Some 50 years later, he sits on the gravel road where the forest once stood, beside the two remaining trees the community salvaged. They're cordoned off behind a concrete wall in hopes they won't be touched.

One of the world's oldest religions, Voodoo originated in the kingdom of Dahomey — present-day Benin — and is rooted in animism, the belief that all things, from rocks and trees to animals and places, have a spirit. Today, millions of people practice it, turning to Voodoo priests to perform rituals to ward off evil spirits, overcome illness and achieve professional and personal success.

While Benin has many Christians — comprising nearly half the population — Voodoo is em-

bedded in most people's lives.

Gatherings don't begin without dropping water on the ground, a ritual that pays respect to ancestors. Initiation into Voodoo takes many years. And with few exceptions, only those initiated are allowed to enter the sacred forests. Many of the parks ban women, due to beliefs they'll go mad if they enter. The men must enter naked.

In the West, Voodoo is sometimes regarded as evil, or conflated with witchcraft. In Benin, Voodoo priests say the religion is grounded in positivity, based on tolerance and acceptance, and abides by a strict set of rules.

BLESSED WATER OR GIN

Carefully guarded stories about which spirits inhabit which forests have been passed down through generations. Believers say the spirits usually live in baobab or Iroko trees, considered the most sacred, and are places where priests perform the rituals, such as drinking blessed water or gin, eating cola nuts or sitting in a sacred spot, such as inside a tree.

"The sacred forest is a vital area," said Dada Daagbo Hounon Hounan II, the Supreme Spiritual Voodoo Chief. "It's an area that enables the reception of positive energies and positive vibrations to direct and rule the world."

Only certain priests can communicate with the spirits, doing so through chants, prayers or making noise like ringing a bell.

During an October visit to several sacred forests in southern Benin, The Associated Press heard what sounded like intense swirling wind emanating from two forests after Voodoo priests

called to the spirits.

It's unclear what the sounds were, but religion experts say what matters is that people believe they can communicate with the forest.

"It all points back to the idea that we don't live in a world where the only actors are the human ones," said Danny Hoffman, a cultural anthropologist who is director of the University of Washington's Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies.

Losing these forests eliminates places for experimentation and innovation, he said. "When we lose spaces demarcated for spiritual practices, these are spaces where people come together and try to understand how they're going to respond to new challenges and new difficulties."

Standing in front of a sacred tree, priest Gilbert Kakpo said women with childbirth troubles go there for help.

"Our divinity is the protector of women," he said. "If you're a woman who's had miscarriages or has given birth to stillborn children and you come here for rituals, you'll never endure those hardships again ... I can't count the number of people who have been healed or treated here."

LOST SACRED SPACE

It's hard to quantify how much sacred space has been lost in Benin, and to pinpoint the root cause.

Locals and officials look to the early 1970s. The government at the time cracked down on Voodoo believers, arresting and lynching people and chopping down trees deemed sacred. Decades later, new administrations made

amends with the Voodoo community, but by then development had surged.

Between 2001 and 2012 approximately 45% of Benin's sacred forests had disappeared or were diminished, according to the Circle for Safeguarding of Natural Resources. The aid group tries to preserve sacred forests by working with communities to demarcate boundaries, raise awareness about cutting trees and teach people how to financially benefit through honey harvesting or snail farming.

Urbanization and desertification shrank the forests, but the biggest factor was agricultural expansion driven by poverty, said Bienvenu Bossou, the group's executive director. Benin's economy depends on agriculture exports, notably cotton and cashew nuts, and Bossou says many people — unable to afford fertilizer — expanded their farms into the forest to use its rich soil.

Others blame the government's development push.

Earlier this year in the village of Ouanho, residents said the government destroyed part of the forest to construct roads without notice. Now the spirits, which need protection, are too exposed by the fading forests, residents say.

The government is doing what it can to protect the spaces, but can't always ask for permission to build, one official said.

"The state is doing its best not to construct where there are sacred forests. We often ignore the sacred forests because we don't want them to prevent us from developing the country," said Florent Couao-Zotti, the technical adviser for the ministry of culture.

The government has banned cutting down trees without state approval and since 2016 has invested some \$3 billion into the culture and tourism sectors, which will indirectly help the forests, he said.

As Benin's population grows at nearly 3% a year, communities are trying to reconcile how to develop their land while preserving the forests.

"It's very hard to see how we can cope with development while maintaining our cultural heritage," said Andre Tondonou, a youth leader in Houeyogbe, where the forest was reduced to a handful of trees.

Many villagers say the creation of roads, water and electricity was necessary to feel more connected to the rest of the country. Others say allowing any development to overtake the forests is sacrilegious and risks angering the spirits.

"We don't want any topographic or urbanization work that will destroy our forests and bring instability to our community," said His Majesty Oviga Toffon, king of the Adjarra region. The divinities guarantee peace of mind and stability and shouldn't be angered, he said. **MDT/AP**

RUGBY WORLD CUP

South Africa stands alone at cup summit as new eras beckon everywhere

GERALD IMRAY,
SPORTS WRITER

GIVE the Springboks a few days to revel in their record-breaking Rugby World Cup success. Give losing finalist New Zealand a little time to grieve.

But before long, those two giants and rugby as a whole will emerge from World Cup fever and face the prospect of entirely new eras. They'll all do it with a hint of trepidation.

South Africa's most successful coaching combination ever — some call it a rugby love affair — finally parted in the Paris night on Saturday with back-to-back titles for them and an unprecedented fourth Rugby World Cup win for their country. How on earth do the Springboks ever replace the Rassie Erasmus-Jacques Nienaber partnership?

New Zealand also bids farewell to coach Ian Foster and a group of retiring all-time All Blacks greats in Sam Whitelock, Brodie Retallick and Aaron Smith without the consolation of them leaving with winner's medals around their necks. With those three players, the All Blacks see nearly 400 test caps of experience head off into the sunset. Also irreplaceable.

And the Rugby World Cup itself will not be the same the next time it kicks off in Australia in 2027. The sport's showpiece will be expanded from 20 to 24 teams by then and the global game will have also undergone — according to plans announced last week — its most revolutionary change in 30 years.

THE END OF 'RASNABER'

Erasmus and Nienaber have been inseparable since they began coaching together nearly 20 years ago, so much so that they are referred to as one — "Rasnaber" — in South Africa. The 12-11 win over New Zealand in Saturday's final was the last hurrah. Nienaber will leave



as head coach. Erasmus stays on as South Africa's director of rugby for now.

Make no mistake, they didn't inherit what they've left, a top-ranked, world-beating team. They created it from ruins. When they were hired in 2018, the Springboks were quite simply at their worst and had twice been embarrassed by 50 points by the All Blacks among a trail of historic losses in the pre-Rasnaber years.

Erasmus and Nienaber won their first World Cup a year after coming in and the Springboks now have more titles than anyone having played two less tournaments than the others because of apartheid. The Springboks have four titles from eight appearances, an incredible 50% strike rate at the Rugby World Cup. Erasmus and Nienaber have a 100% strike rate.

Fill those shoes.

RESTORING THE ALL BLACKS

That task falls to Scott "Razor" Robertson, who has the head coach job already having been appointed in March to take over from 2024. He will walk into a renowned pressure cooker of a position with the temperature pushed higher and the desperation for success even more after the All Blacks' agonizing near miss in France.

Rugby's most celebrated team won't start from square one, but with Whitelock, Retallick, Smith and hooker Dane Coles officially retiring and pivotal figures like captain Sam Cane, No. 8 Ardie Savea and two-time World Cup player of the year Beauden Barrett the wrong side of 30 for another World Cup, there is no straightforward path to redemption in 2027.

"This one is going to stink for a bit as all losses do. It's pretty tough at the moment," New Zealand center Rieko Ioane said.

After 120 years of being rugby's best team by virtue of their victories week in and week out, the three-time world champion All Blacks will without doubt be back.

RUGBY NEEDS MORE MATCHES

There will be more teams at the next Rugby World Cup, but that doesn't necessarily confirm a thriving game.

What's of primary concern for the development of the sport is the four years between World Cups, when the tier two teams are in the large part ignored by the rugby superpowers before everyone suddenly celebrates their participation at the big show. Take Samoa, which nearly beat former champion England in this World Cup having played

a total of 13 matches in the four-year gap since the last World Cup.

In its latest attempt to redress that, World Rugby

has announced a new international tournament from 2026. The 10 top tier teams will play each other in the closest rugby

has come to a global season, and be joined by two as yet unnamed tier two teams. The other tier two teams can win promotion to the once-every-two-years tournament.

It's designed to — but not certain to — solve rugby's simple yet confounding problem: After 48 games packed into an intense, enthralling seven-week period in France — and even more promised for Rugby World Cup 2027 — the likes of Samoa, teams that hold rugby's hopes of growing, are still crying out for just a few more matches in the years in between.

"Just more games," Samoa player Theo McFarland said after so nearly stunning England. "That could help us a lot."

MDT/AP

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OPINION

World Views

Christopher Rugaber & Anne D'innocenzio, MDT/AP

US CONSUMERS KEEP SPENDING DESPITE HIGH PRICES: CAN IT LAST?

A flow of recent data from the U.S. government has made one thing strikingly clear: A surge in consumer spending is fueling strong growth, demonstrating a resilience that has confounded economists, Federal Reserve officials and even the sour sentiments that Americans themselves have expressed in opinion polls.

Yet economists caution that such vigorous spending isn't likely to continue in the coming months. Many households have been pulling money from a shrinking pool of savings. Others have been turning increasingly to credit cards. And the additional savings that tens of millions of households amassed during the pandemic — from stimulus aid and reduced opportunities to travel, dine out and visit entertainment venues — are nearly depleted, economists say.

Still, the truth is no one knows where things go from here, given the unusual nature of the post-pandemic economy. The "death of the consumer" and an ensuing recession have been forecast by most economists for at least a year.

The durability of consumers' willingness to shop has caught the attention of Fed officials, who have signaled that they will keep their key interest rate unchanged when they meet this week. But they've also made clear that they are monitoring the economic data for any sign that inflation could reignite and require further rate hikes.

In the meantime, businesses, especially those in the sprawling service sector, are benefiting from what still appears to be pent-up demand, likely driven by higher-income earners, after the restrictions of the pandemic. Last week, Royal Caribbean Group reported robust quarterly earnings. Travelers crowded their cruise ships and spent more even as the company raised prices.

What's behind the outsize gains, so far? Economists point to several drivers: Sturdy hiring and low unemployment, along with healthy finances for most households emerging from the pandemic.

With inflation slowing — it's at a still-high 3.7%, down from a peak of 9.1% in June 2022 — average wages are starting to outpace price gains.

In many lower-paying industries, like hotels, restaurants and warehouses, companies have struggled to find and keep workers and have raised pay accordingly.

And most households started 2023 in better shape than they were in before the pandemic erupted, according to a report from the Fed. The net worth of the median household — the midpoint between the richest and poorest — jumped 37% from 2019 through 2022 as home prices shot higher and the stock market rose. That was the biggest surge on records dating back more than 30 years.

At the same time, the net worth of the richest one-tenth of households leaped by \$28 trillion — or about one-third — from the first quarter of 2020 to the second quarter of 2023, according to the Fed. The poorer one-half of Americans gained a bigger percentage increase but in total dollars much less, from about \$2 trillion to \$3.6 trillion. (Those figures aren't adjusted for inflation.)

"When wealth is growing by the amount that it has been the past three years ... I do think that it's playing a larger role in this spending strength than maybe we thought it would," said Sarah Wolfe, U.S. economist at Morgan Stanley.

Aditya Bhawe, senior economist at Bank of America, noted that the spending isn't all driven by the affluent. Spending on the bank's credit and debit cards by households with incomes below \$50,000 has risen faster than spending by higher-earning clients.

Many analysts still warn of a new crop of headwinds facing consumers and the economy. Nearly 30 million student loan borrowers had to start paying their loans this month. And government dysfunction in Washington could lead to a government shutdown next month.

[Abridged]

Portuguese police have apologized to the parents of Madeleine McCann for the way they handled the three-year-old's disappearance, according to a BBC documentary.

Madeleine went missing from a holiday complex in the Algarve in May 2007.

A delegation of senior officers traveled from Lisbon to London earlier this year, BBC Panorama has been told.

They met Gerry McCann, Madeleine's father, and apologized for the way detectives investigated the case and treated the family.

The McCann family has not commented on the apology and their

daughter's disappearance remains unsolved, BBC reported.

In September 2007, four months after Madeleine vanished, Kate and Gerry McCann were made "arguidos" - or suspects - in the Portuguese investigation. Both were questioned by detectives, who believed they had staged an abduction and concealed Madeleine's body.

McCann said she was offered a deal to admit covering up her daughter's death in exchange for a shorter sentence.

The couple's arguido status was lifted in 2008 but they remained under suspicion in Portugal for years.



A person takes pictures of a makeshift memorial for Matthew Perry outside the building known as the "Friends" building in New York

'THE ONE WHERE OUR HEARTS ARE BROKEN'

'FRIENDS' CREATORS, ACTORS, FAMILY MOURN MATTHEW PERRY

MATTHEW Perry was widely mourned this weekend by friends, co-stars and some very famous fans, including his childhood classmate, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau; his "Friends" mom Morgan Fairchild; and even Adele.

Perry, who played Chandler Bing on NBC's "Friends" for 10 seasons, was found dead at his Los Angeles home last weekend. He was 54.

"This truly is The One Where Our Hearts Are Broken," "Friends" co-creators Marta Kauffman and David Crane, along with executive producer Kevin Bright, said in a joint statement yesterday [Macau time].

"We are shocked and deeply, deeply saddened by our beloved friend Matthew's passing," Kauffman, Crane and Bright wrote. "We will always cherish the joy, the light, the blinding intelligence he brought to every moment - not just to his work, but in life as well. He was always the funniest person in the room. More than that, he was the sweetest, with a giving and selfless heart."

Perry's family also gave a statement to People Magazine, writing that they are heartbroken by the loss.

"Matthew brought so much joy to the world, both as an actor and a friend," the

family said. "You all meant so much to him and we appreciate the tremendous outpouring of love."

Others, some who knew him, some who didn't, took to social media to express their grief.

Trudeau, who attended elementary school with Perry while their parents worked together, wrote a tribute on X, formerly Twitter.

"I'll never forget the schoolyard games we used to play, and I know people around the world are never going to forget the joy he brought them," Trudeau wrote. "Thanks for all the laughs, Matthew. You were loved — and you will be missed."

Perry's mother served as press secretary to Trudeau's father, Pierre Trudeau, during his time as prime minister.

Adele took a moment to talk about him during her show in Las Vegas on Saturday night. She recalled how his work made her laugh and said that even though she'd never met him, there is a strange thing that happens sometimes when an entertainer dies that makes you feel personally sad.

"I just want to say how much I love what he did for us," she said to the cheering crowd.

Saturday Night Live also showed a tribute card for

Perry during the weekend's episode. Perry once hosted the show, in 1997, which featured one sketch where he played Matt LeBlanc's character Joey and Colin Quinn played Chandler.

Fairchild, who played Chandler's mother on "Friends" wrote on X, that she was "heartbroken about the untimely death of my 'son.'"

"The loss of such a brilliant young actor is a shock. I'm sending love & condolences to his friends & family, especially his dad," Fairchild wrote.

She had also worked with Perry's father, actor John Bennett Perry, on several television series.

Another frequent "Friends" co-star, Maggie Wheeler, who played his girlfriend Janice, wrote, "The joy you brought to so many in your too short lifetime will live on. I feel very blessed by every creative moment we shared."

Selma Blair, who also appeared on an episode of "Friends," posted on Instagram that she was "broken hearted."

"My oldest boy friend," Blair wrote. "All of us loved Matthew Perry, and I did especially. Every day. I loved him unconditionally. And he me. And I'm broken. Broken hearted. Sweet dreams Matthew. Sweet dreams." MDT/AP



Russian President Vladimir Putin called a meeting of security and law enforcement officials yesterday, the day after a mob stormed the airport in the southern region of Dagestan after a flight from Israel landed there. Hundreds of angry men, some carrying banners with antisemitic slogans, rushed onto the tarmac of the airport in Makhachkala looking for Israeli passengers on the flight from Tel Aviv, according to Russian news reports. More than 20 people were injured.



USA Efforts to use the U.S. Constitution's "insurrection" clause to bar former President Donald Trump from running for the White House again entered a new phase yesterday as a hearing began in the first of two states' lawsuits that could end up reaching the U.S. Supreme Court. At the start of yesterday's hearing in Colorado, the judge rejected a Trump motion that she step aside because she once contributed money to a liberal group.

USA Over 1,000 residents of Lewiston, Maine return to work yesterday, the morning after coming together to mourn those lost in Maine's worst mass shooting. They gathered yesterday [Macau time], hugging one another, singing a rousing edition of "Amazing Grace," and seeking guidance out of these dark days from religious leaders who talked of hope, healing and the power of prayer.



UK HSBC announced a \$3 billion buyback program after pretax profit came in at \$7.7 billion, falling short of the \$8.1 billion estimate, Bloomberg has reported. The bank also said it may increase some performance-related pay — resulting in higher expenses. It's setting aside more funds for possible losses in China's commercial property sector after warning of the risk of a further deterioration.