



WEDNESDAY
20 Dec 2023

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"THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN' "

MOP 8.00
HKD 10.00



BANK OF CHINA APPROVED OVER 100 MORTGAGE APPLICATIONS OUT OF 300 FOR THE LOCALLY-FINANCED MACAU NEW NEIGHBOURHOOD ON HENGQIN

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GAMING REVENUE IN CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR TO GROW: CITI

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AP PHOTO



Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida pledged to lead efforts to simultaneously achieve decarbonization, economic growth and energy security in Asia, an ambitious goal he set Monday at a regional climate summit attended by Southeast Asian leaders. Kishida told the summit of the Asia Zero Emission Community, or AZEC, that the initiative will create "a new, huge decarbonization market in Asia that will attract global capital."

AP PHOTO



Syria An airstrike believed to have been carried out by Jordan's air force struck a province in southern Syria yesterday (Macau time), Syrian opposition activists said. Hours earlier, Jordanian authorities said their troops killed several smugglers in a border clash. There was no immediate confirmation from Jordan on the strike that hit the province of Sweida, a known route for drug smuggling from war-torn Syria to its southern neighbor.

AP PHOTO



Israeli strikes killed at least 28 Palestinians in southern Gaza and troops raided one of the last functioning hospitals in the north as the country pressed ahead with its offensive against Hamas yesterday with renewed backing from the United States, despite rising international alarm. The offensive, launched in response to Hamas' Oct. 7 attack into Israel, has killed nearly 20,000 Palestinians and displaced some 1.9 million. More on p14

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MAKOTO OZONE PERFORMS THIS WEEKEND

As part of the Macao Orchestra Concert Season, the concert 'Makoto Ozone with Macao Orchestra' will be held Dec. 23 at the Galaxy Auditorium of the Galaxy International Convention Center. Led by the music director of the Macao Orchestra, Lio Kuokman, acclaimed jazz artist Makoto Ozone will collaborate with bassist Shimpei Ogawa and drummer Kunito Kitai to bring music aficionados into a world of classical music and jazz to celebrate Christmas with the public.

SMG ISSUES COLD WEATHER WARNING

Macao continues to be affected by the supplementary winter monsoon, causing temperatures to drop today from 10 to 16 degrees Celsius, as stated by the Meteorological and Geophysical Bureau (SMG). The minimum temperature is expected to drop further to about 8 degrees during the winter solstice and Christmas holidays, with temperature fluctuations between day and night. SMG forecasts dry and cold conditions in the mornings and evenings for the upcoming week.

Cotai hospital soft-opens today

ANTHONY LAM

THE new Islands District Medical Complex in Cotai will partially open today, with officials promising an Accident and Emergency (A&E) Department in the future.

The new private-public hospital, the location of which was confirmed back in 2010, will provide health management and specialist outpatient healthcare services, with in-patient and oncology services to follow.

During the project's midway point, there was some confusion as to whether this hospital, managed and operated by a private medical entity from Beijing, would offer A&E services. An inquiry was made by the Times on this matter in October, but to date no reply has been received from the Health Bureau (SSM).

However, Chief Executive Ho Iat Seng clarified at the Policy Address Press Conference that the A&E department will not be opened during the hospital's initial operating phase. Secretary for Social Affairs and Culture Elsie Ao Ieong subsequently confirmed that the Conde de São Januário Hospital's A&E Division at the Macau University of Science and Technology Hospital would eventually be relocated to the new Cotai hospital.

Owned by the government and operated by Peking Union Medical College Hospital, the new facility operates on a three-tier tariff system.

The first tier offers services free-of-charge to eligible local residents referred by the SSM.



The second tier provides discounted services to eligible residents referred by the SSM. The third tier offers private services, but local residents may receive certain discounts.

Spanning a total floor area of 430,000 square meters, this hospital will be the largest medical facility in Macau, consisting of multiple buildings set to gradually open. Anticipated to have 800 beds at the primary facility and an additional 300 in the rehabilitation building, the new establishment will also house an international healthcare center, aesthetic medicine center and traditional medicine center. Dedicated spaces for medical education, training and research have also been built.

The government highlighted that the new hospital is twice as large as all existing SSM medical venues.

The new hospital is also home to Macau's largest operation theater, measuring 113 square meters

and equipped to host multiple surgeries simultaneously.

Dr Lei Wai Seng, director of the hospital's preparatory office, said that local residents will be able to access the state-of-the-art equipment at the new hospital when required.

The Chief Executive has also repeatedly emphasized that the new hospital will boost Macau's healthcare market and is a testament to the notion of One Country, Two Systems.

Medical professionals from mainland China, will be stationed here to deliver services based on their specialized knowledge and expertise. This is anticipated to enhance the quality of Macau's healthcare services and additionally attract visitors on a global scale through medical and healthcare tourism.

Dr Lei Chin Ion, director of the hospital's strategic development committee, provided his assurances that international experience, in addition to advice from consultants, had been considered as part of the new hospital's preparations.

SSM director Dr Alvis Lo expects that the new hospital will significantly enhance public healthcare services in Macau.

NEW HOSPITAL LAUNCHES SECOND ROUND OF RECRUITMENT

THE Islands District Medical Complex has launched a second round of recruitment, offering 80 vacancies. The recruitment drive encompasses 25 positions to be filled through individual labor contracts under private law. The registration period spans 10 working days, from today to Jan. 9 2024. Various roles are open for recruitment, including medical laboratory technicians, radiologists, financial accountants, legal experts, informa-

tion systems specialists, marketing and publicity, and administration and billing personnel. Detailed information for prospective applicants is available on the hospital's website. The hospital launched its earlier recruitment drive in late October, listing 90 vacancies for general practitioners, nurses, pharmacists, and radiologists. In early September, the government highlighted a need to recruit 400 health workers for phase one of the complex.

LOANS

Bank of China approves over 100 MNN mortgages

BANK of China, Macau has thus far approved over 100 mortgage applications out of approximately 300 for the locally-financed Macau New Neighbourhood (MNN) realty project on Hengqin.

Around the time of MNN's sales opening, its developer, Macau Urban Renewal Limited (MUR), affirmed that local banks were

supportive of offering a maximum loan-to-value ratio of 90% to aid unit buyers.

Earlier this month, news outlet Macao Daily reported that many buyers decided to make a purchase on the assumption that they would be maximally financed. Many were later told that they would only receive 80% financing, and that only specific groups would receive

90%. In some circumstances, certain purchasers believed they would receive financing of 80% but ultimately were granted 70% due to age-related concerns.

Responding to these claims, Chan Weng Tat, director and vice president of the bank, recently acknowledged that banks had agreed to offer a maximum loan-to-value ratio between

80% and 90% for MNN buyers. However, he emphasized that banks would evaluate the qualifications and repayment capacities of each applicant before deciding on the final mortgage amount. He advised prospective buyers to consider their circumstances, noting the pre-approval evaluation services undertaken by Bank of China. **AL**



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on the 24th Anniversary of
the Establishment of Macau SAR

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RENATO MARQUES

Residents unhappy with design of new Taipa parking lot

RESIDENTS and commuters have expressed several concerns about the recently-opened outdoor parking lot situated at the junction of Estrada Governador Albano de Oliveira and Avenida de Kwong Tung, under the flyover in front of the Macau Jockey Club.

Beyond concerns about the parking costs – raised repeatedly by many online – individuals interviewed yesterday by the Times expressed specific dissatisfaction about the design and functionality of the new amenity.

One of the most frequent subjects of criticism was the space allocated for sections dedicated to light vehicles and heavy vehicles (particularly buses).

“It’s regrettable that the Transport Bureau (DSAT) has reserved such a large area for buses but not for private cars. The bus park is always empty or has only one or two buses, as you can currently see, while the car parking area has very high demand,” a woman with the surname Long, who works at a bank across the street, told the Times.

She also noted that despite the availability of the new parking lot, most bank clients continued to park in front of the premises, in the public bus stop area, to avoid paying the hourly fee of 8 patacas during the day.

“It would be better if there was a half-price option [4 patacas] for 30 minutes of parking. At the current rate, many people would prefer to risk parking illegally,” Long remarked.

During the period of the Times’ inquiry, the bus parking lot had 14 vacant spaces out of 17, while the light vehicles parking area had around 22 unoccupied spots out of 41.

Another criticism regarding the parking lot’s design came from a man with the surname Yip, who works at a store nearby.

Yip said that the design made poor use of the available space and disregarded the needs of the area, resulting in waste and inefficiency.

“It is badly executed. There is a lot of unused space and no parking for motorbikes, which is actually what we need more of around this area,” he said, pointing out the motorcycles and mopeds parked on the sidewalks outside his store.

The Times surveyed the area and found that, due to the layout of the land, several areas marked with white diagonal stripes, as well as chevrons painted on the road, were designated as non-parking zones, with plastic poles enforcing the restrictions.

According to Yip, such areas could have been used to accommodate two-wheel vehicles, but this had been overlooked by the DSAT.

Yip also told the Times that al-

RENATO MARQUES



though the car park was usually full at nighttime, it was usually only half-full during the day, excepting weekends.

More design flaws were highlighted by a driver stopped in the bus stop lane.

When questioned why he had stopped there rather than the car park, he explained he was picking up a disabled passenger with mobility constraints. He explained

that the car park only has one parking spot for people with disabilities and that this was located on the far end of the parking lot facing the Macau Jockey Club. He said this was not useful at all given the location of the services nearby.

“It’s very badly done. The handicapped park is right at the far end, but people need access to the services on the other side,” he said, pointing to the bank, restau-

rants, supermarkets, and convenience stores located across the street.

The Times also interviewed a resident named Victor, who was double-parked illegally at the Avenida de Kwong Tung.

Questioned by the Times if he was aware of the new parking lot, he responded, “Yes, I know, but I only need to stop here to get something from the shop. It takes

only 3 to 5 minutes. To go to the park is very expensive as I must pay for a full hour. Everyone is doing the same,” he remarked, pointing to several cars in double parking on the same street.

The Times has contacted the DSAT on the new car park but has not, as of time of publication, received a reply on either the parking lot utilization rate or the public’s feedback.

CONGRATULATIONS ON

THE 24TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF

THE MACAO SPECIAL ADMINISTRATIVE REGION



ARTS

Audience encouraged to embrace upcoming Alice shows

ANTHONY LAM

DANCER-representatives from the reimagined Alice in Wonderland performances met the press yesterday afternoon and encouraged audience members to embrace the upcoming shows with open hearts.

Seah Hagan and Heather Conn are dancers at the shows that will be performed at the Macao Cultural Centre between Dec. 21 and 25.

The duo outlined that this rendition would not strictly adhere to the traditional Lewis Carroll storyline, and instead would incorporate lighting, mirrored images and other visual and audio techniques to stage a refreshed presentation of the globally-recognized story.

According to the dancers, members of the audience may be "pleasantly surprised" by the highly reimagined version of the story, in place of a conventional Alice in Wonderland narrative on the stage.

When asked by the Times how local audience should prepare

ANTHONY LAM



themselves for the highly reimagined shows, the dancers, who are both from MOMIX Dance Company, said that people should "come to the shows and let everything come to [them] without preconceived notions."

Conn added that the shows will be able to connect with people from all walks of life, and that "they do not have to be someone spe-

cial" to understand the story. The duo hinted that despite the adaptation, the essence of the story is maintained.

In certain scenes, technologies will be used to enlarge Alice, while in others, viewers may not even see the dancers on the stage. Previous shows served as examples to demonstrate the adaptation's influence and ability surprise the

audience.

MOMIX's artistic director and choreographer, Moses Pendleton, leads audiences on a journey filled with eccentricity, fantasy, and movement, reinventing a classic for both children and adults.

This circus-like adaptation of the iconic story introduces an intense parade of familiar characters and visionary ideas, where the

skillful dancers in colorful costumes interact with a contemporary setting of holograms, special effects and sophisticated design.

Founded in 1980, MOMIX has been enchanting audiences around the world, including in Macau, where the company performed Opus-Cactus, a desert-inspired production.

PUBLIC HOLIDAYS AFFECT AUDIENCE TURNOUT

With seven shows scheduled in Macau, tickets for initial performances were nearly sold out as of press time yesterday. However, as Christmas approaches, more seats remain available.

For instance, one fifth of seats for the evening show on Dec. 23, as well as for performances on Dec. 24, remain available.

This Christmas marks the first time in three years without travel restrictions, potentially prompting additional travel. In addition, the city's show organizers now face competition from nearby counterparts. For example, on Dec. 22 and 23, the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra will stage three sold-out concerts featuring Disney's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* by the influential Tim Burton.

Macau's tourism industry has acknowledged that the lack of international flights to and from Macau is one of the main reasons that the city is less attractive to international visitors.



EDUCATION

IFTM to be classified as university in the future

LYNZY VALLES

THE Macao Institute for Tourism Studies (IFTM) is to be renamed 'Macao University for Tourism Studies.'

During the First Standing Committee meeting, lawmaker Ella Lei cited documentation submitted by the government detailing that the name change adheres to the provisions of the Higher Education Law.

The institute's software and infrastructure also satisfy the criteria required for university status.

As such, the name change is in alignment with the SAR government's higher education marketization strategy, which aims to expand student enrollment, promote cooperation with international higher education institutions, and cultivate international tourism.

Government data revealed that

the institute currently employs 339 full-time staff, with plans to potentially increase the ratio of teaching staff in the future. Presently, it serves a student body of 1,843.

According to the committee, plans are underway to further recruit students from the mainland and overseas once local enrollment goals are achieved.

NEW DOCTOR OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION PROGRAM

In a recent announcement, the IFTM will launch a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) program in the 2024/2025 academic year. The new program will be in effect upon publication in the MSAR Gazette.

The DBA program will be offered in both Chinese and English, affording a wider range of educational options for individuals seeking academic enrichment and professional advancement.

Specializations within the program include International Hospitality Management, International Tourism Management, International Event Management, and Digital Marketing and Analytics.

Typically spanning three years, the program structure involves the completion of eight courses within two years (comprising six core courses and two elective courses). The final year entails the completion of a doctoral thesis and a successful defense to fulfill graduation requirements.

MARTIAL ARTS ATHLETE LI YI AND MUST LAB AMONG GOV'T AWARDEES

MACAU has announced the individuals and entities to be honored for their achievements, outstanding contributions to the SAR, and distinguished services.

In an official statement, the government disclosed the recipients of the 2023 Decorations, Medals and Certificates of Merit, recognizing noteworthy accomplishments and services by individuals and entities.

Among the awardees is martial arts athlete Li Yi, who won a gold medal in the women's changquan competition at the Asian Games in Hangzhou. Accolades were also extended to the State Key Laboratory of Lunar and Planetary

Sciences of the Macao University of Science and Technology (MUST), and Pastelaria Chui Heong, a pastry shop known for its handmade chargrilled almond cookies.

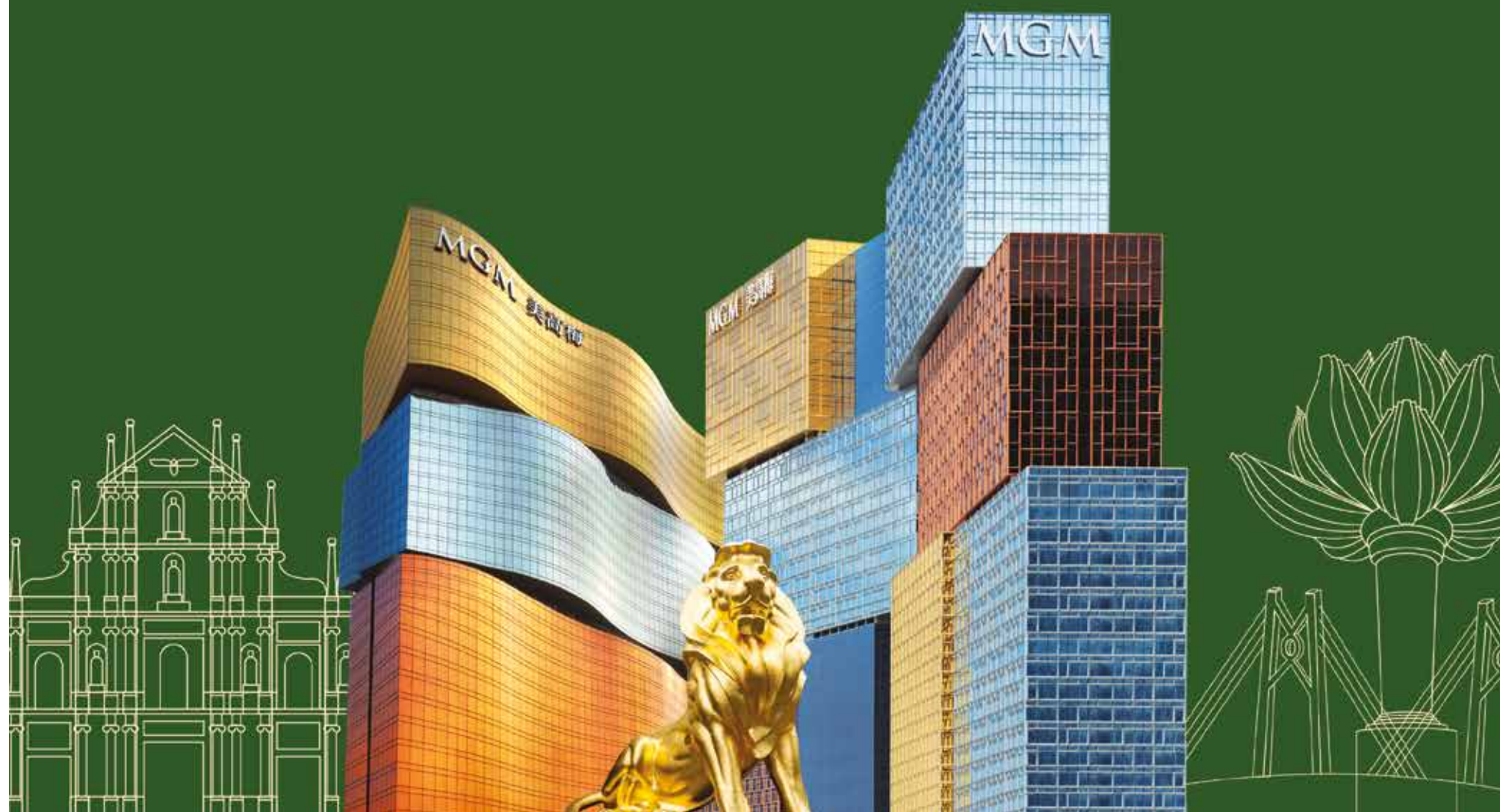
Decorations of Honor encompass the Grand Lotus, Golden Lotus, and Silver Lotus divisions.

Such awards are granted to individuals or entities that have made outstanding contributions locally or internationally to the image and reputation of the MSAR, or for those individuals or entities who have made exceptional contributions in any field beneficial to the development of the MSAR.

The awarding ceremony is scheduled for Jan. 19, 2024. LV



CONGRATULATIONS ON THE 24TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF MACAU SAR



**BEIJING: NEW CE
REPORT ARRANGEMENTS
HIGHLIGHTS IMPORTANCE
OF SARS**

The format of this year's Chief Executive Reports to the National Leader, presented in a different format compared to previous years, highlights the country's emphasis on the two Special Administrative Regions and the work conducted by their respective governments, as reported by Xinhua News Agency. The adjusted format is also reported to be "conducive to improving the system and Beijing's full governance of the two SARs." The agency's report also highlighted the full compliance of the new arrangement with the country's constitution as well as the Basic Laws of the SARs.

**CHINA'S TOP LEGISLATURE
SCHEDULES SESSION FOR
LATE DECEMBER**

The Standing Committee of the 14th National People's Congress (NPC) will convene its seventh session in Beijing from Dec. 25 to 29. On the proposed agenda are discussions on draft revisions to the Law on Supervision by the Standing Committees of the People's Congresses at All Levels, as well as the Frontier Health and Quarantine Law. Additionally, the session will address draft decisions aimed at enhancing the system for recording and reviewing normative documents, as well as authorizing Macau to administer land and waters southeast of Gongbei Port in Zhuhai City, Guangdong Province.

GAMING

**CITI: GGR IN CHRISTMAS
AND NEW YEAR TO GROW**

LYNZY VALLES

MACAU'S gross gaming revenue (GGR) for the first 17 days of December may reach about MOP9 billion, Citi Research forecasted in a report based on the latest industry data.

The figure suggests that the average daily GGR will be around MOP543 million, about 4% higher than the MOP520 million on average during the first 10 days of December.

The brokerage firm predicts an acceleration in GGR growth during the Christmas and New Year's Eve holidays – despite these not being official holidays in mainland China.

Citi Research also anticipates a surge in patronage around Christmas and New Year's Eve, boosted by a series of concerts sche-



duled throughout the month.

The broker has maintained its Decem-

ber GGR forecast of MOP17.5 billion, about 77% of December 2019 levels, implying a dai-

ly run-rate of MOP600 million for the rest of the month.

Previously, Citi Re-

search projected Macau's GGR to grow by 19% year-on-year to MOP216 billion in 2024.

This estimation is contingent on Macau's visitor arrivals recovering to 85% of pre-Covid-19 levels, matching figures from the third quarter of 2023. Gaming expenses per player need to remain at the same level as 2023, with a slight increase in the time spent in Macau, according to the analysts.

This is despite China's weakening economy affecting casinos over the past few months, which has caused price wars on player incentives and impacts on luxury spending. Analysts have nonetheless stated there is a "weak correlation" between China's gross domestic product and Macau's mass gross gaming revenue growth potential.

Citi Research remains optimistic about the gaming industry's revenue growth in 2024, stating that the fundamentals continue to offer long-term value.

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KEN MORITSUGU, BEIJING

AN overnight earthquake killed at least 127 people in a cold and mountainous region in northwestern China, provincial officials said yesterday, in the nation's deadliest quake in 10 years.

Emergency authorities in Gansu province issued an appeal for 300 additional workers to comb through collapsed buildings and for other search and rescue operations. Officials in neighboring Qinghai reported 20 people missing in a landslide, according to Chinese state-owned media.

The magnitude 6.2 earthquake left more than 700 people injured, severely damaged houses and roads, and knocked out power and communication lines, provincial officials and media reports said.

It struck just before midnight on Monday near the boundary between the two provinces at a relatively shallow depth of 10 kilometers, the China Earthquake Networks Center said. The U.S. Geological Survey measured the magnitude at 5.9.

By mid-morning, 105 people had been confirmed dead in Gansu and another 397 injured, including 16 in critical condition, a provincial emergency department official said at a news conference. Thirteen others were killed and 182 injured in Qinghai in an area north of the epicenter, a local Communist Party official said at a separate news conference.

The earthquake was felt in much of the surrounding area, including Lanzhou, the Gansu provincial capital, about 100 kilometers (60 miles) northeast of the epicenter. Photos and videos posted by a student at Lanzhou University showed students hastily leaving a dormitory building and standing outside with long down jackets over their pajamas.

"The earthquake was too intense," said Wang Xi, the student

Earthquake in northwestern China kills at least 127 people in deadliest quake in a decade



Rescuers search a collapsed building in Caotan village of Minhe Hui and Tu Autonomous County in Haidong City, northwestern China's Qinghai Province

who posted the images. "My legs went weak, especially when we ran downstairs from the dormitory."

The death toll was the highest since an April 2013 earthquake that killed 196 people in southwest China's Sichuan province. The country's deadliest earthquake in recent years was a 7.9 magnitude quake in 2008 that killed nearly 90,000 people and devastated towns and schools in Sichuan, leading to a years-long effort to rebuild with more resistant materials.

The latest quake struck in Gansu's Jishishan county, about 5 kilometers (3 miles) from the provincial boundary with Qinghai. The

epicenter was about 1,300 kilometers (800 miles) southwest of Beijing, the Chinese capital. There were nine aftershocks by 10 a.m., about 10 hours after the initial earthquake, the largest one registering a magnitude of 4.1, a Gansu official said.

The remote and mountainous area is home to several predominantly Muslim ethnic groups and near some Tibetan communities. Geographically, it is in the center of China, though the area is commonly referred to as the northwest, as it is at the northwestern edge of China's more populated plains.

Tents, folding beds and quilts were being sent to the disaster

area, state broadcaster CCTV said. It quoted Chinese leader Xi Jinping as calling for an all-out search and rescue effort to minimize the casualties. The overnight low in the area was minus 15 to minus 9 degrees Celsius, the China Meteorological Administration said.

The Beijing Youth Daily, a Communist Party newspaper, quoted an unnamed rescue coordinator saying there was a need for generators, long coats and fuel for stoves, among other items. The coordinator recommended sending halal food because of the ethnic makeup of the affected population.

At least 4,000 firefighters, soldiers and police officers were dis-

patched in the rescue effort, and the People's Liberation Army Western Theatre set up a command post to direct its work.

Han Shujun, a spokesperson for the Gansu provincial emergency management department, asked people to avoid going to the quake-hit areas to prevent traffic jams that could hinder the rescue and relief work.

A video posted by the Ministry of Emergency Management showed emergency workers in orange uniforms using rods to try to move heavy pieces of what looked like concrete debris at night. Other nighttime videos distributed by state media showed workers lifting out a victim and helping a slightly stumbling person to walk in an area covered with light snow.

Middle school student Ma Shijun ran out of his dormitory barefoot without even putting on a coat, according to a Xinhua report. It said the strong tremors left his hands a bit numb, and that teachers quickly organized the students on the playground.

Earthquakes are somewhat common in the mountainous area of western China that rises up to form the eastern edge of the Tibetan plateau.

Last year in September, 93 people were killed in a 6.8 magnitude earthquake that shook China's southwestern province of Sichuan, triggering landslides and shaking buildings in the provincial capital of Chengdu, where 21 million residents were under a COVID-19 lockdown. **MDT/AP**

HONG KONG

Court begins Day 2 of activist publisher Jimmy Lai's trial

THE national security trial of Hong Kong's famous activist publisher Jimmy Lai entered its second day yesterday, with judges expected to rule by the end of the week on his lawyers' bid to throw out a sedition charge that has been increasingly used to target dissidents.

Lai, 76, was arrested in August 2020 during a crackdown on the city's pro-democracy movement following massive protests in 2019. He faces a possible life sentence if convicted under the national

security law. He was charged with colluding with foreign forces to endanger national security and conspiring with others to put out seditious publications.

His landmark trial — tied to the now-shuttered pro-democracy newspaper Apple Daily that Lai founded — is widely seen as a trial for press freedom and a test for judicial independence.

After Lai walked into the courtroom yesterday, he smiled and waved to his supporters

just as he did the day before. He also subtly blew a kiss to the public gallery. A supporter chanted, "Hang in there!" Before opening statements, the judge heard arguments from both sides about whether the prosecution had passed the time limit in charging Lai for sedition. The law requires the prosecution of sedition charges to begin within six months after an alleged offense was committed.

Robert Pang, one of Lai's lawyers, argued the

prosecutors had laid the charge too late for the alleged conspiracy that ran between April 2019 and June 2021. But prosecutor Anthony Chau said the time limit should be set based on when the alleged conspiracy — involving at least 160 articles — actually ended.

The judges, approved by the government to oversee the proceedings, said they would make a decision Friday. The trial is expected to last about 80 days without a jury.

British Minister of Sta-

te for the Indo-Pacific Anne-Marie Trevelyan said Monday the U.K. would continue to press for consular access to Lai, who holds British citizenship. The city's prison authorities have repeatedly refused that request, she said. "China considers anyone of Chinese heritage born in China to be a Chinese national," she said.

Beijing has dismissed criticisms from Western governments. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said Monday the U.S. and the

U.K. made irresponsible remarks and that go against international law and the basic norms of international relations.

Hong Kong leader John Lee said he was confident in the city's judicial system and in the professionalism of its courts. Lee said some people, particularly representatives of foreign governments, tried to exert pressure in an effort to influence the court presiding over Lai's case. He said such action violates the spirit of rule of law. **MDT/AP**

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AP PHOTO



In this undated photo provided Monday by the North Korean government, Kim Jong Un, his daughter and an official watch what it says is an intercontinental ballistic missile launching from an undisclosed location

NORTH KOREA

Kim threatens 'more offensive actions' against US after watching powerful missile test

HYUNG-JIN KIM, SEOUL

NORTH Korean leader Kim Jong Un threatened "more offensive actions" to repel what he called increasing United States-led military threats after he supervised the third test of his country's most advanced missile designed to strike the mainland U.S., state media reported yesterday.

Kim's statement suggests he is confident in his growing missile arsenal and will likely continue weapons testing activities ahead of the 2024 U.S. presidential election. But many observers say North Korea still needs to perform more significant tests to prove it has functioning missiles targeting the U.S. mainland.

After watching Monday's launch of the Hwasong-18 intercontinental ballistic missile, Kim said the test showed how North Korea could respond if the United States were to make "a wrong decision against it," according to the official Korean Central News Agency.

Kim stressed the need to "never overlook all the reckless and irresponsible military threats of the enemies ... and to strongly counter them with more offensive actions," KCNA said.

The Hwasong-18 ICBM is a developmental, solid-fueled ICBM that is considered North Korea's most powerful weapon. Its built-in solid propellant makes launches harder for outsiders to detect than liquid-fueled missiles, which must be fueled before liftoffs. But many foreign experts say North Korea still has some other technological hurdles to master to acquire reliable nuclear-tipped ICBMs, such as one to protect warheads from the harsh conditions of atmospheric reentry.

KCNA said the Hwasong-18 missile — launched at a high angle to avoid neighboring countries — flew a distance of 1,002 kilometers for 73.5 minutes at a maximum altitude of 6,518 kilometers before landing in an area off the North's east coast. It said Kim expressed "great satisfaction" with the launch, which verified again the reliability of "the most powerful strategic core striking means" of North Korea.

It was the North's third test of the Hwasong-18 missile. Its two previous launches were in April and July.

"Based on their statement, this looks to have been an exercise in signaling and a developmental test in one," said Ankit Panda, an expert with the Carnegie Endow-

ment for International Peace. "There's nothing new here technically as far as I can tell at this early stage, but they're certainly growing increasingly confident in their new solid propellant ICBM."

Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul, said the North's latest ICBM test is another indicator of how far its missile engine technology has progressed, but added there are limits to what North Korea can learn from lofted trajectory firings.

"Demonstrating warhead targeting and reentry capabilities would involve provocative launches across greater distances," Easley said. "So more significant tests of both technology and diplomacy are likely in the New Year."

KCNA said that a recent U.S.-South Korean meeting to discuss their nuclear deterrence plan openly revealed their intention to hold joint drills with a simulated nuclear attack on North Korea.

It referred to the second Nuclear Consultative Group meeting between senior U.S. and South Korean officials Friday. During their meeting in Washington, the two countries agreed to update their nuclear deterrence and contingency strategies and incorporate nuclear operation scenarios

in their combined military exercises in the summer, according to officials in Seoul.

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol said during a Cabinet Council meeting yesterday that a "nuclear-based, powerful Korea-U.S. alliance" would be formed soon.

The nuclear consultative body is responsible for sharing information on nuclear and strategic weapons operation plans and joint operations, though the U.S. will retain operational control of its nuclear weapons. The group's establishment was part of U.S. efforts to ease South Korean worries about North Korean provocations while keeping Seoul from pursuing its own nuclear program.

Since 2022, North Korea has performed more than 100 ballistic missile tests in violation of the United Nations' bans in what outside experts call an effort to upgrade its nuclear arsenal and win greater U.S. concessions. The North has still avoided fresh international sanctions as China and Russia blocked the U.S. and others' efforts to toughen U.N. sanctions on the country.

Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi said yesterday that Tokyo is coordinating with Washington and Seoul to arrange

a United Nations Security Council meeting on Wednesday to discuss the North's latest launch. He said Japan will try to get the council to fulfill its intended role.

The United States and South Korea have expanded their military training, bolstered trilateral security cooperation with Japan and increased the temporary deployments of powerful U.S. military assets in South Korea.

Yesterday, South Korea, the U.S. and Japan began putting into operation the sharing of real-time missile warning data on North Korea and established details of their trilateral exercises in coming years, South Korea's Defense Ministry said in a statement.

North Korea has viewed growing U.S.-South Korea-Japan partnerships as a security threat and sought to boost its own ties with China and Russia in response. North Korea recently faced outside suspicions that it receives sophisticated weapons technologies from Russia in return for supplying conventional arms to support Russia's war in Ukraine.

"The allies' justified actions of cooperation and information-sharing will remain the Kim regime's primary reason to concentrate greater resources and energy into its weapons program," said Soo Kim, an expert with Virginia-based consultancy LMI and a former CIA analyst.

"Kim (Jong Un) is clear-eyed in the regional split between the U.S.-allied countries and the North Korea-Russia-China trilateral relationship," she said. "So while Kim continues to raise issues with the U.S.-Japan-Korea trilateral, he sees the utility in forming alliances and gravitates toward Beijing and Moscow to serve as a thorn in our side and to protect his own security and interests." **MDT/AP**

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AP PHOTO



ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR

US envoys work for new hostage release deal and a scale-down hostilities

TARA COPP, TEL AVIV

THE head of the CIA jetted to Europe for talks with Israeli and Qatari officials yesterday [Macau time], sounding out the potential for a deal on a new cease-fire and the release of hostages in Gaza as the United States defense secretary spoke to Israeli military leaders about scaling back major combat operations against Hamas.

Still, there was no sign that a shift in the war was imminent after more than two months of devastating bombardment and fighting. Fierce battles raged in northern Gaza, where residents said rescue workers were searching for the dead and the living under buildings flattened by Israeli strikes.

Pressure is growing as France, the United Kingdom and Germany — some of Israel's closest allies — joined global calls for a cease-fire over the weekend. Israeli protesters have demanded the government relaunch talks with Hamas on releasing more hostages after three were mistakenly killed by Israeli troops while waving a white flag.

U.S. officials have repeatedly expressed concern about the large number of civilian deaths in

Gaza. But after talks with Israeli officials, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said, "This is Israel's operation. I'm not here to dictate timelines or terms." The U.S. has vetoed calls for a cease-fire at the United Nations and has rushed munitions to Israel.

The U.N. Security Council delayed to today [Macau time] a vote on an Arab-sponsored resolution calling for a halt to hostilities to allow unhindered access to humanitarian aid. Diplomats said negotiations were taking place to get the U.S. to abstain or vote "yes" on the resolution.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has insisted that Israel will keep fighting until it ends Hamas rule in Gaza, crushes its formidable military capabilities and frees hostages still held in Gaza since the deadly Oct. 7 attack inside Israel that ignited the war. Militants killed some 1,200 people and abducted 240 others in the attack.

The war has killed more than 19,000 Palestinians and demolished much of the north, turning it into a moonscape. Some 1.9 million Palestinians — nearly 85% of Gaza's population — have fled their homes, with most packing into U.N.-run shelters and tent camps in the southern part of the besieged territory.

HOSTAGE TALKS

In an apparent sign that talks on a hostage deal were growing more serious, CIA Director William Burns met in Warsaw with the head of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency and the prime minister of Qatar, a U.S. official said.

It was the first known meeting of the three since the end of a weeklong cease-fire in late November, during which some 100 hostages — including a number of foreign nationals — were freed in exchange for the release of around 240 Palestinians held in Israeli prisons.

National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said the talks were not "at a point where another deal is imminent."

Aiming to increase public pressure on the Israeli government, Hamas released a video showing three older Israeli hostages sitting in white T-shirts and pleading for Israel to bring their immediate release.

The comments were likely made under duress, but the video signaled Hamas wants to move on to discussions of releasing sick and old men from captivity. Israel has said it wants around 19 women and two children freed first. Hamas says the women include soldiers, for whom it is expected to demand a higher price in terms

of prisoner releases.

Hamas and other militants are still holding an estimated 129 captives. Hamas has said no more hostages will be released until the war ends.

SCALING DOWN THE WAR

Austin, who arrived in Israel with Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. CQ Brown, said he and Israeli officials exchanged "thoughts on how to transition from high intensity operations" in Gaza and how to increase the flow of humanitarian aid.

American officials have called for targeted operations aimed at killing Hamas leaders, destroying tunnels and rescuing hostages. U.S. President Joe Biden warned Dec. 12 that Israel is losing international support because of its "indiscriminate bombing."

Speaking alongside Austin, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said only that "the war will take time."

Israeli military spokesperson Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said the Israeli chief of staff met with Austin and Brown and presented "plans for the continuation of the battle in the coming stages."

European countries appear to be losing patience. "Far too many civilians have been killed in Gaza," European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell posted on X, formerly Twitter.

Under U.S. pressure, Israel provided more precise evacuation instructions earlier in December as troops moved into the southern city of Khan Younis. Still, casualties have continued to mount and Palestinians say nowhere in Gaza is safe as Israel carries out strikes in all parts of the territory.

Israel reopened its main cargo crossing with Gaza to allow more aid in — also after a U.S. request. But the amount is less than half

of prewar imports, even as needs have soared and fighting hinders delivery in many areas. Israel blocked entry of all goods into Gaza soon after the war started, and weeks later began allowing a small amount of aid in through Egypt.

MORE DEATH AND DESTRUCTION

At least 110 people were killed in Israeli strikes Sunday on residential buildings in the urban Jabaliya refugee camp in northern Gaza, Munir al-Boursh, a senior Health Ministry official, told Al Jazeera television.

Fierce fighting continued this week in Jabaliya and the Gaza City districts of Zaytoun and Shijaiyah, where tens of thousands of Palestinians remain trapped, crowded in homes or schools.

In Jabaliya, first responders and residents searched the rubble of many collapsed buildings. "They use their hands and shovels," said Amal Radwan, who is staying at a U.N. shelter there. "We need bulldozers and above all the bombing to stop."

More than 19,400 Palestinians have been killed, according to the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza, which has said that most are women and minors and that thousands more are buried under rubble. The ministry does not differentiate between civilian and combatant deaths.

Israel's military says 127 of its soldiers have been killed in the Gaza ground offensive. It says it has killed thousands of militants, without providing evidence.

Israel blames civilian deaths on Hamas, saying it uses them as human shields. But the military rarely comments on individual strikes.

REGIONAL TENSIONS

Yesterday in Bahrain, Austin said that the U.S. and other nations have created a new force to protect commercial ships passing through the Red Sea from attacks by Yemen's Houthi rebels. The Houthis say their attacks aim to end Israel's offensive in Gaza, and their campaign has prompted a growing list of companies to halt operations in the major trade route.

"This is an international challenge that demands collective action," Austin said in statement.

Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah have traded fire along the border nearly every day since the war began. And in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, over 300 Palestinians have been killed since the start of the war, including four overnight during an Israeli military raid in the Faraa refugee camp, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry.

This has been the deadliest year for Palestinians in the West Bank since 2005. Most have been killed during military raids, which often ignite gunbattles, or during violent demonstrations. **MDT/AP**

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the establishment of
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USA

ELF BAR, OTHER E-CIGARETTE MAKERS DODGED US CUSTOMS AND TAXES AFTER CHINA'S BAN ON VAPING FLAVORS

MATTHEW PERRONE,
WASHINGTON

IN only two years, a small, colorful vaping device called Elf Bar has become the most popular disposable e-cigarette in the world, generating billions in sales and quickly emerging as the overwhelming favorite of underage U.S. teens who vape.

Last week, U.S. authorities publicly announced the first seizure of some of the company's products, part of an operation confiscating 1.4 million illegal, flavored e-cigarettes from China. Officials pegged the value of the items at \$18 million, including brands other than Elf Bar.

But the makers of Elf Bar and other Chinese e-cigarettes have imported products worth hundreds of millions of dollars while repeatedly dodging customs and avoiding taxes and import fees, according to public records and court documents reviewed by The Associated Press.

Records show the makers of disposable vapes routinely mislabel their shipments as "battery chargers," "flashlights" and other items, hampering efforts to block products that are driving teen vaping.

Elf Bar is the lead product of Shenzhen iMiracle, a privately held company based in Shenzhen, the sprawling Chinese manufacturing hub.

In the U.S., iMiracle recently abandoned the Elf Bar name due to a trademark dispute and efforts by regulators to seize its imports. Instead, its products are sold as EB Create.

A spokesman for iMiracle said the company stopped shipping Elf Bar to U.S. earlier this year and is trying to comply with regulators.

When asked about EB Create e-cigarettes he said: "I can't tell you anything about that."

Details on the company's U.S. sales and activities are beginning to emerge in court documents.

At a 2022 court hearing in the case over the company's name, U.S. distributors described skyrocketing sales.

Jon Glauser of Demand Vape told a federal judge his company had sold more than \$132 million worth of Elf Bar products last year.



AP PHOTO

"We were selling it faster than we could get it in," Glauser said, according to the court transcript.

Glauser attributed Elf Bar's quick rise to its profit margin. Sellers make about a 30% profit, double that of other disposable e-cigarettes.

iMiracle's parent company, Heaven Gifts, previously described how it could help customers evade import fees and taxes. Heaven Gifts' website advertised "discreet" shipping methods to buyers, including not mentioning e-cigarettes or its company name "anywhere on the package."

"We also mark a lower value to avoid tax," the website stated.

In June, Heaven Gifts announced on it would "go offline," after the FDA directed customs officials to begin seizing shipments from the company.

Neither Heaven Gifts nor iMiracle appear in customs data reviewed by the AP and compiled by ImportGenius, an analytics company.

The seizure announced last week suggests part of the answer: The shipments arrived at Los Angeles International Airport, and air carriers are not required to disclose the same details about their cargo as ocean vessels.

Ships docking in the U.S. must provide information on suppliers, recipients and types of cargo they are carrying. But importers can obscure their identities and products.

For example, recipient information is listed as "not available" for roughly 45 of over 100 shipments of e-cigarettes from China this year, according to ImportGenius data. U.S. companies can avoid disclosure by

using third-party shippers, called freight forwarders.

It's likely most disposable e-cigarettes coming into the U.S. aren't even declared as vaping products.

Esco Bars, one of Elf Bars' chief rivals, imported 30 shipments from China this year labeled "atomizers," a generic type of hardware that turns a liquid into a spray.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection did not make officials available for interviews, but pointed to the agency's recent operation in Los Angeles with the FDA.

"The rise in illicit e-commerce demands that our agencies remain vigilant in intercepting shipments that could pose serious health risks to the public," Troy Miller, a senior official with the border agency, said in a release.

FDA Commissioner Robert Califf said that agency was "committed to continuing to stem the flow of illegal e-cigarettes."

China's vaping sector is estimated to be worth \$28 billion, and the U.S. accounts for nearly 60% of the country's vape exports, according to the China Electronics Chamber of Commerce.

Chinese authorities have encouraged those exports while at the same time curtailing the country's domestic vaping business.

The government brought vaping companies under control of its state-run tobacco administration last year, banning all flavors except tobacco.

Authorities cited "safety issues around unsafe additives," and other risks. But experts point to another cause. The

China National Tobacco Corp. is the largest tobacco company in the world. In cooperation with its regulatory arm, the Tobacco Monopoly Administration, the entity controls the manufacture of all cigarettes made in China.

"The tobacco administration says, 'Well, every e-cigarette sold means one less cigarette smoked,' so they are going to regulate the hell out of them now," said Dr. Ray Yip, a former director of the Gates Foundation's China program.

Hu Leng, manager at a vape manufacturer said: "There is no future in the domestic market. All of our products are sold to Europe."

Elf Bar-maker Shenzhen iMiracle is among the companies that have built their entire business on exports.

In late 2021, the company began shipping to the U.S. to exploit a regulatory loophole: The FDA had prohibited kid-appealing flavors from reusable vapes, such as Juul, but not disposable ones.

A spokesperson for China's tobacco administration did not respond to requests for comment, but the country's tobacco regulations state that exported vapes "should comply with the laws, regulations and standards of the destination country." Since the FDA has declared Elf Bar illegal, iMiracle would seem to be violating Chinese law.

But experts say such rules go unenforced.

"China basically couldn't care what happens to the products if they're selling for export," said Patricia Kovacevic, an attorney specializing in tobacco regulation. **MDT/AP**

this day in history

1973 SPANISH PRIME MINISTER ASSASSINATED

The Spanish Prime Minister, Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco, has been killed in a car bomb attack in Madrid.

The 70-year-old, his bodyguard and a driver died instantly and four other people were injured after a remote-controlled bomb was detonated as he passed.



A massive explosion sent the car hurtling into the air and over the roof of the San Francisco de Borja Church where Mr Blanco had just been attending mass.

The vehicle landed on the second floor terrace of a building on the other side of the church and a great deal of damage was caused in the area.

No one has admitted carrying out the attack.

The Spanish Government has declared three days of national mourning and the cabinet has held two emergency meetings.

All public buildings are closed but it is not known if a state of emergency will be declared.

Police did not confirm the prime minister had been assassinated until six hours after the attack. They said the killers had dug a tunnel under the street the admiral used regularly on his return from mass.

Police said the killers triggered the bomb from an opposite basement in a well-planned assassination bid.

The prime minister's death came 15 minutes before the start of a trial involving 10 of Spain's leading opponents of the Franco regime, one of them a Roman Catholic priest.

They were arrested in a Madrid Church 18 months ago and were accused of unlawful assembly.

Thousands of angry demonstrators have campaigned against the case and have already clashed with police.

Commentators said the admiral's death must be seen in the context of this controversial trial and against the backdrop of his staunch support of General Franco's regime.

Not since the Civil War, which ended in 1939, has a government minister died in such violent circumstances.

The former naval officer, who was considered authoritarian and hated Communism, was devoted to the Roman Catholic Church.

He has been succeeded by the vice-prime minister Fernandez Miranda, 57.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

Basque nationalists were blamed for the murder in retaliation for the execution of Basque militants in Spain.

Luis Carrero Blanco had only been prime minister for about six months when he was assassinated.

In June that year Franco had separated the duties of chief of state and head of government and Mr Blanco became prime minister. He had been influential in improving links with monarchist groups, and his appointment as head of state was considered to be part of a process to restore the monarchy under Juan Carlos.

Mr Blanco was opposed by many for propping up Franco's hard line regime, stifling opposition and for opposing mainstream European political life despite the country's progress in tourism and trade.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS



ARIES

Mar. 21-Apr. 19

Make plans to meet again in the near future. Don't exhaust yourself or minor health problems will set in. Get involved in worthwhile endeavors and meet new friends.



TAURUS

Apr. 20-May. 20

Make sure that new mates live up to your high standards. Correspondence may not clear up issues. Romance and social activity will be a promising combination.



GEMINI

May. 21-Jun. 21

Problems with in-laws or relatives may be more damaging than you realize. Do not get involved with individuals who are already committed to others.



CANCER

Jun. 22-Jul. 22

Things will be emotional with your mate. Take whatever time you can to get to know each other all over again. Renovations or purchases made for your home will payoff.



LEO

Jul. 23-Aug. 22

Don't try to get even without having all the facts. Look into the cost factor, but don't try to get backing yet. You should be trying to clear up legal contracts that have been pending.



VIRGO

Aug. 23-Sep. 22

Find an outlet for any mounting frustration. Consider a creative hobby. Deception is evident around you. Get more involved in group efforts at work.



LIBRA

Sep. 23-Oct. 22

Don't let others restrict you from saying how you feel about family issues. Be careful when using machinery or electrical equipment. Make changes regarding your status in society.



SCORPIO

Oct. 23-Nov. 21

You don't need to pay out in order to have fun. Praise will be yours if you have been pursuing your goals. Romantic opportunities will flourish through travel or communication.



SAGITTARIUS

Nov. 22-Dec. 21

Group endeavors will provide you with entertainment. You will have opportunities to advance, but you may have to be willing to make some changes and possibly a residential move.



CAPRICORN

Dec. 22-Jan. 19

You may want to plan physical activities that will help burn off some of their excess energy. Be careful that you aren't saddled with the responsibilities of others.



AQUARIUS

Jan. 20-Feb. 18

The key to feeling good about yourself will be to do something about it. Your emotional state could leave you vulnerable and confused.



PISCES

Feb. 19-Mar. 20

Colleagues may try to undermine you when talking to superiors. Social activity should be on your agenda today. Take positive action.

The Born Loser by Chip Sanson



SUDOKU

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

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

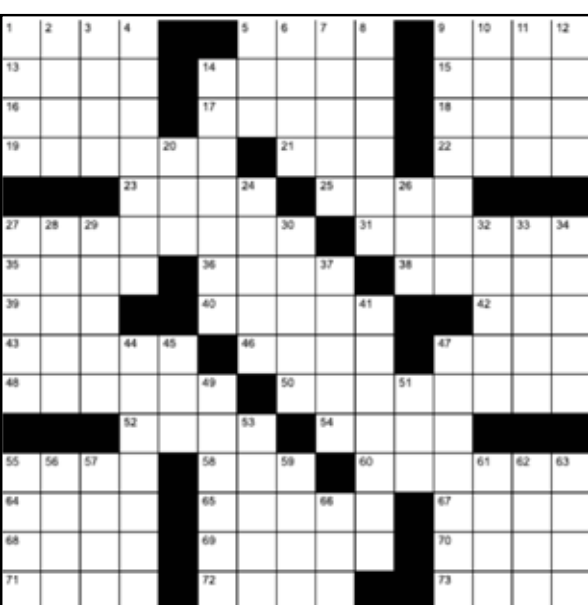
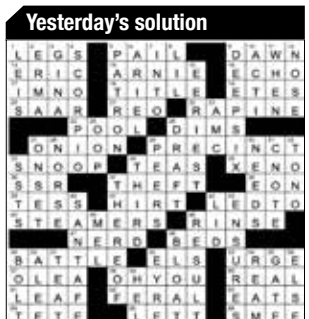
WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	-12	-6	fine
Changchun	-24	-18	fine
Chengdu	1	10	fine
Chongqing	4	11	cloudy
Fuzhou	10	12	overcast
Guangzhou	7	14	cloudy
Guiyang	-2	9	cloudy
Haikou	13	17	overcast
Hangzhou	-1	3	cloudy
Harbin	-29	-21	cloudy
Hefei	-6	2	fine
Nanjing	-4	1	fine
Shanghai	0	4	fine
Taipei	15	16	rain
Wuhan	-3	6	fine
Hong Kong	12	19	cloudy
WORLD			
Moscow	1	-3	cloudy
Frankfurt	6	7	cloudy
Paris	9	9	cloudy
London	9	10	rain
New York	2	7	fine

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Pulls in; 5- First name in country; 9- Zoo barrier; 13- Just ___; 14- All-night parties; 15- Thomas Edison's middle name; 16- Roseanne, once; 17- Utopian; 18- Low-cal; 19- Majestic; 21- Compass dir.; 22- Concerning; 23- Apiece; 25- Tennis units; 27- Source of water; 31- Suitable; 35- Terminates; 36- Dejected; 38- Slippery as ___; 39- Acid; 40- "Dallas" matriarch; 42- Bass, e.g.; 43- Ogles; 46- Close with force; 47- Locks up; 48- Skylighted lobby; 50- Soft-shell clams; 52- Rind; 54- Horne solo; 55- Gator's kin; 58- Chinese "way"; 60- Fleet; 64- ___ sapiens; 65- Matriculate; 67- Madam, I'm ___; 68- Mimic; 69- Santa's reindeer, e.g.; 70- Anklebones; 71- Tear apart; 72- Break; 73- Watched warily;

DOWN 1- Collars; 2- Biblical birthright seller; 3- Maryland athlete, for short; 4- Sieves; 5- Far out; 6- Level; 7- Leguminous plants; 8- Out, in bed; 9- 4th president of the U.S.; 10- Actress Lena; 11- Declare; 12- London gallery; 14- Enclosure formed by the chest bones; 20- Snitch; 24- Small mountains; 26- Song syllable; 27- Gal's guy; 28- Beginning; 29- Milk container; 30- Negates; 32- Freedom from war; 33- Conger catcher; 34- Like non-oyster months; 37- Mazda model; 41- Green berry; 44- It opens your parachute; 45- Litigate against; 47- Office of a Muslim cleric; 49- Shooting star; 51- Life support?; 53- Cavalry weapon; 55- Burn slightly; 56- Weapon in Clue; 57- Portent; 59- Scraps; 61- Forever's partner; 62- Roy's "singin' pardner"; 63- Among; 66- Cheerios grain;



Crossword puzzles provided by BestCrosswords.com

USEFUL TELEPHONE NUMBERS

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



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Hellene Garden
HKD 11,800/mth 3 bed 2 bath

AD



AS 2023 HOLIDAYS DAWN, FACE MASKS HAVE SETTLED IN AS OCCASIONAL FEATURE OF THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE

DEEPTI HAJELA, NEW YORK

THE scene: A crowded shopping center in the weeks before Christmas. Or a warehouse store. Or maybe a packed airport terminal or a commuter train station or another place where large groups gather.

There are people — lots of people. But look around, and it's clear one thing is largely absent these days: face masks.

Yes, there's the odd one here and there, but nothing like it was three years ago at the dawn of the COVID pandemic's first winter holidays — an American moment of contentiousness, accusation and scorn on both sides of the mask debate.

As 2023 draws to an end, with promises of holiday parties and crowds and lots of inadvertent exchanges of shared air, mask-wearing is much more off than on around the country even as COVID's long tail lingers. The days of anything approaching a widespread mask mandate would be like the Ghost of Christmas Past, a glimpse into what was.

Look at it a different way, though: These days, mask-wearing has become just another thing that simply happens in America. In a country where the mention of a mask prior to the pandemic usually meant Halloween or a costume party, it's a new way of being that hasn't gone away even

if most people aren't doing it regularly.

"That's an interesting part of the pandemic," says Brooke Tully, a strategist who works on how to change people's behaviors.

"Home delivery of food and all of those kind of services, they existed before COVID and actually were gaining some momentum," she says. "But something like mask-wearing in the U.S. didn't really have an existing baseline. It was something entirely new in COVID. So it's one of those new introductions of behaviors and norms."

THE SITUATION NOW IS ... SITUATIONAL

It tends to be situational, like the recent decision from the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center hospital system to reinstate a mask mandate at its facilities starting Dec. 20 because it's seeing an increase in respiratory viruses. And for people like Sally Kiser, 60, of Mooresville, North Carolina, who manages a home health care agency.

"I always carry one with me," she says, "cause I never know."

She doesn't always wear it, depending on the environment she's in, but she will if she thinks it's prudent. "It's kind of like a new paradigm for the world we live in," she says.

It wasn't that long ago that fear over catching COVID-19 sent de-

mand for masks into overdrive, with terms like "N95" coming into our vocabularies alongside concepts like mask mandates — and the subsequent, and vehement, backlash from those who felt it was government overreach.

Once the mandates started dropping, the masks started coming off and the demand fell. It fell so much so that Project N95, a nonprofit launched during the pandemic to help people find quality masks, announced earlier this month that it would stop sales Monday because there wasn't enough interest.

Anne Miller, the organization's executive director, acknowledges she thought widespread mask usage would become the rule, not the exception.

"I thought the new normal would be like we see in other cultures and other parts of the world — where people just wear a mask out of an abundance of caution for other people," she says.

But that's not how norms work, public safety or otherwise, says Markus Kimmelmeier, a professor of sociology at the University of Nevada, Reno.

In 2020, Kimmelmeier authored a study about mask-wearing around the country that showed mask usage and mandate resistance varied by region based on conditions including pre-existing cultural divisions and political orientation.

He points to the outcry after the introduction of seatbelts and seatbelt laws more than four decades ago as an example of how practices, particularly those required in certain parts of society, do or don't take hold.

"When they first were instituted with all the sense that they make and all the effectiveness, there was a lot of resistance," Kimmelmeier says. "The argument was basically lots of complaints about individual freedoms being curtailed and so forth, and you can't tell me what to do and so forth."

FIGURING OUT THE BALANCE

In New York City's Brooklyn borough, members of the Park Slope Co-op recently decided there was a need at the longstanding, membership-required grocery. Last month, the co-op instituted mask-required Wednesdays and Thursdays; the other five days continue to have no requirement.

The people who proposed it weren't focused on COVID rates. They were thinking about immunocompromised people, a population that has always existed but came to mainstream awareness during the pandemic, says co-op general manager Joe Holtz.

Proponents of the mask push at the co-op emphasized that immunocompromised people are more at risk from other people's respiratory ailments like colds

and flu. Implementing a window of required mask usage allows them to be more protected, Holtz says.

It was up to the store's administrators to pick the days, and they went with two of the slowest instead of the busy weekend days on purpose, Holtz says, a nod to the reality that mask requirements get different responses from people.

"From management's point of view," he says, "if we were going to try and if there's going to be a negative financial impact from this decision that was made, we want to minimize it."

Those shopping there on a recent Thursday didn't seem fazed.

Aron Halberstam, 77, says he doesn't usually mask much these days but wasn't put off by the requirement. He wears a mask on the days it's required, even if he doesn't otherwise — a middle ground reflecting what is happening in so many parts of the country more than three years after the mask became a part of daily conversation and daily life.

"Any place which asks you to do it, I just do it," Halberstam says. "I have no resistance to it."

Whatever the level of resistance, says Kimmelmeier, the culture has shifted. People are still wearing masks in places like crowded stores or while traveling. They do so because they choose to for their own reasons and not because the government is requiring it. And new reasons can come up as well, like when wildfires over the summer made air quality poor and people used masks to deal with the haze and smoke.

"It always will find a niche to fit in with," he says. "And as long as there are needs somewhere, it will survive." **MDT/AP**

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

RUGBY

Contepomi takes over Pumas to 2027 World Cup

ARGENTINA confirmed Felipe Contepomi as the new coach of the Pumas yesterday [Macau time] after assisting Michael Cheika for 18 months.

Contepomi was contracted to the 2027 Rugby World Cup in Australia.

The hall of fame flyhalf paid tribute to Cheika, calling it an honor to work under him as the attack coach and being "grateful for the extraordinary opportunity."

Cheika guided Argentina to the semifinals of the recent Rugby World Cup in France. He was an assistant and adviser to the team for two years before taking charge in March 2022.

Under Cheika, who made an effort to learn Spanish, the Pumas beat the All Blacks in New Zealand, the Wallabies in Australia, and England at Twickenham. They beat Wales in the World Cup quarterfinals and lost to the All Blacks in the semis.

"Having been the head coach of Los Pumas fills me with pride, and it is one of the experiences that I enjoyed the most in my career as a coach," Cheika told the Argentina Rugby Union website. "Although I was born in Australia, a big part of me will be Argentina. I am convinced that Felipe and his staff are going to lead the team in the best way."

AP PHOTO



Cheika also coached Australia to the final of the 2015 World Cup.

Yesterday, Rugby Australia chief executive Phil Waugh said he would not rule out Cheika

returning for a second stint as Wallabies coach, replacing his former Sydney club Randwick

teammate Eddie Jones.

Jones resigned as Wallabies coach after the team's ill-fated Rugby World Cup campaign where the team failed to advance from the group stage for the first time. Jones has since signed with Japan as head coach.

"Everyone's in the hunt, to be fair," Waugh said. "We haven't gone to market with it yet. We're hoping to announce our high-performance director this week and then get in the process of going to market for a head coach."

Contepomi was the flyhalf at Leinster — and Cheika the coach — when they won their first European Cup in 2009. Contepomi played 87 tests, and was key to Argentina reaching its first Rugby World Cup semifinals in 2007. He captained the Pumas at his fourth World Cup in 2011.

After he retired from playing in 2014, he learned the coaching ropes with the Argentina XV and Super Rugby Jaguares, and returned to Leinster. Cheika brought him back home in 2022.

UAR president Gabriel Travaglini thanked Cheika.

"His professionalism, passion and dedication to Argentine rugby is something we will remember forever," Travaglini said. "Today, we are convinced that Felipe is the right person for this new path towards Australia 2027." **MDT/AP**

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OPINION

Multipolar World

Jorge Costa Oliveira



REDUCTION OF FOSSIL FUELS IN ROAD TRANSPORT

According to the IEA, in its World Energy Outlook 2023, energy demand in transportation increased by 4% in 2022, with oil accounting for 90% of this growth (although mainly driven by aviation). Oil use in road transport is responsible for 45% of global oil demand. It currently totals 41 million barrels/day (mb/d), with cars accounting for 21 mb/d and trucks for 16 mb/d.

Also according to the IEA, sales of internal combustion engine vehicles using fossil fuels (ICEV) grew by an average of 3.4%/year from 2010 to 2017, reaching a peak of 85 million in 2017. Electric vehicle (EV) sales increased from 3 million in 2020 to >10 million in 2022 – 14% of all new cars sold in 2022, compared to 9% in 2021 and <5% in 2020.

Three markets dominated global sales – China (60% of global EV sales), Europe (EV sales grew >15% in 2022), and the USA (EV sales grew >8% in 2022). By 2030, total car sales are expected to increase >30%, reaching 100 million. About 2/3 of this figure comes from emerging markets and developing economies, especially China, India, and Indonesia. For the IEA, the rise in EVs means that ICEV car sales are not expected to return to their 2017 peak.

The Boston Consulting Group (and BloombergNEF) do not endorse this forecast and highlight multiple uncertainties (affecting EV sales projections): (i) rising battery prices; (ii) increasing electricity costs; (iii) changes in government subsidies; (iv) insufficient guarantees of raw material supplies for batteries; (v) insufficient supply of essential metals at stable prices. We can further add: (vi) the limited number of EVs produced; (vii) problems with high-capacity charging systems; and (viii) the [still high] cost of EVs, especially in low-income countries.

The “incentives” for the shift from ICEV to EV involve increases in current taxation on ICEVs, special “green” taxes, on top of [unrealistic] deadlines for the ban on the sale of new ICEVs. These punitive “incentives” for ICEVs assume that technological advances will make EVs competitive. However, EV batteries remain expensive (and huge, heavy), most EVs do not have a great range, and high-capacity charging systems have problems.

The [expensive] price of EVs and the low available income of the vast majority of families (especially in developing countries) will slow down the pace of new EV purchases. At the same pace, control of oil supply by OPEC+ is expected to keep fuel prices high. If new green taxes significantly increase fuel prices (e.g., 3/liter), there will be riots.

Providing generous financial support to families and companies for the replacement of ICEVs with EVs is only within the reach of a few countries (e.g., Norway). It is more likely that governments will continue to define prudent policies on the assumption of the long-term continuity of ICEVs. In summary, the reduction of fossil fuels in road transport is being, and is expected to continue to be, much slower than the wishful thinking underlying the net-zero scenario by 2050.

AUSTRALIAN JURY RECORDS FIRST CONVICTION OF FOREIGN INTERFERENCE AGAINST A CHINESE AGENT

THE BUZZ

An Australian court yesterday recorded the first conviction under the nation's foreign interference laws with a jury finding a Vietnamese refugee guilty of “covertly working for the Chinese Communist Party”.

A Victoria state County Court jury convicted Melbourne businessman and local community leader Di Sanh Duong on a charge of preparing for or planning an act of foreign interference.

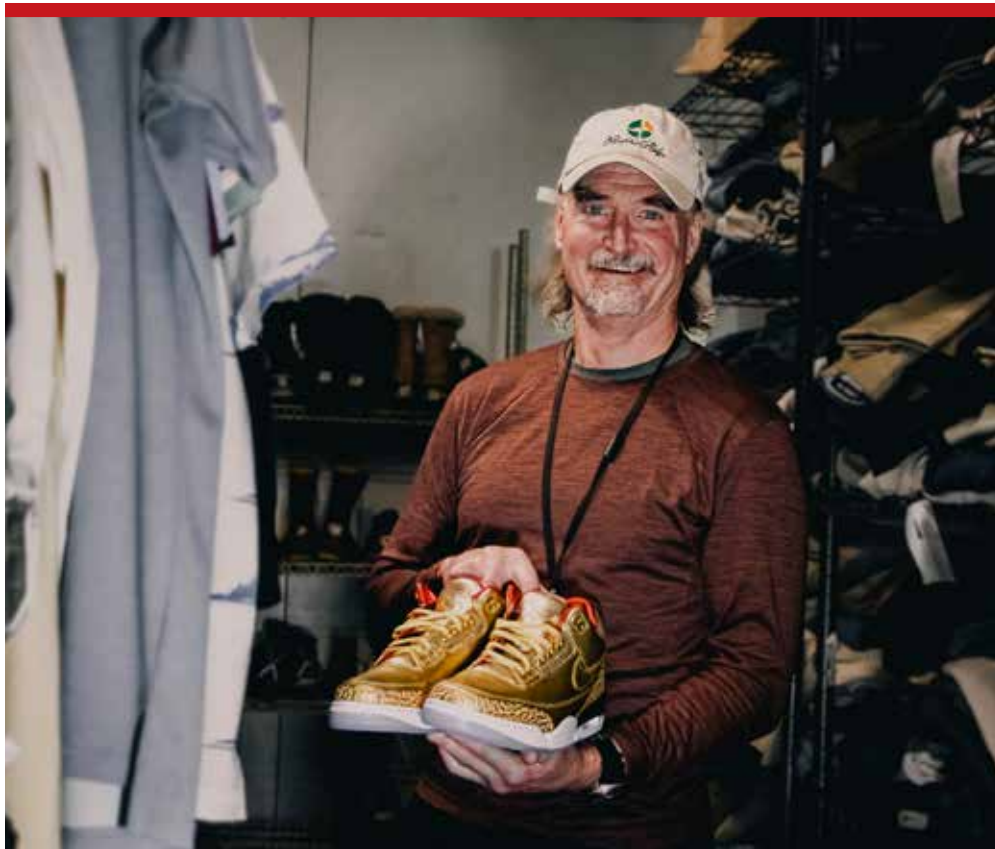
He is the first person to be charged under federal laws created in 2018 that ban covert foreign interference in domestic politi-

cs and make industrial espionage for a foreign power a crime. The laws offended Australia's most important trading partner, China, and accelerated a deterioration in bilateral relations.

Duong, 68, had pleaded not guilty. He was released on bail after his conviction and will return to court in February to be sentenced. He faces a potential 10-year prison sentence.

Prosecutors had argued that Duong planned to gain political influence in 2020 by cultivating a relationship with the then-government minister Alan Tudge “on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party.”

AP PHOTO



This photo provided by the Portland Rescue Mission shows James Free posing for a photo with a pair of gold Nike Air Jordan 3 sneakers at the Portland Rescue Mission

AIR JORDANS MADE FOR SPIKE LEE AUCTIONED FOR NEARLY \$51,000

CLAIRE RUSH, PORTLAND (ORE.)

WATCHING a countdown of the auction's final minutes yesterday [Macau time], Erin Holcomb couldn't believe it: the sale price kept jumping for the rare, gold Nike Air Jordan 3s that were anonymously dropped in the donation chute of the Oregon shelter where she works in Portland.

“In the last five minutes it went up and up, and every time we saw that number increase, there were tears and people clapping,” Holcomb, director of staff ministries at the Portland Rescue Mission, told The Associated Press.

The sneakers, one of just a few custom pairs that had been made for filmmaker Spike Lee, ultimately sold for \$50,800 — more than double the high end of the predicted sale price. All proceeds will benefit the Portland Rescue Mission, which has served people struggling with homelessness, hunger and addiction since 1949.

“We couldn't believe it,” Holcomb said. “The generosity of this moment has been a huge celebration for our whole organization.”

Some two dozen people, mostly staff, gathered yesterday to watch the auction live on a big screen TV in one of the shelter's conference rooms, Holcomb said. Among them was James Free, a formerly homeless man who founded the shoes while sorting through donations and brought them to the attention of the staff. Free has lived at the mission for the past few months as part of its long-term shelter program, Holcomb said.

“I'm just so happy to be a part of this,” Free said in a news release shared by the shelter after the auction closed. “I love this place, and I'm so glad to see this story shared.”

The sneakers were on auction at Sotheby's. They were auctioned along with a replacement box and other Nike merchandise donated by Tinker Hatfield, who custom designed the sneakers for Lee in 2019.

Lee wore his pair to the Academy Awards that year when he accepted an Oscar for his “BlacKkKlansman” screenplay. The donated sneakers weren't Lee's personal pair, but were among a few made for him to give out to his inner circle, the Portland Rescue Mission said.

Hatfield visited the shelter and authenticated the shoes. Nike is based in nearby Beaverton, Oregon.

Holcomb said the money from the auction will help fund services at the downtown Portland shelter, which provides food and access to bathrooms and showers, as well as health care, housing and employment resources. It serves some 6,000 people and 300,000 meals every year, Holcomb said.

“That building is open 24/7, 365 days a year,” she said. “It's a really beautiful, helpful gift and it is a piece of a much larger story of generosity in our community.”

The identity of whoever donated the shoes remains a mystery. **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



U.S. and a host of other nations are creating a new force to protect ships transiting the Red Sea that have come under attack by drones and ballistic missiles fired from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin (pictured) announced yesterday in Bahrain. The seriousness of the attacks, several of which have damaged vessels, has led multiple shipping companies to order their ships to hold in place and not enter the Bab el-Mandeb Strait until the security situation can be addressed.

AP PHOTO



Romania A boarding school building partially collapsed in central Romania on Monday, leaving one person dead and three injured, authorities said. Emergency workers raced to find the four people under the rubble in the town of Odorheiu Secuiesc in Harghita county, according to the General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations. The affected area was about 200 square meters. There was no indication as to what caused the collapse.

Guinea An explosion and inferno at Guinea's main fuel depot in the capital of Conakry left at least 13 people dead and 178 injured, authorities said Monday, as the West African country was assisted by other nations in managing the disaster. The massive explosion sparked the fire at the Guinean Petroleum Company depot after midnight Sunday, Guinea's presidency said. It caused significant damage in the heart of the Kaloum administrative district, home to most government offices.

HOLIDAY TIMES
 Macau Daily Times will not be published during the holiday. The Times will be back on the stands on Friday December 22. However the MDT website will be updated with breaking news during the recess period. We wish our readers, advertisers and friends the best of times.