

**The Alcohol Control Law**  
shall enter into force on 5th November 2023

Enjoy a healthier life: Quit smoking and limit alcohol consumption!

Scan QR code for related infographics

iPhone 15 Pro. Capture more than ever before.

iPhone 15 Pro

CTM5G: Fast · Entertaining · Unlimited  
\$468 / 3-Destination Unlimited Data Usage  
Handset Bundle Price \$2,070 up

Note: Customers of the above promotion are bound by the respective service agreement.

**DIFFICULTIES IN ACCESSING TRANSPORTATION REMAIN A MAJOR CHALLENGE TO THE CITY'S FURTHER TOURISM DEVELOPMENT, RUTGER VERSCHUREN SAYS** P5

**FLU VACCINATION BY APPOINTMENT ONLY DUE TO HIGH DEMAND: HEALTH BUREAU** P4

**PROPERTY: SAVILLS ANTICIPATES INVESTMENT CLARITY IN YEAR'S SECOND HALF** P6



AP PHOTO



**Japan** signed a deal with the United States yesterday to purchase up to 400 Tomahawk cruise missiles as part of its ongoing military buildup in response to increased regional threats. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's government has pledged to double its annual defense spending to around 10 trillion yen by 2027, which would make Japan the world's third-biggest military spender after the United States and China. More on p10

AP PHOTO



**Malaysia** The director and producer of a banned film that explores the afterlife were charged with offending the religious feelings of others in a rare criminal prosecution of filmmakers, slammed by critics as an attack on freedom of expression. Mohamad Khairianwar Jailani, the director and co-scriptwriter of "Mentega Terbang," and producer Tan Meng Kheng pleaded not guilty to having a "deliberate intention of wounding the religious feelings of others" through the independent, low-budget film.

AP PHOTO



**Singaporean** Transport Minister S. Iswaran was charged yesterday in the first ministerial corruption case ever seen in the Asian financial hub known for squeaky clean government. The Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau said in a statement that Iswaran, 61, faces 27 charges: two for corruption, 24 for receiving gifts as a public servant, and one for obstructing the course of justice. Iswaran said after leaving court that he had resigned from his post on Tuesday, and denied the charges.

More on backpage

# LEONINE CLAUSE

**Mutual agreement on contract termination to trigger return of Macau Jockey Club security deposit to the extent of possibly MOP15 million** P2

RENATO MARQUES



**CNY HOLIDAY**  
**TOURISM OFFICE FORECASTS AVERAGE OF 120,000 VISITORS PER DAY**

P3,4



P15





From left: Rui Leao, Nuno Soares and Henry Lei

tect and scholar Nuno Soares supported the idea of the creation of a large-scale leisure area.

“That space is in an area with proximity to housing and is very well served by public transportation, with both buses and the Light Rapid Transit. It also has proximity to Taipa [Olympic] Stadium along with many other sports facilities, the casinos and waterside. It is important to take advantage of the geographic location to serve the public and the Macau population in general,” Soares said, adding that this area can be an “emblematic space and meeting point for leisure and quality of life of Taipa. It is a space that has potential to be a great park.”

He suggested that an ‘Ideas Competition’ be organized to gather diverse proposals for the best possible use of the space, with a focus on increasing the population’s quality of life and wellbeing.

Conversely, economist and vice-president of the Macau Economic Association, Henry Lei, told the Chinese language newspaper Macao Daily News that he believed the best solution would be the construction of a mega theme park with Chinese and Portuguese cultural elements to differentiate itself from parks in neighboring regions.

Lei noted the government’s goal of transforming Macau into a World Centre of Tourism and Leisure, advancing that the creation of a theme park would “integrate well with existing several sports facilities, casinos, and hotel units” in the area.

URBAN PLANNING

# FUTURE OF JOCKEY CLUB: OPINIONS DIFFER ON FUTURE LAND USE

RENATO MARQUES

**F**OLLOWING the government’s decision to cease all horse racing activities in Macau with the closing of the Macau Jockey Club and the planned reversion of the facilities to the government, various opinions, suggestions, and speculations regarding the future use of this nearly 400,000 square meters of space have emerged.

While the government has ruled out using the land for other gaming-related purposes, alternative options are being considered.

Several entities and individuals have expressed their views on the future of the land over the last few days. Amid differing opinions, urban planning experts converge into one aspect: the final decision should exclude high-rise buildings. Meanwhile, economists have

expressed a preference for a mega structure, such as a theme park.

Local architect Rui Leão said to public broadcaster TDM that the land area should be reserved as part of Taipa’s future “green lung,” the idea being that the area should be maintained as a green and tree-covered area without visual barriers caused by buildings.

Leão suggested that this land be used for anything but buildin-

gs, saying, “given that Zone A [of the new landfills] has been almost entirely allocated to housing, I believe that this area [the Jockey Club] should be for everything but housing.”

Leão added that as Taipa has been converted into a largely suburban area, it therefore needs a new central area of public and leisure space.

To the same broadcaster, archi-

RENATO MARQUES

JOCKEY CLUB

**T**HE termination of the concession contract for horse racing and betting activities, achieved through agreement, will result in a refund of an approximately MOP15 million security deposit to the Macau Horse Race Company, Ltd. (MJC) under section six of the agreement signed between the government and the company.

The agreement specifies at section six, “the refund of the security deposit paid under the terms of Article 26 of the contract granting the exclusive operation of horse racing will only be carried out after adequate treatment of the matters provided for in this con-

# Mutual agreement on contract termination to trigger return of MJC security deposit

tract and without any compensation or payment of any amount in debt from the second party [MJC].”

The matters governed by the contract relate to the handling of horses as well as workers’ labor rights.

Although the security deposit amount is not explicitly stated in the agreement, previous contracts reviewed by the Times indicate that this sum is linked to the annual land rent of the MJC and should

be regularly updated based on the annual land premium.

According to information from the last contract in 2018, this sum is estimated at MOP15 million, a figure that the government must reimburse to the MJC. However, account reports from the Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau and Financial Services Bureau reveal that this rent amount has been waived over several years.



RENATO MARQUES

www.macaudailytimes.com.mo

**REACHING OUT!**

+25,000

Like us on facebook.com/mdtimes



MacauDaily 澳門每日時報  
**Times**

DIRECTOR & EDITOR-IN-CHIEF\_Paulo Coutinho paulocoutinho@macaudailytimes.com  
ASSISTANT EDITOR\_Lynzy Valles  
CONTRIBUTING EDITORS\_Leanda Lee, Severo Portela, Sheyla Zandonai

NEWSROOM AND CONTRIBUTORS\_Alex Torrão, Albano Martins, Annabel Jackson, Anthony Lam, Emilie Tran, Grace Yu, Irene Sam, Ivo Carneiro de Sousa, Jacky I.F. Cheong, Jenny Lao-Phillips, João Palla Martins, Jorge Costa Oliveira, Joseph Cheung, Juliet Risdon, Linda Kennedy, Paulo Cordeiro de Sousa, Renato Marques, Richard Whitfield, Sérgio de Almeida Correia, Viviana Seguí DESIGNERS\_Miguel Bandeira, Rebeca Almeida | ASSOCIATE CONTRIBUTORS\_JML Property, MdME Lawyers, PokerStars, Ruan Du Toit Bester | NEWS AGENCIES\_Associated Press, MacauHub, MacaoNews, Xinhua SECRETARY\_Yang Dongxiao amy@macaudailytimes.com

SEND NEWSWORTHY INFORMATION AND PRESS RELEASES TO: NEWSROOM@MACAUDAILYTIMES.COM WEBSITE: WWW.MACAUDAILYTIMES.COM.MO

A MACAU TIMES PUBLICATIONS LTD PUBLICATION

ADMINISTRATOR & CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Kowie Geldenhuys kowie@macaudailytimes.com

OFFICE MANAGER Juliana Cheang juliana@macaudailytimes.com

ADDRESS Av. da Praia Grande, 599, Edif. Comercial Rodrigues, 12 Floor C, MACAU SAR Telephones: +853 287 160 81/2 Fax: +853 287 160 84

Advertisement advertising@macaudailytimes.com

For subscription and general issues:

general@macaudailytimes.com | Printed at Welfare Printing Ltd



**TOURISM**

# MGTO forecasts an average of 120,000 visitors per day during CNY

RENATO MARQUES

**T**HE director of the Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO), Maria Helena de Senna Fernandes anticipates an average of 120,000 visitors to Macau per day during the Lunar New Year (CNY) period.

At the sidelines of a press conference unveiling the festive season's activities at the Macau Tower yesterday morning, Senna Fernandes commented, "We are expecting some 120,000 visitors per day during the eight days of the Chinese New Year. This year, we will have a total of eight days. We have a broad program to attract and entertain those tourists over this period," she said.

The longer holiday period will occur as the first day falls on a



Saturday (February 10), which extends the holiday period due to the weekend and compensation days.

This month, the daily avera-

ge of visitors entering Macau is around 70,000 to 80,000 per day, reaching over 100,000 on weekends. This stable baseline has led the MGTO to expect to reach about 33 million visitors for the entire year by the end of 2024.

Considering the 25th anniversary of Macau's handover this year, Senna Fernandes said that MGTO aims to focus on revitalizing overseas markets and attracting more international visitation.

In the first half of 2024, the MGTO will continue its road show promotion in South Asian countries, with events scheduled in Thailand and Malaysia. Preparations are also underway for promoting Macau in European countries, with the MGTO to attend tourism fairs in Portugal and Spain this year.

## TURBOJET VESSEL CATCHES FIRE DURING TRIP, NO INJURIES

**A**N engine room fire broke out in a turbojet ferry traveling between Hong Kong and Macau at approximately 10 a.m. yesterday, approximately one nautical mile east of the No. 2 buoy in the Qingzhou Channel near Macau, according to information provided by the Marine and Water Bureau (DSAMA).

The crew successfully extinguished the fire before the rescue team from DSAMA arrived.

None of the 239 passengers on board the vessel or the nice crew members were injured in the incident.

The vessel was towed and escorted to the Taipa Ferry Terminal, its originally planned

final destination.

The DSAMA noted that upon receiving the notification, the Bureau promptly dispatched rescue ships, activated the emergency plan, and notified relevant departments to offer assistance and information at the Taipa Ferry Terminal.

The incident occurred with the "Universal MK 2011" vessel, an Austral Catamaran vessel with a total capacity of 418 passengers.

Originally delivered in 2008 to the New World First Ferry Services (Macau) and named "New Ferry LXXXVII," it was later transferred to Turbojet and renamed "Universal MK 2011." **RM**



AD



# 2024 金沙中國 17/03

## 澳門國際十公里長跑賽

SANDS CHINA MACAU INTERNACIONAL 10K  
SANDS CHINA MACAO INTERNACIONAL 10K



下載「澳門十公里」  
手機應用程式  
Descarregue a aplicação para  
telemóvel "Macao 10K"  
Download "Macao 10K" mobile app

www.macao10k.com





### INFLUENCER PASSES AWAY, SAYS OWN SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNT

A female influencer with over 2 million followers on TikTok's mainland parent app, Douyin, recently passed away, according to local media outlet Exmoo. According to the Douyin account of the influencer, she had battled severe depression for three years. The announcement shared on the platform requested privacy for the influencer's family and friends during this time. An earlier post of the influencer accused Douyin users of engaging in libel against her, using "vulgar and crude" language. The influencer, originally from Nanchang in mainland China, had relocated to Macau following her marriage. Her Douyin account primarily focused on leisure news about Macau.

### MONETARY AUTHORITY WARNS AGAINST FRAUDULENT MACAU PASS WEBSITE

The Monetary Authority of Macau (AMCM) has issued a warning regarding an impostor website mimicking the local payment service operator Macau Pass. The payment operator has also been asked to post a warning on its website to inform users. The AMCM advised the public to exercise caution and recommended that users verify information reportedly from financial institutions with those institutions to avoid potential loss. Assistance can be sought from the Judiciary Police at 8800 7777 or 993 if needed.

### LATE HENRIQUE DE SENNA FERNANDES FEATURED IN LATEST IC PUBLICATION

To commemorate the centenary of the birth of the late Henrique de Senna Fernandes, a Portuguese lawyer and writer in Macau during the last century, a cultural magazine published by the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) features a column highlighting studies on the lawyer's works and subsequent adaptations. These studies were conducted by academics from both Macau and overseas. The magazine's issue will include at least five articles on Senna Fernandes's works and subsequent adaptations. The IC invites academics to submit their articles or studies for publication in the magazine.

### OVER 3,000 SMOKING OFFENCES LOGGED IN 2023

The Health Bureau (SSM) recorded 3,147 cases of smoking offences in the previous year. Of these, 3,101 related to illegal cigarette smoking, 22 involved defect sales, and 24 pertained to the import of e-cigarettes. The top three locations for violations were catering establishments, the airport, and casinos. During the 1.5 months following the enactment of the alcohol law, the SSM issued 1,156 opinions to 760 venues. The smoking and alcohol hotline received 1,503 calls throughout the year, comprising 848 enquiries, 628 complaints, and 109 suggestions. The bureau took appropriate actions in response to these calls.

### CNY HOLIDAY

# CELEBRATIONS WITH PARADE FLOATS, FIREWORKS, AND MUSICAL PERFORMANCES

STAFF REPORTER

**T**HE Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO) has unveiled the activities program for the upcoming Lunar New Year that will take place in the central and northern districts.

The MGTO program includes float parades, cultural performances, float exhibitions, fireworks, and other activities to enhance tourists' nighttime experience in Macau.

The Parade, along with the 2024 Chinese New Year (CNY) Activities and Chinese New Year Fireworks Displays, has been listed by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism as part of the "Happy Chinese New Year" celebrations for the year.

Featuring a procession of 15 floats, representing the "Wood Dragon," the creative team behind the parade has designed a themed story specifically for this year's event.

The opening ceremony of the Parade will take place at Sai Van Lake Square at 8 p.m. on the 3rd day of the CNY (February 12) and will feature performances by Hong Kong pop groups and singers including XiX, George Au, and Phoebus Ng from P1X3L, Gordon Ip and Lincoln Hui from BOP, and Tik Tang. Macau singers Filipe Tou and Germano Guilherme will



also be part of the event along with local pop group MFM.

The parade route will also be extended to Macau Fisherman's Wharf.

Over 2,500 spectator seats will be set up at Sai Van Lake Square, Avenida Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, the front square of the Kun Iam Ecumenical Centre, and the roundabout in front of the Macao Science Center. Audiences may enter the spectator stands from 5:30 p.m. onwards on the day. Several barrier-free vantage points will be provided at the spectator stands for people with accessi-

bility needs.

On the 8th day of the CNY (February 17), the 15-float parade will attend Macau's northern districts, starting from the University of St. Joseph and St. Joseph Diocesan College Six, and concluding at Iao Hon Market Garden.

A grand finale show of cultural and artistic performances will commence at Iao Hon Market Garden at 8:15 p.m., featuring Hong Kong artists Selena Lee and Carman Kwan, as well as local singers Germano Guilherme, Rico Long, and Viviana Lo, to conclude the ni-

ght's festivities.

During the nights of the third day of the Lunar New Year (February 12), the seventh day of the Lunar New Year (February 16), and the Lantern Festival (February 24), a fireworks display will be held opposite the Macau Tower.

Additionally, MGTO will organize community tours on the first and second days of the Lunar New Year to visit various districts in Macau, delivering Lunar New Year greetings and presenting special performances to create a vibrant environment for visitors and locals.

### HEALTH

# Flu vaccination by appointment only due to high demand

STAFF REPORTER

**H**EALTH authorities have announced that flu vaccinations now require an appointment, primarily through the OneMacau app, due to high demand and temporarily low stocks. This measure has been in effect since yesterday.

The Health Services (SSM) report that flu vaccination rates have increased by 30% compared to the same period last year. In 2023 and 2024, the agency ordered 160,000 doses of the seasonal flu vaccine. Owing to high demand, "an additional 10,000 doses were acquired."

Vaccination efforts for high-



-risk groups are nearing completion, with an increase in vaccination rates across various

risk groups. SSM states that vaccination rates in nursing homes exceed 90%; in kindergar-

tens and primary schools, they are close to 80%; and for children under three and seniors over 65, the rate is nearly 50%.

Observing a "significant increase" in vaccination willingness among other residents, the agency has declared that to meet the needs of those who have scheduled vaccinations, "priority will be given" to these individuals.

Consequently, those who have scheduled an appointment will be vaccinated according to their arranged date and location. Currently, "walk-ins without an appointment are not being accepted."

To mitigate flu and other upper respiratory tract infections, in addition to the seasonal flu vaccine, SSM encourages the public to get the COVID vaccine and booster shots, and to maintain healthy habits, including adequate sleep, a balanced diet, and regular physical activity.



HOSPITALITY

# Hotelier finds transport still challenging tourism's further development

ANTHONY LAM

**D**IFFICULTIES in accessing transportation remain a major challenge to the city's further tourism development, Rutger Verschuren, an executive at the Macau Hotel Association, said yesterday.

Verschuren, who is also a hotelier in Macau, made these comments in an exclusive interview with the Times on the sidelines of a lunch event hosted by the British Chamber of Commerce in Macao yesterday.

When asked which areas in Macau still require enhancement to support the development of the tourism industry – the main economic pillar of the city – Verschuren pointed towards local transportation.

"500 more taxis will definitely help ease the difficulties," the hotelier said, but added that digital solutions should be embraced for hailing taxi services, similar to ri-



de-hailing apps used in both the mainland and external territories.

Acknowledging that hailing private vehicles for rides is not legal in Macau, the hotelier suggested that the taxi industry move towards digitization.

He also expressed concern about the service attitude of taxi drivers, citing guest complaints about rude treatment during rides.

"I have been told by hotel guests that when they requested a route suggested by their navigation apps, some taxi drivers would start driving poorly, often accelerating and braking abruptly," Verschuren revealed. "What is harmful is that news of this behavior spreads out of Macau and hurts Macau's reputation."

Regarding the workforce, the

hotelier acknowledged improvements in recruitment challenges year-over-year, but new difficulties have emerged in finding the right people.

"We need to look for people with the right attitude and suitable language abilities. We have had a hard time finding quality, polite and hospitable employees who have the motivation to do the job," the hotelier disclosed.

Utilizing staff across roles is one tactic employed to cope with the labor shortage, Verschuren said, explaining that some staff members are horizontally mobile across similar positions or responsibilities.

He thanked the Labour Affairs Bureau (DSAL) for helping the hotel industry to fill vacancies, and reinstating a portion of pre-pandemic non-resident worker quotas.

He also suggested allowing non-local students in Macau to work part-time for limited hours each month to help mitigate the

recruitment pressures.

Meanwhile, the hotelier is also confident with the hotel occupancy rate over the upcoming Lunar New Year period. In mainland China, the period equates to seven days of holiday.

Comments have emerged that mainland Chinese tourists are not as attracted to Macau and Hong Kong now that normal travel has resumed. This is due to a variety of factors, including visa-free policies in multiple Southeast Asian destinations and the smaller difference in exchange rates between the Chinese yuan and the Hong Kong Dollar or Macau Pataca.

Despite this, the local hotelier remains optimistic.

"Frankly speaking, I do not see many hurdles, as Macau is very close to mainland China, so there is a lot of appeal from the perspective of the mass, premium mass, gaming, family, and couple-oriented markets," Verschuren said. "We definitely see a very bright year ahead of us."

AD

Churchill's  
Table

Celebrate Chinese New Year with Exquisite Delights

Discover a curated selection of Chinese New Year gifts at Churchill's Table Boutique for your family and friends.

The Dragon Gift Box | MOP 368 PER BOX

Available from Jan 8 - Feb 18, 2024

Scan for Details

ADDRESS | Churchill's Table Boutique, Level 1, The Londoner Macao

ENQUIRY | +853 8118 8822  
churchillstable.boutique@thelondoner.com.mo

\*Terms & Conditions apply.



ANTHONY LAM

PROPERTY

# INT'L REALTOR ANTICIPATES INVESTMENT CLARITY IN 2H24

INVESTMENT forecasts will be "a game of two-halves" this year, with the second half of the year to bring greater clarity. Speaking at the sidelines of a British Chamber of Commerce in Macao lunch event yesterday, Simon Smith, senior director at the international real estate firm, Savills, expects the first half of the year to have a slow recovery if any due to prolonged uncertainties in the market.

In particular, he noted during his presentation that the first half of the year features a number of elections in Asia and the Pacific. The period before any election is rife with uncertainty, but these will settle once post-election results are known.

Smith believes that the outlook will become clearer in the second half of the year. "I think there will be more certainty around inflation, economic growth and interest rate, and that will reassure investors that now is the time to reinvest into these markets," Smith said.

He attributes his confidence in the projected stabilization and decline in interest rates to several factors that had driven up figures to begin with.

"The supply chain disruptions caused by the emergence of Co-

ANTHONY LAM



Simon Smith

vid-19 are beginning abate," he said. "Inflation is partly a base game. So if you have a high base

for comparison from last year, things will almost inevitably come down. It is mathematical. Infla-

tion will begin to come down as the post-Covid supply disruption is dissipating."

Nonetheless, he noted that the market is concerned with supply disruptions in the Middle East, caused by geopolitical tensions and other wars. Notwithstanding this, he noted that all things being equal, inflation was likely to fall on a global scale in 2024.

He underlined that decisions to increase interest rates as part of efforts to mitigate inflation were made at the cost of economic growth. With high interest rates, small property owners encounter difficulties in repaying mortgages, while larger investors consider deferring investment plans due to the high cost of capitalization.

That being said, he observed that the US economy has held up well in recent times. However, the European market has shrunk slightly. As such, unseen factors may underlie the global expectation that interest rates will fall soon. A positive sign, however, is that the US has managed its inflation somewhat.

In spite of his confidence, he added that it can be difficult to predict the market because it is always "flip-flopping." He expects the US Federal Reserve could delay lowering interest rates, but eventually it would take the necessary step.

Overall, he predicted that this year would be a positive year for real property investments.

AD

律師事務所



C&C  
LAWYERS  
& NOTARIES  
SINCE 1996



合夥人 PARTNERS:

官樂怡 Rui José da Cunha ° 山度士 Álvaro Rodrigues ° 馬天龍 Nuno Sardinha da Mata ° 趙魯 Zhao Lu °\* 馬傑安 João Nogueira Marques

大律師 ASSOCIATES:

高文軒 Adelino Correia °  
羅善齡 Zelina Rodrigues  
馬潔冰 Maria João Marques  
陶義德 António Isóo de Azeredo  
白穎怡 Iclia Berenguel  
冼玲鳳 Mariana Afonso Esteves  
馬秀文 Sofia Mendes Martins  
飛嘉華 Carlos dos Santos Ferreira °  
莫永誠 Rui Velez de Moura  
安東尼 António Manuel dos Santos  
巴慧雅 Vera Bastos  
歐文傑 Miguel Evaristo  
陳芷喬 Joana Chan

大律師 ASSOCIATES:

顏曉蓉 Teresa Xiaorong Yan  
諾瑪莉 Maria Noras  
康靜雅 Viviana Hong  
梁淑嵐 Ana Leon  
黃瀚賢 Frederico Vong  
斐彥德 Gonçalo Figueiredo  
吳霆鋒 Ng Teng Fong

實習律師 TRAINEE LAWYERS:

陳健雄 Eurico Chan  
戴博晴 Tai Pok Cheng  
吳佩愉 Ng Pui U  
陳子健 Kimi Chan

法律專家及外地註冊律師

JURISTS AND LAWYERS

QUALIFIED IN OTHER JURISDICTIONS:

林思潔 Jessie Lin  
羅成軒 José J. Rodrigues  
楊詩婷 Si Teng leong

法律專家 JURISTS:

張偉鴻 Cheong Wai Hong  
伍福賢 Domingos Ng  
許栢桓 Rui Fernandes Brás

WWW.CCADVOG.COM  
TEL: (853) 2837 2642/ 2837 2623

° 私人公證員 Notary Public \* 中國委託公證人 China Appointed Attesting Officer



C&C RECEIVED THE 1ST SILVER  
"DEIGNAN AWARD"  
FOR RESPONSIBLE ENTREPRENEURSHIP  
IN MACAU (2023)





GAMING

# LVS to spend additional \$750M to revamp MBS

**I**N a strategic move to capitalize on Singapore's soaring room rates and a booming post-pandemic travel sector, Las Vegas Sands (LVS), steered by the late casino magnate Sheldon Adelson's family, is channeling an additional \$750 million into the enhancement of Marina Bay Sands (MBS), Forbes reported yesterday.

This infusion escalates the overall expenditure on the refurbishment of this landmark casino, hotel, and convention center to a striking \$1.75 billion.

The initial phase of this extensive renovation has already transformed 1,280 rooms across two towers of MBS, incorporating 390 newly minted suites. The ambitious second phase aims to reimagine approximately 550 rooms in the third tower, of which 380 will be luxurious suites.

Paul Town, MBS's Chief Operating Officer, said that "the reinvestment in Marina Bay Sands over the past two



Marina Bay Sands in Singapore

years has significantly elevated our offerings in luxury travel. The ongoing phase is pivotal in elevating the property to unprecedented levels, ensuring we are well-positioned to seize future growth opportunities."

This investment in Singapore is part of Las Vegas Sands' broader strategy to exploit the Lion City's travel surge.

The company is concurrently investing an additional \$3 billion over the coming years to expand Marina Bay Sands, including the ad-

dition of a new luxury hotel tower with 1,000 rooms, and extensions to both the convention center and shopping mall.

Marina Bay Sands has witnessed a 34.3% increase in net revenue, reaching \$1 billion in the third quarter of 2023, as Singapore's travel and tourism industry continues its robust recovery.

According to Forbes, rival operator Genting Singapore, under Malaysian billionaire Lim Kok Thay's control, is also intensifying its investment efforts.

In November, Genting announced plans to invest an extra \$2.3 billion (\$1.7 billion) in refurbishing Resorts World Sentosa, raising its total renovation budget for the casino resort and theme park to S\$6.8 billion.

In Macau, LVS is committing \$3.8 billion following the renewal of its gaming license in the territory. This investment will predominantly support non-gaming ventures, including new meeting spaces and entertainment amenities. **MDT/FORBES**

RETAIL

# UNIQLO SUES SHEIN OVER ALLEGED COPY OF ITS POPULAR 'MARY POPPINS BAG'

**U**NIQLO Co. has sued rival retailer Shein over a small shoulder bag the Japanese retailer said was an inferior and unlawful copy of its hit product touted as the "Mary Poppins bag."

The lawsuit demanded Shein stop selling its product that Uniqlo said looks too much like its Round Mini Shoulder Bag.

The Uniqlo bag is praised on TikTok and other social media as roomy but also light and compact. The Mary Poppins nickname refers to the 1964 musical starring Julie Andrews in which a nanny pulls just about anything from her magical carpet bag, including a hat stand.

Shein, founded in China but now based in Singapore, did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The lawsuit was filed in Tokyo District Court on Dec. 28 by Tokyo-based Fast Retailing Co., which operates Uniqlo stores.

Uniqlo said yesterday it's

demanding damages of about 160 million yen (\$1.1 million) in its lawsuit targeting the three companies that operate Shein, Roadget Business Pte, Fashion Choice Pte and Shein Japan Co.

Uniqlo said Shein's product was a copyright violation of inferior quality that undermined customer confidence in the Uniqlo brand.

Uniqlo's bag comes with inner pockets and is billed as durable and water-resistant. In Japan, it costs 1,500 yen, and in the U.S. \$19.90, coming in various colors, including light blue and violet.

Uniqlo, which has nearly 2,500 stores in 26 global markets, is behind hit affordable casual clothing like HeatTech thermal underwear.

Shein reaches customers mainly through its app. The company says it uses digital technology to respond nimbly to customer tastes and avoid waste. **MDT/AP**

## CORPORATE BITS

### 2024 Sands China Macao International 10K set for March 17

The organizing committee has announced that the 2024 Sands China Macao International 10K will take place on March 17 (Sunday).

The event will follow a similar format as previous editions, featuring a concurrent Fun Run (5K) and 10K competition.

There are 7,000 spots available for the 10K event, and 3,000 for the Fun Run.

The Fun Run race will start at 7 a.m. followed by the 10K at 7:30 a.m. at the Sai Van Lake Square. The course runs along Avenida Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, Kun Iam Ecumenical Centre, and Sai Van Bridge, con-

MDT ARCHIVE



cluding inside the Taipa Olympic Stadium. Registration will open at 9 a.m.

on Feb. 3 (10K) and Feb. 4 (Fun Run) on the event's website (www.macao10k.com).

### Airport opens tender for airside retail space

The Macau International Airport Co. Ltd. (CAM) has opened a tender seeking proposals for two retail store spaces totaling 574 square meters in the airside departures zone, according to a notice on CAM's official webpage.

The Requests for Proposals specifies that the retail store should sell fashionable clothes, accessories, watches, and jewelry, and includes the design, layout concept, and development of the space.

The tender excludes two types of

goods and products categories: Duty-free Liquor & Tobacco, and Perfume & Cosmetics.

The available spaces include Shop 7 (326 m2) and Shop 8 (248 m2).

CAM will announce the results no later than the fourth quarter of 2024, with the contract expiring in November 2030.

AD

**LECTURE**

**MEDIA MANAGEMENT TODAY**  
CREATIVE INDUSTRIES AS ADDED VALUE

**Speakers:**  
José Luis de Sales Marques, President of the Institute of European Studies of Macau  
Paulo Faustino, professor at the University of Porto  
Margarida Saraiva, Founder and director of Babel - Cultural Organisation  
MODERATOR: Paulo Barbosa, journalist

**Venue:** Creative Macau Center for Creative Industries (Cultural Centre building)

**January 20 Saturday 4 pm**

**ORGANIZATION:** aipim, CREATIVE MACAU, etc.

**PARTNERS:** IMMAA, BABEL, USJ, etc.



DIPLOMACY

# China and Ireland seek stronger ties during Premier Li Qiang's visit

SYLVIA HUI

**I**RELAND'S prime minister extended a warm welcome to visiting Chinese Premier Li Qiang yesterday [Macau time], saying his country wanted a "strong and constructive relationship" with China despite not agreeing on some issues.

Prime Minister Leo Varadkar and Li, China's No. 2 leader and a close confidant of Chinese President Xi Jinping, struck an upbeat note after a bilateral meeting.

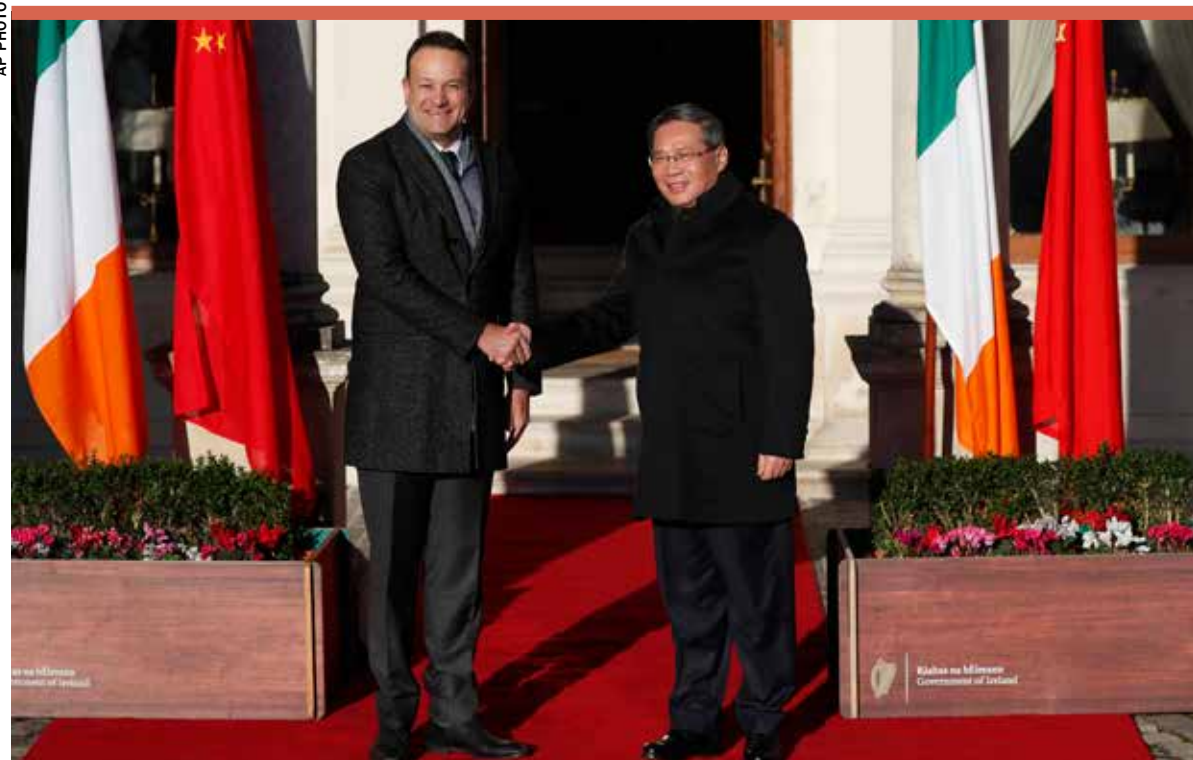
"There is huge potential in our cooperation," Li said.

Troops formed a guard of honor outside Ireland's state guest house to greet Li. A military band played as he inspected the soldiers.

Ireland was the third European country Li has visited since he was appointed as China's top economic official last March.

He made the European Union the destination for his first trip abroad last summer, visiting Germany and France, Europe's leading economies, amid growing calls for the European Union to "de-risk" — avoid overreliance on Chinese trade — and tensions over Beijing's stance on Russia's war in Ukraine.

Varadkar said that China has



Premier Li Qiang (right) is greeted by Ireland's Prime Minister Leo Varadkar at Farmleigh House, during a visit to Dublin

an "indispensable" global role in overcoming challenges from climate change to security issues including the conflicts in Ukraine, the Middle East and Myanmar.

"We want to have a very strong and constructive relationship with China. One based on trust and respect, and one informed by our values and the multilateral system in which we're both

stakeholders," he said.

"Of course, we won't find agreement on everything but I hope we'll always speak frankly and respectfully to each other, and candidly, as we did today," Varadkar added.

The Irish leader said trade between the countries has tripled in the past five years and that there was a clear desire on both sides to

increase investment. China is Ireland's fourth-largest trade partner and fifth-largest export market.

Varadkar also said that China agreed to immediately reopen its market to Irish beef. Chinese authorities suspended the exports in November after Irish veterinary officials discovered a case of atypical bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or mad cow disease.

Varadkar said Irish officials raised human rights concerns related to Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, Macau and the trial of Hong Kong media mogul Jimmy Lai.

He said Li was happy to discuss the matters, but added: "I think it's fair to say that they would have a very different view of the facts and dispute a lot of what's said in the media."

This is the first time a senior Chinese leader has visited Ireland since Li's predecessor, Li Ke-qiang, visited in 2015. He arrived from the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland, where he pitched China as an investment opportunity despite its slowing economy.

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has said that Li's visit to Switzerland and Ireland would "kick off the high-level exchanges between China and Europe in 2024."

The visits are seen by some as an effort to smooth over simmering tensions over trade imbalances and security concerns over technologies linked to the Chinese government.

Like the U.S., the EU has rejected the prospect of decoupling with the Chinese economy, instead stressing the need to "de-risk" and better protect its vital economic sectors. **MDT/AP**

MANUFACTURING

# Chinese, French funded nickel hub stoking deforestation on Indonesia island: report

**A** nickel processing hub in eastern Indonesia, financed by Chinese and French entities, is contributing to deforestation and pollution in the area, a report by US-based NGO Climate Rights International revealed this week, according to an AFP dispatch yesterday.

This development comes as China places significant investments in the metal essential for electric vehicle (EV) batteries.

Indonesia, a leading global nickel producer, has attracted substantial interest from both domestic and international firms aiming to mine this crucial component for EVs. The focus is on the Weda Bay Industrial Park located on Halmahera Island in the Maluku region.



A general view of the Morowali Industrial Park in Indonesia

"The park is causing significant deforestation, air and water pollution, and emitting massive amounts of greenhouse gases from

captive coal plants," the NGO stated in its Wednesday report.

The report highlighted the cutting of at least 5,331

hectares of tropical forests within nickel mining concessions on Halmahera, resulting in a loss of approximately 2.04 metric tons

of stored greenhouse gases (CO<sub>2</sub>e).

The park's operations are managed by a joint venture between three China-based companies—Tsingshan, Huayou Cobalt, and Zhenshi Holding Group—with France's Eramet also being a key investor.

Local inhabitants, in their accounts to the NGO, accused the companies of "land grabbing and intimidation," facilitated by the police.

Since 2018, the industrial park has established five coal-powered plants to operate its smelting facilities and intends to build 12 more, a scale of coal consumption surpassing that of countries like Spain or Brazil.

The NGO urged the plan-

ts' management to address the water and air pollution caused by their activities and called for appropriate disposal of mine tailings by nickel companies to reduce environmental harm.

Responses to AFP's inquiries for comment from Tsingshan, Huayou, Zhenshi, Eramet, and the industrial park were not immediately available.

China's escalating involvement in Indonesia's nickel sector has sparked concerns over labor conditions and the hidden costs of Jakarta's aspiration to be a key player in the EV supply chain, AFP said.

Recently, Indonesian workers protested at a nickel plant on Sulawesi Island following an explosion that caused at least 19 fatalities and numerous injuries.

Indonesia boasts the largest nickel reserves in the world, holding over 21 million tonnes and accounting for more than 20% of the global total. **MDT/AGENCIES**





A Pakistani checks morning newspapers covering front page story of Iran's strike, at a stall in Islamabad, yesterday

PAKISTAN-IRAN

# Islamabad retaliates with airstrikes in Iran after an attack by Tehran, killing 9 people

MUNIRAHMED &  
JON GAMBRELL, ISLAMABAD

**P**AKISTAN'S air force launched retaliatory airstrikes yesterday in Iran allegedly targeting militant hideouts, an attack that killed at least nine people and further raised tensions between the neighboring nations.

The tit-for-tat attacks Tuesday and Thursday appeared to target two Baluch militant groups with similar separatist goals on both sides of the Iran-Pakistan border. However, the two countries have accused each other of providing safe haven to the groups in their respective territories.

The strikes imperil diplomatic relations between the two neighbors, as Iran and nuclear-armed Pakistan have long regarded each other with suspicion over militant attacks. Each nation also faces its own internal political pressures — and the strikes may in part be in response to that.

The attacks also come as the Middle East remains unsettled by Israel's war with Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Iran also staged airstrikes late Monday in Iraq and Syria over an Islamic State-claimed suicide bombing that killed over 90 people in early January.

Pakistan's Foreign Ministry described their attack yesterday as "a series of highly coordinated and specifically targeted precision military strikes."

"This morning's action was taken in light of credible intelli-

gence of impending large scale terrorist activities," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement. "This action is a manifestation of Pakistan's unflinching resolve to protect and defend its national security against all threats."

Pakistan's military described using "killer drones, rockets, loitering munitions and standoff weapons" in the attack. Stand-off weapons are missiles fired from aircraft at a distance — likely meaning Pakistan's fighter jets didn't enter Iranian airspace.

Pakistan's caretaker Prime Minister Anwaarul-Haq-Kakar, who is in Switzerland to attend the World Economic Forum in Davos, cut his trip short to return home, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mumtaz Zahra Baloch said. Foreign Minister Jalil Abbas Jilani is also returning home from a trip to Uganda.

A deputy governor of Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province, Ali Reza Marhamati, gave the casualty figures from the strike, saying the dead included three women, four children and two men near the town of Saravan along the border in Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province. He added that the dead were not Iranian citizens and acknowledged a separate blast near Saravan as well.

The Baluch Liberation Army, an ethnic separatist group that's operated in the region since 2000, said in a statement the strikes targeted and killed its people.

"Pakistan will have to pay a price for it," the group warned. "Now the Baluch Liberation Army will not remain silent. We will avenge it and we announce war on the state of Pakistan."

HalVash, an advocacy group for the Baluch people, shared images online that appeared to show the remains of the munitions used in the attack. It said a number of homes had been struck in Saravan. It shared videos showing a mud-walled building destroyed and smoke rising over the strike immediately after.

Iran later summoned Pakistan's charge d'affaires in the country. Pakistan already had withdrawn its ambassador over Tuesday's attack.

Pakistan named its operation "Marg Bar Sarmachar." In Iranian Farsi, "marg bar" means "death to" — and is a famous saying in Iran since its 1979 Islamic Revolution used to refer to both the United States and Israel. In the local Baluch language, "sarmachar" means guerrilla and is used by the militants operating in the cross-border region.

Pakistan's Baluchistan province, as well as Iran's neighboring Sistan and Baluchestan province, already have faced a low-level insurgency by Baluch nationalists for more than two decades.

However, the groups targeted in the days of strikes are different. Jaish al-Adl, the Sunni separatist group that Iran targeted Tuesday, grew out of another Islamic extremist group known as Jun-

dallah once alleged to have ties to al-Qaida. Jaish al-Adl has long been suspected of operating out of Pakistan and launching attacks on Iranian security forces.

The Baluch Liberation Army, which has no religious component and has launched attacks against Pakistani security forces and Chinese interests, is suspected of hiding out in Iran.

Both Iran and Pakistan face internal political pressures. For Iran, there's been growing pressure for action after the Islamic State group attack, Israel's war on Hamas and wider unrest against its theocracy. Meanwhile, Pakistan faces a crucial February general election as its military remains a powerful force in its politics.

The risk of escalation remained yesterday as Iran's military will begin a planned annual air defense drill from its port of Chabahar near Pakistan all across the south of the country to Iraq. The drill, Velayat 1402, will include live fire from aircraft, drones and air defense systems.

Iran and Pakistan share a 900-kilometer, largely lawless border in which smugglers and militants freely pass between the two nations. The route is also key to global opium shipments coming out of Afghanistan.

For both Iran and Pakistan, the cross-border attacks renew questions about the preparedness of their own militaries, particularly their radar and air defense systems.

For Pakistan, such systems are

crucial as tensions always remain at a low boil with India, their nuclear-armed rival. Their equipment has long been deployed along the frontier, rather than its border with Iran. For Iran, it relies on those systems against potential strikes by its main enemy, the U.S.

"The government and military have been under immense pressure," said Abdullah Khan, an analyst at the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies. "Iran celebrated (Tuesday's) attack in its media and the Pakistani public perception of a strong army is not as it used to be, so it had to respond."

There's also complex geopolitical considerations in the tensions. Pakistan's military relies on American, Chinese and French fighter jets for its air force — meaning some of those foreign weapons were used in yesterday's attack.

China, a crucial partner in both countries, has urged restraint. Beijing is a key regional player and has a major Belt and Road development in Gwadar port in Pakistan's Baluchistan province. Baloch, the Foreign Ministry spokesperson, said she was not aware of any direct Chinese mediation in the conflict so far, though Beijing has offered it.

"China sincerely hopes that both sides can exercise calm and restraint and avoid escalation of tension," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said yesterday. **MDT/AP**



## MILITARY

# JAPAN SIGNS AGREEMENT WITH US TO PURCHASE 400 TOMAHAWK MISSILES IN DEFENSE BUILDUP

MARI YAMAGUCHI, TOKYO

**J**APAN signed a deal with the United States yesterday to purchase up to 400 Tomahawk cruise missiles as part of its ongoing military buildup in response to increased regional threats.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's government has pledged to double its annual defense spending to around 10 trillion yen (\$68 billion) by 2027, which would make Japan the world's third-biggest military spender after the United States and China.

Defense Minister Minoru Kihara announced in December a decision to accelerate deployment of some Tomahawks and Japanese-made Type 12 surface-to-ship missiles beginning in fiscal year 2025, a year before the original plan. The government says Japan is facing its "severest" security environment since World War II because of "threats from China and North Korea," causing it to increase military cooperation with the U.S., Australia, Britain and other friendly nations.

In November, the U.S. approved a \$2.35 billion sale of two types of Tomahawks — 200 Block



Japanese and U.S. military officials and Japanese Defense Minister Minoru Kihara (third right) stand behind a defense equipment procurement official as he signs a document for the Tomahawk purchase deal

IV missiles and 200 upgraded Block V versions. They can be launched from warships and hit targets 1,600 kilometers away, officials said.

The signing of the purchase agreement was attended by Kihara and U.S. Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel.

Japan and the United States agreed to expedite the deployment "in response to the increasingly severe security environment," Kihara said.

Emanuel said training of Japanese servicemembers for the Tomahawks will start in March.

Late last year, Japan's Cabinet

eased a ban on exports of lethal weapons, allowing the sale of Japanese-made weapons and components made under license from other nations to those countries. The government quickly approved a shipment of Japanese-made Patriot missiles to the United States to comple-

ment the U.S. inventory.

Japan is accelerating its deployment of long-range cruise missiles capable of "hitting targets in China or North Korea," while Japanese troops increasingly work side-by-side with the U.S. and other friendly nations and take on more offensive roles, AP says.

At a news conference earlier yesterday marking the end of his second year in Tokyo, Emanuel lauded Japan's rapid move during that time to build up its military and strengthen its alliance with the U.S. to meet challenges in the region.

Under a new defense strategy adopted in December 2022, Japan has joined the United States, Australia, South Korea and many other regional partners "in an aligned vision of how to promote peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and meet the challenges head on," Emanuel said.

The U.S. approach to its partnership with Japan is "one of ensuring deterrence" and making sure there is no change in the region by military force, Emanuel said.

"There is a new Japan emerging, a more competent Japan," he said. **MDT/AP**

## THAILAND

# Remains of fireworks explosion victims taken to temple where families give DNA to identify them

JINTAMAS SAKSORNCHAI, MUEANG SUPHAN BURI

**R**ESCUE workers carried out the grim task yesterday of recovering the remains of the 23 apparent victims of a fireworks factory explosion in central Thailand.

Only part of the building frame stood at the site of the devastated factory in an otherwise-empty rice field in rural Suphan Buri province the day after the blast.

The damage to the site and the condition of the bodies made the number of victims difficult to determine.

Families and friends of the victims gathered at a temple where remains were being stored, to report missing loved ones and provide



Thai rescue workers carry the body of a victim from the site of an explosion at a fireworks factory in Suphan Buri province, yesterday

DNA samples to help identify the remains, but uninformed local officials sought to keep reporters from speaking with them. Several

of the bereaved openly wept.

The province's deputy governor, Don Samitakertarin, said the death toll was

23 and not expected to rise. National police chief Torsak Sukvimol, who traveled to Suphan Buri to oversee police operations, said 22 bodies had been found and one more person was considered missing but presumed dead.

The cause of the blast has not been determined.

"There are no survivors from the site at all, so there are no eyewitnesses to tell us what happened," Torsak said. "We can only use forensic science to discover the cause."

Don said it will take time to investigate the cause as there were no survivors to tell what happened. He said the area was sealed off as officers were not done clearing hazardous materials.

The factory marketed small fireworks to sca-

re away birds, a common practice for Thai farmers to protect their crops. Its products looked like what are sometimes called cherry bombs, but it did not appear that the factory manufactured fireworks for entertainment, which would be in high demand to celebrate the Lunar New Year next month.

Don said the factory had met the requirements for operating legally. It experienced an earlier explosion in November 2022 that killed one person and seriously injured three others, but Don said there was no regulation that could prevent it from obtaining a new permit.

"This business operation complied with all the regulations from the Interior Ministry, so we had to give

it a license," he said.

The remains of the victims were taken to Wat Rong Chang, a Buddhist temple in the province capital, Mueang Suphan Buri, where they were being kept in a refrigerator truck pending confirmation of their identities.

The government will pay maximum compensation of 300,000 baht (\$8,400) per affected household, Don said.

The 16 women and seven men presumed to have died in the blast included the workers and the wife and son of the factory's owner, Don said.

An explosion at a fireworks warehouse in southern Thailand last July killed 10 people and wounded more than 100 while damaging about 100 houses in a 500-meter (1,640-foot) radius of the warehouse. The region's governor said sparks from metal welding work likely ignited the fireworks in the warehouse and caused the explosion. **MDT/AP**



AP PHOTO



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy delivers his speech at the Annual Meeting of World Economic Forum in Davos

## PUTIN'S WAR

# Nearly two years after invasion, West still seeking a way to steer frozen Russian assets to Ukraine

FATIMA HUSSEIN,  
WASHINGTON

IT'S been nearly two years since the United States and its allies froze hundreds of billions of dollars in Russian foreign holdings in retaliation for Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. That roughly \$300 billion in Russian Central Bank money has been sitting untapped as the war grinds on, while officials from multiple countries have debated the legality of sending the money to Ukraine.

The idea of using Russia's frozen assets is gaining new traction lately as continued allied funding for Ukraine becomes more uncertain and the U.S. Congress is in a stalemate over providing more support. But there are tradeoffs since the weaponization of global finance could harm the U.S. dollar's standing as the world's dominant currency.

At this week's World Economic Forum meetings in Davos, Switzerland, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called for a "strong" decision this year for the frozen assets in Western banks to "be directed towards defense against the Russian war and for reconstruction" of Ukraine.

"Putin loves money above all,"

he said. "The more billions he and his oligarchs, friends and accomplices lose, the more likely he will regret starting this war."

Biden administration officials who previously dismissed the idea as legally cumbersome are showing growing openness to the idea.

Penny Pritzker, the U.S. special representative for Ukraine's economic recovery, said at the Davos forum that the U.S. and Group of Seven allies are still looking for an adequate legal framework to pursue the plan.

"Get all the lawyers and all the various governments and all the parties really to come together to sort that through," she said. "It's hard, it's complicated, it's difficult, and we need to work."

Administration officials caution that even if a legal way can be found to transfer the frozen dollars to Ukraine, the war-torn nation has immediate needs for funds that must be met by other means since U.S. assistance to Ukraine's military has ground to a halt.

Bipartisan legislation circulating in Washington called the Rebuilding Economic Prosperity and Opportunity for Ukrainians Act would use assets confiscated from the Russian Central Bank

and other sovereign assets for Ukraine.

A senior official who spoke on condition of anonymity to relay internal discussions said the administration was generally supportive of legislation to give the U.S. more flexibility in making sure Russia pays for the damage it has caused and is in "active conversations" with allies on how best to do that.

But even if legislation were enacted, Nicholas Mulder, a sanctions expert at Cornell University, cautioned that seizing frozen assets could have the unintended effect of undermining efforts to ensure longer-term funding for Ukraine.

"Right now it is being advanced by Washington as a substitute rather than a complement to long-term Western support for Ukraine," he said. "If the assets are transferred, these funds too will run out sooner or later. But by that time Western leaders will have ceased to make any political case for supporting Ukraine, and getting support back up will be much harder."

The U.S. announced at the start of Russia's invasion that America and its allies had blocked access to more than \$600 billion that Russia held outside its borders

and take seriously."

Sergey Aleksashenko, a former Russian Central Banker who is now a member of the Russian Antiwar Committee with other dissidents, said that while he strongly believes Russia should be forced to compensate Ukraine, "I do not believe that there is any way to confiscate assets of the Russian Central Bank without a court deciding on the matter."

"Because if there is no legal basis to confiscate Russian assets, and if it is done by the decision of the administration, that means that there is no rule of law in the U.S. and there is no protection of private property."

He said an administrative decision to confiscate Russia's assets could prompt nations like China — the biggest holder of U.S. Treasuries — to determine that it is not safe to keep its reserves in U.S. dollars.

There are some efforts under way to seize Russian funds and those of sanctioned oligarchs under limited circumstances. Last May, the Justice Department announced that it had transferred \$5.4 million seized from Russian tycoon Konstantin Malofeyev to a State Department fund for rebuilding Ukraine.

And in December, Germany's federal prosecutor filed a motion for asset forfeiture concerning more than 720 million euros (\$789 million) deposited by a Russian financial institution in a Frankfurt bank account because of a suspected attempt to violate embargo regulations.

Belgium, which is holding the rotating presidency of the European Union bloc for the next six months, is now leading the talks on whether to seize Russia's assets. Belgium is also the country where most frozen Russian assets under sanctions are being held.

The country is collecting taxes on the assets. Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said in October that 1.7 billion euros (\$1.8 billion) in tax collections was already available and that the money would be used to buy military equipment, humanitarian aid and help with the rebuilding of the war-torn country.

But EU countries are worried that going further by confiscating the assets could pave the way for serious legal problems and could also destabilize the financial system.

De Croo said this week he is hearing "a lot of prudence" when the issue of seizing assets is raised.

"It's crucial that we stay within a legal framework," he said.

Maria Snegovaya, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, cautioned that if Ukraine's immediate needs aren't met, "no amount of seized Russian assets is unfortunately going to compensate for what may happen."

"And by then it is going to be very overwhelming." MDT/AP



AP PHOTO



Smoke rises following Israeli bombardments in Khan Younis, southern Gaza Strip

## ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR

# ISRAELI STRIKE KILLS 16 IN SOUTHERN GAZA; NO WORD ON WHETHER MEDICINES REACHED HOSTAGES

NAJIB JOBAIN AND  
BASSEM MROUE, RAFAH

**A**N Israeli airstrike on a home killed 16 people, half of them children, in the southern Gaza town of Rafah, medics said yesterday. The military continued to strike targets in areas of the besieged territory where it has told civilians to seek refuge.

There was meanwhile no word on whether medicines that entered the territory Wednesday as part of a deal brokered by France and Qatar had been distributed to dozens of hostages with chronic illnesses who are being held by Hamas.

More than 100 days after Hamas triggered the war with its Oct. 7 attack, Israel continues to wage one of the deadliest and most destructive military campaigns in recent history, with the goal of dismantling the militant group that has ruled Gaza since 2007 and returning scores of captives. The war has stoked tensions across the region, threatening to ignite other conflicts.

More than 24,000 Palestinians have been killed, some 85% of the narrow coastal territory's 2.3 million people have fled their homes, and the United Nations says a quarter of the population is starving.

Hundreds of thousands have heeded Israeli evacua-

tion orders and packed into southern Gaza, where shelters run by the United Nations are overflowing and massive tent camps have gone up. But Israel has continued to strike what it says are militant targets in all parts of Gaza, often killing women and children.

Dr. Talat Barhoum at Rafah's el-Najjar Hospital confirmed the death toll from the strike in Rafah and said dozens more were wounded. Associated Press footage from the hospital showed relatives weeping over the bodies of loved ones.

"They were suffering from hunger, they were dying from hunger, and now they have also been hit," said Mahmoud Qassim, a relative of some of those who were killed.

Internet and mobile services in Gaza have been down for five days, the longest of several outages during the war, according to internet access advocacy group NetBlocks. The outages complicate rescue efforts and make it difficult to obtain information about the latest strikes and casualties.

### WAR REVERBERATES ACROSS REGION

The war has rippled across the Middle East, with Iran-backed groups attacking U.S. and Israeli targets. Low-intensity fighting between Israel

and Hezbollah militants in Lebanon threatens to erupt into all-out war, and Houthi rebels in Yemen continue to target international shipping despite United States-led airstrikes.

Iran has launched a series of missile attacks targeting what it described as an Israeli spy base in Iraq and militant bases in Syria as well as in Pakistan, which carried out reprisal strikes against what it described as militant hideouts in Iran yesterday (see p9).

It was not clear if the strikes in Syria and Pakistan were related to the Gaza war. But they showcased Iran's ability to carry out long-range missile attacks at a time of heightened tensions with Israel and the U.S., which has provided crucial support for the Gaza offensive and carried out its own strikes against Iran-allied groups in Syria and Iraq.

Israel has vowed to dismantle Hamas to ensure it can never repeat an attack like the one on Oct. 7. Militants burst through Israel's border defenses and stormed through several communities that day, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking around 250 hostage.

Israel has also vowed to return all the hostages remaining in captivity after more than 100 — mostly women and children — were released during a November cease-fire in exchange

for the release of scores of Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

Family members and supporters were marking the first birthday of Kfir Bibas, the youngest Israeli hostage, in a somber ceremony Thursday in Tel Aviv.

The red-haired infant and his 4-year-old brother Ariel were captured along with their mother, Shiri, and their father, Yarden. All four remain in captivity.

### MEDICINES BOUND FOR HOSTAGES ENTER GAZA

The agreement to ship in medicines was the first to be brokered between the warring sides since November. Hamas said that for every box of medicine bound for the hostages, 1,000 would be sent for Palestinian civilians, in addition to food and humanitarian aid.

Qatar confirmed late Wednesday that the medicine had entered Gaza, but it was not yet clear if it had been distributed to the hostages, who are being held in secret locations, including underground bunkers.

Hamas has continued to fight back across Gaza, even in the most devastated areas, and launch rockets into Israel. It says it will not release any more hostages until there is a permanent cease-fire, something Israel and the United States, its top ally, have ruled out. **MDT/AP**

## this day in history

### 1966 INDIRA GANDHI TAKES CHARGE IN INDIA

Indira Gandhi, only daughter of India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, is to become the country's next leader.

She was chosen at the end of a bitter leadership battle with former finance minister Morarji Desai.

Following her win, Mrs Gandhi pledged herself to serve the Congress Party and the country, and said she would "strive to create what my father used to call a climate of peace."

Crowds had gathered outside Parliament House while the election was held, and cheered Mrs Gandhi wildly as she went to the President's House to report.

She will not become prime minister until she submits her cabinet to the president.

Mrs Gandhi did not confirm she would be a candidate until four days ago, when chief ministers from 11 of India's 16 states let it be known they would support her to take over.

Another leading candidate, Gulzarilal Nanda, withdrew once it was clear Mrs Gandhi would be running.

He has been acting as prime minister since the unexpected death of Mr Nehru's successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri, earlier this month.

Mr Desai was under extreme pressure to pull out as well and avoid a potentially damaging leadership contest, but he insisted on going to a vote.

It was predicted he would get less than 100 of the 526 votes from Congress MPs, but he surprised many by winning 169 votes to Mrs Gandhi's 355.

Afterwards, Mr Desai pledged to cooperate fully with Mrs Gandhi. It is the second time running he has been defeated in a leadership contest: the first time, against Mr Shastri, he withdrew his candidacy without a vote.

Mrs Gandhi, 48, was educated at West Bengal and Oxford and has two sons, Rajiv and Sanjay, who are both studying in England.

She gets her name not from Mahatma Gandhi, the legendary independence campaigner and founder of the Congress Party, but from her husband Feroze Gandhi, a lawyer who died in 1960.

The couple spent 13 months in prison for subversion after fighting against British rule in India during the 1940s.

She has played a key part in the Congress Party since 1955, and served as information minister in Mr Shastri's government.

Courtesy BBC News

## IN CONTEXT

Morarji Desai went on to form a right-wing faction opposed to Mrs Gandhi within the Congress Party. Nevertheless, she won general election victories in 1967 and 1971.

She presided over the 1971 conflict with Pakistan which created Bangladesh.

She subsequently lost the 1977 general election to Morarji Desai, who headed Janata, part of an alliance of opposition parties.

His coalition broke apart in 1979, however, and Mrs Gandhi returned to power.

In 1984 she ordered the storming of the Golden Temple in Amritsar to flush out Sikh militants pursuing self-rule for Punjab.

Two months later, she was assassinated by her own Sikh bodyguards. About 1000 people, mostly Sikhs, died in the four days of rioting which followed her murder.

Her eldest son, Rajiv, succeeded her as prime minister. He too was assassinated in 1991.



MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

**YOUR STARS**

**ARIES**  
Mar. 21-Apr. 19  
Do not let lovers cost you money or take advantage of you. Colleagues may try to undermine you when talking to superiors. Sign up for seminars that will expand your business awareness.

**TAURUS**  
Apr. 20-May. 20  
Your ability to organize and get everyone together will enhance your popularity and bring interest from potential mates. You may find that lectures or travel will be highly successful.

**GEMINI**  
May. 21-Jun. 21  
You are exceptional at presenting your ideas. You can help them with difficult projects. Your ability to put things together will be appreciated by your comrades.

**CANCER**  
Jun. 22-Jul. 22  
You will be well looked upon due to your compassionate and giving nature. You can make excellent investments if you are in the right place at the right time.

**LEO**  
Jul. 23-Aug. 22  
Avoid any gossip and be careful that you aren't misinterpreted. Join a club to work off that excess energy; but consider ways of doing that without spending the money.

**VIRGO**  
Aug. 23-Sep. 22  
Changes in your domestic scene are evident. This will not be the day to lend money to friends or family. Do not let them in on your plans if you want things to run smoothly.

**LIBRA**  
Sep. 23-Oct. 22  
Do not let lovers cost you money or take advantage of you. Someone may try to damage your reputation. Travel will lead you in new directions.

**SCORPIO**  
Oct. 23-Nov. 21  
You might find that the extra cash will come in handy when an opportunity to invest comes along. Make sure that you get legal matters checked out thoroughly.

**SAGITTARIUS**  
Nov. 22-Dec. 21  
Overindulgence could cause problems for you with your loved ones. Make changes that will enhance your appearance and entice potential partners.

**CAPRICORN**  
Dec. 22-Jan. 19  
Don't get involved in other people's private doings. Be sure to question any detail that you feel could leave you in a precarious position at a later date.

**AQUARIUS**  
Jan. 20-Feb. 18  
You can meet potential new mates, but make sure that they aren't already committed to someone else. It might be time to pick up the slack and do your share.

**PISCES**  
Feb. 19-Mar. 20  
Changes in your home may be disruptive and upsetting. You will have no problem getting along with clients. Don't put all your cash in one place.

**The Born Loser by Chip Sanson**



**SUDOKU**

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

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

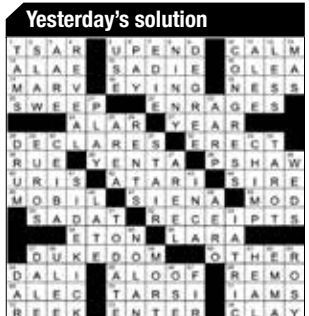
**WEATHER**

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
<b>CHINA</b>			
Beijing	-5	0	overcast
Changchun	-17	-8	cloudy
Chengdu	7	12	rain
Chongqing	11	13	rain
Fuzhou	14	22	overcast
Guangzhou	16	26	cloudy
Guiyang	7	12	showers
Haikou	19	26	cloudy
Hangzhou	8	9	rain
Harbin	-26	-16	fine
Hefei	2	3	rain
Nanjing	4	6	rain
Shanghai	8	9	rain
Taipei	16	23	fine
Wuhan	3	4	rain
Hong Kong	21	22	overcast
<b>WORLD</b>			
Moscow	-15	1	cloudy
Frankfurt	-7	1	overcast
Paris	-5	2	fine
London	-3	4	overcast
New York	-6	0	cloudy

**CROSSWORDS**

ACROSS 1- Lost; 6- Quarterback Manning; 9- Pilsner; 14- Gathers; 15- Batman after Michael; 16- Mio; 17- Unmoved; 19- Florida citrus center; 20- CD predecessors; 21- Mil. school; 22- Flavorful; 23- Annoyance; 25- Native American tent; 26- Automaton; 29- Connect; 31- Stylish; 32- Inspiring amazement; 36- Helps; 37- Chinese philosopher Mo-; 38- Comic Fox; 40- Designed to arouse wonder; 43- Painted; 45- Suggestive; 46- Scope; 47- Disney mermaid; 50- Succulent plant; 51- Snow conveyances; 52- Natural blue dye; 54- Before, of yore; 57- Religious doctrine; 58- Measures atmospheric pressure; 61- Conductor Dorati; 62- Ending for legal or Japan; 63- Kofi of the U.N.; 64- Mock, annoy; 65- Young fellow; 66- Flies high;

DOWN 1- Seed cover; 2- Office fill-in; 3- Enervates; 4- Clean air org.; 5- Chucklehead; 6- Eject; 7- Hot rock; 8- Three Lives; 9- Gives slack; 10- Tin Pan Alley org.; 11- Flip out; 12- "Dallas" matriarch; 13- Went through, as the paper; 18- Pert; 23- Deputised group; 24- French connections; 25- Neckwear; 26- Nutritional fig.; 27- Not a dup.; 28- "Venerable" English monk; 29- Fancy; 30- Be in the red; 33- Emulate Cicero; 34- Allot; 35- Garden spot; 37- Spasm; 39- Banned spray; 41- Use a full nelson, say; 42- Actor Holbrook; 43- Yo Yo's instrument; 44- Tic-tac-toe loser; 47- Coeur d'\_; 48- Oscar de la \_\_\_; 49- Brainstorms; 50- Displayed dirty laundry; 51- Sports figure; 52- Genesis shepherd; 53- American space agency; 54- Europe's highest volcano; 55- Be a mother to; 56- Sea eagles; 59- Bell and Barker; 60- Brian of rock music;



**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



It's prime time to **BUY & RENT!**

有關樓宇廣告法例資料請向職員查詢  
For more information on advertising laws, please speak to one of our representatives.

**jml property**  
CONTACT US & SEIZE THIS OPPORTUNITY!  
hello@jmlproperty.com  
www.jmlproperty.com  
jmlmacau jmlproperty

**Va Fat**  
HKD 3,980,000 2 bed 1 bath

**Tou Un**  
HKD 2,980,000 1 bed 1 bath

**Supreme Flower City**  
HKD 22,000/mth 3 bed 1 CP



MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

**H**ow ya doing?" Mick Jagger asks the crowd, arriving for a club gig in Manhattan.

You read that right: A club gig. And how would YOU be doing if you were in a club and the house band turned out to be The Rolling Stones?

True, it wasn't a total surprise when Jagger, Keith Richards and Ronnie Wood, plus some invited musicians and one very high-profile guest, showed up to play at Racket NYC, capacity around 600, back in October. The crowd, industry folk and VIPs like Elvis Costello and Trevor Noah, had gathered to fete the release of "Hackney Diamonds," the Stones' first album of new songs in 18 years.

There were hopes, but most didn't know the band would be playing seven tunes — four from the new album and three longtime hits, including "Jumpin' Jack Flash." Few can say they were there, but now there's one way to recreate the experience: "Hackney Diamonds (Live Edition)," a two-disc CD out Friday, includes both the studio album and the live show.

"We're gonna play old, we're gonna play new!" Jagger tells the crowd. First, the old: "Shattered," in which the band sings about New York, of course, whe-

**TUNES**

# ROLLING STONES LIVE ALBUM WILL GIVE YOU SERIOUS PARTY FOMO

re the crime rate's "going up, up, up." That was back in 1978, but guess what, we've still got "rats on the West Side" (arguably more) and yes, "bed bugs up-town," too.

We next get "Angry," the big (now Grammy-nominated) single from "Hackney Diamonds," in which Mick pleads, "Don't get angry with me, I never caused you no pain." By the end, though, he's off to Brazil. And then "Whole Wide World," with Richards and Wood sounding like they're having an especially good time (in videos, the band is smiling a lot — surely energized by enthusiasm over the new album).

"Everywhere I'm looking there's memories of my past," the song goes, but these lads — now 80 (Mick and Keith) and 76 (Ronnie) — also give a nod to the future: "And you think the party is over, but it's only just begun..."

Another oldie, "Tumbling Dice," features terrific backup vocals from Chanel Haynes.

That aggressive vibe from "Angry" returns with "Bite My Head Off" — but alas no Paul McCartney, who played bass for the studio album. Might Sir Paul join the band on a tour date? One can dream.

A rollicking "Jumpin' Jack Flash," often the band's encore song, closes out the show — well, for a second, because we know the Stones always come back.

And they do, with the gospel-infused "Sweet Sounds of Heaven." Mick starts it off and then, sure enough, Lady Gaga comes out to do her vocal dueling thing with the frontman, the two trading "Oh yeah!" howls.

At the end, Gaga salutes this up-and-coming bar band: "New York City, The Rolling Stones!" Jagger suggests: "Let's take a bow."

And now, on to the arenas. To anyone who saw them in this tiny venue: Congrats. For everyone else, the FOMO is real. **JOCELYN NOVECK, MDT/AP**



"Hackney Diamonds" (Live Edition) by the Rolling Stones (Polydor/Universal)

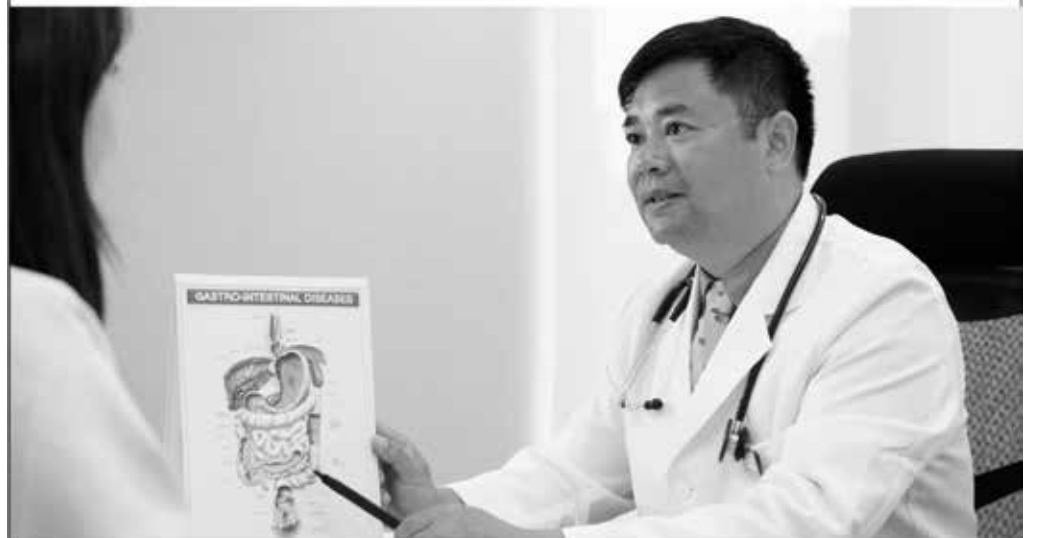
AD



NOW ON SALE



仁德 CENTRO MEDICO PEDDER  
仁德醫療中心



We bring high quality of medical service to Macau

- General Surgery** : Dr. Fok Manson, Dr. Lai Cheuck Seen Edward, Dr. Lau Wing Kee Peter, Dr. Kwong Man, Dr. Nie Fu Zhong, Dr. U Chong San, Dr. Lei Chin Chong
- Breast Surgery** : Dr. Leong Iat Lun
- Urology** : Dr. Lo Kwong Yin Richard, Dr. Zhao Yun Qiao
- Paediatric Surgery** : Dr. Yeung Chung Kwong
- Paediatrics** : Dr. Zhang Zhiqin
- Obstetrics & Gynaecology** : Dr. Fong Kuan Io
- Plastic & Aesthetic Surgery** : Dr. Lam U Lin
- Orthopaedic Surgery & Sports Medicine** : Dr. Lam Kun Kuan
- ENT** : Dr. Cheng Zheng Ang
- Cardiology** : Dr. Jin Chun, Dr. Leong Man Kin
- General Medicine** : Dr. Ng Kam Hong, Dr. Lam Weng Chio
- Dietitian** : Chan Lai U Joey

Avenida da Praia Grande No 599, Edifício Comercial Rodrigues 14 e 15 Andar, em Macau  
T. 2832 2298 / 2832 2229 Website: www.peddermacau.com  
Opening Hours: Mon - Fri 10:00 - 19:00 Sat 10:00 - 14:00 Sun & PH closed





## Power of the Dragon

**O**RIGINATING from the sacred Balinese symbol of love, protection, myth, and magic, the Naga dragon resides in solitude atop the volcanoes of Tiga Gunung. Witness the dragon's daily ritual as twilight sets in, when it plunges into the sea to embrace its one true love, the pearl. As dawn breaks, the dragon's wet scales scatter water on the rice fields, blessing the soil and bringing prosperity to the hopeful farmers anticipating a bountiful harvest.

The John Hardy Naga collection, which began with a single bracelet in 2007, pays homage to this captivating creature and its symbolism. Evolving from its humble beginnings, the collection now features an array of single- and double-headed rings, bracelets, necklaces, and earrings, each meticulously handcrafted by skilled artisans in Bali. **IS**



Chef Ricardo Chaneton



Chef Johanne Siy



### TASTE OF EDESIA

## Chef Siy at Mono

IRENE SAM, MDT

**M**ONO, Asia's window to Latin American gastronomy and the one MICHELIN-starred restaurant that came 41st on the Asia's 50 Best Restaurant 2023 list, is excited to welcome Asia's Best Female Chef 2023 and Chef of the Year at World Gourmet Awards 2021, Guest Chef Johanne Siy of Lolla Singapore, which came 63th on the Asia's 50 Best Restaurants 2023 list, for its first **MONO** Unplugged of 2024 on February 7 and 8.

Diners can expect a culinary feast like no other as the two acclaimed chefs join forces to create a multi-course tasting menu that highlights their contemporary European culinary influences and shared passion for using high-quality seasonal produce.

"Johanne and I have known each other for a few years now and after a five-day culinary retreat at Shishi-Iwa House in Karuizawa, Japan last October, where we visited local farmers and food producers, and collaborated on a one-off menu, we decided we needed to do a collaboration and cook together once more. I am delighted to have her join me in the MONO kitchen to celebrate another year of great food with great people," says Chef Chaneton.

"Being from the Philippines, I've always had a fascination with Latin American food since we share a lot of culinary ties and traditions. Even as chefs, Ricardo and I also have a very similar philosophy in terms of our European culinary training and creating produce-driven dishes. I'm looking forward to working with Ricardo on creating a special menu filled with delicious new creations that incorporate our roots and our journeys," adds Chef Siy.



OPINION

China Daily  
Editorial, China Daily

**ACTIONS MUST BE TAKEN TO BOOST CONFIDENCE AS RECOVERY ON HEALTHY UPWARD TRAJECTORY**

Despite external pressure and internal difficulties, China's economy rebounded with a growth rate of 5.2 percent last year, surpassing the official annual target of around 5 percent, according to the National Bureau of Statistics on Wednesday.

This has been achieved even without the government resorting to "massive stimulus", which reflects the country's "good and solid fundamentals in its long-term development", as Premier Li Qiang said at the World Economic Forum in the Swiss ski resort of Davos on Tuesday.

The government has obviously taken note of the need to shore up the market's confidence in the long-term growth prospects of the Chinese economy. To better boost the growth of the real economy, the central leadership stressed the need for the high-quality development of China's financial sector, vowing to accelerate the building of a modern financial system on Tuesday.

That China will make efforts to build itself into a financial powerhouse, and take measures to fend off financial risks, especially systemic risks, and will further strengthen the interconnectivity between domestic and overseas financial markets speaks volumes of the central authorities' resolve to steer the country's financial market out of its current woes onto a healthy path of sustainable development.

The growth of the national economy last year is hard-won and should be objectively observed. In 2023, the world economy was in a downturn, the international landscape was evolving fast, geopolitical conflicts occurred frequently, and the external environment was more complex, severe and uncertain than expected. There were many domestic cyclical and structural contradictions as well. Not to mention a series of natural disasters.

Generally speaking, the annual data for China's economy released by the NBS indicate, as it said, that the foundation of "stability" is more solid, the motivation for "advance" is more sufficient, and the characteristics of "quality" are becoming more obvious.

China's economy has withstood the external pressure, overcome the internal difficulties, and continued to develop while overcoming challenges. It has achieved a relatively high growth rate, low prices, stable employment, and a basically balanced international balance of payments. The main goals of economic and social development have been achieved, and high-quality development advanced.

But the national economic and social development tasks will still be arduous this year, and many difficulties and challenges will have to be overcome. The country must persist in seeking high-quality development while maintaining stability and promoting stability through the advancement of economic upgrading. Macro-control efforts should be strengthened so as to effectively enhance the country's economic vitality, and prevent and resolve risks with foresight.

In the process, authorities at various levels should take concrete measures to try and raise expectations, so as to further consolidate and enhance the positive trend of economic recovery.

CHINA, PHILIPPINES AGREE TO LOWER TENSIONS ON SOUTH CHINA SEA CONFRONTATIONS

THE BUZZ

China and the Philippines said they have agreed to work on lowering tensions after a year of public and tense confrontations in the South China Sea between their ships that have raised concerns of armed engagement in the region.

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said yesterday that the two sides agreed to continue to improve communication and use friendly negotiations to manage their differences at sea, "especially to manage well the situation at Ren'AI reef."

Ren'AI reef is the Chinese name for what the Philippines call Ayungin Shoal and the U.S. calls the Second Thomas Shoal, the site of multiple confrontations between the two countries' ships in recent months.

In November, Manila said that a Chinese coast guard ship and accompanying vessels conducted dangerous maneuvers and blasted a Philippine supply ship with a water cannon in disputed waters. China disputed the account, saying it acted appropriately.

China and the Philippines said they agreed to limit tensions at a meeting on the South China Sea on Wednesday in Shanghai, the eighth in a series that began in 2017.

"The two sides had frank and productive discussions to de-escalate the situation in the South China Sea and both sides agreed to calmly deal with incidents, if any, through diplomacy," the Philippines' Department of Foreign Affairs said in a statement Wednesday.

AP PHOTO



Head of the Italian committee on AI, Franciscan Friar Paolo Benanti who is also a consultant for The Vatican

THE VATICAN'S TOP EXPERT ON AI ETHICS IS A FRIAR FROM A MEDIEVAL FRANCISCAN ORDER

FRANCES D'EMILIO, ROME

**F**RIAR Paolo Benanti wears the plain brown robes of his medieval Franciscan order as he pursues one of the most pressing issues in contemporary times: how to govern artificial intelligence so that it enriches — and doesn't exploit — people's lives.

Benanti is the Vatican's go-to person on the technology and he has the ear of Pope Francis as well as some of Silicon Valley's top engineers and executives.

With a background in engineering, a doctorate in moral theology and a passion for what he calls the "ethics of technology," the 50-year-old Italian priest is on an urgent mission that he shares with Francis, who, in his annual peace message for 2024, pushed for an international treaty to ensure the ethical use of AI technology.

"What is the difference between a man who exists and a machine that functions?" said Benanti in an interview this week with The Associated Press during a break at the Pontifical Gregoriana University, where he teaches courses such as moral theology and bioethics to students preparing

for the priesthood. "This is perhaps the greatest question of these times, because we are witnessing a challenge that every day grows more profound with a machine that is humanizing."

Benanti is a member of the United Nations' Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence as well as head of an Italian government commission tasked with providing recommendations on how to safeguard journalism from fake news and other disinformation. He is also a consultant to the Vatican's Pontifical Academy for Life.

Benanti says he helps "better clarify the more technical terms for the Holy Father" during their encounters. His knowledge came in handy for a 2023 meeting at the Vatican between Francis and Microsoft President Brad Smith that focused on how AI could help or hurt humanity.

Francis and Smith had also discussed artificial intelligence "at the service of the common good" during a meeting a few years earlier, according to the Vatican. With a papacy heavily attentive to those who live on society's margins, Francis has made clear his concern that AI technology could limit human rights

by, say, negatively impacting a homebuyer's mortgage application, a migrant's asylum bid or an evaluation of an offender's likelihood to repeat a crime.

"It's clear that if we choose some data that aren't sufficiently inclusive, we will have some choices that aren't inclusive," said Benanti, whose religious order was founded in the early 13th century by St. Francis of Assisi, who renounced earthly riches and promoted charitable works.

Microsoft first reached out to Benanti several years ago for his thoughts on technology, the friar said. In 2023, Smith did a podcast with Benanti in Rome, describing the friar as bringing "one of the most fascinating combinations in the world" in terms of his background in engineering, ethics and technology, to the AI debate.

Benanti, who was one year shy of obtaining his engineering degree at Rome's Sapienza University when he forsook the degree — and also his girlfriend — to join the Franciscans in his 20s, described how AI could be a "really powerful tool" in bringing down the cost of medicine and empowering doctors to help more people. **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



**Thailand** A court yesterday acquitted more than two dozen protesters who had occupied Bangkok's two airports in 2008 of charges of rebellion and terrorism related to their demonstration, which at the time disrupted travel in and out of the country for more than a week. The Bangkok Criminal Court declared that the members of the People's Alliance for Democracy had neither caused destruction at the airports nor hurt anyone.

**Russia's** top diplomat dismissed the United States proposal to resume a dialogue on nuclear arms control, saying yesterday that it's impossible while Washington offers military support to Ukraine. Speaking at an annual news conference, Sergey Lavrov accused the West of fueling global security risks by encouraging Ukraine to ramp up strikes on the Russian territory and warned that Moscow will achieve its goals in the conflict regardless of Western support for Kyiv.

AP PHOTO



**Hungary's** government will not change policies the European Union believes infringe on LGBTQ+ rights and those of asylum seekers, even if doing so would unfreeze billions in funding the bloc has withheld from Budapest, a government minister said yesterday. The EU has frozen funding to Hungary over concerns its right-wing nationalist government has trampled on minority rights and academic freedoms, failed to rein in official corruption and undermined democratic values.

**Panama** A severe drought that began last year has forced authorities to slash ship crossings by 36% in the Panama Canal, one of the world's most important trade routes. The new cuts were announced Wednesday by authorities in Panama. Canal administrators now estimate that dipping water levels could cost them between \$500 million and \$700 million in 2024.