



CHIEF EXECUTIVE HO IAT SENG COMMENDS CONTRIBUTION OF MACANESE COMMUNITY IN MACAU'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC RECOVERY DURING SPRING LUNCHEON

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CUSTOMS POLICE PLANS TO EXPAND IRIS-FACILITATED BORDER CLEARANCE

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HEAVY SNOW TO HIT CENTRAL, EAST CHINA THIS WEEK

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AP PHOTO



Japan A group of citizens, including a man of Pakistani descent, launched a civil lawsuit against the country's police yesterday, accusing the authorities of racial profiling and discrimination and demanding an end to the alleged practice. The case, to be heard in Tokyo District Court, comes as Japan in recent years has seen an influx of workers from abroad. The number of non-Japanese living in Japan reached a record high last year, at nearly 3 million people.

AP PHOTO



North Korea's weekend test of new cruise missiles for submarine launches added to its provocative start to 2024, as leader Kim Jong Un flaunts his growing nuclear arsenal and threatens nuclear conflict with Washington, Seoul and Tokyo. Kim has gained confidence from the advancement of his nuclear weapons program and from strengthened ties with Russia as he looks to break out of diplomatic isolation and strengthen his footing against the United States.

AP PHOTO



Malaysia charged a former minister yesterday with failing to declare assets, the latest step in a corruption probe that's targeting several people connected to a former prime minister. Former Finance Minister Daim Zainuddin, who left office more than 20 years ago, is a key ally of ex-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed. Both argue that the probe is politically motivated and that prosecutors have ignored potential corruption among allies of the current government.

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**WEATHER BUREAU
FORECASTS RAPID
WARMING MID-WEEK**

After several days of chilly temperatures, the Meteorological and Geophysical Bureau (SMG) announced in a special forecast yesterday that temperatures may rise above 20 degrees Celsius in the middle of the week. The bureau predicts that the wind will blow from the east in the coming days, leading to a quick rise in temperature to above 18 degrees Celsius in or after the middle of the week. Due to the easterly winds, the weather will also become humid, accompanied by occasional showers. The bureau cautioned that daytime and nocturnal weather conditions may fluctuate significantly, advising the public to stay vigilant.

**85% SOCIAL SECURITY
PROOF OF LIFE LOGGED
ELECTRONICALLY**

As of yesterday, 139,000 out of a total of 159,000 pension or disability pension beneficiaries required to provide proof of life to the Social Security Fund (FSS) have submitted the necessary documentation, with 85% opting for electronic submission. The FSS encourages beneficiaries who have not provided proof of life documentation to use electronic methods such as the "Macao One Account," which is both time-saving and convenient. The beneficiary's spouse or immediate family member may also log in to their personal account to assist the beneficiary in the process.

**NATURAL GAS PRICES
DROP 3.4-5.6%**

The Environmental Protection Bureau (DSPA) has announced in a statement that the government has approved a price decrease for locally provided natural gas, with immediate effect. The drop will range between 3.4% and 5.6%, depending on the user grouping. Despite rising prices in most petroleum products and by-products in Macau, the drop in natural gas prices is attributed to the narrower difference between the Macau Pataca and the Chinese Yuan, the DSPA explained in the statement. The bureau also pledged that it would continue to supervise active collaboration between the concessionary company and the upstream natural gas supply company.

MENTAL HEALTH

SUICIDES ROSE TO 88 IN 2023

LYNZY VALLES

MACAU saw a total of 88 suicides in 2023, slightly higher than the 80 recorded in 2022.

In a statement from the Health Bureau (SSM), data shows that 57 of the cases were men, with the fourth quarter of last year recording the highest number, with 20 cases involving men.

The youngest of all cases was 14 years old, while the oldest was 92 years old.

According to the SSM, suicide may be related to mental illness, chronic or physical diseases, gambling or financial problems.

Early last year, data from the Bosco Youth Service Network shows that the number of teenagers seeking mental health services has remained steady, noting that even one case is "too many."

The network has stated that teenagers sometimes hide their negative emotions from their school and student counselors.

In 2022, the public hospital's Department of Psychiatry diagnosed a total of 200 residents with common mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and others.

According to the SSM, although the figure was similar to the annual average of past years,



Caritas noted that as of August 2023, its Life Hotline had received nearly 6,947 calls and online requests seeking assistance. Of these, 527 callers were suffering from depression, and 179 were on the verge of suicide due to depression.

Lawmaker Ella Lei has pre-

viously condemned Macau's current workforce of psychiatrists and psychologists as being too small to support the population's mental health needs.

Currently, there are 16 psychiatrists and 86 psychologists working across public and private medical facilities in the city.

For Lei, this is evidence that "there is not enough support for mental health in Macau. The government needs to work on developing this industry, and [encouraging] professional careers [in mental health]."

Macau has just one psychiatrist per 42,100 people and one psychologist per 7,800 people, as cited in a previous TDM report.

The government is appealing to people with emotional problems to seek professional support as soon as possible.

In order to help reduce the incidence of suicide, the SSM called on citizens to monitor their mental health and encourage people who are emotionally distressed to actively seek professional assistance. The causes of suicide are complex and often involve several factors. Therefore, SSM reminds those suffering or facing difficulties to seek help from health professionals.

The Social Welfare Bureau (IAS) encourages residents to be conscious of their psychological and emotional state as well as those of their relatives and friends. If in need, residents can call Caritas' Life Hope hotline (28525222) or IAS' counseling hotline (28261126).

Ron Lam questions repeated but restrictive requirement for specialist medical training

ANTHONY LAM

IT is suspected that the Macau Academy of Medicine only accepts applicants who have completed intermediate clinical training at the government hospital. Lawmaker Ron Lam has issued a written inquiry to query the matter.

The lawmaker cited complaints that he had received as the foundation for his inquiry.

Lam revealed that the Academy requires applicants to comply with the stipulation on prior training pursuant to Law

No. 18/2020, but he finds it vague as no specific provisions were denoted precisely.

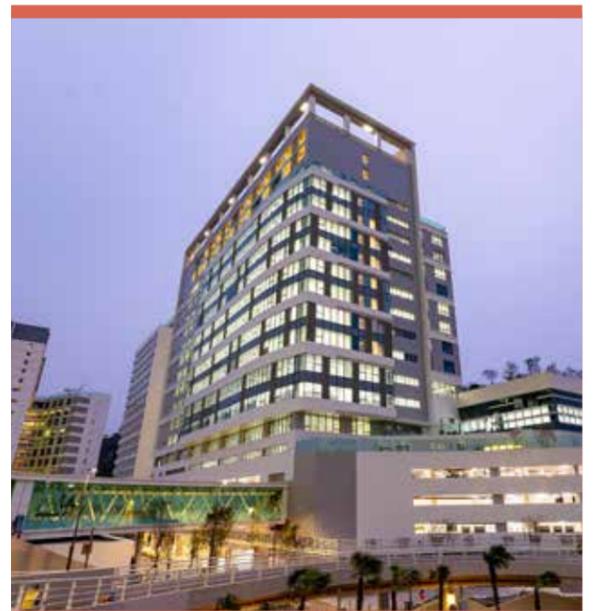
Hinting that he was told that the Academy only accepts training conducted by the government hospital, the lawmaker suspects that it could cause inequitable treatment and block medical graduates from outside of Macau. Even worse, it turns the Academy into a private club for doctors within the civil service structure.

He cited a law governing registration of medical staff to demonstrate that, in fact, doctors who

graduate outside of Macau are entitled to registration, with internship requirements waived.

As such, the lawmaker demands the Academy or the Health Bureau clarify their criteria so as to create more fair opportunities.

On the categorization of specialist medical staff, the lawmaker pointed out that such registration is only applicable to the government hospital. Even those entering private practice after serving at the hospital are not permitted to refer to themselves as specialist doctors.



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PSP plans to expand iris-facilitated border clearance

ANTHONY LAM

THE Public Security Police Force (PSP) yesterday disclosed that iris-facilitated border facilities are planned for six major checkpoints.

The six checkpoints will be the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge, Macau International Airport, Taipa Maritime Terminal, Outer Harbour Ferry Terminal, and Inner Harbour Ferry Terminal, as well as the Border Gate, which is the first to have the facility as well as the testing checkpoint for the facility.

Expecting usage to rise further, Mui Kin Meng, division head at the PSP, said that the 10 iris channels at the Border Gate have logged over 170,000 registrations and 1.2 million counts of use, as of Jan. 26.

Immigration clearance by electronic identity, meanwhile, has logged over 5.6 million counts of use as of end-2023, equating to about 15.6% of all border crossings. Last year, there were 183 million counts



of border crossings, an 86% increase year-on-year. The Border Gate accounted for over 55% of all crossings.

Some 28.25 million people visited Macau last year, or about 72% of the level in 2019. Similar to all years in the past two decades, mainland residents made up the largest part of the visitor count, accounting for precisely 67%.

As for crime figures, last year logged 8,190 cases, a 25% rise year-on-year.

Most of the crimes involved unreturned lost property, theft, physical assault and damage to property. Deputy Commissioner Wong Wai Hong of the PSP believes that the rise in crime figures was triggered by the resumption of normal travel, leading to increased people

movements. Despite this, rates of serious crime still ran low in Macau.

Last year, the police also shut down 106 illegal accommodation facilities. In addition, 530 counts of people were believed to have worked illegally, which equated to 130 cases for investigation. Meanwhile, 81 cases were identified to involve illegal driver-workers.

IC CALLS FOR STALL OPS FOR TAP SEAC CRAFT MARKET

The Tap Seac Craft Market in spring will be held from Apr. 18 to Apr. 21 and from Apr. 25 to Apr. 28 April at Tap Seac Square. The calls for stall operators and creative handicraft workshops will be open from today until Feb. 22. Organised by the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC), the craft market is a distinctive cultural and creative market in Macau that has been held in spring and autumn annually since 2008, aiming to provide a platform for cultural and creative practitioners to display and sell their products.

MGTO PROMOTES MACAU IN EUROPE

The Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO) organized a Macau Business Breakfast and other destination promotional initiatives at a travel fair, FITUR 2024, held last week in Madrid, Spain, to enhance cooperation with Spanish travel trade and increase European travelers' intention to visit Macau. Also, according to a statement, MGTO's next major Macau destination promotion in Europe will be in Portugal at the Lisbon Travel Market (BTL), running Feb. 28 to Mar. 3, where MGTO will join the Portuguese Association of Travel and Tourism Agencies (APAVT) pavilion at the event to promote Macau's "tourism +" offerings. Following APAVT's election of Macau as its "Preferred International Destination" for 2024, the association will also especially highlight Macau at this year's BTL, in another cooperation between the two sides.

TOURISM

HOTEL OCCUPANCY IN 2023 GROWS TO 81.5% AMID SURGE IN VISITORS ARRIVALS

STAFF REPORTER

HOTEL occupancy in 2023 went up by 43.1 percentage points year-on-year to 81.5% amid economic recovery following border reopening in January 2023.

Data from the Statistics and Census Service (DSEC) shows that the rates for 2-star (85.1%) and 5-star hotels (82.5%) were relatively high, demonstrating growth of 36.3 percentage points and 48.3 percentage points respectively.

In 2023, the number of guests soared by 165.4% year-on-year to 13,573,000, which recovered to 96.2% of the level in 2019. Guests from mainland China (9,844,000), Hong Kong (2,219,000) and Taiwan (256,000) jumped by 154.6%, 876.3% and 559.8% respectively.

The 2023 year closed with a provisional total of 28.23 million visitors, signifying a 71.6% recovery when compared to the 2019 year-end tally of 39.41 million visitors.

The government has also



reported a strong recovery at the end of 2023 due to the recent influx of foreign visitors, particularly in November over two weekends of the Macau Grand Prix and other events. In December 2023, foreign visitors reached about 93% of 2019 numbers.

In December, the average occupancy rate of guest rooms hiked by 43.1 percentage points year-on-year to 85.9%, with the rates for hotels of various star ratings and economical accommodation establishments all exceeding 80%.

Meanwhile, for the whole year of 2023, the number of visitors arriving on package tours totaled 1,276,000, and that of Macau residents purchasing outbound services through travel agencies rocketed by 796.3% year-on-year to 418,000.

Government data shows that in December 2023, there were 160,000 visitors arriving on package tours. A total of 53,000 Macau residents purchased outbound services through travel agencies, an uplift of 808.5% year-on-year.

4,000 HOTEL ROOMS UNDER DESIGN OR CONSTRUCTION DURING 4Q23

NEARLY 4,000 hotel rooms were either within the design or construction phase during the fourth quarter of last year, the Land and Urban Construction Bureau (DSSCU) announced in a statement yesterday.

According to the bureau, 14 hotel projects were either being designed or constructed during this quarter. There were equal numbers of projects in each category. As for the number of rooms, 3,105 were being built and 851 were

being designed, amounting to about 179,000 sqm. of gross room area. The 14 projects will create 1,145 and 317 spaces for motor cars and motorcycles respectively.

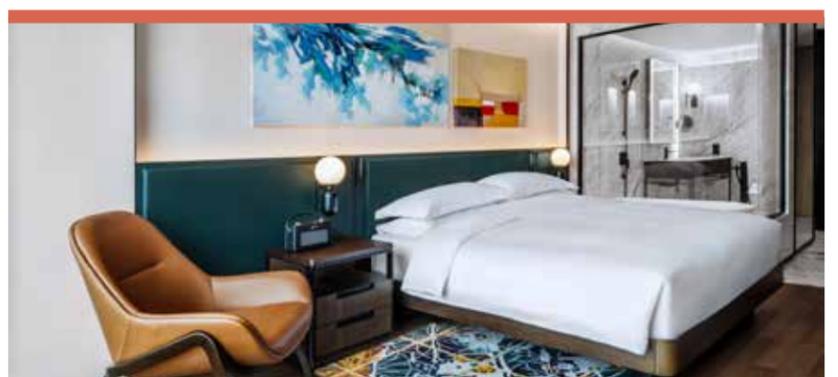
The whole year saw seven new hotels constructed, adding 1,792 rooms or equivalent to about 157,000 sqm. in room spaces to the city.

As for residential projects, during the same quarter, two projects had their licenses for usage approved, equating to 14 units. Neither project includes parking

spaces.

There were 48 projects under construction with 10 concluded. The former will see 2,286 units and 1,595 parking spaces built in total. The latter, on the other hand, feature 322 units and 105 parking spaces. Some 91 projects are under design phase and include a proposed 6,415 units and 4,668 parking spaces.

Throughout the whole year 183 residential projects were approved for use, with no parking spaces. **AL**



TREASURE ISLAND HOTEL OFFICIALLY OPENS WITH NEW RETAIL BRANDS

STAFF REPORTER

THE YOHO Treasure Island Hotel has officially opened late last week, providing 600 rooms and multiple retail brands, following a number of delays.

The property has also opened the first-ever Bona International Cineplex in Macau and the Galeries Lafayette department store in Macau, located inside YOHO Shopping Centre.

As the hotel begins its soft opening and the mall reaches nearly 90% occupancy, the site offers a collection of over 100 international and niche brands, including more than 10 exclusive "First in Macau" brands. The cross-brand area, "EDIT by Galeries Lafayette," showcases emerging brands, further expanding the fashion options within Macau.

Previously, JLL – the leasing agent – said that it sees this opening as a positive sign for the presently sluggish retail market in Macau.

Oliver Tong, general manager of JLL in Macau and Zhuhai, stated, "The full reopening of the mainland and Macau borders, alongside the significant rebound in mainland visitors to Macau, is expected to drive foot



traffic and sales at YOHO Resorts World Shopping Centre."

The resort project initially had the completion set date for June 2022, but has also suffered several construction delays due to the pandemic.

The property covers an area of 8,100 square meters with a total construction cost of about MOP4.7 billion.

The original design was a "hotel + casino" project, but it was transformed into a "hotel + shopping mall" project after gaming and tourism company Genting Hong Kong Limited sold

its stakes to a company owned by local real estate businesswoman, Ao Mio Leong.

Additionally, Bona Film Group has constructed the Bona International Cineplex in Macau. To commemorate its debut, the cinema hosted an event called the "Bona Film Group Movie Screening Event." The event offered free screenings of eight well-known Bona films, including acclaimed titles such as "Bursting Point," "The Battle at Lake Changjin," "Operation Mekong," and "Flying Swords of Dragon Gate."

GAMING

CICC projects gaming sector to recover 77% pre-pandemic levels

INVESTMENT bank CICC remained bullish on Macau's gaming industry, expecting the sector to recover to 77% of pre-pandemic gross gaming revenue (GGR) levels.

In a research report, the CICC noted that the sector expected to see continued normalized growth. Performance in the mass segment is expected to continue to perform strongly, while the VIP segment is expected to remain subdued. Amid the strong growth and recovery, the investment bank maintained its 2024 GGR forecast for Macau, and stated that it anticipates GGR to recover to 77% and



83% of 2019 levels in 2024 and 2025 respectively.

Meanwhile, analysts from Hong Kong-based financial services firm CLSA Limited believe the 12 months ahead will further

improve Macau's pandemic comeback. In a note issued earlier last week, the group said it expects GGR in Macau to recover to 82% of 2019 levels this year.

The SAR government, meanwhile, is

confident that the city's GGR for 2024 will amount to MOP216 billion, a surge from last year's expectations of MOP130 billion, as 2023 gaming sector income hit MOP183 billion. LV



MGTO visits the international showcase of Halal certified food

LOCAL BUSINESS ASSOCIATION HOSTS HALAL FOOD SEMINAR

A seminar was held by the Industrial Association of Macau to familiarize local caterers with requirements in Halal gastronomy

The association has invited the Imam at the Incorporated Trustees of the Islamic Community Fund of Hong Kong to speak at the seminar. The local Muslim Imam Ding Siaojie was also on the panel.

About a year ago, the local Imam underlined in an interview with the Times that it was difficult for Muslims in Macau to access Halal food.

The seminar covered information related to the requirements and application procedures of the Halal accreditation.

Chui Yuk Lum, president of the organizer of the seminar, explained the necessity of the event by citing the 28 million counts of visitors to Macau last year. He ad-

ded that despite the direction of developing tourism, leisure and gastronomy, there is not much Halal food in Macau.

He also said that the Middle-East will be a major source market to Macau, so the lack of Halal food here should be remedied.

Recently, the Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO) led a Macau delegation to a Hong Kong food fair in the attempts to make contact with the Halal community there.

Despite the effort, unlike most international airports around the world, the local airport still does not have prayer rooms, which are crucial to Muslims who need to say prayers five times per day.

About a decade ago, Grand Coloane Resort was among the first, if not the first, hotel in Macau to run a Halal-accredited restaurant. AL

CE COMMENDS CONTRIBUTION OF MACANESE COMMUNITY IN MACAU'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC RECOVERY

STAFF REPORTER

THE Chief Executive Ho Iat Seng hoped that the Macanese community could "accurately grasp the development trajectory of our times, making full use of development opportunities and maintaining the forward push of the various community initiatives, in order to scale new heights."

Speaking at a reception hosted for representatives of the local Macanese community yesterday, Ho mentioned the government's ongoing effort to advance Macau's appropriate economic diversification, as well as the integrated development between Macau and Hengqin, and advancement of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area.

The Chief Executive noted the contribution the local Macanese community had made to the ove-

rall socio-economic recovery in Macau.

According to Ho, developing a platform for economic and trade cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries has always been a "top priority for the government over the years."

"With their language, culture and history, Macanese people not only attested to Macau's unique features, but also played a pivotal role in promoting Macau, and in people-to-people communication," he said.

As the 6th Ministerial Conference of the Forum for Economic and Trade Co-operation between China and Portuguese-speaking Countries (Macao) is to be held later this year, the government is actively participating in the preparatory work for its organisation, and looks forward to receiving the support and participation of the Macanese community, he said.

Wynn Ushers in the Year of the Dragon with Exceptional Culinary Experiences

CHINESE New Year is one of the most festive times of the year where family and friends re-unite to indulge in exceptional gastronomy. The signature restaurants at Wynn Macau and Wynn Palace are delighted to present an array of Chinese New Year culinary surprises for everyone to enjoy together.

WYNN CHINESE NEW YEAR 'JEWELRY GIFT BOXES'

Wynn is pleased to present sets of four Chinese New Year Festive Cakes in elegantly designed gift boxes. The striking red 'jewelry gift box' with gold handles features two majestic dragons and Wynn's iconic floral patterns to symbolize the "soaring of the dragon" and "blossoming flowers for prosperity". Designed to be both elegant and practical, the gift boxes may be used time and again as jewelry cases, in line with Wynn's ongoing commitment to sustainability.



Wynn Chinese New Year Festive Cake Jewelry Gift Boxes

Experience Chinese New Year culinary surprises at Wynn

AT Wynn Macau, the Michelin two-star Wing Lei Cantonese restaurant is preparing a variety of auspicious dishes including the Sautéed Macau sole fillet and crispy bones with black moss and truffle. For this dish, the award-winning chefs at Wing Lei will expertly prepare a large fillet of Macau sole at just the right temperature to ensure the fish bones are crispy and the flesh of the fish is perfectly tender. To elevate this dish even further, the fish is garnished with

truffles for an incredible aroma. The Forbes Five-Star Golden Flower restaurant, renowned for its rich history, artistry, and official cuisine of China, will present a luxurious version of Northeastern home-cooked dishes. The Northern hot pot with seafood and lamb at Golden Flower will feature seasonal seafood and nutritious lamb. Bursting with flavor, this hot pot is perfect for celebratory gatherings amongst family and friends.

Café Esplanada, home to de-

licacies from around the world, will also present Chinese New Year-themed Afternoon Tea Set for guests to enjoy in a festive atmosphere surrounded by lush gardens. From February 9 to 18, Café Esplanada will also prepare Chinese New Year Buffet dinners featuring a variety of festive delicacies for family and friends to enjoy together.

At Wynn Palace, Chef Tam's Seasons – the new concept restaurant created by Cantonese Master Chef Tam Kwok Fung – will pre-

sent an array of culinary surprises for Chinese New Year including an Abalone, superior sea cucumber, semi-dried oyster and chicken served in cast iron cocotte. Each ingredient blends beautifully with one another and is symbolic of the new year.

Lakeview Palace, home to the flavors of Jiangnan is also crafting a variety of festive dishes, and one dish that is an absolute must is the 'Yushang' abalone prosperity salad. In true Chinese New Year tradition, family and

friends can enjoy tossing the salad to even greater heights with the goal of achieving more prosperity than ever before in the new year.

From February 1 to 29, Sweets will also present a limited-edition Year of the Dragon – Milk Chocolate and Mandarin Cake. This festive red cake features a mighty golden dragon in a symbolic nod to a prosperous Year of the Dragon and is filled with a combination of citrus jam and milk chocolate, for a flavor that is full of surprises.



Wing Lei presents an auspicious Sautéed Macau sole fillet and crispy bones with black moss and truffle dish for Chinese New Year



Experience a leisurely Chinese New Year afternoon tea at Café Esplanada



Lakeview Palace invites family and friends to celebrate a prosperous Chinese New Year with 'Yushang' abalone prosperity salad



Golden Flower is pleased to present a luxurious Northern hot pot with seafood and lamb for Chinese New Year



Chef Tam's Seasons presents a festive Abalone, superior sea cucumber, semi-dried oyster and chicken served in cast iron cocotte for Chinese New Year



Sweets will present a limited-edition Year of the Dragon – Milk Chocolate and Mandarin Cake

INFRASTRUCTURE

CHINA-LAOS RAILWAY TRAIN ADDS 50 SEATS

LUO WANGSHU, CHINA DAILY

MORE seats for international passengers are being offered on the bullet train operating on the China-Laos Railway to meet the strong demand for travel between the two nations as the Spring Festival approaches next month, the line's operator, China Railway Kunming Group, said last weekend.

Since Friday, the first day of China's Spring Festival travel rush, the train has added 50 seats — for a total of 350 — for cross-border travelers between Kunming, the capital of Southwest China's Yunnan province, and Vientiane, capital of Laos. Round-trip service between Kunming and Vientiane is offered daily once a day.

The train takes about 9 hours and 30 minutes to travel between the two cities, departing Kunming at 8 am and arriving at Vientiane at about 4:30 pm.

China's Spring Festival falls on Feb 10 this year. This year's Spring Festival travel rush started on Friday and will end on March 5. The national railway network expects to see 480 million passenger trips during the 40-day period.

According to the Kunming railway company, there is a strong demand for cross-border travel along the China-Laos Railway during the travel rush. Passengers are advised to make plans in advance.

Vannaphone Khamphilom, a Lao student who studies at Kunming University, took the ride from the Yunnan capital to Vientiane for winter vacation this month.

"The train is always busy," she said, adding that her Chinese friends asked her to buy train tickets for them during Spring Festival.



Members of a tour group from Thailand check in to take the train on the China-Laos Railway in Vientiane, Laos, on Friday

"There is a surge in demand during the holiday, and the tickets are hard to get," she said.

She said she prefers traveling by train to flying.

"Since (the international train service) opened, I stopped taking the plane. On the train, I can talk to different people, Lao and Chinese," said Khamphilom, who owns a human resources company.

She said such trips are a great opportunity to gather travel information for her mother, who owns a travel company.

This year's Spring Festival travel rush is the first since the China-Laos Railway began offering international passenger service in

April last year.

Railway employees along the route are well prepared for the "big test" of the year.

Train conductor Yi Bofeng ensures that arrival cards are issued in Chinese, English and Lao to passengers on the train so they can fill them out before arriving at Mohan, Yunnan, or Boten, Laos, the border cities where passengers must clear immigration and customs.

She helps passengers complete the cards in advance to shorten clearance times and make their trip more efficient.

Although she can speak four languages — Mandarin, English, Lao and the Dai dialect — Yi said

she was initially nervous when foreign travelers would ask her for help, but now she is more confident.

"To offer better service to international passengers, we have received tailored training in Lao and English. I also practice my language skills to show my professionalism as a conductor on the international route," she said.

She said she and her colleagues are well prepared to offer high-quality service during the Spring Festival travel rush to more passengers.

The line's international passenger service has experienced a gradual increase in demand since its operation began. This month,

the occupancy rate of the international passenger train has already reached 93.1%, according to China Railway Kunming Group.

Because of the winter, the warm and pleasant climates in places such as Vientiane and Luang Prabang in Laos, as well as Xishuangbanna Dai autonomous prefecture and Pu'er in Yunnan, has been favored by a large number of tourists from China and Southeast Asian countries.

Many tourists are opting to take the China-Laos Railway to visit these places.

Wang Lijuan, general manager of the Kunming Merry International Travel Service, an international tourism company, said: "Since the opening of the international service, travelers, particularly from northern Thailand, can take the railway to China. In the past, they had to travel to Bangkok to make a transfer before taking the plane to China."

Wang's company mainly works with foreign tourists who want to travel to China.

She also noted that since the adoption of the visa-free policy between China and Thailand, more inquiries are being made about traveling to China by train.

According to China Railway Kunming Group, the international service has so far handled more than 125,000 passenger trips from 75 countries and regions. Most of the passengers hail from China, Laos, Thailand and Singapore.

The 1,035-kilometer China-Laos Railway, a landmark project of the Belt and Road Initiative, began operation in December 2021. It has turned Laos from a landlocked country into a land-linked hub in the Indo-China Peninsula. **CHINA DAILY**

CORPORATE BITS

MGM fully converts to natural gas



MGM Macau has become the first hotel on the Macau Peninsula to convert to natural gas, the gaming operator announced in a state-

ment.

The MGM Macau's changeover into natural gas is expected to result in an annual reduction of over 550 tons

of carbon dioxide equivalent, which is equal to planting approximately 24,000 trees. Apart from adopting green energy, MGM pledged it will continue to explore the feasibility of utilizing other renewable energy sources like solar energy as well as fully switching to electric shuttle buses, moving towards a greener development in the long run.

Kenneth Feng, president and executive director of MGM China Holdings Limited said, "MGM MACAU has become the first hotel on the Macau Peninsula to switch to natural gas usage, enabling us to further reduce carbon emission and head towards a safer and more efficient operation."

Studio City to open Don Don Donki Feb.2



Macau's largest Don Don Donki store is set to open its doors at Studio City on Feb. 2. Spanning over 30,000

square feet, the Japanese specialty store boasts an array of offerings, including freshly ground Japanese

rice, made to order rice balls and bento boxes.

To cater to guests seeking the freshest and highest-quality Japanese rice, the store brings the first "Yasuda Seimai" outlet to Macau.

Macau's first Yasuda Seimai offers in-store ground Japanese rice, made to order rice balls and bento boxes using freshly cooked high-quality Japanese rice.

Unprocessed rice from Japan can be freshly ground in the store as part of the store's offerings. In addition, the store will feature Macau's first "SEN SEN SUSHI," offering a unique Japanese gastronomic experience for leisure diners and alike.

ECONOMY

Evergrande ordered to liquidate after failing to restructure over \$300 billion debt

KANIS LEUNG
& ZEN SOO, HONG KONG

A Hong Kong court ordered China Evergrande, the world's most heavily indebted real estate developer, to undergo liquidation following a failed effort to restructure \$300 billion owed to banks and bondholders that fueled fears about China's rising debt burden.

"It would be a situation where the court says enough is enough," Judge Linda Chan said yesterday. She said it was appropriate for the court to order Evergrande to wind up its business given a "lack of progress on the part of the company putting forward a viable restructuring proposal" as well as Evergrande's insolvency.

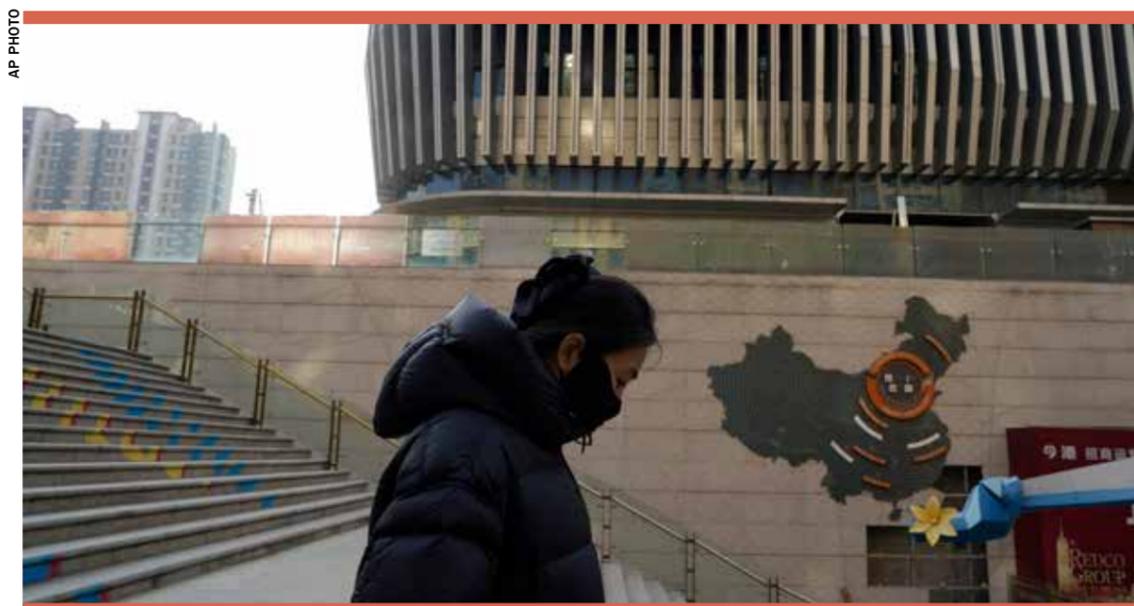
China Evergrande Group is among dozens of Chinese developers that have collapsed since 2020 under official pressure to rein in surging debt the ruling Communist Party views as a threat to China's slowing economic growth.

But the crackdown on excess borrowing tipped the property industry into crisis, dragging on the economy and rattling financial systems in and outside China.

Chinese regulators have said the risks of global shockwaves from Evergrande's failure can be contained. The court documents seen yesterday showed Evergrande owes about \$25.4 billion to foreign creditors. Its total assets of about \$240 billion are dwarfed by its total liabilities.

"It is indisputable that the company is grossly insolvent and is unable to pay its debts," the documents say.

About 90% of Evergrande's business is in mainland China. Its chairman, Hui Ka Yan, who is also known as Xu Jiayin, was detained



by authorities for suspected "illegal crimes" in late September, further complicating the company's efforts to recover.

It's unclear how the liquidation order will affect China's financial system or Evergrande's operations as it struggles to deliver housing that has been paid for but not yet handed over to families that put their life savings into such investments.

Evergrande's Hong Kong-traded shares plunged nearly 21% early yesterday before they were suspended from trading. But Hong Kong's benchmark Hang Seng index was up 0.9% and some property developers saw gains in their share prices.

China's largest real estate developer, Country Garden, initially gained nearly 3% but was flat. Sunac China Holdings rose 2.4%.

The Shanghai Composite index dropped 0.9% while Shenzhen's A-share index fell more than 2%.

The Hong Kong court gave Evergrande a reprieve in December to allow it time to "refine" a

new debt restructuring plan.

But Chan, the judge, said Evergrande "has not demonstrated that there is any useful purpose for the court to adjourn the petition — there is no restructuring proposal, let alone a viable proposal which has the support of the requisite majorities of the creditors."

In remarks published online, she lambasted the company for putting out only "general ideas" about what it may or may not be able to put forward as a restructuring proposal. The interests of creditors would be better protected if Evergrande is wound up by the court, she said.

Fergus Saurin, a lawyer representing an ad hoc group of creditors, said he was not surprised by the outcome.

"The company has failed to engage with us. There has been a history of last-minute engagement which has gone nowhere," he said.

Saurin said that his team worked in good faith during the

negotiations. Evergrande "only has itself to blame for being wound up," he said.

Tiffany Wong, one of two liquidators appointed by the court from global services firm Alvarez & Marsal, said that their priority was to ensure that "as much of the business as possible (is) retained, restructured and remains operational."

"We will pursue a structured approach to preserve and return value to the creditors and other stakeholders," Wong said. That includes considering any viable restructuring proposals, she said.

Evergrande CEO Shawn Siu told Chinese news outlet 21Jingji that the company feels "utmost regret" at the liquidation order.

He emphasized that the order affects only the Hong Kong-listed China Evergrande unit and that the group's domestic and overseas units are independent legal entities. Siu said that Evergrande will strive to continue smooth operations and deliver properties to buyers.

Real estate drove China's economic boom, but developers borrowed heavily as they turned cities into forests of apartment and office towers. That has helped to push total corporate, government and household debt to the equivalent of more than 300% of annual economic output, unusually high for a middle-income country.

Evergrande first defaulted on its financial obligations in 2021, just over a year after Beijing clamped down on lending to property developers to cool a property bubble.

As a former British colony, Hong Kong operates under a legal system that is separate, though increasingly influenced by, communist-ruled China's. In some cases, mainland courts have recognized bankruptcy rulings in Hong Kong but analysts say Evergrande's is something of a test case.

Brock Silvers, managing director at Kaiyuan Capital, said the liquidation order was likely to have more of an immediate impact on foreign investors and their confidence in China's financial markets than on Evergrande's operations in mainland China.

"So onshore, Evergrande tomorrow will look a lot like Evergrande yesterday, there won't be a lot of noticeable difference," he said.

Regulators need to restructure Evergrande and other struggling property developers, but it will be a complex and difficult process, said David Goodman, director of the China Studies Center at the University of Sydney.

"If the government could see simple answers to these problems, it would have reached them two to three years ago," Goodman said. **MDT/AP**

WEATHER

Heavy snow to hit Central, East China this week



CHINA'S meteorological authority yesterday warned of a large-scale and persistent heavy snowfall in the eastern and central regions of China, which might pose challenges for travelers during the upcoming Spring Festival holiday.

From Wednesday to next Monday, inclement weather will basically cover the entire central and eastern parts of China, with areas north of

the Yellow River and Huaihe River basins expected to see snow, the National Meteorological Center said.

Snowstorms will hit parts of the provinces of Shaanxi, Shanxi, Hebei, Henan, Shandong, Hubei, Hunan, Guizhou, Liaoning and Jilin during the period. These areas will generally see between 10 and 20 millimeters of snowfall, with some seeing as much as 30 millimeters, the center said.

Henan, Hubei, Anhui, Hunan and Guizhou provinces are also expected to see freezing rain, it said.

The cumulative precipitation over the next 10 days will be higher than usual, with the central Jiangnan area — south of the Yangtze River — and the northern part of South China receiving 120 to 180 millimeters of rainfall, two to six times

higher than the same period in a normal year.

The center said that temperatures will not change dramatically during the period.

As this year's Spring Festival travel rush in China began Friday and is expected to see a record 9 billion passenger trips during its 40-day period, the center reminded local authorities to make early arrangements to promote traffic safety, ensure the continuity of power supplies and guarantee the stability of communication facilities. **CHINA DAILY**

Sands China honours excellent suppliers, rema

SANDS China Ltd. recently shined a spotlight on Macao's suppliers with a joint event at The Londoner Macao: the Sands Supplier Excellence Awards ceremony and the graduation ceremony for the 13th and 14th cohorts of the Sands Procurement Academy.

The Macau SAR has released its first-ever economic diversification roadmap, in which cultivating local SMEs is a pathway to diversification. This is something that Sands China has given attention to since its establishment, with the company having purchased services and products from local businesses, including SMEs, for many years.

So far, the number of service or product providers that have cooperated or are in cooperation with the integrated resort operator has reached 2,000, Dr Wilfred Wong, executive vice chairman of Sands China Ltd., said during his speech at the event.

Sands China enhanced this year's event by inviting representatives from the procurement departments of both Las Vegas Sands Corp. and Marina Bay Sands in Singapore, fostering direct links with local SMEs.

Dr Wong said this demonstrates that Macau SMEs are not only attractive to local enterprises, but they also appeal to purchasers outside of Macau.

During the 2023 Sands Supplier Excellence Awards, recognition was conferred upon vendors that have provided commendable services or products throughout the year.

There are seven categories: small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME), corporate culture and sustainability, cost management, service excellence, project management, total quality management, and innovation.

The winners of the 2023 Awards were Aon Hong Kong Ltd. – Macau Branch for corporate culture and sustainability, Angel Macau Ltd. for innovation, YH Engineering Company Ltd. for cost management, Matrix Event Planning and Exhibition Ltd. for quality management, China Construction Engineering (Macau) Company Ltd. for project management, Maxtime Food (Macau) Ltd. for service excellence and Iat Lei Stationery Ltd. for SME.

The winner of the Innovation category, Angel Macau Ltd., is a manufacturer of playing cards and other cards. Keijiro Kan, president and board member of the company, described the award as a confidence booster to the company and its team.

The award will also help encourage and inspire the company's team members to progress further in their services and pro-



ducts, Kan added.

Angel Macau Ltd. has also developed an AI product to digitalize analog signals on card games and chips which Kan believes it is one of the reasons the company won the Innovation award.

The company started in Japan as a stationery wholesaler and is now supplying playing cards to gaming establishments around the world, with Macau being the largest market.

Service Excellence award winner Maxtime Food (Macau) Ltd. began its relationship with Sands China in 2006 by supplying seafood and associated products. Since then, Maxtime has flexibly adjusted its capacities to meet Sands China's needs, especially during the past several years when demand regularly fluctuated, Hermit Chan, administration and sales manager of the supplier, recalled.

She said the company has its own warehouse where auxiliary

stock is stored, so that when Sands China makes urgent additional orders, supplies can be provided as soon as possible.

SANDS PROCUREMENT ACADEMY: FIRST OF ITS KIND

Alongside the award ceremony, Sands China also celebrated two cohorts of SMEs graduating from the Sands Procurement Academy.

Organized in association with the Macao Chamber of Commerce (MCC) and the Macau Productivity and Technology Transfer Centre (CPTTM) since 2017, the academy promotes the development of local SME suppliers by sharing business knowledge and skills.

The academy's goal is to help SMEs gain experience and capacity for working with large-scale international corporations like Sands China, so that they not only will be on par with Sands China's requirements, but will also be

prepared to close more deals externally.

The academy is a first-of-its-kind industry training academy and initially targeted four categories of local suppliers: small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), micro-enterprises, Macau young entrepreneurs, and "Made-in-Macau" enterprises. It opened to all local SMEs in Macao in 2017, allowing a broader range of SMEs to benefit from the skills and knowledge offered by the academy's professionals.

Participating local SME suppliers learn through tailor-made practical training modules, presented by lecturers with diverse areas of expertise.

The modules cover logistics management, sustainability, quality assurance, procurement process and system overview, supplier code of conduct, procurement contract basics, and Macao labour law fundamentals.

The ceremony saw 69 enterpri-

ses graduating from the training program.

Dr Wong used the opportunity to thank the MCC and the CPTTM for their support. Since 2017, the academy has trained 524 local SMEs, with 485 having graduated.

Victoria Kuan, director-general of CPTTM, said the Sands Procurement Academy has not only turned experience into knowledge for the betterment of local SMEs, but also opened their eyes to the importance of obtaining global accreditations and certifications.

"Many local SMEs did not understand why their business would not thrive despite their quality products or services," Kuan said. "With training from the academy, they started to see the importance of becoming internationally accredited, such as with ISO."

U Kin Cho, vice president of the board of directors at MCC, commended Sands China's efforts in supporting the local busi-

Businesses committed to partnerships with local SMEs



U Kin Cho



Victoria Kuan



Hermit Chan



Keijiro Kan



Connie Lei



Edith Sio

ness circle.

Echoing Ms Kuan's comment, he agreed that Sands China has helped broaden the horizons of local SMEs.

During the past several years, local businesses have been heavily impacted by shrunken and unstable demand amid COVID-19 and the cash flow of local SMEs was affected significantly.

To assist with the situation, Sands China implemented a policy to shorten the payment terms for local SMEs, which effectively supported the survival of local SMEs. The policy has been implemented during other times of acute need as well, such as in the aftermath of Typhoon Hato and during the COVID pandemic period.

Adding to his comment, Mr U concurred with the positive impact on local SMEs brought about by Sands China's shortened payment term.

"It represents great trust from

Sands China toward local SMEs," he said.

Among the academy's two graduating cohorts is Aeternus F Gifts and Design, a small gift supplier with the capacity to provide up to 500 goods in a single order. The company's owner, Connie Lei, said the academy's training means a lot to her development.

"For example, I was not aware of certain global standards for courier packaging. When I delivered orders to clients in the past, I used my own ways of packaging," she said. "However, after completing the procurement training program, I know how to better package my goods."

Aeternus F's example demonstrates that Sands China has not only opened the academy for its own business partners and suppliers, but for other enterprises that do not have any business dealings with Sands China.

Sands China has always considered environmental friendliness

a prominent element in its corporate social responsibility efforts. Another graduate, Hongcai (Macau) New Material Technology Co., Ltd., is an example demonstrating this.

Its partnership with Sands China started in 2019, when the integrated resort's purchasers encountered the company at a local commercial exposition.

Not only has Sands China sourced utensils from the company, it has also made suggestions on how products could be improved in terms of quality and user-friendliness.

Edith Sio, managing director of the company, which supplies biodegradable disposable utensils to Sands China, described the information learnt from the courses as useful.

"Sustainability is core to many businesses now, not only to those in the eco-friendly industry," Ms Sio said. "The academy has opened our eyes [to] obtaining certi-

fications in Hong Kong, so that it helps improve the credentials of our products."

Following the two ceremonies, Sands China arranged a cocktail and networking session at the foyer of the Londoner Theatre for representatives of participating SMEs, enabling them to connect directly with purchasers from Sands China, its parent company Las Vegas Sands and its sibling company in Singapore, Marina Bay Sands.

Sands China believes such occasions are constructive to the expansion and progress of local SMEs, helping them advance their connections and learn from the experiences of others.

As part of its corporate social responsibility efforts, Sands China remains committed to procuring locally and helping Macao's SMEs grow – 26% of its MOP8.4 billion procurement expenditure last year went to local SMEs.

THE WINNERS OF THE 2023 AWARDS

Aon Hong Kong Ltd.	Corporate culture and sustainability
Angel Macau Ltd.	Innovation
YH Engineering Company Ltd.	Cost management
Matrix Event Planning and Exhibition Ltd.	Quality management
China Construction Engineering (Macau) Company Ltd.	Project management
Maxtime Food (Macau) Ltd.	Service excellence
Iat Lei Stationery Ltd.	SME

LAOS

SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS CAUTIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC OF PROGRESS ON MYANMAR AND SOUTH CHINA SEA CONFLICTS

DAVID RISING,
LUANG PRABANG

CHINA'S increasingly assertive posture in the South China Sea and escalating violence in Myanmar topped the agenda for Southeast Asian diplomats at their meeting in Laos yesterday, with the Laotian foreign minister expressing guarded optimism that progress could be made this year on both acrimonious issues.

Laotian Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith told reporters that Thailand was moving ahead with plans to provide more humanitarian assistance to Myanmar, where more than 2.6 million people have been displaced by civil war.

He said it was a good sign that the military leaders who seized control of Myanmar in February 2021 from the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi had for the first time sent a high-level representative to attend the meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers in the historic city of Luang Prabang in Laos.

"We feel a little bit optimistic that the engagement may work, although we have to admit that the issues that are happening in Myanmar will not resolve overnight," Saleumxay said. "I think there is probably a small light at the end of the tunnel."

Myanmar has been prohibited from sending its foreign minister or any political representative to high-level ASEAN meetings since the end of 2021, when it blocked the group's envoy from meeting with Suu Kyi. Instead, it has sent non-political representatives to lower-level working meetings but has refused to send anyone to high-level meetings.

In Laos, however, it sent a Foreign Ministry civil servant, ASEAN Permanent Secretary Marlar Than Htike, which Saleumxay called "a positive sign."

ASEAN member nations Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Myanmar, Cambodia, Brunei and Laos have a combined population of nearly 650 million and GDP of more than \$3 trillion.

Landlocked Laos, which has taken over this year's rotating ASEAN leadership, is the bloc's poorest nation and one of its smallest, and many have expressed skepticism about how much it can accomplish while the crises mount.

Still, it is the first ASEAN country that shares a border with Myanmar to serve as chair since

AP PHOTO



Representatives pose for a group photo during the ASEAN Foreign Ministers retreat meeting in Luang Prabang

the military took control of the country, giving it a perspective different from that of previous chairs.

Laos has already sent a special envoy to Myanmar for meetings with the head of the ruling military council and other top officials in an attempt to make progress on ASEAN's "five-point consensus" plan for peace.

The plan calls for the immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar, a dialogue among all concerned parties, mediation by an ASEAN special envoy, provision of humanitarian aid through ASEAN channels, and a visit to Myanmar by the special envoy to meet all concerned parties.

The military leadership in Myanmar has so far ignored the plan, and the violence and humanitarian crisis has been growing at a rapid pace.

Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan told reporters after the meeting that it was "helpful" to have a representative from Myanmar attend again, but that he would not say he was optimistic Myanmar would take concrete steps to implement the plan.

"If you take reference from the past, it can sometimes take a very long time for positive change to occur," he said. "I do not want to raise hopes or expectations unrealistically."

Saleumxay said ASEAN would continue to push for full implementation of the consensus which

also increasing humanitarian support.

"We think humanitarian assistance is the priority for the immediate period of time when implementing the five-point consensus," he said. "We welcome in this regard the efforts by the Thai government to ... try to create a humanitarian corridor where support and assistance can be provided to all Myanmar people."

Communist Laos is one of the ASEAN countries with the closest ties to China, and some have speculated it may look to its giant neighbor for help in dealing with the crisis in Myanmar, where Beijing also wields considerable influence.

China has said it will not interfere in the internal affairs of other states, however, and it is also unknown whether it taking on such a role would be acceptable to other ASEAN members.

SEA DISPUTES

ASEAN members Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei are locked in maritime disputes with China over its claims of sovereignty over virtually of the South China Sea, one of the world's most crucial waterways for shipping. Indonesia has also expressed concern about what it sees as Beijing's encroachment on its exclusive economic zone.

An estimated \$5 trillion in international trade passes through the South China Sea each year, which has led China into direct

confrontations, most notably with the Philippines and Vietnam.

The ASEAN meeting in Laos came on the same day that Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. was meeting with officials in Vietnam, among other things to discuss the ongoing tensions in the South China Sea.

The Philippines has been looking for more support from its ASEAN neighbors amid increasingly tense hostilities with China, which many worry could escalate into a broader conflict that could involve Washington, Manila's longtime treaty ally.

The Philippine government protested the Chinese coast guard's use of water cannons, a military-grade laser and dangerous blocking maneuvers that caused minor collisions off Philippine-occupied Second Thomas Shoal.

China and ASEAN agreed in 2002 and 2012 to a declaration on conduct in the South China Sea, seeking to "enhance favorable conditions for a peaceful and durable solution of differences and disputes," but there has been little sign of adherence to that in recent years.

In Luang Prabang, the group "underscored the importance of the full and effective" implementation of the declaration, according to a statement issued by Laos after the talks.

"We reaffirmed the importance of maintaining and promoting

peace, security, stability, safety and freedom of navigation in, and overflight above, the South China Sea," it said.

Under last year's chair, Indonesia, ASEAN agreed with China on guidelines to accelerate negotiations for a South China Sea code of conduct, but that has yet to produce results.

In the talks yesterday, Saleumxay said several ASEAN nations brought up the tensions in the South China Sea and that Laos hoped to have a third reading of the code of conduct with China "as soon as possible."

"That would create an environment where both ASEAN member states, especially the claimant states, and China can build more trust and confidence," he said. "Whatever happens in the South China Sea should be resolved in a peaceful manner through dialogue and consultations."

Saleumxay said all sides with claims in the South China Sea need to respect the United Nations convention on the law of the sea.

Under that convention, a U.N.-backed tribunal ruled in 2016 that China's expansive claims in the South China Sea on historical grounds were invalid and that Beijing had violated the right of Filipinos to fish in the shoal.

China has refused to participate in the arbitration, rejected its outcome and continues to defy it. **MDT/AP**

PHILIPPINES

Duterte assails Marcos, accusing him of plotting to expand his grip on power

JIM GOMEZ, MANILA

FORMER Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte is throwing allegations at his successor, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., and even raising the prospect of removing him from office, bringing into the open a long-rumored split between the two.

In an expletive-laden speech late Sunday, the former populist leader alleged that Marcos' legislative allies are plotting to amend the constitution to lift term limits and warned that could lead to him being ousted like his father, the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Duterte also accused Marcos of being a drug addict.

Marcos laughed off Duterte's allegations in comments to reporters before flying to Vietnam for a visit. Marcos said he would not dignify the accusations with an answer, but claimed his predecessor is using fentanyl, a powerful opioid.

In 2016, Duterte said he had



used fentanyl in the past to ease pain caused by injuries from a motorbike accident. His lawyer, Salvador Panelo, said yesterday that Duterte stopped taking fentanyl before he became president in 2016.

"I think it's the fentanyl," Marcos said. "Fentanyl is the strongest pain killer that you can buy. ... After five, six years, it has to affect him, that's why I think this is what has

happened."

Members of the House of Representatives have been talking about amending the constitution, and Duterte claimed without offering any evidence that lawmakers who support Marcos, including House Speaker Martin Romualdez, are bribing local officials to amend the 1987 constitution to remove term limits so they can extend their grip on power.

Romualdez, who is the current president's cousin, has denied that claim, saying he wants the constitution amended only to remove restrictions on foreign investment.

Marcos has said he is open to altering economic provisions of the constitution but opposes changing a provision that restricts foreign ownership of land and other critical industries like the media. Philippine presidents can serve only a single six-year term.

Opponents of opening the constitution to changes include the Senate. It issued a statement last week warning its checks-an-

d-balance role could be undermined if the House of Representatives proceeded with plans to pursue amendments in a joint session rather than by separate voting in the 24-member Senate and the 316-strong House.

The Commission on Elections said yesterday it was indefinitely suspending all activities related to the effort to change the constitution, which requires the signed consent of about 8 million registered voters nationwide. The decision temporarily derailed moves to revise the charter.

The 1987 constitution, which is laden with safeguards to prevent dictatorships, came into force a year after Marcos' strongman father was ousted by an army-backed "people power" uprising amid allegations of plunder and human rights atrocities during his rule.

The speech put credence into months of rumors about a political split with his successor even though Duterte's daughter Sara is Mar-

cos' vice president following their landslide election victory in 2022.

In recent weeks, Duterte's supporters have been angered by reports of an unannounced visit by International Criminal Court investigators last month who are probing widespread killings during an anti-drug crackdown Duterte launched as president. The reported visit has not been confirmed.

Duterte, who became notorious for the harsh crackdown that left thousands of mostly poor suspects dead, claimed in his speech without offering any evidence that Marcos was once on a law enforcement list of suspected drug users.

"You, the military, you know this, we have a president who's a drug addict," Duterte said to cheers from a few thousand supporters in his southern home region of Davao city.

The Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency said yesterday that Marcos was never on such a list, contrary to Duterte's claim. **MDT/AP**

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"DEIGNAN AWARD"
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IN MACAU (2023)



ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR

Israel notes 'significant gaps' after cease-fire talks but says constructive

NAJIB JOBAIN, RAFAH

ISRAEL said "significant gaps" remain after cease-fire talks yesterday [Macau time] with the United States, Qatar and Egypt but called them constructive and said they would continue in the week ahead, a tentative sign of progress on a potential agreement that could see Israel pause military operations against Hamas in exchange for the release of remaining hostages.

The U.S. announced its first military deaths in the region since the war began and blamed Iran-backed militants for the drone strike in Jordan that killed three American service members amid concerns about a wider conflict.

The statement from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office on the cease-fire talks did not say what the "significant gaps" were. There was no immediate statement from the other parties.

The war has killed more than 26,000 Palestinians, according to local health officials, destroyed vast swaths of Gaza and displaced nearly 85% of the territory's people. Israel says its air and ground offensive has killed more than 9,000 militants, without providing evidence. The Oct. 7 Hamas attack in southern Israel killed about 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and militants took about 250 hostages.

With Gaza's 2.3 million people in a deepening humanitarian crisis, the United Nations secretary-general called on the United States and others to resume funding the main agency providing aid to the besieged territory, after Israel accused a dozen employees of taking part in the Hamas attack that ignited the war.

Communications Director Juliette Touma warned that the agency for Palestinian refugees, known as UNRWA, would be forced to stop its support in Gaza by the end of February.

CEASE-FIRE TALKS TO CONTINUE

The intelligence meeting included CIA Director Bill Burns, the head of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency, David



Visitors look at photos of Israeli people who were killed during Hamas militants attack on Oct. 7 and those who died during the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip

Barnea, Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, and Egyptian intelligence chief Abbas Kamel.

Ahead of the meeting, two senior Biden administration officials said U.S. negotiators were making progress on a potential agreement that would play out over two phases, with the remaining women, elderly and wounded hostages to be released in a first 30-day phase. It also would call for Israel to allow more humanitarian aid into Gaza. The officials requested anonymity to discuss the ongoing negotiations.

More than 100 hostages, mainly women and children, were released in November in exchange for a weeklong cease-fire and the release of 240 Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, speaking to troops, said that "these days we are conducting a negotiation process for the release of hostages" but vowed that as long as hostages remain in Gaza, "we will intensify the (military) pressure and continue our efforts — it's already happening now."

At least 17 Palestinians were killed in two Israeli airstrikes that hit apartment buildings in central Gaza, according to an Associated Press journalist who saw the bodies at a local hospital. One hit a building in Zawaida, killing 13 people, and the other an apartment block in the Nuseirat refugee camp, killing four.

On Sunday, 10 Palestinians were killed in a strike that hit a residential building in the Sha-

ti refugee camp in Gaza City, said Dr. Moataz Harara, a physician at Shifa Hospital, where the dead were taken.

Israel's military said troops were engaging in close combat with Hamas in neighborhoods of the southern city of Khan Younis, Gaza's second-largest.

US DEATHS HIGHLIGHT REGIONAL TENSIONS

The three deaths announced by Biden were the first U.S. fatalities in months of strikes against American forces across the Middle East by Iranian-backed militias amid the war in Gaza. U.S. Central Command said 25 service members were injured.

U.S. officials were working to conclusively identify the group responsible for the attack, but assessed that one of several Iranian-backed groups was responsible. Jordanian state television quoted a government spokesperson as contending the attack happened across the border in Syria. U.S. officials insisted it took place in Jordan, which U.S. troops have long used as a basing point.

The U.S. in recent months has struck targets in Iraq, Syria and Yemen to respond to attacks on American forces and to deter Iranian-backed Houthi rebels from continuing to threaten commercial shipping in the Red Sea.

The war in Gaza has sparked concerns about a regional conflict. The United States, Israel's closest ally, has increasingly called for restraint in Gaza and for more humanitarian aid to be allowed into the territory while supporting the offensive.

A GAZA LIFELINE AT RISK OF 'COLLAPSE'

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said "the abhorrent alleged acts" of staff members accused in the Oct. 7 attack "must have consequences," but added the agency should not be penalized by the withholding of funding, and "the dire needs of the desperate populations they serve must be met."

The United States, the agency's largest donor, cut funding over the weekend, followed by eight other countries including Britain and Germany. Together, they provided nearly 60% of UNRWA's budget in 2022.

Guterres said that of the 12 employees accused, nine were immediately terminated, one was confirmed dead and two were still being identified. He said they would be held accountable, including through criminal prosecution.

UNRWA provides basic services for Palestinian families who fled or were driven out of what is now Israel during the 1948 war surrounding the country's creation. The refugees and their descendants are the majority of Gaza's population.

Since the war began, most of the territory's 2.3 million people depend on the agency's programs for "sheer survival," including food and shelter, UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini said.

A quarter of Gaza's population is facing starvation as fighting and Israeli restrictions hinder the delivery of aid, which has been well below the daily average of 500 trucks before the war. **MDT/AP**

this day in history

1965 LAST FAREWELL TO CHURCHILL



Thousands of people have paid their last respects to Britain's greatest wartime leader Sir Winston Churchill who was buried today after a full state funeral.

Silent crowds lined the streets to watch the gun carriage bearing Sir Winston's coffin leave Westminster Hall as Big Ben struck 0945. The procession travelled slowly through central London to St Paul's cathedral for the funeral service.

Sir Winston died six days ago, following a stroke earlier in the month from which he never regained consciousness.

A total of 321,360 people filed past the catafalque during the three days of lying-in-state.

Today, millions around the world watched the funeral procession at home and abroad as television pictures were beamed from 40 BBC cameras placed along the route.

The mourners were led by Sir Winston's wife, Lady Clementine Churchill, his son Randolph and daughters Mary Soames and Lady Sarah Audley. The Queen and other members of the royal family, the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, and representatives of 112 countries packed into the cathedral for the service.

The funeral cortege was accompanied by a 19-gun salute and an RAF fly-past as it began the journey to Sir Winston's final resting place. At Tower Hill, the coffin was piped aboard the launch Havengore for the voyage up the Thames.

From Waterloo, it was placed onto a train drawn by a Battle of Britain locomotive named Winston Churchill. Thousands gathered to pay tribute at wayside stations. At many football matches a two-minute silence was observed.

Sir Winston was finally laid to rest in the Oxfordshire parish churchyard of Bladon, close to Blenheim Palace where he was born 90 years before, with only family members present.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

Sir Winston Churchill was the first statesman to be given a state funeral in the 20th century. Former prime ministers, the Duke of Wellington, Lord Henry Palmerston and William Gladstone, had preceded him in this posthumous honour in the 19th century. Sir Winston left a wife and three children. His eldest daughter, Diana, had committed suicide in 1963 and another daughter died in infancy. His political legacy lives on. His grandson, Nicholas Soames, is a Conservative MP and former armed forces minister. Another grandson, Winston Churchill, served as a Tory MP until 1997 when he lost his seat. A BBC survey in January 2000 voted Sir Winston the greatest British prime minister of the 20th century. BBC viewers and users voted him the greatest Briton in November 2002.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS

ARIES
Mar. 21-Apr. 19
You're in the mood to spend money. Some situations may be blown out of proportion. New hair, new outfit, new you. Be prepared to take advantage of your good fortune.

TAURUS
Apr. 20-May. 20
You need time to think things through. You will be in the doghouse if you are being. You may be overly emotional when dealing with your mate.

GEMINI
May. 21-Jun. 21
Stop telling others about your problems. The knowledge you have will enhance your reputation. Be inquisitive about unfamiliar circumstances.

CANCER
Jun. 22-Jul. 22
You are best not to confront situations that deal with in-laws or relatives. You will be well looked upon due to your compassionate and giving nature.

LEO
Jul. 23-Aug. 22
Think before you act if you wish to avoid friction. Family responsibilities are escalating. Your ability to stand out in a crowd will bring you the recognition you desire.

VIRGO
Aug. 23-Sep. 22
Spend time with youngsters today. Deception in your home is evident. Don't beat around the bush. You need to get out if you want to meet potential partners.

LIBRA
Sep. 23-Oct. 22
You may have a problem keeping secrets. You must follow your desires and dreams. You don't need to pay out in order to have fun.

SCORPIO
Oct. 23-Nov. 21
Opportunities will unfold; however, you must be willing to pay the price. If you haven't planned a vacation, then at least try to get away for the weekend.

SAGITTARIUS
Nov. 22-Dec. 21
Don't let yourself get rundown. Don't spend more than is necessary on travel or friends. Don't let any money slip through your fingers today.

CAPRICORN
Dec. 22-Jan. 19
Catch up on correspondence. You will be overly sensitive today. Be prepared to meet new lovers through colleagues. Take some time to change your house around.

AQUARIUS
Jan. 20-Feb. 18
Insincere gestures of friendliness are likely to occur. Your ability to dazzle others with your unique and innovative ideas will attract attention.

PISCES
Feb. 19-Mar. 20
The only thing you'll accomplish is a bad reputation. Put your energy into self-improvement programs that promise to make you into a better you.

The Born Loser by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

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

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

WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	-4	3	overcast
Changchun	-18	-6	snow
Chengdu	4	9	cloudy
Chongqing	6	12	cloudy
Fuzhou	10	19	rain
Guangzhou	10	19	overcast
Guiyang	2	14	overcast
Haikou	18	26	cloudy
Hangzhou	4	16	rain
Harbin	-27	-16	snow
Hefei	0	14	cloudy
Nanjing	3	14	overcast
Shanghai	6	13	rain
Taipei	15	21	cloudy
Wuhan	2	11	rain
Hong Kong	19	21	cloudy
WORLD			
Moscow	-1	2	cloudy
Frankfurt	1	8	cloudy
Paris	6	12	cloudy
London	4	9	cloudy
New York	-1	3	cloudy

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- WWII battle site; 5- Income source; 10- Players; 14- Take ___ Train; 15- Heat home; 16- Jai ___; 17- 3:00; 18- Wing it; 19- Chow ___; 20- Predecessor; 22- Like marshes; 23- Court fig.; 24- Scull; 25- Squinting eye; 29- Rashly; 33- Barbecue leftovers?; 34- Grape plant; 36- Cordelia's father; 37- Henri's here; 38- Turkish palace; 39- Clean air org.; 40- Wife of a rajah; 42- Ayatollah's land; 43- Satisfies; 45- Art of public speaking; 47- Shut in; 49- Supplement, with "out"; 50- Cartesian conclusion; 51- Lots and lots; 54- Perfume; 60- Wrinkly fruit; 61- Don't match; 62- Christmas; 63- Folk singer Joan; 64- Lure; 65- Bhutan's continent; 66- Periphery; 67- Impudent; 68- Type of phone;

DOWN 1- Pace; 2- Whaler's direction; 3- ___-majesté; 4- Bread-like item made of Quaker product?; 5- Wise guy; 6- Helps; 7- Composer Schifrin; 8- Chieftain, usually in Africa; 9- Bro, e.g.; 10- Pertaining to a judge's chamber; 11- Away from the wind; 12- Stated; 13- Very small; 21- Western Native Americans; 22- Go, team!; 24- That's ___ haven't heard; 25- Africa's most populous city; 26- Academy award; 27- Porcelain tableware; 28- Partner of each; 29- Silly; 30- Tend; 31- Ribbons; 32- Clear the boards; 35- Roth ___; 38- Beget; 41- Put into a list or an inventory; 43- Sign of injury; 44- Annual reference book; 46- Gives the go-ahead; 48- Bedwear; Var.; 51- Bumpkin; 52- Crikey!; 53- Shake ___ (hurry); 54- Type of market; 55- Super Bowl XXXIV champs; 56- Serpents; 57- It smells; 58- Slather plaster on the upper surface of a room; 59- Airline to Tel Aviv; 61- Short change?;

Yesterday's solution

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

USEFUL TELEPHONE NUMBERS

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

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RELIGION

WHO WAS ST. BRIGID AND WHY IS SHE INSPIRING MANY 1,500 YEARS AFTER HER DEATH?

PETER SMITH, MDT/AP

DEVOTEES of St. Brigid celebrated her Sunday with the return of a relic associated with the so-called matron saint of Ireland. The festivities came about a millennium after her remains were removed from the town of Kildare, where she founded a prestigious abbey and inspired a host of colorful, miracle-filled legends.

The celebration in her hometown, southwest of Dublin, is part of Brigid 1500 — a series of observances across the world centered around the saint's feast day of Feb. 1, marking the 1,500th anniversary of her death around the year 524.

In a sense, Brigid is on a roll. The commemorations come a year after Ireland began honoring her with an annual public holiday — the first Irish woman to be recognized with one.

While St. Patrick has long been the saint most identified with Ireland, Brigid has gained a growing following in the 21st century. Devotees draw inspiration from Brigid the saint — and from Brigid the ancient pagan goddess, whose name and attributes she shares — as emblematic of feminine spirituality and empowerment. This comes amid growing disenchantment with the patriarchal and historically dominant Catholic Church.

WHO WAS BRIGID?

First question: which Brigid?

Brigid was the name of a prominent goddess worshipped by ancient pagan Celts — the namesake of the saint who lived in the fifth and sixth centuries.

Brigid the goddess was associated with everything from poetry, healing and metal crafting to nature, fertility and fire. She was honored on the mid-winter holy day of Imbolc, still commemorated on Feb. 1, which also became St. Brigid's Day.

St. Brigid's father is said to have been a ruler, her mother enslaved. Though Brigid's life story has been embellished by legends, she is believed to have been the abbess of a monastic settlement of men and women that became a center of arts and learning and that gave the town its name, Irish for "church of the oak." One legend says that when the local king agreed to give her only enough land for her monastery that could fit under her cloak, she miraculously spread it across the surrounding countryside.

St. Brigid traveled, preached and healed. She's often depicted with images of fire and light and

AP PHOTO



is associated with fertility, care for living things and peacemaking.

According to another legend, Brigid gave her father's jeweled sword to a needy man for him to barter for food.

WHAT RELIC HAS BEEN RETURNED TO KILDARE

Brigid was believed to have been buried at her monastic church in Kildare. Around the ninth century, her remains were moved to the northern town of Downpatrick in hopes of avoiding the pillages of Vikings and others. That shrine was later destroyed by English troops during the Protestant Reformation.

Various churches on the European continent claim to have relics of St. Brigid. This includes a bone fragment from Brigid's skull, which tradition says was brought to a church in Portugal by three Irish knights. A fragment of that relic was returned in the 1930s to Brigidine Sisters elsewhere in Ireland and is stored in a small metal reliquary, shaped like an oak tree, an image associated with Brigid. That's the relic that was returned to Kildare on Sunday.

The relic's new resting place is the Catholic parish church named for St. Brigid, which plans to display it permanently.

WHY DO CATHOLICS VENERATE RELICS?

Catholic canon law says the church "promotes the true and

authentic veneration" of saints because of their pious examples. This can involve veneration of relics — which can include fragments of bodies of saints, as well as their clothing and other items associated with them.

"Veneration must be clearly distinguished from adoration and worship, which are due God alone," says the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

St. Brigid's Day and Imbolc, a pagan holy day associated with the goddess Brigid and heralding the coming of spring, both fall on Feb. 1, although Ireland is observing the public holiday on the following Monday.

Brigid's moment is happening as many Irish are disillusioned with traditional Roman Catholicism and its patriarchal leadership amid a secularizing culture. Even many devout Catholics are dismayed over scandals including the cover-ups of sexual abuse.

Whether devotees honor Brigid primarily as a saint, a goddess or some combination of both, they see Brigid as emblematic of feminine spirituality, environmental care and artistic creation.

Brigid's Day is "an invitation to stop the pointless millennia old war of Christianity versus paganism" and see "the wisdom and beauty in both lineages," wrote Melanie Lynch, founder of Herstory, which campaigned in support of the new national holiday.

HOW IS THE DAY BEING COMMEMORATED?

The most dramatic event occurred Sunday with the return of the relic to Brigid's hometown, with a short procession to St. Brigid's Parish Church from Solas Bhride — a Christian spirituality center led by Brigidine Sisters in Kildare with a mission of welcoming "people of all faiths and of no faith."

The procession was led by three girls riding horses and dressed as the medieval Irish knights who, one tradition says, accompanied the relic to Portugal centuries earlier.

Bishop Denis Nulty of Kildare & Leighlin preached at the Mass that followed, calling on hearers to practice the welcoming values that Brigid championed, particularly at a time when some are protesting migrants being housed in Ireland — including some at institutions named for St. Brigid, he noted.

"It's too simple to install a relic," Nulty said. Brigid "would call us to do much more. She was hospitable. She was a peacemaker. She was a strong woman of the faith."

David Mongey, chair of Into Kildare, the local tourism board, said Brigid remains highly relevant.

"What amazes me is, 1,500 years later, she's still remembered with love in Kildare and Ireland," he said. "Her words, her wisdom and her actions mean more today than they ever did, when you

think about how we treat our land ... how we treat each other and how we treat ourselves."

Several events are being organized this week by Solas Bhride, Irish for "Light of Brigid," including a noontime "Pause for Peace" on Thursday. Thousands of students plan to mark the pause by making a human formation of a large St. Brigid's Cross, shaped by a square with four symmetrical arms.

Others around the world are joining in the pause — a minute's silence at noon local time — said Brigidine Sister Rita Minehan, one of the founders of Solas Bhride.

"We are sending out a message that we actively oppose warfare in our world and the proliferation of arms," she said. "It's rather frightening what's happening in our world. It's sorely in need of peace, and Brigid was renowned as a peacemaker."

The group Herstory, which uses arts and education to promote female role models, plans events around Ireland on the holiday and days afterward. These include lightshows in which artistic depictions of Brigid are projected onto historic landmarks.

Elsewhere worldwide, Irish-heritage groups plan to mark the day with cultural events. Churches plan Masses in honor of the saint, while Wiccan and other pagan groups plan meditations and other ceremonies in honor of the goddess. **MDT/AP**

TENNIS | AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Sinner rallies from two sets down to beat Medvedev and clinch his first Grand Slam title

JOHN PYE, MELBOURNE

JANNIK Sinner lined up a forehand, drilled it down the line and dropped to the court on his back, giving himself some moments to process how he'd managed to come back from two sets down to win his first Grand Slam title.

The 22-year-old Sinner found a way to turn defense into attack in his first major final and take the Australian Open title from Daniil Medvedev 3-6, 3-6, 6-4, 6-4, 6-3 over the weekend.

"I like to dance in the pressure storm," he said of his seemingly serene approach to the most tense moments. "I like it, because that's where most of the time I bring out my best tennis."

It was his third straight win over a top 5 player after his quarterfinal victory over Andrey Rublev and his semifinal upset that ended No. 1-ranked Novak Djokovic's long domination of the tournament. Only Djokovic and Roger Federer have done that previously in a major played on hard courts.

So he's in great company.

Sinner is the first Italian to win the Australian Open and the youngest winner in a men's final here since Djokovic won his first Grand Slam title in 2008.

With Carlos Alcaraz winning Wimbledon last year and Sinner winning the season-opening major, a generation shift is arriving.

"I still have to process it, because ... beating Novak in the semis and then today Daniil in the final, they are tough players to beat," Sinner said. "It's a great moment for me and my team. But in the other way, we also know that we have to improve if we want to have another chance to hold a big trophy again."

Sinner's success has lit



Jannik Sinner of Italy plays a backhand return to Daniil Medvedev of Russia during the men's singles final

a tennis fuse in Italy, where his run to the ATP Finals championship match and leading role in the Davis Cup title win in November captured the country's attention. The night time final in Australia made for pre-lunch viewing in Italy.

For 2021 U.S. Open champion Medvedev, the loss was his fifth in six major finals. The third-seeded Medvedev set a record with his fourth five-set match of the tournament and time on court at a major in the Open era, his 24 hours and 17 minutes surpassing Carlos Alcaraz's 23:40 at the 2022 U.S. Open.

He's also the first in the Open era to lose two Grand Slam finals in five sets after taking a 2-0 lead.

Medvedev lost back-to-back Australian Open finals — to Djokovic in 2021 and to Rafael Nadal after holding a two-set lead the following year.

Sinner only dropped one set through six rounds — in a third-set tiebreaker against 10-time Australian Open champion Djokovic — until he lost two straight to Medvedev.

It wasn't until a break in the sixth game of the fifth set that he really had a full grip on his first Grand

Slam title.

In two of Medvedev's five-set matches — a second-round win over Emil Ruusuvuori that finished at almost 4 in the morning, and a 4-hour, 18-minute semifinal win over No. 6 Alexander Zverev — he had to come back from two sets down. Nobody had done that on the way to an Australian Open final since Pete Sampras in 1995.

Against Sinner, he started like man who wanted to win points quickly.

Standing closer to the baseline to receive serve and going to the net more regularly than usual, he broke in the third game and took the first set in 36 minutes.

He had two more service breaks in the fourth and sixth games of the second set but was broken himself at 5-1 trying to serve it out. He was successful next try.

The third set went with serve until the 10th game, when Medvedev was a point from leveling at 5-5 until three forehand errors gave Sinner the set, and the momentum.

He won the fourth set, again with a service break in the 10th game, recovering immediately to win

three points after mis-hitting a forehand so far out that it shocked the Rod Laver Arena crowd.

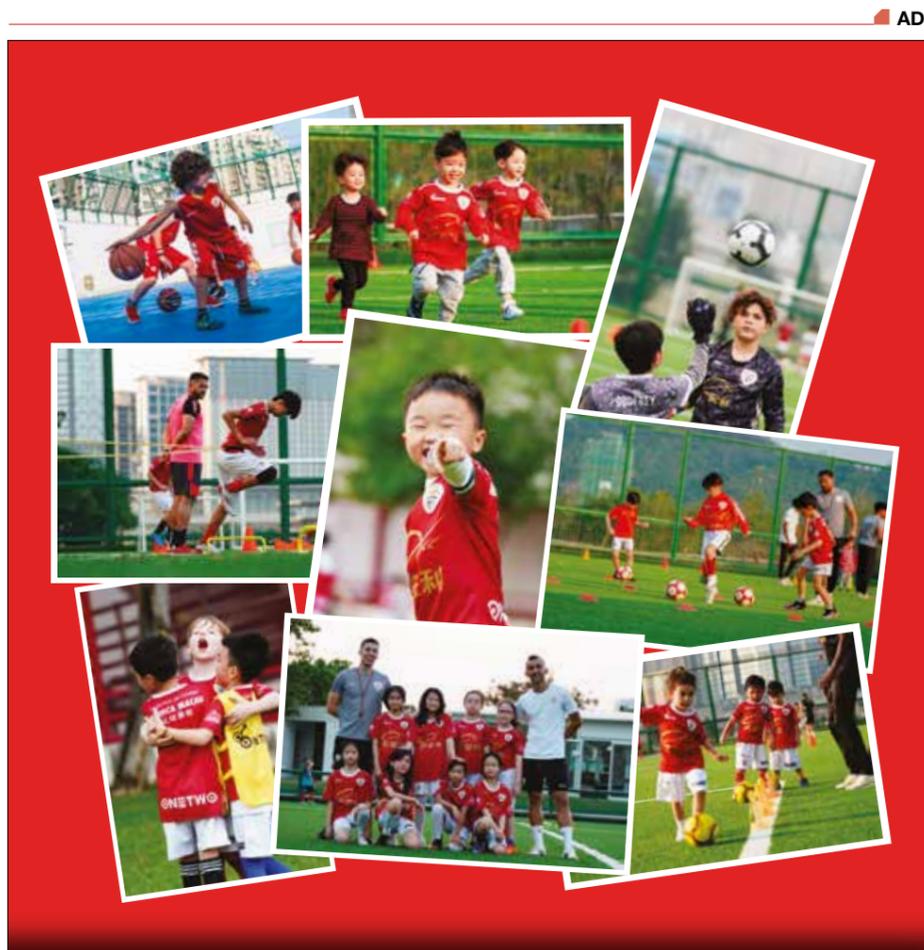
And so the tournament equaled a Grand Slam Open era record set at the 1983 U.S. Open with a 35th match going to five sets.

In the sixth game of the fifth set, Sinner had triple breakpoint against a fatiguing Medvedev. He missed with his first chance but converted with his next, a forehand winner, for a 4-2 lead. From there, he didn't give Medvedev another chance.

Medvedev had faced either Djokovic or Rafael Nadal in all five of his previous major finals. He beat Djokovic to win the 2021 U.S. Open title but lost all the others.

The 27-year-old Russian has been saying through the tournament that he has more stamina than he used to, and is mentally stronger in the tough five-setters. He certainly showed incredible endurance but came up just short — again.

Medvedev won his first six career meetings with Sinner, but has now lost four in a row — including three finals. MDT/AP



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FOOTBALL | BASKETBALL | DAILY TRAININGS

OPINION

China Daily
 Editorial, China Daily

KNEE-JERK REACTION TO TEL AVIV'S UNRWA CHARGES SHOWS SOME COUNTRIES PUTTING CART BEFORE HORSE

Israel's intention in alleging that 12 staff members of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East were involved in Hamas' Oct 7 attacks is open to question.

The head of Israel's Military Intelligence Directorate, Aharon Haliva, met with senior United States officials on Friday, and gave them "specific names and which organizations they are affiliated with, whether Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad or others, and what exactly they did on Oct 7", and showed them that "we had solid intelligence from different sources", Israeli officials familiar with the matter told the media.

The US State Department said it had "temporarily paused additional funding" to the agency in the wake of the allegations. And Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Finland, the Netherlands and Japan soon followed suit. This means the UNRWA, which is in charge of providing subsistence for millions of refugees in Gaza, who are already struggling with hunger, will soon be put out of operation if no new sources of funding are forthcoming in a short time.

It is no secret that Tel Aviv wants to paralyze the agency, if not totally uproot it from the Palestinian enclave. It has viewed the agency as a protective umbrella for anti-Israel forces in Gaza since its founding in the late 1940s, and its disabling has been a key part of Tel Aviv's long-term plan to "neutralize" the Gaza Strip. Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz suggested on Friday that Israel will seek to stop the UNRWA from operating in postwar Gaza.

But despite Israel's allegations, the international community, including the US and its allies, has regarded the UNRWA as an indispensable player in Gaza and beyond over the past more than seven decades, during which it has taken care of about 5.9 million Palestinian refugees that have been displaced from their homes since the war in 1948. The existence of the agency is a testimony to Israel's continuous expansion and the grave impacts it has had on Palestinians.

With about 13,000 employees, the UNRWA represents one of the few channels that still enable humanitarian assistance to trickle into the besieged Gaza Strip. Over the past more than three months, about 152 employees of the agency have died in Israel's "self-defense" offensive. That's why not all the US' allies, including Norway and Ireland, are following its lead and they insist they will continue to give funding to the agency.

That the agency has sacked the suspected members of staff before the UN launches its investigation into the charges conveys the urgency with which the UNRWA is acting in an effort to persuade all funding parties to continue their support. The move should by no means be taken as evidence that the UNRWA admits Tel Aviv's allegations are true.

It is notable that the Israeli allegations against the UNRWA on Friday came almost at the same time the International Court of Justice issued orders that Israel must act immediately to prevent genocide in Gaza. The timing effectively diverted the world's attention from the ICJ's condemnation of Israel's actions in Gaza.

Even if Israel's allegations are substantiated, as long as the agency takes all necessary measures to solve the problem and plug its loopholes, Israel has no reason to deny the legitimacy of it. Shame on those immediately suspending their support for the Palestinian refugees even before Israel's charges are substantiated while talking big about their concern for civilians' lives.

CHINA PROTESTS INTERROGATIONS AND DEPORTATIONS OF ITS STUDENTS AT US ENTRY POINTS

THE BUZZ

The Chinese government has protested to the United States over the treatment of Chinese arriving to study in America, saying some have been interrogated for hours, had their electronic devices checked and in some cases were forcibly deported from the country.

Xie Feng, the Chinese ambassador in Washington, said dozens of Chinese have been denied entry every month for the past few months when returning to school from overseas travel or visiting relatives in China, according to a post on the Chinese Embassy website.

"When they landed at the airport, what awaited them was an eight-hour-long interrogation by officers who prohibited them from

contacting their parents, made groundless accusations against them and even forcibly repatriated them and banned their entry," he said yesterday [Macau time] at an event at the embassy on student exchanges. "This is absolutely unacceptable."

The protest comes as the U.S. and China try to boost student and other exchanges to shore up their relations, which have turned confrontational in recent years over trade, technology, human rights and, more fundamentally, the future direction of the world.

Nearly 290,000 Chinese students are in the U.S., about one-third of the foreign students in the country, according to the embassy post.

AP PHOTO



This image provided by the JAXA shows an image taken by a Lunar Excursion Vehicle 2 of a robotic moon rover called Smart Lander for Investigating Moon, or SLIM, on the moon

RISE AND SHINE

JAPANESE MOON PROBE BACK TO WORK AFTER SUN REACHES ITS SOLAR PANELS

MARI YAMAGUCHI, TOKYO

A Japanese moon explorer is up and running yesterday after several tense days without the sunlight it needs to generate power.

Japan's first lunar mission hit its target in a precision touchdown on Jan. 20, but landed the wrong way up, leaving its solar panels unable to see the sun.

But with the dawn of the lunar day, it appears that the probe has power.

The Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency, or JAXA, said yesterday that it successfully established communication with the probe Sunday night, and the craft has resumed its mission, taking pictures of the Moon's surface and transmitting them to the Earth.

After a last-minute engine failure caused the Smart Lander for Investigating Moon, or SLIM, to make

a rougher-than-planned landing, JAXA used battery power to gather as much data as possible about the touchdown and the probe's surroundings. The craft was then turned off to wait the sun to rise higher in the lunar sky in late January.

With power, SLIM has continued work to analyze the composition of olivine rocks on the lunar surface with its multi-band spectral camera, seeking clues about the Moon's origin and evolution, the agency said. Earlier observations suggest that the moon may have formed when the Earth hit another planet.

A black-and-white photo posted by JAXA on social media showed the rocky lunar surface, including a rock the agency said it had named "Toy Poodle" after seeing it in initial images. The probe is analyzing six rocks, all of which have been given the names of

dog breeds.

SLIM is expected to have enough sun to continue operations for several earth days, possibly until Thursday. JAXA said it's not clear if the craft will work again after another severely cold lunar night.

The SLIM landed about 55 meters (60 yards) away from its target, in between two craters near the Shio-li crater, a region covered in volcanic rock. Previous moon missions have typically aimed for flat areas at least 10 kilometers (6 miles) wide.

SLIM carried two autonomous probes, which were released just before touchdown, recording the landing, surroundings and other lunar data.

The landing made Japan the world's fifth country to reach the moon surface, after the United States, the Soviet Union, China and India. **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



Sri Lanka The Seychelles coast guard yesterday rescued six Sri Lankan fishermen whose vessel was hijacked by Somali pirates two days earlier, an official in Colombo said. The three armed hijackers have been arrested. The fishermen and their boat are now safe and are being taken to the Seychelles, according to Susantha Kahawatta, a top official in the Fisheries Department of Sri Lanka, who said he was told of the men's freeing by the Sri Lankan envoy to the Seychelles.

AP PHOTO



Pakistan and Iran yesterday agreed to work together to improve security cooperation in the wake of deadly airstrikes by Tehran and Islamabad earlier this month that killed at least 11 people, marking a significant escalation in fraught relations between the neighbors. The development came after the top Iranian diplomat, Hossein Amirabdollahian, held talks in Islamabad with his Pakistani counterpart, Jalil Abbas Jilani. The Iranian foreign minister also met with Pakistan's caretaker Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq-Kakar.

AP PHOTO



UN An Israeli document obtained yesterday spelled out allegations against a dozen U.N. employees the country says participated in Hamas' Oct. 7 assault — claiming seven stormed into Israeli territory, including two who participated in kidnappings. The allegations against staffers with the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees prompted Western countries to freeze funds vital for the body, which is a lifeline for desperate Palestinians in Gaza. The U.N. fired nine of the 12 accused workers and condemned "the abhorrent alleged acts" of staff members.