



**GOV'T BUREAUS USE SEVERAL TACTICS TO COMBAT TICKET SCALPING AT EVENTS, PRESIDENT LEONG PEK SAN OF THE CONSUMER COUNCIL TOLD LAWMAKER**

P3

**OFFICIAL STATS: 2023 CASINO CRIME FIGURES HALF OF 2019**

P2

**CHINA SEES TWO 'BOWLS OF POISON' IN BIDEN AND TRUMP: ANALYSIS**

P10



AP PHOTO



**North Korea** fired multiple cruise missiles into waters off its western coast yesterday in its third launch of such weapons this month, South Korea's military said, as the North continues to flaunt its expanding arsenal of weapons designed to overwhelm its rivals' defenses. South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said the South Korean and U.S. militaries were analyzing the launches that were detected around 7 a.m.

AP PHOTO



**Pakistani** court convicted former Prime Minister Imran Khan (pictured) of revealing official secrets yesterday and sentenced him to 10 years — the latest in a slew of legal cases that supporters say are meant to sideline the imprisoned former cricket star just days ahead of parliamentary elections. The Islamist politician, who was ousted in a no-confidence vote in 2022, is not on the ballot because he is already serving a three-year prison term.

AP PHOTO



**Estonia** Lawyers for prominent Russian opposition figure Vladimir Kara-Murza Jr., who is serving a 25-year sentence for treason, said that he has been transferred to another prison in Siberia and placed in solitary confinement again, for at least four months, over an alleged minor infraction. The move comes amid unrelenting pressure on Russian dissidents at home and abroad that has intensified significantly since President Vladimir Putin sent troops into Ukraine almost two years ago.

More on backpage

# DRAGON RIDES



**Taxi fares may hike 10% during CNY**

P3

**TOURISM MGTO LAUNCHES HK-MACAU FREE BUS, FERRY TICKETS**

MDT ARCHIVE



P4

**TRADE BELT AND ROAD EXPORTS SURGE 48%**

P4

### WOMAN IN HER 20S DIES AFTER VEHICLE ACCIDENT

A female motorcycle rider died yesterday after her vehicle collided with a cash-delivery vehicle nearby Rua Cidade de Sintra. Authorities are still investigating the cause of the crash. The deceased, in her 20s, is a Macau resident. She died before reaching hospital. The male driver of the cash-delivery vehicle, also a Macau resident and in his 60s, tested negative for drink driving.

### MACAO ORCHESTRA TO PRESENT BEETHOVEN, BRAHMS AND ELGAR

The Macao Orchestra will present the concert "Beethoven's Emperor by Haochen Zhang" this Saturday at the University of Macau's University Hall (N2). British master conductor Christopher Warren-Green will conduct several classical pieces, and internationally renowned pianist Haochen Zhang will perform Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat Major, Op. 73 "Emperor." Warren-Green, music director of the London Chamber Orchestra and Conductor Laureate of the Charlotte Symphony in North Carolina, who has served as a conductor for many of the British Royal Family's celebrations, will also join forces with the Macao Orchestra to perform works including Brahms' "Academic Festival Overture" (1880) and Elgar's "Enigma Variations" (1899).

### FUJIAN, MACAU TO SHOWCASE CULTURAL PERFORMANCES

To strengthen cultural exchange and cooperation between Macau and Fujian, the governments of the two regions will present "Refreshing Fujian: The Starting Point of the Maritime Silk Road – Showcase of Intangible Cultural Heritage" from Feb. 2 to May 5. The showcase is not only a part of the signature event "Happy Chinese New Year," presented by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Beijing, but also a part of a series of activities called "Let's Celebrate the Lunar New Year of the Dragon," organized by the Cultural Affairs Bureau. The opening ceremony will be at Mount Fortress Garden, during which puppet shows and martial arts performances featuring Fujian characteristics will be staged.



### STATS

## 2023 CASINO CRIME FIGURES HALF OF 2019

ANTHONY LAM

A total of 2,717 investigations related to casino crimes were conducted last year, the Judiciary Police (PJ) announced in a press conference yesterday.

There were 5,428 such cases in 2019. However, both gross gambling revenue (GGR) and tourist arrivals in 2023 were incomparable to those in 2019.

Among the 2,717 cases, six involved investigations requested by third parties, 1,604 involved simple investigations, and 1,107 involved inquisitive investigations.

Elaborating upon the figures, the PJ said the number of casino crimes had dropped significantly.

In addition, the severity of these crimes has mitigated, with occurrences of gambling usury and related confinement having dropped 80.2% and 90.4% when compared with the figures from 2019.

Illegal gambling and money laundering in casinos, among other similar crimes, have significantly decreased.

"The gambling industry is healthily developing in the correct direction," the PJ said.

Illegal currency exchanges still occur in casinos internationally, "presenting a severe threat to the safety of local casinos," the PJ added.

Last year, over 11,000 illegal currency exchange practitioners were intercepted in or near casinos. Of those, 2,048 people were banned from local casinos under the authority of the Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau (DICJ).

### Illegal currency exchanges still occur in casinos internationally, 'presenting a severe threat to the safety of local casinos'

Apart from combating the practice here in Macau, efforts have also been used in communication and cooperation with the mainland police to investigate the origins of these practitioners and disconnect them from their financial streams.

Other efforts to combat illegal

currency exchanges included negotiations and studies conducted alongside local governmental and private entities on the introduction of legal tools. Promotions were also conducted at local immigration checkpoints and other tourism locations.

Online and telecom frauds also rose last year. The PJ attributes the increase to more habitual online activities forged by three years of the pandemic and associated lockdowns.

Last year, there were 407 cases of telephone fraud, a year-on-year increase of 2.6 times. The main method of this fraud was to impersonate government agency personnel. There were 871 cases of internet fraud, a year-on-year increase of 42.8%.

There were 329 cases of credit card abuse cases for online consumption, an increase of 89.1% year-on-year. Phishing sites were responsible for initiating half of these crimes. In addition, there were 133 cases of nude chatting and extortion, an increase of 52.9% year-on-year (though, in 2019, it should be noted that there were only five such cases).

### PUBLIC EDUCATION CAMPAIGNS

Last year, the PJ established the Anti-Fraud Coordination Centre to coordinate and plan against such crimes and malpractices. A lot of resources were invested to promote all-round and in-depth work in three aspects: prevention, recovery and crackdown.

As far as suspected fraud goes, these three aspects are sequential.

For example, public education campaigns attempt to prevent the occurrence of such crimes.

In a case involving a proposed fund transfer to an alleged scammer, financial institutions will try to persuade the account owner to not to execute the transaction. The last aspect focuses on combating future illegal practices of similar natures.

Following these aspects, and through additional mechanisms, the banking industry has managed to stop 531 fraudulent wire transfers with account owners' consent, rescuing MOP130 million.

In the same year, the PJ reported 361 allegedly-fraudulent bank accounts to the local banking industry, so that the industry could take preventive measures against these accounts. The PJ described these preventative measures as "crucially useful" in combating online and telecom scams.

Another mechanism the police established with the local telecom industry blocked 194 phishing sites between July and December last year. External policing cooperation efforts were also used to combat these types of crimes.

### RISE OF INVESTIGATIONS

In 2023, a total of 12,390 investigations were conducted, a 43.9% increase year-on-year and a drop of 20.5% in comparison to 2019. Among them, there were 6,804 criminal investigation and prosecution cases, an increase of 52.2% compared with 2022, and an increase of 7.1% compared with 2019. Throughout 2023, the police transferred 2,516 people to judicial authorities for further action.

Last year, the number of serious crimes remained low. There were four homicides, 45 arson cases, and 33 robberies during the year. There were no serious assault or kidnapping cases.

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TRANSPORT

# Taxi fares may hike 10% during the CNY

LYNZY VALLES

**M**ACAUI may see a taxi fare hike of 10% just before the Chinese New Year (CNY), as the Macau Taxi Driver Mutual Association has long-called for fare surcharges. The hike is due to be implemented ahead of Spring Festival.

Previously, the Macau Taxi Driver Mutual Association lobbied the Transport Bureau (DSAT) for an 18% fare hike, citing rising operating expenses, taxi rental prices and fuel prices.

However, such calls were denied by government, as there was no room for an increase due to Macau's economic downturn suffered during the pandemic.

When the city's economic rebound commenced, the taxi association announced that Macau's taxi drivers would lobby the government for an increase ahead of Chinese New Year. The association has reiterated that it has received opinions and requests from "many colleagues" on the call for an increase.

Tony Kuok of the association said that the surcharge for the Lunar New Year is to compensate drivers who have to work holidays, even if they want to



stay with their families. He argued that taxi fares have not increased in six years. The sector attempted a similar adjustment to fares in 2019; however, the government did not implement the increase due to the pandemic.

Kuok told TDM the industry has recently met with the DSAT.

Responding to the call, DSAT noted that it would study the fare adjustment of 10%, which

it recognizes is lower than the proposed 18% fare hike. The previous hike was deemed too impactful, and public objection had been feared.

Kuok and his association acquiesced, worried that if they did not then the re-application process might take more time.

The current plan still needs to be discussed by the advisory committee.

Of a taxi fare, the first 1,600

meters will increase from the current rate of MOP19 to MOP21; the meter's tick will reduce from every 240 meters to every 220 meters, and the waiting time for passengers to stop will be reduced from 60 seconds to 55 seconds.

In addition, the surcharge applied to fares beginning from the Macau International Airport, Taipa Ferry Terminal, University of Macau, Pac On Immi-

gration Building taxi stands and the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Artificial Island Port has been increased from MOP5 to MOP8.

It is believed that the changes are likely to come into effect on Feb. 12 or 13.

The city has been facing a taxi shortage following the reopening of the border, making it difficult for residents and tourists to hire one, particularly during peak hours.

## Multiple bureaus combating ticket scalping

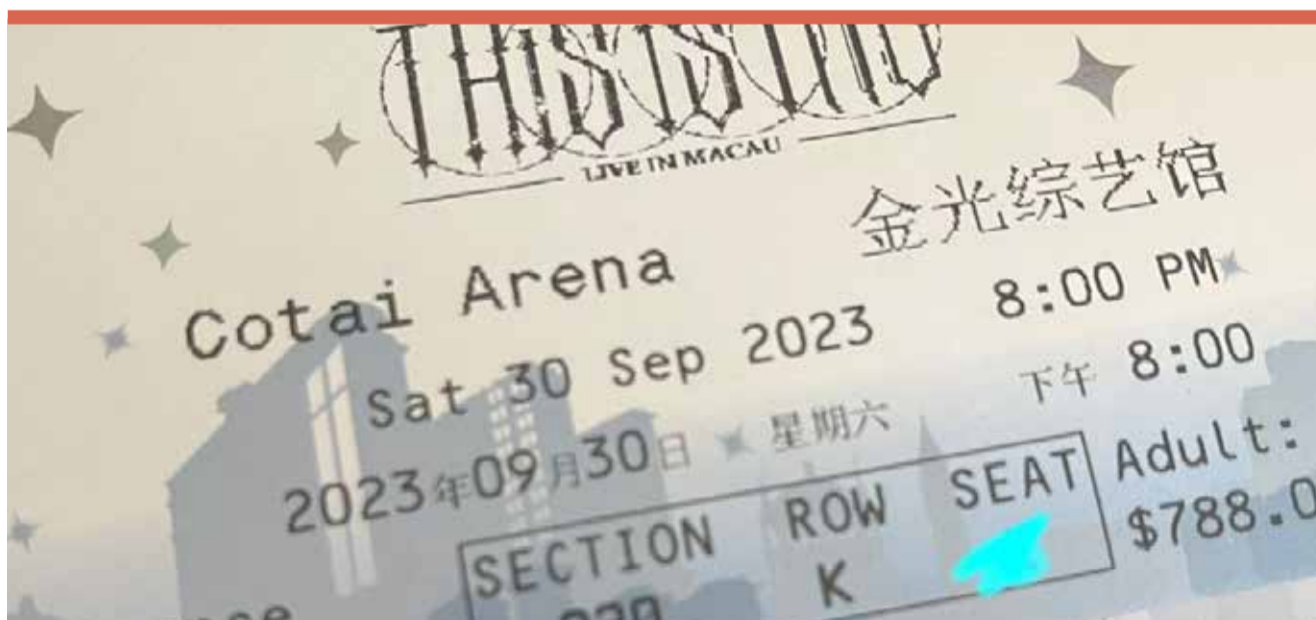
ANTHONY LAM

**G**OVERNMENT bureaus use several tactics to combat ticket scalping at events, President Leong Pek San of the Macao Consumer Council has told lawmaker Lo Choi In.

In response to Lo's written inquiry on the matter, Leong disclosed that although the Council is chiefly responsible for safeguarding consumer rights, other bureaus, such as the police, are included in the joint efforts to combat ticket scalping.

The practice is subject to punishment under laws protecting public hygiene or the economy, as well as other related criminal laws.

In terms of preventive and investigative measures, she said that the Public Security Police Force (PSP) works closely with performance venue owners and providers. As soon as hotel security departments discover any ticket scalping, the police will be notified. Officers also patrol venues on



show dates.

The Judiciary Police (PJ) works with the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) on the matter. Intelligence is also collected to combat computer system malpractices.

The two police departments, as well as the Council, are trying to educate the public about the risks of purchasing second-hand tickets through unofficial channels.

Citing the IC and the Sports Bureau (ID), Leong said electronic and physical tools had been employed to ensure tickets are being used by the original purchasers.

For example, the IC tried last year a ticket sale mechanism of registration, lot-drawing and purchase sequentially. Purchase and entry to events also requires real-name verification. Both

the IC and the ID pledged that existing tactics would be constantly reviewed and improved.

Concerning the in-place protections for the local workforce, the IC said that it had been prioritizing local suppliers when it sourced performers and production services. In addition, the sourced suppliers were also requested to prioritize employing the local workforce.

A mechanism was also established last year to refer proposals to Macau's six resort operators.

The Labour Affairs Bureau (DSAL), on the other hand, has said it has been working with the police to investigate and combat illegal employment and workers.

In another inquiry, the Economic and Technological Development Bureau

(DSED) told lawmaker Ron Lam that it is in negotiations with several bureaus to review the Advertising Law.

Replying to Lam's inquiry, director Tai Kin Ip of the bureau said work is underway with the Legal Affairs Bureau, the Municipal Affairs Bureau, the Health Bureau, the Pharmaceutical Administration Bureau and the Macao Government Tourism Office, among other bureaus, to review the aforementioned law.

Tai added that the Legal Affairs Bureau would provide the necessary legal support to assist other concerned bureaus to draft amendments to areas in the law that concern them.

However, Tai did not respond to Lam's questioning regarding the existence of a future public consultation ahead of the law review.

Citing the Municipal Affairs Bureau, Tai said the bureau has been reviewing applications for advertising signboards or billboards "in compliance with the law." It has also compiled a set of guidelines for concerned groups to follow.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER



**BUSINESS**

# CHINA'S GANSU LURING BUSINESSMEN FROM HK, MACAU

STAFF REPORTER

**P**OPLE from the Hong Kong and Macau regions are increasingly being attracted to Gansu. This is, in part, due to the northwestern province's rich natural and cultural resources, according to political advisers of the province.

Chiu Tung-ping, founding president of the Hong Kong Gansu Association and a member of the Gansu provincial committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, said Gansu has great potential in attracting investment from Hong Kong and Macau because of its improving business environment and abundant cultural and historical resources, China Daily reports.

Meagan Ho Peng-peng, general manager of San Ou Iao Group, a Macau travel company, said Gansu is home to Dunhuang, a cultural asset with a thousand-year history.

"It's more than just a tourist attraction," Ho said.

"Visiting Dunhuang is a journey that involves both landscape and culture, where people can not only revel in natural beauty but also connect with deep-rooted history

and culture."

On the business side, last year, more than 30 groups consisting of more than 200 business people from Hong Kong and Macau conducted inspection and research visits to over 50 counties and districts in Gansu, according to Sun Xuetao, a member of the Standing Committee of the Gansu Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of China, the same report has said.

"Various cities and prefectures have signed 46 cooperation projects and agreements, plus 40 preliminary cooperation intentions, with entrepreneurs from Hong Kong and Macau and the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, involving an investment of 24.3 billion yuan," said Sun to China Daily.

Sun is also director of the united front work department in the province. He added that the number of tourists from Hong Kong and Macau to Gansu is also growing steadily.

"Over the past year, all CPPCC members from Hong Kong and Macau have strengthened their awareness of fulfilling their duties and responsibilities to closely link Gansu's construction to the development of their companies," he said.

**TOURISM**

# MGTO LAUNCHES FREE BUS, FERRY TICKETS TO MACAU VIA HK

STAFF REPORTER

**T**OURISTS can claim free, one-way bus or ferry tickets from Hong Kong to Macau, the Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO) has said in a statement. The scheme is based on a first-come, first-served basis, and is subject to availability.

The free bus discount lasts for seven months, until Aug. 31. Upon arrival at Hong Kong Airport, passengers can take the bus to Macau for free by presenting their boarding pass at the designated site. Passengers with boarding pass stubs, electronic tickets or transportation tickets arriving in Hong Kong within seven days before coming to Macau can use their tickets to secure their free ferry tickets to Macau.

Meanwhile, the MGTO also launched travel offers that encourage international cruise visitors to join group tours to Macau during their stopover in Hong Kong, as cruises



dock at the Hong Kong Cruise Terminal.

The offer is set to expand the range of international visitations, boost tourism to both cities, and tourist spending in Macau, as cited in a statement issued by the MGTO.

During their cruise stopover in Hong Kong, international cruise visitors can join group tours to Macau, to sightsee and shop.

Macau group tour packages are now on sale, on offer from

12 international cruise lines. Before or during their cruise, or upon arrival at the terminal in Hong Kong, passengers can enquire about or purchase Macau tour products on the cruise lines' websites, as well as at tour counters on board their ship, to sign up for group tours to Macau.

The itineraries include visits to the World Heritage Site "The Historic Centre of Macao," Macao Museum, Macau Tower and integrated resorts.

**STATS**

# BELT AND ROAD EXPORTS SURGE 48%

STAFF REPORTER

**T**HE city's external merchandise trade totaled MOP154.78 billion in 2023, up 0.9% from MOP153.33 billion in 2022, according to data from the Statistics and Census Service (DSEC).

The total value of merchandise exports in 2023 dropped 1.3% year-on-year to MOP13.34 billion. Of this, the value of domestic exports (MOP1.55 billion) declined 23.2%, while the value of re-exports (MOP11.79 billion)

grew 2.5%.

The latest figures show the total value of merchandise imports rose 1.2% year-on-year to MOP141.44 billion. The merchandise trade deficit totaled MOP128.11 billion in 2023, up by MOP1.82 billion from MOP126.29 billion in 2022.

Analyzed by destination, merchandise exports to mainland China (MOP975 million), Hong Kong (MOP9.53 billion), the USA (MOP438 million) and the European Union (MOP151 million) decreased by, respec-

tively, 25.5%, 7.5%, 28.1%, and 8.8% year-on-year in 2023. However, exports to the Belt and Road Countries (MOP772 million) increased by 47.8%.

By place of origin, merchandise imports from the Belt and Road Countries (MOP30.92 billion) and Hong Kong (MOP7.19 billion) rose by, respectively, 18.0% and 41.3% year-on-year in 2023, while those from the European Union (MOP44.61 billion) and mainland China (MOP40.51 billion) dipped by, respectively, 2.7% and 4.6%.

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MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

# Wynn Welcomes the Year of the Dragon with Auspicious Festivities

In celebration of auspicious new beginnings for the Year of the Dragon, Wynn Macau and Wynn Palace Cotai are launching a series of vibrant Chinese New Year festivities which showcase Macao's rich and diverse tourism offerings. The Chinese New Year is set to begin on a high note as renowned Hong Kong singer and actor Cheung Chi-lam entertains audiences with his heartwarming "Chilam In The House Music Live" at Wynn

Macao and Wynn Palace. Wynn will also host special Chinese New Year-themed events in the Rua da Felicidade Pedestrian Zone and participate in the Macao SAR Government's "Parade for Celebration for the Year of the Dragon 2024". In grand tradition, Wynn Macau and Wynn Palace will also showcase colorful Chinese dragon and lion dance performances to convey Chinese New Year blessings to visitors from around the world.



Wynn presents a series of vibrant Chinese New Year festivities at Rua da Felicidade

## CNY CELEBRATIONS AT RUA DA FELICIDADE TO BOOST COMMUNITY TOURISM

IN support of the Macao SAR Government's diverse array of events all throughout the Chinese New Year, Wynn is pleased to encourage more visitation to the Rua da Felicidade Pedestrian Zone by presenting an array of festive culinary delicacies, specially concocted beverages and cultural traditions. From February 10 to 18 and February 23 to 25, the Rua da Felicidade Pedestrian Zone will be filled with festive Chinese New Year décor, traditional cultural performances and a lively handicrafts market. Wynn is also crafting specialty cocktails, limited-edition Chinese New Year cookies, and inviting visitors to join in free guided cultural tours

along Rua da Felicidade. The God of Wealth will also be visiting Rua da Felicidade to spread good fortune and share his blessings with everyone from February 10 (the first day of Chinese New Year) to February 14 (the fifth day of Chinese New Year). Through the series of festive activities, delicious delicacies and cocktails, Wynn hopes to give visitors and local residents a deeper insight into the unique character of Macao's historic neighborhoods. While walking through the colorful streets of Rua de Felicidade, visitors will be able to share in the joy and excitement of celebrating Chinese New Year together with locals.

## CHEUNG CHI-LAM PRESENTS – "CHILAM IN THE HOUSE MUSIC LIVE"

On February 12 and on February 14, Hong Kong artist Cheung Chi-lam will perform the "Chilam In The House Music Live" for guests at Wynn Macau and Wynn Palace. Talented and remarkably versatile, Cheung Chi-lam is renowned for his acting career on the big screen and for TV shows, as well as his incredible voice. He quickly rose to fame for his leading roles in many popular television series – The Legend of the Condor Heroes, Return of the Cuckoo, Point of No Return, Triumph in the Skies and more. He is also widely known for his moving vocal performances of "Modern Love Story", "Maple Leaf", "Wish You Well" and many more classics. When Cheung Chi-lam graces the Wynn stage in Macao, audiences will enjoy an intimate live performance – the perfect way to ring in Chinese New Year and celebrate a romantic Valentine's Day.

## A VIBRANT CHINESE NEW YEAR PERFORMANCE

On February 12 and February 17, Wynn will participate in the "Parade for Celebration for the Year of the Dragon 2024" hosted by the Macao Government Tourism Office. This year, the design of the Wynn float features the iconic Wynn SkyCab and a golden dragon to symbolize a dragon taking flight to bring good fortune to everyone at Chinese New Year. Performers from all walks of life will lead a joyful celebration along Rua da Felicidade, extending their best wishes to everyone in Macao for the Year of the Dragon.

In addition, on February 17 and February 18, dragon and lion dances will be held at both Wynn Macau and Wynn Palace to spread good fortune with the lighting of firecrackers. Spectators can follow in the footsteps of the lion dance team as they dance to the

beat of drums and weave their way through all major areas of each resort while "plucking the green" – a symbolic way of spreading blessings of peace, prosperity, and good health. Both resorts will be full of elegant Chinese New Year décor, for a truly festive atmosphere.



Wynn will participate in the "Parade for Celebration for the Year of the Dragon 2024" hosted by MGTO



Wynn celebrates Chinese New Year with dragon and lion dance performances and the lighting of firecrackers

2024/2/12 星期一 8:00 P.M. 永利澳門宴會廳 WYNN MACAU GRAND BALLROOM	2024/2/14 星期三 8:00 P.M. 永利皇宮宴會廳 WYNN PALACE GRAND THEATER
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"Chilam In The House Music Live" at Wynn Macau on Feb 12 and Wynn Palace on Feb 14

TRADE

# CHINA AIMS TO CLINCH MORE FREE TRADE AGREEMENTS, VOWING INCREASED OPENNESS

**C**HINA plans to step up efforts to expand its global network of high-standard free trade areas in 2024, building on significant accomplishments in negotiating free trade agreements (FTAs) over the past year.

Chinese Vice Commerce Minister Wang Shouwen told a recent press conference that China has already inked 22 FTAs with 29 countries or regions, and the combined trade value with those countries and regions accounted for one-third of China's total.

In a move to further share China's opening-up dividends and power regional economic growth, China will enhance efforts regarding FTA negotiations in 2024, according to Wang. "We have a full agenda for FTA negotiations this year," he said.

As negotiations for Version 3.0 of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area are scheduled for this week in the eastern Chinese city of Hangzhou, Wang has vowed to exert efforts to conclude the talks this year.



The building of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area was completed in 2010. According to customs data, trade between China and ASEAN since 2013 has logged an annual growth rate of 8.8 percent. In 2023, ASEAN was China's largest trading partner for the fourth straight year, while China held its position as ASEAN's largest partner for several years.

The two parties announced the official launch of the negotiations to upgrade the free trade area to its third version in November

2022, with the negotiations covering fields such as trade in goods, investment, digital and green economy to build a more inclusive, modern, comprehensive and mutually beneficial China-ASEAN FTA.

Experts believe that the upcoming version of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area would also prompt the upgrade of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

It will be easier for the RCEP to leverage its coordinating and

superimposing effects, following the leading example of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area Version 3.0, said Wang Yiwei, a professor at Renmin University of China.

Apart from ASEAN, China also aims to complete the FTA negotiations with Honduras, and the negotiations involving the FTA upgrade with Peru this year. Advancements will be made in negotiations or upgrades of FTAs with the Gulf Cooperation Council, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, and Switzerland, according to the vice minister.

On a broader scale, Wang Shouwen noted that China will continue its efforts to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA).

In an attempt to align with the CPTPP rules, China has introduced related documents and formulated reform measures to enhance institutional opening-up in Shanghai and other eligible re-

gions. "If the practices yield good outcomes, we will replicate them in other regions of China," Wang Shouwen said.

In the past year, China committed to a negative-list model of services and investment opening-up by signing an FTA with Nicaragua and reaching a protocol to further upgrade the FTA with Singapore.

This marked a historic moment in China's FTA negotiation history, indicating that the country has reached a new level in advancing its FTA network toward high standards, according to Wang Shouwen.

Commenting on the FTA upgrade protocol with Singapore, Yuan Bo, a researcher with the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation under the Ministry of Commerce, said services and investment are where the growth potentials of the two countries' future development reside. "These two fields are the common interests of China and Singapore." XINHUA

AD

Celebrations of the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Establishment of the Macao SAR

2024 Chinese New Year Activities

10/2 11:00 - 13:00  
Gigantic Golden Dragon Parade  
Ruins of St. Paul's → Sai Van Lake Square

10-11/2 10:30 - 18:30  
Performances presented by the dragon and lion dance teams, Mak Mak and performance troupes from Mainland China and Overseas at 16 designated locations across Macao, Taipa and Coloane

Chinese New Year Fireworks Displays

12/2 21:45  
3<sup>rd</sup> day of Lunar New Year  
Seafront of Macau Tower

16/2 21:00  
7<sup>th</sup> day of Lunar New Year

24/2 21:00  
15<sup>th</sup> day of Lunar New Year

Parade Float Exhibition

13-16/2  
Macao Fisherman's Wharf outdoor carpark

Parade for Celebration of the Year of the Dragon 2024

3<sup>rd</sup> day of Lunar New Year  
12/2 20:00 - 21:45  
Route: Sai Van Lake Square, Av. Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, Macao Science Center, Macao Fisherman's Wharf

8<sup>th</sup> day of Lunar New Year  
17/2 20:00 - 21:30  
Route: University of Saint Joseph and Colégio Diocesano de São José, Estrada Marginal da Ilha Verde, Av. do Conselheiro Borja, Estrada do Arco, Estrada da Areia Preta, Av. de Venceslau de Morais, Rua Quatro do Bairro da Areia Preta, Av. da Longvidade, Rua do Mercado de Iao Han, Iao Hon Market Garden

18-25/2  
Top Seac Square

MACAO GOVERNMENT TOURISM OFFICE

HONG KONG

# SAR begins work on its own National Security Law, years after a similar law crushed dissent

KANIS LEUNG & ZEN SOO,  
HONG KONG

**H**ONG Kong began public consultation on a local National Security Law yesterday, more than three years after a similar law has all but wiped out dissent in the semi-autonomous city.

The new law could expand the government's ability to prosecute residents for offenses like collaborating with foreign forces to influence legislation or "publish misleading statements," and to close down civil society organizations. Some of its provisions threaten criminal prosecutions for acts committed anywhere in the world.

Hong Kong's mini-constitution, the Basic Law, calls for the city to enact a national security law, but it's been delayed for decades because of widespread public opposition based on fears it would erode civil liberties. In 2003, an attempt to pass a version of the law sparked street protests that drew half a million people, and the legislation was shelved.

But the city's crackdown on political opposition likely clears the way for the bill to pass easily. Since 2020, many of the



city's leading pro-democracy activists have been arrested, silenced or forced into exile. Dozens of civil society groups have been disbanded, and outspoken media outlets like Apple Daily and Stand News have been shut down.

The draft text will be written later based on input from public consultation, which will begin yesterday and will end Feb. 28. But the city released a 110-page document outlining its plans for the legislation.

City leader John Lee called the legislation a "constitutional responsibility."

"We shouldn't wait any longer," he said during a news conference. "The threats to national security, they are real. We have

experienced all these threats. We have suffered from them badly."

Both the Hong Kong and Beijing governments have hailed the previous National Security Law for restoring stability after the massive pro-democracy protests in 2019.

Lee said a local version is still necessary to keep Hong Kong safe against "potential sabotage" and "undercurrents that try to create troubles," in particular surviving ideas about Hong Kong independence. Lee also said that some foreign agents may still be active in Hong Kong.

He said other countries, including the U.S., U.K. and Singapore, have similar laws to sa-

eguard security and Hong Kong would draw from them.

Critics worry authorities will use a domestic national security law as another tool to crack down on dissidents, further eroding freedoms that were promised before the handover.

The current security law criminalized subversion, advocating secession, and collusion with foreign forces to intervene in the city's affairs as well as terrorism, but did not cover all the offenses authorities wanted to target.

Eric Lai, a research fellow at the Georgetown Center for Asian Law, said that the one-month public consultation was shorter than the three months typical for important laws, saying it appeared to be "window dressing."

Highlights of the package include a ban on "threatening national security by collaborating with external forces to interfere in the affairs of our country or the HKSAR through improper means." The document also suggested that colluding with an "external force" to publish a misleading statement with the intent of endangering national security could be considered an espionage offence.

It also bans inciting public

officials to abandon the Basic Law or their allegiance to Hong Kong and China, expanding an existing law that only covered members of the police and other security forces.

Security chief Chris Tang said the legislation would cover the use of computers and electronic systems to endanger national security, as well as disclosing state secrets and espionage, treason and sedition. The proposal includes an expanded definition of state secrets that covers the "economic and social development of Hong Kong," as well as defense and diplomatic activities.

The leader of the city's largest pro-democracy party called for clarification about how the law will define state secrets. Democratic Party Chairman Lo Kin-hei asked if journalists could be liable when reporting on inside information from the government in the public interest.

The new law could also make it harder for civil society groups to operate in Hong Kong. The city's security chief would gain new powers to shut down such organizations in order to safeguard security.

Following the consultation period, the proposed legislation will be drafted as a bill that will be scrutinized by the Legislative Council. Once the proposed law reaches the legislature, lawmakers are expected to pass the domestic national security law without much opposition in the three readings given a lack of opposition lawmakers following an overhaul of Hong Kong's electoral system.

Lee did not give a timeline for enacting the law, other than that it should be done "as soon as possible." **MDT/AP**

HONG KONG

# 'Expats,' starring Nicole Kidman, was filmed in the city, but you can't watch it there

**N**ICOLE Kidman's latest project is set in Hong Kong, but people who live there are blocked from seeing it, prompting speculation about censorship in a city where civil liberties are shrinking fast.

The first two episodes of "Expats," a six-episode drama about expat women, were released on Amazon Prime on Jan. 26. But when viewers in Hong Kong try to watch it, they instead get a message saying that "this video is currently unavailable to watch in your location."

The city has hardened its controls over political



This image released by Prime Video shows Brian Tee, foreground, and Nicole Kidman in a scene from "The Expats"

speech after 2019 anti-government protests rocked the city.

In 2020, authorities imposed a National Security Law that criminal-

ized political activities, such as protesting for independence. Since then, hundreds of activists have been arrested or driven into exile, while opposition-leaning media have been forced out of business.

The first episode of "Expats" includes a brief scene in which people at a rally chant in Cantonese "I want real general elections." The trailer for the show also features a crowd holding umbrellas, a reference to the 2014 Umbrella Movement, when protesters demanded the right to choose the city's

Chief Executive.

Previously, the Walt Disney Co. removed an episode of the cartoon series The Simpsons from its Disney Plus streaming service in Hong Kong. In both cases, it's not clear whether authorities were involved in the decision to pull the content or companies acted on their own.

In June 2021, the city's government changed the Film Censorship Ordinance to give them the power to remove films which include "portrayal, depiction or treatment of any act or activity which may amount to an offense

endangering national security."

A spokesperson at the Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau said the government was not commenting on the issue, and directed questions to Amazon.

Representatives of Amazon did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Kidman's role in the series prompted controversy in 2021, during the height of the pandemic, when the government gave her permission to skip a mandatory quarantine when she came to Hong Kong to film the series, according to local media outlet HK01.

Yesterday, the Hong Kong government announced plans to enact a local version of the 2020 National Security Law. **MDT/AP**

## BRIEFS

**MACAU, HENGQIN ATTRACT INVESTMENT FROM GBA COMPANIES**

Around 30 companies from the Greater Bay Area expressed their interest in investing in Macau and Hengqin, as reported by the Macau Trade and Investment Promotion Institute (IPIM) last week. This interest was sparked during a promotional event in Guangzhou. The session, aimed at encouraging branch establishment in Macau and Hengqin, witnessed participation from over 150 representatives across various sectors. The organizers provided pre-establishment services and received 28 investment intention letters, mainly in advanced technologies and cultural investment. Business representatives shared their experiences and advantages in the Macau cooperation zone in Hengqin, while over 60 Macau and Guangdong enterprises engaged in commercial contact sessions. The success was also evident in the Canton Fair, where local Macau products were highly sought after.

**BOOMING CROSS-BORDER TRAVELS IN CHINA IN 2023**

China witnessed a remarkable surge in cross-border travels in 2023, with a 266.5% increase in trips through mainland, Hong Kong, and Macau border ports, totaling 424 million. Mainland residents made 206 million trips, while Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan residents accounted for 183 million, showing year-on-year increases of 218.7% and 292.8%, respectively. Foreigners contributed to this boom with a 693.1% increase in trips, totaling 35.48 million. The issuance of Chinese passports soared by 1,625.4%, reaching 18.43 million, while travel passes and permits for Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan rose by 1,318% to 86.09 million. Also, visa issuances to foreigners increased by 158.3% to 1.7 million, reflecting a significant rebound in international travel and exchanges.

**MAINLAND TALENTS ENTER HK UNDER EXIT ENDORSEMENT PROGRAM**

By the end of 2023, nearly 10,000 talents from the GBA entered Hong Kong utilizing the "exit endorsement for talents" program. The Hong Kong Secretary for Security, Tang Ping-keung, reported this significant influx at a Legislative Council meeting. This program, initiated in February 2023, categorizes talents into six sectors, including outstanding, scientific, educational, healthcare, legal, and others. Of these, 347 were classified as 'outstanding' with a five-year endorsement, while 5,872 in scientific, educational, or healthcare sectors, and 3,739 in legal and other sectors, received endorsements for three and one year respectively. Moreover, the 2023 Policy Address enables foreign staff of Hong Kong-registered companies to apply for "northbound" multiple entry visas to the mainland, reflecting an increase in cross-border professional mobility.

## THE AVIATION CLUSTER

# IATA PROJECTS GBA TO REACH 390 MILLION

## ANALYSIS

**T**HE Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) is poised to establish a world-class airport cluster, an ambition underpinned by substantial growth in passenger traffic and a strategic development plan aimed at enhancing air travel and cargo throughput capacities, according to policy documents released by provincial and central governments and an analysis piece put together this week by the People's Daily.

In 2023, the GBA's cumulative passenger traffic reached approximately 180 million, signaling a recovery and setting the stage for future expansion. Key airports in the region, including Hong Kong International Airport, Guangzhou Baiyun International Airport, and Shenzhen Bao'an International Airport, have reported significant passenger trips – rapidly getting closer to pre-pandemic air traffic volumes – illustrating their growing importance as international aviation hubs.

These airports, along with Macau International Airport and Zhuhai Jinwan Inter-



An artistic rendering of the GBA as a bustling aviation hub, capturing its ambition to establish a world-class airport cluster. The connectivity symbolized by the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-

national Airport, form the core of the GBA's ambitious aviation project. The development of the GBA's airport cluster is a multifaceted endeavor.

One innovative initiative is the "Fly-via-Zhuhai-Hong Kong" passenger transfer service, which seamlessly integrates Zhuhai Jinwan International Airport with Hong

Kong International Airport via the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge.

This service simplifies travel by eliminating the need for entry and exit inspections

## Mainland, Hong Kong begin mutual recognition of civil, commercial court rulings

## ON THE AGENDA

**M**AINLAND China and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) have agreed to implement mutual recognition and enforcement of each other's judgments in civil and commercial court cases. This agreement is expected to play a pivotal role in facilitating legal matters within the GBA.

The "Arrangement on Reciprocal Recognition and Enforcement of Judgments in Civil and Commercial Matters by the Courts of the Mainland and of the HKSAR" became effective this week, marking a crucial milestone in GBA's development.

The arrangement, initially formed in 2019 by the Supreme People's Court (SPC) and Hong Kong's Department of Justice, streamlines legal processes and reduces economic costs



for all parties involved.

While judgments from mainland courts will not automatically apply in Hong Kong, and vice versa, this arrangement will simplify cross-border legal disputes. It relieves creditors from initiating litigation in two different jurisdictions and will be instrumental in resolving civil and commer-

cial issues involving GBA elements.

Speaking to mainland media, Vice-President of the SPC, Yang Wanming, stated that this new arrangement, which includes intellectual property cases – usually excluded from international covenants – will lead to mutual recognition and enforcement of judgments

in over 90% of civil and commercial cases between mainland China and Hong Kong. This represents the highest level of mutual recognition and enforcement within a single country.

Si Yanli, deputy head of the Research Office of the SPC, told China Daily the hope that Hong Kong would continue to deepen its integration with mainland China's judicial and legal rules, fostering closer judicial connections within GBA.

Additionally, substantial progress is expected soon, allowing Hong Kong-invested enterprises registered in the entire Greater Bay Area to adopt Hong Kong law and choose Hong Kong's arbitration services, a development actively researched and implemented by the SPC, further strengthening GBA's legal infrastructure. **MDT/CHINA DAILY**



# LION AIR PASSENGERS IN 2030



The scene showcases the key airports, busy runways, dynamic passenger flow, and Macao Bridge

in Hong Kong, expected to serve around 500,000 passenger trips annually. This integration is a clear example of the GBA's commitment to enhancing connectivity and

convenience for travelers.

Logistics play a crucial role in the GBA's airport strategy.

Hong Kong, leveraging its status as an international shi-

pping hub, has established new mechanisms for goods flow with various GBA cities. The Dongguan-Hong Kong International Airport Logistics Park, launched in April last year, served over 300 foreign trade enterprises with an enormous import and export value.

In terms of infrastructure development, the GBA boasts seven transport airports with 11 runways, including three major international hubs and two feeder airports, Foshan Shadi Airport and Huizhou Pingtan Airport.

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) estimates the Greater Bay to reach 387 million passenger trips and 20 million tons of air cargo traveling through the area by 2030.

However, the major airports in the GBA are already operating at or near full capacity. To facilitate more frequent movement of people and goods in the GBA, multiple airports in the area are undergoing expansion and accelerated development. In the coming years, there will be significant progress and breakthroughs as these airports strive to meet the growing demand.

Hong Kong Internatio-

nal Airport's three-runway system, Guangzhou Baiyun International Airport's third-phase expansion, and Shenzhen Bao'an International Airport's runway expansion are pivotal projects in this respect.

The Macau International Airport is not left behind, with the Macau Airport Company initiating last year the Macau International Expansion and Reclamation Project. This project aims to refine the airport's capacity and integrate it further with Hengqin, fostering a "One Journey, Multiple Stops" travel experience.

By 2035, the GBA is expected to have seven transport airports with 17 runways, handling a passenger throughput of 420 million and a cargo throughput of over 20 million tons.

"The future demand for air passenger and cargo transportation in the GBA will only continue to grow. By leveraging their respective strengths and promoting coordinated development, mutual benefits and win-win outcomes can be achieved," Cheung Kwok Law, senior research fellow at the Aviation Policy and Research Center, Chinese University of Hong Kong, told the People's Daily this week.

Indeed, experts alert that the aviation cluster faces the need to meet rapidly increasing demands for travel, cargo, business, and leisure amenities. And it requires achieving superior connectivity and operational efficiency, which are key differentiators of a world-class airport cluster. Additionally, regional coordination is a crucial aspect.

Hong Kong International Airport, recognized as one of the best airports globally, plays a pivotal role in this development.

Its geographical advantage allows passengers to reach major cities in the Asia-Pacific region within five hours of the world's population.

Fred Lam Tin-fuk, CEO of the Airport Authority Hong Kong, emphasizes the vision of transforming Hong Kong International Airport into a crucial international aviation hub.

This vision aligns with the broader goal of strengthening cooperation and connectivity within the GBA, offering improved travel options, and attracting more overseas investors and tourists.

## WORK IN PROGRESS

### NOTES ON ACADEMIC RESEARCH

**"Deciphering the spatial structure of China's megacity region: A new bay area—The Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area in the making"**

E. Hui, Xun Li, Tingting Chen, Wei Lang  
Cities Volume 105, October 2020

In 2015, the China State Council in its 13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development strategically initiated the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, with emphasis on strengthening its role in economic development and its powerful synergy with the all-important The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the country and globally. The Greater Bay Area is a unique mega city region situated at the Pearl River Delta, covering the 11 [9 mainland cities + 2 special administrative regions (Hong Kong and Macau)] cities. However, few studies examined the bay area under a unique institutional and economic context. This study aims to examine regional integration and spatial connection that affect the growth and success of the megacity region using network analysis. Particularly, it analyzed the centrality of human movements, traffic flow and railway network through visualization of the results from Tencent (QQ) Location Big Data, railway service and census data. The study reveals that the vital contributor to the formation and success of the Greater Bay Area is its rapid growth of transport infrastructure and capacities, particularly high-speed railway, promoting free flowing of the key factors. Strong spatial and transport connection critically harness regional integration and boosting viable development of the Greater Bay Area. Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong has shaped a triangle structure. The findings provide planning recommendation and policy implications for city planners and policy makers for regional governance and cooperation in mainland China, Hong Kong and worldwide. **FROM THE ABSTRACT**

**"The second-generation real-time ecological environment prediction system for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area: Model setup, validation, improvements, and online visualization"**

L. Luo, Zhao Meng, Weiwei Ma, Jingwen Huang, Youchang Zheng, Yang Feng, Yineng Li, Yonglin Liu, Yuan-guang Huang, Yuhang Zhu  
Frontiers in Marine Science (2023)

With the rapidly growing population and socio-economic development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area of China, inputs of diverse contaminants have rapidly increased. This poses threats to the water quality of the Pearl River Estuary (PRE) and adjacent seas. To provide valuable information to assist the governors, stakeholders, and decision-makers in tracking changes in environmental conditions, daily nowcasts and two-day forecasts from the ecological prediction system, namely the Coupled Great Bay Ecological Environmental Prediction System (CGEEPS), has been setup. These forecast systems have been built on the Coupled Ocean-Atmosphere-Wave-Sediment Transport modelling system. This comprises an atmospheric Weather Research Forecasting module and an oceanic Regional Ocean Modelling System module. Daily real-time nowcasts and 2-day forecasts of temperature, salinity, NO<sub>2</sub> + NO<sub>3</sub>, chlorophyll, and pH are continuously available. Visualizations of the forecasts are available on a local website (<http://www.gbaycarbontest.xyz:8008/>). This paper describes the setup of the environmental forecasting system, evaluates model hindcast simulations from 2014 to 2018, and investigates downscaling and two-way coupling with the regional atmospheric model. The results shown that though CGEEPS lacks accuracy in predicting the absolute value for biological and biogeochemical environmental variables. It is quite informative to predict the spatio-temporal variability of ecological environmental changes associated with extreme weather events. Our study will benefit of developing real-time marine biogeochemical and ecosystem forecast tool for oceanic regions heavily impact by extreme weathers. **FROM THE ABSTRACT**

## GBA AIR TRAFFIC 2023/2019

Airport	Passengers 2023 (Million)	Passengers 2019 (Million)	% Change
Hong Kong International Airport	39.50	71.50	-44.76
Guangzhou Baiyun International Airport	63.00	73.39	-14.16
Macau International Airport	5.15	9.60	-46.35
Shenzhen Bao'an International Airport	52.73	52.90	-0.32
Zhuhai Jinwan International Airport	11.46	12.28	-6.70

DATA PROVIDED BY THE AIRPORTS

## MAJOR WORLD AIRPORT CLUSTERS

**NEW YORK METROPOLITAN AREA:** This cluster includes airports like John F. Kennedy International Airport, LaGuardia Airport, and Newark Liberty International Airport. Together, they form one of the world's largest airport systems in terms of passenger traffic and serve as a major gateway for international flights. In 2022, JFK alone recorded 55.2 million passengers and handled a total cargo and mail volume of 1.5 million short tons.

**LONDON AIRPORT SYSTEM:** Comprising Heathrow, Gatwick, Stansted, Luton, and London City airports, this cluster serves the London metropolitan area. Heathrow, in particular, is noted for being one of the world's busiest airports in terms of international passenger traffic.

**LOS ANGELES BASIN:** Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), John Wayne Airport, Ontario International Airport, and several others make up this cluster. LAX is the primary airport and is among the busiest in the world,

while the others serve regional or specific airline needs.

**TOKYO AIRPORTS:** Narita International Airport and Haneda Airport are the two main airports serving the Greater Tokyo Area. While Narita serves more international flights, Haneda is one of the busiest airports in Asia for passenger traffic.

**PARIS AIRPORT SYSTEM:** This includes Charles de Gaulle Airport and Orly Airport, among others. Charles de Gaulle Airport is the largest international airport in France and one of the world's principal aviation centers.

**SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA:** This cluster consists of San Francisco International Airport, Oakland International Airport, and San Jose International Airport. While San Francisco International is a major international gateway, the other two airports primarily serve domestic flights and some international destinations.

AP PHOTO



Biden or Trump: China ponders who is 'the lesser of two evils'

ANALYSIS

# BEIJING SEES TWO 'BOWLS OF POISON' IN BIDEN AND TRUMP

DIDI TANG  
& KEN MORITSUGU, BEIJING

AS the U.S. presidential campaign moves closer to a Donald Trump-Joe Biden rematch, China is watching uneasily.

First, there are concerns about the campaign itself, where candidates are likely to talk tough on China. That could threaten the fragile improvements in U.S.-China relations seen in recent months.

Then there's the outcome of the November vote. Neither candidate is particularly appealing to Beijing. While Biden has looked for areas of cooperation with China, Beijing is concerned about his efforts to unite allies in the Indo-Pacific in a coalition against China. It's also nervous about his approach to Taiwan after he has repeatedly said he would have U.S. troops defend it in a conflict with China.

Trump, with his isolationist approach to foreign policy, might be more hesitant to defend Taiwan. But nothing can be ruled out given his unpredictability and his tough rhetoric on China, which he blames for the COVID-19 outbreak that dogged the end of his term. He also could deepen a trade war that hasn't eased since his presidency.

"For China, no matter who won the U.S. presidential election, they would be two 'bowls of poison,'" said Zhao Minghao, a professor of

international relations at Fudan University in Shanghai.

Even with the slight improvement in relations, tensions remain high, particularly over Taiwan. The question of who is in the White House could have enormous consequences not only for U.S.-China relations but for peace in the Asia-Pacific region.

Zhao's views are echoed by a number of analysts in both countries, who suggest Beijing may find Biden the lesser of two evils for his steadiness over Trump's unpredictability but also point out that the Chinese government agonizes over Biden's success in building partnerships to counter China.

"No matter who takes office, it will not change the overall direction of America's strategic competition with China," said Sun Chenghao, a fellow at the Center for International Security and Strategy at Tsinghua University. "China doesn't have any preference for who will win the presidential election because China has experience dealing with either of them for four years."

In China's social media, many commentators appear to be favoring Trump, whom they see not only as a businessman up for a deal but also a disruptive force that undermines American democracy and U.S. global leadership to the benefit of Beijing. Trump's policies and remarks as president earned him the nickna-

me of Chuan Jianguo, or "Trump, the (Chinese) nation builder," an implication that he was helping Beijing.

Trump's recent accusation that Taiwan took the chip-making industry from the U.S. has been seen as a sign that Trump, a businessman at heart, may not be willing to defend the self-governed island that is Chinese territory.

Sun Yun, director of the China program at the Washington-based Stimson Center, cautioned against nationalistic sentiments in China that could be at odds with government officials and elites. "With Trump, there is no floor to U.S.-China relations, and Trump poses great risks and uncertainties, including the possibility of a military conflict," Sun said, adding China in 2020 was convinced that Trump could attack Taiwan to win reelection.

"There might be some benefit associated with Trump's potential to damage alliances and partnerships, shaking the world's confidence in America's leadership, but the benefit for China will not be able to offset the even more significant damage he would impose on the relationship with China," she said.

Trump started off on the wrong foot with China when he took a congratulatory call on his 2016 election victory from the president of Taiwan, angering the government in Beijing, which opposes any official contact between

Taiwan and foreign governments.

Relations appeared to get back on track in 2017, when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Trump at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida in April and, six months later, hosted the U.S. president in Beijing with a dinner at the Forbidden City.

But in 2018, Trump started a trade war by imposing tariffs on Chinese imports. China retaliated with tariffs on U.S. goods, and the tariffs on both sides remain to this day.

The COVID-19 outbreak in China in 2020 pushed Trump's relationship with the country to the point of no return. As the virus spread to the United States, he tried to deflect criticism of his handling of the pandemic by blaming China, drawing strong rebukes from Beijing.

When Biden and Trump squared off in 2020, U.S. intelligence agencies reported before the election that China viewed Trump as "unpredictable" and opposed his reelection. A subsequent assessment issued months after the election said that China ultimately had not interfered on either side and "considered but did not deploy" influence operations intended to affect the outcome.

Experts say the Chinese also are unlikely to interfere with the U.S. presidential election this year. If Beijing is to interfere, it is more likely to try to discredit U.S. democracy, amplify partisan dis-

cord, and undermine faith in the election process, they say.

Once elected, Biden kept his predecessor's China policy. Not only did he keep the tariffs but Biden also limited access by Chinese companies to advanced technologies, sanctioned Chinese officials over human rights violations and expanded restrictions on China-bound U.S. monies.

Then in early 2023, tensions spiked again when the U.S. shot down a Chinese spy balloon. It took months of diplomacy to set up a meeting between Biden and Xi that resulted in some modest agreements and a vow to stabilize relations.

Miles Yu, director of the China center at the Hudson Institute, said the U.S. has come to a bipartisan agreement on China, with the two parties sharing "pretty much the same China policy." In response, China's ruling Communist Party has a new U.S. policy, he said.

"It doesn't matter if it's a black cat or a white cat, as long as it's an American cat, it's a bad cat," Yu said, borrowing from the famous saying by China's reformist politician Deng Xiaoping that encouraged market reforms regardless of ideology.

But several experts expressed a guarded preference for Biden because of his steadiness, which they say Beijing may appreciate in managing the already-fraught relations.

"Trump is by nature volatile and cruel and is a person hard to be familiar with," said Shi Yinhong, international relations professor at Renmin University of China. While Beijing can expect its relationship with Washington to stay the course if Biden is reelected, it may not wish to deal with Trump's hysteria toward China and possibly drastic changes if he returns to the White House, Shi said.

Wang Yiwei, director of the Institute of International Affairs at Renmin University of China, said Beijing is more worried about Trump's hostility toward globalization than Biden's worldwide efforts to build alliances. "We don't expect any one of them would be better for China, but the key (for China) is to continue its opening and reforms, and high-quality development," Wang said.

But Shi Sushi, a veteran commentator in Beijing, said it is easier for China to handle Trump, who just wants to cut a deal, than Biden, who has a values-based approach to governing.

"Biden's toughness is something few Chinese understand," Shi said. "He is an establishment politician. He is a defender of American values. He is engaged in 'friends-circle diplomacy' to form a circle of friends that integrates the power of the West to (counter) China. From this point of view, I can bluntly say that Biden is more difficult to deal with." MDT/AP

JAPAN

# Kishida says he's determined to break ruling party from its practice of money politics

MARI YAMAGUCHI, TOKYO

JAPAN'S Prime Minister Fumio Kishida stressed yesterday he was determined to make a clear break from money politics as he renewed an apology for the latest major corruption scandal in the governing party, which has eclipsed his key policies such as strengthening the military and Japan's alliance with the United States.

His policy speech had been due last week when the new parliamentary session opened, but Kishida broke with tradition and instead faced an intensive session on the scandal first.

Kishida said he must admit that factions in the Liberal Democratic Party seemed to work for money and favors rather than policy, and he promised to lead reforms. "I humbly regret, and made a determination to have policy groups make a complete break from money and personnel affairs," he said.

Kishida gave no further explanation about the scandal or how the money was spent. Opposition lawmakers have pressed for him to disclose details.

Kishida said he needed to re-



Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, on platform, delivers his policy speech at parliament in Tokyo, yesterday

gain public trust, citing challenges including a deadly earthquake on New Year's Day and the economy.

Kishida pledged to "further expand and deepen" the Japan-U.S. relations, which he called the lynchpin of Japan's diplomatic policy, including by meeting President Joe Biden on a state visit to Washington in April. He said Japan needs to further strengthen Japan-U.S. alliance to reinforce

Japanese security and to play a greater role in regional peace and stability.

Under the national security strategy adopted in December 2022, Kishida announced plans to double defense spending in five years for drastic military buildup that include strike capability amid growing threat from China and North Korea. He did not clarify in his speech yesterday how his government plans to secure

the funding.

Public support ratings for Kishida's administration have dropped to around 20%, and while his leadership tenure may be shortened, the LDP is most likely stay in power because the largely fractured opposition parties are not seen as a viable alternative.

The LDP has governed postwar Japan almost without interruption and has repeatedly had corruption scandals followed by

promises for cleaner politics.

The latest scandal centers on political funds raised through party event tickets bought by individuals, companies and organizations. Dozens of LDP lawmakers, most of them belonging to a faction previously led by assassinated former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, were accused of systematically not reporting funds in violation of the Political Funds Control Law. The money was alleged to have gone into unmonitored slush funds.

Prosecutors recently indicted 10 people, including three lawmakers, though cases were dropped against political heavyweights.

Kishida on Monday admitted at least 37 lawmakers are now correcting the accounting of their political funds.

Governing lawmakers say proceeds from fundraising events provide key income to help cover election costs and other political activities, and deny they hid or pocketed unreported income. Experts say the Political Funds Control Law has many loopholes.

Kishida has announced the dissolving of his faction following the scandal and he has established an internal task force to make reforms, but half of its members are linked to the scandal, raising questions about how much it can achieve.

Critics say the real problem is not the factions but the behind-the-scenes dealings often based on lawmakers' connections with voters in their electoral districts.

Kishida doesn't have to call a parliamentary election until 2025, but his party has set a leadership vote for September. **MDT/AP**

SOUTH CHINA SEA

# Philippines, Vietnam agree to cooperate on disputed waters as Marcos visits Hanoi

THE Philippines and Vietnam signed an agreement yesterday on preventing and managing incidents in the disputed South China Sea during Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr.'s visit to Hanoi.

Several countries, including the Philippines and Vietnam, are locked in maritime disputes with China over its claims of sovereignty over virtually the entire South China Sea, one of the world's most crucial waterways for shipping, and high-seas faceoffs between Chinese and Philippine ships have intensified over the past year in the contested waters, fueling fears of a



Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. (right) and Vietnamese President Vo Van Thuong inspect honor guards during a welcome ceremony in Hanoi, yesterday

wider conflict.

The Philippines and Vietnam agreed to increase coordination on maritime issues and work to promote trust and confidence, the

Philippine government said in a statement.

They didn't release details about what actions they would take under the agreement.

"Vietnam remains the sole strategic partner of the Philippines in the ASEAN region," Marcos said during a meeting with his Vietnamese counterpart, Vo Van

Thuong, referring to the regional grouping of Southeast Asian nations.

He added that while maritime cooperation was the "foundation" for this partnership, relations between the two nations had expanded.

The two countries also signed a deal yesterday for Vietnam to supply the Philippines with 1.5 million to 2 million metric tons of rice each year at affordable prices.

Vietnamese rice accounts for 85% of imported rice in the Philippines and the two countries agreed to create a framework for ensuring stable supplies. A rice shortage last year, ex-

acerbated by climate change and some major producers halting exports, resulted in prices soaring globally including in the Philippines.

Marcos, who arrived in Hanoi on Monday, also met with Pham Nhat Vuong, Vietnam's richest man and the chairman of the sprawling conglomerate VinGroup, which runs the electric vehicle company VinFast.

VinFast said after the meeting it would open an EV business network in the Philippines and that the investment would start later this year.

VinFast's plans to expand in the Philippines are part of its goal of selling EVs in 50 markets worldwide. It is exporting EVs to the U.S. and also building a \$4 billion EV factory in North Carolina, where production is slated to begin this year. It has also said it will build factories in Indonesia and India. **MDT/AP**

NORTHERN IRELAND

# Unionist party agrees to end two-year boycott that caused the gov't to collapse

JILL LAWLESS, LONDON

**N**ORTHERN Ireland's largest British unionist party has agreed to end a boycott that left the region's people without a power-sharing administration for two years and rattled the foundations of the 25-year-old peace. The breakthrough could see the shuttered Belfast government restored within days.

After a marathon late-night meeting, Democratic Unionist Party leader Jeffrey Donaldson said yesterday that the party's executive had backed proposals to return to the government. He said agreements reached with the U.K. government in London "provide a basis for our party to nominate members to the Northern Ireland Executive, thus seeing the restoration of the locally elected institutions."

The breakthrough came after the U.K. government last week gave Northern Ireland politicians until Feb. 8 to restore the Northern Ireland Assembly and executive or face new elections.

"All the conditions are in place for the Assembly to return," Northern Ireland Secretary Chris Heaton-Harris said. "The parties entitled to form an executive are meeting today to discuss these matters, and I hope to be able to finalize this deal with the political parties as soon as possible."

The DUP walked out in February 2022 in a dispute over post-Brexit trade rules. Ever since, it has refused to return to the government with the Irish nationalist party Sinn Fein. Under power-sharing rules established as part of Northern Ireland's peace process, the administration must include both British unionists and Irish nationalists.

The walkout left Northern Ireland's 1.9 million people without a functioning administration to make key decisions as the cost of living soared and backlogs strained the creaking public health system. Amid mounting pu-



Democratic Unionist Party leader Jeffrey Donaldson

blic frustration, teachers, nurses and other public sector workers staged a 24-hour strike this month calling on politicians to return to the government and give them a long-delayed pay raise.

The British government has agreed to give Northern Ireland more than 3 billion pounds (\$3.8 billion) for its public services, but only if the executive in Belfast gets back up and running.

The political impasse in Northern Ireland stems from the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union and its borderless trading bloc after decades of membership. The DUP quit the government in opposition to new trade rules put in place after the U.K. left the EU in 2020 that imposed customs checks and other hurdles on goods moving to Northern Ireland from the rest of the U.K.

The checks were imposed to maintain an open border between the north and its EU neighbor, the Republic of Ireland, a key pillar of the peace process that ended decades of violence in Northern Ireland. The DUP, though, says the new east-west customs border undermines Northern Ireland's place in the U.K.

In February 2023, the

U.K. and the EU agreed on a deal to ease customs checks and other hurdles for goods moving to Northern Ireland from the rest of the U.K. But it was not enough for the DUP, which continued its government boycott.

Donaldson said further measures agreed by the British government will "remove checks for goods moving within the U.K. and remaining in Northern Ireland and will end Northern Ireland automatically following future EU laws."

The DUP's decision faces opposition from some hard-line unionists, who fiercely guard Northern Ireland's place in the U.K. and say even light-touch post-Brexit checks create a de facto internal trade barrier. Dozens of protesters gathered outside the DUP meeting venue outside Belfast late Monday, waving placards saying, "Stop DUP sellout."

Details of the supposedly private five-hour meeting were live-tweeted by Jamie Bryson, editor of the Unionist Voice newsletter, who is opposed to Donaldson's attempts at compromise.

Donaldson said last week that he had received threats over his attempts to negotiate a return to the government.

"I think my party has displayed far more courage than those who threaten or try to bully or try to misrepresent us," he said yesterday. "We are determined to take our place in taking Northern Ireland forward."

The situation has been complicated by Northern Ireland's changing political landscape. Unionists were the largest force in the Northern Ireland Assembly from its establishment in 1998 until 2022, when Sinn Fein won the most seats in an election.

That gives the nationalist party, which seeks to take Northern Ireland out of the U.K. and unite it with the republic, the right to hold the post of first minister. The DUP would fill the post of deputy — a bitter pill for some unionists to swallow.

Sinn Fein President Mary Lou McDonald said she was optimistic the Belfast government could return before the Feb. 8 deadline.

"It is vital there is political stability to address the scale of the crisis across our public services," she said. "Let's now focus minds on the job at hand and to the solutions required to support workers and families who want and deserve functioning government." MDT/AP

## this day in history

### 1983 BRITISH DRIVERS ORDERED TO BELT UP



Drivers and front seat passengers must wear seatbelts under a new law which came into force at midnight.

The Department of Transport says 30,000 people a year are killed or seriously injured in road accidents. It hopes the compulsory wearing of front seatbelts will save 1,000 lives a year.

Evidence suggests six out of 10 drivers currently ignore advice to belt up in the front.

Police are being urged to take a softly softly approach to start with - but drivers could eventually be fined £50 for not wearing their seatbelts.

The row over making front seatbelts compulsory has been going on for 15 years and there have been 11 previous attempts to make it law.

Critics have accused the government of operating a nanny state and some drivers have complained their personal freedom is being infringed and they find seatbelts uncomfortable.

The government has been urging drivers to check the position of their seatbelts and make the necessary adjustments before today's law came into effect.

Junior Transport Minister Linda Chalker said: "Nobody likes being told to do something when they haven't seen for themselves the sense of it."

"You can remain in control of a vehicle when you don't get knocked out. If you are held in your seat by a belt you have more chance of stopping your vehicle careering into another vehicle containing other people."

She dismissed claims some people would suffer worse injuries through belting up, saying the evidence suggested only a tiny proportion of front seat passengers would suffer worse injuries if they were restrained by seat belts.

There will be some exceptions to the new law. Taxi drivers will be exempt because of the possible threat to their safety from dangerous passengers. Drivers of electric delivery vehicles such as milk floats will also be exempt.

Courtesy BBC News

## IN CONTEXT

Figures showed 90% of front-seat passengers began routinely wearing seat belts after it became compulsory.

In 1991 it became compulsory for adults to belt up in the back seat. Figures showed an increase from 10% to 40% of backseat passengers wearing seatbelts

Research in 1998 showed 160 lives could be saved a year through belting up in the back - this included 40 drivers or front-seat passengers killed by an unbelted passenger in the back.

A high-profile advertising campaign, launched in July 1998, showed a mother being killed in a car when she was hit from behind by her unbelted child.

Figures for October 2000 showed the wearing of rear seatbelts had increased to 59% of adults and 91% of children.



AP PHOTO



Customers play with micro pigs at a mipig cafe in Tokyo

## HOSPITALITY

# AT TRENDY JAPANESE CAFÉS, CUSTOMERS ENJOY CUDDLING WITH PIGS

YURI KAGEYAMA, TOKYO

**F**IRST there were cafés that allowed pets. Then came cat cafés, where lattes took second place to feline interaction. The latest craze in Japan: The pig café.

"It was wonderful. Very relaxing and enjoyable," said Brad Loomis, a software engineer from Pullman, Washington, after visiting Tokyo's Mipig Café with his 21-year-old daughter, Paige.

They were among dozens of customers on a recent morning, taking selfies and breaking into huge smiles. The pigs, a miniature breed, trotted about the room, looking for a cozy lap to cuddle up.

The pigs are surprisingly quiet, although they do snort now and then. They don't like to be alone, making for great companionship. Unlike the stereotype, they're very clean and don't smell.

Customers pay 2,200 yen (\$15) for the first 30 minutes in the company of the pigs. A reservation is required.

"Each pig is unique. Each one has his or her own personality. You may notice one may be strong-headed, and another may be gentle," said Shiho Kitagawa, an executive at Mipig who refers to the pigs as "buta-san," using an honorific.

The Mipig Café in fashionable Harajuku is among 10 such pig cafes the operator has opened around Japan. The first one opened in

Tokyo in 2019. Two more are in the works for later this year.

The animals, known as "micro pigs," don't get bigger than a corgi dog, even as adults. The cafés also feature adorable baby pigs the size of toy poodles.

Pig lovers say they make great pets. They can be purchased for about 200,000 yen (\$1,350) from Mipig, have already been toilet-trained and are used to being with people. Micro pig food is also for sale. Mipig says it has sold 1,300 pigs as pets.

A drink dispensing machine is in the corner of the café, but hardly anyone was bothering to get a drink, being too occupied with the pigs.

Foreign tourists visiting the café said they found out about it on Instagram and other social media. The café does not invest in advertising. They made sure to include a visit during their trip to Japan, along with the usual tourist spots like the ancient capital of Kyoto, they said.

Australian Ben Russell smiled when a pig finally climbed into his lap. Although this was his first encounter with a real pig, they have always been his favorite animal, he said, although he wasn't sure exactly why.

Sophie Mo'unga from New Zealand, in Japan with her husband and two children, was a big hit with the pigs, with several of them fighting over her lap.

"They were cute. I think they

were all keeping each other warm," she said.

The pig café is the latest in a series of animal coffee shops that have popped up in Japan, including ones that feature owls, hedgehogs, birds and even snakes.

Some people have raised ethical questions about whether the animals enjoy the experience as much as the humans.

"It must be stressful to be touched and fondled by a bunch of strangers," said Sachiko Azuma, head of Tokyo-based PEACE, which stands for Put an End to Animal Cruelty and Exploitation.

"The animals have become

tools for a money-making business," she said.

Her group mainly opposes animal experiments and "petting zoos." Cafés tend to be tiny and don't provide enough of a natural environment for cats or small pigs, and those that entrap wildlife are abhorrent, Azuma said. She approves of cafés run by shelters trying to find owners for abandoned pets.

Dr. Bruce Kornreich, professor of clinical sciences at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine in Ithaca, N.Y., said interacting with animals can lower one's blood pressure and reduce

headaches and the risk of cardiovascular disease. It also enhances a sense of well-being and helps people cope with stress, he said.

"How they do these things, I'm not sure we know the answer," said Kornreich, who is also part of the Cornell Feline Health Center, which advocates the study and well-being of cats.

"There is mounting evidence that associating with and owning pets can provide mental health and physical health benefits for people," he said in a Zoom interview.

Even with dogs, it's not clear if it's walking the dog that helps the owner's health or being in the presence of a friendly animal.

Whatever it is, with dogs or pigs, people are soothed and happy.

"Very cute and very sleepy," Paige Loomis said of the pigs. "They made me sleepy." **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



**RUGBY**

# Rugby Australia to help run debt-affected Melbourne Rebels for Super Pacific season

**R**UGBY Australia said yesterday it is working with the debt-affected Melbourne Rebels to ensure they field a team in this year's Super Rugby Pacific competition.

The Rebels formally entered voluntary administration on Monday night, with the season set to get underway in less than a month. The national governing body said it remains committed to rugby in Victoria state.

In a statement, Rugby Australia said it will focus on a "viable professional rugby footprint in Melbourne that can be sustainable and commercially successful in the future."

Rugby Australia chief executive Phil Waugh said his head office will work with the appointed administrator to ensure Melbourne teams play in this year's men's and women's Super com-



petitions.

"RA is committed to ensuring the Melbourne Rebels play in the 2024 Super Rugby competitions, and we will support their preparation for the new season," Waugh said in the statement. "We are determined to ensure that RA is making responsible decisions for a sustainable and

successful future — we will work with the Rebels and the relevant stakeholders to that end."

Super Rugby Pacific's Super Round, set to take place on March 1-3 at Melbourne's AAMI Park, will not be impacted by the Rebels' struggles. Waugh said the Victorian government would be involved in talks over the

future of the club, which is believed to be 9 million Australian dollars (\$5.9 million) in debt.

The state government previously bailed out the Rebels in 2017, reaching an agreement with Rugby Australia that involved hosting rights for the Bledisloe Cup and British and Irish Lions test matches in Melbourne.

Rebels coach Kevin Foote, who was an assistant at the Perth-based Western Force when they were cut from the league, said the current situation would help bring the team together.

"The first thing we spoke about was controlling what we can control," Foote said after a meeting with the players. "If anything this is made the players very determined — I lived through this in Perth and I can tell you this will galvanize the team." **MDT/AP**

**FOOTBALL**

# MAN U'S RASHFORD TAKEN RESPONSIBILITY FOR HIS ACTIONS

**M**ANCHESTER United said Marcus Rashford had "taken responsibility for his actions" after he was reportedly seen in a Belfast night spot last week and later reported himself ill.

The club confirmed yesterday [Macau time] it dealt with a "disciplinary matter" regarding the England striker.

Rashford was left out of his team's 4-2 win against Newport in the FA Cup on Sunday, with United saying he was too ill to take part.

Afterward, manager Erik ten Hag said he would deal with the forward following his reported activities in the week leading up to the match.

"Marcus has taken responsibility for his actions. This has been dealt with as an internal disciplinary matter, which is now closed," United said. It did not say if he had been fined.

Rashford will be available for selection when United plays Wolves in the English Premier League on Thursday. **MDT/AP**

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**2024 – 2043 The Fire Feng Shui Era: Challenges & Opportunities**

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**OPINION**

**China Daily**  
 Editorial, China Daily

**FUSS ABOUT POLICING  
 DEAL MUCH ADO  
 ABOUT NOTHING**

Pat Conroy, Australia's minister for defense industry and minister for international development and the Pacific, pledged A\$35 million (\$23.13 million) in policing assistance to neighboring East Timor on Monday during an official visit. The promise of funding comes amid rising concerns in Canberra and Washington that Beijing is seeking to increase its influence in the region through police and security cooperation with Pacific island countries.

It is unnecessary for Washington and Canberra to feel nervous about China's cooperation with Pacific island countries. China seeks to develop cooperative relations in all fields with any country it has diplomatic relations with, and its cooperation does not target any third country.

Yet China being in early talks with Papua New Guinea on a potential security and policing deal, following an earlier one with the Solomon Islands, seems to have set the proverbial cat among pigeons, with Washington and Canberra already displaying unease at Beijing's cooperative outreach in the Pacific.

China reportedly approached Papua New Guinea in September with an offer to assist its police force with training, equipment and surveillance technology, with talks continuing last week.

"We deal with China only on the economic and trade level at this point. They are one of our biggest trading partners. But they have offered to assist our policing and security on the internal security side," Papua New Guinea's Foreign Minister Justin Tkachenko said. Talks are still in the early stage he said, with Papua New Guinea assessing if the Chinese offer duplicates security and policing assistance already being offered by Australia and the United States. Tkachenko said Papua New Guinea would not do anything to jeopardize its defense and security relationships with Australia or the US.

There can be no denying the quality and effectiveness of China's public security apparatus. It is natural for some countries to seek to learn from China's ways to maintain public security. It is also natural for China to offer to share its expertise in police training and its experience in ways to maintain sound public security with other countries.

As a spokesman for China's Foreign Ministry said at a regular news briefing in Beijing on Monday, Papua New Guinea is a good friend and partner of China, and both sides have cooperated in various fields, including police cooperation, for a long time.

China is not concerned about how Washington and Canberra view its cooperation with Pacific island countries, as no matter what they may claim to the contrary, such cooperation is on an equal and fair basis and does not infringe on the interests of either the US or Australia.

China will continue to work with Papua New Guinea and other Pacific island countries to promote cooperation in related fields and advance common development.

**GLOBAL ANTI-CORRUPTION EFFORTS ARE FALTERING,  
 PARTLY DUE TO A 'DECLINE' IN JUSTICE: SURVEY**

**THE  
 BUZZ**

Efforts to fight public sector corruption are faltering around the world, in part because a "global decline in justice and the rule of law since 2016," according to a corruption index released yesterday.

Transparency International, which compiles the annual Corruption Perceptions Index, found 23 countries at their worst level since the global ranking began almost three decades ago, including both high-ranking democracies and authoritarian states.

On the reported decline in justice, the group said that "the rise of authoritarianism in some countries contributes to this trend, and even in democratic contexts, the mechanisms that keep govern-

ments in check have weakened."

"Corruption will continue to thrive until justice systems can punish wrongdoing and keep governments in check," Transparency International chair François Valérien said in a statement. He added that "leaders should fully invest in and guarantee the independence of institutions that uphold the law and tackle corruption."

The organization measures the perception of public sector corruption according to 13 data sources including the World Bank, the World Economic Forum and private risk and consulting companies. It ranks 180 countries and territories on a scale from a "highly corrupt" 0 to a "very clean" 100.

AP PHOTO



This aerial still image from video provided by KTLA shows law enforcement vehicles where several people were found shot to death in El Mirage, California

**ORGANIZED CRIME**

**FIVE SUSPECTS ARRESTED  
 IN CALIFORNIA DESERT  
 KILLINGS IN DISPUTE  
 OVER MARIJUANA**

**T**HE six men found dead at a remote dirt crossroads in the Southern California desert last week were likely shot to death in a dispute over marijuana, sheriff's officials said as they announced the arrests of five men suspected in the violence.

Authorities discovered the bodies yesterday in the Mojave Desert outside El Mirage after someone called 911 and said in Spanish that he had been shot, San Bernardino County Sheriff's Sgt. Michael Warrick said during a news conference.

All the victims were likely shot to death, and four of the bodies had been partially burned together, Warrick said. A fifth victim was found inside a Chevy Trailblazer, and the sixth was discovered nearby the following day, he said.

"It looks like illicit marijuana was the driving force behind these murders," Sheriff Shannon Dicus said, adding that the area is known for illegal marijuana growing operations.

The scene showed a "level of violence" reminiscent of a drug cartel, but investigators couldn't immediately confirm that

cartels were involved, officials said.

Five men, ranging in age from 24 to 34, were arrested, and eight firearms were seized after deputies served search warrants Sunday in the Adelanto and Apple Valley areas of San Bernardino County and the Pinyon Hills neighborhood of Los Angeles County, Warrick said at a news conference.

Officials said investigators believe all the suspects in the case are in custody. They were held without bail.

Authorities identified four of the victims as: Baldemar Mondragon-Albarran, 34, of Adelanto; Franklin Noel Bonilla, 22, of Hesperia; Kevin Dariel Bonilla, 25, of Hesperia; and a 45-year-old man whose name was withheld pending family notification. Coroner's officials were trying to identify the remaining two men.

Investigators believe Franklin Bonilla was the man who called 911, Warrick said.

California voters legalized recreational marijuana in 2016, and the state has become the world's largest legal cannabis marketpla-

ce since then, with billions in annual sales. But the illegal market continues to thrive.

Dicus called the black market "a plague" that results in violence, and he called on lawmakers to reform cannabis laws to "keep legalization but revert to harsher penalties for users of illegal pot."

Overhead footage from TV stations last week showed a dark blue SUV with a passenger window blown out and another door open, with part of the image blurred. The footage also showed numerous yellow evidence markers in the scrubby desert.

The area, some 50 miles northeast of Los Angeles, is so remote that the sheriff's department called in help from the California Highway Patrol's Aviation Division to find the scene.

In 2020, seven people were fatally shot at an illegal marijuana growing operation in a small, rural town in neighboring Riverside County. More than 20 people lived on the property, which had several makeshift dwellings used for the production of honey oil, a potent cannabis concentrate. **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



Brazil's federal police yesterday [Macau time] searched the home and office of Carlos Bolsonaro, the son of former President Jair Bolsonaro and a Rio de Janeiro city councilman, two days after the Supreme Court granted the warrants. Police said in a statement that they conducted nine searches as part of a broader investigation into the nation's intelligence agency and alleged spying on political opponents during Bolsonaro's term.

Colombia's government and the nation's largest remaining rebel group announced they will extend their current cease-fire by one week, while delegates from both sides who are meeting in Cuba continue to discuss policies that could secure a longer lasting truce. In a joint statement, the government and the National Liberation Army said they will abide by the conditions of the current cease-fire, which began in August and was set to expire yesterday.

**Business** Amazon called off its purchase of robot vacuum maker iRobot, blaming "undue and disproportionate regulatory hurdles" after the European Union signaled its objection to the deal. The companies said in joint statement that they were disappointed but mutually agreed to terminate the acquisition. The deal faced antitrust scrutiny on both sides of the Atlantic, but most strongly in Europe.

AP PHOTO



**Internet** Elon Musk's social media platform X has blocked some searches for Taylor Swift as pornographic deepfake images of the singer have circulated online. Attempts to search for her name without quote marks on the site yesterday [Macau time] resulted in an error message and a prompt for users to retry their search, which added, "Don't fret — it's not your fault." Sexually explicit and abusive fake images of Swift began circulating widely last week on X.