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CHINA PLEDGES MORE HELP FOR ITS AILING PROPERTY MARKET, AS IMF FORECASTS ECONOMY WILL SLOW

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AP PHOTO



Sri Lanka signed a trade pact with Thailand this weekend in a bid to boost trade and investment as the Indian ocean island nation is struggling to recover from its worst economic crisis that hit two year ago. The Sri Lanka Thailand Free Trade Agreement covering trade in goods, investment, custom procedures and intellectual property rights was signed in the capital Colombo in the presence of Sri Lanka President Ranil Wickremesinghe and Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin.

AP PHOTO



Greek farmers dumped chestnuts and apples on the pavement outside an agricultural fair Saturday and promised to escalate protests after a Tuesday meeting. Those who did the dumping were from the Thessaly region, in central Greece, who came to the northern Greek city of Thessaloniki on buses to join their colleagues from the north who had come with their tractors last week.

AP PHOTO



France Parisians were voting yesterday whether to muscle SUVs off the French capital's streets by making them much more expensive to park, the latest leg in a drive by Socialist Mayor Anne Hidalgo to make the host city for this year's Olympic Games greener and friendlier for pedestrians and cyclists. Hidalgo is looking for voters' backing for a proposal to triple parking fees for SUV drivers from out of town.

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The Outer Harbour Ferry Terminal will continue to operate as normal, ending rumors the facility will close, DSAMA told the Times

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IC LAUNCHES NATIONALLY-BRANDED CNY CONCERTS

On Saturday, Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) launched a nationally-branded series of orchestral concerts held at the Ruins of St Paul's. The first evening had Tan Dun, Lang Lang and Pang Ka Pang, alongside the Macau Chinese Orchestra, the Macau Youth Choir and the Lo Leong Sport General Association performing against the backdrop of the former façade of the St Paul's Cathedral. At the opening ceremony, Chief Executive Ho Iat Seng described the event as an example of Beijing's focus on Macau, and expressed his gratitude to the Central People's Government.

MPU LAUNCHES SECOND NURSING TRAINING COURSE

The Centre for Continuing Education of the Macao Polytechnic University (MPU) will launch the second "Nursing Assistant Training Course" this year, the university announced in a statement. At a recent briefing session, Maggie Hau, acting director of the Centre for Continuing Education of MPU, said the course aims to "respond to the needs of Macau medical care institutions, to train up nursing assistants, to improve the knowledge and skills of caregivers." The "Nursing Assistant Training Course" is now open for registration until February 28.

ZHUHAI INTERCITY RAILWAY LINKS TO AIRPORT

With the second phase of the Zhuhai airport railway now open, which signals the full operation of the railway line, the travel time between Zhuhai's Gongbei and the city's airport has been shorted to 36 minutes when using the fast train. The semi-commuter train will take approximately 40 minutes and the commuter train – which stop at all stations – will take approximately 54 minutes. The price for each full trip is RMB26. The line has two stations in Hengqin, being Hengqin North and Hengqin, with the latter to be connected to the Macau LRT in future. While the new railway entered full operation, a new bridge built on the purpose, with motorway, was also opened.

OUTER HARBOUR TERMINAL WILL CONTINUE TO OPERATE AS NORMAL, DSAMA CLARIFIES

RENATO MARQUES

THE Outer Harbour Ferry Terminal is to continue to operate as normal, the Marine and Water Bureau (DSAMA) said in a response to an inquiry from the Times.

According to DSAMA, "regarding the recent discussion on the operation of the Outer Harbour Maritime Terminal, the Marine and Water Bureau clarifies that [the Maritime Terminal] will continue to operate normally."

This was in response to the Times' inquiry following rumors that the government was preparing to shut down the facility due to the upcoming construction of an overpass that will connect Zone A of the new landfills and Zone B of the same urban new landfills that connects to Zone B at the side of the Macau Science Center.

Construction on this public facility was announced during the second quarter of this year and, when complete, will cross the whole waterway between the two landfills that are used by all vessels to access the Outer Harbour Maritime Terminal.

According to DSAMA, "in future, when works begin for the construction of the access between Zone A and Zone B of the New Urban Landfills, passenger vessels will still be able to navigate following safety control measures."

Previously, the Public Construction Bureau (DSOP) announced that the main structure of the overpass will have a total length of approximately 1,550 meters, from which roughly 900 meters will be over water.

DSOP also said that the structure is planned to have four spans that will allow vessel navigation with a maximum clearance height of 130 meters.

Also responding to several questions from the Times, DSAMA said that during the construction period, which, according to DSOP, will be over approximately 1,000 working days (roughly 3 years), it is likely that there will be temporary restric-

RENATO MARQUES



tions on navigation in the area. DSAMA confirmed that such information would come "in due course and in coordination with the construction works."

The government's decision to opt for an overpass to link the two areas (original plans were for an underwater tunnel) prompted many doubts and questions, particularly by groups concerned about maritime passenger transportation.

Among those who expressed the most concerns were the Jetfoil Conservation Concern Group.

In an interview with the Times, the group leader Anderson Cheong said he'd received information over time that suggested a potential total partial closure of the Outer Harbour Maritime Terminal, and another person close to the operations of the terminal, who wished not to be named, said to have heard of the possibility of the terminal halting its functions and to be, in the future, used almost exclusively for DSAMA and Customs Service (SA), as well as by small tourism vessels in support of maritime tourism.

These rumors have not been confirmed at this point, with DSAMA affirming that passenger ferries will continue to operate in

the future via this Terminal.

The operation of the Outer Harbour is currently concessioned to the Sociedade de Turismo e Diversões de Macau, which won a public tender in 2018 and has a concession valid for a period of eight years. The concession is due to expire in 2026.

IMPLICATIONS ON JETFOILS RESUMPTION

One of the main concerns raised by Cheong in his conversation with the Times was about the potential halting of the operations of the ferry terminal, and this is related to the announced return of the Jetfoils trips between Macau and Hong Kong.

Cheong recalled that the Outer Harbour is the only facility that allows the docking of such type of vessels although it is not yet known when they are resuming their activity.

Cheong noted that a "closure" of the Outer Harbour would certainly represent a final blow to the hopes of seeing the Jetfoils return to the sea.

"TurboJet has been preparing the Jetfoils [to return to operation]. One of them has been recently renewed and sea-trialled but I heard that DSAMA will not allow Jetfoils to resume activity due to the ongoing construction on the fairway [related to the 4th Macau-Taipa bridge]," Cheong said.

FOURTH BRIDGE NORTHERN SECTION MAIN DECK COMPLETED

Construction of the still-unnamed 4th Macau-Taipa Bridge is progressing and the northern section main deck has just completed, the Public Works Bureau (DSOP) announced in a statement. There is now only one section remaining for the whole main deck linking the Pac On area in Taipa to Zone A of the new landfills. According to the latest update on

the project made in mid-December last year by DSOP's director Lam Wai Hou, the bridge's full completion date has been moved from the first to the second quarter of this year (April to June). Lam also announced that, when it commences operation, the new bridge should accommodate up to 28% of all traffic crossing between the Peninsula and Taipa Island.

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Survey finds 30.6% of elderly concerningly lonely

ANTHONY LAM

LOCAL NGO survey results show that 30.6% of its respondents reported experiencing concerning levels of loneliness or solitude.

Conducted by the social service branch of Sheng Kung Hui from August to September last year, the survey obtained responses from

109 residents aged between 50 and 59, as well as 287 aged over 59. The survey was conducted both offline and online.

In response to the worrying results, the survey operator highlighted that loneliness can jeopardize mental health and may elevate the risk of depression and anxiety, among other mental health issues.

Another finding from the survey is that most respondents reported average levels of mental toughness, which is used to measure a person's psychological resilience when faced with challenges in different areas of life that they would otherwise overcome to adapt and grow. The NGO discovered that respondents who had stronger mental toughness were

better at facing the feeling of solitude.

The group also discovered that measuring the half year prior to the survey period, 55.5% respondents had experienced, perceived or felt deteriorated physical conditions, 43% participated in less physical activities, 34.2% were going out less, and 30.8% had fewer people to talk to.

On the quality of life of the age group 50 to 59 – categorized by the survey as pre-retirement – the survey discovered that the average score for satisfaction with life was 6.73 out of 10 points, which is “significantly” lower (according to the NGO) than results reported by the age group over 59, which generated 7 points.

The NGO interprets this as a reflection of the more intense pressure of life experienced by the pre-retired, and calls for enhanced understanding and concerns over the life, stress and satisfaction of this group of people in the future.

It is also reminded that care for elders' mental health should be constant and proactive. The survey discovered that 10.8% of the respondents aged above 59 had developed a habit of using smartphones, and 71.4% of them thought utilizing technologies have benefits. However, 74.9% of them still found using smartphones difficult, leading the NGO to conclude that targeted assistance in using technology is still necessary.

The survey also found that improving elders' information technology aptitude can help improve their social connections, mental toughness and life satisfaction.

The NGO added that with technology use being one of the strengths of young people, opportunities should be created for young people to support older people in learning how to use technology. As such, inclusion and narrowing of generational gaps should be

TOURISM

134 flights approved for Lunar New Year so far

ANTHONY LAM

AT time of reporting, a total of 134 additional flights have been approved for the Lunar New Year period, the Civil Aviation Authority of Macao (AMCM) has announced.

As the first Lunar New Year after Covid-19 restrictions eased between mainland and Macau, the local government expects many tourists to visit Macau during the upcoming holiday period.

Over the past several weekends, supported by several concerts by domestic and foreign artistes, the city has been packed with tourists from several localities, although most of them from mainland China.

The approved additional flights – both extra and charter – will mostly serve routes between Macau and a number of destinations, including the



mainland, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

Last week, the marketing director of the airport's management company also announced additional flights. He said that the airport company will also create incentive measures to support and attract airline companies to operate longer haul flights to a wider options of destinations.

These flights will operate from Feb. 3 to 24, by Air Macau, Air China, Juneyao Air, Shenzhen Airlines, China Eastern Airlines, Cambodia Airways and Sky Angkor Airlines. The cities served are Shanghai, Chengdu, Wuhan and Wuxi, mainland China; Taipei, Taiwan; Bangkok, Thailand; Hanoi, Vietnam; Palau; Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

TOURISM

UPCOMING SPRING FESTIVAL TO SEE SURGE IN INBOUND, OUTBOUND TRIPS

CHINA is expected to experience a surge in inbound and outbound trips during the upcoming Spring Festival holiday, returning to the pre-pandemic levels in 2019, the National Immigration Administration (NIA) said yesterday.

The NIA estimates that the peak of passenger flow at major international airport ports will occur between Feb. 8 and 11, as well as Feb. 16 and 17, while the land ports adjacent to Hong Kong and Macau are expected to peak from Feb. 11 to 15.

It is estimated that the Chinese mainland will see a daily average of 1.8 million inbound and outbound passenger trips during the holiday



period from Feb. 10 to 17 this year, an increase of approximately 3.3 times compared to last year, according to the NIA.

To facilitate efficient entry and exits during the holiday, border inspection agencies have been instructed to enhance the monitoring of passenger flows

and release relevant information in a timely manner for travelers' reference.

Sufficient personnel were deployed to ensure that Chinese citizens pass through customs queues in no more than 30 minutes, added the NIA. **MDT/XINHUA**



F4 UAE

RODRIGUES 'SHOWS TEETH' AT DUBAI, SCORES FIRST POINTS

RENATO MARQUES

AFTER the first two rounds of the Formula 4 UAE Championship when local racer Tiago Rodrigues seemed to be out of the fight, Round 3, raced over the weekend at the Dubai Autodrome, saw Rodrigues finally "showing the teeth" and fiercely fighting for one of the top spots.

The one weekend break on the championship turned out well for the local racer who showed up for Round 3, showing significant improvement and battling for a place in the Top 10.

Rodrigues's improvement was obvious right from the start of the weekend as, due to a better qualifying session, he finished in tenth place on the grid for Race 1 on Saturday (Feb. 3).

Steadily fighting for a spot in the Top 10, Rodrigues eventually finished in eighth position after contact with another driver in the last lap damaged his car's front wing.

Rodrigues was in seventh position at the time of contact and eventually lost this place to Doriane Pin on the last turn. Still, Rodrigues scored his first four

points on F4 UAE.

The Race 1 winner was the pole-sitter Nikita Bedrin, who took the checkered flag in front of Kean Nakamura-Berta and Dion Gowda.

Benefiting from the inverted grid for the first 12 positions, as is always that case in Race 2, Rodrigues started the second race of the day from fifth position on the grid.

At the start, Rodrigues kept his cool and managed to jump to fourth and to run in podium position for some time.

In the second half of this race, a fierce battle took place between the fifth to tenth position with constant overtakes, contact between cars, and constant pressure from this second group of racers chasing the leader.

In the middle of the fight for sixth position, Rodrigues was eventually pushed back and dropped to eleventh on the last lap.

Although the position is not bad, he showed that he had race pace and skills to place in the Top 5 on Race 2, which unfortunately did not eventuate.

The winner of Race 2 was Alex

Powell, followed by Keanu Al Azhari and Jack Beeton.

For the third and last race of the weekend, raced on Sunday afternoon, Rodrigues started from seventh on the grid and ran most of the race in sixth until the last lap when, while fighting from sixth position with Deagen Fairclough, the pair crashed and their cars ended up entangled. Rodrigues's car was seen hanging on top of Fairclough's car, putting an end to the race for both and making for a bitter end to a weekend that had been, until then, quite sweet for the local teenager.

The winner of the final race was Bedrin, followed by Dubai's Al Azhari, and then Nakamura-Berta.

The championship returns this weekend to the Yas Marina Circuit in Abu Dhabi for Round 4 of the championship, which will be raced between Feb. 9 and 11.

The local racer is currently in eighteenth position (out of 37) in the driver's championship that is currently led by Freddie Slater (135 points), which is two more than Al Azhari in second. Third overall is Bedrin with 124 points.

EXCO

GOV'T PROPOSES DRAFT REVISION OF LAWS PUBLISHED BEFORE 1993

AS part of the Macau government's review of the 2,123 laws and decree-laws published between 1973 and 1993, 746 laws or by-laws have been deemed ineffective or expired. To rectify this issue, the government proposes to either repeal or revise them in two phases to properly adapt them in accordance with the Basic Law and the Law of Reunification, as well as rectify any inaccuracies between the Chinese and Portuguese versions.

Laws that have no reason to exist or have expired after 2019 will be repealed, according to André Cheong, Secretary for Administration and Justice, and spokesperson of the Executive Council.

In a press conference, Cheong said the government estimates that the process of reviewing, revising, and finalizing all the proposed changes will take up to a year.

The modification proposals are also expected to be put forth in the Legislative Assembly in the middle of next year.

In 2017 and 2019, the SAR government has confirmed in legal form that 746 regulations have been implicitly repealed or invalidated,

and 17 regulations have been abolished that have no existing value.

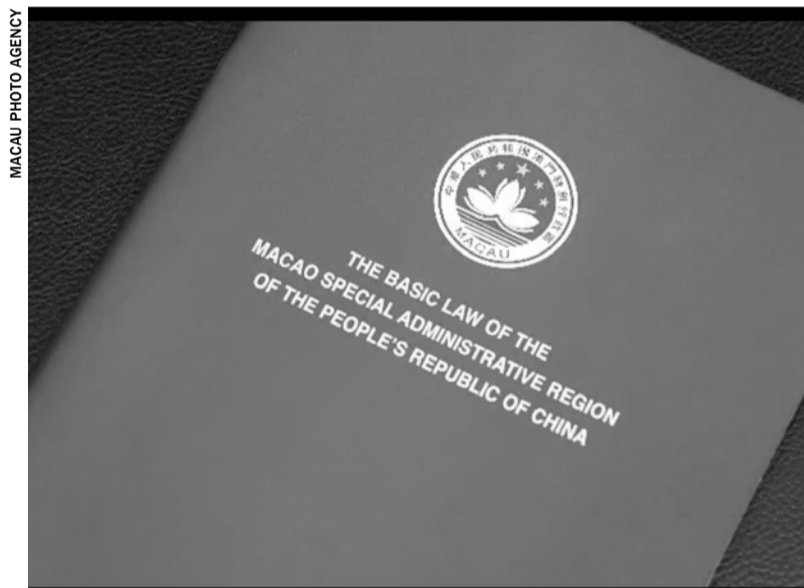
REVISIONS ON REGULATIONS ON FOOD ADDITIVES

Due to the frequent use of food additives in the food industry, coupled with the health risks associated with long-term consumption of food additives, the Macau government has proposed new regulations that establish safety criteria for food coloring, sweeteners, preservatives, and antioxidants.

These regulations will follow international standards and criteria defined by the Codex Alimentarius Commission, which is a collection of internationally recognized standards, codes of practice, and guidelines for food safety.

The regulations will focus on additives such as emulsifiers, acidity regulators, stabilizers, anti-caking agents, flavor enhancers, and others. In total, about 400 types of additives will be listed within these regulations, specifying the maximum dose of use to protect public hygiene and food safety.

The regulations will come into effect on May 1, 2024.



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Transport committee deems it 'reasonable' to increase taxi fare

STAFF REPORTER

A meeting was held to discuss the fare increase proposal of the local taxi association, where members believed it was 'reasonable' to increase taxi prices given that the last increase was seven years ago.

The Transport Advisory Committee chairman and director of the Transport Bureau, Kelvin Lam, emphasized that there is currently no finalization nor implementation timetable and will continue to work towards it.

He also said that assuming the proposed plan is approved, he hopes that the taxi industry can improve its customer service.

The first 1,600 meters of taxi fare 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.

DSAT data shows that there were 538 taxi violations last year, which was a significant decrease compared to 2019 when the new taxi law was not yet implemented.

Among the cases, 168 concerned trip refusals, 34 were cases of excessive fares and improper behavior, and 96 cases were of

rudeness.

Taxi associations have long called for an increase in fares surcharges before the Chinese New Year.

Groups lobbied DSAT for an 18% fare hike, citing rising operating expenses, taxi rental prices and fuel prices.

However, such calls were refused by the government due to Macau's economic downturn during the pandemic.

Also, the DSAT has announced that it will fine the taxi meter operation company for a brief malfunction that occurred while it was testing the system. On Saturday, the bureau became aware of some taxi meters showing incorrect commencement fares and a message indicating that the commencement fare had been adjusted.

It was later confirmed that the malfunctions occurred while the company was testing these meters. The malfunction has since been rectified.

The bureau did not disclose the quantum of the fine.

Meanwhile, Macau Travel Management Services Co., Ltd. officially launched the "Macau Taxi" mobile application and mini-program. Currently, about 300 taxi drivers have registered to provide services.

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2024 MGM Macao International Regatta successfully concluded



The 2024 MGM Macao International Regatta, organized by the Sports Bureau of the Macao SAR Government, MGM and the Ursa Major Sailing Management, co-organized by the Marine and Water Bureau of the Macao SAR Government and the Macao Sailing Association, and supported by the Zhuhai Culture, Radio, Television, Tourism and Sports Bureau, has officially concluded recently. A total of 37 teams, consisting of approximately 300 team members from 31 countries and regions, have competed in three events, including the Macao Cup International Regatta (Beneteau First 40.7 Unified Design Group), the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area Cup Regatta (IRC group) and the International Catamaran Invitational (Hobie 16 unified design group).

To further promote 'Sports+', "2024 MGM Macao International Regatta - Family Fun Day" was held at the Leisure Area of Kun lam Statue Waterfront, featuring sailing experiences, family workshops, and live broadcasts of the races. The event allowed residents and tourists to participate in the event in various ways and to deepen their understanding of sailing sport. In addition, the "2024 MGM Macao International Regatta - Photography Competition" was conducted to enhance audiences' enjoyment and participation of the competition.

MGM also invited 70 families from the Macao Federation of Trade Unions, the General Union of Neighbourhood Associations of Macao and the Women's General Association of Macao to enjoy the fleet parade, followed by a professional instructor's presentation the Fareast-11 sailboat, as well as a number of sailing-themed parent-child workshops and remote-control sailing races to give children a taste of what it's like to be a windsurfing athlete. Many participants were excited to enjoy the experience of being a windsurfer.



The 2024 MGM Macao International Regatta is an international regatta hosted by Macao, with its extraordinary geographical advantages - a coastline of 76.7 km. This maritime sports event is aiming to promote sports exchanges between Macao, mainland China, and the international community, which at the same time also drives the coordinated development of various industries in Macao, such as sports, culture, and tourism, helping to build Macau into a "City of Sports." To facilitate Macau as the World Center of Tourism and Leisure, MGM will stay dedicated to organizing diversified events and further showcasing Macau's charm of "Tourism+".



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Gov't pledges more help for its ailing property market, as IMF forecasts economy will slow

ELAINE KURTENBACH,
BANGKOK

MARKETS in China sank Friday despite a fresh flurry of measures to help prop up the ailing property sector, as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecast that the Chinese economy will continue to slow in coming years.

The report by the IMF forecast that the economy would expand at a 4.6% annual pace this year, down from 5.2% in 2023. It put growth in 2028 at 3.4%. It noted that housing starts had fallen more than 60% from pre-pandemic levels after a crackdown on excessive borrowing that began in 2020.

That's a pace "only seen in the largest housing busts in cross-country experience in the last three decades," it said.

Shanghai's benchmark composite index lost 1.5%, dipping sharply at one point before regaining some losses but still logging its worst week in five years. The smaller market in Shenzhen lost 3%.

The moves to increase the supply of affordable housing and spur demand come just weeks before top officials will gather in Beijing for the annual meeting of the national congress, a time when the ruling Communist Party will want to showcase its leadership.



AP PHOTO

The real estate industry's woes were highlighted earlier this week by an order by a Hong Kong court for the liquidation of China Evergrande, the world's most heavily indebted developer with more than \$300 billion in liabilities.

China's property sector accounts for nearly a third of the country's economic activity and the industry-wide meltdown has weighed on growth and sapped the confidence of both investors and consumers.

The economy expanded at a 5.2% annual pace last year but is forecast to slow this year.

The sluggish property market also has dented local government revenue from vital land use sales,

adding to public debt. The Finance Ministry reported last week that land sales revenues fell 13.2% in 2023 from the year before.

The IMF report noted that serious problems remain. Many developers are insolvent but are avoiding bankruptcy because accounting rules allow them to delay booking losses on their loans. The need for new housing is bound to slow, it said, as the population shrinks and the pace of urbanization slows.

In the medium term, real estate investment is likely to fall to between 30% to 60% below its level in 2022, it said.

The government recently has expanded access to loans to

help developers recover from the downturn. Last week, Wang Dongwei, a vice minister of finance, pledged to keep spending at a "necessary intensity."

Various regions in China have issued "white lists" of projects that qualify for lending, a key part of the government's effort to revive the industry.

The central bank and State Administration of Financial Supervision issued a list of 17 measures to support the rental housing market, due to take effect on Monday. Most have to do with financial services for leasing, promoting investment in rental housing and improving the financial management of rental properties.

"Financial support for the development of the housing rental market should highlight key points and target shortcomings, mainly in large cities, focusing on solving the housing problems of new citizens, young people and other groups," said a document posted on the government website.

The aim is to "support various entities to build, renovate and operate long-term rental housing, and to revitalize existing housing stock, effectively increasing the supply of affordable and commercial rental housing," it said.

Home ownership in China has vastly expanded over the past few decades, after a sweeping housing reform that gave workers ownership of homes that were previously assigned to them by the state-owned companies and agencies that once employed most city dwellers in the formerly centrally planned economy.

The home ownership rate in China is about 90%, much higher than in many Western countries, and many urban families buy multiple properties as investments. Beefing up the rental market would help free up more housing for young people and others who lack the means to purchase apartments.

In other moves, some local governments have announced preferential terms for families with more than one child to obtain mortgages for homes for their own use. In Shanwei, in southern China's Guangdong province, families with two or more children can get loans that are 20% higher than the usual limit, among other measures.

The Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, meanwhile, said a first batch of real estate projects qualifying for loans and equity financing in eight cities or provinces required financing amounting to 3.5 trillion yuan (\$496 billion). **MDT/AP**

US will resume Peace Corps program in Palau as it moves to counter Chinese influence in Indo-Pacific

MATTHEW LEE,
WASHINGTON

The United States will resume a long-suspended Peace Corps program in the North Pacific island of Palau as the Biden administration continues moves to counter growing Chinese influence in the region.

The Peace Corps said Friday that it would start sending volunteers back to the island in 2025 following an agreement reached between the agency's director and Palau's president, whose country is one of the

few in the world to have diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

"Volunteers will live and work side-by-side with community partners to improve childhood literacy and math and science skills, along with teaching English as a foreign language," Peace Corps director Carol Spahn said in a statement.

Palau's president, Surangel Whipps, said the return of the Peace Corps reflects the strong relationship between his nation and the United States. He said prior

Peace Corps members had become "an integral part of our national family," and he extended his gratitude to them and to a program he said "has enriched our country in countless ways."

"To those Peace Corps members preparing to come and contribute to Palau," Whipps said, "welcome home."

The Peace Corps programs in Palau and in the Federated States of Micronesia began in 1966 but were shut down in 2014 after more than 4,400 volunteers had served there.

Since then, as China has made successful inroads in the Pacific, successive U.S. administrations have sought to improve relations with the island nations, including by opening or reopening several embassies and renegotiating cooperation agreements known as compacts of free association last year with Palau, Micronesia and the Marshall Islands.

Palau is among the 12 countries that still recognize Taiwan's statehood and do not have diplomatic relations with Beijing. **MDT/AP**



AP PHOTO

The Palau Capital building, in Melekeok, Palau

CORRUPTION

Malaysia halves prison term for ex-Prime Minister who oversaw multibillion-dollar 1MDB thefts

EILEEN NG, KUALA LUMPUR

MALAYSIA'S Pardons Board said Friday it has reduced ex-Prime Minister Najib Razak's 12-year jail sentence by half and sharply cut a fine, less than two years into his sentence from a corruption case linked to the theft of billions of dollars from state coffers.

With the sentence commuted, Najib will be freed by Aug. 23, 2028, the board said in a statement. The board also cut Najib's 210 million-ringgit (\$44.5 million) fine to 50 million ringgit.

It is unclear if Najib is still eligible for additional time off for good behavior. If so, he could be out as early as August 2026.

Despite his conviction, Najib is still influential in his party, the United Malays National Organization, which is now a member of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's unity government that took power after 2022 general elections.

The Pardons Board didn't explain why it commuted Najib's sentence, nor why it waited until Friday to announce it. The board isn't required to give any grounds for its action, which has prompted an outcry and triggered calls for the government to justify the move.

The board said it considered Najib's application for a royal par-



Former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak

don at its meeting Monday and decided to reduce his sentence and fine after considering advice and opinions. The meeting was chaired by the country's then-king, Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah, who is from Najib's home state of Pahang. A new king took office last week under Malaysia's unique rotating monarchy

system.

The decision is seen to further hurt Anwar's anti-corruption campaign, just months after prosecutors dropped 47 graft charges against Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who is the current UMNO party chief.

Anwar said Najib had gone through the process of law and

has the right to appeal for a royal pardon. He said the king has the final say.

"It's beyond the prime minister or the government. I respect the decision of the then-king. ... Of course it is very political, some support, some don't but they cannot ignore the fact that you must respect the rights of everyone convicted to appeal to the Pardons Board," Anwar said in an interview with Al-Jazeera.

Najib still has other linked trials which will continue, he added.

Najib, 70, was imprisoned in August 2022 after losing his final appeal in his first of several corruption trials linked to the multibillion-dollar looting of a state fund, 1 Malaysia Development Berhad, or 1MDB. He became Malaysia's first former leader to be imprisoned after the shocking defeat of his long ruling coalition in a 2018 general election due to the 1MDB scandal.

1MDB was a development fund that Najib set up shortly after taking power in 2009. Investigators allege at least \$4.5 billion was stolen from the fund and laundered by Najib's associates through layers of bank accounts in the U.S. and other countries and financed Hollywood films and extravagant purchases that included hotels, a luxury yacht, art and jewelry. More than \$700 million landed in Najib's bank accounts.

Najib was found guilty in 2020 of seven charges of corruption for illegally receiving \$9.4 million from SRC International, a former unit of 1MDB. He still faces several other graft trials linked to 1MDB. His wife, Rosmah Mansor, was also sentenced in 2022 to 10 years in prison and a record fine of 970 million ringgit for corruption involving a solar energy project and is out on bail pending an appeal.

Najib has maintained his innocence, alleging he was duped by Malaysian financier Low Taek Jho, thought to be the mastermind of the scandal, who remains at large.

Many Malaysians on Friday demanded to know the justification of the pardons board's move for such a high-profile graft case in which the government had to spend billions of dollars to service 1MDB's debts.

"The message to the world ... is depressing and bleakly clear: there are 2 tracks for criminals in Malaysia — 1 for all of us ordinary rakyat (citizens), 1 for the political elite. Very sad day for this country," lawyer and politician Lim Wei Jiet wrote on social media.

Some analysts said pushback is likely to be contained. Anyone who insults the king can be charged for sedition.

"Anwar's reputation as a reformer would take a beating. There will be some outrage but the fallout will be limited. The Malay community is quite feudalistic and once they are told it's the king's prerogative, they will back off," said James Chin, professor of Asian studies at Australia's University of Tasmania.

Najib's daughter, Nooryana Najwa Najib, posted on Instagram that the family appreciated the board's gesture but were disappointed that Najib wasn't given a full pardon and released immediately. **MDT/AP**

ANDI JATMIKO & NINIEK KARMINI, JAKARTA

ELECTIONS

Indonesians flock to presidential campaign rallies as criticism against the government mounts

TENS of thousands of Indonesians flocked to presidential campaign rallies on Saturday to air their concerns over the state of democracy in the country.

President Joko Widodo is facing mounting criticism over his lack of neutrality after he threw his support behind frontrunner Prabowo Subianto, who has picked Widodo's son as his running mate.

Widodo has distanced himself from the governing Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, under whose banner he ran in 2014 and 2019.

The party's presidential candidate, Ganjar Pranowo, the former governor of Cen-

tral Java province, addressed a crowd of more than 130,000 supporters and stressed the need for government neutrality in managing military and police forces and civil servants. He said he received reports of intimidation against regional leaders and civil society during the 75-day campaign period in the world's largest archipelago nation, home to more than 270 million people.

"Let the people decide their vote freely," Pranowo said. "Let the military, police and civil servants work

to serve people, let them be neutral and provide the best service to this nation."

The nomination for vice president of Gibran Rakabuming Raka, Widodo's 36-year-old son, is widely seen as representing Widodo's implicit support of Subianto, the current defense minister who launched his third bid for the presidency.

Raka's candidacy has been the subject of heated debate because the Constitutional Court had to make an exception to the minimum age requirement of 40

for vice presidential candidates to allow him to run.

Later, the chief justice, who is Widodo's brother-in-law, was removed by an ethics panel for failing to recuse himself and for making last-minute changes to election candidacy requirements.

Activists, students and university lecturers in Indonesia in recent days have expressed concern over democratic standards in Indonesia, citing unethical, corrupt and nepotistic practices and worsening quality of life in the country. **MDT/AP**



Supporters of Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) shout slogans during a campaign rally at Gelora Bung Karno Main Stadium in Jakarta, Indonesia, Saturday

ANALYSIS

What to know about the US strikes in Iraq and Syria and its attacks with the UK in Yemen

BASSEM MROUE,
LOLITA C. BALDOR
& TARA COPP, BEIRUT

B RITISH forces on Saturday joined their American allies in new attacks against militia in Yemen. The U.S. military earlier launched strikes on dozens of sites manned by Iran-backed fighters in western Iraq and eastern Syria in retaliation for a drone strike in Jordan in late January that killed three U.S. service members and wounded dozens.

Tensions have been rising in the region since the Israel-Hamas war started on Oct. 7. A week later, Iran-backed fighters, who are loosely allied with Hamas, began carrying out drone and rocket attacks on bases housing U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria. A deadly strike on the desert outpost known as Tower 22 in Jordan near the Syrian border further increased tensions.

WHAT HAPPENED IN YEMEN?

The United States and Britain on Saturday launched a barrage of strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen from fighter jets and warships in the Red Sea, U.S. officials told The Associated Press.

The strikes hit 36 Houthi targets in 13 locations, the officials said on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly discuss the military operation. It is the third time in two weeks that the U.S. and Britain have conducted a large joint operation to strike Houthi weapon launchers, radar sites and drones.

The strikes came in response to almost daily missile or drone attacks against commercial and military ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, and New Zealand supported the latest wave of strikes intended to "defend lives and the free flow of commerce in one of the world's most critical waterways."

AP PHOTO



A RAF Typhoon aircraft takes off to conduct further strikes against Houthi military targets in Yemen, from RAF Akrotiri, Cyprus, Saturday

WHAT JETS WERE USED IN THE YEMEN STRIKES?

The Houthi targets were struck by U.S. F/A-18 fighter jets from the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower aircraft carrier, by British Typhoon FGR4 fighter aircraft and by the Navy destroyers USS Gravely and the USS Carney firing Tomahawk missiles from the Red Sea, according to U.S. officials and the U.K. Defense Ministry.

WHO WAS TARGETED IN SYRIA AND IRAQ, AND WHY?

The strikes on Friday came in retaliation for the drone strike that killed three U.S. troops in Jordan on Jan. 28.

U.S. forces struck 85 targets in seven locations in a strategic region where thousands of Iran-backed fighters are deployed to help expand Iran's influence from Tehran to the Mediterranean coast.

U.S. bases in Syria's eastern province of Deir el-Zour and the northeastern province of Hassakeh have come under attack for years. The Euphrates River cuts through Syria into Iraq, with U.S. troops and American-backed Kurdish-led fighters on the east bank and Iran-backed fighters and Syrian government forces to the west.

Bases for U.S. troops in Iraq have come under attack too.

Iran-backed militias control the Iraqi side of the border and move freely in and out of Syria, where they man posts with their allies from Lebanon's powerful Hezbollah and other Shiite armed groups.

person Bassim al-Awadi said the border strikes killed 16 people and caused "significant damage" to homes and private properties.

WHAT WAS HIT IN IRAQ AND SYRIA? HOW MANY PEOPLE WERE KILLED?

The U.S. military said the barrage of strikes hit command and control headquarters; intelligence centers; rockets and missiles, drone and ammunition storage sites; and other facilities connected to the militias and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force, which handles Tehran's relationship with, and arming of, regional militias.

Syrian opposition activists said the strikes hit the Imam Ali base near the border Syrian town of Boukamal, the Ein Ali base in Quriya, just south of the strategic town of Mayadeen, and a radar center on a mountain near the provincial capital that is also called Deir el-Zour.

Rami Abdurrahman, who heads the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said 29 rank-and-file fighters were killed in those strikes.

The attacks also hit a border crossing known as Humaydiya, where militia cross back and forth between Iraq and Syria, according to Omar Abu Layla, a Europe-based activist who heads the Deir Ezzor 24 media outlet. He said the strikes also hit an area inside the town of Mayadeen known as "the security quarter."

Iraqi government spokes-

person Bassim al-Awadi said the border strikes killed 16 people and caused "significant damage" to homes and private properties.

The Popular Mobilization Force, a coalition of Iran-backed militia that is nominally under the control of the Iraqi military, said the strikes in western Iraq hit a logistical support post, a tanks battalion, an artillery post and a hospital. The PMF said 16 people were killed and 36 wounded, and that authorities were searching for other missing people.

WILL IRAN-BACKED FIGHTERS RETALIATE?

Iran and groups it backs in the region aim to put pressure on Washington to force Israel to end its crushing offensive in Gaza, but do not appear to want all-out war. The defeat of Hamas would be a major setback for Tehran, which considers itself and its allies the main defenders of the Palestinian cause.

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq, an umbrella group for Iran-backed groups, said it carried out two explosive drone attacks Saturday on bases housing U.S. troops in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil and a post in northeast Syria near the Iraqi border.

The only Iran-backed faction that has been escalating are the Houthi rebels in Yemen, and they have made clear that they have no intention of scaling back their campaign. MDT/AP

this day in history

1994 MARKET MASSACRE IN SARAJEVO



A mortar bomb has exploded in the main market square in Sarajevo killing 68 and wounding 200 people.

It is the worst single atrocity in the 22-month old conflict between Bosnia's Serbs, Muslims and Croats.

UN inspectors are examining the crater left by the bomb to determine where it came from, but it is widely believed the Serbian forces besieging the city launched it.

The single 120mm shell landed on a stall in the packed open-air market just before noon leaving Muslims and Serbs dead and injured.

"Some people were literally torn apart. Heads and limbs were ripped off bodies," said one eyewitness.

Kosevo hospital was inundated with victims carried by ambulance, car and lorry, some of them wrapped in the canvas used on the market stalls.

The attack came on the day Bosnian Serb, Muslim and Croatian leaders were meeting in the city to discuss its future.

Peace envoy David Owen said: "We had reached the point where Bosnian Serbs were ready to take Sarajevo outside an overall peace settlement to try to demilitarise it.

"I am absolutely determined it is not aborted."

The mainly Muslim Bosnian Government immediately accused the Serbs of the shelling.

Information minister for the self-styled Bosnian Serb Republic, Miroslav Toholj, denied the charges and blamed the Muslims, saying, "Serbs don't kill civilians".

The Bosnian Serb army has threatened to prevent UN aid distribution unless accusations against them are dropped.

This latest attack came after allied peacekeepers - under new commander General Sir Michael Rose - have taken a stronger line against Serbian aggression.

Altogether 200,000 people have died so far in the war*. Food queues and markets have already been targeted.

A mortar killed 16 people queuing for bread in Sarajevo in May 1992.

The western response will be decided at meetings of Nato and the UN over the next few days.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

The UN could not prove where the mortar came from and the US was unwilling to strike against the Serbs without evidence.

On 10 February Nato - with UN authorisation - gave the Bosnian Serbs a 10-day ultimatum either to withdraw their artillery to 12.5 miles (20 kilometres) outside Sarajevo or place it under UN control or face air strikes.

Shelling by the Serbs decreased and Nato lifted their threat even though the Serbs had failed to fully meet the deadline.

By the end of the year former US president Jimmy Carter brokered a fragile ceasefire. But it took until December 1995 for a final peace to be agreed at Dayton, Ohio.

In 2007 an independent study, funded mainly by the Norwegian government, reported that at least 97,207 people were killed in the Bosnian war, fewer than had been estimated - 65% were Bosnian Muslims, 25% were Serbs and more than 8% were Croats.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS



ARIES

Mar. 21-Apr. 19

Socialize with friends, but don't overspend on lavish entertainment. Your fun loving approach will be admired and appreciated by others.



TAURUS

Apr. 20-May. 20

Talk to employers in order to promote your career objectives. Try to put your money away for a rainy day. Passion is about the best way for you to relieve tension.



GEMINI

May. 21-Jun. 21

You can expand your circle of friends if you get out and socialize. Try not to hang out with coworkers if you wish to avoid problems later.



CANCER

Jun. 22-Jul. 22

Sudden changes concerning coworkers may surprise you. Don't let them blame you. Travel will be good if you are seeking knowledge.



LEO

Jul. 23-Aug. 22

Your emotional attitude with respect to your status and direction in society may be unrealistic. Your leadership ability will enhance your reputation.



VIRGO

Aug. 23-Sep. 22

Keep your wits about you and be sure that you can trust those you confide in. You can beautify your surroundings by renovating or redecorating.



LIBRA

Sep. 23-Oct. 22

Confusion could result when communicating with others. Don't consume more than necessary. Try to curb your bad habits, and compromise if your partner gives you an ultimatum.



SCORPIO

Oct. 23-Nov. 21

Don't hesitate to sign up for lectures or seminars that will enlighten you. You could have a need to make some changes today. You must consider yourself for a change.



SAGITTARIUS

Nov. 22-Dec. 21

You can make major gains if you talk to your boss about your findings. Limitations at work might set you back. Risks will not be profitable.



CAPRICORN

Dec. 22-Jan. 19

You can pick up information that will give you an edge. Exercise your talents and present your ideas to groups you think you can contribute to.



AQUARIUS

Jan. 20-Feb. 18

An older member of the family may need assistance. Be careful not to sign your time or your cash away. Get out and enjoy some entertainment.



PISCES

Feb. 19-Mar. 20

Difficulties at an emotional level may be likely. You may find that someone at work hasn't been trustworthy. Avoid being overly opinionated or you will alienate friends.

The Born Loser by Chip Sanson



SUDOKU

EASY

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

EASY+

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

MEDIUM

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

HARD

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

WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	-4	4	cloudy
Changchun	-20	-9	cloudy
Chengdu	3	7	overcast
Chongqing	6	9	overcast
Fuzhou	11	18	rain
Guangzhou	12	18	rain
Guiyang	0	8	rain
Haikou	21	26	rain
Hangzhou	1	6	overcast
Harbin	-26	-12	fine
Hefei	-4	-2	overcast
Nanjing	-1	0	overcast
Shanghai	3	5	overcast
Taipei	15	17	rain
Wuhan	-4	1	overcast
Hong Kong	18	22	cloudy
WORLD			
Moscow	-7	-4	cloudy
Frankfurt	7	12	cloudy
Paris	7	11	cloudy
London	8	12	windy
New York	-2	6	clear

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1-Face shape; 5- Rings; 10- Old Testament book; 14- Royal Indian; 15- "Bolero" composer; 16- Flat circular plate; 17- Choir member; 18- At first; 20- Well-known; 22- Walk stealthily; 23- Self-assured; 25- Stimulate; 26- Eats grass; 27- Sprechen ___ Deutsch?; 28- School founded by Henry VI; 32- Animate existence; 33- Get to the point?; 35- Bank takeback; 36- ___ dreaming?; 37- 100%; 38- Kan, neighbor; 39- Morse element; 41- Commerce; 43- Female horse; 44- K-12; 45- Siegfried's partner; 46- Secular; 48- Boxer Spinks; 50- Passes by degrees; 51- Washroom; 54- Great; 55- Concerned with childbirth; 57- Biblical garden; 61- Go it alone; 62- Hawk's nest; var.; 63- Baseball family name; 64- Leak slowly; 65- Orchestra section; 66- ___ Irae;

DOWN 1- Man-mouse connector; 2- Actor Kilmer; 3- Tiny toiler; 4- Treat as a celebrity; 5- Expression of objection; 6- Having auricular protuberances; 7- Gung-ho; 8- Human limb, section of a journey; 9- Slide; 10- Power plug transformer; 11- Comic Kamen; 12- Capital of Norway; 13- Terrier type; 19- Never, in Nuremberg; 21- Sugar suffix; 23- Original; 24- Uncouth; 25- Brandish; 26- Open space in a forest; 27- Spread apart; 29- Bridge holding; 30- Musical dramas; 31- Prestigious prize; 34- Biblical brother; 40- Summit of an earthy mound; 41- Horse, at times; 42- Goes by; 43- Engage in textual misprison; 47- Mimic; 49- Shoe width; 50- Clear; 51- Throw; 52- It's blown among the reeds; 53- Archipelago part; 54- Foal's father; 56- Cereal grass; 58- Half of MClI; 59- Fair-hiring abbr.; 60- Greek letters;

Friday's solution



Crossword puzzles provided by BestCrosswords.com

USEFUL TELEPHONE NUMBERS

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



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Va Fat
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Tou Un
 HKD 2,980,000 1 bed 1 bath

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

AD

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Wan Keng (Tap Seac)
1 bed 1 bath
56.20 m² / 605 ft² | HKD2,850,000



VA FAT (Taipa Village)
2 bed 1 bath
77.10 m² / 830 ft² | HKD3,980,000



Tou Un (Taipa)
1 bed 1 bath
44.12 m² / 475 ft² | HKD2,980,000



Supreme Flower City (Taipa)
4 bed 3 bath 1 car park
191.38 m² / 2,060 ft² | HKD22,000/mth



Manhattan (Taipa)
3 bed 2 bath
162.58 m² / 1,750 ft² | HKD13,000,000



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WORLD AQUATICS CHAMPIONSHIPS

Osmar Olvera Ibarra gives Mexico its 2nd diving gold medal in world championship history

OSMAR Olvera Ibarra gave Mexico its second diving gold medal in the history of the World Aquatics Championships, winning the men's 1-meter springboard on Saturday.

Olvera became the first diver from a country other than China to claim the top spot in the event since Alexandre Despatie of Canada in 2005.

Paolo Espinosa is the only other Mexican diving world champion, capturing gold on the 10-meter platform at Rome in 2009.

The 19-year-old Olvera was a silver medalist on both 1- and 3-meter springboard at last summer's world championships in Fukuoka, Japan. Now, he's got some gold-medal momentum with the Paris Olympics just five months away.

Olvera led the morning preliminaries and cruised through the fi-



Osmar Olvera Ibarra of Mexico makes a dive during the men's 1m springboard finals at the World Aquatics Championships in Doha, Qatar, Saturday, Feb. 3

nal, posting a score of 431.75 points over six dives. The silver went to Li Shixin of Australia at 395.70, while Ross Haslam of Britain took the bronze in 393.10.

China, which has dominated

diving at both the Olympics and world championships, claimed its first gold in Doha when 13-year-old Huang Jianjie and Zhang Jiaqi won the mixed 10-meter synchronized platform.

With its focus firmly on Paris, China sent a scaled-back team to Doha, giving other nations a chance to shine. The diving superpower didn't enter the first two events Friday and is assured of its fewest gold medals at worlds since settling for eight in 2017.

Over the last three championships, China has claimed 37 of 39 gold medals.

Zheng Jiuyuan of China lost any chance of cracking the 1-meter medalists with a botched dive in the fifth round, nearly landing on his knees. He finished 11th out of 12 finalists.

Li's silver-medal performance marked another remarkable turn for the 35-year-old diver, who captured 1-meter gold for his native China at both the 2011 and 2013 worlds before moving to Australia.

In the mixed event, Huang and 19-year-old Zhang romped to victory for China with 353.82 points.

Zhang added to the gold won at Fukuoka while paired with Wang Feilong.

Jo Jin Mi and Im Yong Myong of North Korea took the silver in 303.96, while the bronze went to Kevin Berlin Reyes and Alejandra Estudillo Torres of Mexico at 296.13.

In other finals on Day 2 of the first world championships held in the Middle East, Sharon van Rouwendaal of the Netherlands pulled off a thrilling victory in the women's 10-kilometer race and Evangelia Platanioti of Greece took artistic swimming gold in women's solo technical.

Van Rouwendaal touched first in 1 hour, 57 minutes, 26.80 seconds — a mere 10th of a second ahead of Maria de Valdes of Spain. The bronze went to Angelica Andre of Portugal, who was 1.4 seconds behind the winner.

On the last of six laps around the Old Doha Port, Moesha Johnson of Australia faded from the lead to fourth as van Rouwendaal showed off her finishing kick in the final 500 meters of the rough-and-tumble race.

The 30-year-old van Rouwendaal regained the title she held at the 2022 world championships in Budapest, Hungary. She finished fourth last summer in Fukuoka, where Leonie Beck of Germany swept the 5k and 10k titles.

Beck finished 20th at Doha, 45 seconds behind the winner. **MDT/AP**

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Urology : Dr. Lo Kwong Yin Richard, Dr. Zhao Yun Qiao

Paediatric Surgery : Dr. Yeung Chung Kwong

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Obstetrics & Gynaecology : Dr. Fong Kuan Io

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OPINION

China Daily

Li Guoxiang, * China Daily

ZHEJIANG'S RURAL VITALIZATION INSPIRING FOR NATION

This year's No 1 central document, as a tradition, focuses on rural vitalization, drawing inspiration from the Green Rural Revival Program in Zhejiang province. The initiative, planned and promoted by Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, when he was the Party secretary of Zhejiang province, can become a model for comprehensive rural vitalization.

The program, which began more than two decades ago, has helped address pressing issues while yielding remarkable results. Initiated to improve village sanitation and farmers' quality of life, it has not only transformed the countryside but also changed urban-rural relations, and enhanced rural production, lifestyle and governance.

Thanks to the rapid development of the private economy in Zhejiang since the launch of reform and opening-up, local farmers had become relatively affluent by the end of the century. But this prosperity had come at the cost of the environment.

To repair the environmental damage, the Green Rural Revival Program was launched in 2003 with the aim of restoring the environmental health of about 10,000 administrative villages in the province within five years. Out of these, about 1,000 villages were earmarked to be developed into moderately prosperous demonstration villages. The comprehensive development plan involved demolishing illegal structures, improving waste and sewage management, shutting down polluting enterprises, building roads and upgrading public facilities.

Zhejiang's unwavering commitment to the program has given birth to scientific rural vitalization. It is focused on targeted improvement of the rural living environment and prevents ecological degradation, embodying the value that lucid waters and lush mountains are as valuable as gold and silver. It has improved rural aesthetics, refined cultural aspects, promoted sustainable industrial development, and strengthened ecological protection.

The impact of the program is evident in the transformation of villages such as Yucun village of Huzhou city in Zhejiang. Once infamous for environmental degradation due to its focus on the "stone economy" — with mountains stripped bare and water resembling "soy sauce broth" — Yucun village has become an environmentally friendly village with the closure of mines and cement factories. Due to its scenic environment, Yucun village today thrives on agri-tourism, showcasing the success of the rural vitalization program.

Zhejiang's efforts to improve the rural environment have not only improved the farmers' quality of life but also spurred comprehensive rural vitalization. In September 2018, the program was honored with the United Nations' highest environmental accolade, the "Earth Guardian Award". The commendation said: This exceptionally successful eco-restoration program shows the transformative power of economic and environmental development together.

With the continuous improvement in its ecological environment, Zhejiang has emerged as a national leader in rural economy. The per capita disposable income of Zhejiang's rural residents soared from 5,431 yuan (about \$760) in 2003 to 37,565 yuan in 2022. It maintained the highest position among provinces and autonomous regions for 38 consecutive years.

Zhejiang's success story continues with the "Beautiful Countryside+" initiative, fostering the vibrant development of new agricultural, cultural and tourism models. Zhejiang has established 82 complete agricultural value chains with an output exceeding 1 billion yuan each, providing employment and entrepreneurship for 4.78 million farmers. By early 2023, Zhejiang had trained 47,000 "agricultural innovators" — individuals who after graduating from college engage in agricultural and rural entrepreneurship.

In implementing the No 1 central document, regions across China should learn from the experiences of Zhejiang's Green Rural Revival Program. But while doing so, they need to adjust the program to suit the local conditions, distinguishing between developed and less-developed areas, urban outskirts and traditional rural regions, and grain-producing and non-grain producing areas.

Besides, it is important that the program aligns with local development levels, financial capacities and farmers' needs. As such, a flexible and nuanced strategy needs to be adopted, and the focus should be on ensuring rural construction corresponds to the local economic development level, and avoiding formalism and striving to make achievements for the sake of achievements.

*Researcher at the Rural Development Institute, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

MICROSOFT SAYS STATE-BACKED RUSSIAN HACKERS ACCESSED EMAILS OF SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAM MEMBERS

THE BUZZ

State-backed Russian hackers broke into Microsoft's corporate email system and accessed the accounts of members of the company's leadership team, as well as those of employees on its cybersecurity and legal teams, the company said Friday.

In a blog post, Microsoft said the intrusion began in late November and was discovered on Jan. 12. It said the same highly skilled Russian hacking team behind the SolarWinds breach was responsible.

"A very small percentage" of Microsoft corporate accounts were accessed, the company said, and some emails and attached documents were stolen.

A company spokesperson said Microsoft had no immediate comment on which or how many members of its senior leadership had their email accounts breached. In a regulatory filing Friday, Microsoft said it was able to remove the hackers' access from the compromised accounts on or about Jan. 13.

"We are in the process of notifying employees whose email was accessed," Microsoft said, adding that its investigation indicates the hackers were initially targeting email accounts for information related to their activities.

AP PHOTO



United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression Irene Khan, center, gestures after talking to reporters during a press conference in Mandaluyong, Philippines, Friday, Feb. 2.

PHILIPPINES

UN EXPERT SAYS MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE TO ADDRESS HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

JIM GOMEZ, MANILA

THE government of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has taken steps to address human rights abuses in the country, including the killings of journalists and rights activists, a U.N. expert said Friday. However, more needs to be done, she said, including ensuring accountability.

The remarks by United Nations Special Rapporteur Irene Khan came at the end of a nearly two-week visit — at the invitation of the government — to assess rights conditions in the Philippines, where she met with officials and activists, as well as a detained journalist.

Khan said she underscored the need for the Marcos administration to seek justice for rights victims under his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte.

Watchdog groups had described Duterte's term as a "human rights calamity" due to widespread violations, including the killings of thousands of mostly poor suspects in a brutal anti-drugs crackdown. The International Criminal Court is investigating the killings as a potential crime against humanity.

"These are all positive signals, but they are not sufficient to turn the page decisively on the past," Khan

said at a news conference in Manila.

"Tackling the grave and deep-seated human rights problems of the Philippines ... will require more fundamental and sustained reforms and also a clear commitment to accountability," Khan said.

She cited U.N. figures saying that at least 81 past killings of journalists in the Philippines have not been investigated and remain unresolved.

With four journalists separately being killed since Marcos took office in 2022, "the trend remains disturbing," she said. The justice department in Manila was prosecuting suspects in three of the killings and an investigation was underway in the fourth case, she added.

"The killing of journalists is the most egregious form of censorship," Khan said, adding that the Philippines "remains a dangerous country for journalists."

Khan urged Marcos' government to abolish its task force overseeing a campaign to end a decades-old communist insurgency, one of the longest-running in the world, and also appealed against the policy of "red-tagging," a practice by authorities to link activists with armed insurgents.

Since 1969, the Communist Party of the Philippines

and its armed wing, the New People's Army, have fought successive Philippine governments.

"There is clear evidence that red-tagging and terror-tagging are being practiced by security forces as part of their counterterrorism strategy," Khan said.

Legitimate activists have been targeted, she said, and "the vilification has often been followed by threats, unlawful surveillance, attacks or even unlawful killing."

Jonathan Malaya, assistant director-general of the National Security Council, denied there is a policy of "red-tagging" critics.

He insisted that the task force Khan wants disbanded had helped weaken the communist insurgency in recent years, with just 1,500 guerrillas remaining. Once remaining guerrilla fronts have been dismantled, the task force would turn to promoting peace and national unity, Malaya said.

The Maoist rebel force was established in 1969 with only about 60 armed fighters in the country's north but gradually grew amid crumpling poverty and unrest among farmers, spreading across the country. However, battlefield setbacks and infighting have weakened the guerrillas, who remain a key threat to Philippine security. MDT/AP

AP PHOTO



NATO British aircraft carrier that had been set to lead the largest NATO exercises since the Cold War did not set sail yesterday after a problem with its propeller was discovered during final checks, the Royal Navy said. The HMS Queen Elizabeth will not join the exercises off Norway's Arctic coast and will be replaced by the HMS Prince of Wales. The change of plans is almost a reverse scenario of what happened in August 2022 when the Prince of Wales broke down with a propeller problem on its way to carry out training exercises with the United States and Canada off North America.

AP PHOTO



El Salvador People headed out to vote yesterday in a presidential and legislative elections that's largely about the tradeoff between security and democracy. With soaring approval ratings and virtually no competition, Nayib Bukele is almost certainly headed for a second term as president. El Salvador's constitution prohibits reelection. Nonetheless, about eight out of 10 of voters support Bukele, according to a January poll from the University of Central America. That's despite Bukele taking steps throughout his first term that lawyers and critics say chip away at the country's system of checks and balances.

AP PHOTO



Chile Intense forest fires burning around a densely populated area of central Chile have caused at least 46 deaths, Chile's president said, and officials said at least 1,100 homes had been destroyed. In a nationally televised address, President Gabriel Boric warned that the death toll could worsen as four large fires burn in the region of Valparaiso, where firefighters have struggled to reach the most threatened neighborhoods.