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HONG KONG'S SECURITIES REGULATOR MAY DELIST TWO COMPANIES FORMERLY HEADED BY ALVIN CHAU OVER CONCERNS ABOUT ITS MILLIONAIRE SALE OF ASSETS IN RUSSIA P4

MGM RECORDS ALL-TIME HIGH IN REVENUES, HITS 20% MARKET SHARE P5

JAPAN SLIPS INTO A RECESSION, LOSES SPOT AS WORLD'S THIRD-LARGEST ECONOMY P7



AP PHOTO



South Korea's presidential office claimed yesterday that the country's move to establish diplomatic relations with Cuba would deal a "political and psychological blow" to the South's war-divided rival North Korea, whose diplomatic footing is largely dependent on a small number of Cold War allies. The comments followed an announcement by South Korea's Foreign Ministry on Wednesday night that it has agreed to open ambassador-level relations with Cuba following a meeting between their United Nations representatives in New York.

AP PHOTO



Japan Activists and LGBTQ+ community members handed out colorful chocolate candy for Valentine's Day in Tokyo, marking the fifth anniversary of the launch of a legal battle to achieve marriage equality for same-sex couples. Japan is the only member of the Group of Seven nations that still excludes same-sex couples from the right to legally marry and receive spousal benefits. Support for legalizing marriage equality has grown among the Japanese public, but the governing Liberal Democratic Party remains the main opposition to the campaign.

AP PHOTO



Thailand Two years after Thailand made pot legal, the country appears set to crack down on its freewheeling drug market with a ban on "recreational" use. Legal cannabis has fueled Thailand's tourism and farming trades and spawned thousands of neon green shops, but it's facing public backlash over perceptions that under-regulation has made the drug available to kids and caused crime.

More on backpage

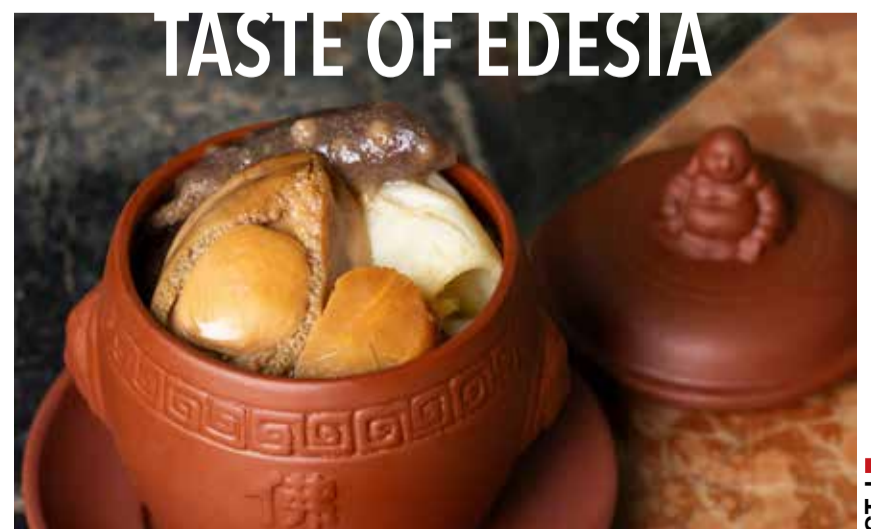
HOLY MOLY

Official CNY visitors' estimates short of actual stats – more than 1.5 million may have visited Macau during the 10-day holiday P2-3



GAMING
FEBRUARY GGR MIGHT TOP MOP19.8B AS CASINO STOCKS SURGE

P4



P15

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

SPRING FESTIVAL GOLDEN WEEK

Daily visitors hit almost

RENATO MARQUES

THE first five days of the Spring Festival Golden Week, from Feb. 10 until Feb. 17, brought to Macau more visitors than in 2019, provisional figures released by the Public Security Police Force (PSP) and Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO) have shown.

In the first five days (Feb. 10 to Feb. 14), the daily average of visitors entering Macau was 179,807, up 7.02% from pre-pandemic figure of 168,008.

This increase is even clearer when compared with the same period last year with the 2024 figure being 180% higher year-on-year.

The first three days of the new year, Feb. 10 to 12, contributed significantly to these results.

Visitor entries were consistently and significantly higher than in 2019, a trend that inverted from the fourth day onwards.

As the Times reported late last week, the MGTO had made a conservative forecast of about 120,000 visitors in the first eight days of the new year, a figure that should be easily surpassed. The peak of these numbers had already been reached by the third day, and after that the entry numbers started to decline.

In the same MGTO forecast, the tourism authority predicted 960,000 people would visit Macau over the week-long holiday, a number reached yesterday before noon with two days remaining.

As expected, the city was extremely busy around the major tourist landmarks such as the Ruins of Saint Paul's and surrounding streets, in the Peninsula and the Rua do Cunha and surrounding areas in Taipa.

Still, most other areas of the Peninsula and Islands remained quiet as many locals prefer to spend holidays outside Macau.

DAILY VISITORS CLOSE TO AN ALL-TIME RECORD

A total of 217,541 visitors were recorded during the peak, the third day of the new year.



This figure is the second largest for a single day and is close to the all-time record of 226,326 entries recorded on the third day of the new year in 2019.

The results of the first five days are reportedly making the MGTO reconsider its initial forecast with director Maria Helena de Senna Fernandes telling Chinese media outlets Wednesday that is now expected the final figure for the eight days will be over 1 million visitors.

76% FROM THE MAINLAND, 18% FROM HONG KONG

As expected, visitors from mainland China continue to top the list of market sources by a large margin with 76.1% of all

visitors entering Macau in the first five days of the new year coming from the mainland.

Hong Kong visitors were the second largest group, accounting for 18.4%.

Together, these two sources account for 94.5% of the total.

Those coming from other parts of the world, including visitors from Taiwan, were just 5.5%.

An analysis of the PSP's daily figures, released before verification and cross-information, shows the number of foreigners in the first five days was a little over 40,000 while those arriving from Taiwan was around 10,000, which accounts for an average of respectively over 8,000 and about 2,000 per day.



Ho Iat Seng: SAR seeks economic diversification in Year of Dragon

STAFF REPORTER

CHIEF Executive Ho Iat Seng said it is necessary to be proactive to realize substantial progress in appropriate economic diversification in the Year of the Dragon.

In his message for the Lunar New Year, Ho said the past Year of the Rabbit witnessed Macau's recovery from the pandemic and its robust development.

The government implemented effective measures to lift Macau out of the pandemic's shadow and set the stage for a rapid economic resurgence. The passage of amendments to the Law on Safeguarding National Security further strengthened efforts to protect national security.

Ho also recalled several notable projects that were completed, including the trial operation of the Macao Union Hospital, the construction of elderly housing units and the Macau New Neighbourhood, and the inauguration of the LRT Barra Station. These achievements bolstered public confidence and contributed to the stability and harmony of society.

The government reaffirmed its commitment to upholding national security and fostering patriotism and love for Macau. It also stressed the importance of economic recovery and the implementa-

tion of the "1+4" development strategy to achieve substantial progress in economic diversification. The growth of the Cooperation Zone and enhanced integration into the national development plan were identified as key priorities.

Looking ahead to the new year, Ho said, "we will prioritize the growth of the Cooperation Zone and meet the phased goals laid out in the Master Plan of the Development of the Guangdong-Macao Intensive Cooperation Zone in Hengqin at a faster pace; more efforts will also be made to conduct external exchange so that Macau can better integrate into the overall national development."

Liu Xianfa, commissioner of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the SAR, said in his New Year message that, in the past year, the SAR's chief executive and government have united and led all sectors of society, achieving remarkable results in promoting the development of various undertakings.

In the new year, Liu noted, the foreign affairs office will fully support Macau to govern according to law, actively help the SAR expand foreign exchanges and cooperation, firmly shoulder the responsibility of "diplomacy for the people" and "diplomacy for Macau," and earnestly implement the purpose of serving the SAR.

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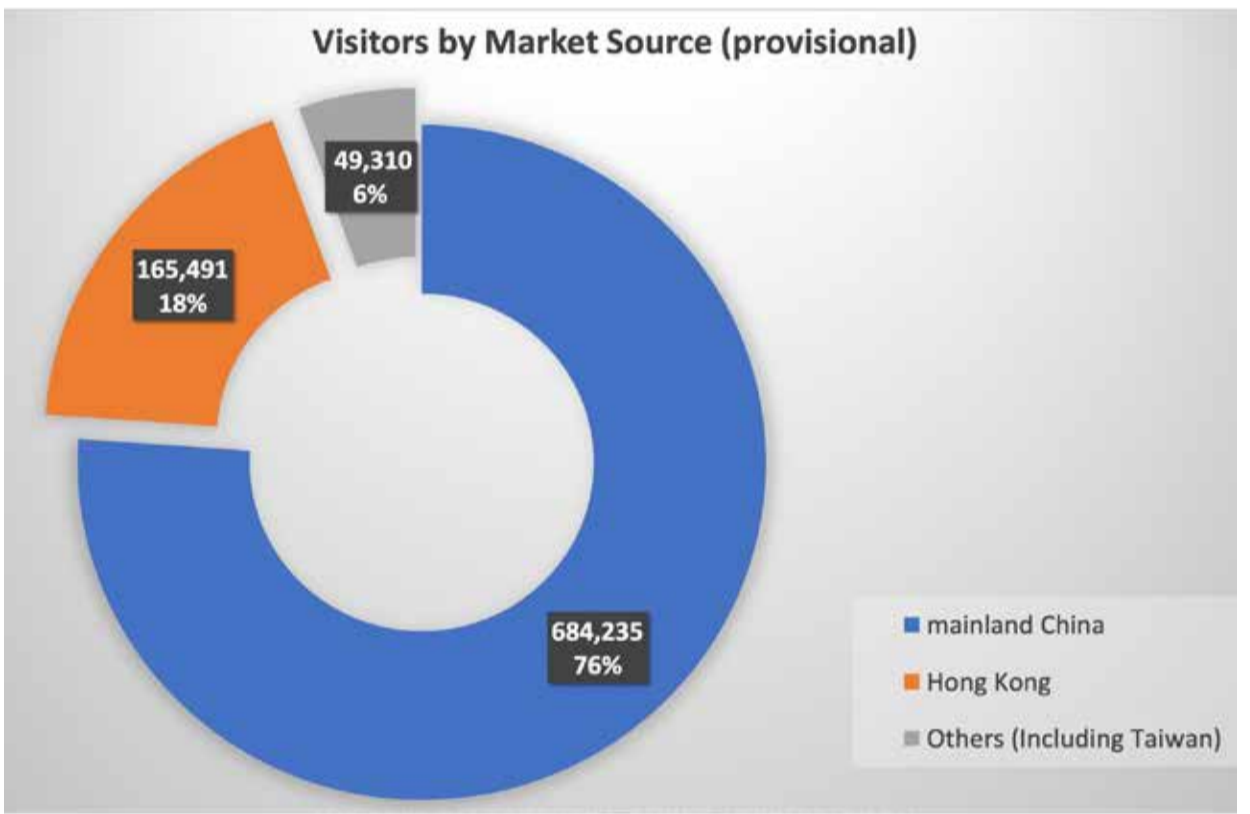
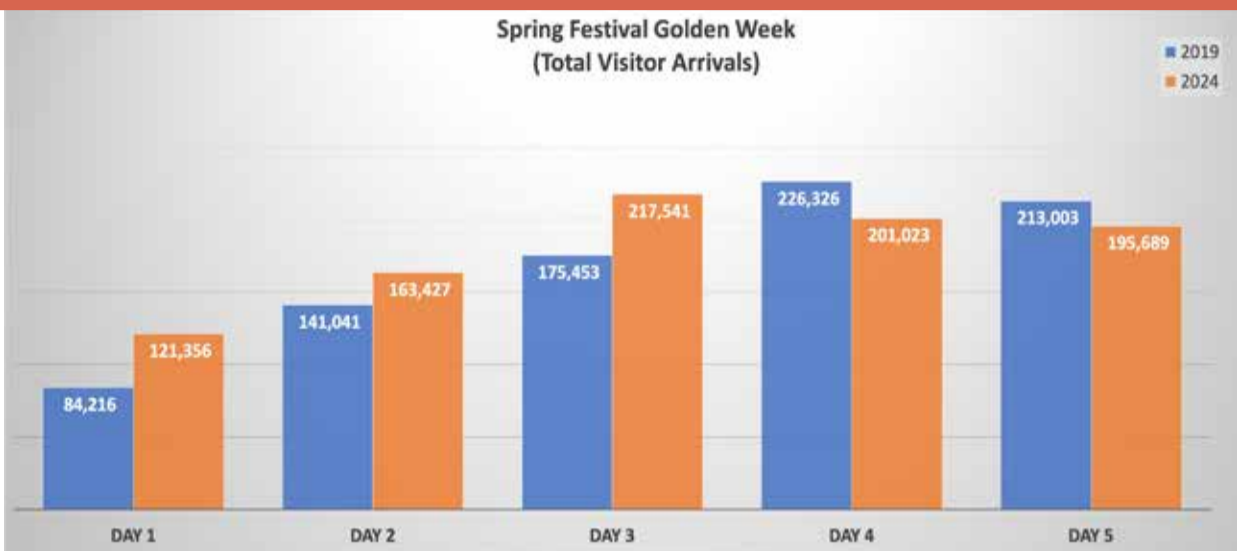
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For subscription and general issues: general@macaudailytimes.com | Printed at Welfare Printing Ltd

180,000, reaches pre-pandemic levels



HOTEL OCCUPANCY OVER 90%

According to information released by the MGTO, hotel occupancy has recorded figures over the same period of over 90%.

Senna Fernandes said both the hotels very high occupancy rate as well as the number of visitors arrivals reflects favorably on the fact that the hotel industry has kept hotel room rates at a reasonable price.

F&B INDUSTRY ESTIMATES SALES UP 20-30% COMPARED TO CHRISTMAS

Addressing the predicted effects of the Spring Festival Golden Week, representatives of the food and beverage (F&B) industry have said to expect sales from this sector to be up some 20 to 30% when compared to the holidays, at the end of last year, which includes the Winter Solstice, the Macau handover day and the Christmas holidays.

The forecast was aired by the president of the Macau Catering Industry Association, Lei Iam Leong, during a talk show on TDM's Chinese-language radio

station.

Lei also said the flow of visitors to traditional tourism areas

is booming and that shops in the area are mainly focused on snacks, which are especially

appreciated by tourists because they can eat on the go.

Lei said some of the products

were being sold at a promotional price which also attracted more consumers.

FLOAT PARADE AND PERFORMANCES DAZZLE CITY DURING CNY

THE float parade and performance organized by Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO) made its debut on earlier this week, with 15 floats, 30 performance groups, and around 1,000 performers celebrating the festival with residents and tourists. Audiences lined the parade route to join in the festive celebrations.

That evening, the "Happy Chinese New Year" fireworks performance lit up the sea opposite the Macao Tower, adding even more joy to the festival celebrations.

Zhou, a mainland visitor, said Macau is rich in tourist programs and the city itself has a very good historical heritage, so children can also get to know different customs and history apart from having fun.

Data from the MGTO showed that the average occupancy rate of hotel establishments reaches 90% within the first three days of the Chinese New Year.

Mui, a Macau resident, told Xinhua that she had witnessed flows of visitors every day. "Wealth comes with popularity, so I see a good sign of

Macau's tourism industry and the overall economy this year," she said.

Qu and his wife came here to celebrate Va-

lentine's Day, which falls on Wednesday. Having visited the heart-shaped tree near the Macao Science Center, made a wish under the bright fireworks, and wandered hand in hand on the streets of Fisherman's Wharf in the festive atmosphere, they had an experience "unforgettable for a lifetime." XINHUA



GAMING

FEBRUARY GGR MIGHT TOP MOP19.8B AMID CASINO STOCKS SURGE

STAFF REPORTER

SHARES of MGM China Holdings Ltd. surged 10% in Hong Kong, reaching their highest level since June 2021. Galaxy Entertainment Group Ltd. and Wynn Macau also experienced over 3% gains.

This news follows a report showing that Macau's gaming revenue in January had risen by 67% year-on-year, surpassing analyst expectations. Analysts believe that Macau is attracting not only high-stakes gamblers but also casual players and leisure travelers, with growing non-gaming entertainment events, such as concerts, appealing to a younger audience.

According to brokerage firm CLSA Ltd., Macau's casino gross gaming revenue (GGR) is expected to exceed MOP19.8 billion in February, driven by a strong



performance during the Chinese New Year holiday, as cited in a GGRAsia report.

Analysts from CLSA noted that the average daily visitor count during the holiday period aligns with

the Macao Government Tourism Office's forecast of 120,000 visitors per day. The analysts also reported witnessing robust foot traffic at border crossings and the four integrated resorts they

visited on Feb. 12.

Preliminary data from the city's Public Security Police showed that Macau received over 898,000 visitors in the first five days of the Chinese New Year break, with an average of approximately 179,700 visitors per day.

The analysts attribute this increase in revenue due to the popularity of certain table games. For example, the minimum bet for baccarat tables was commonly seen at MOP1,000, and tables with higher minimum bets (MOP2,000, MOP3,000, and MOP5,000) were notably occupied in the afternoon. Sic bo, a table game with a higher house edge than baccarat, and slot machines were also popular among players.

CLSA believes higher-than-expected GGR in February is possible, potentially surpassing the MOP19.8 billion forecasted and marking the highest monthly figure since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. During CLSA's visit, they observed high demand for ferries and golden shuttle buses, with packed transportation services across the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge.

BUSINESS

HK WATCHDOG WARNS ALVIN CHAU'S FORMER FIRMS OVER RUSSIA DEAL

STAFF REPORTER

HONG Kong's securities regulator has warned it may delist two companies formerly headed by jailed junket mogul Alvin Chau over concerns about its USD116 million sale of assets in Russia.

Shares remain halted as the Securities and Futures Commission (SFC) said it was concerned LET Group Holdings and Summit Ascent Holdings had not complied with rules requiring shareholders' approval of the deal, the regulator said in a statement Wednesday, as cited in a Bloomberg report.

The completion of the asset sale may leave both LET Group and Summit Ascent without sufficient assets to warrant their continued

listing in Hong Kong, it said. The SFC said it has serious concerns about the conduct of the companies and their management, the report added.

LET Group was formerly part of Chau's gambling empire Sun-city Group before it re-branded in 2022 with Andrew Lo at the helm.

"Issues associated with Alvin Chau made its parent company's junket business evaporate. Covid dragged tourist foot flow to Hoi-an in Vietnam, and the company lost direction of its business in Vladivostok due to sanctions related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict," Angela Hanlee, a senior gaming and hospitality analyst at Bloomberg Intelligence, as cited in the report.

AD

CRIME

SEVERAL LOCAL RESIDENTS CAUGHT SMUGGLING PRODUCTS INTO THE MAINLAND

RENATO MARQUES

MAINLAND authorities have reportedly caught several local residents trying to smuggle several kinds of products into the mainland.

There were at least three different cases reported over the Lunar New Year period in which residents were found trying to smuggle live lobsters as well as wine and other alcoholic beverages into the mainland.

The Chinese authorities are said to have caught the suspects during random inspections of vehicles. In most cases, the smugglers were using double-plate vehicles to transport the goods. In at least one case, the suspect was using a private car with a single plate from Macau registered under the Macau Vehicles Going North scheme.

In one of the cases reported yesterday, a man was caught at the che-



ckpoint of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge (HKZMB) with 136 live lobsters stuffed in gym bags.

The lobsters seized totaled 81.4 kilograms.

In a different case, which occurred in early February, a man was also caught at the HKZMB this time transporting 34 bottles of red wine and Cognac.

On Feb. 8, local customs were also said to have sei-

zed 110 kg of live undocumented lobsters that were found in an Industrial Building in the Northern District.

The lobsters were said to have a market value of approximately 50,000 patacas.

Questioned by the authorities, a 22-year-old local man admitted the lobsters were also intended to be smuggled into the mainland.

MGM records all-time high in revenues as casino shares hit 20%

LYNZY VALLES

LAST year was MGM China's best in terms of income collected, hitting 20% market share.

In an earnings report, the gaming operator revealed all-time highs for 4Q23 and entire year Adjusted Property EBITDAR, posting net revenues of HKD24.7 billion, up 369% year-on-year, and up to 9% compared to 2019.

The casino operator also recorded adjusted EBITDA at a historical high of HKD7.2 billion, representing 117% of 2019 levels.

"Looking ahead in Macau, our exceptional results for 2023 have carried into the first 45 days of 2024, driven by successful events, including a Bruno Mars concert at the MGM Cotai driving strong visitation to our properties."

"Demand in our properties for Chinese New Year's, which is also going on now, is also very strong," said Bill Hornbuckle, president and CEO of the gaming operator.



"As we look further into the year, the Macau government has set a target of 33 million visitors in 2024, reflecting a 17% increase year over year.

This is a testament to our team's continuous innovation and crafting compelling experiences for our predominantly premium mass clientele," he added.

The executive revealed that

MGM's focus on its Macau operations are based on three priorities: implementing strategic adjustments to its casino floor and existing room offerings to optimize yield, prioritizing the needs of its mass and premium mass customers, and actively driving international tourism.

MGM Macau recorded revenue of HKD3.05 billion and adjusted property EBITDAR of HKD824.7 million in the fourth quarter, while MGM Cotai recorded HKD4.62 billion and HKD1.37 billion respectively.

"Macau is doing amazingly well. I know some of our competitors are wondering what we're doing. [Kenneth Feng] and the team broke through 20% in the month of January for market share," Hornbuckle added.

"Macau is well-positioned. We've ended up in a great space in digital, and we're in the game for real for the long haul, and so you'll see us continue to do that."

Q1 MICE EVENTS TO ATTRACT 33,000 PARTICIPANTS

Macau expects to welcome approximately 33,000 visitors in the current quarter through a series of nearly 20 convention and exhibition events, as reported by the Macao Trade and Investment Promotion Institute (IPIM). Among the upcoming events, the Greater Bay Area International Sports Business Summit in February is anticipated to attract senior managers and experts from the sports industry, with around 300 professionals expected to participate. Macau will host the "2024 UFI Asia Pacific Conference" in March, as well as the "2024 Macao International Environmental Co-operation Forum and Exhibition" (2024MIECF).

WATER CONSUMPTION UP 7.1% IN 2023

Water consumption in Macau has seen a year-on-year increase of 7.1%, with business consumption rising by 21.7%, according to the director of the Marine and Water Bureau. The growth in commercial consumption is attributed to the economic recovery and increased tourist arrivals, leading to higher demand from hotels and tourist complexes. In contrast, domestic water consumption has decreased by almost 4.5%, likely due to residents traveling overseas and maintaining a high level of water conservation awareness. Last year was one of the driest years since the 1950s with an extended period of salinity. Although the situation this year has not been as severe, total water inflow from upstream remains lower.

AD

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ECONOMY

Japan slips into a recession, loses spot as world's third-largest economy

YURI KAGEYAMA, TOKYO

JAPAN'S economy is now the world's fourth-largest after it contracted in the last quarter of 2023 and fell behind Germany.

The government reported the economy shrank at an annual rate of 0.4% in October to December, according to Cabinet Office data on real GDP released yesterday, though it grew 1.9% for all of 2023. It contracted 2.9% in July-September. Two straight quarters of contraction are considered an indicator an economy is in a technical recession.

Japan's economy was the second largest until 2010, when it was overtaken by China's. Japan's nominal GDP totaled \$4.2 trillion last year, while Germany's was \$4.4 trillion, or \$4.5 trillion, depending on the currency conversion.

A weaker Japanese yen was a key factor in the drop to fourth place, since comparisons of nominal GDP are in dollar terms. But Japan's relative weakness also reflects a decline in its population and lagging productivity and competitiveness, economists say.

Real gross domestic product is a measure of the value of a nation's products and services. The annual rate measures what would have happened if the quarterly rate lasted a year.

Japan was historically touted as "an economic miracle," rising from the ashes of World War II to become the second largest economy after the U.S.. It kept that

AP PHOTO



going through the 1970s and 1980s. But for most of the past 30 years the economy has grown only moderately at times, mainly remaining in the doldrums after the collapse of its financial bubble began in 1990.

Both the Japanese and German economies are powered by strong small and medium-size businesses with solid productivity.

Like Japan in the 1960s-1980s, for most of this century, Germany roared ahead, dominating global markets for high-end products like luxury cars and industrial machinery, selling so much to the

rest of the world that half its economy ran on exports.

But its economy, one of the world's worst performing last year, also contracted in the last quarter, by 0.3%.

Britain's likewise contracted late last year. Britain reported yesterday that its economy entered a technical recession in October-December, shrinking 0.3% from the previous quarter. The quarterly decline followed a 0.1% fall in the previous three-month period.

As an island nation with relatively few foreign residents, Japan's population has been shrinking

and aging for years, while Germany's has grown to nearly 85 million, as immigration helped to make up for a low birth rate.

The latest data reflect the realities of a weakening Japan and will likely result in Japan's commanding a lesser presence in the world, said Tetsuji Okazaki, professor of economics at the University of Tokyo.

"Several years ago, Japan boasted a powerful auto sector, for instance. But with the advent of electric vehicles, even that advantage is shaken," he said. Many factors have yet to play out, "But when

looking ahead to the next couple of decades, the outlook for Japan is dim."

The gap between developed countries and emerging nations is shrinking, with India likely to overtake Japan in nominal GDP in a few years.

The U.S. remains the world's largest economy by far, with GDP at \$27.94 trillion in 2023, while China's was \$17.5 trillion. India's is about \$3.7 trillion but growing at a sizzling rate of around 7%.

Immigration is one option for solving Japan's labor shortage problem, but the country has been relatively unaccepting of foreign labor, except for temporary stays, prompting criticism about discrimination and a lack of diversity.

Robotics, another option, are gradually being deployed but not to the extent they can fully make up for the lack of workers.

Another key factor behind Japan's sluggish growth is stagnating wages that have left households reluctant to spend. At the same time, businesses have been invested heavily in faster growing economies overseas instead of in the aging and shrinking home market.

Private consumption fell for three straight quarters last year and "growth is set to remain sluggish this year as the household savings rate has turned negative," Marcel Thieliant of Capital Economics said in a commentary. "Our forecast is that GDP growth will slow from 1.9% in 2023 to around 0.5% this year." **MDT/AP**

CORPORATE BITS

MGM enchants Chinese New Year with melodies by A-Lin



The Golden Melody Awards winner and songstress, A-Lin, delivered a two-night full-house concert,

"A-Lin Chinese New Year Music Show at MGM." The concert successfully concluded on Feb. 12 and 13,

marking the third and fourth day of the Chinese New Year, at the MGM Theater in MGM Cotai.

These two nights of musical bliss not only captured the joyful spirit of the Chinese New Year but also embraced the romantic ambiance of Valentine's Day. A-Lin, with her powerful vocals, soul-stirring melodies, and relatable love lyrics enchanted her fans with a radiant and joyous atmosphere, alongside her heartfelt performances of her best-known songs such as "Give Me a Reason to Forget," "When I Think of You," "You are My Song" as well as her soulful love songs, such as "Big Big Hug."

SJM celebrates Lunar New Year with lion dance parade



On the first day of the Chinese New Year, SJM Resorts, S.A. celebrated the advent of the Dragon Year with the "SJM Lion Dance Parade" at

its iconic Grand Lisboa Macau and Grand Lisboa Palace Resort Macau, bringing together residents and tourists in a jubilant celebration.

With the resonant beat of drums and the crackle of firecrackers, the energetic lion dancers made their way through the Grand Lisboa and Grand Lisboa Palace, extending New Year greetings to the assembled crowds, spreading festive joy and New Year wishes to citizens, visitors and businesses alike.

Daisy Ho, managing director of SJM, remarked, "SJM is delighted to welcome the Year of the Dragon with all residents and visitors of Macau, wishing everyone a vigorous and prosperous year! [...] In the new year, SJM will continue to drive forward the revitalization plan of San Ma Lo District."

DIPLOMACY

Russia and China clash with US and UK over strikes on Red Sea ships

EDITH M. LEDERER,
UNITED NATIONS

RUSSIA and China yesterday [Macau time] accused the United States and Britain of illegally attacking military sites used by Yemen's Houthi rebels to launch missiles at commercial vessels in the Red Sea, disrupting global shipping.

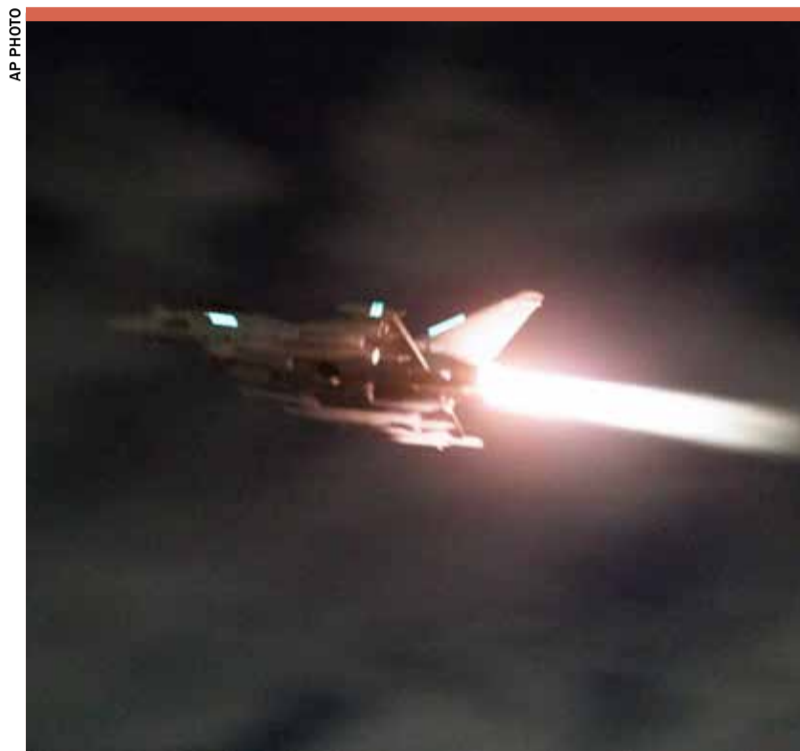
U.S. deputy ambassador Robert Wood and UK Ambassador Barbara Woodward countered that the Houthi attacks are illegal, and their "proportionate and legal action" against the Yemen rebels are being taken in self-defense.

Woodward said the Houthi attacks are "driving up the costs of global shipping, including the costs of food supplies and humanitarian aid in the region."

But Russia's deputy U.N. ambassador Dmitry Polyansky and China's U.N. envoy Zhang Jun argued that the U.N. Security Council never authorized military action against Yemen.

The clashes came at a council meeting where U.N. special envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg said promising efforts to restore peace to Yemen have been slowed by rising regional tensions linked to the war in Gaza and "in particular the military escalation in the Red Sea."

Since November, the Houthi rebels have targeted ships in the Red Sea to demand a cease-fire



An RAF Typhoon aircraft takes off to conduct further strikes against Houthi military targets in Yemen

in Israel's offensive in Gaza. They have frequently attacked vessels with tenuous or no clear links to Israel, imperiling shipping in a key route for trade among Asia, the Mideast and Europe.

In recent weeks, the United States and the United Kingdom, backed by other allies, have launched airstrikes targeting Houthi missile arsenals and launch sites for its attacks.

Wood, the U.S. envoy, said American strikes in response to attacks on U.S. naval vessels, "aim

to disrupt and degrade the Houthis' ability to continue their reckless attacks against vessels and commercial shipping in the Red Sea, the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, and the Gulf of Aden."

Since 2014, he said, Iran has provided the Houthis with "a growing arsenal of advanced weapons" that they have used to target commercial ships, and "Iran cannot deny its role in enabling and supporting the attacks carried out by the Houthis."

Wood accused the Houthis of

"trying to apply a chokehold on global shipping through the Red Sea" and urged all countries, especially those with direct channels to Iran, "to press Iran's leaders to rein in the Houthis and stop these lawless attacks."

Russia's Polyansky stressed that Moscow "categorically condemns attacks and seizures of commercial vessels and (...) any attacks which impede freedom of navigation." He said Russia has conveyed messages to the Houthi leaders to focus on Yemen's domestic agenda and pursue peace.

Grundberg, the U.N. envoy, said that in late December the Houthis, who control the capital and much of the country's north, and Yemen's internationally recognized government "committed to a nationwide cease-fire, measures to improve living conditions, and restarting an intra-Yemeni political process."

But he said Yemen's peace process can't be cordoned off from the events in the region, and the U.S. and UK attacks on Houthi targets, and the U.S. designation of the Houthis as a "Specially Designated Terrorist Group" are "concerning."

"Despite potential complications, my work will continue no matter what," he said. "It is therefore imperative that we protect the political space, that communication channels are kept open and that all actors remain actively engaged with my efforts."

Russia's Polyansky said the root cause of the current situation is Israel's military offensive in Gaza following Hamas' surprise attack in southern Israel on Oct. 7, which has provoked a chain reaction in the Middle East including by the Houthis.

"An immediate cease-fire in Gaza will help to stabilize the situation in the Red Sea, and the de-escalation in those waters will in turn unblock the efforts of the special envoy, Mr. Grundberg," Polyansky said.

Yemen's civil war began in 2014 when the Houthis swept down from their northern stronghold and chased the internationally recognized government from Sanaa. A Saudi-led coalition intervened the following year on behalf of the government and in time the conflict turned into a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The war has devastated Yemen, already the Arab region's poorest country, and created one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters.

Edem Wosornu, the U.N. humanitarian office's director of operations, told the council that Yemen faces "massive continuing needs."

This year, she said, over 18 million people – over half the country's population – will need humanitarian aid.

The U.N. anticipates that 17.6 million people will be "severely food insecure" – facing serious hunger, she said. "Nearly half of all children under five face moderate to severe stunting" of their growth and development.

Last year, the U.N. received just 40% of its \$4.3 billion humanitarian appeal, she said. This year, the Yemen appeal is more targeted and seeks \$2.7 billion to reach 11.2 million people across Yemen.

MDT/AP

DIRE STRAIT

Two mainland fishermen drown after chase with Taiwan's Coast Guard, which alleges trespassing



In this handout photograph provided by Taiwan Coast Guard Administration, Taiwanese coast guards inspect a vessel that capsized during a chase off the coast of Kinmen, Wednesday

TWO Chinese fishermen have drowned while being chased by Taiwan's Coast Guard off the coast of Taiwan's Kinmen archipelago, the coast guard said Wednesday while accusing them of trespassing.

The deaths are unusual despite the level of Chinese activity in the waters near Kinmen, which is closer to China than it is to Taiwan's main island.

China's Taiwan Affairs Office strongly condemned the deaths and called for an investigation, saying "such a malicious event during

the Spring Festival seriously hurts the feelings of compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Strait." Both China and Taiwan are celebrating the Lunar New Year holiday.

The statement accused the ruling Democratic Progressive Party in Taiwan of using "all sorts of excuses to forcefully inspect Chinese fishing vessels, and using violent and dangerous methods towards Chinese fishermen."

The unnamed Chinese vessel had been sailing about one nautical mile off the coast of an islet of Kin-

men island, Taiwan's Coast Guard Administration said in a statement. The Chinese vessel attempted to flee but capsized.

Four fishermen fell into the water and two survived and are in "good shape," while resuscitation efforts on the other two failed, the vice captain of the coast guard in Kinmen, Chen Jien-wen, told a local TV channel.

The Coast Guard said the case has been reported to the Kinmen prosecutor's office, and the fishermen's families were being contacted via official channels.

Taiwan's head of the Mainland Affairs Council, Chiu Tai-san, who oversees the island's relations with the mainland, told reporters yesterday morning that "we keep a certain level of contact with the other side and our Coast Guard, and will promptly let them know of related developments."

Kinmen is in the Taiwan Strait that separates China and Taiwan. From some parts of the archipelago, the southern Chinese city of Xiamen is visible to the naked eye.

Kinmen residents in recent years have reported seeing an increase in sand dredger vessels from China, which take sand from the ocean floor, as well as fishing ships, close to its coast. At times, dozens of the ships can be seen from the island, they say. MDT/AP

ANALYSIS

Who is Prabowo Subianto, the former general who's Indonesia's next president?

VICTORIA MILKO, JAKARTA

A wealthy ex-general with ties to both Indonesia's popular outgoing president and its dictatorial past looks set to be its next leader. He's promised to continue the outgoing president's widely popular policies, but his human rights record has activists and some analysts concerned about the future of Indonesia's democracy.

Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto presented himself as heir to the immensely popular President Joko Widodo, vowing to continue the modernization agenda that's brought rapid growth and vaunted Indonesia into the ranks of middle-income countries.

"We should not be arrogant. We should not be proud," Subianto said in a speech broadcast on national television from a sports stadium on the night of the election. "This victory must be a victory for all Indonesian people."

But Subianto will enter office with unresolved questions about the costs of rapid growth for the environment and traditional communities, as well as his own links to torture, disappearances and other human rights abuses in the final years of the brutal Suharto dictatorship, which he served as a lieutenant general.

Other than promising continuity, Subianto has laid out few concrete plans, leaving observers uncertain about what his election will mean for the country's growth and its still-maturing democracy.

A former rival of Widodo who lost two presidential races to him, Subianto embraced the popular leader to run as his heir, even choosing Widodo's son as his running mate, a choice that ran up against constitutional age limits and has activists worried about an emerging political dynasty in the 25-year-old democracy.

Subianto's win is not yet official. His two rivals have not yet conceded and the official results could take up to a month to be tabulated, but unofficial tallies showed him taking over 55% of the vote in a three-way race. Those counts, conducted by polling agencies and based on millions of ballots sampled from the across the country, have proved accurate in past elections.

Subianto was born in 1951 to one of Indonesia's most powerful families, the third of four children. His father, Sumitro Djojohadikusumo, was an influential politician, and a minister under Presidents Sukarno and Suharto.

AP PHOTO



Indonesian presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto checks his ballot during the election in Bojong Koneng, Wednesday

Subianto's father first worked for Sukarno, the leader of Indonesia's quest for independence from the Dutch, as well as the first president. But Djojohadikusumo later turned against the leader and was forced into exile. Subianto spent most of his childhood overseas and speaks French, German, English and Dutch.

The family returned to Indonesia after General Suharto came to power in 1967 following a failed left-wing coup. Suharto brutally dealt with dissenters and was accused of stealing billions of dollars of state funds for himself, family and close associates. Suharto dismissed the allegations even after leaving office in 1998.

Subianto enrolled in Indonesia's Military Academy in 1970, graduating in 1974 and serving in the military for nearly three decades. In 1976, Subianto joined the Indonesian National Army Special Force, called Kopassus, and was commander of a group that operated in what is now East Timor.

Human rights groups have claimed that Subianto was involved in a series of human rights violations in Timor-Leste in the 1980s and 90s, when Indonesia occupied the now-independent nation. Subianto has denied those allegations.

Subianto and other members of Kopassus were banned from traveling to the U.S. for years over the alleged human rights abuses they committed against the people of Timor-Leste. This ban lasted until 2020, when it was effectively lifted so he could visit the U.S. as

Indonesia's defense minister.

In 1983, he married Suharto's daughter Siti Hediati Hariyadi.

More allegations of human rights abuses led to Subianto being forced out of the military. He was dishonorably discharged in 1998, after Kopassus soldiers kidnapped and tortured political opponents of Suharto, his then-father-in-law. Of 22 activists kidnapped that year, 13 remain missing. Several of his men were tried and convicted, but Subianto never faced trial.

He never commented on these accusations, but went into self-imposed exile in Jordan in 1998.

A number of former democracy activists have joined his campaign. Budiman Sudjatmiko, a politician who was a democracy activist in 1998, said that reconciliation is necessary to move forward. Sudjatmiko left the governing Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle to join Subianto's campaign team.

Sudjatmiko said that international focus on Subianto's human rights record was overblown. "Developed countries don't like leaders from developing countries who are brave, firm and strategic," he said.

Subianto returned from Jordan in 2008, and helped to found the Gerindra Party. He ran for the presidency twice, losing to Widodo both times. He refused to acknowledge the results at first, but accepted Widodo's offer of the defense minister position in 2019, in a bid for unity.

In the most recent election, Subianto has respected the democratic process.

He has vowed to continue Widodo's economic development plans, which capitalized on Indonesia's abundant nickel, coal, oil and gas reserves and led Southeast Asia's biggest economy through a decade of rapid growth and modernization that vastly expanded the country's networks of roads and railways.

That includes includes the \$30 billion project to build a new capitol city called Nusantara. A report by a coalition of NGOs claimed that Subianto's family would profit from the Nusantara project, thanks to land and mining interests the family holds on East Kalimantan, the site of the new city. A member of the family denied the report's allegations.

Subianto and his family also have business ties to Indonesia's palm oil, coal and gas, mining, agriculture and fishery industries.

Subianto bristles at international criticism over human rights and other topics, but he's expected to keep the country's pragmatic approach to power politics. Under Widodo, Indonesia has strengthened defense ties with the U.S. while courting Chinese investment.

"Countries like us, countries as big as us, countries as rich as us, are always envied by other powers," Subianto said during his victory speech after the election. "Therefore, we must be united. United and harmonious."

The former rivals became tacit allies: Indonesian presidents don't typically endorse candidates, but Subianto chose Widodo's son, 36-year-old Surakarta Mayor

Gibran Rakabuming Raka, as his vice presidential running mate, and Widodo coyly favored Subianto over the candidate of his own former party.

Raka is below the statutory minimum age of 40, but was allowed to run under an exception created by the Constitutional Court — then headed by Widodo's brother-in-law — allowing current and former regional governors to run at age 35.

"This is the first time in Indonesian history that a sitting president has a relative who won in a presidential election," said Yoes Kenawas, a research fellow at Atma Jaya Catholic University in Jakarta. "It could be said that the Jokowi political dynasty has been established at the highest level of Indonesian government."

Subianto has also had close ties with hard-line Islamists, whom he used to undermine his opponents.

But for the 2024 election, Subianto projected a softer image that has resonated with Indonesia's large youth population, including videos of him dancing on stage and ads showing digital anime-like renderings of him roller-skating through Jakarta's streets.

"We will be the president and vice president and government for all Indonesian people," said Subianto during his victory speech. "I will lead, with Gibran (to) protect and defend all Indonesian people, whatever tribe, whatever ethnic group, whatever race, religion, whatever social background. It will be our responsibility for all Indonesian people to safeguard their interests." **MDT/AP**

JAPAN

ARE WE ABOUT TO FIND OUT THE MOON'S ORIGIN? SPACE AGENCY SAYS IT MAY NOW HAVE CLUES

MARI YAMAGUCHI, TOKYO

AN unmanned lunar spacecraft has captured and transmitted data analyzing 10 lunar rocks, a greater-than-expected achievement that could help provide clues about the origin of the moon, a Japan space agency official said this week.

For four days, the Smart Lander for Investigating Moon, or SLIM — which landed on the moon last month — has used its multi-band spectral camera to study rock composition, and worked on examining lunar rocks, said Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency project manager Shinichiro Sakai.

The lunar mission is Japan's first. The spacecraft made a historic precision touchdown on Jan. 20, though it landed the wrong way up, with its solar panels initially unable to see the sun and was turned off after a brief communication with Earth. But on the eighth day, it started working, allowing it to successfully reestablish com-



An image taken by a Lunar Excursion Vehicle 2 of a robotic moon rover called Smart Lander for Investigating Moon, or SLIM, on the moon

munication with the command center at JAXA on Earth.

A black-and-white photo transmitted soon after SLIM was reactivated showed the bumpy lunar surface, including six rocks. The craft eventually obtained data from 10 rocks altogether, all of which have been given the names

of dog breeds, such as "Akitainu," "Beagle" and "Shibainu."

"We are hoping that the rock analysis will lead us to the origin of the moon," Sakai said. By comparing the mineral compositions of moon rocks and those of Earth, they could find out if the rocks have common elements, he said.

According to the "giant-impact" hypothesis, the moon is believed to have formed as a result of the Earth colliding with another planet, and a smaller mass spinning off of them.

The JAXA team expected SLIM to study and analyze only one rock, so having data on 10 rocks

was a cause for celebration, propelling the team to pursue studying the moon's origins.

SLIM is currently "hibernating" in another lunar night that will last till late February. It remains unknown if the probe and its spectroscope will survive the severe cold night temperatures and be able to "wake up" once sunlight returns.

The spacecraft had landed about 55 meters (60 yards) away from its target, near the Shioli crater, a region covered in volcanic rocks. It's the most precise landing compared to previous moon missions that typically aimed for flat areas at least 10 kilometers (6 miles) wide.

If the lander had not encountered a last-minute failure in one of the two main engines that caused a harder-than-planned landing, SLIM's touchdown was estimated to be within meters of the target, JAXA said.

SLIM carried two autonomous probes which were released just before touchdown, recording the landing, surroundings and other lunar data. The two small probes had completed their mission of recording SLIM's initial work and have since stopped working.

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

MDT/AP

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



BRAZIL

A Carnival day, from a morning street party to an evening samba parade

A typical Carnival day in Brazil starts around 7 a.m., when the first blocos — as the free street parties are known — start their loud and colorful musical journey down the city's streets. Drummers, stilt walkers, trumpet players and other performers, all dressed up and lacquered in glitter, attract thousands of followers.

Blocos are thematic, inspiring the costumes and songs of their followers. In Rio alone, the city authorized 500 street parties this year.

On Saturday, a dog donned an alligator costume during the Blocão dog Carnival parade, a play on words that joins "bloco" and "cão," or dog in Portuguese. In northeastern Brazil's Madre de Deus, there is even an aluminum can street party, where performers dress up in gigantic outfits made from approximately 1,600 cans gathered over the course of the previous months, then thoroughly washed to dispose of lingering odors.

Some blocos are powered by behemoth sound trucks known as electric trios, others by small fanfares.

From the different street parties, which usually end in the evening, some revelers move onto the Sambadrome, where samba schools parade and compete to win the annual title.

From giant unicorns to greater-than-life divinities, the samba schools spend much of the year preparing massive floats and churning out elaborate costumes to enact a parade before millions of spectators, both present and watching live on television. MDT/AP

AP PHOTOS



Performers from the Unidos da Tijuca samba school parade on a float during Carnival celebrations at the Sambadrome



Dancers from the Dragões da Real samba school perform on a float during a carnival parade



Drum queen Mayara Lima from Paraíso do Tuiuti samba school performs during Carnival celebrations



A performer from Porto da Pedra samba school parades during Carnival celebrations



Musicians perform at the "Cordão do Boitata"



A child coated in silver body paint, smiles during the "Loucura Suburbana," or Suburban Madness

AP PHOTO



F/A-18F Super Hornet fighter jet takes off from the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Dwight D. Eisenhower, also known as the 'IKE', in the south Red Sea earlier this week

MIDDLE EAST

ON THE IKE, FOUR MONTHS OF COMBAT AT SEA FACING HOUTHI MISSILES

BERNAT ARMANGUE,
ABOARD THE USS DWIGHT
D. EISENHOWER

SAILORS aboard the aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower and its accompanying warships have spent four months straight at sea defending against ballistic missiles and flying attack drones fired by Iranian-backed Houthis, and are now more regularly also defending against a new threat — fast unmanned vessels that are fired at them through the water.

While the Houthis have launched unmanned surface vessels, or USVs, in the past against Saudi coalition forces that have intervened in Yemen's civil war, they were used for the first time against U.S. military and commercial in the Red Sea on Jan. 4. In the weeks since, the Navy has had to intercept multiple USVs, including one yesterday [Macau time].

It's "more of an unknown threat that we don't have a lot of intel on, that could be extremely lethal — an unmanned surface vessel," said Rear Adm. Marc Miguez, commander of Carrier Strike Group Two, of which the Ei-

senhower is the flagship. The Houthis "have ways of obviously controlling them just like they do the (unmanned aerial vehicles), and we have very little little fidelity as to all the stockpiles of what they have USV-wise," Miguez said.

The Houthis began firing on U.S. military and commercial vessels after a deadly blast at the Al-Ahli hospital in Gaza on Oct. 17, a few days after the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war. The rebels have said they will continue firing on commercial and military vessels transiting the region until Israel ceases its military operations inside Gaza.

The Eisenhower has been on patrol here since Nov. 4, and its accompanying ships have been on location for even longer, since October.

In those months the Eisenhower's fleet of fighter and surveillance aircraft have worked non-stop to detect and intercept the missiles and drones fired by the Houthis at ships in the Red Sea, Bab-al-Mandeb strait and Gulf of Aden. The carriers' F/A-18 fighter jets are also frequently launched to take out missile sites they detect before munitions are fired.

As of yesterday, the carrier strike group, which includes the cruiser USS Philippine Sea, the destroyers USS Mason and Gravely, and additional U.S. Navy assets in the region including the destroyers USS Laboon and USS Carney have conducted more than 95 intercepts of drones, anti-ship ballistic missiles and anti-ship cruise missiles and made more than 240 self-defense strikes on more than 50 Houthi targets.

"We are constantly keeping an eye on what the Iranian-backed Houthis are up to, and when we find military targets that threaten the ability of merchant vessels, we act in defense of those ships and strike them precisely and violently," said Capt. Marvin Scott, commander of the carrier air wing's eight squadrons of warplanes.

But the USV threat, which is still evolving, is worrisome, Miguez said.

"That's one of the most scary scenarios, to have a bomb-laden, unmanned surface vessel that can go in pretty fast speeds. And if you're not immediately on scene, it can get ugly extremely quick," Miguez said.

That pace has meant the

ships have spent four months at a constant combat pace with no days off with a port call. That takes a toll on sailors, the commander of the Eisenhower, Capt. Christopher "Chowdah" Hill said in an interview with The Associated Press aboard the Eisenhower.

The ship keeps up morale by letting sailors know how important their job is and by giving them wi-fi access so they can stay connected with their families back home.

"I was walking through the mess decks the other day and I could hear a baby crying because someone was teleconferencing with their infant that they haven't even met yet," Hill said. "It's just extraordinary, that sort of connection."

The destroyers don't have wi-fi because of bandwidth limitations, which can make it harder for those crews.

Joselyn Martinez, a second class gunner's mate aboard the destroyer Gravely said not being in touch with home and being in a fighting stance at sea for so long has been hard, "but we have each other's backs here."

When a threat is detected, and an alarm sounds directing the crew to respond, "it is like a rush of adrenaline," Martinez said. "But at the end of the day, we just do what we come here to do and, you know, defend my crew and my ship."

Yesterday, the U.S. confirmed carrying out four new strikes against the Houthis targeting anti-ship missiles, drones and a bomb-loaded drone boat that were prepared to be launched against ships in the Red Sea. **MDT/AP**

this day in history

1959 CASTRO SWORN IN AS CUBAN PM



Cuba's revolutionary leader Fidel Castro has become the country's youngest ever premier.

At the age of 32, he has been sworn in as Prime Minister in the Cabinet Room of the Presidential Palace in Havana.

Dr Castro led the resistance against the seven-year military rule of President Fulgencio Batista and commanded the 26 July Army, a guerrilla force that drove the old regime into exile on New Year's Day.

But this is the first time he has assumed administrative responsibilities within the new, provisional government.

Cuban newspaper 'Revolution' - regarded as the voice-piece of the 26 July Army - explained his appointment is to solve the problem of "a dispersal of power", as many workers and industries have observed Castro's pronouncements and not the government's since the revolution.

According to the newspaper, "now the government, the revolution and the people will take the same path."

Dr Castro was on leave from his previous post as Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces when Dr Jose Miro Cordoba - prime minister since 5 January - and his cabinet resigned, without explanation, two days ago.

As well as his supporters, a hoard of Cuban and foreign media witnessed Fidel Castro being sworn into office wearing his olive-green rebel army fatigues and sporting his trademark square cap and beard.

He told them: "We have great plans and we suffer when we cannot put these into effect rapidly, but technical preparations take time."

He also denied he had any interest in taking over as president, saying legal moves to lower the age of eligibility for the post last week were the initiative of the incumbent president Manuel Urrutia Lleo.

President Urrutia and Prime Minister Castro are old allies and are expected to work together to achieve revolutionary aims of economic reform and improved living standards for all Cubans.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

Fidel Castro became patron of the Whiskers Club in Derbyshire, UK, on 23 February after promising not to shave his two-year-old beard until his country had a "good government". The Cuban Cabinet refused to accept Dr Castro's resignation on 18 July 1959, claiming President Urrutia was obstructing reforms, and the President was prompted to step down instead. Antagonism with the US grew and the Americans imposed economic sanctions on Cuba from 1960. Cuban alliance with the USSR led to the nuclear missile crisis in 1962. Dr Castro passed a new constitution and became president, secretary general of the Communist Party and commander-in-chief of the army in 1976.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS

ARIES
Mar. 21-Apr. 19
Deception may cause disputes you can do without. Don't make any unreasonable promises. You may have a problem at work with a female coworker.

TAURUS
Apr. 20-May. 20
You will have a childlike approach today, big hearted and full of spunk. Empty promises are evident and deception probable.

GEMINI
May. 21-Jun. 21
Concentrate on yourself or your work. Empty promises will cause confusion. You may want to take another look at the investment you are about to make.

CANCER
Jun. 22-Jul. 22
Your charisma will no doubt attract a lot of attention. Catch up on any correspondence you've neglected. Be honest in your communication and don't lose your cool.

LEO
Jul. 23-Aug. 22
Don't expect others to live up to their promises and you won't be disappointed or find yourself stuck with delays. You might find it difficult to control your emotions.

VIRGO
Aug. 23-Sep. 22
Don't use emotional blackmail on someone you love. Your need to get away could lead you into greater debt. Do not yield to children or relatives when they really don't deserve it.

LIBRA
Sep. 23-Oct. 22
Do your own thing and everything will settle down. Try not to be so demonstrative. Try to be patient and understanding. Control your emotions and everything will fall into place.

SCORPIO
Oct. 23-Nov. 21
You will have the discipline to make changes you feel are necessary. You could find yourself having problems with coworkers and employers.

SAGITTARIUS
Nov. 22-Dec. 21
Avoid lending money or belongings to friends. Do not expect others to do your work. You will have excellent ideas and you should be able to help your partner get ahead.

CAPRICORN
Dec. 22-Jan. 19
Try out for a local sports team such as volleyball, tennis, lawn bowling, or whatever interests you. Take care of matters involving institutions or government agencies.

AQUARIUS
Jan. 20-Feb. 18
Deception is apparent. Don't forget to let your mate know how much you care. Tone down and put some of that hard earned cash into a safe, long-term investment.

PISCES
Feb. 19-Mar. 20
Chronic health problems are likely to surface if you are keeping your problems locked up inside. Love and romance are evident. Take the time to help those less fortunate.

The Born Loser by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

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

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

WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	-2	9	Fine
Changchun	-9	5	Fine
Chengdu	3	18	Fine
Chongqing	10	16	Cloudy
Fuzhou	10	13	Overcast
Guangzhou	12	23	Cloudy
Guiyang	5	15	Cloudy
Haikou	18	22	Cloudy
Hangzhou	1	10	Cloudy
Harbin	-17	0	Fine
Hefei	-1	10	Fine
Nanjing	-1	10	Fine
Shanghai	2	11	Fine
Taipei	14	16	Overcast
Wuhan	1	14	Fine
Hong Kong	18	21	Overcast
WORLD			
Moscow	-8	-6	cloudy
Frankfurt	9	16	overcast
Paris	6	13	cloudy
London	6	12	clear
New York	-1	6	overcast

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Counterfeit; 5- Receiver Jerry; 9- Canonized mlle.; 12- Musical ending; 13- Muse of poetry; 15- Rain cats and dogs; 16- Seed covering; 17- Carried; 18- Bushy hairdo; 19- Fast time; 21- Highest singing voice in women; 23- Chatters; 24- Flyers' org.; 25- Calm; 28- Maintained by the federal government; 33- Singer Cleo; 34- Persian fairy; 35- Talk irrationally; 36- Syr. neighbor; 37- Municipal; 38- Lummo; 39- Clothes-pins; 41- "Star Wars" princess; 42- Fess up; 44- Railway ties; 46- In a gay manner; 47- Descartes's conclusion; 48- Illustrious warrior; 49- Slowpoke; 53- Isolated; 57- Pine; 58- Nary a soul; 60- Donated; 61- Songwriter Jacques; 62- Pacific kingdom; 63- Med. care providers; 64- DC bigwig; 65- Golf pegs, northern English river; 66- Canvas shelter used on camping trips;

DOWN 1- Harry Potter's lightning bolt, e.g.; 2- Israeli dance; 3- Take ___ view of; 4- A language of Singapore; 5- Capture again; 6- Removes wrinkles; 7- House pet; 8- Hot times abroad; 9- Couch; 10- Go bad; 11- Suffix with sock; 14- Dental; 15- Living room; 20- Take out; 22- ___ Beta Kappa; 25- Minor mistakes; 26- Stand used by painters; 27- Threnody; 28- One of the Leeward Islands; 29- Type of song, to be sung solo; 30- Mother-in-law of Ruth; 31- Benefit; 32- Southpaw; 34- Pillar; 37- Lenient; 40- Large beer mug; 42- Broadcasts; 43- Dearth; 45- Bud; 46- Virgil hero; 48- Pivot; 49- Small amounts; 50- Brazilian state; 51- At what time; 52- Dig like a pig; 54- Without full use of a leg; 55- River which flows through Stratford in England; 56- Catch one's breath; 59- Single unit;

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DRIVE IN

DAKOTA IS FUN ENOUGH, BUT 'MADAME WEB' IS REPETITIVE AND MESSY

LINDSEY BAHR,
MDT/AP FILM WRITER

THERE is a lot of pretty niche comic book mythology swirling around "Madame Web," the inspiration for the newest of Sony's "Spider-Man" spinoffs.

This is a character who goes back to 1980 and whose powers of clairvoyance helped Peter Parker at some point. She's elderly and blind and sits atop a web throne that keeps her alive. But to be honest, reading about her didn't help give any more meaning or urgency to the Dakota Johnson movie that's heading to theaters Wednesday. You've been warned.

"Madame Web" is striving to be a classic superhero setup movie, about how the future Madame Web — now just single gal paramedic Cassie Webb — comes to terms with her newfound power that allows her to see the future. Well, sometimes at least, when it involves a death or something extremely violent.

It's also about the origins of a few other Spider-Women who are now just a couple of teenage girls, played by 20-somethings Julia



Dakota Johnson (left) in a scene from "Madame Web." (Columbia Pictures/Sony)

Cornwall (Sydney Sweeney), Anya Corazon (Isabela Merced) and Celeste O'Connor (Mattie Franklin). Watching the flash-forwards to these three in their Spidey costumes makes you feel like there's some Marvel TV show you forgot to watch that might make you care more.

There is also an alarming amount of repetition in just un-

der two hours. Part of this is because Cassie is learning about her powers and sees various incidents play out over and over, which, by the fourth set piece, starts to get very tedious. You forgive it, a little, because Johnson is just always fun to watch and it at least serves a story purpose in theory. But then there's all these scenes in which the bad guy, Ezekiel Sims (Tahar

Rahim), is either seeing his future death at the hands of the Spider-Girls.

We know Rahim to be a talented, charismatic actor, but Ezekiel is one of the dullest, most thinly sketched superhero villains in recent memory. The movie doesn't even withhold his own cosmic connection to Cassie as a reveal — it literally opens with him killing

her mother (Kerry Bishé) who is on a spider research trip in the Amazon while very pregnant with her. The venom, and some Amazonian spider-people, save the baby though.

Johnson's singular performance style can make almost anything watchable. Her cool-girl deadpan is always interesting and funny and, thankfully, filmmaker S.J. Clarkson has the good sense to keep the camera on her as much as possible. She makes gems out of nothing and finds humor even while the script and story are crumbling around her. It's too bad because there could have been a more fun movie in here — Clarkson imbues it with a distinctly feminine and teenage energy that makes good use of its soundtrack. But it spins itself into a knot trying to justify a silly story instead.

The studio, it seems, is playing a very long game with this one. Cassie's paramedic colleague is Ben Parker (Adam Scott), whose sister-in-law Mary Parker (Emma Roberts) is about to give birth. But one has to imagine after seeing "Madame Web," that, ironically, whatever payoff was planned may be a vision that will not come to pass.

"Madame Web," a Sony Pictures release in theaters Feb. 14, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association for "violence/action and language." Running time: 117 minutes. ★★★

AD

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Larsson's latest album "Venus" releases today

tTUNES

Swedish pop singer Zara Larsson imparts wise and caring lessons of love

THE month of February, with its overload of flowers, candy and everything heart-shaped, is an annual celebration of that warm, fuzzy feeling we call love.

But if you aren't in a steady relationship or even stuck in a toxic one, Swedish pop singer Zara Larsson's latest album "Venus" might be exactly what you need.

"Venus" is a fourth record for Larsson, showcasing a more emotional and daring side of her talents, diving deeper into who she is and where she comes from atop her characteristic Europop sound.

It begins with the album artwork: Larsson is nude — vulnerable and powerful — with a visible tattoo of the letter "H" on her ribcage for her sister, Hannah. The singer is posed to recreate Sandro Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" painting, her modesty protected only by her long golden hair and a pink chrome seashell.

And just like the messaging behind the famous work, Larsson's latest album feels like a rebirth and a celebration of beauty, as though she takes the role of wise older sister for all her fans looking for a romantic resurrection of their own.

The first track, "The Weeknd" -channeling synth pop of "Can't Tame Her," establishes that Larsson's album

is not simply preoccupied with heartbreak — rather, there is very little time left to cry when you are dancing the night away.

"So if she wants to party all night/No you can't tame her no/ And you can't tie her down/When the night comes around," she sings over an upbeat melody.

On "On My Love," the artist is joined once again by EDM giant David Guetta. The duo previously collaborated in 2016 with "This One's for You," the anthem for the UEFA European Football Championship that year.

The 2010s Europop throwback track is about adoration. "Into the dark, into the light/Baby I go/Whether it's wrong, whether it's right/I will follow," Larsson sings, in a romantic song sweetly dedicated to her own ride-or-die, Hannah.

From one type of love to another, the Rihanna-esque slow burn "Ammunition" tells the story of a destructive relationship. In the cheery chant-a-long "You Love Who You Love," Larsson tells a friend to give up a man that brings her down.

Even then, Larsson never stops the dance party: the advice is delivered atop a cheeky pop melody, stuck between funky production and steady percussion. Clearly, Larsson knows how to pair hard truths with joyful music. **MDT/AP**



TASTE OF EDESIA

Celebration of Hokkien Cuisine

IRENE SAM, MDT

ISLAND Shangri-La Hong Kong announces the much-anticipated opening of **Ming Pavilion**, a new culinary gem that pays homage to the rich heritage of Hokkien cuisine of China. Inspired by the abundant landscapes of Fujian province and its vibrant cultural legacy, Head Chef Jack Lam Yeung brings to life the authentic essence of Hokkien culinary traditions through his heartfelt creations. Complementing Chef Lam's dishes are the exquisite tea pairings curated by Tea Master Tiffany Chan, elevating the dining experience to new heights of sensory delight. Together, they craft an immersive dining experience that introduces a new perspective of Hokkien cuisine, honouring the heritage while embracing the future of this beloved culinary tradition.

"Our journey in conceptualising each recipe led us through the evolution of Hokkien cuisine, not only in Southeast Asia, but also in Fujian

and Hong Kong," says Mr. David Yip, Ming Pavilion's Culinary Consultant.

Step into the majestic setting of Ming Pavilion and be transported to simpler times, where the intertwining aromas of tea and heartfelt conversations fill the air.

At Ming Pavilion, each plate presented is not just a culinary masterpiece, but an opportunity to delve into the rich narrative behind every dish. Every meal becomes a catalyst for strengthening connections with friends and loved ones, fostering warmth and camaraderie. As the dining experience unfolds, guests are left with not only the lingering memory of exquisite flavours but also the rekindled bonds of community.

Originating from the coastal province of Fujian in south-eastern China, Hokkien cuisine reflects a diverse heritage shaped by its proximity to the sea, fertile farmlands, and a history of cultural exchange. The cuisine is characterised by its

emphasis on fresh, seasonal ingredients, delicate flavours and intricate cooking techniques that have been passed down for generations. At Ming Pavilion, these time-honoured traditions are celebrated and brought to life, inviting guests to savour the authentic flavours of Hokkien cuisine.

Signature dishes offered at Ming Pavilion include Deep-fried Five-spice Pork Roll, a dish of crunchy water chestnuts wrapped in delicate bean curd skin, originating from the Minnan region of Fujian province; Deep-fried Prawn Roll, featuring premium shrimp paste, fresh prawns, fatty pork, and water chestnut, creating a delightful chewy texture; Xiamen-style "Popiah", a traditional local dish from Xiamen, Fujian, with a rich texture and crispy sensation, filled with fresh cabbage, carrots, fatty pork, and shrimp, and enriched with Alaskan crab, pork lard, and peanut candy; Fujian-style "Buddha Jumps Over the Wall", an iconic dish that harmoniously blends precious ingredients such as abalone, dried scallops, fish maw and sea cucumber, stewed with old chicken, pork ribs and duck in a Shaoxing wine jar; and Steamed Mud Crab with Glutinous Rice, which highlights carefully selected Philippine red caviar crab paired with rich crab roe, served alongside glutinous rice steamed with dried seafood and pork belly.

OPINION

Multipolar World

Jorge Costa Oliveira



LESSONS TO BE DRAWN FROM TRUMP'S BETRAYAL OF EUROPEAN ALLIES

On February 10, in one of those remarks bordering on the outrageous, the candidate who the Republican Party, also known as the Grand Old Party (GOP), will likely nominate to contest the presidential elections, Donald Trump, stated that NATO countries not spending [the minimum allocation of 2% of their GDP on Defense expenditure] will not only not be defended by the U.S., but he would also encourage Russia to attack them (!). Various European leaders condemned these irresponsible statements, and NATO's Secretary-General explained that they put allies at risk by encouraging Russian aggression.

No Euro-Atlantic supporter can downplay this statement. Trump's declaration is an act of betrayal against long-time allies who share with America a civilizational heritage and common values. Beyond grotesque, Trump's quip reveals ignorance; European countries neighboring or closer to Russia already contribute to NATO above the minimum threshold of 2% of their GDP, with the exception of Turkey (which has the second-largest armed forces in the Alliance and does not seem to be apprehensive about Russian expansionist whims).

The problem is not new. As Anne Applebaum reminds us in a recent article in *The Atlantic*, long before becoming a political candidate, Trump questioned the value of American alliances. Regarding Europeans, Trump wrote that "their conflicts are not worth American lives," suggesting that "withdrawing from Europe would save [the U.S.] millions of dollars annually." During his presidency, he took several derogatory stances towards the Alliance, having declared in a meeting with John Bolton (then National Security Advisor): "I don't give a shit about NATO." Accordingly, Trump threatened several times to withdraw from NATO, including at the NATO summit in 2018.

The main lesson to draw is that we have been overly dependent on the goodwill of the U.S. concerning Europe's defense. European states (and the EU) need to increase their military spending and provide the European Defence Agency with serious means. To create a truly deterrent arsenal. To have our own massive European production in all relevant segments. And to use the European economic and financial muscle without hesitation.

Moreover, Europe absolutely must ensure that European technology and components, military or dual-use, cannot reach enemies of European interests. And that companies that supply such technology or components to them are severely punished; given the ineptitude in combating the current shame of indirect exports from EU countries to Russia, via Central Asia or Turkey, this task should be assigned to a special supervisory entity.

After the reaction of European leaders and the NATO Secretary-General, prominent GOP members (controlled today by a militia of uncritical spineless lackeys of the creature) rushed to express solidarity with Trump. When a deranged person with no sense of state, honor for international treaty commitments, or respect for History, may very well be the next president of the U.S., we must assume as a priority the full autonomy of Europe's security to avoid depending on him (now) or whichever other lunatic Americans may want to elect in the future.

[linkedin.com/in/jorgecostaoliveira](https://www.linkedin.com/in/jorgecostaoliveira)

MICROSOFT SAYS US RIVALS ARE BEGINNING TO USE GENERATIVE AI IN OFFENSIVE CYBER OPS

THE BUZZ

Microsoft said that U.S. adversaries — chiefly Iran and North Korea and to a lesser extent Russia and China — are beginning to use its generative artificial intelligence to mount or organize offensive cyber operations.

The technology giant and business partner OpenAI said they had jointly detected and disrupted the malicious cyber actors' use of their AI technologies — shutting down their accounts.

In a blog post yesterday [Macau time], Microsoft said the techniques employed were "early-stage" and neither "particularly novel or unique" but it was important to expose them publicly as U.S. adversaries leverage large-language models to expand their ability to breach networks and conduct influence operations.

Cybersecurity firms have long used machine-learning on defense, principally to detect anomalous behavior in networks. But criminals and offensive hackers use it as well, and the introduction of large-language models led by OpenAI's ChatGPT upped that game of cat-and-mouse.

Microsoft has invested billions of dollars in OpenAI, and the announcement coincided with its release of a report noting that generative AI is expected to enhance malicious social engineering, leading to more sophisticated deepfakes and voice cloning.

A threat to democracy in a year where over 50 countries will conduct elections, magnifying disinformation and already occurring.

AP PHOTO



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg

NATO CHIEF HAILS RECORD DEFENSE SPENDING, SAYS TRUMP'S REMARKS UNDERMINE SECURITY

LORNE COOK & MATTHEW LEE, BRUSSELS

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said this week that its European members and Canada have ramped up defense spending to record levels, as he warned that former U.S. President Donald Trump was undermining their security by calling into question the U.S. commitment to its allies.

Stoltenberg said U.S. partners in NATO have spent \$600 billion more on their military budgets since 2014 when Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in Ukraine prompted them all to reverse the spending cuts they had made after the Cold War ended.

"Last year we saw an unprecedented rise of 11% across European allies and Canada," Stoltenberg told reporters on the eve of a meeting of the organization's defense ministers in Brussels.

In 2014, NATO leaders committed to move toward spending 2% of their gross domestic product on defense within a decade. It has mostly been slow going, but Russia's invasion of Ukraine two years ago focused minds. The 2% figure is now considered a minimum re-

quirement.

"This year, I expect 18 allies to spend 2% of the GDP on defense. That is another record number and a six-fold increase from 2014 when only three allies met the target," Stoltenberg said.

On Saturday, Trump, the front-runner in the U.S. for the Republican Party's nomination this year, said he once warned that he would allow Russia to do whatever it wants to NATO members that are "delinquent" in devoting 2% of GDP to defense.

President Joe Biden branded Trump's remarks "dangerous" and "un-American," seizing on the former president's comments as they fuel doubt among U.S. partners about its future dependability on the global stage.

Stoltenberg said those comments call into question the credibility of NATO's collective security commitment — Article 5 of the organization's founding treaty, which says that an attack on any member country will be met with a response from all of them.

"The whole idea of NATO is that an attack on one ally will trigger a response from the whole alliance and as long as we stand behind that message together, we

prevent any military attack on any ally," Stoltenberg said.

"Any suggestion that we are not standing up for each other, that we are not going to protect each other, that does undermine the security of all of us," he said.

Trump's comments have not only sent a wave of unease through Europe but are also likely to be a major topic of conversation at the annual Munich Security Conference, starting later this week in the Bavarian city.

Both U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary of State Antony Blinken will be present at the event that American officials hoped would concentrate more on immediate security concerns in Ukraine and Gaza, as well as challenges posed by China and the importance of multilateralism in collective defense.

The top U.S. diplomat for Europe, James O'Brien, said Tuesday that Blinken would be prepared to address questions about America's commitment to NATO allies and issues related to Trump's comments. But he also sought to downplay European concerns, noting that NATO has been a cornerstone of European security for more than seven decades. **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



USA has gathered highly sensitive intelligence about Russian anti-satellite weapons that has been shared in recent weeks with the upper echelons of government, according to four people who have been briefed on the intelligence. The people, who were not authorized to comment publicly, said the capability was not yet operational. The intelligence sparked an urgent but vague warning. Rep. Mike Turner (pictured) gave no details about the nature of the threat.

AP PHOTO



USA Another private company took a shot at the moon yesterday, launching a month after a rival's lunar lander missed its mark and came crashing back. NASA, the main sponsor with experiments on board, is hoping for a successful moon landing next week as it seeks to jumpstart the lunar economy ahead of astronaut missions. SpaceX's Falcon rocket blasted off in the middle of the night from NASA's Kennedy Space Center, dispatching Intuitive Machines' lunar lander on its way to the moon, 230,000 miles away.

AP PHOTO



Football Sven-Goran Eriksson will finally get his chance to take charge of Liverpool. The Swedish coach, who is a Liverpool fan and has said his wish has always been to manage the English club, revealed last month that he has cancer and might have less than a year to live. Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp responded by offering Eriksson, who coached England from 2001-06, the opportunity to come over and help coach his team in a training session, use his office and "have a few great hours together."