



CITY'S REVENUE IN JANUARY INCREASED NEARLY FOURFOLD FROM THE SAME MONTH IN 2023. THE RECOVERY OF GAMING TAXES CONTRIBUTED TO THIS GROWTH P3

CULTURE OFFICIAL UNCLEAR ABOUT RETURN OF INVESTMENT OF INT'L PARADE P3

CHINA'S SERVICES SECTOR GROWS THANKS TO NEW OVERSEAS ORDERS P5



Southeast Asian countries' quest to reach agreement with China on a code of conduct in the contested South China Sea will take time, with difficult issues yet to be resolved despite recent efforts to accelerate the process, Singapore's prime minister said yesterday at a regional summit in Melbourne. Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien (pictured) Loong said a first draft of the code had been written but negotiations are still required.



South China Sea Chinese and Philippine coast guard vessels collided in disputed waters, and four Filipino crew members were injured yesterday in a series of confrontations. The Chinese coast guard ships and accompanying vessels blocked the Philippine coast guard and supply vessels off the disputed Second Thomas Shoal and executed dangerous maneuvers that caused two minor collisions between the Chinese ships and two of the Philippine vessels, Philippine officials said.



Vietnam Real estate tycoon Truong My Lan (pictured) faces the death penalty in a trial that began yesterday over alleged fraud amounting to \$12.5 billion — nearly 3% of the country's 2022 GDP and Vietnam's largest financial fraud case on record. The chair of the real estate company Van Thinh Phat allegedly used "thousands of ghost companies," paid bribes to government officials and violated banking regulations, according to a government document.

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EXECUTIVES CONFIRM TDM MANAGEMENT SHAKE-UP

TDM Portuguese and English News and Program Controller Joao Francisco Pinto confirmed to the Times he will step down from the position on Apr. 1, and that he will stay with TDM. "I [spent] six years as head of the news department, plus 19 at the current position (TV and radio controller). It was time for me to step down from my position and work in TDM in other capacities and in projects to be discussed with the next director," Pinto said. TDM's current Deputy News Controller Gilberto Lopes, who joined TDM back in 1998, and became head of the Radio News Department in 2000, will replace Pinto, according to media outlet Plataforma.

SANDS RESORTS INTRODUCES FLIGHT CHECK-IN AND TRANSFER SERVICES FOR GUESTS

Sands Resorts Macao guests can check-in and take direct transfer services to Hong Kong's airport. The company aims to offer convenience and comfort to its guests through these new services. This initiative, claimed to be a first in the industry, enables guests to complete the entire flight check-in process at the integrated resort. Sands Resorts Macao emphasized that this initiative supports the government's objective of achieving its visitor arrival targets in 2024 and beyond. Additionally, the resort now provides a bus service that transports guests from the Venetian Macao directly to the local checkpoint of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge.

CONSULAR SERVICES FOR US CITIZENS IN MACAU ON MARCH 20

The U.S. Consulate General in Hong Kong and Macau will be providing consular services for U.S. citizens in Macau on March 20. Consular officers will be present to accept passport applications for minors, first-time adult passport applications, and applications for Consular Reports of Birth Abroad. Notarial services and adult passport renewals will not be available during this visit. Appointments will be on a first-come, first-served basis, and confirmation emails will include the scheduled appointment time and location.

RESIDENTS' DEPOSITS GROW TO MOP717B

Resident deposits grew 1.5% from the preceding month to MOP717.2 billion while non-resident deposits edged up to MOP323.8 billion, according to data from the Monetary Authority of Macao. On the other hand, public sector deposits with the banking sector fell 1.9% to MOP189.8 billion. As a result, total deposits in the banking sector rose 0.6% from a month earlier to MOP1,230.7 billion. Meanwhile, domestic loans to the private sector fell 0.4% from a month ago to MOP536.0 billion.

TWO SESSIONS

CE REITERATES THANKS TO BEIJING FOR MACAU SUPPORT

ANTHONY LAM

CHIEF Executive Ho Iat Seng yesterday thanked Beijing for its care and support for the Macau Special Administrative Region.

Yesterday morning, the local government head sat in the opening of the second plenary of the 14th term of the National People's Congress (NPC), held in Beijing. Following the opening ceremony, Ho listened to the work report of the Chinese Premier, Li Qiang.

In addition to expressing his gratitude to the Central People's Government, Ho also highlighted that this year marks the 75th anniversary of the People's Republic of China, as well as "the key year" for the journey towards realizing the country's 14th Five-year Plan. The "Two Sessions" will open new doors for "the full-scale construction of a strong nation under Chinese-style modernization and the great achievement of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," he added.

Ho further promised that the government would, in partnership with citizens from all walks of life, "learn, comply with, and implement the spirit of the 'Two Sessions' and forge a new chapter of successful and stable implementation of 'One Country, Two Systems' with Macau characteristics."

He reiterated that, in addition to being the 75th anniversary of the People's Republic of China, this year is also the 25th anniversary of the SAR, as well as the third anniversary of the Guangdong-Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin, and the actualization of the zone's first-phase development goals.

The Macau Representatives at the NPC described Li's report as "pragmatic" and "clear in direction." They also expressed confidence in the country's development this year.

Representative Vong Hin Fai noted that Li's report mentioned the deepening of work targeting the construction of the greater bay area (GBA)



and believed that Macau will continue to utilize the GBA as a platform to merge with the country and its general development plan. He also believed that Macau would do a better job in the construction of the Hengqin cooperation zone, which is a part of the GBA. Vong said that he is particularly interested in youth employment and livelihood improvement, which were both mentioned in Li's report.

Meanwhile, Representative Kevin Ho also described Li's report as pragmatic, as it not only reviewed the work of the past year, but also forecast possible difficulties in the coming year as well as a variety of national policies. This year, he believes, it is key to develop the economy in a stable way, and ensure a reliable livelihood.

Spokesperson and vice-head of the NPC Macau delegation, José Chui, observed that the Central People's Government is aware of the difficulties faced by small-to-medium enterprises, given Li's report mentioning policies supporting them. He recommends that youths in Macau choose their career paths considering national needs, and hopes that Macau will further its development in technology

and education.

On Monday evening, Communist Party of China Central Committee Hong Kong & Macao Work Office Director and State Council Hong Kong & Macao Affairs Office Director Xia Baolong met and dined with the Macau NPC delegation.

Chui quoted Xia as describing Macau as a blend between Chinese and Western cultures and "having unique external relations and networks," while encouraging Macau to act as "a super contact person."

Chui also reported Xia's hope for deeper cooperation between Macau and Hengqin so as to diversify its economy – to "walk with two feet," in Xia's wording. Xia was also satisfied with Macau's work in terms of national security.

Chui believes that Xia is confident that the people of Macau have the capability to handle their own business and develop the economy well. Xia also reiterated that "One country, two systems" remaining unchanged for 50 years means it is an inherent system of the country.

LI QIANG PLEDGES CONTINUOUS SUPPORT TO HONG KONG AND MACAU

CHINESE Premier Li Qiang pledged yesterday to support Hong Kong and Macau in growing their economies, improving the lives of their people and participating in the development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area by leveraging their distinctive strengths and features. This will ensure that Hong Kong and Macau can better integrate themselves into China's overall development and maintain long-term prosperity and stability, Li said.

We will continue to fully, faithfully, and resolutely implement the policy of 'One country, two systems', under which the people of Hong Kong administer Hong Kong and the people of Macau administer Macau, both with a high degree of autonomy. We will remain committed to law-based governance in Hong Kong and Macau and ensure that Hong Kong and Macau are administered by patriots," Li told a roomful of national legislators.

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DIRECTOR & EDITOR-IN-CHIEF_Paulo Coutinho paulocoutinho@macaudailytimes.com
ASSISTANT EDITOR_Lynzy Valles
CONTRIBUTING EDITORS_Leanda Lee, Severo Portela, Sheyla Zandonai

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

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

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ADMINISTRATOR & CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
Kowie Geldenhuys kowie@macaudailytimes.com
OFFICE MANAGER Juliana Cheang juliana@macaudailytimes.com
ADDRESS Av. da Praia Grande, 599, Edif. Comercial Rodrigues, 12 Floor C, MACAU SAR Telephones: +853 287 160 81/2 Fax: +853 287 160 84
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Culture director unclear about ROI of Macao International Parade

ANTHONY LAM

THE estimated return on investment (ROI) of the upcoming Macao International Parade is still unclear, director of Culture DeLand Leong told a press briefing yesterday afternoon.

The press briefing was held to announce the organization of the parade this year, which will be held near the end of this month, unlike previous editions which were held on Dec. 20, the anniversary of the establishment of the Macau Special Administrative Region.

Leong was asked by the Times about the expected ROI and the estimated number of tourists attracted by the event. Her justification for not having an estimate of the ROI is that the event will be held in March for the first time, hinting that there is no precedent from which her team could take reference.

She added that her team would conduct an evaluation of the ROI immediately following the conclusion of the event.

On the question regarding the number of tourists, Leong also turned to the event's March timing to explain that she has no estimate for this either. "We are unsure," she said, adding



that her bureau would like to test the appeal of holding the event in March.

Despite the lack of estimated figures, the culture chief moved on to discuss the broadcast of the event to an audience within the greater bay area. It was announced at the press conference that a total of 100 million viewers will have access to the broadcast.

Various sources have cited that the six Singapore concerts of U.S. singer Taylor Swift are expected

to generate a total of associated income ranging between USD380 million to USD500 million. It was also reported that concertgoers from across the region have filled or will fill most hotel rooms available in the city-state. Singaporean officials started talks with the singer's management early last year.

In response to questions from the press, Leong disclosed that this parade will cost the government MOP7 million, lower than

previous editions "because the six casino operators will be involved in sponsorships."

The total budget is about MOP23.3 million.

In addition to sponsoring the event, the six casino operators will also see performers at the parade – totaling 1,800 people from 64 local entities and 15 to 20 external entities on a preliminary estimate – bringing activities to their premises.

The casino operators will also set up booths along the route of

the parade to stage shows and activities "to enrich the program," in Leong's words. They will also help promote the event to their customers and visitors. Leong said that specific joint promotions will run at the operators' discretion.

Leong also explained that the event was moved to March to create gaps in the event calendar.

According to the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC), the parade is organized by the bureau, alongside Galaxy Entertainment Group, Melco Resorts & Entertainment, MGM, Sands China Ltd., SJM Resorts, S. A. and Wynn Resorts (Macau), S. A. and will be held on Mar. 24. The event aims to "celebrate the 25th Anniversary of Macau's Return to the Motherland," the IC added.

The event will bring about artistic performances of different styles and participating groups with conceptual themes, strengthening the synergy of the event, increasing promotional activities and pre-events in the community and historic districts, extending the influence of the parade.

This year's parade will feature art groups from different countries and regions including Portugal, Brazil, Mozambique, the Togolese Republic, France, Spain, Norway, United Kingdom, Italy, Shenzhen, Hong Kong and Macau.

New categories have also been added for the local parade group this year, such as the "Parade of Large-Scale Artistic Installations," which features portable installations such as gigantic puppets and delivery backpacks.

STATS

Macau's revenues nearly quadruple in January

STAFF REPORTER

MACAU'S current revenue in January 2024 increased nearly fourfold from the same month in 2023. The recovery of gaming taxes contributed to this growth, with the government also increasing public spending by 28.5%.

Current revenue reached MOP10.3 billion in January, the highest value since 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic. Of this revenue, MOP7.34 billion was collected in gaming taxes. In January, Macau collected 10.1% of its projected current revenue for 2024, which is MOP102 billion, according to the budget.

The government's budget execution report indicates that govern-



ment revenue could reach MOP109.6 billion for the year, a 7.5% increase from the initial budget estimate. Public spending also increased by 28.5% to MOP5.07 billion in January, primarily due to investment in infrastructure.

However, current spending decreased by 3.5% to MOP3.81 billion due to a reduction in social support

and subsidies to the population.

Macau's budget for 2024 aims to achieve surpluses in the public accounts without resorting to the financial reserves, after three years of economic crisis caused by the pandemic.

The city had MOP5.24 billion in public accounts in January, the highest value seen in four years.

GOV'T TO LAUNCH 'CONSUMPTION CARNIVAL' IN NORTHERN DISTRICT TO BOOST SPENDING

THE Economic and Technological Development Bureau (DSED) has announced that it is launching a "Consumption Carnival" from March 18 in Macau's Northern District, aiming to boost consumption in that part of the city.

According to a DSED statement, the carnival will run for 20 weeks until August 4.

Through the common method of discounts and lucky draw prizes via electronic payment methods, the government aims to attract more locals as well as visitors to spend in the Northern District, an area said to be particularly affected by the proximity of the Border Gate and where many residents usually shop across the border.

The activity is supported by the Macao Cham-



ber of Commerce and the Industry and Commerce Association of Macau Northern District which will sponsor some of the prizes to be offered to consumers.

In the final lucky draw, prizes will reach as high as 500,000 patacas.

Just recently, a representative of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Macau has raised concerns about the potential closure of businesses in non-tourist districts.

Fong Kin Fu, the president of the Federal General Commercial Association of Macau Small and Medium Enterprises, highlighted the decline in business activity and spending in residential areas, particularly in northern Macau. While the recent influx of visitors to Macau during CNY has undoubtedly helped local SMEs, Fong believes more focus needs to be redirected towards non-tourist districts. **RM**

SURVEY

PORK CHOP SANDWICHES SOAR AS CC FINDS WHOPPING PRICE DIFFERENCES AT LOCAL CAFES

RENATO MARQUES

THE Consumer Council (CC) has surveyed the prices of a range of food and beverage items at local cafes and continues to find significant disparities between establishments.

In the latest price update, released yesterday, the CC also found that several establishments have recently increased the price of several popular menu items such as milk tea, coffee, butter toast, and pork chop sandwiches.

In some cases, price hikes were as high as 14.3% (milk tea and coffee), with the highest increase in the food category found to be pork chop sandwiches (+12.5%).

The Times investigated the price differences for some items, noting that the CC's cheapest price for milk tea was 12 patacas, while the higher priced items were as much as 22 patacas.

An even larger price gap was found for hot coffee, with prices ranging between 12 and 24 patacas.

Similar differences were also noted for ice lemon tea, with the lowest price being 15 patacas and the highest 27 patacas.

Slightly lower variation was found in several food items, such as butter toast (ranging between 10 to 18 patacas) and egg sandwiches (between 13 to 22 patacas). Of the products selected by the Times, egg sandwiches presented lower price increases compared to January this year, with the price remaining stable in most eateries and the highest price increase recorded being 6.7%.

On the other hand, pork chop sandwiches registered, in some cases, a price increase of 12.5%, with a price range of 17 patacas to 30 patacas.

Café T.H.S. Honolulu consis-

tently came out on top for higher prices in Macau in all but one category (the pork chop sandwich), with Café Alves in second place for the most items.

On the other end, the cheaper food and beverage items in most categories reviewed could be found at The Estabelecimento de Comidas Combo at Toi San and the Estabelecimento de Comidas Zuan Pu at Areia Preta.

The Estabelecimento de Comidas Kam Hoi Ma at Rua da Barca and the Estabelecimento de Comidas Kuong Chong at the Avenida de Venceslau Morais also presented very reasonable prices, particularly for food items.

The CC has also recently updated its price investigations for eggs and raw chicken, but unlike with other categories, no reference was made to the previous price of these items making comparison difficult.



GAMING

Post-CNY slowdown drags February GGR recovery, IVS to help tourism in GBA

STAFF REPORTER

THE recent decision by mainland authorities to include two more cities in the Individual Visitation Scheme (IVS) is expected to have a positive impact on the ongoing recovery of tourism in Macau and Hong Kong.

According to Goldman Sachs analysts, Macau's gross gaming revenue (GGR) for February reached MOP18.5 billion, a recovery to 70% of the pre-Covid levels. However, the February GGR recovery is lower than the respective 78% and 81% recoveries reported in January this year and December of the previous year.

The investment bank attributed this decline to a more pronounced than anticipated slowdown following the Chinese New Year holidays. Daily GGR dropped from MOP715 million in the first two weeks of February to MOP543 million in the final weeks, returning to levels seen towards the end of last year.

Assuming a consistent trend in VIP GGR at approximately 30% of pre-pandemic levels, the analysts estimate



that mass market GGR in February was exceeding 100 percent of the pre-pandemic run-rate.

Goldman Sachs analysts anticipate that GGR data for March and April will remain stable due to seasonal factors before picking up again during the Labour Day holidays in May.

The firm also highlighted that casino operators have responded positively to mainland authorities' decision to include two additional cities, Xi'an and Qingdao, in the IVS.

"This move is expected to enhance the recovery of both Macau and Hong Kong's tourism industries, as it increases the total number of IVS cities from 49 to 51 and expands the scheme's coverage of mainland China's population and GDP from 32%/45% to 33%/47%, respectively," stated the investment bank.

Q1 CASINO REVENUES MAY REACH ABOVE 5%

Deutsche Bank Securities Inc has estimated that Macau's GGR for March will

be slightly below USD2.42 billion, reflecting a month-on-month increase of approximately 5.7%. This growth is in comparison to the GGR of USD2.29 billion recorded in February, as cited in a report by GGR Asia.

However, despite the positive outlook, Deutsche Bank's analyst Carlo Santarelli mentioned in a memo that the forecast for March GGR indicates a 2.2% decline per day compared to the previous month. Nevertheless, this decline is still an improvement over the average sequential per day decline of 7.7% observed in March relative to February.

In comparison to the same month in 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic, Deutsche Bank's March forecast shows a decline of 25.2%.

The institution now predicts that Macau's GGR for the first quarter of this year will reach approximately USD7.15 billion, representing a year-on-year increase of 65% and a sequential increase of 5.6%. However, this quarterly figure will still be around 25% lower than the corresponding period in 2019.

LABOR

DSAL JOB MATCHING SESSIONS THIS MONTH EXPECTED TO OFFER 1,500 JOBS

RENATO MARQUES

THE Labour Affairs Bureau (DSAL) is once again organizing a series of job-matching sessions in partnership with all six gaming concessionaires. The sessions will be held over three consecutive days this month (March 18 to 20).

DSAL advised that the new job-matching sessions will have some 1,500 job vacancies available. The local tourism sector has been gradually recovering and there are also new facilities commencing operation.

To apply, local residents should register online between today (March 6) and 22 by accessing the "Local Job Vacancies" information window on the DSAL website.

Among the jobs on offer will be positions in restaurants, catering and other food and beverage establishments, as well as in several front-line service and logistics companies.

According to DSAL, the vacancies are in three main categories, namely "catering," "room-keeping and cleaning" and "front-line operations," with these categories making up 80% of the total vacancies.

Another group of jobs on offer includes those relating to managerial and professional roles, such as manager in the tourism development sector, assistant manager of a shopping center, manager/head of facilities, marketing manager/head, and information technology analyst, among others.

The first job-matching sessions, on March 18, will present offers from Melco and Wynn, followed on March 19 by Sands China, SJM, and MGM. On the last of the three days (March 20), Galaxy will offer posts.

DSAL said that the six companies are likely to schedule more matching sessions on other dates, depending on the number of people enrolled.

PMI

China's services sector grows thanks to new overseas orders

BUSINESS activity in China continued to expand in February, according to survey data yesterday, led by the country's services sector, Alliance News reported.

The Caixin services purchasing managers' index edged down to 52.5 points in February from 52.7 in January. Remaining above the neutral 50-point mark, the figure shows the sector continued to grow.

However, it marked the slowest pace of expansion since November last year and came in slightly lower than FXStreet-cited market consensus of 52.9 points.

"The slower rise in business activity coincided with a further mild upturn in overall new work placed with Chinese service providers during February. New order growth was little-changed from January and remained slower than the average seen over 2023 as a whole. In contrast, services companies registered a solid and accelerated increase in new work from overseas," S&P Global noted.



Having risen in January, payroll numbers fell across the service sector in February at the fastest pace seen in over a year. Meanwhile, input price inflation picked up slightly, amid higher raw material and fuel costs. After selling prices eased in January, firms raised their prices in February to pass on the higher costs to customers.

"Market optimism was steady. Looking ahead,

some surveyed companies indicated expansion plans, which showed they were confident there will be a further improvement in demand. However, the corresponding measure for expectations about future activity remained below its historical average," said Caixin senior economist Wang Zhe.

The composite PMI, which weighs services and manufacturing, was unchanged at 52.5 points.

Released on Friday last week, the manufacturing PMI pointed to a slight expansion at 50.9 points in February, edging up from 50.8 the month before.

The services PMI is compiled by S&P Global from questionnaires sent to 650 services companies in mainland China, excluding Hong Kong and Macau. Responses are collected in the second half of each month. **ALLIANCE NEWS**

SOCIAL MEDIA

Former Twitter executives sue Musk over firings, seek more than \$128m in severance

FORMER senior executives of Twitter are suing Elon Musk and X Corp., saying they are entitled to a total of more than \$128 million in unpaid severance payments.

Twitter's former CEO Parag Agrawal, Chief Financial Officer Ned Segal, Chief Legal Counsel Vijaya Gadde and General Counsel Sean Edgett claim in the lawsuit filed yesterday [Macau time] that they were fired without a reason on the day in 2022 that

Musk completed his acquisition of Twitter, which he later rebranded X.

Because he didn't want to pay their severance, the executives say Musk "made up fake cause and appointed employees of his various companies to uphold his decision."

The lawsuit says not paying severance and bills is part of a pattern for Musk, who's been sued by "droves" of former rank-and-file Twitter employees who didn't receive

severance after Musk terminated them by the thousands.

"Under Musk's control, Twitter has become a scofflaw, stifling employees, landlords, vendors, and others," says the lawsuit, filed in federal court in the Northern District of California. "Musk doesn't pay his bills, believes the rules don't apply to him, and uses his wealth and power to run roughshod over anyone who disagrees with him."

Representatives for Musk and San Francisco-based X did not immediately respond to messages for comment.

The former executives claim their severance plans entitled them to one year's salary plus unvested stock awards valued at the acquisition price of Twitter. Musk bought the company for \$44 billion, or \$54.20 per share, taking control in October 2022.

They say they were all fired without cause. **MDT/AP**

ADVERTORIAL

GREAT TIMES

CHOCOL'ART Delights with French Pastry Master Angelo Musa



Macau's gastro-nomic scene is set to be infused with excitement as MGM joins hands with French avant-garde pastry master, Angelo Musa, World Pastry Champion and the Best Craftsman of France (M.O.F.), to present The CHOCOL'ART Series at MGM COTAI, a series of events featuring delights crafted with the finest chocolates from the prestigious artisan chocolatier Chocolaterie de l'Opera.

On March 8, The Perfect Pairing event at Grill 58 invites connoisseurs to explore the intriguing pairing of whiskies and artisan chocolates. Five exquisite canapés crafted by Chef Musa will be paired with single malt whiskies, creating an enticing sensory experience with harmonious taste combinations.



Another highlight is the Six Hands Degustation Dinner at Aji on March 8. Chef Musa will be joined by Executive Sous Chef Homan Tsui, who helms Black Pearl One-Diamond Restaurant Imperial Court, and Chef de Cuisine Sihui Pan of contemporary dining hot spot Aji, to create an unparalleled gastronomic experience that combines exquisite East-Meets-West flavors and single-origin chocolates. Chef Homan will present Lingnan delicacies with an indulgent twist of cacao, while the cold plates from Chef Pan are perfectly complemented with the specialty white chocolate, and the cocoa journey will be rounded off with signature desserts of Chef Musa.



Chocolate enthusiasts can't miss the chance to sample Chef Musa's winning dessert for the World Pastry Champion, the Papilio, and an afternoon tea set masterfully crafted by Chef Musa, both centered around the rich flavors of cacao, will be available exclusively at Anytime from March 9 until April 30. For inquiries and reservation, please call (853) 8802 3888 or visit mgm.mo.

KEN MORITSUGU &
ELAINE KURTENBACH, BEIJING

NPC

CHINA aims to achieve 5% economic growth this year, Premier Li Qiang said yesterday, acknowledging that it will be a challenging goal in difficult times.

In his address to the annual session of the National People's Congress, Li outlined plans to boost spending on developing advanced technology, fortifying China's military and supporting the economy, among many other longstanding goals.

Li, presenting an annual report on the past year and future plans, said the government would continue with a "pro-active fiscal policy and prudent monetary policy," suggesting no major change in the leadership's approach to the economy.

He did unveil a plan to boost

growth by issuing long-term bonds over the next several years, starting with 1 trillion yuan (about \$139 billion) this year. The money would be spent to implement "major national strategies" and fortify security "in key areas."

Li said the government plans a "new development model" for the housing market, including building government-subsidized housing in a bid to ease a prolonged

real estate slump that has been a major drag on the economy. That appeared to confirm reports that authorities plan to use public funds to buy up some of China's legions of unoccupied apartments and turn them into affordable housing.

" [Gov't would continue with] a pro-active fiscal policy and prudent monetary policy.

PREMIER LI QIANG

"The foundation for China's sustained economic recovery is not yet stable, with insufficient effective demand, overcapacity in some industries, weak social expectations, and still many risks and hidden dangers," Li told delegates to the annual session of the congress,

China's legislature, in Beijing's majestic Great Hall of the People, adjacent to Tiananmen Square.

The govern-

ment released a draft budget that included 1.67 trillion yuan (\$231 billion) in defense spending — a rise of 7.2% that matches the pace of increase in 2023 and reflects a continued focus on security as well as the economy.

China's economy grew at a 5.2% pace last year, but that was on top of just 3% annual growth rate in 2022, when millions of people were locked down for weeks and some businesses were ordered to close as the country endured the worst disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic. Replicating the same

ANALYSIS

Govt report releases signs of high-quality development

YAO YANG, CHINA DAILY

ON Tuesday morning, Premier Li Qiang delivered the government work report, summarizing the government's work in 2023 and outlining the government's objectives for 2024. The report aligns with the principles of the Central Economic Work Conference held at the end of last year, emphasizing the prioritization of economic growth as a key government focus.

Many foreign observers claim they find it difficult to understand China's policy-making because the country's economic policy seems to have no clear goals.

In advanced economies, the government's ability to manage the economy is very much limited to monetary and fiscal policies whose goals are well defined — monetary policy mainly helps keep prices stable and employment rate high, while fiscal policy is mainly aimed at managing demand. But the Chinese government has more responsibilities than its Western counterparts, not least because it has to fulfill different goals and formulates its economic policy for a year or a five-year plan period accordingly.

China's economic development model is in transition. In the past, exports and domestic investments were the main economic growth drivers. But over the past decade, the government has



been promoting high-quality development — development that does not prioritize high-speed growth and, instead, promotes domestic consumption- and innovation-driven development.

Of late, the government has also begun promoting a new means to boost productivity — new quality productive forces, which needs to increase total factor productivity. As such, the speed of capital accumulation retreats to a secondary importance.

Other changes have followed these developments. For example, the central authorities have become more alert to debt. They have learned lessons from the consequences of

the stimulus package of 4 trillion yuan (\$586 billion at the 2008 exchange rate), which was announced right after the global financial crisis broke out in 2008.

That stimulus did accelerate growth but it also increased local government debt. And the Chinese people, by nature, do not like debt. They prefer tightening their belts to borrowing from others in times of difficulty. The Chinese government shares the same philosophy.

The Chinese authorities have also learned lessons from the recent record inflation in Western economies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Western governments handed out

large amounts of cash to families and companies, as well as increased their expenditure. This led to rising inflation. And the Chinese people also dislike inflation, prompting the government to take measures to keep inflation low.

Controlling local governments' debt has thus become one of the key objectives of the central government in recent years. The central authorities are determined to not bail out local governments. Heavily indebted provinces are not allowed to borrow anew, because it would further increase their debt. In response to local budget shortfalls, local governments have been asked to "live a tight life".

The central government's policy on the real estate sector follows the same logic. Many China watchers tend to liken today's China to Japan of the 1990s, because like Japan in the 1990s, China's real estate sector has declined sharply since mid-2021. But such China watchers miss the point, for they fail to understand the causes of the real estate sector's decline. The decline is not a consequence of burst bubbles, but a result of the central government's deliberate move to control the disorderly expansion of the sector, because the top authorities are worried about rising debts — the real estate sector consumes a lot of resources and creates too much debt.

China's short-term economic performance depends on the importance the central authorities attach to different goals. Over the past several years, it has become clear that the central government does not attach the same importance to high-speed growth that it did in the past. The Central Economic Work Conference in December 2023 signaled a shift toward growth, though, for it called for government policy to "seek progress while maintaining stability" and "establish the new before abolishing the old".

"Stability" here means stabilizing growth, and "to establish the new" means

laying a sound economic foundation for high-quality development.

Premier Li Qiang reiterated the government's commitment to this objective in the government work report, which sets this year's growth target at around 5 percent. While this doesn't appear to be an aggressive target, given that it is consistent with last year's, the planned fiscal and monetary policies are evidently more aggressive than those implemented last year. The central government deficit will increase by 180 billion yuan compared to the previous year's budget, and special-purpose bonds for local governments will increase by 100 billion yuan. Additionally, the government plans to issue ultra-long special treasury bonds to fund public investments.

The inflation target has been set at around 3 percent, and "aggregate financing and monetary supply will align with the projected economic growth and CPI increase." The relatively high inflation target is noteworthy given recent CPI performance, signaling the potential for more aggressive monetary policies in the year ahead. With these measures in place, this year's growth may indeed exceed 5 percent.

The author is Liberal Arts Chair Professor at Peking University.

et of around 5% to achieve

growth rate this year will be more difficult, because the economy is starting from a higher base.

"Achieving this year's targets will not be easy," Li said, referring not only to economic growth and other goals including raising incomes, creating 12 million jobs and making the economy more energy efficient in pursuit of climate goals.

China has set a 2.5% goal for reducing its energy consumption, after having failed to meet its target for a 2% cut in 2023.

Xi Jinping, China's most powerful leader in decades, heads the party and, according to observers, "has installed loyalists like Li in top posts to strengthen its grip on the economy and society." Xi, 70, is in his third five-year term as party general secretary and may hold that post for life.

The meetings of the national congress run for about a week and are China's biggest political events of the year. The congress usually endorses policies already set by top

leaders, but it provides a platform to showcase the party's accomplishments and to build support for its aims.

Leaders have been emphasizing the need to raise consumer spending to help drive the economy. But the consumption-led recovery it was counting on after anti-pandemic controls ended in late 2022 has faded and most forecasts are for growth to slow this year.

Falling housing prices and worries over jobs have left many families either reluctant or unable to spend more. China's real estate market is in crisis after many developers defaulted on their debts following a crackdown on excess borrowing.

Li said the government would defuse such risks and provide support to local governments whose finances have been strained by high spending on anti-virus measures and lower tax revenues due to the downturn in land right sales.

China should not lose sight of



Li Qiang speaks during the opening session of the National People's Congress at in Beijing, yesterday

"worst case scenarios," Li said.

But he reiterated calls for greater confidence despite China's challenges, noting the country's vast market of about 1.4 billion people, its advanced manufacturing capacity and its massive workforce.

"The underlying trend of economic recovery and long-term growth remains unchanged and will not change," he said. "So, we must be more confident and more assured of ourselves."

Among the dozens of projects Li listed in his roughly 30-page Chinese-language report — 55 pages in English — China plans a program this year for "worry-free consumption" to encourage people to spend more. Households will be encouraged to trade in old cars and appliances and buy new ones.

Li also said the government would focus on employment, a pressing concern for the many people whose jobs became more precarious during the pandemic

and many young Chinese who are struggling to find work after leaving school. Plans include unemployment insurance and other social support, loans and subsidies to companies able to create many jobs.

The government also plans to provide support for local governments facing "economic difficulty," he said, suggesting that Beijing will limit damage from debts of cash-strapped cities and regions that have been rising sharply. MDT/AP

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USA

Supreme Court restores Trump to ballot, rejecting state attempts to ban him

MARK SHERMAN,
WASHINGTON

THE Supreme Court yesterday [Macau time] unanimously restored Donald Trump to 2024 presidential primary ballots, rejecting state attempts to ban the Republican former president over the Capitol riot.

The justices ruled a day before the Super Tuesday primaries that states cannot invoke a post-Civil War constitutional provision to keep presidential candidates from appearing on ballots. That power resides with Congress, the court wrote in an unsigned opinion.

Trump posted on his social media network shortly after the decision was released: "BIG WIN FOR AMERICA!!!"

The outcome ends efforts in Colorado, Illinois, Maine and elsewhere to kick Trump, the front-runner for his party's nomination, off the ballot because of his attempts to undo his loss in the 2020 election to Democrat Joe Biden, culminating in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol.

Colorado Secretary of State Jena Griswold expressed disappointment in the court's decision as she acknowledged that "Donald Trump is an eligible candidate on Colorado's 2024 Presidential Primary."

Trump's case was the first at the Supreme Court dealing with a provision of the 14th Amendment that was adopted after the Civil War to prevent former officeholders who "engaged in insurrection" from holding office again.

Colorado's Supreme Court, in a first-of-its-kind ruling, had decided that the provision, Section 3, could be applied to Trump, who that court found incited the Capitol attack. No court before had applied Section 3 to a presidential candidate.

The justices sidestepped the politically fraught issue of insurrection in their opinions yesterday, but some Trump critics pointed to the silence on that topic as a victory of sorts because the court failed to absolve him of responsi-

AP PHOTO



lity for the Capitol riot.

The court held that states may bar candidates from state office. "But States have no power under the Constitution to enforce Section 3 with respect to federal offices, especially the Presidency," the court wrote.

While all nine justices agreed that Trump should be on the ballot, there was sharp disagreement from the three liberal members of the court and a milder disagreement from conservative Justice Amy Coney Barrett that their colleagues went too far in determining what Congress must do to disqualify someone from federal office.

Justices Sonia Sotomayor, Elena Kagan and Ketanji Brown Jackson said they agreed that allowing the Colorado decision to stand could create a "chaotic state by state patchwork" but said they disagreed with the majority's finding a disqualification for insurrection can only happen when Congress enacts legislation. "Today, the majority goes beyond the necessities of this case to limit how Section 3 can bar an oathbreaking insurrectionist from becoming President," the three justices wrote in a joint opinion.

It's unclear whether the ruling leaves open the possibility that Congress could refuse to certify the election

of Trump or any other presidential candidate it sees as having violated Section 3.

Derek Muller, a law professor at Notre Dame University, said "it seems no," noting that the liberals complained that the majority ruling forecloses any other ways for Congress to enforce the provision. Rick Hasen, a law professor at the University of California-Los Angeles, wrote that it's frustratingly unclear what the bounds might be on Congress.

Hasen was among those urging the court to settle the issue so there wasn't the risk of Congress rejecting Trump under Section 3 when it counts electoral votes on Jan. 6, 2025.

"We may well have a nasty, nasty post-election period in which Congress tries to disqualify Trump but the Supreme Court says Congress exceeded its powers," he wrote.

Both sides had requested fast work by the court, which heard arguments less than a month ago, on Feb. 8. The justices seemed poised then to rule in Trump's favor.

Trump had been kicked off the ballots in Colorado, Maine and Illinois, but all three rulings were on hold awaiting the Supreme Court's decision.

The case is the court's most direct involvement in a presidential election since Bush

v. Gore, a decision delivered a quarter-century ago that effectively handed the 2000 election to Republican George W. Bush. And it's just one of several cases involving Trump directly or that could affect his chances of becoming president again, including a case scheduled for arguments in late April about whether he can be criminally prosecuted on election interference charges, including his role in the Capitol riot. The timing of the high court's intervention has raised questions about whether Trump will be tried before the November election.

The arguments in February were the first time the high court had heard a case involving Section 3. The two-sentence provision, intended to keep some Confederates from holding office again, says that those who violate oaths to support the Constitution are barred from various positions including congressional offices or serving as presidential electors. But it does not specifically mention the presidency.

Conservative and liberal justices questioned the case against Trump. Their main concern was whether Congress must act before states can invoke the 14th Amendment. There also were questions about whether the president is covered by the provision. **MDT/AP**

this day in history

1993 ANGOLANS DIE IN BATTLE FOR HUAMBO



More than 350 people have died in a battle between Unita rebels and Angolan government forces in the city of Huambo, according to Angolan army reports.

The government of the southern African country also said that up to 1,500 people had been injured in the fighting.

Diplomats say the battle is "vicious", with neither side taking many prisoners.

According to the radio station of Angola's rebel movement Unita, government troops are fleeing from the city and large amounts of arms and ammunition have been seized, including several Russian-built tanks.

The government garrison in the city has been cut off for several weeks and is being supplied by occasional air drops.

Fighting around Huambo has intensified after Unita brought in troop reinforcements from Bie province, which is around 165km away to the east of the city.

Unita radio also reported that its leader, Dr Jonas Savimbi, would address the nation on the search for a peaceful settlement of the conflict.

Since January there has been no running water or electricity in Huambo, which is home to 400,000 people, and many areas have been flattened by artillery shells.

The battle for the key city is seen as more symbolic than strategic.

The fighting in Huambo comes after the breakdown of a 1991 peace agreement which was aimed at ending 16 years of civil war in the former Portuguese colony.

Huambo is home to the Ovimbundu, the people who gave Mr Savimbi's Unita (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) movement its main support.

Earlier, UN officials admitted defeat in their diplomatic attempts to halt renewed civil war in Angola, calling the outcome a "bitter disappointment".

Unita failed to attend UN-sponsored peace talks in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, last week, but proposed fresh talks in Geneva.

Local aid agencies have described the health situation in Angola as "dramatic" - with a child dying every two hours in the paediatric hospital in the capital Luanda.

Most of the main aid agencies have left the country after Unita launched an abortive coup attempt in Luanda last November.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

Two days after the gun battle started in Huambo, Unita announced it had seized the country's second city and was in complete control after capturing government positions.

More than 10,000 people are estimated to have died in the two-month battle for Huambo. The rebel leader of Unita, Jonas Savimbi, died in a gun battle with government forces in February 2002.

Unita went on to become a political party and signed a ceasefire with the Angolan government in April 2002.

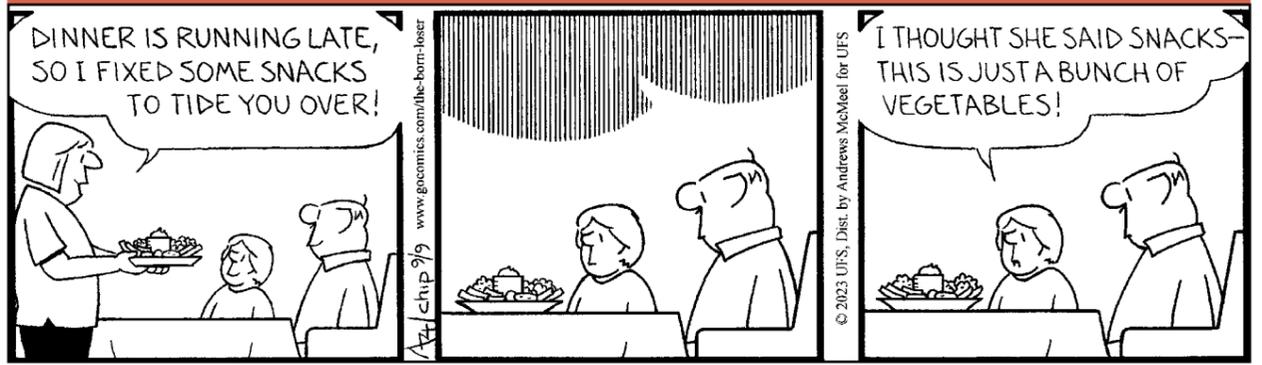
In 2003, Unita apologised for its part in Angola's 27-year civil war and asked for forgiveness.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

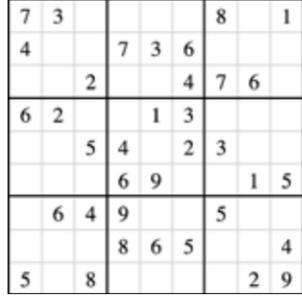
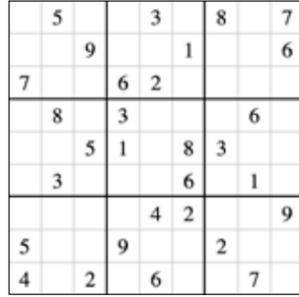
YOUR STARS

 ARIES Mar. 21-Apr. 19 Make an important professional connection. Advance with help from your friends. Your past work speaks well for you. Luck into a fantastic situation.	 TAURUS Apr. 20-May. 20 Fortune favors your latest exploration. A new assignment opens new possibilities. Research, coordinate and investigate. Test your theories. Expand territory.
 GEMINI May. 21-Jun. 21 Weave your interests together. Support each other to take advantage of a lucky opportunity. Dreams come true with coordinated efforts and shared passion.	 CANCER Jun. 22-Jul. 22 Have fun with your partner. Share a spontaneous adventure. Coordinate efforts for ease and efficiency. Communication channels are wide open.
 LEO Jul. 23-Aug. 22 You're growing stronger. Prioritize your health. Take a spontaneous walk. Enjoy getting outside with sun, wind, earth and water.	 VIRGO Aug. 23-Sep. 22 Relax and have fun. Enjoy water in whatever form. Creativity flows in new directions. Follow your heart. Express your views and vision.
 LIBRA Sep. 23-Oct. 22 Home centers and nurtures you. Enjoy domestic comforts. Advance household projects and improvements. Realize a long-held dream. Upgrade water systems.	 SCORPIO Oct. 23-Nov. 21 Fortune favors your creativity and initiative. Follow your heart, ideas and vision. Express your views. Take advantage of great conditions.
 SAGITTARIUS Nov. 22-Dec. 21 Follow a hunch. Accept encouragement. A lucrative prize lies within view. Include fringe benefits in your value assessment. Push to advance a dreamy possibility.	 CAPRICORN Dec. 22-Jan. 19 Wear your confidence like a magic cloak. Enjoy the spotlight when it shines your way. Your ideas are gaining respect. Discover a personal treasure.
 AQUARIUS Jan. 20-Feb. 18 Thoughtful planning leads to an inspiring vision. Savor quiet time for thinking. Keep digging for a clue. Prove your latest hypothesis. Develop dreamy scenarios.	 PISCES Feb. 19-Mar. 20 Group collaboration flows. Coordinate roles and responsibilities. Concur with experts on best options and solutions. Keep objectives in mind.

The Born Loser by Chip Sanson



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MEDIUM 	HARD 

WEATHER

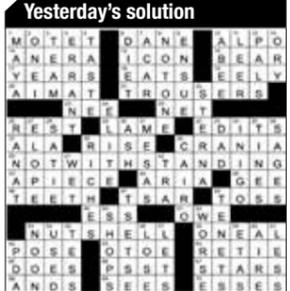
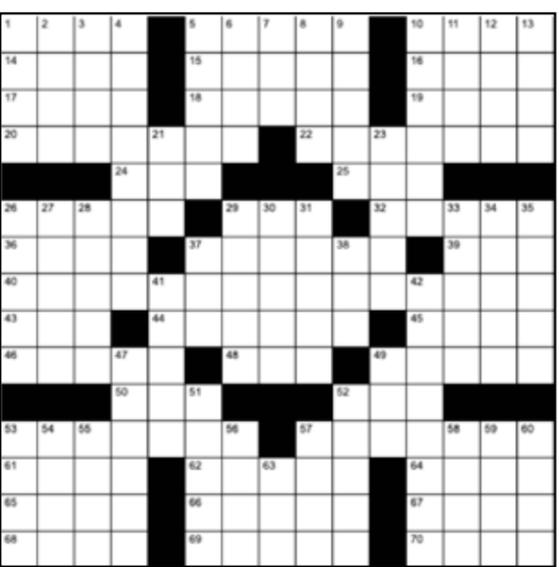
	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	-1	7	cloudy
Changchun	-13	1	fine
Chengdu	9	17	cloudy
Chongqing	11	17	rain
Fuzhou	12	16	rain
Guangzhou	15	22	rain
Guiyang	6	12	overcast
Haikou	21	27	cloudy
Hangzhou	7	11	rain
Harbin	-14	0	fine
Hefei	6	13	cloudy
Nanjing	6	10	cloudy
Shanghai	6	10	overcast
Taipei	14	23	rain
Wuhan	6	11	overcast
Hong Kong	17	23	cloudy
WORLD			
Moscow	-15	-3	overcast
Frankfurt	3	11	cloudy
Paris	2	9	overcast
London	3	11	overcast
New York	9	12	rain

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Fashionable; 5- Land measures; 10- Sneakers brand; 14- Impulsive; 15- Stock unit; 16- Buck follower; 17- Inter ___; 18- Capital of Vietnam; 19- Meter maid of song; 20- Warning device; 22- Athletic shoe; 24- Originally named; 25- Cornerstone abbr.; 26- Fewest; 29- So that's it!; 32- Perfect Sleeper maker; 36- Bear in the sky; 37- Tristan's love; 39- Feel poorly; 40- In spite of; 43- Toothpaste tube abbr.; 44- Shorthand pros; 45- Between ports; 46- Puzzle in pictures; 48- Bro's counterpart; 49- Rub out or remove from memory; 50- Boy king of Egypt; 52- Pop the question; 53- Sieves; 57- Catch; 61- Banned apple spray; 62- October birthstones; 64- 007's alma mater; 65- Andean country; 66- Name; 67- Transport, mail; 68- In order (to); 69- Computer key; 70- Oceans;

DOWN 1- Jam-pack; 2- Circle of light often seen around the head of saints; 3- The doctor ___; 4- Woodcutter power tool; 5- ... who lived in ___; 6- Blacken; 7- Hurried; 8- Archer of myth; 9- Paris divider; 10- Self-defense method; 11- Actor Estrada; 12- Lavish affection (on); 13- Fly high; 21- Lunar New Year; 23- City on the Ruhr; 26- Pertaining to the moon; 27- Wear down; 28- Take ___ at (try); 29- Barbecue leftovers?; 30- Anwar's successor; 31- Chorus section; 33- Mrs. Gorbachev; 34- Prongs; 35- Aquarium buildup; 37- "The Addams Family" cousin; 38- ___ Kapital; 41- Magazine copy; 42- Absence of light; 47- Womb; 49- Tricky curve; 51- Govt. security; 52- Goose genus; 53- Suckers; 54- 1963 role for Liz; 55- ___ avis; 56- Whirl; 57- Popular fashion magazine; 58- Suit to ___; 59- Gossipy Barrett; 60- Terminates; 63- ABA member;

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- 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
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AP PHOTO



A mosaic by French artist Invader (top right) is seen on a street of Paris

GRAFFITI ART

LIKE BANKSY, FRANCE'S MYSTERY 'INVADER' MARKS CITIES WITH ART. HE COULD SURPRISE THE PARIS OLYMPICS

JOHN LEICESTER, PARIS

FOR the Paris Olympics, it could almost be a new sport: Score points by hunting down mosaics that a mystery artist who calls himself "Invader" has cemented to walls across France's capital, the world and even had carried aloft to the International Space Station.

Vincent Giraud, one of the artist's Parisian fans, is already an avid player. He downloaded Invader's addictive "Flash Invaders" mobile-phone game that awards points to users who find and photograph the colorful and quirky pieces of pixelated art.

Quickly hooked, Giraud has in just a year already tracked down 1,565 of them, accumulating so many points that he has rocketed into the leaderboard's top 1,000, out of more than

360,000 players.

"In a few months I found and flashed all those in Paris," says Giraud, game-name Vince-Vader. Hunting for Invader mosaics, looking up and around for them on walls, pavements, bridges and even atop the Eiffel Tower, is "another way of discovering the city."

Put simply: When Olympic visitors flock in their millions to Paris for the July 26-Aug. 11 Games, they'll be crowding onto the turf of France's most international, invasive and intriguing contemporary street artist. It will be one invasion coming face-to-face with another.

Like Banksy, the British street artist he is sometimes likened to, Invader is elusive, fiercely protective of his anonymity and operating on the margins of illegality. He comes, glues,

and disappears into the night, leaving behind his signature pixelated mosaics made mostly with small ceramic and glass tiles.

Most resemble the aliens from the Space Invaders arcade game. Others are wonderfully elaborate, such as still lifes of fruit or, in New York, portraits of Lou Reed and Andy Warhol. Some reference pop culture — Spiderman, Star Wars, Bugs Bunny, Ninja Turtles, pizza and the like. Some hint at deep research, including a portrait of guitarist Django Reinhardt facing the house where he lived, south of Paris in Samoëns-sur-Seine.

Since the first catalogued mosaic of a blue Space Invader went up on a Paris street in 1998, numbered PA_01, Invader has colonized the world. There are now more than 4,000 of his

mosaics in cities and towns on all continents except Antarctica.

London, Tokyo, Los Angeles and other cities were invaded in 1999; New York, Geneva and more in 2000; Hong Kong in 2001; Berlin, Bangkok, Melbourne. On and on.

The 4,000th mosaic was glued to a brick wall in Potosi, 4,000 meters (13,100 feet) up in the Bolivian Andes, in 2021. The European Space Agency installed Invader's Space2 mosaic aboard the International Space Station in 2015.

"Anytime, Anywhere" is the philosophy," he says on his website,

In Paris — by far his most invaded location — the artist's footprint is larger than ever as the Olympics loom.

A new exhibition in a disused multi-story building has one of his pixelations painted

on its roof, visible via satellite on Google Maps. With a telescope, the show's visitors can also peer across the grey roofs of Paris to Invader's latest milestone: his 1,500th mosaic in the Olympic host city and its suburbs.

PA_1500 was unveiled in February on an exterior chimney of the Pompidou Center, Paris' foremost contemporary art museum. Unlike for the bulk of his works which he installs guerrilla-style without asking, Invader sought and got the museum's permission to cement the red-and-white Space Invader -type alien into place overlooking the city.

"It's a symbol. It's number 1,500. It's Paris," said Alexandre Aumis, the iconic building's security director. "It's got to be here."

Aumis is a new convert to "Flash Invaders."

"I run a lot in Paris, so I see them everywhere," he said.

Some of those who know Invader say they're expecting him to spring more surprises for the Olympics, perhaps installing new Games-themed mosaics.

"The invasion is the 15 million people who are going to arrive in Paris for the Olympic Games. It's a lot. Obviously, there will be Invader fans among them," said Fabrice Bousteau, the editor of Beaux Arts Magazine who curated Invader's latest exhibition. "So there will be this meeting between two cultures."

"He will doubtless invade the Games in a different way. I am almost certain."

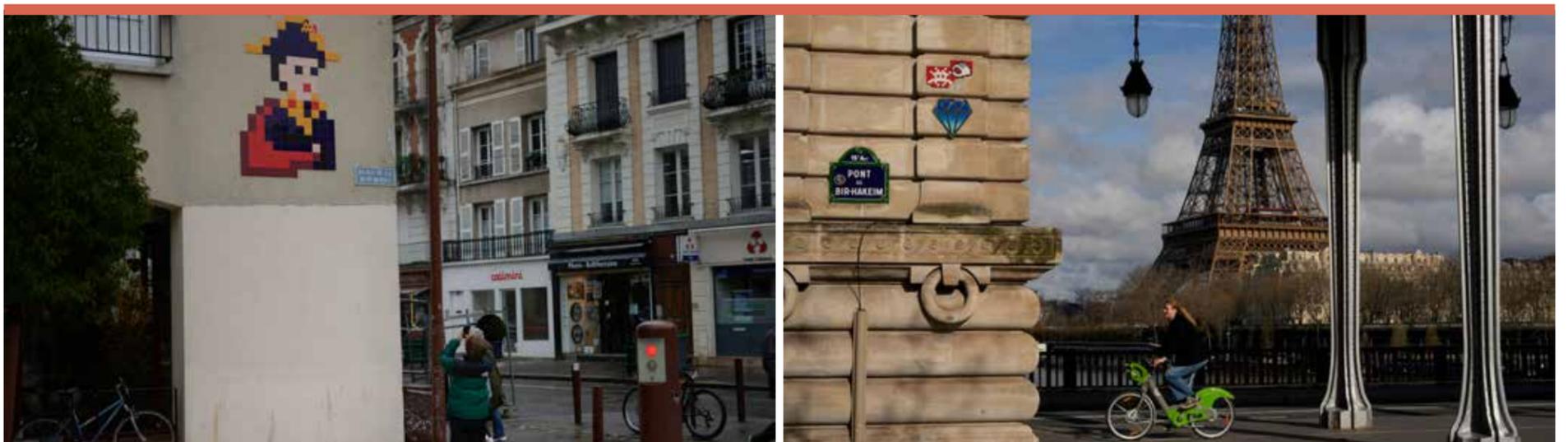
That's thrilling for "Flash Invaders" players.

Niasha Chassain has tracked down just over 50 of the mosaics in Paris and says her children love the hunt.

"It's a big celebration when we find one," she said. "It forces you to look up in the street, to look around a bit, to think about turning around, to look in places that are perhaps not so attractive and discover that there are still things to see."

MDT/AP

AP PHOTO



FOOTBALL

Australia star Sam Kerr pleads not guilty to racially aggravated harassment charge in Britain

AUSTRALIAN soccer star Sam Kerr has pleaded not guilty to racially aggravated harassment of a police officer, prosecutors in Britain said yesterday [Macau time].

The 30-year-old striker, who plays her club soccer for Chelsea in England, was charged with causing a police officer harassment, alarm or distress during an incident in Twickenham, southwest London, on Jan. 30 last year, according to the Crown Prosecution Service.

The PA news agency in Britain reported that London's Metropolitan Police said the incident involved an officer who was responding to a complaint about a taxi fare.

Kerr was charged in January. She denied the charge at a plea and trial preparation hearing at Kingston upon Thames Crown



Australia's Sam Kerr celebrates after scoring her side's first goal during the Women's World Cup semifinal soccer match between Australia and England, in Sydney

Court, the Press Association reported. She is set to face court next February.

Chelsea has not commented officially about the reported incident.

Football Australia CEO James Johnson and women's national team coach Tony Gustavsson told Australian media they'd only been made aware of the charges against Kerr on Tuesday morning.

Johnson said he had sent a message to Kerr to check in on her welfare but hadn't had a conversation with her about it.

"We're trying to get to the bottom of it. We have our own questions we would like to know," Johnson was quoted by News Corp. as saying during a press conference in Adelaide. "There is a process that is under way and that process needs to run its course.

"I don't want to get into the allegations. They are serious allegations. At the same time, Sam has rights — natural justice rights, procedural rights — that she has to work her way through and we respect that."

Gustavsson said he couldn't comment on the charges and referred to an earlier statement from Football Australia.

"The only thing I can comment on is my experience and interaction with Sam as a person and as a footballer," he said, "and I have only positive experience with that."

In an earlier statement issued after media reports started emerging from Britain, Australia's soccer federation said it was aware of the proceedings involving Kerr but was unable to comment on the ongoing legal matter.

"Our focus remains on supporting all our players, both on and off the field," Football Australia said in a statement. "We will continue to monitor the situation and provide support as appropriate."

Kerr is currently sidelined after an anterior cruciate ligament injury during a warm-weather training camp with Chelsea women's team in Morocco in January.

Kerr is the captain of Australia's national women's team, the Matildas, and the country's all-time leading scorer in international soccer with 69 goals from 128 games.

She has scored 58 goals for Chelsea in the WSL since 2020 following prolific stints playing for clubs in the U.S. and Australia. **MDT/AP**

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OPINION

The Conversation

Michael D. Bailey, Iowa State University

**CAN WITCHES FLY?
 UNPACKING THE
 MEDIEVAL INVENTION**

The image of a witch flying on a broomstick is iconic, but it is not nearly as old as the idea of witchcraft itself, which dates to the earliest days of humankind.

Several theologians, church inquisitors, secular magistrates and other authorities first wrote about such flight in the early 1400s. The earliest known visual depiction of flying witches appears in a 1451 manuscript copy of one such text, "Le champion des dames" ("The Defender of Ladies"), by the French poet Martin Le Franc.

Witchcraft accusations at this time were increasingly focused on women. The clothing of the figures in Le Franc's text depicts them as coming from non-elite ranks of medieval society. So do the implements on which they fly. Staffs and brooms were tools for ordinary housework.

The notion that witches could fly served to support the idea that they gathered in large groups called sabbaths. These gatherings, in turn, heightened the supposed threat witches posed to Christian society.

Even after the idea of witches flying on brooms was introduced to European society, it was not readily accepted. Many who wrote about witchcraft at this time, including Le Franc, were quite skeptical about the reality of flying witches.

As it turned out, however, authorities could still perceive a threat even if they believed witches' flight was imaginary.

In my work as a scholar of medieval European history, I have researched texts describing witchcraft in the early 1400s.

Some texts fully accepted the idea that witches flew, often on brooms or staffs. One described witches traveling to sabbaths on staffs anointed with a magical ointment and flying into the mountains to gather ice to cause hailstorms.

Other texts, however, were not sure that such flight was real. One noted that accused witches claimed to fly from mountaintop to mountaintop on chairs, but it also hinted that demons might have tricked them into thinking they did. Another text stated that accused witches who claimed to fly were "deluded" by the devil.

Skepticism about flying witches drew on an early 10th-century church law about women who claimed to ride at night on "certain beasts" in the train of the pagan goddess Diana, whom Christian authorities understood to be a demon in disguise. The law declared that such flight was not real, and anyone who thought so had been "seduced by illusions and phantasms of demons." It prescribed no direct punishment but mandated priests preach against such "infidels."

Skeptics of magical flight were quite specific in their doubts. Le Franc, for example, declared that anyone who thought that witches could fly lacked "common sense." On the other hand, he fully accepted that magicians, who were generally male, could conjure demons and that "magic arts" had been practiced as far back as ancient Persia.

The story, however, is not so simple as male authorities accepting the reality of magic practiced by men but doubting that women flew on brooms. These same authorities were, in general, taking other aspects of witchcraft more seriously.

Did women accused of witchcraft really insist that they flew on brooms?

Scholars have speculated that the ointments often mentioned in accounts of such flight might have functioned as hallucinogens, producing sensations of flying. The most thorough study of these accounts, however, finds that such references rarely appear in voluntary testimony.

In the end, allegations of flight and dismissal of its reality may have sprung entirely from the minds of legal and religious authorities who codified and condemned the idea of witchcraft.

Although witch-hunting ended – at least in Europe and North America – in the 18th century, the image of witches flying on brooms endures.

[Abridged]

AI PERVADES EVERYDAY LIFE WITH ALMOST NO OVERSIGHT

THE BUZZ

While artificial intelligence made headlines with ChatGPT, behind the scenes, the technology has quietly pervaded everyday life — screening job resumes, rental apartment applications, and even determining medical care in some cases.

While a number of AI systems have been found to discriminate, tipping the scales in favor of certain races, genders or incomes, there's scant government oversight.

Lawmakers in at least seven U.S. states are taking big legislative swings to regulate bias in artificial intelligence, filling a void left by Congress' inaction. These proposals are some of the first steps in a

decades-long discussion over balancing the benefits of this nebulous new technology with the widely documented risks.

"AI does in fact affect every part of your life whether you know it or not," said Suresh Venkatasubramanian, a Brown University professor who co-authored the White House's Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights. "Now, you wouldn't care if they all worked fine. But they don't."

Success or failure will depend on U.S. lawmakers working through complex problems while negotiating with an industry worth hundreds of billions of dollars and growing at a speed best measured in lightyears.

AP PHOTO



Right to left: Billionaire industrialist Mukesh Ambani, Anant Ambani, Paula Hurd, and Bill Gates posing for a photograph at a pre-wedding bash of Mukesh Ambani's son Anant in Jamnagar last weekend

A PARTY LIKE NO OTHER? ASIA'S RICHEST MAN CELEBRATES SON'S PRENUPTIALS WITH A STAR-STUDED BASH

WHAT happens when the son of Asia's richest man is about to get married?

His father throws a three-day prenuptial bash four months before the actual ceremony.

Tycoons from around the world, heads of state, as well as Hollywood and Bollywood stars descended on the small western Indian city of Jamnagar on Friday where billionaire industrialist Mukesh Ambani is kickstarting a big fat wedding celebration for his youngest son.

The nearly 1,200-person guest list includes pop superstar Rihanna, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Sunder Pichai, Ivanka Trump and Bollywood celebrity Shah Rukh Khan.

All eyes are on Anant Ambani, 28, and his long-time girlfriend Radhika Merchant, 29, who will tie the knot in July. Radhika is the daughter of Viren Merchant, CEO of Encore Healthcare Pvt. Ltd., and entrepreneur Shaila Merchant.

Such festivities keep up with the Ambani family's tradition of lavish and over-the-top parties while displaying the Indian

billionaire's economic and political clout

Here is everything you need to know about the family and the bash that captivated the country.

Mukesh Ambani, 66, is currently the world's 10th richest man with a net worth of \$115 billion, according to Forbes. He is also the richest person in Asia.

His Reliance Industries is a massive conglomerate, reporting over \$100 billion in annual revenue, with interests ranging from petrochemicals, and oil and gas to telecoms and retail.

Under Ambani's leadership, Reliance — founded by his father in 1966 — sparked a telecom price war with the launch of the 4G phone and broadband service Jio in 2016. Today, it has more than 420 million subscribers and offers 5G services. Earlier this week, Disney struck an \$8.5 billion deal to merge its India business with Ambani's Reliance Industries, forming a new media giant.

The Ambani family owns, among other assets, a 27-story private apartment building, named Antila, worth \$1 billion in Mumbai. It has three he-

lipads, a 160-car garage, a private movie theater, a swimming pool, and a fitness center.

Ambani's critics say his company has flourished mainly because of political connections during the Congress governments in the 1970s and 80s and subsequently under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rule after 2014. They say "crony capitalism" in India has helped certain corporations, such as Ambani's, thrive.

Mukesh Ambani, 66, has started passing the torch to his two sons and daughter. The oldest son, Akash Ambani, is now chairperson of Reliance Jio; his daughter, Isha, oversees retail; and the youngest, Anant — who will wed in July — has been inducted into the new energy business.

The three-day pre-wedding bash offers a glimpse of the opulence expected at the July wedding.

The Ambanis are celebrating it at the family's hometown of Jamnagar — a city of around 600,000 in a near-desert part of Gujarat state — where they also have the business' main oil refinery. **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



South Korea Thousands of striking junior doctors forced proceedings to suspend their medical licenses yesterday, as authorities are pushing for police investigations targeting leaders of the walkouts that have disrupted hospital operations. Nearly 9,000 of 13,000 medical interns and residents have been refusing to work for the last two weeks to protest a government plan to enroll thousands more students in the country's medical schools in coming years.

AP PHOTO



US-Israel U.S. VP Kamala Harris met with a member of Israel's wartime Cabinet who came to Washington in defiance of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as the Biden administration intensifies its efforts to push more humanitarian aid into war-battered Gaza. White House officials said Benny Gantz, a centrist political rival of Netanyahu, requested the meeting and that the Democratic administration believed it was important that Harris sit down with him despite Netanyahu's objections.

Gaza Strip A United Nations report has found credible allegations that sexual assaults took place during the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on southern Israel. A team led by the U.N. special envoy for sexual violence in conflict, Pramila Patten, found "reasonable grounds" to believe Hamas committed rape and "sexualized torture." Patten presented the report yesterday [Macau time] at the United Nations. The team conducted interviews with survivors and witnesses of the Oct. 7 attacks, released hostages, health providers and others.

Northern Europe NATO kicked off an exercise to defend its newly expanded Nordic territory when more than 20,000 soldiers from 13 nations take part in drills lasting nearly two weeks in the northern regions of Finland, Norway and Sweden. With over 4,000 Finnish soldiers taking part, the Norway-led Nordic Response 2024 represents the NATO newcomer's largest ever participation in a foreign exercise, according to Finland's military.