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AP PHOTO



United States ambassador to the United Nations said yesterday that America will stand with Japan until all the Japanese abducted by North Korea decades ago return home to end their painful separation. Linda Thomas-Greenfield (pictured) made the comments yesterday as she began her visit to Tokyo by meeting with the families of those kidnapped. Japan says North Korea abducted at least 17 Japanese citizens during the 1970s and 1980s.

AP PHOTO



United Arab Emirates struggled Thursday to recover from the heaviest recorded rainfall ever to hit the desert nation, as its main airport worked to restore normal operations even as floodwater still covered portions of major highways and roads. Dubai International Airport, the world's busiest for international travel, allowed global carriers yesterday to again fly into Terminal 1 at the airfield. "Flights continue to be delayed and disrupted, so we urge you to only come to Terminal 1 if you have a confirmed booking," the airport said on the social platform X.

AP PHOTO



Israel-Iran Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel would decide whether and how to respond to Iran's major air assault earlier this week, brushing off calls for restraint from close allies. Israel has vowed to respond to Iran's unprecedented attack, leaving the region bracing for further escalation after months of fighting in Gaza. Israel's allies have been urging Israel to hold back on any response to the attack that could spiral.

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FROM MONACO TO GBA VIA MACAU

Monaco eyes strong ties with Macau to be 'door to Europe for GBA', Ambassador Marie-Pascale Boisson told the Times

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STATEMENT

ENHANCING MACAO'S ROLE AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN CHINA AND PORTUGUESE-SPEAKING COUNTRIES FOR BUILDING A COMMUNITY WITH A SHARED FUTURE FOR MANKIND

Liu Xianfa*

The 6th Ministerial Conference of the Forum for Economic and Trade Cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking Countries (Forum Macao) will be held in Macao from 21st to 23rd April 2024. Since the establishment of Forum Macao over 20 years ago, China and 9 Portuguese-speaking countries have continued to bring cooperation in various sectors to new levels, with significant advantages in several aspects and multiple important outcomes.

Political mutual trust has been strengthened and deepened. Currently, the overall relationship between China and Portuguese-speaking countries is at its best in history. Since last year, President Xi Jinping has held talks or meetings with visiting leaders of Portuguese-speaking countries, including President Lula of Brazil, President Lourenço of Angola, Prime Minister Xanana of Timor-Leste and Prime Minister Maleiane of Mozambique. Important consensus on developing bilateral relations and deepening international cooperation have been reached. Although China and the Portuguese-speaking countries have different social

systems, histories and cultures, and levels of development, they have always, in a spirit of mutual respect, equality and win-win cooperation, supported each other on major issues, appropriately handled differences, and been committed to building a long-term healthy and stable partnership. In a new era of intensifying turbulence and transformation across the world, both China and Portuguese-speaking countries firmly support peace and development and uphold international fairness and justice. We have promoted solidarity and cooperation in areas that are of common interest to all humanity, such as climate change, public health, disaster prevention and mitigation, among others. The two sides have worked together to set up a communication center on epidemic prevention in Macao, in order to improve the global health governance system. China has also helped Forum Macao members in need to build maritime meteorological monitoring stations and other facilities to tackle disasters and climate change.

Economic cooperation has produced fruitful results. The Belt and Road Initiative has played an important leading role

in economic and trade cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries. Guided by the principles of wide consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits, the two sides have advanced trade and investment liberalization and facilitation, as well as cooperation on infrastructure connectivity and production capacity. Cooperation in agriculture, environmental protection, transportation, communications, finance and other areas has borne fruit. Measures to promote cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries announced by China at the 5th Ministerial Meeting of Forum Macao have been fully implemented. In 2023, the total value of goods imported and exported between China and Portuguese-speaking countries amounted to 220.9 billion USD, an increase of nearly 90 billion USD compared with 10 years ago. Since its establishment in 2013, the Cooperation and Development Fund for China and Portuguese-speaking Countries has supported the implementation of 10 projects with a total contribution of 470 million USD, driving Chinese enterprises to invest more than 5 billion USD in Portuguese-speaking

countries. These projects cover infrastructure, agriculture, finance, production capacity cooperation and other key areas. Projects which have been completed and put into operation, such as the Paranaguá Container Terminal (Terminal de Contêineres de Paranaguá) in Brazil, the Mozambique Agricultural Park, and the power transmission and distribution and water supply equipment in Angola, have effectively promoted local economic development and improved people's livelihood.

Mutual learning between civilizations has achieved remarkable outcomes. Although China and Portuguese-speaking countries are distant from each other, they have long been engaged in people-to-people exchanges and civilization communication. In the Ming Dynasty, Navigator Zheng He visited Timor Island and the Port of Beira in Mozambique, leaving behind a historic story of peaceful exchanges and friendly cooperation between Chinese and foreign people. Both China and the Portuguese-speaking countries pursue independence and oppose hegemony, advocate seeking commonality while reserving differences and embracing di-

versity, and strive to break new ground while following the fine traditions and upholding fundamental principles. The number of Chinese tourists visiting Portuguese-speaking countries is growing fast. The two sides have also enhanced educational and cultural contacts. Learning Portuguese in China and Chinese in Portuguese-speaking countries have become increasingly popular. Cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries in fields of culture, art and tourism has continued to bring people on both sides closer, enhancing mutual understanding and friendly feelings. Last year, Macao hosted a seminar on cultural homogeneity between China and Portuguese-speaking countries and a forum on mutual learning of civilizations between China and Portuguese-speaking countries. Participating experts and scholars highly recognized the Global Civilization Initiative put forward by President Xi Jinping. They believe that deepening exchanges and mutual learning, integration and innovation between civilizations of China and Portuguese-speaking countries is of great inspiration and practical significance for all countries to join hands in building a com-

munity with a shared future for mankind.

Macao is the first place where Chinese and Western civilizations interacted and conducted exchanges. It is also a city where tradition and modern civilizations are well blended. This year marks the 25th anniversary of Macao's return to the motherland. Today, Macao is giving full play to the advantages of the "one country, two systems", fully implementing the important positioning of the "One Center, One Platform and One Base" conferred by the Central Government, and actively seizing major opportunities such as the development of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, and the Guangdong-Macao In-depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin. I believe that Macao, which serves as an important bridge for cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries and the permanent host city of Forum Macao, will make greater contributions to China and Portuguese-speaking countries working together to build a community with a shared future for mankind.

*** Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China in the Macao Special Administrative Region.**

MINISTERIAL MEETING

Forum Macau an opportunity to boost Portuguese economy: Minister

STAFF REPORTER

PEDRO Reis, Portugal's Minister of Economy, has announced his attendance at the upcoming Macau Forum ministerial meeting is a strategic move to enhance the internationalization of the Portuguese economy. He made this statement before his departure for Asia, Lusa reported.

The Macau Forum ser-

ves as a platform for economic and trade cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries, including Portugal.

The meeting, taking place next week, is particularly significant as it coincides with the 25th anniversary of Macau's transfer of sovereignty from Portugal to China—a milestone that Reis noted has gone "exceptionally well."

Reis emphasized the

Forum's importance in strengthening economic and commercial ties, pointing out that it offers an invaluable opportunity for Portugal to deepen its relationship with China and other Portuguese-speaking nations. The conference marks 20 years of exchange and commemorates a symbolic anniversary in the history of China-Portugal relations.

This year's 6th Minis-

terial Conference of the Macau Forum will be held in the MSAR from Sunday to Tuesday. The event underscores the ongoing collaboration and potential for growth in trade between the two countries.

According to Lusa, economic data from the Portuguese Ministry of Economy highlights China's role as a key trading partner. In 2023, China was Portugal's fifth largest supplier



Portugal's Minister of Economy Pedro Reis

of goods, accounting for 5% of Portuguese imports. Additionally, in 2022, 1,309 Portuguese companies were actively exporting to China, with 402 of these firms also exporting services to Macau.

Looking forward, Reis sees vast potential for

Portuguese companies in various sectors such as agribusiness, infrastructure and transport, tourism and the burgeoning blue economy. These areas, he believes, hold great promise for businesses aiming to internationalize and expand into new markets.

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AL PLENARY

Ella Lei insists gov't should put land reserves to good use

RENATO MARQUES

LAWMAKER Ella Lei has again called on the government to proceed with plans for the use of several plots of land it has reclaimed in the past few years and which are now part of the so-called land reserves.

Lei was speaking in the period before the agenda of yesterday's Legislative Assembly session specially dedicated to addressing the bill for the removal of property market cooling measures.

In her inquiry, Lei noted the government now possesses a high quantity of land but few plans or ideas have been unveiled for its use. Even where some ideas have been mentioned, there has been no progress on work to turn them into a reality.

She recalled the response from the Chief Executive (CE), earlier this week, to her inquiry on the topic, noting that he expressed interest in utilizing some of the land for the construction of temporary facilities for artistic, cultural and sports activities to boost the tourism



and economic sectors.

"However, it is suggested that, besides large-scale events, the government should temporarily utilize vacant land to address the requests of sectors and residents during socio-economic development, which would be more beneficial for sustainable city development," she said.

She also remarked on previous responses from the Se-

cretary for Transport and Public Works, Raimundo do Rosário, who said that in the past, there was the possibility of designating some of the plots to public services in case their use is requested. According to Lei, in practice it is very difficult for any public service to have these requests approved.

She noted several calls from the population for the creation of outdoor leisure areas, which

require little construction, but none of these calls have been answered and the land remains unused, overgrown with weeds and mosquitoes.

She urged the government to accelerate decisions and take action as these temporary allocations give the government nothing to lose, so the land should be rapidly made available for the different sectors of Macau.

PROPERTY MARKET

Bill to remove cooling measures approved in one shot

THE recently announced bill to remove cooling measures for the property market has been passed and approved at the Legislative Assembly (AL) in a single take.

As requested by the government, the bill was addressed yesterday as a matter of urgency, a procedure that skips the need for debate and discussion of the bill in detail at the Standing Committee, proceeding with the first reading, voting, and continuing to the second reading and final vote in just one take.

The bill was approved with the unanimous votes of lawmakers at



the plenary session held yesterday afternoon and with little debate and few questions to the Secretary for Economy and Finance, Lei Wai Nong.

Among the few making comments were lawmakers Che Sai Wang, Ngan Iek

Hang and Wu Chou Kit who expressed similar concerns.

More than criticizing the bill itself, the lawmakers reminded the executive of the need to follow up and evaluate the results of the implementation of the new law and pro-

mote promptly, if necessary, others to respond to the changing market.

Che also noted that it is not guaranteed that the removal of the cooling measures will have any effect at all, and certainly not the same effect as in neighboring

regions that implemented similar measures, calling on the government to remain vigilant and work on measures to facilitate the new generation's easier access to housing.

Lawmaker Ngan also mentioned young people's access to the housing market, remarking particularly on the effects of the credit ratio, that is, the percentage of the total price the banking sector can finance via a mortgage.

In response, Lei said, "14 years ago the banking interest rate was low and there was a lot of speculation, so to avoid this and the financial risks the government launched measures to manage the demand," remarking that the government is constantly addressing this matter and taking into account changing factors in both the local and international market. **RM**

LAWMAKERS' AGENDA

NATIONAL GAMES: Lo Choi In, Lam Lon Wai and Angela Leong have expressed concerns over the co-organization of the 2025 National Games.

Lawmakers want the government to focus on the games' organization as well as take this event as an opportunity to promote Macau as a "City of Sports."

Lo criticized the disproportionate budget allocated to sports associations and organizing entities compared to the subsidies for the athletes, noting that there is a need to better balance resources so that those competing can feel suitably compensated and perform at their best.

On the same topic, Leong wants good "online" advertising for the events in Macau so that the tourism sector can benefit from the games on a large scale.

URBAN RENEWAL AND REVITALIZATION:

Ip Sio Kai wants the government to adopt a different strategy in its approach to the idea of renewal and revitalization of the old neighborhoods. The lawmaker said that "urban renewal is not only a transformation of urban physiognomy but also a continuity and innovation of historical heritage," explaining that "to renovate" does not mean "to reconstruct" old buildings but can also pass through the "restoration" of the old buildings to their former look and purpose so that residents and tourists can "feel the historic environment of the city."

Ip also noted that such works can also create local jobs and, consequently, wealth. He wants the government to explain to building owners that restoring their buildings will increase the building's value.

RESTRUCTURE THE CROSS-BORDER INDUSTRIAL PARK:

Wang Sai Man wants to revamp and repurpose the "Zhuhai-Macau Cross-Border Industrial Park" that dates back to 2003.

For Wang, the park and the industries in it need urgent reconversion and upgrading, he said, noting that it is possible to take advantage of the opportunities arising from cross-border electronic commerce to transform the park into a national level "Cross-Border Electronic Commerce Industrial Park."

This conversion would allow the park to keep its original role while upgrading it to meet contemporary demands. Another area Wang suggests the park be upgraded for is the sector of renewable energy.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

RENATO MARQUES



The Individual Visit Scheme (IVS) for residents of Xi'an and Qingdao, launched March 6, 2024, contributed to this growth, with 47,000 and 24,000 visitors from these cities respectively.

International visitor arrivals also rebounded strongly, exceeding 580,000 in the first quarter, more than a threefold increase from the same period in 2023. The top source markets included Southeast Asian countries, Northeast Asian nations, as well as the United States and Canada.

The recovery in tourism is also reflected in the hotel sector, with the average occupancy rate reaching 85.8% in January and February, surpassing the corresponding figure in the first two months of 2019 by 8.8%.

The Macao Government Tourism Office is actively tapping into the potential of different visitor markets and diversifying tourism products to enhance the destination's appeal.

Macao's tourism industry is showing a positive trend, with increased visitor arrivals, hotel occupancy rates, and the implementation of the Individual Visit Scheme. The figures suggest Macau's tourism industry is on its way to a full recovery, with a growing diversification of visitor markets.

Macau poised for tourism boom during Labor Day Golden Week

STAFF REPORTER

WITH the mainland's extended five-day Labor Day holiday approaching, Macau's tourism industry is gearing up for a surge in visitor numbers, expecting an average of 130,000 passengers during the upcoming Golden Week, higher than the Ching Ming Festival and Easter holidays.

Maria Helena de Senna Fernandes, director of the Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO), expressed optimism about the influx of mainland tourists, citing the longer holiday period as a key factor.

"The mainland has a five-day Labor Day holiday this year, which is a longer holiday and can drive more mainland tourists to visit Macau," she said, as cited in media reports.

The industry is also hopeful

the implementation of the multiple round-trip policy for mainland tour groups between Hengqin and Macau will further stimulate the recovery of the mainland tour group market. Senna Fernandes noted that many Macau tour guides have obtained qualifications to practice in Hengqin during the pandemic, and the new policy will allow them to expand their practice space across the region.

As for international tourists, Senna Fernandes expressed confidence that Macau will exceed its target of two million international visitors for the year, citing strong performance in the first quarter.

With the extended holiday, Macau's tourism industry is poised to experience a significant boost in visitor numbers during the upcoming Labor Day Golden Week, signaling a promising recovery for the region's economy.

STATS

VISITOR ARRIVALS SURGE IN FIRST QUARTER OF 2024

STAFF REPORTER

PROVISIONAL figures from the Public Security Police Force show Macau registered about 88.84 million visitor arrivals in the first quarter of 2024. Average daily visitor arrivals neared 98,000,

up 79.6% from the first quarter of 2023 and 84.8% of levels in the first quarter of 2019.

The surge in visitor numbers was driven by a significant rise in mainland Chinese tourists, who accounted for 6.30 million arrivals, a 94.6% year-on-year increase.

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ECOLOGICAL ISLAND

MA CHI SENG EXPRESSES SUPPORT FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF CONTROVERSIAL ISLAND

MA Chi Seng has expressed support for the construction of a potential Ecological Island for the deposit of construction waste.

The lawmaker noted the facility is necessary for the development of Macau as a World Center of Tourism and Leisure and that the project has passed scrutiny from the central government, which he said is continuing to follow the project to ensure the scientific use of the marine waters.

Ma claimed the whole world is adopting similar solutions to improve the environment and balance urban development, noting the examples of the Japanese city of Naoshima, South Korea's Nanjido, and Pulau Semakau in Singapore.

Moreover, the lawmaker emphasized the importance of ecological environment planning and creating a place that attracts tourists and provides resi-

dents with a comfortable natural environment.

"On the one hand, it can solve the waste problem, avoid the pressure of insufficient land resources in the future, and reduce the impact of onshore site selection on nearby residents," he explained.

"Secondly, it can increase Macau's limited and precious natural ecological environment resources and enrich Macau's urban [environment]. Through ecological protection and landscape construction as an ecological and environmental protection education base, the public and

students can experience nature in person and realize the importance of environmental protection, so that Macau's development can be sustained," he said.

Should the ecological survey teams conducting a feasibility survey of the project greenlight the construction of the ecological island, the government can continue to improve the protection of Macau's natural ecology and cultural landscape, and build a low-carbon, high-quality, livable and tourist-friendly ecological environment for Macau, he added. **RM**



CRIME

Two women arrested in alleged Macau scam network

STAFF REPORTER

THE Judiciary Police (PJ) has arrested two Hong Kong women suspected of fraudulently collecting money for a criminal syndicate, authorities said yesterday. The arrests come after two elderly people reported losing around MOP150,000 to a recent scam, according to officials.

In the first reported incident Wednesday, a woman received a call from someone claiming to be her son-in-law. He told her he had been arrested for injuring someone and needed MOP100,000 for compensation.

She believed him and



RENATO MARQUES

handed over the money. The caller continued demanding more funds for alleged medical expenses until the victim contacted her actual son-in-law and learned of the scam, police said.

As the victim prepared a second payment, police intervened and intercepted the two female suspec-

ts. They recovered all the stolen funds. One suspect admitted to being hired to collect the money in Macau, after which she would receive MOP18,000, officials said.

Investigators also discovered another elderly person had been defrauded of MOP50,000 in the same scam.

To address the rise in telecommunications fraud cases, the PJ has been cooperating with local educational institutions to organize special lectures for faculty members on fraud prevention.

In recent years, telecommunications fraud has increased significantly in Macau, with many victims being students and some teachers, according to the Judiciary Police. To enhance anti-fraud education, officers gave special lectures to over 1,370 faculty members at 12 higher education institutions and primary/secondary schools from February to April.

The presentations warned of the latest scam tactics like impersonating government officials and discussed investigation techniques.

Divisional police encouraged teachers to share the information to help students avoid falling prey to scams. Officers pledged continued collaboration with communities to optimize anti-fraud messaging and build a society with universal anti-fraud awareness.

CINEMA

LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL FILMMAKERS GATHER AT FIRST MACAU SHORT FILM FESTIVAL

STAFF REPORTER

OVER 1,600 film professionals and enthusiasts from Macau and around the world gathered for the 1st Macao International Shorts Film Festival held recently. Organized by the Cultural Affairs Bureau and Galaxy Entertainment Group, the festival featured over 50 short films in competitions and special screenings from local and international filmmakers.

The festival promoted Macau's film industry through various activities, including screenings, workshops led by industry professionals and panels introducing diverse international and Asian films.

Notable was the "Director in Focus" section on acclaimed Japanese director Shunji Iwai, who was invited to share his filmmaking experience. Special screenings also included post-film discussions with directors from Hong Kong and other regions.

At the closing ceremony at the Galaxy International Convention Centre, awards were given in the "New Voices from Horizon" and "Macao Shorts" categories. Icelandic director Gunnur Martinsdóttir Schlüter won best short film for "Far." Colombian director Esteban Pedrazza received best director for "Bogota Story." Locally, Ellen Wong's "Bubble" earned the title of best Macau short.

Festival organizers aimed to provide an international platform for filmmakers to showcase talent and exchange ideas.

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THE LONDONER MACAO

GAMING

LAS VEGAS SANDS EYES SHERATON, LONDONER REFURBISHMENT TO BEAT VENETIAN REVENUES, TRAFFIC

LYNZY VALLES

SIGNIFICANT renovation projects are underway at Sheraton Grand Macao and The Londoner Macao, with Sands China announcing the second casino at The Londoner Macao will undergo refurbishment starting in May.

In an earnings call with analysts on the first quarter revenue, the company cautioned there will be considerable disruption to its services and products until 2024.

The completion of the USD1 billion Phase 2 renovation of The Londoner Macao, which is on top of the USD2 billion already spent under Phase 1, includes the Sheraton, with Sands confirming the hotel's first tower will be complete by the end of this year and its second by May 2025.

Renovations of the second casino at The Londoner are also scheduled for completion by December.

"The fundamentals of the Sheraton Tower are quite good and both towers are quite good. They're actually a little bit better than the existing Londoner side, believe it or not. The layout of the casino will be very good, [with] additional food and beverage amenities that we can add," said Patrick Dumont, president and chief operating officer.

"And when we're done, it's going to be one of our best properties in Macau. The design



will be high-level," he added. The top executive said connectivity will be a very good driver of future results for the property, noting that when completed, it will meet or exceed

that of the Venetian.

In its revenues report, Londoner Macao saw net revenue fall from USD589 million to USD562 million due to fewer hotel rooms being available during renovation works.

"The worst is going to be across the summer when we have the lowest key count that we've had since we opened what was then in Sands Cotai Central because we're taking out ... the Sheraton. And so it's going to be more of this disruption across the summer," Dumont said.

"But then hopefully, as keys come back online across the [project] phasing, and as we get the arena back [in around] October-November, we'll have a

much more powerful set of assets to drive tourism and create cash flow. So there will be disruption," he added.

Meanwhile, explaining the upgrade works at Venetian's Cotai Arena, which has "always been a core part of our content programming," Sands China CEO and president Grant Chum said the gaming operator was able to offer plenty of shows at the London Arena.

"If you just compare the sheer number of shows that we had in the first quarter, we had 12 shows compared with the fourth quarter last year, we had 31 shows. It's a big difference. And obviously, in terms of capacity, there's a big difference," he said.

"So the attendance per show was much higher in the fourth quarter as well. That gives some color in terms of the disruption that had on our business with the arena being closed for renovation," he added.

With hotel renovations ongoing, the group will see more keys out of inventory in the next couple of quarters.

GAMING

SANDS CHINA REPORTS STRONG Q1 RESULTS FUELED BY GGR GROWTH

STAFF REPORTER

MACAU gaming operator Sands China Ltd. (LVS) has reported robust financial and operating results for the first quarter of 2024, with significant growth in both Macau and Singapore.

The company's total net revenue increased 42% year-over-year to USD1.8 billion for the quarter, while net income reached USD297 million, a turnaround from the USD10 million net loss recorded in the same period last year.

Sands China's adjusted EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization) reached USD610 million in

the first quarter of 2023, an increase from the USD398 million recorded in the same period of the prior year.

However, the EBITDA figure would have been higher by USD31 million if the company had held as expected in its rolling program, according to Patrick Dumont, president and chief operating officer of parent company Las Vegas Sands.

"When adjusted for lower-than-expected hold in the rolling segment, our EBITDA margin would have been 34.4%, up 380 basis points compared to the first quarter of 2023. This highlights our focus on cost discipline and profitability," Dumont said.

The growth in Macau was driven by

the continued recovery of the market, with the annual run rate reaching over USD28 billion in annualized gaming revenue, up from USD17 billion in the first quarter of 2023.

"The Macau market continues to grow as it has in each of the past five quarters. Since the reopening in early 2023, the annual run rate of the market has grown every quarter," said Robert G. Goldstein, chairman and CEO of Las Vegas Sands.

Sands China's capital expenditures during the first quarter totaled USD196 million, including construction, development, and maintenance activities of USD90 million in Macau.

"We remain deeply enthusiastic about our opportunities to deliver industry-leading growth in both Macau and Singapore in the years ahead, as we execute our substantial capital investment programs in both markets," Goldstein added.

CORPORATE BITS

Sands China launches 'Summer Fiesta' community revitalisation attractions



Sands China Ltd. has launched Summer Fiesta, the latest round of its Community Revitalisation Series at the former Iec Long Firecracker

Factory and the Taipa Houses, with installations on display April 8 to May 31.

In April and May, Sands China is undertaking the

transformation of the firecracker factory into the Iec Long Zoo, showcasing animal sculptures, while the Taipa Houses "continue to embrace love and offer romantic and leisurely sanctuaries for the public with Love at Taipa Houses," the gaming operator said in a statement.

"Moreover, in the hope of benefitting a wide range of stakeholders through our community revitalisation events, Sands China is pleased to present Todos Fest!, an inclusive arts festival aimed at spreading positivity in the community and promoting the idea of social inclusion," Wilfred Wong, executive vice chairman of Sands China, said.

Burnt Ends and Meet the Bund to mark pop-up debut at MGM



In April, two star chefs and MGM teams will join forces with the culinary team at the gaming operator.

The line-up includes Dave Pynt, Chef-owner of the grill restaurant Burnt Ends from Singapore, and

Wu Rong, the founder of Fujian cuisine restaurant Meet the Bund from Shanghai. Both of them have recently earned recognitions again in Asia's 50 Best Restaurants Award 2024.

From April 18 to 20, Dave Pynt, the Chef-owner of Burnt Ends, will make his first guest chef appearance in Macau, with a three-day exclusive grill experience at MGM Cotai's Grill 58, showcasing Australian-style barbecue.

From April 26 to 28, Wu Rong, founder of Meet the Bund specializing in Fujian cuisine, will join forces with Chef Homan Tsui, Executive Sous Chef of MGM Macau's Imperial Court. Together, they will present a three-day exclusive gastronomic experience, allowing guests to savor the classic delicacies from two of the "Eight Major Regional Cuisines" of China: Cantonese and Fujian.

SHANGHAI GRAND PRIX

China-born Zhou Guanyu will be a star regardless of who wins the race

STEPHEN WADE

FORMULA 1 returns to China this weekend after a five-year absence. And no matter who wins on Sunday, the star locally will be China-born driver Zhou Guanyu.

Despite his so-so results, Zhou is a being promoted as a celebrity in China. He's the subject of a new film as the first Chinese driver to compete in F1. And he's, of course, a favorite of sponsors who want a Chinese connection.

Ahead of the first Grand Prix weekend in Shanghai since 2019, Zhou described as more than a race for him, saying "with a Chinese driver on the grid, we will write history."

By the time he got to the driver's news conference yesterday, where the questions to him ranged from China's economy and politics to its burgeoning auto industry's future potential in F1, Zhou had spent more than a week doing promotional work and meetings with sponsors, backers and fans.

"I've been extremely busy, you know — the busiest man, probably, in Shanghai over the last week and a half," he said. "A lot of activities done. It's great to see the support from from the country already."

Zhou has never won a Formula 1 race. In 48 races since 2022, he's yet to even reach the podium — meaning a finish in the first three places. In the last F1 race almost two weeks ago in Japan, his Sauber retired with a gearbox failure and he placed 18th out of 20.

In the season standings in 2023, he was also 18th with only six points from 22 races.

But the numbers don't matter much in the search for a hometown hero in F1.

"The pressure, of course this race is a little bit higher, but I don't think it gets much more than for me than my

debut in Formula 1," he said. "Because by now everything feels a lot more familiar than back in the day. First day here is completely different ... now's third season. So I'm just going to use that."

Zhou was born in Shanghai and, though he's spent many of his formative years in England, Sunday's Chinese GP is a homecoming for him — and for the race. The last F1 in China was run in 2019, and the following four were canceled during the COVID-19 pandemic.

He noted that tickets sold out quicker than ever for the Chinese GP, with interest in the sport growing exponentially since he watched his first F1 race.

"For me, of course, it's been 20 years waiting until this Grand Prix," Zhou said. "Coming back here being an F1 driver ... yeah, I can't wait."

"A lot of mixed emotion, of course, but I want to treat it as much as the normal race weekend."

A film about Zhou's life will be released Friday by the Shanghai Media Group, a state-owned company and one of China's largest media conglomerates.

Seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton of Mercedes — he's moving next season to Ferrari — won the 2019 race in China in the midst of his era of dominance when he won four straight season titles between 2017 and 2020.

However, the race two weeks ago in Japan was the 49th straight that Hamilton has failed to win. His last victory was in 2021.

The Chinese GP weekend will include a sprint race on Saturday and the main event on Sunday. Several drivers have raised concerns about the sprint being run on a track that has not been seen since 2019.

The only practice is scheduled for today, followed by sprint qualifying. Saturday has the sprint race, and qualifying for Sunday — all on a newly

paved track. Sunday, of course, is race day.

The 90-minute Chinese-language documentary about Zhou is entitled "The First One." The race is part of a campaign by the national and provincial governments to lure tourists back to China following the pandemic. It's also part of an effort to keep businesses from moving investment out of the country.

China is relatively new to auto racing, and Shanghai held its first GP in 2004. In a statement last month, China's General Administration of Sport — combined with the commerce and culture ministry — indicated sports events were a priority.

The statement urged the recognition of "the comprehensive benefits of sports events" and cultural tourism to "fully release consumption potential."

The national statistical bureau said that 82.03 million inbound tourists entered mainland China in 2023, down from 145.31 million in 2019. Visitors from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao are counted as inbound tourists and their numbers have reached 81% of 2019 levels.

However the report, compiled by a branch of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, said "inbound and outbound visits by foreigners only returned to 36% of the 2019 level."

According to statistics, in 2023, the number of inbound tourists received by travel agencies was less than 10% of 2019, reflecting the low recovery level in the tourism market.

Zhou is part of the effort to show the global community that China is open for business and tourism, his helmet for the race will show details of Shanghai's subway system and famous landmarks around the city.

"It's an opportunity to inspire and pave the path for future generations being interested in the sport," Zhou said. **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi (right) shakes hands with Foreign Minister Wang Yi during their bilateral meeting in Jakarta yesterday

DIPLOMACY

China and Indonesia call for cease-fire in Gaza

THE Chinese and Indonesian foreign ministers called for an immediate and lasting cease-fire in Gaza after a meeting in Jakarta yesterday, condemning the humanitarian costs of Israel's ongoing war against Hamas.

Indonesia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Retno Marsudi told reporters that the two countries share the same view about the importance of a cease-fire and of resolving the Palestinian problem through a two-state solution.

"I am sure that China would use its influence to prevent escalation," Marsudi said, adding that China and Indonesia "would also fully support Palestine's membership in the U.N."

The meeting took place on the second day of a six-day tour during which Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi will also visit Papua New Guinea and Cambodia.

Wang blamed the United States for holding up cease-fire resolutions at the U.N.

"The conflict in Gaza has lasted for half a year and caused a rare humanitarian tragedy in the 21st century. The United Nations Security Council responded to the call of the international

community and continued to review the resolution draft on the cease-fire in Gaza, but it was repeatedly vetoed by the United States," Wang told reporters.

The U.S. vetoed a number of proposed Security Council resolutions because they didn't tie cease-fire directly to the release of Israel hostages or condemn Hamas' attacks that prompted the war, before allowing a resolution to pass with an abstention in late March.

American officials have argued that the cease-fire and hostage releases are linked, while Russia, China and many other council members favored unconditional calls for a cease-fire.

"This time, the U.S. did not dare to stand in opposition to international morality and chose to abstain. However, the US claimed that this resolution was not binding," Wang said. "In the eyes of the United States, international law seems to be a tool that can be used whenever it finds useful and discarded if it does not want to use it."

The two ministers also discussed their countries' economic relationship and the South China Sea.

MDT/AP

AP PHOTO



BRIEFS

GBA SEES UPTICK IN NEW HOME SALES FOR 2024

New home sales in the Greater Bay Area are projected to increase by 5% this year compared to 2023, influenced by enhanced transportation networks and more favorable housing policies, according to Cushman & Wakefield. The real estate firm anticipates approximately 400,000 new home transactions in 2024. Recent policy changes in Guangzhou and Shenzhen, such as lower down-payment ratios for first-time buyers and extended benefits, aim to boost market confidence and stabilize residential property prices in the first half of the year.

HONG KONG BUSINESS CONFIDENCE DECLINES AMID HIGH US INTEREST RATES

Business confidence in Hong Kong has significantly declined in the first quarter of 2024, hitting the lowest point among cities in the Greater Bay Area, as reported by a survey from Standard Chartered Bank (Hong Kong) and the Hong Kong Trade Development Council. This decline is primarily attributed to high US interest rates causing an outflow of capital, adversely impacting the local market and the import-export sector. Despite rising business confidence in other parts of the Greater Bay Area, uncertainties like geopolitical tensions continue to affect Hong Kong's economic outlook.

INTERCITY DRONE DELIVERY SERVICE ENHANCES LOGISTICS IN BAY AREA

A new intercity drone delivery service between Shenzhen and Zhongshan has been launched, promising to enhance logistic efficiencies within the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. The service operates over a 70-kilometer route and features drones capable of carrying up to 20 kilograms at speeds of 108 kilometers per hour. This initiative is expected to lower logistics costs and foster economic integration between the two cities, contributing to the broader development of low-altitude logistics technology in the region.

LYNZY VALLES



Marie-Pascale Boisson

MONACO EYES STRONG TIES WITH MACAU TO BE 'DOOR TO EUROPE FOR GBA'

INTERVIEW
BY LYNZY VALLES

AN ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the wealthiest European state, Monaco, was this week on a Macau visit in hopes of bolstering ties and investments between the two regions.

In the SAR to woo investors and offer greater networking opportunities, Monaco's am-

bassador to China, Marie-Pascale Boisson, along with Frederic Genta, a high-ranking official from the wealthy principality, expressed a bid to "be a small door to Europe for the Greater Bay Area."

Boasting nearly 30 years of diplomatic relations with China by 2025, Boisson is positive about advancing ties and creating exchanges in the field of environment and culture.

In an exclusive interview with Macau Daily Times, she

said Monaco is eyeing cooperation with a new field of cooperation, following the halt of activities that were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

"During the Covid-19 period, it was really difficult. So, I think now we start again. So, I am organizing an economic mission with our Chamber of Commerce, and also the Federation of Businessmen and Women to come to see China and to try to make more exchanges," said Boisson.

For the ambassador, both Monaco and Macau share a series of similarities – particularly in their platforms for glitz and glamour associated with casinos, drawing in high rollers, though the European principality offers a relatively small selection in terms of its casino selection.

The world's second-smallest state by land area after Vatican City, the region is home to the Formula One Monaco Grand Prix, an annual yacht show, and the Monte Carlo Casino.

"A big company in Macau is a shareholder of our main resort in Monaco," said Boisson.

"It was Monaco who invented the concept of the resort more than 160 years ago. It was the first in Europe to do that," she recalled.

Back in 2015, Galaxy En-

CANTON FAIR

Guangdong and GBA enterprises seize moment to capture foreign

ON THE AGENDA

THE 135th China Import and Export Fair, also known as the Canton Fair, opened this week in Guangzhou, Guangdong province, and is showcasing nearly 5,440 local enterprises. These companies represent approximately 19% of total exhibitors and occupy 21.4% of the exhibition space.

This fair serves as a significant platform for these businesses to connect with international markets, particularly highlighting Guangdong's role within the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) in fostering economic and trade development.

Companies such as Foshan Huibaisheng Laser Technology and Guangdong Zilink Aero Technology are among those capitalizing on the opportunity to expand their international presence. Foshan Huibaisheng has reported an increase in orders from the European and American markets due to its advancements in laser technology. Meanwhile, Guangdong Zilink Aero Technology, initially focused on aviation engines, is now exploring the drone market and sees the Canton Fair as a pivotal event for entering global markets.

According to China Daily, the fair also emphasizes the GBA's push towards innovation with

a focus on emerging industries like low-altitude economy, new energy, and humanoid robotics. These sectors are presenting new technologies and products, aiming to attract global investors and partners.

As cited by state media, Governor Wang Weizhong of Guangdong province stated that the fair is integral to achieving the province's annual economic and social development goals. He emphasized the fair's role in stabilizing foreign trade, attracting investment, and enhancing consumption within the region.

This year, the fair "is not only a trading hub but also a demonstration of Guangdong's strategic initiatives to improve

trade efficiency and expand into new markets."

The region's focus on developing export-oriented industrial clusters is expected to bolster its economic standings and contribute to China's overall growth in foreign trade.

THE PREMIER SYMPOSIUM

On Wednesday, Chinese Premier Li Qiang held a symposium with overseas buyers attending the Canton Fair.

Overseas buyer representatives spoke about their experience in strengthening cooperation with China through the Canton Fair, noting that the fair has long played an important role in promoting trade exchanges and



Frederic Genta

ertainment Group made a modest investment of 42.4 million euros to acquire a 5% stake in Societe des Bains de Mer (SBM), a Monaco government-controlled company that operates the Monte Carlo Casino.

This initial investment paved the way for a successful partnership between Galaxy and SBM, leading to collaborations on different projects such as exploring new casino opportunities in Asia and supporting cultural exchanges between Monaco and China.

On one occasion, they even transported Albert's throne and other valuable artifacts to Beijing for an exhibition held within the Forbidden City.

Meanwhile, Genta, Monaco's Secretary for Attractiveness, Development, and Digital Transformation is strategically moving with clear intentions: to leverage the close relationship between Monaco and Galaxy Entertainment Group to pitch to investors in the Greater Bay Area.

The cluster, envisioned by Chinese government planners

as an integrated economic area aimed at taking a leading role globally by 2035, includes Macau, Hong Kong, and nine cities in the Guangdong province.

Genta's trip to Macau was not solely focused on attracting large corporations, but also had his sights set on luring in ultra-wealthy individuals whose fortunes are overseen by family offices.

Following a recent two-day stay in Macau, Genta traveled across the Pearl River Delta for a series of similar meetings in Hong Kong, which were arranged by Galaxy.

Amid existing geopolitical tensions, Monaco, a non-EU member, maintains stronger ties with China compared to some of its neighboring countries.

In 2019, Monaco became the first European nation to introduce a 5G phone network utilizing technology provided by Huawei.

"We have a contract with Huawei and Monaco was the first country in Europe to get 5G," Boisson said.

"What is important is that between President Xi Jinping and Prince Albert II, there is really a personal, free and lean relationship. Of course, they talk about economy, they talk about environmental issues because Monaco has a lot of commitments in this field," said the ambassador.

"In 2019, President Xi Jinping's visit to Monaco was his first official trip. For a little country like us, it was crazy," she added.

Currently, the ambassador has noted that the region will participate in the China International Import Expo, a trade fair held annually in autumn since 2018 in Shanghai, China.

The expo is the world's first import-themed national-level expo, featuring exhibitions of multiple countries and businesses and hosting the Hongqiao International Economic and Trade Forum.

"We just recently received the invitation; we will build a pavilion of Monaco among the national pavilions to bring the entrepreneurs of Monaco

to China to try to find contacts," said the diplomat.

The move mirrors Genta's remarks to Nikkei News, also this week, as the principality has consistently demonstrated its willingness to establish new relationships and has openly welcomed Chinese culture.

During his tour, he will provide a unique benefit or an enticing reward in the form of an invitation to join the esteemed Monaco Private Label (MPL), a select network comprising only 2,000 influential business leaders hailing from 60 different nations.

This alluring proposition is particularly appealing to numerous Chinese investors, who frequently face exclusion from similar associations in Western regions.

Established in 2009, the MPL is an international club of decision-makers, business executives, and opinion formers from 2,000 business powerhouses and 60 countries who are renowned in their respective fields.

Genta expressed his desire to increase the club's membership from Hong Kong and Macau, as well as consider hosting certain events in the Chinese cities in the upcoming year.

As Monaco serves as a sanctuary for the extremely wealthy, as it imposes no income tax, capital gains tax, or inheritance tax, and boasts a thriving private banking industry, the semi-enclave has high hopes of being a door to Europe through thriving cities including Macau, Hong Kong, and the rest of the GBA.

"We hope Monaco can be a European base for many of them," Genta said.

WORK IN PROGRESS

NOTES ON ACADEMIC STUDIES

Comparative study on registration application of proprietary Chinese medicine in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area of China

Zicheng Liu, Jinmin Zhao, Yitao Wang & Hua Luo

Journal of Pharmaceutical Policy and Practice: 2024, issue 1

Proprietary Chinese medicine (PCM) is widely used in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area (GBA) of China. However, the regulatory frameworks and procedures for PCM registration in the region are not well-established, and there are differences among the three jurisdictions. The study is aimed to compare the legal basis, regulatory guidelines, application requirements, and evaluation criteria in each jurisdiction.

We conducted a comprehensive review of the registration application processes for PCMs in the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, and Macau based on publicly available information from respective regulators.

The study found that the registration application process in the GBA was complex and time-consuming, with differences in requirements and procedures among the three jurisdictions. The study also identified several challenges faced by PCM manufacturers, such as the lack of harmonisation of regulatory requirements and procedures and the requirement of package inserts and labelling for PCM products. The study proposed recommendations for improving the registration process and promoting the development of the PCM industry in the GBA.

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of the PCM product license application procedures and requirements in the GBA, coupled with discernment of their similarities and disparities, equips applicants with the knowledge to formulate an appropriate strategy for obtaining product approval. Exploring potential methods for harmonising the regulatory process stands to benefit manufacturers, regulators, and patients by improving efficiency and curtailing costs. **FROM THE ABSTRACT**

Urbanization impacts on sequential flood-heatwave events in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area

Kaican Zheng, Zhuoyan Xian, Weilin Liao & Yang Chen

Urban Climate: 2024

Urbanization has been shown to significantly increase the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, i.e., extreme precipitation events, and heatwave events. Actually, the occurrence of compound extreme events, such as sequential flood-heatwave (SFH) events, can lead to more severe impacts than singular extreme events. However, the impact of urbanization on these compound extreme events is not well understood. In this study, we examine urbanization effects on the change of SFH events during 1961–2017 in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area, China. The results showed that the frequency of SFH events in urban areas increased from 0.218 events per year before the 1990s to 1.401 events per year after the 1990s, while the frequency of SFH events in rural areas increased from 0.250 events per year to 0.920 events per year. The urban contribution of 0.131 events per decade also shows that urbanization can significantly promote the occurrence of SFH events. Furthermore, our analysis indicates that urbanization promotes the growth of SFH events mainly by increasing the frequency of heatwave events. These findings highlight the need for further research on the effects of urbanization on compound extreme events and the development of effective management strategies to reduce their risks. **FROM THE ABSTRACT**

Foreign trade

friendly relations between China and other countries.

They also put forward opinions and suggestions on developing the circular and green economies, on optimizing the business environment in China, and on strengthening people-to-people exchanges between China and foreign countries.

Li said he appreciates their long-term, active participation in the Canton Fair, as well as their vigorous economic and trade cooperation with China. He noted that many overseas enterprises have made connections with China through the Canton Fair, and have grown stronger along with China's development.



INDIA

Once a fringe ideology, Hindu nationalism is now

KRUTIKA PATHI & SHEIKH SAALIQA AHMEDABAD

HINDU nationalism, once a fringe ideology in India, is now mainstream. Nobody has done more to advance this cause than Prime Minister Narendra Modi, one of India's most beloved and polarizing political leaders.

And no entity has had more influence on his political philosophy and ambitions than a paramilitary, right-wing group founded nearly a century ago and known as the RSS.

"We never imagined that we would get power in such a way," said Ambalal Koshti, 76, who says he first brought Modi into the political wing of the Rashtriya Swayam-sevak Sangh in the late 1960s in their home state, Gujarat.

Modi was a teenager. Like other young men — and even boys — who joined, he would learn to march in formation, fight, meditate and protect their Hindu homeland.

A few decades earlier, while Mahatma Gandhi preached Hindu-Muslim unity, the RSS advocated for transforming India — by force, if necessary — into a Hindu nation.

(A former RSS worker would fire three bullets into Gandhi's chest in 1948, killing him months after India gained independence.)

Modi's spiritual and political upbringing from the RSS is the driving force, experts say, in everything he's done as prime minister over the past 10 years, a period that has seen India become a global power and the world's fifth-largest economy.

At the same time, his rule has seen brazen attacks against minorities — particularly Muslims — from hate speech to lynchings. India's democracy, critics say, is faltering as the press, political opponents and courts face growing threats. And Modi has increasingly blurred the line between religion and state.

At 73, Modi is campaigning for a third term in a general election, which starts today. He and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party are expected to win. He's challenged by a broad but divided alliance of regional parties.

Supporters and critics agree on one thing: Modi has achieved staying power by making Hindu nationalism acceptable — desirable, even — to a nation of 1.4 billion that for decades prided itself on

pluralism and secularism. With that comes an immense vote bank: 80% of Indians are Hindu.

"He is 100% an ideological product of the RSS," in said Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, who wrote a Modi biography. "He has delivered their goals."

UNITING HINDUS

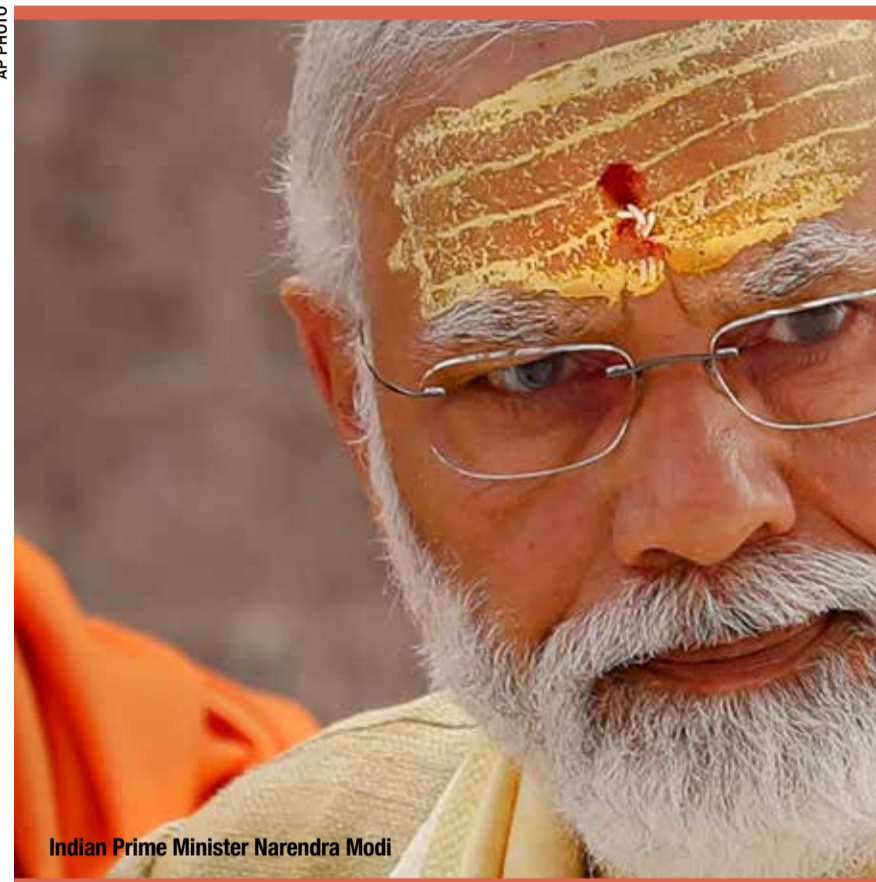
Between deep breaths under the night sky in western India a few weeks ago, a group of boys recited an RSS prayer in Sanskrit: "All Hindus are the children of Mother India ... we have taken a vow to be equals and a promise to save our religion."

More than 65 years ago, Modi was one of them. Born in 1950 to a lower-caste family, his first exposure to the RSS was through shakhas — local units — that induct boys by combining religious education with self-defense skills and games.

By the 1970s, Modi was a full-time campaigner, canvassing neighborhoods on bicycle to raise RSS support.

"At that time, Hindus were scared to come together," Koshti said. "We were trying to unite them."

The RSS — formed in 1925, with the stated intent to strengthen the



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi

Hindu community — was hardly mainstream. It was tainted by links to Gandhi's assassination and accused of stoking hatred against Mus-

lims as periodic riots roiled India. For the group, Indian civilization is inseparable from Hinduism, while critics say its philosophy is rooted

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



mainstream, thanks to Modi's decade in power



in Hindu supremacy.

Today, the RSS has spawned a network of affiliated groups, from student and farmer unions to nonprofits and vigilante organizations often accused of violence. Their power — and legitimacy — ultimately comes from the BJP, which emerged from the RSS.

“Until Modi, the BJP had never won a majority on their own in In-

dia's Parliament,” said Christophe Jaffrelot, an expert on Modi and the Hindu right. “For the RSS, it is unprecedented.”

SCALING HIS POLITICS

Modi got his first big political break in 2001, becoming chief minister of home state Gujarat. A few months in, anti-Muslim riots ripped through the region, killing at

least 1,000 people.

There were suspicions that Modi quietly supported the riots, but he denied the allegations and India's top court absolved him over lack of evidence.

Instead of crushing his political career, the riots boosted it.

Modi doubled down on Hindu nationalism, Jaffrelot said, capitalizing on religious tensions for political gain. Gujarat's reputation suffered from the riots, so he turned to big businesses to build factories, create jobs and spur development.

“This created a political economy — he built close relations with capitalists who in turn backed him,” Jaffrelot said.

Modi became increasingly authoritarian, Jaffrelot described, consolidating power over police and courts and bypassing the media to connect directly with voters.

The “Gujarat Model,” as Modi coined it, portended what he would do as a prime minister.

“He gave Hindu nationalism a populist flavor,” Jaffrelot said. “Modi invented it in Gujarat, and today he has scaled it across the country.”

BIG PLANS

In June, Modi aims not just to win a third time — he's set a target of receiving two-thirds of the vote. And he's touted big plans.

“I'm working every moment to make India a developed nation by

2047,” Modi said at a rally. He also wants to abolish poverty and make the economy the world's third-largest.

If Modi wins, he'll be the second Indian leader, after Jawaharlal Nehru, to retain power for a third term.

With approval ratings over 70%, Modi's popularity has eclipsed that of his party. Supporters see him as a strongman leader, unafraid to take on India's enemies, from Pakistan to the liberal elite. He's backed by the rich, whose wealth has surged under him. For the poor, a slew of free programs, from food to housing, deflect the pain of high unemployment and inflation. Western leaders and companies line up to court him, turning to India as a counterweight against China.

He's meticulously built his reputation. In a nod to his Hinduism, he practices yoga in front of TV crews and the U.N., extols the virtues of a vegetarian diet, and preaches about reclaiming India's glory. He refers to himself in the third person.

P.K. Laheri, a former senior bureaucrat in Gujarat, said Modi “does not risk anything” when it comes to winning — he goes into the election thinking the party won't miss a single seat.

The common thread of Modi's rise, analysts say, is that his most consequential policies are ambi-

tions of the RSS.

In 2019, his government revoked the special status of disputed Kashmir, the country's only Muslim-majority region. His government passed a citizenship law excluding Muslim migrants. In January, Modi delivered on a long-standing demand from the RSS — and millions of Hindus — when he opened a temple on the site of a razed mosque.

The BJP has denied enacting discriminatory policies and says its work benefits all Indians.

Last week, the BJP said it would pass a common legal code for all Indians — another RSS desire — to replace religious personal laws. Muslim leaders and others oppose it.

But Modi's politics are appealing to those well beyond right-wing nationalists — the issues have resonated deeply with regular Hindus. Unlike those before him, Modi paints a picture of a rising India as a Hindu one.

Satish Ahlani, a school principal, said he'll vote for Modi. Today, Ahlani said, Gujarat is thriving — as is India.

“Wherever our name hadn't reached, it is now there,” he said. “Being Hindu is our identity; that is why we want a Hindu country. ... For the progress of the country, Muslims will have to be with us. They should accept this and come along.” **MDT/AP**

INDONESIAN

People leave homes near erupting volcano, airport closes due to ash danger

INDONESIAN authorities closed an airport and residents left homes near an erupting volcano yesterday due to the dangers of spreading ash, falling rocks, hot volcanic clouds and the possibility of a tsunami.

Mount Ruang on the northern side of Sulawesi Island had at least five large eruptions Wednesday, causing the Center for Volcanology and Geological Disaster Mitigation to issue its highest-level alert, indicating an active eruption.

The crater emitted white-gray smoke continuously during the day yesterday, reaching more than 500 meters above the peak.

People have been ordered to stay at least 6 kilometers from the 725-me-

ter mountain. More than 11,000 people live in the affected area and were told to leave. At least 800 have done so.

An international airport in Manado city was temporarily closed as volcanic ash was spewed into the air.

“We have to close flight operations at Sam Ratulangi Airport due to the spread of volcanic ash, which could endanger flight safety,” said Ambar Suryoko, head of the regional airport authority.

Eruptions Wednesday evening spewed volcanic ash approximately 70,000 feet into the atmosphere, according to the Australian Bureau of Meteorology's Volcanic Ash Advisory Centre. The bureau said in a statement yesterday it was

tracking and forecasting the ash dispersion.

Indonesia's volcanology center noted the risks from the volcanic eruption include the possibility that part of the volcano could collapse into the sea and cause a tsunami. In December 2018, Indonesia's Anak Krakatau volcano island erupted and collapsed, losing around 3/4 its volume and triggering a powerful tsunami that killed more than 400 people. An 1871 eruption at Mount Ruang also triggered a tsunami.

Tagulandang Island, east of the Ruang volcano, could be at risk if a collapse occurred. Its residents were among those being told to evacuate.

“People who live in the

Tagulandang Island area and are within a 6-kilometer radius must be immediately evacuated to a safe place outside the 6-kilometer radius,” Abdul Muhari, spokesperson of the National Disaster Mitigation Agency, said. “And especially those who live near the coast should be aware of the potential for incandescent rocks to erupt, hot clouds and tsunami waves that could be triggered by the collapse of a volcanic body into the sea.”

The agency said residents will be relocated to Manado, the nearest city, on Sulawesi island — a six-hour journey by boat.

Indonesia, an archipelago of 270 million people, has 120 active volcanoes. It



Hot molten lava glows at the crater of Mount Ruang as it erupts in Sanguine Islands on Wednesday night

is prone to volcanic activity because it sits along the “Ring of Fire,” a horseshoe-

-shaped series of seismic fault lines around the Pacific Ocean. **MDT/AP**

EUROPEAN UNION

'There is no time to waste' to boost competitiveness, close gap with US and China: leaders

EUROPEAN Union leaders yesterday debated a new "European Competitiveness Deal" aimed at helping the 27-nation bloc close the gap with Chinese and American rivals amid fears the region's industries will otherwise be left behind for good.

In a volatile geopolitical landscape redefined by the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine and increasing tensions in the Middle East that create new economic challenges, EU leaders believe there is an urgent need for action.

China, the U.S. and the European Union are the three largest economies in the world, but the EU's share has diminished over the past 30 years. Europe is now feeling pressure amid U.S. and Chinese efforts to support investment in domestic production through subsidies and tax breaks, particularly in renewable energy and green technology.

Before the summit in Brussels, the former president of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, said the EU did not pay enough attention to "external competitiveness as a serious policy question" and insisted Europe's biggest economic rivals "are no longer playing by the rules."

"In the face of a new geopolitical reality and increasingly complex challenges, the European Union is committed to strengthening its strategic sovereignty and acting decisively to ensure its long-term competitiveness, prosperity and leadership on the global stage," leaders were expected to agree at their summit in Brussels, according to a draft of conclusions seen by The Associated Press.

Leaders will hear a proposal for an EU-wide effort to subsidize industrial companies in response to the Biden administration's support for investment in environmentally friendly technology through the Inflation Reduction Act, and to China's subsidies for electric cars and solar panels.

The proposals, contained in a report from former Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta, are in response to widespread concern that U.S. subsidies, which favor domestic production in



European Council President Charles Michel, right, speaks with author of the High-Level Report on the future of the Single Market, Enrico Letta

the U.S., are drawing investment from Europe and threatening the loss of industrial jobs on the continent.

"Competitiveness means prosperity for our citizens," Letta said. "We're in danger of falling out of touch. There is no time to waste. The gap between the European Union and the U.S. in terms of economic performances is becoming bigger and bigger."

According to his report, GDP per capita in the U.S. increased by almost 60% from 1993 to 2022, while in Europe the increase was less than 30%.

Draghi said the EU lacks a clear strategy to answer the challenges proposed by Chinese and American rivals in key industries.

"Today we invest less in digital and advanced technologies than the U.S. and China, including for defense, and we only have four global European

tech players among the top 50 worldwide," he said. "We are lacking a strategy for how to shield our traditional industries from an unlevel global playing field caused by asymmetries in regulations, subsidies and trade policies."

EU rules restrict member governments' aid to companies to avoid distorting business competition across the 27-member union's free trade zone. One solution, Letta proposed, is to require countries to use a chunk of such aid for EU-wide projects instead of purely national ones.

The report also calls for better integrating the bloc's financial markets so companies can raise money for new renewable energy projects from stock, bond and venture capital investors instead of relying mostly on bank lending. That is a longstanding idea that has progressed slowly. Letta's ideas would be taken up only after this year's

EU parliament elections and the appointment of a new executive commission.

"There is a need for more investment," said European Council President Charles Michel, who chairs EU summits. "What is fundamental is to act in order to put in place the capital markets union. And also to increase the capacities of the European Investment Bank to invest in strategic sectors."

Creating more broad-based financial markets would channel European citizens' "billions of euros" in savings as a tool to invest in strategic sectors within the bloc.

"Today, there's a paradox," he said. "A substantial part of these savings leaves the European Union and is not mobilized to support the economic base, to support innovation, to support the technological base." **MDT/AP**

this day in history

1993 WACO CULT SIEGE ENDS WITH INFERNO



At least 70 people are feared to have died in a fire at the besieged headquarters of the Branch Davidian sect near Waco, Texas.

The fate of the cult's leader, David Koresh, is still unknown.

The White House said the blaze had been started deliberately by those inside after the FBI began a dawn assault.

Tear gas canisters and stun grenades were fired into the cult's compound and an armoured vehicle moved in to demolish the walls.

Three hours later they broke down the main entrance.

At one point reports said the cult members had agreed to come out but then reneged on the deal.

When the fire started at around 1200 local time (1800GMT) several children were believed to be inside with David Koresh and his followers.

By the time firefighters arrived the fire had taken a firm hold on wooden buildings inside the compound.

The fire worsened when the cult's store of munitions exploded.

Eight cult members escaped but David Koresh is not believed to be among them.

The cult's buildings been surrounded since February when four agents with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) were killed as they attempted to arrest Mr Koresh on firearms charges.

It was hoped Mr Koresh would give himself up last week but he sent FBI agents a message saying he had not yet received his orders from God.

The Branch Davidians descend from a breakaway group from the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

President Bill Clinton said yesterday he had had advance warning of the assault on the compound.

But the president added that newly-appointed Attorney-General Janet Reno made the decision to begin the operation.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

Approximately 77 cult members, including David Koresh, died in the fire.

Some cult members, including David Koresh, were found to have died of gunshot wounds.

The FBI was criticised for what were seen as heavy-handed tactics to end the siege and newly-appointed Attorney General Janet Reno was forced to defend her decision to use tanks and tear gas.

In January 1994 11 surviving Branch Davidians were put on trial.

They were all cleared of the most serious charges relating to the deaths of the four government agents.

Five were convicted on the lesser charge of voluntary manslaughter.

In July 2000 a government-appointed investigator cleared the FBI of any blame in starting the fire after hiring a specialist firm to stage a re-enactment. In September of the same year a \$675m (£433m) claim against the US Government by relatives of those who died and survivors was thrown out by a judge.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS

ARIES
Mar. 21-Apr. 19
Practice to strengthen your physical performance. Distractions abound, and urgent tasks await. Push your boundaries, while respecting limitations. Put your back into it.

TAURUS
Apr. 20-May. 20
Little things express your love. Find creative ways to let someone know how you feel. Actions get farther than words. Share your heart.

GEMINI
May. 21-Jun. 21
Domestic matters have your attention. Physical action gets satisfying results. Cooking, cleaning and renovation projects pay off. Nurture family. Work to fulfill a vision.

CANCER
Jun. 22-Jul. 22
Get terms, agreements and ideas down in writing. You're especially persuasive. Reevaluate what you've been learning. Survey your network. Pursue a fascinating inquiry.

LEO
Jul. 23-Aug. 22
Focus on generating funding. Take action to get results. Don't worry about money or spend much, either. Avoid risky business. Maintain positive momentum.

VIRGO
Aug. 23-Sep. 22
Take charge of your destiny. You're ready to make improvements. Assertiveness gets results. Discuss subjects of personal passion. Ask for what you want.

LIBRA
Sep. 23-Oct. 22
Review priorities. Adjust plans and budgets with changes in real time. Truth and assumptions don't match. Restore integrity everywhere it's missing. Rest and recharge.

SCORPIO
Oct. 23-Nov. 21
Discuss what you love. Take action for a cause of shared passion. Coordinate with your team, tribe or community. Together you can accomplish miracles.

SAGITTARIUS
Nov. 22-Dec. 21
Prioritize professional projects. Don't react blindly. Disagree respectfully. Stick to facts and data. Your work is gaining recognition. Outcomes are better than expected.

CAPRICORN
Dec. 22-Jan. 19
An exploration calls you into action. Arrange connections in advance. Avoid risky routes. Confirm intuition with data. Check reservations. Don't forget an important job.

AQUARIUS
Jan. 20-Feb. 18
Find a painless way to cut costs. Conserve energy and resources. Compromise for equitable solutions with your partner. Collaborate to fill the family pot.

PISCES
Feb. 19-Mar. 20
Collaborate with your partner. Share the load. Strategize together. Align on common dreams, goals and objectives. Talk about what you love and want.

The Born Loser by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

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

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

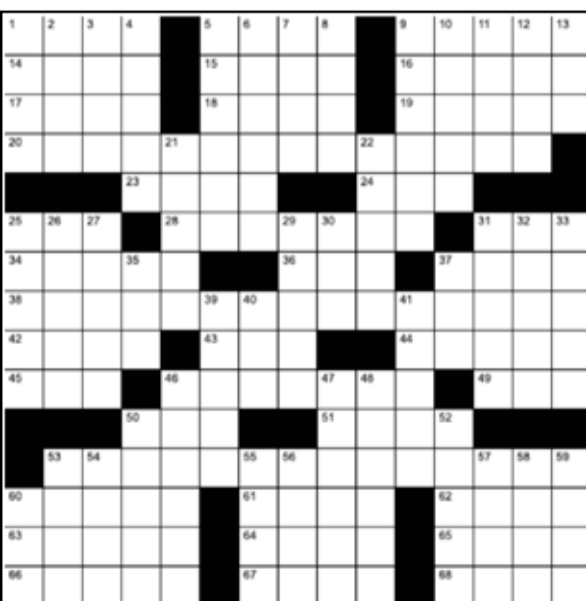
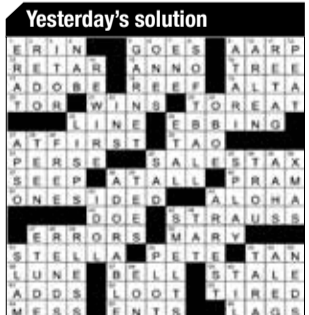
WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	14	28	overcast
Changchun	4	19	fine
Chengdu	16	25	cloudy
Chongqing	20	27	cloudy
Fuzhou	17	22	rain
Guangzhou	23	29	rain
Guiyang	17	27	cloudy
Haikou	25	34	cloudy
Hangzhou	11	22	rain
Harbin	1	17	fine
Hefei	12	22	rain
Nanjing	13	22	thunderstorms
Shanghai	13	21	rain
Taipei	19	24	rain
Wuhan	16	26	rain
Hong Kong	28	30	thunderstorms
WORLD			
Moscow	2	15	showers
Frankfurt	4	10	rain
Paris	4	13	showers
London	3	13	cloudy
New York	9	13	cloudy

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Tel ___; 5- Ali ___; 9- Leaves out; 14- Open infection, painful; 15- Cheese; 16- Charged; 17- Like ___ not; 18- What ___ mind reader?; 19- Foe; 20- Make lurid; 23- Came down to earth; 24- Code-breaking org.; 25- Asian language; 28- I've been framed; 31- Male sheep who may play football for Los Angeles; 34- Take ___ at (try); 36- Canine command; 37- ___ avis; 38- In spite of; 42- Human leg joint; 43- Small battery size; 44- Kind of kitchen; 45- ___ Lingus (Irish carrier); 46- You don't bring me flowers, ___; 49- Beverage commonly drunk in England; 50- Pan-broil; 51- Created; 53- Distinguishing feature; 60- Rub out; 61- Acting part; 62- Pro or con; 63- Components; 64- Like Nash's lama; 65- Pulitzer-winning biographer Leon; 66- This is only ___; 67- Metropolis; 68- Marine mammal, secure something;

DOWN 1- Sale condition; 2- Cast a ballot; 3- Wrinkle remover; 4- Vice ___; 5- Scram!; 6- Lets in; 7- Scott of "Charles in Charge"; 8- ___ for All Seasons; 9- Ultimatum words; 10- Craze; 11- Don Juan's mother; 12- Domesticated; 13- Hog home; 21- Suspect's story; 22- Singer Baker; 25- Sri ___; 26- Unified; 27- Sleek swimmer; 29- Indian state; 30- Ignited; 31- Singer Bonnie; 32- Golfer Palmer, informally; 33- ___ Carta; 35- Reverence plus fear; 37- Old vitamin bottle abbr; 39- Singer Tucker; 40- Cut and dried grass; 41- ___ say more?; 46- Take into custody; 47- Brunch dish; 48- Seldom; 50- Observes Ramadan; 52- Curved letters; 53- Pluto's tail?; 54- Fabled loser; 55- Gator's cousin; 56- Author Morrison; 57- Periodic movement of the sea; 58- The very ___; 59- Red or white, in the blood; 60- Clean air org.;



Crossword puzzles provided by BestCrosswords.com

USEFUL TELEPHONE NUMBERS

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



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Jade Garden
HKD 11,880,000 4 bed 3 bath

DRIVE IN

IN ALEX GARLAND'S POTENT 'CIVIL WAR,' JOURNALISTS ARE AMERICA'S LAST HOPE

LINDSEY BAHR,
MDT/AP FILM WRITER

THE United States is crumbling in Alex Garland's sharp new film "Civil War," a bellowing and haunting big screen experience. The country has been at war with itself for years by the time we're invited in, through the gaze of a few journalists documenting the chaos on the front lines and chasing an impossible interview with the president.

Garland, the writer-director of films like "Annihilation" and "Ex Machina," as well as the series "Devs," always seems to have an eye on the ugliest sides of humanity and our capacity for self-destruction. His themes are profound and his exploration of them sincere in films that are imbued with strange and

haunting images that rattle around in your subconscious for far too long. Whatever you think of "Men," his most divisive film to date, it's unlikely anyone will forget Rory Kinnear giving birth to himself.

In "Civil War," starring Kirsten Dunst as a veteran war photographer named Lee, Garland is challenging his audience once again by not making the film about what everyone thinks it will, or should, be about. Yes, it's a politically divided country. Yes, the President (Nick Offerman) is a blustery, rising despot who has given himself a third term, taken to attacking his citizens and shut himself off from the press. Yes, there is one terrifying character played by Jesse Plemons who has some pretty hard lines about who is



Cailee Spaeny (left) and Kirsten Dunst in a scene from "Civil War" (A24)

and isn't a real American.

But that trailer that had everyone talking is not the story. Garland is not so dull or narratively

conservative to make the film about red and blue ideologies. All we really know is that the so-called Western Forces of Texas and California have seceded from the country and are closing in to overthrow the government. We don't know what they want or why, or what the other side wants or why and you start to realize that many of the characters don't seem to really know, or care, either.

This choice might be frustrating to some audiences, but it's also the only one that makes sense in a film focused on the kinds of journalists who put themselves in harm's way to tell the story of violent conflicts and unrest. As Lee explains to Cailee Spaeny's Jessie, a young, aspiring photographer who has elbowed her way onto their dangerous journey to Washington, questions are not for her to ask: She takes truthful, impartial pictures so that everyone else can.

"Civil War" a film that is more about war reporters than anything else — the trauma of bearing witness and the moral and ethical dilemmas of impartiality. Dunst's Lee is having a bit of an existential crisis, having shot so many horrors

and feeling as though she hasn't made any difference — violence and death are still everywhere. She's also a pro: Hardened and committed to the story and the image. Her colleague Joel (Wagner Moura) is more of an adrenaline junkie, chasing the gunfire and drinking himself into a stupor every night. There's Jessie (Spaeny), the wide-eyed but ambitious newbie who is in over her head, and the aging editor Sammy (the great Stephen McKinley Henderson), wise and buttoned up in Brooks Brothers and suspenders, who can't imagine a life outside of news even as his body is failing him. All are self-motivated and none of them have a life outside of the job, which might be a criticism for some movie characters but not here (trigger warning for any journo audiences out there).

The group must drive an indirect route to get from New York to Washington as safely as possible, through Pittsburgh and West Virginia. The roads and towns are set-dressed a little bit, but anyone who knows the area will recognize familiar sights of dead malls, creaky off-brand gas stations on two lane roads, boarded up shops and overgrown parking

lots that all work to provide an unsettlingly effective backdrop for the bleak world of "Civil War."

Dunst and Spaeny are both exceedingly good in their roles, effectively embodying the veteran and the novice — a well-written, nuanced and evolving dynamic that should inspire post-credits debates and discussion (among other topics).

Dread permeates every frame, whether it's a quiet moment of smart conversation, a white-knuckle standoff or a deafening shootout on 17th street. And as with all Garland films it comes with a great, thoughtful soundtrack and a Sonoya Mizuno cameo.

Smart, compelling and challenging blockbusters don't come along that often, though this past year has had a relative embarrassment of riches with the likes of "Dune: Part Two" and "Oppenheimer." "Civil War" should be part of that conversation too. It's a full body theatrical experience that deserves a chance.

"Civil War," an A24 release in theaters Friday, is rated R by the Motion Picture Association for "strong, violent content, bloody/disturbing images and language throughout." Running time: 119 minutes.



AD

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MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

TUNES

Jazz pianist Fred Hersch creates subdued, lovely colors on 'Silent, Listening'

JAZZ pianist Fred Hersch fully embraces the freedom that comes with improvisation on his solo album "Silent, Listening," spontaneously composing and performing tunes that are often without melody, meter or form.

Listening to them can be challenging and rewarding. The many-time Grammy nominee's impressionistic approach creates colors that are subdued and lovely. It's chamber jazz — closer to classical music than the blues — that will be familiar to fans of ECM Records founder Manfred Eicher, who produced. The album will be released Friday.

Hersch returns to the Swiss studio where he recorded his first ECM album, "The Song Is You," a 2022 set with trumpeter Enrico Rava. The sound is pristine and airy, in classic fashion for the label, and Hersch makes full use of his instrument.

He explores the highest and lowest octaves, and strums inside the piano. With a light touch and disdain for anything showy, he plays single notes in meticulous extended sequences. There are also clusters that splash, splay and sashay, and an occasional forte chord for startling contrast. Sometimes a tune emerges, such as near the end of the contemplative "The Wind," and amid the unsteady but seductive pulse of "Starlight."

Hersch's hands converse with each other, the parts they play by turns contrasting or complementary. Rumbling bass is answered by treble toggles and trills. The animated "Little Song" swings with bouncy good cheer, but the mood on Hersch's other original compositions tends toward the wistful, ethereal or — as he describes it — nocturnal.

The amorphous, atonal music contrasts with his lyrical style on covers. The Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn tune "Star-Crossed Lovers" becomes a gentle wee-hours examination of melancholy melody. Hersch interprets "Softly, as In a Morning Sunrise" as a hummable, jaunty toe-tapper, and he saves for last his bluest performance, "Winter of My Discontent," which achieves a glow that lingers. **STEVE WINE, MDT/AP**



"Silent, Listening" by Fred Hersch (ECM Records)

TASTE OF EDESIA

Mono Unplugged

IRENE SAM

CHEF Ricardo Chaneton of one Michelin-starred restaurant **Mono** by JIA Group will host Asia's Best Female Chef 2024, Chef Pichaya "Pam" Soontorniyakij of one Michelin-starred Restaurant Potong in an exclusive Mono's 10th edition of its Unplugged collaboration series on the April 23rd and 24th at Mono in Hong Kong.

This event marks an exciting moment for food enthusiasts, as both chefs celebrate their cultural heritage through modern culinary techniques that elevate traditional flavours and recipes. At Mono, Chaneton draws inspiration from his Italian-Venezuelan background, serving innovative creations that have propelled the restaurant to award-winning international acclaim. Soontorniyakij is known for her progressive Thai-Chinese cuisine where she masterfully executes the 5-element philosophy of "Salt, Acid, Spice, Texture, and Millard

Reaction" in every dish at Restaurant Potong. She was recently named Asia's Best Female Chef 2024 by Asia's 50 Best Restaurants, and was the first-ever recipient of the Michelin Opening of the Year award in 2023 for Thailand, earning recognition for the successful opening of Restaurant Potong in the heart of Bangkok's Chinatown.

"I am very excited to team up with chef Pam. It's a privilege to bring her distinctive culinary expertise to Hong Kong to cook at Mono upon the city's dynamic multicultural culinary scene, especially since she is one of the most influential chefs in Asia. We're creating something that's unique and personal, inspired by our roots while resonating with Hong Kong diners," says Chaneton.

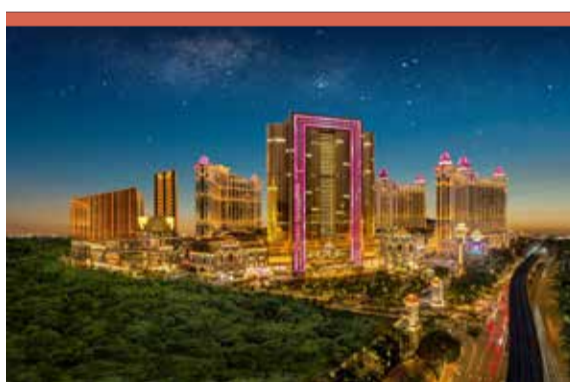
"I am thrilled for this opportunity to come to Hong Kong and share my Thai-Chinese heritage. Hong Kong is a vibrant city and I can't wait to create something new with chef Ricardo at Mono that blends our respective backgrounds," adds Soontorniyakij.



Chef Pichaya Soontorniyakij



Chef Ricardo Chaneton



EXCELLENCE IN LEISURE

GALAXY Macau has recently received a trio of prestigious awards from three respected publications, highlighting the continued excellence and innovation of the renowned integrated resort and its world-class luxury hospitality brands. Galaxy Macau was ranked in 'China's Top 100 Hotels' by Travel + Leisure, Andaz Macau was named 'Best New Hotel in China' at the TTG China Travel Awards, and Banyan Tree Spa Macau was recognized as the 'Best Hotel Spa' at the Vogue Hong Kong Beauty Awards 2024. The first of the three accolades arrived when Galaxy Macau was ranked in 'China's Top 100 Hotels' at the Travel + Leisure 2023 China Travel Awards. Launched in 2007 by world-renowned travel magazine

Travel + Leisure, the Travel + Leisure China Travel Awards partners with Ctrip's "Reputation Ranking" to evaluate hotels, destinations, and scenic spots using a variety of criteria, providing an authoritative benchmark for China's tourism industry. The next esteemed publication to recognise a Galaxy Macau hotel was Vogue Hong Kong, with Banyan Tree Spa Macau being named 'Best Hotel Spa' at the Vogue Hong Kong Beauty Awards 2024. Celebrating excellence in the world of beauty and skincare, the Vogue Hong Kong Beauty Awards recognize outstanding products, brands, and innovations that have made a significant impact over the past year. And the most recent accolade was announced at the 17th Annual TTG China Travel Awards 2024, which took place in Shanghai with Andaz Macau being named 'Best New Hotel in China', just six months after opening. Launched in 2008, the TTG China Travel Awards honors the best of Greater China's travel industry, including airlines, hotels and resorts, serviced residences, and travel services. **IS**

OPINION

Business Views

Shuli Ren, Bloomberg



MAKING SENSE OF CHINA'S MAGICAL 5.3% GROWTH

China's first-quarter 5.3% growth handily beat expectations and Beijing's own target of "around 5%." But if you ask households, companies and even the taxman, the reality on the ground feels a lot less rosy.

By the end of 2023, only 9.5% saw good job prospects, according to the central bank's latest urban depositor survey. Preparing for rainy days, households added 8.6 trillion yuan (\$1.2 trillion) in their savings in the first quarter, prompting some banks to discontinue long-term fixed-income offerings to protect their margins. The CSI 2000 Index, whose small-cap companies are more sensitive to business cycles, is down 20% for the year. Meanwhile, as of February, government fiscal revenue fell 2.3% from a year ago.

Accusations that China is cooking its economic-expansion statistics have been around for decades. But to understand its economy and political system better, one should try to reconcile and make sense of the difference between the headline number and people's daily perceptions. As far as I can see, two forces are at play.

First, the economy is experiencing its longest deflationary streak since 1999. As such, the 5.3% increase in real gross domestic product doesn't offer useful insights into stagnant income growth experienced by workers and corporations, whose earnings are in yuan terms. Indeed, in the first quarter, nominal GDP notched only 4.2%. Household disposable income increased by 6.2%, well below pre-pandemic levels.

Manufacturing was the main growth engine, driven by strong exports and new energy-related investments. The 6.4% increase validated President Xi Jinping's conviction that high-end industrial upgrades can eventually replace real estate's prominent role and pull his economy out of its slump.

However, one hardly expects those in the electric vehicle supply chain to be feeling cheerful. Many wonder if strong exports can last. Trade tensions and protectionism are once again on the rise. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen expressed worries in recent trips to China that the vast output of factories there have become a global problem.

Indeed, the industrial capacity utilization rate fell to 73.8% last quarter, the lowest on record other than the early pandemic days when much of the country was in lockdown. In the first three months of the year, a price war erupted and escalated — market leaders BYD Co. and Tesla Inc. sacrificed profit margins for sales volume — in turn worsening producers' price deflation in China.

The second factor has to do with how China calculates quarterly GDP. It uses a so-called production account, which prioritizes the value-add of each industry and brushes away end demand.

Manufacturers may have been replenishing their inventories — as of February, the latest data available, stockpiles grew 6.8% from a year earlier, an uptick from late 2023. What this also means is that in the future, companies might sell products out of their storage rooms before producing more, which would put pressure on China's GDP later in the year.

As China undergoes structural transitions, it's becoming harder to read the economy and figure out when and where it bottoms. That the government is quick to stop providing insightful statistics doesn't help either. More than before, one needs to sift through minute data series that the general public doesn't pay much attention to and are thus less likely tempered. Those who can only read the headline numbers don't know China.

Courtesy Bloomberg/Shuli Ren

UK POLICE SAY THEY DISRUPTED CYBER FRAUD NETWORK THAT STOLE PERSONAL DATA FROM THOUSANDS

THE BUZZ

A website that allowed international cyber fraudsters to trick up to 70,000 British victims into revealing personal information such as bank account details and passwords has been infiltrated and disrupted, London police said yesterday.

Metropolitan Police said they seized the LabHost site, which enabled more than 2,000 criminals to create phishing sites that got victims to reveal 480,000 bank card numbers and 64,000 PIN numbers.

Law enforcement in the U.K. and abroad arrested 37 people since Sunday, and another 800 were warned that police know their identity. Many of them remain under investigation.

The site set up in 2021 allowed criminals to pay a monthly fee to create fraudulent websites that appeared to be those of legitimate banks, healthcare agencies or postal services but were designed to steal users' personal information.

The site provided templates and a how-to lesson for less tech-savvy users to use profiles of 170 companies to set up some 40,000 scam sites. The tutorial ended with a robotic voice saying: "Stay safe and good spamming."

Police have notified as many as 25,000 U.K. victims that their data was compromised.

AP PHOTO



HUGH GRANT SAYS HE TOOK 'ENORMOUS SUM' TO SETTLE SUIT ALLEGING ILLEGAL SNOOPING BY TABLOID

HUGH Grant accepted "an enormous sum of money" to settle a lawsuit accusing The Sun tabloid of unlawfully tapping his phone, bugging his car and breaking into his home to snoop on him, the actor said yesterday [Macau time] after the agreement was announced in court.

Grant said he reluctantly settled because of a court policy that could have stuck him with a huge legal bill even if he prevailed at trial — a reality that could also force fellow claimant Prince Harry to settle, their lawyer said. A civil court rule intended to avoid jamming up the courts would have required Grant to pay legal fees to both sides if he won at trial but was awarded anything lower than the settlement offer.

"As is common with entirely innocent people, they are offering me an enormous sum of money to keep this matter out of court," Grant said on the social media platform X. "Even if every allegation is proven in court, I would still be liable for something approaching 10 million pounds (\$12.4 million) in costs. I'm afraid I am shying at that fence." The amount of the se-

ttlement was not disclosed. NGN said in a statement that it admitted no liability and said the settlement was in the financial interest of both parties to avoid a costly trial.

Grant and other claimants have alleged that NGN, a subsidiary of the media empire built by Rupert Murdoch, violated their privacy through widespread unlawful activity that included hiring private investigators to intercept voicemails, tap phones, bug cars and use deception to access confidential information between 1994 and 2016.

Grant is among several celebrities, including actress Sienna Miller, soccer star Paul Gascoigne and Spice Girl Melanie Chisholm, who have settled claims against the publisher.

Attorney Gideon Benaim, who was not involved in the case, said the publisher probably used the "incredibly powerful" rules of the court by making an offer Grant was unlikely to surpass at trial. If a judge awarded Grant less than the settlement offer, he would have faced significant legal costs under the rules.

"Hugh Grant would have been left in little doubt by

his lawyers that the offer was pitched so that there was a real risk that he would not 'beat' it at trial," Benaim said. "Therefore, even though he may have preferred to have fought the case, the financial risks were simply too great and he had, in effect, no choice but to settle."

The settlement leaves The Duke of Sussex and 41 others scheduled to go to trial in the High Court in January, though their lawyer said settlements were being "forced upon" them.

"The Duke of Sussex is subject to the same issues that Sienna Miller and Hugh Grant have been subject to, which is that the offers are made that make it impossible for them to go ahead," David Sherborne told a judge Wednesday at a hearing in the case.

The settlement came less than a year after Justice Timothy Fancourt rejected NGN's attempt to throw out Grant's lawsuit alleging unlawful information gathering.

"If true ... these allegations would establish very serious, deliberate wrongdoing at NGN, conducted on an institutional basis on a huge scale," Fancourt wrote in May. MDT/AP

AP PHOTO



USA Joe Biden will accept endorsements from at least 15 members of the Kennedy political family during a campaign stop in Philadelphia on Thursday as he aims to undermine former President Donald Trump and marginalize the candidacy of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Kerry Kennedy, a daughter of former Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, niece of former President John F. Kennedy and sister of the current presidential contender, will deliver the endorsements of Biden, his campaign announced.

AP PHOTO



USA Google has fired 28 employees involved in protests over the tech company's cloud computing contract with the Israeli government, according to statements from the company and campaigners. The workers held sit-ins at the company's offices in California and New York over Google's \$1.2 billion contract to provide custom tools for Israeli's military. They were fired yesterday [Macau time] after police earlier arrested nine people.

AP PHOTO



Croatia Ruling conservatives said that talks have already started about the formation of a new governing majority following a highly contested parliamentary election that saw a far-right party emerge as a potential kingmaker. Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, who is the leader of the Croatian Democratic Union party (pictured), or HDZ, said that the party has contacted some of the potential future partners and more talks will take place today [Macau time].