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FOUNDER & PUBLISHER Kowie Geldenhuys EDITOR-IN-CHIEF Paulo Coutinho www.macaudailytimes.com.mo

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PJ REPORTED SEVERAL CASES OF TICKET SCALPING OVER THE WEEKEND TARGETING VISITORS WHO CAME TO MACAU TO WATCH THE TABLE TENNIS WORLD CUP

P5

MGTO TO HOLD ROADSHOW IN SINGAPORE AS VISITORS INCREASE

P4

CHINESE GENERAL TAKES A HARSH LINE ON TAIWAN AT INT'L NAVAL GATHERING

P6



AP PHOTO



Germany Three people suspected of spying for China and arranging to transfer information on technology with potential military uses were arrested in Germany yesterday. Prosecutors said the three German citizens are accused of having acted for Chinese intelligence since some point before June 2022. They are also suspected of violating German export laws by exporting a special laser without permission. One of the suspects, identified only as Thomas R. in line with German privacy laws, was allegedly an agent for an employee of the Ministry of State Security.

UK Two men, including one who was reported to be a parliamentary researcher, were charged with spying for China, British prosecutors said. Police said Christopher Berry, 32, and Christopher Cash, 29, were charged with "providing prejudicial information to a foreign state, China." They will appear at Westminster Magistrates' Court on Friday. Police allege the two men collected, recorded or communicated information "prejudicial to the safety or interests of the state" and violated the Official Secrets Act between late 2021 and February 2023.

AP PHOTO



Papua New Guinea PM James Marape accused Joe Biden of disparaging the South Pacific island nation by implying that an uncle of the U.S. president had been eaten by "cannibals" there during World War II. Biden's comments offended a key strategic ally as China moves to increase its influence in the region. The president spoke at a Pennsylvania war memorial last week about his Army Air Corps aviator uncle Second Lt. Ambrose J. Finnegan Jr., who he said was shot down over Papua New Guinea, which was a theater of heavy fighting.

GBA GAME CHANGER FOR FORUM MACAO

P2-3

中國 - 葡語國家經貿合作論壇(澳門)第六屆部長級
6.ª Conferência Ministerial do Fórum para a Cooperação Económica e Comercial entre a China e os Países de Língua Portuguesa



GAMING
CASINO REVENUE STEADY IN EARLY APRIL: JP MORGAN

TOURISM
VISITOR ARRIVALS RECOVER TO 86% PRE-PANDEMIC

FORUM MACAU

Action Plan announced as members talk and new opportunities in their relations

RENATO MARQUES

THE 6th Ministerial Conference of the Forum for Economic and Trade Cooperation between China and the Portuguese-speaking countries (Forum Macau) kicked off officially yesterday morning with the opening ceremony.

Forum Macau also announced its Action Plan for 2024-2027, which involves enhancing collaboration in established fields and introducing innovative initiatives in sectors like healthcare and environmental conservation.

Presented by the Secretary-General of the Permanent Secretariat of Forum Macau, Ji Xianzheng, the Strategic Plan for Economic and Trade Co-operation (2024-2027) outlines fresh areas of focus for the Forum.

As listed in the plan, the Forum aims to have a continuous effort to enhance collaboration in traditional sectors, particularly in the fields of medical and health care, environmental protection, and the development of Portuguese-speaking countries.

The plan also focuses on exploring new areas of cooperation, such as establishing the Blue Partnership between China and Portuguese-speaking countries and addressing climate change.

Forum Macau will also highlight for Macau's platform building, with an emphasis on leveraging its central city position in the Greater Bay Area to foster economic and trade relations between China and Portuguese-speaking countries.

As on previous occasions, the ceremony was an opportunity for each of the nine Portuguese-speaking countries and China to address other members and talk about their latest achievements as well as upcoming opportunities for further development or cooperation.

ANGOLA

On behalf of the Republic of Angola, the Minister of Industry and Commerce, Rui Miguêns de Oliveira, highlighted the way that

the government of the People's Republic of China has handled the adversities of the pandemic period and post-pandemic initial recovery, stating that, over the last four years, it has shown persistence and resilience.

"China's solidarity was highly appreciated and we are grateful for it having saved thousands of human lives," Miguêns de Oliveira said.

He noted that China has been an inspiring source for the process of national reconstruction after the conquest of the effective peace of Angola in 2002, having been since that period Angola's "largest trading partner, the main source of direct investment and main partner in the construction of notable infrastructures such as roads, bridges, dams, hydroelectric power plants, residential urbanization, schools, hospitals, railways, seaports, and airports."

Miguêns de Oliveira also noted that the Angolan government has now created conditions that configure a facilitated business environment aiming to "support business and attract foreign investment," with reforms and economic measures that simplify administrative and bureaucratic procedures and circulation of people. Another innovation mentioned was amendments made to the laws on foreign investment that included now "packages of incentives and attractive benefits to investors."

He concluded by inviting all members as well as companies, agencies, and chambers of commerce, to participate in the 15th edition of the meeting of businessmen for economic and commercial cooperation between China and the Portuguese-speaking countries, which will take place in Luanda, from July 24 to 26, at the time of the implementation of the largest business matching market in Angola.

BRAZIL

Representing the Brazilian government, Executive Secretary of the Ministry of Entrepreneurship, Micro and Small Business, Francisco Tadeu Barbosa de

Alencar said, "Brazil shares the goal of promoting economic and commercial development from cooperation and believes in the efforts that this Forum [Macau] has made to seek consensus and tangible and measurable results."

He also highlighted that, over the past 50 years, Brazil has had China as its most important strategic partner and that over half a century this partnership has developed, "based on a multidimensional relationship with mutual respect that brings concrete benefits to our respective societies."

In terms of commercial and economic fields, Alencar noted that China is the main commercial partner of Brazil in the world "with a trade value that surpasses the sum of Brazil's trade with the United States and the European Union combined."

Alencar focused his speech on the economic figures of trade between China and Brazil and the importance of micro and small enterprises and how these take a central role in this trade between the two countries.

"Our economies have something in common that I want to draw attention to. We all have small businesses in our countries that play an essential role in the generation of jobs and technological development. Brazil has almost 14 million individual micro-entrepreneurs and 5.5 million micro and small businesses. That's 93.4% of the total number of formal active companies in the country. If we also add up the medium-sized companies, this figure exceeds 99% of all Brazilian companies. Small businesses account for 30% of Brazilian GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and 55% of formal jobs," he remarked, adding, that in 2023, these small-sized companies were responsible for more than 70% of the new jobs created. Still, he noted that many of these companies, due to their size, have difficulties in accessing the export market alone, pointing to this fact as an aspect in which Forum Macau can help, facilitating the arrival of these types of companies in China.



CAPE VERDE

China needs Africa and Africa needs China; these were the words chosen to open the speech of the representative of the government of Cape Verde to the Ministerial Conference.

Vice Prime Minister, Minister of Finance and Business Promotion, and Minister of Digital Economy, Olavo Correia explained that this is the ultimate reason leading members of Forum Macau to gather in Macau.

"We are all here by will and by necessity," he said, adding, "We are all here today to [...] discuss, clarify, and discover the ways how we can do more, do better, do faster, and with more impact for our fellow citizens."

Calling for the need for a fairer, more sustainable, more balanced, and a framework more focused on mutual benefits cooperation, Correia noted also the need to concentrate more on people, particularly on young people and women.

Correia noted that more than discussing the initiatives China has to help their countries, it is more important to discuss how China can help the countries in their initiatives and the development process that is being led by the countries themselves.

"China, as a credible and re-

liable partner, as an active partner, fulfills the promises and is committed to our well-being. It is not just about business, trade, and investment, it is also about being able to count on China to transform the African continent, Lusophony, and Cape Verde," he remarked.

With a focus on eliminating poverty and guaranteeing everyone's access to energy, clean drinking water, sanitation, internet, education, health, and employment, Correia noted that the greater good is promoting the dignity of the human being, something that Cape Verde knows that they can count on China to achieve, he said.

For Correia, the new Action Plan 2024-2027, signed in the afternoon during the Ministerial Conference, is not just a document acknowledging intentions but, instead, "It is imperative to accelerate the implementation of the measures drafted on the new Action Plan 2024-2027, aiming to strengthen the construction of the Macau platform and raise the level of cooperation between China and the member countries so that the mechanism can effectively respond to the objectives and proposals." Cape Verde continues to bet on their previously identified fun-

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

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

A MACAU TIMES PUBLICATIONS LTD PUBLICATION

ADMINISTRATOR & CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
Kowie Geldenhuys kowie@macaudailytimes.com

OFFICE MANAGER_Juliana Cheang juliana@macaudailytimes.com
ADDRESS_Av. da Praia Grande, 599, Edif. Comercial Rodrigues, 12 Floor C,
MACAU SAR Telephones: +853 287 160 81/2 Fax: +853 287 160 84
Advertisement_advertising@macaudailytimes.com
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about achievements with China



damental areas for future investment, including the blue economy, tourism, digital transaction, energy transaction, the green economy, human capital reinforcement, the private sector, and connectivity.

GUINEA-BISSAU

Minister of Economy, Planning, and Regional Integration Soares Sambú highlighted the fact that this was the first presentational conference from Forum Macau members since the joining of the organization of São Tomé and Príncipe and Equatorial Guinea, respectively in 2017 and 2022.

The same official noted that the motto of the meeting, "New Era, New Vision," should represent a new multifaceted and audacious approach by all partners involved in the cooperation strategy, aiming to achieve the maximum possible benefit of the advantages offered to the members by the Forum Macau and its structure.

He noted that, despite the advancements of Guinea-Bissau in the construction of its economic and political stability, the situation in both domestic and external environments is still very challenging for the country.

"We recently concluded the signing of a reform program with the IMF (International Monetary Fund) and today we have a stable macroeconomic framework and we bet on budget consolidation and optimization of the management of public finances," Sambú said, adding, "our Government is deeply committed to the development of adequate public policies that stimulate the private sector and create a favorable business

environment in the country, promoting the diversification of the economy."

EQUATORIAL GUINEA

The fact that it was the first time that Equatorial Guinea was present at the Ministerial Conference was also highlighted by the country's representative, noting the relevance of this meeting for the country.

"Despite the Republic of Equatorial Guinea being one of the countries that recently joined the Forum Macau, we appreciate and [admire] the path that the Forum has been following since its creation and that of the government of China in general," said the Vice Minister of Trade, Industry, and Business Promotion, Jerónimo Carlos Osa Osa Nzang.

The same official noted the country's efforts on new policies, namely on visas that aim for the country's national strategy of sustainable development by 2035.

"This objective is aligned with other objectives pursued by the initiative of the Forum in general, and namely as a program of economic and commercial cooperation in particular. To a large extent it brings together the sectors of interest for the development and economic diversification, which motivates our government to continue cooperation in favor of this initiative."

MOZAMBIQUE

Vice Minister of Industry and Commerce, Ludovina Bernardo noted the roles of the Forum Macau over the past more than two decades, noting that besides promoting economic interconnections, it was also possible to com-

bine other variables, such as health, education, and gastronomy, in a search for an inclusive and integrated project paying attention to the different dynamics, realities, and challenges related to the specific realities of each country.

With a focus on the new Action Plan for Economic and Commercial Cooperation for 2024-2027, Bernardo noted that this plan will "challenge us to look at our cooperation to respond to the new world dynamics requiring the participation of all in its implementation," adding that Mozambique is committed to the consolidation of cooperation aimed at sustainable development, promoting the implementation of basic economic and social infrastructures, increasing investment in agriculture, in industry, in renewable energies, in health and education, with emphasis on technical professional training, aimed at self-employment, especially in the rural, semi-urban and urban sectors.

"We want, with our potential, to increase and diversify our exports with the Made in Mozambique brand for the Chinese market, but also for the Portuguese-language market, thus promoting micro, small and medium-sized companies, transfer of technology and business partnerships and investments," she concluded.

For Bernardo, the geostrategic position of Mozambique, combined with new regulations that include visa exemption for 29 countries and the application of E-Visas for others makes the country more open, accessible, and attractive for visits and foreign investment.

PORTUGAL

Highlighting the fact that despite the impacts of Covid-19 in the country, Portugal has been one of the fastest-growing economies in the Eurozone in the last few years, the Minister of Economy Pedro Reis remarked that the country has now, in addition to the traditional sectors, several new growing sectors such as renewable energy, digitization, and tourism.

Still, he remarked that international cooperation plays a fundamental role for Portugal, not only in the European space but also with the rest of the world.

Reis noted that the creation of the Forum Macau "represents the recognition by the Chinese government of the strategic value of the Portuguese linguistic and cultural heritage in Macau, and the eco-

omic importance of the Portuguese-speaking countries," adding that Portugal "recognizes the strategic value of this multilateral cooperation mechanism, and we have always followed, in close collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the activities developed by the permanent Secretariat of the Forum."

"We [hope] that the Forum [Macau] becomes more and more a true platform for cooperation at the service of common development, with tangible results for all. The objective is to continue to strengthen the mechanism of complementary economic and commercial cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Portuguese-speaking countries. The areas of cooperation have diversified, and a permanent dialogue structure has been created between the participating countries," he said, adding that for the upcoming years, "the main challenge will be the increasing consolidation of the added value and the distinctive mark."

SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

Vice President of the National Assembly, Abnildo do Nascimento D'Oliveira noted the initiative of the meeting, focusing on the promotion of the renewal of the links of cooperation and existing partnerships, both bilaterally and multilaterally.

He noted the outcomes from the recent "Two Sessions" held by the Chinese government and said that these will "unequivocally reflect the vision and global influence of China, emphasizing stability, progress, and international cooperation," a series of aspects he claimed to be "fundamental conditions for strengthening ties with partners such as São Tomé and Príncipe."

Addressing the relationship with China which has been a strategic partner in the process of economic and social development, "contributing significantly to various sectors, from infrastructure, education, fishing, health, and agriculture, among others," Nascimento D'Oliveira said that is imperative to explore new opportunities for cooperation, diversify sources of income and promote the training of human resources.

"We believe that investing in key sectors such as sustainable tourism, agriculture, and renewable energies can open new prospects for growth and development for São Tomé and Príncipe," he remarked.

TIMOR-LESTE

Focusing more on the challenges that his country is facing, the Vice Prime Minister, Minister Coordinator for Economic Affairs, and Minister of Tourism and Environment Francisco Kalbuadi Lay said that "in the face of current challenges and future opportunities, it is imperative

that we further support the construction of the Forum Macau, ensuring that it continues to play a relevant and effective role in promoting multilateral cooperation."

The same official noted the great richness of natural resources existing not only in Timor-Leste but in all Portuguese-speaking countries which can be combined with "China's vibrant economy and a prominent position as one of the main global actors."

By doing so, Lay said that it is possible to create a powerful synergy that benefits all parties.

"By creating a more favorable environment for business, we can encourage a greater flow of trade and investment between China and the Portuguese-speaking countries," he said, noting the commitment of Timor-Leste to China's main initiatives such as the Belt and Road.

The improvement of living conditions in Timor-Leste is one of the aims of the local government, noting that the country is eyeing interventions aimed at health, education, and social well-being.

CHINA

At the opening speech of the opening ceremony of the 6th Ministerial Conference of Forum Macau, the Vice-chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, Li Hongzhong presented a series of six new measures to continue to promote China's cooperation with the Portuguese-speaking countries.

The new measures involve promoting trade and investment, expanding industrial cooperation, strengthening development, promoting advancements in human resources training, medical and health cooperation, and deepening the Macau platform role.

He noted that Macau will build a financial services platform for China and Portuguese-speaking countries, as well as develop an international bond market denominated and settled in RMB, as well as MOP.

Scientific and technological cooperation is also on the agenda with the implementation of more eligible projects on audio-visual cooperation mechanisms.

The participation of companies from Portuguese-speaking in China major exhibitions and fairs is also one of the measures to implement complemented by the facilitation of inspection and quarantine of imported food and agricultural products.

On training, China is offering 3,000 training places and scholarships for Portuguese-speaking countries students to study in China as well as research internships in tourism and other fields, and training in Traditional Chinese Medicine.

THREE WOMEN DEFRAUD COMPATRIOTS OVER FALSE JOBS

Three Filipino women have been accused of defrauding seven fellow Filipinos out of over MOP100,000 by falsely promising assistance in finding employment. One of the suspects, a Filipino woman employed as a domestic helper, has been apprehended by the police, while the other two individuals remain at large. According to investigations conducted between September and November of last year, five male and two female victims approached the three suspects in hopes of securing cleaning and security jobs in Macau. However, upon realizing the deception, the victims sought help from the police. On Sunday, law enforcement intercepted one of the suspects at the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge port.

ILHA VERDE LIBRARY TO BE OPERATIONAL BY YEAR-END

The Cultural Affairs Bureau has confirmed that preparations are underway for the Ilha Verde Neighborhood Library to be operational by the end of the year. In response to lawmaker Ella Lei, the bureau said is actively working towards completing the construction, which will have a significantly larger usable area of approximately 1,060 square meters. This is more than double the size of the current library in the district. The new library is expected to house a collection of around 31,000 books, including approximately 3,000 audio-visual materials. Additionally, there will be approximately 140 reading seats available for visitors.

GAMING

CASINO REVENUE STEADY IN EARLY APRIL: JP MORGAN

STAFF REPORTER

MACAU'S casino gross gaming revenue held steady in the first three weeks of April according to estimates from JP Morgan Securities. The brokerage estimated GGR at 12.5 billion patacas for the period, which the firm said was "in line with historical seasonality."

The daily run rate for casinos in April was estimated at 595 million patacas, down just 5.4% from March. Last week saw stable revenue of around 600 million patacas per day according to JP Morgan's analysis of industry checks. Mass market gaming revenue, including slot machines, was tracking over 110% of pre-pandemic levels while VIP play remained around 20% recovered from before the pandemic.

JP Morgan analysts expect some variation in quarterly earnings results among Macau's six casino operators. Wynn Macau, MGM China, and SJM Holdings are forecast to report strong double digit earnings growth compared to the first quarter. However, Sands China, Galaxy Entertainment, and Melco Resorts may report earnings declines of 2-8% for the period.

Sands China already reported a 6.7% drop in adjusted property earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortization



to USD610 million for the first three months of 2023.

JP Morgan attributed potential divergent results to differences in individual operator market shares and expense controls as overall industry recovery levels off near current run rates. The brokerage believes unique company factors will be

more influential on profits going forward.

"This, in our view, happens as the industry recovery stabilizes at around current levels, which in turns makes the idiosyncratic factors (market shares, operational expenditure control, promotions) to be the key earnings driver for each operator, as

opposed to the pace of industry recovery itself," the JP Morgan team stated.

Overall, Macau's casino industry appears to be stabilizing, with mass market gaming largely recovering to pre-pandemic levels, while VIP volumes remain at around 25% of their former strength.

TOURISM

MGTO to hold roadshow in Singapore as visitors increase

THE Macao Government Tourism Office (MGTO) will hold its second overseas promotional event in Singapore, which includes a four-day roadshow and a presentation and networking seminar from April 25. To be held at Suntec City Atrium, the bureau will lead a delegation of Macau's travel trade to Singapore and organize the "Macao Tourism + MICE Product Updates Seminar & Travel Mart" on the first day of the roadshow.

At present, Singapore ranks as the eighth largest international visitor market for Macau. In the



first quarter of 2024, there were 25,623 visitor arrivals from Singapore to the city.

The average daily volume of Singaporean visitors recovered to 82.6% of the level in the first quarter of 2019 and increased by 263.1% compared

with the first quarter of 2023. Two airlines (Air Macau and Scoot) currently operate regular direct air services between Macau and Singapore with two flights daily.

Last week, the government announced that in a bid to make more ef-

fective use of the e-Channels and to enhance the clearance experience of foreign visitors, with effect from April 19, the Public Security Force is again extending the categories of eligible groups by allowing foreign visitors holding Portuguese and Singaporean passports, aged 11 or above, to use the conventional two-gate e-Channels at the various Macau checkpoints upon registration.

Applicants are required to complete the registration formalities in person at the registration locations with their valid passports. LV

STATS

VISITORS RECOVERY 86% PRE-PANDEMIC IN Q1

STAFF REPORTER

VISITOR arrivals to Macau jumped 79.4% in the first three months of 2024 compared to the same period last year, according to government statistics. The 8.9 million visitors amounted to 85.7% of arrivals in the first quarter of 2019.

Same-day visitors increased 107.5% to 4.8 million while overnight visitors grew 54.8% to 4.1 million. However, the average length of stay dipped slightly to 1.2 days.

Most visitors came from mainland China, with arrivals up 94.3% to 6.3 million. This included a 68.3% rise in visitors traveling under the Individual Visit Sche-

me to 3.5 million. Visitors from the nine Pearl River Delta cities in the Greater Bay Area increased 74.9% to 3 million.

International visitors totaled 584,026, recovering to 68.2% of pre-pandemic levels. Tourists from the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand all showed signs of recovery, while visitors from South Korea and Japan remained below half of their 2019 levels.

By entry point, land crossings surged 75.9% to over seven million visitors, with most using the Border Gate or Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge. Sea and air arrivals more than doubled from a year ago.

CRIME

Several people swindled with fake ITTF World Cup tickets

STAFF REPORTER

THE Judiciary Police (PJ) reported several ticket scam cases that occurred over the weekend. The victims, all mainland residents, came to Macau with their friends to watch the ITTF World Cup and wanted to purchase discount tickets online.

In one case, the victims found a seller that sold discounted tickets for about RMB2,400 but they never received their purchased tickets. The seller kept asking for more money, citing various excuses, and the person ended up paying a total of RMB11,700 and ultimately



did not receive the tickets. In another case, a mainland resident reported that she was also deceived by someone selling her discounted tickets for the World Cup. She paid over RMB9,000 for tickets but did not receive any of them. She had purcha-

sed the tickets online at a reduced price and was told to pay an additional RMB2,800 at the venue. When she arrived, she was met by four people who said that they were employees of the customer service department of the ticketing website she

had purchased from, and that she needed to transfer another RMB4,000 to finally get the tickets. When she did not receive her tickets, she reported the incident to the police due to the employees changing the agreed upon final price.

Gov't lowers electrical vehicles charging rates

STAFF REPORTER

IN a move to further promote the adoption of electric vehicles (EVs), the Macau government has announced a series of adjustments to its electric vehicle charging policies, including reduced rates for medium and fast public charging and an expansion of "off-peak" charging hours.

According to the Chief Executive's Instruction No. 66/2024, the changes will take effect on May 1, 2024. The new policy will lower the medium-speed and fast electric energy charges in public charging stations to MOP 2.980 and MOP 3.440 per kWh, respectively, representing a maximum reduction of 24.4% in electricity costs.

The "off-peak hours" for slow charging of public charging charges and general charging charges (applicable to private parking lots) will be revised from 11 p.m. to 9 a.m. of the next day to 8 p.m. to 9 a.m. of the next day, catering to the living habits of charging users.

After revisions, Macau's public EV charging fees will be lower than Hong Kong's. The change is in line with Macau's long-term carbon reduction strategy by continuing to improve the public charging network and monitor global EV trends.

The changes simplify calculations and improve charging experiences while lowering costs, according to the government.

AD



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DIRE STRAIT

Chinese general takes a harsh line on Taiwan at an international naval gathering

BY NG HAN GUAN & CHRISTOPHER BODEEN, QINGDAO

ONE of China's top military leaders took a harsh line on regional territorial disputes, telling an international naval gathering in northeastern China yesterday that the country would strike back with force if its interests came under threat.

The 19th biennial meeting of the Western Pacific Naval Symposium opened in the port city of Qingdao, where China's northern naval force is based, providing a vivid backdrop to China's massive military expansion over the past two decades that has seen it build or refurbish three aircraft carriers.

The four-day meeting has drawn representatives from partners and competitors including Australia, Cambodia, Chile, France, India and the U.S. and comes amid heightened tensions over China's assertive actions in the Taiwan Strait and the East and South China seas, and as China's navy has grown into the world's largest by number of hulls.

Zhang Youxia, the vice chairman of the ruling Communist Party's Central Military Commission, which controls the armed forces, spoke of "common development"

and said "decoupling, friction and confrontation will only divide the world into isolated islands guarding against each other with suspicion."

However, he then turned to China's territorial claims, which have not been recognized under international law and in some cases have been denied. Beijing has ignored rulings not in its favor, particularly in the South China Sea, where it is in

dispute with five other parties over islands, waterways and undersea resources.

Japan continues to defend its control over the uninhabited Senkaku island chain, called Diaoyu by China, in the East China Sea, against incursions by the Chinese coast guard.

Taiwan last week reinforced its foothold in the disputed South China Sea by establishing satellite

communications between the main island and its garrison on Taiping Island, also known as Itu Aba, the largest land feature in the highly contested Spratly Island chain. China has created seven artificial islands in the area by piling sand and cement on top of coral reefs and then equipping them with airstrips and other military infrastructure.

Zhang said China's territorial sovereignty "brooks no infringe-

ment and its core interests cannot be challenged. We do not provoke trouble, but we will never flinch in face of provocation. The Chinese military will resolutely defend the reunification and interest of the motherland."

Zhang has spoken in the past of Beijing's determination to take control of the self-governing island of Taiwan, which it claims as its own territory, using force if necessary. With its crucial high-tech economy, Taiwan has been building up its defenses on its own and with help from the U.S., where Congress this weekend approved \$8 billion in military aid for Taiwan and the Indo-Pacific.

Taiwan is also building its own submarines and trainer aircraft and waiting on the delivery of upgraded versions of F-16 fighters, battle tanks and other hardware from the U.S.

Zhang appeared to press China's unilateralist approach to foreign relations and military conflicts as espoused by Xi Jinping, the top military commander, Communist Party leader and head-of-state.

China "remains committed to resolving maritime disputes with directly concerned countries through friendly consultations, but we will not allow our good faith to be abused," Zhang said. "Particularly over the self-governing island republic of Taiwan that Beijing threatens to use force to bring under its control. We will take justified actions to defend our rights in accordance with the law."

Zhang's comments follow a major shakeup of the Chinese military in recent months that has seen the still-unexplained disappearance of former Defense Minister Li Shangfu and several top officers in the missile corps. **MDT/AP**



Zhang Youxia, vice chairman of the CPC Central Military Commission, speaks at the Western Pacific Navy Symposium held in Qingdao, yesterday

DIPLOMACY

Wang visits Cambodia, Beijing's closest Southeast Asian ally

CHINESE Foreign Minister Wang Yi arrived in Cambodia last weekend for a three-day official visit to reaffirm ties with Beijing's closest ally in Southeast Asia. His visit is the last stop on a three-nation regional swing that also took him to Indonesia and Papua New Guinea.

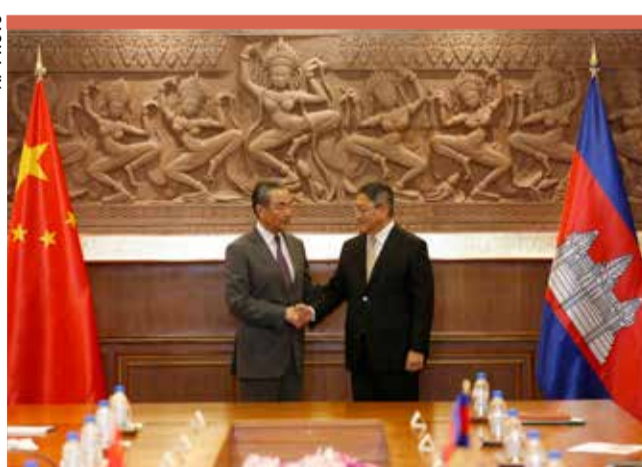
He is visiting amid foreign concerns about two big Chinese-funded projects in Cambodia — a planned canal and a naval base — that critics allege could aid Beijing's strategic military interests in Southeast Asia.

China is Cambodia's most important ally and benefactor, with strong influence in its economy. That is illustrated by numerous

Chinese-funded projects — particularly infrastructure, including airports and roads, but also private projects such as hotels, casinos and property development. More than 40% of Cambodia's \$10 billion in foreign debt is owed to China.

Wang is scheduled to have separate meetings with Prime Minister Hun Manet and his father, Hun Sen, now serving as president of the Senate after serving for 38 years as Cambodia's head of government until he stepped down last year to be succeeded by his son. Wang was also granted a royal audience with King Norodom Sihamoni.

Hun Manet has shown



Foreign Minister Wang Yi greets with Cambodia's Foreign Minister, SOK Chenda Sophea (right) in Phnom Penh

no sign of deviating from his father's pro-Beijing foreign policy. In August 2023, Wang visited Cambodia just days after Hun Sen announced he

would step down as prime minister in favor of his eldest son.

Beijing's support allows Cambodia to disregard Wes-

tern concerns about its poor record on human and political rights, and in turn Cambodia generally supports Beijing's positions on foreign policy issues such as its territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Cambodia has recently reiterated its determination to go ahead with the Chinese-financed 180-kilometer long, \$1.7 billion Funan Techo Canal project across four provinces in the southern part of the country to connect the capital, Phnom Penh, to the Gulf of Thailand.

The plan has raised concern from neighboring Vietnam, where some scholars speculated the 100-meter-wide and 5.4 meter-deep canal could make it easier for China to send military forces southward, close to Vietnam's southern coast. There are often frosty relations between Vietnam and its massive northern neighbor China, which aggres-

sively claims maritime territory claimed by Hanoi and in 1979 staged a brief invasion.

The United States has also weighed in on the project, appealing for transparency on the part of Cambodia's government. Wesley Holzer, a U.S. Embassy spokesperson in Phnom Penh, was quoted as telling the Voice of America that "the Cambodian people, along with people in neighboring countries and the broader region, would benefit from transparency on any major undertaking with potential implications for regional water management, agricultural sustainability, and security."

Hun Manet, speaking last week to government officials and villagers in southern Takeo province, dismissed the Vietnamese concern and vowed to push forward with the project, which he said would provide a huge benefit to Cambodia. **MDT/AP**

SOUTH CHINA SEA

US and Philippine forces launch combat drills in disputed waters

JIM GOMEZ, MANILA

AMERICAN and Filipino forces launched their largest combat exercises in years yesterday in a show of allied firepower near the disputed South China Sea that has alarmed Beijing.

The annual exercises by the long-time treaty allies will run until May 10 and involve more than 16,000 of their military personnel, along with more than 250 French and Australian forces.

While the Philippine military maintains that the Balikatan — Tagalog for “shoulder-to-shoulder” — trainings are not directed at a particular country, some of their main conflict scenarios are set in or near the disputed South China Sea, where Chinese and Philippine coast guard and accompanying ships have figured in a series of increasingly tense territorial faceoffs since last year.

In encounters in disputed areas, Chinese coast guard vessels have resorted to water cannons, blocking and other dangerous maneuvers that have caused injuries to Philippine navy personnel and damaged supply boats.

The Philippine military said a key focus of this year's drills is territorial defense. “We're dead serious about protecting our territory —



Philippines' military Chief Gen. Romeo Brawner Jr. (center left) and US Embassy Chargé d' Affaires, Robert Ewing arrive for the opening ceremonies of the “Balikatan” in Quezon City, yesterday

that's why we do these Balikatan exercises,” Col. Michael Logico, who speaks for the Philippine military on the combat drills, told The Associated Press.

As the disputes between China and the Philippines have escalated, President Joe Biden and his administration has repeatedly warned that the United States is obligated to defend the Philippines, its oldest treaty ally in Asia, if it is attacked.

U.S. Marine Lt. Gen. William Jurney said in the ceremony that the large-scale military exercises will

demonstrate that the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty between the U.S. and the Philippines “is no mere piece of paper.”

Washington lays no claim to the contested waters but has declared that freedom of navigation and overflight and the peaceful resolution of the disputes are in its national interest.

Philippine military chief of staff Gen. Romeo Brawner, who opened the exercises in a ceremony, said that as Pacific coastal nations, the United States and the Philippines “understand the importance of

maritime cooperation in addressing the complex challenges that threaten peace and security in our region.”

China strongly criticized the exercises, saying the Philippines was “ganging up” with countries from outside Asia in an obvious reference to the United States and its security partners, and warned that the drills could instigate confrontation and undermine regional stability.

The combat drills will include a joint sail by the U.S., Philippine and French navies in and near disputed

waters off the western Philippine province of Palawan, the sinking of a mock enemy ship by combined U.S. and Philippine firepower, and the retaking of an occupied island off the northwestern Philippines, according to the Philippine military.

China specifically opposed the transport of a U.S. ground-launched missile system to the northern Philippines ahead of the exercises. No missile would be fired but the aim was to build familiarity among military participants with the hi-tech weaponry in a tropical setting.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian expressed China's grave concern over the deployment of the missile system “at China's doorstep.”

“The U.S. move exacerbates tensions in the region and increases the risk of misjudgement and miscalculation,” he said in response to a question in a news briefing in Beijing last week. “The Philippines needs to think twice about being a cat's paw for the U.S. at the expense of its security interests and stop sliding down the wrong path.”

The Biden administration has been strengthening an arc of alliances to better counter China, including in a possible confrontation over Taiwan, the self-governing island which is part of China.

That dovetails with efforts by the Philippines under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to defend its territorial interests by boosting joint military exercises with the U.S. He has also allowed rotating batches of American forces to stay in additional Philippine military camps under a 2014 defense pact, including in his country's north, which lies just a sea border away from Taiwan and southern China. **MDT/AP**

MALDIVES

Pro-China Muizzu's party sweeps Maldives parliamentary elections

MALDIVES President Mohamed Muizzu's political party has swept parliamentary elections in a strong endorsement of his pro-China foreign policy, according to preliminary results reported yesterday by local media.

The People's National Congress won 70 out of 93 seats in Sunday's vote, and along with three seats secured by its allies has taken absolute control of Parliament, according to the preliminary results.

The Maldivian Democratic Party, led by former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, who is seen as pro-India, held 65 seats in the previous Parliament

but won only 15 seats, the news site Mihaaru.com reported.

Official results are expected today [Macau time].

The election was closely watched by regional powers India and China, which are competing for influence in the archipelago nation, which has a strategic location in the Indian Ocean.

Muizzu's election as president last year sharpened the rivalry between India and China as he took a pro-China stand and acted to remove Indian troops stationed on one of Maldives' islets.

Sunday's election was

easier than expected for Muizzu, who had been expected to face a tough fight because some of his allies had fallen out and more parties entered the race.

Six political parties and independent groups fielded 368 candidates for the 93 seats in Parliament. The number of seats is six more than in the previous Parliament following adjustments for population growth.

Muizzu ran for president on a campaign theme of “India out,” accusing his predecessor of compromising national sovereignty by giving India too much influence.

At least 75 Indian military personnel were sta-

tioned in the Maldives and their known activities were operating two aircraft donated by India and assisting in the rescue of people stranded or faced with calamities at sea. Muizzu has taken steps to have civilians take over those activities.

Relations were strained further when Indian social media activists started a boycott of tourism in Maldives. That was in retaliation for three Maldivian deputy ministers making derogatory statements about Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi for raising the idea of promoting tourism in Lakshadweep, India's own string of islands



similar to the Maldives.

India has fallen from being the top source of foreign visitors to Maldives to No. 6, according to Maldives government statistics.

Muizzu visited China earlier this year and negotiated an increase in the

number of tourists and inbound flights from China.

In 2013, Maldives joined China's “Belt and Road” initiative meant to build ports and highways to expand trade — and China's influence — across Asia, Africa and Europe. **MDT/AP**

PUTIN'S WAR

Aid approval brings Ukraine closer to replenishing troops

SAMYA KULLAB, KYIV

UKRAINIAN commander Oleksiy Tarasenko witnessed a frightening shift last month in Russia's efforts to punch through Kyiv's defense of the industrial region known as the Donbas.

Standing against Russia's unyielding advance in the strategic front-line town of Chasiv Yar, he noticed that, instead of making typical light infantry assaults, Moscow's forces were taking brazen risks by launching battalion- and platoon-sized attacks, sometimes with up to 10 combat vehicles.

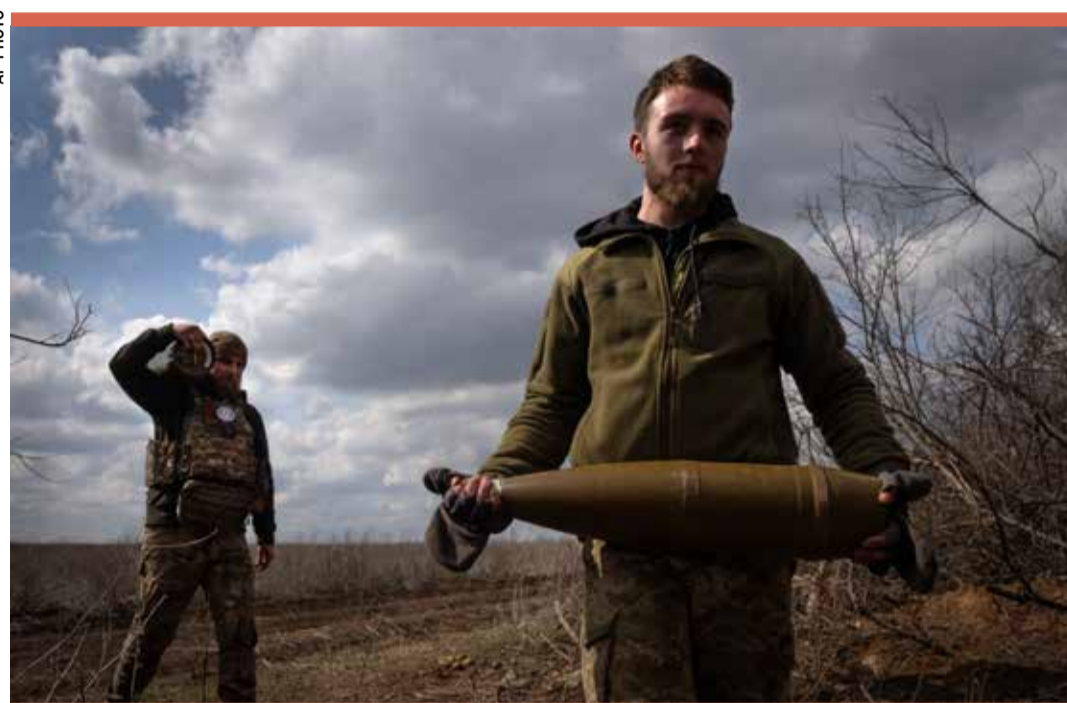
His men destroyed up to 80 tanks in the weeks that followed, but it did not slow the enemy. The confidence of the Russian military reflected the Kremlin's knowledge that Ukraine's ammunition supplies were dwindling as the U.S. dawdled over approving more military aid.

Saturday's passage by the U.S. House of Representatives of a much-awaited \$61 billion package for Ukraine puts the country a step closer to an infusion of new firepower that will be rushed to the front line to fight Moscow's latest attacks. But the clock is ticking, with Russia using all its might to achieve its most significant gains since its invasion by a May 9 deadline. In the meantime, Kyiv has no choice but to wait for replenishment.

Seeing a window of opportunity, Russia has seized the momentum on the battlefield and forced Kyiv's forces to cede tactically significant territory, one painful meter (yard) after another.

Wave after wave of mechanized units came for Tarasenko's brigade. Protected under an umbrella of attack drones and artillery fire, they reached the foot of Chasiv Yar, which is the gateway to Ukraine's defensive backbone in the Donetsk region.

"They concentrated disproportionately enormous resources in this direction," said Tarasenko, deputy commander of the 5th Separate Assault Brigade. "The



most difficult thing is to cope with this constant onslaught from the enemy, which does not change, even though the enemy is losing a lot of military equipment and soldiers."

The Pentagon has said it could get weapons moving to Ukraine within days if the Senate and President Joe Biden give final approval to the aid package. But experts and Ukrainian lawmakers said it could take weeks for the assistance to reach troops, giving Russia more time to degrade Ukrainian defenses.

The seven-month effort to pass the package effectively held Ukraine hostage to the internal politics of its biggest ally. It also raised concerns about how the shifting sands of American politics will influence future military support.

European partners cannot match the volume and scope of American assistance, which remains Kyiv's main hope to win the war. But that support has come with red lines, including rules that forbid using Western-supplied weapons for strikes inside the Russian Federation. Some Ukrainian officials argue that such limits handicap their ability to cripple the enemy's more robust capabilities.

Assuming the assistance arrives in the next two months, plans are afoot for a potential late-summer offensive. Analysts have argued that future support should not count on one big decisive battle, but a sustained

strategy over many years.

But first, Ukraine must hold off Russia's attempts to break defensive lines and entrenched positions.

In the past month, The Associated Press spoke to a dozen commanders across the active zones of the eastern front line, from Kupiansk in the northeast to Bakhmut farther south. They said their soldiers have rationed shells and struggled to repel enemy attacks with insufficient artillery ammunition.

They are also running critically low on air-defense missiles, not only for high-end Patriot systems that protect cities, but also for tactical air systems. That has given Russian fighter-bombers an opportunity to lob thousands of deadly aerial glide bombs against Ukrainian positions, razing defenses to the ground, something Russia's air force has not been able to do before.

Since January, the Kremlin has seized 360 square kilometers (140 square miles) of Ukrainian territory, roughly the size of the American city of Detroit, according to the Washington-based Institute for the Study of War.

Ukrainian commanders have complained about dire ammunition shortages since late December. By February, heads of artillery units in several regions said they had less than 10% of the supplies they needed as Kyiv rushed to economize shells.

Nowhere are supplies more needed than in Chasiv Yar, where after weeks

of fierce fighting, Moscow is intent on conquering the town. Ukraine's commander in chief, Oleksandr Syrski, said Russia's top military leadership ordered its soldiers to capture the town by May 9, Russia's Victory Day, a holiday that marks the defeat of Nazi Germany.

To reach that goal, Russia unleashes daily drone assaults and glide bombs on Ukrainian forces that have no way to counterattack.

Time is of the essence, said Yurii Fedorenko, a battalion commander of the 92nd Brigade in the Chasiv Yar region.

"They simply destroyed our positions with massive strikes. Now those positions are constantly hit by artillery, making it impossible to recapture them," he said.

"Now we have nothing to answer the enemy with," he added.

Commanding men who have reached extreme levels of burnout, Fedorenko acknowledged the Russians were steadily advancing. At the time of the interview, Russian forces were just 500 meters from the town, he said.

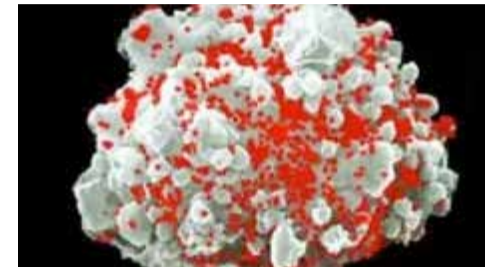
The soldiers who died to protect land that was lost could have been spared if the U.S. aid had been approved earlier, he said.

"Our losses could be reduced to a minimum, and we would not have lost territories that would later have to be reconquered."

MDT/AP

this day in history

1984 SCIENTIST FINDS AIDS VIRUS



The discovery of a virus which may cause Aids, the fatal disease sweeping through America, has been hailed as a "monumental breakthrough" in medical research.

The development was announced in Washington by US Health Secretary Margaret Heckler.

She said the virus was a variant of a known human cancer virus called HTLV-3. A blood test has also been developed, which, she said, would be available within six months, preventing the tragedy of transfusion patients contracting the disease through tainted blood products.

She also suggested that a vaccine to prevent Aids might be ready for testing in two years' time.

"Today's discovery represents the triumph of science over a dreaded disease," she said.

Aids, or Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, weakens the immune system, leaving its victims open to a series of wasting diseases. Those people who appear to be more at risk of contracting Aids include homosexuals, haemophiliacs, drug users and those who have received blood transfusions.

It has been causing widespread panic in the United States, where 4,000 people have been infected since the discovery of the disease in 1981. Almost half have died.

The findings in the United States are similar to the discovery in France last week of a virus called LAV, although French researchers stopped short of saying it was definitely the one which causes Aids.

Reaction to the news among victims was philosophical. Bob Scheckey has lived with the disease for two years - far longer than his doctors predicted. He welcomed the news from Washington, but said a possible vaccine was too far off to offer comfort.

"I am working with people with Aids on a daily basis," he said. "To hear that there is a possible vaccine that could come out in two or three years is no good news for these people. Most of the people we're working with now will be dead by that time."

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

The HTLV-3 virus was discovered to be the same as the LAV virus discovered in France. To avoid confusion, it was re-named HIV in 1987. An estimated 24 million people, both homosexual and heterosexual, have died of Aids since the disease emerged in the United States. It has now reached pandemic proportions in some parts of southern Africa, where two million died in 2001 alone. No successful vaccine has yet been developed, although billions of dollars have been spent trying. Only eight potential vaccines are currently being tested on humans, and just one, developed by US firm VaxGen, has reached end-stage trials. The trials were held in North America, Europe and Thailand and involved thousands of volunteers at high risk from Aids. But preliminary results announced in November 2003 from the AIDS VAX trial in Thailand showed it does not work. Nevertheless since the start of the HIV epidemic, a series of drugs have been developed which significantly prolong the lives of people who are HIV positive.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS

ARIES
 Mar. 21-Apr. 19
 Support each other with patience and persistence. Expect misunderstandings and repeat communications for clarity. Clean any messes. Share apologies and appreciations.

TAURUS
 Apr. 20-May. 20
 Maintain momentum with your work and fitness practices. Physical activity recharges you. Have patience, especially with yourself. Ignore the noise. Nurture your health.

GEMINI
 May. 21-Jun. 21
 Relax. Prioritize having fun. It's easy to feel stressed or overwhelmed. Misunderstandings abound. Don't share unfinished work. Make a creative mess. Envision hidden beauty.

CANCER
 Jun. 22-Jul. 22
 Make domestic upgrades with lasting benefit. Clean and repair messes. You can see what's not working. Patiently share support with family and housemates.

LEO
 Jul. 23-Aug. 22
 Review and edit communications carefully before hitting "send". Stories can get twisted or lost in translation. With messy news, document the discovery.

VIRGO
 Aug. 23-Sep. 22
 Tap into lucrative and lasting income sources. Ignore gossip, rumors or noise. Complications or delays could impact cash flow. Consider backup plans. Envision possibilities.

LIBRA
 Sep. 23-Oct. 22
 Carve out extra time for yourself. Messes demand attention. Prioritize personal matters. Who do you want to be? Relax with hot water and bubbles.

SCORPIO
 Oct. 23-Nov. 21
 Step aside from the noise and chaos. You're especially productive behind closed doors. Imagine an inspiring possibility and consider what it would take.

SAGITTARIUS
 Nov. 22-Dec. 21
 Misunderstandings spark easily with groups. Keep shared communications to a minimum or risk making public corrections. Edit carefully to avoid mistakes. Wait to launch.

CAPRICORN
 Dec. 22-Jan. 19
 A professional project with interesting potential requires extra effort. Edit carefully to avoid mistakes or delays. Aim to hit deadlines early. Clean messes later.

AQUARIUS
 Jan. 20-Feb. 18
 Widen your horizons. Your exploration could expand. Consider potential consequences. Review and revise. Ignore chaos or mixed signals. Postpone travel. Plan and prepare.

PISCES
 Feb. 19-Mar. 20
 Avoid financial discussions with your partner. Misunderstandings and mistakes spark easily. Patiently listen. Clarify communications. Clean messes while small. Resources can be found.

The Born Loser by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

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

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

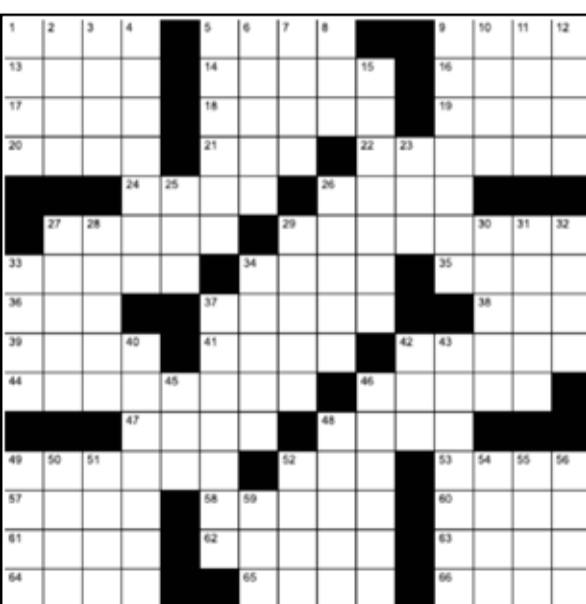
WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	13	22	cloudy
Changchun	11	18	rain
Chengdu	16	25	overcast
Chongqing	17	26	overcast
Fuzhou	20	26	rain
Guangzhou	21	26	showers
Guiyang	13	21	overcast
Haikou	26	33	thunderstorms
Hangzhou	14	21	rain
Harbin	9	19	cloudy
Hefei	15	26	cloudy
Nanjing	15	23	overcast
Shanghai	15	19	rain
Taipei	22	26	rain
Wuhan	18	28	cloudy
Hong Kong	24	27	thunderstorms
WORLD			
Moscow	3	14	cloudy
Frankfurt	1	12	sunny
Paris	6	13	sunny
London	4	11	showers
New York	10	16	sunny

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Litter's littlest; 5- General ___ chicken; 9- Encounter; 13- Son of Rebekah; 14- Tirades; 16- Peruvian of yore; 17- Titanic's undoing; 18- As ___ resort; 19- Sleuth Wolfe; 20- Yemeni, for one; 21- Lair; 22- Worm; 24- Cries at the bullfight; 26- Aroma; 27- Rubber-stamps; 29- Previous to birth; 33- Happily; 34- Principal; 35- Actor Rob; 36- High mountain; 37- Aspect; 38- Fuel type; 39- Greek T's; 41- Like Nash's lama; 42- Clear the slate; 44- Planetoid; 46- Rubbish; 47- ___ boy; 48- Perceived; 49- Sliding compartment of furniture; 52- Cath. or Prot.; 53- Put your hands together; 57- Able was ___; 58- Actor Ryan; 60- Auditorium; 61- Sneaky guy?; 62- Name; 63- Vogue rival; 64- Arctic transport; 65- Lascivious look; 66- Tabula ___;

DOWN 1- First name in country; 2- Computer owner; 3- Japan's first capital; 4- Harbor helper; 5- Swaps; 6- Shops want to achieve high ones!; 7- ___ even keel; 8- Ave. crossers; 9- Ore; 10- Cabinet dept.; 11- Beige cousin; 12- Town near Santa Fe; 15- Scholar; 23- Large amount; 25- Caustic chemical; 26- Corbeled bay window; 27- Paella pots; 28- Done for; 29- Walked back and forth; 30- Roman garments; 31- Covered with water; 32- ___ majeste; 33- I could ___ horse!; 34- Craze; 37- Hoof infection of sheep; 40- Kelp; 42- Before, once; 43- Ben Cartwright, for one; 45- Road map abbr.; 46- Bank employee; 48- Bobby of the Black Panthers; 49- Immerses; 50- Film spool; 51- Johnson of "Laugh-In"; 52- Nerve network; 54- In ___ land; 55- ___ well...; 56- "Not guilty," e.g.; 59- Nada;



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
- 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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TOKYO OLYMPICS

WADA STANDS BY DECISION TO CLEAR CHINESE SWIMMERS, CITING CONTAMINATED SAMPLES

THE world's top anti-doping regulator said after reviewing a television documentary and newspaper reports that it stands by its decision to clear 23 Chinese swimmers to compete at the 2021 Tokyo Olympics despite testing positive for a banned heart medication.

The World Anti-Doping Agency issued a statement following the release Sunday of a documentary on the cases by German broadcaster ARD.

In an earlier statement following initial newspaper reports, WADA said it agreed with Chinese authorities and ruled that the swimmers' samples had been contaminated.

The New York Times reported that Chinese anti-doping authorities found the results of the tests were Adverse Analytical Findings, but cleared the swimmers without any penalties after finding that the samples were flagged as positive as a result of contamination.

"Following WADA's review of



the documentary, the agency still stands firmly by the results of its scientific investigation and legal decision concerning the case," WADA said in the statement Sunday. "We are equally confident that WADA's independent Intelligence and Investigations Department followed up on all allegations received, which were not corroborated by any evidence; and thus, did not meet WADA threshold to open an investigation."

WADA said based on available scientific evidence and intelligence, "which was gathered, assessed and tested by experts in the pharmacology of trimetazidine (TMZ); and, by anti-doping experts," it had no basis under the global anti-doping code to challenge the Chinese agency's findings of environmental contamination.

WADA said the position was also accepted by World Aquatics, which governs international

swimming.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin yesterday described the media reports as "disinformation and a misrepresentation", and affirmed WADA's decision.

Wang said China's anti-doping authorities investigated the incident and found the positive results were due to "the ingestion of contaminated food by the relevant athletes without knowledge of the contaminated food, and the Chinese swimmers involved were not at fault or negligent, which did not constitute a doping violation."

"I want to emphasize," he said, "that the Chinese government has maintained a firm stance of zero tolerance towards doping, strictly abides by the WADA Code, resolutely safeguards the physical and mental health of athletes, maintains fair play in sports competitions, and contributes positively to the global efforts in the crackdown on doping."

WADA scheduled a news conference for today [Macau time], saying its president, Witold Banka, and director general Olivier Niggli would be among the officials on hand to answer questions.

The 30-member Chinese swim team won six medals in Tokyo, including three golds. Many of the athletes still compete for China and are expected to swim at the Paris Olympics that start in July.

In its initial statement, WADA responded to what it called "some misleading and potentially defamatory media coverage this week" and explained the process it undertook upon learning about the positive tests.

The global drug-fighting organization said it also had been given a tip by the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency as early as 2020 — before this case arose — about allegations of doping cover-ups in China but that USADA never followed up with evidence.

USADA CEO Travis Tygart called the news of the Chinese positive tests "crushing." **MDT/AP**

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IN MACAU (2023)



SUPER RUGBY

Playoffs picture clears but system raises questions

STEVE MCMORRAN,
WELLINGTON

THE playoffs picture in Super Rugby has cleared a little after the weekend's ninth round of games but has again raised question of whether the playoff system is too liberal.

The top eight of 12 teams, or 66% of all teams, contest the Super Rugby quarterfinals and, after nine rounds this season, the price of admission to the top eight is only three wins or 13 points.

Last year the Queensland Reds squeaked into the top eight with five wins and 24 points from the full 15 rounds of the regular season. In 2022, the Dunedin-based Highlanders qualified with four wins and 23 points, four wins and 12 points behind the seventh-placed Reds.

With six rounds left in the current season, Moana Pasifika are on the fringe of the playoffs in eighth place with three wins and

12 points, one win and one point ahead of the New South Wales Waratahs.

All 12 teams technically are still in with a chance of making the playoffs, even the defending champion Crusaders who have won only one of eight matches. The Christchurch-based Crusaders suffered one of their worst defeats this season on Saturday when they went down 37-15 to the Western Force.

On the current reckoning, the top three teams — the Wellington-based Hurricanes, Auckland-based Blues and ACT Brumbies — are already safe in the playoffs. The fourth placed Melbourne Rebels and Hamilton-based Chiefs are on the margins.

The financially-troubled Rebels appear to have over-performed by winning five of their eight matches. But those wins have come over lower-ranked Australian teams, Moana Pasifika and the Fijian Drua. They have a tough run towards the playoffs

AP PHOTO



Kurtley Beale of Western Force breaks away from the tackle of Owen Franks (right) of the Crusaders during the Super Rugby Pacific rugby game in Perth, last weekend

with three matches against New Zealand teams, another against the Brumbies and a last-round match against the Drua in Fiji.

The Hamilton-based Chiefs have five wins and 23 points

and are likely to make the playoffs, though they have to face the Hurricanes and Blues in their last two regular season matches.

The run-in will be critical in the last weeks of the season.

Moana Pasifika have a tough finish with matches against the Drua in Fiji, then the Highlanders, the Chiefs, the Hurricanes, the Waratahs and the Crusaders.

The Waratahs have an even tougher run in with matches still to come against the Chiefs, the Hurricanes, the Blues, the Brumbies and the Reds.

In each case, the run-in will help determine final placings and quarterfinal match-ups. The question remains whether the first round of playoffs can provide compelling competition when the top teams will be drawn against sides which at best have won half as many matches.

Super Rugby has struggled to attract crowds in Australia and New Zealand this season — not in Fiji where 15,400 filled the national stadium to watch the Drua play the Hurricanes on Friday.

A system in which twice as many teams make the playoffs as miss out may not help attract fans, though it prolongs some teams' involvement.

In Australian soccer's A-League, six out of 12 teams make the playoffs. The Australian National Rugby League has eight playoff qualifiers out of 17 teams and uses a weighted system which advantages the highest-placed teams. **MDT/AP**

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OPINION

Business Views

Shuli Ren, Bloomberg



CHINA'S \$3.7 TRILLION WEALTH INDUSTRY IS PLAGUED BY SUB-3% RETURNS

Which companies may blow up and which stock indexes will nosedive? Most investors are not distressed-debt specialists and are not keen to find out.

As China undergoes a structural economic transition that may last decades, low-risk investments that yield 3% are becoming rare. It's disorienting for a nation of savers who could easily get that rate from plain-vanilla bank deposits just a decade earlier.

Banks have been lowering performance benchmarks for new wealth management products. In March, big state-owned institutions were on average guiding 2.9% for their offerings, down from 3.3% at the onset of 2023. One could earn a bit more from riskier and less-capitalized city commercial lenders, but the expected returns there were not much better at an average of 3.28%. As of 2023, banks managed 26.8 trillion yuan (\$3.7 trillion) of wealth management products.

A bear rally in bonds, as well as a stock market rout, is behind what the Chinese call an "asset famine." These days, the 10-year sovereign note is at only 2.25%, the lowest on record. Of the 15 trillion yuan corporate bond market, about 87% offers sub-3% yield.

As a result, wealth managers are struggling to meet their benchmarks, especially for older products. To appease disappointed investors and get them to stay, some have slashed management fees all the way to zero. Meanwhile, banks are cutting deposit rates and a few have stopped offering longer-term certificates of deposits, so that wealth management products look relatively alluring.

This comes at the worst time for commercial lenders. The People's Bank of China's interest rate cuts have already compressed net interest margins to 1.7%, below the 1.8% threshold that the industry deems necessary to maintain profitability. Now, commissions and fee income are under pressure too.

The PBOC may be to blame for this asset famine and the sharp squeeze in fixed-income returns. For almost two years, money supply growth has well exceeded demand.

This perhaps explains why President Xi Jinping recently called for the central bank to include government bond buying and selling in its open market operations. It's probably not the kind of quantitative easing desperate traders had been calling for. Rather, it will be an attempt by Beijing to control bond yields, so that they don't go too low and pressure banks' financial health as well as the yuan.

Of course, China's middle class is not happy with this low-return environment, either. Only 15.6% plan to invest more, a sharp drop from 43% at the height of the 2015 stock bubble, according to the central bank's latest urban depositor survey. There are simply no winners in this sub-3% world.

Courtesy Bloomberg/Shuli Ren

HEAVY RAINSTORMS KILL FOUR PEOPLE IN SOUTHERN CHINA, TEN OTHERS ARE MISSING

THE BUZZ

Heavy rainstorms that swept across southern China over the weekend killed at least four people in riverside cities, while a search was underway for 10 others missing, state media said yesterday.

The official Xinhua news agency said three people died in Zhaoqing city while one rescuer died in Shaoguan city. It didn't say when or how they died.

The two cities in Guangdong province are among the worst hit areas of sustained torrential rains that began late last week.

Footage on state broadcaster CCTV showed rescuers in rubber boats evacuating residents from inundated shopping streets and residential areas.

By Monday, about 110,000 people had been evacuated across the province, while 25,800 people were in emergency shelters, according to Xinhua.

In Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong province, the government said that as of 10 a.m. yesterday, the city had logged a cumulative rainfall of 60.9 centimeters (24 inches) in April — the highest monthly rainfall since record-keeping began in 1959.

China's Central Meteorological Observatory extended a rainstorm warning through today evening, with heavy rain expected in large swaths of southern China, including parts of the Guangxi region and Guangdong and Fujian provinces.



A Brightline train is shown at a station in Fort Lauderdale, Florida

FROM SIN CITY TO CITY OF ANGELS, BUILDING STARTS ON HIGH-SPEED RAIL LINE

KEN RITTER, LAS VEGAS

WORK is set to begin today [Macau time] on a \$12 billion high-speed passenger rail line between Las Vegas and the Los Angeles area, with officials projecting millions of ticket-buyers will be boarding trains by 2028.

Brightline West, whose sister company already operates a fast train between Miami and Orlando in Florida, aims to lay 218 miles of new track between a terminal to be built just south of the Las Vegas Strip and another new facility in Rancho Cucamonga, California. Almost the full distance is to be built in the median of Interstate 15, with a station stop in San Bernardino County's Victorville area.

In a statement, Brightline Holdings founder and Chairperson Wes Edens called the moment "the foundation for a new industry."

Brightline aims to link other U.S. cities that are too near to each other for flying between them to make sense and too far for people to drive the distance, Edens said.

CEO Mike Reininger has said the goal is to have trains operating in time for the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles in 2028.

U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg is scheduled to take part in today's groundbreaking (Macau time). Brightline received \$6.5 billion in backing from the Biden administration, including a \$3 billion grant from federal infrastructure funds and approval to sell another \$2.5 billion in tax-exempt bonds. The company won federal authorization in 2020 to sell \$1 billion in similar bonds.

The project is touted as the first true high-speed passenger rail line in the nation, designed to reach speeds of 186 mph, comparable to Japan's Shinkansen bullet trains.

The route between Vegas and L.A. is largely open space, with no convenient alternate to I-15. Brightline's Southern California terminal will be at a commuter rail connection to downtown Los Angeles.

The project outline says electric-powered trains will cut the four-hour trip across the Mojave Desert to a little more than two hours. Forecasts are for 11 million one-way passengers per year, or some 30,000 per day, with fares well below airline travel costs. The trains will offer rest rooms, Wi-Fi, food and beverage sales and the option to check luggage.

Las Vegas is a popular

driving destination for Southern Californians. Officials hope the train line will relieve congestion on I-15, where motorists often sit in miles of crawling traffic while returning home from a Las Vegas weekend.

The Las Vegas area, now approaching 3 million residents, draws more than 40 million visitors per year. Passenger traffic at the city's Harry Reid International Airport set a record of 57.6 million people in 2023. An average of more than 44,000 automobiles per day crossed the California-Nevada state line on I-15 in 2023, according to Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority data.

Florida-based Brightline Holdings already operates the Miami-to-Orlando line with trains reaching speeds up to 125 mph. It launched service in 2018 and expanded service to Orlando International Airport last September. It offers 16 round-trips per day, with one-way tickets for the 235-mile distance costing about \$80.

Other fast trains in the U.S. include Amtrak's Acela, which can top 150 mph (241 kph) while sharing tracks with freight and commuter service between Boston and Washington, D.C. **MDT/AP**



Japan An initial analysis of flight data recorders recovered from the crash of two Japanese navy helicopters showed no sign of mechanical problems, Japan's defense minister said, indicating likely human error. One of the eight crew members died and a search is continuing for the seven others. Defense Minister Kihara said an initial analysis of data from the two flight data recorders on each helicopter showed no abnormality during their flight and that mechanical failure was most likely not the cause of the crash.



Israel The head of Israeli military intelligence resigned on Monday over the failures surrounding Hamas' unprecedented Oct. 7 attack, the military said, becoming the first senior figure to step down over his role in the deadliest assault in Israel's history. Maj. Gen. Aharon Haliva's resignation could set the stage for more resignations among Israel's top security brass over Hamas' attack, when militants blasted through Israel's border defenses.



Ecuador's fledgling president got a resounding victory Sunday in a referendum that he touted as a way to crack down on criminal gangs behind a spiraling wave of violence. An official quick count showed that Ecuadorians overwhelmingly voted "yes" to all nine questions focused on tightening security measures, rejecting only two more controversial economic proposals. The quick count was announced by the Electoral National Council.