



DAILY GAMING REVENUE DECLINED FROM ESTIMATED MOP910 MILLION DURING LABOR DAY GOLDEN WEEK TO 578 MILLION IN FOLLOWING WEEK, JP MORGAN SAYS

P4

GALAXY Q1 EARNINGS DOUBLE AMID DISRUPTIONS OVER GAMING FLOW

P4

PUTIN TO MAKE A STATE VISIT TO CHINA THIS WEEK

P7



China-US Top envoys from the U.S. and China huddled in closed-door talks in Geneva yesterday to lay out their national approaches to the promise and perils of emerging artificial intelligence technology. The talks, which Biden and Xi agreed to launch in 2023, are meant to open up bilateral dialogue between the world's two biggest economies — and increasingly, geopolitical rivals — on a fast-moving technology that already has consequences for trade, lifestyles, culture, politics, national security and defense and much more. U.S. technology experts say the meeting could offer a glimpse into Beijing's thinking about AI.



China-US President Joe Biden issued an order blocking a Chinese-backed cryptocurrency mining firm from owning land near a Wyoming nuclear missile base, calling its proximity to the base a "national security risk." The order forces the divestment of property operated as a crypto mining facility near the Francis E. Warren Air Force Base. MineOne Partners Ltd., a firm partly backed by Chinese nationals, and its affiliates are also required to remove certain equipment on the site.



European carmaker Stellantis said it had formed a joint venture with the Chinese electric vehicle startup Leapmotor that will begin selling EVs in nine European countries later this year. Sales will begin in September for Belgium, France, Italy, Germany, Greece, Netherlands, Romania, Spain and Portugal. Stellantis CEO Carlos Tavares said at a news event in Hangzhou. From Q4, electric vehicles will also be sold to countries in South America, Middle East and Africa, as well as India and the Asia Pacific.

More on backpage

THE EIGHTH DAY OF FOURTH MONTH

Buddhists to gather in honor of founder's birthday in profound significance of faith in Macau and around the Asian world

P2-3

XINHUA



HKMAO

XIA BAOLONG URGES YOUTH TO SEIZE OPPORTUNITIES

P3

EVENTS

MGM INTRODUCES NEW EXHIBITION TO REVITALIZE BARRA DISTRICT

P5

AP PHOTO

Buddhists monks clean Buddha statues ahead of the upcoming birthday of Buddha on May 15, at the Jogye temple in Seoul

BUDDHA'S BIRTHDAY WHEN IS IT AND HOW IS IT CELEBRATED AROUND ASIA

DEEPA BHARATH, MDT/AP

THE birthday of the historical Buddha or Shakyamuni Buddha, known as Vesak in several countries, celebrates the birth of the child who became Prince Siddhartha around the end of the 4th century B.C. This is a holy occasion for all Buddhists, but is celebrated on different dates depending on the school of Buddhism or country to which one belongs. In several Asian countries and regions, like Macau, it is observed on the eighth day of the fourth month of the lunisolar calendar, which this year falls on May 15, today. In several South and Southeast Asian countries, it is celebrated on the first full moon of May, which falls on May 23.

BUDDHA'S BIRTH AND LIFE

Siddhartha was born in Lumbini, which is at the border of what is India and Nepal today. His mother, Maya, was the wife of Suddhodana, king of the Shakya clan. According to Buddhist lore, when she conceived, the queen dreamed that an auspicious white elephant entered her womb. A number of texts recount the child's miraculous birth, detailing how the baby was received by the gods Indra and Brahma, and took seven steps soon after he was born. He is then believed to have received a cleansing bath from the gods, or dragon kings, depending on the country or culture where the legend originated.

Suddhodana sheltered his

son from pain and suffering, believing that keeping him isolated would put him on the path to becoming king. However, he could not protect Siddhartha for long, and the prince began to reflect after witnessing sickness, old age and death. Disillusioned by the impermanence of life, Siddhartha engaged in six years of ascetic practice and attained enlightenment at the age of 35 in Bodh Gaya in northeast India. He then became known as the Buddha, which means "the awakened one."

WHY, HOW IS BUDDHA'S BIRTHDAY CELEBRATED?

Buddhists around the world use this time to not only celebrate, but also reflect on Buddha's teachings and what it means to practice the faith. In many parts of Asia, the sacred day marks not just the birth, but also the enlightenment

and passing of the Buddha. In most Asian cultures and the diaspora, Buddhists go to their local temples and participate in chanting, meditation and festivities all day. Families decorate their homes with lanterns and gather for feasts.

CHINA

In China, the faithful do a bathing ceremony that involves pouring scented blessed water over a statue of the infant Buddha whose right forefinger is pointed upwards toward the sky and left forefinger is pointing down to the Earth. According to legend, the Buddha announced shortly after being born that he would have no more rebirths, and the dragons of heaven baptized him with pure water.

KOREAS

Buddha's birthday is a national holiday in South Korea. The

highlight of the celebration in Seoul is the lotus lantern festival called Yeondeunghoe, a parade of thousands of colorful, lighted paper lanterns often shaped like lotus flowers that are hung in temples and streets. On Buddha's birthday, many temples provide free meals and tea to all visitors. Festivities in temple yards and parks include traditional games and various performing arts displays. The luminous display is believed to symbolize the light of Buddha's teachings.

While Buddha's birthday is not an official holiday in North Korea, it has been observed in Buddhist temples there since 1988. In 2018, Buddhist monks in North and South Korea held joint services when animosities between their governments eased. But such exchange programs have been stalled in the past few years due to tensions over North Korea's nuclear program.

JAPAN

In Japan, April 8 is observed as Buddha's birthday and is celebrated in Buddhist temples as Hana Matsuri, which means flower festival. On this day, a small "flower hall" is set up on temple grounds and decorated with colorful flowers. A bowl of water with a statue of the baby Buddha is placed in the middle and devotees pour sweet tea on the head of the statue. A priest performs the Kam-butsu-e nativity festival recreating Buddha's birth in the garden of Lumbini.

SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

Countries in South and Southeast Asia celebrate Buddha's birthday on the full moon of the second lunar month known as Vesakha or Vaisakha. The Sanskrit word for full moon is Purnima, which is why the holiday is also called Buddha Purnima. The Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya is decorated on this day and devotees perform special prayers under the bodhi tree under which the Buddha is believed to have attained enlightenment. In India and Nepal, sweet rice porridge is served on this day to recall the story of Sujata, a maiden who offered the Buddha a bowl of milk porridge.

In Malaysia and China, caged animals and birds are set free on Buddha's birthday because people believe it is good karma. In Sri Lanka, celebrants decorate homes and streets with candles and paper and bamboo lanterns. Festivities feature devotional songs, decorative structures called "pandals," burning of incense and electric light displays depicting stories from Buddha's life. In Vietnam, Buddha's birthday is a still popular festival, but not a public holiday, which it was from 1958 to 1975 in what was formerly South Vietnam.



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HOLIDAY

Buddhists to gather in honor of founder's birthday in profound significance of faith

LYNZY VALLES

FOR some, Buddha's birthday may be observed only as a public holiday but, for many faithful individuals, it holds profound significance as a meaningful celebration.

Macau commemorates the birth of the founder of Buddhism, Buddha, on the eighth day of the fourth month in the Asian lunar calendar, which falls today.

In the city, the focal point of the celebration involves devoted individuals bathing the sacred statue of Buddha with purified water to pray for blessings.

Buddha's birthday is also when Buddhist temples in different districts hold sutra recital ceremonies and lectures to disseminate Buddhism, according to the Cultural Heritage of Macau.

Nowadays, the celebrations of Buddha's birthday have become even more diverse, incorporating numerous additional charitable initiatives.

The Day of Buddha's festivities also encompass various



activities including the distribution of Buddhist literature, sale of vegetarian food and handicrafts for charitable causes, and hosting of entertainment games, cultural performances, and recreational events that attract a significant number of participants.

Celebratory events for Buddha's birthday, such as the Drunken Dragon and lion dances, were suspended for three years during the Covid-19 pandemic. These returned in-person last year and will continue this year.

The celebrations typically attract crowds of spectators, pho-

tography enthusiasts and believers.

In parallel with these celebrations, the fishermen associations have organized the Feast of the Drunken Dragon, which starts in the morning at the Kuan Tai Temple near Senado Square and will feature men performing a drunken dance with the wooden head and tail of a dragon.

The procession will traverse through several locations, including the Inner Harbour Ferry Terminal, the Red Market, Iao Hon Market, and A-Ma Temple.

Another highlight of the festival is the distribution of "longe-

vity rice" in the city's several districts, symbolizing good fortune and health.

According to the local government, the passing down of this cultural tradition showcases the vibrancy of Chinese heritage, serving as a crucial aspect for exploring the local folk culture.

Typically, on this day, the faithful adorn the surroundings with radiant lanterns, gracefully engage in traditional dances alongside wooden dragon statues, offer alms and distribute complimentary meals, and even liberate captive animals as a symbol of auspiciousness.

The city has several Buddhist temples, including the Pou Chai Temple, the Kun Iam Temple (Kun Iam Tchai) and the Kong Tac Lam Temple, which have many followers.

According to the Pew Research Center, approximately 59% of Macau's population are adherents of folk religion, while 17.3% are followers of Buddhism. Christians make up approximately 7%, while the remainder practice different faiths including Judaism and Islam.

GRAND LISBOA TO UNDERGO REFURBISHMENTS

Grand Lisboa will undergo a phased renovation starting this year, with a focus on internal improvements, according to SJM Holdings chairman Daisy Ho. Speaking on the sidelines of an event, Ho said the entire project is expected to be completed within a two-year timeframe, resulting in a completely revitalized appearance. The renovation will be carried out in multiple stages, ensuring that the operation of the Grand Lisboa remains unaffected. The project will encompass enhancements to the catering and hotel rooms, with the catering renovation anticipated to be completed first.

AVERAGE RENT UP 2% Y-O-Y

The average rent per square meter of usable area for residential units in Macau was MOP133 in the first quarter of 2024, up by 2.1% year-on-year. Data from the Statistics and Census Service (DSEC) shows that among the districts with a relatively high number of lease declarations, the average rent for residential units in Barca (MOP120), NAPE & Aterros da Baía da Praia Grande (MOP136) and NATAP (MOP153) increased by 6.1%, 5.8% and 5.5% respectively. The average rent per square meter of usable area for office units decreased by 2.5% year-on-year to MOP300, while the average rent for industrial units rose by 1.2% to MOP124.

PRIX DE LAUSANNE'S ASIA-PACIFIC PRE-SELECTION TO TAKE PLACE IN MACAU

The Asia-Pacific pre-selection for the Prix de Lausanne, a renowned international dance competition for aspiring classical ballet dancers, will be held in Macau this September. This marks the inaugural selection of Macau as the region's pre-selection location. The Grand Lisboa Palace Resort will host the event. Registration for the pre-selection opens tomorrow and closes June 15. Only four dancers will advance to the next stage. The Asia-Pacific pre-selection is scheduled from September 27 to 29.

APPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORT FOR SCRAPPING VEHICLES ENTERS SECOND PHASE

The government is progressing with the second phase of both the plan to provide financial assistance to replace outdated motorcycles with new electric motorcycles, and the plan to provide financial assistance to scrap old diesel-powered vehicles. The first application period for both programs will open June 1 and close May 31, 2024. Importantly, vehicle owners who meet the eligibility criteria during the first application period will not be eligible to apply in the second application period.

STAFF REPORTER

BEIJING'S top official for Hong Kong and Macau affairs has called on young people to "strive harder, become more competitive and seize the opportunities given by the central government to Macau."

The director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office at the State Council, Xia Baolong, met with members of the Central District Community Service Consultative Council and of the Northern District Community Service Consultative Council to learn more about community affairs and people's livelihoods.

According to Ou Mun Tin Toi, Xia conveyed the message that young people are the "hope of the country, Macau, the

HKMAO

Xia Baolong urges youth to seize opportunities



Xia Baolong visits the National Security Education Exhibition

Cooperation Zone, and the Greater Bay Area," all of which present numerous opportunities for the younger generation.

Xia also urged various

sectors to collaborate in improving community care and act as a bridge for facilitating dialogue between residents and the government.

He then visited the Government Headquarters to hold discussions with Chief Executive Ho Iat Seng and other senior officials of the SAR.

During the meeting, he listened to a presentation on the SAR's approach to governance, and exchanged opinions regarding Macau's overall situation and its appropriate economic diversification effort.

According to government statement, Xia acknowledged the "pragmatic and promising nature of the government," and agreed that the government's actions are "characterized by active innovation and revitalization."

In the afternoon, Xia, accompanied by Ho and Secretary for Security, Wong Sio Chak, visited the National Security Education Exhibition; and met with entrepreneurs and members of the Macao Chamber of Commerce Secretary for Economy and Finance, Lei Wai Nong.

GAMING

GALAXY Q1 EARNINGS DOUBLE Y-O-Y AMID DISRUPTIONS OVER GAMING FLOW

LYNZY VALLES

GAMING operator Galaxy Entertainment Group (GEG) recorded a net revenue of HKD10.6 billion, marking a 50% year-on-year increase and a 2% quarter-on-quarter rise.

In a financial result announcement yesterday, the group reported a Q1 Group Adjusted EBITDA of HKD2.8 billion, up 49% year-on-year and 1% quarter-on-quarter.

Group chairman Lui Che Woo disclosed in the statement that GEG "made substantial adjustments" to Galaxy Macau's gaming floor, which in the shorter term "was disruptive for the month of January and the early part of February."

"The renovation was completed just prior to Chinese New Year. With the completion of this renovation, we have seen a significant improvement in the flow of customer traffic across the entire floor," said Lui.



Additional lucky play contributed approximately HKD63 million to Adjusted EBITDA, resulting in a normalized Adjusted EBITDA of HKD2.8 billion, up 50% year-on-year and down 5% quarter-on-quarter.

The latest twelve months Adjusted EBITDA reached HKD10.9 billion, marking an increase of 1,297% year-on-year and 9% quarter-on-quarter rise.

The chairman also remarked

that the group is in the process of implementing smart tables, which they expect drive further efficiency across the gaming floor.

A recent report from Citigroup has noted that the use of smart gaming tables fitted with radio frequency identification (RFID) technology has the potential to significantly boost casino revenue in Macau.

Smart table usage could lead to a 5.9% increase in gross gaming

revenue without the need to attract additional customers, according to estimates from analysts. This provides confidence in the long-term growth prospects of the Macau gaming industry.

Galaxy is also updating its slot machine products and are reportedly working on a range of upgrades to StarWorld Macau.

Lui also noted that the group is "particularly encouraged with our casino performance over the

May Golden Week and post the reconfiguration of Galaxy Macau's gaming floor."

Citibank data shows that the Golden Week holiday period saw a significant increase in gambling activity compared to the same period in 2023. Total wagers were 144% higher, while the player count increased by 119%, and wager per player rose by 11% year-on-year.

For the first time ever, the top player in Macau's premium mass gaming rooms during the Golden Week holiday period was not Chinese. The biggest spender was a South Korean high roller, Macau's first-ever "player of the month" to be a non-Chinese customer.

The South Korean player was among three "whales" – individuals betting HKD100,000 or more per hand – spotted in Galaxy Macau's Horizon Room. All three individuals wagered between HKD250,000 and HKD399,000 during their play.

GAMING

Macau experiences post-Labor Day slowdown: JP Morgan

HOWARD TONG

MACAU'S daily gross gaming revenue (GGR) declined from an estimated MOP910 million during the Labor Day Golden Week to MOP578 million in the seven days following, as reported by investment bank JP Morgan. While JP Morgan described this decrease as slightly weaker than preferred, it still falls within post-holiday expectations.

According to analysts DS Kim, Mufan Shi, and Selina Li in a note on Monday,

the combined GGR for the first 12 days is estimated at MOP8.6 billion, averaging MOP716 million per day. The mass GGR has remained at approximately 120% of pre-COVID levels.

JP Morgan's forecast for May's GGR remains unchanged at MOP19.5 billion to MOP20 billion, potentially marking it as the best month since the reopening of borders in January 2023.

Additionally, JP Morgan highlighted that Beijing added eight additional cities to the list eligible for Individual

Visit Scheme (IVS) visas for travel to Macau and Hong Kong, bringing the total number of eligible cities to 59.

While these cities, including Taiyuan, Hohhot, Harbin, Lhasa, Lanzhou, Xining, Yinchuan, and Urumqi, are not expected to significantly impact Macau visitation, analysts noted the favorable policy support from the central government.

"We believe it is always the thought that counts when it comes to China policy," the analysts wrote.

CAPE VERDE GOV'T IN TALKS TO REVOKE MACAU LEGEND LICENSE

THE government of Cape Verde has announced that it is engaged in discussions with Macau Legend Development Ltd, a casino services firm listed in Hong Kong, regarding the revocation of Macau Legend's concession to develop and operate a casino resort in Cape Verde.

Olavo Correia, Cape Verde's vice prime minister and minister of finance and business promotion, said in an interview with local broadcaster RTC that negotiations between both parties are underway. The government's aim is to reach an amicable agreement to revoke the concession contract with Macau Legend within two months.

Correia emphasized that, if an acceptable resolution cannot be reached within a reasonable timeframe, the government will resort to other legal means as Macau Legend is alle-



dly in breach of its contractual obligations.

Macau Legend announced in 2015 that it had signed agreements with the Cape Verde government to develop a casino resort in the capital city. The company had planned to invest approximately EUR250 million in the project.

Construction on the casino resort began in 2016 but has faced significant delays, with reports suggesting that construction work has been halted for an extended

period. Macau Legend's most recent annual report, released in April, did not provide an update on the project's status.

Correia revealed that the Cape Verde government is seeking new investors for the casino resort project and has received interest from several parties. The government aims to select a partner capable of providing guarantees with respect to the financial, management, and project execution to avoid further delays. **HT**



AP PHOTO



Catarina Lio, senior vice president of MGM China's Brand Marketing

MGM introduces new exhibition to revitalize Barra district

LYNZY VALLES

MGM China is unveiling a new exhibition to further revitalize Barra district and offer tourists a distinctive experience amid evolving trends in the city's tourism market.

The current trend among tourists is to seek unique experiences, reflecting a change in the market compared to a decade ago. The question is whether such revitalization efforts and new offerings in Macau will allow tourists to have these desired experiences.

For the gaming operator, MGM is focusing on creating unique experiences to attract tourists as part of its promise to local government.

As a pledge to the local government following the granting of a 10-year casino concessionaire last year, all six gaming operators are required to boost their non-gaming spending, with each operator handling an area of revitalization to spur traffic and spending.

Currently, MGM is partnering with local small and medium-sized food service businesses at Navy Yard No. 2 to operate food trucks offering snacks "aiming to promote local delicacies, open up new opportunities for these businesses, and make the district more vibrant."

The gaming operator is in charge of transforming 10 buildings at the site within the stipulated years of its gaming license.

Questioned by the Times regarding its long-term goals, Catarina Lio, senior vice president of Brand Marketing of MGM China, said that the group's ambition is to extend its projects "on a larger scale moving forward to create a more interesting market direction here."

The revitalization extended beyond the exhibition halls. Art murals by local artists have also adorned the once-dull walls of buildings, injecting color and creativity into the urban landscape, which is a key objective of the initiative.

"We want this neighborhood to be considered when tourists

come over. It will help Macau to attract more tourists if there are more things to do and they will be more likely to spend," said Lio.

"We want them to enjoy themselves in different neighborhood district," the executive added.

Yesterday, MGM held a media tour to the ongoing "Into the World of Wuxia Legends: Jin Yong Wuxia Drama Costumes and Weapons Exhibition at Barra," featuring costumes and a collection of lifelike props from renowned works such as "Heavenly Sword and Dragon Slaying Saber," and the "Condor" from The Condor Heroes 95.

The exhibition includes screenings of TVB Jin Yong drama clips and a pop-up bookstore that sells themed souvenirs, which aims to pass down Jin Yong's literary classics.

The exhibition seeks to immerse visitors in the world of wuxia and offer an experience that showcases Jin Yong's tales and the essence of chivalry and pop culture from different perspectives.

EDUCATION

UM ranks 14th in 2024 World Young University Rankings

THE University of Macau (UM) has been ranked 14th globally in the 2024 World Young University Rankings, a remarkable improvement of 12 places compared to last year and a significant achievement. Announced by The Times Higher Education, this achievement marks a record high for the university.

In addition, the Macau University of Science and Technology has ranked tied for 38th place worldwide. This year's rankings include a total of 673 universities from 79 countries and regions, an increase of 68 universities compared to the previous year.

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore has retained

its place at the top of the ranking. Meanwhile, Hong Kong continues its strong showing in the top 10, although individual institutional performances vary. The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology has slipped from second to third place, and The Hong Kong Polytechnic University from fourth to seventh place. However, City University of Hong Kong has risen two places to fourth place.

Earlier this month, the UM climbed into the top 200 of the 2024 Times Higher Education World University Rankings, coming in at number 193. The university also moved up one spot in the Asian University rankings to number 36 from 37. LV

CRIME

THREE MEN ATTACKED WITH KNIVES OVER MOP8,000 LOAN

THE Judiciary Police (PJ) received reports on the evening of May 12 regarding a case of serious bodily harm involving three victims. The victims were blue-collar immigrant workers from Vietnam, aged between 20 and 30.

The incident occurred following a dispute over an outstanding loan of MOP8,000 owed by one of them. Four creditors met with the victims to discuss the repayment but, when it became apparent that they were unable to repay the loan, the creditors resorted to violence and attacked the three men with knives.

The victims sustained knife wounds of varying degrees of severity, with one requiring emer-

gency surgery while the other two sustained non-life-threatening injuries. The perpetrators fled the scene leaving the knives behind.

The PJ promptly secured the crime scene and ensured that the victims received appropriate medical treatment. They then initiated a search for the perpetrators and apprehended three out of the four attackers on May 13. By reviewing CCTV footage, the PJ discovered that one of the attackers had escaped and left Macau via the Macau-Zhuhai border.

The investigation remains ongoing, and the three assailants in custody have refused to cooperate with the authorities regarding the whereabouts of their accomplice. HT



JUSTIN SPIKE, BUDAPEST

WHEN Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Hungary last week, he arrived to one of the few places in the European Union where his country is considered an indispensable ally rather than a rival. By the time he left on Friday, he'd secured deals that provide fertile ground for China's plans of economic expansion in Europe.

After meeting with nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orbán last week, the leaders addressed a small group of select media in Hungary's capital, Budapest, announcing the formation of an "all-weather partnership" that would usher in a new era of economic cooperation.

As most EU countries make efforts to "de-risk" their economies from perceived threats posed by China, Hungary has gone in the other direction, courting major Chinese investments in the belief that the world's second-largest economy is essential for Europe's future.

While Xi and Orbán didn't unveil concrete agreements following their meeting, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó later said in a video that a deal had been reached on a joint Hungarian-Chinese railway bypass around Budapest, as well as a high-speed train link between the capital and its international airport.

The two countries also agreed to expand their cooperation to the "whole spectrum" of the nuclear industry, Orbán said, and deals were reached on China helping Hungary build out its ne-

work of electric vehicle charging stations and on construction of an oil pipeline between Hungary and Serbia.

Zsuzsanna Vegh, a program assistant at the German Marshall Fund and visiting fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, said those deals were "a clear signal that China sees Hungary as a key and reliable ally" in the EU as it seeks to reverse Europe's toughening de-risking policy.

Xi's visit, Vegh wrote in a statement, shows that Hungary's government "remains indifferent to its allies' concerns and will continue to strengthen its bilateral ties with China in order to position itself favorably in what it perceives as a developing multipolar world."

Pursuing a similar strategy is Serbia, Hungary's neighbor to the south, which has also provided wide opportunities for Chinese companies to exploit its natural resources and carry out large infrastructure projects.

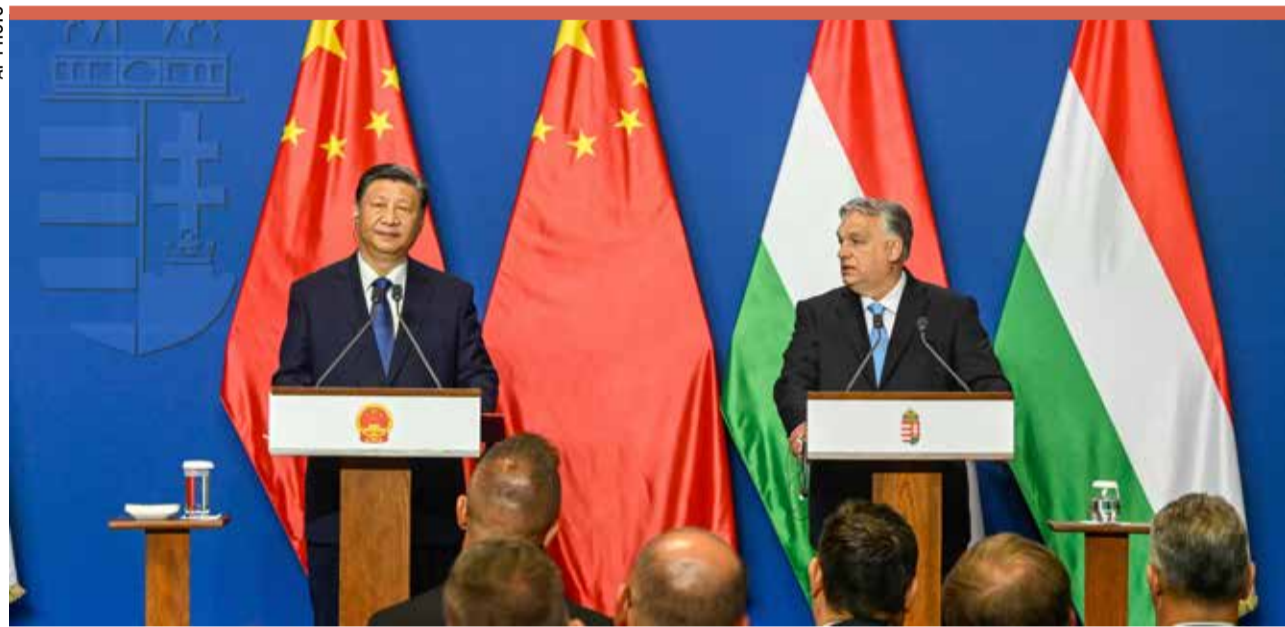
Like Orbán, Serbian President Aleksandar Vuc has built a form of autocratic governance that eschews the pluralism valued in more traditional Western democracies — making both countries attractive to China as direct deals help to eliminate red tape.

During Xi's visit to Serbia last week, he and Vuc signed an agreement to build a "shared future," making the Balkan country the first in Europe to agree on such a document with Beijing.

Vuk Vuksanovi, a senior researcher at the Belgrade Center for Security Policy, said that Xi's interest in Serbia reflects his strategy

ANALYSIS

Xi's visit to Hungary, Serbia investment and deeper tie



President Xi Jinping and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at a press conference following their talks at the PM's office, the former

of appealing to countries that are less committed to a U.S.-led economic and political community.

Xi's "shared future" agreement with Belgrade, Vuksanovi said, promotes "China's vision of the international order, the one where China is much more powerful, the one where the Western powers, primarily the U.S., no longer have the ability to dictate the agenda to others."

China has poured billions of dollars into Serbia in investment

and loans, particularly in mining and infrastructure. The two countries signed an agreement on a strategic partnership in 2016 and a free trade agreement last year.

While Serbia formally wants to join the 27-nation EU, it has been steadily drifting away from that path, and some of its agreements with China aren't in line with rules for membership.

Vuc is friendly with Russian President Vladimir Putin, and has condemned Russia's full-scale

invasion of Ukraine but refused to join international sanctions against Moscow.

The red-carpet treatment by Serbia and Hungary has worried some of their Western partners, which see China's incursion into the region as both an economic and security risk. According to Gabriel Escobar, U.S. envoy for the Western Balkans, Xi chose to visit the neighboring countries because they "are open to challenging the unity of the Euro-

HONG KONG

Lee calls for respect of its overseas-based trade offices after UK charged London staffer

KANIS LEUNG,
HONG KONG

HONG KONG'S leader yesterday urged foreign governments to respect the duties of its overseas-based trade offices after a staff member in its London branch was charged in Britain for allegedly helping the city's intelligence service gather information.

Chief Executive John Lee said his administration has demanded the British government to provide an explanation about the prosecution of Bill Yuen, the office manager of the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in London. Lee said any attempt to make unwarranted



Hong Kong Chief Executive John Lee (Oct. 1, 2023)

allegations against the city's government is unacceptable.

British police allege that Yuen, along with Chi Leung (Peter) Wai and Matthew Trickett, agreed to engage in information gathering, surveillance and acts of decep-

tion that were likely to materially assist the Hong Kong intelligence service. The trio was charged under a new national security act that gave British police additional powers to tackle foreign espionage.

In his weekly news briefing, Lee said the duties of the trade office in London are to foster ties with various sectors in Britain and promote Hong Kong.

"Any attempt to interfere with the work of the ETO of-

fices in different places will be against free trade and free economy and will harm the economy of the countries that try to do bad things to the operation of the ETO offices," he said.

Monday's prosecution is likely to sour relations between Britain and China. Chinese authorities in both the U.K. and Hong Kong have decried the charges, saying they were just the latest in a series of "groundless and slanderous" accusations that the British government has leveled against China.

In April, British prosecutors also charged two men, including a former researcher working in the U.K. Parliament, with spying for

China. The Chinese Embassy called the allegations completely fabricated.

On Monday, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak warned the U.K. was facing an increasingly dangerous future due to threats from an "axis of authoritarian states," including Russia, China, Iran and North Korea.

The three men were granted bail in a London court on Monday and their next court appearance is scheduled for May 24.

Hong Kong media reported that Yuen is a former police officer in Hong Kong. The Associated Press found Yuen's name printed in local police publicity materials online.

In the news conference yesterday, Lee also responded to reports of a photo he had taken with Yuen for a news article years ago.

"This photo appears to be a graduation group photo," he said. "My impression of this person is solely based on this photo." MDT/AP

China brings new Chinese investments to Europe's doorstep



Carmelite Monastery, in Budapest, last week

whereby Chinese law enforcement officers would be permitted to assist their Hungarian counterparts in police actions within Hungary.

The government has said the officers will ensure public safety among Chinese tourists and members of Hungary's large Chinese diaspora. But critics say the officers could be used as an extension of Xi's single-party state to exert control over the Chinese community.

As Orbán has deepened relations with Beijing, he has also been engaged in a protracted conflict with the EU that has seen billions in structural funds frozen to Budapest over concerns that he has captured democratic institutions and abused the bloc's funds.

That money shows no sign of arriving any time soon, and Hungary's pursuit of additional Chinese developments shows its

government "does not envision the possibility of financing such strategic infrastructure projects from EU funds," Vegh wrote.

While the inflow of Chinese capital is a boon to Hungary's sputtering economy, having production sites on EU territory also helps Beijing to circumvent costly tariffs and Europe's increasingly protectionist policies.

In December, Hungary announced that one of the world's largest EV manufacturers, China's BYD, will open its first European EV production factory in the south of the country, and has invited large direct investments in the production of EV batteries.

Such investments, Orbán said Thursday, are what will keep Hungary competitive in the future, from wherever they come.

"The concept driving the Hungarians is that we want to win the 21st century, and not lose it," he said. **MDT/AP**

RUSSIAN PRESIDENT PUTIN TO MAKE A STATE VISIT TO CHINA THIS WEEK

Russian President Vladimir Putin will make a two-day state visit to China this week, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said yesterday, in the latest show of unity between the two allies against the U.S.-led Western liberal global order.

Putin will meet Chinese leader Xi Jinping during his visit starting tomorrow, the ministry said, saying the two leaders would discuss "cooperation in various fields of bilateral relations ... as well as international and regional issues of common concern." No details were mentioned.

The Kremlin in a statement confirmed the trip and said Putin was going on Xi's invitation. It said that this will be Putin's first foreign trip since he was sworn in as president and began his fifth term in office.

China has backed Russia politically in the conflict in Ukraine and has continued to export machine tools, electronics and other items seen as contributing to the Russian war effort, without actually exporting weaponry.

China is also a major export market for energy supplies that keep the Kremlin's coffers full.

China has sought to project itself as a neutral party in the conflict, but has declared a "no limits" relationship with Russia in opposition to the West. The sides have also held a series of joint military drills and China has consistently opposed economic sanctions against Russia in response to its now two-year-old campaign of conquest against Ukraine.

The two continent-sized states are increasingly in dispute with democracies and NATO while seeking to gain influence in Africa, the Middle East and South America.

Putin's visit comes just days ahead of Monday's inauguration of William Lai Ching-te as the next leader of Taiwan. **MDT/AP**

-Atlantic community."

In February, Hungary followed Serbia's lead by concluding a security agreement with Beijing

AD

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AP PHOTO



Allies: Zelenskyy welcomes Blinken in Kyiv, yesterday

UKRAINE

Blinken in Kyiv says US arms will make a difference

MATTHEW LEE, KYIV

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said yesterday that American military aid will make a “real difference” on the battlefield, as the top diplomat made an unannounced visit to reassure an ally facing a fierce new Russian offensive.

In increasingly intense attacks along the northeastern border in recent days, Moscow's troops have captured around 100 to 125 square kilometers (about 40 to 50 square miles) of territory that includes at least seven villages, according to open source monitoring analysts. Though most of those villages were already depopulated, thousands of civilians in the area have fled the fighting.

Analysts have called this moment one of the most dangerous for Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 — and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy asked yesterday for more air defense systems to protect civilians under Russian fire in the northeast.

“We know this is a challenging time,” Blinken said in the Ukrainian capital where he met with Zelenskyy. But he added that American military aid is “going to make a real difference against the ongoing Russian aggression on the battlefield.”

The visit comes less than a month after Congress approved a long-delayed foreign assistance package that sets aside \$60

billion in aid for Ukraine, much of which will go toward replenishing badly depleted artillery and air defense systems.

Some of that “is now on the way,” Blinken said, and some has already arrived in Ukraine.

Moscow's renewed offensive in the northeastern region of Kharkiv is the most significant border incursion since the early days of the war. More than 7,500 civilians have been evacuated from the area, according to authorities.

The Kremlin's forces are now expanding their push to the northern border regions of Sumy and Chernihiv, Ukrainian officials say, and repeated shelling and sabotage raids there are further stretching Kyiv's resources.

Zelenskyy thanked Blinken for the aid — but added that more is necessary, including two Patriot air defense systems that are urgently needed to protect Kharkiv.

“The people are under attack: civilians, warriors, everybody. They're under Russian missiles,” he said.

Artillery, air defense interceptors and long-range ballistic missiles have already been delivered, some of them already to the front lines, said a senior U.S. official traveling with the secretary on an overnight train from Poland who spoke to reporters on condition of anonymity ahead of Blinken's meetings.

On his fourth trip to Kyiv since Russian troops rolled over the border, Blinken's goal is to

underscore the Biden administration's commitment to Ukraine's defense and long-term security, U.S. officials said. They noted that since President Joe Biden signed the aid package late last month, the administration has already announced \$1.4 billion in short-term military assistance and \$6 billion in longer-term support.

In a statement released after Blinken's arrival, the State Department said he would hold talks with Zelenskyy and other top Ukrainian officials “to discuss battlefield updates, the impact of new U.S. security and economic assistance, long-term security and other commitments, and ongoing work to bolster Ukraine's economic recovery.”

Delays in U.S. assistance, particularly since the Israel-Hamas war began and has preoccupied top administration officials, triggered deep concerns in Kyiv and Europe. Blinken, for example, has visited the Middle East seven times since the Gaza conflict began in October. His last trip to Kyiv was in September.

The U.S. official added that Blinken also would give a speech today [Macau time] extolling Ukraine's “strategic successes” in the war. It is intended to complement a Blinken address last year in Helsinki, Finland, deriding Russian President Vladimir Putin for Moscow's strategic failures in launching the war.

Since the Helsinki speech, however, Russia has intensified

its attacks, most noticeably as the U.S. House of Representatives sat on the aid package for months without action, forcing a suspension in the provision of most U.S. assistance. Those attacks have increased in recent weeks as Russia has sought to take advantage of Ukrainian shortages in manpower and weapons while the new assistance is in transit.

Top Biden administration officials and Ukrainian national security officials held a call Monday “about the situation on the front, about the capabilities that they are most in need of, and a real triage effort to say, ‘Get us this stuff this fast so that we can be in a position to effectively defend against the Russian onslaught,’” said national security adviser Jake Sullivan.

The administration is “trying to really accelerate the tempo” of U.S. weapon shipments, he said.

Zelenskyy said over the weekend that “fierce battles” are taking place near the border in eastern and northeastern Ukraine as outnumbered Ukrainian soldiers try to push back a significant Russian ground offensive.

The new Russian push in the northeastern Kharkiv region and a drive into the eastern Donetsk region come after months when the roughly 1,000-kilometer front line barely budged. In the meantime, both sides have used long-range strikes in what largely became a war of attrition. **MDT/AP**

this day in history

1986 SOVIETS LAUNCH SPACE STATION MIR

The Soviets have opened a new phase in space exploration with the launch of the world's biggest space station, Mir.



The successful launch of Mir comes just over three weeks after the American space shuttle Challenger disaster, in which seven astronauts died.

At next week's Communist Party congress in Moscow the Mir project is likely to be hailed as proof that the Soviets are leading the peaceful exploration of space.

Mir, which means both peace and world in Russian, is intended to provide a base for a permanently manned complex orbiting the Earth.

Too costly

It succeeds the Soviet Salyut models, the last of which, Salyut 7, was launched in April 1982 and is still in orbit.

The Americans also had a space station, Skylab, which suffered damage on its initial launch and eventually proved too costly to maintain and fell back to Earth in 1979.

Soviet officials say their new craft represents the transition from research to large-scale production activities in space.

The station has six docking stations, which means other modules or laboratories can be added to it, expanding its size and capability.

Remain in orbit

The deputy head of the Soviet cosmonaut training centre, Alexei Leonov, said it would only be possible to determine how long Mir would remain in orbit after it had completed its first flight.

He said the cosmonauts, now taking part in a special training programme, would have separate cabins with windows and even individual desks and armchairs.

Mr Leonov explained that Salyut 7 was too small for the plans now being implemented by Soviet experts.

It has only two docking stations and can support a crew of only three, whereas Mir can carry between six and ten people.

The main work of the first cosmonauts on board Mir will be to continue with the experiments in materials processing, begun on Salyut 6 and 7.

Other activities will include observation of the Earth using high-powered cameras, as well as helping locate mineral deposits on Earth and monitor the seas for trawlers.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

The first crew arrived on board Mir on 15 March 1986 and it remained more or less continuously occupied until November 2000. Crew member Valeri Polyakov stayed up a record 439 days. The end of the Cold War marked a new era of space co-operation. In September 1993 US Vice-President Al Gore and Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin announced plans for a new space station, which would later be called the International Space Station, or ISS. In preparation for this new project, the US became more closely involved with Mir. From March 1995 seven US astronauts consecutively spent 28 months on Mir, during which time the spacecraft suffered a number of emergencies including a large fire on 23 February 1997 and a collision with an unmanned cargo ship on 25 June 1997. Mounting costs contributed to the decision to bring down Mir. Mir remained in space until 23 March 2001, during which time it orbited the Earth more than 86,000 times.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS

ARIES
Mar. 21-Apr. 19
A creative project could make a mess. Beautiful results may require some deconstruction. Undo an error. Fix a mistake. Adapt around a surprise.

TAURUS
Apr. 20-May. 20
Take care of domestic messes or they grow larger. Make repairs before something breaks. Hunt for simple solutions with a family puzzle. Collaborate and coordinate.

GEMINI
May. 21-Jun. 21
Write a bad first draft. Make a mess. Mold and edit into something interesting. Adapt around a challenge or surprise. Express your creative idea.

CANCER
Jun. 22-Jul. 22
Monitor cash flow to adjust with unexpected expenses. Communication and action are your superpowers. Connect and share. Make powerful requests. Provide excellent services.

LEO
Jul. 23-Aug. 22
You are who you say you are. Upgrade your personal brand. Polish your profiles. Dress for new photos. Update portfolios with your latest work.

VIRGO
Aug. 23-Sep. 22
You can see what didn't work. Revise plans. Clean messes, organize and put things away. Savor private rituals to process recent changes. Slow to recharge.

LIBRA
Sep. 23-Oct. 22
Keep your patience. Untangle a knot. Show respect even when others forget. A challenge could be divisive. Remind people of shared commitments, goals and ideals.

SCORPIO
Oct. 23-Nov. 21
Adapt with an unscheduled change at work. Align words and actions to clean a mess. A challenge requires attention. You've got this. Take charge.

SAGITTARIUS
Nov. 22-Dec. 21
Dig into an investigation. Watch for hidden dangers along the road. Delays and obstacles abound. Adapt around surprises. Hunt for solutions to a challenging puzzle.

CAPRICORN
Dec. 22-Jan. 19
Practice extra patience with your partner, especially concerning a financial challenge. Support each other around a change. Surprises can get expensive. Share the load.

AQUARIUS
Jan. 20-Feb. 18
Changes require adaptation. Avoid butting heads with your partner. Keep snarky comments to a minimum. It's never too late to apologize. Share support and results.

PISCES
Feb. 19-Mar. 20
Watch where you're going. Slow to avoid accidents. Nurture your physical health and wellness. Don't ignore a warning sign. Eat well and rest extra.

The Born Loser by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

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

MEDIUM					HARD					
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6		4	3				1		8	
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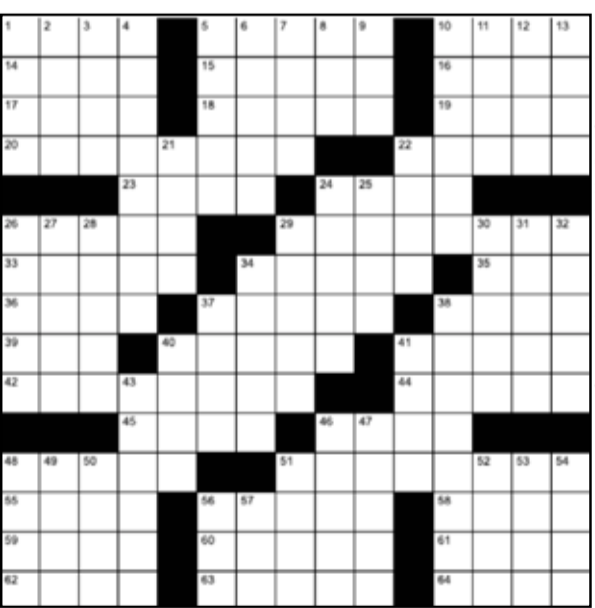
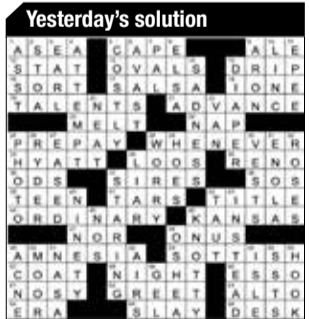
WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	15	27	fine
Changchun	7	19	cloudy
Chengdu	19	28	cloudy
Chongqing	19	31	cloudy
Fuzhou	14	30	cloudy
Guangzhou	19	32	fine
Guiyang	16	20	showers
Haikou	25	29	thunderstorms
Hangzhou	15	28	fine
Harbin	5	18	fine
Hefei	13	24	cloudy
Nanjing	14	23	cloudy
Shanghai	15	26	cloudy
Taipei	18	25	cloudy
Wuhan	17	27	fine
Hong Kong	25	29	sunny
WORLD			
Moscow	7	16	cloudy
Frankfurt	14	23	cloudy
Paris	11	21	cloudy
London	11	19	cloudy
New York	14	19	showers

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Lump of dirt; 5- Used up; 10- Cain's brother; 14- Start to type?; 15- Hawk's home; 16- Big bash; 17- Sign of things to come; 18- Run of bird-song; 19- King of the Huns; 20- Heaven; 22- Late bloomer?; 23- It transforms carbon dioxide into oxygen; 24- Soviet news service; 26- Fasten again; 29- Flat flour or corn bread; 33- Shaft shot from a bow; 34- Main artery; 35- Pupil's place; 36- Parade spoiler; 37- Dean Martin's "That's ___"; 38- Sail support; 39- WNW's reverse; 40- Fish covering; 41- Babbled; 42- Uneasy; 44- Physicist Nikola; 45- Curtain holders; 46- Bad time for Caesar; 48- Remove dirt with a broom; 51- Icing; 55- Introduction to physics?; 56- Sporting blades; 58- Toast topper; 59- Q.E.D. part; 60- Heavy metric weight; 61- Withered; 62- Hard to hold; 63- Yielded; 64- Stench;

DOWN 1- Hoof sound; 2- Capital city of Peru; 3- Lulu; 4- Contribution; 5- "Socrate" composer Erik; 6- As such; 7- Pennsylvania city; 8- Zero; 9- Aviv preceider; 10- Two-time U.S. Open champ; 11- Inner layer of a quilt; 12- Popular fashion magazine; 13- Den; 21- Took a blood sample; 22- Nick and Nora's pet; 24- Baseball manager Joe; 25- Comedian Johnson; 26- Less common or less cooked; 27- Clear the boards; 28- Attempts; 29- Implements; 30- Inclines; 31- Disinfectant brand; 32- Big name in insurance; 34- Gather; 37- Scored 100 on; 38- Majestically, musically; 40- Sow chow; 41- Hwys; 43- Agreement; 46- "Goodnight" girl; 47- Gave medicine to; 48- Hook's helper; 49- Used to be; 50- List-ending abbr.; 51- Ward off; 52- ___ Three Lives; 53- Sleuth Wolfe; 54- Attendee; 56- List ender; 57- "The Raven" poet;



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
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MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

DIEGO Maradona's heirs will launch a lawsuit to try and stop the auction of a trophy he was awarded after the 1986 World Cup won by Argentina, their lawyer told The Associated Press on Tuesday.

The Golden Ball trophy rewarding the best player of the tournament had been missing for decades after it disappeared in unclear circumstances and only recently resurfaced. It is set to be auctioned in Paris next month, the Aguttes auction house said last week.

Maradona, who died in 2020 at age 60, captained Argentina in its 3-2 win over West Germany in the 1986 final in Mexico City. Before that were the "Hand of God" goal and the "Goal of the Century" in a 2-1 win over England in the quarterfinals.

Maradona's heirs say the trophy was stolen and claim the current owner cannot be entitled to sell it.

Gilles Moreu, a lawyer working with Paradox Lawyers firm, said he will throw an urgent request to the president of the Nanterre judicial court near Paris to have the Golden Ball withdrawn from the auction. He told the AP he will also request a judicial sequestration of the trophy and file a complaint for theft and concealed theft.

Aguttes said the trophy reappeared in 2016 among other lots that were acquired from a private

FOOTBALL | AP EXCLUSIVE

MARADONA HEIRS SAY HIS GOLDEN BALL TROPHY WAS STOLEN, THEY WANT TO STOP ITS AUCTION

collection at auction in Paris.

Maradona received the award in 1986 at a ceremony at the Lido cabaret on the Champs-Élysées. It subsequently disappeared, giving rise to rumors.

Some say it was lost during a poker game or sold to pay off debts, Aguttes said. Others say Maradona stored it in a safe in a Naples bank that was robbed by local gangsters in 1989, when he played in the Italian league. Maradona's heirs believe it was stolen from the bank.

Moreu, who represents two daughters of Maradona, say the heirs found out only recently that the trophy had been stolen. According to the lawyer, Maradona's family wants the sale to be banned because it believes the Golden Ball belongs to them.

Moreu said he was contacted by an Argentine colleague after the two daughters discussed the matter with the other heirs, who gave

their approval to the legal action.

The auction house's argument is the person who bought the trophy years ago was not aware it had been stolen.

"If the owner of an object can claim ownership under French law, it is on the obvious condition that his or her good faith cannot be called into question," the Paradox Lawyers firm said in a statement to the AP. "This cannot be the case for the owner of a trophy that was famously stolen from Diego Maradona and whose heirs can legally claim ownership."

Moreu said, "It doesn't appear that the seller contacted Diego, which wasn't that complicated."

The auction house said it expects the trophy "to fetch millions due to its uniqueness."

Bidders will be asked to make a deposit of 150,000 euros (\$161,000) to participate in the June 6 auction.

The Hand of God goal came when Maradona punched the ball



Maradona and West German goalkeeper Schumacher are holding their World Cup Soccer Ball awards during the Soccer Golden Shoe Award ceremony held in Paris on Nov. 13, 1986

into England's net. Four minutes later, he weaved through England's midfield and defense and past

goalkeeper Peter Shilton for what FIFA later declared the greatest goal in World Cup history. MDT/AP

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MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

AUTO RACING

Jimmie Johnson to attempt his own version of Indy 500 & NASCAR doubleheader

ENNA FRYER,
INDIANAPOLIS

JIMMIE Johnson will attempt his own version of "The Double" when he becomes the first driver to be part of the Indianapolis 500 broadcast team hours before he competes in NASCAR's Coca-Cola 600.

Johnson, who ran the Indy 500 in 2022, was part of NBC Sports' broadcast booth in 2021 when he ran only the road and street courses on IndyCar's schedule. He added ovals in his second and final season in American open-wheel racing.

NBC said yesterday that Johnson will be part of the



broadcast team at Indianapolis Motor Speedway for the May 26 race. It will be the first of recurring analyst opportunities for Johnson with the network this year.

"To have the opportunity to experience 'The Greatest Spectacle in Racing' once

again is such an honor," Johnson said. "I was part of the NBC broadcast team in 2021 and it just fueled the fire I needed to make my childhood dream of racing in the Indianapolis 500 one day a reality. Competing in this race as a driver was a chan-

ce of a lifetime, so to be able to experience the pageantry again is just so special."

Johnson will fly to Charlotte, North Carolina, after the Indy 500 to compete in NASCAR's longest race of the year. The Hall of Famer won the Coca-Cola 600 four times as a full-time NASCAR driver. Johnson now races a partial schedule as co-owner of Legacy Motor Club.

For NBC, Johnson will also be an analyst later this season for NASCAR races at Daytona and Talladega, as well as races he's schedule to compete in.

"Any time you can add one of the greatest drivers of all time and an icon of the sport, you jump at the opportunity," said Sam Flood, lead producer for NBC Sports' motorsports coverage. "We are thrilled to be working with Jimmie and adding his unique perspective on every race he covers, as well as having him become the first person ever to do the 'Double' — history awaits."

Kyle Larson will become the fifth driver to attempt to complete both the Indy 500 and the Coca-Cola 600 on the same day. Tony Stewart in 2001 became the only driver to complete all 1,100-miles of racing. **MDT/AP**

FOOTBALL

FRENCH STRIKER GIROUD MAKES HIS MLS MOVE, JOINING LOS ANGELES FC

WTC-WINNING French striker Olivier Giroud is signing with Los Angeles FC.

LAFC formally announced the long-anticipated move yesterday for the 37-year-old Giroud, who leaves Europe after 18 years in the top professional leagues in France, England and Italy. Giroud confirmed Monday that he would leave AC Milan for a Major League Soccer club.

LAFC general manager John Thorntington said the club has been eager to add Giroud since last fall, and it attempted to land his services in the January transfer window. The 2022 MLS Cup champions and 2023 runners-up then decided to wait for Giroud to become available this summer, rather than signing another offensive star for the current season.

"The way he fits really complements our attacking group," Thorntington told The Associated Press.

Giroud is best known for his six prolific seasons at Arsenal from 2012-18, followed by three years apiece at Chelsea and Milan. He has scored 285 goals in 716 matches during his club career while winning a wealth of trophies, including a Champions League triumph with Chelsea three years ago. **MDT/AP**

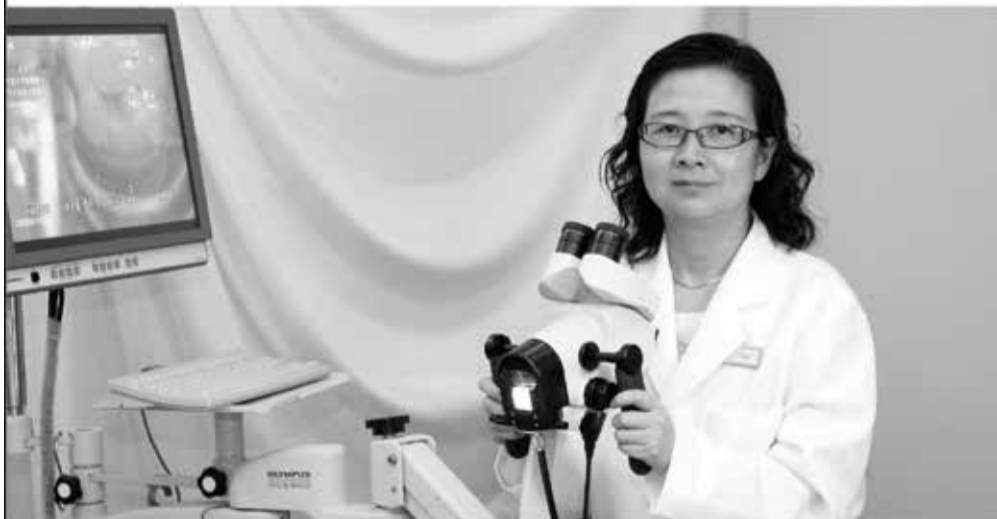


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OPINION

Multipolar World

Jorge Costa Oliveira



ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN INDIA AND THE WEST TURNING A BLIND EYE

India is the “largest democracy in the world” (970 million voters in the current elections). According to the Democracy Index 2023 by the unsuspecting Economist’s Intelligence Unit, India appears ranked among the “flawed democracies”, i.e., those that “at least allow for the possibility of change, although incumbents or anointed successors are likely to win in these too.” In this Democracy Index, India’s “electoral process and pluralism” is rated excellent, the “functioning of government” and “political participation” are good, but the “political culture” and “civil liberties” receive poor scores (6.25 and 5.88 out of 10).

In the Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Initiative, India ranks 66th in 2022 (up from 50th in 2017). The Swedish V-Dem Institute, in its latest report on democracy, considers that India has become an “electoral autocracy”.

What are the reasons for this degradation of the Indian political regime’s democratic credentials? First of all, the Hindu religious nationalism of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has grown electorally riding a religiously based apartheid. At a recent rally, Modi again used hateful rhetoric, calling Muslims “infiltrators.”

Moreover, the BJP has been displaying authoritarian tendencies, manifested in: (i) progressive centralization of power, undermining the autonomy of institutions such as the judiciary and the electoral commission; (ii) misuse of central investigative and financial agencies (e.g., freezing the bank accounts of the Congress Party, weeks before the current general elections); (iii) increasing government repression of dissenting voices – including journalists, activists, academics, and opposition politicians – with accusations of harassment, arbitrary detentions, and misuse of sedition and anti-terrorism legislation; (iv) censorship and control of the media, through intimidation and pressure on journalists; (v) imposition of internet freedom restrictions, including blocking access to websites and information platforms, and implementing surveillance measures that violate privacy.

On the other hand, according to Amnesty International, “we are witnessing a brutal crackdown on human rights, including through the misuse of central investigative and financial agencies, attacks on peaceful protests, arbitrary detentions, the use of invasive spyware for illegal surveillance, targeted suspension of opposition leaders who dare hold authorities accountable, and systematic discrimination against religious minorities to fuel (...) Hindutva.”

In addition to the treatment of marginalized communities such as Dalits and Adivasis, there have been calls for the genocide of Muslims, who have been lynched by Hindu mobs under allegations of eating or smuggling cows (an animal considered sacred to Hindus), Muslim homes have been demolished, their businesses boycotted, and their places of worship set on fire.

The allure of the Indian market and geostrategic considerations (India’s relevance in the [American] strategy of “containing” China in the “Indo-Pacific”) do not justify turning a blind eye while civil liberties and democracy in India deteriorate, and the near future does not bode well.

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

PALESTINIANS MARK 76 YEARS OF DISPOSSESSION AS A LARGER CATASTROPHE MAY UNFOLD IN GAZA

THE BUZZ

Palestinians today will mark the 76th year of their mass expulsion from what is now Israel, an event that is at the core of their national struggle. But in many ways, that experience pales in comparison to the calamity now unfolding in Gaza.

Palestinians refer to it as the Nakba, Arabic for catastrophe. Some 700,000 Palestinians — a majority of the prewar population — fled or were driven from their homes before and during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war that followed Israel’s establishment.

After the war, Israel refused to allow them to return because it would have resulted in a Palestinian majority within its borders. In-

stead, they became a seemingly permanent refugee community that now numbers some 6 million, with most living in slum-like urban refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

In Gaza, the refugees and their descendants make up around three-quarters of the population.

The refugee camps have always been the main bastions of Palestinian militancy.

Now, many Palestinians fear a repeat of their painful history on an even more cataclysmic scale.

AP PHOTO



THAILAND

MONARCHY REFORM ACTIVIST DIES IN DETENTION AFTER MONTHS HUNGER STRIKE

NAPAT KONGSAWAD, BANGKOK

A young Thai activist who went on a hunger strike after being jailed for advocating reform of the country’s system of monarchy died yesterday in a prison hospital, officials said.

Netiporn Sanesangkhom, 28, was a member of the activist group Thaluwang, known for their bold and aggressive campaigns demanding reform of the monarchy and abolition of the law that makes it illegal to defame members of the royal family. The group’s name can be loosely translated to “breaking through the palace,” a reference to its open criticism of Thailand’s monarchy.

She appears to be the first political activist in Thailand to have died after carrying on a hunger strike.

The royal institution until recent years was widely considered an untouchable, bedrock element of Thai nationalism. Criticism of the monarchy was taboo, and insulting or defaming key royal family members remains punishable by up to 15 years in prison under a lese majeste law, usually referred to as Article 112 of Thailand’s Criminal Code.

Student-led pro-democracy protests beginning in 2020 openly criticized the

monarchy, leading to vigorous prosecutions under the law, which had previously been relatively rarely employed. Critics say the law is often wielded as a tool to quash political dissent.

The protest movement faded due to government harassment and the coronavirus pandemic, but Netiporn was one of more than 270 activists charged with Thailand’s royal defamation law since the protests in 2020-21.

Netiporn suffered cardiac arrest yesterday morning, and medical teams spent several hours trying to resuscitate her. She was pronounced dead just before noon, according to a press release from the Corrections Department.

She had two charges of lese majeste pending against her, both of them involving conducting polls in public spaces in 2022 asking people’s opinion about the royal family, according to the group Thai Lawyers for Human Rights. Her release on bail was revoked in January due to her participation in a political rally last year.

Netiporn started her hunger strike after she was detained in January. The Corrections Department said she started eating and drinking water again after April 4. However, the human rights lawyer group’s latest update

on her condition on April 25 said she was still fasting.

Two fellow jailed activists are also carrying out hunger strikes. Both are Thaluwang’s monarchy reform activists slapped with lese majeste charges, and they started their hunger strike about a month after Netiporn.

Netiporn’s lawyers had applied to transfer her from the Central Corrections Hospital to Thammasat University Hospital but was never granted a prolonged stay there for treatment, said her lawyer Kritsadang Nutcharas.

“Does it seem like there’s standard treatment in the Thai justice system when we compare what these kids are going through with their political charges and what some prominent adults have gone through?” Kritsadang said. He was making an apparent reference to former Prime Minister

Thailand announced its bid for a seat on the U.N. Human Rights Council for the 2025-2027 term after the current government took office last year, seeking to show its commitment to protect human rights. Critics charge that the reality of law enforcement in the country strongly contradicts its ambition to be recognized by the international community as a human rights defender. **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



Australia A judge sentenced a former army lawyer to almost six years in prison yesterday for leaking to the media classified information that exposed allegations of Australian war crimes in Afghanistan. David McBride, 60, (pictured) was sentenced in a court in the capital, Canberra, to five years and eight months in prison after pleading guilty to three charges including theft and sharing with members of the press documents classified as secret. He had faced a potential life sentence.

New Caledonia Authorities in the French Pacific territory announced a two-day curfew and banned gatherings yesterday after violent unrest on the vast archipelago with decades of tensions between indigenous Kanaks seeking independence and colonizers’ descendants who want to remain part of France. The French Interior Ministry announced that police reinforcements were being sent to the island that long served as a prison colony. 82 people were arrested and 54 police officers and gendarmes were injured. The airport was shut down.

AP PHOTO



Denmark Europe’s oldest monarch, King Harald V of Norway, yesterday welcomed Denmark’s King Frederik and his Australian-born wife, Queen Mary, on their second official visit abroad after the Danish monarch’s mother abdicated this year. The 87-year-old Harald returned to work last month following two surgeries to implant pacemakers. The Norwegian royal household said he would scale back official activities, but Harald has said he has no plans to abdicate.

HOLIDAY TIMES

Macau Daily Times will not be published during the holiday. The Times will be back on the stands on Friday May 17. However the MDT website will be updated with breaking news during the recess period. We wish our readers, advertisers and friends the best of times.