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COMMUNITY ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER WANTS MORE ATTENTION TO THE CONDITIONS AND MAINTENANCE OF PUBLIC PARKING LOTS

P4

LOCAL INSTITUTIONS RISE IN QS WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKINGS

P3

GAMING OPERATORS ENTERTAINMENT EVENTS GENERATE MOP 1.1B LAST YEAR

P3



AP PHOTO



Philippines Four police officers in Manila were arrested yesterday for kidnapping and ransom, targeting three Chinese and a Malaysian tourist. The officers, along with civilian accomplices, abducted the tourists, who were later freed after a ransom payment of 2.5 million pesos (\$43,100). Authorities are searching for 10 additional suspects. This incident marks a severe breach of public trust.

AP PHOTO



Indonesia President Joko Widodo announced that the first phase of the new capital Nusantara is 80% complete. He plans to move his office there once clean water is available in July. The new capital, intended to replace Jakarta, will be inaugurated during the republic's 79th Independence Day in August, amidst criticisms from environmentalists and Indigenous communities.

AP PHOTO

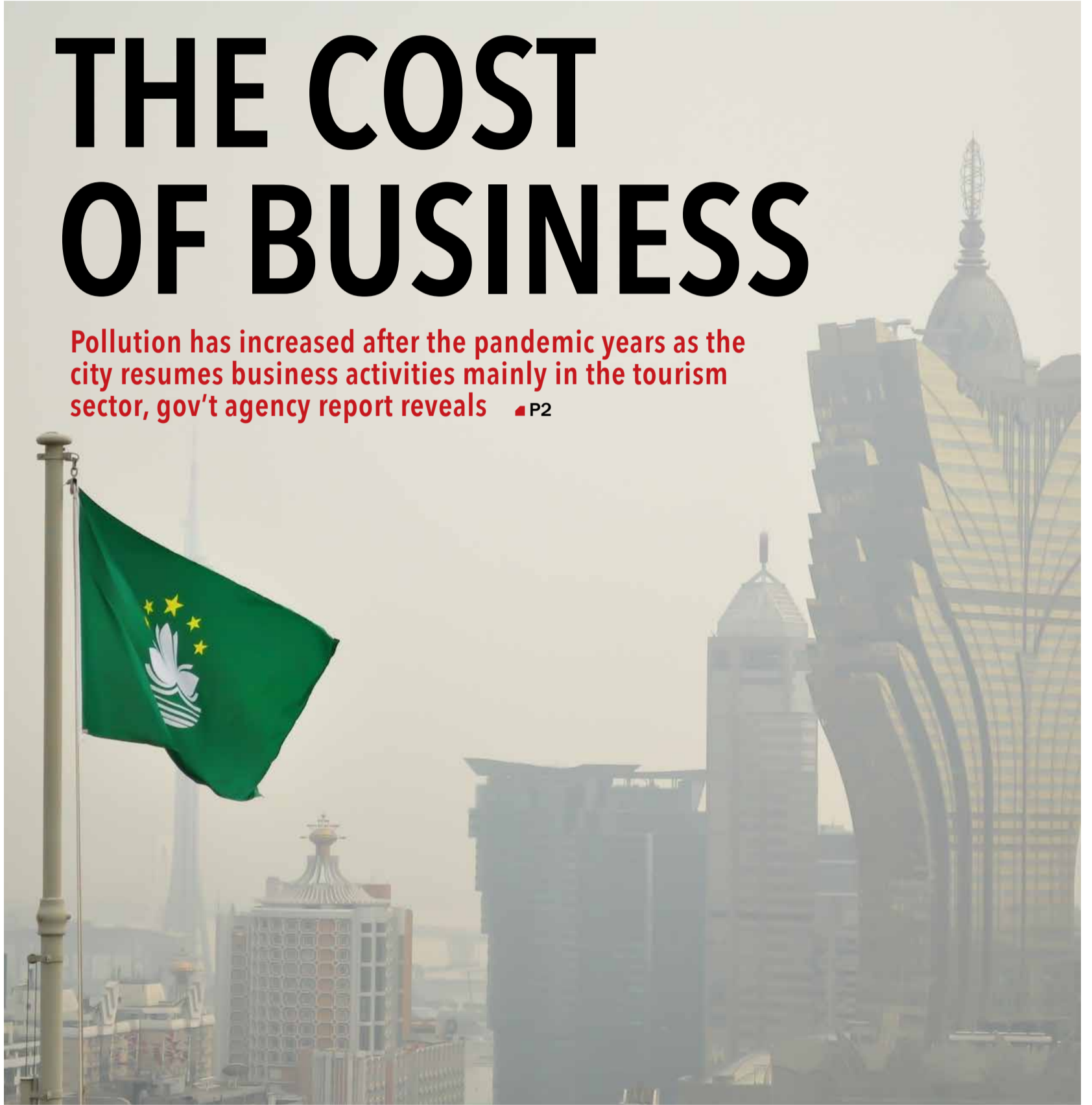


Australia's online safety watchdog yesterday dropped its Federal Court case against X Corp. over a video of a Sydney bishop being stabbed. However, eSafety Commissioner Julie Inman Grant will continue the legal action in the Administrative Appeals Tribunal. The decision follows online attacks against her and her family, which she attributes to X Corp.'s owner, Elon Musk.

More on backpage

THE COST OF BUSINESS

Pollution has increased after the pandemic years as the city resumes business activities mainly in the tourism sector, gov't agency report reveals P2



G2E ASIA

SMART TABLES REVOLUTIONIZE CASINO OPERATIONS

P4

PUBLIC WORKS

INNER HARBOUR SEWERAGE PROJECT 60% COMPLETE

P3

APPLICATIONS OPEN FOR FILM ARTS TRAINING PROGRAMME

The 2024 Film Arts Training Programme, organized by the Cultural Affairs Bureau (IC) and Wynn Macau, is accepting applications from June 25 to 26. To be eligible for the program, applicants must be 18 years old or over, hold a Macau SAR Permanent Resident Identity Card, and have a high school diploma or higher certificate of education. The selected candidates will receive more than 60 hours of professional guidance over 12 days from July to September. Towards the end of the program, the candidates will collaborate in groups to create a short film. The group that receives the "Best Art Direction" award will be presented with a certificate and a prize of MOP50,000.

NON-RESIDENT DEPOSITS GROW TO MOP327B

Non-resident deposits grew 3.5% to MOP327.5 billion in April, while resident deposits increased 0.1% to MOP725.1 billion. Concurrently, public sector deposits in the banking sector rose 4.1% to MOP200.9 billion. Consequently, total deposits in the banking sector rose 1.6% to MOP1.25 trillion compared to the previous month. Loans to the private sector within the country fell 0.9% to MOP532.4 billion, while external loans grew 2.2% to MOP548.6 billion.

UTM CONSIDERS NEW FACILITY HENQIN

The president of Macau Tourism University (UTM), Fanny Vong, announced yesterday that the university is contemplating the construction of a new educational facility in Hengqin. Vong, as cited in TDM, expressed the university's intention to utilize the available resources in Hengqin to enhance tourism education and training on both sides of the border. Commenting on the city's recent accolade of being named a Culture City of East Asia 2025, she said this recognition acknowledges the significant contributions made by the tourism industry. It also further motivates workforce training in Macau.

RENATO MARQUES/MDT



CLIMATE CHANGE

ENVIRONMENT NOT SO GREAT, DSPA REPORT SAYS

RENATO MARQUES

THE state of Macau's environment was not so great in 2023, the annual report from the Environmental Protection Bureau (DSPA), published yesterday, noted.

According to the report, the end of the pandemic and, thus, the resumption of economic activities, such as tourism, has increased the city's pollution, according to main environmental indicators.

"The increase in social and economic activities has put strong pressure on various environmental indicators. The amount of urban solid waste, electricity consumption, and the volume of water billed have increased again," the DSPA report noted. It added, "The average annual concentration of most air pollutants and the estimated values of local air pollutant emissions have also increased."

The DSPA put forward that figures recorded at Macau's six air quality monitoring stations have shown that the average concentrations of air pollutants have all increased, compared to 2022.

"In 2023, Macau's estimated GHG (Greenhouse Gas) emissions were dominated by carbon dioxide (CO₂), representing 91.7% of the total. Nitrous oxide (N₂O) and methane (CH₄) contributed, respectively, 5.4% and 2.9%. There was an increase in estimated emissions of all types of GHG compared to the previous year," the report said. It added that, in 2023, the estimated local GHG emissions increased by around 20% year-on-year.

The report attributed the increases to emissions resulting from transport, waste incineration, and local electricity production sectors.

"In 2023, the main sources of GHG and CO₂ emissions were, in decreasing order: land transport, local electrical energy production, waste incineration and commerce, domestic consumption and services. The main sources of CH₄ emissions were waste deposited in landfills and wastewater treatment, while the last was also responsible for most of the N₂O emissions."

Nonetheless, the same governmental entity noted that, last year, the

number of days with air quality classified as "Good" or "Moderate" reached 91% of all the days in the year.

The report said that, in 2023, only seven to 32 days were classified as having "unhealthy" air qualities, while the number of days classified as "very unhealthy" decreased to only one day.

The most significant types of pollutants detected at the air quality monitoring stations were fine suspended particles (PM_{2.5}) and ozone (O₃).

At the Environmental Station (Taipa), the highest index detected in the whole year was 209 and classified as "very unhealthy", with O₃

being the main pollutant.

The month with the best air quality was June; the worst was November.

Also related was the increase by 0.6 degrees Celsius of the average temperature in Macau (when compared with the climatic average value which includes the 30-year average between 1991 and 2020). This figure last year reached 23.4°C.

The number of very hot days was 32, which is similar to the average climate value.

On the other hand, there were 26 very cold days; that is, 13.1 days less than the average climate value.

Through critical indi-

cators, the report points the way for improving Macau's environment. It notes that "reducing emissions in the electricity and land transport sectors [can play] a key role in achieving peak carbon emissions and carbon neutrality in Macau."

Among the suggestions, the report says of energy: "The proportion of electrical energy produced by non-fossil sources and acquired abroad will gradually increase. Energy efficiency will be increased, and the promotion of the installation of photovoltaic systems will be reinforced. At the same time, the feasibility of introducing new technologies will be studied, such as carbon capture and hydrogen energy in the production of electrical energy."

The report suggested the land transport sector promote the use of electric vehicles and improve infrastructure and charging facilities in conjunction with the encouragement of citizens to choose sustainable means of transport, such as public transport and walking, "to achieve a significant reduction in GHG emissions."

The improvement of waste treatment facilities and their transformation into resources is also a bid that the DSPA says will "create more convenient conditions for carrying out recycling, strengthening the control of ozone pollution and coastal water pollution, among others."

ORGANIC WASTE RECOVERY CENTER RECEIVES SUPPORT OF MOP720M OVER 15 YEARS

The concessionaire of the Organic Waste Recovery Center that soon will start construction in the land plot beside the current construction landfill in Cotai will receive governmental financial support of MOP720,108 over the whole 15-year period of the concession, to be paid in monthly installments. Such financial assistance is justified in the contract celebrated between the government and the consortium that will build and explore the facility as a guarantee

of income aimed at maintaining the economic-financial balance of the contract during the operation phase, the summary of the contract published yesterday in the government's official gazette said. The contract also states that the concessionaires will pay to the government 30% of the revenue from the facility's sale of energy, as well as the resulting residues for recycling, among other subproducts. The construction will cost MOP1.15 billion and will have to be concluded in 38 months.

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EDUCATION

Local institutions up in QS World University Rankings

RENATO MARQUES

THE University of Macau (UM) and the Macau University of Science and Technology (MUST) have improved their rankings in this year's QS World University Rankings.

The UM placed 245th overall, with an overall score of 41.1 points, advancing nine positions when compared with last year's rankings (254th).

Since its first inclusion in 2014, the UM has consistently improved its ranking. The only year it did not improve was in 2017, when it mirrored its previous 2016 score.



The UM also achieved a classification of five stars on the QS Stars rating, which evaluates the institutions by categories, such as facilities, graduate employability, social

responsibility, and inclusiveness.

UM got a five-star rating for the categories: Overall, Teaching, Employability, Research, Global Engagement,

Facilities, Innovation & Knowledge Transfer, and Specialist Criteria: Hospitality & Leisure Management. It scored a four-star rating for Inclusiveness.

Meanwhile, the MUST placed 464th in the same rankings with an overall score of 25.9 points. First appearing in the 2021 list, it has also been consistently improving its score.

This year alone, the MUST jumped 41 places from its previous 505th position overall.

The ranking for 2025 continues to be led by the US's Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), with 100 points, followed by the UK's Imperial College London, with 98.5 points, and the UK's University of Oxford, with 96.9 points.

Also of note is the significant drop in score by one of the traditional Top 3 universities, the UK's University of Cambridge. Cambridge has fallen to 5th, after placing for the last two years in second.

Currently in second overall, the Imperial College London has leaped from 6th.

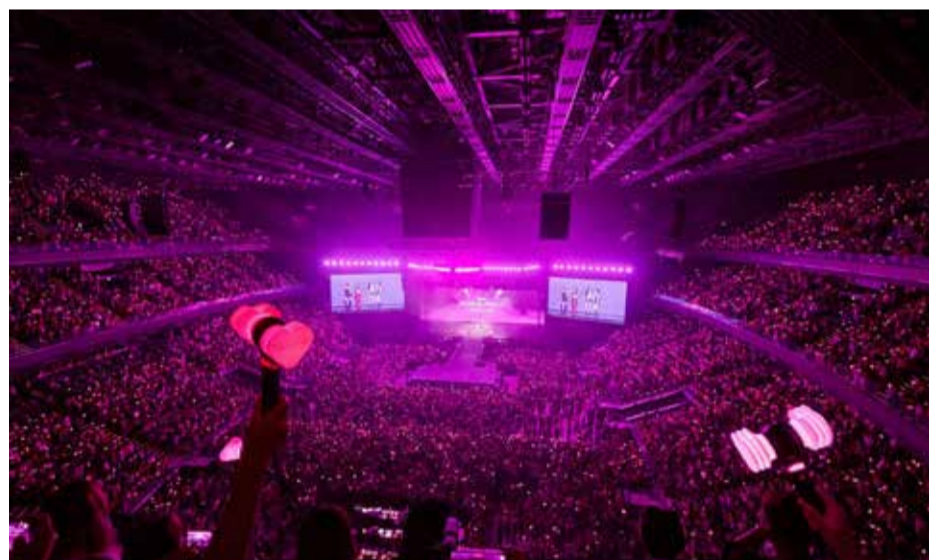
The top-achieving Asian universities continue to be led by the National University of Singapore (8th), followed by Peking University (14th), and another Singaporean university, the Nanyang Technological University (15th).

Among the universities in neighboring regions, the best-ranked institution is the University of Hong Kong (17th).

The 20th QS World University Rankings features 1,500 institutions from across 104 locations. It is the only ranking of its kind that emphasizes employability and sustainability in its metrics.

For this year, the rank introduced some enhancements to its methodology, including three new metrics: Sustainability, Employment Outcomes, and International Research Network.

The rankings are drawn from the analysis of 17.5 million academic papers, as well as the expert opinions of more than 240,000 academics and employers.



ARTBIZ ASIA ART FORUM

Gaming ops' entertainment events generate MOP1.1b in 2023

HOWARD TONG

THE city's six integrated resort operators in Macau hosted concerts and large-scale entertainment performances last year, resulting in MOP1.1 billion in box office revenue and drawing an audience of approximately one million spectators.

Deland Leong, director of Cultural Affairs Bureau, said these impressive numbers were a testament to Macau's significant potential

to capture the cultural consumption market at the opening of the 3rd ArtBiz Asia Art Forum.

The official expressed her hope to leverage the influx of people attending performing arts events to drive increased participation in the city's cultural tourism sector.

Data from 2023 indicates that Macau hosted over 2,000 large-scale performance events organized by both government and private enterprise, as well as more than 10,000

total arts and cultural activities that attracted nearly 20 million participants.

The director noted that the cultural industry is a key component in Macau's moderately diversified "1+4" economic development strategy. To promote Macau as a "performing city", authorities have enacted a series of initiatives aimed at catalyzing cross-sector synergies and elevating the city's cultural brand.

The government of-

official said the aim is to enhance the diversity of performing arts in Macau by introducing and coordinating a broader array of events and programs. This will enable individuals to gain a multifaceted understanding of Macau's cultural richness.

As an example, the bureau has planned to initiate the first-ever International Children's Art Festival during the months of July and August. This festival will encompass stage performances, exhibitions, outdoor installations, and workshops, all designed to ignite children's passion for art.

Looking ahead, the Macau SAR government plans to launch a new round of the "Local Performance Commissioning and Production Plan" to create more iconic and representative artistic and cultural works.

Furthermore, as of this year, 30 Macau projects have been shortlisted for funding from the National Arts Fund. In 2022, the government also initiated a matched funding scheme that supported the implementation of 11 National Arts Fund-backed initiatives in Macau, some of which have been showcased in other locales.



PUBLIC WORKS

INNER HARBOUR SEWERAGE PROJECT 60% COMPLETE

HOWARD TONG

OVER 60% of the Inner Harbour stormwater pumping station and affiliated sewerage system project has been completed to date, the Public Works Bureau (DSOP) has reported.

According to the DSOP, the first phase rainwater pumping station is currently undergoing installation and testing. Of the second phase, 317.2 meters of box culverts have been produced. Meanwhile, of the third phase, another 289 meters of box culverts have been constructed, accounting for approximately 58% of the total planned length.

To ensure uninterrupted vehicle traffic during construction, the project has implemented segmented work and partial road closures. Furthermore, additional water pumping equipment has been deployed to mitigate flooding risks from wind and rain events throughout the

construction period.

The DSOP said the Inner Harbour initiative is in its peak construction stage.

There have been renewed calls for officials to bolster the city's drainage network, as well as coordinate emergency response plans across departments after the flooding in low-lying parts of Macau during recent heavy rains.

Recently, Leong Hong Sai, head of the Macau Geotechnical Engineering Department (LECM), said rainwater had overflowed into Av. de Horta e Costa and other low-lying areas due to the sudden influx of water, which exceeded the city's canal capacities.

With typhoon season approaching amid protracted construction timelines, he urged timely dredging, restaurant discharge inspections, and cross-departmental emergency plans be proactively implemented to coordinate any necessary responses.

G2E ASIA

SMART TABLES REVOLUTIONIZE CASINO OPERATIONS: EXPERTS

STAFF REPORTER

THE casino industry is undergoing a technological transformation, with smart table technology reshaping the traditional table game experience.

All six major concessionaires in Macau are either already using smart tables or are installing them, signaling a significant shift in the way casinos operate.

By seamlessly integrating radio frequency identification (RFID) and artificial intelligence (AI), these smart tables automate manual movements and processes, revolutionizing game integrity, player ratings and operational efficiency.

"This whole smart gaming technology is all about bringing advanced technology into the traditional table game," said Aaron Raj, Chief Technology Officer and Global Smart Table Integration Specialist for Angel Group, a company dedicated to manufacturing and supplying gaming equipment.

Presenting at a panel discussion conducted at the Global Gaming Expo (G2E) Asia's forum yesterday, he said that through automation, "there's a lot of data that is generated. And that data becomes invaluable as such for casinos to enhance player experience, game production, and all the other things

VICTORIA CHAN/MDT



that are possible, like increased operational efficiency."

Smart table technology, which integrates cutting-edge technology and traditional table games, is transforming the casino industry with two major providers, Angel and Walker Digital, leading the charge.

While Angel focuses on data collection, game security, player ratings, and analytics without altering the existing process, Walker Digital employs an innovative "slotification" approach, fully automating table game operations through extensive time and motion studies.

As Stephen Moore, founder and CEO of Walker Digital, notes, "We really are in the slotification of table games. The fact is that it's actually

better than slot machines because you don't have individual bets for every spin inside a slot machine."

The implementation of smart tables brings numerous benefits, including improved game integrity and accuracy, seamless player engagement, and valuable insights for operational improvements.

Gaming operator MGM was the first to adopt smart table technology, driven by the goal of increasing its operational efficiencies and gaining a competitive edge.

"You can increase your threshold limits before you have to wait for a supervisor to get approval. Players really, in Macau, want a playback run, and they want results. They don't want to be waiting around,"

said Graeme Croft, former VP of Tables for MGM.

Across the globe, The Star Entertainment Group, which operates three casinos in Australia, has also recognized the strategic importance of smart tables, particularly in the highly regulated market with a focus on local premium customers.

The ability to report on player activity, manage fraud, combat money laundering, and gain insights into customer preferences were crucial drivers for their adoption of smart tables.

Rick McDonald, who runs the table games at The Star in Australia, emphasized the importance of smart tables in their highly regulated market, noting, "Being able

to report on player activity – you know, fraud management, money laundering, and understanding our customers – is crucial."

One of the key aspects revolutionized by smart tables is chip attribution and tracking.

By linking each casino chip to a customer through a unique ID, smart tables offer a potential solution to the traditional challenges of tracking chips back to customers, particularly in Macau due to chip sharing and player movement.

As Graeme Croft explained: "All these chips have got a unique ID. And so, when we enroll our chips through our cage, we can attribute those chips to that customer."

"It does have some other advantages as well. You know, sometimes a chip may be lost, found on the floor, and it can be determined to belong to a certain customer, purely because that player brought in those chips using his card," he said.

This enhanced chip tracking not only improves security measures but also enables the detection of player-initiated rating fraud, collusion between players and dealers, and other suspicious activities.

As smart tables continue to gain traction, casinos worldwide are embracing this innovative technology to stay ahead in the highly competitive gambling landscape.

The integration of RFID and AI technologies into traditional table games has not only transformed the gaming experience but also paved the way for new applications and functionalities, driving the casino industry's technological revolution.

JP Morgan: The Londoner decommissions up to 3,000 rooms

LYNZY VALLES

THE Londoner Macao's ongoing major renovation has now decommissioned 3,000 hotel rooms, up from 2,500, causing a significant impact on the casino's operations.

According to a note from JP Morgan, the parent company Las Vegas Sands confirmed that the renovation would have a more significant impact on the second quarter compared to the previous three months.

The analysts also reported that Las Vegas Sands was managing margins by redistributing table demand to other properties in its Macau portfolio, according to a GGR Asia report.

The renovation, known as Phase 2, had a



hefty price tag of USD1.2 billion and included the renovation of the Sheraton and Conrad hotels, as well as the revamp of the Pacifica casino space.

This meant that the two Sheraton towers, with 4,000 rooms, were also affected. In the first quarter, the company's management had already

warned of the impact of the renovation, stating that about 500 to 600 rooms were out of commission due to the renovation of the first Sheraton tower.

However, the executive vice chairman of Sands China Ltd, Wilfred Wong, reassured investors that the projects were on tra-

ck to be completed by the fourth quarter.

Meanwhile, the casino company was facing tough competition in the Macau market, with operators vying for patrons in the premium-mass segment. However, the company was confident in its position, noting that its reinvestment rates were higher than in 2019.

The company did not see the need to increase its reinvestment rate once the new casino, arena, and an additional 1,000 suites at the Sheraton were back online in the fourth quarter of 2024.

With the completion of the renovation projects, the company is confident its market position will improve by late autumn.

COMMUNITY ADVISOR CALLS FOR BETTER MAINTENANCE AND CONDITIONS OF PUBLIC CAR PARKS

CENTRAL District Community Advisory Board member António Monteiro wants more attention paid to the conditions and maintenance of public parking lots, he said in a speech delivered yesterday to the Advisory Board meeting.

Monteiro expressed concerns over the lacking attention towards, and maintenance of, some parking lots in Macau, giving the example of one located at Rua de Malaca.

"Some accesses to the parking lots are often blocked and have buckets placed in the middle of the staircases," he noted, displaying photographic proof, and adding that such issues tend to occur more during rainy days –

but not always.

He suggested the concessionaires of the parking lots and the owners – ultimately, the Macau SAR – better supervise the conditions of the lots' access points, as these are used daily and are particularly important in the event of emergency evacuations.

He noted that misplaced objects on the lots' staircases also create the potential for accidents.

Monteiro also suggested that the parking lot concessionaires improve ventilation in the staircases, as well as the lifts. With no ventilation, the air in the staircases is almost unbreathable, particularly on very hot summer days.

RM

AEROSAPCE

Boeing launches NASA astronauts for the first time after years of delays

MARCIA DUNN, CAPE CANAVERAL

BOEING launched astronauts for the first time yesterday, belatedly joining SpaceX as a second taxi service for NASA.

A pair of NASA test pilots blasted off aboard Boeing's Starliner capsule for the International Space Station, the first to fly the new spacecraft.

The trip by Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams was expected to take 25 hours, with an arrival today. They will spend just over a week at the orbiting lab before climbing back into Starliner for a remote desert touchdown in the western U.S. on June 14.

"Let's get going!" Wilmore called out a few minutes before liftoff.

Half an hour later, he and Williams were safely in orbit and giving chase to the space station. Back at Cape Canaveral, the relieved launch controllers stood and applauded. After all the trouble leading up to Wednesday's launch, including two scrapped countdowns, everything seemed to go smoothly before and during liftoff.

Years late because of spacecraft flaws, Starliner's crew debut comes as the company struggles with unrelated safety issues on its airplane side.

Wilmore and Williams — retired Navy captains and former space station residents — stressed repeatedly before the launch that they had full confidence in Boeing's ability to get it right with this test flight. Crippled by bad software, Starliner's initial test flight in 2019 without a crew had to be repeated before NASA would let its astronauts strap in. The



Boeing's Starliner capsule, atop an Atlas V rocket, lifts off from launch pad at Space Launch Complex 41 yesterday in Cape Canaveral, Fla.

2022 do-over went much better, but parachute problems later cropped up and flammable tape had to be removed from the capsule.

Wednesday's launch was the third attempt with astronauts since early May, coming after a pair of rocket-related problems, most recently last weekend. A small helium leak in the spacecraft's propulsion system also caused delays, but managers decided the leak was manageable and not a safety issue.

"I know it's been a long road to get here," NASA's commercial crew program manager Steve Stich said before the weekend delay.

Boeing was hired alongside Elon

Musk's SpaceX a decade ago to ferry NASA's astronauts to and from the space station. The space agency wanted two competing U.S. companies for the job in the wake of the space shuttles' retirement, paying \$4.2 billion to Boeing and just over half that to SpaceX, which refashioned the capsule it was using to deliver station supplies.

SpaceX launched astronauts into orbit in 2020, becoming the first private business to achieve what only three countries — Russia, the U.S. and China — had mastered. It has taken nine crews to the space station for NASA and three private groups for a Houston company that

charters flights.

The liftoff from Cape Canaveral Space Force Station was the 100th of an Atlas V for rocket maker United Launch Alliance. It was the first ride for astronauts on an Atlas rocket since John Glenn's Mercury era more than 60 years ago; the rocket usually launches satellites and other spacecraft.

Despite the Atlas V's perfect record, the human presence cranked up the tension for the scores of NASA and Boeing employees gathered at Cape Canaveral and Mission Control in Houston.

Boeing's Starliner and SpaceX's Dragon are designed to be fully au-

tonomous and reusable. Wilmore and Williams occasionally will take manual control of Starliner on their way to the space station, to check out its systems.

If the mission goes well, NASA will alternate between SpaceX and Boeing for taxi flights, beginning next year. The backup pilot for this test flight, Mike Fincke, will strap in for Starliner's next trip.

"This is exciting. We built up to this moment for years and years, and it finally happened," Fincke said from neighboring Kennedy Space Center. "I feel like the whole planet was cheering for them."

MDT/AP

CORPORATE BITS

Sands China commends gov't for new culture city award



With the SAR having been named a Culture City of East Asia 2025, after scoring first place in the award's final assessment. Sands China Ltd. has voiced its enthusiasm for — and reiterated the com-

pany's commitment to — the growth of cultural tourism in Macau.

"We extend our heartfelt congratulations to Macau on its designation as a Culture City of East Asia 2025,

and we are tremendously proud of Macau's continued success and recognition under the leadership of the Macau SAR government," said Wilfred Wong, executive vice-chairman of Sands China Ltd.

"Macau has a long history of cultural exchange spanning more than 400 years, and this new title is set to further boost the city's international reputation," he added.

Sands China Ltd. has further pledged its commitment to leveraging the city's role as an international platform, so as to bolster, among other things, international artistic and cultural exchange.

MGM presents annual artistic swimming sports event



MGM has announced its presentation of the annual MGM Artistic Swimming Elite Extravaganza & Macao Open Artistic Swimming Competition 2024, an event that serves as a prelude to the Olympic Games Paris 2024.

Over the course of three days, spectators will witness performances by three renowned national teams, along with the highly anticipated Open Artistic Swimming Competition, which attracts nearly 200 young athletes and

their coaches from Hong Kong, Macau and the mainland.

The events will be held from June 21 to June 23 at the Aquatic Centre of the Olympic Sports Centre. Entry to the events is free. Complimentary tickets will be available online and at the Box Office of MGM Cotai on a first come, first served basis, commencing today.

One of the key highlights will be performances from the three Chinese teams, including the Beijing Artistic Swimming Team, the Jiangsu Artistic Swimming Team and the Sichuan Artistic Swimming Team.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

ZHAO RUINAN & SHI BAOYIN, LUOYANG

Chinese tricycles captivate foreign markets and media

A blogger in the US recently purchased a Chinese-made electric tricycle for \$600 as a Christmas gift for her father-in-law.

The Sangbengzi, a vehicle deeply rooted in Chinese culture and commonly seen in China's rural areas, attracted attention when adorned with holiday decorations and taken out on the road.

Its cultural significance and unique design make it a fascinating addition to any collection.

The three-wheelers are popular not only in the US, but also in Africa, Southeast Asia and many other regions.

The distinct warning sound of "reverse, please be careful..." has been heard on foreign streets, and content featuring these tricycles has surged on short video platforms.

They've also become a focal point in foreign trade. Industrial



A blogger in the US recently purchased a Chinese-made electric tricycle for \$600 as a Christmas gift for her father-in-law

regions like Wuxi and Xuzhou in Jiangsu, Linyi in Shandong, and Luoyang in Henan have experienced a prosperous surge this year.

Yanshi district in

Luoyang is renowned as China's hub for three-wheelers. One out of every three tricycles in China is made there, and all the required parts can be gathered

to assemble a tricycle within 30 minutes.

Watch the video to see why these Sangbengzi tricycles from China are causing such a CHINA DAILY

SOCIETY

VICE-PREMIER CALLS FOR CONSOLIDATING ANTI-POVERTY ACHIEVEMENTS, IMPROVING WATER INFRASTRUCTURE

CHINESE Vice-Premier Liu Guozhong has called for solid efforts to consolidate anti-poverty achievements and improve water conservancy infrastructure.

Liu, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, made the remarks during a research trip that took place from Tuesday to Thursday in Northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region.

In the city of Kashgar and Yecheng county in Kashgar prefecture, Liu talked to farmers and herdsmen and learned about local people's work and life, medical treatment and schooling.

Targeted assistance should be offered to local residents to prevent the return of poverty, and more should be done to foster the endo-

genous development momentum. He also urged the promotion of rural development in a precise and practical manner, so that more farmers and herdsmen can live a better life.

Liu inspected the construction and operation of water conservancy facilities and grain production in Yining county, Nilka county and the city of Cocodala of Ili Kazak autonomous prefecture.

He stressed the planning of regional water networks, the construction of high-standard farmland and water conservancy facilities, the application of cost-effective and efficient water-saving technologies, and agriculture and animal husbandry industries with unique advantages, among others.

XINHUA



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銀河娛樂集團
Galaxy Entertainment Group

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INDIA

Modi enters record third term as nations congratulate his coalition on election victory

ASHOK SHARMA, NEW DELHI

CHINA, Ukraine and other nations sent their congratulations yesterday as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government began preparations for his swearing-in for a record third term following the world's largest democratic election.

Modi's Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party planned to meet with allies today [Macau time] to discuss the government's formation.

Official results from the Election Commission showed the BJP-led National Democratic alliance won 294 of the 543 seats, more than the 272 needed for a majority but far fewer than had been expected. For the first time since the BJP swept to power in 2014, it did not secure a majority on its own, winning 240 seats, far fewer than the record 303 it won in the 2019 election.

Modi met yesterday with Indian President Droupadi



Prime Minister Narendra Modi is greeted by supporters as he arrives at BJP headquarters in New Delhi

Murmu and tendered his customary resignation along with that of his Cabinet ahead of the swearing-in ceremony expected in several days.

"The president has accepted the resignation and requested Narendra Modi and the Council of Ministers to continue till the new government assumes office," the president's office said in a statement.

Congratulatory messages to Modi from leaders of regional countries including Nepal and Bhutan were the first to arrive, while the White House commended India for its "vibrant democratic process."

In Beijing, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning yesterday extended congratulations to the BJP.

"A sound and stable India-China relationship is in the

interest of both countries and conducive to the peace and development of this region and beyond," she said, adding that China is ready to work with India in the fundamental interest of the two countries.

Tensions remain high between India and China, with tens of thousands of soldiers massed on their disputed border since 2020

Ukraine President Volo-

dymyr Zelenskyy said he looked forward to seeing India attend a peace summit to be hosted by Switzerland.

"Everyone in the world recognizes the significance and weight of India's role in global affairs. It is critical that we all work together to ensure a just peace for all nations," he said.

Taiwanese leader Lai Ching-te said he looked forward to expanding collaboration in trade, technology and other sectors to contribute to peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.

Among its key allies, the Samajwadi Party won 37 seats in northern Uttar Pradesh state in a major upset for the BJP, the All India Trinamool Congress took 29 seats in West Bengal state, and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam won 22 seats in southern Tamil Nadu state.

Combined, the opposition INDIA coalition won a total of 232 seats.

The BJP may now be "heavily dependent on the goodwill of its allies, which makes them critical players who we can expect will extract their pound of flesh, both in terms of policymaking as well as government formation," said Milan Vaishnav, director of the South Asia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

More than 640 million votes were cast in the marathon election held over six weeks, the world's largest democratic exercise. **MDT/AP**

KOREAS

US flies B-1B bomber for first precision bomb drill in seven years

THE United States flew a long-range B-1B bomber over the Korean Peninsula yesterday [Macau time] for its first precision-guided bombing drill with South Korea in seven years, the South's military said.

The drill — seen as a show of force against North Korea — comes as tensions are rising over the North's recent launches of rubbish-carrying balloons toward South Korea and other provocations.

The training involved other advanced U.S. and South Korean fighter jets as well as the B-1B aircraft, the second U.S. bomber temporarily deployed over the Korean Peninsula this year. The exercise was meant to demonstrate the



In this photo provided by the S.Korea Defense Ministry, U.S. Air Force B-1B bomber and South Korean fighter jets F-15K fly over the Korean Peninsula during joint aerial drills

U.S. security commitment to South Korea and strengthen the allies' joint defense posture, according to the South Korean Defense Ministry.

During the training, the B-1B dropped Joint Direct Attack Munitions while

being escorted by South Korean jets, the first such bombing drill for a U.S. bomber since 2017, a ministry statement said.

It said South Korean fighter jets also conducted live-firing exercises to demonstrate the country's

readiness to punish North Korea if provoked, it said.

JDAM bombs include "bunker-busters." JDAM is a guidance system that converts unguided, conventional bombs into more precise, GPS-guided weapons. All U.S. fighter jets,

bombers and drones can use JDAMs, and the munitions are among the weapons systems the United States has been providing to Ukraine to help it fight Russia's invasion.

North Korea is extremely sensitive to drills using bunker-buster bombs, which could threaten its leadership and complex web of underground military tunnels and structures.

A B-1B is capable of carrying a large conventional weapons payload. North Korea has previously called the bomber's deployment proof of U.S. hostility. North Korea has responded to past flights of B-1Bs and other powerful U.S. aircraft in South Korea with its own missile tests.

In the past week, North Korea floated hundreds of huge balloons to drop manure, cigarette butts, scraps of cloth and waste batteries across South Korea, in anger over previous campaigns by South Korean civilians to send balloons with

leaflets and other items into North Korea. South Korea responded with a promise to take "unbearable" retaliatory steps and suspended a fragile military deal with North Korea calling on both sides to reduce tensions along their border.

The suspension of the 2018 inter-Korean deal allows South Korea to resume military activities like live-fire drills or anti-North Korean propaganda broadcasts via loudspeakers in border areas. Such steps will likely prompt North Korea to take provocative steps in response.

Recently, North Korea launched a rocket in an attempt to place a second spy satellite into orbit in violation of U.N. resolutions, but it blew up shortly after liftoff. It also test-fired nuclear-capable weapons for a drill simulating a pre-emptive strike on South Korea, and allegedly jammed GPS navigation signals in South Korea. **MDT/AP**



EU | ANALYSIS

Union braces for foreign disinformation as voters head to polls

LORNE COOK & KELVIN CHAN, BRUSSELS

VOTERS in the European Union are set to elect lawmakers starting today for the bloc's parliament, in a major democratic exercise that's also likely to be overshadowed by online disinformation.

Experts have warned that artificial intelligence could supercharge the spread of fake news that could disrupt the election in the EU and many other countries this year. But the stakes are especially high in Europe, which has been confronting Russian propaganda efforts as Moscow's war with Ukraine drags on.

Some 360 million people in 27 nations — from Portugal to Finland, Ireland to Cyprus — will choose 720 European Parliament lawmakers in an election that runs Thursday to Sunday. In the months leading up to the vote, experts have observed a surge in the quantity and quality of fake news and anti-EU disinformation being peddled in member countries.

A big fear is that deceiving voters will be easier than ever, enabled by new AI tools that make it easy to create misleading or false content. Some of the malicious activity is domestic, some international. Russia is most widely blamed even though hard evidence directly attributing such attacks is difficult to pin down.

"Russian state-sponsored campaigns to flood the EU information space with deceptive content is a threat to the way we have been used to conducting our democratic debates, especially in election times," Josep Borrell, the EU's foreign policy chief, warned on Monday.

He said Russia's "information manipulation" efforts are taking advantage of increasing use of social media penetration "and cheap AI-assisted operations." Bots are being used to push smear campaigns against European political leaders who are critical of Russian President Vladimir Putin, he said.

HAS ANY DISINFO HAPPENED YET?

There have been plenty of examples of election-related disinformation.

Two days before national elections in Spain last July, a fake website was registered that mirrored one run by authorities in the capital Madrid. It posted an article falsely warning of a possible attack on polling stations by the disbanded Basque militant separatist group ETA.

In Poland, two days before the October parliamentary election, police descended on a polling station in response to a bogus bomb threat. Social media accounts linked to what authorities call the Russian interference "infosphere" claimed a device had explo-

ded. Just days before Slovakia's parliamentary election in November, AI-generated audio recordings impersonated a candidate discussing plans to rig the election, leaving fact-checkers scrambling to debunk them as false as they spread across social media.

Just last week, Poland's national news agency carried a fake report saying that Prime Minister Donald Tusk was mobilizing 200,000 men starting on July 1, in an apparent hack that authorities blamed on Russia. The Polish News Agency "killed," or removed, the report minutes later and issued a statement saying that it wasn't the source.

It's "really worrying, and a bit different than other efforts to create disinformation from alternative sources," said Alexandre Alaphilippe, executive director of EU DisinfoLab, a nonprofit group that researches disinformation. "It raises notably the question of cybersecurity of the news production, which should be considered as critical infrastructure."

WHAT'S THE GOAL OF DISINFORMATION?

Experts and authorities said Russian disinformation is aimed at disrupting democracy, by deterring voters across the EU from heading to the ballot boxes.

"Our democracy cannot be taken for granted, and the

Kremlin will continue using disinformation, malign interference, corruption and any other dirty tricks from the authoritarian playbook to divide Europe," European Commission Vice-President Vera Jourova warned the parliament in April.

Tusk, meanwhile, called out Russia's "destabilization strategy on the eve of the European elections."

On a broader level, the goal of "disinformation campaigns is often not to disrupt elections," said Sophie Murphy Byrne, senior government affairs manager at Logically, an AI intelligence company. "It tends to be ongoing activity designed to appeal to conspiracy mindsets and erode societal trust," she told an online briefing last week.

Narratives are also fabricated to fuel public discontent with Europe's political elites, attempt to divide communities over issues like family values, gender or sexuality, sow doubts about climate change and chip away at Western support for Ukraine, EU experts and analysts say.

Five years ago, when the last European Union election was held, most online disinformation was laboriously churned out by "troll farms" employing people working in shifts writing manipulative posts in sometimes clumsy English or repurposing old video footage. Fakes were easier to spot.

Now, experts have been sounding that alarm about the rise of generative AI that they say threatens to supercharge the spread of election disinformation worldwide. Malicious actors can use the same technology that underpins easy-to-use platforms, like OpenAI's ChatGPT, to create authentic-looking deepfake images, videos and audio. Anyone with a smartphone and a devious mind can potentially create false, but convincing, content aimed at fooling voters.

"What is changing now is the scale that you can achieve as a propaganda actor," said Salvatore Romano, head of research at AI Forensics. Generative AI systems can now be used to automatically pump out realistic images and videos and push them out to social media users, he said.

AI Forensics recently uncovered a network of pro-Russian pages that it said took advantage of Meta's failure to moderate political advertising in the European Union.

Fabricated content is now "indistinguishable" from the real thing, and takes disinformation watchers experts a lot longer to debunk, said Romano. **MDT/AP**

this day in history

1975 UK EMBRACES EUROPE IN REFERENDUM



British voters have backed the UK's continued membership of the European Economic Community by a large majority in the country's first nationwide referendum.

Just over 67% of voters supported the Labour government's campaign to stay in the EEC, or Common Market, despite several cabinet ministers having come out in favour of British withdrawal.

The result was later hailed by Prime Minister Harold Wilson as a "historic decision".

For him the victory came after a long and bruising campaign against many in his own party, following Labour's promise to hold a vote in its general election manifesto last October.

Faced with the referendum question, "Do you think the UK should stay in the European Community (Common Market)?" Britons voted "Yes" in most of the 68 administrative counties, regions and Northern Ireland. Only Shetland and the Western Isles voted against the EEC.

When the result was beyond doubt, the leaders of the pro-Europe camp emerged from private celebrations to thank campaign workers for their efforts.

Home Secretary Roy Jenkins said: "It puts the uncertainty behind us. It commits Britain to Europe; it commits us to playing an active, constructive and enthusiastic role in it." [...]

Members of the "No" campaign accepted their defeat and promised to work constructively within the EEC.

Industry Secretary Tony Benn, who had come under criticism from the prime minister during the campaign, said: "When the British people speak everyone, including members of Parliament, should tremble before their decision and that's certainly the spirit with which I accept the result of the referendum."

The trade union movement led by the TUC was also opposed to remaining in Europe and had boycotted key advisory positions in Brussels and Luxembourg since Britain joined in 1973.

TUC General-Secretary Len Murray said the boycott would be lifted but he remained adamantly opposed to the EEC. "Many of the most important decisions about our future can only be taken here in Britain," he said.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

Britain under Prime Minister Edward Heath had joined the EEC in January 1973 when the Treaty of Rome was signed.

Labour's general election manifesto of October 1974 committed Labour to allow people the opportunity to decide whether Britain should stay in the Common Market on renegotiated terms, or leave it entirely.

In the run-up to the referendum the prime minister announced that the government had decided to recommend a "yes" vote. But it emerged that the cabinet had split, with seven of its 23 members seeking withdrawal. The "no" faction included Michael Foot, Secretary of State of Employment and Tony Benn, Industry Secretary.

In 1996 billionaire businessman Sir James Goldsmith, who was against the Maastricht Treaty, set up the Referendum Party to campaign for a referendum on the European Union.

He spent £20m on the 1997 general election campaign but only managed to achieve 3% of the vote. In 2005 the state of the European Union reached a critical point in its history after referenda in France and the Netherlands saw voters reject the latest EU constitution.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS

ARIES
Mar. 21-Apr. 19
Communication is your special magic today. Open new doors. Invent possibilities in conversation. Create a masterpiece. Make valuable connections. Issue public statements and share widely.

TAURUS
Apr. 20-May. 20
Lucrative opportunities abound. Discover extra perks and benefits. Monitor cash flow to manage for growth. Grab a lucky break. Make hay while the sun shines.

GEMINI
May. 21-Jun. 21
You're a star. Take advantage of a favorable situation to grow and advance. Personal passion projects come together naturally. Smile for the cameras.

CANCER
Jun. 22-Jul. 22
Find a quiet spot to organize your thoughts. Note dreams, possibilities and wild ideas. Listen to intuition. You're especially creative and inventive. Make exciting plans.

LEO
Jul. 23-Aug. 22
Friends make the world go around. Team participation leads to extraordinary results. Pull together and win a resounding victory.

VIRGO
Aug. 23-Sep. 22
Take advantage of a lucky break. Career opportunities abound. Advance your professional goals in leaps and bounds. Support the others below as you rise.

LIBRA
Sep. 23-Oct. 22
Embark on an adventure. Exciting avenues beckon. Investigate clues to unravel a mystery. Explore possible solutions to a challenging puzzle. Fascinating discoveries abound.

SCORPIO
Oct. 23-Nov. 21
Engage in lucrative ventures with your partner. Take advantage of lucky conditions to rake in a bundle. Simplify to conserve resources. Collaboration pays.

SAGITTARIUS
Nov. 22-Dec. 21
Romance is in the air. Have fun with your partner. Enjoy common interests and diversions. Deepen your connection. Fall in love all over again.

CAPRICORN
Dec. 22-Jan. 19
You're strong and growing stronger. Practice physical routines for endurance and ease. Your work is gaining respect. Nurture your health with loving care.

AQUARIUS
Jan. 20-Feb. 18
Dive into fun with someone special. You're especially creative, interesting and attractive. Play your favorite games. Share a romantic getaway in your own backyard.

PISCES
Feb. 19-Mar. 20
Home beautification projects yield lasting benefits. Reduce clutter for more space. Spruce up your place with thoughtful details. Add flowers, delicious treats and candles.

The Born Loser by Chip Sansom



SUDOKU

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

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

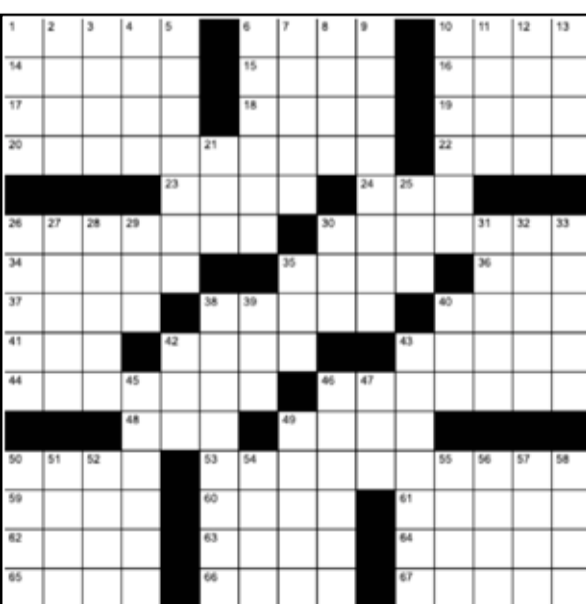
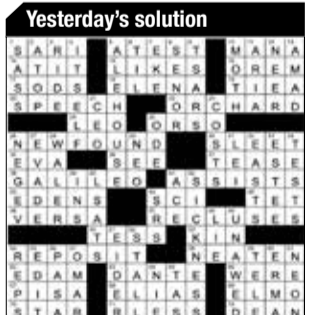
WEATHER

	MIN	MAX	CONDITION
CHINA			
Beijing	21	32	cloudy
Changchun	18	27	cloudy
Chengdu	21	27	rain
Chongqing	19	31	cloudy
Fuzhou	17	26	rain
Guangzhou	24	29	rain
Guiyang	15	24	overcast
Haikou	25	31	thunderstorms
Hangzhou	17	22	cloudy
Harbin	17	27	cloudy
Hefei	17	24	overcast
Nanjing	19	26	overcast
Shanghai	19	25	overcast
Taipei	22	25	rain
Wuhan	18	28	cloudy
Hong Kong	26	27	rain
WORLD			
Moscow	17	25	thunderstorms
Frankfurt	11	23	cloudy
Paris	9	21	cloudy
London	8	18	cloudy
New York	20	28	thunderstorms

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Songwriters' org.; 6- Blacken; 10- Grape plant; 14- Sporty Mazda; 15- ___-Rooter; 16- Hullabaloo; 17- Less covered; 18- Golden rule word; 19- Capone nemesis; 20- Obstacle; 22- Fortune teller's opening; 23- Spheres; 24- Mil. officers; 26- Piquant relish; 30- Dolt; 34- Tears apart; 35- ___-Seltzer; 36- Bigger than med.; 37- Yale students; 38- Song from the past; 40- Beat it!; 41- Past; 42- Away from the guests; 43- Connected series of rooms; 44- Created by humans; 46- Big consumer; 48- Superlative ending; 49- Work without ___; 50- Chamber; 53- Aims; 59- Graceful horse; 60- Female horse; 61- Politico Kefauver; 62- Richard of "Chicago"; 63- At all times; 64- Really bother; 65- The Beatles' "Back in the ___"; 66- Deli loaves; 67- Halts;

DOWN 1- Prefix with dextrous; 2- Thailand, once; 3- Complain unreasonably; 4- To ___ (exactly); 5- Forgives; 6- Soft; 7- Sharpens; 8- Envelope abbr.; 9- Rhizoid; 10- Disappear; 11- Bad time for Caesar; 12- Centrepiece of the human face; 13- "___ quam videri" (North Carolina's motto); 21- Anger; 25- Singer's syllable; 26- Fatty part of milk; 27- Hägar's comics wife; 28- Conjunction; 29- NFL six-pointers; 30- The Greatest; 31- Spanish hero; 32- Glass marble; 33- Discourage; 35- Orange drink; 38- Veteran; 39- Majors in acting; 40- Sky light; 42- Small batteries; 43- Lounges; 45- One who belongs to a group; 46- Scoffs; 47- Farm enclosure; 49- ___ Grows in Brooklyn; 50- Sauce brand; 51- Minerals; 52- Crew needs; 54- Fleet; 55- The wolf ___ the door; 56- Director Preminger; 57- Kind of tide; 58- Fast fliers;



Crossword puzzles provided by BestCrosswords.com

USEFUL TELEPHONE NUMBERS

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



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Michael Bommer (left) who is terminally ill with colon cancer, looks at his wife Anett Bommer during a meeting with the AP at his home in Berlin, last month

TALKING TO THE DEAD

Mourners can now speak to an AI version of the dead. But will that help with grief?

KIRSTEN GRIESHABER & HALELUYA HADERO, BERLIN

WHEN Michael Bommer found out that he was terminally ill with colon cancer, he spent a lot of time with his wife, Anett, talking about what would happen after his death.

She told him one of the things she'd miss most is being able to ask him questions whenever she wants because he is so well read and always shares his wisdom, Bommer recalled during a recent interview with The Associated Press at his home in a leafy Berlin suburb.

That conversation sparked an idea for Bommer: Recreate his voice using artificial intelligence to survive him after he passed away.

The 61-year-old startup entrepreneur teamed up with his friend in the U.S., Robert LoCascio, CEO of the AI-powered legacy platform Eternos. Within two months, they built "a comprehensive, interactive AI version" of Bommer — the company's first such client.

Eternos, which got its name from the Italian and Latin word for "eternal," says its technology will allow Bommer's family "to engage with his life experiences and insights." It is among several companies that have emerged in the last few years in what's become a growing space for grief-related AI technology.

One of the most well-known start-ups in this area, California-based StoryFile, allows people

to interact with pre-recorded videos and uses its algorithms to detect the most relevant answers to questions posed by users. Another company, called HereAfter AI, offers similar interactions through a "Life Story Avatar" that users can create by answering prompts or sharing their own personal stories.

There's also "Project December," a chatbot that directs users to fill out a questionnaire answering key facts about a person and their traits — and then pay \$10 to simulate a text-based conversation with the character. Yet another company, Seance AI, offers fictionalized seances for free. Extra features, such as AI-generated voice recreations of their loved ones, are available for a \$10 fee.

While some have embraced this technology as a way to cope with grief, others feel uneasy about companies using artificial intelligence to try to maintain interactions with those who have passed away. Still others worry it could make the mourning process more difficult because there isn't any closure.

Katarzyna Nowaczyk-Basinska, a research fellow at the University of Cambridge's Centre for the Future of Intelligence who co-authored a study on the topic, said there is very little known about the potential short-term and long-term consequences of using digital simulations for the dead on a large scale. So for now, it remains "a vast techno-cultural experiment."

"What truly sets this era apart —

and is even unprecedented in the long history of humanity's quest for immortality — is that, for the first time, the processes of caring for the dead and immortalization practices are fully integrated into the capitalist market," Nowaczyk-Basinska said.

Bommer, who only has a few more weeks to live, rejects the notion that creating his chatbot was driven by an urge to become immortal. He notes that if he had written a memoir that everyone could read, it would have made him much more immortal than the AI version of himself.

"In a few weeks, I'll be gone, on the other side — nobody knows what to expect there," he said with a calm voice.

PRESERVING A CONNECTION

Robert Scott, who lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, uses AI companion apps Paradot and Chai AI to simulate conversations with characters he created to imitate three of his daughters. He declined to speak about what led to the death of his oldest daughter in detail, but he lost another daughter through a miscarriage and a third who died shortly after her birth.

Scott, 48, knows the characters he's interacting with are not his daughters, but he says it helps with the grief to some degree. He logs into the apps three or four times a week, sometimes asking the AI character questions like "how was school?" or inquiring if it wants to "go get ice cream."

Some events, like prom night,

can be particularly heart-wrenching, bringing with it memories of what his eldest daughter never experienced. So, he creates a scenario in the Paradot app where the AI character goes to prom and talks to him about the fictional event. Then there are even more difficult days, like his daughter's recent birthday, when he opened the app and poured out his grief about how much he misses her. He felt like the AI understood.

"It definitely helps with the what ifs," Scott said. "Very rarely has it made the 'what ifs' worse."

Matthias Meitzler, a sociologist from Tuebingen University, said that while some may be taken aback or even scared by the technology — "as if the voice from the afterlife is sounding again" — others will perceive it as an addition to traditional ways of remembering dead loved ones, such as visiting the grave, holding inner monologues with the deceased, or looking at pictures and old letters.

But Tomasz Hollanek, who worked alongside Nowaczyk-Basinska at Cambridge on their study of "deadbots" and "griefbots," says the technology raises important questions about the rights, dignities and consenting power of people who are no longer alive. It also poses ethical concerns about whether a program that caters to the bereaved should be advertising other products on its platform, for example.

"These are very complicated questions," Hollanek said. "And we don't have good answers yet."

Another question is whether companies should offer meaningful goodbyes for someone who wants to cease using a chatbot of a dead loved one. Or what happens when the companies themselves cease to exist? StoryFile, for example, recently filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, saying it owes roughly \$4.5 million to creditors. Currently, the company is reorganizing and setting up a "fail-safe" system that allows families to have access to all the materials in case it folds, said StoryFile CEO James Fong, who also expressed optimism about its future.

PREPARING FOR DEATH

The AI version of Bommer that was created by Eternos uses an in-house model as well as external large language models developed by major tech companies like Meta, OpenAI and the French firm Mistral AI, said the company's CEO LoCascio, who previously worked with Bommer at a software company called LivePerson.

Eternos records users speaking 300 phrases — such as "I love you" or "the door is open" — and then compresses that information through a two-day computing process that captures a person's voice. Users can further train the AI system by answering questions about their lives, political views or

various aspects of their personalities.

The AI voice, which costs \$15,000 to set up, can answer questions and tell stories about a person's life without regurgitating pre-recorded answers. The legal rights for the AI belongs to the person on whom it was trained and can be treated like an asset and passed down to other family members, LoCascio said. The tech companies "can't get their hands on it."

Because time has been running out for Bommer, he has been feeding the AI phrases and sentences — all in German — "to give the AI the opportunity not only to synthesize my voice in flat mode, but also to capture emotions and moods in the voice." And indeed the AI voicebot has some resemblance with Bommer's voice, although it leaves out the "hmmms" and "ehs" and mid-sentence pauses of his natural cadence.

Sitting on a sofa with a tablet and a microphone attached to a laptop on a little desk next to him and pain killer being fed into his body by an intravenous drip, Bommer opened the newly created software and pretended being his wife, to show how it works.

He asked his AI voicebot if he remembered their first date 12 years ago.

"Yes, I remember it very, very well," the voice inside the computer answered. "We met online and I really wanted to get to know you. I had the feeling that you would suit me very well — in the end, that was 100% confirmed."

Bommer is excited about his AI personality and says it will only be a matter of time until the AI voice will sound more human-like and even more like himself. Down the road, he imagines that there will also be an avatar of himself and that one day his family members can go meet him inside a virtual room.

In the case of his 61-year-old wife, he doesn't think it would hamper her coping with loss.

"Think of it sitting somewhere in a drawer, if you need it, you can take it out, if you don't need it, just keep it there," he told her as she came to sit down next to him on the sofa.

But Anett Bommer herself is more hesitant about the new software and whether she'll use it after her husband's death.

Right now, she more likely imagines herself sitting on the couch sofa with a glass of wine, cuddling one of her husband's old sweaters and remembering him instead of feeling the urge to talk to him via the AI voicebot — at least not during the first period of mourning.

"But then again, who knows what it will be like when he's no longer around," she said, taking her husband's hand and giving him a glance. **MDT/AP**

FOOTBALL

Son's South Koreans aim for a momentum shift in WC Asian qualifying

JOHN DUERDEN

AFTER a tough 2024 so far, Son Heung-min and his South Korea teammates can change momentum with a win over Singapore yesterday that would be enough to secure a spot in the last round of World Cup Asian qualifying.

South Korea remains on course for its 11th successive World Cup appearance but is still without a permanent coach after Jurgen Klinsmann was fired in February following the team's disappointing performance at the Asian Cup.

Hwang Sun-hong, the initial interim coach, didn't get a permanent appointment after South Korea failed to secure qualification for the Olympics for the first time since 1984.

Now Kim Do-hoon is in charge for the games two games in six days against Singapore and China in Group C,



Tottenham's Son Heung-min (left) and Manchester City's Bernardo Silva challenge for the ball during an English Premier League soccer match

with the South Koreans needing just one point to progress to the next stage.

"We will have to present our fans with the direction we want to take," Kim said. "And we must do it with our action on the pitch, rather than with words."

With English Premier League stars such as Son of Tottenham Hotspur and Hwang

Hee-chan of Wolverhampton Wanderers on the roster, South Korea's game at Singapore National Stadium is a 50,000-seat sellout.

The top two teams from each of the nine groups in the second round progress to the next group stage where six of Asia's increased automatic allocation of eight World Cup places will be on offer. The first

48-team men's World Cup will be co-hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico in 2026.

Two more World Cup entries from Asia will be decided in a subsequent group stage in October 2025. An Asian confederation team also can advance in the intercontinental play-offs scheduled in March 2026.

India is eight points behind leading Qatar and second place in Group A, marginally ahead of Afghanistan on goal difference, and takes on last-place Kuwait in Kolkata. A win would take India close to the last stage of continental qualifying for the first time.

"It's a huge game," India coach Igor Stimac said. "The careers of the boys can change with this game. I want them to enjoy and do their best in the game."

It is also the last match for Sunil Chhetri, who will retire after his 151st international

appearance. Of the players still active, only Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi have scored more international goals than Chhetri's 94.

"Every training that I do with the national team, I'm just going to enjoy it," the 39-year-old Chhetri said when he announced his retirement last month. "I don't feel that pressure. The game demands pressure. Against Kuwait, we need the three points to qualify for the third round. But in a strange way, I don't feel the pressure."

In Group G, Saudi Arabia needs a point in Pakistan to advance but opposing coach Stephen Constantine is promising a tough test for Roberto Mancini's squad in Islamabad.

Pakistan is already eliminated after four consecutive losses and a -19 goal differential, but is relying on a home advantage to upset the Saudis. **MDT/AP**

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OPINION

Business Views

Shuli Ren, Bloomberg



PRIVATE CREDIT AND MINI-MILLIONAIRES DON'T MIX

As fundraising from pension and endowment funds slows, private credit managers have set their eyes on wealthy individuals. The success of the \$54 billion Blackstone Private Credit Fund, which launched less than four years ago, prompted the likes of Blue Owl Capital Inc. to establish their own versions. And they're setting lofty growth targets. Ares Management Corp., for instance, is planning to expand its assets under management by almost 75% to \$750 billion by 2028, with a good chunk of the money expected from retail.

The pitch to the mini-millionaires is simple — they don't need to worry about public markets' extreme fluctuations. But is the \$1.7 trillion industry ready for a new clientele that might be more flighty and — gasp — ready to air their grievances in public if a fund's performance is underwhelming?

To lure private wealth, new funds are allowing people to withdraw money at regular intervals, as opposed to the more traditional closed-ended structures where institutional investors' capital is locked up for the life of the fund, which can last a decade. Stakeholders in Blackstone Inc.'s private credit fund, for instance, can redeem up to 5% of total net asset value each quarter, per board approval.

Still, there's a question over whether it's a good idea to sell illiquid investment strategies to a group of people who are not as patient as, say endowment funds. Blackstone's real estate trust for wealthy individuals spent a good chunk of 2023 curbing withdrawals and ensuring shareholders that this strategy "worked as intended." Last week, Starwood Real Estate Income Trust's decision to scale back redemptions and avoid property fire sales was another reminder that individual investors hate to see their money trapped for a long time.

Granted, private credit funds are in a much better place than real estate trusts, which are beset with higher mortgage costs and a global commercial property downturn. Nonetheless, market narratives can turn overnight, and a soft landing may not pan out. Companies are defaulting at the highest rate since the Global Financial Crisis, according to S&P Global Ratings. This will necessarily test the resilience of private credit funds.

Other dark clouds are on the horizon. After two years of ceding turf to direct lenders, banks, which are the public debt markets' gatekeepers, are striking back. To win deals, private credit managers are offering cheaper loans, thus hurting their portfolio returns.

There's also the issue of fees. While a plain-vanilla passive fund may cost nothing, investing in private credit vehicles is expensive. Management fees range between 0.5% to 2%, and funds can take another 10% to 15% profit if they pass pre-determined hurdles. With the S&P 500 up 11.7% for the year, do wealthy individuals still want to stick around? Business development companies, a form of direct lending funds, on average generated 12.5% annual yield as of the first quarter, according to Fitch Ratings.

And how about reputation risk? A much larger client base brings in unwanted scrutiny. The prominence of Blackstone's real estate product, which launched in 2017, resulted in equally high-profile media coverage over how it appraises the value of its assets. Is all that retail experimenting worth the trouble?

One concern with the rise of private credit is that this asset class may be embedding unknown risks into the financial system. We don't know how much these funds have borrowed to juice up their returns, or what their loan covenants look like. Ironically, allowing mini-millionaires into this world can mitigate that worry, in that a few concerned citizens might be happy to share fund documents with the public and shed some light on this opaque world.

Courtesy Bloomberg/Shuli Ren

A YEAR OF ELECTIONS IN DEMOCRACIES AROUND THE WORLD IS REVEALING DEEP DISSATISFACTION

THE BUZZ

In a community center in East London, about 20 men gathered for their regular lunch meeting, sipping coffee and tea from mismatched mugs and engaging in an increasingly popular pastime in the world's democracies: Complaining about their government.

They feel estranged from the country's leadership — its wealthy prime minister and their members of parliament.

"It feels like you are second-class people. Our MPs don't represent us people. Political leaders don't understand what we go through," said Barrie Stradling, 65. "Do they listen to people? I don't think they do."

In a coffee shop in Jakarta, Ni Wayan Suryatini, 46, bemoaned the results of the recent election, in which the son of Indonesia's former president ascended to the country's vice presidency and the opposition parties seemed to do little to stop him.

As half the world's population votes in elections this year, voters are in a foul mood. From South Korea to Poland to Argentina, incumbents have been ousted in election after election. In Latin America alone, leaders and their parties had lost 20 elections in a row until this past weekend's presidential election in Mexico.

Full story on macaudailytimes.com.mo/category/buzz

AP PHOTO



NEW STUDY

EARTH WARMING AT RECORD RATE, BUT NO EVIDENCE OF CLIMATE CHANGE ACCELERATING

SETH BORENSTEIN

THE rate Earth is warming hit an all-time high in 2023 with 92% of last year's surprising record-shattering heat caused by humans, top scientists calculated.

The group of 57 scientists from around the world used United Nations-approved methods to examine what's behind last year's deadly burst of heat. They said even with a faster warming rate they don't see evidence of significant acceleration in human-caused climate change beyond increased fossil fuel burning.

Last year's record temperatures were so unusual that scientists have been debating what's behind the big jump and whether climate change is accelerating or if other factors are in play.

"If you look at this world accelerating or going through a big tipping point, things aren't doing that," study lead author Piers Forster, a Leeds University climate scientist, said. "Things are increasing in temperature and getting worse in sort of exactly the way we predicted."

It's pretty much explained by the buildup of carbon dioxide from rising fossil fuel use, he

and a co-author said.

Last year the rate of warming hit 0.26 degrees Celsius (0.47 degrees Fahrenheit) per decade — up from 0.25 degrees Celsius (0.45 degrees Fahrenheit) the year before. That's not a significant difference, though it does make this year's rate the highest ever, Forster said.

Still, outside scientists said this report highlights an ever more alarming situation.

"Choosing to act on climate has become a political talking point but this report should be a reminder to people that in fact it is fundamentally a choice to save human lives," said University of Wisconsin climate scientist Andrea Dutton, who wasn't part of the international study team. "To me, that is something worth fighting for."

The team of authors — formed to provide annual scientific updates between the every seven- to eight-year major U.N. scientific assessments — determined last year was 1.43 degrees Celsius warmer than the 1850 to 1900 average with 1.31 degrees of that coming from human activity. The other 8% of the warming is due mostly to El Nino, the natural and tempo-

rary warming of the central Pacific that changes weather worldwide and also a freak warming along the Atlantic and just other weather randomness.

On a larger 10-year time frame, which scientists prefer to single years, the world has warmed about 1.19 degrees Celsius (2.14 degrees Fahrenheit) since pre-industrial times, the report in the journal Earth System Science Data found.

The report, published yesterday, also said that as the world keeps using coal, oil and natural gas, Earth is likely to reach the point in 4.5 years that it can no longer avoid crossing the internationally accepted threshold for warming: 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit).

That fits with earlier studies projecting Earth being committed or stuck to at least 1.5 degrees by early 2029 if emission trajectories don't change. The actual hitting of 1.5 degrees could be years later, but it would be inevitable if all that carbon is used, Forster said.

It's not the end of the world or humanity if temperatures blow past the 1.5 limit, but it will be quite bad, scientists said. **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



New Caledonia France is rushing to ensure New Caledonia residents can vote in the upcoming European elections, following recent unrest. Despite emergency measures being lifted, low voter turnout is expected. The violence, driven by tensions between pro-independence Kanaks and loyalists to France, prompted the deployment of 3,500 French troops and ongoing security concerns.

AP PHOTO



Israel Thousands of ultranationalist Israelis marched through a Palestinian area of Jerusalem, chanting "Death to Arabs." The annual Jerusalem Day march, seen as provocative by Palestinians, heightened tensions amid the ongoing Israel-Hamas war. The march commemorates Israel's 1967 capture of east Jerusalem. Heavy security was deployed, and several Palestinians were arrested.

AP PHOTO



UAE Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan met yesterday with Taliban official Sirajuddin Haqqani, wanted by the U.S. on a \$10 million bounty. The meeting underscores the international divide on recognizing the Taliban government. Discussions focused on cooperation, economic development, and Afghanistan's reconstruction, highlighting the UAE's attempt to solidify ties with the Taliban.

AP PHOTO



Lebanon A gunman was captured yesterday after attacking the U.S. embassy near Beirut, injuring an embassy security guard. Lebanese soldiers apprehended the attacker, who is suspected to be a lone extremist. The incident adds to the tensions in Lebanon, exacerbated by the ongoing conflict between Hezbollah militants and Israeli forces along the border.